



Poems by
Jonah Bornstein, Frank Coons, Sharon Corcoran,
Amy Wray Irish, Melody Jones, Marjorie Power,
and Andrew Schelling

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SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Bristlecone welcomes poems from writers of the Mountain West region. The editors are especially eager to read poems that reflect the region's various cultures and landscapes, although we have no restrictions in mind regarding subject matter. Our main concerns are with the quality of the work and the cultivation of a regional community of poets and poetry lovers.

Submissions are accepted year-round. Please adhere to all of the following guidelines:

- Submit 3 to 5 unpublished poems in a single Word attachment (no poems in the body of an email) to: bristleconemag@gmail.com. Submissions with more than 5 poems will not be considered.
- Poems posted on blogs and social media are considered published. Simultaneous submissions are fine as long as you let us know right away if the work is accepted elsewhere.
- Use a header on at least the first page of your submission that includes your:
 - Name as you wish it to appear in the journal
 - Mailing address
 - Email address
 - Phone number
 - Website address (if you have one)
 - Phone number
- Submission should be in .doc or .docx file format (no .rtf or .pdf)
- Times New Roman 12 pt. font—titles in bold and *not* all caps
- Flush left alignment except for drop-lines, internal spaces within lines, and any other special formatting your poem requires
- 100-word maximum bio at the end of the submission; same guideline for translator bio(s). Feel free to provide live links to your website.

After publication, all rights revert to the individual *Bristlecone* authors. We consider simultaneous submissions but please let us know immediately if something you've submitted to us has been accepted elsewhere.

The Editors: Joseph Hutchison, Jim Keller, Sandra S. McRae, and Murray Moulding



Jonah Bornstein

Raven Flight at the Grand Canyon

I know the lust of hang-gliders to loop upward
in the grace of ravens, forming fissures in air
as if they, too, were custodians of space.
I watch them drift across the desert,
hands clenched to the reins
of taut wings, their bodies clamped to saddles;
I remember seeing
one of these creatures
dangling like a struck bird from electrical wires
above the coast highway—no formula of wellness
would return him, the bent grille
of his body haunting
me for years after. Now relaxed
in a warm motel room below the canyon,
its buffeting wind unlocked from my body
by a hot shower, I wonder whether the woman
who spoke truly did see a tagged condor,
the exposed pink guts
of its head a splotch of luminescence
against the ragged streaks of light
shifting on canyon walls, or a moose
in Oak Creek Canyon, the trolley
of her imagination unfolding at the rim,
smiling, glorious in her tellings, rose
madder dyeing the pale skin
under her eyes. It is enough, I wanted to say, to see
the particulars of where we are—
the clipped dust of deer tracks, to hear the thump of wings,
and watch a brace of ravens coil
up from the canyon's lips, making visible
channels of air unfelt from our perch on the rim.
But I, too, have created canyon stars
out of a scattering of desert datura; and I question,
even, the hang glider forty years ago—wonder
if my parents diverted my gaze away from the snared man
to the cable of knotted cars, afraid
of death hovering above us, or whether I'd seen
at all, that my young mind opened a fissure
to move the uneasy flight
of man toward earth where I could see
its consequence, and know that daring
brings death close—that my story now

is to climb the pole, lasso the impervious hum
of wires that crowds our bodies
with a language we cannot understand.

Nightfall at Bell Rock

The red hills begin to glow
shrugging heat off their chameleon buttes.
It is their breath
faithful as the night blending into them.
Soon Bell Rock alone remains distinct, her full nipple
ready to drip its mineral milk down the smooth
slope of her breast to the gulch
where branches of a cypress skirt above
the ground like the woman in Guanajuato
who begged me
to buy a white carnation for my wife.

Fields of dwarf primroses
glow and shake in the dark, like a bed frame
of the newly married.
I look up at Venus dulling the checkerboard
of stars, and feel a chill
catch in my back, as if a cold blade
had found the spine.
I sit down in the dark; the insect's
guttural grate vibrates in my body
as do the junipers' silhouettes, their wild gestures
so quiet, finally, in postures of relief.

This Morning's Dark Rain

This morning's dark rain
buds on the tips of branches, sunlight
taking shape in these pendants
the way the flamelight from the candles
illuminated your hair and eyes
the night before you left
on a journey to the Mohave where the straggly
Larrea endures, its roots sprawling
outward for thousands of years to bind
the earth under the desert. You will sit before
this ancient bush until you learn
that patience is a feeling

that shifts with the winds the way
sands drift into forms
that cannot be predicted—such is the heartbeat
that pulses between bodies at rest
and in the fanned petals of ardor.

Pilot Light

I spend mornings shadowing
the pilot
light; it flickers against the heat
stone in the gas fireplace; the flame bows
and drifts one way,
then another,
from a wind of its own shaping.
Sometimes I turn up the thermostat.
The heating element blazes
open, clarifies the carnelian underside
of the curved stone—
it glows like rock arches
at sunset, or a campfire
as night falls.

I'm invited to sit and listen
among the broad-faced peoples
of the desert, to stories
of the morning, how
the world glistens
in a tree's veins, and blushes
along the escarpment rims
where jackrabbits stand up to acknowledge
beginnings and ends.

When the wine is done,
we rouse. The black night
opens its hearth, a fleck of moon funneling us
up the slope to our tents, entrances
facing northeast where ridgelight
breaks from darkness
and reveals a fluted sky
we must all climb if we are to go
forward from absent
leaves into the harsh light of summer.

It is then, hidden things disclose

themselves, insects begin to hum,
and the black-spotted
lichen, that rings
the flats of rocks become a map
to the labyrinth we spend our lives
seeking entrance to.

We mumble goodnight.
I close the tent flap.
My friends have put away
their azure and turquoise jewelry,
settled into their beds as I will do,
our lives linked by more than story
or shared blankets, the stutter-steps
of our dreams arcing
into the course of the river,
tracing natural cairns
to a shore where there is no longer any need
to cry out to one another.

Desert Praise

White birch and aspen,
fir and willow and pine,
outcroppings that give the earth
shape, rock, your salmons
and grays, your yellow and blue
lichen and your red, the plant in your crotch,
the grassy plot on top
and the hidden reach of its roots.
Fish that give colors names,
the needles of pine from afar
that provide the tree its earth,
the mountain air and my breath,
spot to lie down on by the creek,
lonely yarrow flower
thinking it's spring.
And you, too, desert and all dry things,
piñon and juniper, sagebrush
and bottle brush, lizard on the windowsill,
grasshopper with only one hind leg,
the sky that asks for nothing,
the stones in the road, the white-tails
plunging into brush,
the red birch along Secco Creek

and the late sun that glows at its tips,
the red grasses, the golden grasses,
the sycamore's open arms
and the oaks, leaves that do not fall
and the buds at the nips,
the ants who have closed their gates
too early and wait in their hills like people before a fire,
the arroyo and the canyons, the powdered
desert and the hard, the basalt and the quartz,
I praise the dry rivers and the wet,
my father who is dead
and my mother who is not,
the lover who guides and the lover
who does not, the broad mesas
and being alone and loneliness which is its opposite.
I praise the wind that pricks the ears of things.

Jonah Bornstein has taught poetry and creative writing at several universities in New York City, Oregon, and now University of Denver. Jonah co-founded and directed the Ashland Writers Conference (1997-2002) and directed the International Writers Series at Southern Oregon University. His poetry collections include *The Art of Waking* and *A Path Through Stone*, as well as three chapbooks, "Mortar," "Treatise on Emptiness," and "We Are Built of Light." Publications include poems in *Prairie Schooner*, *Wallawa Journal*, and *The West Wind Review*. He lives in Denver with his wife, the artist Rebecca Gabriel.



Frank Coons

Interspecies Encounter Question

It's not a crime
to walk this path
through late winter
snow in this open space
on the edge of the city
though I'm blatantly
stealing time wandering
through the mind-fog
of last week's muddle
when I should pay
tribute to the soft
carpet of white
underneath and that's
when I see the three
coyotes
who no doubt
eyed me
who knows
how long ago
two on my left
and one on my right
keeping equidistant
and quiet
they're nervous eyes
watching watching
and yes I know
they are unlikely to
mistake me as prey
yet some ancient part
of my amygdala
is navigating fight/
flight parameters
and perhaps
but who really knows
maybe their gray matter
is doing much the same
because we sentient beings
treasure survival
and are destined to calculate
and recalculate odds
so I walk and they
walk until a teen

on a fat-wheeled bike
rolls up yelling
do you see them
do you see them
and like that they're
off on spindly legs
soundlessly disappear
one looking back just once
I wonder
will they catalogue
like me
this interchange under
interspecies interaction
and wonder
what the fuck
just happened

Tribulations of the Mockingbird

Does the mockingbird
ever forget
how his own song sounds?

Gifted with pliable voice,
he prattles on, mimicking
screech owl and hawk—
it pays to know an assassin's catchphrase.

Chickadee and phoebe come easy—
staccato syllables repeated ad nauseum.
Same with crow and wood pee wee.

But some birds must drive him crazy.
Like the multisyllabic meadowlark
or solitaire and the rabble warblers

who blare various arias, canticles
and madrigals in the pale blue air of spring,
over and over in varying renditions—

like an ostinato or a Phillip Glass opus
and no wonder the bird sits sometimes
mute on a branch pretending to be deaf.

To the Universe, a Million Years is a Long Crazy Weekend

The dove-gray Morrison soil,
half clay, half gravel,
conceals the evidence
of long-dead behemoths.

A word not chosen lightly,
but the size of bleached bones
and teeth and the reconstructed
museum specimens speak truth
to what's gone missing.

I walk on bedrock
that once held effluvia
on the edge of an inland sea,
where palms towered over
a tangle of vines and creatures
of enormous proportions
roamed the swamps.

What I see now
is stunted greasewood and sage
on a landscape of scarcity.
A quarrelsome crow
and a five-inch lizard,
(who could both be descendants
of the giants)
are the only animation.

The mind shutters at geologic time,
an oldness hard to fathom.
But I can't help but wonder,
long after the Anthropocene is over,
what the next iteration
might look like.

Proteus in the Rocky Mountains

Hiking through rarified air on the cusp of tree line,
I saw a worn man on a roan mare, visage
of a previous century, all muslin and leather
and burden and asked him to where he traveled.

In a voice born of gravel and tobacco, he said,

to find that changeling Proteus in his lair,
just where the water gathers above the avens,
from a thousand runnels.

But so mobile, so malleable is the old king,
he'd determined that the searching was the thing,
and not the finding. By this, I gathered
he was just some fool gone wandering,

and probably more vagabond than philosopher.
Against my better self, I determined to follow
him at a distance up the rock-strewn path, in search
of such sea monsters and water gods as might

be found this high. Through the day, we climbed
until the tarns were small as mirrored moons
and the tundra, bog-like. I followed the horse-
shoe prints of a rider on a mission until I spied him

lighting kindlin for his fire. Pause, now reader
if you will, but there beside him, a beast I find
even now at a loss to describe, but it was a lion
head and serpent tail he had, that morphed

as he talked, in both color and form like some
chameleon—man, god, creature, who spoke
in a voice of rain, waterfall, vapor, streams too small
to bear a name, and the oceans they drained to.

Believe it if you will, or not and beware the wanderer
who seeks a myth. Some find what others won't,
Poseidon's son, I insist, was here where water
is birthed before it runs.

Frank H. Coons is a poet and veterinarian living in Colorado. He is the author of three books of poetry. His first book, *Finding Cassiopeia*, published in 2014, was a finalist for the Colorado Book Awards. His second book, *Counting in Dog Years* was published in 2016. Both were published by Lithic Press. The third, *A Flash of Yellow Wing*, was published in 2021 from Orchard Street Press. His work has appeared in *Caesura*, *Pinyon Review*, *Evening Street Press*, *Plainsongs*, *Pensive Journal*, *Santa Fe Literary Review*, *Pacific Review*, and elsewhere. He was nominated for a Pushcart prize in 2019



Sharon Corcoran

Mountains and Clouds

Made for each other, in the way that
opposites attract, mountains in their solidity,
stolid and unmoving despite illusions of advance and retreat,
while clouds work their magic in movement and change,
draping the rocky shoulders with snowy capes,
diffusing dawn sun through their scrim,
sneaking like smoke from behind,
mimicking peaks' profiles like a tease.
The sharpest peaks stir up lenticulars,
flattened like caps for protection,
or haloes for glorification, God's palms
descended in blessing. At night
there's more of the same, but for moon
and its magnification. And if there's a window
facing the scene, and a pair of eyes
looking on, something like this arises—
words wondering
what to make of it all.

Sharon Corcoran lives in southern Colorado. She translated (from French) the writings of North African explorer Isabelle Eberhardt in the works *In the Shadow of Islam* and *Prisoner of Dunes* published by Peter Owen Ltd., London. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *River Styx*, *Canary*, *The Buddhist Poetry Review*, *One Art*, *Sisyphus*, *Literary North*, and *Bearings Online* among other journals. She is the author of two books of poetry, *Inventory* (2018, KDP) and *The Two Worlds* (2021, Middle Creek Publishing).



Amy Wray Irish

The Crime of the Poem

after Douglas Kearney

The poem stormed your defenses
in an angry mob of words.

The poem slipped into your dark
and rearranged the furniture.

Invited into your home, the poem played
with matches.

Invited to your table, the poem devoured
the decorative flowers.

The poem lurched against you in the subway
and picked your pockets.

The poem pressed against you for one steamy moment
leaving you aching and wanting.

Stretching out its languorous language,
the poem sold itself for anyone to undress.

Kidnapping a body of language
the poem strip-searched history.

Searching for hidden pockets of decay
to expose, to diagnose, the poem

Turned you—turned us all—into bystanders
of this dissection. The crime of the poem

Came when it made us chose
to be voyeurs complicit in the violation,

Or archivists delicately digging in the dark.

Hindsight

Hindsight takes time—
for tearing down, tearing apart,

getting a look at the hidden
inner workings. Like

The Henry Ford Museum. 1999.
A massive collection of Americana
that I took by mistake
for greatness. Its sheer volume

Awed me. Dizzied me into
submission. But in the unfiltered light
of hindsight I find a scattershot
attempt at history, a fractured

Narrative of national pride
thrown together and piled
in a hoarder's tangled maze
of dead-end aisles. And

Any entry allowing exit steered
all captured souls
past a single Lincoln Continental,
that vehicle of JFK's death.

Repainted, reupholstered, returned.
Driven by other presidents for years,
worn like a symbol of victory in battle.
Not bothering to cover up its violence.

It wasn't even roped off, there
in the so-called museum—
a painted line parted the floor.
I could still see the bullet

Holes, could have reached out
and touched their impact. In 2020,
at last, I see that I was invited
to do so, to cross that literal

Line. To enter the exit wound.
In 2020, I still see too many believing
the mangled heap of history, reaching
into the breach to become

That jagged body. To get a taste.
When more should walk away.

The Art Critic Clarifies Why Their Marriage/Show Closed

Because the wife flowered, fresh as a smooth-skinned Matisse
and the husband splintered, rending open dark as an Ernst.

Because the man exploded in a Pollock detonation of brain and blood,
while the woman arose in a liquid curve of sweet Chagall.

Because lady opened stamen and pistil, a pastel-petaled O’Keeffe;
the gentleman withered, grew spindle-legged, a charcoal-smudged Redon.

Because she was a cathedral, a river, a lily abloom at dawn.
And he was as shattered as a Guernica—broken, burning, burned.

The Fabric of the Feminine

after ‘Four Purple Velvet Bathrobes’ by Beverly Semmes

i.

A queen’s plush garb. Stitched
in duplicate, for the royalty

Of domestic moments. Delicious
velvet, sweet and far too rich

Against the skin, the lips—
she never said *Let them eat cake*.

Her mouth was far too full
of her lust and fabric and mistakes.

ii.

Mother shoulders the robe with a shudder
as others depart for the day.
She stands frozen, framed in the door,
like the faded pictures she displays.

Like her infamous honeymoon
at the crime-scene-photo lake
where drowning and waving
grew indistinguishable.

iii.

The liquid cloth waterfalls, swirls,
gathers in a still, dark pool
thick with fishy sirens.

Indigo-skinned housewives,
hair plush as a 50's settee,
recline, drink in hand.

The velvet alcohol they sip
tints their lips plum
like cold corpses under ice.

From the depths come their murky
murmuration. Their queenly
smiles and waves.

iv.

Unholy robes claim us, one by one.
But there's still a single cloak
of uncertain ceremony
set aside for you.

Amy Wray Irish grew up near Chicago, received her MFA from the University of Notre Dame, and now resides in the foothills of Colorado. Her recent work can be found in local anthologies like *Chiaroscuro* (Northern Colorado Writers); national journals like *Stone Gathering* (Danielle Dufy Publishing); and online journals like *Twenty Bellows* (twentybellowslit.com). Irish's third chapbook, *Breathing Fire*, won the 2020 Fledge Competition and was published by Middle Creek Press in 2021. To read more of her work, go to amywrayirish.com.



Melody Jones

My First Love

Turning my back on the crowded grit and crush
of humanity and hulking metal, still
the bluest of skies, the biggest of skies
 (you don't have a monopoly on the biggest of skies, Montana)
Welcomed me most days when I paid attention, but
 the first order of business was to
Evade Death by City
 (even a Colorado city)
and go home,
Return home. I love you, Palisade.

The bluest of skies
The biggest of skies
Escorts me back, and exhausted
 tears drive me
Home
Peach orchards, and now vineyards not present in my youth greet me
 Look at your old home/new home/good-to-be-home
Welcome home
It's been time.

Summertime

Oh, there are reasons to smoke
Ticks
 and 50s movie glamour in boxed black and white
 plus James Dean regaled in wrinkled brow
 and lip-dangled cigarette

But back to camping
Somewhere on the west side
 in the dry of my childhood days
 and indiscriminate brushing through Colorado foliage
were tiny branch passengers, waiting
just waiting
 for the tender smooth skin under straggled blonde hair, a hiding place, sheltered

But not secret enough from mom's eagle eye
And dad's adept use of his own

lip-dangled cigarette
to dissuade that tick – urgently – from
permanent domicile behind my right ear

Good reasons.

Melody Jones resides in Grand Junction, Colorado, recently returned to the Western Slope after 30 years in Denver. She is published in *Stories Gathered at the Kitchen Table*. First Vice-President of the Denver Woman’s Press Club from 2019-2021, she now serves as President of the Western Colorado Writers’ Forum. Melody is currently working on a poetry collection. Visit her website at www.MelodyJonesAuthor.com.



Marjorie Power

While My Husband Explores Colorado Railroad History

A man at the counter asks for *the book Dave read*.
He goes on speaking, quietly, laughs a laugh
you'd hear past the edge of town.

The librarian, jolly in Crayola,
rubber-stamps his find. Out he clomps
to his high clearance vehicle.

A mother of two spills in with four
who pile like puppies on the librarian
who laughs a laugh you'd hear past the edge.

Three computers, three users plus a next-in-line.
And look – a card catalog! – revered elder,
rich silence, trunk of a thick tree.

Across the street stands a small stone house,
windows framed in age. Someone
has put on a new roof to help weather slide.

In the yard
aspens shimmer
like hesitant belly dancers

lit by late afternoon
sun. Many of the leaves
already undone.

Each thin branch,
delicate inscription
on a vast blaze of blue.

Marjorie Power's newest full-length poetry collection is *Sufficient Emptiness* (Deerbrook Editions, 2021). A chapbook, *Refuses to Suffocate*, appeared from Blue Lyra Press in 2019. *Southern Poetry Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Caesura*, *The Raven's Perch* and *Commonweal* have used her work recently. She and her husband lived in Denver (his home town) from 2015 to 2020 and have since moved to Rochester, New York, to live near their son and his family.



Andrew Schelling

Huge Cloudy Symbols of a High Romance

Keats & Shelley, & the lot of 'em
said many things, & said 'em well

but never stood to gaze
upon a stone
game-drive wall, splotched with black lichen
curling down a rock-strewn hogback pass
towards talus.
Scant rain, much ice
the Continent divides.

Thousand years ago
someone lined an oval pit with slabs of rock.
Here's the shock-blue alpine
forget-me-not—
tiny yellow pistils
and used the pits for what?
roofed with thatch to hide the hunters?
or shamans sang the bighorn in?
in trance state sounds called forth—

At this elevation many ways one has to call forth sound—
chant the six great
odes of Keats
hunch in the pit
finger the living spearshaft.
Stiff wind from West, shreds the spoke-out words.
Tender is the night
hedge-cricket
sing

it all hides in the hyphen
skyline one long hazy pall of smoke.

On the wind
blows all that burning oak
drawn in from California.

[Chittendon Mountain, August 2021]

Andrew Schelling, poet, translator, essay writer, has published twenty-odd books. Among recent titles is the folkloric account of bohemian poets, linguists, and wilderness encounters, *Tracks Along the Left Coast: Jaime de Angulo & Pacific Coast Culture*. Recent poetry title is *The Facts at Dog Tank Spring*, and for translation,

with Anne Waldman a new edition of *Songs of the Sons & Daughters of Buddha*. He teaches at Naropa University.

