

KISSING DYNAMITE: A JOURNAL OF POETRY

ISSUE 11 NOVEMBER 2019: "HOLD ON"

Welcome to Issue 11, in which we're just trying to hang on to our selves, the ones we love, our very sanity.

This month's featured poet is Chi Sherman.

Issue 11 includes work by Chris Blexrud, Michael Chang, Meredith Faulkner, Shannon Frost Greenstein, Kyla Houbolt, James O'Leary, Sarena Pollock, Chi Sherman, Olivia Stowell, Carly Madison Taylor, Katrina Washington, and Salam Wosu. And Robin Gow is featured in "Surreal" to make it a baker's dozen.

Featured Artist

Stuart Buck is a BOTN/BIFFY50 nominated poet and artist living in North Wales. His second book *Become Something Frail* was released to critical acclaim on Selcouth Station Press in 2019. When he is not writing or reading poetry, he likes to cook, juggle and listen to music. He suffers terribly from tsundoku—the art of buying copious amounts of books that he will never read.

Featured Musician

Suchoon Mo lives in the semiarid part of Colorado. His music compositions appear in *Treehouse Arts*, *FishFood Magazine*, *Cerurove*, and *Forge*. He has been composing for many years, but he has no formal music education. Requests for sheet music may be sent to: suchoon@aol.com.

His recent poems appear in *Aji Magazine*, *Jonah Magazine*, *Modern Literature*, *Modern Poets Magazine*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Armarolla*, *Transnational*, *All The Sins*, *Bitterzoet Magazine*, and *Nine Muses Poetry*. He obtained his Ph.D. in psychology from University of Pennsylvania.

"Miami" by Chris Blexrud

Of all the solid unrealities
I indulge

there is a palm
rooted deep
before the door
and the white columns
and the room where
your mother smiled
before she got sick

beyond the Spanish tile
and barred windows
the light pours in
and it stays in

what you whispered
there
a crystal secret
that
fell like hail

And I saw it
before it melted
and only I know
the shape of it

“black gold” by Michael Chang

there you go again
some shocking
rumor about their relationship status
breaking news about teleporting space raccoons
the no-good tinder twins
their banquet nobody ever leaves
sun tzu said
if the enemy leaves a door open, you must rush in
robert greene said
crush your enemy totally
your fingers worker bees
pads pressed against cold keys
eyes scanning with ferocity
processor speeding beyond belief
you steal the president’s husband
you walk into the liquor store nervous
although you’re 30
you do hot pot

spice level suitable for caucasian
crocodile tears & ravenous consumption
etch-a-sketch reality
bug bites & yoyogi park
bad boys & newports
circling like vultures
against god
can they keep up
for maintenance of healthy hair & radiant skin
finally understanding
it is banal after all
here in unit 223
i am happy
skin
as promised
like silken tofu
alexa play center point road by thomas rhett
touch me now
but handle with care

[“A Chiropractor, an Arborist, or Maybe Just a Lumberjack and a Priest” by Meredith Faulkner](#)

I am a tree post-hurricane,
trunk half-straight with misaligned vertebrae,
dreaming of the days I spent scraping the sky,
not trapped in limbo, the mouth to hell.
(Wind flies overhead like a sad memory.)

Even if I grow, my reach
will only go towards low-
flying buzzards, not the open
sky I once called home.
I am Tantalus, a doomed hypotenuse.

I am a tree in forest of corpses
held up by stilts, all Quasimodos
with hot metal braces strapped to their backs
that I could not see until now,
humbled and resigned to peering up skirts.

Now I know what all trees know:

my roots are poisonous.
I was born bound by skin.
I can never straighten myself,
never be right until I lie like a cradle, a coffin.

I am a tree begging for a saw
now that I see that the music I thought
came from me was the wind
and birds using me. Even the clouds
have painted over where I once stood.

I wish I could laugh at this cosmic joke,
But I cannot breathe while my spine is stilled curved,
not until earth shivers when I hit the dirt.
My soul screams for a Chiropractor, an Arborist,
but I am crooked; death is all I know.

I am a tree born buried, living half-dead.
Schrödinger would wrap his theories around me like Christmas.
I could only germinate under six feet of dirt,
and despite the pain of scoliosis
I am not blind to myself anymore—

I see that I can never be straight until I am broken, supine.

[“My Body Is a Coffin for Dead Children, and Other Things: For Kelly” by Shannon Frost Greenstein](#)

We stand outside in the sun;
vapor, smoke.
A break in a day of the churning capitalist machine.
Acquaintances, burgeoning friends, shared burden and symbiotic empathy.
Wednesday.

I do not recall how I know
when in the dialogue insight struck.
When I learned I can not
in fact
empathize
With loss that is foreign to me.

Mothers.
Givers.

Protectors.
Shouldering the yoke of the burden of life
and death.

I.
I am lucky. Lucky twice.
She is unlucky. Eleven times.

To bear a child is an awesome thing.
Not awesome but awe-some,
something which inspires awe;

to grow a child
has nothing to do with glowing.
Omnipresent fear;
certainty in pessimism.
The pressure of sustaining
a stranger whose life
matters more than your own.

Death lingers, unseen, with every twinge and ache.
A promise of loss and grief camouflaged
by love, and growth, and society's demand
that blessings rain on the mother.

I.
I am lucky. Lucky twice.
She is unlucky. Eleven times.

I try to think.
Sympathize, not empathize.
impossible to do
impossible to imagine
impossible to endure.
I do not understand, can not understand.

We smoke, the sun shines,
the phenomenological lived experience of a Wednesday.

Light. Bubbles. Strength.
Not awesome, but awe-some
something which inspires awe.

I feel like my body is a coffin for dead children.

Eureka. Insight. Understanding. Empathy.

A flash of emotion
that I, the poet, did not divine
this beautiful
haunting
visceral
sentence born from mourning, grown from decades of hurt, watered by tears.

A seed
falls from the sentence;
takes root.
Poems emerge and friendships evolve and I am struck
suddenly
by how quickly it can all
go wrong
and
how life isn't fair.

I.
I am lucky. Lucky twice.
She is unlucky. Eleven times.

For Kelly, whose body is so many other things.
For Kelly, who is stronger than anyone knows.
For Kelly, who bears this Sisyphean cargo
through the capitalist machinations
of the day to day.
For Kelly, whose body tells a story.
For Kelly, whose story is awesome.

Not awesome but awe-some,
something which inspires awe.

My body is a coffin for dead children

And suddenly
I get it
I can never get it
and her grief
for a moment
becomes my own.

Down to the filter
and I return
to the machine
with gratitude
that I have been granted the privilege
to lean in
to sit with
to share
to be sad together
because it's better than being sad alone.

For Kelly. Who is awesome.
Awesome and awe-some,
something which inspires awe.

["Not Yet -- A Whimsical Meditation on Death" by Kyla Houbolt](#)

and here I am
saying thank you to Tuesday
praising its shapely dailiness,
and admiring the doors, telling them hello
and goodbye and you've been
just lovely, so open and shut
and then how beautiful is this walking --
oh we must tell it so, how variously
stumbling and graceful, how tripping,
how halting, how purposed foot by foot
by foot, and oh the toes. Ah! Have you ever
thought of anything so marvelous, and
the fact that most of us have ten of them!
This, this is the splendor I mean
when I say we cannot burn it down
not yet, we have not huddled
joyous in tents, not
sung all the songs
we have not been homeless
in all possible towns
we have not cried enough
over the beached and parched
we have not lain down
under all the stars
and we have
not yet kissed,
you and I.

(Thanks to Jordan Davis for the phrase “a whimsical meditation on death”, used with his permission)

“Fever Sestina” by James O’Leary

you tell me i am sick / wicker skin pale as firefly light
you tell me i am sick / boy-witch in ignorance tied to death-bliss
watch me wave alone to shadows made of smoke
alone on apple choke & self / too a kind of fire
flesh & memory / orange edge of what burns bright
tell me pain is paradise / not napalm pain / am i not sick

try again / naked & normalized / i am not sick
too long have i held each blue vein up to lamplight
as if to see inside of anxiety a working bright
as if to see inside of loathing gender / gentle bliss
binary taken made anew / oxygen’s gift of fire
i want fuel to bathe in that uncertain smoke

between / what’s hidden / all ripple steam & smoke
don’t pile wood on blackened wood / *please i’m not sick*
amnesia of childhood a kind of self-effigy / blank fire
memory / unaware of light except by lack of light
tell me bellows: have you ever honestly granted bliss
o silver lining / a lie can make even darkness bright

do not name me invention / don’t call me bright
a complex fuel makes for indecipherable smoke
signals / a flame for a boy / or lack of bliss
my bellows tried to hear / but to say i am sick
oversimplifies nonbinary dichotomy of james / aka light
trying to hide & flicker away from their own fire

inside & heat rises / regardless the heaviness of fire
whose desire to take to ash all previously bright
can be doused by even a flicker / shadows flee from light
like magic / a candle son’s uses of eye-smoke
& blue burns brightest at the tip of red / red as cells sick
with bliss / with bliss / risen hundred-degree cinders of bliss

but is not death a scorching side-effect of that bliss
crumbled to cremation / final heat for final fire
what kills me is this: the doctor’s diagnosis of sick

try again / notre dame's miracle flames made bright
history tells me what to do / not breathe in that grey smoke
or hold to strength away from dancing lights

but i am sick / of those who wish to extinguish this bright bliss
scared smothered by sweltering cold shrouds of dark smoke
i refuse / to freeze in fear of future burn / in wind / i light my fragile fire

“familial burdens” by Sarena Pollock

My grandmother tells me the story of her father’s abandonment at every holiday dinner, every time we drive past the birthplace of her legacy. *There, that’s the house I grew up in, the one on the hill*, and I expect her to scream, or cry, or laugh, but she says nothing. She lets the silence fill the story in for her. I dismiss my father’s call for the third time this week, and every time I do, she reminds me *At least your father calls at all*. Fatherhood is an illness my family refuses to treat, the missing link in our bloodline that no one seems to notice. I watch my grandmother through the kitchen door read the letters addressed to me from my father, and part of me wants to scream, but the other part lets her continue, because maybe she likes to imagine his letters as the ones she never received from her own. The other day she told me her father finally died at 95. I asked if she went to the funeral, but she just laughed and said *He’s been dead to me for 63 years*. I don’t ask why she never sent the letters she’s rewritten to him over the years. Sometimes it’s easier to imagine having a dead father than one who left.

“we massive” by Chi Sherman, November’s Featured Poet

we massive
we so massive
that when you shout *were you there*
we say we aren’t sure
but we must have been
we must have worn black wings
and feathered hats
and swooped over fields
looking for our next meal

we so grand
reverence is routine

our tongues don't fit behind our teeth
and when we laugh
candy falls from our forests of hair
we so bewitching
that friends who knew us in the shallow end
also know that jump ropes and silence
are the best gifts of all

we so massive we pillow the clouds
and indulge the idiosyncrasies of soil
we survey what we will consume
in our quest for reign and thunder
we strike the ground with armored fists
reveling in ripples that uproot maidenhair

we so diffuse that isolation has a houseguest
our language lives in roots and leaves
our history formed the mountains from hills
we graze on brush and sap
collect lightning bolts in a quiver
and roar farewell to kingdoms in denial
about our requisite departure

we so massive
our voices rattle the morning cage
dawn crests the horizon
and asks where we've been
in and around
through and in between
but never so far away
that we couldn't pull you close
and remind you
with fingerprints and heat
when this adventure began

Chi's Commentary on "we massive":

One of my favorite things about "we massive" is that I wrote the first draft in bed. I woke up one morning and had the words "we massive" in my head. I'm not sure if it was from a dream or just a random inspirational spark, but in about 10 minutes, tapping away on my phone, I had a pretty solid first draft. It actually stayed a first draft for a long time. I'd futz around with it every once in a while, but it wasn't until I saw KD's call for submissions that WM assumed its final form. Much of the first draft remains, but I was also able to see where a stanza should come out and where lines could be stronger. In a sense, it's been a very magical poem... the

when did you feel a becoming
what in living are you keeping

i came to poetry
in many small
unspoken explosions
i do and do not want
to name

and this is the way i
keep meaning collect and
continue.

“Tonight I shave precise like my mother to protect my body from harm” by Carly Madison Taylor

Shaving my legs I am thinking about
shaving my legs: I quit on my armpits a couple
of weeks ago because the hot girl bartender
doesn't shave them either, my long time
wonder become desire to become.
That hair is downy soft, darker copper
than my head's. I use a men's razor.
Wear men's deodorant. My vulva has worn
mustaches more elaborate than Groucho Marx.

Shaving my legs I am thinking about
my mother shaving her legs. My mother
shaving her legs. We were bath time mermaids
we were caring for our bodies, she said
I should know what my body looks like
because if I know it, I can protect it from harm.
As though if I know it, I can protect it from harm.

My mother's knees and ankles are small
cathedrals of tendon and bone. Her tan
rose windowed by freckles. Her body the body
for which I prayed and prayed.

She shaves her legs precise. I don't.
Except tonight, when I haven't shaved my armpits
and I'm waiting on my vulva till the night before
my lover gets home, the scratch and itch

of after sex on newly bare skin worth the flicks
of tongue and rush of purposeful
invitation. Tonight I shave my legs
like a wire walker. I know I have thought myself
into this worship of one kind of beauty
with its limits and its bias and its rules.
I know I am choosing my own subjugation.

The scars and stretch marks and the right big toe
with its trapezoid nail: my rooster claw. Two
birthmarks on one thigh. I decorate this house
around its architecture and sometimes I shave
precise like my mother. I once watched her
cut her Achilles, bleeding wet tie-dye.
She told me it's an easy place to slice
an easy mistake. She bared her teeth. I perched
on the edge of the tub by the faucet, legs splayed,
the water too hot for my little frog body.

I now soak as hot, as long as I can stand. I taught
myself to shave the folds of my genitals bare
and never once made myself bleed, but my ankles
are iced roads, earthquakes, tie-dyed.

[“Instructions for My Funeral Too” by Katrina Washington](#)

When I die
wash but don't press
my hair

Dress me in Ankara
and pretend that
you know and
I knew
where I came from

I don't need a preacher
A choir
Or flowers
following me to death

Sing Maya and Toni
Olivia Pope and Rosa
Beyonce and SZA

Assata had a song
didn't she?

Don't put me in soil
on land I don't own
but don't
take me home either
You'll have to burn me

But don't use no fire
not baptized
by my children
They'll know
what that means

This earth owes me
but our reunion
won't be memorialized
It won't come easy
It will not be
where my grandchildren
can find me

Don't cry
because I died
I cried a lot
when I was living
Let my ashes
do the mourning

Concoct a Backwood
large enough to
pearl me and
then light me again
Let it die out
over and over
again
'til I'm gone

Let some future
girl of the south side
write my eulogy
never having been told

anything about me.

It should be inappropriate.
Our secrets.
My search history.
All the pictures I ever sent.
Expose me.

Or don't. But find a way
to do away
with all the duality
I never escaped.

For the first time
introduce me
exactly as I am
and then
forget me

“Elegy for the Need to Sway” by Salam Wosu

because whatever saves us now will kill us later
because water, poetry, love
because there is much talk of tomorrow, today is crying on yesterday's shoulders
because abortion, war, climate change
because I am idle I die in song
because life is worth a living I can't afford it
because how else does a body survive water before rescue / swim or sway?

I only listen to songs that sound like water / Fonsi sings in a
rhythm that swims around / I feel like prey / like poetry / finding myself by
getting lost in a strange language
because the bedroom is too small for my dreams / quietly I sculpt
a castle out of air
because I need saving / because I will need a place to die in someday

because I watch a woman give birth & I know that death is better than dying
& I can't help but think how love is sado-masochist
Love is something to do before the war starts
Love brings the war / the fire / & everyone wants
to die for love rather than live / rather than sway

& I have no experience in death nor have I a boat to sway through life
because I have no God / or rather no prayer / or maybe because I rather sway than pray

because whatever saves me now will kill me later
How does a body survive a song that never ends?
Sway.

“Surreal”

From EIC Christine Taylor: **Robin Gow** takes us through the warped space where algorithms possibly meet the supernatural. Could these suggestive ads be just what we need? Their poem "the robots who suggest Facebook ads are just ghosts" explores the surreal.

[“the robots who suggest Facebook ads are just ghosts” by Robin Gow](#)

a friend's mouth is moving but the room is so loud
it's like there's no words coming out. i miss
my bed room & i missing having a window. Facebook suggests
i buy a window & i know yes that's what i want
i want it right now. Facebook suggests yes i should buy
a very small night light just like the one i had
when i was six or seven years old—the one in the shape
of saint mary glowing blue & mom plugging in
the night light & saying that i won't have to be
scared anymore. we don't have to be scared anymore.
my smart phone knows who i am & this proves to me
that maybe i am knowable. that maybe there are
formulas floating around under my skin. or yes
the truth is i've always thought that maybe
there's a sea of ghosts working long hours
to pick the right ads that i want to see. i get one
about discount hotels in new jersey. i want to leave
this city i want to lay on the ocean. no i want
to go farther. i get an ad for the rocket to mars
& i scroll past. yes, they know me too well.
no i can't go that far. i want small actionable items.
a rainbow tooth brush. a trans flag.
yes, my phone sees me. face recognition. this isn't
a poem about disconnection. the room is loud
i told you & there are items to make me feel
more tangible. an electric tooth brush.
a pair of soft pajamas. download a new design program.
i want to design a new skeleton. the ghosts
are passing me notes. they're saying
we know you need this & i do need all of this.
not just the items, but the attention. the ghosts

endlessly working to find what i need. in the room
we're all sitting with our ghosts & the haunting
is thick in the air. i speak a word aloud
& it turns into a screen. a brilliant lovely screen.
i text the person across from me that i love them.
she loves up & smiles, puts her foot on top
of mine underneath the table. the ads tell me to buy
her something beautiful. the ghosts perch like
eagles on our heads. my mouth is full of light
so i don't open it & the room thrums until we leave
& step out onto the open street where silence rushes
long & black as the asphalt.

Robin's Commentary on "the robots who suggest Facebook ads are just ghosts":

The seed for the poem came from an evening where me and my friends were at a bar and all the things we were talking about kept coming up in Facebook ads. They felt so personalized I imagined a person specially assigned to me to be able to know that I might want these items. I was thinking about how much our desires are informed by our pasts, specifically our childhoods. I definitely think ads are kind of creepy but just as an experiment I wanted to consider an explanation other than algorithms or artificial intelligence. Often my poems turn towards the surreal and the supernatural to explore reality. Then again, maybe there are ghosts enlisted to choose my ads on Facebook.

Poet Biographies

Chris Blexrud is an editor and writer living in New Orleans. He has a spiritual connection with his French press.

Michael Chang (they/them) hopes to win the New Jersey Blueberry Princess pageant one day. Michael strongly suspects that they were born in the wrong decade. A recovering vegan, their favorite ice cream flavor was almost renamed due to scandal.

Meredith Faulkner lives in North Carolina with her husband and cat. Her work has appeared in *tenderness lit*, *MICRO // MACRO*, and *Nightingale and Sparrow*. She tweets @faulknerwrites1.

Shannon Frost Greenstein resides in Philadelphia with her children, soulmate, and persnickety cats. She is a former Ph.D. candidate in Continental Nietzschean Philosophy, a two-time 2019 Best of the Net Nominee, and a 2018 Pushcart Prize Nominee. Shannon was also awarded a writing residency through Sundress Academy for the Arts in October 2019. Her work has appeared in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Crab Fat Magazine*, *Chaleur Magazine*, *Bone & Ink Lit Zine*, the *Philadelphia City Paper*, and elsewhere. Follow her on Twitter at @mrsgrgreenstein or her website: shannonfrostgreenstein.wordpress.com. She comes up when you Google her.

Robin Gow (they/them) is the author of the chapbook HONEYSUCKLE by Finishing Line Press. Their poetry has recently been published in *POETRY*, *New Delta Review*, and *Roanoke Review*. Robin is the Editor-at-Large for *Village of Crickets* and Social Media Coordinator for *Oyster River Pages*. Their first full-length poetry collection is forth-coming with Tolsun Books.

Kyla Houbolt writes, mostly poetry, though she is old enough to know better. She is a 2019 Best of the Net nominee. Some of her work can be found in *Mojave He[art] Journal*, *Burning House/The Arsonista*, *Neologism Poetry*, and elsewhere. Most of her work is linked in her Linktree, here: [@luaz_poet | Linktree](#) and you can find her on Twitter @luaz_poet.

James O'Leary (they/them) is a nonbinary poet and writer from Scottsdale, Arizona. After having lived in the deserts and forests of their home state, James has now traveled across the US to pursue an MFA at Sarah Lawrence College, where they are a poetry reader and blog contributor at *Lumina*. When James isn't writing or reading, they're probably playing music, learning to cook, or watching birds from a windowsill. You can find James's most recent works at *Blacklist* and *Mistake House*; or, follow them on Twitter @thesundaypoet.

Sarena Pollock (she/her/hers) is a poet and artist from Pottstown, Pennsylvania. She is an upcoming graduate of Susquehanna University studying Creative Writing, where she is an Intern for Santa Fe Writers Project and President of SU Slam Poetry Club. You can find her work in the latest issues of *Honey & Lime* and *Metamorphosis - Paragon Press*.

Personal Website: <https://sarenapollock.wixsite.com/papertalk>

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Chi Sherman is an Indianapolis-based writer whose preferred mediums are poetry and creative nonfiction. She has produced four chapbooks of writing, a solo spoken-word CD, and a poetry CD with her father. Her work has appeared in *HuffPo*, *The Body Is Not An Apology*, *Brave Voices*, *Tenderness Lit*, and quite sporadically on her blog, Chi Rising (<http://chirising.blogspot.com>).

Olivia Stowell (she/her) is a graduate student at Villanova University pursuing her MA in English. Her recent poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Ghost City Review*, *The Albion Review*, *Sweet Tree Review*, *THAT Literary Review*, *3Elements Review*, and *Madcap Review*. Find her on Twitter @dogsandguac, or on her website oliviastowell.weebly.com.

Carly Madison Taylor (she/hers) is a poet, songwriter, and essayist living in Buffalo, NY. She earned her BA in Creative Writing and Dance Studies from Knox College in 2016. More of her work can be found at or is forthcoming from *Rhythm & Bones Lit*, *PVSSY MAGIC*, *Electric Moon Literature*, *Memoir Mixtapes*, *Blanket Sea Magazine*, and *Vamp Cat Magazine*.

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Katrina Washington (she/her) is a poet and prose writer from the south side of Chicago. She holds a BA in English with a concentration in Poetry as well as Masters in Higher Education and Organizational Leadership. She is currently pursuing a PhD in English with concentrations in Poetry, Prose, and Black Studies. Outside of teaching and writing, Katrina enjoys cooking with her husband and son. *Kissing Dynamite* is now the home of Katrina's first piece of published work since childhood.

Instagram Handle: @wife.mom.write

Salam Wosu (he/him), a poet and aspiring novelist, is a Chemical Engineering student from Nigeria. His works interrogate grief, depression, love, anti-chauvinism and sexuality. He was shortlisted for the Korean Nigerian Poetry Fiesta Award 2017 & 2019. His works are in or forthcoming in *Glass Poetry Press*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *Dream Noir*, *PIN*, *RIC Journal* and *Mounting the Moon* (anthology of queer Nigerian poems). He is @salam_wosu on Twitter, Instagram.

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