

CML NEWSLETTER, ISSUE #353, WINTER 2026

CML News

We live in a time of wonder and ease when it comes to meetings. Thanks to Zoom, late December finds the group that manages the endowment for our whole enterprise—the Lucerna Fund board—meeting a second time (after being in-person in May) to approve a budget for the coming year. This is a short and friendly gathering, but the work of categorizing expenses, clarifying financials, and tallying costs from the previous year, and projecting for the next—just before breaking for the holidays!—is not without concerted effort. Thankfully, we have our diligent Publisher, Mike Tedeschi, and his meticulous cohort, Office Manager Raquel Sime, to get it all collected and made accessible to the board members. We are ever grateful for their work and that of the Lucerna Fund board. Happy listening and New Year to all!

Highlights

This winter, as we enter a new year, we face not only rising prices but a bumper crop of worldly concerns: In Venezuela, apparent war crimes on the high seas, a major military operation capturing the head of state, and the threat of occupation; at home, open corruption, shocking presidential pardons and continued mass arrests and deportations of immigrants and citizens alike. Everything is changing, it seems, down to our firmest values. Even our currency! The last U.S. penny was minted on November 12, 2025, just months short of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. In this issue, we commemorate the passing of the penny with **Victor Mather**'s obituary for this once ubiquitous, but increasingly irrelevant (and expensive!) coin. Here we part ways with the penny: CML intends to remain in circulation, highly valued, and absolutely free of charge, in perpetuity. Welcome to 2026!

CML continues to bring you the finest in American and world poetry. This issue includes work by **Christopher Kennedy**, Director of the M.F.A. program at Syracuse University; **E. Ethelbert Miller**, the renowned, and much beloved, Washington, D.C. poet; **Wisława Szymborska**, the 1996 Nobel laureate in Literature; and **Jorie Graham**, a CML favorite, whose latest poems explore ecological and societal collapse. We are equally proud of our selection of fiction, which includes short stories by the brilliant emerging writer **Nathan Blum**; Korean author **Woo Dayoung**; Jersey-based author and construction worker, **Bud Smith**;

and another CML favorite, Laotian-Canadian writer **Souvankham Thammavongsa**, whose story, “A Place to Pray”, is a moving depiction of cultural displacement and religious disillusionment among a family of Laotian immigrants.

Another form of displacement, homelessness, is at the heart of **Rebecca E. Williams**’s “St. John the Wondermaker,” a brief but powerful account of her time providing free pedicures to unhoused men whose feet suffer from calluses, infections, collapsed arches, and other consequences of endless walking, worn-out shoes, and rain-soaked socks. “I wonder a lot,” she writes, “about how these men got here. How far they had to walk from wherever they were sleeping.” Physical health is also the theme of “Bodies by Joe” by **Alma Guillermoprieto**, a fascinating history of Joseph Pilates, the German immigrant who transformed exercise through his use of pulleys and machines focusing on the core abdominals, the center of bodily control. Despite initial success among ballet dancers and movie stars, the Pilates system fell out of use, only to be rediscovered by a new generation, long after its founder’s death. Few creatures are more physically different from humans than octopuses, yet, as animals, we both share highly developed levels of intelligence. In “Such Flexible Intensity of Life,” **Verlyn Klinkenborg** contemplates the otherness of octopuses and how, with our irresistible urge to empathize with them, we risk anthropomorphizing their unique, strange, and mysterious characteristics.

Sometimes, humans are mysteries unto themselves. Take unsolved crimes and their elusive motives. In “My First Murder,” a riveting excerpt from **Skip Hollandsworth**’s collection of pieces for *Texas Monthly*, we ponder the conundrum of the 1974 murder-suicide of Abbie and Bobby Burns, the fabulously wealthy Texas couple that seemed to have it all. But, was it in fact a murder-suicide? It was this case, and its unresolved edges, that first set Hollandsworth on a career of crime reporting. The answers to some human mysteries die with the person, but others might still be accessible in a preserved brain. **Rachel Lehman-Haupt**’s “My Visit With My Dead Father’s Brain” recounts her visit to a medical “brain bank,” where the brain of her deceased father, a renowned literary critic, resides for research. What she discovers about him from analyzed brain samples changes her understanding of his life and death.

Lunar exploration was a national obsession in the 1960s and early 70s, in the heyday of the Apollo program. **Charles Fishman**, in “The Great Moon Rush,” prepares us for a new race for the Moon, this time motivated less by pure scientific research—though there is that—than by commercial, military, and

hegemonic needs. The Moon, not least, will be an ideal launching point for Mars, humanity's next interplanetary goal. Indeed, we have always been fascinated by Mars. **Nathaniel Rich**'s review of David Baron's book, *The Martians*, revisits early 20th-century obsession with the Red Planet, especially astronomer Percival Lowell who, before his search for Planet X, which led to the discovery of Pluto, claimed to see canals, vegetation, indeed a whole civilization on the Martian surface. Rich recounts the swell of public enthusiasm surrounding this "discovery" and how it reflected a society in flux.

TOP PICKS

Acclaimed author **T.C. Boyle**'s short story "Cold Summer," set in the near future, explores climate change angst and the catastrophic aftereffects of a billionaire's presumptuous, single-handed attempt to reverse global warming. The narrator, suffering "solastalgia," the pain caused by environmental change, struggles to help himself and his wife survive a snow-bound July, forced to weigh the costs of going it alone.

Oliver Egger's essay, "The Haunting of Pennhurst" is a sobering reflection on the history of the notorious Pennhurst State School and Hospital, which operated in Spring City, Pennsylvania from 1908 to 1987, housing people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in often shocking and inhumane conditions. While examining the history of the deinstitutionalization movement and the role played in it by former inmates (such as disability rights leader Roland Johnson), Eggers ponders the fraught ethics of the site's current dual use: a museum of disability by day—one of only two such institutions in the United States—and a popular Halloween "haunted asylum" by night, where the staff (many identifying as disabled themselves) perform the traumas of the former patients, using the proceeds to fund the fledgling museum.

Closer to home for us, in more ways than one, is "Band of Outsiders" by **Michael Hall**, featuring an ensemble of innovative musicians from the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Led by a supportive music teacher, Dan Butler, the students perform on electronic synthesizers, hence their collective name, The Semi-Modulars. Popular on campus and in the Austin music scene, the Semi-Modulars play their own original compositions, which have fun, surreal titles, such as "Lasagna Paradox" and "Toasted Mushroom Beatbox." It is a story of triumph through creativity and collaboration empowered by the leadership of a gifted, devoted teacher—and a reminder "[y]ou can do things in a band that you

can't do alone." CML has included an audio sample of The Semi-Modulars performing one of their hits, "Don't Interrupt Me."

The "D-B Beat"

It's rarely easy finding just one writer to spotlight from each of our issues for this section. We work to provide thematic variation, and a rotation of genres for folks of all inclinations. In reviewing this issue's offerings, we encountered a holiday haul of authors with works in the NLS BARD catalogue: true crime legend Skip Hollandsworth, poet Wisława Szymborska, historian Charles Fishman, naturalist extraordinaire Verlyn Klinkenborg, and novelist-essayist Nathaniel Rich each have at least one listed there. However, it's the simultaneously surreal, satirical, and serious T. Coraghessan Boyle (author of "Cold Summer"), with no fewer than two dozen novels and short story collections available for download, whose work we're gifting you this holiday season. We hope you don't find yourself snowed in, "Cold Summer"-style, but if you do, contact your local reader advisor, fire up your digital talking book player or BARD app and consider giving these titles a spin:

- *World's End* (DB 27116)
- *Talk Talk* (DB 63173)
- *The Terranauts* (DB 86693), read by Mare Trevathan
- *The Harder They Come* (DB 81696), read by Joe Wilson
- *I Walk Between the Raindrops* (DB 111639)

And special thanks to... Joseph N., from Georgia, who called to tell us how amazed and appreciative he is that he is able to listen to the "back" (archival) issues of CML. His fascination and curiosity about how we were able to convert the old "records" to digital files and create and share the archives, prompted him to ask our Publisher (and technical genius), Mike Tedeschi, how it was done. Mike called him back to give a full report. Thanks for your interest, Joseph!