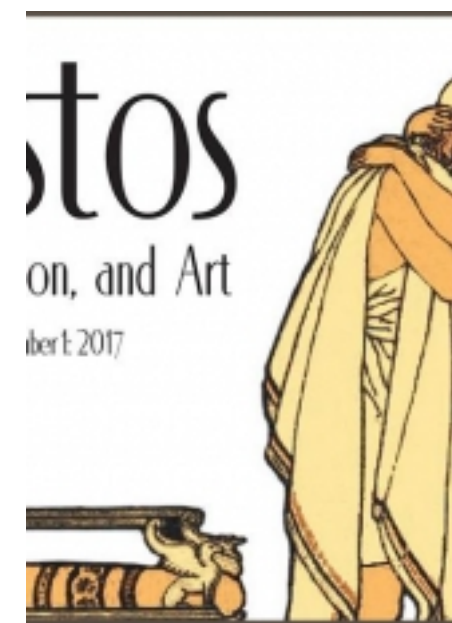


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## New California Lit Mag Explores Ideas of Home

Review of *Nostos*, Fall 2017 by Bethany Marcel

Rating: ★★☆☆

Keywords: Conventional (i.e. not experimental), Cultural focus

“Nostos” is a homecoming, more specifically a literary theme often used to describe an epic hero returning home again. I’m certainly no hero—just a lowly reviewer. But I did happen to be at home as I read this issue of *Nostos*. And so it felt fitting to sit on my own couch as I read, curled up by the fireplace, the dog at my feet.

It was an ideal setting for an issue Editor Lawrence Tjernell writes is “dedicated to all our journeys home and homecomings in the hope of being received there, undeserving though we may be.”

*Nostos* is published by Longship Press, a small-press publishing company based in Marin County, California. This is the inaugural issue of *Nostos*—and by some accounts they’re certainly off to an impressive start. For instance, this issue opens with a poem by B.H. Fairchild, “The Dumka,” followed by several poems by Rebecca Foust. Most of these are reprints. Unsurprisingly, they are beautiful poems. I was particularly taken by Foust’s “Altoona to Anywhere,” a poem that opens:

*Go ahead, aspire to transcend  
your hardscrabble roots, bootstrap  
the life you dream on,  
escape the small-minded tyranny  
of your small-minded Midwestern  
coalmining town.*

Is home a place we ever truly leave? How and when are we called back to it? Or do we always, no matter what we do, carry home within us? The work in *Nostos* often grapples with questions like these. In “Altoona to Anywhere” and many others like it I felt as though the narrator were speaking directly to me. In general, the poems in this issue are accessible in this way. Indeed, this is the sort of poetry that inspires one to curl up by the fireside.

Upon opening this issue—even from the Foreword—one has the sense of holding something both personal and yet universal in theme (ie the longing for — and return to—home). The issue reads almost like a letter from a dear friend, written long ago. I had the feeling that many of the writings in this journal were written longhand. Whether this is true or not, I don’t know. But the feeling was there. One of intimacy, nostalgia, and the warmth of home.

Poems like Jane Shlensky’s “Inheritance,” a poem with lines like “I know now,






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in some future dream,/I'll be a child loosed from her hand,/wandering frightened, craving home—" and then, at the end, "She'll offer me her sweetest smile/with biscuits buttered just the way I like" made me set the journal down for a moment as I swallowed some creeping, sentimental tickle in my throat. Poems like Anne F. Walker's aptly titled "homecoming" hit me with lines like "you make me want to come home/put out the cigarette by the laundry machine/your eyes are not the same/odd and deep."

This issue reminds us of all the things home can be—as well as what it isn't.

The bulk of the content here is poetry. The fiction arrives at the back of the issue, in the form of three short stories by James Tipton, the author of the novel *Annette Valon*. I enjoyed "Adrianna" most, the first short story. It's a story that reminds us of our own nostalgia for the past, as the narrator Randall drives for days on end, thinking of—and longing for—his old flame Adrianna. I do wish there were a few more pieces of fiction and nonfiction like this sprinkled in amongst the poems. A piece or two of flash fiction would even feel appropriate here.

I also enjoyed the visual art by Lorna Stevens, paintings that "reflect experiences of a journey home....derive[d] from aerial photographs of the United States-Mexico border." I was moved by these images. I admit I lingered longer here than I usually do over graphics in a literary journal.

So the writing is good—a lot of it is even impressive. But who are the writers in this issue? Of course, we've heard of many of them. Most of their biographies are long, each taking up their own page. Many of the biographies include lines such as "After 42 years of teaching poetry..." and "He is retired now, but for 27 years..."

And so *Nostos* does not—at least so far—seem to be a journal for beginners but rather for very established writers. It's here I admit I wanted shorter biographies (my eyes glazed over by the third of fourth long entry). I'd rather read an extra poem or two than the odd details of the author's life. I can't be the only one.

My biggest gripe with this issue is its lack of diversity. This issue is populated by writings of white, middle-aged, established writers living in California. Yes, it's a very specific demographic. I wonder if *Nostos* is even aware of this flaw—or if it has plans to fix this in the future. Right now it reads as a very particular—and not particularly inclusive—journal designed for a particular writer. I can't say for certain of course, but I'd worry this is a journal where the slush pile might be overlooked.

If you do want to submit your poetry, short fiction or artwork, *Nostos* accepts submissions twice a year. There is currently no payment, aside from 2 copies of the issue.

As Lawrence Tjernell writes in the Foreword: "Home is wherever you are allowed in warts and all, deserving or not. Like grace."

So in the end, I enjoyed this issue of *Nostos*, warts and all. But I wouldn't tell a friend to submit her writing there. Not yet at least.



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