

Social Media Poems 2021

Simeon Berry

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It's Like She Loves Us and Like She Hates Us

Our whole guise is like giving a sign to the world to think of us in a certain way but there's a point between what you want people to know about you and what you can't help people knowing about you.

—Diane Arbus

Sometimes I feel like that Diane Arbus portrait of a woman with curlers in her hair and a cigarette in her well-manicured hand staring too long at the camera. Sometimes I feel like every character I meet is an allegory of myself. John fell from a ladder in his barn and broke his lawn mower with his body but wasn't hurt himself at all. It was so astonishing he's already posted about it on Facebook three times. Reading between the lines, you can tell he's worried maybe he actually died in that fall. So I mess with him in the comments and say something to that effect. He wonders if there's a German word for this feeling. I tell him there's a German exchange student crashing at my house right now playing Hot Lava with my kid. And they call it lava in German too. The German short "a" is so much like ours it may as well be the same word. I'm worried that John is really dead and the rest of us with him, because there's no word for this feeling—not even in German—and that's how you know. I've been writing lecture notes this morning, summarizing Plato's Cave for nineteen-year-olds who will no doubt conclude getting a little high is the way out. I assume this because that's what I did. I have to remind myself I am not everybody. Everybody in the cave is chained and suffering. I have an animation to show them that retells the story in clay, like a Gumby episode, except every still frame echoes that government report on torture released last month that is just one more example of our denials as a society and complicity as a nation, bolstered by the fact the photographic evidence was censored and only later released through leaks. I've read torturers come to like their work and any of us could, because we don't have a way to understand another person's pain and we really want to understand each other. My notes also include Susan Sontag, who said fifty years ago in her essay on Plato and photography, "Enough with the pictures already." She was thinking of Dachau and thinking of Arbus. The pictures, she said, feel like they're breaking something inside ourselves we might have liked to keep.

I'd like to remember what picture I was looking at when I was sober enough to realize there is no light but this light. Maybe I just looked out the window, as I did this morning, and saw my neighbor on his mower, smoothing his lawn into that grassy plane he likes so well. I felt a little closer to him, like he's one of those portraits Sontag was talking about, his face so hardened it's repelling at first, which is why Sontag derides them so forcefully. I've found, though, if you make yourself hold on, the faces Diane Arbus made of people preparing to turn their show become so vulnerably human you start to fall in love a little with the relentlessness of gazes. Even the ones that are pathetic. Even the ones that are pitiable. Even the ones that terrify for how much they look like you. John, I think being dead suits me.

Kathryn Nuernberger

1

¹ [Kathryn Nuernberger, "It's Like She Loves Us and Like She Hates Us,"](#) *FIELD*, collected in [Rue](#), [BOA Editions. Ltd.](#)

Dear P.

Someone will love you many will love
you many will bother you some of these
loves will bother you some will leave you
one might haunt you hunt you in your
sleep make you weep the tearless kind of
weep the kind of weep that drowns your
organs slowly there are little oars in your body
little boats grab onto them and row and row
someone will tell you *no* but you won't know
he is right until you have already wrung your
own heart dry your hands dripping knives until
you have already reached your hands into his
body and put them through his heart love is
the only thing that is not an argument

Victoria Chang₂

² [Victoria Chang, "Dear P.," *Poem-A-Day*](#)

Gift Economy

I give you a gift card for a store that doesn't accept gift cards.

The store is in another galaxy.

I give you a paper airplane and a paper ticket for the plane.

I let you fly the plane.

I give you the manifest which says this is a cargo plane filled with horses.

I tell you the horses don't think of themselves as cargo.

I give you sugar cubes for the horses, and apples.

They're gifts you can look at in the horses' mouths.

I give you a flight plan and a lighter with which to ignite it.

You give me the flash fire that begs an encore.

I give you me going up in smoke.

Andrea Cohen
3

³ [Andrea Cohen](#), "[Gift Economy](#)," *diode*, collected in [Nightshade](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Just a Bunch of Received Ideas About Mazes

I'm nothing if not an excessive reaction
to an imaginary problem.
In other words I really am
something, I think, therefore I am,
I think, intermittently intimate
with the infinite. I drink
therefore—you know how that goes.
The second Big Bang will be
noted Renaissance dilettante Frames Janco
exploding into a new universe
yes we are tired
and a literally split second previous
my mouth will be full of buttons
before the Dancin' School School of Dance,
in my back pocket a flask full
of something to tenderize the buttons.
It is not always easy. When friends
told you they thought less of you
than you thought they thought
for example. How terribly the world
rakes the felt in the glitterbang and halfight
and doubleword of this casino.
Will we ever find our way
of course we will find our way
and lose it again and again and again
walking past a bus stop. It is morning
and we must decide which game
can lay claim to having the most
of our skin in it. Or maybe just sink,
through with deciding, through with maybe.
Sometimes, though, I enjoy thinking
of all the shoes I might fill
and the sun roars once more.
Before, I told you it rained inside
our umbrellas and that wasn't made up.
On the far side of the Eastgate Foods parking lot,
an older and older man sits on the curb
facing away from the highway.
Once upon a time, there was a phone booth
there. You pushed silver into it
and a voice came out.

Marc McKee

4

⁴ [Marc McKee](#), "[Just a Bunch of Received Ideas About Mazes](#)," collected in [Meta Meta Make-Belief](#), Black Lawrence Press

The Year Annie Lennox Released “Why”

my mom found my *Fuck You I Have Enough Friends*
T-shirt in my home-from-college laundry, crying,
Do you still love God? Annie was in question,
and I was in penance. Mom told me when
I was grown, after her hysterectomy, when she heard
that word, she was afraid she'd accidentally curse
God. My best friend said *fuck God* because
everyone dared her. She has ugly kids now
and married the first man who came inside her.
After the surgery dad would send me upstairs
to check on her, wrapped in bed in the middle
of the day. *I'm fine, just napping.* Later, she told
my sister, she'd held a gun, saw herself in the casket
peaceful. *You don't know how I feel,* I screamed
at a boyfriend, part truth, part needing for him
to believe nobody had it worse. He made it
a rule to never say sorry. When we had sex,
I worried I had cuts in my mouth. My friend
on the phone: it doesn't get better, it just gets
bad in other ways. *Why can't you see this boat*
is sinking? Yesterday I bought a ring I couldn't
afford and hid it in the trunk of the car.
That year I apologized all the time: to my

mom, my sister, my best friend even when it was
her fault. It felt good to feel bad, absolved.

Aaron Smith
5

⁵ [Aaron Smith](#), "[The Year Annie Lennox Released 'Why,'](#)" collected in [The Book of Daniel](#), [The University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

First Narrowly Averted Apocalypse

Once upon a time I knew
that whales had ears.
That in them were bones,
and by them the tight spiral of time
could be gauged. I knew
the names of many stars
and the myths in which they glowed
like cold, dead fire. Once,
I trembled before love like fire.
Once. O sad heart, what to say
of this cold air, this darkness,
this will to credulous harm,
and the suspicion that California
is another world entire?
That there is in this poem a world,
a mostly empty train, darkness
and mountains and, sure, danger,
is fitting. That there is a fat guy
named Steven Seagal who
doubtlessly, breathlessly, knows
many ways to visit martial death
upon evil-doers, well, this, too,
is fitting. Some nights, so
very late my bones seem to weep
with hard pain, I stare up
at the ceiling, in the direction
of God and the angels and all
objects which in their orbits are decaying.
I don't exactly pray for anything
or anyone and now
you know my selfish secret,
dear reader. Look,
snow on the ground and toxic
despair and a nuclear bomb,
somewhere, and a villain
who looks a lot like Eric Bogosian
in a justly maligned role
and the wind which is lousy
with solitude.

Paul Guest

6

⁶ [Paul Guest, "First Narrowly Averted Apocalypse," *Plume*, collected in *Because Everything is Terrible*, Diode Editions](#)

Play Therapy

I am the puppet a girl flops around in her dollhouse,
and I represent her anger. I'm daughter and teacher
and cousin too. I'm brother and Papa Smurf's baby.
The girl's made a ratty mattress from a red quilt patch.
The pillow is a dirty cotton ball where I reenact the scene
of her father (Ken) weeping into her breasts. Then
she pulls the arms off of him, then I stop being her
and go down to the kitchen to be a mother who is quiet,
and martyred, and the both of us make meals
from our symbiotic tragedy. I've 3,000 roles
in the air ready for the girl's next endeavor. In the next
room, this girl becomes a poet, both brilliant and mean.

Carmen Giménez Smith

7

⁷ [Carmen Giménez Smith](#), "[Play Therapy](#)," collected in [Be Recorder](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

from "13th Balloon"

In some ways our story amounted
less to paper
 than to staples and holes
Only hours into the weekend you left town
with someone else without telling me
I sensed what it meant

 Having swallowed
long ago the placebo of monogamy
I determined not to speak to you again
let alone forgive

I have no idea how much time passed
 maybe a year
Now and then our friends would try
to convince me to see you
but I managed to avoid you
even in our shriveled city
and we would not talk again until you called
to tell me you had tested positive

I remember the weight of the phone
in my hand and thinking as I looked
out my window at the simmering
oranges of dusk above the trees
that *crepuscular* was one of the ugliest words
I could think of
though later it would be surpassed
by *cryptosporidium histoplasmosis*
and *non-Hodgkin's lymphoma*
your official cause of death

I could say I started forgiving you that night
you called and maybe I did but before
me lay two interminable weeks
of waiting for my own results
during which I decided
I would leave behind among other things
this miserable stagnant city we shared

Eventually I and everyone around you
would be all but delirious
with forgiveness and mercy and love

What was that trick
How did you do it

It was as if you'd unfolded a map
you'd secretly been drawing
for us all along a map
of a new and radiant country
across which together we would
carry you as you died

Mark Bibbins
8

⁸ [Mark Bibbins, "13th Balloon \[In some ways our story amounted\],"](#) collected in [13th Balloon, Copper Canyon Press](#)

X

X Vietnam Vets with shotguns and six-packs, fingering shells after watching *The Deer Hunter*.

X cops pushing mops, X machinists laid off after twenty hard years, drinking
straight shots of Jack, buying 50 cent drafts with counted dimes.

X cafeteria workers and coal smoke. Who ain't broke? Who ain't X'd?

Who ain't waiting for that last severance check?

Who X'd out twilight at the plant gate, ghost towns and gutters and two inch pipes.

X the broken traffic light in burnt-out Toledo. On the corner some woman waiting in the rain for nothing
we can name.

You dig it, X marks the spot. What else she got? What else she forgot about her skin?

X on the cap on my Pops, tilted sideways still cool like he's copping a fro and long sideburns.

X on the sidewalk where bleeding Billy Montgomery laid down and said, "Please walk my dog."

X sleepwalkers listening to Slovenian Polka as Wittgenstein Scholars pass out pamphlets, Xtra Xtra
rhythm swiveling, skeleton suits in the dark Museum of Irrational American History.

X operators still sticking digits in the air above their hospital beds, milky white cataract eyes. Who takes
the minimum wage to change their bed pans, hold their fingers as they tremble?

Can you dig this? Can you dig the dying and the dead? Dig into the X-Files to find the forgotten and the
grievous, the lost causes undercut by FBI agent provocateurs? You think the government don't have the
cure, locked in a secret cabinet meeting? Wild-haired bitter academics talking about Hegemony—

Did you ever think that you're the enemy? With your obfuscating lingo? have you ever witnessed the old
women talk and smoke at BINGO? The beauty of their brash ashes?

When you walk on my block, I'll jack your thesis (just more feces).—don't believe this? You're funded
by Guggenheim; I'm funded by wind chimes and cheap wine, carpenter's nails and Kool-Aid.

Let us begin again, X is X filling the world with evening prayers poured slowly in a cool glass.

X is a DJ named gravity who speaks in the language the color of charity. Says Marry Me.

X gangbangers along the Los Angeles basin the graffiti spells *Día De Muerto*.

X voices that spill through subway shadows, what elegy what slow child named Sorry, what sixties funk,
what rhymes with physician?

Can I get an X-ray Doctor?

Named J.

Rising from the far foul line: recognize his dissonance, the distance between Schoenberg and Psychedelic Funk is seconds not centuries.

X-out nostalgic riffs for the spark of spliffs and grifted gliss. This is more than spit. This is a manifesto to toe (repeat to infinity).

*Sean Thomas Dougherty*⁹

⁹ [Sean Thomas Dougherty, "X,"](#) collected in [Sasha Sings the Laundry on the Line, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

The Cow

I used to think of this creek as a river
springing from mineral caverns
of moonmilk and slime,

but really it's just a slow thread of water
that comes from somewhere up north
to trickle its way out
near the edge of our property.

And I've always imagined
the toolshed as it is,
though it was once
an outbuilding for a watermill
whose wheel and timbers
have been reborn
as exposed rafters and flooring
for the Old Money in the valley.

The day before my grandfather died
he drove a diesel flatbed
to the edge of the creek
and paid ten day laborers
to unload this shed.

He left his will on the shed floor,
which wasn't a will
as much as it was a quick note
scrawled on the pink edge of an invoice
for a few bundles of chicken wire.

I found the note
and showed it to no one.

This shed should have the smell
of seed packets and mousetraps.
It should have a calendar
whose pages haven't turned since Truman.

The sounds of usefulness and nostalgia
should creak from its hinges,
but instead there's nothing
but a painting the size of a dinner plate
that hangs from an eightpenny nail,
a certain style of painting
where the wall of a building
has been lifted away

to reveal the goings-ons of each room,
which, in this case, is a farmhouse
where some men and women
sit around the geometry
of a kitchen table playing pinochle,
a few of the women laughing
a feast-day kind of laughter,
and one of the men, a fat one
in overalls with a quick brushstroke
for a mouth, points up
as if to say something
about the death or the rain
or the reliable Nordic construction
of the rafters.

A few of the children
gathered in a room off to one side
have vaguely religious faces—
they're sitting on the floor around their weak
but dependable uncle
who plays something festive
on the piano. The piano
next to the fireplace, the fireplace lit,
a painting of the farmhouse
hanging above the mantel.

What passes for middle C
ripples away from the uncle, the children,
the pinochle game—
the wobbling note finally collapsing
in the ear of the cow
standing in perfect profile
at the far right of the painting.

The cow faces east and stands knee-deep
in pasture mud. The pasture
is a yellow, perspectiveless square,
and the cow, if you moved her
inside the house, would stand
with the sway of her back
touching the rafters.
Perhaps the fat man is referring
to the impossibility of it all,
the inevitable disproportion,
the slow hiss of something he can't explain.

The cow is gray and blue
and orange. This is the cow
that dies in me every night,

the one that doesn't sleep
standing up, or sleep at all,
but stamps through the pasture muck
just to watch the suckholes she makes
fill with a salty rot-water
that runs a few inches
below the surface of everything here.

The cow noses through
the same weak spot in the same fence,
and every night finds herself
moving out beyond the fields
of her dumb, sleeping sisters.

The cow in me has long admired
the story the night tells itself,
the one with rifle shots and laughter,
gravel roads crunching under pickups
with their engines and lights cut,
the story with the owls
diving through the circles
their iron silences
scratch into the air.

The cow in me never makes it past
the edge of the painting—
and she's not up to her knees in mud,
she's knee-deep in a cattle guard.
Bone and hoof and hoods of skin
dangle below the steel piping
into the clouds of the underworld.

The cow cries, and her cry
slits the night open and takes up house.
The cry has a blue interior
and snaps like a bonfire stoked
with dry rot and green wood.

The cry is a pitcher of ink that never spills,
until it does, until it scrawls itself
across the fields and up into the trees.

The cry works in the night
like a dated but efficient system.

The cry becomes a thread of black water
where the death-fish spawn.

On nights like this

the cow inside me cries,
and I wake as the cry leaves my mouth
to find its way back to the shed,
where it spreads
through all the little rooms of the painting
like the heat building up
from the fireplace by the piano.

The cry makes a little eddy
around the fat man's finger.

It turns the pinochle deck
into the sounds of the creek
trickling into nothing.

The cry watches my grandfather
weeping over the only thing
he said to my father
in two decades,
which he didn't say at all
but penned onto a crumpled invoice
that found its way to the nowhere
of my hands.

The cry in the cow
in the painting in me
rotates in the night
on a long axle of pain,
and the night itself
has no vanishing point.

Michael McGriff
10

¹⁰ [Michael McGriff](#), "[The Cow](#)," [Blackbird](#), collected in [Home Burial](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Salat

When I asked *regrets?* you could speak only of the cement rooftops
the woman you left for Arizona

who took thirty-two Ativans and drove herself to your father's house

You give what you give to reclaim it

*

The fog a necklace around the bridge

I am possessed as in possessed by the sound of checkpoint guards whistling;
they love tap the taxi's windshield

the joke of *how many Beirut girls does it take*

*

In Girona we climb marble stairs
to find an unwashed couple sleeping in the grass

Ramadan, *baba*, I fast for the plastic tarps, hypothermic infants, ebola winter,
my grandfathers' names—Salim, Mohammad—

*

For the afternoon tea, we gather in the elders' parlors,
kissing their fingertips

introducing ourselves hurriedly—somewhere, a film reel unspools—

ibn Fares, bint Hilal, we recognize ourselves by what we belong to

Hala Alyan

11

¹¹ [Hala Alyan](#), "[Salat](#)," collected in [Hijra](#), [Southern Illinois University Press](#)

Arsenic Kiss

We were young and golden and we had no faces
only goddess bodies, blue jeans, a whistle when
we walked, red talons six inches long. We had fast
little horses and we raced the wind down wheat
fields, jumped through rainbow hoops, we had Jesus,
we had morphine kisses, but we had no faces.

In the old pictures where we line up in our
white dresses we're grainy like we're made of sand, like
the sand is trickling out of us, counting the minutes
we have left, and still we have no faces, our heads
blank ovals with little black jockey caps on top.

We went to church and sang our hymns, and the
old priest said, it takes a knife to make a face,
a butter knife for butter faces but if you've got a
coal or salt or granite face it takes a hammer and
chisel to get that smile right, so stay soft my
little ones, stay butter, pure sweet white butter.

We went to school and there were the scholars and
the man-poets, and they had our faces on consignment,
they'd pin them to walls, they'd dangle them like tiny
watches to hypnotize each other, you are feeling
very sleepy, you are feeling very horny, you are
feeling very brilliant and important about this.

After the faces wear out we get them back.
These are salt and coal and granite faces. Butter
knives wouldn't touch us. Our bodies are a different
kind of goddess, the kind with bat wings.

We do not say thank you when we get our faces back,
but if we pull them nice and tight you might even think
we're smiling, lean in, lover, and I'll give you my butter
my Jesus, my sweet arsenic kiss.

R. Bratten Weiss
12

¹² [R. Bratten Weiss, "Arsenic Kiss," Connecticut River Review](#)

First Birthday

When I was born, there was no noise for him,
while she heard everything at once:

roil of water steaming the windows,
damper of milk rushing in to the ducts,

clockwork cry of each contraction,
again and again, the same frustration—

unable to feed itself or feel the illuminated touch
that makes us breathe or sigh.

When they lifted me out of her
body's blue kiln, swollen as a fistful

of walnuts, veined cord
clinging to my neck like wisteria,

doll drowned in a jar, my spine coiled
like a screw into her woodenness.

When she told him, was he angry?
Was she waiting for something to begin?

Robin Ekiss
13

¹³ [Robin Ekiss](#), "[First Birthday](#)," [Waccamaw](#), collected in [The Mansion of Happiness](#), [University of Georgia Press](#)

Somewhere Real

Get in, George Eliot. I packed PB&Js. I'm bringing that rainbow parachute we held hands under as eight year olds. Get in, right beside Autumn, beside every manic pixie dream girl screenplay written by a man, beside "bad weather," beside Allegra's pomegranate split into five uneven offerings, beside Allegra herself, she's a mother now, as I write this. Get in, television and all the extinct hardware of the nineties. Montel, Jerry, Ricki, get in. I'm driving. Get in, exes. Tell me about life without me, pick the music, thread a threat through my dumb brown hair, something like you were always so then let the rain finish your sentence. Get in rain, but don't hog the air. I'm running away. I'm tired of not being a monk. Get in, "You're So Vain," and five o'clock shadows and how hard it is to not talk to my brother. We went a whole year and a half. Get in, year and a half. Get in, therapist with the good haircut and bad advice. You too, Michael Jackson. I'm so sorry you had to be Michael Jackson. The kind of snow that only fell when I was young, get in. Or maybe it's just how I saw it, get in. I'm trying desperately not to sound cute, which is, of course, adorable. But, please. Eleven siblings killed in the camps, get in, next to my grandfather. Pillheadedness, get in. Pema Chodron's forehead and everything behind it, get in. I'm not going to say it again: buckle up, put a daffodil behind my ear, touch my shoulder from the backseat, write my will for me, tell Mary Ann Evans I can hear her humming, it's fine except it's driving me nuts. I'm aware that I'm crying, get in, sit next to K. The baffling intelligence of starling and uteri—front seat. I'm only five feet tall, too many strangers pick me up as a gag, my recurring dream is that I choose this life again—keep your hands inside the vehicle. The mandolin I inherited because of genocide, keep me awake all night. Morgan, I just want to watch your hands protect a flame. Everybody, I'm sorry, I'm doing my best not to lean so hard on metaphor I avoid where I am. This road invented itself. Even though I get the facial expressions right, I'm a poor listener, get in. Greasy haired, bucktoothed, gets distracted easily, deodorant stains, secret crush on Kathryn, come on in, throw your book bag out the window and tell me your favorite color. Turquoise, get in. The locker they shoved Gabby into and I didn't do it, but I didn't stop them, get in. The line between where you almost went and where you're going: they call that a fork. Funny. Every time I let the moon roof slide open, but there was no moon, get

in, hurry slowly, slow up, slur your worlds, say you're sorrow, admit you loved the uglier twin while arm-in-arm with the one older by a second. Oh, cherishing, get in, it's not too late, get in, the diner never closes, get in, put your feet on the dash, I'm stopping at a—I can't believe they call it this, two commands: Rest! Stop! The game is we rush into the gas station, you buy me a souvenir I most certainly don't need, and I, you. I found this keychain, it blinks your name, they never have mine, get in. Get in, world, death, time. I swear I'll turn this car around if you don't hot box us vapid. The day the stars come down and start walking around like they own the place, God said, I'm quitting, get in. The game is I spy, the game is who can be quiet the longest, the game is hold your breath there's a cemetery. Order me fries. Order me lungs. Order me around. Order my manuscript. Here's a handful of pennies, of ketchup packets, of sky. I know you're exhausted, get in, I'm driving you home. Roll down your window, the forecast is alive. The dog's kicking in his sleep which means a brain the size of a lemon can squeeze a whole dream. Poor poet, get in, you never could say goodbye with grace. Lucille, get in. Dead family, get in. I want to show you something: I had no map when I started and now here I am, somewhere real called loving you, get in.

Shira Erlichman

14

¹⁴ [Shira Erlichman](#), "[Somewhere Real](#)," [The Nation](#)

Terror is My Business

Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto.
—Terence

Why so afraid of the stars and their denizens?
I'm what mutates in *this* body. Which is to say,

this space for lease. Nothing non-human is alien
to me, or everything human is. What need to up

the ante, call Hoover in his cocktail dress,
the geniuses at No Such Agency. I mean *terror*

is my business. Roswell is just dress-up for what
we are, larvae in our sleep and when we sign up

every a.m. with *der Kommissar*—so many leg-sets
on the floor, antennae waving in the mirror....

Rachel Loden
15

¹⁵ [Rachel Loden](#), "[Terror is My Business](#)," collected in [The Last Campaign](#), Slapering Hol Press

Four Months Along Primipara Song

Everyone starts with their ears in their necks

Sing ho, sing hey

Instead of eyeballs tiny black specks

I'm off to Tallahassee

I'd ruin him good in a pile of furs

Sing ho, sing hey

Začne lézt na nervy you're climbing up my nerves

but I'm off to Tallahassee

Drones in the sky, and an embryo in me

Sing ho, sing hey

Standing in the shower is the body's time to grieve

I'm off to Tallahassee

Even when it's planned, sometimes you want a well

Sing ho, sing hey

When it's all over you'll be the one I tell

and I'm off to Tallahassee

Kelly Morse

16

¹⁶ [Kelly Morse](#), "[Four Months Along Primipara Song](#)," collected in [Heavy Light](#), [Two of Cups Press](#)

The Man Who Won't Pay Dues

While the bad slept well, he
moiled, sweating, on the sofa.

Telephone, she sings from the kitchen
as he pops the hood.
Their daughter stamping swarms
of ants into dust. The man
considers his stalled Ford,
his Adam's apple rising
and falling. The hound wails,
the girl pulls down her panties
by the tottering clothesline.

Sock-footed, he pivots on the stoop
and a splinter goes deep.
The screen door slams
next to a chevron of sand
she has swept beside his Red Wings.

Forrest Gander

17

¹⁷ [Forrest Gander](#), "[The Man Who Won't Pay Dues](#)," *College English*, collected in [Lynchburg](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

There Are Things I Won't Tell My Daughter

The lover who pierced his scrotum
with a cube of ice and screw

sterilized in a Bic's small flame,
how he said it felt like a tiny bell

ringing in the church of his body.
Or the girlfriend who drew spirals

of blood when she thrashed inside me,
amniotic pink and trickling down

my thighs like a watercolor.
I won't tell her about the smell

of vomit on a staircase in Madrid
where I used my body to secure

a place to sleep. The banker who spat
into me like a well. The taste of cold eggs

the next morning, mouthwash and windex
to wash my cervix clean. I won't tell her

either, stories my mother told me,
the stranger who watched her fold

clothes at the laundromat while I
twitched in her belly, how he scribbled

the glass with murky cum. I won't tell her
the wreckage and blossom of red light filling

a parked car. Why I never reported it.
How I learned to stay in my body

long enough to feel the bloom
and thud of my heart that is a shack

of honeysuckle and shot of grease.
That is a trail of staggered stars

a needle left along my inner arm.
I will tell her about the color of fire escapes

in the city where she was conceived,
the bowl of oranges in the kitchen,

my body a fortune, a record,
a lamp post in the dusk.

How snow covered us all winter
and I walked outside, happy

and delirious, collecting the blue
shards on my tongue.

Kendra DeColo

18

¹⁸ [Kendra DeColo, "There Are Things I Won't Tell My Daughter," *Ninth Letter*, collected in *My Dinner with Ron Jeremy*, \[Third Man Books\]\(#\)](#)

Press

It was the summer of Son of Sam
and we girls wore our hair in ponytails.
We formed a club, our code names
the names of his girls, clipped
their reprinted photos, learned
to twist a shoulder forward.
Nights, we rode with stoned boys, impatiently
led them over the browned terrain of our bodies.
In the dark of their fathers' cars
our untanned places glowed a milky white.
When they reached inside, we arched back
in a way that would bring him to us like a howl.
We read he went for long dark hair and
in the morning we let down our ponytails.
Then August's last press of heat
sent the town to water. Boys snuck from behind
to unlatch swim suits. We dove,
our tops waving like gills. Young mothers
stayed poolside, baggy in their bodies;
the old songs off their radios were too loud.
When it was all over, it was all wrong.
We told the boys to drive us home.
There was no dog. This was no mail clerk.
We girls were oiled and brown and knew
he was out there still, aiming
to fix us forever. We would wait.
Cars came down fast off the hill.
Some never stopped for the light.

Victoria Redel

19

¹⁹ [Victoria Redel](#), "Press," collected in [Already the World](#), Kent State University Press

Salvation Sonnet

Almost sweetly the judge gaveled away my summer,
knocking her desk lightly like a quiet neighbor's door.

I worked three hundred hours at a Salvation Army—
their motto *Blood and Fire*. Our small misfit militia,

teenagers unearthing ourselves from the stacks
of stuff left behind, piecemeal Lego sets, doll houses

with missing balconies. Some people would donate
anything for a write-off: prosthetic limbs, uncle's ashes

mistaken for a daisy vase, countless dildos, dildoes, dildi.
I learned the Spanish word—*consolador*, from *to console*.

We took fishing pictures with the biggest and brightest,
threw them in a box we hid from management like a pile

of armless crosses. When I cup my ear towards that
summer, I can sometimes hear them shiver back to life.

Steven Espada Dawson
20

²⁰ [Steven Espada Dawson](#), "[Salvation Sonnet](#)," [The Adroit Journal](#)

Call Her Vincent

for & after Edna St Vincent Millay

Let's try one more time: call her Vincent
and she will press against your lips backstage,
write you letters that say, *when you tell me to come,*
I will come, by the next train, just as I am.
Her first lover will disclose to a biographer
that she'd been raised a son
by a mother who did not expect her, who gave birth
just moments after an uncle was revived
from the brink. His name? Vincent.
There's a photograph
in which she already knows how to take up space,
Vincent's hands small, wrapped around the branches
of a flowering tree like the tree is hers alone,
like it only bloomed within the picture's frame.
The photo is from 1914 and she is twenty-two,
already the age to touch herself and not feel sorry for it,
to let the salty-sweet of ache deliver her.
She never traveled without Milton or the Bard.
She lived in a farmhouse
in a field and that field was in a forest. She knew
that if you settle somewhere beautiful
you will live more spectacularly,
with firework and flare, with dewdrops
that rest on morning blades of grass
when you find you are sore from the way you fucked
and cannot sleep, with a breath that sounds
the same whether born of ecstasy or darkness,
a gasp, a rush to take in the world
and breathe ourselves out, O, like a mess, like a man,
with grace, even if our finale is a fatal tumble
down some stairs, the literati hushing our name
like a sexed-up prayer: Vincent.

Oliver Bendorf
21

²¹ [Oliver Bendorf](#), "[Call Her Vincent](#)," [Quarterly West](#), collected in [The Spectral Wilderness](#), [The Kent State University Press](#)

Postcards Nos. 1-6

4.17

I'm supposed to say *wish you were here*. Or *the water's swell*. Or what have you. But what with the pine and the oily lake, this is better. What with the teakettle whistling. What with the sound the door makes when it opens to no one.

Don't forget to sleep.

xo,
X

6.24

Did I tell you about the last time my parents were in the same room? I was there. Or at least I've imagined it. They stared at each other. Four dead fish eyes and me the color of wallpaper. I waited for one of them to vaporize the other. But no one had the energy. Your tomatoes must be in the ground by now. They must be fruiting. Did you plant the ugly ones again? Are they tart like last year?

X

7.4

It's a picnic day. Will you color your hair blue? Did you ever when you were a kid? Was there a cookout and did you eat too many hotdogs and curl into your mother's lap, and did she tell you it would be okay? And was it?

Forgive me. I sound frantic. I'm not. Does that worry you?

xxxxx,
X

7.5

It worries me.

8.19

If I come back, let's go to the Cadillac Ranch. It's in Amarillo. I saw it once—Cadillacs nosing out of the ground like dolphins. There are seven, I think, or nine. Everyone scrawls love and proclamations on them. If we go, I want you to paint my name there. I've painted yours here.

All my frustration,
X

10.1

Or to Alaska. We could see caribou and wolverines. We could awake for days. So much light. Would it drive us crazy, do you think? Is it cold even in the summer? Know that if I could I would apologize. If I could I would slip under the crack of your door and fall into bed with you like someone almost drowned. But I don't have enough words. And can't fit through small spaces. I am running out of room. Come to the bus depot. Bring your helmet. And your arrows. I will be the girl wearing nothing.

Yours, most likely,
X

Catherine Pierce
22

²² [Catherine Pierce, "Postcards Nos. 1-6,"](#) collected in [Famous Last Words, Saturnalia Books](#)

Indiana Problem (Fear, 1983)

In one episode of *Little House*, the brother Albert gets addicted to morphine. Doc Baker tells him to puke and he does and then he's not addicted anymore. Even though after I watched it with Mom I asked her if I could do drugs when I grew up (she said no), I knew I never wanted to go through what Albert did: desperate for his next fix in too-short homemade overalls and feathered hair, barfing all over the bed.

I used to keep myself up at night worrying about drug addiction in general, and also sexual intercourse, ghosts, skeletons, and the devil. I would convince myself that a skeleton was standing next to my bed: sometimes I would see the white of a leg bone through one squinted eye with the thrill of hundreds of sparrows beating my skin and I was the only one in the world who had ever been this afraid. I would get through the day dry-eyed and light with exhaustion before night came with its ghost nurses and dried rubbery corpses from *Ripley's Believe It or Not*. And on another *Little House*, Laura gets lost in the hills and is cared for by some old man. When Pa finally finds her, the desperation to keep her that riots out of him froze me: that you could be that wanted, that someone could want to save you.

Julia Story
23

²³ [Julia Story](#), "Indiana Problem (Fear, 1983)," [The Rockhurst Review](#), collected in [Spinster for Hire](#), [The Word Works](#)

Light of Sleep

In the library of night, from the darkness of ink
on paper, there is a whispering heard book to book,
from *Great Catastrophe* and *The World of Silence*
to *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera*, a history having
to do with aerial leaflets, air raid papers,
bills of mortality, birth certificates and blotting papers,
child lost-and-found forms, donor cards, erratum slips,
execution broadsides “liberally spattered with errors of all kinds”
sold by vendors at public hangings, *funeralia*, with drawings
of skeletons digging graves and inviting us to accompany
the corpse of x to the church of y, gift coupons, greeting cards,
housekeeping accounts, ice-papers to place in windows
for the delivery of blocks of ice, jury papers, keepsakes,
lighthouse-dues slips for all ships entering or leaving ports,
marriage certificates, news bills, notices to quit, oaths, paper
dolls, plague papers, playing cards, quack advertisements,
ration papers, razor-blade wrappers, reward posters,
slave papers, songbooks, tax stamps, touring maps,
union labels and vice cards left in telephone boxes,
warrants and watch-papers used to keep the movements
of the pocket watches under repair free of dust,
wills and testaments, xerography, yearbooks and the Zoetrope
disk also known as the wheel of life wherein figures painted
in a rotating drum are perceived to move, faster and faster
whether dancing, flying, or dying in the whirl of time.

Carolyn Forché

24

²⁴ [Carolyn Forché, “Light of Sleep,” *World Literature Today*, collected in *In the Lateness of the World*, Penguin Books](#)

Touch

We made our own laws.
I want to be a Hawk,
A Dolphin, a Lion, we'd say

In stores where team logos hung
Like animal skins.

Even by moonlight,
We'd chase each other
Around the big field

Beneath branches sagging
As if their leaves were full of blood.

We didn't notice when policemen
Came lighting tree bark
& our skin with flashlights.

They saw our game
For what it was:

Fingers clutching torso,
Shoulder, wrist—a brawl.
Some of the boys escaped,

Their brown legs cut by thorns
As they ran through the brush.

It's true, we could have been mistaken
For animals in the dark,
But of all possible crimes,

Blackness was the first.
So they tackled me,

And read me my rights without saying:
You Down or Dead Ball.
We had a language

They did not use, a name
For collision. We called it Touch.

Terrance Hayes
25

²⁵ [Terrance Hayes](#), "[Touch](#)," [Callaloo](#), collected in [Hip Logic](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Shameful

to have fucked up
your day by my body in
those old pink sweatpants
that don't fit and are stained
from a cooking accident
on the thighs. It's my fault
I have not kept up the dye
job and my roots are dull,
gray and inching towards
the ends. This belly fat
is about 6 years old
now, and the spots are from
an aging situation I inherited
from all my pale ancestors
who only recently emerged
from the forests we were banished to
by history, poverty, an act of murder
(long ago) and other bad luck,
real and imagined. I know
I could try to be someone else,
like a person on TV, perhaps,
but the only shows I watch
are English these days and
about the unfortunate,
where actors have yellowish
teeth and red eyes. *No wonder,*
you'd say, and I am only ashamed
in some distant, uninvolved way.
It's not personal, I'd say
about my body if
you and I were actually able to speak, *it's*
more like a kind of darkness
or artichoke. I can imagine
your laugh if I'd said that.
It's craziness, really, that part
I secretly feel I must kill to survive,
to call that after a vegetable
which is actually a variety of thistle
(the roots are called suckers!).
If I could hold hands with you
on public transport,
beside the woman who smelled
different from any of my people,
the man who said mother-
fucker many times in various
places in one long sentence

into a phone beside a strollered
and beribboned baby (pierced ears)
who twitched in her guileless
sleep, and then if you could say
I am hateful and despairing,
I'd console: *we all are too.*

Connie Voisine
26

²⁶ [Connie Voisine](#), "[Shameful](#)," [The Rumpus](#), collected in [And God Created Woman](#), [Bull City Press](#)

Essay on *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

John Locke says children don't understand elapsed time,
and when I was a girl it was true
and it remains true—

It's been three hundred years and still my feelings for Locke
must pass unrequited.
I keep his book in my satchel

with other pleasures—
lipstick, Ricola, matches, binder clips, and a tiny bar of soap
stolen from the Renaissance Inn

where I sometimes cheat on Locke with another man.
At least objects endure—
how my old sofa holds up!

Locke would look pretty good lying here
with his long face, his furrowed brow and center part,
he who too quickly flourished

and outraced this crowded place.
La duration, I said, trying to roll my *r*
when some new French friends asked

what I'd been thinking about.
John Locke et la duration.
They thought I said *l'adoration*,

which is also true.
Turns out *duration* is not a French word,
no matter how badly I pronounce it.

The correct term is *la durée*,
another word I mispronounce
though once I passed a lovely *durée*,

riding my rented *vélib* from the Seine
to the *Sacré-Coeur*,
where had I planned in advance

I could have spent the night in adoration.
Instead I only leaned my bike against the church
and looked out across the sea of human hours.

Catherine Barnett

²⁷ [Catherine Barnett, "Essay on An Essay Concerning Human Understanding," *The New Yorker*, collected in *Human Hours*, Graywolf Press](#)

Pity the Doctor, Not the Disease

Science in its tedium reveals that every spirit
we spirit ganks a solid half hour from

our life spans. So says my doctor, a watery,

Jesus-eyed man, and hard to suffer
with his well-intended scrips for yoga

and neti pots, notably stingy with the better

drugs, in situ here amid the disinfected
toys, dreadful in their plastic baskets.

Above his head, the flayed men of medical

illustration are nailed for something like
décor. The eyeball scheme is best,

with its wondrous canal of Schlemm,
first favorite of all weirdly named

eponymous body parts. It's just a splotch
of violet on the diagram, but without it

our aqueous humors would burst
their meshy dams and overflow. *Dust*

*thou art, to dust returnest, was not spoken
of the soul...* is what I quote him

as he thumps my back with his tiny
doctor's tomahawk. But he's used to me.

We have an understanding. What he
means to miser, I've come to spend

most lavishly. And I feel fortunate again
to be historically shaky in the maths,
enough to avoid making an easy sum

of my truly happy hours, or nights curled

sulfurous on my side, a priced-to-sell
shrimp boiling in anxious sleep.

If we're lucky, it's always a terrible time

to die. Better the privilege of booze
than the whim of one more shambolic

butcher shelling peasants in a wood,
our world's long spree of Caesars

starting wars to pay their bills
in any given era's Rome. Turns out,

Longfellow's stomach did for him,
and he died thirsty, calling for more opium.

Free of the exam room now, I spot the same

busted goldfish in his smeary bowl
beside the door where he's glugged along

for years, a mostly failed distraction

for poxed or broken children. I raise my fin
to him, celebrate the poison we're all

swimming in, remembering the way
you say cheers in Hungarian:

Isten, Isten, meaning,
in translation, "I'm a god. You're a god."

Erin Belieu
28

²⁸ [Erin Belieu](#), "[Pity the Doctor, Not the Disease](#)," [Poetry Daily](#), collected in [Come-Hither Honeycomb](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Vacation

my sisters come for dinner
of lobsters cracked with a hammer

when it rains we swim in the pool
where a few toads die every night
mornings we get the skimmer
and flip them into the woods

under boiling white clouds
in the orchestra plays
Overture to "The Wasps"

all night the fan goes
sounding like a highway

in the fields bees refuse
to return to their tiny cells

Cammy Thomas
29

²⁹ [Cammy Thomas](#), "[Vacation](#)," *Blaze*, collected in [Cathedral of Wish](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Ancestry

I never know who is looking
out from my eyes: sadistic German
Catholic or silent Appalachian clockmaker.

The sky is so blue today as I drag the neighbor
boy to the bus, the onion farmer in me
against the army vet in him. There's the

army vet in me, too. He gets things done,
like taking my daughter and the neighbor
boys to the bus, even if one is having a tantrum.

The older children are on the bus and I take
the baby inside. There's the opera singer in him
and the opera singer in me, failed, both of us.

There's the gossip columnist. The one who wore
furs and Shalimar. And the dairy farmers.
There's the poet who had séances, and the dead

who talked and talked to everyone but her.
She is glad to be playing on the floor with the baby,
glad to come with me to the kitchen

to cook him eggs. There are the small-game hunters.
Banjo pickers. Football coach. The general manager
of the factory and the factory line man are both here,

looking into my mirror as I pin my hair and
put on earrings. There's the hairdresser. There are
the twins. Both were painters and stopped at the

same time, when one of them died. There's the other pair
of twins, alto and soprano. They are arguing about my outfit,
but I don't have time to change. I just have to go.

I put on my coat, say goodbye to my son
and the neighbor who came over to watch him.
The onion farmer's vicious wife is putting on my gloves.

There are the ones who played ice hockey but they're not
helping. It's so cold. This unending winter might break me.
Now I'm inhabited by a whole group of the good-for-nothing

ones, with their side-long looks and wispy hair,
delicate, who never made their mark or even had a trade.
Everyday we leave together. They walk me to the train.

Laura Cronk
30

³⁰ [Laura Cronk](#), "[Ancestry](#)," [Mississippi Review](#), collected in [Ghost Hour](#), [Persea Books](#)

Our Principal

beat his wife.
We did not know it then.
We knew his slanted-stripe
ties.
We said, “Good morning”
in our cleanest voices.
He stood beside the door
of the office
where all our unborn
report cards lived.
He had twins
and reddish hair.
Later the news
would seep
along the gutters,
chilly stream
of autumn rain.
My mother,
newspaper dropped down
on the couch, staring
out the window—
*All those years I told you
to pay good attention to
what he says.*

Naomi Shihab Nye
31

³¹ [Naomi Shihab Nye, “Our Principal,”](#) collected in [Fuel](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

The Ravens of Denali

Such dumb luck. To stumble
across an “unkindness” of ravens
at play with a shred of clear visquine
fallen from the blown-out window
of the Denali Truck Stop and Café.
Black wings gathering in the deserted
parking lot below the Assembly of God.
Ravens at play in the desolate fields
of the lord, under the tallest mountain
in North America, eight of them,
as many as the stars in the Big Dipper
on Alaska’s state flag, yellow stars
sewn to a blue background flapping
from a pole over the roadside.
Flag that Benny Benson, age 13,
an Alutiiq Indian of Seward
formerly housed at the Jesse-Lee Memorial
Home for Orphans in Unalaska,
designed and submitted to a contest
in 1927 and won, his crayoned masterpiece
snapping above every broken-down
courthouse, chipped brick library
and deathtrap post office
in the penultimate state accepted
to the Union, known to its people
as the Upper One. Though a design
of the northern lights would have been
my choice, those alien green curtains
swirling over Mt. McKinley, Denali,
“the tall one,” during the coldest, darkest
months of the subarctic year.
Red starburst or purple-edged skirt
rolling in vitreous waves
over the stunted ice-rimed treetops
or in spring, candles of fireweed
and the tiny ice blue flowers
of the tundra. Tundra, a word
that sounds like a thousand caribou
pouring down a gorge.
But all that might be difficult
for an orphaned 7th grader to draw
with three chewed-up crayons
and a piece of butcher paper.
As would these eight giggling ravens
with their shrewd eyes and silt-shine wings,
beaks like keloid scars. Acrobats

of speed and sheen. Black boot
of the bird family. Unconcerned
this moment with survival.
Though I hope they survive.
Whatever we have in store for them.
And the grizzly bear and the club-
footed moose. The muscular salmon.
The oil-spill seal and gull.
And raven's cousin, the bald eagle,
who can dive at 100 miles per hour,
can actually swim with massive
butterfly strokes through
the great glacial lakes of Alaska,
her wingspan as long as a man.
Architect of the two-ton nest
assembled over 34 years
with scavenged branches,
threatened in all but three
of the Lower 48, but making, by god,
a comeback if it's not too late
for such lofty promises.
Even the homely marmot
and the immigrant starling,
I wish you luck,
whatever ultimate harm we do
to this northernmost up-flung arm
of our country, our revolving world.
But you, epicurean raven, may you
be the pole star of the apocalypse,
you stubborn snow trudger,
you quorum of eight who jostle one another
for a strip of plastic on the last
endless day, the last endless night
of our only sun's solar wind,
those glorious auroras, glassine gowns
of Blake's angels, that almost invisible shine
tugged and stretched between you
like taffy from outer space, tattered ends
gripped in your fur-crested beaks as we reel
headlong into the dwindling unknown.
Denizens of the frozen north, the last
frontier, harbingers of unluck
and the cold bleak lack to come.

Dorianne Laux

32

³² [Dorianne Laux](#), "[The Ravens of Denali](#)," collected in [Facts About the Moon, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Gizzard

I was in a bar in Albuquerque
I was going to have to sleep with somebody
I was going to have to choose between two men
It wasn't going to work with both of them
This blue-eyed man was very drunk
On leave from the army, big German
Bones in his face, he was telling me about his sex
Career. I didn't particularly want him
There were however things I wanted him
To tell me. He'd been at Mount Sinjar
After the massacres there. He wanted
To tell me about his marriage. I'm impotent
Now, he said, but I have chemicals (he was
An army chemist but he was referring
To Cialis which he said he preferred
To Viagra), and having never
Yet fucked a geezer on pills I wasn't
Totally uncurious how it all might
Go down. But this other
Man was supposed to be showing up any minute
On his motorcycle who was the hottest
Person in town I'd been able to find with my phone
I'd been living in a trailer on my friend's land
I had taken refuge with the lesbians
And their dogs. I had been dealing with a creep.
I had hardly seen a man
In going on two months. I just had to know if they
Were still there. Things had gotten to that point. Through
Great confusion must we make
Our way. A rare people practicing their ancient
Religion had recently
Been massacred by the Islamic State
On the mountain that was sacred to them.
This man had been there.
But I'd grown too drunk to engage
Him any further. It would have meant
Going to his room. I didn't want to.
I went with the other man, the one
I wanted, who didn't know anything
About what I wanted to know
I'd seen the iridescence
On the surface of spilled oil. I'd seen
Rainbows. Until the fan spread
Across my vision I had mistaken
Peacocks for decoration
Were they secretly Quetzalcoatl

The phoenix, guardians at the gates
Of Eden, were the gates of Eden
Depicted in the amber gates
That partly enclosed the many
Eyes in their tails, were they
Allegories for the heavenly
Panopticon or answers
To the feminine yearning to feel seen
And what about their ugly voices
Shameless horniness, and the legend
They copulate as follows:
The male weeps
The female licks his tears

Ariana Reines
33

³³ [Ariana Reines, "Gizzard," *blush*](#)

Yolande Speaks

*Yolande Du Bois was the only
daughter of W.E.B. Du Bois*

I know some call him
“Doctor Dubious.”

I hear how people
talk. I know

who’s called my marriage
counterfeit. I know

who thinks me stupid.
I would love

the peace and quiet
of stupidity,

having witnessed
the hot hiss of

true intelligence,
a white noise, a

camphor that over-
takes the globe.

I have laughed
at my father’s gloves

and spats. My pace
is my own. I am

a sputtering
cadmium light

turning on
like the R.K.O.

Radio Tower.

Elizabeth Alexander

34

³⁴ [Elizabeth Alexander](#), “[Yolande Speaks](#),” collected in [Crave Radiance](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Brazilian Wedding: Dream No. 4

Above: the filthy sky
of an unrestored painting,

a hardcore before,
as opposed to an after.

On the way to the church:
dogs copulating,

lined up three thick,
behind a mangy bitch.

So much for the dream—
the stupefaction of love.

I am the palest girl for miles,
except for Beth,

who looks like a mime.
She & I are made to wait

on the stairs of the Shrine.
The ocean starts to rise,

licking our sandals,
wicking up our hems.

Families float by in sailboats
to snap our pictures before

we go in. A horn blows
at the refinery & oily crows

coat the sky, though my waking
mind knows there's no oil

here. Waves start to crash
against the church door.

We'll be soaked, I say. But
the Bishop, our uncle

Alfredo, calls us fellas, even
though we're not boys.

*Now you fellas come inside.
You'll make everyone jealous.*

I am the oldest so I go first:
the tallest angel in the Christmas

pageant, flat-chested &
awkward, stalking deathward,

loveward—the flecks of foam
particles of Solomon's wisdom.

Kathleen Rooney
35

³⁵ [Kathleen Rooney](#), "Brazilian Wedding: Dream No. 4," collected in [Oneiromance](#), [Switchback Books](#)

the collective noun for faggots is also a murder.

Heavens horizon, then bruise, then rust.

Bradley Trumpfheller
36

³⁶ [Bradley Trumpfheller](#), "[Reconstructions \[Hills flatline in the rearview\]](#)," *Tinderbox*, collected in [Reconstructions](#), [Sibling Rivalry Press](#)

Riddle at 29,000 Feet

You said marriage must sacrifice itself on the altar
of family, but this week I read about a man who
climbed back up Everest to find his missing wife.
I wash moonlight from your forehead and the Sphinx
in your chest asks again: *What comes down but never
goes up?* You never did learn how to waltz. The site
called Rainbow Valley earned its name from the bright
coats of all the climbers who never made it back
to base camp. The husband who went after his wife
is red is orange is blushing in the valley. Love is such
an unreliable savior. *What's so delicate that saying its name
breaks it?* The wife lived for two days in the cold. Saving her
was too risky, climbers said. Snow collected in her mouth.
The mountain whitened its history. She is blue is green
is singing when wind rides through her sockets. Who knows
if they had children. That's not the story. Ever, ever,
our happiness common, enduring. I ask what crazy thing
you'd do for me. Answer, the rain. Answer, silence.

Traci Brimhall
37

³⁷ [Traci Brimhall, "Riddle at 29,000 Feet," *Orion*, collected in *Come the Slumberless to the Land of Nod*, Copper Canyon Press](#)

A Portrait of the Self as Nation, 1990-1991

Fit in dominata servitus
In servitute dominatus
In mastery there is bondage
In bondage there is mastery
(Latin proverb)

The stranger and the enemy
We have seen him in the mirror.
(George Seferis)

Forgive me, Head Master,
but you see, I have forgotten
to put on my black lace underwear, and instead
I have hiked my slip up, up to my waist
so that I can enjoy the breeze.
It feels good to be *without*,
so good as to be salacious.
The feeling of flesh kissing tweed.
If ecstasy had a color, it would be
yellow and pink, yellow and pink
Mongolian skin rubbed raw.
The serrated lining especially fine
like wearing a hair-shirt, inches above the knee.
When was the last time I made love?
The last century? With a wan missionary?
Or was it San Wu the Bailiff?
The tax collector who came for my tithes?
The herdboy, the ox, on the bridge of magpies?
It was Roberto, certainly,
high on coke, circling the galaxy.
Or my recent vagabond love
driving a reckless chariot, lost
in my feral country. *Country*, Oh I am
so punny, so very, very punny.
Dear Mr. Decorum, don't you agree?

It's not so much the length of the song
but the range of the emotions—Fear
has kept me a good pink monk—and poetry
is my nunnery. Here I am alone in my altar,
self-hate, self-love, both self-erotic notions.
Eyes closed, listening to that one hand clapping—
not metaphysical trance, but fleshly mutilation—
and loving *it*, myself and that pink womb, my bed.
Reading “Jing Ping Mei” in the “expurgated”
where all the female protagonists were named
Lotus.
Those damned licentious women named us

Modest, Virtue, Cautious, Endearing,
Demure-dewdrop, Plum-aster, Petal-stamen.
They teach us to walk head-bent in devotion,
to honor the five relations, ten sacraments.
Meanwhile, the feast is brewing elsewhere,
the ox is slaughtered and her entrails are hung
on the branches for the poor. They convince us, yes,
our chastity will save the nation—Oh mothers,
all your sweet epithets didn't make us wise!
Orchid by any other name is equally seditious.

Now, where was I, oh yes, now I remember,
the last time I made love, it was to *you*.
I faintly remember your whiskers
against my tender nape.
You were a conquering barbarian,
helmeted, halberded,
beneath the gauntleted moon,
whispering Hunnish or English—
so-long Oolong went the racist song,
bye-bye—little chinky butterfly.
There is no cure for self-pity,
the disease is death,
ennui, disaffection,
a roll of flesh-colored tract homes crowding my imagination.
I do hate my loneliness,
sitting cross-legged in my room,
satisfied with a few off-rhymes,
sending off precious haiku to some inconspicuous journal
named “Left Leaning Bamboo.”
You, my precious reader, O sweet voyeur,
sweaty, balding, bespectacled,
in a rumpled rayon shirt
and a neo-Troubadour chignon,
politics mildly centrist,
the *right* fork for the *right* occasions,
matriculant of the best schools—
herewith, my last confession
(with decorous and perfect diction)
I loathe to admit. Yet, I shall admit it:
there was no Colonialist coercion;
sadly, we blended together well.
I was poor, starving, war torn,
an empty coffin to be filled.
You were a young, ambitious Lieutenant
with dreams of becoming Prince
of a “new world order,” Lord
over the League of Nations.

Lover, destroyer, savior!
I remember that moment of beguilement,
one hand muffling my mouth,
one hand untying my sash—
On your throat dangled a golden cross.
Your god is jealous, your god is cruel.
So when did you finally return?
And... was there a second coming?
My memory is failing me, perhaps
you came too late
(we were already dead).
Perhaps you didn't come at all—
you had a deadline to meet,
another alliance to secure,
another resistance to break.
Or you came too often
to my painful dismay.
(Oh, how facile the liberator's hand.)
Often when I was asleep
You would hover over me
with your great silent wingspan
and watch me sadly.
This is the way you want me—
asleep, quiescent, almost dead,
sedated by lush immigrant dreams
of global bliss, connubial harmony.

Yes, I shall always remember
and deign to forgive
(long before I am satiated,
long before I am spent)
that last pressured cry,
“your little death.”
Under the halcyon light
you would smoke and contemplate
the sea and debris,
that barbaric keening
of what it means to be free.
As if we were ever free,
as if ever we could be.
Said the judge,
“Congratulations,
On this day, fifteen of November, 1967,
Marilyn Mei Ling Chin,
application # z-z-z-z-z,
you are an American citizen,
naturalized in the name of God
the father, God the son and the Holy Ghost.”
Time assuages, and even

the Yellow River becomes clean...

Meanwhile we forget
the power of exclusion,
what you are walling in or out—
and to whom you must give offense.
The hungry, the slovenly, the convicts
need not apply.
The syphilitic, the consumptive
may not moor.
The hookwormed and tracomaed
(and the likewise infested).
The gypsies, the sodomists, the mentally infirm.
The pagans, the heathens, the non-
denominational—
The colored, the mixed-races and the reds.
The communists, the usurious,
the mutants, the Hibakushas, the hags...

Oh, connoisseurs of gastronomy and *keemun* tea!
My foes, my loves,
how eloquent your discrimination,
how precise your poetry.
Last night, in our large, rotund bed,
we witnessed the fall. *Ours*
was an "aerial war." Bombs
glittering in the twilight sky
against the Star-Spangled Banner...
Dunes and dunes of sand,
fields and fields of rice.
A thousand charred oil wells,
the firebrands of night.
Ecstasy made us tired.

Sir, Master, Dominatrix,
Fall was a glorious season for the hegemonists.
We took long melancholy strolls on the beach,
digressed on art and politics
in a quaint wharfside cafe in LaJolla.
The storm grazed our bare arms gently...
History has never failed us.
Why save Babylonia or Cathay,
when we can always have Paris?
Darling, if we are to remember it at all,
Let us remember it well—
We were fierce, yet tender,
fierce and tender.

Marilyn Chin

³⁸ Marilyn Chin, "[A Portrait of the Self as Nation, 1990-1991](#)," collected in [A Portrait of the Self as Nation, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Jesus said Will someone

tell me, please, what this
pink grass is called? I see it
in a field east of 116 as I'm driving south,

also behind an old cemetery in Deerfield,
and in other waste places.

It hovers about seven inches,
rosy (color of wisdom) in late summer, then
when, in fall, dew or frost sends sparks

running in and out, it's like unto
gold tried in the furnace.

Jesus said, I may have said this before, but
consider the grass. How famous it is
for what it is. Nutritious. Useful, twisted

into ropes, woven as cloth or burned
as smudge over your

sometimes sick body.
So many characters the grass seems to be,
getting up from the fields

in the morning, companions
of the dew.

*(Fleeing the deep grasses of the hunting ground,
Sokaku wrote, I heard the stag cry
—my friend is lost—)*

Switch grass, blue grass, crab
grass, knot, quaking, *Leaves of:*

You used to go into the juice shop on 23rd Street
and you drank that wheatgrass as though
it could save you from the cry of a lonesome retrovirus.

And you did live, till now, lived to write that.
So many stories, as many as all beings. That's how many

fall in front of the mower,
companions of the fire, come evening.

Patrick Donnelly

³⁹ [Patrick Donnelly](#), "[Jesus said Will someone](#)," *Mudlark*, collected in [Little-Known Operas](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Adult Entertainment

“I got you,” the man in the porn
said to the woman in the porn.
Meaning, I won’t let you fall.
Literal meaning is a balm;
acts of tenderness can occur
just about anywhere.
To be freed from the burden
of being oneself is a joy
rarer than orchids: a joy
only animals and thespians
know. The world is slated
for liquidation, which is better
than demolition, n’est pas?
“I got you,” the man in the porn
said to the woman in the porn.
Meaning, you’re not going anywhere,
anytime soon. In another context,
in another poem, to get implies
comprehension: a brief elision
between sacrosanct worlds.
I hurl myself against the glass door,
like a spurned employee, or lover.
It won’t break. The world has me
in its grip, when all I ever wanted
was to be fucked, then left alone.

Virginia Konchan
40

⁴⁰ [Virginia Konchan](#), “[Adult Entertainment](#),” *Diagram*, collected in [Any God Will Do](#), [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

Dollar General

At the Dollar General before Christmas
a woman muttering to herself in Gift Wrap

picks out a roll of pastel paper that's clearly meant
for a baby shower—ducks, bottles, lavender

safety pins—then asks me if I think it's all right
for a baby shower. I tell her it's cute, and

when she holds up two enormous cotton-candy
pink gift bows, and asks me to choose, I point

to the one with small pink feet dangling in plastic
from the bow's center, which looks cheaper

than the plainer option, but more festive,
and who doesn't like festive? Everyone in town

is buying stocking stuffers, and in the next aisle,
a familiar woman juggling bubble bath and pencils

waves hello—I only know her as Kate's mom—
and she's actually wearing one of those

floor-length green and red wool plaid skirts
featured exclusively in holiday catalogs with

faux family photo spreads of tree-trimming
parties. Near a pyramid of cookie tins,

there's a kindergarten teacher I also recognize
from my son's school, out with her teenage son,

loading up on frozen pizzas and Sunbeam bread.
What are the details I've left out? That I'm not

poor. That I've never had to buy food
at the Dollar Store at the end of the month.

That I'm relentlessly straightforward lately,
which has to do with my need to tell you

exactly what happened, because what happened
is so unclear. There is never enough information

about my neighbors, about the ways in which
people live. I've been living in the South now

for most of my adult life. You shall love your
neighbor as yourself, says Leviticus 19:18,

and the Hebrew word for neighbor is *ray'ah*,
meaning *friend, companion, fellow, other*. I am

neighbor and other. I am a Jew and the mother
of one white son and one black son. I've been

writing about guns lately, but this is not really
a poem about guns—it's about Christmas, though

some people think I've declared war on the holiday
when I wish them *Happy Holidays* instead of *Merry*

Christmas. We are the only Jewish family in the
neighborhood, which isn't a problem, except

around holiday time, when I'm sure our house
is the saddest on the block because it is unlit.

When we had lunch to chat about adoption,
my neighbor—my neighbor who is also

infertile—my neighbor, whom I do not see
in Dollar General—my neighbor, who has three

Christmas trees in her house and garland wrapped
on every handrail and mantel—she asks me about

the home study process: when a social worker
comes to your house to assess how you live,

what kind of family you are, whether you have
fire extinguishers on each floor and keep your

firearms locked up. *Make sure your firearms
are locked up*, our social worker would say

on the phone before each visit, and I'd remind her
that we own no guns. *What kind of people own guns?*

I'd think as I hung up the phone. My neighbor
and I share a plate of onion rings and become

teary over our intimate infertility heartbreak.
She says, *Good thing I got John a new*

gun safe for Christmas. On clear days, when
I walk the roads, sometimes with my neighbors,

I hear people shooting off their weapons
at the firing range in the distance. Which is

to say it's not surprising that in the past year
there have been over thirty-thousand gun

deaths in the United States. Which is to say
there are many people I have compassion for,

like the woman in the gift wrap aisle who maybe
had some kind of slight disability. And there are

many things that make me furious, like the fact
that we pay our schoolteachers so little

they have to shop for groceries at Dollar General
at the end of the month because smaller quantities

cost less. My son's first grade teacher runs
a family side business called Ruttin' Camo &

Grafix where she and her husband sell
Redneck Stemware in camouflage patterns

made from mason jars, and also custom hydro-
dipped firearms. In their Etsy "About" section

they say they are a small family-owned business.
They say they started putting hydrographics

on mason jars on a whim, to help pay for expenses
at gun shows. At gun shows in Virginia, you can

still purchase a gun, a high-capacity magazine,
an assault weapon with no background check

or waiting period. You need only be 18 and
bring two forms of ID. You can walk off with your

purchase. We've seen my son's first grade teacher
working her family booth at craft fairs, at the Pumpkin

Patch next to the Kettle Corn folks. I always
make him go over to her and say hello.

She is quite strict so he doesn't always want to,
but I push him toward the camo'd mason jars

on their leggy stems. *Say hello to Mrs. Giles,*
I say, and he does. What are the details

I've left out? That this year I asked my husband
to hang icicle lights from the eaves.

That each night before bed, one of us opens
the front door, unplugs the extension cord

and the house goes dark.

Erika Meitner

41

⁴¹ [Erika Meitner](#), "[Dollar General](#)," [Oxford American](#), collected in [Holy Moly Carry Me](#), BOA Editions. Ltd.

Come to Find Out

That's what my mother and her sisters used to say
on the porch late at night when they thought I wasn't
listening: *He said he had to travel so much because
his job was in sales, but come to find out he had a wife
and a whole other family in Breau's Bridge or He said
he was a captain and got wounded in the war; come to
find out he never rose above private and damn sure*

never saw active service, excuse my French.
Come to Find Out meant that something was going
to be revealed and in that way was a cousin to All Is
Not As It Seems and One Thing Led to Another,
which suggests that the second thing reveals or
in some way at least echoes the first. And then there
was What Was I Thinking, the answer to which

was almost always You Weren't, though sometimes
you were: *She's not very bright so I'll have my way
with her or He'll stay home and keep house and I'll pay
the bills or Who needs health insurance.* What'd you
think, those babies were going to feed
themselves and change their own diapers? Oh, if only
life were like the opera, where you can say what

you think about somebody while you're standing
right next to them, yet they don't seem to hear you.
Actually, a better verb than "say" is "sing": apparently you can
mouth the most wounding insults and get away without
being slapped or stabbed as long as you dress them
in eighth-note triplets. Art says to us, What do you
want to be true, and then it gives us all these choices:

you can do whatever you like or, if you prefer,
nothing at all. No wonder some people hate it,
though I say, Thank you, art! Thank you, opera, plays,
movies, things you hang on a wall or put on a pedestal!
Thank you, poems of every length, from the *Inferno*
to a haiku, provided the haiku poet puts as much time
into his or her poem as Dante put into his! Which seems

unlikely, but we're trying to uphold standards here,
right, reader? Thank you, symphony orchestras
and flash mobs—what could be better than going to
your local Walmart to buy a sack of onions, some puppy
biscuits, and a carton of smokes only to be surprised
by a guy pulling a sax out of a box and being joined

by a woman with a bassoon, three string players,
and a twenty-person chorus who launch into “Ode to Joy,”
a 1785 Friedrich Schiller poem that becomes the final
movement of the Ninth Symphony by celebrated German
composer/pianist Ludwig van Beethoven! It’s 1796 now,
and come to find out Beethoven’s losing his hearing,
possibly from typhus, systemic lupus erythematosus,
or even his habit of immersing his head in cold water

to stay awake. He stops performing, though he continues
to compose. He also avoids conversation. Talk is cheap!
He digs in, though, writes the Fifth Symphony that begins
with the four most famous notes in musical history, notes
that, as he himself said, sound like Fate knocking
at the door. Then another symphony and another
and another still, till he writes the Ninth, the one whose

opening fanfare is said to have put a lump even
in Hitler’s throat. Come to find out art works the same
way on everybody; you could be a pirate or a headsman
or the pope or the owner of a dry cleaning establishment
and still laugh as Punch and Judy throw pots and pans
at each other, weep when the soprano sings
of the lover, the land, the mother she’ll never see again.

Everybody’s got a story, and half the time there’s a story
behind the story, and in half of the cases that are like that,
we’ll never know what it is. But you can go your whole
day without hearing any music at all, and then you can
talk to or buy a carton of tomatoes from or just pass by
somebody who has; one thing leads to another in this
world, and the next thing you know, you’re happy.

David Kirby
42

⁴² [David Kirby, “Come to Find Out,” *Superstition Review*, collected in *Get Up, Please*, Louisiana State University Press](#)

Catching Copper

My brothers have
a bullet.

They keep their bullet
on a leash shiny
as a whip of blood.

My brothers walk their bullet
with a limp—a clipped
hip bone.

My brothers' bullet
is a math-head, is all geometry,
from a distance is just a bee
and its sting. Like a bee—
you should see my brothers' bullet
make a comb, by chewing holes
in what is sweet.

My brothers lose
their bullet all the time—
when their bullet takes off on them,
their bullet leaves a hole.

My brothers search their houses,
their bodies for their bullet,
and a little red ghost moans.

Eventually, my brothers call out,
Here, bullet, here—
their bullet comes running, buzzing.
Their bullet always comes
back to them. When their bullet comes
back to them, their bullet
leaves a hole.

My brothers are too slow
for their bullet
because their bullet is in a hurry
and wants to get the lead out.

My brothers' bullet is dressed
for a red carpet
in a copper jacket.

My brothers tell their bullet,
*Careful you don't hurt somebody
with all that flash.*

My brothers kiss their bullet
in a dark cul-de-sac, in front
of the corner store ice machine,
in the passenger seat of their car,
on a strobe-lighted dance floor.
My brothers' bullet
kisses them back.

My brothers break and dance
for their bullet—the jerk,
the stanky leg. They pop, lock
and drop for their bullet,
a move that has them writhing
on the ground—
the worm, my brothers call it.
Yes, my brothers go all-worm
for their bullet.

My brothers' bullet is registered,
is a bullet of letters—has a PD,
a CIB, a GSW, if they are lucky
an EMT, if not, a Triple 9, a DNR,
a DOA.

My brothers never call the cops
on their bullet and instead pledge
allegiance to their bullet
with hands over their hearts
and stomachs and throats.

My brothers say they would die
for their bullet. If my brothers die,
their bullet would be lost.
If my brothers die,
there's no bullet to begin with—
the bullet is for living brothers.

My brothers' feed their bullet
the way the bulls fed Zeus—
burning, on a pyre, their own
thigh bones wrapped in fat.
My brothers take a knee, bow
against the asphalt, prostrate
on the concrete for their bullet.

*We wouldn't go so far
as to call our bullet
a prophet, my brothers say.
But my brothers' bullet
is always lit like a night-church.
It makes my brothers holy.*

You could say my brothers' bullet
cleans them—the way red ants
wash the empty white bowl
of a dead coyote's eye socket.
Yes, my brothers' bullet
cleans them, makes them
ready for God.

Natalie Diaz
43

⁴³ [Natalie Diaz, "Catching Copper," BuzzFeed](#), collected in [Postcolonial Love Poem](#), Graywolf Press

Poet at Twenty-Four

In those days the wind seemed to whittle me down
to the root. Round off my fingers as if I were some
piece of glass in the evening sea. If you saw me
at the grocery store picking through fruit,
my backpack hanging behind,
eyes gone slack as a turned-off TV at the Radio Shack
in the mall, testing the peaches and ripe avocados,
scratching the skin of a grapefruit
for luck, you would barely have noticed
the hawk's foot necklace I wore on a copper
electrical wire, the ribbon of foil I glued to my beanie
to block out invisible low-wave rays.
If you saw me at a coffee shop watching the crowd,
scribbling notes on a wrinkled receipt,
you would never have noticed yourself in those words,
but you would be there still,
in the softest rhyme, in streetlight spilling across
your empty cup. You would be the simple
wish of mist, the unnamable music that kept me alive,
even after you turned to forget who I was
and left through the automatic doors.

Kai Carlson-Wee
44

⁴⁴ [Kai Carlson-Wee, "Poet at Twenty-Four," *The Cortland Review*, collected in *Rail*, BOA Editions. Ltd.](#)

Nancy Drew

Merely pretty, she made up for it with vim.
And she got to say things like, “But, gosh,
what if these plans should fall into the wrong
hands?” And it was pretty clear she didn’t mean
plans for a party or a trip to the museum, but
something involving espionage and a Nazi or two.

In fact, the handsome exchange student turns
out to be a Fascist sympathizer. When he snatches
Nancy along with some blueprints, she knows he
has something more sinister in mind than kissing
with his mouth open.

Locked in the pantry of an abandoned farm house,
Nancy makes a radio out of a shoelace and a muffin.
Pretty soon the police show up, and everything’s
hunky dory.

Nancy accepts their thanks, but she’s subdued.
It’s not like her to fall for a cad. Even as she plans
a short vacation to sort out her emotions she knows
there will be a suspicious waiter, a woman in a green
off the shoulder dress, and her very jittery husband.

Very well. But no more handsome boys like the last one:
the part in his hair that was sheer propulsion, that way
he had of lifting his eyes to hers over the custard,
those feelings that made her not want to be brave
confident and daring, polite, sensitive and caring.

Ron Koertge
45

⁴⁵ [Ron Koertge](#), “[Nancy Drew](#),” [Gargoyle](#), collected in [Fever](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

Self-Portrait with Rabbit Ears and Seventeen

a girl in crooked bangs
hitting the high note
on a channel of half static.

telephone cord
triple-wrapped
around my wrist.

outside the kind of sunset
they invented color swatches for.

the magazine says
we need to get contacts
if we're going to get boys.
that we should draw
more attention
to our lips. fixate.

the ceiling fan whirs
like it's gonna keep going
until the stars die out.

i put on more lip gloss,
think about eating
the sun.

Cassandra de Alba
46

⁴⁶ [Cassandra de Alba](#), "[Self-Portrait with Rabbit Ears and Seventeen](#)," *Action/Spectacle*, collected in [Ugly/Sad, Glass Poetry Press](#)

Evidence

Blue is the evidence of what I do,
the lies I'll leave behind, no more, no less.
This is the past, and so it must be true.

This stack of DVDs, of overdue
pornography, the titles meaningless:
blue is the evidence of what I do.

This is the coat from Saks Fifth Avenue,
charged to my old American Express—
this is the past, and so it must be true

that once I loved this wretched shade of blue,
I dreamed of men whom I could not impress.
Blue is the evidence of what I do,

the letter here that ends in I love you.
My prose was from the heart, my heart a mess.
This is the past, and so it must be true

I lacked the guts to send it off—I knew
of certain things that one should not confess.
Blue is the evidence of what I do.
This is the past, and so it must be true.

Randall Mann
47

⁴⁷ [Randall Mann](#), "Evidence," [The Paris Review](#), collected in [Complaint in the Garden](#), Zoo Press

Aesthetics of Crying

You meet someone and later you meet
their dancing
 and you have to start again
You like cat one
 and you like cat two
and they do terrible things to each other

Once to celebrate a bad mood
we broke all the clean dishes

There are pictures
 I'd like a portrait
of an angry horse with his beauty
and his fuming
 It's hard to know
what you look like when you're mad

Crying's easier
 I have cried at times
for so long that I have moved the activity
in front of the mirror
 out of curiosity
The information I gathered there remains
thus far unused
 but let the record show
my horrible face

Heather Christle
48

⁴⁸ [Heather Christle, "Aesthetics of Crying," *The Fanzine*, collected in *Heliopause*, Wesleyan University Press](#)

Self-Portrait with Your Head Between My Legs

Glazed in sweat, I'm in the hot tropics
of Florida,
 where the geckos Velcro across
the bedroom window
on fine invisible hairs,

 where a perfunctory promise
hangs over us like a broken chandelier
too heavy
to dismantle.

I watch the ceiling
 for cracks, a water stain
and try to imagine the happy
 kingdom,
as if I could punch my own ticket
 just by wishing harder

but the princess sleeps and sleeps.

Say peach, say plum, say typical
 to split the velvet nap
 with a clumsy thumb:

so much depends on
 the idea of breakfast in bed
 versus the sloppy practice.

Rebecca Hazelton
49

⁴⁹ [Rebecca Hazelton](#), "[Self-Portrait with Your Head Between My Legs](#)," collected in [Gloss](#), [University of Wisconsin Press](#)

The Purpose of Poetry

1

The truth of it is, the stars won't give us any more answers. We've sailed that way as far as we can. Anyway, the Chinese discovered everything first. What did it get them? The emperor Zhu Di forced six million laborers to build the huge junks, killing half in the process, most of starvation. The palace burned; he renounced travel. They burned sixteen screaming concubines alive with him when he died. Add that to the horrors we already know, there's a kind of trance, like watching TV, pixels instead of stars.

2

On *Law & Order*, the boy's father beats the soccer coach to death because he thwarts his son's chance for a scholarship. When we run out of oil, no TV. Notice when the machines go out in a modern house, it's like living in a corpse. Oil is heavier than poems. Poems think that when the oil is gone, they'll sing a ballad of when lights came on with a flick and you could fly down the road so fast birds couldn't remember you. Poems think they're on *Restore America*. They'll scrape the ugly green paint off the fireplace stone and bring back the superior life of the past.

3

Or they will stuff the terrible suffering into some decorative urn that will ferment it into Beauty. But the Big Bang is speeding up. All of this goodwill is flying apart, and the poem is getting to be about as sturdy as a spaceship made out of eyelashes. It acts more and more like people trying to make love after too much to drink, the climax always ahead until the blank moment when it's gone.

4

Or like the birds outside our window. They think the glass is the whole sky, some of them, but when they hit, the other sky takes over, the one they never thought of. I don't know why it's always the house wrens and the sparrows, the least showy, the ones who live in the Ninth Ward.* Poems keep trying. On TV,

I read the bios beside the pictures of those
killed in Iraq, seven or eight a night,
ranging in age from 19 to 45. I feel
the bios longing to be verses of an epic. In possibly
the oldest epic, Gilgamesh sits with his dead
friend Enkidu, whom he loves like a lover. He “veils
his face like a bride, paces around him like an Eagle,
like a lioness whose cubs are trapped in a pit.” He tears
his hair out. Why did Enkidu die?

5

Because of a dream. Because he believed he would die.
This is the poem reminding itself how powerful
it is. Where do the dead sit? They sit
in pitch darkness dressed in feathered garments
like birds. What could be more like living? If Enkidu
could open the lid, living would be the very
pupil of his eye, his own TV screen. Captain Kangaroo
is dead, Mr. Green Jeans is dead. Mr. Rogers is dead.
Veterans with their quiet ways put on their old
uniforms and salute the flag, but the poem is pacing
like an Eagle, tearing its hair. “Why don’t you just say
what you mean?” people say, especially the students.

6

But now the poem’s occupied with the most seemingly
trivial tasks, like asking, “Where do the lost
shopping carts go? Where do the angels toss
their garbage?” And since there will be absolutely no room left
in the Cherry Hill landfill after 2012, the poem
is thinking it will clear its throat then, and try singing again.

Fleda Brown
50

⁵⁰ [Fleda Brown, “The Purpose of Poetry,” *American Poetry Review*, collected in *No Need of Sympathy*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

* It’s sad how even the most terrible things turn into footnotes. Students will read the footnotes before the poems. They will skip the poems.

In Galleries

It's places like this, surrounded by edible sculptures, ceramic pelvises, and pieces of other planets, that I think most of my stalker. When I was a teenager I showed my mom a drawing my first girlfriend gave me of Kermit the frog with two cacti growing out of his head and the caption: "I fuck pigs." My mom said her friends would have been too afraid of offending each other to exchange things like that.

In places my stalker would never venture, I'm most aware I'm being pursued, places like the parking garage where my first girlfriend and I covered an office chair with tinsel and spun each other around until it collapsed, wondering if it was art. We slept in the same bed every night for a year before I even got to touch her tits, which for that year, like me, were composed entirely of wondering. Now, both of us having all the sex we want with people far better suited for us, we sit in bars talking about insurance.

When we met we played Judas Priest on screeching 45 under a table, eating cake with our hands that we had baked secret messages into. I wanted to kiss her like I wanted my next breath, but I couldn't—I felt something bad might happen, like somehow I would be followed.

Sarah Galvin
51

⁵¹ [Sarah Galvin](#), "[In Galleries](#)," [The Alice](#), collected in [Ugly Time](#), Gramma Poetry

Sweat Bee

some days I'm better
for my anger more
prepared for my pain

for my pain more
prepared for instance
I knew the storm was coming

yesterday for the way
the screws tightened
in my heel their heads

just visible under my
skin the dog's crying
for all the fireworks

though his nose's to the air
for the grill the hiss
of meat we try not to

imagine with names
like Bluebell and James
Dean sometimes I think

that all these 4th of July
parties are really to celebrate
each person as a country

each unto their
own I am nostalgic
for a time when my friends

would have said *sick*
burn after an insult
we used to go

to the skating rink
and play redlight greenlight
whoever got caught

moving after *redlight*
had to sit out
until allskate I almost

hit a bird today
because it ran across
the road instead of taking

wing the most patriotic
I get these days is loving
the smell of a struck

match and almost
reveling in a sweat
bee's sting while I eat

watermelon at a picnic
table rafted together
from dry-rot and some

semblance of family after
that summer of wheels
and nachos and pinball

quarters the owner of Skatin'
Jakes set the rink on fire
for the insurance

payout I hope the cost
wasn't too high I hope
the cost wasn't too

low it's not a fire
this flame inside me
it's a temper

Emilia Phillips
52

⁵² [Emilia Phillips](#), "[Sweat Bee](#)," *diode*, collected in [Hemlock](#), [Diode Editions](#)

Girl of Lightning

*The bodies seemed so much like sleeping children that working with them felt “almost more like a kidnapping than archaeological work,” Dr. Miremont said.
—New York Times, September 11, 2007*

Thunder loves you,
mumbles charms to warm
you—folded cold body.

Lightning’s pity picks you,
licks a kiss, but what’s left
to wick?

Even direct hits miss—
no amount of flash and hiss
fires you. Inviolable virgin,

inflammable channel to Gods
long gone or gone underground,
ghost-gray flecks left in the rock

altar, your shelter for five centuries
where you huddled, red-painted
hair and wreathed with feathers.

Weave threads of your shawl—
not a shroud since you were live
when left for dead—weave cover

please, I beg your handlers.
Pull stitches so that wound closes
over your smoldered remains.

They say you clutch your mother’s hair,
strands in a bag sent up the mountain,
an introduction to the Gods

of Science, who read threaded
DNA to determine who you
were related to when human.

Not the crushed boy near you,
no brother he nor sister the girl,
bound away to sacred silence,

cased in plastic cased in glass.
Visitors point and justify the past:
See what they did—child sacrifice.

Fattened 'em up, drugged 'em—
Spanish violence, Christian influence,
border fences, all deserved because of her

wad of coca leaves and elaborate braids.
Lightning's mark spares you display.
Singed cheek and blasted chest,

blackened flesh looks less asleep,
flashed back the fact you're dead,
a charred mummy, so far gone even

Lightning's longing couldn't wake you.
Thunder won't forget you, hums
a generator's song in cooler vents

to your coiled form in cold storage—
song of your six years plus five centuries
come to this: doom, doom, doom.

Lightning still sighs: *release, release, release.*

Heid E. Erdrich
53

⁵³ [Heid E. Erdrich](#), "[Girl of Lightning](#)," collected in [Cell Traffic](#), [University of Arizona Press](#)

This is a Screwdriver, She Says

pouring something called Smirnoff
into my Sunny-D and telling me
terrible things I can never unknow.
We get tired of Uno.
It's too hot, she says, and undresses,
room damp with the open-mouthed
memory of her ton of sleeping brothers—
a smell I can put my finger in:
sweet socks and peppered ham.
They share this mattress.
But they aren't home.
She stretches out in bluebell panties.
The window AC drips in my drink.
Thunder mutters in the distance.
She opens her legs. *You lost*, she says,
so this is your punishment.
Ew, I say, but I want to, and do.
Then it's time for her punishment.
Up above, the heavy cloud of her
teddy hammock threatens to burst.
We hear a door slam. We scuttle
to the closet. In the dark we're even
closer. My face in her crotch
and an old pair of Converse.
I don't think we can ever stop this.
But it's raining and her brothers
come back in from the court.
The closet opens and they catch us at it
like unearthed worms.
One of them throws a ball at us.
She curses at them in Spanish.
You raped our sister, says the tall one.
He looks like he believes it.
I try to find my shorts as they spit
and kick me. I'm so dizzy.
She was my friend. We were eleven.

Karyna McGlynn
54

⁵⁴ Karyna McGlynn, "This is a Screwdriver, She Says," *Quarterly West*, collected in *Hothouse*, Sarabande Books

Story About the Moon

It was no lunar eclipse;
the moon had simply given up,
gone on strike, skipped town
with the proverbial cow. *Dusk*
grew to mean *trouble*; *Nighttime*,
worry. Children in our town adjusted,
which scared us, though some boys
cried out in their sleep. We understood them
and it pleased their mothers, who'd grown tired
and nervous. The stars, too, worked harder for us,
but it was not enough light to comfort.
We mourned. Poets and atheists blamed themselves.
Fights broke out. The senseless made sense
and wanderers settled down in vacant buildings.
Folks in the homes shriveled up into fetal position.
Months went by. Women stopped bleeding
and some were inconsolable; they began to age
more quickly than we'd thought possible.
Every day, at sundown, a young woman
would drown herself in the reservoir.
The barber threw away his blades.
Shop clerks threw their arms in the air
and wailed. Night watchmen went blind.
People stayed inside. Television newscasters
seemed different, heart-broken, maybe.
The clergy all moved to the city and left
the doors to their rectories wide-open,
soap still wet in the soap dishes; acolytes
hid in the churches until their older brothers
found them and made threats. The libidinous
abstained and some enjoyed it. On Sundays,
everyone at the Doughnut Shoppe would holler
and fight until the tired police came; the police
lost their taste for organization. Science
teachers offered no explanations, read poems
in class instead; students slashes their tires.
Many beat themselves and screamed
just loudly enough that a neighbor might hear,
might make a phone call;
they were taken away. The mechanic began to think
his tools felt strangely like his daughter's
soft, pale hands and lost his job. Dogs went mad
with nothing to howl at. There were those who tried
to remain positive, praising God
for the sunlight, chanting in circles
in the large parking lot between the strip mall

and the grocery store. Most of us tried to pray
alone at home, but it was more difficult
than it had ever been. We made it to the middle
of November, but it looked like we wouldn't
make it much further. School teachers flailed
about in the schoolyards, overdosing;
Young men gassed themselves in their fathers' garages cv b.
We told our younger children to say their prayers
every night. This is how it was; it went on
like this. Children kept growing older.

Paul-Victor Winters
55

⁵⁵ [Paul-Victor Winters, "Story About the Moon," *Web del Sol*](#)

Math

I used to sit in the bathroom stall at school
and weep
about math—

But it is possible here
in the nightclub of naked, spiritual wellness
for those who never got it before.

It's a kind of vanity
you can commiserate over with strippers
who fall under the mathematical term *homeomorphism*,

which means if you stretch and stretch
you can make a version of yourself out of them;
their topological space is equal to our own,
just as a doughnut and coffee mug are equal.

Do you understand?
There's so much to learn.

An even number of nipples
swaying in the strobe-lit main thoroughfare;

the murmuring of understanding,
ah-ha moments of orgasm
like reaching an original state of consciousness,

that brief moment of freedom
from the memory of your education.

The strippers will bend over you
at your tiny round table

breathing cream-and-sugar coffee into your ear
asking you if you need anything;

rethink this,
check your math—

I'm here for you, the ancestry says

placing a gold star on your cheek

where an F should be.

Bianca Stone

⁵⁶ Bianca Stone, "Math," *The Brooklyn Rail*, collected in [The Möbius Strip Club of Grief](#), Tin House Books

Black Coffee

I didn't know that when my mother died, her grave
would be dug in my body. And when I weaken,
she is here, dressing behind the closet door,
hooking up her long-line cotton bra,
then sliding the cups around to the front,
leaning over and harnessing each heavy breast,
setting the straps in the grooves on her shoulders,
reins for the journey. She's slicking her lips with
Fire & Ice. She's shoveling the car out of the snow.
How many pints of Four Roses did she slide
into exactly sized brown bags? How many cases
of Pabst Blue Ribbon did she sling onto the counter?
All the crumpled bills, steeped in the smells
of the lives who'd handled them—their sweat,
onions and grease, lumber and bleach—she opened
her palm and smoothed each one. Then
stacked them precisely, restoring order.
And at ten, after the change fund was counted,
the doors locked, she uncinched the girth, unbuckled
the bridle. Cooked Cream of Wheat for my father,
mixed a milkshake with Hershey's syrup for me,
and poured herself a single highball,
placed on a yellow paper napkin.
Years later, when I needed the nightly
highball too, she gave me this story.
She'd left my father in the hospital—
this time they didn't know if he'd live,
but she had to get back to the store. Halfway
she stopped at a diner and ordered coffee.
She sat in the booth with her coat still on,
crying, silently, just the tears rolling down,
and the waitress never said a word,
just kept refilling her cup.

Ellen Bass

57

⁵⁷ [Ellen Bass](#), "Black Coffee," collected in [Indigo](#), Copper Canyon Press

Rough Draft as Caeneus Abroad

“Grant I might not be a woman: you will have given me everything.”
—Caenis to Poseidon, *Metamorphoses*, Book XII

“He did not understand that there is as much liberty
and latitude in the interpretation as in the making...”
—Montaigne

I.

I have this theory: everything I’ve written
is really an acquisition

of language Or acquisition
of one language over another.

Like when I watch skiers laze down
Snoqualmie’s slope like melt,

like Kees’s bathers
stuck in the wrong season. Or the way

a former student writes me to say
she’s *experienced a traumatic event*

& my hands stiffen & begin to ache
on instinct. *How do we make sense*

of tragedy in writing she asks me
over iced coffee, expecting

I know. A steamer wand screams
into milk, a muffin cools on a blue plate—

she was the first neighbor to respond
to the father’s yell & she is shaken.

The real question:
what is the poetic voice in excess of?

I am three thousand miles from the place
that made me. Now
in a place with a windy season,
a fire season,
brim of the high desert,

I can see scorched earth & whitecaps
from the same June lookout.

That which takes us captive
shapes us, too. Out here

no Poseidon ever makes good: I'm refused

service at the brewery off 3rd
in my oversized clothes, an ex says

how could you possibly
over FaceTime & I have both

a *your kind* & no kin
while missionaries find my doorstep

twice a week. Who is there,
in this place, to grant me

release? The dirtfloor arena waits

below a bluff, empty
fifty weeks a year, and I watch the day sink,

thinking, *Ravisher, make me anew*
in the shadow of high mountains, grant me

liminal-unthinkable, take this,
all of this besides—

& that body, released
dismissed discarded might

just become mine.

This same student emailed a while back
& signed off *in the real world I'd like to think*

we would have been friends.
Naming's a whole affair, you see—

it matters what you celebrate

in a thing, too. Name me a god
who hasn't thundered. That one may speak

and be heard becomes a demand
to speak and be heard.

II.

My student tells me that a father
backed over his daughter with his pickup.
She died, chest-split staining the grass black.

My student talks about the hush
that smothers a block

even weeks later.

The mind, tethered
to the body, officiates
our myth-making. Surveillance buffs

mythos from physical container—
the body is nothing
but a marionette. In my head,

I've got hellhounds
on a pack lead
strutting down Pine:

all transition is violence,
erosion, & origin at once—two mirrors
facing out from opposite walls—cause

& invention.

I try to search up the name
of the child:

accident father death girl Seattle,
pickup truck neighborhood accidental death
but come up empty. Name me

a god who hasn't plundered.

Tragedy & spectacle:
these twin puncture wounds.

III.

Cast out, I begin each day with an invocation
for what I've lost—passing:

Let my captors have the legend
if I may keep the sound which marks

my life like a bell.

The quarter I'd had this student
I shaved my head for the first time:

homemade undercut, radiation carryover.
Two years since the scare of a tumor

in my chest, the body bears the mark
of every way it's been:

I look tough and tired.
This tradition

of the Narcissian pool
obligates a final reflection—

Chase down the name

*so that we can have power over it,
draw the force of the thing right up to us—*

& so I swallow hard when my student admits
she Googled my name, a name

which is no longer enough. I cannot tell her
that every Thursday for all those weeks,

classes let out to the sweep
of a weekend, I drove the canyon road south of campus

with my lights off, I took every rock-wall turn
lastsecond swearing, sometimes,

I never touched the wheel at all.

IV.

Rebel Poseidon, defiler
of the genderedbody, wield
your sharpest knives. Cut away
& remake in the image
of that which you fear most. Avenge
your boundary with doubt—
all those titles which never fit:
necessity of reinvention a hard year

fleeting emotional response this container with its own rules.
Name me a god who hasn't pardoned

and cursed in the same breath.
Every idea is a question, too,

& my top surgery is denied
a third time—too risky amid the body's constant
sway between well & ill
& I tell myself *never mind*. I tell myself

you are seeking comfort
in a body incapable of such things. Some days

I tell myself *there is nothing*
to be done. There is so much work

to *becoming*.

V.

When the buzz grew back
& decisions had to be made,

I tried *boy*. Hair pulled tight, smoothed
to one side, I thought *yes*, body as

boy, which became *boi*, then *then*,
then *was*, then *just maybe*, then *just vessel*, then

nothing more, then *just this once*, then
neveragain.

Thing is, we don't have canyons where I'm from,
just the junk of melt and migration:

passivity, inevitable landscapes. Appalachia
is all slow creep. But ridges—

the exposed rock of a canyon wall
is what remains

when a river has bored its way through.
Name me a god without design:

I have learned to take, too.
My night drive carved its shape

from red desert and basalt,
riparian zone: the surrounding biome

of this foreign earth, a strip of habitat
between the river & the land beyond.

An interplay,
a margin: Space to remake,

right and revise
the narrative—cell mutation, bones hollowed,

chest cracked open like a seed
in surgical—I deadname

girl belle proper
frailmeekthing deadname

diagnosis relapse and recur. Instead take up
them, of consequence, reluctant then a made thing,

then *threat*, then *body between*.
Is the line not so very thin

between making again & making new?
Galvanized, then forged, rewarded

for a long and searching gaze. Taking
& taking up, armed—

I have acquired. Name me the god
who says *Yes, and*.

Worthy animal.
I have learned

all sacrament rests on the tongue.

Victoria C. Flanagan
58

⁵⁸ [Victoria C. Flanagan, "Rough Draft as Caeneus Abroad," *The Adroit Journal*](#)

Coarse Gold

They have the good sense, these horses,
to stand back-to-flank in the shade.
Every field is a system.

Shivering their hides,
they stare at the way the grass spills
its brocade past the fence, or at nothing.

The Frontier Inn sells cold beer
many miles up the road.
What does it mean to live like this,

expressing nothing that eats the mind?
A few of the trees are splitting
and falling into themselves, widening

the shade. Pitiful to think
whatever came before is gone
in a world this inestimable and wide.

I long to take their heavy faces in my hands
and show them how to turn the future
into the past. I understand nothing

about their eyes, emptier by the moment,
twitching at sightless flies.
Maybe they've done already what I would show.

When the field blue-cools at night,
stranger beasts come to see them
moving childlike in the open,

by which time I've discarded
the many grand promises I tend
to make myself during the day.

Christine Gosnay
59

⁵⁹ [Christine Gosnay](#), "[Coarse Gold](#)," [The Rumpus](#)

Four Fights

1.

(point) To stop a crime in progress,
racking the action is often enough.

(counterpoint) Woody Allen: NOTHING WORTH KNOWING
CAN BE UNDERSTOOD WITH THE MIND—

EVERYTHING REALLY VALUABLE HAS TO ENTER
YOU THROUGH A DIFFERENT OPENING.

So much dark

I would like to be kept in. When I said you could think of me
as your therapist,
I meant can you leave the room and I'll make notes?

2.

The housecat was declawed for her aggression, but turned only
more combative post-procedure. This was against her interests
and also was expected. She had developed a hypervigilant
tendency, symptomatic of trauma-related stress, of being pinned
and severed of defenses. She was quick to battle and couldn't
fend anything off. Stitching her side at the clinic, the doctor waved
away cash: COME NOW, YOUR MONEY'S NO GOOD HERE.

3.

(point) THE IT GIRL FINALLY HAD AN ORGASM AND HER DOCTOR
TOLD HER IT WAS THE WRONG KIND.

(counterpoint) Woody Allen: I'VE NEVER
HAD THE WRONG KIND, EVER, EVER. MY WORST ONE

WAS RIGHT ON THE MONEY.

Some girls charge by the hour; some, the act.

And what can I do for you? I'm not the healthy sky downing
a raw egg yolk at night and spitting it
back in the morning.

I can dish it out but can't, and how

4.

could you be so blasé
and how could you leave me in this low

lying state, replete with slings and swinging doors and how
many times have we all seen fucking *Manhattan*?

In the end, he gets with the teenage girl
and we really don't know how to feel.
I don't expect compassion.

Natalie Shapero
60

⁶⁰ [Natalie Shapero, "Four Fights," *The Offending Adam*, collected in *No Object*, Saturnalia Books](#)

Love Poem: Just Then

Just as the young man pulled the Glock from his jacket
and aimed it at the cashier's head,

at the very moment he balanced the gun just so,
but before he could say a word,

while outside the sun slipped from the cloud
and brightened the parking lot's windshields,

just as the old man at the register realized
exactly what was going to happen next,

to him, to his head, the way it would feel,
concussive, just then, far away,

you lay in bed having just made love,
the sound of him washing himself

in the bathroom, his gentle cough,
just as you contemplated opening the blinds

to let a little sun in, just then, the sun
holding its breath, stillness, stillness, the cool

noise of water, just then I was writing
about how I missed you and wanted you back,

how could I not have you back?
how could I not take you back?

just then, that young man opened the door
and walked right into my sunlit poem

and drew his gun on the old clerk
who held up his hands, said, *Stop*,

*I'll give you whatever you want, I'll give you
everything you want—*

and even the bullet, snug in its chamber,
couldn't believe what would happen next,

what it would become: a sunburst, an idea,
a sort of pathway.

Kevin Prufer

The Lighthouse Keeper

My ear, a shell on the pillow;
the down, the sea from which his mouth arrived.

Strange to live in a wet world, then wake in the desert.
The cactus on whom milky needles grow.

Let me live offshore, where the water is low.
Strange, and then so much less so.

I was seventeen. Do you want
to know what I didn't know?

I do.

Meghan O'Rourke
62

⁶¹ [Kevin Prufer](#), "[Love Poem: Just Then](#)," *Copper Nickel*, collected in *How He Loved Them*, Four Way Books

⁶² [Meghan O'Rourke](#), "[The Lighthouse Keeper](#)," collected in *Halflife*, W. W. Norton & Company

from *Casting Deep Shade*

Home in Illinois, Lincoln liked to read under a beech. Lincoln liked to read period. For all we know he may have liked to look at dirty flip books under the ample canopy of a solitary beech.

Though Lincoln was known to have enjoyed reading under a beech, it is apparently not true that he and his son Tad played and read under a copper beech at the cottage on the grounds of the Soldiers' Home. This is where Lincoln drafted the Emancipation Proclamation, and the kids could play mumble-the-whatever-the-hell-it-is-peg. This is where he rode Old Bob, grey shawl over his own grey shoulders, and though usually accompanied by a cavalry detail, did once have his high hat shot through. The tree, real enough, was probably not big enough at the time to provide shade for the idle, bookish type.

~

The eucs (the predominant one in Northern California being Tasmanian blue gum or *Eucalyptus globulus*) are embattled. Described as hyperactive, they are nonnative, invasive, and "generally disagreeable," say many. They do shed a lot, and their aromatic oils are susceptible to burning. They are christened dirty trees, trash, mongrels, and widow makers. Someone says their seeds are like walking on ball bearings. That their beauty is "cold and otherworldly." They get awful press. Humans aren't native either, claim some of their defenders. One diss goes, Living next to one is like living next to a fireworks factory staffed by chain-smokers.

~

Judson Dynamite & Powder Company started planting the eucalypts in the Oakland hills in the 1880s to muffle the sound of dynamite and conceal the hideous sites caused by the blasts. Then they were planted on a grander order for timber, real estate development, and to control fires. None of the latter proved to be sound thinking. The latter latter in particular.

~

Jojoba oil is used for aphids. If it comes to that. Replaced sperm oil from whales and is used against mildew. Being used copiously in fact. As whale sperm once was.

~

Xylem tissue, as we know, moves the water. Phloem is the other transporter, esp of sugar. Even I remember, a dropper of seventh-grade science.

Xylem carries the water up the length of the plant, to the top of the sequoia whereas a suction pump can raise water only 10 meters. Dig this: the sequoia can raise water 100 meters. Though fog absorbed by the leaves is a major factor in its survival. Solomon the excellent plumber keeps telling me water works in strange ways.

With drought, air bubbles develop in the tubes of the xylem, obstructing the water's flow.

~

In Providence, there are a number of small parks, with various lovely trees, and virtually no one visiting them. Fine for drug deals by night. Empty benches by day. They are one frame off, location-wise, not positioned where people walk or cycle or can park a vehicle. Plus, the habit of the small urban park has not established itself to wipe off the bird shit and sit with fresh baguette and wedge of cheese. To read. To amble. To visit. To stroke the chin over a cement board of hand-carved chess pieces. To watch a fan-shaped leaf drift to the grass.

~

A tree can only take so many insults. Esp when geriatric and distressed.

Commonly a tree dies of hunger or thirst. As did my mother, as a result of Alzheimer's.

~

Resilient fighters, the beech, says Olavi Huikari, who also tells us a full half of our DNA is held in common with them. *Half*.

~

In accordance with 11th-century English law, a beech became a *deodand* (gift to god) when it fell on a woman and splattered her brains. By law the owner had to give the tree to the state or pay its value, 16 pence, to the town. Brains, assigned no ordinal value.

C.D. Wright
63

⁶³ [C.D. Wright, "Casting Deep Shade,"](#) collected in [Casting Deep Shade, Copper Canyon Press](#)

The Difference Between Science Fiction and Fantasy

A man at the local dive claimed
he'd done more drugs than all the people
who'd ever lived in Mississippi.
I probably ran a close second.
More than the intergalactic samurai
and the centaur, more than any greater-than sign
turned on its feet on the chest of a uniform
and more than any dice-rolling, Reno
son of a bitch. I smoked shake
held together with super glue and drank
a half gallon of vodka while I cooked banana peels
in the oven and smoked their vegetable stench.
Then I stripped down to my boxers on acid
and snuck into the Grant High School pool
and became another creature entirely
after I entered the water, horned and pearly,
throat gilled like multiple stab wounds.
Staring at earth from the deep silence of outer space
must be like this. Forget to breathe
and simple actions become properties
of the surreal. Like sneaking into your parent's bedroom
to steal money one night, being stuck in the closet
as your father disrobes your mother,
enters her from behind and smacks her ass with a belt.
Sounds you've never heard from her mouth,
oohs and *ahhs* your coworker would say
were death chants in the land of Elvendor,
warnings meant to frighten trolls
and large pterodactyls into submission.
Like listening to that Gulf War vet at the bus stop
pointing at cars. Or seeing pictures of yourself, naked
as that sex-hungry astronaut sailing alone through meteors
for twenty-nine days, spill across
the book buyback counter. Or witnessing three men
with baseball bats and brass knuckles
peeling away a chain link fence,
throwing themselves onto your best friend
who has a well known affinity for boyish nymphs dressed
like Peter Pan. Holding him down
and beating him senseless in a back alley
as you glance over your shoulder before deciding to run.

Jay Nebel
64

⁶⁴ Jay Nebel, "The Difference Between Science Fiction and Fantasy," collected in [Neighbors](#), Saturnalia Books

Purple Heart

In History, Beverly is showing me
a bruise on the inside of her arm;
she taps my shoulder each time the teacher
turns to write on the board
so she can point out another one
of its many features: yellowed edges, dead
center, blue spots, red. “That’s blood,”
she whispers, “all of it.” And the war
goes on for a few more minutes, the click
and drag of chalk on the board
as the Vietcong retreat again to the jungle
and the class grows more restless, little
conversations and flirtations springing up
everywhere, until suddenly our teacher,
overcome by our inattention, draws one
incredible breath, turns and writes
FUCK IT on the board, pulls her keys
from a drawer, unhooks one and lets it
drop—*clink*—to the floor, then walks down
the little aisle our desks make, looking no one
in the face, until she’s out of the room, gone
forever, and one of us has to buzz the office.
Who knows? Who knows it will be Beverly
who will rise out of the silence and take charge,
calling each of us to her: the stunned;
the crying; the boy who takes the key
to the window and throws the goddamned thing
into the parking lot; the few
who are taking advantage of this time; the few
who are waiting, dumbstruck, for some
order, for anything, even if it’s simply for that
horrible woman to come back, to continue
the lesson; the unchanged; the seemingly
unchanged; the changed; those who’ll die
young; those who will go on in this world
to the eighth grade, to graduate, to investigate
their interests and exploit their potential,
to buy and sell, to make payments, to settle in.
When she pushes the button, the secretary
will say, “Yes?” from a thousand miles away,
and Beverly will say, “Something violent
happened here,” she among us
understanding this is one way
the violent get you: not by coming
for you, but by leaving you behind.

Carrie Fountain

⁶⁵ [Carrie Fountain](#), "[Purple Heart](#)," [The Marlboro Review](#), collected in [Burn Lake](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Quartet for the End of Time

After T.S. Eliot's "Four Quartets"

1

If you play me then you
Play yourself. That was
All the dead needed
To say. To get the better
Of time, we got better
With time. I left my body
And took on the look
Of a man. I made him
An honest woman.
A diagram of this
Sentence builds a
Structure made from
Wind. Inside of that
House is a box. Inside
The box is the head
Of a goat. Inside the
Goat: a knife's quiet
Song. The blade of
Desire is the silver in
My teeth. My mouth
Has a certain ring to it.

2

I will take you now to after-
Life's kitchen, where the salty
Girls cure meat with their tears.
Only through time is time
Conquered. Come correct.
Come prepared to sit at the table
Of contents. We bow our heads,
Count our blessings like
Little pigs, while the king-
Fisher waits for a shaft of
Sun. Sprint, said the bird,
For the foothills of truth.
Stop, stop, stop, said the bird,
There is mischief afoot. Then
We sat and ate with our hands,
An entire field of wild thyme.
When asked to choose a hill
To die on, we wanted to kill

The bird. To reconcile our pain
We made the stars into a bear.
Myth made all the difference.

3

If your wrist holds a five-
Nailed star, clock the T.
Who can open the door to night
And not see themselves in black?
Not I. For thousands of years,
I have sat on a milk crate.
Stationed at the crossroads, I sing:
Bone. Bone. Bone. Bone. Bone.
I don a yellow jacket and fox-
Gloves to push out the sun.
The morning is such a production.
A ghost—aghast at the sound
Of singe, a crowned knot of fire.
There is no sense to be had
In the country of our making.
This language a garden
Of strain. No limit
Soldiers, we marched
To the drum of empty
Cups and if a spoon fell
A woman was cursed.

4

When I was sold
Down the river,
God set down his book
In the shape of a tent.
That day I was born again,
My limbs—American letters.
The stairway to heaven is
Yellow-boned legs, antiqued
In their quadron rust.
At the gate to eternity,
A lawn jockey grins, wide
As the science of mercy.
In his hands a badminton
Racket. He swats and we
See how they run, how
Crickets gallop in the
Dark like horseflies.

Heaven is a thousand
Chandeliers, every crystal
A single body, each head
A grizzly sparkle.

Alison C. Rollins
66

⁶⁶ [Alison C. Rollins, "Quartet for the End of Time," *Poetry*](#)

Capacitor (Be Mine)

Call us anything: *spirits, specters, spooks*—
Say what you will about ghosts & widows:
that we don't exist, we're invisible,
that we go naked under the sheets,
and leave pornography in little free libraries.

Oh, how we messed with Ms. O'Keeffe
until she ditched mimesis for yonic flowers—
Sweet ruin of a decaying arrangement,
biological clock shocked by the red pulse of time...

Oh, how we would take your camera
and keep it on the nightstand
next to our bed. How we would take you
in your Subaru, between dashboard
and bucket seats—despite red dirt and lousy music.

Serendipity, acne, nothing connecting to nothing.
Poltergeistly, wet-palmed, the mopey joy
of mumbling the same words
because they never come out quite right.

Pretty much everything moves at erosion speed;
those blemishes on the blue sky are called *clouds*.
The world's mostly tweetups, irreconcilable
differences, legal separations, and restraining orders.
Forever after, the taxes happily unprepared. Our backs
bent beautifully like the workers at fulfillment centers.

Everyone's always endorsing accuracy over precision—
closeness of the measurements to a specific value,
over closeness of the measurements to each other.
Arrows missing hearts, bypassing bodies altogether.
(Would it help to get a bow?)
Or should we keep throwing them
and throwing, everly happy, everly after.

Cindy King
67

⁶⁷ [Cindy King, "Capacitor \(Be Mine\)," *Baltimore Review*](#)

Just checking in

Do you believe the speculation
that soon, having already fought over land,
God, beets, the size of your crown
versus my crown, we'll be fighting
over water, the right to raise roses
and bathe and live? The pessimist in me
wears a suit of armor and says Yes,
while the optimist is too busy
staring at the sun to take this survey.
They are inseparable as dust
and sneezing. Where one goes,
the other says, Watch out. And when one says,
A random-number generator
has more to look forward to
than I do, the other says,
It's as if my soul were eating rat poison
when I read that Bechtel owns the rights
to rain in Bolivia. Would you go to jail
for putting a bucket on your roof?
More importantly, would I? I need to know
so I can arrange bail now. Never put off
until tomorrow preparations
for Armageddon you can do today,
said my pappy, right before telling me
to never call him pappy again.
My all-time favorite question
in school was, What are the results
of a zero-sum game? Second place
went to, Is history a measure
of progress or the increasing noise
of a system going to ruin? My answers
were Eight and Yes. My laughter
was recorded and sent into space.
My crying was famous
for frightening rocks away. What else
can I tell you about me: I'm scared
but not shitless. Eager
though incapable of wagging. Here
but also there. Trying. I am trying
your patience and to make it
to the other side, wherever that is.

Bob Hicok
68

⁶⁸ [Bob Hicok](#), "[Just checking in](#)," [Grist](#), collected in [Hold](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Smoke and Mirrors

Back then, girls teased their hair, big bangs
like loofahs on their foreheads. Plumes.
Somebody spiked the punch, they said,
as if they'd wanted plain old punch.

They shared their earrings, weed, and jeans,
wore underwear with satin bows,
and danced like sex. The nights wore on
in shots and smoke—and on and on.

Back then, before the silly me
of retrospect, they reeked of yes,
diffusing through the bar to go
their separate ways the moment stay

awake or stick together seemed
impossible—demanding later
in the tone of frowning, *Tell
me everything*. They saw their share

of bunk beds, ancient futons, floors,
and dudes whose moves were easily
excused before the sunlight cut
through dirty panes where, sitting up

like damsels in a cuckoo clock,
they smoothed their tops and balled their socks,
said, *This we didn't do*, assured
what's missing isn't—can't be—true.

Caki Wilkinson
69

⁶⁹ [Caki Wilkinson](#), "[Smoke and Mirrors](#)," [32 Poems](#)

Thinking of You

My mother tells me she saw Greg and he asked
if I was married, and I think of how he used to run
down the hall of our high school to open the doors
for me into Senior Hall with its rows of blue
lockers, the smell of amphibians in jars, how
he sent me roses in a box with *Thinking of You*
printed on it, and he was, turning his flushed face
towards me like a lamp during Religion.
My mother tells me Greg lives alone now
on his family farm, growing wheat and alfalfa.
I can see him there, behind his gingham curtains,
and I think this is where youth is kept,
all these years since have been moving
like the creek at the edge of Greg's property
but the farm is the same, the grain turning gold
every night. This was the color of the future.
The color of the walls of the restaurant
where the boy I really loved works now,
I don't have the courage or I'd go there some time,
sit alone at a table with a silk rose and a candle,
order Chardonnay and watch the light catch
in the glass. Greg thought I was kind.
When someone loves you like that,
you should pay attention. You shouldn't drive
all night with Dave up into the mountains of Idaho
until Coeur d'Alene Lake is too far
below you, a black hole like the ones you read about
in school. You could float on that lake forever,
the sound of a motor telling you its story of speed,
how it can turn water over so you can see
its white underside, how you could get caught in it,
your body a red bloom in the water.

Laura Read

70

⁷⁰ [Laura Read](#), "[Thinking of You](#)," [Alaska Quarterly Review](#), collected in [Dresses from the Old Country](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Bullet (Lead + Alloy)

Lead in the belly, copper
& nickel skin in abundance
each year. 10 billion bullets

made in the U.S.A. each
year. Enough bullets to kill
most of us twice each year.

The bullet hits 3 times
faster than we can hear
its concussion. The bullet

breaks the air with its 2,182-
mph admission. The bullet
is a grim onomatopoeia

for itself. The bullet is
a slim allegory for a gun
happy nation & its attendant

segregations. Lead belly,
wrapped in the grinning
freedom amendment:

the gun is always more
important than the people
in front of it as the antagonists

tell us. & here we are again:
so many black women
& black men in front of it.

Adrian Matejka
71

⁷¹ [Adrian Matejka](#), "[Bullet \(Lead + Alloy\)](#)," [Four Way Review](#)

Black Box

We were in a small, grim café.
She sipped pure black droplets
from a tiny cup.
Make him come back, she said,
her voice like something brought up intact
from the cold center of a lake.
It was the kind of story I like, and I wanted
to get it right, for later:
The hot morning in the café,
feeling encroached on by a cloud
of dusty ferns and creepers
and the low earth of duty.
I can't read a book
all the way through, she said,
and most days I'm only unhappy.
My heart is always with the lovers.

Sandra Lim

72

⁷² [Sandra Lim](#), "[Black Box](#)," [Smartish Pace](#)

Jefferson, Midnight

In another version of this story, he's a naturalist who dabbled in politics. He reinvented the plow. He joined the American Philosophical Society's Bone Committee. And while trying to prove the great Western lion, gave us our first giant sloth. He shipped a rotting moose to France to demonstrate the greatness of our mammals. He is a father of paleontology who didn't believe extinction was part of God's plan. He asked Lewis and Clark, should they encounter the mammoth, to capture one for him. For months his sea wall has been sinking, the Potomac's mud flaps sucking at the support timbers. In 1918 and for six summers after, the Tidal Basin was chlorinated so that this bank could become a beach. Whites only. Spiders who are drawn to rising heat heavily populate the ceiling of Jefferson's Memorial. Once the sun sets, the temperature drops, they lose their grip and fall, bodies bounce off my shoulders, bodies land in my hair, guards call this the *spider rain*.

Sandra Beasley
73

⁷³ [Sandra Beasley, "Jefferson, Midnight,"](#) collected in [Made to Explode, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Verde

For Lorca, for C.G.

You are mine once
My hands up, your thighs drugged
with crinoline. Escargot and campos verdes
Verde, que te quiero verde
Well-worn B cups
Your chest, above your ribs
Where your speeding heart lives
And I want to

If you are fucked up, you sober up
To drive me home

You forget a business jacket, ashes
They haunt my hallway for weeks
I smell you in there
A dry-ice potion slinks from under the door, caressing
My ankles when I pass

If our moms could see us now:
Two Hub Cities dykes holding
Back the waters for eighteen million
Put your finger where
Stop it from flooding
The neighborhood, the Food 4 Less
The softball field, my
Daddy's car

Vickie Vértiz
74

⁷⁴ [Vickie Vértiz](#), "[Verde](#)," collected in [Palm Frond with Its Throat Cut](#), [The University of Arizona Press](#)

Meaning Well

Marrying is like somebody
throwing the baby up.
It happy and them throwing it
higher. To the ceiling.
Which jars the loose bulb
and it goes out
as the baby starts down.

Jack Gilbert
75

⁷⁵ [Jack Gilbert](#), "[Meaning Well](#)," collected in [Monolithos](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

A Friend Asks If I'm Comfortable Writing about My Marriage

My last long-term love, before my husband,
had writer's block, and thank God
he wasn't a writer just like my husband
but a physicist whose goal was to explain
something about the Northern Lights and CO₂
so he went to Alaska where he sat amid stacks
of math formulas that looked like swear words
in code and smoked and wrote missives
in pencil about wolves he'd heard,
his cabin's heater, how bad the fruit was
and the dog he might take in since he was already
feeding it peanut butter sandwiches at 4 a.m.
The pencil and idea of me,
a far-away ear silent as a half moon,
freed him to write the mysteries of solitude
but not those of the Aurora Borealis.
I'm uncomfortable

seeing my face in my computer screen.
The skin under my chin hangs
like another face shadowing mine.
A second, a double. How do you talk
about a spouse, the person you promise
to live with *forever* even though no one understands
the extreme oxygen of that word?

I was much younger when I gasped
my last love. We drove twenty hours to Duluth,
slept alongside a cornfield, woke
to sweat-tangled clothes and a man with a rifle
and a serious understanding
of property rights. He took a minute
from his anger. turned his mouth toward me,
Miss, you alright?

My friend asks his question when my husband and I
are bodies orbiting a shriveled sun.
There we are passing in a hallway,
there we are flossing our teeth. When conversation
snags like a toenail catching a bedsheet.
I'm comfortable saying I'm not sure my husband likes me,
like being a rough metal that,
in marriage's alchemical reaction,
softens to love, then vaporizes

into shuffling routine, quiet-pleasured duty, a formula
based on the mass or pressure of years.
That's part of marriage's hoopla, what to expect
when you're expecting to live with the same person
for decades, a word less galactic than *forever*
and still incomprehensible.
How many closed-mouth kisses, empty milk cartons,
prescriptions filled? How lucky
to know the moles on another person's back,
to be woken by deep-throated snores.
My friend, who is unmarried, suggests trading sexual favors
for chores, a proposition I find equally
boring. I want to be comfortable

writing the limp leg of old sex—I've loved
and fucked and fallen asleep to our bodies
and woken again to their pillow bellies
well-curved feet. I've written my husband
twelve-page love letters, had day-long fights
over nail clippings in the sink,
gotten love, gotten bored, almost gotten in trouble
from forgetting any new body
also gets old. Thank God
alchemy is a ramshackle science
one that, in my case, leaks minutes, sometimes days
of pure joy, moments when my husband's sturdy eyes
astound me, when, watching him make a ham sandwich
I stumble into the calm cloud I call his soul.

When my last love and I made it to Duluth
the temperature was 20 degrees colder
than where we'd started. The lake masqueraded
as an ocean, but truth hung in the blank sky:
No Northern Lights. We sat in an all-night diner
waiting for pie, and even we, so temporary,
so astral, had nothing to say.

Nancy Krygowski

76

⁷⁶ [Nancy Krygowski, "A Friend Asks If I'm Comfortable Writing about My Marriage,"](#) collected in [The Woman in the Corner](#),
[University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

To the Woman Crying Uncontrollably in the Next Stall

If you ever woke in your dress at 4 A.M. ever
closed your legs to a man you loved opened
them for one you didn't moved against
a pillow in the dark stood miserably on a beach
seaweed clinging to your ankles paid
good money for a bad haircut backed away
from a mirror that wanted to kill you bled
into the back seat for lack of a tampon
if you swam across a river under rain sang
using a dildo for a microphone stayed up
to watch the moon eat the sun entire
ripped out the stitches in your heart
because why not if you think nothing &
no one can / listen I love you joy is coming

Kim Addonizio
77

⁷⁷ [Kim Addonizio, "To the Woman Crying Uncontrollably in the Next Stall," *diode*](#)

Body in a Phone Booth

The body in the phone booth

is a curious whodunit, is a theatric
in which gross death interrupts
and leaves the body in a mute
derangement the crumpled corpse
caught broadcasting aspersion
or committing a clumsy espionage
now dropped like soiled laundry
in a glass hamper, so the dial tone hums
from the handset, but the body's ear
is switched off, its circuit disconnected,
and somewhere—Johannesburg
maybe or maybe Lima, Peru—
some handler or mistress fidgets
the night anticipating
the startle of a telephone bell.

A body in the phone booth

grants the booth a sense of perpetuity,
the body a temporary occupancy:
You stood provisional
under the permanent sky.
You were out of quarters,
the automatic voice
on the line reiterating,
*If you'd like to make a call,
please hang up...*
This expelled you then
into frantic morning, your body
moving like a quick tourist
through a perpetual Chicago.
You were a word,
the booth a mouth
you'd been spoken out of.

This body in that phone booth

is a longing for elsewhere,
for rough shrubs at the foot
of a hill in the rock-littered,
lidless night of the desert.
A phone booth is there,
is an adorable carnival
in its small fluorescence
beside a stygian interstate.
You'd step into it.
You'd stand there awhile.
You'd dial a number

you'd never call again.

That body in this phone booth

is a case of specific wanting
wherein I see your body
in a snap-button shirt, a skirt
the color of brushed aluminum,
and want to be in cramped quarters
with you. *My body
in your phone booth*
is the invasive sense
of sex, smothering
and wet, how I impose upon
and inhabit your cordoned
spaces, but *Your body
in my phone booth* is a song
of devotion in which I invite
your intrusions, surrender
the clicker, let you pick your side
of the bed, and concede
the last of the kettle corn.

Our bodies in a phone booth

is a diorama, is our place
in the narrative,
how we stood,
gripping receivers,
and spoke to one another
in glass shanties
the way the ancients
howled from trees
or murmured in mud huts,
set signal fires
and transmitted
their stark messages
in a grammar of smoke.

The body in a phone booth

is the antique metaphysic,
is the cloistered subject
apart from the objects.
In the museum of natural history
Sara says, *Think of the self
like the body in a phone booth,*
so all afternoon I picture
myself in an encasement
circa February 1997, my body
in a plaid flannel shirt,
my mouth almost open,

my slack jacket hanging
like a dead cat from my hand,
I'm about to say something.
I look like an artifact,
precious and defeated.

Jaswinder Bolina
78

⁷⁸ [Jaswinder Bolina, "Body in a Phone Booth," *Columbia Poetry Review*](#), collected in [Phantom Camera, New Issues Press](#)

David Naughton at Midnight, Full Moon, etc.

Shelly Beecher was so metal: pregnant in 9th grade, smoking on the grass behind the lockers in her Iron Maiden t-shirt. Her boyfriend, Tom Moody, was a senior, and he had muscles and a moustache and a car with no muffler that jackhammered across the parking lot every morning. One day in class you let her copy your *Great Expectations* quiz and after that you never saw her again. It didn't take long for Tom Moody to get a new girlfriend; she was blonde and wore dresses with skulls on them, and when they kissed against his locker, she'd put both hands on his face. You hoped she would destroy him quickly. The night the moon did something it does every three thousand years, all the members of a famous hard rock band were killed when their tour bus flew off the freeway and exploded in an empty field behind the miniature golf course. On the news, smoke tumbled from the twisted knots of scattered fuselage, and firemen ran relays with hoses around giant burning dragons. Paramedics knelt over bodies as policemen took notes and the cameraman trained his lens on a tennis shoe in the bushes. Behind the reporter, a girl in a bikini with wet black eyes emerged from a patch of smoking debris to wander in circles in the ash. A few hours later, while cleaning your parents' pool, you pulled a mouse from the drain and set it down in the grass. Crushed by the press of water, it gasped and steadied itself in the moonlight. You wanted it to dart back into the night but it didn't; it just stared straight ahead like it was waiting for you to do the same thing. You still can't remember who moved first.

Alex Green

79

⁷⁹ [Alex Green](#), "[David Naughton at Midnight, Full Moon, etc.](#)" collected in [Emergency Anthems](#), [Brooklyn Arts Press](#)

Lackawanna

My brain felt swiped clean.
I couldn't love
songs I loved; friends came

nameless as mailmen...
A loaf of dough
forbidden to rise,

I'm slid into the hollow magnet.
Din of a dozen arcade games, but louder.
The MRI finds no sign

of stroke; the EEG, no fried circuitry.
Short-Term Temporal Lobe Seizure.
I'm told: forget it.

Forget my state of forgetfulness...
Was *Dismal Harmony* a childhood
wildlife preserve?—near tracks

where *Lackawanna* means
two streams meet and divide
in the tongue of an obliterated tribe.

Steven Cramer
80

⁸⁰ [Steven Cramer](#), "[Lackawanna](#)," [The Paris Review](#), collected in [Listen](#), [Mad Hat Press](#)

Nightwalk

The beekeeper's hut. The square, shared lots of the neighborhood gardens. A cemetery plot. A child's white coffin. You slip past them all with the old lamplit longings. But tonight the stars are skyless and your eyelid is scratched and you're crying. You pass a pack of sheepdogs. A barn. Barbed wire. The sole, open window of a small yellow house where a wife in a shoddy red robe has mantled her hair in a towel. (It's never. Or now.) And the city signs. And the welcome mats. The fact of a placard that spells out a speed bump. Apple trees ranked on the shoulder of the road. Do the sunflowers know they're eclipsed by the moon? You can't go home to a hell. The bench on the hill seems to sob. And church bells bang like pans and pots.

Jill Alexander Essbaum

81

⁸¹ [Jill Alexander Essbaum](#), "[Nightwalk](#)," *Moirá*, collected in [Would-Land](#), [Cooper Dillon Books](#)

Faint Music

Maybe you need to write a poem about grace.

When everything broken is broken,
and everything dead is dead,
and the hero has looked into the mirror with complete contempt,
and the heroine has studied her face and its defects
remorselessly, and the pain they thought might,
as a token of their earnestness, release them from themselves
has lost its novelty and not released them,
and they have begun to think, kindly and distantly,
watching the others go about their days—
likes and dislikes, reasons, habits, fears—
that self-love is the one weedy stalk
of every human blossoming, and understood,
therefore, why they had been, all their lives,
in such a fury to defend it, and that no one—
except some almost inconceivable saint in his pool
of poverty and silence—can escape this violent, automatic
life's companion ever, maybe then, ordinary light,
faint music under things, a hovering like grace appears.

As in the story a friend told once about the time
he tried to kill himself. His girl had left him.
Bees in the heart, then scorpions, maggots, and then ash.
He climbed onto the jumping girder of the bridge,
the bay side, a blue, lucid afternoon.
And in the salt air he thought about the word “seafood,”
that there was something faintly ridiculous about it.
No one said “landfood.” He thought it was degrading to the rainbow perch
he'd reeled in gleaming from the cliffs, the black rockbass,
scales like polished carbon, in beds of kelp
along the coast—and he realized that the reason for the word
was crabs, or mussels, clams. Otherwise
the restaurants could just put “fish” up on their signs,
and when he woke—he'd slept for hours, curled up
on the girder like a child—the sun was going down
and he felt a little better, and afraid. He put on the jacket
he'd used for a pillow, climbed over the railing
carefully, and drove home to an empty house.

There was a pair of her lemon yellow panties
hanging on a doorknob. He studied them. Much-washed.
A faint russet in the crotch that made him sick
with rage and grief. He knew more or less
where she was. A flat somewhere on Russian Hill.
They'd have just finished making love. She'd have tears

in her eyes and touch his jawbone gratefully. “God,” she’d say, “you are so good for me.” Winking lights, a foggy view downhill toward the harbor and the bay. “You’re sad,” he’d say. “Yes.” “Thinking about Nick?” “Yes,” she’d say and cry. “I tried so hard,” sobbing now, “I really tried so hard.” And then he’d hold her for a while— Guatemalan weavings from his fieldwork on the wall— and then they’d fuck again, and she would cry some more, and go to sleep.

And he, he would play that scene once only, once and a half, and tell himself that he was going to carry it for a very long time and that there was nothing he could do but carry it. He went out onto the porch, and listened to the forest in the summer dark, madrone bark cracking and curling as the cold came up.

It’s not the story though, not the friend leaning toward you, saying “And then I realized—,” which is the part of stories one never quite believes. I had the idea that the world’s so full of pain it must sometimes make a kind of singing. And that the sequence helps, as much as order helps— First an ego, and then pain, and then the singing.

Robert Hass
82

⁸² [Robert Hass, “Faint Music,” collected in *Sun Under Wood*, HarperCollins Publishers](#)

Elegy for the Modern School

This much I can prove:
we were black & unfinished
in the Harlem of old,

a mass of naps
& Vaseline knees
before the promise

of faster Wi-Fi & craft
beer was code for
what it is code for.

& my mother would
drop us off in her '89
Toyota Camry, its cool

steel flesh the color of a
half-dead rhododendron.
& my big sister would hold on

to my left hand—which fit
in hers like a quarter's worth
of Peanut Chews back then

—until the bell bid us scatter.
Let the record show that I felt
no particular way as it pertained

to her invariable nearness.
I was a good boy, & thus
defined by a certain lust

for solitude, the countless
ways I learned to scream
don't touch. This was all I knew

of the world I had yet to name,
its utter indifference, its
physical laws, my sister

a kind of atmosphere,
more god or feeling
than another small,

finite body like mine
that could be known
well, or else unmade.

Miss Cherry owned a ruler
long as my daddy's
entire forearm,

called it *Redeemer*, kept
the instrument at the front
of our classroom

so as to enrich
our already budding
sense of the apocalyptic,

would rap our knuckles
& backsides with it
like a blacksmith in love

with his labor any time
we dared to behave as if
we were, in her words,

*outside our natural
minds.* Our parents
thought this little more

than the rational extension
of the age-old wisdom
when it comes to rearing

the hunted: *I cannot keep you
alive, but will see you die
at my hands long before*

*the day I let the law erase
your name from the ledger
of the living.* & so it was,

that in songs & parables
long-given to the tide
of Reagan & concrete

bleeding blackness
all over & wayward
shots meant

for men themselves too young
to know the scent of cells
& aspiration rotted through,

we learned how we arrived
at the underside of modernity,
children only while we were held

& honed within those broad
brick walls, a place for us
to be unburied & yet unashamed,

unassailable, unaware
of an entire order lingering
like lions at the door

Joshua Bennett
83

⁸³ [Joshua Bennett](#), "[Elegy for the Modern School](#)," [Connotation Press](#), collected in [Owed](#), [Penguin Books](#)

ESL Students

They ask, Why is it in the car but on the bus?
I turn up my hands and give them a pained expression.
There is a moment of quiet anger. Then they pop
open their blouses and the buttons fall
like foreign coins to the floor.
They stand on the desks. They kick the air.
We're sick of this bullshit, they say.
I am very still. I look them in the eyes.
We've shown you our tits! they shout.
Yes, I say quietly, and begin to unbutton my cardigan.
The class is silent. For some time we stand there naked,
they on their desks and me in front of the blackboard.
Then Maoki says, There is a different scene
in every room in the world.
Our clothes are but the lint of a passing era, says Hana.
I will light a candle and watch the prayer moths
circle the room like used napkins, says Oui.
I don't speak. A shadow passes over the left
side of my chest. Then the bell rings.

Lauren Shapiro
84

84 [Lauren Shapiro](#), "ESL Students," collected in [Easy Math](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

The Lovely Voice of Samantha West

I once worked at a call center. We weren't allowed to talk, only script-read, and I thought: *Can't they automate this?* Magazine circulars promised twelve books for a cent, and seemingly eager to be fooled, our customers skipped the fine print, mailed in their pennies, and signed up to pay for a book a month they swore they didn't want.

Explaining this con dozens of times every day as an agent of the company, I still knew I was human, the sort requiring ham sandwiches and occasionally to urinate. And I knew, too, the people whose lives I interrupted as human—wondered if dust storms clotted their skies in Topeka or, hearing the scrape of a pot being lifted from a stove, what dinner they'd made for the children who fussed through our call.

I had to clock out to use the toilet and worked in a windowless, chattering room, but as Americans, we had fans on our desks, a tap with all the clean water we could drink, a vending machine as ever sold out of Sprite. We had our voices, trained in American English since birth.

Still, it was all I could do to make the script into a conversation, to be its human participant. The call center made me an expert in my voice's currency, what I could do with its pitches and pauses, my larynx flexing around the rarely varied words. It was work. Every three hours on the dot I stood outside in a designated area and burned the high-nicotine cigarettes I'd bought.

More recently, I know why, when the nearly human creature they named Samantha West started calling to give people their health insurance quotes, her voice was programmed to sound reassuringly American. But those who picked up their phones knew something wasn't right.

No distractions could pull them from their interrogations. “Hey are you a robot?” “No I am a real person. Maybe we have a bad connection.” “Just say, ‘I’m not a robot.’ Please.” “I’m a real person.” And so on—all conversation stuck permanently in the uncanny valley.

And yet there was nothing wrong with the monstrous voice of Samantha West. She seemed to be patterned after Doris Day, sunny and mildly titillating, relentless high rising terminals that turned every speech act into a request for approval. The Doris of *Pillow Talk*, cozy in bed in her ruffled nightgown, flirting on the phone with Rock Hudson before realizing he was the dirtbag on her party line. Doris, whose every indignation was cute.

Are you a robot? Samantha West was not technically a robot. And yet her operators on the other side of the world in India, sitting in front of their computers in a crowded, industrial-lit room, not unlike the one where I worked fifteen years before, understandably paused a beat too long when asked this question. Their good middle-class living depended on the correct response. They searched for the command key that would trigger some version of an acceptable answer:

I am a real person.

Frank Sinatra once said, *Doris is the only person who can hit a note and make you feel it like I do.* But for the people Samantha West called, her voice vibrated in the terrifying space between barely and fully human. It reached into their homes in the middle of the day and threatened the necessary belief that conversations take place between people. Not eager to be fooled, people recoiled.

On the day I quit, I remember setting down my headset and pressing the “break” button. Later my boss called me at home. *Is there any way we could have made this better for you?* I’d rarely seen Barb’s snowbird pixie cut and

chunky sweaters on the calling floor. Her voice on the phone had a human response for me, but I was unable to explain why I left.

Erin Hoover
85

⁸⁵ [Erin Hoover](#), "[The Lovely Voice of Samantha West](#)," *LIT*, collected in [Barnburner](#), [Elixir Press](#)

Memory Fed Me until It Didn't

Then the erotic charge turned off like a light switch.
I think the last fire got peed on in that hotel outside Lansing.
Peed on and sizzled and then a welcome and lasting silence.

Then my eyes got hungry.
They looked at bowls and barn owls and paper clips,
panoramic lavender fields and a single purple spear,

and it was good but not good enough.
My eyes were hungry for paint, like I used to imagine
a horse could taste the green in its mouth

before its lips found the grass.
Then I woke to the words "still life," not as the after-image
of a dream but as the body wakes and knows it needs

mince pie before the mind has come to claim it.
I craved paint like the pregnant body craves pomegranates
or hasenpfeffer or that sauerbraten made with gingersnaps.

Van Gogh ate paint. At least that's the myth of van Gogh.
I ate van Gogh, the still lifes of old boots and thick-tongued
irises. Then my eyes followed the trail back, to Dürer

and his plump rabbit, as perfectly composed as a real one,
as if he'd invented rabbits, and Chardin's dead hare
strung up in a brownish-gold space, its head and ears

flopped onto what appears to be a table, the ears
made of rough bands of white and black and gray
and green-brown paint, the whiskers painted in, the tufts

of fur articulated with white gestures from a thin brush.
And the vanitas paintings of skulls and unspent coins,
and Baugin's dessert wafers shaped like little flutes,

and Pieter Aertsen's *Butcher's Stall with the Flight into Egypt*
in which a small rendering of the Holy Family
is relegated to the background

while the foreground is loaded with gaudy carnage,
a vat of lard, a pig's head hung by the snout, cascades
of sausages, strangled hens, and yawning sides of beef.

The huge gory head of a cow is front and center,
directly below the cool blues of the miniature Virgin Mary
handing out alms to the poor. The cow's cold nose

is so close it makes my eyes water. Its watery eye
gazes back at me and I fall in love. I fall in love again.

Diane Seuss
86

⁸⁶ [Diane Seuss, "Memory Fed Me until It Didn't," *Los Angeles Review of Books Quarterly Journal*, collected in *Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl*, Graywolf Press](#)

We are not allowed that.
Papa in the doorway
with his soft voice saying
because you have come
all this way, enter,
his beard like a moonbeam
pouring down to the waist.
Brood of Men and Women
of Science, do you know

what year it is in the ever-
lasting life of our Lord?
Yesterday the Tzar's soldiers
hunted us with shears,
the Old Believers' glory
thrown to the wind
for any beast of the field
to line her nest with.
Thus the Lord drove us here,

the Siberian taiga on the edge
of the tree line, forty years
and hundreds of miles
from the nearest human heart
until the People Who Consider
the Rocks walk out of the forest.
My sister and I, we talk
like a blurred cooing,
Mother long starved and asleep

under the double-barred cross.
On the other side of the room
Eldest Brother is a hard man
because without the faith
why shape our lives to this hunger?
For the right to cross ourselves
with two fingers, not three?
For the freedom to walk sun-wise
around the altar? I remember

the epoch of the rowanberry leaf,
the potato top, bark, the bones
in Mother's face manifesting.
Once when I worked all night
in the woods to excavate
a new root cellar by hand,
One With Windows on His Face
asked was I frightened to be alone
in the wilderness after dark.

“What would be out here
to hurt me?” I said. 400 years ago
under Pyotr the Antichrist
a merchant swindled us of bread
and Papa's eyes still burn.
Later when there is no one left to
share in the nightly entertainment
of the relating of dreams
(my siblings infested with

the bacteria of our visitors,
Father dead though his age
at death is infantile compared to
the Bible's first men), I will
dream of Eden as a mountain
riddled with stands of larch,
spruce, and birch, raspberries
big as your thumb, pine nuts
raining on the roof. I will

go on living thirty solitary years
on the taiga having never seen
money or been held
as a beloved in someone's arms,
me among the handful
of Fortunates to have ever existed.
Why? The lives you live are lived
by the billions, indistinguishable.
Through Him I am my own

shining city on a hill. *In 1961
it snowed in June. The hard frost
killed everything in the garden.
By spring the family had been
reduced to eating bark.
They were saved
by what they regarded as a miracle:
a single grain of rye sprouted
in their pea patch.*

*The Lykovs put up a fence
around the shoot and guarded it
zealously night and day
to keep off mice and squirrels.
At harvest time, the solitary spike
yielded 18 grains, and from this
they painstakingly rebuilt
their rye crop.*

Quan Barry
87

⁸⁷ [Quan Barry](#), "[loose strife \('We are not allowed that'\)](#)," collected in [Loose Strife](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

The Jennifer Century

America! Give to me your 200 years
of names borrowed from the Bible, Anyone
can be a Mary. Australians, a Canadian.
Take instead the all-American sound
of *Jennifer*. Feel how it Kansases
in your mouth, a flat rectangle of democracy.
Notice in it the guttural yearn,
primal urge for curds, conspicuous consumption
of the doubled-n. Leave for the limeys
their *Guinevere*, to the Cornish *Gwenhwyfar*,
the origin stories too. America
did not rise, enfogged, from a lake,
was not pulled from a stone by a king.
We emerged from the stocked shelves
of Spencer's Gifts and More,
from the aisle of black lights and St. Patrick's Day
shirts festooned with "I'm So Irish, My Liver Hurts"
and "Erin Go Braless." Give to our Jennifers
the American *J*, so goddamned unique
the Commies have nothing like it
and which the French mispronounce.
O Beautiful Jennifers, for spacious Camaros,
for amber waves of perms. May you crack
your gum forever, the canyons and forests
and food courts echoing with its snap,
Haileys and Kaylees circling the edges,
watching for the moment your fringed jackets drop
to paw the ground and pounce.

Erin Adair-Hodges

88

⁸⁸ [Erin Adair-Hodges](#), "[The Jennifer Century](#)," [Boulevard](#), collected in [Let's All Die Happy](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Doubt

“Don’t use that teleological argument on me,”
you say to your mother.
You are fifteen, only beginning your long slippery
descent into skepticism.
It’s ugly at first, like a new baby, red, sticky,
screaming, keeping you up at night,
but soon it begins to plump up, coo, grow eyelashes
and what was once heresy turns into nihilism,
which is French, looks good in black,
has thin lips with a *bon mot* on each one.
Doubt is anxious, bites at her lip, but wears
beautiful shoes, pointed and to the point.
You read Sartre, drink absinthe, listen to Billie
Holiday sing “I Cried for You,” stay up all night,
sleep till noon.
You have a job but you leave one day and never go back.
You’re not sick exactly but rather sick of it.
Money is a problem, but money is nothing and nothing
is everything so you are rich, a plutocrat
of minutes and hours and days.
You read Russian novels into the night,
and you become confused. Are you Kitty Shcherbatskaya
or Natasha Rostova or Prince Myshkin?
Outside the window, is it your street or the steppes?
It’s cold, and doubt keeps you warm
by its cozy little fire.
But something goes wrong. You fall in love with a boy
who believes everything.
This is rich. You scoff at his dogma,
but how can you love him?
What is this fly-by-night disturbance in your chest?
The sex is terrible, because he says you believe
in nothing, but you know nothing makes sex better
than nothing, letting your body fly
into the dark midden of disbelief.
You hear music in the street, in the uneven surface
of the afternoon.
Too hot the sun falls like a plague of light, squandering
its heat on a world of uncomprehending surfaces.
What is it that you love? You cry, “I don’t know.
I don’t know,”
And it’s funny but you don’t, and you tell him that doubt
is oriental, Chinese to be precise,
and he can kind of get it, but in the end you’re bored,
and he is *de trop*.
“What do you want?” he cries. It’s what they all finally ask

when you can't stand them anymore.
"Not your skinny inauthentic ass, that's for sure,"
you think. Or say, depending on how fed up you are.
But you reflect upon it sometimes, what you want, I mean.
It's not life after death or an ersatz immortality
in the form of a little bundle of joy,
and you have the perfect black dress.
No, it's something in you, what you want to be or do or say,
not courage or anything like that,
but to be thrown into prison and know the lyrics
to all the Motown hits from 1962 to 1973,
including "My Guy" and "Ain't Too Proud to Beg."
It would be important for morale, maybe even start
an insurrection
because you suspect that more than anything,
life is like a play by Samuel Beckett,
which is to say it's sometimes funny and always weird,
and when the lights go out and the curtain closes,
you want to be someone who could stand alone in the dark,
look into the face of God and say,
"You look like him, but let's see the wounds."

Barbara Hamby
89

⁸⁹ [Barbara Hamby](#), "[Doubt](#)," collected in [Delirium](#), [University of North Texas Press](#)

(Kiddie Pool)

Don't take things so personally, Parker. Your anger is fed by snowmelt and advertising. The insurgency began and you were too busy feeling sorry for your latchkey self to fix your own goddamn snack. On August 11, 1985, a small toxic cloud escaped from a Union Carbide plant in Institute, West Virginia, which officials denied contained methyl isocyanate, the chemical that had escaped from another Union Carbide plant and killed 2,000 people in Bhopal, India, the previous December. I despise principals but I got this job to get my mother out of there. You can come in, Jordan Cisco, I don't bite. *If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.* Listen up. When you leave here tonight, walk to the top of Maytime Drive—a mother will run screaming from a split-level, a child limp in her arms. A bigger child will run after her saying they were just playing. She was pouring water from scoops into the plastic mill wheel and her sister was pretending to sleep. She told her to. The mother will collapse on the lawn with the child. Go to her. Tell her the bigger child is right: she is only sleeping. Tell her to give the child a sippy cup.

B.K. Fischer

90

⁹⁰ [B.K. Fischer](#), "[\(Kiddie Pool\)](#)," collected in [Radioapocrypha](#), Ohio State University Press

Yellow Rubber Gloves

Sisters, why bother? The telling is done.
I once fancied myself centaur, sweeping
floors with my tail as my arms sunk deep
into dishwater, half lost, indeed, looking
almost as if they'd been clean topped off.
Mopping up all that blood, rusty strings

on the mop dragging their fat hairs along
the linoleum: I'm never surprised when
someone calls me lady. They may as well
call me a cleaning lady. Though I know
they mean *Lady!* As in, *What the hell do
you think you're doing, Lady?* I am merely

washing dishes. Yours. It makes me want
to give in, adopt those dozen cats, makes
me nervous enough to count how many
cigarettes I've got left. I've seen the lines
inching across my face. I'm wise enough
to know no great plans are afoot, I've no

hope of launching any ships, and, besides,
I'm done with beauty. They say the hands
go first, then the eyes. Then you get a little
pinched, whiskery around the lips. I'm not
adverse to invisibility. I'm already used to
getting shoved aside anyway, sitting small

as a pin between men spreading their legs
on packed subways. I'm the blunt cunt who
should have known long ago it's about time
I shut my fucking hole. But bring my hands
deep into suds, watch me muck with the dirt
of men's dishes, you'll see I really know what

I'm doing. My advice: yellow rubber gloves
will save your hands, young bitches, awful
twats who think you'll never be me. Trust
me as I never trusted myself. We're in this
together. Look at your hands! Who else did
you think he had in mind, undermining your

time by leaving dish after dirty dish behind?
And try using a milder solution. It may bubble
up less, but, being less caustic, the fewer skin
cells it destroys. Who do you sleep beside? Also
lotion is important. Apply it just after washing
dishes and every night before you go to bed.

Cate Marvin
91

⁹¹ [Cate Marvin, "Yellow Rubber Gloves,"](#) collected in [Oracle, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

“A lonely man in his greatness”

Pius XII, who for some unknown reason
always hated flies, rotted in his coffin.
He who had been crowned with such ceremony,
glittering in a bejeweled, ascetic pose, had
the tip of his nose fall off while he reposed
in state. He who had such a delicate stomach
that trains of foodstuffs traveled with him
and yet who, as Europe starved, faced
every heaping plate as if *opening a warrant*,
who was so parsed, he said nothing of the Jews;
who *smelled of the absence of all scents*,
who lifted his arms in a gesture of *immolation*
and said nothing for the Jews, who had himself
filmed carrying a lamb on his shoulders, who
required that *no human presence should mar*
his daily stroll in the gardens, whose odor
of sanctity was antiseptic doused on his hands
and linens, from whom the workers hid
in the bushes rather than disturb the *pure white wraith*,
who would not sanctify those who smoked
or uttered a single curse, who would say nothing
to the Jews, rotted in his coffin. The doctor
who tended to his strange undiagnosed ailments
embalmed his body with a technique
that failed like the Concordant with Hitler,
though, in a sense, it was successful,
elevating the absolute power of the Pope,
as his coffin was elevated through the streets
of Rome. As the trinity of coffin, one nested
inside the other, passed from the caecum
of Saint Peter's, past the appendix of the archives,
to the colic streets, through the gates of Ileum,
the bowels of the city itself, strange noises,
of belches, flatulence, erupted from the corpse
of the Angelic Shepherd—like the earth
in many places in Europe, even in 1958
still rising and falling to the noises of death.

Rebecca Seiferle
92

⁹² [Rebecca Seiferle](#), “[A lonely man in his greatness](#),” [Archipelago](#), collected in [Bitters](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

The Grasshopper and the Cricket

The poetry of earth is a ninety-year-old woman
in front of a slot machine in a casino in California.

She is wearing a gray dress, her sharp red lipstick
in two lines across her mouth, put there

by a daughter. Like Gertrude Stein's, her hair
is cut close. Nearby is her wheelchair, painted blue

like a boy's bicycle. It is a weekday in March,
the casino is the size of a hangar that could house

a dozen planes, but it is thousands of machines
that fill the eye, an event of light and color.

The sentences she now speaks are like the sentences
of Gertrude Stein, without the ironies of art.

Time is like a compressed accordion, the farthest
points now near, more present than the present.

Waiting, I am at the food court, reading a magazine
article about the languages the world is losing.

The languages spoken by a few remaining
people. Or by one remaining person. Or lost

totally, except for the grainy recordings in archives,
mysterious as the sounds made by extinct birds.

The reels on her machine spin, their symbols
never matching. She is playing the one-cent slots,

and her money will go far into the afternoon.
And because waiting is thinking, I am thinking

of the eternity Keats writes about in the sonnet
about the grasshopper and the cricket, *ceasing never*

in the hedges and meadows, in the evening stove,
the grasshopper of summer, the cricket of winter.

Rick Barot
93

⁹³ Rick Barot, "The Grasshopper and the Cricket," *Threepenny Review*, collected in *The Galleons*, Milkweed Editions

A Natural History of Columbine

When I met her she was playing her part
as the maiden who could not speak.
It was the Romantic Era, when mime
was still a sort of serious ballet, not yet
a circus act. Poor Columbine, always
being dragged by Harlequin from one side
of the stage to the other. This too because
it was an era when consent had not been
invented yet, so if she says yes or if she says
no, if she fights or if she succumbs—
these are not meaningful distinctions
for an audience so full of worries about
what will happen to them, regardless
of what they ask for. Columbine is a prop
the people have invested with strong
feelings of pity and concern. She is
a metaphor with a pretty body.

In this silent phase she could not say
whether she knew her name means dove,
a meaning she shares with the flower
whose blossoms hang in clusters like a cote
of birds brooding. She could not answer
whether her vow of silence came with
a vow of forgetting. Does she remember
how once upon a time a mother
or a midwife or an old witch at the edge
of town could give you a tincture of crushed
columbine in white wine to induce miscarriage?
Does she remember this is why she was
once known as the flower of unbridled
lust? That men crushed in their hands
her musk-scented seeds for courage
and virility? That lions ate her flower in spring
for strength? That the spur at the back
of the blossom looks as much like the talon
of an eagle as it does a slipper en pointe.

The good advice is always to know thyself.
As if any of us is walking around knowing
they are not knowing themselves.

Columbine cries with her whole body
under the blue lights. She leans like a plant
on one toe after Pierrot, the lovelorn clown
in white who has neither the financial

wherewithal nor the violent disposition
to circumvent Harlequin's ambitions. But just
when you think there is no hope, a fairy
descends to swirl everyone off in a tempest
to the clouds where the dancing is more merry
and minor characters are turned into lobsters.

Then intermission.

If you are studying the history of theater
and comedy, you might think of Columbine
as the granddaughter of Punch and Judy,
the famous medieval hand puppets.
Punch would hit Judy. Judy would hit
Punch. Sometimes they used bats.
The audience cheered and threw coins
in the hat. Columbine, the dancing beauty,
was there but not there, learning how funny
it was to see a man beat a woman bloody.
She tried to laugh along. Back then everyone
said Columbine blossoms looked like
jester hats so they called her the flower
of folly and foolishness and chuckled
to muss the little girl's hair when they passed
her, off at the side of the stage, waiting
for her folks to wash their faces clean
and set the dinner table. A day was coming
when she'd paint her forehead pale and rouge
her cheeks too. When she'd crimson her lips
into the pucker of two unfurling petals. The people
always thinking they want something new,
would clamor for Harlequin's Columbine,
not Judy's Punch, even as they meant Judy's
Punch, not Pierrot's Columbine.

The years circle their tastes round and round.
Being myself more a Punch than a Columbine,
I say Pierrot would have done better to show
himself the affection he made into those relentless
invisible flowers with the dance of his silent
hands. His mooning about is so tedious.
And I suspect Harlequin wants nothing
more than the kiss of a stinging slap, though
I'm not so naive as not to realize it might
be that he is another one of these who can
be satisfied by nothing but what he takes.

Oh this audience, with their handkerchiefs
to their eyes, as if this story represents

the meaning of their lives. You know
she's not even real, right? That she never was?
You can't be her, you can't be the clown
that had her. You can only be this scuttling
lobster the fairy won't change back, even now
that the curtain has fallen. Pierrot has bowed
with Columbine and Harlequin bowed
with Pierrot and Columbine dipped her curtsy
once more with the mayor and the magistrate
and the can-can girls, all these extras still
wearing their claws and boiled red leggings.

Lobsters can't talk either, though they can clap
after a fashion, so long as they have not
been rubber-banded and their clacking
is not lost beneath the roar of those crashing
waves. The meaning of their pantomime
is impenetrable and will come to replace
clowns and maidens as the archetypal figures
at the center of the Theater of the Absurd,
which is a kind of ballet and a kind of circus
that amuses the intelligentsia until it is
supplanted in another generation by
Artaud's theories of the Art of Cruelty,
when we watch a man shave his own eyeball
on the screen while dipping ourselves and others
in a rich butter sauce, with no idea how
it makes more sense than any of the gestures
that came before. Our mother, the flower,
our father, the joke, these are the stories we tell
our children over this glass of sparkling
white wine, letting them watch each little
bubble rise to the surface and pop, because,
as usual, we are at a loss for words as to why
we made some choices but not others, gave
ourselves, over to this clown but not that one.

Kathryn Nuernberger

94

⁹⁴ [Kathryn Nuernberger](#), "[A Natural History of Columbine](#)," *Origins*, collected in [Rue](#), [BOA Editions. Ltd.](#)

Some Little Movie

Lousy with suicides
the unicycle paths, lousy

with umbrellas
the Olympic pool

and I am dismantled
by the love I suspect

in the air, I hear the ocean
in your question,

yeah, yeah and beside
the crosswalk, a man

playing an accordion.
This can be one movie.

This can tattoo
one thousand little movies

like a window shattered
into a delta of glass

teeth. Sequins. Freckles.
The man is young,

the man is wearing
a facsimile of the hats

worn by those bent
on ascending the Alps

in movies about
ascending the Alps.

I fix something
and two other somethings

break. You know this,
you know what it is

to walk all the way home
carrying a live coal,

tripping through
an upset reliquary

like a clumsy risk
whose equilibrium

has never not
been crippled.

You know I won't stop
asking by breathing

to carry this cup
as far as you want.

Marc McKee
95

⁹⁵ [Marc McKee](#), "[Some Little Movie](#)," [Absent](#), collected in [Meta Meta Make-Belief](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

Saint Monica and the Itch

Used to be she only had eyes for the uncles, for the fifteen years older, the stiff dark jeans her girlfriends would giggle at, the men in t-shirts reading *Moustache Rides 5¢*, confusing Monica because were clean shaven. The boys in her class were doughy and pimpled, always lurching into her in the hall and dropping their pencils. At the county fair Monica lingered in the horse barn, her sandals gathering quills of straw. It was the way Jeff Spatz flicked manure out of a hoof while lighting a cigarette in the other hand, his four white-haired sons stabbing each other with miniature American flags, wife giving the evil eye over a funnel cake. It was Brigit McPherson's neighbor with the motorboat, a six-pack in the cooler, the way his hands moved under her swimsuit and up the back of her neck, *You hold on like this*—she'd never gone water skiing before—*It's like this*—Brigit draped in her Looney Tunes beach towel—*That's it, good girl*. They drove exotic cars, like Mazdas, had a ziplock of weed stashed in the glove box or a joint already rolled and tucked into a pocket. They had tan lines around their wedding rings, worked jobs in air conditioner repair or tool and die, wore terrycloth headbands in summer and mowed the lawn shirtless, claimed a latex allergy but not to worry, they knew what to do. After all, they were twenty-nine or thirty-four, shift managers or certified welders, checked themselves into hotels as Mr. Hanson or Mr. Stan Rusk. Monica's homecoming date was mistaken for a chaperone—they even gave him a clipboard and flashlight for peering under the bleachers—until the principal got wise and called the police. She was left with boys taking bets on how many snickerdoodles they could stuff into their mouths at once, a good Tesla song wasted. Eighteen years later she would dream her way back into that gymnasium, while Randy from next door trimmed the hedges. Jason was out of town on business. The children pressed their noses to the screen, watching each thwack to the arborvitae. Randy wore a t-shirt with *FINISH WHAT YOU STARTED* on the back. Monica wondered what was on the front and offered him some lemonade, only he didn't hear her. He was wearing the tiny headphones that fit inside your ears. Randy was nineteen and had just dropped out of college, come home with a four-inch tattoo on his left calf: a skull with a snake winding through the eye socket. What was it about the way sweat lingered on his collarbone, his hand uncalled for as he reached for the lemonade when she asked a second time? Through the lens of the glass tumbler he was backlit like a dashboard, and Monica's face blurred into the aluminum siding. She was thirty-five and knew just what to do. The shrubs shook their goldfinches onto the driveway, and a thunderhead framed the steeple at St. Paul's. Later she would stand an extra minute at the curb, run her fingers along the flagstones as if they were covered with skin.

Mary Biddinger
96

⁹⁶ Mary Biddinger, "Saint Monica and the Itch," *The Laurel Review*, collected in *Saint Monica*, Black Lawrence Press

Death by Chocolate

A man wants my take on his novel
where a wife dies with a peanut in her mouth
after we've met her husband, in the act with his secretary
in the passenger seat of a late-life convertible.
A man wants my take on his novel
where the husband's marital issues are solved
by her anaphylactic collapse after he serves her takeout
spiked with a cashew, and for another 300 pages
he wonders, *Was it an accident? Or did I
know?* Somewhere out there a man
is writing a novel about a chef with a taste
for adding shrimp paste to curry and his unsuspecting
shellfish-allergic wife, and I will be asked
for my take on it. I have been offered dozens of takes
on my own death. Suggestions abound.
Death by ice cream. Death by cake. Death by cucumber,
though that would take awhile;
perhaps gazpacho as a shortcut. *Death by mango.*
Death by Spanish omelet. Death by dairy,
an abstraction sexy to someone who has never side-eyed
cream brought out slopping toward the coffee;
who has never felt histamine's palm at her throat,
who says *Cheese makes life worth living.*
These wives! I see you, women who
did not grow up aspiring to be a plot device.
We almost die a lot. Or: we die a lot,
almost. We're over it. Our mouths have more to say.

Sandra Beasley
97

⁹⁷ Sandra Beasley, "[Death by Chocolate](#)," [The New York Times](#), collected in [Made to Explode](#), W. W. Norton & Company

Smokey

the most dangerous men
in my neighborhood
only listened to love songs

to reach those notes
a musicologist told me
a man essentially cuts

his own throat. some nights
even now, i'll hear a falsetto
and think i should run

Amaud Jamaul Johnson

98

⁹⁸ [Amaud Jamaul Johnson](#), "[Smokey](#)," [Arkansas International Review](#), collected in [Imperial Liquor](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

To the woman who accused me of not being a feminist, I'm sorry

for pointing out that we are subject to
& act upon the same ugly desires

that fuel the men who've used us.
I apologize for every time I've confessed

I need a man's love, & meant it.
Forgive me, please, for continuing

to believe that roses are beautiful.
Pardon me for loving them more as they wilt,

heavy with dreams of being scattered
down wedding aisles. It's true:

the mornings I'm coated in sweat & come
& hear the train heaving over the river

past smokestacks pushing up their innards
I don't pause to consider how the world is home

to a million angry phalluses.
Can you blame me? Look at my man

lying there soaked in what light makes
it through the curtains—his thin

& gorgeous mouth slack & silenced
by pleasure our body afforded him.

You can't tell me women should feel ashamed
of their impulse to please—

that we should cast each breast in iron
& march into the day daring it to try & love us.

I am not sorry I mirror the desire
none of us can fend off.

If you insist, I will leave you
to your heavy-breasted troops

& climb back into bed
where I'll resume my life's work.

Katie Condon

⁹⁹ [Katie Condon](#), "[To the woman who accused me of not being a feminist. I'm sorry.](#)" *Narrative*, collected in [Praying Naked](#), [Ohio State University Press](#)

Florida Again

I forgave myself for having had a youth.
—Thom Gunn

At the Fashion
Square mall,
back
of Waldenbooks,

I see my younger self
haunting
the magazine rack.
Ripping out pages

of *Blueboy*,
tucking them
in a Trapper
Keeper.

Turn back.
His eyes meet mine,
animal
and brittle,

a form
of gratitude
that a man
kept his stare.

Any man.
I half-smile
some admission,
and though

he cannot
see it coming,
I excuse him
his acid jeans;

two Swatch
watches,
two guards.
He, I,

must be
nineteen:
sex was “safer”
then—

scribbles
on the mall
men's room stall;
malaise

of saxophone
and PSAs.
How
did I

even
learn how to live
in 1991?
Landlocked,

cock-blocked,
Spanish moss
festering.
I forgive him.

Randall Mann
100

¹⁰⁰ [Randall Mann](#), "[Florida Again](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [A Better Life](#), [Persea Books](#)

Ann Arbor, 1974

Sky bruising purple when I stuck out
my thumb and caught a fast ride
west in a spoke-wheeled Cadillac
with three geezers who passed

a silver flask of Scotch, honeyed
with age, and even I sang along
with Sinatra on the car stereo, soprano
blanketing their reedy tenors, all the way

to South Bend where the driver
handed me a Hershey bar and a wad
of ones. I played pinball for hours
at the Greyhound station, high

on horsepower and whiskey,
an eternity before the bus
chuffed in. How is it that time
is slow and heavy as an elephant

when you're young and impatient to get
to the next second? Now, the merry-
go-round of years, a heartbeat
between Christmases. It's like you

go out a girl who can honky tonk
all night and come home old, smelling
of spiced apples and cat, fat
with memories coding your bones.

Sarah Freligh
101

¹⁰¹ [Sarah Freligh, "Ann Arbor, 1974," diode](#), collected in [We](#), [Small Harbor Publishing](#)

from "After Damascus"

5.

Your paperback of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
sank into the motel bathtub, was fat
and seeping when you plucked it back. Outside,
old people shrieked for the bus.
Played games of chance with bones
from the roadkill beside the curb.
The bus never came. There was no bus.
On desiccated stationery,
you drew a square
with knobby wheels and a few windows.
Stick people stared out. At you.
You threw the book out the door,
praying they'd shut up or scatter.
All night long
no one noticed
the hiss of oxygen tanks,
the electric clack of wheelchairs,
and the chirping alarms of the world's congestive failures
at your door. You missed
the book you'd stolen from a library
in the next town over. Why
you had picked it made no sense.
Everything was pitiable. Above the bed
the room's sallow light hummed
and wouldn't shut off. The mattress felt like straw.
You figured it wouldn't be long
before you found work again
in a mine or as a museum decent.
Whatever that meant. *Decent*. You liked the word
like the matches you kept
in your pocket like identification.
There was more to your story,
you always said if you were asked.

Paul Guest

102

¹⁰² [Paul Guest, "After Damascus: 5," *The Greensboro Review*](#), collected in [Because Everything is Terrible, Diode Editions](#)

from "13th Balloon"

One of the only facts I can find
online about you is wrong

You didn't die on a Saturday Night
you died on a Tuesday
It was a Tuesday morning the sun was frozen
and Mars or Venus barely glowed somewhere
or Mars was hidden in Tuesday
or Venus had broken into a billion splinters
of ice and covered the grass
outside the hospital
and the sun dragged with it your death
from the frozen pit
out of which daily it rises

Unless I too am wrong and Thursday
was the day
the nurse called and told us *It's time you should
come now he's getting ready to go*

Ready to go after how many times we thought
you were going or were ready
to go or had gone
 after how many times I'd arrive
 at the hospital
thinking it would be the last
only to find you
sitting up doped up cockeyed grinning

You'd lift your head a little
and say *Hey what'd you bring me Boo*
and I'd climb into the bed
with you and say *Nothing good just me*

Mark Bibbins
103

¹⁰³ [Mark Bibbins, "13th Balloon \[One of the only facts I can find\],"](#) collected in [13th Balloon](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Midwinter

Midwinter.
She lets the darkness
sit down beside her.
Some nights
she walks through the pasture
and out of her body.
Some nights she sits
in the Studebaker
junked by the millpond
and dials through the radio,
the electricity of Jupiter
hijacking the AM frequencies
with its ocean sounds,
its static code, a coyote
whose mouth is stuffed
with volts and rust.
Tonight she sits at the kitchen table.
She could be over the bay,
high enough to see
that it's shaped like a rabbit
hanging limp
from the jaws of the landscape.
She hasn't spoken
in days—she's afraid
what comes alive at night
will break if she talks about it.
The wives of the Legionnaires
bring her food once a week,
and a Bible the size of a steam iron.
She packs up her china
each afternoon,
then unpacks it before bed.

She could be flying
the way it looks
with all this fog gusting by.

Michael McGriff
104

¹⁰⁴ [Michael McGriff](#), "Midwinter," [The Missouri Review](#), collected in [Home Burial](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Someone Else's Mother

Helena Joy drank pickle juice from the jar, stole
my green nail polish, egged her humping rabbits on, killed
the basement light so I couldn't find my hands, cracked
too many eggs into the batter, enjoyed the hatch & fester
of a lie in her mouth, named every doll after herself, tore
fake bills out of my fists & claimed the game, carefully laid
three drawings on the rug: legs, torso, face of some man
& ground her hips against him. In her dusty Victorian
with nibbled chalk in the driveway & a circular pool in the back,
chewed her long braid & poured syrup. When maggots galloped
from the bottle's lip onto our pancakes her body chose
a laugh. But unlike her I couldn't leave them, or, they wouldn't
leave me. Later, I climbed the ladder & edged the lip of the
pool, plastic blue tarp sealing it for autumn, & fell in, writhing
in my sudden coffin. My useless hands grasped no rail until
it was her mother, three hundred pounds lifting me,
having heard the splash from the living room & run fast,
fastest to me, my own mother behind her.

Shira Erlichman

105

105 [Shira Erlichman](#), "Someone Else's Mother," *NAILED*, collected in [Odes to Lithium](#), [Alice James Books](#)

Sentence

after Don McKay

I crawl back he unpacks his tools
oils the wooden handles rinses the metal

fragrant his thighs fragrant his sneer

koi & eternity inked on his skin an ecstatic
blue a bewildered green

some wounds are ovals some wounds are opals
the ears of a white wolf pivot toward the moon

I flee now & then alone in the desert for months
a nomad in a kimono of pressed-together dust

beautiful his throat his words even more beautiful
“it’s my turn to ask for a bit more from you”

he likes it when I bleed strangers once

gently he hammers gold into a sentence gently
the sentence enters me

Eduardo C. Corral
106

106 [Eduardo C. Corral](#), “[Sentence](#),” collected in [Guillotine](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Belfast Standard Time

for Raymond Lennon

Whenever I was born in Belfast. Whenever
I grew up on the Shankill. The Falls.

Newtownards Road. Whenever
there was a bomb threat. Whenever the RUC

barricaded the street. In security.
Whenever I walked to school, I avoided

the wall. Whenever I met a Catholic
for the first time, I was already at university.

Whenever we were burned out
our house. Whenever we burned

our fingers lighting the Pope for King Billy.
Whenever we hurled a petrol bomb.

Whenever we remembered the Somme
on Remembrance Day. Whenever

we neared the wall to lay the wreath.
Whenever we were spread-eagled and leaning

against the wall, the rifle spreading
us further. Whenever I looked down to check

the time on my wrist. Whenever the bomb.
I wished I could have told my father

whenever he was alive, how much
I. Whenever I was thrown

three hundred feet. Whenever I was blown
out of my shoes. Whenever I heard

a woman wailing, I thought, why don't you
shut your bloody mouth? Whenever

I don't forgive them. Whenever I hear
the likes of them are statesmen

shaking the hands of the Queen, I think
of my father—whenever he met me

whenever I came home, he took my hand so hard
my whole body quaked. Whenever

we came back from the funeral, my hand
ached from shaking

everyone else's hand.

Philip Metres
107

¹⁰⁷ [Philip Metres, "Belfast Standard Time," *The Rumpus*](#)

Miss October

If I have to be a playmate
In my time on earth
I want to be the girl
Of drifting leaves, cold cheeks

And passionate regrets.
I think Hef loves October best
Because although he cannot
Say so, he is *this* close

To death. December
In its stealth has hung
Long spikes of ice
Around his sagging ears, his

Sex. So in October
I'll be the centerfold of gay
Pretense, the girl who says
We're at our blondest

And most perilously beautiful
Right before we check out
Of the manse.
Soon all Hef's dreaming

Will be ash, his favorite pipe
And smoking jacket,
Last vial of Viagra
Safely under glass

At the Smithsonian.
When my shelf life here
Is done and all the damp
Boys stealing glimpses

At the newsstands
Are old men, I want them
To remember how many
Playmate-months

Are gone, how many rooms
Stand empty, shutters
Drawn, the last girls slipped
Away in bright October.

Rachel Loden

¹⁰⁸ [Rachel Loden](#), "[Miss October](#)," collected in [Dick of the Dead](#), Ahsahta Press

Nursery

We opened the door to the fairy house
& took our tea on matching pebble seats.
Somehow we got out of there alive

though something crystalline of us
remains in that dark, growing its facets.
We opened the door to the fairy house

at the oak's black ankle. You asked
What could happen? as you disappeared
somehow. We got out of there alive

the strange tea still warm in our bellies.
Inside, our hosts gave damn few answers.
Who built that door? Is this a fairy house?

They had no faces yet. We spoke
into their quince-bud ears. You wept.
Somehow we got out of there alive

though we didn't quite return. Our life
is different now we've drunk the tea.
They're alive somehow. I got us out.
Why did you open the door to the fairy house?

Kiki Petrosino
109

¹⁰⁹ [Kiki Petrosino](#), "Nursery," *Poetry*, collected in [Witch Wife](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Weaning, I Listen to Paganini's Concerto, No. 1

When I'm alone my tits scream
while the refrigerator

hums like a man nodding
off behind me on the bus.

There is never any food
I want to eat and I am ravenous

all the time: soft-boiled
eggs and mint tea. Milk

thick as leftover grease
stored under the sink.

My friend is a dairy farmer,
which means she delivers

cows, pulls velvety hooves
from gaping maws like psalms

into the muck and wet
hay. We haven't spoken

since my daughter was born
but maybe our friendship

ended when I was eight months
pregnant and she told me about

a stillbirth over the phone,
how the mother

kept licking the calf's body
drowned in dull light

and I couldn't un-hear
her voice, no matter how much

I believed it might unstitch
me from my own grief,

the way I became no more
or less beautiful

when I became a mother,
more like the perpetual

frost of astonishment
across a windshield,

more like I was doubled
and emptied, permanently

bent as if tending to a wound
or some unspeakable joy.

Kendra DeColo

110

¹¹⁰ [Kendra DeColo, "Weaning, I Listen to Paganini's Concerto, No. 1," *Tin House*, collected in *I am Not Trying to Hide My Hungers from the World*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

At the Haunted Doll Market

<http://haunteddollsforale.com/>

They call buying them adoption.
The seller knows Betty doll drowned
in a lake because she told him
through his radio scanner, said the words
water, Robert, boat, tree, under, and her name.

And sometimes I listen to my downstairs neighbor
beat his girlfriend. He did twenty-four
years before the state admitted
he was wrongly incarcerated. Pretty sure
I'm not scared of him, but I don't call
the cops either.

Some couples get a doll
because they can't have children,
and each handwritten purchase agreement
begins with a promise that Betty,
or Bianca, would love to join a good
spirit family.

Every morning, my neighbor
helps his daughter up the steep stairs
onto her school bus. Sometimes his girlfriend
comes running to the curb with a book,
or forgotten lunch.

Dresses and new hairstyles
are essential to happiness, reads the tag
on Bianca; Betty's says she's *good with dogs*,
but hates birds. Vendors have
different theories to explain how
a spirit can enter an object.

My neighbor's girlfriend isn't the mother
of his child. I know because
he calls her a *dumb barren cunt*.
In nice weather, all three of them spend
evenings out on their patio. He pumps iron.
She braids his daughter's hair, yells at her
when she won't stay perfectly still.

Keith Kopka
111

¹¹¹ [Keith Kopka](#), "[At the Haunted Doll Market](#)," [The Journal](#), collected in [Count Four](#), University of Tampa Press

The Wheel of Fortune

is flat and I don't have a jack
or a tire iron, or a clue how to use
one except maybe to kill a man

but it keeps spinning anyway
all wobbly and with that *thwump*
thwump of a thing that should
be round but isn't

and the people passing me
are gesturing wildly out
their windows and I just
wave back

gripping the wheel like the stem
of a wine glass or a penis I don't
know how to operate, and I'd like
to buy a vowel

whichever one will allow me
the longest uninterrupted scream
I'd like to spin again and again
until it's time to go back

to my dressing room, wipe off
my eyebrows, shuck this girdle,
and pour a glass of whatever will
blur the letters

into a puddle of spilled ambition,
and think about how I got here,
what series of accidents led
to these high heels,

this vacant smile, this shiny
new car spinning on its lazy Susan,
glittering and depreciating
by the second,

its hubcaps gleaming under
the studio lights, begging
take me, take me, I am yours
for the taking

Suzanne Langlois

¹¹² [Suzanne Langlois](#), "[The Wheel of Fortune](#)," [Cider Press Review](#), collected in [Bright Glint Gone](#), [Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance](#)

Berkeley in the Nineties

again for C. & J.

Too late for hippie heyday
& too young to be yuppies
we wandered creeksides & used bookstores.
There were still so many movie theaters.
Our parents marched against the many wars
& fed us carob chips. We foraged
in free boxes for old wrap skirts
but had absorbed consumerist desire,
& also longed for new J. Crew.
There was no internet yet & so we listened
to Steve Miller Band on repeat
& cut geometry to skinny dip
in the Essex Street hot tub.
We knew the code, just as we knew
to disapprove of America.
We walked out of high school
after Rodney King. We helped our mothers
shop for bulk oats at the Co-op.
We felt we could & couldn't
solve it. We could say *systemic racism*
but couldn't name yet how our lives were implicated.
We drove our grandmothers' Volvos up Marin
& watched the spangled world
from Grizzly Peak. We climbed Mount Diablo
in spring rain. We learned
the meaning of the word *hegemony*
but thought the word itself was hegemonic.
We got high to the patter of the windchimes.
When we missed our friends
we wandered to the farmers market
for bruised peaches. Bruised peaches were
our kind of revolution. There was not internet yet & so
we made elaborate cutout flyers to invite
our friends to picnics up at Codornices.
Bodies in space were revolution.
Some of us were feminist & queer.
Some of us wore wool sailor pants
& passed out at bad university parties.
Oh my god, that was embarrassing.
Some of us cut class to spend
days reading in the dank public library.
Alone in our aloneness we fumbled
with one another's bodies
in dim alleyways near City Lights.
Our revolution: under cherry blossoms,

reading Virgil. One of us made red
mushroomy kombucha. One of us
taught the others to eat burdock.
The burdock eating didn't really take.
Some days we paid the toll
for people behind us
on the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge.
At Steep Ravine howled Whitman at the sea.
Most days, we were a crumbling outpost. Nearby
the street preacher, Paul of the Pillar,
spoke in helter-skelter baritones from
liberated air on the Cal campus.
We too believed in liberated air & some nights
bought Paul sausages at Top Dog.
Under the Campanile, we discussed
how Ginsburg was a sellout now because he posed
for Gap ads in wide-legged chinos.
Chinos were not the revolution.
Trigonometry was not the revolution.
We memorized short poems by D.H. Lawrence.
We were quick fish who read
Gary Snyder in someone's dad's Mendocino cabin.
Some of us climbed ferny gullies
on winter solstice & got topless.
Decorated each other in white reindeer lichen.
Recited the *Tao Te Ching*. Had sex on a cliff.
Reindeer lichen was the revolution.
Our new breasts in rain were revolution.
We craved transcendental revelations,
the radical & burning future:
We lobbied for condoms in the high school bathrooms
even though the bathrooms needed toilet paper—

Tess Taylor
113

¹¹³ [Tess Taylor](#), "[Berkeley in the Nineties](#)," [At Length](#), collected in [Rift Zone](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

Elegy in an Orchard

It's only now, in the spring of my forty-fourth year,
that I come to understand there's a proper way
to read a poet. Larry Levis, for example,
is to be read late at night in bed by the weak flame
of an old flashlight, while the plumbing
aches in the walls and the branches of the oak
scrape the upstairs window. Only this way
can I lean into his California, its dusty vines and old stars,
which, however dead they were then, were closer
to being alive than they are now

in *this* California, where I lie awake
in a red barn at the edge of Branciforte Creek
as the coyotes proclaim their victory over the furred body
of their latest kill, and the frogs crouch in the pond discussing
their wet underworld of sex.

And I find I've begun to talk to him, the poet,
who, I imagine, still attends to these lines
the way the spirit of a river was once said to dwell
in the river's bed. And so I tell him what I know about beauty,
or, at least, what I'm thinking of it now—what I see
outside the window when I get up to pee—a pear orchard
by moonlight, the black shadows of bats
swooping down between the trees

And something else—the yellow pickling jars by the shed.
A tractor left abandoned within the field, adorned now, by its bloom
of rust. *Isn't the heart, too, improved by a little wear?*
I ask, as if he's listening, though I can feel him
see his heavy-lidded eyes as he nods, stokes the stubble on his jaw.

But his mind is elsewhere, traverses a vastness I can't see,
the rough particles of stars grazing his ghostly lungs.
I want to know if he misses the crickets' steady dirge,
the weight of a wool blanket, a pen's satisfying scratch
on a clean, white page.

Once, a man told me he wanted to be near me
because he wanted to make beauty, pull it from the world
like a gold thread. Which we did—or tried to—for a while,
sitting up late at night with our notebooks, knees almost touching,
as we unfurled spools of language.

Which is why I am leaning into Larry Levis

at this hour, turning the pages of this slim volume
and folding back the corners. Even his absence
is a kind of beauty. Let me be a guardian
 of such absence, make a small altar to it
in the center of my chest. Not for flame
or proffered fruit, or even a wisp of scented smoke. A hole
you can't fill with anything and so it fills with silence
and dust.

Danusha Laméris

114

¹¹⁴ [Danusha Laméris, "Elegy in an Orchard," *Miramar*, collected in *Bonfire Opera*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

I Used to Be Able to Listen to Sad Songs

but that was before they started strutting
around with rocks in their fists, started
kicking the backs of my knees so that I
crumpled right there on the asphalt,
their faces streaming tears all the while.
That was before they started showing me
the switchblades in their boots. Before
the twisted arms and sucker punches.

Once, the songs slept soft beside me.
Their eyes were like moons
and they never closed them, so all night
I dreamed under lunar beams and woke
each morning sky-lit. But then I learned
that the earth is infinitesimally slowing
its spin. Then I learned that we're born
with more bones than we die with. The songs
started growling sometimes when I wanted
to cuddle. The songs started cracking their knuckles.
One morning I caught one filing its teeth.
That was when the problems started.

Now I armor myself in hand claps and tambourines.
I've honed a trigger instinct with the radio.
But sometimes I'm walking down a boardwalk
in the safe, bright sun, seagulls dipping overhead,
cotton candy spilling from every hand,
and there they are, locking step beside me
past the ring toss, the arcade. It doesn't matter
how fast I turn away. *Hello again*, they whisper.
You can't run forever. And then I know the ocean
is there but damned if I can find its crashing.

Catherine Pierce

115

¹¹⁵ [Catherine Pierce](#), "[I Used to Be Able to Listen to Sad Songs](#)," *diode*, collected in [The Tornado is the World](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

For Ilya at Tsarkoe Selo

We stand at the casement window of Pushkin's Lycée.
These are the desks where Pushkin wrote, his chalkboards, his astrolabe.
Snow falls from here into the past and vanishes on golden minarets.
Snow recedes from the birches. A lesson writes itself in winter chalk:
On the day Michelangelo died in Rome, Galileo was born in Pisa.
Isaac Newton was born the year Galileo died. When they searched for
the poet Kabir, they found nothing beneath his shroud but a sprig of jasmine.
Man is like the statue whispering about the marble chiseled from his mouth.
You are the guardian of this statue, standing in your silent world.
The year Isaac Newton died, there was a barn fire during a puppet show.
Kabir says all corpses go to the same place, and the world has fallen
in love with a dream. This life is not the same as your other life.
We are here now in one of the shrines of the silver poets.
You are one of the silver. The snow is a white peacock in a Russian poem.

Carolyn Forché
116

¹¹⁶ [Carolyn Forché](#), "[For Ilya at Tsarkoe Selo](#)," [Poetry London](#), collected in [In the Lateness of the World](#), [Penguin Books](#)

The First Boy I Thought I Loved Was in a Band Called Romanticide

after I broke up with him He used to call me
dumb
as a way of flirting A man came
uninvited
to the house the other day
and I stood
on the other side of the locked storm
door, the dog a low
growl at my heel The man pleaded
for me to *open up*
and take
the free gift of laundry detergent
out of his hands
so he could show me what else
he had My father told me
to always be in a position of leverage, to maintain
a range
of motion so I could always turn
away or into
an assailant's grip and get away Lately, my husband
has been sleeping
on the sofa and so I've learned
how to

stretch my body out as far as it will
go to the mattress
corners to take up space and dream
of her
who made strong the wound by honoring
the tender
scar that men are
always reaching out to touch without
asking and asking, *did you*
get that in a cat fight, sweetheart without a question
mark at the end because they don't care
about the answer only
that they define the violence I was followed by
a car for ten minutes and at a traffic
light the passenger leaned
out his window and yelled, *I'd love*
to pound your cunt to pulp
while my buddy rips your ass
apart Some mornings when I wake
I think I can
unthink my body, to make it salt or sand—
my head the top
chamber of a halved hourglass
spilling
into the wind, but I'm trying

not to violence

myself as a way to protect *this*

will make a kind of tongue

should mine be pulled out,

I think while looking at the end

of my soft-worn belt and not at the blue-scarred abdomen

in the mirror in which I dress.

Emilia Phillips
117

¹¹⁷ [Emilia Phillips, "The First Boy I Thought I Loved Was in a Band Called Romanticide," *The Adroit Journal*, collected in *Embouchure*, The University of Akron Press](#)

Gifts from the Dead

A student said, I've been studying
your line breaks and can't figure out
how they work. I couldn't
explain. All those years they
fought their way to the surface
like cats in a bag. But Lucille
must have given me
breath, because after she died, I
noticed my lines
started to look
a lot like hers! She had told me,
when you lose the flesh
you gain more power. In fact,
that's the only gold
a poet counts on: the power
to give it away. When Ruth Stone
died, she gave me
a new way
to pick up words, like those
silver claws in grocery
stores that pick up
stuffed animals and this time they
don't leap away. Ruth had said, just
put your hand
up in the universe and a poem
will jump in. It's crazy
to trust yourself
like that! But, now,
I'm learning how
to live.
Even when she was getting chemo
twice a week, Lucille would go
anywhere they asked—Australia, Alaska—
carrying her thirty-pound purse, which she would never
give up. No matter how we
warned her, she
did it for nothing! On her deathbed, she wouldn't leave
until her daughters promised,
We'll be all right. You can let go.
Ruthie, starlit, ribboned
and silked, fragile-skinned, like a coat from a Chinese
wardrobe in the Middlebury
Goodwill, told us
she wasn't going to
die. That evening,
after we sank her

down in the hole they had
clawed out that morning,
we sat around the table
where Marcia had planed
the pine slats of her casket
just the day before (her last words,
Marcia said, spoken really
to herself, *Everyone
has to die*), spooning her favorite—
Kozy Shack rice pudding—
right out of the plastic.

Toi Derricotte
118

¹¹⁸ [Toi Derricotte, "Gifts from the Dead," collected in *I: New and Selected Poems*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Husbandry

The working cocker mounts my 10-pound Dachshund; earlier he humped his great-grandmother. It's for once not raining, and the two dogs are lit up from behind by the setting sun, the dying-Muppet sheep sounds so loud that we have to keep saying What? The ram is soon to be outfitted with a crayon that will mark the ewes he mates with because most of the lambs in the field were surprises. Though the ghosts of many farmers stand within me, I'm more Monsanto and McMansion-spotted bean fields than what is bred here. When I was a tired divorcee in Indiana, women young and old stood mightily between me and their husbands, afraid that when I stopped being sad I would be ready to mate. Now breeding permeates the air like an ocean of ground squirrels I saw once: writhing and undulating, each separate, but swarmed together into a sheet of tribal, comforted fur.

Julia Story
119

¹¹⁹ [Julia Story](#), "[Husbandry](#)," collected in [Spinster for Hire](#), [The Word Works](#)

Self-Portrait as Medic

I am stained by this war,
and who wouldn't be,
staggering into the traffic
in the square, blood soaking
my uniform, my mind poured out.

How to say what I could have
asked for instead—a vase? A lovely scarf?
How can I return to being
pale, freckled and wanting?

You are my duty and my dulling;
it's a row of you moaning.
I hold all your greasy heads.
I change my clothes, a little

more gone in the hourglass,
in my shoes, in the radio,
in the surgery, blood soaking
the beloved warm and I love

your wounds more than my own,
soldiers, with my clean hands,
fresh apron, my neatly
skewered curls and cap. All I have
is yours. I bathe you again

in my drum of ribs, my cup
of skull. I recall how the saint
buried alive is released
to be buried again in the
hagiography, or, rather,

manual for losing beautifully.

Connie Voisine
120

¹²⁰ [Connie Voisine](#), "[Self-Portrait as Medic](#)," collected in [And God Created Woman](#), [Bull City Press](#)

Egg

You take us down.

I'll ask a camera
to capture the ruin.

Rupture the egg,
master the sea,

you already have
enough of me.

Cammy Thomas
121

¹²¹ [Cammy Thomas](#), "[Egg](#)," collected in [Inscriptions](#), [Four Way Books](#)

From This Distance

He would take a small folded paper from his pocket—
“I have been diagnosed with schizophrenia”—
the same moment you wanted to kiss him.
What was he wringing in his hands all those years?
The chicken refused to smoke a cigarette.
Seven white stones circled a thistle.
You would have gone with him,
but he climbed a high fence.
There was always this Y in the road.
Red checkered jacket draped
over picnic table.
Arrangement of broken bottles
in the doorway of the Paris Hatters.
He would take a word and remove its shirt.
The open heart of the o, the wink of an e,
the long trapped mystery of the crossed t
and the squirrel gathering what it needed,
scrambling high into the branches,
dropping shells on his face
as he stood under the tree looking up.

Naomi Shihab Nye
122

¹²² [Naomi Shihab Nye](#), “[From This Distance](#),” collected in [Fuel](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Monument

I take off that winter like a sports bra
eye bright woman with the roman nose, roman back-arch
denim on denim on I take off my skirt
in minutes and in front of no one
what kind of my people is this
a glass wren sweeping feathers from the museum floor
how bone-rag, my time stutter
how three-windless, our nightjars & nightsticks
be serious

there was a boy, wolf's bane, bright
dress, fifth grade, what was
his name, worm
moon with her twenty-sided hands
and the milk-eyed curtain what room
falling where we I wonder
is he still a boy was he a boy then the mountain
snow melts the mountain flowers, seabirds sling
their diamonds, their syntax
my people, my exquisite corpse-breath
and pronoun and softly and sister
forgive me

I'm trying I'm trying I'm trying I'm trying
to write a history of us
without writing a history of us
being harmed

but when I think about that day
it is not your name I remember first

Bradley Trumpfheller
123

¹²³ [Bradley Trumpfheller](#), "[Monument](#)," collected in [Reconstructions](#), [Sibling Rivalry Press](#)

Dear Thanatos, [Last week a pregnant woman...]

Last week a pregnant woman ate rat poison at dusk
and feared the light she woke to.

The last time I stood in front of a mirror, a monster
crawled out, forlorn and flailing, who looked like my mother
when she dreamed of snakes.

I bit its neck until it stopped moving, split it open,
and where its first heart should be. I found a model of the moon.

I never consented to this. The telescope lens cracked.
I can't see the Pleiades.

This week, an auction house found a copy of Milton's *Paradise Lost*
bound in the skin of a convicted murderer—

a ratcatcher by trade who poisoned his lover with roasted apples
and milk, whose flesh now clothes a book about temptation
and the architecture of hell.

Mine is a thrifty grief. It recycles its nails.

When I broke open the cupboard, I found the monster's second
heart made of blank paper and burning.

Traci Brimhall
124

¹²⁴ [Traci Brimhall](#), "[Dear Thanatos, \[Last week a pregnant woman...\]](#)," collected in [Come the Slumberless to the Land of Nod](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Sacral

I creep east along Twenty-third Street, crooning to the wound
the surgeon made, horizontal cut just above my right thigh,
another swollen node removed, lesion in my sacral chakra,
seat of sex and grasping, everything base and low.
And here I've come to the Chelsea Hotel, its beautiful balconies,
dead now, everyone who lived there:
Dylan Thomas, Thomas Wolfe, Virgil Thompson;
the self-destructive, the sarcastic, the charming;
the late James Ingram McCarthy, all of these,
my first New York love,
first to exchange his beauty for a respirator,
first person to die while I was still mad at him;
and Curtis too is gone, who was a Quaker,
who drank cheap wine from a coffee cup,
who could lift me over his head, who gave me the clap (twice);

and Diego is dead,
who brought me away from the Adonis in a cab,
away from men leaning over the balustrade of the oval oculus,
disappearing in pairs into the dark niches
between the urns of dusty lilacs;
who made me tunafish sandwiches in the middle of the night;
who slept through lightning striking the building next door;
who was too Latin to let any insult slide, especially the word *fag*,
who smashed a bottle against a wall and gave chase to the thugs that spoke it,
who paid with bruises, ribs broken and taped,
who wanted to make love anyway only two days after,
who was too Latin to lie back and let me do the work of it—
who couldn't wait, who had to have it—
fucking like poisonous starfish or porcupines—
who finally crumpled with pain, with laughing, hankering and pain;
whose head in his last days I held, whose deaf ear I told *You can make it*,
then rinsed danger off my hands at the little hospital sink,
as I had after fetching poison from the basement as a child.

Dear Diego, which Greek was it, the hero with a wound
that stank to high heaven and would not heal?

Patrick Donnelly

125

¹²⁵ [Patrick Donnelly](#), "Sacral," collected in [The Charge](#), Ausable Press

Arcadian

I am in love with the way I see the world,
but I am all alone there.

None of this matters.
We make our meek adjustments:

we barter body parts for wine.
All ecstasy is vertiginous.

There are times when I listened
and heard no one saying no.

Learn the errata of the mouth.
Learn the lesson of the pioneer.

O eros, put away your bully stick.
O liberty, put away your crown.

My body does the burning:
it's a kind of winning.

I am the loneliest planet,
a vacancy sign hung askew

at a claptrap, seedy motel:
my flesh is all I know.

You open your mouth wide enough
for me to crawl in and speak.

If there is a place further from me
I beg you do not go.

Virginia Konchan

126

¹²⁶ [Virginia Konchan](#), "[Arcadian](#)," *carte blanche*, collected in [Any God Will Do](#), [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

The Wyndham Sisters (after Sargent)

Their satin shapes foretell an ambassador's ball,
The fourth this season—such a dreadful bore. The long
Hand of evening comes forward as if to enfold them
Before the gas lamps go on. In the half-light their bodices
Softly glow, wrapped in oyster and ivory
Like expensive presents; their hair is pinned up
By underpaid maids into towering birds' nests
With steel grips and diamonds. How idle
Their hands are when emptied of fans. How heartless
Their eyes are in the looking-glass. Outside, the houses
Stretch off to infinity, white and identical
As a line of blank cards. The patrolman does his rounds
Past the rows of gleaming windows each day
As darkness falls. At night the trees cast
Their shadows across the pavements, lean
Their heads together, murmur about strange children
And creeping moss. Far below in the basement
The servants keep working. A colossal salmon mousse
Droops on its platter, slowly melting. In the heat
From the oven, a mound of roasted meat drips
Greasy tears. They carry tray after tray upstairs
Without stopping, as though their lives depend on it.
They do. In the ballroom: whirling bodies,
Rising voices. The sound of laughter in their ears.

Jane Yeh
127

¹²⁷ Jane Yeh, "[The Wyndham Sisters \(after Sargent\)](#)," collected in [The Ninjas](#), Carcanet Press, Ltd.

Diaspora

I am riding the F train to Brooklyn
with my son, who is Appalachian
as much as anything, who is six and
does not notice the Hasidic women
reading Tehilim on their way home,
praying psalms from worn leather-
bound siddurim, moving their lips
past Broadway, Second Avenue,
Delancey, and he would not know
to identify them by their below-
the-knee skirts, the filled in parts
of their sheitels where scalp should
be visible, or the Brighton Beach men
in gray fedoras with threatening hand
tattoos speaking Russian, the occasional
wondrous mosaic murals or regular
green and white tiles spelling station
names: Bergen St., Carroll St., Smith
9th St., my son discovering he can see
his own reflection in the windows
of the cars when they plunge into
dark tunnels while the women's lips
keep moving, and I want to tell him
I know their kind, though I know
to say this is reductive or offensive,
even if I might say it too about the
bleach blond with the septum ring,
or the old Russian mobsters, so
when he says, *It's hard to believe that
you got off here everyday*, I agree and
think of all the times I climbed
the station stairs or felt the give
of metal turnstiles on my hips,
the jangle of apartment keys or
click of my own heels on pavement
after a night out too late, the car service
guys playing dominoes on overturned
crates outside the bodega who didn't
look up, and the way the trains still
vibrate beneath the surface with exactly
the same frequency they always did,
blowing hot air through the grates,
rattling me to the bone with foreboding
joy, and I want to tell him I know this
exact moment, the one where you finally
learn the contours of your own face,

its beauty as it hurtles through darkness.

Erika Meitner
128

¹²⁸ [Erika Meitner, "Diaspora," collected in *Holy Moly Carry Me*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Skeletons

So whatever's the opposite of a Buddhist that's what I am.
Kindhearted, yes, but knee deep in existential gloom,
except when the fog smokes the bridges like this—
like, instead of being afraid we might juice ourselves up,
eh, like, might get kissed again? Dwelling in bones I go straight
through life, a sublime abundance—cherries, dog's breath, the sun, then
(ouch) & all of us snuffed out. Dear one, what is waiting for us tonight,
nostalgia? the homes of childhood? oblivion? How we hate to go—

*

Sundays I spend feeling sorry for myself I've got a
knack for it I'm morbid, make the worst of any season
exclamation point yet levity's a liquor of sorts,
lowers us through life toward the terminus soon
extinguished darling, the comfort is slight,
tucked in bed we search each other for some alternative—
oh let's marvel at the world, the stroke and colors of it
now, while breathing.

Deborah Landau
129

¹²⁹ [Deborah Landau](#), "[Skeletons](#)," [The New Yorker](#)

Letters to Juliet

When Barbara calls from Verona, she says
they're looking for a woman to answer
 all the letters addressed to Juliet Capulet,
because the woman who's answered them for years
 is tired of the *problemi di cuore* and wants to retire.
Problems of the heart: these, at least, haven't changed.

In the Dark Ages of my own life,
I had fantasies of myself as a swashbuckler,
 stuffing my pouch with the gems I'd sucked
from the navels of dusky maidens,
 though my search for amorous adventures
just lead me into one utterly inappropriate relationship

 after another, such as the one with the woman
who claimed she could make people disappear completely
 except for their eyes. And that's love, sure,
though love's also Pepi Deutsch hoarding three slices
 of bread and slathering them with marmalade
so she can make her daughter Clara

 a 17th-birthday cake in the hell of Auschwitz-Birkenau.
And it's 50-year-old Antonio Delfini opening the bier
 of his father, who had died when he was 30, and weeping
as he gazes at the body of a man 20 years younger than himself.
 Now who was he loving, his father or himself?
Surely both, for while we love those we love

 almost with all our hearts, we love ourselves even more,
which means we pity ourselves even more,
 as I do now, for instance, because while I'm grateful
for the silence in which to read and write for hours on end,
 I can't help thinking, from time to time, that one day
this room will be forever silent except for the sound of one person

 making coffee or pressing the collar of an old shirt,
and that person could be either of us—
 unless one day we're in our eighties, say, on a flight to,
oh, I don't know, Prague, and we have a couple of icy martinis
 on the tray tables in front of us, and one seat over,
this nervous guy opens his carry-on bag, and inside it there's this bomb...

Maybe all love is self-love.
Maybe, when the *New York Times* food critic said the best Wiener schnitzel
he ever had wasn't all that much different from
the worst Wiener schnitzel he ever had,
he meant that, taken as individuals, we are all too much
like Wiener schnitzel—too schnitzel-y, in a word.

Last night, as I sat in the piazza, I thought of Barbara,
and as people opened and closed their shutters and lighted up
this room and darkened that one, I pretended
all the little flashes were the eyes of those who had disappeared
and who'd come back to look for someone,
though who it was, they couldn't remember.

David Kirby
130

130 [David Kirby, "Letters to Juliet,"](#) collected in [The Ha-Ha, Louisiana State University Press](#)

The Cloudmaker's Bag

He shows me the camp stove he cooks with.
Ten-dollar poker chips. Crystals he carries
in small leather pouches, tied to his shoelace,
his belt loops to harness the sun. He carries
a matchbook, a cell phone and charger, a lighter,
an old deck of playing cards with nudes
on the backs of them, needles and balled thread,
thin strips of tinfoil wrapped up in two yellow
Ziploc bags. He carries his own wife's bones
on a necklace. Fingers them round in the glow
of the shelter lights. Nuggets he dug from
the cremator's shoebox of ash. He is seven
years homeless now. Living on handouts,
gravedigger jobs he has only been fired from,
free meals down at the church. He carries
a homemade knife in his pocket. Dull gray.
Whetstone for keeping the blade-tip able
to break through aluminum cans. Watermark
stains on the handle from leaving it drawn
in the seaside rain. He carries a King James.
He carries a loose gold tooth on a string. He
carries a phony ID in his wallet. Stranger from
Delaware, barely resembles him. Writes
down the names of the good eucalyptus trees.
Calls them his *Darlings*, his *Leafy-green Loves*.
He carries an old pair of foggy binoculars,
out-of-date passport, a penlight for writing his words
on the night sky. Something he picked up in Bozeman,
Montana. *The stars are so clear there, they beg
for connections. For someone to map out
their infinite faces. To draw the invisible lines.*

Kai Carlson-Wee
131

¹³¹ Kai Carlson-Wee, "[The Cloudmaker's Bag](#)," collected in [Raj](#), BOA Editions. Ltd.

Poetry Begins in Delight

“That panting on the wall”
really was the most interesting line
in the whole magazine.

But my pleasure in it was diminished
by the abject apology in the next issue:
Apparently the poet is still lying down
due to the typo that turned *painting*
into *panting*.

My disappointment was offset though
by a new poet who went on and on
about the waning light across harrowed
fields and the long shadows of cedar
and pine until finally everything
was covered by “dorkness.”

Ron Koertge
132

¹³² [Ron Koertge](#), “[Poetry Begins in Delight](#),” collected in [The Ogre’s Wife](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

Signs, Oakvale, Mississippi, 1941

The first time she leaves home is with a man.
On Highway 49, heading North, she watches
the pine woods roll by, and counts on one hand
dead possum along the road, crows in splotches
of light—she knows to watch the signs for luck.
He has a fine car, she thinks. *And money green
enough to buy a dream*—more than she could tuck
under the mattress, in a Bible, or fold between
her powdered breasts. He'd promised land to farm
back home, new dresses, a house where she'd be
queen. (*Was that gap in his teeth cause for alarm?*)
The cards said *go*. She could roam the Delta, see
things she'd never seen. Outside her window,
nothing but cotton and road signs—*stop* or *slow*.

Natasha Trethewey
133

¹³³ [Natasha Trethewey, "Signs, Oakvale, Mississippi, 1941,"](#) collected in [Domestic Work](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

northern new england & nowhere else

i went to the woods
and the woods said
you're a bitch.

ice melting through my shoes.

i get told i'm wrong
til i can't walk straight.

*how many stray cats
won't survive the winter*
is the kind of question
i should stop asking.

the woods say nothing.
i keep spitting blood.

Cassandra de Alba

134

¹³⁴ [Cassandra de Alba](#), "[northern new england & nowhere else](#)," collected in [Ugly/Sad](#), [Glass Poetry Press](#).

The Illustration

Linda came in silently from the hall—she raised her finger to her lips and her eyes danced.

“Hist, comrades... she said, there’s mystery afoot.”

—from a novel by Robert Ormond Case, published serially in *Country Gentleman*, 1936.

She’s a pink rose, flounce upon flounce, the set table
behind her blanched. The brother, the father, all three
enact their miniature gestures, their signals, the way
the privileged do. Forever, the ancestors have kept to
their frames, forever the chandelier has blinked
its constellation, the chairs stiffened their backs. Forever
the white-haired father has presided over the plot whose
consequences will be amusing, will never cross the threshold
into disarray and darkness. Their little mystery is a slight
stirring of the air, a brushstroke. The world is made
of glass and whispers. You with your boots, you with your
hunger, clearing your throat, snorting like a cow, nothing
will make them turn your way. Nothing will stop their play,
even if you die, even if soldiers come and take you away.

Fleda Brown

135

135 [Fleda Brown](#), “[The Illustration](#),” collected in [No Need of Sympathy](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Taco Time

Every couple has their Saturday night activity,
like eating a dress made of tacos
off a go-go dancer together.

Addiction is when a person wants every moment
of life to feel that way,

which everyone does.

Our voltage is no lower than other mammals—
pigeons dance and strut after each other
even on footless stumps.

The mind capable of conducting an orchestra
envisions being fucked with every instrument.

Most people die with an entire taco-dress
in their bloodstream, still smiling
at the crash of cymbals on the stereo.

Sarah Galvin
136

¹³⁶ [Sarah Galvin](#), "[Taco Time](#)," collected in [Ugly Time](#), [Gramma Poetry](#)

Steve is on Top of Me

Steve is on top of me again. His hair keeps changing color: fluorescent red, bleach-streaked, Maui blue. “Wow,” I say, “You dyed your hair *again*?” He pulls away, wounded. “No,” I assure. “It looks hot. You’re so hot you can get away with anything.” I kiss him reassuringly. I give him a slice-of-cake smile. I’m always doing that. Is Steve my son or what? We go back to making out, but, really, I’m being half-assed about it. He wants to know why I’m not more eager for his dick. He keeps trying to press it into me, but I’m dry and he’s manic. Seriously. He can barely keep still or shut-up. His eyes are somewhere else. He’s babbling about Johnny Cochrane; he’s dancing in place. Jesus, I think, he’s so high. He gets up, so I get up.

We go on a mad sweep through the apartment building—imagined domesticity: *If we lived here. When we lived here.* For example, this bathroom has a spiral staircase leading to nowhere, and I’m showing Steve how I could/did/would lounge on it with a glass of Franzia while he shaved. I’m showing Steve this little statuette of the Space Needle I’ve found in the medicine cabinet. But he’s already off. If only you could keep men on leashes. And how am I with someone so unemployed and self-absorbed? So sloppy and unpredictable? I want to bring things down a notch now with indie rock. And I can. I will. I have to: Steve wants us to be “monog.”

I go outside. It’s the college quad in early autumn and everybody is spread-eagle in the leaves. The whole world smells like a refrigerated zucchini loaf and everyone is kissing. *You know, I think, this is exactly where I want to be.* But that’s just too bad, because Steve starts screaming my name from inside the apartment building. He doesn’t know where I’ve gone. Have you ever seen a little boy who’s lost his mother in Woolworths? Have you seen him scream holy hell into the towels? That’s what I mean. He’s flipping out. The Doppler effect as his desperate howls move through the building!—through other people’s apartments, just screaming my name. And to say the general vicinity is alarmed...? Well, they’re all out in the hall looking at one another in their bathrobes. What to do about the madman?

Of course I’m responsible, but by the time I get inside, it’s too late: he’s shot a girl. Everybody heard it. Everybody knows it. That girl. Right inside apartment 3C. Just then, a door opens and a tall goth girl steps into the hall. “Excuse me,” she says. She’s just passing through. I know it’s Steve escaping in drag, but, bewigged, Steve’s perfectly composed. Well, that’s ginger-peachy, but I’m the one who has to hide the dead girl’s clothes. I rip open her papasan chair with a bowie knife. I try to stuff all of her clothes & scabbards & candle sconces inside, but there’s just not room for all of it. I mean, if her mother sits here and all this metal pierces her corduroy tush? I’ll be found out. Now, where do I put all these old baby clothes? These water wings? Maybe in her mattress? I cut the ticking open with the bowie knife. Steve is on top of me again.

Karyna McGlynn

137

¹³⁷ Karyna McGlynn, “[Steve is on Top of Me](#),” collected in [Alabama Steve](#), Sundress Publications

The Lit Club Slaughter

Lost in the coatroom at the Gramercy lit club,
in my sister's dress, feeling the pockets
of famous writers, living and dead—their brittle balls
of used Kleenex, their grocery lists
and fragrant marijuana in tins, their loose change
and half-done cough drops, cracked cellphones
and hair brushes, their Mactaggart jewelry—holy
amethyst and gold Egyptian talisman,
their nips of Old Crow, letters of intent,
trust documents and set lists—I'm too drunk
to bargain. Instead, I'm hounding Patti Smith about her life.
That punk-poet genius—I'm telling her about you.
I'm making things up. It was
a beautiful, caramel-colored evening, until I was
slashing my wrists in the bathroom
with a pair of scissors after I'd been led by Rosanne
into the street and put into a cab.
And I reached your voice
across the veil. It said: *quit smoking.*
You're getting fat.
Be nice to your mother.
In general, I am the life
of the party. And it's always the eve of battle.
In general, I am hard and quiet. Like a floorboard
from a tree long gone. Like a floorboard
sanded down, shellacked, hammered in a house
no one lives in anymore.

Bianca Stone
138

¹³⁸ Bianca Stone, "[The Lit Club Slaughter](#)," collected in [The Möbius Strip Club of Grief](#), Tin House Books

Subway in Madrid

When the old woman
saw the two girls
sitting on the tile
beside the turnstile,
shiny ponytails and skin
dewy as cut melon,
each dragging
on a slim cigarette,
she had to bend
to their exposed ears and whisper,
as though she were a shell
delivering the message
of the sea, an angel
in checkered slacks
and matronly shoes
sent to tell them:
Sois preciosas
They giggled and leaned away
as she strode through the gate,
but one may remember those
words when a boy enters her,
spilling his river of stars,
and the other,
the first time he slaps her.

Ellen Bass
139

¹³⁹ [Ellen Bass](#), "[Subway in Madrid](#)," collected in [The Human Line](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

from "The Venus Hottentot"

2.

There is unexpected sun today
in London, and the clouds that
most days sift into this cage
where I am working have dispersed.
I am a black cutout against
a captive blue sky, pivoting
nude so the paying audience
can view my naked buttocks.

I am called "Venus Hottentot."
I left Capetown with a promise
of revenue: half the profits
and my passage home: A boon!
Master's brother proposed the trip;
the magistrate granted me leave.
I would return to my family
a duchess, with watered-silk

dresses and money to grow food,
rouge and powders in glass pots,
silver scissors, a lorgnette,
voile and tulle instead of flax,
cerulean blue instead
of indigo. My brother would
devour sugar-studded non-
pareils, pale taffy, damask plums.

That was years ago. London's
circuses are florid and filthy,
swarming with cabbage-smelling
citizens who stare and query,
"Is it muscle? Bone? Or fat?"
My neighbor to the left is
The Sapient Pig, "The Only
Scholar of His Race." He plays

at cards, tells time and fortunes
by scraping his hooves. Behind
me is Prince Kar-mi, who arches
like a rubber tree and stares back
at the crowd from under the crook
of his knee. A professional
animal trainer shouts my cues.
There are singing mice here.

“The Ball of Duchess DuBarry”:

In the engraving I lurch
toward the *belles dames*, mad-eyed, and
they swoon. Men in capes and pince-nez
shield them. Tassels dance at my hips.
In this newspaper lithograph
my buttocks are shown swollen
and luminous as a planet.

Monsieur Cuvier investigates
between my legs, poking, prodding,
sure of his hypothesis.
I half expect him to pull silk
scarves from inside me, paper poppies,
then a rabbit! He complains
at my scent and does not think
I comprehend, but I speak

English. I speak Dutch. I speak
a little French as well, and
languages Monsieur Cuvier
will never know have names.
Now I am bitter and now
I am sick. I eat brown bread,
drink rancid broth. I miss good sun
miss Mother’s *sadza*. My stomach

is frequently queasy from mutton
chops, pale potatoes, blood sausage.
I was certain that this would be
better than farm life. I am
the family entrepreneur!
But there are hours in every day
to conjure my imaginary
daughters, in banana skirts

and ostrich-feather fans.
Since my own genitals are public
I have made other parts private.
In my silence I possess
mouth, larynx, brain, in a single
gesture. I rub my hair
with lanolin, and pose in profile
like a painted Nubian

archer, imagining gold leaf
woven through my hair, and diamonds.
Observe the wordless Odalisque.

I have not forgotten my Khoisan
clicks. My flexible tongue
and healthy mouth bewilder
this man with his rotting teeth.
If he were to let me rise up

from this table, I'd spirit
his knives and cut out his black heart,
seal it with science fluid inside
a bell jar, place it on a low
shelf in a white man's museum
so the whole world could see
it was shriveled and hard,
geometric, deformed, unnatural.

Elizabeth Alexander

140

¹⁴⁰ [Elizabeth Alexander](#), "[The Venus Hottentot](#)," [Callaloo](#), collected in [Crave Radiance](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

In a Beautiful Country

A good way to fall in love
is to turn off the headlights
and drive very fast down dark roads.

Another way to fall in love
is to say they are only mints
and swallow them with a strong drink.

Then it is autumn in the body.
Your hands are cold.
Then it is winter and we are still at war.

The gold-haired girl is singing into your ear
about how we live in a beautiful country.
Snow sifts from the clouds

into your drink. It doesn't matter about the war.
A good way to fall in love
is to close up the garage and turn the engine on,

then down you'll fall through lovely mists
as a body might fall early one morning
from a high window into love. Love,

the broken glass. Love, the scissors
and the water basin. A good way to fall
is with a rope to catch you.

A good way is with something to drink
to help you march forward.
The gold-haired girl says, *Don't worry*

about the armies, says, *We live in a time
full of love*. You're thinking about this too much.
Slow down. Nothing bad will happen.

Kevin Prufer
141

¹⁴¹ Kevin Prufer, "In a Beautiful Country," collected in *In a Beautiful Country*, Four Way Books

The Happiest Place on Earth is Norway

Portland never cracks the top
one hundred, though many
move here after visiting
between July and September
when the sun is out,
and those same people leave
because the sun is never out
the other nine months, and buy
into the wrong neighborhoods
because someone once wrote,
there are no bad neighborhoods,
and heroin is rampant here,
as are antidepressants, and I use
“rampant” because my mother
always says “rampant” when talking
about drugs and you know she’s
never done drugs because she’s using
a word that should only be used
when speaking about murder,
the spread of disease, or Godzilla,
I have friends, Christ, I have friends
who have inhaled pills and syringes,
though most are dead now, my memory
opening and closing
like dryers in the Laundromat.

Jay Nebel
142

¹⁴² Jay Nebel, “[The Happiest Place on Earth is Norway](#),” *Connotation Press*, collected in [Neighbors](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

The Cricket

I am sad for the cricket,
Sadder for the late
First century B.C. Tibetans
Who tried to get rid of it.

Billions of yellow-black
Herbivorous villains
Devoured the Himalayan Valley,
Now as good as the Dead Sea,

Moved prodigiously over
The Yangtze, desecrated
The shrine of the Gods
Of Fruition and Harvest.

A cricket can be a friend.
As individuals they're all right.
Before her exile, Yang Guifei
Held one in her palm.

No wonder the Grand Eunuch
Of the Dowager Cixi said
Unleash it and it will kill;
Cage it, it will sing.

Marilyn Chin
143

¹⁴³ [Marilyn Chin, "The Cricket,"](#) collected in [A Portrait of the Self as Nation, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Little Oaths and Apologies

By the time you heard it again,
a therapy dog foiled the bank heist,
the old covered bridge was washed out in the storm,
the dictator was almost overthrown,
and Tom, he almost survived.
The man who slapped his child
came close to saying sorry.
Sorry, you can say it in just about
any situation and feel practically absolved,
better about how you've laboured in the yard,
in a thunderstorm, yanking out ivy
that will grow back again next year.
Understand that these are Mother Nature's intentions:
listen to the sizzle of rain on the blacktop,
bacon as it weeps in cast iron,
radio static, television applause.

For whatever it was they told you, forgive them,
because it just isn't true—

mistakes were made, oversights and misunderstandings

Thank you for holding

*your (desperate) call (for help) is being transferred and will be taken
in the order in which it was received by the next available representative*

But he *did* complain about the back of the baby's head,
about how it was blocking his view of her breast,
and the Cutlass Supreme *really did* fly
across the river and antiquated ruins.

And the weeks progressed, coupons
expired, milk spoiled in the dead of night—
substantiated, confirmed, corroded, ineffable,
and unspeakably, beautifully sorry.

Cindy King
144

¹⁴⁴ [Cindy King, "Little Oaths and Apologies," *Minola Review*](#)

Poem with a Dream of the Future in It

I hear my children speaking
with their future shrinks.

One says, *It was as if whining
was a war crime and I was*

always on trial. The other
remembers this one time

his mother made him cry
asking him to stop playing

with his penis so she could
close the diaper around it

and put him to bed. There
are others in there, too, to bear

witness: the woman
at the picnic who scolded me

for spraying Off! on my toddler's
toes, asking through a mouth

full of potato salad, *You don't
want to poison this little angel,*

do you? And the man who
approached me in the bulk foods

section at the co-op during
the last week of my first

pregnancy to ask if I'd have
the baby in the hospital

or at home, and then, when
I said hospital, went off about

the evils of Western medicine,
right there, surrounded by

the silent nuts and grains
and many kinds of silent rice:

he is there to testify that
I, too, was silent, that I did not

tell him to shut up, seek help,
fuck off, that I probably even

said thank you before
I finally maneuvered my cart.

around him and escaped.
She was never brave enough,

I hear my grown daughter
say. *It took her too long*

to recognize how deeply
she'd internalized the patriarchy,

and even longer before she did
anything about it. She wrote

poems about us and then,
when people asked her if

that really happened, *she'd get*
angry and say we were

metaphors. I wait in the hall.
I pace. I skim an article

containing dire warnings
about the future in *Time*

magazine. I can't help
myself. I peer through

the keyhole. The scene. Those
I tried so hard to love

correctly. The wars I fought
I thought were the right

wars, the sides I took I believed
were the right sides.

And the shrink, nodding,
furiously writing notes.

I cannot see what she is
writing, not even here,

in my own dream. This,
too, I must let happen.

Carrie Fountain
145

¹⁴⁵ [Carrie Fountain](#), "[Poem with a Dream of the Future in It](#)," collected in [The Life](#), [Penguin Books](#)

For love of the game

Early in the first quarter,
after an incomplete pass, we gathered
in the huddle and called Stephen Hawking
to ask, In an entropic system, what's the value
of ritualized violence? He thought
it was the huddle itself, that men pretended
for a moment a circle could hold them,
then tried to kill each other, then returned
to the circle, which is the moon, the womb,
a symbol of perfection as well as our desire
to achieve it. I tried to tell the cornerback
covering me how noble life is, but he thought
A Brief History of Time went on too long
and wasn't about to be distracted by my idea
that in failing to be perfect, we embody
the slight disruptions in DNA or alterations
in an environment that make evolution
possible. He felt every play
was a little version of the big bang,
an explosion into barely ordered disarray,
followed by collapse, and wished we'd go back
to talking about women or Greek Mythology
like in the old days, when football
was football and men cried only
when shot or their dogs died
or they realized that war
was their most memorable achievement.
I was so moved by his wisdom
that I could have kissed this guy
but facemasks make that impossible.
Fear of the homoerotic is why the facemask
exists, Susan Sontag explained
to the Green Bay Packers
when they called her on fourth and one
not long before she died
and they couldn't decide what men
are more afraid of, death or love? She said
fear of death is fear of love,
and to go for it, you nancy boys.

Bob Hicok
146

¹⁴⁶ [Bob Hicok](#), "[For love of the game](#)," *diode*, collected in [Hold](#), Copper Canyon Press

Prisoner No. 280

The Widow Capet,
buried in a mass grave,
quicklimed with her kind
and ignoble others, found
anonymity until her garter
gave her remains away
and they dug her up,
placed her by her husband's side
in the crypt for royal tenants.

There St. Denis stands with mitered head
in hand, his halo still aglow above
his raggedly chopped neck.

Saints before the time of guillotine
bore less scientific execution,
endured rough decapitations yet walked,
some for miles. Their sermons they gave
to the last, to the grave made on the spot
where their bodies finally dropped.

Basilicas sprang up where such saints stopped,
churches fit for kings, their widows, and orphans,
who may have lost their heads, but none their hearts
—customarily embalmed as souvenir.

Prisoner No. 280 had given birth in public,
so execution merely brushed her dignity—
her last words a *pardon moi* as she tread
the executioner's boot.

The final words she left her boy asked
he not avenge her death. He lived eight years,
most in prison torture, forced drunkenness,
t.b., then death found the Lost Dauphin.

She would have died to save him,
and tried, when the military arrived to pry
the child from his mother. That's what it took.

His heart did survive not embalmed,
but bottled by the surgeon in alcohol
until the days of testing DNA—
Marie's own mother mitochondria
identified the boy's heart as of the royal line.

In the year of her Lord, 2004,
they put that pickled organ to rest
with all the rest of the royals at St. Denis,
guarded by the headless patron of headache,
to whom we might now pray with all our hearts.

Heid E. Erdrich
147

¹⁴⁷ [Heid E. Erdrich, "Prisoner No. 280,"](#) collected in [Cell Traffic, University of Arizona Press](#)

Animus

We meet on a bridge in the rain.
I know the perspective is wrong.
You are larger than the building.
Even from this angle.
We marry dressed in lilac.
Makes sense.
A hive of bees slated to die exists somewhere.
Through the glass it almost looks as if you love me.
A red fox runs under the overpass.
Your thigh fills most of the frame.
We became ferocious at sunset.
How many days will it last this time?
The orange chaise, and half-dressed.
You come up behind me with a whisper.
A red spool of string means our time is running out.
In the room you slip your finger between my breasts.
I have never touched you. I would know it.

Caitlin Bailey
148

¹⁴⁸ [Caitlin Bailey](#), "[Animus](#)," collected in [Solve for Desire](#), Milkweed Editions

Say the Word

To be apart, I'm told.
To be asunder.
To be a privative, negative, reversing force.
To be reached only by oaths and curses.
To have black sheep sacrificed in my name
because I'm a god, yes,
as we are all gods on occasion.
To be bodied as I am bodied.
To be rich of earth,
which is to be chronically chthonic.
To be where the gems are—
underground.
To be Dīs. To be Dīs. To be Dīs.
To reject any pickaxe disguised as love.

Sandra Beasley
149

¹⁴⁹ [Sandra Beasley](#), "[Say the Word](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [Made to Explode](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Lover's Letter

For Morrissey fans

Because we craved permission to be despondent in English
Desperate to hide erections for boys
Behind Trapper Keepers
To document Kotex leaks in our journals

We needed
To be maudlin, to be untranslatable
To do this in private, in the company
Of someone with rank

We hunted for you in crates, battled mold and being broke
Scraped pennies from grandparents who collected
Cans to feed us
We needed your '50s guitar in the key of sorrow

Mexican and not, born here or not, our duplexes
South of the 60 freeway
No Movement murals cushion our daily gray sky
Our 99 cent interchanges

To your voice, we work our lives away in UPS trucks, as perfect
Receptionists, in community college forever

This is how you hate the queen
I seethed at the church for making me dirty
So we were instant friends

You made me want a public transit death, so we
Could be together

We saved you from the has-been dollar bin
We're your American Manchester day dream, empty tire
Factories, soot-covered eyelids, cracked front
Teeth and bleeding lips

We fondled open your shirts and built a country around you
Of sidelong glances and glum gladiolus

When you saw our tight black jeans and creepers
You could taste our penchant for racing Chevys down
Slauson with no headlights

We're your wistful twin, that boy you won't share
You watched us make love in cemeteries
Made us trim our sideburns, Las Vegas Elvis beats made
Us jump like beans

We are fatalists by nations on all sides
Death happy because it constantly raps at our door
In the carcinogenic heart of this Manchester
Our black lungs sing with you

Because every time we listen
It's our last day too

Vickie Vértiz
150

¹⁵⁰ [Vickie Vértiz, "Lover's Letter," Brooklyn & Boyle, collected in *Palm Frond with Its Throat Cut*, The University of Arizona Press](#)

Notes on the Notion of a Boundless Poetics

for Lyn Hejinian

Pierre Reverdy: All talk of poetics is more or less indiscreet praise of one's own methods.

But why not? Who is going to defend or explain, or for that matter take an interest in them, if the poet doesn't?

My first response to the phrase "boundless poetics" was to imagine putting on an old phonograph a 78 rpm recording of Mississippi John Hurt singing "Make Me a Pallet on the Floor" and lying down on the floor and listening to it.

Down, pretty baby, soft and low.

And then maybe getting up and putting on the Lucinda Williams versic from *Ramblin'*.

I think it might be the election. The word "boundless" calling up immediately the rhetorics of American exceptionalism. It makes me want a presidential candidate who would promise to make the United States the fourth richest country in the world, one that would take care of its elderly and of people who are struggling in their lives, and would try to learn from other countries, and would pay its dues to the United Nations promptly and gratefully.

The second thing that came to mind was a one line poem by entitled "On the need to draw boundaries." It goes, in its entirety, "Wretched and dishonest was the sea." In an English translation of the word order of the original, except that there is no "the" in Polish.

"Pallet," according to the *OED* is a very old word, came into English from medieval French in which a *paillet* was a bundle of straw. Chaucer's *Troilus*: "on a paylet / all that glad night by Troilus he lay."

There have probably never been more means available to poets ever, in the history of the written art in English than there are now. From intricate rhymed and metrical forms to prose to concrete poems, audio poems video poems. Perhaps not infinite means, but lots.

And in that sense, I guess, one could speak of a boundless poetics. And—but—to choose to do any one thing is to choose not to do everything you might have done instead and in that sense any poetics, any making, is bounded. So maybe *sustainable* poetics? An *adequate* poetics?

Connected in my mind somehow with manners. Politeness, consideration, civility. Some Swiss canton of the mind where the inhabitants practice an externalized disposition to kindness.

But also connected to what is one of the most thrilling things to me about an art or work of art—the way it traverses and embodies the energy of a gesture.

And gesture, like energy, in humans, is finite. And in a particular work of art finite also, but you might say, infinitely finite: done with and ongoing. Pound, Olson: poem as hieroglyph, etc.

The third thing that came to my mind was to wonder why the first thing that came to my mind was a lyric in which the speaker is a man who wants a woman's body very badly and understands that to act on his

desire would be a betrayal. Something about an intensity of need that drives you to your knees. How a poetics might imply it.

And I love Basho, so I am not drawn to the poetics of extremity. Basho would think the impulse vulgar. (Nabokov: *poshlot.*) A hard November rain after a stretch of mild autumnal days. Foaming gutters the color of potato skins, raindrops leaping off hard metal in a parking lot. One of those gusts of breath off the Pacific. He would have been satisfied to get that into language. And it wasn't exactly mimesis he was after, though he was certainly committed to a mimetic tradition. (Here a notion of manners comes in— what might be thought of as the basis of an eco-poetics, a courtesy.)

But representing an external world is not quite what he meant when he said “Learn about bamboo from the bamboo.”

The fourth thing that came to mind was the notion that obsession had the virtue of combining quite narrow boundaries and boundlessness. Eugenio Montale: *Per qualche anno ho dispinto solo roccoli. A ròccolo* is a bird-trap.

A lashing Pacific storm. Like the crack of a whip or a temperamental prince. The native peoples of this coast must have had myth names for kinds of storms, they must have had stories! Lower Manhattan in flood and the need to draw boundaries. A gasp in cold air.

There are probably lots of procedures to set a piece of writing in motion, a seriality that proposes no limit and that would be, in that sense, boundless, but it would seem, it always seems, to end up as a form, a footrace between the narcissism of the writer and the attention span of the reader or auditor. Or between the writer's diligence and the reader's; patience. Still a “boundless” poetics (i.e., he does “go on,” doesn't he?) and if the writer is having a good time, why not?

My own stumbling desire for lightness, and also necessity like a metallic taste in the mouth, and the civility of shape.

And I think of Gorky's story about Tolstoy in Yalta grabbing him by the back of the neck with his great hand and pointing his head toward an old woman in the street across from the café where they were having lunch with Chekhov. They had been talking about writing. And Tolstoy, he said, held his head and said “Her, her.”

So there is writing and there are ideas about it and the world full of rain, so many parts of it either tragic or brutal, any sense of responsibility to which would be a boundary as well as an entry.

And time as a boundary, e.g., the telephone just rang. Writing this I was missing a meeting.

Robert Hass
151

¹⁵¹ Robert Hass, “Notes on the Notion of a Boundless Poetics,” *Lana Turner*, collected in *Summer Snow*, Ecco

They'll Know When You're Gone

The people in the ad for the health club don't actually belong to the health club. The girl on the elliptical trainer is a singer from Portland who has written hundreds of songs about dead surfers. At night she stays awake listening to her hermit crab shift in his tank while imagining someone on the roof with a knife and a bad knee. The guy with the towel around his neck stars in movies about lifeguards and rock stars and people pretending to be rich and terrible in Malibu. He holds the record for most scenes shot in a hot tub (124) and most consecutive movies with the word "heat" in the title (9). The thing that troubles him most in the world is that he knows exactly how much time he has left to look carelessly handsome. The kids in the pool aren't related or even friends; in real life they eat candy the color of electricity, do sports that mostly bore them, and play video games about murder sprees in outer space. Not only are the couple in the sauna not married, the picture wasn't even shot with them in the same room. She does print work for clothing catalogues for an agency in Vermont, but her fake husband's shirtless picture was stolen from an ad in a European hospitality magazine and Photoshopped in to make it look like they were together. The real guy will never find this out. He'll continue to play a ski instructor on a German soap opera and his synth pop band, Klaberjass will do quite well. Their hit "Dance Ceramics" will stay atop the charts for a record number of weeks (34). A staggering number of people will fall in love to it on the dance floor (12,987). One of these couples will break up and the boy will take it very badly. He'll tell someone his heart feels like a house that has slid down a muddy riverbank and collapsed into the rapids. They won't know what to say. Years later he'll write an essay called "The Trouble with Love Is You Never Forget How You Thought You Felt." It will be published in an esteemed journal and the cover will be a drawing of a robot with a heart over its head offering a flower to a seal. The drawing will become very famous. It will make people feel terrible and hopeful. It will be called "It Doesn't Matter What Happens Next."

Alex Green
152

¹⁵² [Alex Green](#), "[They'll Know When You're Gone](#)," [New Ohio Review](#), collected in [Emergency Anthems](#), [Brooklyn Arts Press](#)

Halloween

There were a hundred wild people in Allen's
three-story house. He was sitting at a small
table in the kitchen quietly eating something.
Alone, except for Orlovsky's little brother
who was asleep with his face against the wall.
Allen wearing a red skullcap, and a loose bathrobe
over his nakedness. Shoulder-length hair
and a chest-length, oily beard.
No one was within fifteen years of him. Destroyed
like the rest of that clan. His remarkable
talent destroyed. The fine mind grown more
and more simple. Buddhist chants, impoverishing
poems. There are no middle tones in the paintings
of children. Chekhov said he didn't want
the audience to cry, but to see. Allen showing
me his old man's bald scalp. A kind of love.
Aachen is a good copy of a mediocre building.
Architects tried for two thousand years to find
a way to put a dome on a square base.

Jack Gilbert
153

¹⁵³ [Jack Gilbert](#), "[Halloween](#)," collected in [Refusing Heaven](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

from *Clangings*

First I denied the no-seeums speckling
my dead boy. *Over here*, they called.
I overheard *there*. My shoulder thawed,
felt fine. I exhaled my unson's song.

Then came blame. Used up, I sued it.
Anger management? I nail-gunned
flies all over drywall. My tantrum
plucked a geshrunken dish; threw it, it

pitched back, *threw!* Pawed hardball,
return me his birthdays. I'll be prompt,
promise, to Commencement. Unkempt?
I'll kempt. But worms don't dicker a deal...

I resigned my shift; I mean, took a break.
Blanket our dog wouldn't even adopt,
I laid off apostrophes to the teardrop.
His name sank, forsook all heartache—

no more pantomime palominos.
If you can't stage miracles, curtain.
It's not like you become Adam, even
whistling to the herd in widow grass.

Steven Cramer
154

¹⁵⁴ [Steven Cramer](#), "[Clangings \[First I denied the no-seeums...\]](#)," [Memorious](#), collected in [Clangings](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

The Next Black National Anthem

Will naturally begin
with a blues note.

Some well-adorned
lovelorn lyric

about how
your baby left

& all you got
in the divorce

was remorse.
& a mortgage.

& a somewhat
morbid, though

mostly metaphorical,
obsession with

the underground.
With how it feels

to live in such unrelenting
emptiness, unseen,

altogether un-correctable
by the State's endless

arms. Just imagine:
Ellison's Prologue

set to the most elaborate
Metro Boomin instrumental

you can fathom, brass
horns & pulsar cannons

firing in tandem
as Aretha lines a hymn

in the footnotes. Twelve
& a half minutes

of unchecked, bass-laden
braggadocio. An owed

to the unwanted.
The most imitated,

incarcerated human
beings in the history

of the world & every
nanosecond of the band's

boundless song belongs
to us. It is ours, the way

the word *overcome*
or *The Wiz* or Herman

Melville is ours. In every
corner store & court

of law. Any barbershop
argument or hours-long

spat over Spades. The Next
Black National Anthem

will, by the rule, begin
in blood, & span

our centuries-long war
against oblivion, elaborate

the anguish at the core
of our gentleness. How

that generosity is a kind
of weapon.

This music, a blade
-d criticism of a country

obsessed with owning
everything that shimmers,

or moves with a destination
in mind. Even the sky.

Even the darkness
behind our eyes

when we dream.

Joshua Bennett
155

¹⁵⁵ [Joshua Bennett](#), "[The Next Black National Anthem](#)," collected in [Owed](#), [Penguin Books](#)

I've Always Wanted to Say This

There was a time when mansions had so many rooms
they had one just for fainting. If you had to faint,
this was the best room for it—chairs the size of beds,
shag carpet, cloud-scent, the whisperings of Enya.
But when you woke up it was the worst room in the world,
and such are the machinations of life. When I was little
I wanted to be a truck driver and now, essentially,
I'm a truck driver. I watch that show—what's it called?
I forget—for eight hours straight. Then once in a while
as I'm walking down the street a man's eyeball pops out,
and we're both a bit surprised, and he cups it in his hands
and blows the dust off, and puts it back in.
At the dinner party I tell the story of the eye popping out,
and then someone else tells about finding an ear in the gutter
and everyone drinks more wine and Marty finally opens up
about his little brother losing a hand in a table saw
and Sarah admits that she once lost a nipple to a feral dog,
and Tim, after some prodding, shows the empty area
where his testicles once hung. And then we walk home and
Jesus Christ it's cold outside! says my husband, and
it's so cold it does feel like something huge is about to happen
and that's when I see both of our features slipping off
our faces and we go home anyway and make love
and rub our blank faces together and I feel a deep
and exciting newness welling up in my stomach
and I think that I *will* bake muffins tomorrow morning after all.

Lauren Shapiro

156

¹⁵⁶ [Lauren Shapiro](#), "[I've Always Wanted to Say This](#)," *Thermos*, collected in [Easy Math](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

My Face Instead of the Virgin Mary

In an oxidation stain beneath the freeway overpass
and in a smudge of oil on the window pane

and in the scorched surface of a slice of toast,
my face instead of the Virgin Mary.

My face in Lourdes and in Clearwater
and in Finca Betania.

The sun is not a rose.

Red helmet of evening,
the sky is not a cornea.

My plain face instead of the Virgin Mary
unable to relieve or to heal you.

The constellation above me
is winking beacons of the radio relay tower.

The constellation beside me is the fizz
in a ginger ale catching some light.

What appears cradled in my arms
is only a loaf of rye.

Why would you tell me the things that hurt you?

Jaswinder Bolina
157

¹⁵⁷ [Jaswinder Bolina](#), "[My Face Instead of the Virgin Mary](#)," [The Laurel Review](#), collected in [Phantom Camera](#), [New Issues Press](#)

What Is the Sisterhood to Me?

Do you know yourself? I thought I did
at nineteen, when my boyfriend called
from the hospital to say he'd been hit
in the face with a fire extinguisher
and got kicked out of school *because
of some dumb bitch*. And so I drove

to Westchester General that night,
four hours, to see how bad it was,
the muscles he used to grimace
barely refit to his facial bones,
his nostrils plugged with rust-colored
gauze. Maybe I already knew a girl
hit him, not a coked-out buddy
or a crew from Yonkers, but I needed
to hear, in person, why a woman
would try to split the bridge
of a man's nose like the seam
on a baseball. My boyfriend knew

what so many men know: if you don't
admit it, it's not true. That in a year
I would still bake cookies for him,
wrapping them in a coffee can bound
for his boot camp at Fort Jackson.
He'd never tell me who hit him.
But I'd see her in the faces
of other women at college, where
we spun pots and talked about Plath,
avoiding the story they all knew,
that I was the one whose boyfriend
tried to rape a woman.
I didn't know what I was capable of
at thirteen, when the softball captain
cornered me in the bathroom, held
my face in her hands and spat in it,
sneering, *Why don't you talk?* Or when
my father told me in the car one day
he didn't believe I'd ever get married.
But I was determined, the stringy
teenager who picked out

“Stand by Your Man” on the guitar.
I fucking *got* that song, its notes already
chording in me, like the woman
who lives, as Adrienne said,
in the queasy strobe light
of the lie. Don’t say you know yourself
unless you’ve stepped outside of it,
seen the shadow you cast
in your own bronze light.

Take me, for instance—
I never would have guessed,
holding the fire extinguisher,
how nearly weightless it is
in my woman’s hands.

Erin Hoover
158

¹⁵⁸ [Erin Hoover](#), “[What Is the Sisterhood to Me?](#),” [Prairie Schooner](#), collected in [Barnburner](#), [Elixir Press](#)

The Abuser: from The Italo Poems

I was not beaten as a child
but I was in the room my sister was
and tried to pull our father off
her single thrashing body
to call for help the summer's
open window told
the neighbors and the hammered day
made sequins of the screen
the screams I couldn't stop my father's
hand her legs the welts and all her sobbing

I was not beaten as a child
but my mother's nose was broken
the war was on her mother drove them
to the hospital knowing that her father
did it is a story tunneled through
a culvert of the camp some sixty years
my mother tells me with her hands
of rationed gas and sugar you'll have to stop
telling bad times just remember good
I answer *no* I answer I will never

I was not beaten as a child
but I was beaten down called *stupid*
clumsy smart for talking back—for saying
what I wanted I was shown
pornography French-kissed by my
accuser locked inside the room and later
when a woman called I have hung up
ignored her given goodness rage and
mercy all the days of my life surely now
the names will follow *yes* I promise I will tell

Patricia Kirkpatrick

159

¹⁵⁹ Patricia Kirkpatrick, "The Abuser: from The Italo Poems," *Prairie Schooner*, collected in *Odessa, Milkweed Editions*

Cana

For weeks the dreams called you
my husband. I hadn't the heart
to correct them. Besides, dreams
are often confused, anachronistic,
analog to nothing. One minute,
we're the way we are. The next,
as in the dream where you fell
shaking and sweating into diabetic
shock, everything goes to hell.
(When I tried to dial an ambulance,
the numbers all turned to nines
and ones.) If dreams are transmitted
from a place where we've already
happened and failed, then miracle,
another form of imagination,
has its limits. One minute: water,
the acceptance of impossibility.
The next: wine, the dreams all but
calling me *wife* or *widow*, the moon
soft and white as a wedding mint.

Maggie Smith
160

¹⁶⁰ [Maggie Smith](#), "[Cana](#)," [Roanoke Review](#), collected in [Lamp of the Body](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

Black Hands

I wept when the rains came so soon,
knowing how he hated to get his feet wet—
now wrapped in a pillowcase
in the cold ground. I wept on the question
of his sleep, the vet closed his eyes, first
the milky blind one, and then the one
he used for pleading. He gave
a small final mew when the air left,
and his dark muzzle relaxed—she cupped
her hand beneath that last sound and
closed his jaw, dark face, dark paws,
ivory and seal, his old dustbag of a body
abandoned at last. We swaddled him
like an infant. Since he's been gone
every afternoon a tightening in my throat
takes me out past the crumbling incinerator
past the empty hutches, wood blanched
silver by the wind, rusted screens sprung
free, back into the sphere of the lemon, unshaped
so many seasons now, its crown a bramble
of dead branches. Too much fruit kills the life
at the tip of the bough, darkness sets into
the fingers, *black hands* my daughter calls
them, the tallow won't reach, no,
it's flowing into misshapen lanterns
glowing sulfur yellow in the tangle
and thorn. And everywhere the smell
of waxy blossoms, faintly bitter zest
of dew, the whole tree exhaling not just
perfume, but breath of leafmold and
compost—he used to stretch out
like feline Egypt in its aura. Late
afternoon, green air almost cold, and
the black hands strain upward, reaching
towards that indigo in the dome,
trying to wash themselves clean, my life
come to this disturbed earth in the shadow
where cowslips grow, shade-lovers—
my cowslips—like me, paper white,
simpletons my daughter says,
as if it's vulgar to crave to be
first in your loose lacy whorls—
crowding cyclamen on the mound,
five petals drawn together
like the clasp on a lady's handbag,
and the color, cherry cider, but she says, *no*,

*darker, more like the hammered
seeds inside a pomegranate, and suddenly*
I want to be simple as cyclamen—
pale horseshoe on its split leaf—
a stretched heart—and underground, his small
body hollowing out a chamber...

Marsha De la O
161

¹⁶¹ [Marsha De la O](#), "[Black Hands](#)," [Miramar](#), collected in [Antidote for Night](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Gloss

My mother said that Uncle Fred had a purple
heart, the right side of his body
blown off in Italy in World War II,
and I saw reddish blue figs
dropping from the hole
in his chest, the violet litter
of the jacaranda, heard the sentence
buckle, unbuckle like a belt
before opening the way
a feed sack opens all
at once when the string is pulled
in just the right place:
the water in the corn pot
boils, someone is slapped, and summer
rain splatters as you go out
to slop the hogs. We drove home
over the Potomac while the lights spread
their tails across the water, comets
leaving comments on a blackboard
sky like the powdered sugar
medieval physicians blew
into patients' eyes to cure
their blindness. At dusk,
fish rise, their new moons
etching the water like Venn diagrams
for *Robert's Rules of Order*
surfaced at last, and I would like to
make a motion, move
to amend: point of information, point
of order. I move to amend
the amendment and want
to call the question, table
the discussion, bed
some roses, and roof the exclamation
of the Great Blue heron sliding
overhead, its feet following flight
the way a period haunts
a sentence: she said that
on the mountain where they grew
up, there were two kinds
of cherries—red heart
and black heart—both of them
sweet.

Angie Estes

162

¹⁶² Angie Estes, "Gloss," *FIELD*, collected in *Tryst*, Oberlin College Press

Poem

When I picture *1940* everyone poses
for me, as though I had the one

camera in the world. I cannot distract them
from their studied, ghoulish jolliness.

My grandmother is posing, yelling
Smile and my grandfather is horsing around

with a tire, making his biceps big. I
can't know the past, because the past

keeps arranging itself before my lens. People call
out *Here*, and *Over Here*, striking

their prewar, rural, easygoing stances.
That night, when I try again, everyone

is indoors, in parlors, reading quietly.
A woman rocking in and out of lamplight

studies me. The neighbor's
middle child died this afternoon.

Dan Chiasson

163

¹⁶³ [Dan Chiasson](#), "[Poem](#)," [Slate](#), collected in [The Afterlife of Objects](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Premonition

Just because it smells like popcorn does not mean today is a theater. The moles under your arms are exactly what you think they are: scalloped warnings, quick-stitched deaths. We can sit around a table and eat salads all day without feeling like we are full of it. Dad can still love tomatoes. Mom can still be overweight. I can still fail to tell you *Sister, I don't know you. Sister, you are cystic you are stranger you are stronger than every failing heart*. If your daughter was not dead I'd say let's go water skiing just to see how many arms we can break. I'd say let's relive the Renaissance to see how many errors we can make. If this were a movie it would be Russian and cold. If there were a soundtrack it would be cello and cello and cello. There is no better best seat from which to watch your world end. And here I am crying over my broken zipper which my psychiatrist would call the irreparable divide between desire and intent. My ear is housing a small beetle which all day clicks like a hard black dock—over, over, over. The previews are playing backwards which is the only way to hear the truth. The lights won't stop dimming which could mean it is nighttime it is our last time it is no time to keep complaining about our arteries. As a stand in, I predict you will be brown haired and motherly. I predict you will break your teeth on what you haven't done. If you paid me to dream clairvoyantly it would be another contorted poem.

Meghan Privitello
164

¹⁶⁴ [Meghan Privitello](#), "[Premonition](#)," collected in [A New Language for Falling Out of Love](#), [YesYes Books](#)

Eleven

It's the eleventh
hour on the eleventh
floor. We chose this
apartment (if not
this hour) for the light,
though my father could,
from any height, look
back. Below are oaks
and magnolias and tracks
on which freight and passenger
trains pass, and my father
knows the difference by
the blowing of their horns,
both of which he prefers,
he says, to that other one
he's hearing, by which he
means Gabriel's, disguised
as tinnitus. He's remembering also,
since it's fall, the shofar Herb
Karp blew for the new year—
a sorrowing sound, he
always said, especially if
you were a ram. That
day we moved him
from the split-
level to the eleventh
floor, we brought a few
photographs and chairs,
lamps to see the
dark with, spoons,
a cup. It was a kind
of sky burial. He
has his pocket comb.
He has his wristwatch
with the busted strap,
he has his wallet
with a dollar. He's getting
smaller and smaller, his vast
past vaster. Looking out
from the eleventh hour
is like looking from
a hole punched to make
a room into a camera
obscura. Anything can
be a camera. Anyone
might be in this aerie,

but today it's us, watching
on the compact TV what
he watched, rapt
at the Imperial Theatre
in 1936—Buster Crabbe
as Flash Gordon, trying
to stop the planet Mongo
from colliding with Earth.
I forget how it ends, my
father says, *but it ends*.
And then we're looking
from the small screen out
the sliding glass toward
dusk, where below us,
on fluted, Spanish roofs,
two men in straw hats
are ambling the inclines
of tiles without ropes
or harnesses, without
fear. One man is tossing
bottles of water to the other,
who's smoking a cigarette
and catching the bottles,
and I'm thinking danger
and OSHA and laborers
in the vineyard and my
father from his eleventh
hour says—*lucky devils*.

Andrea Cohen
165

¹⁶⁵ [Andrea Cohen](#), "[Eleven](#)," [The New York Review of Books](#), collected in [Everything](#), Four Way Books

September 10, 2016

In one version of the story, I find you by way of several minor accidents.

A girl in high school used to tell us *look for the guys who drive stick.*

It means they know what they're doing.

Ask them for a ride, she'd say. Make them show you.

That winter two boys nearly died speeding down the town's back roads.

That winter I bent over a boy in his borrowed car.

His became the first body I studied besides my own.

Alone after, I would reach for the electric toothbrush, the wooden spoon, and search for the places he lit for a moment, then darkened.

I thought myself the only animal in a frozen city full of men, but I was wrong.

I thought I'd starve, but I was wrong.

Rachel Mennies
166

¹⁶⁶ [Rachel Mennies, "September 10, 2016," *Jet Fuel Review*, collected in *The Naomi Letters*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

After Suicide [A hole is nothing]

A hole is nothing
but what remains around it.

My brother stood
in the refrigerator light

drinking milk that poured
out of his head

through thick black curls
down his back into a puddle

growing larger around him.
My body stood between the

living room and kitchen
one foot on worn carpet

one on cold linoleum.
He couldn't hear his name

clouding from my mouth
settling in the fluorescent air.

I wanted to put my finger
into the hole

feel the smooth channel
he escaped through

stop the milk
so he could swallow it

but my body held
as if driven into place.

The milk on the floor
reflected the light

then became it.
Floated upward and outward

filling every shadow
blowing the dark open.

Matt Rasmussen

¹⁶⁷ [Matt Rasmussen](#), "[After Suicide \[A hole is nothing\]](#)," [Oyez Review](#), collected in [Black Aperture](#), [Louisiana State University Press](#)

from "River House"

47.

I wake myself up repeating the same sentence.
The kind of thing you think will change your life.

The next night I dream that I drag the body of my friend.
I hold her tight because she has been shot. Some war is on.
Underneath it all, I get the sense that she will be fine.

For many years I went on the same tangent in class.
The problem with mirrors, I'd start, is the same with art:

You think you see yourself, but the world you know
Never gets reflected back. Later, I tell my friend the dream.

At a dinner party, I take the side that literature
Does nothing in the face of death. Not that I said
Even a fraction of what I really thought.

Could it be true that we dream what we want?
"The man in prison is not in prison" is the sentence I wrote.

The poem my friend writes, after my dream, she sends me.
Inside of her poem, I am surprised to find myself.

Sally Keith
168

¹⁶⁸ [Sally Keith](#), "[River House \[47\]](#)," collected in [River House, Milkweed Editions](#)

Miss Consolation for Emotional Damages

When the embarrassment began, no one could see it. It lived

in the closet, the basement, the attic, the brain. It was
a moth at first, and then it was the hole a moth had made.

It had to do with unemployment: No! (Who
cared that my father couldn't work?) It had

to do with the boy next door, who'd
seen my mother drunk, whose
own mother had explained to him
that it wasn't our fault we were poor.

No.

It had been born
in another country. It had come to this one on a boat.
It couldn't speak the language. It had
left a wolf
on the other shore. (A tame
wolf: someone
had beaten the wildness out of it
with kindness, and a stick.) It had

to do with paradox, that space was transparent
and also dense.

It had to do with Einstein. The curvature of the world in a third dimension. It couldn't

take the contradiction, woke
one morning as a careless
American girl, mouth
stuffed with pink
fluff: When

she opened it, for centuries, nothing
but pleasant inanities came out.

Laura Kasischke
169

¹⁶⁹ [Laura Kasischke](#), "[Miss Consolation for Emotional Damages](#)," collected in [Lilies Without](#), Ausable Press

Get Thee to a Nunnery.

When the woman asks the woman behind the counter
if they have the current issue of *People*,
she says, “I think all we have is the ‘beautiful’ issue,”
and the woman says, “I want ‘regular’ *People*.”
And before I can help myself, I’m blurting: “the ‘beautiful’ *People*
is the ‘regular’ *People*. It still has articles; I saw it on *Wendy Williams*.”
I hate how helpful I am even when not asked,
how I need flight attendants to like me,
so I watch their safety presentations
though I know about oxygen masks and how to float after a crash,
or I’m extra nice to the waiter, assuring him everything’s fine
when everyone’s talking, so I’ll be his favorite.
The woman looks at me with a face that says “weirdo” or “faggot”
and in either case, she’s right. Her husband is waiting outside,
looking at his watch, not watching his wife
interact with the weirdo faggot in the magazine store at the airport.
His muscle-gut and ball-bat forearms make me swell in my belly
the way I swell when I listen to Fischerspooner’s *Sir*.
I wish her husband was a faggot
and we could have weirdo-faggot sex
in the Terminal F bathroom where men aren’t washing their hands.
I have a friend who won’t leave the house for a hand job:
it’s oral or anal or he stays home.

Okay, all of my friends stay home unless it's oral or anal:

If I'm giving up my parking space, I'm at least getting fingered.

My therapist says I have agoraphobic tendencies.

I ask him if it's strange that I'm a man who dates men and am afraid of men.

He says it's only strange if I think it's strange, and I say:

"Wow," in my best fuck-you voice, "that's a thinker."

Then somehow we're talking about Nicole Kidman in *Big Little Lies*
and the line between abuse and lust.

I say something like: "Is all lust abuse, and is sex by its very nature violent?"

He says the scenes where Nicole stands up, sits down
are the best he's seen depicting therapy.

My shrink's my longest intimate relationship.

I just nod when he compares my life to a line in *Hamlet*
because I haven't read it in years:

he's smarter than me, and I don't want to remind him.

But I have seen *Girls*, so I know what he means about the guy and girl
who masturbate together on the couch without touching,
proving sex doesn't have to mean fucking and can be what I need it to be
and pleasurable, making my previous statements wrong.

Fischerspooner's limited-edition vinyl has a big, thick cock—
we'd all leave the house for—on the cover.

P!nk is on the cover of *People*—beautiful and happy.

I love how Casey Spooner wears women's clothes.

I should mind my own business when I fly.

Aaron Smith

¹⁷⁰ [Aaron Smith](#), "[Get Thee to a Nunnery.](#)" [Court Green](#), collected in [The Book of Daniel](#), [The University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Milk

That first winter coming back to our bed what did I want?
My mother tits tongued, licked back to breasts again?
Can I say that sometimes it came on me, a pleasure
in that dark where I rocked, taking the clamp
of the baby's bony ridged gums. How I came back
to our bed one breast overfull and leaking,
the baby fallen off the nipple and into sleep,
I have still not said it—not just pleasure—
a pulse in the cunt in the dark while the baby sucked.
How you slept through the nights. How I wanted that too,
to walk the corridor back and forth between your breath
and the baby's hunger. How it was less walking
than it was prowling, curling around myself
and waking to find myself in different rooms.
How every room that winter was a kind of leaving.
A duct engorged or cracked, without even pleasure sometimes,
a growth spurt so that all day was a frenzy of milk.
I would waste the extra milk into the bathroom sink.
I would look up to see myself in a spray of milk—
some she-beast ready to kill for or kill her young,
or I would not look at myself at all, walking
back through rooms we did not have, waking in moss fields
waking on avenues, sitting on dented car hoods to nurse.
And what of it? What of wanting? What of milk
and the bleaty hunger of this baby and that baby
who have long left the tit? And what of avenues?
What now to say to Jen, who calls
to say she is having the baby no one thinks she should have.
She says she wants to have it and give it up,
I tell her how up in those other days Dick cooked
and ate his wife's after-birth. I was not looking for that.
I was looking for a way back.
I was looking for the mossy tongue.
What of that bed we left there, taking with us
only the idea of the bed, sides we call yours and mine?
I could show you how, even now, I can roll a nipple
and thin drops of clear yellow milky fluid bead
in the folds. I could show you this. Or I could,
as I do, lick it off my finger and it is done.

Victoria Redel
171

¹⁷¹ [Victoria Redel](#), "Milk," collected in [Already the World](#), [Kent State University Press](#)

Appeal to Numbers

In the brief rented rooms of our randomized
uncontrolled experiment

nights seem to last longer when I count
one Mississippi two Mississippi

not doing much
only watching you sleep now

your mouth a little bit open
my mouth a little bit open

Why are you so uneducated you once asked
It's true I can't read music charts spreadsheets

the future the signs the leaves your face
the racing forms

But stats ok yes
Statistic of impermanence

statistic of desire
YOU WERE HERE

says the silvery green light of time
breathing in and out like any mortal

eight Mississippi nine—

Catherine Barnett
172

¹⁷² [Catherine Barnett](#), "[Appeal to Numbers](#)," collected in [Human Hours](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

In Which a Therapist Asks for the Gargoyle Who Sits on My Chest

Better say first,
the gargoyle she's requested,

I doubt he'll appear.

A fragrant character at most,
he's so wily, and hard to woo,

and God knows I'm terrible
at therapy—

the pushy box of tissues,

and kindly on-the-clock
neutrality. It's exhausting,

how the whole's designed to scrub
our greasy pan of sorrows to
a gleam in which we've actually paid

to see ourselves. Caveat emptor?

O, verily.
To talk and talk like this is what
the age calls progress—

that peculiar human rage for moving
forward, like tourists walking off
of cliffs while taking selfies.

But since I've come to talk,

and urged to use my similes:
it's apt to say I *feel*
most like a Fenian Incursion—

the third botched skirmish,
specifically. God bless the Irish,

(those poets), for thinking they
could hotwire Canada, then sell it
to the British.

Though, this makes perfect sense

to me, another unsurprising
outcome of an ill-considered plot,

conjured awkward in a haystack
near a town namesaked for that
rebellion's leader, one John O'Neill—

a man with such a gift for losing,
he finally thought he'd really rather
not die trying,

(and proving, therapeutically,
it's best to recognize your limits).

Charged with speaking honestly,

I'll confide I think it late for
custom-order hindsight, or rigged

stories spat into our mouths when we
were only infants by the one bitchy
fairy not invited to the party.

What patterns there might be
emerged Cassandra-style,

with inner portents left
for me to sort, then artfully
ignore for half a century. Maybe that's

the weight we grown-ups mule, being
untranslated books the book club
never votes to read: its measure

heavy as the Easter Island glyphs of
Rongorongo, a mystery bitten into
wood by ancient shark's teeth.

Maybe it's enough to recognize

ourselves unsolvable, half trash,
half glitter bomb, dropped along
the trench by dying stars.

The French say, *who can say?*

And since they basically invented
what we know of dread, and food,

and love, this seems a likely place
to make like Ginger Rogers

forever waltzing backward down
the stairs, partnered with a man
who never liked her;

that feathered, practiced creature,
bleeding in her heels,

her steps not what I'd call the act
of any faith, but more a process

of elimination. Until she finds
the bottom, searching for her mark,

spinning toward the promised spots of light.

Erin Belieu
173

¹⁷³ [Erin Belieu, "In Which a Therapist Asks for the Gargoyle Who Sits on My Chest," *The American Poetry Review*, collected in *Come Hither Honeycomb*, Copper Canyon Press](#)

Thirst

Unclouded third eye and lush
red wings. I'm pouring water
from cup to cup.

This is the water we are meant
to drink with the other animals.
There are daffodils by the water,

a road leading from the water
to the shining crown of the sun.
My white hospital gown—

off-the-rack and totally sane.
My foot unsteady, though,
heel held aloft, missing its stiletto.

Nine months sober emblazoned
on my flat chest in red
below girlish curls and mannish chin.

You can't see my eyes.
You've never seen them.

Laura Cronk
174

¹⁷⁴ [Laura Cronk](#), "[Thirst](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [Ghost Hour](#), [Persea Books](#)

Dear Utah

State in which I have lived longer
than any other, state of my discontent.
Horace said *skies change*,
souls don't, although like most,
I blame anything but myself.
You are the place where I moved for work
and the place I've complained about
for one-third of my life,
the locus I'm trapped in—
an aging otter in an arid zoo.
You are my theremin—vibrations
and tremors I feel without touch.
Sometimes a fly-over sense
of being left alone, even though
the bank teller calls me by my first name.
We Utahns wear jeans to the symphony
and use family as an excuse
for not showing up. We drive streets wider
than highways while the “blessed”
call the shots, where one in five
carry a gun. I roll my eyes at special
rings and garments that mark
me as having no ward. You are the state
I must explain: watery beer
or restaurants close to schools
without liquor. You are also the state
where I'm never lost: your over-the-top
mountains breathlessly close—
craggy grey rock brown-hilled in summer,
whiter than my teeth in winter, green in May
before drought—always tell me where and when
I am. Along with the copper mine one can
see from space, the salt lake too shallow
to swim, the townhouses jammed
into crevices of valley like trilobites
procreating frantically in a tidepool,
while humans are edged by wilderness
where elk, coyotes, moose, and mountain lions—
and no mosquitos! no mold!—roam.
O Utah, you're a kinky rectangle and I'm a pear
wasted on a December tree.
We're both queer as cupcakes except you
pretend you're white bread.

Natasha Sajé
175

¹⁷⁵ [Natasha Sajé](#), “[Dear Utah](#),” [Painted Bride Quarterly](#), collected in [Special Delivery](#), [Diode Editions](#)

Against Detroit

Let's move to Detroit she said,
her leg overtop of mine
in the bar.

•

She said, *Use your phone*
as a flashlight, the darkness turning
purple beneath her hand.

•

Dark is the most common adjective
found in poems. The second
is silent.

•

Nothing is completely
dark or absolutely
silent.

•

The more boring a piece of art is
the easier it is to explain it;
hence also to praise it.

•

I've never been to Detroit
but it sounds boring because
everyone loves it so much.

•

I want to read
a book of selected poems
that contains only one poem.

•

By reading that poem aloud
with a particular intonation. the reader unlocks
another poem. And so on.

•

The best part of an orgasm
is that afterwards, I don't feel
like having another one.

•

Producing art doesn't seem to
exhaust anyone. What exhausts them
is talking about producing it.

•

Whenever I told you
I was busy
I was masturbating.

•

It was obnoxious when Boulez said
the solution to opera
was to bomb the opera houses.

•

Feldman also did certain things
to get a rise out of an audience.
Music wasn't one of them.

•

The sharpest turn I can think of
in a contemporary poem is in
Boland's "Atlantis."

•

Someone should define
where a turn becomes
a leap.

•

If you've read the book,
no matter how you felt about it,
it's one of your influences.

•

We fell asleep beneath
the stuffed goose and woke
beneath the stuffed goose.

•

Feldman had four wives,
three mistresses,
and no children.

•

I once made a list of everyone
I'd slept with and realized later
I'd forgotten about someone.

•

Lying to your therapist
is dumb and a waste of money,
but I do it anyway.

•

Scientists estimate you
can only stay in love
for eighteen months.

•

They should also specify:
with the same person,
consecutively.

•

In interviews, Feldman hardly
ever mentions love
or romance.

•

In *Distant Star*, the armless
man turns the pages
of the book with his tongue.

•

She asked me if
I still loved her like crazy,
or just regular.

•

Music's tragedy,
Feldman said, is that it begins
with perfection.

P. Scott Cunningham
176

¹⁷⁶ [P. Scott Cunningham](#), "[Against Detroit](#)," *Maggy*, collected in [Ya Te Veo](#), [The University of Arkansas Press](#)

Off

Take that hair out of your mouth, paint it, shave your legs, look at boys all forlorn, take their last names in a notebook of curlicue move along the hallways of school with any sway you can muster, better yet, get face from the TV.

I forgot I wanted to be tiny and grew ten feet tall.

It was a mistake to forget, for I was left out of games I wanted like courtship and pageantry.

My mother reassured me only time, and sent me into the woods where dusk happened.

I became a small colony in the world upon request, a gauzy window into coy. I was hooded and set loose with my colored face, so that someone might say

uncharted and fresh. What I wanted: a way from the careworn. My stories were tattered rosary beads under my oily thumb. I could barely fall in without falling out. I could barely fall.

Carmen Gimenez Smith

177

¹⁷⁷ [Carmen Gimenez Smith](#), "Off," collected in [Goodbye, Flicker](#), [University of Massachusetts Press](#)

Democracy

When you're cold—November, the streets icy and everyone you pass homeless, Goodwill coats and Hefty bags torn up to make ponchos—someone is always at the pay phone, hunched over the receiver

spewing winter's germs, swollen lipped, face chapped, making the last tired connection of the day. You keep walking to keep the cold at bay, too cold to wait for the bus, too depressing the thought

of entering that blue light, the chilled eyes watching you decide which seat to take: the man with one leg, his crutches bumping the smudged window glass, the woman with her purse clutched

to her breasts like a dead child, the boy, pimped, morose, his head shorn, a swastika carved into the stubble, staring you down. So you walk into the cold you know: the wind, indifferent blade,

familiar, the gold leaves heaped along the gutters. You have a home, a house with gas heat, a toilet that flushes. You have a credit card, cash. You could take a taxi if one would show up.

You can feel it now: why people become Republicans: *Get that dog off the street. Remove that spit and graffiti. Arrest those people huddled on the steps of the church.* If it weren't for them you could believe in god,

in freedom, the bus would appear and open its doors, the driver dressed in his tan uniform, pants legs creased, dapper hat: *Hello Miss, watch your step now.* But you're not a Republican. You're only tired, hungry,

you want out of the cold. So you give up, walk back, step into line behind the grubby vet who hides a bag of wine under his pea coat, holds out his grimy 85 cents, takes each step slow as he pleases, releases his coins

into the box and waits as they chink down the chute, stakes out a seat in the back and eases his body into the stained vinyl to dream as the chips of shrapnel in his knee warm up and his good leg

flops into the aisle. And you'll doze off, too, in a while, next to the girl who can't sit still, who listens to her Walkman and taps her boots to a rhythm you can't hear, but you can see it—when she bops

her head and her hands do a jive in the air—you can feel it as the bus rolls on, stopping at each red light in a long wheeze, jerking and idling, rumbling up and lurching off again.

Dorianne Laux
178

¹⁷⁸ Dorianne Laux, "Democracy," collected in [Facts About the Moon](#), W. W. Norton & Company

Teamwork Should Come from the Soul

They were projecting a hologram onto my snowsuit
A hologram of nature A snowsuit of white
Nature was not moving but I was moving and that
was most of the plot We got good ratings
They were going to release nature in Los Angeles
Houston and Maine but I was never going to be released
anywhere They were going to give me snacks and
send me into the tundra and evaluate how long
I survived it was our greatest collaboration
I thought Only they were the ones with ideas and
I contributed two things My body and the suggestion

Heather Christle
179

179 [Heather Christle](#), "[Teamwork Should Come from the Soul](#)," *The Believer*, collected in [What Is Amazing](#), [Wesleyan University Press](#)

California

We often ate late by flameless
candles and took turns choosing
how best to be disposed of.
I want to be buried. I want everyone
to be buried. I realize there's scarcely
a spare acre left in the ground, but I just
can't do without the indecorous
transit from parlor to plot.
I need the array of daytime headlights
jolting the arid access road,
the only remembrance that matters.
Don't make a speech.

For years I would wonder whether
the man who attacked me—
in his memory, did the event of it
persist as a dull sort of flash? Then
he died and became himself
just a flash in the mind of the world.
Now I wonder—is he anywhere?
I don't believe in Hell and also I don't
believe in nothing, so that leaves only
Heaven. I have a couple
questions. It is my understanding
that the weather in Heaven

has only a single setting,
which is PLEASANT. I haven't
spent real time in California, but friends
of mine who've moved there
say it's challenging, absent the changing
of the seasons, to remember when things
took place. With reference to always
the lodgepole pine and the low-bent
needlegrass, you get confused.
Dates and sequences, even the people
involved. You can almost imagine
the whole thing was somebody else.

Natalie Shapero
180

180 [Natalie Shapero, "California," *Brick*, collected in *Popular Longing*, Copper Canyon Press](#)

Introduction to Poetry

Professor Nordhaus assigned me
Galway Kinnell's "The Hen Flower," section 2
of *The Book of Nightmares*, instead of section 3,
"The Shoes of Wandering."

Who wouldn't rather go with Galway
to The Salvation Army to try on "these shoes strangers
have died from"? But instead, I got the hens,
unable to understand the ax or the eggs,
and me, not getting why it was the hen
who helped Galway know how little he knew,
how we sleep on the feathers
of hens, how these feathers are all that lie
between us and darkness.

How hard it must have been to write
"Listen, Kinnell," and then to stop writing and listen
to the hens in their sawdust beds.

How hard it was to read and then go back
to my room in Grace's house where she let me stay
for free while I went to school
so I could learn again and again that everything
dies, even the poem, even Galway
who died this week and brought me back
to that classroom where I sat behind
a dark-haired girl named Mona.

She only spoke once in class, the day we discussed
a poem called "Breasts." I learned then that she wasn't
shy, she just didn't care much for shoes
or hens, but breasts she liked, she kept almost
cupping her own under her sweater as she talked
about the poem until I thought she was going
to actually show them. Which is where I think
the poem was going.

Laura Read

181

¹⁸¹ [Laura Read](#), "[Introduction to Poetry](#)," collected in [Dresses from the Old Country](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

The Female of the Species

They leave the country with gasping babies and suitcases
full of spices and cassettes. In airports,

they line themselves up like wine bottles.
The new city twinkles beneath an onion moon,

Birds mistake the pebbles of glass on the
black asphalt for bread crumbs.



If I drink, I tell stories about the women I know.
They break dinner plates. They marry impulsively.

When I was a child I watched my aunt throw a halo
of spaghetti at my mother. Now I'm older than they were.



In an old-new year, my cousin shouts *ana bint Beirut*
at the sleeping houses. She clatters up the stairs.

I never remember to tell her anything. Not the dream
where I can't yell loud enough for her to stop running.

And the train comes. And the *amar* layers the stones
like lichen. How the best night of my life was the one

she danced with me in Paris, sharing a hostel bed,
and how sometimes you need one knife to carve another.



It's raining in two cities at once. The Vendôme plaza
fills with water and the dream, the fountain, the moon

explodes open, so that Layal, Beirut's last daughter
can walk through the exit wound.

Hala Alyan
182

¹⁸² [Hala Alyan](#), "[The Female of the Species](#)," collected in [The Twenty-Ninth Year](#), [Mariner Books](#)

Comfort of the Resurrection

One day everything that's over or dead
will come back, oil painting & God,
chivalry & the kings (even the mad
old rotters, why not, while the heads
of the plotters are removed
from their iron spikes & carefully glued
on again)—why not believe in the miracle—plaid
has already come back so why not the starved
& flooded corpses, why not fresh bread
from charred toast, aren't the grubbers in the cupboard
constantly churning up from the charnel the old
ingredients, holy seed, holy blood,
nothing is ever destroyed,
but tell that to Marianna whose child
lived for three days brainless & blind
close by cheap factories on the filthy Rio Grande,
tell it to all the ruined & annulled
residents of the earth, everything
& everyone will be restored
& immortal diamonds will soon be yours.

Kim Addonizio
183

¹⁸³ [Kim Addonizio](#), "[Comfort of the Resurrection](#)," [James Dickey Review](#), collected in [Now We're Getting Somewhere](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Lass / Let

Lass, which could mean many different things in English: sweetheart, young girl, a feminine darling. In German, it only means to “let” something happen...

The line that has carried me through my nights, companioned or no, my lyrical creation myth, begins as an imperative in both languages. It supposes obedience, wants to instruct. Like a master, this word heralds into the room with agency, with an agenda. Rilke wrote, “God talks to us before he makes each one of us”—what tameness brought him there?

Gott spricht mit jedem von uns ehe er in macht—

Rilke wrote *The Book of Hours* in Russia, where he was startled by God's presence. Like Nietzsche before him, Rilke thought God to be pantheistic, all-encompassing.

Marina Tsvetaeva said of Rilke that he was pure; poetry incarnate; that he was the only clean, and cleansing, soul among war-destroyed Europe, because his poetry refused to acknowledge that terror.

My mother let me happen to her. She let prison happen to her, simply because she believed in Women's Rights and Afghanistan as a sovereign state. She went to prison with her little sister, and she emerged. She was, I can say now, a political prisoner. She let it happen to her; then she decided to leave her family behind, move on for love, for family, for me.

This sacrifice let her become monstrous. She let monstrosity happen to her, then offered it back to me. When I ask, “God, who am I?” am I not just asking, *Mother who are you?*

Let me rephrase this—are there any mothers that aren't cruel, perverse, unbelievable?

Rilke's mother, to this day, is called “perverse” and “unbelievable” by many male critics. She is ostracized, her own monster. She was a woman, she had her tics. She had opinions.

Rilke, who writes as neither man nor woman, is influenced mostly by God. Rilke loves God endlessly *und* is not ashamed of it. Brecht called his relationship to God “gay.” I like to believe Rilke wouldn't have cared, would have said: “Let me be gay with God, then.”

As Ulrich Braer puts it, Rilke's God wasn't a fascist or heterosexist; he simply was, encompassing both the finite feelings of physical intimacy and his *Draufensein*, his being-outside.

The transitive verb *let* supposes danger; it is aware of the other, like paranoia. It is influenced by the other, only exists in relation. Let is only summoned when we want to be done away with: let me do this.

Meaning: give me permission. Let this happen to you. Let it go.

Meaning: I give you the permission to abandon it. *Let me go outside!*

Let me be

everything that happens to you.

Aria Aber
184

¹⁸⁴ [Aria Aber](#), "[Lass / Let](#)," collected in [Hard Damage](#), [University of Nebraska Press](#)

[I have slept in many places, for years on mattresses that entered]

I have slept in many places, for years on mattresses that entered my life via nothing but luck, as a child on wet sheets, I could not contain myself, as a teen on the bed where my father ate his last pomegranate, among crickets and chicken bones in ditches, in the bare grass on the lavish grounds of a crumbling castle, in a flapping German circus tent, in a lean-to, my head on the belly of a sick calf, in a terrible darkness where a shrew tried to stay afloat in a bucket of well water, in a blue belfry, on a pink couch being eaten from the inside by field mice, on bare floorboards by TV light with Mikel on Locust Place, on an amber throne of cockroach casings, on a carpet of needles from a cemetery pine, in a clubhouse circled by crab-apple trees with high-school boys who are now members of a megachurch, in a hotel bathtub in St. Augustine after a sip from the Fountain of Youth, cold on a cliff's edge, passed out cold on train tracks, in a hospital bed holding my lamb like an army of lilacs.

Diane Seuss
185

¹⁸⁵ [Diane Seuss, "\[I have slept in many places, for years on mattresses that entered\]," *The New Yorker*](#)

Seeing Ex-Boyfriends

Sometimes you see the young man you knew
inside the skin of this deflated one,

punk in pleats, bekhakied skater,
as if he has been drugged and eaten

by a mid-level manager not out of hunger
but rather boredom.

Sometimes, you look good, never better.
Mostly you do not.

Once, it is in traffic, you singing along
to Salt-N-Pepa, he in a car far nicer

than the rusting truck in which he took
your good bra as a trophy, hanging it

from the antenna, donuting the Kmart parking lot
the night you learned smoking was a good way

to kill time between disasters. Sometimes,
it is at a party you did not want to go to,

hair unwashed, skirt unpessed, crust of spit-up on your neck,
so that when you see him, though he is fatter and fading,

you think of why you stayed those extra months,
the gentleness with which he parted you,

and your full breasts let down their milk.

Erin Adair-Hodges
186

¹⁸⁶ [Erin Adair-Hodges, "Seeing Ex-Boyfriends," *Yes Poetry*, collected in *Let's All Die Happy*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Bird's-Eye View

Earnest thinks shrimp do not have legs
and I am holding folders with kittens on them. "I'm a poet,"
I say, "I like poetry."

INT. A MOVING VEHICLE

His lunch in a paper bag,
his lunch on the floor beside his feet,
the apple on top of the peanut butter sandwich,
the sandwich being crushed—see how funny it is? That sandwich is
absolutely crushed.

This is an experiment: a pair of cross-tracked lovers.
The shingles on the houses glisten in rain or shine.
On the street, people furl and unfurl their umbrellas.
It is raining, and as it rains, the raindrops turn round the wheels of trucks
and rise as mist.

I'm dabbling in desolation, I'm dabbling in debilitation.
A pair of cross-tracked lovers—and honestly—
who comes up with this?
He is going to stick his hand down my shirt when I see the plastic trash bag
in the road in front of us, flapping in the wind and rain, a bruised eyelid
and have to swerve.

I have been driving for a long time and haven't hit anyone yet, but, *baby—
that's dangerous.*

I'm having trouble feeling anything, and he says, "You don't seem to feel
pain, Eleanor.

You're numb and cold like some sort of lower, lower form of life."
The shadows from the dumpsters fan out and slide down the hillside
and the little pebbles that make up the hillside stay
in their places—remain motionless—miles and miles
of hearts of stone.

The tarantulas on the roadway and all the little animals in the forest
freeze in the headlights—
turn to stone.

I drive over the shadows on the highway.
I'm terrible—don't forget that—I'm evil and was born it,
but, Earnest, you do not think
shrimp have legs.

This is an experiment to see if I can be kind—to see if I can lie—
and I like words too much. I know all women do,
but I'm not going to lie. I am a lower, lower form of life.

EXT. RESORT PARKING LOT

The shingles on the cabins glisten in rain or shine.
This is the parking lot. This is our stop. And I get out
 to have a cigarette. One car pulls from its parking spot
 in the fading light; the car in front eclipses one headlight.
It seems like an accident that we are here together. Perhaps it is
 an accident that we are here at all. Already, men are trying to help.
I know I won't be able to carry anything—
 not my suitcase, not my remembered pain, not even this thought.
I will be given a key. I will walk to a threshold that I will cross,
then I'll be naked. They call this vacation.
They call it recreation. I will not remember what
 the weather was, but before I give it up,
I point my umbrella outward and to the side and collapse
 a single tooth. The silver ribs shut the black skin quickly. Like an eye.

Eleanor Boudreau
187

¹⁸⁷ [Eleanor Boudreau, "Bird's-Eye View," *The McNeese Review*, collected in *Earnest. Earnest?.* University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

In Response to My Mother When She Says Hearing Me Read My Writing's like Hearing God

In my world God is a crystalline superstructure, God
is a molecular bond. God is the space, Mother,
between Fibonacci's one and one. God is not my

word for good days—it's yours, and so "God"
really makes no appearance. Exiled from all my
first drafts, my rationales: Mother,

I wasn't sure how to tell you. And the truth is, Mother,
that all those tiny prayers I whispered up to God
were just the grotesque stories of a sleepless child, my

Sunday teachings warped to torture—Mother,
Ruth and Athalia fought to the death for God's
favor in my dreams, and neither won. When my

Sunday school teacher—Paul—went to jail for molesting my
peers, when those five men in four years forgot all that their mothers
never taught them—in an alley, in a hallway, in a field out toward God

knows where, right there in my bedroom, right there—tell me, why does God
let policemen fuck—yes, I say fuck now, Mother—
those in custody? Mother, it is legal in 32 states, and my God,

South Carolina is one of them. No, make no mistake: when I speak, my
words are mine. You can call it bitterness, vanity, but it is only proof of my
ability to care for myself—because when you were grieving, Mother,

the type of pearl-clad woman I would never be, I tended
blotched, cancerous skin, a three-centimeter mass in my chest: God,
what of that? What of what I have become? I had all the God

you'd given me, and I've sat in fourteen hospital chapels, God
still a no-show. God is a no-show. God, as you call him, saw my
MRIs, blood counts, and said this, give her this, too, but why, God,

do I feel that I should give thanks, stage communion with my
every effort—I can't write around the rhythms, the mother
tongue of the place I ran from. It's just language—Mother,

this is where we meet. How could you hear me and not remember a mother's
covenant: I was born, then wouldn't breathe for weeks. God heard and God
produced a debt: firstborn's life against all odds. I am grateful, I'm grateful, Mother,

it is just—they say the body remembers, and that must explain it. My
body must remember how to fight, pluck must linger in the blood, haunt my
white counts. Yes, it must be the numbers. It has to be in the numbers. God

cannot be remission, the clear scan, a bell's clang after my
last treatment. God cannot be needle, drip bag, R-CHOP,
God cannot be the clot I throw, the fourteen God-forsaken

calls I almost made from the waiting room, wanting
to tell you, Mother, this—which I will not read to you—
I am sick again, and I am sorry. Mother,

I just wasn't sure how to say it.

Victoria C. Flanagan
188

¹⁸⁸ [Victoria C. Flanagan, "In Response to My Mother When She Says Hearing Me Read My Writing's like Hearing God," *Palette Poetry*](#)

The Things-No-One-Knows Blues

after Wanda Coleman

I filed for bankruptcy in the borough of luxury.
I suspect it's time to eat my poetry.
My favorite turtleneck sweater, the green,
50% rayon, 5% cotton (rest unknown) one,

shrank in a tub of hot
bath water. A prisoner bit
a chunk out of my step-daddy's smile.
My mamma filled

her cancer with silicone
& pity. My wife dwells in
a house of critics. I'm younger than
sugar, but older than

NutraSweet because I had a birthday in
New Orleans.
I suffer various degrees
of wistfulness.

Honey,
I guess it's time I eat my poetry.
Cranked to ten my *Walkman* screams
static. I believe B.B. fingered

Lucille like the back of a pretty woman's knee,
but no one seems to agree.
Need pecks at the latch
of my *Wal-Mart* wristwatch.

The lines on my palms slope like portable ex
& why graphs. Baby, I suffer various degrees of wistfulness.
I suspect my penis will
be fed to a swimming Gila

monster. Occasionally Death
calls me collect.

Terrance Hayes
189

¹⁸⁹ [Terrance Hayes](#), "[The Things-No-One-Knows Blues](#)," collected in [Hip Logic](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Self-portrait as Autopsy

I smell the way all dead things smell.
I am a fish on the silver table,
I am ineffectual and erotic as Ophelia
and yes beyond help. He needs a saw
to rip the skullcap my mother knitted
from her femur, her fibula,
the extra rib she deep-throated and stole
from my father. There are sequins
under my eyelids. He calls them *petechiae*.
He says: *strangulation*, and the students
take note like those old computers the size
of whole rooms. *This does not mean murder*.
I have *livor mortis*. My blood is
10th birthday jelly pots under my skin,
my buttocks are heathered moors.
This means she died on her back.
I am a prettiness of organs on the silver table,
I am a wet glistening cornucopia.
I am an arrangement of Christmas presents
mutilated by fairy lights. Oh
I am my grandmother's chintz tablecloth,
the May Queen's garlands and garlands
and gorgeous gorgeous gorgeous. The students
take turns squeezing my lungs, trying on the rose gold
rings of my trachea. He puts me back together
apart from the ligaments he keeps for himself
in jars of formaldehyde, lined up
like nail polish, Hello Kitty red, for later.
I am smiling like a beauty queen,
the way all dead things smile.

Ellora Sutton
190

¹⁹⁰ [Ellora Sutton, "Self-portrait as Autopsy," *The Poetry Review*](#)

The Pact

Mother, I have destroyed you. Forgive me as I am destroyed. The submarine of you, mother, has, underwater, shipped me off, has fired on me, is nuclear. Mother, the gold tooth of me is stolen, the frayed cord of me is broken, the scored record of me is frozen, the scratched recording of me is full. Fire on my self pulled from a pile of the wreckage, fire on my plumage-self planned in advance. And decorated for the homecoming and sheltered by the colors and the blending in with ending and the touch of a Cyclops to the backs of wool. Clinging to the belly of the sheep, I come home. Mother, my blood is the blood sum of you and my father. I have no choice. I need your rules. And now the tides come in and, like driftwood, I drift, and like summits I rest and like the Eucharist I am blessed, and like the lost reflection I am lit from below by what appears to be light. I say my name and it ignites. I say my name and it tires like a rower on a stolen ship or lags like a haggard sail. I lost my veil, I lost my bed, I lost what I thought had been said to you to make you understand. You, the shape eating waterfowl with bare hands. Mother, your grand chandelier of lies has so many eyes it sees like a spider or a fly in every direction; it decides, goes for miles. What opens before you is my smile. Empty as a room. Empty as a foot. Empty as a ruse. Empty as a lung. Empty as a tongue that has not said. Empty as a vein that has not bled. What am I, mother, but the undead walking the way you want me to walk, the way you want me to talk, up from the grave at your command. The zombie I am, covered in soot. Soon I swoon and faint and fall. But that is not all. I am the spoon you cook. I am the food you concoct. I am the line you lost with the hook at the end, meant to sink into a mouth. My cheek is set, my wretch is good, I am not what wooed you. I am no good. This I know. I had to sew myself shut. For years, I was the rut in the good old road. Do not trust the old, do not trust the new, there is nothing to do and nothing can be done. The two were one, now they are two. I was born, I was new, then I spoke, I was no good, I was me, I had flaws countless and contagious as disease, not the least of which grew. I was me, I was mine, I was not yours. I could not be you. Mother, you took from me the drought and gave it meaning, you smacked the pout right off my feeling, you kept stars lit on the ceiling so you could navigate out from my room. It was noon when the sun set in you. I felt the earth cool. I felt the fires lit so those of us who survived could go on living. I felt the beasts arrive when night was confirmed. You killed us off. You felt you'd earned it, the right to make us into what fears and what crouches and what grows cold. I could not grow older. I could not mature. I was sure there was nothing

left. What I felt in the end was the blow of yours
sent across the miles to find me where I lay spent
and desert-like in the heat. Keep me here. I serve
your needs. The edges of me, mother. I cannot be
until you let me recover. I cannot run to the subset
of another. You are too wise, you know what the constant light
means, you know what grows where and how to twist it
when the darkness meets it so that it can moss over and meld
into a growth that will melt it down. You fungi plus silk,
the lurch of me is trying to unlearn all the confusions of you.
Mother, mother, quite contrary, how does your deadliness
grow? With a tooth and a rack and a craw and a sack
and all the daughters caught in their rows.

Jennifer Militello
191

¹⁹¹ [Jennifer Militello, "The Pact," *American Poetry Review*, collected in *The Pact*, Tupelo Press](#)

After Aftermath

Orphaned boys plus my mean calculations.
Orphan boys plus desire equals their long
bodies. How they sucked summer-long water
off a garden hose from beside the trailers.
Their mean mothers weary of them sharing
rooms in mental hospitals: I want to meet
them with flowers, thank them for offering
up their sons to this, our glazed Plexi-glas
world. What would we do if not for them.

If not for them, *how could I breathe*. How
would I know what to do, if I did not have
to care for them because they learned how
to not care for themselves because of you.
Orphan boys make mean men. Because of
them, I feel mean. I make my calculations.
Because I love them, am loving how they're
dropping off the other end of their phones.
They hung up on them. You hang up on me.

I am tired of your ultimatums, Skunk Mom.
My eyes squeeze. I'm unhappy with you, Mom.
You're not my mom, but I'm calling you Mom
now that I'm his mom, Mom. Your son can't
say what he thinks because you didn't teach
him how to articulate himself, Mom. *Shhhh,*
your beautiful baby's asleep. I'm a mom too.
You left him alone in that room that night he
heard you rucking on the sofa, Mom. Said he

saw a ghost. It shooed him from the doorway
so he would not see you fussed up on a sofa.
He was just a little kid, Mom. But I get it. Kids
forget. I've got your kid in my bed now, Mom.
It's inky in here, where you forget him, Mom.
I love him as stars lick our faces with the nose
wet cold of cat kisses. I had thought of men
as flowers. I picked a few. Then I met your son,
Mom. He's still weeping flowers to that belt's

swish in your basement. And isn't it on nights like this, Mother, the thought of killing yourself looks you head-on, beautiful in the face, velvety and faithful in its gaze as that of the violet iris? This is men, Mom. Your mistake was begetting one. Mine was letting him in. He's asleep now. *Shhhh, your son is safe.* What about you, Mom? What about me? We're only daughters. Who's become our father? Your son, Mom, your son.

Cate Marvin

192

¹⁹² [Cate Marvin](#), "[After Aftermath](#)," [The Rumpus](#), collected in [Oracle](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

A Great Place to Raise Children

I hardly feel anything these days beyond the boredom that makes it seem only a promotion with a raise could give a thrill now. I mean there is no such thing as sky or I mean I don't know how to turn myself back on. I mean I drink as much as is reasonable and it does make things a little more rosy-fingered than they were when I woke up in this pale pink dress of a gray morning's wheatfield. Stillness, of course, has its Andrew Wyeth retrospectives to recommend it, but I'm in my J. M. W. Turner and the tornadic sky phase. I spent yesterday in the company of small children. Small children make my small daughter so happy. If I look at her sky I can be a little kite on the wind about it too, but then her very annoying buddy is in what his mother calls "a Band-Aid phase," where sometimes, despite how there is no injury and no blood, he decides he needs a Band-Aid and wails in a way that wrecks the air down to the very molecules until someone runs out to the mini-van to raid the First-Aid kit and you better hope there are Snoopies on that unearthed Band-Aid or there will be no end. I tried to keep my refusal and disdain of this getting of Band-Aids to myself, because I know it only seems I can parse the difference between loving kindness and a spoiled brat. Can you believe the whole point of orgasms is this? From the nervous thrill of a kegger on East Campus to the feathery glitter of this pair of new earrings, it's all for the creation of a snot-faced wailing four-year-old in the ball pit at Going Bonkers? When I have a great orgasm the sky turns into Turner's portrait of Parliament on fire. When I just have an orgasm, I remember he chose the brightest paints he could find and didn't care that they start to fade the moment you brush them on. Dealers and critics complained, but he wasn't concerned about museums a hundred years out, so now you must try to imagine the riot of storm through the almost invisible serenity of pastels under glass. I don't know what the point is. Perhaps the point is drunk? Or high? Or—otherwise? Ruskin was the nineteenth century art critic who loved how Turner blew up the blue sky. To paraphrase his masterpiece, *Modern Painters*, Vol. 1: If you must prefer to savor a blue sky, at least notice there is no monochrome of blue; the painters lie to you. Ruskin hates lies. He hates the lie of order, the lie of geometry, the lie of serenity. Does the great Turner make you feel a chaos the chest of your eye can't contain?

Well, you wouldn't do well to stare directly into the sun
either. Well, you know there is an endless sea of sugarcane
fields on the empire's other horizon. Well, you know
there are fires burning a constellation of islands across
that long night of the Atlantic. A still life is just a portrait
of things a rich man owns coupled up with a lie of meaning.
All those fine landscapes foregrounded with English
gardens and a well-dressed couple on a park bench
are commissioned portraits too of the land the commissioner
calls his own. How is it, Turner asks with each crimson
stroke, that we even abide such pictures, much less pay
to hang them on a wall and gaze in satisfaction at how we own
them? We'd have to have no idea what a feeling was to take
such pleasure. We'd have to think we exist for the sake
of something else altogether. Well, I have a feeling, I have
an idea, I know a pleasure. Fuck the sky, I say. Burn it down.

Kathryn Nuernberger

193

¹⁹³ [Kathryn Nuernberger, "A Great Place to Raise Children," *Tongue*, collected in *Rue*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Public Health Response to a Rabid Kitten—Four States, 2007

Come here, throw pillow.
Come here, tawny flame wobbling
on the side of the road.

White coats come out of the building
like kleenex after kleenex
pulled from the tall box

by an invisible hand
and they are making the sun hurt
even more. Come here, little electron,

can't you hear the ice hissing at you?
It is the year for this kind of bend,
the things that the tumbling coats want

is taken away from them
and given to some other fear-goosed thing
and said fear-goosed thing

does not have the right hands.
Come here, unhappy bean, I know
you think you are a stone

with an itch inside. I promise you
this is only a blanket.

Marc McKee
194

¹⁹⁴ [Marc McKee, "Public Health Response to a Rabid Kitten—Four States, 2007,"](#) *Anti-*, collected in [Meta Meta Make-Belief](#), Black Lawrence Press

Don't Be Bitter, Baby!

"Each one of my breasts," she cried, "is 3 lbs
of pure gold
 & if you don't believe me, tough!"

She thinks the secret to possessing
beauty is to be nauseously overwrought about everything

& I hate to admit, occasionally she's right:

sometimes the only way to solve my hunger is to scream
I have a vast lust for beef! as I drive through
 McDonald's at 3 a.m.

& sometimes wearing a boa to the supermarket
is the only cure for my sorrow.

She tells me I glitter
& brags that the guy she took home last night
 looked like George Clooney & God.

The world isn't ugly, she tells me, if you let it borrow your stilettos.
She giggles, "Don't be bitter.
 Eat lipstick. Sob onto your mirror."

& I do—

each tear ballooning the reflection of my grievances
falling red from my hypocritical mouth.

Katie Condon
195

¹⁹⁵ [Katie Condon](#), "[Don't Be Bitter, Baby!](#)," [Blunderbuss](#), collected in [Praying Naked](#), [Ohio State University Press](#)

The Lone Palm

for Kevin Killian, 1952 - 2019

The chatter,
a little
matter.
The bas-relief,
shallow grief.
Décor, 1930s, or
is it 1983:

neon signs;
a deco dish
of golden fish;
real fronds
and bottle
blondes
lit by George Platt Lynes...

My friend Kevin
tells a story.
It was 1982;
he stepped into
the Lone Palm.
A bartender,
tall and all
alone,

eager
to be of service:
a nervous
nod, some code.
meager
speech—
doors locked,

the bar
a makeshift
bed—
it was efficient,
half an hour
at most,
and almost
tender.

Time for the shift.
“What’re you doing

next Saturday?
Come by then..."
A week passed;
Kevin returned.
"Where's so-and-so,"
he asked,

starting
a description.
"He took a turn
last week and died,"
said the latest
bartender, slow
to answer.
"The gay cancer."

Sometimes,
that's how
it worked—
before the test.
I'm out of luck,
thought Kevin.
We all were...

—It's sentimental,
some say,
to allude
to the plague.
The indignities
of the Eighties
and Nineties,
an urn

on the mantel.
Keep it vague
because
it's over...
It's never
over.
If it were,
we would all

be at the Lone Palm,
white
tablecloths,
chrome shaker
and a flask:
no need to ask.

Mark has his vision,
James scoffs

at the new
religion,
unmarred
by a purple
lesion—
and right
after last call,
we stumble/fall

to 22nd and Guerrero,
kiss each other
on the corner:
fading together,
no one scared.
The night
simplified.
Good night.

Good night.

Randall Mann
196

¹⁹⁶ [Randall Mann](#), "[The Lone Palm](#)," *Asian American Poetry Review*, collected in [A Better Life](#), [Persea Books](#)

What We Remember

The holy roller girl who writhed with the fever of Jesus on Sunday while her pastor daddy twirled snakes like lariats over the heads of sinners crying to be cleansed. Who bused in from out-county on Monday, undressed for gym in a mop closet. Who stuffed a transistor radio down her pants while her pastor daddy handed out salvation in front of Sears. Who believed she'd ascended to heaven whenever Diana Ross sang in her ears, all gauze and sequins, whenever Smoky *baby baby*-ed her down rows of corn where she danced with her tall green partners. The nights her father came to sanctify her. The day she collapsed in gym class and sang to Jesus in her gospel tongue, an arpeggio of gibberish, all amen and hell yes. How she came back to us a ghost girl, rinsed of all but the hard, high notes.

Sarah Freligh
197

¹⁹⁷ [Sarah Freligh, "What We Remember," *Milk Candy Review*, collected in *We*, Small Harbor Publishing](#)

Monticello

My grandfather would give me coins
fished from stained denim pockets
when I pestered him enough, or looked glum
to the point of pity. Go buy some comic books,
he instructed, but I feared
he'd one day ask for cigarettes
or wine or one of the skin mags
that were sold beside *Richie Rich* and *Iron Man*,
and to my ten years were
terrifying. He'd quiz me:
what did *anno domini* mean?
What did *VJ Day* stand for?
What was on the backs of nickels
(Jefferson's Monticello,
little hill in Italian,
then not much more than architectural trivia)?
Now I see each morning
walking in to work
its white roof throwing off sunlight.
When he died last year,
unable to speak following two strokes,
I didn't attend his funeral
ten hours away. I imagined
the day was somber,
lustrous with rain,
appropriately mournful.
A few wept and made romantic noise.
I imagined I could tell him
how close I live
to Monticello, though this
proximity has led me to visit just once,
in autumn, as leaves
fall away and the air turns to cool rain.
I didn't stay long:
I imagined the damage
my wheelchair
would cause if I spasmed,
if my feet crashed
through the double glass doors of the study,
if I punched a hole
in the wall's thick plaster.
I left and it was dark
outside and below us
glowing ribbons wound into town.
That night, the stars,
this poem like apology.

¹⁹⁸ [Paul Guest, "Monticello," *Monticello in Mind: Fifty Contemporary Poems on Jefferson*, collected in *Because Everything is Terrible*, Diode Editions](#)

from "13th Balloon"

Here in the spectral academy
here in the home of the freaks
I devote myself to something
Candy Darling said

I will not cease to be myself for foolish people

Yes but Candy what
if foolish people's who I *am*

As the windows in the city sweat
Candy's ghost collects
herself behind one of them
I know it
running her lines
her voice a raft
of white flowers floating
in a bathroom sink

Each day we are invited to try
suicide by zoo animals
or by eating a handful of ghost peppers
thus triggering a laugh track
over footage of a rainforest being razed

Ruin feasts on us
pausing between bites to baste
us with our juices

As a stopgap against never praising
ruin enough we might praise the alien
We might
praise blood
We might praise the blood of the alien
as it sizzles through the floor
while we're sat safe in our seats
in the theater of money

we might believe as the child
in its dark room believes
it cannot be seen
that nothing could touch us here.

Mark Bibbins
199

¹⁹⁹ [Mark Bibbins, "13th Balloon \[Here in the spectral academy\]," *T Magazine*, collected in *13th Balloon*, Copper Canyon Press](#)

In the Break Room

The mill holds us
in its mouth,
the graveyard shift
and its floodlights.

There's a stillness between us
as we eat our sandwiches
and leftovers.

Back in town
someone's daughter
stays up all night
eating her own hair.
A woman on Third Street
applies makeup to a corpse
she's recently washed.
A cop drifts over a fog line
in his Crown Victoria.

Todd thinks the foreman's
new girlfriend looks
like a country singer,
her hair shines
like broken glass.
She rests her hands
on the animal of sleep
and it leans against her leg.

In fifteen minutes
she'll crawl up a ladder
into a metal cage
where hot sheets of plywood
will shoot out one after another
like a satanic card trick,
and she'll guide them
by the edge, in midair,
and let them drop
to the sorter...

until she closes her eyes
just long enough
to float upon the waters
where sleeps winds
through the cattails.

When a sheet of veneer
will tear her face open
a corpse's hands
will be placed together,
the cop will drive
his cruiser into the river,
which will soon fill
with a daylight our curses
may never reach.

Michael McGriff
200

²⁰⁰ [Michael McGriff, "In the Break Room," *The Missouri Review*, collected in *Home Burial*, Copper Canyon Press](#)

Portrait of a Release

It was my mother who picked me up
from the mental hospital—but only to drop me off
at Kit’s. Kit is the type of friend who will not only
let you stay at her house after you’ve been in a mental hospital,
no questions asked, but will give you her bed
instead of the couch. The car ride was silent.
My mother didn’t dare speak.
I stared out the window, boiling and frozen.
There was no radio and autumn was Jackson Pollocking
all over our windshield.
The ride from McLean Hospital to Kit’s doorstep
was forty-five minutes of foliage and breath.
I remember when she dropped me off at the curb,
my backpack full of clothes, wondering
how she could just drive off.
As if a car, if you were a mother dropping off your child,
should just stop working, dry of gas or brakes cut,
forcing mothering to take effect.
But I got out, said a one-syllable goodbye,
and the car pulled away with my mother inside.

•

Four days is a long time in a mental hospital.
How do you even fill one day in a mental hospital?
Where do you go? Who do you talk to?
When the pay phone rang and some sleepy body shouted for me,
I asked if it was my parents, and if it was,
I wouldn’t answer.
The one time I did answer, my mother spoke
like a garden hose full of holes, spouting everywhere,
“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, it should have been different.”
And the sad thing is, the garden hose was trying,
it was actually elegant in its miserable mess,
it was trying.
But the thing about “I’m sorry”
when you’re hearing it from a phone booth
in a neon hallway of a mental hospital, is that it doesn’t really
mow your lawn, it doesn’t really cut your steak, you know?

•

Four days of avoiding the girl who wanted to tell me
why she didn’t really belong in this ward.
Four days of collaging papier-mâché to a journal
and banging a stupid tiny drum in “Music Therapy.”

Four days of knowing your parents are paying
the hospital bill and wondering if they resent you.
Four days of irreconcilable boredom,
which gives way to awe at the glory of autumn
outside your barred window.
Four days of reading Rumi by yourself in your room.
Four days of bathrooms without locks.
Four days of nurses with minuscule paper cups
of experimental doses.
Four days in which "I'm sorry" is like a bird
thrashing against your window.

•

Kit's house is a twenty-minute walk
from Faulkner Hospital, where I'll be an Outpatient,
which basically just means I don't sleep there.
For a week and a half, for six hours a day, I am
a body in a chair listening and talking
with other bodies in chairs. I don't cry.
Not for myself. At least, not here.
But I do cry for others whose stories undo my sense
of capital J Justice. In all their stories
there is a common thread: someone didn't listen.
Sometimes it is a brother, or a wife,
sometimes it is a mother.

•

On my morning walks to the hospital
I am shellacked in beauty. Red leaves falter
like prayer flags on the branch. Yellow leaves grin
their good yellow teeth. When I start to think of my family,
my father stewing somewhere in evergreen sweatpants
and a private, heavy rage, or my brother
ignoring his feelings, moving like a bolt of brunette lightning
through his days, or most vividly, my mother,
guilt eating her heart like a silkworm on the vine,
I practice a Cognitive Behavioral Exercise
the Group Therapist taught us.
It's simple and it works:
notice the colors around you.
In ROYGBIV order.
This will reroute your brain
away from the emotional center, where mother happens,
toward the logical center, where math happens.

•

Red: leaves, stoplight,
jacket on a woman down the path,
red fleck of paint on my brown boots.
Orange is how headlights look when they're turned off midday;
where are these cars going? To work? To family?
Orange is a tree shaking its arms like a bad dancer.
Orange is the sign advertising a new TV show,
one lost orange glove near the bus stop bench.
Yellow, slutty tree,
oh cerebellum, oh Lithium,
do your job.
Oh cortex, oh frontal lobe, throw me into a logic
that doesn't make me think of family.
Yellow nails, yellow-pale cloud
in an otherwise blue sky.
Green trees losing to autumn,
green grass with signs: *Keep Off*.
Green jacket on a man walking toward me.
Blue sky. Blue sky. Blue jacket on me.
Blue car. Blue building with white trim.
Indigo, what is indigo anyway?
Violet's moody sister. Purple, let's just say,
and it's nowhere.
A car, dark purple, that'll do.
A passing woman's cold lips.
The hospital is not purple. If it was,
it wouldn't be a hospital. It wouldn't be
a serious place. Purple is a flower color
and color, all color, is something my mother loves.

Shira Erlichman
201

201 [Shira Erlichman](#), "[Portrait of a Release](#)," collected in [Odes to Lithium](#), [Alice James Books](#)

Cocktail Hour at the Petting Zoo

I want to go to cocktail hour
at the petting zoo

where the fainting goats blackout
on fainting couches

and miniature sheep rest their haunches
on pillows made of human hair—

I want to feed beer nuts and ambrosia
salad to the parrot who plucks

feathers from her grey chest
and sings “My Baby

Just Cares for Me,” punctuated
by a busted smoker’s hack.

I’d buy her an Old Fashioned
and listen to stories

about the woman who kept her locked
inside a tapestry

covered cage, taking her out
at night to teach her how

to sing, and I’d tell her about the man
who’d slip postage stamps

of acid under my tongue while I slept,
waking to our room

needled with fire, the roots
of my teeth extinguished stars,

repeating the story until I realize
I’m drunk and take one

for the road—not before stroking the muzzle
of Clementine, the cow who lived

strapped to milk machines for years,
surrendered one calf after the other,

and now likes to stay perfectly still

in her green velvet corner,
nuzzling the flowered astroturf
as if she has all the room she needs.

Kendra DeColo
202

²⁰² [Kendra DeColo, "Cocktail Hour at the Petting Zoo,"](#) collected in [My Dinner with Ron Jeremy, Third Man Books](#)

Monument

Since I've spent
this hour perfecting
a controlled arc
of spray paint to enclose
the giant red "A"
scrawled across
the clapboard siding
of someone's vacation
home, I decide it's
a good idea to run
when the police
appear in response
to the rattan patio
bonfire I've started
with a blowtorch
of hairspray
and lighter stolen
from my mother's
purse; but even though
I fold myself, creep vine
flat along the banks
of the Bristol River,
I am caught, zip-tied
and foot stuffed
into the cubby-holed
backseat of an idling
Crown Vic, my wrists
shredding more with
each strained shout
through the window
at the chubby rookie
left behind to watch me;
even then I knew
he was the boy picked last,
yet secretly too sure
of himself in a body
growing faster than
the small world
it governs. He was
like the dinosaur
sponges I bought
at the market to ripen
in kitchen bowls,
until they capped
their potential by
sucking every

container dry. I swear,
I can see that water
on his cheeks
as he pulls me from
the car by my neck,
getting bigger,
and taller, and thicker
in front of me, my
compliant frame
absorbing each swing
of his nightstick,
until finally I, too,
start to take shape.

Keith Kopka
203

²⁰³ [Keith Kopka, "Monument," *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, collected in *Count Four*, University of Tampa Press](#)

Amorphism

There must be a song that birds use
to describe a form of clairvoyance
based on the motions
of our human commutes,

or the family tree
of a tree
drawn in the shape of man
recycling himself underground.

There must be an angler fish
so deep in the squeeze
of the ocean's core
alighting its ancient leather face
like a nightmare in the nightlight in the night.

I love the Komodo dragon sleeping in the zoo,
his poison tongue locked in his jaw,
his breath bluing the glass for a moment like smoke.

I love the Loch Ness Monster
because I know she is a stick.

Sarah Matthes
204

²⁰⁴ [Sarah Matthes, "Amorphism," *jubilat*](#)

Undressing

I need help with the zipper on this skin
suit. I can't reach the pull and all
I want is to step out of it and drape it
over a chair while I smoke a cigarette
or light an orchard on fire. But it's just
me here, and knocking on my neighbor's
door to ask for a reason to stay in
my body seems a bit forward. I mean,
we haven't even exchanged cups
of sugar yet, or had a blowout fight
over who's been hogging the dryer.
We've both lived in this building
long enough to have raised a child
together, if by raised you mean
managed to keep it alive long enough
to send it to school so someone else
can have a go at it. But this is all
beside the point. The point is I have
an itch in the middle of my back,
right where the zipper would end
if I were wearing a strapless gown,
which I'm not, but a girl can dream,
right? A woman who once was a girl
can dream she's still a girl, right?
A sweet intoxicating thing, cherry
run through with a plastic sword.
But that skin doesn't fit me anymore.
That skin was just on loan, anyway.
That skin surely looks better
on whoever is wearing it now.

Suzanne Langlois
205

²⁰⁵ [Suzanne Langlois](#), "Undressing," collected in [Bright Glint Gone](#), [Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance](#)

Passion Fish

for Joe and Dorianne

When we got there, Joe was expecting
a deep red dining room, shadows flickering on the walls, the waitress
with a husky voice showing just a little décolletage as she leaned in
to take our order. Riffs of saxophone. A couple making out in the back corner.
A sea bass mounted on the fireplace, its glistening scales and puckered lips.
Codfish bladders covered in gold leaf, dangling from the light fixtures.

Instead, the place was plain as a train station.
Painted a kelpy shade of grey, looked over by a somber hostess
with a long face, and dark curly hair tied at the nape. I almost thought
she might begin to cry as she led us down the narrow hall to our table.
Or that maybe she'd been crying in the kitchen, already, wiping her tears
on the creased cuffs of her starched shirt.

But oh, when it arrived—the fish! Flaky and soft,
falling apart in our mouths. Arctic char, fresh wild salmon.
Armando's came on a bed of mashed turnips. Dorianne's laid out
on a sea of jewel-toned vegetables. "Try this," she said, offering us small,
purple cubes of starch. Parsnips? Beets?

We never could tell. But still—the buttery flesh,
a fat moon slung between the pines. "For me, this is as good as it gets,"
said Dorianne, and we nodded in agreement as the waitress
poured us more water from the endangered reservoirs of California,
and we feasted on the sustainably harvested bounty of the Pacific,
never mind the mercury quickening in our veins, the traces
of radiation borrowed from Fukushima's sunken fires.

By then we were talking about the long poem,
how you can tend it, bit-by-bit, keeping your nets in the water,
allowing the accumulation of old griefs, your mother's pearl earrings,
the paper cranes you kept in the closet for good luck, the crisp ten-dollar bill
folded in the back of your wallet, tick of the fluorescent clock
above your childhood bed, brush of fingertips against your neck,
the stars' dusky breath.

And I wished the night would go on and on,
a long poem drifting over the page, lines spilling out to the edge
of evening and beyond, to this outcrop of the continent. And that
all of us would live forever, so we could keep sitting down
to plates of exquisite fish. And so Joe and Dorianne
could keep talking about the line, how you've got to follow it,
see where it goes, without imposing, without backing away.
"It's *April is the cruelest month, breeding...*" said Dorianne,

lifting her glass to take another sip of Sierra run-off, the ice
clinking time as she spoke. "Not, *April is the cruelest month.*"
Only then,

I couldn't help thinking about how everything
and everyone I love are slipping back into the sea, how voracious the abyss
that holds our fingernails and soft, tender knees, the delicate
bones of our feet.

The earth beneath us, indifferent, busy as it is,
making and unmaking. Which, I suppose, is what makes April cruel.
Because it's relentless, the way the world goes on, pushing out tulips
and sparrows, with or without us.

And I don't want to back away from it
with its polluted streams and sadness, and I don't want to grasp
on with the tight fist of my heart.

I just want to let it all pass by, as if I were riding
the North Equatorial Current, so in love with the ocean, each gorgeous
surge, each pulsing saline rush, that I don't even care where I'm going,
or what I leave behind. Only how sunlight filters through
the dark water, flecks the waves with mica and silt.

Danusha Laméris
206

²⁰⁶ [Danusha Laméris, "Passion Fish," *American Poetry Review*, collected in *Bonfire Opera*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Hue: From a Notebook

We went down the Perfume River by dragon boat
as far as the pagoda of the three golden Buddhas.

Pray here. You can ask for happiness.
We light joss sticks, send votives downriver in paper sacks,

then have trouble disembarking from the boat.
Our bodies disembark, but our souls remain.

A thousand lanterns drift, a notebook opens in the dark
to a page where moonlight makes a sound.

These soldiers are decades from war now:
pewter-haired, steel-haired, a moon caught in plumeria.

We are like the clouds that pass and pass.
What does it matter then if we are not the same as clouds?

There was then the whirl of stork wings, and bicycle chains ringing.
It is still now the way the air is still just before the mine explodes.

Once we fired at each other. Now we pass silence back and forth.
On the ten thousand graves, we lay chrysanthemum.

Carolyn Forché
207

²⁰⁷ [Carolyn Forché](#), "[Hue: From a Notebook](#)," collected in [In the Lateness of the World](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Poem about Death Beginning with a Humblebrag and Ending with a Shower Beer

Today, for once, I did not think of Death. I avoided him like all men
in public by pretending to read, by putting in
my earbuds to drown out his *I still need you, babys* with Patsy Cline's
I go out walkin'. I watched the unglued soles
of his black Converse hightops pass in front of the bathroom stall
into which I'd retreated when I needed to
decompress from teaching. But I didn't say anything, only fished
in my purse for a pink clonazepam
that had spilled out into the bottom with all the pennies and single
sticks of gum. *I have to take*
this, I said when he later approached, and then I *helloed* into my phone
although it hadn't rung. I tried to look busy
all day. I answered emails I'd been putting off and I even remembered
to say *thank you for your patience* instead of *sorry*
for my delay. I invited students into my office to ask about their summer
breaks, and I heard about a job
petsitting four dogs, two cats, some Sea Monkeys, and a snake. I asked
the student if she had to drop mice by their tails
into the hot tank. They were brown and frozen in bags, with freezer burn
on their noses. I remembered then
that snakes smell with their tongues, remembered one flick against a glass
enclosure. I remembered then what it was
like to be kissed by Death—his tongue like an old, limp carrot left too long
in the crisper drawer. Sometimes, I imagined
sticking it into one of those old-fashioned pencil sharpeners mounted
on the wall. The sizing guide, the little crank,
the shavings coming out in coils, you know. Once, when we were
together, Death forgot my birthday. I had
to plan the party and smear the cake with buttercream myself, but Death took all
the credit. He was often like that. *A man*

of consequence, some would say. He never laid a hand on me, but any time
I told him he had hurt me he would say, *I don't*
know what you're talking about. I began to think that maybe I was
making it all up. *Maybe you are*, he said
without moving his lips, and I began to worry he could talk to me
telepathically. That seems like something
Death could do, I reasoned. But maybe his voice in me was me too.
It sounded funny after all, a little off, like Bob
Dylan in the late 80s, his voice just starting to turn to wet concrete.
Most of the time, I don't think
about Death, except when he drunk-texts in the middle of the night
or happens to run into me buying
milk. Sometimes when we'd *make love*, as he liked to call it, I was too drunk
to say *no*. Sometimes when I was under
him, his sweat dripping off his brow and stinging into my eye, I
would think about a woman and how she tasted
after we walked around the city for hours, finding every excuse to delay
returning to the hotel room we could
barely admit we had for reasons we couldn't say aloud, even to one
another, even though we both knew.
Today was a small triumph. As I said, I didn't think of him at all. But I can't
say he wasn't there. Isn't still. Here in the muscle
after I've undressed. In the brown bottle at my lips, in my hand on my breast.
And in the steam I inhale.

Emilia Phillips
208

²⁰⁸ Emilia Phillips, "[Poem about Death Beginning with a Humblebrag and Ending with a Shower Beer](#)," *The Adroit Journal*,
collected in [Embouchure](#), The University of Akron Press

Ireland, To Bethlehem

The plane is packed and over sweaty heads,
 rumpled hair, the movie glows in the transatlantic nighttime
 murmur of priests and nuns and Riverdancers returning

home—a baby is cooed by an older mother, a boy feels
 for his seat in the dark. I've read my books
 already, 2 days traveling, the difficulties

technical. *I hate that money*, says the priest beside me,
 and he orders another scotch, his third.
 The Feast of the Epiphany tomorrow, he studies religious

journals for a message, writes in a notebook
 impossibly small. *We are having problems*
 with sound, the flight attendant announces,

it is not your headset, and so the oceans swell in silence,
 bright blue tumbles across the screen mutely, foam
 collapsing over a tiny nimble figure

but she darts through to a green glow,
 sunshine through a veil of wave, her surfboard tense between
 her feet and the world's largest ocean. Her ride

is long, impossibly long—her hips stay low, a friend
 drops onto her wave and, together, they glide towards the shore
 No music. Just water and that blue. I check the SkyMall catalogue

for something I might need and didn't know. There are
 reasons I am flying over the ocean, reasons
 I wish I were sure of. Someday I might say, *yes, I chose*

him, and it wasn't wise. Or maybe we'll be old and
 surrounded by our own. The screen flashes;
 the surf is wild, but the bright sky makes me whisper,

Hawaii, where nothing could be that beautiful
 but is. The waves are bigger and she sets out, flowered
 bikini, hair pulled back in a serious bun.

But too soon she's underwater, arms above her head,
 spinning down into a champagne sea.
 The priest asks would I like some English chocolate. I say *no*

at first and then say *yes*. I say,
 how many Euros for the scotch? The baby Jesus

is a lot to be adored by black men, foreign kings, in
fact, tomorrow. They're stumbling, the Magi,
12 days across an ocean and through the desert.
It's so hot they must travel at night—
who wouldn't? And there was that star, sudden and perhaps a sign.
We've already tried to get there once,
I want to say to the kings. It's cool in this 747,
which later the pilot will land with only one engine.
A problem with
compressors. But what a sweet,
sweet ocean, and those few younger girls
who try to ride it. And what a night,
warmed by the sun-shocked smell
of saddle and sweat, the strong breath of camels.
What carved, fragrant trunkfuls
born across deserts and ready to be opened before an infant god.

Connie Voisine
209

²⁰⁹ [Connie Voisine, "Ireland, To Bethlehem," *Hunger Mountain*, collected in *Rare High Meadow of Which I Might Dream*, The University of Chicago Press](#)

Obit

Logic—my father’s logic died on June 24, 2009 in bright daylight. Murdered in the afternoon. I hung up Missing Person posters of myself and listened for the sound of a tree falling. The sound of the wind through trees is called *psithurism*. There’s no word for the translator of wind. If the wind is words, the trees are exclamation points. The spears of moonlight, question marks. My father doesn’t realize his words always end in prepositions. *I have a problem with [the moon], there is a problem between [the moon and me], the problem is on [the moon]*. What if he can no longer find what is being modified, in the way snow would fall forever if there were no lip to die on.

²¹⁰ [Victoria Chang, "Obit \[Logic—my father's logic died\]," *Ploughshares*, collected in *Obit*, Copper Canyon Press](#)

Bedtime Story with *Goodnight Moon* & CNN

Here, the now turns, the cardboard pages to telephones
and red balloons. *Goodnight moon. Goodnight room.*

There, in the then, a scarecrow stuffed with a missing
woman's hair. There in the web, a wolf spider

with a September hunger and blind in half her eyes.
Back, back in your newest hour, a woman vanished

and no one looked for her. Dark, dark my stalk and tassel.
Darker still my shadow's voice reciting newborn gospels,

ardent as the sing and saw of wind. *Goodnight nobody.*
Goodnight mush. Rock, rock in a stippled field. Hush

as the rest of the woman is found in an abandoned building.
with other bodies curled into positions of sleep or rapture.

Who knows how many we could find, the officer says as teams
sweep the empty blocks. *He wanted women no one would miss.*

This motive relieves me—I would miss your nose, your ears,
your sour breath; therefore you are safe. Emergency numbers

secure on the fridge, the reassurance of curtains. *Goodnight air.*
Goodnight noises everywhere. Soft, soft the windfall apples. Softer

still the curled fists gripping the yes of the world, the television's
cadence of tragedy and the sleepless months revised into happiness,

the yes of flies corseting a body, the yes of trees shepherding
shadows closer to home. Yes, the moon, the bright unending.

Traci Brimhall

211

²¹¹ [Traci Brimhall](#), "[Bedtime Story with Goodnight Moon & CNN](#)," *Narrative*, collected in [Come the Slumberless to the Land of Nod](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Hat Trick

We are snowed in again so we watch
Voldemort remove the Elder Wand
from Dumbledore's tomb. How big
my son's feet are when they stretch
past the blanket we are sharing, past
the slice of sunlight casting us in sharper
and sharper light. I am keeping a list
of what I did today. I have showered.
I have stayed in my pajamas. I have
typed on my laptop in the kitchen.
I have bought Girl Scout cookies in
my pajamas from the neighbor-girl,
Isabelle, who rang the doorbell holding
bright boxes of Peanut Butter Patties
and Thin Mints. I do not tell my son
about my mother's constant refrain—
that Girl Scout uniforms reminded
her of Hitler Youth each time we'd
see a folding table of girls in their
tan vests and pinned sashes outside
Pathmark. This is not extreme
given our family history, but I think
other moms on the block who post
memes like, "Technically you're not
drinking alone if your kids are home"
on the neighborhood Facebook group
and sell handbags or weight loss
shake mix in their spare time would
maybe not understand this particular
trigger. Voldemort is shooting green
lightning from his wand again, and
I have seen the frozen white face of
Dumbledore, impassive, as the camera
pans into his white marble tomb,
lingers on his long white beard.
He pried it from his cold, dead hands!
shouts my son, at the screen, as if he's
been waiting to use this exact phrase
for a long time. I have washed escarole.
I have made Italian wedding soup with
tiny meatballs in it. I have wondered
if we will run out of food before the town
plows us out. Snowzilla, Winter Storm Jonas,
or whatever we name this endless stretch
of white. I have sketched a picture of my

son's favorite hat: a blue faux-fur-lined Russian bomber with ear flaps, which he refers to as *hashtag hat*. He often wears it around the house, though we keep the heat up. I get that. I have ordered myself a #hat on Amazon so I can wear it next time it snows. So I can go out at night when the whole block is orange-skied and quiet, and every house muffles itself from the street; their windows become faces I watch and watch. When it falls, the snow sounds like sugar on foamed milk, like turning a page in a delicate book. I haven't told my son the stories about my grandparents—the ill-fitting wooden clogs all the prisoners wore through the winter and stuffed with rags for the long walk from the camps to the factory and back in the snow. When my grandfather came to America he made sweatshop hats, then opened a factory and copied popular styles from movies: Barbra Streisand's leopard print fake fur number in *Funny Girl*, her plaid newsboy cap from *What's Up Doc?* He was not a milliner, but he taught me to sew, pressed puffed fabric down into a neat seam with his long pinky nail while his machine spit out fake mink pillboxes or folded Cossacks people wore to navigate the winter streets of Manhattan. Our neighborhood is whited out. *Hello gorgeous*, says Barbra.

Erika Meitner
212

²¹² Erika Meitner, "Hat Trick," [Colorado Review](#), collected in [Holy Moly Carry Me](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Radioisotope Thermoelectric Generator Ode

Sure, lots of lousy poems have been written about Adam naming the animals and no doubt lots of lousy scholarship as well, but we're talking about lousy poems here and not lousy scholarship. We'll leave that to the scholars, though not the lousy ones.

And actually there's a bunch of hooley on creationist web sites about Adam naming the animals because there are so many of the little critters that, if Adam had started just a few minutes after Our Creator "breathed the breath of life into his nostrils," as it says in Genesis, he'd still be doing it today, unless he restricted his labor to, not the individual beasts, but to their genera, for each genus contains dozens, even hundreds, of species.

So if Adam named each of the 2,500 genera only, according to a web site I just consulted, "it would have taken him approximately three hours and forty-five minutes to complete the task if we include a five-minute break every hour."

Ha, ha! See? Poets and academics aren't the only idiots in the world.

Here's what we know about names, be they of animals or people or pianos (we'll get to that in a minute) or, from the viewpoint of marketing professor Tim Calkins, businesses. "It's always very tempting to name a company after yourself," says Professor Calkins. "It is simple. It is honest. And for a lot of entrepreneurs, when they're starting a new business, it's the place to start."

Also, it works: Procter & Gamble were people before they became a business, as were the founders of Bose, Duncan Hines, Doc Martens, and the Mayo Clinic, which is named not for the popular sandwich spread but for two brothers, W. W. and Will Mayo.

The Mayo brothers founded their clinic in 1892 along with Augustus Stinchfield, who was smart enough to go with the brothers' name rather than his own.

If your name were Steinway, you could found Steinway & Sons and make and sell high-end pianos.

Or your name could be Steinway and you could have nothing to do with pianos, though “if your name is Joe Steinway,” says Professor Calkins, “people will think you know a lot about classical music and have this association with you that isn’t true.”

My name is Kirby, and once I was dating this Jewish woman, and when things started to heat up, her father said, “David, I like you, but I wish your name were Greenberg.”

“David” means “beloved” in Hebrew—well, not to him.

I’m sure I have a number of the more admirable Jewish character traits and none of the unsavory Aryan ones, such as a fondness for torchlight rallies and the desire to annex parts of the former Czechoslovakia.

Still, I had the wrong name.

Or I was the wrong brand, if you want to put it that way.

In business, the right name can give a company a story, and that’s what a company needs to get its brand across, says David Aaker, vice chairman of Prophet, a branding firm.

“Facts don’t work,” says Mr. Aaker. “People counterargue. They’re skeptical. But if you tell them a story, all that goes away.”

Duke Ellington’s childhood piano teacher had the wonderfully Trollopian name of Marietta Clinkscapes. True fact!

Not that she had any choice in the matter, since her mother and father were Mr. and Mrs. Clinkscapes and thus relieved of the burden of coming up with a last name.

It’s hard enough to come up with a first: a neonatal nurse of my acquaintance tells me it’s not atypical for a patient to say something like, “My father is Terrell and my mother is Jennifer, so I want to name my baby Tennifer—how would I spell that?”

“Any way you like,” she tells them, “though before you fill out

a birth certificate, you should go out to the parking lot, get in your car, roll the windows up, and scream the baby's name as loudly as you can."

It's not a name, but my new favorite word is *spurtle*, which is a sort of paddle used to stir soups, stews, broths, and especially porridge, which, considering that the spurtle is Scottish in origin, makes sense, given that a lot more porridge is prepared and consumed in Aberdeen, Glasgow, and Dundee than colcannon, haggis, neeps and tatties, sticky toffee pudding, black pudding, or grouse.

To the job let the tool be suited, be that tool a kitchen utensil or something else entirely.

I mean, you could stir your porridge with a regular spoon or a pencil or a World War II bayonet, for that matter, but wouldn't it taste better if you'd stirred it with a spurtle?

Verdi's little-known opera *The Battle of Legnano* has everything an opera needs: best friends who are in love with the same woman; a woman who loved one man once but is now totally faithful to the other man, who is her husband; a villainous third man who lusts after the wife; a loyal but weak serving woman who falls into the villain's clutches; a threatening army camped just outside the city gates; and a battle during which one of the best friends dies.

I'm sure you'd like to know which of the friends dies, though I won't say which in case you actually see *The Battle of Legnano*, which you won't because it's almost never staged due to its unpopularity.

There's also a letter slandering the once wavering but now totally steadfast wife, which, like every letter in every opera ever written, swoops in and out of the narrative as it is lost, found, hidden in someone's bosom, and left on some table on which it should not have been left.

Don't read that letter! you want to shout. But they do, and more misery ensues at least until such time as some milquetoasty plot device lifts the mood a little and the curtain comes down.

The Battle of Legnano, though. Who's going to see an opera called *The Battle of Legnano*? Okay, me. But it sounds like a history lesson, not an opera.

The other two thirds of the seats would have been filled on the evening I went if Verdi had called it *Love and Slaughter* or *She Chose the Right One*, *Alas* or *The Poisoned Letter*—anything but the name he gave it.

The ancient Greeks didn't name their children till they were three because they wanted to make sure they lived.

Maybe we shouldn't name ours till they're 26, since neuroscientists are confirming what car rental companies have already figured out, that the brain doesn't fully mature until age 25.

Till then, the prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that helps curb impulsive behavior, isn't fully developed.

This explains why a colleague of mine says she can teach her students about feminism as long as she doesn't use the word "feminism."

That would alienate a lot of the young men in her classes as well as the young women who think they can gain the respect of such men by agreeing with them, which they can't.

Ever been to Prague? The area in front of the train station is called Sherwood Forest because it's populated by drunks, homeless people, and panhandlers.

I would describe it as seedy rather than dangerous, but why pull the devil by his tail, as the wise people of that city say?

The name is lighthearted and even affectionate, in its way, though something tells me that any monies thieved from the pockets of tourists and passersby become the sole property of the thief and are not scheduled for redistribution to the populace as they might have been in the days of Robin Hood and his merry band.

I do wish my Jewish girlfriend's father had thought better of me.

There's nothing wrong with my name, even if it isn't as grand
as that of Good King Wenceslas,
who illustrates my point perfectly, since he wasn't.

Sure, he was pious, but he wasn't effective, which is why his
brother Boleslaus stabbed him to death.

Boleslaus was also known as Boleslaus the Cruel.

Can you imagine letting your daughter date somebody
named Boleslaus the Cruel?

I'd have had a chance if my name had been different.

But if my name had been different, wouldn't my life have
been different as well?

At the May 4, 1990 memorial service for artist Keith Haring,
actor Dennis Hopper referred to him as "my good
friend Keith Harington.

That was bad enough by itself. But Hopper then added "and I
mean that sincerely," which is what you say when you
don't mean it sincerely at all.

Reader, be content with your name.

That said, do what you can to make it soar like a falcon or kestrel.

Let it be the Hope Diamond of names, the Everest, the Cadillac.

Live so that your name becomes a word known to the people
of every country, like "okay" and "Coca Cola®."

Let your name be worthy of inclusion on the audio-visual
discs aboard the Voyager space probes that were
launched in 1977 and are now flying through the star
systems of our galaxy and are expected to do so
until 2025, when their radioisotope thermoelectric
generators can no longer provide power.

Till then, should the discs be retrieved by beings from other
planets, they will find photos of the earth and its life
forms, greetings from the President of the United
States as well as the Secretary-General of the UN,
music by Mozart, Blind Willie Johnson, and Chuck

Berry, and your name.

Let yours be the fifth face on Mount Rushmore, and below it,
your name.

Let the four faces on Mount Rushmore be dynamited to
pebbles and dust. Let yours alone appear there and
the mountain be named for you.

Let your name be lisped by nuns saying their rosaries and
priests telling their pater noster.

Let it be on every prayer wheel, be it powered by wind, fire,
water, or the hand of the devoted.

Let your name be such that when the sun streams through
your window and you prepare to meet the day, flights
of angels shall sing thee to thy single or double
espresso, thy latte or cappuccino, thy tea of so many
types that it would be impossible to enumerate them
all, each more musical-sounding than the next, from
chai and matcha to rosehip, spearmint, mulberry.

Let your name be such that each morning the devil says oh
goddamn, she's up.

David Kirby
213

²¹³ [David Kirby, "Radioisotope Thermoelectric Generator Ode," *Birmingham Poetry Review*](#)

I Wish I Were a Little More Oblivious

Or knew how to direct it outward, like the professor with the crazy hair said that time. I didn't realize the pained look on my face until he asked about it, and I said, "Oh, you know. Existential malaise." "Project it outward!" he said, and turned back to his chicken nuggets and orange soda. I thought he probably meant it kindly. It seemed very kind when he said it.

Maybe it's like the boys in sixth grade who looked calm only when they were furiously hitting drums in the band room. The one kid Roger loved KISS and took me to his room, past the stoner mom and her boyfriend in the dim macraméd living room, so that I could watch him take off his shirt and put on a new one.

Those were the boys I liked—the angry drum-hitting ones who looked like they wanted to cry when they talked to their fathers and sucker-punched bullies in 11th grade, back when being the only kid in school with a mohawk meant taking your life in your hands. Those were the boys I liked. Maybe wanted to be.

Joanna Penn Cooper
214

²¹⁴ [Joanna Penn Cooper](#), "[I Wish I Were a Little More Oblivious](#)," collected in [Wild Apples](#), [Ethel](#)

Myths

Today my mother says she is afraid of turning into a vegetable. I know what she means, but the way she says it reminds me of Greek myths where people became poplar trees and cows.

I imagine being called to the hospital and there, under a light blanket, is a huge zucchini. I struggle to make sense of it even if that means embracing the randomness of willful gods.

But the doctor can't keep a straight face. He bites the inside of his lip to keep from laughing. I can hardly blame him. It's not his mother lying there with a stem.

Well, probably she won't turn into anything distressing. Not that Mom hasn't had her share of greed or ambition or longing, but she's very healthy. In fact, she's been in the hospital only once—the night I was born.

Halfway through the delivery, she thought she saw God's face on the ceiling. Then it turned into a Chrysler. "I didn't know which to believe in," she confides. "I still don't."

Ron Koertge
215

²¹⁵ [Ron Koertge](#), "[Myths](#)," collected in [Fever](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

This is a review for *Blue in Green* by Miles Davis

It's raining. Has to be raining. Someone in the corner room is in love with you. Loves you enough to touch her body, wants you to watch; pull up a chair. The horn asks: *How long has it been since?* There are a number of feelings you are in need of. You are not sadness, but near. Down one road in your mind you are walking alone; down another everyone is your wife. The horn asks: *temperance, obedience*. In the corner room, the daybed pressed to spark against the wall, she came. When you leaned in to know about it, you wished she would've slapped your hand away; wished to unhear your name falling out of her.

Taylor Johnson

216

²¹⁶ [Taylor Johnson, "This is a review for *Blue in Green* by Miles Davis," *Indiana Review*, collected in *Inheritance*, Alice James Books](#)

Letter to a Letter to the Editors

She clearly knew her melodramatic fears were groundless, and avoided challenge by expressing her invective through poetry—a multifaceted, intentionally cryptic medium through which she could conveniently deny unprovoked attacks upon those who loved her.

—Anne Sexton’s nieces, Lisa Taylor Tompson and Mary Gray Ford, in a letter to the editor, “Anne Sexton’s Vision of Reality,” *New York Times*, August 1991, after the publication of Diane Wood Middlebrook’s *Anne Sexton: A Biography*

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
—Emily Dickinson

Where Blanche saw reindeer on the roof, Santa, and expressions of love, Anne saw a particularly villainous season. Anne could “find a cloud in the sunniest sky.” These people from Scituate, Mass.—I know them in my head and heart. The way they say how it is interesting but not surprising, that everyone who is slaughtered (reputation-wise) is dead. The way one person took up so much static-electric space, and spread out. How could that sweet old man we loved have molested her? they ask. (Oh that’s how predators work, separating one from the rest.) The body cringing at the sight of the one who harmed it—the deep voice of it comes out, to balance the well-meaning upper-middle-class, the cherished, the sweet, loving facade. Nothing is accurate. Nothing is right. And who would see clots of blood for beautiful roses? (They ask.) Presuming the wet, real grass is just yours, the garden where everything is flourishing, the sidewalk where a chicken bone lies, the way the morning takes its time to unwrap, and the street begins to fill like a play—nothing you lay your eyes upon is just yours. And it is also all yours.

*

Does anguish only come from within your own head? Yes. But so does the meaning of words, the depiction of a cloudless sky, where there is nothing, no sky at all, only an unbroken stream of water hoarded in it. And Anne went and ruined everything with her fucking chemical imbalance! Her strange and unsettled anger! Her “insistence on what she saw as brutal honesty”!

What is “brutal honesty” in poetry? How does that work?

Of course she chose a mysterious medium to talk about a cloud that existed in a sunny sky. The “pleasant memories were slashed.” ☹️ They assume that Anne assumed that poems were concerned with fact. But she knew the complicated presentation of existence. She didn’t write essay or memoir. She was all “imagination, without basis in fact.” Is imagination constrained by fact? The accepted social story must be consistent. The story must be sanctioned. The story must be liked. Must not upset great-aunts, carted off, screaming. Awe at death was what she had in the end. Sisters will hate one another, and nieces will always take their mother’s side. So normal, I know! My family is full of angry sisters who want to explain their childhoods in different ways.

*

I had a vision last night of a massive heron with a shimmering rainbow neck that stood, in my mother’s backyard, on top of a machine that dug graves. And the heron’s chicks were gathered under her wings as the machine swayed and clanged; the man at the levers, indifferent in his control center, continued to dig

where the birds had lived—“But they are rare!” I cried up to him. “RARE! LIKE, ’NOT SEEN NORMALLY!”” But he continued on, saying he didn’t think they were rare. And I watched, there being nothing I could do about it.

What unwarranted conclusions can we draw? What horror provide? There was also the “accident of birth” hypothesis offered by Annes nieces.

Is it “a misfitted chromosome,” a “generic misfortune,” that makes a poet?

“Some families, confronted with a child like Anne, would have turned her over to state agencies for warehousing.

Our family chose to accept responsibility for one of our own.”

—this, this medium is not done with itself. And I’ll take her babble, her immature, completely unwarranted conclusions. And tell things honestly with a slant like a roof where apples roll down, and snow slides off, under which phoebes make weird hive nests and lay eggs—I think a poet will see truth through a distorted reverence for the underlying truth of shadows; “human decency” has nothing to do with poems—

And where do these poems’ truths come from? We are mistaken when we try to make broken things new; rather, we must proceed through the outrageous, cryptic medium of vision, which is only curiosity at being alive. When one has seen horrors in the midst of everyone’s enjoyment, to pretend to see reindeer and elves is to ignore a more powerful perception, covering it with a sheet, as over a wound that will fester. The ordinary conceptual system that we live by is governed by metaphors neither obvious to nor desired by most citizens. The automation of living is comforting. To closely examine the realities of germs, for instance, disgusts people, drives them to enthusiastically kill the vital bacteria necessary for a healthy organism. Purell™ and a set of agreed-upon concepts. It wasn’t that Anne was bad, just that, for whatever reason, she wasn’t let in on the agreed-upon system of understanding reality—and her madness was stayed a little with poetry.

So, dearest nieces of Anne Sexton, *I get it*. But I disagree.

Bianca Stone

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²¹⁷ Bianca Stone, “[Letter to a Letter to the Editors](#),” *The Brooklyn Rail*, collected in *The Möbius Strip Club of Grief*, Tin House Books

loose strife

Embarrassingly it was just outside the tunnels. One American dollar bought you one bullet. Consequently I did it because I could. A few hundred miles west in Cambodia rumors that \$100 could buy you a single shot with a rocket launcher and a cow. In all my days

I have never met anyone who's done it or seen it done. The animal's essence geysering up into the blue. Muse, help me to understand why I paid the money and laid down in the dust, the thing pressed against my shoulder. What wrath compelled me. What narrative. "Barry, who was born in Vietnam

but raised in America, provides what is definitely a Western point of view. From her perspective, violence is a shocking misfortune that remains foreign, beyond her personal borders." Yes. That other time the way I balled it all up and left it behind in Guayaquil after we were robbed at gunpoint on a deserted road

in the national park, the local police stroking our faces and telling us in Spanish that we were lucky and how, as it was happening, a light went on and I realized I had the capacity to die, that capacity was the right word, that it was a power, an aptitude, an ability

which I possessed, a potential, and I wondered how others do it right here at home, how the worst thing in the world happens to people right in their own living rooms, on the street where they live, at the movie theater, the grocery store, at the rally to meet their congresswoman

or the place where they worship their loving god and for those who don't die, for those in whom the capacity remains unfulfilled, the gunman's thousand rounds somehow missing them, how they keep going day in and day out, how they ever feel safe despite the public's reluctance

to do anything to keep it from happening again,
someone taking up a gun in the place where you sleep,
where you love, the place where you educate your children,
the spot from which you can't fly out
like Andrée and I did, back to Miami and then onward,
handing over your passport and saying please,

just let me go.

Quan Barry
218

²¹⁸ [Quan Barry, "loose strife \('Embarrassingly it was just outside the tunnels'\)," *Fusion Magazine*, collected in *Loose Strife*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Indiana Problem (Mousetrap)

Wrapped in an afghan and playing
Mousetrap, I worried that I wasn't
giving enough attention to the stupider
toys: Lite Brite with most of the pieces
missing; life-size Barbie head smeared
with red and blue, forever bruised
and smiling; shoebox of rubber animals.
Boredom was always a dim garden in
the background, a place where twilight
was described by adults, ears stretched
toward the opening notes of sitcoms, eyes
stretched toward the windows and the sketchy
trees, dark Hoosier sadness, the houses
so close we could hear their forks and knives
if we left the door open. I didn't plan this
second kingdom: not exactly in the mind
or the heart but in the dullness between
them, a waiting so long it made another
body in case this one got too lonely.

Julia Story
219

²¹⁹ [Julia Story](#), "[Indiana Problem \(Mousetrap\)](#)," [The Rockhurst Review](#), collected in [Spinster for Hire](#), [The Word Works](#)

I Live in an Actual Flophouse

built for destitute men in the 1920s,
although it's 2015 and I'm
made entirely of expensive marble,
especially my enormous breasts.
This may explain why,
as my first romantic gesture to you,
I played a song called "Party Time,"
which is about an orgy of grandparents
at a family reunion.
See: it isn't true that stone hearts
are always cold, as anyone
who has smelled rain
on summer freeways knows.
My weird mineral heart
sincerely loves reunions.

Sarah Galvin
220

²²⁰ Sarah Galvin, "[I Live in an Actual Flophouse](#)," *Gramma*, collected in [Ugly Time](#), [Black Ocean](#)

Saved

Once I burned a man's letters
in a metal can in front of him

a wisp of that smoke returns
in the clear breath of mountains
his rueful look the flare of anger
that struck the match

nothing we'd planned to happen did
we have all been saved so many times

why I should think of this
years later in such elegant air
not wondering what happened to him
or feeling regret but thinking instead
how the signs on abandoned motels
west of Langtry Texas have faded more
each year

EXCELLENT BEDS
just a pale red whisper now
TILE BATHROOMS
ghost of a promise
receding into stucco wall
SLEEP WELL HERE

Naomi Shihab Nye
221

²²¹ [Naomi Shihab Nye](#), "[Saved](#)," collected in [Red Suitcase](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

The Newspapers

How they tumbled down the snow-filled streets,

how they slept in battered vending boxes
and hung from dowels in the public library.

How my father kept the memorable ones in his closet,
among the dying shoes.

Then the power went out. The TV closed its eye

and the house felt strange in the new silence:
a hush of snowstorm.

Because there was nothing else to do
I went upstairs to read.

In his closet, I found an old newspaper
in a language I couldn't understand.

There he was in uniform, just below the fold—but where?
And who was that other man by his side?

I did not hear what my mother said in the kitchen
that made him throw his wine glass at her,

cutting a stain on the wall behind her head.

*Let's go to the museum, my father said,
Let's get outta here.*

He smelled of wine and sweat, familiar and good.

Newspapers fell from the clouds,
clotting the rooftops and the branches as we drove.

At the museum, a giant brain turned on a gear.
Press a button, he told me. Now try another one,

and for once I did exactly as he said.

Colored bulbs glowed on the surface,
temporal lobe, hippocampus, neural highways,

the great brain moving in the silence—

but who was that other man by his side, a rifle
propped carelessly against his shoulder?

And what had become of the gun my father held?

He was casually checking his watch.
She's cooled down by now, he said,

but I was still pressing those buttons, I couldn't stop.

Thoughts blinked on the surface,
bright networks of gold and blue,

the brain humming as it glowed in the vast gray room.

Back home, my mother wouldn't turn from the stove
or look at us. The house smelled good.

I quietly stowed the newspaper with the others, behind the shoes,
then came downstairs for dinner.

She'd cleaned the stain away.

That night, I couldn't sleep. My brain kept turning.
Pinpricks glittered like cities viewed from an airplane.

From downstairs, a muffled conversation,
then the TV changing channels

and, much later, the noise of sex.

To think he has been dead twenty years now
and she can no longer feed herself. I am 48,

typing this on a hot June night
1000 miles from there.

Kevin Prufer
222

²²² [Kevin Prufer](#), "[The Newspapers](#)," [The Paris Review](#), collected in [The Art of Fiction](#), [Four Way Books](#)

from "Testaments Scratched into a Water Station Barrel"

Far from highways I flicker
gold the whispering
gasoline

if I pinch her nipples
too hard
no joy for her

no joy for me
so I practice on ticks
press them

just so so they give
but do not burst
beneath

my boots
thistle & puncture vine
a wild horse

asleep on all fours
its shadow still grazing
my lips

black meat
my tongue
black meat

in my backpack
sardine tins
saltines

& a few cough drops
the moon is my library
there's a glacier

inside a grain of salt
do you understand
I'm sorry

my Albanian
isn't very good
tremble

if God forgets you
tremble
if God

remembers you
out of clay I shape
sparrows

I glaze their bills & claws
I give them names
like gossamer

inglenook lagoon
she bathed
a trumpet

in milk
her tenderness acoustic
& plural

her pupils perched
in all that green
there's nudity

around the corner
bones cracked
& iridescent

sometimes it rains so hard
even the moon
puts on

a raincoat
zinc razz zinc jazz
I notch my arms

I notch my thighs
five six days
I score

my skin but not
the back of my knees
two ovals

two portraits
my son at ten
his eyes ablaze

my son at one
his eyes shut
once

I dressed him in burlap
once bicycles
& marbles

once I tore rain
out of a parable
to strike down

his thirst

Eduardo C. Corral
223

223 [Eduardo C. Corral, "Testaments Scratched into a Water Station Barrel \[Far from highways I flicker...\]", *Poetry*, collected in *Guillotine*, Graywolf Press](#)

First

There is a holiness to exhaustion
is what I keep telling myself,
filling out the form so my TA gets paid
then making copies of it on the hot
and heaving machine, writing
Strong start! on a pretty bad poem.
And then the children: the baby's
mouth opening, going for the breast,
the girl's hair to wash tonight
and then comb so painstakingly
in the tub while conditioner drips
in slick globs onto her shoulders
and her discipline chart flaps in the air
conditioner at school, taped
to a filing cabinet, longing for stickers.
My heart is so giant
this evening, like one of those moons
so full it's disturbing, so full that
if you see it when you're getting out
of the car you have to go inside the house
and make someone else come out
and see it for themselves. I want
everything, I admit. I want
a clean heart. I want the children
to sleep and the drought to end.
I want the rain to come down hard—
It's supposed to monsoon, is what
Naomi said, driving away this morning,
and she was right. It's monsooning.
Still I want more. Even as the streets
are washed clean and then begin
to flood. Even though the man
came again today to check the rat traps
and said he bet we'd catch the rat
within twenty-four hours. We still haven't
caught the rat, so I'm working
at the table with my legs folded up
beneath me. I want to know
what is holy—I do. But first I want
the rat to die. I am thirsty for that
death and will drink deeply of that
victory, the thwack of the trap's
hard plastic jaw, and I will rush
to see the evidence no matter how
gruesome, leaning my body over
the washing machine to see the thing

crushed there, much smaller than
I'd imagined it'd be, the strawberry
large in its mouth.

Carrie Fountain
224

²²⁴ [Carrie Fountain](#), "[First](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [The Life](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Getting there

Anas and I had Oreos this morning, as we do
once a week, on the bench outside his store,
sharing them so we don't get fat
(ter). Now and then, for a change,
Nutter Butters. Anas keeps a picture
of his mother above the register.
Right before he was shot three years ago
by a thief, he focused on her face.
Asked weeks later by a cop
what the man looked like, Anas thought
but didn't say, *Home*. He told me that.
I told my wife, who told her mother,
who told her mother, who said, How lovely.
Even in her senility, her eyes sparked
to the word *home*. Anas' wife is dead,
his mother, grandmother, but I've leant him
three generations of women
admiring his thoughts. Below
being a man, he's Anas. Beneath
being Syrian, he prefers Paris.
Under wanting to get even, he doesn't.
Retribution is like playing catch
with an egg. How far would we get with war
if every man first asked his mother,
Can I kill? Most of whom would say,
"It's *may* I kill. And no, you may not."

Bob Hicok
225

²²⁵ [Bob Hicok](#), "[Getting there](#)," [PoetsArtists](#), collected in [Hold](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Customer Service Is

We take pride in serving the
We're accustomed to servicing the
Please take the attached
Please answer these six
Please answer these eight
This will only be a quick
If microphones don't reach, then
If ramps are required, then
If you need audio, then
If you need visual, then
We request one week's
We request one month's
All reasonable requests will
A flock of surveys is a surveillance.
A stampede of stairs is an architecture.
An expectation of elevators is a favor.
An "oh-crap" of crips is a caucus.
But I have an aunt who is
I had a friend who was
We practice best
We follow the
You have to see our
You have to stand up for
Your help is so
Your answers will be

Sandra Beasley
226

²²⁶ [Sandra Beasley, "Customer Service Is," *Split This Rock*, collected in *Made to Explode*, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Smoking in Heaven

Watching young poets in the early evening
Smoking on the terrace outside the poetry reading,
I wondered if there would be a smoking terrace
in heaven. I have a friend, dead now,
A Catholic who was unimpressed by the prospect of paradise
Until he discovered a group of medieval theologians
Who had proposed that there was a special kind of time
In eternity. They gave it a Latin name.
Like my friend, they couldn't conceive of a God
Who would force them to live forever
Without sunrise and sunset. His wife, a skeptic,
Called it decaffeinated time, at which he shrugged wryly,
This idea of life after death made him very happy,
Which was, as far as he was concerned, the point.
He's been dead now for almost a decade,
So I suppose he knows one way or another
Whether there is nothing after death and no one there
To know it or not. The smoking terrace would, of course, be out of doors,
So it wouldn't be as depressing as those smoking rooms in airports
Where people with grey skin submit to their addiction
With religious humility. You could light up and walk to the edge of the clouds
And watch the fragrant smoke you were expelling
Drift into the decaffeinated sunset. It made me wonder
If there were coffee in heaven. Or sex. I knew a woman
Who said that the main reason for sex,
As far as she was concerned,
Was the cigarette afterward. And if there were sex
In heaven, why would there be anything else? Probably
So that you could watch Canada geese settle on a lake
Just as the moon was twilighting the surface of the water
In luminous little scallops. The young poets
Should read Allen Ginsberg who said that poets should set an example
By not submitting to what he called "the nicotine haze
of capitalism." Probably in the heaven without tobacco
The couples are walking by the sea, having already made love,
And the moon, almost unnaturally large, is just coming up,
And the color of the moon on the water is just like what
Their bodies are feeling, contented but still tingling,
And in the moonlight they can see a pack of feral goats
With their beards and inhuman eyes grazing on the hillside, also contentedly,
As if time and eternity were the wrong ideas altogether,
And the women would have come in with their Greek masks on
To walk the shoreline and dance what fate is.

Robert Hass
227

²²⁷ Robert Hass, "Smoking in Heaven," collected in [Summer Snow](#), [Ecco](#)

Crush the Smiling Nothing

Your girlfriend broke up with you the night the Oilers won the Stanley Cup. Gretzky and Messier skated like royalty, while the other team flailed and struggled to stay standing, like third-string astronauts. Because she told her parents she was sleeping at Katie Noreyev's, and you were too far from college to drive back, after she broke up with you in the lobby, there was nothing else to do but stay together in the room you rented at the Hotel McDonald. You fought for a little while, and then things went quiet. Later, when she turned away from you in bed, you wondered if she was crying, then wondered why she wasn't. Outside you could hear the hotel in flames of celebration. The walls shook, the floors throbbed, and the streets stayed steady with currents of horns. Things were being torn apart in the name of victory and romance, and you felt stupid about the note you wrote her. Maybe quoting a dead rock star and making a weird analogy about sharks navigating their way around the world by moonlight wasn't the right way to tell her you loved her. While she slept, you opened the bottle of champagne that was chilling in a bucket by the bed and drank it yourself. It went down cold and sharp, like a world that had gone to glass, a decade turned to ice.

Alex Green
228

²²⁸ [Alex Green](#), "[Crush the Smiling Nothing](#)," collected in [Emergency Anthems](#), [Brooklyn Arts Press](#)

from "Act One. Our House Is Now Another House"

7. Salim

To lift my arms as if in praise / when they strap it beneath
my shirt, to feel the ice-cold shell / against my chest, its promised

hatching into blood-heat. To imagine myself already
dead, yet buoy in the wash / of capillaries pulsing like web,

every strand tensile, a gleam. To tread the streets now paved
over my father's house & to be held / up at the checkpoint

between my village & what's left / of our groves of lemon
& olive—razor-wired & identity card. To believe that

this will stanch his wound, this mad algebra dividing
all numbers back to one, the columns on each side

of the equal sign equal again, if I can walk into a stranger's cafe
& in a sudden illumination / join shard to skin, flesh

to flesh, & wake us / from a nightmare, unhooked
from the wall like a clock / that needs to be wound again.

Philip Metres
229

²²⁹ Philip Metres, "Act One. Our House Is Now Another House," collected in [Shrapnel Maps](#), Copper Canyon Press

My Friend Says I Should Be Thinking about “Masked Intimacy” When I Think about Leila Olive

I am making an exception for the tree that fell in the storm. And the guy I hired to clean up the tree. And the limbs he left plunged deep in the yard. And the shape they make: a V.

Everyone agrees. Restaurant workers are *very exposed*.

On Tuesdays late, so 3 a.m., I sign into a Zoom where we sit around and read Lacan’s *The Psychoses*. I am googling “what is masked intimacy?”

Cool your jets. Cool your jets. This is the phrase I most often think in regards to Leila Olive. And then. Cuddle with her. Something else with her. Ask her “Does this feel good? How about this?”

I don’t really see the need to think about *masked intimacy* yet. Leila Olive works in a restaurant all the time and has a boyfriend and yeah, she’s bi, and I’ve only seen her once. During the pandemic. In December.

First my ex was a watercolor above the fireplace. Then I moved her to the kitchen. I knew she’d hate that. But she’d like it better than being listed for sale on Etsy.

Having the hots for artists is a recurring problem for me.

When people say “recurring problem,” do we actually mean “chronic desire”?

There’s a squirrel on the V and he’s eating a nut. I’m just reporting the facts.

This summer I had a weather phobia. No, worse than that. My partner—you can have more than one—had to look up the weather every day. If it was going to rain or storm, I got on the floor between the sofa and coffee table and put a sofa cushion over my head.

You could lie in the bathtub covered by sofa cushions, my therapist suggested.

It is very unlikely you will die from a tree crushing you during a storm.

All this medical in the pandemic is reminding you of your childhood. You did not have much choice.

But I know the truth: Zelda Fitzgerald went to a party. She was getting drunk and watching Scott flirt and she called the fire department. The party carried on. This was in the 1920s. She had been to several parties, was rich, from Montgomery, died right up the road from here in Asheville, North Carolina.

Finally, I got on Buspirone and then I didn’t care about the tree that I knew would fall and which did fall, but not on my house, and I didn’t care about my lungs and I stopped taking the X-rays out of the closet to have a look at myself.

Are you practicing *masked intimacy*? Best I can figure you wear a mask and take off all your clothes. I don’t take off all my clothes for anybody. It’s not my thing. I like to have a long cape or tee shirt or latex thigh-highs still on me.

One person is not talking to me about *masked intimacy* at all: Leila Olive. The subject has not come up. Twice she said, *I'll get tested for you*. She said, *Send it to me. Send it to meeeeeee*. She said, *I missed ya today at work*. And, *Ugh yr so hot I love you*. The next morning: *So embarrassing. I was drinking tequila*.

Hey. Cool your jets.

You're thinking I have Leila Olive on a pedestal and you're right. I can hardly go anywhere outside my brain. But this isn't Ancient Greece, so I do not imagine her cast in marble on a column in front of a temple.

More like on a blue velvet chaise lounge in a living room—not mine: there's a guy here, he's my partner; this is not for him—where she's wearing whatever she wants and bored by the poem she's reading.

When Auden said, *Every critic should state his Eden*, he was basically saying, *Every poet should taste her Leila Olive*.

She goes into work at 3 p.m. and gets off at 10 p.m. and sometimes makes \$500 in tips.

I cannot actually imagine kissing Leila Olive through a mask. Okay, I have imagined it. If we must do it, we must. But I would like a pair of small ^[SEP]copper-handled scissors nearby so we can cut the parts out of our masks for our lips. You're thinking, "That defeats the purpose."

But there's not a purpose here. This is not a business meeting.

So many red flags I could build a castle behind them.

Zelda's at the party and she's flirting too. She has forgotten about calling the fire department. She's talking about jazz to someone in that way white women have of wanting, so badly, to be conversant in Black aesthetic. The firemen arrive.

Nothing seems to be on fire. "Who called the fire department?" some guy shouts, relieved to finally have a thing to say at a party. "I did," Zelda says, and then that guy, for the rest of his miserable life, tells everyone he talked to Zelda Fitzgerald once at a party.

I did not know my own heart around Leila Olive in the before times. I thought she was standoffish, very smart, and of course I, and everyone in the room, recognized her beauty. I did not ever think of kissing her.

She does not champion her own beauty. Does it grieve her? Has she come to grief? Will she come to grief? Am I going to be involved here, somewhere, in this coming or this grieving?

Let's say you're right and I did think of kissing Leila Olive. It was so far back in my mind that it was like one of those Lacanian books. I would've had to look my index up to find the page of the kiss I imagined.

Index fingers are highly underrated. Trigger, slick, button, quick.

"I did," Zelda says. "Where's the fire?" this one fireman asks. And Zelda points to her heart. "It's here. It's right here," she says.

I don't know. I'd wear a mask and go to coffee with her. I'd wear a mask and go to her place. I'd wear a mask and watch a movie. I'd wear a mask and say, "Plz take off your mask" and she'd say, "We really shouldn't be doing this."

That's the phrase people use right before they really want to do something.

It wouldn't be sad without the ending. But you have to know the ending. For once, you get to know the ending. Zelda was in a waiting room. In Asheville, North Carolina. A waiting room for electroshock therapy. That's when the fire broke out.

Did she know, in advance, at the party, that there would be a fire and she would need those firemen?

Auden wrote privately to a friend, *Of course, I know Sappho's work has homosexual valences. But it's not time.*

On man-time, it matters who presides over the money and the weaponry. On crip-time, I send a GIF of two women kissing. She hearts it.

Jillian Weise
230

²³⁰ [Jillian Weise, "My Friend Says I Should Be Thinking about "Masked Intimacy" When I Think about Leila Olive," *Poetry*](#)

Terra Nova

There is infinite space in the digital cloud,
yet no one can inhabit it.
It is cold and vacuous, like the moon.

If you disobey the higher laws,
you then must obey the lower laws.
Pick your poison, as they say.

Hyperbole will not protect you
against diminishing returns.

Elms exist, spite exists, birds exist.
What is a bird, but a handful
of sinew and song?

Definitions terrify.
Distinctions frighten more.
What do you mean, this is better than that?
Is language a boa constrictor or a valve?

Oh so this is what a boundary is.
Oh so this is what it means, to cop a feel.

I, too, divide light from darkness.
I, too, create animals of land and sea.

Why can't it all be opera, heroine
dragging her voluminous dress
across the floor? Captive me.
Croon explicit lyrics in my ear.

I haven't had a thought worth
thinking in three straight days,
and yet still you love me.

I might be a junkie,
and yet you draw ever near.
I don't need proof of anything.

The only trial is by fire:
the only fear is fear.

Virginia Konchan
231

²³¹ [Virginia Konchan](#), "[Terra Nova](#)," [Bennington Review](#)

Poem for Tucker Carlson's Face

So nothing anymore makes sense,
let me tell you. Is it secret
what you love, or loves you like
a medicine. A flame. I am
so committed to this moment
in which it's easy to imagine violence.
In movies, getting punched
seems to hurt just a little.
Mostly is impact, slap of meat on meat,
then an instant sleep
and no dream of crushed knuckles
and blood and pain
that will always linger.

When you're old, grows worse.
When you press close
to a future warmth
and confess everything about a previous life.

I floated in space. I won.
The ocean was lavish then
and not dead and not memorial to this ruin
that seems to be encoded
within. I'm afraid of you. What you mean.

Last night the moon
in the sky hung
like a glowing fraction
and a stranger asked me if I believed in fate.

I thought of the night
I spent in an emergency room years ago:

a man lay sobbing
with a hunting knife deep in his shoulder.
My heart is broken, he sighed.
Let me go. Let me die. Let me out of here.
What he wanted, I did.
I do.

Paul Guest
232

²³² [Paul Guest, "Poem for Tucker Carlson's Face," *Southern Indiana Review*](#)

Not Part of Literature

Monolithos was four fisherman huts along the water,
a miniature villa closed for years, and our farmhouse
a hundred feet behind. Hot fields of barley, grapes,
and tomatoes stretching away three flat miles
to where the rest of the island used to be.
Where the few people live above the great cliffs.
A low mountain to the south and beyond that the earth
filled with pictures of Atlantis. On our wrong side
of the island were no people, cars, plumbing, or lights.
The summer skies and Mediterranean constantly. No trees.
Me cleaning squid. Linda getting up from a chair.

Jack Gilbert
233

²³³ [Jack Gilbert](#), "[Not Part of Literature](#)," collected in [Monolithos](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

Elegy to My Family

My middle name went down in the Tyrrhenian
off Anzio Beach, life jacket filling with the sea.

After that, my father, split in half, would sing
into the bathroom mirror, where his twin lived.

After she died, we found poems my mother wrote
to her five dogs, each killed by a neighbor's car.

You do what you have to do was a motto she loved
saying over and over. Her tailor's dummy,

buxom amputee, lived in the attic. The attic,
said Bachelard, denotes the rational mind,

but the basement's where I find my brother,
back from the hungry i, strumming his Martin D-18.

He came of age in the era of the pocket radio,
The Kingston Trio, and public swimming pools

polio closed. Era when the sky might catch fire.
To improve us, my aunt read uncensored Grimm—

Rumpelstiltskin danced until he tore himself in two.
She'd write to Richard Tucker, and he wrote back

twice, and sang Verdi from a boom box in hospice.
In a dream I hold my sister's hand. A walk, yes,

a walk would be good. New moon. Poplars circle
the duck pond. New Jersey church spires blacker

than the black sky. What I tell her wakes me up.

Steven Cramer
234

²³⁴ [Steven Cramer](#), "[Elegy to My Family](#)," [Salamander](#), collected in [Listen](#), [Mad Hat Press](#)

be all yr sins remembered

polonius is alive, fortinbras is alive, king hamlet
is smearing on beard oil still buttressing the world
when i find ophelia bored as shit floating
 on her back in the apartment complex pool.
her nose is tinging red
 & her hair's a sunburst
& i'm like, *where'd you get your swimsuit? i've been
looking for one with flowers but they're all tacky dayglow.*
she's all, *ugh that means a lot my boyfriend's being a total
drag today* & no one's stabbed anyone yet
or feigned madness—it's normal boy stuff
 like he clogged her garbage disposal.
in this world ophelia finds the perfect Bible study group
 & starts painting her toenails emerald
 & i tell her how the first girl i loved
married a cop last april & the last girl i loved
was a sagittarius you know what i mean.
in this world we take fencing lessons at the y
& talk about ghosts like maybe they don't exist
i guess today i'm bitter about the separate worlds
we really got. my mind keeps ambling back
 to [amy coney barrett]
i'm scared i want to write a happy poem. about flowers.
about me and ophelia buzzing our hair
 & screaming down backroads to mannequin pussy.
we're hanging our heads out the windows we will never
crash the car
 the muggy air curtsies all around us.
but i can't stop meeting ophelia. i can't stop meeting
her. every violet here withers.

Casey Smith
235

²³⁵ Casey Smith, "[be all yr sins remembered](#)," [Tinderbox Poetry Journal](#)

With Gratitude to Those Who Have Made This Book Possible

With the rich and mighty, always a little patience.
—“Spanish proverb” in *The Philadelphia Story*

I’ve got a story for you where I’m the asshole,
and the other assholes in it are my friends. A story
about the lives most of us will never afford,
though their scuttlebutt details seduce us. Its subject
is the people, and the parts of the city, that turn

the majority of us into Victorian urchins,
our noses pressed against bakery windows.
Among these friends is my college roommate,
who every summer invites me to her French chalet,
routinely forgetting that in order to eat

I heave my body daily into a Midtown office.
She tells me I’m better than that job when I decline.
But today I’ve been asked to a Prospect Park picnic,
and when I arrive, I’m hugged earnestly, invited
to sample citrus oil from someone’s endless

cache of gift bags. I’ve brought a summer salad,
corn and heirloom tomatoes from the greenmarket
I diced carefully to impress people that I’d hoped
a decade ago to be like, girls whose fathers built
pipelines in Africa while they wrote papers

about French Colonialism in school. Back then,
I pretended to be them, though at night I joined
the other scholarship kids to prank numbers
from our school directory, roused gentle Bitsy
from Potomac or dyspeptic Mortimer in Bel Air

at three a.m., because I could. Every distant
family member of mine would have to die at once
to inherit me into one of my friends’ second homes.
Of course I felt inadequate. But we spent
so much time together, it seemed I’d as easily

marry a Belgian prince or a hedge fund wunderkind
as they would. That first summer after college,
walking in Strawberry Fields, my dad asked me
why I didn’t rent one of those little attics
on Central Park West. He was unable to fathom

the duplex penthouse behind dainty windows,
or that at sleepovers at ones like it, I hesitated
to spit my toothpaste in Italian marble sinks.
And now my friends can't picnic in Brooklyn
without someone commenting on the park's

illusion of equality. Nearby, ordinary people
are frying their plantains, circling the clumpy field
in a game of pick-up soccer. From their vantage
I am the rich person, coddled as a tiny duke
or duchess in a Renaissance court painting,

or at least one of the glossy mastiffs they liked
to pose alongside. I only exist by proximity.
But it's proximity that grants me a peek
into the bespoke panic room that generates
so much of what we call art, and who gets

to make art. The fault of these friends I look
at the acknowledgments of certain books
and find I've been the plus one at birthdays
for Brooklyn literati, people whose patios
reminded me of the time needed to write a book,

how the sting of rejection might be reduced
on a golden cloud. Of course I was dying to go.
I've got a talent for noticing these friends'
failures, their bakery scones staling in the sun,
not an oily kernel left of my corn salad. My job

is to notice. I imagine the architects who sculpted
the park's hills, believing the poor deserved
their share of countryside, and how growing up,
I bit into tomatoes we grew ourselves. We made
our own pleasures, unprofitable as the hue

on a piece of fruit. Vendors push the day's last
coconut ices, as the sun sets on a lawn strewn
with chicken bones, soccer balls flattened to discs.
They have been kicked so hard, and so often.
How recently they amused somebody.

Erin Hoover
236

²³⁶ [Erin Hoover](#), "[With Gratitude to Those Who Have Made This Book Possible](#)," *Scoundrel Time*, collected in [Barnburner](#), [Elixir Press](#)

Crossing Over

This time of year I like the gnarled
little sugar skulls
like dolled-up potatoes,
fingerlings with eyes gouged out,
daisies growing through the sockets,
this time of year always wondering
about that baby I lost,
otherwise don't look back,
otherwise why think at all?
When my body refused, his presence
didn't dissipate right away,
never meant any harm,
just trailing after in the ether
and now this ether-light's *shining*
and the wind twitches,
I can hear the ropes bite the macadam,
crossing over,
neighbor girls playing Double Dutch,
chanting as they jump
but can't make out their faces in the glare.
Their ropes strike the ground in rhythm.
When my baby girl was born
sometimes she took it so hard just living,
I crooned *don't come undone now, don't come undone*
the way my grandma used to.
She raised prodigious chickens
out back,
great-breasted matrons
who laid huge eggs,
most every one had two yolks
and whenever one of us asked
How'd they do it?
she answered *they're double-souled,*
honey.
This time of year, gold lingers
in thin autumn air
ether-light shining
crossing over
ropes beat the ground in rhythm
I can hear their voices
but can't make out their faces.

Marsha de la O
237

²³⁷ [Marsha de la O](#), "[Crossing Over](#)," [Solo Novo](#), collected in [Antidote for Night](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

from "Happinefs"

7.

At the choir leader's door
I stood, offering guests
chilled shrimp bites
woody darts of rosemary.
I waited with the tray
she'd given me & peered
back through her faculty Pavilion.
Arrangement of deepening grids:
silver, silver, silk. One whole
chamber just for books. With
my eyes, I robbed it bare. No one
saw me chomp the chandelier.
It went down, a carnival onion.
My jaws grew: salt-sharp & strange.

Kiki Petrosino
238

²³⁸ [Kiki Petrosino](#), "[Happinefs](#)," [Tin House](#), collected in [White Blood](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

My Whole Life I Was Trained to Deny Myself

to please my father who'd make me
tiptoe from wall to wall then back again

to improve my lacking calves
or worm the ground like a vacuum

palming the carpet for bits of trash
he'd count in my little hands. When I spilled

a cupful of crushed chili flakes
on my Chapagetti noodles, he forced

the whole hot bowl down my throat
as I sobbed. And he ordered my hair pulled

back, always, in a ponytail. It wasn't until
I neared forty that I discovered

them—the women I'd twisted myself into
for the men I loved—all slumped in my gut

like a heap of secondhand costumes.
Once, I followed a man into a hurricane

minutes before it stripped half of Manhattan
from power. I trailed behind him

when the transformer line exploded
and the night sky flashed a ghastly

green like God smothering the city
with a neon sheet. Then the traffic lights,

streetlights, and every last lamp through
every window flickered then snapped,

and in that alarming darkness, the city shrank
into a closet so cramped I couldn't breathe.

Still, I stood in that downpour
on a sixth-story roof to hold up his boom mic

as he recorded the storm. For another,
I became a Ron Paul for President

groupie. I scanned Reddit in my homemade

campaign shirt while smoking weed
to white boy emo tracks about tommy guns
and existentialism the same year
I voted for Obama. For yet another,
I learned to ride a bike. Even managed one
from the Village to the GW Bridge,
but when the path clogged
halfway up with bikers on three sides of me
close enough to kiss, I forgot
how to brake. I threw out my hands
to grab the highway divider and collapsed,
then I hauled up the rental to finish the trek,
bloody knuckles and knees be damned.
And for hundreds of mornings, I woke
each morning before the morning—
not even two hours after last call in the city—
to blend spinach and strawberries
with flaxseed meal and hemp seeds for a man
to take to work. And when one provoked
a drunk stranger then couldn't meet a deadline
with his battered head, I let him
turn me into a comic book android.
I wrote pages upon pages of a monologue
he fed to the robot, fashioned
by a toymaker who loved her the way
he thought he loved me.
He injected her with scene after scene
from my childhood, and in the final issue,
haunted by my life, she screams,
Stop inventing me! before she claws open
her chest and yanks out a fat blue gem
carved like a heart. And during a spell
when I was shackled to no man, I got naked

in a room full of naked people, all of us
drunk and stoned, seated in a circle

like schoolchildren waiting for some game
to begin or for the morning hello song,

the kind that loops until you've hollered
everybody's name. At daylight, I drove

the prettiest of the girls home. The one
some men bragged they could bed

with a fat stack of C-notes, the one
who eventually married the mayor's son.

She had a habit of laughing
at everything everyone said and danced

with her hands above her head like someone
panicking with a pistol pointed at her face.

For years leading up to that day,
I thought she was the sort of woman

I was supposed to be—nonthreatening
with a body that inspired valuation.

She insisted she ride with me
instead of with the boys hovering over her

like a flight of hungry kestrels. And minutes
into the drive, it became clear she wanted

something from me, something like
absolution. Approval maybe.

And she said, *I feel sad*. And she said,
I don't know who that was, I don't know why

I did that—that being what we'd all done
all throughout the night, and I admit

I was rankled by her conscience, clanging
louder than mine, which was bored

of my neglect by then and resigned
to watching my life lurch forward without it.

When my father wasn't sculpting
or smacking me, he said I was made
in the image of God. So God I became,
forging myself each time I found a man
to die for. I was the creator, the crucified,
the wildfire slamming against their chests.
I read what they read, and I drank
what they mixed. I bent the way they bent me
to do what they invented. And how I charmed
their brothers. How I disarmed
their mothers—the lemony dolmas,
the pink pork meatballs I rolled with them,
the dough I pinch-pulled then dunked
in anchovy broth. And when I married
the last man I loved, as the woman
I thought I was, I woke one night
like a jinn horrified to find herself
fixed in her final incarnation. I stopped
recognizing myself to such a degree
that some days I'd wake having forgotten—
really, I'd forget—we had an actual child.
I morphed into a serpent, a tempest.
I struck myself against our domestic walls
like a mad bat trapped in a coop.
And my husband—who from the beginning
looked at me like he understood
I was not his, like he was willing
to take what he could get
for as long as I'd let him have it—refused
to enter my war. How bereft I was
left with no enemies. How I brawled
on that battleground alone with myself,

punching at nothing until I conjured
my multitudes. I wish I could say

I freed myself somehow. That I'd pried
those shadow selves from me

with a hex, a needle, a healing quartz.
Or that like the cloak of Bartimaeus,

they dropped in the dust
when I stripped myself to sprint toward

the savior's voice. No. By then, I'd lost
that appetite for discarding myself.

I carried them, one by one,
like bride after bride across the threshold

and removed their boots. I drew baths
loaded with salts, cooked meals in butter.

I let each one sleep when she needed to sleep.
And in time, I thanked them.

I came to recognize their service.
And in time, they let me love them the way

a father or a mother ought to have loved them.
Them.

Yes, I suppose I do mean me.

Eugenia Leigh
239

²³⁹ [Eugenia Leigh, "My Whole Life I Was Trained to Deny Myself," *Poetry*](#)

Queen Anne's Revenge

The oldest child's favorite word is *detonation*.
He turns foam bath letters
into pistols and oranges into cannonballs.
When you're a kid you can aim down the crosshairs
and shoot another human being in the back.
They can writhe around on the jungle floor, convulse
and die, then get up to eat popsicles.
I broke a grown man's cheekbone
and was his best friend the next day.
Two months later we shot bottle rockets
and he burned the sweater right off my back.
When I feel unimportant I imagine taking a bullet
for a friend in a gunfight
and then dying in a beautiful woman's arms,
the whole town calling me a hero,
but that's a whole different kind of violence.
Today, I'm Captain Blackbeard
and I am renouncing my retirement.
I'm the King of No Mercy,
the Scoundrel of Shark Teeth
storming the deck of an unfamiliar ship,
bow rusted and glistening with barnacles and sea water.
I'm dying with eighteen holes in my chest.
I'm watching, one open eye to the ground,
as my son rips free
from my arms, teeth bared, the breeze lifting
his thin black hair, the ghost mast
wavering above, the Queen Anne gone,
only this ship now, a misty steering wheel
with snot and apple juice stuck to it,
and packs of four- and five-year-old pirates
pouring over us, their gangly arms tangled in the chain rigging,
exploding from the red play structure
with fists full of bark dust.

Jay Nebel
240

²⁴⁰ Jay Nebel, "[Queen Anne's Revenge](#)," collected in [Neighbors](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Nebbiolo

Gray patina covers the mature
grapes like fog, the way breath
from a mouth would bloom

on a mirror if the person were
alive, if the *s* of *exist* still
clouded *exit* or, as the British say

Way Out. For the Greeks, utopia
could mean both a good place
and no place, just as mist

backs away so quietly you don't
even notice until it's
no longer there. *How is it,*

Augustine asked, *that I remember
forgetfulness?* Wine, like history,
is the work of time: what it was

in its original state, but also what time
has made of it. And what's missed
is what the French call

personne—either no one
or everyone. The three Fates never
missed anyone: one spun the thread

of life, one measured how long
it should be, and one decided when
to cut the thread with her shears,

Just as the vintner decides in late
October when it's time to snip
the cord that dangles each cluster,

to release the scent of roses
and tar. *I don't want hints
of roses, of lilies of*

the valley, Coco Chanel told
her perfumer, said that instead
Chanel No. 5 should smell like *a bouquet*

of abstract flowers. At the end
of her life, she no longer
made sketches but cut fabric

right on the model, sometimes piercing
the skin of the woman, who had to stand
motionless for hours, smiling. At Chanel's

memorial mass in Paris, the models
in the front rows dressed in Chanel
and faux Chanel, placed

on the casket a spray of white
flowers arranged in the shape
of a tailor's shears.

Angie Estes
241

²⁴¹ [Angie Estes](#), "[Nebbiolo](#)," *FIELD*, collected in [Parole](#), [Oberlin College Press](#)

Ode to Airheads, Hairdos, Trains to and from Paris

For an hour on the train from Beauvais to Paris
 Nord I'm entertained by the conversation of three
American girls about their appointment the next
 day with a hairdresser and if there is a subtext
to this talk, I'm missing it, though little else. Will bangs
 make them look too dykey? And layers, sometimes they hang
like the fur of a shaggy dog. Streaks, what about blonde
 streaks? "Whore," they scream, laughing like a coven of wild
monkeys, and after they have exhausted the present
 tense, they go on to the remembrance of hairdos past—
high school proms, botched perms, late-night drunken cuts, the Loch Ness
 Monster would be lost in their brains as in a vast, starless
sea, but they're happy, will marry, overpopulate
 the Earth, which you can't say about many poets,
I think a few weeks later taking the eighty-four
 bus to the hairdresser, where I'll spend three long hours
and leave with one of the best cuts of my life from Guy,
 who has a scar on his right cheek and is Israeli,
but before that I pass a hotel with a plaque—
 Attila József, great Hungarian poet, black
moods and penniless, lived there ten years before he threw
 himself under a train in Budapest. If we knew
what the years held, would we alter our choices, take the train
 at three-twenty instead of noon, walk in the rain
instead of taking the Métro? The time travel films
 I adore speak to this very question: overwhelmed
by disease and war, the future sends Bruce Willis back
 to stop a madman. I could be waiting by the track
as József arrives in Paris, not with love but money,
 which seemed to be the missing ingredient, the honey
he needed to sweeten his tea. Most days I take the B
 line of the RER, and one of the stops is Drancy,
the way station for Jews rounded up by the Nazis
 before being sent in trains to the camps, but we can't see
those black-and-white figures in the Technicolor
 present like ghosts reminding us with their pallor
how dearly our circus of reds and golds has been purchased
 and how in an instant all those colors could be erased.

Barbara Hamby
242

²⁴² Barbara Hamby, "Ode to Airheads, Hairdos, Trains to and from Paris," *Indiana Review*, collected in *All-Night Lingo Tango*, University of Pittsburgh Press

Registry

They asked for what
they'd need: one

cup and one plate,
one day whose stunt

double would be
night, and two miner's

lights, for when
each was lost

to the other.

Andrea Cohen
243

²⁴³ [Andrea Cohen](#), "[Registry](#)," [The New Yorker](#), collected in [Everything, Four Way Books](#)

Marie Curie and the Isotopes, World Tour 1911

is what my new t-shirt that I got for Christmas says
under her picture.

When I unwrapped it, my son was mysteriously
exasperated and asked why I like Marie Curie so much
anyway, which oddly I was unprepared to answer.
I think I said that winter in Paris when she wore
everything she owned to stay warm in her attic room
while she nobly studied Chemistry
for the good of all of us, or maybe Pierre's head
crushed by the wheel of a carriage
leaving her to raise Irene and Eve on her own
or how she left them home alone at night
while she went to the laboratory to finish the work
she and Pierre had started or how she and Irene
dragged their x-ray machine onto the fields of WW1
to help the soldiers or maybe her hands rotting
and killing her or the glowing journal
she left in her drawer.

I mean, any one of these is a good enough reason.
But he was right when he said that I was never good
at science. Maybe I shouldn't have worn
those flowered skirts and thought only of boys
and suffering. Was Marie the antidote?
Like my own mother to whom I wouldn't listen?
Once someone asked her
if she was a poet too, and she said *No*,
with an expression of almost horror,
I'm a social scientist.

I gave my nephew a *Mama Llama* book for Christmas,
and my mother called to tell me she approves
of *Mama Llama*. *Mama Llama* doesn't
like melodrama. Well, of course she doesn't.

The rhyme was inevitable.

In the library at St. Aloysius Grade School,
there was a section of biographies of famous women
that included St. Theresa of the Little Flower,
Florence Nightingale, Clara Barton, and Marie Curie.
I checked them out again as soon as they were due.

Marie Curie was the one most famous
for her mind. Kindness was what my mother said
I had already, and this was clearly disappointing.
I think it would help if I had a band.

Like the Isotopes. I have never heard them but imagine
they are as clever as Bach's two-part inventions

which I always loved playing because you had to tell

one hand to do something completely different
than the other, not just complementary but distinct
and simultaneous. It is easy to think danger
is beautiful when you're not in it
or to love the thing you are discovering
when you don't yet know it's killing you.
I am discovering something. I can feel it coming closer.
Like the new year that is about to begin
in this late afternoon darkness,
the Christmas lights beaming sadly
after their time has passed, which is difficult
to determine while it's happening
but you know when it has.
I wonder if Marie Curie was surprised
when she learned that science had deceived her.
I know she did not admit that radiation exposure
could have had anything to do
with her illness and death, which is in keeping
with her character, and thus another thing
I must admire.

Laura Read
244

²⁴⁴ [Laura Read, "Marie Curie and the Isotopes, World Tour 1911," *The Laurel Review*](#)

you told me it worked & i've been doing it ever since

the feeling of the protagonist in a teen movie
when she takes her glasses off & her hair down
& descends the stairs in something sparkling—
i will never be looked at like that. i will never
have flowers i didn't buy for myself. i keep
killing plants by forgetting to water them
& then overwatering them all at once.
i wanted to write something pale pink & sexy
but my legs are loosely crossed. i can't
stop hearing bells where there are no bells.
i lie down extravagantly & get ash in my hair.
i daydream about a frozen river.
i am in a wind-up life waiting for hands.
nothing about me is pale pink & sexy.
everything about me is rubbery. growing mouths.
i am trying to hurl facts out of my body
& away from myself. to tie them
with ribbons & drown them in the lake.
cut the faces off every flower. i want
to be softer but instead i would drink blood
if anyone asked. no one ever does. i grow
fractal with worry, triangles of fear
pulsing out & out. in my fantasies:
gauzy slip, floral sofa, the right kind
of no. the man from craigslist who hauled
my floral sofa through my second-story window
had startling arms & talked about his divorce.
i didn't consider it for a second. where is
something rougher to break through
all this noise? mostly i want to be left
alone, to watch traffic from the overpass
& walk back home. i'll never be pretty
in an easy way but i match my cotton sheets
to my uneven nails. i smoke on the roof
& watch the low arcs of planes, pretend the light
on that distant tower is mars. jess tells me
i decorate like a protagonist
& i don't believe her.
protagonists eventually get what they want:
or they don't, but it's spectacular.
i'm going to sputter out
like a dying vibrator battery
i stole from a smoke detector.
i'm going to clench my teeth & nothing's
going to happen. who would run
through an airport for me?

who would hold my turbulent hand?
geese rising like smoke over the interstate.
plane-scattered sunset the color
of a just-formed bruise, of my bedroom walls,
where the vaseline on the lens
only blurs you walking away.

Cassandra de Alba
245

²⁴⁵ [Cassandra de Alba](#), "[you told me it worked & i've been doing it ever since](#)," collected in [Ugly/Sad](#), [Glass Poetry Press](#)

December 17, 2016

The first winter storm has passed over me, Naomi.

Today the city issued a travel warning—the frozen streets *still in the process of treatment*—I left the house anyway and drove a long way under the heaviest white branches.

Not a flake moved in the air as I drove.

Do you know the Mary Ruefle poem about snow?

Every time it starts to snow, she writes, I would like to have / sex.

I remember a professor joking before class in Boston *I imagine none of you gets laid here in the wintertime—how do you even know what's under those coats, those hats?*

You probably wish you went to college in San Diego, or in Miami.

But the erotic survives longest as theory.

Your thick black scarf unwound from your black hair, still warm from your neck, would be enough.

The scarf on the chair's cooling back, waiting as long as necessary

Ruefle's poem ends *when it snows like this I feel the / whole world has joined me in isolation and silence.*

This is how I feel speaking to you so often without my mouth moving.

How the buckled branches lift and lower the weight of it until spring

Rachel Mennies
246

²⁴⁶ [Rachel Mennies, "December 17, 2016,"](#) collected in [The Naomi Letters, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Joy

I stayed in bed for days and watched
a spider in the light spin
an airy web above my head, something

cool and loose, without
the use of force, or weight.

That time, I nearly died

of joy I was a child. Still alive.
Relatives stood above me smiling. Summer
was my sickness. Translucent

nurses brought me everything
I needed, while I

swam in and out of sun, which
unraveled its white knitting
on the surface of the pool, and flew

above the orchards, which stretched
in bloom
from my mind to the end time—just
above the branches, but at great speed

and thought I saw a small girl
running like a madwoman beneath the trees.

I didn't even need to eat! I *drank* the beautiful meals
my mother made for me

from coolness and silver spoons. My father

sat at the edge of the bed
and prayed for the angels' protection. Like

talcum and masculine sweat, the smell
of wet feathers as I slept. I got better

and better, listening...

But what was that sound? The clock? The toilet

flushing? Rain on the playground? The ocean
choking on its own waves?

No.

It was a dog
lapping at a bloody tray.

Childhood came and went in a day

and I woke on Sunday in the arms of a stranger.
Oh, I realized then,

this must be joy again. Despite

the headache, the salty thirst, the shame—that

spinning above the bed, more
light than thread, was

exactly, *exactly*, the same.

Laura Kasichke
247

²⁴⁷ [Laura Kasichke, "Joy," *The Southern Review*, collected in *Dance and Disappear*, University of Massachusetts Press](#)

Faith

O perilous night, O
darkening sky:

You smell coffee, and the skin below your blouse burns.
You know you've hit rock bottom when
it's Friday night, again
and here you are, in a church basement, holding tight a stranger's hand.

In your new life, you say things like Hi, my name is and
thank you for your and
what I'm trying to say is and...

You've always been a good student. You recite the 12 steps under your breath.

Outside, it is night: lights flood the sky, the stars
tonight are just thumbtacks. You pinned
small notes to your fridge reminding you
to do this,
that,
stop
searching out the eyes
of strange men in the street.

You like the women's groups best.
(In the women's groups, you think about sex less.)

It was an angel who struck the dagger
from Abraham's hand, and you imagine her awash
with the kind of light that stars cast
in the jungle, like how once you slept
in a hammock
your backpack a pillow
your hammock a blanket
and it was enough:
a kind of light like that.

Tonight, you were stuck on the train between an ad
for cancer care and Klimt, peering out
at the darkening sky. Even the tortured body
was beautiful in this light, tonight
there was only the quiet, falling
snow, and a man
nearing sleep
reaching for his bagged beer can.

Kierkegaard says to love God without faith is to see
only the self, and you think of the hospital across the street.
All night, Mt. Sinai will sit quietly, its fluorescent hallways marked
by every human grief—someone
crying in a lobby chair, someone
reciting childhood prayers.

Will God draw close
if you call?

Tonight, another party. You hide in the bathroom stall. You are

thirsty, so you bring
water to your lips,

you are careful
and still, water

keeps falling through your hands.

Megan Pinto
248

The Necessary Preoccupations

Cure means something else to a roofer, as does *cant*.
I just found out I've got no mansard and my underlayment is aging
like my flashing, which were my eyes.
Eyes has the word *yes* in it, have you ever realized that?
I might have misheard the roofer's blue eyes.
Is there plywood on that baby? he asked.
And something about ferrule and bitumen,
a word I imagine having been called under as many roofs
as breaths. I like to say it with the British pronunciation.
Bitumen.
Hot stuff is bitumen, actually, I looked it up.
I look up but can't see the roof and can't climb up on the roof
to see the stars, which were his eyes.
Weep hole is not an anatomical term,
we looked for my weep holes but he couldn't find them,
he gave up too soon, some men do.
Doggedness is my hobby, that's what I wrote
on the jury-duty questionnaire.
Someone else wrote down happy hour.
Happy hours, which were his eyes—
He promised to send a bid last night but nothing
except *Your pkg has shipped*
came across the ether, through the skies,
down through the three layers of old shingles I've got to haul away
before anything new goes up.
Most shingles have a lifetime warranty now.
Who needs a lifetime?
All of *Ulysses* takes place in one single bitumen flashpoint of a day.
I see the words *yes* and *yeses* and *eyes* in *Ulysses*.
Molly Bloom says *yes* eighty-seven times and the sky touches the roof.
Yes, I would have said.
In the package coming my way are new headlights.
Those are headlights that were his eyes!
And blue-tinted headlights aren't even legal.

Catherine Barnett

249

²⁴⁹ [Catherine Barnett](#), "[The Necessary Preoccupations](#)," collected in [Human Hours](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

As for the Heart

I am come to the age
of pondering my lastness:

buying what seems likely
my final winter coat at Macy's,
or when a glossy magazine
(so very blithely)
asks me to *renew*. As for

my heart, that ever-pixilated
tweener, how tediously long
I've been expected to baby
her complaint
(unLOVED unLOVED),

alarmed and stubborn clock—
refusing to listen even as
the more intrepid tried.

Now she mostly mutters
to herself, though
occasionally there's
some clanging, a tinny sound,

like the radiator in a Southie
triple decker, fractious as
a pair of cowboy boots
in a laundromat's dryer,

It's always been this
joke the old ones know—
in such a state
of nearly doneness,

the world grows sweeter,
as if our later days
were underscored with music
from a nocturne's saddest
oboe hidden in the trees.

Just yesterday,
while standing in the kitchen,
my son complained nonstop
about his AP psych class
while wolfing warmed-up

bucatini from a crazed,
pink china bowl.

Shiny, kvetching creature.
Even if I could tell him
what he doesn't want to know,
I wouldn't. But now

the pissy storm that's spent
all afternoon flapping like
a dirty sheet
has wandered off
to spook some other
neighborhood.

There's one barbed weed
pushing up greenly through
my scruffy loropetalum.

And it falls on me, this little
cold rain the day has left.

Erin Belieu
250

²⁵⁰ [Erin Belieu, "As for the Heart,"](#) collected in [Come Hither Honeycomb, Copper Canyon Press](#)

Boston Year

My first week in Cambridge a car full of white boys
tried to run me off the road, and spit through the window,
open to ask directions. I was always asking directions
and always driving: to an Armenian market
in Watertown to buy figs and string cheese, apricots,
dark spices and olives from barrels, tubes of paste
with unreadable Arabic labels. I ate
stuffed grape leaves and watched my lips swell in the mirror.
The floors of my apartment would never come clean.
Whenever I saw other colored people
in bookshops, or museums, or cafeterias, I'd gasp,
smile shyly, but they'd disappear before I spoke.
What would I have said to them? Come with me? Take
me home? Are you my mother? No. I sat alone
in countless Chinese restaurants eating almond
cookies, sipping tea with spoons and spoons of sugar.
Popcorn and coffee was dinner. When I fainted
from migraine in the grocery store, a Portuguese
man above me mouthed: "No breakfast." He gave me
orange juice and chocolate bars. The color red
sprang into relief singing Wagner's *Walküre*.
Entire tribes gyrated and drummed in my head.
I learned the samba from a Brazilian man
so tiny, so festooned with glitter I was certain
that he slept inside a filigreed, Fabergé egg.
No one at the door: no salesmen, Mormons; meter
readers, exterminations, no Harriet Tubman,
no one. Red notes sounding in a gray trolley town.

Elizabeth Alexander

251

²⁵¹ [Elizabeth Alexander](#), "[Boston Year](#)," collected in [Crave Radiancy](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Dear Apostrophe

I.

I'm a tad sorry for you floating mark
often forgotten or in the wrong place
trivial as lint

a currant in a muffin
sweet in the way that being correct is sweet

II.

for years I circled *its'* on student papers
explaining that *its'*
like irregardless does not exist

now I often let error stand

marks only sometimes useful
in this economy we've made

III.

in English the apostrophe developed a voluminous appetite
for possession not just elision

swallowing *es*

womman is mannes joye and al his blis

IV

savvy printers saving time and type
changed the way we scribe and snipe
til we be roten, kan we nat be rype

V.

*you might understand
when I rue myself*

*and turn
neck tucked into torso
limb at a right angle*

*flamingo sleeping on one leg
still a body*

a gust of wind could topple

Natasha Sajé
252

²⁵² [Natasha Sajé, "Dear Apostrophe," *Minnesota Review*, collected in *Special Delivery*, Diode Editions](#)

Bidart & Lowell

After you were dead, I worked
non-stop at night sewing
your poems back together, or where
necessary, pulling them
apart, subsisting on tear-

and-eat items at the gas station
on the corner, push-button
milkshakes, microwaveable
popcorn. My body
was a suit I picked out

every morning and every
night hung back up
in the closet, surrounding by
your weightlessness, at once
heavy and useless,

one leg still a little longer
than the other, a dead father
and mother, the history
of cinema before 1960 playing
on loop inside my brain.

One day I'm Janet Gaynor
in the Parisian sewers, another,
I'm the mountain in *The Searchers*
John Wayne is walking toward
and then I'm the ranch house door

that closes on itself to consecrate
the darkness, the border
between the country of loss
and the country of time.
O, my mentor, my minotaur—

the hospital where you held
my hand is gone, and with it
the labyrinth and the latticework,
the chandeliers of tubes,
the horrible food, the buffet

of ways to be dead and still falling
in love with how the light blinds
the television, how the body stays

exactly where you leave it
laid across the crux of sheets

like Helen Hayes in *A Farewell
to Arms*, a pillow for an aureole,
and no one to lift you up
so I lift you up now—
I take your body

to the cherry blossoms
in the window, the bell choir,
the lake thawing in the valley.
You weigh almost nothing.
My arms are giving way.

P. Scott Cunningham
253

²⁵³ [P. Scott Cunningham](#), "[Bidart & Lowell](#)," *Okey-Panky*, collected in [Ya Te Veo](#), [The University of Arkansas Press](#)

Facts About the Moon

The moon is backing away from us
an inch and a half each year. That means
if you're like me and were born
around fifty years ago the moon
was a full six feet closer to the earth.
What's a person supposed to do?
I feel the gray cloud of consternation
travel across my face. I begin thinking
about the moon-lit past, how if you go back
far enough you can imagine the breathtaking
hugeness of the moon, prehistoric
solar eclipses when the moon covered the sun
so completely there was no corona, only
a darkness we had no word for.
And future eclipses will look like this: the moon
a small black pupil in the eye of the sun.
But these are bald facts.
What bothers me most is that someday
the moon will spiral right out of orbit
and all land-based life will die.
The moon keeps the oceans from swallowing
the shores, keeps the electromagnetic fields
in check at the polar ends of the earth.
And please don't tell me
what I already know, that it won't happen
for a long time. I don't care. I'm afraid
of what will happen to the moon.
Forget us. We don't deserve the moon.
Maybe we once did but not now
after all we've done. These nights
I harbor a secret pity for the moon, rolling
around alone in space without
her milky planet, her only child, a mother
who's lost a child, a bad child,
a greedy child or maybe a grown boy
who's murdered and raped, a mother
can't help it, she loves that boy
anyway, and in spite of herself
she misses him, and if you sit beside her
on the padded hospital bench
outside the door to his room you can't not
take her hand, listen to her while she
weeps, telling you how sweet he was,
how blue his eyes, and you know she's only
romanticizing, that she's conveniently
forgotten the bruises and booze,

the stolen car, the day he ripped
the phones from the walls, and you want
to slap her back to sanity, remind her
of the truth: he was a leech, a fuckup,
a little shit, and you almost do
until she lifts her pale puffy face, her eyes
two craters and then you can't help it
either, you know love when you see it,
you can feel its lunar strength, its brutal pull.

Dorianne Laux
254

²⁵⁴ [Dorianne Laux](#), "[Facts About the Moon](#)," collected in [Facts About the Moon, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight

1

You scream, waking from a nightmare.

When I sleepwalk
into your room, and pick you up,
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me
hard,
as if clinging could save us. I think
you think
I will never die, I think I exude
to you the permanence of smoke or stars,
even as
my broken arms heal themselves around you.

2

I have heard you tell
the sun, *don't go down*, I have stood by
as you told the flower, *don't grow old*,
don't die. Little Maud,

I would blow the flame out of your silver cup,
I would suck the rot from your fingernail,
I would brush your sprouting hair of the dying light,
I would scrape the rust off your ivory bones,
I would help death escape through the little ribs of your body,
I would alchemize the ashes of your cradle back into wood,
I would let nothing of you go, ever,

until washerwomen
feel the clothes fall asleep in their hands,
and hens scratch their spell across hatchet blades,
and rats walk away from the culture of the plague,
and iron twists weapons toward truth north,
and grease refuse to slide in the machinery of progress,
and men feel as free on earth as fleas on the bodies of men,
and lovers no longer whisper to the presence beside them in the dark, *O corpse-to-be...*

And yet perhaps this is the reason you cry,
this the nightmare you wake screaming from:
being forever
in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

3

In a restaurant once, everyone
quietly eating, you clambered up
on my lap: to all
the mouthfuls rising toward
all the mouths, at the top of your voice
you cried
your one word, *caca! caca! caca!*
and each spoonful
stopped, a moment, in midair, in its withering
steam.

Yes,
you cling because
I, like you, only sooner
than you, will go down
the path of vanished alphabets,
the roadlessness
to the other side of the darkness,
your arms
like the shoes left behind,
like the adjectives in the halting speech
of old folk,
which once could call up the lost nouns.

4

And you yourself,
some impossible Tuesday
in the year Two Thousand and Nine, will walk out
among the black stones
of the field, in the rain,

and the stones saying
over their one word, *ci-gît, ci-gît, ci-gît,*

and the raindrops
hitting you on the fontanel
over and over, and you standing there
unable to let them in.

5

If one day it happens
you find yourself with someone you love
in a café at one end
of the Pont Mirabeau, at the zinc bar
where wine takes the shapes of upward opening glasses,

and if you commit then, as we did, the error

of thinking,
one day all this will only be memory,

learn,
as you stand
at the end of the bridge which arc,
from love, you think, to enduring love,
to reach deeper
into the sorrows
to come—to touch
the almost imaginary bones
under the face, to hear under the laughter
the wind crying across the black stones. Kiss
the mouth
that tells you, *here,*
here is the world. This mouth. This laughter. These temple bones.

The still undanced cadence of vanishing.

6

In the light the moon
sends back, I can see in your eyes

the hand that waved once
in my father's eyes, a tiny kite
wobbling far up in the twilight of his last look:

and the angel
of all mortal things lets go the string.

7

Back you go, into your crib.

The last blackbird lights up his gold wings: *farewell.*
Your eyes close inside your head,
in sleep. Already
in your dreams the hours begin to sing.

Little sleep's-head sprouting hair in the moonlight,
when I come back
we will go out together,
we will walk out together among
the ten thousand things,
each scratched in time with such knowledge, *the wages*
of dying is love.

Galway Kinnell

²⁵⁵ [Galway Kinnell](#), "[Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight](#)," collected in [The Book of Nightmares](#), [Houghton Mifflin](#)

The Panther is a Virtual Animal

with a line from Tavia Nyong'o

Anything that wants to be can be a panther. The black lion or ocelot, the black cheetah or cornrowed uptown girl sprinting up her neighborhood block just like one, in dogged pursuit of the future world. In this frame, I imagine Huey and Bobby as boys in the sense of gender and genre alike, an unbroken line reading: *my life is an armor for the other*. Before black berets or free breakfasts, then, there is friendship. Before gun laws shifting in the wake of organized strength, leather jackets shimmering like gypsum in the Northern California twilight—or else magazine covers running the world over, compelling everyday ordinary people across the spectrum of context or color to sing *who wants to be a panther ought to be he can be it*—there is love. The panther is a virtual animal. The panther strikes only when it has been assailed. The panther is a human vision, interminable refusal, our common call to adore ourselves as what we are and live and die on terms we fashioned from the earth like this. Our precious metal metonym. Our style of fire and stone.

Joshua Bennett
256

²⁵⁶ [Joshua Bennett](#), "[The Panther is a Virtual Animal](#)," [The New York Times Magazine](#), collected in [Owed](#), Penguin Books

Good Share

An airport—like a hog farm,
like a landfill, like a graveyard—

has to go somewhere. An airport
has to go somewhere, so
why not here? I nominate you

and you and me to roil
in our respective beds while planes

fly so low overhead we can tell
what makes they are. The yowl
of the Airbus, the Boeing's

Gregorian roar. At least they drown
out the rest of this inexcusably human

night: longneck bottle greeting
the side of a passing car,
strange chanting, fistfight too close

to the tracks, the neighbors
with their nonstop innovation

in the arena of sex-offender-registry
drinking games. View the mug shot,
guess the offense, drink a shot if

you're wrong. Eleven men in ten
locations: guess which two guys

split a duplex. Drink a shot
if you're wrong. Plug in the ocean
in order to find out if anyone's

currently in the ocean and if
we, consequently, should avoid it.

Do you think we should avoid it?
Drink a shot if you're
wrong. Drink while you can,

because I heard from a dead guy
there's no alcohol in Heaven.

I also heard no alcohol
on Earth. If you're drinking right
now, buddy, you're in Hell.

Natalie Shapero
257

²⁵⁷ [Natalie Shapero, "Good Share," *Los Angeles Review of Books*](#), collected in [Popular Longing](#), Copper Canyon Press

Maidenform Museum

Downstairs there's a Dr. Pepper machine
and an unplugged Ms. Pac-Man. A girl
about his age—a little older—comes in, says

her name is Christina except she changed
both *Is* to *Ys*. Her dad is a stuntman. If
you go from the pool to the hot tub too fast

you can die from blood boiling. She starts
to strip, arms in one at a time then disengages
her head. Her breasts aren't like his mother's,

which hang away from her body, but puffy
and beige like the round Band-Aids they put
over the spot of a measles shot. She folds

her bra, cup to cup. You have to learn to
undo it with one hand. He sneezes. She snaps
the swimsuit over her shoulders. What are you

looking at? Upstairs his mother, irritable,
drops her bra to the floor. Patent 1927.
Ginghams, gossamers, missiles, snowcones,

push-ups, second skins. I Dreamed I Was.
I Can't Believe It's Not Butter. Old fleshy duo,
once so admired by a lover he named them

Coconut and Key Lime Pie. Or maybe everyone
has a lover who does this. Afterwards: enormous,
ovoid as a pigskin and slick with lanolin, nipples

raw, his infant fist jerking to find the edge
of her nightgown, an underthing to grip as he
drew his milk—resolute pulls from the jaw.

B. K. Fischer
258

²⁵⁸ [B. K. Fischer](#), "[Maidenform Museum](#)," collected in [Mutiny Gallery](#), [Truman State University Press](#)

On the Brighton Beach Boardwalk

On the Brighton Beach boardwalk men sit in the rain shelters smelling of piss, shouting drunk genius into the afternoon sun. Men play chess on small portable sets holding beach umbrellas for cover. Men take care of other men, raising them from wheelchairs and guiding them to benches and it looks just like slow dancing. So gentle. And someone has rolled blue carpets from the boards, over the beach, to the pale-blue water.

There are so many young mothers but my mother has hope for me too. She says *a beautiful girl like me, men must make advances all the time. A beautiful girl like me has to think of her future. A beautiful girl like me, well, cousin Lena turned forty and she quit that Los Angeles life and that Los Angeles girlfriend. Got herself a rich husband, an adopted baby. And, don't you know they love that baby? They love her despite how, in the wrong light, she's a little too brown.*

I'm furiously stuffing my mouth with black bread because this talk makes me angry and because I'm crying, staring down into my plate, thinking on last night—how you called me *difficult* when you could have called me *beautiful*. And here it is, *beautiful* tumbling out my mother's mouth like bad oil. More and more I imagine my dead body slumped beside me. It feels peaceful. *We're just having a heart to heart*, my mother comforts me, *you shouldn't get so upset*.

Gala Mukomolova
259

259 [Gala Mukomolova, "On the Brighton Beach Boardwalk," Boston Review](#), collected in [Without Protection](#), Coffee House Press

Night in the Castle

I'm not sure what to do about that scorpion twitching on the wall
Maybe I should slam it with this book of terrible poetry

or just read aloud to it until it dies of a histrionic metaphor
bleeding out on the ancient stones in a five-octave aria

If I get a little drunker I might try to murder it with my sandal
I gave up on mercy a while ago

That's what happens when you live in a castle on an artist's grant
You look at the late-afternoon Umbrian light smearing itself over the tomato vines

& feel entitled—like an underage duchess whose husband has finally died of gout
leaving her free for more secret liaisons with the court musician

She might even have poisoned the duke, the lecherous shit
It's hard to remember what life was like before this

& I don't want to, I want to stay here & poison the king next
I want to be a feared & beloved queen ordering up fresh linens & beheadings

locking up bad poets in their artisanal hair shirts
torturing academics with pornographic marionette performances

Meanwhile the scorpion is still there twitching slightly
reciting something about violence & the prison of ego

& I can hear the clashing armies on the wide lawn outside
sinking down into history & then standing up again

Kim Addonizio
260

²⁶⁰ [Kim Addonizio, "Night in the Castle,"](#) collected in [Now We're Getting Somewhere, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Portrait of the Village

We believe in God the way the blind must believe in color,
the deaf in rondo. We and the children are abundant and named
after saints and angels. Lailah is dyspeptic, Ezekiel horny,
Helena terrorizes Gabriel with a bullfrog commandeered
from thick muck that borders the river. Our bodies cruise
around in cars the way the mind cruises around in the body,
the streets and boulevards named for famous bays
we haven't sailed to. I own a colonial on Guantanamo Road.
Theresa is a boarder at the women's inn on Bengal.
To witness her arrival weekly at banquets in the village
is a deluge of the sensory, a bottle of Chablis cradled
like a musket in her right arm, her fingernails the hoods
of ten red Edsels, her floral prints, her black Pumas,
her cardigan clearly. I'm her devotee, in love in the village
and with the village, which isn't to say life is so much better here
than elsewhere but that it fits together like a prong in an outlet,
silent and electric, which isn't to say life is so much better here,
but that the horror is a delicate drone in the offing like gears
of an elevator buzzing beneath the Muzak. We understand others
in the elsewhere are lasing gazebos and strafing begonias,
we understand the horror will not end in some bodies
smooching exuberantly, but in the village sodium lights halo
the grain silos, the firmament entwines with girders
of the industrial bridge I'm not leaping from, a propane flame
waves its pale blue banner over the verdant bulge of the landfill,
and my arm parts the lazy pollen of afternoons with Theresa.
All autumn we are unobtrusive as clean laundry left in a basket
in a quiet apartment on a quiet corner of the village
where no-one is waiting. When winter arrives belated,
we walk out into the avenue into a snowfall so thick it's as if
the whole scene's coming in over a faulty antenna.
Our bodies in white noise. The village in a crystalline rainfall.
The snow as one kind of atmosphere falling out of suspension.

Jaswinder Bolina

261

²⁶¹ [Jaswinder Bolina](#), "[Portrait of the Village](#)," *Cavalier*, collected in [Phantom Camera](#), [New Issues Press](#)

[The problem with sweetness is death]

The problem with sweetness is death. The problem with everything is death. There really is no other problem if you factor everything down, which I was no good at when studying fractions. They were always using pie as their example. Rather than thinking about factoring things down I wondered what kind of pie. And here I am, broke, barely able to count to fourteen. When people talk about math they say you'll need it to balance your checkbook. What is a checkbook and what, indeed, is balance? Speaking of sweetness, for a time I worked in a fudge shop on an island. After a week the smell of sweetness made me heave, not to mention the smell of horses; it was an island without cars, shit everywhere. When I quit, the owner slapped me.

Diane Seuss
262

²⁶² [Diane Seuss, "\[The problem with sweetness is death\]," *Shenandoah*, collected in *Frank*, Graywolf Press](#)

Regeneration

Forgiven, my father says he struggled
to not hit us the way his father
had punched and smacked and kicked him

and so my father is a man who had thought
of putting his boot to my head. When my son
pushes me saying *not you not mama go away*

I think of giving in to him, leaving
in the old way/cheap gas way, driving until all
is borderless and taking with me

only impractical clothes. After he was born
I did not want to die but nor
did I exactly want to not-die so I imagined

escaping to Prague, getting skinny,
and wearing knee-high boots
as I walked the languorous walk

of those who have somewhere to go
and all the time to arrive, over the city's
storied skin bulging with violins

and sadness, kavarnas exhaling smoke,
drunks spitting come-ons because it is late
and I am beautiful and I am alone.

Erin Adair-Hodges
263

²⁶³ [Erin Adair-Hodges, "Regeneration," *Superstition Review*, collected in *Let's All Die Happy*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Wedding Planning

I begin to dread the surf and turf. I cross
then double cross another friend off of the list. Now this,
“The jaws of leopard seals and grizzly bears are similar,
except the leopard seals’ are twice as big. They’re also more intelligent.”
God knows my mother likes to tell me things
I do not want to know in restaurants.
“This scientist, she studied icebergs in Antarctica.
She watched them drift and scour the sea floor,
and the ensuant loss of life and habitat—”
This story I know cold and could deglove.

Snow settled round the research base, like a halo.
The ancient face, the surface, of the bay
under a layer of jostling, floating crags—“brash ice.”

Birds flew in fists into the teeth of sky.
Whether she believed in god or anything below us,
wind furred the shallows and she snorkeled out.

“The leopard seal attacked from underneath,
and so she must have seen the open jaws, the teeth. She screamed,
was dragged, her dive computer says, to a depth of 230 feet.”

I cross another friend off of my list.
Punishment should be immediate,
but accident cannot be reckoned with.
This is the myth inside decorum—
and what I’ve ordered never does arrive.

Eleanor Boudreau
264

²⁶⁴ [Eleanor Boudreau](#), “[Wedding Planning](#),” [Copper Nickel](#), collected in [Earnest. Earnest?](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Odaxelagnia

When I sink my teeth into you,
there is a taste, a satisfaction, the start
of a match, the catch in your throat.
We are rich with the exhilarations
of our blood, we are rich with our
print-blackened roots, like the crowns
of my teeth in you cracked like dirt,
enamel-fragile and eggshell-veined. I sink
my teeth and they knit your history
a coat. I shut the cold like a tap
and lean like a trunk and we unravel
as though thread and when we fall,
the quiet is like a feather, like
a bough. It was a God I held
in the trap of my mouth, in you,
my rabbit gone limp, my bite
at your neck and me tasting fur
like wind and me tasting the scent
of you melted as wax. A wick lit,
it was my path, it was a desire
to solidify and start. At the front.
At the back. In the lip. At its cry.
No dry soul unsickened yet. I sink
my teeth. I notch your depth. I prove
it has terror, an Atlantic I've wept.

Jennifer Militello
265

²⁶⁵ [Jennifer Militello](#), "Odaxelagnia," [Boston Review](#), collected in [The Pact](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

The Destruction of the Piano Was the Destruction of Me

My problem is there is just not enough joy.
Or, joy is too big to fit through my tiny heart-shaped door.
Not just my joy. Your joy. Their joy. Our joy
can't ever be shared. Like cocaine, in its small white envelope,
or the cocaine tucked into that little pocket of your jeans—that coke
will be my coke. I'll write my name with it on a mirror. Sometimes
I have to chop things up to get them through and
out my door: my heart door, my eyeball door, my brain door.
Joy, as a guest, never stays long enough. Joy is rude,
a fickle flat-leaver and too proud of its letters, which hang
below the line. In some tongues, the letter “j”—
that hooker—can sound like “y.” Why? My mother
loved this letter desperately, like it just wouldn't last:
couldn't have enough of us with joy: all “j”, all day.

Jennifer Martelli

266

²⁶⁶ [Jennifer Martelli, “The Destruction of the Piano Was the Destruction of Me,” *Incessant Pipe*](#)

Regarding Silphium, the Birth Control of the Roman Empire for 600 Years, Extincted by Careless Land Management in the Year 200 A.D.

When I was just about done being married and he was a blossomed-out nerve of seeing himself through the ugly eyes of how I had come to see him and myself for letting our lives get so Tupperware-fur-molded, for thinking I could lace and pinprick it back with just the right delicacy, when a good punch in the face was what a mess this bad required. (I know, you're thinking a punch in the face is never the answer, but that's the lace talking.) When I was just about done with the lace-throated maybe-violence, our daughter, who is five, told me how he broke—she didn't say he broke, she said he got really worked up—driving past all the protestors outside Planned Parenthood on Providence Ave., from which the university medical school had just withdrawn funding and also the option for residents to do training there, how he took a hard left into the parking lot and with our daughter by the hand marched in with an urgency that made the young man working the desk say, "Sir?" with some alarm. He took a breath to be more steady and said, "I'm so sorry about all of this—all of that out there—and I just thought I'd make a donation" as he pulled all the money from his wallet, some of it crumpled, a mixture of 5s and 1s and pushed it across the counter, our daughter watching and looking around the room, studying the faces of timid and nervous young women, I imagine, in those plastic chairs I remember from when I once sat in this exact waiting room myself, so many years ago, feeling embarrassed and ashamed because it seemed that's what I was supposed to feel, though if I could have felt my way beyond "supposed to" back then to my actual self, I would have known I didn't feel sorry at all, only annoyed by the tedium of appointments, the practical necessity of that clean smell, the chilly dustless air of a building with nothing soft except the aspect of the resident, who is the only

doctor I have ever had who joked as she put her gloved hand in my body. "I guess this is the most awkward thing you'll do today, huh?" It was funny and made me feel like we'd been friends a long time. My husband, who is still my husband after all, knew that story and I guess he wanted our daughter to somehow know it too. "Sometimes you'll feel very alone," I tell her on a day when I find her pressing her face against the window, watching the children next door play in the grass, wiping tears from her face as fast as they fall. "Other times you'll be so wonderfully surprised by the strange bridges people manage to build out to you when you never would have expected they could."

Kathryn Nuernberger
267

²⁶⁷ [Kathryn Nuernberger, "Regarding Silphium, the Birth Control of the Roman Empire for 600 Years, Extincted by Careless Land Management in the Year 200 A.D.," *The Account*, collected in *Rue*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Diamonds

Judith Butler, I am calling you out
here in the kitchen where I'm unloading the dishwasher
performing my gender as I'm wont to do
My son yells from upstairs, How do you spell *probably*?
My daughter plays a game on my phone
caring for little green monster who needs a bath
I need to buy diamonds so her monster can sing
I need a sack of diamonds so I can work part-time
to take care of my kids and still eat when I'm old
performing my old lady tasks
I hope I'm yarn-bombing an embassy somewhere
Better start learning to knit or whatever
Knitting performs femininity, apparently

We need diamonds to afford my house
now that I'm a single mom
Conflict-free ones for a conflict-free life
To perform a single mom's gender
is to need a chest of gold coins
and my life is easy I am not hungry
not beaten up working three jobs taking night classes
not ill without insurance I have a good job
I'm already leveled up! Got all my privileges
I'm not floating on a raft to escape war
not having sex with soldiers for food
my children are not digging for diamonds
we're not being exploited in any way
"*Could Be Worse!*" is a book we love to read
at bedtime, it's by James Stevenson
It is, my son & I think, the plot to most movies
It is I think the plot to most lives

I'm lucky, I get to teach you, Judith
to students who eat up your words like candy hearts
who return to the arms of their friends
to dye their hair blue & fuck everyone & not shave
and make manifestos & tweet witty protests
who do drugs & sleep late & dance naked
They seem so unafraid ahistorical dreamfull
They stand outside the library smoking cigarettes
as if we're not going to die!
As if there aren't books to read!
I have the greatest job in the world
Could be a lot worse

But I'm lonely in debt there's no one to love me

I'm feeling sorry for myself & guilty for all my luck
Mutually contradictory states of mind
that's what Shakespeare invented, supposedly
Gender, you say, is a performance
continually created through *citational repetition*
Daily rituals we put on again & then again
as if we were born into a theatrical family
putting on the same play that's been going on forever
and there's no way out, so says Foucault
Michel, my turtle-necked darling, I love you
although you make me feel imprisoned
docile and subject to self-surveillance
Judith, Michel, I'm calling on you

I think I'm stuck in *Hamlet*
in the role of Queen Gertrude
but not at all royal I'm from Pittsburgh
because if I mention any man's name
my son says, I hate that guy
I asked him if he thought I was pretty
He said, Eh, you're okay-to-good

For his birthday he'd like a BB gun
My daughter spins in the living room to Rihanna
who has a pile of diamonds, probably
This little Ophelia talks to her Legos
and swims with water wings
She wants to know if music is air
She says my butt jiggles when I walk
Yes, that's it, I am a single Gertrude
in a little New England hamlet
Yet there are no louche kings to marry
no murderous uncles available nearby
Yet in the porches of my ear has poured
the poison of the wish for Reliable Love
Marriage's a prison
Then is the whole world one

What I want is someone, not a husband
to perform the male gender around my house
I need help stacking wood putting the garden to bed
for the winter I need a man in my bed
It goes way below zero in the winter round here
The garage door is broken I don't know how to fix it
Better learn to fix stuff, I guess
Like Gertrude, I am the Interpreter of the men around me
as I put snacks into little plastic bags
and so disciplined plan another play date
I play the Assuager I'm afraid

of being left with nothing for my future
No castle no bolthole on this dirty planet
No extra-small bag of gems
I have unappreciated skills, it's true
I know how to do a close reading
I know where commas go
I can spot phallogocentrism miles away
in my cat glasses I'm laying it down

Yet I'm terribly lonely, Judith
less lonely than Ophelia floating downstream
clutching flowers and singing sad songs

I want someone to perform love on me
Any kind of love any kind of role I don't care
but I want the real thing Real Love
To be a prisoner of Love, the songs say
and to perform all the sex acts, too
I want a masterful performance of that
with repeat performances
 Who's there?

I am sitting here folding laundry on the couch
performing the pairing of the socks
In anxiety and pleasure, you say
In the porches of my other ear
pours the poison of the wish for diamonds
Could be worse
My daughter spins her own tornado
My son builds a house of diamond blocks
I want the curtains to part now
I want to be swept away

Camille Guthrie
268

²⁶⁸ [Camille Guthrie](#), "[Diamonds](#)," [Boston Review](#), collected in [Diamonds](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Marriage Abstract

Arguments taint our mouths like spice.
Opening and closing doors, we rhyme.
The house creaks to pass, or mark the time
under our bare feet, the mortgage like ice
we balance upon above the bottomless water.
It mustn't crack; we can't afford to fall.
I love you like my hands, which haul
the money in. Into our laps spill daughter
and son. We are drowning in wine and beer,
carrying each other across these rooms,
glasses filled above our brims. We doomed
ourselves to a big shared bed. Here,
plans overrun our mouths, all synonyms.
You used to be her; I used to be him.

Craig Morgan Teicher
269

²⁶⁹ [Craig Morgan Teicher](#), "[Marriage Abstract](#)," [Colorado Review](#), collected in [Welcome to Sonnetville, New Jersey](#), BOA Editions, [Ltd.](#)

Not a Mile

from where my students ask me
why Sylvia Plath wanted to eat men,
two men overdose. This is rural Ohio,
and the new drugs from Columbus
are cut with elephant tranquilizers.
The police are nurses now.
They don't dream. My students try
to understand why the voice
in the poem brags about death but
never dies. Not a mile from here,
two men regain consciousness
in their living room full of litter boxes
and Optimos. They are not particularly scared
by the police or their I.V.s. They have both
died before, and been revived with Narcan.
It's November 6th, and the sky
has been blank for so long its emptiness
has turned supple. The men refuse
further medical treatment. One dumps
a baggie of crickets into a lizard tank.
My students are sincerely trying
to analyze death: its cadence and anaphora,
its German origins. The police
do not know how to speak
to my students. They bark and lord
over a scuffle or jaywalking
because they are used to hauling the dead
back to life and fishing names
out of their mouths. They cannot help
but see everyone as needing to be saved
by force. Not a mile from where my students
show me outlines of what they are trying
to say about resurrection, one of the men
pulls a phone out of his mesh shorts
and calls Columbus. My students worry
they cannot explain where Plath ends
and death begins. Not a mile
from our classroom, men dissolve
like powder in water. Men so close
we can't see them. Men like air.

Andrew Grace
270

²⁷⁰ [Andrew Grace](#), "[Not a Mile](#)," [The New Yorker](#)

What Long Ellipsis

It's not that I am lost but that I carry the ones I've lost inside me so much I forget exactly who I am the only world or such is sleep and fullness and hissing wilderness in alleys where raccoons rise to show their sharp teeth on East side streets where empty vials litter yards I stumble drunk from the Polish Falcons where I shot pool with a welder cranked out of his mind with an aloneness I don't even know was there the face of Matt with his late night binges and a window sill of pills he stole from the hospital where he lit people's bones with radiation, his imagined trephination, telling us "sometimes I can see another kind of light inside them" swallowed Percocet and valium and shared, or Roger with his cocaine and his crates of vinyl he carried spinning house parties and then the nose bleeds and the palpitations and the speed and the throwing things and the bad women and he was gone to a prison in somewhere Tennessee, his late night calls and rants. I bet you can name a dozen more. Is it guilt or grief we carry, married to the rain I walk in every downpour bearing shame. What city of amnesia do I search for? Delirium or laudanum. Oxycodone or valium lifted by stoned attendants from the old folks' homes that line the edge of the frozen lake. There is never silence to help me through the daily noise. The whispering of voices is a hallway in my head. I carry Ohio across my chest. Those older neighbor girls who beat me with a stick and took off my pants. Is this so incorrect? They beat me and beat me with a stick and still I did not tell or beg. Day after day, week after week they honed me into a perfect blade. And then we moved, and I was saved. I was six years old. I can still inside my head hear cicadas' violent blaring as the last time I walked up those stairs. I had survived to claim this life, despite what long ellipsis.

Sean Thomas Dougherty
271

²⁷¹ [Sean Thomas Dougherty](#), "What Long Ellipsis," [North American Review](#), collected in [Not All Saints](#), [Bitter Oleander Press](#)

Volatile Elegy

I left a very convincing suicide note in the chrysanthemums.
How I love pollen & my sticky fingers!

Is being dead all fun & games?
This comet will sleep upon this park bench.

In my hair, tangled like the possibility of life elsewhere,
God places a flower.

3 a.m. & the North Star writhing. A mourning dove. A glassy eye.
The stars are what the dead get hard for.

Sometimes I love god, & sometimes I love geraniums.
Take it, the sorrow my mouth makes.

A flower for the lady who is so beautiful.
A lady for the ground that is so beautiful.

I hold my lust like a pool in my palm
(some honey for the dead) (some nectar for my God).

Tonight the stars will share my bed.

Katie Condon
272

²⁷² [Katie Condon](#), "[Volatile Elegy](#)," [Blunderbuss](#), collected in [Praying Naked](#), [Ohio State University Press](#)

Day 4

I'm tired of everything
and am getting old.

I'm unexcited by stealing pets
and diagnosing strangers' loneliness
by the way they move food
around plates in low-lit cafes.

If my kindergarten teacher had told me
that coloring pictures of squirrels would be the most satisfaction
I would ever know, I would have run
the dull classroom scissor blades against my wrist
until the crayon fell out of my hand.

Look, she's bleeding!
Look, she's a rose!

I am now so conscious of time
that I have no choice but to sleep
in a bed full of clocks, trying to find a way
to love their voices enough
that together we become a chord.

I've always loved at intervals.

Passion was most fresh
when temporary.

The world, in its promise to end,
has become so bland
that when I am hungry and start to eat
the thighs of a living cow,
I could swear I was only talking.

Meghan Privitello
273

²⁷³ [Meghan Privitello, "Day 4,"](#) collected in [Notes on the End of the World, Black Lawrence Press](#)

Make-Belief

When I was a child, I could not imagine
not being a cheerleader. At the edge of the road
I stood imagining the components

of a routine. I would celebrate the semi-boiled faces
of the volunteers looking out from the quiet
fire truck, but I was never a child. When I was

never a child, I could not imagine not being
a fire truck. The trees got in the way
of my being a tiny messiah. First, think

of yourself as a tinker toy. Next, never
don't. History was a line I could follow
only follow down a hallway of a stranger's house

in the dark, and History is. Along its track
doors open into closets full of ancient racquets
estranged from the tennis for which they were cut

and strung. You can tell I'm talking about
something else. History is a dotted line, an ellipsis
is a clearing and now we are floating

ladies and gentlemen. Hello Laurie & Ian,
hello all my other friends, tonight the xylophone
sounds like a lilting belt of bones. A door

in this ellipsis History is again and I am no longer
the dream of a cheerleader, no longer contained
like the plastic explosion mimetic in the pom

pom that blooms from my wrist in the fire-forced
drop of sweat on the passing cheek of a volunteer
whose grit quotient got amped as she or he tried

and failed to save the family victrola
from the heedless rampage of accidental flame.
Where was I? Where *wasn't* I. Allow me

to tuck into these masks we float like stunned
kites like last year's pinned-on fashion silvers.
But I am not a cheerleader, I am not a pom

or another pom, or even myself. The split rock
gushes water, the sky sweats manna, how else
to know paradise except already here. History reels

pull backwards. A shout goes up. Whatever
whoever whichever I this is rains ahead like a cloud
with an irrational hope. Another closed door opens,

the closed door of the dead, upon entry of which
more and more and ore and ore. When I was
a spaceship I could not imagine anyone

not wanting to be a docking bay. Same way
when I was a carrot and an ant farm.
This is how we make our way into the day,

when-I-was-a-childing each moment. What comes
after that is knowing better and what comes
after knowing better is knowing you'll never know

better. Let the plastic trees come up,
let the projector booths be giddy with the giddyup
of projecting whatever they may be projecting

and only later we recognize such heartbreaking
and putting-back-together tools, instruments
of suturing light threaded with music

and faces that open the hive of trapdoors
in us. What is this but the compartmentalizing
of infinity, what are we but those compartments?

What can account for the aggressive radiance
of our mortal decorations? When I was a kite,
I was never going to die. When I was a child,

I knew better. But
like I said—

Marc McKee
274

²⁷⁴ [Marc McKee](#), "[Make-Belief](#)," collected in [Meta Meta Make-Belief](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

Partial Genius

Being a cigarette girl was nothing like being a suicide girl but whatever. Try explaining to an eclectic readership that your only comfort is the sound of rain against a dormer window. Once I had a cold reading in a rehabilitation home basement. It reminded me of a shooting gallery with all that nodding and nobody particularly alarmed. Also the covert counting of small bills. You had to ask a lady to watch the door to the bathroom, and if you took more than ten minutes somebody started pounding. I was only able to offer customers two choices: kings or ultra-lights.

Things I could not get clean enough for you: politics, cuffs of trousers, the entire fleet of public transportation, air and water, tropes of fine literature, religion (but not mythology—that was okay), croutons lost in their shaggy wonderland, my past, the final page of your checking account register, peals of Bob Seger even though we were in an actual church rather than “the church of erotic ecstasy,” the sirens that you used as an excuse for walking faster, anything not related to the body because it wasn’t supposed to be clean, and alleluia at least I did that right.

I held the hand-sized radio in my palm and wished it could be implanted in my chest. Not instead of a heart. As a sort of companion to a heart. It could only play one song, however, or else it would bleed out. That’s a heavy commitment, presuming life has multiple decades. Multiple favorite sweaters dropped to the floor of someone’s living room. That’s a lot of living if it’s actually lived. Rolling down the stairs like spilled marbles. Exhumed from a backyard like a thimble that slipped away. Some Motown hit poorly remade several decades later.

We decided to name a certain hour *the melancholy hour*, but then fought over when it would be (morning was both sad and triumphant, there was most likely thunder at twilight, dinnertime was packed with morose wives and their dreams of increased square footage, middle of the night was only for trips to the loo). In retrospect, most of my memories are about novels. Did I even own a wing chair, or just the impression of one upon my back? Was that us, or a story about two characters with similar motivations? The novels never answered.

Confession: I was only a partial genius. Please don’t say it was the parts you left in me, because that wasn’t much. In between checking the knobs on my gas stove, I worried about immortality. We should have been the subject of at least one plaque by now, one tribute panel at a major literary conference. My first time at the major literary conference we just huddled on a couch touching each other’s badges. Then we got lost in our own city, like a couple of housecats. At least my genius was a little bit flashy and held market value. You were a wallet filled with questionable credit.

Mary Biddinger
275

²⁷⁵ [Mary Biddinger](#), “[Partial Genius](#),” collected in [Partial Genius](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

from "Disintegration Loop 1.1"

A body falls much faster
than the night

•

You will forgive me won't you
for the lines

I'm copying in
I do not want to be alone here
despite what I have said

•

And I have forgotten
to mention the music

though it has this whole time
been mentioning me
I will say it is the sound of a clock
which has had all of its hours removed

•

The screen is dark enough now
that it can perfectly reflect
the facing window
a corner of morning

•

And some of the lights
they tremble
trying to decide
whether they can go on

•

Lights like pronouns for the buildings

•

to remove to go through to withdraw
to slowly walk into another room

What is legally an hour?
The time it takes the king

to fall asleep
the melting
of a candle in the snow

Heather Christle
276

276 [Heather Christle, "Disintegration Loop 1.1," *Everyday Genius*, collected in *Heliopause*, Wesleyan University Press](#)

from "After Damascus"

3.

Stern-faced authorities suggested
you develop hobbies unlikely to attract
the attention of local apex predators.
That made a lot of sense, you had to admit,
so you began assembling
quarter-scale models of sunken cruise liners.
As you bore down on cheap plastic parts,
locking each to each,
you imagined
what it must feel like to drown.
The sea was awful.
Infinite, as far as you were concerned.
You made mustard sandwiches
and watched John Wayne films.
Wept when each was about to end.
You felt tired but good,
the way convalescence looks on-screen:
lap shawls in abundance
and guys in white scrubs
pushing your made-of-wood wheelchair
through Victorian gardens.
Down the block
a goldfish pond effervesced
in a neighbor's weed-choked lawn.
Whenever you passed, whistling like a pressure cooker,
the blur of your body
moving over the green water.
followed you back home.
You thought of North Carolina or Fifteenth Street.
Anywhere that hadn't turned so oppressive.
I'll write when I arrive, you said
to the unfortunate, to the curious,
who watched you wave from the ledge of the horizon.

Paul Guest
277

²⁷⁷ Paul Guest, "After Damascus: 3," *Plume*, collected in [Because Everything is Terrible](#), Diode Editions

from "13th Balloon"

Scraps of magazines
hoarded by boys
in our fort in the woods
The pictures were what nude women
cavorting in a gym
nude women lying on a tile floor

I told myself not to look
at the boy next to me
in the horny grim leaflight
as he studied page after seedy page
I told myself don't wish
for us to be nude together now
nude in the branches nude in the clouds

Don't look at the other boy
in case he sees me looking at him
 Look down at the dead leaves
on which are projected
nude photos of me nude photos of him
nude photos of him all slippery with me

Don't look for the two
of us nude on the rocks
where the sunlight cuts through
 the two of us
nude at the edge of the stream

Don't look at him don't look
don't look at his hand at his crotch
better to look at the ground instead

Mark Bibbins
278

²⁷⁸ [Mark Bibbins, "13th Balloon \[Scraps of magazines\]."](#) collected in [13th Balloon](#), Copper Canyon Press

Dread

My name is Shirley Herlihy,
but to the lowlifes on my beat,
I am Officer Girlie.
They do not mean to diss me.
It is a sign of respect
that I let them think is ok with me, and it is,
when I am trying to do my community policing.
After my brother disappeared
at the World Trade Center,
the word went out.
The lowlifes even gave me a bouquet of flowers
I could not accept.
They came from the Korean store
before somebody tossed a Molotov cocktail
through the front door
in retaliation for a "situation"
that involved the girlfriend of a drug dealer
shoplifting disposable diapers and Tampax.
The fact is I appreciated the thought
if not the deed.
I mean the flowers were at least a sign
I had not become a cop
turning a blind eye on the misery of the street.
I was known as someone who was tough,
but fair in meting out justice.
God knows it's hard to toe the line
every single time a perp messes up, but I tried.
If somebody's mother needed a ride
to a bail hearing,
my transportation specialist,
Bobby J, the gypsy cab guy would oblige.
I'd say thanks by slipping him
tickets to a ball game, a movie
or some lame excuse for entertainment.
I kept the wheels turning,
so I didn't fall under them.
I only had to use my gun once in two years
against a sonofabitch
who murdered his uncle
and hid his body in a dumpster.
Original, huh?
Stanko, the wino, found him on his garbage rounds.
We cornered the asshole in an alley
behind that shooting gallery
in the building that's now been gentrified
and is home to a decorator, six cats

and stacks of old cool jazz albums.
Anyway, the asshole said he had nothing to lose
fired and missed, fired again
and clipped me in the shins,
but I got him as I went down.
He died, but the paramedics revived him
and now he's in prison.
He's born again and keeps claiming Christ has risen,
as if nobody heard the news.
Once in a while, he calls me to apologize
and proselytize. I let him last time,
even as I sat, holding the telephone,
wishing my brother would come back.
I keep telling myself he's gone forever,
but it's so hard to accept.
He was always rescuing things
when we were kids—injured cats, birds,
even a German shepherd
who had been known to bite without provocation.
I used to tease him by singing,
“Patrick Kevin's going to Heaven.”
I wonder if he made it,
or if he's suspended between the life
that didn't mean much to him
and the death that means everything to me?
He was such a good boy.
He would have been a better man, if only...
After our parents died
when I was fifteen going on twenty-five
and he was twelve, we raised ourselves.
No one else had the time.
It's a busy world out there
the addicts tell me and I believe them
because I know.
I bet they're lining up at Smitty's
crack house right now to score.
I should be there to arrest someone,
but I've turned in my badge and gun
and come downtown to search this crater
for some sign of Pat,
even if it's only a feeling
that he's still around in spirit at least,
if not in body.
There're just a few of us
who won't give up.
With our shovels, picks and garden tools
we dig among the hunks of steel,
the concrete and remnants of people
who went to work one day

and vanished into our memories.
I dread finding him and dread I won't
as I choke from the fumes less poisonous
than the hope that keeps me awake at night,
but I can't give up.
He'd do the same for me.
Patrick Kevin Herlihy, I repeat under my breath
as I uncover another credit card
and a wallet with something that looks
suspiciously like blackened flesh fused to it.
I turn them in and return to digging
until faint from the effort and fumes, I collapse.
Two other searchers take me by each arm
and help me to a chair,
but I don't stay there long.
After a candy bar and a glass of water,
I'm back at my task.
On the job, I never questioned what I was.
I had my role to play
in the day to day give
and mostly take of the criminals
who inhabited my world,
but this sixty acres is a city of ghosts
and I don't know where I stand with them.
When I arrived this morning,
nothing greeted me but the wind
and a grackle making a din
as it pecked and scratched
at flat, charred patches of ground.
Maybe it's a good sign
that the birds have returned,
a sign of rebirth. But whose? I wonder,
as I stare at my bruised hands.
Last year, I solved the robbery
of a palm reader.
As a lark, I let her read my lines.
She said, "In the future,
you'll find the one you lost,
but it will cost you."
Now as I stand above a hole seventy feet deep,
looking down, I don't see Pat.
When I call his name,
my voice is swallowed up by the roar of machines.
At first, that sound signified the possibility
of finding him
and made my heart beat faster,
but now it's just the white noise
I hear in my nightmares
that always begins at the scene of a shooting

that occurred during a domestic disturbance
between a man and a woman in Queens
that left two teens bereft of a mother and father
and made them cling to one another much too tightly,
so that now the one left behind is frightened
by her utter loneliness
and drinks Irish whiskey at the pub
where her brother, Pat, used to hold up the bar,
promising the patrons he was going to quit drinking
one of these days
and to assorted laughter
call for another round of drinks,
knowing his sister would never let him
sink as low as he wanted to go.
He'd seen the fight. I hadn't
but I was haunted too
although I tried not to show it,
especially to him.
That day when I got home
from basketball practice,
I found Pat cowering under the stairway
as I had so many times before
when our parents fought,
but this time, I knew something was different.
He wasn't crying for a change.
"Are Mom and Dad fighting again?" I asked.
"They were," he said, without a trace of emotion,
then he told me Dad had come into his room,
hugged him and said goodbye.
That's when I knew something terrible had happened.
All the years since, I'd nursed him
through the rough times, the blue funks
and the highs that were too much
and always ended in a rush
of promises to stop drinking.
He worked construction, he'd say,
I wouldn't catch him falling off some scaffolding
high above Manhattan,
even drunk he could maintain his balance.
The truth was he was often unemployed,
but I supported him.
I'd long since moved into our parents' room,
but he stayed in his
across the hall from where they'd died,
surrounded by all his trophies from high school, comics
and posters taped and retaped to the walls.
The week before the attack,
he'd told me he was going back to work.
He'd stopped drinking for good

and I believed him, as I looked deeply into his eyes,
and saw a boy who having barely escaped
the inferno of family violence
would still finally perish in fire's cold embrace.

Ai
279

²⁷⁹ [Ai](#), "[Dread](#)," *Canary River*, collected in [Dread](#), *W. W. Norton & Company*

Mother, Expanding from the Piano, the Light, the Whales (1)

Dust and blackberry carried on the wind,
sand moving hand over hand
in the dunes, memory,
like invisible paper, ribbons away
from the dead pulp mill.
The neighborhood is cold.
Across the street an old friend leaves
her houselights blazing
through early widowhood.
My mother sits at her piano bench,
shuffling lieder. I listen, pressed
to my bedroom wall,
the hollow pedal-thump,
dust and Chopin
moving through the room
on the back of the sun, parasites
on a whale of descending light.
My grandfather is dying, there's light
around my mother.
Georgia Pacific's closing its mills
for the last time in the '80s.
My father no longer raises
stickered 2x4s into the machined night.
What black keys does he hear
as he waits at the D.M.V.
for an endorsement to drive a cab?

Michael McGriff
280

²⁸⁰ Michael McGriff, "Mother, Expanding from the Piano, the Light, the Whales (1)," *Exile: The Literary Quarterly*, collected in *Dismantling the Hills*, University of Pittsburgh Press

Epidemic

Because Davie Gray is protected by the blood of Jesus and his scripture-spouting pastor daddy, he stays in the classroom practicing his times tables while the rest of the class waits outside the gymnasium, sleeves rolled, for the stern-faced nurses to swab and stab us with the biggest needles in the history of the world, according to Markie Wolf, who will faint at the very sight of it, or Judd French who Darlene Meadows will tell us *cried like a little baby* though he looked just fine by the time we break into groups of three and argue over what color to make the map of the Dakotas, *green or blue* I say, though Judd insists on brown because of the Badlands while Davie just sits there coloring and quiet.

Because we are inoculated, none of us will get the mumps that year or the next, though Davie Gray will spend a month in the hospital in eighth grade and come back to us a shadow, skinny as a scarecrow and sterile, according to Darlene who claimed she overheard her nurse mother say the sickness settled in his balls, which is how joke got started: *How is a starter's pistol like Davie Gray?* Answer: *Both of them shoot blanks*, something we will all ha-ha over until the day Davie shows up at school with his father's gun in his black backpack and shoots his way through the cafeteria before the cops cuff him and lead him away but not before he kills six people, Judd and some other jocks and a lunch lady, and for weeks the school will be lit up with television cameras and microphones tethered to women with glossed-on faces who talk about *never forgetting* what happened here but there will be a mall next week and after that a synagogue and a movie theater and a nightclub and a mall again until we lose track, an *epidemic of violence* say the glossed-on faces before tossing to the weather guy for tomorrow's forecast *more rain on the way*. And sometimes I think about hunting down Davie Gray on the Internet but I never do, though what I did do once was drive through North Dakota where I took a cell phone shot at sunset of the Badlands, which weren't bad at all, in fact, they were kind of lovely in their vast and shadowed dark.

Sarah Freligh
281

²⁸¹ Sarah Freligh, "Epidemic," *Fractured Lit*, collected in [We](#), Small Harbor Publishing

The Two Things I Remember from Freshman Physics Class

1. Ms. Kissel's deep love for her cockroaches.
2. Relativity.

I'll start with Ms. Kissel: barely 5'2" with a red-headed pixie cut. It is her second year teaching public high school and it shows. The whole year Roc, a tall, freckled, hell-on-legs, calls her by her first name and only raises his hand to make fart noises. Quaking Ms. Kissel, bargaining with Roc to "Please, stop?" while he pops his gum, snorts. Then there is Crazy Willy, perpetually clad in black with floppy, unwashed hair. He was just Willy before The Incident, which should be solid foreshadowing for you.

One day Willy raises his hand and when called upon staples his middle finger. The class goes silent. Ms. Kissel shrieks, which is what any human being would do. But we are high schoolers, forever fronting. To us her reactivity is ludicrous, a delicious edge, our tiny teacher's face stretched beyond recognition in terror. Poor Ms. Kissel, begging Crazy Willy to go to the Nurse while he just smiles, bug-eyed, no one's child.

But the one time we all give her our undivided attention is after Thanksgiving. "How was your break?" she asks, and before we can answer she interrupts, begins describing a three-hour car ride to her parents' place for the holiday and how she took her pet cockroaches with her in the back seat because "no one could take care of them." Now we are riveted, and she is tall with story, her arms windmilling describing all six roaches freezing to death on the ride over because her heat was broken. How she wept all the way home, speeding, hands choking the wheel.

We are teenagers, judgmental, freakishly un-ourselves, but we are listening. We think we know how this goes. Some of us throw out a few real condolences, until Ms. Kissel twists to face Willy, her eyes glowing, her smile bucking. "When I got to my parents' house I put the little fish tank in front of the fireplace. I waited. Ten minutes passed. And then, one by one, their little legs began to twitch." Someone in the back throws a fist into the air. Another stops chewing her pencil to gasp. "They lived."

It's true. But what I remember most about the story is that she cried. As if her heart longed to kiss the vermin awake. No disgust. Lithium, my despicable stranger, you too have a hard shell, your own flawless antennae. Every morning and every night I swallow your bitterness, the imposed disgrace, the so-called proof of a shortcoming or defect or lack. Say what you will about roaches, what she loved would not die.

Shira Erlichman

282

282 [Shira Erlichman, "The Two Things I Remember from Freshman Physics Class,"](#) collected in [Odes to Lithium, Alice James Books](#)

Love Letter with The Beatles, Lana Del Ray, and Julio Cortázar

I feel most like a mother
at the coffee shop drinking decaf
and eating a Costco-brand
granola bar discreetly
wishing it had a different name
or something with Chia Seeds exuding
a nonchalant kind of wealth
when someone slides *Rubber Soul*
on the record player and I stop
what I'm doing because it's holy
to give this album your attention

Have you ever wanted to be so rich
your uterus is glitized as a luxury apartment
lips Lana Del Ray swollen
lifting every song from the ether of glamour
and grief bee-stung
with a hunger that keeps us honest
so that we're bursting
with it sometimes the hydraulics
of ghosts jacked up on perverse longing?

The first song plays like a cigarette marquee
blinking subliminal commands
and I feel most like a mother
when I'm disappointed no one else
appears moved as if they've wrestled
their demons at 4 am
a dervish of fast food wrappers
and tax returns
spilling from the back of a garbage truck
swishing through pre-dawn
streets as when I would nurse my daughter
and a bloom of lochia unfurled
its salamander heart
beneath us

The record skips
like the synapse of recognition
when I first spotted you
across a field the feeling that says
I would explode right now
if I lingered too long
on the thought of you

I read a thought-piece on Lana Del Ray

tits thrumming with urgency
waiting to be pumped and wonder
if selling oneself is a kind of authenticity
or if ambition makes you less
honest I mean attractive
lord I am so tired

Most like a mother cataloging
stints of grief the singe and hiss
of a record making contact
like the wheels of a car
doing donuts in a parking lot
remembering the smell
of summer and rubber burning
my tits full of ash

Pompei tits Burning Man tits
just graduated and touring Europe
tits my tits are not flashy
but comfortable living just within their means
happily married and paying taxes
on time tits sometimes unwashed
sometimes restless and wanting
to masturbate with nowhere to go
most like a mother when orgasms
are ashy apparitions my body
a phonograph leaking combustible notes
most like a mother wandering the aisles
of Costco the apples unholy and apoplectic
with polish whose skins
wince as I walk by tingling smugly
in the vegetable locker
like a morgue of refrigerated air

Most like a mother shaving my legs
in the bathroom at Wendy's
or not brushing my teeth most like a mother
on the playground
making small talk with other mothers and feeling
worn out and hollowed
among the rows of expensive strollers my inner tape deck ticking
I want to be rich I want to be rich I want to be rich
to win the contest of most motherly

fuck mothers fuck target fuck
listservs fuck nanny shares
fuck blogs fuck Ivanka fuck registries
fuck mother industrial complex
fuck Scary Mommy fuck permission

to eat frozen pizza alone and cry

If I hadn't met you
I'd probably be in an open "relationship"
with someone who wears a man bun
and says things at 38 like
I want children just not right away
who plays in a band and lets me pay his rent
who asks for ferret support
a year after we break up

I feel most like a mother
when I think of how lucky we are
and still resent
everything about you

Most like a mother
wanting to hide my big ass and thighs
wanting to celebrate my big ass and thighs
feeling it's an accomplishment
to go out in public and let myself
be seen most like a mother
when the young barista spills my drink
and calls me ma'am
and doesn't look at me

Most like a mother
shapeless in the bruised light
drenched in the pre-echo of another song
about to play wanting to steal every line
our daughter says and put it in this poem
"emphatic yogurt" and "the fox is holding
the moon"

I'm saying I love
the soft reception of your body

how the night she was born
you paced the room
singing Wreckless Eric
I'd go the whole wide world
I'd go the whole wide world

the dimmed fluorescence
of our singular heart
clanging *more more more*

How it rained
so hard one night in April

driving home from a cafe in Queens
where we'd eaten sweet tamales
I thought we might drown
but we didn't and I want to say
that was the night she was conceived
I want to say

*Everything I'd want from you
is finally so little
because finally it's everything*

Husk and sugar
an apartment filled with music
hiss of damp clothes
drying on the radiator,
a prayer made with a record's broken needle
to become beaming
and undone

Kendra DeColo
283

²⁸³ [Kendra DeColo, "Love Letter with The Beatles, Lana Del Ray, and Julio Cortázar," *Columbia Journal*, collected in *I am Not Trying to Hide My Hungers from the World*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Drink to This

shake a pair of dice
in the bottom of the wine glass
stain the table cloth

why drink, if not to gamble
if not to drop the reins
and urge the horses on

adult behavior is a conscious act
let's drink to unconsciousness
we all take our clothing off too soon

the night starts with a flame
that fits in the palm of a hand
like a wine glass

and ends in a forest fire
so many mistakes begin
with wanting to be warm

Suzanne Langlois
284

²⁸⁴ [Suzanne Langlois, "Drink to This," NAILED](#), collected in [Bright Glint Gone](#), [Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance](#)

Etymology

We need a German word
for when someone you love,
or a celebrity, turns out to be
a scientologist.

I know the Germans
have already given us a word for the desire
one feels climbing through a window
to have sex with their first girlfriend
while her father, a floor below, sharpens
his ceremonial Prussian sword,

and another to describe the embarrassment
we feel on our own behalves when our friends'
dance moves look like their most sensitive
parts have been hooked to a car battery,
while an orthodox priest revs the engine.

But the word I propose is more intricate,
acknowledges the choices we make,
while still capturing

the post coital pleasure that comes
when releasing small whiffs of judgment,
like when you're driving
and a squirrel darts at your car, so you break hard
just as it turns back to the shoulder,
and you think, *yeah buddy! Good call!*
But as you speed up again, the contents shift
in the tiny suitcase of its brain, and it turns
and jumps right under your tire.

The meaning of our word is not in this moment,
but, rather, in what comes after
when you start to admit to yourself that you
might have seen the squirrel starting to turn,
but you couldn't be bothered to break again,

how you feel sad for a second, but then think
you didn't invent the order of species,
and how at this point in history the damn thing
is designed absolutely to die.

So it's unclear whether you're upset
about killing something, or because you've
been trying to find parking for like, twenty minutes,

and now that you finally have,
you're standing at the meter, and it keeps eating
your money without giving you back any time.

Keith Kopka
285

²⁸⁵ [Keith Kopka, "Etymology," *Copper Nickel*](#), collected in [Count Four, University of Tampa Press](#)

Hyperbole is Underrated

A kid, I caught a cricket in Kelly's garage and shoved it down the front of her t-shirt. This was an expression of love, like swear words we practiced mouthing when our mothers'

backs were turned. But I'm more sorry than you can imagine. To this day, the cricket is her biggest fear. Mine? Fire while I sleep, lovelessness,

and octopuses. (Loneliness I can master.) The octopus at the fish counter is laid out on ice like a gray and many-rayed sun. Sometimes my belly feels full of shook champagne; this means I am

confronting desire. And what is desire but an anxiety of distance? How near, how far. I am the world's worst liar, which means I expect forgiveness,

always. A hyperbole-less world means we are too comfortable, unprepared for our failure. Yesterday, a grasshopper rode my cart all the way through the natureless

store. No one but me noticed it, not even the cashier who announced with envy that I'd bought the most beautiful golden beets she'd ever seen. I'm dying to see you, so I sent a picture.

Emilia Phillips
286

²⁸⁶ Emilia Phillips, "Hyperbole is Underrated," [Great River Review](#), collected in [Embouchure](#), [The University of Akron Press](#)

I Wake Thinking about Depleted Uranium

Lying here, looking out at the day—so much
the way I left it when this part of the Earth
turned away last night—not as one spurned,
but as a woman in bed might turn her back
to her lover, only to draw in closer
to the body's curve. In early light
the bare limbs of the great pines
look painted on the sky—
a Japanese monk, his brush thick
with sumi ink. Only now I start thinking
of depleted uranium, shaken over Iraq,
a cook gone berserk with the salt,
a crazed mother dusting talcum on her infant,
raining it down over the chubby thighs, belly, face,
the delicate nostrils, burying the child in fine powder.
Except it's not. It's not any of these things:
this poison with a half-life the age of the Earth.
Babies born without heads, lumps of flesh.
Soldiers returned with burning semen.
I had condoms filled with frozen peas in my freezer,
one widow said, *the only way I could bear it.*
These days it's dangerous to wake,
to try to make meaning,
as when a parent stumbles away
from the small raw grave
and someone mutters, *She's with God now.*
It takes four days for the dust to swirl
around the planet, to reach these pines,
their praying branches,
as though it were a blessing
they were about to receive.

Ellen Bass
287

²⁸⁷ [Ellen Bass, "I Wake Thinking about Depleted Uranium,"](#) collected in [The Human Line](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Instructive Fable for the Daughter I Don't Have

Walk into the woods and keep walking.
The tall pines swing like curtains in the moonlight;
the moonlight swings like a drunk man on a ship.
Search for the place the jewels are hidden, a.k.a.
the dark-furred hollow. Search for the mirror
in the old oak. Search for The Stag Who Can Speak
to Girls Like You (his voice, the stories say, is like a river—
low, and full of deaths it can't help). Small animals
will serrate the silence with their chatter. Underfoot,
roots will crack like bones. Wear your hair uncovered.
Wear your mouth unset. You may not find
the jewels, the mirror, the stag. But you may find
a bare possum skull. You may find some eyeteeth
in a damp log. You may find a berry patch, but
with bullets in place of berries, silver sparks
in the nightgleam. Put all these things into your pockets
and keep walking. The grackles will tell you
This way out, this way out. Don't answer. Don't be turned.
You entered the woods lost. Leave that way.

Catherine Pierce
288

²⁸⁸ [Catherine Pierce](#), "[Instructive Fable for the Daughter I Don't Have](#)," [Colorado Review](#), collected in [Danger Days](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Small Wonder

“Alf,” I think as I wake
in the dark, feeling
the presence of something
animal and human, familiar
and terrifying, ordinary
and hidden. The dad,
the only human character
I remember, was puny,
fussy: his worry powered
everything, as the antics
of the furry child became
old quickly. On *Small
Wonder*, the robot lived
with the family like a real
girl, not understanding how
to hide her non-humanity.
I don’t know if she slept
standing in a closet,
but that’s what I
would have wanted.
“Vicky”: Victorian, like
the rolling-eyed automata
in pharmacy windows,
peddling kidney elixirs
with their jerking. Sitcom
children: tooth-filled, shrill,
hiding loneliness with lessons
about strangers, not getting
stuck in abandoned
appliances, pot and pills.
And Reagan’s huge square
head, a sick ghost but
real, part robot and part
live animal.

Julia Story
289

²⁸⁹ [Julia Story](#), “[Small Wonder](#),” collected in [Spinster for Hire](#), [The Word Works](#)

The Devotions

Hate gives all its reasons
as if they were terms for something more
I would do to you with a foot or a shovel.
There is a certain peace in hate, a clear mountain
that's high with a whitewashed H
on its side which is all mine.
The road is circular and steep,
the stones roll onto it and the plants are
low and ground-hugging and often
appear to be dead. When I walk it
I am always surprised
at how the road drops off at the edge
and how the garbage of others, not mine,
stuns the land. The views are
enormous and belittle.
I would take you there,
I have already many times
thought about it but you are lazy
and ungenerous of yourself and your time.
The last stretch is the most tiring.
I have seen some people sprint all of a sudden,
laughing like it's a game. Not me.
It's a long, ugly slog and the wind hits hard from
all sides once I clear the last corner.
At the top there are two things:
a telescope with a locked door
for all the scientists of hate, not me,
and an altar for the pilgrims,
which is wrecked and ugly, the silk flowers faded
and the votives filled with dust or water.
I saw a tarantula there, so lovely and slow
with her haired segments.
I saw a snake once, too, its rattle woke
the bottom of my brain.
How I hated what she taught me.

Connie Voisine

290

²⁹⁰ [Connie Voisine](#), "[The Devotions](#)," [Zócalo Public Square](#), collected in [And God Created Woman](#), Bull City Press

Barbie Chang's Father Paid

Barbie Chang's father paid her tuition
by intuition his brain

now shuns all logic the law is thin with
rules about love but

if a person is so edited that they are
unrecognizable can you

still love them is it possible to write an
elegy for someone who

isn't dead yet what if a name no longer
means what it used

to where does the wind go when it
is not blowing

today Barbie Chang packs up his
clothes again to move him

to a facility to mute him no longer
able to travel to Italy or

the local deli he tells Barbie Chang she
is demented his dementia

is self centered it has no more center
his words have lost

what they are trying to signify she drives
away from his house for

the last time it's cold outside he stands
at the front door waving

saying that he's fine that he's put on
his *long distance shirt*

Victoria Chang
291

²⁹¹ [Victoria Chang](#), "[Barbie Chang's Father Paid](#)," collected in [Barbie Chang](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Sleep Regression Lullaby

No matter, the moon will anoint its other princes,
and you will remain Lord of Thwarted Sleep.

Your body with its endless appetite for stars and milk.
My body with its groggy offering. When you were born,

my sister said, *Maybe now you'll write some happy poems.*
But she's a mother. She should know better. Two by two,

dreams confirm their alibis, but you prowled painted blocks
with sleepless intent. So I try to sing you something happy,

like balloons rounding the corners of your room, like daffodils
who refuse to know the season and thrust through December

frost, like my mother's letter when you were nothing
but a few cells, how she said it was God who was making you,

knitting you whole. Perfect, her faith that the unseen
would prove its love through you. Enough. This night calls

for stronger magic, a song rigged for sleep, and so I'll sing you
something I'd never dare say—some nights I switch off

the headlights and count to ten, some nights I get the urge
to eat you and bite your cheeks. My sister reached into

our dead mother's mouth to tug her tongue. *Just to make sure,*
she said, and I thought *Sure*, like praying even though

no one answers, how even if you pulled out his bloodless
tongue, God still wouldn't know which mother was yours.

Traci Brimhall
292

²⁹² [Traci Brimhall](#), "[Sleep Regression Lullaby](#)," collected in [Come the Slumberless to the Land of Nod](#), Copper Canyon Press

Factography: Hometown

down by the water who can even remember
driving over the bridge at night

or cassette tapes: winding their unraveled
innards with a pencil, this reinsertion

of a familiar, slightly mangled melody—
the men with home-scratched

tattoos fishing the docks, a clear
jellyfish the size of a dime bag

bobbing in a plastic bucket
like a ziplock of organs, unmoored

resident, this moment of transit,
of taking a body, this boundary from which

something begins its presencing

Erika Meitner
293

²⁹³ [Erika Meitner](#), "[Factography: Hometown](#)," [The Ampersand Review](#), collected in [Holy Moly Carry Me](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

The Nematode

“I’m not drunk!” my student says, though her features sag
and her speech slurs. “The doctor’s doing tests—I just
wanted you to know.” She comes to class and talks about
the assignments in her halting voice,
the other students nodding and giving her the time she needs, even
slowing their own speech so hers doesn’t seem so different. A month
later, she says, “Do you know what amyotrophic lateral
sclerosis is?” and I say, “Yes, Lou Gehrig’s Disease,”
and we cry and hug each other and go
to class, where she continues to talk, a little slower each time, until
she can’t talk at all, which is when she begins to write down
and give me everything she would have said
had she been able to say it. There’s beauty in everything:
in a man’s losing his sight and saying
how lovely it is to have everyone come so close so he can recognize
them, in the woman who decides to think of her demented spouse
as a recent addition to the family and not the man
she married years earlier, in the family that runs
the same notice in the paper every year to tell
their dead son and brother that his place in the circle of life still brings
hope to others. We fall, but we fly first, as Jack Gilbert says
in his great poem about Icarus. By the end
of the term, my student is dead. No one escapes
the bitter enemy, the unbeatable opponent:
the old Greeks called it Nemesis, a word which always reminds me
of the nematode or roundworm that attacks plants in the part
of the country where I live. My student’s name
appears on the grade sheet, and I give her an A,
even though her final paper
wasn’t the strongest—what else are you going to give a dead person?
Just recently, I learn that there are two kinds of nematode,
the root-knot variety that kills plants
and the good or predatory nematode that attacks worse
pests, like cutworms. When I go out
into my garden at night, I look up at the sky, and sometimes I think
of what I see there, and at others I think of the scariest painting
I know, the one in which Van Gogh
shows the heavens blazing as the little village sleeps below.
Those stars are burning too brightly!

That fire you see can't last. Still, as it burns, it lights everything.

David Kirby
294

294 [David Kirby, "The Nematode," *Southern Review*](#), collected in [Get Up, Please, Louisiana State University Press](#)

Bauhaus

When I was a teenager, I knew a thing or two. I stayed in my room being skinny and having bangs, listening to Bauhaus and lifting 3 lb. weights. I drew pretty good portraits of my own face. I learned to drive stick, and I would drive farther out into the suburbs to go to the mall and walk around drinking Dr. Pepper and chewing candy and being mildly disgusted with all the people, who seemed to be sinking of their own accord. On the way there I'd look for the Eagles on the radio, in order to demonstrate that the Eagles are always on the radio, and to further demonstrate that—for good or bad—my vocal range exactly matched that of one Don Henley. On the way back, I would listen to Heart or Fleetwood Mac, which reminded me of my childhood in the '70s, a time of honest belting and bad vibes. Boys at school would talk to me in class, and I guess I would just look at them or say something weird about *The Sorrows of Young Werther* or something, because after a while they'd get nervous and blurt out, "I guess that's how people dress in *Europe*." Then we'd both turn around, and class would start.

Joanna Penn Cooper
295

²⁹⁵ [Joanna Penn Cooper](#), "[Bauhaus](#)," collected in [Wild Apples](#), [Ethel](#)

First Grade

Until then, every forest
had wolves in it, we thought
it would be fun to wear snowshoes
all the time, and we could talk to water.

So who is this woman with the grey
breath calling out names and pointing
to the little desks we will occupy
for the rest of our lives?

Ron Koertge
296

²⁹⁶ [Ron Koertge, "First Grade,"](#) collected in [Vampire Planet, Red Hen Press](#)

Peep Show

“Why does this even exist?” read the caption below photo of a flower on social media. The caption was a joke, but in an age when everything has a bird on it, the sentiment was refreshing. Birds are probably great, but the best peeps are silent, be they glimpses of nudity or marshmallows. Does anyone ornamented with images of wolves and owls even know these animals are not marshmallows? To be honest, the only time I’ve been totally convinced birds aren’t marshmallows was when I witnessed two male pigeons mating and was legitimately turned on. Directly obtaining a resource from another organism was so alarming I had to dress up as a combine harvester immediately.

Sarah Galvin
297

²⁹⁷ [Sarah Galvin](#), “[Peep Show](#),” [The Alice](#), collected in [Ugly Time](#), [Gamma Poetry](#)

Ones Who Got Away with It

I still fantasize I can do something about it.
That girl in the outpatient-care facility for teenagers
confided to me that she sneaked out to see a guy
at his frat party, and he *shared* her with his three friends,
to have a taste after he was done. “Is it supposed
to hurt so much?” she whispered to me. “I mean,
for this long *after*?” She was bulimic, and we both
hated our mothers. The next day I said, *We should
tell someone*. And she said, “I’ve talked it over
with my best friend. She says
I should be proud of it.” She was thirteen
and I, sixteen, recovering from those endless nights of shrieking
across the house, out into the yard and
into the cold moonlight to wish myself into some
other species; the endless silent Stooges’ bangs and thwacks,
some self-preservation up against inherited solitude;
bent almost in half, the copper piping of my family grief
that always raked itself across me
until I was deformed by it,
until I was defined by it—
but dammit,

I hope that girl’s doing well.
I hope she can keep down food
and it’s nourishing her. I hope her cells are cheering
like parents in the stands at a game, even if those men still exist—
important men, I imagine. Men who now run conglomerates
and have well-to-do families. Or maybe men I see
every day at work. Or whose books I read.

And how am I here? With my life intact?
I’m painful to the touch only when I don’t light
a candle and praise oblivion, give myself over
to nothingness—and is it every day
or was it long ago,
that I’d slid shut my teenage self’s veranda doors
and stepped
onto the world’s fancy balconies
and was prepared to do something drastic
like live and live and live.

Bianca Stone
298

²⁹⁸ Bianca Stone, “Ones Who Got Away with It,” *Pinwheel*, collected in *The Möbius Strip Club of Grief*, Tin House Books

The Translator

A poem in translation,
the young man was fond of saying,
is like the dead body of a foreigner
washed up on our shores.
Here

he usually paused to let the metaphor sink in.

Some members of the audience nodded thoughtfully.

I will now read from my translations of a little-known ancient Roman poet,
he told them,
shuffling his papers, then looking into
the dark,
half-empty auditorium.

+

The dead body refused to be still. The waves
loved it too much,
pushing it onto the beach, then rolling it
seaward again.
And so it made its way down the beach,
alighting for a moment,
or several moments,
on the wet sand,
then bobbing out
among the American swimmers.

+

120 foreigners in a leaking boat
is too many,
so the ocean fills with poems. Some retain
the qualities of their original language,
but others sink
into a new language.

+

Here I am, out here! I can see your
oil rigs glittering on the horizon,
says the young woman whom no one
listens to. Or,
she says nothing,
clinging to the side of the waterlogged boat,

where she has floated all night
among the drifting bodies.

A few of them became tangled among the oil rigs,
while others arrived
gently on our shore.

+

A poem that has floated some distance
from its accident
transforms—so the people
ran away in horror
when at last he came to rest
on a crowded part of the beach.

+

*You foreigners in your many-sailed ships,
come join the empire!* the translator intones
from his spotlit podium,
and the audience sighs.
Here I am, out here,
says a little voice in the translation,
a voice no one,
not even the translator,
can hear.

+

The audience
had come to hear a lecture on poetry in translation

and now the translator was going on
about the ancient Roman tendency to absorb,
and therefore transform,
foreign cultures,
their gods and foods.

Outside the auditorium, it had grown dark,
a perfect summer night.
The thousand vessels
on the great black ocean
glittered and loomed.

+

and for days, bodies

washed up on the beach.

Now, the American workers
zippered them into vinyl bags,

which, in the translator's metaphor,
constitutes a kind of publication.

+

But what is there to say
about that young woman
still clinging to the wreckage
two days into my poem?

A gentle summer rain
prickles her skin. *Here I am*, she says,
looking toward the oil rigs hunkering between her
and the shore.

Here I am.

+

She is a very fine woman
and someone should translate her.

Kevin Prufer
299

²⁹⁹ [Kevin Prufer](#), "[The Translator](#)," [The Paris Review](#), collected in [The Art of Fiction](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Fall

Forbidden the shotgun, my father
tried to kill the wounded deer with a crossbow,
and then the shovel he asked me to fetch
from the shed. Grass stiffened to spikes

beneath my feet. The season's first freeze.
The toolshed was a skin of aluminum
I was happy, for a moment, to
wear. And still the trees were noisy,

even without their leaves. Squirrels
clawed their faces and the fields
ran loose in the wind. Among
acorns and husks and leaves,

he stood. In sawdust and in blood.
He chewed and spat. His chest
rose and fell.

Nothing is redeemed until
it remembers its fall. Unless it has
no memory,

like snow, falling
through clouds,
branches and boughs, falling
and forgetting my father and me.

Cindy King
300

Watermark

In the dark only the Devil can cast a shadow.

she walked down the aisle holding a glass of milk.

is nicknamed Juan. The right, Diego.

with newspaper cones.

Lungs black with cancer,

before the wedding.

in my mouth: *Socorro, Socorro.*

when she was six months pregnant. Rain

the face of her child.

into beauty marks. Beautiful flaw.

I keep a spur under my pillow to ward off nightmares.

to afford lace,

Too poor to afford lilies,

Her left breast

Nightly she catches moths

Hammock Skipper. Southern Emerald.

her father was buried two months

Co coo coo roo. Her name a tassel

Rain pierced her womb

singed

The burn marks turning

Terrible ornament.

Too poor

on a cold afternoon, her breath a veil.

reads the wings

Nine of Swords. Knight of Corns.

a bolero. *Co coo coo roo.*

in pleated pants.

she folds and folds paper. Alas. Faros.

on my thirteenth birthday.

I put on the gold ring she leaves by the sink.

but presence.

was the rain. The dark of her knees

Socorro, Socorro.

with my hands, I wake up holding

she walked down the aisle

She arranges moth wings on a table,

like Tarot cards.

Her mouth waters when she hears

Her father was buried

Day after day

She gave me a pack of cigarettes

Often

Not cathedrals

The first man she saw naked

a watermark.

If I dream I'm cupping her face

the skull

of a wolf.

Eduardo C. Corral
301

301 [Eduardo C. Corral, "Watermark," *New England Review*](#), collected in [Slow Lightning](#), Yale University Press

from "Future Anterior"

2. *What is a ruin?*

They said it was a ruin so they expelled the families who lived there, mostly in the caves. Who's to say what's a ruin, and what's a home? On the day of a prominent Bar Mitzvah, which occupied the new members of the town, the Center for Jewish Nonviolence bought tickets for the families expelled from Susiya, hundreds of people and their children. They toured their town, entering the mosque (now a synagogue), and we brought chairs and tables and had a big feast together. When everyone was full and tired, they slowly climbed back onto the buses and left. I was the last one, cleaning up. Suddenly, an IDF bus pulled up, and soldiers came streaming out, all at the ready. But everyone was gone except me. A man with a JNF nameplate came up, put his arm around my shoulder, and said, "you win this round."

Philip Metres
302

³⁰² [Philip Metres](#), "Future Anterior [2. What is a ruin]," collected in [Shrapnel Maps](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Why Don't You Wear a Black Crepe Glove Embroidered in Gold, Like the Hand that Bore a Falcon?

You are describing how the transparent oval of my face seems to hang before you in the seconds before sleep. I peel off my gloves to eat from your paper cone of burning chestnuts even though they taste like bugs to me. You buy the chestnuts because you want me to enjoy this trip but then never to come back, not to your bedroom where I left my footprint in lotion on the hardwood, not to sit with you before your mother's scant bowls of *pastina in brodo*. We pass the newsstand next to the bakery next to the bus stop by the restaurant that used to be an orphanage. You're still talking about my phantom face, about the white light which you say surges into a beautiful tree-shape on top of my head. The clarity of this light magnetized your soul, or perhaps your soul already contained the exact spinning glob of sweetness that matched my own. It would be wrong to say precisely, it would be wrong to remember in any particular fashion. Our futures float by in their clear bulbs of breath, & I tell you the story again.

Kiki Petrosino
303

³⁰³ [Kiki Petrosino, "Why Don't You Wear a Black Crepe Glove Embroidered in Gold, Like the Hand that Bore a Falcon?,"](#) [Memorious](#), collected in [Witch Wife, Sarabande Books](#)

Not Holding the Gun

At this cookout,
in a parallel universe,
a version of me lifts
the gun, considers
its weight a handful
of peanuts. But
in this current
rotation of speed
and light, Pak's pump
action is between us
on the table.
The cookout has been
swell, and I'm glad
his sister, my date,
invited me. His mother
is grilling cow tongue.
The whole gang's
here to celebrate
Marshmallow's release
after three years
in Rahway.
He's at the grill
asking for a fourth
helping, the word *Rascal*
carved in his chest
like a pacemaker scar.
In the universe of
wooden nickels,
I am best friends with
this blunt instrument. But
it's not that universe.
My date's brother
is asking
if I'm interested
in a job, simple robbery.
I'd get a part of
the product. He needs
me because it won't
get back to his crew,
or the black gangs,
if a white man robs
his own. I'm the only guy
at the cookout wearing
a shirt. Her brother
has a tattoo of two devils
balanced on the top of

a mountain range.
It covers his whole
stomach. He tells me
if I shoot the guy,
when I rob him,
it's ok. But if I kill,
there's nothing
in this world
he can do to help.
Marshmallow settles
himself in a deck chair,
eyes closed. The meat
on the grill smells like
warm wood. *Hungry*,
I think, is the only word.

Keith Kopka
304

³⁰⁴ [Keith Kopka, "Not Holding the Gun," *New Ohio Review*, collected in *Count Four*, University of Tampa Press](#)

Definition

How to describe what it felt like
to be gay when I was young?
I didn't feel *different*, a given
for a boy who went to church,
didn't cuss, and stayed inside
all summer. The guy said,
"Thanks for missing the football,
faggot," after class, and I died
inside the flood of lockers. Not
dead, or *unborn*: a mercy I was
afraid of, but wanted. Hiding
in the corner to change for gym,
they laughed at my soft, pimples
back. Boys on one side of the field,
girls on the other. "Aren't you
on the wrong side, Smith;"
even the coach laughed, and I was.
Days I stared through three-pane
windows at trucks gliding
interstate to somewhere better,
stranger, not quite right, but true.
The gray-weather chest
I carried the summer I rubbed
the pillow between my legs
and thought of the UPS man
and neighbor's tight belly
until the semen I wasn't sure
how to clean, but God wasn't
watching, he turned away,
and I begged him like I would beg
all men before I hardened to stone,
not one rolled away, but invisible;
stone, invisible, not right either.
What do you call the kid of a dad
a mother calls home from evening
shift because she caught him
watching "nearly-naked men"
on television? He didn't spank
me, but didn't love me anymore
in the same way. "Don't tell
your mom about this again,
Dammit!" *Damaged, Damned.*

Aaron Smith
305

³⁰⁵ [Aaron Smith](#), "[Definition](#)," [One Art](#)

Step One: Admit Powerlessness

I loved the paper gowns, too, my slept-in body discarded
and remade into jail bait, the ER doctor pressing a handful
of brightly colored condoms into my palm. I won't call it rape,
because a tree can't be killed twice; God,
lurking in the X-ray of my abdomen, a single apostrophe
between the bowed ribcages, capillaries like typewriter ribbon.
I am most miraculous on my back, one earring lost on 148th,
my mouth thin as the people I come from, each leg
palmed astray, unable to ask for anything other than this.
The word pulled through me like a needle's eye, daughtering
into seventeen bruises, *no*, because Mama didn't even want me
to get on that airplane, *no*, and I did it like America:
what wasn't mine I took, ambulance lights red as peppers,
two years starving on bread and lemon water, me
at the door of somebody's wife, pulling electric bills from my purse.
Arabi-girl, baba-girl. Rich boys, pretty boys, tell the
boys as angry as Nevada, to own a thing you must want it.
Out in the cold night I was a body renamed, emerging from a sea
of white girls, my hoodie too thin, veins blue as hydrangeas,
laughing with the Columbia boys on Morningside,
chasing one tallboy with the other. Through the bar window,
a lightbulb exploded like a white tusk in the evening,
and when the sun finally rose, I believed in a different god.

Hala Alyan
306

³⁰⁶ [Hala Alyan](#), "[Step One: Admit Powerlessness](#)," [Crazyhorse](#), collected in [The Twenty-Ninth Year](#), [Mariner Books](#)

Geschehn / Happen

Geschehn or *happen*—both are verbs, which often presuppose a chance occurrence.

In the original, this verb is tied to the indirect object (*Dir*) and hence is conjugated into the Dative case.

What is so special about the Dative? It assumes passivity.

I am left alone in the happenstances of my profoundly average life. I like apples, my hair is black. I was born to refugees, political prisoners from a country where almost the entire educated middle class was imprisoned at some point—because they were educated enough to think of themselves as safe, and failed.

At the breakfast table of a family reunion, I sit with Rilke's collected poems in my lap and drink green cardamom tea with cream, meticulously prepared with ice cubes so that it has a pink sheen, sheer-chai.

Oranges, Afghan naan, sausages, poppy-seed biscuits, Swiss cheese, homemade sour prune jam, blanched almonds. I like to keep a list of food; it helps me remember who I am.

Oh, yes, that happened to your aunt during her eight year prison sentence, someone says, while the invisible badge of “heroism” grins at me from everyone's sleeves.

I wonder about your trauma—why is yours so much more pronounced than everybody else's at this table? What *happened* to you? You have a wound you carry instead of a badge, so you rip other people's badges off.

I touch you. I think of all the other *yous* my life is populated with. Mostly, they are lovers—I sometimes believe that only lovers and mothers can touch one to this extent, to the extent of branding themselves into you as a perpetual addressee.

Everyone at the table hushes when you mention the cousin who committed suicide, your favorite sister's son, whose name you hurl onto the table like a lit match.

Like good Afghans, we pretend it didn't happen, discard the match, put the tea pot on the place where there is a little tear now, the size of an eyelash.

If you happen to be a daughter, you are forced to live a double life. You will become a con master: the good girl who has acquired X degrees, serves tea to her parents, dances at weddings, sends money home; and the girl who dances on tables, exchanges kisses with strangers, drinks *Sharah*, etc.

That I am both variables at once, that it is *possible* to be both, is unheard of. My twoness—or merely the possibility of twoness—still looks like a Venus flytrap to them:

obscene, exotic, incomprehensible.

But I want to live.

Your main objective shouldn't be to be a good person. Good artists can be horrible people, said my father, the absent one.

Rilke left his wife.

What of Clara, Rilke's wife?

Even she abandoned her child, went on a pilgrimage to Egypt, made sculptures instead of attending to her newborn. She wasn't content with the role of the victim; and even the victim—the child—would continue to dedicate her life's work to remembering her father.

Rilke, my favorite asshole, my tempest, in my lap:

Look, it happens to me,

*That at times my hands become aware of each other,
or that my worn face is visible to them.*

But who would want to live for only that?

Aria Aber
307

³⁰⁷ [Aria Aber](#), "[Geschehn / Happen](#)," collected in [Hard Damage](#), [University of Nebraska Press](#)

On Camping

For each person I've said *I love you* to, the lie
was always there but wasn't understood
until some later date.

Dormant, perhaps; some recessive gene that finally
finds a part in this stage production. Sudden context,
like reading the *Iliad* and realizing sure, there's anger,

but before that there's just a lot of camping.
And what strikes me most is the scepter of Apollo,
slowly slipping out of Chryses' hands as he loses

everything in the sounding sea; black ships.
Or how he, like any other father, invokes revenge
not as a single stroke, but a thousand bites.

Smintheus, the literal *mouse* god, or maybe
just some flea that won't leave
me. You need to understand

there's this particular tree, hemlock or poplar,
at this particular campsite where she told me
all of this: lectured through the long line of her lips

like ships parted and imparted. That *love* was a word
that could be pushed like pumice stone in glass of water:
light, and porous, and impossibly afloat.

Matthew Minicucci
308

³⁰⁸ [Matthew Minicucci](#), "[On Camping](#)," [Copper Nickel](#)

[Somebody, please put something]

Somebody, please put something
over that window with the star
crack in the middle: some cardboard

bent into the intimate, maybe, some
plastic stretched like an unnecessary truth.
Guitar feedbacking its imaginary arc.

Please, somebody, cover it with
whatever's close because I can hear
the instinct machine scratching

the clothes line outside with asthmatic
fingers. I can hear quadrophonics
swinging in double digits: huffed up

harmonies fidgeting on the one
like a wheeze still trying to breathe.
Please, somebody put something

over that empty socket of winter.
The bus never shows up on time.
Blame it on lake snow. Blame it

on maladroitness: I can hear bleak
squeaking coming around the block
like a soloist on his last encore

for the evening. So many ambidextrous
players, excess & rust in the mind:
maggot brain, maggot brain.

Too much road salt & seasoning
in Detroit this evening. Ain't you
supposed to triplicate into more

than this mess like a breezy heart?
Ain't you ready for this solo part?
The chamber below your frets is just

the start of breathing. Put your guitar
in its lung before the headlights
spotlight your leaving. Put your hat

on, too, so you don't hear December's
cold leanings: southward where
notes ought to be—winged in bright

flight. It's nearly here: struggle buggy,
sorry wagon of rickets & laments
for the cricked necks & bird leery.

Adrian Matejka

309

³⁰⁹ [Adrian Matejka](#), “[[Somebody, please put something](#)],” collected in [Standing on the Verge of Getting It On & Maggot Brain](#), [Third Man Books](#)

Problems with the Early Times Poetry

Out with yard stars and the ragged tomatoes in coffins,
the big houses and the grills throw smoke. Eat the whole
grill, why don't you? Big country. We all loved younger
poets. Let me tell you of the early days when the settlers
lived in these log cabins and did nothing but make Alpo.
They were writing folksy love poems. They were smearing
Chia Pet seed all over the terra-cotta sculptures of Yoda.
They missed the path through the dunes and wound up
in the dunes with some biting brown flies and then pricked
by cactuses and dune grass with secretive sawtooth edges.
They filled housefuls with heads in the rain, piling creative
anachronism shields and swords made from black foam
wrapped in silver duct tape. Their beards and their armpits
smelled like green lentils cooked with smoked ham hocks.
There were hordes, and they lived cheap, but they slept late.

David Blair
310

³¹⁰ [David Blair](#), "[Problems with the Early Times Poetry](#)," collected in [Barbarian Seasons](#), [MadHat Press](#)

Poem without New Year's Resolution

Maybe it's no longer a pure kind of behavior
you seek, with so much breathing in it

and so much regret. What if you take with you
only this dark morning and the insane thuds

the giant dumpsters make behind the strip mall
when they're tossed back to the pavement

by the trash truck? Let Spanish go, let running
go, let yoga do flawless back walkovers across

the dead lawn in its very flattering leotard,
let it just be gone. Let this body

be the body you'll carry forward, at least
into this day. Let the sound of the dumpsters

wake the baby so she starts calling for you
too early, *Come upping me right now!*

in her new businessy voice. What if this is just
your luck and all you need to do is let it

come into the room—just let it come—let it
take off its coat and talk to a few people

before you reach for its elbow, kiss its cheek,
and start telling it what it owes you?

Carrie Fountain
311

³¹¹ [Carrie Fountain](#), "[Poem without New Year's Resolution](#)," [Ecotone](#), collected in [Instant Winner](#), [Penguin Books](#)

You can leave me & I will not kill you.
 That this needs to be said is insane
 but I am a man, & this is the world.
 Probably it should have been in our vows:
 in sickness & so forth,
 I will wash your coffee cups
 & do the laundry if you fold,
 I will walk the dog when it's my turn,
 & I will not kill you,
 nor will I ever fill your car
 with wet cement, which is a thing
 I read about today: a man hurt
 when a woman declined
 to wear his name.
 When we married, you kept
 your name; people told me
 I should be bothered. People
 told you that you were young
 & did not understand
 how the world worked. By people
 it should be obvious I mean men.
 I don't want to make a joke
 of all these wounded
 walking around among us
 dividing the world
 into Fuck Marry Kill
 which is supposed to be
 a fun conversation starter
 but the world reminds us
 over & over there's nothing
 funny about it. For every
 man who loves you
 there are eleven who love you
 & will still come to your job
 & shoot you in the head.
 For every body you have,
 there is a man willing to claim it,
 one way or another.
 The story goes that God
 spent five days making
 this amazing place, its cedar trees
 & canyons & its many egrets
 taking flight over so many
 grassy marshes, & then
 on the sixth day he created
 men. If God is reading

this poem, if God truly
sees all & knows all,
he's probably also thinking,
At least the shorebirds are lovely,
& I have to give him that
even though out there
right now some man
is thinking, *Fuck the shorebirds,*
marry the canyons, kill
everything else. This is the world,
in which, somehow, you
& I found ourselves together,
& in which we wake up
every morning & pledge
not to harm each other
any more than we have already.

Amorak Huey
312

³¹² [Amorak Huey](#), "FMK," [Four Way Review](#), collected in [Dad Jokes from the Late Patriarchy](#), [Sundress Publications](#)

Think Starlight

Think containment. Think caseload. Think
of your parents. Think of Lily, who taught you
the etymology of *stanza*—
a kind of stopping place, the room
where we self-quarantine. Think
of all the faces you've known by hand,
the curve of your lover's skull, how no one
ever admits they wish they'd worried more,
so you keep your panic on you at all times
like a passport. The paper reports the nameless
score, tally marks on the wall of a white stanza
where women in green speak a language
you don't understand and decide who deserves
the breathing machine. Think starlight:
it took so long to touch us,
we trusted we were spared.

Leigh Stein

313

³¹³ Leigh Stein, "[Think Starlight](#)," collected in [What to Miss When](#), Soft Skull Press

All My Boyfriends Love My Father the Best

He comes to pick me up on his Harley he shows up
with his earring and his jean jacket and my boyfriends

sigh like they want a boyfriend too
he's blaring Led Zepelin and smoking

a Marlboro and pretending he likes them
as much as me asking who they're reading

oh yeah, he's the shit my Dad says and my boyfriends
go a little sweet in the knees—*tell me again*, they say,

what he did time for? an ex con who reads who listens
to Marley and drinks coffee like a grad student

whose hands are calloused from some romantic labor
and all those tattoos—I can see them squinting

when they look at him, imagining he's Kerouac—
he's everything

they ever dreamed and a Jungian too—and I know
that love where you try so hard to get someone

to see you and it feels like you'll never be let in
to the mysterious house you know from distant

observation is the most beautiful house, that you know
from closest study everything
but what it's like to step inside

Katie Schmid

314

³¹⁴ [Katie Schmid](#), "[All My Boyfriends Love My Father the Best](#)," *The Spectacle*, collected in *Nowhere*, [University of New Mexico Press](#)

Interview with Phyllis Fromme

My sister didn't do those things to hurt us.

After you called, while I sorted out my pills,
my mother's blond Danish Modern end tables
flashed through my mind.
I open the crisper, and there's Lynn timer,
inside a dumpster, picking through freckled lettuce,
bent on helter skelter.
They ruined the Beatles for me.

Last night, I dreamed of a scarlet pond,
an albino koi surfacing
with the barrel of a .45
poking out of its mouth.

Yes. Father. Not well.
I took my first *full* breath the day he died.

Is it cold in here?
Father kept our thermostat low
and monitored Mother's odometer, leaving us
just quarters when he traveled for work.
I'd watch Mother and her shoulders march
her empty purse next door to scrub linoleum.

I read Lynn timer said our own father
abused her (sexually I mean).
How was I supposed to know?
When he'd unlock our bedroom door,
she wouldn't hide welts that would darken, but—
the year I started kindergarten,
he stopped talking to her.
I was so young.

Redheads with spark get beaten.
I swallowed my peas.

Three years later, he spoke to Lynn timer again.

I wish your editor never found me.

Did you read she took a staple gun,
aimed a line of punctures up her arm?
Ground into her skin with lit
cigarettes as if she were an ashtray?
Father told her she was ugly.

Then she met Manson.

I kept quiet, learned to sew,
traced patterns, left extra cloth.
I'd smile back at Breck girls in study hall
but couldn't invite them home,
even when Father was away.

So I'm in high school, right,
and there's Lynn timer on TV,
an X carved in her brow.

I wanted my teachers to forget her.
You're the only one who remembers
she had a sister. I never corrected
teachers who said our last name wrong.
That always set Father off.
He insisted on the German way:
From-ma. From-ma.

I imagine Lynn timer hunched over,
thinking, thinking, thinking in her cell.

No, I've never visited her—never will.
No, the people at work don't know.

Now I have a question for you.
Why couldn't I just have been Phyllis
Fromme, the good girl
who went to the prom?

Steven Riel
315

³¹⁵ [Steven Riel](#), "[Interview with Phyllis Fromme](#)," [Evening Street Review](#), collected in [Edgemere](#), [Lily Poetry Review Books](#)

Poof

At the party she said she wakes
every night 2:05ish and can't get back
to being gone, comes down and puts
five plates away, whatever's
in the dishwasher, has a frozen
or two daiquiris, takes a knife
and works at the hole in her head
until dawn and footsteps and lies
to hubby and kids she slept fine.
Too bad Sisyphus isn't here, I thought.
He'd move the rock in her heart
or at least offer insight
on being stuck. But while I
was thinking Greek, she noticed
all she'd said and turned pink.
Isn't it weird blushing
draws attention
instead of camouflaging the face
to fit in with the drapes? Pink
and looked down at her feet
doing nothing, so made them move
a little forward and back.
I did the same with mine
until I was tapping her shoe
and saying I miss when kickball
was a nutritious part of my day.
She remembered running
and sending a dragon on a kite
so high, it was scary to look at
far off and alone
or think of pulling home
and away from its new life
in the sky, so let it go.
I remembered that too
from the day before, the tumbling
feeling of reverse vertigo,
of doing something wrong
by trying to be free.
There's an intimacy
unique to the little tent
two people can put up at a party,
a species of speech as open
as it is never
to be spoken of again. I am almost
as no good today
as I was no good decades ago

at being human. The thing I like
about Sisyphus—he gets us.

Bob Hicok
316

³¹⁶ [Bob Hicok](#), "[Poof](#)," collected in [Hold](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Elephant

On the Route 7 strip,
next to the office supply store,
next to the pool supply store,
next to the Tower Records,
next to the TJ Maxx,
was the Ranger Surplus lurked

where I shopped only
at the edges: iron-on patches,
all-weather lighters,
vintage plate pin-ups,
never venturing into the groin
of camouflage and camping gear,

until I began buying weapons:
including a mace, a chained flail,
several throwing stars, and the book
Contemporary Surveillance Techniques,
with its cover showing a man
crouched in a stereo speaker,

all gifts for my father
because what do you get the man
who has everything—and by *everything*
I mean a large-caliber shell casing
upright and decorative
in the living room, where you might

expect a potted ficus to be—
and these, too,
were the years he gave me
t-shirt after t-shirt, souvenirs
of every posting and deployment,
including the one that said

*Hard Rock Cafe Baghdad—
Closed—Kuwait, Now Reopening—*
T-shirts that fit poorly
over my new breasts, boxy,
unflattering, and so I shut them
away in drawers again

and again, each of us
trying to say to the other
I see you,

the way a blindfolded man
takes the tail into his hands, believing
from this he can see the elephant.

Sandra Beasley
317

³¹⁷ [Sandra Beasley, "Elephant," *Waxwing*, collected in *Made to Explode*, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Orpheus in Greenwich Village

What if Orpheus,
confident in the hard-
found mastery,
should go down into Hell?
Out of the clean light down?
And then, surrounded
by the closing beasts
and readying his lyre,
should notice, suddenly,
they had no ears?

Jack Gilbert
318

³¹⁸ [Jack Gilbert](#), "[Orpheus in Greenwich Village](#)," collected in [Monolithos](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

Oracles

In the year of buzzcuts
Mom and Dad gave me dinner-

money every morning.
I never ate dinner. Instead:

bought secret hipster glasses,
stash of hairgel, a tearaway

bravado; preened wet spikes,
walked around Seoul

like I belonged there. I imagined
I was someone's shadow.

I grew skinny with movies.
In the dark, in the *bee-deh-oh*-booth—

the cathodes asked questions
of current and fluorescence.

The VCR sighed and sybilled.
From the next room

someone moaned like Cinemax.
I thought I knew the future, then:

the round spooling of it,
its generosity and malice,

the hiss of snow. How one day
everything would become real.

Sam Cha
319

³¹⁹ [Sam Cha, "Oracles," *Lily Poetry Review*](#)

Rave-Ups and Galaxies

Jimmer, there's a thing in the woods and they need you. The city's gone silver, like the west coast of the moon, and it's been dusk so long they're thinking of calling it a season. After the breakup backstage, and the long, late night drive up the coast, you remember the trees on the side of the highway, twisted blasts of sculpture, old champions with bulky hands trying to find their way back to a tragedy. When you're running out of time you say everything but *I am running out of time*. You become an expert on small university basketball programs and talk about the weather at parties like you really understand it. You have to keep telling yourself to stop thinking about the girl from Huxton; it doesn't matter if she's the best kisser in the world or not. It's winter, the water is frozen, and the neighborhood cats huddle on the doorstep like French orphans from a novel. There's a thing in the woods, Jimmer. You can hear it in the hoodoo of the turbines above the highway. And we're all turning gray like we have the same fever.

Alex Green
320

³²⁰ [Alex Green](#), "[Rave-Ups and Galaxies](#)," collected in [Emergency Anthems](#), Brooklyn Arts Press

Correspondence Theory

In Winn-Dixie, where I've never seen
anyone buy flowers, a box of rose petals
has been sweating inside a tiny refrigerator

all Valentine's week. I can't help but
consider who would buy them, the unlikely
art of their hands as they pullstrip

open the container to scatter petals
like rubber lips on the bed, on the table
before the romantic meal. I'm here with a basket

of ingredients for a hamburger bean pie
you'll eat in silence. I saw an accident
on the way, was listening to the traffic report

as the car in front of me swung into
the opposing lane. I saw it coming,
but couldn't stop the car's body erupting

as if discharged from inside. Then quiet,
a still figure, indistinctly human. I've been
inside that car, been that figure, asking:

*Is it broken? Is this my blood? Are these
my hands moving?* I mistrusted
my perspective. Now I know the inside

and outside of an accident are the same.
I count the romantic gestures completed
on my behalf on one hand, in the wine aisle.

I know we are not cars. But I wonder
if your other woman appreciates
the dulcet stink of your ear canal, like oil

on a switchblade. I read the covers
of the women's magazines, drink in
their exuberant defeat. I, too, know how

thin one can slice a word and still
have enough to live. This is how it tastes,
like sucking a dirty half-dollar, like

emerging from the car, as a radio announcer reports what feels like my accident in real time. He suggests another route to take.

Erin Hoover
321

³²¹ [Erin Hoover](#), "[Correspondence Theory](#)," collected in [Barnburner](#), [Elixir Press](#)

from *Clangings*

Back on my wings, wings became me.
I banked, broke, beside myself. Besides,
honeysuckle sang, and brooked words
overran beds of pebbles, but see?—

no meadow. Never was a meadow.
Lots of long division, and times tables
where once there were standing pools.
If you played into them you got polio.

Polished glass wading downstream,
oaks barked spells, and hexed books
cracked, spine-open. Those are *facts*.
None of that sailor-ruby-sky eventime.

Red robin, red robin, bash again, again
against my window, feathers in flame
—a fireman's?—to get in. Or be calm.
With lunatic squires in your bloodline,

your beak-and-pockings won't open
more living room. You're so enamored
of mates you don't know your mirrored
yew from yew. So bloody your reflection.

Steven Cramer
322

³²² [Steven Cramer](#), "[Clangings \[Back on my wings...\]](#)," [Memorious](#), collected in [Clangings](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Coyote

The coyotes are wilding again, a frenzy of high-pitched yowls
and quick staccato yips that wafts up through my windows after dark.

I thought they'd howl like wolves, or dogs left out too long
in the backs of trucks, not this otherworldly keening, sound

that stirs up dust, slips through the black boughs of the pine,
careens through the muck of the creek, its stony bed,

through the fetid water and old trestles, their thin sheen of rust.
From down here, it's just so much ruckus, so much fury

lifted on the wind. Except nights they ghost, and all
I can hear is the rain, falling in blank verse on the roof.

I do not care for the coyote's voice. It's like someone
singing the blues in another dimension. Feral riffs

through the thicket, past hemlock and horsetail, through
buck brush and oak—and I want to trot four-legged in the grass,

seek them out, nose skimming the duff.
There is an animal inside of me that wants to tear

into the body of something soft and luscious, cracking
small bones. To prowl the church of the dark, ragged

and dangerous, wearing my grief like a fur jacket.
To test my tongue against the rough spines of blackberry

and prickly pear, feel the barbed prongs in the pit of my gut.
Haven't I been good long enough?—kept my sorrows

tucked in a back pocket, folded like a Swiss blade.
But now I want to lie down, press my spine to the pocked earth,

tear off my shirt and writhe 'til I loosen something at the back
of my throat, make my own, terrible noise, hear it slip

into the iced air—is this how they do it?—when they open
their trick jaws, tilt their heads up.

Danusha Laméris
323

³²³ [Danusha Laméris, "Coyote,"](#) collected in [Bonfire Opera, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Killing Jar

There are days
I go to the mailbox
and find letters
from my dead husband
translating for me his suicide:
the cold blade softened into cursive,
his fear licked onto the stamp,
as the return address: the date of his death.
I look forward to these letters.
Some are addressed to my son,
I collect and keep those.
I think at times this is a greedy act,
but he is too young.
I see my body asleep in my son's body,
my eyes behind his eyes.
But now I worry that there is distortion,
like Parmigianino's *Self Portrait
in a Convex Mirror*, his hand
slightly reaches out to me,
slightly curls back into itself.

When I was a girl, my uncle
mailed to me framed collections
of mounted butterflies.
Blue morpho. Tigerwing.
Malachite. Moon Satyr.
These are all names my husband
could take now. I imagine him
as Goldman's Euselasia
or the Great Eurybia.
I know that to kill a butterfly,
you use a killing jar.

Because they are so fragile,
sometimes butterflies batter
themselves in the killing jar.
At night, this makes me wonder
about the mixing
spoons in the bowl,
the tangles of the dough,
such small, temporary fights.

For a clean kill, it is better
to first stun a butterfly
by pinching its thorax.

But you must practice to get
this method right,
so it is recommended to try
it on common moths or butterflies
you are not concerned about.
Pinch smartly between your finger
and thumb like tweezing a piece of sky.

Didi Jackson
324

³²⁴ [Didi Jackson, "Killing Jar," *The Common*, collected in *Moon Jar*, Red Hen Press](#)

Ordeal

The creatures throwing
bran muffin at me
from the back seat
of the Volkswagen SUV

stopped talking to themselves
and now take turns
becoming dinosaurs,
their happiest

of games. They are a torture
I talked myself into,
and as I ferry them, my favorites,
I notice with my tongue

that I have managed,
in my sleep, to lose
the sliver of one side
of a premolar:

a portioning out,
a judgment, from the German
urteil, that which the gods
dole out, one arduous deal.

Most end up lucky
never to have been
marched barefoot,
like Cunigunde of Luxembourg,

over red-hot ploughshares,
nor forced to swallow feathers
in dry bread,
nor made to carry

through a hissing crowd
the planks of wood
their fate will nail them to,
nor waterboarded.

Most of us are lucky,
yet when we smile, we draw

attention to the contours of the skull
beneath uneasy skin,

to the confusion
polluting the eyes,
startled like burghers
in a painting by James Ensor,

whose work makes clear
what scared him
in the tranquil afternoon:
the dignified

deteriorating faces smiling
into him as he traversed
a bridge or saw
a mirror. And the skeleton inside.

Myself I prefer to retreat
into the jellyfish dream factory
of my open eyes, as we traverse
the span allotted, each hillside

pedicured and tilled, a burst
of starlings hurtling
themselves in trapezoids
at the clay sky above us:

the brontosaurus, the triceratops,
and me, who loves them,
if love is the right term
for what the stand of hollow trees

feels toward its greening
canopy, for how night rain
scatters itself
over the eager topsoil,

for the extent to which I'm able
to luxuriate in light, inhaling
steam, though I suspect
I am succumbing,

gradually, to an identity
deficiency, an overpowering
lack of sense,

as I continue serving

(until it's time to ascertain
if the accused will sink
in innocence, or, obstinately, float)
what's left of my life sentence

with all of you beneath this wire
and bird, amid the tangled
shadows, root systems,
a congeries of slate rooftops.

Michael Dumanis
325

³²⁵ [Michael Dumanis, "Ordeal," *The Common*](#)

The Order of Things

Tonight, I smashed a spider
with a nineteenth century Russian
novel for crawling across my desk.
I hate them the way I hated lectures
in college, though I could sleep
through the homosexual tendencies
of monkeys, the industrial revolution
or Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*.
I hate walking face and teeth
and nose into their webs
where they spin and wrap and suck
the blood from flies. My mother
brushes them into her palms,
escorts them like admirals to the sidewalk.
I know. I'm upsetting the order of things.
I'm drowning the wolf that hunts the deer that ingests the grass
that wants to cover our graves.
My wife says, *Think of something nice*.
I daydream about punching the man next door
for cutting down the hedge.
I wonder if God feels repulsed by the sight of us.
Before bed every night I sweep the sheets
for legions of eight-legged creatures
coming for me while I reach around
hoping to touch my wife's breasts.
One friend pours armies into her garden
from a paper sack to save the tomatoes.
Miraculous! she says. How they multiply, the waves
of spiders growing over the leaves.
My three-year-old came into the study last week
in his Superman underoos, turned off my reading lamp
and said in his tiny voice:
You don't need any more light.
This is what I tell a spider before I kill it.

Jay Nebel
326

³²⁶ Jay Nebel, "[The Order of Things](#)," [Tin House](#), collected in [Neighbors](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Wine with Everything Was What I Said

when someone would ask me
for the color of my lipstick.
I loved the way it made me feel
like a mad queen issuing a proclamation—

Wine with Everything and enough
roasted squab for all the rowdy villagers.
A festival of plums & harlequin roses—
that color, I mean, the way it never bled
in betrayal across my teeth. *Amative*—

(disposed to love), the gist of a shade
too kitten-heeled and pearly for me,
a shimmer lifted away by the wind
while riding on the back of an older boy's
motorcycle when you were supposed to
be home babysitting your younger brother.

Mars Rising, a chroma too atmospheric
not to leave what looked like a trail of blood
across throats and earlobes, and let me just say
Desire Was a Blue-Eyed Man, silky & humid,
a taste that really left me wanting
to be kissed down there by the river
before I learned *Crush* was a color
that meant avalanche, matte and opaque,

too heavy for a girl revved up on Revlon,
a girl too impractical to sustain
the momentum of anything but dancing,
who thought there was nothing more
hypnotic than moonlight darkening the hollows
of a man's cheekbones. I tried them all—

by that I mean the lipstick shades, of course—
the orchids and the mochas and the corals,
the lacquered, the frosted,
the ticklish feather coats of glossy nudes,
the amber-golds and apricots—all
imprints ghosting on goblets raised
in the palette cleansing light
between him and him and him.
Wine with Everything clinging to the rim.

Laura Sobott Ross
327

³²⁷ [Laura Sobott Ross, "Wine with Everything Was What I Said," *Kestrel*](#)

Elegy for a Youth Shot by Police on the Day Robin Williams Died

August 11 circles round again,
and a new doc appears to celebrate
Robin Williams's life and artistry.
While *Spirits and the Muse* illuminate
the web with clips from standup, interviews,
random hilarity shared with the gaffers and crew

(concealing pain we should have recognized),
there is a corner of the internet
dedicated to your memory:
your sister posted an In Memoriam page;
the funeral home offers public space
under your obituary

for heartfelt testimonials; there's also
a dormant but unpurgéd Instagram
account that once you made more lovely
with selfies in flat cap, graduation gown.
Someone could Google your common name and find
your profile in the *Picayune* before

the paywall shuts her out. Of course complete
transcripts from the failed investigation
are in the public record, held in storage
in the white radiance of a server housed
somewhere in Oklahoma City. Have you
seen his warm exchange with soldiers serving

in Kuwait? How many young men died that day?
Half the jokes in *Good Morning Vietnam*
were ad-libbed for the camera crew. No doubt
he was the Sire of an Immortal Strain.
And that was *after* he kicked cocaine, "God's way
of saying you have too much fucking money."

What hard mishap hath doomed this blameless swain?
Apparently you kept your hands concealed
during an investigative stop
for thirteen seconds from the moment when
the felon winds appointed you their next
and the bullets that would now themselves disown.

It must be said his Boston accent was
not convincing. But the performance?
Transcendent nonetheless, although some say
his first success as a moving tragic clown
was in *Seize the Day*, dir. Fielder Cook.
You bled out from the misty dream of life,

choking your last in an asphalt parking lot,
wasting your sweetness on the desert air
while the blush on your chest expanded wide to take
in the fresh paint, the dim streetlights, even
the Gang Squad panting in their body armour.
A heart once pregnant with celestial fire

now blown apart by superior ballistics.
We will not be distracted. We will not be
dismissive of depression and its toll.
Let passion-wingèd Ministers of Thought
forge memes and PSAs to keep us focused.
Grief is mortal, the internet is not.

We are all guilty for his death because
“we wanted more of him than he could give.”
Let talk about depression now increase
with its new famous patron saint and martyr.
Let all accept responsibility
for our sins of omission on August 11.

Let this day forever serve to remind us
of those we could have saved, lauded or
dishonoured, friend and foe alike. Let no
more life divide what Death can join together.
Sleep with comedians and kings, clear Sprites.
Tomorrow to fresh pastimes and headlines new.

Adam Sol
328

³²⁸ Adam Sol, “[Elegy for a Youth Shot by Police on the Day Robin Williams Died](#),” collected in [Broken Dawn Blessings](#), [ECW Press](#)

I'll Call You *This Afternoon*,

I'll call you *nowhere, now*
 here: the cardinal's almost almost
almost, quite. Until the winter solstice
 there is less light
 than night. Then a whole other
 manna, in a manner of
 speaking. But darkness is so much
faster than light. Have you
 noticed that if you go into a room
 that is completely dark and flip
the switch, you see the light
 enter the room but don't
see the darkness leave? At dawn
 we watch the light appear
 while night slips out
unseen like the tide before
 it leapfrogs in. Chablis
not only rhymes with *sea*
 but comes from, remembers
 the sea: its chalky, stony
salinity. The best come from
 grapes grown on a prehistoric
sea, limestone and clay soils
 full of fossilized shells
 and marine skeletons. In the Middle Ages
and Renaissance, the depiction of
 the rotting body became
an art form. Sculptors carved
 cadaver tombs, double-decker like
 the buses in London or the bunk beds
I once argued over with
 my brother: on top, the reclining
effigy of a person as he appeared
 in life—clothed and sometimes praying
 or reading—and on the bottom
a naked corpse laced
 with worms. Ligier Richier, a pupil
of Michelangelo, sculpted the *transi*—
 the transition from body
 to dust—of René de Chalon, still standing
in the church of Saint-Étienne: unraveled
 muscles and flaps of skin
dangle from bones as he grasps
 his rib cage with the right hand, his left reaching
 up to hold a space that once held
his dried heart. One of Dickinson's correspondents

likened her handwriting to the fossil tracks
of birds. Where they were headed
cannot be said, so I'll call you
what I was going to say
was, what I meant, I always
thought that like Aeneas, clinging
to the wreckage after the Trojan fleet
has gone down: *Someday, even this*
will be recalled with pleasure.

Angie Estes
329

³²⁹ [Angie Estes, "I'll Call You This Afternoon," *Plume*, collected in *Parole*, Oberlin College Press](#)

Ode to Odor, Ardor, and the Queen's Chickabobboo

Harold Pinter is drinking a bottle of champagne
during intermission at the Cottesloe, the rain
of words ceasing for thirty minutes, so the skein
of lies Chekhov's characters tell themselves while they feign
desire or perhaps love, drink vodka shots, and complain
about provincial life can soak into the terrain
of our minds, though how we can possibly regain
our hold on joy after watching Ivanov's insane
hectoring of his dying wife I can't see. It's plain
the great playwright feels the same as I watch him drain
glass after glass of so-so theater-bar champagne,
and I think of a group of nineteenth-century Plains
Indians, visiting Paris and tasting champagne,
calling it the Queen's chickabobboo, and may she reign
supreme, because nothing can break the dreary membrane
of November fog like a glass of Veuve Clicquot, vain
thoughts exploding like a silly *Mikado* refrain,
and even the most jaded, worn out demimondaine
will raise her glass to what? Tomorrow? The last domain
of hope until it takes its final dip in the Seine,
though there is probably a French heaven of Gitane-
soaked cafés, populated by Rimbaud and Verlaine,
poetes maudits plus, or, even better, the Great Dane,
Hamlet, nothing wrong with him that a little champagne
couldn't cure, right, Sir Harold? Or did you choose to remain
plain Mr. Pinter? Who knows or cares? I entertain
so many idle thoughts that the inner cupcake of my brain
has mounted an armed and, may I say, vicious campaign
against itself and its thousands of questions, mostly inane,
such as, Why do roses smell like mildew, and in Spain
did the lisp begin with a lisp king? Does Bruce Wayne
aka Batman have the best costume, and the quatrain,
who would put a poem in box? For Macbeth, that Thane
of Cawdor thing was a real problem. Oh, where is Jane
Austen when you need her? Nursing a pulsing migraine
or Francis Bacon shouting over shambles, "Real pain
for my sham friends, champagne for my real friends." It's plain
that pain's the problem—think of poor rich Citizen Kane
whispering "Rosebud" with his last breath or Chekhov again,
I must be dying. It's so long since I've drunk champagne.

Barbara Hamby
330

³³⁰ Barbara Hamby, "Ode to Odor, Ardor, and the Queen's Chickabobboo," collected in *All-Night Lingo Tango*, University of Pittsburgh Press

To the Woman Going Up the Escalator at Columbus Circle at Five-Thirty Last Evening

You were holding
a fortunate orchid.
I was not
the slob standing
beside you. I
was the slob behind,
one who'd live
happily on half
an ice cube
now and again
to ascend once
to a blue
moon with you.

Andrea Cohen
331

³³¹ [Andrea Cohen, "To the Woman Going Up the Escalator at Columbus Circle at Five-Thirty Last Evening," *Arkansas International*, collected in *Nightshade*, Four Way Books](#)

January 22, 2017

I went to the imaginary bridge last night.

The gravity was pharmaceutical—the moony Ativan under the tongue, the whiskey passing over.

I have let things slip.

There's no way to tell you this without the story shimmering at the edges—and I don't mean to scare you, or to impress you.

Instead I report the numb night, the day's chemical thumbs smoothing my brain.

I report the eye flashing in twilight, in any dim light. I report wishing for a larger dose.

By the time this letter reaches you, maybe I'll have forgotten those lines in the middle of Plath's poem:
how free it is, Naomi, you have no idea—

I don't know what I'm admitting to, but I don't want you to worry.

Rachel Mennies
332

³³² [Rachel Mennies, "January 22, 2017,"](#) collected in [The Naomi Letters, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Postcards

You'd love the stories they tell so often in these parts in which the fish monger dies and for weeks his dog doesn't eat until the dog also dies, everybody murmurs, of a broken heart. All the rickshaw men tell that story and young women in bonnets tell that story; it makes me feel so attached—like a ligament—to the whole of human experience, which is so much less complicated here.

No need to wire money, everything's fine, I'm having a wonderful time dawdling for hours on the mall among the noble truckers and pharmacists on Sundays or at the café beside the barracks where the artillery men indulge in spirits and brie.

Somewhere, I found this photograph of the township in black and white in winter at night or this copy of a print of a painting of the township in sunlight refracted through the smog I've come to regard as lovingly as the egrets here regard their river homes, and I thought you might have it for the door of the fridge or for your cubicle wall.

The weather's been so gorgeous, and I feel so awful for the folks who work here through all this gorgeous weather, but they do work and do work hard so they all acquire the same sort of expression indicative of a quiet, native nobility though they wear such funny hats and tend to their rutabaga patches with an almost religious fervor.

Religion's very big here. As are tulips. They say this is suggestive of the something-of-divinity intrinsic to tulips, but they say it in a way impossible to translate, so forgive me, I won't bother.

On the mesa the other day I looked out across the tracts of amber hemmed together by rows of mangled vines and noticed some kids ditching school to neck in the fields that seem so much more lush than those I remember from home, the kids courting each other with such refreshing schmaltz: *I love you. Here is a tulip. Do you love me also?*

It's all this fresh air here, I can feel myself changing, it's all the red mosses and hand-crafted hubcaps and moving walkways I glide down, I can feel myself utterly altered being here which is so unlike being there where everything's so complicated.

I drink an aperitif distilled of wormwood every morning with a breakfast of baked bananas wrapped in palm fronds. I listen to the mayor on the radio make his daily pronouncement regarding crop height and the anticipated rainfall. It hardly ever rains, but when it does, it rains for months straight, so you never need carry an umbrella except for when you must always carry an umbrella. You see how much simpler everything is?

I wish you were here you'd love it. We nap all through Tuesday and eat horsemeat marinated in lime juice and marmalade.

Listen, I have to admit I wouldn't believe any of that hooey about the dog dying of a broken heart either, but they tell me it died at this very highway exit or in this very bath house converted into a dance hall or behind this very epitome of a Gothic cathedral, so I thought you should have this picture of a dog.

Why I even thought of you I don't know, it's so perfect here, though I did think of you and thought I'd send you some piece of my pristine life without dentistry or tax shelter.

And so you'd know that I and everything are really much, much better and life can really be so serene and simple, I wanted to send you this postcard of a tempest on the plateau, of this cut tulip pinned to a young girl's bonnet, of these regal horses en route to so quiet and so noble a butcher.

Jaswinder Bolina

333

³³³ [Jaswinder Bolina](#), "Postcards," [The Laurel Review](#), collected in [Phantom Camera](#), [New Issues Press](#)

Show and Tell

Now begins the season of Minor Feasts.
Easter's over. All
that grief.

These are the first green weeks. May

opens it up to the public—the cathedrals
& boutiques. The tourists

and the dumb animals come, the simple
insects, and the very young—
Beau McCallister is back. Beau

who brought to Show and Tell
the news of his grandmother's death.
I see him dearly still, walking
with his small fists in his pockets, face

made out of tears and phlegm, taking
his child-sized seat again.

White-blond hair.
Big square teeth.

I was also a child then
but when my grandmother died
it hasn't occurred to me to tell. Outside,
the willow facetiously weeped. The sloppy

needlepoint of lilacs in the breeze. Soon
a hard rain would come
to drive nails and needles into the ground

And here's another thing we don't yet know:
In another decade. Beau

will die a boy's swift death
by Jeep. He will

be driving too
fast in the snow, too
close to the side of the road. And this

old lady in France
taking bad snapshots of the stained glass (*Grandma,*

there's too much light, step back)—this
shadow in the corner of her last bright blur

will belong to me.

Laura Kasischke
334

³³⁴ [Laura Kasischke, "Show and Tell," collected in *Dance and Disappear*, University of Massachusetts Press](#)

Landscape with Borrowed Contours

If you've got it, flaunt it,
said a t-shirt my mother gave me,
but what did I have?

Tiny batteries in my breasts,
which hummed along, expectant.
I did and didn't want to grow up

and into a woman
so I tore pages out of *Mademoiselle*
and the monthlies we found hidden

under our fathers' medical journals,
photos I studied as I cut out a CV
of eyes, mouths,

legs, hips, lips, nipples.
What did I have?
Farrago messages,

tomboy's body, irreconcilable gig
of what it meant to be "liberated."
More nipples than clouds, more clouds

than faces, more faces than mothers.
I worked my way around each silhouette,
made a collage,

and shellacked the whole rig with glue
until it crazed, an amateur's map
once but no longer kept pinned

beside the full-length mirror
out of which unrecognizable landscape
I sometimes stare.

Catherine Barnett

335

³³⁵ [Catherine Barnett](#), "[Landscape with Borrowed Contours](#)," collected in [Human Hours](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

The Death of Humphrey Bogart

*This moment, I can't recall exactly which,
but there's a sect of Buddhists who believe one's
version of heaven lasts only as long as his
name is remembered on earth. Then, if this watch
truly times what's billed as eternal, add heaven
to that list of life's disappointments—all hype,
no finish. Women know the aphorism:
it's easy to fall for an ugly man. Your type,
Bogie, with your sad, gargoyle profile
and fidgety pistol, the hair-trigger style
of you sipping your gin with killers and dolls,
lips curled back from the glass. Who'd call that a smile?*

* * *

Baby? Where are you?

It's after Christmas time, 1956,
when a young woman, eyes
like a leopard's cub, lies quiet on the other side
of the bed.

Nearly all this night she's watched
her husband pick at his chest, the laboring itch
of the very sick.

She doesn't know it yet, but already she's settled
on Psalm 23, white roses,
the fresh, green leaves of their own magnolia,
to salt the ocean with ashes.

This morning the wind tangles
a thin whistle in
the trees outside their bedroom window. Soon

other women will rise, with newspapers and husband
on their way to business...

*

...During the service, her mind may drift, wondering
if heaven has a kidney-shaped pool,

a barbecue, burgers grilled pink in the middle, a painted
sunset eternally bobbing on
a sound stage of perfect, pacific horizon:

Prayers are being read:

*...He will receive blessing
from the Lord and vindication
from the God of his salvation.
Such is the generation of those
who seek Him...*

...She can picture them together at poolside
the Nivens coming for cocktails at five
Frank soon to arrive with the broad he's brought

round; platinum haired, stacked like an angel,
an attitude of kisses, well-placed
and meaningfully red, forever at her hips.

Erin Belieu
336

³³⁶ [Erin Belieu, "The Death of Humphrey Bogart,"](#) *The Nebraska Review*, collected in [Infanta, Copper Canyon Press](#)

corporal

Best known in youth for its punishments, its poor
Grasps at pleasure. As in fantasies of dates where chocolate & cola
Do not later overrun the face with a crop
Of pimples. It is the simple, but loco
Motives. As in creeping through evening snow to croon a carol
At a girl's window. It is not singing, but a roar
That does not cease. The stench of imitation Polo
Cologne on the breeze. It is shoveling coal
Into the heart's mindless furnace. The lack of cool.
The skin's burning color.
The skull's charred parlor.

Terrance Hayes
337

³³⁷ [Terrance Hayes](#), "[corporal](#)," collected in [Hip Logic](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Bakersfield, 1969

I used to visit a boy in Bakersfield, hitchhike
to the San Diego terminal and ride the bus for hours
through the sun-blasted San Fernando Valley
just to sit on his fold-down bed in a trailer
parked in the side yard of his parent's house,
drinking Southern Comfort from a plastic cup.
His brother was a sessions man for Taj Mahal,
and he played guitar, too, picked at it like a scab.
Once his mother knocked on the tin door
to ask us in for dinner. She watched me
from the sides of her eyes while I ate.
When I offered to wash the dishes she told me
she wouldn't stand her son being taken
advantage of. I said I had no intention
of taking anything and set the last dish
carefully in the rack. He was a bit slow,
like he'd been hit hard on the back of the head,
but nothing dramatic. We didn't talk much anyway,
just drank and smoked and fucked and slept
through the ferocious heat. I found a photograph
he took of me getting back on the bus or maybe
stepping off into his arms. I'm wearing jeans
with studs punched along the cuffs,
a t-shirt with stars on the sleeves, a pair
of stolen bowling shoes and a purse I made
while I was in the loony bin, wobbly X's
embroidered on burlap with gaudy orange yarn.
I don't remember how we met. When I look
at this picture I think I might not even
remember this boy if he hadn't taken it
and given it to me, written his name under mine
on the back. I stopped seeing him
after that thing with his mother. I didn't know
I didn't know anything yet. I liked him.
That's what I remember. That,
and the I-don't-know-what degree heat
that rubbed up against the trailer's metal sides,
steamed in through the cracks between the door
and porthole windows, pressed down on us
from the ceiling and seeped through the floor,
crushing us into the damp sheets. How we endured it,
sweat streaming down our naked bodies, the air
sucked from our lungs as we slept. Taj Mahal says
If you ain't scared, you ain't right. Back then
I was scared most of the time. But I acted
tough, like I knew every street.

What I liked about him was that he wasn't acting.
Even his sweat tasted sweet.

Dorianne Laux
338

³³⁸ [Dorianne Laux](#), "[Bakersfield, 1969](#)," collected in [The Book of Men, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Hostile Platitudes

The walk-through model of the working heart
will scare you—stay away. It is most honest

to speak in truisms if you also think
in truisms, though if you dream in them,

to speak becomes dishonest once again.
Because a stranger drinking and watching you sing

will likely pity you, it is wise to request
a karaoke number full of sex

and kick. A heartsick plaint: a sorry scene.
If I've learned anything, I must be certain

nobody cares for folk tales. All they like
are hostile platitudes. Nobody wants

a history lesson, especially not now.
In ancient Rome, a prisoner brought to death

could be released if he met a vestal virgin
en route to execution. Had to be

by chance. The guys get hot for anyone
who shows up like she didn't plan to come.

Natalie Shapero
339

³³⁹ [Natalie Shapero](#), "[Hostile Platitudes](#)," collected in [No Object, Saturnalia Books](#)

Fixed and in Flux

The cicadas swarm the pines all summer,
the males flexing their tymbals to make
the horrifying sound that will attract a mate.
The new people are fidgeting in strollers,
running on little piston legs
hard toward the street, toward the breast
and then the beer can, and soon
the breast again. When one door closes,
another floats downriver
under the night sky. Nine planets
seemingly forever and then suddenly
Pluto's demoted. *The king is dead!*
Long live the king! Existentially,
we're either crawling toward
a top-shelf margarita being perfected by
adorable six-winged angels, or else
getting puréed in a food processor
on a decapitated mountain.
Meanwhile, a sea worm slithers through a mortgage.
72% of Americans believe in angels,
no wonder that parasitic amoeba got elected.
Meanwhile, a lake comes to realize
it's now a grenade.

Kim Addonizio
340

³⁴⁰ [Kim Addonizio, "Fixed and in Flux,"](#) collected in [Now We're Getting Somewhere, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

The Last Judgement

I come to you in all seriousness, reverent
as a turtleneck—I am graceless but I am not depraved.
I went to synagogues for a year because I had lost God

and was trying to find Him, following clues
with my comically oversized magnifying glass held up
to my giant eye, lashes collapsing like jaws, grilling congregants

under the naked lightbulb of my longing. I kept just
missing him. He went thataway. Maybe I wanted to be Jewish
to be done with Jesus but not yet break up

with God, as if moving into the guest room but leaving
my clothes in the other closet, that version of myself
a hallway away. I am the ghost of the house I live in—

old me-phantoms surround, fuck around with the furniture,
make all the mirrors tell the truth. One night I have a dream
my husband leaves and the nightmare part is that I'm

relieved and so I finally see who I am. It's not
that I got used to loneliness, only that it was too late
to learn anything else. The first time a man touched me

it was to lower me into the water and raise me out,
new fish, the sin picked clean. I was saved, as if I could be
spent—saved, I saved myself for God, or if not God

then a man God sent, posing us toward each other
in a desert diorama, His Holy Homework,
but the first two boys I loved are dead, so at night

I give myself to them, unzip the hollows, usher them into
the pitch. The books inside me are blank. I birth the boys
as my son, whom I love and whom I try to forgive.

Erin Adair-Hodges
342

³⁴² [Erin Adair-Hodges, "The Last Judgement," *Painted Bride Quarterly*, collected in *Let's All Die Happy*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Self-Portrait as Mouthpiece of an Anonymous Benefactor

Flocks of sparrows are waiting to be articulated.
Like Bob Dylan after a concert in the middle
of the night in a strange city, mount your mare
of a motorcycle and ride her into the outer

township, or be Emily, who broke her seclusion
to walk the moonlit fields, only after midnight,
as she was a jazz musician, and only with her
Newfoundland, Carlo. At some point, you must

unpackage your pen. Your hair like an unpeopled
spring-fed pond full of small leeches. Your eyes
like snails on the riverbank where colonial madmen
sailed. At some point, be Arturo at the piano,

land hard on a note like Frank and listen to its echo.
Don't think about things with any degree of largesse.
Be the rock in the pocket that helps the weary poet
sink. There are fawns in the fields: triplets and twins.

Some without lice, without meningitis. I'm giving you
hope like a weird dessert whether you want it or not.
Do you want it? Or not? By the way, the chickens
need to be locked in their box. The fox is hot to trot.

The moon's on a suicide watch. Her swelling
makes her nervous. No, she's not bulimic. It's genetic.
Explore the long sentence. I mean the long prison
sentence. Unmask syntax. So many ways to be a petty

linguist. Government cheese is an aesthetic. Gratitude
for free food is an aesthetic. If you start to smell
like a fish, you've gone too far. The best artists are gutted,
their innards thrown to hungry dogs in a story

by Chekhov. In Chekhov, all the dogs are hungry.
The hairdos are outrageous. There is no such
thing as a personal lubricant. There is spit.
There is something like cement made of tiny

shells and off-brand pearls, flora but no fauna.
I'm not drunk. Are you drunk? This is elementary
and I'm the custodian. I'm who swats the fly
that buzzes when you die. That guy.

Diane Seuss

³⁴³ Diane Seuss, "[Self-Portrait as Mouthpiece of an Anonymous Benefactor](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl](#), Graywolf Press

from “The Ballad of Eleanor and Earnest”

Part III—Literal Interpretation

As the lovers near the West
Tennessee State Penitentiary,
the adulteress contemplates
the signage.

Signage is largely useless.

that cannot be and cannot be
unsaid. “You just have to.”
And like the Bible, she wonders if
this is literally true.
“I want,” she says, “to leave him and
I want to live with you.”

I agree. I think capital
punishment is wrong, but
whether or not God agrees is
another question.

The signs along the road, she feels,
loom large and numerous—
FOR SALE, one reads, FOR SALE, FOR SALE!
PECANS (with a phone number).

The signs are hard to comprehend—
ANTIOCH MISSIONARY BAPTIST.

The prison she mistakes for a castle
(for the seventh time), and cries.
“You’re acting crazy,” Earnest says.
He doesn’t spell out why.

CAPITAL PUN. IS ALWAYS, ALWAYS
WRONG. Earnest says,
“You have to tell me what you want.” Like the
Bible,
she fears the words once said

³⁴⁴ [Eleanor Boudreau](#), "[The Ballad of Eleanor and Earnest](#)," collected in [Earnest, Earnest?](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Felon's Logic

Dear body I do not resent,
experiment with me.

I feel my mind grow broad as orchestras,
I feel its oceans weep. How I fall

awake. How all the alphabet
falls from my hands. I feel beneath my skin

the little needles of a life. I listen
whenever an intersection calls, I obey

its schizophrenia, an understanding of the art
in me that cries for me to act.

What I mean by hurt is that the hours,
they lie to me. I have been, but am not limited to

a tense. Scars personify the mouth, too fragile
to sing or be. At the sills, estuaries. At the sorrows,

speech. I drink at the dream's atmospheric
embrace, I feed the mouth that bites me.

I become what is running through the woods.
Like armor unworn, I pose my battle

along the wall, plain as a god, singing like a verb,
sadistic. I wince and bleed with the world

and all its seamless ways to be rid of me,
until its complications octopus in my irises,

until the moment becomes my mother's sleeve
I once forgot to grasp.

Jennifer Militello

345

³⁴⁵ [Jennifer Militello](#), "[Felon's Logic](#)," [Gulf Coast](#), collected in [Body Thesaurus](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

At the End of the Endless Decade

For years had anyone needed me
to spell the word commiserate

I'd have disappointed them. I envy
people who are more excited

by etymology than I am, but not
the ones who can explain how

music works—I wonder whether
the critic who wrote

that the Cocteau Twins were the voice
of god still believes it. Why not,

what else would god sound like.
Even though I know better, when I see

the word misericordia I still think
suffering, not forgiveness;

when we commiserate we are united
not in mercy but in misery,

so let's go ahead and call this abscess
of history the Great Commiseration.

The difference
between affliction and affection

is a flick, a lick—but check
again, what lurks in the letters

is “lie,” and what kind of luck
is that. As the years pile up

our friends become more vocal
about their various damages:

Won't you let me monetize
your affliction, says my friend

the corporation. When I try to enter
the name of any city

it autocorrects to Forever:
I'm spending a week in Forever,

Forever was hotter than ever
this year, Forever's expensive

but oh the museums,
and all of its misery's ours.

Mark Bibbins
346

³⁴⁶ [Mark Bibbins, "At the End of the Endless Decade," *Poem-a-Day*](#)

We Dive

Age 12, we dive and dive. For the girl playing dead by the drain in the deep end of the pool. For the pennies we toss in the water by the lifeguard's chair. From the diving board: three steps, the hurdle, the launch. We come up for air long enough to eat lunch, cheeseburgers and fries drowned in a murder of ketchup. Our bellies, humped and rounded, push against the elastic of our bathing suits as we dive and dive and dive.

At 14, we lie in the gutters of the swimming pool, basting our bellies in baby oil and the occasional wavelets of cool that slop up whenever someone dives in. We pick at burgers without buns, drink cans of Tab poured warm over ice that cracks like knuckles. We learn about calories and fat from the high school girls who shout warnings across the humid locker room. Sometimes we dive but only at the end of the day.

At 18, we arrange chaise lounges and serve up the buffet of ourselves, tasty swell of breasts basted to brown, a feast for the boys teeing off on the first hole. Later we pull out hand mirrors and paint alien faces over our own eyes and lips, wait by the 18th green while they putt out. We prop our feet on the dashboard of their cars, let them drive us to a rutted field off a dirt road where we unzip and dive as if we are starving. We hold our breath, but we've already smothered. Already drowned.

Sarah Freligh
347

³⁴⁷ [Sarah Freligh](#), "[We Dive](#)," [Cease. Cows](#), collected in [We](#), [Small Harbor Publishing](#)

My mother gives a man permission

to slit her throat. The incision
no larger than a vulva's inner lips,
the surgeon slips his slender tools in.

It is simpler than her first time,
he says—the nodules curled in the throat
almost at peace.

Rain, & in the late morning
my knees scraped from kneeling
at the mouth of the lake.

Simpler, but not the last time,
he says—death growing again
& again because it grew

the first time. My first lover
forever dressing in my car's backseat
by the lake. In her neck,

death's conception like a hand
curling to a fist. In the hospital,
my mother willing birth

& so I was. In the hospital,
some man willing life
& so she is, still.

Death curls & hardens, rain
gaining speed, rising
heat in the backseat

& I was—am—far
from the edge of forgiving
my mother for giving me

a body. Gaining speed, she
wakes, sewn. Rain, late
morning, shore

so familiar it bleeds.

Katie Condon
348

³⁴⁸ [Katie Condon, "My mother gives a man permission," *The Columbia Review*, collected in *Praying Naked*, Ohio State University Press](#)

Owed to the Plastic on Your Grandmother's Couch

Which could almost be said
to *glisten*, or glow,
like the weaponry
in heaven.
Frictionless.
As if slickened
with some Pentecost
-al auntie's last bottle
of anointing oil, an ark
of no covenant
one might easily name,
apart from the promise
to preserve all small
& distinctly mortal forms
of loveliness
that any elder
African American
woman makes
the day they see sixty.
Consider the garden
of collards & heirloom
tomatoes only,
her long, single braid
streaked with gray
like a gathering
of weather,
the child popped
in church for not
sitting still, how even that,
they say, can become an omen
if you aren't careful,
if you don't act like you know
all Newton's laws
don't apply to us
the same exactly.
Ain't no equal
& opposite reaction
to the everyday brawl
blackness in America is,
no body so beloved
it cannot be destroyed.
So we hold on to what
we cannot hold.
Adorn it
in Vaseline, or gold,
or polyurethane wrapping.

Call it ours
& don't
mean owned.
Call it just
like new,
mean *alive*.

Joshua Bennett
349

³⁴⁹ [Joshua Bennett](#), "[Owed to the Plastic on Your Grandmother's Couch](#)," collected in [Owed](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Notes on the End of the World

Cold rainy days say *Do it, lie in bed with a stranger.*
Even if a house is on fire, and a dog is inside burning, do not leave.
I could almost believe the world planned for itself to fail.
Then a wasp burrows in a fig. Then a baby is perfect
in its inability to remember.

If you are a stranger, I am a stranger.
Things are funny that way.
Chameleons trying to blend into chameleons
until the way to go unnoticed is to disappear completely.

And when the Deep South seems empty except for dead peaches
and sallow fields, it is actually full of men and women lying in bed
asking how much closer they have to get in order to define love.
It is actually bustling with elbows and knees.

There are abandoned playthings everywhere you look.
Under the bed where you lie, a tin horse on wheels eats the carpet.
Underneath your bodies, the metallic neigh weighs on you.
You could tell the man next to you about it if you knew his name.

Meghan Privitello
350

³⁵⁰ [Meghan Privitello, "Notes on the End of the World,"](#) collected in [Notes on the End of the World](#), Black Lawrence Press

This is the Part of the Poem Where You Help Me Out

This is the part where I describe
the edges of the lake
but not the lake

so it will be your lake I tiptoe around
with my scalpels
and my markers,

with my masking tape and my staples
and my ideas
about all things

insisting their way into frame. This
is the part
where mountains rise

because pop-up book, because eagle-struggling-
to-be-born-from-a-heart
song, because bittersweet-battery

movie. In this part the parts depart and what remains
is the echo
of what's been played.

All the stage is a world. Staging the world
is our awl,
punching breathing holes

into the suffocations. This is the part
where the hero barks
his forehead

coming to too fast on the bottom bunk
of the bed
fronting The Brother Cave

floor display at Prepubescent Males 'R Us.
This is the part
where he limps

toward the exits, feeling
whatever you think
feeling wronged by inanimate

objects feels like: The smallest lightning.
Seventh grade shame

in the face.

I leave it to you
to determine
how the hero came to be

here, what is indicated
by *he*, the color
of the unquestionably clean

shirt he wears. This is that scene. What you see
tells you something
about yourself, about

your relationship to a world that finds you
in it. A door in you
now and again swings open

and from the sea behind it
something swims
toward you.

The next part is the part where
the camera of the I
pulls back

and up: you can see that the bunk beds
are shaking
or they are trembling

or they are falling slowly apart, they are
popsicle sticks or pillars
on the verge of coming down

into a music
it takes your bent / ear
to make.

Marc McKee
351

³⁵¹ [Marc McKee, "This is the Part of the Poem Where You Help Me Out,"](#) collected in [Meta Meta Make-Belief](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

Little Rabbit

Some mornings, I come to on the floor,
my neck burned with moon tracks

or fingerprints, my tongue swollen
and split through, as if by an arrow

though it could've been my teeth,
or yours—I can almost feel the memory

trembling in me like milk in a pail,
or my throat when I'm scared to speak,

so you speak for me—and I don't know
how I came to be this skittish creature,

shaking beneath your shadow, begging you
to hold my wrist, hold it tight against

the floor, and kiss my palm closed, tell me
I'm here, tell me I'm good, or good

enough, that the blood on your teeth
isn't mine, and if so, that I taste clean,

like sap tapped from an underwater forest,
from an epoch when the Earth was only

ocean, and the only sound the wind
moaning across it—or is it a song?

Is it a name you gave me, still rippling
across my body from your mouth.

Is that what's written in moon on my throat.
Or is it your name. Are those your hands

pressing hard against the bones of my neck.
Do you dream of that crack, as I do,

like lightning through a dark room,
the puzzle box of my skull opening wide.

And what do you see inside.
What walks toward you in that light.

Is it gentle. Is it good.
Tell me.

Sara Eliza Johnson
352

³⁵² [Sara Eliza Johnson, "Little Rabbit," *Virginia Quarterly Review*](#)

They Are Leaving You a Message

for Arda Collins

What they are trying to tell you
is you are wearing the wrong bra
for your shape and situation
This might not even be your life
and in the midst of my thinking
to tell you this a fruit fly
has begun to trail me through the house
as if I were its mother or as if
it were the other way around
and it always is and the house
is on fire at some point
in the simultaneity and I am leaving it
to buy all the things I do
and do not devour

Heather Christle

353

353 [Heather Christle, "They Are Leaving You a Message," *Two Serious Ladies*, collected in *Heliopause*, Wesleyan University Press](#)

New Year

In the last year I've been unable to banish
a single monster slaving in the light
of the moon, or rid my days of this
stupid old man in Washington that is president
and is kind of amazing how awful
he is. All these poems, hot as a glede,
a word I learned from Tolkien,
I think, and what have I accomplished?
Love me, a little, they plead;
they preen like birds so alive
all around is a little dull
and songless and colorless and near death.
I care that Florida is ruined,
mostly, that its aquifers are poisoned
by metals I can't pronounce,
that everywhere water is draining away
and used up and no good
to those who thirst. Right now,
I'm starving. I want meat
and fire and an ancient hearth
and someone singing
and no livestream of this stupid moment.
I don't want right now,
and tell me if this is nostalgia.
How in my bones I feel
entitled to some cosmic do-over.
Of what? I can't say.
When you see me, when you say hello,
rehearse a sad joke,
let me know what time it is, if it's raining.

Paul Guest

354

³⁵⁴ [Paul Guest, "New Year," *Kenyon Review*](#)

The Last Temptation of Christ

I read the Bible literally. I believe
waters parted and desperate people
and a few stray animals crawled

through mud and over sea creatures
that by now must be extinct. I believe
men lived hundreds of years and continued

to please their lovers and wives.
Christ walked on water.
I believe in our most daily moments,

how we're cornered by angels, devils, ghosts.
Why wouldn't I? I've watched my father
rip lumber with a Skilsaw straight

as a table saw with a fence. Every winter
watched men put in weeks of double shifts
at the mill. My mother working until

her wrists had to be cut open, the tendons
rewired. My friend slipped from my hands
and fell like a pinball through a thirty-foot redwood

then just lay in the duff laughing at the Oregon rain.
Maybe pain is the father of imagination.
In the book of John, in pain

we seldom admit exists, we find you
hoisted above Golgotha—raised
in that Place of the Skull between

I am thirsty and It has ended.
Between those two breaths
you look inward, to a kingdom

of another world, where a possible
brother-self goes through his life.
As it turns out, you've carried him all along.

It was his feet you saw stitched
to the soles of your own
as you took those first watery steps

over the Galilee. It was his body
that wandered into marriage and three kids
and a gradual retreat from his wife.

He was a low-end administrator for the city,
kept a concealed weapons permit,
shot slugs into the clay bank

behind his house, had an affair
with his secretary most people knew about.
Spent nights in the garage smoking

Luckies and listening to the CB scanner,
the voices of long-haul truckers,
policemen, cab drivers, and drunks

scratching the empty air of insomnia
over the citizens band. Is it so hard to believe?
One night he overhears the 9-1-1 dispatcher

give directions to a bend in the road
three pastures from his house. To take his mind
off things he drives to the curve that mirrors

Coalbank Slough's sharp elbow. As if he himself
is called. Before the fire department arrives
at the turn known for its wreckage

and popularity among farmers for dumping
livestock into the silt, before the engines scream
through the listless dark, he finds himself

undressing by the busted guardrail and breaking,
with his own body, through the skin
of that November water. How many times

will he feel as close to it as he does
swimming down to the half-sunken car, fumbling
for her body? How many times will he return

to his mouth sealed over her mouth,
to breath and ruined water passing between them
with no hope of making a life,

to the blue and red lights finally arriving?
Lord, that could have been you, weeks later,
drunk and chain-smoking, weeping

in the arms of your secretary, the taste of metal
in your mouth. She will say she doesn't recognize you.
The man she knows used to comb her long hair

and talk about cashing in his 401(k)
for a new life away from the coast.
She says go back to your sad wife.

But something's filling you with bodiless light.
You turn to the untouchable, invisible kingdom
already decided for you and live forever.

Michael McGriff
355

³⁵⁵ [Michael McGriff, "The Last Temptation of Christ,"](#) collected in [Dismantling the Hills, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

They Said I'd Never Be a Dancer

even though I was born into the family
business—half-off Tuesdays at the Gilded

Cage—the club my uncle owned
and kind of place that paid

in beer and arcade coins, where women's
tasseled parts were out-glittered

by skee-ball prizes and slot machine
music. My ankles were too thick

to work the club so I performed
back-up moves at Bar Mitzvahs,

taught middle school boys how
to two-step and fake the Cotton-

Eyed Joe while their parents observed,
a naughty gleam in their eye, fisting

over the night's tip saying, "You girls
really worked it tonight," and I didn't

even break a sweat but once
got sentimental watching a girl

in braces get felt up for the first time,
imagining the ride home in her father's

minivan, murmuring into the cold
rolled-up windows when asked

about her night and all she remembers
is the sticky residue, the glimmer

of contraction in her chest,
how she'll never be good at math

again, concerned only with the shape
of her stunted breasts after hearing

her groping-partner the next day
tell a classmate that it felt like touching

skittles taped to a rock, and don't make me

tell you it builds character, don't make

me lie and say I intervened
as he shoved her against the tinsel

walls of Sammy's Roumanian
while the pitchers of chicken fat

gleamed and shivered on the table,
that I took her hand and said

"Darling, let's hoof it," and we danced
like lunatics until our ligaments shone.

Kendra DeColo
356

³⁵⁶ [Kendra DeColo, "They Said I'd Never Be a Dancer,"](#) collected in [My Dinner with Ron Jeremy, Third Man Books](#)

Haha-Boohoo

When I keep crying long
after I've started
laughing my therapist
says it's my body

grieving because I haven't
grieved properly
as if my body has
unfinished

business like defecation
after death but it seems to go on
for hours and hours even
days and I think maybe

crying will never end
the way some people
hiccup and then live
the rest of their lives

sleeping and waking
sleeping
and waking their diaphragms
skipping like a jump

rope a word
I just misspelled
just now before
I corrected it for you dear

reader because I was told
that's what you need
When I was
a kid I thought

damn was spelled
D-A-M-B like *lamb*
and a few years
ago I asked my gynecologist

for an IED so
I wouldn't get
pregnant I wouldn't have
to have... I talk too

much when I get nervous
or when I drink too
much which makes
me nervous

which makes me
drink too
much which I did
the other

night because I saw
someone I hadn't
seen in a long
time and my heart

is like bubblegum
chewed for
the world
record for which I am

crying for
the record
for the record
I'm crying

Emilia Phillips
357

³⁵⁷ [Emilia Phillips](#), "[Haha-Boohoo](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Embouchure](#), [The University of Akron Press](#)

How She Went to Salisbury Beach the Day Before She Died.

She wanted no cocktail.

No hypodermics on the beach; only one child
tripped her as he chased, with a sucker, a seagull.

She loved children. She preferred to be
where they were not.

She stood outside Eddie's bar, then in line for fried dough.

The disappearing sun on the water was oily
and not special.

She wanted no karaoke or tarot
as she walked.

She played one game of Ms. Pac Man
and made it to the peach board.

And the mothers were drunk and danced
to the eighties band.

And the skinny girls grew in numbers as they walked,
and their screeches joined the Harleys.

And the tide went out and the feet disappeared.

And she wanted no one.

And she felt her back on the sand.

Julia Story
358

³⁵⁸ [Julia Story](#), "[How She Went to Salisbury Beach the Day Before She Died.](#)," *Mount Island*, collected in *Julie the Astonishing, Sixth Finch*

American Poetry

As if
at a urinal,
focus.
But look
both ways
before
you cross
your streams.
In dreams.

Repeat
your
reflection
like a pop
song,
a bloodless
erection.
Or
rejection.

Stir
comparisons—
cocktails
of damage,
ambition.
Grovel.
The devil
in the details,
your image.

Handshakes;
tax
breaks,
or line.
Limp
facts.
Your pimp,
a public
moan.

No embarrassment,
a bloated
bio
or acknowledgment
page—

the list,
careerist
thank you,
your gauge.

Mister
Malaprop,
hand
on your book,
and
on your ass,
will look
you in the eyes,
accustomize.

In the indifferent
corner,
your map;
your dunce-
cap
correspondence:
three zs,
like a laugh,
or sleep.

The headlong
performance,
quivering
voice,
a loving
unpunctuated
self,
five minutes
since.

Type
control-C,
control-V,
and *the sea.*
Bend on trend.
What's my type,
you say.
Your boyfriend.
End.

Randall Mann
359

³⁵⁹ [Randall Mann](#), "[American Poetry](#)," [On the Seawall](#), collected in [A Better Life](#), [Persea Books](#)

Trinkets

The Hall of Mirrors in the Palace at Versailles is the most frightening room in all of Western Civilization. In this room some of the cabinets are doors. Some of the mirrors are windows. In a time when mirrors were the most expensive thing a king could possess, 17 arches tiled with 21 mirrors each lined a narrow corridor gilded by as many courtiers begging an audience with the passing king. Some of the kings were enamored by costumes, spying, and punishment. All of their names were Louis. The painted ceiling shows Louis winning one battle and Louis winning another.

The dauphiné lands were purchased in 1349; henceforth the eldest son of the king was called dauphin, which also means dolphin. There are no dolphins in the Rhone or the Seine or the Rhine. The kings of Britain and Spain owned the seas. Nevertheless, the candelabra are dolphins, as are the mantle clocks. The drawer pulls on the swivel desk are interlaced with dolphins, so too the ewers, the inkwells, the door handles, the towel bars, the crest, the flag, the fountains (of course the fountains), the frames, the tasterin, the table legs, the dinner knives, forks, and spoons, the teapots, even the chenets that hold the fire logs.

His name means dolphin. His name means sun. His name means two cockerels fighting. His name means lily of the valley. His name means crystal. His name means silver. His name means brass. His name means king who will be king.

Louis XV had a mistress who would buy him little dolphin knick-knacks to show she'd been thinking of her king and the boy he'd once been. The mark of excellence in her position was that he should never once contemplate the precise nature of her thoughts or why she had them. Have you ever tried to erase yourself? I think about her choice to assume the position of official royal consort as being very much like a nun's in terms of the extremes of self-sacrifice.

Louis XV loved Jeanne Antoinette Poisson to her death. He gave her many names, among them *mistresse* and *madame* and *marquise*, but it seems she always preferred *poisson*, which meant fish and which she had received from her father, an untitled merchant in the upper tier of the third estate.

Louis first seduced her disguised as a yew tree among yew trees dancing through the Hall of Mirrors at Christmastime. To be seduced by a King of France was to sign and see signed documents that made your husband rich enough and titled enough that the king could be permitted to know you in public. A woman who ran one of the most highly regarded literary salons in Paris knew what was coming, and chose for her costume Diana, Goddess of the Hunt. The *Bal des Ifs*, as it came to be known, was like a wedding made out of whispers. After, the king went to battle Austria, and she spent months learning the accents and nods and titles and corsets that were part of the duties of a woman in her position. She learned how to address differently a duchess with an adequate chef from a duchess with an excellent chef.

I've heard the arc of history is long, but bends towards justice. Which is another way of saying that you're going to have put up with a whole lot of bullshit.

In her favorite portrait, made by Delatour in 1788, her hand rests on a folio from the *Encyclopedia*, which her lover had banned for its seditious challenge to the principles of the divine rights of kings. To a point, it was erotic to be so provoked by a woman.

Jeanne had tried early in her career to interest her lover in her friends the writers, but they only knew how to bore and incense. She could hardly contain her disappointment at how they squandered the

opportunities she tried to create for them. Once Voltaire took Louis by the sleeve (the sleeve!) to tell him something. Once Voltaire insisted the privies in his apartment at Versailles have doors put on them. Once after a performance of his opera on the victory at Fontenoy, he asked of the king, “Is Trajan pleased?”

And then there was Diderot. In the article in his *Encyclopedia* on “Political Authority,” credit is given not to God or heritage, but to the people and their natural rights. In “Economic Politics” he lectures, “When the means of growing rich is divided between a greater number of citizens, wealth will also be more evenly distributed; extreme poverty and extreme wealth would also be rare.” What more could the official royal consort do after that but turn the King’s eye instead towards architecture and the stage and try to keep it there for the next twenty years?

Jeanne described herself as cold by nature. She was terrified the king might find out and tried to work herself up for his ardors using every known means. Her friends worried over the effects of so many dubious concoctions and elixirs. For a time she subsisted on a diet of nothing but vanilla, truffles, and celery. That she was always ill was a secret she kept well.

I ascribe to a brand of feminism I like to call You Don’t Know Me. It’s the wave that waved right after or maybe just before You’re Not the Boss of Me. I have to remind myself Jeanne Poisson didn’t know what her end game was either.

There were many who hated her and feared her for the control they thought she wielded. They called her a spendthrift and a whore.

“It is curious,” the Duc de Nivernois said at one of the little salons she organized now in her apartment in the king’s attic at the top of the king’s secret staircase for the entertainment of the king himself. “We amuse ourselves in killing a partridge at Versailles, and sometimes killing men, and getting killed at the front, without knowing precisely how the killing is done.” This according to Voltaire, who was not there but heard of the evening third-hand. A writer in an Age of Enlightenment couldn’t risk ignoring the gossip from court if he wanted to keep his head and his wits about him. To hear him tell it, this remark was how Nivernois skillfully incited that little debate about the way to make gun powder—equal parts saltpeter, sulfur, and charcoal; or one part sulfur, one part charcoal, and five parts saltpeter?

Jeanne interrupted then to exclaim, “We are all reduced to that about everything in the world. We are reduced to that about the rouge on our cheeks and the stockings on our feet.” She was the only woman in the room and she always knew which part was hers to play. She directed the king’s eye to her ankle.

“It is a shame,” sighed the Duc de la Vallière, in a way that could only have reminded everyone of Diderot’s *Encyclopedia* locked up in some cellar of the castle. Who hadn’t heard that Dennis had gone underground after his life’s work was seized by armed men? Before supper was over, Louis had called for the volumes, which fourteen footmen delivered with dignity and flourish, each like a duck on a platter.

Among Voltaire’s salon, the writers admired Jeanne, then missed her, then wondered who she had become after so many years in that palace of privilege. They may have heard the rumors that her private rooms in the attic were gilded all over with fish, that every document she signed included a flourish of carp. She put the fish of herself on everything, as if she was trying to remember herself and worried the effort was not working.

“Sire,” she said, after they passed the evening amusing themselves with that remarkable compendium of human knowledge and achievement. “If one possesses it, one has all the wisdom of your realm.”

Indeed, the *Encyclopedia* was very nearly comprehensive in its catalog and the entry on kings is only a few pages, hardly more than what was devoted to an ocean of ice at the end of the world or the construction of a mechanized loom. Some have said the lifting of the ban, followed by widespread printing and distribution was what undid the monarchy. To read—to even know that you could read—so much of the world, had the effect of snapping the peasants to their senses. If that is true, then Jeanne Poisson, Madame de Pompadour and the king’s whore, did something extraordinary with that little jewelry box of a life she had.

Kathryn Nuernberger
360

³⁶⁰ Kathryn Nuernberger, “Trinkets,” *Tupelo Quarterly*, collected in *Brief Interviews with the Romantic Past*, The Ohio State University Press

Cinderella's Diary

I miss my stepmother. What a thing to say,
but it's true. The prince is so boring: four
hours to dress and then the cheering throngs.
Again. The page who holds the door is cute
enough to eat. Where is he once Mr. Charming
kisses my forehead goodnight?

Every morning I gaze out a casement window
at the hunters, dark men with blood on their
boots who joke and mount, their black trousers
straining, rough beards, callused hands, selfish,
abrupt...

Oh, dear diary—I am lost in ever after:
Those insufferable birds, someone in every
room with a lute, the queen calling me to look
at another painting of her son, this time
holding the transparent slipper I wish
I'd never seen.

Ron Koertge
361

³⁶¹ [Ron Koertge](#), "[Cinderella's Diary](#)," collected in [Vampire Planet](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

The Moment I Knew I Shouldn't Have Married My Husband

We were at a dark deserted rest stop.
Somewhere between Minnesota and Santa Cruz.
On the way home from our honeymoon.
I guess we'd been fighting.
Our fights could have been a measure
of infinity—like grains of sand or stars.
What I remember is the short walk back
from the bathroom along the concrete path
lined with scruffy, unkillable bushes
and the sudden clarity:
I'd made a mistake. But what,
I asked that voice
that wouldn't defend itself, what
about the new orange towels
we just bought? I'm not kidding.
This is exactly what I said to myself.
Even though now I can't stand that color,
even though now there's nothing
orange in my house.
Not even a goldfish.

Ellen Bass
362

³⁶² [Ellen Bass](#), "[The Moment I Knew I Shouldn't Have Married My Husband](#)," collected in [The Human Line](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Porch Light

This Monday, before her morning appointment with her therapist where she discussed enabling tendencies, Hayley ate spinach salad with silvered almonds, as she did every day. She drove cautiously just minutes before confidently telling her therapist she was carefree. Hayley always walks quickly—even uphill—but decided to not talk with her therapist about obsession. At least not yet. She bought new clogs and thought about kissing her next-door neighbor, Tim. Instead, Hayley talked to her therapist about her husband, Donny—his grating interest in sports, his strange, new beard.

That evening, after they finished mowing their adjoining lawns, drank a beer over the fence, and listened to Nirvana's *Nevermind* on her screened-in porch—Donny off at a baseball game—Hayley kissed Tim. The music reminded her of the irresponsible time in her life that she described as carefree. Back then she obsessed over happiness, but was usually discontented. She enabled a string of boyfriends, enjoyed dysfunction. Back then she wore vintage prom dresses to clubs, drank until she fell over.

Hayley kissed her neighbor who seemed to kiss her back, but then nonchalantly finished his beer, propped his hands on his knees, pushed open the screen door, and ambled through her cleanly shorn lawn and onto his without a goodbye.

Pretty cricket noises, pulsing fireflies.

The moon and yard sounds took over after Hayley clicked off the table lamp. Sitting in the dusky dark she heard a moth's papery wings clobbering the dim porch light. Hayley knew she'd talk of stability at her next appointment, of changing attitudes, of the need for a new monotone wardrobe and a juicer—a juicer with a variety of settings.

Sherrie Flick
363

³⁶³ [Sherrie Flick](#), "[Porch Light](#)," collected in [New Micro](#), W.W. Norton & Company

Mexico

When he thought he was about to encounter Christ, the poet
threw away the last of his heroin.

In Paris, he carried a knife beneath his shirt,
and, without warning, would stab it into the nearest tree.

•

The other poets lied.
They said the poet killed herself after falling in love with a boatman.

That wasn't true.

She grew old and died
in her daughter's bed.

•

A shaman described the poet's body
as *shot through with lightning*.

•

When the storm was at its worst, the poet undressed
and walked out to address the lightning—

Thou art the thing itself, the poet said.

•

The poet believed the self was its own oracle
and became the thing the oracle warned against.

•

To create an anthology
the poet solicited two groups
of people: his friends, and the people
he wanted as his friends.

•

The movement died
not because it went out of fashion
but because the war killed
all of its poets.

For the poet, becoming
a good poet meant necessarily becoming
a good person.

But as soon as he became a good person
he ceased being a good poet.

•

*To excerpt someone else's words, the poet said,
is a form of begging.*

*To bring dignity to poetry
we must first bring dignity
to other forms of begging.*

The poet said,

*More poets fail from lack of character
than lack of indulgence.*

Which was certainly true of the poet.

•

The poet invented the alphabet
and brought it to the king, saying,

I have created an elixir that will make the people wiser.

But the king replied,
No, you have created the opposite.

•

When the banquet hall collapsed, the lone
survivor was the poet.

The bodies of the other guests were crushed
and mangled, and their families wept
because they could not recognize their dead.

But the poet remembered where all four hundred
had been sitting and, walking through the wreckage,
named the corpses one by one.

•

The poet believed the body
was a sunken ship

unable to prevent the ocean from passing through
a place where even the sharks felt at home.

•

*There are some people for whom
no real profession exists,* the poet wrote

in a letter to his father. *I count myself
as one of them.*

•

The poet died while ice skating with a friend.

Some lumberjacks
heard them screaming but by the time
they reached the lake, no one was there

just a hole in the ice in the shape of an ear.

•

In the Talmud, the poet invented an angel
and named it Forgetfulness.

•

By writing poems, the poet believed
she could extract the madness from her head

like the doctor in the Hieronymus Bosch painting
who augurs the stone.

And the poet did
and died from doing it.

•

The poet got into the car with the intention
of driving to Mexico

but at the entrance
to the Golden Gate Bridge, parked
and walked out to the middle.

Why drive all the way to Mexico
when Mexico is just over the railing?

•

Every morning, in front
of the mirror, the poet had a routine—

*I am a briefcase, he said.
In a crowded train station.*

And he put himself down
and walked away.

P. Scott Cunningham
364

³⁶⁴ [P. Scott Cunningham](#), "[Mexico](#)," collected in [Ya Te Veo](#), [The University of Arkansas Press](#)