[Alternate Route]

Issue 16 Winter 2025

⁅Alternate Route⁆

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JC Alfier

's (they/them) most recent book of poetry, The Shadow Field, was published by Louisiana Literature Press (2020). Journal credits include Faultline, New York Quarterly, Notre Dame Review, Penn Review, River Styx, Southern Poetry Review and Vassar Review. They are also an artist doing collage and double-exposure work after the style of Toshiko Okanoue, Francesca Woodman, Deborah Turbeville, and especially Katrien De Blauwer.

Gender Affirmation Theory / This Being What the Body Meant

. . . Let me put it to you this way:

My flesh gamboled from puzzle to puzzle

— a half-dreamed fiction,

till I kicked my own riddles into ruins.

Left the male beside his dim clothing,

his dimmer heart. And so today

I sing the tremulous hazard

of what was born like a sound

that wakens you before daylight:

water falling into water

through the warming dark.

Her Oldest Brother and the New October Moon

A slither beneath an overstory of red oak and white pine.

She watched fog give the sun its glaucous eye.

It was like being snowblind.

Complicit were sparrows heedless of God's eye.

Her brother dropped a deer out of season.

He'd unsealed private land with bolt cutters.

She asked him something and he asked where the fuck she's been.

Said the hardwood kindling needs cutting.

She can't find the plate that rusted off her bumper.

It's too damn early for cold like this.

Tonight she'll gather windfall apples from the widow's trees.

Her brother will stalk the dark thigh of the moon.

Russell Chamberlain

was born in Nashville, Tennessee, but currently lives in the Pacific Northwest with his family. He recently published an article in the Salt Weekly (issue 35) about the independent music scene in Nashville, Tennessee. He writes short stories, fiction, and poetry. He has two nonfiction pieces coming out this winter, one with Waxing and Waning and one with Beyond Words Anthology.

Find a way home

It's a wet and slushy November morning, and I'm up early to start the day fresh, although it was my 3rd day on the road, so I was anything but fresh. I woke up to dull light glowing around the curtains in an unfamiliar room. The trip started in Nashville, Tennessee, and I am now somewhere just past Omaha. Outside my hotel window, I see the town coming to life as well. It's just a highway stop with a gas station and some fast food joints, so calling it a town is somewhat of an exaggeration. These buildings look forlorn and soiled amidst the otherwise empty landscape. They seem like lonely glimpses of a larger world, offering little to the locals. There is no activity or hope for miles around this time of year.

The harvested fields are fog-covered, creating an eerie yet somewhat beautiful view. When I visited one summer in my youth, my aunt, who had spent her entire life in Nebraska, spoke of the black fields of winter, and its empty desolation all came clear to me now. She wanted me to understand that the summer I saw was a passing phase, and the empty, soggy depression awaited them in winter. I understood very well with the sight be-

fore me, but I would not stay here, so the desperate lands felt more tolerable at this moment, even beautiful in their own way.

Mark J. Mitchell

has been a working poet for 50 years. He's the author of five full-length collections, and six chapbooks. His latest collection is Something To Be from Pski's Porch Publishing. A novel, A Book of Lost Songs is due out in Spring of 2025.He's fond of baseball, Louis Aragon, Dante, and his wife, activist Joan Juster. He lives in San Francisco where he points out pretty things.

HIS PILGRIM VOICES

Pilgrim, you said
in your cowboy voice
when you took off
to explore the world.

Pilgrims, you'd murmur
in your sinful voice
to those fallen wives
who bathed when you left.

Pilgrims? You asked
in your nun-like voice
asking me to follow
like your monkish servant.

Pilgrims, you'd welcome
in your innkeeper voice
keeping wine and ale
flowing into both our mouths.

Pilgrim, you asked,
in your coarse miller's voice,
do you think I should
want her? She wants me.

Pilgrim, you whispered
in your dying priest voice,
I'll confess only once
to you before my long silence.

You left me, pilgrim,
in your echoing voice
with a fistful of fragments
I may never sort out.

A LATE PHILOSOPHER

He dropped his words like fairy-tale breadcrumbs
to escape (later) the forest he chose.
He knew his own greatness was enough to numb
certain scholars. Get a free pass. With those
and a tender, bright mistress, his vile sins
wouldn't stain profound thoughts. He lined up pens.
His pipe leaned against his books. And he thought
about everything but what he'd really done.
On some cold nights, he dreamed angry nuns.
Stern. Sad. Saying, you forgot all we taught.

MONDAY MORNING

While questioning
yesterday's breakfast
she asked eggs
for an answer
they could not give.

Toast stood guard,
silent as toast
tends to be.
The eggs
would not escape.

From the cup
coffee steam rises
like a melody,
summoning the sun
to her table.

She's lost interest
in her interrogation.

After retiring as curator of historic maps at Princeton University Library,

John Delaney

moved out to Port Townsend, WA, and has traveled widely, preferring remote, natural settings. Since that transition, he's published Waypoints (2017), a collection of place poems, Twenty Questions (2019), a chapbook, Delicate Arch (2022), poems and photographs of national parks and monuments, and Galápagos (2023), a collaborative chapbook of his son Andrew's photographs and his poems. Nile, a chapbook of poems and photographs about Egypt, appeared in May 2024.

Camino Days

Day 0: León, Spain

María de Regla de León Cathedral, begun in the 1200s

Faith as a UFO

It's as if a UFO had landed
in the square and drawn a curious crowd.
Staggering in size and weight, it must have come
from another world, you think, over-awed
by its commanding sentient silence.
Ramparts high and thick. Spires pierce the sky
like transmitting towers, but what wavelengths?
Supernatural stonework laser-cut
and some kind of solar stained-glass panels.
What's the source of its magnetic power
that's drawing so many onlookers in?
How long can your uncertainties hold out?

Unbelievable as it seems, pilgrim,
a leap of faith will overcome your doubt.

Day 12: Sarria → Mercadoiro (17 km)

No Reservations

A gorgeous day. Stunning gravel paths. Woods.
Fields with stone walls. Went to the pilgrim store
to purchase walking poles for my sister
who had left them and her hat behind.
Reached Mercadoiro around 2 pm,
but missed out on a private room—lucky
to get beds, though, when we are winging it.
"

Octopus was the pilgrim menu's "meat",
with salad and a tarte. A first for me.
I'll admit I had some reservations.
Our dinner group of nine consisted of
2 Canadians, 1 New Zealander,
1 German, 3 Americans, and 2 Aussies.
They shared their interesting life stories.

Day 14: Hospital de la Cruz → Casanova (19.1 km)

Bounty

A misty morn, a sunny afternoon:
almost twenty kilometers today.
Passed an old couple with pail, gathering
chestnuts on the ground. Also, an orchard
with unpicked apples, apples on the ground.
Numerous times, while walking under trees,
acorns came raining down in the warm breeze.

A Dutch couple, in a labor of love,
was tackling the Camino triad:
she in a car, he on foot, placing a bike
ahead each night so he could ride it back
to her after reaching it the next day.
I never learned her illness or what she did
while he was hoofing/biking it, hybrid.

H.L. Dowless
is a thirty five year veteran writer who loves
traveling and living life on the edge.

Take Me Away!

A special place out on the shore,

Tucked away among the Yaupon and the trees,

A boat many people adore,

I pause in wait for a certain breeze.

A gust of wind soon eases me along,

Now I'm flying out on the water,

I'm singing Freebird's holy song!

I don't have to obey anybody's demanded order.

Sailing,

Take me away!

Take me to an island of paradise adventure,

Let me feel the angel's soothing sway.

I truly hate this life of enduring secular indenture.

Reality is what we make it,

It's what we labor for.

Look at me just a-shaking it,

It's my poetry that multitudes adore!

When I'm out here on the ocean

The surging water beckons me,

I move forward with the mighty motion,

It's a dynamic end I subconsciously seek.

If I had a choice of many more years to live,

Only to die a nameless nobody;

Or to choose and perish tomorrow

And leave earth a mighty hero.

I fear not any potential horror and would cheerfully choose

Death on the morrow.

Sailing,

Take me far away,

To the land I've always heard.

I long for an enduring golden day,

Far away from this secular drudgery of earth

Constantine Contogenis

is one of two finalists for the 2024 Pablo Neruda Poetry Prize. His collection Ikaros (Word Press, 2004) won a First Prize Open Voice Poetry Award". He co-translated Songs of the Kisaeng Courtesan Poetry of the Last Korean Dynasty (BOA Editions, 1997). His work's in Joining Music with Reason 34 Poets, British and American Oxford '04-'09, chosen by Christopher Ricks (Waywiser P.,2011); and Pomegranate Seeds Greek-American Poetry, ed. Dean Kostos (Somersert Hall P., 2008).

MEN PLAY MEN

"I say, men play men, not hole cards."
A new player, he mimed peeking-under-to-not-see
his down cards. Reading him: we called up weak
smiles. He bet big on some promising up cards—

such a nerve, he owned up, to not look under
for the possible heart flush, which he said, "Beginner's luck,"
straight-faced at showdown, "must've filled from the hole."
When showing
an open-four-card-straight, he went all in, revealing

(to help us out) that he had seen his hole cards, a ploy we
couldn't read since he was new and hadn't. But when he
learned, before us, his own tell for betting blind, to betray
in betting seeing, we learned the fear in playing.

CLEAR THE DECK

"What occurred beneath the surface does not bear contemplation."
—John Keegan, *Intelligence in War*

'Dive! Dive!'
Sir! the boy…
'Level out at dream-depth.'
He's on the sinking deck.
What? No, I was last down the hatch.
Sir…
OK, OK… 'Belay dive. Man overboard!'

(All I needed. The boy'll be time-proud now—all this fear of drowning—Won't be able to read him a thing.)

'Prepare to surface. Surface!' Alert lookouts. Cast out lines.
Aye, sir. Shall I 'This is not a drill'?
Isn't it?
Sir?
He's not crew. Though you're right, of course, Not the point! But this fear we all…
it's not—well, yes, he'll breathe in bubbles—drink some diesel, choke a bit.
Sir? I don't… The boy…

It's this talk of ways to go. Stating preferences, you see? I mean,--
Naturally, the body doesn't love being under. Lurching, flailing about. All true.
Sir…(you all right)? The rescue divers! Passwords, sir.
Ah— day code. Say, 'Time's a flotation device.'
V-very good, sir.

This fear, I say. Stops you thinking the next. I mean, without next, what?
Mind leaks into brain. Then there's Have-to-know and Always. Must, Now.
Should I …
Remind crew. Yes. Tell the lines out, left to right. Those dangling loose

ends…he sees one, reads into it, grabs on. Like following a story.

Um, done sir. Lines out. All's ready for…

Good. 'Divers go! Lively now!'

Thank you. Cutting it close. Sir.

You mean, we're making good time.

Sorry?

We've taken one minute, thus far, one, of his dryer ones. While the soppier ones, well, they last much longer.

What if, sir, they can't grab him?

He'll catch on…up…get absorbed. All in the story line.
Reading himself in, to the twists and twirls, pulling for his favorite endings.
Then crew hoists him aboard!
If not, well, I've come to believe in a final, quick…a Meant Struggle:
Yes, he grapples his panic, and…shudders, no, convulses his way through.

Thomas Piekarski

is a former editor of the California State Poetry Quarterly. His poetry has appeared in such publications as The Journal, Poetry Salzburg, Modern Literature, The Museum of Americana, South African Literary Journal, and Home Planet News. His books of poetry are Ballad of Billy the Kid, Monterey Bay Adventures, Mercurial World, Aurora California, and Opus Borealis.

Cruising Santa Cruz

The radiant soda of the seashore fashions
fun, foam and freedom
—Delmore Schwartz

Soul on cruise control, a walk along Cliff Drive
looking down two hundred feet to the beach below
all is peaceful, minimal foam, only slightest surf,
while on the other side of the continent a hurricane
tears through neighborhoods, cutting power, bridges
washed out, buildings destroyed, people drowned,
such destruction formerly unheard of. Six states
ravaged, thousands displaced, and still some swear
global warming is nothing but a fairy tale, a hoax.

On oceanside sand a volleyball tournament, courts
lined, contestants mainly adolescent athletes getting
their first taste of stiff competition. They spike, dive,
set, huff, sweat, may the better team be the winner.

Gulls pluck plankton from kelp piled on the shore.
Dream Inn built into a cliff edge faces the beach,
pricey rooms stacked ten stories high with views
out onto the endless Pacific: foreign freighters
off in the distance gliding along the horizon line,
Champagne Yacht with a full load of passengers,
surfers waiting for an adequate wave as schoolboys
clutch paddleboards braving the frigid water.
Watching them a woman with children, umbrella up,
sun tan lotion applied, cell phone and kick ball,
relaxed as if nothing else in the world really matters.

At Boardwalk's edge the Cocoanut Grove ballroom
that once hosted illustrious figures of the Swing era,
Benny Goodman, Lionel Hampton, Tommy Dorsey,
now a prime venue, upstairs haven for special events.

The rides in silence, fall come, though summer heat
yet beats down with its generous life-instilling gifts.
Big Dipper roller coaster mysteriously still, overhead
gondola, favorite of tots and kissing couples, inert,

Tilt-a-Whirl and bumper cars on sabbatical, corn dog
and lemonade station now closed for the season.

A few miles up the coast near tranquil Half Moon Bay
numerous pumpkin patches strung along the highway,
considerable cooling weather ahead wished by many.

Under the ballroom an arcade of preposterous games,
the huge room dark, lit only by multicolored lights
blinking on and off that flash from every machine
in a blinding blizzard of Space Age fantasy—bizarre
encounters, challenges, man versus electronic mind,
this place a breeding ground for the clinically insane.
Two hundred foot palms don't sway as they would
with leaves blowing only one way on a windy day.

Though rides are dormant the rest of the Boardwalk
remains brisk, locals and visitors from distant regions
strolling along, their cares on hold, beholden of sun,
frivolous. Families on leave from reality, from pain,
distraction, politics, obstruction, traffic, jobs, war.

In the near distance a whale watchers boat bobs along
tacking north toward the lighthouse. Two hipster
throwbacks from the Sixties suck deep, pass a spliff.

The lonely, disgraced, rejected, scorned, debunked,
brokenhearted, or otherwise forlorn will find here
ample amusements to dash fears. Start with food:
deep-fried Twinkies, cotton candy, ice cream swirl,
turkey leg, caramel apple, scrumptious burger,
the Boardwalk shake, crunchy shrimp and more.

Play Miniature Golf, Skee-Ball, Roll-A-Bingo, Air
Hockey. Visit the Magic Shop, maybe bring home
terrific secret tricks and special effects technology.
Take a load off, find a table, gaze at rolling waves.
Allow the weight of the world to quit your psyche.

One wouldn't suspect nowadays that this esplanade
was once engulfed by an enormous storm surge,
nearly wiped off the map. There's Neptune's Palace,
its grand facade inviting any and all. Beside it set

behind glass panels crown jewel of the entire venue,
the inimitable Laughing Sal. Once pride of Playland
in San Francisco, Sal delighted and frightened two
generations, placed right at the entrance. Thousands
paused to watch her cackle with a screeching laugh
that could initiate panic. Old Playland torn down
and replaced with condos, so Sal now resides here.
Haunted and haunting, she pretends to be funny but
scares the wits out of kids. With scraggly red hair,
two missing front teeth and freckles she frightens
as she rocks back and forth with shrieking laughter
that repeats itself perpetually in a prerecorded loop.

On a clear day such as this you can readily see
all the way to Monterey peninsula. Here the pier
is lengthier than there, or even Santa Monica.
Walk past a row of immigrants casting lines
on the way to a succession of typical west coast
souvenir shops: shells, magnets, fleeces, shorts,
broad assortment sure to lift the weariest guest.
Then enter the realm of seafood establishments,
reviewed, given ratings, ballyhooed, patronized
over decades. Which selected depends on your
taste, for all offer splendid views of the Pacific.
If you choose Riva's at lunch time you're likely
to have to loiter and ogle a while awaiting a table.

Have your seafood feast and then amble back down
the opposite side of the pier. Note that man with legs
amputated at the waist seated, back propped against
the pier's wooden railing, merely peering, no can
nor hat to collect donations, assumed content to sit
and watch folks pass, people watch in wonderment.

Sea lions, those blubbery brutes, not seen but heard,
resting upon cross timbers underneath, they bellow
a boisterous, shrill stream of loud barks and whines.

Later in the day at twilight, no sunset more stunning
than over this Pacific: our glowing yellow sphere
dips below the horizon like a donut slowly dunked.
A carnival of brilliant colors appears high in the sky,
carmine, royal blue, magenta, turquoise and orange,

all whirled together and reflected on the calm water,
this jaw-dropping spectacle never to be forgotten.

The downtown promenade takes on a life of its own,
brimming with neon, brazen starlight and musicians,
UC students, people of all stripes milling, kibbitzing,
nothing better to do than soak in indigenous synergy.
Congregation of nerds, misfits and rebellious youths,
anxious, lined up at Catalyst to see the grunge band.

The atmosphere electric, elastic, eclectic, magnetic.
Dazed by ambiance of trendy bistros, bars, boutiques,
with unforgettable names as anyone would observe
strolling up one side then down the other direction:
Cognito Clothing, Bloom Body Care, Go Ask Alice,
Leaf & Vine, Mythic Games, Bodhi Tree, Om Gallery,
Good Vibrations, Toque Blanche and Moon Kissed.

Entering Blue Lagoon don't expect doom and gloom
as you may find in a dive bar like the Jury Room.
Dig the reggae, jazz, rock, country, blues or hip-hop.
Play pool, have a beer on tap. Amid continual hubbub
engage some native afficionado in a lively rap session.
Bask in dim lights tossing shadows against the wall.
Let your hair hang down, send inhibitions into freefall.

Moon diffuse, amid beaming streetlights roam on over
to the Cooper House, colonial brick octagon rebuilt
to original specifications after collapse in the '89 quake.
Join the block party, some 200 people all in one groove,
tables set out to accommodate everyone. The local band
polished, gets the crowd clapping and dancing, romance
everywhere in the air. So indulge liberally in libations
if so inclined, grab a partner and get out there, dance
as though you couldn't help being entranced. And then
once spent retire for the night in a cozy beach motel.

Time will tell, but next day you might make your way
up Highway One into San Francisco's Mission District,
little Guadalajara, and spoil yourself with a big burrito.

Kelly Doheney
is an emerging author whose work can be seen at SpillWords, Academy of the Heart, Feed the Holy and Agape Review.

Echoes in the Shadows

Shadows of the past, pain revealed.

Voices threaten; my lips are sealed.

Robbing me of peace, creating turmoil;

a plant rooted in depleted soil.

Memories that refuse to fade,

An internal cell that I have made.

Creating a trap where they lie.

A storm within, darkening the sky.

Flashes of sound, lightning strikes.

Shattered images are ghostlike.

Fear's cold grip is a binding chain.

Emotions shower like rain.

In darkness, a fireworks display

Sparks the words that I can't say.

Time flows like a river,

Yet, my soul is threatened by the Grim Reaper.

A haunting replay of lost memories.

Pain that passes through centuries.

My heart struggles to be made new.

My eyes are desperate for a different view.

I am reminded that I survived.

I hold on to hope, a heart revived.

Echoes of Identity

In the shattered mirror of memory,

Echoes of identity are lost at sea.

A birth of a newborn soul.

A heart caged longing to be free.

A stranger's face I see in the mirror,

A disguise to cover my broken heart.

A clown ready for the show to begin.

A performance ready to start.

A kind of faith with whispers of love.

The gentle voice of God I long to hear,

It's masked behind doctrine and rules.

Creating an image that I fear.

Locked inside a prison of shame,

I break the chains and set myself free.

Labels fall like pouring rain,

masks become as clear as can be.

This is the longing my heart's dream.

A teeter toter of doctrine and love,

Which one rules this never-ending scheme.

Amanda Scroggins

is a court transcriptionist in Wichita, KS pursuing their MFA in Creative Writing through Pacific University. When not reading or writing, they can be found playing cozy games with their cat, Coraline. Their work has previously been published in Mikrokosmos, Mikro Mini: Scary Stories, Boxer Shorts, and is forthcoming in The Clockwise Cat.

Trust Prescription

There's a vulnerability in taking medicine in front of others.

Not the medicine that isn't really medicine – amber alcohol self-prescribed or cheap heroin (maybe mixed with fatal fentanyl) given by scamming dealers in grimy alleys marked by tattered shoes slung over telephone wires by frayed shoelaces - but the real stuff, the stuff given to get you out of bed or to stop your obsession with chocolate pudding or to make your long-gone leg stop thrumming in ghost spasms.

Because it's easy to drink with a group and claim celebration, easier still to avoid confrontation when your mother finds your spoons and needles still rusty with dried blood. But popping that little white dissolvable pill from its shiny aluminum casing, the prescription clearly scrawled on the thin white paper that curls in on itself as it drifts under the table is an act of trust (*I trust you not to ask me how I'm broken; I trust you not to judge me for my weakness; I trust you to turn your eyes away but still look at me the same*) and only after the act is done do you know if you chose right, or if you need to slip back into the bottle to forget the shining pity in their eyes.