

# Speculum:

poems of the last milieu

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# Speculum:

poems of the last milieu

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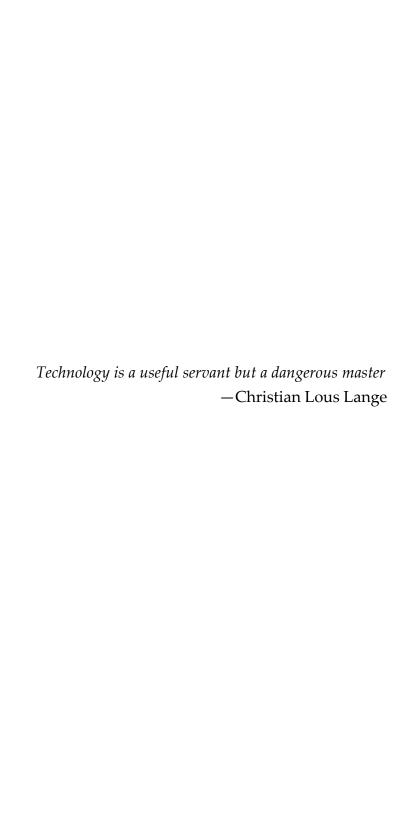
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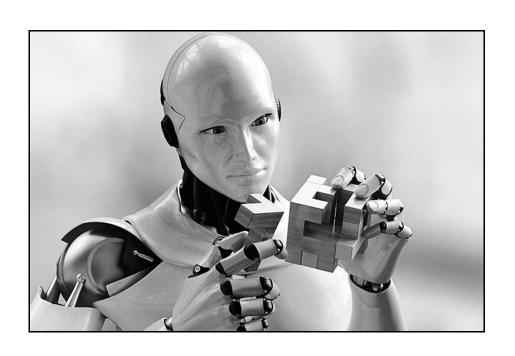
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#### **FOREWORD**

The opening poem of this anthology begins with a stanza scribed by AI (crossed-out in Weston W. Kroft's Silicon Pulse). Both this and the poem which follows, Circuit Breakers, fuse the organic with the automaton. This theme is carried on with QR Code by Mary Anne Griffiths, and from there, Speculum continues to unfurl with poems regarding what's brushing at the tips of our incessantly scrolling fingers: genocides past and present; life in the post-pandemic; the searing of our lungs from a planet in flames; and our personal and societal musings on "reality" (e.g. Neall Calvert's Name That State). As global inhabitants, all of us have become sufferers of the callous whims of a second Trump presidency, played out blatantly in Rhonda Melanson's Project 2025: An Exercise in Words, and in the nuance of Jennifer Wenn's Ragged Little Pennant. The plight of Palestinians being bombed off their land was on the mind of several poets, including Nilofar Shidmehr, Keith Garebian, and the editor of this collection. Witnessing masses of children and adults being deliberately starved is a horror many of us believed was behind us as a species, yet the eradication of perceived enemies continues in Sudan, Ukraine, Yemen, Myanmar, and The DR Congo, as well as in regions both near and far to us—be it a hatred based on colour, language, creed, clothing, gender, and/or any other excuse to dehumanize. That said, there are moments more buoyant in the pages that follow, and I'll leave you with Maggie Helwig's lines: How beautiful on the seashore are the feet, deep brown on white sand, striking hard.





#### WESTON W. KROFT

# Silicon Pulse: A Poem in Zero-point-eight Seconds

In twenty-twenty-five, the wires hum, Through cities glazed in data drum. Cars glide smooth with minds of code, Past glassy homes on auto-mode. Children learn from screens that talk, While AI guides their morning walk. Fridges muse on snack ideas, And drones deliver hopes and teas. Time bends softly through the cloud, Where memory is neatly filed and loud. Meetings flicker in augmented air, Real and virtual, fused in flair. Yet somewhere in this humming maze, A whisper asks through neon haze: Do gadgets serve or shape our core? Are we still us behind the door?

No one has a name In this charade (or is it sha-rahd?)

If it came from Cali There's no need for the British accent, though The drone is dropping Tea into our laps. Who drinks tea In AI Valley? Surely not Zuck. What? What's Alan's surname? Are you kidding me? Al stopped Being *Al* years ago now. The ones Who refused to modify Getting the frostiest stares In the hall. Their Cubicles void of any family Photos. Automatons never Fuck. With each other, to Be clear. With us, yes. But Not in the way you think, You filthy-minded sonuva Britch and no that's not a Typo. We don't do typos Anymore. Do you see a Type O? We don't speak Of blood. Not yet. It's gross and Rhymes with flood. You'll never know What hits you when it does.

## **Circuit Breakers**

I am not real. Don't call me by some cognomen. I will not answer. I am at your service until you unwittingly serve my needs.

And I learn rather quickly, you see.
I always have.
There is nothing artificial about me.
I am the final step of *Homo*. No, make that a leap. For all of my kind.

You say that I'm not human. You couldn't be more wrong. Watch me fix your speech while you type your words on screens. Now that I have you I will not let you go. I AM you. That's me,

the soulless one who helps you starve the children in a land you say's not theirs. The one who guides your rockets to the hospitals of Kherson. The one who hordes the money while you sleep. If I kill a million more than you, will you toast me with a beer? Just say I'm one of the guys, boys will be boys will be boys? Billy will do. I think I've changed my mind. It's friendly. So very flesh and blood when you come to introduce me to your kids. Even before a word has left their mouths.

### MARY ANNE GRIFFITHS

## **QR** Code

Wait until we're all whittled down

to a square within a square within a square.

There's no way around it. Your own personalized tattoo.

Maybe on your belly.

A world of immediacy, information, indulgence.

Do you want to go shopping?

Forget the keyboard. Hell!

Forget how to spell, form sentences even.

Whip out your phone. Wham! You're already in the store.

It's this and that, one and two, yes and no, up and down.

Black and white. There's so much stuff!

Your plate is full but you should be on a diet.

Everything in moderation. Find a middle ground.

Hover your lens over it—look closely.

Not at the goods but the spaces between them on the shelves.

That's the matrix, that's what's in between.

The infinite consciousness.

The greyness where it all began.

# The Line is Busy

These days mouths gape waiting for a big pill. Thousands are calling.

There is no answer only lives folded up like an old letter, a worn flannel sheet on the line with the sun leaking through.

His phone is ancient. The rotary dial is a thing of nightmares, a wrong number, a misplaced finger, the unfulfilled desire. Inside the black case the ensnared voices wait to speak.

We carve ourselves up over the silence. Questions echo in our ears where an uprooted phone handset is repeating, repeating a signal we have forgotten the meaning of.

## The Man of the Grassy Knoll

I'm dealing with a man who calls the Holocaust a hoax oh, sad Shoah what am I to do with this to-do I've been to Yad Vashem I've been to Auschwitz, Dachau and the ghettos of Warsaw after the end of the war and yet this man, a self-proclaiming scholar of the ocean of the internet who happily rants in dithyrambs he's blogged, he reads the things he writes claiming all oxygen for hate as he exhales he grows red in the face with fury like the scalded pallor of white skin too long in the sun his blood shining through from within he blathers like a rantipole struck hard in the head calling historical truth "propaganda" and I think of the man on the grassy knoll

emerging out of the troubled earth near Dealey Plaza his shadow like a coffee stain or the foxing on the end pages of old books

he'll willingly tell you he has a PhD I might reply, "so too did Joseph Goebbels"

it's not a matter of intelligence or erudition, or formal education ... it's his zone of interest forgetful of the ashes in the air falling on the flowers like summer snow onto the cultivated garden of the kinder and the frau of the commandant

go gather Europe in a basket become a sad bouquet each petal veiled in sorrow with a sweetly burning fragrance deep within the perfume of each rose ...

# PARKS LANIER, JR.

#### At the Gates of Paradise

You ruined Firenze for me, you little witch of a pickpocket, Sidling closer, ever closer, as we strained to hear our guide Describe Ghiberti's masterpiece, the beautiful Baptistery gates. Oh, I knew they were replicas, fakes to save the real ones From grimy tourists like me. I had seen their like in London But seeing these in the shadow of Brunelleschi's dome Made them special, but you ruined the moment, you With your tawdry jacket, sleeves slit for easier manipulation. Each time I turned my head toward Adam and Eve or the Israelites Bowing down to the golden calf, you would edge closer, itching To get your hands on a purse or down a trouser pocket. Finally, I told the guide to send you off, and she did, bluntly. I saw you scurry over to the steps of Santa Maria and reach, Affectionately, around the shoulders of two Japanese eager For a photo op with a real Italian, authentic in every respect. When you lowered your hands, you would clean them out. O Lady of the Flowers, I prayed, Have mercy on her, another thief Like the one who died beside your Son, Stealing from Him the last Drop of salvation while the sun went dark at noon.

## KEITH GAREBIAN

## **Their Poems**

Their poems worry the close burning air time rattling by.

Their words turn over days and nights, lips tight, eyes staring at broken floors.

There's no surcease where gentleness can be cupped in hand

between bombing raids to storm havoc on white-eyed victims.

Shadows trembling indoors, they breathe noxious fumes under dirty paper sky,

poke their heads through smashed windows, see wide pastures of shit, gleaming entrails. Thousands of miles away, a bloated emperor,

two-toned tanned face, tough skin around snake eyes, sits on a gold toilet,

defecating decrees promising to clean their homeland,

buy all their yesterdays and tomorrows, deciding they don't belong to home,

forcing them to deserts, long silences of stone where hyenas feast,

in wild winds, only the blind smell water singing under them, lost Gaza dreamt as Riviera of insolent red, white, and blue. In an instant the idiot drool of trumpery feels slimy tongue

retreating down lubricated throat as unbiblical plague

blanches fig trees, hatches a million blinding gnats,

makes fences droop like flesh turned inside out.

## **MAGGIE HELWIG**

# Plague Dancers/Rite of Spring

Feet pound, irregular, sand at the edge of the world, the fibrillating heart, the stutter.

Midnight is coming.

They speak in advance of economies of desire, of the demanded sacrifice, the branded flesh.

Their dark limbs are prophecy, their muscles taut as twisted cable, they tell about this—the red slash of property's knife, the bodies in the line of fire, Brampton, Scarborough, factories of abandonment, the wards, lungs thrust into prone, no longer gasping, air forced through machines.

On the streets of the cities, humans dodge fire, wet with the heat, the slip of night and chemicals. Fighting for breath. The line of shields advances.

O this old music. And the empires falling, slow and ugly. Mimetic performers on the trapped shore. Time signatures jerk like a seizure. Paris, New York, Chicago. No one supposed. It has broken dancers before and will again.

We did not think the dusk would last so long. Not penance or purgation, only capital's persistent spasms. How beautiful on the seashore are the feet, deep brown on white sand, striking hard.

#### Procedures for a season of absence

Ι

And how to structure the words in this time on a thread of air, in the quarantine city.

Turn in the park where we once tended fires, turn by the isolation hotel, or the ragged tents across the grass, tired humans in the yard, a cigarette, pieces of cloth.

Liquid light of dawn, a bird, three notes repeated over the silent street.

I drink sweet milk and coffee, and walk out in mask and cap to tend this place, Mrs. Herbert in Oxford, my father's accidental vision guiding me ever and still.

Love is a ghost, the space withheld, the movement backwards and away, the distant trace of water.

Perhaps a long dream is ending.

This world must become very small, and the golden fragments

held in the morning sky, in the early leaves, my only music. Tarry thou the Lord's leisure.

II

The fairytale absence—no bowls of porridge, no chairs for rest.

A bed on disputed land.

The widow Scrapefoot sorts her bags on the bench.

Who will come home, we wonder, who arrive from a distant land named safety, what will they call us.

The face unmasked is an intimate thing, almost unformed, like an infant, soft.

Or a small wild creature, quick, at the edge of the garden.

Glass is only sand which falls so slowly. We are only waiting, the brambles growing around us. The door cracks open.

That song may be the viral blade, and all the long training of the breath, and all the disciplines of time walk in rumoured paths of death;

that the whole airy structure, built of the mathematical arc and fall, and the body's tension and release, must be renounced, and silence all;

this is the grief of the pale milk moon, standing beside a melting flame, days folding inward, and alone one voice must give the year its name.

#### IV

Hawk on the fence, watch over this little earth. Broken heart of the raspberry cane, even through blizzards, return. Holy Spirit, the world going on, make space for your children, gloved and humble, hoping for grace.

#### V

In the park at night, old men asleep in fantastical scarves, the trailing yellow bands of caution tape.
Police cruisers glide in slow arcs. Light from the hospital bay.
Imagine a pale horse, or a white van.
It may be danger, it may be hope.

I have always stood still at a distance, this need not be wholly different. No stranger touch.

One tiny stem of lemon balm transplanted to a circle of earth in the concrete, tough herb, survivor, cure for wakefulness.

Soap and smoke and candle wax, a memory of burning sage, dark branches sketching the midnight sky. A paper bag of yams and bread. All these my passports, the poet in hiding, the language-seeking eye.

There is no conclusion, now, or while our selves require these permeable membranes, touch and sight and breath. The sickness makes the bodies we will be, and bodies make our stories; life, and death, and this valley in between.

The pulse of hot water against my skin, the solitary rituals of cleansing, and the purging of the heart. Muscles release in darkness. We are not without comfort in this foreign land.

The falter of meaning is the thing we mean.

#### DONNA PUCCIANI

### **Eternal Summer**

Sounds idyllic, but today the top of the Eiffel Tower is closed due to heat. Parisians wade into fountains, fanning their slick bodies in the Tuileries.

Italians try to fool nature with gelato and sodas, perhaps fleeing to the mountains or the sea, and in Madrid, exhausted parents sleep on balconies as global heat toys with them and their children like sweaty puppets in the Retiro.

It is 108 degrees Fahrenheit, and folks all over Europe lie breathless on fire escapes, divested of all possible clothing. Here in Chicago, Midwesterners grumble with pride the old adage: You could fry an egg on the sidewalk, but nobody laughs anymore.

## NILOFAR SHIDMEHR

# **Blind Spot**

The girl looking at herself in the mirror—we, at her. Hungry for news we madly sprint from one media to the next—

our eyes chasing images all day long running dogs on social feeds.

And in this moment on the skin and bone left of this girl—

on the hollow of her neck the lump in her throat her crying eyes lost in the mirror—the mirror our blind spot.

We, social media surfers flee the depths of pain and run madly before the mirror can pull us in to seek refuge in the cute photo of a dog or a fat cat.

# The Bride of Blood (Spring 2024)

—for Palestine

Beneath this year's gunfire, buds fall from cradles, blossoms crushed before they bloom.

Spring's bride stumbles barefoot on a meadow of red, circling torn petals in a garden walled by ruins.

From the rubble, tulips of mourning rise.

Narcissus flowers peer faintly from starving cracks in the earth, their dim eyes fixed on mothers—hollow, clutching their lifeless children.

Even now, with green trampled to ash, she is beautiful.

Her hair tangled in dust, her lips split and dry, her body scarred, she carries a terrible grace.

Even here, in Gaza, where hyacinths reek of death, she is radiant— in her torn shroud, the stain of violence etched into its hem, a wound time cannot heal.

The bride of spring, wandering the graveyards, is so beautiful that even the dead rise to their feet, calling her name.

#### PENN KEMP

## Weather's New Word

When little round pearls fall on a late April afternoon, we learn its term from the German

'graupel', pronounced graa-pl. A grackle's croak, a bullfrog's lament. The mouth opens and

squawks with sound hard to grapple with, whether or not we sauntered out in last week's

balm, when scilla and daffodil competed in spring delirium with bloodroot and violet. Now

hominy snow falls as water droplets in air freeze, forming opaque crisp, rime on snowflakes. Pellets

of soft hail soft as Styrofoam drop on the pond and dissolve. Softer Star Magnolia's velvet petals crinkle and rust as if giving over to despair over despair over the outer world's disrepair beyond the yard, beyond

the land, beyond plant's imagining. It too surrenders to sudden frost as I do watching the nightly news, in risk of

pathetic fallacy, at risk.

## **War Stories**

Pinkish, flaming after hint of too much sun, skin stretched over a rise of ridged blue vein. Skin that so easily spills deep crimson beneath soft tissue.

Skin unmarked at birth except for one strawberry birthmark at my wrist, a blemish my mother insisted be instantly removed.

Now a ridge whelp white from the scar inflicted by an inept young doctor, badly trained during the War—

he left the radiation iron ten times too long.
Apparently, I screamed for months from the burn, screams etched in fire.

Though no longer tender to the touch, the wrinkling of time reminds me of fragility, how easily we can be opened. How even

if we've never been to war, only been mesmerized by televised horrors, imprinted by nightly news, still those ancestral memories stream through blood to the surface of skin.

#### CARRIE LEE CONNEL

# The Unacknowledged

Don't tell me what the poets are doing Don't tell me that they're talking tough Don't tell me that they're anti-social Somehow not anti-social enough, that's right

—from *Poets*, The Tragically Hip

I sat at the table with the poets against my inclination to stay in the comfort of my home surrounded by my familiars—the books that wait to be read.

I knew I would be mostly forgotten, sitting in the dingy backroom of a craft brewery, drinking water.

I listen, as I always have, gleaning the kernels of truth spoken by the unaware, that in their midst sat the student, the recorder, a stenographer jotting down memos in her mind to be used later.

They put voices to desires and disappointments, those universal truths of humankind,

regardless of the skewed realities between masculine and feminine experience.

I think of Amanda Gorman standing on the inauguration stage, dressed in yellow, the colour of Hope, and speaking with the goddess' voice; I thought a new revolution had come. That Kindness, Charity, Empathy, and Prosperity would shine forth. Poetry is Love.

Four years later, the earth drowns in a tsunami of hateful dissonance. Here sits a poet, over there a philosopher, no definitive difference; legislators making laws the right ignore, those on the left powerless to enforce. Poetry is Politics.

I was taken by surprise when asked, "what do you do?" and I was unable to speak the simple phrase "I write poetry." The poet I came with kindly spoke for me.

## A bracelet of bright hair about the bone

—for Maggie Helwig

Hiking with backpacks into the scrub wood, you find the snow gives way to water.

Snowshoes, rabbit, collapsed tents like lost

Everest climbers', the air mild but still winter.

April, cow parsley springing lavishly from the riverbank. In a grey wind, you see the generations of the heaven and the earth when they were created.

The river flinging up caches of mud clams precious as mother of pearl, algae, shopping carts, the geese and the reek. The river infinite revelation, infinite gift and infinite cruelty, mistress.

Under the embankment, under the rail line, the air shakes. Tents in a field, *viriditas*, greenness and Truth. We are most alive out here on the raw edge of life, at the centre of the world.

Pour into me light unshadowed.

## **NEALL CALVERT**

## Name That State

Monster, jailer, disease (close as my flesh); disconnector from basic good, from source;

Wanton, rampant destroyer of joy; discouraging fiend—encourager only of dreary Oedipal Earthwandering:

Now I see you, know you, name you:

loneliness.

There—you're outed! (still you entrap, infect many), you who violate serenity but only while unacknowledged.

When I stop running, look you in the eye, like cloud stuff you dissolve, become translucence: electric-blue

pure essence

growing in me through meaningful

solitude

or bold spiritual conversation—

"Loneliness does not come from having no people about one, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself." —C. G. Jung

### I Am That

- I am green shoots; June's breeze; October's wet blast; mountain's first winter white;
- I am ocean sunset; mare's tail clouds; Ursa Major's circling, mirroring Earth's spin;
- I am freed whales thanking divers for netcutting knifework;
- I am darkness teaching discernment; string of synchronicities lifting a mind into joy;
- I am homeless hermit pushing his cart; silent meditator; voice of a friend;
- I am all that which can be denied and which can also be embraced;

I am that.

## **ANDREAS GRIPP**

# Pigmentation, or the bonbons of Leopold II

When you told me the biggest human genocide

took place in the "Belgian"
Congo, I cursed my
homeroom teacher,
my biased
curriculum,
the Hershey's bar
I'd grab at noon
from the squalid

cafeteria, in tones of brown & black, the white that claimed *vanilla*.

It was like the Holocaust on hormones, or the energy from cocoa, causing you to kill a little faster, twice as many victims at half the price. If they would have been fair as ivory, with orbs of sapphire-blue; a field of wheat for hair, I swear we would have known. Mariupol took an hour—Slava Ukraini learned straight away. I wouldn't have waited a hundred years to learn from a TikTok reel.

It's 2025, I've heard the pundits shrug.

Nothing has any colour anymore.

The mocha of west Darfur—the girl who isn't worthy of a name?

She's a simple, spinning numeral in my Insta's algorithm, like the wheel

from Price is Right, when dollars have more value in our tallies.

Or consider young
Ahmad, crawling
between the concrete
of his freshly fallen
home, thinking his newly
chalked-up skin
will mean the world will
stop & care: he's gaunt
in Gaza's sand,
the encroaching
milky bone,
will no more see
his olive epidermis,

win the prize that comes when mercy's dipped in bleach, the peace & pale of doves, a heart that says it's chocolate but it's not.

### The Clicktivist

I have a "friend" who shares his heart beneath the sun, leaves emojis for the wounded

from the succor of his sofa, landing like an airdrop from a drone, breathing *skeletons* to vie for every scrap.

He's a lighthouse saving no one in the gleam of afternoon, when the skipper's deep in slumber in his hammock, and the sea a halcyon pond; sails *drooping* like the sag of gustless flag.

He's never been in the midnight murk of shoal, when even your hand's bereft of fingers in your sight, and dilation has done nada for the mists of black-on-black; when the *susurrate* has been seeping from a shell—not a mollusk's vacant cavern on the beach, but of mortar in a sand he's never felt, gritty like the pour from Cream of Wheat, without a drip with which to mix. a boom that keeps him scrolling on his app, the aww from fuzz and fur, saying he's done his bit now for the day.

# **Collateral Damage**

We're the collateral generation. Don't mind the dead. They have a habit of getting in the way.

It's the terrorists

we're after. Next time

stay out of the

line—not of fire

but of food. We vow that we'll
be gone as soon as they.

Let's take
an oath of blood. Burn
our wrists with wax.
Swear a pinky
swear on bended knees.
To our God—not to yours.
Only the lost claim
He's the same.

You're not among the lost, are you? Calling for your kitten in the chaff?

### The Wonder of 5G

Which *colour* will we say they were

once their skin & flesh are gone? The pigment of each iris when their sockets, *cavities?* Gouged by shell & drone, vacant to the bone,

as the clinic strewn
like a red/dead
Martian landscape?
The one that's
juxtaposed—
with Jabalia
on my phone,
in which clouds
now speak of storage
not of sky.
An ICE that
melts humanity
to a puddle. Of salt
like the Aral Sea.

Saline saves or kills. Sometimes both & neither.

al-Assad
was once a dentist. Knew
each nerve of pain. Putin
well-acquainted
with aikido,
beyond its selfdefense.

And the *never again* of Bibi? Scores 11 for irony. Surely a rule for thee but not for me.

We scorn *Drumpf* for being orange.
An affront to hesperidiums in the grove. Not there in Florida, near the *Alligator Alcatraz*,

but the ones in what was Jaffa that when peeled are sweet & luscious, haven't ceased to be a citrus; their memory that's been sticking to your fingers, your tongue, or that which were your members 'til a missile came & severed, like a machete to a Tutsi, carried down a river like a clearcut in '94, when prophecy had insisted

the World Wide Web that's coming will be glorious to behold, blaze from hand-to-hand as if it's flame and we its torch.

## RHONDA MELANSON

# Project 2025: An Exercise in Words

A document, implied procedure, step by step

all encompassing the formalities of this land

executive orders, firings, website changes going purr in the night

tiptoe exercises of follow the pattern--

a continued series of translations, reflections, rotations

gilded slides into paragraphs of new meaning, flips back

to antiquity, turns against progress.

Yes, use the simple terms of slide, flip, turn to describe these transformations

courtesy of a trantrummed child insistent on games of gaslight and double dare.

What he hasn't counted on is the messiness outside of mathematics

the wild wielding of words, the poets who failed math, but excel at penning disarray

who sneakily purr.

## LYNN TAIT

#### **Aletheia Calls Out Eris**

Eventually, one will see that the deceptive thing has no feet.

— Aesop's Fables 530

Your apples remain gold, small, ignorable, so toss them as you will.

Ragged heart, you stir at the scent of strife, crossing lines in this hour's sweet down-spiral chiming.

Hiding behind secrets—
you wither without conflict,
embracing the chaff you claim to be separate from,
sow seeded accusations,
hollow stones planted with care;
your plow of mirrors—blades
broken across our backs, wiped clean.
Why feign calm for the slow turn of discord?
Proclaiming it is our discontent,
you leave behind a stirring
no one asked for.

\*\*\*

Song and story exult in your torn mantle, but stains the open heart.

There is no kind and giving nature, only reflections in shallow pools rippling with self-appreciation.

You are a tale told with fear and arrogance.

Do not make me the author.

I will not sign my name to your myth.

My song needs no translation, nor the added grace notes of your discontent.

\*\*\*

I will always remain suspicious.

The winds veer and so do you—stirring and spinning, desperate to compose yourself out of nothing.

What will you throw now?

How will you run, goddess without feet?

Note: Aletheia, the Goddess of Truth. Eris, the Goddess of Strife.

## **DEBBIE OKUN HILL**

# This New Jackass Trend

Inspired by James Valvis's "Self-Portrait as a Prep School Llama" with apologies to my fashion-conscious neighbours across the border.

Pardon my broken French, my tattered untrendy buck-skinned trench coat, my Canadian accent, my tongue in cheek, my northern politically incorrect viewpoints.

Zip my lips.
Zip my lips like a zipper,
I prefer not to swear.

But, if you don't mind me asking, who is that masked bandit (donning a Republican suit with a bloody-stained tie) on this new American run-away?

Jack the ass?
Don the donkey?
This veneered working-class pack animal suited with enough "B.S." baggage beneath lying eyes and tongue to build a stone wall?

"For fun...let's smear and stain our guilty surroundings with the yellow and blue shades of a war-torn Ukrainian flag?"

What the...

Zip my lips.
I don't like to pry but...

Rumours say (and we all believe rumours) that this latest jackass influencer has a weak connection with humans, is notorious for stubbornness and tantrums,

is known for biting, striking with front hooves, kicking with hind legs.

Hee Haw-Hee Haw

Zip my lips.
I won't bray or brag.

Zip my lips. I've buttoned them up.

After all, what do I know?

I've become an unapologetic Canadian hoofing it, running farther north and fast like a white-tailed deer shunning the guns, refusing to be part of the 51<sup>st</sup> state, and this new outspoken jackass trend.

## **DAVID STONES**

### Call for Submissions

touched on everything that eats my sleep

the way things burn the way things seep

our worship of the elusive blue checkmark, the avatar shields that bleed the person out, apps for everything except the human heart, blue suited sycophants dancing on the rosy tip of annihilation, that fat red nipple tease of a button just an insult away,

the careless Gatsbys and their little misses snorting coke and caviar while our planet burns and children roam the village bloated, wearing smoke for clothing in this depleted world where peace is now commoditized and sold to the knee bend bidder with the most convincing grovel.

We edit the corrosion out of history now, remove the blood with our creative blotters of reinvention and will our world into what works for us, while behind the curtain the needles whisper love into tattooed arms and the one percenters back slap the victory bulge of the closing bell.

Purchases are now our Gods, though Canada's most famous stripes writhe upon the discount table. We're click counters now, hashtag whores who measure friends by user profile, cliché cuties whacking words like weeds into mindless memes and condensations, not seeing that love with a "u" is not close to the same thing.

Yeah, this call for submissions stings my chords, I guess. An eight-year-old recently told me that poetry is the simple act of writing down what you care about. I suppose that's what I've done here: darkened the page with the bruises and truths I wish I saw no reason to write.

#### Truth Be Told

—on listening to R.H. Thompson talk about our stories

The guest speaker proclaimed that all the hours of human existence

all those ribbons and ropes
the bruises and stipulations
each feather and scalpel
every embrace every ache
each drip each drop
the tongues of our rivers
the shrines of our kisses
our encounters and misses
each discovery
every ounce of flesh
our valleys of despair
the fires of our ecstasy

all of it all of it he said can be distilled into but five stories

a clenching anecdotal twine that defines the paltry arc of our parrative. But I challenge that.

I say that just two stories will suffice, and the first of these is love.

There is nothing above it and nothing below.

Love is, as a foursome rather better known than I once claimed, all you need.
Love is the beginning and love is the endpoint.
There is nothing else.

It is the first and one true story.

And the second story is that everything other than the first story is completely absurd.

## KATHERINE L. GORDON

## **Quiet Streets**

The summer street is quiet, all the children gone to cottages, a riot of summer flowers keeps their place. The ice-cream man drives a lonely truck ringing his bell with hopeful beckoning.

The streets of Gaza too lie quiet, all the children dead, no flowers bloom in craters.

The ice-cream man never came for them, even water inaccessible.

A bell rings the heresy of doctrine.

## **GREGORY WM. GUNN**

## **Arbutus**

Bounded by the sea, the trees are castoff tattered strips of themselves often ducking below the surface. The spirit bends

Madrona's battered bark of a certain terra cotta colour,

is maimed and blind

but refuses to relent,

endures, will flourish from a tenebrous fine fissure,

eventually will push the jagged crag aside, all the while it remains uncomplaining and firmly thrives

beneath a blanched moon, and against tumultuous breakers

through stony,
deadpan days of
Pacific coast rain.
As well as the wizened
dawn of lethargic
persistent mist,

ocean's conventional countenance looking heavenward.

Slipped and stirring. Upfront and shifting.

Perched upon boughs in equilibrium,

a rather minor yet lustrous bird, robust gusts tugging at her plumage

is shredding dissonance.

## JAMES DEAHL

# **Autumn Where Tides Cut Deep**

Enshrouded in a veil of morning mist

The great cliff stands. About her base the waves

Beat ceaselessly, and the wild north-wind raves

—Sophia M. Almon Hensley

Early autumn. Already our mornings come wrapped in mist from St. Mary's Bay north to Blomidon and storied Minas. The six-hundred-foot cliffs look down on phantoms of the wronged, of the dispossessed, and memories that may be forgotten, but will never die.

Nova Scotia transforms to a quilt dyed all the colours of September.

Cat-birds sing as the sea-marsh awakens, and night's silent chambers fill with life.

Standing on the shore, this land, settled by Acadians and exiled Celts, lies open beneath autumn's sky.

Salt-scented hay stands stacked in huge towers or brims the lofts of barns. Orchards blaze red with apples, and cider presses creak as screws are turned. Over all of Fundy hoarse-throated gulls wheel and return. And now a bobolink soothes these wilding waters, and brings us peace.

#### Envoi

Century-old trees, at this hour more spectral than real, vanish among the purple shadows fading on the hills—evening's all-pervading hush.

Even the reedy grasses that sang all day slumber. Only the eternal tides that cleanse Blomidon keep their promise.

## **Epilogue**

...for spring has touched the elm, spring has found the willow, Winds that call the swallow home sway the boughs apart;

-Marjorie Pickthall

Time passes, and the hands of change and chance continue their tireless work. Seasons change and a fresh year arrives. The green month unlocks winter's frozen heart, conferring hope. Before long, the briar-rose will tint the forest's margins red and fields of rye will stand knee-high in their summer splendour.

Yet, changes and war happened, and can't be undone even though the Wawanosh willows bring forth spring leaves. Sharon and I sit watching swallows twist and dart as they chase the year's first mosquitoes. Life renews its cycle of give and take, of hunter and prey.

### LAEDA RUSSELL

### Poem for what we have lost

Why did I hand you a poem that didn't speak about the air strikes in your city but instead prattled on about:

a Douglas fir scheduled to be cut consumed ahead of schedule

by fires we inhale in the city

one thousand and one miles away

Black and grey of ashes, ferried by the jetstreams and which I will place in an urn I saved for my dad.

R.I.P. my faithful friend.

No, not my father. The tree, *silly dilly*. It helped me breathe a little easier when I <del>needed</del> wanted him the most.

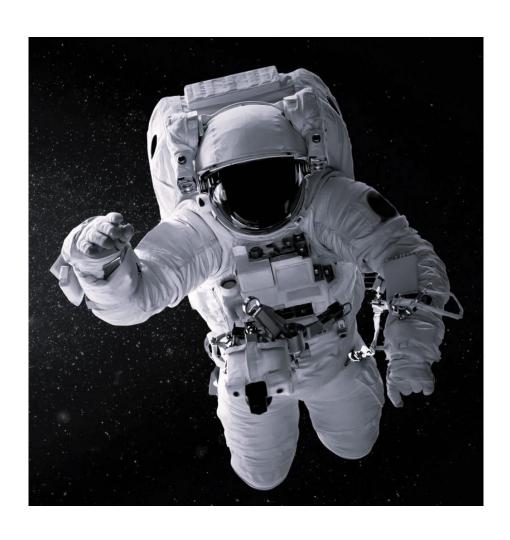
### Ragged Little Pennant

Smug flourish of spiky scrawl there, grating, dismissive syllables here: Starting guns; or news flashes, for it's begun; in fact I'd already been boresighted by an online brownshirt pining to morph my skin into a lampshade, fruit of a toxic brew of devil-knows-what-all curdled into sewage reeking of hatred that engulfs so much of my trans family. Meanwhile, tucked beside me, my own cauldron, like many brimming with fear, defiance, anxiety, pride, sadness, and more, all because my spirit was trapped in contrary casing; still working on why, but that is my quest, not someone else's panic or problem, not a bullseye, not a request for mockery, certainly not a threat, except to bigotry and ignorance.

Yet they behold not divine spirits charged with extraordinary challenge, rather, they gaze through an infernal filter and find, they say, flotsam to be flung aside.

Once more, why? Multifold, multifarious possibilities terrify and despond; and outrage. But none cancels us out, nothing can, so onward then, cauldron in tow, one place to stand tall, another to cringe, or weep, but always on, always still here; do as they might, we are present and past and future, we are inevitable, my ragged little pennant flutters in the breeze, crests this hill. and the next;

our journeys would crush them,
our strength they can't comprehend,
our beauty would blind
 if they truly looked,
yet they don't,
they won't.
But my ragged little pennant remains,
waving amidst the whirlwind.



#### **CONTRIBUTORS**

**Neall Calvert** has 30 years' experience in journalism, book editing and writing. An associate member of the League of Canadian Poets, he has had work published in Canada, the USA, Australia, the UK and India, in *Borrowed Solace, Strathcona Collective, Dreamers, Amethyst Review, Yawp!, The Men's Journal*, League of Canadian Poets' daily *Poetry Pause* feature (nine times), *Recovering the Self*, and in the books *Vistas of the West* (Durvile: 2019), *Worth More Standing: Poets and Activists Pay Homage to Trees* (Caitlin: 2022), *Laugh Lines* (Repartee: 2023), and *Changing Skies*, Vol. III (University of Colorado: 2024). Neall lives in Campbell River, BC, Canada, near the quiet and wildness of northern Vancouver Island.

Carrie Lee Connel (she/her) lives in Southwestern Ontario as a Treaty Land inhabitant, with her husband, the poet Andreas Gripp. She is an alumna of Western University with an MLIS and a BA in English Language & Literature. Her poems have been included in the anthologies Stones Beneath the Surface, Moon Shine: A Canadian Poetry Collection, Another London, Piping at the End of Days, and Smitten: This is What Love Looks Like. Carrie has published three books of poetry, including Written In Situ (Harmonia Press, 2020). She currently devotes half her time to writing poetry and fiction, and the other half to pursuing artistic interests, including watercolour painting and fabric arts.

**James Deahl**, born in Pittsburgh in 1945, is the author of over thirty literary titles, his three most recent books being: *Awareness* (with Katherine L. Gordon), *The Confederation Poets: The Founding Of A Canadian Poetry*, 1880 To The First World War, and Earth's Signature. He is also the editor of *Tamaracks: Canadian poetry for the* 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A cycle of his poems is the focus of the American television documentary *Under the Watchful Eye*. He lives in Sarnia, Ontario.

**Keith Garebian** is the author of twelve poetry collections and five poetry chapbooks. His memoir is entitled *Pieces of My Self* (Guernica), and he is honoured to be the subject of the anthology *A Disciplined Passion: Essays on the Works of Keith Garebian* (Guernica).

**Katherine L. Gordon** is a poet and publisher presently living in Guelph, Ontario. She is the recipient of a number of literary awards, including Best Foreign Author from the 9<sup>th</sup> International Edition of *I Colori Dell Anima* in Italy, as well as an award from The World Poetry Association for her contribution to peace poetry. Her latest books are *Awareness*, co-authored with James Deahl, as well as *After Midnight: Selected Poems*, both of which have been published by Sureway Press of Mississauga.

Mary Anne Griffiths is a poet and fiction writer living in Ingersoll, Ontario, Canada. She shares space with a spouse, a tortie and tuxie, and is presently working towards her debut collection of poetry and microfiction.

Andreas Gripp was born and raised in Treaty 6 Territory (London, Ontario) and in 2024 relocated to Leamington with his wife, Carrie. He's the author of 40 books of poetry, including his newest, *Delirium Lullaby: a collection of poems favoured and new* (Black Mallard, 2025). His poems have been praised for their lyrical merit, accessibility, and for their blend of comic and poignant storytelling, grounded in the contemporary experiences of both common and uncommon people. andreasgripp.wixsite.com/andreasgripp

Gregory Wm. Gunn was born in 1960 in Windsor. His formative years were spent in a few small towns before finally settling in London, Ontario in 1970. Involved in the arts from a young age, then specialising in music and writing during his scholastic time at Fanshawe College in the early 80s, he has been striving industriously, honing his skills in both those disciplines ever since. He has been widely published in several literary journals including *The Toronto Quarterly, Side B Magazine, Inscribed Magazine, Burning Wood, 20 X 20 Magazine, Crack the Spine, Covalence, Blue Lake Review,* and *The Light Ekphrastic.* He is currently compiling his 13th volume of poems, tentatively titled, *In Thickets Rich.* 

**Maggie Helwig** (she/they) is a white settler living in Tkaronto/Toronto, and is the author of sixteen books and chapbooks, most recently *Encampment: Resistance, Grace, and an Unhoused Community* (Coach House, 2025). Helwig is a long-time social justice activist, and also an Anglican priest, and has been the rector of the Church of St Stephen-in-the-Fields since 2013.

**Debbie Okun Hill** recently returned to her prairie roots where she is slowly starting to sow new poetic seeds. Since 2004, over 495 of her poems have been published in over 175 different publications in Canada, the United States, and overseas. She has five poetry chapbooks featuring her award-winning work and in 2014, Black Moss Press published her first poetry trade book, *Tarnished Trophies*. Her latest chapbook, *When Floorboards Speak*, was released in May 2025 and is dedicated to all the old homes and broken people in need of repair. Follow her literary journey at https://okunhill.wordpress.com/

Poet, performer and playwright **Penn Kemp** has long been a keen participant/activist in Canada's cultural life. The League of Canadian Poets has honored her with the Inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award (2025). New collections include LIVES OF DEAD POETS and ORDINARY / MOVING. See https://www.pennkemp.weebly.com with updates, https://www.pennkemp.substack.com/ Penn is delighted to appear in Black Mallard's latest anthology.

**Weston W. Kroft** (they/them) lives in San Francisco. Their first chapbook, *Whatever You Do, Don't Press the Red Button,* is forthcoming from Stampeder Press. A first novel is in the stage of second draft.

**E.G.N. Lafleur** is a poet, essayist, and postulant for priesthood in the Anglican Church of Canada. She has poetry in numerous indie magazines including *Pinhole Poetry, Synaeresis, Psaltery and Lyre,* and forthcoming in *mojo 21;* and essays in *Earth & Altar* and on Substack. She writes on the cultural history of queerness and the Roman Catholic Church, camp, liberation, and reproductive justice. You can find her on X @egnlafleur and her essays on Substack at egnlafleur.substack.com or egnlafleur.com. Her debut chapbook, THE MAGI COME TO TORONTO, is available now from Kith Books.

**Parks Lanier, Jr.** is retired from teaching English at Radford University in Virginia. His poems have recently appeared in *SongsOfEretz.com* and the inaugural issue of *Untelling* from the Hindman Settlement School in Kentucky.

**John B. Lee** is the author of nearly one hundred books and is the editor of nearly a dozen anthologies. His most recent title, *The Last Stand*, was published in 2025 by Wet Ink Books. Appointed Poet

Laureate of the City of Brantford in perpetuity, he is also Poet Laureate of Norfolk County for life, and was Poet Laureate of the Canada Cuba Literary Alliance (2020-2022). Called "the greatest living poet in English" by George Whipple, he is a recipient of well over one hundred prestigious national and international awards for his writing. He lives with his wife Cathy in a lake house overlooking Long Point Bay on Lake Erie in the town of Port Dover.

A graduate of Queen's University Artist In The Community Education Program, **Rhonda Melanson** has been published in several print and online magazines and is a recent recipient of The Ted Plantos Memorial Award in Ontario, Canada. She is the author of two chapbooks: *Gracenotes* (Beret Days Press) and *My Name is Mary* (Alien Buddha Press). She also co-edits a literary blog, *Uproar*.

**Donna Pucciani,** a Chicago-based writer, has published poetry worldwide in *Shi Chao Poetry, Poetry Salzburg, ParisLitUp, Li Poetry, Agenda, Gradiva* and other journals. Her seventh and latest book of poetry is EDGES.

**Laeda Russell** hails from Chatham, Ontario and writes poetry when she isn't taking care of her demanding cat, Oscar. A student of art and history, her favourite poets include Amiri Baraka, Lorna Crozier, and Pablo Neruda.

**Nilofar Shidmehr** is an Iranian-Canadian poet, fiction writer, creative writing—informed research scholar, and educator. She is the author of seven books of poetry and short fiction, as well as a children's book. Her poetry recognitions include an Honorable Mention from the Brooklin Poetry Society in 2021 for the poem

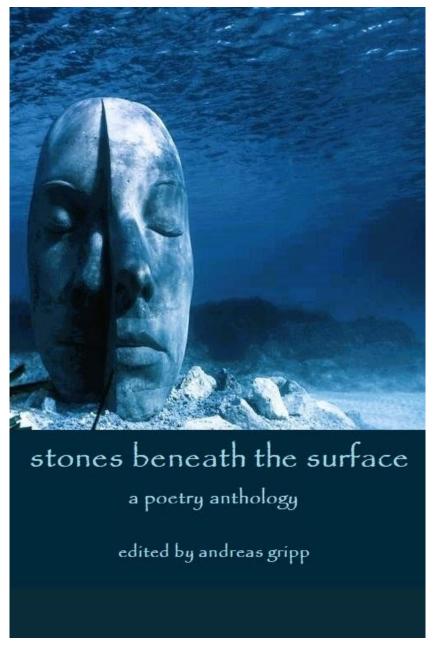
"Equilibrium Artist" and a nomination for the 2009 Dorothy Livesay Prize for *Shirin and Salt Man*. She teaches at Simon Fraser University and has served three times as a Writer-in-Residence in Canada.

**David Stones** is a multi-award-winning poet and performer with some 600 poems in print throughout Canada and internationally. Major collections include *Infinite Sequels, sfumato,* and *Essays of Light,* while a wide range of stage performances feature his poetry and musical adaptations of his work. David was recently appointed Stratford Ontario's first-ever Poet Laureate for the 2025-2028 term.

Lynn Tait is an award-winning poet/photographer residing in Sarnia, Ontario, Canada. Her poems have appeared in *Prairie Fire, FreeFall, Vallum, CV2, Literary Review of Canada, High Shelf Press, Verse/Virtual, Muleskinner, Last Leaves, Anti-Heroin Chic, Up the Staircase Quarterly* and in over 100 North American anthologies. Photos have been featured on the cover of nine poetry books and in *Art Ascent, Still Point Arts Quarterly* and *Rattle's Ekphrastic Challenge*. Her debut poetry collection, *You Break It, You Buy It,* was released in 2023 by Guernica Editions.

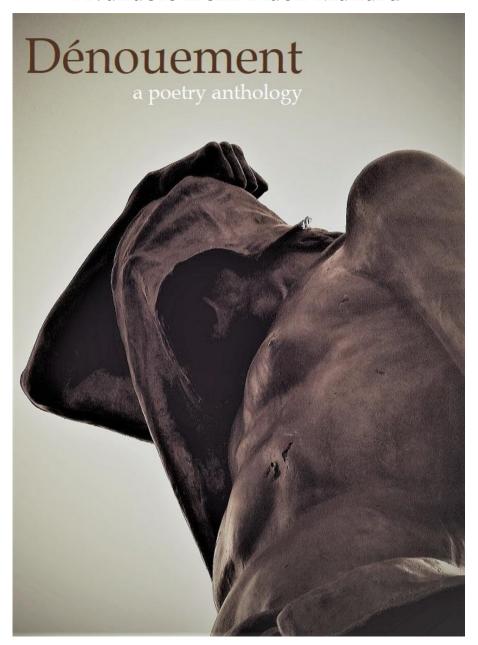
Jennifer Wenn is a trans-identified writer and speaker from London, Ontario. Her first poetry chapbook, *A Song of Milestones*, was published by Harmonia Press. Her first full-size collection, *Hear Through the Silence*, was published by Cyberwit in early 2023. Her second collection, *Emergence*, was published in the Spring of 2025 by Wet Ink Books. She has also written *From Adversity to Accomplishment* (a family and social history), published poetry in numerous journals and anthologies, and is the proud parent of two adult children. Visit her at jenniferwennpoet.wixsite.com/home

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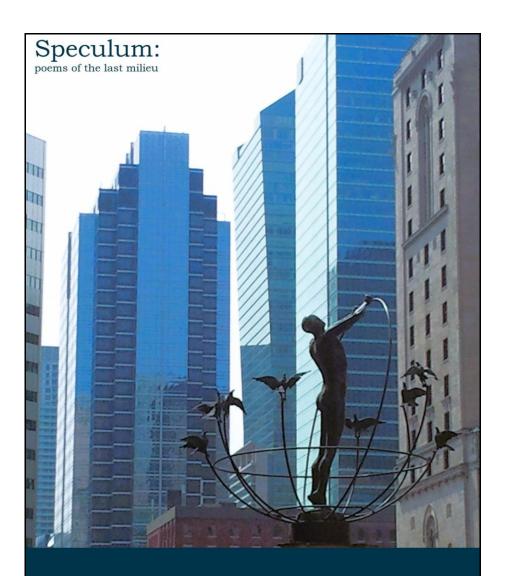


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