

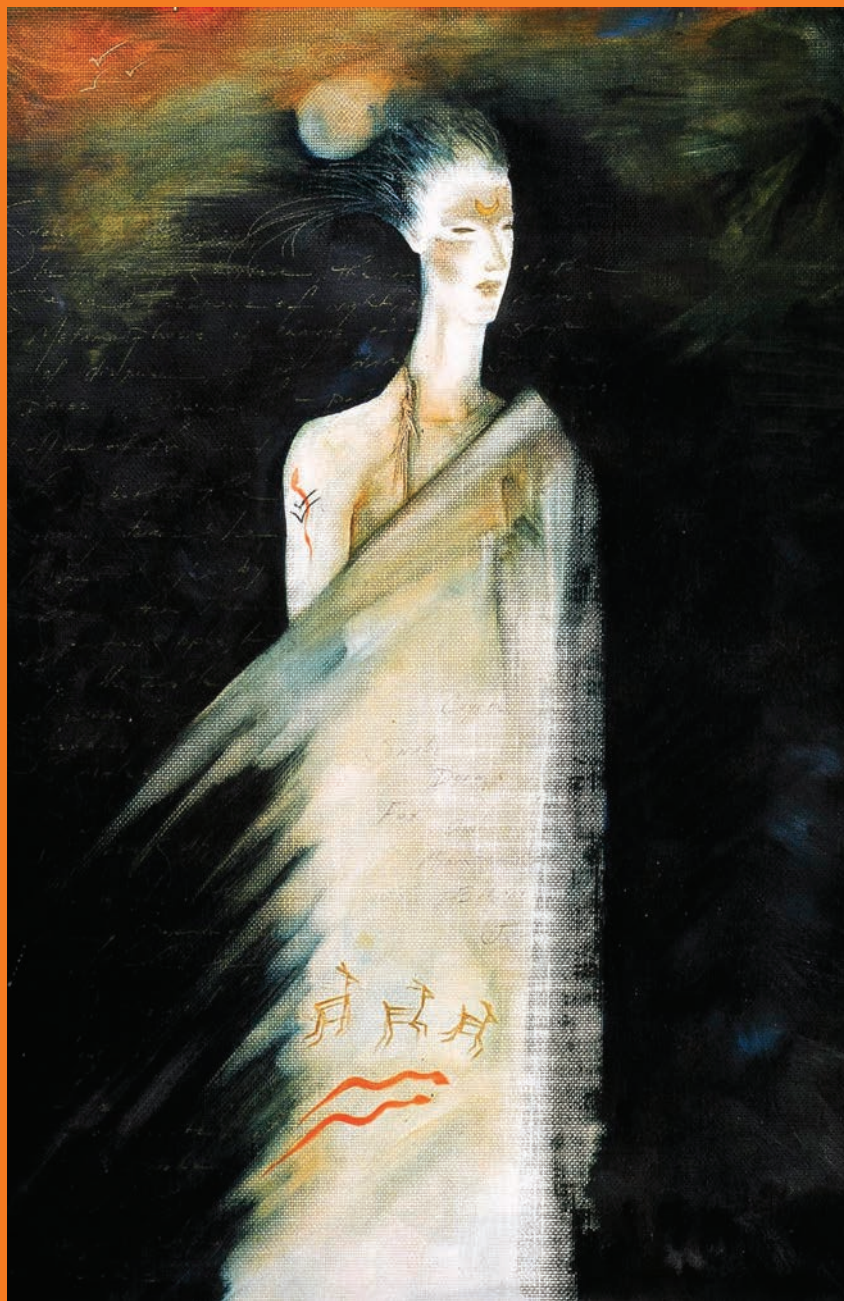
The

# Cascadia Subduction Zone

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Special Focus on Poetry



☉ Terri Windling



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and Space...Women's Poetry  
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*The Moment of Change*  
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*He Do the Gay Man in  
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## FEATURED ARTIST

Terri Windling

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# Undines, Vampires, Statues, and Space... Women's Poetry

by Liz Henry

I translate poetry from Spanish to English, with a particular focus on work by women poets from the Americas. Writing my thesis, an anthology titled "Spanish American Women Poets, 1880-1930," I was struck by the many speculative elements in work from the turn of the 19th century. I wondered in my preface, discussing sexism in the definitions of the literary movements of romanticism and modernism, what might come to light reading this work as feminist speculative writing.

These poems paint sweeping portraits of imaginary landscapes, idealized scenes with fantastic elements from mythology or ancient Greek history, statues coming to life in the moonlight, and conversations with the ghost of Sappho.

One striking image recurs in "Las hijas de Ran" by Juana Borrero, a Cuban poet, and "Las ondines" by María Eugenia Vaz Ferreira, from Uruguay—Undines or ondines, nymphs or water elementals who live in waves or sea foam. Borrero's Norse daughters of the sea goddess and Vaz Ferreira's ondines laugh and sing playfully to each other in the waves, jostling each other in constant motion, perhaps echoing these women's active participation in literary circles of other women poets. They are extraordinary poems in featuring female characters who exist in relation to each other. They pass a sort of poetic Bechdel test.

## Las hijas de Ran

Envueltas entre espumas diamantinas  
que salpican sus cuerpos sonrosados,  
por los rayos del sol iluminados,  
surgen del mar en grupo las ondinas.

Cubriendo sus espaldas peregrinas  
descienden los cabellos destrenzados,  
y al rumor de las olas van mezclados  
los ecos de sus risas argentinas.

Así viven contentas y dichosas  
entre el cielo y el mar, regocijadas,  
ignorando tal vez que son hermosas,

Y que las olas, entre sí rivales,  
se estrechocan, de espumas coronadas,  
por estrechar sus formas virginales.

## Ran's daughters

Wrapped in diamantine froth  
that flecks their blushing bodies  
glowing with the rays of the sun,  
the undines rise, gathered in a group.

Covering their far-ranging shoulders  
their unfastened hair tumbles down,  
and to the clamor of the waves they mix  
the echoes of their silvery laughter.

Thus they live content and fortunate  
between sky and sea, rejoicing,  
perhaps ignoring that they're beautiful.

And how the waves, contesting with each other,  
crash and twine, crowned with shining foam,  
stretching out, defining their virgin forms.

## The ondines (Las ondines)

At the shore  
where the cool and silvered wave  
bathes sand,  
and the shining stars  
flare and die  
at dawn's first rays,

from sea-foam  
the ondines lightly leap,  
swift curves  
and forms,  
ethereal dress of ocean nymphs,  
fair visions.

They roll onward, clear green,  
resplendent as emeralds,  
the bright waters  
that lend color  
to their polished shoulders,  
snow-white swan...

Some wrap themselves  
in diaphanous blue mists  
dressed in dawn,  
others in the wind  
let fly light floating gauze  
the color of heaven

and the fair ones sink  
svelte forms of sonorous ocean  
beneath the waters,  
and over the waves  
their hair snakes  
like rays of gold...

*"I was struck by the many speculative elements in work from the turn of the 19th century. I wondered... what might come to light reading this work as feminist speculative writing."*

*"Norse daughters of the sea goddess and Vaz Ferreira's ondines laugh and sing playfully to each other in the waves, jostling each other in constant motion, perhaps echoing these women's active participation in literary circles of other women poets."*



## Undines, Vampires, Statues, and Space (cont. from p. 3)

*"...they...stake a claim in a world of the fantastic, in an imaginary Utopian geography where they are free and exist in a chaotic and mutable state."*

Women poets in Spanish America were not working in isolation but wrote and published in a literary landscape dominated by men. Miriam Díaz-Diocaretz writes of their "strategic discursive consciousness"—ways in which Latin American women poets position themselves and their work as part of a larger literary conversation. By writing with elements of mythology and the fantastic from the Old World, Borrero and Vaz Ferreira situate themselves on a world stage and in a history that stretches outside their particular time and place. They are declaring a particular cosmopolitan, educated, elite status, but they also stake a claim in a world of the fantastic, in an imaginary Utopian geography where they are free and exist in a chaotic and mutable state.

Mercedes Matamoros wrote an entire book of sonnets speaking as Sappho; María Luisa Milanés wrote of herself as Spartacus. Vaz Ferreira wrote of maenads as well as ondines. They wrote themselves into an alternate poetics, into alternate mythologies rather than alternate histories.

Statues never come to life in these poems, but seem to stand for an immutable patriarchal reading of history and myth, undermined or criticized from a feminine point of view. Statues are male: beautiful, cold, pompous, ridiculous, and wrong because they're unmoving. María Luisa Milanés ridicules vain Narcissus as empty-headed; Juana Borrero addresses a marble statue of Apollo, describing this god of poem and song as sterile, haughty, and cold, while she celebrates her own creative energy. Delmira Agustini writes in "Fiera de Amor" of fierce blood lust that drives her to rip out the heart of a statue and eat it.

Agustini writes also of herself as a vampire or a weird other kind of being. Here are my translations of her poems "Otra estirpe" and "El vampiro." I translated "Otra estirpe" as "alien other" though estirpe may more accurately mean lineage, race, or species. In this case, my reading of the poem as "science-fictional" meant that I felt free to play with the idea of

an alternate lineage, race, or species as an "alien." And in "El vampiro" I also used the word alien in the line "¿Soy flor o estirpe de una especie obscura...," which taken literally would be "Am I a flower, or the stock of an obscure species..." Translating that as "a mysterious alien being" is a stretch, but one that I think illuminates Agustini's radical positioning of herself as a being outside of rational human understanding.

### Alien Other

Eros, blind priest, I long to guide you...  
From your all-powerful hands I would pray for  
his sublime body spilling fiery  
over my swooning body on a bed of roses.

The electric petals that I hold open, ready,  
offer him full all the nectar-cup of a garden of women;  
as for his vultures, I'll tempt them with my flesh—  
a whole swirling flock of rosy doves!

Surrender to the two cruel serpents of his arms  
my tall frail flower-stem... absinthe, honey,  
spill from his veins, from his mouth...

Stretched out like this, I'm an ardent furrow  
where seed could be nourished—  
seed of an alien species supremely mad!

### The Vampire

Embraced by evening's sorrow,  
I invoked your grief... To feel it was  
to feel your heart! You grew pale,  
even your voice, your waxen eyelids,  
lowered... and you were silent... You seemed  
to hear Death's footsteps... I, who opened  
your wound, sank my teeth into it - you felt me?—  
I bit into you - my golden honeycomb!

And sweetly, traitorous, I sucked harder  
from your wounded mortal heart,  
pierced by my rare dagger, cruel and delicious  
with nameless evil, as you bled, sobbing!  
And the thousand mouths of my damned thirst  
reached out to that wide open fountain to drink your  
suffering.

.....  
How did I become your bitter vampire?...  
Am I a tender flower, or a mysterious alien being  
who licks wounds and drinks tears?

*"They wrote themselves into an alternate poetics, into alternate mythologies rather than alternate histories."*



One of my favorite poets, Juana de Ibarbouro, is well-known but considered to be sentimental and old-fashioned. Her early work from 1919-1930 often uses fantastic elements as well as a transcendent vision of leaving this world for another. I can't read "Las olas" without thinking of spaceships.

## Las olas

Si todas las gaviotas de esta orilla  
Quisieran unir sus alas,  
Y formar el avión o la barca  
Que pudiesen llevarme hasta otras playas...

Bajo la noche enigmática y espesa  
Viajaríamos rasando las aguas.  
Con un grito de triunfo y de arribo  
Mis gaviotas saludarían el alba.

De pie sobre la tierra desconocida  
Yo tendería al nuevo sol las manos  
Como si fueran dos alas recién nacidas.  
¡Dos alas con las que habría de ascender  
Hasta una nueva vida!

## The waves

If they wanted to, all the gulls  
on this beach could join their wings  
to make an airplane — or a ship —  
to carry me to some other shore...

Through the dense mystery of night  
we'd venture, skittering over the water.  
With a scream of triumph, my gull-ship  
would alight on land and greet the dawn.

Walking on virgin soil  
I'd hold out my hands to the rising sun  
like two newborn wings.  
Two wings, to lift me  
to a new life!

And in the following odd little poem  
with its unromantic sweaty armpit, de Ibar-  
bouro gazes at the stars, the ambrosia of  
their falling light, and longs to launch her-  
self into space to sail through infinity. I love  
her protest of being bound "to only one  
earth!"

## The shout

The night hot like an armpit  
and the sea mirrored in shadow.  
Golden grain of the zodiac's stars  
ground in a tireless mill-wheel.

And their light — mysterious flour — falls  
on the restless, roaring waves.

On shore, an avid audience,  
with my eyes I devour the divine ambrosia  
denied to my bitter mouth.

A sailor's song  
pierces the encircling night.

From my seat on the wheel of shadows  
I seize an impossible desire.

And give a shout, a keen-edged shout  
to cut the cord that binds me to the earth.

To only one earth!  
Which I know right down to the dust  
that dances on the winds.

(The winds carry the scent  
of wild grass and forest.)

The useless shout falls into the sea  
like a gull with wounded wings.  
Night, tropical night!  
You refused to cut my anchor rope!

Finally I'd like to mention Nydia La-  
marque and her amazing "Invocation (to  
the ghost of Sappho)," too long to quote in  
entirety here. She refers to the mythology  
of Sappho's leap off the cliff into the sea  
and calls the ghost to her for a whispered  
conversation in bed, mutual weeping, and a  
passionate, emo make-out session.

Come to me, now far distant sister, speak to me with your voice of centuries.  
Come now, sister, made of night, alive in silence.  
No one at my side, no one will hear our talk.  
Only memory, that faithful owl, will be with me.  
Look, the stars let their bodies fall into the hidden nest of night,  
and for us alone, Time will turn, running backward.  
You'll let me come into your welcoming arms,  
you'll let me press my warm flesh to your marble body,  
so I can rest, too, my fevered brow  
to hear you better on your breast...

*I see these poems as  
speculative not just  
in their inclusion of  
fantastic elements,  
but in the authors'  
radical positioning of  
themselves as artists  
existing beyond time  
and space.*



## Undines, Vampires, Statues, and Space

(cont. from p. 5)

Liz Henry's poems, translations, stories, and articles have appeared in *Lodestar Quarterly*, *Poetry*, *Two Lines*, *Cipactli*, *Fantastic Metropolis*, and *Strange Horizons*. Her poetry collection *Unruly Islands* was recently released by Aqueduct Press. At [bookmaniac.org](http://bookmaniac.org), she blogs about feminism, writing, and technology.

Honestly, as a science fiction nerd, on some level I just get excited whenever a poem has stars in it.

I see these poems as speculative not just in their inclusion of fantastic elements, but in the authors' radical positioning of themselves as artists existing beyond time and space. They create unreal landscapes and speak to imaginary beings specifically for that "strategic discursive positioning" necessary for them to escape the bounds of a strongly male-dominated world of literary criticism and poetics.

[The full text in Spanish of most of these poems is at <http://bookmaniac.org/poetry/antologia>.]



## Writing, Race, and Poetry

by Mark Rich

© 6 "The presentation intrigued me, for it showed how differently I came at some questions. Maybe due to what is called my mixed-race background...."

"People in his own day were often unsure what to make of Poe's writings... They placed volumes of Poe upon their parlor tables... these new readers may not have put their fingers upon the source of newness Poe had been exploring in poetry, in divorcing his literary world from our consensus one."

About a year ago Eileen Gunn invited me to participate in a group interview concerning racial identity and its relation to writing. I felt my usual surprise at being solicited—which may indicate that my accustomed place is in the realm of the excluded, or at least ignored, as opposed to the included. I sloughed off the self-deprecating and sometimes butt-of-my-own-cleverness approach that I have adopted in the past, took Eileen's questions as seriously as they seemed intended, and responded as carefully as I could without producing an essay for each question. The results went into *The WisCon Chronicles, Vol. 5: Racial Identity and Writing*, edited by Nisi Shawl. Eileen organized the interviews by question rather than by individual. The group interview read like the transcript of a panel discussion, with multiple interviewees chiming in, one topic at a time.

The presentation intrigued me, for it showed how differently I came at some questions. Maybe due to what is called my mixed-race background—a phrase to which I have mixed reactions—I tended to be clear of mind in certain areas where others responded with vagueness or silence. Similarly, I was vague or prone to questioning in areas where others were more inclined toward decisiveness.

Eileen's overall question was this: "Writing reflects racial identity...yes?"

I gave tentative assent to the idea without being sure what my "racial identity" is. This interests me...because I have memories of earlier responding differently to a similar sort of question.

In the 1980s, when I spotted a notice about a university-sponsored colloquium focusing on Edgar Poe, it entered my head that I should submit a paper. Somewhat to my surprise it met with acceptance. No stipend came with acceptance. The colloquium was being hosted in, of all places, France.

Poor though I was, I got there, thanks to blind faith, chutzpah, family, and friends. At the University of Nice I gave the paper, "From this dim Thule: Poe and speculative poetry," the afternoon of April 2, 1987. My short offering followed others by sf novelist Brian Stableford and academics John Dean and David Ketterer, and preceded one by the main attraction of the afternoon, Brian Aldiss. The other main English attraction, Angela Carter, had given the final paper of the morning.

I had been working with the idea of "speculative poetry" for some time—for more than ten years, actually, by that day in France. I had pored over collections of poetry seeking antecedents to Poe. Byron and Meredith came close in positing otherness as a context for poetic narrative voice: yet both extended grapples or shepherd's hooks back to our consensus world. The consensus world of experience exerted an overpowering weight in times prior to Poe. As with Milton before Byron and Meredith, the imaginative vision given voice in poetry had for its generative instinct the desire to create a work of art that reflected back upon the world we know. The poems were illustrative, didactic, indicative, satiric, pointed. Edgar Poe, consciously or otherwise, wrote some of his poems as if the connection to the consensus world was not to be assumed. Instead, the disconnection from our consensus world forced itself upon the reader. Poe emphasized not the relevance, but the severance.

At the end of the session, after the paper by Aldiss, a French academic approached me to say, "This speculative poetry—it is something new, is it not?" All I could do was to respond in the affirmative. That was as far as I knew, then. It remains as far as I know—just as I still point to Poe as offer-



ing the best beginning-point for the form. Given the way historical movements come upon the world, other writers were likely reaching for the same effect, or same level of understanding, as Poe, at the same time or earlier. Who they were, when they were, where they were—I still do not know.

People in his own day were often unsure what to make of Poe's writings, even if they felt oddly affected by his readings and fascinated by his printed works. In the aftermath of the Civil War and other events, as our Western world entered the Age of the Modern, US readers became increasingly enamored of Poe's works, with Henry James and others puzzled that Poe's contemporaries had not recognized his worth. They placed volumes of Poe upon their parlor tables: he now ranked as a major adornment of the cultured life. Even so, these new readers may not have put their fingers upon the source of newness Poe had been exploring in poetry, in divorcing his literary world from our consensus one.

What has this to do with racial identity?

The connection is John Dean. Dean was, and I assume still is, a knowledgeable authority on popular American culture and literature. At the time of the colloquium at Nice he was teaching at one of the several million Universities of Paris that were active—the number being a slight exaggeration on my part: yet at the time there must have been in excess of a dozen, which is nearly the same. John was unabashedly American in his diction, American in his pronunciation of French, and perhaps Ugly American in his approach to the French people. I remember sitting in a cab with him, struck by the interjections with which he spotted our conversation, calling out "*Vite! Vite!*" to the cab driver—a rudeness that appalled me as much as his comfortable boldness impressed me. In his own presentation at the colloquium, Dean spoke with directness and insight about the world of early mass culture, during Poe's time. When he quoted from Poe, however, he changed his rhetorical stance, adopting an approach that drew upon the lugubrious-horror tradition of cheeseball radio and cinema. He used an affected voice I might have expected to hear in a high school dramatic reading of Poe. Later in the week, during a session at which I

*Cont. on p. 8*

## Crow at Solstice

by Mark Rich

Such unquiet quickness with which Winter comes:  
whitened suddenness, to follow  
all that slowness, all that snowless  
Fall—as crystal-coated clouds  
shatter now to stinging shrapnel. Crow in pinetop  
feels swift claw-sharp cloud-shards  
strike between wind-ruffled scales of silken armor,  
  
feels the ancient cold that clutched at year-end hearts  
in even ages of the past—and so she turns,  
turns upon her perch  
high among green boughs,  
turns to let the sleet-spray  
slide against and smooth again  
her night-sleek wing and cheek and breast.

At this turning point of rest,  
when Earth's year-striding struggles  
to hold sunlight in her grip for longer hours  
slow and show the waning of her failing powers—

When Dusk's star-flecked feathers quiver sooner, quicker—  
Dusk, who crows at falling day, who spreads  
thick shadows with her wing-rise, who sends herself  
pitched skyward with a pinion-spread that stretches  
pole to pole around the globe below—

At this turning point of rest,  
Crow sees past near boughs now bowed with crusting snow,  
past these to passed times of this passing year  
when fledglings of the Summer tribes  
grew kingly, queenly crowns of darkest crow-down.  
Grown now stately, as in dream she sees them—  
children of the past who cluster  
chirring and conferring over  
coming Spring's new child—the Year-Child—  
to be born upon the solid bark-thick branch  
that stretches like a promise  
over open air. Such immortality  
comes among us all, at such a birth, and at each birth,  
thinks Crow. Such recurring  
turning from this frozen point of rest.

And the blackless walkers, coated, shoed and gloved  
down below the shelter of the upper tree  
shovel snow, scrape window, salt ice,  
dreaming in unrest—walking, thinking, walking—  
pushing off the gifts remaining of this whitened year,  
pushing off old mists of older dreamings  
as they dream anew, dream of children  
gathering around with mouths agape,  
wanting filling. The walkers dream of solstice gifts,  
thinking that they feed a child,  
Spring's child, in exchanging  
shiny trinkets found along the ground.

*Cont. on p. 8*



## Crow at Solstice (cont. from p. 7)

Each would be Spring's chick  
cheeping for parental gift of pabulum:  
all would trade those symbols of a made-believe  
All-Motherhood, arranging them beneath the cut-off tree—  
symbols wrapped and ribboned as if  
such old knowledge might be hidden, might surprise.

None are what they think they are.  
Spring's chick gives no gift, thinks Crow. A child  
gives no gifts. Chicks, children,  
sick ones, poor ones, crows.  
Crow. I give no gifts  
here above them in the tree. I perch unturning  
here, just as the year must go unturning,  
that it might then yield, and turn again.  
No gifts. So I am child. Crow

is child. Stillness steals upon her:  
visions of a coming season rise and settle,  
there beyond this point of rest:  
just sun's moving slowness in its reaching  
east to west. Or just that resting—  
that, itself, that resting. Or the knowing, knowing  
that the rest, the momentary  
rest of all the Earth has come to rest  
here upon this bark-thick tree, here  
even as it has upon the rest of all the Earth.



## 8 Writing, Race, and Poetry (cont. from p. 7)

*"To be most effective,  
the speculative poem is  
'about' our consensus  
world even while  
affecting distance or  
separation from it....a  
meeting place of the  
deeply rational and the  
deeply personal."*

was the sole English-speaker present, I believe I heard one of the French contributors casting aspersion, without direct reference, on Dean's affected performance. Dean displayed behavior that could make him seem an academic charlatan or even a fake. Even so I liked him, perhaps as one specimen of American must almost inevitably like the only other one present.

Whoever he is, whatever he may be, wherever he may have ended up, I feel affection for the man because of an episode at the end of the colloquium. The organizers hosted a meal at a small restaurant in the Maritime Alps. The major participants sat around tables arranged in a large U-shape, with the Aldisses and Carter in places of prominence. I recall being fascinated with the finely slivered meats put before us, so different from the mixed Japanese and middle-American cooking of my youth. The trip down the curving mountain roads afterwards proved most memorable, however. Jean Emelina was driving, with Denise Terrel in the passenger seat. They, the two organizers of the colloquium, were absorbed in the plunge

down the winding mountain roads. John Dean and I sat in the back, engrossed in lively discussion and oblivious to the majestic nighttime mountains. John seized with insistent curiosity upon my background. How much did my idea of the "two worlds" that I perceived in the poetry of Poe arise from my own experience of being the product of two worlds? Dream and waking, yes; youth and adulthood, yes. What of Japanese and Anglo-Swiss? As the little French auto swayed around turns, I maintained that however interesting an idea his was, it failed to apply. What I saw in the poems was what I saw. No doubt I trotted out a dozen arguments or more. Did I see myself as split between my two halves? No. Denise occasionally looked back, amused and astonished at us so volubly entertaining ourselves in back.

I was glibly giving John an answer I no longer can give so easily.

In Japanese terms, I am *Sansei*, or third generation immigrant to the United States. My Japanese grandparents were *Issei*, first generation, making my mother *Nisei*, or second. Even though my name is purely English, with my Kikuchi background unrepresented, other Japanese-Americans are still apt to regard me as *Sansei*. The *Sansei*, as it happens, have tended to exhibit strong propensities toward assimilation, toward burying home-culture beneath the vast available sediment of dominant United States culture.

A seed being buried, of course, opens the possibility of its eruptive growth. The dirt, and that which passes for dirt, contains or conceals potential for something utterly unlike dirt.

To be most effective, the speculative poem is "about" our consensus world even while affecting distance or separation from it. The poem can be, as I believe Poe's were, a meeting place of the deeply rational and the deeply personal. As a term, "speculative poetry" has come, in some sectors, to serve as a catch-all, an umbrella beneath which to gather various sorts of genre-related poetry, verse, verbiage, and nonsense. Yet in other sectors, sometimes overlapping ones, the term finds use in describing the poem that seem to take a step aside—not a step aside into some genre-related cache of notions and vocabularies, but a step aside into a world original unto itself.





We all operate in multiple worlds or have the experience of moving from one world into another. We have felt the divisions between youth and experience no less than did Blake, Wordsworth, and Poe; between dream and waking no less than did Chuang Tzu. In our times, if we operate at all as conscious beings, then we operate constantly at the dividing line between the sphere of personally important activities and the sphere that characterizes what I call the Age of the Masses.

I may, indeed, struggle internally with the notion of a split racial identity. Would I be struggling with the perception of division between worlds, between the “two worlds,” in poetry, in the absence of such personal background?

How can I know? My mind keeps going back to Poe, whose personal experiences, too, split him apart in many ways. The culturally mature Scotland and England of part of his youthful upbringing stood in contrast to the ragamuffin United States of his youngest years and his adulthood. The poverty of his childhood and again his adulthood stood in contrast to the promise of comfortable life offered by the miscreant who lent Edgar the “Allan” part of his public name. The fact of Poe’s artistic accomplishment most certainly offered frustrating contrast to the fact of his worldly failure.

I think sometimes, too, of Poe’s operating in a world in which certain matriarchal elements still watered the roots of Western civil society. Poe’s life was shaped intensely and positively by a mother, a kindly aunt, and a young cousin who represented joy and hope for the future. His life was warped, on the other hand, by the adoptive father, who represented the burgeoning power of international trade. Symbolically the women were the world of tradition, culture, and civility, while John Allan was one of the coming captains of the Modern Age, the captains of commerce and industry whose unquestioned preeminence would greatly diminish the powers of those who kept and nurtured tradition, culture, and civility. Events in Poe’s life had a terrible ring of symbolic truth to them: for Poe’s mother’s died young—and his young wife even younger. While the maternal, womanly aspect of society sustained Poe, its episodes of crumbling and collapse left him devastated.

Why not suppose that this division in life between male and female influences, especially between the growing Western technological-industrial patriarchy and the diminishing Western matriarchal social structure, should be as powerfully influential, in Poe’s work, as the divisions between youth and adulthood, dreaming and waking? In the wake of Poe’s exact contemporary Darwin, thanks to Spencer and others, the techno-patriarchal mood deeply infected the Age of the Modern with the illness of techno-economic “progress” that has become the almost unquestioned mark of “health” in our own Age of Masses.

Being myself a writer in the middle decades of this Age of Masses, I find these thoughts as they arise provocative ones. For what is Japanese in me, except what is of my mother? In considering my decades-long interest in and pursuit of speculative poetry, as distinct from other kinds of poetry and other kinds of writing, can I not point to divisions between youth and adulthood—dreams and waking—mother and father?

In these dichotomies, which side is more “real”? Which one is “about” the other? Within which one does “meaning” lie? Which one is future, and which, past? Even with youth and age, the feeling that youth presages adulthood seems no greater than the feeling that age is the regaining and redeeming of youth. Within our Age of Masses cages we can only hope that our utterances, our writings, our acts, are ones that widen the gate that may let us peer out and perhaps one day escape. Speculative poetry may not be a form of world-shaking significance. Yet it may be a form that is distinctively appropriate in our times.

Poe in pre-Modern years, James Thompson (“B.V.”) in Modern years, Alice Notley in our own years: ignored voices, but vital.

## Notes

“From this dim Thule: Poe and speculative poetry” appeared in *Actes du Troisieme Colloque International de Science-Fiction de Nice*, Centre d’Etude de la Metaphore No. 15-16, University of Nice, 1988.

The notions underlying my understanding of the Modern Age and the Age of the Masses provide important structural underpinnings for *C.M. Kornbluth: The Life and Works of a Science Fiction Visionary*, and a current project.

*“We all operate in multiple worlds or have the experience of moving from one world into another... if we operate at all as conscious beings, then we operate constantly at the dividing line between the sphere of personally important activities and the sphere that characterizes what I call the Age of the Masses.”*

*“In these dichotomies, which side is more ‘real’? Which one is ‘about’ the other? Within which one does ‘meaning’ lie? Which one is future, and which, past?”*

Mark Rich is the author of *C.M. Kornbluth: The Life and Works of a Science Fiction Visionary* and several collections of short stories. In the 1980s with co-editor Roger Dutcher he established the current *Magazine of Speculative Poetry*.



☪ *Promised Lands: Poems from the Sovereign  
of Dishpan Sonnets*, by JT Stewart,  
Lamaya Press, 2010

Reviewed by Eileen Gunn

"Each poem, even the  
shortest—especially the  
shortest, sixteen words  
alight with power—  
stops the reader in her  
tracks.... that's what  
poetry is supposed to  
do. Just pay attention."

The African-American poet and educator JT Stewart is one of the founders of the Clarion West Writer's Workshop. She has been an inspiration and mentor to me and to many, many other writers over her long career.

Stewart's *Promised Lands* is a small whirlwind of poems—stories, songs—about the African Diaspora. Each poem, even the shortest—especially the shortest, sixteen words alight with power—stops the reader in her tracks and insists that she pay attention, right now. Be calm: that's what poetry is supposed to do. Just pay attention.

The first section, *Masks/Secrets*, is a selection of five short poems that deal with relations and ties between African-Americans and Africa—Africa then, Africa now, and Africa-of-the-imagination. It starts with ancestors and dark ships, lost names and the language of bones. Almost every poem has an individual, not necessarily the poet, at the heart of it, and a sequence, a motion, in which things change. In "Ancestors," a girl's drawing of a basket contains Africa itself and releases a spirit voice that calls to her friends. In "Horn Men," an American listens to tenor sax players in a Johannesburg bar:

hey  
you ever wonder  
how they survive  
these quote/unquote black  
men jazz jiving they tenor  
saxes  
in the up-to-date badlands  
of South Africa

In the reverie of the poem, she connects these urban musicians back in time to the bush, across the ocean to jazz, and through intuition into a network of aspiration and achievement by people of African heritage. In "History Lesson: Diaspora," a collection of African masks first evokes in visitors' minds the horror of the Middle Passage and its erasure of identity and cul-

ture, then shakes loose atavistic memories, calls forth the lost ancestors, and brings home their names. Museum and horror and memory resonate with one another:

We shiver

Discrete signs announce our origins

Other signs caution us      Do not touch

Do not touch      Alarms will sound

The poems in the second section, *Testimonials*, are less stories than they are statements or requests. In "Say My Name," the voice of a restless ghost, a woman thrown overboard from a slave ship, pleads that she be acknowledged, the ghost's story and the poet's memories melding in an uncanny way. I am not sure I completely understand it, but it makes my hair stand on end. "Strange Fruit: II" addresses a woman with magnolia-white skin, or with magnolia-white scars, and contrasts the white flower floating in a bowl with the severed head of a lynched black man. It is as still and controlled and as horrific as Billie Holiday, a gardenia in her hair, singing the song the poet references. "Fingers," immediately following, is a joyous paean to the fingers that play the blues, pull the guitar strings, pound the pulpit, read the bible, shape the pastry, and hold the family together.

The third section, *Blues/Transformations*, is made up of three longer poems that move away from the individual and (to some extent) from the personal. This does not in any way leave them devoid of emotion. "Blue Note Belly Blues" is a poem that begs to be read out loud. Its epigraph, "a call & response, 'How-I-Got-Ovah' piece," alludes both to the African/African-American religious tradition and to the work of influential black feminist poet Carolyn Rodgers; its verses paint complex vignettes that reference slavery, freedom, and black culture. It moves from Africa and the Middle Passage to slave narratives to juke joints to the traditional second line of dancers at African-American parades and funerals in New Orleans. The refrain/response "Think About It," repeated after each verse, implies a public affirmation of the verse and creates a brief pause, allowing the meaning of the verse to sink in, and the rhythm of call-and-response



carries the listener/reader on to the next stanza. The second poem in this section, “Promised Lands: Urban Style,” confronts Miami-Vice-style consumer culture, giving it a thorough dressing-down:

Well – isn’t this the home of  
hip hop  
re bop  
no bop  
ice drop  
pants drop  
bikini drop  
boogie drop  
super drop  
cool

while simultaneously acknowledging, tongue in cheek, that the high life has its appeal:

But ButBut  
haven’t we all fantasized  
about pink flamingoes and lilac  
Bee-em-double-yous for our  
beach condos w/triple garage space

Next to these present-day consumer-culture distractions, it places past realities: Jim Crow laws, centuries of abuse, failed promises of reparation; mothers who had to push hard to get almost nothing, to be hired as day laborers to clean houses and watch children. Then, having drawn such a clear line between the past and the present of black America, the poem, without taking back a word of criticism, pulls everyone—mothers, grandmothers, and the “us” of right now—together, everyone waiting. The third long poem, “An Outsider Writes from New Orleans,” is divided into two parts: pre-Katrina and post-Katrina. In Part I, the visitor revels in the food and music and nightlife, the joyous, guilty excesses, of pre-Katrina New Orleans; Part II begins with an eerie tour of the flooded city from a bus full of spirits, then moves on to the exodus of the citizens that were its lifeblood:

Many thousands gone  
Many thousands gone  
by car by plane by bus  
by feet by wings  
Some folks they fly away

The finale of the poem is a musical funeral for Katrina herself, and by now you can hear the brass band playing “I’ll Fly Away,” a song that offers comfort to the bereaved, hope to the fugitive, courage to the displaced. The Black Men of Labor are in the front line, and Katrina’s coffin follows in a horse-drawn hearse. The poet and the reader join the second line and call on Katrina, who has taken on the visage of the orisha Oshun, associated with rivers and water, to bring peace. And she does.

These poems make your head bigger by packing ideas into it. Thank you, JT.

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Eileen Gunn is the author of the story collection *Stable Strategies and Others* and the co-editor of *The WisCon Chronicles. Vol 2*. Her fiction has received the Nebula Award in the US the and Sense of Gender Award in Japan, and has been nominated for the Hugo, Philip K. Dick, and World Fantasy awards, and short-listed for the James Tiptree, Jr. award.

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## Said in Tones of Conversation

by Mark Rich

Said in tones of conversation,  
tones of everyday  
without a chiming, ring-ding singing,  
without bronze-bell clanging,  
without rose-cheeked dulcet warble.  
Said with horns and flutes left wrapped in cases  
on a Tuesday, Thursday, Friday—any working day  
when clear-eyed folk might wake  
to don the worn-down denims,  
wake to scan the sky outside  
for signs of ordinary trouble.  
Said the way the morning mirror-gazer  
meets a vision of dishevelment  
with motions, combing, that recall  
and augur, back and forth, the starts of days  
until the end.

Or said the way that waves  
have ways of never skirring over sand  
exactly as the stirring sand has seen before—  
of varying while also never changing,  
marking off the seconds, minutes, hours  
by imparting to them lapping sighs and slaps,  
in well-worn phrasings and rephrasings,  
with such words as waves have long imparted here  
and there, and elsewhere; with such intonations  
as are much the same as heard on any other day—  
so much the same as ever in remembered time  
that listeners must stop to wonder  
where they have arrived, in being here now.  
Murmurs thus and so must rise and fall  
in distant reaches, in other  
changingly unchanging places. Waves must stretch  
for these same shifting graspings  
anywhere.



☪ *The Moment of Change: an Anthology of Speculative Poetry*,  
edited by Rose Lemberg, Aqueduct Press, May 2012, 188 pages, \$20.00

Reviewed by Rachel Swirsky

*"Literature of the fantastic allows us to create worlds and visions of society, origins, social justice, and identity. As such, it is directly relevant to feminism; and of all the genres of speculative literature, poetry is crucial..."*

In musical theater, there's a saying: when emotions get too strong to speak, you sing. When emotions get too strong to sing, you dance.

As a writer who primarily works in prose, sometimes my emotions get too strong, and I slip into verse.

The world is wrong and I am wrung,  
a bell of cloth dripping salt  
into an earth too broken for roots.

—Excerpted from "Pieces"  
by Amal El Mohtar

Poetry can be many things. Delicate and precise and measured. Dense and layered with allusion.

But poetry is often seen as embodying the emotional and the mysterious. Free verse defies grammar. It's wild. Unruly. Visceral. Intuitive. It mirrors a scatter of stereotypical feminine aspects: moon madness, hysteria, unfathomable womanly ways that can't be reined in by logic.

V.

The haunted girl has mirror eyes  
sometimes opalescent  
if you fear forgetting, being forgotten  
like barren eggshells  
empty seashells  
flashlights in the fog.  
Sometimes they're black gloss  
if you fear futility  
absolute as a mine shaft  
blank as a brick wall.

Sometimes they're simply scarlet.

Because you know you have it coming.

—Excerpted from "The Haunted Girl"  
by Lisa Bradley

Rose Lemberg's *The Moment of Change* is the first anthology of feminist speculative poetry. In her introduction, Lemberg writes, "[l]iterature of the fantastic allows us to create worlds and visions of society, origins, social justice, and identity. As such,

it is directly relevant to feminism; and of all the genres of speculative literature, poetry is crucial...

"I think of this collection as a cornerstone—a compendium of dreams, oppressions, hopes, empowerment, yearning, and mature strength that comes from knowing that we are here. We speak with voices that have been silenced, ignored, marginalized, suppressed, ridiculed, forgotten. We re-remember ourselves, constantly remake ourselves, grapple with theory and life's challenges. 'See us,' the poets of this collection say. 'Change with us. Walk with us. Dream with us.'..."

"We are here."

I'm here to tell you all your secrets, all your underneath. I am the drain, the trap, the grating. You walk over me, uncaring.

I am vanishing without a name, but before I go I must deliver the messages you gave me to keep, silent, barred from your knowth.

—Excerpted from "Transbluency: An Antiprojection Chant" by Nisi Shawl

As the first anthology of its kind, *The Moment of Change* takes on the project of defining its own genre. Lemberg aspires toward a feminist speculative poetry that is diverse and adaptable. The anthology includes a variety of aesthetics—"works that can be labeled mythic, fantastic, science fictional, historical, surreal, magic realist, and unclassifiable." It also features the perspectives of authors who inhabit a multiplicity of points on the kyriarchical spectrum—"poems by people of color and white folks; by poets based in the US, Canada, Britain, India, Spain, and the Philippines; by first- and second-generation immigrants; by the able-bodied and the disabled; by straight and queer poets who may identify as women, men, trans, and genderqueer."

Lemberg quotes Flavia Dzodan. "My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit."



I am not a fighter — I am: rabbit  
wood: Asian when  
convenient: sun & moon  
melting into smoke  
& rain: speaking two  
tongues bound in  
calligraphy: bubbles: girly  
when inconvenient: water  
at work for woman: caught  
between charge!  
& fire: bull-stubborn: as  
industrious as a river flowing  
through the corridors of dream.

—“Self Portrait” by Emily Jiang

Recurring images define the obsessions,  
anxieties, and passions of the movement.  
Poetic symbols stand in for femininity:  
needles, moons, hair.

... The ladies  
must needs smile; turn their sights  
away from manly pursuits, drop their  
gazes instead  
to the needles in their laps; the threads;  
the scissors poised to cut.”

—Excerpted from “Division of Labor”  
by Amal El-Mohtar

I want to go moonwalking  
on it or under it I don't care  
I just want to go moonwalking  
alone.

—Excerpted from “Werewomen”  
by Ursula K. Le Guin

...which of us me you  
will always wear white gloves  
straighten  
perm  
henna  
croquignole  
relax  
fry  
cornroll  
vaseline  
pomade  
gerry curl  
lard  
our hair

—Excerpted from “Ceremony”  
by JT Stewart

Women themselves are often repre-  
sented by archetypes: mother, daughter,  
sister. Princess. Witch.

witches' daughters learn to hide their self-portraits  
and poison their still lifes with crushed smiles  
of course, it's the same thing that anyone learns  
growing up a woman

—Excerpted from “Art Lessons”  
by Yoon Ha Lee

Many poems describe the yearning  
for freedom. Hair is bound and con-  
strained—or loose and liberated. Women  
grow wings, take flight, reach for the sky,  
attain the stars.

Often, they sing. In “The Last Yangtze  
River Dolphin” by Cassandra Phillips-  
Sears, drowned princesses “singing/with  
their bodies /lifted me,/taught me how  
to swim.” In darkness, “I must sing to see  
my way.” In “Journey to the Mountain of  
the Hag,” Patricia Monaghan's titular  
character “sings/stars to me. She calls my  
perfect name.”

Without freedom, asks Phillis Got-  
lieb's “The Robot's Daughter,” “what song  
have I to sing?”

Before women can sing, they must first  
find their voices. In the poems of *The Mo-  
ment of Change*, the right to speak is rarely  
taken for granted. It's contested, anxious  
territory that women must fight to access.

and I would tell these sons of men  
something so shiniingsharp that they would sing with it  
hold the sun in a cup of their hands  
but this glass voice breaks in my throat  
and I would speak swallows with clear wings  
to scrape an augury against the sky in splinters  
but no one speaks glass.

—Excerpted from “Pieces”  
by Amal El-Mohtar

Cont. on p. 14

“See us, the poets  
of this collection say.  
Change with us. Walk  
with us. Dream with  
us'...  
We are here.”

“As the first anthology  
of its kind, *The Moment  
of Change* takes on the  
project of defining its  
own genre.... It also  
features the perspectives  
of authors who inhabit  
a multiplicity of points  
on the kyriarchical  
spectrum.”



## The Moment of Change, (cont. from p. 13)

*"The poems not only reflect anxiety about finding voices to sing with, but also concern about their voices being heard."*

Sometimes "voice" is used metaphorically; other poems examine literal linguistic colonization.

Where are my  
mothers  
What will become  
of me us  
if I we think  
only in English

—Excerpted from "Ceremony"  
by JT Stewart

The poems not only reflect anxiety about finding voices to sing with, but also concern about their voices being heard. Lemberg lays this down in her introduction: "it is not enough for our voices to simply exist; poets writing from marginalized perspectives must also find venues."

When fighting for the right to speak, one is also fighting for the right to be acknowledged.

Say my name please.  
Please say my name. Look at me when  
you say  
my name. My name.

—Excerpted from "Say My Name"  
by JT Stewart

By far, the most striking recurrent theme in *The Moment of Change* is the conflict with old stories—fairy tales, myths, classical plays—narratives that loom large in the construction of what it means to be "a woman." Poets stage interventions with these tales. They flesh out their glossed-over moments; analyze their metaphorical imagery; imagine them from new perspectives; alter their events.

Poets describe how unexamined retellings enable these stories to continue policing the boundaries of "womanhood":

Retelling stories also creates spaces for poets to challenge the traditional, limited gender roles of old stories.

We cannot talk of fathers fallible  
as they are frail, of daughters sad  
as they are terrible. Instead, we speak of quarterings,  
betrayals, wasting madness and cold marriages.  
Like rustling leaves these whine at last to dust  
in favor of those tales comfortable and beloved as  
the youngest girl Papa loved best,  
his poppet and his jewel.

Perhaps this is why we always come to grief:  
Cordelia twisting in the air like rags,  
her wicked sisters strangled on knife and henbane,  
the motley King exiled and world-broken  
upon cold clay, beneath the brewing storms.

—Excerpted from "The King's Daughters"  
by JoSelle Vanderhooft

Lisa Bradley's "In Defense of Sleek-Armed Androids" deconstructs love-bots as a trope. In an essay about her writing process, Bradley explains that "idealized able-bodied androids that exist as sex objects" are "attempts to police my desires, deny my needs, erase me." Expressing the counter-narrative releases revolutionary potential: "I didn't know how strongly I felt, how rebellious, until the words were on the page."<sup>1</sup>

In her "Cinderella" retelling, Sofia Rhei re-imagines the feminine icon as a woman sought by another woman, endowing both women with explicit sexuality.

I wouldn't have heard how someone  
entered the next cubicle and masturbated  
slowly,  
whispering, between gasps, an  
uncommon name:  
mine.

I could only see her strange shoes...

—Excerpted from "Cinderella"  
by Sofia Rhei,  
translated by Lawrence Schimel

While *The Moment of Change* includes poems with strange and beautiful lines ("you looked so thick/and pure, like the inside / of a bone," the fox says to the girl in Cat Valente's "The Girl with Two Skins"), its true heft is in how it contributes to the feminist conversation by putting these diverse poems in tension with each other, revealing how the feminist speculative poetry movement uses words to describe oppression and incite revolution.

*"By far, the most striking recurrent theme in The Moment of Change is the conflict with old stories—fairy tales, myths, classical plays—narratives that loom large in the construction of what it means to be 'a woman.'"*



My voice is in pieces  
I cannot swallow.  
But if you would hear it  
I will put a sliver in your eye  
slide it stinging into place.  
It is glass. See through it.  
Change.

—Excerpted from “Pieces”  
by Amal El-Mohtar

A short list of outstanding poems from  
the anthology:

- “The Haunted Girl” by Lisa Bradley  
“In Defense of Sleek-Armed Androids”  
by Lisa Bradley  
“Division of Labor” by Amal El-Mohtar  
“Pieces” by Amal El-Mohtar  
“Berry Cobbler” by Samantha Henderson  
“Self-Portrait” by Emily Jiang  
“Towards a Feminist Algebra”  
by C. W. Johnson  
“Art Lessons” by Yoon Ha Lee  
“untitled Old Scratch poem, featuring River” by  
Sheree Renee-Thomas  
“Bluebeard Possibilities” by Sofia Rhei  
(translated by Lawrence Schimel)  
“Cinderella” by Sofia Rhei  
(translated by Lawrence Schimel)  
“Hypatia/Divided” by Lorraine Schein  
“Transbluency: An Antiprojection Chant” by  
Nisi Shawl  
“Say My Name” by JT Stewart  
“Ceremony” by JT Stewart  
“The Girl with Two Skins” by Cat Valente  
“The King’s Daughters”  
by JoSelle Vanderhoof

1. Bradley, Lisa. *Not So Broken. Fantastique Un-*  
*fettered*, Thursday, October 27, 2011.  
<http://www.fantastique-unfettered.com/2011/10/not-so-broken-some-thoughts-on-in.html>

Rachel Swirsky is a graduate of the Iowa  
Writers Workshop where she learned  
about A) fiction, and B) the cold. She  
now lives in Bakersfield, California,  
with her husband and cats, where she  
A) writes full time and B) copes with  
the heat. Her first collection, *Through the*  
*Drowsy Dark*, a slim volume of fiction  
and poetry, came out from Aqueduct  
Press in 2010.

## East Coast Summer

by Emily Jiang

I stepped into Hell once—  
it was a dinner party, with Peking duck.

*Where’s Rice?* They asked of my alma mater,  
a non-ivy. I met stares so blank  
I could have been quacking, or spouting  
philosophy, or clicking an alien code  
with my chopsticks—

My mouth was full of Chinglish defense  
and duck—a bit of fat in between  
vowels stuffed in my cheeks hatching  
Silence, its tentacles brushing my temple  
to wind twice around my ear.

*Duck’s your favorite, right?*

I nodded, tried to swallow, my teeth  
caught crisp skin and consonants, my tongue  
sorted polysyllables from rice grains,  
and I lost a chopstick, falling from  
the tablecloth onto the plush blue carpet.

The Silence grew unacknowledged, its tendrils  
dissolving words in my throat.

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The daughter of Chinese-  
American immigrants,  
Emily Jiang has an MFA  
in Creative Writing from  
Saint Mary’s College  
of California and a BA  
in English from Rice  
University. She is also a  
graduate of the Clarion  
Writers’ Workshop,  
where she discovered  
that tentacles can be  
temporarily tamed,  
though never fully  
domesticated.

## Bird-Winged

by Michele Bannister

I am the taker of children.  
Talon-fingered and rag-feathered,  
I am the long shadow of the ancient eagle,  
the darkness in every red-backed marbled cave,  
the silence behind every drop.  
Every rivulet, calcifying  
all your stone-enamelled expectations.

The darkness in caves is absolute.

Ancestral taniwha stand between you and your fear;  
you point to the tangle of bones in the sinkhole,  
the claw-traces down the rock.  
Ngutu ana: it is always a gateway.  
Look out further, past the bush-clad valley of the land  
could you not look above and consider  
what it might be to soar?



☼ *He Do the Gay Man in Different Voices*, by Stephen Mills,  
Sibling Rivalry Press, March 2012, 100 pages, \$14.95

Reviewed by Evan J. Peterson

*"What's noteworthy is that the poems in this book are neither eccentric nor wild, and totally believable.... Stephen Mills brassily presents a gay everyman, who at his kinkiest is still fascinatingly unfabulous."*

Stephen Mills' first book, *He Do the Gay Man in Different Voices*, is a volume of somewhat cynical queer Americana, remarkable in just how unremarkable it dares to be. It's straightforward and practical, taking place in that world where even the drag queens "[a]re, in fact, not singing"—our own painfully normal world.

The book opens with a poem about sex, atheism, and death by car accidents. What could be more painfully common? This is neither the glossy universe of Kenneth Anger nor the chilling techno-fetish of J.G. Ballard. It's just unavoidable, as life tends to be. There's a distinct resignation in the description of "a boy with tattoos, a pierced/tongue, a plaid shirt tied at his waist. It was the 1990s." Of another boy: "His parents/donated his organs. Organs packed in coolers/and shipped off as last minute stays of execution." The dead become absorbed into the living in ways that make simple sense. The young people who populate this poem have sex as an act against doom, against the sudden accidents that claim Mills' young friends such as author Jill Caputo, run down in a crosswalk.

Later, in "The Ghost of Little Edie Beale Meets Me in a Gay Bar," the titular icon is "a star here, where gay boys love the eccentric,/the wild, the unbelievable." What's noteworthy is that the poems in this book are neither eccentric nor wild, and totally believable. Mills writes narrative poems, like his hero Frank O'Hara, that give the reader glimpses into a life that's undeniably ordinary. The gay male world is unabashedly fascinated with fame, with drama and glamour, and the straight world knows this. Stephen Mills brassily presents a gay everyman, who at his kinkiest is still fascinatingly unfabulous. He even manages to make extreme fetish sex somehow nonchalant, and—most impressively—romantic. He and his partner try it on a whim, "the art/of manipulating space": "We are not/the same as boys who knock/holes into walls and faces." This is neither the shimmering steam and sequins

of Doty nor the quiet violence of Siken. It just *is*, much like O'Hara.

Mills is a storyteller, and the book reads as a single coherent poem divided into chapters. Besides O'Hara, other influences and sly nods are clear. The title is a play on Eliot's intended title for "The Waste Land," "He Do the Police in Different Voices." As with Eliot and Pound, there's plenty of image rhyme echoing through the book, from blunt and sticky race relations to execution by hanging. The public execution (read: murder) of two queer Iranian boys returns as Mills imagines himself guiltily as Capote. He waits for his jailed acquaintance, to whom Mills has been writing to and about, to be hanged—"so I can have my ending." He describes this man, Edmon, as "like Andy in *The Shawshank Redemption*, except/he isn't innocent."

The disarming racial questions posed by late poet Reginald Shepherd in his poem on the Jeffrey Dahmer murders, "Hygeine," return in Mills' poem "An Experiment in How to Become Someone Else Who Isn't Moving Anymore," the title of which is borrowed from Shepherd's original poem. It's at once a sequel, an homage, and an elegy to Shepherd, but the poem also becomes an elegy to Dahmer himself, as well as to the community of Milwaukee. Mills seeks to understand Dahmer and refrains from glamorizing him.

Race resurfaces in the final section of the book, the one in which Mills writes of his pen pal, an imprisoned porn model. Mills weighs the pros and cons of being a porn model himself, rather than an ordinary English teacher,

because in Hollywood  
white ambitious teachers are the only ones who  
can save  
black kids from gangs, violence, their own  
families,  
maybe even hurricanes.

Again, the everyman ponders extraordinary and extreme lives, accepting his own as a shoe that fits.

*"Mills is a storyteller, and the book reads as a single coherent poem divided into chapters."*





Hollywood continually surfaces for metaphor and analogy; it's always thrilling, as opposed to our lives, which are usually less than. Ordinary gay life is contrasted to the zone in which authors are kidnapped by their fans ("Missing You While Watching *Misery*") and men have the superhuman power to escape to Mars ("Imagining Your Penis in Blue After Watching *Watchmen*").

Ultimately, Mills' most audacious risk is to show the average American gay man's life for what it really is: average. It's not a tell-all or a fairy tale, not a drug-addled sex romp or a double-income-no-kids life of privilege. Mills reveals the true secret of the gay community, that it's unremark-


able as hell, domestic and predictable, full of brunches and chores like the straight world, but punctuated by fears, occasional brutality, and, if one is lucky, a moment or two of kinky sex. This is a book for the post-Don't-Ask-Don't-Tell world of same-sex weddings and, soon, same-sex divorce. It's a book for people who don't fear HIV because they've had the same monogamous partner for years, though they still fear an old fashioned gay bashing (or the occasional random car accidents and serial murders). It's an elegy for the Hollywood dreams that have been replaced by reality TV. Welcome to assimilation.

*"Mills reveals the true secret of the gay community, that it's unremarkable as hell, domestic and predictable, full of brunches and chores like the straight world, but punctuated by fears, occasional brutality, and, if one is lucky, a moment or two of kinky sex."*

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Evan J. Peterson is a poet, fiction author, columnist, and book reviewer. Recent and forthcoming writing may be found excerpted in *The New York Times* and in full in numerous venues. He is also an active zine maker and founding editor of *ZiReZi*. For more, check out [EvanJPeterson.com](http://EvanJPeterson.com).

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 *Suspended Somewhere Between: A Book of Verse*, by Akbar Ahmed.

PM Press / Busboys and Poets, April 2011, 152 pages, \$15.95

Reviewed by Liz Bourke

David Futterman's foreword to Akbar Salahuddin Ahmed's first book of verse opens with a comparison to Jalal al-Din Muhammed Rumi, perhaps Sufi Islam's greatest—and certainly best known—poet. It's an unfair comparison: the work of Rumi (a poet, a mystic, a jurist, and a theologian, a man known as Mawlana, meaning "Our Guide" in Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan) has the poetic weight and heft to resonate down eight centuries.

Born in India in 1943, raised from the age of four in then West Pakistan, Akbar Ahmed joined the Pakistani Civil Service in 1966. Since then he has been a diplomat, an anthropologist, a man of letters, and a recipient of Pakistan's Star of Excellence, the third highest civilian award. At present he is Washington DC's American University Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies.

Professor Ahmed is no Rumi. In *Suspended Somewhere Between*, he gives us an interesting but very uneven poetry collection. The poems range from the viscerally striking ("At the Khaibar Pass" and "they are taking them away") to strained rhyme-schemes that ring false ("Zeenat, Princess of My Heart" and "Golgotha"), to bland love poetry that brings nothing new to its theme, to at least one piece ("The Passing of an Empire") that reads better as prose than poem.

I look, in poetry, for something prose cannot say, or cannot say *as well*. For the feeling carried in a certain slant of light, in the curl of a wave or the dip of a wing or the scent of summer on the breeze—for something almost nameless, almost ineffable, but not—not quite. Most of Akbar's poems don't hit that sweet spot for me.

This collection is divided into five sections: Pakistan, Love, Islam, Echoes of History, and Pensées. Pakistan is the strongest, Love the weakest section. Islam is a fascinating look at Akbar's personal approach to his religion, but its best poem in terms of imagery, "I, Saracen," suffers from the forced AA BB rhyme and screwy metrical stress:

Badr was sobbing, Panipat weeping  
the universe gaped as I lay sleeping,  
kaleidoscopic chaos seemed far to me  
I slumped, I sank, I fell free...

Rather than dwell on the collection's failings, however, I want to talk about three poems, all from the section Pakistan, which do hit that sweet spot.

"walking the streets with the Dahta" is the first of these. One of the longer poems in the collection, it stretches across three pages in rolling, expressive free verse.

*"Professor Ahmed is no Rumi. In Suspended Somewhere Between, he gives us an interesting but very uneven poetry collection."*

*"I look, in poetry, for something prose cannot say, or cannot say as well. For the feeling carried in a certain slant of light, in the curl of a wave or the dip of a wing or the scent of summer on the breeze—"*

Cont. on p. 18



"they are taking them away' is a shocking, arresting piece of work. ... the repeated refrain of 'they are taking them away/to the slaughterhouses' beats like a bell inside your brain..."

Some beggars swayed  
gnarled dying tree-trunks meanly  
clothed in  
winter leaves through which dim-glowed  
the night-lights of bazaar nocturnality;  
some beggars dressed in tiers  
of foreign suiting and fat of Lahori  
ghee...

Dahta (or Daata) Ganj Baksh, "the master who bestows treasures," as Abul Hassan Ali Ibn Usman al-Jullabi al-Hajvery al-Ghaznawi was known, was an 11<sup>th</sup>-century Persian Sufi and scholar, a holy (indeed, saintly) figure. His monumental tomb in Lahore is the object of pilgrimage—according to the Internet it is the most popular shrine in the city. The experience of being part of the crowd around al-Hujwiri's tomb on Thursday night (*Jomay raat*) comes vividly to life: the poor and the wealthy, the local and the international. As does the sensation of being part of something more:

They were all there:  
love remains love  
however crudely exhibited  
faith turns to love  
however clumsily expressed  
love creates faith  
from whatever quarter coming.

"they are taking them away" is a shocking, arresting piece of work. Located in the 1971 Bangladesh War of Liberation/Indo-Pakistan War (during which numerous atrocities were committed, including the murder of a large proportion of the Bangladeshi intellectual community by West Pakistani-supported irregulars and the rape of an estimated two hundred thousand—200,000!—women), the repeated refrain of "they are taking them away/to the slaughterhouses" beats like a bell inside your brain:

who was martyr  
which one saint  
depended only  
on the language he spoke:

to such a fine point  
is the concept of alienation reduced; for  
there is no shame like the shame of  
taking them away to the slaughterhouses.

"At the Khaibar Pass" is the third poem to close its fingers in my gut and pull. It's a striking, vivid piece situated in the Khaibar (more often transliterated Khyber) Pass between Pakistan and Afghanistan, a meditation on the transience of empire.

Like wind they came, like water they left,  
the thousands of soldiers, the thousands  
of years,  
passages long gone, long forgotten  
in this catacomb of desire and history.

The poem ends:

...silence beyond and silence behind  
to this end  
teasing imagination leads us;  
and leaves us."

The poetry in this collection spans the length of Akbar Ahmed's life, which is now nearing its seventh decade. At times fascinating, at times bland, one might be tempted to see in his poetry a reflection of the man himself. That man is not, it's clear, a poet *first*.

But there are poems here that reward reading, nonetheless.

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Liz Bourke is reading for a postgraduate degree in Classics at Trinity College, Dublin. She spends her free time (what there is of it) reading, getting beaten up in a variety of martial arts, and falling off perfectly good walls. When not courting death by bruises, she reviews for *Tor.com*, *Ideomancer*, and *Strange Horizons*.

"The poetry in this collection spans the length of Akbar Ahmed's life...  
That man is not, it's clear, a poet first.  
But there are poems here that reward reading, nonetheless."



🌀 *A Mayse-Bikhl*, by Sonya Taaffe, Papaveria Press,

October 2011, 32 pages, £6

Reviewed by Amal El-Mohtar

To review a good book of poems is to attempt an act of translation. "Attempt" is the operative word: one must try to do so in spite of not feeling fluent in either the language of the book or the language of the reader. It is like having woken from a fierce, vivid dream, wishing to relate it, scribbling it down while still fresh, and yet finding that the gear-grinding day-brain is already taking over, yoking your noumina to narrative, to something that will make sense to a listener.

To attempt a review of Sonia Taaffe's work is much the same. I find myself feeling that what is required is a translation of the marvellous to the mundane, a report about an experience that took place elsewhere in a different language, and which marked me in ways I must struggle to articulate to you, someone who has not shared it yet. I could tell you the truth: *A Mayse-Bikhl* is a collection of fire and ink with bone and bread for its pages. Here is a single warm voice that reads like watching a brilliant actor donning masks on a low-lit stage, a one-woman play of demons and dybbuks, angels and golems, ancestors and fools that will leave you breathless and uncertain of whether or not it would be appropriate to clap.

I could tell you that the book itself is beautiful: a saddle-bound chapbook with thread for a spine, with a photograph on the cover of the Czech Memorial Scrolls at Westminster Synagogue, taken by the author's grandfather. In a collection that often feels like a murmured conversation between family members, everything about its materiality is appropriate and understated, leading me to feel immediately intimate with a volume thin enough to hold between my thumb and forefinger.

But none of that is enough. Let me try, instead, to tell this collection as I would tell a dream.

You wander around a deserted house with many rooms. The ceilings are high; you can hear the wind breezing cool through open windows. Curtains shift and sway. In one room, you find a half-open valise, in which are leaves of loose paper.

You remember that you once saw a play called *52 Pick-up*, where two actors scattered a deck of cards onto the stage and allowed the audience to pick up and call out one card at a time. Each card corresponded to a scene they had rehearsed; the order in which these scenes were performed changed each night; but the audience never knew any story but the one that played out before them. With the logic peculiar to dreams, you know that as soon as you pick up one paper, the order of the rest will be determined, and you will not be able to imagine it otherwise.

You reach for a page. The moment you touch it, the empty room around you flushes with life, with warmth, with color. You are not reading the words: you are watching the scene play out. You are watching women give poems to other women, watching young people and old people reading, talking, baking, grieving, laughing, writing their names in ash and clay. You think of Andersen's "Little Match Girl" just in time to anticipate the sharp burn each scene's end will leave you with: a soul-singe, a gasp, an ache of loss. You find yourself thinking of that girl all the more as your reaching for the pages speeds up, because you don't want the rooms to fall empty and quiet again, you want them to remain full of domovoi and challah and soup-rain, violins and lemon tea.

When you wake, it is with the confused sense that the last page turned you into a swallow and set you free.

Even this analogy is not enough. The experience of the collection as a whole is similar to the experience of reading a single poem: one of Taaffe's extraordinary skills lies in layering a complex density of associations that cannot be untangled into a sequence. One of my favorites, "Cemetery Theater," lays ghost on grave on stage on synagogue on poem on heart, forces you to swallow all at once and only wonder at how apt are the connections afterwards. Her words are often made food in this collection, braided into bread or scattered as crumbs on a seashore, and to read is to eat.

*"A Mayse-Bikhl is a collection of fire and ink with bone and bread for its pages. Here is a single warm voice that reads like watching a brilliant actor donning masks on a low-lit stage..."*

*"You reach for a page. The moment you touch it, the empty room around you flushes with life, with warmth, with color. You are not reading the words: you are watching the scene play out."*



## *A Mayse-Bikhl*

(cont. from page 19)

"...one of Taaffe's extraordinary skills lies in layering a complex density of associations that cannot be untangled into a sequence."

"A Mayse-Bikhl is lovely; it is tremendous; it is a work to be cherished as much as lauded, and I consider it a small treasure."

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Amal El-Mohtar is a two-time winner of the Rhysling Award for Best Short Poem and has been nominated for the Nebula award. She is the author of *The Honey Month*, a collection of poetry and prose. Her poems have also appeared in multiple venues online and in print, including *Stone Telling*, *Welcome to Bordertown*, and *Mythic Delirium*. She also edits *Goblin Fruit*, an online quarterly dedicated to fantastical poetry.

Consider these lines from "Hershel Said":

Dreidel with demons, groschen  
from a table, long coat flying  
as stories stretch and braid  
like challah for the rising...  
...  
Like matzah all year round, the truth.

The movement from image to image is cinematic, a slow pan over a room, seamless as the spill from one line to the next: spinning demons to a stationary coin on a table, left behind a long coat indicating leaving, leading to a story pulled into dough, and the whole to be consumed while being immersed in the scene.

Each of the twenty poems in *A Mayse-Bikhl* is short, none longer than a page and a half, most only one page or less. Consequently the density of each poem makes it feel like a chapter, but more: in so many of these pieces, each line contains a whole story ambered in an image to stop the heart.

Cold hangs like glass on the air.  
Every lover's letter is a golem.  
Pomegranates bloom in the open streets  
like graffiti.

Papaveria Press's description of this collection says the poems are "curated" by Rose Lemberg, and the metaphor is apt: I am left helpless before the inevitability of one poem's following the next. The whole is a move from echoes, ghosts, haunting, and desolation to nourishment, fantastika, joy, and fulfillment, while passing through a quiet carnival of characters. But the way one poem prepares the next has all the elegance of ligament, the beauty of a muscle flexing into motion: I think in particular of how the "You are a demon, dressed in yesterdays" of "Sheydim-Tants" leads into "Of Chasing After Yesterdays," how the former's "season that never stays" gives way to "sheets cold and full of broken leaves, / dead flowers, fool's gold strewn in my empty bed."

I love that this collection has taught me new things, though I do not dare to pretend that I have reached all these poems' dense layers; every reading has helped me to uncover a new one without detracting from the awe and pleasure of the first. *A Mayse-Bikhl* is lovely; it is tremendous; it is a work to be cherished as much as lauded, and I consider it a small treasure to have and hold: an heirloom given to me in passing by a stranger with whom I would be friends.

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## The Problem of Two Bodies

by Michele Bannister

We shall not dwell in more detail, lemma-led and wistful,  
there is the commute, here the commutator;  
no longer can I convolve this life, project my hope,  
sum every fleeting arc to a bound orbit: it resolves nothing.  
If I follow you, I fall adjunct to ambition,  
if you follow me, no chance to keep your calling –  
it is a null set, the space of which I speak,  
the intersection of hearth and home and happiness.  
This the price of scribing and scrying the universe:  
your continent here, mine half a planet away,  
and travel that takes even light seconds, all held between.

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Michele Bannister lives in Australia, where she is working towards her doctorate in astronomy. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons* and *Stone Telling*, and is forthcoming in *Ideomancer*, *Jabberwocky*, and *Inkscrawl*.



 *When the Only Light is Fire*, by Saeed Jones,

Sibling Rivalry Press, November 2011, 44 pages, \$12.00

Reviewed by Sheree Renée Thomas

In his new poetry chapbook, *When the Only Light is Fire*, Memphis poet and Rutgers MFA graduate Saeed Jones offers readers his own sensual and wise take on Raymond Patterson's classic, *26 Ways of Looking at a Black Man*. Composed of twenty-six poems, Jones's volume is an explosive reading experience from the very first page. In "Kudzu" Jones skillfully takes the well-known demonweed, siren of about seven million acres of the South's fertile earth, to create a sultry, clever tangle of desire and craving. Aware of its supposed outsider status in life's garden, the narrator is unapologetic. Though "soil recoils" and "pines turn their backs," the narrator reaches beyond the summer air "crowded with want" to reflect on other desires. Jones writes:

All I've ever wanted  
was to kiss crevices, pry them open,  
and flourish within...

The poem is graceful and stealthy as the strongest clutch of kudzu, and its final lines leave readers excited to continue reading the collection to see if the poet promises and delivers more.

The poet not only writes of desire and its myriad faces, but also of the impossible desires and expectations we hold for others and of ourselves. He writes of the burdens of bridges, rusting under

the weight of the living,  
who expect the dead  
to finish what we will not do.

He writes of dark Mississippi roads of today, not of Jim Crow slavery days but today, where backs must sing or break, where "pavement becomes skin tight" and we are reminded of just how cruel some desires can be. Of the three poems in this cycle "Jasper, 1998: III" is the strongest. Written in memory of James Byrd, Jr., a black man who was dragged down a three-mile road chained to a truck by three white

men in Jasper, Mississippi, the poem is a chilling testimony. "Hear me, Jasper. Hear me for miles," Jones writes, employing the call-and-response of chain gangs and work songs, ring shouts and Dr. Watts hymns in church pews. Conscious during most of his tragic ordeal, Mr. Byrd's body was broken apart, his torso dumped before an African-American cemetery. Jones's poem leaves this horror in the spaces around the work's haunting refrain, making Byrd's imagined voice even more powerful.

In "Terrible Boy," a quiet, unsettling work possibly exploring seduction and abuse, the young narrator "...turned the family portrait face down" and "fed gasoline to the roots of forsythia." In "Boy in Stolen Evening Gown" readers find themselves standing in a field of thistle as the narrator saunters into overgrown grass. In this work and in many that follow, Saeed Jones "wears the word" and he wears it very well. His imagination and his work are rich and verdant. In his poems we learn the electric slide, we wear snakeskin cowboy boots and dance with blue-black boys. The landscape of his poems is familiar and unfamiliar, rearranging the world and our grasp on it in the magical way that good poets do. And while there is darkness, there are also memorable moments of sweet passion and laughter. In "Meridian," Jones reminds us of those perfect moments among lovers, when our sky is "burned to blazing." In "Sleeping Arrangement," one cannot help but laugh at a disgruntled lover's lament and the instructions to "learn the lullabies of lint."

Drawing on the common themes of coming-of-age, coming-to-terms with who and what we are, and how best to be human, Jones takes some of the wildness, the beauty, the darkness, and the cruelty of that journey—perhaps best portrayed in the poem, "Mississippi Drowning"—and creates a series of psychological portraits whose images and ideas linger long after the pages have turned. *When the Only Light is Fire* is an exciting work from a poet who clearly has more to tell us.

*"The poet not only writes of desire and its myriad faces, but also of the impossible desires and expectations we hold for others and of ourselves."*

*"Drawing on the common themes of coming-of-age, coming-to-terms with who and what we are, and how best to be human, Jones takes some of the wildness, the beauty, the darkness, and the cruelty of that journey..."*

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Sheree Renée Thomas is an award-winning poet, writer, editor, and publisher known especially for the Dark Matter series, a collection of some of the best science fiction, fantasy, and horror produced by people of African descent. The first collection of her own stories and poetry, *Shotgun Lullabies*, is available from Aqueduct Press.





Kit Fox

## The Desert Spirits of Terri Windling

Terri Windling is our splendid artist of the interstitial in multivarious forms (editor, visual artist, essayists, author). Her visual art work is poetry in three dimensions—as paint, ink, collage. For years Terri spent her winters in Tucson, Arizona—where she developed a deep bond to the Sonoran desert and the multicultural American Southwest, the muse for the paintings featured here.

Terri says, “*I didn’t find my own style until I moved to Tucson and started seriously painting in oils. In the desert light, my palette, technique, and imagery abruptly changed.*”

The animal series of paintings shown here was born of an “eclectic range of influences from Mexican Surrealism (Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington) to Bill Worrell and Holly Roberts. The strongest influence of all, though, was the desert itself, the greens and browns and blues of the Sonora, the endless skies and the mountains that change with every shift in light, the javelinas and jackrabbits and roadrunners...the coyotes that sang... and the blend of cultures—Native American, Latino, and Anglo—that have made the desert their home and embodied it in stories, songs, and art.”

The series includes spirits native to the land and is inspired by its mingled folktales and myths. Some are protective figures, but tricksters abound throughout, too (both benevolent and malevolent): “healers, muses, and oneiric shape-shifters beneath the desert moon.”

The desert palette is the ground upon which the work builds symbolic meanings. “These iconic paintings share a number of recognizable elements that form a kind of symbolic language. Many of the figures are wounded, which in Terri’s iconography

symbolizes the importance of ‘*acknowledging difficult passages of life, as opposed to fearing, repressing, or ignoring them; celebrating the strength and wisdom that comes from hard experience.*’ Female figures are often depicted with one breast exposed to indicate transformation, “*shedding human consciousness or returning to it from a primal animal state.*” Both male and female figures are sometimes horned, as an indicator of healing spirits. Many have one eye that is either shut or concealed. Reminiscent of Odin’s blind eye gazing into the spirit world, these figures look into the ‘*Wilderness World,*’ the realm of spirits, ancestors, and myth.”

Sometimes words can be almost deciphered in Terri’s paintings, written in ink onto the paint or scratched into the background. Although a word here and there may be readable, they do not form coherent thoughts and are not meant as literary. Rather, they show the artist’s vision of the blurring of boundaries between stories and visual arts.

“*The words are intended to evoke ancient stories, distantly recalled and half-forgotten. My desert paintings are rarely illustrative of any single folk tale, but of generations of stories, layered one on top of the other—the mingled stories of indigenous and immigrant groups, woven together, affecting each other.*”

Each painting conjures two elements: a figure who lives somewhere in the interstices between reality and myth, and the embodiment of the landscape, its stark beauty and inscrutability.

“*I think of myself as a landscape painter of sorts, even though my work is figurative, because each figure embodies my feelings about a particular piece of land, at a particular time of day. To me, the land and the myths that it contains are inseparable.*”

[All quoted text from “Once Upon a Time: An Introduction to Terri Windling’s Art” by Ellen Steiber

Read Ellen’s essay on Terri and her work here: [www.endicott-studio.com/gal/galterri.html](http://www.endicott-studio.com/gal/galterri.html).

<http://www.terriwindling.com/>

Front Cover  
Desert Spirit — Medicine Vision





*Old Coyote Woman*



*Snake Shaman*



*Coyote and the Dog Spirits*



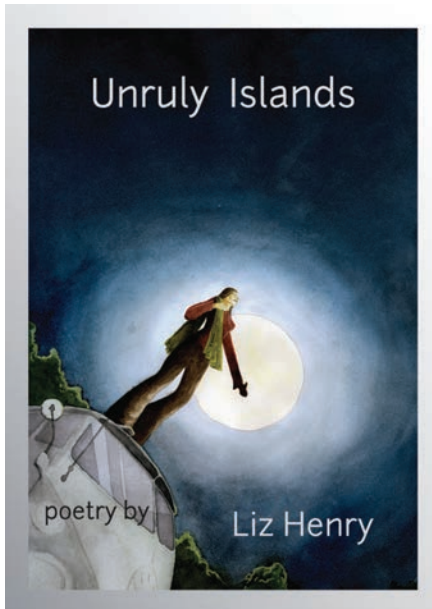
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## New Poetry Collections from Aqueduct Press



*Unruly Islands* collects 36 poems suffused with science fiction, revolution, and digital life on the edge. Annalee Newitz, editor of *iO9*, says of the collection, “Liz Henry’s poetry is always moving, funny, and weird, regardless of whether she’s flying us on a rocketship through a science fictional social revolution or telling us a wry story about being an adolescent embezzler. This collection is like a monster cyborg mashup of Walt Whitman, Joanna Russ, and the Internet. Which is to say: Fuck yeah!”

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