

CML News

Since COVID changed our workday from office to home-office, it's been occasional zoom meetings, conference calls, and emails that keep us connected. But come Friday, October 20, 2023 we are not just gathering *our* team, we're joining over 50 organizations and hundreds of visitors for the annual Andrew Heiskell Braille and Talking Book Library's *Accessible Community, Culture, and Technology Fair!* This free event is being held at the New York Public Library's beautiful Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library branch at 455 Fifth Avenue, NYC from 11:00 am to 4:00 pm ET. If you're in the area, please come by our table and say hello. We'd love to meet you!

Highlights

Wait! Did summer really pass by so fast? Just when we were getting used to the heat! Hard to believe that it is already fall. No matter the season, one thing, at least, never changes: CML's commitment to bringing you quality writing not only from the present but also the past—for in this issue, **Leo Tolstoy** himself makes an appearance. Considered by many to be the greatest novelist of the 19th century (and perhaps of all time), Tolstoy also wrote profound and moving autobiographies, including our selection from "First Recollections," in which he tries to pinpoint his earliest memories and the birth of consciousness itself.

Poetry lovers can look to several strong offerings in this issue, including poems by such acclaimed contemporary poets as **Peter Gizzi**, **Jane Hirshfield**, **Garrett Hongo**, **Mark Jarman**, and **Rosanna Warren**. However, here too we feature some important bards of the past: **Fernando Pessoa**, Portugal's most important 20th century poet, writing under one of his several liberating heteronyms, **Álvaro de Campos**; and a Middle English poem, "John's Knot," by a poet whose name has been wholly lost to us but whose voice has endured through the centuries.

Six powerful short stories constitute our fiction offerings, including the haunting "Walking the Dead," by **Rita Chang-Eppig**, in which two orphans seek their deceased mother as they follow a procession of priests who "walk the dead home" through the war-ravaged landscape of early Maoist China. **Elizabeth Tallent's** "A Little About Why," is a complex, layered story of sexual harassment, while in **Stuart Nadler's** "Fania" a family hires an investigator to search for traces of their grandmother in a village once besieged by the Nazis. Was she murdered,

or did she survive to become a successful woman under another name? Equally powerful are the stories in this issue by **Caleb Crain**, **Laura van den Berg**, and **Jess Walter**.

One of the most urgent issues of our time is the development of artificial intelligence, or AI. Is it the ultimate tool for humanity, or will it replace humanity itself? Two pieces consider the benefits, dangers, and hidden costs of AI: **Adrienne LaFrance's** "In Defense of Humanity" calls for a movement that can "reimagine human relationships with nature and with technology, while still advancing what this technology can do at its best," while **Josh Dzieza's** "AI Is a Lot of Work" exposes the "vast workforce mostly hidden behind the machines," the tedious human labor that is required to train the AI systems themselves, "work that people want to automate, and often think is already automated, yet still requires a human stand-in."

Less dire than the threat posed by AI, yet often quite irritating, is being placed on hold when waiting to speak to a customer service representative. To distract you during your wait, many companies entertain you with largely bland, anonymous music, a kind of elevator music but for telephones. In **Sal Cataldi's** "That Jazzy Tune You Heard on Hold?" we meet Harriet Goldberg, whose composition, "My Time to Fly," has made her the "Queen of hold music," transcending its genre to become popular among jazz fans throughout the world, particularly in Japan. (And you bet—we provide an audio sample of this catchy tune!)

TOP PICKS

Writer and teacher **Andrew Leland** began losing his sight while still in high school. Afflicted with retinitis pigmentosa, a progressive eye disease that leads to the deterioration of the retinas, Leland was legally blind by his thirties. In "How to Be Blind," an excerpt from his recent book, *The Country of the Blind: A Memoir at the End of Sight*, he recounts the vigorous, at times even harsh, training that he received at the Colorado Center for the Blind, including the notorious "independent drop" test, in which a blind student is left at an unknown location in Denver and must find their way back to the Center on their own. Leland learns new skills of self-reliance. "I began," he writes, "to appreciate the novel experiences that blindness gave me."

Poet **Karl Kirchwey**'s memoir, "Hope Till Hope Creates," is a rich and searing exploration of the after-effects of the death of his uncle, a Navy combat pilot shot down either by enemy or friendly fire during the invasion of Saipan in WWII. Kirchwey describes the incurable grief felt by his grandmother, his uncle's mother, and the plight of the author's father, himself a combatant, who endured not only survivor's guilt but the ultimate rejection: "My life ended the day your brother died," the author's grandmother allegedly says to him. "The wrong son came home."

For decades, scholars have believed that childhood as we know it—a loving relationship with our parents, freedom to play with toys and indulge in carefree behavior— is a relatively recent development, dating from the 19th Century. However, in **Catherine Nicholson**'s delightful "Right Busy with Sticks and Spales," we learn that some of the fundamental characteristics of modern childhood already existed as far back as Tudor England. "Premodern European societies (and premodern European parents) were, as it turned out, perfectly capable of understanding, educating, amusing, nurturing, disciplining, and, all too often, mourning children, not in exactly the ways we do today, but in many we can recognize and sympathize with."

Few would argue with the claim that **Mel Brooks** is one of the funniest people in America. In "The Immortal Mel Brooks," **Judd Apatow** interviews this comedic genius, who can see absurdity and humor even in his dangerous WWII experiences as a defuser of explosive booby traps and landmines. "The scariest and funniest one was a jar of pickles," Brooks remembers. "In the middle of the pickles there was a stick of dynamite." Brooks meditates on anti-Semitism, and also recalls his interactions with many legendary Jewish comedians, including Carl Reiner, Harpo Marx, Sid Caesar, and above all Lenny Bruce. "In five minutes, [Lenny Bruce] really just busted up all my thinking...No one talked like that before." We highly recommend this conversation with Brooks, whose humor is ultimately rooted in wisdom and human empathy.

The "D-B Beat"

We do our best to bring our subscribers the fullness of human experience in these issues. Even in the worst of times, this necessarily includes moments of levity, humor, and absurdity. Laughs can be hard to come by, now more than ever, but when we find a piece that can make us crack a smile, we always sit up and take note. Three of the authors featured in this issue are noted for their wit and

wisdom alike, and several of their books are available for download from the NLS's BARD service. Ask your local reader adviser about the following titles:

- *All About Me!: My Remarkable Life in Show Business* by Mel Brooks (DB 105810)
- *The 2,000 Year Old Man in the Year 2,000: The Book* by Mel Brooks (DB 46760)
- *Him, Her, Him Again, The End of Him: A Novel* by Patricia Marx (DB 64580)
- *Let's Be Less Stupid: An Attempt to Maintain My Mental Faculties* by Patricia Marx (DB 81923)
- *Priestdaddy* by Patricia Lockwood (DB 88242)

And Special Thanks to...Dale S., who took the time to call and tell us she really liked one of the articles we chose for the Summer issue—"An Oasis in the News Desert" by Tom Foster (the article originally appeared in the April 2023 issue of *Texas Monthly*). Thank you, Dale. We *love* getting feedback from our subscribers.

Happy Fall Reading from Alfredo, Jay, Raquel, Mike, and Annie!