

# Gnarled Oak

*an online literary journal*



Issue 11: Natural Outlaws  
Jan-Feb 2017



**Gnarled Oak**  
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## Contents

Natural Outlaws — Melissa Fu	1
The Past Is Not Where I Left It — Stephanie Hutton	2
The Teenager Who Became My Mother — Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto	3
In the Feet of a Refugee — Frank Eze	4
In Merciless Air — Steve Klepetar	5
Sometimes the Water — Marie Craven	6
In the Clouds — Cui Yuwei	7
kite festival — Anthony Q. Rabang	8
There Was a River— Micki Blenkush	9
I Have Me Some Hobbies — Paul Beckman	10
Journey — Olivier Schopfer	11
a boy draws a bird — Nicholas Klacsanzky	12
The Boy by the River Told — Matt Dennison	13
Dis-Spelling — Mary McCarthy	14
fistfuls of hair — Marilyn Fleming	15
Carried Away — Micki Blenkush	16
Hats Off — Betsy Mars	17
Scattering in Harmony — Tony Press	18
frost-filigreed — Debbie Strange	21
Grief's Engine is a Flower — José Luis Gutiérrez	22
The Sound of Taste — Steve Klepetar	23
Poem for Rent — Marie Craven	24

The Road Dreamers Take — Robert S. King	25
beneath the surface — Marianne Paul	26
their affair — Deborah P. Kolodji	27
The Next Generation of Stones — Amy Kotthaus	28
When My Youth Catches Up with Me — Robert S. King	29
And When — Chumki Sharma	30
Have Made It — Matt Dennison & Michael Dickes	31
 Editor's Note	 32
Contributor Bios	33

## **Natural Outlaws**

*Melissa Fu*

### **I. Hubble's Law**

The Universe's overriding impulse is to back away. The further that galaxies are from each other, the faster they move to increase that separation. For almost fourteen billion years, the Universe has been accelerating away from connection, away from communion. This makes me immeasurably sad: what could be lonelier than a Universe full of galaxies whose first principle is to recede from one another at an ever increasing speed?

### **II. Length contraction**

If you make a long bus go fast enough, you can enclose it in a short barn. You need to be snappy with the doors, though. By this logic, you can fit a metre rule in a thimble if your sleight of hand moves like lightning. You can even stick a length of swiftly moving truth in the fine cracks across your beliefs.

### **III. Illumination**

Seeing is subtraction. Leaves are green only because of all the colours of light, green is the only hue the leaf refuses to embrace. It happily absorbs enlightenment from red to violet, gaining heat and energy whilst hopscotching over the middle ground of green. And so it is that a black hole accepts all, absorbs all, embraces every colour, every wavelength of light. Likewise, white results from complete indifference, lack of engagement at any frequency, deflecting away every encounter with the light.

## **The Past Is Not Where I left It**

*Stephanie Hutton*

Last time I saw it, it was shivering in blackness  
wrapped tight in layers of shame  
squeezed small with no room to breathe  
locked up as he never would be.

I searched that space, that hole, that valley.  
And in its place, the compressed past  
formed diamonds so hard and bright  
I placed them in my eyes and faced forward.

## **The Teenager Who Became My Mother**

*Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto*

The teenager who became my mother had a way of feeling,  
seeing and hoping.

It was hope in particular rafted her through the war.

She was not one-eyed either were her hairs curly,

She had a body of one colour: black.

I remember when I asked her if she has ever seen anyone die.

She moved her head up and down: A kind of Yes.

She said she saw five and twenty and more;

That most of them drowned inside of her.

I looked her in the eyes after she had exhausted her dying  
tales before me.

I saw the teenager who became my mother

and was a graveyard for those drowned inside of her

to see us crawl through the war.

## In the Feet of a Refugee

Frank Eze

*-At the Internally Displaced Persons Camp, Kuje, April, 2015.*

I know where daffodils trade their yellows for crimsons;

I know where they are, too weary and weathered with war;

Yes, I know where their cornet-cast crowns are full of furrows:

The soles of a refugee's feet—bloodied, broken into lines of  
latitude and longitude of longing;

Longing for home on whose pristine paths sprout earth's  
most prickly plants:

Bombs, blades and crying kalashnikovs.

## **In Merciless Air**

*Steve Klepetar*

You shouldn't venture into fog,  
where a mountain's head rises,

a face without eyes, arrowhead  
jammed into the flesh of sky.

It may be, someday  
that the world will flip to face

another sun, and you the fish  
choking at the bottom

of a wooden-ribbed boat,  
your eyes smoke and glass,

your desperate lips pouting  
as you drown in the merciless air.

## Sometimes the Water

*Marie Craven*



View Marie Craven's video "Sometimes the Water" at  
<http://gnarledoak.org/issue-11/sometimes-the-water/>

## In the Clouds

*Cui Yuwei*

out the porthole  
a primordial sun  
wears the colour it was born with  
the stewardess keeps altering its flavor  
sometimes it tastes like orange juice  
other times, Chinese tea

I feel myself ascending  
into the divine world  
not far away, Zeus and the Jade Emperor  
are comparing notes  
about how to woo a lady  
the gods' lost chargers  
hide in long sleeves of fairy maidens

night falls, moonless  
stars are out  
no other celebrations  
in the firmament  
except for a silent pair of wings  
fashioned out of iron

///

*Author's note: The Jade Emperor in Chinese culture and traditional myth is one of the representations of the first god. In Taoist theology he is one of the three primordial emanations of the Tao.*

**kite festival**

*Anthony Q. Rabang*

kite festival –  
my whole crayon set  
up in the sky

## **There Was a River**

*Micki Blenkush*

at the farm of a girl my age.  
We were maybe nine or ten.  
The length of her hair  
galloped like a mane  
as she splashed ahead into the water.  
Cows drank from shallow banks.  
The current was fast from rain  
and pulled at our legs as we moved  
around branches and stones.  
We swept and fell outside the hours.  
I don't remember hot or cold  
or the wet afterward.  
We laughed at weakness  
as we climbed from the water.  
Our steps sought buoyance  
upon return.

## **I Have Me Some Hobbies**

*Paul Beckman*

I take advantage of everything—mostly people and of these people mostly friends. I have other hobbies. Yes, I consider taking advantage a hobby and “found” items I display in my modest ranch house near the beach but the lists and the taking advantage summaries I keep hidden away in my knotty pine den with two boards that open to a secret closet by a spring opener. My found things are scattered all around the house, including my stash closet. One day in the supermarket I spotted an open purse in the baby carrier of a cart. After watching the lady shopper walk off a few aisles and no one else was in the ethnic foods aisle I snagged the wallet and hit a mother lode of cash, credit cards, even a debit card with the password written on it. I sold that for five hundred dollars to some degenerate at a bar. Outside the hardware store I took a wheel barrel on display and filled it with bags of potting soil and wheeled it to my car at the far end of the parking lot and asked some young guy with the hardware store logo on his apron if he’d help me unload the soil and get the wheel barrel in my car. He couldn’t have been nicer so I gave him a \$2 tip. That’s how my collections go. My bookshelves have a bunch of library books that I was able to walk out with in my backpack and my walls have pictures I’ve taken off of doctors office walls. You’d be surprised how many doctors are good photographers and like to display their work. I list the “found objects” in a moleskin notebook and keep it in my hide-a-way along with my “taking advantage” of moleskin. Who can remember so many items? I have to make some changes because my house is filling up with things I no longer treasure, Yesterday; I started dropping my collected wallets randomly into open purses in the supermarket.

**Journey**  
*Olivier Schopfer*



**a boy draws a bird**

*Nicholas Klacsanzky*

a boy draws a bird  
at an industrial station  
bus window fog

## The Boy by the River Told

*Matt Dennison*

The boy by the river told to await his father's  
return plays with pebbles, kicks at rocks  
as the night rises through water,  
drops from trees to fashion a statue  
cast in grey then black when the last  
spark of faith flickers, falters  
and goes out, the night  
rushing in, floating him upright,  
stiff through the woods to lie in bed  
listening to water spilling from  
room to room, door to door,  
the whole house shivering, shaking,  
breaking down under water flashing,  
flooding quietly down the stairs,  
pooling, stopping, crawling  
past the father unseen.

## **Dis-Spelling**

*Mary McCarthy*

I remember that party  
the one where cats danced  
in circles  
and wolves sang  
beneath a bloody moon.

The one where we all took  
strange communion  
and neon visions bloomed  
rooted in our bodies,  
electric petals opening  
wide enough to swallow  
our lame conventions.

I remember how my heart beat  
in a hard stutter  
with the flash  
of strobe lights  
hyphenating time  
deranging vision  
until I turned  
spinning like a dizzy girl  
in a game meant to break  
through  
to some bright new world  
beyond the walls of reason.

**fistfuls of hair**

*Marilyn Fleming*

fistfuls of hair  
fall from her head  
hope so small  
it slides through  
a needle's eye

## Carried Away

Micki Blenkush

She doesn't need to tell me  
the cancer has returned.  
Now on daily morphine  
for the pain raking her bones,  
she left the window open last night  
as she tried to sleep, flat and still  
on her back. She let the June breeze  
pass right over her body.

*Bad as I feel, she says,  
if someone wants to come  
and get me, let them.*

Anyone could slice the screen  
next to her bed and reach  
to touch the gossamer hair  
sprouting after last year's chemo.  
Who might take her away?  
Instead of the thieves and gunshots  
known to this neighborhood,  
let it be some feathered creature  
never before seen. Let its name  
be whispered into her ear.  
Let any other word  
be stricken from this room  
once she has been lifted  
with unsinkable wings  
over and above  
our distant streets.

## Hats Off

*Betsy Mars*

Your big floppy hat that so overshadowed me –  
The funky floral one that I couldn't begin to wear –  
Your Jackie shades and little pillbox –  
all too sophisticated for my less confident style.  
In the sun, the wide-brimmed straw hat protecting  
your pale, exquisite skin

The hats you wore when  
your hair thinned from the chemo  
The berets when  
it was finally all gone –  
I couldn't pull off any one of those looks,  
and now your hat rests, accessorizing

the canister of ashes  
as I take my time  
gradually scattering  
your body to the wind and waters  
of the world where you belong  
Hatless

## Scattering in Harmony

*Tony Press*

The ashes scattered and danced on the calm surface of the Rock River. After a quiet minute Cynthia squeezed his hand and whispered:

"But this is probably illegal, right?"

Oliver didn't answer. Clutching his other hand was her son Jimi, now a stocky eight-year-old, and Oliver had no desire to go beyond this moment.

"Right?" She asked again.

Jimi broke free and scampered a few yards farther across the bridge, the better to watch the last of the ashes as they disappeared into the elements. Oliver turned to her and kissed her forehead. He said:

"Lady, I am indeed a real lawyer, and I'm here to tell you there's nothing 'probably' about it – we have committed an exquisitely illegal act."

"Well, then, I'll just tell them it was my lawyer's idea."

"Great plan. That should work."

They walked to Jimi. River gulls swooped in and out of the afternoon sun, their shadows on the water as graceful as their true selves in the air.

"Mom, once Grandma Millie and I saw an eagle here, a real eagle!"

"I remember, sweetie, because you wrote me a letter all about it. I still have it. I'll always keep it with my most-important-papers."

Oliver thought of another most-important-paper that would be waiting for them back in Janesville, the one that awarded him guardianship of Jimi. They would pick it up from the courthouse on Monday before driving Cynthia back to the women's prison in Taycheedah. Her funeral furlough ended Monday at midnight and they were not going to be late. She still had four months on her ticket and nobody wanted an extension.

Millie had been his client for a year, a remarkable grandma taking care of the fatherless little boy while his mom served two years for selling dope. Marijuana, in fact. Nothing else. Now his client was dead and he was in charge of Jimi. They had taught him nothing of this back in law school.

"Hey," he said, "did I ever tell you about my buddy Sean? The one who works out in Arizona?"

He gave them no opportunity to respond before beginning his story:

"Sean works in a tiny town, Sacaton, on the Gila River Reservation. After his first year they had a dinner in his honor and someone from the Tribal Council announced: 'From this day forth, Sean shall be known as *Walking Eagle*. We are extremely grateful for his service.'


Sean was touched, he told me, and then the Judge of the Tribal Court stood up, and said 'Of course, Sean, we chose that name because you're so full of crap you'll never fly.'

Everyone laughed, Sean told me, no one more than he did."

Jimi giggled all the way back to the shore, followed by his mom and Oliver. There were worse things than full immersion in the music of laughter.

May it always be so, Oliver implored anyone who might be watching. Even Millie.

frost-filigreed  
*Debbie Strange*

A misty, orange-toned landscape with bare trees and a body of water. The scene is hazy and atmospheric, with the warm light of the sun or moon creating a soft glow. The trees are dark and silhouetted against the lighter background. The water in the foreground is calm and reflects the ambient light.

frost-filigreed  
seasons pass slower  
without you

words/image DStrange

## **Grief's Engine Is a Flower**

*José Luis Gutiérrez*

Today each shadow is a giddy cosmonaut  
navigating fields of light.

Wherever I stand sprinklers go off  
and invite rainbows.

The transparencies of air feel  
vertiginous as sky.

Every cloud is pregnant with rain that never falls.  
Every tree vibrates with telepathic zest.

Ossicles spell out a symphony  
that began in the Mesozoic with giant lizards.

The migratory patterns of vampire bats  
have been rerouted to your house in the suburbs.

Politicians in Washington and everywhere else  
wear overalls and are muzzled with honesty.

A virus somewhere has decoded the gene  
for happiness.

All our liminal angels reel in the dark

## The Sound of Taste

*Steve Klepetar*

There's a yellow boat on a blue sea.  
It's a drawing you made, and the sun

is like an olive in the sky.  
Maybe you were thinking Martini

thoughts, or maybe you were drawn  
to that horizon which always seemed

to mark your work, that blurry line  
of spray and cloud where the world

disappeared. Some artists render light  
as if it were something you could touch

or breathe, but you always drew  
and painted taste, a world made of lemons

and salt. Your objects melt and fade,  
like something sweet on the tongue.

What lasts cannot be trees,  
their trunks and leaves, but a flavor

caught for an instant, a sensation  
in the act of fading into itself.

Your landscapes hang on my walls,  
and every meadow, every sea cliff,

each green field, lingers in my mouth,  
the sound of taste, another lovely, long farewell.

## Poem for Rent

*Marie Craven*



View Marie Craven's video "Poem for Rent" at  
<http://gnarledoak.org/issue-11/poem-for-rent/>

## The Road Dreamers Take

*Robert S. King*

We draw our maps in darkness,  
get lost and trip on fallen signs,  
detour like wingless birds  
into night's black holes.  
Feet as heavy as our hearts,  
we wait for morning's widening light  
when trees gleam and lean apart  
for our passage—and where the road  
shines ahead for a day,  
we follow the fickle light  
of dream again.

beneath the surface

*Marianne Paul*



**their affair**

*Deborah P. Kolodji*

their affair

the pattern of stones

in a zen garden

## The Next Generation of Stones

*Amy Kotthaus*

Spring finds new stones forced into the world,  
children of winter's long hidden labors.  
Not even keen ermine sensed their coming  
under that crystalline surface.  
But they were there awaiting shifts,  
pressures, erosions to bring them out of hiding,  
into the leveled field to trip up horse and plow.  
The only way to light they take is tearing.  
Seeing fields now marred and broken,  
farmers root them out, preserving them for walls  
when they should be buried back.  
Summer brings even plots that welcome seed,  
but crops will wilt, and snow will hide  
the next generation of stones.

## When My Youth Catches Up with Me

*Robert S. King*

The one I am is fragile in the mirror.  
The one I was still lives wildly  
along a nature trail, throws rocks  
through windows of pools, makes waves,  
never grows up but climbs the tallest  
of an old-growth forest. He still growls  
loudly in my ears, though the lines  
he cannot cross are trails worn  
so deeply in the past and on my face.

I grumble, clear a hole in the window fog,  
replay a film on the pane, eyes flickering  
along the forest path where the barefoot boy  
is lost forever. Still an echo calls,  
not to warn me, but to lead me through  
long winters, the snow settling deeper  
and deeper in my hair. The trail beneath  
my slowing steps whitens, frozen in time  
but for a time still cracking like glass.

**And when**

*Chumki Sharma*

And when,  
my castle was gone,  
I brought the ocean home

## Have Made It

*Matt Dennison & Michael Dickes*



View Matt Dennison & Michael Dickes's video "Have Made It" at  
<http://gnarledoak.org/issue-11/have-made-it/>

## Editor's Note

In a fit of helpfulness, I volunteered to be an assistant coach for my son's t-ball team. Having no experience with t-ball, baseball, or athletic coaching didn't stop me, but now on the eve of the first practice, I realize I have no idea about any of this: my sports were soccer and swimming, and my coaching was academic (high school debate).

I start flipping through the literature books in my classroom looking—as all reasonable people do—to poetry for guidance and come upon “Casey at the Bat” by Ernest Lawrence Thayer, “Analysis of Baseball” by May Swenson, and a personal favorite “Slam, Dunk & Hook” by Yusef Komunyakaa. Good stuff but probably not much help with the mechanics of coaching little kids. Still, where would we be without poetry?

Not without a sudden lesson plan to coax a bunch of hardened teenage boys to write poetry about their favorite sports and surprise themselves by how much they enjoyed doing it.

And certainly not here at the end of this latest issue of *Gnarled Oak*. Which brings me back round to coaching t-ball but mostly the trying-new-things aspect of it. Poetry was a new thing once (and remarkably, still strikes me as such though I've been at it eight years now). So was starting up this journal that still feels new to me. May all good things in life always feel that way.

With gratitude and thanks,

James Brush, editor  
Feb 2017

## Contributor Bios

**Paul Beckman's** story, "Healing Time" was one of the winners in the 2016 The Best Small Fictions and his 100 word story, "Mom's Goodbye" was chosen as the winner of the 2016 Fiction Southeast Editor's Prize. His stories are widely published in print and online. His published story website is [paulbeckmanstories.com](http://paulbeckmanstories.com) and his latest collection of flash stories, *PEEK*, is available on his site.

**Micki Blenkush** lives in St. Cloud MN and works as a social worker. She is a 2015 recipient of an emerging artist grant awarded by the Central MN Arts Board, funded by the McKnight Foundation. Her writing has also appeared in: *Sequestrum*, *Naugatuck River Review*, *\*82 Review*, and elsewhere.

**Marie Craven** is a media maker and musician from the Gold Coast, Australia. She has been engaged in online collaboration since 2007 and has contributed to works with artists in many different parts of the world.

Website: [pixieguts.com](http://pixieguts.com)

After a rather extended and varied second childhood in New Orleans, **Matt Dennison's** work has appeared in *Rattle*, *Bayou Magazine*, *Redivider*, *Natural Bridge*, *The Spoon River Poetry Review* and *Cider Press Review*, among others. He has also made videos with poetry videographers [Michael Dickes](#), [Swoon](#), and [Marie Craven](#).

**Michael Dickes** has conceived, filmed, edited, and produced a variety of video and audio vignettes that feature his own short stories and poems, as well as producing pieces for hire in the U.S. and Europe. Most recently, two of his short prose

films were featured at the International Film Festival in Athens, Greece. See more at: [michaeldickes.weebly.com](http://michaeldickes.weebly.com)

**Frank Eze** lives in, and writes from, Ibadan, Nigeria. He recently won the Eriata Oribhabor Poetry Prize. His works have been published in online journals—*Praxis*, *WritiVision*, *COAL* and many others. Frank is working on his debut poetry collection, *AMARANTHINE*.

**Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto** is a Nigerian who likes reading and writing.

**Marilyn Fleming** was raised on a dairy farm in Wisconsin. It was this small slice of life, living in nature, which often defines her work. Her poetry has been published in various international journals, and anthologies. She has a special interest in haiku and tanka, Japanese forms of poetry, and won her first prize in the Hildegard Janzen Oriental Forms Award in 1988. She currently resides in Pewaukee, WI. Visit her online at [marilynflamingpoet.wordpress.com](http://marilynflamingpoet.wordpress.com).

**Melissa Fu** grew up in Northern New Mexico and now lives in Cambridgeshire, UK. Skeletons in her closet include a couple of physics degrees and many valiant but disastrous attempts at classroom teaching. Learn more at [Spillingtheink.com](http://Spillingtheink.com) or [onetreebohemia.com](http://onetreebohemia.com)

**José Luis Gutiérrez** is a San Francisco-based poet. His work has appeared in *Eratio*, *Scythe*, *Margie*, *Poemeleon*, *DMQ*, *Jetfuel*, *Caliban* and is forthcoming in *Metonym*, *Xavier Review* and *Kestrel*, among others. His first poetry collection, *A World Less Away*, was published in 2016.

**Stephanie Hutton** is a writer and clinical psychologist in the UK who believes in the therapeutic value of short creative works. She has published flash fiction, short stories and

poetry online and in print. In 2016 she was shortlisted for the Brighton Prize for flash fiction. She can be found at [stephaniehutton.com](http://stephaniehutton.com)

**Robert S. King**, a native Georgian, now lives in Lexington, Kentucky, where he serves on the board of FutureCycle Press. His poems have appeared in hundreds of magazines, including *Atlanta Review*, *Chariton Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Spoon River Poetry Review*. He has published eight poetry collections, most recently *Developing a Photograph of God* (Glass Lyre Press, 2014).

**Nicholas Klacsanzky** is the editor of [Haiku Commentary](#) and has been published in the top haiku and tanka journals, like *Modern Haiku*, *Ribbons*, *The Mainichi*, and *Mayfly*. He lives in Ukraine.

**Steve Klepetar** has received several nominations for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize, including four in 2016. Recent collections include *My Son Writes a Report on the Warsaw Ghetto* and *The Li Bo Poems. Family Reunion* and *A Landscape in Hell* are forthcoming in 2017.

**Deborah P Kolodji** is the California Regional Coordinator for the Haiku Society of America and the moderator of the Southern California Haiku Study Group. She has published over 900 haiku and other short poems in numerous journals both on and off the web.

**Amy Kotthaus** is a writer, translator, painter, and photographer. Her poetry has been published in *Ink in Thirds*, *Yellow Chair Review*, and *Section 8*. Her photography has been published in *Storm Cellar*, *Ground Fresh Thursday*, *Crab Fat Magazine*, *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*, and *Digging Through*

*the Fat*. She currently lives in Maine with her husband and children.

**Betsy Mars** is a Connecticut-born, mostly Southern California raised, formerly lapsed poet. She has returned to the fold after too long of an absence. She is a mother, educator, and animal lover with a severe case of travel fever. Having spent part of her childhood abroad, she has always had an interest in language and its nuances. Her work has been published by Silver Birch Press and *California Quarterly*, as well as in several anthologies.

**Mary McCarthy** has always been a writer, but spent most of her working life as a Registered Nurse. Her work has appeared in many online and print journals, including *Earth's Daughters*, *Gnarled Oak*, *Third Wednesday* and *Three Elements Review*. She is grateful for the wonderful online communities of writers and poets sharing their work and passion for writing, providing a rich world of inspiration, appreciation, and delight.

**Marianne Paul** is a Canadian novelist and poet who recently transitioned to short-form poetry, primarily haiku, senryu, haiga and haibun. She was the winner of the 2016 Jane Reichhold Memorial Haiga Competition, multi-media category. Read more of her writing on twitter [@mariannpaul](#), and on her website [literarykayak.com](#).

**Tony Press** tries to pay attention and sometimes he does. His short story collection, *Crossing the Lines*, was published in 2016 (Big Table). He'd love for you to buy it. He lives near San Francisco and has two *Pushcart* nominations but not one website.

**Anthony Q. Rabang** finished his BS Biology at the University of the Philippines – Baguio in 2015. He started writing haiku,

senryu, and haibun while soul-searching in January 2016. He has poems published in the *Asahi Haikuist Network*, *Failed Haiku*, *World Haiku Review*, *Contemporary Haibun Online*, *Cattails*, *Wildplum*, *Akitsu Quarterly*, *Akisame*, *Makoto*, *Presence* and *Under the Basho*. Website: [Short Pauses](#)

**Olivier Schopfer** lives in Geneva, Switzerland. He likes to capture the moment in haiku and photography. His work has appeared in *The Red Moon Anthology of English-Language Haiku 2014 & 2016*, as well as in numerous online and print journals. He also writes articles in French about etymology and everyday expressions at [Olivier Schopfer raconte les mots](#).

**Chumki Sharma** is a poet from Calcutta, India. Words are the only things eternal in a transient world and so she writes.

**Debbie Strange** is a widely published Canadian short form poet, haiga artist and photographer. Her first collection, *Warp and Weft: Tanka Threads*, is available through [atlaspoetica.org](http://atlaspoetica.org). She invites you to visit her archive at [debbiemstrange.blogspot.ca](http://debbiemstrange.blogspot.ca) or on Twitter [@Debbie\\_Strange](#).

**Cui Yuwei** is a bilingual poet and translator based in China. Her poems and translations are widely seen in Australia, the US, Canada, Vietnam and India. Her pocket poetry collection *Fish Bones* published by Flying Island Books is forthcoming soon in Macau. Currently, she works as an English lecturer in Beijing Normal University, Zhuhai Campus in China.