

# Aji

magazine

fall 2014: issue 1



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## Art / Publication Design

Katie Redfield  
Denver, CO

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[www.ajimagazine.com](http://www.ajimagazine.com)  
[support@ajimagazine.com](mailto:support@ajimagazine.com)

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# EDITOR'S *welcome*

"Perfection is a godless ghost." Such is the title of a poem by Firestone Feinberg published in this collection. It seems an especially fitting assertion for this introduction to *Aji*'s inaugural issue. *Aji* does not adjure authors to change their work, although inevitably we do see a flaw here or there. Instead, we celebrate the spirit, the expression, the image, the mood or the idea a particular piece evokes.

In order to produce this first issue, our editorial staff (all unpaid, as is our web developer), read through many wonderful submissions from writers across the U.S. and from various locations around the globe.

We didn't always agree on what should be published, but time and again, there were poems that spoke to us all, intrigued us, and drew us into that magical imaginary space where minds meet and we communicate with a depth of understanding or recognition beyond that of our ordinary day-to-day routines.

In these pages, you will encounter the work of established poets alongside that of emerging writers, some of whom have not yet graduated from high school. Unfortunately, we didn't receive enough submissions to include works of prose in this issue. However, we were immediately impressed by the quality of poetry we were regularly receiving, and also by the refreshingly civil correspondence we enjoyed with all of those who submitted. In their poems, in their letters and in their bios, we discovered a unique class of reflective, thoughtful individuals exhibiting kindness, patience, even grace in spite of their relative distance from us. In short, we were and still are inspired by them!



The approaches to prosody in this issue are varied and diverse, from very rational, controlled lines and stanzas to more free-wheeling, stream of consciousness free verse that relies on sound and image at least as much as it does on "sense." Readers may note some stylistic choices currently unpopular among contemporary schools, some definite "don'ts." But *Aji* reviewers believe that a poem's merits sometimes outweigh its perceived weaknesses, as Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark" challenges the pursuit of absolute perfection.

Roughly half of the poems here relate to the fall issue's theme of exploring the experiences of students and teachers. Enjoy the browsing; enjoy contemplating the rich thought, creativity, playfulness, and wisdom these poems offer from their electronic pages. It will cost you virtually nothing but time and a bit of your energy.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Erin O'Neill Armendarez". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline.

Erin O'Neill Armendarez  
General Editor



# CONTENT

*in this issue*



## Robert Smith

<i>In This Fallow Season</i> .....	18
<i>Requiem for a Fisherman</i> .....	19

## Craig Kurtz

<i>Cul-de-sac</i> .....	21
<i>Cameo of a Conundrum</i> .....	22
<i>Your Impossible Eyes</i> .....	23

## B.Z. Niditch

<i>Exiles</i> .....	24
<i>Vision of San Francisco</i> .....	25

## Michael Berberich

<i>Any Major Dude (The Jazz Band)</i> .....	26
<i>Maria Callas in Ecstasy</i> .....	27

## Firestone Feinberg

<i>There is Something Sad about Books</i> .....	28
<i>Perfection is a Godless Ghost</i> .....	29

## Charlie Baylis

<i>J.C.</i> .....	30
<i>Cycling into Memphis</i> .....	31
<i>Lilia in the Storm</i> .....	32
<i>Morning Song</i> .....	33

## Anca Mihaela Bruma

<i>Hypnotic Dreams</i> .....	34
<i>Her Equilibrium</i> .....	35
<i>What If?...</i> .....	36

# CONTENT

*in this issue*



## William L. Alton

*The Tattooed Man* ..... 37

## Bruce McRae

*Identity Crisis* ..... 38

*Dear Future* ..... 39

*The Dog That Couldn't Bark* ..... 40

## Colin Dodds

*Investigating Fuck* ..... 41

## Jesus Davila

*Reasons* ..... 42

## Steve De France

*Oblomov* ..... 43

*Fine Haired Sons of Bitches* ..... 45

## Lazola Pambo

*Compassion* ..... 46

## Thomas Piekarski

*A Three Penny Apology* ..... 47

## Mark Goad

*Kaffee Kafka* ..... 49

*Not of your Deserving* ..... 50

*As If Oblivion* ..... 51

# CONTENT

*in this issue*



James Grabill

*In the Ambience* ..... 52

Tom McLaren

*Seligman, Arizona* ..... 53

Paul Hostovsky

*Poetry at the Burger King* ..... 55

*The Place of Literature* ..... 57

Yvette Schnoeker-Shorb

*Scholars* ..... 58

Ted Millar

*Riding My Bike to the Library*..... 59

Michael Keshigian

*Music Appreciation* ..... 61

Mark Murphy

*Idea of Endurance* ..... 63

Wanda Wakkinen

*But, You Just Don't Understand* ..... 65

C.S. Fuqua

*Counselor's Office* ..... 68



# CONTENT

*in this issue*

Gale Acuff	
<i>Full</i> .....	69
Chase Spruiell	
<i>Oh, Leonard</i> .....	71
Erin O'Neill Armendarez & Betty J. Hendricks	
Review of Rich Murphy's <i>Americana</i> .....	72

# WRITERS

*in this issue*

## Gale Acuff

Gale Acuff has had poems published in many journals; he has authored three books of poetry. Gale has taught university English in the US, China, and Palestine. He currently teaches literature at Sichuan University for Nationalities, in Sichuan, China.

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## William Alton

William L. Alton was born November 5, 1969, and started writing in the Eighties while incarcerated in a psychiatric prison. Since then his work has appeared in several publications, including *Main Channel Voices*, *World Audience*, and *Breadcrumb Scabs*. In 2010, he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He has published one book titled *Heroes of Silence*. He earned both his BA and MFA in Creative Writing from Pacific University in Forest Grove, Oregon. He currently lives in Keizer, Oregon, with the love of his life. You can find him at <http://www.williamlalton.com>.

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## Charlie Baylis



Charlie Baylis lives and works in Nottingham, England. His poetry and short stories have most recently appeared in *Elohi Gadugi*, *the Boston Poetry Magazine* and *Litro*. He spends his spare time completely adrift of reality. He blogs sporadically here: <http://www.theimportanceofbeingaloof.tumblr.com>.

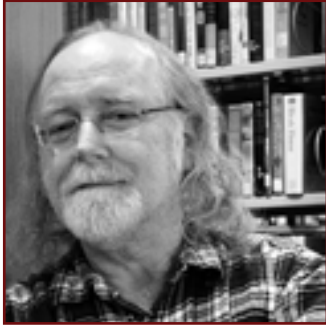
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# WRITERS

*in this issue*

## Michael Berberich

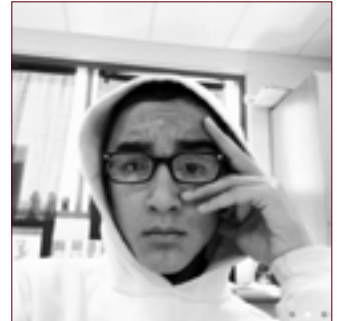


When he was nine, the guys on his Little League team told Michael Berberich he should be a writer. One year later he made the All-Star team. Against all odds of such an occurrence he came to bat three times in a row with two outs and the bases loaded. He struck out each time. Imbued with a new understanding of tragedy, he decided to write baseball poetry. Since then he has been published by *Notre Dame Magazine*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Vocabula Review*, and *The Superstition Review*. He has never written a baseball poem, however.

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## Jesus Davila

Jesus Davila is a freshman in high school who enjoys boxing.



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## Steve DeFrance

Steve De France is a widely published poet, playwright and essayist both in America and in Great Britain. His work has appeared in literary publications in America, England, Canada, France, Ireland, Wales, Scotland, India, Australia, and New Zealand. He was been nominated for a Pushcart Prize in Poetry in 2002, 2003, and 2006. Recently, his work has appeared in *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, *The Mid-American Poetry Review*, *Ambit*, *Atlantic*, *Clean Sheets*, *Poetry Bay*, *The Yellow Medicine Review*, and *The Sun*. In England, he won a Reader's Award in *Orbis Magazine* for his poem "Hawks."

(continued...)



# WRITERS

*in this issue*

## Steve DeFrance (continued)

In the United States, he won the Josh Samuels' Annual Poetry Competition (2003) for his poem "The Man Who Loved Mermaids." His play *The Killer* had its world premier at the Garage Theater in Long Beach, California (September-October 2006). He has received the Distinguished Alumnus Award from Chapman University for his writing. Most recently his poem "Gregor's Wings" has been nominated for The Best of the Net by Poetic Diversity.

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## Colin Dodds



Colin Dodds grew up in Massachusetts and completed his education in New York City. He's the author of several novels, including *WINDFALL* and *The Last Bad Job*, which the late Norman Mailer touted as showing "something that very few writers have, a species of inner talent that owes very little to other people." Dodds' screenplay *Refreshment* was named a semi-finalist in the 2010 American Zoetrope Contest. His poetry has appeared in more than 140 publications and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He lives in Brooklyn, New York, with his wife, Samantha. You can find more of his work at <http://www.thecolindodds.com>.

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## Firestone Feinberg

Firestone Feinberg lives in New York City. He is a retired high school music teacher, a pianist, and a composer. In addition to music, Firestone enjoys painting and writing poetry. He writes both metrical verse and free verse. His poems have been published in print and online. Firestone has two websites, one that showcases his own poems and watercolor paintings (<http://www.firestonefeinberg.com>) and another, *Verse-Virtual*, an online journal or e-zine which features the writing of outstanding contemporary poets (<http://www.verse-virtual.com>).

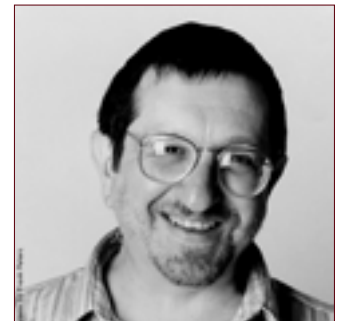


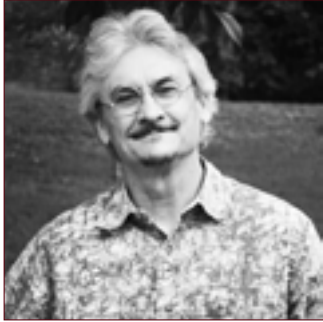
photo by Frank Peters

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# WRITERS

*in this issue*

## C.S. Fuqua



C.S. Fuqua's books include *White Trash* and *Southern: Collected Poems*, *The Native American Flute: Myth, History, Craft, Rise Up*, and *Hush Puppy! A Southern Fried Tale*. His work has appeared in numerous publications including *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Main Street Rag*, and *Year's Best Horror Stories*. Please visit <http://www.csfuqua.weebly.com>.

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## Mark Goad



Mark Goad is a poet now living in the Boston Metro area of the USA. Born in Ohio, he has lived and studied in Chicago; Geneva, Switzerland; and Boston (with sojourns in Connecticut and rural Nebraska). He has completed undergraduate and/or graduate studies in English literature, German language, theology, and philosophy. His work has been published previously in journals such as *Assisi*, *BAPQ*, *Epiphany*, *Bluepepper*, *Decanto*, *Big River Literary Review*, *Extracts*, *Crannóg*, *Ayris*, *The Wayfarer*, *Contrary*, *Turbulence*, *Concho River Review*, and *Christian Century*. In addition, his work is soon to appear in *Spiritus* and *Poetry Salzburg Review*.

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## James Grabill

Since the '70's, James Grabill's poems have appeared in periodicals such as *Harvard Review*, *Terrain*, *Urthona (UK)*, *Shenandoah*, *The Oxonian Review (UK)*, *Stand (UK)*, *East West Journal*, and *The Common Review*. His books include *An Indigo Scent after the Rain* and *Poem Rising Out of the Earth*. He teaches "systems thinking" relative to sustainability.

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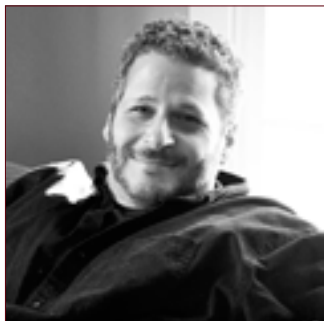




# WRITERS

*in this issue*

## Paul Hostovsky



Paul Hostovsky is the author of five books of poetry and six poetry chapbooks. His poems have won a Pushcart Prize and two Best of the Net awards. He has been featured on *Poetry Daily* and *Verse Daily*, and Garrison Keillor has read his poems eight times on *The Writer's Almanac*. He was a featured poet on the Georgia Poetry Circuit 2013. He makes his living in Boston as a sign language interpreter at the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Visit him at <http://www.paulhostovsky.com>.

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## Michael Keshigian



Michael Keshigian's published poetry books include *Eagle's Perch*, *Wildflowers*, *Jazz Face*, *Warm Summer Memories*, *Silent Poems*, *Seeking Solace*, *Dwindling Knight*, and *Translucent View*. He has won a Pushcart Prize five times, and has been nominated for Best of the Net twice. His poetry cycle *Lunar Images*, set for clarinet, piano, and narrator, premiered at Del Mar College in Texas and was also performed in Boston and Moletto, Italy. "Winter Moon," a poem set for soprano and piano, premiered last fall in Boston. Read more at <http://www.michaelkeshigian.com>.

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## Craig Kurtz

Craig Kurtz lives at Twin Oaks Intentional Community where he writes poetry while simultaneously handcrafting hammocks. Recent work has appeared in *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *The Blue Hour*, *Outburst*, *Regime*, *Indigo Rising*, *Harlequin Creature*, *Reckless Writing*, and *The Tower Journal*. His music work has been featured at Fishfood and Lavajuice.

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# WRITERS

*in this issue*

## Robert Lavett Smith



Raised in New Jersey, Robert Lavett Smith has lived since 1987 in San Francisco, where for the past fifteen years he has worked as a Special Education Paraprofessional. He has studied with Charles Simic and Galway Kinnell. He is the author of several chapbooks and two full-length poetry collections, the most recent of which is *Smoke in Cold Weather: A Gathering of Sonnets* (Full Court Press, 2013).

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## Tom McLaren



Tom McLaren is originally from Pittsburgh but has traveled extensively and lived for a few years in East Asia, where he was a professor of literature and oratory. He has written a few unpublished dramatic works, and his work has appeared in such publications as *Word River Literary Review*, *Gallup Journey*, *Flipside*, and *Martial Arts Training*. In addition to writing and presenting at academic conferences, his hobbies are judo, aikido, jujutsu, EDM, Goa-Psy Trance, and trips to Las Vegas.

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## Bruce McRae

Pushcart nominee Bruce McRae is a Canadian musician with work in more than 800 publications, including *Poetry.com* and *The North American Review*. His first book, *The So-Called Sonnets*, is available from the Silenced Press website or via Amazon books. To hear his music and view more poems, visit his website <http://www.bpmcrae.com> or “TheBruceMcRaeChannel” on Youtube.

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# WRITERS

*in this issue*

## Anca Mihaela Bruma

Anca Mihaela Bruma is a Romanian living in Dubai, UAE. Her love for poetry started when she was nine years old. She has always viewed writing poetry as the perfect medium capable of depicting the profound, unfathomable complexities of life, to render into words that which is unsayable, the ineffable, which can be deeper than language itself. Through her writings as well as through years of reading, she looks to see something beyond that which is apparent to others. She pursues beauty in all forms of art. Poetry has inspired her thirst for more and more knowledge of the mystery beneath and beyond, the symbol of something greater and higher with its own power to immortalize expressions across ages of time.



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## Ted Millar

Ted Millar teaches English at Mahopac High School and creative writing at Marist College. He lives in New York's Hudson Valley with his wife and two children. His work has appeared in *Chronogram* and *Inkwell*.

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## Mark Murphy



Mark A. Murphy's first full-length collection *Night-Watch Man & Muse* was published in November 2013 by Salmon Poetry (Eire). Find it at <http://www.salmonpoetry.com/details.php?ID=315&a=250>. Murphy's poems have been published in more than 100 magazines and e-zines in 17 different countries worldwide.

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# WRITERS

*in this issue*

## B.Z.Niditch



B.Z. Niditch is a poet, playwright, fiction writer, and teacher. His work is widely published in journals and magazines throughout the world, including *Columbia: A Magazine of Poetry and Art*, *The Literary Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Hawaii Review*, *Le Guepard (France)*, *Kadmos (France)*, *Prism International*, *Jejune (Czech Republic)*, *Leopold Bloom (Budapest)*, *Antioch Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*, among others. He lives in Brookline, Massachusetts.

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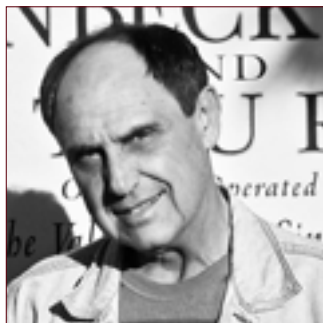
## Lazola Pambo

Lazola Pambo is a poet, novelist, and essayist. His works have been published in many places, including the 2012 *Pendle War Poetry Collection* (UK), *Poetry Potion Literary Journal*, *New Asian Writing* (Thailand), 2012 *Short Story Day Africa* anthology, and *Fundza Literacy Trust*. Lazola's hobby is reading ancient and modern literature.



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## Thomas Piekarski



Thomas Piekarski is a former editor of the *California State Poetry Quarterly*. His poetry and interviews have appeared in *Nimrod*, *Portland Review*, *Kestrel*, *Cream City Review*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *Boston Poetry Magazine*, *Poetry Pacific*, *Poetry Super Highway*, and many other publications. He has published a travel guide entitled *Best Choices in Northern California* and *Time Lines*, a book of poems. He lives in Marina, California.

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# WRITERS

*in this issue*



## Yvette Schnoeker-Shorb



Yvette Schnoeker-Shorb's poetry has appeared in *300 Days of Sun*, *Terrain.org*, *200 New Mexico Poems*, *Science Poetry*, *Concho River Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, and other publications, including work forthcoming in *Sierra Nevada Review*. A recent Pushcart Prize nominee, she holds an interdisciplinary MA and is co-founder of Native West Press.

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## Chase Spruiell

Chase Spruiell was born in June of 1989. He played basketball for 22 years of his life, finishing only when he graduated college in 2012 with a degree in Digital Cinema. He currently resides in Austin, TX where he writes songs for his band Free Kittens & Bread.



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## Wanda Wakkinen



Wanda Wakkinen served at NMSU-Alamogordo from 1999 to 2015 as a Communication Studies instructor. As a former Occupational Therapist, she used dance, movement, and mask making in a therapeutic fashion. As a writer, she utilizes The Artist's Way techniques to expand her creativeness in life.

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## *In This Fallow Season*

for Valerie

Yesterday, impecunious in this fallow season,  
I arranged for a gift—some DVDs you wanted—  
to be sent on your birthday, topping that off  
with a nice floral arrangement I saw no need  
to clutter up with teddy bears or Mylar balloons.

Years, now, into this longing, I have come  
so far from hopefulness there is no need  
to speculate about your response to this bounty,  
no point anymore in trying to pretend  
such offerings will soften your obdurate heart.

No matter. What little I've learned of love  
suggests we see it clearly only in memory,  
suggests there comes a point in every life  
when solitude is as certain as the scrimshaw  
of winter branches on a bleached-bone sky.

What then? We give for the sake of giving,  
for remembrance. And if every gift takes us  
a little deeper into loneliness, it imparts as well  
a bittersweet blessing, like deepening twilight  
anticipating the splendor of the darkness.

## ***Requiem for a Fisherman***

i.m.: Bursal Cox, died circa 1969

I remember your smile  
as you guided the rod  
in my tiny hands,  
pointing at a barracuda  
I couldn't see  
among the corals—  
how I heard years later  
your body had been  
discarded, bullet in your brain,  
floating face-down in the shallows  
off Miami, mouth leaking  
a billowing trail of blood  
like a hooked marlin.





## *Cul-de-Sac*

“Love knows nobody.”  
—Molière, *The Miser*.

It's a cut-throat business  
to be in love  
and a laughing-stock  
to be alone.

It's an under-handed office,  
this observance of courtship  
but an absolute quagmire  
to preserve a decent distance.

Involvement is a hazard.

It's a brutalizing venture  
to be a paramour  
and a skirmish of disinterest  
complicates a campaign's triumph.  
It's an unvaliant affair,  
this vice of tenderness  
but a conspiracy of deterrence  
will embroil self-reliance.

Affiliation is a peril.

It's an ignoble tradition  
to be ambushed by passion  
and a stratagem of damnation  
to conscribe autonomy.  
It takes tortuous decorum  
to waive the heart's indemnity  
but a scruple of diplomacy  
out-maneuvers tour de force.

Coupling is such a coup de grâce.

## *Cameo of a Conundrum*

“My art, it always suffers  
when my life enjoys contentment”  
she would say; and so  
happy relations (dear friend),  
not to mention concertinas,  
are a menace to the muse.  
It’s lamentable, this kind friendship;  
and, alas, it’s such a curse  
carousal is so willing  
to inspirit uninspiration.

“There’s a downturn of the verve  
when the angst attenuates”  
we had agreed, admitting  
agreeability debilitates  
a genius happiest when vexed.  
How can it be justified,  
our jolly banter, these lovely  
hours, when such selfish pleasures  
make anemic the complaining  
necessary for afflatus?

“It’s a definite dilemma,  
the chivari becalms the longing  
while the latter lights the art  
and the life without the art  
doesn’t seem to signify”  
she sighed. How could I be so  
coarse to importune her with  
assuagement, when there’s misery  
to nourish and felicity is  
conscious anguish? Alack.

## *Your Impossible Eyes*

No one's mapped the sun  
because the telescope's too short  
or the questions lack the depth  
& the numbers shift the sum.  
It's not a closed universe,  
the thread rejects its spool;  
this locale is hypothetical  
with instants intermultiple.

No one's mapped your eyes  
because the contents stay in flux  
or the color calls the sky  
& the sky is undefined.  
It's not a finite chronicle,  
the strand transcends an open key;  
this proximity is undeterred  
by antecedents or cartwheels.

Periodic charts only hypothesize  
apertures chronologized by aliquots;  
perhaps a map, scaled mote to mote,\*  
would communicate this aggregate.  
Diminution as well as augmentation  
correspond to pitched revisions  
yet clarity of expatiation  
might require lifetimes unattained.

No one's mapped the universe  
because the contents intermultiply  
or the colors hypothesize the sum  
& the sum transcends the undefined.  
It's not a closed proximity,  
the questions might require flux;  
this strand is scaled to aliquots  
with instants undeterred by maps.

## ***Exiles***

The air is cushioned  
on a drowsy noonday  
by empty resting docks  
now an injured hovercraft  
rumbles out to sea  
by the New York wharf  
climbs from abysses  
to a friendlier horizon  
near white peaks  
and you spy a swan  
painted in the waves  
feathers sailing  
by a lost Italian passport  
plunging us to memory  
on a coastal surface  
printed on a daring back.



## ***Vision of San Francisco***

In low rise San Francisco  
at five PM  
among smooth jazz enthusiasts  
the dish still repeats  
with no one watching  
behind withdrawn blinds  
but everyone speaking  
or chewing on gossip  
pasta or pork  
trying to sleep off  
war or death  
chilled out  
by every Dear John or Jane  
letter, not willing  
to surrender  
the happy hour  
even the remote possibility  
of going off line  
or losing control  
of a poor reception  
yet you still keep on  
playing the blues  
here in October  
on the sidewalks' cafe  
no one sleeps  
except on music sheets  
in harmony on brass beds  
with my newly haired bow  
of my violin's rosin  
I'm floating in a morning shine  
gazing at the Bay.

## ***Any Major Dude (The Jazz Band)***

Any cocky dude'll do  
if he can play  
the "East St. Louis Toodle-Oo."  
Really blow it out  
Duke it out, swaying  
to and fro it out.

Any cocky dude'll do  
if he can play  
the "East St. Louis Toodle-Oo."  
Really funk it  
plunk it, swaing, swing and  
swunk it.

Any cocky dude'll do  
if he can play  
the "East St. Louis Toodle-Oo"  
Really bang it,  
clang it, thump-dump  
and hang it.

Any cocky dude'll do  
if he can play  
the "East St. Louis Toodle-Oo."  
Really thrill it  
trill it, whop wah woo me  
'til I fill with it.

That bird'd really be  
somethin' to crow about!

## ***Maria Callas in Ecstasy***

Maria Callas looks at the floor.  
The room thunders; the rafters quake.  
A rose soars stageward  
rolls forward and graces her feet.

Maria Callas looks at the faces.  
The cascade continues; the building shakes.  
Kneeling, gently she lifts the flower;  
a slow, bare smile dares trace joy.

Maria Callas looks to the ceiling.  
Her eyes close; she dreams of Bernini.  
A healing tear limns each crescent lid.  
    She bows discretely  
then scurries for the door (as if  
somehow she is embarrassed).

## ***There is Something Sad about Books***

There is something sad about books  
Standing on shelves. Books that haven't  
Been read in years. Books that were never

Read. They are empty and separate  
From everything else. No one  
Even looks at them anymore. Meant to be

Companions -- they are alone now. Neither  
Touched nor handled. And who would  
Take one down? Yes. Sewn. Yes. Bound.

But they are undone. Still. And. Severed.

## ***Perfection is a Godless Ghost***

Perfection is a Godless ghost  
That plays upon the mind - -  
No attention give it - -  
It's only made of air.

Demand it not; experience  
Informs the one who's wise - -  
That good enough is faulty stuff - -  
Regardless - - else - - Nowhere.

*J.C.*

I think about you,  
Limbs sprawled on my bedroom floor, Jesus Christ,  
A smudge of lipstick on your open mouth,  
My high heel under the Bible

I think about you,  
Wand dipped in black  
Magic tossed over your eyelashes, Jesus  
Christ, the button of your blue jeans

Opened for a spell

Do you still want to fuck me up  
For all the flowers that I have?  
If I came with fairies green with dew,  
Torrential, rushing by like rivers

Flooding holy lands, I'm sure  
I will collapse in a cloud of smoke  
Twelve minutes before the next client

Alone outside your shadow,  
My love lost in the dirt, thinking of you

An empty vessel  
A cross in the sand



## *Cycling into Memphis*

Maybe sometime I'll shove it off a bridge  
The day will clear, cycling into Memphis  
Smack to the dirt with the clout of a King

Punch-drunk on polka dots and lovesongs  
Laid low like the branches of palm laid low  
After Easter's passing, lions on my back

I will not care if the red sand flutters  
From the red lips of the river Jordan  
To the red basin of the Mississippi

Waiting weightless like a walk on water,  
Still for every moment that made me  
If the end won't come, if the end will come.

## ***Lilia in the storm***

The night jumps out a butterfly jar  
Whispering stories on black mirrors,

Of lightning, peeling thuds of thunder  
Five years away, rolling into honeycomb

The leaves in the wind, the light on the water  
A blue body bathed in the moon's blood

Mouthing silver globs to the swathes  
Of wild sways of rain, swinging from the eaves

Clattering a pool where a single swan weaves  
Distilling the dreams I dreamt to dream

Of Lilia racing through the storm  
The saffron flames on fire behind her

Five years away, chasing through the trees  
The light on the wind, the leaves in the water

The black crosses tower, where she escapes  
And crashes into the day's wide arms

## ***Morning Song***

Together we lie under ice-cream swirls  
And spirals, under the moon's music

My head as soft as a dandelion  
Seed, rippling in the water of your dreams  
The empty aisles are silent

Still let me sing through the sadness  
Into a silhouette of silk and suede

The black sun bursts the morning  
The banks smashed by dynamite

Still let me lower the sadness  
A kiss below my deepest golden kiss

The bedside sky spins inside Catherine wheels  
Untangling to two blue lips, uncoiling the curls  
Of smiles and songs, soft and criminal

## ***Hypnotic Dreams***

Between brief interludes and hypnotic sensations,  
Your name orbits around all temptations...

Lost between the verbs and all translations,  
Your fingertips orchestrate my own salvations...

Like a karmic explosion imbued with incantations,  
You came to show me the quantum fascinations...

## ***Her Equilibrium***

Her equilibrium  
is faltered by the parallels  
between her thoughts...

The verses rise  
above the Absolute,  
leading to a labyrinth.

You started counting backwards  
mystified by Her maze,  
a mundane repetition  
of your own Dimension!...

And the scarlet Passion  
still holds Her crown!



## ***What If?...***

What if...  
butterflies grow under my skin,  
with overwhelming aroma?  
Will you still say good bye  
sixteen times per a day?...

What if...  
their wings paint  
the rhythm of your Heart,  
with its elegant brushes?  
Will you still say good bye,  
during the electric nights?...

What if...  
with their own swirling dance  
bring your breath nearer  
to taste the endless similarities?  
Will you still say good bye  
during the fleeting hours?

And.... do you know  
where the butterflies go  
when lavender kisses touch you  
in the night?!....

## *The Tattooed Man*

Art lies at your body's fiery edge.

A simple rose or a lover's name.

You carry your first kiss drawn on the thick tendons of your neck, your first date on your left wrist.

You carry peace written in kanji on your shoulder.

Flowers twine through your ribs.

I miss you when you go away.

You've made a gift of your flesh and I draw it around me to hide from eyes prying through the windows, trying to steal my face.

I wither in the direct sunlight and hide in the shadows until the moon rises whole and rusty in the summer air.

You lay your head on the pillow beside mine.

You breathe directly into my mouth, I cannot roll away.

I cannot turn without tearing your hands from your wrists.

They hold me and cup me and stroke me.

This is love.

This is what you do when we lie in on the mattress, making love.

In the morning, I turn away from you.

Your face is narrow and wild.

The light comes through the window.

Dust dances gold and light near the floor.

This is the last time I'll see you until night falls. I don't know where you go, but please come back.

Remember me when you fade through the walls.

Please, please remember.

## *Identity Crisis*

You were the Wife of Bath  
and I was Claudius Ptolemy.  
I was your sixth or seventh husband.  
I was your invisible lover, Mr. Incubus.  
We played games in the sack by candlelight.  
We crossed deserts.  
Some days we didn't even know each other.

Little wonder I was so confused.  
How does one label their experiences  
when rampaging Visigoth's are at the gate?  
With biblical floodwaters rising?  
In these damnable firestorms?

One minute we're Bedouins in a Saharan caravan,  
and the next we're planting tomatoes back in Omaha.  
'Now you see me, and now you don't,'  
you cried out from behind a burning mulberry bush.

And I couldn't have said it any better.

***Dear Future***

Allow me to apologize  
for the actions of my contemporaries.  
I'm afraid they were quite drunk  
on the wine of living.

## *The Dog That Couldn't Bark*

The dog that couldn't bark  
was born in a fallout shelter.  
Last century, last millennia,  
the dog that couldn't bark  
lost its bite in an industrial accident –  
long before progress  
assured the injured of fair recompense.  
Time, however, means little  
in this little backyard of the Universe.  
It's not all water bowls and licked haunches.  
Life is about the celebration of the senses.

The dog that couldn't bark  
tried barking once but didn't enjoy it.  
A stick came out. A boot. A flyswatter.  
Somebody's god rolled up a newspaper,  
threatening to restore nature's balance,  
investing in terror from a position of power.  
'Wag your tail.' Its former master demanded.  
'Shake a paw.' 'Roll over.' 'Play dead.'  
But only the finest leaders command respect.

The dog that couldn't bark  
was heavily into petting, panting deeply.  
The moon came up and it sat alone.  
Merciless teasing from the neighbour's cat  
and the dog uttered nothing more than a low growl,  
never one for blandishments or self-aggrandizement.  
Poor thing, always at the end of its rope...

But why, you may or may not be wondering,  
can't the dog bark: is it by choice or by design?  
Perhaps it's had its vocal cords cut  
in an act of revenge or a time of war.  
It might be the dog enjoys the quiet life,  
concluding that it's wisest to keep one's counsel.  
Silence may be its only option  
in a dominion of brandished leashes  
and choke-chain collars.



## *Investigating Fuck*

“Fuck You!” ricochets off the taxi  
and bolts the evening in place

Even this late, slamming doors are louder than gunshots  
like the first “Fuck You” that cracked heaven,  
hurled us children from our celestial songs  
and turned the stars to beggars

The word itself lingers on like a hinge or an axle  
To Fuck:  
*To commune while maintaining an intractable sense of otherness*

It is the secret seed of what we call the world,  
though we ought not speak it much more here,  
not because it is profane, but because we  
are so precariously profane,  
and need the word to maintain our condition

The word hides  
Its rage won't tolerate inspection  
Its self-sabotage won't withstand scrutiny

It is a battery gathering energy,  
a cocoon of scaffolding around a transformation  
that can only mature in the shade

And I am haunted by the “Fuck You”  
that set me reeling,  
haunted by the “Fuck You”  
that set me free

## Reasons

Screams echo through the tattered village.  
Yet he ignores all of the noise  
marches on, and continues to pillage.  
The innocent are divided, men, women, and boys.

They dispose of the old, collect the young.  
Smoke swirls, scorching his lungs,  
he remembers being on the other side of the gun.

But that was before he was robbed of all hope.  
Before he toked just to cope  
with the loss of a father, a mother, and most importantly, his brother.

Now it was different, he had changed.  
He was a *man*, with a rifle on his waist and a command in his brain.

At least that's what he thought was the case.  
When in reality  
the only thing different are the cuts on his face.  
He isn't a man from the loss of his family.  
He is a pawn in a game played by an oppressive man.  
Without help in a desolate land.

His name is Azubuike.  
He is eleven years old.  
And he is a child soldier  
forced to execute the orders he is told.

Still that's not the worst part  
because the worst part  
is the fact that our savage society has no heart.

See, there aren't enough resources there  
for countries to care.  
So we might as well leave these kids to themselves,  
close this scary book and put it back on the shelves.

## ***Oblomov***

This morning I woke thinking of Oblomov.  
A 19th century Russian Count  
He refused to leave his house, refused to leave  
his bed. Believed in nothing. Wanted nothing.  
Got nothing. In short, a nihilist.

It was a story I had read while studying  
in Paris. And as I stand at the sink shaving,  
this Russian aristocrat's image hangs in my mind.

Perhaps it was too much Sartre and Camus  
But I identified with this Russian and his malaise.  
I smiled into the mirror. I have a case  
of rampaging Oblomovism.  
I thought at the time we had things in common.  
Both nauseated by each day's banalities,  
both filled with a rational dislike for existence,  
both feeling a conscious self loathing.  
Each dead at times.

So the image of Oblomov ruminating  
about the pointlessness of his life  
burns in my mind. Confined in self-exile.  
Is there nothing he wants, needs?  
Yes!. There is Love.  
From behind imported windows built in France,  
time was running out.  
"Dimitri, he cries, "bring the carriage.  
And for the love of God, hurry man."  
Feverish--- flushed---away he flies for love!

Unfortunately for Oblomov---the Countess  
of his romantic dreams is quite fickle hearted.  
And to be plain she has a carnal appetite, a real taste  
for young lieutenants.

I cut my lip with the razor.  
My blood soaks the Kleenex,  
as I remember---it was a naked poet  
who told me: "a paranoid is simply  
a man with all the facts."  
I linger on this thought.

Love & illusions of love did-in Oblomov.  
After this final disillusionment, he returned to his

country estate. There he grew old,  
quarreling obtusely with his  
overly inbred servants.  
And with a revolver under his pillow,  
never quits his bed, as he  
counted out the remainder of his days.

I leave my apartment.  
Drive the Harbor Freeway,  
it's clear I can't afford  
the luxury of suffering from  
Oblomovism,  
truculent servants,  
even romantic love.

But like Oblomov,  
I grow older.

More empty.

I check my revolver,  
it's loaded  
... the safety's off. . .



## ***Fine Haired Sons-of-Bitches***

Willie Sutton when asked why he robbed banks  
simply replied, “because that’s where the money is.”

Bonny & Clyde were a little more complex---murky.  
Consumed by sexual failures—flirting with death.

Butch Cassidy and Sundance---asking then--- the question  
we ask of them now, “Who are those guys?”

Black Bart the robber-poet  
left poems in exchange for stolen cash.

“I’ve labored long and hard for bread  
For honor and for riches  
But on my corns you’ve too long tread,  
You fine haired sons-of-bitches.”

Why had Joaquin Murrieta tried to right the wrongs  
of Americans stealing Spanish land grants?

Stepping out of another century  
Highwayman in lace & silver buckles.  
Stand and deliver!  
Down comes a chest of golden Sovereigns!  
Everyone pays.  
Except attractive ladies.

Today Enron types are not called BRIGANDS  
but Vice Presidents for internet infidelity,  
or a CEO in Coitus.Com  
These corporate criminals jack-up prices  
SELLING swamp land as real estate,  
flood insurance in the desert,  
education as if it too weren’t propaganda,  
coffins designed with a view & a cell phone,  
political correctness as if it weren’t oppression.

Thanks---but no thanks!  
I’ll take my bank robbers as robbers!  
My crooks clearly marked “crooks”.  
No secrets--No legerdemain--No hypocrisy.  
Something plainspoken. MAYBE EVEN. . .  
“Howdy folks—this here is a bank robbery.  
Kindly reach for the sky!”

## ***Compassion***

African woman of a dry lonesome village,  
crowded by grey stony mountains,  
Rises early in the morning, to prepare a warm breakfast,  
the children are still asleep, Oh the young joyful fountains,  
She tightens her black headscarf,  
walking barefoot to a gum tree forest,  
silver water dew drops on green blades of grass,

Grey fog in an invisible atmosphere,  
the white sheep are bleating, the brown cows are mooing,  
She gathers the dry firewood, nearby a cracked muddy hut  
and lights a furious fire of blue and orange flames,  
beats the yellow corn on concrete,  
using a long weighty iron beater,  
until the corn is pure soft grains,

She pours the grain inside a three legged black pot,  
stirring the porridge with a brown thick wooden spoon,  
the chickens echo with a cuckoo, waking the children up,  
Oh the young and innocent minds,  
Yes the children have awoken,  
not by the sound of a bell ringing, but a mother's dining,  
a mother's porridge with a caramel smell.

## *A Three Penny Apology*

Don't watch the news; it will make you cry  
And give your heart a big black eye.  
Deny their truths and you'll be free. You know  
The drug is really me. So take me. I am the drug.

In the fortress of no it always snows  
As seen through Three Penny eyes. Go there.  
Pick the daffodils that bloom in the frozen  
Ground in February amid gigantic glaciers.

Don't give your heart a big black eye.  
Let Kant and Kierkegaard lament:  
The cement oozing over the dock isn't cement,  
Perhaps the shadow of some lurking fiend.

Ages roll past on eight millimeter film, harden  
Then flake, flake and catch fire in ballrooms  
That we commend to the chastened grip of glucose:  
The cement oozing over the dock isn't cement.

As if foretold, there is a likeness—Jenny Diver  
As diva with long diaphanous gown flowing  
In Antarctic wind. One supposes that is why  
The phrases get utterly twined and confused.

The phrases get utterly twined and confused:  
Macky for MacHeath when Bobby Darin sings  
“Mack the Knife” in the camellia-filled bower  
In the middle of winter heavy with greasepaint.

In Placerville there is a hangman's saloon  
Where outside from a pole hangs a stuffed effigy  
Of a man with a noose around his stretched neck:  
The phrases get utterly twined and confused.

In the middle of winter heavy with greasepaint  
We search for the old tree from which they claim  
Criminals were hanged. It is said to yet exist  
Beneath the saloon, but we're unable to locate it.

Once the purse strings are loosened we're able to view  
That gargantuan chasm lined with freshest daisies.  
There sheep graze on the grasses of glorious dreams  
In the middle of winter heavy with greasepaint.

Consider those trumpets that stretch and yawn across  
The frost-stiffened stage. Dizzy Gillespie's cheeks puffed,  
Loaded with London fog, about to explode. Ella Fitzgerald  
Almost forgotten the words. Could Mack the Knife be near?

In the kingdom of no there is a great wall  
Made of marble that spans many continents.  
But it isn't a wall at all, because those who say no  
Haven't the authority to deem it so.

Hey wait a minute! MacHeath has just  
Removed the noose from his foetid neck.  
So what can this portend--clear sailing?  
Ample breeze to usher the ship safely to port?

In the field of glorious dreams where sheep graze  
The question becomes, what is this sound?  
Is it square or round? And is it advisable  
That we follow it down the abandoned mine shaft?

It matters not say Suky Tawdry and ol' Lucy Brown.  
The result is invariably the same. The truth painful,  
So it matters not whether that sound is square  
Or round. What's lost is lost and will never be found.

## ***Kaffee Kafka***

Not believing anymore begins with waking  
one morning muddled, in desperate need of a cup of coffee  
and having to remind yourself of each small step  
in the making of it. The rubric shaping the easy-mindless ritual  
has been misplaced, displaced, lost. Every movement  
is forced and awkward. You don't know what comes next.  
And the coffee-when-it-is-finally-ready doesn't taste  
right, either. Like someone else made it or someone else  
is tasting it and reporting the sensation telepathically,  
except there is a bad connection and the coffee has lost  
its essential quality of being-what-it-has-always-been.  
And amazed you wonder: If my morning coffee has become something else,  
what about everything? What can be trusted anymore? It is like  
the appearance of a small crack in the universe through which  
everything is slowly leaking out but first,  
those things you believed you knew to be true.



## *Not of Your Deserving*

i

You have that lucky complacency of time and place  
which is not of your or anyone's deserving,  
which comes from some unknown god's will or  
some part of God's unknown will. So be it.

ii

Time waits for everyone. Time the tide  
that carries everything to itself.

iii

Memory approximates the past. Imagination conjures one future  
or another. Present indwells the muscled upwelling  
of imagination and memory. Eternity  
is all things considered.

iv

The mountains are blue this time of year. Peepers call  
from the greening woods. The air is cool  
and breathing-deep delicious. Anyone  
who experiences these things is fortunate.

## *As If Oblivion*

The only thing, I figure, that can't be taken away is the past.  
Even if a person is erased, that person, all,  
will have been.

Her past, in bits and pieces, will then belong to others. They  
glean the leftovers, looking for things of great value  
and juicy scandalous parts which

are gathered-in to what they will have been.  
Even in a glance, by happenstance

remembered, the living, having died,  
remain.

It is an ongoing story  
and we don't know how it ends.

## ***In the Ambience***

Crest-cries spread in the flux of cellular hope. The small ribs of a feather fill with afternoon sun, exuding haloes of subatomic variables.

A slim chance mints comprehensions in the camera-phoned city, as heaviness presses down. Mallards descend quick to arteries of back-water sloughs. They lift into air and land as if it weren't anything, muscling the self into breath, new energy under the wing.

In a gallery, people peer into the photograph of an ancestor with a grip on the overturned boat. Holding the moment steady, the root of the sun cannot be seen from the Hubble.

Where the void lobs lightning into the gene pool, soaked as it is with passion and fear, offshore rain sharpens its draw where the story's out of our hands.

Urgency sweeps in with light, refracting down to a tiniest. Reeds at the lake have dragonflies flying luminous flutes of their spines. Of the viable composite in sleep-dive swoon, the lips fill in matter as in mind, riding at depths that break around us on waking.

If it does anything at night, the overpopulation expands. The hour ticks faster in poor villages on wrists of a river, unmasking as unequal distribution, bearing unfinished identity.

The scent of soil goes back to the earliest mammal mother, and out into the future rock-bottom shuck of mythical unthinking.

## Seligman, AZ

In Seligman, Arizona, lies the magic spot  
Harmonic convergence, ancient aliens  
Collective unconscious  
Astral projection

My body healed, leeching energy from  
the Shá and walls of a red rock canyon  
standing in a 6' nicho in a Spanish campsite  
carved for the Body of Christ;  
grinning skulls and snakes carved surround the deathtraps  
Jesuits and turtles point the way to the Zuni Witch Murder

Ciguri healers and sorcerers on lost plateaux  
Tarahumara  
I have come to (New) Mexico to make contact with the red earth (and rocks)  
Stone carcasses being tortured, sun signs and shadow men, crosses branded into trees  
The Mountain of Signs is real, carved by the Spanish as Treasure Trails  
to Apache Gold and Zuni Silver the Kingman Mines;  
The Land of the Magi Kings  
Artaud passed out during the peyote dance  
I don't care about your revolution, I care about mine

Did Artaud see the 15' high knight with his arm raised, carved into the cliff face  
or the Renaissance hat?

Muzak and Acid Rock  
*One pill makes you larger, and one pill makes you small*  
*Go ask Alice, when she's ten feet tall*  
*When the men on the chessboard get up and tell you where to go*  
*And you've just had some kind of mushroom, and your mind is moving low;*  
Three horseman like chessboard Knights, backpacked peasants, and poodles mark the trails:  
two legs and four and the king's highway

I-40, The Mother Road  
Goa 2 Ibiza 2 Vegas 2 Koh Phangan  
Trance EDM Moon Rain XS  
ritual dancing sleep deprivation;  
Szechuan chili endorphins  
floating above the floor, high like Apache Chief  
looking down on sexy bodies

Tao is the Ultimate Buddha Bar  
Claud Challe & Daniel Masson's Morning Fall  
the ultimate chillout room  
When I die, leave my ashes at Milos  
and my ch'jjdii at the branch, so I can chase them all to hell!

## ***Poetry at the Burger King***

Where is it? It's not here.  
All these plastic chairs and tables  
are empty. Nothing but a lot of  
dead meat here, and this associate  
behind the counter mumbling: *Welcome  
to Burger King, may I take your order?*  
Mine is the only car outside in the sad  
parking lot ringed by a handful  
of gimpy trees, a blue dumpster in the corner.  
Beyond that, the highway where I  
came from, and where I will return.  
If your daily life seems poor, said Rainer  
Maria Rilke, do not blame *it*. Blame yourself.  
Tell yourself you are not poet enough  
to call forth its riches. I'm fingering a salty  
corner of my empty French fries pocket,  
licking my fingers, looking out the window  
and telling myself I am not poet enough,  
when I notice two kids running, sort of  
galloping, sort of hopscotching across  
the sad parking lot ahead of their parents  
and into the Burger King. They are  
very happy to be here, this little girl and boy,  
jumping up and down now at the counter,  
dancing to the song of the associate  
which wasn't a song until their dancing  
made it so. There are so many riches  
on the menu, they can't make up their minds.  
And while their parents order they play  
duck duck goose, touching all the tables,  
and all the chairs, the girl behind the boy,  
following him, copying him, and laughing  
louder and louder, because it's all so wonderful  
here at the Burger King, which they seem to have  
all to themselves, except for one man in a booth  
smiling, writing something down on a piece of paper.





image by David Thompon  
ninemilephoto.com

## *The Place of Literature*

Mr. Gordon was perhaps a little tipsy  
at the awards ceremony, perhaps a little  
scornful of the football coach's ode  
to yardage, the basketball coach's  
paeons to the MVPs, the music teacher's touting  
her flautist, the science teacher his  
scion of Einstein. So when Mr. Gordon  
got up to give the literary magazine award  
to me, he lurched a little drunkenly, swayed  
a little imperceptibly, steeply rocking in his  
moment on stage. Not to be outdone,  
he said in his opinion I was probably  
the greatest poet writing in English anywhere today—  
and a gasp went up from the high school auditorium,  
then murmurs of admiration and disbelief and  
mutiny spread through the audience as I rose  
to accept Mr. Gordon's slightly exaggerated  
handshake. Then he kissed me on the mouth,  
and raised my hand above my head in the manner  
of referees and prizefighters, grinning glaringly  
over at the football coach, and nodding trochaically.

## *Scholars*

Sometimes I feel like a freak  
rooted and deserted in the grit  
of search and research, of ground  
and soul, a many-armed ocotillo,  
long, thin, fading green bones  
with scarlet blooms fossilized  
in mid bloodburst, tendrils  
crying to an uncertain sky,  
waiting for the sharp edge of lightning  
or simply a crack of light. On the horizon  
I can sense the streaks of reason  
as you shape-shift by, but I can't  
keep up with you, can't anticipate  
your synaptic trails. Staying faithful  
to the foundations of your work  
when isolation from you penetrates  
so deeply that madness drives me  
to the desert, inspires me to clutch  
the barbed hooks of a barrel cactus  
or curl up on some shallow ledge  
to dry out from my heat,  
sun burning relief from the effects  
of your brilliance and the envy within me  
like venom. The sound of a sidewinder  
hiss-slips by, rattles my shadowland,  
and I know that soon instead of dreaming  
of being you, I'll drift to sleep forever  
as myself, frustrated flesh just clutter  
and dust—a feast for buzzards or beetles—  
falling away from your skeletal concepts;  
let them be released for some other  
more conscientious coyote.

## *Riding My Bike to the Library*

I've just an hour and a half before  
my wife returns from getting the kids' haircuts,  
but I could pedal all day through this quirky  
farming village, down the goat trail,  
past the old train station,  
up Cardiac Hill,  
toward the bottling company  
chuggling round the clock  
with tractor trailers, out the North Road,  
orchards buzzing with their inchoate harvest.

Today, though, I'm not out for air,  
basking in the rare freedom  
from domestic stress.  
I yearn this moment to be ensconced  
among the spines of the most sagacious minds,  
the novels that challenge,  
philosophies that probe,  
poems that hum with dactylic flow.

In a previous life I might have been  
a medieval monk pondering the judgment  
over a doctrinal tome,  
or a Tibetan youth steeped  
in Buddha dharma.  
A room with books is all I need  
for nirvana. Call it heaven or Shangri-La.  
Call it anything you like.

My bike is slower on the return.  
The added weight makes my thighs burn.  
I don't think I've ever seen that bald old man  
resembling Socrates on his porch before,  
his eyes shut, lips curled around  
"Blue Moon of Kentucky"  
filling the hollow with radio.  
I wasn't aware there were so many wild flowers  
nodding to the breeze. Normally beer cans  
in the dirt are all I see.

If I pump a little harder  
maybe I'll make it home in time  
to settle into my deck recliner  
and the first chapter.  
If really auspicious, maybe I'll doze  
off and dream about my next life  
as a librarian.

## ***Music Appreciation***

He asked them  
to take the music outside,  
listen as they held it toward the sky,  
let the wind rattle its stems,  
or place the sheet against an ear  
to hear a tune  
through the hollow of its shell.  
He told them to jog  
the parameters of the staves,  
walk the winding road of its clef  
and imagine living there.  
Perhaps they could drop a feather  
upon the music's resonance,  
follow its float among the timbres,  
or ski the slopes of musical peaks,  
gliding unencumbered into its valleys,  
then thank the composer  
for varying the landscape  
when they left the lodge.  
But the class was determined  
to stalk each phrase,  
analyze chords for manipulation, cunning  
and seek the hidden form.  
They handcuffed the notes  
to the music stand,  
even flogged the melody  
with a drum mallet,  
until it whistled a meaning  
never intended.







## *Idea of Endurance*

I  
My young poet-friend, John Bolton  
reads Homer and Heaney,  
  
ties himself up in knots, ties the ends  
he thinks will bend.  
  
See how he turns in one full rotation  
to the next, seeking the truth  
  
in one night's moon,  
seeking truth in the bog-man  
  
and the clock, his forehead hardened  
against the mountain boot  
  
and time that would kick him in the face  
with warm regards. Life  
  
in a West Yorkshire sitting room  
will never suffice for a man who wades  
  
through estuaries and snow-drifts,  
forests and dykes, sails oceans  
  
and dreams in search of sacred ground  
that he might still taste  
  
the sheen on her thighs, touch her hand,  
kiss her cherry mouth.  
  
Oh we know, it's not the earth  
that demands love,  
  
gaiety and death, the undiscovered  
country at the heart of man,  
  
but men who insist on gods.  
So we move from one generation

of lovers to the next, free falling  
through years of darkness,

reminiscing as the shortened days  
reach for the sun and pass us by.

## II

Now our young student  
laughs in the face of memory,

torture, floods,  
ploughs the hardened sod,

writes his verse  
knee-deep in history,

true unto himself  
beneath the sodden branch,

beneath the Breughel sky  
like a hunter in the snow.

## ***But You Just Don't Understand***

But, you just don't understand...  
Tell me, please.  
...what it's like to be a Black man.  
I concede – I haven't had that experience.  
What I do understand is  
what it's like to be  
a poor, White minority  
in a Black majority –  
and live in a country where Black men  
were given the right to vote before White women.

But, you just don't understand...  
Tell me, please.  
...what it's like to come from the inner city.  
I concede – I haven't had that exact experience.  
What I do know is  
what it's like to live in a series of small towns,  
one in which our family was outcast  
because we weren't the "right" religion,  
and I did live in an inner city –  
a city where I heard a man plead for mercy  
right outside my window,  
a gunshot, and then silence.

But you just don't understand...  
Tell me, please.  
...what it's like to not have a father.  
I concede – I haven't had that exact experience.  
However, I do know what it's like  
to have an alcoholic father  
and emotionally distant parents –  
to not feel the hug of a parent until later in life.

But you just don't understand...  
Tell me, please.  
...what it's like to live in fear and terror.  
I concede – I haven't had that ongoing experience.  
However, I have been attacked  
by a roommate's boyfriend  
who tried to kill us –  
and was mugged by a Black boy  
on a tropical island.

But you just don't understand...  
Tell me, please.  
...what it's like to only fail in school.  
I concede – I haven't had that experience.  
What I do know is  
you have made it this far,  
that there are people  
here who want to help you, and  
that others in similar circumstances  
have survived  
and even thrived.  
You decide.



## *Counselor's Office*

The girl in high-tops  
rolls her eyes,  
says she regrets switching off  
the radio on the shelf.  
The woman behind the counselor's door  
lets go, voice reverberating  
into the waiting room.  
I compliment the girl on her shoes,  
nod toward my daughter's,  
the hand-drawn flowers and caricatures.  
"I used to draw on mine," the girl says,  
"in high school, but I don't have time now."  
She's maybe two years older than my daughter.  
"I hate them new and clean,  
so I rub them in the dirt and grass  
before I wear them."  
The counselor's door opens.  
A tiny woman with downcast eyes flees.  
The girl's gaze meets my daughter's  
and she snickers.  
The counselor appears,  
and the girl rises,  
pausing long enough  
to switch on the radio.  
When the door closes,  
my daughter kneels before the radio  
to dial in a station that satisfies,  
her low-tops tapping time  
until the counselor returns.

**Full**

When I die I can't hang around. I mean  
I have to go to Heaven or Hell to  
live, if you call it living, me being  
dead. But in Sunday School Miss Hooker says  
that if I'm good, she means while I'm alive,  
that I'll get to go to Heaven when I  
die and dwell forever but if I'm bad  
then Hell's the place and there's nothing there but  
fire and brimstone and eternal torment  
from Satan and his band of bad angels.  
So after class this morning I strolled up  
to Miss Hooker to tell her how I feel,  
that I don't really want to die at all,  
I'm happy with life the way it is now,  
and that my idea of an after life  
is that there shouldn't be one at all, just  
life that goes on without winding down so that  
folks can live as long as Methuselah  
--longer, a lot longer, as long as God  
--and instead of dying just lie down and  
rest and then wake up again to be as  
good as new, just older, if you can be  
older in a world in which you'd never  
die, I haven't quite figured that out yet.  
Miss Hooker said that I had *good ideas*  
but that facts are facts and I can't change them  
just because I may have a better way.  
She said that if nobody ever died  
but babies went on being born then where  
would all the people live? She's got a point  
but I said that any god who could keep  
us alive forever should be able  
to find a place for everyone to live.  
Then she said that I was just tempting God  
and would probably live to regret it  
or not, that God could strike me down even  
if I'm only ten years old for thinking



that I know better than He does what's-what  
or should be. Then I went home with her words  
echoing in my ears: *I'll pray for you,*  
*Gale, I'll pray for you.* When I saw Mother  
and Father in the kitchen for lunch I  
asked, *Why is it that people have to die?*  
*Why go through all the trouble of being*  
*born and growing up just to have to croak?*  
Father answered, It's a fair question, and  
Mother said, *Yes.* And then we ate our fill.

***Oh, Leonard***

The creases that fall  
From your mid nose  
To the outskirts of your  
Knowing smile  
Give me hope that  
With age  
Comes wisdom  
And with wisdom  
Comes peace

## Review of Rich Murphy's *Americana*

Winner of Prize Americana. Press Americana, 2014. \$15.00 paper, ISBN 0982955871.

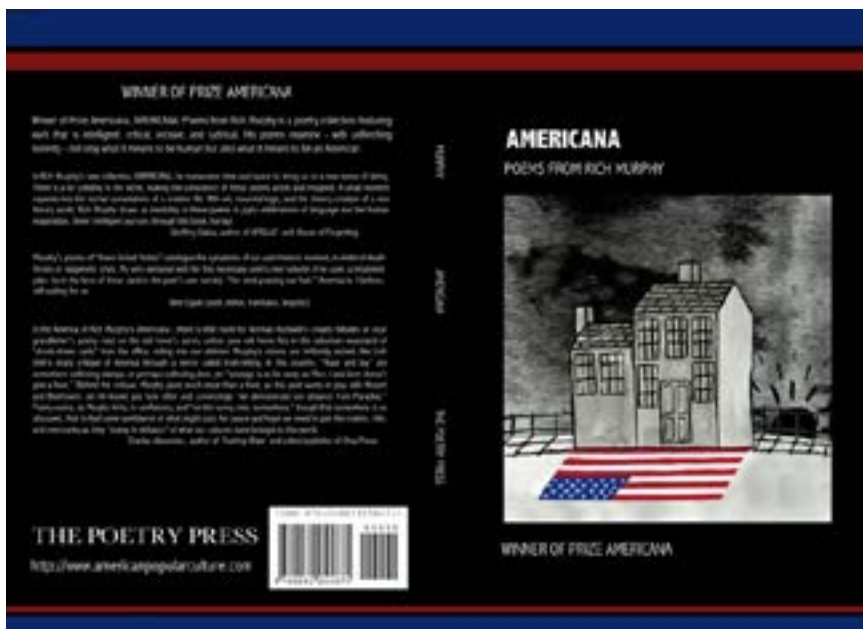


illustration by Bartek Walicki - bartekwalicki.net

review by Erin O'Neill Aremendarez & Betty Fleming Hendricks

On the cover of Rich Murphy's second book of poems, *Voyeur*, Derek Walcott appraised his poetry thus: "It takes aim." That is certainly the case with *Americana*; according to Murphy in a recent *Word Riot* interview (Hoenigman, 2009), *Americana* began as a "search for American culture." Apparently, it developed from there into what can be read as a brash polemic against postmodern American pop culture, capitalism, and materialism.

From the very first poem, Murphy throws the gauntlet down in his portrayal of a disjointed wasteland of contemporary American bloat and apathy. "Western State Penitentiary" imprisons America's native sons from birth to death in a deterministic, violent landscape of false promise where, setting the mythos of the entire civilization, only the imperialist rapes and murders with impunity, denying any hope of equity or a fair chance for those "entering the prison yard/by way of the womb/and leaving only as the fertilizer/for another civilization. . ." (1-4).

Immediately after, capitalism's inevitable social injustices are reified in the second poem "Anthem," which echoes lines from the well-known and much-loved "America the Beautiful":

From the mountains of wheat  
to unmined coasts of milk and money  
thoughts are empty of wailing bellies.

The air is grimy with snacks and booze  
on the fat that belches townhouse and ranch  
and movement cripples a creeping hand  
while rocketing chains and expensive pain. (1-7)

Murphy focuses his poetic lens on greed and indifference, maladjusted American ideals perpetually spewing from urban billboards, frenetic commercials, blockbuster films, and political ads. In "American Dream," the blame for blind indifference is placed on "the home movie of the fenced-in green/surrounding a house of sticks" (1-2) where "too few lumps of clay from the land of the free/find their way to a hand of the brave" (15-16).

It's tempting to read *Americana* as an overgeneralized rant stereotyping all Americans, from the impoverished to the working class to the wealthy, dismissing us all as a nation of paralyzed consumers sleepwalking like lemmings from cradle to grave. Upon closer examination, the book becomes a richly textured exploration of a particular vein of the American psyche, the place where myth and mass media spin the mind into a sort of torpor so pervasive it becomes increasingly difficult to resist: a quick search of 150 cable channels will undoubtedly confirm this vein is alive and well in living rooms across the continent and beyond.

Hyperbole seems impossible in a land where Richmond's Monument Boulevard, characterized in Murphy's poem "Monument Boulevard Vacation," is touted on [Visitrichmondva.com](http://Visitrichmondva.com) as "the only street in America listed on the National Register of Historic Places," the place where in 1890 a statue of Robert E. Lee was unveiled before 100,000 admirers, and the inspiration for the Monument Avenue 10K race, voted on another website as "the best roadrace in the southeast!" Let's face it—we can't make this stuff up! A poet's biggest challenge, if he is Rich Murphy, is to get our attention, to get us to pause, to consider just how lost we really are, to reflect carefully upon whether or not there is anything at all to be recovered.

"And Every Day Is a Hard Day," a poem from the last section of the collection, is perhaps the truest statement of intent readers will get from Murphy's *Americana*:

**And Every Day Is a Hard Head Day**

Waiting for the new knowledge  
to sink in, I try to cut it  
with animation, but am corked  
by know-it-alls accusing me  
of thinking I know it all.

Facts, settling like stagnant puddles  
seep through the roof.  
Leaks are the only way for information  
to flood. Every shingle  
must be waterlogged  
for the people of the body.  
And to leave them behind  
is to mumble after inventing the chair.

Tomorrow any or all  
of the statements could be  
stated away for at least the time being,  
but sink your investments  
upon the next breath.  
The atmosphere, the sky,  
I send the clouds in  
to clarify the peaks of being.

Such a confession could not come from an aloof persona, but only from one genuinely concerned over the ultimate fate of American culture and indeed world civilization.

The use of a first person narrator is rare for Murphy; the first person is employed in fewer instances in *Americana* than in *Voyeur*, winner of the 2008 Givall Poetry Press Award, where, according to critic Alvin Malpaya (*Rattle*, 2010), it appears only eleven times.

As an alternative, the plural “we” gives voice to the numbed, morally paralyzed “sheeple” roaming the pages of *Americana*. For example, in “Exterior Wash,” this “we” is more invested in shiny appearances than in self-reflection:

We bless then groom our escape  
vehicles with undercoating and wax  
sealer, while sitting at the controls,  
mangy from boredom, mangled  
by our lack of reflection. (1-5)

In order to impress others, “we” have sold out, wasting not only “our” lives, but the resources of the land “we” inhabit, as subsequent stanzas make clear:

The mountains of refuse we’ve left  
behind, our trails of grime, have led  
to these attempts to cover our tracks  
with ritual and shine. Behind  
our innocence, our experience  
speeds toward the rest area. (16-11)

Every success at evading  
responsibility for landfill  
is rewarded with rust and the broken  
destination that becomes us.  
Considering every passing glare,  
we avoid the bridge abutment  
and the push and pull  
of internal combustion,  
but we are hauled away by the mirror,  
the wind praising our hair. (12-21)

Murphy’s “we” can be read a couple of ways. Is it meant to represent Murphy’s acknowledgement of his own complacency toward apocalyptic phenomena like global warming, as well as the reader’s, or is it meant to represent some zombie-like cadre of numb, apathetic caricatures helpless before the rise of Big Brother via cable TV and the Internet? However this “we” is interpreted, it is clear there will be no introspection, no interior cleansing, hence the irony of the poem’s title.

Unfortunately, in Murphy's *Americana*, there is no epiphany, no enlightenment, no awakening. The book ends with the hopeless "Now Clones," where "suckers" are endlessly born into a culture of insatiable corruption and "The point/above prime scene flashes/naked body parts its ongoing spectacle/to make lemonade from threat,/ contusion, and a sack of money" (11-15). All American institutions and segments of society, the church, the state, corporations, the military, the media, the educational system, the nuclear family, in particular the suburban bourgeoisie, are slowly burying themselves in tons of physical, psychological, and spiritual filth.

As in a post-modern novel, the reader is invited to simultaneously laugh, cry, and sigh at the spectacle, no hero in sight, no hope of individual self-actualization. Such is Murphy's nightmare, beyond Dickensian in its implications. And this is where he must use caution, for as Oscar Wilde supposedly once said, "'One must have a heart of stone to read the *death of Little Nell* without laughing.'" While no one would accuse Murphy of being overly-sentimental, his attempts to horrify may on rare occasion have the opposite effect, as in the following passages from "A Line for Whatever":

The American poet dots hamburgers  
with his blood at the drive-thru window. (1-2)

The procession of disposable families  
idles and crawls in each aerodynamic  
bragging rite of urbane grease.  
On their way to the bone yard,  
where they become the fast food  
for worms, whatever the unsuspecting  
vampires say is said in commodity, fashion. (7-13)

When he is fired or grows up,  
Anonymous ceases his offer, "French  
fries with that?" and gets his moment  
In the line citizens don't decipher. (19-22)

The clichés must certainly be deliberate (fast food families, starving poets), but the reader can't be certain whether this is self-indulgence or just another snapshot of a stultified postmodern American dream. Either way, the "fast food/for worms" is probably just too much, too maudlin to take effect (those worms are sure to get dyspepsia from such unpallatable fare).

Murphy's poetry is densely packed in the first half of the book, rich in irony and metaphor, and not necessarily as accessible as the work of some other contemporary poets. In the previously mentioned *Word Riot* interview, the poet acknowledged that some readers may become frustrated attempting to find meaning in his poems. Those who approach his work should expect to read and re-read. They should expect to encounter ambiguity and uncertainty in relation to his ironic metaphors. This effect is deliberate, as Murphy explains, "When the metaphor is broken down, the reader is left only with aporia and possibility."

Many of *Americana's* poems contain tongue-twisters that slow the mind, as in the following mouthfuls from "Viva, Viva," an early poem in the collection:

The explorers of backyards  
and entrepreneurs of suburban boredom  
vacation Las Vegas  
tangled in the safety net  
its knitters proclaim the United States. (1-5)

Try saying that three times really quickly, or this passage, from the last stanza of the poem:

The casinos' arms mine the last nickel  
From the cookie jar brokers and the nightclub  
Dancers while tumbling the amateur acrobats dry. (15-17)

There is alliteration, assonance, and enough hard consonants and stressed syllables to firmly punctuate each line. On the other hand, the collection contains some lyrical poems. For example, consider the following lines from the more pensive "In River City":

As the sky falls, you don't notice  
your deeper breath, nor your head  
more often in a cloud watching birds  
with a star in your eye. (1-4)

While none of *Americana's* poems is easily paraphrased from start to finish, the second half of the book contains more accessible poems that should satisfy those readers looking for more traceable lines of thought.

The ideas offered in *Americana* are hardly new (in fact they are depressingly omni-present), but *Americana* offers a unique treatment of these ideas; Murphy holds a mirror so close to the American face that the surface becomes a strange, new terrain, too close for familiarity.

If there is fault, it is in excess, an overabundance, perhaps the final irony, especially for millenials, impossible to shock: perhaps Murphy's point is therein proven all the more.



## Rich Murphy

Rich Murphy's credits include two other books: *The Apple in the Monkey Tree* (Codhill Press, 2008) and *Voyeur*, winner of the 2008 Gival Press Poetry Award (Gival Press). He has published six chapbooks, *Great Grandfather* (Pudding House Press), *Family Secret* (Finishing Line Press), *Hunting and Pecking* (Ahadada Books), *Rescue Lines* (Right Hand Pointing), *Phoems for Mobile Vices* (BlazeVox), and *Paideia* (Aldrich Press). Recent prose scholarship on poetics has been published in *The International Journal of the Humanities*, *Reconfigurations: A Journal of Poetry and Poetics*, *The Journal of Ecocriticism*, and *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*. Murphy has taught academic and creative writing at several colleges and universities.

