

picaresque

poetry



Issue #14



# Picaroon Poetry

Issue #14

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## **An example of conceptual art**

In the cool white of the gallery,  
There's a sign with Exit and a running man  
But the rectangle of the door is painted over  
almost to vanishing, with white emulsion

There's a door shape, but no handle,  
You could hardly say it was an exit at all  
In fact perhaps it's just an artwork.  
Perhaps behind it, is just white wall.

Either way, as doorway or as art  
I'm not sure it works. I've tried  
Just thinking about it as a symbol  
Or a comment on something  
Or a metaphor.

I've tried thinking about it as a botched idea  
Mainly though, it's a question  
and I won't break my blue nails  
Trying with my fingers to cram them  
Between door and jamb  
To open, answer it

## **Jumped**

Suicide bridge curves obliquely toward the moon;  
streetlights like crosses punctuate my descent.

Hey, Rotarians, pack me a sack lunch,  
place it on the ragbag of these shattered hips.

California sky, each stroke of smoke  
on which a brushfire could ignite  
this place where homeless are forgot.

Questions, questions, why did I do it?  
No one saw me on the bridge that Thursday night.

White out my spirit,  
tell my ex I went to heaven —

fishing with Jesus in the casting pond,  
vines climb lattices in marine layer fog,  
veiled by phantom shadows of a one-way street.



## **Washing**

washing whites  
washing colours

washing your face before dawn breaks

washing the brain

washing the bloodstains  
from gunshot wounds

washing the hair of a dead person

washing one's soul  
of goals  
of dreams  
of schemes

adding each day  
to the rising river  
of tears unchecked

stains scrubbed and rinsed away  
drying on the bushes in the sun

## **Uncatching**

Hey you, yes you.  
You should write it this way  
Not that way.  
In fact what  
are you doing?  
Why are you doing?  
That's not what we want.  
Who are you anyway?  
With your blank sheet of paper?  
Staring out to sea from your inland city,  
climbing a tree that's due for the chop.  
Addressing the birds in their sky:  
on your terms.  
Let the moment alone.  
Let it lie.  
Let it loose or  
you'll lose it.  
Your moment.  
Your epiphany.  
Like the sound of that?  
You can have it.  
Leave it with a tang of the now,  
or else it'll get snagged,  
up in some words  
that won't do it justice.  
The unbridgeable gap between  
felt and unfelt, left suspended.  
Forget the dry letters  
of the not there any more moment.  
Leave it where it was,  
leave yourself where you was.  
Yes, yes that's the way.  
Let your desire out.  
Leave it endless.  
Let it go.  
Let it go.  
Let it  
go

## **The Path**

“enlightenment is overrated”  
said the candle to the glowworm  
which made no reply, but inched quietly  
away, as it could see to stay may have  
risked drippage of hot wax onto its  
luminescent soft body, and such  
ordeals are painful to endure  
without mastery & composure.

## **Nebuchadnezzar**

Nebuchadnezzar crawled in the grass  
his empire all aflame.  
He couldn't recall how it came to pass  
still less who was to blame.  
There are those who die for silver or gold,  
there are those who yearn for fame,  
and no one knows if the Norns will thread their name.

Cleopatra the queen took hold of the asp  
and pressed it against her breast.  
Not one of the kisses of warriors or kings  
had ever hurt her less.  
There are those with poison on their tongue,  
there are those who kill in jest,  
and no one knows if the Norns will thread their name.

Agamemnon the brave lay back in the bath  
arrayed in glory and praise.  
He didn't see the knife that opened his back  
for the blood of one he had slain.  
There are those who die for the truth or a lie,  
there are those who kill in vain,  
and no one knows if the Norns will thread their name.

Arthur the king rode out on his steed  
to hunt the ravaging boar.  
The banners were bright the trumpets were loud  
that ended the day in gore.  
There are those who dream in eternal peace,  
there are those who wake to war,  
and no one knows if the Norns will thread their name.

**anti-goddess**

I'm leaving my blues behind. It was a deep fall, but I have muscle-memory, and I'm using it to hoist myself free. I'm hoisting my colours, and they are not blue.

This is the start of a blueless age, because I've decided to be red. I am finding my resplendence. I'm reshaping myself into an exhale, swimming through the Universe, gill-girl, I've got a denim jacket and vivid dreams. I'm reborn under a blood moon, and the force of this rebirth is an animal. It eclipses my old self, eats away the melancholy.

I'm throwing the flimsy off, tearing away the myth. You know my name, but I've never been the Persephone type of girl, I'm too claustrophobic for a chthonic life. Topshelf gods ignored me, so I went searching for something euphoric,

and what I found was spider-free, but not brave. Now I can offer love, but it's the Old Testament kind: indistinguishable from rage.

I claim the bloody and egotistical life for my own, your shit has nothing to do with me. Not anymore.

*Kelli Simpson*

---

## **Red Flag Waving**

I was a red flag waving  
in Good Touch / Bad Touch class.  
Anger in the swing  
of my braid. Shame

in my squirm away  
from the wound salt  
flickering and wavering  
on the pull down projector screen.

How well is any secret kept  
by clumsy class clowning  
rotten  
at the edges  
and fast falling  
from the bone?

A shush in the dark.  
Sticky seconds. Film unspooling.  
How many secrets have been left  
between the hum of flourescents  
and the blink of dark accustomed eyes?

## SLUT

i.

when your teacher calls you a slut, you are thirteen and a boy has just hugged you. she says nothing to the boy. you are wearing what all other girls at your catholic school wear: red polo shirt, plaid skirt. the boy takes off running while you stand there, too stunned to cry and too wounded to move, like an icy shard from the heavens has just pierced you to the floor.

ii.

when your teacher calls you a slut, you believe her. your lips have never met anything but your mother's cheek, but in your teacher's eyes you are lying naked, legs spread and sultry. she says *slut* but you hear *filthy*, you hear *worthless*. every time you pass your reflection, you see the whore she sees, and your heart crawls farther into your ribcage to hide. your mother asks you that evening how your day went, but you're too ashamed to tell her the new word you learned.

iii.

when your teacher calls you a slut, it is loud. it is noticeable. it is as palpable in the air as choking, sticky moisture. it is head-turning, a dog whistle for every other thirteen year old within a mile. she says, *I can't trust you on your own*, and, *who's next on your list?* and, *look at all these boys you ruin*. she speaks of girls who fall pregnant at fifteen, who waste their futures pleasing men on their backs, and the whole time she's looking at you. and so is everyone else.

iv.

when your teacher calls you a slut, it is forever. it is carved in your skin by a rusted knife. you scrub and scrape away at the words but they only inch deeper. when she calls you a slut, it follows you, lingering in every strand of your hair, in the breath streaming from your mouth, in the sour-slanted looks boys will give you for years to come. you're punching every mirror that glances twice at you. you're shaking and shaking and shaking your body but the *slut* won't pry loose.

## **Reclamation**

half-dissected dreams  
pilgrimage across  
lunar whispers

bellyful of butterflies  
pockets full of prose  
rise up from the ashes

tonight I reclaim  
all you stole  
greedy, hungry soul  
gaping mouth  
steel trap-teeth  
dirty blood  
visceral

mine.



## Don't Stand So Close

Laid down, braids brown, mock-virgin feast, main stage  
unzipped, rewind, supine, a Police song  
about schoolgirl desire — men end up caged,  
expire, gunfire. This offering, Barbie thong

is stretched, bared breasts, five minutes long, amidst  
six pilots, constrained gangbang, a backlit  
acrylic bed, circled, strip club sadists,  
*airtight*, pound freckled, glittered head. They fit

in minuscule meatus holes, left, right, no law  
protects, controls. Whispers beneath  
spread blanket green, *raw dog*, their *shock & awe*;  
alone there's Google, moans, Rainbow Brite sheets.

They stood so close, six colognes seeped in skin.  
Annihilation never feels pretend.

Steven Bruce

## My Own Raven

---

This black feathered fucker  
perched on my shoulder  
whispers to me

*remember, that somewhere,  
there's a patch of land waiting  
for your carcass.*

*If you're lucky  
people will weep for you,  
if you're lucky.*

*And those people  
will face the same fate.*

*And your gravestone will decay.  
And your bones will decay.*

*And the remaining memories of you  
will decay.*

*And there'll be no more opportunities  
to face up to the things you're afraid of.*

*Maggie Mackay*

---

**Banshee Hitches a Ride on the Govan Ferry**

She sneers through bubbled glass  
from the Tower of Mournful Wailing.  
Hamish, the skipper, dances  
to the howl of reimagined wolves,  
long extinct. Fools, fools.  
Passengers rise flesh butchered,  
sons, daughters float as limbs,  
skulls bobbing on white horses.  
Each rides a lunar tide,  
riding to the rhyme of her keening  
sons, daughters as relics,  
as reincarnated rodents.

*Michael J. Galko*

---

## **Black magic meditation**

I wake up in hot soup.  
My brother is gone.

There's a current,  
and an evil music.

I've seen that toe,  
that tongue, and,

right before I died,  
that wing of owlet,

now dissolving with me  
in this heady broth.

Strange pool, when  
the baboons' blood

(is that what they said?)  
cools one down.

I am only an eye,  
and I am thankful

I am not the Turk's  
nose. Or that finger,

that measures me  
every cycle of this tide.

**Critical Point**

Whether it is        the Babel Tower,    Icarus  
Or   Golem, once our   brains grow larger than our bodies  
      We        will either become gods or  
Get punished                and dumped                into hell

Now, with AI,    as disciples of    Dataism  
      Are        we upgrading                ourselves  
Into    Frankensteins                or downgrading  
Ourselves        into programed                godlins?  
Critical Point

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Ourselves        into programmed                godlins?

**These words will never be read or even seen**

It saved time.  
The pictures and clips were better,  
and of course we wanted to record our lives

so nearly everyone signed up.  
And the different networks came  
to install the cameras in our homes,

offered coverage anywhere, anytime,  
offered post editing suites  
that could do almost anything.

Soon we went about our lives  
oblivious to being watched,  
besides the occasional couple posing  
arm-in-arm on a mountain side,  
not a selfie stick in sight.

Log in, enter a time  
and there you were  
and we all knew  
that even the worst movies  
could make good trailers.

And those who failed to embrace  
this technology  
wasted time  
snapping photos, recording snippets  
of their lives  
that in comparison  
just looked contrived.

And those of us who did neither  
simply disappeared  
from the timeline.

---

**Rooms in the House**

As if our attic could keep secrets:  
    beams like subcutaneous joints  
        creaking under what's asked of them,  
            door into the ceiling on a string  
                even I could pull, the smallest of all  
                    five of us. At night ghosts came,  
                        glowing & blue, like jellyfish.  
                    How their glimmer blacked the light  
                        in the hall! Curled up tight, I was  
                    just a girl stomaching the gelid  
                knuckles of fear, my spine icing up  
            like popsicles in the deep freezer  
my bones fit right in. Some winters –  
    not just humid months – I'd  
        open its sparkling crystalline maw,  
            perch inside. It always smelled  
                quiet. In our basement, the grey  
                    rock walls looked wet. I couldn't  
                        stop putting my hand to them,  
                    touching their disguise, retesting  
                until someone called me upstairs.  
            Violets burbled from the porch edge  
                while we ate in the kitchen. Birds a twee  
            xylophone. I always wondered how  
you did it, ignored that phantom  
    zoo, or hid knowing.

---

## Family Portrait

In this photograph my parents stand  
on the top step of the courthouse. It's their  
wedding day. They're younger than I knew them  
--I wasn't born until eight years later  
--but as I gaze I seem to be behind  
the camera. Perhaps I was: I took  
the photo from their future, or went back  
in time and place to a time and a place  
where I belonged because I am to be.

Now that one is dead and one is dying,  
at the tender age of fifty-one I  
look at the black-and-white and see color  
and dimension. Now they're moving, stepping  
down, going to their honeymoon. I hope  
that it's a sweet one, they can afford it,  
and when they turn off the hotel-room light  
(my father perhaps already in bed,  
waiting for her to undress in the dark  
and somewhat shyly, and somewhat not, join

him), I know that they begin to make me.  
I won't say that I was there, of course, but  
somehow figured. Breakfast the next morning,  
and perhaps a shopping trip or sight-seeing.  
I don't remember details well but call  
back the heart of things, and after three days  
Father's back at work, selling mobile homes,  
and Mother's in secretarial school.

By the time it's time for me to appear,  
real and naked and umbilical'd and  
bawling *Here I am, Here I am, At last*  
*I show myself*, I'm so happy to be free  
that I forget I was with them always.  
Only now does it come back to me, just  
after half a century and this shot  
of them just married. One day I'll be born



to them again, but in that second world  
some people call the first, and this the real  
other. We'll have a new life together,  
living the non-life that's lived in Heaven  
and recalling how we were when we were  
flesh. It's going to be so good to see

them again and not have eyes, and to hold  
them close and have no arms that fall away  
or hands to slip out of hands or souls to  
ache with words, reprimands, and rebellion.  
I'd call that a marriage made in Heaven  
and a family history of love pure

as nothing, which never disintegrates  
or ages or waits nervously, waiting  
for the eye to open, close, and capture,  
as if in that moment all Creation  
comes down to a finger pressing, releasing,  
and touching us all, to give us life still.

---

**Michelle's Photograph**

The parapet is an ocular disturbance  
what with the low sky's crushing headache

and at April-skinned fifteen, I pose  
for the camera (stolen from your father). I balance;

do not smile at the bitemark of moon,  
or at you, but stare down into the crossfire

as an incendiary device lifts the day;  
lets it fall in Catherine Wheel flecks.

Through a precarious polaroid gauze,  
I watch my nail slivers (painted aubergine),

my hair (like boiled noodles). The meat  
of my neck is betrayed by your mosquito kiss:

far, far rawer to the eye nowadays  
when the sun leans in closer and closer

yet leaves you cold under a sessile oak.

**Prey**

I have this pain inside. It is lower  
than my chest, but higher than my knees.

It is a diving Horned Owl.  
Hunting weakness and clawing it.

I try to push the owl away  
his talons are unrelenting.

I have the drugs that help fuck the owl up.  
He just hoots back with a swivel of his head

and a double nod in my direction.  
His eyes wide and unmoving, he swoops

again. Struggling to escape, I lie down  
flat on my stomach. Hope for him to leave.

**Blade**

Sunday, TK Max, this young man  
in a grey boucled coat, slicked hair,  
moves among the shoes, talks to his gran,  
his mum is there too.

He has a tattoo, clear as you like,  
round the front of his collar bone,  
a folding knife opened, the blades face his neck.  
It's solid this tattoo, pure and beautiful.  
I want to tell him, it has splendour.

He lives with it every day,  
this blade pushed up against his throat, open.  
And winding up to his right ear,  
a single, red rose.

**The Day Wally Was Murdered Love Poem**

She came at him  
with a knife  
and drove it  
into his upper  
left pectoral  
muscle. It was  
only a rubber knife  
with a painted  
silver blade. But  
she put some  
*umppf* into it.  
He knew the knife  
a fake before  
she lunged, so he  
wasn't scared,  
really, more startled  
by the blaze  
in her eyes.  
She was crazy  
with her desire  
to stab him  
with something,

even rubber,  
folding what  
the fuck  
up to the hilt,  
up to her fist,  
through his upper  
ribcage, nearly  
missing the  
spot, where  
she insisted,  
he had  
no heart.

## **Remembering**

I remember the day I was home sick frying my penis on the stove,  
and when the phone rang I pretended it was far worse than it was.  
“Yes, I’ll more than likely return in a few years,” I responded,  
“but I’ll definitely need help remembering which desk was mine.  
And beyond that I’ll certainly need more regular vacations,  
ones in which I can safely swim in hotel pools that haven’t been pissed in  
to the point that my eyes burn when I look in the mirror,  
and make me have to hold onto the handrail all the way down  
67 flights of stairs.”

Other than that, I don’t have too many complaints  
other than I should have been born to different parents;  
had different aunts, uncles, cousins, friends,  
and even a couple of different cats and dogs,  
though I did love my Bedlington Terrier named Duchess  
who often slept on my bed,  
woke me in the morning with a lick to my face  
and sometimes a pat on my head. . .

**Gone for a Burton**

Slung across your shoulders,  
your green-grass sweater,  
mohair and lambs' wool,  
makes light, soft promises.

Look down. Your brogues,  
shone at dawn, now caked  
in foul mud.

Your pockets bulge, lies  
hidden in swirled silken hankies.  
Untruths tick muscles  
bedded in your hooded eyelids.

An imp stabs your nerves,  
forked punishment, yet fevered  
you will not stop. Liz stares,  
kohled Cleopatra eyes,  
bedraggled, on Kodak paper.

---

**All The Snowflakes Look The Same To Me**

The city is a fanged mortality when you know  
blue brick feet with a stench  
as thick as booze-soaked urine.  
Some days snow turns to pellets, the sky's chamber  
full of bullets,  
emptied into rot. It's tough  
finding a bank to withdraw four nickels, a dime,  
and a menthol cigarette. A lot of doors closed  
due to weather.  
Life in transit's a barren whore,  
legs spread, biting on a bottle,  
still hoping for a child.

It's been the underpass at Armitage and Western  
since they started handing out cardboard and pity.  
God opened a graffiti door, so the wind burned  
plastic from my poncho into my face  
like an iron brand with the city emblem.  
I wrote my name with will  
on that door,  
so somebody would know where I lived.  
My eyes start melting like the ground in spring,  
and I blink walking the overpass,  
today.



## **The Wolf**

At school, I wore colours  
which matched  
the walls. I wore pale  
greens and greys  
and I longed to disappear.

One day, we were told  
the strange tale  
of the little girl  
who is eaten  
by the wolf.

As the story ends,  
she is cut out  
from the creature's insides  
and lives happily  
ever after.

It was the part before  
the ending which puzzled me.  
I wondered how the girl  
spent those lost hours,  
trapped inside the wolf.

And when I look  
at my school years now,  
I see a little boy  
in the window,  
waving,

and everything  
is fuzzy  
like Channel Five was  
and everything  
is frightening.

**Plastic Christ**

My plastic Jesus glowed in the dark.  
A nun's prize for reciting catechism,  
my plastic Jesus raised a hand in blessing,  
the room illuminated by the threat of salvation,  
by the promise of an easy death.  
And me, I'm only nine years old  
and chewing over the Christian koan –  
'God always was and always will be'.  
I'm lying in the dark, filling in spaces,  
my radioactive Christ glowing like a watch dial,  
our hand-painted saviour a messiah made in Mexico.  
He who emanated light and love.  
Who died so that I might sin again.  
Who always was and will be.

**Dressed to the Infinite Nines**

What was God wearing when  
making the world? A gold lame dress

or tight red pants, a light  
blue hanky in the left back pocket?

God the Father in a jock strap?  
Quite heavenly. What about

God the Mother? Or God  
the Single Woman who doesn't

want kids? What hat goes  
with that? Maybe God

stays naked. Forever,  
never covering up even though

parts of the universe chill to almost  
absolute zero. Tough to choose

the sizzling get-up,  
space wearing a frozen mumu.

## **The Blind Pig Live**

bashment of bindlestiffs  
Argus-eyeing a pending  
beach volleyball barn burner  
hoddy-noddy highballers  
repressing Cape Codders  
gingered Moscow Mules

the callipygian tapstress  
garnishes Glencairns  
deluding dipsomaniacs  
chasing her conceit  
with roughhewn ponies  
coprolalia ovations  
distilled devoirs

napkin doodles of beefy Impalas  
rummage sale Civil War tintypes  
neon bronco rider needlepoint  
scaloped ropework overmantles  
arranged in baroque blossoms  
littering mustard sycamore brick

carved fruit maple carpet rockers  
button tufted nailhead divans  
rolling arms and tri-toned verges  
floral-finished wash stand fossils  
tiled serpentine backsplash  
bracket-footed, rouged

## **Whose Hermes?**

My days fly by, placating gods unseen,  
whose digital demands pop up onscreen.  
Chased by clock, enduring traffic's roar,  
I end up mocked with silence at the door.  
The times I've circled back! I've lost all count -  
more work-life balance on Olympus Mount.

Pandora caught my lies, in one last toss  
I slung my satchel, heel-wing kicked the Boss.  
In a thunder-bolt I landed, dazed and grimy,  
sprawled on Car Park asphalt. Blimey!  
Now beached alone, I soon regained delight as  
I saw parcels strewn as Aegean-spewed detritus.

No more dogsbody God, I'd embrace the clay,  
be lord of my hours, rest and proper pay.  
Winged helmet gone, I'd tog myself in Lycra,  
grab scanner gun, high hopes, a Nissan Micra -  
I'd criss-cross worlds - as sleek as any weasel,  
once I'd cash to fill her up with diesel.

But crammed inside this sweaty metal turtle,  
I recall the days when through the air I'd hurtle:  
From rosy-fingered Dawn's caress of sky,  
to traffic-light's glow, red as Cyclops' eye;  
with packages all shapes and sizes poking.  
And do they match my lists? You must be joking .

Once I flew with news, put on disguises,  
Now earth-bound, it's all signed-for, no surprises.  
I take my chance to raise the mischief tally:  
dog-owner's gate left yawning down some alley;  
package flung on flat-roof house extension  
or abandoned to a neighbour's good intention.

Just one thing undelivered: a courier's dreams.  
It would need a god to do this job, it seems.

---

**40 Degree Heat**

Passengers sit on plastic in the bus  
the dry clay village where small lizards dart  
the trickle of sweat in trails down shirt dust  
a wooden stare at primitive cave art  
the air as roasted as the luncheon goat  
greasy finger smears on cups of warm wine  
a shock of ice at Aphrodite's soak  
whose odour will be the strongest this time?

Bedraggled stumble to the foyer air  
the cool of porcelain against my thigh  
vanilla shampoo creamed into my hair  
exfoliant sand drains soft as a sigh  
abundance of clean skin under the grime  
I soothe in perfume as subtle as lime.

**Not on the map**

It wasn't here in this wood we walked  
that spring  
where we wandered aimless

among bluebells  
kicked up aromas with our thoughts,  
where we startled blackbirds' warnings.

It wasn't here  
we talked of how to find a path,  
where we clasped hands

across muddy ruts  
then didn't let go,  
where we talked about whether we would

or would not, could  
or could not  
find a way,

and all the while purple scents  
followed us through the trees.  
It wasn't here

you showed me  
how moss makes velvet on branches  
where wild roses cascade out of hedgerows

how elderflowers perfume the air  
how dark it is  
where leaves make a canopy

but still the sunlight shows through;  
It wasn't here you showed me  
where the path divides.

## **How To Behave At A Wake**

with taste  
(appropriate feeling and grace)

not  
to make a trough of the buffet table

and not  
to get out a pack of cards

and (certainly) not  
to ask  
the widow for a kiss

though  
after the dark hour of grief  
the impulse

to turn back the clock  
and bake  
(once more) the wedding cake

is a phenomena  
too shy  
to name  
too common to ignore

two hands on a clock  
touch  
then go about their measure

we wake  
opposite/apposite  
and go our ways into a new morning



**Observations made inside a coffee shop #15**

It isn't clear why, but she seats herself at a table for four.  
Pours sugar into her latte, spears a piece of cake;  
she takes twenty-eight seconds to chew one mouthful.

She consumes two swigs of coffee then looks around, assesses;  
my guess is that she missed me looking back.  
Reaching under the table from her handbag she pulls out –

a paperback. Cracks the spine, reads a line, stashes  
it back and looks around again. Swigs coffee, eats cake,  
no one saw. I am dying to know what the book is.

**Sea Queen**

A woman of sea-salt renown,  
She holds her fathomless faults at bay  
In a castle of smoothed shell-bone.

Washed by tides of idleness,  
Her crown glints the turning  
Of a new-sown day.

She could drown them all  
With one ripple of her ship-sink gown.  
No word can ebb her spirit –  
Aloft on her throne of boat-wreck rafters.

The men in the pub disbelieve her.  
Yet spit  
                    and touch wood  
                                    and cross fingers  
Ever after.

Thank you for reading!

