

AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL POETS

JUST POETRY!!!

the NATIONAL POETRY QUARTERLY

Vol. 14, No. 2, Winter 2022-2023

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Associate Editor: Mr. Edward Moon

Special Thanks to everyone who pitched in and “volunteered”, either willingly or unwillingly.

Subscription Price: \$20.00 per year

JUST POETRY !!!

is published four times each school year
in Sept., Dec., March, & June.

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Fossils

by Dwight Edward Dieter
our founder and editor

American High School Poets Winter 2022

“BEST of ISSUE” WINNER
(*\$500 SCHOLARSHIP PRIZE*)

Amensalism

13/12/37

A deployment. Head-cocks, pauses midsentence, battered musket muffling wooden, gallantry sprayed thin into microphones an ever-brazening. Bells blurring, father braided my hair in unendurable heat, weaving the ashened strands into side bun, plaits, twin huns. Each knot a future unnamed, buried in wavelets fanning out a bloodless landscape. Hammered light. Steel carcass. Splash of ginkgo leaves, alight on our bare feet. Kawasaki Ki-48 tumbling like a password confessed across a fenced sky. Rendezvous between magnolias twirling under full-bloom Type 98/25. The first morning shell shyly sprouting like a secret heard for the first time. Cryogenic freeze from AC the last gamble at immortality. City blaring *run, run, run*. Bā Lù Jūn facedown in a pool of Sake. A thumb-sized star soaking beside his unstrapped holster. Children impaled on rocks. A clutch of beheaded villages, razed into a tatty scored map of Nán Jīng. Ragtag. Snow shredded naked, slaughter puts the night on mute. Unpronounceable, all over me.

Haoyang Liu, CA, The Thacher School

EDITOR'S CHOICE SELECTION

(\$100 SCHOLARSHIP PRIZE)

mo(u)ring song

It is not enough to want out.

I catch the sun like a pearl in my hands and kiss it goodbye, pledging allegiance to dawn's itching mouth, lighting a sweetgrass cigar to see the smoke wave me off. Anyway, I'm not worried about the cricket I left behind the honeysuckle bush. He promised me that he would tell me a secret, press his umber-lips to my ears and score bone-buds in my cartilage. Still, I imagine him oxidizing under the yolk of the sun, shrugging off his exoskeleton, and learning to dance. In my mind, he knows how to live forever.

I'm worried about her, little girl enveloped by viscous amber in the mouth of an unforgetting shadow. She writes me letters sometimes, tells me how she hasn't drowned yet, how the dusk shoves sunlight back into her lungs, how her leaves sprout flesh. She sends me her pruned fingertips, soft moss shoved underneath the fingernails. She says it's getting hard to sleep. She says the trees still beg for a body. Even now, after my marrow's quiet divorce from the oaks. Even now,

my foot still encaged, cemented in the quicksand foliage. I mistake the crackling branches for snapping limbs, the fluttering sunspots for blinking eyes. Somewhere I am still pulling myself up, watching my roots lift until I can no longer feel them praying for soil.

Alisha Tan, GA, Johns Creek High School

Cassandra, Calpurnia, Clytemnestra

Horses scream in the streets of a thousand cities
while martyr feet march over cobblestone
graveyards. Mascara drags crags over a white cheek,
a ghost of another girl long past with fingers in her hair
to split the sky asunder with shouts of
ruin. She is every woman who has met man.

Bloody statues are pallbearers for the drugstore sanity left
desiccated in the dust while she is dragged
writhing behind her husband's ambitions.
The sky spits magma and salt pepper over the
sepulcher of empire found in her ribcage,
split open like an overripe pomegranate to show a heart,
red for knives shoved into blind backs,
and the anger of a hundred heroes through history—
spots behind your eyelids when the last candle burns out.

Chipped nail polish is the harbinger of familial
fallout, like dead winds on the battle-ready beaches,
and stoplights radiated in rage behind slow trucks. Nothing in this
republic warzone was born for glory, only webs of
women left for unfed vultures in the wake of catastrophe.
Lauren Alagna, NJ, Howell High School

(Multiple/Choice)

(A)midst the rain a sheaf of paper trickles down her spine, covering her
(C)icatrix, glossing the dragon's growl, symbols seared in false flesh.
(B)urning – it was a habit, or a ritual, what was the difference? She
(D)oesn't remember much (;*she lies*) beside her thoughts, her nerves
(C)ombusting in the blaze, in ecstasy, neuropathy or not.
(B)eyond enormous, abscond awareness. A crane takes flight,
(D)on't blink or you'll miss it – a moraine of pulp, a morass of blood.
(C)lasp ing his arm, she turns; an unexplored map, an unquelled quality,
(A)ll shrinking, sagging, wilting in the crimson-stained ink that consumes
(E) All of the above.

(A)mong the flames a drop of liquor dribbles down his face, tempting his
(C)onscience, sobering the dragon's sting, letters leached in rotten rye.
(B)ottoms up, double down. Caskets wobble in their plots. The heart
(D)oesn't compress but beats empty (;*he lies*) beneath the backstreets,
(C)arving shapeless figures, dancing through the air. Midnight kites
(B)elch helium, breathe hell. Broken bottles whistle in the wind –
(D)own goes the crane, strangled in string, survival of the sightless.
(C)radling her head, he smiles; a textbook trance, a detached duality,
(A)ll crumbling, fading, melting in the scarlet-teared heat that spares
(E) None of the above.

Kenneth Su, AZ, Hamilton High School

a thousand revolutions

hands interlock and unravel, a fractal folding
out in reverse. a shout daggers into the throat
where the organ gleams red, bleeding tainted
seawater in the lungs. the beginning is an end:
the paths yawning as their source, inevitable
is tired of melting to the base of its tower of
wax. war is tired of beatings, battlefields won
and lost and won again. foresight is tired of
fighting: voices dissonant in cathedrals built
on limestone besieging its heart. carve cut time
into marble skin and leave four-four between
marble lungs. sharp and weeping, a fistful of
words is wrapped in gauze and pressed into a
ribcage fashioned with roots. this inhale need-
less because rigidity lacks foresight. growth is
forsaken, withering at the spine. ragged points
still stinging. wounded columns crack, wounded
altars quake. wounded tears a cry from its chest;
a tremulous chord reverberates,
enshrining its collapse.

Janice Lin, CA, Monta Vista High School

Lessons:

Perhaps it was my last life, how my soul spiraled before I knew of its existence, that breathed such a horrid curse into my lungs.

As the gods touched life into my body, they weaved a purpose into my bones. They mended a tool from my cells. I was born not a person, but a lesson.

Unwillingly, every relationship in my life ended when the last page of a fairytale was read. I remained inked behind the hardcover, a fox sister in never ending flames. Each companion, enemy, and associate read our interactions like Aesop's. Fables to be tossed on shelves once learned.

It's an arduous thing. At each milestone of my life I waited for a blessing. For a pleasant fairy to lift my curse; for a fictitious creature to pity me, or at least provide me a ride to the afterlife.

Yet, my circumstantial agony remained.

I, however, became an antagonist to authority. I pursued connections that lack a red thread of fate. Ones kept alive solely by my mythological stubbornness and penchant for Robert Frost. Whether by means of free will or a swaying illusion of choice, I fight a battle heretofore lost.

I continue to pass as a seeker or a folktale, never sought for good reason.

If we meet not by my strong-arming of destiny,
but by fate dropping you at my doorstep, be wary. For I am not a friend,
lover, or acquaintance. I am a teacher, whose lesson is written in blood.

Megan Lawson, VA, Colgan High School

Midnight Elegy

Lantern light baring your gaze, cicadas howling during the ripe night,
skylines of mountains crying for untouched blood—yours tainted.
Heavy air & keen mosquitoes surrounded our clasped pinkies.

I tried not to stare at your marred arms pulling pa₁. It was just us—
but I reached to cover your gaunt eyes. You coughed in birdsong,
haloed by thorns; everything warbled as heatwaves assailed your bent back.

Your tears led to prosperous fruit & salted rainwater: *taeguk*, yin & yang.

To cool down, we played gonggi & counted grains of rice. Then, we bowed to
our Fathers. I remember when magpies swooped down to peck at peeled pears—
wings missing sharpened knives, ghost cries encroaching our throats.

Our hands shackled: daughterhood tarnished, duty defiled. I imagine
cradling your pebbled face, fall(en) foliage stitched to your scalp.
Only a foolish american girl would ask, *can't you smile?*

I see you now: azalea & cosmos blossoms braided to earthen strands.

Gamboge leaves of a ginkgo tree fall slowly onto soil;
my ancestors' bones & toil mingle with remnants of lost history.
As the pure moon lies above our heads, cool breezes kiss my cheek.

Dawn, *saebyeong*, will soon come thirsting for our blood.

Cara Wreen, WI, Bay Port High School

¹“green onions” in Korean

Out of the Subway
42nd Street Station, Times Square

children of a sad society,
raised by the back alley—could always do better.

they are no strangers to sewers,
having been smoke-choked and battered

like fish on cracked white porcelain plates,
pulling out rotten teeth for *want* to fill the grooves.

finally, the ones chewing us would exhale—
the kids are alright, they will be alright, and I'm all right.

so at eye level, lessons of the city on canvas kneecaps
chalk it up to subtle suffering, a trip

on each crack with no faults. don't worry,
you can call them bloody bandages. for i am

a blinged-out tetanus shot for cut-up teenagers
stripping off scaffoldings. once a snuffed-out cigarette lying

facedown in a street puddle,
but i hated myself in the right way.

then future suddenly wanted me,
and i craved nothing more than to be its henchman.
Evan Wang, PA, Upper Merion High School

Dreams Across the Oregon River

Gliding along a graceless river, harsh and exciting to a youthful mind,
I am dreaming of Venus and her effortless beauty.

In this forest of all that is genuine and light, words spill like thick tar
and all you can do is laugh at my cherry-stained face.

You point above us into the skies. With nothing but tenderness, you look into
the tail of Cygnus while I look at the ends of your still-wet hair,
dripping remnants of today's swim and yesterday's smiles.

“Did you know a star brighter than the sun lies in the wings of a swan?”

“Have you ever wished to be so beautiful, nightingale?”

I can't find the words for which to express

the recurring sickness in my head preventing me from answering

so all I do is focus on Deneb, on Cassiopeia,

and Neptune in the distance humming words of encouragement.

From our hands burst stories of talking hounds and lambs turning into boys.

From your mouth comes a hazy, honeyed narrative

as our night disperses into a cloud of warm giggles.

For a moment, I believe in goodness, in the possibility of us being cast

into the whirling skies just as Castor and Pollux. I hope all the stars,

dulled out or alive, sing this to you in dreams. Because even the

deities know I have lost the voice for it now.

Susanna Danielyan, CA, Saugus High School

On Unloving

In memory of 奶奶 (grandmother)

He keeps it quiet, but I know. Your kindness a river overflowing.

Cutting a hunched figure through the streetlight, son a shell curled along your spine. O, you woman of clay, molding yourself stronger every day—brisk steps into the kiln. O, blood pumping like the wingbeats of a myth. You coaxed fish-

bones from a child's throat. You poured yourself into little vials and gave them away. Shed skins and grew them back faster. The last time I saw

you, I was thirteen. I foal. I burdened with bloodline and love. Like a parasite, I nestled fingers between your laddered ribs, palming the smooth underside of everything I had known in the city. We took walks by the Huangpu River, the mall nearby. Your son now taller, back also bowed under the shadows of skyscrapers. I trailed

behind you like a smaller child. Returned to America, your voice spilling over the line. Then, the glass emptied. I did not believe it at first, your death. Like a mantra, I kept company with my imagination: We were at the beach. My eyes were on the sand, watching the waves pull you out to sea. Back fading into the sunset. Footprints smoothed away by the tide: your imprint on me.
Karen Zhao, CA, Northwood High School

i am rotting in the coffin of my body

my hands sprawled / make mountains / out of knuckles /
and when I say this / I mean that there is a country /
knifed into existence / whenever someone /
makes a religion / out of religionless / things

Here is what I wanted to ask: when they worshipped
sacrifice in the form of torn homelands & wombs,
and there was nothing holy about the way rebellions
couldn't be fashioned out of teeth alone, when this was all I had—
what pyre is left for me to burn on? They tell me I write
too much about girlhood and I answer *what else can I write about*
but this: body parting like an over-ripened plum beneath
veined, gasping hands. My mother's breath stirring like an afterthought
as she prays for me to sprout male genitalia the way teeth
breaks through gums; the sprawl of my limbs couldn't border in
the exhaust of gunfire, smoke still rising like an exhale. They plow
my back with nails & plant seeds in a barren wasteland over-irrigated
with pills that shatter down my throat like shots of wine.
Because I couldn't fashion claws out of broken skin, couldn't raise
arms to shoulders and call it an embrace.
Because a woman is a country fearing invasion; because a country
becomes a woman to be dominated when named *she, her*.

Vicki Lin, FL, Bell High School

a hateful house, home no more

Of walls with bitter reminders in that familiar voice always despised.
Of roofs that held diseased corners and an emptiness that replaced the sky.
Of floors like a detective worn from tragedy, left cold and hardened.

Its walls enclosed and entrapped just as much as it protected.
Any intimacy towards it had converted to contempt
For it has ruined the foundation of unspoken trust by doing nothing at all.
Breeding the perfect cesspit of meaningless penance
Veiled and excused as necessary hardships for any gratitude.

Its roof suffocated and encapsulated just as much as it aspired.
Held down by unsaid expectations mistaken as cruel realism
And still being the peak of something forever grounded.

Its floor withstood and burdened just as much as it disregarded.
Fronting change with indifferent stubbornness in place of times no longer.
Rooting itself in place of the very thing destroying it.

It is a lonely house. But it is not alone, for what would it hate?
How would it scream? Why would it cry?

A self-proclaimed monster that perpetuates its own suffering.
Its animosity reflects back off unbending barricades.
Its wails pant breathlessly to the stars.
Its tears pray upon desecrated ground.
Christopher Do, MA, Boston Latin Academy

Toil

Each day, along pre-formed tracks, I pad,
paws worn thin by sharp gravel,
decrepit fur stuck full of harsh brambles,
pelt cut by unforgiving nature as I break through thick underbrush.

Heaving, I slog behind packs of well-kempt whelps,
each dripping with sunshine and fire,
bursting at the seams with unbound hope,
flashing past us stragglers over gold-paved trails.

Yet, I must trudge on, encumbered and fatigued,
swimming, flailing, sinking in slow motion,
grasped by unforgiving quicksand,
until I wash up at the next shining oasis.

Predictably, however, the pools have long since dried when I arrive,
lapped up by voracious and lively souls,
primed many years for this journey,
leaving but two drops in the wake of their frenzy.

But I cannot last on diminishing provisions forever,
eventually, I will collapse onto dry earth, weakened by years of ceaseless toil,
and, with decaying maw, take a final, dust-filled breath,
released into infinite slumber.

Samael Hoppe, OK, Edmond North High School

Feverdream

Tangling briars of internal dialogue,
Layered carefully, a delicate tiramisu.
Like baked parchment paper in champagne snow.
Soft, and gentle, such dreams chill me to the core.

It starts out high and shuddering,
Then infinitely numbered and bright.
With fluorescent butterflies that have silk-iron legs like spatulas.
And they take you away, stuff your voice into a Roman-style ampulla.

The people they came, they came, spider-like fingers,
With iced water for your fiery skin.
Like little church mice around the rough drums in your head.
Too far into the cinnamon forest, the internal map has been misread.

Tendons burning, and tight like strings,
A rhythmic melody of grating coughs.
The sugary trees are silver in the silken, rusted light.
Soul snatched from body, not even a fight.

Shoulders, they squeeze in and in,
Breath, it lurches out and out,
As if you are filled with feathers like honey, useless but sweet, easy.
A simple treat for such a feverdream.
Scarlett Durisek, TX, The John Cooper School

Escape

The darkness

Hidden inside you, enveloped in despair. It gnawed at your conscience.

It clawed your brains. Blood everywhere. No one else could see.

But you were different. A phoenix, you rose from the midnight dust,

Ashes black as a rainbow's birth. Your flame raging against memories past.

Set fire, watch as it burns alive. Charcoal edges crumbling

Ghostly shrieks of tradition, fallen to embers.

Dear father, we must leave: these years – my childhood innocence – behind.

Do not return home where arrows pierce raw flesh in angst

Those transphobic lies * Color-blinded aims * will shoot you down.

Do not look back. Wallow too deep in the past,

You lose yourself in these clouded waters.

Salt flooding your nostrils, liquid billowing lungs. Does it remind you

Of my baby gurgles, splashing soapy bubbles. Bath-time in a bucket.

You can't escape – you drown.

You must leave, go chase the child of Tefnut and Ra. Immortal love awaits.

Search the withered forests for your self, lost. Thirty years a warp.

Hurry, the flame is flickering out, engulfing all my breath.

Forget me, and forgive. I will always

Love you.

Selena Xiang, CA, Canyon Crest Academy

Unless Christmas is

Flurry the snow with might

The magical wand taps roofs tickles noses trickles light into drowsy eyes
Twitch once then wide open to embrace the enchantment of winter wonderland

Whiteout. the Star above every spirit illuminates each speck of snowflake;
In the reflection of those whose realities dwindle,
Christmas fantasy prospers indulging little souls till sweetness null

Let it snow upon where gale merges with fading giggles and grunts
As fire igniting the holy night crackles down to nothing but dying embers

Idle in warmth of silence under chimney of all

Noel, noel, sullen voices sang, our brethren under heavenly larks
Word by verse and verse by song their lips sang until

Tranquil to still.

Fresh-cut evergreen faint only a trace of crisp peppermint beneath

the Star blinks just once more before the farewell of conifers
Glimpses of Christmas memories swirled in a spirit dance long gone until
Cedar garlands centerpieces wreaths series of trinkets, Dear Blitzen
Arrives once again on the twenty-fifth of December

Leaves once again on the twenty-fifth of December

Cherish the night of goodwill because jingle bells have no room to chime in
Unless Christmas is

Haelang (Nicole) Kim, WA, Bellevue High School

little glass dolls

it's raining again.

your reflection in each droplet before you shatter on stone,
water slipping across knuckles & you're gone.

the silence between us unfurling to ash. licking burnt
regret from your lips, that tang of molasses and candied smiles &
i can't swallow because swallow is defeat &

i'm not a loser is what you taught me. i miss you.

the nights we drowned together in the world's palm & your
heartbeat shivers on my chest & hands clasped so tight we
thought we'd never let go. what fools.

you just watched.

you watched scraped hands bloodied

hips cheeks pressed against earth like unheard prayers.

your laughter bright as your too wide smiles and your
swishing dress light as you left me broken, like those little glass dolls

you dropped in the shop that sunday afternoon. your mouth flutters
like dancing moths and i almost fall again, but i know the concrete

now, i know the kiss of dusted rubble & yours will never compare.

now i sit, mourn the days where I didn't catch rain but

let it fall.

Benji Fernandez, CA, Polytechnic School

Depedensea

When the sea—where the fish imprisoned lay,
Where asphyxiation takes hold of all—
Longing for another's warm-witted shall,
Floods eastward to stretch its vast arms away,

Ignorant to the promised vows, hearsay,
Must I, in solemn, perch as a cold doll?
Shall I shun deathless loyal lies as kraal?
Seek not but sand, algae, and barricade?

Alas, try not fear for the temptation,
This old sorrow'd fence unstables in storm,
While the vibrant parrots screech to station,
Idly awaiting due train, loosely worn.

So fish, dolls, parrots: taboo be patient.
The water lies; mold your own torrid bourn.
Ava Edelman, IL, Highland Park High School

Purr Withal

Outside, the cats are wailing and I'm thinking about the time
your face collapsed into disgust, the caterpillar still wriggling
its fat, mangled rump on the concrete like the silver hips of
a flashing knife. I am preoccupied with sadness all the time
now. I repent the insect's lost life for you. I want to be well
and you are the only listening ear, but you have always
pronounced sadness synonymous with weakness. On the
bed now, I shudder into the blanket, mantle-eyed: simultaneously
a begging and a forgetting. Every bad sunup comes with a
desire to disappear. Just like all the nights before this one,
I at once crave company and a solitary life with all the windows
nailed shut. The cats are still crying out into the emptiness. There
are no lights outside, only a moon that wishes to escape. In
the bunk above me, the wooden boards creak as you turn on
your side. The last thing I see before I sleep is this: your face,
revulsed. I breathe in thinly, the years shallowed before me.
Sandra Lin, FL, Bell High School

Calling All Gods

What is language outside body but dry echo, reflected want.
For what is body outside voice but quiet unheld hands.
And voice, stripped of syllables, what is sound beyond language.
For the caesura before and after the sandpaper of a clearing throat is a language
of itself.
What is white noise of laughter but baseline, steady heartbeat of the body.
And heartbeat, what is more than nature's metronome.
For what is musical instrument but body, what is orchestra but polyphony.
What is want without the body but language without voice, empty curves of
letters containing nothing but the sweet sound of silence.
Then, symphonies.
Jessica Bakar, CA, Foothill High School

dear mary

i could give you a transplant
but i'll give you my hand
feel the dried little rivers
from the palm to your fingers
can i deliver them rain
and save you from pain.
strands of thin white hair
more draining river bends
i dip my fingers in their movement
and leave my sympathies unsaid.
your body is a pine trunk
the roots decaying from beneath
its okay to fall, detach;
the wilderness will spread her way around
and you will arrive inside her ivy and dirt
become her growing trees.
Holt Daniels, NC, Charlotte Latin School

Rebirth

After Katsushika Hokusai

I still remember the time when I
caught the will to write,
Never took time to erase,
wished to rewrite
my suffering life, erase
never seen again.

the stifling air and
The blazing *cold* then
Drove me to a
pool, red as poppy
Inside my figure *blooms*

Matthew Gu, FL, Trinity Preparatory School

