

# THE HUTCHLIT REVIEW



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# THE HITCHLIT REVIEW



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“Human decency is not derived from religion.  
It precedes it.”

-- Christopher Hitchens

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# Poetry

# The Future

Toti O'Brien

Beyond the door there's a wall  
but another door, smaller  
than the first one just as needed  
for their frames to nestle, their  
hinges properly turn—Another  
door opens onto another wall  
where another door, smaller—So  
you think, this is going nowhere.  
On my side I nurture a sliver of  
hope. Inch by inch, wall by wall  
we are moving forward, though  
the size of the passage is  
squeezing. Soon we'll burrow  
like moles, creep like snakes.

Motherless takes more than a  
generation, starts off from a grave  
and is carried by females only. Pray  
you say, you won't have a daughter.  
Pray for a son. I kneel, my mouth  
buried in damp, brown dirt. Argyle  
gneiss, sulfur fill my nostrils.  
I breathe the darkness of lava. With  
my eyes tightly shut I am looking  
for something, maybe a minuscule  
rock streaked in blue, reflecting  
the ocean, maybe a fossilized manna  
crumb spilled by distant skies, or  
a root shaped like a tiny fetus  
maybe a milk tooth, a seed.

# Traces

Toti O'Brien

Branches of aspen trees prod  
the sky like capillaries  
trying to reach the extremity  
of a fingertip.

Evanescent skin, contour lost  
in a forlorn scatter of molecules.  
Contact failed between distracted  
Adam and absent god.

Under a dome too high  
for dreams to reach the ceiling  
a painter falls asleep, brush in hand  
exhausted by empyreal indifference.

# Sisyphus

Toti O'Brien

Wrapped within a shroud of white veils, the girl  
(was it a boy) sang an aria. Wait, he (was it a she)  
the small bird, the lark didn't sing songs but an Ave Maria  
in Latin, as pure as the shattering of crystal goblets  
invested by a whirlpool of wind. Sang an Ave Maria  
so sheer we wanted to cry. But we couldn't.

At the top of the Ziggurat, the priest shook a thurible  
full of incense that smelled like ganja and dark coffee.  
A strange scent, terrestrial, profane. Yet another tang  
rose from grounds soaked by unstoppable rain. And  
our clothes, drenched, adhering to our skin, also reeked.

But we only paid heed to our step, unsure, undecided  
as we backed up on steep stairs of stone  
leading to the stage where the ritual occurred  
our ankles in chains, our feet anxious to find  
the next landing, afraid we would fall face forwards  
over slippery rock, fall down to the bottom, again.

# White (For Bobby Fuller, Summer 1966)

Kathryn de Leon

*Bobby Fuller was a popular American rock singer, song writer, and guitarist best known for "[Let Her Dance](#)" and "[I Fought the Law](#)", recorded with his group [The Bobby Fuller Four](#). In July 1966 he was found dead in his car at age twenty three. His death was never fully explained; there has been speculation that he was murdered.*

The newspaper article  
said you were found dead in your car,  
twenty three years old, no explanation.  
Defying your own death,  
you were smiling in the picture.

I knew your black and white face  
from TV and magazines.  
I knew your songs.

Death is for old people,  
a slow, white thing, I thought.  
Death is the pallor of used up skin,  
of palsied hands, thin hair,  
tired shoulders gone white with stooping,  
the white of dust and clouds  
moving toward heaven.

Mostly, I thought,  
death is the final white of angels' bright light  
gentling down like silk handkerchiefs  
over ruined bodies,  
bringing comforting sleep.  
You died at night, alone, in blackness.  
Twenty-three years old.

I was nine.

I didn't cry for you. I didn't mourn.

I carry your death like a birthmark.

That haunted summer  
taught me more about life  
than any other summer.

# Wind

Kathryn de Leon

*From the 105<sup>th</sup> floor of the burning south tower of the World Trade Center, Kevin Cosgrove, one of the thousands of people in the complex when two airplanes struck the towers on 11 September 2001, called emergency services 911. His words were recorded: "Please hurry...it's really bad. It's black. It's arid...Tell God to blow the wind from the east.....We're not ready to die!"*

You were in the sky that morning.  
Heaven was missing,  
masked by buckling ceilings  
and the endless black of smoke.  
There is no black in heaven.

The world could not see  
your eyes, your lungs, your hearts,  
all warm and ripe with life,  
your terrified bodies moving  
within the burning towers  
like blood pumping through dying veins  
unseen.

Smoke flowed into the blue sky  
as black and slow as the hair  
on a drowning head  
sad with dying,  
smoke rich with your voices  
rushing out to the people who loved you,  
so much love out of reach.

You filled the tower windows  
with white movement,  
desperate shirts and hankies  
flapping like wings too small and frightened  
to lift you away.

God blew no wind to you that morning.

# Magic

Kathryn de Leon

I have magic in my dreams.

I open and close doors from across the room,  
turn book pages, float pens  
to my waiting hand on invisible threads  
I send out from my eyes  
like a spider's sticky silk.

I am a humble star  
with papers, combs, coins, teaspoons,  
all the tiresome debris of my life  
swirling as faithful as planets around me.

I wake up believing I can do it.  
*I have magic.*  
But the day kicks in,  
the world dulls,  
a slow, heavy world where hands not eyes  
must open doors,  
where arms reach, lift, carry.

But some windy nights  
when the pink-green flowered curtains  
are drawn tight,  
pressed like resting wings  
against the closed living room windows,  
I see the curtains gently billowing,  
a barely perceptible breathing.  
Surely the winds have somehow  
found their way in  
through the closed windows.

I can't help wondering,  
is it me moving the curtains  
with my invisible threads?  
Is magic no longer only  
a dream?

# Manzanita

Kenneth Johnson

A bird sits alone on a branch  
in the garden as we talk about  
nature and lost souls. If there  
is such a thing. The bird sings  
to no one. Does it have a soul?  
We could push everything aside  
to reveal light breaking through  
the trees. We could reveal secrets  
if we knew what we believed.  
Could we strip naked and reveal  
our betrayals? There is a stream  
that flows through this valley  
in spring. The water gives shape  
to our formless selves. It carries  
us as we make our way across  
the hills and through the skies.  
It sustains us and the land as we  
fashion myths from nothingness,  
as we nurture carefully crafted  
prophecies. We are surrounded  
by forests of small broadleaf trees  
bearing fruit, not all of it edible.  
The manzanita's leaves are perfect  
ovals and thick to absorb moisture.  
Its alluring red flowers and berries  
bloom each spring and are edible.  
They will save us if we fall.

# Down

## Holly Day

You have to get down on your knees to scrub a floor. There's no other way to do it.

You have to get down on your knees and put your back into it, like some kind of supplicant

like a penitent crawling towards the altar of a vicious deity that demands

you prostrate yourself in front of him or her, you've got to crawl and crawl

to get that floor clean.

Perhaps this is why some women insist that their children learn to clean a kitchen floor properly

as soon as they are able, to pass on the humiliation of working on one's knees

or why maids make such a big show of crawling around on their hands and knees

to generously impart a feeling of power to the woman or man who hired them

who might otherwise feel trampled and pushed to the ground themselves every other day.

My husband once told me that the only way to really clean a floor was to get down on my hands and knees and scrub it, only to be dismayed to find

I clean a floor with a mop, and if I have to scrub, it's by pushing a rag around with my foot.

"It works better if you get on your hands and knees," he says.

"Show me," I answer back, but he never does.

Tender  
Kayla Cowart

Nothing is tender

Calloused, rough  
Burn scars and broken knuckles  
Pressed firmly against every curve  
Bruising and scratching me

Course, thick, spiked  
Smelling of burnt wires and rotten flesh  
Weaves through my fingers like grass  
Then tangles around everything it touches

Lean, hard, tinged grey  
Carries the weight of years of running,  
Fighting wars, real and imaginary  
And now pin me to every surface imaginable

Hands around my neck  
And I can finally breathe

Bleeding bite marks  
And I feel alive again

You fill me up  
Make me whole

Harsh words spat  
Because I've messed up again  
You can't protect me from myself

“Are you fucking stupid?!”

“I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“You can’t do shit like that!”

“Ask me for help next time.”

You slide into bed

Next to me, it’s 3 a.m.

“I know, I’m sorry. Go back to sleep.”

An explosion outside

I jump out of my skin

From the yard, I hear

“It’s okay! I’ve got it.”

In my favorite person’s voice

Nothing is tender

Everything is soft

# Gneiss

Mary Christine Delea

Stones whisper my name, a hard hiss on an Irish hill.  
I pick up one shaped like a potato, its eyes shamed by  
language, starvation, oppression. The stone was sliced  
in half at some point, like an island country cut north  
and south. Suddenly stones everywhere:

burned monuments, round fossils filled with stories of  
warrior women and fairy queens, a long-ago religion  
that often makes more sense than the one that took its  
place. I pick up smaller pebbles—they all seem past  
tense. The present exists in another

time, a different country filled with a wilderness of  
disappointments, across an ocean to a place that could be  
better, cities flat and watery, farmlands near oceans.  
To leave with only a family Bible and memorized  
recipes for farls and blaa and a cup of tea,

to gather over there, massing together in poverty.  
The lilt of the language—a barrier or worse. Pitted  
against others in similar circumstances. All of the  
voices rising, stones from every foreign place,  
each one a story, a past filled with stones.

Loving the Middle of a Flower is not the  
Same as Loving Its Scent

Mary Christine Delea

beauty can bewilder  
tapping the ground  
rain will greet them  
is a mistake they will die of

like birds worm charming  
to fool worms into thinking  
aboveground but all they find

the glamour of pistil  
stigma, style, ovary

pulls the eye in to  
all the sticky female parts

ovary becomes fruit

graceful tubes swooning  
by petals

tiny goddesses surrounded  
protection

the aroma can stun  
too much  
the air pungent

a battery of fragrances almost  
attraction  
as if palatable with hormones

this messy insistence  
to garden

passed down from garden  
lover to lover

thinking the other flawless  
enchanted by beauty  
sooooooooooooo deep

feeding on a false perfection  
that seems internal

but is just another stamen  
intoxicates, bewitches

pretending the perfume  
anther answering filament

noseless head

Sunday Morning, 2020

Joan Mazza

Surrounded by woods, I hear only titmice  
and Carolina wrens, crow chatter, the hum  
of one mower several acres distant.

In the news, red MAGA hats and applause  
when this goon calls for fewer Covid tests  
and praises more police in Tulsa.

We've had good rain and sun. I see many  
shades of green from every window, juvenile  
crows as big as parents still begging to be fed.

That old song is on repeat on the radio:  
*The government lies. You can't know  
anything. It's classified.* We'd be horrified,

would become revolutionaries if we knew  
one smidgen of the evidence of corruption,  
the wasted billions of what we've paid.

Still the oak leaf hydrangea and lilies bloom,  
while I ponder how my racist thoughts grew,  
fed to me on a Brooklyn street where my best

childhood friends were Jewish, said *schvartze*,  
not the N-word, engraved my psyche along with  
the Hail Mary and The Act of Contrition, guilt

for having a body with its urges. Five  
thousand books in this house and not one  
by Baldwin. Didn't I own one? I didn't finish

reading those by Morrison, Angelou, or Danticat,  
as if their themes of being shunned and shamed  
had nothing to do with Italian-Americans like me,

once considered black. I could become a better  
person. I could make the effort, if that isn't  
one more way to beat myself up for not being

good enough. This time the shouting's louder.  
Black lives matter! *Must* matter for anyone  
to be free and equal. This is the time for me

to shut up and listen, contemplate my unearned  
privilege and wealth. So much of life is luck.  
Like others, I can't stop saying *fuck*.

# American Flag

Joan Mazza

on the side of a barn. No, an illusion  
that makes you think of the flag—  
weathered red boards, a window  
with a grating that look like stars  
on a blue background, not fabric

fluttering on a pole, unraveling  
in today's strong winds. My home's  
former owner left the flag on a pole  
at the entrance to my driveway.  
I unhooked it, folded it, gave it

to a more liberal friend to use for his  
Halloween costume. Ashamed of being  
American, had no respect for Bush II  
or his administration, waited for my  
beloved country to find its way

back to sanity and kindness. How brief  
the reprieve. What keeps you up?  
Crying children yanked from parents?  
No one to change their diapers or offer  
comfort? The moldy food in prisons?

Biting rats and the icy chill that goes  
through the homeless populations  
within view of the one percent? Your  
debts and a hunger you can't satisfy?  
Do you mourn for the loss of checks

and balances? Will we see a saner Senate?  
Will we recalibrate truth and the scales  
of justice? A novel Coronavirus has landed.  
The time on the Doomsday Clock changed  
to 100 seconds before midnight.

# Monasticism for Beginners

Joan Mazza

My pandemic life has become a time of self-isolation, where every book I read is a holy book to absorb slowly in quiet contemplation. I let paragraphs sink in

and read again, pencil notes in the margins, to elaborate in pen in my notebook, and let my thoughts roll out on the page as they come. I don't censor. To see what rises—

question or insight between my daily chores of cat care and washing out their water bowls. Sourdough with cocoa and caraway seeds ferments in a Pyrex bowl. Deer come to savor

fresh grass between the gardener's mowings. We do not speak. I eat one meal a day, argue with my past incarnations, not prone to play computer games or pray. The cats'

meows are church bells to signal my next task. Not bored or idle, I'm waiting for a breakthrough of illumination, something a reader would call wise or sage, words I'll write and type on this white page.

Fiction

## Pasture Statues

Alfredo Salvatore Arcilesi

Millie mooded.

Cate mooded with her.

The cow stared at them.

Millie giggled at the old joke, a pure, authentic song.

Cate giggled with her, exaggerated, trembling notes.

The cow stared at them.

Millie continued to pet the cow's cheek. Cate stroked the other, looking for signs of impatience in the otherwise stoic animal, searching its blank yet somehow knowing eyes for knowledge of her charade. What made her want to release the scream that had been lodged in her throat for inconceivable minutes was how Millie, sitting comfortably in her numb arms, was so far away from screaming; Millie, who had every justification for adding her shrill voice to the one behind them.

She hadn't asked Millie if she was all right; doing so would have given her the impression something was wrong. She hadn't asked Millie her actual name; as far as the little girl's amiable behavior indicated, they had known each other all their lives, and names didn't matter. She hadn't asked Millie her age; from the moment she took the little girl into her arms, she could tell the small human being was no older than her career.

*Three-years-old*, Cate mused again, as she transferred Millie from one desensitized arm to the other, careful not to break contact with the cow. *Three years*, and once again she imagined the retirement banner, growing longer and larger as the idea cooked in her mind, advertising the pitiful number.

Cate was grateful for the brown-and-white animal's presence. Moreover, she was grateful that the cow was the first thing Millie had noticed. She wouldn't have thought to mosey on over to the cow; instinct—training—would have told her to immediately transport the disheveled little girl to her car; and there they would have waited for the next routine steps. *And then she would've known something was wrong*, she thought. *And then she would've started screaming*.

A scream perforated the ambience, a cocktail of pain, fear... and perhaps a note of anger.

“Mooooo!” Cate issued her loudest impersonation yet. Millie echoed her sentiments, prolonging and exaggerating the bovine language until it devolved into more giggling.

Another scream smothered the laughter, and, for a terrible moment, Cate thought she felt Millie stiffen; thought she saw registration on the little girl's suddenly sagging face.

“Moo mooooo moo moo moo mooooo moo,” Cate interjected, the single word spoken in the rhythm of conversation. She fixed upon Millie's eyes, hoping the little girl would take the bait, ready to shift her little body should she decide to go peeking behind her back, toward the scream.

Millie's bowed lips glistened, saliva pooling as she gathered her thoughts about the conflicting sounds. Cate readied her own lips with another string of nonsensical cow-speak, when Millie broke out of her trance, and fired off a meaningless statement of her own: “Mooooo mooooo mooooo”—laughter—“mooooo moo moo moo.”

Relieved, Cate kept the dialogue flowing for as long and as loud as was necessary to beat the intermittent screaming from Millie's ears. As their banter rose and fell with the outbursts behind them, she imagined how the others must have seen them: vulnerable backs; a revolving red light highlighting Millie's arms wrapped comfortably—*Or is she in shock?* Cate couldn't decide—around her neck; mooing from unseen lips; the cow itself unseen, blocked by their combined bodies. How unreal it must have appeared to them.

How grotesquely real it was to her.

How beautifully real it was to Millie.

A terrible thought returned Cate to their cozy huddle: *This is your first time, isn't it?* The scream she struggled to keep deep down in her gorge threatened to erupt. It occurred to her that *this* cow—not the pair grazing further down the fence, dangerously close to the break; not the calf flanked by several adults; not the others standing nonchalantly, laying nonchalantly, living nonchalantly; not the countless others that might have been a blur in Millie's passenger

window—but *this* cow might very well have been the *very first* cow Millie had ever seen.

Cate mooded and wondered if Millie could detect the underlying melancholy. *You don't need to meet a cow*, she desperately wanted to assure the little girl. *Not now. Not like this.* She was certain that when Millie was one day no longer a size fit for one's arms—*There's no guarantee of that*, Cate sadly reminded herself—she might learn to hate the cow. *All cows.* The way Cate hated them for what they had done to Millie. To her.

To Millie's mother.

The human sounds behind them were less frequent now, quieter, the pain, the fear, the anger—if ever there was—giving themselves to realization. Cate hoped Millie's mother would soon forget how to scream; hoped her mother forgot her daughter's name. This line of thinking was drenched in selfishness, but Cate had accepted it... for now; may guilt torment her later. It was just that she and, more importantly, the cow had worked so damned hard to keep Millie occupied.

*Or are we keeping the cow occupied?* Cate thought for the first time.

She looked into the animal's eyes, glossy black islands surrounded by thin halos of bloodshot white. Pulses of red light, rotating like an angry lighthouse—an eye of its own—searched those eyes, much as Cate was doing now, for knowledge.

*Do you see the red light?* she mentally transmitted to the cow. *Do you understand it? Did you see what happened before the red light? Do you understand what happened?*

The cow stared.

*Do you understand that this little girl I'm holding, the one mooing at you, the one petting your face... do you understand that her mother is the one who killed your calf?*

Based on its indifference, she couldn't tell if the calf was blood-related to the cow. Would he or she—Cate couldn't tell which—bite Millie if it understood the situation behind them? Would he or she reconsider biting if it understood the whole thing had merely been a matter of a broken fence? Would he or she refrain from seeking revenge upon Millie if it understood that the calf had wandered

through the broken fence, onto the asphalt, and before Millie's mother's car? Would he or she rethink their potential bite if it understood that Millie's mother had, from the looks of the finale, done her best to avoid the calf, but instead clipped its behind, sending her speeding vehicle into the ditch? Would he or she accept that the calf had been mercifully put down, quickly and painlessly, unlike Millie's mother, who found herself wrapped deep within her metal womb, gasoline-for-placenta everywhere, unable to be reached or moved, lest she perish sooner?

The cow stared.

Cate focused on Millie's silhouette within the animal's sheeny eye: *Do you understand?*

A voice answered the question. Cate couldn't make out the words, only the harshness of the voice. She sensed an approaching presence, and immediately understood what was happening. In a voice tailored for Millie's benefit, Cate said, "Please, don't come any closer," and resumed mooing along with Millie.

"Officer?" The voice didn't sound so harsh. Perhaps it hadn't been at all. Perhaps, Cate decided, she was prejudiced against voices outside of she and Millie's precious bubble.

Cate sensed the intruder take another step forward.

"I said don't," Cate said in her rosiest voice.

"Officer, I need to examine the little girl," the soft voice said.

The well-meaning plea incensed Cate. *She's fine. I checked her when I pulled her out of the car. Some scratches, a few bruises, but she's fine. I checked her. And I named her.* She knew someone close to Millie must have known her real name, but for tonight, in her arms, the little girl would take the name of the first girl Cate had lost on the job.

Footsteps crunched behind them.

"Don't," Cate emphasized, momentarily breaking her character of utter serenity. Before the intruder could interject, she added: "I... just give us a few minutes, okay?"

*And then what?* she thought.

Once again, she caught Millie's silhouette in the cow's eye. *Do you have a father? Grandmother? Grandfather? Uncles? Aunts? Anybody? Do you know your name?*

What would become of Millie when Cate decided enough “few minutes” had elapsed?

What would become of the little girl when the cow was gone?

The intruder's footsteps—a paramedic just trying to do her job—retreated, but Cate sensed she hadn't gone far; Millie *did* need to be examined.

She realized the screaming had died. It made sense to her, not because the outcome was inevitable, but because the paramedic now had time to check on the only survivor.

But they still had a few minutes.

And so, Millie mooed.

Cate mooed with her.

The cow stared at them.

## Contributors

**Alfredo Salvatore Arcilesi**, an Artisan baker by trade, has been published in over 60 literary journals worldwide. Winner of the Scribes Valley Short Story Writing Contest, he was also a finalist in the Blood Orange Review Literary Contest, and was awarded the Popular Vote in the Best of Rejected Manuscripts Competition. In addition to several short pieces, he is currently working on his debut novel.

**Kayla Cowart** is an emerging writer who will soon be pursuing her bachelor's degree in creative writing. She is an introvert through and through with interests in cross stitch, embroidery, video games, reading, writing, and procrastinating with all aforementioned hobbies. Kayla lives in Georgia with her family.

**Holly Day's** poetry has recently appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Grain*, and *Harvard Review*. Her newest poetry collections are *Where We Went Wrong* (Clare Songbirds Publishing), *Into the Cracks* (Golden Antelope Press), *Cross Referencing a Book of Summer* (Silver Bow Publishing), and *The Tooth is the Largest Organ in the Human Body* (Anaphora Literary Press).

**Mary Christine Delea** has a Ph.D. from the University of North Dakota. She will be a Tupelo Press 30/30 Project poet in October 2021. A native of Long Island, she now lives in Oregon.

**Kathryn de Leon** is a teacher from Los Angeles, California but has been living in England for eleven years. Her poems have appeared in several magazines in the US including *Aaduna*, *Calliope*, *Trouvaille Review*, *Neologism Poetry*, and *Black Fox*, and in several in the UK, including *London Grip*, *Snakeskin*, and *The High Window* where she was the Featured American Poet.

**Kenneth Johnson** is a visual artist, writer, and educator living in southern California. His work includes myriad subjects, from the conceptual to the mundane. His poetry has been published in *Carousel*, *humana obscura*, and *3 Moon Magazine*.

**Joan Mazza** has worked as a medical microbiologist and psychotherapist, and taught workshops on understanding dreams and nightmares. She is the author of six books, including *Dreaming Your Real Self*. Her poetry has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Italian Americana*, *Poet Lore*, *The MacGuffin*, and *The Nation*. She lives in rural central Virginia. For more information, visit [www.JoanMazza.com](http://www.JoanMazza.com).

**Toti O'Brien** is the Italian Accordionist with the Irish Last Name. Born in Rome, living in Los Angeles, she is an artist, musician and dancer. She is also the author of *Other Maidens* (BlazeVOX, 2020), and *An Alphabet of Birds* (Moonrise Press, 2020).



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