

The Amistad

Fall 2006



The Literary Journal of Howard University

The Amistad – Fall 2006

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader:

Because the world has not heard from *The Amistad* in nearly three years, bringing *The Amistad* from under water is indeed a celebration. There is something festive about black writers responding to the call to write. I believe I speak for the entire staff in saying that this journal is about continuing Howard University's legacy of harvesting literary greats; a place where Sterling Brown, Toni Morrison, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, and the late August Wilson all touched some corner of the University and literature's pinnacle. It is in the spirit of commitment to literature that this Journal exists, offering the current and next generation of writers of African descent a forum.

Our call for writers sounded across Howard's campus into the local D.C literary scene, to New York, and across the Atlantic to South Africa. As a bonus, we were fortunate enough to publish two high school students from the Duke Ellington School for Performing Arts, a perennial source of creative and gifted students.

What is a writer without a reader? The Amistad exists because there is a need for contemporary voices to be put on the literary landscape (we cannot afford to wait for the mainstream literary establishment to notice our voices.) This Journal is about being the definers of black literature, being proactive. It's about resisting the subservient role of being the defined. That is what *The Amistad* is: a declaration that literature was and continues to be a cornerstone in black culture, and particularly significant to Howard University.

The history of the historic Amistad is significant as it informs this journal. The Amistad Revolt c. 1839 was an uprising on a ship off the coast of Cuba, which was carrying our forefathers and foremothers captured from Sierre Leone to the United States. This uprising led to a fierce legal/political/moral debate about the slave trade, race, Africa, and her children. In a way, the Amistad uprising is one of the earliest examples of Africans participating in being definers, rather than being the defined. Similarly, with this literary journal each published poem, short story, essay is an assertion of black definitions of our selfhood, culture, and history. With this historic slave ship we learn of resistance, a decision to participate in the deciding of our own fate.

In this issue, you will find a rather large sampling of poetry, a few works of short fiction, and personal essays. We decided to make this issue heavy in the genre of poetry to capture (what we feel) is an underexposed genre in the world of literature. The annual publishing ratio for novels to poetry collection is discouraging if you are a poet, particularly a black one. Despite the relative low profile of poetry, it's really everywhere. It happens on street corners, on the metro; bus; it is on the lips of our professors; it is exploited by advertisers to sell things; it's in the hum of our grandfathers, and it happens weekly at some of the newly opened chic coffee shops in metropolitan areas such as Washington D.C. as a part of the ever-expanding gentrification efforts. If you are still not convinced of poetry's prevalence, take a look at our feature interview. The subject of our interview for this issue, Tyehimba Jess, recently won the Whiting Writer's Award for his first collection of poetry, *leadbelly*, carrying a \$40,000 honorarium. Although, this kind of thing happens far and in-between, it is hard not to get excited. Poetry is just as relevant today as it was in Paul Lawrence Dunbar's day or that of Gwendolyn Brooks.

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We have published a diversity of voices in this issue. From a poetic adaptation of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, poet Derrick Brown writes about the Sweet Home Men in his series, "in case we caught and strung/know we as free as Brother Tree." Poet-Essayist Ti'elle Saraa writes, "I can't be from any other feeling than Motown records and cabin fever on a sticky October night." We also found a poetic gem in Uzoma Lane whose voice as a writer is reminiscent of the Harlem Renaissance, he writes, "Black clouds and blacker wails pockmark the sky." I invite you to discover these brilliant young voices that are making literature as we speak. You will notice that a great deal of attention has been paid to history and music as an entry point for self-defining. Each poet armed with the unrelenting will to tell the truth paints a very different view of the black experience. We hope that you are moved by these poems (and short stories and essays.) Get lost inside one of them. Read. Write. Then, tell someone about what you have discovered.

As we move further into this millennium we recognize how important legacy, and bridging generational gaps are in this ever competitive, technology-based society where reading, and sharing rarely happens, if at all. For an example, twenty to thirty years ago, it could be assumed that the overwhelming majority of students at Howard and across the country had seen Alex Haley's *Roots*. Today, that assumption can no longer be made. Is this indicative of the age, or the failure of the older generation to properly educate their youth about our history?

I urge each of you to read our journal, download it, pass it along, email us your comments, email the authors of these works, let them know what you think, invite them to come read their works in your communities. If you have the talent and commitment and want to become a contributor, please get in contact with us. We would like to see this journal survive the relatively quick turnover of student editors. We offer *The Amistad* to the world hoping that it adds and speaks to our rich literary/cultural legacy.

Happy Reading!

Sincerely yours,

Abdul Ali Abdurrahman
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Howard University 2006
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Acknowledgements

This journal would never have seen the light of day had it not been for my editor-friends Jemiah Barrow and Mike Wilson. They believed in this journal sooner than we realized it existed. For the opportunity to edit this important journal, I'd like to extend a very warm thank you to Dr. Jon Woodson. Also, Ms. Tanya Hardy, Administrative Assistant for the Department of English who made sure that I had all of the contacts needed to see this publication through. And most important, to the writers who responded to the call to write—you are the real reason for this celebration.

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INTERVIEW

The Poet as Historian:
An Interview with Tyehimba Jess
Abdul Ali

Tyehimba Jess' first book of poetry, *leadbelly*, is the winner of 2004 Poetry Series. He is a fellow of Cave Canem, and holds an M.F.A in creative writing from New York University. He is currently an assistant professor of English at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and a recent workshop leader at the 2006 Hurston-Wright Writer's Week held at American University. Tyehimba Jess recently received The Whiting Writers' Award for his poetry collection *leadbelly*.

Abdul Ali: Tyehimba, as a poet I am sure you pay careful attention to names and titles, can you tell me what your name means?

Tyehimba Jess: Tyehimba means we stand as a nation, originating from the Tivv people of central Nigeria. Jess is my given first name; it's also my father's name.

AA: When did you know you were a writer, how did it all come together for you?

TJ: I started writing around fifteen. It's still slowly coming together; I hope that it keeps coming together. It's been a long process. I kind of went through a lot of changes. When I was 26 or 27, I decided to pursue [writing] more vigorously as a vocation. I got my MFA; started submitting things. I thought I was a serious writer then, but looking back, I wasn't. It's a continual development.

AA: What are some early influences that color your voice, style, and overall poetic vision?

TJ: The Last Poets, BAM poets, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez (back in the 80s)... Those folks appealed to me a lot- later on, Cornelius Eady, Yusef Komunyakka, and a few others. A major influence was Cave Canem; being in the organization. Also, meeting Cornelius and Toi Derricotte. . . and all the folks I met through them, helped me understand how to become a more fulfilled poet. Initially I exclusively read BAM poets and Renaissance writers, and then I started reading Gwendolyn Brooks, Haki Madhubuti, and Sterling Plumpp- he's been a huge influence and mentor.

AA: You've said that there is no better time to be a black poet today. Why do you feel that way? The reading community is getting smaller; I suspect more so within the young black community.

TJ: I don't know if the poetry reading community is getting smaller. It has always been a very small but dedicated population. There are clearly more opportunities for black poets now than there have ever been. The level of isolation black poets must have felt in the past is far less today. The isolation isn't as intense as it used to be for a number of reasons: the large number of books available by black poets; the number of organizations such as Hurston-Wright, and Cave Canem – these are factors which cut down the level of isolation- making communication a lot better. Also, communication is better through the internet. There are more publishing opportunities. Spoken word

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has been a revolution in American poetry: a movement that must be recognized as something that has changed the face of American poetry. In spoken word, there exists the remnant of our oral tradition. We've been able to really play a crucial part in defining the sound and aesthetic of spoken word. All of these factors combined make writing more accessible to black poets. The more brothers and sisters they put out, the easier it is for other black poets to get their voices out. The more the weight is spread around, the less the burden for the individual. When you're making a cultural statement, because it's one of few, the load is not as well divvied up. There is still much more room for different perspectives in writing.

AA: Why did you choose to write on the blues icon, Leadbelly?

TJ: I felt the history was fascinating. The more I explored, the more I found that his personal themes matched certain major themes in African American history: his relationship to The Prison Industrial Complex, The Great Migration, anthropology... It got more and more interesting. The fact that he was grounded in myth, and on the edges of American folklore was also appealing to me. People today don't know as much about Leadbelly, as they knew 50 years ago. It gave me a lot of wiggle room to go in—take the facts of his life, and imagine them the way I chose.

AA: I hear writers talk a lot about taking risks, what, if any, did you take with writing *leadbelly*?

TJ: The biggest risk was writing sixty odd poems about one subject. Going into a persona and pulling off various personae; sounding different in different ways.

AA: Can you talk a little about your poem "Leadbelly sings to his #1 Crew?" It's one of my favorites in your collection. It reads almost as a critique of Christianity.

TJ: It is partially a critique of the way Christianity has intersected the lives of slaves. They way Christianity has been used in slavery, and in our community as a balm and a lash. When Leadbelly is calling to Jesus and talking about the suffering endured on his behalf, his own suffering; I'm trying to raise those issues and draw a comparison, and question the meaning of sacrifice, the ideas of sacrifice and penance... How do they line up with each other? Through that juxtaposition, I'm making a critique.

AA: What do you think about the overall health of Black Literature?

TJ: I guess I'm more concerned when I look at the state of black literature, and I wonder how we're going to create new frontiers that have not yet been crossed or explored. There's some exciting new work out there, stretching boundaries in that sense. I guess that that is the most exciting thing about it.

It'll be great to see what's happening in black poetry in 10 years, space and time. Who will come up with what? What'll happen outside of street fiction? Integrating hip hop would form a really different kind of literature; jazz and blues have influenced literature in the same way. It will be interesting to see how the problems and issues are addressed; see how many cross genres come out, thereby having some of each.

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Also, it will be interesting to see how the internet is going to affect the consumption of literature.

Lots of doors and frontiers have yet to be opened and explored.

AA: What are some of those frontiers that haven't been opened or explored?

TJ: Everything has been talked about, how it's going to be continued to be talked about is the question. The personal history is going to be unearthed. How will poetry take the task of telling those histories- from famous and infamous, beautiful and ugly, all those sides of blackness? It will be interesting to see how those facets are incorporated into black literature. How poetry will address them.

It will be interesting to see what happens in Gay black literature, Feminist Literature, mixed raced literature, all those aspects that are still evolving, that don't get the play that they deserve. We'll see in the future how that plays out. It's impossible to tell what is going to happen in 10 years. No one would have predicted Cornelius Eady would have written *Brutal Imagination*. Books are unexpected. I'm looking forward to seeing what's going to happen.

How many black poets are going to manifest in the next decade or so? How many black presses will become mainstream? How will those issues be addressed? How do black presses become entities that have good distribution, high quality books and literature? I can't say. The most successful poetry press is here in Chicago. I can't think of too many other ones- African World Press... Third World Press. Hopefully, that will be the next exciting thing to happen in black literature, more black presses.

AA: Do you have any thoughts on why there seems to be more black men writing poetry than literary fiction?

TJ: I would hesitate to say that's true. I think there are brothers are out there writing fiction.

AA: Why do you suppose black poets are teaching more at white institutions than historically black ones?

TJ: Because that's where they can get jobs. That's the bottom line. All I know is that there are very few writing jobs that come up each year. If you get one you're pretty lucky. If you get one that pays well, you're much luckier.

I think the question ought to be: Where are the creative writing programs at HBCU's? I know of one - Chicago State. When you have more HBCU's with MFA programs, perhaps you'll see more black people teaching in those programs.

AA: What do you think accounts for the shift in traditional modes of literature—the novel, the poem—to spoken-word, slam, storytelling, more oral modes of telling stories, particularly among black men?

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TJ: I don't think that's necessarily the case. Think about Paul Lawrence Dunbar, he'd go around the country, or the world, reading his poetry. He made a living doing that. So I don't think that's necessarily true. I do know what's happened in the past 10 to 15 years: spoken-word and slam happened, a more professional vehicle for spoken word. And hip hop, obviously, and people started seeing that as a vehicle for getting their work heard. Then you had Saul Williams, Patricia Smith, and other interesting people, that popularized this form. Spoken-word has gotten more play- Def Poetry Jam etc. But the work on the page has grown exponentially. It has grown all around. Not just in spoken-word.

AA: How would you engage non-academics to read and support poetry?

TJ: Buy a book. Honestly, go to a poetry reading. Buy a poetry book that you like. Not one that people say you should like. Ask some of your friends who they like. Read them, get a good anthology, go to a bookstore and browse. That's the best way to bring poetry into your life.

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POETRY

Letters From Howard University Series, *an excerpt*
Abdul Ali

#1

it is raining
you sit at a
window seat.
your locks look
like swollen
cotton vines.
we don't speak
on the shuttle
only
nod.

#4.

there were
helicopters, snipers
and reporters.
they all came to
protect the first lady by locking
us from our classes.
we stood a band
of Bison on the Yard.
screaming Black Power
wanting some respect.
I was there not as a militant
or an activist
I just wanted to get
across the yard.

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POETRY

Away From Home, Part One

Abdul Ali

summertimes are never breezy in Queens.
slow-motion. to move you stab the cement
and push your way

t h r o u g h
a w a y f r o m
pointy needles that climb
up your arm promising H-I-V

a w a y f r o m
asphalt littered with dime bags
cum-filled balloons
spit-out sunflower seed shells

a w a y f r o m
corner stores that sell loosies for a quarter
neighborhoods that turned from
Jenkins to Garcias

where dreams happen, deferred
where trains become imagined underground railroads
where black boys learn the alphabet on subway maps

where you can age on the A train, listen to stories about
grandpa, how there was gonna be a black mayor, hear the
rhythm of the train skate on the tracks being swallowed
by darkness over and over again.

Next stop 125th Street, Harlem
where the brothers get clean, shining like new plums
at Malcolm's mosque where bean pies
are never watery and smiles always plenty
where you can even hear Final Call shouts every stop

in Harlem, the breeze moves with the people
melting around your body like calamine lotion:
cleansing cool and calming

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POETRY

On God's Watch

Patricia Biela

Angles encircled skin
sheer fabric sewn over bones
bed sheets rescued shivers.

Sunken eyes painted mirages
moved walls papered
with aspirin, closer.

Door's swing interrupted-
doctors gathered
fingernails scraped scalps
left question mark abrasions.

Mr. Sparrow, Mr. Sparrow,
your t-cell count is up.

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POETRY

More Than Just a Game
Patricia Biela

merry-go- round spins
glass coca cola bottle

buttermilk fingers
release neck points to

paprika seasoned
ground beef
colored girl

legs crisscrossed
like pretzels
stand-up

follow buttermilk
legs to the back room

heartbeat drums
djembe beats

flame-blue blues
fire looks to
tree bark browns

see she puckers
he steps backwards
we'll pretend he says

head nods in agreement
like she understands

brain spins the question
why lips never ask

she has no idea he thinks
her skin is overcooked

they return to the circle
with forced smiles

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POETRY

Heart to a Poet

Leah Blue

I take
a mo-
ment here
to rest
and lay
my head
u-pon
your chest
and lis-
ten to
the sub-
tle sound.
Be-neath
your skin
your heart
is poun-
ding. Thump

it goes
a-against
my ear.
I am
con-tent
to just
lie here
and (yawn)
Hey wait,
that's rea-
lly neat!
The heart
beats in
i-am-
bic feet!
Gent-ly
lu-lling
me to –

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POETRY

Paul A Eintou
Sweet Home Men Series
Derrick Weston Brown

Paul A Tells Paul D

Brother
Before we run
In case we caught and strung
Know we as free as Brother Tree
Our roots watered somewhere
In earth that love
Lord know

Paul A Stumps School Teacher

What you
Get when you treat
A man like a prized pig
Force him to root dig grunt squeal claw
You smart study his eyes
What you see there
Don't know?

Paul A and The Rake Tooth

I hear
teachers like a
fresh apple before class
ain't got no apple just this tooth
bone straight rust brown so sharp
a lesson learned
my treat

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POETRY

For Octavia Butler/ 1947-2006

Derrick Weston Brown

I. Red Giant

She taught us to gaze
past stars, supernovas, and deepspace
and ponder the deepest reaches of our skins
the seeds planted in the nebulas of our eyes
beyond beyond, to the changeling within us
the extraterrestrial we are the tongues
spoken across time's continuum
the warmth of the blood that travels
wanders and pools. We will miss you
other Mother.
We chase your echo eagerly
into eternity's ether.

II. White Dwarf Haiku

On the roof after
Word of your sudden passing
I watch the stars dim

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POETRY

all black girls ain't got rhythm

Tinesha Davis

Oh how it still amazes me, for I can't do the same.
Not that I don't try my best for they say sin is low aim.
But every time I attempt my body fills with sudden stiffness,
My motions repeat, I move offbeat, my feet lose their swiftness.
No matter how hard I try I can't do what's in my mind,
My knees shake, my steps break, my whole body is thrown off-time.

That's when I learned not all Black girls have rhythm

When in the company of my friends, we sing to our favorite songs.
We blow and throw and child you know can't nobody say we wrong.
But if I have to do a solo, the harmony escapes me.
My untuned notes do not float; my songs hold no melody.
When in church I try to learn just how to obtain this thing.
But no matter what; my voice gets stuck; my vocals will not ring.

That's when I found out all Black folks can't sing

I had a teacher once, for me she was the first of her kind.
She taught me the things the text didn't bring; she took me back through time.
She filled my scope with books, Maya! Zora! Alice! Toni!
She showed there was more to me than just slavery.
She explained there was more to us than just being able to sing and clap.
That there was more to our culture than the way we talk and act.

That's when I started to learn what it meant to be black

That's when I started to learn what it meant to be black

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POETRY

song of the shipyard worker
Tinesha Davis

<p>My mother works the shipyard My daddy shovels coal Come home at night backs broken Just to feed us all Just to feed us all My mother cleans up tanks And climbs through holes smaller Than who would ever think Who would ever think That my daddy breathes in soot And has lungs that are blacker Than a black man's foot A black man's foot kicked mama In the small of her back 'cause she could not move faster To clean the smoke pipe stacks</p>	<p>The smoke pipe stacks they say Is this black man's pride and joy Who gained the title Mistah Overseer calls him boy Overseer calls him boy And works him just as hard 'til he breaks my old folks' backs Working at the shipyard Working at the shipyard My parents get along To stay behind the bills And this is their song My mother works the shipyard My daddy shovels coal Come home at night backs broken Just to feed us all Come home at night backs broken Just to feed us all Praying for the day When the shipyard's overhauled Then where will they work? My mother works the coalmine My daddy lays down tracks You ask why not something better 'cause this is better when you're black You say there must be better Then you must not be black My mother works the shipyard</p>
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POETRY

mother africa?

Tinesha Davis

Is Mother Africa really her name
Or is she the father from whence we came
But if she was him would we know her today
Or just like all others would he have strayed
Would he have deserted us long ago
Just like the nature in black men says so
For if she was the father from whence we came
Would he have had the decency to at least leave his name

or has America corrupted my mind

Would we have been torn from him or he from us
Deserted in the Congo alone in the dusk
If she was him would we suckle from his breast still
Or would he have given us up free of will
Or would he have fought 'til death like a man
Conquering all defending his land
Or would he have left us this will that is set
Leaving fatherless children and black women no respect

or has America diseased my mind

If Africa is mother is father to be found
Or was he a stranger who once came around
And sired children he did not stay to know
For once dawn came he then had to go
Setting this tradition which seemed around from the start
When a sister is with child the brother departs
Or was Africa a man whose search for us was delayed
And we assumed he was mother for we never knew a father who stayed

or has America poisoned my mind

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POETRY

Esther Speaks of Childhood Dreams

EJ

children open their mouths. circles, worms, mud and splinters fall out. form mud pie dreams. i wanted to be a teacher; someone not so easily erased by life's injustice. children open their mouths. squares, triangles, beans and rice fall out. form iniquity's foundation. i wanted to be a teacher exploring nouns and verbs of worlds outside this town. children open their mouths. parents' dinner table words, pompous predictions scatter my dying rose petals. i wanted to be a teacher. the foxes conspire a different fate. my child opens his mouth; screams fall out; want sticks in the web of breathing. i wanted to be a teacher. the clatter of rusting metal pierces my ears. can i crawl from under the weight of hot soapy water? my child opens his mouth. bleach-laced butterfish bones, grits, collared greens and ham hock fall out. i wanted to be a teacher, not the town washer woman. but, the foxes patch cracks in the fence of mindset. and, i have not the key to the gate.

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POETRY

Washerwoman Series

EJ

Washerwoman Dressed in Red

saturday night she is free. her scrubbing board stands idle on the porch rocking in time to the wind. she stands reflective in the chifferobe mirror, dressed in red stiletto heels, gartered nylons and robe. her red dress hangs on the door waiting. its pin tucked bodice will hint at all there is to savor. its a-line skirt will flare just enough to show thigh, not the stocking edge. (*the discreet know how to flirt shamelessly.*) this night she is loosed from curl killing steam, taste of salty sweat, clients' incessant banter. this night she will dig her heels into swing's luscious blues, honeycombed crimson of jazz. this night her rage will slip through the barb infested curtains of a small town. she will blaze red jealousy, and oh what a time she will have on the dance floor. this night, the sway of her back will echo her flippant hem; she will serve no needs save her own yearning for something, somebody warmer than hand eroding water of weekday ritual.

Washerwoman Dressed in White

this Jehovah morning, her white washbasin holds enough water to scrub Saturday night's scent from her scarlet hands. she looks forward to penance. for hours her spine tightens flat against the high backed wooden bench stationed by the white pine door of sanctuary, she is an usher riffling hymnal pages so old they echo the permanent waffle of her hands. hot water baptized, she is a soldier waving a flag scorched white by her own sultry red sinning nights. she is diligent in her task to keep late comers out once praise the Lord devotionals begin. in this white clapboard church, white-sharkskined deacons cower in her presence. only the white-haired preacher and the pearl-sateened choir wield more power than she. in this house, bleach-rinsed in ritual, her starched white uniform is ablaze with Holy Ghost. she speaks in tongues. her back arches, hips sway, feet dance as they did the night before. shimmy on the dirt floor of refuge. shout glory, fall as the Son's passion comes from man's lips. held down by the righteous gospels of chattel and owner, she drowns in allegory as the deacons smile, watch her hem rise.

Washerwoman Dressed in Black

her baby's eyes: onyx, shiny, reflective pools. watch her dance about the kitchen; shake catfish loose from the blackened skillet. oily grime from too many days of fried fish, chicken, green tomatoes, okra covers the walls. hard to clean, but it's the comfortable perfume of his life - the smell of her doused in stray pepper dust. in the harbor of her breath, he feels everything she was, is, will be. in the crook of her laugh, he hears her song, her answers, her questions, her testimonials. those hues of ebony tinged in raucous blues give him such joy. as he learns to talk, *mommy* shoots clear from the marsh that is her. as he learns to walk, he grabs her hem to dance in the darkness of nights lit by shooting stars. as he learns to read, his moon-shaped eyes absorb black ink off the page. when she scolds him for teasing the dog, his eyes eclipse with tears. her reflection shatters into a thousand shards of ash. soft is the hug she gives. in his laughter, her restoration. because he's not yet old enough to know the difference between parent and child, teacher and student, he's slowly teaching her to smile in the dark make-do days.

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POETRY

When Her BluesMan Comes to Town

EJ

when her bluesman comes to town, her body uncurls in jook's smokey cave. as her guarded mind is loosed by the warmth of his touch, her hair falls from its staid bun, runs long through his calloused fingers. when her bluesman comes to town, she is sweet butter crème folding into the tucks of his skin. as she suckles his sweat, her clothes loosen, puddle, freeze like spent candle wax. in the moment of release, she bathes in his brackish words, digs her heels in, lets the wash water grow winter. when her bluesman comes to town, draw the drapes shut 'cause she's a drunkard wading into the twang of his guitar. pushing her over frenzied line, he lays claim to the woman she hides. and she don't mind 'cause when her bluesman comes to town, her song...her song smolders low down in the sty. a melody teasing open the irregular...breath between his fingers, her skin hissing backbeat of rhythm uncorked, and she don't give a damn who hears it when her bluesman comes... to town.

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POETRY

island kwansabas #1

Van Garret

aqua colors mix like paint in brazil
where human feet turn an ashy gray
and walk like fingers across piano keys
trying not to step on purple jelly
or shards from bottles broken in joy
around the fiery places where bodies glowed
even after the sun rose behind palms

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POETRY

miles is cool as hell

Van Garret

playing some old laid-back trumpet

hunching his shoulders like john wayne

getting ready to do something drastic

like convert a 4/4 tempo

to a double time solo

that makes an audience sweat

as he coolly makes his fingers

breeze over over-worked keys

like a trigger happy maverick

firing shots in clouds of smoke

The Amistad – Fall 2006

POETRY

Raising Ground

Melanie Henderson

I come from
streets bearing nut trees

hear piercing squeezing squinting pressure

to plateau

to die from grind
makes common man
feel headache gravitate to his face
shove itself into his skin
shift inside him like dancing metal

hand over eyes
he draws chalk pattern around
staying weight of his discomfort

his brown eyes open
streets overpowered
hijacked by money

disappear

they've folded in upon themselves

revealing golden safari
bumps of sand perform gymnastics
grains navigating griot voices
singing cultural dance into limbs
smiles of children

The Amistad – Fall 2006

POETRY

Delete

Melanie Henderson

Cleaning out my email this morning
came across this unpleasant correspondence
between his babymama and I
not babymama like too fast and standardless
contrary
she, very much a woman
just happened to lay
with not much of a man

this email reminded me of a place
a time when love was a sick dependence
and he was my personal supplier
a time when us was strong
but us wasn't good
a time when his words were gold
and we were so urgent

babymama's email labeled me homewrecker
their home built high as a castle in her mind
his home historic preserved in me long before
their sex, their pregnancy, their precious baby
breathed misunderstanding between she and I

6-months brief pause between he and I
entangled twin emotion in two brown women
two big hearts desperately trying to type themselves
out of the mess he made
to retell reality

we tiptoed around the ugly issue with niceties
tightroping the words that would make us
less than ladies. we were successful

in our success, still we failed
our homes jaded shadowed
by so much sun
very small light

Smooth skins crease
into many grooves
brown eyes blue-grey
speckle like seven
decades passed through
our tearful embrace
we say goodbye
sister found and lost

his golden words have peeled
exposing a gray content

skimming over initial slanders
pausing over post-scripted Sister
invokes deep prayer in me
that her successes are true ones
ones that spray her home
with as much light as sunshine

this moment feels bittersweet

I can only hope she's free
as free as she can be
with her dear attachment

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POETRY

last call

Alan King

diner lights go up when one
of your boys recalls the night
before his 30th birthday

*brothas, the 20's rolled out
after realizin she didn't have
a future with me*

you turned 25 at midnight,
and another friend jokes about
it going downhill from there

*i'm tellin you, yo. you get
to be 30 like me, people start
callin you an old man*

sneakers squeak over clay
tiles as busboys hurry to clear
their sections, when the old
man pops into your head

*you still in school!? boy,
i was married and making
good money at your age*

and just the day before, coming
out of Gallery Place, you ran into
an old friend from high school

so what'cha doin with your life?
he asked, after mentioning
finishing law school

you remember going blank like
the flat screen over the empty
stools and a bartender buffing
the shiny copper counter

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POETRY

nights like this

Alan King

a darkened diner's candles
are just as comforting
with my brothers, Chai waffles
and chicken sandwiches

our server's busy with a table
of guys laughing as they stick
fries up their noses

she works at 2 a.m. around
scrambling busboys and change
ringing as the register draw
opens while a cashier stuffs
bills into tiny envelopes

Fred speaks of a friend who
caught her old flame and ex-
best friend holding hands
as they strolled U Street

Derrick fingers a charm on
his dreadlock, remembering
that night he talked her out
of fighting the other woman

the streets are seal-skin
slick with rain, and i think
of *her* hours away, who
i held on nights like this

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POETRY

Sorrow

Uzoma Peter Lane

His eyes shed many waters choked with dust.
Black clouds and blacker wails pockmark the sky.
Thick crimson rivers foster wanderlust.
Each ragged breath purloined for heaven's eye.

He kneels nigh riven flesh that once was fair.
Dry winds slash deeper furrows in her cheek.
A soft caress of ashen, blood-drenched hair.
His feral cry "how blessed are the meek."

His soul lay rent in twain and reft of life.
Oblivious to war and war's alarms.
Forsaken. Only whising "O that I,
were young again...and held her in my arms."

The winds scream on, the kites of hell at play.
And Death sails on. Two lives are swept away.

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POETRY

Sweet Georgia Brown

Allison Matthews

the smell of sweet, brown suga
wafted lazily through the kitchen
forming an aromatic trail of
mama's sweet patatahs and collard greens.

Oh! The smooth and sugary taste of sweet patatahs!
as the spicy yet sour flavors of collard greens
satisfy my hunger,
my spine tingles from intense bliss.

as i savor
the sweets and sours and spices of soul food,
flavors flood my senses
sending me into euphoric ecstasy.

Oh...how good it is!!

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POETRY

Tumbling Down

Allison Matthews

London bridge is falling down
and the Church can tumbling thereafter...
the faith in that rock that peter chiseled
is chipping away brick by brick
as Jesus cries his Hail Mary's.
I wonder how long this myth
of salvation will last
when we find out that the rock
landed on us...and not the other way around.

Those lies and manipulated truths
that men and his slaves constructed
created a Church of fortitude and destruction.
and all the pretty little
crosses that lay bare will burn
as the secrets of holy men turn.

Oh St. Jude! Oh holy mother of eden
deliver us from this damnation
and show us the way into your light
and shining armor.
I don't know the way, but i'm willing to follow
just don't lead me to Plymouth again!

I pray that my sins will be forgotten
and yours too by the way...
saddle up your gallops and
get ready to ride
our sunset is near, but our
sunrise will certainly follow!

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POETRY

I AM FROM
Ti'elle Saraa

a March Saturday morning
when my mother washed the walls
barefoot on swollen ankles

because she knew that my father
would be tenderly distracted when
his first child came home

I can't be from any other feeling
than Motown records and cabin fever
on a sticky October night

perhaps the attitude was hip
something new, and seductive
to my father

who had not been raised on
(but nervously needed) the mud
of Mississippi catfish

I got up
from the beds of men
and abandoned their foolish kingdoms

the frostbite
of a sterling bloody table
still hurts my back

an old black pot
being scoured clean,
that's the strongest sound
of myself

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POETRY

mother hen

Ti'elle Saraa

daddy liked ladies
with light skin and long dark hair.
Mommie was that way.

daddy liked ladies
who played piano and hummed.
Mommie was that way.

daddy liked ladies
who baked, fried, broiled à la king.
Mommie even laid eggs.

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SHORT FICITON

The Show Room

Cerstin Johnson

“Look I got this new painting for the living room, so never set foot there again, you hear?” That is what Momma told me the morning she came rushing into my bedroom wearing her neon yellow velour jumpsuit, of which only the legs were visible. The rest of her torso was hidden behind a vast canvas, almost twice her size. Well, that isn’t what she said exactly, but over the next two weeks of the painting hanging up on the wall, that is what all of her words amounted to. A bit of oil slapped onto canvas had managed to get my brothers and I exiled from the living room of our own home. Give a woman in her mid-thirties-who believes flip-flops a fashion wonder and insists on wearing them on every occasion, including church, artwork and you’ll regret it the rest of your days. Every single time she comes bursting through the living room door, with her predictable “Check out this perfection!” grin, my stomach rattles and I consider snatching the canvas from the wall and tossing it into the fireplace. But then I remember that we have no fireplace, and that she would probably have knocked me unconscious with a velour covered elbow before I could even think to complete my mission.

Since then, the “NO Space,” as my brothers affectionately call it, has been off limits at all times. My brothers and I even spent a month developing a sign that we post on the front door when we know that our mother has no chance of ever seeing it. Of course if she ever caught wind of our charming little beacon, we would indeed meet our untimely ends.

All friends of mother may enter here and stare in dumbfounded awe at her masterpiece.

All friends of the children can go to hell because Momma thinks you’re not worthy.

In truth the room is more like a gallery these days. The space where Momma can flaunt her prized possession, speaking in that glazed over and high-pitched tone she always uses. I often listen from my bedroom as she “Ha has” and “Amens” before her many admirers. Mr. Hodges, her old high-school pal thought it “elegant”. Auntie Nettie said that it was pretty and perfect for Momma’s taste. Bishop Jackson issued the work a “Hallelujah!” and then clapping his hands muttered, “I gotta get me one f these, Kim.” To this Momma simply replied, “Oh, well I got this imported from Africa, but I’ll sure see bout orderin’ you one.”

I am not positive where Momma purchased her prize, but I think it was from a flea market on either Airline or Jefferson Highway.

The painting hunkers on the left wall of the living room, straight across from the windows. Sunlight streaming in through the sheer lilac curtains waltzes across the canvas, converting soft purples into deep reds, and blacks into daring violets. The painting, comprised of a scene in what appears to be a Baptist church, resembles my own church in some ways. The carpet is a gentle maroon and the walls a pecan brown, only a shade lighter than that in my place of worship. Maybe that is what induced Momma’s initial attraction to the work, familiarity in something so palpable. Six rows of pew line either side of the sanctuary, filled with the bodies of various women and children.

Mostly all the women are seated toward the front of the church, nearer to the choir stand and pulpit. Some sport hot pink, red, yellow, and one lady standing in the middle of the aisle

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SHORT FICITON

with her hands raised to the heavens, the orange of a ripe pumpkin. These women are the first that you notice in the painting, their beaming appearance scapegoats for the human interest. As you move toward the rear of the church, the colorations of attire hollow out. These women wear dark indigos and navy blues that appear simply black even when taugth by the snow-white rays of the early morning sun. The rays seem to smother these women, curling about their chocolate brown skin and creeping over the brims of their broad Sunday morning hats, hats so large that it is almost too evident that these women are ashamed. Hiding their fears of the all-knowing eye beneath the gaudy accoutrements of the Sabbath.

Momma knocked the painting down once, on mistake. It had been muggy that entire day and the clouds hung low like watermelons in the sky. Uncle Marvin had decided to come into town for the first time in years and of course, she sat on the sofa waiting patiently for his arrival. He had stood before the painting, dressed head to toe in black with those thick eyebrows that seemed to cast shadows over his eyes, and tightened his lips into what Momma expected to be a smile, but it was more like tense simper. “It’s nice I suppose, Kim, but it’s the typical painting, black people in a black church. Who hasn’t seen that?” he had muttered, his entire face cast over by then. If thunder had struck at that moment, it would have been cinematically perfect, overwrought and trite. No, there was no rumbling or grumbling in the skies, only the jarring silence as the sun slipped behind a heaving cumulus cloud. Momma shrugged and muttered almost inaudible, “I guess you’re right, Marvin.” The two of them then digressed into the danker regions of our home speaking of subjects neither of them cared about: the new bill proposed by Congress, the latest killings in Afghanistan, George W. Bush choking on a pretzel. Mother smiled heartily at Uncle Marvin’s jokes, but their was a sadness to it as I had never before seen, grey and endless.

Cerstin Johnson

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SHORT FICITON

They Blossom, They Wither.

Ouma Christopher E Werimo

As Earnest sat there myriads of thoughts crossed back and forth in his already tormented and fettered mind. He was lost in his own world. He could not feel the light afternoon breeze that characterized the month preceding the short rains. Yet for almost two hours he had sat gazing at the multi-colored rose flowers that were blossoming around the mound beside him.

One part of the flower that fascinated him was growing at the centre of the grave. It had brightly colored petals and seemed to attract bees around it. It stood out distinct from the rest. So distinct from the rest that Earnest had noticed just growing a few days after the ceremony. One drone had landed at the centre of the flower. Earnest observed as it perused around the middle, probably looking for nectar. The insect buzzed and zigzagged around like a minor digging for gold. After seconds of digging it buzzed away, probably after a fruitless search. Other bees as if by instinct followed the drone to wherever it had gone.

Earnest wondered what those bees had expected to find out of a flower that was not mature yet. Were they not trying to destroy the life of this young flower? Were they not actually robbing the flower of its youthfulness? Its vitality and energy to grow some more? Earnest thought the bees as exploitative. His biology teacher on the topic living things had said that the relationship was symbiotic: or so he could reminisce. Yet he was puzzled at the fact that the bees did not benefit the flower. They simply came, ravaged through its parts in search of whatever they wanted: nectar probably and buzzed away after futile efforts...

“Earnest you are required at the principal’s office.” His English teacher had told him. He rose up from his chair as curious classmates shot glances at him and whispered to each other. He wondered what the principal had for him. Throughout his three years in school he had been of noble character, of sound mind, obedient and had never been caught flat footed on the wrong side of the law, thanks to his upbringing. So what then did the principal want? He could not figure out what exactly he had done. Suddenly a cold shudder ran through him. His knees buckled and his steps faltered as he shuffled through the corridors of the administration square.

The principal’s office was at the end of the left wing of the administration square. The atmosphere suddenly felt eerie and disturbing. He felt oddly nervous and it took him about a minute to realize that he was standing right outside the principal’s office. He fastened his tie and brushed his hands through his hair before knocking the traditional three times,

“Come in,” the principal’s voice boomed from inside. Mr. Okello was an ex air force man well known for his voice of iron. A voice that could cut through the school atmosphere galvanizing the entire school into action.

“I said come in!” This statement jerked Earnest back to his senses and he nervously, almost forcefully grabbed the door handle and twisted it then ushered himself into the spacious office.

The huge bald-headed bespectacled man motioned him to take a seat. Earnest was struck by surprise at this. He had never been offered a seat on occasions that he had to see the principal.

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The huge mahogany desk before him was well organized. It was a simple office but neat and well kept. The principal then began signing something that looked like a leave out sheet. He handed it to him and said,

“The school driver will take you home. You are required for a function.” Before Earnest could digest the statement, the Principal added,

“Pick your personal belongings and proceed to the gate. The van is waiting for you there. Do it fast.” Earnest sauntered out of the office mesmerized. What function? Endless questions without answers flooded his sub conscious.

At home he was met by his sister Dorothy. Her eyes were red and she whispered something like,

“It is going to be just fine ok?” She took his hand and led him to the house. The mood was somber. It was like a dark cloud was hanging around the living room. A group of women, most of who were unfamiliar to him were seated there not saying anything. Dorothy led him to the bedroom and at this point he managed to ask,

“Where is mother?” Tears welled up her eyes and she grabbed him tightly and hugged him. He could not understand what was going on. Then it all rushed back to him in a moment, the function, the politeness of the principal, the group of women and the somber mood in the living room. He was yet to confirm his fears.

Dorothy blew her nose, wiped her tears and in between sobs said,

“Earnest dear, I want you to understand that it was God’s will, not our will...” Torrents of tears almost choked he a she paused and finally said,

“that mother passed away in that road accident.”

“Oh!” Earnest could not utter any more words. A sharp pain stabbed through him. He felt choked and suddenly could not breathe. Something had snapped inside him and he felt darkness engulfing him. He was suddenly tumbling into oblivion. Into a bottomless abyss. As he slumped down on the floor he felt strong hands grabbing him from all sides.

When he came to, his vision was blurred but he could see a lady’s face directly facing down at him.

“Earnest,” a familiar voice whispered.

“Is that you mother?” he wanted to ask but his mouth was dry. He made out the face of somebody like his mother.

“Mother, oh, mother,” he whispered.

“It is me Earnest.” The voice was familiar yet it was not his mother’s. Earnest struggled with his vision as it cleared and eventually realized it was Dorothy his one and only sister looking down at him, tears in his eyes.

“You are at home Earnest,” she said. Then it came back to him all at once. Something snapped and crushed inside him again. The stab of pain rushed back again. A kind of pain that he could not describe. He groaned and stared at the ceiling. He could not notice his aunts who were seated in the room mourning.

For the whole one week of mourning the home was filled with people. His mother’s friends, his sister’s friends, his own friends and his late father’s friends. Each of course with their own intentions. Some brought with them cash to off set funeral expenses while some came empty handed. Some screamed, others yelled yet others just stood there and watched Dorothy

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and him- probably pitying them or probably rejoicing at the misfortune that had plagued his family. Whether those who shed tears were genuine or whether they shed crocodile tears did not bother Earnest. He rarely ate, rarely talked. Talked only to Dorothy. Dorothy his sister, Dorothy is brother, Dorothy his father and now Dorothy his mother! Wasn't this traumatic panorama of events taking him by storm?

On the visit to the morgue at the Kisumu General hospital to collect the body for burial, the stench of the dead rotting cadavers reminded him a year back when he had visited the same mortuary to get his father's body. The memories rushed back again and bruised the healing scars that had been left behind. What did life mean? Earnest wondered why man had been condemned to this fate. He wondered what it meant to exist. The idea of God seemed so abstract, so far fetched that no matter how he stretched his hands, his mind, his spirit, he could not grasp it. Whether he would survive this blow was yet to be decided.

"Earth to earth, from dust to dust, amen." These words still rang in his ears as the local Anglican Church pastor took a handful of the moist earth and sprinkled it on the coffin. Would it be this pastor or another one? He did not like this one probably because he was the same man who had presided over his father's burial. Dorothy quietly sobbed behind him as his eldest aunt held him tightly. It seemed so unreal that his beloved mother would be eaten up by hunger stricken mites in the coldness of the earth. At this point he did not know whether to cry, laugh, scream and at one point he felt like jumping into the grave and be buried alive with his mother. Nobody and nothing would heal the scar this time round.

"Till we meet, till we meet, till we meet again
God be with you till we meet again."

The mourners chorused in unison. He suddenly hated these words. Hated the people singing. Hated death. Hated himself. Hated God.

As the undertakers scooped and poured soil to cover the coffin each scoop of soil felt like a stab of pain. It was as if each scoop was taking his strength away. He felt the same crush again. This time it was more forceful, deeper and excruciatingly painful. Dizziness engulfed him and a cloud covered his eyes. His aunt held him tighter. He felt like a chapter in his life was closed. A part of his life had suddenly snapped dead. There was nothing to care about.

"It is going to be fine Earnest, hang on," whispered his aunt. These words meant nothing. It was all claptrap. *At least that is what he thought.* Where was the essence of life anyway?

Throughout the burial there was this mad man who stood by the fence awestruck by the multitude of people gathered in the compound. He was practically nude with shaggy and dreadlocked hair and looked extremely filthy. He kept scratching himself all over. Probably lice were eating his blood away. Nobody bothered about him apart from Earnest. He kept looking at the mad man, wondering and wishing he was the mad man. The mad man had nothing to care about in life. No family, no friends. Just existence; actually abandonment. Earnest thought he had something in common with this mad man. *Possibly one of these fine days he should run berserk and care less about the world.*

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Finally after the burial, sympathies and farewell from the mourners began. Apparently none of his paternal uncles turned up for the funeral. After his father had joined the ancestors they had simply grabbed all they could lay their hands from his father's wealth and fled. *A bunch of greedy bastards*. His helpless mother could do nothing to salvage the situation. The courts were corrupt and the services of a lawyer were damn expensive. Her teaching job had sustained them till the ruthless hands of death had robbed them off their worthy bread winner. One generous family friend volunteered to pay for his school fees. He wondered if this meant anything. *Would he live to get this sponsorship?*

That evening after the burial most people had left apart from close relatives from his mother's side. Immediately he retired to bed he saw her. He actually heard her,

"Erne", she called him in her favourite manner,

"Come, I need you son. I miss you." Earnest reached out for her but she was too far! Dressed in dazzling white, yet he could not reach out. He cried and screamed for her, lunged for her. She faded in a distance and was absorbed by a cloud...He woke up sweating profusely and wished the dream would eventually come true. He wept the whole night. Tears of pain. Till he could weep no more...

And now as sat by the three week old mound it was still fresh in his mind. The memories could not go away. For three weeks he had been hurting. For three weeks he had been haunted. Dorothy's constant soothing did nothing to stop the hurting. He had depleted the tear glands. He could shed tears no more. Yet he felt this vacuum in his soul. His spirit was wet with blood, with pain. His body felt numb right from the day he got the news. Now as he watched the multi coloured rose flower at the middle part of the grave his heart tried to reach out and blossom together with this rose flower. To bloom in the splendour of flora and in the sweet warm rays punctuated with the slight soothing breeze now whistling past the distant lake via their homestead.

In his own world he felt so alone, he felt so distant from the real world. He could not get in touch with his life. He felt he had to move on. The task ahead was arduous; to heal the wounds. To heal his world and rejoin his spirit to his soul for they were all asunder. Could he manage? Dorothy seemed strong enough to move on yet something peculiar was holding him back. Pulling him back. He had to find a solution to end this trauma. He had to move on. At once he reached out for the rose flower at the centre of the grave and uprooted it. Keenly he studied the mud that covered the tiny fibrous roots. Worms were already feeding on them. Soon it was going to wither and wilt away yet on the surface it looked attractive! The thought of this effected a chuckle from him. He suddenly laughed loudly attracting the attention of his maternal uncles and aunts in the house. He instantaneously crushed the flower in his hands, threw it down and stepped on it. He walked towards the house. He felt the urge to move on. End this trauma.

"Earnest you should begin preparing to go to school the day after tomorrow. After long deliberations the funeral committee decided that I will look after you," his uncle Omondi said,

"Your sister Dorothy will be taken care of by your aunt Achieng' who will be traveling to Nairobi with her on the same day you will be going back to school. Is it okay?"

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“Yes uncle, thank you,” replied Earnest. He wasn’t sure he meant what he said any more. Anyway there was no need for long arguments.

“Uncle I would like to go to the market and say hi to my friends. Since I came to the funeral from school I have not had time to see some of them.”

“You are permitted son, but please be home before it grows dark. We need you in one piece,” replied uncle Omondi. He seemed to have a liking for Earnest. He knew Earnest was an obedient boy though of late he was not himself at all. This worried his uncle immensely.

Homa bay trading center was about twenty minutes walk from their home. As Earnest trudged along the sand strewn path he racked his brain hard. The idea seemed fascinating. It seemed the only way to his eternal happiness. The only way he could squander the fears looming ahead. There was darkness ahead yet yonder he could see the light. He could feel it. Though he could not know what exactly waited for him yonder. Perhaps they would receive him with dignity. Whatever it was anyway was better than this.

He was now approaching the main tarmac road that eventually snaked into the main street of the Homa bay town centre. From a distance he could see the market place. It was a bee hive of activities. Men, women and children, all and sundry selling and buying wares while others idled. He looked at this people and thought them lucky. He wondered if any of them had suffered misfortunes like him.

As he crossed the road he timed it perfectly. It was time to move on. The fully loaded Mitsubishi canto coincided with him at the very centre of the road. Before the baffled driver stepped on the breaks, the vehicle had crushed into him full speed. It catapulted him about ten meters on the left side of the road. He landed down in a thud.

As he lay down facing up blood gushing from all the orifices, he saw her again in the midst of the clouds vertically above him. He heard her voice again,

“Erne. Come son. I need you, I miss you.”

“Am coming mum”, he managed to whisper. The clouds were descending upon him. He felt buoyed into space as the darkness settled and blanketed his vision. He smiled as he floated into a vacuum...

Meanwhile a crowd had gathered around the scene trying to digest the tragic drama that had unfolded before their naked eyes. Amidst them was the mad man, still completely nude, gaping and gazing at the multitude of people. He pushed himself and squeezed himself to the front of the crowd, looked at the blood soaked body and dropped a crushed rose flower beside the body.

“Ooh! *Neko!* Madness!” he groaned and walked away leaving the crowd staring quizzically at him.

Ouma Christopher E. Werimo

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SHORT FICITON

The Fish

Ashley Williams

Rita Townsend did not sweat; that was the first odd thing the ladies on Montpelier Street noticed. Sitting on stoops where it was cooler, wiping dripping grease from their foreheads with the back of their hands, the women would suck their teeth at the way her skin was always cool and dry. Scorching saffron rays pierced her cumin-colored flesh and went straight to the core, trapped by sealed pores. The second odd thing was her hips. A Pisces in polka-dotted spandex and a matching solid shirt, her hips were rationale and wide as a walkway, turning the corner before the rest of her could follow. That was magic, mesmerizing hip conjure practiced by those women from their country childhoods, the ones that knew the herbs and how to work the roots. But Rita Townsend was a city-girl, twenty-two. Still, no girlhood switch practicing could do that. Her voice was potent enough to slice the muggy summertime air and, with legs cocked open, she rode bikes borrowed from the brown-colored kids already busy playing hide-and-seek. She was something else. The secret powers of the ancestors were buried deep beneath her earthen flesh, embedded in unseen bones, and the whisper of wind that followed her words was frightening. They were like memories that cut the skin and buried in the flesh beneath. That was the Rita Townsend strong enough to make Kincaid leave his lovely wife, with good-stuff so good even Kincaid, mature and charming enough to trick the ears with smooth words sharp enough to puncture the mind, had been coaxed to slip his thick brown fingers around her waist. But the women knew for sure that Rita was a conjure-woman after she had snubbed the church mothers, dressed holy in white, declining to attend Sunday-sermon.

When Kincaid left Marley for good all the stoop-sitting ladies did with the tongue what they were forbidden to do with the flesh.

“Now what you expect from a girl like that?” Aileen questioned, spitting-out the words with disgust.

“Kincaid ain’t have to do this, Aileen,” Marley retorted, her thin lips quivering.

“Kincaid? Marley, Kincaid a man, he gone do what he gone do. Rita knew he was your husband, seen yall together all the time. She a mess, a little hussy. Running around this block all day but won’t dare step a foot in church. That girl need a blessing.”

“She need God, that’s what she need,” June-Bug interjected.

They shook their heads in agreement.

The final thing that convinced Marley of Rita Townsend’s ungodly conjure-powers was the sudden flooding in the tiny veins beneath her skin, protruding sea-green streams that flowed from neck to ankle. Marley Brown was a forty-year-old woman who played no games when it came to her lovely appearance. Attributing the popping veins to the uncomely heat of the season, she purchased Veins-Be-Gone from a cornerstore on N. Calvert and 24th. The tingling cream was ineffective. When the flesh under her eyes began to droop, suddenly swollen and darkened,

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SHORT FICITON

she realized that it was Rita swimming in the crimson of her veins, the conjure-woman's invisible fingers pushing Marley's breasts to the belly. Never before had Kincaid's affairs physically affected her. So she called the hot season of '68 Sag Summer.

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Kincaid Brown blamed it all on the plumb-lipped lady whose tree-trunk thighs were as raw and slippery as just-caught salmon, and Marley would believe him. The sweetened engine was what finally did it. The dead car was serious. There was no money in the bank. Kincaid already knew that Rita Townsend was not the culprit that had tipped the jug of juice into the gas tank. Leslie Simpson had done that in the middle of the night when Kincaid was sleeping, slipping a small note written with flaming red lipstick on the windshield, "Now you know not to play with me, niggah!" But it was Rita Townsend that was the conjure-woman, the Bi Nka Bi¹ that had put a root on Kincaid and his home. And even past the thinning in the thickness of his wallet and the sugar that choked the car and left it sputtering was the incredible realization that a root had been worked against his whole house.

He was walking home, straight down Harford Road and a sharp right onto the 1700 block of Montpelier. Marley would understand this, even if they could never discuss Leslie's purple panties that Rita had thrown in his face before storming forever out of his life. Gone was the sweetness that rushed to his brain and made him light-headed. That sublime high he experienced from the tart taste of #9 RED on the tip of tongue was eternally deflated. Rita Townsend had snapped.

"What you did to me ain't nothing compared to what's in store for you, Kincaid," Rita had promised before walking out. And that was it.

"Ecclesiastes 9:12²," Kincaid had whispered, watching the door close.

He was standing in front of the home he had willingly departed five months previously. The January air was frigid. He sighed. Marley, his wife, was inside. Kincaid, at forty-seven, felt tired finally. He was home for good.

Marley was sitting in the living room when Kincaid opened the door.

"My good Lord, Kincaid!" she gasped.

"Marley..."he hung his head.

¹ Bi Nka Bi – West African Adrinka symbol meaning “no one should bite the other.” It warns against disharmony. The image is based on two fish biting each other tails.

² Ecclesiastes 9:12: for man also doesn't know his time. As the fish that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare, even so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly on them

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Marley rose.

"My money, my car, its gone, baby. Rita gone too. Gone," he said this with finality.

"I'm old now, Kincaid. See all these wrinkles?"

"I know, Marley. I'm old too."

"We just need to pray, Kincaid. We need to ask God what to do."

They fell to their knees.

"Father God, bless Rita," he whispered. "She is evil Father. No good, and she need you."

Kincaid did not pray for himself. He already knew God.

Ashley Williams

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SHORT FICITON

Jasmine's Muse

Mike Wilson

We first found out that my younger sister Jasmine was a little different last year at Christmas dinner. She's always been a bright girl, true, but sometimes the things she does aren't really what you would call "bright". Maybe you'd be better off classifying her actions as "different". Yes, "different" sounds like the right word to describe her.

Last Christmas, Jasmine was asleep in one of the bedrooms upstairs while everybody else was downstairs playing with our presents, talking about how good the ham was, and wishing that, just once, it would snow on the dry Palmdale ground outside. The Christmas before, I had spent with my Aunt Merlyn in New Jersey, and it always snows there. But not in California—most people enjoy that fact; they like going to the beach and frying like an egg in December, but not me; I'd rather it be cold. Jasmine likes it cold too, that's why she didn't want to be downstairs by the fireplace like the rest of us; she wanted to stay inside grandma's cold room. Her room has been cold ever since she passed and Jasmine is always the first one to go in and lay on grandma's old bed whenever we come up to Palmdale for a holiday. I'd never really been inside grandma's room before because I was afraid that her spirit was still inside. I had never seen her spirit, never heard it either; but I always felt something eerie whenever I'd walk past the door at night. Whatever it was, Jasmine always said that she didn't feel it, and that the room was just as comfortable as her own at home. So after a few trips up to Palmdale, everybody had gotten used to the fact that Jasmine would probably be in grandma's room whenever no one had seen her around for a little while. Everybody just carried on like Jasmine wasn't even in the house, especially my aunt and uncle.

Aunt Penny and Uncle Steve were drunk, as usual, and whenever they'd had a few drinks they'd start acting wild and embarrassing momma. They never acted that way when grandma was alive, but now they cursed at each other and sometimes even hit one another, right in front of me too. At first I didn't pay attention long enough to find out what the fussing was all about, but after a while, I stopped playing on the floor and listened to them and that's when I found out that Aunt Penny had been sleeping with another man. "Oh, bitch please, we wouldn't have no problems if you would learn to keep yo' damn legs closed when I'm out of town," I heard Uncle Steve say, then Aunt Penny cut him off and they went back to screaming again.

"Look, we ain't gone have all this fighting on no holiday", my mother said as she tried to break the two apart, "Don't yaw see all these kids up in here? Yaw gone fight in front of the kids? On Christmas?"

Momma always did have a way of making people look dumb when they were really acting dumb. She was a good momma too, especially when Christmas came. She tried her best to spoiled me and Jasmine, she was real flexible and pretty too. Momma could stand in line at the grocery store for an hour, come home and see that I had a "D" on my report card, cook dinner, and still feel good enough to watch TV with me and my sister and tuck us in the bed. She was always ready to listen, but I know when Jasmine finally came downstairs that day, she was

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caught off guard.

To say more of Jasmine, she was six years old, and full of ebony. She wasn't just dark, she was a powerful dark, like energy flowed through her small, smooth arms. She had a perfect little head and perfect little teeth, and her eyes were shaped like baby leaves or something. Her head was topped with poofy curls that me and momma liked to play in when we are all watching TV together.

She came down the stairs crying and holding a blanket in her hands. Everybody looked up at the same time, I ran toward her first to see what was wrong.

"I saw grandma upstairs and she told me everything, everything there is to know, Chelsea!" she said to me as I tried to pick her up to calm her down.

"Girl, what are you talking about, you know grandma passed and went home to be with the Lord". She was making me feel scared, like grandma really was upstairs telling her stuff.

"She is upstairs, she told me yaw wouldn't believe me if I said something because yaw haven't seen the other side."

Aunt Penny and Uncle Steve finally looked normal; they weren't fighting, they were holding hands and looking at one another. Momma ran up to us and took Jasmine back over with her to the couch. She had a new look on her face, not the usual relaxed one. That's when I really started to get scared.

"Baby, listen to me. I want you to tell momma exactly what you are talking about ok? Can you do that for momma?" Jasmine nodded through her tears.

"I was laying in the bed and I looked up and saw grandma standing next to me. She had on that same blue scarf she used to always wear." She reached in her pocket and pulled out the blue scarf. "See, this one right here."

My mother looked shocked now.

"Whenever I have this scarf in my hands, I can hear everything that ya'll are thinking"

"What?" my mother said full of confusion. She looked worried.

"Like, I know none of yaw believe me. You think I had a bad dream, Chelsea wants me to stop pretending so she can get back to her toys, Uncle Steve is hungry and mad, and Aunt Penny is thinking about a man named Geoffrey," everyone froze.

"My God, child, where are you getting all of that from?" I could see that momma was getting agitated now, and so was Uncle Steve. But she was right, at least as far as what she said about me, I wanted to get back to playing. The next thing she said really got to us.

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“Grandma said for Uncle Steve not to worry at all, because even though the sun shines, the day ain’t complete with out the moon.” We all looked confused by then, but momma took the blue scarf from Jasmine and told her to eat some food. She seemed fine after a while.

Then two weeks later, late one night, the phone was ringing like crazy. Momma answered it and Uncle Steve’s sobbing voice came through in spurts. He was loud and I could hear him say, “Penny is dead! Penny is dead!” Aunt Penny got hit by one of those big 18-wheeler trucks in the rain, driving drunk on the freeway. Right after she hung up the phone, we heard jasmine scream from way down the hall. She was in her bed sleeping but all the while she was saying “Penny is dead! Penny is dead!” like she was chanting it. Momma woke her up and the first thing Jasmine asked was, “Where is Aunt Penny?”

Don’t worry, baby just go back to sleep for now” Momma said as she rocked little Jasmine back and forth. Then momma looked at me and I looked back at her, and that’s when we knew Jasmine was different.

Mike Wilson

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ESSAYS

Snow

Jemiah Barrow

I have my mother's voice. It is the one part of me that is hers. My long limbs, brown skin, dark, round eyes, snub nose- all these belong to my father. But my voice: its pitch and inflections, the way it rises when I'm upset or laughing, the watery weight it holds when I'm tired- these are the exact reflections of my mother in me.

My mother gave me her voice one cold winter morning when I was twelve. She leaned over my bed before there was any light out and whispered in my ear, promised me warm tea and the cold, comforting goodness of snow and hot vanilla syrup... all I had to do was rise. I dreamed of snow before I was fully awake. I opened my eyes to my mother's own hazel orbs and she kissed my forehead before lifting me from the bed.

It was early in the morning; the sun was still dawning, slaughtered on the horizon. The unlit parts of the sky were sapped of colour. My mother and I were in the kitchen boiling syrup on the stove. Large white flurries had descended late in the night before and we were making waxed snow. The frozen diathesis of the sky outside the kitchen window had its opposite in the warm, sugary, vanilla air that enveloped us in the kitchen. I had collected a large pot of fresh clean snow and set it down by the back door to keep cold as we cooked the syrup. The snow glowed with a silver light of its own as though it was remembering or dreaming about the moonlight that it had reflected the night before. I was drinking mint tea and my mother was stirring the syrup and we didn't speak- just sat quietly enjoying the patina of home and family that always covers a warm kitchen in winter.

When the syrup started to boil she covered it and turned down the fire, she would let it scorch slightly so that it would have the perfect heat and consistency to pour over the snow. Then she walked over to the pot of snow in the corner and scooped some into her hands. She held them over the sink and snow melted slowly in warmth of her blood pulsing under the delicate skin of her palms. The water she held in her hands glowed as I had noticed the snow did earlier but now with the golden light of the early morning sun coming through the kitchen window. My mother blew on her hands to make the snow melt completely. She then cupped her hands and sipped the water from them and held them out to me to do the same. In all this time we had not said a word to each other; she had pulled me out of bed – her shy and gangly middle daughter – in order to share this winter morning with me, I had not thought to question why. I went to her and I drank the water from her hands...

The water was cold and warm at the same time; after I drank, she held her hands to my cheeks and I could feel the warmth of my face and the cold of her hands mingling in the minute space between her skin and mine. The water burned cold in my throat, but I could feel it resting hot in my stomach after I swallowed. I could feel the light of it pulsing inside me, spreading into my veins, and I felt the familiar spread of warmth I knew from drinking hot black tea after coming in from the cold. I blinked and my mother pressed her forehead to mine and squeezed my head between her hands. She smiled. I could feel all her feeling for me- her loving, and losing, and wishing, and being disappointed and watching me grow- loosed into the small space of the kitchen. I could feel all that feeling pushing against the walls of the house, enveloping me and she breathed it into me: her seeing and her warm, big heart. And between us there was nothing, no difference, no secrets.

I smiled back at her and she laughed. And I laughed with her, with all the joy of our sudden understanding. My laugh sounded exactly the same as hers, my voice was her voice. It always had been.

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ESSAYS

Up And Out And In The Round **Ti'elle Saraa**

I adore small birds. They move like little ornaments. Their charms are of the bundled variety. They hold place unto themselves. As if packaged by God as a boy, they are generously tucked with awful secrets. Small birds posture a round elegance; they are wholesome. Women must study birds. They quiver, within us, the little girls—napping—to *get up!*

I dreamt of birds on the second Sunday in March, one week after I became 23. I dreamt of 5 small white birds after doing the laundry that Sunday. Doing the laundry irresistibly puts me to sleep; that Sunday, I did not resist it; I walked into my room and found my spot on the sofa, curled right up; the final sound that I remember was the chatter of many birds convening at my window.

I dreamt of 5 small white birds in a rusting dark cage. I knew that I was dreaming. I saw myself murder one of the small birds that I adore. I poured far far too much water into its dish. The bird fell in. Its company lapped periodically; their appetites were discreet. The bird that I murdered imbibed too much of the water that I gave it. It floated under, beautifully.

The bird was dead. I did my best maternal magic to make it move. I kissed its lime beak; I wanted to make it better. I blew across its black bean eyes; I wanted to make them flicker. I held it inside my hand so that it could draw warmth from my instincts to resuscitate—nothing. I put it down, in the merry company of all the other white, fresh and prancing birds. But nothing. It would not jump or play.

The bird was dead. I knew that I was dreaming. I could feel myself obey the wet sense that I was not big enough to make it open and active. I did not ordain its first breath; and now, in its shut form, I possessed not the wind to make it sing—not a note—not ever again. I knew that I was dreaming. This vulnerable judgment, it nudged me awake.

Upon rising from this dream, I asked God if the small white bird was my Monreaux. Was all the pouring in his caged space the gathering of my tears? I was so full of sadness before his indifference. I was so tucked of so much water. He told me that he gave away his peace. Sometimes the sky is so generous of water that it destroys all things beneath its rain.
Birds cut out.

Upon rising from this dream, I saved it. I recorded it in my journal so that I would have some artifact of its blessing. It feels like a strategy, but it got carved out as a poem—a plan to keep, I suppose, so that I will know when to cut out—like birds—if ever there is so much water:

On Good Housekeeping of Herself

Tie to no/thing dead.
Keep scissors behind your ears.
Admire no tombs. Heal.

Sometimes misery is watched like the time on a clock. And that lump of the departed hangs on until it bands—rigid—around a finger. But that inelegant bulge, it *is* separable.

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ESSAYS

What My Mother Taught Me **Michelle Wheatley**

Pride is what makes the world go round. Love has nothing to do with it. One never wants to admit wrong. One never wants to bow to another greater force. And yet, I learned that one never really has enough time to say everything one has to say. Growing up, at six, at eight, at twelve, one thinks one has all the time in the world. One lets the world come at a leisurely pace, sure that there is some benevolent God eager to fulfill one's every wish, eager to give one more time. It's easy to believe that, though, isn't it, when life is the endless idyllic summer of one's dreams?

The only problem is . . . dreaming ends. And with this abrupt finish comes the realization that the only thing important in life is speaking up, regardless of arrogance, regardless of the things that cause life to become petty and mean, regardless of hate and anger and jealousy.

It's not hard to remember exactly who I was a year ago. There's still a little of that girl left, trapped under the worry and cynicism of the past year. I was sixteen, vain, self-centered, carefree, eager to be free of parents, restrictions . . . everything. I was, still am, in some ways, a typical teenage girl.

Makeup, boys, parties, popularity-all seem more important than anything else when one is a sixteen year old. Society associates sixteen- not fourteen, not even fifteen- with a coming-of-age, a maturing. Debutante balls and "Sweet Sixteen" parties abound. With the separation between the basics of childhood and adult, came the advent of the teenager in the early 1940's. The gap grew larger as children were expected to stay children longer and as adults were expected to have children later. Despite these societal changes, the age of maturity stayed the same or came even earlier. The modern teenager, half-child, half-adult, is nothing more than a carefree, if not careless, imitation of an adult.

At sixteen, I thought everyone, everything, rotated around me. It didn't matter that my mother was never home, away in Zion, Ill., for cancer treatment. It didn't matter that my dad was constantly shuttling back and forth. It didn't matter that my grades were in a free fall. I was certain there was a safety net. The day my mother died was the day I realized there was no one to catch me.

There are days, even now, where I sit and think, maybe, just maybe, if I hadn't been the kind of teenager I was, my mother would still be alive. It's foolish, I know, but I can't help myself. I'll see a piece of mail come through the door addressed to a Mrs. Cecilia Wheatley and I'll say to myself, "One more person to call." It can't be easy for these voices, these shadows, on the other end to hear. Often I'll cultivate an air of vaguely clinical disinterest. "Oh, didn't you know?" I'll say, "she died February of last year." I hope to never hear my voice catch, an echo of someone else's disbelief. "You don't believe it?" Until I open my mouth, I must admit, I never believe it either. Thankfully, these phone calls come less often as of late.

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I used to distance myself from them, from these other's pain, these churchgoers, these family members. I could hear their hearts shattering like glass within their chests. "Cecilia Wheatley is dead." It was easy to pick up a piece of their heart and grind it into dust between my fingers. This pain, this dilution of pain, made me strangely giddy. With this giddiness, came a feeling of satisfaction. I was not alone in my pain. "And for you, a tenth of what I feel when I close my eyes at night." Knowing others hurt made my own ache that much sweeter, that much more justified.

I always thought that others' pain, would, perhaps, assuage my own guilt, my own shame. None of these others had come to see her, had sat by her bedside late into the night or played her favorite hymns in the beautiful, hollow tones of a flute. Reminding them of their own guilt made it easier to carry my own. My cruelty, their gasps and cries, would drown out the words unspoken below my heart. I had locked them there the night of my mother's death. The words had fought to get free, to scorch the inside of my throat and burn through my cheeks, in their rush to travel to my mother's ears.

I know I battled them, my arms aching from the struggle to hold them inside me, kneeling there at my mother's side. I could do nothing more with so many surrounding me. Tears were a sign of weakness. I was not weak, and if I was, others should not know of it. My pride demanded it of me. "I can't speak," I whispered, feeling the words ricochet soundlessly in my skull, knowing those same words would never escape my mouth. "I can't. There are people here, people who can see through me and witness my pain. No."

It's sad, now that I think of it, how small the words I ached to say were. "I love you." These words, so tiny, so full, no matter the pain I felt upon speaking them, would have brought my mother joy. These words, this indication of the end of my summer, needed to be spoken. And I couldn't do it. I couldn't allow it to end. I held on to some misguided hope, that if I did not say those words, nothing would change. I wished these words to be the tether to hold my mother to me. If I kept them to myself, she would not leave. My hubris did not, and could not, save my mother.

Perhaps Fate, or God, was laughing in the face of my puny efforts. I will never know. But I do know nothing is more important than speaking up. This guilt, this knowledge of my weakness, will never recede. . .that out of my own pride, I could not lessen someone else's burden. My guilt will not disappear. And despite the lesson it carries, or perhaps because of it, I hope it never does. Nothing is more important than speaking up.

Michelle Wheatley

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SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

The Amistad is always looking for fresh literary voices. If you are that fresh voice, and you'd like to publish in *The Amistad*, please send us your unpublished works:

1. Short Fiction- 2000 words or less
2. Poetry- You may submit 2-3 poems which are not to exceed 40 lines in length per poem
3. Essays- 2000 words or less
4. Interviews and Book/Film Reviews 1500 words or less.

*If you are unsure about whether we'd be interested in a submission you may send us your query.

We accept submissions via email:

1. When submitting please include your writing as an attachment- Microsoft Word Documents (.doc), Text Files (.txt) and Rich Text Files (.rtf) are all acceptable. Do not include your submission in the body of the email.
2. Include your full name, title, and the genre in the file name. (ex. Barrow-Jemiah_Snow_essay.doc)
3. Please compress multiple pieces into a .zip file.
4. Include a short biography not to exceed 75 words, within the body of the email. If you are unsure what to include in your bio please refer to our contributors list for examples.
5. Additionally, we request contact information, full name, a telephone number, and an email address.
*Please be advised that we include contributors' email addresses in their short biographies, so only give us an email address that you are comfortable with the general public potentially using to contact you.
6. Please follow this format as closely as possible. We need the format to be followed in order to review submission and contact contributors as efficiently as possible. Be advised that we will not look at or accept submissions that are formatted incorrectly- you will receive a reply asking that you resubmit.

* If you have any questions regarding our submission process please feel free to contact us before you submit your work.

All queries and submissions may be emailed to us at submitamistadhu@aol.com

In our Spring 2007 issue we're going to focus on the genre of fiction. We will publish a comparatively small amount of poetry and essays, however. For this issue we're looking for a wide variety of short fiction which discusses all aspects of the human experience. We will also look closely at any queries concerning interviews of fiction writers and reviews of short fiction collections and novels. If you are interested in doing an interview please query us first. We will be accepting submissions from January to February 15, 2007.

In Fall 2007 we're planning to focus our issue on the theme of Ars Poetica. We are looking for submissions of poetry or prose concerning the art and craft of writing. More information on this submission process will be made available in March 2007.