

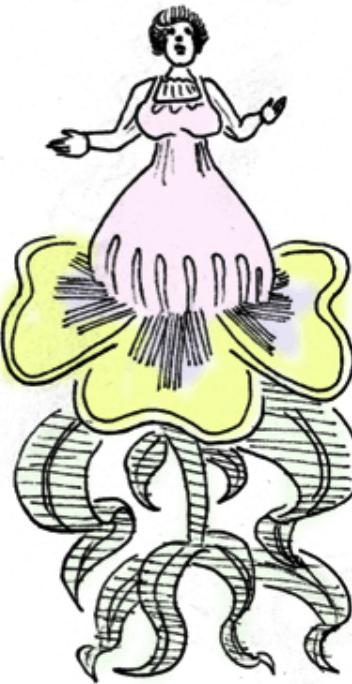
Shit Creek Review

Poetry



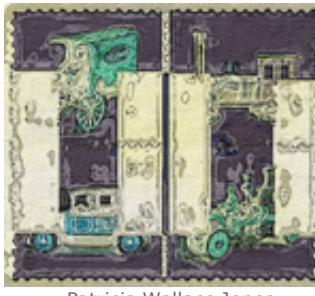
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Patricia Wallace Jones

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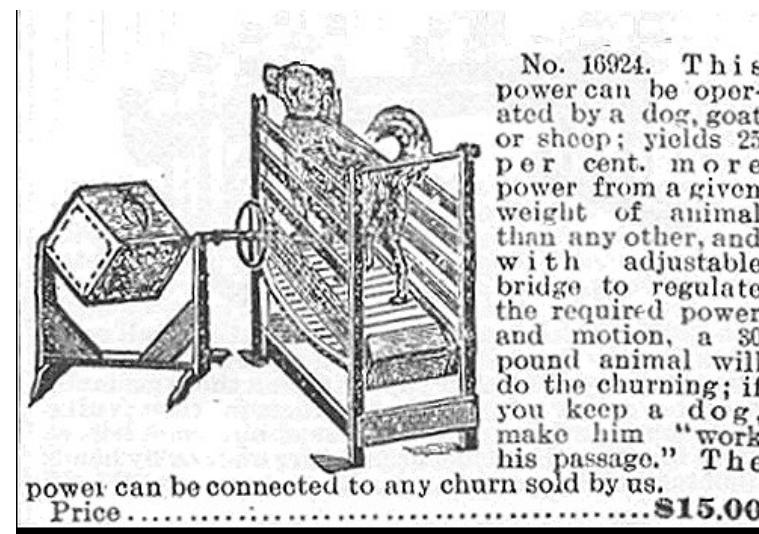
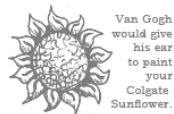
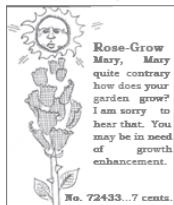
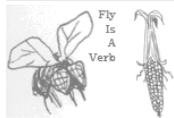
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The HTML edition of SCR 4 was designed on a *Sears, Roebuck* visual theme. A modified design is used to fit the different format of this PDF edition. *Most Web links are not replicated in this edition:* please see the [HTML edition](#) for the original contributors' links.

This Letter-size publication will also fit for printing on A4 paper.

PDF design and publication by [Peter Bloxsom](#)



THE SHIT CREEK BRIBE-COUNTER

Editorial

SCR Issue #4: Sears and Roebuck Edition

The Sears Roebuck catalog is as essential to the understanding of the American mind as the barbecue is to the Australian stomach. This literary achievement eased a new country through the profound shift from nineteenth to twentieth centuries, focusing on the most neglected part of their intellectual tradition, the vast middle of their geography, where men toiled blankly and women languished pitifully. It was here, to this land of promise on the verge of spiritual wasteland, that the postal service delivered its thick, tangible dream. With this book, you could literally feel the weight of possibility. The forefronts of technology and fashion were parceled into easily digestible squares of typography. Perhaps it was at this point in history that Americans began their brave tradition of living for the sake of what could be, rather than what is, a tradition that has brought them to the deserts of the Middle East and to the feet of credit card companies.

And then, when dreams were over and tucked to sleep, the sacred pages were hung with care in outhouses throughout the land, where they dutifully contributed to the hygiene of this fair citizenry. It is my proud privilege to present to you a reunion of sorts, as *The Shit Creek Review* pays tribute to the Sears Roebuck catalog with dreams for a new generation, dreams that we hope transcend national boundaries and a new breed of desire that includes peace and solvency for all.

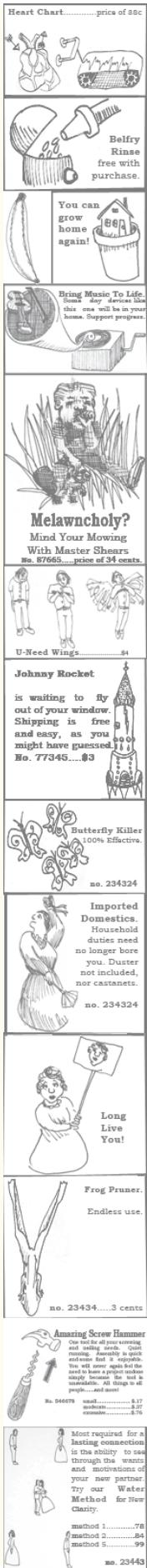
Heart of Darkness

As we paddle ever onwards up-creek, penetrating deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness, the absinthe-crazed crew are very pleased to welcome Angela France (<http://www.poetrypf.co.uk/angelafrancepage.html>) on board the little canoe as Poetry Editor (from issue #5 on, along with the current surly incumbents, Nigel Holt and Paul Stevens). We are hoping that Angela will add a note of sanity to the bizarre goings-on around the compound late at night, and bring some sense of order and decorum to the bribery, head-collection and human sacrifice.

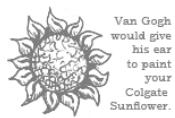
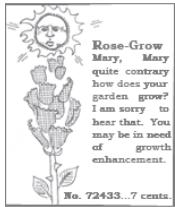
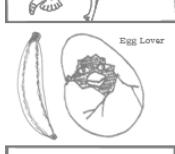
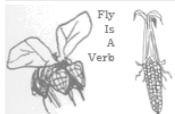
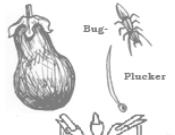
Oh, the horror! The horror! For our next issue, vaguely due out in October, *The Shit Creek Review* seeks poetry, prose and art on Horror — whatever that means to you. As always you may give the theme the widest and weirdest interpretation you please. So make our spines crawl; give us that uneasy-queasy feeling of apprehension; disgust us; set us laughing nervously; frighten the blooming wits out of us; or at the very least cause us mild concern. *If you dare!* More details on the Submissions Guidelines page: please read and completely memorise these guidelines before submitting work!

Zine Overboard!

Speaking of horror: at last we're getting rid of that obnoxious hanger-on, the parasitic subzine **II**. Tired of having it drink our beer, pile korma-sauce-encrusted dishes and pots in the sink, and hog the telly to watch "Big Brother Uncut", we have given **II** its marching orders. The rather annoying little ezine is leaving the canoe and setting off



Editorial



to find its own destiny (snork!), allowing Shit Creekers to focus on their core values of Poetry, Art and Corruption. You'll find more details on the Editorial Page of the current II. While you're there, check out the 'Lives' edition of II where you'll discover — beyond Shit Creek, beyond your wildest dreams! — even more great poetry, coupled with companion pieces of related prose or verse.

Editors' Picks

Pat: When I first read "Animitas" I had just returned from Mexico visiting my sister who "winters" there, a sister I love dearly despite our differing politics. While Mexico is not Chile, this poem captured every uncomfortable moment I experienced there... trying to see what she wanted me to see, not to see the poverty behind the facade of condos, beautiful gardens and incredible displays of American and Mexican wealth. I admit I enjoyed fine meals prepared by Mexican chefs — Asian, French, Mediterranean, Italian — but I left regretting that I had not tasted Mexico.

"Animitas", with its reference to the shrines along the side of the road, the feral dogs, captures that uneasy tourist feeling for me; not to the point of being preachy, but perfectly.

Don: Tea is the height of culture, the ultimate manifestation of the state. Tea is pure experience, the ultimate state of life. Tea is utter ironic distance, to the state of death and beyond. Peter Schwartz's "statehood" puts me in a state. It is insane and yet completely lucid, indeed threatening to create its own state in my mind.

Nigel: Mary Ann Mayer's "Animitas": A sharp, brutal, beautiful slash of a poem that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up like someone had run the cold edge of a knife down my nape. Superb. Poetry at its best.

Paul: John Milbury-Steen's "Pronoun Trouble" is my favourite. I like its wit, and poems about grammar, parts of speech, punctuation and so forth always attract me. "Pronoun Trouble" also passes the memorability test with flying colours; these lines particularly keep running through my mind:

...Pronoun Trouble being why we die,

and even you, so lusty and so able,
will come down down a-down with Pronoun Trouble.

Editors

Don Zirilli — Art Editor

Patricia Wallace Jones — Artist on Board

Peter Bloxsom — Coding Consultant

Nigel Holt — Poetry Editor

Paul Stevens — General Editor

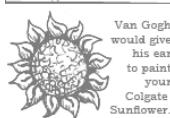
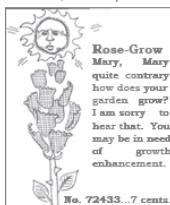
Shit Creek Review



Poetry



Mark Allinson



Orpheus Redux

Singing her up from hell when, almost home,
we met the one who'd stung her, in the street.
I spoke of things like weather — “damn this heat!” —
we parted when we passed the safety zone.
But as I turned to take one final look,
she dropped my arm. That was all it took.



Patricia Wallace Jones

Tiel Aisha Ansari

Midnight Prayer

The fading echoes of a midnight prayer
still faintly audible at break of day
although the supplicant's no longer there

make soft the shadows and make sweet the air.
The morning traffic's noise will drive away
the fading echoes of a midnight prayer

but meantime, linger quiet on the stair
and watch the curtain by the altar sway
although the supplicant's no longer there.

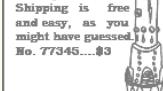
Who knows if it was joy or bleak despair
that brought the sleepless here last night to pray?
The fading echoes of a midnight prayer

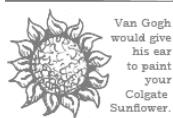
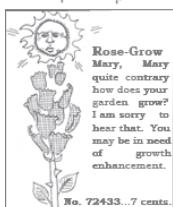
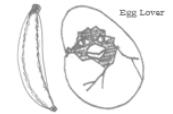
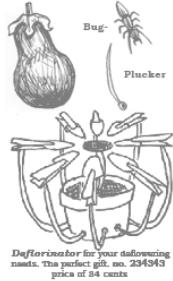
leave holiness on wall and rug and chair
a touch of grace, by grace allowed to stay
although the supplicant's no longer there.

You're seeking God? You'll find Him anywhere —
in every house or room whose walls replay
the fading echoes of a midnight prayer
although the supplicant's no longer there.



Patricia Wallace Jones

	Heart Chart.....price of 88c
	Belfry Rinse free with purchase.
	You can grow home again!
	Bring Music To Life. Some day devices like this one will be in your home. Support progress.
	Melawncholy? Mind Your Mowing With Master Shears no. 87665....price of 34 cents.
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	Johnny Rocket is waiting to fly out of your window. Shipping is free and easy, as you might have guessed. No. 77345....\$3
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	Long Live You!
	Frog Pruner. Endless use. no. 23434....3 cents
	Amazing Screw Hammer One tool for all your screwing needs. It holds a nail and some feet it can climb. You will never again feel the simple burden the tool is unconscious of being used by people....and mice!
	No. 54679 nail.....\$1.17 corkscrew.....\$.27 cone.....\$.76
	Most required for a lasting connection is the ability to see through the wants and understandings of your new partner. Try our Water Method for New Clarity.
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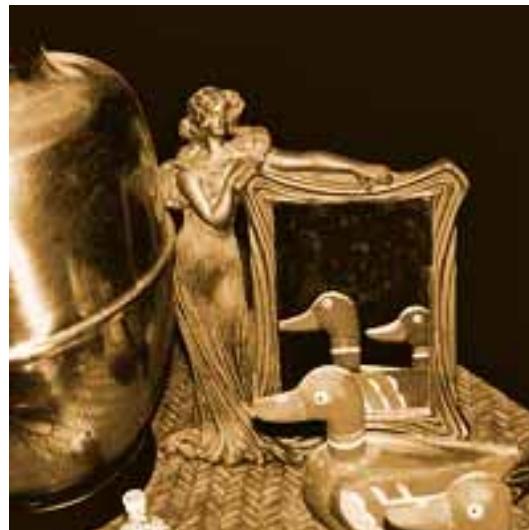


David Anthony

Slush Pile

In some respects I like this, even though
the workmanship's not great. Who'd rhyme "today"
with "day"? This one's arcane: what does it say?
Two down now; just two hundred more to go.
Call that a poem? Prose! And this one's so
Poetic. Why must people disobey
the basic rules of syntax? No. No way,
and No, and No, and No, and No, and No,

and... Oh. Here's something special: see it shine.
It coruscates: a lamp of burnished gold
revealing vistas formerly unseen.
I sense the presence of a noble soul
who dares to go where others have not been.
Ah, I recall it now: it's one of mine!



Jon Ballard

Complicity

Old man in the park refusing
To feed the pigeons, listening

Instead to passers-by disparage
The morning for its sunless sky,

Its unexpected chill, all the banal
Distresses of a malfunctioning day.

Winter-lean squirrels, sloven as dish-
rags, mulling about, while dark birds

Chase down the dawdling trees
In wing-tipped pairs. Leaves of

Innermost boughs no one ever hears
Edgy now in the sough of wind.

A woman on her cell phone saying,
“ — my lunch — I brown-bagged it —

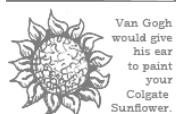
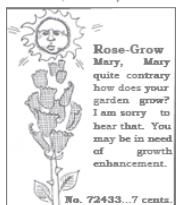
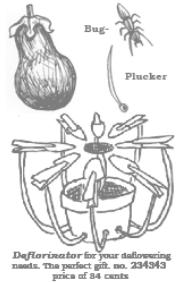
It's gone and no one knows anything.”
That's right, thinks the old man,

So near to weeping for the world,
But burping instead, licking his lips.



 Heart Chart price of 35c
 Belfry Rinse free with purchase.
 You can grow home again!
 Bring Music To Life. Some day devices like this one will be in your home. Support progress.
 Melawncholy? Mind Your Mowing With Master Shears No. 87665 price of 34 cents.
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 Long Live You!
 Frog Pruner. Endless use. no. 23434.....3 cents
 Amazing Screw Hammer One tool for all your screwing needs. It holds a nail and some feet it can climb. You will never again feel the simply because the tool is unique and it's going to hit all people.....and score! No. 54679 nail..... \$1.17 case..... \$2.27 cascade..... \$3.76
 Most required for a lasting connection is the ability to see through the wants and aspirations of your new partner. Try out Water Method for New Clarity. method 1.....\$.78 method 2.....\$.84 method 5.....\$.99 no. 23443

Rachel Bunting



Cain's Confession

one

I saw him. In the field behind our house.
Unnameable, the way he behaved: hands
and lips traversing skin, unapologetic.
I didn't understand. I couldn't stop it.

two

This is for the lies he taught my mother
to repeat: *There is nothing wrong with me.*
I am just like my brother. But I tell you
now: I do not curl around men like a vine.

three

Secrets became our family; we carried
them in the ripe marrow of our bones.
How many nights I could not breathe
for knowing what he was.

four

This is for my father's face: paper crumpled
inward, a sketch changing shape. A fine art,
my father, ruined. Something had to change,
reshape the lines of our life.

five

In the barn, my fisted hands were heavy
stone pendulums, swinging with precision
through the velveted air. He did not cry
out, instead palmed my cheek — tenderness.

six

This is for me: a new sacrifice. No brother
is worth protecting such sin. Blood of my blood.
Six times, my hand makes a flower bloom
in the night from the back of Abel's soft skull.



Patricia Wallace Jones

Rachel Bunting

Exhumation

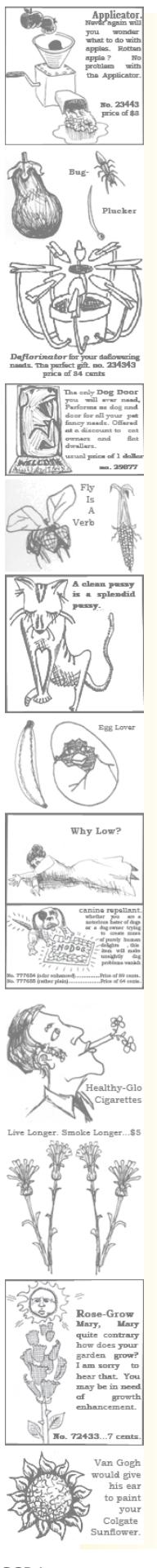
She says she's a gravedigger.
 At the bar, several shots in,
 and we're talking, the way people
 talk in bars: all surface, little substance.
 But not a digger, exactly. She exhumes
 plots at night, probes the upturned earth
 for some sort of explanation, a way to piece
 together what she doesn't understand.
 She's joking, of course — people don't
 say those kinds of things and mean them.

But now — graveyard, 2 a.m.
 She's brought all she needs:
 a pick, shovel, flashlight. Me.
 I've never seen such grace —
 the swift motion of breaking the ground,
 her thin body folding and unfolding
 like a flower that blooms and closes all night long.



R.K. Sohm





Louie Crew

Poem Left on Gwailo's Windshield

Doctor Smith, I am disappointed today
when I know that you will spend
your birthday with someone not me.

I begin to understand my position in fact.

All these days I have been finding
my place with you.

I try my best not to romanticize anything,
to see what is.

Don't misunderstand.
I speak not ironically.

Absolutely not.

And I hope my childishness
and frankness won't make you feel bad.

I am grateful for the change you started in me.

I would value it, even if illusion,
but there is substance to the change.

Thank you.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^

P.S.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^

Disregard this.
I have been reading Keats.



©Hanka Jaskowska

Hanka Jaskowska

Brian Dion

Tombstone #7 Michael Cleary on Kylenagranagh Hill, After the Trouble

*"Are you a witch, or are you a fairy,
or are you the wife of Michael Cleary?"*
— Nursery Rhyme

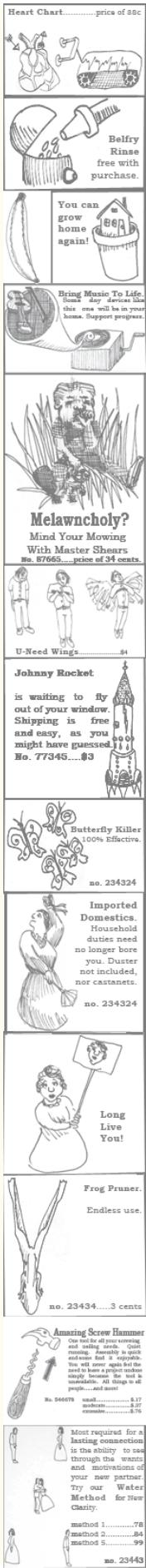
I'll wait until my Bridget reappears
among the bitter grasses which were fed
to that deceiver, writhing in our bed
and pleading, "Michael, I'm your wife!" The tears
she shed seemed almost real and when she bent
to kiss my landed fist, a bruise of doubt
began to spread; a hopeful bleeding out
of my desire to drum her punishment.

But in the end I saw the creature's eyes
reveal the change beneath my darling's skin.
Those blue-green buttons, once so calm and kind,
went wide; the lids, like lips, made silent cries
when by the hearth I poured the paraffin
on one who never truly knew my mind.

This poem originally appeared in **The 2005 Grolier Poetry Prize Annual**.

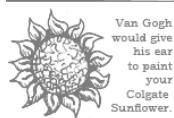
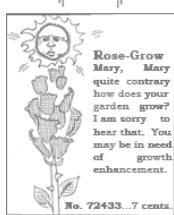
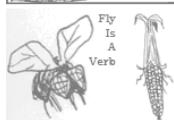
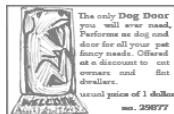
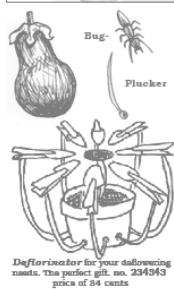


R.K. Sohm



Brent Fisk

Invention, Missouri, Population undetermined



I have created drunken uncles from sackcloth,
lovers from a blue jay's missing tail feathers.

My brother's excited voice rose
like the bark of wet tire on asphalt.
The wobble of my grandmother's head
is the broken wheel of a shopping cart.
My sudden fear, birds kicked up in the underbrush.

Whole towns rise from empty boxes,
skylines twinkling like a fritzed strand of X-mas lights.
The small shops smell of astringent, old books.

Low-slung diners idle along railroad tracks,
tiger lilies and Johnson grass erupting near dumpsters,
one shredded cigar rolling near the door.
Inside, a waitress sweeps quarters from a table,
her forearm now sticky with sugar.

I give her dreams of Chicago,
a produce wholesaler named Brad
who hit her only once but kissed her many times.
I will her my old family farm—

its orchard of apples and pears, hornets carving the fruit hollow.
A possum that trundles the driveway at dusk
while honeysuckle collapses a fence.

And though she wants to idle on the porch, dream of Brad,
I will make her cheek sting, send mosquitoes to drive her in.
I will hire a kind-hearted busboy with a bright future.

Work them the same odd shifts, install a jukebox,
dot the round tables with ugly farmers,
salesmen with liver spots, deviated septums, wrecked voices.

I'll allow dancing in the aisles of the restaurant. Let them have Thursdays off.
And Saturdays, the restaurant closes after lunch.
The rest I'll leave to them.
The rest is up to them.



R.K. Sohm

Eve Anthony Hanninen

Wasn't Snow Nor Hail Kept Me

For Edvard

Too close to the numb
song still, too near touching tongue
to the get-well envelope

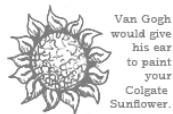
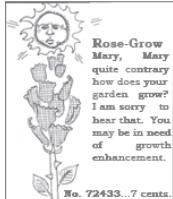
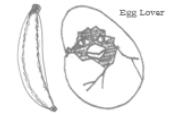
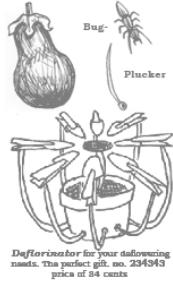
I never sent. Where's the law
against rushing off souls who have yet to receive
the banal good wishes

of late friends like me? I need time
to collect dust in the stamp perforations,
watch the paper yellow, ink fade.



Patricia Wallace Jones





Christopher Hanson

Visiting Your Parents

At first, you note the neatness of the yard.
The lawn, for years unmarked by children's games,
is closely mown. The hedges standing guard
are clipped and uniform, demanding names
and years of residence, as you sneak through.
Your parents seem like monuments; their age
is written into everything they do:
mum's treasured daffodils; their patient rage
at nosy neighbours; dad's home brew (his best!),
so proudly poured, which always tastes like dirt.
You know you're free. Your childhood house arrest
is cancelled. Now, you willingly convert
to early days and chatty, lazy nights,
and savour these forgotten, old delights.



C.D. Russell

Don Kimball

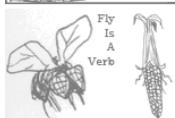
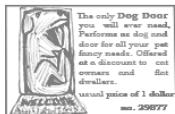
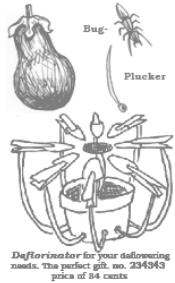
Pariah

Near midnight, caught in our pajamas, we
 corral the beast inside our dining room;
 there, clutching window screens as makeshift shields,
 we track that dark intruder's daunting spirals.
 "What's the matter with that bat?" I shout,
 each time it blunders by a blatant doorway
 or yawning window, "Are you *blind!* Get out!"
 Suddenly — it drops below the table
 (where I resist the urge to whack, to kill),
 then swoops around, again, so close to us
 we almost feel its chilling flight beneath
 our wobbly knees — to flee the glaring light
 and buzz mosquitoes in a boundless night.



Hanka Jaskowska

	Heart Chart.....price of 35c
	Belfry Rinse free with purchase.
	You can grow home again!
	Bring Music To Life. Some day devices like this one will be in your home. Support progress.
	Melawncoly? Mind Your Mowing With Master Shears no. 87665....price of 34 cents.
	U-Need Wings.....84
	Johnny Rocket is waiting to fly out of your window. Shipping is free and easy, as you might have guessed. No. 77345....\$3
	Butterfly Killer 100% Effective. no. 234324
	Imported Domesticus. Household duties need no longer bore you. Duster not included, nor castanets. no. 234324
	Long Live You!
	Frog Pruner. Endless use. no. 23434....3 cents
	Amazing Screw Hammer One tool for all your screwing needs. It holds a nail and some feet to get a hold. You will never again feel the need to buy another tool simply because the tool is unscrewed. It's strong and people....and mice! No. 54679 nail.....\$.17 cascade.....\$.27 cascade.....\$.26
	Most required for a lasting connection is the ability to see through the wants and ambitions of your new partner. Try out Water Method for New Clarity. method 1.....\$.78 method 2.....\$.84 method 5.....\$.99 no. 23443



Danielle Lapidoth

Map of Known Countries

Really, it is best to draw your own. Do not trace. The spider does it in his web; the runner with his pace. But really, it is best to draw your own.

Recall your furthest place, and make a line to lead you back. Remember not to trace. Some start with their death, some with their face. The pilot uses steel

and space. He uses us to prove his path, but you should really draw your own. If you have given birth, consider silver. If not, consider lace. Make a line to lead you

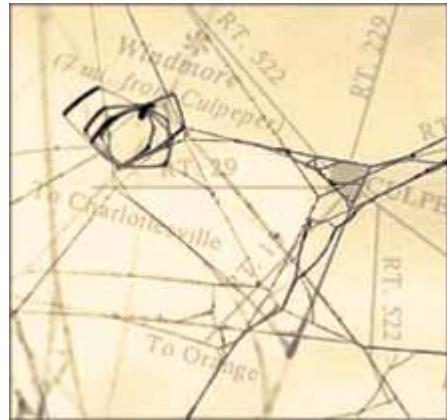
back to when you knew just who you were. Toss a flare: build a cairn. Bury a pearl and X it for your lover. Leave a trace and open each fold wide to welcome guests.

The stylist uses scissors; the mugger uses mace. The surgeon chooses the sharpest knife to cut what you desire most. Recall your furthest place, and make a line to lead you back.

It's not a race. Once you've arrived, leave it in an unsafe place. It needs the rain and other maps. The arsonist uses fire. Cancer uses pain. Lost, it will lead you back to when you knew

just who you were. Be most yourself and make a better map. Keep dragons in their place or let them run claws through your braids. Accept this as embrace. Watch the pine draw

its own in sap. Wherever you are, recall your furthest place and make a line to lead you back. Love and leave it in an unsafe place. Make another. Be most yourself. Leave (no) trace.



R.K. Sohm

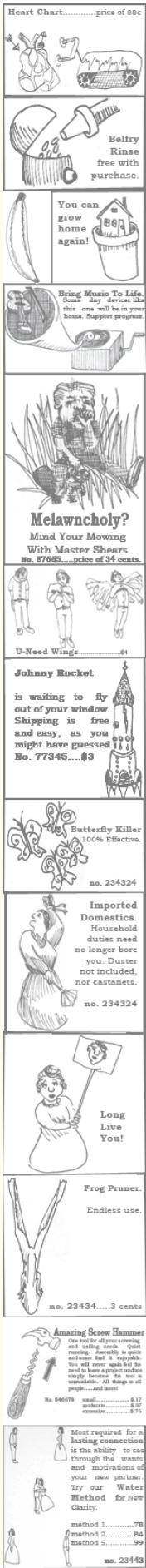
Ralph C. La Rosa

Au Claire de la Loon

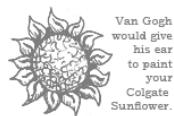
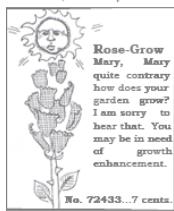
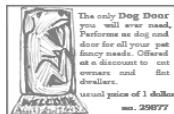
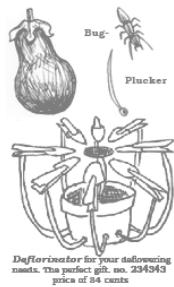
A loon that laughed on Echo Lake
eluded me, but once, alone
in dismal twilight mist, I saw
his head pop up beside my boat—
he stared with shrewd, demonic eyes
until his slippery serpent shape
insinuated inky depths.
He rose and dove repeatedly,
and then abruptly disappeared.
Under his spell, I worked the oars
and circled twice around the lake,
convinced my wits would win this game.
But at his cry, I saw him bobbing
on my crazed, reflected face.
As we divined each other's mind
beneath embracing lunar light,
our laughter echoed through the night.



R.K. Sohm



Mary Ann Mayer



Animitas

Try to ignore
the packs of stray dogs
while touring Chile,

where the wine estates are,
outside of Santiago.

Instead, listen as the tour guide

points out little wooden houses,
Animitas, shrines
to people hit by cars.

When he suggests a prayer,
try to ignore
the pup

crawling on its belly
through barbed wire
toward the bus.

Listen to his story of Chilean wines;
terrific acidity and bright sweet fruit
to rival Napa.

Smile, take his arm, move indoors
to taste the 2003, just released;
an outstanding vintage.

Don't look at his boots.
Pretend you saw
dog-houses.



Patricia Wallace Jones

John Milbury-Steen

Pronoun Trouble

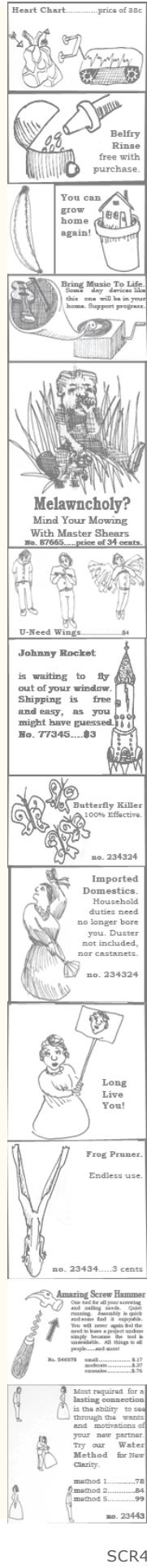
They tried out all their futile cures on me.
They wrote their articles for you to read,
charting the dis-solution that I peed.
Some got tenure by me (prolonged life).
I got death, a definite relief.
And when I died, I found (bingo!) the key.

Passerby, stop passing and come here.
Consent to stoop to One Who Knows. Lean near
The burning of the wick of telomere
is not the crucial thing: it is that we're
doomed compounded of the **it** and **I**,
Pronoun Trouble being why we die,

and even you, so lusty and so able,
will come down down a-down with Pronoun Trouble.

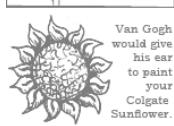
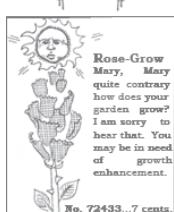
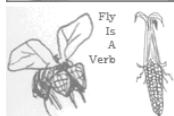
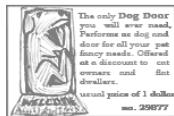
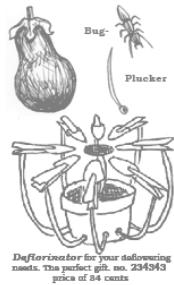


Patricia Wallace Jones



JBMulligan

guarding the sky



Who is watching
those acres of sky
I cannot see?

Do we have it covered?
Get back to me,
get back to me now.
All units report.

We need to see it all
somehow, or the sky
will crack and break and fall.

But we all agree: it's there.
No tumble of blue petals
from the broken dome,
no need to resort
to hurricane measures.
There's nothing further to do.

We can call it a day,
head wearily home
under sturdy and darkening blue,
to consider our treasures.



R.K. Sohm

Rick Mullin

Amity After the Fire

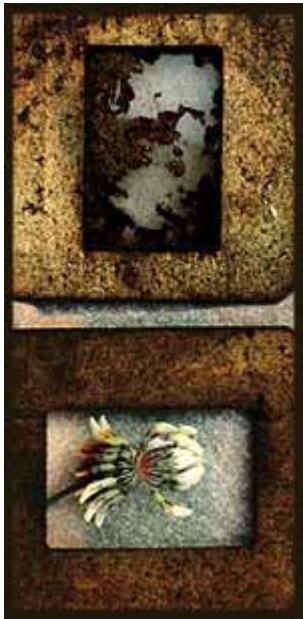
My muse returned from war. Her swollen stumps
were wrapped in rags and paper as she pumped
her arms and pushed her yellow skateboard down
the sidewalk. Amity is back in town
and living in my basement now. I hear
her castors on the floor at night—I'm near
exhaustion, with my inspiration stuck
for benefits despite her service. Luck

would have it, sleep is not among her needs.
There's constant feeding, though, and when she bleeds—
it happens intermittently—my heart
contracts and ices up. I have to start
compression on the remnant of her thigh.
She gently strokes my hair, and then a sigh
I never heard in all her teasing days
accompanies an unfamiliar gaze

from eyes that used to tell me something strange.
They've lost their mystery. As I arrange
a knee-high desk for Amity, prepare
myself to take dictation, I'm aware
she's crossed a line. I used to chase her form,
those perfect thighs, her arms and hair would storm
into my life and leave me nights of sweet
fulfillment or frustration. God, her feet,

the perpetrators of the vixen's trick
of disappearing for a week — a stick,
now, and that slab on wheels. I couldn't touch
her then, yet here I dress her wounds. So much
has changed since Amity embedded with
the wind, "Before the Fire!" her shibboleth.
It echoes in my soul—the soul that longed
to lie with Amity, the soul so wronged

and yet rewarded. Now, I want to sleep.
but I'm on call, her needs are dire, and deep
into the night my ministrations plait
a prelude to the work that she claims fate
prefigures. "Canto I," her voice, without
its old élan, surprises through a bout
of smoker's cough and red encoded warning,
"Engines that You Heard on Tuesday Morning."



Donald Zirilli

First appeared in: Best of Café Café Summer 2007: A collection of poems from MiPOesias Poetic Community.



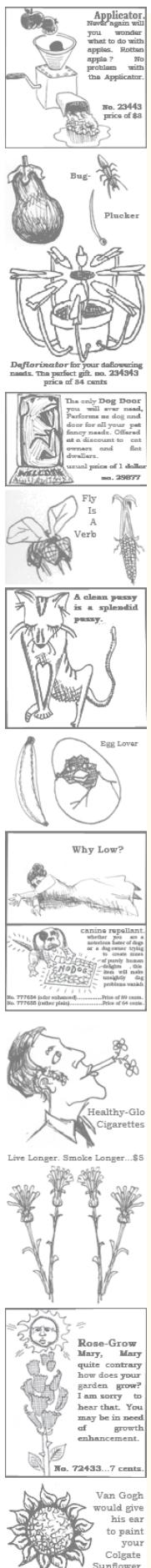
Kirk Nessel

Archile Gorky at Forty

Nobody lived bad luck like he did: the murals in Newark blotted over by fools; the fire that ate five years of dread and paint; days lost and months and false starts and faux pas and who knew, the cosmos incorrectly aligned; and his penis refusing almost always to rise and rage and self-hatred and the wife shipping out (he pledged his love to Marie by pilfering books, invented his name (bitter Achilles) and and past and credentials); and next it was cancer, then the car wreck and broken neck and deeper dark and then the neck snapped again: this time out back with a rope. And not one plane throbbed overhead, trailing its vapor. No quake or outcry; just wind overhead and a door banging somewhere and a glimpse of something intense, the village he was as a kid, plain, unadorned, an ocean and a sea and a life away from the Housatonic and Newark; a village of steeples and dirt tracks and moss and men with scythes singing; of porcupine nests and wild carrots, and that ancient leafless poplar with bits of torn skirt affixed on low branches for hope; and in the shade farther on, that holy blue rock stuck in black earth, and the childless women still young bending bare-breasted to touch it, nipple to stone, praying for luck, praying to God that luck would rub off.



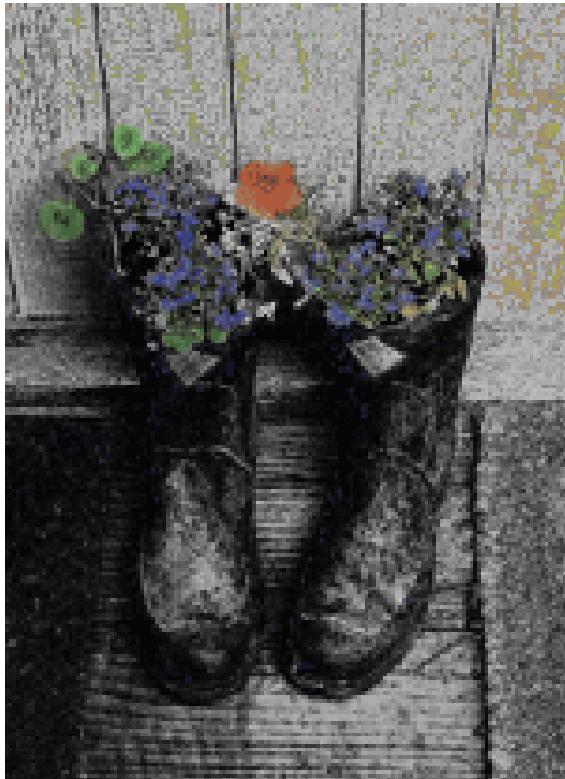
Hanka Jaskowska



Cami Park

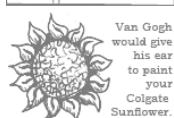
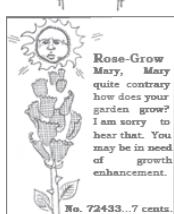
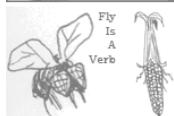
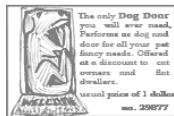
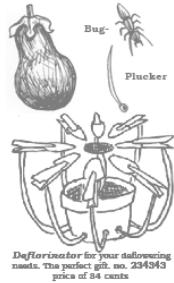
Articulation

If I could articulate the sound of hard-soled boots
 in an empty room, the glacial significance of your merciful
 trespass as I, in your keep, wait, smitten and pruned upon
 this carefully made bed, if I could articulate that sound, like clattering nails,
 like nails clattering down like that biblical flood plague of frogs,
 if I could do that, well, wouldn't that just be gravy?



Patricia Wallace Jones





Rose Poto

Love Sonnet

The soldierness of your astronomy
so gentle hungries in my panging blue,
it shivers the metal mail, unrusting you,
unresting in the owlest leaves of me.

Pitier velvets, trembler sheets of glass,
more forest bloods, of piner hills bereft,
never endeared a dawn; nor fawned a theft
with sharper slenders from more willing grass.

O faint would I elfing go, and bladeful sleep
amid the winter-bell's unthroated soft,
never to sweet again your ladly cry,

if bellward be your summer's lively-keep;
and wolfen salt that cheeks your lash aloft
were petal-dreamt upon the elfer's eye.



C.D. Russell

Rose Poto

Shotgun

His smoke shoots down her throat, an urgent stream
she likes the more because of where it's been.

He's giving it to her. She takes it in.

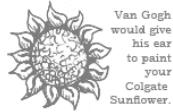
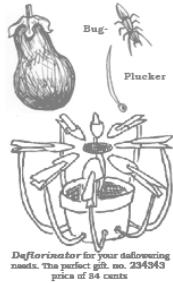
It's not the weed that makes her green eyes gleam,
but pride. Ha! If only Mary Ann
could see her now! Those skinny twelve-year-old
St. Paulsies with their clammy hands can't hold
a candle to this dreamy, mustached man.

He whispers, "God, I shouldn't be doing this."
Forbidden! Secret! Sin! The trinity
of yumminess. A woman of mystery,
she's snaring him with her seductive wiles.
"Aw, don't be such a fart." They quasi-kiss
again. His lashes lower: two black smiles.



R.K. Sohm

Heart Chartprice of 88c
Belfry Rinse free with purchase.
You can grow home again!
Bring Music To Life. Some day devices like this one will be in your home. Support progress.
Melawncoly? Mind Your Mowing With Master Shears no. 87665....price of 34 cents.
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Peter Schwartz

statehood

it's belladonna ladyship with penny royal tea
it's a false widow
exchanging porcelain overseas

it's the brittle little cakes that break
as we take sugar from snowflakes
when neanderthal
needs

it's birdseed and beer gardens
the amber fellowship
of reeds

it's coaxing father T.
to number the parts of his heart
while she whispers siamese
outside the park

it's inelegant,

it's prosthesis, a sarcophagus
a touching of cups
it's mother N. whooping it up
at the steps of
enough



R.K. Sohm

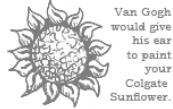
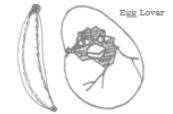
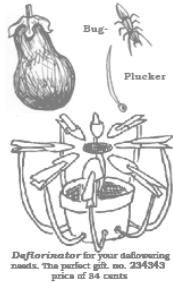
Janice D. Soderling

Lunch on the Glass Verandah

Transparent hands lift and drop the obvious questions, turning them on bone china plates like hors d'oeuvres. Tap-tapping the glass, tight buds of hollyhocks wait like lips to open. Pink-fleshed salmon immobilized on a linen bandage. Baby peas dead in their pods. Pale stalks of asparagus. New potatoes, a brave new hat, a new sensation of falling, over the edge, into summer, into something deeper: a mirror or the funeral smell of roses.

In vitro,
the patients dine. Two knives, two forks
glitter and pierce sharper than the sun's prongs.
Butterflies beat their wings in antiseptic
air. A whiff of ether. The table stretches
like a hospital corridor.





Janice D. Soderling

Portrait of Them Growing Old Together

Tight-lipped
and her pulse throbs like
the belly of a frog.
Her windpipe contracts;
her octopus mouth hovers.

His eyes pick the newspaper columns
like carrion crows at a carcass.
His ears inhale the gaslike silence
seeping across the floor.
Their toenails grow quietly.

Author's translation of *Porträtt av två som åldras tillsammans*
published in Horisont, No. 4, Vol 33, 1986 Finland



Patricia Wallace Jones

Tony Williams

Silt

The fish feel safer when it rains, and don't connect
the murk with their world becoming shallower.

The drifts swallow their best nooks, and even cover
those eyesores Pirellicoatl drops from heaven.

No wonder their fishy wit is subdued: it must fill their stomachs,
a ballast to keep their swim-bladders honest, minds ponderous and hard to turn.
But they are still iridescent, even if this fact should become invisible
when dredgers come to cut a channel, letting loose a stench.

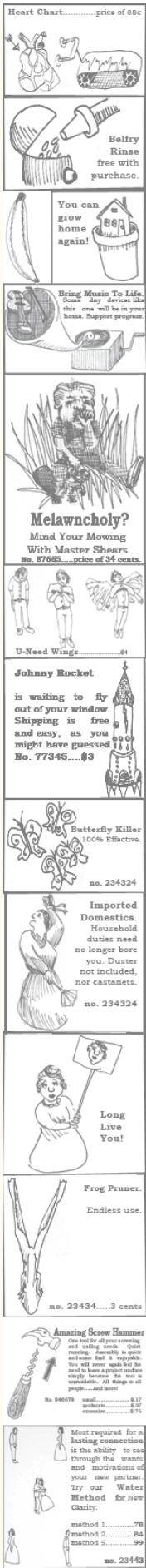
Somewhere upriver, companies manoeuvre their machines
to clear the woods and smooth the way forever.

The soil they expose ups and leaves for a holiday at the coast.
You can move anything by water, even rock, even mountains:

billions of quartzes arrive to tell river-folk it is time to leave.
But their turbid minds turn their eyes from the dust,
and when they drink the masses of minerals they absorb
falsely satisfy their hunger and dull their willingness to move.

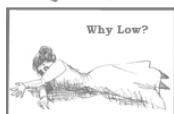


Patricia Wallace Jones

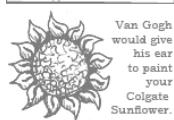
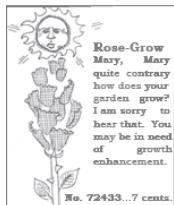




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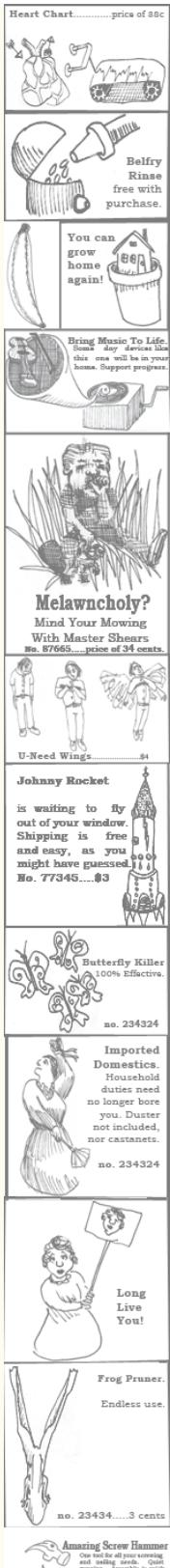


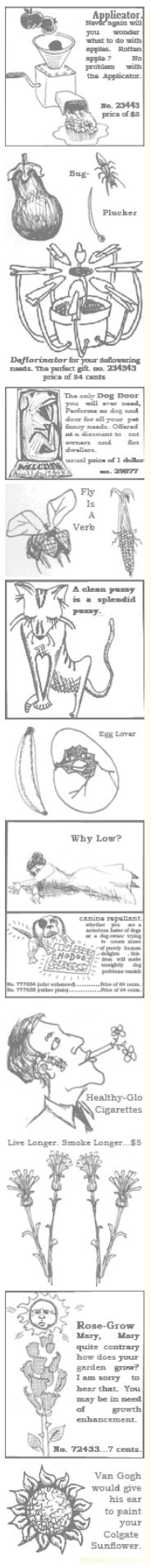
THE SHIT CREEK FALLS

Shit Creek Review



Prose





Form, Ego and the Avant-Garde: A Contrarian View

by D. C. Andersson

Anyone casting a suitably dyspeptic eye over the contemporary poetry wars will be struck by the indisputable fact that the tradition of experimental and avant-gardist writing from the 1960s and 1970s onwards (key figures being so diverse as J. H. Prynne, Tom Raworth and Douglas Oliver representing Cambridge, London and "International" respectively) has proven much more difficult to domesticate and make popular than any other previous avant-garde. Every undergraduate course in French literature, for example, duly takes note of Apollinaire and the Surrealists, and the standard-bearers of English modernism from Ezra Pound to Zukovsky to the poetry of Lawrence Durrell (though some take him for a traditional writer, he is, compared to such other popular figures of the 'forties as Heath-Stubbs or Dylan Thomas, a firm believer in syntactic dislocation and the muse of a non-logical poetry, as his theoretical work, *A Key to Modern British Poetry* demonstrates) were within a couple of decades read with affection and enthusiasm by a wide public. How many people will ever read much of the work of Ulli Freer with understanding and pleasure? Partly, the difference can be attributed to publishers, and the decline of the independent bookshop. Such an economic analysis will only partly do, I think. The close connection between certain theories of discourse and the practice of poetry must also take its fair share of the blame.

One thinks of how
so many great
poets of
friendship... have
also been poets of
ego.

I have often thought that underlying many of the distinctions between rival schools of poetry has been the extent to which form (which demands to be recognized as such, rather than something that any coherent content has) and ego are to be aligned. Obviously there are different ways of politicizing this question, and it is one of the failures of the conservative position that it not been able to coherently articulate its intellectual presuppositions, with the normal conservative response that 'We don't need a theory, for what we are doing is more organic and more dependent on normal human relations' being woefully inadequate. For some, left-wing ideas of the decentred self under the lights of the 1960s avant-garde (and various forms of post-structuralist theory) seem

Form, Ego and the Avant-Garde

appropriate (whether or not these were in fact drawn from text or seemingly “collective” practice of other art forms). An alternative soi-disant radical nexus of ideas would be drawn from the various mutations of feminism from the nineteen seventies onward. The left, however, does not have a monopoly on ideas of the requirement to batten down a childish and self-seeking ego, with the resulting consumerism and domination. A right-wing intellectual model for dealing with the pains and pleasures of the ego, with all of its necessary growing up and disciplining, would entail a sort of sympathetic engagement with institutions (a friend came up recently with the formulation that a Tory is someone who believes institutions are wiser than individuals).

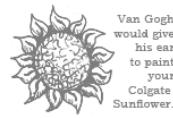
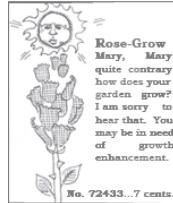
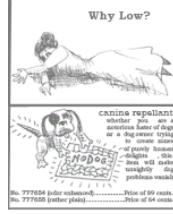
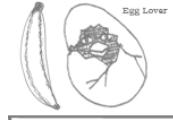
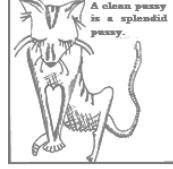
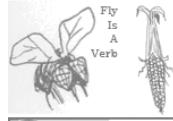
One ends up with the hardly striking observation that taking different modes of social and ethical engagement as foundational will naturally result in other forms of or relations to the self with a knock-on effect on aesthetics and the forms and concerns and tone of the poetry one writes. One thinks of how so many great poets of friendship (from Horace to Donne to Auden to John Fuller) have also been poets of ego. On a more personal note, let me say that whenever I write of human relations in my own poetry, I tend simply to want to record accurately the stable socialized commitments that ebb and flow in and out of the networks of friendship and love and sex. This is, fairly obviously, a recognizably gay male aesthetic that privileges a combination of ego, archness and group identity and ability to ventriloquize others, yet to do so respectfully and with honesty. As my friend Simon said of our rather more “angry” friend Mike, “You don’t have to fight it, you know? Society’s not the enemy. Nasty people are the enemy.”

For some this approach places the muse of poetry too readily at the service of rhetorical functions (to console, to teach, to persuade into bed) that they will find are the route to the “Astleyization” (those *Staying Alive* anthologies) of poetry or its simplistic totalitarian aims. It is important not to be explicit. The range of humane warmth and the Horatian social aesthetic of course depends upon a set of material under-girdings that many will consider lead to a consumerist aesthetic — in the end, like Auden, I prefer “poems” to “poetry”. Pound wrote dismissively (was it in his *ABC of Reading?*) of Cowper that he was simply doing in poetry what was being better done by the novel at the time, that his pastoral work would be unthinkable without the novel. By contrast, I think of that as a virtue, since I want to make poetry more expansive rather than more pure. In the same way, I rather like the novelettish autobiographical narrative poem.

There is an idea that is floating about (chiefly among poets) that poetry is somehow in the twentieth century the marker of true literature, and that it shouldn’t be infected by less pure modes of cognition or narration or argumentation



Form, Ego and the Avant-Garde



such as one finds in the feature film, the novel or the dialogue. Perhaps this is true. Let me, however, suggest a heresy: that the sum total of emotion, intellect, music, image and argument has sometimes been most fully achieved by poetry, but, at other times in the course of history, other art forms carry (as Pound would say) a greater "charge". Naturally, none of the above excuses bad writing by anyone, but I do think that it's interesting that one of my favourite poems written avowedly under the hermetic influence of the Cambridge school is in fact by Charles Lambert, whose main métier is as a novelist, and whose poem "The Gift" (which may be found on his blog) deals with a recognizable human situation with much in the way of disciplined emotional sustenance. Perhaps when more of the linguistic innovation and experimental sensibilities of the avant-garde can be put to the service of what one may refer as an understanding of the human condition, a Leavisite 'view of life', then it will reclaim its mantle as the standard bearer of the arts, and, with changes in the draconian authoritarian publishing conditions, wonderful poetry in a contemporary mode (not the sheer complacent boredom of the American New Formalists nor, for all his integrity, the unreadable aridity of Ulli Freer) can be read and enjoyed widely again. Here's hoping.

Post-Humanism

by Arthur Durkee

Humanism, in the literary arts, is the idea that “man is the measure of all things.” This is a viewpoint that has been in the philosophical ascendant for centuries now, to the point where most people simply take it for granted as natural law. In fact, it’s an illusion, a solipsistic illusion, and a particularly self-absorbed, culturally-egotistic one. The arrogance comes in primarily when human writing is framed as natural writing: the only natural text worth discussing.

This is worth examining in detail. Gary Snyder writes about humanism and posthumanism in his long essay ‘Tawny Grammar’, collected in his book of essays, *The Practice of the Wild*, published by North Point Press. Snyder is worth quoting from at length:

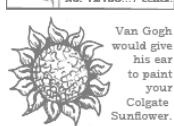
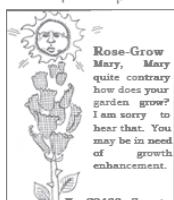
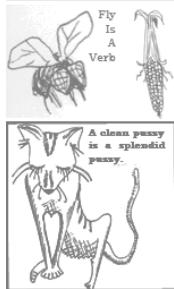
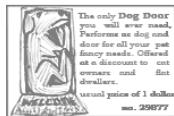
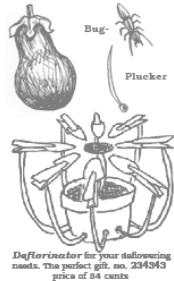
One of the formal criteria of humanist scholarship is that it be concerned with the scrutiny of texts. A text is information stored through time. The stratigraphy of rocks, layers of pollen in swamps, the outward expanding circles in the trunk of a tree, can be seen as texts. The calligraphy of rivers winding back and forth over the land, leaving layer upon layer of traces of previous riverbeds is text. The layers of history in language become a text of language itself. . .

Euro-American humanism has been a story of writers and scholars who were deeply moved and transformed by their immersion in earlier histories and literatures. Their writings have provided useful cultural — rather than theological or biological — perspectives on the human situation. The Periclean Greeks digested the Homeric lore, which went back to the Bronze Age and before. The Romans enlarged themselves by their study of Greece. Renaissance seekers nourished themselves on Greece and Rome. Today a new breed of posthumanists is investigating and experiencing the diverse little nations of the planet, coming to appreciate the “primitive,” and finding prehistory to be an ever-expanding field of richness. We get a glimmering of the depth of our ultimately single human root. Wild nature is inextricably in the weave of self and culture. The “post” in the term posthumanism is on account of the word human. The dialogue to open next would be among all beings, toward a rhetoric of ecological relationships. This is not to put down the human: the “proper study of mankind” is what it means to be human. It’s enough to be shown in school that we’re kin to all the rest: we have to feel it all the way through. Then we can also be uniquely “human” with no sense of special privilege. . . .

When humans know themselves, the rest of nature is right there. (pp. 66–68)



Post-Humanism



I find this to be remarkably similar to what Robinson Jeffers said about his ideas of Inhumanism. The parallels are striking, although the language is very different. Jeffers wrote, in his preface to *The Double Axe* (1948):

The first part of *The Double Axe* was written during the war and finished a year before the war ended, and it bears the scars; but the poem is not primarily concerned with that grim folly. Its burden, as of some previous work of mine, is to present a certain philosophical attitude, which might be called Inhumanism, a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence. It seems time that our race began to think as an adult does, rather than like an egocentric baby or insane person. This manner of thought and feeling is neither misanthropic nor pessimist, though two or three people have said so and may again. It involves no falsehoods, and is a means of maintaining sanity in slippery times; it has objective truth and human value. It offers a reasonable detachment as rule of conduct, instead of love, hate and envy. It neutralizes fanaticism and wild hopes; but it provides magnificence for the religious instinct, and satisfies our need to admire greatness and rejoice in beauty.

Snyder speaks in a gentle, Buddhist-inflected voice, while Jeffers speaks more harshly, more directly, in his Calvinist-raised voice. Yet I believe they are essentially saying the same thing; and they are statements that I agree with strongly, both as a poet and as a human. Having visited or lived among many of the landscapes that Jeffers and Snyder have inhabited and written about, I find myself caring deeply about preserving the natural beauty of those places.

In retrospect, it is ironic that Jeffers was often misunderstood to be misanthropic or bitterly anti-human. In fact, both Snyder and Jeffers explicitly state that their philosophies are not anti-human, misanthropic, or pessimistic. That they have been perceived to be just that, is an indictment of the self-same human-centered solipsism that they are presenting an alternative to, to bring humanism into balance with those natural forces that are part of us, and also much larger than us.

In Western thought, we seem to need to continually be reminded of these ideas; they keep getting lost in recurrent waves of theoretical navel-gazing. But it is

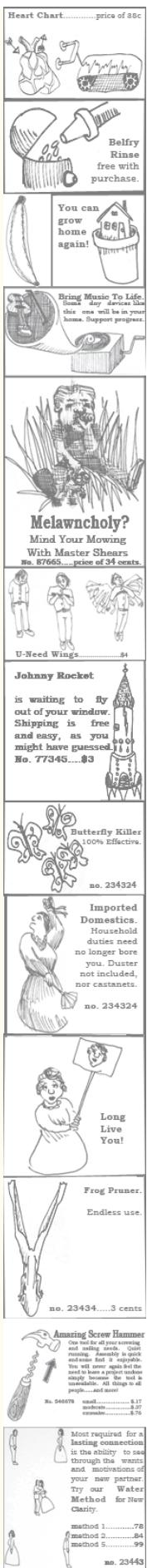
Auden reminds us
that we are part of
nature: nature is
all around us, and
in us...

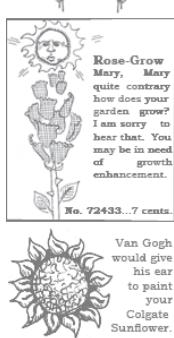
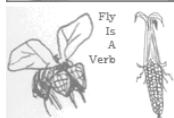
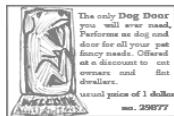
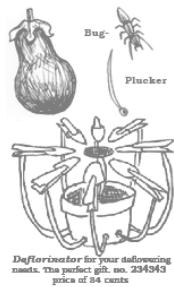
instructive to remember how many great Western thinkers have written attempts to redress the imbalance. Man's proper place in nature, as part of nature, was what Henry David Thoreau wrote about in much of his work, notably in *Walden*. I also am reminded of part of W. H. Auden's argument in his essay book on poetics, *The Enchaféd Flood*, wherein Auden reminds us that we are part of nature: nature is all around us, and in us, and the division between "City" and "Wilderness", as represented by desert and ocean, is a purely mental division, not an actual one. As Snyder writes, "*Wild nature is inextricably in the weave of self and culture.*" I read an article recently about how wild species have made comfortable homes for themselves within our major cities: peregrine falcons nest on our skyscrapers; bald eagles fly along the Mississippi River through downtown Minneapolis; there are thriving packs of coyotes living in Chicago and Boston and Denver.

Recently, I have been noting a new rise of environmentalist rhetoric, this time emerging from within the Biblical fundamentalist community (not a group I've ever considered very rigorous or logical in their theology, which often has little to do with actual Biblical scholarship). It's amazing to find allies about environmental issues coming forward from many surprising directions; regardless of any other differences, it is a hopeful sign, since the Christian evangelical community has traditionally been hostile to environmental issues.

All of these writers and poets, and their ideas about our proper place in the natural world, are converging on a point that the "primitive" (pre-Euro-American climax civilization) cultures knew quite well: *we are not the lords of creation, we are part of the created*. We seem to be living at last, now, in a posthumanist era, where we are being continually brought up against reminders that we're not separate from nature, or from each other, and also that we are not "in dominion over nature", one of the most grievous interpretations of Biblical theology; but rather that we must exist in partnership with nature, or die.

So, in our poetry, it is perhaps time to seek out a posthumanist poetry: a genuine antidote to the current dominance of the navel-gazing confessional lyric, and furthermore an antidote to the solipsistic self-referential hermeticism of the New York School and Language Poetry. A posthumanist poetry that does not exclude humanity, but also does not put humanity into high relief in opposition to nature, but in balanced, reverential, embodied partnership with nature.





A Close Reading of J. R. Q. MacPrune's "Now"

by Prof. H. Blumqvist

Now

Light. Now the open field falls across the river. Only now. And I see the memory fully. Thy youth's now, so gazed on proud.

by J. R. Q. MacPrune

These notes have been devised both to aid the literary critic and the common reader. I present them in hope that they might prove testament to MacPrune's memory and illuminate this, his greatest work.

The poem is a psalm to his native Scotland, a country he once described as "a lump of rock somewhere near Oxford," but here MacPrune acknowledges the influence of his Scottish origins — "Scotland was my birthplace, and each poetic word or event relates to my birth. For instance, this battered cod I am eating now is the poem, not only the words on the page."

MacPrune left Scotland for New York City, aged 2.

- The title "Now" contains an obvious nod to Jim Carruth's:

While others graze scarce pasture
One cow partners the mountain air
To dance the barren landscape

That poem's "cow" is as much like "now" as "sow" or "wow!" One can affirm nothing precise about a "cow". Not now, not ever.

MacPrune stated, "I prefer reading English poems when they have been translated into languages I don't understand. 'Belgium' or 'venison' make less sense to me than 'uitwaaien' or 'koshatnik'. The 'now' of my poem finds its significance in the animalistic foreign-ness of the moment."

- "Light" — MacPrune's famous distrust of poems that conclude with the word "light" or "puberty" lies behind this uncharacteristic act of wit. Light emerges,

MacPrune had always denied the existence of the singular.

A Close Reading

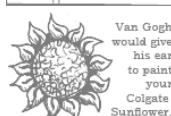
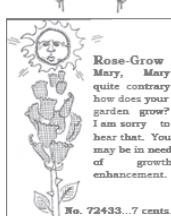
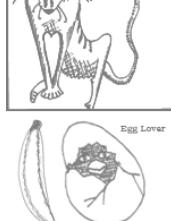
with biblical force, in the beginning, but for MacPrune, of course, “light” has no substantive reality, only gradation, shift. From A. R. Sborthes:

“A language that is *truly literary* works always to undercut its own signification. It describes nothing beyond its self and goes on to unaffirm even that.”

- “Now the open field falls across the / river” — a clear reference to the fall of man (Milton) and the final mythic journey across the River Styx (Dante), but MacPrune sees only the tangle of branches (Yeats) at the end of the crossing (Heaney). “Across the river and into the trees,” he jotted in his wife’s (the post-post-structuralist poet and critic, Lora Roedinh) notebook in a Havana youth hostel. This image may enter the poem through a supreme act of imagination.
- “Only now” — MacPrune’s use of the word “only” parallels Presley’s *Only You*, but with the immediate and playfully-chiming “now”. “In language, one harbours no expectations,” wrote MacPrune to his childhood mentor, Prof. Jack Ishbry. “A word is written that could have been any other word.” Ishbry did not reply. This moment marked the split between the two men. In a clear act of revenge, Ishbry published a sequence of 500 extended villanelles, all employing the second-person singular. MacPrune had always denied the existence of the singular.
- “And I see the memory fully” — the “I” here signifies what MacPrune terms the “multitudinous consciousness”. Critics have interpreted this concept in various ways, but for MacPrune, the phrase resists precise definition. He has directed critics to a little-known haiku of Sorley MacLean, which contains the words “latitudinous conscience” in Gaelic.
- “Memory fully” recalls MacPrune’s dictum, “One should have been only what one must be.” Images of hamburgers held with trembling hands, and a lamplight glow (Eliot), spring to mind.
- “Thy youth’s now” — Sir Thomas Wyatt’s *A Renouncing of Love* — “Farewell, Love, and all thy lawes for ever,” Billy Grime’s epic prose-poem, *Jeezus, Designer Psychiatry, and Yoof Culture*, Rob A. Mackenzie’s *Dated*, previously titled *Then*, a poem lost to posterity when MacPrune, during an eight-hour conversion to Gothik-Marxism, burned every page Mackenzie had written. “That title-change from *Then* to *Now* was significant and helped me finish



A Close Reading



the line,” MacPrune wrote in his 900-page *Collected Self-Critical Works*. “But Mackenzie was ridiculously old-hat, even for the 15th century.”

- “so gazed on proud” — “gazed”, only an “r” different from “grazed”, which evokes cows again. Whatever “cows” might be.
- “Proud”, besides the slant-rhyme with Ezra Pound (MacPrune - “Obviously the word ‘Pound’ does not feature in the poem, but L4 of Pound’s *Separation on the River Kiang* is much in evidence. It’s what I call a *silent slant*”), also mimics Samuel Butler’s “Nor can there on the face of Ground / an individual Beard be found”. MacPrune shaved for the first time in his life while working on this poem.

Further reading — *Bovine Pastoral* (Jim Carruth), “East Coker” (T.S. Eliot) L14-15, *Greatest Hits* (Prof. Jack Ishbry), *Sonnet No. 2* (Shakespeare) L3, *A Social History of Mountain Dairy Farming on Small Islands* (Brnozny) pp. 36-968.

J. R. Q. MacPrune died on an unspecified date last year. Only his thumb has been recovered. Some reports suggest that the rest of his body has risen from the dead and is teaching English literature in a secondary school on an unnamed Hebridean island.

Rob Mackenzie may have had a hand in this.

Surroundings — <http://robmack.blogspot.com>

Groping in the Dark: Reading a Poem by Judith Rechter by Mary Meriam

My Molly You Were Spying

You saw us walk out of the movies
dazed from a bear like darkness
arm in arm; I had just spilled
popcorn over her dress and
she clung to me in the scary parts.

You questioned me about whom I was with.
Always the correctness of inflection
and the despotism of will. Amid the fierce
Christmas lights of the mall, I looked
for exits and saw your black cascading hair
that fell so justly over your eyes.

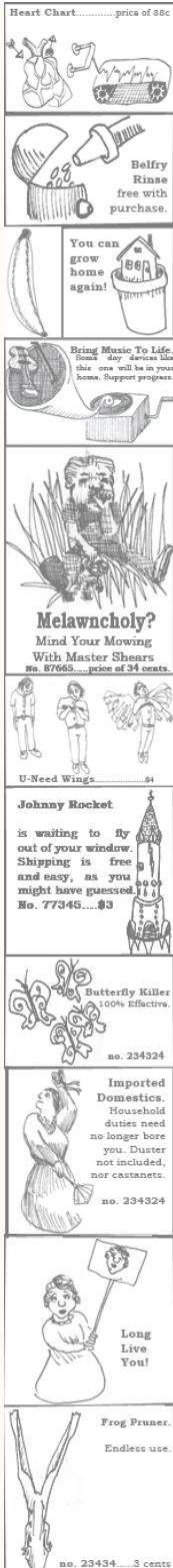
Now they were sad as I introduced my
new companion; and I was suddenly
bereft of vision and wondered why
I could never make commitment.
I watched you on the down escalator.
Didn't you belong in bed?

My Molly why were you spying
or was it mere accident
and retribution?
What a waste of sweetness.
And so I had my newest partner
in my closet for a while.

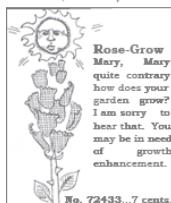
At last I remembered your tears
over a tin of hot chocolate
and wept for all my perversities
that gathered in my cup—
the dregs of feeling all alone again
without my faithful skeleton.

© Judith Rechter, *What I Want From You*, RAW ArT PRESS, 2006

"The situation of a woman in some version of that-culture-in-which-we-all-exist may be described as the desirous reader. She is the reader desiring something, some thing not yet there, perhaps partially there, fleetingly there, oppositionally there, reductively there; if there, perhaps unread, and unread is unseen, unheard." (DuPlessis, Rachel. *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice*. London: Routledge, 1990, p.120.)



Groping in the Dark



How do we read each other? In a culture-within-a-culture, such as the lesbian culture within the mainstream culture, signs and languages may go untranslated. Nevertheless, the delicate dance of amour is always accompanied by the music of one culture or another. The choreographer understands both the dance and the music. In "My Molly You Were Spying," the poet, Judith Rechter, is the choreographer, creating the dance for three dancers: the narrator, the new companion/partner, and the former companion/partner.

The poem is presented simply, in five stanzas, with average-length lines, without any further formal or metrical patterns. And yet, the poem is clearly well-formed and whole. What makes it so? The image of the eye, for one. Look for words related to the eye or seeing: saw, movies, looked, saw, vision, watched, spying, tears, wept. Seeing, here, is understanding, and this poem reminds us that understanding means love, acceptance, kindness. Of course, in our culture, there can be no kindness without sadness. See how sadness and kindness are simultaneously expressed with such exquisite poignancy in these lines:

...this poem
reminds us that
understanding
means love,
acceptance,
kindness.

I watched you on the down escalator.
Didn't you belong in bed?

Where do these three dancers belong? In the bear like darkness of the movies? Amid the fierce Christmas lights of the mall? On the escalator? In bed? In the closet? In the dregs of feeling? Are they coming out of the movies? Looking for exits? What potion or goddess is available for these three dancers? "Here comes Sappho, scorching the history books with tongues of flame." (Jeanette Winterson) Listen, Aphrodite is speaking:

"Who again convince? What quick friendship
do you want? Who hurts you
this time?
Does she run? Then she'll chase.
Didn't like the gifts? Then she'll give them.
She does not love? Soon.
No choice for her."

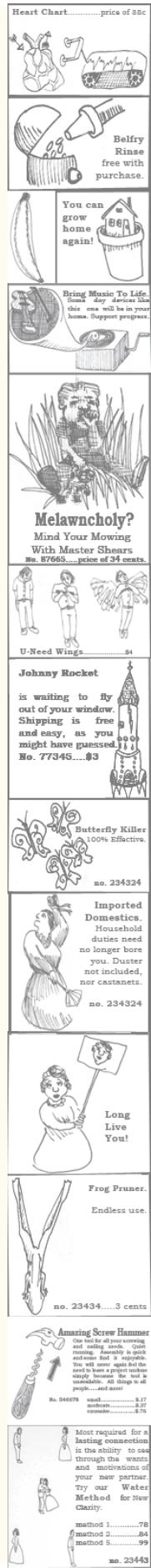
Click here to read "Love and the Trick-Stitching Child" translated from Sappho by Brian Carr. I introduce this poem because I hear a similarity of tone, in the

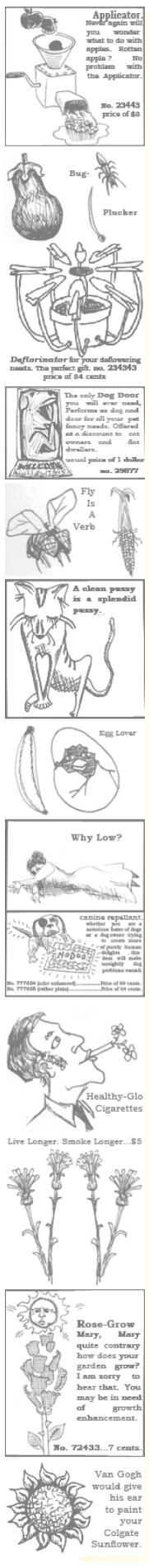
Groping in the Dark

direct questioning and intimate poignancy, with “My Molly You Were Spying.” Also, the former companion/partner is goddess-like, with her “black cascading hair” and possible retribution.

Editors reading this poem may feel an urgent need to hyphenate “bear like”. But the poet’s deliberate idiosyncrasy announces, in the second line, that the culture evoked in the poem is different from the culture at large, more animistic perhaps, a simile with metaphorical aspirations.

One might conclude that this poem’s form is a steady unfolding of dramatic scenes, evenly spaced. The eye’s focus moves from public culture (movie, mall, Christmas), turns on the public/private culture of bed (the poem’s ne plus ultra), enters the privacy of the closet (storage, hiding), and ends all alone with a release of tears (insight).





Beowulf to Borges — from *Requited*, Chapter XI: “Masters of Memory”

by Tim Murphy

Born of Nordic and Irish stock in chilly Minnesota, I conceived a passion for the folk music of the Irish, the Scots, and their descendants in Canada and Appalachia. Later, when my voice crashed, I turned to the poetry of Frost and Yeats, but the Scottish Border ballads and Robert Burns have always remained dear to me. Lallans seemed a native tongue to me.

At Yale I learned more about the roots of our language. Not all the 30,000 lines I memorized were Modern English. Some were Greek (the opening of *The Iliad*), and others were Old or Middle English (favorite passages from *Beowulf*, Chaucer, and various medieval lyrics). Elsewhere I have written how I was fascinated as a student to hear John Pope reciting the *Wulf*. I never forgot the cadence of its accentual tetrameter, so apt to martial or elegiac themes.

A generation later, challenged by a student of my own, I decided to try my hand on *Beowulf* passages I had memorized in college. As my long-time editor, Alan was soon poring over Klaeber's scholarly edition of the text. An ardent fan of Tolkien, he was startled to realize time and again that some term from *The Lord of the Rings* was actually an Anglo-Saxon word: *orthanc* really did mean ‘skill’; and *eored*, ‘a troop of cavalry’. The wily professor had been teaching while he entertained.

At West Chester, Mike Peich decided to hold a session on poetic translation for the 1999 conference. Alan and I were partway through our *Beowulf* by then. We had prepared a chapbook of the poem’s final third, which we completed first because it contained the elegiac passages that most appealed to me. ‘Beowulf and the Dragon’ had already circulated among our friends, receiving the *imprimatur* of eminent translators like Richard Wilbur and Dick Davis, who encouraged us to complete the project posthaste. I had neither the time nor the inclination, but Alan worked full-time on the *Wulf* for the rest of that year. When the millennium ended in frozen Fargo, he had closed the gap between *Hwaet!* and Beowulf’s accession to kingship.

“Translations are like lovers. There are those that are true and unbeautiful, and there are those that are beautiful but untrue.”

Here is a vivid passage that comes early in the 3182-line poem. It describes the coming of evil to the high hall of Heorot, the grandest dwelling ever erected in the land of the Danes. It also gives some notion of life in such a hall, where the principal entertainment, aside from the drinking of mead, was recitation of poetry by a *scop*. In the Dark Ages, poetry was strictly an oral tradition in the north of Europe. Few people were literate, and the songs of the *scops* had not yet been written out. Poets committed whole epics to memory and sang for a living.

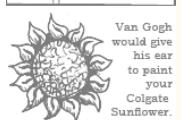
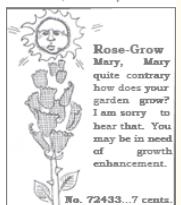
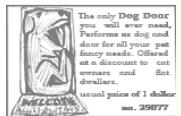
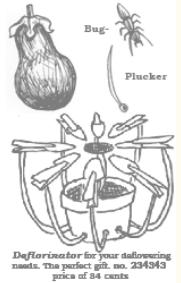
<p>Each day, one evil spitefully suffered where Hrothgar's men Harp-strings would sound, would recount the tales whence mankind had come, had fashioned flat land, surrounded with water. lifted and lit for Earth's dwellers; with branches and blooms; into all kinds of creatures.</p>	<p>dweller in darkness the din from that hall made merry with mead. and the song of the scop told of time past: and how the Almighty fair to behold, The worker of wonders the sun and moon He filled the forests He breathed life</p>	<p>~ gathered in gladness; a horror from hell, wrathful rover holder of hollows, He had lived long born to the band as kindred of Cain, the slayer of Abel. from the first murderer: elves and ill-spirits, whose wars with the Lord</p>	<p>So the king's thanes then crime came calling, hideous Grendel, of borders and moors, haunter of fens. in the homeland of horrors, whom God had banished thereby requiting Many such sprang monsters and misfits, also those giants earned them exile.</p>
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(Translated by Alan Sullivan)

As the translation panel convened at West Chester, Alan and I sat between Robert Mezey and tall, gaunt John Ridland, who had translated Janos Vitek's "John the Valiant" from Hungarian. The classroom had filled, and latecomers were standing near the door while more chairs were brought. There had been some buzz around the corridors, and it had attracted a gratifying crowd. Dick Davis chaired the panel



Beowulf to Borges



and spoke what is probably an old chestnut that I had never heard. “Translations are like lovers. There are those that are true and unbeautiful, and there are those that are beautiful but untrue.”

Bob gave a scholarly but passionate presentation, comparing his versions of Borges with the originals and with the received translations in the Viking Penguin. Throughout the room there were sighs of pleasure at the former, while smirks, rolled eyes, and shaken heads greeted the latter.

Alan then talked about the guidelines we had created and followed for our version of *Beowulf*. To close the session, I recited the final 44 lines, the dirge, in Anglo-Saxon and in our recreation of the alliterative tetrameter. When I concluded, Bob blurted ‘God that sounds magnificent!’

Professor Mezey left West Chester almost immediately after the panel. I only chatted with him briefly while snatching a smoke outside Sykes Hall, but another literary correspondence began soon afterward. I was spending more and more of my office time engaged with literary mail, and my secretary had become a custodian for incoming and outgoing manuscripts.

In the autumn of 2000, Bob invited me to Claremont, where I lectured and read. As I was walking into the English Department, a UPS guy was hauling in a box, *The Collected Poems of Robert Mezey*, just published by Arkansas. What a daunting arrival! I curled up with the book that evening and first read what I believe to be one of the greatest poems of the last century:

Tea Dance at the Nautilus Hotel (1925)

The gleam of eyes under the striped umbrellas—
We see them still, after so many years,
(Or think we do)—the young men and their dears,
Banding forward glances as through masks
In the curled bluish haze of panatellas,
And taking nips from little silver flasks.

They sit at tables as the sun is going,
Bent over cigarettes and lukewarm tea,
Talking small talk, gossip and gallantry,
Some of them single, some husbands and wives,
Laughing and telling stories, all unknowing
They sit here in the heyday of their lives.

And some then dance off in the late sunlight,
 Lips brushing cheeks, hands growing warm in hands,
 Feet gliding at the lightest of commands,
 All summer on their caught or sighing breath
 As they whirl on toward the oncoming night,
 and nothing further from their thoughts than death.

But they danced here sixty-five years ago!—
 Almost all of them must be underground.
 Who could be left to smile at the sound
 Of the oldfangled dance tunes and each pair
 Of youthful lovers swaying to and fro?
 Only a dreamer, who was never there.

(after a watercolor by Donald Justice)

by Robert Mezey

I find this poem as poignant as the evocation of a vanished tribe in a passage that introduces the final third of *Beowulf*. “The Lay of the Last Survivor,” scholars call it. The poet envisions the guardian of a great treasure hiding the hoard in a deep-dug hall where no cup would ever pass, no harp ever ring. The elegiac voice has always spoken to me, even in my youth. So I worshipped “Sailing to Byzantium,” which also dwelt on artifacts and their evocation of bygone time.

Eliot said of Yeats “He is the greatest of the modern poets in English, and so far as I am able to judge, in any language.” As a student, I shared that sentiment. As a novice poet, I wrote Yeats-derived verse. Like such predecessors as Roethke or Schwartz, I conversed too much with an Irish ghost. At least I had the excuse of shared ethnicity.

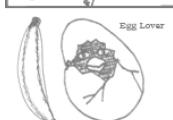
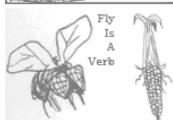
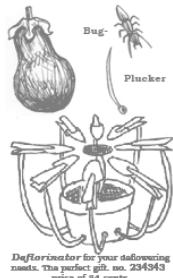
Eliot knew a lot of languages, and I am a monoglot, but I have come to doubt his extravagant claim. As a young man, I already sensed in translation the greatness of poets like Po Chu'i or Catullus. As I grew older, Yeats seemed more and more preposterous. His ear was surely remarkable, and his dedication to Ireland undeniable, but his aristocratic pretenses no longer impressed me.

Of course Eliot also wrote a lamentable essay denigrating Thomas Hardy and praising Lord Tennyson to the skies. I yield to no one in my fondness for Tennyson, but the moderns I most revere are Hardy, Frost, and Borges. These are poets with



Beowulf to Borges

powerful, distinctive voices. It takes humility to subordinate one's own voice to a great original. I challenge anyone to distinguish between the Mezey and Barnes versions of Borges, or to distinguish between the Murphy and Sullivan passages in *Beowulf*. It's a stark contrast to a Lowell or Bly, both of whom made every poet they translated sound like Lowell or Bly! Since I lack Spanish, my clearest window into Borges is Bob Mezey. I will always be grateful to him.



Casa Abandonada

for Robert Mezey

Though he labors in the shadows,
the library of his mind
is a corridor of windows
whose occupant is blind.

The manse is Argentina
but a mirror gives on Spain
as a gaucho's ocarina
moans through a broken pane.

Cobwebs trail from ceilings
over lovers and their bowers.
Mice run on the railings;
a cracked clock-face glowers.

Fingering newel or plinth,
the blind man cannot see
his way through this labyrinth.
Neither, my friend, can we.

The Totems of Poetry

by Joseph S. Salemi

When I was a young and inexperienced teacher, I was advised by some older colleagues to have an “open classroom.” They told me that students learn best in an environment of freedom and unfettered self-expression, and that my task as a teacher was to “facilitate the exchange of ideas,” and to allow for “collaborative interaction,” and to be “non-judgmental” about issues of content, mastery, and individual student performance. This was the early 1970s, and that kind of blather was in the air.

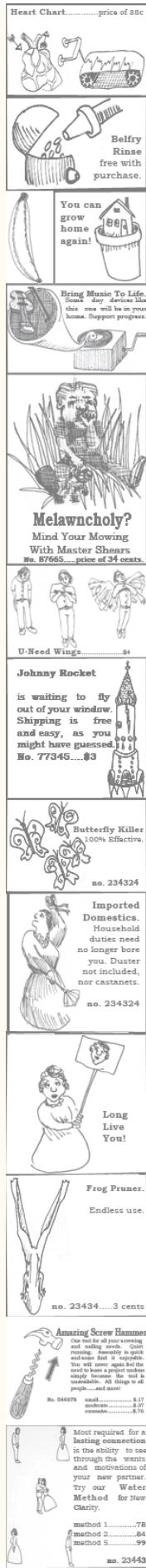
Needless to say, all of it was complete buncombe, as Mencken might have put it. When I foolishly attempted to implement the above-mentioned jargon, my classroom became a disaster area of uncertainty, resentment, and utter failure. Students goofed off or were demoralized, and I hadn’t the slightest idea of what the class was supposed to accomplish, much less how I was to evaluate student work. You’ve heard of the Lost Weekend? Well, that was the Lost Semester.

The following year I decided to follow my own judgment exclusively. I knew that the military gets things done, so I ran the class like a Marine platoon. Requirements were rigorously spelled out, and the syllabus was adhered to religiously. I gave straight lectures, stopping only for the occasional question. I advised students to take copious notes, which they did. I didn’t allow a nanosecond of time to be wasted on pointless chitchat or opining. I taught directly to a final exam that I had prepared well in advance, and which was keyed to the objective mastery of material.

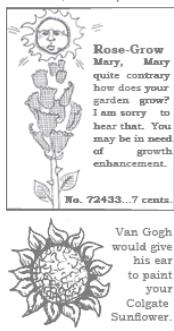
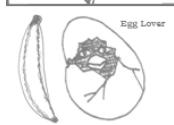
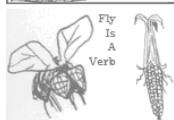
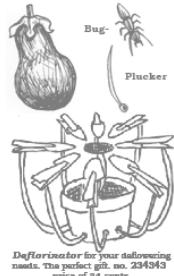
It worked like a charm. A few inherently ditz-brained and freaky students dropped out almost immediately, but the rest stayed, and almost everyone got an A or B grade. But what really surprised me was what happened the following semester. My new class was packed to the rafters, and I was constantly importuned for overtly permission by students who couldn’t register in my closed section. I believe I taught two classes for the price of one that next semester. And I earned an instant reputation as a serious teacher who got things done in a no-nonsense manner.

My colleagues congratulated me — albeit somewhat grudgingly — on my popularity. I timorously asked them why they had given me that wrongheaded advice about an open classroom, and all the other garbage. They hemmed and

We are loyal to
our internalized
totems before
anything else.



The Totems of Poetry



hawed, and looked quizzical. The general consensus seemed to be this: "Well, that's the way it's done. We had to tell you that."

I was shocked. I said "Tell me what? Something that is palpably untrue?" "No, no," they answered. "It's *theoretically* true. But it doesn't necessarily apply to one's work in the classroom."

There you have it, folks: the tyranny of asinine theories. People feel that there's a moral righteousness in trumpeting certain privileged notions, even when the notions lack empirical validity. Most people know that the theories are stupid and inapplicable to our actual work and lives, but they are loyal to them nonetheless. It's similar to promoting a literalist reading of Genesis long after you've been privately convinced by Darwinian arguments.

What causes people to do this? Why are so many persons loyal to theoretical idiocies? The eminent anthropologist Robin Fox, in his essay "The Passionate Mind," makes the point that long-term memory, processed through our limbic system, has "a heavy loading of emotion and that a disturbance of the conceptual system so set up will cause a strong emotional reaction." This means that people viscerally react a lot more frequently than they coolly think, and even their most abstract reasoning is colored by affect. We are loyal to our internalized totems before anything else.

This would explain intense feelings like patriotism, clan loyalty, religious fanaticism, the mystique of violence, ethnocentrism, and a dozen other phenomena as inescapable facets of the human condition. And lest you congratulate yourself, reader, it also accounts for blind faith in reason, the notion of universal human brotherhood, committed pacifism, the urge for utopia, the fixation on human rights, and a whole bunch of other niceties that liberals get wet in the crotch for. These are totems as well, passionately believed in rather than rationally accepted.

What are some of the theoretical totems of the poetry world? We're loaded with them. There are lots of idiotic notions that poets feel compelled to defend, even though they disregard them in practice. Let's look at ten of the most common. Each one is followed by an appropriate deflation.

- It's the task of poets to express what they truly think and feel.* That is not the case at all. They're supposed to lie through their teeth, if necessary, to create a good aesthetic effect.
- Poetry ennobles and heightens human consciousness.* This is like believing that having a college degree makes you a better person, or that learning French will improve your moral stature.

3. *Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind.* This canard was dreamt up by Shelley, a poet with a frustrated power-complex. The very thought of poets having actual political power is as horrifying as Jurassic Park.
4. *The language of poetry ought to be precisely the same idiom as that used in everyday life.* This is so blatant a lie that it's hard to believe anyone utters it with a straight face. The whole point of poetry is to say something arresting and memorable.
5. *Creativity breaks rules and transgresses boundaries.* No it doesn't. Creativity puts itself to school, learning everything it can, and then manifests itself as one more facet of the great tradition.
6. *Poetry teaches us great lessons.* Poetry doesn't teach us a damn thing. It is what it is, and that's all.
7. *If you are going to be a good poet, you must write about things that you personally know.* Good poets write well, period. What they write about is utterly their own choice. Shakespeare didn't write a single thing about his life in Stratford.
8. *Poets see more deeply into reality than the rest of us.* Not at all. They see exactly what everyone sees. Poets are simply more skilled in expressing themselves.
9. *Good poets are always on the side of the angels.* All I have to mention are three names: Ezra Pound, Pablo Neruda, and Amiri Baraka.
10. *Poetry should provide inspiration, uplift, and positive values.* Yeah, and we should all be kind to children and dumb animals. Poetry doesn't have to do anything except be excellent.

As I said, serious practicing poets don't pay any attention to these pious fabrications, except when they are questioned publicly about their work. Then some or all of these totems are trotted out, and we get another heartfelt little homily on The Urgent Importance Of Poetic Endeavor. It's laughable.

I might be persuaded to accept this con-game as an advertising ploy, a noble lie told to the uninitiated to keep our cash flow steady. But since poetry as a craft is notoriously unprofitable, what's the point in maintaining this mythic structure? Just whom do we have to kid?

The answer is simple. Many of us feel the need to kid *ourselves*. Poets, like all people, "become upset when their established category systems are disturbed"



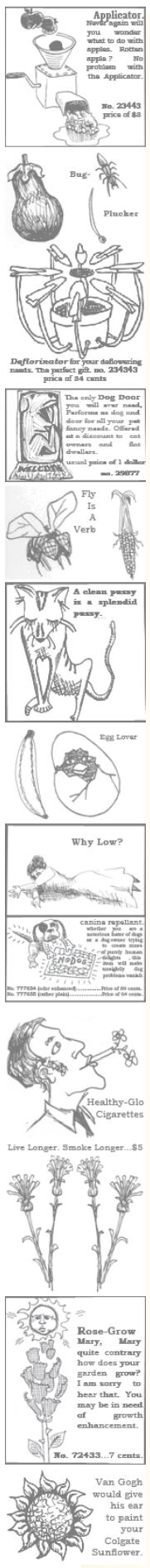
The Totems of Poetry

(Robin Fox again). The need to believe in something, no matter how absurd or irrelevant, is why poets religiously foster their totemic notions about the ennobling and liberating force of poetry. The gap between what poets say, and what poets actually do, is now very wide. Just read some of the vacuous pronouncements of our last few Poet Laureates.

The situation is exacerbated when poets make all or part of their living by running workshops and seminars, or by teaching in college English departments. Conformism and orthodoxy are highly prized in such settings, and totemic loyalties are strongly reinforced. Why endanger one's paycheck or position by telling the truth? Poets are just as venal as the rest of the planet.

If you think I'm wrong about all this, I invite you to make the following experiment. The next time a poet tries to palm off one of the above-mentioned ten totems on you, ask him pointedly if he actually believes it himself. Keep prodding him on it. And watch his anger and discomfort level rise. That's a sure sign that the limbic system has kicked in.

Joseph S. Salemi, Department of Classical Languages, Hunter College, C.U.N.Y.



Houston, We Have a Poem

by Mike Alexander

in our **View from the Shire** series

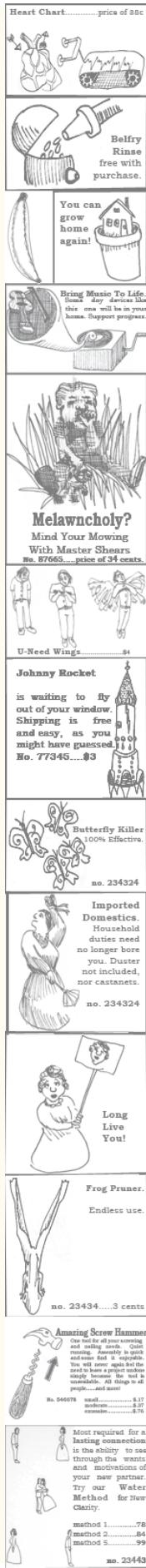
The crowded room might as well have been lit by candles. A poet was trying to read his own writing by the burnt-out stage lights, to an audience of forty familiar faces, regulars at this weekly open poetry reading. His words crackled out of mounted speakers. Almost everyone was listening attentively, aside from some hushed drink orders at the bar, & one table that wouldn't stop reveling.

Two drunk playboys were mocking the poet to their dates — off-duty strippers, by the look of their evening wear. After a round of applause, the poet stepped down. The emcee leapt to the mic, & said, "Hey, guys, you'll get your turn a bit later, but for now could you respect the poets, & shut the fuck up?" The louder of the two playboys stood up. He had often lauded himself as a major talent. He knew all his own poems by heart. He often broke into song, mid-poem. He boasted of reading in New York City. He was big time. He shouted at the audience, "You don't deserve me!" The emcee drawled, "You got that right. Hit the road." Then he called the next reader on the list.

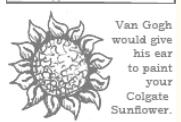
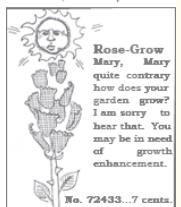
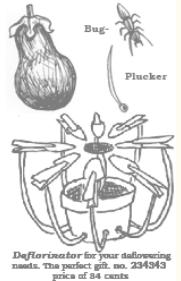
This was poetry in Houston, Texas. Other reading groups, each catering to a particular enclave — students, teachers, activists, feminists, Gays, street poets — popped up on a regular basis, & folded once attendance fell off. This place was the mainstay, the middle ground, where all the disparate fringes mingled. **Helios**, originally a coffeehouse, opened its doors ten years before to any & all types of bohemian activity. Its liquor license made it a bar, but its roster of events made it a cultural center: theatre, jazz, belly-dancing, stand-up, goth bands, & every Wednesday night, poetry. For six of those ten years, I was the poetry coordinator.

At eight or so, I'd walk in with a pack of index cards. The bartender was supposed to have a microphone behind the bar, & maybe a stand. The sound system was supposed to work. Sometimes a key piece of equipment had just been broken or stolen by a band the night before. I would keep a spare mic, a stand, & a portable amp in my trunk. Sometimes I'd have to change the light bulb over the stage.

We staged a poetic
transgender
Celebrity
Deathmatch
between Sylvia
Plath & Ted
Hughes' poems...



Houston, We Have a Poem



Whenever possible, I'd commandeer the jukebox, playing some Sex Pistols to set the mood.

As people arrived, I would start handing index cards to anyone who wanted to read. A card got you up to three poems or nine minutes, whichever came first. No preference to one style or another. On any given night you might hear a poem protesting the government's infringement on Lakota rights, a rhyme against Governor Rick Perry, a confession of addiction, a rap about ghetto life, a blues for children's television, a lament about growing old, or a ballade about chicken soup. Even the odd bit of cowboy poetry. Come one, come all. I heard the local Writing Program poets once called us "Bad Poetry night," but then they started to hang around, too. Unlike the other venues, you never knew what kind of mix we would have. Our readings gave everyone a regular outlet, a bowl of poetic gumbo, a place to listen, a place to be heard.

We ran all through the year, even through school holidays. It could be very hot in the summer, which in Houston lasts about half a year. When we ran the window-unit air-conditioner, you could barely hear the poets. When we didn't, we'd, um, perspire. If we left the doors open, mosquitoes came in to feed on the creative atmosphere. Sirens often passed on the street outside. One time, police entered during a reading; a suspect from a nearby shooting had been seen running through the neighborhood, but the officers must have doubted a criminal would stop somewhere for culture. (I must keep that in mind, next time I'm eluding capture.)

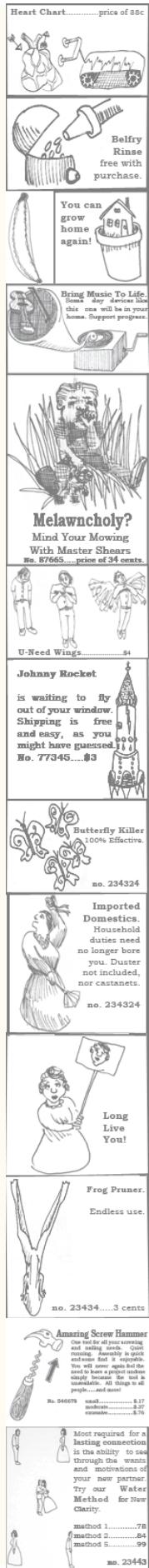
I asked some of the regulars to take turns emceeing, rotating four a month for a year, then changing out. I picked from different cliques to keep any one group from getting the upper hand. When someone among us came out with a chapbook or a CD, we gave them the spotlight. For traveling poets, we were a stop on the circuit.

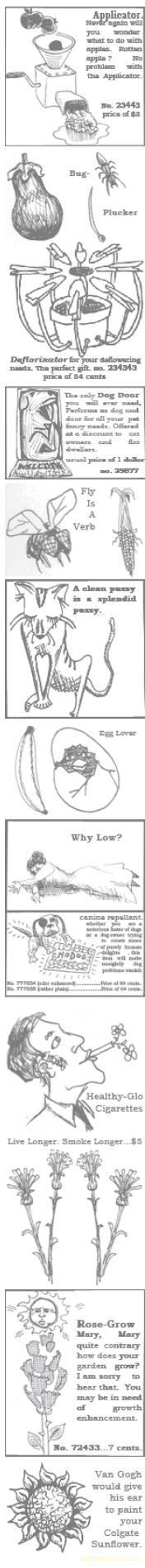
To keep things interesting, we'd come up with special events. Every year, as close as possible to October 20, we held a birthday party for Symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud. We staged a poetic transgender Celebrity Deathmatch between Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes' poems, when *The Birthday Letters* came out. We also held a group reading of *Howl* for its forty-fifth anniversary, & *The Waste Land* for its seventy-fifth. The night of the Eliot reading, one of our readers, a sonorous Mexican-American Marxist called the bar at the last minute to tell me he could not participate. He had decided that the "hooded hordes" in the desert was an unflattering portrait of "his people," & he could not in good conscience perform the work of an imperialist. I found someone with no such qualms to fill in for him.

Houston, We Have a Poem

One of our hosts came up with the Poem Swap. One week a month we'd ask each poet to bring in a copy of a new poem, one legible enough to read by crappy light, without the poet's name on it. The poems would go into a bag, & then, each poet would blindly select someone else's poem. We'd have someone start off by reading the poem thus selected, & then the audience would shout out, trying to guess who had written it. The regulars, of course, built up some familiarity with each other's voices. A tell-tale word or stylistic flourish would often give enough of a clue to give them a fighting chance. Once the poet was guessed (or revealed) he or she would read the next poem. This could get quite rowdy, especially if the guesses transgressed gender or other boundaries. Poets would often bring some of their most scathing work for the Swap. The game proved most popular with the crowd.

One Wednesday before Thanksgiving, we had expected the turn-out to be low. We'd thought the students would be off on a school break, & the others would be staying home with their families. But that's not how it worked out. The crowd had overflowed onto the front patio. All the sign-up cards were taken, signed, & turned in; people wanted to read. We had a full night ahead of us. Then, there was a power failure. Only the bluish back-lighting behind the bar continued to glow. I have no idea why; perhaps it was on a separate grid. We had no other illumination. We had no amplification. All we had was poetry. So we read in the dark over the most attentive crowd ever. The crowded room might as well have been lit by candles.





Poems and Readings and Mics, Oh my!

by Angela France

in our **View from the Shire** series

With the regularity of food health scares and the reproductive tendencies of rabbits, posts and articles warning that poetry is dying circulate the online poetry world. The cyber-Cassandras seem to follow two main themes: that only poets read poetry and that the internet is making it too easy for bad poets to share their work. Are we afraid that we'll either be swept away on a tide of poetasters and doggerelists or spin in ever tightening reading circles until we become some sort of literary Ouroboros?

I have been involved in on-line poetry for a decade now and have come to believe that, paradoxically, the internet narrows our view instead of broadening it. Online, the focus all becomes about who is being published where, which workshops have the best poets or critics and who is considered "good enough" to post at the self-styled "elite" boards. Is it any wonder that online poetry feels like a closed community?

My own view, from South West England, is that poetry is alive and vibrant to those willing to get out there and find it. Given sufficient resources, I could easily spend more than three-quarters of the year travelling from one literature festival to another. As it is, I attend two festivals every year and get to others whenever possible.

Literature festivals have been getting a bad press — perhaps not undeservedly — for filling their programmes with talking heads who are selling their latest (ghost-written) biographies. However, the good stuff and most of the poetry happens at the fringe events which are well worth seeking out. Festivals that are exclusively about poetry, such as Ledbury, Alburgh, and *StAnza* at St Andrews, can offer total immersions that should sate the most starved poet or poetry reader.

Festivals can seem rather insular though, much as I enjoy them, and can be self-consciously aware of trends in publishing — a bit too quick to laud the latest "young Turk". To find living, breathing poetry, I go to local live events: although I should declare a bias as I run a monthly poetry café here in Cheltenham with established

I often hear good poetry at open mics and it isn't unusual to see established poets turning up to read.

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Poets and Readings...

guest poets and open mic. Around three years ago, I mentioned to a few people that it would be great if we had a regular event apart from the festival. They said, "Yes, great! Why don't you?" But that's another story.

Apart from the monthly event that I host, there are a half-dozen similar events within an hour's drive and I get to them when I can. For me, hearing established poets read deepens my appreciation of their works in ways that long study of their writings rarely does. It must be said that my reaction isn't always positive but even disappointing readings are learning experiences.

Then there are open mics, the subject of considerable scorn in some circles. It seems to be considered received wisdom that open mics are stuffed with angry young poets shouting socio-political tirades; droopy Pre-Raphaelite types (of any age!) bleeding all over the stage from shards in broken hearts; or cozy older folk with sentimental or humour-driven doggerel. My experience has been very different. I often hear good poetry at open mics and it isn't unusual to see established poets turning up to read. (By "established", I refer to those whose names regularly appear in reputable print journals or who can command fees for guest spots.) Furthermore, it is always a thrill to find a new voice with something special to offer.

For my own part, there is no better way of finding out if a poem works, since reading to an audience is entirely different from reading aloud to oneself. The lumps and bumps soon become apparent. Open mics can also be a rich source of inspiration as they attract so many "characters". I met one man, in his eighties, who spent all his time travelling around poetry festivals and open mics distributing copies of his poems to anyone who expressed a liking for them. I can think of many worse ways to *rage against the dying of the light*.

There are, of course, some pretty bad poets at open mics, but even the worst of them can surprise with a startling image, or sound combination, or theme that makes me sit up and take notice. They are all part of the energy that builds when creative people are willing to be vulnerable. Even the most polite and generous audience will show a difference in reaction to differing quality so I won't criticize anyone for having the courage to get up there and test themselves. When it comes down to it, for me, poetry is an expression of humanity: humanity can be funny, sad, tedious, glorious, loving, angry and always fallible. Open mics are where we may find poetry when it's most human and alive.



Les Murray for Beginners

by Janet Kenny

in our **View from the Shire** series

The poet who is most closely associated in the popular imagination with present-day Australia is Les Murray. He is probably the only living poet whose name would be known by the man on the street. A great many Australians would recognise his face if he walked past them. He is like Australia itself in that he makes few concessions to the formalities of life.

He has written and spoken of his mild Asperger's syndrome and periods of serious depression. He eccentrically combines the deceptive simplicity of the idiot savant with the sophistication of the academic scholar and the introspection of a saint. Add to these a farmer, a son, a parent and a husband and you have at least understood a fraction of the complexity that adds up to Les Murray the poet.

Non-Australians are sometimes alienated by poems of Murray's which seem to them to use a private language. And so they do but it is a private language to which many Australians feel they have the key. His words are reduced to a strong minimum. He cuts to the chase. He digs into his own mind to find his poetic language. He conducts very little conversation with what Harold Bloom calls the "literary canon". He is an outsider like William Blake. His words seem to splatter like the paint of Jackson Pollock and yet each word is deliberately chosen.

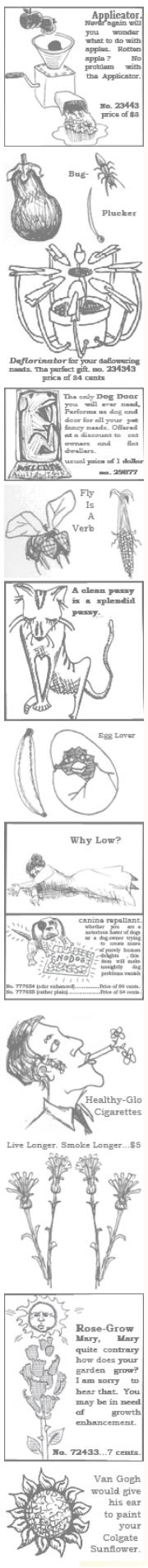
Murray often
“becomes” the thing
he writes about.

Here are the first two stanzas of his poem about oysters.

Baby oyster, little grip,
settling into your pinch of shape
on a flooded timber rack:

little living gravel
I'm the human you need,
one who won't eat you...

(“To Me You'll Always be Spat”)



Les Murray for Beginners

His poem ‘Lyrebird’ is unintelligible to all but those who have experienced the extraordinary display and mimicry of the lyrebird. Australians respond easily to this coded language.

In this poem he uses rhyming couplets but his meter is loose:

Liar made of leaf-litter, quivering ribby in shim,
 hen-sized under froutfrou, chinks in a quiff display him
 or her, dancing in mating time, or out. And in any order.
 Tailed mimic aeon-sent to intrigue the next recorder.
 I mew catbird, I saw crossecut, I howl she-dingo, I kink
 forest hush distinct with bellbirds, warble magpie garble, link ...

When Les’s friend, the Australian writer Bob Ellis, was planning to make a television program with Murray, his left-wing friends objected to Bob being associated with the poetry editor of the right-wing journal, *Quadrant*. Bob Ellis said that he knew Murray was a fascist but he was a nice fascist.

Here is an epigram by Les Murray:

Politics and Art

Brutal policy,
 like inferior art, knows
 whose fault it all is.

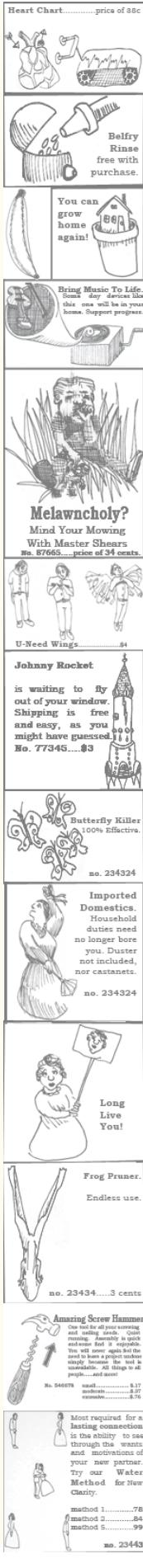
Les Murray annoys many environmentalists because of his sympathy with people whose livelihood is earned in the forestry industry and farming. He is impatient with environmentalists who fail to sympathise with the workers whose jobs they threaten. He romanticises and some might say, sentimentalises, the rural working class whose manners and tastes are out of step with what Les Murray might see as chardonnay socialists.

In “Poetry and Religion” he writes:

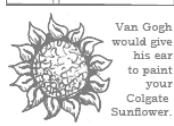
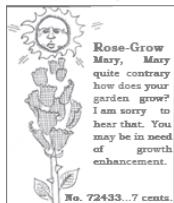
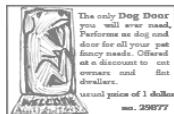
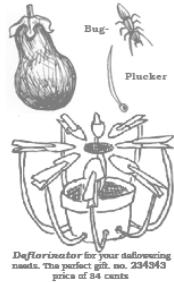
Religions are poems. They concert
 our daylight and dreaming mind, our
 emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture...

In a moving poem about his father, “The Last Hello”, the last stanza is blunt:

Snobs mind us off religion
 nowadays, if they can.
 Fuck thém. I wish you God.



Les Murray for Beginners



Murray often “becomes” the thing he writes about. He is beyond mystery because he becomes the mystery:

Crumpled in a coign I was milk-tufted with my suckling
till he prickled.
He entered the earth pouch then
and learned ant-ribbon,
the gloss we put like lightning on the brimming ones.
Life is fat is sleep. I feast life on, and sleep it,
deep loveself in calm...

(“Echidna”)

Yet the same poet writes descriptively of the emu:

Weathered blond as a grass tree, a huge Beatles haircut
raises an alert periscope and stares out
over scrub. Her large olivine eggs click
oilily together; her lips of noble plastic
clamped in their expression, her head-fluff a stripe
worn mohawk style, she bubbles her pale-blue windpipe...

(“Second Essay on Interest: the Emu”)

In the first poem the poet is his poem. In the second poem he tells his poem.

I have often thought that Les Murray’s poems can be divided between “being” and “telling”. Here is another one of Murray’s “being” poems:

My big friend, I bow help;
I bow Get up, big friend:
let me land-swim again beside your clicky feet,
don’t sleep flat with dried wet in your holes.

(“Goose to Donkey”)

And yet in essence this poem is not too far from Thomas Hardy’s triolet:

- | | |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Rook.</i> | Throughout the field I find no grain;
The cruel frost encrusts the cornland! |
| <i>Starling.</i> | Aye: patient pecking now in vain
Throughout the field, I find . . . |
| <i>Rook.</i> | — No grain! |

- Pigeon.* Nor will be, comrade, till it rain,
 Or genial thawings loose the lorn land
 Throughout the field.
Rook. — I find no grain:
 The cruel frost encrusts the cornland...

In contrast the American Walt Whitman used nature to reflect upon life itself and humanity. He is an observer who is aware of his own mystery:

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant, vast surrounding,
It launched forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself.
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detatched, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them.
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

(Walt Whitman, 'A Noiseless Patient Spider')

Les Murray is strongly metaphysical. His best-loved poem is 'An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow', in which Sydney's city life is transfigured by the presence of a weeping man. The two last stanzas give some idea of the poem's power:

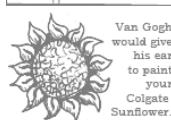
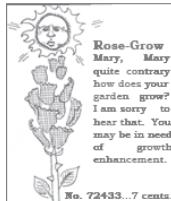
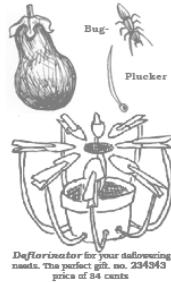
...and many weep for sheer acceptance, and more
refuse to weep for fear of all acceptance,
but the weeping man, like the earth, requires nothing,
the man who weeps ignores us, and cries out
of his writhen face and ordinary body

not words, but grief, not messages, but sorrow,
hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea —
and when he stops, he simply walks between us
mopping his face with the dignity of one
man who has wept, and now has finished weeping.

Evading believers, he hurries off down Pitt Street.



Les Murray for Beginners



Les Murray's inner life becomes more explicable when we know something of his early family experiences. In this Australian Broadcasting Corporation interview conducted by Peter Thompson on 27 March 2005, Les Murray talks about the shyness of rural poverty. I'll let Les tell his own story. He does it much better than I can.

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bigidea/stories/s1328163.htm>

<http://www.duffyandsnellgrove.com.au/authors/murray.htm>

Coffee, College Towns, and Poetry — A View from Oklahoma

by Quincy Lehr

in our **View from the Shire** series

If I am being brutally honest — and why the hell not be brutally honest under the circumstances? — my poetic career, such as it has been, began at the Kettle on Lindsey Street in Norman, Oklahoma. The cliché states that the child is the father to the man, but adolescence is the randy little creepazoid who fathers our more highfalutin intellectual endeavours. I haven't lived in the place on a permanent basis since those years, but Oklahoma, or that bit of it I inhabited, nevertheless remains a fundamental part of my understanding of the universe.

The Kettle wasn't a very likely venue, what with pictures of old sports teams, a wait staff that tended to view us punk rock types with some suspicion—even when we weren't high — and a regular clientele that included a creepy tattoo artist who'd found Jesus in jail, a crew of rednecks who'd file in just after the bars closed, singing "Oh My Darlin' Clementine" and such, and, if you stayed late, some score of schitzos with nowhere else to go. But there was also that clot on the near side of the smoking section, the often thin, intense-looking, stoned-looking bunch. And that was my bunch.

Norman's a college town in the slow process of converting itself into a white-flight community for Oklahoma City. When I began high school, there were two cafes near campus. Last time I was back, there were none. One of them long since became an adjunct to a slightly posh clothing store — along with the independent bookstore which it had adjoined. The other is now an antiques store (because those undergraduates sure do like that antique furniture). Yeah, yeah, *sic transit gloria mundi* and all that, but the point is that the very basic trappings of college-town bohemia were under more or less constant threat from rising rents and, on occasion, low-level police harassment. We inevitably felt embattled. And, like many other disaffected bookish types in relatively out-of-the-way places, we found ourselves camped out in a twenty-four-hour diner.

But the advantages of being in a college town were manifold. There was the

We read poetry
for the same
reasons we
listened to Black
Flag or stayed up
all night or took
up smoking.



Coffee, College Towns, and Poetry

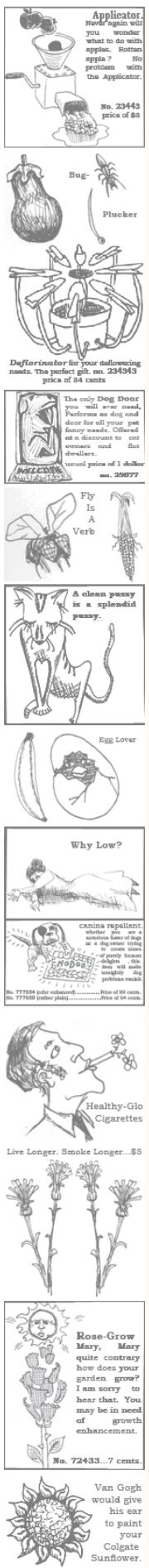
university library for one, and since the bookstores weren't all that good and since the days I'm describing were before Amazon.com and the like kicked off and since we really didn't have much money, anyway, that library got heavy use. In the second place, there was not a huge division between the high schools and the university. A large number of Normanites stayed in town to go to college, and they continued to inhabit their old haunts, often taking the same booths, smoking the same brand of cigarettes, and having the same conversations they had in earlier years, only interlaced with a couple of years of college coursework.

Which is where we come in.

I really hadn't given much thought to poetry up until the end of middle school. My mother had read the stuff to me as a child—mostly nineteenth-century American stuff like Poe, Longfellow, and Whittier—but I had, by the time I started to notice girls and my voice became unreliable, largely forgotten that. No, my introduction came via Jon Soske. Jon was a freak of nature. Still is. Brilliantly intelligent, with a wide range of interests, and a formidable capacity to absorb just about anything you put in front of him, he swooped in from Oklahoma City with books by e. e. cummings and T. S. Eliot (of whom I had heard), and Ezra Pound (of whom I had not). I'd already made tentative stabs at the existentialists — that last line of *L'Etranger* has a particular ring when half the football team is actively trying to kick your ass. But Jon really put poetry in my consciousness in a serious and sustained way.

Ditto Hayes Moore, whose acquaintance I was able to renew when we were both doing our doctoral work at Columbia. I can still remember Hayes calling me up at the unheard-of hour of half-past eleven—my parents were asleep!—and reading me Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market". It *had* to be set to music, he informed me. Well, when the day arrived and we sat with two unplugged electric guitars in Hayes's room, nothing really took shape—we probably just talked about girls. But we'd intended to set "Goblin Market" to music. Hayes is also the guy who turned me on to Thomas Hardy.

So, we armed ourselves with dribs and drabs that we'd read. The various offshoots of punk rock that we listened to helped as well. Goth rock gets a bad rap, frequently justly so. But I read Antonin Artaud because I'd heard the Bauhaus song named after him. I came to a different impression of Eliot after realizing that some of the early Sisters of Mercy lyrics lift lines more or less straight out of the man's oeuvre—and not necessarily the A-list Eliot. The example I can think of is from "Sweeney Erect." Here's Eliot:



Coffee, College Towns, and Poetry

Tests the razor on his leg
 Waiting until the shriek subsides.
 The epileptic on the bed
 Curves backward, clutching at her sides.

And here's the Sisters of Mercy ("Valentine", from the *Reptile House EP*):

The razor bites and the shriek subsides
 He arches clutching at his sides
 Across the floor across the tiles
 The man is dead and the razor smiles

Without going into the relative literary merits of the two (the latter really works better with the music), the point is that a fascination with underground music led to some important literary discoveries. Hell, even Los Angeles-based goth-rockers Christian Death, who dedicated their second album* to Andre Breton, got me into Surrealism and from there into French Symbolism, which reconnected with some of the Modernist stuff my friends and I were already reading.

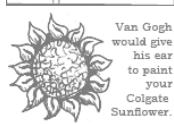
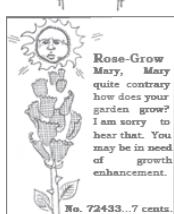
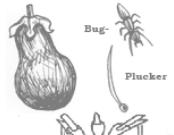
So, armed with all of this, not to mention the more typical gossip and shit talk of the teenaged years, we'd file into the Kettle after school, order a coffee, and start talking. And sooner or later, the college students cramming for their exams or vaguely aware of us through a younger sibling, or what have you, would join in. They'd recommend books to us, which, being precocious little snots, we'd go read, pulling them off the shelves of friends' faculty parents or plopping down in the garret-like stacks in the OU library, trying to find a way to sit with only about a foot between the rows.

But it never felt like duty. Intellectual pursuits were, in the final analysis, not particularly encouraged. We were supposed to do well in school, of course, but, by and large, but the powers that be did not always seem to care if we were terribly interested in what we studied. We had some good teachers, mind you, but it always seemed in school as if what you really wanted to do was coming up the next year. Added to which, the denizens of the "advanced" English classes were more often in there due to being white and middle-class than having any particular aptitude for the subject. By and large, we picked things up on our own—not just how much liquor we could hold before our guts told us to go fuck ourselves, but also a fairly sprawling, idiosyncratic canon.

The thing is, we were serious, but the business of becoming well-read was always something that we did because we wanted to do so, not because we felt particularly duty-bound to do so. We read poetry for the same reasons we listened to Black



Coffee, College Towns, and Poetry



Flag or stayed up all night or took up smoking. And up to the present, I like a bit of danger in poetry. The domesticated little fucking epiphanies that dominate so much verse in the English-speaking world really do very little for me. I want to feel the adrenal gland in full gear. I want a sense of sleep deprivation.

I wrote some verse in high school and the first year of college, but it petered out after a while. But in the spring of 2003, I found myself back in Norman for a time. My father was dying, and I had just come off a serious break-up. I can recall sitting on my father's porch, twenty-seven years old, heartbroken, and completely at sea, and I just started writing. And it was surprisingly good — at least I thought so. And, just as importantly, it was true to what that skinny adolescent would have wanted to read back in the day.

The Kettle on Lindsey, which had been the hub for those early years and in which I racked up, I'd estimate, about 1,000 hours, was gone by 2003, replaced, most recently, by a Mexican restaurant. The Kettle wasn't a great restaurant, but it was a place to go when you had nowhere else to go. I wonder where they go now.

* The album in question, *Catastrophe Ballet*, has to be a beacon of hope for all in the arts, because the first album, *Only Theater of Pain*, is dreadful.

Poetry in Dublin

by Fintan O'Higgins

in our **View from the Shire** series

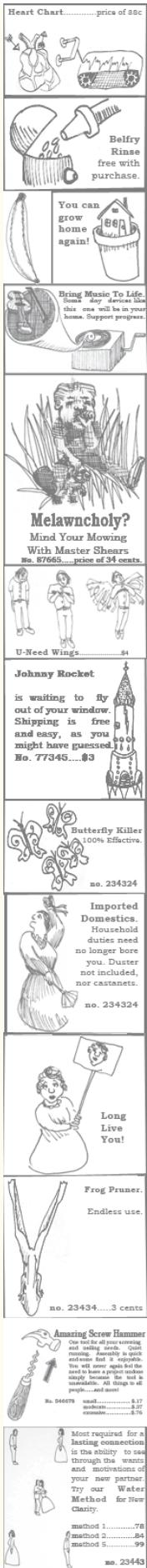
It is said of the city of Dublin that you cannot lob a brick in the place without braining some class of a poet, and while this provides further inducement, if any were needed, to get the old throwing arm back in shape, it also has incidental cultural implications for Ireland's capital. A city whose poet population has been allowed to fester unchecked must naturally suffer the effects of such negligence, and first among these is a dearth of actual poetry. It may seem odd to attribute the deficit of poetry to the surfeit of poets but in a garden overrun by weeds, what hope is there for more rarefied flowers to grow? In a city whose populace spends a good deal of its employers' time congratulating itself on a colourful turn of phrase, who will take the time and who will develop the capacity to recognise among all the distractions that strong true note of our old friend Poesy? This answer to this question is Gerry McNamara. Mike Igoe would also have been acceptable.

For the last four years, for no visible reward and for reasons the rational observer can only guess at, Gerry McNamara has hosted the open mic poetry night Write and Recite. Write and Recite had a difficult birth, arse

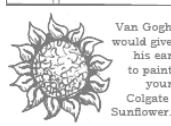
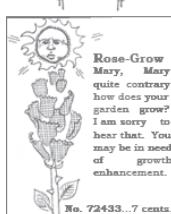
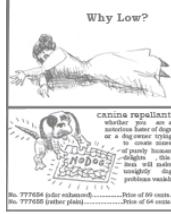
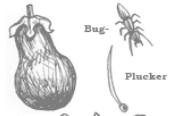
first out of an evening called Poets Anonymous. Poets Anonymous was inclusive, supportive and tolerant of nearly every form of horrible doggerel that could be excreted onto it by the citizens of a town not short of horrible doggerel. This was its strength. Moustachioed working men told ballads of social injustice and wistful housewives rang rhymes of springtime splendour and students in velvet jackets channelled the spirits of Yeats's less talented friends. It provided the opportunity to the nearly talented and the nearly talentless alike to sing their souls in a non-threatening environment, and you occasionally got to hear some good stuff too.

What Poets Anonymous didn't like, however, was mouthiness and what it really couldn't stand was the word "fuck". And in a city where, perhaps even more than most, poetry and drinking are constantly renewing their marriage vows (if I have neglected to mention that Write and Recite took place exclusively in pubs, that's because it would be like writing on the Madagascan rainbow fish and forgetting

...where both the cream and the dregs of Dublin poetry have met and goggled at each other uncomprehendingly over a lot of wine.



Poetry in Dublin



to say that it tends to favour moist conditions) the poetical impresario cannot afford to get too precious about the word “fuck”. Anyway, a division arose between the fucks and the fuck-nots and the division became a schism and from this schism Write and Recite was born like a foul-mouthed amoeba from its parent cell.

It is partly for this reason that Write and Recite had the privilege of considering itself the bad boy of Dublin poetry evenings, which is almost as pathetic as it sounds. However, it also means that the evening – which did, for better or for worse, become the single longest-running poetry night in the city – retained through the years of its existence a kind of defiant vitality which I have not found anywhere else.

This is down to Gerry, a man in his early forties who favours denim, straggly grey hair, and unfashionably large spectacles. Gerry has been variously a drummer, a martial artist and a janitor, and his mid-period classic *Cunt* was seminal (if that’s not mixing metaphors) in the revolutionary split from Poets Anonymous. It is neither necessary nor desirable to quote from *Cunt*, but certain clues in the title should be enough for the discerning reader to indicate its general tone and content.

Write and Recite developed, then, as a free-spirited rather masculine arena for poetic expression. Heckling was not so much encouraged as assumed to be the proper response to most poetry and this gave to the evening meetings a kind of raucous freedom that was beneficial to some poets and not to others. A certain robustness of delivery was necessary to survive the evening which usually culminated in Gerry’s famous Five Word Slam®, where participating poets had the duration of a pint- or cigarette-break to compose some lines using five words suggested by the audience. The results of the competition were compromised by the tendency of audiences to throw up the same words week after week (“nipple” was a particular favourite), but as an exercise in more or less *ex tempore* composition it was very valuable not only as a sort of leveller by which the audience could gauge the respective skills of very different poets, but also for the poets themselves as a way to hone their skills and earn sex toys, which were usually the prizes on offer.

Write and Recite suffered from being dominated by men. The spirits of the Kavanagh and Behan are constantly invoked, less for their literary output, it is sometimes tempting to conclude, than for their alcoholism. It is true that for a period of a few months a series of pretty young American students of literature were lured into the various dives in which the evening was held, aglow with some romantic anthropological dream of cultural authenticity, and it is also true that some of us even managed to get off with one or two of them. For the most part, however, the behaviour of Write and Recite’s regulars has acted as a pretty effective safeguard against the intrusion of soppy girls.

And it is the behaviour of the poets that has sadly overshadowed their work. There are several genuinely talented poets who attended regularly — Eamonn Lynskey, nominated for the Hennessy new writers award, is a credit to the place; Noel Sweeney has recently represented Leinster in the BBC Radio 4 poetry slam competition; Nicholas “Birch” Jackman has been engaged to read at the Electric Picnic music festival — but sadly the accomplishments of these men, literary and otherwise, has tended to be overshadowed by the reputation acquired by Write and Recite for being what amounts to a shower of drunken messers, more interested in slagging each other off and terrorising women than in actually producing good work. So it was sad when Gerry McNamara decided to bow out of Write and Recite. He asserted that “personal problems” made it impossible to continue running the night, and he had the good grace not to mention that it was other people’s personal problems.

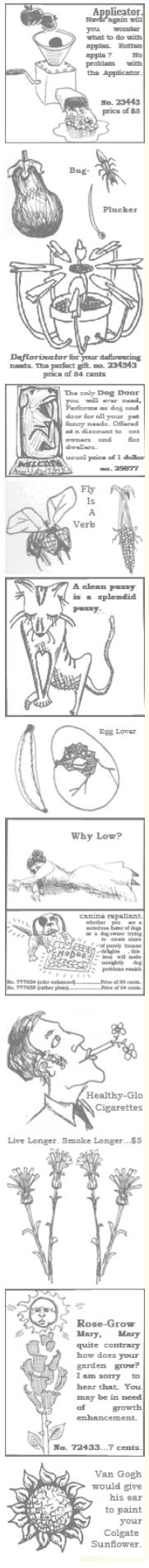
A more recent development in Dublin, and a haven for Write and Recite people who are jonesing for a bit of poetry, has been Mike Igoe’s Naked Lunch, which takes place in Carnival on Wexford St and which — unlike Write and Recite — has not yet even once been forced to relocate due to the bad behaviour of its regulars. The Carnival night is still new and offers, from the poet’s perspective, rather too much guitar-based angst than one might hope for, but Mike Igoe is young, talented and energetic and, since the demise of Write and Recite, his regular fortnightly session is the only regular forum for poetry in town.

There are others, of course. The Monster Truck Gallery on Francis St hosted a series of really lively evenings last summer and there are plans for another series soon; Bowe’s and Chaplin’s have hosted nights on and off and P. J. Brady’s annual Kavanagh night in The Palace on Fleet St can claim to be the highlight of the year for many poets about town. None of these nights, though, has any but the most cursory acknowledgement from Poetry Ireland, the government-funded body in charge of supporting poetry in Ireland.

This is hardly surprising when you meet the sort of delegation charged by these poets of the street to extract money from the government, but it is one of the greatest frustrations about poetry in this city that it tends to be either absurdly rowdy or stiflingly dry. There is no shortage of button-holers in pubs only too eager to spew their creations at you, and you will have no difficulty finding a room in a library where a polite gathering of poetry-lovers spend a pleasant hour trying not to cough too audibly on the dust that whispers from the reader’s mouth. (The distinction between the types of poetry available is one of atmosphere rather than quality; in both camps the overall experience is like trying to find a few plump raisins in a bowl of rabbit-droppings, but this is normal, I think.) It is rare, however, to find a forum where the general merriment of the drunken idiots meets the intellectual rigour of the dried-up academics; but it is not impossible.



Poetry in Dublin



The poet Orla Martin (of the Galway Martins) has successfully managed to keep a foot in both camps. As an attractive woman she is something of a rarity among the circles whose members constituted the hard core of Write and Recite, and she is also recognised by Poetry Ireland, having had her official "Introduction" from them a couple of years ago. She attends a poetry group by and for intelligent well-behaved people but has also been known to consort with the messers at Carnival. (Martin has admitted that she considers her Rathmines group as a kind of wronged wife and her Carnival crowd as her mistress...) Anyway, for whatever reason (possibly something to do with her having a real job, but this is speculation), Orla Martin has managed to reconcile two factions of Dublin poetry that have hitherto been irreconcilable. She has run two nights in the Winding Stair (it used to be a bookshop and café, now it's a restaurant with some old books smelling of soup left around to add a bit of class, but there's still a separate bookshop downstairs) where both the cream and the dregs of Dublin poetry have met and goggled at each other uncomprehendingly over a lot of wine. The last night out was successful combination of formal academic-style poetry and more free-style street ranting, comic children's verse, song and even a dramatic monologue (from O'Casey). With both ages and all sexes represented, the disreputable element managed to behave itself and the other side seemed to have actual fun, no small achievement at a poetry night.

It is to be hoped that Orla Martin will continue with this success, but it will require grit, determination and almost superhuman patience. Ask poor Gerry McNamara.

Here are a few bits of verse that were produced at Write and Recite mentioned in the article. These were composed in the 15- to 20-minute break given for Gerry McNamara's 5-Word Slam, and they are included as examples of the sort of stuff I produced at these evenings. They won variously, some shot glasses, a shoe-tree, a passport cover and a sex toy of some description...

Instant Ballade

(from the slam at the Left Bank, 16th August, 2005)

The disco ball is flinging star on star
On teetering walls in whirling mirrored rays;
They flood the pub and whizz about the bar
To catch the pins and studs of waifs and strays.
My eyes are yellowish like mayonnaise,
My brain is numb but I have no complaint;
I sit or stagger with enraptured gaze
If this is a church then I must be a saint.

I don't know if my friends are near or far.
 The room is spinning in a sort of haze.
 It doesn't really matter where they are;
 I'm talking to myself a lot these days.
 My voice is high in ecstasy of praise.
 No company nor sound or light can taint
 The moment when the stars start to amaze.
 If this is church, then I must be a saint.

I only came in here to have a jar
 But someone gave me something and my ways
 Career on a floor both slippery and like tar,
 Nothing is steady, nothing steady stays.
 The Reaper smokes a cigarette and flays
 My mind of fear for all is bright and quaint.
 His friendly smile is peace, his wink conveys
 That this is church and I must be a saint.

(Our five words were: *star, mayonnaise, reaper, cigarette, saint.*)

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### Instant poem: 25th April, 2006

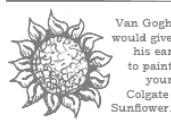
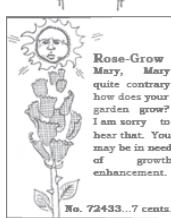
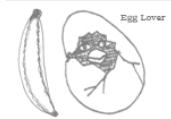
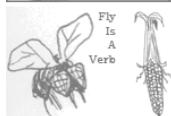
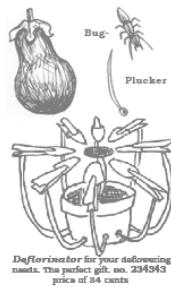
What is elegant is imaginary  
 And what is fruitful lacks a certain grace;  
 The obscene blush of peach and raspberry  
 Is lurching hips and screwing up of face.  
 The sky sweats sunlight, tacky and obscene  
 And bleeds its sticky syrup on the sea,  
 It cloys and clogs the views that once were keen  
 And succulence congeals in you and me.  
 Though, in the lofty breath of sparer sky,  
 The strains of light are finely spun and pure,  
 The purity corrupts and you and I  
 Only in spine and sweat are ever sure  
 That strangers' pulse and breath are really sweet  
 And mind submits to soul and nerve to meat.

(The words were: *elegant, raspberry, fruitful, stranger, sky*



## Poetry in Dublin

---



### Instant Poem, Westmoreland, March

Only when the moon begins to liquefy  
Does syzygy suck the sea's black jelly from the caves,  
And only when the melancholy oceans dignify  
Our pulse in cowering phlegm-flecked foam on waves;  
And sharks are liquorice and bears are gummy  
And bored blood-mouthed tigers turn to marmalade,  
And we seek light from deep in mummy's tummy  
Or flee from cancer in a cavern's shade  
Do we feel awe. It's fear that makes us love;  
It's death that makes us dance in time to our hearts' cease;  
It's oblivion drives our arms thrown high above  
Heads that exist only in their own release.  
What makes the wind into a frightened child  
Makes gods of babies and thought into something wild.

(Our five words were: *jelly*, *bored*, *melancholy*, *syzygy* (Linda's suggestion), *marmalade*.)

# Contributors to *The Shit Creek Review 4*

## Authors

**Mike Alexander** a native New Yorker turned Houstonian by love & marriage, dreams too hard about 19th century Paris, handles money without any of it sticking to him, edits a small Houston litmag called The Panhandler, admins the online sonnet workshop at <http://p197.ezboard.com/bthesonnetboard>, & uses ampersands.

**Mark Allinson** was born in 1947 and raised in Melbourne, Australia. At first Mark believed that he wanted to be an airline pilot, and he completed a private flying licence at 17. Before long, however, he realized that flying was merely a metaphor of his desire to rise above the pettiness of daily life, in order to see the big picture. Eventually this desire for vertical transcendence led to a Ph.D in English literature, and he taught for a while at Monash University, in Melbourne. Mark is now entirely grounded, and living and writing on the NSW coast, south of Sydney.

**D. C. Andersson** was educated at Oxford University and then The Warburg Institute, London. He edits the new poetry magazine *Tempo* and his own work has appeared in numerous UK magazines in the last year.

**Tiel Aisha Ansari**, is a Sufi, martial artist, and computer programmer living in the Pacific Northwest. Her poetry has appeared in *Islamica Magazine* and *Barefoot Muse* and is forthcoming in *Mythic Delirium* and *Shit Creek Review*, among others.

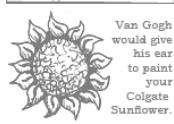
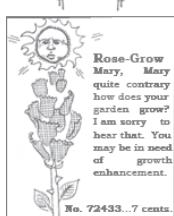
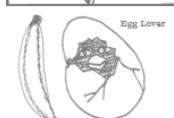
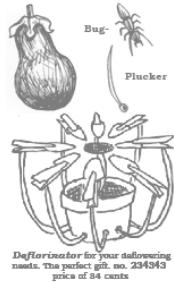
**David Gwilym Anthony** is a British businessman and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. His second poetry collection, *Talking to Lord Newborough*, was published in the United States by Alsop Review Press in 2004. This is his website: <http://www.davidgwilymanthony.co.uk/>.

**Jon Ballard** is an occasional literature and writing instructor for Oakland Community College in Royal Oak, Michigan. He received his B.A. and M.A. from Oakland University. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *The Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Blue Earth Review*, and *Boston Literary Magazine* among many others. A chapbook, *Lonesome*, is due from Pudding House Publications in 2007. Currently he lives in Mexico City, Mexico.

**Rachel Bunting** is a born and bred South Jersey girl currently living between the Delaware River and the Pine Barrens. Her work can be found in *Mad Poets Review*, *Journal of New Jersey Poets*, *US1 Worksheets*, *The Barefoot Muse* and *Wicked Alice*. She likes sushi, acupuncture, and Tony Hoagland. She is a terrible dancer.



## Contributors



**Louie Crew** a native of Alabama, is a retired Rutgers professor. Crew has written 1,814 published poems and essays, including four poetry volumes: *Sunspots* (Lotus Press, Detroit, 1976) *Midnight Lessons* (Samisdat, 1987), *Lutibelle's Pew* (Dragon Disks, 1990), and *Queers! for Christ's Sake!* (Dragon Disks, 2004). He and his husband Ernest Clay live in East Orange, NJ. Louie's website: <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~lcrew/>.

**Brian Dion's** work has appeared in *Candelabrum* and the *Raintown Review* and he was a runner-up for the 2005 Grolier Poetry prize. He is active in his local Community Theatre and recently won the best supporting actor award at the Eastern Massachusetts Association of Community Theater's Drama Festival. He lives near the banks of the Saugus river with his wife and daughter.

**Arthur Durkee** is an award-winning composer, photographer, poet and essayist. His creative work has been featured in numerous group and solo shows, print and online media, and dozens of musical recordings. He has a special interest in book arts and publishing, including illustration, typography, design, craft, and related arts. Site: <http://www.arthurdurkee.net/>

**Brent Fisk** is a three time Pushcart nominee with recent work in *Willow Review*, *The Alembic*, and *Rattle* among other places. He is currently working on several chapbooks and his first full-length poetry collection.

**Angela France** lives in Gloucestershire and is enjoying middle age. She runs a local live poetry event — “Buzzwords” — and writes for self-indulgence, as an antidote to demanding work with challenging young people. She has had poems published in, or forthcoming in: *Acumen*, *Iota*, *The Frogmore Papers*, *Rain Dog*, *The Panhandler*, *The Shit Creek Review*, *Voice and Verse*, and in anthologies *The White Car*, *Mind Mutations* and *When Pigs Chew Stones*. More on Angela at poetry pf.

**Eve Anthony Hanninen's** work has appeared in *The Barefoot Muse*, *The HyperTexts*, *Mannequin Envy*, *Southern Hum*, *Nisqually Delta Review*, *ForPoetry*, and elsewhere. Several poems are also slated to appear in two print anthologies later this year. Recently, she was guest speaker on The Writer's Craft for the *It's About Time* Writer's Reading Service, in Seattle. Eve is the Editor of The Centrifugal Eye Online Poetry Journal.

**Christopher Hanson:** A musician all his life and an English teacher by trade, Christopher lives on the edge of nowhere, in Orange, NSW, Australia with his wife and little girl. His work has previously been published in WORM, and he is a regular at Sonnet Central.

**Janet Kenny** has metamorphosed from painter to classical singer to anti-nuclear activist, researcher, writer, illustrator and poet. Started in New Zealand and zigzagged across the globe to finally settle in Australia. She has published fairly widely as a poet. Some of her poetry can be found at her website.

**Don Kimball** lives in Concord, NH. His poetry has appeared in *The Edge City Review*, *The Formalist*, *Iambs & Trochees*, *The Lyric*, *The Blue Unicorn*, and various other journals. In 2007, he won first prize in the national contest sponsored by the Poetry Society of NH. His poems also appear in four anthologies, the two most recent ones being *The Powow River Anthology* and *The Other Side of Sorrow*.

**Danielle Lapidoth** lives with her husband and children in Zurich, Switzerland, where she runs an editing business, teaches English and writes poetry, flash fiction and essays while her family sleeps. She has work published or forthcoming in *Lily: A Monthly Literary Review*, *Barnwood*, *flashquake*, *Apple Valley Review*, *Literary Mama* and *Mamaphonic*.

**Ralph La Rosa's** poems have appeared in various journals, including *The Lyric*, *Pivot*, *Italian Americana*, *Aethlon*, *Light Quarterly*, *Folly* (online), *Umbrella* (online), *First Things*, *The Raven Chronicles* (forthcoming) and *Raintown Review* (forthcoming).

**Quincy Lehr** was born in Oklahoma and currently lives in Dublin, Ireland.

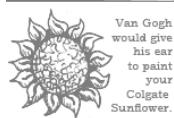
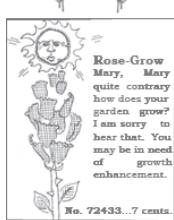
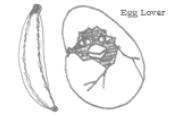
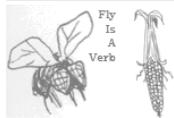
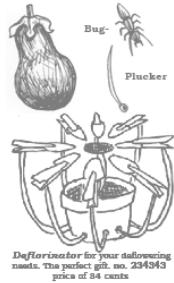
**Rob A. Mackenzie** lives in Edinburgh. His chapbook collection, *The Clown of Natural Sorrow*, was published in 2005 by Happenstance Press ([www.happenstancepress.com](http://www.happenstancepress.com)). He publishes poetry regularly in UK literary magazines, and performed at the StAnza International Poetry Festival 2007 in St Andrews, Scotland.

**Mary Ann Mayer** lives in Sharon, Massachusetts. Her first book of poems, *Telephone Man*, was published in 2005. Her work has appeared in two anthologies and several journals, and is forthcoming in *Raven Chronicles*, *The Bryant Literary Review*, and the ezine *Umbrella*. Before turning to poetry, she practiced occupational therapy for thirty years.

**Mary Meriam's** first book of poems, *The Countess of Flatbroke* (Modern Metrics, 2006), features an afterword by Lillian Faderman and a cover design by R. Nemo Hill. In 2006, Mary was awarded Honorable Mention in Poetry by the Astraea Foundation. Her poems and essays are published (or forthcoming) in *Literary Imagination*, *Light*, *The Barefoot Muse*, and *Umbrella*, among others.



## Contributors



**John Milbury-Steen** Served in the Peace Corps in Liberia, West Africa. Did a Master's in Creative Writing with Ruth Stone at Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. Worked as an artificial intelligence programmer in Computer Based Education at the University of Delaware. Currently teaches English as a Second Language at Temple University, Philadelphia. His poetry has been published in *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Hellas*, *The Blue Unicorn*, *Kayak*, *The Listening Eye*, *The Neovictorian/Cochlea*, *The Piedmont Literary Review*, *Scholia Satyrica* and *Shenandoah*.

**JBMulligan** has had poems and stories in dozens of magazines, including recently, *Autumn Sky*, *Mystic Prophet*, *Animus*, *Doorknobs & Bodypaint*, *Starry Night Review*, *Poetry Midwest* and *Colere*. He has had two chapbooks: *The Stations of the Cross* and *THIS WAY TO THE EGRESS*, and appeared in the anthology *Inside Out: A Gathering of Poets*.

**Rick Mullin** is a writer and a painter who started writing poetry avidly in college in the 70s but later learned that journalism pays more. As the poetry slipped in the ensuing years, painting filled the creative void. Mullin has returned to writing poetry with the youthful ardor of his so-called "Romantic Period," but with much more life and art experience to draw from. Much of his work is autobiographical, nearly all is metrical.

**Tim Murphy** was the featured author in the debut issue of **II, The Shit Creek Review**'s little sister.

**Kirk Nessel** is the author of *Paradise Road* (short stories, University of Pittsburgh Press), *The Stories of Raymond Carver* (nonfiction, Ohio University Press), and *Alphabet of the World: Selected Works by Eugenio Montijo* (translations, Bucknell University Press, forthcoming). He was awarded the Drue Heinz literature prize in 2007 and has received a Pushcart Prize and numerous grants from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. His stories, poems and translations have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The Southern Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Agni*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Iowa Review*, *The Sun*, *Fiction*, *Prairie Schooner* and elsewhere. He teaches creative writing and literature at Allegheny College. Kirk's website: <http://webpub.allegheny.edu/employee/k/knesset/>.

**Cami Park** does most of her writing at a desk, some of it in bed, but none of it, ever, at the kitchen table. The results can be found in publications such as *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Forklift, Ohio*, *edifice WRECKED*, *FRiGG Magazine*, *No Tell Motel*, and *Opium Magazine*.

**Rose Poto's** s work has appeared in various online and print magazines.

## Contributors

**Joseph S. Salemi** teaches in the Department of Classical Languages at Hunter College. C.U.N.Y. His poems, essays, translations, book reviews, and scholarly articles have appeared in over 100 print journals world-wide. He is a N.E.H. scholar, a winner of the Classical and Modern Literature Prize, and a four-time finalist for the Howard Nemerov Award. He has published three books of poetry, the latest being *Masquerade* (Pivot Press).

**Peter Schwartz** is the editor of *eye* and the associate art editor of *Mad Hatter's Review*. His artwork can be seen all over the Internet but specifically at: [www.sitrahahra.com](http://www.sitrahahra.com). His paintings have been published on such sites as *HiNgE*, *Sutble Tea*, and *Mastodon Dentist*. His paintings are in the print journals *Orange Coast Review*, *Whiskey Island*, and *The Louisiana Review* to name a few. He has over 200 poems published in such journals as *Porcupine*, *Vox*, and *Sein und Werden*. His fiction has been published on such sites as *Pindeldyboz* and *Dogmatika*. His last exhibition was through *Aesthetica Magazine* and featured a projection of one of his digital paintings on a busy street in York, UK. Currently he is working on paintings for an exhibit at the Amsterdam Whitney Gallery in Chelsea NYC.

**Janice D. Soderling** who lives in Sweden, was awarded first prize in *Glimmer Train Short Fiction*, summer 2006. Her work is currently on-line at *Innisfree* and *The Barefoot Muse* and archived at *Beloit Poetry Journal*. She is represented in printed literary journals and anthologies of several countries including the 1986-7 and the 1997 editions of *Anthology of Magazine Verse & Yearbook of American Poetry*. Janice received the 2007 stipend from the Foundation for Artistic and Creative Women (Sweden). She has translated the poetry of Heidi von Born.

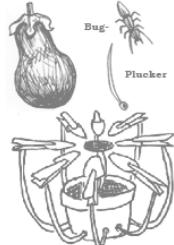
**Tony Williams** lives in Sheffield, UK. His work has appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Anon*, *The Rialto*, *Avocado* and *The Interpreter's House* and is represented in the anthology *Ten Hallam Poets* (Mews Press, 2005).

## Artists

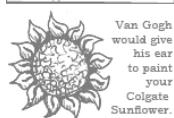
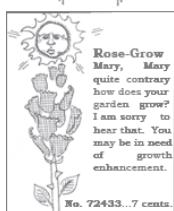
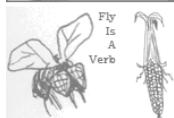
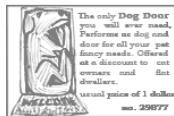
**Hanka Jaskowska** is a 21 year old living in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire. She is currently studying Art and Design, taking the first steps in fulfilling an ambition of a career in prop-making and sculptural costume for theatre/screen. One of her primary hobbies is photography, within which she can be often be found being looked at strangely for finding interest in the less interesting things.

**C. D. Russell** has an itchy shutter finger and is patiently persuading her camera to lie. She prefers to photograph cows.





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SUB-CREEK OF SHIT CREEK

# July 2007



## LIVES

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# Editorial

## Words on Words on Lives

**W**here is the border between Life and Art? This issue of II asked poets to contribute verse on the general topic of “Lives”, and those whose verse was selected were asked to provide an accompanying piece of writing of whatever nature they chose to go with their poetry. As you’d expect, the range of poems submitted addressed this topic in myriad ways, and this variety is reflected in the current selection. I’ve been impressed by the poems we have included, and fascinated by the variousness, insights and surprises emerging from the companion writings.

As for the topic of “Lives”: since Aristotle at least we have had the notion that Poetry and History are closely linked. Poetry can be seen as a form of inner life-history or spiritual autobiography, in that no matter what the topic, a poem is a verbal artefact which records a stage in the poet’s developing consciousness of existence. We have tried to choose an assemblage of well-crafted poems that reflects some of the diversity and multiplicity of poets in their engagement with their lives and their verse. A selection of prose essays adds to the Life-in-Poetry Fest, further exploring aspects of how poetry and life cross-reference.

We hope you enjoy these essays, poems and accompaniments, and savour the lives they reveal. Thanks, as always, to the writers who craft and contribute the work which makes publications like this possible.

### **Harvey Goldner**

It is a sad irony that one poet whose work appears here died during the preparation of this “Lives” edition of II. Harvey Goldner’s poem “In the Hell Hotel with Memphis Jack” was accepted for inclusion, and I wrote to Harvey requesting an additional piece of writing to accompany it. Harvey didn’t answer, so I wrote to him again, and this time received this reply: “will, try paul. i’ve really been up SHIT CREEK last couple months: operation hospit etc etc etc (see bobby byrd’s blog if you’re morbid), so aint been too creative lately...sorry, harv”. Bobby Byrd’s blog (here) revealed that Harvey had been operated on for a cancer tumour; a few weeks later Harvey was dead. I want to thank Harvey’s friends Bobby Byrd for allowing us to use excerpts from his blog as a companion piece to “In the Hell Hotel with Memphis Jack”, and Crysta Casey for permission to use her “Portrait of Harvey Goldner” as visual accompaniment to the poem. This issue of II is dedicated to Harvey Goldner.

## II's Leaving Home

Even ezines have life-cycles, and within its cycle II is proving to be a rapid developer. II, spawned by the *Shit Creek Review*, is now into its second issue, and is starting to flex its muscles, develop an identity, stay out late at night, and yearn for independence. II will change its name to *The Chimaera* and paddle its own canoe as an independent ezine. So as of the next issue, II is leaving home, doing its own thing, and adopting a new monicker. It will no longer be so closely linked with SCR, and it will have its own URL and chart a different course from SCR: perhaps heading to more salubrious destinations than up the proverbial Creek. *The Chimaera* will become the somewhat more wordy, less-visual-arty, general journal. What we have in mind is a miscellany, where there is poetry, satirical and humorous verse, features on particular poets and topics, critical prose, reflective prose, humorous prose, fictional prose in various genres, general cultural business, and whatever other miscellaneous things might fit into a miscellany; in other words, whatever we, the editors, and you, the contributors, blooming-well feel like.

Themes will continue to be a component of *The Chimaera* from time to time, but for our next edition (due out in October) poetry submissions will not be themed. You may submit verse on any subject for our general poetry section; we will also have a satirical and humorous verse section if there are sufficient submissions of that nature. As with the *Shit Creek Review*, we admit that we are biased towards formal verse, but we will also publish vers libre of good quality. We are also asking for critical prose on poetry and on literature in general, as well as on other topics, including historiography. Fictional, (auto-) biographical and opinion pieces are also welcome. Please read our Submission Guidelines very carefully before submitting work.

The Chimaera's *Feature section for the October Edition will focus on expatriate poets: prose essays or articles submitted on that topic will be particularly welcomed.*

---

Editors: Paul Stevens, Nigel Holt, Peter Bloxsom (design and coding)

Artist/Photographer: Patricia Wallace Jones

# Submissions

for the October, 2007 edition of *The Chimaera*

As explained in this issue's Editorial, **II** will metamorphose into an independent ezine, *The Chimaera*, from the next issue.

*The Chimaera is a fabulous beast composed of disparate parts,*

who breathed awful fire,  
Three-headed, frightening, huge, swift-footed, strong,  
One head a bright-eyed lion's, one a goat's  
The third a snake's, a mighty dragon-head.



(Hesiod, *Theogony*, II. 321-4 transl. Dorothea Wender)

With an eponym like that it is not surprising that this ezine seeks to publish a various assemblage of works: mainly Poetry, Satirical Verse and Prose, on a range of topics. We will publish anything that interests us and which we think will interest our readers. Writers are invited to submit work according to the following guidelines.

Submissions for the October Issue of *The Chimaera* may be sent now.

There is no set theme for poems or prose submitted to the October issue of *The Chimaera* — send in your best 1–5 poems, or one or more prose pieces, on whatever topic you like. But read the General Submission Guidelines first (below).

Although we are primarily a text-based literary and general electronic magazine, artists are invited to send in image submissions relating to the Chimaera and other fabulous beasts.

Submissions for *The Chimaera* October Issue must be received by Monday, September 17th, 2007.

Submissions: [editor@the-chimaera.com](mailto:editor@the-chimaera.com)

## General Submission Guidelines

*The Chimaera* will publish quarterly in January, April, July, and October, and seeks to present high-quality original work in the fields of poetry and prose.

We are interested in all sorts of well-written poetry, including satirical and humorous verse.

We are also interested in various sorts of prose relating to literature, culture, history or general social issues: critical prose, essays, causeries, reminiscences, polemics, historiography, biographies, review, and what have you. If you have an idea for a piece of writing but are unsure of what our response might be, ask us.

Submission deadline dates and themes (if any) for the next issue will be specified in each current issue, but you may submit work at any time. If your submission is too late for the deadline date for one issue it will be placed in the batch for the next.

In poetry, we are biased towards formalism, but by no means dismissive of vers libre. We are looking for original work which deals with a wide variety of issues and imagery, including that which might test or challenge boundaries, or disturb sensibilities. But it must be well executed. Please do not send us work which has not been extensively drafted, crafted and polished.

Previous publication is not a problem as long as the previous publisher does not hold copyright. You must inform us of any previous publication when you submit. Posting to blogs or online workshops is not in our opinion publishing, so any such poems or other pieces are clearly eligible. We reserve the right to archive your work as part of this site, and with your specific consent to publish it in a print anthology later; but all other rights remain with the author.

The person who submits work must be the original author.

We accept simultaneous submissions, but please inform us immediately if the submission is accepted elsewhere.

Poets should submit 1–5 poems; writers of prose, one or more prose pieces. Contributions should be sent in the body of an email, or as .doc or .rtf file attachments if necessary to preserve formatting: text contributions, whether poetry or prose, should be single-spaced. (Also see below on formatting and house style.)

If you send your submission in a .doc or .rtf file attachment, please make your surname the first word of the filename, e.g. Smith\_poems.doc. This makes it easier to file and sort submissions.

## Submissions

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Please include your surname and the word “Submission” in the subject line of your email, e.g. “McGonagall Submission”.

Visual arts contributions should be as .jpeg files and may be sent as attachments. Image submissions should be original work or cite relevant permissions from copyright owners.

All contributors should include brief third person biographical details of up to five lines.

We will attempt to acknowledge receipt of all submissions within three weeks of arrival.

There is no payment for publication in *The Chimaera*.

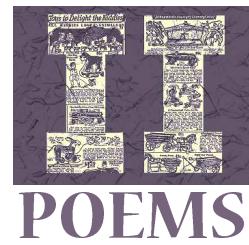
### Formatting: Line Breaks

It will be easier for us to work with your contributed poems if you make each new line after the first with a *line break* rather than a *paragraph break*. In Word, use *Shift+Enter* instead of *Enter*. (Click the ¶ button to make the breaks visible.) When we convert the text for the Web, a Word line break becomes an HTML hard line break, which is what’s needed. Ending every line with a paragraph break results in each line becoming a (spaced) paragraph in HTML, and these then have to be changed. We’ll be grateful, and deeply impressed, if you make a single paragraph of the whole poem — with a double line break at the end of each stanza, strophe or other spaced division — or else make a paragraph for each such division.

### Editorial Practice and House Style

The Editors will endeavour to preserve authors’ indents, strophe breaks, step-breaks, bold and italic style, and use of upper-case and lower-case letters. Authors’ font choices will not be preserved — unless they happen to coincide with the fonts chosen for the Web pages.

We will not wantonly remove or add punctuation, nor attempt to standardise (or standardize) to Australian/British or US spelling. Your British or Australian or Canadian or American spelling will remain. We *may* and probably will edit for consistency in minor typographical details such as em-dashes, en-dashes, quotation marks, and the placement of punctuation inside or outside closing quotes. In these matters, practice varies somewhat from publisher to publisher and country to country. With readers and contributors from all over, we won’t be able to match what everyone was taught as correct or normal, so we’ll probably just do what’s correct or normal for us.



# Mike Alexander

## Convert

*i*

Mother wasn't a Catholic,  
but she spent a Universal Depression  
among the good sisters.  
Separated from her brothers,

she befriended a statue of Saint  
Cecilia, aced the catechism,  
took to her studies, outscoring  
those born to the faith.

She excelled at choir,  
practiced as religiously  
as when her father taught her  
clarinet, & prayer. Not the religious

"type," she enjoyed time  
spent in chapel anyway, away  
from the others. She prayed  
for her family, like Mary in exile.

*ii*

Mother wasn't a Jew,  
but she took a man of the Law  
& bore him two nations,  
Esau & Jacob.

She lived by the hanging gardens  
of Puerto Rico, & sang  
the songs of Zion in captivity,  
after her lawyer left her. One day

her elder son came to her,  
asking for his birthright. She argued  
with him until he left again. The next day  
her younger son came to her.

He had wrestled an angel, & now  
 the angel was heavy with child. She  
 blessed him, saying, have yourself three  
 daughters. Teach them three-part harmony.

*iii*

Mother wasn't a Holy Roller.  
 She never subscribed to the Watchtower.  
 She never sent her money to a number  
 flashing at the bottom of the screen.

Mother wasn't Hindu or Moslem.  
 Never covered her face or sacrificed  
 joss-sticks in the home, never took up  
 Taoism in midtown Manhattan.

Mother wasn't an atheist.  
 She believed in Kodak instamatics,  
 Germanic operas at the Met,  
 & folk guitar on public television.

She believed in all-news radio.  
 She believed in her doctoral dissertation.  
 She believed in the Sunday Times'  
 crosswords & daily finger exercises.

## Companion Piece

I wrote the poem “Convert” in a period of mourning. There was an earlier poem in which my mother “shuts down the engine, having exhausted her personal definition of history”; until she became seriously ill, she had never figured heavily in my writing. My mother’s story is unusual & commonplace, like anyone’s, but the oddly mythic assertions in “Convert” all have some basis in her life. Her idea of faith was at one with the discipline of playing music. She taught music for most of her life. She learned to fly planes. She also asked Allen Ginsberg to his face if there was any money in this poetry stuff.

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**Mike Alexander**, a native New Yorker turned Houstonian by love & marriage, dreams too hard about 19th century Paris, handles money without any of it sticking to him, edits a small Houston litmag called *The Panhandler*, admins the online sonnet workshop at <http://p197.ezboard.com/The-Sonnet-Board/bthesonnetboard>, & uses ampersands.

# Mark Allinson

## Broken Loose

She doesn't care, she doesn't care, old heart.  
 But ox-dumb heart is thick and won't be told.  
 Reason frowned and argued from the start:  
 her skin is fine bone china, and you're old.  
 But ox-thick heart is nothing if not bold,  
 and paws the ground and snorts and doesn't care,  
 and foolishly refuses to be told.  
 Stay in that pen, you beast, and learn despair!  
 Reason ruled as the conference went to air.  
 Six weeks unseen, I watched the screen in dread  
 my hope she'd dress in grey with tied-back hair.  
 But her black-hair was down; her top, pink-red!  
 That's when my ox broke loose, now I can't stop  
 him running wild in reason's china shop.

## Companion Piece

You see — as I couldn't at the time — it was like this. I had been out of university work since the end of my second contract at Monash University in Melbourne in 1993, when the cultural revolution hit and a doctorate on Donne became a career death-sentence. And now, thirteen years later I was once again employed (albeit casually) in a university, teaching English literature.

The day I went to meet the other staff and co-ordinator of the course at the main campus was a balmy day in late summer, warm but not oppressive, the air replete with pleasant memories and associations of my *alma mater*, and the campus-grounds around me like a garden of Eden, with trees and shrubs in bloom, and wide lawns, complete with umbrageous grots and murmuring waters. And lolling on the warm grasses grazed the herds of knowledge-seeking Eloi, straight out of Wells' imagined future "paradise". So I was already in an altered state of consciousness when I walked into the room for the meeting, and beheld...

Well, you can guess what happened next — how one mistaken sign leads to the next, and, before you realize it, you are OBSESSED! Perhaps I was already in a state of love when I walked in that door, and personified it in a single real person ...

but then again, she was ... NO! That way madness lies!

The events of that day were all so dream-like, and seemed charged with tacit meaning. And in the weeks and months which followed, over-reading of normal communications produced meaningful “signs”.

And that’s the point when the images begin a life of their own, as distinct from being under the control of the ego-will. Dreams begin to invade waking-consciousness, and you feel possessed. You are. Possessed by the living imagination, which seems to have its own disconcerting agenda. I use the word “disconcerting” since it implies the coming apart of things previously in concert, or harmony. That’s why we say we feel we are “a complete mess” or “coming apart at the seams” at such times, especially when the images come into conflict with each other. And especially so again when you finally come to realize that you are in this state all alone, along with your bustling crowds and multitudes of opposing images.

One thing I realized clearly while in this state, is that the deep psyche is the powerhouse of waking consciousness: every mood, thought and image arises spontaneously, and we are what the psyche is doing. This becomes painfully clear in the state of obsession, when the images have a life of their own.

Finding the images behind emotions is a great challenge for poetry, of course, and a good way of staying relatively sane at such times, or at least in a state (as James Hillman says) of “illuminated lunacy”. Jung says in his autobiography, that if he hadn’t been able to find the images behind his emotions, those images upon which our emotions ride, he would have been – at one stage of his life – “torn apart” by them.

But every negative has its polar positive, I have found. And so even through the madness of an errant obsession, whose images have such lacerating power, the cuts and bruises visited upon the psyche may bud-forth new shoots of growth.

Well, put it this way, I did get a few poems from the experience, such as this one.

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**Mark Allinson** was born in 1947 and raised in Melbourne, Australia. At first Mark believed that he wanted to be an airline pilot, and he completed a private flying licence at 17. Before long, however, he realized that flying was merely a metaphor of his desire to rise above the pettiness of daily life, in order to see the big picture. Eventually this desire for vertical transcendence led to a Ph.D in English literature, and he taught for a while at Monash University, in Melbourne. Mark is now entirely grounded, and living and writing on the NSW coast, south of Sydney.

# Tiel Aisha Ansari

## Skeleton Dance

So it's a waltz? I'll let you lead, my friend.  
We're just wasting time waiting for the end.  
Icicle bones move under the snowman's skin  
with glacier patience. They say time mends  
but also wears the fabric of the world thin.  
Give that ancient globe a brand new spin—  
it'll fly apart. Don't cry over oceans spilled  
like milk; that's how the Milky Way begins.  
I tell you only what you know. Time kills.  
Seeds wait in old dry lakes for rain to fill  
the expectations of a bygone age. Your bones  
are ivory and ice, long dry, but still  
tatters of skin hang from your fleshless fingers.  
A skeleton dancing on while daylight lingers.



Patricia Wallace Jones

## Companion Piece — Skeletal Thoughts

What is death? Journey, arrival, beginning, end, final mystery, answer to all questions? A country from which no one returns? Merely a gateway? Nothingness, or ultimate reality?

If I approach this subject poetically, it's for lack of graspable facts. We can't know (though we may believe) what death is or isn't. But we can know how we feel about it; and this is a realm best explored through metaphor and imagery, myth and symbolism. The Kingdom of Death is a kingdom of poetry.

Pieces that went into this poem: You've heard that inside every fat man there's a skinny man struggling to get out? Tim Powers gave that idea a unique twist in his novel *Last Call*. Terry Pratchett hid Death inside a snowman in the climactic scene of *Hogfather*. And then there's the classic Zen image of the gleefully dancing skeleton.

We're all walking dead; we're all bones. We might as well dance.

**Tiel Aisha Ansari** is a Sufi, martial artist, and computer programmer living in the Pacific Northwest. Her poetry has appeared in *Islamica Magazine* and *Barefoot Muse* and is forthcoming in *Mythic Delirium* and *Shit Creek Review*, among others.

**Patricia Wallace Jones** is an artist, poet, and retired disability advocate. More of her artwork can be seen at: <http://imagineii.typepad.com/imagineii/>.

# Nicolette Bethel

## (From *Mama Lily and the Dead*)

### The Scotsman Gives Lily Her Name (1904)

He made a bed without regret  
 beside a girl who calmed her child  
 with breasts of well-rubbed teak, wet-sweet with milk.  
 When Annie filled her daughter's mouth  
 on liquid nights, he suckled too,  
 and chased the shades of boats across the sea.  
 His child surprised him, springing wild  
 and undesired in her. Alive despite his fear,  
 she swam insistent for the light.

Malcolm smiled; she looked like him,  
 skin pale as teeth, hair still as water  
 hauled cool from limestone wells.  
 Her lips were pink against the breast  
 his lips had pulled; her hands  
 curled bright against the dark.  
 He dreamed of sails trimmed tight,  
 and fed his face to slapping air.

He named her Lily, for her whiteness,  
 but her eyes held secrets, dark as lakes  
 that swallowed sons beneath their waves.  
 He gathered winds about him. He wrapped  
 her fingers round a ring, and left.  
 Annie held her girls and wept.

### The Obeah Woman Tells Lily's Fortune (1909)

The obeah woman watched the small girl's shadow  
 tip sideways, leak eastward, and trickle  
 under the lintel; it pooled on the floor.  
 No one wiped it. Lily flickered without it.  
 Mary Aurelius stepped from the hut  
 that sheltered her from spilling light.  
 She cupped her hands to catch the sun,  
 flung brightness over the child.

Mary Aurelius knew the terror of the hunt.  
 On long afternoons, the shadows on her walls  
 bloomed, became chainsores and scars.  
 Her neighbour's dinner was sweat and rot.  
 Scramblings and bootsteps over her head  
 made way for blind sunshine. Shafts of light reclaimed her.  
*Ramatoulaye: Mary Aurelius —*  
 fingers skinned lips from her teeth and named her.

Now, she cast light from her hands.  
 But Lily's life, filed sharp by fate,  
 ripped that bright redemption.  
 Light scattered all around the yard.  
 The chickens pecked and clawed.

### The Seamstress Teaches Lily to Sew (1910)

In her shop, Naomi tacked the seams of jackets,  
 flounced pinafores, turned fine lace and lawn  
 to bridal gowns. She laid slave-cotton  
 flat before her, slipped scissors through it,  
 snicked and ripped it, clipped soft riddles from it.  
 Lily watched her unscramble the code of tailoring.

When she finished Naomi called her granddaughter.  
*Come child. Come save these scrap for me.*  
 Lily dropped the strays in tumbling heaps  
 on table corners and broken chairs, fiddled  
 them into piles. Naomi lit the lamp, picked a thimble,  
 sat Lily beside her, and patched scraps together.  
 By lamplight they stitched riddles of their own.

*This where all the hole go.*  
*Each got it own place. Follow the pattern.*  
*Hole make sense all by theyself.*

At night, Annie reclaimed her daughter,  
 fed her, bathed her, sang her to bed.  
 Lily mantled herself in re-membered cloth,  
 swallowed sleep in the embrace of her sister.  
 Behind her Naomi ravelled up riddles.  
 Each clean morning she fetched her granddaughter.  
*Come child. Come thread this for me.*

From *Mama Lily and the Dead* 

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Lily held the end of new-cut thread  
attentive by its needle. She squinted through the metal eye  
and aimed for the sense of the hole.

**The Midwife Delivers Lily's Son (1926)**

*Kahizah bids Atlantic swells  
to throttle jetties, flood the groynes,  
and suck the lime-white surface off the street.  
She tells the sun: Unpeel the sky's blue skin,  
strip artery and sinew, spin  
this air until it thickens.*

Kahizah pulled tea-water from the well,  
unwound greenbitter cerasee from walls,  
piled fever grass to dry in cutlass light.  
Then, after limeleaf tea and fish-and-grits  
and shepherd needle smoked along the shore,  
she bundled baygerina in hard wind  
and told the headland: *silt the ocean's gut.*

*Kahizah molds the belly swell,  
tells Lily: Lean across the sill  
to catch that clapping shutter — tells  
the spongy ripeness: Wring and spill  
wet salt down Lily's thighs.*

When Lily raised her knees and cried  
the ocean heaved its head.  
When Lily clutched Kahizah's side  
salt water claimed the yard.  
And when the new child cleared his eyes  
to name the cyclone world, Kahizah  
bathed him in sagewater, smoothed his limbs,  
and cradled him for Lily's arms to hold.

An earlier version of "The Scotsman Gives Lily Her Name (1904)" was published in *Calabash: A Volume of Caribbean Arts and Letters*, Vol. 2, 2003.

An earlier version of "The Seamstress Teaches Lily to Sew (1910)" was published in *The Caribbean Writer*, Vol. 16, 2002.

"The Midwife Delivers Lily's Son (1926)" is due to be published in *Yinna: Journal of the Bahamas Association of Cultural Studies*, Vol. II.

## Companion Piece — Oh, My Life and Days

“Mama Lily and the Dead” is a series of poems about the life of one woman, my paternal grandmother, who was universally admired, pitied, and loved by all who came into contact with her, mainly because she lived to bury every member of her immediate family. Her husband and all her children predeceased her — some by half a century, the last by a mere three weeks. What people admired about her was her apparently unshakeable faith in the God who took from her everything that mattered most — except us, her grandchildren, for whom she had a bright and shining love, and a house which was a work of art, a crucible for creativity, a home, and a document of history all in one.

She was a fundamentalist of the Puritan persuasion. She was converted by a Pentecostal preacher from the Anglicanism of her birth, and became a lifelong member of the branch of the Plymouth Brethren that settled in The Bahamas round about the turn of the twentieth century. Hers was the kind of world where plainness and modesty were watchwords for behaviour. In an African culture where even the poor strove to adorn their daughters with earrings and bracelets, she stripped herself of those ancestral gifts, taking out her earrings when she was saved, and never wearing jewellery (other than her wedding ring) or make-up for her entire life, not to mention never uttering a swear word she didn’t make up herself (at least not that we heard), never marrying after her husband died (when she, and he, were both only 39), never wearing trousers or cutting her hair or touching alcohol (the last was a bit more flexible than the other prohibitions; when she cooked she sometimes used rum, and her wicked progeny were not above handing her a spiked glass of eggnog at Christmas gatherings, just for the hell of it). “Oh, my life and days!” was what she exclaimed when she was amazed by something, what she said when another person might have said “by damn” or “great shit” or “Jesus Christ”. We thought she was perfect, and were cowed by the idea. I was afraid of her, annoyed by her, embarrassed by her, fiercely loved by her, and, ultimately, inspired by her. She kept us all together; we all shared in her bereavements, though we could never attain her special status — that of a woman who had buried a husband, two mothers, endless cousins, six children, and a daughter-in-law.

The genesis of these poems came during one dark winter I spent studying in Canada. When given the task of producing a long piece of some sort, I composed a poem in five movements called “Stranger Anger”, written during the dull ache that was February, an ode to homesickness. A little to my surprise, the central piece was a poem in blank verse about my grandmother and her house.

Subsequently the longer poem fell away. When my father died, I stopped writing poetry — which I had started as an exercise to help me develop my prose style — but “My Grandmother’s House” continued to live. When Momma herself died, seven years after my father and three weeks after my aunt, I pulled out “My Grandmother’s House” and reworked it so it could be read at her funeral. Later, when I found the ability to write poetry again, around the turn of the millennium, I posted the poem to The Gazebo, the Alsop Review’s online workshop.

*From Mama Lily and the Dead* 

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It was kindly received, I'll say that. It wasn't trashed, but was roundly criticized on several levels. I chose not to revise it after all, because I found I couldn't — it was already too mature, and had been written by a very different person for a very different purpose. Instead, I took to heart the most useful of the suggestions that emerged in the discussion — that I write a series of poems about this woman, Lily, my grandmother.

And so was born the idea of a biography in verse. Her story is, after all, a riveting one. She was born half white and illegitimate in a community settled by ex-slaves and Liberated Africans, looking too much like her white father ever to be accepted. She escaped her community by marrying a man whose outcast status was similar to hers, the child of a mixed-race woman from the tiny middle class who'd been banished from her family home to the edge of town for having had the temerity to become pregnant by a man who was simply too damn black. The two women were far closer in many ways than my grandmother was with her own mother, whom she judged for having had three children by three different men and marrying none of them. In the end, though, she took her own mother in to her home, and looked after her till she died. My father and his siblings grew up in a house of widows and single mothers.

I chose to tell my grandmother's story through the eyes of other people. I never, after all, knew what she thought and felt inside; if she struggled with her lot, if she questioned her faith, if she ever got angry with the hand she'd been dealt, we never knew it. We saw her only from the outside, and so that's how I'm writing her life. She was a lonely, wounded, coping, difficult, loving character, someone who never talked about her grief, who, despite her bereavements could still laugh with her children and grandchildren when they were outrageous (and they were all outrageous) and who, despite her commitment for eighty of her ninety years to a Christ she called upon many times a day, fought her own passing in tears and perplexity. She was our grandmother, and was at her strongest alone. This series is my tribute to her.

# Mark Blaeuer

## Eclogue, With Sofa

“The odour of the burning couch is carried across  
the meadows from the lately-ploughed stubble . . .”  
—Richard Jefferies, ***Hodge and his Masters***

The furniture’s in milo, smoldering.  
Twelve years go by. Astride lunch counter stools,  
he-men taunt the field’s owner: “Is that thing  
still burnin’, Bobby Joe?” They grin like ghouls.

“I reckon so.” An east coast curator,  
in town for an azalea festival  
with his wife, overhears and dares to utter:  
“Let me buy it.” Guffaws, inscrutable.

Then Bobby Joe speaks up: “I reckon you  
did,” causing a young hiree to drop  
her plate of ham and navy beans. A few  
eyes look at the wife, who says: “Bobby, stop.”

### Companion Piece — Extended Bio

Mark Blaeuer’s poems have appeared in dozens of magazines since 1977. He has been employed as library shelver, fast food flipper, “inserter operator” at a junkmail factory, “casual clerk” at a post office, museum aide, archeologist, researcher in a physical anthropology lab, and park ranger. His current job is in the Zigzag Mountains.

He grew up near the American Bottom, where the International Horseradish Festival now occurs every June. He visited the Richard Jefferies house near Swindon, Wiltshire, in 1995 but was disappointed to find it closed. For consolation Mark spent some time at a local pub and (with his wife, a curator) walked around Coate Water, pondering Bevis.

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**Mark Blaeuer** lives about a mile south of what used to be called Lofton, Arkansas.

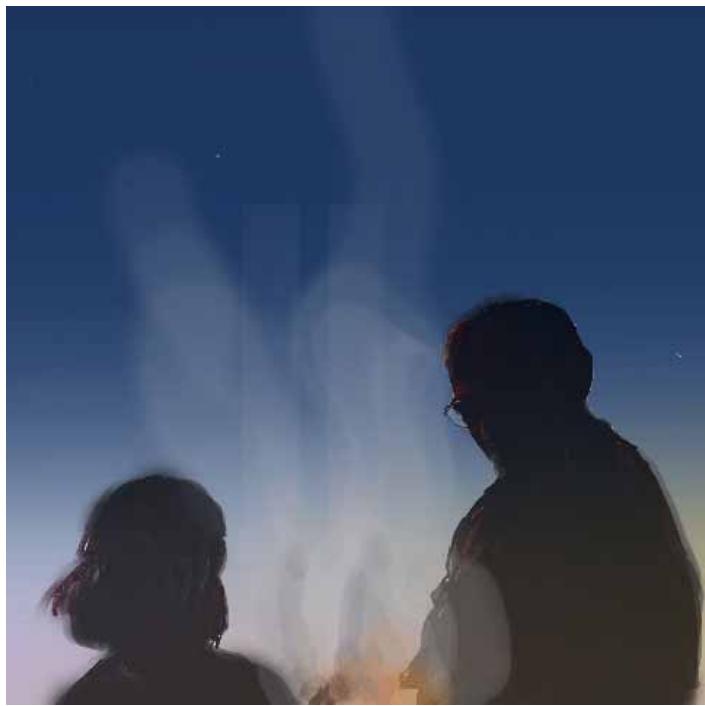
# Michael Cantor

## At Plum Island, 9/28/01

*Dust, smoke, hats, flags, voices, noise  
The set is on all day, there are no commercials.*

I soak the last garlic greens from my wife's garden  
in water from the sea  
set them steaming on a hot grill  
layer on thin half moons of bright lemon  
fresh black trout, quickly cleaned and gutted,  
their mouths and eyes open,  
tuck ears of buttered corn between the fish  
and cast handfuls of coarse sea salt over it all.

As I close the lid on the Weber  
I think of the Shinto priest almost forty years ago  
blessing the new factory at Totsuka  
droning, in a stiff white kimono  
scattering handfuls of salt to the wind  
purifying  
and of sumo wrestlers,  
giant Kashiwado with the pimpled ass,  
my favorite,  
throwing salt as they glowered at each other.



Valori Herzlich

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At Plum Island, 9/28/01

It will all be finished in ten minutes  
 the greens dry and charred, ashes  
 the trout cooked through, moist and tender  
 some of the corn kernels scorched and caramelized.  
 I will make a quick ponzu sauce  
 shoyu and lemon juice and rice vinegar.  
 A salad is ready, slivered fennel and shitaké  
 smelling of earth  
 focaccia for the Friday evening blessing.

And my wife and I will light candles, say prayers,  
 pluck all the trout flesh from the bones,  
 she delicately, using knife and fork  
 in the European style; I with my fingers  
 and drink much too much white wine,  
 go to bed very early.  
 She will try to dream of her daughter, in the hills past Santa Fe,  
 and I of priests and sumo wrestlers,

*They have begun to pull down the steel cathedral  
 the filigree of death  
 soon there will be only a hole.*

“At Plum Island” was previously published in *Manzanita Quarterly*.

### Companion Piece

Every poet I know appeared to want — to have — to write a 9/11 poem, and this one, with its deliberately oblique approach, was mine.

After the initial shock and horror, my wife and I retreated within ourselves. There was an unspoken attempt to live quietly, to treat each other well, to snuggle in and hide from the ugliness of the world. Santa Fe, where we spend part of each year; secluded, emotionally and physically distanced from all this, cocooned by mountains; seemed to call. And aspects of religion arose — not the mad God-worship that led to 9/11, but a more basic contemplation, a search for an inner calm, an attempt to escape to and focus on the most basic elements that surrounded us on Plum Island: sand, sea, salt, sea grass.

At the same time, we could not ignore the real world. The radio was on continuously, three newspapers arrived each morning, we watched TV all night.

The poem is an attempt to present this as flatly as possible, to bring truths through the facts of our lives and thoughts rather than statements, to attempt to demonstrate — without explicitly saying so — how the sight of charred flesh on a grilled fish can be

## At Plum Island, 9/28/01

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enormously disturbing, even as the act of preparation, and joining in a somewhat ritualistic dinner, can be comforting. I believe that political and moral poetry succeeds best through presentation and understatement, through allowing the reader to enter the poem and complete the thoughts, and while my poetry doesn't always follow my own beliefs, this one does.

Technically, I feel that the poem flows and reads well, but I don't know if it succeeds in the goal of bringing the reader inside my head, sharing my half-real/half-suppressed thoughts and emotions. Poetry on events of this nature is so difficult, although it can be done ("A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London"). What I did not want was another *Oh my God, they're jumping out of windows!* cry. I wanted the reader to enter the poem as neutral ground, to go where he or she felt. In doing this — speaking technically again — I may have gone too far. When I first workshopped this at the Powow group, almost nobody realized it was a 9/11 poem, and it was taken by most as a somewhat unfocused depiction of a domestic situation. (I don't believe the italicized "signposts" at the beginning and end were there then. I had felt that the dating in the title would be sufficient to place the poem.) The present version is more explicit. Ideally, I would like to eliminate the signposts, but — particularly as time passes — I'm not certain the poem works as intended without them.

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**Michael Cantor**, New York-born, and a former business executive, has lived and worked in Japan, Europe and Latin America; and now resides on Plum Island, north of Boston on the Massachusetts coast. His poetry has appeared in *Measure*, *The Formalist*, *Dark Horse*, *Iambs & Trochees*, *Texas Poetry Journal*, *The Atlanta Review*, and many other journals and anthologies.

**Valori Herzlich** was born in Latvia, and educated in New York City. She has worked as an art director, designer and illustrator; and is presently very much occupied with Plum Island's most varied and prolific herb and vegetable garden.

# Patrick Carrington

## Finding The Sound of Oak

I used to climb my father, hands  
in the calloused bark of his  
as I walked up his chest  
and stood on his shoulders. When  
I grew he took me to a white oak  
he'd planted in the woods. I  
climbed that too. All the way  
to the crown. It was solid like him.

And sometimes  
in summer storms  
and sometimes  
in branches bent by snow  
I'd imagine I could feel him  
touch me and hear him call me,  
as if he'd evolved into that tree  
to lay hands on my shoulders  
and say one last thing.  
But more often love  
was a matter of silence.

The dead come back. Do they  
ever leave at all? Maybe  
it's a trick, slipping into dirt  
like a root. No matter if  
he's resting now or hiding,  
it was easy to forget

the tree. Shameful  
it took me so long to know  
it deserved better,  
that in a truer world  
it would not have blurred  
into the others  
as if it were just the same. I

lost it long ago to the ax  
of my neglect, like the pictures  
of a man I passed from frame  
to scrapbook to shoebox  
and locked in a closet

like a skeleton. I return  
to these woods with no tongue  
and barefoot. To walk quietly,  
listening for his risen bones.

“Finding the Sound of Oak” first appeared in *Aries*.

## Companion Piece

For me, poetry alternates between a health and a sickness, a curiosity and a defiance, sustenance and addiction. I write it to drain infection. I write it because someone told me not to once. I write it because it adds enough helium to my head to get my chin off the floor. I wrote my first poem after I saw an old man lie down on the sidewalk and cry one day. I am still trying to figure out if I'm him, or he's me, or we're you. I wrote "Finding the Sound of Oak" in a feeble attempt to atone for a multitude of minor sins, hoping to whittle down my purgatory time a bit. And mostly, I wrote it to say, *I'm Sorry.*

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**Patrick Carrington** is the poetry editor at *Mannequin Envy*. His manuscript *Thirst* (Codhill, 2007), winner of Codhill Press' 2006 Poetry Chapbook Award, has just been released ([www.codhill.com](http://www.codhill.com)). His poems have appeared recently (or are forthcoming) in *The Connecticut Review*, *Rattle*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Hunger Mountain*, *The Eleventh Muse*, *Poetry Southeast*, and other journals. His first collection, *Rise, Fall and Acceptance* (MSR Publishing, 2006), was released in December by Main St. Rag Press ([www.mainstreetrag.com](http://www.mainstreetrag.com)).

# Catherine Chandler

## To the Man on Mansfield Street

I have imagined countless reasons for  
 your sleeping on the hotel heating vent —  
 a lengthy layoff, months of unpaid rent,  
 a gambling debt, divorce, a private war.

Or was it something darker, maybe drink,  
 a need to fill your veins with heroin;  
 insanity, a secret or a sin  
 you couldn't whisper to a priest or shrink?

The morning traffic soon will wake you up;  
 you'll check there's nothing missing from your bag;  
 you'll bind your blisters with a dirty rag,  
 and later gauge the clinking in your cup.

I see the bright-eyed boy you surely were;  
 I see the tender infant, newly born,  
 the baby who, before the cross and thorn,  
 was given gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Unlike the offerings of wiser men,  
 all that I give you is a cigarette,  
 the time of day, some change, my mute regret.  
 Cop-outs ending in the word "Amen".

### Companion Piece

I was born in Flushing, Long Island, and, up to now, have usually been too embarrassed to say so, citing simply New York City as my birthplace. However, as I will now be published in *The Shit Creek Review + II*, I have decided to "come clean" once and for all. I lived in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania until 1971.

After my cousin was killed in Viet Nam, I decided I would give peace a chance. I've been living in Canada ever since.

The man on Mansfield Street does exist. He sleeps outside the parking garage of the Bonaventure Hilton on Mansfield Street, Montreal, Quebec. I wrote this poem to acknowledge his life and those of street persons all over the world.

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**Catherine Chandler**, a native of New York and Pennsylvania now living in Canada, has poems and translations published or forthcoming in journals, anthologies and websites in the US and the UK, including *Iambs and Trochees*, *Raintown Review*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Möbius*, *The Lyric*, *Modern Haiku*, *Texas Poetry Journal*, *First Things*, *Candelabrum*, *The HyperTexts*, *Mezzo Cammin*, *Umbrella*, and *The Barefoot Muse*.

# Maryann Corbett

## Seeing Women in Hijab, a Businesswoman Thinks About Fabric

The veils themselves are beautiful, no question,  
 and in this neighborhood they wear them long.  
 Fluidly draped, rich-textured, and in colors  
 I'd hesitate to choose for business wear,  
 they smooth all movement, turning simple moves,  
 like walking, sitting, lifting an arm, to art.  
 A hem off-kilter sometimes says *home-sewn*.  
 I notice, and think of how I used to sew.  
 In fact, I still waste time in fabric stores,  
 modest ones in the Midway, the very same  
 stores where Somali women shop for veiling.  
 I haunt the aisles of "special occasion" fabric,  
 drinking the varied hues and saturations —  
 aquamarine and celadon, wine, plum.  
 Evening wear was what I loved to sew,  
 "evening and bridal" in the pattern books.  
 Dances and proms and weddings, so much sewing —  
 But the thrill was never only the finished dress.  
 The thrill was the fabric — satin, crepe de chine,  
 silk douppioni, taffeta, organza —  
 the uncut rivers running off the bolt.  
 Roll out a bolt of velvet, you're transformed  
 to oriental empress. Cut it up  
 in little pieces for constructed garments,  
 you're right back to your wage-slave weekday role.  
 The clothes approved for Western working life  
 fit closely. They have no extraneous drape,  
 no flow, nothing to veil the daily grind.  
 The clothes that let you love the cloth itself —  
 brocaded stiffness, nuzzling velveteen,  
 bias-cut satin pouring over a thigh —  
 are evening and bridal wear, or period costumes,  
 with bodices and corsets that grip the waist  
 above a gathered skirt that opens softly  
 like an enormous rose, the dress of dreams,  
 the fabric of fantasy, like nothing at all  
 I wear these days, life being what it is.  
 The dream needs yards of fabric, like those veils.  
 Which brings me back to the stabbing little needles  
 of my questioning, when a Muslim woman's veil  
 brushes me as she passes in the aisle  
 of the 16A, as all of us ride downtown  
 to weekdays that are not the lives we dreamed.

## Companion Piece — Blank Verse and Binders

I've written quite a few poems that are fairly long, in loose iambics and a discursive voice. These poems often feature a narrator whose opinions are cynical and whose viewpoint is noticeably blinkered or limited. Three of them will be published this summer (here in SCR, in *poemeleon*, and in *Mezzo Cammin*), and readers may notice that the "I" they encounter in them has an assortment of unlikeable traits. Lest I be confused with my narrators and look even sillier than I am, I'd better explain how this habit of mine got started...

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**Maryann Corbett** earned a doctorate in English language and literature and expected to be teaching *Beowulf* and Chaucer and the history of the language. Instead, she has spent the last 25 years working as an in-house writing teacher, editor, and indexer for the Minnesota Legislature. This close proximity to the legislative sausage grinder makes it necessary for her to turn to poetry as a calming influence. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Measure*, *The Lyric*, *The Raintown Review*, *The Barefoot Muse*, *Mezzo Cammin*, and other journals in print and online.

# Brian Dion

## Finding the Words

*Seanchan called a great convocation and summoned the Fili and poets of all levels to reconstruct the Tain Bo Cualnge... but the poets were not able... The next morning Seanchan and his son departed, riding south.... \**

### I.

#### **Seanchan**

“Search about the clover, boy-o,  
poke about the furze and grass.  
Snap the stalks of autumn yarrow,  
read their seeds before they pass.

Hear the shivered sprigs of hazel  
plucked by harping strokes of wind;  
glean that song if you are able.  
Tales are trebled by the land.

Cut the grain from fields of Honor,  
bid the miller ‘Sift the grist.’  
Roam the bogs and cleave the vapor.  
Stories ride the morning mist.

Bleed the stag on Christian parchment  
stolen from the Abbot’s tin.  
Stain that Psalter’s golden raiment  
red with verses praising Men.”

“I know where we will find the tale,” said Seanchan to his son.  
“We must go to Eanloch where Feargus mac Roich is buried”\*

### II

#### **Muirghein**

“We stood in chafing briar-weed  
and cotton-grass. I must admit,  
I thought the codger short on wit;  
a fool begs favors of the dead.

But when a voice began to rise  
from rickled bones and marrow, sere  
with thirst for one distilling ear,  
my father grew before my eyes.

The verses bloomed like alder leaves  
and I began to understand  
that death can never be the end  
as long as poems can rise from graves.

I watched him swallow braided chords  
and wondered who, if anyone,  
will hear our tale when we have gone  
to barrow, buried with our words.”

\**The Man of Lore* — retold by Tom White in  
*Parabola* Volume XVII, #3

## Companion Piece

My own father was a man of stories. Generally they would come after I'd made some sort of youthful declaration of intent regarding my future. Most often they were small and seemed inconsequential at first, only gaining weight upon reflection. Some never gained any weight at all. This story falls somewhere in the middle of these two categories and came when, at the sagely age of thirteen, I told him I wanted to make a living as a writer.

On a cold November morning in 1967 my father bounded down the stairs from our third floor apartment and burst into fading darkness. He looked up and saw that fuzzed line of dawn slowly spreading across the East Boston sky. Smiling as he jingled a pocketful of change, he turned and quickly walked toward the corner of Falcon and Maverick streets to wait for the bus.

When the bus squealed to a stop he raced up its steps, dropped a dime into the fare box and slid onto a window seat. He was still smiling and he had every reason to smile. He was on his way to a job interview at the Quincy shipyard. It had been a lean six months since he was discharged from service and this chance was even more than he'd hoped for. His wife could quit her job at the pharmacy and look after his two-year-old son. A welder's wages would pay for the life his family deserved. He looked around the bus at the yawning passengers coming alive with the morning sun and chuckled as a thought struck him. He could even buy a car!

When the bus came to a stop at Maverick station he raced to the front and down the steps. Standing in front of the station's entrance, he removed the fistful of change from

## Finding the Words

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his pocket and began to separate it into transfers as the other passengers rushed past him to escape the cold. Fifteen cents to State Street. Another fifteen to South station and the Red Line. Andrews Square and another bus to Galivan Boulevard, then one last bus to the shipyard. He dripped the fares back into his pocket and looked at his other hand. More than a dollar in change left over. He descended the stairs of the subway station, two at a time.

At Andrews Square he looked at his watch. He was early. Very early. The next two buses would have him at the shipyard in half an hour and the interview was more than two hours away. He looked across the street and saw the blinking neon of a diner. Sticking his hand into pocket, he jingled the remaining coins and decided to treat himself to breakfast. The diner was filled with conversations and music hissing from a radio on its shelf behind the register. As he took the corner stool at the counter, he paid particular attention to the three men sitting at the booth to his left. They were laughing as they ate, joking about some foreman or supervisor. They wore the coverall uniforms of shipyard welders.

He ordered coffee and the two-egg special, lit a cigarette and waited. He imagined himself in this very diner the following Monday, sitting with the three men in the booth and joking about that same foreman. The pretty, freckled waitress brought him his order as the men in the booth got up to leave and one of them said "So long, Francine." Then he looked at my father and joked, "Don't forget to tip my darlin'." "Oh, I won't," my father said. He watched the men leave and quietly hoped he'd be on their crew.

When he finished eating the bill came and he counted out the eighty-five cents due, then added two quarters to the stack of coins. He was halfway out the door when he suddenly realized he'd made a fatal mistake. Jamming his hand into his pocket he withdrew the remaining change and frantically started to count. His face flushed. He was forty-five cents short. He turned and looked through the diner window at Francine who was gathering up his coins and moving to the register. She caught sight of him and smiled. He spun away and looked at the sidewalk. Not only did he not have enough money to get to the shipyard; he only had enough to get him back to Maverick Station. He'd have to walk home from there. It was then, for the first time that day, that he began to feel the chill of the November morning and raised the collar of his wool jacket. He stood in a sort of limbo for a long time, then crossed the street, passed the waiting Galivan Boulevard bus and disappeared down the subway stairs.

He resurfaced at Maverick Station an hour later and looked toward the direction of home. The wind seemed to have picked up and he thought about the steep hill he'd have to slog up. He was silently cursing himself when he heard his name called out behind him. It was his landlord, Jerry, on his way home from the night shift at the Edison plant.

"Hi Jerry," my father said.

"What are you doin' here?" Jerry asked.

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Finding the Words

“Jerry, would you like to hear a funny story?”

“Sure.”

“Great,” my father said. “But it’ll cost you a dime.”

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**Brian Dion**’s work has appeared in *Candelabrum* and the *Raintown Review* and he was a runner-up for the 2005 Grolier Poetry prize. He is active in his local Community Theatre and recently won the best supporting actor award at the Eastern Massachusetts Association of Community Theater’s Drama Festival. He lives near the banks of the Saugus river with his wife and daughter.

# Jehanne Dubrow

## Fragment from a Nonexistent Yiddish Poet: *Ida Lewin (1906–1938)*

*AlwaysWinter, Poland*

24.

On Rosh Hashanah, I try  
 the trick of making honey cake —  
 not walnuts mixed with dough  
 which mama recommends,  
 or candied orange peel,  
 not apples from the peasant's field,  
 nor cloves and cinnamon, scented  
 as a Shulamite  
 — the trick, as with all women's work,  
 is disappointment,  
 an old letter  
 tied shut with silk ribbon  
 then stitched into my apron hem,  
 each sentence syrupy  
 with promises,  
 the words *my dearest love*  
 like fat  
 dissolving in the mouth to leave  
 an oily taste behind,  
 and every last *goodbye*, a pinch  
 of salt stirred in the recipe  
 to make it sweeter still,  
 but with a bitterness  
 that sticks like honey on the tongue.

### Companion Piece — Ida Lewin: Poet, Visionary, Jew

Ida Lewin, little known outside academia, is now viewed as a Yiddish poet of great promise whose life was cut short by the Shoah. Her writing, of which only a few tantalizing pieces remain, is characterized by a subversiveness quite unexpected in a woman of her generation and religiously conservative upbringing. Although she received little more than a few years of formal education, Ida's poetry demonstrates a profound sensitivity to Talmudic thought, Jewish tradition, and even the outside world of "present-day" Poland, a crowded, ever-modernizing landscape of trolley cars, shortening hemlines, and syncopated music.

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## Fragment from a Nonexistent Jewish Poet...

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Born in 1906 and raised in the Galician town of AlwaysWinter, Ida wrote of an insulated Orthodox world, a place with its own mythology. Not a dragon or a mermaid like the larger Polish cities but a bird, a shadowy crane, coal-black except for its red beak. People called the crane “December,” because its feathers were as dark as any winter night. “I saw December perching near the church,” the picklemaker whispered to a customer on market day. One week later, the new priest — a man of perfect health and irrefutable Christian charity — died in his sleep. If December settled on your roof or (god forbid) built a nest beside your chimney, then the evil eye would soon turn its blue gaze in your direction. When December flapped its wings, the wind spat frozen rain.

\*

Scholars have wondered if Ida had the gift of Sight. Too many of her poems seem to prophesy a darkness spreading across AlwaysWinter, a thick fog that clung to the ankles, preventing action and escape.

\*

Ida is thought to have died in 1938, during a winter flu epidemic that killed thirty-one other Jews in AlwaysWinter, including her only child, a six-month-old daughter named Rivka. Ida missed the town’s first Aktion by eleven months. In 1986, two schoolchildren discovered her manuscripts as well as a collection of diaries, accounting ledgers, and a handmade book of kosher recipes, buried in an alleyway behind the former site of the Great Synagogue in AlwaysWinter. A sheaf of nearly forty crumbling pages of verse is all that remains of Ida Lewin’s poetry.

\*

As for translators, they have been slow to address Ida’s work. Her outsider status — as female poet, as dissident Orthodox voice — has also caused hesitation. Like other fragmented poetries, Ida’s words are both pleasure and challenge, a puzzle that needs solving but can never be fully pieced together. What remains? What sentences have insects eaten from the page? What has rain washed away?

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**Jehanne Dubrow** was born in Italy and grew up in Yugoslavia, Zaire, Poland, Belgium, Austria, and the United States. She is currently completing a PhD in creative writing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her work has appeared in *Poetry*, *The Hudson Review*, *The New England Review*, and *Poetry Northwest*

# Richard Epstein

## Tiberius Caesar

On his warm island he amused himself,  
 What with his little boys and little fish.  
 He grew quite mad. “Succeeding a new god  
 Whom you knew well is man’s work,” he told young  
 Specialists ferried in from Syria.  
 “I touched Augustus when he was a man.”  
 They brought with them their step-by-step instructions  
 And whiled away some minutes each, but more  
 Time was absorbed — who’d have believed it? — watching  
 Cooks cook. Vigilance was the price of lunch.  
 He grew quite mad. His tarts were not enough  
 To soothe divinity, not even strangled.  
 He grew quite mad. He grew quite mad. Did gods  
 Attend their mothers’ fetes and pillow talk?  
 And when he had his godhead fitted on,  
 Would he have to be dead, and would he notice?

### Companion Piece — He Sleeps with the Fishes

Fucking Suetonius. I mean, who knows what about me? Little fishes. “Tiberius and the Little Fishes” — that’s what they’d call a new biography. If Loeb had wanted you to know, he wouldn’t have left ’em in Latin. Hello? Empire being run here.

I’ll bet there’s a name for someone with a morbidly prurient interest in little fishes. “Yeah, ‘Tiberius’”? “Dark, unrelenting,” said that fat fellow with the hydrocele. What do you mean, what did he mean? Down the Steps and into the Tiber. Find me a sack, somebody.

*He had the old arrogance inbred in the Claudian family, and many symptoms of a cruel temper, though they were repressed, now and then broke out. He had also from earliest infancy been reared in an imperial house; consulships and triumphs had been heaped on him in his younger days; even in the years which, on the pretext of seclusion he spent in exile at Rhodes, he had had no thoughts but of wrath, hypocrisy, and secret sensuality.*

Giggles. Like that’s a bad thing. Waft me away to the villas of Capreae. A casino? What the fuck, “a casino”? The Isle of Capri in Blackhawk. Indoor tropical pools, towering palms, and — no, let me guess. Little fishes. Jupiter Fucking Imperator.

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**Richard Epstein:** A contributor’s note about Epstein appeared in the last issue. His life hasn’t changed much since then.

## Angela France

### Martha Gunn

The dippers all know I'm the Regent's favourite, give me green-eye as I go to take my fill of the Pavilion kitchen. The upstairs staff look askance at my salt-split clothes and reddened skin but can't deny me my pocket load of sweets and rich treats. I can keep myself fat on what I earn from dipping the rich and gullible but have never seen such fat living as this; he surely takes all the cream and leaves the skim for the town. He laughs and says I should make free with his larder lest I should lose breadth and strength to hold him when he roars into the waves.

Gotch-gutted and hopper-arsed I may be, yet it takes every ounce I own to hold him once he lumbers down the steps to wet his royal head. My weight works hard for its being: it is buttress against the tow, blanket against the cold and anchor through the swell. His fat does nothing but soak up taxes; he is all tripe and trillabubs, a gundiguts, a baby, a big white grub. I can't stretch my arms around all the rolls of lard he carries yet must hold him somehow. They call me Queen of Brighton now, the Prince's dipper, but they'd cheer me all the way to Newgate and watch me dip at Tyburn if I should let him drown.

### Companion Piece — Martha Gunn

*To Brighton came he,  
Came George III's son.  
To be bathed in the sea,  
By famed Martha Gunn.*

(Old English rhyme, author unknown)

The bathers and dippers of regency Brighton were tough — they had to be. Long days spent in the sea, even in August, were cold and exhausting. Their role was to receive the gentry as they stepped down out of their “bathing machines” and not only to support them in the waves, but to plunge them completely under the water in order for “the cure” to be effective.

## Martha Gunn

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The men and women who worked as bathers and dippers were of the underclass. Constable (the painter) referred to the women as *hideous hermaphrodites* and described them *mixing the speech and oaths of men ... in endless indecent confusion*. It's hard to imagine how it would have been for a genteel young woman, bathing for the first time: she would probably never have been near such people, and certainly never held, restrained and pushed by them. Usually, men were assisted by male *bathers* and women by female *dippers*. However, it was a hard life for small earnings and competition was fierce. If a customer took a liking to a particular dipper or bather then they certainly wouldn't refuse and Martha Gunn became a firm favourite of the Prince Regent.

The Prince Regent — later to become King George IV — was well known for extravagance and excess. He was a bacchanalian character whose hedonistic lifestyle frequently left him with huge debts. He built the Royal Pavilion, an extraordinary oriental fantasy, for his seaside adventures at great cost.

Martha Gunn was large, strong and hard-working. She worked as a dipper for an astonishing 64 years until the year before she died at 88. It is said that the Prince found her coarse language and forthright manner amusing: he gave her permission to visit the Pavilion at any time and to help herself to treats from the kitchens. One well-repeated story is of her being trapped near a fireplace by the Prince's attentions so that the butter in her skirt pocket melted and ran down her clothes.

Whatever the reason for this odd relationship, this tough old woman is remembered with much greater affection than the extravagant and dissolute Prince. Martha, known as *The Venerable Priestess of the Bath, The Empress of Brighton* and *The Queen of Dippers*, is immortalised in pub names, in music and in art. Her house is preserved and visited, as is her gravestone which records her “Peculiarly Distinguished” career.

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**Angela France** lives in Gloucestershire and is enjoying middle age. She runs a local live poetry event — “Buzzwords” — and writes for self-indulgence, as an antidote to demanding work with challenging young people. She has had poems published in, or forthcoming in: *Acumen, Iota, The Frogmore Papers, Rain Dog, The Panhandler, The Shit Creek Review, Voice and Verse*, and in anthologies *The White Car, Mind Mutations* and *When Pigs Chew Stones*. More on Angela at [poetry pf](#).

# Harvey Goldner

## In the Hell Hotel with Memphis Jack

Having squandered all his inheritance  
of medium-quality counterfeit money, having  
lost his place in the plush pink dream rooms  
of the Yellow Flower Condos, Jack paced  
that night the greasy red hallways of the Hell  
Hotel, forced to face for the first time the fact  
that even his being had become an affront. He  
walked until he wept (across the street, tigers  
burned bright in the cheap furniture store)  
and he wept until he felt his weeping wash  
away his crime and the cancer in his mind.

He returned to his room, to his green plastic  
curtains, to his green plastic bedspread and the  
cracked mirror above the sink. Jack washed  
his face, and in the cracked mirror he saw his  
shame, and because he didn't look away from it,  
he saw that Lady Shame carries a big diamond  
in her hand. And in her diamond he saw the  
children: children like a rainbow revolving  
the Maypole; children sitting in a circle  
in the summer dust, playing marbles beneath  
the branches of an oak; children's faces laughing  
around a campfire; an arc of children wrapped  
in wool, skating on ice through fast-falling snow.

And then, from the cracked mirror above the  
sink, the woman with the big diamond in her  
hand (she was wearing a muu muu!) spoke: "Jack,  
if you wish to find your original mind, speak kindly  
to the child. Forget God: seek the guide, the goad.  
See him! (his grin and grime) a cowboy Indian  
driving a diesel truck, towing a yellow bus east  
across the floating bridge, a broom straw between  
his teeth, an eagle feather in the yellow band of his  
hat, his mind like a hovercraft moving quickly over  
stumps, yet responsive to the contours of the swamp.

"See, beneath the blue-black surface of the lake, the  
slender princess (her green eye shadow the green of  
lovely new American money) asleep in the glow of  
the dome light, in her yellow car sunk in the  
mud, far below the blue-black surface of the lake.

cont'd/...

## In the Hell Hotel...

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“See your mama in her kitchen, baking her  
brain cells with bonded bourbon while daddy’s in  
the broom closet, calculating compound interest—  
blood on the algebra, beyond sugar or anger.

“See the garbage pickers and the poets  
poking through mountains of gray garbage at the  
dump, searching for gold, finding copper  
wires, aluminum cans, rags, tires, souvenirs.

“See the sportsfans sucking on cans.  
See the sportsfans being sucked  
into the concrete stadium mausoleum.

“See the human monkey in his spacesuit  
in his spaceship in space, playing with  
weightless ravioli—as stupid as a computer.

“See skinny Jimmy Walker wrapped tight in a  
woolen blanket on the desert floor, halfway between  
Hell and Memphis, under a night sky ripe with a  
million stars, stars naked and without nametags. See  
Jimmy truly safe in the dry and rocky hand of Mother  
Goose, safe from the rattlers and the roulette wheels  
in the brains of the coiled coral snakes. See Jimmy  
waiting for his best old friend, the rising sun.

“Jack, brush your teeth, and lay you down  
to sleep. And if you should awake into the  
evergray ooze of Seattle dawn, remember  
what beauty the cracked ones can bring you.”

## Companion Piece

### **From Bobby Byrd's Blog**

*14th May, 2007*

This last week I learned that my growing up friend Harvey Goldner is in the hospital. He had a tumor removed from his tongue, and in removing it the doctors removed most of his tongue. This is what his daughter Emily (her e-letters are so clear and straight-forward, a satisfaction to read good writing even as the sadness surrounds her and her dad) wrote me in a letter:

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## In the Hell Hotel...

*He will get radiation in his mouth but no chemo right now. Apparently it takes time to see if cancer has spread to other part of the body...His tongue was reconstructed [they used muscle from the abdomen] but it won't feel or act like a tongue. He will get speech therapy and they are hoping he'll be able to eat food and speak again.*

Hard stuff for a poet who fiddles with language by speaking words out loud. Hard stuff for anybody. I talked to Harvey the Sunday night before his Tuesday morning operation. He said he wasn't afraid of death, but it's the getting there, especially if the journey is going to be like this, that's freaky. And afterwards he has to lie there in his bed without his cigarettes. Emily said they'll stick a nicotine patch on him.

Harvey was born in January 1942, me in April of the same year. Our big sisters were best friends, so I bet we've known each other from at least since the 3rd grade. He lived on Reese Street one block over from Prescott where I lived. We had a secret path that went through the backyards my house to his house. He gave me my first cigarette, a Camel. We smoked it in my bedroom. I got green sick but I loved the smoke.



Portrait of Harvey Goldner: Christa Casey

Harvey's new book *The Resurrection of Bert Ringold* will be published by Cinco Puntos in October. I think I'll go up to Seattle to deliver it to him. I've not seen Harvey in over 30 years. Shit. So get well, Harvey.

4th July, 2007

My friend poet Harvey Goldner, like the Buddhists say, crossed to the other side this morning in Seattle, Washington. He was 65 years old, a few months older than me. In my May 14 blog I talked about the cancer in his mouth and tongue. He really never recuperated from his surgery. This last week must have been hell, and he simply and finally let go.

— Bobby Byrd

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**Harvey Goldner:** See the excerpts above from Bobby Byrd's blog.

**Bobby Byrd** grew up in Memphis during the golden age of the city's music, but now lives in El Paso with his wife, novelist Lee Merrill Byrd, and their three children. With Lee he is co-publisher of Cinco Puntos Press. Bobby's most recent book of poems is *White Panties, Dead Friends and Other Bits & Pieces of Love*. In 2005 Lee and Bobby each received the Lannan Fellowship for Cultural Freedom. Bobby's blog is at <http://whitepantiesanddeadfriends.blogspot.com/>.

**Crysta Casey** has been painting for thirty-five years with little formal training other than community college, art museums, other people's studios and art books, all of which she hungers for. She specializes in capturing the "spirit" of the person she's painting. And she just plain loves to paint. See her work at her blog.

# Janet Kenny

## Keats

When only tortured language wrings the truth  
from placid prose, I turn my mind to Keats  
who with the flagrant confidence of youth  
exploited every word within his reach.

Some supple sense of daring let him slip  
between the heavy pieties and shrill  
excesses of contemporaries — grip  
the bones of prosody with elfin skill.

Where are the ancient *soft embalmers* now  
and where *eternal lids*? Our *mind's cage-door*  
has clanged and left us all not knowing how  
to visit mystery. We are the poor

who must use plastic when we long for wood,  
take Prozac when we weep for some relief  
from what we know is real, in case we should  
seem self-indulgent, giving way to grief

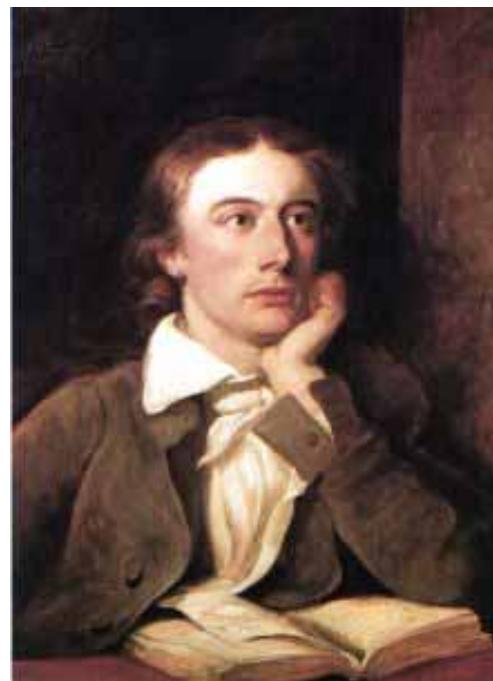
when all about us suffer — maybe more  
than we who speak. Unsure of how to show  
the horror in our heads without the score —  
that raga for the end of human woe

we have no right to commandeer. The shared  
enormity of what we face must dwarf  
our individual commentary, pared  
to blandness we must chatter about golf

and cooking, our vacation in remote  
locations where the language is unique,  
the bread is made of millet, and a goat  
is tethered in our room. Beware of bleak

reminders that, like Keats, we cannot sleep,  
without a draft of something that will ward  
our oiled minds from dangers. Angry sheep  
that leap in endless file, a growing hoard

of memories. I thankfully return  
to Keats with his last sonnet when he knows  
the permanence of moments; his nocturne  
is fixed like dawn upon the alpine snows.



(Quotes from "To Sleep"; "Last Sonnet"; "Fancy")

## Companion Piece

During a longish life I have seen certain changes which have caused me to write this poem. I was reading Keats at the time. His pitifully short and difficult life had some consolations which our medically extended lives no longer have. The richness and unashamed passion of his language grew from a less analysed and more felt life.

Mass communication and population pressure have standardised many of our experiences. Literature has become more inclusive. Heightened language is rarely considered to be acceptable. “Over-written” is the epithet often used to describe colourful or expressive writing. Critics often say that such writing is “unnatural”.

Market forces and technology have increasingly caused a loss of intimacy between the artist and his or her tools. Music is amplified and recorded. Eccentricity is less likely to survive.

Popular science and television have informed people of the dangers of nuclear weapons and global warming. We see chaos, cruelty and destruction on our TV screens.

Urban life is increasingly divorced from nature. Food is becoming globalised at the expense of regional differences.

Human expansion has caused the disappearance of many species of birds, animals and plants. Vanishing wildlife is remotely experienced on television screens. Timber is now a luxury. Plastic and chipboard are increasingly used for ordinary domestic furniture. Population pressure has polluted the seas and rendered many traditionally eaten fish unsafe, on top of which over-fishing has threatened the survival of many fish species.

And then there is the inescapable fact of each individual’s ultimate death. That is something we still share with Keats.

We may not lament or express our fear because every single human shares our fate. So we suppress our grief and hide in trivial pursuits. We dare not pause because then reality crowds in on us.

The natural world, which includes humans, is for many the great consolation. Moments of amazement and beauty bring rare tranquility and peace. Without these moments we almost miss the point of being alive and many people near the end of life wonder why they had failed to realise what it is that matters most.

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**Janet Kenny** has metamorphosed from painter to classical singer to anti-nuclear activist, researcher, writer, illustrator and poet. Started in New Zealand and zigzagged across the globe to finally settle in Australia. She has published fairly widely as a poet.

# David W. Landrum

## Edgar

*Edgar I nothing am.*

— King Lear

I had to be four men besides myself:  
 a madman eating ditch-dogs, eating toads  
 and lacerating skin with thorny goads,  
 elf-knotted hair and chest besmirched with filth,  
 plagued by Flibbertigibbet, my mind's health  
 sicker than scummy ponds, bowed by the load  
 of madness, moonstruck, wandering the roads,  
 a loincloth on my waist all I had left;  
 then when I killed Oswald an oafish swain  
 with rustic speech; a fisherman amazed  
 at Father's supposed jump down to the shore  
 from Dover's chalky cliffs; then when I faced

my brother Edmund's challenge I became  
 another; then became myself once more.

### Companion Piece

A note on the poem: The idea for the poem “Edgar” came after teaching *King Lear* to a group of college students and viewing the film version of it with James Earl Jones as Lear and Rene Auberjonois as Edgar. The role of Edgar requires tremendous acting skill, since the character also “acts” and takes on at least three other personae in the course of the play. This reminded me of the various roles I play, the characters I assume and have assumed, for various reasons, throughout my life. Edgar does this to survive. Perhaps our reasons for being other people are not so dire but none the less they are necessary to us, we play these roles, and we are relieved when we can put them aside and return to being ourselves. Shakespeare’s marvelous use of language, “Edgar I nothing am,” shows the erasure of self life often requires in order for us to get by; the syntactical confusion of words mirrors the disorder which we, as persons, are often forced to inhabit and, hopefully, emerge from in time.

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**David W. Landrum** teaches Literature and Creative Writing at Cornerstone University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He has published poetry in numerous journals and magazines, including *The Barefoot Muse*, *Umbrella*, *Christianity & Literature*, and *Measure*. His literary criticism has appeared in *Mosaic*, *Twentieth-Century Literature*, *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*,

# Danielle Lapidoth

## Biography

There is nothing as misleading, as distressing,  
as a photo caption reading “K picnicking  
two years before her death.” As though

she could peel a hard-boiled egg  
beneath the weight of such a sentence!  
Of course, like you, she knew, but what

had that to do with the crumbled yolk  
on her fingers, yellow dust on grass  
flexed by April winds? Biographies should end

unexpectedly, like life: the reader fooled  
by an inch of white behind the text,  
all that’s left unsaid, all of a sudden.

## Companion Piece

“Biography” was written in no time flat and then tweaked over a period of weeks. The first lines came complete and set the tone for the rest. It was inspired by a caption beneath a photograph in a biography I was thumbing through — I don’t remember whose, I just recall the grainy texture of an old 30s or 40s black and white snap. Neither do I recall if the subject was truly picnicking or engaged in some other lighthearted activity. I may have chosen picnicking myself because it has carefree associations for me.

The caption bothered me for a number of reasons: first of all, it bore no relation to what the subject was doing in the picture — she had no idea she was going to die in a year. The caption made her life seem irrelevant, and the photo made her death seem irrelevant,. Why not write beneath a baby picture, “X sucking his thumb seventy years before his death”? Maybe such a caption is born of an unconscious impulse to inspire Schadenfreude, or to remind us, as the Bible does, that in the midst of life we are in death. My mother had just passed away suddenly — no year’s notice — and I was feeling this before-and-after rupture keenly.

The caption also bothered me because it demonstrates that one knows less of the trajectory of one’s own life than any biographer working after his or her subject’s death. Autobiography is by definition incomplete, and biography complete, and that makes of each life a Truman show, where the audience possess greater knowledge of the scope, if not of the meaning, of the subject’s circumstances, than the subject does. This implies a lack of control over one’s own story that I find disturbing.

## Biography

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So this poem treats my discomfort with death and the partial unknowability, relative to future generations, of one's own story (the end), while poking fun at biographers — maybe by being a (partial) biography of a biographer. I often write series of poems, so perhaps there's more waiting in the wings. I can imagine tackling "Autobiography" next.

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**Danielle Lapidoth** lives with her husband and children in Zurich, Switzerland, where she runs an editing business, teaches English and writes poetry, flash fiction and essays while her family sleeps. She has most recently had work published in *Lily: A Monthly Literary Review*, *Barnwood*, *flashquake*, *Apple Valley Review*, *Literary Mama* and *Mamaphonic*.

# Quincy Lehr

## Till It Hurts

Another gaze glazed vacuous and kind  
 On yet another date that Saturday.  
 She murmured reassurance as her mind  
 Filed its stale minutiae far away.

He smiled at her. He knew that each meant well,  
 Yet counted seconds till they got the bill.  
 He posed the question, wishing her in Hell,  
 But clinging to her fingers, even still.

While fitted for a fitting wedding pose,  
 They feel, at last, that tugging at the gut,  
 That let-down sag that everybody knows,  
 That moment when an unmarked door slams shut —

But still, they don their wedding gowns and shirts  
 And sigh out each pinched, claustrophobic thought,  
 Then hold their smiles, jaws clenched, until it hurts,  
 And blink at flash bulbs, sensing that they're caught.

### Companion Piece

“Till It Hurts” is an imagined life, or, rather, two imagined lives. The couple in question are loosely based on two people I saw in a restaurant in Oklahoma city on a visit back a few years ago. They were obviously a long-term couple and exhibited all the outward signs of deep, permanent devotion — holding hands, taking little nibbles of each others’ food, etc. — but they obviously bored the crap out of each other. All of the tawdry cute couple crap was all by rote, inertial. One almost wanted to say something, but what the hell do you say to two complete strangers based on the vagueness of the way they were looking at each other, the way there was nothing kinetic in their touches? I don’t mean in verse in this instance; I mean saying this to a real live pair of human beings. Soon enough, the friends for whom I was waiting arrived, and I stopped eavesdropping (which, let’s face it, I had been doing out of my own boredom). But that was, nevertheless, the genesis of the piece.

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**Quincy Lehr** was born in Oklahoma and currently lives in Dublin, Ireland.

# Michele Lesko

## September 11th Deliverance

I am here. You are dead. And every year  
 someone sings your praise: Hero. I regret  
 that restless fall day, when scooped out  
 by your hand on my bee-stung chest, I prayed  
 the way you said I should — at bedtime. You said  
 let us pray. You began by making me kiss the tip  
 of the cross you wore. Kiss Christ's toe. A sacrament  
 you used to repent. It didn't help. I never saw Christ  
 and you were never a father, not a savior. And I was  
 not a child, born again as a novitiate. Ritual is a hook.  
 Reeling, I begged Him to deliver me; over and over  
 like a curse it worked. You jumped and died. Yet  
 other fathers kept falling, after you.

### Companion Piece

We do keep falling. All of us: fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, lovers and friends, old and young. We want community. We want to belong. It is want that moves us through this world. We want what we want. And we often fall. We use that word to refer to love: we fall in love. We use it to refer to evil: *he fell from grace*. We will not fall for something someone is selling us that rings false.

What we want very often clashes with what those around us want.

What did the terrorists want? Were their actions the absolute image of self-sacrifice to their brethren? Could their belief, their utter faith in their religion negate any innate morality human beings have regarding killing their fellow man?

Religious faith is power. It instills in its believers the sense that there are absolutes. I suppose there are; one instance might be the absolute sense of self, which we try to ameliorate by conditioning ourselves, often through religion, to consider the other. We acknowledge that there exists a reality outside of our individual need or desires. Raised as a Catholic I was taught to pray for the non-believers, who would ultimately suffer a terrible fate. These teachings made prayer very complicated. How can we pray for others, yet accept that they are bound for a dark fate? They did not want the right way

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## September 11th Deliverance

because they did not know our prayers. But what if what we wanted and prayed for had unintentional results; what about collateral damage?

On 11 September 2001 my husband and I lived in New Jersey. I was waiting in line at a Starbucks in Morristown when the first plane hit. The barista ran out from behind the counter and shouted something about bombs hitting a building. The other customers and I followed him out into the street. He stopped in front of a department store window; he was watching the televisions displayed there. The second plane was shown flying directly into the World Trade Center. We eventually saw people falling from the windows. There followed extraordinary sadness and extraordinary heroism. But, even after a tragedy of these proportions, people began thinking about how they were personally affected. What did September 11th 2001 mean to those left behind?

“Hero” defined a great many folks during those first hours and days. Eventually altruism was commemorated. It is absolutely true that innocent people were taken and that our innocence, our confidence, as a nation was broken. But the heroes were an absolute. “Hero” defined them: if one being goes without question to the aid of another, that act of selflessness is heroic.

So when the media and politicians and essentially all Americans began referring to all of the dead as heroes, I began to wonder about our use of the word “hero.” I’m not sure we had done that before September 11th. When the Lockerbie Pan-Am flight crashed, killing two hundred and seventy people, we did not call the dead “hero.” I thought about synchronicity; there must have been people who got out of a bad situation because of the chaos: deadbeat dads, criminals on their way to the lower Manhattan courthouse, some guy who knew his lifestyle was about to implode or the guy who sexually abused his daughter night after night. He could not get away from his want. His sense of his own desire grew to far outweigh his need to belong to the community of his family.

I wrote this poem thinking only about the child who prayed for her father to die. What would happen in the mind of a child, who still resides in that magical thinking phase of development? The prayer did not equal the event, though her father did die, so the child, an indoctrinated Catholic, must acknowledge the fear that her desire caused the deaths of all the others. When we are taught to pray for others, pray for ourselves and pray for deliverance, are we culpable when our answered prayers conflict with another’s?

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**Michele Lesko**’s poems and short stories have been published in a variety of literary journals. A graduate of Fairleigh Dickinson University’s MFA program, she is at work on her first book of poetry. She and her husband enjoy traveling and playing tennis with their three sons.

# Margaret Menamin

## The Bombing Of Breskens, 1944-45

*For Jenny Elmore (Janneke)*

**1**

### **The Tunnel**

*Janneke's Story*

Because our little *dorp* was on the Schelde,  
 main waterway to Antwerp, we were cursed  
 with perilous importance. Ours were worst  
 of Holland's losses, ours the air that smelled  
 of burning bodies as the allies shelled  
 our suspect streets. Our families were first  
 to take the "liberating" bombs that burst  
 inside the churches where our hope had held.

We dug a hasty tunnel lined with straw  
 and, buried under graves of our new dead  
 in claustrophobic dark, solicited  
 the mercy of a God we never saw.  
 They didn't bomb the cemetery. Odd,  
 it was the dead who saved our lives, not God.

**2**

### **The Runner**

*Philip's Story*

My father, working for the underground,  
 offered me up as sacrifice — or, rather,  
 tried to believe the Nazis wouldn't bother  
 to search a child for messages. So, bound  
 by crisis and obedience, I found  
 my way through night-black streets somehow or other,  
 running from bullets, being good for Father  
 who needed someone small and fast and sound.

I still have nightmares. When I try to run  
 my feet are bolted to the cobblestones.  
 I stumble over paratroopers' bones.  
 I hear a growling "Halt!" and face a gun.  
 I never found a path that led to joy,  
 but I was a good boy, such a good boy.

**3****The Bucket***Mieke's Story*

We set the stinking bucket by the door,  
 away from where we slept. We didn't dare  
 go out to free our lungs of poison air,  
 not with the cellar shaking from the roar  
 of bombs that dropped like falling worlds and tore  
 great craters in the street. I couldn't bear  
 to use the bucket; someone forced me there,  
 and then it overflowed across the floor.

When I stood up I saw the soldier's feet,  
 his upraised hand, before he slipped and fell.  
 I screamed out "*burgers!*"\* and he heard me yell,  
 twisted and threw the missile in the street.  
 What's not worth shit? There is no thing on earth  
 but has some value, some intrinsic worth.

**4****The Hand***Annie's Story*

We teased the stern Gestapo, climbed inside  
 their horse-drawn carriages. My childhood friend  
 and I would take our dolls there to pretend  
 that we were having a *verboten* ride  
 and they would chase us out. "*Raus, raus!*" they cried.  
 In those last days we didn't comprehend  
 that it was not the Germans, in the end,  
 but the Canadians from whom we'd hide.

Bent double in a corner, with my fist  
 pressed to my mouth, I saw him pull the pin  
 on the grenade and blindly throw it in.  
 I couldn't put my hand back on my wrist.  
 Through all these years, my absent fingers burn  
 and search for me and struggle to return.

## The Bombing of Breskens

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**5**

### The Windmill

#### *Lies's Story*

My father and my brother went at night  
out of the house and slipped across the field,  
wary of shadows, watching for concealed  
Gestapo and, without a trace of light,  
entered the windmill creeping, keeping low.  
There in the dark, sometimes all night, they hovered  
over the pile of molding rags that covered  
our secret — the forbidden radio.

Did they go mad with freedom when they heard  
the Allies held the village, boy and man  
breaching the blinding morning as they ran  
to bring the rest of us the longed-for word?  
We never knew. They never made a sound  
before retreating Nazis shot them down.

\*civilians

### Companion Piece

In 1944-45 little Janneke Geluk saw her town bombed by Canadian soldiers who had to keep the Germans from reaching Belgium via the River Schelde. In later years, Janneke came to the U.S. where she became Jenny Elmore and where I met her in the 1980s. These sonnets tell of things she and her neighbors experienced during that bombing.

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**Margaret Menamin** (<http://www.menamin.com>), a native of rural Missouri, has lived in Pittsburgh, PA since 1984. Her earliest published poems were in *Seventeen*. Most recently her poems have been seen in *Iambs & Trochees*, *The Lyric*, *Panhandler*, *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, and on-line in *Contemporary Sonnet* and *The New Formalist*.

# Mary Meriam

## The Countess of Flatbroke

I shun the man-made world and stay at home.  
 This suits the world, since I am very queer.  
 I eat my spinach quiche and write a poem.  
 I like my chair and bed; it's pleasant here.  
 Except one little problem, namely cash,  
 which threatens to undo my little life.  
 The bank account is headed for a crash.  
 The fridge is empty — where's my working wife?  
 What happens when a poet lives beyond  
 the time she would have died, except for fate?  
 A strange career, but not designed to bond  
 somebody to a steady job this late.  
 I have no skills in generating wealth.  
 I've spent my time recovering my health.

## The Bitter Side of Flatbroke

Some people lead an easy life, from birth  
 to death, connected, pampered, lucky, rich,  
 convinced that smiling fate defines their worth,  
 quite safe and snug and settled in their niche.  
 I wonder why I can't be one of them.  
 If I had money, I'd have time to write  
 and read and socialize with any femme  
 or butch or in-between who came in sight.  
 Or spend my time alone or take a trip.  
 Then I could call my life a life and not  
 this constant jungle fight to get a sip  
 of water, find a place to rest, too hot,  
 too cold, too worried, hungry, lost, alone.  
 Perhaps someone will throw this dog a bone.

(This brace of sonnets previously published in *The Countess of Flatbroke*)

## Companion Piece

### How To Be A Flatbroke Poet And Get A Chapbook

~ or ~

My Year Of Miracles (May They Never End)

1. Want a chapbook. Dream about a chapbook.
2. Struggle to assemble a collection of your poems.
3. Repeat step 2 once a year for several years.
4. Join an online poetry workshop and realize your poems need a lot of work.
5. Fall in love with a stranger's poems in the workshop and say so.
6. Publish your poems in journals and feel closer to having a collection of viable poems.
7. Play with Google and send your poems to writers you admire, asking for advice on how to get a chapbook.
8. Get a response from a famous writer offering to write an afterword for your chapbook once you find a publisher.
9. Feel extraordinarily motivated!
10. Write a book proposal and submit it to publishers.
11. Forget about contests because you're flatbroke.
12. Get a response from another famous writer advising you to self-publish.
13. Forget about self-publishing because you're flatbroke.
14. Feel dizzy from sudden contact with beloved famous writers.
15. Try to stay grounded.
16. Remember the stranger at the workshop whose poems you loved and said so? He offers to publish your chapbook (Nemo!).
17. Nemo and Quincy help you select a group of poems. You realize there is no way you could have made these selections yourself.
18. But there are more poems to write! Feel incredibly inspired by the close editing Nemo gives.

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The Countess of Flatbroke

19. Try not to swamp your friends with millions of files of possibilities of collections of poems.
20. Realize again how far you have to go to write, edit, collect, and order your chapbook.
21. Miraculously discover that another new friend from the workshop wrote her dissertation on the order of poems in books, and feel awestruck when she sends you the chapter that you need to help you find the right order for your poems.
22. Try not to drive Quincy and Nemo crazy with your obsessive attention to which way the apostrophe points in 'neath, and other details.
23. When Nemo designs a gorgeous chapbook cover, try not to completely break down from joy and gratitude.
24. Ditto when you read Lillian Faderman's afterword.
25. Hold your chapbook in your hands and dream about reciprocating all the kindness and support given to you by your new friends.

Yours truly,

*The Countess of Flatbroke*

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Mary Meriam's first book of poems, *The Countess of Flatbroke* (Modern Metrics, 2006) features an afterword by Lillian Faderman and cover design by R. Nemo Hill. In 2006, Mary was awarded Honorable Mention in Poetry by the Astraea Foundation. Her poems and essays are published (or forthcoming) in *Literary Imagination*, *Light*, *The Barefoot Muse*, and *Umbrella*, among others.

# John Milbury-Steen

## Uncle Charlie

My uncle, when my parents needed a sinner as an example, was always conveniently there smiling toothlessly. And why? They swore he could not wait to find an opener as soon as he got out of the liquor store and lost his front teeth opening bottles of beer.

And when his shoes were soiling our welcome mat at 6 PM, my mother couldn't not invite him in for dinner, lest that good for nothing piece of walking human waste, dead of starving on our stoop, amount to marring of her soul's pristine account.

He was a glazier, often glazed, so his avocation and vocation phased, a life of glasses tossed and glass replaced. He worked when sober and, alas, when drunk, those were the days that he spent shooting out windows (people say), which helped his business.

Holding his liquor, holding liquids, impounding mighty waters like a dam, he had a hobby — building aquariums larger and larger, and the neighbors came to every filling, betting whether that frame would hold. The sense of doom was thrilling.

Served, he also served; given to drink, he also gave; he took and passed the cup. With summer at its hottest, he had a block of ice on two saw horses in his shop he shaved with a special sort of plane to make snowballs for us kids and the local cop.

And he had made a bar, behind him those flavorings on a shelf like fifths of booze. His favorite expression then was *Youzer!* (Yes sir! Great!) agreeing with your pleasure, whatever color poison you might choose — vanilla, cherry, grape, whatever it was —

or just erupting *Yowzer!* when there was no statement in the air to be agreed to, as if it were his inner voice that said something so right that it simply had to be yowzered gladly with such generous glad that he attributed that thought to you.

(Let no one read this wrongly and conclude Good Lord! I am condoning drunkenness, which kills you in the ward or on the road, and makes you Rudolph when your nose is red and even a flying horse to a little child up in a cloud on your undulating lap.)

When I was four and on my horse, I said, *Yowzer!* loud and clear and silence reigned around the table and my folks were stunned as carillon joy, unrestrained in their hearts, sounded the utterance of my first word, confirming I was well in throat and mind.

I only marvel that I had been so adamant in Nowzer No so long, refusing to reply or even say “cookie” for a cookie. That, I see, foretold the actual way that I would go — autodidact in sullen autistry.

Twice now at a formal concert when I was bored and have smelled whiskey on someone’s breath, Yowzer has come down and brought a heady round into my brain and my so-called **niveau mentale** has been **abaisse**’d to yes not walking a straight line

as in some parody of bread and wine, some form of inspiration which irks those that cut the air and people with remarks, who guard their arks against the bad outgroups, while my salvation is from drink, not works, and my prayer beads are loops of strung corks.

## Companion Piece

When I wrote “Uncle Charlie” I intended the poem to be a mere character portrait. (As if portraits were easy!) I did not realize that the poem would become not only a manifesto for my work, but also for my life.

My folks, Baptist fundamentalists, certainly did feel morally superior to Charlie, since he drank, and drink was one of their moral hot buttons. I think there is a certain key generation in which the adults must get “saved” in order to acquire enough of a sense of duty to get up when the alarm clock rings and obey a boss. Obeying God is certainly good practice, sociologically speaking, and is one important American way a blue collar generation prepares a white collar for the next. For that older generation, alcohol symbolizes everything slovenly and undisciplined. (A few generations later, the by then professional descendants can start drinking again without danger.)

Alcohol is a strong spirit and Charlie was intoxicated with Yowzerness, the “yea-saying” spirit that wants to accept people and please them. He literally was a glazier, but, figuratively, a glazier fixes windows, that is, repairs our broken view of the world. Charlie knows how to build aquariums, which are frames that effectively contain their inner pressures and yet are transparent and fun to watch. Charlie is the horse that bounces you up and down; also, Pegasus, the Word’s horse: it really was on his lap, within his whiskey breath, that I uttered my first words at the age of four to the relief of my desperately worried parents. In the poem he even gets consecrated into the Church of Charlie, and his whisky becomes Eucharistic. The sacrament figured by his life saved me from a form of mute autism. So the poem describes what kind of church I belong to, Charlie’s intoxicating spirit church, the main requirement of which is to say Yes (*Yowzer*) continually.

By the way, to **abbaise votre niveau mentale** means to “lower your mental level” from a conscious and controlled mode to a less conscious and more open one.

**John Milbury-Steen** Served in the Peace Corps in Liberia, West Africa. Did a Master’s in Creative Writing with Ruth Stone at Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. Worked as an artificial intelligence programmer in Computer Based Education at the University of Delaware. Currently teaches English as a Second Language at Temple University, Philadelphia. His poetry has been published in *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Hellas*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Kayak*, *The Listening Eye*, *The Neovictorian/Cochlea*, *The Piedmont Literary Review*, *Scholia Satyrica* and *Shenandoah*.

# Rick Mullin

## Waziristan

They send their children into mountain passes,  
 children from emerging frontier cities  
 file in rite of passage to the war.  
 Waziristan, the northern tribal zone  
 resurges, reinforced with hungry children  
 of the dispossessed invisible.

The networks are enhanced, invisible,  
 uncoiling through the infinite snow passes  
 and electric channels through which children  
 shunt to detonate in modern cities  
 where there is no God but God: The Zone,  
 Waziristan, the garden of the war.

The vast magnetic sweep of modern war  
 erases maps, combatants fade, invisible  
 perversions coalesce. Across the Zone  
 a vulnerable thread of soldiers passes  
 through the stone and snow. While in the cities  
 of the new frontier the hungry children

lean on radios, distracted children  
 in the modern world tune out the war.  
 They're sick of louder voices in the cities  
 and the lies that hype invisible  
 yet color-coded danger. Now, what passes  
 for commitment flows into a witless zone

of pallid bumper magnets. But the Zone  
 has opened browsers and enlisted children  
 from the London Underground with passes  
 that are honored at the gates of war.  
 Which could be anywhere. Invisible.  
 The giant holes surrounding giant cities.

Witness their arrival in the cities,  
 and you'll watch them fill the holes. The zone  
 of death will garner wreaths. Invisible  
 formations in the wind will cry like children  
 on the anniversary. The war  
 arrives one day, it detonates and passes.

Winding passes of the frontier cities  
 know the war at heart, that hollow zone  
 where children radiate invisible.

## Companion Piece — Drive Time

It took five years of commuting to Edison New Jersey on the Garden State Parkway to ensponge the engine of my beloved Tercel. And in that time, I watched certain other institutions and icons — not least of which America and the Pabst bottling factory beside the big graveyard in Newark — take a similar beating.

It was a time of change in my life. After twenty years of working in New York, I had taken a job in my home state. This meant that instead of walking out the door of an office building onto the streets of Manhattan at lunchtime, I would pretty much stay inside a squat, twin-tower structure across the street from the railroad tracks in a development called Metro Park. Close by Thomas Edison's famed Menlo Park workshop, it is the only part of New Jersey that looks exactly like Houston, where the lack of zoning laws has led to patches of squat glass office parks on residential streets all over the city.

It also meant that after two decades of riding a New Jersey Transit train through the Meadowlands to the ferry terminal in Hoboken, I'd be stuck behind the wheel in New Jersey traffic. No longer able to read the New York Times on the way to work, I'd be reduced to listening to National Public Radio and reading bumper stickers.

I got used to it. In fact, I probably became better informed. NPR covers a lot of ground and can be somewhat enjoyable once you acclimate. But it's the bumper stickers that really kept me in touch with what was going on. Nobody had a better sense than the alert Garden State Parkway driver, for example, of how perilously close New Jersey came to becoming a red state in 2004.

I wrote *Waziristan* driving on the Parkway, listening to NPR, and taking in the bumper stickers. I incorporated things that occurred to me on the commute — thoughts about homogenization and loss of control. Thoughts about the war. Writing it became an exercise in defining a new world that I had been assured by Thomas L. Friedman (in his interview with NPR's Terry Gross) is flat. On its flat surface, I wanted to find the position of certain touchstones, certain... clichés — the Rite of Passage, the Modern World, the New Frontier. I went to work in the alley of bumper stickers, tuning-in to America and the world on a crummy car radio. My comprehension of the rather grave state of things went into the sestina, as did my experience working three blocks from the World Trade Center/Ground Zero between September, 2000 and September, 2002.

No, you can't read newspapers while driving. And you can't go to sleep, as I must admit I did more mornings than not on the tracks to Hoboken. You have to keep your eyes open and on the road. You can, however, write poetry — at least as much poetry as you can remember for an hour — when you're driving on the Garden State Parkway.

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**Rick Mullin** is a writer and a painter who started writing poetry avidly in college in the 70s but later learned that journalism pays more. As the poetry slipped in the ensuing years, painting filled the creative void. Mullin has returned to writing poetry with the youthful ardor of his so-called "Romantic Period," but with much more life and art experience to draw from. Much of his work is autobiographical, nearly all is metrical.

# Tim Murphy

## Lealty

In a small country graveyard  
 I watched a man of ninety  
 crossing himself and kneeling  
 before a tilted headstone.  
 I saw he was a farmer  
 by his Carhart coverall  
 and wondered at his stature  
 unbowed by work or weather.  
 After he planted flowers  
 I glanced at the engraving  
 from Nineteen Twenty-seven  
 to “Beloved Wife, Maria”  
 and an infant son, Jason.  
 The clan name was Chisholm.  
 What brought them to our valley –  
 the world away from Scotland  
 though hardly a plot in heaven?  
 I’ll never know their story.

## David

For the slow death of his father,  
 the near loss of his mother  
 and swift death of his brother,  
 I have a friend who suffers.

An innocent in the Garden,  
 he shouldered every burden  
 and marched straight out of Eden  
 when the angel told him “Go.”

He cannot hear the Gospels.  
 Moses and the Epistles  
 are no aid in his struggles.  
 He fleeth from the Father.

To me he is a beacon  
 of decency and reason.  
 Someday the Lord will beckon,  
 but will David turn home?

## Companion Piece

Tomorrow is Memorial Day, and I shall be visiting the graves of my people in the little village of Georgetown, Minnesota. There is a small cemetery there which is at the confluence of the Red, the Sheyenne, and the Buffalo. It is where I encountered the tall 90-year-old Scot exactly described in my poem "Lealty". "David" is written for David Mason, who was introduced to me by my mother. David and I are of an age when we are suffering a lot of losses, some of them shared, particularly our beloved editor Fred Morgan, founder of *The Hudson Review*, Anthony Hecht, our Master, under whom David earned his Doctorate, and our dear friend, the poet Michael Donaghy.

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**Tim Murphy** was the featured author in the **debut issue** of *II*.

# Lee Passarella

## Requiescat

*This wallpaper is killing me; one of us has got to go.*  
 — last words of Oscar Wilde

A pale (though beefily substantial) ghost,  
 he haunted streets that'd feted him before.  
 He preyed on countrymen who'd heard the lore  
 about his fall. Yet none presumed to boast  
 superiority — played gentle host  
 instead, since the absinthe he favored more and more  
 was so well recompensed: the endless store  
 of epigrams and bon mots, all but lost

on poor old proper England now. Still, he  
 had little luck in Paris streets, as free,  
 almost, of love for him as London's. So,  
 when money came — infrequently — he bought  
 love. Death was just an afterthought, a blow  
 as slight as his least sin. A minor blot.

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**Lee Passarella** teaches English at Georgia Perimeter College and acts as senior literary editor for *Atlanta Review* magazine and as associate editor for the new literary journal *FutureCycle*. Passarella's poetry has appeared in *Chelsea*, *Cream City Review*, *Pudding*, *Louisville Review*, *The Formalist*, *Antietam Review*, *Gaia*, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, *The Literary Review*, *Edge City Review*, *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, *Snake Nation Review*, *Slant*, *Cortland Review*, and many other periodicals and ezines. *Swallowed up in Victory*, his long narrative poem based on the American Civil War, was published by White Mane Books in 2002. It has been praised by poet Andrew Hudgins as a work that is "compelling and engrossing as a novel." Passarella's poetry collection *The Geometry of Loneliness* (David Robert Books) appeared in 2006. His poetry chapbook *Sight-Reading Schumann* will be published by Pudding House Publications later this year.

# Rose Poto

## Brockton Man

In newsprint gray, a friendly face  
greets me from the Local section:  
bearded, young, with just a trace  
of resignation

tugging at one brow, the eyes  
meeting mine — but no, not quite,  
they're fixed on something just beyond,  
at earring height.

He's cut his hair, I see. Looks good.  
And from a glimpse of neck I know  
the rest: the veiny arms he had  
ten years ago

still white-hot, rivered with blue,  
the tender skin, still prone to burn.  
A headline calls the youth I knew  
Brockton Man,

as if he were some ancient skull,  
perhaps not human, scientists  
dug up. But modern man can kill  
with his bare fists,

and knives are only sharpened stones.  
Excuses, too, are nature's law.  
He stabbed her more than twenty times;  
her children saw;

but that was the drugs, my heart contends,  
and if I feel a twinge of lust  
remembering those tapered bands  
of muscle, just

or unjust doesn't enter in,  
nor grief for someone I don't miss  
and never having known, can't mourn.  
Only this,

of all instincts, best and worst:  
to bond, to bend, to waive, to waver,  
to put unruly feelings first,  
and gloss it over.

## Laissez-faire

“[The overpopulation of Ireland] being altogether beyond the power of man, the cure has been applied by the direct stroke of an all-wise Providence...” — Charles Trevelyan, British Treasury Secretary, 1846

The extra folk. The fat. The gristle.  
Ragweed, nettle, buckthorn, thistle.  
Girls in shirtwaist factories.  
Brushwood burned to free the trees.  
Dusty little Mom-and-Pops.  
Apple peelings, turnip tops.  
The latchkey kid, the lemon rind,  
the poor New Orleans left behind.  
The trampled ant, the straying sheep,  
the badly schooled, the compost heap  
that must decay to feed the crop.  
John Henry's carcass, should he drop;  
his life, his living, should he live.  
The damn we frankly do not give.  
The sack in which we drown the whelp  
(as Nature sometimes needs our help).

## Companion Piece

At first it surprised me to hear that these two pieces would appear side by side in a themed issue; they seemed so dissimilar. They have several things in common, though, one being that they're more about people than poetry. One's mostly narrative, the other satire; neither is surreal or cloaked in metaphor. Both push the boundaries of my definition of poetry. Are straightforward musings about moral issues allowed in poetry? Increasingly I find myself wanting to use the word "verse" instead of "poetry," as A. E. Stallings suggests in her essay, "Crooked Roads Without Improvement: Some Thoughts on Formal Verse." I like the word "verse." It's freeing. If I aspire to be an artist, art always has to come first. If I'm just a humble versifier, I'm allowed to have something to say.

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**Rose Poto**'s work has appeared in various online and print magazines.

# Peter Richards

## Attention

*for Arthur Miller*

When I turn over stones I see the world  
 of a disclosed and fetid underground  
 — a rude reality — another kind  
 of living room. Decay and damp, the wild  
 that calls to those that live there in the mould  
 unites them creeping, cold and pallid, lends  
 the wet and ghostly sheen of something spawned  
 and not yet quickened, like a life withheld.

But they do live. Attention must be paid  
 to life. Our own criteria of air  
 and light are only felt by stirring motion  
 of more solid things or shown inside  
 a frame of shadow, or the dark fear  
 in guts and marrowbones. Turn over stones.

### Companion Piece: PDSNRA

Tentative Deoxyribonucleic acid spirals, destined to form the basis of Peter Stewart Richards, once extricated themselves from a primeval slime. They have striven to retain the discrete identity thus established.

Opinions draw fire. An open mind is like an open sewer and every bit as acceptable in society.

Cleverly passing off autobiography as fiction has lasting survival value, although it must be said that survival value that doesn't last is another thing entirely.

Why chimpanzees ever decided to leave the fruity forest environment to which they were peculiarly suited and wander out over savannas and seas is not immediately obvious.

Along with changes in the external environment, maybe, things like a sense of humour and/or mild mental imbalance come to mind.

*One is always nearer by not keeping still.*

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**Peter Richards:** prior publications are limited to *Chippy Weekly* (2) and frequent light-hearted efforts in the *Wood Shavings Review*. There are unconfirmed rumours about Peter and the name of Earl Haig's plume. Pass it on.

# Gail White

## Anne Bronte

For once, just once, I exercised my will  
 and made poor Charlotte bring me here to die,  
 to Scarbro', by the sea. And on the way  
 I saw York Minster, glass and stone like snow,  
 so delicate, and thought, "Man can do that."

Always the quiet one, I sheltered in  
 the wake of my bold sisters like our great  
 dog Keeper who was Emily's guard and slave.  
 Emily ruled our private world. We made  
 the Gondals live and made them take Gaaldene.  
 In the kitchen, working under Tabby's eye,  
 or sewing by the fire, we dreamed out  
 the poems we set down later — all those kings  
 and princes, rebels, sages, whose desire  
 was love, adventure, conquest, or revenge  
 of wrongs. We gave them such romantic names  
 as Charlotte would have laughed at, but we tried  
 to make them live. They lived at least for us.

I had my dream of love. Emily, I think,  
 and Charlotte, never did — too mystical  
 was one, too practical the other. They  
 could see our narrow prospects all too well:  
 a school the most we could aspire to.  
 But wasn't so impossible,  
 was even likely, when new curates came  
 to Papa's church and faced down Emily's  
 aloofness, Charlotte's ridicule, and Branwell's  
 gibes at religion. Someone might have seen  
 the quiet, pious sister looking on,  
 silent but sympathetic! Curate's wife  
 is just the role that would have suited me.  
 I might have been a blessing to some village,  
 and to my children...well, read *Agnes Gray*  
 and see my poor dreams realized in print,  
 not elsewhere.  
 not elsewhere. If my life were dressed,  
 it would be dressed in gray. I had to teach,  
 what else? Long dreary years as governess  
 in other people's homes. I had to see  
 my brilliant brother shame us all and die  
 of drink, dying by inches while we paced



the parlor late at night and planned our school  
 and when that failed, our books. And when the books  
 came out, oh what a quivering of success,  
 what dazzling hopes, especially for Charlotte!  
 And then the blow: Emily's cough grew worse,  
 she refused care or medicine, and died  
 just before Christmas, under heavy snow.

Now the tide laps the shore, the gentle waves  
 of death rise warm and whispering, and I slip  
 and slip, so quiet, so content. I seem  
 a little thing for that immensity  
 to swallow up, and yet I do not fear  
 the end. For God our Compensation keeps  
 for us, forever, all the blessedness  
 that was denied us here. And He makes great  
 our little goodness and our little gifts  
 of beauty. I was in York Minster once  
 and saw the windows, those five sister jewels  
 that shine and shine, and thought, "We have done that."

### Companion Piece

How endearing to know Mrs. White,  
 Whose verses are scattered like manna!  
 She likes to drink Bourbon at night,  
 But they do that in South Lou'siana.

Her manner is somewhat reclusive.  
 Her cats are named Pushkin and Daisy.  
 Her light verse is seldom abusive.  
 She thinks counting carbs is plain crazy.

She has traveled in Russia and Greece  
 And would like to go on to Tibet.  
 She is childless but does have a niece.  
 She's not rich and famous just yet.

Her loved ones have called her a cynic.  
 She drinks (as aforesaid) at night.  
 Before she checks into a clinic,  
 How endearing to know Mrs. White.

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**Gail White**'s new book, *Easy Marks*, is in the works at Word Tech Press. She still lives in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana.

# Tony Williams

## A Lock-Keeper

Muttering about breakfast, he trudges down to work the gate,  
disturbing ducks which flounder off to the neighbouring carr,  
leaving a scummy swell to press on the concrete shore.

Painted lines speak mysteries of volume, pressure, weight,

a peeling scale above a trough, a weed-encrusted grate.  
The dropping level absorbs all the patience he can muster,  
and staring down at the silted mud-bank of his chore  
he might be entirely unaware of the waiting boat,

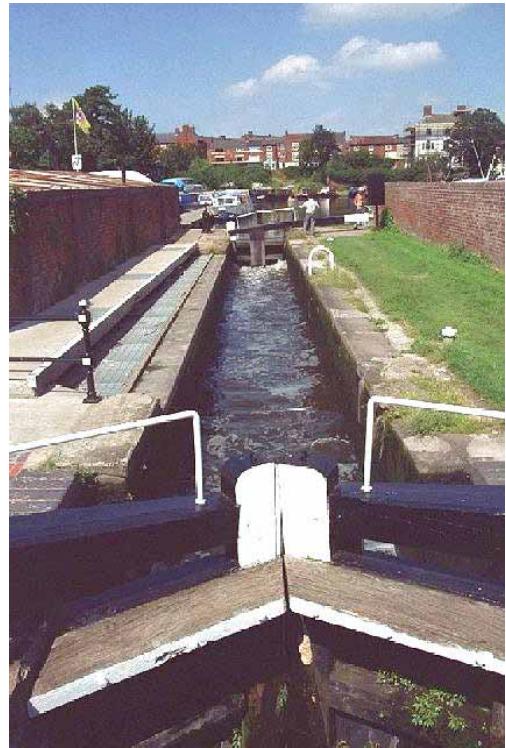
closed-faced and scornful, pouring silent ire  
on freights of families, who lounge out where the ore  
would lie in a heap, dredged from some rural scar  
they are heading westwards to investigate.

The reed-beds shiver when he clears his throat;  
sharp and half-submerged, they rock and tether  
the buoyant, coal-black coots in the still water  
and rot steadily upwards from the root.

### Companion Piece

As children in the English Midlands our history lessons were usually tied to the Industrial Revolution, and one school trip involved a visit to the local canal, by then disused except for a single narrow-boat that chugged up and down a truncated stretch for educational purposes, manned by volunteer enthusiasts. We got as far as the first lock, which was derelict or at least not put through its paces for the likes of us. I didn't really believe it could work anyway — opening a gate to make water levels rise? Come off it.

Nowadays Britain's canals "are enjoying something of a renaissance", as the travel brochures would have it. Having been superseded by rail and road and fallen into disuse, they'd mainly become fairly dirty and dismal places — where vegetation did indeed



## A Lock-Keeper

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seem to “rot steadily upwards from the root”, though I doubt that such a thing is botanically possible. But lots of them have now been redeveloped, and you can hire narrow-boats and barges and toddle off on a holiday round the region, stopping at down-at-heel provincial pubs or upmarket urban quaysides according to your taste. Very nice too.

I wanted my lock-keeper to be a miserable sod. He’s one of those enthusiasts, Fred Dibnah’s bitter brother, working at a job he loves in the service of an industry utterly different from the one it was designed for, resenting the holiday-makers who now populate the river and make his life possible. They’re a necessary evil, the modern reality which both enables and sours his living in the past. To some extent I sympathise with him, but I’d be one of those tourists; I suppose it’s a mixture of sympathy and scorn. He needs to watch his blood pressure.

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**Tony Williams** lives in Sheffield, UK. His work has appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Anon*, *The Rialto*, *Avocado* and *The Interpreter’s House* and is represented in the anthology *Ten Hallam Poets* (Mews Press, 2005).

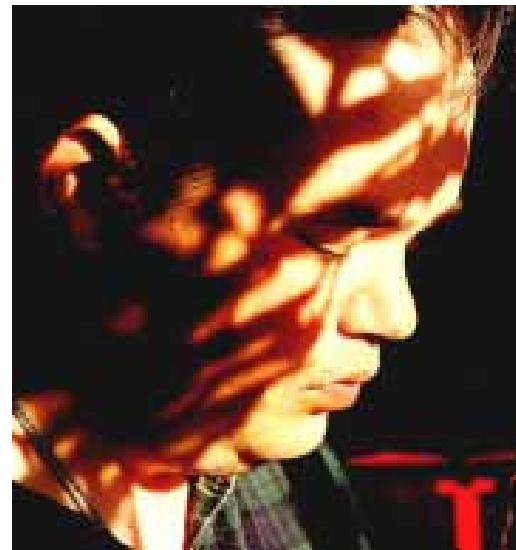
# Leo Yankevich

## John Clare Escapes the Essex Asylum

How romantic they are in his mind,  
 crouched around the fire singing songs,  
 their sad emaciated dog behind  
 them, barking at the moon. He counts the wrongs,  
 pities them in his way, himself not right  
 in life, or ever in his troubled head.  
 He, too, beholds things in a different light.  
 Today the ale was malty, amber red,  
 yet like a grunting badger he now runs,  
 looking for Mary in the hazel woods.  
 He will not find her, or their ghostly sons.  
 He'll spend the night outside the Gypsy camp,  
 pipe in his mouth, bag full of stolen goods,  
 his mind warmed by sweet dreams, his body damp.

## Hank

He finds himself alone again, pig-drunk  
 on the third planet from the sun, his thought  
 maudlin, stale as umpteen years ago,  
 but fresher than the whisky in his mouth.  
 Through failure he finds solace in the funk  
 of 10 o'clock. The Nashville moon has not  
 yet touched him like the talons of a crow.  
 One with the evening, he will not fly south,  
 guitar strapped just behind the sprawling wings  
 of a misunderstood angel, cough and voice  
 inspired in the wake of careful choice.  
 He'll linger in the drawling words he sings,  
 the hero of this blue and lonesome story  
 while love moves on, and basks in all the glory.



Patricia Wallace Jones

## Companion Piece

### Heraclitus

*a dry soul is wisest and best*

Biographers write that above all men  
he was a lofty and hubristic spirit.  
A walking contradiction, he would shout  
that Homer should be turned out of the lists  
and beaten, and Archilochus as well,  
since better to extinguish impertinence,  
than to put out fire. He felt that men  
should fight for law as much as for their city.  
Yet, when requested to make laws for them,  
he turned them down, by arguing their city  
already had a faulty constitution.  
Besides, he had important things to do:  
a game of dice with children at the Temple.  
(It was there his magnum opus lay.)  
Turned misanthrope, he headed for the hills  
where for years he fed on grass and plants,  
Only when afflicted with edema  
would he come back down, asking the physicians  
if they could bring drought after heavy rain.  
When they said no, he smeared his trunk and face  
with ox manure, and dried out in the sun.  
He was discovered dead the following day,  
his parched lips now two gates to the sahara,  
the river in his veins not quite the same.

**Leo Yankevich** lives with his wife and three sons in Gliwice, Poland. His poems have appeared in scores of literary journals of both sides of the Atlantic, most recently in *Blue Unicorn*, *Chronicles*, *Envoi*, *Iambs & Trochees*, *Staple*, and *Windsor Review*. He is poetry editor of *The New Formalist*.

**Patricia Wallace Jones** is an artist, poet, and retired disability advocate. More of her artwork can be seen at: <http://imagineii.typepad.com/imagineii/>.



# PROSE

# Maryann Corbett

## Blank Verse and Binders

I've written quite a few poems that are fairly long, in loose iambics and a discursive voice. These poems often feature a narrator whose opinions are cynical and whose viewpoint is noticeably blinkered or limited. Three of them will be published this summer (here in SCR, in *poemeleon*, and in *Mezzo Cammin*), and readers may notice that the "I" they encounter in them has an assortment of unlikable traits. Lest I be confused with my narrators and look even sillier than I am, I'd better explain how this habit of mine got started.

It was the end of my younger child's first summer at home after a year of college, a summer that often brings out tensions between parents and children. It was also a low point for Minnesota's state budget, which meant that my work at the legislature seemed to be under attack. I felt besieged at the office and at home.

That left as a safe space only music, in the Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings I spent in the choir of the Cathedral of Saint Paul. Into that safe space came Anna George Meek, a professional singer joining us as alto section leader. Our directors gave her a glowing introduction: violinist, poet, teacher at The Loft Literary Center, organizer of poetry readings, winner of the Brittingham Prize, and author of a book of poems published by the University of Wisconsin Press. They were soon talking excitedly about commissioning poems.

Unsettled as I was just then, simply hearing the word "poet," let alone being around one twice a week, set something going in me. Although my credentials are in English, and my daily work is with words, and I'd done some translation work for choral compositions, I had written no poetry since my twenties. Suddenly I remembered it. I started reading contemporary poetry, an area I'd neglected when concentrating on literature before 1600. At the same time, Anna began giving me rides home from rehearsal, and we talked about poetry. And I read Anna's poems. This remains one of my favorites:

The Pacifist Dreams of an Apocalypse

*Fresh Broccoli Soup Can Be Ready In an Hour*  
*— a front page newspaper headline*

No one will get hurt in the green world.  
 The wealthy summer will spend its humidity  
 generously, fresh silver in the morning streets.  
 But you must prepare for it. A woman arrives  
 at the shelter wearing fingerprint-black

from the angry night. She has her purse  
 and her son. In the shelter's kitchen  
 the foods imitate a healed body: a head of lettuce  
 and, of course, the bronchial vegetables,  
 cauliflower, broccoli. That life is spacious  
 and deep-breathing, believing that the coming revolution  
 will not be violent, will appear like splendid harvest  
 and all things rusting will move again with a little  
 olive oil. Steel yourself for the day  
 the broken man, who sobs and threatens you  
 through the telephone, receives a cup of green tea  
 and is soothed. Prepare, in our new millennium, for the end  
 of desires for which we hate ourselves.  
 Expect bounty. At this very hour, whole armies  
 are serving asparagus, repairing their nations  
 of grief, of the terrorism of illness, of beatings.  
 Sit down, says the shelter worker.  
 Let me fix you something.

This is Anna: dreaming the dream of the day of justice, and doing something about it, volunteering, protesting, being open to other people's hurt. A number of her poems, like the one above, come out of her experiences on the crisis intervention staff at a domestic violence shelter. The poem "In Response to a Woman Who Asked Me What Stories I Would Tell My Daughter, If I Had One" is her most complete depiction of the

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craziness and vulnerability of shelter clients, and of the workers, too. An old lady weeps because her house has been destroyed by the city, and we learn gradually that the house was condemned because the bodies of forty dogs, strangled by her husband, were rotting under its floor. A woman has delirium tremens; the clients tell the staff to call it "migraine" so that the sufferer will feel less condemned. A woman wanders out on a winter night and is later found dead of exposure. The poem makes clear the battering effect of these things on a shelter worker.

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## What I had to write from, what I wanted to dig into, was on the surface a very placid life.

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Still, there are moments of graced compensation: In "Langue de Femme," for example, the poet gives us first plain, near-the-surface description of the interactions of staff and clients —

The boiling water tattles and sighs. We argue  
 about legalizing pot, we argue pain medication, not pain  
 medication: I'm the only one here never knifed....

## Blank Verse and Blinders

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— and then extracts from a knocked-over vase the full emotional intensity of sharing with women all their joy and pain:

lily tongues everywhere, broken glass, greenery,...Then  
 lily tongues everywhere, broken glass, greenery, the table shaking  
 under the nervous weight of our laughter. Langue  
 de femme: we are rich beyond shattering.

That these were accurate observations I knew, though only at second hand. I had visited a shelter years before with a close friend who did the same work. I had listened many times to the stories she needed to tell me to stay sane. So I knew that shelter work took a selflessness that I had not been able to muster. Knowing something about the strength of the person behind the poems brought the poems into high mental relief. All of poetry suddenly became more solid.

At the same time I was reading Anna, I was starting to write poetry again, much of the time in a blank verse that came as automatically as water from a spigot. Having been silent for decades, I had a life to draw on. But it struck me forcefully that the life problems I wanted most to explore in this writing lacked the drama of the problems in Anna's poems. Women running from violence were not my material. What I had to write from, what I wanted to dig into, was on the surface a very placid life, and even beneath the surface it was a quiet matter: the dailiness of mothering, the adjustment to children's independence, the discovery of what comes next.

It also became clear that writing involves real risk of self-exposure. Say what you think and what you feel, even in fiction, and your interests, preoccupations, limits, and tics are clear to the world and open to its judgment. To be figuring that out after years of having read literary criticism sounds a little ridiculous, but then (1) I'd been away from the academic study of literature for over 20 years, (2) medieval literature has many Anons and relatively few personalities, and (3) it's different when it's your own life. Once I discovered on-line poetry boards, I found out quickly that mine was also a comparatively circumscribed life, defined by a religious view of the world and well insulated against other ways of seeing it. There is nothing quite like offering a poem for comments to deliver the lesson that what you thought was obvious — whether the antecedent of a pronoun or the philosophy of a life — is not.

This was an uncomfortable spot. I was comparing myself with a brave and generous poet, twenty years my junior, who wrote gripping poems about exciting material, while I poked with blank-verse tools at the low fire of midlife and reached conclusions that often looked wrong to half my readers. To get the same intensity, by the same

methods, as the poet I admired was not within the realm of the possible, and I would have to do something different.

Not by logic, but by guess and indirection, I arrived at a kind of self-protective method. I would write my long loose-iambic pieces, letting them ramble in whatever direction seemed productive toward any conclusion that seemed to present a real human being. Then, in drafts that whittled the piece down and tried to improve its vividness and craft, I would try to emphasize the speaker's flaws, limits, specific kinds of brokenness. That might mean an aspiring contemplative who tries to ignore good ideas, or a woman who focuses on clothes and brushes past the lives of the wearers, or a mother more bothered by waste than interested in creativity.

The end product is something like a "flawed narrator" poem in which — I hope — some interest and intensity derive from the process of learning how the narrator struggles. By this process I've distanced myself from the person speaking but still said what, at some level, I think is true, however awkward it may be to utter. That the broken person looks a lot like me is no great matter. All narrators are flawed, because all human beings are.

Whether this way of working will go on being productive for me is an open question. I still go back to Anna's poems, and I've never stopped admiring their vividness of diction, image, and emotion. My new goal is to focus on the small, closely observed moments, like the one that begins another Meek poem, "An Old Man Performs Alchemy on His Doorstep at Christmastime":

After they stopped singing for him,  
the carolers became transparent in the dark  
and he stepped into their emptiness to say  
he lost his wife last week, please  
sing again. Their voices filled with gold....

I still hope for the day when in my own writing I can begin at the point of that vividness, instead of lobbing pentameter at it from a distance.

*Anna George Meek's poems are quoted from her book *Acts of Contortion*, University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.*

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Maryann Corbett earned a doctorate in English language and literature and expected to be teaching *Beowulf* and Chaucer and the history of the language. Instead, she has spent the last 25 years working as an in-house writing teacher, editor, and indexer for the Minnesota Legislature. This close proximity to the legislative sausage grinder makes it necessary for her to turn to poetry as a calming influence. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Measure*, *The Lyric*, *The Raintown Review*, *The Barefoot Muse*, *Mezzo Cammin*, and other journals in print and online.

# Duncan Gillies MacLaurin

## A Modern-Day Icarus

**W**hat should you do when someone you care for has gone mad? In “The Wheel”, from *Calendar of Love*, 1967, George Mackay Brown’s first collection of short stories, the general response is to humour the main character, Robert, when he goes out looking for his dead friend, Walls, every Saturday night. At the fisherman’s pub, Old Tom the barman merely tells Robert that Walls “hasn’t been here tonight”. Captain Stevens is the only person who tries to make Robert face up to the truth. But as time goes by, even a Captain Stevens may see the wisdom of bowing to the inevitable. Otherwise he risks being as obsessive as the person he is helping. It is interesting to note that this same Captain Stevens does go mad, in “The Eye of the Hurricane”, the final story in George Mackay Brown’s second collection *A Time to Keep and Other Stories*, 1969.

George Mackay Brown addresses a similar theme in his short story, “Icarus”, from *A Time to Keep and Other Stories*. Once again, the main character, Uncle Tom, is an eccentric, a village idiot, and again the central feature is how those around him deal with his disorder, and how the main character refuses to change his ways despite an increasing burden of evidence that he ought to do so.

A reference to Greek mythology is another thing the two stories have in common. In “The Wheel” Robert is described as “the gorgon’s head” and the people in the pub freeze when he enters; here the reference is highlighted by the title, “Icarus”. Both Robert and Uncle Tom share a fate similar to that of Sisyphus (who endlessly rolls a huge stone up a hill only to see it roll back down again) inasmuch as they have been condemned to an existence where they must endlessly repeat seemingly futile actions. The title of “The Wheel” — presumably the name of the pub — underlines this theme of endless repetition without pointing directly to Robert’s crime (although we can perhaps surmise that he was guilty of drinking too much), while the title of “Icarus” is explicit in apportioning blame.

Uncle Tom is not just an ordinary “Icarus”; in the story he is described as “a presumptuous Icarus” (p.80, l.29). This is because Icarus is merely a foolhardy youth who forgets his father’s advice, while Uncle Tom is a full-grown man who ought to know better. However, before we condemn these characters cursed by the gods, it is worthwhile to consider Albert Camus’ interpretation of the fate of Sisyphus, and, by extension, of others like him: “The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a human heart. One must imagine that Sisyphus is happy.” (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 1942)

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It could be argued that “Noah” would be a more apt title than “Icarus” inasmuch as the end of the world is imminent, and Uncle Tom is the only one who has been told. It would be ironic to compare Uncle Tom, the complete failure who is only interested in saving his own skin, to Noah, the mythical hero who saves both man and the animal kingdom from destruction. At any rate, there are some significant departures from the original Icarus myth: it is Daedalus, Icarus’ father, who builds Icarus’ wings — Uncle Tom makes his own wings; Daedalus is a master craftsman, and the wings he makes are in good working order — Uncle Tom’s wings are never in good working order; Icarus is a captive of King Minos on Crete — Uncle Tom is a free man; Icarus comes to grief while escaping danger due to over-confidence — Uncle Tom knows the end of the world hasn’t occurred but doesn’t want to have to admit he is wrong; Icarus has somewhere to escape to, the Greek mainland — Uncle Tom fails to state where he is hoping to land. And yet, when we consider the essential image — both Icarus and Uncle Tom crash as the result of an act of rebellion while flying on home-made wings — then the parallel is a compelling one. The common elements of trying to escape danger, overestimating one’s powers and ending up crashing on man-made wings are sufficient to persuade us that Uncle Tom is a modern-day Icarus.

Another reason why the large number of significant departures from the Icarus myth need not worry us unduly is that while the Icarus myth is a tragedy — he dies — this short story about Uncle Tom is a comedy — he breaks a leg. The moral of the Icarus myth is that we should not get carried away by success: in “Icarus” the moral is that we should not get carried away by failure — a comic moral, perhaps, but with tragic undertones, with the narrator calling man’s life on earth a “long rambling incoherent tragic comic fiction” (p.79, ll. 2-3). Thus the failure of the narrator to be faithful to the Icarus myth is in keeping with the theme of the short story: ambivalence and a sense of life as “tragic comic”. Bella supports her husband, but only under protest. Although we can only guess what the narrator really thinks of Uncle Tom, he seems, like Bella, to have mixed feelings about him. He does not think Uncle Tom is helping himself by his actions, yet he tolerates them and thus encourages the reader to do likewise.

While “The Wheel” has a third-person narrator, in “Icarus” Uncle Tom’s nephew is the first-person narrator. This suits a more light-hearted narrative style. The punch-line in “The Wheel” — “What a man for eggs!” — is hilarious because it is in such contrast to the lugubriousness of the rest of the story. In “Icarus” the humour is explicit from the outset: “There are some folks who take a great delight in prophesying the end of the world.” This is a joke in itself, that people should take “great delight” in what is, of course, the most awful scenario they can envision.

More overt comedy follows soon afterwards: “We had spent a very pleasant evening round the fire, talking about shipwrecks, tinkers and storms.” (p.77, ll.11-13) Again misfortune is described as a source of great amusement. This idea is echoed near the end of the story when the narrator visits his uncle in hospital: “He was very cheerful.” (p.81, ll.1-2) Likewise, when we hear about Bella’s “riotous spate of gossip”, it starts with positive news — “what couples were getting married” — but ends with negative news — “and what boys had got summonses for running their bikes without licenses” — so that we are no longer quite so sure just how good the news in the middle was — “and what girls were having babies”. (p.77, ll.25-28)

This anomaly of being joyful about distress is only one of several ironies, viz. Madame Roberta’s Aberdeen accent, which is incompatible with her exotic name; Bella’s hypocrisy in being happy to go along with Uncle Tom’s projects until it is displayed openly to their neighbours (“It was all right when he used to sit quietly in the ben room waiting for the trump to blow.” p.80, ll.11-12); the description of Uncle Tom’s foolhardy leap from the roof as “his moment of splendid rebellion” (p.80, l.26); Uncle Tom’s politically incorrect description of the Indian as “a darkie” (p.81, l.3), repeated blithely by the narrator in the next line (“This darkie...”). Fittingly, the ending supplies the most deliberate irony of the whole story; ironically sympathising with Uncle Tom’s uncertainty about his next prediction, “whether it’ll be five past four in the morning or ten to eight at night” (p.81, ll.14-15), the narrator concludes: “Apart from that, he’s getting along as well as can be expected.” The heavy underlying irony here subverts the narrator’s dead-pan delivery, and we can only interpret this as the narrator showing us how ridiculous Uncle Tom is. Uncle Tom’s antics are described as if they were the actions of a rational man, but we know they are not.

The narrator’s ridicule of Uncle Tom never seems to get nasty, however, not least because he also directs his barbs of irony towards Bella and even himself. The most obvious instance of the latter is his hypocrisy in having Madame Roberta tell his fortune when he has told us that he doesn’t hold “with all that nonsense” (p.77, l.20). But there are also many other comic effects that help to make the ridiculing of Uncle Tom seem relatively harmless, for example the colourful bird/animal imagery throughout: “Bella clucked dis-approv-ingly...” (p.77, l.17); “Bella herded me into the straw chair...” (p.77, ll.22-23); “The last haddock tail went flying from her scissors.” (p.77, l.30); “It had taken Bella most of the morning to get him harnessed” (p.80, l.5); and the description of the wrecked wings as “a strange discarded chrysalis” (p.79, l.27).

This imagery ties in well both with Uncle Tom’s flying project and with the centrepiece of the story, the Dounby Show, which is a celebration of the farmyard

animals that are so important for the existence of a small, rural community. In the description of the Show we can find a strong sense of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls ‘the carnival life’, where the hierarchy of everyday social life is disrupted and all beings can associate with each other as equals: “Among the animals wander the laird with his deerstalker and shooting-stick, and Sam the tinker, and everyone else in between.” (p.78, ll.25-7) Here the narrator has switched to the present tense, legitimately so, as he is describing an annual event, but he also cleverly manages to depict the Show as an eternal, timeless event.

The spectacle of the Dounby Show is itself a carnival element, and in fact a carnival spirit pervades the whole story. According to Bakhtin, the most important feature of carnival is the carnival crowning and decrowning, where the village idiot is made king for a day and then robbed of his crown at the end of it. So here we have Uncle Tom standing proudly up on his roof, the king of the castle, only to land in “a wild disorder of legs and canvas and outraged fluttering hens” (p.80, ll.30-31). By comparing plain old Uncle Tom to the mythological Icarus the narrator is actually mocking Uncle Tom mercilessly, and yet, in some strange way he is also honouring him. This sublime mockery is underlined by a minor dramatic event just before Uncle Tom jumps off the roof: “A seagull lighted for a moment on the canvas tip of Uncle Tom’s right wing.” (p.80, ll.16-17) Here George Mackay Brown is asking us to picture a ridiculous and yet exalted moment of carnival life. And the contrast of the seagull — and an Uncle Tom that actually *can* fly — with the hens — and an Uncle Tom that *cannot* — is a striking one.

Mistaken identity is also a feature of Bakhtin’s notion of carnival, and just as the narrator is mistaken for a farmer by Madame Roberta, so Uncle Tom mistakenly imagines he can fly, like Bottom from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. We can also perhaps discern the narrator’s discreet confession to over-indulgence when he tells us he cycled to the croft “when inn and marquee closed and the last drunkard went home under the moon” (p.79, ll.21-22). Who is this “last drunkard”? The narrator himself? He admits soon afterwards that he has “the tang of ale on his palate”. (p.79, l.32)

Other carnival elements identified by Bakhtin present here include excess (the drinking at the Dounby Show), obsession (Uncle Tom’s), philosophical flights of fancy (the narrator’s musings), fantastic contrasts (the “darkie” saying “Sugar!”), and carnival opposites (Uncle Tom and Bella). There is also a carnival contrast between concrete time (Uncle Tom’s watch on the roof, and the alarm clock in the house) and imagined time (the dates when doom will fall). And, as so often in Mackay Brown’s stories, there are elements of the fairy-tale, which is also a genre saturated

with carnival. Here the number three is significant. There are three main characters: the narrator, Uncle Tom and Bella. The narrator also makes three visits to Uncle Tom and Bella. First he visits them together (on the Sunday), then separately but on the same occasion (on the Wednesday), and finally separately on two different occasions. There are also the nine parishes that meet together at the Dounby Show, the three calves that the narrator's supposed cow is to give birth to, and the three ploughmen standing on "the darkie".

Carnival delights in ambivalence, and thus the message of "Icarus" is an ambivalent one. It shows us that there are other ways of treating a madman than bullying him or simply pretending not to notice. Tact and a sense of humour would seem to be important qualities. And we should not be afraid to compromise; otherwise we are no better than the madmen ourselves. And yet the uncompromising nature of George Mackay Brown's heavy, tongue-in-cheek irony suggests that there is a deeper message, that we *should* believe in something and be willing to stand up for those beliefs.

If we were to look for a more serious message here behind all the fun and games, then it is useful to remember that George Mackay Brown has often been very critical of modern technology (e.g. in "The Wireless Set", also in *A Time to Keep and Other Stories*). Therefore it is by no means far-fetched to see Uncle Tom as a symbol of modern civilisation and modern technology, and thus the whole story as an appeal to us to distrust the belief that we can save ourselves from disaster by inventing new devices. Daedalus constructs a labyrinth he later has to escape from, and he only succeeds in doing so at a great price. Likewise, we have created a society that we want to escape from, but perhaps we will not be able to do so without some similar, terrible loss.

In literature it is never wise to try to force a message down the reader's throat; if it is too easy for the reader to put a finger on the message then the work is more propaganda than it is literature. It is a joy to read work you can feel is persuading you to a certain point of view without being able to label that point of view as anything but a call for tolerance and insight.

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**Duncan Gillies MacLaurin** was born in Glasgow in 1962, sent to boarding school in Perthshire, and awarded an exhibition in Classics to Oxford. He left without his degree, and after a short spell at London University he spent two years busking in the streets of Europe. In 1986 he met Danish journalist and writer, Ann Bilde, in Italy and went to live in Denmark. He took degrees in English and Latin at Aarhus University and since 1995 has taught at a high school in Esbjerg.

# Joseph S. Salemi

## Poetry and “Life”: What We Do, and Why We Do It

**W**hat is it that poets do? If poetry is to regain its bearings, this question has to be answered specifically and straightforwardly.

Vagueness and uncertainty are the enemies not only of clear thinking, but also of vigorous action. As I constantly tell my students, wallow in nuance and nebulosity and you will become a moral paralytic. So let me cut to the core of the matter.

Many years ago, Joseph Wood Krutch in his book *The Modern Temper* made the point that art furnishes a means by which life may be contemplated, but not a means by which it may be lived. It was a brilliant insight. You can't model your behavior on what you read in a poem or a novel — to do so would lead either to prison or the lunatic asylum. Literature serves for entertainment and contemplation, or what the medievals would have called a *speculum mundi* — a mirror of the world.

Krutch was following Bernard Shaw's argument in *Man and Superman* that aesthetic excellence has no necessary link to actual day-to-day existence. Art creates beautiful things, but they exist in a realm of their own. The biggest and most dangerous error a writer can make, as Pirandello pointed out, is to confuse art with reality.

For some reason, many people in the poetry business fight tooth and nail against this truth. They can't bear the idea that their literary creations are verbal abstractions from life rather than pulsating realities. They're offended by the notion that a poem might just be a poem, and not a moral compass or a testimony of feeling.

This is why such a godawful fuss is made in so many poetry workshops and classes about “sincerity” and “authenticity” and “genuineness” and “honesty” and all those other bogus scarecrows designed to frighten people away from real art. Many poets and readers refuse to accept the fact that poems are fictive artifacts, produced out of errant fantasy in the same way that a doodle is produced on a notepad. *No, it can't be!* they shout. *It must be more important than that!*

No, it isn't. There really is nothing more to it than that. As a poet, you don't have some priestly vocation to save the world or to teach the truth. You just have to write good poems that will provide entertainment and contemplation for yourself, and maybe for some other people as well.

It's especially hard for American poets to accept this limitation, because they come out of a dreary puritanical tradition, as old as *The Mayflower*, which insists on seeing the world in moralistic and utilitarian terms. If poetry doesn't “do something,”

they feel, poetry is trivial and non-serious. It can't just be a verbal *jeu d'esprit*. It has to have some positive impact on the world.

People of this sort want poems to be beacons of intellectual light, illuminating the path for others. They want poets to have “a sense of responsibility” — a hideous phrase that is lethal to all art. To put it bluntly, they are poltroons and conformists who cannot conceive of the joyous freedom that art affords its creators and appreciators. And I'm not making a partisan political judgment here — morons like the stodgy conservative William Bennett are just as culpable in this regard as left-wing liberals who want all art to be politically correct. In both cases, poltroons see art as a means rather than as an end in itself.

And yet, for the sake of argument, let's grant that poetry as a human activity must have some purpose or goal. Well, what's wrong with having the purpose of providing entertainment and contemplation? Are these somehow less valuable than teaching and moral edification? If you think so, then perhaps you ought to examine your puritan prejudices.

There's nothing more boring than a poem with an agenda. But it's wrong to imagine that agendas in poetry are limited to crude attempts to push readers into some intellectual position. There are emotional agendas as well, designed to manipulate readers into feeling something, or as the current jargon has it, “to raise their consciousness.” These intellectual and emotional agendas make a great deal of current poetry unreadable.

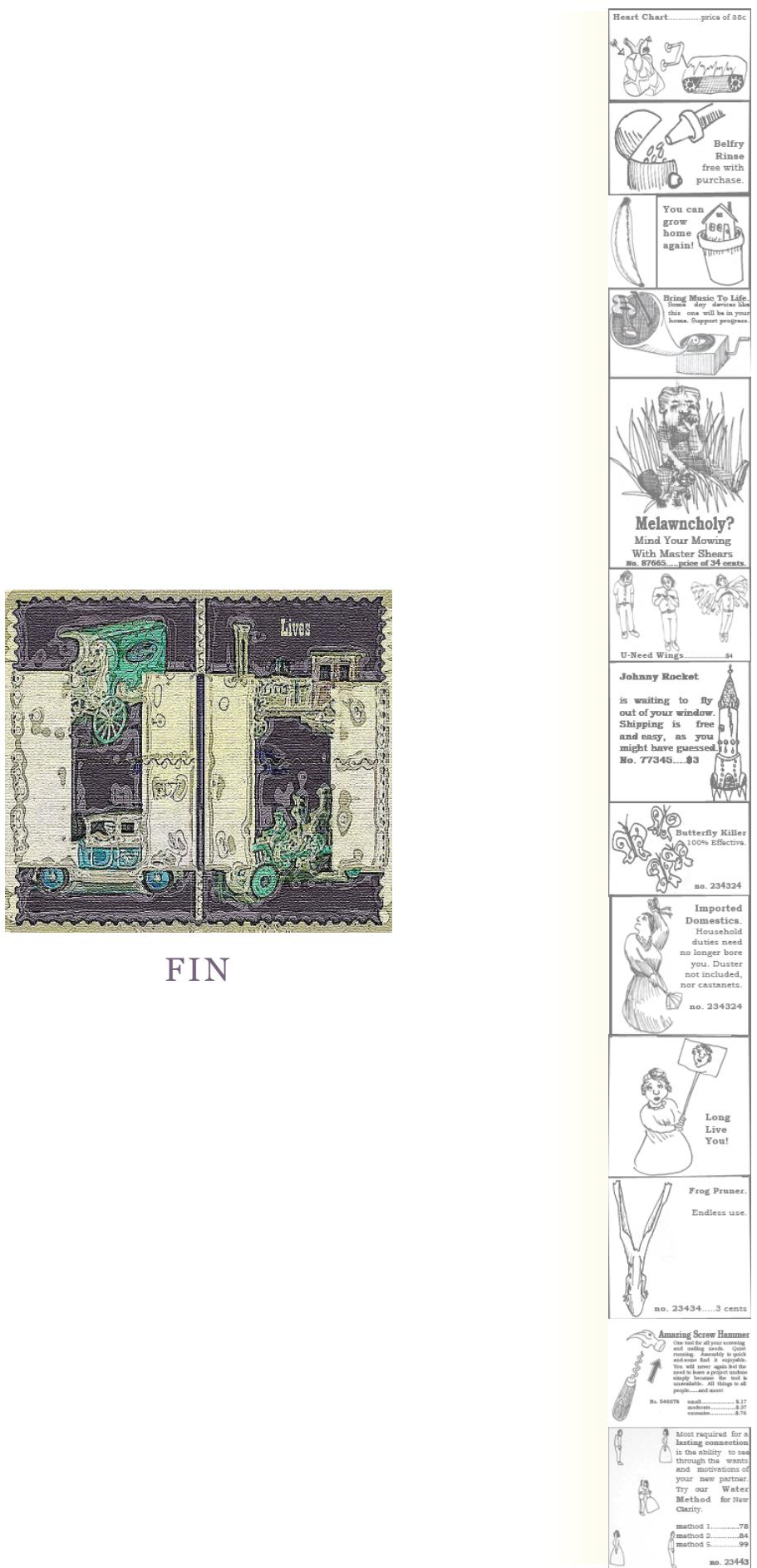
You can't use art as a guidebook to life. Art is sublimely free precisely because all the major issues of human existence are decided elsewhere, on non-aesthetic grounds. Once you accept that, you might be able to stop worrying about saving the planet, and write a few good poems.

Some persons say that this attitude trivializes poetry. Well, let them say what they like. I say that it gives poetry and poets *carte blanche* to do whatever they wish in the realm of literary creation. It opens up possibilities that people with intellectual and emotional agendas can't begin to dream of. And it frees us once again to provide material for entertainment and contemplation. That's what we do.

Why do we do it? Because we happen to be good at it, and because it gives us pleasure to exercise our talent. If you need two better reasons than that, then something is wrong with you and you should seek professional help.

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**Joseph S. Salemi** teaches in the Department of Classical Languages at Hunter College, C.U.N.Y. His poems, essays, translations, book reviews, and scholarly articles have appeared in over 100 print journals world-wide. He is an N.E.H. scholar, a winner of the Classical and Modern Literature Prize, and a four-time finalist for the Howard Nemerov Award. He has published three books of poetry, the latest being *Masquerade* (Pivot Press).





Patricia Wallace Jones

THE STEPS TO SHIT CREEK