

Angel City Review



Foreword

Dear Reader:

Welcome to another issue of Angel City Review. We continue with another more pared down and tight issue. We want to make the entire issue something that people will take in as opposed to reading a few pieces and closing the digital page. As opposed to every other issue we have released, this particular one was personally curated by me (Zachary). As the managing editor it has always been a joy to share work by all the amazing submitters we have recieved over the years. I have very rarely asked people to submit work or directly solicited pieces for issues. I wanted the issues to be as organic as possible. To see what the editors would pick and let the theme (if any) form from there. I have always been amazed at the work that we have had the honor to publish, but as the managing editor I usually left the control of what pieces were chosen to each section editor. So... I thought it would be fun to reach out to some people who I think are doing great things in the writing world and see what they would give me. An interesting thing occurred, regardless of what genre I know the writers to be working in, most everyone sent over poetry. So this issue has been primarily dedicated to poetry by some great people in contemporary writing today. That being said this issue (and perhaps future issues) could definitely benefit from some more prose. I hope you enjoy the work as much as I enjoyed collecting it.

- Zachary C Jensen

Featured Artist

SAM LOPES



Sam Lopes lives and works in San Francisco, CA. He holds a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design and an MFA from California College of the Arts. He has recently exhibited at Klaus Von Nichtssagend Gallery, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles and the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard in Cambridge, MA. He has work in the collection of the RISD Museum in Providence, RI. You can find more of his work at www.samlopes.net

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Zachary Jensen: Managing/Founding Editor

Janice Sapigao: Poetry Editor

John Venegas: Fiction Editor

Simon Tran: Arts Editor

Gabby Almendarez: Editor

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For Jack

BY TAURI ALONSO

I let my blind cat lead me into the world

His fur,
embedded in petroglyphs of ancestral stories
within the spots and manchas of his coat

He hears the trees morph into lions
he smells the clouds evolve into danzantes,
the sky quakes in feathers and ayoyotes

My cat breathes life back into himself
after a seizure

He is exhausted with the stars

I study the astronomy of his nervous system

I make him an altar

with cat shaped sugar skulls

lavender,
carnations

I light copal

I watch the smoke weave into his whiskers,
prepare for his transition
into the spirit realm

I crush his kibbles with my ama's molcajete
feed him through a syringe
carry him outside with his blanket
let him feel el solecito
tell him, *los pajaritos are here to serenade you*

in my backyard below the sun

I wait for his body to become soil

For his body to give life to my ama's lemon trees

I wait to inhale the splutter of his ecosystem
To have his organs regenerate an aerial of bees

My blind cat lead me into the world

leads me into visions where butterflies
meet the butterflies of every exoskeleton

Where our past lives meet the trine in our astrology

Lead me into your bloodline, Jack
I want to know the Aztec gods you were born after
the meows and purrs floreciendo entre tu,
you, feline fire
you always being this fire

Lead me into spirals of curiosity
born from the madness
of just being you, Jack

Lead me into love,

Lead me where soul leaves ego and all we are is you, Jack
— light

Rosie Angelica Alonso aka Tauri was born in East LA and grew up in East Los until she was a teenager. She is a part of the Los Angeles Poet Society and is the chief editor of Acid Verse Literary Journal, published annually. Her first full length book, *The Cockroach Manifesto*, delves into the realms of magical realism and narrative poetry. Aside from writing, she is a tarot reader, seamstress, cat mom, and avid skateboarder

variations on a note to Henry Dumas #11

BY CHAUN WEBSTER

you say, “the people get tired of dying.” we so tired of watching ourselves be undone, our un-living lives amounting to no more than a quarter mile of track. board the train Henry, hold that pistol close as a prayer, say it to usher in our rest. lay us to sleep. terminus. something of an end. an opening. a second act. we are tired of watching you of watching us board the train, a passage unspooling beyond grounds for return. dead reckoning. you never returned. we are watching the tired outline of our dying. & somewhere at the end of the line, we open our mouth, no longer a mouth but a steam trumpet, whistling, our buzzing lips assembling vibrations, a mass of impossible sound.

Untitled

BY CHUAN WEBSTER

at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean there's a railroad made of human bones."

—Amiri Baraka

how bottom road &
wet land
how rail, how wail
of body disaggregate

how bone & mollusk
how coral & algae
how bioluminescent train

how brine & track
how tempest & ticket
& unaccounted darkness
how black the haunting
how long the ride?

Chaun Webster is a poet and graphic designer living in Minneapolis whose work is attempting to put pressure on the spatial and temporal limitations of writing, of the english language, as a way to demonstrate its incapacity for describing blackness outside of a regime of death and dying. Webster's debut book, *Gentry!fication: or the scene of the crime*, was published by Noemi Press in 2018, and received the 2019 Minnesota Book Award for poetry. Webster's work has appeared in *Obsidian*, *The Rumpus*, *Here Poetry Journal*, *Ploughshares*, and *Mn Artists*, and his second collection, *Wail Song: wading in the water at the end of the world*, was published by *Black Ocean* in April 2023

The Pigeon

BY JAVIER SANDOVAL

You sigh, striding through the night's wet, Seattle streets. It's St. Valentine's Day, and what's the point of wishing she'd call?

You've lost a good woman.

Now you're losing your hair. You've seen it in the shower drain between your feet.

You've seen coils of it, withered, on the side of the bed, where she used to sleep.

You wait for the train, underground, among rolling Gatorade bottles, pigeons, crumbled cigarette cases. Plastic bags sulk by, like sullen ghosts.

Or bad thoughts.

It smells of mud. You sit and wait.

And sigh.

Even the pigeon beside on the floor, lonely and dumb, looks like it could use a cigarette.

Its gray, balding head, a reminder of everything you're losing. It nods at you like it's felt your woes. You ignore it.

And the both of you, lonely and dumb, sigh.

And wait.

A lady in dark clothes, lips shaded a cartoon pink, and eyes the pastel green of soft blankets, comes in shivering from the rain, and sits beside you.

You turn away. As does the pigeon with a sad coo.

She coos back at him.

Stunned, the pigeon he—he bobs his head at her.

She smiles. The pigeon bobs and she waves him over. He waddles excited and nestles against her boots, gazing up at her, still kinda dumb, but no longer lonely.

You wish you could tell her what this makes you dream of.

So you take out some receipt, uncrumple it, and on the back write:

To the kind one beside me,

We both
sit alone in a train station
wet and dark
on Valentine's Day
I deserve this for all the good I've ignored
But not you Even a pigeon
with his gray bald head
has made you smile
And you don't even know

how much he needed it
Like you don't even know
how much you've left me here dreaming
dreaming on this gum-covered bench
of someday being
as sweet as you

You have to scribble to finish before her train leaves.
You catch her in line, one folded receipt in hand, like it's your last dollar.
Surprised, she takes it, and steps behind the sliding doors.
You left out your number. Your name.
And as the train knocks down the tunnel, leaving you to wonder,
the pigeon waddles up
to watch alongside you.

Visions from the Gutter

BY JAVIER SANDOVAL

It's not enough
that you realized a life of LA music
was not what you wanted, realized art
is just a version of love
that doesn't depend on anyone,
realized your parents' touch made you trust
only colors and sounds
without understanding a home
with me and a daughter
also counts.

It's not enough you left me on Christmas Eve
after I asked what I could do
to make you happier.

I slumped to Christmas Mass alone, shell-shocked
and annoyed by God's brass music;
I slept through Christmas,
and for New Year's drove my mother
and brother to Dollywood
where I bumped along
a country roller coaster
with a ditch in my heart;
then it was three months in Seattle, trudging home
from late nights at work downtown, all wet, sloppy and brisk,
even the streets missed you,
three months wishing—
close to my chest like a hate-prayer—
I wouldn't dream of you
any longer,
but like the water blowing through the heart of Seattle,
you never stopped.

Javier Sandoval grew up in the Chihuahuan Desert of Mexico, but later immigrated to Texas (falling for its blues music) and North Carolina (living in a shelter for three years). For his work consulting minority-owned businesses, he received the full-ride Leadership Endowed Award at Brown University, where he studied creative writing under Forrest Gander, C.D. Wright, and John Wideman; had his writing featured in [2 Billion Under 20](#) (St. Martin's Press); and published his first book of fiction, a literary gang-thriller, [Cicada, Ladybug](#) (Thought Catalog Books). He's now a Graduate Council Fellow at the University of Alabama's MFA program where he teaches and serves as Poetry Editor of *Black Warrior Review*. His stories, poems, and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Gulf Coast*, *Indiana Review*, *Salt Hill*, *FOLIO*, and *The Madison Review*, among others, and in 2023, he was a finalist for The Pinch's Literary Award and the North American winner of Frontier Poetry's Global Poetry Prize. But mostly, he loves to smoke on the stoop with his lady.

You can follow him on IG for updates and jokes @JavierWantsCandy



AT NIGHT

BY METTE MOESTRUP

TRANSLATED BY KATRINE ØGAARD JENSEN

The sound of an apple being eaten, bite by bite,
 woke me up just now. I'm not entirely sure
 where I am. But this much I know:
 I'm alone. There was a dark red apple
 on the nightstand when I went to bed.
 A red-fleshed apple, a blood apple.
 Blutapfel. Pounding heart. Remembering:
 I'm in Germany. Europe. Something about a cold lake.
 I'm afraid to move, to open my eyes. Not sure if
 there was one or two apples. Feeling more and more certain
 that it was two, yes, two apples. Did they not lie there like
 little bombs or artificial breasts in the dark? Not sure if
 I drunkenly brought someone home with me in the cab.
 Feeling more and more certain that I'm not alone.
 Flashes of flirting in a bar with a beauty my age.
 Ruby-red cupid's bow. I couldn't have had sex
 with zero memory of it? But this much I know:
 I'm lying in bed in my room in Wannsee.
 I'm working on an essay about German poetry.
 About the blue flower in poetry. Die blaue Blume.
 They say there was a casino here after the war.
 Perhaps also during. Maybe a brothel? Something, a feathery,
 clear rummaging by the footboard, the ankle: *Is anyone here?*
 I turn on the bedside lamp. Eyes squinting as if hit by a camera flash.
 Alone. An apple, dark red in the light.
 I search on all fours as if possessed, behind the nightstand, below the bed,
 for the other apple, the missing one.
 And later: many nightmares.

IN THE MORNING

BY METTE MOESTRUP

TRANSLATED BY KATRINE ØGAARD JENSEN

Blood apple, draped in a pale morning light
that wedges itself through the curtain slits, eye slits.
Specks of dust in a Saturn-ring around the apple's diameter. A fear
for the other apple. If there were two. Were there two? Weren't there?
Did they not lie there like little bombs or artificial breasts in the dark?
I grab my own, real. They're two. One apple.
Encircling its oneness, wholeness. And inside, invisible, hidden:
Core and seeds. Small, egg-shaped seeds.
But the scent of exposed apple flesh trembles in competition
with alcohol breath and sweat stench in the air: If there were two,
where is the other apple now? Its absence is reflected in
the blood apple shimmering before my bloodshot eyes.
The mouth and crotch feel tacked on. Lip-like apple slices.
When something is red inside and out. Blutapfel. Pounding heart.
Something knife-bright, I blink and gain knife-sharp vision,
it vanishes again just as quickly. I rub my eyes.
But this much I know:
I'm lying in bed in my room in Wannsee.
I'm working on an essay about German-language poetry. Die blaue Blume.
Er sah nichts als die blaue Blume, und betrachtete sie mit unnennbare Zärtlichkeit.
He saw nothing but the blue flower and contemplated it for a long time
with unspeakable tenderness. Novalis.
But I'm not producing a single word. They say a human torpedo
was built here, in the basement during the war. On the other side of the lake
the Wannsee Conference took place. *Mother tongues grow in bloody soil,*
a chorus whispers in my head. I hear myself asking
out into the room: *Did you take my blood apple last night?*

ABOUT TWILIGHT

BY METTE MOESTRUP

TRANSLATED BY KATRINE ØGAARD JENSEN

I decide to go for a walk in Wannsee's forest
before it gets dark. It gets dark fast.
Dogs are roaming freely. German Shepherd, Dobermann, a Red Riding Hood-feel.
My night vision is as good as an animal's, I sniff dog.
A German Shepherd looks me in the eyes, seemingly with pity.
Some raindrops on a flaming red fallen leaf
form such a moving pattern that tears trickle
down my cheeks, and in the twilight
my tears also feel red, even though they probably aren't.
Red tears. Blue veins.
An urge to get lost, as the dark darkens.
Growls and whistles from stomach and trees.
I'm leaking blood, hungry like a wolf
in the royal-blue twilight with blue flower on the brain:

As he finally approached, it started to move and transform; the leaves glistened and wrapped around the growing stem, the flower curtsied to him, and the petals spread out like a blue collar on which a delicate face floated.

Woe is me, where do I, when it is winter, find flowers.

Blue flower, like gentle notes in yellowed rock.

Rest in peace, little aster!

Crocus in tiny exile.

The winter wind rushes straight through my red wool-hat
as if seeking to penetrate my dark hair
and fontanel. Blow the blue flowers away.
Blow all the blue flowers of the brain's herbarium away,
and blow away the hole that the blue flowers left. Take it all
and only leave oblivion. Now I see the memorial stone.

ABOUT THE MEMORIAL STONE

BY METTE MOESTRUP

TRANSLATED BY KATRINE ØGAARD JENSEN

I need to pass the memorial stone
for Heinrich von Kleist and his friend Henriette Vogel
on my way to restaurant Loretta am Wannsee on Kronprinzessinnenweg
to get roasted veal liver and red wine. Feeling the iron deficiency
whirring at my temples. The blood coagulates in the cold,
becomes stiff in the textiles, like how soft testicles in cold air
shrink and turn bluish like doubtful knight's-spur,
become small like glaucous fritillaries. A nest with blue-green eggs
once disappeared in my childhood garden, and I found in the grass:
many feathers and two blackbird heads. With beaks attached.
One for each hand, a female and a male. To measure against each other.
Was it a bird of prey? Our black cat?
A marten, perhaps? (Mom had seen a marten speed through the orpines).
Or someone's dog. In the growing darkness: It smells of dog.
The dog's smell precedes the dog itself. Like an invisible sign.
I also emit a smell. Of smoke and rose shampoo, blood.
(Can I enter menopause already, please? I'm sick of smelling my blood
and I'm over the idea that something can still grow in me.)

I stop by the memorial stone.
Think of the so-called double suicide.
Two shots, one following another
on the twenty-first of November eighteen hundred and eleven.
He first shot his friend in the chest, then himself in the mouth.
The bodies were found like this: Adolphine Sophie Henriette
on her back with folded hands.
Heinrich on his knees, collapsed around the gun.
Its muzzle in his mouth like a fatal fellatio.
She had cancer. He had given up.
Their relationship was supposedly platonic. It is said they were euphoric
that November night before the suicide. It is said they drank tea and wine
(or, according to other sources, coffee and cognac) in the garden of the guest house and sang
as they penned their farewell letters. He writes to his sister, Ulrike.
His gesticulation jitters and flickers, like stroboscopic light in a fog.
His handwriting and the wet ink. The wet, stubborn ink.

An octopus spews
a blue-black cloud
into an oceanic trench.

A heavy heirloom ticks in Kleist's pocket.

She: dressed in a cream silk shirt with a tall lace collar
and mini mother-of-pearl buttons in the back. Ankle-length gray wool skirt.
An even darker gray wool cloak. Button-up bootees. Loose bun and pearl earrings.
She loosens the earrings carefully, intuitively
before the shot, puts them in an envelope: *For my daughter ...*
(This daughter. Did she, many years later, swallow those beautiful
pearls like bitter pills?)

Nineteen hundred and thirty-six: They Aryanized the memorial stone,
removing a quote by the Jewish poet Max Ring.
Now the quote has been reinstated: De-Aryanization.
Aryanization. De-Aryanization. Aryanization. De-Aryanization.

The personal pronoun is he. Not he and she. Not they.
He sought death,
but found immortality.

Mette Moestrup is a Danish poet, literary critic and feminist, born in 1969. She had her debut as a poet in 1998, and has published five books of poetry, a novel and two children's books. Her poetry has been translated into Swedish, Norwegian, German, and English and she has received the Montana Prize, the Aarestrup Medal, the Beatrice Prize, and the Danish Art Foundation's lifelong Honorary Grant. In addition to writing poetry, Moestrup works with translation, teaching, performance, net-poetry as well as collective, cross-aesthetic projects. She lives in Copenhagen. Her latest poetry collection, *Til den smukkeste* (*To the Most Beautiful*), is forthcoming in English translation from *co-im-press* in 2023.

Katrine Øgaard Jensen is a poet and translator from the Danish. She is a recipient of several fellowships and awards, including the Danish Arts Foundation's Young Artistic Elite Fellowship in 2020 as well as the 2018 National Translation Award in Poetry for her translation of Ursula Andkjær Olsen's book-length poem *Third-Millennium Heart* (*Broken Dimanche Press/Action Books*, 2017). Her translation of Ursula Andkjær Olsen's *Outgoing Vessel* (*Action Books*, 2021) was a finalist for the 2022 PEN Award for Poetry in Translation. Her latest translation, *My Jewel Box* by Ursula Andkjær Olsen, was published by *Action Books* in March 2022. She teaches creative writing and literary translation in the School of the Arts MFA Writing Program at Columbia University.

Statues of the Dead Poets

BY SESSHU FOSTER

Of course the statues of the dead poets are made of words.

Words on lips of students at Calarts, Naropa, CSULA, ELAC.

In theater seats at Beyond Baroque, folding chairs at Midnight Special Bookstore, 2 AM tables at Gorky's and Atomic Cafe.

Phrases flapping like gulls, flitting like swallows, swooping like nighthawks.

Statues of the dead poets stand in the weary morning outside Roscoe's Chicken and Waffles, flicker outside weird midnight motels on Sunset, conjure particulate on really unbearable afternoons.

Statues of the dead poets ride up Angel's Flight funicular only when it's broken down, chow down a fish feast at Ports O'Call, look out of windows of the Million Dollar Hotel Rosslyn.

Statues of the dead poets circle the block to pay to park never again, go through metal detectors at the courthouse never again, talk to a cop with one hand on a Glock, never again.

Statues of the dead poets are spots on the sun when you look up, stars occluded by the glare of avenue streetlamps, moonlight on dirt roads of the Verdugo Hills.

Moonlit coyote shadows across the Hollywood Hills.

We'd make statues of the dead poets from silvery opossum fur, curly mockingbird cries, dry rasp of palm fronds.

Statues of the dead poets in grease-soaked dumpsters behind the buildings, smoldering in a grassfire alongside the Golden State Freeway, tossed like a Frogtown shopping cart in the L.A. River.

Statues of the dead poets: words—-ash.

Words: ash.

Words—-ash and leaves.

A life of taxes paid in words, grit and blood on the teeth.

A life of grief paid in poetry, tenderness, sweetness.

A life of trouble paid in promise, piddly demands, others scoffing.

Statues of the dead poets, Wanda Coleman, Lewis MacAdams, Amy Uyematsu, standing at the edge of the world in the dusty weeds of an open field, gazing across the universe from Santa Monica Bay.

Wanda Coleman's words tasseled blue and gold, flashing like heavy earrings, one quiet evening as we chatted outside the Women's Building, she supported the women reading in the gallery by taking donations at the door.

Wanda's grin might show incisors, but her squint kept a steely reserve, an edge to laughter both exhilaration and derision.

Wanda edited the '92 issue of High Performance Magazine, "The Verdict and the Violence," on the riots/rebellion in the spring, and we read at Midnight Special Bookstore, where she introduced me to her son Ian, but I'd already spent hours lost in those stacks, spent too much money there and every other bookstore I wandered into, carried out stacks of lonely books to study for days and years, while somebody else went to Paris and Hawaii, Squaw Valley and MacDowell, hung out in bars with grad students and academics, divas and their entourage.

Statues of the dead poets in the KPFF archives, Pacifica airwaves of 90.7 FM.

Statues of the dead poets in chapbooks and original editions of Black Sparrow Press books.

Statues of the dead poets recall Jerome's 93 year old grin at Brand Bookstore, Moe's bookstore cigar, Ferlinghetti arranging books in the City Lights window.

Statues of the dead poets indifferent to the quotidian like the clerk at Left Bank Books at Pike Place, Seattle, she didn't even look up but just nodded when I returned forty years later and told her I was glad they were still alive.

Statues of the dead poets implacable like the wet empty streets, early morning outside Pike Place Public Market when you could find parking between produce trucks and fish delivery vans and blackberry brambles in empty lots, but now there's expensive condos and ten thousand tourists crowding everywhere.

Statues of the dead poets know.

The delight of bumble bees.

Blackberries bloom in the beginning of summer.

Hundreds packed the Church in Ocean Park to commemorate Wanda for two days so I drove across town to catch that sea breeze, I stood at the back to watch the poets of the city give tribute to their champion, and Lewis MacAdams joined me with a cane, what's going on? Phlebitis? He looked pale, fragile—*is Lewis shaking?*, “How you doing Lewis?” I asked, “Not good,” he replied, maybe he said he was recuperating from a stroke, did I hear right? The speaker at the podium loud, Wanda gigantic on screen behind the the stage, the crowd loud—-regardless, Lewis came out to pay tribute.

Then Lewis was gone too.

Statues of the dead poets wrapped in cellophane, bought by a kid at a corner market.

Statues of the dead poets telling your fortune for 5 cents when you step on the scale in front of the liquor store.

Statues of the dead poets stolen for their weight in copper from the Parque de Mexico on Valley Blvd.

Statues of the dead poets dispense ice cream bars or soda cans for quarters at the park outside the gym.

Lewis and I sat around the table for years in the Beyond Baroque bookstore, listening to Fred Dewey rail and rant about not having any money, about needing more money, we gotta bring in more money, sometimes Fred would start screaming. Pam Ward, Viggo Mortensen, who else was on the board of trustees, trying to keep the place alive? I complained about Fred screaming and they told me, “That’s just Fred,” who raised \$100K to pay off the decade of debt and put the city’s oldest literary venue back in the black. Lewis was always cool, he was writing a book about the word “cool,” how it emerged from 1940’s jazz hipster jargon to general overuse by suburban teens everywhere. Lewis always dapper in his cool fedora.

Statues of the dead poets selling tickets from the booth in front of the Rialto.

Statues of the dead poets standing all night under the yellow light of a booth in the vastness of a parking lot on Spring Street.

Statues of the dead poets made of colored plastic on dashboards navigating traffic.

Statues of the dead poets would have more to say, recite a scratchy poem from memory, but their batteries ran out.

Statues of the dead poets half-dressed in mismatched doll clothes or dragged around naked by toddlers.

Wanda's statue sighs like the air brakes of a semi coming down the long incline of I-10 between Quartzite and Desert Center. "*Avoid overheating, turn off A/C.*"

Lewis's statue watches the shift change at the hospital, nurses, PAs, techs and orderlies released into the employee lot as the streetlights wink out, when the sky turns light.

Amy Uyematsu's statue glints and gleams like water in substance and thought, in real and imaginary numbers, fractions and irrational numbers, tracing the long black hair of care along X and Y axes.

Amy's statue made of granite and quartz from the San Gabriel Mountains backlit and illuminated like bright cumulus, as brilliant stratocumulus or cumulonimbus in a breeze over Raul and the generations.

Amy's statue admiring surfers catching waves or coming in off the water, nostalgia in black and white for Toshiro Mifune, revisiting Neruda and Machu Picchu. Cedar, cypress and pine. Eucalyptus, pepper, and jacaranda.

Pine, bamboo, plum, camellias.

Wanda's statue a pinch to grow an inch.

Lewis's statue a ringing in my ears.

Amy's statue says, "Remember Bill Oandasan, Henry Morro, Gil Cuadros, Akilah Oliver. Remember the others, remember also Akilah's son Oluchi Nwadi McDonald, you never met him, but remember Wanda's son too."

Words, ash.

Words: ash.

Fresno Postcard

BY SESSHU FOSTER

One day I'll live in Fresno with the poets. I'll live in Fresno like Gary Soto and Juan Felipe.

I'll live on a side street named F or G, or Mono, or Inyo, or Kern.

A little 1920s wooden house that needs new paint and a new roof, clapboard with bad insulation and swamp coolers hanging off the windows (that almost work if it wasn't over 100 degrees), the house dark and quiet inside so you can hear cars pass in the street.

Horns blast or beats fade away, flies circle at the screen door or in the middle of the living room. Mexican music from a couple houses away. Even under the shade of a tree the sunshine on the sidewalk makes your eyeballs ache.

But I'll walk around the heat where I've never walked around before.

Where Arturo said the ELADATL dirigible lines station was, which he described like an abandoned Greyhound depot.

I'll get mutton stew for lunch at a Basque restaurant with Mexicanos staffing the kitchen, a pyramid of fat ceramic cups for coffee, stacks of plastic cups if you want ice water get it yourself.

I'll sit at the formica table with Tabasco sauce, salt, pepper, and a tin paper napkin holder by the window. Thinking about Philip Levine, Omar Salinas and William Saroyan. I'll open a book by Joseph Rios, Anthony Cody or Mai Der Vang, read some poems and think about them. Annotate or write in the books if I feel like it.

I might get inspired and have to write something right there.

I'll look out the window and think, here I am in the capital of poets, here I am in Fresno.

Sesshu Foster is author of *City of the Future* (*Kaya Press*, 2018) winner of the CLMP Firecracker Award, and *ELADATL: A History of the East Los Angeles Dirigible Air Transport Lines* (*City Lights*, 2021), a novel co-authored with artist Arturo Ernesto Romo.

Shall We Play A Game?

BY ANTHONY SEIDMAN

If you wake up on your left side, your shoes will last the day. Black sedan will not be parked in front of the doughnut shop where you buy coffee. If you wake up on your right...best speak of rivers, fedoras, and dusk. Don't bend over to pick up a penny. No luck there. If you end the day with pennies in your pocket, throw them in the trash. The result: a restful night, no indigestion. If your spouse falls asleep face-up: comet showers, frayed slippers, dislocated shoulder. If you start your day by stepping forward with your right foot and have yet to sneeze, the rain has been delayed. If your zipper snags, well, you will not attend tomorrow's parties. No more champagne for you! Of course, if you toss a quarter and ask: Heads or Tails? You have been indoctrinated into the wisdom of thin paint on dry-wall. You're exuding the skills of man eating pasta with a single chop-stick. Let's save departure for twilight; the lute's string has yet to be plucked. Let's reserve snail, orange, and cognac. If you step outside your front door and no crow, siesta awaits you. You shall be fruitful, despite your aversion to wash-cloths. Despite dandruff.

Kerotakis

BY ANTHONY SEIDMAN

Now the Verb reaches me via conduits and commixtures: fruit of silence breaking flower into scarlet, cartilage and nerve, tamarind, lemon, sulfur, the opened triptych of thighs whose center panel sweats midnight. In this velvet one can't distinguish camembert from cabernet. Is that grease coagulating on the fields, redolent of garlic and mashed cilantro, or the blackest earth, indistinguishable from blood clotting, bull on hilltop, vinegar pouring on the valley? You Oh Verb rise from the tar. Heaven bubbles with stars and comets. I have levitated, float out the window among black roses, towards the hotel named after your toes. I am reading your hair and sniffing your accent of feverish fans and machetes. Rose of panties scrubbed with soap and left in the shower's stall. Rose of haunted mansions torched centuries ago. Rose of expired postage stamps and kite caught in oak branches. Rose of Rosa, whose name rhymes with everything molten and mortgaged, like atoms, train station, molasses, ivory. Bells, clanging?

Anthony Seidman is a poet and translator from Los Angeles. He has recently published the collection *That Beast in the Mirror* (*Black Herald*: Paris, London), a bilingual gathering of his work with poems translated into French by Blandine Longre, as well as the translation of *Contra Natura* (*Cardboard House Press*), by Peruvian Rodolfo Hinostroza. Seidman's poetry, reviews, and articles, can be found in publications like *Latin American Literature Today*, *Bitter Oleander*, *New American Writing*, *LARB*, and *Poetry International*, as well as journals from Mexico, Chile, and Argentina.

I Grew Up Going to la Pulga

BY BRIANA MUÑOZ

After Daniel Garcia Ordaz

I grew up going to la pulga
every Sunday,
where my grandparents sold
planchas y escobas,
cantaritos y vestidos de ballet folclórico,

sewn by fingers
that pushed colorful fabric
across 32- stitch machine.

My grandma's foot
pressed lightly against the pedal,
in intervals.

In Mexico, my grandmother was a nurse.

I grew up going to la pulga
and sitting on buckets flipped over
while tapping my feet to the music
blaring from neighboring vendor booths
that sold bootleg NB ridaz CDs.

I grew up going to la pulga
where one could find a pair of fresh botines
or first communion gifts,
fruta picada, or caged birds for sale.

When us kids wanted spending money,
our parents would send us to la pulga
to help our grandparents.
All the primos were first introduced
to business, in this manner,

or perhaps, survival.

I grew up going to la pulga

observing men cologned
and suited in tejanas,
wearing their ladies on their arm.
Later, they'd dance a quebradita
at the Friday night baile.

My grandma had nicknames
for every regular, here.
El Jotito
Doña Piojos
La Señora de los Raspados

It was at la pulga,
when attending to my grandparent's customers,
where I learned that my Spanish skills
were at a level of someone
considered to be Pocha.

I grew up going to la pulga
where my "domingo",
a term for allowance,
would be spent at the toy vendor booth
once earned, after a long day's hard work.

Briana Muñoz is a poet from Southern California. She is the author of two books of poetry including *Loose Lips* (*Prickly Pear Publishing*) and *Everything is Returned to the Soil* (*FlowerSong Press*). Her work has been published in the anthology *How to Reimagine America*, *Cultural Daily*, the *Beat Not Beat Anthology*, the *Oakland Arts Review*, and several other publications.

Penguin #256 Came to the Zoo with what's Left of His Daughter

BY NICELLE DAVIS

They say I'm making myself ill, but I feel I'm keeping myself well—well, as one can holding the dead under tongue.

The Keepers are always rooting around my mouth with their fingers, trying to uproot my daughter, but I swallow her into

my second stomach and resurrect her once the Vet has gone. Wellness doesn't concern Keepers so much as the appearance

of care. Way to go. You care. Now let me go look at my wall and think wall, wall, until all is one and the same wall. What's

left of my daughter is a matted mess of features—I managed to hold only a beak-full of plume. Nets pulling me one way

and the current her another. When I recall her, I see how she swam towards nadirs, volume taking her soon, and sooner

upon that soon, by her own valediction. As if all of her could not wait to be rid of me, but this mouthful of fuzz. How much

of me is her? Her mother never came back. It was just us and a shared hunger. We went to sea too soon because we had to.

It was go or starve. She wasn't ready. I wasn't ready. There is never enough time to love any one thing well. Let me look at

this wall. Let me swallow what's left and think wall, wall, wall, until wall.

Penguin #625 Begins to Suffer from Dissociative Disorder Cause by Repeated Self Inflicted Head Traumas:

BY NICELLE DAVIS

You remember something, something like flying
but of course, you never flew, you never could.

You are in a space so full of birds (who're no sort
of sky) it's impossible to move. Every day you go

to the edge where mouths full of knives flash you.
A glass of forward-facing eyes watches you dive.

Full-force you smack your head against bottom—
at bottom there's a spot marked just from you.

Was this for them? Red turned murky; the stain
mistaken for a hole dug by blood. You can feel

yourself escaping. When you rise, all Penguins
take one step back. Something mad about this

one, is what they say about you. Something mad
about you, is the only thing Penguins say to you.

Once nearly all Penguin is beat out of you, a set
of forward-facing eyes comes flashing knives

that never bite—the lie of it worse than incision.
Picked up from ground, you are something like

your failings. You are flying outside the ice, and
into a small container where you'll stay until

the bleeding gives up. Healed you'll be returned
to try again. Only harder—to break into liquid sky.

You're a main show attraction—you have become
The Penguin who Wants to Fly.

Nicelle Davis is a multidisciplinary artistic who uses video, poetry, performance and publication to discuss topics ranging from artistic collaboration, feminist identity, poverty and power, and the environment. Her books include *The Language Of Fractions* (2023 Moontide Press), *The Walled Wife* (2016 Red Hen Press), *In The Circus Of You* (2015 Rose Metal Press), and other books.



THE GEOTOUR

BY PETE HSU

It's about noon on the day our dad Ming is supposed to come back from his trip. I'm reading a comic on the sofa, when my brother Jack grabs it out of my hand and tells me to get ready to go. He grabs it hard and I can see he's crumpled the pages. I tell him that he's crumpled the pages, and he presses it against his leg and pretends to smooth it over, but he's only making it worse.

I say, "I don't want to go."

Jack tosses the comic book back to me and says, "It's not optional."

He's already got his shoes on. Our sister Elle is standing next to him. She's looks tiny next to Jack, just barely at his waist. She says for me to hurry up. She looks happy like we're going out on a trip.

I tell Jack, "It's way too hot to walk across campus."

Jack says, "It's not that hot."

I know he's lying, but still, I get my shoes on, and we all head out.

It's fifteen minutes to the University North bus stop where we're supposed to meet Ming. Ming is our father, but he always taught me and Jack to call him by his name instead of by a title, but Elle will only call him Daddy. She's only six. When Jack and I were six, we were calling him Ming, but Mom was still around then, so we had a parent that we could call by their title. Maybe every kid needs at least one.

Jack's been trying to get her to start calling Ming, Ming. So far, she won't do it.

She says, "It's the same."

Jack says, "It's not."

Elle says, "A person can have two names and still be the same person."

This makes Jack stop to think, and then they both stop talking about it.

By the time we get to University North bus stop, there's already a crowd there. I'm embarrassed because I've sweat through my entire shirt. Jack's just as sweaty, but it doesn't seem to bother him.

University North bus stop is an actual bus stop where buses pick people up and drop people off. But it's also kind of famous place too. It's sometimes used in TV shows and romantic movies. It doesn't look at all like it belongs here. It looks more like something from off a

plantation in the South. It has a line of elm trees on each side and then brick walkways and a big fancy awning. Underneath the awning is an old-time ticket booth. I don't know if they actually sell bus tickets there, but the booth looks neat. Then there's the most famous part, this big hill that the bus stop is kind of built into that's covered in purple, white, and pink flowers. Old people like to stop and take pictures in front of it. The flowers are fresh all year, even in the summer, even in the desert. There is an automatic watering schedule. It is beautiful. It looks like magic because you don't expect to see something like that here. I can't help but admire it. But the way it's made for only looking at, makes me feel like it's a place just for grown-ups.

We are the only kids here. By that I mean that we are the only kids waiting for a parent. Everyone else is a parent waiting for a kid. I mention this to Jack. He puts his arm around me, the back of my head against his bicep.

"Jesus, William," he says. "Why's everything gotta be something with you?"

I want to say, Jesus, Jack, why's you gotta be a dick about everything? But I don't say that. I keep it to myself. Jack is a big kid. He's only a year older than me, but from a distance it looks like we could be father and son. He keeps his arm around me. He does this thing where he flexes and unflexes his bicep and it bumps my head back and forth. It makes me feel like how I always feel, soft and malleable. I don't have that physicalness that everyone else in my family has: Ming, Jack, and Elle, and Mom too.

Jack had tried to toughen me up with football over summer. He had a program for me and Elle that he called Devil's Bootcamp, and then just D.C. for short. He'd take us out to the field to Coach Us Up. One day it'd be passing, then route running, then tackling, and so on. I was bad at everything. Elle caught on faster than me. Jack seemed to like that. The last thing we were working on was blocking. Jack was upset because I wasn't able to Lock On to him as he rushed at me. He'd grabbed me at the front of my shirt and yelled, "Like this. On the numbers." But when I tried, he slapped my hands away and pushed me onto the grass. He then told Elle to show me how it's done. Elle got into a pass blocker's stance. Jack crouched in front her. He growled like a caged beast. He then pounced, and Elle screamed and ran away.

Ming's been away on this school trip called the Hoodoo Mesa Geotour. Jack's been in charge while Ming's been away, which is also how it is during most the school year too.

Elle has flowers. They are roses, the big kind with little wires to keep the bulbs from wilting. She had asked Jack to take her to the flower shop earlier. Jack said it was stupid. So, I took her. That was just a couple hours ago, but the flowers are already looking old, maybe because it's so hot out and also maybe because she's been holding them the whole time.

I tell Elle to put them down. She won't. I offer to hold them for her, but she doesn't want that either. Jack, the dick that he is, is making cracks at her.

"What, you asking Ming to the Prom?"

I tell him, “Shut the flick up.”

I say “flick” for Elle’s sake.

“Shut the flick up,” says Jack. Then he punches me in the arm, “Good one.”

Elle doesn’t seem to notice any of this.

Ming is a teacher at the University. He teaches geology. His research is on tectonics and petroleum. The Hoodoo Mesa Geotour is this geology trip he puts on for incoming freshmen. It’s the kind of thing the University seems to like. They call it a Bridge Program. They say it’s good to recruit early talent.

However, Ming’s boss, Dr. Peter Fredrickson (who goes by Cap for some reason), does not like the Geotour. Cap also does not like Ming. We know this because Ming tells us about Cap

Ming says things like: “Cap keeps blocking the Hoodoo Mesa; Cap keeps making Chinese spy jokes; Cap suffers from paranoia; Cap thinks I’m gunning for his job.”

Then Ming will say, “But Cap’s not actually paranoid. I may not be a spy, but I am gunning for his job.”

Ming likes to make jokes that are also truths.

Cap had cut the funding for the Geotour last year, but Ming got around that by cutting a deal with this oil company called One-Star. Cap really hated that. They had a long fight over it, and in the end, Ming had to run the ’89 Geotour as a private event, with One-Star as the sponsor. Ming renamed the Geotour as “The One-Star Future Stars of Geology Tour,” and One-Star renamed Ming as the “1989 Best Early Career Petroleum Geologist” even though Ming is not early in his career.

And now a couple dozen 17 and 18-year-old kids still get to drive thumper trucks in the desert and listen to Ming talk about fault-lines and strain-to-friction ratios. Ming even promises that they’ll dig for oil if they locate a promising spot, though, he jokes, they’d better be careful not to trigger an earthquake.

It’s so hot, maybe close to one hundred, but the parents at the bus stop all seem happy and good-natured. I count. There are fifteen of us, including me, Jack, and Elle. It seems like a small group since there are twenty-four students on the trip. I overhear that some of the parents had decided to let their kids find their own way home. Which makes sense because most of the people on the Geotour are actually adults even though they call them kids.

One of the mothers asks Elle about her flowers. Elle describes how she picked them one at time (true) and how they cost one hundred dollars (not true).

The mother laughs and says, “So cute!”

Meanwhile, Jack argues with a group of fathers about football. He says the Raiders are going to be really bad this year. One father is a big Raiders fan. Jack seems to know this. He then starts talking about how Raider fans are weirdos. He's making fun of them. Calling them a freakshow. The Raiders fan father is trying to defend himself and the Raiders, but it's not going well. Whenever the Raiders fan father says anything, Jack retorts with, "Whatever, Darth. Whatever." He says this because Raiders' fans like Darth Vader.

Another one of the fathers seems to try to smooth things over. He offers to buy everyone a soda from the machine. This is very nice of him. Almost nobody takes him up on it. I also do not take him up on it, even though I am thirsty. Jack takes him up on it.

The chitchat goes on like this for a while. Then, maybe an hour later, everyone is either reading a newspaper or talking just with the people they already know. And then, another hour later, people are complaining regularly. A couple of parents leave to go to the administration office.

It's even hotter now. It's always hottest around this time. I look over to the father who had offered to buy us sodas earlier. I want to ask him if he'll still buy me a soda. But he doesn't look like he would.

The parents who went to check the administration office get back. Everyone asks them what they found out. They say they didn't find anything out. The office was closed. Someone asks them if they tried the geology office. They did not. The person that asks about the geology office leaves to try the geology office. Once he leaves, everyone mostly agrees that the geology office is definitely closed.

Then, at around 4:00, a bus rounds the corner. It's headed towards us. The crowd leans towards the curb. It isn't the first bus we've seen, but this one is yellow. That seems like a good sign. We all watch it as it comes closer. The bus slows down at the driveway. I make eye contact with the driver. He's a younger guy. He nods at me. I wave. He then keeps going. As the bus passes, I see there are no passengers. It drives past us and then up the hill and then turns at that corner and is gone. It was a false alarm.

Elle, Jack and I smush into the shady part of a bench. A man and a woman come and sit on that bench too. The woman sits beside Elle. This pretty much uses up all the shade, so the man stays standing. The both of them are in office clothes. The man has his blazer on. He is sweating all the way through it, around the collar and across his back. I recognize them. They teach at the University. They're a couple. Their daughter is on the Hoodoo Mesa Geotour. The mother is named Val. The father is Ming's boss, Cap.

Cap says, "I can't believe we let her go with that imbecile."

The imbecile he's referring to is Ming.

He goes on, “This is the last straw with that fool.”

Val says, “Cool it, Cap.”

“You cool it, Val. I swear there’s something wrong with this guy. What kind of man wants so badly to spend a week in the desert with a bunch of teenagers? I swear…”

Cap gestures with his hands. He doesn’t finish his sentence.

Val nods her head towards us to point us out to Cap, in case he didn’t already see us. Though, it’s pretty unlikely he didn’t already see us.

Val says, “Would you please take off your coat. It’s a hundred degrees out.”

Cap unbuttons the front, but leaves it on.

“And please,” he continues, “Before you start, this has nothing to do with him being a Chinese.” He says the “Chinese” part quieter.

Val says, “Please, stop.”

“It’s not the 60’s anymore. We don’t know what he’s doing, what he’s thinking, what he’s up to.”

“We’re geologists, Cap. We study rocks. I doubt Yang and Gorbachev are sending spies to steal our data on flood predication,” says Val. “We’re not at war with China.”

“Tell that to those dead kids in Tiananmen.”

Val turns away from Cap and looks at Elle. Val waves at Elle. Elle smiles. Cap also looks over at us. I’m sure he knows that we’re Ming’s kids, but he doesn’t apologize for what he said. I think that, if Ming were here, Cap might have already apologized and maybe even offered to buy us all an ice cream. He would never offer to buy us ice cream. It’s so hot. So, ice cream would be a nice offer. But Cap does not offer. And anyway, there is most likely nowhere to get ice cream right now.

Jack nudges me with his elbow and sticks his pointer finger at Cap, and then says, “Get a load of this guy.” He says it like it’s a joke, but I can tell Jack is mad. It’s one of those Family Honor moments that he sometimes talks about.

Meanwhile, Cap looks like he wants to say something to Jack, but Val, again, tells him, “Please, just cool it.”

Jack says, “Yeah, Cap. Cool it.”

“Excuse me, Jack. Were we speaking to you?” says Cap, standing in front of Jack and pointing a finger at him, “You’re the one who should cool it.”

“What are you talking about? You’re the one popping off like you own the place.”

Jack gets up too now and stands in front of Cap. They're now face to face, both big, the same height even though Jack is 14 and Cap must be at least 50.

Cap talks like he's trying to teach us something, "As if I own the place? What this place? The University? This place where my grandfather was on the construction crew that built it. Where my father attended after fighting World War Two. Where I've been a professor for 19 years. Now your daddy shows up three years ago. Three. He comes along and 'pops off' like he owns the place. Maybe you could be quiet. Consider the facts of history before you speak."

When I hear that, I think it's fine. Ming is not a good colleague. He does pop off. And he does like to walk around like he owns the place. I'm pretty sure Jack agrees, but that's not what he says.

Jack says, "Are you serious? It's 1989, man. We're all Americans here."

This seems to make Cap even more mad.

He says, "What are you saying? That I'm a racist? Do you have any idea who I am? I led the march for integrated housing in Palo Alto. In my office, on my bookshelf, I have a picture of myself with Bobby Seale, arm in arm in front of the Black Panther headquarters in Oakland. 1967. Protesting Vietnam."

Jack smirks and pats Cap on the shoulder as if they're old friends.

Jack says, "Is this what this is about? You've still got hang-ups about Vietnam. Do me and my family remind you of some village you torched or some VC commandos you got ambushed by? You need to let that go, man. Let it go, or it's gonna eat you alive."

"Are you insane? I wasn't a soldier in Vietnam. I was an activist."

The crowd comes over and makes a circle around Jack and Cap. People sort of jostle around for a better view.

"Oh, I see," says Jack, "So you deferred? What was it, plantar fasciitis? Compressed disc? Or what, high blood pressure?"

"I see. You're trying to get a rise out of me."

Jack smirks again, "Good one! Me get a rise out of you. That's not appropriate."

Jack has a look in his eyes, like he's made up his mind about something and nothing anyone says or does is going to change it.

Cap maybe recognizes this look. He takes a breath, and then another. He tries to smile.

He turns to Val and says, "Now do you see what I've been saying, Val?"

Val shakes her head. Cap turns back to Jack.

“Look, son, everyone is frustrated. It’s been a long afternoon. I’m sure everyone is concerned about where the bus is, about our children. If I misspoke, I apologize.”

Cap sticks his hand out to Jack to shake. Jack doesn’t shake. Not right away. Everyone is looking. We’re all waiting to see what Jack will do. I’m thinking in my head, please, shake his hand, Jack. Please shake his hand.

Then Jack nods and puts his hand out towards Cap. It looks like they’re gonna shake hands and then we’ll all be friends. But instead of shaking Cap’s hand, Jack grabs it and pulls Cap towards him with a jerk. Cap stumbles forward. Jack turns as Cap passes him, and shoves Cap in back. Cap makes a sound like, “Oop!” Which me and a couple people can’t help but laugh at. Then Cap flops onto the brick walkway. His arms and legs all bent up. His glasses fall off. I see them. They’re cracked.

Jack stands over Cap and mocks him, “Oop.”

Cap gets up. He seems like he’s getting up as fast as he can, but it’s not very fast. When he gets all the way up, he has his fist pulled back as if to punch Jack.

Val says, “No, Cap, no!”

Cap doesn’t punch Jack. Instead he shoves Jack in the chest. But Jack must have been ready for it, because he doesn’t move. Instead, Cap kind of bounces backwards and into Val, who then falls into the flowers. This messes up the flowers pretty badly, worse than I’d expect.

Elle pulls her hand away from me and runs in-between Jack and Cap. She stands there, just tiny. Three feet tall. She’s holding the roses up at Cap as if they’re some kind of weapon.

Elle says, “Stop it!”

Cap pulls his foot back like he’s going to kick Elle. He sucks in his spittle and jerks his shoulder, but he doesn’t kick.

Then Jack rushes at Cap

Elle turns around and puts her hands up at Jack, as if she’s protecting Cap now. Jack runs right into her, and now it’s total carnage. Elle, being so little, flies back a ways into the street. Landing on her back and then rolling over onto her hands and knees, hitting the tarmac, the roses all flung across the sidewalk.

Someone screams, “Oh my God.”

Then a bunch of the parents say stuff to Jack like: “Have you lost your mind? She’s a baby for god’s sake. She’s your baby sister for god’s sake.”

A couple of the fathers pick Cap up and get him over to the other end of the bus stop. They make a big show out of checking if he’s okay. The father who earlier offered to buy sodas comes over and grabs Jack by the arm, “What is wrong with you, kid?”

Jack pulls his arm away from that father and walks over to Elle. He kneels down next to her. Elle has her hands around her knees and is crying, but not loud. It's like she's trying not to cry. Jack tries to pick her up. She won't let him.

He says, "Come on, Elle. You know I didn't mean that."

But she turns away from him, and then I go over and ask if I can pick her up and she says, okay, and carry her to a bench, saying a couple times, "You okay, Edelweiss?" I ask that maybe a dozen times. Elle answers, yes, at first, but after a while, she doesn't say anything anymore.

Jack is quiet now. He stands there like he doesn't know what to do. I want to ask him if he's okay, but I can't find the words. Then Jack goes to pick up the roses. He gets them one at a time, even though he could probably scoop most of them up in one scoop.

As this all goes on, no one seems to notice as the real Geotour bus pulls up, not until it comes to a stop and the doors open. The kids then start to come out. The parents all talk at the same time, saying things like: "Finally. Thank God. Oh Jesus. Well, about time."

As more kids get off, the parents get more excited and then the whole bus stop is like a party. Each kid gets scooped up, some of them literally, and reattached to their families. Once it starts, it's like a chain reaction. There's a barrage of questions, hugs, pats on the shoulder, more hugs.

The three of us find our way back to our bench. We look up at the bus and crowd. The crowd moves around and past us. Some of the parents look over as they walk around, but no one says anything. In the middle of the crowd, there's Ming. He's talking to some of the parents. He looks happy. He says something about the bus breaking down. He jokes that they hit a landmine, but that has to be joke. He's laughing when he says it. The other parents laugh too. He doesn't notice us sitting there. Neither Jack nor I get up to say hi to him, and Elle has her head turned away, sitting in-between me and Jack. We all stay like for what seems like way too long a time. Then finally I say to Elle, "Hey, Daddy's here."

Elle looks up and sees Ming. She seems right away back to normal. She gets up off the bench and runs over to Ming. When she gets to him, Ming picks her up and holds her as he keeps talking to the other parents.

I think about saying something to Jack, but I still can't think of anything to say. We sit together watching Ming and Elle and the other people. At least I'm watching. I don't know for sure what Jack is doing, but I'm watching. It looks like no one's worried anymore. No one seems to be worried about the bus having been late, even though they still ask their kids and each other what happened.

I see the father who offered to buy us sodas. He's now drinking a soda of his own. I wonder if he just likes sodas. He's drinking a soda now and talking to his son. They look normal. I see also the mother who had asked Elle about the flowers. She's talking to her son. I assume it's

her son. I assume the kids these people are talking to are these people's kids, but I don't know for sure. She's talking to a kid who I assume is her son, and they seem happy like regular people who haven't seen anything bad happen today at all. And then there's Cap and Val. They smile and hug their daughter. They talk about which steakhouse to go to for dinner. There seems to be a lot of different steak houses that they have to choose from.

One family lingers close by. I don't remember them from before. I wonder if they want to talk to us. The father is standing right next to us, really close. He looks at us like he wants to say something. I look up at him and wait for him to say something to me. He smiles and he seems like he likes us, or at least like he wants to be nice to us, and I like that.

I say, "Hi."

He says, "I'm sorry."

I say, "It's okay. It's not your fault."

He says, "Excuse me?"

I say, "It's not your fault."

He says, "Oh, sorry. I was just hoping I could get you to take our picture?"

He motions to his daughter. His daughter hands him a camera, which he then holds out to me. It's one of those cardboard disposable kinds. I look at it for just a second and then I take the camera. The father thanks me and runs over and stands in front of the famous bus stop flower garden. He's there with the mother and a couple of little kids and their daughter who was on the Geotour. I don't know if the family realizes that the bus stop flower garden is messed up from when Val fell into them. It doesn't seem like it. They all just get in a line and smile at me. They stay smiling at me for a long time. They look like nice people, all of them together and smiling like that, but the flowers next to them look all terrible, a big muddy ground-up spot with torn-up purple and yellow plants.

I wind the film on the camera. I aim the camera at the family. Then I aim the camera at the busted-up flowers. I hold it steady and say, "Say cheese."

~

PETE HSU is the author of the short story collection *IF I WERE THE OCEAN, I'D CARRY YOU HOME* and the experimental fiction chapbook *THERE IS A MAN*. His work is also featured in *LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS*, *F(R)ICTION MAGAZINE*, *FAULTLINE*, and others. He teaches creative writing at the UCLA Extension Writers Program.



AMONG THE RUINS

BY DEE ALLEN

Among the ruins of a village in northern Ukraine, quiet and long in dilapidation, houses and a rusted husk of an old car indicated that fact, a grey female cat and her three kittens played the waiting game. A tiresome game, waiting around the homestead for their human caretaker to return. He never did, for he joined 50,000 in departing the village *en masse*. Impatient, the grey feline mother and children had to fend for themselves.

Alone or in unison, the grey feline family ventured outside their ramshackle house on the village outskirts to hunt for their meals. Each day, they flushed out rats, from the overgrown green fields, from the old abandoned school. The same luck wasn't travelling with them one day, when they wandered into a cattle barn. There were fewer rats to be found, but a lone owl in the rafters found the 3 cats, disturbed, rather angry at those intruders. Awkward move. Walking into owl territory.

One little grey kitten broke away from the rest of her family, venturing into an open field alone, for the first—and only time. A winged shadow swiftly descended on her from its rounds in the sky. Exposed prey for a famished eagle.

Over the decades, the forest crept into the village. With the former human world depopulated, nature's as prolific as the black pen in this writer's hand. Botanical green dominated everything. Green light for the animals of the wild to stroll in, some once assumed by scientists to be extinct.

Uninterrupted, the food chain goes on. Eagles fly from rooftops hunting snakes in the grass, black beetle hunts for worms in the soft dirt, timber wolves hunt for boars in the night-time woods [when not searching for a mate], bears scrounge for anything, moving or not—

Elk and deer graze, buffalo grow in number, horses gallop on former farm land and roads once frequented by cars.

Most people the globe over expected a post-disaster wasteland, covered in radioactive fall-out like lethal snow. A desert formed from a reactor core explosion. Nuclear bombardment versus nature. Hands-down winner—nature.

Unsafe for humanity. Unforeseen paradise for animals. Chernobyl.

W: 4.15.21

[Inspired by the 2007 documentary *Chernobyl Reclaimed* a.k.a. *Wildlife Takeover*.]

Dee Allen is an African-Italian performance poet based in Oakland, California. Active on creative writing & Spoken Word since the early 1990s. Author of 7 books--Boneyard, Unwritten Law, Stormwater, Skeletal Black [all from POOR Press], Elohi Unitsi [Conviction 2 Change Publishing], Rusty Gallows: Passages Against Hate [Vagabond Books] and Plans [Nomadic Press]--and 70 anthology appearances under his figurative belt so far. Among The Ruins is his second flash/micro-fiction story.

