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TELLING TRUE STORIES A Workshop in Creative Nonfiction Taught by Cleaver Editor Sydney Tammarine | October 19–November 20

THE ART OF THE SCENE: A Workshop in Fiction and Creative Nonfiction taught by Lisa Borders | August 2 – September 4

EMBRACING UNCERTAINTY, a Workshop to Jumpstart Your Writing, taught by Tricia Park | June 27 – July 25

Ask June!



Cleaver's in-house advice columnist opines on matters punctuational, interpersonal, and philosophical, spinning wit and literary wisdom in response to your ethical quandaries. Write to her at [today!](#)



ASK JUNE: Coronavirus II: The Old Marcher and the Masked Baby

A note to my readers: Here are a few more coronavirus-related letters. Knowing what I know now, I would have submitted them all at once, a few weeks ago, instead of spacing them out. Things have changed so quickly since that first batch: problems like nagging mothers and the niceties of social-distancing behavior may seem petty and quaint as compared to the deadly-serious questions and sweeping protests following the murder of George Floyd. I will submit my second batch of letters now, but humbly, in hopes that they may provide a moment of entertainment for those of you who are ...

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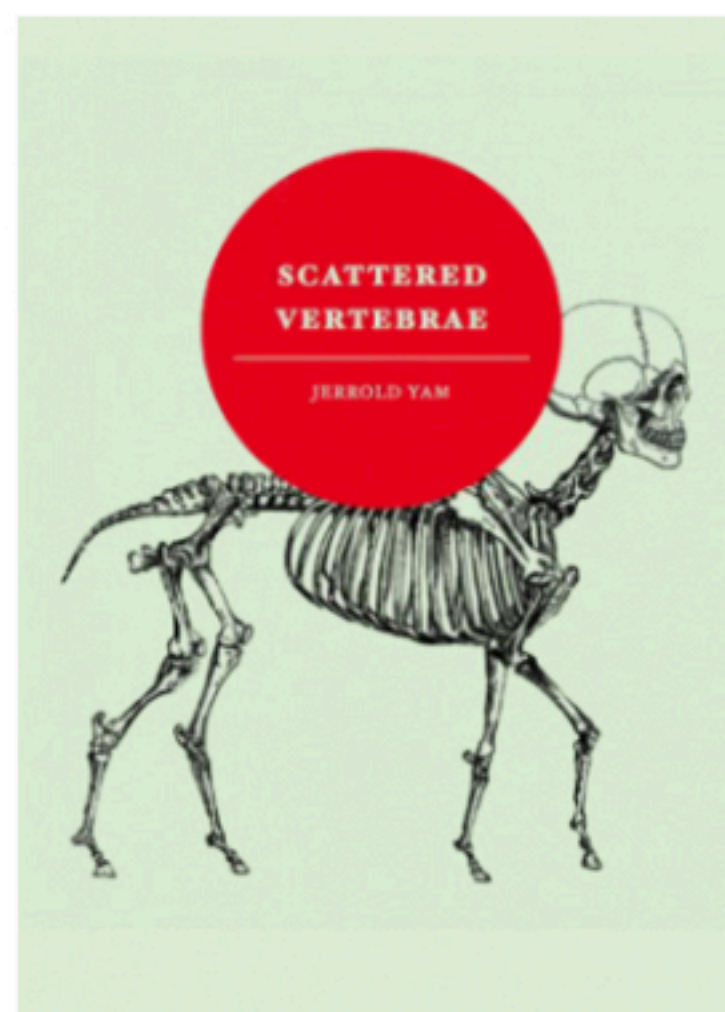
June 9, 2020

Issue 30 Launch!

June 30, 2020

5

days to go.



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SCATTERED VERTEBRAE by Jerrold Yam Math Paper Press, 2013

reviewed by Kenna O'Rourke

Jerrold Yam's second poetry collection was titled with care: like the image of scattered vertebrae, these poems are at once beautiful, dark, and disturbing. Yam weaves family life, social expectation, religion, and tragedy together so ornately that at times one does not realize what they're reading. This technique generally makes for compelling and delicate poetic image, but at times the disorientation feels less deliberate—Yam's is a poetics that requires rereading, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. It is a poetics of "pleated identity" (31), turning away from singular intent or simple subject matter, and its difficulty reflects the

personal sense of unease that Yam confronts throughout: unlike some collections, here one can safely equate the speaker with Yam himself.

Yam's verse is elaborate, complex by nature, for the poet dives into his own conflicted psyche in a ritual of Freudian digging. He dredges up childhood memory as well as painful scenes of the present day, from his disappointed mother's mixed acknowledgement of him, to his stricken grandmother with curled body and "feet knotted / in wreaths and bouquets" (89). The book is writhing with sexuality, pulsing with imagery of "the unripe / egg of the female before sperm tongue their way through / its gelatinous down" (50): indeed, the poet seems to have a minor obsession with the womb, seeking, perhaps, his own origin story.

The anatomical fascination that cohabitates with Yam's social/familial relations begins to fail, however, when the author resorts to explicit sexual description—or worse, dramatized sexual description. His memories of locker-room explorations, a hand job rendered in the seat of an airplane, and so on appear out of nowhere, the sensitive hedging of previous poems yielding suddenly to such excessively wordy lines as "my / beating organ about to froth over its glistening cloak" (66). Perhaps Yam's eagerness to write about ejaculation can be rationalized as part of the Freudian catharsis discussed above, but bodily attention seems far more effective in this collection when limited to scientific curiosity, rather than what might be misread as fond reminiscence of past orgasms; consider, for instance, the more poetic "I / survey this cinema of red, / feverishly waiting for a gene to / raise its flimsy translucent palms" (65) or "things stranded in the script of capillaries" (86). Lines like these may not smack of sexual courage (the "unbridled fire" [85] of which Yam seems to revere as a refusal to conform to societal expectations), but they do not compromise the lovely hauntedness of this poetry with distracting imagery as others do.



Jerrold Yam

In Yam's defense, his sexual orientation appears to be linked heavily to the family discord, and likely the hesitation about religion expressed by "twin criminals of [his] lungs / loaded like doubt in a church" (62), that he transcribes. *Scattered Vertebrae* is, at its core, a book of loaded poetry, driven by psychological, emotional, and physical desire, placing current events (the Sierra Coach Crash and other tragedies), a mother's coldness, turbulent romance, and the church on the same sad but enchanting level. Though the imagery is at times heavy-handed or overwrought ("her limbs propped along the bedstead / like bags of dormant muscle" [100]), its intensity is quite often appropriate for Yam's dark subject matter; if, as the poet asserts, "All that is beauty is also ruin" (95), he has certainly mastered the art of sorting through the rubble. He writes, "I don't know / of sorry and thank you and I / love you — their foul simplicities" (48), and seems to prefer it that way, the book a genuine celebration of life's perplexing lots.



Kenna O'Rourke is an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania majoring in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. Her work has appeared in *The Pocket Guide*, the *Philos Adelphos Irrealis chapbook*, and *Penn's Filament* and *34th Street* magazines. She is an editorial assistant for *Jacket2*, an enthusiastic employee of the *Kelly Writers House*, and an occasional blogger and jewelry-and-sewn-object-maker.

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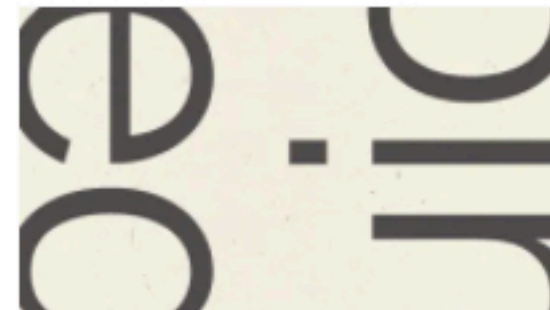
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PICASSO IN 10 LINES and SNOW by Jerrold Yam
September 3, 2013
In "Issue 3"



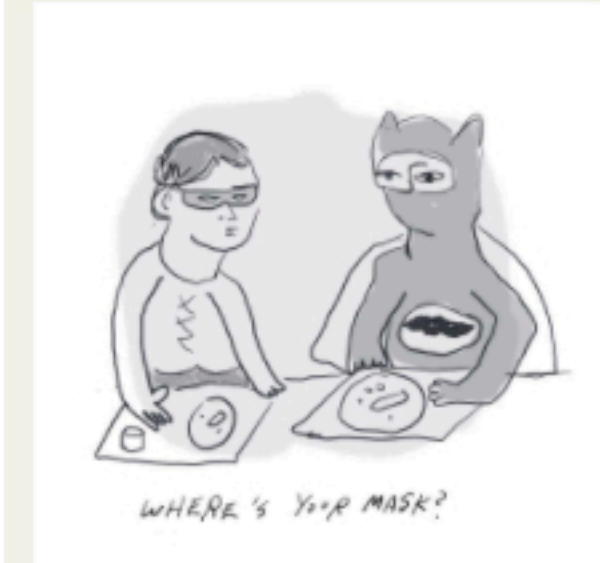
SCRATCH PEGASUS by Stephen Kessler reviewed by Kenna O'Rourke
August 11, 2013
In "poetry reviews"



RED JUICE: POEMS 1998–2008 by Hoa Nguyen reviewed by Kenna O'Rourke
January 14, 2015
In "poetry reviews"

SCATTERED VERTEBRAE by Jerrold Yam reviewed by Kenna O'Rourke Published on **January 16, 2014** in [poetry reviews](#), [reviews](#) (Click for [permalink](#).)

Emily Steinberg's QUARANTINE JOURNAL



Dispatches from inner and outer space.....

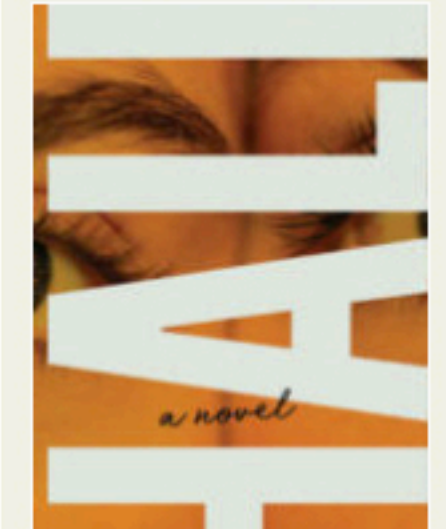
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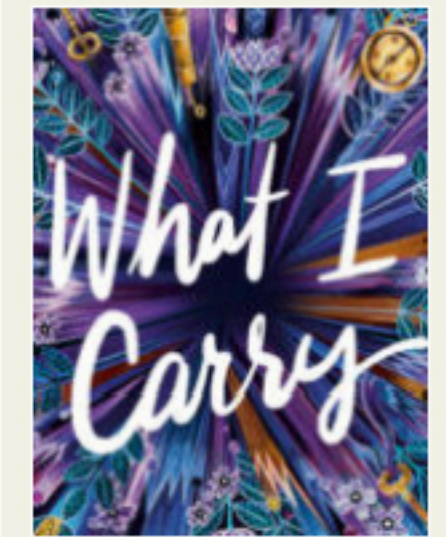
An Interview with Sharon Harrigan, author of the novel *HALF*, by Virginia Pye



Writers have a way of finding each other in Virginia, thanks to several strong literary non-profits. Sharon Harrigan teaches at WriterHouse in Charlottesville and I used to help run James River Writers in Richmond. We ... [Read More](#)

June 15, 2020

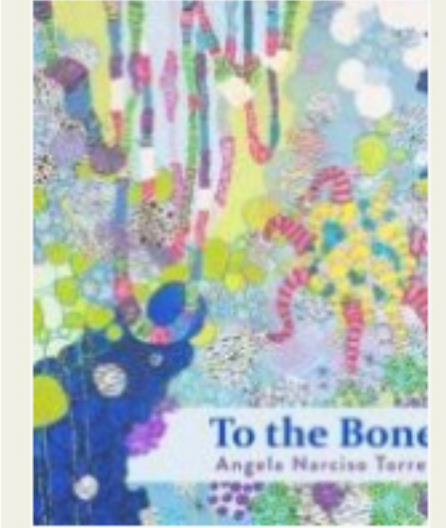
WHAT I CARRY, a YA novel by Jennifer Longo, reviewed by Aja Todd



From the very first moment of her existence, Muriel was born alone. Found abandoned at a medical center with no parents to claim her, Muriel has lived in foster care her entire life. But blessed ... [Read More](#)

June 12, 2020

TO THE BONE, poems by Angela Narciso Torres, reviewed by Alina Stefanescu



To The Bone is a book about the particular sort of remembering that accompanies losing a parent to Alzheimer's. The poet's mother is brought tenuously, haltingly, on the page. A sense of slippage is accomplished ... [Read More](#)

June 7, 2020

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