

# 2RV

16.1 (Fall 2011)

# The 2River View

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2River

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## New Poems by

John Bitner, Steven Coughlin, Gillian Cummings  
John Harvey, Laura Jo Hess, Aw-o-tan Nisgah, Brent Pallas  
Mahtem Shiferraw, Virginia Slachman, Brigit Kelly Young



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## **About the Artist**

Katrina Pallop is native of Princeton, New Jersey, now living in New York City, where she studies drama and aspires to be a playwright and photographer.

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## **About 2River**

Since 1996, 2River has been a site of poetry and art, quarterly publishing *The 2River View*, occasionally publishing individual authors in the 2River Chapbook Series.

Richard Long, Editor  
2River  
[www.2River.org](http://www.2River.org)

**The 2River View, 16.1 (Fall 2011)**

**Contributors**

**Aw-o-tan Nisgah**  
bringing in the night

**Jenny Bitner**  
Dear One  
Dear Emptiness



photograph © by Katrina Pallop

published in *Gulf Coast*, *NAP*, *Poet Lore*, and *Whiskey Island*.

**Laura Jo Hess** is from St. Louis, Missouri. After writing textbooks in Chicago for two years, she moved to New York City to pursue an MFA at The New School. Her work is published in *Blue Mesa Review*, *decomp magazine*, *Margie*, and *White Whale*.

**Aw-o-tan Nisgah** (Shield Little Brother) belongs to the Many Faces People, a family following the Blackfoot tradition in East Texas. His poetry has appeared in *Barnwood*, *3 AM*, and *Willows Wept Review*.

**Brent Pallas** has been in *New England Review*, *Poetry*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *The Southern Review*. He was a finalist for the 2007 and 2011 Pablo Neruda Prize for Poetry given by Nimrod International Journal.

**Mahtem Shiferraw** was born in Eritrea, raised in Ethiopia, and currently lives in the Los Angeles. She is now completing her Masters in Creative Writing at Vermont College of Fine Arts.

**Virginia Slachman** is the author *Inside Such Darkness*, (Tiger Bark 2010). Slachman, former poetry editor of *Aspen Magazine* and associate director of the Aspen Writers Conference, now teaches at Principia College.

**Brigit Kelly Young** has had her work published in *Drunken Boat*, *Gargoyle*, *The North American Review*, *Opium Magazine*, *Pinch*, *Skive*, and *Whiskey Dregs*. She studies at City College, City University of New York.

## **The 2River View, 16.1 (Fall 2011)**

### **Contributors**

**Jenny Bitner** has been published in *Corium*, *Fence*, *Mississippi Review*, *PANK*, and *The Sun*. She is also the author of the chapbook *Mother* (Pine Press).

**Steve Coughlin** lives on a horse farm in southeast Ohio. His recent work has appeared in the *Gettysburg Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *New Ohio Review*, and *Slate.com*.

**Gillian Cummings** teaches workshops at a hospital in White Plains, New York. Her poems have appeared in *Cincinnati Review*, *CutBank*, and *The Laurel Review*. Her chapbook *Spirits of the Humid Cloud* is forthcoming from dancing girl press.

**John Harvey** directs the Center for Creative Work at The Honors College, University of Houston. He is Resident Playwright for Mildred's Umbrella Theater Company. His poems have been



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**Steven Coughlin**  
A Small Sign  
1993

**Gillian Cummings**  
Halo  
Raisins  
**John Harvey**  
Clatter of Dry, Black Wings  
Tight Knots and Family Bonds

**Laura Jo Hess**  
Elegy to a Living Mother  
Things I'm Sorry For

**Brent Pallas**  
Out on the Balcony  
The Gift

**Mahtem Shaferraw**  
Blood Disparities  
She Says They Come at Night

**Virginia Slachman**  
Coach of Black Water  
Map of the World

**Brigit Kelly Young**  
With a child's marker  
As She Learns Geography

**With a child's marker**

she drew a galaxy.  
her belly—the moon.  
fat yellow squiggles around the  
crater of a belly button.  
debris ... circles in circles  
of yellow yellow light.  
her thighs held the stars.  
blue ink on white pathways to  
her bush—the earth.  
inside—the sea.  
each eye a planet;  
venus and neptune  
looking out at the upper west side  
to see new worlds.

she drew a moon  
on her belly  
and it lit up  
the night.  
so yellow. so round.  
the night lit  
through the lampshade  
of a womb.

her back was smooth and blank,  
human,  
and unreachable.

*Brigit Kelly Young*

### **As She Learns Geography**

with manicured fingers  
she holds the world in her hands  
aged yellow africa  
cerulean pacific

as a girl  
she confused the words  
*pacific* and *specific*  
*be pacific* she would say to her little brother  
when he asked for jelly but meant jam  
and she embraced the sea  
in all her details

she turns the sea  
the earth  
round and round  
with purple hands  
throwing it up in the air  
catching it  
like a beach ball

and as on a windy day  
it slips

latvia hits the floor  
and rolls onto japan  
and there's a crack in israel  
that spreads to australia  
and as it rolls  
she notices qatar for the first time  
while she searches on Google  
for how to fix a globe

*Aw-o-tan Nisgah*

### **bringing in the night**

her song calls the night in,  
and the sky hesitates between light  
and dark: my indecision blinking  
like a star caught between  
grandfather sun, grandmother moon,  
and lonesome, lonesome in the black  
that robes my minute light—how  
could I know the loneliness of a star?  
all that distance, all that space, all that  
I am is a being on the face of the mother  
who bore us all; now look at her sweat,  
feel her fever rising with her temper,  
as if she, too, wishes upon a star to be  
one, to nova and be done with these  
trampling feet, tight-toed and wrapped  
like tobacco offerings for the chief  
industries that we clasp hands  
with as in marriage, as she will clasp  
my arm, and I, alone in the night,  
listening to the sprinklers, imagining  
how each drop of water must feel  
amongst so many, all plunging  
like buffalo off a cliff, and yet each  
so willingly plunges to its singular  
death—so alone, so tired, so thirsty  
for all the light it will never have  
a chance to drink

*Jenny Bitner*

**Dear One**

I am not supposed to miss you,  
missing having to do with a concept

of presence and absence  
that we are not trafficking in—

not being present  
in the moment, a crime

which one could accuse  
me of with hatpins in my eyes.

But more seductively, in the hope  
of pulling you in, and there to form a space

outside of spaces, I would argue it is longing  
and not missing that I feel.

Longing is a sweet word and means  
even here, now, I am very

much present—oh yes there  
is the taste of lemon and beer

in my mouth I am present with,  
and the three girls, one kneeling,

a dark tunnel in air surrounded by night—How can we tell  
intention from chance? Those boys tunneling through air  
that close to the peak: Is it as simple  
as not enough light?

These geese should be elsewhere. My grandfather's map  
was long ago folded, packed in his black trunk;

after his blindness, what was the point—those  
wavering

lines he'd drawn each year  
suddenly reduced to

cuts on a great rind of fruit, no longer  
traces left by a life. My tree

will thrive in the midst of the park come spring, leaf out  
around its

damage. Adam named an unrecognizable  
world. We compose its wounds.

## Virginia Slachman

### Map of the World

Geese in the field, likely a hundred. Heavy black and taupe bodies framed against this gray day, the field a packed mass of dirty snow.

I think how the light in L.A. is not so oppressive.

My grandfather tacked a map to his cabin wall, traced his travels on a paper world.

In Aspen, Starr Peak

rises 14,000 feet—My neighbors, gear folded like bunched wings, hiked all day up its angled slope for one run down

years after my grandfather inscribed his map, retracing his routes—out from the west coast and back

to the east—an orbit repeatedly made. I'm losing the names of so many things—that tree in the park, for instance, stripped of its towering branch

etched with a wrenched scar down half its body. We all see what we need to see no matter the light.

Describe the world: this was

Adam's task, but who recognizes

what he meant? The geese

woke me in the night

out on the pond, a mile

from here. They circled the sky as my grandfather circled the globe from the bowels of a freighter, year after year. Once he fell down an elevator shaft,

looking into the display case at the pastries in the café. They shake their heads and go somewhere else. I am sorry that the café could not please them.

A motorcycle helmet is in front of me, and the man who goes with it

got nervous just now because I tried to read the title of the book he was reading.

There, now I see it *Love and Awakening*, That is something to hide. A man comes in

trying to sell a typewriter. Saying, *Any students here? I got a good typewriter here, a Westing.*

All of this is proof that I am very much here in the moment in this café.

And still I feel something tug on me as I am pulled towards your absence.

*Jenny Bitner*

### Dear Emptiness

To be emptier than the moon on a clear night,  
when you think you can see the insides.

The shapes and cravings. To be empty of you,  
like a shoebox that I can't find any trace of, where  
is the shoe? What gouged out eyes, what sockets  
where there was something? The night

is playing a trick on me where it takes off in a car  
for a long drive on highways and doesn't know

where it is going. It is traveling fast away from me  
with no destination, focused on the lines, the lights.

Some crave for you and take everything away to have you.  
But you are not for me, you cut me out.

and orchards, and the fire of the *duende*. If I tell you I hear  
the flamenco's stiff heels explode the floorboards . . . In  
another book, a man dies  
in a furnace though his key is in the door. You  
can't be betrayed unless  
you are first loved. I want to know the words

that slip through the mind when the *duende* is no longer a shadow.

*Each afternoon, a child dies.*  
*The dead wear mossy wings.*

So many things are true. Oysters have small, three-chambered  
hearts and colorless blood.  
It is the irritant trapped in the dark  
interior the oyster refuses; in the flamenco, defiance  
Lorca was

*Gitano* in a land of gypsies, one of them. When he  
stepped into  
that rough cart he saw a world  
he'd invented. *In a coach of black water I will go . . . his*  
death slipped in  
unnoticed as words to the mind.

The oyster secretes nacre  
to obliterate the offense, each layer a lustrous dark  
shining—precious, unwearied, wordless.

## Virginia Slachman

### Coach of Black Water

*Now I have a right to silence.*

—Tanikaro Shuntaro

I can't read anymore. The words slip into my mind though I hardly notice their coming. Today I read about the death of Lorca, again, how he was taken

from the house of Louis Rosales. It was a mild day in Granada, a day like many others, sounds of the cantes and quejios falling over the abbey and the gardens of the *Sacromonte*.

At least I imagine it so: death simply appearing among the usual events: the old women in doorways dressed in black, the white houses of the *Albaicin*—the Falangists came, loaded

him into their wooden cart. A schoolteacher, two *banderilleros* The light must have been startling.

I picture this over and over having read it many times How suddenly

the world was vivid. Thirty-eight, one bullet for each and the hand that made the bullet, I think of that man. They may be buried by the olive tree, a twisted old thing, raw rivulet-barked, turned and bent. There was a time this would have meant nothing. The white-washed caves in the hills of Valparisio, Andalusia his pilgrimage, his singing, how they danced through the streets

## Steven Coughlin

### A Small Sign

Still in a canyon of grief my mother worked with a hand spade in the backyard six weeks after my brother's murder frantic for company. The house was loud with silence; her closest friends visited less each afternoon and my father, arguing a need for money, had disappeared behind the grey fog of work.

My mother was digging up dirt for a tomato garden she would never plant.

It makes sense when the bird flew by a third time, placing itself on the lowest branch of the only tree in our backyard, she considered it a small sign: she was desperate

for another round of Scrabble with my brother at the kitchen table, his fingers delicately picking up the small wooden pieces, counting off points for each letter; his twenty-one year old forehead without a hint of blue from the tire iron that cracked his skull.

In this way the bird's reappearance, its exact positioning five feet from my mother, was filled with meaning—the shifting of its head from side to side, like jagged movements in a flip-book, suggested to her the universe was not simply an ocean of darkness.

My mother held to it tight—on knees bruised with dirt she stared at the bird, its grey feathers unremarkable, convinced the void in its black eyes, as if looking at nothing, understood sorrow after all the other birds had moved on.

## *Steven Coughlin*

1993

Year my sister sat in front of an oval mirror covering traces  
of my mother's face in her own. Year of the pea-green winter  
jacket,  
my paper route with 37 houses—a windstorm always blowing.

The cat's body ached with tumors,  
its stomach a concrete block of suffering. My father drank Riuniti  
watching endless episodes of Matlock.

Eight years after my brother's murder,  
fourteen years after my brother rescued the cat  
abandoned behind Little Peach, and still my mother waited  
for her oldest son to return home—29 in 1993.

Year of cat shit in every hidden corner of the house.  
My mother insisted we not touch  
my brother's yellow lamp on the porch, a crack down its side,  
terrified it would break.

My sister sealed herself in her bedroom  
listening to Simon and Garfunkel's "Cecilia." She went to the  
junior prom  
with Dan Corsten; year of my first date to the Paragon  
Fairgrounds—  
Anna Valley's blue skirt on the carousel,  
the white horse I rode chipped brown.

Firstborn sons were killed on a quiet night,  
like any other.

I say diligent thieves get only  
what they came for.

She says they do.

Come and get. Only the ones  
submerged into the night.

The ones rattling as if they were  
discomforted, as if they did not  
belong there. Quick and quiet.  
Taken. Like small things. Small  
small things. Lollled and rolled.

***Mahtem Shiferraw***

**She says they come at night...**

quick and quiet, like diligent thieves. They take things, small small things, tuck them deep into their pockets, roll them like socks, cup their palms against the warm cloth to feel certainty.

How do they know?

They lurk; each home has its own devil. They smell, sucked air, thin air, empty air. They probe, curved swallows, thickening fear.

I say they must come at night.  
She says they do.

I say I already hear them, their footsteps a faint forking of carpet hairs. She says their silence is deafening. But I do hear them.

She says there is no quietness in me.  
I think that's a good thing.

Always my mother stranded in the house.  
Always my mother, lungs clouded with nicotine, refusing to get out of bed before nine. My father backed out of the driveway each morning, 3 AM, escaping to work; my sister, school over, drove with friends to Dairy Queen.

Day my mother, alone, cat laboring to breathe, unable to stand, finally carried it out of the house in a brown box.  
Afternoon the veterinarian stuck a three inch needle into its back.

We ate a frozen pie for dinner, my mother silent, as the family failed to notice the cat's absence.

Morning I waited for the school bus on the sidewalk, still not aware,

preferring cold morning air to the heated house.

Afternoon my sister stayed late for softball practice. Day my mother,

always in a pale blue bathrobe, always with a cigarette, sat the kitchen table even more alone.

## *Gillian Cummings*

### **Halo**

There is one photo of me I like. A crown of daisies covers my hair, a wreath of wilting daisies wraps me. Petals crooked, warped like thorns. I look up. My chin, lifted. My mouth closed firm as if I keep a secret shared with God. As if, no matter what, He will say of my body, flesh of His flesh. You can see my breasts in this photo, the aureoles of my nipples. You can see two beauty marks on my face, one above my lip, one high on my cheek, made from black eye-pencil. I think that here I'm the Magdalene. But Jesus has said my seven demons can stay mine. Mine to be smudged with like a stranger's words: cocotte, conasse, gourgandine, grue, poule, poufiasse, putain. Mine the way father fucked me: seven times from behind, my hunched haunches like a cow's, his dick a hot prod poking, pressing, searing. Mine the way les marronniers dans le Jardin du Luxembourg drop their chestnuts with a crack, and the soft shell splits to let the hard kernel out, shiny and ready to be squirreled into ground. Papa split me that way, spreading my buttocks. God the Father split me too, for my soul sometimes can't find my body. And Jean splits me: me from my image, the girl with chestnut brown hair from the girl all shades of grey. White daisies late in the season either way. Seven demons skulking, yet none too shy to haunt a saint—

## *Mahtem Shiferraw*

### **Blood Disparities**

My sister—not the weird artist who drew me with a hammer soaring over my forehead—but the one who's trying to become a doctor—she said that understanding biology, and chemistry will help me understand lives, and perhaps save them she said, if I looked at the intimacy shared between the small and large intestines, crawling comfortably with each other in sprawling heated caves, I would understand what it meant to be together and alone at the same time;

she said, if I witnessed the autopsy of lab cats and murdered rats I would understand the devotion and dedication of red blood cells, scurrying and flinching to sink into our veins, or if I fathomed the duplicity of the different colors of blood—raspberry blood, strawberry blood, teething gums blood, bloody hell blood—I could make poetry and conceive words, like anaphylaxis, and C6H12O6

pretending to understand concocted, warped lives, when all I can see is the flesh, and the wound within the flesh, and the salmon blood, and the chestnut crust, and the dead—

**Brent Pallas**

### **Out on the Balcony**

Nutty. It's a spring night in the middle of February.  
Winter's hound is locked up as jonquils spike  
near the bushes. An odd bliss that looks like litter.  
I tell him, *It's crazy weather tonight*, and notice  
a rip in his sleeve. He's homeless.  
And I'm a volunteer here at the shelter  
we'll both leave in the morning. It's an old  
story he rakes up: with custom suits  
and girls on every arm of it. And I don't believe  
much of it, but, so what? He's clean now,  
but hanging at the noose end of things.  
Right there in that tree, he says pointing,  
there's nothing left but a sister in Jersey.  
He doesn't hear the intoxicating rush  
of warmth tonight as he coughs and lights  
another cigarette. Its calm ether filling him  
like a sigh as coatless blondes go by  
licking ice cream, their bare arms so white  
and promising as if its July's stars out there  
beaming through those leafless branches.

**Gillian Cummings**

### **Raisins**

Jean didn't want to show me with a glass of wine. He thought  
the grapes themselves more sensual. Provocative. Thick  
clusters of fruit ripening. Gnarled ropes of vine. A September  
sky ghosting the morning's hills with fog. Sauvignon. Chenin  
Blanc. Muscadelle. Semillon. An aroma of melon, cinnamon,  
acacia—linden blended with lemon and honey. We guessed:  
which tang on the tongue would tempt you? But we knew: the  
rootstock everywhere was American now, ever since the yellow  
aphid bored a hole through the heart of France. We knew: after  
cheap sugar copied the sweetest vintage, vigneronns revolted in  
Languedoc, six innocents killed. But Jean,—*Que puis-je dire?*—  
Jean has a sense of humor naughty as his nudes. So he said,  
You want those grapes like you want a man with money and a  
big dick, your *raison d'être*. And I thought: the Eucharist. I want  
these grapes the way the disciples wanted to swallow Christ's  
soul. Whole. Round. Ripe. The grapes' terroir, my terror. The  
seeds sunken inside, Jesus' judgment on the hard bite of my  
temper, opposite of these too tender teeth. So I draped the  
grapes over my open mouth, as if all the world could be eaten—

*John Harvey*

### **Tight Knots And Family Bonds**

Grave numbers refer to grave cuts. The groundskeeper smiles and tells me more than one body sleeps in a hole. Families drink their own bones.

My grandparents buried their tongues in lost friends

before they died, then dug a room in flat, dark cares.

Cremations are common, just like thin soup.

Each year new burials shovel out a meager gruel.

Stir bruises. I stomp my legs warm, kick off a few cold

raindrops as my arms swing through a blur of oak leaves.

This cemetery shoulders its way into the sea.

Above, the sky swallows her son; below, I root out

my father's mother lying in a hospital room, screaming

as her blood eats away her veins. A fumbling, red muscle aches with its own poison. It's anyone's guess how they build a city of the dead.

Maybe dumb words bleached white and a pile of slag.

*Brent Pallas*

### **The Gift**

You know when there's something wrong. Branches down in the half light

like a storm dripping from the eaves. That morning the cat wasn't there.

And you searched until you found something barely cat. Thinking she had dragged herself

beneath that chair after meeting a bobcat out back in the woods, leaving her

with one ear. And you carried her for weeks from room to room until her weariness edged back

into stealth. Because all along the vet said, *Sure*, and sure enough she drifted out back again

into those woods after leaving the still rag of a chipmunk on your bed.

**Laura Jo Hess**

### **Things I'm Sorry For**

Just today I preached about Texas—  
roads I haven't seen and a bridge I won't cross  
to a town I could never love. I sat close-kneed  
on the train and listened to boys bang  
tight-lipped canvas with their forefingers.  
I watched a man stumble up a twenty  
from the bottom of his pocket, crumple it  
hard into the palm of the drummer.

Also, a confession: I don't love music  
or sound or silence. Speakers tumble  
a song I swayed and it played in the car  
that one time my dad told me  
he was getting married and I reached  
my hand back from the front seat  
and Jamie found my fingers  
and I can't remember the last time  
we touched and it meant something.

So go on and gasp and love me less  
when I like books better than sound,  
when every note makes me cringe and recall  
some memory, some head-down walk  
round campus where I wound up weeping  
under a tree and flipping open a cell phone  
to dial my mother and say, *Mom I've stolen  
something, mother I've slept with someone,  
mother I think I've died.*

Please, a fire, to warm my feet and please money  
for the man with the bad voice singing subway songs  
and the mime in Times Square, silver-faced and free.

**John Harvey**

### **Clatter of Dry, Black Wings**

I sit for an hour or more in a little light, a little dark. My  
father's here.  
Next minute there's no one at all. The world rocks back and forth  
inside his eyes. A photo album  
confides he's losing his sight, forgetting who I am. Light reveals  
all seams. Skin round his eyes sinks into bone, the back of his  
head  
collapses under a few  
strands of hair. My father asks if I remember boiled cabbage,  
his mom in bedroom light. He can't find her yet knows she's here.  
I walk the house picking-up  
what he's lost. I can hear a beetle somewhere in the house—  
clatter of dry, black wings. TV images flicker across my father's  
neck, empty sleeve.  
Outside the sun makes landfill. I ask, *What hurts?* What do you  
want  
me to do? Eyes focus, lips part, and for a moment someone is  
there.  
I hold his face.

Laura Jo Hess

### Elegy to a Living Mother

Pity the rhododendrons didn't rise  
from the dirt where a fence  
sits in segments growing from earth

Today, I think I'll ask  
the postman if he loves his wife  
and the waiter if he's ever cheated.

I'll unbind and watch  
a letter flutter to the ground: *Dear Luke,*  
*I've got to stop doing acid on weekdays.*

I've got to stop walking so slowly past  
the psychic who is really a prostitute,  
watching her cross legs  
beside a billboard.

I took a knife now and thought of the oven, I thought  
of the bedside

where you won't rest your head  
& felt my body I stopped eating  
go mother you'd be proud  
of the way I'm breathing

[one in at a time  
half out]  
mother you said in this life

—the don't leave the stove on  
might house catch  
fire