

CML NEWSLETTER, ISSUE #354, SPRING 2026

CML News

Back in July of 2025, CML was contacted by a producer at a Western New York public television station (who had years before spoken to a former editor at CML) alerting us to the fact that a series about a blind outdoor adventurer was in the works—with possible distribution to public television stations across the country.

Were we interested in becoming a sponsor?

The idea was tantalizing to all five of *us*, but in its 64 years of providing service to the visually impaired community, CML had *never* taken a sponsorship role. Could that change?

This was a question for our board.

Now, after months of preparation and meetings, and unanimous support and funding from our board, “Blind Adventures with Ron Walsh” is available for viewing—with a 15 second announcement about CML prominently placed at the beginning and end of each episode. We couldn’t be more excited—come adventure with us!

Highlights

We enter Spring in a state of war and a world experiencing heightened instability. The joint attacks by the United States and Israel against Iran have led to significant human casualties and to a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, triggering a global oil shortage that threatens to raise energy prices to unprecedented levels. In Venezuela, American military action has reasserted the long-dormant Monroe Doctrine, and Cuba, too, has been targeted for US intervention, while here at home, investigations into the Jeffrey Epstein files, and possible presidential complicity, continue at a slow pace. In such a fractured and degrading world, we may well ask, why even bother reading literature? **Caryl Phillips**, in his essay, “Why Read?” suggests that “in these difficult times reading...may well be the most powerful tool we have to redirect our attention towards a much-needed

sense of non-judgemental tolerance and compassion.” By reading in challenging times, we might achieve what the great contemporary poet, **Terrance Hayes**, in his powerful poem in honor of Yusef Komunyakaa, “How to Write a Yusefian Ode,” urges us to do: “Break the lines sealed with the paste of history.”

In addition to the poem by Hayes, this issue offers a feast of illuminating poetry, including work by **Sydney Lea**, **James Davis May**, **Sharon Olds** (a CML favorite!), and **D.A. Powell**. **Rowan Ricardo Phillips**’s poem, “La Resurrezione di Piero della Francesca,” is a vivid re-creation in words of the Early Renaissance master’s painting of the rising Christ. **Devon Walker-Figueroa**’s extended poem, “The Perch,” brings an ancient mummified Egyptian fish to life. This issue also brings you equally powerful short fiction, including work by **Joseph O’Neil**, **David Searcy**, and **Anthony Varallo**, as well as “Water Tower” by **Nathan Blum**, a moving tale of personal and collective loss in a small New York town, and “Lara’s Theme,” by **Madhuri Vijay**, a coming of age story set in Bangalore that, while quiet and nostalgic, simmers with familial tensions.

An important fiction writer of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 30s was **Rudolph Fisher**, whose novel, *The Conjure-Man Dies*, was a best-seller among Black readers, part detective story, part celebration of Harlem itself. But Fisher was more than just a creative writer, as we learn in **Harriet A. Washington**’s biographical essay, “Renaissance Man,” which explores Fisher’s brilliant medical career, his pioneering research in radiology, his mastery of foreign languages, and even his singing abilities, being particularly adept at performing German *Lieder*. Fisher’s earlier novel, *The Walls of Jericho* has recently been republished by the distinguished Library of America, and *The Conjure-Man Dies* is available for download via the NLS BARD program as part of the anthology *Harlem Renaissance: Four Novels of the 1930s* (DB 91302).

Poetry, fiction—and music! In this issue, we bring you two pieces that celebrate American euphony. **David Browne**’s “I’m the Last Old Man Playing the Blues” explores the long life and picaresque career of Buddy Guy, one of the last of the great blues guitarists and singers, “a vital link to the music’s roots and the cultural backdrop from which [it] emerged.” “Art is how we decorate space; music is how

we decorate time,” we learn from Jean-Michel Basquiat by way of **Micah Nelson**, author of “Decorating Time”. Nelson, son of the legendary musician Willie Nelson, recounts a COVID-era collaboration with his father to produce *Last Leaf on the Tree*, an album featuring a pared-down, raw, “lo-fi” intimacy which even includes moments of extended silence.

TOP PICKS

Hélène Cixous is an influential French-Algerian writer, literary critic, and feminist theoretician, most notable for coining the concept, *écriture féminine*, in her seminal essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa”. In “An Interview with Hélène Cixous,” **Alice McCrum** explores Cixous's remarkable life and career, including the isolation, loss and hardship of her childhood as a Jew in Algeria under the rule of Vichy France, which she survived in part thanks to her early love of reading. The interview covers Cixous's rise as a literary scholar, writing the first French study of the works of James Joyce, as well as her role during the 1968 student uprisings, when she helped found the ground-breaking University of Vincennes, “a utopian institution[...] where an architect, a secretary, and an engineer might find themselves in the same night class as their children played together in the university's childcare center.” The interview also highlights her close, lifelong friendship with the renowned French-Algerian philosopher, Jacques Derrida. A vivid testament to a full, dynamic, intellectually rich life, McCrum also beautifully captures Cixous's unique wit, verve, and playfulness with words.

Another distinguished author and critic was **Calvin Tomkins**, who began his long career at *The New Yorker* in 1958 and became especially noted for his art criticism during the 1960s, an exciting time for modern American art. In “Centenarian,” told in diary style, Tomkins reflects on contemporary events as well as the physical travails of turning 100. Throughout, Tomkins recalls his decades at *The New Yorker*, including his first encounter with the work of artist Jean Tinguely, his tenure under the “unshakably formal” Wallace Shawn, and his complicated friendship with the renowned editor and author Roger Angell. Sadly, we learned, as this issue went to press, that Tomkins passed away on March 20th of this year at his home in Rhode Island, a witness to a century of our shared American life.

Continuing the theme of art, CML editors were fascinated by **Sophie Pinkham's** essay, "Mixed Blessings," an account of how Uzbekistan has become an unlikely center of international art. In the wake of the dissolution of the USSR in the 1990s, the artistic and architectural legacies of Soviet Uzbek artists like Ural Tansykbayev as well as of Russian exiles was rediscovered, helping establish Uzbekistan as a contemporary creative hub, fomenting new scholarship, new art, and a hip art scene with galleries and even a biennale. This has proved a "mixed blessing," however, as the pace of political reform has not kept up with cultural openness. While Shavkat Mirziyoyev, President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, welcomes and supports this renaissance, he has also used it to wield soft power and distract from his illiberal policies "One rule, at least, is written clearly," Pinkham says: "it is a criminal offense to criticize the president[...]Uzbekistan doesn't have free elections or free speech. But it does have a biennial."

Escape to relative freedom is also at the heart of **Ernie Wang's** short story, "Paper Cranes". Andrew, a young man from a blighted Ohio town, abandoned by his parents and barely surviving, finds support in a high school mentor. Mourning the death of his beloved teacher, Andrew has moved from his impoverished, violent world to Japan. Told in a tough but moving noir style, we follow a night in Andrew's lonely life, full of encounters with American expats and a Japanese woman, herself intensely lonely in her marriage.

The "D-B Beat"

One of the most prolific and influential working poets of our time, Terrance Hayes is a frequent presence in our readings (and, accordingly, in our tables of contents). Published in 2018, in the early days of the first Trump administration, his keen social commentary in *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* has lost none of its urgency or sense of alarm eight years later, amid the enormities of the second. This volume, along with two others authored by Hayes, is available for download from the NLS BARD system, along with many editions of the yearly *Best American Poetry* anthology that include contributions from Hayes. If you're interested in Hayes' vital ongoing work, ask your local reader advisor about the following titles:

- *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (DB 91758), read by David Hartley-Margolin
- *Lighthouse* (DBC 06541), produced by the Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (now known as the Library of Accessible Media for Pennsylvanians, or LAMP)
- *Wind in a Box* (DBC 08132)
- *The Best American Poetry 2021* (DB 108346)
- *The Best American Poetry 2018* (DB 93423)
- *The Best American Poetry 2017* (DB 93219)
- *The Best American Poetry 2016* (DB 90811)
- *The Best American Poetry 2015* (DB 90319)

And special thanks to... Michael Anthony Aliffi, who passed away suddenly just before the release of this issue. Mike was part of the dynamic duo at CML of 'Mike and Mike' (the other Mike being Mike Tedeschi, our publisher) who worked behind the scenes and in tandem with our production company in Missouri, to design, write, integrate, and test, an upgraded code for a new rolling subscription model for our subscribers. Both Mikes also spent countless hours in Denver at our recording studio, gathering video footage for another ongoing project—a step-by-step view of how an issue is created—to be used for outreach. It is with profound sadness that we put these projects on hold, while mourning a man who was an essential and vital part of their creation. Godspeed, Mike.

Happy Spring reading from Alfredo, Raquel, Annie, Mike, & Jay!