

# **Social Media Poems 2024**

## **Simeon Berry**

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## The Future Is Here

Man burns at a certain degree  
but I always burned a little slower.  
When I went into school  
I left a trail of blackened footprints  
to my classroom of spelling words,  
never starred. At the end of the earth  
we'll be locked in our own spelling mistakes,  
our arms around the legs of our mother  
so she won't leave, our heads filled with beer, the light  
receding. What kind of death is reserved for me?  
The green plastic soldier has his gun up against everything.  
And what does one do with a gun really?  
I've only held three my entire life.  
The third I held was the first I used.  
I was with Rebecca and her father, deep in the woods of Vermont  
when she was staying with me in the heap.  
I shot at a beer can until my hands went numb.  
And I loved her the whole time;  
the car accidents and barbiturates, the way  
she got wasted, knocked her teeth  
into her lap and told me  
I loved her too much—what was all that?  
What man does is build whole universes out of miniscule  
disasters and educational degrees.  
I have mine in an enormous envelope two feet behind me.  
My name looks good in gangster font.  
It makes me want to alight  
on the thigh of my beloved like a moth  
because I know all careful grief  
comes out from behind the thigh  
and makes a fist at the grey sky above Brooklyn.  
The destroyed continue  
into the snow-filled future, shoveling.  
And love is either perpetually filthy  
or intermittently lewd.  
I'm sweeping the entire apartment because it's mine forever.  
And that's valid, too: domestic eroticisms. The way  
he gets up out of bed before you  
and puts on clothes and can't find his keys.  
All of it, without parents, without children, without roommates.  
It feels good to get something  
back. And the whole feels  
detrimental and complicated and forever stimulating.  
Which is why we live—and why we send out  
balloons into the atmosphere  
with notes tied to them that say  
Nothing bad can touch this life  
I haven't already imagined.

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<sup>1</sup> [Bianca Stone](#), "[The Future Is Here](#)," collected in [Someone Else's Wedding Vows](#), [Tin House](#)

## I Have Watched Toxic Men

I have watched toxic men in the dark of an old theater and felt what Lorca called *Duende* and what my therapist calls *displacement*.

I have watched toxic men weep while eating hot chicken wings, dousing their lips in mercurial milk.

I have watched toxic men undone in a paper bag, eyes luminous as mollusks, cacophonous clams.

I watched toxic men watching their own movies.

I have watched them unfold their genitals like unformed vowels and slowly stroke them into being.

I watched toxic men every afternoon one winter when my heart was the wrong end of a violin, candescent as a beetle rotisserie under a heat lamp or souvenir off-gassing in a mini-mart.

I watched them as a comet, ellipsis, a glow-in-the-dark word for every ugly feeling.

I watched them while dissociating, brought back to my body the way a cicada might crawl into its abandoned husk.

One spring I did not watch them and my husband and I saw *The Apu Trilogy* at Film Forum.

It was the month before I got pregnant and I remember walking up subway steps, white blossoms bursting out of cherry trees, innocent and obscene.

I don't know why I'm thinking about it now except it was a time when my body briefly belonged to me and I could squander it:

the solitude of an almost spring afternoon spent inside a theater, could absorb the crackled radiance of Satyajit Ray

then walk back out into the world holding my love's hand as if sauntering through an extended hum;

gush and séance, everything holy splayed out like a word fallen from god's mouth, suddenly without purpose and seen.

Kendra DeColo

2

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<sup>2</sup> Kendra DeColo, "[I Have Watched Toxic Men](#)," [The Ilanot Review](#)

## Jellyfish

In Victoria, we watched from the rocks  
as the jellyfish floated towards us.

A jellyfish has no brain so its thoughts  
are different, tentacles trailing from its head

like ribbons, like something shredded,  
like what you say but shouldn't.

I thought if I touched one, I would never  
stop. I thought I wanted to be stung.

My mother wore a long blue dress.  
She had brought a man with us.

My eyelids were heavy from watching.  
We slept in a trailer with the sea

on one side and the hills on the other  
and inside the hills were goats

with bells on their necks.  
Jellyfish bloom suddenly and in large

numbers. Like when you turn a doorknob  
and the room comes rushing towards you,

all its lamps and clocks.  
This woman was not my mother.

She hummed to herself.  
She glowed underwater.

She used her body to propel herself forward.  
The moon jelly swarms, which implies

an active ability to stay together.  
The moon jelly is also called *Aurelia*.

Everything has another name.  
In Victoria, I did not yet know

my own secrets. That I think with my body  
and this means I am not good.

That it's dark and the hills are ringing  
and I am silent and twisting inside the sea.

That what stings is beautiful.  
That what is beautiful stings.

*Laura Read*  
3

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<sup>3</sup> [Laura Read](#), "[Jellyfish](#)," [Radar](#), collected in [But She is Also Jane](#), [University of Massachusetts Press](#)



## Impact Sport

By age 15 I was a hungry, red wolf.  
I worked at JoAnn Fabrics one  
summer—scowling women forming

lines at the back of my hangover and a  
terrible crush that kept blooming over  
floral-patterned fabric beneath my palms.

I scanned coupons and resisted knowing  
the definition of a window valance. So  
many sighs from women in search

of a texture, a measurement, some small  
tool that I could never afford. After I  
learned the cameras were decoys,

it was over: stickers, hot-glue guns,  
a bounty of expensive scissors I never used.  
Most nights I brought sneakers and ran

the four miles back to my childhood home,  
happy to be moving in the dark from white light.  
It was worse than McDonald's, which in truth

was fun: working the butt of  
every parent's joke in the '90s, living the  
worst-case-scenario at 16. Kind of

punk rock the way MJ and I figured out  
how to deliver unrecorded beverages  
in the drive-thru and pocket the

complicated math. Though it was here  
where I found the limitations of my face,  
where the fry guy would hold me

by the shoulders in the walk-in freezer  
and plant a greasy mouth on mine. And  
what else could you do but laugh about it

later with MJ in the same freezer  
sitting next to the chilled cookie dough  
with a fistful of nuggets, each of you

taking too long of a break, taking  
mouthfuls of soft serve and the feeling  
that we could never, ever truly die.

Fast-forward to college and I'm at the  
campus bookstore, I'm at the library,  
I'm cleaning professors' offices and

watching their sick cats. But worst of all  
I'm telemarketing, which was an unknown  
quantity of death, a bait-and-switch

operation for selling car listings  
with a scripted, ghost's voice  
though the phone. Later,

I'd be back alive and against  
the clock trying to find a thrifted  
shift that would everlast dancing

in New York City all night. The  
origins of the phrase "go-go dancing"  
derives from the French *a gogo*

meaning abundance, meaning galore,  
which links to the word *la gogue*, or a  
French word for joy. I don't know if

I ever found happiness, shaking my  
ass over glass cups and faces going  
gloss. But most nights in that

mechanical suture I felt like air,  
maybe freer than a walk-in freezer,  
my time and movement in abundance,

like no one could ever clock me in,

like no one ever could touch me again—  
not my face, not my hand, not my teeth,

*my, what big—*  
*my, what sharp—*

like I'd never eat that red hunger again.

Jessica Q. Stark

4

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<sup>4</sup> Jessica Q. Stark, "[Impact Sport](#)," [Moist Poetry Journal](#), collected in [Buffalo Girl](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Death parade

Once I had a boyfriend from Kentucky who liked to hear me talk: *Tell me about 9/11 again*. An English professor in training, he didn't believe the disaster was a big deal outside of its rhetorical possibilities.

It is easier to believe in the look of an object than in the object. For instance, he scouted eBay for replicas of the black patent boots the Kentucky state police had issued to his father during the strike in Harlan County. They looked French, in the way certain high-fashion cuts sometimes trickle down to the mass market.

\*\*

Every so often, I try again to find that post-9/11 air.

Back then, I lived with an asthmatic roommate on Thirteenth Street and both of us waitressed at a cafe outside Beth Israel. I mostly remember talking about the air with my roommate and other people at the cafe. Letting a day pass without talking about the smell of the air felt wrong, and yet to do so now approaches cliché, decades later when 9/11 has been so thoroughly discussed.

\*\*

According to scientists, when a memory includes vivid details, we feel confident about it, but most of these “flashbulb” memories are not accurate.

Reiterating my memories of 9/11 hardens them, separates me from them, while I want to move closer, to turpentine away their finish.

In the restaurant where I worked, a paramedic asked me if I knew what we were breathing in. I said I'd read it was the contents of the WTC, filing cabinets and computers charred and transformed into tiny particles. *Bodies, too*, she said. *The buildings contained people*. I wept at the time, but when I share that anecdote, it enters the minds of others and means less to me.

\*\*

The terrors of years ago have quit offering useful advice.

When I was a kid, everyone talked about Love Canal as a toxic dumping ground, or radiation from Three Mile Island, and today no one talks about either.

\*\*

Now the coronavirus has arrived. It was always going to arrive; it was predicted, like 9/11.

\*\*

A parade is a string of symbols, but a parade is also a display of power, prosperity, or the national mood, the definition of each being a matter of control.

\*\*

Several summers ago, I attended the sesquicentennial of my small hometown, a parade of cars with the tops down, fire engines, dignitaries throwing hard candy into the street. One man dressed like Abraham Lincoln, complete with stovetop hat made of paper mache. He sauntered down our main street on stilted boots, tossing candy.

I can't see the sidewalk in front of my old apartment, and I can't picture the walkway leading to the house I live in now. I do have the memory of every kid in town shoulder to shoulder at the curb, crouching in the sun, anxious for those boring butterscotch candies to ricochet off the pavement, toward their small waiting hands.

\*\*

People didn't have kids after 9/11, and so there are fewer adults of college age today. This is one of the facts distressing my field, higher education. The pandemic is another.

At first the pandemic was all of the things we couldn't have. Then it just was. A cough was a harbinger of death. Then, it was a cough.

I phoned friends still living in New York, losing their minds for any reason besides the cold-storage morgue trucks parked outside the hospital. *She didn't do the dishes. She left out the margarine.* On the news, a commentator called the numbers on our screen, the uptick in fatalities, a death parade.

I live in one of the states that didn't close down. I got on videochat with a local friend who had the virus, delirious,

rasping that she'd see me soon. She was the one struggling, but I couldn't stand to look at her pretend everything was all right. Her sunken posture in the recliner and the fever shining through her skin, that is inside me now. Will I keep it?

\*\*

It is tempting to want always to reduce the thing to its detail.  
To make it small.

*That morning I wore heels, and because I had to walk forty blocks that day, I no longer wear them, I said for the first time a year after 9/11 at an event commemorating the cataclysm. I don't remember the walk home at all, but I would say it again and again.*

*Erin Hoover*  
5

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<sup>5</sup> [Erin Hoover](#), "[Death parade](#)," [Prairie Schooner](#), collected in [No Spare People](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

## Preventing a Relapse

If you begin with the moths,  
their bodies marred to a dark vernacular,  
their stars more savage than the excellent seas,

their sob of crows with coal-born wings,  
their scansions of the lullaby rain,  
their boneless worship longer than the wind.

If your luck runs out when the tide comes in.  
If you pry the barb from the appetite beast.  
If you hang the sky from its collapsed-rag wings,

their antithesis of candelabras.  
If you sleep on a plain reed mat. Are glad  
for dusk that dances silence half to death,

one minute ordinary, delinquent the next.  
If you let each moment fragment like the moon.  
Linger with the sky the pigeons ask

while going down to their now-dry rivers.  
If you let your skin feel the relent.  
If you elegize the soft occasion.

*Jennifer Militello*

6

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<sup>6</sup> [Jennifer Militello](#), "[Preventing a Relapse](#)," [New Orleans Review](#), collected in [Body Thesaurus](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

## Lion

Split dandelion, peeled down its silvery stalk, split head eyeing two directions. In one, I'm headed west in a Volvo stationwagon held together by a filigree of rust. In the other, I'm drowning in the bath, pristine and lavender. Either way the path rolls up behind me. I could dazzle in the volts of the car battery. I could rise, fragrant and redeemed. A relief to know it's always earlier someplace else. Somewhere—dear lion, dear crown, my dear sweet resting place—the ruin I've made is in one piece.

*Melissa Stein*

7

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<sup>7</sup> [Melissa Stein](#), "[Lion](#)," [The Literary Review](#), collected in [Terrible Blooms](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

The Itinerant Girl's Guide to Self-Hypnosis [I was born in a town of vegetable gardens...]

I was born in a town of vegetable gardens, anthropology professors, pregnant teenagers drinking Cokes, and signs in bar windows saying, *No Indians*. A place of myth and history. Kansas. This morning I woke thinking, *I have all of it left to do*, and wondering what it was. My best artist friend has a five-year plan that reads something like, *Build a mountain of plywood. Learn to breathe out of my eyelids. Love*. I guess I'll do that, too. Some version of that. I guess I'll learn to pray without ceasing by committing to my part. Here's what I found recently: A worksheet from 3rd or 4th grade divided into two halves asking, *What makes you happy?* and *What makes you sad?* For sad, I drew a dog getting hit by a car and a horse with a broken leg. Sad for the animals. For happy, I was there in crayon with puffy pigtails, enjoying an ice cream cone on a sunny day. With tulips. There was also a drawing of a shirtless guy surfing an extravagant pompadour of a wave, a moon man in profile above, having a laugh in a cage of pointy stars. I wrote a caption: *At night*. I may have been born chronically homesick. But don't tell me I don't know happy.

Joanna Penn Cooper

8

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<sup>8</sup> Joanna Penn Cooper, "[The Itinerant Girl's Guide to Self-Hypnosis \[I was born in a town of vegetable gardens...\]](#)," collected in [The Itinerant Girl's Guide to Self-Hypnosis](#), Brooklyn Arts Press



## Continuity

Before getting into the cab, she hands him a cup.  
Then, after they kiss, she hands him the cup again.

As they walk, she hands him a man-made substance.  
Then, after they kiss, she hands him the cup again.

She hands him a chalice of lightning  
And he hands her a chalice of fire.

Then in the next shot, after they kiss,  
They exchange chalices again.

When she goes through the metal detector,  
She carefully places a pair of hoop earrings in a plastic tray.

When she retrieves them,  
They are two silver bangles she fits to her wrists.

When they climb from the cab in the rain, her hair is wet,  
But when they kiss on the sidewalk, her hair is dry again.

After she takes off her helmet & breastplate,  
And enters the water wearing nothing but courage,

She says to him, "You are nude,  
But you must be naked to win."

But the subtitles read,  
"To survive you must bear the heart."

When they climb from the river, her hair is a river  
Where night has fallen, tangled with twigs & stars,

Parting like a path of escape,  
But in the very next shot,

As they climb from the river,  
Her hair is braided with wire & string.

When he bangs on the rain-streaked window  
Of the cab yelling her name in a pivotal scene,

Briefly reflected in the window in the rain  
Tangled with wires & stars above a river

Is the hand of a fan or stagehand or bodyguard,  
Body double, bystander, interloper, beloved ghost,

And the two of us watching from a bridge on the far side.

*Terrance Hayes*  
9

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<sup>9</sup> [Terrance Hayes](#), “[Continuity](#),” [The New Yorker](#), collected in [So To Speak](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## Notes on a Monument to Ether

A man perches atop a pillared tower. He is seated & draped across his lap is another man, nearly naked, who seems to be unconscious.

The men are meant to represent the discovery that ether could be used as an anesthetic. The first successful demonstration of this was at the nearby Massachusetts General Hospital (where my brother was born), in a surgical theater that is now known as “the ether dome.”

/

The origin of the word *ether* is akin to the Greek *aithein*, which means “to burn brightly,” & to the Sanskrit *idhryas*, “of or like the brilliance of a clear sky.”

/

*Neither shall there be any more pain* is etched into the side of the tower. It comes from the book of Revelation & points to the one place where (as far as we know) there truly is no pain—death. In this life, when it comes to pain, you can either feel it or you can numb it. Yet spend too long in that realm, wrestling with whatever it is you hope to numb yourself from feeling, & soon enough very little else will matter.

The word anesthesia is from the Greek *anaesthesia*, a lack of feeling.

*Revelation* is another word for apocalypse, which I always thought signaled the end of the world. But the word *apocalypse* comes from the Greek *apokalyptein*, “to take the cover off.”

The word *revelation* comes directly from the Latin *revelare*, “to unveil, uncover, lay bare.”

To uncover, in the sense that it is revealing some deeper truth.

/

In my twenties, when I lived in Boston, I would have passed this statue nearly every day, yet I didn’t take it in—it never spoke to me. I never looked up to see the man lying in another man’s arms, this *pietà*. This says something about the statue & something about me. Did I even have a deeper truth? My friend Richard, who lived with me in that abandoned strip joint, had just tested positive. I was working in the shelter, I knew everyone who slept outside by name. I knew my father’s name, the way he used it as a blanket. If asked, I’d tell you the apocalypse had come a couple years earlier & now we were all walking through the ruins. Now we were walking in its shadows. Now we were painting curtains on plywood to make the abandoned buildings look lived in. But I was using the word wrong—I wasn’t seeing what had been uncovered. I stopped to look at a box on the sidewalk & realized someone was alive inside it.

/

It was in Boston that I began to consider myself a poet, yet (or so) I anesthetized myself daily with whatever I could find, for most days it seemed I felt too much (*neither shall there be any pain*).

What I felt created a tension in my soul, for I could not transform it into words. Tension is essential for all art, yet for me, at this time in my life, it was not a useful tension. I didn’t know how to use it.

*Anaesthesia* is the negation of the root *aesthete*, from the Greek *aisthetes*, “a (keen) perceiver.” Though I called myself a poet, I was (clearly) not a keen perceiver.

/

Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) contains the first recorded use of *ether* in the poetic sense of “heavenly, celestial.”

The word *ether* first appears before 1398, the year of Trevisa’s translation of Bartholomew’s *De Proprietatibus Rerum*. The etymological dictionary defines ether as the “upper regions of space; constituent substance of stars & planets.” Ether was both the stuff the planets were floating in & the stuff the planets were made of.

What the planets were floating in is what we now call “dark matter”— we now admit that we know essentially nothing about it.

/

*Essentially*. That’s another word like ethereal. It comes from the word *essence*, which also came into use sometime before 1398 (around the years *The Canterbury Tales* were being written).

*Essence*, from the Greek *ousia*—“being.”

The general sense of *essence* as the most important or basic element of anything is first recorded in 1656 in Hobbes’s translation of *Elements of Philosophy*.

*Essence*, see IS.

/

The main reason to take drugs is for the promise of the pain to go away. *Feeling no pain* is what we used to answer, if asked how we were (*name your poison*) after a few beers.

It only becomes a problem when we take it to the point where (*to be or not to be*) there is no is.

/

Francis Bacon’s triptych *In Memory of George Dyer* is a tribute to his lover, who took his life on the evening of Bacon’s greatest (up to that point) success. Bacon’s painting was influenced by his reading of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, especially the lines: “I have heard the key / Turn in the door,” which Bacon represents in the central panel, in which a figure (Dyer) turns a key in a lock.

/

*Let us go then...*

/

Bacon’s bodies are often cut open, dissected, flayed.

Michelangelo would cut up cadavers to learn human anatomy. As it was illegal at the time to desecrate a body, he had to do this in secret, in a back room of the Basilica di Santo Spirito.

*Santo Spirito. Holy Spirit.*

An essence, something impossible to hold on to.

*In the room the women come and go...*

Michelangelo, searching for something inside us he could hold on to, something essential.

It is said that cutting these bodies open left him with a taste for nothing but bread & water.

*This is a man / this is a tree this is bread.*

Bread is essential, water is essential.

*It is* is the most basic, elemental sentence.

It is raining. It is broken. It is full. It is finished.

*It is finished* is one of the seven last phrases of Jesus.

*It isn't* is always just on the other side.

*Nick Flynn*  
10

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<sup>10</sup> Nick Flynn, "[Notes on a Monument to Ether](#)," [BOMB](#), collected in [Low](#), Graywolf Press

## Cassiopeia

Meanwhile, a stranger's grandma spoons cold  
butterscotch pudding to her lips beside your own grandma.

They prefer custard but won't complain to the nurses.  
Revolutions happen elsewhere. The once beloved's face

becomes unfamiliar, the moustache greasier, and it is the least  
you could have hoped for, but it doesn't satisfy.

Your brother is doing well because you have adjusted  
your definition of "well." He wakes sober in a house

of sober men. They eat dry toast, and he drives to the tiny  
Cape Cod airport to wave his arms around and drag

cigarettes, the weight of himself, and duffel bags  
filled with souvenir driftwood and bathing suits

along the tarmac all day. The Vineyard people offer  
pinched smiles to his dropped *R*'s and the desire to feel

another, very particular way plays beneath each  
moment like Muzak. He resists. How noble,

to resist. How unlike the gods. Meanwhile, the mortals  
are fasting. Your sister listens to the same screech

on repeat and walks along the White River, seeing  
only the stones beneath the low, clear water, surprised

by its sting when she kneels and leans to press  
her face against their shine. She has not cut her thighs

in weeks. And you go on not calling your brother  
or grandmother, crying each time you fold clothes.

Elsewhere, sickness spreading is one way bodies  
communicate. Your mother sends a card

with some money in it, says her husband is dying  
so slowly he seems fine. You make the same corn salad

for a different set of dinner guests, put on *Nebraska*  
one more time. Meanwhile, the constellations. Cassiopeia

hanging upside down from her throne and you on Earth  
just gawking, wondering what kind of person you are,

and if you'd be the one to open up your arms  
when she's no longer able to hold on.

*Caylin Capra-Thomas*  
11

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<sup>11</sup> [Caylin Capra-Thomas](#), "[Cassiopeia](#)," [New England Review](#), collected in [Iguana Iguana](#), [Deep Vellum](#)

## Dry Season

It had ended and ended  
badly so I'd stopped drinking  
and started again or was  
about to when an old friend  
bought me a nonstop to stay  
with him in Colorado this was early  
October and the first snows  
had driven the elk down  
out of the upper ranges  
backing up traffic into Lyons  
and drawing crowds of tourists  
who posed alone or with  
their blonde polo'd families a safe  
distance from their wildness I  
watched disgusted I thought  
there is nothing worse  
than this shit knowing of course  
that there was much worse and that I  
had done it I lay down  
on my friend's bottom bunk  
and woke in the morning  
and wandered into the living  
room where vaulted windows  
looked out on a parched field  
and there was an elk there  
then four five clustered  
between boulders picking at  
the stunted shrubs even larger  
up close than I expected the night  
before I left for good I slept  
on the living room floor  
and she came out shivering  
and sobbing asking me  
to hold her just for a minute and I  
said no I said no because so  
many times before I had said  
yes and not meant it and just  
like that I knew I was  
small and cruel and moved  
out across the placid bay  
and shut myself up in my one-  
room apartment and drank  
and watched spaghetti  
westerns A Fistful of Dollars  
Duck You Sucker the elk  
meandering closer  
to the window where I stood  
scowling into the light I pressed



my palm to the thick sheet  
of glass between us and smacked it  
once hard and not one of them  
turned so I hit it again both  
hands this time making a sound  
like an empty plastic tub a  
hollowed-out thing and the closest  
lifted its head ears high  
tuft of white tail twitching  
and looked calmly upon me  
without recognition  
and went on eating the wild grasses

*Edgar Kunz*  
12

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<sup>12</sup> [Edgar Kunz](#), "[Dry Season](#)," collected in [Tap Out](#), [Mariner Books](#)

## Come Again

These are the runes that ruin me, today's telling typos:  
*Heavy police pretense. Thank you for your corporation.*

Jane invents the word *era-ist* for those of us  
who discriminate against the past. Careful, it's not erased.

The birds persist in rapid-fire accusation: *Isn't-it-so? Isn't-it-so?*  
then feign ignorance in response, slurred syllable made two: *Me-e? Me-e?*

The waitress apologizes, *Sir, there's no syrup, so so sorry, Sir.*

Trying to get from here to there, familiar with Flower,  
one has to ask: *is Hope a one-way street?*

A man once promised to meet me at Liberty, but now's not at it.

Did we install the filter backward?  
An errant arrow faces the wall like a dunce.

I make: my bed, peace with, amends, and light of—sure.

Epistolary too's a kind of aim, a game like pool in which you can't  
just shoot, must point to the greener pasture's pocket first.

On the patio, the woman on her second wine carafe  
screws up her courage to ask the waiter: *what are legs?*

Across the Missouri border:  
*CHEAP SMOKES FIREWORKS WHISKEY WORMS.*

At Bruno's, *I'll have another one* slurs to *I'll have an urn.*

Inking inkings in the crossword, I pen a cramped crescent in  
after I mis-guess the answer for *hole-making tool*:

It's *auger*, not *luger*. I'm off one letter. I'm off again.

Dora Malech  
13

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<sup>13</sup> Dora Malech, "Come Again," [Tampa Review](#), collected in [Flourish](#), Carnegie Mellon University Press

## Little Matter

Field trip-sized headache.

Ad for a cruise ship  
that bops the arctic

in the puss. Little girl

getting her master's  
in the pathetic fallacy.

Ad for a fork  
with a flashlight attached

so you can eat  
in the dark.

School play about  
a log cabin where something

boring once happened.  
Documentary about making

eye contact,

about answering-machine  
tape. Student essay

called "I Hate

the Past" with a Works Cited page

a mile long. Two bullies  
having a taunt contest.

One calls the other what  
the other called the other.

Makes you want to give up  
and paint wooden ducks

or smuggle model boats  
into bottles

like a fart in a dream.  
Imagine

a submarine the size  
of the Azores carrying all

the Tom Clancy novels  
that retired guys ever read

at their beach houses  
in Maine. Now imagine

a Tom Clancy novel  
about feelings and art.

When you're done  
put the toilet seat down,

pull down the shades.  
My lines are short

because they're afraid.

*Gregory Lawless*

14

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<sup>14</sup> Gregory Lawless, "[Little Matter](#)," collected in [Dreamburgh, Pennsylvania](#), Dream Horse Press

The Ideograms [Five days later I thought...]

Five days later I thought  
of a good comeback.  
I want to come back to the still gloomy sea.  
Any deviation from the plan makes me crazy.  
The rain fell all over Minnesota's beer halls.  
The streets were wet and confusing.  
You were sleeping at home  
in the cat-blackened gloom.  
I'll be home in four days.  
I have new shoes,  
sunny music.  
The sun is shining.  
The sun is shining on the river.  
But I am like the rain  
falling on an abandoned couch  
with a tree growing out of the middle of it.  
You are the tree.

*Matthew Rohrer*

15

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<sup>15</sup> [Matthew Rohrer](#), "[The Ideograms \[Five days later I thought...\]](#)," collected in [Rise Up](#), [Wave Books](#)

## The Insecurities of These Blood-Thirsty Savages

come from the usual place. “39 Ways to Make His Head Explode.”  
“Are Your Breasts Too Circular?” She knows she is a monster.  
Hair everywhere and that dimple on her thigh so deep it tunnels  
all the way to China. Not to mention the way she snorts in hot yoga,  
giggling each time the yogi purrs, “Deepen your dog,” or the way  
she wants to name her only daughter “Agony” just for the sound of it,  
or the thing in the drawer of the nightstand that secretly keeps her sane.

*Quan Barry*  
16

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<sup>16</sup> [Quan Barry](#), “[The Insecurities of These Blood-Thirsty Savages](#),” collected in [Auction](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Instars

I keep passing my driveway, keep  
circling the block, circling,  
waking up in the house of butterflies.  
It's hard to think about Tom. It's hard not to.  
I want to go back. I want to start over.

I found my umbrella.  
Years later I still have that corsage.  
My mother corrects my hair brushing:  
"Start with the ends," she says,  
"You're doing it all wrong."

They say it was an accident.  
Not the driver's fault.  
You gave the guinea pig an aspirin, but still, it died.  
Who could have known?  
Everything smells like gin.

Snow falling beneath streetlight. Moths?  
A magic carpet—could it be? Or just a migration of butterflies?  
I walk down Hennepin Avenue.  
From across the street, a man in a wheelchair shouts:  
"Hey, you got some nice legs!"  
Am I offended? Should I be?

I can't stop moving.  
The new drug is the same as the old one,  
Only the name's spelled backward:  
Xanax, the last palindrome.  
Chaise lozenge, chaise life raft,  
Chaise in the shape of an antidepressant.  
A life-size molecule, plastic and clear.  
Umbrellas at the drive-thru restaurant.  
Flowers of a fiberglass planet.

There are no paper towels.  
When Tom died, I tried not to move and not to cry.  
I still can't breathe underwater.  
Butterflies have been known to drink tears.

Imago is the last stage of butterfly life.  
Death can't put a name to a face anymore.  
Adulthood reached, maturity attained,  
I rake the boar bristle brush  
Through my wet and squealing hair.

Cindy King  
17

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<sup>17</sup> [Cindy King](#), "Instars," [Twyckenham Notes](#), collected in [Zoonotic](#), [Tinderbox Editions](#)

## Granite

In your granite bedroom  
inside the wallet in your purse

I'm scavenging  
your unfiltered thoughts

a page with your savings  
in the lace of an unschooled scrawl

rather than burn on the moon  
I hurl myself

against the cold door  
because I pity the door

I can never revive the violin  
locked without leaves in a tree

*Jane Miller*

18

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<sup>18</sup> [Jane Miller](#), "[Granite](#)," collected in [Thunderbird](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)



## Double Sonnet Ending in New Testament

This poem is meant to have the make and model  
of a vehicle in it, include a food I dislike, a musical  
instrument. He gave up the cello. There were multiple  
mandolins on his worktable. An item that is broken  
beyond repair? My body. That's easy. This & this  
& this. A love note that falls into the wrong hands?  
Every poem I have ever written. Please stop posting  
your thumbs-up sonogram pictures. I don't care  
if you're 43. If you're an exception or a miracle or  
whatever you are. A bird of prey. His son was learning  
to be a falconer. Are these like vultures? I'm not sure.  
An item of lost clothing—this doesn't happen often  
now that I'm married. Remember those bras  
that went missing in apartments, knapsacks, cars?

Bless that time: fear of conception. Holy ruckery  
& whiskey & some guy. I drive the highway  
in my Honda Civic to the phlebotomist, try to arrive  
early to avoid the trainee who always leaves  
the bloodless needle halfway in my arm, then  
calls for help to the other woman who looks like  
a former heroin addict or the Mennonite; both can  
deftly navigate my scarred veins. Falcons are  
the fastest moving creatures on earth. Your baby  
this week is the size of a poppy seed, a sweet pea,  
a black olive. I hate olives. In the lab, they play  
Spirit FM & don't know anything about me. The DJ  
croons, "I am the vine & you are the branches. Those  
who remain in me, & I in them, will bear much fruit."

*Erika Meitner*

19

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<sup>19</sup> [Erika Meitner](#), "[Double Sonnet Ending in New Testament](#)," *Plume*, collected in [Holy Moly Carry Me](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Ghosts

*After Anne Sexton*

Some ghosts are my mothers  
neither angry nor kind  
their hair blooming from silk kerchiefs.  
Not queens, but ghosts  
who hum down the hall on their curved fins  
sad as seahorses.  
Not all ghosts are mothers.  
I've counted them as I walk the beach.  
Some are herons wearing the moonrise like lace.  
Not lonely, but ghostly.  
They stalk the low tide pools, flexing  
their brassy beaks, their eyes.  
But that isn't all.  
Some of my ghosts are planets.  
Not bright. Not young.  
Spiraling deep in the dusk of my body  
as saucers or moons  
pleased with their belts of colored dust  
& hailing no others.

*Kiki Petrosino*

20

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<sup>20</sup> [Kiki Petrosino](#), "[Ghosts](#)," [Poem-A-Day](#), collected in [Witch Wife](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## Low-Effort Thinking

Did you know that when mob bosses want somebody killed, they get the one of the victim's friends to do it?

That way, if you go to your friend's house to kill him and are seen entering by a nosy neighbor or if, after the deed's done, investigators find your fingerprint or a strand of hair, it can be explained away.

"I was just dropping off some cannoli," you could say. "He looked okay to me. Said he had to get his taxes in and find a math tutor for his kid, but otherwise, fine. Is there a problem, officer?"

This is what's called high-effort thinking.

The opposite of high-effort thinking is low-effort thinking, which leads to political conservatism according to the scientists who tested that hypothesis by conducting two experiments, one boring and one not.

The boring experiment consisted of assigning one group of volunteers to react to items on a list of liberal and conservative statements such as "Large fortunes should be taxed heavily" and "A first consideration of any society is property rights."

Meanwhile, a second group was given the same task but instructed to listen simultaneously to a tape of tones varying in pitch and to count and record the number of tones that preceded each change.

Ha, ha! I'd go batshit, too, wouldn't you, reader?

Or at least I'd make conservative choices, as everyone in the second group did.

☹️

Popcorn movies as well as most bumper stickers and t-shirts tell us that decisive action by one person saves the day, but in reality, usually that gets you jack diddley.

No, no. False starts, trial and error, teamwork: human progress is built on these.

And patience. Wittgenstein said, "Philosophy is like trying to open a safe with a combination lock: each little adjustment of the dials seems to achieve nothing, and only when everything is in place does the door open."

☹️

Case in point: it's 1967, and Albert King is in the Stax studio, and the recording session for his next album is almost done. Thing is, they need one more song.

Now William Bell is in the studio as well, and Mr. Bell has a verse, a chorus, and the bass line to a new song worked out, and when he tries them out on Albert King, the bluesman likes what he hears and asks for the rest.

Well, there is no rest. So Mr. Bell goes off with Booker T. Jones of Booker T. & the M.G.'s, and they stay up all night and finish the song, which they call "Born Under a Bad Sign."

The next day, everybody comes back to the studio, and here's where the story gets good.

"Albert King couldn't read," Mr. Bell says in the course of an interview about the incident.

"You mean he couldn't read music?" says the interviewer. "A lot of musicians can't read music —Paul McCartney can't read music."

"No, I mean he couldn't read!" says Mr. Bell. "Couldn't read English. Couldn't read words. So I stood next to him in the studio and whispered each line to him, and he sang it."

Amazing, huh? Or maybe not.

If you're a musician, especially a successful one, almost certainly not.

Good musicians always take their time, and the best musicians listen to others.

As they learned their craft, the Beatles played a stint at a Hamburg club called the Indra which was managed by Bruno Koschmider, described by Beatles' biographer Bob Spitz as "a florid-faced man with a preposterous wig-like mop of hair."

Koschmider would yell "Mach schau!" ("Put on a show!") during the boys' lackluster performances.

At first the four musicians laughed and staggered around, knocking over mikes as they made fun of the silly German man. But when the audiences went crazy, the boys saw the value of "putting on a show" and became the band that changed the world.

☛

And now for the fun experiment.

Mixed-sex groups of experimenters waited outside a bar and asked potential participants if they would complete a short survey on social attitudes and then consent to being tested for blood alcohol levels.

Ha, ha again! Can you imagine how much fun it was for the psychology students to accost a bunch of drunkos and ask them to agree or not with statements like "Production and trade should be free of government interference" and "Ultimately, privately property should be abolished"?

The drunkos didn't care; they were drunk.

The drunkest among them registered more conservative attitudes because alcohol limits cognitive capacity and disrupts controlled responding while leaving automatic thinking largely intact.

☹️

By the way, if you're wondering if conservatives are all dumb-asses, the answer is "Not quite."

That's from principal investigator Scott Eidelman, who devised both the boring experiment and the fun one.

"Our research shows that low-effort thought promotes political conservatism," says Dr. Eidelman, "not that political conservatives use low-effort thinking."

Those undergraduates must have had so much fun interviewing those drunkos.

"Excuse me, drunko, would you agree that rich people have the right to shove as much money up their backsides as they like?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, and guns and cocaine and—BLOOOOORCH! Excuse me. Say, who are you anyways?"

Oh, Jesus. I better not laugh again or I might not be able to stop.

*David Kirby*  
21

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<sup>21</sup> [David Kirby](#), "[Low-Effort Thinking](#)," [The Account](#)

## In Context

The people in the coffee shop talk about boutique firms and methodology while behind them strange artwork morphs out of the wall in 3-D. The mother and her five-year-old have an argument about clothes in front of the pregnant nude photographs she had commissioned in her third trimester, when the world felt heavy but easy and she used websites like Pinterest without irony. I read the tabloids alongside the news headlines and the interest pieces on BuzzFeed like “Woman with Third Boob Wants to Be Unattractive to Men.” Meanwhile my students are writing terrible and heartbreaking poems about children dying in Syria and we discuss the necessity of imagery and *show, don't tell*. At this point I am a robot regurgitating tropes and when I tell my students we are going on a field trip one smartass says she hopes it's not to the art museum *again*, and I say no, not to worry, we're going to a sweatshop up the street, and I sense some of my students are scared and some are excited and they are all clutching their notebooks and pencils as we line up outside the building, which is made of dark concrete with no windows and which seems to be vibrating slightly the way all my students are vibrating slightly and everyone stands on tiptoe and peers around each other as I slowly open the door.

Lauren Shapiro

22

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<sup>22</sup> Lauren Shapiro, “In Context,” *Forklift, Ohio*, collected in *Arena*, Cleveland State University Poetry Center

## Onions

I always think of Pauline going  
down the stairs I always hold  
on thinking how going down  
she must have tripped she  
was always going fast after  
all we called her the Flash  
and when her husband  
found her it didn't matter  
that he was an ER doc he  
might as well have been a post-  
doc in art history he might as  
well have been a window  
washer or mortician there  
she was at the bottom  
of the stairs with that busted  
sack of onions sweet onions  
she'd have sliced and cried  
over and eaten raw with a little  
salt and she'd have handed  
you a slice like a sliver  
of moon and if you  
were in a dark  
time she'd have  
said hey friend hold  
on

*Andrea Cohen*

23

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<sup>23</sup> [Andrea Cohen](#), "[Onions](#)," [The New York Review of Books](#)

## Degenerate

It's true, I'm full  
of dead lawn chairs  
and wet parking lots,  
lottery tickets and gray fires  
burning at the edges  
of small towns.  
I'm a wild donkey dusted  
in frozen rain.  
I'm dumb as a cistern.  
I'm the wrong mix  
of air and gasoline,  
a piano stored in a barn.  
I hear the snow fences  
near Powder Creek  
trying to draw my grave  
on December's maps.  
But I've pressed my ear  
to the hive of your back  
with its blue vapors  
and lost tribes.  
I've listened to the owls  
coursing inside you.  
I've held the night's wrist  
against my face,  
trying to get back  
to the signal fires  
of your hips.

*Michael McGriff*  
24

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<sup>24</sup> [Michael McGriff](#), "[Degenerate](#)," [Alaska Quarterly Review](#), collected in [Early Hour](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)



## Frock

If you wear it, child,  
wear it until the hem frays, until the thread

slithers from stitches,  
until the flowers become splotches.

Loosen it around the chest, the  
hips. Measure your body by it.

Discolor it with perfume, lotion,  
honey, sun. Never scrub it.

If you hike it, hike it up. Summon July in it.  
Name the hem after prayers, the

buttons after days. Touch  
yourself through it. A secret? A tip?

Someday, let it puddle the floor.  
This will break your father's heart.

*Hala Alyan*  
25

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<sup>25</sup> [Hala Alyan](#), “[Frock](#),” collected in [Atrium](#), [Three Rooms Press](#)

## Halloween in the Anthropocene

& Memphis is out in Full Fang!  
Skeletons skip down our pitted streets.  
Whole families with matching hobo stipple  
roam tragicomically through the sprawling  
candy deserts: polka-dot bandanas  
on sticks, flapping Chaplinesque shoes.

Unclaimed pumpkins pile high  
behind razor wire. The air's thick  
with caw & trouble. Our porch light's out  
but we stay in, listening to the festive cackle  
of semiautomatics in the autumn night.

Some faceless Handmaids do a spooky  
hopscotch in a Walgreens parking lot.  
Two drunk men in tiger masks loll from  
the window of a passing truck to tell some  
Handmaid she's "thicc as shit." Anyway,

Witches are back! They straddle plastic  
brooms—streaming  
across the moon's bright knuckle: hedge  
witches & wicked witches. Waves  
of Sabrinas: blonde bobs, black  
headbands, whole hexes of freckles!  
Here come the Elphabas & Endoras,  
the Elviras & Elsas. Even a couple  
of Baba Yagas—bewitched huts  
strutting forth on sexy chicken legs!

So what if it's a bit  
more *wink* than Wand.

We've stopped scaring ourselves  
on purpose, stopped wearing our Weirds  
on our Outsides. My sweetie's spilled on  
the couch as Melted Clock. I park myself  
on the dark stoop as Empty Pyrex Bowl.  
According to the Post-it Note on my face,  
my nickname is No-Treats-for-the-Wicked.  
I'm a weird white lady on an unlit porch.  
No one dare approach this childless abode—  
not for phantom candy. Certainly  
not for clarification.

Karyna McGlynn

26

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<sup>26</sup> Karyna McGlynn, "Halloween in the Anthropocene," collected in [50 Things Kate Bush Taught Me About the Multiverse](#), Sarabande Books

## Abiding

When I married him, there were things I thought were jokes that were not jokes. In thirteen years I have often changed my mind about which are which.

“A Blair will sooner knife you than shoot you,” the old timers say with a laugh and serious eyes that hold your face longer than you would like.

He is an atheist who believes in haints and the resurrection of the body, and when he dies, he wants his remains left in the holler beside the foundation of the cabin where the first Blair was born. He’s upset about how there are no wolves or bears left on that fifty acres to render his body. It’s one of the things about neighbors you have to abide.

He has kin he won’t claim living out on Monkey Mountain Road and uncles with show caves and cousins with haints and criminal records, a grandpa with one eye who drinks and who everyone calls crazy.

There is a code about family and what you do for them, which is anything, and everyone else, to whom you owe nothing, and whose living gets in the way of your living, but they also have family who would do anything, so you abide each other as best you are able.

He does not want his organs donated. He says, “I don’t want to find out later that I need them.”

I didn’t take his name, but I have his power of attorney, so I thought it right to tell him I would feel a moral obligation to donate his organs despite his wishes. I told him this so he could make someone else legally if it matters so much. It was a question of conscience for me, it was my code.

His code does not abide other codes. “I have taken many of your responsibilities off your plate. Our daughter carries the name. My father will take care of my body.” As long as his father doesn’t die and his daughter stays obedient, I won’t have to think about getting my hands corpse-dirty or shovel-blistered, or contemplate jail time for illegally dumping remains. So I think about neighbors who need organs instead.

Then he’s not mad anymore and he says, “Nevermind. I’ll just make sure I take you with me.”

I’ve asked him in my most serious voice not to threaten to kill me anymore, because I can’t tell what parts are kidding.

“Death,” he says, “is a gift.” He won’t squander it on anything less than a boat full of fertilizer somewhere along the Colorado. Is that a joke?

Is it a joke that I will be tied to the mast?

It is most likely a joke and well delivered and hilarious.

When we were dating he talked about how much he wanted to jump a train and tramp. We were reading so many books together I thought we were having a different conversation. We made up hobo names and I chose Marge because that’s a name that is also a funny sound.

He chose Head-in-a-Bag Hobo because he was starting to realize he’d never have it in himself to vanish as long as I was alive, but in grief he’d be unable to hold himself back. When he left, he’d carry my shrunken head with him in his bindle to be his love and his weapon against the bulls and other murderous

insane hobos in the yards.

I thought he was so funny and romantic.

There was a year we were living on seventeen acres in Ohio, and every six hours or so a train skirted the edge of the field. When I was pregnant we sat on the trellis bridge and skittered stones across the frozen creek while we picked names and listened for a distant whistle.

When the baby was gone, I sat at the window and watched the wind blow the grass and for months it's the only thing I remember. But he remembers that he had finally worked up the nerve to go, and I held his hand and cried and said, "Please, I can't lose you too." So he didn't go. And now we have a living child whose name is Blair, and if I die, he'll take her along, and if I don't, his whole life will be something different. He promises he can abide that because we are family.

This means I should put his whole body in the woods for the wolves that will never come. That I should stop thinking about mothers on dialysis and children who have gone blind and how a heart falters into the straightest green line you've ever seen.

I thought Blair was something I was becoming and he did too, but when we're being honest it's clear I have no honor and he tells no jokes. We're right to fear each other.

*Kathryn Nuernberger*  
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<sup>27</sup> Kathryn Nuernberger, "Abiding," *Iron Horse Literary Review*, collected in *Brief Interviews with the Romantic Past*, The Ohio State University Press

## Burnt Plastic

Today in the taxi I picked up a Wall Street type on Park Avenue near 48th Street. He was going to Montclair, New Jersey. His house was on fire and he spent the trip on the phone barking orders at his wife, his roofer, his contractor, his insurance company, and at me.

He kept saying: “Go this way!” or “Which way are you going?” He said to someone that there are firearms and ammunition in the house. Periodically he held back tears. It was a long 25 miles for me, and I suppose, longer for him. We got there, and the house was burning. The Talmud says: *Nature rules over all things except the terror it inspires.*

Sean Singer

28

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<sup>28</sup> [Sean Singer](#), “[Burnt Plastic](#),” collected in [Today in the Taxi](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

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 near schools without liquor.  
You are also the state where I'm never  
lost: your mountains close—gray rock in summer,  
whiter in winter, green in May before drought—  
tell me where and when I am,  
along with the copper mine seen  
from space, the salt lake too shallow  
to swim, the townhouses jammed into  
crevices of valley like aphids on a leaf.  
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  
29

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<sup>29</sup> [Natasha Sajé](#), “[Dear Utah](#),” [Painted Bride Quarterly](#), collected in [The Future Will Call You Something Else](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

## A Walk in the Park

The palms along  
Dolores Street  
do not belong.  
The past looms  
like chat rooms.

At the top  
of the park,  
a fellow  
suns himself.  
(They call the hill

the *fruit shelf*.)  
The view  
from here  
ruthless—  
more or less.

We play a game  
of name  
the building  
that was razed.  
Ding, ding.

Downtown  
off-limits  
as a wish,  
or noun.  
The weeds

like all the right  
wrong words.  
Or none.  
Swish, swish.  
I'd trade

interest rate  
and day trade  
for clean-  
your-house-  
in-the-nude days,

and date-the-broke-  
actor days.  
Urinal talk:  
this is as close  
as we can get.

Show don't show,  
and yet, and yet—  
the city  
part sunny  
aggression,

part accent piece.  
Rush, rush.  
The smoke;  
the dirt;  
the sky—

I spy  
the gospel  
in the park,  
septic,  
lush as real money.

*Randall Mann*  
30

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<sup>30</sup> [Randall Mann](#), "[A Walk in the Park](#)," *The Adroit Journal*, collected in [Deal: New and Selected Poems](#), Copper Canyon Press



## Ancestral Poem

And so we settled upon the shore  
of a nasally Midwestern sea  
governed by a moon that hung  
like a medal we'd won above  
the subdivision. Evenings,  
the starlings made an ecstatic  
calligraphy against the gloam,  
landed upon the slack, black  
wires, our antique telephony  
rippling between their toes.  
From my vantage in a second-story  
window of the split-level ranch  
where we kept our things,  
I could see some moths mistake  
the neon heat of a Blockbuster  
Video sign to the west for home,  
your babaji watering the impatiens  
in their beds beneath a local cosmos.  
Crisscross of the pinkening contrails,  
your bibiji nursing her twilight  
chai in a patio chair. She said a thing  
then that made them laugh, the clouds  
like painted bulls tumbling across a cave wall  
in this, the only known record of these events.

*Jaswinder Bolina*

31

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<sup>31</sup> [Jaswinder Bolina](#), "[Ancestral Poem](#)," [The New Yorker](#), collected in [English as a Second Language](#), Copper Canyon Press

## The Workshop

One student writes an intricate poem using a spider web as metaphor for a failed romantic relationship. Another writes a political manifesto with line breaks. Three write autobiographical narratives about childhood traumas. I am also a student but when I turn in my imagined historical encounter between Clara Barton and Florence Nightingale the other students look at me and say, *Write what you know*. Next week I turn in a poem about a poet who is tired of other poets' lousy personal narratives so she brings in a gun and shoots all the poems in the chest before taking the life of her own poem. The professor calls campus security. At the station, the police officer asks me questions about my family and emotional state. *This isn't about me*, I say. *This is a failure of imagination. We take this kind of thing very seriously*, he says. *It isn't a joke*. His office is full of the usual detritus—framed certificates of completion and honor, the college calendar, an inspirational photo of skydivers. On his desk there is a picture of his wife and two young children. He sees me looking at it and turns it away.

Lauren Shapiro

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<sup>32</sup> Lauren Shapiro, "[The Workshop](#)," [Forklift, Ohio](#), collected in [Arena](#), [Cleveland State University Poetry Center](#)

## Two Sonnets

It was the only world he knew back then:  
brown fields, oil pumps like great birds that rose  
and fell, big-haired women, roughneck crews.  
The rig lot sunk in mud when storms blew in,  
and country songs that told of love and sin.  
At night he stood alone on deck, the dark ooze  
bubbling up, drill pipe grinding, a moon in trees  
that shrouded it. Dirt, grease, the cold night wind.  
The bunkhouse calendar displayed a girl, nude  
and smiling, dark hair spilling down her back.  
He had never known a woman, and never would,  
he thought. *But now, ten years later, his bed  
grows warm, she snuggles close, and her hair, black  
as oil, comes down the way he dreamed it should.*

The sudden kiss, some awkwardness, the bar  
of soap she drops onto the bathroom floor.  
*Would you, please?* she asks, and hands me more  
of something said to fill her hair with stars.  
*I love to feel your hands, your fingers, there.*  
As she looks up, the shower's heavy downpour  
casts her as weather's orphan: the plumbing's roar  
and thunder, clouds of soap-streaks in her hair,  
her eyes, the look of children in a storm,  
the ones too brave to run back home in time.  
But soon the drops that diamonded her face  
seem more like tears, and grief begins to form.  
For that was long ago, and now I dream  
of hair in rain. A girl I loved. A time. A place.

B. H. Fairchild

33

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<sup>33</sup> B. H. Fairchild, "Two Sonnets," collected in [An Ordinary Life](#), W. W. Norton & Company

## Sea Change

Fresh back from Alaska  
North can't stop talking about it:  
the scale of the ships, the mountains,  
the hauls of kings brought up  
in a hundred and fifty fathoms  
of net. You're not picking up nickels,  
he says. You're locking down a buck  
every time you touch a fish.  
His stories leave me sheepish  
about our humdrum routine:  
circling the store to make sure  
closing crew's gone, then dropping  
into hills of black plastic bags  
we sort by weight. North foxtails  
the heavies toward me, I rip in and fish  
for what's good: grape juice,  
squash, hotdogs dusted with floor  
sweepings we'll have to singe off.  
All summer, he rode the open sea,  
hoisted ropes hand over hand,  
pounded meals of raw salmon. Now  
he's built like a Greek statue:  
sleeves rolled, forearms popping veins,  
and each time he flexes to lift a bag  
he looks godlike, unbreakable.  
Dude, he says, I bet we could  
sell this shit, start a business.  
Profits. Employees. A marketing  
approach. How far his mind goes  
I'm afraid to imagine.  
I sniff to see if the chicken in my hands  
is bad. It is. Who would buy this?  
Anyone. People like us.  
I wipe cold grease on my pants.  
But we wouldn't buy this.  
North shrugs, drops a rotten plantain  
and reaches for a persimmon.

*Anders Carlson-Wee*

34

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<sup>34</sup> [Anders Carlson-Wee](#), "[Sea Change](#)," [Smartish Pace](#), collected in [Disease of Kings](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## Boom Box

My father leaves again. Returns, falls asleep  
in the driveway with a warm six-pack of Pabst like a fist  
between his thighs. He swears  
he has not been gone that long, is not  
that drunk. My mother smokes more now  
than before she quit. The fire  
was four years ago, we're still living  
in a trailer parked behind  
the charcoaled foundation of our old house.  
Before it's too late I should  
mention the rifle, the box of bullets  
I found in the back of the closet  
behind the skin mags, the vibrator.  
My parents don't even talk to each other  
but the body is capable of all kinds of lies.  
My mother will not let me listen  
to Run-DMC, which she says  
is because of God but I know better.  
All those gold chains, such audacity.  
She doesn't know anything about me.  
I steal Marlboros one at time,  
matches from the back of the stove,  
I'm cutting the sleeves out of my t-shirts  
these days, freaking out the neighbor kids  
by spelling *pussy* on my Ouija board,  
trying to make it sound like bragging,  
telling them how this summer I'm going to get  
Stella from up the hill to pull up her shirt for me.  
I carry my boom box everywhere,  
my secret cassette of *Raising Hell*,  
and sometimes the gun. I can make  
you believe anything. Maybe  
my father hits me. Maybe the war  
changed him, though I never knew him before,  
so what do I know? Maybe I shoot  
at squirrels but can never hit one.  
Maybe I'm hanging out on the girders  
of the old bridge with the volume on 10,  
hoping one of these songs will piss off someone  
enough to stop and give me a talking-to.  
Maybe I'm setting fire to sticks  
and dropping them in the water.  
Maybe I killed one of the coon hounds  
caged up by Stella's asshole dad  
who maybe hits her sometimes, too,  
maybe hurts her in more silent ways.  
Maybe I hope she is as lonely as I am.  
Maybe this is the most fucked-up time

in the history of the world  
to be fourteen, maybe there's poison  
in the river that feeds our wells.  
Maybe I can feel my skin blistering  
from the inside out, maybe the bruises  
are bleeding into each other. What a mess.  
Maybe the gun never even goes off.  
Maybe it's only the music announcing  
I am here. Maybe I'm shouting  
my own name, over and over, synced  
with the beat. Boom, boom,  
like that. Boom.

*Amorak Huey*  
35

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<sup>35</sup> [Amorak Huey](#), "[Boom Box](#)," [Bloodroot Literary Review](#), collected in [Boom Box](#), [Sundress Publications](#)

## Saturday Morning

When the dog won't stop barking, I meet  
my neighbors in front of the blue house.

It's early and in our pajamas and robes  
we look like delegates from the Land of Nod.

Someone pounds on the door as the sky  
darkens with the black Lab's consonants.

Then we shrug and go home to lie rigid  
as fossils, or maybe make love to

the steady hectoring like couples at some  
Fascist bordello, or perhaps just turn

on the TV and find Pluto banned to the back  
yard. Mickey frowns over the yellow fence

The last time he heard a racket like that  
Minnie was having a nervous breakdown.

He certainly hopes history isn't about  
to repeat itself.

*Ron Koertge*  
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<sup>36</sup> [Ron Koertge](#), "[Saturday Morning](#)," collected in [Fever](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

Nineteen Forty

*They got Lewes at last yesterday.*  
—Virginia Woolf

The sun just drops down through the poplars.

I should sit out and watch it rather than  
Write this!

The red of it sweeps along the houses past the marsh  
To where L. is picking apples.  
The air is cold.  
Little things seem large.  
Behind me there's moisture like windows on the pears.

And then the planes going to London. Well, it's  
An hour before that yet. There are cows eating grass.  
There were bombs dropped on Itford Hill. Yesterday,  
I watched a Messerschmitt smudge out in the sky.

*What is it like when the bone-shade is crushed in  
On your eye. You drain. And pant. And, then, dot, dot, dot!*

Walking Sunday (Natalie's birthday) by Kingfisher Pool  
I saw my first hospital train. It was slow but not laden,  
Not like a black shoebox but like a weight pulled by  
A string. And bone-shaking!  
Private and heavy it cut through the yellow fields:

And a young airman with his head in his hands,  
With his head in a fat, soiled bandage, moved  
His good eye, and nothing else, up to the high corner  
Of his window and through the cool, tinted glass watched,

I believe, as  
individual wild ducks scraped and screamed in along a marsh.

*Norman Dubie*

37

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<sup>37</sup> [Norman Dubie](#), "[Nineteen Forty](#)," collected in [The Illustrations](#), [George Braziller, Inc.](#)



## Testimony

Numbed up from rum and slushies, smoking bowls  
in a friend's friend's backyard, time's a minor chord  
the night keeps playing. *Dude, we need to go,*  
*we say, but don't.* We're good at being bored

in front of everyone. But cross our hearts,  
the worst we ever feel is incomplete,  
just texting, checking Tinder, taking shots  
for an album called More Pictures of Our Feet.

It's August, nothing left to talk about  
but June, when we were tan, and got along,  
instead of laughing at the girl who's not  
our friend or year—just some dumb stumbling pawn

the night keeps playing. *Dude, we need to go,*  
we say, then get the liquor from our trunk.  
We can't remember having so much fun,  
though most of us are almost way too drunk,

just texting, checking Tinder, taking shots  
of three guys showing off a halter top.  
Numbed up from rum and slushies, smoking bowls,  
we never wonder should we make them stop

instead of laughing at the girl, who's not—  
who's passed out, galaxies away by now,  
in front of everyone. But cross our hearts,  
it makes us sick, or will, admitting how

we can't remember having so much fun;  
that's just the sort of muddle summer was.  
It's August, nothing left to talk about  
but what will happen after nothing does.

Caki Wilkinson

38

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<sup>38</sup> Caki Wilkinson, "Testimony," [The Hopkins Review](#), collected in [The Survival Expo](#), Persea Books

## In the Future a Robot Will Take Your Job

It's not my job to make you happy though  
it was my job to make my last husband happy

despite the fact I was paying him through the nose  
with my student loans and sending him swan

bouquets at great expense, their intricately  
lettered placards pleading *Please don't hit me*

*again*. I still can't stop smoking. Sometimes  
it feels like I'm standing on that back porch

staring out at the lawn from my middle-aged  
face, squinting into all the gray hair looking

back at me from the clouds of my future: I am  
bones. Bones crack inside a body like glass

in a sack, rattle shards against the dresser  
drawers after a body is flung from

a bed. He'd been laid off. The toll this took  
made his face undertake a dance of tremors:

one eye atwiltch blinked, the other winked,  
stuck on its lie like a typewriter key stuck on

a letter. Now he is asleep. Darkness seeps  
from out the room into the hall. Hands press

air to meet the bed, feel it out in the soft black.  
Now I fold myself beside him: dreams wait

on lavender cusps of cloud-breeding gods—  
then two hands sudden press, elbow edges

jangle, my tailbone landing hard on wood.  
Why not just go ahead and fashion my coccyx

into a key chain? Stop blaming the economy.  
Who pays for husbands anyway? Mine needed

a job not to hit me. He lost his job. Then there  
were no jobs. In the future a robot will take his job.

It would take a robot to make him happy.  
It will take a robot to make his robot happy.

Cate Marvin

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<sup>39</sup> [Cate Marvin](#), "[In the Future a Robot Will Take Your Job](#)," collected in [Event Horizon](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Everyone Has an Old Neighborhood They Drift Back to in Dreams

They called me *Spike*, and not because of my hair. Everyone knew I was trying hard. All the cashiers on duty. Blue polyester vests behind the counter. Alma made us polish it even though it was not real wood. Lemon Pledge in archipelago. Soft-hit remakes on the radio. Hit after hit. Vibrant pink of my best rag. Evening shifts straddled midnight like a bar stool. You'd clock out on a fresh day, already ruined. We laughed at a lady buying six enemas and a box of red licorice. At the barrel of leaves that swirled in through automatic doors. Laughed when Old Jeffrey pretended he couldn't choose between cashiers. Sixteen dollars, all singles, all damp. One nickel. A separate bag for each item. In the employee parking lot, floodlights flooded a loading dock and nothing else. Night birds crossed in factory smoke. House lamps in the hills like a children's book with kids asleep in narrow beds.

Mary Biddinger

40

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<sup>40</sup> [Mary Biddinger](#), "[Everyone Has an Old Neighborhood They Drift Back to in Dreams](#)," [diode](#)

## Today's Alchemy

On a Top of the Pops from 1980,  
Phil Collins in his Hawaiian shirt  
dances awkwardly, lip synching,  
his bald spot flashing pink and blue.  
The couch I just bought is already  
wearing out and gray dust covers  
everything, even the sky and distant  
tangle of trees. Out the window I watch  
a new lamb unfold onto bent legs.  
I feel a pulley in my chest whenever  
I look at her movement, crumpled  
and blind, automatic. Her pupils  
are rectangular like the pupils  
of all prey. I could hunt her if  
I wanted to. But my natural instinct  
is a long Formica counter with a row  
of harmless ladies stalking their feelings,  
collapsing and stuck in their own black holes.  
Phil Collins, my flamingo in flight,  
my looped dancer of mediocrity: all I have  
is the external. Boys and girls on the greatest day  
of their lives dance and push each other  
to the stage as the camera swings up to blue  
lights before collapsing skin and young joy  
into me, their silent mannequin.

*Julia Story*  
41

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<sup>41</sup> [Julia Story](#), "[Today's Alchemy](#)," collected in [Spinster for Hire](#), [The Word Works](#)

## Foreign Affairs

Back in the city after my lover's funeral  
I met with a man who had treated me,  
  
during our months together, like a chore.  
He had just moved to the city to write poems,  
  
which he'd convinced me I shouldn't bother doing  
because nothing about my life was interesting.  
  
He was sorry for my loss, he said.  
He handed me a mug I'd left at his place,  
  
a serious gray mug sent by a magazine  
I used to pretend I enjoyed reading.  
  
He wanted my gratitude for bringing this mug  
across four states, my gratitude for remembering  
  
it was once mine. Clean, empty, it reminded me  
that for a long time all I could manage  
  
was to get high and fake orgasms and try  
not to die, which I am still learning how to do.

*Carolyn Oliver*  
42

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<sup>42</sup> [Carolyn Oliver](#), "[Foreign Affairs](#)," [The Commuter](#), collected in [Night Ocean](#), [Seven Kitchens Press](#)

## The Paper Anniversary (1)

Paper gowns are not as soft as cloth gowns are not as soft  
as silk      as milk      which is only soft until it sours

here in the wee hours I sulk      the bulk of my body  
my thin skin      the membrane of my weak brain

after the fanfare      the hoopla      the careful decisions  
sloppy incisions I write about the violets gone blue

the violence      that roses are red      that also pale yellow  
hello?      it's been one year      what have I to fear?

these queer balloons      pop      pop  
pop

*Nicole Callihan*  
43

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<sup>43</sup> [Nicole Callihan](#), "[The Paper Anniversary \(1\)](#)," collected in [This Strange Garment](#), [Terrapin Books](#)

## The Imperial Ambassador of the Infinite

One August afternoon  
he came back, after thirty years,  
and they stood in the garden briefly,  
no more than twenty minutes.  
We know she shaded her eyes  
with her hand, because someone saw her.  
He held his hat in his.  
We know not what they said  
and I never think of it, except  
when I see the windshield of a car  
smashed in the street, its silver  
loosed like the sea itself.  
Except when I run away from home  
by hiding under the bed.  
Except when I think being alone  
hasn't been invented yet,  
except for the mirror,  
and there there are two too,  
standing cold and damaged and drenched  
in their own awkwardness,  
which is the awkwardness of Mercury  
bringing a message to himself  
(after so many years!), and except  
when I see the bee,  
stoned out of his mind,  
leaving the flower forever.

*Mary Ruefle*

44

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<sup>44</sup> [Mary Ruefle](#), "[The Imperial Ambassador of the Infinite](#)," collected in *Indeed I Was Pleased with the World*, [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)



## Obit

The Doctors—died on August 3, 2015, surrounded by all the doctors before them and their eyes that should have been red but weren't. The Russian doctor knew death was near before anyone else, first said the word hospice, a word that sounds equally like hospital and spice. Which is it? To yearn for someone's quick death seems wrong. To go to the hospital cafeteria and hunch over a table of toast, pots of jam, butter glistening seems wrong. To want to extend someone's life who is suffering seems wrong. Do we want the orchid or the swan swimming in the middle of the lake? We can touch the orchid and it doesn't move. The orchid is our understanding of death. But the swan is death.

*Victoria Chang*  
45

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<sup>45</sup> [Victoria Chang](#), "[Obit \[The Doctors—died surrounded by\]](#)," [32 Poems](#), collected in [Obit](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Love Letter: Final Visitation

I come back to you  
in the interregnum of wisteria,  
    in the epoch of the armadillo's  
fetching leprosy: storm season, mold season, season of  
Savannah's ghosts rotting for  
    the sozzled gawkers. Parked in  
the public fountains, your banshees rattle  
their Marley chains, carry signs that read  
    *Will Work for Any*  
        *Human Sympathy.*  
But there's none left over:  
we blew, we consumed, we squandered, we lavished,  
we bounced that check high as a Super Ball and snickered  
as it leapt away.  
    O, we were numb, dumb, and increasingly  
wasted; put pigs in the Piggly Wiggly, did ravage  
and damage. We read the infected stories, mumbled them  
high at the lip of the Devil's Pool. What is a kiss  
    but the mouth's potential for wreckage?

I come back to you: yes,  
    wept for, wracked, and now unfamiliar—  
the cauldron's cold in the shed and I can't  
put a hand to my planchette, no matter where  
I look. Peace, peace, I free and undream you.  
    The priestess of nothing,  
        I am pleased to be plain.

*Erin Belieu*

46

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<sup>46</sup> Erin Belieu, "Love Letter: Final Visitation," *The New Guard*, collected in *Slant Six*, Copper Canyon Press

## Allegory

I loved the north. I remember that.  
The quality of light, yet I don't have the will  
to describe it. Thimbleberries,  
things out of fairy tales.  
Green water overpowering the night.  
That impersonal bashing sound.  
Cold fingers combing through stones.  
Looking for something. I don't remember  
what. Blue fingers. Lips.  
A blue garment I called my power shirt.  
Green-blue. Big enough it floated in the wind  
and barely touched me. Grief  
that I had to leave and everything  
leaving represented, an ache  
in my guts, work, a premonition, but still  
the belief I would one day return.  
It would all be here waiting for me,  
unchanged. But even the body  
of water grows tired of itself.

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I yearned only for what I had.  
I am tempted to list those things,  
but the time for listing is over.  
I'll mention that there was a monastery.  
Monks with long beards who made jam  
from wild berries and baked heavy  
loaves of bread. In their literature  
they wrote of winter as their season of suffering.  
There are worse things than winter, I wanted to say,  
handing them money for bread.  
I wanted to lift my shirt and show them my long scar.  
When I was still bleeding, I changed my tampon  
in the woods behind the monastery and left  
the used one behind like the scat of a wild animal.  
Blood in the air, the scent of it like wet pennies.  
Tearing into those loaves.  
The wind with its one-track mind.  
It had broken me down and starved me.

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It was a place filled with plotless stories,  
music without melody.  
How can I explain. I'm sure you've heard  
discordant music, but that's not what I mean.  
And you've read stories in which nothing happens.

Maybe composed of a series of low-grade epiphanies.  
Or flamboyant description that in the end comes to nothing.  
Sooner or later, those authors all died of syphilis.  
The tubercular ones were the meaning-makers,  
as if meaning would keep them alive.  
But meaning, in a gale, is the first to go.  
In the north, all forms stood for themselves.  
There was no need to fill them with anything.  
Chalices in which wine would be superfluous.  
And every moment a form, a string of tongueless bells.

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There is a poetry of rage and a poetry of hope.  
Each fuels the other, looks in the mirror and sees  
the other. Or wields the other. Isn't it funny  
to imagine hope, not much more than a toddler,  
wielding rage in its fist like a cudgel?  
When I was in college and working on a paper  
about Hawthorne's story "My Kinsman, Major  
Molineux," I had to find "cudgel" in a dictionary.  
We were to explicate the symbol of the cudgel.  
Later it would be the gold doubloon in *Moby-Dick*.  
What is "explicate," I wondered. What is "cudgel"?  
Dictionaries then were musty and heavy and old.  
You had to go to them. They did not come to you.  
When I was north, I read books with flimsy pages.  
Books without symbols. Only facts.  
And photographs, not drawings.  
I did not have to rise to them, or kneel at their feet.  
When the house burned, struck  
by lightning, they burned with it.

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The air in the north was cold and thin.  
There were enemies but not tyrants then.  
Ghost towns and towns. Ships and shipwrecks.  
Ships and mirages of ships.  
Who could tell the difference?  
A herd of white deer whose ghosts,  
after the deer were shot, looked as they had in life,  
white, their eyes rimmed pink.

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Sandhill cranes flew over,  
their calls like bones rattling in a wooden box.  
It seemed as if one gravedigger covered the whole region,  
his face bashed in by his own shovel.  
At a bar called Chum's I shot

pool with the locals, drank myself under the table.  
Whatever filled my glass was colorless and lethal.  
No one spoke to me, as people in the north  
did not speak to strangers, and I was a stranger.  
One murky country song played over and over  
until I began to believe it was the only song in the world.  
During the day, the light in the trees was green-gold.  
That's all I'm going to say about it.  
There are too many poems about light.

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Whatever the north was, I miss it.  
My life since has grown thick without it.  
Thick, like sorghum syrup, with experience.  
Heavy with memory's tonnage, such a drag, such a load.  
It has no place here. Be, or leave.  
I wish I was less, a recipe composed of a single ingredient.  
I once knew a singer with a voice like that.  
The high, thin sound of the white plastic flutes  
we were forced to play in elementary school.  
Each note the same as the last,  
and each instrument the same as the next,  
like a lineup of factory-raised chicken eggs.  
The thin-voiced singer moved to Ireland.  
Bartended. Smoked a pack a day.  
Some would say her voice was ruined,  
husky now, dragging itself through the lower registers.  
Many thought we looked alike but I couldn't see it.  
Now that her long hair is frizzed by time,  
her garden unruly, her hem scraping the floor,  
and her voice raw and low as something that echoes up  
from an open pit mine, I see the resemblance.

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In the north, there was not much to buy and little to sell  
but for bread, and jam, and meat pies wrapped in wax paper.  
I collected materials from the woods floor,  
and using a toy hammer and tiny gold nails  
built a boat that would carry a message out into water.  
I enjoyed building it and composing the message,  
which was not unlike every other message sent into water.  
It was a child's message, really.  
I rolled it into a scroll, and encased it in a plastic film cannister,  
and attached it to the boat with waterproof wood glue,  
but as soon as I launched it into deep water,  
and watched it drift and bob toward sunset,  
I lost faith in it, or interest.  
Once it sailed away, it seemed to have little to do with me,  
or nothing at all to do with me.

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During the plague,  
which has become a way of life,  
I collected the ends of bars of Ivory soap,  
worn too thin for bathing or hand-washing,  
but useful maybe later when things like soap  
begin to disappear off grocery shelves,  
or what's left of the money dries up.  
I imagine tethering the scraps together  
with rubber bands I've saved and lassoed  
to the glass door handle that leads to the attic.  
One long winter of the plague a raccoon lived  
there, in the attic. I could hear its claws as it wandered  
in circles over my head. My ceiling, its floor.  
I know you've lived it, too. You understand  
that you can cross a hundred bridges  
but there is no way to go north again,  
by which I mean it's time to put to bed,  
like the row of the giant's children  
in their matching nightcaps,  
our allegories of innocence.

*Diane Seuss*  
47

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<sup>47</sup> [Diane Seuss](#), "[Allegory](#)," [Poetry](#)

## Night of the Living, Night of the Dead

When the dead rise in movies they're hideous  
and slow. They stagger uphill toward the farmhouse  
like drunks headed home from the bar.  
Maybe they only want to lie down inside  
while some room spins around them, maybe that's why  
they bang on the windows while the living  
hammer up boards and count out shotgun shells.  
The living have plans: to get to the pickup parked  
in the yard, to drive like hell to the next town.  
The dead with their leaky brains,  
their dangling limbs and ruptured hearts,  
are sick of all that. They'd rather stumble  
blind through the field until they collide  
with a tree, or fall through a doorway  
like they're the door itself, sprung from its hinges  
and slammed flat on the linoleum. That's the life  
for a dead person: *wham, wham, wham*  
until you forget your name, your own stinking  
face, the reason you jolted awake  
in the first place. Why are you here,  
whatever were you hoping as you lay  
in your casket like a dumb clarinet?  
You know better now. The soundtrack's depressing  
and the living hate your guts. Come closer  
and they'll show you how much. *Wham, wham, wham,*  
you're killed again. Thank God this time  
they're burning your body, thank God  
it can't drag you around anymore  
except in nightmares, late-night reruns  
where you lift up the lid, and crawl out  
once more, and start up the hill toward the house.

Kim Addonizio

48

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<sup>48</sup> Kim Addonizio, "Night of the Living, Night of the Dead," *Chelsea*, collected in [Tell Me](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Testimonial

It's difficult to care, much, for so much death.  
Look, my whole side aches, more than  
all the days I have should engender. But,  
here I am in this fried air and the melody  
is Beyoncé and in an hour it will be time  
to go do this job that nobody cares for.  
Not the manatee whose flesh was razored  
open by a cheap boat's propeller.  
What ruin! It's amazing the sea exists at all.  
That in it are any radiant fish. I want  
to apologize to them but what a stupid thing.  
The other night in the news were  
images of birds dying in a sick heap.  
Dead in feathered circles  
atop black, wet sand and island rock,  
and watching the footage I thought  
how the filmmakers obey a Prime Directive,  
of sorts. Saving nothing. Never  
interfering. No injections that glow and gloss.  
I was this morning singing  
an old song from a past life  
in which I was alarming and vast  
and my politics were just  
depressing, and since then,  
since the raw dawn and its sad hymn,  
I'm wondering why any of us keep on.  
Out on the warm ocean  
there is an island of plastic refuse  
that is the size of Texas,  
and that fact is way beyond anything that feels real.  
My favorite show was canceled.  
Nobody was watching.  
Besides me. I glowed before it like a mirror.  
I woke up thinking about  
dead lawyers and scarred antagonists  
and what it means to invest  
one's whole heart in a fiction.  
I am telling you the truth. I am telling you a secret.  
A holy thing. A spell.  
A password. I love you. Knock knock. Who is still there?

*Paul Guest*

49

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<sup>49</sup> [Paul Guest](#), "[Testimonial](#)," [The Kenyon Review](#)



## The Village Sparkles

*for Susan Wheeler*

In German, Vagina is always capitalized.  
It is subject, therefore, important.

In America, who knows what is important.  
Like Roberts or Vagina or Julia Roberts and Vagina.

Actually, this is a dodge. My hand hurts.  
My heart aches. Intemperate spices breach summer air

and yet, I blush. Nutmeg, cinnamon. Who can handle Spring or  
Penis in Winter. Cardamom, ginger. Garlic for Luck.

Who cares about Dream?  
Important, subject.

Action. Where is action? If we weep too much,  
we go crazy. If we don't weep, we go crazy.

Crazy, he calls me. What a great line.  
Willie Nelson looks like tobacco spit in snow.

But what a great line. Crazy, who calls me crazy?  
The one I want hollers for me, STELLA.

STELLA walking the floors, diva in the making,  
clicking my Italian boots' steel-edged heels.

Vagma or Vocation. Vaginal, vocational.  
Love or Lust or Limits at the gas station.

Everything reckons on days when heaven releases perfume.  
Come claim my loving heart, I call to him.

I want you funny and hungry  
and wrinkled with sweat.

Sunday morning, after Church  
the Village sparkles. I tell a good friend.  
You know, *I can smell men*.

*Patricia Spears Jones*

50

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<sup>50</sup> [Patricia Spears Jones](#), "[The Village Sparkles](#)," *The World*, collected in [Femme du Monde](#), [Tia Chucha Press](#)

## Tunnel

The wind blows through  
the chain-linked yards of Allston Street:

It lifts the neighbor's forsythia into a Ferris wheel  
of light and tips the girl aloft for the first time.

Now the petals follow her  
along the cellar stairs in a yellow yelp

of March, passing the candy dish, filled  
to overflowing by invisible hands—

ominous bullseyes, endless M&M's;  
to the first floor tenants newly married;

the glamorous man with a green anchor  
on his arm

renames her "pea-nut" and drives diesel trucks,  
which excites the child, tremendously.

In the wind tunnel, now their living room,  
the couple talk as if they live  
among horses and lobsterpots.

As they embrace her,

she knows this is the encyclopedia

of her real world. The life of undershirts  
and pipe smoke,

penny candy. Love so fresh it appears  
palpable.

The wind of her heart now  
follows her up more stairs to the other mother,  
other father, then drifts down

hallways so grim it seems an aunt in Cincinnati  
has just died

and then nine cousins drowned, too.

The wind follows her through the attic of the dead  
where she touches their beautiful

chins with her thumbs. It is peaceful here  
when she walks through herself  
    leaning above the current's edge.

*Susan Rich*  
51

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<sup>51</sup> [Susan Rich](#), "[Tunnel](#)," [Alaska Quarterly Review](#), collected in [Cloud Pharmacy](#), [White Pine Press](#)

## The Optimism of French Toast

No matter how many years since  
the first bite passed my lips, that business  
of eggs and day-old bread, ribbon of syrup,  
fireflies of butter sparking my tongue's buds,  
I think of my Acadian ancestors  
landing on the shores of Nova Scotia, dragging  
logs from the deep woods, fashioning windows,  
hanging laundry from two oars dug into sand—  
the flags of domesticity flayed by the wind.  
I see the fruits of their labor rise up  
from the marshes: beets, parsnips, cabbages  
and corn, and the wheat they ground  
to powder and baked into bread.  
And the chickens shook out egg after egg  
we broke into shallow bowls, beat  
with a spoon, each thick slice dipped  
into that loom of albumen, chalazae and yolk,  
then laid on a scrim of grease in the pan  
where it sizzled its solitary song.  
How could these French be  
considered a scourge, their houses  
burned to the ground they had worked,  
forced to take the tangled circuitry  
of dirt roads with nothing but what  
they could carry on their backs? No time  
for funerals, no place to go. And yet  
here I am at my kitchen table listening  
to Clifton Chenier on the radio, daughter  
of a people who refused to die: sacks  
of wheat on their shoulders, spoon  
in a belt loop, sugar sprinkled in a pant cuff,  
a sleeping chicken hidden under a coat.

*Dorianne Laux*

52

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<sup>52</sup> [Dorianne Laux](#), "[The Optimism of French Toast](#)," *Résonance*, collected in *Life on Earth*, [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Gosha Rubchinskiy x Timur Novikov

In the image it appears to be summer. June  
wanting the land with its whole green mouth.

Boy models lean like Baroque furniture,  
objects for fainting. History, a bad streak, a thin line

like their lips, mostly closed, but in some images,  
slightly parted—small pink, half-no,

which can mean a thousand words, though,  
I think most often: *why*.

In *Untitled* by Timur Novikov  
a tiny, literal tractor discovers the surreal,

and it is a field that swims.  
Everything is so delicate in this world,

I imagine God would be a spoon.  
Even the infinite rendered a girl, snow.

*Alisha Dietzman*

53

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<sup>53</sup> [Alisha Dietzman](#), "[Gosha Rubchinskiy x Timur Novikov](#)," *Pain*, collected in [Sweet Movie](#), Beacon Press

## Heart Valve

Every evening at 5:00 pm, the third wife would raise a bottle of liquor above her head and yell *Ding-dong!* It was five o'clock somewhere and somewhere was here. She was the kind of person who had heavy, brown ceramic mugs shaped like Moai on hand at her homemade makeshift outdoor bar; the kind of person who garnished drinks with fruit chunks and paper umbrellas; the kind that stocked the cabinets with pineapple juice, grenadine, and apricot schnapps. And now she was dead. The woman who put tiny, decorative, shell-shaped soaps in the bathrooms when company came over was dead, and she had left us alone with our father. She had been pulling the tubes out of her arms for several days, screaming *I'm no longer beautiful let me die*. They put the tubes back in each time, of course, but soon enough she went under and was gone. Without her, our father was difficult to wrangle. He was a complicated man. The rules were different. He had a bad heart valve, which made it difficult for his heart to pump, but he also had anemia, which thinned his blood and kept him alive. Cancer was keeping my father alive. He still said, *You're an abomination*, but I could deflect him more easily now. *I know, dad, but would you like half a sandwich?* It was enough to change the subject. He wanted to keep living in the house, so he did. And since I was living in the guesthouse and helping out, he reinherited me. Everything was fine until the night I came home and found him in the living room, stuck in an Eames chair. He had been stuck for hours. The next day we started visiting assisted living facilities. My brother left New York to help. He moved into the house with me. I had already claimed the master bedroom with the Jacuzzi and walk-in closet, the glassed-in gym, and the side patio; he took the office, maid's room, dining room, and library. He turned the office into his studio. I made a studio in the garage, under the guest house. We shared the kitchen and the pool. Our father had a single room at assisted living, but it was large. We brought over furnishings from the house. It was a strange edit, a condensed personality. Now he had comrades. He charmed the ladies in the dining room. He met a woman who had also been a lawyer and they started sneaking into each other's rooms at night. They held hands at lunch. They took naps together and listened to books on tape. I think it was the first time he had actually fallen in love. She managed to stay alive for seven months. After she died, he moved to hospice. He was angry and extraordinarily sad, and it had done him in. I did not visit him, he wanted to spend the time with the other son. It was the right decision. He wanted to be buried and not cremated. My brother bought him a new suit and new shoes, selected a casket. The executor said the suit was a waste of money. The rest of the formalities had already been decided. We carried out his wishes as instructed. His lawyer made sure we did.

Richard Siken

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<sup>54</sup> Richard Siken, "Heart Valve," [TriQuarterly](#)

## Absence

There are men and women huddled in rooms tonight  
discussing dark matter, the non-stuff, the anti-  
things that fill the universe. Imagine writing  
that grant. Their children are of relatively  
specific dimension, their houses occupy  
nearly calculable space. Seven have dogs.  
One dreams of playing in the British Open  
nude. Yes, exactly like your father.  
Of special interest is the woman in an office  
in Princeton in a swivel chair looking  
through a window at the pond where Einstein's  
said to have sat and thought about sailboats,  
the little ones German children race on Sundays.  
She whispers *Bolivia*, a word she caught  
on a map earlier and hasn't been able to shake.  
She has never been there. She has never left  
the east, finds Bar Harbor exotic, thinks  
of lobsters as the first wave of an alien invasion.  
Together with a colleague she is trying to total  
the mass of everything, the mental equivalent  
of 27 clowns cramming into a '60s vintage Volvo.  
What she likes about the word Bolivia  
beside the sexual things it does to the tongue  
is her feeling that anything you do there  
might cause people to dance. She would like  
to dance now. If most of what exists  
can't be seen or spread on toast  
or wedged under a door in summer  
when you want to fall asleep on the couch  
to a wind that began somewhere near Topeka,  
it's acceptable to dance on a desk in an office  
paid for by the Rockefeller Foundation  
in an attempt to resurrect that once  
good name. And even as she pictures herself  
clearing and scaling the desk,  
she is striding to the board and brushing  
away a series of calculations  
and replacing them with another, more  
elegant run, adding at the end the curlicue  
of infinity, which normalizes the equation,  
which makes her noodling momentarily right  
with God and explains how a pinhole  
could have the density of a universe, how half  
of Jupiter could lie balled in your shoe.  
Bolivia, she says, spinning. Bolivia,  
she repeats, grabbing Bill Morrison  
by the collar. Bolivia, he answers,  
embracing the odd particulars of revelation,

kissing her hand in a burlesque of manners,  
knowing it's just made chalk beautiful,  
aligned the glyphs of mass and spin  
into a schematic of everything. Then briefly,  
looking over his shoulder at the board,  
she realizes in essence she's trapped  
nothing, not the stars but the black leading  
between the light, the same absence  
she feels at night when looking up a force  
like wind rises through her body, leaving  
no trace except the need to be surrounded  
by anything more comforting than space.

*Bob Hicok*  
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<sup>55</sup> [Bob Hicok](#), "[Absence](#)," *Boulevard*, collected in [Plus Shipping](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)



## Essay on Need

By the third night of each disappearance I grew desperate.  
I imagined her running. I imagined her among wild dogs

making offerings: Bic lighter, crabgrass.  
Howling to seal the trade. Meanwhile I slept

with her army jacket over my head.  
Meanwhile I looked for her

in the faces of babies. I knew this was the price  
for the daily impersonations, living

somewhere without snow, without  
parents, phone calls with the landlord and the city

and the bank, thrift store mattress and car driven away  
in a truck, and I knew if she came back I couldn't ask.

So the washing machine, the mechanical landscape.  
So the pancakes turning black on the stove.

I woke up and woke up. I tried to get on with it.  
Washed the sheets, burst the tomatoes.

Front door broke and electric's due I wanted to say.  
Come back I see you in all our spoons.

*Gaia Rajan*  
56

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<sup>56</sup> [Gaia Rajan](#), "[Essay on Need](#)," [swamp pink](#)

## Ode on the Brides of India

Ketaki tells me that her husband's mother and grandmother insisted she have her nose pierced for the wedding so she could wear a family heirloom, a gold hoop the size of a tea saucer, and throughout the four days of the wedding her nose was bleeding, and she couldn't eat because her face hurt so much, and when the photos came back her mother-in-law said, "Why weren't you smiling?" and she wanted to say, "Because I didn't want the blood to run down my face," but when her photo was placed with the other daughters-in-law they, too, had the same look, and then there was the matter of astrology, a bride and groom having to match in 18 out of 36 areas, and Ketaki and her husband scored an eight the first time, but after bribing the astrologer they squeaked by with 18. Ketaki told us about a woman who was told her husband would die in two years, but she married him anyway and he dropped dead in the allotted time. A few weeks later on a train to Jaipur, Una tells me about the morning of her wedding, waking early and her uncle placing neem leaves on her body and covering her face with turmeric paste for purification. As soon as he left, she jumped into the shower and washed everything off. Taran says her Sikh wedding was much less complicated than a Hindu wedding. The bride wears red, because white is for widows, and black is just plain bad luck. Weddings always take place early in the day. The bride and groom walk around the holy book seven times. Taran's husband says Indian weddings are a hedge against divorce. They are so difficult no one would ever want to do it twice. Taran says the bride's mother gives the groom a coconut, which he takes to the wedding and puts under a fire, and that's when luck begins. But what is luck? Before it was outlawed, a widow would jump on her husband's funeral pyre to join him in the afterlife, and then there is *joyhar*, or mass suicide, as in the case of Queen Padmini, who jumped on a fire with all her ladies when a rival king, who lusted after her, attacked her husband's fort and was about to breach the walls, and I think of the horoscope my sister did for me and my husband for a wedding present, and it said we were an incandescent match except for raising children, so thank you, Margaret Sanger, for helping me dodge that bullet, and while I'm at it, thank you, India, for your women who work in the fields in saris of magenta and gold, like bright jewels in the sun and the chic women of Mumbai, clicking along on heels, but also the girls who are sold to families that work them like slaves or the woman killed by her husband because he wanted to take a new wife and that wife, too, because they say a second murder is easier than the first. O brides everywhere, what is it we hope

for, what is it we want? It's hard to tell, and sometimes  
we make these choices before we know what we  
are doing, and those of us who hold back, we don't know what  
we want either, but it's something we can't see, but we know  
it's out there somewhere, though there's a feeling in our minds  
of a life so free that it might not be possible in a body  
with all its rivers and continents of desire, but there it is,  
and if we can dream it, maybe it can come true.

*Barbara Hamby*  
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<sup>57</sup> [Barbara Hamby](#), "[Ode on the Brides of India](#)," [Literary Matters](#), [Holoholo](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

from "The World Doesn't End"

We were so poor I had to take the place of the bait in the mousetrap. All alone in the cellar, I could hear them pacing upstairs, tossing and turning in their beds. "These are dark and evil days," the mouse told me as he nibbled my ear. Years passed. My mother wore a cat-fur collar which she stroked until its sparks lit up the cellar.

~

Things were not as black as somebody painted them. There was a pretty child dressed in black and playing with two black apples. It was either a girl dressed as a boy, or a boy dressed as a girl. Whatever, it had small white teeth. The landscape outside its window had been blackened with a heavy and coarse paint brush. It was all very teleological, except when the child stuck out its red tongue.

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The stone is a mirror which works poorly. Nothing in it but dimness. Your dimness or its dimness, who's to say? In the hush your heart sounds like a black cricket.

*Charles Simic*

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<sup>58</sup> [Charles Simic](#), "[The World Doesn't End \[We were so poor.... Things were not as black.... The stone is a mirror....\]](#)," collected in [The World Doesn't End](#), [Ecco](#)

Like a cracked cup of milk, the swan leaks  
white on the wet dock. It's hard to know  
if this is normal. I'm worried, and ashamed  
to be. "Sensitive," it was called by the family,  
in the hushed tones of a fatal diagnosis.  
My grandfather, also sensitive, was a "great  
reader," they said, a crease in his cuffed pants,  
fedora on his head in all weathers. He retired  
early from the Coty factory, lungs clotted  
with sweet-smelling powder. Our rounds  
included the library, the church, the river,  
and the shoe store, each equally holy,  
he and the salesperson zealously attentive  
to the room needed for my toes to grow.  
As he aged, he drank less and talked more,  
played Simon & Garfunkel's "Parsley,  
Sage, Rosemary, and Thyme" on his Victrola,  
cooled tea in a saucer, drew in his shaky  
hand what looked like boats with crosses  
inside. "Keelson," he wrote underneath,  
"Use this as a keelson." He'd dreamed it,  
he said, many times, God gave him the vision.  
How could I understand? I never saw  
my immigrant grandparents exchange a warm  
word, not a touch, not a glance, but I worried  
them, joined them in that worry. They  
sent me to drama camp once to help me  
"come out of my shell." The teacher said  
I had the melancholy look of an Audrey  
Hepburn, only less "buoyant." Teachers  
used to say, when you misspelled a word,  
"Look it up in the dictionary." How can you  
look it up in the dictionary if you can't spell  
it? Before the internet, nothing and no one could  
ask you, "Do you mean SWAN LAKE?"  
when you looked up SWAN LEAK. Now,  
when a Swiss friend texts "Let's go for perch  
in Morges," my heart leaps with the poetry of it,  
like a fish on the line, like the invisible keelsons  
bobbing toward the dock. Look it up: you can  
listen to a French speaker pronounce *Morges*,  
see Audrey Hepburn's Swiss home nearby,  
memorize the French words for tea, yogurt,  
and cherries, which I long to buy  
at market each day, and which, every day  
as I practice, tumble from my mouth like  
body parts from a dump truck. How familiar,  
how reassuring I envision the puzzled, pitying,

mildly disgusted looks of incomprehension on the vendors' faces to be. Which is why I stopped speaking in the first place, and would sooner go hungry than ask to be understood.

*Kathy Fagan*  
59

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<sup>59</sup> [Kathy Fagan](#), "[Keelson](#)," [swamp pink](#), collected in [Bad Hobby](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

## Mystery of Jerky

What I choose to eat, at a BP station in Nebraska,  
is a thin, reddish- brown tube of meat product  
I discovered shrink-wrapped and hanging  
between the wiper blades and tire gauges  
on a countertop above the engine coolant.

Why I or anyone would eat this is not clear.

The Plains Indians, the buffalo hunters,  
cut the heart from a fresh kill and ate it  
raw, hoping the great beast's courage  
would pass into them.

But as I stand here  
in the air- conditioned gas station,  
chewing on this tube of what might  
once have been meat, I can assure you  
that is not what is happening.

*George Bilgere*  
60

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<sup>60</sup> [George Bilgere](#), "[Mystery of Jerky](#)," collected in [Central Air](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

I'm Smarter than This Feeling, but Am I?

I watch your film about fisting: orifice as cave,  
as grave, as starlit wormhole dug in space.  
You're obsessed by interiority.  
By the drunk shipwreck of it. By our inside rivers  
so alien, we might as well call them Sweden or Pluto or 1973  
and what's the difference, all of them are out of reach.  
I know we're both smarter than this feeling  
because we have talked about desire and her little games.  
I cry easily as I watch. You're old school.  
You want what O'Hara wanted, I think, which is a kind of boundlessness  
that won't kill anyone. Edging. You don't believe in bodies.  
Everyone is dust, condensed by circumstances.  
You see what I was before I was a was. An am.  
What's your thing with smut, I ask.  
You say it's not smut, it's a love story.  
To be taken apart is as important as being put together.  
Near-annihilation reminds you of a limit  
and ask yourself, who do you trust at your limit?  
At a party last night in Chinatown, I invent you  
walking through the door. It is warm and I smoke  
a cigarette on the balcony. Everyone is a producer  
and talking about Kathy Acker and what would I say  
if I could? That I want our years to keep meeting.  
I don't want 1973 or a failed planet or even Sweden.  
Instead of saying this, I ask about your film.  
We put the art between us because the art exists  
and we do not. This is called sublimation.  
We puppet our meat in the grey twilight  
of the real world and I pretend  
I'm not speaking to Time.

*Megan Fernandes*

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<sup>61</sup> [Megan Fernandes](#), "[I'm Smarter than This Feeling, but Am I?](#)," collected in [I Do Everything I'm Told](#), Tin House Books



## On Dark Days, I Imagine My Parents' Wedding Video

My mother, Anita Bryant, waves to the cameras  
without looking at the men behind them, keeping her chastity  
intact, unassailable as her perfect coiffure, dark  
as coffee, the white saucer of her face. The news  
conference is a whirl of men and microphones. *Save  
the Children* blaring on a banner behind her.  
I am waiting to be born, a child unlike others,  
one my mother would not save. The reporters'  
blazers are plaid, unbuttoned; he's disguised  
like them, the man approaching the dais,  
my father. I love my mother, innocent, smiling  
at the softball questions, I like the hiding in plain  
sight that the man and the Anita are doing  
before they become my parents. I like knowing  
more than the camera. And here is the moment,  
their kiss: the man slaps a pie square in Anita's face.  
She hadn't seen him coming. She was saying,  
*What they want is the right to propose to our children  
that theirs is an acceptable life.* Then it's time for cake.  
I like his hate which hates her back. She is my mother  
because she says, *At least it's a fruit pie*, then begins  
to sob. I like watching her dissolve,  
thirty years ago now, my father dead, buried,  
and no one remembers his name.

James Allen Hall

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<sup>62</sup> James Allen Hall, "On Dark Days, I Imagine My Parents' Wedding Video," *The Iowa Review*, collected in *Romantic Comedy*, Four Way Books

## I Have Cried Off All My Makeup

on a Tuesday. The marching band  
sweating on the dry grass below the clock tower  
disgorges its spit valves, primes the batons  
for maximum sincerity. I huddle behind  
my office door in the dark. In the hallway,  
Margot is looking for a stapler.  
She knocks on all the doors.  
She cannot be satisfied, and for the first time,  
I understand her, her wiglet askew, eyeliner  
cracked up in crow's feet. Margot doesn't want  
your mini stapler, your tot stapler, your pocket  
stapler, Jeff—she needs  
security, has worked too hard  
for it all to fall apart. I hold my CV  
as proof I am real. It's true I am not  
exactly living in my car, but it is also true  
I am not exactly living anywhere else.  
I've forgotten what's in the boxes  
I marked with my name  
and what could bring me to need  
what's inside. I spirit into the swank  
and seedy, a diplomat brokering accords  
with desire. Men have trouble guessing my age  
which makes it hard for them to know  
in which way to dismiss me. Each twilight  
I pull out a map to sleep, drive  
down truant streets and kids with night  
in their eyes. Me a mouth in search of words.  
Toledo's teeth of glass and wood.  
Without mountains I don't know where I am  
and wind to the river, ask its banks  
what it is they are hungry for. Is it me?  
Is it my children? Is this where my own  
have gone? I'm forgetting if I remembered  
to make them. I am beloved  
and only the river knows my name.  
My head is underwater.  
On the banks, children wave.  
Their parents shout *good luck*.

Erin Adair-Hodges

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<sup>63</sup> Erin Adair-Hodges, "[I Have Cried Off All My Makeup](#)," [Poetry Northwest](#), collected in [Every Form of Ruin](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

## Sex Talk

“After a fight, men want to have sex, but I don’t,” my mother said.  
She glanced at undergraduate me from the driver’s seat as if a membrane  
had been breached and asked, “Do you?”

I wanted to change the subject.  
We were returning from the mall through the stony suburb

where the model lived, the one who said, “Nothing comes between me  
and my Calvins,” where the fire department floods the common  
every winter for skating, creating warty ice ungroomed by Zambonis,  
grass snagged in its skin like ingrown hairs. My mother kept looking  
at me, her eye a sideways question mark, tricky liquid liner painted  
along the lid, pupil unrelenting.

Everyone in the family except  
my mother owned their own lockable room. She had to read her Harlequins  
out in the open like a gazelle. We stalked through, asking and asking:

“Where is the,” “Why can’t I,” “Help me.” Nightly, her shirtless husband  
arrived with a pump-jar of Jergens, demanding she moisturize his back,

scaly from chlorine, but I knew—spy crouching on the stairs,  
fingertips brushing wallpaper embossed with creamy trees,

its surface all bubbles and seams—what he was after.

Once, at a modernism conference, a guy chased me around the canapés

while lecturing me on Marianne Moore’s asexuality.  
I knew my mother didn’t like sex, but I never asked

was it generally or just sex with my father. Nothing  
gets between me and my shame.

I don’t know what Moore wanted,

just that she wrote cryptic poems under her mother’s surveillance.

Heterosexual marriage: she, too, disliked it. She was nearly sixty  
when her mother died.

Now, I know death’s intimacy.

How honesty frightens me. My mother is everywhere:  
cells lodged in my body, invisible flakes of skin on sweaters,

a baggie of ashes on the bookshelf.

Not after a fight.

Until adrenaline burns off, I'm hot the wrong way. Clenched.

I hope she knew what an orgasm feels like. (During my first,  
a rainbow tree grew between me and my eyelids, privately.)

She said to us, over her book, "No, I don't want  
to hug you goodnight."

*Lesley Wheeler*

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<sup>64</sup> [Lesley Wheeler](#), "[Sex Talk](#)," [The Gettysburg Review](#)

## Nights at Ruby's

Jane leaned toward us across the table at Ruby's  
to make a point about a book. This was 1954  
and her point was sharp. Her nose was sharp  
in a good way, this was a type of beauty,  
this was beauty with edge. Jane's fingers were long  
tapping the table in 1954 at Ruby's  
to make her excellent unexpected point about a book

and there were no other tables, no other cafes,  
no other streets that could matter at all  
as we were so smart-funny together  
saying "lizard wisdom" and "black umbrellas of fate"  
and "the motif motif" and "Ginger breaks free  
in Chapter Three." There was no place else.

And so

if you speak of Wendy with two-color hair  
leaning across some table at Como's in 2001  
to make some arguably cogent point about some derivative book  
in 2001, for godsake, I can barely hear you,  
you speak from behind so many scrims of gauze  
with your little voice so thinned and vagued  
by the wrongness of it not coming from Ruby's in 1954—

I want to feel embarrassed for you  
as you lean forward claiming some Wendy was so smart  
in Dobo's or Como's in 2001,  
2001 a year so disastrously unimportant!  
You say Wendy's hands hilariously shaped a plot in air  
and the five syllables of "hilariously" sound so presumptuous,  
so exorbitant, so unweighed, so deeply uninformed,  
you actually say that in 2001 Wendy's eyes "sparkled"  
as she called some book *Esther Goes Wester on the Retro Metro*—  
that's a tinsel kind of sparkle, it wipes off in a blink  
but you can't see why. Please don't talk so loud.  
You and your zippy friends,

you're drowning the beauty of 1954  
and you can't even hear the ship going under  
and it's me, what meant me, what I meant to know as me

so I am going to wake up early each morning  
and think of sarcastic things to say to keep you small.

Mark Halliday

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<sup>65</sup> Mark Halliday, "Nights at Ruby's," [Black Warrior Review](#), collected in [Jab](#), The University of Chicago Press

from “Act Two. This Tide of Blood”

4. Azriel

*for Zaka*

Because someone has to pick up the pieces  
of G-d. We get the call & don neon vests

to sort the flesh from flesh. There is a kindness  
in looking. To bring even a finger to burial.

Here is a human bomb. Here is a wedding hall.  
Now scrape the bride & groom gently from the walls.

They scatter higher—onto trees, roofs, balconies.  
A ladder to gather them up, to put them together

like a puzzle. Something pushes them to do this.  
No matter what they have done, each human

in the image of G-d. A baby strapped in a stroller  
ID'd by the stroller. There is a kindness.

Everybody wants his company to grow.  
May HaShem help us go out of business.

*Philip Metres*  
66

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<sup>66</sup> Philip Metres, “[Act Two. This Tide of Blood \[4. Azriel\]](#),” collected in [Shrapnel Maps](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Elegy

Think of nothing so much  
as light thinking of where  
it will hide when all  
the bulbs have gone out,  
and follow Vita Sackville-West's advice  
to plant flowers you can recognize  
in the dark because *elegance*,  
said Madame Errazuriz, *means*  
*elimination*, a room edited  
to make room for more  
room so that every object stands  
in relief. *I have been memorizing*  
*the room*, Queen Christina replied; *in the future,*  
*in my memory, I shall live*  
*a great deal in this room*. Inviolable,  
really, like the violence,  
the violins in the andante of Schubert's  
fourteenth string quartet, the *v* sound,  
Poe claimed, is the most  
beautiful of all because it is  
the sound heard in violets  
and viols, although I have come  
to prefer the sound of *x* because it marks  
the spot in *exile* and *exit*, exquisite  
and exact. Before she was  
Harriet Brown, Greta Garbo  
was Greta Gustafsson. Once  
you were here. Now you are  
the most elegant of all, the future  
as we imagine it  
to be: a beautiful room, vacant  
except for the blonde light  
flooding its face, like Garbo  
staring ahead at the end  
of *Queen Christina*, already  
thinking of nothing, no longer  
needing her director's advice.

Angie Estes  
67

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<sup>67</sup> Angie Estes, "Elegy," *FIELD*, collected in *Chez Nous*, Oberlin College Press

## The Unrecorded Conversation

*Isolation is the indispensable component  
of human happiness.  
—Glenn Gould*

Maybe genius is its own nourishment,  
I wouldn't know.  
Gould didn't need much more than Bach  
whom he devoured  
and so beautifully gave back  
we forgave him his withdrawal from us.  
Food frightened him, as people did,  
though it was known he loved  
to call Barbra Streisand at 3 a.m.  
He must have liked hearing in her voice  
the presence of sleep, the slightest variation.

Jeanne Moreau was in her late sixties  
when I heard her say she lived alone,  
adding, *by choice*— a smile in her words  
missed by the interviewer who pushed  
ahead, pleased to let us hear a woman  
who'd learned to live *sans* men. "What  
do you like best about your solitude?"  
asked the interviewer. "Ah," Moreau said,  
"inviting people into it," and I was Jules  
or maybe Jim and in love again.

Gould retreated to his studio  
at thirty-one, keeping his distance  
from microphones and their germs.  
He needed to control sound, edit out  
imperfection. His were the only hands  
that touched the keys, turned the dials.

In my dream, Moreau calls, inviting him in.  
It's easy for Gould to refuse,  
which he does in French,  
one of his languages, and with charm,  
one of the vestiges of the life  
he can no longer bear to live.

*Stephen Dunn*

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<sup>68</sup> [Stephen Dunn](#), "[The Unrecorded Conversation](#)," [The Yale Review](#), collected in [Everything Else in the World](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)



## Call & Response

Between the living  
& the dining rooms  
the woman screams

& the girl who hears asks me  
to ask the woman to please stop screaming  
to please stop begging for her mother's water  
a sip of her mother—

*I am thirsty*, she tells the girl  
but what can we do? Trace her back  
to the Jew dressed in gingham  
who killed herself in our kitchen  
after the war? I cannot hear her

as my breasts fill & let down a river made  
for another mouth.

Maya Pindyck  
69

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<sup>69</sup> [Maya Pindyck](#), “[Call & Response](#),” collected in [Impossible Belonging](#), [Anhinga Press](#)

## The Way Mirrors Happen

Going up the stairs of your house with laundry  
like one of the washers  
of the Magdalene asylums for fallen women,  
you pass the tall, always unclear mirror  
and glance quickly at yourself, meeting your eyes,  
like a waitress commiserating by sight  
with the only other waitress  
at the steakhouse of off-duty men.  
A whole needlecraft passes between you,  
a fleeting empathy that hardens and endures.

Your job has become a conduit of static electricity.  
Wrinkled tea towel, faded underwear.  
You are both undercover  
in the Domestic Tragedies Department  
playing housewife. That you are somehow not separate  
from your reflection  
cannot fully resolve in your heads.  
And it is a weird comfort.  
To think one of you  
will no longer look out  
after the other has collapsed.

*Bianca Stone*  
70

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<sup>70</sup> Bianca Stone, "[The Way Mirrors Happen](#)," collected in [What is Otherwise Infinite](#), Tin House Books

## Epistemology of the Shower

We were thirteen. R explained that her parents forbade her showering alone because she had been masturbating. She didn't use that word.

I was lying on a blow-up mattress beside her bed. Our habit on Saturday nights, so together we could rise at seven and ready ourselves for church.

This was why I would have to shower with her in the morning. A masturbation monitor. Each of us, she quoted, has a habitual sin.

To offer some sin in return, I said, I think I might be a lesbian. I'd never met one as far as I knew. I knew the word, I thought I knew what it signified.

How do you know? she asked, and through the dark I could hear her terror for my soul. I retracted: Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I just hate men.

My habitual sin, we already knew, was hating my father whose habitual sin was hitting me. Through the dark, R reached for my hand.

I was nineteen when I concluded that I *was* wrong, that the word I needed—insofar as a word confines desire—was *bisexual*, whose sound I loathe. No music.

But at this party there's music:  
a Greek song loud as in the center of the room a man dances the zeibekiko.

Wild cheers as he circles and circles a glass of red wine. To finish, he falls to his knees, picks up the glass with his teeth, tilts his head back.

I dated that man for a while, I've seen him dance this dance.  
Tonight I miss the finale. I'm out in the stairwell

kissing A, whose long auburn hair preserves my modesty  
as bliss destroys thought.

But the next morning, in an unfamiliar bed, I do think of R's question, answerable only by the body—like, I'd argue, faith, the faith that habitually tumbled the two of us

to the sanctuary floor, overcome by the Spirit. She kept her faith.  
She grew up to be a godly woman; I racked up habitual sins. I desired, desire

such knowledge from this world that if age one day empties my mind  
I sometimes think I'd be grateful. Imagination, too,

is old habit, assiduously maintained  
despite consequences. For instance, I can easily imagine damnation, as I did in R's room,

my hand in hers. The usual visions of hell. Then the shock of sun, the shock of cold water; some boiler problem. We showered anyway, together as commanded. Shivering, wet, we

slid our hands across each other's bodies for warmth, ostensibly.  
One pretext leads to another:

I pretend not to understand the shower's workings  
so that A will help, and then join, and then and then and then—

I learned you can separate pleasure from disgrace, though  
it's hard to make a habit of pure happiness, when there's so much to know.

*Elisa Gonzalez*  
71

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<sup>71</sup> [Elisa Gonzalez](#), "[Epistemology of the Shower](#)," *American Chordata*, collected in [Grand Tour](#), [Farrar, Straus, and Giroux](#)

Love Letter with Nightguard and Liam Neeson

Stoic and stately bouncer of the world's smallest  
strip club, I am delighted every time I pull you out

like a Sunkist can from a creek  
so I can say *good morning* to my husband,

delighted my teeth survived the night  
cloaked in their velvet slurry

like a monk feral beneath his robe  
delighted to feel my tongue do their figure eights

on the roof of his mouth even though,  
let's be honest, we are middle-aged

and married and the last time we morning-  
fucked was before my uterus swelled like a prize

pumpkin, back when we could watch a matinee  
directly after, still wet with 11 am, a giant cup of soda

sweating between us under the glow  
of Liam Neeson, surly as a saint

or Tom Hanks cowering in his ship,  
waiting for that perfect line (say it with me)—

*I am the captain now*—whoever thought I would miss  
watching a past-their-prime star

pay off his alimony, Liam Neeson  
hovering above us like a renaissance angel,

that years later I would whisper his words  
into my husband's ear (say it)

*"what I do have are a very particular set of skills"*—  
and it would almost transport us back

to when we could sit in the dark sipping  
collective air—

Oh guardian of syllables, flash dancer in the supermarket aisle  
of anxiety where the only things left are musky bottles of Mountain Dew—

I used to love rest stops, the constellations of key chains,  
lighters with zodiac signs, and silk-screened wolves, oh the wolves—

Did I start grinding my teeth then when the world first signaled its descent,  
the two halves of my body swing dancing

as if pressure might crown a spark, my mouth a parking attendant  
in God's strip mall holding her citations

and spitting out a star—  
Lord, I want to taste everything now that oranges are hard to come by,

want to know what my husband feels as his mouth circles the perimeter  
of an ice cream sandwich, his teeth glimmering

like the shores of my childhood where treasure  
proliferated from the ocean's inky jaw

steadily grinding against itself—the way  
anything is ever born, Liam Neeson

struggling through a movie  
so bad it becomes the only one I want to remember.

*Kendra DeColo*  
72

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<sup>72</sup> [Kendra DeColo, "Love Letter with Nightguard and Liam Neeson," \*The Ilanot Review\*](#)

Jane Doe I-9

The president of my college has been accused by nine Jane Does.

Jane Doe is what we call an unidentified body.

One Jane says he put his hand on her breast.

One Jane says he showed her his penis.

One Jane took notes of everything he said and did.

*Smart girl*, he might have said.

The road I drive to the college is lined with evergreens.

It's not that evergreens don't lose their needles

but that they replace them quickly.

My mother's name is Jane. She was an only child.

Lonely in the woods of childhood.

I read mysteries inside that silence, stared at a shaft of light

where you could see particles of dust.

I couldn't believe I hadn't known they were there.

One Jane says, *Of course she did not come forward.*

Would we have believed her?

One Jane said, *Don't walk home in the darkness.*

One Jane said, *Yes, she had sex with him but she was afraid for her job.*

One Jane said he texted her 559 times in one day.

One Jane destroyed the records.

One Jane taught me how to read, sketch of a girl on an empty page

with her brother Dick and their dog Spot.

I liked how only some of the page was picture.

People can appear from out of nowhere.

There's also a younger girl in a red wagon.

Jane is pulling her.

But she is also Jane.

*Laura Read*  
73

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<sup>73</sup> [Laura Read](#), "[Jane Doe I-9](#)," [The Kenyon Review](#), collected in [But She is Also Jane](#), [University of Massachusetts Press](#)



### Three weeks

The most famous athlete  
in the country wanted you as he  
wanted many women,  
but then, he wanted you  
more, that elite gloss to your hair  
and skin, photogenic emblem  
of where you came from  
and where you'd go,  
Nicole, you pink-skied Los Angeles  
of possibility, not his wife  
but you. More than anything,

you were young  
in those three weeks  
between the day you finished school  
and your first club shift,  
all spray tan and Hash jeans,  
in the days and hours you weren't  
yet with him but alone.  
After that, did your mind  
ever quiet, did you stop considering  
him and think about yourself?  
Because I can tell you where I was

in that thin cut of time  
when like you I didn't belong  
to anyone, riding in the Chevy Malibu  
of an 18-year old boy. *An adult*,  
I whispered to my friends.  
I was 15 and I couldn't stand my face  
in photographs, so none exist,  
but people would have called me pretty,  
no ice queen—not like you—  
a girl lukewarm and unchic  
though as perishable  
under the right  
circumstance. In 1994

June was no different  
than in every year prior or since.  
In evening the stupid moon hung  
in the stupid sky even with the sun  
shining, the piece of earth we knew  
closer to the sun than it would be  
nearly all year. I was in his car,  
school was out and the whole day  
felt like squinting through  
the hot, greasy dust on a windshield.

Earlier that day, alone,  
I cut my nails too short out of boredom,  
binged mint ice cream out of boredom,  
I waxed nonexistent hair from  
my upper lip. I never thought  
about myself because like you,

I was the culmination  
of every falsehood I'd been taught,  
the days whipping by me  
as I willed my time to run out,  
I was that close to feeling loved,  
but that night, Nicole,

we turned on the radio  
and your husband had realigned  
your murder story to his own orbit.  
He threatened to shoot himself  
zooming down the freeway—  
or crawling, as it appeared to us  
from the eye of a helicopter. Slow.  
Penitent. It was like any of the cop shows  
we watched to teach us about danger.  
I'd like to say I learned that day  
about men who don't think women  
are people at all,

but I already knew, all over the country,  
girls like me knew.

*Erin Hoover*

74

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<sup>74</sup> [Erin Hoover](#), "[Three weeks](#)," [On the Seawall](#), collected in [No Spare People](#), Black Lawrence Press

from “The Itinerant Girl’s Guide to Self-Hypnosis”

Nothing much happened today, unless you count seeing a hawk on a low branch in Central Park. Unless you count going to the Guggenheim and getting dizzy.

Haunted tries to happen, but I’m too dizzy to notice.

Strong iced coffee. Meeting a friend for lunch, I talk in a very animated way for thirty minutes before the coffee personality goes away again.

Summer birthday. Wildflowers, Hudson.

Thirty-nine and \_\_\_\_\_

Few summer activities to report in July. I travel down Manhattan to sit in the Quiet Reading Room. I’m looking into Bernadette Mayer. A man follows me into the Quiet Reading Room and sits on the other couch. I make a face at him. I start reading Bernadette Mayer and making little snorts and chortles. The man gets up and leaves.

When we were children, we were all sort of dry and made of hair and limbs, with boys just a bit warmer and drier. Then we were teenagers and made of shoulders and hips and different hair.

Voice says, *The hum and click braiding*. Voice says *tethered in the paddock*. (What’s a paddock?)

I call my grandmother and she says, “Don’t ever allow yourself to get used to something that’s not good for you.” Useful all-purpose advice.

For a few days, I skulk around the apartment thinking phrases like, *It liked to have killed him*. Some of my family might say such a thing.

Found in summer notebook: *Stop having ideas about ideas*. (Tethered in a paddock.)

Yeats said it this way: *Tragic joy*.

Joanna Penn Cooper

75

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<sup>75</sup> Joanna Penn Cooper, “[The Itinerant Girl’s Guide to Self-Hypnosis \[Nothing much happened today...\]](#),” collected in [The Itinerant Girl’s Guide to Self-Hypnosis](#), Brooklyn Arts Press

from “Calaveras”

9.

At nine  
years old

I sat in  
understudy

at the bar,  
worshiping

Shirley Temples.  
Grandpa smiled

and said  
Let’s go

as I chewed  
a maraschino,

Dante’s devil,  
a cherry

in nine  
rings of ice.

I finished  
the meat,

threw down  
the stem.

I laughed,  
enjoying

the tart tingle  
of grandpa’s

old,  
red bones

teetering  
in beer.

*David Tomas Martinez*  
76

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<sup>76</sup> [David Tomas Martinez](#), “[Calaveras \(9\)](#),” collected in [Hustle](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

For My 20-Year-Old Sister on My 30th Birthday

Nobody knows what they're doing, Maddie.  
Sometimes I can see, as if from above, the wave  
of each fresh generation gathering, drawing

more of itself into itself and looming, perilous  
and untenable, above the lower water.  
The collective breath of newborns responsible

for the atmospheric shift. Freaky shit. The morning  
shows call it sweater weather. I call it death knell  
with elbow patches. *Best case scenario*, I say,

*how do you think the world will end?* It's near two a.m.  
and you're walking uphill in Worcester in a silver  
dress, shivering like the moon must shiver

in her lockstep tidal darkness. Know me, sister.  
I bequeath you the decade between us. It was  
useless and warm, like a house party.

Like a house party, I spent it in the kitchen,  
counter-top-perched, glittering so lightly  
no one noticed my gravity. I felt like I knew

something then. It was mostly a feeling. *Best case  
scenario?* you say. *Dinosaurs return for a feeding.*

Caylin Capra-Thomas

77

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<sup>77</sup> Caylin Capra-Thomas, "For My 20-Year-Old Sister on My 30th Birthday," *Washington Square*, collected in *Iguana Iguana*, Deep Vellum

Michael

If we met up in the iced-over lot at the neighborhood's edge  
we were kids in—grid of low-slung ranches sunk  
under the lengthening shadows of larch and pine,  
each street slanted toward the state building where our folks  
collected their checks on the first of each month—

and if your eyes were glossed with oxys and a week  
without sleep, body a loose frame of copper piping propped  
under your oversized coat, and we stood, face to face—  
Michael, what would be left between us?  
What would remain of tunneling under chainlink

after the Wilsinski house burned down, slipping  
between the brick pallets and front-end loaders, looking  
for something to claim? Or that July we worked stripping kudzu  
and poison oak from your sideyard on the promise of a few bucks  
from your dad, our longsleeves matted with pine pitch and sweat?

We found a yellowjacket nest, a paper lantern buried deep  
in the brake. You dared me to hit it with a Wiffle ball bat  
and I did and the yellowjackets stitched my chest and arms  
with fire. I came back last Christmas and sat on the hard edge  
of my little brother's twin bed as he showed me how to thumb

an imaginary bullet into a handgun with REPLICA etched  
on the barrel. Taught me words like breechblock  
and chamber-throat. Blowback and primer. Showed me how  
to switch off the safety, to keep my finger away from the trigger  
until I'm ready to pull. The way your brother Daryl

took himself out of this world. I thought of you, thirteen,  
weighing out nickels in your bedroom at your dad's place.  
Twisting a dutchie, licking it shut. You didn't give a shit,  
but I staffed a paper towel tube with dryer sheets and we blew  
our smoke through to hide the smell. All I have of you now

is rumor: a few run-ins with the cops for small stuff—  
petty theft, possession—that you knocked up a girl  
from Willimantic. That you were faded on cough syrup  
and drifted into oncoming traffic on 84, limped away  
with a sprained ankle but otherwise fine. There was a time

when I thought I knew what swerves us from disaster,  
what separates us. All I can do now, Mike, is praise the state-  
cut checks and the baggies of pills. Praise the quick transaction,  
the no-look pass, twenty twisted into a palm. The Robitussin-  
kiss, the slow drift of the wheel. The soft shoulder.

*Edgar Kunz*

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<sup>78</sup> [Edgar Kunz](#), "[Michael](#)," [The Sewanee Review](#), collected in [Tap Out](#), [Mariner Books](#)

## Drift

In the desert  
they found fossils  
of my father  
as a young man,  
his Converse sneakers  
dripping with tar, stacks  
of old beer cans  
and all of his hair.  
One paleontologist  
took pictures  
of the whole dig team  
packed into his wrecked  
yellow Mustang,  
with the scarred  
fender and dented  
doors. That was before  
he learned to walk  
upright and carry  
a briefcase. Now his body  
is held together  
with a necktie  
and mortgage,  
and his offspring  
have scattered  
to climates  
he cannot survive.  
Still, we call him  
once in a while  
just to hear  
his rough voice,  
that prehistoric  
grumble, like continents  
cracking and drifting  
apart, carrying some of us  
this way, some  
of us that.

*Gregory Lawless*  
79

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<sup>79</sup> Gregory Lawless, "[Drift](#)," [Pleiades](#), collected in [Dreamburgh, Pennsylvania](#), Dream Horse Press



from "The Ideograms"

I hear my baby crying.  
Even when he's not crying.  
I hear steamships.  
I hear phantoms.  
The baby is not crying anymore.  
All of my love rushes outwards to fill  
the empty city. Rush. Rushes out of my ears.  
*Do you hear that?* she says.  
*It sounds like a boxer punching a horse  
through the top half of a barn door.*

*Matthew Rohrer*

80

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<sup>80</sup> [Matthew Rohrer](#), "[The Ideograms \[I hear my baby crying...\]](#)," [Bear Parade](#), collected in [Rise Up](#), [Wave Books](#)

## Harmony is Mostly Revolutionary

& now everybody is some kind  
of delicious fetish. A whole  
chorus of proclivities, full-throttled  
in the washbowl of next-door  
freaky: those Picasso lickable  
toes ones. Candle wax on skin  
for some. Those forehead-camera  
recording ones. Wigs are optional  
on some of them. The *it happens*  
*to a lot of guys*, sitting on the edge  
of the bed just like a rerun.  
The suctioned toys on the wall  
for solo fun & the *Yes whatever*  
& then some. Meanwhile,  
another antagonist wobbles by  
the conjunction of satisfaction  
on a busted heel. With that rip  
in her stocking, she's as oblivious  
as a cloud in the early evening.  
So thick in her own arbitered  
heart she can't hear the tassels  
swishing or the cuffs clinking.

Adrian Matejka  
81

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<sup>81</sup> [Adrian Matejka](#), "[Harmony is Mostly Revolutionary](#)," collected in [Somebody Else Sold the World](#), [Penguin](#)

## Stand-In for a Shooting Star

static on the screen of an old TV  
steel shavings, mercury  
streak of rain catching the light  
fork of lightning prodding the night  
drip, a flash, God's lost eyelash  
faucet's splash in the curve of a spoon  
spit curl on the face of the moon  
a dot, a dash  
smear of snot  
a comet's tail, cum shot  
cup of black coffee, a half and half swirl  
a run in the stocking worn by a dead girl

*Cindy King*  
82

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<sup>82</sup> [Cindy King](#), "[Stand-In for a Shooting Star](#)," [African American Review](#), collected in [Zoonotic](#), [Tinderbox Editions](#)

## Memory

Shouting *shayna maidel*  
literally *beautiful unmarried female*  
translation *pretty girl*

implied *open the goddamn door*  
my savior breaks in on me  
humping my boyfriend one afternoon

despite Bob Dylan protesting in stereo  
behind a closed shade and door  
Gary's hand is inside my pants

and I'm coming practically by breathing  
*Jesus* whereupon she screams *what*  
*in hell is going on?*

I swear on my mother's life in this poem  
I will not let her despair  
ruin a stranger's reputation

*Jane Miller*  
83

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<sup>83</sup> [Jane Miller](#), "[Memory](#)," collected in [Thunderbird](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Assembled Audience

This morning on the beach there's a small nurse shark,  
whiskered & flipped on the sand & right past its shined  
white underbelly, a man—dissipated, ponytailed, leathery—

filming his younger blond girlfriend with his phone.  
She's wearing a tiny print bikini—the kind that's nearly  
a thong, cheeky—and is literally shaking her ass. When she

stops he says, *Did we get it?* & she must have nodded  
no, because he says, *Aw fuck, let's do it again.* I know  
what I gotta do. Hélène Cixous said *to be human we need*

*to experience the end of the world* & do you agree with her  
right now in this particular moment? There's a tropical storm  
throttling toward us, & everyone is out on the sand before

the cone of uncertainty sidles its way up the Eastern seaboard—  
even a bridal party in blush-colored gowns. Even a family reunion  
in matched T-shirts. So many things remain uncertain. I keep

thinking of what my friend Emily, who chained herself to a  
bulldozer to protest the Mountain Valley Pipeline, told me:  
pipeline fighters never ask *how are you?* They simply say,

*it's good to see you.* It's good to see you, random strangers  
on the beach. I've been in my house for months. You, under  
your striped umbrellas. You, smoking weed in the surf.

You, fishing from the shore. You, head down, searching  
for washed-up shark teeth in the shell hash. Your radios &  
coolers & sun hats. I know what I gotta do. Buy bottled water.

Safeguard the soul's passage. Check the flashlight batteries.  
Map a topography of displacement & exile. Remain untouched—  
the hollow space of the body—the nothing of my mouth

covered by a mask. Cixous also said *my body knows unheard-of  
songs*. Laments. To use a gesture to communicate something.  
The same crowd never gathers twice. A dead fish can symbolize

an uneasiness in your body. Someone who is unresponsive.  
A portent of bad things to come. It can mean you're next  
on the hit list. An occupation of loss.

Erika Meitner

84

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<sup>84</sup> Erika Meitner, "Assembled Audience," *Shenandoah*

## The Night We Met, You Told Me About Marie Curie

The first thing you tell me is she wasn't Jewish.  
But stupid people will always look askance at anyone  
who is female, foreign, and accomplished, you say—she'd  
already won the Nobel Prize in Physics eight years  
earlier, and in 1911, her affair with a fellow scientist  
named Paul Langevin became public, so the right-wing  
press vilified Curie as a foreigner and an atheist,  
which is pretty hypocritical, you say, since the newspapers  
portrayed her as a godless Jew whenever she won  
a French prize, though somehow she was hailed as a true  
daughter of France when another country recognized  
her achievements and she received a foreign prize  
such as the Nobel. Well, was she an atheist, I say?  
No idea, you say, though certainly a foreigner, since  
she came from Poland, where she studied  
at an underground school called the Flying University that met  
in private homes in Warsaw so that young Poles  
could be free from the warped ideology of their  
Russian occupiers. That must have been dangerous,  
I say, and then I remember a story I'd read about  
a mountaineer who's walking across a Swiss glacier  
when he hears a creak beneath his feet and then a crack,  
like a trap door opening, and he drops,  
jamming in the ice at belly level, the air punched from his lungs.

The lower half of his body is much colder than the top,  
and of course he kicks in the emptiness until he realizes  
that the movement might dislodge him, so he stops,  
his toes dangling until his climbing partner hauls him  
out the way you might pull a drowning man from a pool,  
and you say a guy, right? A man? And I say right,  
a guy, and you say you'd just read an article  
about all the mammoth carcasses that have been found  
lately, and the thing is, they're all male. Swallowed  
by a sinkhole, washed away by a mudflow, drowned  
after falling through thin ice: the males of every species  
tend to do stupid things that end up getting them  
killed in silly ways, you say, and apparently  
that's true for mammoths as well. Yes, I say,  
but no danger, no fun—what gives value  
to travel is fear, according to Camus, and I'm paraphrasing him,  
but you don't seem to mind, so when we are far  
from our own country, says Camus, we are seized by fear  
and an instinctive desire to go back to our old habits,

and at that moment we are *feverish* but also *porous*,  
 so that the *slightest touch* makes us  
 quiver to the depths of our being. At least that's what  
 I think he said. Feverish, porous,  
 slightest touch: I didn't mean to, but I'm talking sexy now,  
  
 though we've only just met and I don't want to  
 scare you off, so I say, okay, back to Marie Curie. Didn't  
 she win a second Nobel Prize? And didn't she die from  
 radiation poisoning? And you say yes, she won  
 another Nobel in 1911, this time in Chemistry,  
 and yes, she had the habit of carrying test tubes  
 of radium around in the pocket  
 of her lab coat, and she died of aplastic anemia, which they think  
  
 was caused by prolonged exposure to radiation.  
 She did her job too well, I say, and you nod  
 and say she did her job too well, and that's it for me,  
 that's when I tell myself that you're the one,  
 that no matter what happens, I'm not letting let you go, ever,  
 so I say can you really do your job too well? and you say yes,  
 because in 1204, the Venetian navy couldn't breach  
 the walls surrounding Constantinople, so their engineers built bridges  
  
 a hundred feet long and hauled them up the ships' masts  
 and set their far ends down on the enemy's battlements,  
 though when the knights in armor saw those bridges,  
 they said uh-uh, no, not us—they were used to terrestrial battle  
 and paled at the thought of fighting in midair above  
 a rolling sea. Those engineers were too good at their job,  
 you say, and if there's one thing I don't want to be right now  
 it's too good at my job because I'm really really  
  
 really crazy about you and am trying to do everything  
 I can to woo you without letting you see how hard I'm trying.  
 So I say, what's her legacy? and I guess later scientists built  
 on Marie Curie's work, right? and you say that her notes  
 and research materials are so radioactive  
 that they're too dangerous to examine, so they're kept  
 in lead-lined boxes, which is when  
 I ask if I can kiss you and you say no, you can't, then yes.

David Kirby  
 85

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<sup>85</sup> David Kirby, "[The Night We Met, You Told Me About Marie Curie](#)," [American Literary Review](#)

## Hungry Poem

My mother prides herself on being a Good American  
expresses anger when I dismiss myself for five years

first to South Korea, then to Spain; *Korea is full of assholes*  
she says—references a long layover and a fistful of

cashiers that hated her face like I hate my face; *you'll see*—  
I didn't see, but I did come back and I did come back to her strong

arm tracing around the kitchen island, a  
secret in her pocket most of the time we aren't sick with

what wouldn't have been  
there is a decrease in white

frontal brain matter in most diagnosed kleptomaniacs, meaning *what*—  
meaning impulse control, meaning behavioral medicine for undone things

white lilies popping up in every yard, blooming refuse to refuse  
and how else should I categorize my particular brand of cruelty?

Most of my time is spent thinking up different scenarios that  
aren't sensual, don't feel sensual, and in every other episode

I'm only here because of that stupid war—insert unknown relatives' faces  
across the airplane's aisle, my head resting on someone else's backrest

pointing towards the Atlantic, pointed in any direction other than home

*Jessica Q. Stark*

86

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<sup>86</sup> [Jessica Q. Stark](#), "[Hungry Poem](#)," [Moist Poetry Journal](#), collected in [Buffalo Girl](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.



## Year of the Rat

I winch up the sky  
between the shed roof and the ridge  
and stand dumb as a goat  
beneath its arrows and buckets,  
its harmonies and hungers.

Each night I feel a speck of fire  
twisting in my gut,  
and each night  
I ask the Lord  
the same questions,

and by morning the same  
spools of barbed wire  
hang on the barn wall  
above footlockers of dynamite.

We used to own everything  
between the river and the road.

We bought permits  
for home burials  
and kept a horse's skull above the door.

We divided the land,  
we filled in the wells,  
we spit in the river,  
we walked among the cows  
and kept the shovels sharp.

Tonight I'm sitting  
on the back porch  
of the universe  
in the first dark hours  
of the Year of the Rat.  
I'm tuned-in to **AM 520**  
and, depending  
on how intently I stare  
into the black blooms of the sky,  
it bounces either  
to a high-school football game  
or to the voices of rage,  
of plague  
and prophecy.

The wind off the river  
is weak and alone, like the voice  
of my brother.  
He's trying to melt the plastic coating  
from a stolen bundle  
of commercial wiring,  
a black trickle of smoke  
winding through his body  
to empty itself into a pool  
that shimmers with the ink of nothing.

If I had faith in the stars  
I'd let those four there  
be the constellation of my brother  
lying flat on the ground, asking for money.

I like the song  
he almost sings,  
the one he doesn't know the words to  
but hums to himself  
in these few moments  
of absolute stillness.

And I like how he's resting  
with his hands under his head  
as he stretches out  
among the dark echoes  
and spindled light  
of all that black wheat.

*Michael McGriff*  
87

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<sup>87</sup> [Michael McGriff](#), "[Year of the Rat](#)," [Cortland Review](#), collected in [Home Burial](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Golden Age Drinking

Our upstairs neighbor's apartment is leaking  
"Moon River" again—it trickles  
down the stairs & under our door.  
It puts chopsticks in my chignon  
& spritzes the place with Jean Patou.

The girl up there  
has been crying  
for three days straight.

She's pretty, pale & looks like  
she's made of matchsticks, but  
she heaves her Sadness around  
the building like a Giant Toddler  
on a short leash.

She never seems to sleep.  
When she checks her mailbox  
we can see she's a cutter.

This is the late '90s though,  
so what's happening  
feels more like an Aesthetic  
than a Situation.

In the Mansion of Many Apartments,  
we keep facing a choice:  
whether to leave certainty  
for something else  
which might be messy,  
awkward, or mean.

When I try to look through  
the prism of my early twenties  
all I really see is gin, scorn  
& a marble chess set. My stupid  
Scorpio Earrings. I took baths,  
felt wrath. I didn't even have  
a real job, just a Lover who fed me  
slivers of cheese & apple off a knife  
in a silver hammock we scored  
for free on Craigslist. Did I think I was  
some kind of French Duke or what?

By day I did my vocal exercises & listened  
to cassette tapes: etymological lectures, French  
lessons, Robert Lowell intoning "nine-knot yawl"  
& "I myself am hell; nobody's here—"

By night I blew long curls of lavender  
smoke & Julie London tunes through  
the cracks in our ceiling like I was  
fumigating millennial centipedes.

Our upstairs neighbor?  
The short answer is  
I don't know what happened.

None of us did  
a damn thing but drink & egg each  
other on with increasingly melancholic music.

In hallways, I still see her  
rhinestone spine flash & wriggle back  
into the shadow of the fact:  
we made a Whole Skit of her  
but never even knocked.

*Karyna McGlynn*  
88

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<sup>88</sup> [Karyna McGlynn](#), "[Golden Age Drinking](#)," *Fogged Clarity*, collected in [50 Things Kate Bush Taught Me About the Multiverse](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## Wonders and Mysteries of Animal Magnetism Displayed (1791) as What It Is

In a stall where you count the patterns  
you can make of linoleum squares  
which are also triangles and diamonds,  
having contractions you think are not,  
because six weeks ago you were pregnant  
and five weeks ago you were not, and what  
you didn't learn in health class is everything  
you would ever want to know like how big  
a placenta is and how veined and how  
purple and how when you birth it  
in a bathroom outside the classroom  
where you were trying to explain  
the difference between logos and pathos,  
might first think a kidney or your spleen  
fell out, because it seems now anything at all  
could happen, you turn it over with a pencil,  
careful not to break the jelly of it, but what  
part was the baby part? Remembering makes  
my chest hurt with flapping and repeating  
geometry. Pathos is the patient Dr. Mesmer  
annotated, noting her propensity for falling  
into waking sleep fits, crying "My brain  
is too big for my head!" and "I beg of you,  
cut it off!" Logos is how he drew a diagram  
to explain what was wrong with her. See how  
the polar moon over her right eye is bigger  
than the opposite moon over her left?  
Is how his colleagues stroke their beards  
about she won't consent to the procedure.  
Everyone else does. Everyone else wants to  
get it over with. Everyone else wants it  
cleaned out. Everyone else does not think being  
yourself a coffin is the only last act to do  
for a child you couldn't. Did you know a hunk  
of amber is a magnet for feathers and lint  
and paper bits? Did you know they stick to it  
like a miracle? What I want is the weight  
of a lodestone to affix itself on the airy aether  
of my womb and have it be as if my head  
were sap-sealed to my rest of it and there be no  
floating off and there be no sinking under  
and the birds are all sleeping in a nest of stones  
I buried over a blue-and-white china bowl  
with milkmaids and a maypole because it was  
the prettiest I had, how they never stop dancing  
around the center of it.

*Kathryn Nuernberger*

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<sup>89</sup> [Kathryn Nuernberger](#), "[Wonders and Mysteries of Animal Magnetism Displayed \(1791\) as What It Is](#)," *Southeast Review*, collected in *[The End of Pink](#)*, [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## Ambulance

Last night in the taxi I drove to the Bronx, Washington Heights, and down 9th Avenue. The night ended driving a couple from 110th and Broadway to the hospital on 68th and York. The entire trip the woman was crying and moaning and the man was yelling at me: “We’re not going fast enough!”

I had to stop at every red signal, and the buildings huddled their thick trunks. We finally got to the emergency room. I wondered what was wrong with her. People save thousands by taking taxis to the hospital instead of an ambulance.

Kafka, late in his illness, told Max Brod, *There is only one disease, no more, and medicine blindly chases this one disease like an animal through endless forests.*

Sean Singer<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Sean Singer, “Ambulance,” collected in [Today in the Taxi](#), Tupelo Press

## The Prince of Cleveland

I realize it is time to complete the poem  
presenting reasons to visit Cleveland,  
but I don't think I will be able to do so  
until I am actually sitting in Cleveland  
writing about the view from my hotel  
window in a part of the city the city intends  
to gentrify. The bricks of the empty  
newly constructed office building  
have been replaced with less historical bricks.  
They have just about finished the work,  
the men who painted the bricks a colonial  
white & have left fluorescent lights buzzing  
all night on the floors to discourage  
squatters like the brother I see on the street  
outside the building belted in what is either  
a black leather jacket or black plastic trash bag  
belting "Purple Rain" poorly, but earnestly.  
He likely sings throughout the day for money  
and tourists seeking the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame  
where they will find a mural of Prince  
but no Prince made of wax. Hotel windows  
are locked not for fear of suicides,  
but because open windows encourage smoking.  
Outside, the voice of the Prince of Cleveland  
is high as fire. I can tell he smokes.  
He favors my uncle around the eyes.  
Would you like to know your future? he asks  
when I find myself smoking next to him.  
He has made a lucrative fortune-telling  
business with little more than a lawn chair,  
a card table & playing cards. I decline.  
One of the doors of the office building  
is unlocked. Drop cloths, buckets,  
trash bags. One of those old boom boxes  
you never see anymore. My uncle used  
to have one. It was in his bedroom  
I first saw a Prince record, though I didn't know  
it was Prince at the time. I thought it was  
a mustached & hairy woman on a horse.  
I can still hear my host coughing & singing  
a few floors below on the other side  
of the office building windows & the cry  
of a siren crossing the city. You don't look up  
when I look across the boulevard into the room  
of your hotel, but I know you know I'm here.

*Terrance Hayes*

91

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<sup>91</sup> [Terrance Hayes](#), "[The Prince of Cleveland](#)," [Solstice](#), collected in [So To Speak](#), [Penguin Books](#)



## Palliative

*pallium*

the cloak that covers the body on its way to burial

a cloth of comfort

comfort once meant strong and now  
means soft and easeful

as in morphine and mouth sponges  
as in care  
as in acquiring at the end

the cloak  
*clocca* bell-shaped

as when the world was quieter  
and the sound of a bell  
could ring in an afterlife

I'd like to begin anticipating  
my body as a sponge  
filled and wrung out again and again  
by pain and the will to live

palliative  
not *pale*

as in beyond the  
staked vines on a fence dividing  
governable from wild

known from unknown

Natasha Sajé  
92

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<sup>92</sup> [Natasha Sajé, "Palliative," \*Under a Warm Green Linden\*, collected in \*The Future Will Call You Something Else\*, Tupelo Press](#)

Q + A

Do you have any scars Are you aware that you are wearing two different shoes What was your last meal Do you still believe the CIA is after you Have you considered other uses for shoelaces Have you always avoided holiday parties How often do you lie to those you care about Why did you bring the Ziploc bag When was the last time you felt happy Have you thought recently about ending your life and do you have a plan Why do you think I am asking What will the diagnosis mean if you lie will it be different if there is no diagnosis can you leave is it over yet will there be an end to the questions who wants to know these things who is important in the scenario when will it end the scenario I mean has it played itself out who will be waiting at home will someone be able to pick you up what will you tell them who will give the answer what if there is no answer of course there is an answer it just takes a while you may have to try different medications there will be side effects in trying to find the solution it will be necessary to ask the right questions do you think these are the right questions

*Lauren Shapiro*  
93

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<sup>93</sup> [Lauren Shapiro](#), "[Q + A](#)," [Columbia Poetry Review](#), collected in [Arena](#), [Cleveland State University Poetry Center](#)

Oh trust me, honey, you don't wanna know  
about the pelvis of a doe I found  
in a Johnny Rockets, or the bone broth  
made from stray dogs, or the raccoon burgers.  
That's whiskey talk, if ever. Don't worry—  
I won't inspect your kitchen, I don't work  
B&Bs. Besides, am I running late!  
How long did you say to the airport? No,  
don't tempt me: egg whites will do me fine.  
And bacon. And a pancake, but cut me off  
at one, and no butter. Just so we're clear,  
all that blood and guts and gore—that's extreme  
cases. After all, it's scheduled mostly:  
they know I'm coming and I know they hide  
what they don't want me to find. Good riddance.  
You think I wanna see that kind of junk?  
It's a wink-wink occupation, this line.  
Like cops parked out on roads inhaling donuts  
and just because they're there the traffic slows.  
That's basically my job. Intimidation.  
Where'd you find this bacon? You're kidding.  
It's not at all the way you'd think it would be.  
I've got a record, that's why. Nonviolent.  
It was a job I could get and get quick.  
Pays fine. What I like is the power trip:  
seeing fear in men's eyes, bosses pretending  
not to be bosses to buy themselves time,  
saying yes ma'am, yes ma'am, yes ma'am, terrified  
I'm gonna find mouse poo on my walk-through.  
To own a man like that without as much  
as opening your trap—God I'd be rich  
if I could bottle it. Please say there's more  
of this bacon. Bless you. I'll wolf these strips  
and zip. I grew up most everywhere.  
I left home young but should've left younger.  
Never had a plan, never wanted kids  
so never needed Mr. Right. I like movies  
alone and martinis together, my cat's  
name is Boots and I don't do drama—  
that about covers it. Which of these clocks  
is right? Can I smoke in here? Fuck it.  
You know that butter you mentioned? Get it.  
I guess I close about ten joints a year.  
The human factor is the biggest bitch.  
Cut finger, that kind of thing. If your bleach  
is off one part per million, cute, happy  
to let it slide. But if that puddle of blood  
didn't leak from a piece of veal... Last year,

if you can believe it, I found myself  
working my own favorite joint, a surprise  
inspection. Caught a big infraction, too.  
Between us, they didn't need to bribe me.  
I could've found a lot more than a tooth  
and still been keen to keep them clean—  
you don't just stumble into manicotti  
that good. Okay, okay, another pancake.  
Is that rosemary I'm tasting? You sneak!  
If it wouldn't mean completely missing  
my flight, I'd take your kitchen by force  
and sniff out what your little secret is.

*Anders Carlson-Wee*  
94

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<sup>94</sup> [Anders Carlson-Wee](#), "[Barb](#)," [32 Poems](#), collected in [Disease of Kings](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## What Religion Means to Me

Religion is why  
Kristi broke up with me my senior year  
in Holier-Than-Y'all, Alabama.  
All the girls spent spring break at church camp,  
came home and dumped their boyfriends

because of our ungodly desires  
or theirs. Kristi ended us, then washed  
my car in her driveway  
to pay off a friendly wager  
her words had rendered irrelevant  
and to show she meant me no ill will.

I drove home down the longest country road I knew,  
trailing a rooster-tail plume of white dust,  
stopping to taste sweet dark wild fruit on the roadside.

I thought I understood something about the path through heartbreak,  
how its shoulders were choked with kudzu  
and purple-bruised blossoms smelling of homemade grape wine.  
My friends all worshiped  
at the First Church of Our Steeple Is Taller Than The Methodists'

and once after I visited, three men came to witness to my family  
and tell my mother they were sorry  
she didn't care about her children  
as she didn't send us to church.

My twelfth-grade English teacher told us  
which translations of the Bible would get us to heaven.  
The vice principal argued theology

with Robyn, the only out-and-proud atheist I knew,  
who wore her faithlessness like a gaudy blouse with shoes to match.

Mr. Carter thought to trump her by asking:  
*How can a brown cow eat green grass and make white milk  
if not by the hand of God?*

The worst part is, when Kristi sat me down and asked  
was I a Christian  
I looked deep into her tawny lion-eyes and by god I lied.

Purer, simpler faith has never existed

than mine at that moment, nor any martyr felt more forsaken  
    than when she said she was breaking things off anyway  
    though she was happy to know I, too, would be in heaven.

I withstood this test. I still believe  
    religion is  
the pale taste of sweat on the skin of the breast of the woman I adore,  
  
stain of blackberries on the fingers,  
    hot whisper against the throat—a prayer  
  
    to be loved that only the devout can hear.

*Amorak Huey*  
95

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<sup>95</sup> [Amorak Huey](#), “[What Religion Means to Me](#),” [Rattle](#), collected in [Boom Box](#), [Sundress Publications](#)

## Dream

They killed you.  
Lashings in a courtyard,

your face was kept eclipsed,  
but I recognized the wrists. Wilted.

The morning dull  
outside the train, a New Jersey winter.

Just days ago, I left Dubai.  
My clothes still smell

of desert,  
an ache in my left hip like music.

I prefer it, the heat.  
Like a bonbon upon the tongue,

delicate.  
Still, the ice is inscrutable. Unadorned.

I hope this is how I look,  
asleep,

but the pillow I wake to is crime scene.  
Sodden in the red of sunlight.

I write you. *Where are you?*  
*I dreamt of it again. The blood everywhere.*

They tire you, I know,  
irksome,

these catastrophes  
I bed.

*Fine*, you write back.  
*I'm fine.*

The snow is bleached as a desert bone,  
the air rebuke.

*Hala Alyan*  
96

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<sup>96</sup> [Hala Alyan](#), "[Dream](#)," collected in [Atrium](#), [Three Rooms Press](#)

from "Elegies for the Ochre Deer on the Walls at Lascaux"

### III. 1922

The old woman is on her side on the sofa: the vase  
Beside her is a fountain of red straw.  
The old woman  
Has been dead for some time now.

She drank her tea and stretched out on the sofa.  
She looked out the open window  
Across the street to where under the trees  
The local orchestra was beginning something small  
By Debussy. She watched a boy  
Lift his tuba off the grass.  
And with his first clear note she began to chill;  
Her eyes never closed. She was just there  
In her purple dress on the sofa. And  
Through the open window all that night the boy  
With the tuba was watched as if by an animal  
Or monarch. You know how passengers

On a train prepare themselves  
For a tunnel: they are watching the fir trees  
That darken the hillsides while, separate and shy,  
They begin to enter a mountain, they straighten  
Under the white ropes and cool purple curtains:  
There's a fat woman  
Over there who neglects her lap dog and looks  
As if she was stabbed in the neck, the banker  
Beside you was maybe kicked by a horse in the head,  
And even the child across from you  
Stops sucking on her mother's breast and looks up  
Having swallowed perhaps a coin or hatpin,

The victims of composition as dead passengers  
On a train each secretly positioned  
For a dark passage through rock where the ochre deer  
Stand frozen, where everyone stops talking

To watch like the old woman on the sofa  
Staring past her open window for a week, wanting  
Very much to be discovered, she looks almost alive  
Like the elephant gone perfectly still  
In the mountain pass after hearing a train rush  
By below him; he sniffs the air  
And glances down into a forest where like him  
Everything alive had stopped moving for a moment.  
The train went by. The local orchestra sits  
In its folding chairs and sips away at sherry,



All of them that is  
But the boy with a tuba who looks  
Across the street to an open window and further even

Into the dark house  
Where nothing has moved for hours, where  
You'll hear a voice that's not enough,  
That speak to us under the trees  
Just before the white baton flies up:

What it says might be read aloud to children:  
*Tell me about the woman of many turns  
Who had her tables cleaned with sponges  
Who walked the beach like a motionless  
Moving elephant  
And who talked to the hyacinth, gull, and ant.  
Tell me about the woman of many turns.*

*And tell me you can't...*

Only if it had been a rainy morning  
There wouldn't have been  
The freshly cut flowers in the hall,  
Or in the garden in the sun  
The small toad wouldn't have thought her straw hat  
Was a second sun that had cooled  
Like everything else around her.  
Only if it had rained along the coast  
All that morning outside her open window.  
If she wasn't in the garden in the morning  
She would have been alive to see  
The silver tuba like a snail  
Returned to the grass after the concert.

The butterfly buttons its shirt twice  
In the afternoon. After working  
All morning in the garden she walked  
Down to the ocean and looked across to France

Where the ochre deer have stood motionless  
On the cave walls for centuries.  
To the hyacinth she speaks French. She doesn't  
Speak to us at all. This collector of black tea:  
Souchong and Orange Pekoe brewed with the seeds  
Of the St. Ignatius' bean, swallowed hurriedly  
In the shade of a little country parlor. *She doesn't*

*Speak to us at all.*

Does the barbarian cutting the throat  
Of a speckled doe in China ever enjoy his solitude?

Perhaps, he's always been alone  
Like the corpse dressed in purple on the sofa.  
They were both strong.  
They have both eaten venison.  
Their venison is historical and ochre.

How do we remember them? Let me  
Tell you about this woman  
Who's resting on the sofa  
Like a fawn fading into leaves and rocks.  
She's positioned for entering

A tunnel, and, yet, for her it was simply  
An open window through which a boy  
Reaches out for his tuba smiling

Like the Hun  
Who's charging through the Empress Dowager's  
Gardens, leaning down  
From his horse he grabs a virgin by the hair  
And lifts her off the grass

And having seen enough, this ordinary old woman  
Saw an end to her suffering. *And, then,*  
*A white baton flew up!*

*Norman Dubie*  
97

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<sup>97</sup> [Norman Dubie](#), "[Elegies for the Ochre Deer on the Walls at Lascaux](#)," [Black Warrior Review](#), collected in [The Illustrations](#), George Braziller, Inc.

from "The School by the Zoo"

## XII. Women's Studies

From boyfriends, dreamier than Irish setters,  
to kiss-lock bags, pain pills, and debutante  
genderlect ("Love ya lots" in bubble letters),  
history is just an afterthought.  
Stunning, how these facades of nonchalant  
facility (laboriously wrought)  
elude the eye. Like one of Rubin's vases,  
a double-take shows two opposing faces.

Work hard, play hard; in time they'll reconcile  
both *modi operandi* sublimate  
their baser faculties in Old World style.  
Then garnished with Phi Beta Kappa keys,  
they'll stand in line, either to graduate  
or register (Masters and PhDs),  
and spend the years that follow making sure  
nobody knows the kind of girls they were.

*Caki Wilkinson*  
98

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<sup>98</sup> [Caki Wilkinson](#), "[The School by the Zoo](#)," *Raintown Review*, collected in [Circles Where the Head Should Be](#), [University of North Texas Press](#)

## Rendezvous with Ghost

Did it transpire to rise from beneath the floorboards?  
Did it escape into the room through a heating vent?  
Suddenly, my head, palpable as an apple, felt its eyes.  
The folding chairs woven into the room by their rows.  
The shining caps of knees bent that belonged to bodies  
that sat with ears attentive as rabbits struck midfield  
by a passing motor. The poem being read gave us back  
the image of those metallic blankets underneath which  
migrant children in pictures slept. It was then I felt it.  
It was not like saying *It has been so long, where have  
you been*, though I felt that. It was not like saying, *Nice  
you finally turned up, where's my ice cream?* And though  
it did tickle, I once read about a person who was tickled  
to death. It felt like the opposite of death, which means  
I felt my hands lying like quiet historians on my lap,  
as if my books had been alphabetized behind my back.  
I'd been waiting so long I'd given up. I'd always hoped  
it'd be grandiflorous, sweet as a clove cigarette, or shot  
through with delinquency, circumspect. It was a fancy  
fashioned from the idiocy of loneliness, bad as a shark  
movie, sad as an orphan's eyes in propaganda in which  
the child you sponsored did not exist. It is memory like  
this. Once, we curled inside an elegy like a worm inside  
a jumping bean. Afterward, I stood and left, walked  
the halls of the historic hotel, found my face in a mirror,  
and told no one. *But I love him. I love him. I love him.*

Cate Marvin  
99

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<sup>99</sup> Cate Marvin, "[Rendezvous with Ghost](#)," [Birmingham Poetry Review](#), collected in [Event Horizon](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Amaryllis

Having been a farmer's daughter  
she didn't want to be a farmer's wife, didn't want  
the smell of ripe manure in all his clothes,  
the corresponding flies in her kitchen,  
a pail of slop below the sink,  
a crate of baby chicks beside the stove, piping  
beneath their bare lightbulb, cows calling at the gate  
for him to come, cows standing in the chute  
as he crops their horns with his long sharp shears.  
So she nagged him toward a job in town;  
so she sprang from the table, weeping, when he swore;  
so, after supper, she sulks over her mending  
as he unfolds his pearl pocketknife  
to trim a callus on his palm.  
Too much like her mother, he says, not knowing  
any other reason why she spoils the children,  
or why he comes in from the combine with his wrenches  
to find potatoes boiled dry in their pot,  
his wife in the parlor on the bench  
at her oak piano—not playing  
you understand, just sitting like a fern  
in that formal room.

So much time to think,  
these long hours: like her mother,  
each night she goes to bed when her husband's tired,  
gets up when he gets up, and in between tries  
not to move, listening to the sleep of this good man  
who lies beside and over her. So much time alone,  
since everything he knows is practical.  
Just this morning, he plunged an icepick  
into the bloated side of the cow unable to rise,  
dying where it fell, its several stomachs having failed—  
too full, he said, of sweet red clover.

*Ellen Bryant Voigt*

100

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<sup>100</sup> [Ellen Bryant Voigt](#), "[Amaryllis](#)," collected in [The Lotus Flowers](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## Notes from the Underground

Brother lives in a special school, its name is unspeakable. No one is dead yet. At night, we listen as Mother shuffles furniture around and peels off the wallpaper. Sofas and chairs turn fickle, they abandon us, hideous imposters take their place. Sometimes there is food. I peel a single tangerine, it's precious, and build a tangerine trail through the house. *We're beggars here*, I whisper to Little Sister. She accepts her first segment. She's learned how to make it last.

Carla Sarett

101

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<sup>101</sup> [Carla Sarett](#), "[Notes from the Underground](#)," [Harpy Hybrid Review](#), collected in [My Family Was Like a Russian Novel](#), [Plan B Press](#)

## November Rain

I'm thinking of painting  
the bedroom a color called

November Rain, which I  
can't discuss without

picturing Slash standing  
at the top of a cliff after

the accident, still rocking  
even though he's dead

and has no electricity. I  
don't want to model

thinking or what memory  
does. Mostly I just want

people to listen to me and  
then maybe understand me

but I don't even care that  
much about being understood.

Underground the trees help  
each other: even separate

species send messages to  
roots smaller or stranger

than their own and in a way  
hold each other before

they plunge from their  
underground cliffs, and all

I see are the clacking  
branches, leaves trying

again to grow, the music  
inside all kinds of things

that I'll get around to  
one of these days.

*Julia Story*  
102

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<sup>102</sup> [Julia Story](#), "[November Rain](#)," collected in [Spinster for Hire](#), [The Word Works](#)

## A Step Past Disco

I took a step  
past disco.  
Could still  
discern  
the strings,

the horn,  
like a burn  
slow to heal.  
Infectious,  
the hook

already  
curled  
in the body  
like a comma,  
or a buddy.

I took.  
I clicked/  
unclicked,  
hope  
a velvet rope.

Disco:  
Lyrics  
either  
*for just*  
*one night*

or *love*  
*for life*—  
no in between.  
The drama.  
I am

between,  
young enough  
not to have  
lost  
all my friends,

old enough  
to have felt  
(I feel)  
any moment  
the ferryman



will visit.  
Rock  
the boat,  
don't rock  
the boat.

Disco,  
I took a step.  
It's been  
years.  
Of forcing

functions,  
token  
liberation,  
coercing  
conjunctions,

and stroking  
myself,  
the celluloid  
dead  
my valuation.

A void.  
Men come,  
disposable  
as thumbs,  
opposable

as income.  
The ones  
I met  
a data set  
of none.

*Nay, nay,*  
*Fluffy,*  
they used  
to say.  
Who are

*they?*  
Crooked  
lashes,  
side-eye  
like a dash—

broken  
wishes—  
the dance,  
the outline  
of religion,  
  
and splashes  
of Jean Naté  
choking the air.  
Fragments,  
like errors,  
  
the distance.

*Randall Mann*  
103

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<sup>103</sup> [Randall Mann](#), "[A Step Past Disco](#)," *NumberMag*, collected in [Deal: New and Selected Poems](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## More Like Wings

It wasn't an illness as much as it was a grouping of blackbirds on a telephone wire, or at least that's what the doctor said. She asked me to stick my tongue out farther. She said, this is a pale tongue, indicating your poor diet. She asked me what I had been feeding myself, if I ate crows, etc. I told her about the handful of almonds, the coffee. She asked me to lift up my arms. Like this? I asked. No, she said. More like wings. I made my arms into wings. Also, I scratched at my scalp. She explained this was a consequence of being around children too much and too often. They are dirty, she said. But I love my children, I told her. I am not here to talk about love, she said. While my arms were out it occurred to me that I missed the physical world, that if I were to rid myself of anything, I did not want to drag it and drop it into some "pretend" trash can I wanted to burn it, or shred it, or fashion it into huge paper wings, hurl it off a very high building, and see if it could fly. You can put your arms down, the doctor said. But I couldn't. I could only lower them a tiny bit, then lift, then lower, and lift and lower. In this way, I experienced flight for the first time. I found my kin along the telephone wire. From my throat, I released one final call, but the doctor, having perhaps been distracted by her own longings, had already dismissed herself from our virtual appointment.

*Nicole Callihan*

104

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<sup>104</sup> Nicole Callihan, "[More Like Wings](#)," collected in [This Strange Garment](#), [Terrapin Books](#)

## Lost Horse

You wake up. It seems you went out  
for more popcorn during the night.  
You can't have missed much,  
but just to be sure you lean  
to the person next to you and whisper  
*what happened?* She tells you  
a horse has just fallen  
from the top of a cathedral.  
Sorry to have missed it,  
but at the same time relieved,  
you go into the kitchen  
and whip up some eggs.  
You are a young man in love with your wife.  
You were not made to be so terrible.

Mary Ruefle  
105

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<sup>105</sup> Mary Ruefle, "[Lost Horse](#)," collected in *Indeed I Was Pleased with the World*, [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

## My Hand and Cold

Of surgeons putting their knives to erroneous

body parts, stories abound. So can you really blame  
my neighbor for how, heading into the operation,  
he wrote across his good knee NOT THIS KNEE?

The death of me: I'm never half so bold. *You will  
feel*, the doctor said, *my hand and cold*—

and I thought of the pub quiz question: which three  
countries are entirely inside of other countries?  
I bought the bound ONE THOUSAND NAMES  
FOR BABY, made two lists: one if she's born breathing,

one if not. The second list was longer. So much

that I might call her, if she were never to bear  
the name, never turn to it, suffer shaming, mull its  
range and implications, blame it, change it, move

away to San Marino, Vatican City, Lesotho.

Natalie Shapero

106

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<sup>106</sup> [Natalie Shapero](#), "[My Hand and Cold](#)," collected in [Hard Child](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

One for My Baby

colemanite white livid cicatrix  
that scar  
left sometime in the '90s during your black-light  
bright unpromising 20s acetylene that night  
(whoolordy!) what didn't happen? who  
knew a lung collapsed so easily?  
  
and the car lighter briefly kissed your wrist—  
not a name you write in the family  
bible it was nothing (trust me) a fetching  
stubble a season wolfed down  
to the ground clean and ugly the winter  
fields gray something grew there till  
may day and now it's all  
blizzards blizzards blizzards  
as far as your eye can't see but still  
the minuscule moon on the bone  
where you've worn it for X  
many years—so discreet and sure  
  
why wouldn't it hurt a little? for instance people  
leave like road burns and abrasions:  
remember the girl on the green line train  
who said *but grief is for suckers*  
*mom* to the woman in the seat beside me squashing

a damp paper bag  
to her face and the girl now just a voice a high  
girlish meanness how  
incongruous I thought that veil of  
gloss burying her kissing her pretty (I don't forget  
your fucking) her unkind mouth

*Erin Belieu*  
107

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<sup>107</sup> [Erin Belieu](#), "[One for My Baby](#)," collected in [Black Box](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Everyone Knows Beauty is Its Own Blank Slate

Friday night in the Walgreens parking lot—all the teen girls in terrycloth or stretch lace, their boyfriends so hot and so stupid a flock of starlings could fly right through their foreheads. The kind that would remember your bra size but not your birthday or eye color. Wax themselves into a corner working the late shift at Rowdy's. It was mid-Michigan in the 90s. The best thing a teen girl in a floss choker necklace could hope for was a dude stupid enough to love her from the rowboat he'd pushed off a dock without oars. The yearbook competition might have been for "Cutest Couple" but top of that rubric was a set of thick-lashed guy eyes with zero thought behind them. Once Tiffani and Crystal threw down behind Big Boy in a dispute over the merits of Bobby Ash. He looked equally good wet or dry. Spelled "monster" with a u instead of an e. Built the fastest sail car in physics class, but wrote Mindy's name on it instead of his own. Nobody knew if he was actually stupid or just great at pretending, a sort of intelligence in itself. This only increased his appeal. School board members condemned the stupidity as a fleeting trend, like huffing Wite-Out or herding swans into the cafeteria as a senior prank. But every Friday in the Walgreens lot the boyfriends milled around like auditioning for a Marlboro ad. Baker Paul staggered out to the parking lot with the day's unsold donuts to pass out to the guys for free (they would never be able to count change). Stupidity illuminated the back seat of every Camaro. We treasured the boyfriends as we did their homework Sunday night, writing answers in dull pencil with a non-dominant hand.

*Mary Biddinger*

108

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<sup>108</sup> [Mary Biddinger, "Everyone Knows Beauty is Its Own Blank Slate," \*The Indianapolis Review\*](#)



## Ballad Without Music

I dreamed I wrote a book called *Outside the Twat System*.  
I dyed my hair to match the book cover.  
There was a dinner before the reading in New York.  
At the table sat luminaries.  
Famous, beautiful, handsome.  
I don't know where to put my personality.  
Do I have a personality?  
It was one of those dinners where the food is too expensive.  
The food is too expensive but you're starving.  
At the reading someone famous yelled out a request.  
It was for a poem about nipples.  
I was wearing a skirt, out of character for me.  
I think I'm supposed to feel delighted.  
I do feel delighted but something lurks beneath it.  
Something lurks like a frog waiting for flies.

Later, at the hotel, the bed was king-sized.  
King-sized decorative pillows you had to move off the bed.  
I placed them on the decorative chair.  
Others have slept here, I thought, feeling squeamish.  
Squeamish, but I was tired.  
My purple hair splayed out on the pillow.  
I should be lonely, I thought.  
I could have been happily married.  
Some people are happily married.  
I thought back to two creeps.  
Two creeps who gave me good advice.  
One said you can't prevent the unpreventable.  
You can't prevent the unpreventable but you can tolerate what comes.  
The other said Diane, you are in danger.  
You are in danger of becoming an artifact.

On the airplane the next morning I had a realization.  
I am one of those as if personalities.  
It's as if I'm gregarious but I'm not.  
It's as if I'm an open book but my book is on lockdown.  
I don't believe this was always the case.  
I didn't start faking it until 5th grade.  
In 5th grade I started borrowing my best friend's clothes.  
I realized beauty was a matter of income and opportunity.  
In 7th grade I landed the hottest boy in school.  
In 8th grade he dumped me and I peroxided an orange streak in my hair.  
In high school I was pursued by the drama teacher.  
He wanted me to act in his plays, so I did.  
I acted, and my allegiances began to shift.  
I switched lanes.  
Whatever life was supposed to be, I was aiming for something else.

I aimed, but I stumbled.  
I stumbled so often I got a permanent limp.  
There was a life, and then there was an inner life.  
There was an inner life, and then there was an afterlife.  
There was an afterlife, and then there were ideas about the afterlife.  
When I finally lived alone, I became a body moving through empty rooms.  
I became a mind whose only encumbrance was exhaustion.  
When I washed my hands, I shut my eyes.  
Everything disappeared but my hands in warm water, scrubbing.  
I wondered if this is happiness.  
I can hear the furnace click on and off.  
I can hear the wind try to spiral down the chimney.  
I am a homeowner, mortgaged to the rafters.  
Yesterday I saw a mouse, generally minding its own business.  
I am writing a book called *Outside the Twat System*.

*Diane Seuss*

109

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<sup>109</sup> [Diane Seuss](#), "[Ballad Without Music](#)," [Couplet Poetry](#)

## Aliens

Now that you're finally happy  
you notice how sad your friends are.  
One calls you from a pay phone, crying.  
Her husband has cancer; only a few months,  
maybe less, before his body gives in.  
She's tired all the time, can barely eat.  
What can you say that will help her?  
You yourself are ravenous.  
You come so intensely with your new lover  
you wonder if you've turned  
into someone else. Maybe an alien  
has taken over your body  
in order to experience the good life  
here on earth: dark rum and grapefruit juice,  
fucking on the kitchen floor,  
then showering together and going out  
to eat and eat. When your friends call—  
the woman drinking too much, the one who lost  
her brother, the ex-lover whose right ear  
went dead and then began buzzing—  
the alien doesn't want to listen.  
*More food*, it whines. *Fuck me again*,  
it whispers, and *afterward we'll go to the circus*.  
The phone rings. *Don't answer it*.  
You reach for a fat éclair,  
bite into it while the room fills  
with aliens—wandering, star-riddled creatures  
who vibrate in the rapturous air,  
longing to come down and join you,  
looking for a place they can rest.

Kim Addonizio

110

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<sup>110</sup> Kim Addonizio, "Aliens," *Alaska Quarterly Review*, collected in *Tell Me*, BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Homage to Life, 2003

This black trapezoid isn't named death or murder or what a lover promises in the dark. Agnes named it *Homage to Life*. Near the end of her life, Agnes lived in an assisted living facility. Everything violent in the world can be made beautiful with language. Someone *passes*, *departs*, or *succumbs*. This is called *advertising*. The grids are finally gone. Even while at the facility, Agnes drove to her art studio each day to work. I think about the people who bathed her, who cut up her food into trapezoids. I wonder when she stopped painting and if she knew. I have a feeling the shape of her last breath was no longer a rectangle. I have a feeling her last word was in the shape of sovereignty. Every poem is trying to be the last free words on earth.

Victoria Chang

111

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<sup>111</sup> Victoria Chang, "[Homage to Life, 2003](#)," collected in [With My Back to the World](#), Farrar, Straus, and Giroux

## Envoy

I was trying to look a little less like myself  
and more like other humans,

humans who belonged, so I put on a skort.  
Purchased in another life, when I had a husband

and wrote thank-you notes and held dinner parties,  
the skort even had its own little pocket,

and the fingerprint stains yellowing the fabric  
were almost invisible, nothing to be ashamed of

as I walked past homes and faces  
with their welcome signs and their no-trespassing signs.

I was hoping to look domesticated,  
or at least domesticable,

that I too could walk the trails  
and then return home, stretch out

beside another human and watch something  
on a big screen until it was time to sleep.

I too had veins at my wrist,  
and I'd read Maslow,

with his hierarchy of needs.  
I remembered that love and belonging

were pretty basic, and that at the top  
of the pyramid was transcendence.

Late that night I took off the skort  
and lay down on the kitchen floor of a house

where years ago a boy and his girlfriend  
overdosed in the basement, a fact

I try not to remember.  
There used to be a cross staked outside,

beneath the blue spruce that died  
when the place was abandoned.

Because I am afraid,  
I left the outside light on.

Halogen burns hot, so bright  
it must have stunned the imperial moth

shimmering against the window screen.  
Most moths would rather spin around lights

than mate, which is all they are put here to do,  
and sometimes they just tire themselves out

flying at night. This one was disguised  
as an autumn leaf, though it was only midsummer.

Size of my hand.  
As much enigma as legerdemain,

very temporary,  
at most she would live a week.

Something about the way she waited there,  
wings outstretched, still as a flat lichen stone,

made me want to rescue my copy of Maslow  
from the basement and study the hierarchy again.

In the diagram I saw sex at the very bottom--  
along with eating, drinking, sleeping.

I wondered if that meant it was foundational,  
or optional. The moth, vibrating there

in the circle of light, seemed to be choosing  
transcendence over other basic needs.

Imperial moths have no mouthparts,  
they don't eat, they make no sound.

In the morning, I buried her  
under the ghost spruce as cars sped by.

Before I tossed the dirt back  
over the shallow hole, I took a photo,

to prove there really was such a thing  
as an imperial moth.

To prove she wasn't alone.  
Wings made of iridescent chitin

arranged to look like leaf litter,  
in the dirt she glowed a little.

*Catherine Barnett*

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<sup>112</sup> [Catherine Barnett](#), “[Envoy](#),” [The American Poetry Review](#)

## The Teacher and the Student

At one time they could have been  
lovers, one taking the train  
fifteen minutes after the other  
to not arouse suspicion, her black silk  
skirt for Christmas left  
hanging in the closet, the ivory  
blouse with mother-of-pearl buttons  
left with one unbuttoned on the  
hanger, the pleated lace jabot  
to warm the neck in church but also  
for elegance, left on the dresser  
whose top drawer held her mother's Psalter  
and a fist-sized burlap satchel of lavender  
scenting her camisole and stockings,  
because her teacher, meeting  
his students in seminar each day and even  
Sunday afternoons if they were serious  
enough about Augustine's *City of God* to translate  
the text themselves with the aid of a dictionary  
had already seen her in everything she owned,  
his gaze glued now to a cardboard ticket.  
He'd gone first, and did not imagine her  
moving forward on the later wheels  
of an older train that braked and squealed  
through those fields she worked earlier  
summers, and even kissed a farmhand for fun,  
telling the boy she might be back,  
the fields of wheat that looked to her  
like letters of a bemused alphabet,  
catching her breath inside them, wondering  
what school would be like when it came,  
as if he could forestall what would take place  
between them, hunker it so deep  
inside his person, the way they would sit  
at once together on the bed, the sheet pulled tight  
in the way of train station hotels,  
in that town two towns north where no one  
knew them, as no school existed there,  
where not one person would think it strange  
that older and younger could be aligned  
by rings so new and cheaply made  
they looked like they came from a Spring Fair  
and hers on the wrong finger out of fear  
she might offend some god she'd been convinced  
to discount since her father died at thirty-five  
from syphilis her mother would describe  
as punishment but would not say from what.  
Keeping to his half of the seat,



the ticket taking up both of his hands  
like bread doled out in some orphanage,  
the scene could live like iron in the earth,  
hard in the senses, liquid underneath.  
She reaches for his top button with both hands  
as he remembers what she asked in French  
on the first day they knew they would tell each other  
their troubles, not just their interpretations.  
How did the philosopher who built the Church  
want us to talk about our hearts? The one who knew  
why Adam and Eve covered  
their genitals rather than their mouths,  
their mouths, which had done all the sinning—  
not out of any fear of God,  
but since they couldn't face what they had done  
without talking about it.

*Katie Peterson*

113

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<sup>113</sup> [Katie Peterson](#), "[The Teacher and the Student](#)," [Poetry London](#), collected in [Fog and Smoke](#), [Farrar, Straus, and Giroux](#)

Maybe you need to embrace disappointment.  
 The way you don't sleep at night,  
 dreaming of dry dust on furniture  
 and the pleasant odor of plywood  
 and what it feels like to peel skin off  
 of your thumb. Maybe you should begin  
 that perfect novel which will  
 save you. Pluck you from the ruddy jaws  
 of a monster that is right there  
 beyond your failing sight. Not today,  
 Satan, or Ronald Reagan—  
 you learn that often enough evil is not about  
 nuance. It was raining  
 the day I was born  
 and years later I haven't learned much more  
 about the stars: fire  
 and cold light afloat in the murk of the cosmos.  
 Last night I read about  
 the doctors who removed 526 teeth  
 from a boy's dying jaw:  
 hours in they feared there was no end to it.  
 That his pain was infinite.  
 Their hands trapped.  
 Bits of white bone arrayed in a spiral  
 beside his sleeping face  
 and it was lovely and an evidence of the divine.  
 Well, not really. Maybe you  
 aren't real, aren't listening to the wind  
 as it goes through the night  
 like a sad prayer beneath the stippled sky.  
 Maybe. Just maybe things will get better.  
 Give it a year.

*Paul Guest*

114

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<sup>114</sup> [Paul Guest](#), "2020," [The American Poetry Review](#)

## The Thermopolium

*Ancient Snack Stall Uncovered in Pompeii.*  
—*The Daily Star*

Even in 79 AD, people loved street food,  
all the young Romans flocking around  
the sizzling terracotta pots, the stalls frescoed  
with chickens and hanging ducks, hot drinks  
served in ceramic two-handled pateras  
filled with warm wine and spices.  
Their sandaled feet glimmered  
as they milled around, waving hellos,  
smudging one another's cheeks  
with kisses, murmuring gossip,  
complaining about the crazy rise  
in the price of wheat. Soups and stews,  
skewered meats, stacks of flatbread,  
honey cakes and candy made with figs.  
They sprawled on the steps or sat  
near a neighbor's open door, stood  
under a blur of windows, someone  
playing a lyre, barefoot children  
singing the Ode of Horace. Just like  
New York before the pandemic,  
before the many retreated and retired  
to their living rooms to watch the news  
on a loop, alone with a cat or dog,  
a furry stay against the nothing,  
nothing, nothing of loneliness,  
their dreams a passport to fear.  
I used to see the excavated people  
of Pompeii, frozen in time, caught  
curled in sleep or kneeling, a couple  
fucking, though there is one  
of a possible father propped  
in what looks like an easy chair,  
a mother bouncing a child  
on her lap, as if they'd decided  
in their final moments to be  
happy, to go into the afterlife  
covered in ash, buried alive  
by joy.

*Dorianne Laux*  
115

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<sup>115</sup> [Dorianne Laux](#), "[The Thermopolium](#)," *Alaska Quarterly Review*, collected in *Life on Earth*, [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## Stories from Strange Lands

I tell you my lovers never last—  
I'm serious, but my sincerity

sparks laughs. You read me  
over the telephone lines

reportage from tonight's bath:  
If God = love (+ 1 yogic breath)

then it's best to locate our days  
fucking in a feather bed.

This is an ecstatic theology  
we heartily agree on—

a praxis that's not half bad.  
But what I really want

to offer, my beloved,  
is news from another land.

When a good man, a worker—  
a trapeze artist or Cleveland dad—

becomes injured, the French believe  
it merely deepens his craft,

artistry entering the body  
with a dangerous leap or a fall.

The story makes of mistakes  
something holy. My first near miss

of your kiss, your undisclosed desire  
for reading trash. Our skill set working

as we continue our lives  
over a landscape of scars and of mishaps.

*Susan Rich*  
116

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<sup>116</sup> [Susan Rich](#), "[Stories from Strange Lands](#)," collected in [Cloud Pharmacy](#), [White Pine Press](#)

Love Poem by the Light of the Desert

I didn't expect the desert, its longform.  
We took ourselves to water.

I cannot say everything was beautiful,  
but mostly, yes;

I am grateful for the names of God  
we are allowed to speak, and the hidden.

We didn't intend to see them fucking among the trees,  
as deer to me, in my particular way.

I have rejected certain discourses,  
I have accepted certain discourses.

A man you work with tells me he knows  
*everything there is to know about religion.*

I practice a certain docility in my discourses.  
I tell you again, again, the desert,

something dead-already, resurrected: the tightly-metered  
voice calling out kidnappings, the weather,

mildly apocalyptic all June.  
In the river you are cold in my mouth.

*Alisha Dietzman*  
117

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<sup>117</sup> [Alisha Dietzman](#), "[Love Poem by the Light of the Desert](#)," [Changes Review](#), collected in [Sweet Movie](#), [Beacon Press](#)

θαλασσοπλავητος, or why didn't someone ask me sooner?

My plan was to be happy and write about a Greek word  
that means "made to wander over the sea"  
if I could learn how to type it in my old version  
of WordPerfect, but I made a mistake and looked  
at Google News: the Ohio legislature has approved a law  
banning abortions once a fetal heartbeat can be heard,  
or six weeks in most cases. Now I'm stuck, as politics  
and poetry get along about as well as lips  
and soldering irons, hawks and wet cement;  
and amazing clouds are just now rolling past  
the mountain I sit in front of every morning,  
wide spaced and red as pomegranates on the bottom,  
each a kind of boat; and I'm incapable  
of the Vulcan mind-meld, which would allow me  
to put my hand on a stranger's face and perhaps  
understand why anyone wants to tell anyone else  
what to do. I don't even want to tell myself  
what to do, making me a horrible state senator  
from Ohio or Greek king who condemns a man  
to live in a boat on the sea and have moussaka  
and retsina no more, but I don't think it's my biz  
whether my jizz ultimately becomes a tot or not,  
since I'm not the one who has to slosh around  
nine months with a wee fish inside my wee ocean.  
If I heard one three hundred eighty-ninth  
the concern for the sacredness of life  
once the kid has popped and needs grub  
and love and shoes and shots, once there's more  
than a lub-dub in the tummy, I'd at least  
be impressed by the moral consistency  
of the vision, but usually those insistent  
on nixing a woman's say on whether  
she creates a human being, won't give a fig  
or farthing to the living  
once they've imbibed actual air.  
It's clear the solution's to never read  
the news before I write, never live  
in Ohio, never be or love a woman  
who wants to steer her own ship, Greek or not.  
Problem solved, easy peasy, what's next?

*Bob Hicok*

118

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<sup>118</sup> Bob Hicok, "[θαλασσοπλავητος, or why didn't someone ask me sooner?](#)," collected in [Hold](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Bed

You have to understand: there was no noon, no down. Time passed. Day turned to night. I woke and slept. I drank, I ate a bit, I slept. There were few nouns. They wouldn't connect. I didn't know fan. I kept kicking off the blankets and pulling off my clothes. The people came and went. I didn't know now, I couldn't find the latches, and every few hours I found myself at baseline, staccato, returned to tonic. The light moved through its stations: soft white, blur-white, buzz-white, white-white, cream-white, cream, tan, black. My dreams were flickers, my days were smears. I slept in a mechanical bed, three feet in the air. Time and more time. The questions were confusing. I answered in song lyrics and scraps of poetry. Twenty-nine dollars and an alligator purse. It would have been funny except for the yelling. And the fear—the mind that didn't work, the leg that wouldn't move, the people who should have arrived but didn't. I pitched fits; cried jags, hair-triggered—it was neurological, endless. Finally they knocked me out. They clocked me. Soft white, blur-white, buzz-white, white-white, cream-white, cream, tan, black.

*Richard Siken*

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<sup>119</sup> [Richard Siken](#), "[Bed](#)," [The Harvard Advocate](#)

Ode to Driving on Venice Boulevard with Emily Dickinson

What thoughts I have of you tonight, Emily Dickinson,  
driving through deserted streets slick with rain,  
neon glistening like Christmas on the wet pavement,  
red and green lights, and you in your white dress  
looking out on LA, only a dream when you wandered  
through the woods in front of your father's house  
in Amherst, but now its freeways are rivers of methane  
and you with your passionate heart drumming  
through your letters, longing for a master to tell you how  
to become Emily Dickinson, but you were writing  
to yourself, Daisy and Master in one small body,  
and how does any woman become herself in this crazy world,  
I ask as we pass the Monkey Tattoo Parlor and gas stations  
glowing like extraterrestrial landing platforms,  
and in the neon shimmer we can only see the moon and the North Star,  
maybe Orion's belt. O Emily, where are the stars,  
like a carpet of light in the night sky? Where are we, abandoned  
in this chariot of doom? I quote you to yourself, *Wild nights,*  
*wild nights, were I with thee.* I am here with you, but the only stars  
are on billboards like postcards from a race of giants,  
and I am flying home tomorrow to an apartment in Texas,  
flying home to nothing but my own thoughts  
shot like avocados in the tornado of my mind, eating lonely bowls  
of cereal, drinking lonelier glasses of wine, and looking  
out my window at the three houses across the street, but tonight  
I'm in California, my mother across the ocean in Honolulu,  
the library of my brain with me, the women and men who share  
my secret thoughts. I recite Hamlet's soliloquies to you,  
and you say, *I, too, have lost all my mirth, in the field*  
*of my tribulations.* Now that's an Old Testament word,  
and we trade them—my iniquity for your retribution,  
and we are in a desert tent twenty thousand miles from Egypt  
praying to the Lord for some kind of release, but who is this God  
but another master, who can tell us nothing about the dark night  
we are driving through with its taco stands and tanning parlors,  
yoga studios and grocery stores locked for the night, meat  
and apples resting in the dark while palm trees sway in winds  
from the ocean with its islands where women live trying  
to become themselves, but at war with their bodies and every missile  
thrown from their own minds into the hurricane of their hearts.

Barbara Hamby  
120

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<sup>120</sup> Barbara Hamby, "Ode to Driving on Venice Boulevard with Emily Dickinson," *The American Journal of Poetry*, collected in *Holoholo*, University of Pittsburgh Press



from “The World Doesn’t End”

He had mixed up the characters in the long novel he was writing. He forgot who they were and what they did. A dead woman reappeared when it was time for dinner. A door-to-door salesman emerged out of a backwoods trailer wearing Chinese robes. The day the murderer was supposed to be electrocuted, he was buying flowers for a certain Rita, who turned out to be a ten-year-old girl with thick glasses and braids.... And so it went.

He never did anything for me, though. I kept growing older and grumpier, as I was supposed to, in a ratty little town which he always described as “dead” and “near nothing.”

~

In the fourth year of the war, Hermes showed up. He was not much to look at. His mailman’s coat was in tatters; mice ran in and out of its pockets. The broad-brimmed hat he was wearing had bullet holes. He still carried the famous stick that closes the eyes of the dying, but it looked gnawed. Did he let the dying bite on it? Whatever the case, he had no letters for us. “God of thieves!” we shouted behind his back when he could no longer hear us.

~

Margaret was copying a recipe for “saints roasted with onions” from an old cookbook. The ten thousand sounds of the world were hushed so we could hear the scratchings of her pen. The saint was asleep in the bedroom with a wet cloth over his eyes. Outside the window, the author of the book sat in a flowering apple tree killing lice between his fingernails.

*Charles Simic*  
121

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<sup>121</sup> [Charles Simic, “The World Doesn’t End \[He had mixed up the characters...., In the fourth year of the war...., Margaret was copying a recipe....\],” collected in \*The World Doesn’t End\*, Ecco](#)

## Fountain

Dogwood white knuckle it through January, February, March:  
what do your pockets want with those hard stars?

Commissioned in the nineteenth century for thirsty horses,  
municipal fountains in Kansas City, where visitors and locals alike are now invited to kill time,  
outnumber those of Rome.

We mark time in our own ways.  
My dementing dad photographs sunrise and the moon in its phases:  
calls each of them sunset.

I live in fear I'll age like him: I think  
the word persimmon at sunrise, and for half and quarter moons, paper crane.

An addict and dad at sixteen, my best friend's son knew his mother was dying.  
Her hands stroking the cat were perfect.  
His hands, folding cranes out of rolling papers, matched hers perfectly.

We call all paper things ephemera,  
but one thumb-sized bird has hung on my bulletin board for so long  
its pin's rusted out.

He is motherless now, incarcerated.  
I am motherless now, aging.

I waste my time in the nature store. The shells of the aggressively predatory  
snails are so beautiful,  
my impulse is to put them in my mouth,

their perfection owed to repeating patterns,  
what mathematicians call self-similarity.

The cat blinks at sunrise from my belly, as the cat before her did and the cat before:  
ribbons of cloud and blue.

When I shower, water sprays from my fingers like change for the poor box  
or the unclenching fists of dogwood, unfolded origami,  
cat iris, the star in the persimmon where the seeds once slept—

I said like, as in: like we kill time.  
I mean metaphor, as when time kills us back.

*Kathy Fagan*  
122

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<sup>122</sup> [Kathy Fagan](#), "[Fountain](#)," [Plume](#), collected in [Bad Hobby](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

## Sonnet

You jerk you didn't call me up  
I haven't seen you in so long  
You probably have a fucking tan  
& besides that instead of making love tonight  
You're drinking your parents to the airport  
I'm through with you bourgeois boys  
All you ever do is go back to ancestral comforts  
Only money can get—even Catullus was rich but

Nowadays you guys settle for a couch  
By a soporific color cable t.v. set  
Instead of any arc of love, no wonder  
The G.I. Joe team blows it every other time

Wake up! It's the middle of the night  
You can either make love or die at the hands of  
the Cobra Commander

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To make love, turn to page 121.  
To die, turn to page 172

*Bernadette Mayer*  
123

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<sup>123</sup> [Bernadette Mayer](#), "[Sonnet](#)," collected in [A Bernadette Mayer Reader](#), [New Directions](#)

## The Ineffable

I'm sitting here reading the paper,  
feeling warm and satisfied, basically content  
with my life and all I have achieved.  
Then I go up for a refill and suddenly realize  
how much happier I could be with the barista.  
Late thirties, hennaed hair, an ank  
or something tattooed on her ankle,  
a little silver ring in her nostril.  
There's some mystery surrounding why she's here,  
pouring coffee and toasting bagels at her age.  
But there's a lot of torsion when she walks,  
which is interesting. I can sense right away  
how it would all work out between us.

We'd get a loft in the artsy part of town,  
and I can see how we'd look shopping together  
at our favorite organic market  
on a snowy winter Saturday,  
snowflakes in our hair,  
our arms full of leeks and shiitake mushrooms.  
We would do *tai chi* in the park.  
She'd be one of the few people  
who actually "gets" my poetry  
which I'd read to her in bed.  
And I can see us making love, by candlelight,  
Struggling to find words for the ineffable.  
We never dreamed it could be like this.

And it would all be great, for many months,  
until one day, unable to help myself,  
I'd say something about that nostril ring.  
Like, do you really need to wear that tonight  
at Sarah and Mike's house, Sarah and Mike being  
pediatricians who intimidate me slightly  
with their patrician cool, and serious money.  
And she would give me a look,  
a certain lifting of the eyebrows  
I can see she's capable of, and right there  
that would be the end of the ineffable.

George Bilgere  
124

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<sup>124</sup> George Bilgere, "[The Ineffable](#)," collected in [The White Museum](#), Autumn House Press

## Letter to a Young Poet

If you haven't taken the Amtrak in Florida, you haven't lived. At 2:00 a.m., seven months into the pandemic, I'm looking up where Seamus Heaney died. It was Blackrock Clinic overlooking the sea and I wonder, sometimes, what is my thing with the Irish, but if the white kids can go to India for an epiphany, maybe it's fine that I go to Ireland. Don't read Melanie Klein in a crisis. She's depressing and there are alternatives. Like Winnicott or a lobotomy. Flow is best understood through Islamic mysticism or Lil Wayne spitting without a rhyme book, post-2003. To want the same things as you age is not always a failure of growth. A good city will not parent you. Every poet has a love affair with a bridge. Mine is the Manhattan and she's a middle child. Or the Sea Link in Mumbai, her galactic tentacles whipping the starless sky. When I say *bridge*, what I mean is goddess. People need your ideas more than your showmanship. LA is ruining some of you. All analysis is revisionist. Yellow wildflowers are it. It's better to be illegible, sometimes. Then they can't govern you. It takes time to build an ethics. Go slow. Wellness is a myth and shame transforms no one. You can walk off most anything. Everyone should watch anime after a heartbreak. Sleep upwards in a forest so the animal sees your gaze. I think about that missing plane sometimes and what it means to go unrecovered. Pay attention to what disgusts you. Some of the most interesting people have no legacy. Remember that green is your color and in doubt, read Brooks. In the end, your role is to attend to the things you like and ask for more of it: Bridges. Ideas. Destabilization. Yellow tansy. Cities. The wild sea. And in the absence of recovery, some ritual. In the absence of love? Ritual. Understand that ritual is a kind of patience, an awaiting and waiting. Keep waiting, kitten. You will be surprised what you can come back from.

*Megan Fernandes*

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<sup>125</sup> Megan Fernandes, "[Letter to a Young Poet](#)," [New England Review](#), collected in [I Do Everything I'm Told](#), Tin House Books

Please Enjoy These Coming Attractions

A friend keeps writing about the little blue pills,  
every poem a time bomb he plants inside his body.

My little brother says he knows how he'll end it too:  
plastic bag over his head, cinched with rubber bands.

A lover said he loaded the gun once, clicked the safety  
off, held it to his head. The barrel left a surprised O

at his temple for a day. My former teacher crushes crystals  
dirty gray, in a bowl, then holds them in his palm,

the charred remains of pleasure. The college freshman  
shows me the delicate x's the X-Acto made, crossing

his blue veins at sixteen. Chris hanged himself  
on a closet door with hotel towels on vacation in Peru.

Every gay man inhabiting my students' short stories  
crossed out by AIDS or hate crime. Is it any wonder

I have failed to imagine my life won't end  
in autopsy? Hey, straight reader.

Spin this loaded gun between us.  
Let's see whose life it chooses.

*James Allen Hall*

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<sup>126</sup> [James Allen Hall](#), "[Please Enjoy These Coming Attractions](#)," collected in [Romantic Comedy](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Song in the Key of Men Who Try to Fuck Me Then Say They Love Me as a Friend

Save your tongue for tits & whiskey. Don't apologize—I'll do it for you.  
I've nursed your sputtering heart hale, resuscitated you.

I'd had other plans, an accidental expert. It started young, you  
in high school with your little hard-on, rubbing out the light so I couldn't see you.

What a good teapot I am. I sit to steep your other love's leaves.  
The only thing I've ever been called to—in college my major was you.

Your familial complications, your map of shifting borders.  
I get called in to broker peace, suited authority on translating you.

Charismatic preacher gospeling that I am only worth wanting  
sometimes. I hallelujah in white, renamed by the river for you.

Early spring brings bud, then snow. No one single coat will do.  
What does your now-wife know of your weather? Has she insured against you?

This house made of books & beers collapses, turns shack. You  
say *Erin* is the name of a country. That's true—& we've no shore for ships like you.

*Erin Adair-Hodges*  
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<sup>127</sup> [Erin Adair-Hodges](#), "[Song in the Key of Men Who Try to Fuck Me Then Say They Love Me as a Friend](#)," *Prairie Schooner*, collected in [Every Form of Ruin](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

## Bad People

The guys who drank quarts of Busch last night  
here by the backstop of this baseball diamond  
had names given them by their mothers and fathers—  
“Jack” and “Kenny” let us say.

Jack might be  
a skinny guy in a black fake-leather jacket,  
he’s twenty-five, his gray pants are too loose on his hips,  
his jaws always have these little black extra hairs,  
his mother won’t talk to him on the phone,  
she lives on french fries and ketchup,  
he hasn’t been able to send her any cash  
in the last two years, ever since he lost  
his job unloading produce trucks at Pathmark;  
Jack’s father disappeared when he was ten.  
“No big deal,” Jack says, “he was a bastard anyway,  
he used to flatten beer cans on the top of my head.”  
Kenny offers a laugh-noise. He’s heard all that before.  
Kenny is forty-eight, a flabby man with reddened skin,  
he is employed at the Italian Market selling fish  
just four hours a day but his shirts hold the smell;  
his female companion Deena left him a note last month:  
“You owe me \$12 chocolate \$31 wine \$55 cable TV plus  
donuts—I have had it—taking lamp and mirror  
they are mine.” Kenny hasn’t seen her since.  
He hangs with Jack because Jack talks loud  
as if the world of cops and people with full-time jobs  
could be kept at bay by talking, talking loud...

(I’m talking gently and *imaginatively* here  
as if the world of bums and jerks could be kept far off—)

Jack and Kenny. (Or two other guys dark to me with wounds  
oozing in Philadelphia ways less ready to narrate.)  
Last night at midnight they got cheesesteaks at Casseloni’s  
and bought four quarts at the Fireside Tavern  
and wandered into this park. After one quart of Busch  
Jack said he was Lenny Dykstra  
and found a stick for his bat. “Pitch to me asshole” he said  
so Kenny went to the mound and pitched his bottle  
for want of anything better and Jack swung in the dark and missed;  
Kenny’s bottle smashed on home plate and Jack heard in the sound  
the absurdity of all his desiring since seventh grade,  
absurdity of a skinny guy who blew everything since seventh  
when he hit home runs and chased Joan Rundle around the gym  
so Jack took his own empty bottle and smashed it down  
amid the brown shards of Kenny’s bottle.  
Then they leaned on the backstop to drink the other two quarts



and they both grew glum and silent  
and when they smashed these bottles it was like  
what else would they do? Next morning

Nick and I come to the park with a rubber ball  
and a miniature bat. Nick is not quite three  
but he knows the names of all the Phillies starters  
and he knows the area around home plate is not supposed to be  
covered with jagged pieces of brown glass. Like a good dad  
I warn him not to touch it and we decide to establish  
a new home plate closer to the mound (there's no trash can  
handy). "Who put that glass there?" Nick wants to know  
and to make a long story short I say "Bad People."  
Nick says "Bad? How come?"

*Mark Halliday*  
128

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<sup>128</sup> [Mark Halliday](#), "[Bad People](#)," [Indiana Review](#), collected in [Selfwolf](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)

## Set Designer

Once, Mark Leidner talked me into doing set design,  
unpaid, in the Poconos  
where I would be forever traumatized  
by the overpopulation of deer,  
growths on their bodies and bald patches,  
limping and scarred from being hit by cars,  
and the one the crew called “jawbone”  
that kept coming around  
because its jawbone was hanging off, unusable, from its head  
while the body wasted away  
and I brought out mashed potatoes  
that it lapped up with a long tongue.

We had to fire the creepy sound guy  
who was clearly on drugs  
and I found a big plastic gallon of Dewar’s  
in the Airbnb cupboard  
and a guitar  
and got drunk alone on the deck of the cabin  
amazed no one would join me.  
I woke in the middle of the night  
for my usual routine of self-hatred  
until I realized how excruciating it all was  
and instead wrote down on the set schedule  
“remember how good it feels to be good to yourself”  
carrying it around with me ever since.  
Hoping I will.

*Bianca Stone*

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<sup>129</sup> Bianca Stone, “[Set Designer](#),” collected in [What is Otherwise Infinite](#), Tin House Books

I Listen to George Harrison's "Apple Scruffs" After My Miscarriage

the glissando of the harmonica part so much like counting backwards,  
autumn light erupting in blisters,

how I joked with the anesthesiologist  
before blacking out I wasn't sure I wanted to go through with it

but when I woke could feel the wadded suture of my tongue,  
heard myself croon, *was I your best patient ever*

because didn't I want to have succeeded at something, even if only hiding my suffering,  
how the first day I went about my business bleeding into a winged pad

pulsating with contractions, the harmonica part like something opening  
at the glossy hinges what can't be folded

back to its original form—throbbing and iridescent under my life  
like a vellum pit of stars—I loved knowing a woman's hands secured the needle

into my vein, secreting glyphs of narcotics  
before going home groggy and emptied

eating ramen noodles for dinner and the harmonica part—  
little spark of vowels greased and effervescing—

isn't that what was waiting for me on the other side  
like a sun touching the edge of a windshield

and didn't I know I would carry this with me for the rest of my life  
and that it is good, the way an injury is said to work labor into the worker's body,

that to grieve is not always downward but sometimes a fervent ascent,  
not a bridge or hook but a brilliant spill  
with no desire to land

Kendra DeColo

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<sup>130</sup> Kendra DeColo, "I Listen to George Harrison's 'Apple Scruffs' After My Miscarriage," [The Ilanot Review](#)

## The Lucky Penny

Once I was drinking at The Lucky Penny  
with a woman named Becky.  
We waited tables together.  
She was small but could carry those big trays  
that hold six plates.  
Becky took me to bars where I never went  
on my own. But this bar  
was where I used to drink in college.  
So I sat down next to my girl self  
on a wobbly stool.  
She looked like she was just playing  
at sorrow. When she asked if she could  
just go to his apartment to see  
what he was doing, I said *Why not?*  
She said she would run the whole way  
and just look in and then run back.  
What I like about an Edward Hopper painting  
is that it's an open window.  
He was making a sandwich,  
sweeping a knife across a piece of bread,  
and he didn't look up.  
The lamp he would break was still whole.  
For once, he was innocent.  
When she came back, she said all the lights  
in the apartment were on  
and I said it's just like Hopper,  
but she didn't understand.  
I said it was just a room with a person in it  
whose feelings rose in his face for a moment.

*Laura Read*

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<sup>131</sup> [Laura Read](#), "[The Lucky Penny](#)," [Moss](#), collected in [But She is Also Jane](#), [University of Massachusetts Press](#)

from “Forms and materials”

Back then, I thought the only people  
who understood “friend” as I did were long-gone

religious sects, Mennonites in cloisters  
or the Shakers channeling lust into labor,

turning out sweaters, rocking chairs.

What word  
for me isn’t ill-fitting, unclaimable?

A painter I know, a man  
who gave birth around the same time I did

said we didn’t have the language as teens  
for what we are

and to me that made sense,

why he transitioned in his forties after a lifetime  
of femme and why I can be honest now

about what the sex I had got me, a whack  
a-mole, a broken lease, a yeast infection?

For decades I argued with would-be and former  
lovers but I always gave them (mostly him)

what they wanted. I gave a kiss. A layover  
in Saint Louis. A Sarah Lawrence girl

who spills her gimlet at last call pogoing  
to the Stooges’ *I wanna be your dog*

in an ex’s memory. But who will I give  
my honest answer to this: What *are* you, anyway?

Sir Talleyrand,  
I read in the op-eds that The Future Isn’t

Female Anymore,  
but I’ll still dedicate this volume to you—

I’m not a pronoun,  
an orientation, though I am that, too.

I am the word *continue*.

—

179

from “The Itinerant Girl’s Guide to Self-Hypnosis”

On the brick wall opposite my window, light and leaf shadow. Graffiti reading *Joey 79*. Inside, light on the lap of the chair.

My grandmother on the phone telling me what her mother used to say. *Anybody that’s in the same mood all the time is crazy*. The words come to me across space and across time. Then, *You have to travel on the road a long time and learn lots of things*.

At the cafe, a silver fork engraved with a cursive *H. A.*

Out the window, a white-blond pigeon walking by, face colored like a hawk, followed by a fat wolf-dog on a leash, affable as a talking bear.

A squirrel chasing a sparrow.

Light and air and leaves moving. Even water and a stone wall. A cheese sandwich. Espresso.

At the park, a remote control bird is stuck in the tallest tree, twittering. The girl puts her helmet back on and runs her bike up the hill. A boy speeds by on a tiny motorcycle singing, *HEEEY HEEEEY. Boom. Boom. Boom-de-boom.*

Two teenaged girls walk up the hill, holding and swinging hands. They bump hips, drop hands, stop to talk, continue on. Both have wavy brown hair past their shoulders, and the one with bigger hips holds her chin lifted, as if her face is helping her climb.

Later, looking up to see the moon, but it is only light from the window opposite.

*Joanna Penn Cooper*

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<sup>133</sup> [Joanna Penn Cooper](#), “[The Itinerant Girl’s Guide to Self-Hypnosis \[On the brick wall opposite my window...\]](#),” collected in [The Itinerant Girl’s Guide to Self-Hypnosis](#), Brooklyn Arts Press

from "13th Balloon"

One afternoon you fixed me  
lunch in your tiny apartment  
    cream of mushroom soup  
    from a can  
    and English muffins

As you set our bowls  
on a blanket  
on the floor because you didn't  
    own a table

you put on  
a bad British accent and said  
*We're having crumpets*

It was raining but there was  
an abundance of light  
coming somehow from a source  
outside we couldn't see  
From here that light feels like  
what music sounds like  
just before the record skips

*Mark Bibbins*  
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<sup>134</sup> [Mark Bibbins](#), "13th Balloon [One afternoon you fixed me...]," [The New York Times Magazine](#), collected in [The Best American Poetry 2023](#), [Scribner](#)



## Dramaturgy

I'm writing a play about a Kommandant at Auschwitz who recognizes one of the Jewish prisoners as a famous poet, and as the Kommandant has poetic aspirations himself, he pulls the prisoner away from the work detail to receive poetry lessons from the celebrated Jewish writer. The bulk of the play is their discussions of poetry, which the poet is initially reluctant to have, the power differential being so stark, and though he flatters the Kommandant at first, when he begins to see his Nazi pupil's true devotion to the art, as well as his untrained and untapped talent, he goes to work in earnest, and at times they are both simply lovers of the German language, though the truth of their situation often interrupts. In the last act, the Kommandant is on trial for his crimes, and in the days before he is to be executed, he begs the poet to publish his work under his own name—the Nazi's writing under the Jew's name—because as a Nazi, he feels his own name is disgraced, but he believes so strongly in poetry that it matters more to him that his work survive than that anyone know it was his work. The play is pulled entirely from my imagination, a careful rereading of Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower*, and the poetic ideas of Rilke and Goethe, with a smattering of Nietzsche. In readings of the play, the Kommandant has seemed more noble than I had intended—in many ways, more noble than the Jew, because the Jew is suffering by no fault of his own, while the Kommandant is tortured by conscience, and driven by a sense of poetic calling that separates him from the Germans around him. On the morning of the third workshop reading, I watched a video of two Russians on an ice-dancing reality show performing as Jews in Auschwitz. I was sickened, even though I couldn't follow the pantomimed action, and I wondered if I was producing Holocaust kitsch myself, if my work was as disgusting as theirs, though I knew if I asked any of my team, they would reassure me that I am doing important work that rises to the level of art. Last night, during a break in the workshop of the play, I told the story of how my grandmother, upon learning that her entire family had died in the camps, had burned the photo albums of everyone she had loved. I have told that story many, many times, without feeling much more than regret, or sympathy, but this time I broke down crying, and I couldn't stop. Everyone at the table came to comfort me,

and I felt ridiculous, but the only thing I could say was,  
“It’s time for us to go. This isn’t a place we can live anymore.”  
I left the studio embarrassed, and later that day,  
I resigned from the production. I don’t think they believed  
that I was serious, and they’ll expect me to show up  
at the next table reading. I won’t. The play will go on  
though I can have nothing more to do with it.  
This morning, after taking a shirt off the hanger,  
I looked in the mirror and realized I hadn’t put it on.  
Without thinking, I had started packing a bag.

*Jason Schneiderman*  
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<sup>135</sup> Jason Schneiderman, “[Dramaturgy](#),” [Virginia Quarterly Review](#), collected in [The Best American Poetry 2023](#), Scribner

## Purpura

When the poet wrote *I lost my mother's watch*,  
we knew she meant more than a timepiece.

To watch over the soft-skulled expulsive being  
that is *baby* is a genre of love that must break

its own clock. In my first years, I slept little.  
When I slept, I left my eyes' garage doors open.

Poor mother thought *baby awake, mother awake*.  
For months: staring contests in the half-dark,

calling each other's bluff, falling in love as any  
pair must—with desire and jealousy. Jostling

furniture in the psyche, heady hormonal rush.  
When I lost my mother's watch, I was thirteen.

The day, unaccountably bright. Fields of flora  
bloomed under her skin as if she were a lavender

hat in Seurat's famed painting. An ambulance  
rolled its orange glass eye at her strange beauty.

For weeks, we waited for her body to lose its  
artistic ambition. (Toxic drugs, confusion.)

Doctors asked: *Who is President? What year is it?*  
*Can you name your children?* Purpura, the broken

blood vessels in her skin's pointillist painting.  
Some code or augury to read and remember.

I watched, thinking of Phoenicians finding  
the world's costliest color in the crushed bodies

of murex: vats of pulverized mollusks to trim  
the general's cloak, dye an emperor's robe purple.

What a tyrant or daughter claims as her right,  
calling it nature. The first empire is mother.

Heather Treseler

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<sup>136</sup> Heather Treseler, "[Purpura](#)," collected in [Auguries & Divinations](#), Bauhan Publishing

## Elegy for the Me That Died in Childbirth

She did not play horsey on the hardwood  
floor. She did not neigh, nor did she whinny.  
She had some things she wanted to write down:  
something about her father and his guns  
and his alcohol and her trite love for him  
that never got to pale in comparison  
to the blooming chest-fire she would have felt  
if she ever held her son. She didn't get to do  
any of her finest acting: fielding phone calls  
in the hospital bed while pus leaked  
onto the cotton wadded at her stomach  
or smiling at the editor who asked,  
*Is this a trauma poem?* when the title  
was "C-Section." She never got to stand  
under a beach house and hear a man say,  
of childbirth, *Women do die sometimes*  
and say back *I almost did* and then crack  
open her face like Ray Liotta as Henry Hill  
and cackle the moon away. She wanted to sleep  
on her back again. She wanted to taste wine  
and smoke weed. She felt things but not as much  
as the me that I have become. She knew little  
about tears and far less about the tears of others.  
I want to give her a piece of pink bubble gum  
and slap her face. I want to watch her stand  
at night amid the Spanish moss and locusts,  
to press into her vein-streaked belly  
and smell an entire ocean, a blue heron in flight.

Dorsey Craft  
137

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<sup>137</sup> Dorsey Craft, "Elegy for the Me That Died in Childbirth," *Ploughshares*

## The Empty Grave of Zsa Zsa Gabor

On the radio I heard  
that inimitable accent  
say *I want to die*  
*where I was born*,  
I remember her  
so long ago  
appearing on certain  
Saturday nights  
as I religiously wasted  
my youth watching  
others embark  
the boat of love,  
rogues and ingenues  
disappeared into  
commercial breaks  
unravaged then  
into buffet light  
emerged dazed  
with a contentment  
I have never felt,  
some nights  
she stepped  
off the gangplank  
so gracefully  
stumbling a little,  
one hand stretched  
out to the dashing  
purser, the other  
holding the million  
dollar nickel  
of always about  
to escape without  
becoming a bride,  
sometimes clad  
in the white fur  
attitude of a girl  
from the Kremlin  
who wouldn't talk  
to one untouched  
by evil, at others  
under a blue hat,  
a countess of  
what could have been  
were I not who I was,  
she also appeared  
perched amid  
the luminous  
Hollywood square

of afternoons  
pretending not  
to know facts  
about outer space  
or islands or headless  
queens, her laughter  
a sentient bell,  
and never was  
she until those last  
days in the hospital  
allowed to be  
alone, then one  
afternoon just as  
she wished  
her soul left  
the body we all  
desired and returned  
to the old land,  
wind came looking  
but could not find her.

*Matthew Zapruder*  
138

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<sup>138</sup> [Matthew Zapruder](#), "[The Empty Grave of Zsa Zsa Gabor](#)," *A Public Space*, collected in *The Best American Poetry 2023*, [Scribner](#)

## Tours

A girl on the stairs listens to her father  
beat up her mother.  
Doors bang.  
She comes down in her nightgown.

The piano stands there in the dark  
like a boy with an orchid.

She plays what she can  
then she turns the lamp on.

Her mother's music is spread out  
on the floor like brochures.

She hears her father  
running through the leaves.

The last black key  
she presses stays down, makes no sound,  
someone putting their tongue where their tooth had been.

*C.D. Wright*  
139

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<sup>139</sup> [C.D. Wright](#), "[Tours](#)," collected in [Translation of the Gospel Back Into Tongues](#), [State University of New York Press](#)

“HA!”

There's so much wrong with a country where a woman dying of ovarian cancer has to work forty hours a week at Dollar General; and with the stock boy, who when he finds out why she is in the bathroom all the time, starts to call her “HA!” behind her back, which stands for “Hemorrhaging Ann,” and he thinks it is hilarious. This, of course, *is* hilarious, because everything is fucking hilarious when you're nineteen and working a good-for-shit job where you can keep your hash pipe in a baggie in the dumpster behind the store and volunteer to take out trash six nights a week and get paid to get stoned off your ass. And I think things can't get worse for Ann until the night when the cashier who I've always thought was beautiful in that over-fucked-underfed way that addicts have comes in after she's been fired (for shooting up in her car when she claimed she was calling home to check on her little girl) to pick up her last paycheck and grabs a package of tighty whities (a 3-pack for \$5) and rips it open and puts a pair on Ann's head and leaves the store, laughing, with her paycheck. And I wish there was something I could do—give Ann money, which I don't have, so she could take her kids somewhere nice and let them know their mom for the last six months, three months, whatever she's got left; or find her a real job somewhere where she doesn't have to work with junkies and get yelled at by people who don't understand that if the sign says “3 for \$1,” you have to buy 3 because it's “Dollar General” and all the prices are even, but I can't even get myself a job that I'd want to work now, let alone if I had only three months left. But perhaps karma will take care of it somehow, like when the one nice cashier, who Ann thinks is a slut and doesn't know defended her, tells the stock boy, “Steve, don't think that couldn't happen to your girlfriend someday,” and not a week later, she has a miscarriage, and he has to drive her to the hospital where she loses more blood than Ann has in a month.

*Shaindel Beers*

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<sup>140</sup> [Shaindel Beers](#), “[HA!](#),” *the minnesota review*, collected in [A Brief History of Time](#), [Salt](#)



## Out of Respect

*Donald Justice (1925-2004)*

You died many years ago in Miami  
on a normal sunny day in the manner  
of Vallejo—a death made of words.  
The gravedigger spat, and turned away  
abruptly, out of respect. As you preferred,  
all the conditions were yours.

Now, you're gone for real  
in Iowa City, the weather irrelevant,  
unimprovable. You've entered the realm  
of those beautiful nostalgias you worked  
so carefully to make your own.  
Out of respect, I shed no tears for you,

who hated tears, you who once said  
to a woman who came up to the podium  
to say she was moved by your poems,  
"I'm sorry you feel that way, Ma'am,  
I was after other things."  
Oh you were a charming, difficult man.

After the news came, I took your *Selected*  
from the shelf, and there you were  
again, master of the stilled life  
and its tones, and everywhere the tact  
of those rich refusals—what you held back,  
no doubt out of respect for us.

*Stephen Dunn*

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<sup>141</sup> [Stephen Dunn](#), "[Out of Respect](#)," [Shenandoah](#), collected in [Lines of Defense](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## Hexptych on Ambition

I.  
these days tongues  
those pale pigs in bone fences  
are so unruly  
and it seems indeed that poetry  
has devolved into color  
books of biblical  
tricks naval gazing bays  
of praise swallowed  
by a dark dark age  
or so i hear i do not trust  
any poet that did not  
slurp the purple velvet  
milk of excess from  
lucky charms while  
watching voltron  
but my father says  
with clear conscience  
the same thing about  
tang and leave it  
to beaver i hear his  
trepidation his fidgeting  
when i play music his  
point when he says  
we dont come from kings  
that is not why  
we wear gold  
his mouth is not  
filled with hemlock  
mine has gold  
when he says *most us*  
*just grew up poor* i too  
realize that the world  
odes for people  
i dont like most remind  
me of myself oh no  
so many of them poets

*David Tomas Martinez*

142

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<sup>142</sup> [David Tomas Martinez](#), "[Hexptych on Ambition](#)," [Tin House](#), collected in [Post Traumatic Hood Disorder](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## Salvage

Still somewhere in me the summer  
spent driving steel into the wet earth: heft  
and swing of the mattock, my blistered hands,  
blackflies rising like steam. The tables  
I served. The law firms I hustled  
from one zipline to another, classroom  
where I taught economics to the medicated  
kids of bus drivers and stevedores, swept-  
clean boulevards of the city that paid me  
to snap a picture of every downtown  
business, jot the names and hours in a spiral-  
bound book. Somewhere in me the failed  
industrial towns of New England  
with their posh English names—Weymouth,  
Bridgeport, Lowell, Worcester—their dead  
cars, their factories and silk mills converted  
and upsold to commuters, somewhere  
the third-floor walkup we lived in  
longest: cracked plaster and single-pane, plastic  
paneling painted to look like real wood,  
and my stepmother, my real mom, bending  
over the glossy stack of Star Market mailers,  
hands thin, approximate, bright scars  
on the backs of her wrists where the surgeries  
didn't take, and me, problem kid  
with a mushroom cut and his shirt tucked  
into his sweats, clipping the dollar-offs,  
the half-offs, the buy-one-get-ones, the buy-one-  
get-twos, the store-issued doublers, shoulder  
to shoulder on the kitchen floor and the afternoon  
stretching on into no kind of heaven  
I could have understood then. Of peeling  
linoleum and the drone of interstate traffic.  
Of WIC checks, name-brand knockoffs, the gray  
stamps card made to pass as a regular Visa.  
Where we are allowed to know exactly what we  
can have, and keep. And what it will cost.

*Edgar Kunz*

143

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<sup>143</sup> [Edgar Kunz](#), "[Salvage](#)," collected in [Tap Out](#), [Mariner Books](#)

## The Thank-God-I'm-an-Atheist Blues

Devil I've crept with spiders  
I've buzzed among the flies  
I've rolled along these railroad  
tracks conducting sinners' lies

Known jackals and hyenas  
I've learned their shuck and jive  
Know all about those reptiles  
Who eat each other alive

And what of my appearance  
I've asked the goats for hints  
I've customized these old red shoes  
To follow your hoofprints

Know everything they told me  
And everything I've read  
I long to keep Hell's furnishings  
And help you rule the dead

So hurry Devil take me  
Touch me with your flame  
Before my eyes look Heavenward

By God it looks like rain

*Cindy King*  
144

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<sup>144</sup> [Cindy King](#), "[The Thank-God-I'm-an-Atheist Blues](#)," collected in [Zoonotic](#), [Tinderbox Editions](#)

## Evergreen

A fir denuded of its flat leaves  
rests on its side smelling

of the black salt seas as my brother my bellwether  
slowly revives he hears you

our orphaned father scratching  
in the wood box in the parlor like a rat

in steerage you grunt  
uncomfortably from that old country

*now is not a good time*  
but I never turn back

never guess that you're still here  
in the ionized air of the white pine

in your right mind for the wrong reason  
eternity

*Jane Miller*  
145

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<sup>145</sup> [Jane Miller](#), "[Evergreen](#)," collected in [Thunderbird](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

we used to go to the Bulgarian Bar but not together

*for D.*

the place on Broadway & Canal whose motto  
was *helping ugly people have sex since 416 BC* and  
it probably had another name but everyone  
only knew it as the Bulgarian Bar where  
Gogol Bordello frontman Eugene Hutz  
who was sexy in that sweaty limber way like  
Mick Jagger but much skeezier & with a thick  
Ukrainian accent DJ'ed Gypsy music & we  
figured this out somehow while reminiscing  
about our 20s in NYC via text & our 20s  
in the city were PowerPoint temp jobs were  
stealing rolls of toilet paper from restaurant  
bathrooms were pagers & flip phones & pay  
phones were July subway platform infernos  
were whiffs of hot copper & pee & trash  
were walkup cockroaches were dive bar,  
makeout sessions were chain-smoking on  
fire escapes & unspecified parades rolling  
past tall office windows were brick façade  
or window easements falling to the sidewalk  
& shattering at our feet were illegal sublets  
& late rent checks & spit-shined heartbreak  
when nothing & nobody depended on us &  
she said, *Did I tell you I head-butted a girl  
in the face there one night dancing?*  
*Not on purpose but still...*

*Erika Meitner*

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<sup>146</sup> [Erika Meitner](#), "[we used to go to the Bulgarian Bar but not together](#)," [swamp pink](#), collected in [Useful Junk](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## Flying Rats

*with apologies to Mary Oliver*

Actually? You do have to be good.  
For real? You kinda do have to walk,  
if not literally on your knees,  
then figuratively on your knees,  
or, if not on your “knees,” then  
in really lame, falling apart  
grandma tennies with worn out  
orthotics she bought back in the 90s  
at Kmart. For, like, a hundred miles—  
from downtown Los Angeles  
to the Bakersfield McDonalds.  
Also, guess what? You do have to say  
*I’m sorry* many times a day for things  
like forgetting to tighten the faucet,  
or leaving the gas on, or hitting  
your kids, even if only once  
on the bottom. Not gonna lie:  
you can’t go around all jellyfish,  
all shell-less mollusk, scrolling  
Instagram or watching *Love Island*.  
We can talk to each other about  
what pains us (me: not going to visit  
my death-bed mother; you: having  
to gain weight), but let’s be honest:  
saying “meanwhile, the world goes on”  
doesn’t cut it. Why? Because yeah,  
there’s sun and pebbles, prairies  
and trees, mountains and rivers,  
but let’s not airbrush out the number  
of acres of US forest lost to wildfires  
this past summer: seven and a half  
million. Meanwhile, the geese  
are shitting all over the playground grass,  
the walkways and cement barriers.  
Not high up, but dragging their butts  
across mowed down blackberry brambles.  
Okay, so you’re lonely, and the world  
offers you *Itself*? Calls to you like  
one of these cobra chickens? Yeah,  
yeah pretty harsh. Pretty f-ing harsh.

Martha Silano

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<sup>147</sup> [Martha Silano](#), “[Flying Rats](#),” [Kestrel](#)

## I'm Not the Person She Thinks You Are

Richard and I close a couple of local bars and head home,  
and as I walk in, I hear the phone ringing, and it's Richard,  
who says, "Hey, man, can I crash with you tonight? I'll tell you  
why when I get there." Turns out that when Richard  
got to his place, the front door was plastered with tape

and a sign that said CRIME SCENE: DO NOT ENTER.  
Since Richard roomed with his brother, he was certain  
something awful had happened to him, but when he dialed  
the 800 number for the FBI and gave them the case number,  
the agent he spoke to said his brother had been arrested

for counterfeiting, which was a side of his brother's life  
that was news to Richard. Ever print funny money  
and try to pass it off as the real thing? Me, neither.  
Nor do I recall even handling a bogus bill, although there  
is a statistical probability than I have, and the same can be said

of my brother, whose name is not Richard, as well as everyone  
else in my family, though of course we have had the occasional  
run-in with something that turned out to be other than what  
it seemed, and here I think of the day when I still lived  
at home, and one day this package arrives for my dad,

and it's an electric carving knife, he announces with a little  
more excitement in his voice than usual because all the dads  
in the neighborhood had had one for months and were always  
talking about how great they were when it came time to slice  
that pot roast, pork roast, rib roast, Virginia ham, and now

my dad had an electric carving knife of his very own.  
No wonder he was overjoyed—just plug it in and let  
the power of modern energy do the hard work for you!  
Turns out it wasn't quite the miracle my dad thought it to be,  
or, as he observed several months and not a few more or less

successfully carved chuck roasts, round roasts, tri-tip roasts,  
and briskets later, "It works okay, but it's about the same  
whether you turn it on or not." Then there's friendship.  
Who's really your friend? Who isn't? Let's say you walk into  
the room just as the person who thought was your friend

and has been in your house a million times is taking a piece  
of gum out of her mouth and sticking it under your coffee table,  
and for a minute you look at her in disbelief, but when you say,  
"Did you just stick a piece of gum on the underside  
of my coffee table?" she says, "I don't know," so you get down



on your hands and knees to look, and there is wad after  
wad of gum stuck to the underside of your coffee table,  
and you say, “Did you put all this gum under here?”  
and the person who is now looking less and less like  
the friend you thought she was and more and more

like an imitation of one says, “I. Don’t. Know!”  
Then there’s music. Why, composers even counterfeit  
their own compositions, don’t they, choosing to repeat  
a single melody whose meaning changes as the work does,  
as when the tenor sings “Nessun Dorma” at the beginning

of Act III of Puccini’s *Turandot* as an expression of  
his cocksure confidence that he will win the soprano’s hand  
and then again at the end but this time with the entire chorus  
and the soprano herself, seeing as how he has, indeed,  
won that soft little hand of hers along with the delicious rest

of her, thus making “Nessun Dorma” not an idle boast at all  
but an affirmation, a rock-solid certainty, done deal.  
In music, the word for this kind of self-plagiarism  
is contrafactum, which, like all word in languages other than  
our own, sounds elegant and snooty and not at all unsavory

and vaguely criminal as plagiarism and counterfeit do,  
although, in the case of Richard’s brother, the counterfeiting  
was not vaguely but entirely so. Richard’s brother’s problem  
was that he failed to observe the counterfeiter’s cardinal rule,  
which, if I understand it correctly, is “Don’t get greedy—

just make twenties.” Instead, Richard’s brother made big bills.  
What do you think a convenience-store owner is going to do  
when you hand him a hundred for a pack of gum?  
Say “Certainly, sir, and here’s precisely 99 dollars in change.  
Ordinarily I’d charge sales tax, but I’m going to make

an exception for a gentleman of such towering distinction  
as yourself. Now would you prefer paper or plastic?  
Receipt in the bag or in your hand? And may I help you  
out to your car with it? Please—it’s a privilege!”  
While we’re at it, are you yourself? Are you the Marie

or Jamal or David you’ve always thought you were?  
Maybe your parents made you into someone you really aren’t.  
Some countries ban certain names for fear that the child  
who bears one will be bullied in school; among the names  
banned in Sweden are Metallica, Elvis, and Superman.

Yeah, but think how it'd cheer up the joint if you walked in your local bar and someone shouted, "Superman! Hey, look, it's Superman!" Especially if you were a girl. The strangest case of counterfeiting I know of involves 1959 Heisman Trophy winner Billy Cannon, best known, at least at the start of his fame,

for fielding a kick at the 11-yard line and breaking six tackles on the way to the other team's end zone. You can hear the audio of this 89-yard gallop on radio, see the video on YouTube. Fans still paint murals of that run on the sides of their RVs. The other team's mascot was a horse; those who were there

that day say even the horse was looking at Billy Cannon. He went on to spend 11 years in the pros and went to dental school as well and became an orthodontist when he retired. But on the morning of July 9, 1983, Secret Service agents knocked on the door of Dr. Billy Cannon, who took them out

to his back yard and showed them the \$6 million he and his not-too-bright criminal counterparts had run off on a printing press and buried in Igloo coolers. It's said that fathers kept news of the arrest from their sons. Billy Cannon never offered an explanation. He was sentenced

to five years at the state farm in Angola, got out in two. Time passed. Lawsuits piled up. Then, in 1995, he went back to Angola and offered to take over the prison's dental program. What do I have to lose, thought the warden. But Billy turned out to be just what the system needed. He scheduled an appointment

for every inmate, even those who didn't want one. "Those inmates love him," said the warden, who ended up putting Billy in charge of the entire prison hospital, "and because they do, he won't let them down." Billy Cannon became Billy Cannon, in other words, though he never said a word about the how or why

of his crime and remains as much a mystery as Richard's brother. Or Richard himself, for that matter. Experts say that when the world of virtual reality is perfected, it'll seem every bit as real as real reality, and when that happens, the reality we have now will be cast in doubt: if we can

invent reality, isn't it possible that some other civilization has already done so? How do we know we're not already part of its simulation, programmed by it to make versions of ourselves that will make versions of ourselves? Who is reading this poem? Who wrote it?

Still, whoever dreamed us up did a good job, don't you think?  
That's what counts. Look at you sitting there with your pot  
of Earl Grey tea, sandwich on one side of you,  
remote on the other. You've got everything  
you need, you're an artist, you don't look back.

*David Kirby*  
148

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<sup>148</sup> [David Kirby, "I'm Not the Person She Thinks You Are," \*The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature\*](#)

## You Must Wake Up

else give up Ghosting. Your man  
can't hear you. You are an empty wind  
in his ear. The detective isn't picking up  
any of the psychic snail trails  
you're literally laying down.

Get thee to the forest!  
Make a ball gown out of moss.  
It's what you've always wanted.  
With your body out of the way  
the loam & animal musk might  
breathe you back into being.

Follow the party of Artemis  
to the center of things. Find  
the deepest, blackest pool. The one  
with a single moonbeam reaching  
down through it, groping for a  
dropped ring. Someone is singing  
answers to questions you can't hear.

Music swims up the well  
from another world.

The pool ripples its primordial silk.  
It wants you slipped inside it.

You've always been good  
at diving. When you were alive  
& eleven, your mother drank  
Jack Daniel's & tossed dimes  
for you to fetch like a dog  
in the deep end. Always *so good*

at finding the smallest, shiniest things  
& thrusting them triumphantly  
into the light, on the other side  
of asphyxiation—smiling despite the fact  
that nobody actually asked you  
to bring them back.

Karyna McGlynn  
149

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<sup>149</sup> Karyna McGlynn, "[You Must Wake Up](#)," collected in [50 Things Kate Bush Taught Me About the Multiverse](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## Pink Gloves

Tonight in the taxi I drove four women from a bachelorette party complete with their tiaras and feathers to another bar. Already happy, they pushed the bride-to-be forward and she asked me how I thought she looked.

I was too taken aback to answer much of anything. She was liquid, prehistoric, and my little body burned.

I thought of the Lord throwing handfuls of sequins at the party, as if to say, there is no other life but this one.

*Sean Singer*  
150

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<sup>150</sup> [Sean Singer](#), "[Pink Gloves](#)," collected in [Today in the Taxi](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

## Lighthouse's Guide to the Galaxy

Ladies and gentlemen, ghosts and children of the state,  
I am here because I could never get the hang of Time.  
This hour, for example, would be like all the others  
were it not for the rain falling through the roof.  
I'd better not be too explicit. My night is careless  
with itself, troublesome as a woman wearing no bra  
in winter. I believe everything is a metaphor for sex.  
Lovemaking mimics the act of departure, moonlight  
drips from the leaves. You can spend your whole life  
doing no more than preparing for life and thinking.  
"Is this all there is?" Thus, I am here where poets come  
to drink a dark strong poison with tiny shards of ice,  
something to loosen my primate tongue and its syllables  
of debris. I know all words come from preexisting words  
and divide until our pronouncements develop selves.  
The small dog barking at the darkness has something to say  
about the way we live. I'd rather have what my daddy calls  
"skrimp." He says "discrete" and means the street  
just out of sight. Not what you see, but what you perceive:  
that's poetry. Not the noise, but its rhythm; an arrangement  
of derangements; I'll eat you to live: that's poetry.  
I wish I glowed like a brown-skinned pregnant woman.  
I wish I could weep the way my teacher did as he read us  
Molly Bloom's soliloquy of yes. When I kiss my wife,  
sometimes I taste her caution. But let's not talk about that.  
Maybe Art's only purpose is to preserve the Self.  
Sometimes I play a game in which my primitive craft fires  
upon an alien ship whose intention is the destruction  
of the earth. Other times I fall in love with a word  
like *somberness*. Or moonlight juicing naked branches.  
All species have a notion of emptiness, and yet  
the flowers don't quit opening. I am carrying the whimper  
you can hear when the mouth is collapsed, the wisdom  
of monkeys. Ask a glass of water why it pities  
the rain. Ask the lunatic yard dog why it tolerates the leash.  
Brothers and sisters, when you spend your nights  
out on a limb, there's a chance you'll fall in your sleep.

*Terrance Hayes*  
151

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<sup>151</sup> [Terrance Hayes](#), "[Lighthouse's Guide to the Galaxy](#)," collected in [Lighthouse](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## Gold Ring

Life is short and I still haven't  
slept with a married man, swum  
in a fairy pool fringed by gorse  
on the Isle of Skye, or swallowed  
a gold ring. My finger  
in another's mouth: been there. What key  
opens the shed where I keep the spare?  
A ring of petals rests on the table  
because I touched the yellow flower  
I suspected of being dead. All gone,  
all gone is the song of the baby  
who has eaten all her food. All gone,  
the days when I could have been  
doing my undones and been, perhaps,  
undone. Oh wait, hold on, I slept  
with a married man not long ago.  
He was my husband. My days go on.

*Cecily Parks*  
152

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<sup>152</sup> [Cecily Parks, "Gold Ring," \*High Country News\*](#)

## The Lure

I feel your sadness pour like tar  
the darkness worries me

reminiscent of my mother  
manipulation *ur*  
you do it all forlorn

*please* you say *a cure*  
as if I could close your wound

with fine silk thread. couture  
a needle so minute the pricks  
are pleasure not unlike champagne

such sewing could take years  
and in that time you'll moor  
me in a deeper pit

for sure it's flattering  
to leave a spoor

a sticky grandiose allure  
flammable and pure

but worth the torment  
I'll endure?

Natasha Sajé  
153

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<sup>153</sup> [Natasha Sajé](#), "[The Lure](#)," [On the Seawall](#), collected in [The Future Will Call You Something Else](#), Tupelo Press



## Wedge

I find the old bills  
the ones printed on pink, *final notice*  
Living in a beautiful house we couldn't afford  
with even a pool and a giant yard that required a riding mower  
and living there as though we belonged  
When you and Mom visited, willing the baby to smile at you,  
willing him to crawl good-naturedly over your leg,  
to really enjoy the toy you brought, to ham it up in a baby way  
I silently begged him to do something just *do something*  
but he was cranky as usual  
he climbed out of your lap when I put him in  
he threw a full-on tantrum  
while you looked vacantly at the wall  
when I offered lasagna Mom said *I hate lasagna*  
when I offered a glass of wine you had to drive  
I had to hold it together  
what did any of it mean  
now we lived in a cul-de-sac with all kinds of baby stuff  
I couldn't talk to anyone  
You didn't say a word  
Then you spoke mechanically, the machine gears grinding in your brain  
You pulled out your wallet  
and handed me a check

Lauren Shapiro

154

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<sup>154</sup> Lauren Shapiro, "Wedge," collected in [Arena](#), [Cleveland State University Poetry Center](#)

## Where I'm At

I'm alone, sipping water in a café  
when the barista says, Excuse me,  
sorry, someone asked me  
to give you this, and hands over  
a fifty-dollar gift card.  
There must be a mistake,  
I say out of shame. But I know  
it's for me. It's like Aladdin's,  
the thrift store where I hunted  
deals for months before realizing  
Moonflower, the owner,  
was making up discounts  
out of pity, because I was looking  
so hard. Or the time a stranger  
found me sifting through a Walmart  
dumpster, newborn baby  
strapped to her chest, snowflakes  
catching in his wispy  
black hairs, and passed me  
a wad of twenties, saying,  
I've been where you're at. No,  
I wanted to say. You're the one  
with a baby. But as quickly  
as she came, she cupped  
the newborn's head and stepped  
across an ice patch  
toward her car, and I said  
the only thing there is to say

*Anders Carlson-Wee*  
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<sup>155</sup> [Anders Carlson-Wee](#), "[Where I'm At](#)," *Rattle*, collected in *Disease of Kings*, [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## Push

*Gaza.* I'm sorry. *Beirut.* I still love you like an arsonist.  
*Venice.* When that glassblower put his lips to the glowing pipe and I followed his breath into an ornament I understood grace.  
*New Orleans.* Faintly biblical. Swelter and melody and staircase.  
*Boston.* I found the bird already dead crooked nest scattering the pavement and for days all I saw was that constellation of bones.  
*Aya Nappa,* I cannot hear your name without thinking war and ship and two moons before coastline. *Tripoli.* It was whiplash.  
*Rome.* When I think of my future self she is walking your piazza wearing something yellow. *Wichita.* The car rides through your highway backbone. Always a thunderstorm.  
*Gaza.* I'm sorry. *Ramallah.* Thank you for the applause. Seltzer water and tableh player. Tomato and bread. Thank you for the balcony. *Dubai.* I forgot a scarf a silver ring a tube of lipstick. The rest you may keep. *Aleppo.* Forgive me my litter. My uneaten rice. My abundance of light bulbs. *Baghdad.* Twenty six years and you still make me cry. *Doha.* Starlit eels and honey water. I miss those colors. *Istanbul.* Marry me. *Dallas.* I pretended I was Aladdin turning the soil over and gasping. *Gaza.* I'm sorry. *Beirut.* You are cherry end of cigarette. Push and tunnel. How can you fit so much?  
*Norman, Oklahoma.* No one calls me Holly anymore.  
*Brooklyn.* Sixty-two books and mistakes. You showed me where to sit. *Dublin.* Someday. *Damascus.* Nothing is as dangerous as an unlit match. You taught us that.  
*Paris.* By beauty I meant that bridge. My brother's legs over the water. *Jerusalem.* Only you know what I am capable of.  
*London.* I wasn't ungrateful. *Gaza.* I'm sorry. *Manhattan.* Myself in that nightclub. A paper crane with a beating heart. Do not wake her. *Bangkok.* I ate your fruit salted. Shrines of gold and sugar. *Beirut.* I bruise as easily as you do. We are both anemic veins and unbrushed hair. *Gaza.* I'll tell you where I've been.

Hala Alyan

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<sup>156</sup> Hala Alyan, "Push," *The Understanding Between Foxes and Light*, collected in *Four Cities*, Black Lawrence Press

Anima Poeta: A Christmas Entry for the Suicide, Mayakovsky

It has nothing to do with the warmth of moonset  
If I say to you  
The cities are prose, or that my daughter  
Is growing more beautiful than  
Before when her hair was white and cut short.  
The first Wednesday after the peace  
With Germany was like a new brook  
Under the rain, which only the rain could make.

You dream of a steamer with a clean pine cabin.  
The fog in the wreaths.  
The bullets were chalk-white larvae  
That slept in the chambers  
Of a revolver you left near the door;  
*Larvae*, a Latin word for ghosts,  
The pieces of iron letting go  
Of their little red hammer and its stirrup  
Sending you a visitor,  
The moth that dips inside your head: you were  
Gone before you hit the boards on the floor.

Think of yourself with your black fingers  
In the flowerpots, in the candlelight,  
The double violets and scarlet *Anthus*  
Of a narrow window.  
You were trying  
To remember the French word  
For a hedgerow sparrow that soldiers  
Made captive for its song. You thought  
The kingfisher  
Was so slow when in the vicinity of winter  
That even a bureaucrat  
Would distinguish all its colors. Mayakovsky,  
You watched a snail one afternoon eat half  
Its length in brooklime.  
When you were young

You could list all the birds of passage,  
Much later in your life you joined them.

Norman Dubie  
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<sup>157</sup> Norman Dubie, "[Anima Poeta: A Christmas Entry for the Suicide, Mayakovsky](#)," collected in [In the Dead of the Night](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

## Virus

For once I considered the manner in which the breeze  
lifted the leaves that had died to gather in the roadside  
ditch by the mailbox reminiscent of your hair beneath  
the rake of my fingers. Your pelt like a wolf curled hot  
in sleep all winter, dumb and luxurious as I imagined  
your mind, envying the proximity of your body to hers  
as one who stands freezing in a bus depot eyes coats  
that ride the bodies pressing toward the heat pooling  
out from the station's careless doors. And now, at last,  
but long after I have ceased to care, the germs arrive  
to align our lives. Who will cough first? Who between  
us will carry the virus silently, unwitting accomplice?  
You first met me diseased, admired my pockmarks.  
I turned my face from you, walked back to my sickbed.  
Is that how you came to admire me? The word of your  
handsomeness had always traveled a few days ahead  
of you, a royal emissary. Was it that I was preoccupied  
by a pestilence receding, its fever finishing its last lap  
through my veins? You will mistook my illness for  
nonchalance. I was the first woman to rise from a bed  
and approach you with sores. And this is how I make  
the first of several mistakes: I heal. Ultimately, I find  
your flaws in your language. Flourishes rise from your  
letters like something ripe. It is you to whom I credit  
starting me off on this long journey of feeling nothing.  
Which of us will die first? Who will infect the populace?  
I wish I'd never met you is beside the point. Had we  
never met, I wouldn't have come so far with my well-  
regarded study of dismay. You'd be a better person if  
someone had been considerate enough to scar your face.

*Cate Marvin*  
158

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<sup>158</sup> [Cate Marvin](#), "[Virus](#)," collected in [Event Horizon](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## The Pain Scale

You ask me every time I come  
to give you the definition of this thing

I carry with me, which in so many ways  
has gone beyond pain: a burning hand

that takes me to sometimes even a trail  
of beauty, to dying trees covered

in scaffolding, a map of crushed stuff  
at their feet. The longer I stay and look

the more the distant box opens,  
and I can warble or crawl toward it

instead of just trying to sit in this chair.  
I don't know how to be here

either, but the longer I make the path,  
the more lookouts appear. There is a skull

with light in it, a holy shovel until I'm  
nailed again to the sky in my head

and we stand here together like clouds.

*Julia Story*  
159

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<sup>159</sup> [Julia Story](#), "[The Pain Scale](#)," [Pangyrus](#), collected in [Spinster for Hire](#), [The Word Works](#)

pig bttm looking for now

i take pills & pass out in front of cameras.  
an overdose on a live streaming jerk-off site

would be an embarrassing way to go  
no matter who you are. they're angry i'm gone.

don't like to see a body emptied of its spirit.  
draws attention to their own, body i mean.

would rather watch pleasure stampede through  
a stranger like water through a hotel faucet.

we all leak behind screens. i close my eyes only to open  
them on the same country. open them on a man

braying like a dial tone, a group of girls laughing  
in tacoma, messages asking: you okay? you dying?

you dead? don't move. don't make a sound—  
i close the computer, i go rinse my mouth.

*Sam Sax*  
160

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<sup>160</sup> [Sam Sax](#), "[pig bttm looking for now](#)," collected in [Pig](#), [Scribner](#)

Essay: Delicately

The father pollutes his body and  
this is illegal and yet he does not  
knowingly or purposefully pollute rivers  
except by the small necessities  
of daily living. Chevron pollutes rivers  
and dirt and children are born  
into brain cells in wrong places. If my father  
smokes in a public place, this could  
get him into trouble. If he shoots  
heroin at home and someone  
official finds him he  
will be fined or arrested, maybe jailed.  
This is the classic story in which a hero  
sets out on a voyage, like Homer's or Dante's, and  
along the way finds out something about  
her/himself, only this time there's nothing  
left to find out. For the world like Sappho was either

small, dark, and ugly  
or small, dark, and beautiful.

*Eleni Sikelianos*  
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<sup>161</sup> [Eleni Sikelianos](#), "[Essay: Delicately](#)," collected in [Earliest Worlds](#), Coffee House Press



## The Fox

I think I must have lived  
once before, not as a man or woman  
but as a small, quick fox pursued  
through fields of grass and grain  
by ladies and gentlemen on horseback.  
This would explain my nose  
and the small dark tufts of hair  
that rise from the base of my spine.  
It would explain why I am  
so seldom invited out to dinner  
and when I am I am never  
invited back. It would explain  
my loathing for those on horseback  
in Central Park and how I can  
so easily curse them and challenge  
the men to fight and why no matter  
how big they are or how young  
they refuse to dismount,  
for at such times, rock in hand,  
I must seem demented.  
My anger is sudden and total,  
for I am a man to whom anger  
usually comes slowly, spreading  
like a fever along my shoulders  
and back and turning my stomach  
to a stone, but this fox anger  
is lyrical and complete, as I stand  
in the pathway shouting and refusing  
to budge, feeling the dignity  
of the small creature menaced  
by the many and larger. Yes,  
I must have been that unseen fox  
whose breath sears the thick bushes  
and whose eyes burn like opals  
in the darkness, who humps  
and shits gleefully in the horsepath  
softened by moonlight and goes on  
feeling the steady measured beat  
of his foxheart like a wordless  
delicate song, and the quick forepaws  
choosing the way unerringly  
and the thick furred body following  
while the tail flows upward,  
too beautiful a plume for anyone  
except a creature who must proclaim  
not ever ever ever  
to mounted ladies and their gentlemen.

*Philip Levine*

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<sup>162</sup> [Philip Levine](#), "[The Fox](#)," collected in [One for the Rose](#), [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

## Hello

hello to the unimaginative and dim ways of my kin, hello  
to the bad lot we are, to the women mean and plucked, and to the men

on the broken steps who beat down the roses with their hosings;  
to the nights that rose black as an inked plate

into which an acid bit stars—puckered, tight, hard, pale as a surgeon's scars,  
hello to all that vast, unconditional bad luck, to the sensible, the stuffy, the ugly

couture of the thrifty, hello to the limp of bad goods, of old furniture,  
the repeated wince of the creaky rocker and to grandmothers

dying in its clutch, and hello to rage, which, like an axis, can move the world.

*Lynn Emanuel*  
163

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<sup>163</sup> [Lynn Emanuel](#), "[Hello](#)," [New York Review of Books](#), collected in [Transcript of the Disappearance, Exact and Diminishing](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

from "Opera Fever"

I don't go around popping balloons with my cigarette...

I like to look at you through my drink...

I never wrote anything on a mirror with lipstick..

I sat at my abandoned poetry booth...

While autumn burned down like scenery..

And it was a song but it was a barricaded door..

Or merely another vanilla rolls royce...

Maybe it was my weariness..

with an enormous nuance..

When the last note broke like an ampoule..

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You were seduced by a man in pastel suits..

Don't make me go through it again..

Is the zipper on the back or the side...

You were so depressed with your fists clenched...

They drove you away in a little minibus...

Don't drown in the fountain in your nightgown!

Under the candy green moonlight

You were meant to be stabbed during a minuet...

Darling, tell me about my wretchedness..

And I'll tear off one of your military buttons while I kiss you..

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Now you have to be plied with drugged gumdrops

And wait for the music to fade in like an anesthetic...

It's going to hurt, darling!

Darling, the feeling of being cut from your shell..

I shall have to limp to the bar cart...

This is when you match your lipstick to your uniform..

It was a romantic kiss up against the vending machine..

One of us was bad but the other was too.

It was like dying in a bridesmaid dress...

There was a special pink dumpster for poems

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There was a lot of atmospheric loneliness and drones..

And a hanging bridge between our bedrooms...

Sometimes you need that kind of cushion..

When curtains open and close by themselves

Or a revolver wrapped in a foulard..

It was like having a drink in front of you for hours

It made the sequins blur..

What makes a person lonely?

A statue with closed eyes..

Or a hairstyle with diamonds in it...

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Darling, the gloominess of love is ours..

And it's a very mere burned underside...

Now do we sleep with each other or put on chenille robes and go to pieces?

I hope to destroy you with a poem

But what kind of gentle doom is it..

He had the same eyes as everybody..

And a lot of trashy rain..

And a dress scraped off like a glaze...

Now, I see it's a sort of silver wallpaper with seams...

So we drank it out of parfait glasses...

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I'm sorry I set the checkerboard on fire

I'm a bit sorrier than I thought I'd be...

Now get me my cigar..

And why shouldn't I love a man in harlequin tights?

All you ever gave me was handfuls of money...

It was a friendly kiss wasn't it?

Darling, it was the two tone sunset..

It was like I suddenly discovered you had a bullet wound.

Should I waste it all on a poem?

The burning yachts of my egotism...

*Chelsey Minnis*

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<sup>164</sup> [Chelsey Minnis](#), "[Opera Fever](#)," [Copenhagen](#)

## Ward of One

Confined by a lease with a beloved man  
who declared again and again that he waved  
the kitchen knife toward me not to gash

but to indicate, only point, my body became  
a district of our home, calculating his  
gestures and wondering if the signs

would match their means. One night I said  
the character's joke in a movie reminded  
me of him and at his reaction ran away—

I tried, please imagine—but he blocked  
the door and held my key, planned  
aloud to drive the river into my car, but

he meant my car into the river, so perhaps  
he truly believed he had pointed the blade  
up to himself and not to my crouching

chest. True, he punched the square of bed  
next to my face and not my face, slapped  
the wall just above my head to inform

me. Such symbols could be figures: I  
sat in a quiet room when he entered to  
yell that he would sue me for twelve

thousand dollars and I stayed so still as he  
described my domestic sins: various names  
for my allotted gender. There was a spot

on the floor where I would lie as I waited  
for his rage to pass into grief, and there  
I would remember that I was once

the youngest child with glasses  
in the history of my optometrist's office  
and that after they broke in class I taped

the bridge and my teacher smiled. Or  
I'd picture these small pastel drawings  
I made then—long-eared dogs,

cobalt sides, a striped beach ball, drawn  
from memory, taped on the walls I shared  
with my sister, proud of how I saw.

When he wished me dead I whispered to  
myself the word lucky, reminded myself  
I was, because my parents at least

wanted me to live—there were people  
who did not wish me dead. Later he explained  
his fists had been for emphasis and would

never have been laid; he laughed, saying  
the number twelve thousand, my ransom,  
was random, and he was sorry—impossible

—though I felt so sorry when in that year,  
in that house, I found my circumstances  
betraying the love I had tried to inherit.

*Cindy Juyoung Ok*  
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<sup>165</sup> [Cindy Juyoung Ok](#), "[Ward of One](#)," [Poetry London](#), collected in [Ward Toward](#), Yale University Press



At dinner I was seated next to him,  
with whom I might have fallen in love  
were he not married and living in Maine.

“What’s your favorite anthology?” he asked,  
out of the blue. I told him I like  
*In the Shape of a Human Body I Am Visiting the Earth*,

where even friends who dread poetry  
find something to love, some gateway drug.  
Which must be how we got to addictions.

“What are *you* addicted to?” he asked.  
Not wine, I thought,  
though our wine glasses were touching.

Not crab cakes, which I moved from my plate to his,  
or dinner parties, though I wondered who he was,  
this stranger in a navy sweater.

“Mornings,” I said.  
“Trader Joe’s vegetarian meatballs,” he said,  
but he’d resigned himself to potatoes

and spoke of their virtues. Every morning  
he boils up six or seven  
and eats them all day long.

Perhaps because I wasn’t wearing my glasses,  
I mistook a hole in his sweater for a feather,  
a small down feather on his shoulder,

and tried to remove it, but it was only a hole,  
only something to be repaired,  
and I’d embarrassed him.

He said he’d spend the rest of dinner  
with his hand over the hole, like this,  
and as he lifted his arm across his body

I noticed other holes, in the other sleeve,  
and thought of all I’ve meant to mend.  
Meant to mean.

I keep many drafts of failed poems  
on my kitchen table, beside a little sewing kit,  
a notebook, and this memory of Nicholson Baker,

whom I walked to the subway later that evening,  
afraid he might get lost. "Wait a minute," he said.  
We were in Times Square,

I was guiding him through the canyon of lights,  
which were an antidote to grief,  
as was Nicholson Baker himself,

someone I just chanced to meet  
and may never see again.  
"Don't look," he said as we were crossing Broadway.

"My pants are falling off."  
So I looked instead at the fifty-five giant LED  
nonstop life-affirming lights,

which made me think of my father,  
sundowning 3,000 miles away.  
Shouldn't we try to floodlight the dark

outside the dining room where he sleeps,  
or doesn't sleep, in a hospital bed?  
Flawed solutions are sometimes prayers.

"Open the second shutter  
so that more light may come in,"  
said Goethe on his deathbed.

It costs \$25,000 a day to keep Times Square lit  
but it wouldn't cost much to light up  
our front steps. Failing that,

we keep giving my father morphine,  
now that he is officially in hospice  
and before we gain

the hour of daylight savings,  
which he might not live to see.  
I know how addictive it is.

Light.  
Open the second shutter now.  
I could have waited there indefinitely

while Nicholson Baker hiked up his trousers  
and tried to keep his hand over the little feathery hole.  
But we were on a journey of sorts, at a way station.

Which was where? And where were we headed,  
Nicholson Baker and I?  
I was heading home and he

to his overheated Airbnb,  
which he chose, he said,  
because it was near Alice's Tea Cup,

where once years ago he was served  
a tea so electrifying it let him write  
one good paragraph,

and he was looking for that high again.  
He got out at 72nd Street.  
At home later that night, I found him

in the pages of a slim, hilarious novel  
whose hero lights a match  
at the beginning of every chapter.

*Catherine Barnett*  
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<sup>166</sup> Catherine Barnett, "[Nicholson Baker & I](#)," [The Yale Review](#), collected in [Solutions for the Problem of Bodies in Space](#), Graywolf Press

## The Handoff

I wrote a poem  
about a Taoist immortal  
but I was kidding  
I care very little  
but I do believe  
if there were magic  
animals would understand it  
then it started raining  
and my daughter cheered  
and on the stoop  
we sat watching our  
divorced neighbors' sad handoff  
of 2 sleepy kids  
in a lighted doorway

*Matthew Rohrer*

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<sup>167</sup> [Matthew Rohrer](#), "[The Handoff](#)," [Poetry](#)

## Erections

When first described imperfectly  
by my shy mother, I tried to leap  
  
from the moving  
car. A response,  
  
I suspect, of not  
just terror (although  
  
a kind of terror continues to play  
its part), but also a mimetic gesture,  
  
the expression equal  
to a body's system of absurd  
  
jokes and dirty stories.  
With cockeyed breasts  
  
peculiar as distant cousins,  
and already the butt of the body's  
  
frat-boy humor,  
I'd begun to pack  
  
a bag, would set off  
soon for my separate  
  
country. Now, sometimes,  
I admire the surprised engineering:  
  
how a man's body can rise,  
squaring off with the weight  
  
of gravity, single-minded,  
exposed as the blind  
  
in traffic. It's the body leaping  
that I praise, vulnerable  
  
in empty space.  
It's mapping the empty  
  
space; a man's life driving  
down a foreign road.

*Erin Belieu*  
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<sup>168</sup> [Erin Belieu](#), "[Love Letter: Final Visitation](#)," [The New Guard](#), collected in [Slant Six](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## The Window

I want to make a poem like a brick she said, uh huh, he said, only half listening. He was watching the game. It was a really big game he would tell someone long after. Uh huh. Then she bent her head and started writing. She wrote like the ancient ones, putting a sharpened pencil to a piece of paper pressed from a tree. She wrote and wrote, and then out of the corner of his eye he saw her folding the paper. Hey, she said, uh huh, he said, waiting for the next down. Hey, she said, a little louder, who are you? Really? Hey look at me, look at me for Christ's sake, and then he turned, that was when she threw it, threw that poem like a brick and it shattered the shut window he had in his chest. Pieces of him flickered and refracted the blue light of the television on the living room floor. Air and light filtered into his body. Psalms of finches he had never paid attention to. A small green iridescent insect. The smell of TV dinners. There he was at five years old, being beaten. There he was at seventeen on that Greyhound bus. He stood with this gaping hole in his chest. He couldn't speak. The game wasn't even close and the announcers on the TV were asking trivia questions. She walked forward, stretched the hole out with her arms and—what did she do next? Well, she climbed in. She climbed right inside his body. The room became a room of absence. Who am I now, he said? Who were you then, she said, or should I say he told us this story, a long time later out mowing his lawn, a little voice said to him, says to him every day, every time he looks at her, and he pointed back to the house where she waved, or was it when he pointed at his chest where she stood in the window, sunlight streaming from somewhere deep inside him.

*Sean Thomas Dougherty*

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<sup>169</sup> [Sean Thomas Dougherty](#), "[The Window](#)," [Zin Daily](#), collected in [Death Prefers the Minor Keys](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## Election Night

When the deified Nero  
ordered Seneca to “open his veins,”  
the playwright  
complied—though he was, by then, sick and infirm  
and his blood wouldn’t flow quickly enough  
from the wounds,  
so his friends gave him poison  
to speed his demise,  
though this, too, failed,  
and, seeing no other option, they ran a bath  
for the groaning old man and, finally  
successful,  
drowned him in it—

 $+$ 

and that is the end of Seneca who,  
until then, astonished the world.

 $+$ 

I was awakened late that election night  
by raccoons.

They were plundering the garbage  
again, their claws scraping  
inside the bins,

the noise of ripping plastic bags.

A bottle rolled down the driveway into the grass  
while I lay in bed, my book where I'd left it  
under the lamp.

Then a sudden, frantic shuffling  
as they fought over, what?

A piece of old bread,  
an apple, sweet with rot.

Beside me, my wife  
never woke

 $+$ 

even when I went to the window,  
moving the curtains aside,  
squinting into the dark yard  
where there were so many raccoons  
climbing among the garbage bins that I couldn't  
count them.

 $+$





They froze that way—  
cold air swirling, a night breeze  
high in the trees, a car passing somewhere,  
the darkness, for a moment,  
quiet as history,  
their glowing eyes—  
before they returned to their work,

+

as, the next morning,  
I'd return to mine  
picking cold, wet trash from the lawn,  
filling fresh  
black bags with it,  
hosing down the driveway,

+

while my wife slept in,  
and the raccoons,  
fat and satisfied, dozed  
in a black drain somewhere,  
and Seneca stayed dead  
in the book on the table by the bed,  
having shown  
with his friends  
a correct awareness  
for the truth of power  
and the rightness of the state.

*Kevin Prufer*  
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<sup>170</sup> [Kevin Prufer](#), "Election Night," [The Southern Review](#)

impossible sea: celadon, sweet in the smoky mute

what does green sound like? Grief,  
you never did hear the doxology; in Greek, always  
more fragile than you could know. So, there's  
the missing mountain. Once, there was something;  
to see: me, sliding across the sand  
for the rattle, listen for the sun, look at it:  
"like another world," but it's this one,  
lost in this timid tortoise shell. Here,

under glass perhaps. Dear, but  
dusted, bronze bream, always  
an end in the bend beneath the wall beneath  
a body encased in smoke, broke for you  
like a snake waking to greet the day. Watch  
this book built in painted panes. You say it's  
*over so soon, kiln of the moon*, lot tossed and  
there are three voices: you, me, & some

impossible sea: celadon, sweet in the smoky mute

*Matthew Minicucci*

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<sup>171</sup> [Matthew Minicucci](#), "[impossible sea: celadon, sweet in the smoky mute](#)," collected in [Dual](#), [Acre Books](#)

## My Brother is Getting Arrested Again

My brother is getting arrested again.  
What does he want? What does he know?  
We can't talk politics. He doesn't have politics.  
I'm helpless with him.

My brother is getting arrested again.  
He is not weeding community gardens.  
He is not climbing on roofs to bang  
with hammer on shingles, admire  
his arm-hairs going gold in the sun.

My brother is getting arrested again.

My mother makes sarcastic remarks  
and bails him out.  
They can't talk politics.  
She's helpless with him.

He pushes hard at a sawhorse barricade,  
black bandana up over his nose.  
He shouts this is what democracy looks like.

My brother is getting arrested again.

He's not lending a hand at needle exchanges.  
Not fishing from pier's end with his best buddy, Dad.  
He might be facing the incoming clouds.

He's not wearing pinstripes, seersucker, wingtips,  
not dressing down for casual Friday. He doesn't care  
about the future of Krispy Kreme stock.

My father clears his throat. He says "being pro-Palestinian  
is anti-Semitic." They can't talk politics.  
My father is helpless with him.  
The barricade breaks,  
the yellow do-not-cross crossbeam  
smacks to the ground.  
My little sister says, snippily, "I agree with him—  
in principle." They don't talk politics.  
She's helpless with him.

My brother is getting arrested again.

A sudden melee, my brother disappearing.  
He sucks in others like a star imploding.

He's down, he's lifted away,  
wrists latched behind his back.

Now he stinks from the heat on the prison bus.  
Now he's stuffed in a holding cell with eight other protesters.  
Now they take apart the sandwiches they get in jail.  
They eat the bread—they toss  
the orange limp cheese square at the wall.  
It sticks. Collaborative chem-processed  
chance-operation artwork. It's a whale!  
It's the mayor! It's the moon!  
No sleep for three days and three nights,  
the lights never go out, the delirious  
buzzed noise of themselves. They can't  
take a shower. They sass the guards,  
chant protest chants. This is what democracy  
smells like. The funniest joke they ever told.

My brother signs his name on a paper, gets out.

And now?

Is he hopping dancelessly obedient  
to directional arrows on a suburban mall machine  
called Dance Dance Revolution?

Is he driving a waverunner in circles and laughing  
on the filthy Delaware, our city's river?  
Is he advanced degreeing in the even-weathered West?  
Is he climbing Mt. Rainier?

Nope. Come rain, or shine, or sweat, or hope,  
my brother is getting arrested again.

*Daisy Fried*  
172

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<sup>172</sup> Daisy Fried, "[My Brother is Getting Arrested Again](#)," collected in [My Brother is Getting Arrested Again](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

## At Sixteen I Was Twelve

in both body and skill. So that I dropped a note inviting Danny Shubin to the Sadie Hawkins dance and later, after the school gym, found myself pulling his hard cock on top of a guest house out in the country. On the roof of a smaller house next to a big house next to the other big houses next to the golf club. Weeks before

I asked and he said yes! So with money my mother didn't have, I bought matching outfits: Vans, plaid flannel shorts, and Stussy sweatshirts. Classic middle California. Valley-locked in surf-style clothes I found myself pulling his hard cock on an outdoor chaise on top of the guest house, or maybe, the pool house. A boy and a girl who'd exchanged less than three words in their entire lives because I was a girl whose mother did not teach her

to speak. So I pulled and pulled at what I didn't know. I only knew his body was tan water polo muscle and *his* mother's photo hung in the school's main office. She died four years ago. Danny at twelve. I pulled

like the river pulls the body dumped, pulls it toward the sodden mouth. And like the body I obeyed the current, believing the pulling was the point in and of itself. Until he said: "I'm about to come—what are you going to do?" Having no knowledge of *come* as naked intransitive, bare infinitive, an infinite end we'd not yet breached

I jumped up and off the chaise, taking my hand with me. "I don't know." Because I did not and he did not drive me home that night or answer my calls—Danny Shubin, ghosting before ghosting—so I learned I would never be as luminous as a man-o-war, as catching as a cage dancer. Never the one you want

Tana Jean Welch  
173

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<sup>173</sup> Tana Jean Welch, "At Sixteen I Was Twelve," collected in [In Parachutes Descending](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

## Cruelties

When Peter Lorre, Casablanca's pathetic, good-hearted man,  
said, "You despise me, don't you?" and Bogart replied,  
"Well, if I gave you any thought, I might,"

I laughed, which the movie permitted.  
It had all of us leaning Bogart's way.

"Nothing is funnier than unhappiness," Beckett has one  
of his characters say, as if it might be best  
to invent others to speak certain things  
we've thought and kept to ourselves.

If any of us, real or fictional, had said to someone,  
"Nothing's funnier than your unhappiness,"  
we'd have entered another, colder realm,

like when news came that a famous writer had died  
in an accident, and his rival said,  
"I guess that proves God can read."  
Many of us around him laughed.  
Then a dark, uneasy silence set in.

All day long, my former love, I've been revising  
a poem about us. First, a gentle man  
spoke it, then I gave the Devil a chance.  
But you always knew my someone else  
could only be me.

*Stephen Dunn*

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<sup>174</sup> [Stephen Dunn](#), "[Cruelties](#)," collected in [The Insistence of Beauty](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## A Fiery Ball of Fire

The house explodes while you sleep. You are standing next to the fireplace when the fireplace explodes. The microwave explodes in your face. The dryer explodes in your face. Gas leak in the oven. Gas leak in the underground line. Someone said you look like a porcelain doll. One of the other kids called you a ghost. Stand against a white wall, and no one can see you. While you sleep, the gas is a swarm of stars. You buy an escape ladder for every bedroom in the house. That one kid, years ago, didn't know what he was saying. Your own child runs into the snow in her polka dot pajamas, safe. Safe every time.

*Cynthia Marie Hoffman*  
175

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<sup>175</sup> [Cynthia Marie Hoffman](#), "[A Fiery Ball of Fire](#)," [jubilat](#), collected in [Exploding Head](#), [Persea Books](#)

## Vito Bambino Decking and Carpentry

was what my father renamed his business after it became clear  
his Slavic last name was hurting his bottom line.  
That summer, we started getting calls from “Good Looking” Matt  
who wanted him to hang crown molding  
for his mother on The Hill, and Buckles who needed  
someone down the shore to frame garden beds  
at the vacation home he’d just bought for his Goomah.  
Always, they’d gotten my dad’s name  
from another name, Cheeseman or Blackjack  
had said he could do the job. On the phone,  
my father perfected his Vito-ness. His sentences  
brindled with the perfect amount of silence,  
punctuated by the occasional wise-guy maxim, a *marone*  
or *figurati*, assuring the caller he’d *get it done*.

\*\*\*

The Don of Providence, Prince of Providence, Mayor Vincent  
A. Cianci Jr. was always called Buddy

by his loving constituents. He beat twenty-six of twenty-seven charges  
the second time the Feds came at him

with the RICO when they claimed bribery, extortion, witness tampering,  
and more. But whatever crimes he committed,

it didn’t stop the people of Providence from loving their Buddy,  
our unopposed mayor for life, namesake

of his own gravy. Buddy who built the park, Buddy who saved  
our city, Buddy who pleaded Nolo Contendre

to assaulting Ray DeLeo with a lit cigarette, telling him *no one*  
*would find him in the river*. But what would *you* do,

we all asked, if you were convinced someone slept with your wife?  
And we answered by electing him again. Even after

the Feds finally got him, and he was sentenced to four  
white collar years at Fort Dix, everyone knew Buddy,

or at least a version of him, walking free through the city.

\*\*\*

The summer before 8th grade  
I told all the girls I knew  
to call me Trent because



I didn't think Keith sounded  
exotic enough for the woods

behind the Quick Mart,  
where I'd work any angle  
to rub my crotch against  
an offered thigh.

And it was easier as Trent  
to set myself on this goal without fear  
of rejection. Every time a girl unfastened  
her lips from mine just long enough  
to whisper, *Trent, you're such a good kisser,*  
I would hear myself reply, *I know I am.*

\*\*\*

My dad says that in 1957 he and his buddy Tony,  
who everyone called Slink, were challenged  
by Slink's uncle to dig the biggest hole they could  
in his backyard tomato garden with the promise  
they'd each get two dollars and could use  
the leftover dirt to build a fort.

My dad's telling me this because  
I've been staying out past curfew,  
and I've already been picked up once  
for vandalism. He's decided I need a lesson  
in what happens when you trust  
the wrong people. He tells me it turns out

Slink's uncle was the personal plumber  
of Ray "The Father" Patriarca. But it wasn't  
until years later, watching the Marfeo trial,  
that my dad again saw the two men  
who backed their Mark II Lincoln to the very end  
of Slink's driveway that day,  
suited from toe to hat even in the baking

afternoon. *They weren't going to pay us,*  
*my father tells me, so I argued.*

This is when, according to my dad, one of them shot  
a smile at the other, and game, no doubt  
recognizing game, peeled through his billfold  
handing Slink and him each 5 dollars.  
Two bucks for the labor, the hitman explained,  
and three more to buy back the dirt their job required.  
*Do you see what I'm trying to tell you?* he asks,  
and I nod thinking I do.

\*\*\*

By the time I was old enough to wander the city,  
I idolized every man in a shiny suit  
or animal skin shoes. There was Baby Shacks Louie,  
Ray “Il Padrone” Patriarca Jr., and Joseph “Evil Eye”  
Magliocco, not to be confused with Crazy Joe,  
who some people called Joe The Blond.  
I knew all about Bobo who enforced policy games  
with Chippy down the pier, and that Dee Dee did collections.  
That after The Padrone got set up, Cadillac Frank  
took the business back to Boston until *he* got caught  
for extortion, so Carrozza, a.k.a. Bobby Russo,  
(whose stepbrother killed Joe “The Animal” Barboza  
after the guy dined on Patriarca) took control of the family.

My father made sure I never met a single one of these men,  
but they were as clear as the characters in the mob movies  
I’d sneak into. Nicky Santoro, beaten close to death  
and buried alive with his brother in a cornfield, was no different  
from Gaetano taking out Wild Guy Grasso during the war  
over the Providence territory. But Patriarca, Il Padrone,  
(whose other nickname was Rubber Lips), one night  
in bed with his girlfriend, died, peacefully, from a heart attack.

\*\*\*

The man hangs as a trophy fish would hang  
off the edge of the second story deck frame

like it’s a dock scale. Vito Bambino, a.k.a. my father,  
is coming up the driveway, too soon returned

from his lunch break, unannounced even  
by his truck engine. The upside-down man is pleading,

says he has the money, but he’s got to get it  
from his partner Toucan. When my father gets to the top

of the turnaround, level with the scene, everyone  
goes silent. Even the welcher, still suspended,

peers though my father’s passenger window  
like he’s interrupted his wedding.

My dad keeps the truck in gear, tiptoes it  
around the rest of the horseshoe driveway,

and back out to the street. He drives the exact speed limit  
all the way home. The next day, on the same deck,

the trophy fish is gone, but the two men “allegedly” responsible

for his disappearance loom over my dad just as

the compressor for his nail gun clicks on. *For your lunch, Vito,*  
one yells over the tank's shrill hammering, "*Knacky*" told us you're alright,

each of them handing him a hundred-dollar bill.

\*\*\*

My close friends sometimes call me Beefy  
as a term of endearment, but I didn't earn  
the nickname in any way that isn't circumstantial  
to the sonics of my actual name. The name my parents fought over  
when my dad wanted to call me Zoroaster.  
And when that wouldn't fly, he suggested the more literary  
mouthful of Enkidu.

The FBI claims the Providence Mafia is all but dead,  
the syndicate disbanded, and since Buddy  
was brought to justice the Renaissance City  
is no longer run by powers mythically renamed.  
I am my father's son no matter what my name is,  
but I'm also the son of Vito Bambino.  
A lineage I was taught to deny, if asked.

\*\*\*

Most people born and raised in Rhode Island  
never leave for much longer than two weeks of vacation each year.

I am one of few traitors that left but never came back,  
at least not permanently. And when I visit, friends and family  
look at me with suspicion. *Why don't you come home?*  
*You can work for Piggy at the DMV. Don't you want to be with family?*  
*Toucan's son works at the school board. He can get you whatever classes you want.*

They mean well, but when I protest, reminding them that I don't know  
Toucan or his son, they get frustrated. *Sure, you do, Beefy. You do.*

\*\*\*

Vito Bambino hung up his hammer  
after only two seasons of work,

but my dad made enough  
to take the family down south

to the beach where I'd wake up  
before sun to the sound of fat

in the pan, and my dad humming  
like a cricket that baited his hook.

Sometimes, I'd tag along, call out the bait balls,  
as he cast from the pier for position.

We never caught much, and it only got worse  
when the water filled with tourists.

But on the occasion we hooked one  
the old salts would all shout

and crowd around for inspection.  
Too small at best, but we'd still name each fish

before throwing it back in the ocean.

\*\*\*

The city I now call home is big enough to be anonymous,  
and I revel in it. I don't know any of my neighbors and never plan to.  
But that hasn't stopped me from naming them.  
Car Wash and Yorkie I only see on weekends,  
but Stroller Dad comes by at 6 every night, turns down Huntingdon  
where Heavy Handshake stoops it with his dog,  
performing the Sisyphean ballet of exchange that is  
dope boy purgatory. When I nod at Heavy

he only sometimes nods back. This bothers me  
more than it should. I want him to know that I get it—  
there's the you who does what you have to,  
and the you who never heard of him.

*Keith Kopka*  
176

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<sup>176</sup> [Keith Kopka](#), "[Vito Bambino Decking and Carpentry](#)," *Scoundrel Time*

## Oranges

The first time I walked  
With a girl, I was twelve,  
Cold, and weighted down  
With two oranges in my jacket.  
December. Frost cracking  
Beneath my steps, my breath  
Before me, then gone,  
As I walked toward  
Her house, the one whose  
Porchlight burned yellow  
Night and day, in any weather.  
A dog barked at me, until  
She came out pulling  
At her gloves, face bright  
With rouge. I smiled,  
Touched her shoulder, and led  
Her down the street, across  
A used car lot and a line  
Of newly planted trees,  
Until we were breathing  
Before a drug store. We  
Entered, the tiny bell  
Bringing a saleslady  
Down a narrow aisle of goods.  
I turned to the candies  
Tiered like bleachers,  
And asked what she wanted—  
Light in her eyes, a smile  
Starting at the corners  
Of her mouth. I fingered  
A nickel in my pocket,  
And she lifted a chocolate  
That cost a dime,  
I didn't say anything.  
I took the nickel from  
My pocket, then an orange,  
And set them quietly on  
The counter. When I looked up,  
The lady's eyes met mine,  
And held them, knowing  
Very well what it was all  
About.

Outside,  
A few cars hissing past,  
Fog hanging like old  
Coats between the trees.  
I took my girl's hand  
In mine for two blocks,

Then released it to let  
Her unwrap the chocolate.  
I peeled my orange  
That was so bright against  
The gray of December  
That, from some distance  
Someone might have thought  
I was making a fire in my hands.

*Gary Soto*  
177

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<sup>177</sup> [Gary Soto](#), "[Oranges](#)," [Poetry](#), collected in [Black Hair](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Elegy for a Dog

Your use of *synergy* in the absence of any irony  
contributed more than a little to the divorce  
  
and your insistence on *to be frank, the sixties, as it were*,  
  
and other such phrases you'd tic out while the rest of us  
shuddered, like you'd lean in real breathy  
  
to say, *Gimme the straight dope, sweetheart*,  
  
to the cashier in the A&W like you were a couple  
of rocket stages nestled into each other,  
  
and that you boned other people didn't help,  
  
but we couldn't, just couldn't stomach any longer  
your reveries on Joyce and on Mailer, on scotch  
  
and Larry Bird, your insistence on analog audio  
  
equipment on which you'd mostly play bootlegs  
of Bob Dylan, oozingly, insistently, calling him  
  
*DYlin* like he was a beloved Labrador struck  
  
by a Coke truck and you in your beat-up Chucks,  
your cowlick, and Levi's, bearing the dog corpse  
  
out of a ditch to bury beneath the ole willow tree.  
  
You tell everyone that story, how you're still that kid  
your old man called *squirt* those fatted hours  
  
when bread cost a nickel and a paper cost a nickel  
  
and a Buick cost a dime, and all Minnesota smelled  
like an overstuffed ashtray, but in a good way,  
  
you'd say, your corned teeth flashing, the vein  
  
in your temple coursing like a tiny Mississippi  
into the wispy white laurel of your last hairdo,  
  
which are all things we could've overlooked  
  
for a little less cliché in your Converse, a little more  
rigor in your ditties, *But that's just the way things were*

*back in those days*, you'd say back in those days things were  
exactly the way you said they were.

*Jaswinder Bolina*  
178

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<sup>178</sup> [Jaswinder Bolina](#), "[Elegy for a Dog](#)," [Court Green](#), collected in [English as a Second Language](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)



## Re-Education

I listen to podcasts to learn about feminism,  
watch porn to make sure I'm doing it right.  
I dance on the bar because *Coyote Ugly*,  
because these shoes, this drink.  
I'm almost 30.  
And I still think Bloody Mary is  
a game with a mirror. Sometimes  
she appears at 2AM. Sometimes she's  
in the toilet, piss reflection before the flush.  
There is a truth in this magic—  
the time I took Plan B, then  
the other time I took Plan B. I bled  
for two months. There could've been  
a mother in me. I told no one,  
except the man at Tacos Lupita  
who asked what I wanted in my burrito  
and I think I said *baby*. I think I  
spun around three times and whispered a name.  
And there was no floor  
when I fell, when a queen  
flew from my womb. There was glass  
and napkins, and the doctor  
saying, *Wake up. Wake up.*

Diannely Antigua

179

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<sup>179</sup> Diannely Antigua, "Re-Education," *Luna Luna Magazine*, collected in *Ugly Music*, YesYes Books

## Going

Alone now in Oakland. Thin cloud rusting  
over Bernal Hill, garlic simmering

in the pan, lavender potted and long dead  
in the breezeway. I start the water,

carry the milk crates in from the garage.  
You with your mother in Los Angeles.

The lanterns we scavenged and hung  
at the ceremony now a soft racket

in the magnolia. Me turning an old  
summer over, the one where we slept

most nights in a park in Hartford,  
bedded down in the soaked grass.

The local kids coming always after dark  
to tag the pumphouse, sling rocks

at the heron cages. Their bright,  
startled cries and us burrowing deeper

in our bags. I start unshelving  
my books, fitting them side by side

in a crate. How one time a guard  
came hollering, whipping his light

over the lawn and they took off, ditching  
their backpacks, the cans, their names

silvering the brick. We watched  
as they tore down the moonlit hill,

headed for the coupe they stashed  
at the turnoff, bare legs flashing, the guard

close behind as they vaulted the fence  
and hit the blacktop sprinting,

picking up speed—the two of us clutching  
at each other, wincing, whispering.

You saying you hope they get busted.  
Me hoping they get away clean.

*Edgar Kunz*

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<sup>180</sup> [Edgar Kunz](#), "[Going](#)," [The Sewanee Review](#), collected in [Tap Out](#), [Mariner Books](#)

## In the Cemetery

Sunday afternoon nothings so I drive  
undestined until a cemetery  
pulls up on the right and I park  
in a closed Gulf station  
that makes extra cash displaying headstones.  
Across the street the cemetery's unkempt,  
empty, except for brittle grass, turning maples,  
and stones spaced evenly, row after row.  
For no good reason,  
I pace off the length: 260 strides—  
an estimate because I'm distracted, reading names.  
Sweeney, O'Malley, Sikes:  
Irishmen who shipped their names intact,  
unlike my own ancestors  
who threw off -edsky, -ovitch, -insky,  
like portions of themselves  
as they dropped anchor.

My name's not here,  
but scattered across this country:  
in Pittsburgh, where a milkman  
crossing an icy bridge was mugged  
and drowned in three feet of water;  
in Cleveland, 1943, where Nana  
found her widowed sister in bed,  
naked except for her head  
dressed in a shopping bag;  
in Brooklyn, White Fish Bay,  
Bowling Green, Flint, Savannah;  
en route to Sacramento  
where my great-uncle Joe  
slipped under a boxcar of ore;  
and anonymous on another continent,  
ashes lost in a countryside  
I've visited only briefly,  
eating sachertorte, sampling schnapps.

Today it is late in October  
and a golden-leafed yew  
reaches out to catch something autumnal.  
I walk over people who  
are not, grasses which grown  
taller, or aided by an early snow,  
might hide me if I stopped  
to rest among them.  
But what's left of my family  
has enough to mourn,  
and in a kitchen nearby,

someone is waiting supper.

*Andrea Cohen*  
181

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<sup>181</sup> [Andrea Cohen](#), "[In the Cemetery](#)," collected in [The Cartographer's Vacation](#), Owl Creek Press

## Canto 30

### *I Became within My Speechlessness*

December at the cafe with Giana  
the oak table between us  
once tall and green and breathing  
but *nothing happened*, I say,  
*that I didn't agree to*,  
his hands on my waist,  
two glasses of whiskey  
and dimmed lights.  
*What's an agreement?* Giana asks.  
Her hair is the color of the moon.  
She's not afraid of the axe of my shame:  
*oh, I should have known.*

Raisa Tolchinsky  
182

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<sup>182</sup> Raisa Tolchinsky, "[Canto 30 \(I Became within My Speechlessness\)](#)," collected in [Glass Jaw](#), [Persea Books](#)

## The River

It's a little early for Mrs. Dalloway's party,  
so I chat with my students. They went  
here and there over the weekend, saw this  
and that. Me? I worked in the garden, turning  
over an astonishing number of worms.

"Gee," says Laura. "Since you're a poet,  
that must have made you think of death  
and stuff."

Death & Stuff: it sounds like some  
awful boutique selling Yorick's skull  
in designer colors, Sylvia's oven mittens,  
and replicas of the *S.S. Orizaba* including  
a toy Hart Crane to bob in its wake.

Suddenly I feel like the kind of poet  
Laura means, the kind who throws himself  
on a chaise and says, "I grow weary."

Instead, I reach into the river that runs through  
my classroom, fill both pockets with rocks,  
and step into the first class of the day.

*Ron Koertge*  
183

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<sup>183</sup> [Joe Hall](#), "[Someone's Utopia: Love as Refusal](#)," [Bat City Review](#), collected in [Someone's Utopia](#), [Black Ocean](#)

## Scripture

I'll tell you what is meant  
on condition that it be  
understood, what is lent on condition  
that it be returned. Chartreuse,  
first ruse of spring, liqueur  
of the Carthusian monks at Grenoble,  
is pale green, yellow as eggs

inside fresh hens in the markets  
of Firenze each spring, pale  
as the grappa from Piemonte  
whose label, handwritten in red  
and black ink on torn  
paper reads *Dear Maria,*  
*I have to talk to you.*

Le Corbusier's statue of Mary  
in the chapel at Ronchamp  
swivels to bless pilgrims inside  
and out, but the effigy Ruskin found  
on the tomb he climbed  
in Santi Giovanni e Paolo  
turned out to be only half

a Venetian doge: one hand, one  
cheek, one side of the forehead  
wrinkled, carved to be seen only  
from below like the face  
of the moon we can see  
or the cameo, raised relief  
of love. What is lent:

the curved throat  
of the road, the deer  
thrown back like the s  
in *swan*: squirrel  
flat on the asphalt, carnival  
mask, its own black map  
of what it means.

Angie Estes  
184

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<sup>184</sup> Angie Estes, "[Scripture](#)," [TriQuarterly](#), collected in [Voice-Over](#), Oberlin College Press



## Cutlass

there is a gun / silver / rusted / cutlass 2 door sedan / grey hoody: you.  
there is a gun / rust / the color of forever / your play-brother  
got a lead foot

*Mahogany L. Browne*  
185

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<sup>185</sup> [Mahogany L. Browne](#), “[Cutlass](#),” collected in [Chrome Valley](#), [Liveright](#)

## Locker

On the first day of September  
you open the locker  
and see inside some joker  
from last year  
has left a mirror there  
with the word “loser”  
written across your eyes  
in black Magic Marker.  
And seeing it now  
makes it seem  
suddenly inescapably  
true, and  
this witch doctor  
of the soul  
is probably watching you  
somewhere out of sight,  
cackling into his fist  
or coat—but, of course,  
he had to write the word  
across his own face first,  
so you look around  
for him now,  
whoever he is, who  
answers to the same name  
as you.

*Gregory Lawless*  
186

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<sup>186</sup> Gregory Lawless, “[Locker](#),” collected in [Dreamburgh, Pennsylvania](#), Dream Horse Press

from “Kyrie”

Nothing would do but that he dig her grave,  
under the willow oak, on high ground  
beside the little graves, and in the rain—  
a hard rain, and wind

enough to tear a limb from the limber tree.  
His talk was wild, his eyes were polished stone,  
all of him bent laboring to breathe—  
even iron bends—

his face ash by the time he came inside.  
Within the hour the awful cough began,  
gurgling between coughs, and the fever spiked,  
as his wife’s had done.

Before a new day rinsed the windowpane,  
he had swooned. Was blue.

*Ellen Bryant Voigt*  
187

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<sup>187</sup> [Ellen Bryant Voigt](#), “[Kyrie \[Nothing would do...\]](#),” collected in [Kyrie](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

crime and punishment, again

In the thick drunken light, the hordes  
stumbled through Nevsky Square

The summer heat was terrible.  
Everyone was dying for the shore.

We bought vodka for Raskolnikov.  
We praised the refinement of his lashes.

We are older now than the widow.  
The one he called the old crone.

The one he slaughtered  
then couldn't be *bothered*

to remember why  
or what she was paying for.

*Carla Sarett*  
188

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<sup>188</sup> [Carla Sarett](#), "[crime and punishment, again](#)," collected in [Woman on the Run](#), Alien Buddha Press

## Misinformation

Out in Texas Hill Country I am squatting over a kiddie pool  
filled with ice, noodling for beer.

The birthday boy mans a roiling crawdad pot  
his five-year-old loading clay pigeons into the trap.

As the eyes of rifles trace and fire  
kids rumble around the fields  
in dirt bikes without helmets.

In the dust, a woman calls out to her black dog  
using a racial epithet.  
Like a bird loaded into a trap, I am frozen in place, hoping no one sees me.

But everything goes on just the same:  
shirtless men teach me horseshoes, gently a wife stores  
cheesecake in the fridge for later.

I pee a little in my boots when we take shots after sundown  
because I am jumping, jumpy.

A Black neighbor joins late, everybody's  
glad to see him. *Hey, Frank!* they say.

The dog comes over to check out the stranger  
and they sweetly greet each other.  
*What's your name, boy?* the man asks.

*Frank*, a woman replies.

*Diana Khoi Nguyen*

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<sup>189</sup> [Diana Khoi Nguyen](#), "[Misinformation \[Out in Texas Hill Country\]](#)," [New England Review](#), collected in [Root Fractures](#), [Scribner Books](#)

### The Paper Anniversary (3)

Paper gowns are not as soft as cloth gowns are not as soft  
as dust    the uncle who cussed    and threw bottles

his face of mottles    this pace of piecing    of piecemeal  
quiet thrill    grown shrill    grown silent as a mole

on your spine    o you're divine    in your shame  
this blame    your name is mud    in my eye    a chicken

thigh I licked    gnawed to the bone    this moan  
a wishbone caught    in my pale clean throat

*Nicole Callihan*

190

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<sup>190</sup> [Nicole Callihan](#), "[The Paper Anniversary \(3\)](#)," *Anti-Heroine Chic*, collected in *This Strange Garment*, [Terrapin Books](#)

## Kiss of the Sun

If, as they say, poetry is a sign of something  
among people, then let this be prearranged now,  
between us, while we are still peoples: that  
at the end of time, which is also the end of poetry  
(and wheat and evil and insects and love),  
when the entire human race gathers in the flesh,  
reconstituted down to the infant's tiniest fold  
and littlest nail, I will be standing at the edge  
of that fathomless crowd with an orange for you,  
reconstituted down to its innermost seed protected  
by white thread, in case you are thirsty, which  
does not at this time seem like such a wild guess,  
and though there will be no poetry between us then,  
at the end of time, the geese all gone with the seas,  
I hope you will take it, and remember on earth  
I did not know how to touch it it was all so raw,  
and if by chance there is no edge to the crowd  
or anything else so that I am of it,  
I will take the orange and toss it as high as I can.

Mary Ruefle  
191

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<sup>191</sup> [Mary Ruefle](#), "[Kiss of the Sun](#)," collected in *Indeed I Was Pleased with the World*, [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

Big Mistake. Big. Huge.

Mark Rothko was just too trusting  
when he announced I'M INTERESTED ONLY  
IN EXPRESSING BASIC HUMAN  
EMOTIONS—TRAGEDY, ECSTASY, AGONY  
AND SO ON. Personally, I couldn't begin  
to fill in what the other ones are.  
Is one of them the feeling of overly  
enjoying the joke WHAT'S BLUE  
AND SMELLS LIKE RED PAINT  
(BLUE PAINT)? Is one of them not  
being able to remember  
which director it was who said,  
regarding violence in his movies, THAT'S NOT  
BLOOD; THAT'S RED? Is one of them  
returning from the dead? Strolling  
back into the world, I felt like the movies:  
Julia Roberts in PRETTY WOMAN,  
decked out and making a beeline  
for the boutique that declined to serve her:  
BIG MISTAKE. BIG. HUGE. The mulberry  
silk. The gold brocade. Is one  
of them they could've had it made.

*Natalie Shapero*  
192

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<sup>192</sup> [Natalie Shapero, "Big Mistake. Big. Huge." \*The American Poetry Review\*](#)



## Cowpunk

Do you think your suffering is exceptional?  
Maybe. Maybe not.  
The times are strange, no doubt.  
In the heat of it, what I believed  
was the heat of it, I shouted like a dockworker  
that I was unafraid. Come at me,

I hollered, you can only kill me  
once. There is nothing left  
to take. I've said that before. I still hear  
the echo from when the flames  
licked my feet,  
my fearlessness a cabaret.

Of course, there is more to take.  
I'm copious and so are you.  
My pipe. My roses. My stubborn  
mule. My burbling  
brook which must be traversed  
to get to the island of blue lawn chairs.

My loaded apple trees,  
raspberry bushes, and prefab on a slab,  
and memories of Petra, with three  
teeth, who made a salsa just for me  
when she saw me coming toward her  
diner, Petra's. My high school drama

teacher, Jim, his hair bronze, his pallor  
ruddy, his gait exceptional. I believe  
we should marry, he said to me one night,  
blowing smoke rings, driving me home  
from play practice. I was Mary Warren  
in *The Crucible*. I'd just learned

to insert a tampon. There were no  
boundaries then, and Jim was queer.  
His real love was the boy who played  
The Boy in *The Fantasticks*.  
I could feel my blood let down  
like breast milk into the fabric

of his car seat. I loved the theater.  
What luxury, putting on plays  
in the middle of a cornfield.  
The witch I played giving me  
license to go into fits  
in front of the student body.

Jim was fired, and died.  
Petra's dead.  
The berry bushes are a dream.  
The island is a pipe dream.  
The pipe is a hallucination.  
Still, I'm copious, and so are you.

*Diane Seuss*  
193

## The Embers

My friend Priscilla and I used to stop in for  
drinks, after I'd taught  
my wretched poetry class—  
most of the students were lithium-dosed, or  
alcoholic, sprung for  
the evening from cheap rooms  
in the seedier part of downtown, living on  
state checks, nourished  
by a belief in their latent genius,  
which they were sure I would discover. They  
were desperate to  
publish, though criminally indifferent  
to actual poetry. After class, the Embers  
restored my faith in the  
kind of failure that is sufficient  
unto itself, without requiring the  
amplifications of art. There was  
always a guy who could barely speak  
slumped over the bar, always a boozed-up old  
crone, and usually  
some ill-at-ease young couple  
who'd wandered in from the street of  
respectable cafés and pricey  
boutiques. Once, Priscilla danced  
on the bar, but on her knees, because the  
ceiling was low. Always a  
song about lost love throbbing  
on the jukebox, always those wooden doors  
with the high  
windows like portholes, sealing in  
the damp smell of cigarettes and defeat. Did I  
say always? One  
night I passed by there,  
after weeks away from the neighborhood, and  
there was nothing  
left. The new place was all plate glass,  
and blue neon blared PLUTO'S, and it was  
just as though I'd  
stepped into space: here's where  
the bar was, here's the bathroom where I once  
stood up, dizzy,  
wiped my face with a wet paper towel  
and staggered back out. Here are the ashes of  
that night, and all  
my attempts to teach anyone  
how to do anything but stay upright, and keep  
going, while you're  
feeling so sick you can hardly breathe.

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<sup>194</sup> [Kim Addonizio](#), "[The Embers](#)," collected in [Tell Me](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Panopticon

My bedroom window can be seen from the viewing deck  
of the World Trade Center. I've seen it.  
What I saw?

My roommate experimenting with my vibrator.  
She looked lovely through sheer curtains  
on my creamy bed. Is she thinking of me?

I am thinking of her and I left bread crumbs on the telepath.  
She can feel it, my seeing, even through a trance of fog.  
I've lit her with it.

It is her blindfold, her sweet curse, her ration  
of privacy spilled like flour as she imagines  
the miraculous bread is rising.

I decided on three possible reactions:

To keep watching her and, when I go home, to mention  
the *strange vision I had*, describing  
what I saw in detail.

To feed the telescope with quarter  
after quarter, and read a book while the time ticks.  
I have been blessed with seeing, as with a third eye,  
without the compulsive mimesis of appearing. The luxury  
of an octopus is never using any legs for walking.

Or, to stay home with my own  
pair of binoculars, in the dark, watching whoever is  
watching me, watch me.

Brenda Shaughnessy  
195

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<sup>195</sup> Brenda Shaughnessy, "[Panopticon](#)," [Ecotone](#), collected in [Interior, with Sudden Joy](#), Farrar, Straus and Giroux

I began to die, then. I think  
 I was asleep. Dreaming  
 of an afterlife that revised  
 my flesh into what  
 I had wanted. Why do  
 I think of Ronald Reagan  
 the way one recalls  
 vague nightmare:  
 the sick heart and terror  
 which is percussive.  
 Was this the year  
 I saw him at the airport.  
 Men grimly tested  
 my body for hidden death,  
 waving a wand up  
 and down. My left arm  
 healed wrongly  
 and it was surgery  
 that put it right. Look,  
 if you want, at  
 the pale stippling of scar,  
 there. Some nights I wake  
 and everything hurts  
 a little. It is  
 amazing how long  
 a ruined thing  
 will burn. In the night,  
 there are words,  
 though often I've denied  
 their shape. Their sound.  
 My soul: whatever  
 it sings it is singing.

*Paul Guest*

196

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<sup>196</sup> [Paul Guest](#), "[1987](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#)

## Spoleto

I remember Italy for the water  
falling from the mouths  
of stone lions, the liquid  
birdsong of sparrows, arias  
floating from the open doors  
of the Cathedral, so beautiful  
you wanted to collapse  
on the cobblestones  
and crawl toward the sound,  
your palms embedded  
with 2000 year old gravel.  
I remember biting into  
a Pinova apple, honey sweet,  
crisp as winter, mosaics  
set in the walls, every window  
flung open to the breeze,  
the breeze scented with vanilla  
from the *Pasticceria*. It was so human:  
the buzzing cafés and terraces,  
the vendors, dogs and children  
and doves in the street, the wooden  
wheels of painted carts, the sun  
surrendering to the shade  
of red and green umbrellas,  
their taut wire ribs. Even  
the ugliest baby in a carriage,  
its face still scrunched  
from the womb, blinked  
its dark eyes up at you  
and banded its small fists  
against its fat cherub thighs.  
When we left I felt banished,  
bereft that I couldn't take  
it with me, the little bell  
that tinkled when we stepped in  
and the cashier pointed  
to an empty tiled table  
where I first learned the word  
for ice cream was *gelato*,  
and the word for *gelato* with  
a shot of espresso is *affogato*  
*al coffee*, dessert of the angels  
that slipped over our tongues  
and down our throats  
like a landslide, a flavor  
we would taste all day  
as we walked the ungodly  
hot streets, wobbling along

the uneven roads, our shirts  
stuck to our chests with sweat,  
smelling of genoa sausage, our breath  
of onions and garlic, the olive oil  
stain on my best silk blouse  
I could never get out.

*Dorianne Laux*  
197

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<sup>197</sup> [Dorianne Laux](#), "[Spoleto](#)," [Five Points](#), collected in [Life on Earth](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)



## Portrait with Lorca

Beneath her shirt, pages are turning,  
climbing her shoulders; images  
rearranging her breasts, the thin line

of clavicle—highlighting her underwire  
x: two satin cups, black straps. Beneath her  
shirt, lives were being lived by other men

and women. Families acquired toddlers,  
several gerbils, teens. Often the world  
beneath her blouse took precedence

over what happened at school.  
And so, when the leather binding  
touched her belly, nestled near her hips,

flirted with a reference to a Lorca aperitif—  
she could no longer fool the old professor  
who had loved someone, or two.

And when the tests came back  
her examination booklet marked  
with almond skins, perfume, and candle wax—

the commentary simply said—  
*We all wear branches that we do not  
have. Castanet! Castanet! Castanet!*

*Susan Rich*

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<sup>198</sup> Susan Rich, "Portrait with Lorca," collected in [The Alchemist's Kitchen](#), White Pine Press

Love Poem by Yellow Light

July: loose dress.  
Outside the town, the sage on fire  
smells like sugar, money.

That man you work with burning  
sage, dousing sage, says he knows  
*everything there is to know about religion,*

*and none of it good.*

We are in a bar on Taco Tuesday.  
Beside him someone keeps saying softly  
he's killed a cougar. Beside him: yellow

vinyl reflects yellow. Uneasy glasses.  
Michel Pastoureau devotes himself  
entirely to the study of color:

*first and foremost a social phenomenon.*

Yellow is the least loved color, in most socials,  
per Pastoureau. My hands slide down my glass,  
coldblooded as airports.

The man tells me he's going on a date.  
He does not know the woman. He tells me  
they will undress together and run

through the rooms of her quiet  
house somewhere in Idaho:  
two pale verses.

Alisha Dietzman  
199

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<sup>199</sup> [Alisha Dietzman](#), "[Love Poem by Yellow Light](#)," [Changes Review](#), collected in [Sweet Movie](#), [Beacon Press](#)

from "Act Two. This Tide of Blood"

7. Sahar

for reason not / totally clear / I was to wear  
tight pants midriff shirt & congratulations a backpack

of blood / to be with him in Paradise / with Salim  
so fast I never imagined it could happen so fast

to be reunited in heaven a real heroine / I did  
whatever they told me / I was thinking only of him

I got out of the car / the place not exactly  
like on the map / lot of people, mothers with / re-

embered / an Israeli girl I used to / Facebook  
before / I looked at the faces / I looked at the clouds

& walking toward the pizza shop I smelled the thyme  
& then I caught my own reflection in the glass

& then I understood what I was about  
to do / & now I'm here / & the fact is: I didn't

*Philip Metres*  
200

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<sup>200</sup> Philip Metres, "Act Two. This Tide of Blood [7. Sahar]," collected in [Shrapnel Maps](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Building a joke

A man goes to war with the same country  
his father did. No. A man wears insulated pants.  
Sony. A man holds two cups of coffee  
in one hand and one hand of poker  
in the other hand and one  
thermonuclear device in the other  
other band. I am trying. Did you ever think  
it's wrong to want people dead  
when maimed is more interesting?  
All that clomping and falling  
when a leg's shot off and a man  
wants revenge. Someone told him no.  
Someone said very loudly or in a soft voice  
or maybe this someone just wrote  
the word on a pad and slipped  
the piece of paper  
under a door but anyway there it was,  
no. No is on turned around, the man thought,  
and on is the first part of only,  
and only means just a bit,  
and just a bit isn't too much,  
and not too much  
is never enough, we need more  
and more is yes and yes  
is basically what no is telling me,  
the man thought. A man  
wants an entirely personal relationship  
with semantics. I will love you to death  
is really not such a bad phrase if a man  
walks into a bar and something funny  
happens in the bar. If the bar's  
in another country, the joke  
can be amended, a man walks  
into another country. There's a duck, a house,  
a Rabbi, Muhammad. Whenever a man  
says knock-knock, don't ask, who's there?

*Bob Hicok*  
201

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<sup>201</sup> [Bob Hicok](#), "[Building a joke](#)," [Poetry](#)

## Gun Case

In his head my brother was a little boy, helpless, when he thought of himself, so he didn't understand that saying things like *I have a black belt* or *I unlocked the gun case* made him difficult, sometimes, to approach. He bumped into things or knocked things over because he hadn't realized how big he had gotten. He was a little boy—we were both little boys—but I was in my forties, he was in his fifties. My father's last words were *You don't deserve to outlive me*. He said them to my brother, who told me he was referring to both of us. I don't know. I wasn't there at the end. Nobody called and I wouldn't have gone anyway. He had used the line before, so really it was just another disappointment. I had hoped for something unexpected, something tragic and grand. At the reading of the will, we discovered he had changed it again, leaving my brother almost everything. For me, he had calculated a minimum wage for the years that I had taken care of him. He left me exactly that amount. My brother had been pushing against our father for his entire life. Without him, the force of his pushing had spun him off balance. I could be cold-hearted, hard-headed; I could be the stand-in but I wasn't going to be. I wanted out and fast. I wrote a check for the deposit on an apartment downtown, by the bars. I started putting things in boxes. My brother sent me a text: he had unlocked the gun case and I needed to call before I came over. The coyotes were howling like somebody screaming and maybe it was somebody screaming. I wasn't quite clear on it, but he said it wasn't safe to come over. It was fine, except I hadn't finished moving out yet, so really it wasn't fine.

Richard Siken

202

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<sup>202</sup> Richard Siken, "[Gun Case](#)," [TriQuarterly](#)

Ode to Anglo Saxon, Film Noir, and the Hundred Thousand Anxieties That Plague Me Like Demons in a  
Medieval Christian Allegory

Yo, Viking dudes, who knew your big-dog cock-of-the-walk  
raping and pillaging would put us all here, right smack  
dab in the middle of a decade filled with the stink  
of war. Yes, sir, boys and girls, we're eating an old sock  
sandwich, but we're speaking English, kind of a weird fluke  
(a piece of luck, not the parasite), because the kick-  
ass Angles were illiterate hicks while the sublime Greeks  
had been writing poetry for a thousand years, heck,  
history and philosophy, too, though they did shellack  
the Trojans and a lot of other guys as well, stuck  
them with their bronze age swords, testosterone run amok,  
or so I'm thinking here from my present perch—a swank  
appartement in Paris, swilling champagne, clothes black,  
as if my past were a masterpiece by Jan van Eyck,  
the soundtrack written by Johann Sebastian Bach  
or his son, rather than the Three Stooges-Lawrence Welk  
debacle that really occurred. My mind's a train wreck  
of two lingo, twenty-six letters, and thousands of quick  
images from movies, French—yes, but mostly aw-shucks-  
ma'am Hollywood westerns or policiers in stark  
black and white, and I'm the twist, tomato, skirt, the weak  
sister who rats out her grifter boyfriend, palms a deck  
of Luckys she puffs while scheming with the private dick  
to pocket twenty large, or I'm the classy dame, sick  
of her stinking rich life and her Ralph Bellamy schmuck  
of a boyfriend. That's when Bogart's three-pack-a-day croak  
(dialog by Raymond Chandler) sounds like music,  
maybe John Coltrane, and you're up the five-and-dime creek,  
ma chere, because love can turn you into a mark, punk,  
jingle-brained two-bit patsy who'd take a fast sawbuck  
for snitching out her squeeze to the cops. Or you're the crack  
whore with an MBA standing on the corner in chic  
Versace rags, falling for the D.A., till the Czech  
drug lord plugs him. So who are you? Not the hippie chick  
of your early twenties or the Sears-and-Roebuck  
Christian judge your mother became, though Satan still stalks  
you on a regular basis. Is that guy a slick  
operator or what with his Brylcreemed hair and pock-  
marked face? There's still smallpox in Hell, so you push him back  
whenever you can, grow orchids and for dinner cook  
risotto alla Milanese, because knick, knack  
paddy whack, you're counting on something, not luck or rock  
and roll, though you've been there—at the HIC with Mick  
Jagger prancing around like a hopped-up jumping jack  
on speed. No, ma petite Marcella Proust, this is the joke:  
when your mother prays for you, your stuttering heart ticks  
a little more like a Swiss-made watch, and when you speak,

does French come out? Nah, it's the echo of those shock-jock  
Vikings, hacking their way across Europe, red-haired, drunk  
on blood and blondes, and though your husband looks like the Duke  
of Cambridge, that's not what you love so much, ya dumb cluck,  
but his Henry James-Groucho Marx-Cajun shtick. Knock,  
knock. Who's there? It's Moe, Larry, and Curly, nyuk nyuk nyuk.

*Barbara Hamby*  
203

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<sup>203</sup> [Barbara Hamby](#), "[Ode to Anglo Saxon, Film Noir, and the Hundred Thousand Anxieties That Plague Me Like Demons in a Medieval Christian Allegory](#)," collected in [On the Street of Divine Love: New and Selected Poems](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

from “The World Doesn’t End”

He calls one dog Rimbaud and the other Holderlin. They are both mongrels. “The unexamined life is not worth living” is his favorite saying. His wife looks like Delacroix’s half-naked Liberty. She wears cowboy boots, picks dangerous-looking mushrooms in the forest. Tonight they will light tall candles and drink wine. Later, they’ll open the door for the dogs to come in and eat the scraps under the table. “Entrez, mes enfants!” he’ll shout into the night, bowing deeply from the waist.

~

“Everybody knows the story about me and Dr. Freud,” says my grandfather.

“We were in love with the same pair of black shoes in the window of the same shoe store. The store, unfortunately, was always closed. There’d be a sign: DEATH IN THE FAMILY or BACK AFTER LUNCH, but no matter how long I waited, no one would come to open.

“Once I caught Dr. Freud there shamelessly admiring the shoes. We glared at each other before going our separate ways, never to meet again.”

~

Dear Friedrich, the world’s still false, cruel and beautiful....

Earlier tonight, I watched the Chinese laundryman, who doesn’t read or write our language, turn the pages of a book left behind by a customer in a hurry. That made me happy. I wanted it to be a dreambook, or a volume of foolishly sentimental verses, but I didn’t look closely.

It’s almost midnight now, and his light is still on. He has a daughter who brings him dinner, who wears short skirts and walks with long strides. She’s late, very late, so he has stopped ironing and watches the street.

If not for the two of us, there’d be only spiders hanging their webs between the street lights and the dark trees.

*Charles Simic*

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<sup>204</sup> [Charles Simic, “The World Doesn’t End \[He calls one dog Rimbaud...., Everybody knows the story...., Dear Friedrich....\],”](#)  
collected in [The World Doesn’t End, Ecco](#)



Deal

*The sun sets.  
We are all robots.  
Market forces.  
—Ed Smith*

Eating cereal  
over the sink,  
I think,  
this is  
what's real:  
the urgent  
piss;  
the grout  
like doubt.  
By now,  
Anonymous,  
no  
gent,  
is in  
his Lyft...

Adrift.  
This fall  
all  
the kids  
want  
to shoot  
vids,  
amateur  
auteurs,  
little  
hard  
Godards.  
To boot.  
Spittle,  
my haunt.  
I want  
my hair.  
And,  
a split,  
somewhere  
between  
mathematics  
and tricks  
buried  
in the yard,  
the dream  
a multilevel  
scheme.

Get  
a shovel.

I shrivel—  
by  
bleak  
acronym,  
boutique  
gym,  
Commie  
leak,  
Jimmy  
hats,  
metallic  
antibiotic,  
lost  
chats  
on a hill.

A hell  
of  
passive  
investors.  
Reboot  
love,  
with massive  
clawback  
provisions,  
money  
dripping off  
your robot  
back.  
The monsters.  
My stars.

*Randall Mann*  
205

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<sup>205</sup> [Randall Mann](#), "[Deal](#)," [Copper Nickel](#), collected in [Deal: New and Selected Poems](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## The Ghost on the Handle

The houses here are named La Vague and Chantebrise  
like places in a childhood daydream,  
  
an actual lake filled with literal swans.  
As a kid, I was most at home in the pages of a book,  
  
a bee sliding the banisters of the blue  
delphinium. Apollinaire called his books,  
  
in the soft golden bindings of the period,  
his blocks of butter. The sun here is like that,  
  
palpably stacked, flaking off the wavelets,  
filling the boats with yellow flowers, crowning  
  
the heads of the young couple arguing, body and soul.  
He calls her Pig, whore. Pig, whore,  
  
while she sobs and keeps trying to touch him.  
I didn't know it then, but when I was her  
  
age we were called borough girls: a little too  
fashion-forward, filthy-mouthed, and ready  
  
to settle at seventeen. The older you get  
the less surprised you think you can be,  
  
but when the bus with its Sans Voyageurs sign roars by,  
I think of my child who won't ever get born, ghost  
  
in a sunhat, shoulders narrow and pinked. A swan,  
ungainly out of water, slaps up the shore to preen  
  
with its knobbed orange beak. Mallarmé wrote that  
everything in the world exists in order to end up in a book.  
  
A golden book. Death, is not this the sunshine?

*Kathy Fagan*  
206

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<sup>206</sup> [Kathy Fagan](#), "[The Ghost on the Handle](#)," [The Nation](#), collected in [Bad Hobby](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

Inheritance at Corresponding Periods of Life, at Corresponding Seasons of the Year, as Limited by Sex

Some species mate, then decapitate.  
Some frogs never reproduce the same  
place twice. Some species film with  
fancy cameras their fucking. My father  
said my mother requested one night  
to be whipped by strangers. No species  
lack pleasure receptors in their ears.  
Some bees use sex as revenge, some  
as memory. Fell ponies never uncouple.  
Some sharks orgasm with their eyes  
so can never trust their seeing. My father  
said *I can't do it*, sent my brother inside  
the porn store to buy what my mother  
wanted. Some call out to a god, others  
to excrement. I am not making equivalencies.  
Finches sing to seduce. Ornithologists  
theorize the same song also eulogizes  
if produced in a tree hollow. That this is  
not the saddest fact in all of zoology is  
zoology's saddest fact. Unprompted,  
my mother told me she loved my father  
*like a brother*. Some mate for safety, to avoid  
sadness, to self-flagellate. Some say *there*,  
*there* as if pushing on a bruise. After  
her affairs, my father forgave his wife.  
For all species, desire is the most boring  
verb, yet they connive for it most hours.  
Some species of snake copulate in hopes  
they are another species altogether. Grunion  
bury their spawn in sand. My mother said  
she would have aborted me, but the clinic  
was closed. When whales abandon a grieving  
mother, she does not find kindness again.  
Some lives are taken down to salt, some to water.  
Some species invent facts about the living  
to explain the dead. I cannot fathom the bones  
I find in the woods posed themselves like this,  
though some species of grief find meaning  
in minutia, a mechanism for survival. It is hard  
to imagine a face for each skull.

James Allen Hall  
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<sup>207</sup> James Allen Hall, "Inheritance at Corresponding Periods of Life, at Corresponding Seasons of the Year, as Limited by Sex," *The Adroit Journal*

## For the Slip 'N Slide

For the WHAM-O Manufacturing Company  
which in 1961 invented the Slip 'N Slide.  
For Brenda Harris's shady back yard  
with its long fairway of soft grass where she  
and her sister whose name is now lost  
set up the Slip 'N Slide and attached it to the hose  
under the burning summer sky of East LA.  
How Brenda and her sister and I ran  
in our swimsuits, took a flying leap, and skidded,  
screaming bloody murder on our tummies.  
How we did this ten thousand times, howling  
our Tarzan cries and never tiring of it. For Brenda,  
who invented the Double Decker, whereby  
the two of us would run, Brenda just behind me,  
and I would belly flop onto my stomach  
and she would land on my back and we streaked  
across the yard out of control and smashed  
into her mother's hydrangeas. For her mother,  
who didn't get mad. Who at lunch time put out  
a pitcher of iced lemonade or Kool-Aid  
and a bunch of Velveeta and Wonder Bread sandwiches  
on the table under its green umbrella and we kids  
sat there eating like royalty. How nothing  
was better than those Wonder Bread sandwiches.  
For the Safeway supermarket down the road,  
which employed Brenda's father in the produce department,  
where he earned the salary that paid for the Slip 'N Slide.  
How he would fill a couple of shopping bags  
with day-old lettuce and carrots and oranges  
and onions and radishes and potatoes  
destined for the dumpster behind the Safeway  
and leave them on the front porch of our house  
where my mother would find them when she got home  
from her job as a guard at Fontana Women's Prison,  
the only work she could find after my father died  
of booze and left her with the three kids  
and a falling apart little stucco house. How  
accepting the day-old produce hurt her  
even more than working at the women's prison  
and collecting food stamps because in her former life  
as socialite wife of a well-to-do drunk  
she had employed people like Brenda's father,  
who entered from the back door when they came to work.  
For the women incarcerated in Fontana Women's Prison,  
whose crimes, whatever they were, gave my mother a job.  
How she never thanked him. For that summer  
under the cobalt LA sky, where a place  
called Watts had yet to ignite, and our Tarzan cries

echoed in the yard and the cold lemonade  
made our heads ache and the days went on  
forever, the Slip 'N Slide like an endless river  
which arrived one day at a fork which none of us  
could see coming, and Brenda and her sister,  
her mother and her father drifted off  
into a place called African America,  
and my mother and sisters and I drifted off  
into something called gated communities,  
the Slip 'N Slide, the Wonder Bread sandwiches,  
the bags of groceries long forgotten.  
For Brenda, and the Double Decker that summer  
a lifetime ago, and how the two of us now  
keep on journeying deeper and deeper  
into a country growing stranger,  
less recognizable, more lonely every day.

*George Bilgere*  
208

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<sup>208</sup> George Bilgere, "[For the Slip 'N Slide](#)," [Barrow Street Review](#), collected in [Central Air](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Juvenilia

I am a child in the lunchroom  
which is the sometimes gym  
singing my known truths: *I love milk*

to which Tanya says *If you love it so  
much why don't you marry it?*  
And that's a fair point, Tanya.

Why don't I marry this milk, why  
don't I plan an elaborate ceremony,  
choose colors, invite milk's family

and milk's college friends to stay near,  
but not with, us? Why don't I start  
picking the poems now to be read

as we wed somewhere necessarily  
refrigerated? Just like a child  
to think it's so easy—that love

is a one-way act or a matter  
of decision. We can't love  
what we love into loving

us. Tanya, if I could  
why would I waste my time  
with milk, or with you, you

whom I decidedly do not love?  
I'd be out charming  
my indifferent grandmothers

into expressions of genuine affection  
and jewelry. I'd be deepening  
a correspondence with television

and movie star Michael J. Fox  
who I imagine chastely kissing  
with my full and future lips,

making the sounds  
I've seen on the screen.  
Tanya, this is the smallest torture

you'll think up for me, perfected  
until junior high starts and I  
am in honors classes and you

are not—forgive me this, my own  
small wounding, but I am  
storing these cruelties inside me

like a library dedicated  
to one kind of war. I am becoming  
a woman who'll do almost anything

to be wanted. Why don't I marry  
the milk, Tanya? Ask the milk  
what there is in me to love.

*Erin Adair-Hodges*  
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<sup>209</sup> [Erin Adair-Hodges](#), "[Juvenilia](#)," [Green Mountains Review](#), collected in [Every Form of Ruin](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)



## Threads

Whether or not they moved into a blue clapboard duplex  
in their mid-thirties, Ted and Tina—  
clapboard?—bringing three bicycles  
and the case of Beaujolais given them years before  
by Uncle James who said, as if he knew what was to come,  
“This will refine your thoughts” and  
five mirrors and five small boxes of old letters  
(Ted: three; Tina: two), Tina insisting  
the sand-colored carpet must be professionally cleaned  
at a cost which Ted called “really absurd”;  
and whether as a result of the new location  
Tina met a young Irish theorist at the Dorwar Bookshop  
who introduced her and Ted to the artist Ted would call  
the Rembrandt of the Eighties whose talk apparently  
precipitated Tina’s essay “Eidolons and the Muser’s Eye”  
it seems certain that in that period one action pointed  
to another  
otherwise  
Ted’s friend Alberto two years later might not have written  
what he wrote about his mother (the painter) dying including  
the beautiful “sand between our toes” passage  
which Ted more than once read aloud in the International House  
of Pancakes to among others R. Glenn Paul the budding  
Spenser scholar who pined for Tina till 1990 swearing  
only she enabled him to *see*  
and Jayne Alice Orson the imminent star of the purple movie  
“Ardalion and Lydia” which won a small obsessive audience  
for director Lona Moseley throughout the decade and caused  
both Ted and Alberto’s brother Juan the accordionist  
to lie sleepless many nights or ride bicycles till dawn—  
a web of truth stretches among these facts surely  
and if this web does not shine importantly  
then everything is too sad; hence our research.  
Some sources say it was in fact at Café Budapest  
that Ted recited Alberto’s page about the shadows at midnight  
in Memorial Hospital and the waitress allegedly proposed  
to marry him (Ted? or Alberto?) on the spot. There was  
an intensity, an atmosphere in which each minute counted,  
almost a chemical glow around their heads...  
Why did Tina leave Ted? This we can’t know  
till the green box is opened, but the web already shines for us  
under the moon-like light of inquiry, as we note for instance  
that when Ted joined the Garcia group late in ’87  
young Lloyd Zebrun had not yet departed and was just on  
“the maddening edge” of composing the end of  
*That Lingering Smoke.*

Mark Halliday

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<sup>210</sup> [Mark Halliday](#), "[Threads](#)," [Virginia Quarterly Review](#), collected in [Selfwolf](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)

## Everyone Rise, the Gavel's Coming Down

Our neighborhood corner granny had jury duty for two weeks in August of 1985. She had to stay in a hotel and family could not bring her meals, not even a bundle of yeast rolls. After six hours without her watchful silhouette, the alley filled with Coke cans and damp leaves. Cats chased cardinals without fear of reprimand. Some kids spit at an elm tree outside the bar. A gust of wind knocked an angel statue onto its face and nobody had the manners to stand it back up. We speculated about what sort of jury would seat our corner granny. She spoke in adages and superstitions. Wore a hair-colored sponge at her nape, corona of bobby pins the exact shade of her fringe. Everything she owned smelled of garlic, even her dogs, curled at the foot of my bed for two weeks. I could tell the dogs missed her but also loved my waxy stamps of American cheese. The newspaper printed a crude sketch of the courtroom, but jury box smudges looked nothing like corner granny. After school I let myself into her apartment with the key stowed in a plastic rock. She had instructed me to run the kitchen tap once a day, fill the birdseed in her swaying gourd. When the trial was over (guilty, manslaughter in the first degree) we all watched corner granny step out of a yellow cab. Chipmunks retreated to their holes. A damp flag attempted to dry itself in the breeze.

*Mary Biddinger*

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<sup>211</sup> [Mary Biddinger](#), "[Everyone Rise, the Gavel's Coming Down](#)," *Had*

## What's Poetry Like?

Poets play the winter tarantella,  
making love in the midnight hours  
on a white iron bed like a dog skeleton  
distinguishing the essential and unessential  
moment, shared between ordinary lunatics  
and screaming over a bird in an apple tree  
until an elegy has to be written  
to resuscitate the relation—those who look  
toward the depleted wildlife of neighborhoods  
with tragic relish, to see somehow ourselves  
disappearing about ourselves.  
Once, in New York City, years ago,  
the Internet technician finally arrived.  
His teen-age apprentice stood in my living room  
over a Tranströmer book. He said it looked  
kind of cool, and he wanted to know  
what it was. “Poetry,” I said.  
“What’s poetry like?” he asked. And  
the treacherous inadequacy with which one  
finds oneself explaining in a few loose  
deficient words something with lungs  
and no face, the immortal freak  
of language you haunt and hunt  
which is the original state of language  
you’re trying to get back to from within—  
poetry, whose rare geniuses come  
as bittersweet suicidal explosions  
on the tongue, randomly felt during  
long, tedious meals; award-winning and  
already forgotten. All the emoting of the  
unanalyzable fragments. All the surrender  
and detonations of precision  
and reckless insight  
and reference to hidden wisdom and Coke cans—  
conversations across time, and slips  
into truth, and obscurity of thought altogether  
blissful, the form itself at its best strings of dreams  
in the waking life,  
overlaid like unobserved clothing:  
the words that sing  
stillness, the silence craved  
by perpetual auctioneers—that which is not  
the tale of event but itself *an* event—  
“You know what? Just take the book,” I said finally,  
pushing it into his hands—  
“THANKS!” he said, and took it away, grinning a little.  
But later, with snow in my head and a thunder  
in my right eyelid... I was worried, as I was

so dangerously then, about dark, yet-unspoken things  
—it frightened me: that shiny black and white book  
wafting around New York City in the back  
of a Time Warner Cable van, waiting to be opened,  
waiting to torment him, thinking of it changing his life.

*Bianca Stone*  
212

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<sup>212</sup> [Bianca Stone](#), “[What’s Poetry Like?](#),” [The New Yorker](#)

## Crow Flying Overhead with a Hole in Its Wing

I looked up and saw you this morning  
flying over a tex-mex restaurant  
the hole in your wing  
the size of a bottle cap  
I googled what it means  
and read about parasites  
but nothing about whether it is  
a benediction  
to see an animal flying  
with this perfect portal in its wing  
through which I saw the sky  
through which its jeweled language  
leaked muted and streaky  
through which I heard  
the first song I ever played my daughter  
holding her near the window  
that overlooks our street  
through which I saw everything  
I had been afraid of  
which was a kind of death  
which was a kind of  
abandon  
buckling toward joy  
as I have fallen to my knees

in grief  
but have never known  
what it sounds like  
to sing without expecting  
mercy  
through which the wind  
might touch us  
which is the only  
benediction I need

*Kendra DeColo*  
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<sup>213</sup> [Kendra DeColo](#), "[Crow Flying Overhead with a Hole in Its Wing](#)," [The Account](#)

## Monica

We were having breakfast  
for dinner, which is never good for me  
because I don't like eggs,  
and this seems to offend some people  
but is not something I can fix.

Someone brought up Monica Lewinsky,  
how she has a TED Talk now,  
and then someone else asked if  
it was about giving good blowjobs.  
I said *No, it's about shame.*

This was stronger than what  
I usually do, but not strong enough,  
so here I am, mechanical pencil  
scraping away on the receipt  
from the vet as I wait for the car wash,  
trying to make amends.

When I was a child,  
I had a friend named Monica  
who painted my fingernails red.  
When her mom saw,  
she removed the polish right away  
because *red was for hussies.*

Monica asked the audience  
to raise their hands if they had not  
done something when they were 22  
that they regretted.

When I was 22,  
I made the biggest mistake of my life.  
I will never forgive myself  
though I couldn't help it.  
And the thing is  
I don't have to tell you.

I should have said more  
on Monica's behalf.  
I sat at that table while people said  
she should have changed her name,  
and my husband was the one  
who said that Monica pointed out  
that Bill Clinton didn't have to.



I was mostly silent, staring at my nails,  
which I had just gotten done that afternoon  
to see if I could stop biting them.

When I was 22,  
I had a rule that I could only bite  
three a night because  
more than three Band-Aids  
looked like a problem.

But now my nails looked good.  
The polish was clear  
but had little flecks of glitter  
that flashed like intelligence  
when they caught the light.

*Laura Read*

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<sup>214</sup> [Laura Read](#), "[Monica](#)," [Rattle](#), collected in [But She is Also Jane](#), [University of Massachusetts Press](#)

## Red Bird, 1964

I've only seen a dead bird up close once. It wasn't red but blue. I named it *Happiness* before I buried it. My child found a few sticks so we could make a cross. We dug a hole and dropped the bird in, along with a few flowers we plucked. We didn't touch the bird with our bare hands, in case death was contagious. When I put the cross into the ground, I felt that Nietzsche was wrong. Happiness isn't the feeling that power increases. The lake isn't a marketplace. The small pencil marks on the painting aren't measuring anything. Seeing the dead bird up close only made me want to cover it, not sell its feelings. I am far away from it, in another house, but I still have the bird's feelings in a small box. Each spring, I can't see the baby birds in the rafters that, when hungry, sound like death. All these months, I thought they were birds, but it turns out they were really rats. And the feelings in the small box were my own.

Victoria Chang  
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<sup>215</sup> Victoria Chang, "Red Bird, 1964," *The Paris Review*, collected in *With My Back to the World*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux

from “Forms and materials”

[Sonnet]

*You matter to me.* Back in sex ed we saw  
genitals, breasts, sex organs. All else mere  
positioning, the way in. I prefer a voice,  
its kindness; a face, a custom tea set  
of expressions. Give me an acceptable  
love, not for everyone, but morphed to me.  
Its form could come in company or not,  
some purpose long stumbled over welling up  
suddenly. My daughter arrived by doctor catheter;  
I didn't need sex at all. I still dream of friends  
who left, who didn't get it. Like my body,  
my dreams are rate, until I catch a blur  
I recognize, and in the dark, my eyelids flutter.  
A face or voice etched within me reaches out.

—

We've read already the story stitched  
on my pelvis. Not born there, but worn anyway.

Only when I quit its familiar loop  
of woe and wretchedness—as Mary W. put it,

My Life as a Toy of Man—could I testify  
about the beckoning hand I anticipated,

conjuring children from air. The crone

peddling herbs at the forest perimeter  
that villagers threaten to torch or stone

or mine for laughs on Twitter,  
she midwives all of the town's young,

crawls between caverns and surfaces  
where new life blinks alive,

stunned. As I have.

Though an option, the Witch deflates me.  
I hesitate to fold my ambition so neatly

into medieval Black Forest thinking,  
that *Malleus* of women-hating and -hunting

which still hacks out infinite decrees,  
scrolls of punitive legislation,

judicial argument.

If form is shape and structure, I'm not  
who or what I left out,

Mrs. Coney Barrett, I assure you—

no partner of mine is dead  
or in prison or simply too feckless  
to keep loving me. Whispers

suggest I'm a casualty of women's lib,  
my girlhood a die to keep

casting. A perfect circle is hard to imagine  
(except if you have imagination),

but it's obvious:  
my daughter and I are  
complete by ourselves. She is  
all capacity

a bespoke miracle that learns easily,  
as I once did, intuiting

her correct speed. Bit by bit I navigate rooms  
with my voice, ambiguous walks

and calls at any hour to whoever I please,  
a trip to the airport without significance,

to headline the bill, an act of *something*  
*something colubrine,* *feline,*

credible behavior  
though it took me time to believe, too.

Recently on a hike, my friend asked after  
My Life as a Drooping Lily (Mary W. again),

meaning, why do I persist in such  
glad self-liberation, and I said,

I want to be able to talk to people  
without having to fuck or be fucked, yeah?

and with the flies whizzing around us,  
the ticks burrowing into my socks

in midsummer, I said nothing else,

and she nothing, and we walked further

up the rock face, and I had stumped her  
because that's all—the entire revolution so  
painfully  
simple—

yet I refuse the lonely retreat,  
to be swallowed by true crime podcasts

and a day-drunk pinot,  
though the hag-hairs on my chin

do blossom. Wield neither chainsaw  
nor crockery, a holy conundrum—this blank

will not fill,

but an example I set.

I'm found in front  
of the auditorium,

applauding the ballet, the spelling bee,  
a woman turned moral experiment,

A Wollstonecraft / A Moore

/ A Mother

hewn ride-or-die that birthed  
my open revolt of a girl, loyal

to my friends, we who chose something else. Now,

when the ellipsis pirouettes open  
its mutable door, beyond,

I find a new form, growing real. I call to her,

Welcome home.

*Erin Hoover*  
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<sup>216</sup> [Erin Hoover](#), "[Forms and materials \[You matter to me...\]](#)," [Northwest Review](#), collected in [No Spare People](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

from “The Itinerant Girl’s Guide to Self-Hypnosis”

I will always have the sense that leaving is easy, until I get to the next place and get my hair cut for company. Nightmares about having to leave, for me, are also nightmares about having to stay. Like that kid that time (my brother), I’m apt to start screaming if I can’t get on a transatlantic flight with my hobo bundle. So I’ll retire to the bushes by the front stoop to eat carrots, sing mournful songs, and look for my runaway turtle, as we all did as children. It’s hard to grow up in poems when you’ve been working on the same project all these years. I’ll be here in my closet office with a bowl of popcorn and a bare bulb to keep me warm. Besides, no one wants to hear about adult heaviness. Not the wind. Not even the road.

*Joanna Penn Cooper*

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<sup>217</sup> Joanna Penn Cooper, “[The Itinerant Girl’s Guide to Self-Hypnosis \[I will always have the sense...\]](#),” collected in [The Itinerant Girl’s Guide to Self-Hypnosis](#), Brooklyn Arts Press

Love Poem When We Run Out of Chickens

The way you love me: draining every  
last drop of rat's blood into the goblet—  
lest the crystal go to waste.  
When you are sad you smell like moonshadow,  
like ink in a sink. But when you look at me  
like you *Like Me* it's like  
someone set fire  
to a field of goldenrod & let loose  
a herd of wild game in my drawing room.

Your desire is cornflower blue  
& slowly uncoiling my scarf.  
It smacks the plate of crawfish  
to confuse my scream. The whole affair  
clatters to the floor! Even  
the boiled ones scuttle.

The whole place is ablaze  
but I wake up anyway  
to the drip & the clink—  
hair swept back in some rogue bow  
of monstrous self-control.

I'm aware you might be a devil  
but I'm a rut in your boulevard.

Maybe my Love-Bite is the price of pushing  
your body cart up this Thunder Mountain.

Maybe it just rains all the time now  
& rats no longer run from me.

I cradle my Old Faith like a New Baby  
that refuses to open its eyes

You & I have gifts to give out.  
They're gathered in these skirts.  
They're tucked like dark eggs  
in the folds of the Sensual World.

It's time we are unlikely vampires—  
twin foxes sucking the oxygen directly  
from our Only Henhouse.

Karyna McGlynn

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<sup>218</sup> Karyna McGlynn, "[Love Poem When We Run Out of Chickens](#)," collected in [50 Things Kate Bush Taught Me About the Multiverse](#), Sarabande Books

from "A Palace of Pearls"

14

Was my best self the painter of my youth  
a pretty lousy untrained sensibility  
a couple dozen naked figures materialized  
in the rain forests of northern California  
in an upstairs room what's her name  
and what's her name posing for free  
I wasn't a good person I cheated on my boyfriend  
I lied to my parents saying I was married  
I loved someone who was herself  
married minor offenses of the bourgeoisie  
I skipped school I grew pot  
it rained and rained it was unbelievable  
TO FELL THE PRECIOUS REDWOOD  
TO LIVE IN A REDWOOD HOUSE

*Jane Miller*

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<sup>219</sup> [Jane Miller](#), "[A Palace of Pearls \(14\)](#)," collected in [A Palace of Pearls](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)



## The Poet and the Nurse

A few days before it all unfolded in NYC,  
a doctor was feeling my left breast  
and we made jokes until we were not joking.

Go now, she said, because now was all  
she could guarantee. I ducked awnings  
forty blocks in the rainy blitz

of the March afternoon. I sat in an empty  
hospital on 13th. There is a lump  
with some debris another doctor told me

and I replied, *well, that doesn't sound very sexy*  
because it wasn't. I went home and thought  
about my rotting chest. My prophetic breast.

A week later, the same doctor who sent me  
downtown closed her practice and learned  
how to intubate patients on YouTube.

Under lockdown, I sing cabaret by firelight.  
And Helen in Paris is cooking fish  
and chermoula in full Goth.

Alex makes a shopping list of champagne  
and diet coke and audacity and says to me:  
*You better not look like shit at my funeral.*

I dig my cast of macabre angels,  
one foot in the grave, another on the internet.  
When my sister calls me from Texas

after a long shift, I play piano for her  
to forget her day, but I muddle keys.  
They won't behave. She doesn't mind.

My sister has bathed and bagged the dead.  
She is not tortured by a bad melody,  
instead, she'd prefer pain not be

glamorous or candlelit or ironic  
or theater. She knows that not everything  
holy has to hurt or cohere.

Megan Fernandes

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<sup>220</sup> Megan Fernandes, "[The Poet and the Nurse](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [I Do Everything I'm Told](#), Tin House Books

## Liquid Nitrogen

I dropped my son at a Saturday science enrichment program on campus  
then went to Starbucks to work except I didn't get much done because

last night I drank too much at the bowling alley / I drank too much at the  
bar with darts at the entrance / I drank too much at the hotel talking to

my friend Lily about the men who have done problematic things but  
haven't been shunned from our community and the coffee didn't help

my hangover and I can't stop staring at the college student across from me  
at a raised table who has distressingly heavy black eyebrows drawn over

her own, arced like coal bridges or small tented pelts—she also has a  
Girl Gang sticker on her pink laptop, a Save the Wilderness sticker too

which makes me think of the Vigil for the Earth I am missing today  
(a member of my synagogue sent out a flyer) where people will pray

and lament because they're still running the Mountain Valley Pipeline  
through town despite everyone's protests / these days we protest

everything—it's the same group of us holding up signs about what  
we hate (guns, racism, the president, sexism, etc.) and what we support

(immigrants, equal rights, peace, Muslims, health insurance, etc.)  
I got carded last night at the bar with the darts and my license had

VOID stamped on it since I just renewed it at the DMV which smelled  
like stale smoke and camouflage and asbestos remediation and the nice

but vigilant bouncer made me unfold my temporary license: a piece of paper  
that says I am validly nearly 43 and I actually said to the bouncer *I'm old*—

*I'm a mom*, which means it's my turn to go back to the auditorium to pick up  
my son and wait in the second of two lines (A-M / N-Z) while three engineers

in front of me talk about a Florida bridge collapse: what happened, they don't  
understand, something about water ratios for concrete or stress tests or cracks

and a pipeline blast could incinerate our entire town / on the radio yesterday  
the mother of one of the Parkland shooting victims—the girl's name was Carmen—

said *I'm thankful that one out of two of my children came home from school*  
and at the bar with the darts my grad student says he's been doing too much

coke lately / lights my cigarette for me / tells me his girlfriend is trying to help  
one of the other grad students who's diabetic get health insurance again

to get his insulin / I regularly weep in my car to the news, especially since  
the inauguration and sometimes I wept before it too / we are still waiting

for our children who are in the auditorium / there is a woman further down  
the line wearing a black shirt with white lettering: Fuck Gun Control but the

F and K are semi-automatic weapons / when I reach him, his blue coat slung  
over his head by the hood, my son says that in the demonstration they watched

a guy handling liquid nitrogen with his bare hands

*Erika Meitner*  
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<sup>221</sup> [Erika Meitner](#), "[Liquid Nitrogen](#)," [The Ilanot Review](#)

## Gerda Weismann is Putting on Her Ski Boots

You're in an old shop in an old city that you have  
never been to before, and it's just about to close,

but you pick up a kettle, a bottle, a tobacco tin,  
and then a snow globe covered in dust, most

of which you blow away with one big breath,  
and you wipe off the rest with your gloved hand  
and turn the globe toward the window so it can  
catch the last rays of the dying light, and you

look at it and blink and look again, for what you see  
is not carolers or reindeer and a sleigh but young  
Gerda Weismann in the town of Bielsko in Poland  
in the summer of 1942, and she's arguing with

her father as she is putting on her ski boots, of all things,  
because she promised him she would wear them  
even if the weather is still warm when the Germans  
come for her, which they do two months later,

shuttling Gerda and other women from one  
work camp to another till the war turns in favor  
of the Allies in early 1945 and her captors decide  
to evacuate and march her and 2,000 others west

through freezing weather. When the three-month  
death march ends at an abandoned bicycle factory  
near the German border, only 120 have survived.  
Most of those who died were wearing sandals,

whereas "I had my ski boots," said Gerda,  
"and my imagination: if you were a person who  
faced reality, you didn't stand much of a chance."  
Genius is childhood recaptured at will,

said Baudelaire. Gerda Weismann wasn't a child—  
she was 18 when she was taken—but she thought  
like one. She was playful. She made things up.  
"I started Early – Took my Dog – / And visited

the Sea –," wrote Emily Dickinson, and then  
"The Mermaids in the Basement / Came out  
to look at me." I bet she had fun writing that one,  
don't you? I bet she had fun writing them all,

even the ones about the men who abandoned her,  
one of whom was God. "I always believed  
I would survive," said Gerda as she was marched  
from one place to another, imagining her dead brother

would be waiting for her or planning in detail  
a party she'd host when the war ended—should she  
wear a red dress or a blue?—or making up stories  
for the other girls, telling them their rescue

was imminent. Gerda Weismann was writing  
a poem of hope inside the larger poem  
of the Holocaust, one in which the mind  
of an entire people is taken prisoner by a thing

that doesn't exist. That's what happened in Salem  
in 1692, said Arthur Miller as he gathered materials  
for *The Crucible*: "Poetry may seem an odd word  
for a witch-hunt, but I saw there was something

of the marvelous in the spectacle of a whole village  
whose imagination was captured by a vision  
of something that wasn't there." On the morning  
of May 7, Gerda Weismann finds her captors gone

and a jeep approaching, the big white star  
of the U. S. Army on its hood. She weighs  
just 68 pounds and her hair has turned white  
from malnutrition, and when the jeep stops,

one of the two soldiers walks over to her and asks her  
if she speaks German, and she nods and says,  
"I'm Jewish!" and Lieutenant Kurt Klein says,  
"I am, too," and then he does something that Gerda,

who has been treated like an animal for three years,  
later said "restored my humanity, all of it"—  
Kurt Klein says, "May I see the other ladies?"  
and when she turns back toward the factory,

he holds the door for her. They fall in love  
and marry in Paris in 1946 and have a long  
and happy life in Buffalo, NY, where Kurt  
runs a printing business and Gerda works

for seventeen years as a columnist with  
*The Buffalo News*. "The devil danced happily  
into Salem" in 1692, said Arthur Miller,  
"and took the place apart," just as civilization

officially ended in Germany in 1939, just as  
it's ending now, is always ending, its death  
attended each time by hope and imagination,  
you think as you put the snow globe back

and turn your collar up and walk out into  
the darkening night. They're always there,  
you say to yourself. You just have to look  
for them. You have to put them on.

*David Kirby*  
222

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<sup>222</sup> [David Kirby, "Gerda Weismann is Putting on Her Ski Boots," \*Gargoyle Magazine\*](#)

## Limbo

Today in the taxi, driving a commercial real estate type from 43rd and Madison to 57th and Park, I said, "Would you prefer to go up Madison, or Park?" He said, "It doesn't matter. Either way we're fucked."

And it was true when a black pier of birds burst from the building, like fulfillment.

I, too, seek to weave a memory from foam. A black bottle opener and the blackest bottle, and the flow of liquids. You cannot know it; you can see it.

General "Beedle" Smith reported that in April 1945 when they liberated Buchenwald, he witnessed:

"General Eisenhower go to the opposite side of the road and vomit. From distance I saw Patton bend over, holding his head with one hand and his abdomen with the other. I too became sick."

When the oncoming headlights are too bright, it is said you should look to the side at the lines on the road. You would stop yourself from being blinded, and stop yourself to imagine the road ahead, unstrung, and the rubber against it.

*Sean Singer*  
223

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<sup>223</sup> Sean Singer, "Limbo," [The Southampton Review](#), collected in [Today in the Taxi](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

## Would You Like to Learn More About Yourself or Others?

you can assume your identity will be protected how interested are you in discovering your true self is this something you'd be prepared to admit your hoarding I mean has it become a problem in your marriage do you slam it in a drawer when someone walks in the room are you embarrassed do you find it meaningful the old shampoo and toothpaste cartons the stacks of printed emails packages on packages of doublemint gum do you remember the provenance of each item under the bed does it make you feel happy and then very sad is this a way to live is there a trash can in this room would you use all ten magnifying glasses in case you decide to go on a picnic you will need the travel mayonnaise it is possible there will be a use for each piece of wrapping paper there is probably information in the magazine that would interest an acquaintance there is a story behind the bag of plastic bags the many brochures it's a straightforward case they call this a compulsion but how could they possibly know the medical establishment how could they

*Lauren Shapiro*  
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<sup>224</sup> Lauren Shapiro, "[Would You Like to Learn More About Yourself or Others?](#)," collected in [Arena](#), [Cleveland State University Poetry Center](#)



George Floyd

You can be a brother who dyes  
his hair Dennis Rodman blue  
in the face of the man kneeling in blue  
in the face the music of his wrist-  
watch your mouth is little more  
than a door being knocked  
out of the ring of fire around  
the afternoon came evening's bell  
of the ball and chain around the neck  
of the unarmed brother ground down  
to gunpowder dirt can be inhaled  
like a puff the magic bullet point  
of transformation both kills and fires  
the life of the party like it's 1999 bottles  
of beer on the wall street people  
who sleep in the streets do not sleep  
without counting yourself lucky  
rabbit's foot of the mountain  
lion do not sleep without  
making your bed of the river  
boat gambling there will be  
no stormy weather on the water  
bored to death any means of killing  
time is on your side of the bed  
of the truck transporting Emmett  
till the break of day Emmett till  
the river runs dry your face  
the music of the spheres  
Emmett till the end of time

*Terrance Hayes*  
225

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<sup>225</sup> [Terrance Hayes](#), "[George Floyd](#)," [The New Yorker](#), collected in [So To Speak](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## Where I'm From

Grinning and flicking me off,  
Gavin left practice and climbed  
in the car beside his mom  
just as my ex-girlfriend's new  
boyfriend was drunk and doing  
90 past the high school.  
A small-town constellation.  
Seatbelts would have done  
nothing, authorities told us.  
As if that blunted something.  
Amber gave birth just before  
the sentencing. The new father  
did time in juvie, in time  
was set free. At the double  
funeral my father preached,  
Good Shepherd Lutheran  
so full they had to roll a TV  
into the nursery for overflow.  
Toddlers stacked blocks, zoomed  
Hot Wheels. The janitor got  
confounded by a cluster of cords—  
picture came through, but no  
audio. In black and white  
I watched my father climb  
into the pulpit and silently  
say what no one could believe.

*Anders Carlson-Wee*  
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<sup>226</sup> [Anders Carlson-Wee](#), "[Where I'm From](#)," [Oxford American](#), collected in [Disease of Kings](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Pastoral

It happened so fast. Fenya was in the straight  
Chair in the corner, her youngest sucking  
On her breast. The screams, and a horseman  
Outside the cottage. Then, her father in a blue tunic  
Falling through the door onto the boards.  
Fenya leaned over him, her blouse  
Still at the waist and a single drop of her yellow milk  
Falling into the open eye of her father. He dies  
Looking up through this screen, what he sees

Is a little lamp-glow,  
Like the poet describes less often even than harness bells  
Or the icon with pine boughs. He sees snow  
Falling into a bland field where a horse is giving  
Birth to more snow dragging its placenta all over  
The glaze which is red; all the snow is red, the horse's  
Blood is white. He sees tears on Fenya's face and  
Milk coming like bone hairpins from her breasts.  
The straight force in the twig that makes a great black  
Branch. Two of which are crossed over his chest. Terror is

The vigil of astonishment

*Norman Dubie*  
227

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<sup>227</sup> [Norman Dubie](#), "[Pastoral](#)," collected in [In the Dead of the Night](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Event Horizon

Remember when you stabbed me on my birthday?  
A glass of wine itched, scratched itself off the table.

Whatever phones were then, they were dead.  
Whatever phones were then, we can barely recall.

But numbers remain numbers and yours dialed  
went unanswered. You were dead on the other end.

And no one knows about the flowers you sent, nor  
the manner in which I sat through dullest hours

on my couch aiming a kitchen knife at my wrist.  
That I do not choose the role of victim remains

unsaid. I sit across a table from you at a thesis  
defense and by my silence advance the thesis

that I never sucked your dick like the broken stem  
of a honeysuckle flower. For many years we continue

to act like I have never sucked your dick like the broken  
stem of a honeysuckle flower. You ask if I'm willing

to recommend to my editor a manuscript you have  
had trouble publishing. I'll oblige because it seems

I do not know what I am about. I adopt more cats.  
I develop an exercise routine. I note you do not own

any pets. I don't get that and don't have much sympathy,  
though I'm thankful animals are spared. The Dalai Lama

himself would have appreciated my calm that afternoon.  
Walking into that room to sit across from you at that table,

months after my birthday, you smiling at me like we'd just  
met: perhaps it was true. We had only just met.

There was a reason for language back then. Back then,  
words meant something. I am bent down, kneeling to pick

up the bouquet you've sent that's been left by a delivery  
person employed to get its message received. Across our

table, my tears are not diamonds, nor does the sun's knife  
come off my smile. Remember when your floor met my knees?

You're lucky I'm as lazy as I am. Animals like me, knives like  
me, strange as forgiveness. I picked those bad flowers up.

*Cate Marvin*  
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<sup>228</sup> [Cate Marvin](#), "[Event Horizon](#)," [The Kenyon Review](#), collected in [Event Horizon](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

pedagogy

now she's gone my teacher wants to know  
where the speaker enters the poem

the wind blows open the screen door & it catches  
on its chain. out back my neighbors are smoking

a pig to make it last. my teacher only became  
my teacher after she passed. before that

she was a woman who had lived a long time.  
as always i am an ungrateful child, a student

first of ingratitude. ungracious as a wasp. a knot  
in a history of rope your hands don't notice

as you hold on for dear life. dear life, the speaker  
is the chain holding the door closed & the wind

is my teacher, the smoke curing meat.  
my teacher had stories about all the dead poets

which made her, while living, prophetic. proximity  
is next to godliness. for a woman who had no use

for music or pleasure her writing beats the page  
until knuckles singe. my speaker wants to know

when the teacher enters the poem, if she ever leaves,  
if she's always there in the text, shaking her heads,

cutting the weeds.

*Sam Sax*  
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<sup>229</sup> [Sam Sax](#), "[pedagogy](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [Pig](#), [Scribner](#)

## Icon

While the moon scoops in the early April sky,  
I fold paper into a tragic crane. One magician  
burns sand, another palms a tree. My crane  
flickers her lovely neck and weeps. After the fire,  
everything smelled of brick, a red that  
guttered in the neighbor's dreams. A piano  
turns bodies magnetic with music. I want to break  
myself like an egg for you, to pool in gold and lost.

*Hala Alyan*  
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<sup>230</sup> [Hala Alyan](#), “[Icon](#),” collected in [Four Cities](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

## Indiana Problem (Three Steaks)

The babysitter  
came with a suitcase  
full of crap we  
liked: old clothes,  
naked Barbies with  
limbs scratched  
by some unknown  
girl. We ate TV  
dinners: mine rubber  
corn, burnt square  
of chocolate, spongy  
metallic rectangle.

\*

At The Camelot  
I would eat  
the entire prime  
rib on its bed  
of soggy toast  
before taking  
my ice cream cone  
into the bar  
with its full suit  
of armor, drunks  
I'd recognize  
in daylight.

\*

I left the charred  
fat in a little  
wall, left  
the camper  
and walked into  
the firefly-packed  
dark green dark and  
no one looked  
for me.

*Julia Story*  
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<sup>231</sup> [Julia Story](#), "[Indiana Problem \(Three Steaks\)](#)," [Barnstorm](#), collected in [Spinster for Hire](#), [The Word Works](#)



## Hard-Boiled Elegy

It's one o'clock in the turmoil. The funeral isn't what it used to be. The unknown come calling, make Meaningful Eye Contact. Where's the juice, they ask. It's been stepped on like a tango, I retort. You are lying in your grave, a penny in a slot. I have old-fashioned ideas about death. I don't give a damn. "Well, the future isn't what it used to be," the Detective says, solving the case. So, what about the dead blonde? What's with the mad doctor, the creep with the axe? What do the mirrors mean? Lace curtains? French windows? Wan smoke from my-burned-bridges-cigarette unspools like a reel-to-reel tape. I'm sitting here trying to bargain my way out of sorrow. It came last night through the door I didn't lock. And now it holds its gun against my heart.

*Lynn Emanuel*

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<sup>232</sup> [Lynn Emanuel](#), "[Hard-Boiled Elegy](#)," [New Ohio Review](#), collected in [Transcript of the Disappearance, Exact and Diminishing](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Unoccupied Time

The line at the market  
moved so slowly it's possible  
my vagina shrunk to the size  
of a fingernail.

That's what the tabloid said could happen,  
and I was so suggestible  
I felt it was true.  
I read the whole issue,

which OK wasn't Derrida or  
Cornel West but did give me a few  
ideas, unstoppable rhizomes,  
wolf men, gold rush,

the return of the seventeen-year  
cicada. The sheer life force of a weed  
named hairy bittercress, which flings  
its seeds three feet into the air.

Life force...  
There was a boulder at the foot of the hill,  
which I wanted somehow to haul up to my place.  
The Coptic monks had said yes,

I could have it, but it was so heavy.  
Pure dead weight. Igneous  
or sedimentary, I didn't know.  
I didn't want to die alone.

Kody said he'd borrow a rig  
and once the ground dried out  
he'd tow it to me, where  
did I want it placed,

in the shade by the spruce  
or in full sun? One more thing  
I couldn't decide. Some tombstone.  
Logic said if I was in line

at the 24/7 grocery store then I wasn't  
alone, I was waiting with others,  
the lights would be on, surveillance  
cameras fired up, other people

too must be waiting and breathing,  
like my friend, who was waiting  
for news from the doctor. Without  
ever saying so, each of us had promised

to be there for and after the other's  
death, which defies logic. I wasn't  
going to cry, neither of us were.  
To pass the time, I opened

another tabloid and saw it was  
possible to plant old ginger,  
like the kind I had in my cart,  
I loved ginger, I was buying extra

to ease my friend's nausea. The little eyes  
would sprout. They would regrow and  
rise up and see everything  
heal and form calluses.

*Catherine Barnett*

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<sup>233</sup> Catherine Barnett, "[Unoccupied Time](#)," collected in [Solutions for the Problem of Bodies in Space](#), Graywolf Press

from “The Ideograms”

The train drew my family  
through Rijeka steaming to the embarkation.  
To the Adriatic Sea.  
If you pause long enough the 500 steps of the pilgrimage  
will kneel down to you,  
the highest point in Rijeka.  
The church where my ancestors saw two invisible Spaniards  
riding small donkeys.  
Rijeka was steaming.  
They went to find an umbrella outside a café.  
They never wrote a word of criticism.  
A big ship with monstrous screws waited for them  
in a sea of beer.

*Matthew Rohrer*  
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<sup>234</sup> [Matthew Rohrer](#), “[The Ideograms \[The train drew my family...\]](#),” [Bear Parade](#), collected in [Rise Up](#), [Wave Books](#)

## A Story about the Antichrist

“The opposite of transubstantiation is a yeast infection  
just as the opposite of wine is the grape seed  
born of a grape fuck,” the Antichrist had offered  
to her SAT prep instructor, which is how  
she’d landed in detention now wondering  
whether a Bordeaux or a zin converted more  
readily into platelet and plasma. It must vary  
by vintner and vessel, she thought, carving  
a tiny, upside-down cross into her desk  
with a raw corner of her switchblade comb.  
She’d been itching for a Coors and a long draw  
off the joint in her sock, and she prayed to Christ  
the dean hadn’t ratted her out to the homefolk,  
as if Christ was more than just an idea, but she knew  
Christ was just an idea, and she still thought it was weird  
she’d never read a single elegy for the guy  
except in the way the whole religion is an elegy  
for the guy, which she mostly admired  
for its choral arrangements and galloping pastors,  
for how it kept mistaking epileptics for saints  
or for demons, for its unrepentant gore and the soft  
lighting of the midnight mass at Christmas  
and the blood in its cups and the flesh on its tongues,  
none of which she would change a bit,  
she thought. She’d do it all exactly the same.

*Jaswinder Bolina*  
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<sup>235</sup> [Jaswinder Bolina](#), “[A Story about the Antichrist](#),” [Poetry Northwest](#), collected in [English as a Second Language](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Your Character Is Your Destiny

but I'm driving:  
to where the prairie sulk  
like an ex-husband, pissing  
away his downtime in a day-old  
shave, the permanent arrangement  
this sky moved out on years ago.

You're in my jurisdiction,  
the territory that makes old men  
look older than their unpolished boots;  
where only truckers get by, cranked  
on speedballs and shooting up what passes  
for an incline; where dead-eyed ranch  
dogs drink oil from a roadside pool,

sick in the kind of viscous heat that will  
fuck you without asking, and  
whenever it feels the need.  
You're straight out of my town's  
post office, not the face on  
the flyer but the blank propped up  
behind him. You're the new stoplight,

the red direction from nowhere,  
the signal I want to run.

*Erin Belieu*  
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<sup>236</sup> [Erin Belieu](#), "[Your Character Is Your Destiny](#)," collected in [One Above & One Below](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Eating Cartoons

There were no sirens in the distance, no sound, not even the El. The steel blue that is Donald Duck's hat. Can we drink his hat? Can we drink the dark? What will it taste like? It was then I knew I was in a dream. I was chewing on a piece of a cartoon like it was a smoked turkey leg. I woke up hungry to write this down. I remembered my daughter had woken me up out of sleep. On the nights I work third shift she climbs into bed when she wakes to sleep with her mother. But tonight our daughter returns to bed uncomforted. I want to tell you this poem isn't about my daughter, or her mother, or work, or worrying about our unpaid bills. It isn't about insomnia or the sound of traffic heading off for first shift. It is only about how wonderful it would be if we could eat cartoons. Thin sheets we'd hang on fire escapes between huge tenements like in Hong Kong or Donkey Kong, dry them like hemp, we'd cut and fold to eulogize the living, and let them go through our projector eyes. Can you see them reflecting in my pupils, the television my mother turned on for me as she bent over the big books to study. She has placed a sheet of cartoons in the oven to bake. I can smell the falling anvils are burning. She brought me a bowl of pratfalls. A plate of TNT. She was a young radical law student, then in a city that no longer exists, in another century. I eat the bread of Wile E. Coyote falling off the cliff. A cartoon of cold milk I'd pour like static. Down our open throats they'd go like singing. Each Saturday morning, I tell my disbelieving daughters, was the only time they showed cartoons. I'd sit for hours watching on a 19-inch tv that weighed as much as me, rabbit ears bent to the signal (what are rabbit ears?). I stand to show them on one leg, like some great addled ostrich who has lost its egg, and they are laughing, spitting milk, as I teeter and make the sound of electromagnetic radiation, (the sound they told us in school is the sound of the universe unfolding, the sound of time itself), in a rented house long torn down, in another century. I wish I had turned more from the wise guy talking rabbit, to witness my young mother beside her enormous book pile, in her serene silence, head bent as she turned the pages of tiny words.

*Sean Thomas Dougherty*

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<sup>237</sup> [Sean Thomas Dougherty](#), "[Eating Cartoons](#)," collected in [Death Prefers the Minor Keys](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Memory

The remarkable will live forever  
and the rest of us will fuck around  
endlessly on computers until we are dust,  
says my friend Tony  
from the afterlife.

 $+$ 

Tony, who broke a guy's skull with a pool cue  
then laughed about it,  
wiping blood off his sleeve,  
because that asshole was so drunk  
he never knew  
who hit him—

 $+$ 

Tony, who could recite most of Keats  
and lived in a garage  
and wrote furiously at a novel  
no one would publish—

 $+$ 

You gotta stop fucking around,  
he told me. You got  
a talent, man.  
The bathroom floors were sticky with beer,  
and I looked at my face in the mirror,  
looked into my eye,  
my iris like a stopped fan.

 $+$ 

I loved Tony,  
                who told me I could preserve myself  
in poetry,  
                then drank himself into oblivion.  
Because of him, I've been up late  
typing for thirty years  
                about my fears. For instance,

 $+$ 

my mother called to say she was in the hospital.  
It's nothing, she said. I'll be out in a couple days



$+$  $+$  $+$  $+$ Kevin Prufer  
238

Walking the Flood of Fire Trail in Kimberly, OR

what does green sound like? Grief,  
you never did hear the doxology; in Greek, always  
more fragile than you could know. So, there's  
the missing mountain. Once, there was something;  
to see: me, sliding across the sand  
for the rattle, listen for the sun, look at it:  
"like another world," but it's this one,  
lost in this timid tortoise shell. Here,

under glass perhaps. Dear, but  
dusted, bronze bream, always  
an end in the bend beneath the wall beneath  
a body encased in smoke, broke for you  
like a snake waking to greet the day. Watch  
this book built in painted panes. You say it's  
*over so soon, kiln of the moon*, lot tossed and  
there are three voices: you, me, & some

*Matthew Minicucci*  
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<sup>239</sup> [Matthew Minicucci](#), "[Walking the Flood of Fire Trail in Kimberly, OR](#)," collected in [Dual](#), [Acre Books](#)

## Notes on the Fractures

*after Robert Hass*

My seven-year-old mother climbs a ladder to retrieve a bottle of medicine for the soldier waiting at the counter whose face is covered in cystic acne, a white circle on the dusty shelf where the bottle had been. Each of them has a job they think they are good at.

I could say it is the moment just before "White Christmas" played over Armed Forces Radio. A sheet of newspaper tumbles in the street. A promissory note flies by. Two of my uncles are studying overseas, and neither sends word back about what's to come.

Light, pale white, white, fair, medium, yellow, yellow. Always check with a doctor beforehand. My mail carrier asks if I've had a baby because he's been delivering samples of formula to my door.

Upon returning to the trailhead, we tail a wedding shoot, our dogs scattered in the tall grass, the cameras flash like a globe in the field, mist rolling through cottonwood and lace. I think of their wedding day, where these photos would be framed beside a guest book.

After a frightening suicide threat, I get my brother to talk to someone and he goes on meds. His doctor tells me he's given her permission to share his files with me. The last time we spoke: "My libido is back," he reports. His last email, a year later: "Fuck off." Then: "i don't want therapy (more for you), i don't want medication (you could use some), and i don't want yours or anybody else's help. Oh and in case it doesn't seem obvious, there won't be anymore Skype 'meetings.' if you want though, feel free to find a gif of an Asian person nodding and smiling."

I could say that I was taught to nod and smile, listen and get along. Witnessing is a way of listening, and a way of catching what goes unsaid: a man takes his young sons, leaving his wife and daughters. They wake up in a country to a quiet they don't recognize, dust rising like smoke around bees, smoke without fire.

*Diana Khoi Nguyen*

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<sup>240</sup> Diana Khoi Nguyen, "Notes on the Fractures," collected in [Root Fractures](#), [Scribner Books](#)

## Legacy

*For my father,  
Charles Dunn (1905-1967)*

1.

### The Photograph

My father is in Captain Starns,  
a restaurant in Atlantic City.  
It's 1950,  
I'm there too, eleven years old.  
He sold more Frigidaires

than anyone. That's why we're there,  
everything free.  
It's before the house started  
to whisper, before testimony  
was called for and lives got ruined.

My father is smiling. I'm smiling.  
There's a bowl of shrimp  
in front of us.  
We have identical shirts on,  
short sleeve with little sailboats.  
It's before a difference set in

between corniness and happiness.  
Soon I'll get up  
and my brother will sit next to him.  
Mother will click the shutter.  
We believe in fairness,

we still believe America  
is a prayer, an anthem.  
Though his hair is receding  
my father's face says nothing  
can stop him.

2.

### The Secret

When Mother asked him  
where the savings went, he said  
"the track" and became lost  
in his own house, the wastrel,  
my mother and her mother  
doling out money to him  
the rest of his life.

I was sixteen when he told me  
the truth, making me his private son,  
making anger the emotion  
I still have to think about.  
I see now that chivalric code  
held like a child's song

in the sanctum of his decency,  
the error that led to error,  
the eventual blur of it all.  
And so many nights in the livingroom  
the pages of a newspaper being turned

and his sound—scotch over ice  
in a large glass—how conspicuous  
he must have felt,  
his best gesture gone wrong,  
history changed, the days going on and on.

3.

### The Family

The family I was part of  
was always extended, grandfather  
and grandmother on my mother's side  
living with us, and grandfather  
with a mistress only my father

knew about, beautiful supposedly  
and poor. When she began to die  
and wouldn't die fast,  
when money became love's test,  
grandfather had no one

to turn to except my father  
who gave him everything.  
It was a pact between men,  
a handshake and a secret,  
then the country turned

to war and all other debts  
must have seemed just personal.  
Every night the two of them  
huddled by the radio waiting for news  
of the clear, identifiable enemy.

4.

### The Silence

My father became a salesman  
heavy with silence.  
When he spoke he was charming,  
allowed everyone to enjoy  
not knowing him.

Nights he'd come home drunk  
mother would cook his food  
and there'd be silence.  
Thus, for years, I thought  
all arguments were silent  
and this is why silence  
is what I arm myself with  
and silence is what I hate.

Sleep for him was broken speech,  
exclamations, the day come back.  
Sleep was the surprise  
he'd wake up from, on the couch,  
still in his clothes.

I carry silence with me  
the way others carry snapshots  
of loved ones. I offer it  
and wait for a response.

5.

#### The Visitation

At the airport, on my way to Spain,  
he shook my hand too hard,  
said goodbye too long.

I spent his funeral in a room  
in Cadiz, too poor to fly back  
and paying for what I couldn't afford.

The night he died, the night before  
the telegram arrived,  
something thumped all night

on the flat roof.  
It was my father, I think,  
come to be let in.

I was in another country,  
living on savings. It must have seemed  
like heaven to him.

*Stephen Dunn*

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<sup>241</sup> [Stephen Dunn](#), "[Legacy](#)," [The Missouri Review](#), collected in [Not Dancing](#), [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

Origin Story (with Frank O'Hara)

*How it begins:*

Easily. Jane said, "Meet me in the park /  
if you love me." And I boarded that jet, a jade  
bracelet binding paper flowers, no longer bound  
to any man. For seven hours bodies  
below curved and curled against  
each other: hills, hills. Craters, rivers,  
lake shores in lush lines. Crop circles  
kissing water wheels, dunes enveloping dunes  
in a soft chain across the continent. And the earth's  
pliable sinuosity where the plane landed:  
I went straight to Golden Gate Park and sat  
near the Japanese Tea Garden, the pagodas  
a perfect backdrop for her entrance.

∞

*How it was:*

An afternoon, all of us crafting our art.  
I said to my husband: "Meet me in the park /  
if you love me." And he did. Same as always:  
bandstand, mouth full of tombstones,  
a jagged granite smile, ghosts of martyred Quakers  
skimming the Frog Pond. The Boston Common  
was very common. But still, there's something  
to be said for Galatea and Acis' eternal love spitting  
from Brewer Fountain. Even if Acis  
was crushed by a boulder in the end.  
I said *meet me* and he did.

∞

*How it is:*

In one of the cities I walk  
past the Dairy Bar and the public library,  
its seven windows awash in obsolescence  
and paper fliers. Then into Maurice's  
Fine Chocolates to buy a balsamic  
for Timothy, a Mexican spice for Kara.  
Out front I spy a sparrow importing  
toxins from one neighborhood  
to the next—wire, skin, metallic stems. A paper  
scrap, and scrawled across its dirty creases:  
"Meet me in the park / if you love me."  
Suddenly we were millions  
upon millions breathing this air  
but not a one of us could answer  
which park? what kind of love?



*How it begins:*

Frank O'Hara listens to Prokofiev surrounded  
 by sheets of paper, tea cups and scotch  
 in Norman Bluhm's studio on Park Avenue South.  
 On one of the sheets Bluhm splats black, illustrating  
 the opening theme's pizzicato strings. But the poet writes  
 through this splashy gesture: "meet me in the park /  
 if you love me." Again the painter blots black  
 across a sheet of paper. The poet writes "apples /  
 light / fires / dances." Point and counter point,  
 each moves in their own medium. Paper after paper  
 tacked on the studio walls, the poet prints  
 through the paint "this is the first person / I ever  
 went to bed / with." The painter smears gouache over  
 "Help! I am alive!" and twenty-six sheets later  
 the sonata stops. The two men look  
 out the window, down to the park below,  
 and no one is coming.

*Tana Jean Welch*

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<sup>242</sup> [Tana Jean Welch](#), "[Origin Story \(with Frank O'Hara\)](#)," [subtropics](#), collected in [In Parachutes Descending](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## The Deposition

1.

I get to school early, take down the crucifix.  
There's one in every campus room. I lift it  
gently from its hook, push it into the AV desk  
among paper clips and wires. Or stand it  
on a high sill, turn Jesus to look at the rain.  
Or under the flap you lift to adjust the thermostat  
where he vibrates a little when the heat turns off.  
I like Jesus fine, just not when he's being tortured.  
Every day somebody rehangs him  
beside the whiteboard, I don't know who. It's like  
I'm playing a game at a distance  
like Words With Friends against people I haven't met.  
Lately my life's been so stupid and harried  
I've been doing the prompts I give my class.

*Prompt: Dramatic monologue from the perspective of someone talking about their work.  
Let it comment on something from your day.*

### *My Maquettes*

My money job is making models for mass production:  
cat with tiara, Hobbit, Harriet Tubman, polar bear on ice floe.  
I'm doing a crucifix series, Jesus sagging  
on the cross, red gash to be painted in his side,  
he looks like a diving trophy figure  
wrung off his base. Loincloth in place of a Speedo,  
crown of thorns, not swim cap.  
I tried to make his eyes pained.  
I made the stigmata with my smallest hook.  
The Augustinian college ordered three dozen.  
A dozen more for the seminary.  
They needed a new look since the scandal.

I hunch on a high stool at a pedestal  
topped by a wheel like a lazy Susan  
on which I build, rotating it  
to shape a finger or bevel an edge, cigarillo jutting  
from my lips, getting smoke up my nose, magnifying specs  
clipped to my face the better to see details.  
Picky work, makes my neck and shoulders hurt.

When I have a minute off, I draw sculptures  
I wish I could build, things requiring  
sledgehammer and fire. Requiring courage  
and desire. So beautiful  
this pod in my head of welded steel

I sketch it, sketch ten.  
Half egg, half chrysalis, what they give life to.  
Then ten I-beams requiring cranes to lift and lean them  
cantilevered, on an enormous pile of iron shavings.  
A monstrous nest. Ten mothers  
looking for sons, for daughters.

I save the drawings.  
Some so delicate you can hardly see them.  
Someday I'll have a show, 4×6, postcard size,  
"All My Failures."

I touch and drip the sketches with colors  
you find in the scum of a woodland pool,  
in the iridescence of a pigeon ruff,  
in the edible flower salad  
under plastic wrap at the organic co-op.

Selecting my pencils carefully, making notes  
for scale and dimension  
calibrated with prissy precision, even calculating costs...  
Then I put them away, go back to my Jesuses, my maquettes.

2.

Wet weather, students enter shutting up umbrellas  
with exhaling snaps, wrestle out of diaphanous  
ponchos, none more drenched than Dave the ROTC boy  
in his drab cammies because Thursday is muster day,  
or whatever you call it, rain or shine. Watching the students  
is to watch for breaks in dispassion. Little blue gaps  
appear in their cloud cover. The girls are wary  
and ready to be praised, pleased the way girls can be  
pleased and wary of motherly women not their mothers.  
The boys are comfortable, condescending, chummy.  
"Have you got your brackets ready?" asks ROTC Dave  
in NCAA season, genuinely surprised when I say  
I do. "Professor! Did you have a good weekend?  
Is your husband doing better?" That's Laney,  
shrugging out of her blazer, the only black kid  
in the class, possibly the whole school,  
and she always remembers to ask. She's the best writer.  
Wilson, from China, unzips his motorcycle jacket.  
"Over the weekend I read Faulkner," he says.  
"I think. He's even better than Kerouac?"  
He's read more American fiction than me  
and all my other students together, but can't  
write in English. (I grade him on interest.)  
Caitlyn from Brooklyn sleeps morosely by the window  
in her black lipstick, chthulu-print leggings  
and cold-shoulder pirate blouse. I wonder how

she got here where the students are dutiful, kind,  
bland, mostly rich and Roman Catholic.  
Sometimes they *almost* catch me hiding Jesus.  
Sometimes they catch me. They think I'm funny?  
Or think they're supposed to think I'm funny.  
They don't say who it is putting him back up.  
They advise each other: "Don't take theology—" required course—"with a priest. You won't learn anything." They mostly wear tiny crosses.  
A small commotion in the corner.  
"Am I going to have to separate you two?"  
Frank Jr. and Talia, white kids from several earlier immigrant groups. Him: "She stole my banana"  
Me, automatic: "Well that's symbolic."  
I don't *think* I'll hear about it from the Title IX office.

*Prompt: I remember. Present tense.*

*Mr Fisher*

Eighth grade,  
I have crazy Mr Fisher for science.  
Maybe he's just bored.  
Boys are harmed all kinds of ways.

He puts one foot on a chair,  
rolls his pants leg, shows his varicose veins.  
*This one, he says, is Mekong Delta.*

Brown polyester stretches across his shoulders.  
A few sandy strands combed  
over his flaking scalp.

A great teacher, he hardly teaches.  
He tells stories of boys he grew up with.  
One, one time, snuck onto a farm,  
stole twelve ducks, dug a shallow trench  
and buried them up to their necks.

*Then, says Mr. Fisher, twisting  
his chubby body to demonstrate,  
he took a golf club to every duck head,  
whack, whack, whack, down the row.*

It's in the 80s. The forests  
are dying from acid rain.

3.

Today I'm talking about how "metaphor  
is like cosplay, like putting on a pressed uniform

or tailored skirt, to sally forth in the world  
 or in your heart, and feel according to the forms,  
 also beyond the forms. Say a girl's sneaks—"

I look at a girl—she looks back—"are untied and gaping.  
 Well you could compare them to a dog in July  
 with its tongue hanging out, his drool stretching  
 from his teeth to the porch planks. So now you have  
 a pair of, say, Air Force 1s superimposed on  
 or merging incompletely with a memory  
 of the scary mastiff that growled at you  
 from the neighbor's porch then got up as if  
 to come for you that one time you felt your mother  
 truly protected you otherwise it was always  
 just you and your feet stung as you ran home."

I'm overdoing it. Feet in fancy sneaks  
 don't sting slapping the pavement. "I mean  
 seems like metaphor could help us feel again.  
 I mean maybe you don't feel that way,  
 maybe it's just me experiencing pity fatigue."

They look back, waiting.  
 My hands are made of desk they rest on. I lift  
 the lid a little, lift them away from Jesus.

*Prompt: Describe a public scene from memory  
 using simile and metaphor.  
 Which type of figure works best and why?*

### *Life is So Good Here*

Barbecue smell drifts from over the river.  
 Too much lighter fluid splashed in the pouring.  
 Flares of sudden fire. Parkland.  
 Given: a family. Dad home on leave. The kids lead him  
 by the hand, showing him off, he's theirs. And Mom  
 fully reclined on the blanket, angers and anxieties  
 pushed aside, even evaporated. Brief oasis  
 of self. On her shoulders  
 lotion makes windows of sheen.  
 Gluts of garbage blowing around,  
 a subtle stink in the weeds.  
 The happiness of that other family.  
 That time in the Atlanta airport, all the soldiers  
 in their desert combat fatigues, deploying,  
 redeploying, loping along in their big boots stuck out front  
 like clown shoes, like goose feet, down the concourse.  
 The man on the loudspeaker asking us to stand  
 and applaud for our heroes;  
 me frozen trying to think out what,  
 if I clapped, I'd be clapping for.  
 A woman with a collapsed face,  
 to the soldier nearest the gate,

*Thank you for your sacrifice. My family is a military family.*

He, sullen, blank, bored...

The faces of the other passengers formatted to show  
they understand everything.

Which looks like happiness.

And what happened to us.

Goose gangs loiter, obstructing the bike path,  
pumping their neck pipes.

There's all the food thrown by the picnickers  
and left by the picnickers

and all the food the river brings

with its floods and slithers of algae.

Life is so good here. The geese never fly south.

4.

The students I'm talking at might be listening.

ROTC Dave bangs his chair legs down.

He pulls his pant legs out of his boots, wrings the hems.

He unlaces: his socks are sopping. "These army issue  
boots are shit. They're supposed to be waterproof."

He fiddles with hooks, gusset. "I can't do this."

I don't know what it is he can't do; what I can't do

is work the tech to run the video I want to show,

a reading of the poem with the girl burning

that's nothing more than a list of similes that escalate  
till the girl's reformed as beast and dead and wind.

Helpfully ROTC Dave jumps up to link up  
the connection, sees Jesus under the auxiliary,

pulls him out, looks at me, puts him back

where I left him. "There you go," he says.

Video light softens the room. The students  
make no comment; no one has told them what  
is okay to say. To the shuffling that crescendos  
at dismissal like windsong ruffling underbrush  
as if wind is fire and fawns and bunnies

are running away, but losing my mind a little,

I tell the story of a boy I met who enlisted

at the height of the Iraq War, then came home  
a year later with no legs, one hand, three fingers

of that one gone in the explosion. (More recently

I heard he married, has a career he likes, a family,

like a TV special, uplift for the win. Feeling's a trinket.)

I say, "His body flew up. The wreckage and smoke  
and flames and pieces of his body

engulfed him. It was like a god that didn't exist

was giving a shiny red star to the world."

They look at me worried, kind of a mirror,

waiting for assignment, for me to say "you can go."

Or "I'll be interested to see what you do."  
Nothing. But they go. Out into the rain they go.

*Take-home assignment: Write about a life change; no punctuation. Employ metaphor.  
Address it to a "you." Break at least one rule at least once in the poem.*

I always loved the stratagems the solidarity  
of those nights before we got all the A.C. window units  
in all the rooms and before her  
it was you and me  
the weather too hot to bear and you pushed  
the misery forward into something that could be remembered  
with a grim fondness *lets just go sleep on the floor*  
*in the living room it's cooler there lets just suck*  
*on some ice till our bodies take the cool here*  
*rub some on your wrists let me run*  
*this ice down your body*

*too hot to sleep* our girl says  
crawling into bed with us I say *did you try leaving your door*  
*open I can't* she says *the cat will sit on the mesh top*  
*of the terrarium he'll sit on it break it then*  
*my snake will escape crawling out the gaps again*

well the other thing she says about the snake is  
when she holds it  
it crawls from hand to hand trying to escape trying  
to get back into the substrate and hidey-holes  
*it's like holding* she says *a liquid*  
*it's like holding a liquid* she says again  
then nestles her curly head into my neck and shoulder  
and it's easy to fall asleep that way and wake  
to birdsound just there sullen and banal  
in the leafy branches rubbing at  
the window let me in  
as I keep rolling the gems, blue red purple,  
hand to hand to hand  
*what gems* you say *where did they come from*

Nowhere. That's all. Nowhere.

Daisy Fried  
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## This Is All True

If your foot dangles off the edge of the bed, a metal blade rises from the floor and slices it off. The blade has already been installed in the floor. How do you know you haven't murdered someone accidentally? Look directly at the sun. Touch your eyeball once a day. Bite a hole in your cheek. Run to bed and lie perfectly still beneath the quilt before the toilet stops flushing. Something will happen if you don't. Press your fingers to your palm in a particular order. Don't blink while looking at something upsetting, like knives or illness or graves. Blinking seven times memorizes the faces of the people you love. This knock on the door is the police coming to take you away. Everything can be taken away in a blink. This could be your last day of freedom.

*Cynthia Marie Hoffman*

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<sup>244</sup> [Cynthia Marie Hoffman](#), "[This Is All True](#)," [Superstition Review](#), collected in [Exploding Head](#), [Persea Books](#)



Diary Entry #13: Being Sick is a Romantic Idea

It was the summer of pain, summer  
of becoming the rhythm  
of spasms down my cervical spine,  
calling it a reunion of ache. I remember  
the unbuttoned shirt felt like a grave,  
and the grave like practicing the Bible  
in a basement, or like being Achilles  
in reverse. I was strong  
from the ankles down, from my shallow  
baptism in the Atlantic. As a child,  
I'd heard a story about an angel so beautiful  
she was evicted from heaven by the others,  
made to live out her days trapped in flesh,  
confined to a hospital bed. I'd like to pretend  
God called on the phone every day—  
a worried Father—or perhaps  
disguised as a nurse, brought her water  
and pills. To say I'm not afraid of dying  
is to admit I want to be stared at  
like something to lose. I thought I could  
leave with the dignity any breaking woman  
would want. I haven't been sleeping,  
or walking, or kissing the people that I love.  
Sometimes my lips will graze an ear,  
a freshly shaved neck.

*Diannely Antigua*  
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<sup>245</sup> [Diannely Antigua](#), "[Diary Entry #13: Being Sick is a Romantic Idea](#)," [The Cortland Review](#), collected in [Good Monster](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Sugar

What was the name of that  
bar was it really the Sugar  
Club is it still there who were  
we with running in from the cold  
and wind and you could still  
smoke in bars then you could  
still go home with six cartons  
of smoke in your hair we all  
had hair for days then our  
hands got lost in it and our faces  
and how crowded the bar was  
and hot too and I liked running and  
being useful and you and ran back  
to the blue Chevy Nova to stash  
our coats in the trunk and ran  
back and “Lush Life” was playing  
and Bowie and yelling to be  
heard and the lights in the bar  
flashing because that part  
of the night was ending and out  
we went to the street it was Hoboken  
it was 1983 right before Christmas  
and I turned left and everybody  
else went in the other direction and  
this way you said and I said no  
no I ought to know I’m the one  
who ran back to the car with all  
our coats and the key and who  
could have guessed what are  
the odds that it was somebody  
else’s car our key unlocked and  
that blue Nova was long gone  
to Teaneck or Long Branch or  
Secaucus and we looked and  
looked in the empty dark of our  
car’s trunk it was like looking  
for gold at the 7-Eleven and  
someone said how stupid could  
you be and it wasn’t a question and  
one of us couldn’t stop crying knowing  
someone had her yellow coat and  
maybe her whole life to come and  
what are the odds forty summers  
later here we are on a hilltop in Italy  
and you tell the story but in this  
version it’s you and your pals  
from high school in Maplewood  
Joey and Emma and Gabe and

what's-his-name and as it happens it  
happened before I ever knew you  
you say so I was never there  
and the name of the place  
was Sugar Reef on Second Avenue  
in the city not in Hoboken and  
down there in the dusk of the valley  
lights are coming on and above  
us swallows and clouds like  
threads from a jacket unravelling  
and from some hidden speaker  
Lady Day is singing *Sugar*  
*I never maybe my sugar—*  
*maybe* as an action item—  
imagine—and if I never was  
here please please don't tell me

*Andrea Cohen*  
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<sup>246</sup> [Andrea Cohen](#), "[Sugar](#)," [The New Yorker](#)

## Hotel Simic

At the edge of a village  
Bloodied by the setting sun,  
A dive with dim lights  
And middle-aged waitress.  
The kisses she blows to us  
Are as cold as prison walls.  
Here then are the small  
Beads of rain rapping  
Against the windowpane  
The day your grandmother  
Died. To pass the time, I  
Played a teentsy fiddle  
Using one of my love's long  
Black eyelashes as a bow.  
My future is my past,  
The scratchy record sang.  
Till the clock coughed up  
Its first drop of blood.  
A hundred horror films  
Are crammed in my head.  
The undeveloped film  
Of the few clear moments  
Of our blurred lives. The  
Fleeting moments know  
No care, as they go around  
Collecting memories that  
Do not belong to them.  
That's what the leaves are  
All upset about tonight.

*David Trinidad*  
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<sup>247</sup> [David Trinidad](#), "[Hotel Simic](#)," [Action Spectacle](#)

## What She Thought

*What's poetry? Is it the fruits and vegetables and  
marketplace of Campo dei Fiori, or  
the statue of the martyr there?*

*[ . . . ] The truth  
is both, it's both I said.*

—Heather McHugh, "What He Thought"

But if this is an idea of truth as inclusive,  
it's bigger than both marketplace and statue—  
it has to be at least as big as the billboard  
towering over both of them: don't ask me  
what it's selling: there's a sexy, tight-skirted  
ass being grabbed by the right hand of a life-size  
wooden dummy the woman is carrying  
(with surprising lightness) under her left arm,  
his eyeless head peering around her hip  
(her head, of course, is cropped out of the frame).  
I don't know if it is an Italian  
habit to see this or to ignore this, but I  
fixate on the way the dummy's fingers  
individually press, like Pluto's in Bernini's  
"Rape of Proserpine," into her right  
buttock. But more than that, it's poetry  
in the *trompe l'oeil* billboard framing this one,  
mimicking the real facade behind it:  
ochre stucco, gray shutters, cream-colored trim—  
and from three *trompe l'oeil* windows, rainbow  
PACE flags hang down, just like the ones  
on adjacent buildings, except that these  
don't flutter in the wind. And if something  
smells a bit fishy here, it's because the best  
view is from this corner of the market  
where the fishseller's large brown hand is gutting  
the white belly of an enormous fish,  
then tossing it into a bin. I'm close enough  
to hear the knife crick-cracking its way through  
the next fish, to see his left hand up in under  
the gills, the white "flesh / packed in like feathers"  
(not unlike the Madonna del Parto, by Piero  
della Francesca, the way the neat white seams  
in the front of her dress are beginning to pull apart).  
He heaves that fish into the bin as well.  
Elaine Scarry says that beauty prompts a copy  
of itself, that generation is unceasing:  
when the eye sees someone beautiful, the whole body  
wants to reproduce the person, to do  
justice to the seen. Directly under  
the dummy billboard, there's a booth where one  
can buy peace flags, along with diverse aprons

advertising fourteen shapes of pasta,  
kinds of cheese, Italian wines, or featuring  
*trompe l'oeil* torsos: nearly naked except  
for black lace lingerie and garter belt,  
or else full-frontal David. We're the species  
that copies things because we love a joke.  
We love the way a joke holds out the idea  
of how things ought to be and *uses* that against us.  
(One has to think the first joke went like this:  
God made us in his image.) At the moment  
everything in the Campo seems to tremble  
with the heat, activity, and too many visual  
rhymes, games, silly questions—because we are  
the species always asking questions, just  
to try them out—I have to remember what  
I came for: tomatoes. *Pomodori*.  
And my vegetable guy knows, without my asking,  
to add the usual *due foglie di basilico*.  
What's meaning? What's meaningful? Silly, but then  
I'm thinking about the relationship (*folie à deux*),  
between those leaves of basil and a basilica,  
and then I'm remembering that “silly,”  
because it takes us past the bounds of reason,  
comes from “*Seele*,” comes from the word for soul.

Jennifer Clarvoe  
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<sup>248</sup> Jennifer Clarvoe, “[What She Thought](#),” [Southwest Review](#), collected in [Counter-Amores](#), The University of Chicago Press

Sandtown-Winchester, or We Built Another World

Sian's taking two klonopin  
so she can quit flipping  
and face our friends. But the white,  
white asteroid is crashing,  
black fossil fire like a crowd  
making way. You never heard  
such silence. Satellites explode  
like harbor lights, busses grinding  
their gears through car alarms  
all over town. Sian says, Here comes  
midnight with the dead moon  
in its jaws. I wish I didn't love her  
or loved her much more. She has no idea  
how hard I try to eat her cooking.  
We take our heads down  
off the shelf, and ride elevators  
into the earth and space  
sickness; seal the doors, hope  
for warm bodies. Barricaded  
because we could live, we could  
live compartmented for a year,  
then more. First thing on our  
emergence action list, secure  
the lines, tour the debris,  
the stray dogs, find a pharmacy.

*Adam Day*  
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<sup>249</sup> Adam Day, "[Sandtown-Winchester, or We Built Another World](#)," *The Adroit Journal*

## the psychological hour

The man who had assumed I was Japanese walked out with his sake after thanking me in Korean: that much was ominous. Then I rang up a man who didn't want a paper bag for his bottle of wine: *let's save the trees*, he said. *Those trees are already pretty dead*, I said. *Whatever*, he said, clutching his Sancerre by the throat. *Have a good night*, I said. I thought I understood irony. Then I worked in retail. I rang up an old bespectacled man on crutches who wanted to tell me about his close female friend—*practically my daughter*, I call her *my daughter*, he said—who was Chinese. I didn't have to ask him why he was telling me. It was ordinary. It was plain. It was plain to see that he thought it was plain to see from. The nose on my face. My face. The planes of. The angles of. My eyes. *Les yeux les yeux les yeux*. I held the door so he wouldn't trip and break his hip. *See you next time*, Arthur, I said, and handed him his cheap Bourdeaux. Next I rang up a French grad student who paid with a Tupperware full of 5 pennies, 77 nickels, 83 dimes, and 65 quarters, all of which I had to count; all of which I would have to count again when I closed the register for the night. *Keep the change*, he said. *Thanks*, I said. Sarcasm is from Greek to gnaw to tear to bite at your lips with rage: a mouth that eats itself. To consume to replace your flesh with the meat of anger. Blood-lipped & verdigris-fingered I rang up a man who was seven feet tall and I resolved to buy a new bottle of dandruff shampoo. I took care not to scratch my head as I rang up a man who said *wow, every time I'm here you're always crushing the books*. (I'd just finished reading *Edinburgh*.) I rang up a man who asked me about myself and then said: *well, my favorite poet is Ezra Pound*. I didn't say I think of Pound as Nebuchadnezzar crawling around gnawing on leaves of grass I didn't say I think of him in a cage with mud under his fingernails grass stains on his teeth grass stains around his mouth grass foam flecks flying as he mutters into a grass shit-stained microphone the Jew the Jew the Jew I did not say in every poetry workshop there is a white man whose favorite poet is Pound and it is always a white man in the workshop whose favorite poet is Pound and a white man whose favorite poet is Pound will always tell you in the workshop that his favorite poet is Pound and a white man whose favorite poet is Pound is a white man whose favorite poet is Pound is a white man whose favorite poet is Pound and the white man whose favorite poet is Pound will always try to talk over you in the workshop and he never has anything useful to say because he fundamentally doesn't believe that anybody else who is not a white man whose favorite poet is Pound has read anything of worth i.e. Pound but nevertheless I like a sestina a villanelle a half-gross of line breaks and I like the way he howls when he reads a canto like Hecuba on a shipwreck beach—instead I said *which of his works do you like the best* and he said “In a Station of the Metro” like I knew he was going to say and I said *petals on a wet, black bough* and handed him his six pack of dry-hopped cranberry gose. I rang up a regular customer who, with one pale well-moisturized red-nailed hand, turned my copy of *Edinburgh* around so she could look at the cover. She didn't ask for permission. She didn't say anything. I rang up a new customer who asked me about the book that I was reading (*Shadow-Feast*) and then when I told her what I was reading said, *oh. I wasn't expecting poetry*. By this time, I must admit, I was running low on patience. *Why not*, I asked. I looked her in the eye. *Well*, she began. Her eyes were very blue. She stopped. Adjusted. Gathered her thoughts. Her eyes flicked up, down. *Well. I guess. I didn't—I mean, I don't—expect poetry from—anyone? You know what I mean?*—I did.

Sam Cha

250

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<sup>250</sup> Sam Cha, “the psychological hour,” collected in *The Yellow Book*, PANK



## War

He comes back reciting the poetry of war. Not that crap from high school, those stupid roads diverging. The real poetry of war. It recites itself to him, and he recites it back.

He'd like to give a rat's ass about the night school teachers and bartenders his wife has been sleeping with. He'd like to get all riled up and crash his new pickup. But he's busy listening to the poetry of war, which nobody else can hear.

His mother just sucks it up and cooks. His father is fucking hopeless. Crying when those busses pulled up to the Ramada two years ago, and now Dad's—what's that word?—baffled. Yeah. Fuck.

Then one day at the mall, there's this girl at the Hospitality Desk. Plain. Staring at a book maybe because everybody knows where The Gap Outlet is, and half the other stores are closed.

And he manages to put together a sentence. "What are you reading?"

"Something," she says, "sufficiently sordid to keep me from falling asleep."

*Sufficiently sordid.* Even the poetry of war stopped to listen.

Her nametag said "Ivy" and he knew, from a life before this one, how Ivy could, in time, bring down any wall.

"Is that your real name?" he asks.

"What happened to your face?" she answers.

*Ron Koertge*  
251

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<sup>251</sup> Ron Koertge, "War," collected in [Sex World](#), Red Hen Press

## Rhapsody

No one says it  
anymore, *my darling*,  
not to the green leaves  
in March, not to the stars  
backing up each night, certainly  
not in the nest  
of rapture, who  
in the beginning was  
an owl, rustling  
just after silence, whose  
very presence drew  
a mob of birds—flickers,  
finches, chickadees, five cardinals  
to a tree—the way a word  
excites its meanings. *Who  
cooks for you*, it calls. *Who looks  
for you?* Sheaf of feathers, chief  
of bone. The owl stands  
upon the branch, but does he  
understand it, think *my revel*,  
*my banquet*, *my tumult*,  
*delight?* The Irish have a word  
for what can't be  
replaced: *mavourneen*, *my  
darling*, second cousin once  
removed of memory, *what is not  
forgotten*, as truth was  
defined by the Greeks.  
It's the names  
on the stones in the cemetery  
that ring out like rungs  
on a ladder or the past  
tense of bells: Nathaniel Joy,  
Elizabeth Joy, Amos  
Joy and Wilder Joy,  
and it all comes down  
to the conclusion  
of the cardinal: *pretty, pretty, pretty  
pretty*—but pretty what?  
In her strip search  
of scripture, St. Teresa  
was seized, *my darling*, rapt  
amid the chatter  
and flutter of well-coifed  
words, the owl  
in the shagbark hickory,  
and all the attending dangers  
like physicians

of the heard.

*Angie Estes*  
252

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<sup>252</sup> [Angie Estes](#), "[Rhapsody](#)," *FIELD*, collected in [Voice-Over](#), [Oberlin College Press](#)

Variations: Thorn Apple

Priam looking down from the city wall,  
Echo near the pool, Charles Bovary,  
Anna Karenina standing by the track,  
or the one who survives, rescued from the bridge,  
the poor selling fake flowers on the street,  
and on the stage, the frozen prodigy  
or the brilliant mind that stutters when it speaks,  
the woman who sleeps with the snapshot of her dead child,  
the daughter whose father cherishes his girl  
like the deer whose head is mounted on the wall

*Ellen Bryant Voigt*  
253

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<sup>253</sup> [Ellen Bryant Voigt](#), "[Variations: Thorn Apple](#)," collected in [Two Trees](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## Meditation near an Air Mattress

The postcards at O'Hare  
kind of blow so I take  
a plane south for the lime  
green palm trees the pearly  
shells raise a little hell let  
my hair divorce its part an  
art I think being a mother  
the secretions slash many-  
eyed rooms slash snap  
snicker pop my husband  
on the stoop with a pillbox  
me locked in the attic with  
a laptop here the speaker  
identifies a lack in herself  
here the speaker correlates  
matriculation with mentos  
here the speaker posits  
the polyp as benign here  
she pitches a better life shaft  
of light through the window  
miser turned gold my mother  
says ask for forgiveness not  
permission which maybe she  
told my daughter ashes on  
an old orange couch remember  
when we worried about falling  
asleep in bed with a cigarette  
those were the fucking days it  
is dangerous to smoke in bed  
some wise person would say ha  
ha an orange fox no a brown  
one jumping over a lazy red  
dog my uncle's tailpipe the  
little hole where the push  
pin went through the death  
certificate this document  
certifies that X once lived this  
document certifies that X has  
passed this document is a  
blush-colored urn this document  
has no postage if an abnormal  
antelope eats an abnormal  
cantaloupe if the scan shows  
no abnormalities Iris texts me  
a question and I can't tell if  
it is a question or a joke is it  
a question or a joke the sherbet  
floats in a bowl we all stand

around kicking the dirt and  
talking about what a good  
heart so and so had a good  
heart what must be relegated  
and or regulated I remember  
Hillary's mother didn't want to  
die because she didn't want them  
to weigh her that scale the final  
number typed in by a stranger

*Nicole Callihan*  
254

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<sup>254</sup> [Nicole Callihan](#), "[Meditation near an Air Mattress](#)," [The Indianapolis Review](#)

## Winter Inversion

*Salt Lake City*

All winter, the air is at  
record-breaking levels  
of toxicity; announcers

warn not to go out into  
the red days. Seagulls  
displaced from coastal

cities cry *poison* over  
the desert planes. We  
pretend not to live

where we do, that we  
don't turn away from  
each other with regret.

I try to avoid breathing  
in your scent. Long ago,  
glaciers carved this valley,

then melted away  
into sand. The change  
was torture, and now

the stunned hills shudder,  
go white. You see, it's not  
a simple mimesis: memory

for landscape. It's the silence,  
the smog, my skin blazing  
for you like a lamp at the end

of a wharf where an ocean  
never was, or was so long  
past it doesn't matter.

I can't stand it anymore.  
At night, when I walk out,  
I feel the crush of shells

beneath my feet—mollusks  
fooled by the cool, wet air,  
so at first I think I've arrived

at a shore, then I see how  
I've murdered what would  
have delighted me: how they

must have shone in the dark,  
reaching out their antennae  
before them, blind and gleaming.

I find no pearls within  
their ruined flesh. I know  
that you will never touch me.

*Danielle Cadena Deulen*  
255

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<sup>255</sup> [Danielle Cadena Deulen](#), "[Winter Inversion](#)," [The Journal](#), collected in [Our Emotions Get Carried Away Beyond Us](#), [Barrow Street Press](#)



## Prosody

Acacia honey from Hungary is considered  
the finest in the known world  
and I want to pass this knowledge on to you  
before I die tomorrow.  
I do not know why birds have wings,  
why people lose their legs  
and have glistening, interesting stumps instead,  
nor do I know why when objects are dropped  
we say *oh god* in such an elongated fashion  
the seas could fill; I never knew anything  
deeply emerald though I dreamt of it,  
and there is no known reason for my swelling heart  
which is ill, the thing that is killing me  
is very small and has no eyes to see at all,  
I don't know why that rhymed, but out of the mouths  
of physicians come rubber bands—  
if you knew me, I think you would like me, I am  
in the laundromat reading Hedda Gabler and eating  
caviar, the infidelity of riches is within my reach  
and everything else beyond me—  
I wish there were a small battle I might lead.  
An army of soft animals diving into the pillows  
of individuals who have had no recent history  
of loss—they would be nimble, under my command!  
Alas I know nothing; sorry I am, but go to Hungary,  
there there is a bush and from it the bees  
make the real thing.

Mary Ruefle  
256

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<sup>256</sup> [Mary Ruefle](#), "[Prosody](#)," collected in *Indeed I Was Pleased with the World*, [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

## Pop Song

I met my father again in a video store by the creamery,  
in a record store on my lunch break, in a museum whisper booth,  
in Washington Square performing with a Beatles cover band,  
and he said to me, Di, he said, you're not what I expected,

like an online date who doesn't think you measure up  
to the photograph. I think he meant I turned out differently  
than he imagined when I was three and I'd already learned  
to read the newspaper. Di, he said, and I saw in his face,

well, what father would want me for a daughter?  
It was as if God looked upon creation and wondered  
at its atrocities. How, God thinks, could I  
have fucked up so badly, but keeps it to himself.

Di, my father said, we were in the lamb barn of a county fair.  
The lambs' fleece was matted. They bleated piteously.  
My father hadn't aged a day, black hair combed into a wave  
in the front you could lose yourself in. Children are known

to accept their parents' hairstyles without question, no basis,  
yet, to judge. I'm not sure he was glad to see me. To a dead man,  
a living adult daughter must be such an overwhelm, a real load,  
and from death he had learned to prefer simplicity, the ephemera

of steam rising from a cup, birds, but he didn't care what kind  
of birds. He was wearing a humble but clean shirt. He wanted,  
I believe, to keep it that way. I was like a cake  
with too many ingredients that had overflowed its pan, spilled

into the oven, and smoldered there. Di, he said.  
I could tell he had a mint lozenge in his mouth.  
One of those that winnows but never really goes away.  
It wasn't a sheep barn after all,

where we met up, it was a diner, and he did a spin  
on his stool at the counter as if to entertain me, as fathers  
are apt to do, or so I've been told. It's too late for me  
to be beautiful, I said, the ruin too vast,

for I assumed he wanted beauty. Don't fathers want beauty  
from their daughters? How ashamed  
he was at my exploits. A nuanced man had lost, in death,  
all nuance. In fact, the dead don't love the living.

Like Jesus, they judge us.  
Di, was all he said. Nice to see you.

*Diane Seuss*

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<sup>257</sup> [Diane Seuss](#), "[Pop Song](#)," [The Adirondack Review](#), collected in [Modern Poetry](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

## Therapy

My brother's in the house. I close my door.  
He's in the kitchen. Bottles, knives. He breaks the lock,  
drags me by one arm across the floor.  
A small bird thrums its wings inside the clock;  
now it's coming out, it's keeping track  
of each indignity: that helpless day,  
my father's drinking—Christ, the whole sick  
drama of my childhood's on display  
like a document in a museum. And you  
sit listening, and nodding, like those toys  
I've seen, their heads on springs. It's too  
ridiculous, this ordering the noise  
the past makes into music. What's it for?  
Time's up. You're in the house. I'm through the door.

*Kim Addonizio*  
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<sup>258</sup> [Kim Addonizio](#), "[Therapy](#)," *Bastard Review*, collected in [Tell Me](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## User's Guide to Physical Debilitation

Should the painful condition of irreversible paralysis  
last longer than forever or at least until  
your death by bowling ball or illegal lawn dart  
or the culture of death, which really has it out  
for whoever has seen better days  
but still enjoys bruising marathons of bird watching,  
you, or your beleaguered caregiver  
stirring dark witch's brews of resentment  
inside what had been her happy life,  
should turn to page seven where you can learn,  
assuming higher cognitive functions  
were not pureed by your selfish misfortune,  
how to leave the house for the first time in two years.  
An important first step,  
with apologies for the thoughtlessly thoughtless metaphor.  
When not an outright impossibility  
or form of neurological science fiction,  
sexual congress will either be with  
tourists in the kingdom of your tragedy,  
performing an act of sadistic charity;  
with the curious, for whom you will be beguilingly blank canvas;  
or with someone blindly feeling their way  
through an extended power outage  
caused by summer storms you once thought romantic.  
Page twelve instructs you how best  
to be inspiring to Magnus next door  
as he throws old Volkswagens into orbit  
above Alberta. And to Betty  
in her dark charm confiding a misery,  
whatever it is, that to her seems equivalent to yours.  
The curl of her hair that her finger knows  
better and beyond what you will,  
even in the hypothesis of heaven  
when you sleep. This guide is intended  
to prepare you for falling down  
and declaring détente with gravity,  
else you reach the inevitable end  
of scaring small children by your presence alone.  
Someone once said of crushing  
helplessness: it is a good idea to avoid that.  
We agree with that wisdom  
but gleaming motorcycles are hard  
to turn down or safely stop  
at speeds which melt aluminum. Of special note  
are sections regarding faith  
healing, self-loathing, abstract hobbies  
like theoretical spelunking and extreme atrophy,  
and what to say to loved ones

who won't stop shrieking  
at Christmas dinner. New to this edition  
is an index of important terms  
such as catheter, pain, blackout,  
pathological deltoid obsession, escort service,  
magnetic resonance imaging,  
loss of friends due to superstitious fear,  
and, of course, amputation  
above the knee due to pernicious gangrene.  
It is our hope that this guide  
will be a valuable resource  
during this long stretch of boredom and dread  
and that it may be of some help,  
however small, to cope with your new life  
and the gradual, bittersweet loss  
of every God damned thing you ever loved.

*Paul Guest*  
259

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<sup>259</sup> [Paul Guest](#), "[User's Guide to Physical Debilitation](#)," [The Paris Review](#), collected in [My Index of Slightly Horrifying Knowledge](#), [Ecco](#)

from "Bride of Palestine"

*Nahida*

Back then we lived as though  
the Bible happened yesterday.  
I'd fall asleep to the lighthouse  
sweeping across our windows, a  
comfort from explosions.

I saw a man carrying a coffin lid  
like a shield, the shuffle of their  
feet the only sound.

In the coffin, a clean-shaven  
man in charcoal-gray suit, as if  
dressed for a wedding.

"If you do not want the same  
thing to happen to you as hap-  
pened in Deir Yassin," we heard  
the loudspeakers say, "then you  
will flee."

Our bags packed, we drove  
past houses in flames houses in  
houses in houses in flames

Without those documents I  
could never prove I lived there  
that this house was mine this  
life was mine

*Philip Metres*  
260

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<sup>260</sup> Philip Metres, "Bride of Palestine," collected in [Shrapnel Maps](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Refrain of the Woman Who Has Lived Too Long Alone

Over the bed sheets, the single supper plate  
absence of beloved, absence of self  
absence of hunger on the bright kitchen shelves.

Absence of Cupids, of payphones, of Mars—  
of girls pressed to boys who taste like fall rain—  
absence riding a life switching trains.

*Hello, absence*, echoes through the wasteland  
of night. *How are you keeping? What's new?*  
Like a child checking the scent of her shoes.

It's a call and response, a checkpoint, a fugue—  
Here, absence stars in the classic Film Noir  
the banker's lamp burning by the empty boudoir.

*Susan Rich*

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<sup>261</sup> [Susan Rich](#), "[Refrain of the Woman Who Has Lived Too Long Alone](#)," collected in [The Alchemist's Kitchen](#), [White Pine Press](#)



Dušan Makavejev's *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism*

In the end, Vladimir Ilyich beheads Milena with an ice skate.  
Milena's head tells us *he's romantic*—  
with his sad, important hands.

We're romantic in the same way.  
At some point as in all movies,  
there is despair on the faces of the band.

Milena's death is not strictly political.  
She is not sock-white on a battlefield.  
There are no trumpets.

I know the primary mystery of the organism  
is not Milena's head looking for a body  
like a doll. There is something larger.

I like to imagine her anyway as a ghost  
of a fictional character, who dies like we often do,  
for satire. I know how important it is to be part of a narrative.

*Alisha Dietzman*  
262

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<sup>262</sup> [Alisha Dietzman](#), "Dušan Makavejev's *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism*," [Pleiades](#), collected in [Sweet Movie](#), [Beacon Press](#)

The roots of geometry

It was just a lump of fat  
below my wife's nipple. Thank god  
I didn't have to text people  
the news of a scalpel. Not like B.  
for H. "Out of surgery. Doing fine."  
Not like C. for L. S. for S.  
Add an O—SOS: save our sisters.  
I have four of those. My mother  
is the author of eight breasts.  
None of my sisters  
have the philosopher's taste  
for martyrdom, the mechanic's taste  
for oil, the aerialist's taste  
for release from the dress of gravity.  
But they all have bodies  
and have entered the time of lessing:  
anyone I touch  
can touch the person next to them—  
next in age, next in love—  
and be only one further touch away  
from a scar. What a weird  
game of tag. I prefer  
when a stream touches a river  
touches a watershed touches an ocean,  
not the one we came from  
but so much like it, who cares  
to split hairs. Just a glob of fat.  
Still, I'm picturing cutting  
and wincing. Picturing hands  
handing over and over  
pieces of my wife's life  
that have been unlived.  
Is imagining an amulet  
against happening? Do we repeat  
what we fear until it's as small  
and comforting as a baby's rattle  
in our heads? A friend  
feels her flesh not being there,  
ghost breasts she wonders  
if a ghost child suckles.  
I picture the nothead  
bent to the notmilk and still  
turn away, build a tent  
in my own thoughts for them both  
of privacy. The first intimacy.  
How did the circle  
find us? Mother and child.

*Bob Hicok*

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<sup>263</sup> [Bob Hicok](#), "[The roots of geometry](#)," [The Massachusetts Review](#), collected in [Hold](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Piano Lesson

When I was ten, I had an imaginary friend. He lived on pork and beans and played the viola. People would look at us and hear sad music, turn away. That's pretty much how it was, what it was like, for most of 1977. A viola is slightly larger than a violin. It makes a deeper sound. The cello and the double-bass: larger and deeper still. All, like Pinocchio, have hollow wooden bodies, though Pinocchio has more strings and is hollow only metaphorically. Guitars have strings. Harps also. If a harp lay down and fell asleep and you bludgeoned its dreams with felted hammers, then you would have a piano. If you were wearing a tuxedo, you would have a grand piano. If you knocked a clock to the floor and left it there, on its back, staring at the ceiling, spinning slowly to its own sad music, then you would have a record player. Or a carousel, if you had horses, or luggage. A table turns into a barricade, a vase into a broken vase. The lazy Susan becomes the place where the lazy Susan used to be. Pinocchio wants to be a real boy. The real boy wants to be a robot. The dream of becoming. By 1699, although there were no pianos, some composers were already anticipating their arrival. Sheet music from the time shows notes too high or low to play on the harpsichord. By 1837, with some refinement of the pedals, a player could sustain the notes even after their hands had moved away. By the time I was eleven, I stopped being sad and started to be afraid.

*Richard Siken*

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<sup>264</sup> [Richard Siken](#), "[Piano Lesson](#)," [The New Yorker](#)

## Florida

Like eelgrass through a glass-  
bottom boat on the Silver River,  
I see the state, obscured yet pure. Derision,

a tattooed flame crackling  
underneath the lewd, uncool  
khaki of an amused park worker.

I was the sometimes boy on a leash,  
my sliver of assent in 1984—  
as if it were my decision.

The I-75 signage, more than metaphor.  
As if I had the right to vote.  
The slumber parties then were hidden wood;

the tea so sweet, the saccharin  
pink and artificial, like intelligence.  
The science sponsored in part by chance.

I made my acting debut with the red  
dilettante down the street, “Rusty” Counts,  
in *Rusty Counts Presents: Suburbs of the Dead*,

straight to VHS. My parents phoned a counselor.  
A palmetto bug read *Megatrends* on the fold-  
ing chair by our above-ground swimming pool...

The pool shark lurked, but not to fear.  
The end unknowable, blue, inmost, and cold,  
like the comfort of a diplomatic war.

Randall Mann  
265

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<sup>265</sup> [Randall Mann](#), “[Florida](#),” [Poetry](#), collected in [Proprietary](#), [Persea Books](#)

## Ode on Words for Parties (American Edition)

Why do we have so many words for parties, a slew  
of them once you start looking: shindig, bash,  
meet-and-greets, raves, blowouts, barbecues,  
and more tepid functions, receptions, luncheons, and do's  
of all kinds, though, let's face it, most people have no clue  
about how to throw a party, like the friend who was complaining  
because her husband wanted to have lots of food at the brunch  
they were planning, but she knew people didn't go  
to parties to eat, and Marsha and I had to break it to her  
that brunch was the combination of two meals,  
so her guests were expecting to eat double, and you can't believe  
the shock on her face, but her husband put out a great spread  
and everyone ate and talked, though we've all been to those parties  
with the bowl of dead chips and the onion dip  
that looks like cat vomit on the driveway, actually not that good,  
but my sister throws a fabulous party, because she's a great cook  
and has an army of wine bottles that never stops marching,  
and her garden is verdant, and she has a pool,  
which some people end up in at the end of the night. What  
would be the word for that kind of party—Vinocoolpool  
Party? And the other one might be a Kittydip Party. And guests!  
They can ruin a party, too. Think of the Music Nazis  
who make their way through the world with their one-upmanship,  
and your collection of Van Morrison and Jimi Hendrix  
is so uncool compared with the Mud Stumps and Echo Park,  
but only before they caved and became famous  
and were no longer cool. Then there are the couples  
who are glued at the hip, twins conjoined  
by church and state, or the bloviators, or the drunks who can turn  
a party into a Godzilla-stomps-Tokyo apocalypse,  
like the time the guy with the Ponderosa belt buckle slid chest first  
in a dance move and put a gouge three feet long  
in my hardwood floor, and I hadn't even invited him; he was  
my hairdresser's friend. That party was over. I wanted  
everyone out of my house. Or what about the people who live  
in the middle of nowhere, and you know  
that on the way home you'll end up in Hades or a ditch,  
if you're lucky, what would you call those?  
Suburban-Hell Parties? Hansel-and-Gretel-Lost-Weekend Parties?  
I often try to talk my husband into pulling over  
so we don't crash, but he reminds me that we're just setting  
ourselves up for the serial killers who roam lonesome  
highways looking for poets, and what would you call  
that concatenation of events? Zodiac-After-Party-Stab-Fest?  
Post-Bash-Head-Bash? You can see that when I'm not  
going to parties I'm watching too many true-crime shows,  
which make you mistrust your fellow human beings  
in the most basic way, and yet we continue to throw parties,

which is an interesting choice of verbs, and English  
is full of them—throw a party, pitch a fit, pitch a tent, pitch  
a no-hitter, pitch in, pitch-black, and that's what the road  
is like now, and I'd give anything to be at that Kittydip Party  
two blocks from my house, with the Einstein Brains  
blaring on the sound system so I can't hear the guy talking  
about how he prepares petri dishes for his research  
or the woman who is describing an airline-ticket fiasco  
that wouldn't even be interesting if it had happened  
to me, but I guess that's life—a continuum between darkness  
and mala folla, a Spanish phrase that describes an indifference  
so profound it can't be bothered with scorn,  
but I remember one of the best parties ever was a wine tasting  
put together by an Australian father and son  
and by the end everyone was dancing to "Tutti Frutti"  
and screaming drunk and in love with the world and I danced  
with a roly-poly lawyer named Booter, whom I never saw  
again, and the hangover the next day was a small price to pay  
for that crazy mix of Little Richard and Cabernet,  
and there was food, yeah, but who remembers what.

*Barbara Hamby*  
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<sup>266</sup> [Barbara Hamby](#), "[Ode on Words for Parties \(American Edition\)](#)," *The New Yorker*, [Holoholo](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Prodigy

I grew up bent over  
a chessboard.

I loved the word *endgame*.

All my cousins looked worried.

It was a small house  
near a Roman graveyard.  
Planes and tanks  
shook its windowpanes.

A retired professor of astronomy  
taught me how to play.

That must have been in 1944.

In the set we were using,  
the paint had almost chipped off  
the black pieces.

The white King was missing  
and had to be substituted for.

I'm told but do not believe  
that that summer I witnessed  
men hung from telephone poles.

I remember my mother  
blindfolding me a lot.  
She had a way of tucking my head  
suddenly under her overcoat.

In chess, too, the professor told me,  
the masters play blindfolded,  
the great ones on several boards  
at the same time.

*Charles Simic*  
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<sup>267</sup> [Charles Simic](#), "[Prodigy](#)," collected in [Classic Ballroom Dances](#), [George Braziller](#)



## The Rule of Three

One of the first I learned was the trinity, three persons in one  
God: father, son, and holy spirit, née ghost. Then I started writing  
JMJ on all my homework and tests, for good luck, but also because

My ballpoint's blue ink looked pretty beside the paper's purple  
Ink, like the inside of a clamshell when I teared up or squinted  
From the smell. Sometimes the sheets were wet and curled like

Petals reeking of gin, which is why it was called spirit duplication,  
After the nonflammable alcohol used in the process. Jesus, Mary,  
And Joseph, is what the three initials meant. I'd draw a cross from

The descending caret of the M and think of Mary, the mother,  
And of the other Mary, not, weeping at the limp feet of the crucified  
Jesus. Where was Joseph, I wondered, but never asked. We seemed

To pity him a little, for reasons I couldn't name, like my father,  
Who was both my father and a son, and soon to be the son of  
His father's ghost. When my grandmother was dying, she asked

Her only child, my mother, to go with her. Mom waited decades  
To obey, but she finally went. Together in one grave now, they are  
Two Marys, maybe with the Jesus of their most solitary prayers,

Petals littering their one stone's four corners. Being motherless,  
Like being childless, is both good and bad, I think,  
And it is a third thing, too, that is neither of these.

*Kathy Fagan*  
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<sup>268</sup> [Kathy Fagan](#), "[The Rule of Three](#)," *Poetry*, collected in *Bad Hobby*, [Milkweed Editions](#)

My Grandmother Slams Crystal Meth the First Time, Four Months after Her Death

My brother is kissing a man who's brought a Ziploc  
of crystal and two rubber bands. On the television, gay porn.

But my grandmother hasn't finished dying yet, not where  
the meth descends. And now my brother's hands are hers,

feeling for the curlers, arthritic through her permed hair.  
The lucent part of him remembering the blackberrying,

the dinner theater musicals, the vapor rub, her perennial scent.  
Instead of gay porn, what my grandmother is watching

are black and white home movies, made the year  
*Mother Wilde died, oh how your grandfather hated her*

*but he let me keep her Tiffany lamp. I liked how the colors  
turned in the brief chandelier.* The man beside my brother blinks,

almost remembering too, almost again someone's grandson.  
*There you are in my bedroom, my little Zsa Zsa, trying on dresses.*

*You got your coal eyes from my side, but that mess you're in now  
from your mother's.* She pinches his elbow and laughs.

The man shakes his head. *Shut the fuck up*, he says  
to my brother who sniffs, clutching for invisible pearls.

*Young man*, he chides, his voice breaking,  
*that is no way to talk to your grandmother.*

James Allen Hall  
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<sup>269</sup> [James Allen Hall](#), "[My Grandmother Slams Crystal Meth the First Time, Four Months after Her Death](#)," collected in [Romantic Comedy](#), [Four Way Books](#)

## Curator of the Year

It was a period of “laying low” after the pedagogy awards ceremony fiasco. I was still mortified after penning a mini invective against the presumed winner, drinking two pitchers of beer (out of the pitcher), then unexpectedly winning and performing a revolting dance at the podium. But within the confines of my favorite Pottery Barn, which we frequented daily, I was simply another style curator. Sometimes I finessed the merchandise into more positive angles. Polished the weekender spoons against my tank top. At the awards ceremony podium I could barely hold the novelty award check steady, but still executed the *drop it low* as if no time had passed since undergrad. I tried to abandon this memory in a glass carafe filled with seashells.

One Pottery Barn sales associate lingered next to my roommate, who was pondering the cost-effectiveness of homemade rattan, and then fifteen minutes later that same clerk was perched on my roommate’s knee talking about Swedish up-dos and pillows stuffed with alternative down. I was doing a great job of not thinking about the particulars, such as what kind of beer was in those pitchers (Miller Lite) and which jukebox songs I’d played on repeat to pump up my outrage before the awards ceremony. After the ceremony my roommate hand-fed me dates and made guillotine gestures at the bartender, but I just kept railing on about Scott Fennell and his feckless pedagogy paper on passive assessment.

At least I still had Pottery Barn, I thought, running through every retained fragment of dialogue from the post-awards reception, where my roommate claimed to be re-clasping my bracelet but actually tied my wrist to a railing. Around 8:00 pm we needed to make a purchase before Pottery Barn closed. My roommate strolled to the cash register with an armful of wooden beads, a six pack of plastic lemons, and a perfumed drawer buddy. I (accidentally) slammed one tiny sweet dreams bar soap onto the counter.

Mary Biddinger  
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<sup>270</sup> Mary Biddinger, “[Curator of the Year](#),” [Does It Have Pockets](#)

## The Roughs

Whitman says he's one of the roughs.

I don't think so.

I tried to be one of the roughs  
and even when I worked with them—  
painting HUD houses for a summer in Denver,  
hanging drywall in San Jose—  
I wasn't a rough.

The roughs I worked with  
drank at the titty bars all night  
then showed up at the site twenty minutes early  
in their beat-to-shit Impalas and LeSabres,  
with their black eyes and paint-spattered Dead Head wife-beaters,  
smoked a big fatty, and pulled their fuckin' shift.

The roughs I worked with were not familiar  
with the term "dentist."

The roughs I worked with subsisted entirely  
on cigarettes and coffee, dope and beer,  
and a daily chimichanga-nacho combo  
from Taco Bell. And were perfectly healthy.

The word for "love"  
among the roughs I worked with  
was "pussy."

The roughs I worked with  
could start a conversation at 8 a.m.  
about pussy, or rebuilding the tranny on an '82 Trans Am,  
and stay with it, expanding upon it, singing their arias  
of divorce and blown clutch plates  
until the light began to fail.

The roughs I worked with regarded the English language  
as a mere backdrop for the word "fuck."

I knew one rough whose total daily requirement  
for self-expression was satisfied by "What the fuck,"  
"Fuckin' A," and, quite simply, "Fuck."  
(Also, "Fuck it").

The roughs said INsurance and POlice  
and had no use for either.

The roughs I worked with didn't vote  
cuz what's the fuckin' use.

In idle moments the roughs  
shot their nail guns at squirrels and stray cats,  
or pissed off the roof onto the heads of other roughs.

They could spread boiling tar all day  
under an August sun and never bitch about it,  
but they disliked Barry Manilow and were merciless  
in their assessment of his *oeuvre*.

The roughs I worked with had parole officers  
and no fixed address.

And many joints were smoked, and many Iron Maiden  
and Judas Priest and Black Sabbath songs rose up  
from the radio and blared  
their barbaric yawp above the rooftops.

And how the roofs got shingled and the walls went up  
I'll never know, but the roughs I worked with  
packed up their tools at day's end  
and drove down to Murphy's  
and blew their whole fuckin' paycheck on Bud Light,  
none of that foreign import crap for them,

and they dilated further upon the supreme themes  
of pussy and transmission repair.

Don't get me wrong:  
there are some fine things to be said  
about Walt Whitman—opera lover, kosmos,  
father of American poetry—

But I knew the roughs.  
I worked with the roughs.  
The roughs were friends of mine.  
And Mr. Whitman, you ain't no fuckin' rough.

*George Bilgere*  
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<sup>271</sup> George Bilgere, "The Roughs," collected in [Blood Pages](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

## When I Say Jesus Was My Boyfriend

I don't mean that I snuck out my bedroom window,  
vaulting over juniper bushes to get to his car  
which he'd bought by working summers and weekends  
at the Trujillos' Broken Moon ranch,  
tractoring the fields, hauling bales,  
and turning a red so deep  
it gives up into brown,  
nor do I mean

he'd drive me through the early winter night  
to the lonesome mesa and turn off the engine,  
sitting still for a nervous moment before leaning in  
to French my face, his eager tongue  
a newborn calf struggling its way  
to milk, his hand searching my shirt and,  
when finding form, cupping my breast, not  
with lust so much as reverence,  
a jeweler staring through a loupe  
at a gem rumored and finally realized,  
the radio playing an R&B song filled  
with harmonies and breakdowns and, at one point,  
talking, a testimony, the deep voice pledging  
to do better, be better, love harder,  
if given the chance.

When I say Jesus was my boyfriend

I mean only that I talked about him  
to all my friends and did the things  
I thought he'd like because I knew  
he loved me but mostly in the way  
we know at fifteen that everyone we love  
will someday be dead, and we will be dead,  
and an army flying some future flag  
will build an outpost on what was once the mall  
where our parents dropped us off  
to hang out with our friends  
except that no one else shows and so  
it's just us drinking an Orange Julius  
and trying to look indifferent  
to loneliness, which is to say  
this certainty was theoretical and I wasn't sure  
of anything, so I gave my body to the river,  
wore white because I was his.

When I say

Jesus was my boyfriend what I mean  
was that he told me he loved me  
even though I didn't deserve it,

that it was a gift I had to repay  
with my one stupid life  
and that I should wait for him.

And I did, and I am, still

waiting, not for him to descend  
from a sky in which clouds have formed  
the shape of a cross, which is a real dream I once had,  
him bursting golden in the blue over my church,  
my family and friends rising to meet him,  
first a few and then more  
and I watched them go and suddenly  
he went too, the cross of clouds collapsing  
into nothingness, and I was still there, still  
earthbound, untaken, and so this wasn't  
a dream so much as it was  
damnation, to have seen pure happiness come  
but not for me, so I am not waiting for him  
but for that feeling, the someone-would-do-anything-for-you  
feeling, would-die-a-sandal-wearing-virgin-  
because-it's-him-or-you feeling,  
and I think that maybe this

is what has ruined me the most,

that I want such love now, not  
in some rumored after and not  
from a ghost. And all I get is regular love,  
which doesn't even ask anymore  
how it is I like my eggs, and so maybe  
I don't deserve even this milk love, its expiration date  
stamped along the seams, this love that makes  
listening sounds while staring off into  
a thicket of its own desires, only half  
in where it is and half where it wants  
yet to be. But why should love  
be any more resilient than the bodies  
we do this loving with? Why shouldn't  
love flab and crease, spot and sag,  
developing a weird but specific smell?  
And I keep wanting love  
to be kinder to me, but perhaps it is that I  
have not been kind to love,

not understanding, not patient enough to warm my own bed  
while love works nights in a factory that manufactures  
forgiveness, meeting the ceaseless demand,  
bringing the seconds home to me.  
I gave birth once  
and there was so much blood,  
in the pain I punched a wall, the fist  
mark left hanging like an angry moon,

so I think it's no big thing to bleed for love,  
no miracle in being breakable.  
When I say Jesus was my boyfriend  
    I mean he died when the car he drove

crossed over the solid line, that he's been married  
twice and has his real estate license,  
that he would look me up but has forgotten  
my last name. I mean he said what he needed  
to say. I mean that some days,  
when I see a group of girls, tinged golden  
from chosenness, whisper curated confessions  
they release like doves into the air,  
I miss him. I miss him and do not tell  
my husband, do not tell my friends.  
I carry the secret of missing him  
in my grown and tired body  
until the world nudges a new horror forward  
and I need the space he's in.  
I offer my good hands.  
    I save what I can save.

*Erin Adair-Hodges*  
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<sup>272</sup> [Erin Adair-Hodges](#), "[When I Say Jesus Was My Boyfriend](#)," [The Sewanee Review](#), collected in [Every Form of Ruin](#), University of Pittsburgh Press



## Psychodynamic Motivational Speech

*On my last night as a child, that sleep was final.*  
—Larry Levis, “The Cry”

I love the way the great mystery looks back at itself  
in horror. The elementary school  
keeps improving, as if your childhood were one big fire hazard.

You can almost see yourself, waiting there on the curb  
with your little stained backpack  
and that

disastrous stare you were developing,  
already affixed to your brow; knowing  
that no one is coming  
except the primal departed  
in an eternal, salubrious nuptial—

nothing is coming for you, you know now,  
but the sparrow black wind,  
an endless depression; fossil and pitted expanse of skin—

in the meantime  
there are so many things to think about, to thank.

The shadow that does what you are loath to do.  
Bird-bone whistle, whittled by the first bard,  
blown for the first time  
for the success of a newborn’s first bowel movement—

you, stuck in the neurotic house’s cerebral files,  
the wardrobes,  
                    in astonished shame,  
and the wallpapered drawers like flower-lined coffins.

And like words, the closets will carry obligations.

Now let me tell you something: Shame is spent.  
Empty. Redundant.  
Let’s look at this for a minute. You, who present

                    a totally deluded clown  
wandering drunkenly up  
and down the squalid street, scaring everyone.  
You, who present the ugly, tragic  
petulant child, who can’t stand the thought of being wrong—

it is the only wrong thing you've done,  
saying you're wrong  
over and over again.

That's purgatory, baby.        Can you see that?

Can you look me in the eye and tell me? Detached  
as you are from the room—can you  
tell me where it appears in you? I'm here to wait.

Praying in the leafless wood—I get it: stuck looking  
at the destroyer every time you look in a mirror.  
The long hours of it. The halogen views of it.

The way you carry a wall in your face  
like Ophelia not cast

as Ophelia  
                                 but as the nameless Chorus

I get it—that you believe you must flounder  
each day  
let ichor  
from the eye  
from the arm  
from the lips—

you get to watch your own suicide offscreen  
every day  
                                 you get to clean up the flowers after every take—

I mean,  
                                 what do I know about shame,  
being only the madness you leaped from?

I know it will let itself in.  
It will handle, roughly, the tiny glass animals on the mantel.  
Break the ears off, the tails. The delicate edges. I know

that shame  
                                 lessens the value of things, the truth of things,  
not the opposite. Now tell me how sustainable that guest is.  
How long-term that is.

Is any of this landing?  
Can I get an Amen from you?

And between the whole plasticky  
currency of memory, opened now like a ripped menu,  
tell me, what you would have—

now that you've looked back,  
now that you can look back  
at *me*, divine and unavailable—

when will you put  
lavender in the linen,  
with the selected works of Goethe, opened on your bed  
like you were punishable

for your own frozen, Faustian nature—a pocketknife  
in your hand,  
the flesh, shoved against the crypt's corner  
and the fingers of the dead in your mouth—tell me what good is *that*

misdirected wrath? Glinting and flickering and blue

like a TV in an empty room;

howling in someone else's hallway for a hundred years—  
is this coming though?

How long

is this going to take? Would you

put my whole, wounded body in your own, if I asked you?

Where is your anger?

(I would love that animus, bridge between sexes, that  
stranger with a face like a young lion—nothing can  
touch it, manifesting in whole arias, antidotes  
from that joy devil.)  
What of it? Just to the end of time?

What of it?

You can grow old this way.  
What of it?

Oh, you can definitely *go on like this*.

Stepping out into the street in Rutland, across from the bus stop  
where a painkiller couple sits  
with their wallets and cigarettes and socks in plastic bags,  
smoking in the cold wind, complaining about—something, muffled—they  
are more content, it seems, than you,

in your blue coat that falls open

and shows all the gold watches of men hidden there,

their cracked glass, their cocks toward midnight,  
oxidized into place—can you, leading yourself  
out—overgrown child as you are—tell the difference?

Perseus, looking in the mirror at what  
could not be seen directly—and Medusa, bound in a statue;  
bound to her own stone—

you, aimed at the floor,

can you tell the difference?

*Bianca Stone*  
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<sup>273</sup> [Bianca Stone](#), “[Psychodynamic Motivational Speech](#),” collected in [What is Otherwise Infinite](#), Tin House Books

## I Hope Hillary Is Having Good Sex

I hope Hillary is having good sex  
I say to myself at the farmer's market  
While fingering the over-ripened bustier  
Of an heirloom tomato  
So close to rot it nearly sucks  
My pinky into its dappled maw  
I hope she's at least getting decent head I say again  
Now that she's proven a woman  
Can win the popular vote  
And still lose to an imbecile  
Because sexism  
Because Russian interference  
Because my grandmother  
Who worked for LBJ and then  
Nixon and was harassed by male coworkers  
Until she had to quit  
Even she said of Hillary, "There is something  
About that woman I just don't trust"  
I hope Hillary is getting it in  
By Bill or someone better at listening  
Who asks her what she needs  
Then gets directly down to business  
Without preamble or pussyfooting  
Someone who emerges

Only for a sandwich or breath of fresh air  
I hope she has multiple sidepieces  
Each a different build and scent  
And when they ask  
To see her closet full of immaculate suits  
Organized and shimmering on their racks  
Like a god's molted skin  
She lets them touch just the hem

*Kendra DeColo*  
274

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<sup>274</sup> [Kendra DeColo, "I Hope Hillary Is Having Good Sex," \*The Account\*](#)

from "Today"

Feb.4.2022

Twice now I've thought about the wood casket  
and what proportion of the ashes are  
wood. Twice now I've read about the chamber,  
this time I learn it is called a *retort*,  
also a sharp reply. This time, I read  
about the *pugilistic stance* when they  
burn the body, the boxer-like pose the  
body makes. I think about my father,  
alone in the retort, in a small box,  
two thousand degrees, his legs bent, his fists  
ready to punch me and my live flesh.

Feb.5.2022

Someone said my poems are *incredibly  
clear*. Out the window, in the field, seven  
cows now gather. When I looked ten minutes  
ago, only three cows. What does it mean  
to count cows and to name them? Everyone  
must know that to be clear means to have lost  
something we have loved. Adolf Loos said that  
*ornament is a crime*. No wonder why  
the black cows here keep moving in and out  
of the window frame. They know someone  
has died and landscape is reversible.

Victoria Chang  
275

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<sup>275</sup> Victoria Chang, "[Today \(Feb.4.2022. Feb.5.2022\)](#)," *Poetry*, collected in [With My Back to the World](#), Farrar, Straus, and Giroux

## Neither Bride Nor Daughter

Once I went to a kegger at my childhood home.  
I didn't know I was going but Jen was sitting  
on her dresser listening to the Eagles  
and curling her hair and then we were walking  
through the dark neighborhood and then  
we were on my porch and someone  
was handing me a plastic cup.  
I said *This is my porch*, and he laughed  
and said, *Mine too*, but it wasn't.  
He didn't know there was supposed to be  
a brown-flowered couch in the living room  
and over the mantle, a print of a Rembrandt  
called *The Jewish Bride, 1655*.  
For all of childhood, it hung there  
and I never knew what it was called or why,  
how an art dealer said it was a father giving  
a necklace to his daughter for her wedding,  
but how most art historians now think  
it is actually Isaac and Rebecca.  
There was another keg in my room  
in the basement. Strangers were moving  
between my invisible bed and my stereo,  
stepping over my clothes on the floor,  
staring at themselves in my mirror,  
wondering if they would ever be good enough.  
The water rushed through the pipes  
and the furnace made that sound  
like it used to. I had to stand in the corner,  
drinking and singing both parts  
of "Total Eclipse of the Heart,"  
holding the note at the end of *Turn around*,  
*bright eyes* long enough to imply it was still  
going when I started *Every now and then*  
*I fall apart*. This was the song I listened to  
late at night while I waited for you  
to come pick me up so we could drive through  
the empty streets in the dark.  
Years later, you sent me a picture  
of that house to show me you remembered  
where it was. In the painting,  
the man and the woman  
are not looking at each other.  
I like it when one thing covers another  
but not completely, like fog.  
Rembrandt was famous for his ability  
to concentrate light. In the painting,  
the light shines on the man's hand  
touching the woman's chest.



Everything else is dark.

*Laura Read*  
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<sup>276</sup> [Laura Read](#), "[Neither Bride Nor Daughter](#)," [Willow Springs](#), collected in [But She is Also Jane](#), [University of Massachusetts Press](#)

## White woman

The men in my state clean up, in suits  
that fit and faces shorn for work,  
and this place has made me prettier,  
spanked the hard vowels right out  
of my mouth. Every door swung open  
for me, a man behind it, beaming  
a question, an allowance: *ma'am*? True,  
some days, I'm the pioneer wife,  
keeper of the homestead, but others  
I'm absurdly educated for a uterus,  
afraid I'll forget how closely this place  
once held water fountains as an organizing  
force, still does. The Northern states  
are self-satisfied, segregated too,  
but here I am whiter, a white  
weapon to be wielded, a pliant, powerful  
fool. I've never been so queer as I am  
In the South, where we're taught  
to call a scrape of cells "baby, pre-born,"  
like cake mix or powder cement  
to be reconstituted by men. Like water,  
men arc everywhere, and I am a vessel  
unmatched, unmarried, a chamber  
to be eyed. Some Northern men  
would like to handle me, too, but for now  
I moderate my voice and when I get  
a *ma'am* I nod my princess nod. The men  
in my state clean up, and so do I,  
but if "prettier" is a door to walk through,  
where does it ever get me? I say  
the only words safe for me to say,  
*thank you, beg your pardon*, I lilt them  
like charms as I search for my way out.

Erin Hoover

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<sup>277</sup> Erin Hoover, "White woman," *Florida Review*, collected in *No Spare People*, Black Lawrence Press

## The Joy of Weird Friends

You're in my hall of fame room holding a ginger seal pup with a fabulous mullet. You have the mullet, not the seal pup. I'm in your hall of fame room going all post-apocalyptic child star, killing and roasting my own venison and wearing glorious deerskin gaiters. If I had news about my plasma, you'd be the person I'd write to, to take my mind off the news about my plasma. If you needed someone to hold the sides of your head to keep your mind ok, I'd totally write you a poem that metaphorically held the sides of your head. In our previous friendship back in time, we were some of those proto-human toddlers who took painting lessons in a cave ritual about painting lessons. As a middle-aged man of 15, you invented dung sculpture, blowing everyone's mind. I had my own project, blowing on fiery twigs to create shapes like those little brass angels that fly by the heat of candle flame at Christmas, but nothing like that at all.

*Joanna Penn Cooper*  
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<sup>278</sup> [Joanna Penn Cooper](#), "[The Joy of Weird Friends](#)," collected in [Crown](#), [Ravenna Press](#)

## This Was Supposed to Be an Ode to Aqua Net

To its chlorofluorocarbonic sexiness, like stilettos in a can.  
To bangs like bandshells & the minor stardust  
that glazed my dresser to a high sheen!

But something keeps showing up in the mirror  
behind the poem & freaking me out:  
that pack of Eighth-Grade Girls who pinned me  
to the bathroom floor, sprayed Aqua Net  
in my eyes & hissed, Say yr a dyke, *dyke*...

Say it... I didn't quite  
say it. Instead, I cried  
through lunch period,  
through the rest of Texas  
History, down the halls & straight  
into the New Counselor's arms.

I rode the stallion of the New Counselor's  
Concern into the sunset of the school day  
& stepped out of the office with something  
special: the Key to the Faculty Bathroom.

In third-period math, Candace saw me  
staring & flashed a gun from under the hem  
of her denim skirt. She gleeked smoothly  
into my hair & said she would *hex* me.

"But why do they *hate* me?" I cried, nearly  
fainting into the New Counselor's arms.

Surely, I knew. I spent my youth  
yammering my way into undeserved glamour,  
trying to distract from the fact that  
I was unbearable. Meanwhile, the Faculty Bathroom  
was dim & forgiving. The paper towels: softer.  
The soap: pearly. There was even cinnamon  
mouthwash & a little stack of Dixie cups.

But I was a snide, sneaky, preposterous girl  
who used Big Words on purpose. I wrote  
earnest poems about squirrels toying to stay  
warm in winter & recited them in a Big Voice  
& lapped up all the sweet glaze  
of the Language Arts teachers' weird  
love for me, like Robert Frost  
had tapped my soul & sapped  
my maple syrup Himself.

There I go again: snapping that big brass  
Faculty Key to my backpack as if  
I did something to deserve it.  
See me clip-clopping down those  
endless halls like a My Little Pony—  
straight As tattooed across my ass!

*Karyna McGlynn*  
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<sup>279</sup> [Karyna McGlynn](#), "[This Was Supposed to Be an Ode to Aqua Net](#)," collected in [50 Things Kate Bush Taught Me About the Multiverse](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## Beggars and Choosers

*"Ah, Carl, while you are not safe, I am not safe."  
—Ginsberg*

I admit it, I don't really know how the internet works  
or the economy and when the newspaper says  
that the body of government is consolidating debt  
to make room for more credit, it sounds like a divorce  
or like when in-laws move in, this "making room,"  
the language of spatial necessity escaping me.  
I'm learning a lot about lungs in the pandemic:  
glass opacity, x-rays of snow, organs embracing  
like adjacent continents in a bad winter.  
Mutual downfall. When I lived in Shanghai,  
I performed a ritual of water to ward off a hoax  
or a curse or the dead of heart. I needed an amulet  
and bought an expensive piece of jade  
because I was in China and I was desperate  
and unimaginative. It was heavy, easily chipped.  
I poured water into one glass and out of another.  
I spoke to the horizontal incestuous gods—Apollo, Artemis, Athena.  
I wished good things for you though now, a year later,  
I want evidence that you, too, suffered, my generosity run dry  
or maybe really wasn't there in the first place.  
Under lockdown, you get so lonely that you begin  
to personify furniture, and send me a video  
of your body dancing with a ladder,  
its long shadow cast wide against you.  
I hate your audacious whimsy, bright as a smashing orange  
against the sirens' howl. For every sick set of lungs  
speeding by, your feet quicken around  
the six-foot totem and I break,  
envious of the inanimate, its stoic presence,  
longing for any entanglement  
with your form.

*Megan Fernandes*  
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<sup>280</sup> [Megan Fernandes](#), "[Beggars and Choosers](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [I Do Everything I'm Told](#), [Tin House Books](#)

## Reputation

We are ratted out  
to Mr and Mrs Parents about

my foul self liquored up  
whom their son delivers late

one Saturday night  
as an abandoned newborn

to a wrought iron door  
Your Honor does that now and again

come from the known world  
to redress or esteem us

two teenagers working the loam  
in the far east of Siberia

Pasternak's *back of beyond*  
where the worst pupils sit in the class

my point being that shame  
informs consciousness

*Jane Miller*  
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<sup>281</sup> [Jane Miller](#), "[Reputation](#)," collected in [Thunderbird](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Vicissitudes

The man who comes to view the mistakes in the yard is a turf expert

I point out the red thread disease overtaking patches of lawn that are withered and brown

He says different poisons will knock out the poison ivy and silverthorn

I've been bitten by something that itches (the vicissitudes of daily life?)

I wash the accidental pee off blue sandals

I wash the red clay dust from yellow rain boots

Carry me, say the small dead spiders in every ceramic cup, who tuck themselves, too, between carpet and moldings

The carpool father asks if McDonald's for dinner was okay when he comes to the door to deliver my older son

And I am grateful for my son stumbling in, batting helmet blue in his hand, which thunks when he sets it down in the foyer

His small box of leftover McNuggets, his sweaty head, his bat bag slung off his shoulder

I send him up to the shower

Rabbi Tarfon said it is not your responsibility to finish the work (the dishes in the sink, the knotted plastic bag from daycare)

He also said you are not free to desist from it

When he said "the work," he meant perfecting the world

My younger son thinks there are ghosts in his room

He says, *Lie down with me* (I don't)

He is stealthy when he drops from his top bunk and appears in the den like a ninja

He calls himself *Sister Vampire*

I make him climb the stairs again, and he again asks for water

I tell him if he closes his eyes and stays under the covers, I'll be back to check on him (I don't)

There is no one I can depend on to do the work but me

Not the trusty blue whale knick-knack on the mantle



Not the hum of the HVAC or the song of the spring peepers

They are responsible for their own things

The torn paper from the pad on the fridge resting on the counter:

LOVE YOU ALL! / SEE YOU SOON!

Tomorrow will be June, and I will drag my ennui (or is it sorrow?) into the fogless morning

I will sign everyone into school, and try to remember what I was reaching for before I lower my hands to my sides and keep walking

*Erika Meitner*

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<sup>282</sup> [Erika Meitner](#), "[Vicissitudes](#)," collected in [Holy Moly Carry Me](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## My Hometown

Do you love your hometown? Hate it? Meh?  
I grew up in Baton Rouge—pretty corny!  
Now I live in Tallahassee, which is cornier still.  
Salman Rushdie gave a talk at my school once,  
and afterwards I went up to him and said, “Hello,

Mr. Rushdie, my name’s David Kirby, did you  
know that Tallahassee is the only city in the world  
that contains the name of Allah?” and Mr. Rushdie  
replied, “Well, David, there are many cities  
in the world and many languages, so we don’t know

if that’s true.” If you think about it, he’s right,  
also if you don’t think about it. It’s December 7,  
1984, and Bruce Springsteen is playing at  
the Donald L. Tucker Center here in Tallahassee,  
and between songs he asks the crowd if they like

their hometown, and everybody goes, “Boo, hiss!”  
and makes the thumbs-down sign because when  
you’re young, you’re not supposed to like anything,  
since everything you have is handed down  
to you by your parents, deeply flawed human beings

who are unable to do anything right in comparison  
to the flawless individual you’ll be when you  
are their age, and then the Boss starts to sing  
“My Hometown,” which is a song about how  
a smart person loves his or her hometown

even though the stores on Main Street are vacant  
and the mill closed and the jobs are gone as well  
because you might not know it but your hometown  
is inside you at this very minute, working tirelessly  
to forge that future self who’s going to step confidently

onto the scene a few years from now and solve  
all of your problems and the world’s to boot.  
You’d be crazy about your home town if it were Florence  
and you were living there in 1472 like Leonardo,  
whose contemporary Benedetto Dei said, “Beautiful

Florence has all seven of the fundamental things  
a city requires for perfection, including “a large, rich,  
and elegantly dressed population” as well as  
“masters in every art” and “a river with clear, pure  
water” as well as a university at which “both Greek

and accounting are taught.” Leonardo himself was illegitimate, gay, vegetarian, left-handed, and at times heretical, yet Florence flourished in the fifteenth century because it was comfortable with such people. Imagine if Lorenzo de’ Medici

had sold caps that said “Make Florence Great Again” to supporters who, drunk with fury, held rallies in the Piazza della Signoria and threatened to beat up or jail or deport anyone who wasn’t exactly like them. Myself, I like Pittsburgh

though I’ve never been there. I’ve seen pictures of those bridges, though. Pittsburgh has hundreds of them—28 across the across the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio rivers alone, including the Roberto Clemente Bridge, the Rachel Carson Bridge,

and the Andy Warhol Bridge, these being named for a star baseball player, a pioneering environmentalist, and a visual artist described as a genius by some and a charlatan by others, though my favorite is the Hot Metal Bridge that once carried railcars

full of molten iron fresh from the city’s blast furnaces. There were giants in those days, or at least the bridges of Pittsburgh look as though they were built by people twenty feet tall wielding these gigantic wrenches to tighten bolts the size of dinner plates. What are bridges

made of now? No telling, but they’re all a little too arty for me, whereas the bridges of Pittsburgh look as though they’d actually rust were it not for the fact that they’re all painted yellow thanks to an 1899 ordinance stipulating black and gold as

the city’s official colors, these being the ones used in William Pitt’s coat of arms, and who wants to go around painting everything black? I would also like to know more about the city of Ys, pronounced “Ys,” which was built off the coast of Breton by King Gradlon

on land reclaimed from the sea and surrounded by a dike through which ships could pass when its gate was opened. The royal palace was made of marble, cedar, and gold, and Ys itself was said to be the most beautiful city in Europe. It sounds to me

at least as snazzy as Leonardo’s Florence and probably was until it turned into a veritable epicenter of iniquity under the influence of Gradlon’s wayward

daughter Dahut, who once took as her lover a knight dressed in red who was really the devil, and when he

persuaded her to open the gate so he could leave early the next day, Dahut stole the key from around her sleeping father's neck and opened the gate to a wave as high as a mountain that submerged the entire city, though the king and his daughter

were able to escape on his horse, which is when a saint appeared and said, "Throw the demon thou carriest into the sea if thou dost not desire to perish," so Gradlon pushes Dahut off and the sea swallows her and she becomes a mermaid or maybe

a morgen, which is like a mermaid without the fish tail. There's also this little town in Finland called Kauniainen (pronounced COW-nee-AY-nen) which is said to be the happiest place on the planet because Finland was named the world's happiest country

by a UN agency in 2018 and then a survey taken a few months later found that the 9,600 residents of Kauniainen were the most satisfied in Finland, which is like saying your neighborhood was voted the nicest in your hometown and that, because you

are the nicest person in your house, possibly because you're the only person in your house, you are the nicest person in your town, but whatever. Even Finns say they're melancholy introverts, and the suicide rate in that country is higher than it is in many others;

there's a Finnish proverb says that if someone smiles at you in the street, that means they're either drunk, crazy, or not Finnish. Professor Frank Martela, who researches well-being at the University of Helsinki and grew up just a few miles from Kauniainen, says

we don't really know what we're talking about when we talk about happiness. Is it daily joy? A feeling of satisfaction that waxes and wanes over one's entire life but is more often present than not? "It's a bit ambiguous," says Professor Martela,

though all Finns enjoy a universal medical system, free university education, and affordable child care, and little Kauniainen itself has more than a hundred sports and cultural facilities—music schools, a ski slope, a skating rink, an adult education center

where one can throw pots, sing in a choir, paint replicas  
of Orthodox Christian icons, practice yoga—all  
subsidized by the local council. Who cares if  
you can't define happiness? If you're working on  
your triple axel at the ice rink or trying to knock out

a better likeness of Saint Jude than the ones Lumi  
and Toivo are working on at the table next to yours,  
you're too busy to wonder if you're happy or not,  
so maybe Kauniainen would be the best place  
to live after all. When I started looking for teaching

jobs, I decided I'd live anywhere but the South  
since I'd lived there my whole life, but the offers  
I got were from schools in Virginia, Georgia,  
Texas, and Florida. Looks like Allah wants me  
to stay in the South after all! Okay, let's go back

to Ys. Did you know that "Paris" comes from  
"par Ys" or "similar to Ys"? Ys was said to be  
the most beautiful city in Europe until Dahut screwed  
everything up, so when Paris is swallowed by the sea,  
a once-unlikely scenario seeing as how it is located

some 350 miles inland from the Atlantic coast  
yet one that is increasingly credible in the era  
of rapid and seeming unstoppable climate change,  
Ys will rise from the waves, meaning American  
college students will go there on their spring breaks

and semesters abroad instead of to Paris,  
and before you say there is no such mythical city,  
let me point out that locals observe that when  
the sea is calm, you can hear the church bells of Ys  
tolling softly beneath the water. The new Ys

will be beautiful again. Why not spend a day there  
when you feel like it? You're happy where you are now,  
but you'll be happier still if you go away for a while  
and come back; even the folks in Kauniainen want  
to get away from time to time. There'll be cheap flights

to Ys daily as well as a ferry with board games on deck  
and a full bar, and a bridge is in the works, not  
the new arty kind but one of those sturdy yellow  
Pittsburgh bridges, although the actual paint shade  
is Aztec Gold, a classier name than "yellow"

and about a hundred times sunnier than "black."  
In 2001 a planning commission proposed that  
some of the bridges be painted in different hues,

such as Perfect Peach and Purple Ice, but that idea  
went nowhere when too many Pittsburghers

said they'd feel silly driving over a bridge painted  
Purple Ice to watch the Pittsburgh Steelers, whose  
team colors are, wait for it, black and gold, then  
driving home again over a bridge painted  
Perfect Peach, especially if the Steelers lose.

You love your hometown. Still, the new Ys is as  
bright as a diamond. Should we have a look?  
Come on, I'll take my unicycle, and you can sit  
on my shoulders. Don't worry, Dahut's  
not there anymore—well, she is if you want her to be.

*David Kirby*  
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<sup>283</sup> [David Kirby](#), "[My Hometown](#)," [Dead Mule](#)

## Who's Sorry Now

Today in the taxi it was a couple on the corner of 14th Street and 7th Avenue. The woman was wearing giant ski goggles.

She said to me, "He said I was the greatest fuck on the planet." I said "That's a nice compliment" and moved on.

Martin Buber said *In an encounter, something happens to a person. It is at times like a light breath, at times like a wrestling match; no matter, it happens.*

The body stays the same, all edge and shell, but the soft part is the anvil of light pushing against the copper envelope.

Sean Singer  
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<sup>284</sup> Sean Singer, "[Who's Sorry Now](#)," collected in [Today in the Taxi](#), Tupelo Press

## How to Be Drawn to Trouble

The people I live with are troubled by the way I have been playing  
“Please, Please, Please” by James Brown and the Famous Flames  
All evenings, but they won’t say. I’ve got a lot of my mother’s music  
In me. James Brown is no longer a headwind of hot grease

And squealing for ladies with leopard-skinned intentions,  
Stoned on horns and money. Once I only knew his feel-good music.

While my mother watched convicts dream, I was in my bedroom  
Pretending to be his echo. I still love the way he says *Please*  
Ten times straight, bending the one syllable until it sounds  
Like three. Trouble is one of the ways we discover the complexities

Of the soul. Once, my mother bit the wrist of a traffic cop  
But was not locked away because like him, she was an officer

Of the state. She was a guard at the prison in which James Brown  
Was briefly imprisoned. There had been broken man-made laws,  
A car chase melee, a roadblock of troopers in sunblock.  
I, for one, don’t trust the police because they go around looking

To eradicate trouble. *T-R-oh-you-better-believe*  
*In trouble*. Trouble is how we learn what the soul is.

James Brown, that brother could spice up any sentence he uttered  
Or was given. His accent made it sound like he was pleading  
Whether he was speaking or singing. A woman can make a man  
Sing. After another of my mother’s disappearances, my father left her

Bags on the porch. My father believes a man should never dance  
In public. Under no circumstance should a grown man have hair

Long enough to braid. If I was a black girl, I’d always be mad.  
I might weep too and break. But think about the good things.  
My mother and I love James Brown in a cape and sweat  
Like glitter that glows like little bits of gold. In the photo she took

With him, he holds her wrist oddly, probably unintentionally  
Covering her scar. There’s the trouble of being misunderstood

And the trouble of being soul brother number one sold brother  
Godfather dynamite. Add to that the trouble of shouting  
“I got to get out!” “I got to get down!” “I got to get on up the road!”  
For many years there was a dancing competition between

My mother and father though rarely did they actually dance.  
They did not scuffle like drums or cymbals, but like something



Sluggish and close to earth. You know how things work  
When they don't work? I want to think about the good things.  
The day after the Godfather of Soul finished signing just that  
All over everything in the prison, all my mother wanted to talk

About were his shoes. For some reason, he had six or seven pairs  
Of Italian leather beneath his bunk suggesting where he'd been,

Even if for the moment, he wasn't going anywhere.  
Think about how little your feet would touch the ground  
If you were on your knees pleading two or three times a day.  
There are theories about freedom, and there is a song that says

None of us are free. My mother had gone out Saturday night,  
And came home Sunday an hour or so before church.

She punched cleaned through the porch window  
When we wouldn't let her in. I can still hear all the love buried  
Under all the noise she made. But sometimes I hear it wrong.  
It's not James Brown making trouble, it's trouble he's drawn to:

*Baby, you done me wrong. Took my love, and now you're gone.*  
It's trouble he's asking to stay. My father might have said *Please*

When my mother was beating the door and then calling to me  
From the window. I might have heard her say *Please* just before  
Or just after the glass and then the skin along her wrist broke.  
*Pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease*, that's how James Brown says it.

*Please, please, please, please, please, Honey, please don't go.*

*Terrance Hayes*  
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<sup>285</sup> Terrance Hayes, "[How to Be Drawn to Trouble](#)," collected in [How to Be Drawn](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## Unspoken Bond

He gave me his grandmother's emerald engagement earrings  
and said, *Don't tell my mother.*  
I gave him my grandfather's ancient Roman coin  
and said, *Don't tell my father.*  
Then he gave me his father's war medal  
and I gave him my mother's Olympic trials trophy  
and he gave me his mother's Chanel suit  
and I gave him my father's gold cuff links  
and then we each stole cash from our parents  
and threw it at each other in handfuls like leaves  
and greedily picked it all up and laughed  
and threw it again, this time with feeling  
and we kissed and kissed and kissed and kissed like that forever.

*Lauren Shapiro*  
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<sup>286</sup> [Lauren Shapiro](#), "[Unspoken Bond](#)," collected in [Arena](#), [Cleveland State University Poetry Center](#)

Oscar

Fuck no she didn't leave me over money.  
She left me cause I have no ass. It's true—  
a belt holds on my hips about as good  
as an oiled-up pole dancer. That's why  
I invented these strapless suspenders.  
Can't see em, can you? Good, that's the idea.  
Almost went bankrupt makin the prototype.  
My wife kept sayin What suspenders?—  
you aint wearin nothin. But riddle me this:  
Are my jeans pooled at my feet? I swear,  
bonafide genius dumbfounds belief  
with simplicity. Same goes for the truth.  
Like if I told you my wife left me cause  
I got less milkshake than a garter snake,  
you'd say there's gotta be more to that story.  
Like what? I go to work one day and come  
back home to no trace of her. No photos.  
No toothbrush. Not even the carrots  
she raised in the garden beds, just holes  
in the earth like buckshot where she plucked em  
free. And of course, she got custody.  
And the house eventually, which, I'll admit,  
I mortgaged to pay for the patent.  
You think that was the dagger? Here I am  
workin to cure auto-pantsin for the assless  
and she's fussin over a little loan? Yes or no:  
could I win her back if I doubled down  
and got those silicone implants? Fine,  
shake your head, but I don't think you respect  
how bad it is when God forgets to blow up  
your balloons. Hell, I'd show you, but these  
suspenders are a bitch to get back into.

*Anders Carlson-Wee*

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<sup>287</sup> [Anders Carlson-Wee](#), "[Oscar](#)," [Rattle](#), collected in [Disease of Kings](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Sun and Moon Flowers: Paul Klee, 1879 - 1940

First, there is the memory of the dead priest in Norway  
Dressed in a straw hat, his tie that's white  
But splashed with violet, and the black skirt;  
He'll hang forever in the deer park.  
Beneath him German officers  
Are weaving in and out of trees in a white sunlight.

When there is music crossing over the water from France  
The little steamers pull their beds of coal  
Slowly up the canal, and, Klee,  
You walk back to your room saying,  
"What on earth happened to us? Any simple loss  
Is like the loss of all of us. Nothing's secret?  
Just look straight into the North Sea.  
And, then, tell me there's anything they can keep from us."

The matron who walked you through the orchard at Orsolina  
Should have said, "There's a black star with conifers."  
Klee, don't listen to them. Next Wednesday your heart  
Stops like a toad. You're dying of a skin disease.  
They are not telling you about this war, the Luftwaffe,  
The Nazi who's resting on a sofa beside a stream,  
And, Klee, this Nazi is inside Poland. And  
In Poland your moon flowers have already begun growing!

The opaque dice in your painting can no longer  
Be mistaken for some weathered houses by the coast.  
The woman sick with tuberculosis says to you,  
"A war will clear the air!"  
The war puts priests in trees. Puts a sparrow's nest  
Beside a sleeve in a train station in Tuscany.  
You and your friends saw the unlikely, ruptured ceilings  
And painted them, but not as premonitions, or images  
Of war—  
The war your family won't acknowledge or discuss.  
But an orderly who has news of Poland whispers  
To the day nurse; she touches her blouse.  
You ask her what is happening.  
You make a scene. And then she says what is necessary  
By slipping you a morning tray

With its ice water, blue spikes of lupine, and morphine.

*Norman Dubie*

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<sup>288</sup> [Norman Dubie](#), "[Sun and Moon Flowers: Paul Klee, 1879 - 1940](#)," collected in [The Illustrations](#), [George Braziller, Inc.](#)

*Beer Lotto Wine Cigs* is a sign before a doorway I walk through to buy a bottle of water, is a hole I fall some stairs down into in order to buy a bottle of water for three dollars from

a shop that features two old men sitting in their dirt by the register and who laugh at charging me a dollar for a banana; I'm sure they'll have lots to joke about once I turn to

walk back out, cross the street to climb back up to the room in which I am thinking about Leda and the Swan and what I can't get over is how the search results always direct me

to the same object of focus: I am wondering how it would feel to travel down a swan's throat as a water reed, and if the fluid neck's vertebrae are not unlike a snake's, and is there

a coiling that a swan undertakes should it wish to be your companion, say, weaving its neck around your arm thrice before tucking its head to rest beneath your breast? The search terms

for *swan swallowing* allow me to consider that the words reversed mean to suck a penis, and just below, there is a video of Two Happy Swans Eating Lunch. Would Marianne Moore not have

adored the internet? She was never one of those girls who made goo-goo eyes at guys, she never traipsed late night the grounds of some writers' conference, never slipped out from the poet's

room; instead she was counting her fragments, fossils, filaments and syllables under her own bright light recklessly and methodically as old Chinese women go at mah-jongg in the park; she

was wise in that she was always only about her art. She didn't herself get mixed up in a domestic situation, no man ever grabbed her by the neck because she insisted he turn his music down,

*the baby is sleeping*. She solved that problem before it could start by having no babies, no men, allowing only her preoccupation with craft to balloon itself up inside the room of her

life, her attraction to chintz china *vital and fatal* as one critic closed her piece like a beak. I think I rarely think of Moore, but realize I must think more of Moore than I realize. She had no messy

umbrage. But she, like Leda, sat on wonders, no doubt. She could not have pretended not to, not now in our age of sex videos and selfies. Hands feel like rubber on the neck that holds the head

up screaming to turn the music down because the baby is sleeping. The neck feels the hands as if they were not attached to the man. Hands, however, do not have brains, do not arrive upon

one's throat of their own accord. It's not the swan that is violent, nor is it the man; rather this brand of excitement is the liberty of gods. Yeats's version is all over the police blotter, but I wonder which

is worse depicted: force or coercion? The swan in so many pictures poses as a companion, a pet, or, in one, an amateur gynecologist who peers curious between the splayed legs of a woman supine, as

if prepared to use its beak as a forceps. Bishop is another one who probably saw such images and, restrained as she was, made the decision to make no mention of it. The thought of some

god disguised as a swan shimmying up to me makes me nauseous. God posing as a sort of arm candy. My daughter's favorite purse, silver with a small swan, the notions crawl out manholes to reach

for my ankles just before I step into the store in which I buy my bottle of water from the old men. They appear unwashed, the kind of old men we consider *abandoned*, luckless, spent, no kind

and grateful women to look after them. Their table is covered with cards and bills and whirls with their laughter shared like lovers'. The store offers more more more of what I really do want:

wine and cigarettes, but my brain is ailing me  
and I cannot recall which night I lasted late,  
slipped inside a pine tree to hide and pretend  
I was not one of those girls. I got lost the second

his hand appeared on my knee. What were those  
girls looking for, I wonder; we used to call them  
*Starfuckers*, when all they wanted was to close  
the gap between teacher and student, god and

mortal, all those swans walking around smoking  
their own poems! The Ledas wanted what they  
got, so it seemed to me as I walked buckling over  
drunk back to my room. These old men must be

successful selling three-dollar bottles of water  
to parched drunks just flush from lotto winnings;  
only in that state of delirium would a reasonable  
human frequent this store. It has everything I want

and nothing I want anymore. I don't drink anymore,  
but I can't say I don't cry anymore. I cry more!  
Maybe I was a sort of starfucker, too, inside that  
conifer, thinking myself a little god disguised

behind needle and sap, too good for the regular  
fucking of people enjoying an evening, taking  
things, as usual, too seriously, unable, as always,  
to just relax. It's weird to me to think that I still

have the body I had then now. All its digits are  
intact. The problem with the story is the binary  
nature of the interpretation: it was either rape  
or pleasure. Neither equation fails to surprise

or repulse me. The pair of hands that grabbed  
my neck are a hundred towns back, the baby  
a girl who sees the flimsy literalness of a myth.  
And the girl I was is still in the pines, maybe,

lurking and turning into her own weird swan  
of that swamp, chucking up weeds dredged  
from the silty deep to tug them down the long  
trail of throat, miles and miles, its dark-supple

eternity where all the ghosts go, even the girls  
who hated me as I hated them, despite being  
poets too: I realize now, we were all Ledas,  
all our tongues were all stretched and pulled

deep inside that swan's dark belly. I thought  
to wipe Moore right out of this poem, until my  
own mother on the phone, listening as mothers  
do, sighed, *Oh, the one who wore the tricorn.*

*Cate Marvin*  
289

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<sup>289</sup> [Cate Marvin](#), "[Starfuckers](#)," [The Kenyon Review](#), collected in [Event Horizon](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)



from "Mistress"

8.

Above the tightrope walker, the fireworks  
are a chemistry,

droplets of iodine  
mushrooming in clear water.

The circus tent flaps,  
deserted for the night.

Tigers are left in a row,  
savage with remembering.

7.

Mornings find me paper-  
skirted with case studies of barren

women, bellies no different than  
appendix. An obnoxious reminder.

I want to be like Polyxena,  
greeting death with the tilt

of my naked throat,  
arranging petticoats to cover my sex.

*Hala Alyan*  
290

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<sup>290</sup> [Hala Alyan](#), "[Mistress](#)," collected in [Atrium](#), [Three Rooms Press](#)

a very small animal

@ The Lafayette Inn

last night i took pictures of myself  
in a borrowed leopard print robe  
  
in my head i was beautiful, the imitation  
cat skin open as a novel at the middle  
  
proust or another lonely queer  
whose obsessions make clean taxidermy  
  
of the temporary body. disgusting to look  
upon oneself in any capacity but especially  
  
here—face rearranged in the split approximation  
of pleasure. glamorous for a moment  
  
then gone. it's not the lens but the living  
who fathom eternity. my face so full  
  
of wonder it's sick. how many men have  
passed through this room, through my lips?

Sam Sax  
291

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<sup>291</sup> Sam Sax, "[a very small animal](#)," *The Rumpus*, collected in *Pig*, [Scribner](#)

## My American Self-Portrait

*There was a child went forth every day,  
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became.*  
—Walt Whitman

*man, hand, gun*  
—Catherine Gammon

At the movies I become a man. I don the breastplate of a hairy chest, etc. I mean, at the movies, I become the coroner. I enter the body. The movies teach me I am a dead man when I look at a dead man. Every image is a mirror. Every soundtrack is a gun. This is a movie about a blonde woman, and I don the heavy leather handbag, the pockets that glow with silver change. A phone rings, as it is rigged to ring. In the window, the rain, like a sentence in a book, is struggling through the dark, from left to right, trying to escape. We stand and wait for the freight of our future to arrive. And, when it does, I become the gun with its neat rank of slugs. I am the hive of the blast. Or I am the director who screams *cut*. I perform the autopsy. It's been going on for hours now. Digging out the bullet holding it to the light. The body lies in disarray. It is the evidence of what happened here. Whatever is meant by *happen*, whatever is meant by *here*, the killing is clear.

*Lynn Emanuel*  
292

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<sup>292</sup> Lynn Emanuel, "[My American Self-Portrait](#)," collected in [Transcript of the Disappearance, Exact and Diminishing](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

## Itinerary

I cut my father's steak in small pieces  
and read to him, who once read so beautifully to us.  
*Back out of all this now too much for us,*  
back when our father could repair anything,

it was as if he made us solely so we could stand there  
and study him, listening to the Accutron  
that hummed on his wrist as he measured.  
We could see the insides of the watch,

and it would work, he told us,  
in any gravitational field, at any speed.  
It was so accurate—  
99.9977% accurate—

Gordon Cooper said it saved his life  
when something went very wrong  
in his mission to circle the earth.  
So there was nothing to fear

while our father drove Highway 1 at night  
and the cliffs dropped to the Pacific  
and we asked him to slow down  
but he sped up.

Taillights swerved and flickered ahead.  
Were they to start to fall, he said,  
he'd just turn the other way.  
I think I have been alarmed all my life.

Once, two or three martinis deep,  
just beginning to lose his memory,  
my father reached across the console  
and whirled the steering wheel

right through my fingers.  
Or did he put his foot on the gas?  
Now the skin at my father's wrist is so thin  
it bruises. I can almost see through it,

to all the mechanisms inside.  
Dark blue bruises there, too.  
I think he'd like a martini now—  
lemon twist, no olive, I can hear him say—

but words have left him.  
Have left him here, at the kitchen table,  
where I listen to his new Timex  
make no sound as the hours sweep by.

*Catherine Barnett*  
293

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<sup>293</sup> [Catherine Barnett](#), "[Itinerary](#)," [Freeman's](#), collected in [Solutions for the Problem of Bodies in Space](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Mar-a-Lago-a-Mar

If we aren't guilty of ignorance, we're guilty of evil,  
we giggle to each other at the hotel bar  
the color of a sea the color of wisteria pretty  
  
as the past where we will live one day  
  
upon a flotilla of detergent bottles upon  
that sea, breezy as the dilettantes of history,  
  
which is rich with wisteria and dilettantes  
  
drinking Sazeracs in hotel bars that used to be  
so well-regarded when white people wore their finest  
  
laundry and ate snails there chortling *regatta*  
or *eugenic* or *frittata* at each other,  
and now all of that is lost to the progress,  
  
which is as unnerving and relentless  
  
as it is relentless and unnerving,  
its infants arriving insolvent,  
  
demanding succor, new weirdos  
  
ascendant, the progress insistent as a refugee  
or a tidewater or the whole of the thunderful sea rising  
  
to eat us, we giggle to each other, like we wouldn't eat it first!

Jaswinder Bolina

294

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<sup>294</sup> Jaswinder Bolina, "[Mar-a-Lago-a-Mar](#)," [Big Other](#), collected in [English as a Second Language](#), Copper Canyon Press

from *From The Exploding Madonna*

iii: THE HOUR OF LEAD

*...First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –...*

The chrome shines until it stings, reflecting  
The women's sad asses as they shuffle  
In papery gowns from the locker room:  
Fun house butts or the elongated and  
Elegantly dead derrieres of a  
Mannerist's pietà, depending on  
How kind the angle, how soft the focus.  
The big blonde nurse is a sugar mountain  
Inserting IVs all around the room.  
Hair spun to confection, sticky in sea-foams,  
Girded in an arsenal of pastels,  
She reviews the proper method for mounting  
The gurneys—*Place both hands on the side guards,  
Then lift and scooch, swinging the legs over  
Onto the bed.* She demonstrates scooching.  
The blue paper gowns chatter uniformly,  
Obediently. Each woman reviews  
The advice she's been given by her friends.

- 1. Ignore the first sound you'll hear. It's just  
Machines separating blood from plasma.*
- 2. There are two doctors. Ask for LaBenz. The one  
Who looks like Trapper John on TV.*
- 3. Head for the escorts in the orange vests.  
Keep your head down and just keep walking. They can't  
Come across the sidewalk. Wear sunglasses,  
Maybe a hat, and don't look at the signs.*
- 4. Make sure you bring cash. No checks accepted.*
- 5. Pay the extra for the anesthesia.*

One woman is thinking of an old Greek  
Philosopher, how his students must have  
Hated him, stolen his ideas, maybe  
Even went to bed with him only for  
The grade, and how this ancient philosopher  
Must have known they mocked him, those beautiful  
Young men, so smooth, and how it filled him with  
Shame but, still, he couldn't stop, the ways he loved  
Them, adored their soft hands and conversation,  
Their white tunics brushing at the knees.  
Another woman, a very young woman, is  
Thinking of the boyfriend she's left sitting  
Somewhere, out there, somewhere past the surgical,  
Sitting in a chair, his hands together,

Fingers steeped over his crotch. She is  
Thinking about the night they slept naked

Under the big screen TV, thinking of  
The way the colors blurred over their skin;  
Pale green, then red, yellow, all the colors,  
Bleeding and separating, then coming  
Together, one hue bruised onto their bodies.  
Next to her a woman is fascinated  
By the needle pushed into the vein  
Snaking across the top of her wrist,  
The small pucker of skin around its entry  
Point, the cold sensation of the drip  
Burning up her arm. She consoles herself  
By making a hierarchy of pain: *less than*  
*Having your ears pierced, less than having your*  
*Teeth cleaned, less than getting a tattoo...*  
Top Forty hits float down from speakers hidden  
In the ceiling: Whitney Houston wants to know  
If he really loves her; Mötley Crüe reveals  
She goes down good. When the doctor comes through  
The double doors at the far end of the room,  
He speaks softly to the women, holds someone's  
Hand as the gurneys wheel past, then disappear.

Erin Belieu  
295

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<sup>295</sup> Erin Belieu, "[from From The Exploding Madonna](#)," [Harvard Review](#), collected in [Infanta](#), Copper Canyon Press



## I Have So Little to Offer this World

is something I often say to myself in the worst of times, those days I can barely make it out of bed, but the kids still need their lunches packed for schools, and their mother is in the hospital on dilaudid to ease the pain from her pancreas or her feet. Those days it is the *responsibilities* that get me out of bed, but I go, as they say, through the motions, and not even beautiful motions, not some sort of ballet, or Shaolin, or even yoga, and certainly not like the old people I saw doing tai chi, standing like cranes, or playing harps or lutes in the town square in that city I lived in so long ago it may have been another lifetime, maybe another life. The one I suspect centuries ago I lived and followed Tu Fu, reading back to him his poems before he lit the paper and sent them burning in tiny paper boats or on Lotus leaves down the river, the river which courses back and forth in this life so much it is as if it curls back upon itself. And there we are reliving the death of our father, or our daughter's first day of school, or a time I lost my job and those days looking for work when there was none. My daughters are now up and walking through the house completely oblivious to how I feel, which is how it should be: Stop worrying and be a child I constantly say to my autistic daughter who perseverates over everything, who calls herself dumb. "What is dumb," I tell her, "is this world. It doesn't speak and when it does what it says is often cruel. But you and I can say beautiful things—" when she grins, opens her mouth and shouts "*Shiiiiiiiiit*," the word she knows we must climb out of already, rising over the rusting yellow school bus that pulls up and opens its door like a great hinged jaw and takes my daughters to the place of rules and numbers. But somewhere today (I know from the paper calendar their mother magnetted to the fridge, they have music) my daughters will be singing, in a room full of children, notes will be taught and there will be arpeggios and off-key sharps, and my wife is on the cellphone to make sure I got them off ok to school, and her voice is a red bird warbling a meandering tune that means she is feeling better and a little high and the doctors say she will be home soon (to be home) is another kind of music: and my old grumpy neighbor walking outside in his jockey shorts and blue robe and black socks to pick up the paper and wave a little wave is another psalm. I glance up at a red-tailed hawk gliding high before it drops in one seamless glissando—a coda for this inane tremulous joy.

Sean Thomas Dougherty

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<sup>296</sup> Sean Thomas Dougherty, "[I Have So Little to Offer this World](#)," [Southern Indiana Review](#), collected in [Death Prefers the Minor Keys](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## The Cities, the Armies

In the bright days of ancient Rome  
when a child was born  
Unwanted  
her father might choose *exposure*,  
which meant  
he might abandon the infant  
in the forest  
where eventually  
she would no longer be  
a burden  
to the family.

 $+$ 

For years, I tried  
to understand the mind  
that could be right  
with this:  
a child in the leaves  
crying into the night,  
the hungry wolves.  
I could not  
understand it.  
But there it was  
in the history books—

 $+$ 

The Romans  
                                have spoken to me over the centuries  
and I have listened  
                                Carefully,  
and loved them more than I have loved  
even my friends.  
                                They whisper  
into my ear,  
                                and I write down  
every word they say,  
                                and have made a career of it,

 $+$ 

made a convenience of them. What excites me most is their apparent familiarity that doesn't quite conceal their foreignness. They are a foreign

mind. An alien

+

mind, they who could expose  
a child  
so easily  
and thus make resonant the stories  
of Moses,  
of Romulus and Remus, of Oedipus or Hercules,  
fuck,

+

I have lived fifty years and hope  
I have done as little harm  
as possible, though I  
doubt it.  
My mother inherited her mother's  
senility,  
by which I mean she loses her glasses  
all the time  
and probably will eventually forget  
who I am.

+

I do not want forgetfulness  
for myself,  
though I suppose in a broader sense  
it might be a mercy  
to forget who we once were.  
These days, she reads  
the same book over and over,  
and seems happy  
with that.

+

It is a book I gave her  
about the many empires  
that preceded us.  
*Listen to this, she keeps saying.*  
*Can you imagine*  
*the armies? Can you imagine the cities*  
*those people once built?*

Kevin Prufer  
297

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<sup>297</sup> Kevin Prufer, "The Cities, the Armies," *Poetry International*, collected in *The Fears*, Copper Canyon Press

Thirty-Seven Thousand Feet Above Illinois

Calm is a kind  
of impossibility. You see

the buck isn't some  
sort of gambler's luck, it pulls

at the seams, means

nothing but hum to the rattle

sleeping next to you; blue, before  
the bounding deer below. Slow and snow

and I miss the powder

that covers  
every piece of the Midwest

in winter. There's less  
now, where I call home

a plow shudders in below, scrapes  
at a pitch I can't know

glides like dusk or rose  
garden rows, moves the way

a fountain pen  
breaks its own nose

just to say anything  
at all.

*Matthew Minicucci*  
298

## A Hundred and Then None

Last night a man was yelling in the parking lot as I walked to my car.  
I don't know what he said, but it sounded like my name,  
like my stepfather when he called me four Christmases ago  
from an unknown number, said he loved me like a daughter  
as if he'd never touched me like a lover. I was nine. He wasn't  
asleep but pretending, his large hairy arms locked around  
my frame, my body accustomed only to my mother's hairless arms  
in those early years of begging to be close to my creator.  
Yesterday, the man I'm seeing used the words *love* and *you*  
in the same sentence. I can tell summer is coming because I am  
afraid. There are pills. Will I be a good mother? I can't forgive her  
soft harm. In my family, the women believe in powder under the arms,  
under the breasts. Today I hold three pills in my palm  
where I once held more than a hundred and then none at all.

Diannely Antigua  
299

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<sup>299</sup> Diannely Antigua, "A Hundred and Then None," [The Massachusetts Review](#), collected in [Good Monster](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Getting Places

That red gash in the hills, I told her,  
is bauxite, not clay. I saw that it was *gash*  
that made her smile. What about  
those cows the color of Irish Setters  
grazing in the lowland? she asked.  
Oh, just big, slow dogs.  
Thank you, she replied, like Elvis,  
thank you very much.  
That over there, I said, feeling it now,  
is bougainvillea, and see, up the trail,  
that house, the one gutted by fire?  
It once belonged to a famous bandit  
and his high-maintenance woman,  
dear friends of mine.  
I like the word *cornucopia*, she said,  
the sound and size of it,  
that's the kind of girl I am.  
I understand, I didn't say.  
Instead I told her that beyond  
the red gash in the hills  
are the caves, and beyond the caves  
are the monasteries beyond sleep  
where you get to lie down.  
Good, she said, we're getting places now.

Stephen Dunn  
300

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<sup>300</sup> Stephen Dunn, "Getting Places," *The Iowa Review*, collected in *The Insistence of Beauty*, W. W. Norton & Company

## Masquerade

Because the Bengal tiger only attacks from behind, the honey harvesters and fishermen in India's mangrove forests wear a rubber mask—a pale-faced human with a thin mustache—on the back of the skull.

A two-faced trick more survival than deception, like but not like the scientists who camouflage their visage into pandas, cranes, and crocodiles to get closer to the creatures they're trying to save.

Like but not like myself, who as a young girl dreamed of dressing like a man so as to be a man, to be able to do what I wanted—

to fight, wield weapons, crave my face unmade, my hair short. To not be a girlfriend or a wife. To not worry about anything. But somewhere along the way it became harder to distinguish between survival and deception, between the longing to be sheltered and different and insane and decorative as a Mayan idol too well understood to be beautiful. So I embraced the double-bind of short skirts, boosted breasts.

And I got what I wanted, but mostly I didn't.

Still, the tedious costume became a habit, the height of heels too high to surrender. And now I am with Jane, femme to her femme.

And now Kurdish women brandish AK-47s, fight ISIS, rescue mothers and daughters, while taking time to apply make-

up before strapping on the  
rifle—mascara, shadow,  
lipstick—not to proclaim their  
freedom, but so the enemy will  
look at her and *know* he dies by  
the hands of a woman, *know* he  
goes straight to hell without  
collecting his virgins.

ISIS fighters would rather run  
than die this way. So this make-  
up, this mask, is also about  
survival.

As is the guise of the Japanese  
*paantu*, faces covered in muddy  
vines, smearing sooty muck on  
babies and children to thwart  
evil, to bring good health.

That when I mull over the many  
masks Jane wears, or wonder if  
she has counted my own, I attend  
the masquerade like a courtier  
devouring, like a dancer caught  
fire, I heed the transformation as  
resuscitation

knowing I was never so much  
myself as when I took on a shape  
made by someone else.

*Tana Jean Welch*  
301

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<sup>301</sup> [Tana Jean Welch](#), "[Masquerade](#)," collected in [In Parachutes Descending](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)



## It's Okay

If you're afraid of turbulence. Outside the window, whales levitate, heavy with rain. Remember that time the fire alarm went off at home? You went flying down the stairs and out the door while your family laughed, your mother flapping a towel at the oven door. But isn't that what you were supposed to do? Save yourself? You were afraid of other children playing down the street. How could you have known from their screams that someone hadn't sliced off a hand? And if some rowdy ghosts have wrapped their sheets around this airplane's wings and are now playing tug of war, that doesn't make you a baby. All of us are rocked by the whims of invisible forces. Remember that time your sister hid beneath the basement stairs, listening for your footfalls? And just before your foot landed, she shot her hand between the steps and screamed. You jumped and hit the wall. But you know what you had been afraid of? Hurting her. Listen, you should stop being afraid. Let this plane and every soul in it sink to the fiery core of the earth. You should have stomped on your sister's hand. That'll show them all. You should have sat in your room and burned.

*Cynthia Marie Hoffman*

302

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<sup>302</sup> [Cynthia Marie Hoffman](#), "[It's Okay](#)," [The Journal](#), collected in [Exploding Head](#), [Persea Books](#)

## Mask

My mask has been recalled:  
back to the factory it goes.

So too, my superhero  
cape and the melancholy French

lullabies I was translating.  
Soon there will be nothing

left of me but a glass  
sigh, a wooden thigh,

and the love letters I send  
religiously to myself,

the ones that come home  
stamped: alas, unknown.

*Andrea Cohen*  
303

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<sup>303</sup> [Andrea Cohen](#), "[Mask](#)," *Front Porch*, collected in [Furs Not Mine](#), [Four Way Books](#)

## My Girlfriend Recaps the News

When she says *Ohio*, I don't think  
of the animal ownership regulations,  
of the farmer who sets his forty-nine exotics free  
then shoots himself in the barn.

Eighteen tigers, nine lions, eight bears, two wolves,

and most of them so afraid they don't move  
towards freedom, and are shot  
where they stand. The schools are closed.  
The cops tell everyone to stay  
off the streets—and when she says *Nebraska*,

I am flipping through my notepads,  
intent on writing a poem about lynching. She says,  
*two girls were found*  
*locked in a kennel, in a trailer home.*  
*There was a mattress... animal feces... four adults*  
*watching Jeopardy in the front...*

\* \* \*

...a pumpkin shortage in Illinois.  
Cancer spreading because of planes dropping poison  
over farming fields. Pumpkin-in-a-can.  
Hoarders stocking up on eBay.

\* \* \*

A quote from a friend: "This has jalapeños.  
This is Southwest Cornbread."

\* \* \*

Then a call from Jonathan, who taught me how to fly fish  
and set a lure, and is always concerned about me being eaten  
by bears, even way out here in the desert. Jonathan,  
whose house in Kalamazoo is surrounded by coyotes in winter,  
and whose book is always *about to be done*, as if it were  
a murder, and he needed encouragement to follow through.

\* \* \*

Note: drink from the beach, your mouth full of kelp and foam,  
glass of iced tea, cherry stem, lemon zest, pearl.

\* \* \*

Drawing of a friend as a robot, dog-eared pages with just my name—  
and she says *every fifteen seconds a burglary happens in the US*  
*and a man grows a two-hundred-pound watermelon that won't ripen*  
*and is green all the way through,*  
*and cocaine increases dopamine*  
*related to creativity, which is why...*

I fold bits of paper into footballs, the way we did in middle school,  
and my cats chase them around the room like lions after some little boy  
in a B-level horror movie, where you can see the zippers under their manes.

And it's midnight now, and rescuers pull  
a fourteen-day-old baby from the wreckage of an earthquake  
in Turkey. And I start my poem:

*Sunday, June 6 in Brandon, Mississippi...*

*Dexter L. Booth*

304

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<sup>304</sup> [Dexter L. Booth](#), "[My Girlfriend Recaps the News](#)," *Connotation Press*, collected in [Abracadabra, Sunshine](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

Aglow

Hello everyone, hello you. Here we are under this sky.  
Where were you Tuesday? I was at the El Rancho Motel  
in Gallup. Someone in one of the nameless rooms  
was dying, slowly the ambulance came, just another step  
towards the end. An older couple asked me  
to capture them with a camera, gladly I rose and did  
and then back to my chair. I thought of Paul Celan,  
one of those poets everything happened to  
strangely as it happens to everyone. In German  
he wrote he rose three pain inches above the floor,  
I don't understand but I understand. Did writing  
in German make him a little part of whoever  
set in motion the chain of people talking who pushed  
his parents under the blue grasses of the Ukraine?  
No. My name is Ukrainian and Ukrainians  
watched as the Germans killed everyone  
but six people with my name. Do you understand  
me now? It hurts to be part of the chain and feel rusty  
and also a tiny squeak now part of what makes  
everything go. People talk a lot, the more they do  
the less I remember in one of my rooms someone  
is always dying. It doesn't spoil my time is what  
spoils my time. No one can know what they've missed,  
least of all my father who was building a beautiful boat  
from a catalog and might still be. Sometimes I feel him  
pushing a little bit on my lower back with a palm  
made of ghost orchids and literal wind. Today  
I'm holding onto holding onto what Neko Case called  
that teenage feeling. She means one thing, I mean another,  
I mean to say that just like when I was thirteen  
it has been a hidden pleasure but mostly an awful pain  
talking to you with a voice that pretends to be shy  
and actually is, always in search of the question  
that might make you ask me one in return.

*Matthew Zapruder*

305

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<sup>305</sup> [Matthew Zapruder](#), "[Aglow](#)," [The Paris Review](#), collected in [Come On All You Ghosts](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Eighteen months later I find a tampon

in the little flower pouch I keep  
in my bag, and a lighter, just in case  
I start smoking again, or the oophorectomy  
failed, and I'm still releasing eggs.  
Now, I can tell you that Ethan Hawke  
twice made eye contact with me  
on the streets of Brooklyn, and so as  
to spare my family from our affair,  
I looked away. And pop quiz!  
guess who I saw read all new poems  
at Bryant Park last night! It seemed  
like rain, but Nick Flynn! who I also  
find hot, or found hot, back when  
I was more inclined to arbitrary desire.  
I just kicked at the dirt and talked  
to Nick about high school acceptance letters.  
Where Maeve might go. Where Eva.  
Didn't mention star migration,  
or cancer, just started name-dropping.  
Oh yeah, Ada loves rose petal lattes.  
Why confront the rancid, the desiccated,  
the sublime when you can talk  
about the weather? Which fish to release  
back into the sea? My anesthesiologist  
looked like Keanu Reeves w/ a beehive  
and asked me to count backwards from ten.  
I was all, are you wearing eyeliner, ten,  
nine, eight. I was lit from within.  
Seven, six, and when I woke up, five,  
four, three, two. I shined—one—like  
so much sun through a hospital window.

*Nicole Callihan*

306

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<sup>306</sup> Nicole Callihan, "Eighteen months later I find a tampon," collected in [This Strange Garment](#), Terrapin Books

from “Future Anterior”

4. *What is a ruin?*

when Issa was sentenced and buried  
in parentheses / and his mother saw her house

slowly becoming debris / she slid  
into a comma / she was driven

by ambulance / dashes to ashes /  
pupils to colons / the new revised standard

replacing the old revised standard  
replacing the King’s version and so on

outside the house not-yet not-house  
a nightingale offered quotation marks

around the bulldozer’s boring  
exclamations of / instant ancient ruins

footnote to a lengthy dissertation  
on subject-object relations

*Philip Metres*  
307

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<sup>307</sup> Philip Metres, “Future Anterior [4. What is a ruin],” collected in [Shrapnel Maps](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Quick Note About the Think Source

My dreams are not worth a halfpenny:  
a battery cut in two, eighty orange roses,  
and old boyfriend in a new car of the kind  
he would never drive. Fortunately for us,  
the universe is not that complicated:  
eventually, words like *torpor* and *muddle*  
came into being, and then torpid, muddled  
accounts of the universe took over the populace,  
many of whom died while it was snowing.  
There is always someone willing to tell you  
who they were, though it takes a little time  
to find the professional, but much less than if  
you had to do the reading yourself. If you are  
planning on being born, you should know there was  
a primordial abundance of helium, if something remains  
in the same position for nine consecutive days  
it is safe to assume it has passed, and that  
oleanders really do grow along the Oxus,  
which is a river. After that you are free to pursue  
the violent activity of happiness. But for the universe,  
after the first three minutes nothing of interest  
occurred for 700,000 years: it just went on cooling  
and expanding, as it were asleep on a premium mattress,  
until it felt cold enough to wake up and make stars.  
The rest is almost history: volcanic holes, small  
French paintings, one-eyed bats, a handwritten note  
wedged between the doors of a church. And oh, one  
more thing: when asked, if you say "I do not dance,"  
the next day an infant is born without feet.

Mary Ruefle  
308

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<sup>308</sup> Mary Ruefle, "Quick Note About the Think Source," *The American Poetry Review*, collected in *Indeed I Was Pleased with the World*, Carnegie Mellon University Press



## Ballad from the Soundhole of an Unstrung Guitar

The best I ever wrote was in an attic.  
No chair. Manual typewriter on an upended box.  
No screen on the lone window, which I removed.  
Bats flew through.

I woke up one night and Blue was in bed with me.  
Nah, I said, and he put on his wire-rimmed glasses and left.  
Somehow, I ended up with two kittens. Littermates.  
I wonder how they lived and died, where they went.

The only furniture was the mattress on the floor.  
A wooden box full of someone's Mardi Gras beads.  
No ethics. No lock on the door.  
No worries about vermin, rabies, fleas.

Where did I pee in the middle of the night?  
There must have been a bathroom down those narrow stairs.  
A shower somewhere.  
A gold shower curtain laced with mold.

Blue once told me I walked in on him peeing and I laughed.  
That it ruined his life.  
Well Jesus, I'm sorry.  
I would never have apologized back then.

I knew no forms.  
Just a swarm of bees in the rafters who agreed to leave me be.  
I made a line break when I took a drag on my Salem Light.  
Menthols were pure as poetry.

Where are the words now, that you wrote in that hellhole?  
On a typewriter ribbon I stuck in a knothole.

*Diane Seuss*  
309

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<sup>309</sup> [Diane Seuss](#), "[Ballad from the Soundhole of an Unstrung Guitar](#)," *The New Republic*, collected in *Modern Poetry*, [Graywolf Press](#)

## New Year's Day

The rain this morning falls  
on the last of the snow

and will wash it away. I can smell  
the grass again, and the torn leaves

being eased down into the mud.  
The few loves I've been allowed

to keep are still sleeping  
on the West Coast. Here in Virginia

I walk across the fields with only  
a few young cows for company.

Big-boned and shy,  
they are like girls I remember

from junior high, who never  
spoke, who kept their heads

lowered and their arms crossed against  
their new breasts. Those girls

are nearly forty now. Like me,  
they must sometimes stand

at a window late at night, looking out  
on a silent backyard, at one

rusting lawn chair and the sheer walls  
of other people's houses.

They must lie down some afternoons  
and cry hard for whoever used

to make them happiest,  
and wonder how their lives

have carried them  
this far without ever once

explaining anything. I don't know  
why I'm walking out here

with my coat darkening  
and my boots sinking in, coming up

with a mild sucking sound  
I like to hear. I don't care

where those girls are now.  
Whatever they've made of it

they can have. Today I want  
to resolve nothing.

I only want to walk  
a little longer in the cold

blessing of the rain,  
and lift my face to it.

*Kim Addonizio*

310

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<sup>310</sup> [Kim Addonizio](#), "[New Year's Day](#)," *The Pinch*, collected in *Tell Me*, BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Queer Benediction

Herbert lived across the street with his mother and his aunt. He took a lot of baths then sat on the steps with his hair in a towel, swami-style. He smoked a lot, too, and held a Chesterfield between thumb and forefinger, palm up. “As they do,” he said, “on the continent.” He was twenty-eight years old and didn’t have a job.

My mother told me to never use the bathroom at Herbert’s or go into the garage with him alone. I could sit on the porch with Aunt Mabel. but when she went inside for more lemonade Herbert always talked about the poet Shelley—the genius. Or he might ask me to sit half in sun half in shade and turn just so.

In our town, the men worked and drank. Coming home from the tavern once my father charged the porch, tore me from the striped canvas chair, and held me up like a lantern. That was the night Mrs. Alexander threw her husband’s things on the lawn. All the neighbors gathered to look at the long johns, work shoes, half a carton of Kools, and the dead rooster her husband had raised from a chick.

Herbert put his palm on my head. “Oh, honey,” he said, “promise me you’ll get out of this town.”

*Ron Koertge*  
311

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<sup>311</sup> [Ron Koertge](#), “[Queer Benediction](#),” collected in [Fever](#), Red Hen Press

from “San Marco Suite—after Fra Angelico”

Cell 7: The Mocking of Christ

The pages of the book have turned  
to stone and cracked, but Saint Dominic,  
seated on the floor to the right, reads on  
while Mary sits alone  
on the left, *bella cosa*  
beatified—not to be confused  
with *bellicose*, inclined to start  
quarrels or wars, like the bodiless hands  
of the Roman soldiers, positioned  
around the face of Christ.

*Kosmos*,

the Greeks would call it, everything  
in order like a chess game before  
it begins, but *no architecture*  
*can be truly noble which is not*  
*imperfect*, Ruskin advised,  
because it does not resemble  
life—Venetian palazzos, gladioli—  
one third in full bloom, one third  
spent, and one third on  
the way. Blindfolded

above and behind

Mary and the Saint, Christ  
is the apex of their triangle, check  
of their mate, point  
toward which everything  
retreats—even the gaze  
of Mary, although for now  
it is turned away while she  
touches her cheek to make  
sure she is real.

Angie Estes

312

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<sup>312</sup> Angie Estes, “San Marco Suite—after Fra Angelico (Cell 7: The Mocking of Christ),” *Slate*, collected in *Voice-Over*, Oberlin College Press

## Post-Factual Love Poem

I'm thinking of the boiling sea  
and the dream in which  
all the fish were singing.  
I want to wake up with my heart  
not aching like death,  
but I am always falling  
in to terror. I'm a good person.  
I grieve to appropriate degrees.  
I mourn this season. This moment.  
I mourn for the polar bear  
drifting out of history  
on a wedge of melting ice.  
For the doughnut shop  
which reached an end  
yesterday, after decades and decades.  
I'm thinking of the light  
at dawn. Of the woman  
in Alabama who ordered  
six songbirds from a catalog because  
she was lonely. Or  
heartbroken. I'm thinking  
of the four that came  
dead in the box, mangled.  
Of the two that are  
missing. I want to tell you  
that they were spotted  
in the humid air  
winging above a mall.  
I want to tell you a story  
about the time leaves fell from  
the trees all at once. I am  
thinking of cataclysm.  
More than anything, I want to tell you  
this. I want to disappear  
in the night. I want  
the night to vanish from memory.  
I want to tell you  
how this happened.

*Paul Guest*

313

Friday

*Is this a story  
or a problem,*  
a colleague said.  
I'm dead!  
Which is to say,

living  
for her shade.  
I switch off  
my face,  
and chat,

*Sorry.*  
*Having issues.*  
Anything  
but that...

I'm looking  
to stream.  
I settle on  
*I Killed My Mother.*  
Rotten Tomatoes'

pithy  
description?  
"A young homosexual  
has problems  
with his mother,"

which is also  
every film ever  
when I watch.  
The first film  
I ever saw

was *Citizen Kane*,  
nice start but also  
are you kidding,  
a lesson  
in all-

downhill-  
from-here—  
it was at the  
Kentucky  
Theatre,

a palace  
with delicious  
Orange Whip.  
I was six.  
The first

gay thing  
I remember  
other than  
the longing  
was seeing

Rock Hudson  
on a stretcher  
on the news.  
I didn't know  
I knew...

*Have a great  
weekend,*  
we end  
our e-mails,  
late in the day.

*Great.*  
Like the  
weekend,  
modifiers  
have a way

of taking us  
farther  
away:  
the long  
walk;

the afternoon  
read.  
Regret.  
Marooned  
on my shelves,

like Paul  
Monette.  
All  
my ambitious  
friends want



to talk about  
is joy.  
Oh boy:  
The End.  
Maybe that's

fire,  
maybe satire—  
so much rolls  
off the tongue.  
There is always

the distance  
to revise.  
Look how  
I'm undoing  
my own ruin

now.

*Randall Mann*  
314

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<sup>314</sup> [Randall Mann](#), "[Friday](#)," [Narrative](#), collected in [Deal: New and Selected Poems](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## History of a Kiss

And, if they are lovers—  
is this the first kiss

or their mother's final  
sparkling sorrow?

The children with their hats  
cast down

cannot recall  
the man's calm eyes, his animal

coat but all their lives  
the taint of his cologne—

cinnamon and thyme—  
will keep them

seeking love's illusions,  
committing all its crimes.

*Susan Rich*  
315

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<sup>315</sup> [Susan Rich](#), "[History of a Kiss](#)," *Iota Journal*, collected in [Cloud Pharmacy](#), [White Pine Press](#)

We've come a long way toward getting nowhere

My obsession with Jews is an obsession  
with one Jew. I look at her walking  
and wonder what anyone could have  
against Jews, at her sleeping  
or hunting for her keys in the morning,  
which she does often, lose her keys  
when she has to go to work, suggesting  
she doesn't want to, and maybe this  
is the problem with Jews:  
they don't want to leave. Or they eat  
lots of chicken. Or worry the black  
of their skirts doesn't match the black  
of their tops. Or like children more  
than babies. Or fret over their mothers.  
My Jewish problem is figuring out  
why America in 2016 has a dab  
of 1930s German Fascism to it—  
people at political rallies  
yelling crap about the Jews.  
If I thought it would do any good,  
I'd go to Topeka or wherever  
and bring Eve with her troubled wardrobe  
and her love of chicken and fascination  
with children between two and thirteen,  
when they can talk but before  
they've begun planning the murder  
of their parents, bring her face-to-face  
with the screamers and ask, So these  
are the freckles you hate? I would—we have  
a lot of Amex points and I've never been  
to Topeka or wherever, and I'm sure wherever  
is very nice. And whenever we travel  
to wherever, whatever people say  
and however they say it, Eve's freckles  
will be the same, kind of cute  
and kind of Jewish,  
just like all her other parts  
that do and do not have freckles,  
in an inventory I alone  
get to take, though trust me—  
after repeated inspection, I can attest  
that underneath it all, she, like many  
of the people you know or are,  
is ticklish, wrinkly, sexy, scarred—  
since Jews really are relentless  
when it comes to being human.

*Bob Hicok*

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<sup>316</sup> [Bob Hicok](#), "[We've come a long way toward getting nowhere](#)," collected in [Hold](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Fear

*I am jet fuel and six miles long. I am bad business. I make the rooms grow smaller. Underneath my shirt is another shirt and under that the cloudbanks clang their worksong. They pitch their weight in droves. This is a cold shelf, Sport. A struck bell. I gloat when I say this. I shine in the frost. You are a ham tied up in string. You are pineapples and cherries and ham on a plate at dinnertime. Fate eats you up. We rub against the facts now. My face is a glass jar. My heart is applesauce and a cold spoon. I clear the decks and spend my leverage. The rest is dazzle. You are an obstacle course and I am a pair of dice. You hop, like a rabbit, cabbage to cabbage. I win by a landslide. I smear the mirror and distort your face. You are the flipped coin and I am the outcome. I don't decide, I collect; thumbed scale or not. You hit the ground, or so you say. You can't unknow the facts so you run faster. You, the boy from bruised tomorrow, under the eaves where everything gets put down. I am a lamp, you are a gun. You spend your bullets on a hat, I burn when touched.*

Richard Siken

317

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<sup>317</sup> [Richard Siken](#), "[Fear](#)," [The Harvard Advocate](#)

As Antigone— [I am tired of everyone]

I am tired of everyone  
telling me what to do.

For as long as I can remember  
my mother told me how

I should feel, what to eat,  
who to date, what clothes

looked good (and bad)  
on my shape—which colors

I could pile in front of stunned  
cashiers. During the first

hurricane, she said I would die  
if I didn't listen to her orders.

I grew up confusing opinion  
with oracle. She reminded me

all men are dangerous, each time  
I left the house alone. Even after

I moved four states away for college,  
she sent me newspaper clippings—

warnings in the mail. She believed  
I was safely married to a surgery

resident and drove five hours  
to sit by my hospital bed and watch

as IV fluids hydrated me.  
That winter, I wanted to end

my pregnancy, after losing  
thirty-three pounds in seven weeks.

She joined my husband's campaign  
to keep me sick and expecting.

I visit a friend I haven't seen in years,  
and confide how afraid I am

for my disabled daughter when I'm dead.  
Her husband tells me my daughter

is happy and oblivious and she  
wouldn't know if she were being raped

as if she has less sentience than a dog  
chained to a pole in an overgrown yard.

*Jennifer Franklin*  
318

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<sup>318</sup> [Jennifer Franklin](#), "[As Antigone— \[I am tired of everyone\]](#)," *Vox Populi*, collected in [If Some God Shakes Your House](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Something, Not a Love Poem

At midnight I eat your expired *for him* vitamins.  
Email with its body as the subject line.  
The cut on my thumb from a knife. Or was it paper?  
My mom sends me floss in the mail.  
The laugh we stained the streets with; the stumbled over sidewalk piss.  
The 2-year-old January to-do list in my coat pocket: *order furniture*.  
My back bedroom window asks my neighbor for intimacy.  
The man I sit next to on the bus tells me he always wanted to marry an Asian woman.  
Face ID doesn't recognize me when I cry.  
I paid \$17.60 in postage and the frame arrived broken.  
After the party, you're still the answer to my security questions.  
I sleep beside your disassembled bed.  
Change saved address on Google Maps.  
I subscribe to the eBird rare bird alert for anywhere but here.

Stephanie Choi  
319

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<sup>319</sup> [Stephanie Choi](#), "[Something, Not a Love Poem](#)," [Electric Literature](#), collected in [The Longest Nois](#), University of Iowa Press



## The Promise

In the dream I had when he came back not sick  
but whole, and wearing his winter coat,

he looked at me as though he couldn't speak, as if  
there were a law against it, a membrane he couldn't break.

His silence was what he could not  
not do, like our breathing in this world, like our living,

as we do, in time.

And I told him: I'm reading all this Buddhist stuff,

and listen, we don't die when we die. Death is an event,  
a threshold we pass through. We go on and on

and into light forever.

And he looked down, and then back up at me. It was the look we'd pass

across the kitchen table when Dad was drunk again and dangerous,  
the level look that wants to tell you something,

in a crowded room, something important, and can't.

*Marie Howe*

320

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<sup>320</sup> [Marie Howe](#), "[The Promise](#)," collected in [What the Living Do](#), [W. W. Norton](#)

from “Couplets”

Now and then, I’d get the strange impression  
that *she was me*. A stab of chthonic recognition

would set off a little spasm in my eye.  
Sometimes from far away I’d spy

her slanted walk or messy hair and every muscle  
in my body would contract. At school,

while my students bent over their exams,  
I’d scroll through photos on her Instagram,

the fabric growing damp between my legs  
where her finger liked to press

itself inside me like a key. An undiscovered  
ancestor. An eidolon. An isomer.

And an uncanny sense of unity,  
to love in her what had always seemed deformity

in me. To yield. To feel the snugness of the fit.  
To turn the lock. To hear the little click.

*Maggie Millner*  
321

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<sup>321</sup> [Maggie Millner](#), “[Couplets](#),” [n+1](#), collected in [The Best American Poetry 2024](#), [Simon & Schuster](#)

## Making Out at the Movies

*After Frank O'Hara*

There was always gum involved,  
back row under the projector.

Sometimes I wanted to, sometimes  
I didn't but let it happen anyway because

once you agreed, those were the rules.  
Sometimes I "went to the bathroom"

and put a coin in the Pac Man machine  
in the lobby instead, that dark,

confetti-print carpet smelling of stale butter,  
the concession stand cashiers outside for a smoke

or leaning conspiratorially against  
the counter, facing somewhere else,

I didn't care, away from me.  
The boy had been brought up in church.

I hadn't, but that didn't save me  
feeling shame all the time.

I was so absorbent. I remember  
the smell of his saliva around my lips, scraps

of dialogue from whatever B-movie  
we'd bought tickets to

because it would be mostly empty  
and was playing at the right time.

God was everywhere but with me,  
and I was superstitious.

Kids of America, let yourself go to *good* movies!  
There are things you can absorb

without meaning to, like that you can tell sincerity  
by its sound, or that protagonists

are mostly white, or that there are whole genres  
where the woman evaporates

during the good parts, or that people usually know  
what they want. After,

it was always a relief to emerge  
from the over-airconditioned building

to thaw in the steamy Florida night, frogs  
and insects setting up an electric throb

from the retention pond between the theater  
and the strip mall. I could go home, then,

having played my part convincingly,  
my face in the dark: screen, projector, dust.

*Margaret Ray*  
322

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322 [Margaret Ray](#), "[Making Out at the Movies](#)," [Southeast Review](#), collected in [Good Grief, the Ground](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## On the Street of Divine Love

I'm walking down the *Vincolo del Amore Divino* in Rome  
with a girl I hardly know, behind us the Spanish Steps,  
Keats's words swimming inside me like thousands of fish  
in a transparent tank of skin, and if his breath lingered,  
it's gone now, mixed with the *sieg heils* of Mussolini,  
the ecumenical denunciations of 15 popes, the pidgin  
of the Japanese American soldiers from Hawaii  
who liberated Rome but weren't allowed to march into the city  
during the day, the cries of the baffled Romans who saw them  
and shouted, *Cinese, Cinese*, and the millions of tourists  
aiming cameras with lenses the size of a whale's penis  
saying to the mystified ticket sellers, *Is this a museum?*  
What isn't a museum? My body being Exhibit A. Step right up,  
ladies and gents, a once beautiful specimen  
broken down by Time and *vino rosso*. I have a lion's teeth  
and a mockingbird's tongue, 400 million items  
clogging my curio cabinet brain, and no strategy to clear the clutter.  
Oh, no, my dear doctor, I am adding to the detritus,  
as when watching an infomercial at three in the morning, and a woman  
has cured herself of a horrible disease with a ten-point program:  
eating organic and drinking more water, yoga, fresh air,  
but the one that really throws me is to forgive everyone  
who has ever done me wrong, which I know is right but so very hard to do,  
and I go through all my enemies and wish them well,  
but that's not the same as forgiving them, because wishing them well  
is in the future whereas forgiveness is anchored in the past,  
which is a continent of jungles, the Gobi Desert, and London bombed  
by the blitz, or so I'm thinking while walking in Rome,  
and we pass a shop of gowns so frothy and pink that wearing them  
would transfer you to another plane of existence,  
as in a few days when a tsunami will rage through the Indian Ocean,  
and Katrina is in the offing, but of all the gods, Jehovah  
must sometimes show his wrath, for he is a jealous god,  
as is Shiva stirring up his mayhem in the waters of Earth,  
but I'm walking down the street of divine love,  
*Il Vincolo del Amore Divino*, and I want a God  
big enough to love those who don't believe in him,  
because isn't it enough just to walk this world  
with its psychedelic wah wah, its lightning storms and squalor,  
Paris and Calcutta, so I'm walking down the street of divine love,  
listening to Son House sing "John the Revelator"—*Who's that writing?*  
*John the Revelator. Who's that writing?* It's Rimbaud  
on his drunken boat, Noah railing on his ark, the Emperor Domitian  
staging naval battles in the flooded Piazza Navona,  
and yesterday I saw Caravaggio's *St. Matthew and the Angel*,  
the otherworldly creature dipping down to tap  
the former tax collector on his noggin with some divine inspiration.  
Where is my angel? For I'm on the street of divine love,

and if this pavement isn't God, then I have nothing to pin my hopes on  
like a big orchid corsage before the senior prom, so I am walking,  
with the Visigoths rampaging through Rome, *gli fascisti*  
being harangued by Mussolini, popes lining up like Barbie dolls  
on Bernini's loggia, Severn burying his friend out by the pyramid  
beyond Rome's walls, where some ragged bird is perched  
on a palm tree, singing his heart out for everyone walking alone  
through the alleys and fields of this broken night on Earth.

*Barbara Hamby*  
323

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<sup>323</sup> Barbara Hamby, "[On the Street of Divine Love](#)," *Five Points*, collected in [On the Street of Divine Love](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

## Dinner Party

At the Chicago home of two of the film's well-to-do backers, Irish Catholics.  
There was talk of the baby their daughter had adopted from Uzbekistan.  
The trauma of not being held.  
There are not enough women in the orphanages  
to hold all the babies, so they put them in one crib.  
The night outside was black  
and I felt the chill inside my womb.  
There was a closet to hang our coats.  
The director, absent from the table,  
is tense when his wife is on set.  
The hostess took our coats.  
They had a white dog four feet tall  
with a coat you could find on a Bergdorf floor.  
The Bulgarian washed vegetables barefoot.  
When we embraced, she smelled my perfume.  
"Look how beautiful your woman is!"  
A remark about my collarbones.  
There was talk about filmmaking in Occupied Palestine.  
The trained fighters hired for security  
ran off leaving the actors in combat.  
They had to push the car through the desert.  
The meal was decadent and the hostess pleasant.  
There were collard greens, corn, a roast.  
The hostess said they wanted an American feast.  
And Jack with his white beard and iridescent teeth at the head of the table.  
The Palestinian went out into the frost to smoke,  
stepped in the tundra dog's shit.  
There was talk about the gentrification of Eastside Los Angeles,  
the finest sushi in Little Tokyo.  
The cinematographer requested roasted vegetables.  
A rhubarb pie was served.  
There was a large bowl of tropical fruit.  
The wooded suburbs of Chicago  
are so dark you could die  
if a deer runs in front of your car.  
The house was recently remodeled.  
The Bulgarian actress pretty without makeup.  
The director was off on a marital dilemma.  
All the actors had spouses.  
Instructions how to kiss, blocking  
can make anyone fall in love.  
There was talk about the promise  
of the young director who sat beside me.  
There were three Palestinians, two Irish, the Bulgarian.  
The cinematographer was Chinese American.  
The AD was white and gay.  
The house was so big I got lost in the powder room.  
It had been a tough night on set.

The scene called for nudity.  
An intimacy coach was brought on set.  
The director is having marital problems.  
There aren't enough women to hold the babies.  
A letter arrived and I saw him smell it.  
We smoke in frost and step in shit.  
The Akita is angelic.  
There was talk about the rental market.  
A stucco Mediterranean  
true to the Golden Age of 1920s Hollywood.  
He's a promising young man  
who directs me.  
I am a decent woman.  
I have scandalized a few.  
Everyone fell silent.  
The rhubarb pie was served too hot.  
The hostess was pleasant.  
There was a coatroom and a remark  
about my collarbones.  
A decadent American feast.  
The Palestinian fought off three men,  
or so he says.  
Being held is a trauma.  
One crib held all the babies in Uzbekistan.  
When we embraced, she smelled tropical.  
Nudity was called for.  
The Palestinian was humiliated.  
A car could kill you in the dark.  
Not while your wife is on set.  
Washed face and barefoot.  
It had been a tough night.  
We held hands the whole way up the cobbled path.

*Jessica Abughattas*  
324

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<sup>324</sup> [Jessica Abughattas](#), "[Dinner Party](#)," [Literary Hub](#), collected in [Strip](#), [The University of Arkansas Press](#)



## The Father of Lies

I have a garden with nothing  
But barbed wire and cinder blocks.  
My bees go around on crutches.

When they buzz,  
It's a lazy afternoon  
In the meadow,  
When they go gathering  
With their hats,  
The sky is cloudless,  
Birds sing.

The honey in the black glove  
Is golden.  
Give it to a child  
To lick,  
Give it to his dying mother  
Lying in the shade  
Of the old  
Sleepwalking tree.

Time is slow. My bees  
Are busy  
And their eyes are closed.

*Charles Simic*  
325

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<sup>325</sup> [Charles Simic](#), "[The Father of Lies](#)," collected in [Walking the Black Cat](#), [Ecco](#)

## Bad Hobby

From his pocket, my dad pulls  
A roll of wooden toothpicks  
Bound with a rubber band.

We're driving to the V.A.  
To have his toenails trimmed,  
As we do every three months,

"A standing appointment,"  
I used to say to him,  
But he no longer gets the joke,

Asking only why I can't  
Do it myself. And why won't I?  
I've catheterized him,

Twice, but can't bring myself  
To tend his feet, so like mine,  
Wide with high arches—

Ballerina feet, my mom  
Called them, none of us dancers.  
Now that he's lived with me

For almost as long as he lived  
With her, I'm beginning  
To look like Mom—pissed.

The podiatry techs are always good-  
Natured, thanking Dad for his service,  
Raising their voices when

I remind them he can't hear.  
The big toenail on his left foot  
Looks to be made of horse hoof.

They cut and file but never  
Hurt him. Some vets smoke outside  
The building, waiting on rides.

*Don't ever smoke, Kath,*  
Dad says, *it's a bad hobby,*  
Scrambling his words, forgetting

Our ages and both our pasts.  
The toothpicks he saves and reuses,  
Even when broken, he calls

*A bad hobby.* And the drinking  
He once was well enough to do.  
Vets here age out at Korea;

Most are Vietnam, Gulf, Iraq,  
Afghanistan. Since  
The suspension of the draft,

Only the poorest of us  
Serve. Like sports, the art of war  
Holds little interest for me,

Though both are everywhere on  
Display and, in theory, I get it:  
Offense, defense, spectacle,

Competition. The Renaissance  
Painter, Uccello, was commissioned  
By a nobleman to paint the famous

Triptych of the Battle of San Romano,  
A skirmish really, between  
City-states, fought by mercenaries.

More than the birds he was  
Nicknamed after, he loved linear  
Perspective, using mathematics

To create a three-dimensional  
Effect. The work hangs  
In three European countries now,

In keeping with its divisive history,  
And is considered Uccello's  
Masterpiece. Painted with egg

Tempera on poplar, it reminds me  
Of the tarot, with its broken staves,  
Like toothpicks, and sexy horses.

The gold leaf's intact  
On the bridles, but the silver  
Of the soldiers' armor has oxidized,

Darkening to ghostly shades.  
My mother's hobby was painting,  
Is how I know.

Uccello's daughter, a Carmelite  
Nun, was described by Vasari  
As "a daughter who knew how to

Draw." None of her work survives.  
Hobby derives from a Latin  
Diminutive for horse, from which

We get hobbyhorse, as in one man's  
Sport, another man's war.  
On the other hand, habit

Is defined as a sustained  
Appearance or condition, from *habeo*,  
Meaning "I have, hold, keep." Known,

In some cases, as hard to break  
Or more useful broken:  
A spirit, a promise, a horse.

*Kathy Fagan*

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<sup>326</sup> [Kathy Fagan](#), "[Bad Hobby](#)," [On the Seawall](#), collected in [Bad Hobby](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

It's just a flimsy mattress  
in a hookup motel, a night  
when the moon is a single stud  
in a leather sky. Just a bed  
smelling of spilled poppers,  
until two men enter.  
Then it's a story: one lays  
himself naked, face-down,  
offering his wrists, ankles  
to be rope-knotted, the thrill  
of seeing what exists after  
extremity. The movie's first  
image: a hand floating  
in a helpless river, cross-fading  
into a couple of male cops  
forcing two queer sex  
workers, their painted mouths.  
All sex is a body trying  
to tell a story with a hand  
over its mouth. Because this  
is erotic crime, what follows  
are hours of leather bar dancing,  
the ball-sweat skulking  
off the celluloid, and plenty  
of interrogation. The killer  
spreads like a plague—  
first one nondescript actor  
plays him, then another,  
until the undercover cop  
catches the serial virus, this  
being 1980, the end of innocent  
beds, of innocuous jocks,  
foam parties, condomless  
trade. As if the director—  
in conjuring the end of taboo  
in strobe light, in dim urinals,  
in park bushes, under the  
spinning doom of moon—  
in trying to make us subject  
has subjected us to ravage instead.  
My friend says I'm dramatic,  
says you can't blame art  
for epidemiology. Forgive me.  
I have come here to the river,  
to the bed, to the foaming edge  
of time, to 1980, a year before  
the first reported cases. I have

come with my one good hand  
and all my blood and I will say  
anything to save us.

*James Allen Hall*  
327

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<sup>327</sup> [James Allen Hall](#), "[Erotic Crime Thriller](#)," [Pleiades](#), collected in [Romantic Comedy](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Tosca

My sister held on to our old turntable  
and all the old records we listened to  
through the long Italian opera  
  
of our childhood. So tonight  
we sit in the living room with some wine  
and Puccini, as the needle scratches  
  
the black door of the past, the air comes to life  
with that lovely, cornball melodrama,  
and our father is sitting in his chair,  
  
ice cubes clinking in his scotch,  
and our mother is in the kitchen  
trying to be quiet, trying not to disturb  
  
Maria Callas as she explains  
to Tito Gobbi that she has lived for art  
and she has lived for love, but it's hard  
  
to fry pork chops and dice an onion  
without making a certain amount of noise,  
and pretty soon my father is shouting at her,  
  
he's trying to listen to the goddamn music  
for Christ's sake, could she for once  
show some goddamn respect,  
  
and our mother says nothing,  
it's just the same old argument  
between ghosts, after all—the music  
  
won't let them sleep—although  
it has my sister in tears  
and even Tosca has begun to weep.

*George Bilgere*  
328

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<sup>328</sup> George Bilgere, "Tosca," collected in [Haywire](#), Utah State University Press

## Terms of Agreement

The man who described himself as a contemporary American novelist  
in his biography for the *Nextdoor* neighbors forum hasn't mowed a blade  
of his lawn since May, but who cares about that when there are cost  
-effective generics to assess, easements to criticize, balking about frontage  
which makes nobody else recall nights in the Winchester Mall overflow  
lot, the one never used because there were never crowds. Oh, the fronting  
executed there. I briefly showed a class a snapshot of some jeans noted  
in a poem (I once owned a pair) and my evaluations shuddered. However  
we soon moved on to discussing fates of wild horses, which banished  
all memories of distressed denim. The woman who typed "HI" in response  
to the heated discussion of chipmunk proliferation, or the headstrong  
babysitter who uploaded a pic of herself eating two ice cream cones at once:  
instantly forgotten. None of them knew I was surrounded by couch  
cushions, regarding a sepia portrait of a cherished ex like it was newfound  
currency. Back then I had a vague notion that fifteen years later we  
would be separated by amateur divorces and lactose intolerance and miles.  
Warmed by the heat of our respective pit bulls, we would hang on to  
imaginary locketts while reading (again) *Cold Mountain*, like it was secretly  
the story of us. But the real story was why the intersection of Rhoades  
and Maple was flooding. Perhaps the new mini strip mall, or illegal dumping,  
which is how you described it when I dropped my big salad and ghosted  
contrary to the terms of our agreement, which were written in gross cursive.  
Sometimes I yearn to fill out the rest of my bio, but right now it's mostly  
symbols: a wave, a skull, a shark, a daisy that might look nice behind an ear.

Mary Biddinger  
329

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<sup>329</sup> [Mary Biddinger](#), "[Terms of Agreement](#)," [Sugar House Review](#)



## Haunted

Nature needs confusing,  
heat filling the pumpkin-studded street  
with the smell of rot and ruin

so I take the books I don't believe in  
and shred them to snow,  
blowing them like sleet  
down a lane named  
for a tree eaten to oblivion  
by a bug-hungry blight.

I have to think that something can matter  
in a world I'm old enough to own

and take up smoking again like a job,  
not out of love but to be reminded of  
the satisfaction of a plan  
enacted. What else can I do

with my homeless heart?  
I've shopped it around, whored  
its red flexing, dangled its candy  
for bites. I loved a person

into existence and yet I sleep steady  
through each silent night.  
Light dips. Wolf on a skateboard,

tiny devil in a sugared dervish.  
Their bags sulk, the chocolate  
melts. My house shrinks,

lightless on the electric street.  
The deep night comes that I've waited for—  
one hand an apple,  
in the other a gun.

*Erin Adair-Hodges*  
330

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<sup>330</sup> [Erin Adair-Hodges](#), "[Haunted](#)," collected in [Every Form of Ruin](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Rime of the Ancient Mariners

What kind of people spend all day  
on the most subtle signs of displeasure

from everyone else  
with all the sorrow of Berryman

that cherished alcoholic, drunk-dialing his student in the middle of the night  
and threatening to kill her—

his fragile and unending barrel  
of shame that, when opened,  
proved to be unoccupied.

Save him for the one hawk, or

the clean gray wing he couldn't handle, the bane  
of his existence was his tiny

mouth that was stuck to him—

Now, tell me, what kind of person  
says: *tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow*

every day before she falls asleep,  
like a prayer in reverse,  
like the ancient mariner  
whose immediate guilt

is useless,  
selfish even,  
ignoring everything else

and managing, always, to make everything  
worse. Tell me, who is that looking out

from that crow's nest  
from that widow's walk?

What kind of person  
can be found standing in one spot in the snow  
until all the skin is gone

and there's only a dismal luster, breaking apart?

*Bianca Stone*

331

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<sup>331</sup> Bianca Stone, "[Rime of the Ancient Mariners](#)," collected in [What is Otherwise Infinite](#), Tin House Books

All I Want a Poem to Be Is the Solo in *The Wind Cries Mary*

the moment Jimi's voice returns  
*the traffic lights say turn blue tomorrow*

bruise and reverb  
hyacinth jewelizing our doorstep

turquoise kettle whispering obscenities  
to the crooked sieve of herbs

I douse with boiled water  
like an orgasm in a hot tub

yarrow and hyssop bubbling  
sugary feedback loops

All I want is Joni Mitchell singing  
*All I really, really want*

as my daughter jumps on our couch cushions  
torn up and padding the floor

I want our house to be the geode  
in Joni's voice, both opaque and translucent

what I am saying is I want a poem  
quiet as the side of my mother's face

driving us to the rich people mall  
as Lou Reed's "Perfect Day"

cracks over suburban streets  
how when I pull broken glass

from the flower beds  
before planting Pink Wave petunias

it's like hearing him sing  
*you're going to reap just what you sow*

and isn't mothering at the end of the world  
like this, cutting your hands open

on the trash-woven soil  
before making it bloom,

isn't it going for a long drive  
so your child can look out the window

dreaming in the backseat,  
while you weep quietly, humming  
along to your favorite song.

*Kendra DeColo*  
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<sup>332</sup> [Kendra DeColo, "All I Want a Poem to Be Is the Solo in \*The Wind Cries Mary\*," \*The Ilanot Review\*](#)

Dear Sylvia,

I also had a Mademoiselle summer,  
I mean a summer in New York,  
though I was only 9, and you were 21,  
and you were writing for *Mademoiselle*  
and I was only being called one  
by my grandpa who addressed me  
as Mademoiselle Lorraine because  
I wanted to go to France.  
How did I invent this dream for myself?  
I thought Paris was black and white  
with splashes of pink. One thing that's real  
is that when Marie-Claire picked us up  
from Charles de Gaulle, she definitely said,  
*Look out your windows for rabbits.*  
I was sitting on the floor of the van  
she'd borrowed to pick up Les Americains,  
but I got up on my knees to see all  
the bunnies. I haven't eaten since Tuesday  
because I have to have a colonoscopy.  
It feels like floating in a light I think  
you would call *blue and planetary*.

During my Mademoiselle summer,  
my brother and I stayed three weeks  
with our dead father's parents.  
I had brought only one skirt  
that I didn't know I'd be required  
to draw lines of water over with an old  
toothbrush every night and hang  
in the bathroom while I showered  
so that it would be wrinkle-free  
for 8:00 a.m. mass, where I accompanied  
Nanny while my brother and grandpa slept.  
Apparently, men don't need to pray  
for forgiveness. The skirt was white.  
If I'd known, I'd have brought a different  
one so I wouldn't have looked every morning  
like an advertisement for purity,  
a state you both desired (baths)  
and despised (sex).  
During your *Mademoiselle* summer,  
you threw all your skirts out the window  
of the Barbizan Hotel.  
My grandfather was strange.  
That's what people say when they don't want to  
speak ill of the dead.  
He used to cover up the television  
with a sheet and then sit with us

on the plastic-covered couch until  
we obliged him by laughing.  
At every meal, he announced  
that this was our home. This was frightening.  
On the subway, Nanny pulled a roll  
of saran wrap out of her purse  
and wrapped me in it because I was cold.  
Once on the street, she pointed at a man  
and yelled, *That man wants to rape you!*  
I felt sorry for the man who put his hands up  
and fled. Perhaps he was Everyman, and this  
was one of her lessons, but it felt too specific.  
I have to say though that it stuck. Whenever  
I see a man, I wrap myself in my grandmother's  
invisible plastic. Once in the subway,  
we saw a body. The police were taping off  
the area. There was blood around the head.  
It was like our trip to Brooklyn in 1979  
had been written to be written. Like the summer  
of 1953 when you began to break down.  
Today I am hungry in a way  
that makes me realize I have never been hungry.  
On the last day of fourth grade, my teacher told us  
she was moving to Australia.  
I went home and flung myself down on my bed  
and cried without thinking, *I'm going to cry now,*  
and thought, *oh so all that other crying was made up?*  
*This is finally it? Mrs. Welch?*

Laura Read

333

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<sup>333</sup> [Laura Read](#), "[Dear Sylvia](#)," [The Adroit Journal](#)

La Belle Dame Sans Merci

Wordless I've left many a lover.  
Sleeping in the house of a dead poet  
old love notes tumble headlong  
out of books like love ran so common no one noticed  
any more. He and his dead wife, mad  
for each other unto death. Their graves confirm:  
Here we were happy.  
What more could be said? On a first date, a woman quoted  
an anonymous source who'd warned her off me:  
You cut people out of your life without a word.  
I'll have to marry her, I thought, to prove otherwise.  
Soon I'll be a divorcée. Not a good wife  
to my husband, though I coddled  
his writing more than my own—historically  
the wife's obligation. The dead poet's wife  
wished to be a writer.  
Her diaries fell through the rusted-out floor  
of a cabinet carted to the dump.  
My husband and I couldn't shake  
the intuition that I gave him the best room, best view  
because I believed my words needed  
less midwifery. Correctly.  
Sometimes people are born hard-hearted. My mother  
deemed me so. To save me from the sin of vanity, she never  
said a word about my face till I was fifteen. As I bungled  
repairing a toaster, she burst out, It's a good thing  
you're so beautiful. Men will always help you.  
I've been raped once by a friend, once by a lover, once by an enemy.  
My lovers are natural anthropologists. They've taught me.  
I'm prone to closing my eyes when talking.  
I draw my hair over my face.  
You can never get a good look at the whole of me.  
It's seductive, people accuse.  
Once, a man with blue eyes forced me to stare into them.  
He held my chin.  
He said Baby as if it were the loveliest name.  
I complained I felt naked.  
I lied. Nakedness  
is nothing, and this—  
as if the sound shut off, my mouth  
still moving, as if I'd gone  
underwater, babbling till drowned, as if in some hallucinatory  
nightmare I'd no control of my meaning, if I meant,  
and would know my words only by what returned  
in his eyes. I wrenched myself back under cover.  
Some animals there are with eyes so strong  
they have no fear of sunlight, Petrarch claims.  
Inhuman grace. No mercy.

Louise recommended analysis because in analysis  
you're not supposed to look at the person you're talking to.  
Isn't that the same as poetry? She didn't laugh.  
A poem, like a dream, chooses  
its own faces and the poet, the dreamer, faces up.  
All times I turn my eyes in your direction,  
one dead lover writes,  
who've made me quite alone, lost to the world.  
The first time my father left, I said too much.  
That'd be Freud's explanation for my errors in love,  
I joked to my therapist. I watched  
the square that held my face  
in the upper-right corner of the screen.  
She asked, What did you say?  
I chased after his truck on my bike.  
It was July. I was barefoot. The handlebar streamers glittered.  
My eyes went white. If you don't count the ghosts,  
I'm alone in this house. I'm lonely  
for you, you a convention in love poems, you  
a blue-eyed man who's seen enough.  
Silence is a form like any other.  
Outside, a rain so fine it's almost  
soundless needles into spikes of wild ginger.

*Elisa Gonzalez*  
334

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<sup>334</sup> [Elisa Gonzalez](#), "[La Belle Dame Sans Merci](#)," [Blackbird](#)



## The Last Undeveloped Land

His mother is getting over pneumonia  
and still smoking. I say, "There's nothing  
worth slaving over anymore. This vacuum,  
for instance, who's to say it even works?  
When I went to prom I had a ten p.m. curfew,  
look where that got me. I hung dead roses  
in my room for years. Later when the phone  
never rang, I dreamt of boys in T-shirts  
that read I RESORT TO LONG LAPSES OF SILENCE.  
They were intentional. The boys came around later  
when I'd stopped thinking of them. We kissed  
behind the hospital in a Colorado wheat field,  
the last bit of prairie still in view of the mountains."

*Bethany Schultz Hurst*

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<sup>335</sup> [Bethany Schultz Hurst](#), "[The Last Undeveloped Land](#)," collected in [Miss Lost Nation](#), [Anhinga Press](#)

from “Forms and materials”

Form is not

my body, its bodily problems  
by fortune a brief phone call or uncomplicated

doctor’s visit. For years I dutifully followed  
its directions, slotted limbs into the games

you may have tried, too, the blood-rust  
carny rides and ball toss, bored fellow teen

at the helm. I didn’t complain back then.  
I needed affection like I deserved

to sit first-chair violin, to win the masonic  
scholarship. In hooking up I earned a Fulbright.

For some sex is shameful, but like later  
things I tried, drugging or extreme dieting,

this wouldn’t be a big deal to me,  
another example of socially condoned ways

to grow up. I don’t know enough  
about my ilk to call that normal,

but I sat in a lot of leatherette Hondas  
making alpha, beta, and gamma plans to escape

being touched by boys. More than once,  
an older woman asked if I knew what I was,

a dyke (she called herself), promising a slow  
start, that we hold hands to get into the bar

since I was only 17. I didn’t care—  
I wanted to sit with someone, talk semiotics

or Japanese film, prime numbers, Anthony Bourdain—  
and if a promise of sex got me close to that,

then okay.

My body was an entrance fee

for women, too, though I got spooked back  
to the boys who smell like pot roast

and deodorant and would one day want kids.  
I wanted a child, and like my math equations,

I knew what to do. You may have guessed,  
I allowed but one way to do things.

*Erin Hoover*  
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<sup>336</sup> [Erin Hoover](#), "[Forms and materials \[Form is not my body...\]](#)," [Northwest Review](#), collected in [No Spare People](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

## Trying to Write a Poem While Reading the Children's Encyclopedia

*Mammals all have similar skeletons....  
The ribcage holds the tiger's lungs in place.*

In graduate school I dated a large mammal  
who could fit my whole fist in his mouth, which, I'll be honest, was more fun  
than I'd had in a long time.

I was a smaller mammal then,  
burrowing under the covers and dreaming  
when the large mammal would leave to play basketball  
with a poetry book in his pocket.

*Joanna Penn Cooper*  
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<sup>337</sup> Joanna Penn Cooper, "[Trying to Write a Poem While Reading the Children's Encyclopedia](#)," FOLDER

## Where Thoughts Come From

A murder of crows wing black vectors across  
my window—called *Double-Hung*, a touch  
suggestively—& alight nowhere I see.

Back to coffee in a chipped cup, then out  
of a borough in my brain comes *ashes, ashes*,  
the playground singalong some believe

invokes the Black Death. *We all fall down*. Years ago,  
I'd have begun my boneyard of butts by now—  
the next one stubbed next to the last one

next to the next-to-last, then one last stump—  
a waste-heap late Guston got so right, or so  
I thought. Revisiting *A Life Spent Painting*

turns up half a dozen smoldering insomniac  
self-portraits, Klansmen with black cigarettes,  
studded shoe soles & horseshoes,

& what looks too much like an entrail sandwich.  
But no mass graves of ashtrays. Memory  
misremembers: *that* we know by heart.

Tougher to hold in mind that Self itself is pure  
fiction, the first person not to trust. *Your brain*  
*without your body would get nowhere* rings

true enough; but give it thought: since when  
did Brain & Body get divorced? While I was  
unearthing the *memento mori* of my smokes?

My butt-pile played the part of the skull,  
& someone with more than my math skills  
might calculate any given poem's risk-

benefit by timesing nine eternal lines to time  
by nine Marlboros in ninety minutes,  
factoring in two packs a day. The benefit's

the poem, of course, for what that's worth.  
Why all those *nines*? Think: the lives of a cat;  
think Yeats's bean rows; think baseball

players & the innings played; think planets before  
Pluto got traded for a dwarf; think how many  
stitches a timely stitch saves; think #9, #9, #9...

Thinking of time, for a sweet spot of it, why not start  
with touch?—how a hammer-haft befits the hand;  
our first fingerings; rummagings of all kinds;

ivory-laid paper riffled, thumbled (like a thigh, I feel);  
braille & how, hand-in-pocket, even the blind  
from birth can tell a penny from a dime;

& the sex—my sister told me—when she first felt  
the tumor. So much for touch, & stirring up  
the dead I thought at rest. In today's *Times*—

a 40-foot-wide ring made of skulls, ribs, & tusks  
from 60 mammoths. No one knows for what.  
The mammoth, though—*there's* a mammal

worth a sidebar. Even its idiocies appeal: gulped  
by sinkholes; washed away in mudflows; drowned  
after falling through thin ice—the male

beats out the female, more than three-to-one,  
for getting himself killed in stupid ways.  
Man, can't we identify with that?

& you, my audience of one, my true-penny—  
Hamlet's nickname for the Ghost—remember  
what Sis said: *I'm dying young but not*

*before my time*. To you, then, the guy I can't look  
in the eye unless mirrored or snapped, don't quit  
stirring up artifice; be *me* on the sly, in & out

of frames—like my crows, or Hitchcock's cameos.  
He loathed location, directed outdoor scenes  
before rear projections on a soundstage,

giving the façades of Lombard St., Bodega Bay's dunes,  
& the headstones behind Mission Dolores  
their auras of beautiful fakery.

Stephen Cramer  
338

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<sup>338</sup> Stephen Cramer, "Where Thoughts Come From," *Plume*

from "Today"

Feb.9.2022

Today they burned my father. A man named  
Garrett called me, in his toneless voice, to  
say that someone cleaned his body, covered  
him in white linen. After the man called,  
I felt warmer all day. My body reached  
two thousand degrees but would not burn. I  
realized I had not thought of my father  
more than once in Wyoming. You'd never  
know the planet is dying. Here, the clouds  
have holes in them and the deer are more etched  
with shadow. A sandwich arrives at my  
door at noon. I'm so hungry that I eat  
the sandwich first, then think of my father.

Feb.10.2022

Today the river is in crisis, no  
horizon dares to go near it. Today  
my father is in a small jar. At dusk,  
I went into a painter's studio,  
saw his stretched canvas on the table, white,  
empty. What are we without those who made  
us? *May his memory be your blessing*,  
people emailed me all week. The artist  
was painting a series of doors, which were  
so real that I walked through the one that was  
slightly open. Inside the room was my  
breath that I had held since January  
13, an eyelid, a loose eyeball, the  
knob the eye fell on, the girl's hands that tried  
to catch him, which were charred and still waving.

Victoria Chang  
339

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<sup>339</sup> Victoria Chang, "[Today \(Feb.9.2022. Feb.10.2022\)](#)," *Poetry*, collected in *With My Back to the World*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux

## Suggested Donation

In the morning I drink  
coffee until I can see  
a way to love life again.  
It's okay, there's  
no difference between  
flying and thinking  
you're flying until  
you land. Somehow  
I own like six nail clippers  
and I honestly can't  
remember ever buying  
even one. My sister  
came to visit and  
saw them in a small  
wooden bowl. I  
heard her laughing in  
the bathroom. I hope  
she never dies. There's  
no harm in hoping  
until you land.  
The deer are awake,  
Is one pregnant?  
If they kept diaries  
the first entry would  
read: *Was born*  
*Was licked*  
*Tried walking*  
Then they'd walk  
away and no second  
entry would ever exist.  
I run the deer's  
archive. It's very  
light work. Visitors  
must surrender  
their belongings.  
Surrender to me  
your beautiful shirt.

*Heather Christle*

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<sup>340</sup> [Heather Christle](#), "[Suggested Donation](#)," [FIELD](#)



## I Thought No One Would Ever Love Me

So I lay in my daybed at night  
& fashioned myself a Future  
Wife. Someone like the girl  
up the street with the old tan  
Volvo. The one with one foot  
in volleyball & the other  
in drama club. Maybe I hid  
her bleach. Maybe I gave  
her pearls & a satin-trim  
robe. Maybe I cut her  
diploma into fleur-de-lis  
& dipped them in the dark  
chocolate of my chintzy  
desires. I installed My Wife  
in a woody, masculine den  
& made her whippet-willed  
& full of brandy. I stole her  
hairspray & gave her a letter desk  
instead & an actual inkwell.  
I gave her lockable, leather-  
bound love. I imagined her parents  
somewhere safe, warm & out  
of the way. We summered in Monaco,  
read nothing but Daphne du Maurier,  
took our sun at the Top of the City.  
She had a smile like a high-wire act  
& a signature like a sigil. I never  
stopped loving the way she slid  
into day-old stockings like a snake  
reassuming its shed. In truth?  
Her name was Jill. She wore  
athletic shorts & never spoke  
to me. So I renamed her Miriam  
de Havilland & had her  
handle my correspondence.  
We cohabitated fantastically.  
I installed paintings throughout  
our Morning Room: storm-  
flecked seas, gold-framed  
& foaming at the mouth.

*Karyna McGlynn*

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<sup>341</sup> [Karyna McGlynn](#), "[I Thought No One Would Ever Love Me](#)," *Tupelo Quarterly*, collected in [50 Things Kate Bush Taught Me About the Multiverse](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Your Rivers, Your Margins, Your Diminutive Villages

We are all as old as each other and the  
cashier at Food Lion does not check  
ID for Chardonnay, cards me next time  
for the case of PBR, looks at my license

and says, *You're the same age as my mom,*  
*but you look much younger*, and I think  
of her hard-living mom—of the women  
who come after shift-change at Moog

for bagged salad and Lean Cuisine and  
ground beef for the kids and I want to  
make it clear that I am at the Food Lion  
with my faded tattoos again every day

sometimes more than twice mostly  
for my kids since I'm the mom with  
the overrun cart and the yelling we've  
run out of toilet paper again we're

missing the cheddar or ketchup and  
no you can't have that, but today  
outside the automatic doors by the  
caged propane tanks and water dispenser

and Red Box movies and Coke machine  
there's a two-tiered metal stand with hanging  
baskets of trailing pansies on the bottom  
shadowed by wind chimes with miniature

pastel birdhouses on top and what I want  
to tell you is that these stop me: their song  
and their otherworldly new age light  
speaking at the top of their lungs

trembling against engines revving  
and carts shuddering into one another  
after groceries are unloaded into trunks  
slamming shut—this music the best failure

of my imagination which is usually stuck  
on the camo'd pickups or the home piercings  
or the plastic bags skittering the curb—  
everything other than what it is I think

I am, which is part of this but younger  
and ethereal, so what if everywhere had  
wind chimes: doctors' waiting rooms  
or Jiffy Lube or the DMV? What if

they trailed after us wherever we went  
as though our actual steps on concrete  
or asphalt or linoleum generated song  
that's not quite song but two objects

strung closely together knocked into  
each other by randomly generated  
breezes—your cart my cart the beverage  
aisle: our trembling jittery refrain.

*Erika Meitner*

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<sup>342</sup> [Erika Meitner](#), "[Your Rivers, Your Margins, Your Diminutive Villages](#)," [Crab Orchard Review](#), collected in [Holy Moly Carry Me](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Get Your Shit Together and Come Home

High on a beach in Miami, I once asked my friends  
whether the sun or moon was closer to the earth  
and they both looked at me like I was an idiot  
and said to never tell anyone I had asked that question aloud.  
Kind of like the time I briefly thought I met Spike Lee  
at an event and asked him what he did for a living  
after saying I was a poet because I did not  
recognize him right away and then  
I was embarrassed and also wearing a pink jumpsuit  
that made me look like a walking salmon. I'm bad at faces,  
but I mean, obviously it is the moon or we'd be burnt up by now.  
And obviously it was Spike Lee. I am a fish  
out of water sometimes, trying to remember  
which celestial body is closest. The only tattoo  
I got was from a guy named Fish in Portugal  
at thirty-five because that was the age  
I learned what I could live with forever  
and what I could not live without.  
With his ink gun halfway in me, I asked,  
*why do they call you Fish* and he said, *because I'm a drunk*.  
The tattoo is a word in Sicilian: *ARRICAMPATI*,  
which means, loosely, get your shit together  
and come home to me, a perfect middle-aged tattoo,  
and also what a mother says to a kid who is playing  
out in the street too long or what a wife says  
to her drunk husband who keeps ordering rounds  
at the bar. Exasperation is part of its spell.  
I got it with a friend whom I hadn't seen in a year  
because of the virus and now, when she's bouncing  
from one city to the next, passing out in a hotel in Seoul  
and calling to show me the scar on her forehead, I yell,  
just pick a place, Jesus, I mean, pick a life,  
get your shit together and come home to me and she laughs  
and says I am one to talk since I am usually the one  
on the run, moving so fast I cannot even tell  
when I'm facing a legend or how close  
the moon has always been by my side.

Megan Fernandes

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<sup>343</sup> Megan Fernandes, "[Get Your Shit Together and Come Home](#)," collected in [I Do Everything I'm Told](#), Tin House Books

## The Italian Garden

I'm not talking about a green space with hedge walls  
and citrus tree tunnels but a restaurant in the Baton Rouge  
of my boyhood, a red-sauce joint that specialized in dishes  
no Italian would call Italian—spaghetti with meatballs,  
baked ziti, chicken parm—but which were manna from

heaven to hungry me, who polished his plate with a piece  
of bread I'd later learn to call *la scarpetta* or the little shoe,  
and even ate his salad, sour peppers and all, in anticipation  
of the ice creams that awaited me like the caboose  
of a gastronomic freight train: the three-flavored spumoni,

the tortoni with its tiny bits of almond, cherry, macaroon.  
These days, I find myself more or less half-consciously  
dividing my experiences—a concert, say, or a movie  
I've just seen—into three categories: (1) not worth it,  
(2) almost worth it, and (3) wow, really worth it!

The Italian Garden was always really worth it.  
The rest of the time it was either school or farm work,  
but once a month we'd feed the chickens, lock the barn,  
wash, put on our nice clothes, and make the long drive  
to a restaurant that represented the best that life offered,

that sated my senses but promised even more than  
it delivered, that held out travel to me, elegance,  
a language other than my own. Wanting something.  
Getting it. My mother was hard of hearing, and we were  
too polite to talk among ourselves without her, so we ate

in silence, which meant I was free to think about  
the other people in the room: the nervous waiter who  
might be a spy, the pretty twelve-year-old at the other table  
whose disdain showed how much she loved me,  
the bald gent with the wire-rim glasses who escaped

Hitler's bunker and fled to Buenos Aires before deciding  
he'd be better off in Baton Rouge. And thus it was that  
I found myself on Her Majesty's Secret Service: literature.  
I worked alone at first and then in a vast company,  
my army like the sleeping knights who lie beneath

a mountain, waiting for the king to wake them  
when their country is in danger. And that's been  
my life since. I haven't been home in years, but friends  
tell me The Italian Garden closed and sat idle before  
being boarded up, then razed, its spot on Government

Street now taken by a bank. I'm not buying it.  
Wasn't I there just last night? The same waiter was there,  
same pretty girl, same Nazi. And my father and brother, too,  
trading jokes like a couple of nightclub comics,  
my mother laughing and hanging on every word.

*David Kirby*  
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344 [David Kirby](#), "[The Italian Garden](#)," [The Missouri Review](#), collected in [The Winter Dance Party](#), [Louisiana State University Press](#)

## Look to the Side

Tonight in the taxi I picked up two women at Bellevue just after their friend died in an accident. He was skateboarding and hitched a ride on the passenger side of a garbage truck and lost his balance when the truck changed lanes. He was crushed by the rear tires.

There were no heroes and no monsters, and there was silence. They loved him, and they wanted something else, and they wanted cigarettes.

I imagined some vibrations, the outlines of bones—dark things—the way the song moves. The last kind words I could think of were take care, but they were inadequate, and the shadows kicked over the wind's cathedral.

*Sean Singer*  
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<sup>345</sup> [Sean Singer](#), "[Look to the Side](#)," collected in [Today in the Taxi](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

## Wolf Heaven

In the last letter you wrote me, sealed with castor wax,  
mailed from somewhere in Hungary I couldn't  
make out, the last page yellowed and signed  
in your blood, as you always did then, from the side  
of your thumb or the pale stretch under your thigh,  
you wrote, *Love is a distance, failed by time*,  
and went on to describe how the Gaudi cathedral  
was melting, how the human statues that lined  
the streets of Las Ramblas could hold so perfectly still  
there was no way to know they were breathing.  
*Nothing is permanent here*, you wrote, *but nothing is lost*.  
In the bleached light of those Red River winters  
I drove to my weekend job at the parks department,  
clearing the sidewalks in front of the depot, shoveling  
entryways, salting the roads. How purely the cold  
made a claim on the body. How slowly the gold  
in the hoarfrost fell to the landlines and bent stalks of corn.  
If telling you made any difference. If hearing your name  
in the high-liner fences, jaw-harp harmonicas, moans  
of the train. I think of the night you did acid in Dennison,  
frozen and throwing up vitamins, dragging the mud  
from your boots on the bed. Or the night we went  
driving around on the service roads, finding the bones  
of a wolf in the ditch. How quietly the skull sat shining  
in the moonlight. And how quietly I held you then,  
watching the tree-shadows rise on the downed blinds,  
talking of floodlights and wolf eyes and what  
a strange gift it would be to be dead. Those moments  
are silence inside me now. Lost in the snow-piles north  
of the yard. And what can I call them? A phony rose?  
A frozen carnation? A thing to keep sealed  
in a clear plastic box in the fridge? It could have been  
anyone, taking me down to the train-bridge, pouring  
the India ink on my shin. Walking the deer trails  
back to the spillway, climbing the guardrail, touching  
our tongues to the bars. *Not to love*, you wrote, *but to learn*  
*not to trust the deception. For it's this life or nothing.*  
*To die with intention. To leave something blue in your skin.*

Kai Carlson-Wee

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<sup>346</sup> Kai Carlson-Wee, "Wolf Heaven," *The Adroit Journal*, collected in *Rail*, BOA Editions, Ltd.



## The City of the Olesha Fruit

*The spider vanished at the boy's mere  
Desire to touch it with his hand.  
—Yuri Olesha*

Outside the window past the two hills there is the city  
Where the color-blind are waking to blue pears;  
Also, there are the blue treetops waving  
To the schoolgirls who step harshly along  
In winter dresses: out of the mouths of these girls  
Come the cones, their breath,  
A mist like the silver ear trumpets  
Of deaf children tipped toward whatever it is  
They are almost hearing.

An old man without legs, not yet in a chair, has  
Invented the city outside the window.  
*And everywhere now it is morning!* He hears

His wife climbing the stairs.  
What, he thinks... what to do?  
The strong line of her back  
Is like a spoon.  
He says, "Good morning and how are you?"  
She says, "Rumen,  
I told you the hen should have been put  
Up with straw in the attic. Last night the fox  
Ate all but the dark spurs under her chin  
And a few feathers."

His wife gathers him up in her arms, walks to the far  
Corner of the room, and lowers him into a straight chair  
Beside a table. Only last year he would sit  
And stare at the shoes he could wear, without socks

And with the laces loose.  
A tub is filling in another room.  
He thinks, poor Widow is inside the stomach  
Of a fox. My wife's idea was not a good one:  
Where would Widow have found the scratch  
And gravel for her shells while up in the attic?  
And what about  
The rooster! What about the poor rooster  
On his railing by the barn; inconsolable, crowing?  
Rumen remembers a Russian story about a copper rooster  
With a green fern for a tail.  
Rumen's favorite writer is the great Russian  
Yuri Olesha. Rumen thinks, "Yes, Yuri, my companion,  
There is cruelty in the format of a kiss!  
And the blue skins of pears

In a heap on a dish leave a memory

Of myself as a boy running along the flume water  
Down past the village ditch.  
But, Yuri, in my city all the streets are,  
Just this moment, being swept: old women  
In jade dresses sweeping, sweeping.  
And soon it will rain for them and then  
I'll return their sun, a noon sun  
To take away the wet before the children  
Rush out under the bells for an hour's recess.

Oh, Yuri, beyond the grin of a smelly  
Old fox, that's where Widow is, our best hen!  
Yuri, my legs, I think, are buried in the orchard  
Beside the stable where the hospital horses  
Of my city wait, poised for an emergency.  
These horses are constant; how they race  
Down the cobbled streets for me. They've never  
Trampled the children!"

"Rumen," his wife called, "do you want a haircut  
This morning?" She steps into the room.  
He smiles at her. She is buttoning her blouse.  
And she smiles back to him. Rumen would say

To Yuri that sometimes her yellow hair  
Got into the corners of his mouth.  
"And, Yuri, that was when I most missed my youth."  
Then Rumen would again fall silent.  
He was off opening a raincloud over his city.  
It was winter when he woke, but now I'm sure it's  
Not. There are a few dark flowers?  
Rumen feels that it is best for the children  
If they walk to school in the clear winter air, but  
Once he gets around to raining on his trees,  
Streets and houses, well, then he changes everything  
To late July and August.  
But the evenings in his city are always  
Placed in autumn: there is the smell  
Of woodsmoke, so pleasant,  
And leaves burning. Flocks of bluebirds would be  
Flying south.

And so there is the obscurity of many lives,  
Not yours, Olesha, but mine and my wife's,  
Two characters  
Who are, perhaps, in a shade  
Placed in autumn: there is the smell  
Of woodsmoke, so pleasant,  
And leaves burning. Flocks of bluebirds would be

Flying south.

And so there is the obscurity of many lives,  
Not yours, Olesha, but mine and my wife's,  
Two characters  
Who are, perhaps, in a shade  
Just now sipping an iced summer tea  
With its twigs and leaves floating around inside:

We are giggling, I think, about how shy  
We were as lovers that first winter night  
When I kissed her in the dark barn  
Right in her open eye. I tried again  
And missed again. To accidentally kiss a young girl

In her open eye is, I think,  
The beginning of experience. *Yuri*,  
I did find her mouth that night!

But then the following winter, a week before  
Our wedding, I missed again, this time  
I kissed a small bare breast.  
That wasn't an accident—

She reached out to touch my hand  
And found my thigh!  
The shyness of lovers, as softly, at night,  
They miss and miss while following an old map, yes,  
The format of a kiss.  
In the city of the Olesha fruit

A citizen never dies, he just wakes  
One morning without his legs, and then he is given  
A city of his very own making:

In this way his existence narrows  
While expanding like a diary, or  
Like this landscape with two hills  
Seen through my window early  
Each and every winter morning! But, *Yuri*,  
Outside this window—yes, I know,

What's there is there, and all of it  
Indelible as our memory of blue pears, washed  
And being eaten in the sunlight of a city  
That is being constructed all of the time,  
Its new gold domes and towers,  
Just beyond two hills in the winter air, and  
Somewhere inside the mind.

*Norman Dubie*

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<sup>347</sup> [Norman Dubie](#), "[The City of the Olesha Fruit](#)," *Blue Moon News*, collected in [The City of the Olesha Fruit](#), [Doubleday](#)

Pseudacris Crucifer

The father begins to make the sound a tree frog makes  
When he comes with his son & daughter to a pail  
Of tree frogs for sale in a Deep South flea market  
Just before the last blood of dusk.  
A tree frog is called a tree frog because it chirps  
Like a bird in a tree, he tells his daughter  
While her little brother, barely four years old,  
Busies himself like a small blues piper  
With a brand-new birthday harmonica.  
A single tree frog can sound like a sleigh bell,  
The father says. Several can sound like a choir  
Of crickets. Once in high school, as I dissected  
A frog, the frog opened its eyes to judge  
Its deconstruction, its disassembly,  
My scooping & poking at its soul.  
And the little girl's eyes go wide as a tree frog's eyes.  
Some call it the "spring peeper." In Latin  
It's called *Pseudacris crucifer*. False locusts,  
Toads with falsettos, their chimes issuing below  
The low leaves & petals. The harmonica playing  
Is so otherworldly, the boy blows with his eyes closed.  
Some tree-frog species spend most every day underground.  
They don't know what sunlight does at dusk.  
They are nocturnal insectivores. No bigger than  
A green thumb, they are the first frogs to call  
In the spring. They may sound like crickets  
Only because they eat so many crickets.  
Tree frogs mostly sound like birds.  
The tree frog overcomes its fear of birds by singing.  
The harmonica playing is so bewitching,  
The boy gathers a crowd in a flea market  
In the Deep South. A bird may eat a frog.  
A fox may eat the bird. A wolf may eat the fox.  
And the wolf then may carry varieties of music  
And cunning in its belly as it roams the countryside.  
A wolf hungers because it cannot feel the good  
In its body. The people clap & gather round  
With fangs & smiles. The father lifts the son  
To his shoulders so the boy's harmonics hover  
Over varieties of affections, varieties of bodies  
With their backs to a firmament burning & opening.  
You can find damn near anything in a flea market:  
Pets, weapons, flags, farm-fresh as well as farm-spoiled  
Fruits & vegetables, varieties of old wardrobes,  
A rusty old tin box with old postcards & old photos  
Of lynchings dusted in the rust of the box.  
You can feel it on the tips of your fingers,  
This rust, which is almost as brown as the father

And the boy on his shoulders & the girl making  
The sound a tree frog makes in a flea market  
In the Deep South before the blood of dusk,  
Just before the last blood of dusk. Just before the dusk.

*Terrance Hayes*  
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<sup>348</sup> [Terrance Hayes](#), "[Pseudacris Crucifer](#)," [The New Yorker](#), collected in [So To Speak](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## Anime Eyes at Corners

The neighborhood my father would have called *undesirable*  
is the neighborhood I live in,  
having always preferred being between *here* and *there*. One  
drives slowly to prevent  
possibly swiping the old white man with low pants who could  
be described as *traipsing*  
by the food pantry. I still feel my own mother installed in me  
like a GPS. Each person  
standing at these corners feels to me dangerous. *Who is their*  
*mother?* I wonder. For  
everyone has a mother. I fear my child will ask this question:  
*Where do they sleep?*  
How do I explain. I do not know where. In parks? She will fold  
for them origami beds  
out of small delicious squares of paper. Or she may not look up,  
being too intent drawing  
cat faces, faces that construct a fantasy of fluff and pink noses,  
their wide eyes' luster  
depicted by two symmetrical ovals drawn inside their pupils.  
These cats look out at us  
as if regarding us most spectacular creatures from their moon  
thrones, their feline planet,  
which is the world in which my child resides, which means she  
is like her mother and  
resides in her head, which is our curse. My serial cat-sketcher  
whose head hosts only  
concerns regarding the habits of cats makes designs delicious-  
strange. Looking into their  
spectral eyes is like eating a sugar cookie on the moon, or seeing  
what it might feel like to be  
conceived of as a star, and it is also an opportunity to experience  
the persistence of a vision.  
Caramel, glitter, moisture. *Forever* glints in the goo of loving eyes,  
a sticky glance trapped  
in the amber of a moment. *Stay*. She will not remember a certain  
jagged window in the house  
with a crooked fireplace and how one day we rolled our suitcase  
out to the car and drove  
away. Everyone's mother wants to see her child safe. Do not lurch,  
do not move between  
traffic as dirigible, cast your body in apathetic sway before these  
air-conditioned cars  
that cocoon us, our glassy eyes always set upon the specter  
of this world as if  
we are watching a gourmet dish being prepared on television.  
Toss in yourself and mix  
it up. The world is the oven we bake in, only to deliver ourselves  
to the mouths of our lovers,

to ourselves becoming mothers, mother of this: There is no love  
larger than these eyes  
filling notebooks. They are in fact the child's craft, their shading,  
her making. *Far be it from*  
*me to ask her to look up now!* But I must ask her to look up now.  
She looks up. She sees.

*Cate Marvin*

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<sup>349</sup> [Cate Marvin](#), "[Anime Eyes at Corners](#)," collected in [Event Horizon](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)



sic transit gloria mundi

my grandfather castrated pigs as a child  
he tells me this casual as bread  
when i bring up the book i'm writing

some thirty odd years of talking  
and this is the first that information raises its head  
and shakes the mud from it

his father, i learn, was a farmer outside  
baltimore. summers he'd be tasked with slicing  
into piglets how one de-pits an avocado—

excising the sweet meats, seizing  
their means of reproduction

*how many pigs did you castrate, grandpa?*  
*just a handful*  
and i picture hands the size of pastures  
filled with castrato pigs singing opera oddly  
wagner probably

my grandfather wears shirts with buttons,  
is freudian by training, obsessed with the germans  
their brutalist art

i can hardly imagine him scolding a dog—

how is it we are always where we've been  
even when unaware of it?

one moment you're drinking a cheap beer  
in a velour jumpsuit and the next  
you're descendent of jewish pig farmers

what might i learn if i were to write  
this book on an entirely different subject:  
antique clock repair, the sex lives  
of astronomers, joy

Sam Sax  
350

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<sup>350</sup> Sam Sax, "sic transit gloria mundi," *The American Poetry Review*, collected in *Pig*, Scribner

## Black Orchid

*Miles Davis, New York, August, 1950*

*for Lynda Hull*

Tonight he's playing the Black Orchid,  
the old Onyx where before his habit  
he played with Bird, looking cleaner  
than a motherfucker, Brooks Brothers suit,  
marcelled hair, trumpet floating over  
that hurricane of sixteenth notes no one  
could have played sober—19, a dentist's son,  
on stage with *Bird* and laying down shit  
nobody ever heard before or since!—but now  
his fourth cap of heroin's wearing off,  
its petals closing up inside his chest so tight  
he can barely breathe. Drunk again,  
Bud hangs heavy over the keys, left hand  
jabbing chords that break his right hand's  
waterfall arpeggios: "April in Paris,"  
and that strangely tropical odor of coconut  
and lime in rum comes back to Miles,  
the smell of Paris, Juliette Greco's sweet lips  
as she sang, each syllable a kiss  
for him alone. *Juliette*,  
his trumpet moans, *her small hands*  
*on the small of my back, long hair black*  
*on the white pillow...* Even Sartre  
tried to talk him into marrying her  
but he'd gone back to America, to Irene,  
and a habit. And though numerology proved  
he was a perfect six, the Devil's number,  
he drove the Blue Demon, top down, to East St. Louis,  
Irene silent beside him, the kids crying  
in the back seat, one thousand miles  
to escape heroin and the memory  
of Juliette's white shoulder. But now  
he's back, alone, long sleeves  
hiding fresh tracks on his forearms,  
and it's not Bird but Sonny who's unraveling  
the melody, looking in it for a way  
to put it all back together again.  
Then Wardell leaps in, *This is it, man,*  
*can't you hear it?* They're dueling  
like Ground Hog and Baby, the junky tapdancers  
who buck-and-winged for dope on the sidewalk  
outside Minton's, feet turning desperation  
into music, and Miles joins them, his mute  
disguising the notes he fluffs. He sounds  
as bad as Fats, last May when they recorded

*Birdland All-Stars*. Glassy-eyed, nose running,  
 Fat Girl had to strain to hit notes  
 he used to own. 26 and just two  
 months to live. *I'm going to kick this shit*,  
 Miles vowed the night Fats died,  
 but here he is, blowing a borrowed horn  
 because he pawned his own to play  
 a syringe's one-valve song. If only  
 he'd stayed, if only he'd never come back...  
 Behind him, Art plays Paris dark  
 as a jungle, and Miles falls into her pale arms,  
 the dark hotel room, and he's lost, lost  
 and free, released from some burden he's borne  
 across the ocean, to this bed, this woman,  
 a burden that, lifting, lifts him  
 like music, one clear unwavering note piercing  
 the silence that defines it...  
 When he tries to explain, she tells him  
 that's *existentialisme*. "Existential,  
 shit," he says, "Let's fuck."  
 And she laughs, her mouth a red flower  
 opening under his. Then he kisses  
 two whole notes out of his horn, their beauty  
 painful as they vanish into the swirling  
 smoke of the Orchid, each note  
 unfurling, an orchid itself, its petals  
 falling and settling on the nodding heads  
 of grinning white Americans  
 who will never understand jazz, or Paris,  
 or him. He closes his eyes,  
 and for as long as his solo lasts,  
 it's not August, it's not New York,  
 and he is not dying.

David Jauss  
 351

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351 David Jauss, "[Black Orchid](#)," collected in [Improvising Rivers](#), [Cleveland University State Center Poetry Center](#)

During the late forties and fifties my mother and I lived on our own in a small residential hotel in a small, damp city. The cold war was all around us.

I loved the feel of entrapment. There was a bedroom and a sitting room with a hotplate: a simple, shut-in space: a door closing, a pipe with a noise in it running across the ceiling. All the windows faced other windows and stared into mine. I was thrilled that I was not safe. My mother was a single working mother in the 1950s. World War II had barely ended. There was no childcare for families like ours. There were no families like ours. When my mother traveled, I was left with friends, acquaintances, the ill-tempered and resentful family of a cleaning woman. I slept on a canvas WW II cot used to transport the wounded.

*Lynn Emanuel*

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<sup>352</sup> Lynn Emanuel, "[During the late forties and fifties my mother and I lived on our own in a small residential hotel in a small, damp city. The cold war was all around us,](#)" collected in [Transcript of the Disappearance, Exact and Diminishing](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

Studies in Loneliness, iii

I take issue with all the studies saying beware loneliness, avoid loneliness, it will speed your death.

I say it will speed your death only if you believe it's a toxin.

Imagine loneliness is a drug curing you of loneliness! This is what I believe, on this late Friday morning before the dermatologist looks at me as if I were a carpet with stains.

—

I have to lie down in my sparkly pink G-string while she examines me for moles. She tells me I have calluses from sitting so much; she reminds me of the studies that show women who get Botox receive more positive reinforcement.

I tell her no thank you very much.

She says Botox could lower my raised eyebrow.

She says she doesn't give Botox to people who need to feel empathy, which I do, deeply, in order not to feel lonely.

At \$500 a shot, Botox is an agent of loneliness.

—

I thought about beginning an essay with Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, and talking about the pathos, ethos, and logos of loneliness.

Or with the id, ego, superego—yes, that would be a way to think about it.

The id of loneliness—

—

Inductive loneliness? Deductive?

—

Studies in loneliness indicate that those high on the neuroticism scale are also high on the UCLA Loneliness Scale.

I think the existential danger of loneliness awakens the imagination, fuels it.

—

Who knows you best in the world?

—

Who knows me best are these black notebooks, purchased in bulk, used up one by one.

But you can't trust what you find here.

For example, sometimes I'm the Angel of Loneliness! Sometimes the Big Foot of Loneliness! Sometimes researcher, sometimes subject.

—

The sense of falling forever is one sign of loneliness, often the earliest sign.

—

"Vertigo," I say at the edge of the Grand Canyon, "I love the vertigo, it's calling to me."

Onto a plexiglass stand my son and I step into and above the void.

—

My mother finds her car by pressing the unlock button on the gadget and listening.

*Catherine Barnett*  
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<sup>353</sup> [Catherine Barnett](#), "[Studies in Loneliness, iii](#)," collected in [Solutions for the Problem of Bodies in Space](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

## How to be Errant

Don't think of the beer  
gardens  
or the veranda

where you discussed  
abortion  
with your mother. No,

think of a man, his voice  
shackled  
to God, the

desire to be  
glib  
with loss and stagnant

with joy. Think of the  
water  
that quiets him,

the archangel who  
quizzes  
him. The four

women who mutely  
bed  
him. How wet

the nights must be. How  
difficult  
to be a prophet.

*Hala Alyan*  
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<sup>354</sup> [Hala Alyan](#), "[How to be Errant](#)," collected in [Atrium](#), [Three Rooms Press](#)

## Liar's Karma

Assassin, asshole, fine craftsman of myth and malice,  
old friend of many years, what was your cause,

Iago? And that afternoon, ear glued to the door, you  
spying while he took me hard against the other side,

is that what made you vicious? Did you want him, too?  
I'll never know your reasons. But now you live with them,

alone in a peeling bungalow that reeks of the animals who  
shit themselves twice daily trying to love you, where a snake

with your mother's face coils like a Freudian cartoon  
in the crumbs behind your stove. From the street, I see

you've taken down the curtains in your living room, afraid  
of what they're keeping out, but watch how the sunlight bends

around your windows, unwilling to waste itself on dirt  
where nothing grows. Consider this your permanent address,

in stunted rooms where fear barely scrapes up the mortgage  
and envy ties a hangman's full Windsor around

your neck. Trust me, you'll suffer that silky tongue, friend.  
It's the sorrow you made me, the knot frenching your throat.

*Erin Belieu*  
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<sup>355</sup> [Erin Belieu](#), "[Liar's Karma](#)," collected in [Black Box](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)



I used to date a woman after high school whose teacher had been Christa McAuliffe

you know the teacher who was the first private citizen to fly into space, but before she reached it, the Space Shuttle Challenger blew up into infinitesimally tiny pieces. The jokes we told at work that week loading trucks: “What were Christa McAuliffe’s last words?” “What’s this button for?” I’d like to say I was kind to my girlfriend; her name was Wendy. But she was sobbing hysterically, and I think I might have said, “She was just your teacher, she wasn’t your mother.” I did not trust collective grief. Maybe it was some instinct about the appropriation of other’s suffering. But who are you and I to know about another’s suffering? There is something unnamed that weaves us all the way a bee knows to find the flower, or the way the tree has faith that it will rain. In AA they try to teach you not to romanticize your own bad behavior. “What else do I have?” The woman said in session. “Why can’t I make it into a story of survival? My story is more than myth.” I like to stand and wait for buses I know will not arrive. I am listening to the silence outside the book. We live in a small city on the shore of a lake so large you can see it from space. I hope no thirsty aliens ever find us. I want to make you laugh but I think I am caught in the crevice between laughter and weeping. How startled I was, hiking along the tracks, to find the homeless family gathering rotting apples in the orchard, in late fall. Sometimes when I eat an apple I see that man’s gaze piercing into my chest, or his daughter’s eyes, green and staring far past me toward something on the horizon. Sometimes I lie to myself and forget that heavy snow erased the world later that week. Nothing here is worth much which means it might be worth more than I can manage. What we witness can be written mythic because at its core, our lives are made of myths we tell and change and tell again and again. What is sacred is as ordinary as hearing an old man cough to tell me he isn’t dead. The light that makes the leaves change. Sleeping beside you nothing is familiar and yet what was it worth, watching you in the morning nearly fall, giggling in the opaque light as you balanced on one leg, pulling on your briefs. I have always known I’ve lived here. How often I return to the morning in a foreign city, in a market where no one speaks our language. I have fallen behind, trying to figure out how much to pay for a bag of blood oranges. I am counting the wrong coins into an old woman’s palm. She is moving her other hand *no, nem nem* as if to erase me. Over and over this happens: Our daughter is in a pram cooing, and as you turn and look back at me, a bit of your hair laughs across your face.

Sean Thomas Dougherty  
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<sup>356</sup> Sean Thomas Dougherty, “[I used to date a woman after high school whose teacher had been Christa McAuliffe](#),” collected in [Death Prefers the Minor Keys](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Finger

Remember how we hid in the college museum  
until that old woman turned off the lights  
and locked us in?

Then we camped out on the floor  
among musty artifacts  
and drank ourselves into hilarity.

You said we should take that old mummy out of his box  
so he could join us.

He was so light,  
like papier-mâché.

I propped him against the wall,  
and when I tried to wedge a cigarette into his hand

a single finger broke off,  
slipping through the linen  
into my palm.

+

In those days,  
I wanted to immortalize myself  
in the pages of a novel  
about a brilliant young man  
who left his home in Cleveland  
and did what?  
I was still discovering  
the plot. I smoked  
and typed, then deleted what I typed.  
It would be a mystery—  
a body discovered strangled  
on unspooled film reels  
in the back of an art-house theater—

+

And how you laughed when I leaped back,  
the mummy's desiccated black finger  
skittering across the floor.

How you held that finger like a half-smoked cigar  
and wagged it at me. You were  
such a hilarious failure,

Groucho Marx in the dark museum, lifting that finger

to your lips—  
you didn't care about anything,

+

you who would die  
jogging in a public park  
among pigeons and ice-cream vendors  
one evening later that June.  
Your sister  
was already dead, head through a windshield.  
Your father, too. It was a family  
tradition, you said,  
holding that mummy's finger and laughing.  
The mummy,  
also thrall'd in death,  
leaned against the wall,  
ghostlit by streetlights—

+

The estranged girl among the unspooled reels  
stared blankly  
at the ceiling fan that rustled the papers  
on the little desk in the corner.  
A single tear  
dried on her cheek. *What was a life,*  
I wrote,  
*but an infinitely replayable film?*—

+

or some such nonsense.  
I wanted to be  
an important writer  
and to be, therefore, immortal.

You were taking apart a suit of armor;  
then you were kissing the marble head  
of some dead emperor.

The mummy stayed lost  
in his dream.  
Someone had cared for him once.  
Someone had rubbed his skin with ochre and resin,  
then extracted his brain  
lovingly through the nostrils.

+

We slept on the floor  
having drunk  
                    far too much, our candles  
gone out.

            When I woke, there you were  
at the window  
                    looking over the lamplit  
dead campus.

+

We packed the mummy back into his case  
and, at dawn, slipped out of the museum  
  
and disappeared  
                    into our futures.

My novel would remain unfinished  
  forever.

I've got that finger in a box on my writing desk.  
Its black skin  
                    has long since flaked away.  
It looks like ivory.

My thumb has polished the bone.

*Kevin Prufer*  
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<sup>357</sup> [Kevin Prufer](#), "[Finger](#)," collected in [The Fears](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Palace of Amenhotep (or 20th Century Elegy)

No pharaoh does miss his kitty any more  
than I miss the dive bars of Chicago, 1998,  
wood-paneled, red-lettered, dank and cozy  
as confessional booths, with a single, knobbed  
television in one corner and an elder  
in a respirator ad on mute between innings  
when I couldn't, I couldn't, I couldn't imagine  
my face affixed to a breathing machine,  
I'd say to the cigarette machine, yanking  
hard, and out bounded a pack of Camels,  
but I could've, I could've, I could've  
imagined it if bleating youth could've  
permitted more than obsessing over other  
peoples' underpants, prime-time dramaturgy,  
shooting Old Crow until 4 a.m. home  
to the car I called Amenhotep, and not  
in honor of the guy. Good old Amenhotep  
would've gnawed my nose clean off  
if she'd caught me on a savanna  
instead of our great apartment enflanneled  
as it was then by loneliness for a whole year  
that lasted seven years, so I really felt much older  
by the end of it but not any wiser, Amenhotep  
ever indifferent to my every want and affection,  
and affection is what I wanted most  
to give as the century ended like a dynasty  
into a perfect ruin where I am, to this day,  
gutted, wrapped, and doggedly intact  
as a cat in a cat-shaped coffin.

Jaswinder Bolina  
358

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<sup>358</sup> Jaswinder Bolina, "Palace of Amenhotep (or 20th Century Elegy)," *The Fiddlehead*, collected in *English as a Second Language*, Copper Canyon Press

## Letter to Those Who Wanted Me

to choose truth over dare. Self-disclose  
for once. Give anything, a barbed fluke, a chain

tongue of a buckle, enough for them to claim,  
*I know her. She is mine.*

Me. Always opting to kiss the cis girl, never holding  
fast. Tagging her lips as if a hot pot, hardly

a blink. Just enough to satisfy the dare, the boy  
forever asking me to strip and streak even

though my deft undress-dress celerity—perfected  
in junior high locker rooms—long ago evolved

into a moonlit self-evasion, polished in pretense.

But no one wants to be left suffocating  
in the polluted orchards of this valley: the earth everywhere

brown and aching. So, older now, I long  
to unmoor myself, disassemble my semblance,

to imagine I never left Jess Johnson's game room  
without answering questions about ejaculations,

virginity mislaid, sexual partners, and other regrets.  
I would've told you I'd never fake an orgasm.

I would've shared the stale story about the back seat  
of somebody's mother's Camry. Spectators

sneering round the windows. I would've told you  
how many sexual partners: enough,

and the only celebrity crush I've ever had—  
*Frank O'Hara*. Odd, but true. Because starseeds,

because a brittle desire  
to land. Because Alice Neel painted his portrait

not once, but twice. Because the body  
is a place in which the city squats and tarries.

Because I've never faked an orgasm—  
except when drunk. I would've told you

I should but don't  
regret trying to OD on my mother's heart pills

at age 16. I slept five days straight and it was absolutely  
fabulous. I would've said *Frank O'Hara*. Because

he "had so much grace, that man,  
even through all the delirium and agony." Because sex

is a common denominator. Because humans  
do things like release all the British birds

cited in Shakespeare into Central Park. Because you wanted  
the truth is I would've liked to kiss her harder. Longer.

To splay myself agape. To open in slow motion  
everything a body has to offer. Hers. Mine.

Middled bare in the coed dare circle—a cadaver peeled  
and pinned—authenticating the thrust and gut inside us all.

*Tana Jean Welch*  
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<sup>359</sup> [Tana Jean Welch](#), "[Letter to Those Who Wanted Me](#)," collected in [In Parachutes Descending](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Acapulco

He was talking about the random  
axe of God, his hand slamming  
the table like a battle axe, and though  
I was a non-believer, I believed  
(I knew) we were sitting, against all odds,  
together, with nothing but a checkered  
tablecloth between us, in North Bay, where  
the maître-d embraced him and seemed to  
want to hug me too. The man had written  
to say he'd known my father would die  
one day, that he'd been preparing nearly  
forty years for that, since he was seventeen,  
and had needed a psychiatrist roughly  
his father's age, Jewish, and on the right  
bus line. By then, he said, his father had  
been dead five years. My father, he said,  
was the first person he confessed his love  
of men in dark suits to. *How gentle, he was,*  
the man said. *How wise. He was the father*  
*I didn't have*, the man said, and I thought, he  
was the father I didn't have either.  
The man was a public defender,  
and when the waiter brought the wrong  
cut of beef, he said. *Everyone is innocent*  
*of something*. We were sitting like  
two people who had met in another  
life and were trying to catch up. I asked  
what had happened to his father and he  
said *swimming* and *Acapulco*. He said  
*shark*. And it occurred to me that we  
were breaking breadsticks together because  
a fish had mistaken a man for something  
else. It's a big, random axe. "It Never Entered  
My Mind" was playing above and around us—  
a sea of Sinatra. *That was your father's favorite*,  
the man said, which surprised me, because  
I always thought my father liked music  
unburdened by words, the way he liked his  
evenings with us. I didn't tell the man  
about the app you can get now, how it tells  
you where sharks are in real time. I didn't  
tell him about the woman who reaches  
into the mouths of hammerheads to cut  
hooks out, how after she's pulled a hook  
from one shark, others approach, sensing,  
no, *knowing*, she means to help them.  
That's a belief system. The world is teeming  
with them, and leaving the restaurant,



the man pointed out, as men tend to,  
the stars comprising Orion's Belt—  
as if it were the lustrous sparks and not  
the leveling dark that connects us.

*Andrea Cohen*  
360

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360 [Andrea Cohen](#), "[Acapulco](#)," [The Hopkins Review](#), collected in [The Sorrow Apartments](#), [Four Way Books](#)

## Thoughts on Punctuation

Staple the ghost to the page  
with your favorite symbol  
and you might find out too much  
or end up prosecuting  
wind for lack of commitment  
when it blows the clouds around  
describe the wind with precision  
torture it for a while  
it will tell you what you know  
sometimes I see the future  
is just the past in a suit  
that will never be in style  
it wears your father's trilby  
shadowing a face that answers  
you with a semicolon  
linking unrelated facts  
like a modern oracle  
a conglomerate employs  
when I rattle on like this  
saying useless things are true  
such as the Egyptians used marks  
shaped like cats to divide words  
please slap me with a hyphen  
put me back on the shelf  
next to that old wooden game  
it had complicated rules  
for diagramming our thoughts  
about who we should become  
so we could leave them behind  
we played it one whole winter  
so deeply absorbed we died  
then were reborn as commas  
happy to go on and on

*Matthew Zapruder*

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<sup>361</sup> [Matthew Zapruder](#), "[Thoughts on Punctuation](#)," *The American Poetry Review*, collected in *I Love Hearing Your Dreams*, [Scribner Books](#)

## The Personal Histories ("More Darkness")

Gogol (his namesake)  
used to make the telephone calls  
during the name day parties.  
There were plural waters  
upon his brain  
and a lunar landscape  
of darkness and craters  
in the back of his head.

"Hello, Althea? I hate it here.  
No one cares for me.  
Well, no, I haven't helped matters any."

When the landlord told him  
to close the drapes during winter days  
(the sun would make the apartment that hot)  
he regrettably did not understand  
this meant "more darkness."  
Gogol's not in need of "more darkness."

One day in this curtain drawn darkness  
he wrote: "Dear Althea,  
I hate it here. I offer you my breath  
and my vague depression. I offer you  
my white box where I used to keep my beach stones.  
I wanted to repeat the word 'smoke'  
to you, so often repeated  
you would worry if solace wasn't offered.  
The repetition went something like this:

I've given you the forgotten smoke..."

Gogol couldn't carry it out.

That winter his curtains always remained drawn,  
and no one came to him.  
By nightfall on almost any night  
he had taken to rearranging his beach stones  
in various places in the apartment.

Gogol told me he did sometimes go for evening  
strolls by himself, and sometimes felt  
good enough to glide to some private windows  
and watch the personal histories which  
were being accounted for. He likened the strolls  
to a stone without wind, fog without wind,  
and the histories there  
like his footfalls in the grass.

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<sup>362</sup> [Michael Burkard](#), "[The Personal Histories \('More Darkness'\)](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [The Fires They Kept](#), Metro Book Co.

## A Story About Power

In this one, she is twenty, dating  
a thirty-two-year-old debut novelist,  
they work at the same tutoring center  
at the college where she's studying  
to be a writer, he is not faculty  
but a returned Peace Corps volunteer, he has  
soft, rumpled hair, soft hands, a body  
like a worn-down couch that smells of the American  
Spirits he keeps tucked  
in a back pocket, he likes  
the novels of Toni Morrison and when  
she wins the Nobel he tells the young woman, *You  
could do that too, someday*, saying it  
quietly, seriously, so she takes him home,  
they are laughing, he touches her hair,  
her ears, he kisses her shoulder  
left out like one pale breadcrumb  
for his mouth to find, they go  
to bed, she wakes up giddy, calls a friend  
who clucks and asks, *Don't you know  
he's still with X?* X being the second-  
oldest tutor at their center, the one  
with wild pink hair and miniskirts  
and a habit of vacuuming up tables  
with her nose; of course, the young woman  
does not know this, had no  
idea of this, and so in a fit  
of guilt, frustration, fear, breaks up  
with the novelist over the phone, at which point  
he begins—of all things—crying  
for her to wait until he calls it off  
with X, isn't she happy, doesn't she want them  
to have a chance together? Actually,  
she doesn't: just that morning, before he left,  
she'd been surprised, perhaps a touch  
repulsed to see the strong left hook  
of his penis in the light, as if  
it were trying to thumb a ride  
onto a different body; his freckled  
belly slopping against the table  
as he ate toast: it saddened her  
to see this, how she had so much  
more future than him for herself  
so that when X called her up  
repeatedly that very night, growing drunker  
hour after hour, addressing her first  
as *Sister*, then *Friend*, then finally  
*You*, as in *You know he just told me*

*I was ruining his life?* the young woman begins to feel less awash in desire than caught in a riptide of various eddying despairs: X demanding on the phone, *Don't you think a man like this deserves to be punished?* And what could she say but *yes*, not understanding that punishment meant their boss, her professor, the chair of their department, would call her into his office a week later because he'd heard a rumor, he would say, a terrible rumor he needed immediately cleared up, *was it true*, he'd ask, was it possible she'd been raped? All this he demands to know: this man, her boss, her professor now staring at her with embarrassment and a slight, sickening distaste; the same look, she realizes, she had slipped that writer as he left her bed, the same expression that must now be pasted onto her own face as she sits nauseous with shame before this question her professor feels he has to ask, she has to answer; confused, too, about whether he should ask, she should answer, the cruelty of this intrusion both of them now feel compelled to complete, knowing—as her professor surely does—whatever answer she gave would not entirely be believed, though she gives it, over and over, each time feeling the truth of the word become increasingly inadequate, as are her protestations: she is fine, it was by choice, misunderstanding, accident: she can see herself as he must: as something small and defiled and humiliated though she is none of these things; yes, there had been drinks, a drug or two, or maybe she'd stopped answering by now as her professor's hand raised suddenly to cut her off—

And so, perhaps, she never said whatever word or phrase would finally satisfy herself, her professor; whatever word they both needed but couldn't trust each other to interpret correctly, perhaps expressed in a tone that would have given

them both some longed-for out:  
a way for her to forgive or him  
to fire the offending writer:  
who knew how her professor really felt  
about this man he'd hired then tossed  
into their center like some hungry,  
soft-bellied fox; who knew what regrets  
he privately harbored, how many young women  
he himself had slept with  
as a single or married or just-  
divorced professor, assistant, TA;  
maybe he hated this writer,  
maybe he, too, wanted him gone, or maybe  
he was just exhausted from supervising  
another of her exhausting generation  
who turned sex and desire into forms of vengeance  
because they were so afraid of them, had been told  
since childhood sex would kill them, and indeed  
it was killing them: the distance  
between what they wanted and what they were told  
they could have, and so, with their needs,  
they punished everyone, including him,  
sitting now in this high-backed wooden chair  
grilling another lank-haired sophomore  
with bad skin and an oversized sweater, this girl  
who in each one of his literature classes  
would slowly unwrap and eat a single  
Japanese nori roll during discussions,  
adding a comment, taking a bite,  
adding a comment, taking a bite, grain by grain  
of roll and novel disappearing over the hour  
as if too much appetite for either would destroy  
her life, which could only sustain itself in measured gasps—

Everything that happens after  
you'd expect. The writer leaves the center  
but is not fired. X leaves the city  
and marries the next man she encounters.  
The young woman becomes the subject  
of gossip at college, is shunned  
in the halls, graduates. Even the professor  
dies of heart failure, which the young woman  
mourns: he was her favorite, the one  
she admired and wanted to be, whose interior life  
she obsessively mulled: she can't even remember  
the name of that writer everyone thought  
had taken advantage of her, she sees this now,  
their dislike of her less about the sex  
than that she'd been messy, indulged a man  
too easy to see through, though what had he done,  
really, she thinks, but take the smallest slice

of happiness for himself; could she begrudge that  
tiny selfishness, both of them punished for it  
so excessively? If she regrets anything,  
she regrets only that recognition  
on her professor's face as she slipped  
from being a person to an assignment  
of blame, a thing to be righted  
or defended, which is what,  
at the last, X warned her she'd become.  
*He's made you an object*, she'd slurred  
on the phone, at which the young woman,  
for a moment, felt as if she stood  
at a great height looking down  
on everyone: she would become a writer,  
yes, and the writer would become nothing  
but anecdote, a half-hearted story spun  
out at a party, and wasn't that power:  
to turn strangers into words  
she could burnish in her mind, absorbed  
into a talent only she possessed, controlled?  
The truth was that she'd never felt  
at anyone's mercy, taking whatever  
had been on offer, the beer, the coke, the cock  
in hand, the smeary outline of whatever person  
she was becoming growing more solid  
with each choice; wasn't this power?  
Or was it merely some indulged delusion  
she was not, as everyone around her  
insisted, a good girl who simply succumbed  
to others' wishes, a dupe in bed, a pawn  
in a rival's playbook, so self-dissociated  
she couldn't even feel the quickening flush  
of her own anger? What is power?  
Years after *the incident*, as she would call it,  
the young woman would apply to the Peace Corps  
herself, arriving to the interview in jeans and the same  
outsize blue sweater she'd worn  
to her professor's office: an outfit the interviewer  
deemed so jejune, so inappropriate,  
he sent her home immediately to reschedule their talk,  
to buy a suit, he insisted, which she could not afford  
and so borrowed instead a skirt and jacket  
too long in the arms, too wide  
in the seat, with a bloom of coffee  
in its lining seam, but it was a suit,  
she returned, she passed the interview  
and got assigned to teach in a small town  
in eastern Bulgaria but the day  
she got the letter requesting  
her answer, she received another  
with a plump fellowship to an art school



in the Midwest, so sat down and wrote back  
to the interviewer who'd sent her home,  
the man who insisted she straighten up,  
she should *respect herself*, he said: a letter  
composed of one word tucked  
into a wrinkled envelope on which  
she'd also smudged some cigarette ash:  
a single word above a blackened X,  
and that word was *NO*.

*Paisley Rekdal*

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<sup>363</sup> [Paisley Rekdal, "A Story About Power," \*The Yale Review\*](#)

## Into the Firmament

Into the firmament I stitched my farewell.  
The crocuses I planted while pregnant  
got eaten by deer. I'd be eight months  
in now, if I hadn't lost the baby.  
What is the firmament, anyway? What is fire?  
I wonder when I lie in bed half awake/aware.  
The same student comes in with her poem  
about how hard it is to write a poem.  
I imagine placing her in the firmament too,  
joints pressed into stars that litter  
the sky. It was the morning the secretary's  
son broke three ribs in a car accident,  
the day I got cheap carnations at work  
from a man in the hall I didn't even know.  
I made tape into circles and stuck the circles  
to the backs of children's drawings about peace,  
stuck the drawings to butcher paper to hang  
in the hall. Everyone said, "I'm so sorry about  
what happened to you with that student."  
They meant the one who wrote a poem about  
my pussy and turned it in for a homework assignment.  
I wore a polka dot dress. I know how to dance  
the polka, a little bit, having grown up  
in Wisconsin. Soon, I'll move back  
to the Midwest, and leave bone cold  
New England far behind. I can imagine  
all the tattered houses fading from sight  
over the back of my son's car seat as we drive  
down the tollway, the mountains receding like sad  
contractions, the popcorn I'll spill on the car floor  
as I check the route on my phone, the car pushing  
to the boozy forever of winter sun and forgetful grey  
Lake Michigan, who will signal hello with each  
crested wave, who will welcome me home  
with a smile of mussel shells and alewives,  
and innumerable tan brick lighthouses,  
swaddled in steel railings that will make  
my son's hands smell like hot pennies.

*Rebecca Lehmann*

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<sup>364</sup> [Rebecca Lehmann](#), "[Into the Firmament](#)," collected in [Ringer](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Self-Portrait as a Goldfish Trapped in a Toilet

To be stuck at reception with a man who fucked you once: another opportunity  
to feel like a small freshwater fish

& remember those nights back in the Precambrian, before you'd evolved  
from a primitive life form that would gulp some whiskey at a party

& then float off in a stranger's car to a bed above a garage  
& lie there spinelessly for the zeptoseconds it took him

Back then there was hardly any oxygen & no one was woke  
Orgasms with men were a few billion years away

Orgasms: You had no idea how to get one  
Men: dining & dashing while you were still pulling out your chair

He's married now, he's got kids, good for him  
Another opportunity for revenge fantasies:

Shadowy wraiths drag him from the hotel ballroom  
down through the gates of Dis, where there's no open bar

A fetal alien creature long dormant in a cheese puff  
slithers down his throat, bursts from his stomach & races under a long white tablecloth

You could follow it & hide under there until everyone leaves  
But he's the first to turn away & it's just like before

He's done & moving away from you in record time  
Time: what you wasted being even briefly attracted to people like him

You: flushed out to sea once more

*Kim Addonizio*  
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<sup>365</sup> [Kim Addonizio](#), "[Self-Portrait as a Goldfish Trapped in a Toilet](#)," collected in [Exit Opera](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## 8th Grade Hippie Chic

I was more interested than anything else in the pop song that you used to say was about God. When you French-kissed the class president on the school trip to Boston and we wore yellow feathers in our hair, and I dropped my beaded red velour bag into the harbor, it opened up a crack of light for me.

*To be my guide and force and truth.* You stole my CD. You borrowed it in 1996 and you never gave it back and I miss it, I miss it every day. And you stole Jay's first kiss, his cleanliness and Godliness and emptiness in a purple haze of Kiss action figures and drama club sex. We found your dirty letters covered in chocolate and sunflower seed shells at the bottom of his backpack, cause real friends have no secrets, and it said that you masturbated lying on your belly and that when you did it, you were thinking about him. And when we asked him about it he told us he had licked your smelly, scary, hairy, huge vagina.

Question: Would you ever kiss a boy whose tongue has been on another girl's vagina? Answer: What's the point? You taught me how to see things double. My fuzzy chain wallet. Your aura. I taught you all the words to that Butthole Surfers song. How to pretend to pass a joint.

You and Jay had an agreement to marry each other if neither of you were married by 28. And I guess I forgot about it when I asked Jay to marry me if neither of us was married by 27. And I guess that Sheila forgot about it when she said they should get married if neither of them is married at 26. I had this picture of him dressed up as the American flag that you stole from me, and then I stole it back, and we never talked about it or about the stealing, ever.

The kids in the back of the bus called you a lesbian. You were wearing a lavender hoodie. I was wearing a silver ring that said, "Imagine" on it. I was eating a green apple. And all of Connecticut was a secret maze arranged in the form of a golf course underneath a permanent lightning bolt. We shared one milkshake with two straws and we walked to see all the old cars. The hot pink ones and the antique ones.

Like nothing is authentic and also nothing is original. That when I do your makeup it is like when I do my own makeup. And when I dye my hair to look exactly like Tiffany's ex-best friend in her picture in the yearbook it is a seamless and perfect process, and I smooth the ends into crescent points with light, foamy pomade that smells like marshmallows.

I put a lock of your 8th-grade hair into the pill box that you bought me in Spain. And I put in little wooden beads with vintage flowers painted on them, from my pious Catholic hippie phase when I used to braid my hair at Sunday school and wear Grateful Dead t-shirts woven from strips of grass and sky and a silver cross around my neck that was filled with carefully arranged dried flowers.

You cut off your dreadlocks and stuffed them in a plastic bag. You passed your driving test with flying colors. That if I think about it long enough and hard enough I should be able to feel the earth vibrating in me. But I can't focus cause the radio keeps on playing all my favorite songs.

I wore a milky-blue blown-glass cross around my neck because of the Black Crowes song “She Talks to Angels” where he says, *she keeps a lock of hair in her pocket. / She wears a cross around her neck. / The hair is from a little boy, / And the cross is someone she has not met.* And he says, *she paints her eyes as black as night now*, so I did that too, in candlelight in my room and I had this lacy black fishnet shirt that I wore with a satin tank top under it and my blue cross. Long, thin braids in my long, greasy hair.

I am inspired by the hippie movement. The women at Haight and Ashbury with flowers in their hair and psychedelic swirls in their eyes and in their hearts. I am inspired by them. When I think about them, I feel a deep and pulling poetic excitement that makes me miss you and makes me want to buy magazines and light candles and get smarter and smarter. Wash my hair with mayonnaise, cover myself with bells and shells and perfectly fitting jeans with holes in the knees. Bare feet on the cleanest pile of dirt and a seriously sad smile. When I think about them, I want to wear enormous feather earrings, but only if the feathers were found lying in the dirt like a gift from the animal kingdom and from the earth and from the spinning, dizzying heavens.

When you told me you were going away to boarding school I started listening to this sad song called “Sister” by The Nixons on repeat for hours at a time until my sister barged into my room and turned off my stereo, said she couldn’t take it anymore. My mother thought I was sad because my sister was going away to college. But that had never really occurred to me.

The female act of bursting through closed doors and exclaiming that you can’t take anymore the repetition of the same melodious song is one that has been passed on through the generations of women in my family.

My mom told me Karen Carpenter stopped her own heart by starving herself and inducing vomiting with ipecac syrup. I looked for it in the medicine cabinet. And I wanted this black lace dress with daisies on it from Express for my confirmation but my mom said it was too expensive. So instead I dreamed about it. I still dream about it. Thought about it every night before bed.

Your mother told you we could take down your blinds and paint them in a tribute to Jerry Garcia but then she woke you up angrily in the morning and made you take them down and wash the paint off, behavior which my own mother likened to the behavior of Joan Crawford as depicted in the tell-all biography *Mommie Dearest*. And she gave me the book to read. When she dies, you will publish all your mother’s angry letters. I will publish a mass of humiliating absence. Burn the rest. She didn’t know about the nights when we smoked pot, dyed our hair, listened to church bells. For a long time, thinking about you was the easiest way for me to get that feeling in my chest.

I never knew justice like I knew putting clothes on my body. A closet full of tie-dye shirts. A hot pink aura. The quotes we wrote on your mattress in every shade of magic marker. Could have sworn I knew revolution. We smoked cigarettes on the swing set in your backyard. We sang, *in this bright future / you can’t forget your past*. This mossy cul-de-sac where I’d bet you anything they wrote the constitution.

Me and Katie’s best friend necklaces were two ancient runes that symbolized gifts and giving when I looked them up later but I always told people that they symbolized love. And I gave one to her in 8th grade because she was my first-best friend even though you wanted to be and I wanted you to be, you could only be my

second-best friend and Jay was your first. And that was how you signed your letters. And instead of giving you the ancient rune I made you a mixtape that I later found out you gave to Jay because you thought the songs on it were too sad.

*Marisa Crawford*  
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<sup>366</sup> [Marisa Crawford](#), "[8th Grade Hippie Chic](#)," collected in [Reversible](#), [Switchback Books](#)