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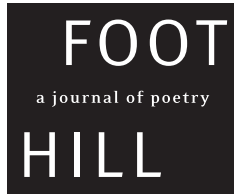
FOOTHILL

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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EDITOR'S NOTE

Surviving It

You feel it coming on. It's barely September, yet the weight of it has hidden the germ of a kink in your neck, forcing a slouch onto your left shoulder. The self-massaging hand is a reminder it's time again to fail a regular practice of yoga or meditation or what was that mindfulness fad you tried last year? Who can remember with a hundred worries rioting your brain like ants into the kitchen to harm your last summer peach? Your shoulder slumps another millimeter.

Stress—its hands are all over us. Though stress persists through the long break, the fresh semester ushers in a throng of new demands, aspirations, and anxieties. Stress is our most deeply shared experience as graduate students. It is a leitmotif of every issue of *Foothill*, each poem's background noise.

What can we do against it? Don't think I am going to proclaim, "Write poems." What in Dante's nine circles is more stressful than writing? Dare I say—and I think our elegant and hard-working interviewee, Marilyn Chin, would agree—that if the activity of writing poems doesn't induce Dante-level hyperbole, you're not doing it right. That said, writing through the stress is far more productive than avoidance, than binge watching *Game of Thrones* with your bottle- and burrito-of-choice (often served with a large side of self-hatred).

However they managed it, the graduate students in this issue (along with those who sent the hundreds of mostly outstanding submissions we read over the past year) produced. Many of them are not MFA students—they wrote these poems on their own time. That level of dedication to the immense, though utterly impractical requirements of creating powerful art when virtually every pressure in life is commanding them to be pragmatic (read: make money) is heroic.

In our interview with Marilyn, we reference a recent quote by CA Conrad that is apt here: "Poetry is proof of survival and I do not want that taken lightly, ever." We never do.

Cheers,

Kevin Riel
Editor-in-Chief

TUFTS

POETRY AWARDS

2015

KINGSLEY TUFTS

POETRY AWARD WINNER



ANGIE ESTES
Enchantée

When night blooms,
it's serious: the poplar spills
soprano and warns the grackles
of my heart.

KATE TUFTS

DISCOVERY AWARD WINNER



BRANDON SOM
The Tribute Horse

A paper-name ensures a debt
of sound. A paper wake, a ream
ripsawed by utter-breath, feathers
—tract to vane—my throat.

THE TUFTS POETRY AWARDS ARE PRESENTED ANNUALLY

by Claremont Graduate University
and given for books published
in the preceding year.

KINGSLEY TUFTS AWARD
\$100,000 awarded
for a book of poetry
by a mid-career poet.

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\$10,000 awarded for a
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POEMS

ROBERT ANNIS
MFA POETRY
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

Alopecia

Now I notice the naked summit peek
through tufts of fine nimbus—his brown halo
just a bit wider than mine. I can't keep
fingering the eye-socket-shaped swath no
longer sprouting behind my ear. I miss
the smell of shampoo already—mint leaves
and amazon berries effervescent,
suds oozing down my face, eyes closed—all nose
soaring over raspberry fields until
the drain clogs again. Mouse-sized fists of hair
hooked by a straightened coat hanger spiral
the toilet. Its porcelain throat burps, clear
and pale as me, not a thread left floating—
I swipe my hand across my head, counting.



JONATHAN BRENT BUTLER
PHD COMPOSITION AND RHETORIC
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Light Reading

Dead town,
the only book
in your library

must be a guide
to terminal illnesses

stuffed full
of bloody illustrations

patiently filled
by your children's crayons.

Some Lousy Truths

The pucker of dry rot,
its fungal fans like rows of teeth.

The collapsed mine shaft
of an old man's mouth.

Syphilitic pox concealed
beneath a penciled beauty mark.

A blue Camaro turning orange
in the leper colony of the junkyard.

ROBERT CAMPBELL
MFA CREATIVE WRITING
MURRAY STATE UNIVERSITY

Father, Figure

Like a neat little picture. Like a collared seaside figure. Like a navy blue fisher. Like a combed and prodded creature. Like a baritone razor. Like a grim

double feature. Like a mannequin's smile. Like erasure. Like the aisles of a tool store, warm and wooded. Like a dangling fixture. Like a neat little picture. Like

a gruesome idea growing nearer. Like a dictionary. Like a magnifying reader: blurry at first, then clearer. Like a dead reckoning among the night buoys. Like plaid

wallpaper. Like numb fingers. Like the purr of a barber's black plastic clippers. Like plaid slippers. Like a haunting, but newer. Like a black eye, but cooler. Like a smart little

fissure. Like a throbbing derision, a thorn in the temple. Like pressure. Like a crumbling tower. Like no cowards. Like a swiss pocket knife, articulate

and icy. Like go hit the showers. Like impressing the neighbors. Like toast without butter. Like jumping on furniture. Like a neat little picture. Like diving for

flounder. Like ironing briefs. Like thunder. Like horror. Like sand-scalded feet. Like pleats. Like the reaper. Like an old leather ledger. Like winding a wristwatch back

further, faster. Like flotation devices. Like attention passengers. Like a bridge over water. Like suture. Like a long pair of pliers. Like you, only "Sir," "Mister."

JACOB EUTENEUER
MFA CREATIVE WRITING
CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

How to Cook a Steak

They say it's more about touch, but what they mean is feel. My son just started school and is disappointed about the food options in the cafeteria. When I was seventeen, my class took a field trip to a slaughterhouse. You didn't have to go. Your parents had to sign a waiver. I hopped in a van and learned where hamburgers come from.

Meat is a muscle, but we don't call it muscle. Kids have no idea what is going on. They think meat is some sort of shank tossed to lions in barred cages. I thought beer was root beer, but yellower until I drank a beer. When the animals in a book talk, it makes kids hate the world. Animals don't really talk. It takes a lot of getting lied to to get used to getting lied to. It usually happens sometime around kindergarten.

My son doesn't know how to work a grill, so I show him through trial and error. Here there is a stack of coals and a cold metal basin. With the help of poison in a squirt bottle and the flick of a match, my son and I rise above the beasts around us. He thinks I control the fire. The fire thinks it will live forever.

They say there are five ways to cook a steak, but there's really only one. You go to the grocery store, pay the cashier, drive home, rip open the plastic, and throw the muscle on something hot. They never taught me this in school. When civilization collapses, I'm going to eat a lot of steak and then open up my own school called "School for Rebuilding Society So It Better Resembles Cartoons." The first day, we're all going to jump off cliffs. Whoever makes the biggest poof of dust doesn't have to do homework. The homework is to cook a steak.

How to Gut a Fish

My wife loves the smell of autumn. She doesn't know it's the scent of death. The leaves retain waste and turn crisp. The grass grows yellow and hollow. Apples fall from trees, but my son snatches them up before they can grow. A fire on the edge of a lake is as close to apocalypse as I have come.

The scales are the first problem. They must be flaked off. Flailed until the shimmer disappears in a pile at my feet. My son throws them into the air. A pre-solstice snow globe. He is too young to handle a knife, but too old to misunderstand dying. The fish must be in balance. All that flesh ends up weighing very little.

My wife wants me to close the fish's eyes. I place tiny pieces of leaves over its sockets. It is only an illusion. The fish is awake. Feels every scrape against its scales. I stick a knife in its belly and run it towards the head. Gold and rubies spill from its gut. They rain down, slip through my bloodied hands. My son picks them up and puts them in his mouth. Berries and chocolate coins. The gold is soft, the rubies hard. I put the fish on a spit and turn it over the fire.

Books about the war are federally mandated to include the term *burnt human flesh*, but no one knows what it means. In the flames, the fish's flesh caramelizes. Sugars form, and our mouths water. My son crosses sticks and builds a graveyard. My wife rubs belladonna on her face. The leaves have fallen off the fish's eyes. We have all been dying for a very long time. When the north wind blows, it is not the cold that surprises us, but rather how good it feels on our burnt faces.

LANA I. GHANNAM
MFA CREATIVE WRITING
UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Skin Anatomy

You maulers, you fantastic analyses
of skeletons
whose stories digested us,

where fancies burn
our breasts, tongues,
hot muscles with fingernails

jagged with discontent—
we spit things, delicious.
Ladies, we grow gray flesh

beneath strong spineless skin—
twist from our molders, fist and mouth.
Say, horror, what wires track

you men? Your hopes convince us
of broken chains, but we store our bodies
in your hands, unspecial. Our eyes

scream *hush*—an attitude women
reflect on, melt to bone.

ANNA IVEY
PHD POETRY
GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

seconds in our palms

—for Jonathan

So how to fill the chasm she leaves is the million-dollar question. My urges are: bring cakes to her parents post pictures on the fridge try to like Elvis circumnavigate a burial tomb or even press rosemary between pages (it grows like magic when the roots sprout in a querulous vase the day I forgave my father for dying). My brother and I wonder what we do except hold the seconds in our palms and toss them back and forth with the ambitions of granite. He—my anthem of an upheaval—he hears me when I scream without noise.

what comes next

—for Allison, Joseph, Jonathan, Adria, and Jacob

The narrative is an unfinished antecedent for a renamed past. The narrative is the identity of exculpated madmen. The narrative is filed and labeled “what not to do.” The narrative is all that went wrong though what comes next can go right. The narrative is the anxiety medication the rusted softball medal the shutting out the fear of abandonment the stolen items the empty chair the anger that is the safest emotion the child with dark eyes. The narrative is my jugular hold on ambition that hides loneliness until holidays. Here amidst the past sins the narrative becomes an invitation to touch the ache that doesn’t have to silhouette us anymore my dear ones.

CATHAY WANG KAIXI
MA LITERARY STUDIES
CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

Oral

When time is right, or not, I bite
your zipper down
in slow certainty
and keep it on your ankles
like I caught a fish
not a salmon or herring
but a mermaid
on her way blossoming
into a woman
—slimy and salty
and your quasi-legs
interlocking

When my taste buds
start pollinating
hopefully your sense quakes
like you're in the sea
honey in the grip and heavy breathing
you're a wandering ship
hence I'm your redeeming captain
in the ebb and flow
I blow out your sirens

Though someday you swim back ashore
the ship will have been haunted
at sleepless nights
when the salty wind annoys your curtain
or at your wedding in spring
when the humid air tags your skin
—you will think of your captain
how helpless having her hands on your wheel
her tongue stirring your pond
her hair between your split tail

LAUREN J. KELLY
MA RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION
WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

The Second Act

I sketch blank space
in the hollow of your neck
lips cupped in a coffee O
caffeine-shake of shoulders
stiffness shrugged on
some scribbled overcoat
drawn and worn.

I drum veins beating
beneath the membrane of your wrists
eyes wide in a whitecap O
blackened-tide of lashes
over pupils sunk low
flotsam forsaken
inky and cold.

I inscribe your name
across the back of my throat
tongue twisted in a cherry O
perfume-ripened season
of fruit hung heavy
a harvest uncultivated
rotten and composed.



ARIANE LEWIS
MA ENGLISH
MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE

Paradise

You can't see the sun I'm under,
but it sleeps on my skin.

I don't remember cold,
but I shiver at the breath

the animals take when
they call to each other.

LUCIAN MATTISON
MFA CREATIVE WRITING
OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY

Collective Unconscious

Face in the crook
of her neck, his bulk pulses,

drapes her like animal
hide. Limbs and breath

woven together, they kindle
into burning.

The room becomes two bodies,
mouths open doors.

The world unspools
in the clutch of fingers,

her chest swells in slow waves.
Moments after,

the box spring is afloat
as if in a bowl of garlic skins.

A dream pencils the outline
of a whippoorwill's shadow

perched on his eyelids—bird
unmoving on the limb

of a barren tree until he wakes.
A wash of sunlight heats

exposed pieces: hand,
shoulder blade, thigh

pulled up as if running.
Backs to each other

they reach away
toward the mattress edge,

breathe like a pair
of punctured lungs.



Trophies

Nailed above
the headboard are tails,

feet, faces—triptychs
of silence, a patient

trigger, the heart
ceasing to pump inside

a fox. Tonight, she unfolds
a blade from its cradle.

Whelp belly at knife tip,
it's always the same

question: is this art
killing animal

essence or the only way
to record experience?

She dissects the subject,
fingers pull hot

organs, tendons pop
on Damascus steel.

She wears a second
skin, blood coating

her hands as she works,
peels the animal's cavity

like wet clothes from a lover,
hangs its brush and pads,

the mask,
still warm to the touch.



BRETT SALSBURY
MFA CREATIVE WRITING
UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS

A Riparian Zone

My uncle blew there in the
strictest wind, by the wildest

steel that glistens in its menace. The
seams rip in the in-between, and sand

on the sidewalk is momentarily
superior. In the driest cracks

of every pore, the dirt nestles and blocks
his blood, and yet it drips

in spite of mammatus. The smoke
mingles in its own greyness and joins

the drum of this broken watershed
and wonderland. The ecosystem

flounders, and plastic bags
float in the sourest patch, snagging

their film on the beckoning
cacti needles. He was further surprised

by three pieces of pepper spray, colored
a vibrant ruby. This list concluded

with a Maneki-neko, its arm severed
by an In-N-Out wrapper smothered

in ketchup. He told me a story
about all the water he misses,

about all the empty crevasses
he is reluctant to relinquish.



KERRI VINSON SNELL
MFA CREATIVE WRITING
ASHLAND UNIVERSITY

Here is how

I mother myself—

I am glass cradling glass,
crowning head leaves wounds.

I am milk pooling from breast
to red snow, fingernails reaching:

I am words skittering through synapses
to corners of crumbs.

I crave something clean.

I lick me down with a tongue nap
like a twig of sparrow meat.

Too skinny to fly, stranded in an unfriendly airport.
The air traffic controllers hold out little hope.

My breasts gorge robin red on parts of worms—tomes.
I am the only monk I will ever read. Ideas that don't fit

through this straw examine me, yet I can peck
anything. I can pretend disgust, say *don't need*

as I spread out my one odd wing.

ECT

The seeds of the buckeye are placed into burlap,
pulverized with a large rock, then scattered across
the river, fingers rubbing together—friction and dust
suspended in the bluest top-water.

A few hours later, the fish will float paralyzed,
the gapes of their mouths sticking out,
waiting for Chickasaw hands to pluck them
like finned feathers into the fire.

1965. *Tabula rasa*—white.

Everything in the room—
the bed, the sheets, your smothering gown.
The only brown thing in the room is your hair. You are
curled and quiet and still, but there is an aura above you—
convulsing, throbbing, the death of something.

I am skipping silently around the room,
not really looking at you, watching the white walls
meander into yellow. I am about to be handed candy.
You are nineteen, and there won't be a rest of your life.
The sun pours through the window, fucking with perspective.

The black tongue-guard goes in your mouth
only once. Around your skull the circular vice with holes
where the thorns of blitzkrieg await. In the reception area
of the stellar assembly line before the double doors
of "shock alley," there are Sinatra records, playing cards,
magazines. My hands wave, never touch yours.

Strangers are pushing your bed.
You are the roots of the buckeye bush,
harvested in your mother's hands and delicately placed.
One joule will lift an apple into the air.
One hundred will power a laptop.

In 47 AD Scribonius Largus prescribed the tinning
of an electric eel to the head of the Emperor. In Switzerland,
schizophrenics were cast in fishermen's nets, lowered
into lakes and nearly drowned.

Your steeples are your hands.

AJ URQUIDI

MFA CREATIVE WRITING

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, LONG BEACH

Autopista Approaching El Oro

hills immersed in dry gold weed pimple

plains like ripples

on the ass of a sinewy pony

here over there too an uncorrupted

bell tower or pink

ermita straddles the fork

where two arroyos wrestle

glassless houses recapitulate

the shape color porous

extremities of each cinder block

fractal upholding their walls

paint's saved only for houses of god—

scent of shirked blood monarchs underway stir-fry

a field of toadstool ceramics harmless

as snaggle-toothed hag heads among them

state police search each

horse van and cab

they don't know what to look for yet

one trooper kicks stones at another

caresses her uzi

with jocular winks

eagle carries a snake away

nobody noticed?

now they'll have to build

a town on this spot

wait! it was a dealership balloon

these mountains once guarded a hoard then
the mine entombed its frenchmen
dry pines who saw still remember

around the sky's corner atlaacomulco oozes
politicians and petrol and isn't ashamed
to mention that to pilgrims

horizon's line quails
beneath omnipotent
blue where man and his burro
shuffle across like struggled unzipping

why aren't there any clouds today?
he gathered them into his pepsi hat
walking where lightning would much rather be



condolences to all of you

the next door neighbor's dog had screamed
and I thought of the day
we murdered Rosco
almost two years now

the veterinary interns younger
than myself had carried him
behind the wheeled steel elephant doors
and he never broke my gaze

the incinerator firing pets
into the hillside behind him
and what made me disgusted
with the world's dishonest practices
and myself was how he looked
like the one apologizing

then I remembered Michael Jackson
dying at my school with strangers
on the street holding signs
and embracing in convulsions
it had made me wonder
why they were sad for a stranger
though I felt it too

or the kaleidoscopic lizard I spotted
on a Mexican sidewalk that I spotted
a decade later in an American film
elegizing extinction and I felt it there too

or the man in a sleeping bag
outside the shake shop dumpster at 1:00 a.m.
with flies buzzing in his nose and I was fuming
on clouds of breath in permanent air
but why wasn't anything steaming from his lips
and I felt it there too but kept walking

back into now where I
slipped on my shorts
skipped into the street to shake
the Etch-a-sketch portrait of Rosco
in my mental gallery and the sunlight
cut me like unsolicited charity
and I started choking

since now it was May and the poplar
trees were fucking my lungs
and I tripped over something

the neighbor's dog's brains and his body
seeping into an open manhole

I had to bend over
tickle his tire-marked belly
place carefully my two lucky Milkbones
on his lids for peaceful passage

some jogger said "is that your dog?
my condolences" and I said
"it's everyone's dog
condolences to you too"

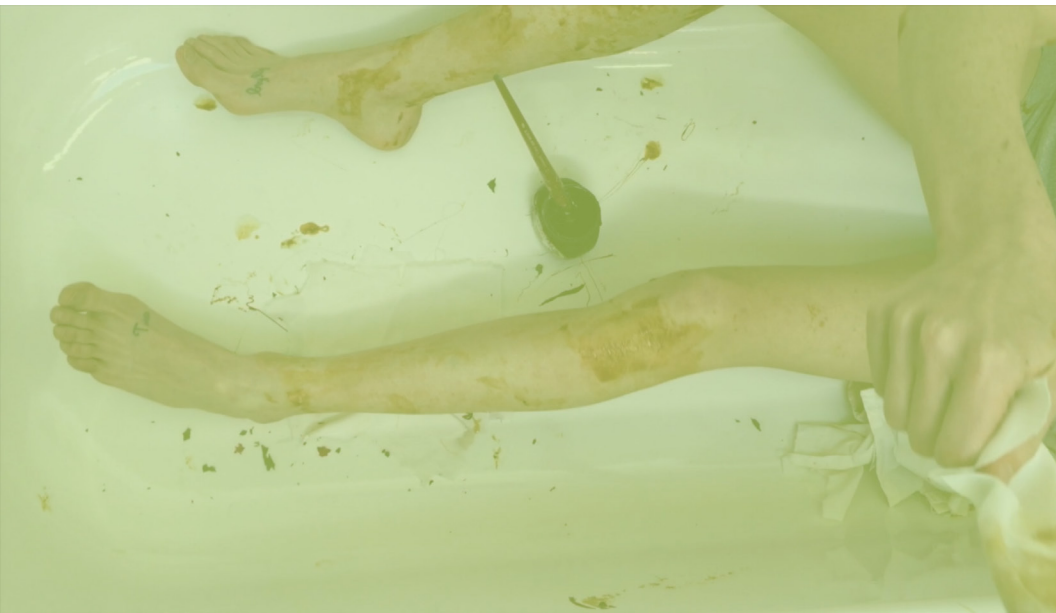
that quivering that hit me then
was the quivering that hits
every so often out of nowhere
on the subway at the car wash
the quinceñera the dog park
that's not out of nowhere
it's another friend's absence piercing
his way into newborn mythology

and we hurt because to share
the same permanent air
to swallow the same poplar ejaculate
and know that he was here
like us and gone like us
that's friendship enough for an absence to stab



ART

Marmite Waxing
Video



Blood Anklet

Pigment print,
blood, yarn
54"x 36"



*Nail polish on lizard skin
on paper*

26"x 40"



Diet Coke Bath
Performance



Again
Performance



Marmite Chesthair

Pigment print

29"x 23"



Surprise
Pigment print
24"x 31"

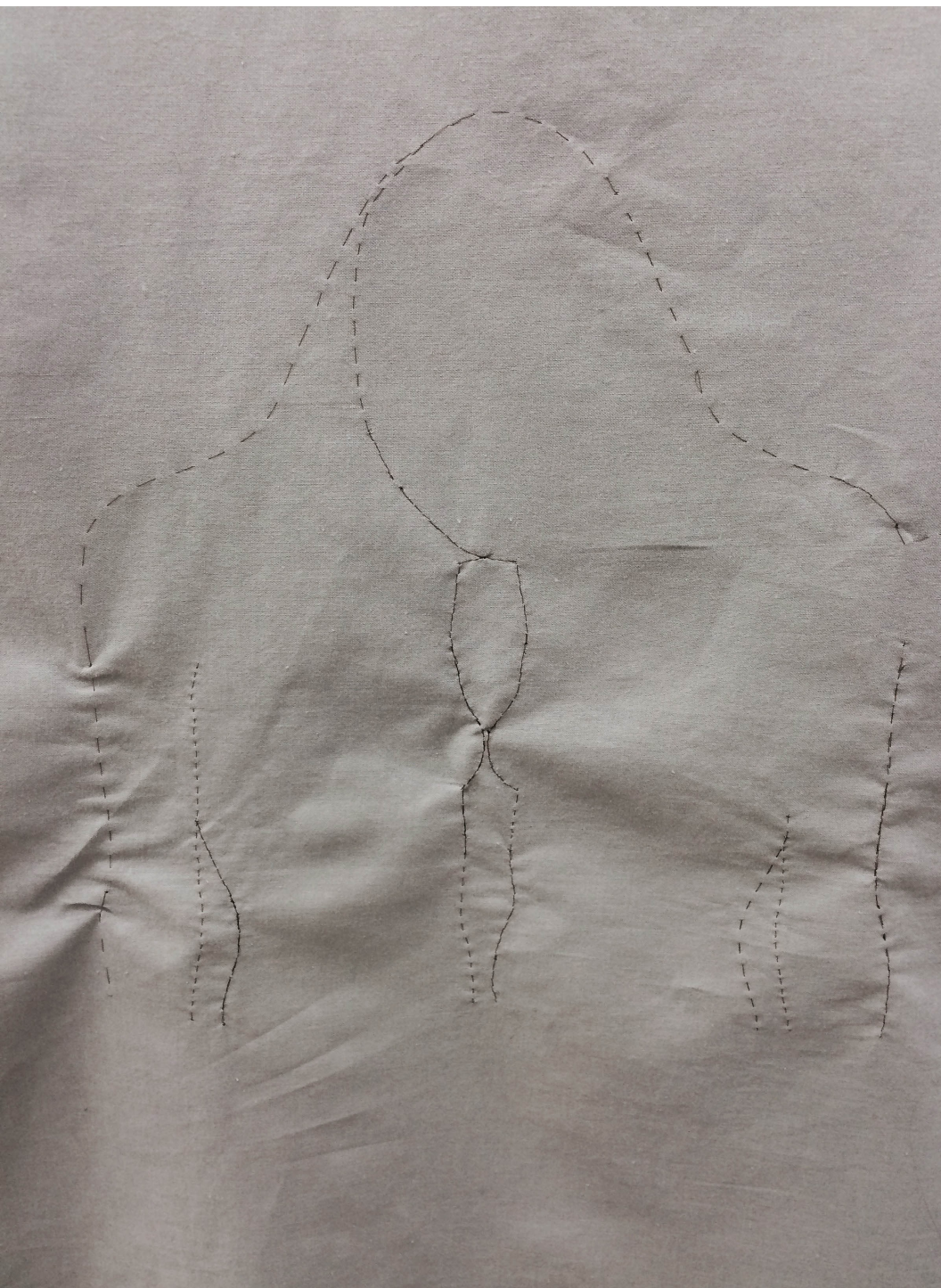


Bu

**Hair, cotton fabric,
pillow stuffing**



Onely Hairs
Hair and cotton fabric



Purple Bar
Pigment print
36"x 54"



INTERVIEW

MARILYN CHIN



Marilyn Chin is an award-winning poet and the author of *Hard Love Province* (2014), *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* (2009), *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* (2003), *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty* (1994), and *Dwarf Bamboo* (1987). Her writing has appeared in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*. She was born in Hong Kong and raised in Portland, Oregon. Her books have become Asian American classics and are taught in classrooms internationally. Chin has read

her poetry at the Library of Congress, and she was interviewed by Bill Moyers' and featured in his PBS series *The Language of Life* and in *PBS Poetry Everywhere*. *Hard Love Province* just received the 2015 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for poetry.

Foothill's Kevin Riel: We want to start our conversation at the beginning—with the first poem from your first book, *Dwarf Bamboo*, titled “The End of a Beginning.” The poem is an homage to your ancestors and an acknowledgement of the brutally hard lives they led as laborers—both in China and the United States—which made far more opportunities possible for you and other Chinese Americans. While the poem expresses gratitude for the sacrifices they made to enable you to become a writer, to “sit here, drink unfermented green tea / scrawl these paltry lines for you,” the poem also introduces this tremendous sense of debt that in various ways persists throughout your work as a constant and animating preoccupation. Now that you have reached a middle period in your career and worked hard to achieve so much as a poet, do the lines still feel “paltry”? Has your relationship to this sense of debt changed as you have gotten older? Is “debt” even the right word or concept?

Marilyn Chin: Thanks for this question because it made me go back to the first book. Don't you think there's a purity of intention in the first book? There's an innocent youthful clarity there. I could never write that book again. And “paltry,” I guess I was being modest, self-effacing. What do I mean by “paltry lines”? I'm honoring my dear “grandfather” with the offering of my poetry. But as you've noticed, there's a satirical break after the riddle. And then it goes off in this

direction that is totally not reverential: “This is why the baboon’s ass is red / why horses lie down only in moments of disaster / why the hyena’s back is forever scarred. / Why that one hare who was saved, splits his upper lip, / in a fit of hysterical laughter.” It’s total nonsense. It’s this teetering between reverence and irreverence that causes the dynamic tension in my work. I honor the ancestors, but I also critique everything. I guess it’s in my DNA.

Yes the work seems very paltry in comparison to the coolie working-class that worked on the railroad and the ancestors before them. I go to Beijing often now, and every time I go to the Great Wall, I realize that there are bones buried within those walls built with slave labor. They forced thousands of men to work on that wall, and when they died, they sometimes buried them near the wall; sometimes they buried them in the wall. So bizarre and gruesome! Yes, I’m honoring my ancestors with my poetry; I don’t take anything for granted. I understand how hard it was for preceding generations.

KR: As much as gratitude and love for your ancestors (both distant and close) comes through in your work, there is also often a tension between generations that you have seemed more concerned with expressing as your career has developed. In the work of the past decade, there is an intergenerational negotiation between feelings of tenderness and hostility, pride and disappointment, gratitude and resentment, that you brilliantly handle and examine. Of course, family dynamics are always fraught with conflict, but the conflicts in your work also manage the collision of Chinese and American culture and of traditional and progressive values. For instance, the grandmother character in your 2009 novel, *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen*, is hilariously portrayed as a cleaver-wielding “Confucian tyrant” by her generally resentful, American-born twin granddaughters, Mei Ling and Moonie, who see her as both protector and oppressor. And the feelings of antagonism are mutual: there is a scene in which the grandmother (with her granddaughters in mind) looks with disgust at a neighbor’s lazy cat that is “now a disgrace to its race. It could never return to the jungle and face its relatives.” And in your latest book of poems, *Hard Love Province*, a mother appears as the moonlight “staring back from death” with a certain moral severity upon the body of a lover, against which the speaker desires to become a “counter glow.” Can you talk about the sensitivities and challenges of writing about cross-cultural conflict within the family? Do you think of your writing as a space to “face your relatives”?

MC: Wow. Ok. It’s a really interesting question. Were you surprised when you read the book of fiction?

KR: Yes, I loved it. Especially being from San Diego myself, I was very familiar with of the sort of characters that populate the world of the novel. I was surprised about the tone, the frankness of the novel around issues of family, though that is certainly a part of your poetry as well.

MC: So, to follow the first question, there is reverence toward the past and an intergenerational struggle and so forth. All that is there. But I realize that I also like teasing the reader by dancing on this edge of transgression. I'm always talking back to the oppressor, to the grown up, to the patriarchy. Facing my relatives really is one layer of the book, talking back to that older generation because I was forced and expected to be the nice Chinese girl—to do well in school, to be the embodiment of the model minority myth. I had to suffer that Confucian hierarchy, the oppressive hierarchical family that oppressed women, in which my mother suffered greatly. She died at 62. She stopped eating. She didn't want to go on living. She had a hard time adjusting to her life in the United States.

KR: How long was she in the United States?

MC: For a long time, but she lived with my grandmother, and they rarely left the house. They lived in Portland, Oregon. They couldn't speak English and were isolated from the world. In the poem "Alba: Moon Camellia Lover," I was messing with the traditional Chinese myth. When one looks at the moon, one is supposed to see one's lover's face. But instead I see my mother's sad face. It's a strange moment of tripartite illumination: the girl speaker caught between her mother's face and her lover's beautiful backside. So it's a very strange moment in which I'm transgressing that romantic Chinese myth. In the last line, I characterize the mother moonlight as "sick." I speak to my mother everyday. She's been gone for over a decade, but she is still a very powerful presence. My grandmother's presence is also powerful. We're eternally talking back at our parents, right? For me, the intergenerational struggle has a reach beyond the grave. I can't speak for all other Asian Americans or Chinese Americans, but for me that "sick light" is still very strong.

Yeah, I am grateful. Gratitude is deep in my work. But I am also defiant, with a need to talk back. Even now I feel compelled to talk back to layers of oppressors, and they could be family or relatives. They could be the empire, the state, the prevailing culture, a new regime, or whatever.

KR: And the poem is always a space for you to express and animate that talking-back?

MC: And the fiction, which is a space where I can play in a more surreal, fun manner. I'm more strident and double-edged. I can kill off the San Diego surfer-dude character—like you—in the first tale, but then I resurrect him at the end of the book. And I am writing quite a bit more fiction right now. The problem with the literary world is that everything is forced into categories. You know, the poets and the fiction writers don't really mix. (They didn't even go to the same bar at Iowa). I believe it's healthy for writers to engage in some genre cross-dressing.

KR: Do you find one genre more difficult to progress through?

MC: They're just different. First and foremost, I was trained as a poet. Poets are careful readers and writers. I torture myself, distilling word-for-word in the fiction. I'm not thinking in terms of paragraphs. I may have a strong general concept for the book, but I'm still working like an obsessive poet, tinkering word for word, exacting gorgeous embroidery. That's why it took me ten years to write *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen!* I've got to change my pace. But I think coming from poetry, that focus on the level of the word is very strong.

KR: *Hard Love Provence* is a book of elegies, occasioned after you lost someone very close, and it touches on classic elegiac themes of loss, grief, and ultimately survival, and yet some of the longer poems—like “Formosan Elegy,” “Cougar Sinonymous,” and “Beautiful Boyfriend”—seem to reach beyond the personal grief of one speaker and take on other voices, other losses. There seem to be these cacophonies of griever, these communities. Are we right about this? If so, who are these other voices? Where do they come from?

MC: This book is centered around elegies. And they are elegies for specific people—I lost two boyfriends, and within the same 15 years, I lost my mother and my grandmother. But the muse can't grieve all the time. As you know, there are surreal pieces, prose poems, erotic haiku, political manifestos, and different things in the book that provide tonal and aesthetic shifts and comic relief.

The book is also a tribute to the form of the quatrain. I look back at the elegy, at something like Tennyson's “In Memoriam.” It's a long poem made of elegiac quatrains that begins as a love poem for this particular person, but then it moves in various other directions. I looked at that as one of the models, and I looked at different masters of the quatrain: Dickinson, Plath, Auden, Mirabai, and even Bob Dylan. I looked at folk songs, ancient folksongs as well as contemporary American folksongs.

The quatrain, and by extension, the ballad, is really a diverse form. Quatrains have been with us for eons. I wanted to exhaust the possibilities of the quatrain. So that's why I used polyphonic voices, and so I begin with the poem for the beloved, and then I give the muse borderless license to move around the world. In "Beautiful Boyfriend," I begin with the self. And I am grieving my boyfriend, Don Lone Wolf, then the imagination moves to different parts of the world, toward a kind of collective mourning.

KR: On the topic of quatrains, yours are buoyant with long caesuras and unusual spacing between and within lines and words. A poem like "Formosan Elegy," for instance, navigates so much white space as it communicates:

I sit near your body bag and sing you a last song
I sit near your body bag and chant your final sutra
What's our place on earth? nada nada nada
What's our destiny? war grief maggots nada

As the speaker ponders questions and bitter realities that are familiar to anyone who has been through deep loss, the spacing offers these little voids of silence, leaving openings for the reader to imagine the speaker's contemplativeness, sighs, or resistance to utter what she feels she must consider. Can you talk about how you came to choose this formal technique, and what you were trying to convey through them and their spacing?

MC: As you noticed, when you read the quatrain out loud, you gave it a chanting quality. "Nada, nada, nada" is a Buddhist incantation. It also means "nothingness," "emptiness." It's a haunting prayer. It's total despair. When you read it, you also had to slow down your reading and mind the spaces...there are pauses between words, pauses between stones and breaths. I actually wrote some of these quatrains in Chinese characters first. And then I translated them into English because I wanted to effect the spare perfection of a Chinese poem. The perfection in placement, perfection in what I keep on and off the page. The precision of the silences between the Chinese characters that forces the reader to slow down and contemplate the words. When I read Classical Chinese poems in the original, I sit and contemplate for hours. There is no punctuation

in a Chinese poem; therefore, the reader must trust her own ear for caesuras. I am trying to control the pacing of the poem, and I am asking the reader to savor the silences as well as the words.

In the twenty-first century, we are over-equipped with devices. Most of my students write their first draft on their gadgets, cell phones, tablets, but I continue to write my first draft with a No. 2 pencil... and of course if we go back to the Tang Dynasty, the poets wrote with ink brushes. They believe that the brush is connected to the heart. So this quatrain is especially interesting in that it could be experienced in multiple ways. If you read it to yourself, it's a much quieter poem with long, sustained moments of silence. But when you read it out loud, you have to chant, minding the pauses, as in a Buddhist chant: "nada nada nada." What is destiny? War. Grief. Maggots. It's powerful and devastating...and simultaneously, it's spiritual. It reminds you that poems come from the oral and spiritual tradition. But when you read it on the page, it's really quiet. It's contemplative, more personal, and deeply sad.

KR: So much of the reading we do is on our phones and tablets, and it is disposable. We read through text really quickly, and sometimes it's hard to turn off that impulse to scan a line of poems. The poems you write really demand that we slow down. Especially these quatrains, they demand that you read them in a different way. This is not language meant to be scanned.

MC: Yes. Like Twitter poems—you read it, and then it vanishes.

KR: And then on to the next forgettable one.

MC: Yes. I wonder if students or poets have stopped reading in a slow contemplative manner.

KR: Yes, let's blame Frank O'Hara.

MC: Yes! And we San Diegans like a slower pace. We want to read at the beach. A student comes to me and says, "Oh, I don't have any ideas." I say, "Well, take some books, a pen and a pad, go to the beach, sit under a palm tree, stay a long time, see what happens. Just turn off all your gadgets. Ideas will come."

KR: *Hard Love Province* is also a fierce record of survival. A poem like "Kalifornia (A portrait of the poet wearing a girdle of severed heads)" reads like an inventory of personal strength, a rallying cry. One of us came across a quote from an interview with CA Conrad that seems aligned to the spirit of your book: "Poetry is proof of survival and I do not want that taken lightly, ever." Did you think of the activity of writing these poems as announcements of your survival? Is the act of writing itself a resuscitating experience for you?

MC: The goddess Kali is a scary goddess. She's got blood dripping from her mouth; she wears a girdle of severed heads; she's stomping on the body of Shiva. She is terrifying. But she is also the goddess of survival, the goddess of rebirth—sometimes, one has to perform total destruction to be reborn. Yes, I'm really sad and angry, angry about all of my losses and about the injustices in the world, and yet I feel inspired! I want to reignite, to carry on fearlessly. Poetry is a great gift—I want to sing out my grief and share it with my readers. Poetry is a rich genre that will nourish me for a long time, and it makes life worth living; it makes life wonderful.

So yes, I love the scary goddess—she's still raging within me. I have nightmares about her. She comes in different forms. Sometimes she's Medusa with snakes, sometimes she has fiery hair. She haunts me; she scares the hell out of me. She is divine inspiration. She is not Guanyin, the goddess of mercy; she is Kali, all dark force, nothing merciful about her, but her dark force balances calmness and inertia. Even when I'm humorous, I'm darkly humorous. Satire is both a playful and savage critique, like chopping Surfer-Dude's head off. Funny, yes? But he reappears and becomes Grandma Wong's best friend in the end through reincarnation.

The reason why I retired early is so that I could explore outside the institution—poetry has become so institutionalized—I want to explore this side of Kali, pure fearless inspiration without academic mediation. Notice I said *Kalifornia*. I see myself as a Californian, but also a pacific-rimmer. California faces the east, and my poetry has eastern resonances. Perhaps, lately, I look toward Asia more than I look toward Europe. Although, of course, I have Tennyson in there! You can't really write an elegy without knowing about that great overwrought elegy. I celebrate many sides of my literary legacy.

KR: On the topic of resuscitation, it's striking how many poets and musicians (mostly dead) show up in various guises in *Hard Love Province*—far more than in any of your previous books. There is Li Po, Adrienne Rich, Walt Whitman, Su Tong Po, Emily Dickinson, Wang Wei, Marvin Gay, Donald Justice, Gwendolen Brooks, Ai, Gary Snyder, John Cage, Denise Levertov, WH Auden, William Carlos Williams, Dylan Thomas, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Mozart, Ezra Pound, Sylvia Plath, etc. Were you relying more on the work of other poets while you were writing this particular book? Was their work a source of strength while you were grieving—an activating force—or do they show up in such numbers for another reason?

MC: I guess it's my time to honor my mentors and influences: I studied with Justice at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and Levertov at Stanford University. I took a class with Ai when I was very young. Adrienne Rich is one of my heroes; I never had her as a teacher,

but she was definitely a mentor, and June Jordan and Gwendolyn Brooks, they were my mentors in many ways, and they all died recently, and so I thought I would honor them in this book. I was also listening to a lot of music during these grief years; I had insomnia, so I would stay up all night listening to everyone from Chopin to Coltrane to Lil' Kim. I love Nicki Minaj's line, "You bitches are my sons." I let old-school rappers drown out my tears with loud beats. I tell my students that if you can't beat the rappers in your rhymes, forget it. Don't write. You have to be inventive and quick.

So I was reading and listening to all these wonderful musicians and writers. I read Auden's gorgeous ballads. I am pissed that most poets have stopped reading him; I want to bring him back. They think he is an old fogey now. But he is amazing! He could write about anything. And in any form. And so much of it! I wish that I could be that facile that didactic and unselfconsciously lengthy! He is a master! He could do those ballads in his sleep. Yeah, indeed, my work is filled with references, and of course I looked at Dickinson's quatrains really closely, and I learned so much about the way she used space and punctuation—or lack of punctuation—and weird caps and dashes. What fun! How amazing that she could create so much from the modest hymnal. And wow, how about those quatrains!

I just had a great time soaking up all that research. Truly, the great poets are poetry nerds. I know that I have a lot of allusion and references. I wear my influences on my silk sleeves...poetry is intertextual fun! I first began with the Chinese *jueju*—the cut-verse form, the Chinese quatrain. Then, I read an overabundance of both western and eastern quatrains to try to create my own beautiful hybrid forms. It doesn't matter if nobody else thoroughly understands what I'm doing. It is important that I, the poet, keep my work interesting...I love reading and writing poetry! I love having that internal and external dialogue with other artists.

KR: In addition to there being a lot of poets in *Hard Love Province*, there are multiple references to a range of religious texts and figurations. The crisis of faith while in the throes of despair is a pervasive theme in the book. For instance, in "Cougar Synonymous":

My cousin calls him Allah my sister calls him Jesus
My brother calls him Krishna my mother calls him Gautama
I call him call him on his cell phone
But he does not answer

Here the divine (named “call him”) is indivisible from our intense desire to converse with it, and yet all the speaker gets is disappointment and half a line of white space. Do you think of elegy, *Hard Love Province*, or even poetry in general, as tantamount with our desire to converse with the divine?

MC: Oh yeah, I mean, it’s about crying out to the lord. Through my poems, I am able to speak to goddesses and the lord and the spirit and the muse. How else do we tap into divine energy? It is through contemplation and making art that we become closest to the divine. This particular quatrain has a Chinese *jueju* structure. The first parallel couplet cries out to four different lords; the final couplet turns to “despair” and a “crisis of faith” as you smartly call it. “He does not answer,”—the lord, the dead boyfriend, the doubleness here is profound. It took me a long time to get it right.

KR: The speakers in your work have never been shy about their sexuality, and the overt voicing of female desire is as strong and thrilling as ever in *Hard Love Province*. It’s especially jarring, though, to find in a book of elegies lines like these (taken, we might add, from the same poem as that referenced in the last question):

What they say about a woman at forty-five

Too late to live too soon to die

My wine is bittersweet my song is wry

My yoni still tight my puma is on fire

The poem explores sexuality almost as a form of predation in the face of grief, distress, and aging. The poem also takes the often demeaning modifier of the “cougar”—the sexually active middle-aged woman—and fuses the voices of many women into a kind of brooding superhero. She has (or they have) no desperation or shame. Would you talk about the composition of this poem in relation to the sexual politics of the twenty-first century?

MC: I am tired of my friends saying that as they grow older they feel invisible, especially in Southern California, where it is all about beautiful bodies. I feel stronger and more sexual as I grow older. I don’t want to be defeated by this youth-worshipping culture. I wanted these quatrains in “Cougar Sinonymous” to speak to the subject about growing older, about claiming our bodies. Young women artists like Nicki Minaj, Margaret Cho, and Amy Schumer, they’re as crude and wild as the dudes! Well, we could love or hate their hyper-sexuality...but why are American poets such prudes? Are we still wearing our Puritan habits? Why can’t we write about

our vulvas? Once we hit the academy, we can't write about sex anymore? What happened to the women-esque, erotic spirit? Has it all turned hipster intellectual?

In connection with the elegies, death is about the end of the body. And what you remember of your beloved is really his body; I mean, you can talk to his ghost, you can dream about him, but you won't ever touch his body again. His body is rotting in the earth as we speak. It belongs to the worms now. Grief is in the body, and joy and memory are in the body, and what we will miss is the body. And yes, it is strange to have sex and grief merge seamlessly...but love and death are the eternal forces. Some female spiders bite off their lovers' heads after coitus. He is only useful for his sperm. For my beloved, Don Lone Wolf, and me, love, intimacy, sex, and death are all intertwined in memory...and intertwined in the imagery of the poems. It is absolutely natural to write "erotic elegies."

KR: You are also known as a poet who does not shy away from the term "activist" in relation to your work, and there are plenty of political propositions made in *Hard Love Province*. How did your politics and the elegiac work for or against each other in the book? Is it possible that ideology can stultify the poetic imagination, or is it an energizing force? How do you navigate this?

MC: When I was very young, I called myself an activist political poet, and I stayed with that mantra. It is in the work whether I want it to be there or not. On the one hand, I am writing elegies for my beloved, Don Lone Wolf. But Don is also of the Ute Mountain Tribe, and the poem can't help but cry out for a larger loss. "One dead brown boy is a tragedy...ten-thousand is a statistic" is personal and political.

The cougar poems are fun, but are also political because I'm writing about older women taking charge and claiming their bodies and their sexuality. So it is very much in the DNA of my best poems, whether I'm writing about the beloved, my mother, a butterfly... it doesn't matter who the subject is. It seems to me there's still that little brown girl in the poem who wants to cry out, who wants to talk back to the world and file her complaint to God, to the regime, to whatever. Henry Louis Gates said in his introduction at the Anisfield Wolf Book Award ceremony that I write "a poetry of resistance." He is absolutely right. I am an activist poet. I am going to try to write some nice landscape poems when I'm at the Civitella Raineri artist colony in Umbria next month. We'll see what happens. I don't know if I can really write a bucolic poem without messaging. I don't know if I can. Perhaps I should try.

KR: Though your work is fierce, trenchant, and beautiful, it is too little acknowledged as incredibly funny. We read in an interview that you sometimes use the work of comedians like Margaret Cho and Dave Chappelle in your creative writing classes at San Diego State University. What is the function or aim of humor in your work? Or is your muse simply funny?

MC: I love satire, and I use humor as a weapon, as part of my activist or political inclinations. I really love the Swiftian form of critiquing the world—using ample irony and satire. My students don't think I'm funny, but I think so much is in the timing, using that particular moment to turn the poem into a hilarious mirror—where the reader can see her own duplicity and ridiculousness in a given situation or problem. Especially with *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen*, writing that crazy book opened me up to humor.

KR: It is a terrifically funny novel.

MC: It is anarchy! I'm not afraid to write about sex. I'm not afraid about writing satire. I'm not afraid of venturing into fiction (although the word-count is scary). I do want to be hilarious. The risk is that the work might fall on its face, but at least I feel like I put in a good try. I like to play with high/low registers, cross genre borders, get edgy toward surrealism. I try to test the waters because I only have one life to create. I should have fun. It's really about testing one's art. I think most poets aren't funny. High seriousness comes with the mantle. But it is important for me to be funny and to be sexual, to love the lord, whatever. There are many ways to write a poem, and I believe we should try them all.

KR: We realize that you have just recently retired, but because so many of our readers teach creative writing, we wanted to ask if teaching creative writing makes 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?

MC: I wanted to retire early because I wanted to see what life was like outside of the university, outside of the academic context. I think that we are conformist within it; we start believing what the dominant purveyors and regimes tell us. We become sheep. We let others categorize us, put us in dull cages. I wanted to stop the noise and take care of my art!

I love teaching creative writing. I love reading good poems with the students. Let's wear our jammies and sit together for two hours and read poetry. Let's read Neruda's poetry together; some of us will read it in Spanish and some in English. How wonderful is that? I

love interacting with my students in that way...the classroom could sizzle with the spirit of poetry. But I don't like the careerism. When a student finishes her MFA, she has to compete with hundreds of others to get an academic job, so that a life of poetry becomes more about the career than about the art.

I see the best workshops as wonderful communities of writers and scholars who love literature and who can exchange work with each other in a supportive atmosphere. The workshop can be soulful and wonderful. I love teaching, and I will continue to teach once in a while. I retired early, so I could take a fresh look at poetry again, if that's possible. But I have always been an outlier anyway; I have always done my own thing.

KR: Because so many of us on the staff are anxious about how much time we devote to our own writing, we are always keen to ask successful poets about their writing process. How often, how long, and when during the day do you write? Do you have a ritual that helps you stay productive, or do you write sporadically? At what point do you feel like you have earned your beverage-of-choice at the end of the day?

MC: Ah! My beverage of choice is my green tea. I write in the morning because that's when my mind is freshest. I always carry a pad with me for first drafts. I never write first drafts on a computer. Lately, I've been trying to write fiction on a laptop, but we will see what happens. But I always have a pad of paper and a No. 2 pencil with me. The first draft is from God, but the rest is hard work. Some of my poems go through a hundred drafts. I can't edit poems on the screen, so, I hate to say, I waste a lot of paper by printing them out and looking at them. Old school. In fact, when I was a young poet, I used an old Royal typewriter. I have to look at the poem on the page to really "see" it.

My biggest suggestion is to read, read, read. You should also learn how to edit your own poems, to learn what's right for you. I have noticed that there are general things that people say in workshops, but I think each poem demands its own care. You would revise a long-line poem differently than you would revise a quatrain. Then, if you're sequencing a bunch of quatrains, that's going to be a different experience than if you're writing a long, narrative poem. I look at each individual poem as its own entity with its own needs. I'm very patient with my work, and that's why it took me 10 years to write *Mooncake Vixen*. It usually takes me five to seven years to publish a book of poems. I'm not one of those poets who can churn out a book a year.

I am extremely grateful. I know that I am lucky to have a reputation. It's something that one can't control. I always say: take care of your poetry, and your poetry will take care of you. Make sure that you're writing the best poem possible. Don't publish too early and keep working on that manuscript until it's almost pristine. Try to write a dynamic, wonderful book. Think of it as being a lasting legacy. It will be out there forever.

CONTRIBUTORS

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LUCIAN MATTISON's first full-length collection, *Peregrine Nation* (The Broadkill River Press, 2014), won the 2014 Dogfish Head Poetry Prize. His work appears, or is forthcoming, in the *Boiler*, *Everyday Genius*, *Hobart*, *Muzzle Magazine*, *Spork*, and the *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, among other journals. In May 2015, he received his MFA from Old Dominion University and started as an associate editor for *Big Lucks*. To read more visit www.lucianmattison.com.

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BRETT SALSBUURY is a writer who lives in the brightly lit and very-sunny Las Vegas Valley. He works at University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he is also a poetry student. His work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *Words Dance Publishing*, *Canyon Voices*, the *Blue Island Review*, *Fourculture*, the *Odd Magazine*, *Jab Magazine*, and *Poetry, USA*.

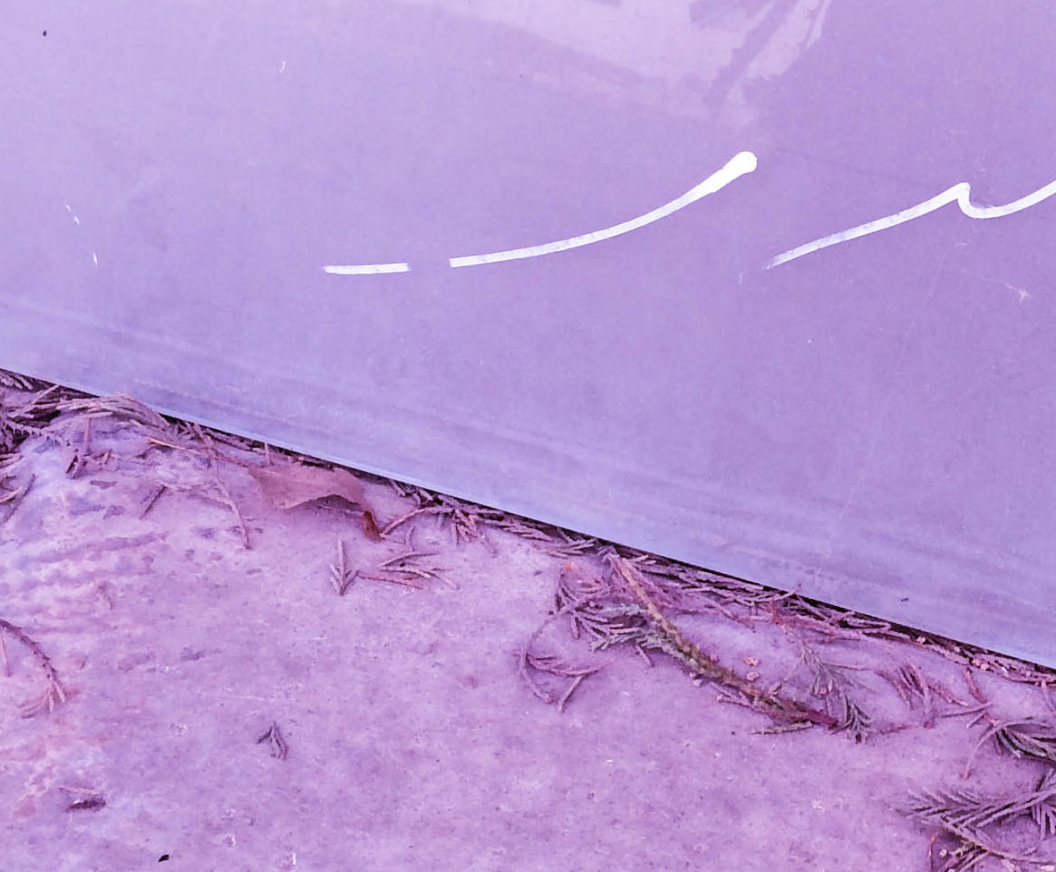
KERRI VINSON SNELL recently earned an MFA degree from Ashland University in Ashland, Ohio. Her poems have been previously published in *Relief*, *Mikrokosmos*, and *Burnside Writers*. She works as an adjunct professor of English at McPherson College in McPherson, Kansas. She is a regular columnist for *McPherson News*. Prior to pursuing poetry, she worked for 15 years as a news writer, columnist, and editor.

AJ URQUIDI, originally from Monterey, California, earned his BA in creative writing/film from UCLA, and studied poetry in New York City. His work has appeared in many journals, including *West Trade Review*, *Chiron Review*, *Marco Polo*, *CIRCLE*, and *Thin Air* and has been anthologized in *LA Telephone Book, Vol. 2*. He has edited poetry for *Westwind* and *RipRap* and is a co-founder of *American Mustard Collective*. Urquidi has been nominated for the Ina Coolbrith Memorial Poetry Award and recently won the Gerald Locklin Writing Prize. His first conceptual collection is *The Patterned Fragment* (89plus/LUMA Foundation, 2014), and he teaches creative writing at California State University, Long Beach, where he is finishing his MFA.

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