

NEW VERSE REVIEW



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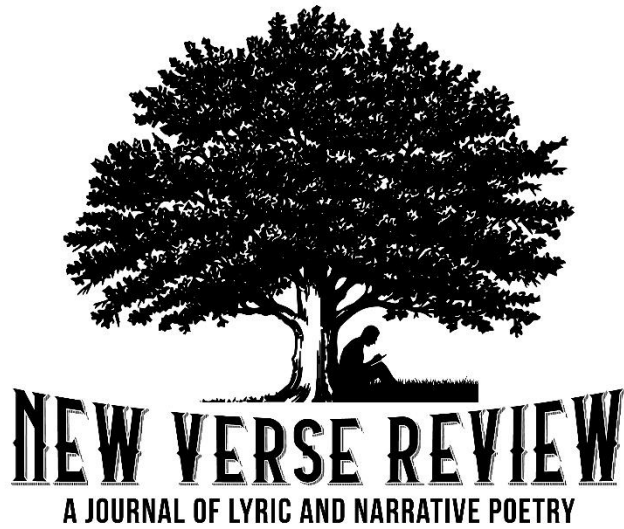
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Marly Youmans

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New Verse Review: A Journal of Lyric and Narrative Poetry features work that renews the ancient affinities among poetry, song, and story.



New Verse Review 2.4: Halloween

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2025

Issue Edited by Steven Knepper and Zina Gomez-Liss

Contents

Marly Youmans, “The Night Float”	1
Hilary Biehl, “Danse Macabre”	2
T. O. Brandon, “Universal Monsters”	3
A. Z. Foreman, “Odin in the Gallows-Wind”	6
Katie Hartsock, “Scylla Names Her Dogs”	7
Vince Gotera, Two Sonnets from a Novel-in-Poems.....	9
Luca D’Anselmi, “Relic”	11
Jesse Keith Butler, from “The Voyage of Saint Brendan”	12
Meredith Bergmann, “The Witch of Grove Street”	14
Brian Palmer, “Ode to Words to a Ghost on Halloween”	15
Angela Alaimo O’Donnell, “The Reader”	17
Kelly Scott Franklin, “Romantic Lines Written on the West Yorkshire Moors”	18
Liz Cambra, “San Francisco’s Fourth Female Detective Speaks”	19
Elijah Perseus Blumov, “Spelunker”	21
Nicole Yurcaba, “It is Apple-Picking Season & You Cannot Help”	23
David Southward, “To Autumn, the Stripper”	25
Timothy Kleiser, “Kentucky Katabasis, or Friday at the Wildcat”	27
Sunil Iyengar, “Southern Gothic”	28
J. M. Jordan, “Incident on the St. John’s River”	30
Mattie Quesenberry Smith, “Autumn, Without Her Healing Hands”	34
Helena Feder, “Camouflaged”	35
John Poch, “Lunatic”	36
Jared Carter, “November”	37
Contributor Bios.....	38

Marly Youmans

The Night Float

The *trionfo*, pulled by oxen, was a very large *carro*, black all over and painted with the bones of the dead and with white crosses. On top of the *carro* was a huge figure of Death with a scythe.

—Giorgio Vasari

Enormous axles churned the wagon wheels
That like the wide but low-roofed tomb on top
Were stained to black, while seven golden seals
Dangled from a jet-dyed leather strop.

Trembling on the shaft between the oxen,
A wooden angel clasped a gleaming horn.
Death scattered smiles from jaws smeared with toxin;
Each rose around his neck was slashed by a thorn.

When torches lit the riders bearing skulls
On crooked staves, and the nags that might be dead,
The city shrieked like rabbits, shrilled like gulls,
And keened like wolves, exulting in its dread.

The horsemen's plainsong shivered through the smoke;
The oxen groaned and strained against the yoke.

Hilary Biehl

Danse Macabre

A tritone on the violin. A thin
white hand on which the wedding band won't stay
leads to an arm, then to a lipless grin—
an invitation to the cabaret.

Marquee lights glitter. The celebrities
are stunned as we are. Remnants of their gray
hair cling like cobweb to the limbs of trees
as each of them is nimbly whirled away.

A politician waltzes stiffly past,
half-leaning on his partner. Birds of prey
are lazily appraising us. At last
the orchestra picks up the Dies Irae.



T.O. Brandon

Universal Monsters

I. Frankenstein

There is no body but body, no soul
But voltage-wracked neuronal stalks, no life
But matter coiled in damp entropic folds,
No secret not a subject for the knife.

I dreamed I made a monument to man,
From bone and sinew stitched, through art refined,
A living body built on Reason's plan,
Mind's mirror in a self-created mind.

I woke to find these Arctic floes, these wild
And iterating sheets of ice, and heard,
As if from ice, that voice: my voice, my child,
The brilliant, cruel, and patchwork thing I made:

*"Prometheus, who mocks the soul's design,
Your monster lives. Your voice, your name, are mine."*

II. Dracula

Because I cannot taste the blood, I need
The blood, because I cannot bleed, I thirst
For blood, because I cannot live, I breed
In blood the old contagion's carnal curse:
The self-consuming self-regard so vast
That it withholds its image from the mirror,
Yet seeks itself in every mirror, and casts
Long shadows out to feast on lust and fear.

This hunger makes a wasteland of my life,
An emptiness inscribed with fang and blood.
Immured within the castle of myself,
I only feel those things so pure they flood
The barren, ingrown deserts of my loss:
The greenwood stake, the rising sun, the Cross.

III. The Mummy

My wealth made all arrangements: mourners cried,
The priests filled carved canopic jars and bade
The salt preserve my flesh, the gods provide
Eternal life beyond the pyramid.

My slaves would fall to dust, my strangled wife
Would worship me as wisps of hair and bone,
While I, immortal, ruled from Pharaoh's throne:
A god on earth, a god in afterlife.

A man who seemed Osiris turned me back.
He pointed to the scales that told my doom,
Then cursed this golden crypt to endless dark.

Know this, who claims the treasure of my tomb,
Who seeks immortal singularity:
You find it here. You find hell. You find me.

A. Z. Foreman

Odin in the Gallows-Wind

Nine nights I hung, and no one cut me down.
The wind unspooled my breath like woven thread.
I watched the stars ignite the ash-tree's crown
and learned the speech that only speaks the dead.
The tongue I drank was neither strange nor kin—
it burned like nettle-broth inside my brain.
Its words were antler-etched in runes. Its din
held swords of sound and silence soaked with pain.
The dead men gave me gifts beyond their telling:
the mead of madness, and the mind of crows.
A wolf awaits. The womb of fate is swelling.
A spear of ash through all nine kingdoms goes.
I gave one eye to see the shape of things.
Now crows are crowned, and fire fathers kings.

Katie Hartsock

Scylla Names Her Dogs

How will we eat,
I wondered like
a woman, the first
to wake that morning
after, and without
thinking, within
what a lonely body
spiraled with strange
absences
and stranger excess,
I pet one's head.
To me it was
not me, but when
she slightly stirred,
her jaw a bit lax,
and leaned her ear
towards my touch,
I felt the comfort
and the satisfaction, too—
a scratch that reveals
the itch. I'd assumed
they all were she's:
risen from my thighs,
so fierce at first
they would have bitten
each other's ears
or my unhinged hands
but for some instinct
they'd feel the sting.
Now all our teeth
taste a single hunger.
I did not want
a lover; I'll never
run or have to run again.

Now it is we
who chase, though that
first day we were a mess.
I was trying to get us
to some vague idea
of cave, and swimming
did not go well.
One got hit
in the face with a wave
and choked, and whimpered.
And I said *It'll be*
OK, come on.
Now we glide—
nautiline,
lemuriate,
intertidal,
abyssal, pelagic.
Gorgo has the bloodhound nose:
if she sniffs,
something's coming.
Missy, my half-wolf
keeps watch all night
and sleeps while the rest
of us work the day.
Chariot leans
his shepherd's head
against my belly
button, just
where fur pivots to skin,
gazing up at me
with such eyes, am
I crazy or do
they look like mine?

Vince Gotera

These two sonnets are from a novel-in-poems about two aswang (mythical Philippine monsters) who fall in love—she a vampire, he a werebeast who shapeshifts into a huge dog—and try to live like normal people, in plain sight. The two lovers marry and move to the US, where they birth a son. At this point in the novel, the husband Santiago has passed away. In this poem, Clara is reminiscing about the time before when she was pregnant and her husband and she had an unusual Halloween experience.

Happy Halloween Surprise

—Pushkin sonnet

Clara lay in bed recalling
Tiyago in much happier times,
memories that had her smiling,
pranks and little harmless crimes.

One Halloween when she was pregnant
the two imagined themselves as parents
taking their little one on the streets
of San Francisco: trick or treat.

Tiyago shifted into his canine
form, as big as a Great Dane,
and out they went, dog and dame,
taking a stroll in the moonshine.

Laughing children gathered around
in costume, petting her lovely hound.

In the second poem, Clara and Santiago's son Malcolm (himself an aswang) celebrates Halloween unlike his schoolmates trick-or-treating.

Flight on All Hallows' Eve

Malcolm, at the close of his first decade,
strolled twilight sidewalks of San Francisco.
On his chest, ensconced in a yellow shield,
a bright S—red blood of HesuKristo—

balanced by a tight suit of blue sapphire,
soft velvet tints of the Virgin Mother.
A boy's homemade costume for Halloween,
the ultimate war hero: Superman.

But our boy was not playing trick or treat.
From underneath Malcolm's billowing cape
blossomed moth wings. Malcolm slowly climbed up
into clear sky, with soft fuzzy wingbeats.

Like his Mom and Dad on their honeymoon,
he soared, glided, over darkling ocean.

Luca D'Anselmi

Relic

I saw the widow kneel by the altar rail,
take a severed finger from a handkerchief,
and press it to her lips. Then the old priest
intoned a gospel: "In those days a girl
taught Peter how to read by writing verse
about a fisherman who wouldn't die
although for weeks he was left crucified
feet up, until his chest grew thick with grass.
And from his mouth a spring of water flowed
out over his eyes, babbling down to fill
dusty cisterns at the foot of the hill.
Mouthing through syllables, Peter didn't know
the verses prophesied that his great love
would never fail." But when the widow put
the finger down beside her on the seat
I thought it twitched, and then I saw it move
on the cushion like an inchworm, and I knew
that what they say about the saints is true.

Jesse Keith Butler

From “The Voyage of Saint Brendan”

Translated from the Middle English text in the South English Legendary (lines 401-438)

These holy men sailed forth, whatever way God’s favour fell.
Because God’s grace was with them, they all traveled very well.

One time, when they were sailing through a tempest, a prodigious
sea creature started chasing them. The thing was huge and hideous.
The beast spewed burning foam out from its mouth and nose. Each blast
sent reeking spume above the ship—so high it cleared the mast.
Ungainly as a house, the monster barrelled after them
astonishingly fast, the whole time belching brimstone phlegm.
The frightened monks cried to Saint Brendan—also to Christ Jesus—
“Please bring us help! That monstrous beast is just about to seize us!”
And when the monks had given up all hope of their survival,
another fish swam from the west and smote into his rival
with such sea-splitting speed that the great monster’s ghastly carcass
was ripped apart. Three fragments drifted down into the darkness.
The fish swerved through the sea and swam back swiftly westward. They
gave joyful thanks to Jesus as they watched it swim away.

From there, these holy men sailed on the sea so long that hunger
set in as their supplies ran out. When they could last no longer,
a little bird flew to them very swiftly, bringing them
a branch with grapes of perfect redness bunched on every stem.
He brought them to Saint Brendan, who received the grapes with laughter.
They feasted and had food enough for fourteen nights thereafter.
But when the grapes were eaten up, their hunger was renewed
until at last they saw an island where they could find food.
That island swayed with lovely trees—each tree so full of grapes
that all their branches hung down to the ground like heavy drapes.
Saint Brendan landed on the island and, with no delays,
he filled their ship so full of grapes they lasted forty days.

Soon after that a monstrous griffin flew across the waves
and pounced upon their boat as if to plunge them to their graves.
The monks cried out in fear and thought their deaths were all assured.
Then something else came flying up—it was the little bird
they knew, come from the Paradise of Birds straight on a course
to intercept the monster. The bird struck it with such force
that the griffin flailed back from their vessel—gladdening Saint Brendan.
The bird in one blow gouged out both the beast's eyes to the tendon.
The eyeballs plopped into the sea, soon followed by the griffin.

There's nothing that can kill the man whom God wants to keep living.

Meredith Bergmann

The Witch of Grove Street

A block from school her weeping mulberry
dropped berries, reddening the clean concrete.
The tree was practically in the street.
In memory, its berries taste of glee

and daring mischief, sweet as party punch.
Erupting from her door to scatter us,
she seemed much larger than her small frame house,
and we ran gasping home to get our lunch.

But not before we called her names. “Old witch”
was probably the worst. I know she heard
and hated. We loved the weapon of the word.
We loved to cut each other with a switch

of epithet, a curse. She has no face,
in memory. The mulberry, its bare,
contorted winter branches gnarled to scare,
and its imbedded scowl, will take that place.

I see gray hair, as mine has turned. And how
a twist of woodwork fit like cobweb in
the gable of her door. She’s fast, and thin.
Why must I see her in my mirror now?

As if her tree, its gothic attributes,
are now engraved in my expression,
stripped of its sweetness, forcing me to question
how I will best protect my fragile fruits.

Brian Palmer

Ode to Words to a Ghost on Halloween

After John Keats (b. Oct. 31, 1795)

*Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!*

—William Wordsworth, “Ode to Intimations of Immortality from
Recollections of Early Childhood”

A ghost—my son in shrouds—and I, mid-fall,
 (as I, a mortal, walk along, he floats)
head homeward down a side street, Avenal
 (a Spanish word, in English “field of oats.”)
It’s Halloween, and we’re alone, out late,
 where all is dark except this haint blue street.
 The wind turns shapes to shades, and time
to dry, light whispers, but my soul and feet
 are leaden, heavy, so I lift the weight
 with words out loud and lighten them with rhyme.

In praising the awaiting, dark abyss
 for those with lives half-lived now gone to graves,
and too, of those who never found the bliss
 in understanding how, in life, love saves
us from despair and toil, I slake the gloom
 the half-moon makes that tries to take my breath;
 my words—before I’ve “glean’d my teeming brain,”
which left unsewn to wither in the tomb
 of night and leave a fallow field, like death—
 can fill the stores with reaped now ripened grain.

We pass a pond, and he imagines mirrored
 there in jointed cottonwoods that grasp
the guttering of the half-phased moon, some feared
 bone fingers reaching out, a drowning gasp,

a child snatched back into that cold, black place.
 My fear turns to praise, as it gives souls
 still gleaming new their passion and their pride
to take their lot, and as do roses, race
 to bloom, despite the quick dead ends: the holes
 filled soon with their pale petals, cut and dried;

and drives those working long their rows with weird
 unease to gather days in bales, do tasks
that left undone means ruin, amid the sheer
 terror of finding nature just a mask
on vacancy, their energies a waste,
 with no celestial past terrestrial; so
 they follow owls to hollow trees for dryads'
earthbound spells to keep the candles placed
 inside their jack-o-lantern heads lit, cold
 beneath the often-vaunted vault of sky.

I praise the ache that makes the pulse, and more
 how full the living seasons set by dying;
at October's end, I ask the one core
 question—though it waves, though time is flying,
though tricky as a 31's 13—:
 Does Death lie at this night's true heart or Life?
 The answer: void as foil to souls and saints
(Both hollow and is hallowed, Halloween);
 matched worth to those unstained and free of strife
 and those in hell amending their constraints.

Near home, his cosmic form, so white three hours
 ago has gathered earth along its hem:
hulls and husks and feathers, dirt, old flowers. . . .
 I've faced some doubts with words in singing them,
as he, while losing his immortal coil,
 imprints on me, his father, flesh and blood.
 We go then two alive down Avenal.
Above the oats, our voices float, mid-fall.
 And as this Halloween I've sung the flood
 of airy fears, new life stirs in the soil.

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

The Reader

For Patrick

Early on, you knew that knowing mattered.
The books on our shelves held worlds you desired.
You a toddler, my attention scattered,
pored over pages that set you on fire

with horror—Blake's *Dante* haunted your dreams,
his sinners writhed in their scorching flames.
Poe's tell-tale corpses made life seem
uncertain, at best. This was no game

as other—unread—children might think.
You were serious so young, understood
the truths spelled out in indelible ink.
All your life you tried to be good.

While others rode bikes, played whiffle ball,
you heard Dante's souls and Poe's bodies call.

Kelly Scott Franklin

Romantic Lines Written on the West Yorkshire Moors

Why must you be so cold, my Catherine dear?
I've loved you more than any lover can,
but now you're hard to get. What's there to fear?
Byronic moodiness? My Gypsy tan?
You used to love me, dearest: why the switch?
Is it that nagging question of my class?
But we were kids together! Now I'm rich!
And sure, you're married—let such trifles pass.
I miss your sympathy, our childhood dreams,
the lonely walks together on the moor.
The smile that graced your lips has died, it seems,
and you've become much graver than before.
Night after night, I lie there next to you;
you're pale and still; you never speak to me.
What's come between us? Tell me darling. Do.

—Your loving Heathcliff, for Eternity.



Liz Cambra

San Francisco's Fourth Female Detective Speaks

Police have always been hiring plain women
in Sunday best to follow pickpockets, befriend
the boarding house matron's brother, but once
you chase down enough men in windowpane
jackets, crush them in the sides with your side
pistol, in full swing of All Saints Day mass,
any decent shopkeeper won't have you.
Secretarial work? Forget about it. Milliner? As if.
And there you have it: mine's the face the troubled
sergeant configures, when a debutante's fiancé
expires after a night of a warm gin—that's Tuesday.
And a new pair of leather shoes, a German chocolate
cake, and 2 cents for the coffee can above the sink.
That couch? An old lecher changing an awful pleated
lampshade— *ZAP!* An electrical surge turned
his adulterous hand black. I make it sound like a load
of flimflam, but be assured, I can pause and take
the eternal note of sadness in: poor lamp, poor
charred hand, poor second wife who should
have fed her husband nicotine instead of wasting it
on the roses. In those early years I wouldn't have
noticed. Now I notice everything, can find
the Czarina's lost emeralds in a pot of clam chowder
with enough time to tweezer the clams from the clasp,
time enough to see the stones set against my second-best
turtleneck, before chucking them off to the sergeant.
At times it's dangerous, I admit. Once, I pissed myself
all over a real nice satin slip, after that arms dealer
threw me in the cellar with his sister's corpse. Her eyes,
as you know, cleaned out with one of those delectable
little sugar spoons—that's why my radio is always on,
I mean, if you like the work it's good to have a way
to fidget the attention, to sleep. But the job has its glamour
for sure. A paid night at the opera in gray mink
and a diamanté crown. Was it the soprano or the violinist

who killed the idiot baritone? One more night of Puccini and I swear I'll tell you! One more night after that and I might forget myself entirely. In fact, I almost did once, holed up among the stout members of the Daffodil Society. It was all especially cheerful, if you don't count all the cut up fingers in the Dutch garden. That autumn, I spent hours in the sun, digging holes, then dropping in bulbs the hue and heft of walnuts. I could stand tea with those broads again, could stomach another chat about the off-color of a rare double bloomer, learn to be afraid of ice, afraid for flowers—but it's no use going back after you've arrested the head matron for murder. I spent the remainder of that afternoon in my gardener's costume: the flannel dress of an ordinary hobbyist, but with a sturdier boot, a pair of elbow-high leather gloves careening out a deep pocket. I just stood in my room like that, near the window, looking out. I had been pretending a long time.

Elijah Perseus Blumov

Spelunker

I sought the depths, and found them.
Down through the bowels of the world
I crawled toward some new birth.
Where was my terror then?
Perhaps all courage comes
when imagination fails.
But yes, I witnessed wonders.
I saw how drops of wet
attain, over dark eons,
to obelisks of gods
whose names we cannot know,
and anti-obelisks
like anglers' teeth. I saw,
as I became a worm
through dank intestinal stone,
what unflappable life can do
bereft of dreams of light.
Here among the pale,
mucus-drenched, and blind,
and bioluminescent
galaxies of larvae,
the monstrous thing was I,
who felt that he belonged
only where he did not.
And when, after I fell—
following a glimmer—
fell wedged in this black rift
where none will find my bones—
hopeless miles of rock
above me and below—
after I screamed a hundred
pointless screams, and writhed
until my limbs were flayed
quite pointlessly, I laughed.
Stuck, like a little piggy.

And I laugh and laugh because
despite the long unthinkable
hours left to die,
I knew now I had found
what I had come here seeking.

Nicole Yurcaba

It is Apple-Picking Season & You Cannot Help

I.

but remember lying on a hay wagon
as your dead lover drove an old blue Ford tractor
the two of you headed into the orchard
to pick pink ladies & his young dog Copper
a kind of heaven beside you your hand in his brown fur
& you told yourself you'd never seen such blue skies
but then you recalled Kyiv in August & you decided
Yes. Yes. I've seen bluer & more beautiful skies
& the wagon bounced your dead lover
looked over his shoulder grinned the rut
in the road now past he flipped you
the middle finger & you returned
 the favor

II.

soon there will be breaking benjamin's "so cold"
soon there will be dwight yoakam's "if there was a way"
there will be led zeppelin's "hey hey what can i do?"
& there will be the moment you tuck his folded photo into a baltimore sidewalk's
crack

soon there will be system of a down's "spiders"
soon there will be alice in chains' "black gives way to blue"
there will be wagner's "ride of the valkyries" spinning on the turntable
& there will be the match you ignite & place at the edge of his final letter

& there will be a gust of wind & you will whisper *til' Valhalla*
 & there will be muddy waters' "mannish boy"
 & there will be the curling backroads you will never drive again
 & there will be the sleepless nights that leave you shattered

III.

somewhere in a lockbox
is an *ikon* you had blessed at saint sophia's

somewhere at a rural post office
is a dead-letter box he kept

somewhere beneath a loose attic floorboard
is a fading photo of you standing in a Kherson rose garden

somewhere in the orchard
his family spread his ashes & never told you the date, the time, the place

somewhere in the cosmos
he & your father take their poles:

they sit beside still waters
their rods bend
the creature they pull from the abyss
is you

IV.

There is the nothing & there is the everything.
There is the beginning & there is the end.
There is the letter & there is the page.
There is the unpruned orchard & there is the unplowed field.
& there is this season which arrives again

again

again:

before sleep finds you, you hear the plunk
of fruit in wooden crates & your dead lover shouting
Hey, girl! I did you a favor!
as he holds a thick, squirming black snake
with one hand by its tail

David Southward

To Autumn, the Stripper

after Keats

Swiller of fifths and dance-pole votaress,
Big-bosomed friend of the proprietor's son;
Conspiring with him how to peel a dress
In ways that make the bachelors' pulses run;
To bend without dislocating your knees,
And fill all seats with bikers guzzling Coors;
To wean plump Hazel off the zinfandels
Bought by a colonel, who keeps shouting "More"
And still "More!" Lately, life's become your tease;
You smoke in bed and swear you've had no peace
Since Summer (that bitch!) ran off with some rich swell.

Who hasn't seen you often looking bored?
Sometimes whoever seeks a broad may find
You, lying facedown on the barroom floor,
Your wig half shifted—freely breaking wind;
Or in the back seat, snoring; a sound sleep
Dashed when a tow-hook clamping on your truck
Scares you near pissless. (Goddamn whiskey sours!)
And microfiber G-strings sometimes keep
Steadily riding up your tush's nook;
Or while your press-ons dry, with time to pluck,
You binge-watch *Cops* and tweeze your brows for hours.

A roommate's mattress-springs screech night and day?
Think not of them, yours had their music too,—
While strobe lights blur the hands of creeps who pay
To graze your stubbled loin with ice-cold brew,
Then in a wailful choir the Spice Girls mourn:
I'm giving you everything. Your heart goes soft;
A cloud of Aqua Velva stings your eyes;
As full-grown men cheer on live-streaming porn,
Your ears ring; now your balance is thrown off,

A redneck whistles from the crowd to scoff
at Summer's glitter, falling from your thighs.

Timothy Kleiser

Kentucky Katabasis, or Friday at the Wildcat

My smile's a silver dollar
I'll flash into your eyes
to make your troubles smaller,
to fill you up with lies.

My word's a silver dollar
I'll tumble in your ear,
in my honey-bourbon drawl or
whatever slakes your fear.

My tongue's a silver dollar
I'll slide around your tongue
and slip beneath your collar.
I'll make you feel so young.

My hand's a silver dollar
I'll trace along your thigh,
to make your insides holler,
so you won't ask me why

I give away each dollar.
The Ferryman knows well.
He's coming on his trawler.
I'll pay your way to hell.

Sunil Iyengar

Southern Gothic

A knot of tourists in the park
are waiting for the guide to show.
It's nearly midnight, but the dark
promises all who stay will know
of old town evils in due course
and come away illuminated.

Each clan subjected to a curse—
its family line snuffed out, or fated
to yield descendants who went mad—
all this will soon be manifest
in anecdotes the town once had
thought unseemly for a guest.

The benches claim both old and young:
couples whose hands slope in a V
between them, as if here among
the dilettantes, a mystery
remained suspended—one per pair.
Others, impatient, check their phones.

Around them all, the drooping hair
of Spanish moss, and cobblestones
that catch the moon before it flies.
No cars. Only a bicycle
bell grows in volume to apprise
the congregants, who can be fickle,

of one who has arrived to tell
rumors about the Ashton place,
where long years back, a skeletal
visitor with a cello case
turned up, was seen, and seen no more.
“Think nothing of it? Think again.

“This out-of-towner, just before
she disappears, solicits men—
three of them—at the Bar & Grill.
She brings them back to Ashton’s hole.
They aren’t seen again, until
one day the case is found. Out roll

three severed heads....” And more besides.
Clichés abound: a woman scorned
is not the worst, by half. As brides
in widow’s weeds, as girls adorned
in frilly night-dresses, as hags
sobbing in hospital gowns,

they roam their ruins, or so brags
a voice that doubles as the town’s—
patrician and authoritative:
A boy of 12 who walks a Schwinn
ahead of them, dispensing native
chestnuts about eternal sin.

J. M. Jordan

Incident on the St. John's River

I.

Flat black water, sparrow-spangled sky.

The surface of the river flames with gold
around you like a flaring sheet of tinfoil
as the outboard's mighty gurgle levels out
into a wet sustained hypnotic hum.

You lean way back and slice the wooden skis
across the wide increasing wake, carving
a sheet of spray. A bright refreshing mist
lifts from the little white caps as they curl
and fade out toward the sawgrass on the banks.

This is the moment you are here for, this
pure summer, golden, open wide and humming
up through the tow-rope to your magic hands,
the river thrumming hard beneath your feet,
the blazing windrush drumming in your ears,
and blaring from the radio on the boat,
above the crackle of the beat-up speakers,
that timeless guitar solo, silver notes
ascending free and skyward like a bird now
from a dense morass of swampy power chords.

You are the racing rakish cavalier,
hell-bent and full-tilt over open fields,
the stuntman going hard at break-neck speed
to hit the ramp and jump the swollen creek,
the dashing highwayman, the moonshine runner.

You are the hero, wild, victorious,
parading through a roaring hometown chorus,
through corridors of sharp defiant flags
and bright bikini girls that smile and wave
from lounge chairs on the lawns of grand estates.

II.

Mile after shining mile blurs by until
you're further up and further in, way back
on unfamiliar water near the swamps.

The river narrows, and the cypress trees
lean out and spill their shade across the water.

The little docks that dot the poorer stretches
like outposts disappear, and great black shapes
turn here and there up in the yellow reeds.
A sudden mass of thunderheads rolls up
across the sun. The river-world goes grey.

Your cousin lifts a beer above his head
and waves it in a circle like a halo
then turns the wheel to nose the boat back home.

You drift out wide to keep the tow-rope taut
as minnows scatter in the sandy shallows.

And there you spy a little cave-like cove,
a world within a world, a dark enclosure
all overhung with oaks and twisted cypress,
a setting like a school kid's diorama
to illustrate some eerie backwoods tale.

Grey wisps of moss frame the murky inlet,
and in the dark you see thick ropes of kudzu
tendrilling down around the empty windows
and rotten skull-like frame of an old wreck,
a stove-in houseboat jammed up on the bank.

Aslant and weathered ghostly long ago,
it rests like it had drifted heedlessly
from out the cool and placid middle channel,
had strayed from its own dream too close, too close
to dark and native trouble on the banks.

It ain't like danger's ever far away
here in this world of hidden moccasin nests,
of twelve-foot gators, armored saw-tooth gar,
of gas cans, guns and whiskey-primed audacity.

But still a different tremor makes your knees
go weak, a fear that brings to mind old stories
of inbred swamp folk, ghosts of ragged slaves
absconded, remnant bands of painted warriors
or fever-struck conquistadors who found
no gold, no magic fountain in the end.

Then just before your cousin straightens out
and points the bobbing prow back down the river,
a blank white face appears, a featureless visage
framed in a skewed black window of the wreck.
It floats there in its little pool of darkness
a moment, like a ragged moon, a portent,
then disappears. At once intent and heedless,
you stare transfixed. Your right ski clips a log
half-hidden in the shallows, and your knees
go shaky as the sky wheels overhead.

Your cousin laughs and spits and pumps a fist
then opens up the throttle like a shotgun.
Your sunburnt knuckles whiten on the handle,
your legs now stiff, steadied by the fear.
You shake the vision from your head. A trick
of light? A drop of water in the eye?
The ghostly wreck in speeding seconds now
drops out of sight, the small dark alcove just
a patch of shadow in the distant tree line,
receding down the river, and away.

A light rain starts to fall. Your sunburnt skin
begins to chill and prickle trekking homeward.
The flags are still, the tan bikini girls
have disappeared into their brooding manors.
There are more things in heaven and earth, indeed,
than even Florida sunlight can dispel
from the depths below, above, around us. So
you keep it in the middle of the channel,
where the water's smooth, being careful you
don't cross your skis, don't let the rope go slack.

Back on your papa's dock you crack a beer
and nod and smile and don't say much at all.

Mattie Quesenberry Smith

Autumn, Without Her Healing Hands

Leaves crack the silence,
Whip, wind-torn in snags of branches.
Black grackles dive in quick arcs
To balance, wedge-tailed, on stronger limbs.
Leaves have been falling here, purple-veined
And drained like the hands of some old, old widow
Wrapped around her rocking chair arms.
Crisp air rushes through wisps of her hair,
Her chair, now creaking, now still.

Some leaves are full-blown purple from
Blood's final rush through weakened
And collapsing veins. We are not dismayed:
Days growing shorter will lengthen again.
The leaves kicked off bits of budding green
Before they twisted and slipped onto unwinding spirals.
But when this widow dies, no one takes her place.
No one to heat up stinking salves
And pass on the wisdom in wives' tales.
We walk out Wind Rock Ridge to her lane,

Jump onto her oak porch,
Run through the door, and
Catch her in the kitchen
Where she should have been baking.
Her house, bleak-boarded and bare,
Withstands a scrub oak thicket.
Withered hands, wrapped in a purple pallor,
Shift in sunlight and dapple the grass,
And the split rail fence leans this way and that
Like a skinny, broken back.

Helena Feder

Camouflaged

If this were real life, I would soon come eye to eye
with ones larger than mine on the back of a black
insect, unseeing neon circles painted by nature
to deter predators like those office experiments
enforcing honesty with a circumferenced pupil taped
above a coffee collection jar. It says something like God
is always watching. Eye teeth. Conversely, camouflage
hides us from others, a work of deception designed
to blend in such a way that we forget even ourselves
as in those dreams I'm a wide winged thing circling
this fat green fig on which a long arthropod feeds, my eyes
keener judging I can take the fruit and beast at once,
that these circles do not see me, that this neon is no poison,
that the uncanny is human, that no one watches above.

John Poch

Lunatic

—they who make reason subject to desire
Inferno 5.39

Where was it we first heard that moths collide
with a lamp because they fancy it's the moon?
I wanted to believe, for who wouldn't side
with a fragile thing that hurts itself so soon

after emerging into life, that lies
in wait for night because of sun-blind truth.
She alters lust to just, perchance, and flies
romantically to blaze: perforce, forsooth!

The moth, no butterfly, no Beatrice,
but shades of wild Francesca to strange flesh gone,
in blackness of darkness she swerves to sacrifice
much hotter than she thought, dumb, blind as bone,

then falls like a petal on a doorstep. Pity,
but no. I pick her up, and her wings turn
to dust, a worthless sensual sparkle. Pretty
vicious, a soul of ash, she loved to burn.

Jared Carter

November

The doorways now entirely
 grisaille, at dusk,
The Duomo's shadow could not be
 more pale, the husk

Of crows that flow along the bridge
 more tenuous—
Dissolving now, the city's ridge
 of towers must

Give way to echoes—cobbled streets
 and stones, and all
That mattered once, no more discrete
 than shades that call.



Contributors

Meredith Bergmann is an award-winning sculptor with public monuments in New York, Boston, and beyond. Her poetry and criticism have appeared in many journals including Barrow Street, Contemporary Poetry Review, Hopkins Review, Hudson Review, The New Criterion, Tri Quarterly Review, and the anthologies *Hot Sonnets*, *Love Affairs at the Villa Nelle*, *Alongside We Travel: Contemporary Poets on Autism*, and *Powow River Poets Anthology II*. She was poetry editor of *American Arts Quarterly* from 2006-2017. Her chapbook *A Special Education* was published in 2014 by EXOT Books, and her self-illustrated book *The Dying Flush* was published by EXOT in 2024. She has won three Honorable Mentions from the Frost Farm Poetry Prize and a 2nd prize from the Connecticut Poetry Club. Bergmann has taught ekphrastic poetry workshops at the Frost Farm, Poetry by the Sea, and Writing the Rockies conferences.

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Brian Palmer is inspired by the natural world which continues to have a formative effect on his life and poetry. His recent chapbook *Prairiehead* was released in 2023. His work appears regularly in various journals, and he is the editor of the literary journal *THINK*. He lives in Juneau, Alaska.

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Marly Youmans is the author of sixteen books of poetry and fiction. Recent work includes a long poem, *Seren of the Wildwood* (*Wiseblood*), a novel, *Charis in the World of Wonders* (*Ignatius*), and a poetry collection, *The Book of the Red King* (*Phoenicia*).

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