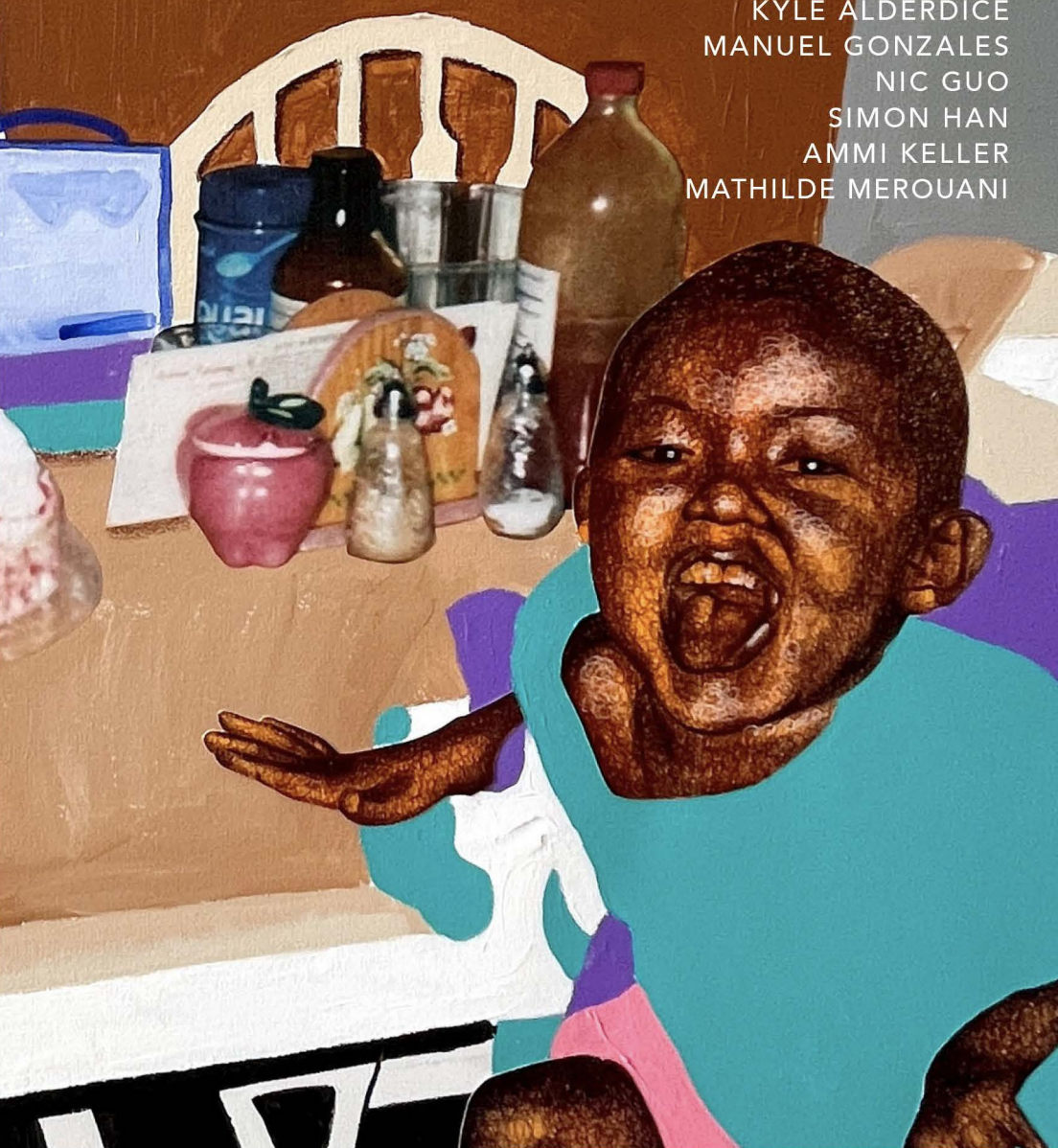


AMERICAN SHORT FICTION

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New Writing by

BABA ADEMOROTI
KYLE ALDERDICE
MANUEL GONZALES
NIC GUO
SIMON HAN
AMMI KELLER
MATHILDE MEROUANI



AMERICAN SHORT FICTION

SPRING 2026



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COVER (front and back) Adrian Armstrong, *Untitled*, ballpoint pen, acrylic, digital collage, glitter, and color pencil on canvas, 30" x 40", 2025.

INTERIOR ILLUSTRATIONS Alasia Dawn McCulley



The American Short(er) Fiction Prize

WINNER

chosen by Tony Tulathimutte

Young Soldier's Diary, May 1431, A Knot of Towers That Was a Church Before the War

Kyle Alderdice

News traveled quickly in the days we were stationed in Rouen, and word of her military successes and her spiritual calling preceded her by many months; it was as if horses ran faster, and people wrote and spoke more clearly then, aided somehow from above. I believed in such heavenly intervention then, and I still do now. It was our biggest difference, Frémin and I, for Frem was the rare soldier who didn't believe in God; it was clear he too fought for love, for life, for land, but never for the divine.

When prophecy's subject was handed over, I noticed first her short hair, uneven, as if cut with a blade, her head scraped in places. She looked like one of us. She smelled of burning grass, the surrounding countryside, but something of it seemed in her essence, like she was the reason the earth this summer was going to be hot and dry. Frem came from a hot and dry land—did she remind him of one of his sisters or brothers, his mother? Then I noticed the rings around her wrists from where various manipulations—chains, armor, hands—kept her imprisoned, even as she walked, escorted by us to the cell with the fallen beam where we, instead of the nuns customary for keeping a woman, would watch her for three nights.

She had escaped imprisonment before, but we did not worry because she bore a heavy shadow, and her window, with its green leaves left over from spring blowing through the arch the fallen beam once spanned, was too high for that weight. I sensed Frem was moved by this. He was silent that evening when she arrived, and still silent later when it grew completely dark, when the night usually sparkled with whispering and stories. I spent my rest that first night alone, awake, wondering if Frem was thinking about God for once and wondering if somehow I was complicit in his new Christian burden. By the early hours, I was almost prepared to walk by the captive's cell to ask her if she thought God was good or vengeful, if she felt inspired or commanded, if there was a difference.

She, like us, had trouble sleeping. It wasn't uncommon to catch another soldier's eyes strange and open, even during a rest, even during that one summer that it rained every day and we found we had forgotten the war, forgotten what our land was and whom it belonged to. She had traveled far, had commanded an army; does she still wake after little sleep under the stars, surrounded by the smell of metal and gunpowder and horses, thinking she is back home on her farm, in the way I wake, unsure if I've locked the gates to the church after my father has finished preaching? It had been my job to keep an eye on God, yet here she was, talking low with Frem on his early morning watch about her visions, like imminent death had freed her of secrecy. "God does not walk by my side," I could imagine him saying to our charge and never to me, "yet because you are here, I have no right not to believe in Him." Was it a sin to be angry at someone who was good at saying the right things, soothing words that were always helpful in our tower writhing with frustrations, named and unnamed? A soldier is a good occupation for a worrier—we worriers often lasted longer. This is where she failed; she was certain about what she was doing. I had always hoped to shield Frem from certainty—so he wouldn't fail our cause or his own, and because he drew closer to us in doubt.

On the second night, I found out she was nineteen, the same age—if this lifelong war hadn't made me lose count—as I was. Frémin was older, more a protector than a fighter, which is perhaps why he didn't have to believe in God. The two of them ate meals together, our meals, mostly alone in her cell, soldier and prisoner indistinguishable in the dark. It

is said we are all equal in God's eyes because we are all going to die and return to Him; but she would die sooner, and though it is a sin to feel so, I was grateful. Yet her blue eyes were tired with something I still catch in mine if I'm ever met with my reflection. She knew many of us wouldn't make it back to see if our families still did the same chores, told the same stories, played the same games.

That summer when it rained and we pretended we could forget the war and more people died in landslides than battles, we men and boys could have believed we lived in a castle or as monks in a monastery together for all our years. A roving band was stranded with us for a few weeks, and we carried on like we were nobles at court, the war supporting our entertainment instead of our pain, our boredom. I said if that summer were to ever end, we would desert, Frem and I, go to where his family toiled over sun-toasted fields, or to where I grew up, the other country, and I would use the Bible to teach him to read. Now on the dawn of another summer, someone new was stranded with us, and not because of floods.

The pyre was already constructed in one of Rouen's many squares; it was visible from the high window in her cell, though from what I saw on my rounds and rests she never tried to look out—Frémin was always the one to linger around openings, from the beginning. It is said that she could predict the future, but I believe she could sense the end; the girl who dreamed of ghosts and moved thousands to life and death, some without even meeting them. This is why she was unafraid, she already knew how people can be wrong, how the world will always be too large even when it feels small, how there will always be another war if the old one doesn't last.

On her third and final night she did sleep, like God wanted her to envision her family, her provincial childhood, things she would have been too removed from to think of while awake. I was told later that she, like Frem, was illiterate, and it only confirmed for me that she was somehow above language, that the language her God spoke was not to be read or written, but felt and heard. My youth was spent preserving old scrolls and watering wine, while she was being visited by saints and angels.

As she slept, Frem used his knife to carve a small cross out of the fallen beam and held it for a long time before giving it to her, perhaps

trying to imagine what armor meant to her anymore, to anyone. I didn't witness the final exchange, but it was around her neck when she was led from the tower.

In a way that felt pious, I sat with him the next morning watching the smoke grow at a distance, wondering if God cared at all about what we did, whom we met, if we could read. For now, with her gone, we had nothing to guard but ourselves again. Reaching the high window from the square below, her scorched-earth smell rang in a new summer as if she were responsible for the seasons changing. It wouldn't rain much. It's said they burned her three times to be sure, but we didn't need convincing; I've seen the dead before, even walking upright among men. And in that way, for us and for Frem, for me through his eyes, for the brief time she was ours, she was already smoke, a spirit; a sign of what's to come.

Contributors

BABA ADEMOROTI's first novel, *The Fool*, is forthcoming from Henry Holt in 2027.

KYLE ALDERDICE is a fiction writer, poet, and French translator from New York. His work appears in the 2026 Saints + Sinners Fiction Anthology, *Swing, Carve* (Editor's Choice 2023 Raymond Carver Contest), and *Strange Hymnal*, among others, and he has received funding from the Bread Loaf Translators' Conference, which he attended in 2024 and 2025. He is a graduate of Duke University, and he holds an MFA in Fiction from the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Kyle is seeking representation for his first novel.

ADRIAN ARMSTRONG's (b. 1990 Omaha, Nebraska) multidisciplinary practice, which encompasses drawing, painting, printmaking, installation, sound, and other mixed media elements, documents the contemporary Black experience in the United States. He is deeply interested in questions of how Black experiences intersect with the history of photography, portraiture, and collage. With friends, family members, and acquaintances as subjects, Armstrong's single and multi-figural works probe the influence of place and popular culture on the formation of self-image, community, connection, tenderness, and love. More specifically, he is interested in the complex ways race informs how we assign value to and interact in the spaces we occupy. Armstrong has shown work both nationally and internationally including New York, California, Texas, London, Paris, Mexico, and Madrid. He has shown at the SCOPE Art Show in Miami and 1-54 Art Fair with Jonathan Carver Moore in New York and did the NXTHVN residency in New Haven, Connecticut. His works have been acquired by the permanent collections of Texas Tech, The University of Texas Black Studies Department, the New York Public Library, and the Library of Congress.

MANUEL GONZALES is the author of the collection *The Miniature Wife and Other Stories*, the novel *The Regional Office Is Under Attack!*, and the novel *Escape from Blackthorne Island*, forthcoming from Flatiron Books. He teaches creative writing and literature at Bennington College.

NIC GUO has published work in *Oyster River Pages* and *The Penn Review*. He is a graduate of Wesleyan University and currently lives in San Francisco, where he practices workers' rights law.

SIMON HAN is the author of *Nights When Nothing Happened*, which was named an Indie Next Pick and best book of the year by *Time*, *The Washington Post*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Texas Monthly*. Born in Tianjin, China, and raised in various cities in Texas, he lives in Somerville, Massachusetts, and teaches at Tufts University.

AMMI KELLER is writing stories set at the intersection of Gen X, punk, queerness, and the Covid pandemic. Other stories from this collection have been published in *The Common*, *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, and *Revel*. Ammi was a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. The last story she published in *American Short Fiction* was reprinted in *The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2015*.

ALASIA DAWN MCCULLEY is a Raleigh-based illustrator and graphic designer. Alasia is a rising senior at North Carolina State University in Graphic & Experience Design. She is passionate about storytelling with multimedia design, blending traditional and digital methods to create pieces that amplify unique stories, capture idiosyncrasies, and stick with audiences.

MATHILDE MEROUANI's debut novel will be published by Melville House in February 2027. Her stories, poems, and essays have appeared in *Joyland*, *The Rumpus*, *The Common*, *Fugue*, *River Styx*, and *3:AM Magazine*. She won the 2021 Joyland Open Border Fiction Prize and was shortlisted for the 2021-2022 Galley Beggar Press Prize. She is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she won the John Logan prize for poetry, and was runner-up in the Academy of American Poets' 2025 Harold Taylor Prize. She is originally from Toulouse, France.

