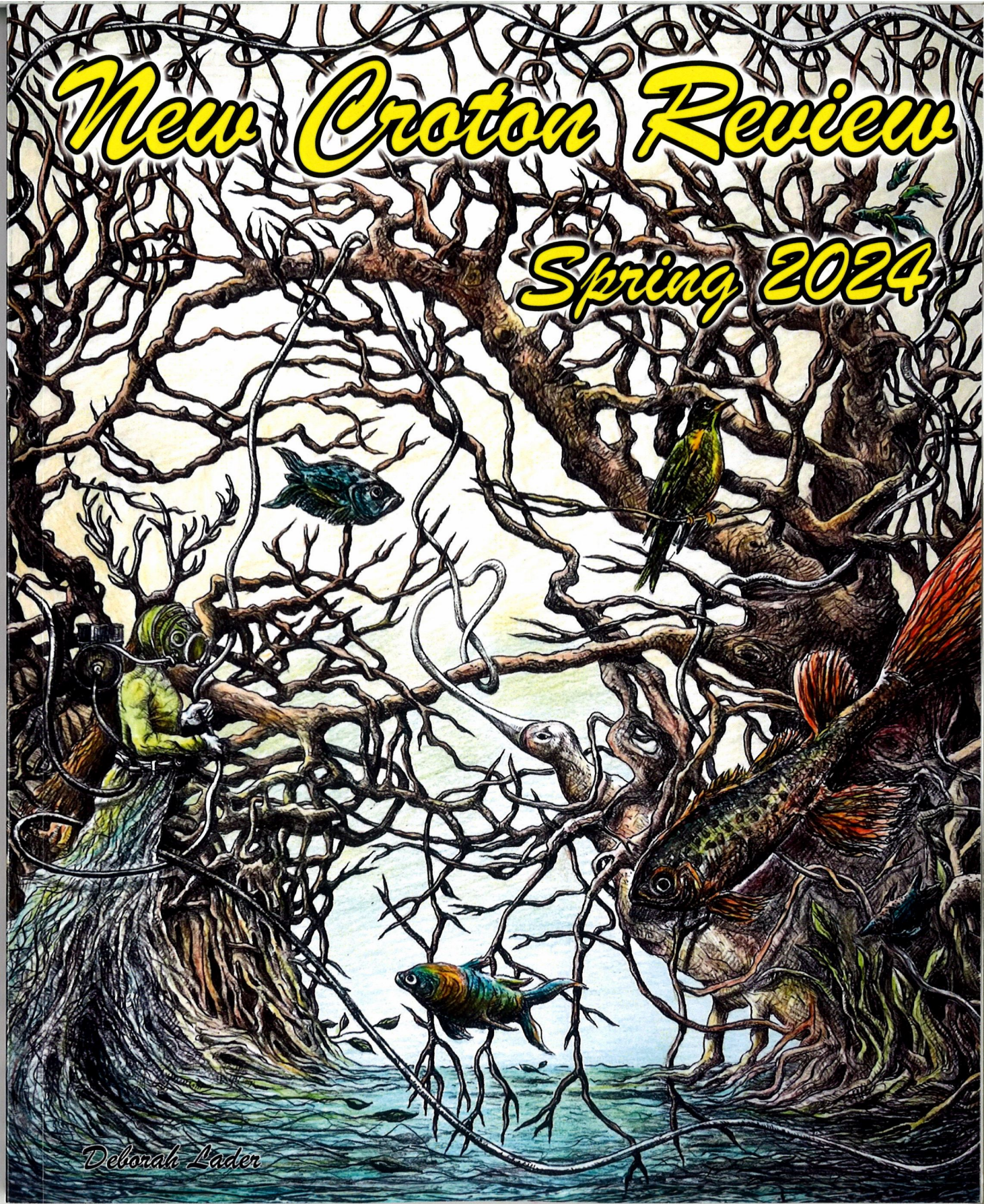


# New Croton Review

Spring 2024



Deborah Lader

Penelope Schott, <i>Back When I Was Still a Good Little Girl</i> .....	30
Penelope Schott, <i>Tonight These Particular Stars</i> .....	29
Penelope Schott, <i>The Woman Who Went Mad from Machine Noise</i> .....	29
Nigel Schroeder, <i>The Hammer</i> .....	30
Ivy T. Schweitzer, <i>Starfish</i> .....	16
Judith Serin, <i>You and Your Sister Don't Learn How to Type</i> .....	31
Dianalee Velie, <i>Lili Elbe</i> .....	38
Dianalee Velie, "You Will Find the Spirit of Caesar in This Soul of a Woman." .....	38

## Fiction

George Blecher, <i>Pretty Big Fish</i> .....	56
Michael Brownstein, <i>Alibi</i> .....	52
Patrick Doerksen, <i>I Was Promised a Hotdog</i> .....	32
Ingrid Hartzell Gallegos, <i>Severed Line</i> .....	18
Ellen McQueen, <i>Games People Play</i> .....	24
Rafaelito Sy, <i>Myrna</i> .....	8

## Nonfiction

John Anderson, <i>Dan's Dandy Haven of Bliss</i> .....	62
Abigail Glassman, <i>Cruel Summer</i> .....	59
Imogen Shearmur, <i>Convict Lake</i> .....	41
Cecilia Soprano, <i>Jose Grande</i> .....	48

## Artwork

Howard Averill, <i>Clouds before Nightfall</i> .....	51
Erick Buendia, <i>Tinkus</i> .....	23
Chele Petitt Coyne, <i>Spring Floral</i> .....	6
Lilly Crist, <i>Hometown on 35mm</i> .....	44
Beth DeWit, <i>Heron</i> .....	36
Beth DeWit, <i>Hudson River</i> .....	37
Bruce Dollar, <i>Heron on Hudson</i> .....	31

# Pretty Big Fish

by George Blecher

A few minutes after I hook the pretty big fish, he explodes out of the water in a torrent of foam and lands in the bottom of my boat. He's very pissed off.

"Who do you think you are, offering me a clump of putrid squid with a hook stuck in it?"

It's hard to reason with something so big and angry, and he has a point. Even though he was stupid enough to take the bait, fishing is a sneaky business, not really worthy of who I am these days.

"Get it out of my mouth!" he demands. I pry the hook loose, but he continues flopping around on the bottom of the boat in an ungainly, energy-expending way.

He reminds me of one of my high school friends, Artie Bialy, whom I haven't thought about in decades. Artie was a solid B student, but he had a large, ungainly body, a body that he hauled around like a burden. He was as big as this fish, maybe bigger, and so embarrassed about his size that he never knew how handsome he was. In those days I was smaller, and I teased him about being big. Maybe as he grew up, men or women discovered the beauty that the rest of us couldn't see but sensed. This fish is pretty gorgeous, too--solid muscle, yet the impression he gives out of the water is of helplessness, interrupted evolution. His missing arms and legs are the most noticeable thing about him; his body looks like it's wrapped in constricting plastic.

I study his expression. He's concentrating hard, keeping his jaw tight so that it doesn't quiver, but in his eyes are fury and terror. That's the way it is with both people and fish: when they find themselves in a tight spot, they try to look strong instead of admitting how unhappy they are.

The big fish flaps against the hull of the boat. Now he's rapping his head against the gunwale, trying to knock himself out. I'd really like to know what it's like to swim around in the depths – I myself have always stuck to the surface. But I don't think he wants to talk. He has only one thing on his mind, which renders the conversational possibilities nearly nil. That annoys me a little. He's as responsible as I am for his situation. He took the bait. He bit. You have to take responsibility for your actions. You can't just pretend it was an accident.

But his skin has a rainbow hue, that extra dose of beauty that nature bestows on big fish simply for being big. "Are you going to just sit there gaping at me?" he manages to croak out.

"What do you want me to do? Slit your throat? Put you out of your misery?"

"No, you idiot! What do you think I want?!"

I knew he'd ask me to throw him back. It's true that at this point I don't think I could eat him, but I can imagine stuffing him and putting him up on the wall if I had enough wall-space. What a fine trophy he'd make! It rarely happens that I or anyone else catches a fish

this big; throwing him back, however humane or politically correct, would leave me feeling incomplete. God knows I have enough disappointments in my life. Failures. I deserve a few successes, and having him stuffed and even just putting his carcass in a closet would make me feel a lot better; it would serve as solace for me in the even worse days to come

“You’re not going to help me, are you?” he says. “But I didn't expect it. Not for one moment.” He nods his head sadly, sighing the exhaling sigh that fish and humans share. “If the tables were turned, I probably wouldn't help you either.”

I'm thinking about *The Old Man and the Sea*. Man vs. Nature. My fish isn't as big as Hem's fish, he's not even as big as I am even though I've put on weight and I'm not sure that if Artie and I met in the street, he'd recognize me; maybe he isn't even that big anymore. With the fish and me, it's not so much a question of Man vs. Nature as of two living beings on different steps of the phylogenic ladder. Me here, him there: what's the big difference?

“What can I do for you?” I ask the big fish.

“Nothing, nothing at all. I'll just stretch out here and expire while thinking of all the pleasure I got over the years from my wives and concubines, and all the little fish I ate.” I hear the sarcasm in his voice, but if a fish could put his fins behind his head and pretend to relax, that's what this fish is doing.

Suddenly he sinks his teeth into my right calf. I yelp and shriek, but I keep a billy-club in the boat in case I actually hook a big fish, and I give him a whack on the head. It is not a good feeling. I already have a relationship with this fish. In a way he deserves a bite out of my calf. That's the way I felt when I saw *Jaws*. The captain got what he deserved, and to his credit that's the way Robert Shaw played it: equality between man and fish. Bopping him was a reflex action that I feel terrible about; if I could take it back, I would. He really is a noble creature as well as a piscatorial version of Artie Bialy. I happen to have arms and legs, but otherwise we're pretty much the same.

I find a can and get some water from the ocean. The waves are gray and choppy; storm clouds churn on the horizon. I pour the water over the fish's head and body. He opens his eyes, but by now he's pretty far gone. He looks at me with a pained grimace.

“Did it at least hurt?” he asks.

Honestly, I hadn't given a thought as to whether his bite hurt, but now I realize that I can give him a little solace. “It still does.”

What I really want to say is: Artie, I'm big now. I'm sorry I teased you. I didn't mean it, but people do these things all the time, they just do.

It's not easy to talk when you're lying on your back, but the fish seems to have found a workable position, like a man with a fat belly who sinks into a chair in Buddha-like serenity. If he was beautiful before, now he is also formidable the way certain middle-aged tycoons used to be: big-bellied, prosperous, unassailable. He even looks a little bigger.

“I’m not going into a song and dance about whom you’re destroying by not throwing me back,” he says. “As you probably know in your heart, I am somebody among my peers. My absence will definitely leave a hole in the universe. Not that you give a damn about that, nor should you; this is a pretty heartless universe in case you haven’t heard. And yes, yes, I know it’s my time, and yes, God knows we die down there too. God yes it was good while it lasted. But what I want to say is that all we have is, is, each other, even if it’s just man and fish, I love everybody even if some don’t deserve it like you you asshole.”

He’s growing incoherent, which is understandable. The water churns louder and more violently. The sea gods are angry for whatever reasons sea gods have to be angry about, venting on man and fish alike so that fish get caught by assholes and boats overturn in rough seas and no one has a clue to why these things happen but they do, they just do. Quaking with fear and love, I kneel down at the bottom of the boat with my pretty big fish that reminds me of a friend who may or may not be dead but whom I loved a lot even though I didn’t know it, and I hug him in all his sliminess and dying beauty. Looking at us from above, you probably couldn’t tell the difference between us, we’re just man and fish, alive and dead, he was right, it’s really doesn’t matter in the long run does it, all we have is this big ocean, this little boat, each other.



Moonset on the Hudson, photo by Jeffrey Friedkin