

The 2River View

16.1 (Fall 2011)



New Poems by

John Bitner, Steven Coughlin, Gillian Cummings
John Harvey, Laura Jo Hess, Aw-o-tan Nisgah, Brent Pallas
Mahtem Shiferraw, Virginia Slachman, Brigit Kelly Young

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Contributors

Aw-o-tan Nisgah

bringing in the night

Jenny Bitner

Dear One

Dear Emptiness



photograph © by Katrina Pallop

Steven Coughlin

A Small Sign

1993

Gillian Cummings

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Aw-o-tan Nisgah

bringing in the night

her song calls the night in,
and the sky hesitates between light
and dark: my indecision blinking
like a star caught between
grandfather sun, grandmother moon,
and lonesome, lonesome in the black
that robes my minute light—how
could I know the loneliness of a star?
all that distance, all that space, all that
I am is a being on the face of the mother
who bore us all; now look at her sweat,
feel her fever rising with her temper,
as if she, too, wishes upon a star to be
one, to nova and be done with these
trampling feet, tight-toed and wrapped
like tobacco offerings for the chief
industries that we clasp hands
with as in marriage, as she will clasp
my arm, and I, alone in the night,
listening to the sprinklers, imagining
how each drop of water must feel
amongst so many, all plunging
like buffalo off a cliff, and yet each
so willingly plunges to its singular
death—so alone, so tired, so thirsty
for all the light it will never have
a chance to drink

Jenny Bitner

Dear One

I am not supposed to miss you,
missing having to do with a concept

of presence and absence
that we are not trafficking in—

not being present
in the moment, a crime

which one could accuse
me of with hatpins in my eyes.

But more seductively, in the hope
of pulling you in, and there to form a space

outside of spaces, I would argue it is longing
and not missing that I feel.

Longing is a sweet word and means
even here, now, I am very

much present—oh yes there
is the taste of lemon and beer

in my mouth I am present with,
and the three girls, one kneeling,

looking into the display case at
the pastries in the café. They shake their heads

and go somewhere else. I am sorry that
the café could not please them.

A motorcycle helmet is in front of me,
and the man who goes with it

got nervous just now because I tried
to read the title of the book he was reading.

There, now I see it *Love and Awakening*,
That is something to hide. A man comes in

trying to sell a typewriter. Saying, *Any students here?*
I got a good typewriter here, a Westing.

All of this is proof that I am very much
here in the moment in this café.

And still I feel something tug on me
as I am pulled towards your absence.

Jenny Bitner

Dear Emptiness

To be emptier than the moon on a clear night,
when you think you can see the insides.

The shapes and cravings. To be empty of you,
like a shoebox that I can't find any trace of, where

is the shoe? What gouged out eyes, what sockets
where there was something? The night

is playing a trick on me where it takes off in a car
for a long drive on highways and doesn't know

where it is going. It is traveling fast away from me
with no destination, focused on the lines, the lights.

Some crave for you and take everything away to have you.
But you are not for me, you cut me out.

Steven Coughlin

A Small Sign

Still in a canyon of grief my mother worked with a hand spade
in the backyard six weeks after my brother's murder
frantic for company. The house was loud with silence;
her closest friends visited less each afternoon
and my father, arguing a need for money, had disappeared
behind the grey fog of work.

My mother was digging up dirt for a tomato garden
she would never plant.

It makes sense when the bird flew by a third time,
placing itself on the lowest branch of the only tree in our
backyard,
she considered it a small sign: she was desperate

for another round of Scrabble with my brother at the kitchen
table,
his fingers delicately picking up the small wooden pieces,
counting off points for each letter; his twenty-one year old
forehead
without a hint of blue from the tire iron that cracked his skull.

In this way the bird's reappearance, its exact positioning
five feet from my mother, was filled with meaning—the shifting
of its head from side to side, like jagged movements in a
flip-book,
suggested to her the universe was not simply an ocean of
darkness.

My mother held to it tight—on knees bruised with dirt
she stared at the bird, its grey feathers unremarkable, convinced
the void in its black eyes, as if looking at nothing,
understood sorrow after all the other birds had moved on.

Steven Coughlin

1993

Year my sister sat in front of an oval mirror covering traces
of my mother's face in her own. Year of the pea-green winter
jacket,
my paper route with 37 houses—a windstorm always blowing.

The cat's body ached with tumors,
its stomach a concrete block of suffering. My father drank Riuniti
watching endless episodes of Matlock.

Eight years after my brother's murder,
fourteen years after my brother rescued the cat
abandoned behind Little Peach, and still my mother waited
for her oldest son to return home—29 in 1993.

Year of cat shit in every hidden corner of the house.
My mother insisted we not touch
my brother's yellow lamp on the porch, a crack down its side,
terrified it would break.

My sister sealed herself in her bedroom
listening to Simon and Garfunkel's "Cecilia." She went to the
junior prom
with Dan Corsten; year of my first date to the Paragon
Fairgrounds—
Anna Valley's blue skirt on the carousel,
the white horse I rode chipped brown.

Always my mother stranded in the house.
Always my mother, lungs clouded with nicotine, refusing to get
out of bed
before nine. My father backed out of the driveway each morning,
3 AM, escaping to work; my sister, school over,
drove with friends to Dairy Queen.

Day my mother, alone, cat laboring to breathe, unable to stand,
finally carried it out of the house in a brown box.
Afternoon the veterinarian stuck a three inch needle into its back.

We ate a frozen pie for dinner, my mother silent,
as the family failed to notice the cat's absence.

Morning I waited for the school bus on the sidewalk, still not
aware,
preferring cold morning air to the heated house.
Afternoon my sister stayed late for softball practice. Day my
mother,
always in a pale blue bathrobe, always with a cigarette,
sat the kitchen table even more alone.

Gillian Cummings

Halo

There is one photo of me I like. A crown of daisies covers my hair, a wreath of wilting daisies wraps me. Petals crooked, warped like thorns. I look up. My chin, lifted. My mouth closed firm as if I keep a secret shared with God. As if, no matter what, He will say of my body, flesh of His flesh. You can see my breasts in this photo, the aureoles of my nipples. You can see two beauty marks on my face, one above my lip, one high on my cheek, made from black eye-pencil. I think that here I'm the Magdalene. But Jesus has said my seven demons can stay mine. Mine to be smudged with like a stranger's words: *cocotte, connasse, gourgandine, grue, poule, poufiasse, putain*. Mine the way father fucked me: seven times from behind, my hunched haunches like a cow's, his dick a hot prod poking, pressing, searing. Mine the way *les marronniers dans le Jardin du Luxembourg* drop their chestnuts with a crack, and the soft shell splits to let the hard kernel out, shiny and ready to be squirreled into ground. Papa split me that way, spreading my buttocks. God the Father split me too, for my soul sometimes can't find my body. And Jean splits me: me from my image, the girl with chestnut brown hair from the girl all shades of grey. White daisies late in the season either way. Seven demons skulking, yet none too shy to haunt a saint—

Gillian Cummings

Raisins

Jean didn't want to show me with a glass of wine. He thought the grapes themselves more sensual. Provocative. Thick clusters of fruit ripening. Gnarled ropes of vine. A September sky ghosting the morning's hills with fog. Sauvignon. Chenin Blanc. Muscadelle. Semillon. An aroma of melon, cinnamon, acacia—linden blended with lemon and honey. We guessed: which tang on the tongue would tempt you? But we knew: the rootstock everywhere was American now, ever since the yellow aphid bored a hole through the heart of France. We knew: after cheap sugar copied the sweetest vintage, vigneronns revolted in Languedoc, six innocents killed. But Jean,—*Que puis-je dire?*—Jean has a sense of humor naughty as his nudes. So he said, You want those grapes like you want a man with money and a big dick, your *raison d'être*. And I thought: the Eucharist. I want these grapes the way the disciples wanted to swallow Christ's soul. Whole. Round. Ripe. The grapes' terroir, my terror. The seeds sunken inside, Jesus' judgment on the hard bite of my temper, opposite of these too tender teeth. So I draped the grapes over my open mouth, as if all the world could be eaten—

John Harvey

Tight Knots And Family Bonds

Grave numbers refer to grave cuts. The groundskeeper smiles
and tells me more than one body sleeps in a hole.

Families drink their own bones.

My grandparents buried their tongues in lost friends

before they died, then dug a room in flat, dark cares.

Cremations are common, just like thin soup.

Each year new burials shovel out a meager gruel.

Stir bruises. I stomp my legs warm, kick off a few cold

raindrops as my arms swing through a blur of oak leaves.

This cemetery shoulders its way into the sea.

Above, the sky swallows her son; below, I root out

my father's mother lying in a hospital room, screaming

as her blood eats away her veins. A fumbling, red muscle

aches with its own poison. It's anyone's guess

how they build a city of the dead.

Maybe dumb words bleached white and a pile of slag.

John Harvey

Clatter of Dry, Black Wings

I sit for an hour or more in a little light, a little dark. My
father's here.

Next minute there's no one at all. The world rocks back and forth
inside his eyes. A photo album

confides he's losing his sight, forgetting who I am. Light reveals
all seams. Skin round his eyes sinks into bone, the back of his
head
collapses under a few

strands of hair. My father asks if I remember boiled cabbage,
his mom in bedroom light. He can't find her yet knows she's here.
I walk the house picking-up

what he's lost. I can hear a beetle somewhere in the house—
clatter of dry, black wings. TV images flicker across my father's
neck, empty sleeve.

Outside the sun makes landfall. I ask, *What hurts?* What do you
want
me to do? Eyes focus, lips part, and for a moment someone is
there.
I hold his face.

Laura Jo Hess

Elegy to a Living Mother

Pity the rhododendrons didn't rise
from the dirt where a fence
sits in segments growing from earth

Today, I think I'll ask
the postman if he loves his wife
and the waiter if he's ever cheated.

I'll unbind and watch
a letter flutter to the ground: *Dear Luke,*
I've got to stop doing acid on weekdays.

I've got to stop walking so slowly past
the psychic who is really a prostitute,
watching her cross legs
beside a billboard.

I took a knife now and thought of the oven, I thought
of the bedside

Laura Jo Hess

Things I'm Sorry For

Just today I preached about Texas—
roads I haven't seen and a bridge I won't cross
to a town I could never love. I sat close-kneed
on the train and listened to boys bang
tight-lipped canvas with their forefingers.
I watched a man stumble up a twenty
from the bottom of his pocket, crumple it
hard into the palm of the drummer.

Also, a confession: I don't love music
or sound or silence. Speakers tumble
a song I swayed and it played in the car
that one time my dad told me
he was getting married and I reached
my hand back from the front seat
and Jamie found my fingers
and I can't remember the last time
we touched and it meant something.

So go on and gasp and love me less
when I like books better than sound,
when every note makes me cringe and recall
some memory, some head-down walk
round campus where I wound up weeping
under a tree and flipping open a cell phone
to dial my mother and say, *Mom I've stolen
something, mother I've slept with someone,
mother I think I've died.*

Please, a fire, to warm my feet and please money

for the man with the bad voice singing subway songs
and the mime in Times Square, silver-faced and free.

Brent Pallas

The Gift

You know when there's something wrong.
Branches down in the half light

like a storm dripping from the eaves.
That morning the cat wasn't there.

And you searched until you found something
barely cat. Thinking she had dragged herself

beneath that chair after meeting a bobcat
out back in the woods, leaving her

with one ear. And you carried her for weeks
from room to room until her weariness edged back

into stealth. Because all along the vet said, *Sure,*
and sure enough she drifted out back again

into those woods after leaving
the still rag of a chipmunk on your bed.

Brent Pallas

Out on the Balcony

Nutty. It's a spring night in the middle of February.
Winter's hound is locked up as jonquils spike

near the bushes. An odd bliss that looks like litter.
I tell him, *It's crazy weather tonight*, and notice

a rip in his sleeve. He's homeless.
And I'm a volunteer here at the shelter

we'll both leave in the morning. It's an old
story he rakes up: with custom suits

and girls on every arm of it. And I don't believe
much of it, but, so what? He's clean now,

but hanging at the noose end of things.
Right there in that tree, he says pointing,

there's nothing left but a sister in Jersey.
He doesn't hear the intoxicating rush

of warmth tonight as he coughs and lights
another cigarette. Its calm ether filling him

like a sigh as coatless blondes go by
licking ice cream, their bare arms so white

and promising as if its July's stars out there
beaming through those leafless branches.

Mahtem Shiferraw

Blood Disparities

My sister—not the weird artist who
drew me with a hammer soaring over
my forehead—but the one who’s trying to become a
doctor—she said that understanding biology, and chemistry
will help me understand lives, and perhaps save them

she said, if I looked at the intimacy shared between the
small and large intestines, crawling comfortably with each
other in sprawling heated caves, I would understand what it
meant to be together and alone at the same time;

she said, if I witnessed the autopsy of lab cats and murdered rats
I would understand the devotion and dedication
of red blood cells, scurrying and flinching to sink into
our veins, or if I fathomed the duplicity of the different colors
of blood—raspberry blood, strawberry blood,
teething gums blood, bloody hell blood—I could make poetry
and conceive words, like anaphylaxis, and C6H12O6

pretending to understand concocted, warped lives, when all
I can see is the flesh, and the wound within the flesh, and the
salmon blood, and the chestnut crust, and the dead—

Mahtem Shiferraw

She says they come at night...

quick and quiet, like diligent
thieves. They take things, small
small things, tuck them deep into
their pockets, roll them like socks, cup
their palms against the warm cloth to
feel certainty.

How do they know?

They lurk; each home has its own devil.
They smell, sucked air, thin air, empty air.
They probe, curved swallows, thickening fear.

I say they must come at night.
She says they do.

I say I already hear them, their footsteps a faint
forking of carpet hairs. She says their silence is
deafening. But I do hear them.

She says there is no quietness in me.
I think that's a good thing.

Firstborn sons were killed on a quiet night,
like any other.

I say diligent thieves get only
what they came for.

She says they do.

Come and get. Only the ones
submerged into the night.

The ones rattling as if they were
discomforted, as if they did not
belong there. Quick and quiet.
Taken. Like small things. Small
small things. Lolloped and rolled.

Virginia Slachman

Coach of Black Water

Now I have a right to silence.

—Tanikaro Shuntaro

I can't read anymore. The words slip into my mind though I
hardly notice
their coming. Today I read about the death of Lorca, again, how
he was taken

from the house of Louis Rosales. It was a mild day in Granada, a
day like many others,
sounds of the cantes and quejios falling over the abbey
and the gardens of the *Sacromonte*.

At least I imagine it so: death simply appearing among
the usual events: the old women in doorways dressed
in black, the white houses of the *Albaicin*—
the Falangists came, loaded

him into their wooden cart. A schoolteacher, two *banderilleros*
The light
must have been startling.

I picture this over and over having read it many times
How suddenly

the world was vivid. Thirty-eight, one bullet for each and the
hand that made the bullet, I think
of that man. They may be buried by the olive tree,
a twisted old thing, raw rivulet-barked, turned
and bent. There was a time this would have meant
nothing. The white-washed caves in the hills
of Valparisio, Andalusia his pilgrimage, his singing, how they
danced through the streets

and orchards, and the fire of the *duende*. If I tell you I hear
the flamenco's stiff heels explode the floorboards . . . In
another book, a man dies
in a furnace though his key is in the door. You
can't be betrayed unless
you are first loved. I want to know the words
that slip through the mind when the *duende* is no longer a shadow.

*Each afternoon, a child dies.
The dead wear mossy wings.*

So many things are true. Oysters have small, three-chambered
hearts and colorless blood.
It is the irritant trapped in the dark
interior the oyster refuses; in the flamenco, defiance
Lorca was

Gitano in a land of gypsies, one of them. When he
stepped into
that rough cart he saw a world
he'd invented. *In a coach of black water I will go . . .* his
death slipped in
unnoticed as words to the mind.

The oyster secretes nacre
to obliterate the offense, each layer a lustrous dark
shining—precious, unwearied, wordless.

Virginia Slachman

Map of the World

Geese in the field, likely a hundred. Heavy black and taupe
bodies framed
against this gray day, the field a packed mass of dirty snow.
I think how the light in L.A. is not
so oppressive.
My grandfather tacked a map
to his cabin wall, traced his travels
on a paper world.
In Aspen, Starr Peak
rises 14,000 feet—My neighbors, gear folded like
bunched
wings, hiked all day up its angled slope
for one run down
years after my grandfather inscribed
his map, retracing his routes—out from the west coast and
back
to the east—an orbit repeatedly made. I'm losing
the names of so many things—
that tree in the park, for instance, stripped of its
towering branch
etched with a wrenched scar down half
its body. We all see what
we need to see
no matter the light.
Describe the world: this was
Adam's task, but who recognizes
what he meant? The geese
woke me in the night
out on the pond, a mile
from here. They circled the sky as my grandfather circled
the globe from the bowels of a freighter,
year after year. Once he fell down
an elevator shaft,

a dark tunnel in air surrounded by night—How can we tell
intention from chance? Those boys tunneling through air
that close to the peak: Is it as simple
as not enough light?

These geese should be elsewhere. My grandfather's map
was long ago folded, packed in his black trunk;
after his blindness, what was the point—those
wavering
lines he'd drawn each year
suddenly reduced to
cuts on a great rind of fruit, no longer
traces left by a life. My tree
will thrive in the midst of the park come spring, leaf out
around its
damage. Adam named an unrecognizable
world. We compose its wounds.

Brigit Kelly Young

As She Learns Geography

with manicured fingers
she holds the world in her hands
aged yellow africa
cerulean pacific

as a girl
she confused the words
pacific and *specific*
be pacific she would say to her little brother
when he asked for jelly but meant jam
and she embraced the sea
in all her details

she turns the sea
the earth
round and round
with purple hands
throwing it up in the air
catching it
like a beach ball

and as on a windy day
it slips

latvia hits the floor
and rolls onto japan
and there's a crack in israel
that spreads to australia
and as it rolls
she notices qatar for the first time
while she searches on Google
for how to fix a globe

Brigit Kelly Young

With a child's marker

she drew a galaxy.
her belly—the moon.
fat yellow squiggles around the
crater of a belly button.
debris ... circles in circles
of yellow yellow light.
her thighs held the stars.
blue ink on white pathways to
her bush—the earth.
inside—the sea.
each eye a planet;
venus and neptune
looking out at the upper west side
to see new worlds.

she drew a moon
on her belly
and it lit up
the night.
so yellow. so round.
the night lit
through the lampshade
of a womb.

her back was smooth and blank,
human,
and unreachable.

The 2River View, 16.1 (Fall 2011)

Contributors

Jenny Bitner has been published in *Corium, Fence, Mississippi Review, PANK, and The Sun*. She is also the author of the chapbook *Mother* (Pine Press).

Steve Coughlin lives on a horse farm in southeast Ohio. His recent work has appeared in the *Gettysburg Review, Michigan Quarterly Review, New Ohio Review, and Slate.com*.

Gillian Cummings teaches workshops at a hospital in White Plains, New York. Her poems have appeared in *Cincinnati Review, CutBank, and The Laurel Review*. Her chapbook *Spirits of the Humid Cloud* is forthcoming from dancing girl press.

John Harvey directs the Center for Creative Work at The Honors College, University of Houston. He is Resident Playwright for Mildred's Umbrella Theater Company. His poems have been



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published in *Gulf Coast*, *NAP*, *Poet Lore*, and *Whiskey Island*.

Laura Jo Hess is from St. Louis, Missouri. After writing textbooks in Chicago for two years, she moved to New York City to pursue an MFA at The New School. Her work is published in *Blue Mesa Review*, *decomp* magazine, *Margie*, and *White Whale*.

Aw-o-tan Nisgah (Shield Little Brother) belongs to the Many Faces People, a family following the Blackfoot tradition in East Texas. His poetry has appeared in *Barnwood*, *3 AM*, and *Willows Wept Review*.

Brent Pallas has been in *New England Review*, *Poetry*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *The Southern Review*. He was a finalist for the 2007 and 2011 Pablo Neruda Prize for Poetry given by Nimrod International Journal.

Mahtem Shiferraw was born in Eritrea, raised in Ethiopia, and currently lives in the Los Angeles. She is now completing her Masters in Creative Writing at Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Virginia Slachman is the author *Inside Such Darkness*, (Tiger Bark 2010). Slachman, former poetry editor of *Aspen Magazine* and associate director of the Aspen Writers Conference, now teaches at Principia College.

Brigit Kelly Young has had her work published in *Drunken Boat*, *Gargoyle*, *The North American Review*, *Opium Magazine*, *Pinch*, *Skive*, and *Whiskey Dregs*. She studies at City College, City University of New York.

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About the Artist

Katrina Pallop is native of Princeton, New Jersey, now living in New York City, where she studies drama and aspires to be a playwright and photographer.

About 2River

Since 1996, 2River has been a site of poetry and art, quarterly publishing *The 2River View*, occasionally publishing individual authors in the 2River Chapbook Series.

Richard Long, Editor
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