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# FOOTHILL

a journal of poetry



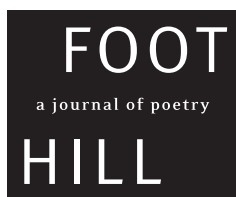
# F O O T H I L L

a journal of poetry





FOOT  
a journal of poetry  
HILL



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# CONTENTS

---

## viii EDITOR'S NOTE

*Close Listening*

## 13 SCOTT BADE Western Michigan University

*Ghost Notes*

*Müesli*

## 15 KATIE BERGER University of Alabama

*Before Completion*

## 16 MAGGIE BLAKE Sewanee, The University of the South

*Love Letter*

## 17 JOHN F. BUCKLEY University of Michigan

*Rejected Drakkar Noir Commercial #53X*

## 19 NATALIE BYERS Missouri State University

*When I Don't Have the Heart to Tell Mom I'm Super High on the  
Blue Haired Kush I Received in Lieu Of Child Support, I Tell Her I'm  
Mad at Sharon Olds*

## 20 CHRISTINE HAMM Drew University

*A is for Afterimage*

*V is for Vacancy*

## 22 ROBERT HITT University of Alabama

*Your Many Waters*

## 23 RICHARD KELLY KEMICK University of New Brunswick

*Migration is Disciplined Wanderlust*

## 24 SHARON KUNDE University of California, Irvine

*The Saint*

- 26 JENNIFER RAHA University of North Carolina  
*Voyeur Vespers*
- 27 JUDITH RONEY University of Central Florida  
*Sanctuary*
- 29 STEVEN SANCHEZ California State University, Fresno  
*English Has Approximately 250,000 Words*
- 30 MICHAEL M. WEINSTEIN Harvard University  
*Apology*  
*Prior to Vacating the Unit*
- 34 ANDREW WEST University of Kansas  
*IMG\_0497.JPG*  
*IMG\_0499.JPG*  
*IMG\_0500.JPG*  
*IMG\_0501.JPG*
- 38 MARCO YAN University of Hong Kong  
*Again*
- 40 CLARKE LATTA HENRY III Claremont Graduate University  
*Art*
- 64 ERIN BELIEU  
*Interview*
- 74 CONTRIBUTORS

# EDITOR'S NOTE

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## *Close Listening*

Louise Glück kicked off a filmed reading I attended a couple of years ago by apologizing for being a bad performer of her work. We in the audience would be far better off listening to Kenneth Branagh perform “Mock Orange,” she pointed out, but since he was unlikely to show, it was not too late for us to do something better with our Friday evening. We laughed, and though her reading style really was somewhat drowsy and monotone, no one left or threw a single tomato. Simply to agree with what John Koethe said in an interview we conducted with him a few issues back—that: “I generally like going to poetry readings more to see what the poet is like personality-wise”—is to miss a larger point about why we in the audience stayed and the video camera kept rolling.

Anyone who has, like me, spent long Saturday evenings in ecstasy with a tall drink listening to poetry readings and lectures on the University of Pennsylvania’s PennSound.org page, or who also like me has alleviated the boredom of jogging by listening to PennSound’s *Poem Talk* podcasts in which a poetry recording is given “a close, but not too close reading,” well knows that a poem’s performance can crucially guide, complicate, and ultimately enlarge our reading of its script.

Poetry recordings are not merely cultural tchotchkes that technology affords us to satisfy our curiosity glands . . . though, sure, sometimes you just want to hear what Hilda Doolittle sounded like. Even then, the subtlest blip of intonation within a phrase or acceleration across a line can betray the poet’s relationship to their material and open up a formerly familiar poem in unexpected ways.

Can you imagine what a treasure a recording of Chaucer reading “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” would be? Or Dickinson reading “I taste a liquor never brewed?” Listen to Pound’s macho performance of “Yeux Glauques” on PennSound: you don’t need Judith Butler to tell you that some urgent (and potentially problematic) act of

bardic-identity formation is being advanced, one crying out for our furrowed brows and analysis.

Any close listening of a performance does not eclipse what can be gathered from the poem on the page (see the Intentional Fallacy); it simply gives us more to consider, more to talk about, more to enjoy.

This is why we are so grateful when the poets we publish in *Foothill* take the time to send in an audio or video performance of their work. I can't say with certainty that a few from our growing catalog of graduate-student performances will one day comprise crucial poetic artifacts for scholars to interrogate or aficionados to delight in, though a few might. I will say with certainty that scanning each QR code in this issue will expand and enhance your reading of its poems.

Tell us what you think on Facebook and Twitter, or on our blog, *Foothill After Hours* ([www.foothillafterhours.com](http://www.foothillafterhours.com)), which generated a discussion about performed poetry that prompted this very editor's note.

Cheers.

Kevin Riel





# POEMS



SCOTT BADE  
PHD ENGLISH  
WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

---

*Ghost Notes*

We've tucked ourselves in  
with nothing but net. All evening  
we tangle the black protests of stars  
and the lineaments of spaces while fish  
nest between water and a dream.  
Their eyeteeth. Their blinking mouths  
full of ring. And like the knots  
so important to the weight of things,  
we hold back, hold front, hold out  
just enough to endure the hour's  
invisible construction. Each morning  
I carry the caught creatures  
night lends us to our bed's edge,  
their voicings like ghost notes,  
and I listen to their songs  
about suspension and bridges, travel  
through an octave's seven leagues,  
the depth at which everything,  
even the fish know nothing  
but the full body of hunger.

## *Müesli*

There is no history without event.  
Six booms and it's time for a rest  
then scan of the cereal ingredients  
this new day. What grainy fusion  
fusses at the heart of the bottom  
of the bowl? So these rocks,  
the dead grey weight of them,  
carry this story. It's story because  
he said so and the voices exist  
because recorded thoughts have  
allowed for even the meekest pea  
gravel, as small as the smallest  
poppy seed, a chance at redemption  
and nevermind the aeons of light  
showing evidence to the contrary.  
There are silences here, they say,  
so full of life one must simply  
marvel and listen. But not Sabina  
who could only think about which  
paintings she was like. And so  
the aggregate and rip-rap reveal  
a little of their reading habits  
if not a penchant for the symbolic.  
She didn't like the tight studies  
of plugs and receptacles, thought  
it ridiculous anyone imagined that  
even in the mundanity of electrical  
work intercourse is all around us.  
A raccoon sips at the stagnant pond  
water, pays little mind to the leather  
shoes standing on the rock. Blustering  
wind voice, tell us of the arguments  
you've so recently won. Nobody  
likes the wet spot but most  
don't mind how it got there.

KATIE BERGER  
MFA CREATIVE WRITING  
UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

---

*Before Completion*

Other city unfinished—  
the second we drove over  
the bridge was the year you confessed  
to a certain aptitude for scorn.  
Was it the shuttered café,  
the painted funeral home,  
the Monday of it all that left us  
speaking again  
of the mountain? To tame this  
country is to shatter ice  
and ice cream trucks.  
To agree with you is to feel  
in the dark for your hand  
or foot the night before contracts  
collapsed the bridge.

Muttered dads left the demolitions  
and daughters admitted to missing  
certain anchor spans before  
they found a scrapyard.

I don't speak to the stars so much  
as tilt toward you and blame  
the terrain.



# MAGGIE BLAKE

MFA POETRY

SEWANEE, THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH

---

## *Love Letter*

One young doe edges the rural highway,  
slim muzzle pointed in toward farmland.  
The second deer on the distanced edge  
turns toward her, between them,  
the stubble of a razed harvest.

A still reservoir, rock hewn and rain cold,  
thick brushstrokes of trees, two cranes  
pushing sky. As I float in clear water, one fish  
bites the mole on my back, small teeth  
and the slap of a tail between shoulder blades,  
the disappointment of an empty mouth.

Your absence spikes each animal  
with need, remakes all movement as  
the curtailing of distance, every step forward  
a love letter, even, beside the traffic's hum,  
the box turtle's shy leather feet on asphalt.



JOHN F. BUCKLEY  
MFA POETRY  
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

---

*Rejected Drakkar Noir Commercial #53X*

The fact of the matter:

So many of these bratwursts  
won't even fit in the bun.

A stiff squirt of sealant will  
weatherproof any sad pane.

Roll them in your hands.  
Feel the heft. Feel the puissance.

Look at these worms in  
loam, fresh from the bait shop.

Over and again, he presses  
the nun's wimpled doorbell.

Just imagine the vocabulary  
of his tufted pet cockatoo.

I'm a Pepper. You're a Pepper.  
But he's the Pepperiest.

Silky as a Persian kitten  
trained in counterespionage.

The man with the iron fists  
rusts like a flaking mariner.

His Epsom salts prune every  
finger in half the duration.

Picking up the kids from school  
has never seemed a chore.

He can tie a bowline, a Windsor,  
a cardiology suture.

With his price gun, he marks  
the Fritos two for three dollars.

His silhouette appeared  
on a burnt piece of French toast.

Everything he knows winds  
up fitting in a dustpan.

He will break someone's heart  
with a prayer and a shovel.

I don't think you're listening.  
There is something to say:

He's a very particular kind of guy.





NATALIE BYERS  
MA CREATIVE WRITING  
MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY

---

*When I Don't Have the Heart to Tell Mom I'm Super  
High on the Blue Haired Kush I Received in Lieu Of  
Child Support, I Tell Her I'm Mad at Sharon Olds*

Because I don't want to tell her she was right  
about the man I ran away and married.  
That I'm high to numb the strain in my  
chest when my daughter leaves  
for the weekend while I worry.  
Did she get a bath? Was she sung  
to before bed? Did he scream *fucking eat!*  
Did his woman's kid hit my baby again?

I don't want Mom to know

I'm alone because she was right about  
those friends I outgrew. The people I claimed  
as family—disowned my blood for—are self-educated,  
self-loathing, white trash hippies who avoid me these  
days. They can't understand my fancy talk, don't  
accept constructive criticism; contradictions: colons  
as a form of punctuation. *The system, is like,  
totally flawed man; you're like: a robot now.*

Mom asks me who this Sharon  
woman is, wants to know if she's someone at work  
giving me a hard time. I don't respond, only cry  
a little until she grabs my face in her hands, stares  
hard like I've just been pulled out of her  
and she needs to laugh and sob but can't decide  
what's best. *That Oldses lady is just jealous.*

CHRISTINE HAMM  
PHD ENGLISH LITERATURE  
DREW UNIVERSITY

---

*A is for Afterimage*

Outside, a field bent by recent snow. A truck idles by the shed. Red, surrounded by a black wavering cloud. I have your necklace in my boot. The music of faulty tractors, the milking shed crying and bleating. Blackened egg shells by the tip of the hose. Our dog flings himself in the air, chasing the spray of water. One eye gone white. His breath rises blue in the cold, his bark a silent cough. The metal links of your chain warm under my toes. I hold the barb wire fence. Scraps of a pink coat, caught crossing over.

## *V is for Vacancy*

We try to drive away from the flood, but the flood washes away the road, and we are trapped in the car. The car floats and settles, leaks springing around the doors. We play your loud sad music, wrap our feet in plastic bags. All along the street, the houses are catching fire. You try to call your mother. I write a letter to my friend in Seattle, telling her about the cooking show I admire. Our hair gets wet. My purse is ruined. We get out and try to walk. The flood sweeps away our boots. I climb onto someone's porch. I think we're in Queens now. The porch is full of blue stuffed animals and a couch. I sit and wait for you for hours, then call a cab.

ROBERT HITT  
MFA POETRY  
UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

---

*Your Many Waters*

The water on your brow—salt-bead tiara. The warbles in an old, single-pane window, amorphous  
and crackled with rain. Pineapple slick on a knife, sliding flat  
along the tongue.

The water in my highball. Your fever snowing coal ash over the glass.  
Blood rust in your joints  
like the chatter of teeth. Stiff-towel mouth, blazing and  
pumice after the drink.

The water gone down. Wave and thicket sea-greens below the caterwaul  
of bat clicks, their flight  
Rorschach. The churns of an auger, hands gnarled around  
handles, lifting earth.

The water coiled up. Whirlpool smiles halved with a hatchet-cough. I  
open the window to allow  
the spruce-combed wind inside of us. White noise cooking  
under the refrigerator.  
My thumb in your palm, kneading the clay of it.

Water staccato. Unpatterned breaths, the low idling of your car in the  
drive. Spaghetti-mess  
of an engine. Your air brackish, metallic. My eyes hover the  
engine like it means something.  
Your clenched eyelids.

Water tectonic. The iceberg folds in your abdomen, frog croak and  
silent. My ear against your lap  
and the channels of television roaring invisibly through the  
walls of our house, the curves  
of radio waves so loud. The chandelier refraction of light  
rippling out your next inhale.

RICHARD KELLY KEMICK  
MA ENGLISH  
UNIVERSITY OF NEW BRUNSWICK

---

*Migration is Disciplined Wanderlust*

The cerebral compass of birds,  
the solar barb of insects,  
the maternal spurs of mammals,  
and then there's my 17 year old self  
in the door frame of my parents' house  
when suddenly it doesn't feel like home anymore.  
It's all a grand march, but modest  
as the footprints of Laetoli.

Come spring, female caribou separate themselves  
from their male offspring since colts  
are not permitted in the calving grounds.  
If intimidation and charging fail, a cow  
will sprint nocturnal across a stretch of ice,  
careful not to leave tracks.

At a red light on the way to the airport,  
the 3am streetlights blurred in rain,  
my mother traces half-moons behind my ear  
then grips and regrips the steering wheel,  
knuckles pulsing like heartbeats of newborns  
beneath their translucent skin.

There is an element of decay  
implicit in parenthood, one  
I am only beginning to understand:  
a votive release and what  
distance really demands.  
My boot-tread in the parkade,  
an errant hoof-track in the snowbank,  
an ash etching of a family's foot-prints,  
all telling a lie of standing still.



SHARON KUNDE  
PHD ENGLISH  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

---

*The Saint*

Pure as choristers, a slur of shot glasses wait for whiskey.  
Crack the door: out snakes a pillar of steam  
into the rainy riverbottom. Shuffleboard table, salt-  
smooth. Fermenting, leavened blur  
of voices and honky-tonk parts like a green curtain  
upon the woman behind the bar, pouring like a saint.

What does God do to saints?  
Deeds, lives, deaths bitter as whiskey—  
does he ease their passage through the curtain,  
melt, thaw, resolve them into a whistle of steam  
that pierces sleepy heaven, blurs  
the constellations, leaving pale hills of salt?

She twists glasses in patens of salt,  
remembering the Japanese gardens in Saint  
Louis, its crowds a comforting blur  
in need of the laying on of hands, liberal application of whiskey  
to wounds too deep to see, steady steam  
of language a jeweled curtain.

I part the years' psychedelic curtains.  
In the corners of my eyes and mouth is salt,  
precipitate left by baptismal steam.  
I am wrapped in white bandages like the relics of a saint.  
I down wavering amber lozenges of whiskey,  
my mouth a wood-tasting, burning blur.

Her moonly benevolent words blur.  
Between bar and kitchen hangs a black rubber curtain.  
One after another she slides shots of whiskey  
to the quartz-eyed man, his beard sprinkled with salt.  
A gold necklace of some saint—Saint Francis or Saint  
Jerome—collars a green bottle filled with steam.

I cannot remove the stains, not with steam;  
soaps leave a muddy blur.  
I speed north on a tiny motorcycle, to Saint  
Cloud: moon's eye plunged in lakes among curtains  
of prophesying loons, their keening a pale salt  
in the failing green sky's pool of sunset whiskey.

One more shot of whiskey. From the sealed door leaks steam.  
Crust of salt on thawing roads and their icy black blurs.  
Meet them head-on, my sister. Through the curtain—the saint, the  
saint, the saint.

JENNIFER RAHA  
MFA CREATIVE WRITING  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

---

*Voyeur Vespers*

The old woman next door  
who plants bulbs every afternoon  
at dusk

looks like she's praying, whole sky  
gray with dust,        no moon,  
no sun, & no horizon.

Even the grass—barely green.

Clouds streak the sky  
like a child running fingers  
over the window of a dirty minivan,

and the only color: dozens  
of light pink roses and my neighbor's  
strawblond hair

against her faded  
black dress, her toil  
her homage to the dust that has been

and the dust that is to come.



JUDITH RONEY  
MFA CREATIVE WRITING  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

---

*Sanctuary*

—With lines from *A Prayerbook for the Use of Catholics, 1946*

We sit on hardwood pews  
to kneel and pray  
    to Joseph and Mary  
    who've tired  
    of their own outstretched arms  
and endless prayers for intercession  
murmured to chalkware ears

*O blessed Virgin, Mother of my Redeemer, mirror  
of innocence and sanctity, and refuge  
    of penitent sinners! Intercede with thy Son,  
    that I may obtain the grace to make a good  
    confession—*

The nuns put words to the mouth:  
Immaculate Conception,  
intercedence and *non sum dingus*

O man of plaster—rigid,  
suspended slack-necked and thin—  
you lift no finger of hand

Witness: old-painted blood, dust-clotted;  
rust flakes at the nail hole, see them fall

*Hail! Holy Queen, Mother of our mercy,  
our life, our sweetness, and our hope! To thee  
we do cry, poor banished children of Eve*

I feel time so well in this place—  
sunlit specks float down slow like tiny

angels and the ash of liturgical years—  
in ordinary time the incense lingers: onycha, burnt  
dung, and wood: blackened like dark water

*I desire, like the prodigal child,  
to enter seriously into myself*

A child swims inside a woman of twisted hair  
black as dark water. Here, a yoke broken,  
no peccadillo to share—

—then I remember something  
and twist around in the deep-lacquered pew

and see the green-curtained confessionals  
have all been removed



STEVEN SANCHEZ  
MFA CREATIVE WRITING  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FRESNO

---

*English Has Approximately 250,000 Words*

If words were rationed like canned meat  
or rice and beans, I'd savor every word

like Grandma's chile verde that left  
something to taste when it was gone.

We would borrow words from our neighbors  
the way Grandma asked ours for tortillas

or milk when we were running low.  
We waited for Grandpa to return from the fields

with something more than an empty bottle  
between his calloused hands. Bruises

sometimes rose on his neck  
like swollen tongues. Grandma would scrape

his cold plates into ours. Refried beans  
hardened onto our spoons like stories

about where Grandpa went—he got lost  
between the rows of apple trees,

or maybe his blue '64 Ford needed  
gas, but he'd be home soon. The woman

spoke English better than Spanish.  
Grandma tried teaching me how to roll

my tongue while she heated tortillas  
over the stove's blue flames. Grandpa

would call her into the next room.  
I tore a match from the book

and held it near the fire, listening  
to the quiet whirl between Spanish and glass.



MICHAEL M. WEINSTEIN  
PHD ENGLISH  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

---

*Apology*

The miracle came to pass it was expensive  
We had to make the hay glisten  
just so  
                    a star had to rise

and overawe them all no wires  
visible from the cheap seats  
                                    We  
need such beauty who have slept  
through history

                            I slept so long  
What would it mean to say I lost  
my faith

                            One might go  
on as the show must but once the claps slow  
like a heart  
                            the curtain falls and

falls and  
                            you are not the star  
not the infant not even the ox with his  
eyes

You might take off  
your wings now they have all gone  
home

                            Believe  
me  
                            I believe  
I would if you didn't

I'm sorry

I thought the apples were  
real apples

I thought  
you were love



## *Prior to Vacating the Unit*

4/7/2013

The dead can't be expected  
to clean up after themselves  
and Inge always such a stickler  
for the impeccable — the made  
bed

the wave of vast feeling  
tucked in , the bloodstain on the tub  
scrubbed to a sterile glow — would not  
have borne the state of this  
refrigerator

She had gallivanted  
in a garden modeled on the French  
watched by her governess and from the window by  
the uncle who would sneak her peaches — this was all  
before —

She learned what it meant to keep  
each syllable crisp or a job — 14 dollars  
a week — a snatch of Wagner in her head as the  
machines churned teeth , her Hebrew name  
a secret

But rot will out :  
stale light floods from the icebox , cold  
cuts mummified and each shrink-wrapped  
knish silver like a headstone , no  
inscription

What would Inge do  
but give the plum cake huddled in  
tinfoil to one along Roosevelt Ave  
who did not have a home who had a  
body

but one won't —  
one weeps — not for the antique  
milk , not for the late  
sun curdled on the paste-grey tiles , for  
the moist microbial

embrace  
against the styrofoam — two breasts'  
taut gasp of plastic stamped with  
PERISHABLE : KEEP



ANDREW WEST  
PHD ENGLISH  
UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

---

*IMG\_0497.JPG*

one would  
like to know.

what is it  
that can be

known? to  
be there,

for one  
must; to know

what it is  
to be there.

this will be  
known: one

would like it  
to be better,



*IMG\_0499.JPG*

all of that  
comes to be

with all of  
this. you say

to yourself,  
it could have

all been so  
different. yes,

it could have  
been. what is

it that one  
is? when one

comes to be  
yet another

*IMG\_0500.JPG*

that is not in  
this; as she is

not in it, not  
more than he.

nor any who  
would be out,

we are not for  
them; when they,

never in it, are  
more than us.

yet all who  
would be out,

where now? and  
why so much?

*IMG\_0501.JPG*

you may in  
those with whom

you are close,  
as if

closeness were  
some greater

thing; to be  
near, to be so

we will for  
those without

to whom  
you are close,

as if farther were  
more than far

MARCO YAN  
MFA CREATIVE WRITING  
UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

---

*Find Me in the Water*

*like a clay idol fording a river;  
hardly able to save oneself.  
—Chinese Proverb*

He was opaque when I found him motherless.  
In Ladies' Market I promised to take him home.  
Our legs wove through an alley of floral shirts,  
air masses leapt from roof to roof  
like rabbits' feet, he saw a sheep leaving the flock,  
caught in the jaws of a cirrus wolf. We stopped.  
*Cu-mu-lo-nim-bus*, the outlying consonants  
filled his mouth, the name of a mystic sea monster  
that swam mid-air, bearing three days of rain.  
Beneath its rippling underside, still lost,  
we watched the entity swoop, electricity tear  
its round belly open, its body weight  
crashing the road signs and zebra crossing—  
there was a river for him to cross, me too.



# ART

*Untitled*

18.75 x 12.5

Digital photograph

2013



*Untitled*

18.75 x 12.5

Digital photograph

2013





*Untitled*

18.75 x 12.5

Digital photograph

2013

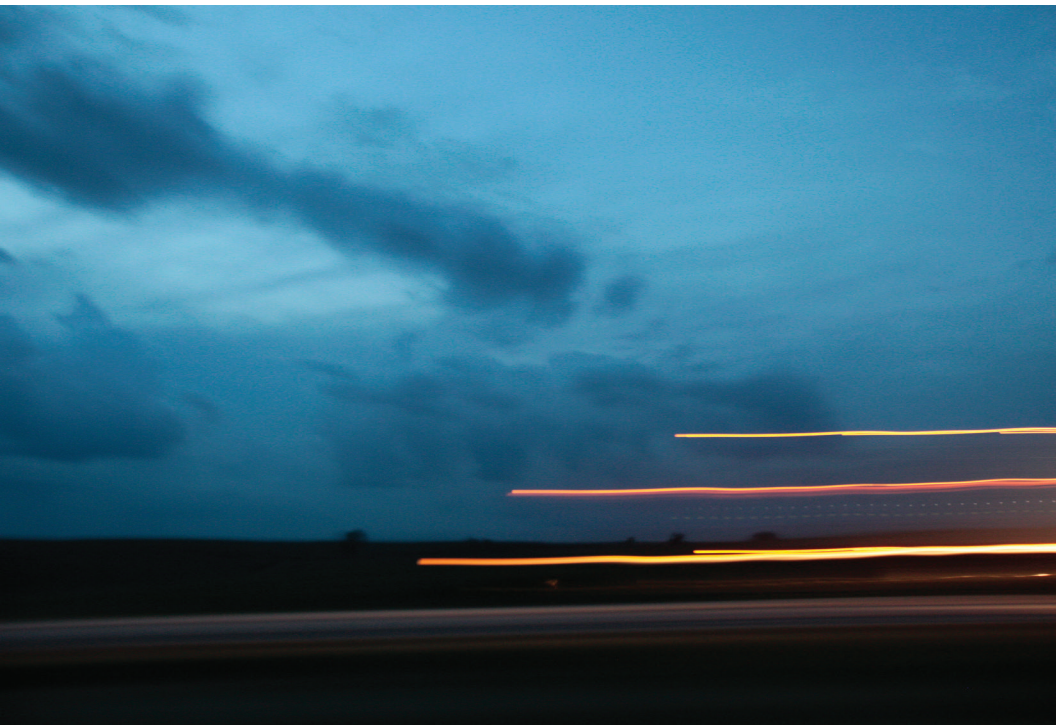


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2013







# INTERVIEW

# ERIN BELIEU

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*Erin Belieu is the author of four poetry collections, including her forthcoming Slant Six, all from Copper Canyon Press. Among her honors, Belieu has been selected for the National Poetry Series, received a Rona Jaffe Foundation award, and was a recent finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. Her work has appeared in places such as the New Yorker, Ploughshares, Tin House, Slate, and Best American Poetry. Belieu teaches for the writing program at Florida State*

*University and the Lesley University low residency MFA in Cambridge, Massachusetts.*

**Foothill:** We publish a lot of students enrolled in creative writing programs much like the one in which you teach (Florida State University) and the one you matriculated from (Ohio State University). Why did you choose to enroll in an MFA program out of college rather than an MA and PhD in English? Or why did you decide to not get a day job, an apartment near a good library, and learn to write better on your own?

**Erin Belieu:** I didn't actually go from undergrad to an MFA program. I took a year and a half off during college and worked as a national field staffer for the Dukakis presidential campaign. Traveled all over the country working for Governor Dukakis. It was a hugely life-changing experience, getting out of that rarified school environment and seeing big parts of the country in a very up-close and particular way.

Then, when I did graduate, I again took time off before applying to MFA programs. During that couple of years I worked some stupid jobs, had some delightfully torturous love affairs, taught myself more about being a grown up, and worked on my poems without a teacher around to tell me what to do. I remember during that time I would pick a canonical writer I thought I should know and then read everything they'd ever written. It was a program I made for myself. I lived above a bar—the Golden Eight Ball—and had to block out the jukebox, the terrible songs that were played over and over, as much as possible while reading and writing. It was a country bar near the

stockyards in Omaha. To this day I still associate the song "Why Don't We Get Drunk And Screw" with *The Brothers Karamozov*.

It's essential to forge that connection with your work independent from a school structure. Because before committing to something like an MFA, it's best to find out if this is really your devotion.

As Rilke says, you have to ask yourself truthfully "must I write?" Because if the answer is anything other than an unmitigated yes, you'd better find another path for yourself. A life in writing is way too brutal, lonely, financially frustrating, to pursue without a genuine devotion to cling to when life is hard. And it's often hard. Even when you've "succeeded," it's still hard.

I am of that transitional generation where the PhD in poetry wasn't terribly common yet. But, due to set a set of convoluted circumstances, I did do all of the coursework for a literature PhD when I was at Ohio State. I spent three years studying literature and theory there, and it was by far the best choice I could have wandered into for myself. I forged a meaningful connection with the history of literature and ideas that has done nothing but usefully inform my own poetry. Then Robert Pinsky showed up to do a one-week workshop there, and at the end of his visit he asked me to come to Boston University. So I just walked away from the PhD. I knew that, again, as much as I enjoyed the scholarly work I was doing, my first devotion was to the practice of poetry. So, long story short, I retroactively got my MFA from Ohio State—I later applied for it as I'd done all of the course work for it and wanted the terminal degree—and an MA in poetry from Boston after the fact. I think writers often have these pinball kinds of trajectories as there's no lock-step way to teach yourself to be a writer. You just follow those experiences that you intuitively believe will add to your devotion.

My advice—unasked for but kindly meant—is absolutely do not go straight from undergrad to a MFA. And don't do a PhD unless you really have a scholarly inclination. It's too expensive, too much of a commitment to do half-assed, and the PhD won't in itself get you a job. Publishing well—not frequently necessarily, but well—gets you a job worth having in academia. And debt determines more of your life in writing than anything else does. Avoid the debt beast! It will own your soul.

**FH:** Related to the topic of student-loan debt, MFA programs have proliferated internationally over the last decade, and come under scrutiny for various reasons, chief among them: their lack of a quantifiable return-on-investment to students' time-, labor-, and money-wise. Can you speak to what was valuable about your time

in an MFA program? Have programs like FSU's, or MFA programs in general, improved in offering value to students? Is a market notion like "value" even an appropriate consideration in this realm, especially if one is able to look Rilke's question in the eyes and emphatically answer 'yes I must'?

**EB:** I don't have any specific statistics to back up any claim I might make here. But my impression is that the MFA has become an industry based mostly on demand. But it is an industry. Then again, the idea that an arts degree would have some kind of quantifiable value is fairly ridiculous. Who goes into an MFA thinking, "Yeah, I could do business and marketing, but I think I'll follow the dollar signs and do the poetry degree"? Who ultimately succeeds in the writing world and who doesn't has little to do with logic or common sense.

So people do the MFA/PhD because they have a dream they're foolish and brave enough to follow. But I do think programs could do a better job of making those applying understand very clearly that the degree in itself is worth very little tangibly. My MA and MFA experiences were very positive because of the people I encountered there, both students and faculty. That alchemy of people coming together to push each other is the key. Carl Phillips and I were in the same class at Boston University, and our long friendship is probably the single most important, ongoing thing I got out of my time there. We've been showing each other poems for about 20 years now. I can't place a direct value on that, but I know it would have been a lot harder to move forward without his feedback and finely tuned bullshit detector. The value of an honest and loyal friend who happens to be brilliant isn't quantifiable, but that camaraderie is essential in a writer's life. I don't know that you need a program to find those relationships, but it may speed up the process some.

**FH:** Does teaching creative writing make you a stronger poet, or does it drain all the creative energy out of you? How do you make time for your writing amid the demands of an oft-busy world?

**EB:** Well, sometimes teaching is a pleasure and sometimes it's draining depending on the semester. But it's my job to be a good teacher, and I take that responsibility seriously. And for the most part I really love teaching. I generally adore my students. Their freshness. Their enthusiasm and humor. I come from a teaching family and believe in the potential nobility of the work. Whatever my complaints are at a given moment, let's be serious—it could be a whole lot worse. I grew up around people who had to break their backs to have a home, support their kids. So when I hear myself or

my colleagues complaining too much I think maybe we ought to go out and dig ditches for a day or work at Walmart or Outback. Seems like that might put our kvetching into perspective. I wish more professors spent more time outside of academia. Most don't. And you can see this in the dysfunction of your average faculty meeting. We'd benefit from a little more gratitude and perspective, a little less ego.

**FH:** In another interview you said you spend a long time from the first to the last draft of a poem, "sometimes years." Why does it take you so long? When do you know it is time to stop editing and abandon the poem?

**EB:** My poems can sometimes take a long time because I have high standards for them. I mean, it'd be easy enough to just write the same kind of poem over and over. You know, I could keep doing the things for which I've gotten some praise in the past and publish a lot more than I do. Too many editors often want the thing they've seen you do before. You have to keep re-teaching them who you are as a poet, the other things you're capable of. Poets who settle into some kind of formal or intellectual 'brand' make me deeply suspicious.

I guess a poem is finished when you genuinely discover something meaningful that you didn't already know from it. When the form and content finally come together to register some truthful surprise. Much of what we see in magazines suffers from being pre-approved.

**FH:** In your collection, *Black Box*, you write about infidelity. For you, does writing poetry demand honesty? Would you ever hold back in order to protect others? (Robert Lowell's refusal to do so comes to mind.) Could either of these things undermine the greatness of a work? Did you worry about this at all when writing *Black Box*?

**EB:** *Black Box* was written in a controlled burn of rawness and deep sorrow. And, for the record, the 'you' to whom some of the poems therein are addressed isn't my ex-husband—I actually like and respect my ex-husband quite a bit. The back matter for the book was written while I was away and unfortunately convolutes some of the narrative elements in that book. But you know, the autobiographical merely serves as an initial trigger in that book. *Black Box* quickly moves away from that into an imaginative space that is about grief and anger—particularly the supposed transgressiveness of female anger—and being in a place of personal apocalypse, keeping in mind that that apocalypse is another way of saying 'transformation.'

Readers make a huge mistake when looking to a writer's biography to interpret poems. Poems aren't the transcript of a deposition or the journal one keeps for their therapist. Or at least good poems aren't. This is what Williams is getting at when he says 'You cannot get the news from poetry . . . ' Poems are beholden to the Truth, absolutely, but that's a whole lot different than the facts of a situation. Writers make things up and rework facts all the time to get at the larger experiential truth of their world. Of course the paradox is, if you've done a good job, readers often believe they're reading facts. So it's an occupational hazard, writing the truth as you perceive it. I've seen some writers struggle with it. But most often that's the price writers are willing to pay for their art. Which is probably why so many regret dating us.

**FH:** During the period of “controlled burn” in which you were writing *Black Box*, were you composing individual poems that related because they were formed out of the same emotional furnace, or did you set out to write a book of poems that relied on “narrative elements” to hold them together? Were all three of your books—*Infanta*, *One Above and Below*, and *Black Box*—collections of individual poems written during a certain period of time or “concept albums” stitched together by various themes? Do you find any particular strategy more useful or productive than the other as you approach the oft-daunting blank page?

**EB:** With my first two books, there was no sense of theme or concept. They're portraits of a consciousness over years. With *Black Box*, I woke up at about 5:00 a.m. every day for about six months and sat on the patio working at a furious pace until my son woke up and it was time to get him ready for kindergarten. Then, when he was off for a few hours, I'd come back and look at those initial morning drafts and start working them into shape, looking for the maps I'd left myself.

I remember I'd had that line, “I'll wear a red dress to your funeral,” in my head for a couple of years, always meaning to do something with that dark humor. And I was reading various translations of *Medea*, as I knew that story had something to do with the inner story I was trying to tell. I was interested in the idea of a woman as a barbarian (Medea being a barbarian queen) and what that actually looks like. What if I were to try and say everything? So much of our construction of womanhood is about what we don't say, aren't allowed to say without being punished. But I was so far beyond caring about that anymore. So I can't say *Black Box* came from a concept. Just certain ideas held loosely in mind as I wrote toward something that insisted upon itself.



I'm generally wary of books that are conceived as concept. I mean, sometimes that works if a writer has a certain obsession that absolutely needs to be explored—Tino Villanueva's *Scene From The Movie Giant* hits me as a terrific example of a concept book that really works truthfully.

But more often recently it feels like a marketing approach poets use in order to spoon feed their work to contest judges and editors. I mean, sometimes presses are looking to distinguish a book in the market by selling story along with it. Gives publicists something to pitch to the *New York Times*. So I have a lot of sympathy for the pressure that puts on emerging poets. That's how you end up with "55 Sestinas Written In A Bowling Alley." Urgh. But then I think of someone like Josh Bell—whose first book *No Planets Strike* went on after publication to be wildly popular. As it should be, as it's pretty damn amazing. It went into many reprints, and people are absolutely culty about that book. But for a while Josh couldn't get arrested if he tried. It took him many frustrating years to get that first book taken. And yet he never went back to redo the book into something more immediately palatable for editors and contests. He stayed true to his vision. It can take some patience and faith, getting your work into the world. Especially if your voice is particularly unique, doing something editors haven't exactly seen before. This has a lot to do with dumb luck, I'm afraid. Much of the writing life has to do with luck. You just want to help that luck along in every possible way you can.

My forthcoming book, *Slant Six*, is held together by a few more apparent themes, I guess, though I didn't plan it that way. It's a book animated by types of engines, forms of energy, the politics of our particular thermodynamics, the body racing toward its mortality. The speaker in that book is writing toward people 500 or 1,000 years in the future. What will they want to know from a poem? I think of it as the mid-life muscle car that I can now afford.

**FH:** You mentioned earlier that *Black Box* sometimes occupies an imaginative space of female anger, particularly "the supposed transgressiveness of female anger." Does a poem like "I Heart Your Dog's Head"—which hilariously casts former NFL coach Bill Parcells as "the illuminated manuscript / of cruel and successful men, those with the slitty eyes of ancient reptiles, / who wear their smugness like a tight white turtleneck, / and revel in their lack of empathy / for any living thing"—simply reveal the "experiential truth" of female anger, or is it a conscious form of political activism against gender norms and prejudice, or both? Do you think poetry is well suited to political activism?

**EB:** Huh. I'd never thought of the speaker of that poem as particularly female. It never honestly occurred to me that the poem had much to do with gender politics. I thought it ended up a *cri de coeur* for anyone who's been traumatized by football as a child. But now that you point it out, sure, I can see that interpretation. I guess poets are often the last to know what their poems are about.

Looking back on it, I personally associate that poem with my deep distaste for bullies and hypocrites. This makes me an inherently "political" person, I suppose. I'm almost genetically incapable of not speaking up when something hits me as unfair or unethical. Which isn't me trying to give myself a compliment. Being such a person has a lot of drawbacks—there's a certain willful naiveté stuck in my character that I haven't so far chosen to cure—and that doesn't always make you the most beloved person in a room.

As far as poetry goes, I don't think poetry escapes its politics any more than any other part of life can. How could that be? Poets are just supposed to call "not it"? You may ignore your politics, but they won't ignore you. The verbal icon seems to me a myth made up by a bunch of privileged dudes to alleviate poetry of some key human responsibilities. I think art for art's sake was an idea invented by people who could afford it.

**FH:** Another point of interest in *Black Box* is the many references to other works of art—from Bernini's Saint Teresa to "my personal Zapruder film"—that serve the book's speakers as "manuals of chaos." The book's first poem, "Of the Poet's Youth," recounts a time when "men were a form of practice for the Russian novel / we foolishly hoped our lives would become." These works of art almost seem to romanticize turmoil, though they also offer it as a shared experience, therefore providing solace and a way out of the grief turmoil conjures (perhaps reminding us that, as you say, depictions of apocalypse are other forms of saying "transformation"). Does this speak to your own relationship with art? Is this an aim you have for your own work?

**EB:** I've always been attracted to art that captures the grand gesture. I think maybe that comes partially from having grown up in Nebraska where humility, understatement, and generally not making a stink are highly prized. Learning self-discipline early is mostly a good thing.

But for a certain kind of soul, it can leave you a little thirsty. A kind of a pioneer hangover, keeping yourself so contained. Even as a very small child, I always wanted the world to be bigger than what I saw around me.

Of course, now that I say that, I also realize how much I gravitate to forms of subtlety in art, to the small motions that reveal the sublime, both in people and literature. Subtlety is valued too little in our place and time. Though certain kinds of subtlety will easily flop over into the twee or precious, which I can't stand. Poems that are too very exquisite get on my last nerve. It's like watching a bad drag show. There are certain poems—swamped by shimmers and sequins—that make me want to throw a wadded up Burger King wrapper right into their dainty middle.

So that's an animating tension for me and a problem I think I try to resolve in my work. I always say I'd like to be the poetic love child of W.H. Auden and Sylvia Plath. His urbanity, poise, and intellectual rigor. Her stance, dark humor, and intensity. I want decorum and drama.

But we shouldn't assume that there's some kind of self-repairing solace in viewing the tragic. That's way too easy, and the idea of catharsis feels to me a tidy invention for something else we don't know how to exactly describe. I think maybe we're talking about the uncanny when we try and identify our mixed feelings about certain kinds of art. That shiver of recognition that both comforts and unnerves. As is true with Bernini's statue. Teresa's ecstasy is simultaneously holy and vulgar. Capturing that lively opposition is what I want art to do. That's what I want my poems to do. You don't get the pearl without the speck of grit at the center of it.

**FH:** One of the goals of VIDA, which you co-founded with Cate Marvin in 2009, is “to create a forum at which all women writers may engage in much longed for conversations about literature being produced by women and its reception by the larger culture.” What was the thought process behind the decision to make this a strictly female space? What if a man expressed interest?

**EB:** VIDA isn't by any means a women-only space. It's a space and conversation for anyone who cares about women's voices in literature. And a lot of men do care about this. We have men on our board, we have male interns, and we have a lot of support from male writers. At recent events we've had Terrance Hayes, Bob Shacochis, and Robert Pinsky read for us. It's been gratifying to see how many men are about these issues, too.

**FH:** The Count is something that really attracted us to VIDA. It was rather startling to see the numbers concerning how women are still underrepresented in the publishing world. Of course keeping them honest is important, and the charts show to what extent these publishers have improved in their inclusion of women over time,

but what are some of the less-obvious goals of the Count? Have you considered adding counts to show how women of color are represented?

**EB:** Yes, we've considered breaking the Count out to highlight other, just as important, kinds of diversity. But one of the best things about the Count is that it's already brought an enormous amount of attention to other kinds of counting. So VIDA has already helped to accomplish that greater awareness. But it may still happen. People need to realize that for all of the attention VIDA has received nationally and internationally, we're a small volunteer organization working with a very limited budget. That makes us even more proud of what we've managed to accomplish, but it is in fact a ton of work. And the Count does point to the publishing situation for women of color in that the Count includes every kind of woman. Every color and creed. Breaking publications down into more specific categories might be useful in some ways in the future, but there's a lot of power in emphasizing the places where our common experience meets. Because divide and conquer has always been the best method for keeping people from coming together to work toward their shared interests.

**FH:** Is there anything else the Erin Belieu fan should be looking out for in the near future?

**EB:** *Slant Six* is already in the chute with Copper Canyon and will appear in September 2014. If you want a preview, poems from it are up online at the *New Yorker*, *Willow Springs*, *Ploughshares*, and *Slate*.



# CONTRIBUTORS

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SCOTT BADE lives in Kalamazoo, Missouri with his wife Lori and sons, August and Stuart. Scott is pursuing a doctoral degree at Western Michigan University. He is a former poetry editor for *Third Coast Magazine* and editorial assistant at New Issues Press. His poems have appeared in *Fugue*, *Parthenon West Review*, *H\_NGM\_N*, and others.

KATIE BERGER, originally from Nebraska, is an MFA in creative writing candidate the University of Alabama. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *otoliths*, *ditch*, the *Broken Plate*, *Steel Toe Review*, *Sugared Water*, the *Untidy Season: An Anthology of Nebraska Women Poets*, and elsewhere. Her chapbook, *Time Travel: Theory and Practice*, was released by Dancing Girl Press in 2013.

MAGGIE BLAKE is currently enrolled in the School of Letters MFA program in poetry at Sewanee, the University of the South. Her work has appeared in the *Southern Poetry Anthology, Volume V: Georgia*, as well as *Town Creek Poetry*. Her review of Jane Hirshfield's *Come, Thief for Flycatcher* is forthcoming this fall and further poems are forthcoming in *Tar River* and *Switchback* later this year. During the school year, she teaches high school English in Atlanta, Georgia.

JOHN F. BUCKLEY has divided his life between California, where he spent most of his adulthood, and Michigan, where he was born and raised and where he now attends the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, working toward an MFA in poetry. His collections, *Sky Sandwiches* and *Poet's Guide to America* (with Martin Ott) were released in the Fall of 2012, as was his second chapbook, *Leading an Aquamarine Shoat by Its Tail*. His website is [johnfrancisbuckley.wordpress.com](http://johnfrancisbuckley.wordpress.com).

NATALIE BYERS is an MA Creative Writing student at Missouri State University where she also teaches poetry and composition. She is an assistant poetry editor for MSU's literary magazine, *Moon City Review*. Her work can be found in *When We Become Weavers: A Midwestern Anthology on the Queer Experience*, *Bop Dead City*, *Gutter Eloquence*, *Slipstream*, and *Paddle Shots: A River Pretty Anthology*. At least once a day, she locks herself in the bathroom with lit journals and yells: "Mommy's pooping!"

CHRISTINE HAMM is a PhD candidate in English Literature at Drew University. Her dissertation focuses on Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath and how these poets use animals to express ideas about gender and identity. Christine is a former poetry editor for *Ping\*Pong*. She won the MiPoesias first annual chapbook competition with her manuscript *Children Having Trouble with Meat*. Her poetry has been published in *Orbis*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *Lodestar Quarterly*, *Poetry Midwest*, *Rattle*, *Dark Sky*, and many others. She has been nominated four times for a Pushcart Prize, and she teaches English at CUNY. *Echo Park*, her third book of poems, came out from Blazevox in the fall of 2011. Christine was a runner-up to the Poet Laureate of Queens.

CLARKE HENRY holds an MFA from Claremont Graduate University and a BA from the University of Redlands, Johnston Center for Integrative Studies. He is a freelance architectural and event photographer in the Los Angeles area, and keeps a studio in Chinatown. He rides really fancy lightweight bicycles late at night as fast as he can.

ROBERT HITT grew up on a cranberry farm in Washington state, deciding at an early age that he would much rather do anything other than drag sacks of cranberries during harvest for a nickel apiece. Eventually, he settled on writing poetry and fiction since the pay is roughly the same. He holds BA and MA degrees from his home state's Western Washington University and is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. This is his first publication, and he has thus far been relieved that the paparazzi have continued to grant him his privacy.

RICHARD KELLY KEMICK is originally from Calgary, Alberta and is a graduate of the University of British Columbia. Richard is currently enrolled in an English MA program at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton, writing a creative thesis on the porcupine caribou migration. He has been published or has works forthcoming in *Feathertale*, *Grain*, *Prairie Journal*, *QWERTY*, and *Vallum*.

SHARON KUNDE has taught English to students in Tirana, Albania; Undurkhaan, Mongolia; New York, New York; and Pasadena, California. By day, she is a doctoral candidate in English at the University of California, Irvine. By night, she sings in a number of ensembles, including Tasty Sqrles. "The Saint" is part of a century of poems written in the hours before dawn over the course of a year. She lives in Altadena, California with her husband, two sons, eight chickens, and four hives of bees.

JENNIFER RAHA is a 2013 graduate of the University of North Carolina's MFA program. She holds a degree in English from the University of Virginia. Her poems have been published in the *WomenArts Quarterly Journal*, *DASH*, and other publications. She was a 2013 finalist for the Nazim Hikmet Prize as well as a finalist in the *Crab Orchard Review's* 2013 Allison Joseph Poetry Prize. Jennifer currently teaches composition and literature at Old Dominion University and Tidewater Community College. She lives in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

JUDITH RONEY is the only child of a single, working mother. She grew up in Chicago and often relied on stories to comprehend the world around her. She is studying poetry as a second-year graduate student in the MFA program at the University of Central Florida (UCF). Currently, she works with adults suffering from mental illness and emotional challenges through a graduate-teaching-associate position in a creative-writing-workshop environment. Judith was selected by UCF for the "Outstanding Senior Undergraduate Poetry Award," in addition to being nominated by UCF for both the 2012 and 2014 AWP Intro Journals Award. Her work has appeared in *Gambling the Aisle*, *Zaum*, the *Cypress Dome*, *All things Girl*, and *Third Wednesday*. She is currently revising a chapbook exploring the human need for a connection to the divine and the mythos, truths, and lies created within that space.

STEVEN SANCHEZ is a Lambda Literary Fellow. He will begin the final year of his MFA in creative writing this fall at California State University, Fresno. He currently works at a small coffee house in Fresno, and his poetry has previously appeared in *Chelsea Station* and *Wilde Magazine*, among others.

MICHAEL M. WEINSTEIN is a doctoral student in English at Harvard and a graduate of the creative writing program at Northwestern University. The recipient of a Fulbright grant to Siberia, he is also a freelance translator of Russian poetry. He is currently at work on a first book of poems.

ANDREW WEST is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Kansas (where he earned an MA). He received his BA from the University of Notre Dame. The poems included in *Foothill* are a small part of a longer sequence still in progress entitled *At Home, In Kansas City*.

MARCO YAN is an MFA candidate at the University of Hong Kong. He writes poems about Hong Kong, as well as the experience of being young. His poems have appeared in *Cha: an Asian Literary Journal*, *Yuan Yang*, *Prairie Schooner*, and more.



FOOT

a journal of poetry

HILL







Directed by students at Claremont Graduate University, *Foothill: a journal of poetry* is a biannual print and online poetry journal that features the work of emerging poets enrolled in graduate programs around the globe. To listen to some of the poets performing their work, visit [www.cgu.edu/foothill](http://www.cgu.edu/foothill).

