magazine for literature and art

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Artwork and photography: Submit copies, not originals, in black and white or color; 5 x 7 inches. Limit of six submissions. High quality photocopies accepted. Pays one copy.

Hart Crane Memorial Poetry Contest: Annual award of $100 for best poem. Include a letter stating submissions are for this contest, and a maximum of two poems to Dr. Pam Lieske, Hart Crane Poetry Contest (address above) by January 15. The winning poem is published in ICON.

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ICON
magazine for
literature and art

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2017 Winner

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Aqiqah: The Boat Speaks

I was born barely competent from the ribs of men.
Not in the way you've heard before—the first human

sparing one from his left side to form a body so dissimilar
he had to rename it, pre-fixed into Christian myth: woman.

I admit, there are some coincidences. By my own count,
on the sixth day I was sanded for the use of moneymen,

then painted for movement in the belly of the night
in the way that is the preference of so many men

who pretend disapproval but disguise desire with prayer.
Outwardly, I was Eliza: hardly a lady for a gentleman.

So perhaps it is more accurate to say that I was hacked
from the trees of Tunis into succulent ribs, the hands of men

bonding me into a corset, fitting me to a country
where no one makes decisions, not even men,

to be stuffed like a gutted pepper with a never-ending mix
of brightly spiced futbol jerseys flavored with the scent of men,

then set to roast again on a convective sea where a cortege
of waves carried me not to an end destined by gods or men

but to a middle where borders are invisible symptoms
and the disease is sacrifice, mandated for all obedient women.
John Grey

The Couple's First Morning

The woman
lies on the bed
in pale motel light.
The man in the bathroom
shaves and sings.

Like a lit match,
the sound of him
warms and illuminates a little.

Her eyes move calmly
from stomach to chin,
from breast to thigh.
She's reassuring herself that
nothing has changed from the night before,
that her shape has held up,
that her beauty is safe where it is.

He enters the room
and it's like that match
has been instantly blown out.
She blames a sudden breeze.
Better that than a sudden doubt.

A Room at Least

A guy has to live somewhere.
So it's one room in
an inner city boarding house
with a landlady who smokes

and coughs and complains
about her swollen feet.
The bed is lumpy.
The wall paper's peeling.
But existence, at least,
now knows where to find me.
A Monk

I shall be a monk,
ambitious Benedict, aspiring
bodhisattva. I will
reckon my days in obsessive
breviary, lauds, vespers,
nocturns, thumbing a rosary,
spinning a prayer wheel.
My feet will tread on cool
stone, dim abbey nave,
or in warm golden stupas.
In the scriptoria,
my pen will scratch at lined,
illuminated parchment,
but I will renounce the noise,

the habitual din,
silence my new scripture.
I will don a saffron robe,
offer my empty bowl
at the supermarket.
Holy beggar? Alms? Well no,
my backyard is my cloister,

a suburban ranch blessed
with every convenience, TV,
washer-dryer, microwave.
I will embrace obscurity,
zealously relish isolation.
Will I dwell upon Jesus,
Buddha, my nebulous course,
or will I simply gaze
upon descending blossoms,
infinite petals, spring?
And look! Now winter,
apples, irrevocably frozen,
still cling to bare limbs,
still red, beguile the deer.
Arthur Russell

Gilbert

I worked for a dirty little cook who honed one knife against another, and talked about women.

When he was satisfied with a knife’s edge, he shaved his arm for proof, and cleaned the blade on his pant leg.

His name was Gilbert. He had a chipped tooth and knuckles like walnuts. He dressed the prime rib with dry rub and put it in a low oven.

I imagined the room where he lived had cockroaches and a limp shirt on a chair back. More than once, he told me about whores.

Drinking beer outside the kitchen door one night, he recited a Spanish poem in an affected lisp: how life was like a bird flying through a room.

I knew him by his pony tail, his hands and teeth, his cigarette wince and his Bondo-bodied Chevy. He stole my last paycheck.

Most things then scared me, but I needed fear to shear myself from the glassblower and become this elaborate thing.
Arthur Russell

Harkness Blues

Hand under the sheets I thought of you;
Hand under your sweater I dreamed of you;
Hand in hand, we crossed the avenue,
then let go to pass around a lamppost.

Remember telling me your father's shoulders were uneven?
Remember saying his shadow had a shadow?
You locked the door to your room three days.
You wrote to me on rolling paper.

Through time, I sent you vagrant mail;
I sent you mail through brackish time;
I loved you poorly and unevenly;
I let you go, then disappear. I let you disappear.

Fourteen years, you wrote a love poem to an addict.
Fourteen years, you lived a love poem with a heroin addict.
Fourteen years, you fought for him.
He rolled away like a black nickel into a storm drain.

You walked the wet park and kicked cherry blossoms.
Depression gave you dominion over the dark, wet park.
You looked up into a black locust tree
and saw yourself suspended upside down.

I imagined that our time would come;
I always imagined that our time would come;
I thought your ear would produce a black pearl;
I was mistaken; no bend or hitch can join us.

You were my sofa and you were my tv;
You were my stiff and you were my hollow;
You were my baseball glove and my lock of hair;
I would cry if I saw you. I'm crying now.
Arthur Russell

FACES

He was the brother to whom it fell
to sell his parents' house, traveling down
to Charlottesville all those years, to visit
both, then one of them, then just the house.
In the room where he'd read books as a child,
other than the oxygen tank beside the recliner
that replaced the wing chair he had loved,
little had changed: dried hydrangeas
in vases, brocade drapes; an oil painting
of a clipper ship lunging through the sea.

There were secret faces in the abstract pattern
of the wallpaper. He'd seen them first
when he was seven, like the moon behind
a scrim of trees. He froze, pretended
to ignore, then peeked again, and saw
a whole tribe of faces around the room,
with crayon jaws and heavy eyes,
most obscured, in part, by drapes or chairs;

but the one above the radiator,
like an Easter Island moai, was chief
of the faces, the one with whom he'd parlayed
and made peace, whom he acknowledged
when he passed through the room to elsewhere,
who held his gaze when parents fought, to hold
back tears, accused him when he lied or acted mean
to girls, and understood him well enough
to help him draft, as he turned 18,
the articles of leaving home.

When married, divorced and married again,
with a stepson playing football for State,
he returned to empty and sell the house,
he made his phone calls from that chair
beside the oxygen tank across from the
chief of faces, who had a scarred cheek
Arthur Russell

from a raised seam in the paper after years of darkening radiator heat.

This is how life found him that November, talking to his sister in New York, to a broker from Weichert and to Goodwill for a pickup date, and gazing at the moai on the walls, like a sort of class photograph.

The cargo of books he’d read was safe within him, as he lunged through the sea to a harbor of his own.

Linda Fuchs

Learning to Fly

fuzzy caterpillar amber and black
looks up
tall tree, canopy of green
so far away
climbing might take forever
falling quite a danger
caterpillar wishes to fly
but has no wings

“I think I’ll just curl up in this cocoon and sleep awhile”
Fatou M'Baye

Look

I have never seen a red so red as the red
that pinched your cheeks
I hesitantly wanted to touch it
I wanted to hug you
I wanted to cry and shriek and squeal
but people would look at me

I have never seen eyes that looked like yours
like flowers in a blotted painting
ones that get their own hallway in a museum
I wanted to reach my hand into them
and send ripples into the cool water
but people would look at me

I have never seen a mind like yours
so colorful
like the blurs from the window of a fast
car during the autumn

I don’t know why people are afraid of being looked at
but I do know that if I never looked at you
if I never let people look at me
I would never see
the way you looked at me
Jeanne Marie Plouffe

(after reading Carolyn Forche)

Small and dark behind your mother’s full skirts as she cleaned other people’s houses. Florence and I imagined worms slithered thru you when you ate lumps of sugar in my grandmother’s bathroom, still stayed thin. Eyes like cloves under huge lashes in classes you wouldn’t say a word in. Canuck the boys called out over Otter Creek Bridge as your legs got less spindly and the girls from college professors’ homes didn’t invite you. People said your last name with the tone they’d say tramp. Your skin creamy, your hair curled with night. There wasn’t a boy who didn’t think he could put his hand inside your dress. You never said anything, as if a part of you was already gone, as if there was some place to go. Once, singing of Quebec, your eyes gleamed like the gold cross boys yanked from your neck and tossed in the snow. I hear the trailer burned down, the survivors headed north. Jeanne Marie, if you read this please write me
Lyn Lifshin

Lemon Wind

all day
nobody wanted
to talk

the sleeping bags
were still wet
from the storm
in Cholla Vista

Nothing went right.

But later the
wood we
burned had a sweet
unfamiliar smell

and all night
we could taste
lemons in the wind
Lyn Lifshin

She Waits Like Some Sharp Cheddar in the Pantry

huddling in the dark
on the shelf
less exotic
maybe than
women flashy as
Camembert,
intense as St. Andre’s
soft cheese,
less outgoing
and sure of their
direction than
women who know
who they are,
like Jarlsborg or
Swiss, clean cut,
in suits, sipping
Chardonnay as
leaves go blood
and burnt siena.
She prides
herself on being
free of holes a
tongue or finger
could get stuck
in. Only her
thighs soften,
so long alone,
still creamy as
Havarti, as blue
spreads under wraps
where what ripens
is dying
Lyn Lifshin

Sitting in the Brown Chair with "Let's Pretend" on the Radio

I don't think how the m and m's that soothe only made my fat legs worse. I'm not thinking how my mother will die, of fires that could gulp a mother up, leave me like Bambi. I'm not going over the baby sitter's stories of what they did to young girls in tunnels, of the ovens and gas or have nightmares I'll wake up screaming for one whole year wanting someone to lie near me, hold me as if from then on no one can get close enough. I don't hear my mother and father yelling, my mother howling that if he loved us he'd want to buy a house, not stay in the apartment he doesn't even pay her father rent for but get a place we wouldn't be ashamed to bring friends. What I can drift and dream in is more real. I don't want to leave the world of golden apples and silver geese. To make sure, I close my eyes, make a wish on the first hay load of summer then wait until it disappears
Lance Nizami

Patience

How many days
How many days till rest, till respite
How many days of glowing monitors, computer screens

How many days
For you, no sunny holiday, so little sunlight penetrates indoors
There's artificial light, just bright enough to see the paperwork

And here you are
Your schedule says: you'll work today, tomorrow, every day
"Day-Day," as Chinese symbols say; that's every day

Your brain will strain, and soon too will your eyes
Your ears will value silence
You'll dream of empty winter desert flats,
High Desert flats all cooled by snow

You'll dream of small cafes, small towns,
your steaming cup of Joe
And space
How many days
Robert Dinges, Jr.

Smile

I buried my mother
in a hospital bed
A crank at one end
propped her up
for visitation
and back down again
when we wanted to pretend
she was asleep.
She slowly sank
to become one
with the mattress,
ashes to ashes,
cloth to cloth.
We wait for her lips
to form a word of protest,
anything but that same
shy unwary smile.

Echoes

We speak to each
other through TV's
mutter, a soft
formless base on
which we walk
barefoot, stub toes
on dog's yaps,
avoid sharp claws
from cat's querying
yowls, feel through
a steady noise
while night oozes
from shadows, our
shared pain
in an empty house.
Robert Dinges, Jr.

Mowing Hay

A hay rake’s rusted
tine skeletal
grin in hay-shorn
field. Only a smile
remains, thin stained
teeth, gapped and grim,
fluttered by frail
yellow wings under
a pale blue sky.
Moon rises and mists
shroud, haunt
from horse’s stomp
and nickers, await
someone to tell
the story of a tall
thin man in overalls
to grip reins,
run them again
across this fallow field.
Brooklyn Bennett

That Place

It's a magical place
scary too
that place I go
to think about who
when where and why
the place I try
to forget the you's
the ones before
the ones after
so many beautiful disasters
it's ironic in its dancing grace
to have become such a terrifyingly comfortable place

Mental

It's funny how I think of you
at all the worst of times.
It's funny how I wish you knew
how much you're on my mind.
I really want to tell you
just how I really feel,
but that would mean my walls come down,
my heart would be revealed.
Instead I'll just keep hoping
that somehow you'll read my mind,
that you'll feel that I'm what's missing
and what you need to find.
I'll send out mental messages and hope
they travel through
and settle on your spirit and pull me back to you.
Ryan P. Kinney

Sentry

Sleep, sweet child
I'll watch over you
Even after my eyes have worn out
And I've leaked the last of my plastic pellets

I watched over your father
Even though, for awhile
I was lost to him
Because of the original corruptor

But I came home
And brought back
The last shred of good from his childhood

I'll keep the monsters
Under the bed
And in the closet
I will turn on the light
I will be there
Long after I'm gone
Kyle L. Barron

Birdsong

Immersed in a peaceful, snow-cloaked forest not too far from where Sand Run pours into the Cuyahoga, a young woman sits on a wooden park bench—tufts of light blond hair peek out from the gaps between knit hat and tightly wrapped scarf; her mittened hands scoop seed from a zippered sandwich bag, carefully placing mounds of millet just far enough away so as not to spook a brilliant ruby cardinal flitting from snow-burdened bough to bench and back again—his dusty cinnamon beloved never more than a few hops away.

Outstretched arm held palm-up, a black-capped chickadee alights on an index finger—firm grip of tiny feet barely perceptible—quickly but calmly selecting the choicest sunflower seed to bash open on a nearby branch.

Between feedings, she reads to her appreciatively chirping audience from a leather journal filled with hand-written poetry, a collection of her most beautiful words and sounds—syllables of human birdsong hung in the air on visible breath—offered up as a heartfelt thank you for the songs they have always sung for her.
Robert Cooperman

To a Mountain Lion

To a mountain lion, if it moves and breathes and it's not a bear, it's food: like me that turquoise Colorado day I barely noticed the trailhead warning sign before digging my legs into the uphill slope, blissfully snapping photos along the way for my out-of-town wife: scenes of the alchemical aspens, wind-driven gold.

I'd stashed my second empty water bottle when my bladder drummed like a thumping hare, but I knew, just knew, something big was panting behind me, the direction cougars prefer to attack from.

I wheeled: to shout, wave my arms above my head, fling anything hard and heavy, to hit and kick and bite. Nothing was there. But that sign had finally worked its splinter into my brain.

All the way back I heard something stalking me, its breaths a steel rasp; it stopped when I stopped, kept pace when I walked faster its low growl assuring me,

"You were lucky this time, but I'll be waiting."
Robert Cooperman

Stan Musial, in His Next Life

His body uncoiled and snake-whipped
to make his bat soar the ball into the stands;
for his career, his batting average an astounding
.331, especially impressive these days,
when both leagues eke out maybe ten players
apiece who can scratch out averages over .300.

He entertained teammates on the bus,
on plane rides with his harmonica playing,
guys snapping fingers to the happy tunes
Stan flicked off, nothing mournful like the freights
hobos had to jump in the hard Thirties,
with always the threat of bat-wielding railyard bulls.

In his next life, he played that mouth harp
in combos, or solo when his disposition—
sunny as an August doubleheader afternoon—
let him caress wailful tunes of guys sleeping out
under bridges or by trash-flowing rivers.

It was a life of four, five sets a night: falling
into bed at dawn, long rides to gigs in a jalopy
finicky as a mule that might refuse to pull the plow.
But his lips made love to the harp, people cheering
in the booked bars, nightclubs, or auditoriums,

the first notes squealing with joy or sorrow
into the hearts of anyone within whistling distance.
Prabakar T. Rajan

English Teacher

Graying hair gathered in a bun--
threadbare, ample-bosomed,
dewlapped and bespectacled--
hobbling the hot mile
of dust-rutted, gutter-ribboned streets
to our home each evening,
cracked feet clutching worn flipflops,
talcum powder staunching fluid flesh,
greedy rattle of coffee cup,
grunts between gulps,
moustached satiety.
On bicycled visits to her tiny house,
three bare rooms
and a picture of Jesus (brown
ringlets, sunset eyes,
barbed lamp for heart),
she'd sacrifice her day's ration
of two moldy biscuits for us,
my little cousin and me,
then kneel us down eyes closed
and quaver the lord's prayer in Tamil.
We made faces at her, giggling.

In the evening of life
people do what evenings do--
become invisible long
before they disappear. Weeks passed
before we noticed she wasn't coming--
would now never come
to afternoon tea.

What's left of any of us is phrases:
dusty lanes' flipflopped hobble,
soggy biscuit-crumbled palms,
cracked prayer-burbled lips
and a smell
like all the long afternoons of childhood.
I want to thank you for the beer I stole. Smuggling it still warm up to the open terrace where it lunged at me as I sat with the clay tiles scorching my thighs. The still wall of afternoon dangled its feet. Below, in dim parlors decked in hot snakes of air swirling from ceiling fans, the women sat with folded hands, staring into silences.

We remained strangers almost to the very end, you and I, clutching at each other but coming away with tufts of air. We couldn't even synchronize an embrace. You wanted a real boy, something tough, tousled, grinning. Not girly plump and prickly. And I wanted more of you, much more—in the ordinary doorway of evenings, and in crumbs such as burnt breakfasts, milk-snorted laughter, trouser-splits, anecdotes wearing threadbare.

We had that moment alone before the very end. You cried very simply, being afraid to die, and I held your hand. And I spoke to you of all the years of your fingers gentle with the fear in large eyes. And that soft, serious courtesy you stiffened into with the very old, and the very poor.

After the funeral I went back up to the terrace before leaving. The evening was a parrot, red-green and screeching. I sat thinking of nights of hot milk, and bananas and noses in books. Of how quietly you shook us at dawn.
Prabakar T. Rajan

Of the quivering of your moustache
before the gap-toothed laughter. Of the flowing
narrative of your hands. And I made
peace with you, lifting up an offering
of forgiveness asked
and given. “Cheers,”

I said, and took another swig.

Sheryl L. Nelms

Outside of Taos

the pine-
filled

mountain
valley

disappears

into the whiteness
of early morning

fog
Sheryl L. Nelms

Saved

On 12th Street outside
the Muehlebach Hotel
in downtown Kansas City
a man hunches into the warmth
of a dirty black trench coat
his top knot of hair
flairs out like long white pinfeathers
prickling his head
in the iced March wind
he holds his place on the sidewalk
going the wrong way
upstream against the other pedestrians
we four women break and snake around him

He turns and hollers to our backs
"I know what you're thinking
you're thinking that I made
a pass at you
but I didn't
you know I didn't
that's a sin
and I'm saved!"

The four of us
trade stares
raise our eyebrows
frown

And sprint into the open door of the Muehlebach Hotel bar.
it takes me back to them
every time I sit

and stare at the sunbonnet pattern
and their meticulous stitches
done in white cotton thread
on yellow and black calico material

Iva and Eva Goldenia Carey
my grandmother and her twin

Kansas farm girls
who stitched the spreads
before either one was married
before World War I
when they were
so young

they made two quilts
just alike

one
for each
of their cedar hope chests
Amanda Girard

Rosary

The white bead rests between my two fingers, identical to all the others, save for the red roses after each decade.

I'm supposed to be thinking of Jesus the crown of thorns around his head, piercing his skin until the blood clouded his eyes.

But it's my great-grandmother who keeps coming back, Marie-Anne, who spoke only French, and would lead a rosary circle for the farmhands after dinner.

Her husband went six years before her. She would sit around after that, wondering, "When will Napoleon come and get me?"

I have only one memory of her: we were sitting alone on the front porch, the dirt circle driveway in front of us.

I was playing with my Memere's toys some colorful magnet game; she was knitting in a rocking chair, not saying a word.

Sometimes I like to imagine I am my great-grandmother, as my tongue finishes the "Hail Mary" and my fingers move on. It makes me feel a little more confident about what I hold in my hands.
Dennis Saleh

Hippolyta

The Moon's
one breast
makes an
invisible

Amazon
whose shaft

fires into
another

unsuspecting
universe

undetected
by any in an

ordinary
world of

insensate
beings

who may
never know

the hidden
magic of a

transparent
arrowhead

with its
buried crater
an earthen
bracelet
Blake spotted an angel in a tree
and a firebird dropped a flaming feather
on the path of some poor Irish fool.
There will be trouble if he picks it up;
there will be trouble if he does not.

I once hollered at God from a hilltop
after reading all the scripture I could hold,
"Show me who you are! Please, a sign!"
Well, friends, that was thirty years ago.
I should have been more specific,

And the wrong demand got made. For
I have been naked ever since. And this
life of mine with its misleading signs
purchased at the rag and bone shop:
trouble if I live it, trouble if I do not.
What Do I Do about My Country

While my wife tried on dresses
in a small shop on the warren streets of Chora,
Naxos, the shop girl talked
about her boyfriend, how she wanted to marry,
but it would be a life on army bases,
moving every eighteen months.
And she is an island girl,
her whole life spent on one thousand square
kilometers of mountainous verdure.

I asked how high in rank was he.
*One-point-seventy-five meters*, she said.
Then, after a pause, *What do you do about your
country?* How do I answer that one?
How do I account? I shrugged, attempting
to convey an Old World sense of resigned
bewilderment and fear.
But all she wanted to know is
how tall are American soldiers.
Jean-Mark Sens

Drizzle

doesn't truly fall
its own density floating in the air
when you step out into the street the acacias
stilled into a grey scale of zillions of pixels
particles from an ethereal spray
merely moistening your face, curling your hair,
leaves absorb in a glistening gladness
Ash Wednesday, drizzle a blessing
absolving with freshness yesterday's hangover.

Looking for a House

—alone—takes measure of your steps
streets with innumerable names—till some catch
Louisa, Dryads, Lesseps, Piety, Flora.
Houses, rooms you visit hesitantly—traces of home to find
Constance, St. Peter, Desiree, Irene
names and virtues—under a blue eave you hear swallows
they nest against a beam, a rustle of a little gurgling
like a coffee maker, wings like paper crumpling.
You had a lover once, and to eternity, who could name every tree
close to her at every new branch, inside eye of a trunk
your heart to her knock at the door like on the sound box
of a guitar
amplified, warm and dark, the palm of your hand on her bare
shoulder
your feet crossing the curb—you are looking for a house,
a house alone.
Jean-Mark Sens

**Sculpture's Voice**

for C.W.

A voice behind the fence calling Hello
slat to slat in slits of autumn light
the gone neighbor whose yard has gone boisterously to seed
and weeds
call and answer—we stepped on the ledge of a flower bed wall
and face to face, neighbor to neighbor revealed over the edge.
Five years gone and merely his passage we noticed
yard sporadically cleaned—Cat Claws, Banana trees,
Golden Rods, evasive and invasive Morning Glories
snarling the many sculptures in the yard
found mechanical parts he welded
a cosmogony, iron and stones in balance
a noria of metal plates lipping a granite ledge
a scarecrow with spring feet of shock absorbers
solar panel head with incrusted pebbles
a two-head bird, each beak of a pointed anvil,
bristling wings of fanned out rakes,
tripod claws holding a black opal egg.
For the first time I meet the artist and his creation
a man we felt the absence resonating in his weed-invaded work
his voice slow and low in parler of Creole
short, strong and stocky—vigorous past seventy
a delayed resonance between words and their tenor
a space between his mind and his lips—words weighed out,
thought out
a voice in the three dimensions of his work.
Craig Kurtz

The Problem with Love Poetry

The problem with love poetry is, should your efforts amuse me, you'd be inspired to write more and that's not what husbands are for.

I want a man to work a trade so I can have goods ready-made; a poet never has a dime and that's a drag for a lifetime.

I need a man who wants children and makes a home to raise them in; a poet's always off somewhere obsessed with publishers unfair.

I'd like a man to pleasure me and help with chores occasionally; a poet's up late scribbling and worse, come day, he's sleeping in.

The problem with a love sonnet is, should I say that I like it, you'd write enough to fill a shelf and that's making love to yourself.