

Social Media Poems 2018

Simeon Berry

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Confessional

“The only good girl to ever make history was Betsy Ross, and she had to stitch up a flag to do it.”

What gal is safe from being slut, tether of lies that leash
a pretty girl through life? Shamed in school by those who claimed
we'd undone the captains of our football teams—
Shunned, despised, how, like dogs, we learned to heel.
How we cringed and whined, how we pissed ourselves
pretending to be good. Oh, but to insist beneath the artificial rules
a realer artifice named “I” might thrive, one capable as Mae
of jokes so bright they'd split the world to its brutal truth.
It wasn't that we were vile; we weren't sluts enough. Reader:
I should have taken that boy out back and fucked
the life out of him. Forget it. I've another forty years to go.
I plan to be filthy. I plan to be low. (Laugh, Reader,
so that “I” can last.) I'm writing the story of a life. Listen:
It's about a girl who lost her reputation. And never missed it.

Paisley Rekdal

1

¹ [Paisley Rekdal](#), “[Confessional](#),” [Ninth Letter](#), collected in [Imaginary Vessels](#), Copper Canyon Press

The Afterlife Is a Room Full of Windows You Are Trying to Avoid

1.

In a bodega called Good Foods
on 5th & 41st, a butterfly fluttered around florescent
light as if it didn't know

florescent lights are ugly

as if it didn't know it wasn't outside near
a real light

like the sun, as if it didn't
know the difference between forest

and kleenex, between grass and cheap
toilet paper. I stopped for a second

and I'm full of bees who died
at sea. A woman outside is yelling

on the phone: Go back

to your mother's house, let me try you
on for size—

my life isn't a performance.

The woman on the other
end hangs up.

2.

You stopped talking to your mother
for three months and you know

this is your fault. This is her fault. This is
everyone's fault and blame is pointless

but you want to have reasons and facts
because they are easier to dress in

every morning that you haven't masturbated
because you never masturbate

you don't really know how. But you know
what you like and what you want

and you've taught yourself how to be
sex and what sex is and what you want

to be for others. What you want to have
done to you

and you never thought as a student
you would have to learn

about what sex means for you, what sex
can do for a body, how sex can make you

an identity. Sex was something that just existed
to you until it was everything

to your body, until it was taken away from you
and your body, until you had to relearn

what sex was and how your body craved it
and how you could make your body crave it

and how you can't make your body crave it
and how you shouldn't make yourself
do anything you don't want to do.

Unlearning is hard to do

especially when you are the teacher
and there are hundreds of faces that look up
from their desks at you everyday

and they trust you but do you even trust
yourself?

This is what you imagine the afterlife
looks like.

You taught your students to dive under desks
make them believe you'd save them
from a gunman.

You'd make them believe
they were safe, make them believe

women can be safe, make them believe
someone is listening to them

in the way their bodies need to be listened
to. Make them believe in the word
okay

even though okay is just a lie
adults feed to kids because we lie
to ourselves about ever

being okay.

Your students ask if they should be
near a window or under the window
and the entire room is full of windows.

Joanna C. Valente

²

² [Joanna C. Valente, "The Afterlife Is a Room Full of Windows You Are Trying to Avoid," *Cotton Xenomorph*](#)

Barbie Chang's Mother Calls

Barbie Chang's mother calls her to
tell her about the
oxygen machine that outfoxes her
father he can't figure
out how to turn it on there's a whole
generation of people
who care about deer porn not form her
dog only cares about the
deer horn she gave him yesterday Barbie
Chang's father who bothers
with everyone's business doesn't know
what Bisquick is someone
wrote a book of poems about Kanye
West there are still
old poets looking for the best new young
poets who are all hornets
around the same old nest Barbie Chang
knows she lives in an
America that most people don't care
about on most days
she can't distinguish between being a
token and racism she
either feels like a token or is experiencing
racism a token needs to be
acted upon by a subject but the same is
true of racism does that
mean her whole life is an object as
a shadow of someone
else on some days she has feeling in
her lungs tries her
mother's oxygen machine the O2 owes her
nothing it goes

through her body breathing for a
shadow is just a hobby

Victoria Chang
3

³ [Victoria Chang](#), "[Barbie Chang's Mother Calls](#)," in *diode*, collected in [Barbie Chang](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

I Am the Whole Defense

Mid-1700s, Southwestern China

Lightning is the creature who carries a knife.

Two months now,
The rains hold watch.

Statues bury in teak
Smear'd with old egret's blood.

I feel the pulse of this inferno,
Tested by the hour to know

That even torches must not waver.

In the garrison, I teach boulders
To trickle from the cliff.

My fallen grow parchment from their hair,

Calligraphy descends
From their lips.

Infantry attack
But my musket knows.

They scale the sides
Yet I tear the rocks.

I am not wife, but my name is Widow.

Let them arrive
To my ready door,
The earth I've already dug.

Mai Der Vang

4

5

⁴ [Mai Der Vang, "I Am the Whole Defense," *Poem-a-Day*](#), collected in [Afterland, Graywolf Press](#)

From the Notes in *Afterland*: "'I Am the Whole Defense' was inspired by an anecdote from A Historical Geographical, and Philosophical View of the Chinese Empire, 1795 by W. Winterbotham, in reference to a Hmong woman who defended a fort by herself after Chinese enemy troops killed all the soldiers, including her husband: 'They were conducted into the fort where she had remained alone, and of which she had been the whole defense; sometimes firing her musket, at others tearing off fragments from the rock, which she rolled down on the soldiers who in vain attempted to climb it.'"

I Meant Eyes But Wrote Yes

D says us long-marrieds need fantasy. He also said “fuck”
twice and used the term, “wet mess.” B says not to be shy,
and that I should embrace myself. I did. It was OK.
J says I need to be inventive. She’s got her own fish to fry,
and I’m thinking about the thong I got for Christmas:
something about its construction reminds me of a muzzle, my ass
barking and growling back there, while my lady parts smirk
behind a lacy scrim. I don’t think that’s the rubric
D had in mind, but J, take note, I’m being inventive, I’m inventing
someone else’s body in place of mine, someone else’s eyes
on my body. I need an artist, chiaroscuro, a visitation, a game:
today I’m a cop, yesterday a nurse. What’s left to unmask?
Should I say that I’m considering one of those bathing suits
with a little skirt? At what age does that become kind
to the people around you? It’s like those beaches where nobody
you want to see naked is naked. A sign should be posted:
Warning. Nothing left to the imagination.

Amy Dryansky
6

⁶ [Amy Dryansky, “I Meant Eyes But Wrote Yes,” *Connotation Press*](#)

Caught In A Trap: The Dead Redux

There were gullywashers in Memphis,
and in an upstairs window of Graceland,
she is facing the Meditation Garden
as if listening to a distant music,
Lisa Marie finally turns to me
and says, *Sweetie, if you can't get on board
with Scientology, this thing between us,
it's through.*

Later, that night, we are lying
yin-yang, head to toe,
in the king-sized bed when
I remind her it wasn't what we thought
that brought us together in that NASCAR bar.
She had liked me and my hair like her daddy's
the front with a curl, the back closely shorn.
That I had played Thin Lizzy's *Rosalie*
on the jukebox. You see, she always
dates the danger boy, just this time a different form.

I protest that I cannot comprehend a world
created by hydrogen bombs, volcanoes,
Xenu. She insists, *Darlin', I believe in you.
You must learn to suspend your disbelief
and trust me until all the facts are in.*
I say *Baby, I am sleepin' with a straight girl
who was once married to Michael Jackson.
There is little left but trust in this world.*

She curls into me, her head on my breast.
She ruffles the short hairs of my neck
and to the rhythm of a river shuffling off the eaves
sings, *She knows music, I know music too you see.*
For that evening, while gently lifting the Mississippi
and quietly uniting the quick and dead
rain was general all over Memphis.

Tanya Olson
7

⁷ Tanya Olson, "[Caught In A Trap: The Dead Redux](#)," [The Pedestal](#), collected in [Boyishly](#), [YesYes Books](#)

Suburban Pastoral

Beer can boys in the Grand Union parking lot
throw stones at a No Loitering sign hanging
from a light pole by one rusty screw. Pock. Pock.
Pong. Behind the store, two girls just off work
practice kissing on a pile of pallets.
Another night of beauty and grace.
The local ice cream dive closed down
and the Cineplex is so full of Disney
even the clerks are monochrome. Houses
in the hills are shut tight against the humidity;
infants inside sleep with slight lisps, heads
full of milk dreams. What can we do?
Beats me. Know anyone who needs
to get pounded? Nah. Well keep thinking.
The sign won't give up its post, whatever
they throw at it, even their car's air filter,
so they drive to the 7-Eleven to hump Mortal
Kombat and shoplift M&Ms. No ID
no smokes no matter what you call my mother.
Back at the Union the girls have given up
on the call they were waiting for
and head home to watch romantic videos.
Why can't the boys we know say things like that?
Can't afford the therapy. Next door someone's father
is deciding he should keep a little extra for himself.
Somewhere a shepherd just broke loose from his leash.

Adam Sol

8

⁸ [Adam Sol](#), "[Suburban Pastoral](#)," collected in [Crowd of Sounds](#), [House of Anansi Press](#)

Night Falls like a Button

from your grandmother's coat. You worry with your thumb the stranger's page. Aging spine of the black sky, night-burps of the sleeping computer. Don't listen to the judgment of your scraped knees. Night anchors in your belly button, your pubic hair. Stars snore safely, for years. Your smile in the early dark is a paraphrase of Mars. Your smile in the deep dark is an anagram of Jupiter. My worst simile is that I'm fancy like a piece of salami wearing a tuxedo. Waiting with a cone of gelato. Your smile in the dreaming dark is an umbrella for all the going, gone, & yet to come. Orioles come for the oranges you've placed in the arms of the architect. Which birds will you pull into orbit tomorrow? You try to sew the night onto your own coat, but it won't stay. Too much memory weather, werewolf migration. You itch for the window's shore. You row, the growing light rearranging your voice, the rain your lunatic photographer.

Chen Chen
9

⁹ [Chen Chen](#), "[Night Falls like a Button](#)," *Poem-a-Day*, collected in [When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities](#), BOA Editions

I Remember, I Remember

I remember being so young I thought all artists were famous.

I remember being so young I thought all artists were good, kind, loving, exceptionally interesting, and exemplary human beings.

I remember—I must have been eight or nine—wandering out to the ungrassed backyard of our newly constructed suburban house and seeing that the earth was dry and cracked in irregular squares and other shapes, and I felt I was *looking at a map* and I was completely overcome by this description, my first experience of making a metaphor, and I felt weird and shaky and went inside and wrote it down: the cracked earth is a map. Although it only takes a little time to tell it, and it is hardly interesting, it filled a big moment at the time, it was an enormous ever-expanding room of a moment, a chunk of time that has expanded ever since and that my whole life keeps fitting into.

I remember writing a letter to President John F. Kennedy and a few weeks after mailing it finding it in the bottom of my mother's drawer.

I remember sending my poems to Little, Brown and Company and suggesting they title the collection "The Little Golden Book of Verse," and I remember their rejection was very kind and I was stunned when they made a guess at my age and were correct, I was in the fourth grade, and I felt the people at Little, Brown and Company were so smart they could read minds.

I remember I chose Little, Brown and Company for a very special reason: they were the publishers of my favorite author, Laura Ingalls Wilder, who wrote the *Little House on the Prairie* books (this was long before the television series). And although Little, Brown and Company sent me a very kind letter indeed, and guessed my age, they also did something I could never forgive them for, something that upset me for days and weeks and months. They sent me a picture of Laura Ingalls Wilder as a ninety-year-old woman; they told me she was dead, her mother and father and sisters were all dead too, and her husband, and that one of my favorite characters had died in a threshing machine accident—a *threshing machine accident*—it was so specific I was able to picture it vividly in my imagination, the mangled body in its overalls, the hat fallen off, some blood on the ground, the machine stopped in the noonday sun, one of its wheels bent out of shape, or some spoke or cog, and a leg or arm was in there, and the whole scene took place in the center of miles and miles and miles—as far as you could see—of beautiful golden grain, all the same length, like a crew cut.

I remember I was not exactly sure what a threshing machine was.

I remember they said that although Pa was dead, his fiddle was in a museum somewhere, and once a year somebody took it out of its case and played it. I remember feeling sorry for the violin, and thinking how lonely it must be to live like that, in a museum.

I remember when I was in the fifth grade my grandfather died and it was my first funeral and when everyone was filing out of the funeral parlor I remember asking if Grandpap was going to stay in there all alone at night and they said yes and I thought that would be awfully scary, lying in a coffin in an empty building, just like the fiddle in its case.

I remember when I was forty-five and my mother died it poured the day we buried her and late at night I thought of how cold her body must be, with the freezing rain pouring down on it, and how much she would hate being out in the cold and rain if she were alive. She would want to be under the blankets of

her own bed on such a night, with a cup of coffee on the nightstand, and the coffee would be on top of the first art object I ever made, at the age of five, a ceramic coaster: a white tile with my face drawn on it in brown lines. For forty years her coffee cup must have burned my face, and since my mother died by fire, I did not want to think of it anymore.

“I remember, I remember,/The house where I was born” are the first two lines of a famous poem called “I Remember, I Remember” by a not-so-famous poet named Thomas Hood, and it was in the first poetry book I ever owned, *The Golden Treasury of Poetry*, edited by Louis Untermeyer.

I remember (later) thinking it was a curious thing, that there were so many famous poems by not-so-famous poets.

I remember (later) being shocked when I discovered Hood was a contemporary of Keats, only four years younger; I always thought of him as a later Victorian, for the diction of the two poets is remarkably different. No matter how you look at this, the implications are truly startling: either the lesser Hood was ahead of his time, or the greater Keats (Miltonian) was behind his time. It means poetry is more than the sum of its diction.

I remember I recognized the allusion when I read Philip Larkin’s version of “I Remember, I Remember.” Larkin’s poem is also called “I Remember, I Remember,” and in it his train happens to stop in Coventry and he happens to remember he was born there. The last line of the poem is “Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.”

I remember my Thanksgiving poem being pinned to the school bulletin board, where everyone could see it, and leaves cut out of orange construction paper were stapled all around it. It began, “We thank God for the living land.”

I remember in high school there was a girl named Lizette. She had black hair and a very pale face and because her mother was French she was an outsider and to make matters worse she was not the best student but was awfully good at art and took all the art classes and we worked on the literary magazine together and I liked her very much but I was afraid to be her friend because after all she was strange and I think I was jealous of her strangeness at the same time as I was afraid of it, and when we were together we read our poems out loud to each other, and in this way, through poetry, it was always safe to communicate.

I remember (much later) wondering what ever happened to Lizette.

I remember another friend in high school whose mother was an artist and their house was full of statues—the Buddha and nymphs—and the furniture looked like it was hundreds of years old and there were paintings on the wall and her mother had a separate apartment called a studio and in it were figures of clay on pedestals and in one corner an old hand-cranked Gramophone and I liked being in there but it was kinda scary too, it seemed forbidden in some way I couldn’t figure out; art was scary, strange, forbidden, and the really confusing part was I wanted it and needed it.

I remember one afternoon my friend and I were in the studio and all the clay figures on pedestals were draped with white sheets and my friend told me her mother did that when she didn’t want to look at them anymore and I was totally confused.

I remember standing in a field in Switzerland at dusk, surrounded by cows with bells around their necks, and reading John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” out loud from an open book I was holding in my hands,

and I started to weep—*weep* is a better word for it than *cry*—and I remember the tears slowly streaming down my face, it was that beautiful to me, and I loved poetry that much. I was eighteen.

I remember (later) thinking that it was actually hilarious that I used to read poetry to cows, that they were an integral part of my most serious moment.

I remember in junior high my leg was in a cast and it was summer and I was lying on a sofa in the basement where it was cool; there was a tv down there, and an ironing board, and a room for my sister to stay in when she came home from college, and my sister was ironing—she was always ironing, sewing, or cooking, she was majoring in Home Economics—and to pass the time she gave me one of her college textbooks, a book of poems by the British Romantics, and the only other thing I can remember is that my life changed that summer. My life changed for good.

I remember when I graduated from college, we were asked to submit exactly how we wanted our names to appear on our diplomas, and I spelled my middle name (which is Lorraine) Low Rain, because the day before I had been reading W.S. Merwin's new book and in it was some kind of brief Japanese thing along the lines of "Low Rain, Roof Fell."

I remember when my parents saw my diploma, they were horrified and kept asking me how I could have done such a thing, after they paid for my education and all.

I remember finding the diploma among my mother's things after she died, and throwing it away.

I remember I never did like to save things much.

I remember saving everything.

I remember the afternoon I sat in a literature class, my hardback edition of *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* open before me, a book I had already owned for years, the pages worn and softened by endless turning and fingering, page after page filled with marginalia, notes, the definitions of words, question marks, exclamation marks, and underlinings, all in the soft gray graphite of my own living penciling hand, when a distracted classmate I did not know very well leaned over my book and wrote in it with her ballpoint pen: *I'm so bored!!! Are you going to the party tonight?* I remember feeling like my blood had stopped and reversed course, not in the heart, where that is supposed to happen, but midvein, the feeling medically called *shock*. I remember trembling and soaring with anger, and I remember the weekend after the unfortunate incident took place, sitting for hours and hours in my room with a new book, trying to cope, copying by hand everything I had ever written in the old book, with the exception of that one bold, sorry, uninvited guest.

I remember, in college, trying to write a poem while I was stoned, and thinking it was the best thing I had ever written.

I remember reading it in the morning, and throwing it out.

I remember thinking, if W.S. Merwin could do it, why couldn't I?

I remember thinking, because he is a god and I am a handmaiden with a broken urn.

I remember the first poetry reading I ever went to; I was in college and it was W.S. Merwin. He sat on a stool under a spotlight and the audience sat at his feet. He had a halo of curls and he looked like a god with his face in the spotlight. He wore blue velvet knee breeches, a flowing white shirt, and soft, flat

yellow leather boots—more like slippers really—that came up to his knees, where his trousers began. Surely this is an imaginary memory, surely he never owned such clothing.

I remember liking the reading.

I remember being young and liking everything.

I remember liking a great many readings that, if I were to sit through them now, I would not like.

I remember hearing the great Spanish poet Rafael Alberti read. I was very young and so he seemed very old to me, with his shoulder-length white hair and his white suit. I was also shocked that he was accompanied by a woman who did not seem to be much older than I was; she wore a skirt so short you could see her underwear when she walked, and white plastic go-go boots, as they were called. I remember one of them carried a birdcage with a white dove in it, but to tell the truth I may have made this detail up, in my mind over the years, perhaps to emphasize to myself that it was, and remains, the strangest poetry reading I ever attended. Alberti read his poems in Spanish and his American translator, Ben Belitt, read them in English. Ben was sober, shy, outwardly conservative; he wore a tweed jacket and tie. Alberti gave Ben a toy pistol, what was called a cap gun, a toy capable of making very loud noises, and told Ben to shoot himself in the head whenever he, Alberti, gave the signal, and that is exactly what happened: Alberti would be reading in Spanish, pause, look at Ben, and Ben would reluctantly shoot himself in the head. But when Ben read the poems in English, Alberti had the pistol and from time to time shot himself in the head with real gusto. I felt it was a great lesson in translation.

I remember hearing James Merrill read, in August, in Vermont, in a barn. He wore a white linen suit and read to a very small group of people (no more than twenty) sitting on folding metal chairs; I remember a shaft of light coming in through an open window and that I spent most of the reading watching the dust motes floating there. Beyond that—nothing, except one detail, the memory of which overrides all else: outside, a car was parked (had he arrived in it?), its rear window was filthy, and someone had written in the dust clean me, in Greek. I always instinctively knew he had written it, and that rear window is my memory of James Merrill.

I remember my first Ashbery reading, also in college. Ashbery was reading from his new book, *Three Poems*, and he said that it was a lot like watching tv—you could open the book anywhere and begin reading, and flip around the book as much as you wanted to. I remember hating him for saying this. I remember the word sacrilege came to mind. I remember not liking that reading.

I remember, two years later, reading *Three Poems* on a grassy slope while across the road three men put a new roof on an old house, and I was in love with one of them. I could watch the men working as I read. I remember that everything I was reading was everything that was happening across the way—I would read a little, then look up, read a little, then look up, and I was blown apart by the feeling this little book was about my life at that moment, exactly as I was living it. I remember loving the book, and that it was one of the memorable reading experiences of my life.

I remember reading Rilke's *Duino Elegies* again and again and again, until I "got" them, until something burst over me like a flood, and I remember, once again, weeping and weeping with a book in my hands.

I remember a reading W.S. Merwin gave in a tiny chapel, with the audience sitting in the pews, and how after a while we were all lost in a suspension of time—I know I was—and after the reading there was a question and someone asked a bizarre question, she asked what time it was, and Merwin looked at the clock (there was a clock on the wall) and every one of us could see it had stopped, it had stopped in the middle of his

reading, literal proof of what we already felt to be true, this spectacular thing, the dream of all poetry, to cut a hole in time.

I remember wanting to hear Anne Carson read, but I was very ill and had to be admitted to the hospital, and I postponed my going into the hospital until the next morning, after I had heard her read. I remember I needed a ride to the hospital but none of my friends could take me, they wouldn't take me, because there were a lot of famous poets in town, and they wanted to hear them all. I remember this made me angry beyond words, but at the same time it was hypocritical of me, because I myself had put off my hospitalization until after a reading.

I remember the year after college I was broke, and Bernard Malamud, who had been a teacher of mine, sent me a check for \$25 and told me to buy food with it, and I went downtown and bought *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*.

I remember John Moore, another teacher, who did the damndest thing. We were studying Yeats, and at the beginning of one class Mr. Moore asked us if we would like to see a picture of Yeats. We nodded, and he held up a photograph of Yeats taken when he was six months old, a baby dressed in a long white gown. Maybe he was even younger, maybe he was an infant. I thought it was the funniest thing anyone had ever done, the strangest, most ridiculous, absurd thing to have done. But nobody laughed and if Mr. Moore thought it was funny, you couldn't tell by his face. I always liked him for that. The poems we were reading in class were not written by a baby. And yet whenever I think of Yeats, I see him as a tiny baby wearing a dress—that photograph is part of my conception of the great Irish poet. And I love that it is so. We are all so small.

I remember going to New York for an awards ceremony, for I had won an award, and standing awkwardly in a grand lobby, and noticing an old man in a white hat who looked rather lost, and thinking he had come to see someone get an award, perhaps a granddaughter or someone like that, and I went up to him and asked him if I could help him, and he asked me where the men's room was, and I walked him there, and while we were walking I asked him if perhaps a member of his family was receiving an award, and he said not that he knew of, and then he went into the bathroom and I waited for him outside and while I was waiting I remember thinking how surprised he would be when he found out that I, the woman who showed him the bathroom, was receiving an award, and then a man and a woman walked by in an important kind of hurry, saying, "We have lost Arthur Miller," and then Mr. Miller came out of the bathroom, and smiled at me and shrugged his shoulders and went away with them.

I remember my first electric typewriter.

I remember sending my first short story out to a national magazine the summer after I had graduated from college and receiving the reply, "We are terribly sorry, but we don't publish poetry." I remember never looking back.

I remember meeting an Irish poet who had just come from Georgie Yeats's funeral, and was still drunk, though he had also just flown from Ireland to the United States. He was furious and maudlin because Georgie, who outlived her husband by thirty years, died only weeks after she had given all her husband's manuscripts to the Irish State, manuscripts she could have sold to an American university for millions of dollars; she did this because she had no money, was an alcoholic, and very much afraid in a moment of weakness she would break down and sell the manuscripts after all; the thought of such a betrayal she could not bear, so she gave the papers to the Irish State, died a few weeks later, and had a three-hundred-mile funeral cortege with only six people present—the poet who told me this was one of them—and not a single representative of the Irish State was among them.

I remember another thing the Irish poet told me: once, drinking in Dublin with Berryman, they had a shot of ouzo and Berryman immediately disappeared. It was a matter of hours before they discovered he had walked out of the bar, taken a taxi to the airport and flown directly to Athens using his American Express card.

I remember reading John Berryman's "Dream Song #14" in my twenties, with its famous opening words, "Life, friends, is boring." I remember being struck by its wit, irony, playfulness, delight: it is the kind of poem students read aloud to each other in a pool of laughter and admiration, and there is nothing wrong with that, for it reinforces their sense of cynicism and superiority, and it is crucial at that age we find a like-minded group to whom we can belong. I remember rereading the poem, not for the second time, some thirty years later, and being struck by its excruciating pain, which is entirely without irony. Many persons who knew Berryman have remarked that he spoke, always, without irony, which means, simply, that he always meant what he said. If you are going through a particularly stable period of your life, and you encounter his bleakest statements, you will react with chagrin and disbelief, as if listening to the ablest jester. If you are going through a particularly unstable period of your life, the straightforward articulation of suffering that has already twisted and dislocated its bearer renders a tension that will very nearly kill you. But I did not know this then.

I remember reading in the newspaper that Ernest Hemingway was dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head, and reading the whole article to the end, which is a very strange memory, as I was ten years old and did not read the newspaper.

I remember figuring out Djuna Barnes was alive and living in Greenwich Village when I was in college and for a long time afterward, and I could have gone and visited her, but I assumed the author of my most beloved book had died before I was born.

I remember repeating this mistake for many years.

I remember making it yesterday.

I remember that Djuna Barnes was living in total obscurity that last decade of her life, and so was I—if we can extend the meaning of the word *obscurity* to include a state of non-alert mind.

I remember that I did not always know authors were ordinary people living ordinary lives, and that an ordinary life was an obscure life, if we can extend the meaning of *obscure* to mean covered up by dailiness, glorious dailiness, shameful dailiness, dailiness that is difficult to figure out, that is not always clear until a long time afterward. Obscure: not readily noticed, easily understood, or clearly expressed. Which is a pretty good definition of life.

I remember, I remember the house where I was born.

I remember driving by the hospital where I was born and glancing at it—I was in a car going sixty miles an hour—and feeling a fleeting twinge of specialness after which I had no choice but to let it go and get over it, at sixty miles an hour.

I remember I was a child, and when I grew up I was a poet. It all happened at sixty miles an hour and on days when the clock stopped and all of humanity fit into a little chapel, into a pinecone, a shot of ouzo, a snail's shell, a piece of soggy rye on the pavement.

I remember the day I stood in front of a great, famous sculpture by a great, famous sculptor and didn't like it. Such a moment is a landmark in the life of any young artist. It begins in confusion and guilt and

self-doubt and ends in a triumphant breakthrough: I see the world and I see that I am free before it, I am not at the mercy of historical opinion and what I want to turn away from, I turn away from, what I want to approach, I approach. Twenty-five years later I read an essay by John Berger on Rodin and in it Berger was able to articulate all that I felt on that afternoon, standing in front of a great Rodin. But by then I was old and vain and the pride of being vindicated was, I admit, just as exciting as Berger's intellectual condemnation of Rodin's desire toward dominance.

I remember thinking my feelings implicated me with Rodin and though now I liked him less than ever, my repulsion was braided with a profound sympathy inseparable from my feelings for myself. And that is a landmark in the life of an old artist looking at art: the realization that none of us can ever be free from ourselves.

I remember the first time I realized the world we are born into is not the one we leave.

I remember feeling my head was made of sandpaper.

I remember feeling my head was made of the smoothest silver driftwood.

I remember Ben Belitt, Pablo Neruda's friend and translator, bent down to pick up the *New York Times* from his doorstep one rainy morning (this was before they had figured out you could put the newspaper in a plastic sleeve) and the first thing he noticed was that the "newspaper had been crying," as he put it, that the newsprint was smudged and ran together in watery lines down the page, just like mascara, and then he saw the announcement of Neruda's death: Neruda had died the night before.

I remember telling this story many times, but leaving Ben out of it, pretending it was me it had happened to.

I remember the night I decided I would call myself a poet. I had been invited to a dinner party of literati, and I knew I would inevitably be asked what I did. I usually said I was a teacher; I was twenty-seven years old and had been writing poems since I was nine. I made up my mind that if anyone asked, I would say I was a poet; I left my apartment with resolve, a sense of mission, and security. And someone asked. Alain, a charismatic French poet wearing a blue velvet jacket and a long white scarf, asked me what I did; I took a deep breath and said I was a poet; his face distorted into a human field of disgust: "A poet!" he cried. "If you call yourself a poet then you cannot possibly be one; poets live in shadows and never admit and do not discuss, and besides, a real poet knows that all the poems in the world do not a poet make. I would no more call myself a poet than call myself a man—it is the height of arrogance, as any dog knows." Dear me! I left the party in tears—hard cold tears of confusion and humiliation. It seemed my final hour.

I remember, I remember, everything you said to me. We went walking out in silence, underneath the cherry tree. Falling blossom, falling blossom, falling from the cherry tree. I remember, I remember, everything you did to me: Annie Lennox, "Twisted." There, the famous refrain from English poetry finds its way into rock and roll, more than a hundred years later.

I remember "remember" means to put the arms and legs back on, and sometimes the head.

I remember, on the first Tuesday of every year, that I became a poet for a single, simple reason: I liked making similes for the moon. And when things get tough and complicated and threaten to drown me in their innuendoes, I come back to this clear, simple, and elemental fact, out of all facts the one most like the moon itself. *O night, sleep, death and the stars!*

I remember the moon was covered with dust and I used my finger to write *clean me* on its surface, and my finger was ever after covered with a fine gray blanket, as when you pull lint from the dryer.

I remember more than I can tell.

I remember heaven.

I remember hell.

Mary Ruefle
10

¹⁰ [Mary Ruefle, "I Remember, I Remember," Poetry](#)

Not a Warning, Not a Challenge, Not an Instruction Manual

I once slept with an older man who eclipsed
every silver of light in his apartment with blankets,

duct tape, and ancient maps of New York.
He flinched awake every hour

on his mattress on the floor
because his childhood stalked him with a knife

at the other end of his eyelids. I orgasmed
to knowing how to make him feel better.

This was the man I used
to cheat on the lover whose parents blew out
birthday candles over a webcam.

While they ate cake in the computer screen,
I reached under my bell jar and pulled out
my mom. Pulled out her chain-smoking boyfriend.

I pulled out my alcoholic friends, all the ruddy
strangers with *fail*
engraved on their necks. And I sat—

cross-legged—in a field of their wild limbs,

which no one could ever climb past.

Eugenia Leigh

11

¹¹ [Eugenia Leigh, "Not a Warning, Not a Challenge, Not an Instruction Manual," Muzzle](#), collected in [Blood, Sparrows and Sparrows, Four Way Books](#)

Dear Reader

I am trying to pry open your casket
with this burning snowflake.

I'll give up my sleep for you.
This freezing sleet keeps coming down
and I can barely see.

If this trick works we can rub our hands
together, maybe

start a little fire
with our identification papers.
I don't know but I keep working, working

half hating you,
half eaten by the moon.

James Tate

12

¹² [James Tate](#), "[Dear Reader](#)," collected in [The Oblivion Ha-Ha](#), [Carnegie-Mellon University Press](#)

Coming and Going

At fifteen, you boarded a Greyhound for Boston. In your pocket,
Mom's neat ballpoint script on college-ruled paper
announcing you "emancipated." Landed a job
at a local co-op, moved in with hippie crust punks. Shaved

your fuchsia curls and Elmer-glued a bi-hawk. Got a septum ring
and bicep tattoo—a google-eyed skull and crossbones. Every day
you practiced on your bass the chorus of Black Sabbath's
"Iron Man." One day, showed up at my place

with a spare-changer you'd just met on the T.
Looked at me and ordered, *Cook him some dinner.*

Train-hopping at sixteen, in North Carolina, you woke
to a sheriff. *Here in Altamonte, you can get yourself arrested
for lookin' the way you do.* You always did have a mouth on you.
A day later, Dad met you at the bus station back home in Florida.

You were always leaving. You always came back.

Everyone got pulled over on Dad's street. Mostly in his front
yard. One sheriff going over sixty hit you on your bike
when an orange punch-buggy pulled out without looking.
You sued. And won. Dad said don't have anymore

run-ins with the cops. You bought a four-hundred-dollar
white Cadillac, souped it up with a bass system, spinning
chrome rims. Started smoking Black & Milds, got a 'thug
love' tattoo under your breasts, a gold grill.

The first five years of your adulthood never happened.
You said the wrong thing to the wrong guy. DOC officers
locked you and ninety-nine others in a "waiting area"
while they doused family photos with bleach, ripped open

ketchup and mustard packets and made a hamburger
of your bunk. Mom called the state for a week. Several
officers were suspended. Then allowed back.
When you were in, you wanted me to turn your stories

into poems. When you got out, you told me to stop.

You covered up that cross-eyed skull with a big blue rose.
Now it looks like one of those trick Magic Eye images—
all you have to do is squint and relax your gaze,
and the past surfaces, just so.

Tara Skurtu

¹³ [Tara Skurtu](#), "[Coming and Going](#)," [The Los Angeles Review](#), collected in [The Amoeba Game](#), [Eyewear Books](#)

That Chile Emmett in That Casket

Photo, Jet magazine, Sept. 15, 1955

Sometimes the page was tacked, flush against plaster with a pearl hatpin,
or jammed into a dime-store frame with a glowing Jesus. In some kingly front

rooms, its place was in the shadowbox, propped on one ripped edge,
or laid curly-cornered on the coffee table, smudged and eaten sheer

with the pass-around. In the kitchen, it was blurred by stew smoke
or pot liquor-blotched until somebody got smart enough to scotch-tape

it to door of the humming fridge, and the boy without eyes kept staring.
Mamas did the slow fold before wedging it into their flowered plastic coin

purses, daddies found a sacred place in pleather wallets right next
to the thought of cash. And at least once every week, usually on Sunday

after church or when you dared think you didn't have to speak proper
to that old white lady who answered the phone at your daddy's job,

or when, as Mama said, you *showed your ass* by sassin' or backtalking,
the page would be pulled down, pulled out, unfolded, smoothed flat,

and you had to look. *Look, boy*. And they made sure you kept looking
while your daddy shook his head, mumbling *This why you got to act*

right 'round white folk, then dropped his smoke-threaded gaze to whisper—
Lord, they kilt that chile more than one time. Mama held on to your eyes—

See what happen when you don't be careful? She meant white men could
turn you into a stupid reason for a suit, that your last face would be silt,

stunned in its skid and worshipped, your right eye reborn in the cave
of your mouth. *Look!* she screeched. You did. But then you remembered

there weren't any pictures of *you* in the house, pinned high on the wall,
folded up tight up against the Lord, toted like talisman in wallet or purse.

You'd searched, woe climbing like river in your chest. But there were
no pictures of you anywhere. You sparked no moral. You were alive.

Patricia Smith

14

¹⁴ [Patricia Smith](#), "[That Chile Emmett in That Casket](#)," [Water~Stone Review](#), collected in [Incendiary Art](#), [TriQuarterly Books](#)

Circus Fire, 1944

I. The Circus Makes Its Way into Town

No rain for weeks. Cows hold
their milk in covetous udders.

The river lies still as an infant
in formaldehyde,

schools of harried shad shuddering
on pebbled banks, a rank

reminder of August coming.
Two nights ago fireworks lit up

parched tobacco fields, the sweet
smell reaching for the towns, listing

into factory windows where women
working the cemetery shift clucked

their tongues, spoke of children
burning the whole city down.

Gabrielle Calvocoressi

15

¹⁵ [Gabrielle Calvocoressi](#), "[Circus Fire, 1944](#)," [The Paris Review](#), collected in [The Last Time I Saw Amelia Earhart](#), [Persea Books](#)

Say When

if you are a man made of birds
if you are a bureau

if chest, if cage

if you are a weather
worn out, say when

if the space between us makes
a dog named vacancy

if I contain all possible crimes

if I can return to the night
in the field, to lift from the grass
the shape of your wife

I can wait and not wait, want
and be a seed, a vessel, believe

the bedroom's red light catching
sweat like cinders in your hair

if I pay close attention, if I stay very still
if I notice how stupid we are

if, say, I was always on fire

Sophie Klahr

16

¹⁶ [Sophie Klahr](#), "[Say When](#)," [PANK](#), collected in [Meet Me Here at Dawn](#), [YesYes Books](#)

Self-Portrait

Little gal, who knit thee?
Dost thou know who knit thee?
Gave thee milk & bid thee beg
Slid a purse between your legs
Stuffed thy brain with blooms of blight:
algae, wool. You're lichen-white.
Gave to thee such vicious lungs
for breathing glitter past your wrongs—

Little gal, I'll tell thee,
Little gal, I'll tell thee!
I, who cut your palms with glass
& poured in poison *tasse* by *tasse*
I am nimble. I am young.
I peeled you with a pair of tongs.
I laughed when no one loved you back
& raked the mist to scarf your flesh.
We come together in the dirt.
I, a rake & thou a twig;
All day we watch the long pig dig.
All day we watch the long pig dig.

Kiki Petrosino

17

¹⁷ [Kiki Petrosino](#), "[Self-Portrait](#)," [River Styx](#), collected in [Witch Wife](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Early Winter, Before (II)

After we stop
touching, I count

your slowing breaths, listening

for your descending sleep
before I reach

for myself in longing—

quietly, so
you do not wake.

This kindness
is the sort

that cannot thaw.

I am ice all over,
the dead tree frozen

and reaching up
to our bedroom window,

and I am also the axe.

Rachel Mennies

18

¹⁸ [Rachel Mennies](#), "[Early Winter, Before \(II\)](#)," [Waxwing](#)

Milhous as King of the Ghosts

A cold cellar-hole at the end of the day,
When faithless pretenders cover the sun
And nothing is left but my candidacy—

There was dead Checkers with her list of slights,
Slow tongue, green bile, black list, white mind
And April, cruel as rumors of my demise.

To be, on the lawns, where no helicopter lands,
Without that preening statuette of dog,
That dog surrendered to the moon;

And to feel that the light is a Key Biscayne light
In which everything is lofted up to the elect
And no returns need be tallied;

Then there is no use in counting. It comes of itself;
All the blue votes turning a brilliant red,
Even in Chicago. The wind moves on the lawns

And moves in myself. The last Iowa sweetcorn
Is for me, the snows of New Hampshire drift up
Into an empire of self that knows no boundaries,

I become an empire that fills the oleaginous pipelines
Of the earth. The bitch is still yapping
By gravestone-light and I am whipped high, whipped

Up, sculpted higher and higher, cool as a sphinx—
I sit with my head like a Rushmore in space
And the scrofulous hound smelling blood on my wings.

Rachel Loden

19

¹⁹ [Rachel Loden](#), "[Milhous as King of the Ghosts](#)," [Spoon River Poetry Review](#), collected in [Dick of the Dead](#), Ahsahta Press

Hair on Fire

We ironed October leaves
 between sheets of wax paper.
We melted crayons to make candles
 and froze Kool-Aid to make popsicles.
We stuck cloves into oranges. We grew roots
 on sweet potatoes in water.
We taped our broken glasses together
 and shut up. We made shoe-box
dioramas with Play-Doh and modeling clay.
 We cut snowflakes from folded paper
and hung them with kite string.
 We made newspaper kites
and imagined they could fly.

We shaped tin-foil into fake coins
 for our church envelopes.
We covered love bites with Kool-Aid.
 We filled liquor bottles with holy water.
We hid our stash in bean-bag chairs.
 We drove to Ohio for drugs
and rolled back our father's odometer.
 We mounted our girlfriends
on basement pool tables, clacking balls together
 for ears upstairs.
We drew lies with chalk
 and the truth with tar.
We lit our hair on fire
 to cover the smell.

Jim Daniels
20

²⁰ [Jim Daniels](#), "[Hair on Fire](#)," [The Alembic](#), collected in [Street Calligraphy](#), [Steel Toe Books](#)

Stray Dogs

"Thou art a beaten dog beneath the hail"
—Pound, Canto LXXXI

To think again of Pound, bared to the sky at Pisa. The traitor's cage they built for him specially. 6 x 6 ft of airstrip mesh & dust. Wire diamonds running even underfoot. Day 25, the DTC doctors transfer him to a medical tent (*A swollen magpie in the fitful sun*) fearing the first signs of a breakdown. Three weeks i' this here sun goan change a man, thinks Mr Edwards (he with the face of *the Baluba mask*) as he flips over a packing crate, hang reg'lations, to fashion the traitor a writing table. Squat at his crate-cum-desk, Pound spreads flat the worn-out covers of his dog-eared Confucius: he'd slipped it in his slacks' side pocket that day at the house, a rifle butt pounding the door. As he flicks through the *Analects*, his hand starts to tremble. He pushes it hard into his temple. Takes up the donated pencil stub: *Pull down thy vanity*. Near illegible. Scrawling on squares of shiny latrine roll now lodged in a library's vaults. Later he gets hold of a G.I. pad, ruled lines turned ninety-degrees like bars. No longer blithely ranting on Rothschilds as in his radiodays (*Whether they are born Jews or have taken to Jewry*). Circe's sty. Glorious cant. Our captive flutters again to the much-thumbed page where, having lost his disciples at the city's east gate, Kung takes with equanimity the stranger's slur: "Look at this man here, he has a face like a lost dog!" "Yes," smiles Kung Fu-tzu, "yes, that's quite correct."

Sarah Howe
21

²¹ [Sarah Howe](#), "[Stray Dogs](#)," [The Poetry Review](#), collected in [Loop of Jade](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Dost

Why dost thou pray in a Cutlass?
Why dost thou drive for Binghamton
when thou come from Scranton
up the snow burnt throat of 81?
Why wipe the ash
from the face of the radio?
Why crates of rotors, pliers, shirts
on the chewed velour of the bucket seats?
Why a map of Arkansas
and the Ozarks crumpled? From what
to what dost go? Between
what truck stop and which cinder
hutch, between what
omelet plate and what gray-faced cop
in shades at ten at night, dost go?
Why dost at dark? Why stop
in the lot of a Radio Shack,
smoking, with the windows cracked
Why black the dash lights now? Why
touch the hot key to thy cheek?
Why a town called Justice,
here, where dost sleep?

Gregory Lawless
22

²² [Gregory Lawless](#), "[Dost](#)," [Drunken Boat](#), collected in [I Thought I Was New Here](#), [BlazeVOX Books](#)

Acetylcholine: Lot and Sparrow

Before time, in the Valley of the Plain, farmers ploughed the rift. To begin, they followed an edge towards the end of their lot, then turned and ebbed their furrow towards the other end, then returned, then returned.

Three in the morning, the night after Easter, 1921, Graz, Austria.

Otto Loewi awakes from a dream about frogs. Spends the remaining night and day enacting his dream. He places two still beating frog hearts in salt water. Stimulates one heart along the Vagus nerve then overturns the brine onto the other heart. The two hearts fall into rhythm. And if you'd drunk the water, yours would too.

•

What can make one heart slow another? Witness governance by chemistry. A chemical effects our pulse. Our ability to turn our head. Perhaps voluntary, perhaps not. Chemically, to this extent, they are the same. To walk. Sweat and to salivate. Remember, to be excited and to judge. Doubt, mistrust. Mistrust even our ability to turn our own head, to walk to this extent, these are all the same.

•

The Valley of the Plain is the place on earth closest to its center. Much has flowed into the heart of this depression. Salt water. Bitumen. Oxygen. Angels. A peninsula called el-Lisan sticks out into the salty water. In Arabic el-Lisan means "tongue."

•

For his experiments with frog hearts, Loewi receives the Nobel Prize in 1936. At the banquet he says "I thank you from deepest heart." In two years, Loewi is again awoken at three in the morning now with a gun to his throat. A dozen Nazi troops set him without his house for being Of Jewish Decent. As he left town, the Soviets leveled Graz and the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace. Loewi escaped to New York. He began breeding frogs.

•

Inside the brine live single-celled organisms. I cannot overstate how primitive they are. Minerals easily encrust them. Yet, they can live where nothing else can, are impervious to radiation, can repair their DNA if damaged. I cannot overstate how suited to living they are.

The Dead Sea is drying up. Sinking. Moving closer to the center. The Dead Sea sparrow is known to be the smallest sparrow but considered the most beautiful.

•

Within the Dead Sea, salt accumulates into large floating bodies, saltbergs. During times of great upset, these may breach onto land and may take the form of a woman craning her neck. The soil of the Plain is rich in bitumen, which burns a thick, sulfurous smoke, once described as brimstone. Tectonic faults underlay el-Lisan, capable of swallowing a city. None of these ideas are facts. A fact is: quick surrender spared Graz. "Fact" is not a thing to hope for.

•

Behind you there is no punishment, no prancing jackal. Heat need not come from flame. Sulfur need not be an omen. There is nothing behind you to concern you. Nothing to consider. No ash, no threshold. Take my word. There is no *there is*. No chance of return. No slowing heart. No shatter. No plough. No tongue. No salt.

Dave Snyder
23

²³ [Dave Snyder](#), "[Acetylcholine: Lot and Sparrow](#)," [Sentence](#)

Tips for Survival

In the Arctic wear only 100% wool.
Sleep in snow caves not tents.

Take a pole on a glacier.
It will help if a crevasse.

In polar bear country sleep in the center
of the ring your dogs make.
The bear will be less hungry when.

Don't date flyboys.
Carry blister tape.

Antibiotics. Antibiotics.

If a giraffe is staring at anything
but you, run.

Make eye contact
on the subway
only if.

Always have three plans.

Don't fuck people
who don't read.

Accept no gift
unless you want that relationship.

Need it. That ship will carry you.
There will never be enough time

or later. Now now now now now.

Maureen N. McLane

24

²⁴ [Maureen N. McLane](#), "[Tips for Survival](#)," collected in [Some Say, Farrar, Straus and Giroux](#)

XLI (Mack, The Breaker)

Do you see how it was with me?
Skinny and of little account,
then growing abruptly,
my left hand a miasma,
my talent, my vanishing ink,
rubbed into the ball
while fate skulked toward me
in Ho Chi Minh sandals and calico noir?

At fifteen I threw in the high eighties
and two curves:
the slow one broke three feet and took all I had;
the other hard, but easy on the shoulder,
the hand loosening the screw, so the ball
jumped at the plate four inches.

And the jilter, with the whole arm,
but the fingers like a hand
cupped lightly around a breast.
So when the bottom dropped,
the batter stood there
and, for just that instant,
saw his girl opening
as she tiptoed on the top step
of the First Baptist Church
to kiss me.

And now when I slip into the pinstripe
suit of the undertaker, strap
on my hook, and drive downtown
past stores with plywood on the windows
and dried puddles of cement in the back lot of the closed block plant,
I think of things like black holes
and time machines that will never happen.

Though I know it was only a pitch,
there and then not, here
each night it breaks
when I touch and am touched,
where I hold and am held,
and, in sleep, run through the jungle by the light of tracers,
dive, and as I dive,
yank the pin and toss the grenade
into the dark hut. Onliness

Refrain

A state becomes statement, Petrarch
trips on a pile of laurel bones, severely damaged
except for two lines. The body absorbs
all kinds of things, a useless brilliant nothing
guarding the borders of witness
where the metaphors start, and the snow.
Petrarch doesn't dream of snow, except
in silver bowls with syrup
mixed into it, pomegranate or persimmon
chasing summer somewhere next to lost,
and then the brilliant birds
fly from his mouth, perhaps
just one, a bird of paradise with no
legs, no feet, a lifetime's inability to land.

Petrarch whispers leaves into my ear,
thinks *Boys smell nice*, boys smell
like spring preserved in a December jar, open
the lid and it escapes me just now, haunts
the room all day: stains air, stains
nostrils, cedar-pressed seasons sweetbitter
somewhat like eros, like crushed laurel
leaves stain fingers. He loves me nowhere
but in words (another of the several things
which I refrain from mentioning), boys' names
on trees or boys named after trees:
fixing beauty in the wind, fixing hunger
in the eye, the *x* of it. (I miss the men
midnighting Lakeview streets.)

Wind only visible in what it touches
leads astray, disturbing to discard;
trees shed their way toward nakedness
leaf by leaf until the bough has been broken.
A spatter of small nameable wings
takes to the wind, takes care not to wake
Petrarch, who's dreaming rain's
refrain, *fall down, fall down*,
but he's already one with grass.
And then a hero comes along
with birds flying out of his mouth:
one of the old verbs might be true,
park paths of wind-polished pebbles
lead one astray, into the snow.

Reginald Shepherd

26

²⁶ [Reginald Shepherd](#), "[Refrain](#)," [Indiana Review](#), collected in [Fata Morgana](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Terrorism

At a college in Dearborn,
Michigan, I read a poem
about watching girls
at camp hold their breaths
under the showers
so I could see
their breasts swell.
Some people call Dearborn
a hub of “terrorist” activity.
I’ve placed the word terrorist
between quotation marks
because “Arab” or “Muslim”
or “people who look like
the terrorists we fear”
is what they mean.
In the poem about the camp
I also use quotation marks
around the words
“pussy” and “chicken-shit,”
but for different reasons—
I’m waiting in line
to jump over a dam
into a river where other boys
have drowned, and I hesitate,
until someone shouts
“pussy” and “chicken-shit”
and you don’t need me
to tell you what I did,
what I had to do.
A famous poet says
for a speaker to express
authority, he must possess
three virtues, one of which
is passion.
After the reading
a young man
approached me.
He turned out to be
the younger brother of someone
I knew and wrote
a poem about, a lifeguard
who saved a drowning girl.
The child pulled from the pool
could have been a boy—
I don’t remember,
it doesn’t matter.
I care about what I’m saying—
that matters. Passion

is a deep-seated conviction,
says the famous poet.
You need to believe
that I believe.
I told the young man
in Dearborn about his brother
saving a life, as if
he didn't already know.
He listened, politely,
until I stopped talking
and then he said
I was out of line and had acted
inappropriately. How,
I asked. He said I shouldn't
use words like that.
Which words, I asked.
He was getting flustered.
I asked him again.
I wanted him to say
"pussy" and "chicken-shit."
He said I should not use words
like that in front of women.
By "women," he meant
Arab and Muslim women.
Maybe he meant
all women. I don't know,
I didn't ask.
A lot of Arabs and Muslims
live in Dearborn.
That's why some people
think of it as a hotbed
of Islamic terrorism.
The phrase "a hotbed
of Islamic terrorism"
should probably appear
between quotes every time
people use it, even if
they are Arab or Muslim,
like me. The other virtues
a speaker should possess,
says the famous poet,
are discrimination
and inclusiveness.
By "discrimination"
he means the speaker
should come to his position
without ignoring but considering
opposed positions,
and finding them wanting.
By "inclusiveness" he means
the speaker immediately

sees connections
between the subject at hand
and other issues.
Also, the speaker needs
to make the reader believe
he is doing his subject justice,
that he is relating it
to the world.
This makes his voice
communal, speaking not
for any community
but with the goal
of making communities,
the first of which is
that of speaker and reader.
The young man speaking
on behalf of Arab and Muslim
women told me that my poems
were “indecent”
and “immoral,”
that I should be ashamed,
that I was a terrible Muslim.
“Go fuck yourself,”
is what I wanted to say,
but—maybe he was right—
so I smiled, I thanked him
for listening, and I told him
I loved his brother, and, “Please,
will you say I said hello.”

Hayan Charara

27

²⁷ [Hayan Charara](#), “[Terrorism](#),” [Poetry](#)

Vince Neil Accompanies Josh to Luncheon w/ Scholars, Poets, and Others—Gets Cell-Phone Number of Grad. Student Sitting at Far End of Table—Orders Cheeseburger, No Tomato—Borrows Josh's Cell Phone—Calls Grad. Student Sitting at Far End of Table

If I'd been born a girl, like you,
I wouldn't have lived any longer than I will,
and whether I'd be waiting
in my new long Johns, or in the plus-size version
of your blouse and Target pumps,
still the ancient Boy Scout Death would sidle up
and find me in the houseboat,
compliment my penmanship, my knots, and then
he'd lead me to the minivan, never to be seen
with this hairstyle again, the handsome scalp
and blond fringe now worn
by seagulls, who hit the high notes like it was nothing,
who think in unison, though they never
seem to fly that way, instead go dropping singular
from the squiggled flock
after bread crust and fish eye, blip-blip
down from the sky, rogue threads of EKG. I mean to say
what's globbed is globbed for good
and even John Keats will not unfuck it for us.
Though maybe you have this feeling
about me—good!—and maybe then
you paste that feeling down with words
and I do the same, and then dreaming in our beds
we get the lonely message from each other,
just in time, just as the jackbooted soldiers
come rushing in, over the picket fence, with every fourth beat
of the fearful heart gone pulsing out its tracer bullet
into a potholed DMZ of sky—I'm not sure
what your dreams are like—the moon
now a cross section of bludgeoned tomato
over the schoolhouse, and now a white pants button
lost on the highway asphalt. Learning is strictly
for girls, the guns still going chop-chop-chop,
and John Keats, in those remaining years,
he kept sending up his test obituaries
like weather balloons, poems still floating even now
over Tulsa and the like, their comely
bivalve pentameter interfering
with radio signals, just the reverse
of the way a beautiful, living body
can scan so vibrantly it zones out
all the ghost code, can get between me
and the important messages
I should be getting from the underworld,
one code for another, the dead only interfering
with the living who've interfered

with the dead, and along those lines
I really think I'd be suspicious
of that veggie plate if I were you. It's strange
how rarely the meat they serve us
resembles an animal, and strange how the vegetables,
despite their cleanliness and grace, so often do:
a tail or torso of zucchini, and once I saw a rat-shaped eggplant
hunched feral in a kitchen off Hermosa.
Look to the sea, as usual, for echoes:
of course the many benthic cousins
of the turnip, spindly fruits morphing up their bodies
for our inspection in unsounded caves
filled with various see-through creatures
easily mistaken for prostitutes,
and finally the Sirens plugging up their ears
against what new songs we have to offer.
My latest begins with a simple verse
about the girl with one lung and one gill,
how she loved me, how she sang
and how I never kissed her more than twenty feet
away from a swimming pool, how
she answered the phone and how
her phone voice made me feel
like running away to the forest, rebuilding
the old tree house, then interrogating
the lilies of the field. And I promise you,
whatever your name is, I'm going to ride this feeling
all the way to Target. Because eventually all voices cease,
and—if I've been reading these poems right—
there's a hand job waiting for us in the clouds.

Josh Bell

28

²⁸ [Josh Bell, "Vince Neil Accompanies Josh to Luncheon w/ Scholars, Poets, and Others—Gets Cell-Phone Number of Grad. Student Sitting at Far End of Table—Orders Cheeseburger, No Tomato—Borrows Josh's Cell Phone—Calls Grad. Student Sitting at Far End of Table," *The Manchester Review*, collected in *Alamo Theory*, Copper Canyon Press](#)

Electrical Flora

for Elizabeth Treadwell

flowers of smoke

who put the ear
 in spirit the eye
in surprise

who obscured
 the hiding I
in annelise or analyse

we parents take care of whomever
 we used to be

who put the host
 in ghost

flowers of mist

perhaps an erasable
 kiss

not to know if we want
 oblivion

or something finer

sniff this bouquet
 then say whether

you'd rather
 be minor

flowers of osiris

and other stories in which
 dismembered daddies obviously come back
thanks to the will and recognized labors
 of mommies who never
have time to do anything else

flowers of no

to be happy
 is to be vulnerable

sadness is amour
 or armor

know who you're sad for

flowers of spring

from underneath the berm
to open meticulous sedimentary nest

or if we change kingdoms then
the message when the epicotyl
arrives

I live in midair
I greet you from there

Stephanie Burt
29

²⁹ [Stephanie Burt](#), "[Electrical Flora](#)," collected in [Advice from the Lights](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

If You Can't See My Mirrors I Can't See You

my stretch marks run like the liquid mother
of pearl of god's
tears I'm aggrandizing because I'm still trying
to cope with how often

I scarfed a whole styrofoam boat of nachos smothered
in sure-sweet ground
beef and gluey cheese in my high school
cafeteria before finding

my solace in a bathroom stall graffitied
(no shit) with i ♥ jesus
my lord and savior and then I bit
down on two fingers

before shoving them all the way in
my throat like a quiver
of arrows I used to pretend I could swallow
fire and that's what

I did every time I let my boyfriend
call me *muffin*
top or worse *dumb* I began to give up
parts of myself

to his names like barren stretches
of highways
to dead cops and lt. colonels why do we
capitalize

I and not *mine* why do we
capitalize *I*
and not *you* a friend's ex-lover
paid cash

money to have some lesser star unofficially
named after
her but how many stars out there are called
Tracy the fifth

most popular name for girl babies
in 1970 sometimes
I'm re-astonished to realize I wasn't alive
for every year

in history unborn until "Alone"
by Heart
held down the no. 1 slot on the American
charts sometimes

I come to a new place and feel I've been
there before
the way I feel when a date I write after
my signature

is the birthday of someone I once knew
but don't
know anymore when I said a new place
I meant

a new stance of my body the way
my muscle and fat and
insecurities sit on my bones that day I'm told my backbone's
gradually bending

into the letter S I wonder what makes
someone cast
an old lover's name into the distance
of space if it's

a gesture of the unrequited or else
a lightyear's worth
of fuck-yous my body doesn't stand
for anything

it's a rigorous honesty I sometimes wish it told me
white lies my
body it doesn't stand for anything I want it to
not

forgiveness or acceptance not the same
thing not even
the name I was given at birth the name
I come to

Emilia Phillips
30

³⁰ [Emilia Phillips, "If You Can't See My Mirrors I Can't See You," *Tinderbox*](#)

Right as Rain

Rain—there are sheets of it whipping across the windows
on the front of the house, rain falling so heavily
the river's disappearing even as it rises.
It's the thirteenth of February, a Friday, the birthday
of a man I haven't seen in years, the first man

I loved. You can count on it: it's raining today
just as it's always raining in the prose poems of the French
and on the dusty surface of heated pools at mountain resorts
and in songs playing on the radio as you drive
at night along the Gulf Coast, through Bay St. Louis

and Pass Christian and Biloxi. I don't think of it as loss
except when I think of it. He's living, I heard,
in a leafy suburb north of here. There's a suitcase somewhere,
in the back of a closet perhaps, with clothes
I wore then, photographs, ticket stubs from the track.

Exhausted, those clothes—the slips and blouses—are thin
as silk from repeated washings, the steam iron.
They smell of him: rain, bay rum, low tide. But it's a rain
that fails to rinse and brighten the room. This is the rain
of the past, with its two stubborn dimensions that flatten

things out and con you into believing there's depth
when it's really a matter of perspective,
of tricking the eye. The heart's less easily deceived.
Fifteen years ago: I am in his room, I am nineteen.
Below the window, a woman's in the telephone booth

on the corner of Third and Bloom. From the bed I can hear
her asking someone to meet her, urgent, pleading.
It's raining and after she leaves the sound of the rain
on the window screens and the air-conditioner
is like that of somebody playing one note on a guitar,

over and over. Back then I'd come to a conclusion as if to a place.
I'd come to a conclusion with a secret advantage,
like the advantage you gain by arriving at night
in a strange city and booking a room with a view:
the next morning you see everything, suddenly and all at once.

Now I travel to remember, as if the diving girl motels
off the interstates down south will offer up some clue,
palpable as an object forgotten in the back of a drawer
decades ago. He was older: I thought I was learning
to hoard time, coin by coin, a jar of ginkgo leaves

in a dark corner. The city we drove through on our way
to matinees and bistros was a city of lights and smoke,
afternoons so thick with rain the light could only turn
the landscape various shades of silver and grey. When
I imagined him lost, as I often did, I'd plan to drive to the track

by the high school, at dusk, and find him running around it
in steadily decaying orbits. For that was how I wanted
to be found: wet, cold, lifted into a car—a car warm and gold
from the dome light with its clairvoyant sense of opening
and closure—a sense I've still only mastered half of.

Aleda Shirley

31

³¹ [Aleda Shirley](#), "[Right as Rain](#)," [Crazyhorse](#), collected in [Long Distance](#), [Miami University](#)

A Crown for Whatever Has Fallen

1.

Patroclus learned healing, as he learned music and hunting, from the famed teacher Chiron, a centaur whose name means *hand*.

With my reading glasses, the world is closer, and I can see the outline of the reflective sphere at the end of each blade of the wet grass, and that the air is full of tiny insects.

Excellence, like *handedness*, is a dactyl, which means the stress diminishes as the sound of the word unfolds. Dactylic meter was preferred by the Greeks for the writing of elegies.

In the early years of his disease, my father compensated easily, switching from a long to a short game in squash, and from a blocky all-caps print to a fast and loose cursive.

Chiron was wounded with a poison-tipped arrow and could not heal himself.

Writing freezes nothing but is always still happening: my hand moving, your eye moving, the vocal chords of both our throats making barely perceptible movements as we voice these words to ourselves.

A tremor is a kind of occupation.

Along the road I find the feathers of the birds of this country, unknown to me but ubiquitous. The feathers are wedge-shaped and blunt-ended, with bands of black and gray. On the external side, the black merges softly into the gray. On the internal side a muted line shows itself between, as in a Rothko painting.

Dactyl, which means, *finger*, is also the name of a mythical Greek race of healer magicians.

It is easy to forget that a word takes time to sound, that it may start one way and end another.

The birds say nothing and carry no messages.

In the last hours your whole body convulsed, and this was followed by something that looked like calm.

What occupied you?

The night nurse knew but was circumspect.

2.

A certain near lisp affected in moments of self-consciousness. A slight thickening.

A narrowing of the eyes as if to say, *contact*. Lips drawn inward in a soft line. An almost-squint.

In Shakespeare's sonnet 30, woe is piled upon woe and moan upon moan in an unrelenting economy of loss.

The right arm extended toward the ashtray, tapping a cigarette and nodding, and exhaling, and talking.

The couplet articulates the total cancelation of long inventory of debt in a single gesture of thought, as if by magic.

The whole body leaning into the book, head propped, fingers of the left hand worrying the hairline.

I don't remember owning an ashtray or washing one.

Shakespeare uses the auxiliary verb "can" with the verb "drown," suggesting a special if unreliable capacity for drowning.

Cigarette between index and middle fingers; fingers slightly curled.

All losses are restored is an incantation.

Talk, breath, smoke. I can see this line: shoulder, arm, hand, cigarette.

Then can I grieve at grievances foregone recollects grief in the space of the line, adding it to itself like trauma, like debt.

Re-collect as in collection agency.

The name of the spell is *dear friend*.

3.

The birds are wood pigeons, family *Columbidae*. Like all pigeons, expert navigators.

Since I left you, mine eye is in my mind;

At the corner of our street, an overpass, a small staircase led to the street below. Climbing or descending this staircase seemed an exercise in the occult.

In one of the myths, the Dactyls bring the alphabet.

You often read all night, or talked, or drank.

Sometimes when I say *you* I mean *I* or *he*. Grief blurs the edges of everything.

Experiments have demonstrated that among other remarkable abilities, pigeons can recognize the letters of the alphabet.

Your mind was always running, as though detached from your body, an indifferent and unstoppable force, all-consuming, all-capacious.

You missed deadlines with a kind of religious regularity.

I learn the script of their movement: noisy flutter, long dive. From the Ancient Greek κόλυμβος (*kólumbos*, "a diver").

The papers, weeks late, evoked lengthy and emphatic responses from your professors, who spoke to you like a colleague even when they gave you Cs. My prompt and dutiful As seemed pallid.

You lied continually, tenderly, always believing, though you knew better. No one was ever so gentle.

The crow, or dove, it shapes them to your feature

Dear Messenger, please accept this alphabet.

4.

In the 1870 siege of Paris in the Franco-Prussian war, pigeons were loaded into hot-air balloons and sent to Tours and later Poitiers, where they provided the only means of communication to and from the occupied city.

For months my father thought the sudden seizing up of his foot was a running injury.

Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws

When the diagnosis came he said, *at least I'm not a concert pianist, or a neurosurgeon.*

During the occupation of Belgium and France in World War I, domestic pigeons were rounded up and destroyed by the German military to prevent their being used as messengers.

In a grainy home video I saw years ago, my father shoots a basket, grins, turns his back to the camera. I don't remember anything else about the video—who recorded it, the day it was recorded, where it might be now.

On my run, more and more feathers. Now some with a pointed tip and a white line along the edge.

Only this brief sequence, perfectly assured.

And do whate'er thou wilt, swift-footed Time

The word *seizure* is not etymologically linked to the word *siege*, but both suggest possession, an overtaking.

Running, I think, this is what it feels like when there isn't enough air.

The pigeons cross and cross again. I have no messages for the dead today, only breath, which echoes in my ears as though not my own.

Whose words are these? Am I occupied?

Swift-footed. I have stopped tracking my pace.

5.

When you grieve two things at once the grief gets braided together.

Achilles plays the lyre, which Chiron taught him also, while Patroclus listens.

I mean two *people*. I mean *I*.

It is both obvious and startling that my hands, which are made of the past, can't touch the past.

Temporal, asymptote, basketball, artifice, circular

Among other things, my father was a writer.

Reading his sentences, I become aware of myself as a bundle of genetic material occupied by a syntactical rhythm.

The *Iliad* gives each of its dead a name and a little story for an elegy. The eye moves over these marks.

Little movements in the muscles of the throat.

The outside fingers of my right hand go numb after writing too long. You can see on the page where it starts.

The pigeons peck at whatever has fallen.

Avian, telegraph, elegy, circumspect, terrify

Dear messenger, please accept this breathing.

Circumspect, I telegraph. Whatever has fallen.

Whose name means *hand*.

Kristen Case

32

³² [Kristen Case](#), "[A Crown for Whatever Has Fallen](#)," [BOAAT](#)

The Dead

*It was the ones no one remembered who pulled at me.
—Dorothy Allison*

So tell me, who remembers Topa, her daddy, his face marked with smallpox
or his two sisters, *one that died one day, the otheren the next?*

Who remembers quarantined houses marked with a red card, the brain
fevers and blood fluxes, or the uncle who found a rafter in the tobacco barn

for his neck? And wasn't there a second cousin
who phoned his brother before making a confetti

of his own brains? Or that other young uncle—*a good-looking
son of a bitch*—who, face-down in the river, took mud

into his handsome lungs? Or the babies—Jesus, always the babies—
drowned in washtubs or bit by brown recluse, or Claire, a girl born

four months early, small enough to crib in a shoebox
who thrived, but her brother—*full-term, healthy as a horse*—

who was sleeping sound on his second day when he
just died?

And who remembers Yael but me, that girl with the name so pretty
I could taste the syllables—*Yah Elle*—

and called her again and again? She was only
seven, her blood a sandstorm of cells, at war with itself.

Or my soft-spoken cousin, that kid
surfer who thought he could crush time-

release pain killers with his teeth and
live? Does anyone remember how impossible

death seemed in Florida, how like a sun-scorched
fern his hands curled, two black fiddleheads, the foam at his mouth

when all his chickenshit friends left him
for dead? On the way to his funeral, Fanny got after us for wearing black:

*All you young girls always wearing dark, dark, dark, she said. You need to put on a bright
and purdy color, something that don't make you look so depressed all the fucking time.*

We laughed, reminded her where we were going, but who can say
her fussing was a joke—her amnesia seemed

fender-struck, a switch flipped
off inside a woman *who couldn't take no more.*

Later that day we walked to church under mangroves swarmed
with the bright green fluster of wild parakeets.

I can't say I remember much more than my aunt, how she looked
up into the trees, said, *Oh, little birds, don't you know?*

And the birds, briskly chittering back, answered her:
No.

Nickole Brown

33

³³ [Nickole Brown](#), "[The Dead](#)," [Cave Wall](#), collected in [The Best American Poetry 2017](#), [Scribner](#)

The Leonids

On the best of days, I hear
that guy who called me
sultry at a party three years ago
while 10cc played heady and strange
on the radio.

On the worst, I think of
the year I lost my virginity:
I watched the stars like sperm
and read Charles Wright nonstop.
I sported lip gloss with a pink sheen
and a blue toboggan with a white ball
on top. The world was exploding.
All the while, I let this boy lay beside
me in a cowfield in Kentucky.
For seconds between starshots,
I closed my eyes (filling with wet,
milky-way glaze).

In November, I saw hundreds
of meteorites. In December, the ground
was ticking with the bodies of living birds.

Jennie Malboeuf

34

³⁴ Jennie Malboeuf, "[The Leonids](#)," [The Cortland Review](#)

1 Fave = 1 Fact About Myself That Is of Interest Only To Myself: Everything Gold Can Stay

1. My first best friend, when I was 6, was a boy named Steven Wu. Steven's Mom was an acupuncturist, and one day after we dropped Steven off, my Dad told me acupuncture was against the law. My first experience of perceiving crime as glamorous.
2. When I was 11 years old, my father bought a CB radio. My CB handle was "Timber Wolf."
3. I have unusually strong fingernails which can grow to remarkable lengths. I can type with my long fingernails. It makes a racket and irritates people in cafés.
4. Because of my long fingernails, which I refused to trim, my mother used to call me "Dragonlady." It was not kindly meant.
5. When I was failing second grade because I thought the assignments were stupid, my mother angrily asked if I thought I was smarter than the teachers. After some reflection, I said yes. My mother went bananas.
6. The hated assignments were worksheets that taught principles like "silent E." They had a friendly cartoon character called "E-Z Indian." I like to imagine that, even at 7, I felt E-Z Indian was problematic & that's why I hated them. But I doubt this is really the case.
7. I'm an adopted child, and my parents liked to mention the fact that I was adopted at 13 days. Over the years, it became clear that this preoccupation of theirs was an insult. I, however, persisted in thinking it made me special in a Goth way.
8. Now here is a truly Goth thing: My mother committed suicide and my father may have been murdered, although we could never be certain. Neither of these things was my fault. I cannot see any way they could be my fault. And yet there is the troubling detail of the 13 days!
9. Every time he handled a pencil, my father used to make the same joke about "Edwin Pencil, inventor of the pencil." You would never have pegged him for a murder victim!
10. I first read Lolita when I was the same age as Lolita. I wished there were more sex scenes and that the sex scenes were more explicit.
11. I'm afraid of heights. Until recently, I would always forget I was afraid of heights & do heights-related things like hiking in the mountains. I would suddenly remember my fear of heights on a ledge in the Rockies, unable to go forward or back, like a cat stuck in a tree.
12. My first husband was half-German. We once got into a screaming argument about whether the German A was more objectively beautiful than the English A.
13. My first husband was also a poet. He once wrote a poem about me that started with the line: "Oh you squally."

14. This first husband of mine was very unworldly. Once we were in a cabin in the backwoods of Portugal. I was sick in bed & he said from the kitchen, "I think there's a cockroach here." I said, "What does it look like?" He said, "Well, it's mottled. And it has a lot of antlers."

15. Whenever I'm looking for underwear, a song plays in my head that's a mash-up of the theme songs to the old Saturday-morning cartoons Underdog and Robin Hood: "Underwear, underwear, riding through the glen. Underwear, underwear, with its merry men."

16. Once my bicycle was stolen. Two days later, a junkie offered to sell me a different bike in the street for \$20. I bought it immediately because I felt that it was fate.

17. The first novel I ever wrote was a handwritten book called "Love's Magic Lands," about a stuffed lion cub named Love who runs away from home with a plastic lion cub named Lemon-Lime and they explore a series of magic lands.

18. The second novel I wrote was a collaboration, written with a friend who had gerbils. It was called "Gerbils On the Loose!" and was about gerbils who run away from home to pursue an independent life.

19. The third novel I wrote was called "Liberty Forever" and was about a horse who runs away from home to become a wild mustang.

20. I wrote "Liberty Forever," and the next several novels I wrote, on the Smith-Corona manual typewriter my father got as a going-to-college present in the 1950s. He gave it to me for my tenth birthday. I used it for 20 years.

21. The manual typewriter came with a carrying case which gradually fell apart. A friend made two replacement cases for it, the 1st wood & the 2nd sheet metal. I still have calluses on both hands from carrying that typewriter in the years when I was repeatedly homeless.

22. In my early twenties, I had a black leather mini-skirt I wore almost every day. It was never washed, and I would think a lot about this fact, telling myself that leather didn't get washed, and it was actually normal and it must shed the dirt "somehow."

23. Through my twenties, I slept on the floor like a dog. Typically in front of the gas fire. I only slept in a bed if I was sleeping with someone else.

24. I also liked to sleep with the lights on. A friend of mine shared this idiosyncrasy, and we complained to each other that our boyfriends always won that argument because sleeping in the dark was "normal."

25. When I was a child, my father bought us an "E-Z Play" organ. On this instrument you selected e.g. a "Bossa Nova" bass line, which would play while you picked out the melody to "Begin the Beguine." Such was my introduction to the musical arts.

26. One of our E-Z Play organ songbooks was devoted to the works of Cole Porter. Because of the way his photo was reproduced in the songbook, I believed for years that Cole Porter was black. When I learned he was white, I irrationally blamed Cole Porter for lying.

27. On the wall in my family's dining room, there were two matching bad paintings, one of a medieval axe, one of a medieval shield. One day when I was 15, I painted a mustache on the axe. No one in my family ever noticed.

28. Another painting we had was a gray somber painting of circus elephants & hot air balloons. For some unknown reason, it had been hidden behind the washing machine in the basement. My friends & I would go to visit this painting, even as teenagers; we considered it mysterious.

29. When I was seven I got a kitten. I'd read a book about a stray cat who envied house cats for their names: "like Algonquin... or even Cherie!" So I named my kitten Cherie, pronouncing it "cheery," then expanded it to Cherie Berie Boo. He was the family member I loved most.

30. Eventually we had four cats. They were all neutered males, and all declawed, and none were ever allowed outside. As a child, I was horrified by this cruelty, but knew I had no power to change it.

31. My cat Cherie Berie Boo slept in my arms every night. He would scratch at my door to be let in. When I was first dating, I dreamed of finding a man who would look at me adoringly as Cherie Berie Boo had looked at me, and sleep in my arms as Cherie Berie Boo slept in my arms.

32. I've never had another cat, like a widow who never remarries.

33. From the age of 10 to the age of 17, I was a member of a local children's theater group called Patchwork Theater. As a result, I know almost all the words to "Evita," "Godspell," "Pippin," and many more obscure musicals like "The Apple Tree" and "Once Upon a Mattress."

34. Whenever I'm sick, these lines from Evita play in my head: "Your little body's slowly breaking down. You're losing [SOMETHING] losing strength—not style! That goes on flourishing forever but your eyes, your smile... do not have the [SOMETHING] of their fantastic past... If you climb one more mountain, it could be your last!" Then my mind sings back: "I'm not that ill. Bad moments come but they go. Some days are fine, some a little bit harder... But that doesn't mean I should change my routine. Have you ever seen me defeated? Don't you forget all I've been through and yet I'm still standing! And if I am ill, that could even be to our advantage!" Then my mind sings back, all traumatized: "Eva! I'm trying to point out that you are dying!" AND THE MUSIC SWELLS TRAGICALLY.

35. The children's theater group was run by a woman who was an Amway distributor and had fourteen cats. Her cat Sir Arthur Sullivan was cut in half by an automatic garage door.

36. Her youngest daughter was a professional mime who studied with Marcel Marceau. We all learned mime from this daughter. I have never made use of this knowledge.

37. I have no tattoos, although for a year I lived with a boyfriend who was a tattoo artist. He let me tattoo the word "Boo" on his stomach.

38. This boyfriend of mine was also an ex-bank robber. He robbed so many banks he had his own nickname, "The Ponytail Bandit."

39. Once he bought a paperback about the bank robbery epidemic in LA of which he was a part, and was bitterly disappointed to see that he hadn't made the index.

40. The first decent joke I remember making was on a 10th grade quiz where we had to use vocabulary words in a sentence. The word was “polyglot,” and my sentence was: “The polyglot sheep meowed at the farmer.”

41. A few days after my mother’s suicide, my father took a day off work and took me out to a Chinese restaurant. Over lunch he told me the plot of the novel “On the Beach,” in which the last survivors of a nuclear holocaust slowly die of radiation poisoning in New Zealand.

42. In my thirties, I had a close friend from New Zealand. She was a gardener. She and her girlfriend (a garden photographer), and their old friend Dan (a garden designer), and his boyfriend Hugh (who was just Hugh), used to all go work together on the gardens of stately homes.

43. Hugh’s role was to bake seed cakes in the kitchen of the stately homes and bring them out to everyone on a tray. The four of them had been best friends for a decade.

44. My friend the gardener was also a writer. She wrote a novel about the last person on Earth after a nuclear holocaust, who was the child of a gay foursome based on her and her friends. In the novel, the child roamed an empty Earth & blamed her parents for her problems.

45. She once had a car crash on the beach in New Zealand where her neck was broken. Stuck in the upside-down car, she was approached by a local homeless guy who asked her if she wanted a cup of coffee. When she tried to explain the situation, he kept asking his question louder.

46. My father was a very fat man all his life. He was about 5’8’ and, throughout my childhood, weighed over 350 pounds.

47. Once my Dad visited me in London & we were in his hotel bar with the Welsh rugby team. A player pointed & drunkenly shouted, “That’s the fattest man I’ve ever seen! He’s got tits bigger than my sister’s!” My Dad said, “Yeah! Yeah!” in a way that was both hearty & depressed.

48. Although my father was so fat, in the many years when he was dating after my mother’s death, he would not go out with a fat woman. This drove me nuts. But I also understood that there is no arguing with tastes.

49. When I was ten, my friend Sandra Jill Cameron revealed to me that she could see microscopic animals—giraffes and lions—on sticks. The animals talked to her & told her secrets. There was also a microscopic king who lived in her desk drawer. After an hour or so, I started pretending I could see them too. But I remained very envious of Sandra Jill because she *really* saw the microscopic giraffes. (I knew she was probably lying too, but she was one step closer to telling the truth.)

50. At around 10 years old, my friends & I were obsessed with developing psychic powers. I once claimed I could communicate telepathically with a marble. We all went into the girls’ room, turned off the lights and said we saw a huge floating eye.

51. I once had a one night stand with an eccentric Danish baron.

52. I met the Danish baron at a supermarket on my first night in Prague. He held up a carton of sour cream in my face and said, “Milk?” I set him straight and we ended up back at his hotel.

53. In the supermarket check-out line, the Danish baron took out his passport to prove to me he was a descendant of the astronomer Tycho Brahe. He was in Prague to reclaim his ancestral land and turn it into a golf course.

54. We went and stood on the bank of the Charles, and the Danish baron gestured at the opposite bank, where the enchanted-looking spires of Prague Castle were bathed in golden light. He said, "It's like when the Americans do something wonderful."

55. At that time, I had a small sebaceous cyst on my nipple. When he first saw me naked, the baron commented on this in alarm. I told him I'd had it for ages & it wasn't dangerous. He said darkly, "I come from a doctor's family and I know that is not normal."

56. The Danish baron was married, and he warned me that he knew people, and if I told anyone about our one night stand, he would have me driven out of Prague. Then he offered me the job of being PR for his golf course.

57. As we were dressing in the morning, the Danish baron mentioned his fellow Dane Hans Christian Andersen, & began to dance and sing, "I'm Hans Christian Andersen—Andersen! That's who!" Then he stopped and clarified: "Danny Kaye. Very funny man!"

58. Then the Danish baron looked me up and down in my going-out clothes and said, "Tomorrow... I will buy you a shirt!" I never saw him again.

59. Towards the end of our marriage, my first husband started to say he was gay. He maintained this for the rest of his life, and appeared to sincerely believe it. However, he continued to sleep exclusively with women, and to cheat on them with other women.

60. My first husband, Amos, was Jewish. When he lived in Berlin, he had a Jewish friend, David, who once tried to guilt trip a German woman into having a threesome with them by telling her his grandmother was a Mengele twin, which was true.

61. The first job I ever liked was going from door to door in New York City, administering a questionnaire about AIDS awareness to women for the NY Department of Health. We knocked on people's doors and asked them twenty minutes of questions about their sex lives. One interviewee wouldn't let me in & made me do the interview in the building's foyer. The questions were written by someone who seemed not to know some women were lesbians, as this woman was. She kept rolling her eyes & guffawing & I got my first ever gay crush.

62. When I first lived in NYC, I once set my mattress on fire with a cigarette. I put it out with my herbal tea, but the smell spread & a neighbor called 911. Ten firemen appeared and chopped my mattress up with an ax. One fireman walked out with one of my bras in his hand.

63. As a result of this incident, whenever I see New York City firemen, I think, "You people stole my bra."

64. The second time I was raped, I was on a date with an Argentine polo player who was awful, so I kept drinking & drinking. I woke up & found him fucking me. Horrified, I went right back to sleep & dreamed I was having really great sex with Sonny from *The Godfather*. This is one of the funniest things that ever happened to me. It makes me laugh every time. It made me laugh then. Nonetheless, of course, when I woke up the morning after, I was traumatized. I find rape very mysterious that way. Why should it matter?

65. My first bicycle, when I was eight, was hand-painted blue with some kind of matte paint that wasn't intended for bicycles. I pretended it was a racehorse and named it "Blueprint."

66. My second bicycle was a racing bicycle that was gold (very exciting!). Again, I pretended it was a racehorse and named it "Oro." This is the first time I've ever told these names to another human being.

67. Through my childhood, I desperately wanted a horse but my parents said we couldn't afford a horse. Embarrassing for them, when I was 12 my friend Marjorie whose mother was on welfare got a horse.

68. The day we first got drunk at thirteen, Marjorie and I walked all the way back to her house (two miles) and took her horse, Rebel, for a walk. We'd both thrown up several times and were too fucked up to think about riding the horse.

69. Marjorie's older brother had severe cognitive deficits & never learned to speak. He was a big teenager and it was difficult to keep him at home because he sometimes developed an aversion to his clothes and viciously attacked anyone who tried to dress him.

70. The first time I met Marjorie, at seven, she told me she had a pet cheetah. Over the years, she really did have the horse, two dogs, two cats, a raccoon, a descended skunk, and innumerable guinea pigs who escaped and reproduced and lived in the walls of her house like mice.

71. I have a habit of saying to my husband when I feel beaten down, "Poor Sandy!" I was very reassured when I learned that the French general, Joffre, likewise went around during World War I murmuring, "Pauvre Joffre!"

72. I also say to my husband reflectively, "Sandies have the hardest time of all of the land mammals." Or I ask him, "Which of the land mammals has the hardest time?" and he will loyally guess, "The Sandy?"

73. I've been married four times. I was the first wife of all my husbands.

74. Although I've been married four times, I've never had an engagement ring or a wedding gown. I like them fine, I just couldn't ever be bothered and neither could any of my four husbands.

75. Oh wait! I just realized this isn't true. My bank robber boyfriend, whom I didn't end up marrying, did give me an engagement ring. I'm pretty sure he stole it from his friend. I still have it in a box with all my old wedding rings.

76. When I told my brother about my bank robber boyfriend, then a bank robber fiancé, he laughed and said, "I don't know, Sandy. I mean, you're an adult, but... what's the matter with a nice doctor?"

77. There was a point, after my second divorce, when both my ex-husbands were in psychiatric institutions. People tried to make me laugh about this, but I was too worried about my ex-husbands. I was especially not receptive to jokes that cast me as the Perdition of Men.

78. In this period I once dated a man who responded to the news about my ex-husbands both being in psychiatric institutions by saying, “No wonder!” His name was Maziar Raein. I wanted to fire him out of a cannon.

79. Here is a cool thing Maziar once did. Maziar was a Persian immigrant in London, and he once met an Englishman who somewhat snottily introduced himself as “the Marquess of [Wherever].” Maziar shook his hand and said, “Maziar Raein. I don’t use my titles abroad.”

80. Maziar broke up with me just before we went in to watch *Mission Impossible II*. Then we had to watch *Mission Impossible II*. Afterwards, I tried to get him to come back to my flat and “talk” (one last sex). He said stuffily, “Let’s just leave it at that.”

81. I dropped out of high school at sixteen and got a GED.

82. I once found myself mentioning that I dropped out of high school when I was doing a campus visit for a teaching post at Dartmouth. It was like the dumbest thing anyone ever said at a campus visit since time began. Four reasons it was dumb:

- a) insufferable humblebrag
- b) weirdly passive-aggressive
- c) also, what idiot believes Dartmouth professors don’t look down on people who dropped out of school?
- d) you didn’t drop out of school because you’re an ideal employee, you dingbat!

83. My first mother-in-law grew up in Germany during World War II. She believed throughout her childhood that all Americans were black. Due to Nazi propaganda on this point, at the end of the war she prayed her city would be taken by the Russians.

84. This mother-in-law who grew up under the Nazis later married a Jewish scholar of Judaica and converted to Judaism. She was a professional actress, a very gifted one, and for a while (so say her friends) she acted the part of a “Yiddische mama” so well it was spine-chilling.

85. After her husband died, she went into the fur trade. She would be on the phone saying things like, “We must get these weasel plates off the ground!” She would rant about how people got sentimental about teddy bears, but bears were ferocious creatures. Better as coats!

86. Many years before I knew her, I had a very cheap fur jacket, bought secondhand, made of a strange rough orangey fur no one could identify. I only wore it twice, then gave it up in guilt. I described this coat to my mother-in-law and she said unhesitatingly, “Dog.”

87. Things my German mother-in-law loved to say:

- Crumbs!
- Fie!
- That will set the cat among the pigeons!
- It would make a cat laugh!

88. She took a dim view of men, and would harangue them tirelessly, inventively, about their shortcomings. Men (other than her son) for some reason did not mind this. My friend Clive visited her on various occasions to be harangued for his fondness for pre-Raphaelite art.

89. My first husband Amos had a psychotic break about six months after we broke up. He was thrilled; he'd always dreamed of being schizophrenic like his father. I said, "PLEASE try to get better. Think: you'll end up living with your mother." This briefly gave him pause.

90. For years after, the voices of Samuel Beckett & Cesar Vallejo, among others, spoke to Amos from his belly. In this period, he married again & had two daughters: a catastrophe. Everyone always loved him, but he had no moral sense. He never experienced the world as real.

91. Ultimately, Amos leapt from the balcony of his twelfth-story apartment. After this, I couldn't bear to see my former mother-in-law anymore. She would harangue me and I couldn't stop thinking, "This is what killed your son."

92. At Amos's funeral, I saw a lot of our old friends. I talked at length to our old friend Bridget about a BDSM club she often went to called Torture Garden. My friend Clive went there too; by all accounts a very loving place. It made the funeral a comforting memory.

93. My friend Clive used to go to Torture Garden with his friend Jane (name changed to protect identity). Neither of them were personally into BDSM, but Jane had two boyfriends in a row who were transvestites (apparently the TV and BDSM scenes overlap). Jane's first transvestite boyfriend was a neurologist. He once looked at Amos's x-rays. We were all at a Portuguese cafe in Notting Hill companionably looking at these x-rays of Amos's brain that was going to kill him. Then Jane met Alan (not his real name) at a BDSM club. Alan had recently divorced his wife because he'd realized he was gay. He'd also just started taking hormones to transition to being a woman. But then Alan fell madly in love in Jane. Jane was totally heterosexual, so Alan gave up on being a woman & stopped the hormones. They've now been together about ten years. Alan still wears women's clothes when they go out. This story isn't intended to convey any message about LGBT people in general. It's offered in a spirit of, "Hey, we're all just human & we don't make fucking sense." Or maybe, "Love: Is it trying to kill us?"

94. When I was 26, I met my birth parents for the first time.

95. It was my birth father who tracked me down: He'd been reading a golf magazine and saw an ad for a private detective and thought: "I wonder what happened to that daughter who was given up for adoption?"

96. At the time, my birth father was living in a castle in the Hollywood Hills which he later sold to Madonna. Like many such people, he considered himself "middle class."

97. Bugsy Siegel had also once lived in my father's castle. I think it had a ghost but I don't remember. The castle itself was more frightening to me than all the ghosts ever made.

98. My birth father and I are both literary novelists. My birth mother and I both have BAs in Russian. Of course this could all just be a crazy coincidence.

99. I can't say much about my birth father because the last time I tried to write about him, he threatened to sue me. Mainly as a result of that episode, my birth father stopped speaking to me after a relationship of 13 years. I miss him but I don't miss the drama.

100. Okay, that was a lie. I do miss the drama. But I also really *don't* miss the drama. I think anyone who's ever had drama and lost it will know what I mean.

101. Shortly after I first met my father, he left me in his castle alone overnight. I set off the security system somehow and the security people came, along with two cars from the LAPD. I had to run out barefoot to tell them the security code.

102. After the LAPD episode, I was too shaken up to stay alone in the castle, so I went out to see my old friend Yana, who'd recently moved to LA. She shared with me a bottle of whisky she had looted in the LA riots.

103. Yana had always had a premonition that she would die at the age of 26. She would talk about this with a faint smile, as if it were something poignant and ironic she'd just learned from a telegram. Now she has two teenaged sons. She's fine.

104. My father later moved to a different mansion in a gated community. His neighbor, Courtney Love, once broke in to his mansion when my father was on vacation & called him to say she loved what he'd done with the kitchen. He later sold that house to Angelina Jolie. My father said to Courtney Love, "Courtney, get the fuck out of my house."

105. My birth mother worked at NASA for 20 years as a crew trainer. She taught astronauts (and for a while cosmonauts) to do the experiments they do in space; mostly growing plants and hatching eggs in microgravity.

106. Among my mother's photographs, there is one of a backyard above-the-ground pool in California, and in the pool is her trans friend James (name changed to protect his identity) and a cosmonaut who is wearing an inflatable sea serpent.

107. Before 911, my mother used to bring me with her to work all the time. Once she brought me on a trip to Russia; I went to Star City. I visited the Russian space agency in Moscow. It was the Yeltsin era, and all the Russian rocket scientists were moonlighting as cab drivers.

108. At the Moscow space agency, my mother & I found a display of photos of space agency staff. We were giggling childishly at a photo of a man with comically protruding ears when the man came walking around a corner, wearing the same clothes as in the photo. We almost died.

109. There was a janitor at the Moscow space agency who had some kind of cognitive deficit. He asked everyone two questions: "Do you have any brothers or sisters?" & "Do you have any pets?" He asked the same questions over & over. The Russian rocket scientists answered patiently. The Russian rocket scientists also patiently translated these questions when the janitor asked them of the Americans and translated the answers. In case you were wondering just how nice these Russian scientists were. I asked the janitor if he had any pets, and he answered very happily that he had a cat named Pushunya ("Fluffy" in Russian). When I translated the name, the Americans laughed & the janitor beamed at the name's success.

110. For many years, my birth mother and I were like two teenagers who have fallen in love. When I visited, we talked all day and all night. She took me everywhere with her. We took stupid vacations together, where we did nothing but walk around blindly talking to each other.

111. As part of my Russian degree, I did a year abroad in Russia. When our student group was heading to the airport to go home, some Russian friends gave us a two-foot-long fish as a going-away present. I still can't decide if this was passive-aggressive.

112. At the time I did my year abroad in Russia, it was still the Soviet Union (under Gorbachev; 1989). We British students (I was at a British university) had to live in a hotel. Our rooms all had radios that could be turned way down but could not be turned off.

113. We were in Yaroslavl, which was a total backwater. One day, another student who wasn't even my friend went with me on a fruitless search through Yaroslavl for a wind-up mouse; we were bored as only 12-year-olds normally get. So was everyone else in Yaroslavl.

114. One of the other British students in Yaroslavl was a girl who, at home, was training to be a jockey. She managed to find a place to go riding, a nearby stable where the horses for Olympic equestrian events were trained. A dozen of us went out there. The Olympic trainers were as bored as we were & let us ride the elite horses. One after another, the British students mounted the Olympic horses, and the horses instantly bucked us off. The trainers were in stitches. Of course the future jockey rode just fine. She kept going back to the stable, and she & an Olympic trainer fell in love. The day we left Yaroslavl (with our fish) they had a heart-rending farewell at the airport. She sobbed uncontrollably in his arms. It was still hard to get visas in & out of Russia then. I watched this with a certain bitterness, because I was certain nothing that pure would ever happen to me.

115. At that airport (with the fish), I was pregnant with the child of a Russian mob guy who had vanished on me. I was devastated, but if I'd cried, it would have just been gross & squalid. This is one reason we never get a true idea of how much pain there is in the world.

116. I first went to London when my adopted father was attending a conference there called Military Microwaves. (He worked for a defense contractor.) He brought me along because I was moping at home. 18 years old. While my father was listening to people talk about military microwaves, I met an ice cream man in Hyde Park & snuck out with him for one night of passion. On returning to the US (depressing!) I unilaterally decided to move to London to be with the ice cream man. I had no money. I was planning to sell my worthless car to buy my plane ticket. Instead, my father bought the ticket to get me out of the house. The car ultimately sold for ten dollars. (This wasn't a car in the sense that you could use it as a car.)

117. So I moved to London to find this ice cream man, but never found the ice cream man. Then I stayed in London for 18 years. What would be funny is if I spent all those years tirelessly hunting for the ice cream man. Really I gave up immediately.

118. The ice cream man's name was Peter Groome. I don't remember anything else about him except that his sexual prowess impressed me when I was 18. I've always doubted it would have continued to impress me over time, but that may be sour grapes.

119. When I saw the movie *Breaking the Waves*, I cried sentimentally through the entire second half of the movie, but only from my left eye.

120. When I did my year abroad in Russia, I shared a room with a Spanish woman named Carmen who was a madwoman & criminal element who talked continuously about people she resented and about needing drugs. She would keep me up all night with it. Years later, I ran into Carmen in London. She told me she'd just given up a job as a professional gambler; she'd been hired by a blackjack player & trained to win at blackjack in casinos. I didn't know what to make of this; I pretended to take it at face value. Two years later, I got that same gambling job, from a classified ad in the newspaper. My new boss remembered Carmen. He said, "Oh God, that woman was insane. I was terrified to fall sleep with her in the room. I lasted two days before I fired her."

121. When we were playing blackjack in Malaysia, one of the croupiers had the name tag “ALIAS.” (I assume this is just a version of Elias. And yet.)

122. My blackjack boss had once had a gambling school in Malaysia. All the local gangsters went to it. One day we met in a bar with a gang boss who unselfconsciously drank the bar’s signature cocktail, which came in a turtle-shaped cup with a straw coming out of its head.

123. One of the other blackjack players, Peter, was also a nature photographer. I once saw him crouch beside an enormous Malaysian beetle and stroke it on the back with his finger. He said to the beetle, “Hello there, little fella.” Otherwise he was kind of an asshole.

124. My German mother-in-law & I once drove together from Vienna to London. I was smoking in the car and she started coughing. I said, “Are you sure you don’t mind me smoking?” She said, “No! I like to cough!” and coughed to show how much she liked it. So I smoked all the way.

125. Once I was walking late at night in Berlin, and a man passing on a bike called something to me. I couldn’t catch the German, so I said, “Wie?” He slowed down on his bike and repeated it. I said, “Wie?” He stopped altogether and said disgustedly in English, “Nice ass!”

126. In the same period, I once threw red paint on a billboard for the far-right German political party, AfD. I did it alone; I didn’t know anyone in Berlin. Afterward, I was embarrassed and never told anyone about it. I was always shocked to see the red paint really there.

127. Berlin was where I first went running, in a park where there were never any other people but always many little rabbits. I had no running clothes; I ran in jeans. I would run & fantasize about moving to Siberia to live with the Tuvan people who have no word for war.

128. I was able to be in Berlin because my first husband had given me five thousand pounds after he sold his flat. I didn’t try to get a job until the money ran out. Neither of us had a lick of sense.

129. A thing my birth father did with his money is to have the Ten Commandments inscribed in a ball made of a near-indestructible material and pay a geologist to find a place to bury it where it will emerge in 200 million years & roll down a mountain.

Sandra Newman

35

Latitudes

Summer Solstice

With that pink-ass moon in Sagittarius beaming obscenely
on the Flatirons, ruffling up infamy, you'd think citizens
would be howling to get out of their homes or booking
groupons to anywhere or philosophizing along a continuum
that might present itself for a stroll into euphoria. Or luck.
I don't know. We're supposed to stay the course, stay
embodied, check out our personal and collective delusions.
I walked my Chihuahua at dawn and a shirtless archer
appeared around a corner with a Great Dane at his side.
We all froze and looked at one another in a kind of rose-
tinted astonishment. Then the Chihuahua growled low,
the archer laughed, and the whole moon vanished in the sun.

Maureen Seaton

36

³⁶ [Maureen Seaton](#), "[Latitudes](#)," [Waxwing](#)

Safety Scissors

Watch what you say about younger sisters within older sisters' earshot. You know, things like, "What beautiful curls the little one has! And what long eyelashes!"

Forty years later I can still feel the yank on my scalp as my four-year-old sister pulled my curls straight so she could shear them. Can still feel her finger forcing my eyelid down, as I sat trapped by the high chair's embrace. Can still hear the scissors' *snick, snick*.

Funny, but what I wonder at now is not that she did it, but that when I realized she was going to do it, I didn't struggle. She was going to do it whether I liked it or not, so I sat still. Even then, I had an instinct for self-preservation. And you see, I was right. I'm alive, and she isn't.

The Visitation

I remember being in the car on the way to my sister's surprise funeral. In the backseat, I think. I can't imagine who was driving. At a stop sign my head swiveled to a flicker in the roadside greenery: a fox, poking its snout from between two bushes. I thought, or chose to think, That is my sister. That is my sister, come back in animal form to tell me it's okay. She's okay. I'll be okay.

But it was not okay. She was not okay. I would not be okay. I would not be okay for so long that when okay arrived it couldn't place me. It looked right past the veil of shivering leaves, my long red snout, my gloved paws swiping tears into my little black mouth.

When They Grow Up

My oldest child will hate me because I wrote an entire book about her. My middle child will hate me because I wrote hardly a word about him. But the baby; ah, the baby. When I write about him, I call it fiction, and I'm always sure to mention he has a big penis.

What I Think About When Someone Uses "Pussy" As A Synonym For "Weak"

At the deepest part of the deepest part, I rocked shut like a stone. I'd climbed as far inside me as I could. Everything else had fallen away. Midwife, husband, bedroom, world: quaint concepts. My eyes were clamshells. My ears were clapped shut by the palms of the dead. My throat was stoppered with bees. I was the fox caught in the trap, and I was the trap. Chewing off a leg would have been easier than what I now required of myself. I understood I was alone in it. I understood I would come back from there with the baby, or I wouldn't come back at all. I was beyond the ministrations of loved ones. I was beyond the grasp of men. Even their prayers couldn't penetrate me. The pain was such that I made peace with that. I did not fear death. Fear was an emotion, and pain had scalded away all emotion. I chose. In order to come back with a baby, I had to tear it out at the root. Understand, I did this without the aid of my hands.

Beth Ann Fennelly
37

³⁷ Beth Ann Fennelly, "[Safety Scissors](#)"; "[The Visitation](#)"; "[When They Grow Up](#)"; "[What I Think About When Someone Uses 'Pussy' as a Synonym for 'Weak'](#)"; collected in [Heating & Cooling](#), Norton

Legendary

You want me to say who I am and all of that?
—Pepper LaBeija

What girl gives up an opportunity
to talk about herself? Not I. Not today.
I won't bore you with my biography—
just a few highlights from my résumé.
I don't aspire; I'm whom one aspires to.
The most frequently asked question isn't
WWJD? It's *what would Pepper LaBeija do?*
Really the question should be *what hasn't she done?*
I've been walking now two decades
and got more grand prizes than all the rest.
I hate to brag, but I'm a one-man parade,
Jehovah in drag, the church in a dress.
Outside these walls I may be irrelevant,
but here I'm the Old and the New Testament.

Nicole Sealey
38

³⁸ [Nicole Sealey](#), "[Legendary](#)," [Callaloo](#), collected in [Ordinary Beast](#), [HarperCollins](#)

April

A scraping sound,
like someone writing his name
in big letters
in the gravel with a Wiffle bat.

It's the sound of my shoes
skidding over the ground
as I'm dragged by my armpits
in short bursts
from the Buick into the woods.

It all makes me think of
the shadow of a waterfall,
a description of a church,
the absence of metaphor.

These are my last thoughts
is what I'm thinking,
my cardigan ruined,
the Buick almost out of view.

She had said she wanted to hitch-hike
across the country wearing
a pair of cut-offs and a taco hat.

She had cupped my neck with her hand
and whispered this into my ear.

Michael Earl Craig
39

³⁹ [Michael Earl Craig](#), "[April](#)," collected in [Yes, Master, Fence Books](#)

Use the Following Construction in a Sentence

Tu
me
manques

No
Nobody misses you—Me
I'm like the French the wary French

They say instead of "I miss you"
Tu me manques
You me lack

You're like the time
I stood at the blackboard 'til I cried and finally the teacher smirks
You can never divide by zero, she says, *Trick question—sit down*

Tu me manques
You are lacking to me

I'm like the French
cool thinky French
There are some things I best not say

But it's safe to recount
how balletically you rode a ten-speed
the one abandoned on the street

and how you proposed before even one kiss
and how, September, when your visa came through
that red lipsticky stamp cost you

It cost
 So you bolt
 You break down

The one evening, months later, this other fellow
takes me to hear a string ensemble playing Bach
like a beast with its multicolored arms rippling the rarefied light

and it makes me cry
so my hot new herringbone date pipes up
You're such a sensitive girl

Tu me manques
You
lack me

I went to a reception
It was a mistake
The councilman tried to comer me by the artist's print of the Kurdish dead

And there was no *you*
to shoot a look to
telegraph for help

So I said, *Roll call! Excusez-moi!*
Dumped my cranberry punch on his ego-shined shoes
You shoulda seen me cuttin' that move

You
lack
me

Once I got home I bunkered down in my swarthy kitchen
and read some poems my student sent
And I know as I talk out of my own bones

she'll be a hit
and I'll live to see it
She lacks me not

Such a lot of things around here you'd like to glimpse
My cousin Karnay got a brand new beau
He sings right up from the roots of his feet

that kiss-me-all-over-'til-the-birds-crank-up kinda scat
You'd hit it off
You could jam all night

but you wouldn't want to come back
I'd cut clean around you like a bad accident
that the state trooper waves me right past

You lack
man
you lack

Things happen round here
that you would cry at the beauty of
you would shout

like I'm in the Metro waiting to change
I see an Amish family get on the train
and as the young girl turns

and spies me through the glass
there on her face the most searing joy
so I wave to her

and she
without hesitating waves back

You lack me
You're like trying to divide by zero
after everybody says

You can't
I'm like the French
the luscious French

playing those cornball accordions in the street
so they don't have to say
Come back

Belle Waring
40

⁴⁰ [Belle Waring, "Use the Following Construction in a Sentence," *The American Poetry Review*, collected in *Dark Blonde, Sarabande*](#)

Ode to Lists

“Lyndon,” writes presidential secretary Evelyn Lincoln just
hours after her boss has been shot in Dallas, and this on
the plane that carries not only Jack Kennedy’s remains but
also Lyndon Johnson himself, seated just a few rows away
and unaware that he is the first in a list of figures she thinks
responsible for the assassination. Surely she covered her

notebook with an in-flight magazine or said, “Oh, nothing”
when the now-president asked her what she was doing as
he passed her on his way to comfort Mrs. Kennedy or just go
to the bathroom, but it wouldn’t have made much difference
if he had seen it—granted, to be named as the number one
suspect in a presidential assassination is probably not

something he dreamed about in high school, but since the list
ends with “Dictators” and “Communists,” it seems more
a hysterical outpouring of grief on Evelyn Lincoln’s part
than anything to worry about; his plate’s full already with
everything on *his* list, all the good stuff (the Great Society
programs) as well as the bad (Vietnam). Every list is a poem,

which doesn’t mean it’s a good poem, although many are, like
Nabokov’s names for Lolita’s classmates, which includes
saintly names like Grace Angel and sinister ones like
Aubrey McFate. Then there are all the synonyms for
“drunk” compiled by H. L. Mencken, among them
snooted, stewed, jugged, jagged, and pifflicated. When

he listed the four most overrated things in life, Christopher
Hitchens said champagne, lobster, anal sex, and picnics,
though when this was repeated at his memorial service,
Stephen Fry said, “Well, three out of four isn’t bad.”
Who knew that Stephen Fry doesn’t like champagne?
You’d think all English people like champagne;

they certainly drink enough of it in the movies. I’m sure
they like lists as much as the rest of us, though,
and see their utility: when the test pilot was flying a jet
alone at 30,000 feet and there was a leak in his oxygen
mask, he passed out and came to at 15,000 feet, and even
though he was groggy, he still told himself, *Cut the throttle*

and punch the dive brakes, cut the throttle and punch
the dive brakes, which he did until the plane leveled out
at 5,000 feet instead of auguring into a schoolhouse
or old folks’ home. Two items is awfully short for a list,
but my wife says there are only two things she doesn’t
understand, dodgeball and limoncello, which I kind of

like, and not only because she's my wife: dodgeball leads
people who you thought were friends to pretend to hate
you, which can lead to real hate, and limoncello has
an alcohol content high enough to make its imbibers merry
yet is sickly sweet, and since alcohol's main effect is
to make you drink more alcohol, more limoncello leads to

a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd, a burning forehead,
and a parching tongue, effects produced also though
in less intensity and duration by craft beer, vodka,
and chardonnay. Long lists are silly, like those "37 Ways to
Drive Your Man Wild in Bed" ones—what right-minded
fellow wants to lie there, dreaming of the pleasures to come,

only to have some naked tart straddle him with a clipboard
in one hand and a Pilot G-2 Fine Point pen in the other!
No, no, keep your lists short, especially ones pertaining
to human relations, for that way you will stand a better
chance of remembering them. Parents of small children,
tell them they can't say "Yuck!" in response to anything

on their plate, and they must take at least one bite
of everything. Parents of older children, say you
have to make the best grades you're capable of and
be mannerly, in school and out. What is not a list?
"I love you" is two pronouns and a verb, yet it has brought
more pleasure than any longer list, also more trouble.

David Kirby

41

⁴¹ [David Kirby](#), "Ode to Lists," [Upstreet](#), collected in [Get Up, Please](#), Louisiana State University

Seeing His New Girlfriend at the Coat Check

The only thing to do was turn
my back and slowly be the opposite
of a stripper, it was winter, I'd checked

a hoodie and a vest and a parka I eased
into, I propped the antidote: reverse
of every curve he bought for free,

I gathered fleece, static, metal, and down,
stretching my arms, not snow angel,
or spread-eagled in his old bed,

I had the floor, I was the negative,
he'd loved me, too, this was the speed
at which, to make him beg, I moved—

Sarah Green

42

⁴² [Sarah Green](#), "[Seeing His New Girlfriend at the Coat Check](#)," collected in [Earth Science, 421 Atlanta](#)

the ghost's daughter speaks: white elephant

she won't be attending my party she's an astronaut always in
orbit she can't come to the phone she's making dinner in the
shower at a very important meeting She's asleep &
we were warned not to wake her She can't come to my recitals
since the explosion that was her on television in the big white
smoke my mother's name is my mother's name
was Judith Resnik yes, the astronaut not the teacher
one the pretty one
We aren't allowed to answer the phone can't write our name on
the mailbox We aren't supposed to answer the door
when Dad's at work can't open the windows the curtains
our mouths If she finds us she might she will
One day she's going to
We have a code: ring once then hang up call back let it ring two
times hang up call back then maybe we'll answer We aren't
allowed to play outside anymore
Grandma accidentally said *A n a h e i m* so she's here now
somewhere searching for our mailbox we can feel it
we can smell her hair She is going to find us
again Peter, if you sneak outside you have to knock
to be let back in knock three times if you're alone
four with a space between the third & fourth knocks if she's
standing behind you The judge says she's allowed visitation again
she's better now believes in God says
I'm going to hell because I touch my
privates says she knows I speak
to the devil knows he gives me orders through my headphones
She made me stand naked & spread used the handle of her
toothbrush to look inside for roaches she says
because I'm Mexican I'll have a lot of
roaches She took me to see Billy Graham
at Angel Stadium to get born again she needed to start
over because her stepdad touched inside her She keeps
lots of dead cats in her freezer says if I'm good &
pray they will come back to life & be my pets
I named all six of them first so Peter can't
say any are his Our mother never sleeps we've been warned
not to wake her
but if she never sleeps how can we not wake her? She says she
was mad when I was born she wanted only boys she
named the little boy inside her but then she buried
him
She told the lawyer she can feel where the Germans stuck needles
in her stomach
Please delete my maiden name
please don't post it on the internet my mother is so many people
& all of them will find me
my mother is not well there's something wrong

Risk Management Memo: The Service Industry & You

Once you get over the whole “three hundred mouths
daily” hang up, work in an industrial dish room
can be much like all that sex you took for granted
back in Oklahoma, where there was little else
and even the old redbud was considered puritanical
in its seasonal desires. Or perhaps the forks
that skewer you daily are not direct and horrifying
reminders of the smallpox vaccination scar
you mistook on a man of yesteryear as his stubbing
out a blunt on his own arm. Silk screen his
likeness on all your t-shirts from 1982, and a flame
is all you need to recreate the great bowling
alley inferno that left even the most prophetic local
stoners bereft. And when you storm out
on your antepenultimate day on the line and scream
about your art, nobody knows you had any.
Except maybe Darius and his mysterious sugar bowl.
Sometimes teenagers run away and towns
hold a farewell parade with abundant paper streamers.
The man with the scar misused the term
“Rococo,” but he did it playfully, like to start a fight,
so that is why you’re still silk screening
his likeness on the bay window of your underpants.
There are all kinds of people you can
partially waste your life with. The woman slashing
her boyfriend’s tires might have suffered
through several hundred butter pats and overdone
dover sole, or its sexual equivalent.
Sometimes it’s not the force of hot water that holds
all the juice glasses in obedience.

Mary Biddinger

45

⁴⁵ [Mary Biddinger](#), “[Risk Management Memo: The Service Industry & You](#),” [Banango Street](#), collected in [Small Enterprise](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

Instructions for Renting an Apartment

Hunger will teach you everything:
the night in a saucepan and the fire on medium blue,
the crescendo of salt hitting oil.
You forgot your fingers were soaked with chili
until my thighs burned afterward, for hours.
Our names together on the mailbox like an invocation,
my books against yours.
Let us love each other like a birthday picnic
on a rooftop, everywhere chicken bones
and halved apples, the tender geometry of cheese.
Let us hang everything crooked.
The yellow key and the scars to match it,
every last bite of the meat.

Adriana Cloud

46

⁴⁶ [Adriana Cloud, "Instructions for Renting an Apartment,"](#) collected in [Instructions for Building a Wind Chime, Poetry Society of America](#)

Valentine's Day

Cherry-bled mittens:
two halves of a heart.

Each holds your pulse.
Hug me in stereo.

The import of the rose
to a hostile climate.

Without reservations,
tables turned.

La fée verte?
I'm seeing stardust.

The Widow's emerald?
Trouble bath.

Nipples hard, forthright.
The sucker's punch.

Feathers plucked. Freeze frame.
"Going, going, swan."

They told us: If it bleeds
it leads. We're all hearts here.

Kateri Lanthier

47

⁴⁷ [Kateri Lanthier](#), "[Valentine's Day](#)," collected in [Siren](#), Véhicule Press

During the Middle Ages

O God I am so fat
I cry all the time
A kitten scrubbed with a toothbrush online makes me sob
I'm so heartless seven species of bees
Are now endangered and I didn't do a thing
Didn't even send any money
To anybody doing any good
And I can't lose any weight I skipped yoga
I'm so hot all the time so broke
So pathetic no wise investments
Should've bought a 7-Eleven on a busy corner
When I was seven or eleven
Nobody wants to lick my neck
Nobody wants to hold my hand at the doctor's office
Nobody to grow old with me I'm so crabby
To pluck my beard feed the cat I don't have
And read me endless Russian novels at night
All the ones I still haven't got to so greatly depressing
Where are you handsome? Are you
Driving in your car to come visit me
Bringing a bottle of wine & a present so gallant?
A new translation of Akhmatova? I love it!
No? Well, I guess it's better than living
In the real Middle Ages when
Some shthead priest threatens you with hell
To pocket your last coin and there's no Tylenol
So you have to suck on some skullcap seeds
And knights race around knocking you down
To take your maidenhood with pointy lances
And you have to work as a midwife with no birthing tub
Nobody washes their hands or votes
Nobody knows about DNA or PMS
There's nothing to read even if you can read
Except boring doctrines or *Spiritual Exercises*
By Gertrude the Great, I'm not even kidding
Yes, there's Dante Chaucer and some sagas
But it's not like you'd get near those books
You'd be lucky to have some jerk recite *the latest*
By Wulfstan the Cantor by campfire
Before he beheads your uncles
And forces you to rub salve on his abs
You know you'd be sweating in a field at twenty-two
Dying from your tenth pregnancy by the bailiff
Courtly love? Not a lot of it I bet
Some doctor would drill a hole in my head
To let the demons out because I'd be full
Of black bile as I am today
It would be a very hard time

When the sun revolves around the earth
And kings are just unbelievably selfish
And it'll be a really long time before Pop Art
And meerkat videos and cotton candy
And Kurosawa and fish tacos and girl bands
Everything's just so bad and you have buboes
Hopefully I'd get shoved into a nunnery
To have some ecstatic experience with mystical Jesus
Or better I could be a hardcore samurai
Laying down justice on the heads of corrupt lords
But that was tough work, dirty work
You're working for nobility who at any period
In history are the worst people in the world
And to be an unemployed ronin was lonely
Even if all the brothel ladies offer to scrub your back
Sometimes you just want a nice nap
And some Neosporin on your wounds
If only I could be like the divine Sei Shōnagon
Resplendent in silks with seven-layered sleeves
Writing in my room about politics and my lovers
I wish okay I could be her servant
Dusting the ink stone and fluffing her pillow
But even she found many hateful things
About living in the middle ages
Like crying babies messy guests and mansplainers
So irritating even way back then
You better shut up and take your medicine

Camille Guthrie

48

⁴⁸ [Camille Guthrie, "During the Middle Ages," *The Iowa Review*](#)

[I floated I flew I fell to earth to learn the pleasures of the lowdown]

I floated I flew I fell to earth to learn the pleasures of the lowdown
which meant sometimes going downtown to the Ready theater
to get my ticket punched by ole hook-for-a-hand I feared ambulances
janitors knives dogwood blossoms my sister's boyfriends one of whom
threw a knife at my head one of whom pressed his whiskers into my face
and whispered things my girlfriends' boyfriends one of whom shot me
in the bone behind my ear at a shooting gallery my unspayed dog's periods
we put her in my sister's bikini underpants stuffed with a Kotex pad the girl
whose eyes were crossed cowboy boots on the wrong feet the birthmark
girl Dwight who saw through me Little S hit and killed by a jeep on 13th
St. the guy who hit him sticking his tongue in my mouth at an adult party
Jesus the eschaton which I learned from a well-read Jehovah's Witness
was a synonym for the end of the world my father resurrecting my
father not resurrecting I feared floating flying falling the lowdown

Diane Seuss
49

⁴⁹ [Diane Seuss, "\[I floated I flew I fell to earth to learn the pleasures of the lowdown\]."](#) [Waxwing](#)

Love Poem in the Style of Jordan's Furniture

Sometimes I sing New England furniture commercial jingles
to my husband so that he might understand me better,

the ones where Boston accents reverberate
like moans in an empty church,

amniotic and relentless, sedating the ear
with elongated vowels like "COME ON

DOWN" and "I DOUBT IT," blunt
anthems we'd recite as kids

until some adult would scoff, "They can't learn
math but they can remember this" and today

while singing one of those songs
to my daughter before bed I felt so American

it hurt, like wandering pickle-deep
in the condiment aisles at Costco, half distracted

by someone asking what kind of meatball
I'd like while YouTube footage

of a Nazi getting punched in the face unfurls
across my phone's screen, his smirk

a sick apology, and I watch it again
beside the mayonnaise jars that are waiting to be snapped up

by doomsday preppers where they will glow
like engorged lanterns

in the basements of musty imaginations —
enough mayonnaise to last through the apocalypse,

not real nourishment but a temporary fix —
not real justice but close enough to feel

like I'm flashing my heart to everyone
in the superstore, asking them to hold it

for just a moment, place the fat joy
of it into their mouths,

the way I ask my husband to hold
this gilded bluster and sprawl

of a busted dialect, a language jagged
as rocks like odes to all of the things

I never learned, which might be the most American
thing about me,

loving what should make me feel ashamed,
filled with unimpeachable pride.

Kendra DeColo
50

⁵⁰ [Kendra DeColo, "Love Poem in the Style of Jordan's Furniture," Waxwing](#)

Ord

It's called the night, what I just broke into. Little pieces, little pieces of my love life scattered in the down below and I'm lifting away, from the oh are dee to the ay tee el, through the hail, through the sheer camp of it, the glassined office parks, the halved valentines I tarnish and wear to be safe and return to you, you who mums me, circumscribes me, loves me high and dry.

I am tuned to the music of the pilots. They are saying they are ready. They are sending wishes into the wires. They are a world of boys, so I grip on tighter. I am swimmy with the murky stars. I am in orbit around my concerns.

Fellas, push the tin I'm on, make it go steady, like a girl with a pin. I have a darling, she's down there, the prairie that's flayed across with Xmas lights, and I'm up in this unholy orchard, departing. I couldn't

ever resent her but oh she keeps my voice down low. Push me into this dark ocean, boys, away and away, then sail me back home.

Arielle Greenberg
51

⁵¹ [Arielle Greenberg](#), "Ord," collected in [Locally Made Panties](#), [Ricochet Editions](#)

Three Poems

HEAVY BONNET

Certain odd little thrills: Speaking to the man behind the counter in between hiccups. Seized with the fleeting sudden thought, "I will move to the Florida Keys and grow my hair!"

*

What percentage of people are psychic on the subway? Are they concerned about me?

*

Looking back through this notebook, I see notations about exercising my "subtle body"; what a falcon signifies; a Russian ice dancing pair and their program on the theme of madness; the emotional toll taken by a very cold January and a very cold February.

*

A woman who leaves her mouth open at the end of sentences stands in front of my table talking on her cell phone. She is saying, "Everyone's all like 'salted caramel,' like a sweet & savory thing." Thing-uh.

*

A page that lists points on my plan. The first item of the plan: Get a lucky break.

*

A gentle psychic gesture toward marveling.

A BRIDGE TOO FAR

There are some things you can correct
by force of will, like being pigeon-toed
or eating an apple from the top of the core,
seeds & all. Other things are history.
People all over are walking around
thinking whatever thoughts they want
about you, and some of these thoughts
and people seem a little irritated
with you about the decisions you made
earlier today. How do they know?
The woman on the subway doesn't like
how you were short with your partner

before you left the house, nor does her little boy
care for what you chose to do with coconut oil
in the shower. The whole city could play
itself like a theremin for all you care.

A SORT OF CRACKLING

I'm back where I began, at the source of my power,
causing the hair to lift from my head and start crackling
and my voice to become audible only to those who have
second sight. I could tell you about how the moon sits
there in the mist just staring or about the spring legs
of girls I no longer am. I could say how I enjoy the sound
of a train as I am falling asleep, as my grandmother did
before me. Or still does, actually. Last night was the same
old lost on my travels gene. I mean dream. I am thinking
of applying to leave this place, but I am also thinking of staying.

Joanna Penn Cooper

52

Natasha Writes Back

In your best story I'm in red
heels that get caught in the cobbles
of my city.
You pluck my foot out
by the ankle
like a beet;
we go back to my mother's apartment.

My mother's apartment
is the size of a chessboard
she sleeps with a rook and a Gypsy.

I'm studying dentistry.
I put on the tea kettle.

In thirty years you return;
you're still a writer.
I've remained the same age but
here's a summary of what's changed:

We're in the EU,
I'm a dental attorney.
You left your wife and your children.

We go back to my mother's apartment.
She should be dead by now.
I put on the tea kettle.

Marta Balcewicz
53

53 [Marta Balcewicz](#), "[Natasha Writes Back](#)," [AGN!](#)

In Which the Chorus Sees an Incomplete Vision of the Future

MARIA HELENA

And in fourteen years, six days, and two hours, a solstice.

MARIA DE LOURDES

And in the guerrilla's pocket, a pacemaker for the dictator.

MARIA APARECIDA

And on a girl's necklace, a wedding ring pulled from a dead hand.

MARIA THEREZA

And on the docks, our abandoned dresses, whitening in the sun.

MARIA MADALENA

And in the mother's purse, a bloody fish in last century's newspaper.

MARIA HELENA

And on the father's lap, a napkin and stolen underwear.

MARIA DE LOURDES

And on his bookshelf, the decoded cryptolex, unread, and on his bedside table, a plastic comb with a missing girl's hair in the teeth, and in his sock drawer, a firework that, when lit, becomes the face of Carmen Miranda, all smile and chica chica boom chic.

MARIA APARECIDA

And in the river, our skin changing, pinkening at last.

MARIA THEREZA

And in the grave, an answer, waiting.

MARIA MADALENA

And in the streetlamp, two witch moths mating.

MARIA HELENA

And in the trees, a sloth. And in the trees, a mother capuchin picking lice from her baby's fur. And on the trees, a word, writing itself.

MARIA DE LOURDES

And below the trees, the penultimate sinkhole.

MARIA APARECIDA

And above the trees, a star seeking Omega, a bright zero, a pulsing no.

Traci Brimhall

54

⁵⁴ [Traci Brimhall](#), "[In Which the Chorus Sees an Incomplete Vision of the Future](#)," *The Believer*, collected in [Saudade](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

The Bad Teacher

She could come to the door in September for our son.

All thistled cursive and miscounted nickels. She
might tell him facts he'll recall all his life:

Mice are spontaneously
generated by garbage.
The size of the skull is the size of the mind.
At the end of all this love
and fuss, we die. *Everything*
your mother told you about eternity was a lie.

I imagine her at night at a desk made for a child.
Her knees too high. Her elbows
rest on the floor. Switched

off for summer. An awful
doll. (*I should have burned her as a girl, this has gone too far.*)
Her spine and her eyes have been
sewn closed
by the same seamstress
who sewed this:

a black felt scrap of nightmare, its
edges stitched up sloppily to the stars.

Laura Kasischke
55

⁵⁵ [Laura Kasischke](#), "[The Bad Teacher](#)," [The New Republic](#), collected in [Lilies Without](#), Ausable Press

Eva Braun

Eva Braun, let's twist again,
like we did last summer,
before you left me for that man,
like we did last year. Damn

your little mustached fellow. Lady,
take me back. Under the Boardwalk,
down by the sea. The season is fading.
All I want to do is talk

to you again, Eva Braun,
feed you cotton candy as though
it were still summer and nothing was wrong.
It's not jealousy. I know

he'll do you wrong, bring you to harm.
Eva Braun, fall into my arms.

Paul-Victor Winters

56

⁵⁶ [Paul-Victor Winters](#), "[Eva Braun](#)," [Spider Mirror](#)

On the Day of Your Wedding

On the day of your wedding,
I'm beating a dead monkey

on the cathedral stairs. I'm wearing
my hat with the horns, a gown

of red arrows that point straight
down. On the day of your wedding,

I'm riding a carousel horse in a glass bikini.
Covered in katydids, licking

oblivion from a dinner plate, sitting
and speaking of love as if it could save us.

Here is my full set of wax teeth.
Here is your dress like a bandage.

Here, my monkey paws.

Kristin Bock
57

⁵⁷ [Kristin Bock, "On the Day of Your Wedding," *Ghost Town*](#)

“The female seer will burn upon this pyre”

Sylvia Plath is setting my hair
on rollers made from orange-juice cans
The hairdo is shaped like a pyre.

My locks are improbably long.
A pyramid of lemons somehow
balances on the rickety table

where we sit, in the rented kitchen
which smells of singed naps and bergamot.
Sylvia Plath is surprisingly adept

at rolling my unruly hair.
She knows to pull it tight.

Few words.

Her flat, American belly,

her breasts in a twin sweater set,
stack of typed poems on her desk,
envelopes stamped to go by the door,

a freshly baked poppyseed cake,
kitchen safety matches, Black-eyed Susans
a cobalt jelly jar. She speaks a word

“immolate,” then a single sentence
of prophecy. The hairdo done,
the nursery tidy, the floor swept clean.

of burnt hair and bumblebee husks.

Elizabeth Alexander

58

⁵⁸ [Elizabeth Alexander](#), “[The female seer will burn upon this pyre](#),” collected in [Antebellum Dream Book](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

from "All Else Fails"

He keeps me waiting
and I start hysteria a little bit.
I start hysteria against everyone's advice.
I go into the street to drink air.
I've never been so thirsty in my life.
Another mouth, some fresh-minted lips.
See, I can feel blue on half a bottle of jewels.
Sleep then wake then this then that day
and another night back on the bed
lying in an eros dumb and slackjawed.
The sound of hustling advances and retreats
as if someone were shuffling money
or unbuttoning a blouse.
Can you put that taffeta away now, please?
Please put it away.

Deborah Landau

59

⁵⁹ [Deborah Landau](#), "[All Else Fails](#)," [The Owl](#), collected in [The Last Usable Hour](#), Copper Canyon Press

The Stall

How we slept not on the open gravel,
but in the corner of the animal's stall.
That night the ghost of a great thoroughbred
kicked at our innards. We heard the great
animal chuff with delight, and when
it flopped on its belly you took me.
The moon made a lattice on our backs.
We were old, traveling far, walking from barn
to abandoned barn. One night we washed
in a trough of rain water and dreamed
a pig's dream: there in the sty aglow,
the savior we had been waiting for,
the starred eyes filled with light.

Catherine Bowman

60

⁶⁰ [Catherine Bowman](#), "[The Stall](#)," collected in [Can I Finish, Please?](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Eyebrows

Ethan calls to say his date remembers me
from drama school. “Oh!” she says.
“Karyna! The one with no eyebrows!”
He reports this in good humor, but the specter
of my hairless face rises like Munch’s scream.
It’s true: I once had no eyebrows.
I shaved them off, drew them back on,
wore wigs, went to drama school,
& worshiped Marlene Dietrich.
“Her name is Opal,” Ethan says.
I know exactly who he means—
she used to stand in front of me
in Movement for Actors. She had
an orchard tattooed across her back.
“From *Into the Woods*,” she said.
You could get lost in it. There was even a wolf.
I tell Ethan about the time she got me drunk
& took me to get a Sappho tattoo on my wrist:
I sobered up in the chair & chickened out.
I told Opal, “*Real* actresses aren’t inked.”
(I’m surprised this isn’t what she remembers.)
I wanted to be made & scraped clean & remade
every night. “I told her I was a *palimpsest*, Ethan.”
He, of all people, should understand—
the men who fell prey to my bizarre charms
slept in the bouncy castles of their own
amorphous sexualities. I want to remind him
how I once stuck a pin in the balloon
of my long-term relationship in order to be
drunk & excellent & eyebrowless with him
in the bad light of a Sheraton bathroom—
watching him fuck me in the mirror,
watching him already regret it,
watching my eyebrows sweat off—
but Ethan’s laughing now: “Seriously? A *palimpsest*?
Opal’s right. You were *totally* pretentious.”
I hang up the phone but it’s too late:
I’m beside myself, back in drama school,
doing *A Doll’s House* for a dozen natural girls
who keep giving each other that arch look,
like I still don’t know the right way to act.

Karyna McGlynn
61

⁶¹ [Karyna McGlynn](#), “[Eyebrows](#),” collected in [Hothouse](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Service

I understand that not everyone will get this.
Leaving your house I saw an Amish woman

pedaling hard on the beaten roads, the bicycle
and her dress. Behind her, the umbrella

rode in a white wagon, held by the tiniest pink
hand... What do I know. I wear a shirt of skulls.

I paint my toes a color called "Hope." I never got
to photograph the drive-in before the screen

rotted down. And now it is a rust *why*.
The lattice of a dead whale. A board without

an x or o. I only believe what my body tells me,
and what it said when the leather went around,

when you told me to write on my skin...
when you said, you said... The lung-shaped bruise

is only the beginning. Try to understand.
When you have no purpose, you drift; there

is the devil. Better to let him, let him... When
the leash snapped on like an ice mouth,

when the length wrapped around once,
twice... This is the purest

sweetness I have known: a kind of locking
into place, a kind of glazing, a kind of remembering

what never happened and is always
happening in a men-circled field, in a shed

in Kendallville, in a room before I was born.
What happened was the woman's face

was rain. But her body was will.
And pain. And the love that comes

From pain. That's you. Or maybe,
that's me. Outside on your marsh,

evening settled into same. The frogs lowed.
The swan was returning to the woman's

house for bread. If the water was salt,
it would be rising. What you described

on my face: a peaceful fear.

Alison Stine
62

Collectable Blacks

This is the g-dropping vernacular
I am stuck in. This is the polyphone
where my head is an agrarian gang
sign pointing like a percussion mallet
to a corn maze in one of the smaller
Indiana suburbs where there aren't
supposed to be black folks. Be cool & try
to grin it off. Be cool & try to lean
it off. Find a kind of black & bet on it.
I'm grinning to this vernacular
like the big drum laugh tracks a patriotic
marching band. Be cool & try to ride
the beat the same way me, Pryor,
& Ra did driving across the 30th Street
Bridge, laughing at these two dudes
with big afros like it's 1981 peeing into
the water & looking at the stars. Right
before Officer Friendly hit his lights.
*Face the car, fingers locked behind
your heads.* Right after the fireworks
started popping off. *Do I need to call
the drug dog?* Right after the rattling
windows, mosquitoes as busy in my ears
as 4th of July traffic cops. Right before
the thrill of real planets & pretend planets
spun high into the sky, Ra throwing up
three West Side fingers, each ringed
by pyrotechnic glory & the misnomer
of the three of us eyeballing the cop's
club as it swings down at the exact same
time Pryor says, *Cops put a hurting on your
ass, man.* & fireworks light up in the same
colors as angry knuckles if you don't
duck on the double. Especially on the West
Side—more carnivorous than almost any
other part of Earth Voyager 2 saw when
it snapped a blue picture on its way out
of this violently Technicolor heliosphere.

Adrian Matejka
63

⁶³ [Adrian Matejka](#), "[Collectable Blacks](#)," [Copper Nickel](#), collected in [Map to the Stars](#), [Penguin Books](#)

How We Count in the South

Add one
tonight, when the barred owl
calls her tent revival, the cortege
trailing a mosquito truck's
deodorant breeze.

Plus two, the night
before, where they inject one more
black man up the road in Georgia.
The Supreme Court tweets his final
opinion.

Which leads to three:
Dear Jesus, The Reason
For Each Season, of course we're
exhausted by our soul's litigation,
the old ones still milling at the polling
place, the recently deceased sweating
their subpoenas in feckless hands.

Required to appear,
we wait. We nurse ourselves and take
a number. We lean against the sneeze
guards at the country buffet until our
ankles swell.

Please. Don't tell us
history. Nobody hearts a cemetery
like we do,

where re-enactors bite
their bullets between headstones,
and ancient belles in neck-high silk
prepare for the previously fought
war. Every day is a day before.

Though we do hear
the news. Oh sure. It gets to us.
Story is, up north, people shit
crushed pineapple and rest stop
whores give change with paper
money. Story is inscribed, fixed as
the roulette wheels clacking inside
casinos, where party boats freak
like viscous bath toys in this
electric gulf.

Certainly, we've learned
our numbers. We build a church for
anyone who owns a pair of knees.
But still, the old disease is catching,
so pray with us—

Unplug the power, Lord.
Illuminate the devils. Degrease
the righteous man's eye.

Erin Belieu

⁶⁴ [Erin Belieu](#), "[How We Count in the South](#)," collected in [Slant Six](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

The *Untied* States of America

America, with your water-tower towns, your irrigation sprinklers,
your perpetual homage to Hopper. America, where if there's a river
there's a dam, and where there's a dam there's a peach grove, a flag
still there. America, where kids pry beer caps from the cooling asphalt.

America, a round of gunshots at three in the morning; the helicopters
circling, searching. America, falling asleep as the alarm starts beeping,
the wife having heard none of it, nothing since the chained dog finished
his aria at 2:37 am. America, a white tablet not exactly *tabula rasa*, on account
of the Lenapes and the Mohicans, on account of the Skagit and the wampum.
But America, the watercress in the oasis, the makeshift crosses. But America,
she outlived five husbands, though of course the questionable death
of the second, and the stolen cattle. America, a duel. America, a drowning.

America, an orchard. America, we are all going to college in diapers.
The prognosis is good, but first a year in Guatemala, a stint with the Nationals,
a frosty cold one. America, you're a Wells Fargo horse-drawn carriage.
America, a two-pack a-day-Camel-unfiltered smoker. America,
the bees have taken over the foreclosures. America, where heroes sacrifice
flies. America, brave as a Cracker Jack. America, we will always pay more
for a view and take out. America, Lunestra-ed. Sonata-fled, all fired up
with popping The American Dream balloon. America, are you related
to anyone famous? America, more dessert than desert. America, *Tu casa
es mi casa*. America, First Assembly of Quik-Mart, *Untied* we Best Value.

America, you're an eagle of greed, an eagle of steel. America, Eat Now
and Escape. America, you're a lake of illogic and thorns. O spacious skies,
Berkeley's a long ways from here. America, prepare to meet thy God
of Lowe's. America, Assembly of Fitch. America, rest in peat and maggots
(the proof through the night). O outlet, o clearance, o slash, slash, slash.
Bridges and brats, Dismal Nitch and pilings. America, too much faith
in plastic. America, you're a Sleep Country, a land of milk and money,
\$49.95 in a vein that will not vanish. America, in velvety red,
white, and blue, in solid-oak splendor, in Mahogany. America, you stupid,
reckless lovely, rest in peace, thirty-four stems For a Limited Time Only.

Martha Silano

⁶⁵ [Martha Silano](#), "[The Untied States of America](#)," *Verse Daily*, collected in *Reckless Lovely*, [Saturnalia Books](#)

Introduction to Poetry

Psychiatrists are not poetic.
Neither is flatulence, or anything involving the intestines.
Breasts are more poetic than penises
or vaginas. Or sunsets.

But better a penis and a vagina than a sunset.
especially a sunset over the glittering ocean, over the craggy peaks.

Rainbows: not an especially good idea
unless your name begins with Elizabeth
and ends with Bishop, and you are referring not to a rainbow

but to oil in a little rented boat. Oil has become more poetic
than ever, due to its listing in the thesaurus
as a synonym for suffering. Which

is more poetic: legless child, drowning polar bear, heartless lover?
If your house was burning down,
would you save

a) your grandmother,
b) the Picasso,
c) your latest poem, the best and truest one
you've ever written, which you will revise
to include an elegy for your grandmother,
using a cubist metaphor?

For revision is poetic, though it seemeth not so.
For thou shalt use no archaic diction
lest ye be stoned. In the biblical sense of the word.

For I must tell you again and again
to show. For when you tell,
ye are as rainbows at sunset arching over the breasts

of beautiful women.
For your ignorance is vast
but I assure you mine is vaster.

For my selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor
rises in the night sky among the starry Fays.
For a poem should not be mean, it should be darling

as a lapdog, but never yap. A poem
should only open its trap to praise
and fuck anyone who says otherwise.

Do not use the word *fuck* gratuitously.
Come to think of it, the penis is perfectly poetic
if used thusly: O my mushroom, we are as microvilli

in the body of the world,
its bleary incandescence, its corporations' need
to dress us like skeletons and hoard all the candy.

The fucking shits. I love you so much, baby.
No one should say that in a poem.
Fuck. Shit. Love. Now write.

Kim Addonizio
66

⁶⁶ [Kim Addonizio](#), "[Introduction to Poetry](#)," [Five Points](#), collected in [Lucifer at the Starlite](#), [W.W. Norton & Company](#)

Tongues of Fire

This is what's become of us: I am
confused by mourning, and he is the sun
that goes to sleep on top of me, undone
by moonrise. Lover, all I speak is iambs

and slant rhyme. That devil lamb
of light called hope is sacrificed and none
too pleased with having lost its bleat. The stone
has rolled away but God's not gone and damn

it, I'm no fan of the weather here, it rains
too often, bones of doves and angel down
until the ground stains red with sighs and blood.

It is wet and cold. Will you explain
again the why of all there is and how
he caught me in the act, discovering God?

Jill Alexander Essbaum

68

⁶⁸ [Jill Alexander Essbaum](#), "[Tongues of Fire](#)," [Wascana Review](#), collected in [Heaven](#), University Press of New England

Ceremony for a Sphere

When asked to sketch your face,
I draw a wheel.

Nights, I close my eyes to the questions:

If I have complained of isolation
amid the din of men
cutting themselves with spokes,

if I have walked beneath a cul-de-sac
of stars crawling their bowl,

toward a hive which swarms
intact in the amniotic dark,
not prone to constellation,

where I meet myself again
in the grove of ruined thinking,
ready to be maimed
with a lemon in my mouth.

Marni Ludwig
69

⁶⁹ [Marni Ludwig](#), "[Ceremony for a Sphere](#)," collected in [Pinwheel](#), [New Issues Press](#)

Summer Barbecue with Two Men

Tonight, the moon looks like Billie Holiday, trembling
because there are problems other people have
& now I have them, too.

I'm wearing a cherry-colored cardigan over
a navy print dress, on purpose.
People think I'm sweet.

I try the ancho chile pork ribs, in case
the man I once wanted might still
rub off on me.

I wonder if I'll ever know about flavors, what
tastes right. In the overheated kitchen,
I chat briefly with a series of

thirty-something-year-old men—all slender, all
bearded, lustful to the point of sullen.
I hug & compliment

their pretty female partners as a way of saying,
I am beautiful in my harmlessness!
Outside, people.

A circle of party chairs. I don't care much
for a stranger's guacamole. The man
I once wanted is grilling

these beautiful peaches. He offers some—
I'm embarrassed. I try not
to touch his hand.

I try to touch his hand. On the porch,
another man I know is kissing
the shoulder of a woman

whose fiancé is here somewhere. *Guess what,*
he says. *You're the only one who cares.*
I wouldn't have guessed:

judgment is a golden habañero margarita
with wings, wet & cold
on his chest. So

many people are tender from the right angle.
I'm hungry & confused. I love
a good barbecue. Save me.

Analicia Sotelo

⁷⁰ [Analia Sotelo](#), "[Summer Barbecue with Two Men](#)," [Waxwing](#), collected in [The Virgin](#), Milkweed Editions

Living among the Dead

*There is another world,
but it is in this one.
—Paul Eluard*

First there were those who died
before I was born.
It was as if they had just left
and their shadows would
slip out after them
under the door so recently closed
the air in its path was still
swirling to rest.
Some of the furniture came from them,
I was told, and one day
I opened two chests
of drawers to learn what the dead kept.

But it was when I learned to read
that I began always
to live among the dead.
I remember Rapunzel,
the improved animals

in the Just-So Stories, and a flock
of birds that saved themselves
from a hunter by flying in place
in the shape of a tree,
their wings imitating the whisk
of wind in the leaves.

My sons and I are like some wine
the dead have already bottled.
They wish us well, but there is nothing
they can do for us.
Sebastian cries in his sleep,
I bring him into my bed,
talk to him, rub his back.
To help his sons live easily
among the dead is a father's great work.
Now Sebastian drifts, soon he'll sleep.
We can almost hear the dead
breathing. They sound like water
under a ship at sea.

To love the dead is easy.
They are final, perfect.
But to love a child
is sometimes to fail at love
while the dead look on
with their abstract sorrow.

To love a child is to turn
away from the patient dead.
It is to sleep carefully
in case he cries.

Later, when my sons are grown
among their own dead, I can
dive easily into sleep and loll
among the coral of my dreams
growing on themselves
until at the end
I almost never dream of anyone,
except my sons,
who is still alive.

William Matthews
71

⁷¹ [William Matthews](#), "[Living among the Dead](#)," collected in [Search Party](#), [Mariner Books](#)

Poem to Remind My Heart to Beat

No matter the upright life I've been trying to lead
I keep looking for new ways to fuck myself
so hard I'm always pleading for relief, frantically
trying to locate whatever blunt object would sock me
into unconsciousness. I know what it's like
to be powerless
on a shag rug. When I tell you—come closer,
closer, look how pretty I am, come closer, close—
I will bury you there
in this petri dish of what-went-wrong
growing in its dozens of gruesome sequences.
It's October, slowly
the webs arch iron railings, the pumpkins appear
like cautions, vigilant but cataleptic.
I would like that, my mood stabbed into me,
triangle eyes blinking only the fire
behind them. Come closer, close; look how pretty
I died on the shag rug, but you still
remember me. Autumn never did to me
what it did to others, a beauty to admire
right before the end.
I've been wrinkling, slowly, closer,
I need you to cuff me to whatever
apparatus will pump the blood into
and out of my heart. Cut me open with chill-
in-the-air, carve into me a face that can over-
take this unreasonable face. Closer, take me
apart into your arms, I am not any brilliant color but
the dried brown leaf of the season folded over
and stepped on by whatever step rushes
where any step is rushing to in all these crumbled pieces
and in all these pieces I am sending myself

into the air to see where I land.

Lynn Melnick
72

⁷² [Lynn Melnick](#), "[Poem to Remind My Heart to Beat](#)," *Phantom*, collected in [Landscape with Sex and Violence](#), [YesYes Books](#)

My 1986

I painted all ten of my toenails with Liquid Paper
then followed my father's injunction and scraped it all off.

The girl I admired second-most in the world
knew how to win any argument, and how to spin,

between thumb and index finger, a ballpoint pen.
I dated her best friend for almost exactly six hours

before she broke up with me over the cordless phone,
explaining, correctly, that I had turned into her shadow.

I failed to assemble, from papier-mache and duct tape,
a glowing, foot-long, love-potion-dispensing flower

for our production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
We used a green wire. I never made props again.

That summer, I peered at the populous universe
through bangs and swaths of hair I tried to comb

and could not comb. I believed I could really fit in
with hippies, if only I met enough of them.

In my late night aerie, my upstairs writer's retreat,
I typed my ten-page poem about a dour,

shy angel confused by his runaway body.
I put alliteration on every line

as a way to define my own verse style,
along with adapted prose from the character study

I wrote longhand in 1985,
when I felt sure that only if people unlike me—

girls, for example—would read it could the time
it took to revise it ever seem worthwhile.

Stephanie Burt
73

⁷³ [Stephanie Burt](#), "[My 1986](#)," collected in [Advice from the Lights](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

the deer become piñatas

and it only takes a little tap
to crack them open,
for them to explode
into their colorful contents—
hard candy, of course, and bright
wax lips, chewing gum
and marzipan and sugar floss,
but also palm-sized switchblades
and gilded bird skulls and pills
that none of us recognize,
that we're too scared to take.
we pile them in altars
on our dressers, watch
their myriad of colors
for signs, or else
we bury them in the woods
where they're found—
where a deer
has run into a tree
and been reduced
to a heap of delicacies
and weapons.

Cassandra de Alba
74

⁷⁴ [Cassandra de Alba](#), "[the deer become piñatas](#)," collected in [habitats](#), [Horse Less Press](#)

Friendship (Half Hitch)

First time I couldn't
get it up, I said
it's like pushing a rope—
my wife said that's a pretty
short rope—I pulled hard
and tried to tie it
into a knot—we laughed
and went to breakfast
at the place we like
that's famous for miles
for being a lot better
at lunch

Bob Hicok
75

⁷⁵ Bob Hicok, "[Friendship \(Half Hitch\)](#)," collected in [Sex & Love &](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Lost Scrolls

After Mark Leidner

Like a passive aggressive gun that fires.....nothing instead of bullets
Or Nostradamus predicting the invention of the Capri pant...
Like a primeval tornado collecting nothing but air...
Like accidentally wishing on a satellite and getting women's golf instead of happiness...
Like your dad threatening to turn the planet around and keep driving...
Like throwing your wedding bouquet backwards into a discount sporting goods store...
Like substituting inspirational quotes for inspirational estimates...
or dawn through a magnifying glass
Like slowly fingering your girlfriend to Bohemian Rhapsody...
It should be like being buried in a denim-lined coffin.....
But it's like a rose in an earthquake...
It should be a bouquet of lilacs shackled to your ankle....
But it's black milk pouring out of the fountain.....
It's like freezing containers of vomit to reheat and pour down the toilet...
or animal activists throwing red paint at deer to save time in the long run...
It's like a calculator for hippies where the only button is 'infinity man'...
or drinking Gatorade in your wedding dress
It's like a garden salad thrown into the blades of a helicopter
It's like something that cannot be said but must be said... and in being said
slows the rapid expansion...of the prison-industrial complex...
It's like your family commissioning a shrugging angel headstone...
It should be like tits at dawn...
or a million trees in winter...
But it's like setting the planet on fire...by letting your kite fly too close to the sun
It's like saving millions on camouflage gear by getting North Korea to invest in smart-casual trees...
It's like being so committed to living each day as if it were your last, you spend each afternoon having a cerebral hemorrhage in a rest home...
Your neighborhood is involved in a gang war and you are trying to stay neutral by wearing white, and your neighbor is stabbing you repeatedly in the chest whispering 'White is not a cooler, it's a shade...'
It's summer on the Rio Grande and 10,000 bees fly towards you in the shape of your father and say....'What do you mean you're quitting baseball?'...
It's like falling in love for the first time for the last time...
or your dead wife returning to you in the body of a convicted pedophile...
It's like wishing on a star so distant the wish isn't granted until you wake up on your forty-seventh birthday with cornrows... and a set of chatter rings...
It's like a tornado in a harmonica shop, or a suicide note burned into a cornfield...
It's like using a mnemonic device based on complex chemical structures to remember your mother's name...
It should be like a film adaptation of the Home Alone novelizations...
But it's like writing the word hunger in gravy...
It should be like fucking in a casket...
But it's sunlight falling on castle stones....
It's like punching someone in the face and saying 'just kidding'...
or trying to find your way out a door museum...
It's the black wind through the maples, and the difficulty of getting tenure...
It's like loading a catapult with a catapult and catapulting it into irony...
or a baby singing itself to sleep...

It's like a post-apocalyptic petting zoo, with cages full of old fur coats...
It's like the bonus level on Tekken where you punch a man's face so hard
he becomes the evil version of himself...
but there's no such thing...as punching a man's face so hard
he becomes the evil version of himself...
there's no such thing as the evil version of anything...
It's like a movie where everything started out...fine
and continued to be...fine
until at the end of the movie it turned out everything had been...fine all along
That's what love is like...
It's like firing a gun into a time machine and accidentally hitting Hitler...
It's like masturbating to a documentary on South African mines and ejaculating real diamonds...
It's like wanting something so bad you would die to have it...
but you do have it and nobody is asking you to die...
Not the civil war re-enactors loading their muskets in the field behind the supermarket parking lot...
Not the man on the bus, with the Ted Bundy biography
Not even the entire American military complex...
Every night you come over and we watch some film...
about people sprinting through the corridors of an abandoned space station...
or
being stabbed to death...in the glittering wetlands of Louisiana...
and every night nobody comes to our house...
and murders us in our sleep...

Hera Lindsay Bird

76

⁷⁶ [Hera Lindsay Bird](#), "[Lost Scrolls](#)," collected in [Hera Lindsay Bird](#), [Victoria University Press](#)

Confessio Amantis

*In the interior of Sumatra the rice is sown by
women who, in sowing, let their hair hang
loose down their backs, in order that the rice
may grow luxuriantly and have long stalks.
—James Fraser, The Golden Bough*

Where are those girls now who twenty
years ago, when you were barely twenty,
opened their arms to you on snowy nights
and put the fever into your veins?

One—later a doctor of medicine—
loved to tryst in the kitchen,
on a butcher-block table,
while her mother (a judge)
read the evening paper in the next room.

You can still see clearly the odd
details of her face: a green cloud
hovering in the left iris, a question-mark
scar by the ear, and violet lips

mouthed the songs on the radio
and then whispering your name faster
and faster under the Tiffany lamp
while the dog watched from the corner.

Later, you recounted to her how,
during his conversion, his back to the light,
St. Augustine claimed his eyes,
by which he saw all things illuminated,
were themselves in darkness.

Your shirt around her shoulders,
her knees drawn up into her chest,
she gazed out at the icy trees
in the park and pretended to listen.

In those days you were full of big ideas.
And while snow spun wildly into Manhattan,
your partners already understood
what you only now begin to grasp,

what the girls on more fertile islands
are taught from birth: the only knowledge
that matters, bridging chasms over the long
years, must find its way into ritual
and stop short of words, always.

Nicholas Christopher

⁷⁷ [Nicholas Christopher](#), "[Confessio Amantis](#)," collected in [In the Year of the Comet](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

Malebolge

Okinawa, 1970

The Bachelor Officer's Quarters. A Sunday morning, my eyes drifting vaguely over the gypsum ceiling tiles, and over cinder blocks as desolate as craters. Outside the sugar cane hisses, palm fronds clack, and a rainstorm darkens a quadrant of sunlight. Next door, the junior supply officer has begun to stir under his cadre of taped-up Playmates smiling down, an air-brushed, backlit canopy for the boy pasha. In my room, hands behind my head, I am deciding to quit the Marine Corps as a conscientious objector.

Nei-San is how it might be spelled phonetically.

Sister or Miss

in Japanese, but we use it for the Okinawan maids. My roommate has what is called a "ranch" and spends his weekends with our Nei-San in a house outside the gate. How easily we all take to the minor pleasures of empire: Nei-Sans to brasso our belt buckles, to wash and starch our uniforms, to spit-polish our boots. Our presence helps, we are told, "the local economy."

In the morning when we leave for our work, the Nei-Sans are setting up, squatting near the soapy showers, their hot-plates lit, tea-water simmering, and Ryukyuan radio music tuned in. A hard, flattening light pours in onto a faded tatami. I want to linger behind and listen to their jokes about us, the young lieutenant-sans.

In Book VI of the Iliad, Adrestos falls to Menelaos. Wrapping his arms around the wronged king's knees, Adrestos begs for his life, and Menelaos wavers . . . but as the gods would have it, Agamemnon discovers them and rebukes his brother for softness bordering on the feminine. Then he spears Adrestos in the belly, and as he withdraws the blade, sets his foot on the man's ribs for leverage, saying not even children in the womb are to be spared. I dream I am under arms, helmeted in bronze, with a raised horsehair plume. My enemy wrestles me into submission, and I bite him full on the calf. His blood wells up like a spring, tasting like smoke and quicksilver. I sip it and do not die.

The strangest moment in the Inferno: when Dante's arms are wrapped around the shoulders of Virgil, who is himself climbing down the coarse-haired flank of Satan, whose enormous body is locked in a lake of ice. Suddenly Virgil seems to be climbing back up, and Dante is bewildered, terrified as a child, and needs to be told they have just passed through the core of the fallen world and they are now hand over hand on their way to the earth's other side.

In Tengan, in Camp Smedley T. Butler, named after a general who in disgust at the “banana wars” turned in his medals and quit; on a thickly flowered, half-jungle hillside overlooking the Brig and a sea of sugar cane the escapees loved like life itself; in a white blockhouse, on a spartan single bed, in skivvies and flip-flops, I ask myself again what *would* I be willing to trade, what part of my body, how much of my life would I pay for one poem, one true line about this war. Then a voice not quite my own, but close to my face and as if behind a wire mesh wonders just how grand, how filled with epiphany the poem would have to be if the cost was an arm or more belonging to another?

Ganesh, son of Shiva and Parvati, has a pot-bellied human torso and an elephant’s head. Beloved by all, he blesses beginnings: businesses, marriages, births. He is also the patron of writers, an inspirer of epic poems. He might as a series of small tremors step through me when he rises out of the cane fields into clouds swollen with rainwater from the east. I wish I could seek his protection in the months it will take me to get out. He would set my penance at twenty years of silence, my words curling up like leaves and blowing away. But even if this were so, I would still claim the quick, half-audible “no” I said out loud was mine.

Fred Marchant

78

⁷⁸ [Fred Marchant](#), “[Malebolge](#),” collected in [The Tipping Point](#), [The Word Works](#)

The Real Thing

Sir John Mandeville, the great explorer and liar, claimed “there grows a kind of fruit as big as a gourd, and when it is ripe men open it and find inside an animal of flesh and blood and bone, like a little lamb without wool.” He called this the Vegetable Lamb of Tartary.

I first learned of it from a very old hippie who was feeling lonesome, one lavender night of a misty joint, for the lambskin condoms of his soft-hearted youth. And also, most likely for a time when women in their twenties heard such a line with more thrill and less derision. A time when he didn’t get on a bicycle and think about his prostate, get on a woman and think about his grave.

When Trojan brought them back as a mass market consumable experiment in nostalgia and the idea of the natural, my husband, who would prefer to have another child truth be told, bought a box for us to try.

After, we assessed. I’ve had better sex, but there was a sort of hallucinatory flower opening at the end, so that’s something.

I’ve been reading about hallucinatory flowers lately, particularly the ones used by medieval midwives to induce abortion. This because I like irony, I like control, and I like to see a woman flipping the patriarchy the bird.

In my daily life, though, I stick with condoms, because once the roots are in you, it’s no mean feat to get them out. It will feel like and be a measure of poison. I think of the women who once did the washing at the river with a pair of stones and the meat of their arms. I admire, but would not care to be, them.

When I took the little hormone pills, I always worried I wasn’t smelling things—pheromones of men, lilacs, coffee, puddles around the gas station—as they were meant to be smelled. “Meant to be,” I’m learning, is a dangerous notion.

Goethe said there was meant to be an Urpflanze, an archetypal plant and prototype containing all plants past and future. He could draw it, but after many years of travel and searching had to conclude there is, nevertheless, no such thing.

After equally many years, I'm starting to worry that I am missing the point of my life. Was I meant to be the ovary of a green calyx always getting fatter? How will I think when I die? I worry there can be nothing worse than realizing your life wasn't what it was meant to be.

The Vegetable Lamb of Tartary, Mandeville reports, grazed the leaves of its mother until its umbilical vine dropped off. Then it became a lamb like any other, with meat for slaughter and skin that is said to feel as translucently delicate as a petal.

Is a petal meant to chafe?

I told my husband sometimes there's great and sometimes there's good enough. He said from his point of view there wasn't really much difference, and what difference there was wasn't an improvement so much as a variation. So we went to sleep, content enough, perhaps content as we were meant to be, perhaps just shades of that.

Kathryn Nuernberger
79

⁷⁹ [Kathryn Nuernberger](#), "[The Real Thing](#)," [The Gettysburg Review](#)

Julie the Astonishing (How She Discovered Christ Was a Metaphor)

The youth group leader did not fully
listen to the song “West End Girls”

His name was Matt and he wore khakis

When you’re married you can do whatever
you want he told them at Hardees

Smiled like a sparkling fox
She ate a biscuit

Later they ate long pretzel sticks
in the choir room and were prayed over

Dear Heavenly Father Jesus our Lord
and Savior I just

Bless these teens today Christ
I want you to lift

Open them Jesus God I ask that you do this

At the lock-in in an all-gold sweat suit
dear Heavenly Father

Bless this pizza to your use
Gratitude was hard

Thank you for this little hut in my chest

Forgiveness was easy
She had done so many things wrong

Please make sure the candle stays lit
Don’t leave me here

The lights off and the sound of crying
Thank you for holding me in this light

Then a hallway opened inside her blood

Julia Story
80

⁸⁰ [Julia Story](#), “[Julie the Astonishing \(How She Discovered Christ Was a Metaphor\)](#),” *Tinderbox*

Meditation on a Suicide

“...if there is no difference between the sublime and the paltry, if the Son of God can undergo judgment for shit, then human existence loses its dimensions and becomes unbearably light.”

—Milan Kundera

True enough. But, I still can't say how or why I would want to leave this world on my own terms.

Listening to Brubeck's "Take Five" doesn't take long, relatively speaking, and it never gets above the level of a quiet conversation, like those held in confessionals or movie theaters right after the lights dim. It's just piano, bass, and drums shuffling unvertiginously, and Desmond avoids the root all he can, his lines slipping like sunlight on a butterfly. Every time I put it on, I wait for the solos that take off, not like a wren, but a Harley or Mustang, a drunk Marine—something so American objects on shelves shiver, and then fall off. But it never happens. Maybe they were on to something with this resignation from their lives that were trying to go everywhere on four chords and five beats. But then again, they didn't resign; all they did was reject the fundamental union of improvisation, which was their lives, because they could. Like I said, I don't know. Don't trouble yourself with what it is I want.

We want to look at each other sometimes, the kind of look that's uneasiness laced with desire, or the other way around. Around here, they're unidentical twins, so it doesn't much matter. Right now, for instance, I'm looking at Andrew Wyeth's nude Helga, *On Her Knees*. After a while, I want her, and I'm almost convinced she wants me too, except she's been looking down at a pillow all this time and her face is as flushed as bruised peaches. Her hands are behind her. I can't imagine holding them enough to go through with it. The more I look at it, the more I see that she's never been comfortable with this. So without ever touching the skin behind the ear, or kissing all the way down the inner forearm, we've turned each other down. And all this "passion," which is how Wyeth described it, is timeless. No wonder she was looking away. There's nothing like anonymity suffused with passion for all eternity. It smothers, I think, and it leavens.

I think it's all about becoming attainable, and being unattainable because there was a time when I was a part of God. I was provisionally eternal, back then. I can't say for sure whether or not I liked it, but why wouldn't I? When I was seven, I told Father Donahoe how my week was going. After a cough, he gave me ten Hail Mary's and ten Our Father's. I kneeled there for forty-five minutes. My back ached. This was my privilege, to be cleansed as such. I was the last to leave chapel that day, and Sister Amadeus kept me after that to clap out the erasers, punishment for failure in small Catholic towns. I found out that taking the Lord's name in vain also involved singing "fuck-shit-damn, fuck-shit-damn" to the tune of "Three Blind Mice" to no one in particular. B. told me this. He walked me through shit for were taught that God was in the details, that we were made in God's image. I know I'm wrong, but I sit down and try to figure out a way to become attainable to God again. Nothing, so far, has been deemed acceptable, or worked, for that matter.

B. grew up one town over from me. They're both unacceptable towns to be raised in, unless you're a Catholic, or at least Episcopalian. Even then, it might not do any good. When B. went and shot himself in front of St. Joe's, where we were baptized, the pigeons in the eaves flew off in every direction, like veins and arteries or the lines on a map. The sky held still behind all this. That was his way out, and I'll love him for it. I'd better because I'm scared to death for him. It is God's nature to reject what was once a part of him. So what does that make B.? Oh, not now Whitman. I still love you, but please not today. Every single morning, at 6:30, pigeons fly out of those eaves when Mrs. McMurtry presses the bass pedals on the organ with her feet, as if she were walking through mud. Every blessed morning, and, occasionally,

when I hear that unseemly shudder of surprise in some pigeons' clutter of wings, I feel closer to the truth than anyone.

Alexander Long
81

⁸¹ [Alexander Long](#), "[Meditation on a Suicide](#)," *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, collected in [The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry](#), Rose Metal Press

In Defense of DMX

No one knows Ella Fitzgerald
was raised in Yonkers,

which probably makes you
the most famous person

to ever hail from Yonkers & most days
I'm pretty cool with this gap in the archive

if only because of that part in the *Grand Champ* intro
where your homeboy says, *Fact of the matter is, I trust dogs*

more than I trust humans & I feel pretty
much the same way only

you should switch out dogs
for written agreements

or Apple products in my case.
I love how you love the ostensible

subhuman. How you praise even
the unworthy muse. How even

your prayers sound like fighting, which
reminds me of my mother & her Baptist

ilk, the way they would bless the air
when kin grew sick or shut in, every line

of holy petition invisible & yet swinging,
this knot of bodies locked to Mama's tone.

You are churchy too, but in a dangerous way
& I respect that. Such multiplicity is no doubt born

of your nameless hometown & no friends to speak
about such things with, the lack of empathy for boys

from yet-unpopular wars. When strangers ask
where I'm from, I either lie (some nonsense

about a BX birthright by maternal bloodline)
or invoke your name to laminate my hood credentials.

It never works as intended,
but I don't blame you.

Our voices occupy different spaces
on the *Trust, You Don't Want No Problems*

spectrum, & I usually follow up any claim
to our home, our beloved, mutual shame

by mentioning the Ovidian qualities
of your more recent work & you know how

it is, Earl. You know nothing beautiful
comes from where we come from.

So when I talk about you like that,
I think it confuses people.

Joshua Bennett

82

⁸² [Joshua Bennett](#), "[In Defense of DMX](#)," collected in [The Sobbing School](#), [Penguin Books](#)

The Obligatory Making of Amends

Museums of war, they bore me. I'm in my thirties
and so already know every form of human
repugnance—only a child has anything there
to learn. And only a child should come to my play
about heaven, how heaven is given one year
to spend as it pleases, and elects to plummet
down here and live as a man. This means, of course,
a year without open heaven, during which no one,
no matter how desperate, lets himself die. People can
do that, you know—resolve to remain

until such and such date, for a christening or IPO
or whatever their thing is. But my primary fear
about dying is not missing heaven. It is burial
beside a hateful tree. They are out there, yes—
the high oaks whose limbs have offered
themselves for hangings, and I fear that my body
will slough itself down to feed one. This is how
I have spent my whole life. I have served yearlings
to tyrants. I have kept fat each war in this war
museum where only a child could hope to learn.

Natalie Shapero

83

⁸³ [Natalie Shapero](#), "[The Obligatory Making of Amends](#)," *Pinwheel*, collected in [Hard Child](#), Copper Canyon Press

from *Queen of the Moon*

DEPRESSION DIET

Here's where Mountain Dew bottles and beach glass
sometimes wash up after storms. I'll eat something later
when I'm not so anxious. I said they were bottles

but they're the bodies of the vanquished. The president sends
warships to seek a vanished plane. When I'm not so anxious
I'll write a longer letter. I'm probably washed up, baby.

Here comes another feel-good tune I'll need to weather.

FLOAT ON BY

No one knows that something's happening to me.
What's most beautiful in all the world, I ask them
and he answers *trees with flowers on their faces*

and she says *snow*. Something's happening:
I'm a little more alive than I was yesterday,
and even so a lot more dead. And what of you?

You don't even know I'm queen of the moon.

Sara Wainscott
84

⁸⁴ [Sara Wainscott](#), "[Two Poems](#)," collected in [Queen of the Moon: Sevenlings](#), Dancing Girl Press

Conjecture on the Stained Glass Image of White Christ at Ebenezer Baptist Church

*For in the one Spirit we were all baptized
into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—
and all were made to drink of one Spirit.
—1 Corinthians 12:13*

If in his image made am I, then make me a miracle.
Make my shrine a copper faucet leaking everlasting Evian to the masses.
Make this empty water glass a goblet of long-legged French wine.
Make mine a Prince-purple body bag designed by Crown Royal
for tax collectors to spill over & tithe into just before I rise.
If in his image made am I, then make my vessel a pearl Coupe de Ville.
Make mine the body of a 28-year-old black woman
in a blue patterned maxi dress cruising through Hell on Earth, TX
again alive. If in his image made are we, then why
the endless string of effigies?
Why so many mortal blasphemes?
Why crucify me in HD across a scrolling news ticker, tied
to a clothesline of broken necks long as Time?
Is this thing on? Jesus on the ground. Jesus in the margins.
Of hurricane & sea. Jesus of busted levees in chocolate cities.
Jesus of the Middle East (Africa) & crows flying backwards.
Of blood, on the leaves, inside diamond mines, in under-
developed mineral-rich countries. If in your image made are we,
the proliferation of your tie-dyed hippie doppelgänger
makes you easier to daily see. & in this image didn't we make
the godhead, slightly stony, high enough to surf a cloud?
& didn't we leave you there, where, surely, paradise or
justice must be meted out? Couldn't we see where water takes
the form of whatever most holds it upright? If then this
is what it's come down to. My faith, in rifle shells.
In Glock 22 magazine sleeves. Isn't it also then how, why,
in a bucket shot full of holes, I've been made to believe?

Marcus Wicker
85

⁸⁵ [Marcus Wicker, "Conjecture on the Stained Glass Image of White Christ at Ebenezer Baptist Church," *Poetry*, collected in *Silencer*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt](#)

A Single Clap of Thunder Can Quite Literally Frighten a Shrew to Death

Nothing has come so simply
to me.

Ten years ago, I curled
a girl's body wrapped in the black

bandages of an evening gown,
tucked it into a corner nest
—foraging for solace

in a restaurant's bathroom—
to give the body a chance
to rest. I moved a glass

of gin sweating mud rings
—the hierarchy of floor layered
an awful heaven: polished, cold

tiles first, then the multitudes
of grime, dust, dried ribbons
of urine, soap slick, foul

invisibilities of germs, and angels,
if any, gone—moved
the glass away from dark grey

silk sheathing the body
in a shroud or maybe wings.
Upstairs
a party screamed like china

smashing on terrazzo and in the falling
mad din of Monk's *Humph*,
I heard the world torn

to shreds. I tried to hold
this body closer to itself.
I tried to breathe, to fill

the room's pause.
Tried to catch
embroidered threads raveling
in that moment.

When scared,
the masked

shrew has a tiny jewel heart
that beats one thousand times
a minute.

Oh, but shit—who cares?

Covering the girl's body with fancies
of any sort—clothes, details,
feints and correlatives, words

(Words! Bare inky refuge!)—
can't protect it from conclusions:
glamour, corruption,

death.

The title of this poem
should be *Evidence*.
Tell the truth.

No angels
froze the dirt around me
into a thickness of light.

The gin and blood
did not halo my hair
with diamonds and rubies.
No.

I curled myself in
a corner of a small wet room,
listening to ripped up

noise crash through the ceiling,
frightened, but not to death.
I told myself to keep lying

on the floor,
near my head, a ruined red sequin
—but if I batted my eyes
fast enough,
it seemed to live.

Landon Godfrey
86

⁸⁶ [Landon Godfrey, "A Single Clap of Thunder Can Quite Literally Frighten a Shrew to Death," *Chelsea*, collected in *Second-Skin Rhinestone-Spangled Nude Soufflé Chiffon Gown*, Cider Press](#)

Survival

Inside the pizzeria, love's latest news was carved
into the darkly stained surface of every table. The force
of blunt gray knives and shameless teenage muscle
creating a landscape of pique, impeccably done.
Caroline is a bitch. Liz and Tommy forever. Sheila likes pussy.
Later, my own name next to the words "Cock" and "Teaser."
I ordered salad and minestrone—pizza, I knew,
would be messy, one of the many tips I'd read in *Seventeen*
along with: *Look interested. Don't disagree. And*
Be yourself! My date ordered chicken, still on the bone.
There were others after this. Different names;
a father's borrowed cologne filling the air between us.
Eventually, making myself homely, shapeless,
anything to let the "No" come, instead, from them.

Lisa Dordal
87

⁸⁷ [Lisa Dordal](#), "[Survival](#)," [Cave Wall](#), collected in [Mosaic of the Dark](#), Black Lawrence Press

The Flâneur Tends a Well-Liked Summer Cocktail

curbside on an Arp-like table. He's alone
of course, in the arts district as it were, legs folded,
swaying a foot so that his body seems to summon
some deep immensity from all that surrounds:
dusk shadows inching near a late-thirtyish couple debating
the post-galactic abyss of sex with strangers,
tourists ambling by only to disappear into the street's gloomy mouth,
a young Italian woman bending to retrieve
a dropped MetroCard, its black magnetic strip facing up,
a lone speckled brown pigeon breaking from a flock of rock
doves, then landing near a crushed fast-food wrapper
newly tossed by a bike messenger, the man chortling
after a sip of flaxen-colored beer, remembering
that, in the Gospel of John the body and glory converge
linked to incarnation and so, perhaps, we manifest each other,
a tiny shower of sparks erupting from the knife sharpener's
truck who daily leans a blade into stone, a cloudscape reflected
in the rear windshield of a halted taxi where inside
a trans woman applies auburn lipstick, the warlike
insignia on the lapel jacket of a white-gloved
doorman who opening a glass door gets a whiff
of a dowager's thick perfume and recalls baling timothy
hay as a boy in Albania, the woman distractedly watching
a mother debate Robert Colescott's lurid appropriations
of modernist art over niçoise salad, suddenly frees her left breast
from its cup where awaits the blossoming mouth of an infant
wildly reaching for a galaxy of milk behind her dark areola,
the sharp coughs of a student carrying a yoga mat,
the day's last light edging high-rises on the west side
so that they seem rimmed by fire just when the man says, *And yet,
immense the wages we pay boarding the great carousel of flesh.*

Major Jackson

88

⁸⁸ [Major Jackson, "The Flâneur Tends a Well-Liked Summer Cocktail," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, collected in *The Best American Poetry 2017*, Scribner](#)

from “Blue Jays”

III

Back during our brief Mormon days
Mom wouldn't let us go to temple
out in Utah and baptize the dead.

“But I can baptize your father,” I insisted,
who'd hanged himself all those years ago.
“He was a Jew,” Mom said. “He doesn't want
to be baptized into the three Mormon heavens.”

And that was that.

Soon after, we stopped attending, and really
I was glad. I didn't want to baptize the dead so much
as get into a swimming pool and be held down
by a gentle hand of the priesthood.

“Your brother got too serious,” Mom said, smoking
in the car in her wool jacket with the elastic loops for shotgun shells
and the flannel insert and loose M&Ms in the pockets
(I loved her in that coat). “He said I was sinning for drinking coffee.”

Nowadays it's, like, two cocktails and my endorphins are spent,
with a big shiny silver dollar, and I'm an old doll
that talks gibberish when pulled apart.

I rush home
with my golden ticket of shit
and pass out in the empty tub.

IX

My sister and I
are stars in our own reality show
that no one watches but us
(“Has Mom responded?”)

spread out in omnipotent banter
waiting for our relationship with Mom to *really begin*

To be loved without a fight
with a calm center—not
passing a mood around like a screaming infant

this black-market DVD collection
that cannot be watched

except when the moon is waning
and no one paid the electric bill
and they're threatening to take the house
and the hostile cats are locked in the bathroom—

and then you can't look away for anything.

Bianca Stone

89

⁸⁹ [Bianca Stone](#), "[Blue Jays](#)," collected in [The Möbius Strip Club of Grief](#), Tin House Books

from “A Smear of Paint to Test the Paper”

10

Anything helps. The obligation
of the possible. The disproportionate
love of epigraphs.
Child on the tracks
and the train don't come.
Like lemons and hairpins
are God's pilot lights.

The dream requires
extracting the lost child whole
from what we call
catastrophic mud. Breathe
toward where her mouth must be
but also
continue digging.
While a hawk turns, nuanced, spare,
in grove dust. Noon is early
and nothing new.

21

Have you come back,
in the hospitable thrall
in which one hangs a wet coat
by nailing it to the wall?
And the “practical
rabble of grackles,” the “undeniable
entirety of sky”—
other phrases
that kept me alive.

Epistle, idyll and far. Soul singing its one
wanting song—mild
hustle—outside the diner. Pay for this
once. Diners
wave it along. Later
holding a door at the station,
demanding a tip.
Later offering a handstand
passing for acrobatic.

Zach Savich
90

⁹⁰ [Zach Savich](#), “[A Smear of Paint to Test the Paper](#),” collected in [Day Bed](#), [Black Ocean](#)

The Week Kanye Joined Twitter

We find there are fewer dinosaurs
when we learn how the skulls age.
Shifting horns, bones that thin
and smooth, holes that form like
some desires do. Changes we
couldn't anticipate, knowing mostly
our simple, fusing domes.

You begin tweeting.

I learn about your suits, videos,
jets, pillows, the new words you
picked up overseas. You take
a picture of your diamond
and gold teeth. You make a joke
about a crown so lovely I see
it on nymphs in daydreams.

Sometimes I see
my curly head of hair outlined in
the morning dark and think I'm
the lovechild of actresses and lions.
But today I see the functionality
of my face and not whether
I'm beautiful. I'm so very animal.
I remember and flare my nostrils.

Sarah Blake

91

⁹¹ [Sarah Blake](#), "[The Week Kanye Joined Twitter](#)," *Fleeting Magazine*, collected in [Mr. West](#), [Wesleyan University Press](#)

This

I rode the highball, I fired the daylight—
I warmed my hands on
the back of your thighs, a tan inch
below your panties,
wanting to die like Jesus
but without the windshear & miracles
save the one
for being reborn over
and over again for as many of those
minutes in which I would kneel before you
on this Dutch siesta—
 what was it Sappho said of your dress
 pooled there on the floor 3000 years ago?—
 “better that transparent muslin from Kos
 than a hoplite army of warriors”—
this happiness as
people have it sometimes
wintering-over
and naked as it comes & goes,
this was hours before our dinner of osso buco.
That I am a professional prizefighter
is a fact as well-known as that
I am a man who has feared no one
in this life, either inside the ring
or out—I can't say I like
to write love letters—hardly at all—
but this
which I write to you now is true.

David Rivard
92

⁹² [David Rivard](#), "[This](#)," [Green Mountains Review](#), collected in [Standoff](#), Graywolf Press

Dearly Beloved, Abomination

I am going through menopause
at twenty-nine, my skin pilling up
like a sweater. It falls from

my bones in cascades of dough. I emerge
as tanned leather hide, as sculpted back.
My penis emerges

like a snail through my labia, slowly,
slowly. Autumnal cornflower blossom.
Light streams in at an afternoon angle.

I have never been so wet with myself:

a creature with the torso of a human,
banded legs of a goat:

a semaphore.

Jason Phoebe Rusch
93

⁹³ [Jason Phoebe Rusch](#), "[Dearly Beloved, Abomination](#)," [BOAAT](#)

Coda

I was *a little bit pregnant*
& every night

the womb grew
more primitive

& refined.
A small cadre

of carpenters
set up shop,

affixing
the child's limbs

with metal hinges
and tacks.

~

I had
my wooden

artifacts,
the books

on ritual
practice

and divination.
But one

tires of ambition—
one's own,

especially the ambition
of others.

~

There was no end
to all this trying

to conceive
a harbor

outside
my childhood

nightmares—
the bedroom

flooding
faster and faster,

bedstead flush
against

the ceiling.
Even so, I boxed

the angel,
shattered his glass

jaw & didn't he
bless me.

~

Then the world
rose

from its stupor—
my stupor—

like a light
triggered

by coins
in a metal box

under a painting
in an Italian church.

The body
darkened

by candle,
arms and legs

tangled in soot,
assumptions

and uprisings.
The singing rooms

set above
the crypts.

~

Before this,
days still

as the wordless boy
you slept

next to every
night.

Not loving him
but staying.

Loving him
but waiting.

Another
two

hundred
cans of soup.

~

Morning.
Years later.

The beloved
makes coffee.

How useless to try
and name

this feeling
of relief.

But at least
you know

the difference
between what

is over
and what

it is
you've finished.

Rebecca Black

94

⁹⁴ [Rebecca Black](#), "[Coda](#)," [Blackbird](#)

Three Dark Proverb Sonnets

1.

None have done wrong who still
Have a tongue: even Cain
Can explain.

 Yet every atrocity
Breeds its reciprocity:
No murder
That doesn't lead to further.

If I was in charge, those who
Praise rage would be made
To visit more graves.

 Skulls
Annul. All knives should be dull.

And yet, once we'd built the coffin
We had no choice: we had to find a corpse.

2.

Watch the leopard, not its spots.

It's the tiger that strikes,
Not the stripes.

The smart hide their claws
In their paws, then add
Fur for allure.

Combining smiles and wiles
And calling it "style."

A sword has a point,
But a needle
Is sharper and cleaner—
Less mess, less evidence.

It was never just the arrow
We bowed to; it was also the bow.

3.

Remember: every fist
Began as an open hand.

Even a bridge is a ledge
If you stray to its edge.

You can lead a horse
To water, but
You can't make it drink.

You can guide a fool
To wisdom,
But you can't make him think.

You can close one eye to evil,
But you'd better not blink.

In the dark, adjust your eyes.
In the darker, your heart.

Gregory Orr
95

⁹⁵ [Gregory Orr](#), "[Three Dark Proverb Sonnets](#)," [Mississippi Review](#), collected in [The Best American Poetry 2017](#), [Scribner](#)

Welcome Back

after Etheridge Knight

Welcome back, Ms. B: Love of My Life—
How's your identity problem?—your culture
problem? you / are / pickling
your lesson—
Gotta / watch / out
for the "Ol' Lesson": Love of My Life.
How's your acid
problem?—your weed, Adderall, Lexapro
and Lithium too?—your lustful problem—
How's your weight problem?—your eating
problem? How's your lying and cheating
and staying out all / night long?

Welcome back, Ms. B: Love of My Life
How's your money / saved up / don't know
what to do with it problem? You quit—
Your job problem. How's your small breast
problem?—your might buy some
titties problem? How's your Plan B?
Welcome back, Ms. B: Love of My Life
How's your used to / write / that boy
in jail / until he got shot & killed problem?
How's your stalker problem?—
Your fucking too many in the crew?

You don't feel magic / ain't never loved no one
problem? How's your book
problem? Ain't been published /
haven't read your lover's book problem?
How's your might go to Dominican Republic
to fix your waist / what you sit on / put
your / breasts in her & his mouth problem?
The porn problem?
Never let go / don't love / don't leave
please need me problem? Your want to fuck
everywhere but a bed / in the dark / problem?
And your crushing pills / crushing dignity
out of pity problem?
How's your drinking?—your thinking?

You still paranoid? Still bipolar?
Still scared shitless? Still wanna die?
Welcome back, Ms. B: Love of My Life.
How's your language problem? Understand
and won't speak to save your
grandmother's heart problem?
How's your / everything is about pussy
and race problem?—Your enough problem—
You gotta watch out for the “Ol’ Lesson.”

How's your social network?
Your / why / did / he / just / post
a / photo / of / his / girlfriend / knowing
I / would / see / it?
Your unfollowing triggers?
How's your checking the last time / who
he's following / Why hasn't he responded
to your hateful, don't mean it text messages
problem? Your want to be a rapper problem?—
Your back on the bed, against the wall
on the pavement—just let it come / problem?
Welcome back, Ms. B: Love of My Life.
You gotta watch out for the “Ol’ Lesson.”

Shauna Barbosa
96

⁹⁶ [Shauna Barbosa](#), “[Welcome Back](#),” collected in [Cape Verdean Blues](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

Destiny and Mystique

The question I would not answer:

Are you a boy or

a girl are you a boy or a girl

and my interrogator would hit me in the face

alternating fists with each cycle of questioning

and might have done so

even had I answered

but I didn't like the question and so

Fuck him

or at least that's what I said

to myself

as I crushed ice and put it in a bag

to place over the periorbital hematoma

of my left eye

because even though he had been switching hands

apparently could only aim with one

are you a lefty or a righty

a lefty or a righty I sang
as I read one-eyed
about how the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants
planned on getting this party
(by which I and they meant a better and more just world)
started
by killing some pompous senator
and whether it would or wouldn't happen
all came down to the actions
of an elderly blind precognitive mutant
whose lover and best friend
was a queer blue shape-shifting terrorist
it was 1981
and all this for fifty cents
Destiny wore a gold mask & could see the future
and as my eye swelled shut
I wondered what the future would look like

when you couldn't see

and I wondered about Mystique

and what it meant to never have to change shape

for the person you loved

because the person you loved couldn't see you

anyway and didn't care

so when my mother asked me what happened

I said

Well Kitty Pryde has come back from the future

to change the past

and she said

No what happened to your eye

and I said

Well the Brotherhood is fighting for mutant liberation

and she said

OK are they good guys or bad guys

are they good or are they bad

are they guys or are they good

are they bad or are they brothers

are they X-Men or are they bad guys

and I said

they are mutants

they are all X-Men to me

Raymond McDaniel
97

⁹⁷ [Raymond McDaniel](#), "[Destiny and Mystique](#)," collected in [The Cataracts](#), [Coffee House Press](#)

The Spinster Project

Spinster loves you. In her house. With her teeth.

Spinster's busy. Called, squints letters into shapes.

Spinster whistles her blue dog back from the bluedark woods.

Spinster is having a Vision! so (please) Leave Her Be.

Spinster's house is smaller than your house, and your house, and yours yours yours yours yours.

Watching Criminal Minds, Spinster is glad she never married a sexual sadist who keeps eyeballs in little jars.

Other creatures Spinster's never lawfully wedded: the State; Deans of Humanities; bank accounts; 6 am.

Spinster goes around all day thinking vitreous humor, vitreous humor as she looks and looks.

Hey, Spinster, say several men. Spinster responds only to those who suck her nipples just so.

Spinster considers writing a manifesto about authority, but Spinster *is* authority.

Spinster owns time and slices it like the sweetest pear tartlet.

Spinster is never lonely. Well maybe sometimes lonely, but for that there are kind men + women + wine + rivers + Visions.

Spinster "sleeps with monsters" and June's been quite the manticore, heavy-pawed muse trundling through her sleep—

To stay fully Spinstered, Spinster has an IUD. By night she sings to the egg as it leaves her body: Hallelujah little egg! Godspeed little you in your fine blood-apparel! Adios my sweet petite iron-tanged bomb-to-nowhere!

Spinster is bleary from staying inside your book so long, but thank you.

Spinster is fond of pink lingerie.

Spinster is standing in the desert. The desert is standing around Spinster. They exchange spare molecules.

Spinster thought of having an imaginary daughter, but the thinking made her tired. Within minutes she was leaving her imaginary daughter on the orphanage steps, note pinned to her sweater signed, Fondly, yr Spinster.

In this Vision, Spinster hangs out with radioactive wolves who are also on their way to becoming something Haute Nouveau.

Spinster is mighty fond of apricots.

Spinster's new lover has bought her a diamond. Not a ring, but still. Ruh-roh, says Spinster to the white dog, their brows furrowed in cross-species commiseration.

It's possible that Spinster is secretly the taxidermist of your hopes and dreams.

There's a covert op designed to unSpinster Spinster. It's code name is TheWholeFuckingHistoryoftheWideWideWorld.

Spinster, says the silence, hiya.
Silence, says Spinster, manna.
They make out for a while.

Spinster knows her breath is a mimetic representation of clouds, and that clouds are a meontic representation of mystery, a barely-there of the there-but-where.

In the movie where Spinster hangs herself from the tree because Spinster, Spinster knows as soon as the swinging blue corpse enters the frame that the screenplay was written by a man.

Spinster wants to literalize your desire inside her mouth.

Spinster pawns her watch to buy herself a hair comb, her hair to buy herself a watch chain. Bald, she hangs the comb from the chain and proceeds clangingly, receiving several compliments.

Of course Spinster makes mistakes! Is only a human Spinster! Her biggest mistake was an ancient riverman with womanly attributes.

In all seriousness, Spinster knows she has gotten born at exactly the right moment in exactly the right place, knows there are a few billion girls who cannot construct an Agentic Spinsterhood, girls who—denied their Spinster destinies as soon as blood starts to leak from them—may choose to set themselves on fire.

Spinster needs an epoch to think about that.

Spinster resolves to Spinster better harder faster. In the phraseology of her childhood, she has the technology.

Spinster sleeps by the river all the livelong day.

Uh-oh: again Spinster kills what botanists say even a monkey could water.
In a rare but pleasing meeting of word origin, insect (sort of), and kismet, Spinster is suggestive of spinning, of weaving, as per spider, as per web, hence many last names.

Spinster concubines the whiskey. Spinster courtesans the empty lot. Spinsters jezebels the very air until it is much more interesting air.

Spinster considers that the original Spinsters were holy women. To declare Full Spinster, you'd show up at God's embassy, ask for asylum, and wait to be let in.

Spinster knows that all paths, if chosen, are gorgeous, but secretly feels it's no coincidence that our greatest poet was a Spinster.

When Spinster passes another Spinster on the street, or at baggage claim, certain passwords and gestures are exchanged.

Spinster's lover says she talks in her sleep.

Spinster does not think she is holy in the manner of, say, rivers or Radioactive Wolves, but really she's fine with weird descriptors.

Spinster's earliest memories of Spinster involve a tree and a book.

How to Spinsterblock: Alexandria the face of all the earth into one vast word-fire.

Even then, though, Spinsters will make ink by spitting into ash and writing on the surface of their bodies, then pressing their bodies onto yours until you are assigned a Dewey decimal number so that people may borrow you.

Spinster worries she is becoming an isolate, a language with no discernable roots.

There were, sure, a few months after the ancient riverman when Spinster full-Havishamed the situation, but then she remembered that Havisham was not a real person, let alone a real Spinster, so got off her ass and went for a walk.

Spinster drives home pleasingly fucked/lies down in the backyard, looking up.

Sometimes Spinster feels like a baobab, ancient plus a little topsy-turvy.

Spinster loves how silence plumps up the house like a crescent roll.

Spinster licks peach juice off her hand.

Kerri Webster

98

⁹⁸ [Kerri Webster](#), "[The Spinster Project](#)," *BOAAT*, collected in [The Trailhead](#), Wesleyan University Press

from *Ironstone Whirlygig*

We are nearly rioting here for lack of baseball. The creation of dimples can be a tragic process with long-lasting consequences. That was bloody yesterday.

It is important to note that I bought my cowboy boots before the Red Sox clinched anything. Are you looking for another girl? Pornographic needlepoint can be disappointing and Moomins are hard to find. Little My! I don't want to change the world.

Boston seems so far away some days, what with roads and rain and stomach aches. Noah cleaned my tub on Friday, leaving little footprints of mud. Could've gone to the Pats game today but no! the rain! They've never heard of love.

I can get sentimental when I am homesick. I apologize to all who have been affected. Pears from the back yard make good crisp. They don't know about us.

Berry tea was very berry. Sports can be a good weapon for a girl. Old Joe Clark! Is Arm Sasser because of the catcher? He should know. Josh Reynolds and his stories of Colombian cowboys, bolsters and manpurses. I go to the dentist on Thursday.

Melancholy what with having pillows and stuffed mouse thrown at me and still no baseball. Good to be home. Tired, but good.

Amanda Cook
99

⁹⁹ [Amanda Cook](#), "[We are nearly rioting here...](#)" collected in [Ironstone Whirlygig](#), Bootstrap Press

Theories of Non-Violence

A frightened rabbit kicks its hind legs so hard that it can
break its own back. Someone thought to record that pain
on tape. Someone said *Shelve this under non-violent tactics*.
Just a line item, buried in daily reports from the siege:
after blasting Ozzy Osbourne and dentist drills, before using
flash bombs and gunfire, they played *Rabbit death scream*.
Repeat loop. Officers wrote the wail was like a teakettle's whistle,
but endless. My father, in uniform, used to speak of war
in terms of the sword and the scalpel. *Scalpel*, meaning we kill
only who we meant to kill. Meaning, *clean*. Meaning, *better*.
Sword, meaning we kill anyone who gets in the way.
Even now, watching news of each new explosion, I wait
to see if our flag flashes onto the screen. If not there's that tiny,
cool blink. *Well then*. An old lover calls to tell me they finally
made him a doctor. *First do no harm*, they made him swear.
Then they said *To save that man, you'll need a sharper knife*.

Sandra Beasley
100

¹⁰⁰ Sandra Beasley, "[Theories of Non-Violence](#)," [Foursquare](#), collected in [Theories of Falling](#), [New Issues Press](#)

Admitted: There Are Tractors in This Hallucination

You breathe through a ratty mask
that makes you look like a surgeon
in some cesspool county—
one who'd rather kill than resurrect.
You've got your sights on a buck,

and I don't blame you. I don't look
like much under these fluorescents.
I don't look like I'm worth the effort
even though it says my name
right there on the insurance card.

I was once called a medical mystery,
but I wanted to be a marvel
with a colon big as a tuna, an eye livid
as piss. There are stones inside me
playing a child's game, and though it hurts

to flick my nail on marble, I need
to have the milkiest orbs. I need to win.
There's enough laudanum for one more
good run, and I'm bounding along
the highway where tractors idle

or get stuck. We'll pass them
on the shoulder 'cause there's room
enough for both of us on this endless stretch
of road where up ahead embers glow
before they're caught and fed to the machines.

Erica Wright
101

¹⁰¹ [Erica Wright, "Admitted: There Are Tractors in This Hallucination," *Ping-Pong*, collected in *All the Bayou Stories End with Drowned*, Black Lawrence Press](#)

Brief Essay on Self-Contempt in the Key of 'S'

On the one hand, just shut up. You're a sarcophagus! Spud pheromone! Cunt-sachet!
On the other, you didn't pollute the consommé. *You* didn't erect the metropolis

or paste up that godforsaken wallpaper of megalomaniac roses
or write that sonata seeping through the pipes you didn't solder.

Then again, your mouth is a basin of smoke. Your skull is a lobster pot!
So yes you could perish and the world would go on spreading out its persnickety piss.

Yes the world without you in it would still have hibiscus exposed in books
Swathed in sensible synthetic slips: Schubert, semen, sorbet, sassafras, echo, snow.

Adrian Blevins
102

¹⁰² [Adrian Blevins, "Brief Essay on Self-Contempt in the Key of 'S,'" *Cimarron Review*, collected in *Appalachians Run Amok*, Two Sylvias Press](#)

Instructions for Pronouncing My Name

Think of the first time you touched
something that could make music:
a string or a sister,
water asking a blue question of rocks.
Picture it: the mechanics of air
in a room that smells like walnuts, like wool on a spindle.
The first time someone asked you to stay,
how you felt the dark past of your bones.
Think of a cornfield, the many leaves sharp with dust
how the cuts will sting with your sweat.
To roll the r correctly you need to be barefoot.
Years ago a curly boy whose grandfather was a horologist
argued on the phone with my sister
because he didn't believe she was not me.
Think of linden tea and horseshoes
and the smell of a cobbled street
as a storm comes down the hill, fluffs wide its skirt.
She hung up on him in the end
because he said my name like it wasn't a secret.

Adriana Cloud
103

¹⁰³ [Adriana Cloud](#), "[Instructions for Pronouncing My Name](#)," collected in [Instructions for Building a Wind Chime](#), [Poetry Society of America](#)

The Doctor Says Hospice

The doctor says hospice as if she is
a hostess and
wants Barbie Chang to try the
crawfish there are
no longer many crawl spaces left for
her mother who no
longer can take her own showers
once she cut flowers
but now her lungs are burnt crust
lost in their own
rusting Barbie Chang always thought
her mother was heartless
not lungless but now she knows the
lungs were framed
a pair of slabs tricked by the heart
traitors to each other
even the lungs want to socially identify
with others to climb
higher search for something better
climbing up a ladder into
the sky is another way of drowning
their punishment is
scars that grow into honeycombs
there's nothing scarier
than something that won't stop fooling
you with its beauty

Victoria Chang
104

¹⁰⁴ [Victoria Chang](#), "[The Doctor Says Hospice](#)," collected in [Barbie Chang](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

In the Wheat Field

“It’s your rabbit,” the officer told the soldier
who pointed his rifle at the fleeing enemy
child. The child was quick in the wheat,
so it took three shots before he tumbled
into the afterlife. Many years later
I put down my book about the war
and walk under the oaks’ black branches
to where the snow has capped all the cars
in the elementary school parking lot.
The rooftops glitter meanly.
I have never killed anything and
look at me. I am like the boss of hell.
In the silent movie, the moon
took a rocket to the face and never
stopped smiling. Tonight its ashes
scatter over the rooftops. No, that’s snow.
Of all the people he murdered,
that soldier could not forget how
the child swayed a moment in the wheat
before disappearing under the sea of it.
I once found a bullet casing right here
on this sidewalk and, not far from it,
a stain. How could I not imagine
the rest of that story? The cars
grow cool and dire in the parking lot,
and the sodium lights hum like enormous
insects. The soldier wrote a whole book about
what he had done, but it didn’t help.
Come on and snow all over me,
come on and shower me with ash.
The sky is bone. The moon is a hole
in somebody’s skull.

Kevin Prufer

105

¹⁰⁵ [Kevin Prufer](#), “[In the Wheat Field](#),” collected in [How He Loved Them](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Self-Portrait as Mae West One-Liner

I'm no moaning bluet, mountable
linnet, mumbling nun. I'm
tangible, I'm gin. Able to molt
in toto, to limn. I'm blame and angle, I'm
lumbago, an oblate mug gone notable,
not glum. I'm a tabu tuba mogul, I'm motile,
I'm nimble. No gab ennui, no bagel bun boat: I'm one
big megaton bolt able to bail
men out. Gluten iamb. Male bong unit.
I'm a genial bum, mental obi, genital
montage. I'm Agent Limbo, my blunt bio
an amulet, an enigma. Omit élan. Omit bingo.
Alien mangle, I'm glib lingo. Untangle me,
tangelo. But I'm no angel.

Paisley Rekdal
106

¹⁰⁶ [Paisley Rekdal](#), "[Self-Portrait as Mae West One-Liner](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [Imaginary Vessels](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Didier Et Zizou

for Zach Horvitz

We loved *Howl* & the Tao when it was still
spelled with a T. We loved green tea but often had
Orangina instead. We loved Trakl & a darkly

declarative sentence. We loved different genders
but knew we were just two variations on the theme,
horny teenage boy. We loved Heidegger

& dwelling in your kitchen, drinking Orangina,
being there, for an hour, two, being moved
by each other's stillnesses.

Sometimes your cat stopped by, ink black
& unimpressed. An ellipsis from next door always
stopped by. It said nothing & preferred to stand,

quietly vibrating, between our adolescent musings
& philosophical urges. Then it reminded us
we had French homework. The future perfect

vs. the plain future. We put off both.
In French one afternoon, when Madame asked for
everyday associations with the season of *l'automne*,

our classmates responded with leaves, scarves, pumpkins,
pumpkin-flavored drinks. Then I raised my hand
& Madame sighed, *Oui, Didier?* & I said, *La mort*, autumn

has to do with death. & you laughed, loud. In French
I was Didier & you were Zizou & Madame was
unimpressed, unamused. In French it was like

we'd never left your kitchen. Except it was raining,
always a panicky autumnal rain with Madame, which
made us crave tea & love e.e. & consider the smallness

of our hands. They were like ellipses, master
procrastinators, unable to finish things & not wanting to,
they loved fooling with the point, multiplying

the period . . . elongating the time . . . the words spent together

Chen Chen
107

¹⁰⁷ Chen Chen, "[Didier et Zizou](#)," [jmwv](#), collected in [When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities](#), BOA Editions

from *On Imagination*

Emily Dickinson had an amazing imagination, but so did her nephew, who came home from school one day in tears, having been berated by his teacher—perhaps even whacked—for having told the class about the white goat who lived in the attic. He was attacked for being a dreamer, a liar, someone who made things up. Upon hearing this, Emily was furious, beside herself with fury, and said that the teacher could come to the house and see for herself the white goat in the attic, for indeed it lived there, Emily had seen it, there it was, munching a pile of grass under the beams.

This anecdote is the only thing I remember from reading a five-hundred-plus-page biography of the poet. I am not even vaguely interested in the men, or the women, or any of that other stuff; I am interested in the goat, whom I love as if it were mine own, and though I don't have an attic, I have a place in my head where it can live, and go on living, as I feed it daily with mounds of fresh cut grass. Over the years, it has been given a blue ribbon round its neck, from which dangles a silver bell.

Mary Ruefle
108

108 [Mary Ruefle, "Emily Dickinson had an amazing imagination..."](#), collected in [On Imagination](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Body Within Body

The lights turned off and the sea wasn't outside your window.
The G train screeched to a stop, the conductor not you said
there are aliens with you when you sleep. At 5:30 AM
someone comes into your bedroom and they are not alive

but you are not scared even though you should be and you
have sex the way a ghost would but you are not a ghost.
Before you get up, you ask, how does dying feel? Maybe
it's easier to eat a dead corpse than to build a new human

so now you understand the use of color in a Monet, the same
way to deconstruct a building, quit a job, masturbate in the arms
of a girl you love but haven't told her you love her yet. You hear
someone say living is the energy of someone else's memory,

like that time you went to the Museum of Natural History
with your dad and both of you walked from exhibit to exhibit
trying to study humanity before humanity existed, before manic
panic could turn brown hair blue, and what does it even mean

to be American but not American?

Joanna C. Valente

109

109 [Joanna C. Valente](#), "[Body Within Body](#)," *Pouch*

from *Bruja*

My grandmother walked faster than I had seen her walk in years.

I sat in a station wagon parked at a curb and watched her across the street, walking a small incline, swift. I was amazed. When she walked back to the car, she lit up a cigarette. I was almost as shocked by this as I was by her speed. She hadn't smoked in about 40 years.

I looked down at the business card of the man I was attracted to.

The words on his business card: *Clower Father*.

•

In my grandmother's house on Euclid, I spoke to a group of people about how special Michael is to me, how I've cherished him in my life. A few moments later, Michael walked in the front door, smiling and unaware of my monologue about him.

S.'s friend Mike from the Bay area handed me a rat, sweet and calm, that reminded me of one of Ren's rats. I thought it was a strange gift, but I accepted.

I spied a coffin-looking container. Inside, I was told, was a half-eaten man. I watched as a crowd of overly-large sewer rats fed on the body.

•

I wanted to buy a camera somewhere in Paris. Something was happening in the sky.

Ten moons in a pattern like a rainbow, curved, each moon in a different phase of moon-ness, unphotographable, laced the darkness. N. and I laughed, crying and gleeful at the spectacle: fish, fire, deer leapt from one moon onto the next until the jumble of colorful fauna finally jumped onto the last moon, extinguishing it.

Elton John was behind me at an outdoor pub, being ill. I did not want to turn to look.

I could not get the door to close in the apartment I'd recently moved into. K. happened by and saw me struggling in my pink silky robe that had fallen open, revealing my nakedness. A woman across the hall watched me try to fit the door into the frame. My robe continually fell open as I worked. The woman moved to help me, until we realized the door was just too small for the doorway. She then offered me a plate. On the plate lay a pair of green yellow striped gloves, fried.

Later, in the large concrete library with one glass wall, the shaking began. The building turned completely on its side. I wanted to stop in a doorway but none seemed safe as we ran.

The earthquake ended. No one had been harmed.

•

I found a rabbit.

The rabbit belonged to the owner of the house who was hosting the party. I tried to capture it to put into a room because I feared it running loose around the many-storied house with so many strangers.

The rabbit had a one to two-foot-long elongated neck. I tried to not get sidetracked by that.

Wandering the house, I came across a photo in a black and white tabloid that showed many people, famous people. They too had elongated necks, like the rabbit's.

Michael sat in a tub of water with all of his clothes on.

•

My husband was convinced—and trying to convince me—that our adolescent son was Jesus Christ.

My husband was stocky and blond and didn't seem delusional, though I wondered.

My son was lean, tall, had blond hair and was clearly popular. His father did not want him listening to music, though it was apparent our son had a proclivity toward music—making it, and listening to it.

I watched my son surrounded by his friends, and yes, he gave off a nice aura, but was he Jesus?

My husband tried to keep music away from our son and I finally confronted him, pleasantly, on Hollywood Blvd. near Highland. I tried to reason with him. *Okay, you think our son is Jesus? Yes, he replied. Then that means I'm the mother of Jesus and I'm a virgin? And I can't have sex? No, I cannot accept that.* And left it at that.

•

My father's bedroom was filled with women. Women from my past, women I didn't know, everyone partying and laughing and bouncing and talking loudly

I wandered through, looking at black and white photographs on the walls.

The photographs were candid shots of me and people I knew: one of my ex-supervisors, her son, S. Once or twice a photograph transformed into a short film: while I looked, the subjects moved, and a little scene played out.

My grandmother lay on the sofa in her sitting room. A black and yellow striped spider crawled on the floor and began climbing up the sofa arm. I expected it would crawl onto her if I didn't say anything... and I didn't say anything.

•

S. and I were busily trying to have sex in my mother's side yard.

I was wet and writhing. From my vantage point, I saw the blinds in the bedroom window being opened.

My grandmother was spying on us.

I yelled at the top of my lungs: YOU ARE DISGUSTING AND I'M HORRIFIED YOU'D WATCH US.

“She is seriously sexually repressed,” I told S., “and therefore perverse.”

Wendy C. Ortiz
110

110 [Wendy C. Ortiz, Selections](#) from [Bruja, Civil Coping Mechanisms](#)

All is Love

Sorry. I'm wrong. Everyone lives alone. All is not love. All is whatever happens next, and whatever happens next, of course, happens in due course, its course, not yours. But all is love, anyway, still. You get clean. And rain is still wet. There's something else in you that's distinct from everything else in you. Each scene is a version of these sexual paradigms, making one feel nothing is love. You're being paid to reinforce someone's fantasy. You just happen to be dressed up in this outfit. You're on a list. You're on a list somewhere, though it's most likely an insignificant list, something to do with the library or your time at the donut shop. Still, there your name is, and you're catching yourself saying All Is Love. All is love, like you really believe it. A glass separates them, these things you say, desire, and thank you so much, it's been a huge pleasure. What are some of the costumes you wore? Sung by Betty Carter, sung by alcoholics anonymous, sung all night from the wardrobe in the other room. The nickel tour begins shortly. And he put a tune to it, comforting as a door. This world is weird and full of hipster lyrics. There's no end to the garage, as if that were a form of love or the form of love. But we only live together—or so the fantasies tell us. As if we were the ante and whole decades the dice cup. They're licking their fingers again, or still. It's another alien invasion film, singing Love Love Love and The End Is in Sight. It's a film of your neighbors crowding your windows. The fourth dimension in a happy state of anticipation, flitting about like it owns the place. Rumor has it that not knowing is better than finding out. So it's neighbor against neighbor. You can join us on all social media. It's 3 a.m., and the aliens are burning Manhattan.

John Gallaher

111

¹¹¹ John Gallaher, "[All is Love](#)," *The Rumpus*, collected in *The Future of Love*, Salt Hill

Nocturne

After Mark Strand

I fill my plate with rain. I fill my belly.
I fill a T-shirt with shells & count them on the floor.
At night, I drink juice from a moon-colored mug.
I feed the lamp & wrap my hair in a scarf.

What good am I doing? The ocean whines from bed.
I take my pills. I bury watermelon seeds.
The pills & the seeds move past each other in the dark.
Who blesses them?

When I slither up from sleep,
my regrets are shreds of pulp in my mouth.
It's true that I love & that I do not love.
I fill myself with my regrets & begin to speak.

Kiki Petrosino

112

¹¹² [Kiki Petrosino](#), "[Nocturne](#)," [Memorious](#), collected in [Witch Wife](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Our Lady of the Prom

In the bridal shop on Defense Highway in Marley,
the matrons spoke of sheaths without swords,
repeat areas of lace yardage, *flounce* as a noun.

We found our way back to the sale rack, spun
the size 8s for something to alter or slit, tea-length
taffetas with terrible bows we could rip off
with our teeth. We were raised on cataclysm,

outside the Beltway but too close to DC
for duck and cover, no drills for vaporization
while we waited for the sky to flash white
over the Capitol—black box, trigger, DEFCON, dawn—

so no one was surprised sex could kill you.
We had half of half-knowledge, knew nothing
of calla lilies or bullwhips, alpha interferon
or ACT UP or Haring, only Mr. MacLeish choking up
in comp explaining that *obscene* came from
keeping sex and anguish offstage—a *microphone*
shoved in a widow's face is obscene—knew
directions to a testing place in Towson where you
got a number and didn't have to tell them
your name. Wait six weeks. Mapplethorpe died

in March but what did we know while we
maneuvered through First Ladies at the Smithsonian:
ghosts of peach faille, ivory silk twill,
copper shantung. We were dreaming of simulacra
in polyester nylon, practicing our up-dos and
feathering the front, giggling when the ladies talked
about boning, when they spoke of La Sirène
in cream silk crepe, its exquisite fishtail, or the spokes
of a dress made to mimic the mechanism of
an umbrella, or the 1955 butterfly—brown chiffon
cut to convey a ruptured chrysalis and wings.

B.K. Fischer

113

¹¹³ B.K. Fischer, "Our Lady of the Prom," collected in [Radioapocrypha](#), Ohio State University Press

Monster

When I met your mother she was a fox
in a field. Your father smoked,
I don't know where I go
when you cover your eyes.

Our sun sits in a watery sky but doesn't sizzle or go out
when clouds cover it. Kid, you've got to keep asking.
What I don't know may kill us both. Zoos and circuses
hold animals, not solutions. In this light

I am an island
of shadow across your kitchen floor
between you and the fridge.

You won't cross over the dark
exaggeration of my shape;
I won't move from the window.

No idea why falling stars drop or if they're sharp. Listen
to me: don't listen to me. By the time my wisdom makes
a dent your world has changed.

Just you looking at me makes me different.

Michael Mercurio

114

¹¹⁴ [Michael Mercurio, "Monster," *Crab Creek Review*](#)

Crawfish Chorus

Crawfish, crawfish,
Mary caught a dogfish.
Dog face, dog race,
send her down the Brown's place.

One, two, three, the roof's
done broke free: now
the water comes and
lifts us all up.
You are not it.

And the wind whirls round
and lifts us up.
And the wind rolls round
and puts us down.
Lightning strikes twice.

If you reach right in,
a catfish.
If you reach right in
a catfish.
Will swallow your arm
and spit you back out.
Swallow it, chase it, chase it
down with a coupla crawfish.
Craw. Craw. Craw. Fish.
Crawling. Fish.

Rebecca Morgan Frank

115

¹¹⁵ [Rebecca Morgan Frank](#), "[Crawfish Chorus](#)," *The Gulf Stream*, collected in [Sometimes We're All Living in a Foreign Country](#), [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

Lapland Not Actually the Country of Lesbians

The country of lesbians
isn't Lapland, actually,

because unlike
Lapland, lesbianism

is a tundra of hooded
rosette lichen

not to be trifled with
by those who don't

herd the reindeer
of its crisp implacable

demands. The winds
of lesbianism blow

snow into the parkas
of those who don't

trudge under the Aurora
Borealis of

Lapland. I say this
even as I accuse myself

of pining after both
the bracing rigors of an

Arctic of lesbianism
and the blue lights

of the Lapp woman's
ice hut, her salty kiss

and the tickle
of her fur-lined bonnet.

Rachel Loden
116

¹¹⁶ [Rachel Loden](#), "[Lapland Not Actually the Country of Lesbians](#)," *Zoland Poetry*, collected in [Dick of the Dead](#), [Ahsahta Press](#)

FOE: Forwarding Order Expired

Gina Fiore lifted her dress to display
her hysterectomy scar. In their tiny kitchen,
her son, my friend Tony, turned away.
Thick red wine in a jug on the floor,
syrup for her brash rage.

Electroshock zapped nothing out of her
except a few extra cuss words.
Every Fiore twitched or flinched.
Who hit who? She might've lost track,
the short-fuse blows, the explosion's
numbing buzz, the deep grind
of an adult waiting for you to do
as you're told. You never knew whether a laugh
was coming—magenta streak of lip and tongue—
or the lower register of black gas, greasy smack.

We played her Redd Foxx LPs in their basement,
recorded live in some nightclub on Planet Sin,
the black circle crackling crass laughter.
Records *click, click*, and somebody's got to lift
the tone arm. Somebody's got to show us scars,
teach us the currency of double X.

Gina Fiore, the only adult to call Crazy Carl
Crazy. Hysterical bee, bent stinger, amplified
buzz. No telling it straight when she's wearing
a tiny gold metal-flake bikini, blushing up the mailman.
The only mother I could imagine enjoying sex,
her face orgasmically elastic, chewing large gum.
She had the heart of an urban lion
and the body of an aging porn star.

After divorcing Big Tony, who made deliveries
to the dark side of the coin, she showed up
in coveralls in the Ford plant, gray and gaunt
without makeup. She lasted twenty years there.

Gina Fiore, a wiggly exclamation point
ready to yank herself straight
in an Instant. I loved her in pink silence
as she bent to wash her feet
before getting in the pool.
Gold metal-flake bikini!

I saw the moon landing on her TV.
Five minutes, then she clicked it off.
Bullshit, she said, *you'll see*.

Last time I saw her she was circling the block,
her feet shuffling two gritty sparks,
walking with Mrs. Miller, whose daughter
Marlene gave me my first true kiss before dying
in a basement fire. One long squealing tire.
One black record and a million blue jokes.

I should've said, *Hey Mrs. F, remember Redd Foxx?*
And, *Hey Mrs. Miller, I loved your daughter.*
They're bundled against it—the cold, death, whatever.
My breath rises here on the same porch
where Tony told me Marlene was dead
and I dove my tears into prickly bushes.

Osteoporosis, and she knows how to spell it,
leaning on Mrs. Miller as they pass.
My heart thick with grief's metal-flake.

Remember the one about the horse race,
the one about the blind man,
the one about, one about...

When Gina Fiore retired, she gave my father
a wet good-bye kiss at the plant. Bought a Fiesta
and drove to Florida for her bones, her crumbling bones,
never to be heard from again except in Christmas cards,
to my mother, who kept her secrets.

Once I knocked an apple into one
of their pool table pockets. She cursed
the bad apple instead of me. The bad apple stuck.
Half-eaten. I could've used just one more bite.

The Garden of the Basement of Redd Foxx
and the apple of the scar and the blessed
holy waters of the backyard pool.

She worked in Heat Treat in the plant,
abandoning bikini lines to the greasy repetition
of loud, dull records.

That Fiesta's not rusting out
down in Florida outside the cute little trailer
she's got all decorated. When she moved,
Tony took what she left to the curb.
If I was there, I would have picked through it.
Maybe I just did.

Marlene, see what you missed, girl,
dying on us? Basements are for ghosts
so what's the big idea, dying there?
All you missed was the survival
of the rest of us, to be continued.
That red mark you left on my neck—
Gina Fiore laughed when she saw it,
then touched it gently with one long finger.

Isn't that as good a period as anything?

Jim Daniels
117

117 [Jim Daniels, "FOE: Forwarding Order Expired,"](#) collected in [Rowing Inland](#), [Wayne State University Press](#)

On Being Asked Who the You Is in My Poems

You are always eighteen or married
or both, carrying inside you
a surgeon or a singer growing
away from you like a little cloud,
and you have just escaped
from the leprosarium hidden
beyond the horizon's lead smudge,
slinking through damp kudzu
to rap at my window
in the slowly sprawling darkness,
in the sodden green glow
of these two nights, mine
and yours. Or you've retired
from a secret life,
the oath sworn upon your bleeding thumb
now broken. The petal,
a curled pink that fell
and boiled in the black mirror of my coffee,
for a moment today was you
just as you were the bone of a thin girl's hip
swimming beneath her
skin like a fish.
Limbless girl
bowling via surrogate
while a jukebox ate through change,
your smile
once broke the earth open like a bone
ribboned with silk red
marrow. In the smoke rank air
all the world did
was turn and turning
away I began to keep your secrets like my own.

Paul Guest

118

¹¹⁸ [Paul Guest](#), "[On Being Asked Who the You Is in My Poems](#)," [Blue Mesa Review](#), collected in [Notes for My Body Double](#), [University of Nebraska Press](#)

Luna My Captive

And seriously now the guitar is beating me up
It is shoving me into the narrow range of its cheerful melancholy
And all sorts of feelings I want to have I cannot
My feet start to move in exactly the same way
They did for so many years each time I entered
The tin shack where the dancing occurred
Again I see you Luna just as I did
When I was a boy once and everything
Made a large kind of sense we were being guarded
The new wave band with the exciting hair
Produced inside us the same faint scent
Of oranges that filled the patio in ancient holy Spain
We read about in our textbooks
We knew someday we would go
Together there and feel our song
In the narrow alleyways made sense
We would sing it and drink each other's blood
Which would only make us grow stronger
Sometimes we talked about just going to Panama
To watch the ships move through the artificial scar
Overlords made in earth to bring the goods we loved
We put them in our mouths and on our record players
Luna I am losing the red thread
I want to rush back out into the street
Away from this terrible guitar that is making me feel
I'm just a chandelier in the reflections of my own
Glass droplets quantifying what has passed
Too enervated to keep toiling like a star
Luna I don't mean to say it's all been a loss
There was that class I took on how to ride
The carousel holding my nephew
But it's impossible to be positive with this guitar playing
There is something inside the tune
I can't alter and this man is singing
All these songs about going there
To be honest I just gave up and moved
I hear my sister yelling in the yard
Luna I'm going to bring my head outside
To see if I can scare some crows
They have bad manners not that I really care
There are three of them right now
Making me think of you and me and the other one
The best evening of my life was when we parked
Above that hill and talked all night
About the things we would never do
Until we grew dark and indifferent
As a well in a ruined village
The army passes by...

Matthew Zapruder

¹¹⁹ [Matthew Zapruder](#), "[Luna My Captive](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#)

Scranton Considers Reviving the Coal Industry

This year, the alderman are sending you
down to study the flushing
in the seams, the state
of sinkholes from below,
the struts, the broken
beams. They're sending you down

to check the chapel underground,
where a white mule still snores
in the corner, and a purblind
priest points to crossed rafters,
housing hardtack in the dark

to the charred black mouths
of breaker boys. What did you expect?
I am just here. The mall sank
three inches last year, and a contractor
from Carbondale dropped
on his backhoe
into the shafts. Maybe
he's still down there, digging
his way out; maybe
he needs your help. Up here

on Main Street, girls
in acid-washed jeans and white high tops
smoke joints in the parking lot
of the roller skating rink,
holding hot tweezers to their lips.
You can see your breath

and the three black spaces
between the teeth of the traffic cop
as you pass him on the crosswalk.

Now the aldermen all clap
and hand you a bagged lunch, a thermos
and a lamp; they knock
the elevator cables with their canes
to clear the bats. You say,

You couldn't pay me
to go down there, and they don't.

Gregory Lawless

120

120 [Gregory Lawless](#), "[Scranton Considers Reviving the Coal Industry](#)," collected in [Far Away](#), [Red Mountain Press](#)

Twenty Thousand Pigeons

In my dream last night, back again on the corner
of Avenue J and 14th, a rabbinical student stops me

to ask if I'm Jewish. I show him the framed photo
I carry: a family of nine. Pale faces, strong noses; black hair

parted or pulled back; the children dressed like the parents.
He says, They, are they Jewish? I don't know, I say.

In my dream last night, Hungaria. The baker of small rolls
says, Can I help you? He means, Are you Jewish?

A loaf of rye, I say. He looks behind him, racks and racks
of loaves, buns, bagels, twists. We have something that is not rye?

he says. And, Why are you saying Hungaria,
Mr. America? I take the steamship to Prague

and all the statues salute me. The young women blow out
kisses like candles, their hair wheat against the scythes

of their cheekbones. No one will let me finish saying,
Will you marry me, or Please, only a sip of your blackberry brandy.

In my dream the twenty thousand pigeons killed in the war
rise thunderous as waterfalls. And so I walk the suspension bridge

from Austria to Niagara and my father and his father
and the crowd of fathers behind them

greet me with a simple pair of shoes, a jar of herring in dill,
a Cherokee headdress, one black potato, a wine glass

to crush under which foot they will not say.

Justin Bigos
121

¹²¹ [Justin Bigos](#), "[Twenty Thousand Pigeons](#)," iO, collected in [Mad River](#); [Gold Wake Press](#)

Three Poems

EVIDENCE

I don't
get
the survival instinct.

In
finite things, in
infinite things.

Being spoiled
is evidence
of over-evolution.

wish.
The grief
The death
economy,

animals,
imaginative
animals,
Strategic

there aren't
very many thoughts.

There's an abyss
you've lost,
but it's not the only
abyss there is.

ERA

The teller at the bank
has feathered hair—her better
era.

I am getting
more and more
amateur.

It never
fails—the numb resignation
a cloud gives off.

(PLUTO)

If everything is wrong
eventually,
then everything
is wrong now.

I was the planet
Pluto
in a play once;

I will make the best
ex-husband.

Chris Tonelli
122

¹²² [Chris Tonelli, *Three Poems*](#), collected in [Whatever Stasis](#), [Barrelhouse Books](#)

Scire Facias: Dr Tchicai, Alias, ER from Beneath Beyond

nothing in his throat but a quick
swig of witch wind & miracle
cure swore a blood oath to repeat
offenders a falconer &
two brigands this before Talaat
& the Young Turks got old razor-
lipped & one-time troubadour sang
a lax prayer for the night blind &

flipped a one-sided coin in his
brain took a chorus & broke blood
vessels in the blank slate said lets
name the trio of fallacies
talent duty & amusement
blind for this life was Thamyris
chose freckles on an egg said never
mind nightingales held for Ransom

Ajax at the corner headed
back off the edge said lions steal
suits for heroes Odysseus
dead for the moment said when he's alive
he gets jelly on a roll &
won't touch the jar said *bo-ring!*
said if you'd choose to do it all again
then there's no point in living at all

Ed Pavlić

123

¹²³ Ed Pavlić, "[Scire Facias: Dr Tchicai, Alias, ER from Beneath Beyond](#)," collected in [Live at the Bitter End](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Love Em and Leave Em Fast

today while driving I was listening
to "Little Red Corvette" when a red
Corvette pulled out

in front of me & the traffic slowed
so that the tail lights lit up my face
so close were we

and I became so embarrassed I turned
down my stereo so the Corvette's
driver couldn't hear

she had a pocketful of horses / Trojans
and some of them used afraid as I was
he would think I was

trolling him and who wants to
piss off anyone in a Corvette
especially in a ten-

year-old Civic with a scuff down
the side made by my grandmother's
bumper in the narrow

drive I won't even wear a t-shirt
into the store where I bought it
even if it was years

ago because I don't want them
to think I'm a shoplifter I once
took a rubber

spider from the Food Lion its black legs
gelatinous its fangs painted red
it was before

I could shelve my memories
with how old I was I must've been
three four for

nights I laid awake listening
for sirens sure my cop father
would have turned

me in when I was a girl
I was a boy most days I made
a beard from cotton

balls hot-glued to felt and slung
around my ears by elastic string I
played the father

in all games of house the doctor
who cut the baby out of her
stomach and I bang-banged

as the Sherriff (my mother misspelled
it on the badge) I only became embarrassed
when someone said

you can't do that and I thought yes
maybe I couldn't only then so I became
quiet as an unfired

weapon made with a finger
and thumb the best thing my love
ever said to me was in

a drive-thru Em you look so beautiful
in red tail light I thought for an instant
about driving up beside

that Corvette maxing out the volume
on my ironies my pitch all my off-key
fucks I shouldn't give

Emilia Phillips
124

¹²⁴ [Emilia Phillips](#), "[Love Em and Leave Em Fast](#)," *Tinderbox*

Another Dream of Beginnings

—after “Portrait Now Before Then,” by Michael Palmer

This is *one*, hoping to exist. This is one, holding out against zero: its reign of absence, its absolute winter.

Down for the count, which needs or does not need our factories of charge.

This is not about language.

The river that might or might not flow. One & naught locked in battle for beginnings. From the. & if this is an illusion, sum of none?

This river black as never. Speeding a child’s bowl of numbers to the greedy sea (apples, wishes, middling C, bounteous regrets).

Or blink off, denied like a dream, urgent & unspeakable as any secret itch.

In your dream, buildings without windows, faces without eyes. Dodging Newton’s apple, headed for another fall. Silvered in the resistant air. Isaac waking to our unlikely, unlikable times. Recoiling, appalled.

In the next fall you are together, blurred as one line or many. The line dragging your point forward, towards the cliff, towards answering the call, towards admitting what you hear. No *one* a bigger zero. As the impossibles pile themselves in babbling towers.

Polishing the luster to no shine for no clay-footed idle. That which is given. How many of how much. Signifying nothing, without which something would be nothing.

In my dream, the tree of numbers sags under Nature’s limited attention. You multiply yourself & wave your dizzying limbs, sinking slowly from my incidental frame of reference.

In your dream, this is about language, which suspends you, in which you are suspended.

In my dream, your dream knocks on the so-called door.

This listening more difficult than archery, than intercourse, than monetary easing.

This listening to nothing, as if something will emerge.

What the numbers spell.

When the tree caressed the soil until its branches became roots. A marriage giving rise to dreams of its own.

What the numbers recount.

Until the trees reach back into the mothering soil. Numbers divided in their loyalty, harking back to n/one.

One more dream of beginnings, until the future swallows itself.

Susan Lewis

¹²⁵ [Susan Lewis](#), "[Another Dream of Beginnings](#)," *Conjunctions*

Rock and Roll

Wildly in love in 1982 Los Angeles, John Doe and Exene Cervenka
Bend to a microphone and howl: *I'm lost, headed down the highway.*
In 1979, all over the world, Bon Scott of AC/DC shouts his anthemic
"Highway to Hell" in reference, of course, to Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*, Book II,
As Satan stands lost staring into the abyss of Chaos and Old Night
With whom he bargains, etc., etc. Henceforth, and before forth really,
All lost highways lead to hell and everyone rides them, at least for a while.
Willy Loman says, "To be thirty and lost in America, the greatest country
In the world, is a disgrace." Of course, it's grace itself that may be the problem
As Willy learns soon enough. If Dante were approaching mid-life today, lost in some
Dark wood, one wonders if he'd simply buy a car and, *headed down the highway*,
Blast classic rock. Many of the lost buy Porsches if they can, the fired-up
Descendant of Hitler's vision of "the people's car," the Volkswagen Beetle,
Engineered by Ferdinand Porsche himself based on Hitler's sketch,
The quintessential car of the Summer of Love, driven by Dean Stockwell—or Dean Jones or John Dean,
who cares?—
Close friend of Neil Young—in The Love Bug. Dean, a beautiful American
By all accounts, was a junky and very lost. In 1994, Kurt Cobain of Nirvana
Could rock with the best of them and was a terrible disgrace. A guitar
Is like a gun is like a cock is like a mic: Simple stuff, says Dr. Freud,
Whose mouth, in the end, looks like Kurt's after he, very lost, stuffed a mic
Down his throat, growled a few remarkably expressive growls, and pulled the trigger.

David Daniel

126

¹²⁶ [David Daniel](#), "[Rock and Roll](#)," collected in [Ornaments](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Essay on Joy

When as a child my father deemed my weight excessive, the measure of which shifted according to whim, he would take his underwear off of his body and place it on top of my head. I was to run in circles around the house, wearing it, for a prescribed number of times. This was called “exercise.”

I am undertaking a new labor: I will imagine myself into deep, focused, and strange hatreds. Spinoza writes, *He who imagines that what he hates is destroyed will rejoice*. Some years ago, dozens of grackles fell dead from the sky in Boston, the cause unknown. And so I think: *I detest grackles*. I rejoice.

If asked, I would have explained the cause: somewhere in a level of atmosphere for which humans hold no keys lived a green-shining carrion crow. As her name indicates, she ate dead bodies. But nothing had died there, ever; and so, she was hungry. She was kept company by this lack.

Sometimes, I tell myself that I cannot think of a lover with terribly much feeling at all. But this is a lie. The absence of feeling is an assertion of a feeling, and it is a memory, or an exercise, of a kind of a joy I sometimes fear I have forgotten, because, as a lover, I have been slighted, and, as a child, often betrayed.

For some length of time that a crow considers painful and I cannot measure, she caressed her lack like a lover. But then she came to fear her lover, for it caused her pain, and she could not convince herself that she had no feeling for her lover. So she undertook an exercise of destruction and began to kill.

When as a child I turned to violence, my mother, who also feared my father and even more feared the thought that I might become him, tried to warn, *A fist is always made with four fingers that point back toward you*. This is the kind of thing a grackle would say, because on their feet is one toe that always points backward.

Then the crow’s fallow field of carrion was her new creation, and she had grown accustomed to hating the products of her own making. She ate some, and so she finally grew in size, and hated that, too. *She who imagines what she hates is destroyed will rejoice*. She opened a hole in the bottom of the atmosphere. Her kills fell.

Sumita Chakraborty
127

¹²⁷ [Sumita Chakraborty](#), “[Essay on Joy](#),” [The Rumpus](#)

In Memoriam: Omaha Tech

*I'm not so mean. I wouldn't ever go out
to hurt anybody deliberately—
unless it was, you know, important,
like a league game or something.
—Dick Butkus, Chicago Vocational*

Built in the '30s to turn out working men
and thrifty wives, it harbored insurrection:
black leather and ducktails, switchblades

and zip guns, boy gangs, girl gangs,
gang bangs, three cop cars dispatched
each afternoon to break up fights.

The blacks drank Lucky Tiger and lurked
in the park at night. The whites sniffed Testers
Extra Fast Drying and sold insurance:

50 cents and you could walk home bruise-free
for a week. Whites hated blacks,
and vice versa, and they all hated us,

suburban kids, coddled and college-bound.
Their football team would take a front cleat off
and sharpen the screw that jutted from the sole,

would pay the 15 yards to land a good
gut punch. After the game, they swiped
tires and hubcaps, beat a friend of mine

with his own French horn. We envied
their gangster cars, their poetry of Fuck You 1
and Who Gives a Shit. Sometimes we'd try

to grow hair like theirs, imitate their sulk.
“Try me, pussy,” we'd whisper at the mirror
in our tidied bedrooms. “Just try me.”

William Trowbridge
128

¹²⁸ [William Trowbridge](#), “[In Memoriam: Omaha Tech](#),” [New Letters](#), collected in [Put This On, Please](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

Infidel

Don't pretend you've got a corner on grave idols
or graven images. It's not your skin that succors,

it's the sneaky way your eyes crawl around
my Überfrau, like the orange silk or surreal feel

of transcendental sums giving in to gravity
or infection or the ingenious revolutionary—

our ten toes lying in a grave together, skin to skin.
Tell the Queen you wish to play with me and I bet

she'll vet you. I can't figure out the meaning
of what some call playing in the dark (what,

yin?) or whistling low because of pseudonyms
you've named yourself after. Now I nudge

junipers as they gnarl and ignore me, aka
you. The way we pretend to know the meaning

of stuff. The painstaking pain of it: One Missoula
two Missoula, Throw yourself beneath a train.

This is the undisclosed story of an infidel
in the throes of her soul's infidelity. How she

wants all these stanzas to herself, doe-eyed
and bra be gone, how she threw her pink

spats and saddle shoes onto the toes of any old
beautiful believer she could find. Or, what

are the chances our ten toes will lie together
under a bed of petunias someday, playing footsies?

Maureen Seaton

129

¹²⁹ [Maureen Seaton](#), "Infidel," collected in [Fisher](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

Prelude and Seating of the Mothers

You know your mother sucks
her Jesus fingers, probes your purse
for strands of tobacco, mother
of necessity and invention
who waits for you in the dark, dragging
on your step-father's Dunhills.
The mother whose body was bicep, a blood-knot,
belly tight, twisted like a budded
rose. Rattling mother who shook you,
the last of her children, "right the hell
from her body."

Forensic mother who dusts her baby
for prints, who pollinates the unfinished face
of her wallflower girl, powder
the shade of a pulverized Barbie.
Mother of the how-will-you-ever-find-a-husband,
of the press-on nails lost in the sofa like the scales
of tropical fish. Lipstick mother who rebuilds
the mouth, lost to too many lies. Shadow mother
who remakes her eyes in smoke, who gazes
at you like a bonfire. Mother of pearl,
envying the daughter of zirconia, who fights
then seek forgiveness at the makeup counter, where
another mother blackens her eyes, the Mary Kay mother,
foundation thick enough to keep thoughts
from surfacing on her face.

The mother who cries at your wedding but whose tears
return to their day jobs of wetting the eye. Mother who is plastered
like the walls of the kitchen, cracked and crazed,
who like the son of God is driven with nails, weighted
with rust-flecked skillets, scalps cut from cast iron heads.
Mother at home at the range in a cabbage rose apron
Mother of the heart-shaped meatloaf,
of Lemon Pledge and broken promises.
The mother who pities the refrigerator light bulb
as it burns without end against the cold. Freezer mother
who begs you to kiss the blue from her lips.

Queen-of-the-night, your mother,
whose mouth is like rain blown sideways, who
when promised the moon, asks what she would do
with the bone of a butchered world.

Cindy E. King
130

¹³⁰ [Cindy King, "Prelude and Seating of the Mothers," *River Styx*](#)

Concerning Pan

Of higher developments he has none.
—*Oxford Classical Dictionary*

No known charm or talisman against you. Not even yellow Xanax
atremble in my palm, its hue unknown
in nature, though it might be found in glittering rows at Home Depot
or Benjamin Moore: a paint chip
christened Goldfinch, Corn Maze, Limoncello, California-something.
Wash it down with water, which roils

& heebie-jeebies out the tap, synced to my own hands' tremor & quaver.
Ten years of the wrong
little death. Spontaneous always, but never a quickie. Stroke approaching
at the big box store.
Aneurism in the National Gallery. Massive coronary, grocery aisle—
Northern Spy or Red Delicious

as a last conscious thought, knees giving out, Ziploc of deli Swiss
falling to linoleum
as a Whole Foods clerk with beard-net reaches out to steady me.
Or summer noonday,
sleep mask & the windows shuttered, in cold sweat waiting for the rumors
of my death to be exaggerated,

hearing through it all the faucet drip, the ceiling fan deafen the room.
& once, in a classroom—no joke—
aphasia while teaching Gertrude Stein. Feral, crafty, stinking son of Hermes,
must I invoke you again?
O goat-footed patron of shepherd & alarm, of grotto & ink-dark cavern,
you lord your Arcadia like

the corpulent licentious Kims of North Korea. Always mad to couple
or confound. From the Villa of the Papyri
in Herculaneum, they dug you up in marble, copulating with a she-goat,
improbable missionary-style,
the creature's eyes as fearful & stunned as Leda's. & woe to those
who disrupt your afternoon naps,

the unwitting herds of sheep or cattle who wake you as they munch
the clover on the rooftop of your den:
thus you curse them with *panic*. Stampede, a cliff to plummet from, a river current
to bear them down to Hades.
No charm or talisman. The yellow pills' reprieve is slow to come. My hands
around the water glass

are shaking as I practice deep slow breaths. God of stench & musk,
how well you know our recent century
where art & terror have so freely & relentlessly conjoined:
the torturer's tools, the artist's palette
& even your defeats are blessed with serendipity. Spurned by Syrinx—
Virgin nymph, disciple of fleet

& chaste Diana—you gave chase to her through all Arcadia's
crevasses & vales, wearing
your pine needle barbed wire crown, of cloven hoof, impeccably swift.
& when she prayed to the river nymphs
to save her from your jisim-y embrace, they changed her in pity
to a hollow reed, one among seven,

which you grasped, confused—though each reed when blown upon
produced its own long mournful note,
a wail like a yearning & tremulous chord struck by Clapton or Albert King.
Stubborn nymph, which note is your cry?
For I will make you weep unendingly. Now, each day, you shall be my captive audience.
& thus with wax you bundled the reeds within

your hands, thereby fashioning the Pan's Pipe, its whistle thundering out
across Arcadia. Clever you. Clever you.
& fuck your smug virtuosity. I stare from the porch to a summer night ablaze
with fireflies, heartbeat slowing in the pills'
benumbed release. Dumbfuck Goat God, which hollow reed, singing ever shrilly,
is David Wojahn? Odds are you'll guess wrong.

David Wojahn
131

131 [David Wojahn, "Concerning Pan,"](#) *Blackbird*, collected in [For the Scribe](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

The Juniper Tree

Bill hands me a book called *Dr. Mary's Monkey*, and it's not
very well-written, but how can you resist
the story of an unsolved murder, a secret laboratory, Lee
Harvey Oswald, the JFK assassination, cancer-causing monkey viruses,
and the outbreak of global epidemics
that, if the book is everything it claims to be, are just around
the corner, and as I'm turning the pages and thinking,
That's not true, and that's probably not true, and that might
be true but it certainly isn't described very well, I realize
that the Dr. Mary in the book is *my* Dr. Mary, that is,
the Dr. Mary Sherman who treated me for polio when
I was a little boy, scared that I wouldn't be able to run
around outside the way the other boys did, wouldn't be able
to do sports like other boys and attract girls and eventually
find my own Dr. Mary, who was, well, "stacked," built like
Jane Russell, say, though older than Jane, yet who shone
on me with a warmth more incandescent than that
of ten Jane Russells. And then she died horribly, but I always
thought I'd get Dr. Mary back. As I lay in bed and waited
for my legs to heal, sometimes at night my father would lie
down beside me and read from a book of fairy tales,
and the one I always wanted to hear was the story called
"The Juniper Tree," in which a man and his wife
want a child desperately, but she dies in childbirth, and his second
wife hates the boy and loves only her own daughter,
and one day she slams the lid of a chest on him and knocks
his head off. When my children were tiny, I used to think,
What if something terrible happens to them? And then
I'd think, What if it doesn't? Usually it doesn't. In fairy
tales, you're always rescued: you suffer, yeah, but you get
the prince or your children are returned to you or you live
forever, if that's your idea of a rescue. I was ten when
I was Dr. Mary's patient, and she was forty, and, if the book
is to be believed, was working in an underground medical
lab to develop a biological weapon that would be used
to kill Fidel Castro, where a witness also puts Oswald,
though the witness is Judyth Vary Baker, who would later
write *Me & Lee: How I Came to Know, Love and Lose
Lee Harvey Oswald*. Who could love Lee Harvey Oswald?
He always looks so sour in his photos. Good shot, though.
Well, not really—he was a terrible marksman as a Marine,
leading even smart people to say no, he couldn't have done it,

couldn't have hit a barn wall at ten paces, much less a moving
US president at 190 feet, must have been a patsy. For who,
though? CIA, Mafia, Cubans? The problem with the JFK
mystery is that those groups and a dozen others all had their
guys in Dealey Plaza that day, not to mention most of
the unaffiliated area nut jobs who just happened to be there

with their rifle, blowgun, crossbow, throwing knife,
water pistol. After the bad mother in "The Juniper Tree"
kills the little boy, she thinks, "Maybe I can get out of this"
and puts his head on his neck again and sits him in a chair
and tricks her daughter, whose name is Marlene, into
boxing his ears, and when she does and the boy's head

flies off, Marlene screams in terror as the mother tells her
they can hide the crime by making a stew of his flesh,
and when the father comes home, he wonders where
his beloved son is, true, but he's also hungry, so he eats
the stew and even asks for more as Marlene stands
by "crying and crying, and all her tears fell into the pot, and they

did not need any salt." In the Texas Book Depository, Oswald
chambers a round in his mail-order rifle and squints
through the scope. Pow, pow: one shot to the shoulder, another
to the head, and it's Johnny, we hardly knew ye. Less than
a year later, Dr. Mary is found in her bed, her right arm
and rib cage completely burned away, though the hair on

her head is untouched; investigators guess she was brought
back to her apartment after suffering the burns somewhere
else, such as, you got it, that secret lab where a malfunctioning
particle accelerator used to mutate monkey viruses sends out
a high-voltage charge that hits Dr. Mary like a bolt
of lightning. Dr. Mary—so warm, so vital, so encouraging to a sick

little boy, then found mutilated, half her body burned away,
though her bedclothes were barely singed. Dark-eyed
and pale, she looked like Snow White grown up. How can
she be dead? Night after night, my father reads me
the same story, and night after night, Marlene buries
her brother's bones beneath a juniper tree, and the juniper tree

begins to move, and a mist rises from it, and a fire appears
in the mist, and a beautiful bird flies out of the fire
and perches on the roof of the house and sings the most beautiful
song anyone has ever heard, and the father is happy
again and says, "What a beautiful bird, and the sun
is shining, and the air smells like cinnamon," and the bird

gives him a gold chain, and Marlene comes out, and the bird
gives her red shoes, and the bad mother comes out,
and the bird throws a millstone onto her head
and kills her, and smoke and flames pour out of the spot where she lies
dead, and when they blow away, the little brother
is standing there, alive as ever. Dr. Mary, I want to kiss your

beautiful face. I wanted to kiss you when I was a little boy,
but I didn't know what kissing meant: I mean, grandmas,
yeah, but not that kind. I'd be older than you are now,
so it'd be okay. Dr. Mary, you were my first crush.

You were a pin-up to me but a saint as well, as beautiful
as a martyr on an ancient wall. How I wish I could soften

the hearts of the gods and lead you out of the underworld,
your fever cooled, your skin clear, your tongue ready
to tell us all you know. Why do we kill one another?
Why do we love one another, and what is love? We say
"I love you" to other people and they say "I love you, too"
or "No, you don't"—how's that work? I see you as in

a swirl of smoke: I'm in a church like one in Rome, say,
before a mosaic of gold and green and blue, and the wind
is high outside, and the great door behind me blows open,
and when I turn to look at it, it slams shut, and the candles
go out, or all but a few, and you step down from the wall,
your eyes bright, your breath warm on my cheek,

and we walk out into the ancient city together,
and I'm a little boy again, and I look up and say,
"You saved me," and you say, "No, you saved me,"
and when you say it, suddenly I'm a man, taller than
you are, and I take your hand in mine, and you say
you saved me, you saved me, all the way down to the river.

David Kirby
133

¹³³ David Kirby, "[The Juniper Tree](#)," [The Cortland Review](#), collected in [Get Up, Please](#), Louisiana State University Press

from *The Dead Girls Speak in Unison*

Where do you keep your trick
now that we're so buried dead
and our teeth like pearls

strung round our powdered necks
above, then below our gashes?

An animal sleeps in your bed.
Like a person, its head
oozing on the pillow

and its hindquarters
crushed into the mattress.
We could go on.

Your car is full of trash.
Your face
is full of trash

your trash the trashiest
for blocks around.
A receipt for turpentine

wiggles out of your wallet
and out of your mouth
the turpentine spills.

Danielle Pafunda

134

¹³⁴ [Danielle Pafunda](#), "[Where do you keep your trick...](#)" collected in [The Dead Girls Speak in Unison](#), [Bloof Books](#)

The orgasm wants to open a Twitter account

but she isn't sure what to tweet. At first she follows other tweeters. They tweet and tweet, forever singing to their wonderful selves. Even when she is sleeping, they are tweeting. Even when the snow falls and cuts off her electricity. Even when she wakes the morning after, cold and shivering, and wraps herself in a robe. One day she decides to tweet, too. *I am lighting up a cigarette*, she tweets. *And I am telling you the one real truth*. She licks her lips and smiles. *I am your last orgasm*. She enjoys the silence that follows and is just about to sign off of Twitter forever. But then someone retweets her tweet. And someone else retweets the retweet. A little flutter begins in her heart. She sucks in deeply and glows like the tip of her lit cigarette.

Nin Andrews

135

¹³⁵ Nin Andrews, "[The orgasm wants to open a Twitter account](#)," *Plume*, collected in *Our Lady of the Orgasm*, MadHat Press

The Glimmering Creature

after Anne Sexton

The first man peeled an orange every night
over the sink, and I studied him alone,
my hip riding the doorframe. At seventeen, I
thought a man's tastes were what you married.
His searching fingers stung inside my mouth.
The citrus oil always stained the bed.

At twenty, each night I slept in a different bed.
Understand: my throat opened around the night
and the men called my hunger *reflexive*.
They touched me, but I felt my pleasure alone.
Finished, I'd look to my audience, ready to marry
the nearest outstretched hand or searching eye.

Who can I blame for this failure? At first, I
asked my body, who wouldn't leave the bed.
I knew the old-wives' trope: no sex after marriage,
listened for my parents, quiet together at night—
only I in the world couldn't stop. Alone,
I married myself. I stopped my counting,

for the problem with blame lies in the accounting:
a fist cannot then love a swelling eye.
I imagine that first man—alone
in his kitchen, hands sticky and feeding. In bed
with each next woman, he tastes the nights
with me. This is a deception I will marry.
My love, perhaps someday you too will marry.

She'll take apart your bookshelf while she cleans,
then sleep while you reorder it each night.
We call these lies *fidelity*. Instead, I
bend over before you, my elbows on the bed—
your face pressed to my back. Alone,

this is how I will lose you. I walk alone
down Harvard Street at dawn, already married
to another man. It smells like oranges in our bed.
What should I have learned?—I know new love
tastes different from its penances. I
suck it from my fingers every night.

Tonight, I palm the rounded flesh alone.
I marry every segment of my blame.
I put my love to bed inside my mouth.

Rachel Mennies

¹³⁶ Rachel Mennies, "[The Glimmering Creature](#)," *Waxwing*

Until She Returns

This is how I say it ends, Bronx County, 1978.
Packed up all my cares and woe in a plastic
garbage bag. It took an hour, maybe
less.

I take myself into the river of salt
for pages at a time, lying for the sake of
accuracy. All that summer it was winter; I said it
for her sake.

(For a year after she died
I dreamed of her; she came to say
she was just hiding. Death was just
a place to stay, a drift of cloud smeared half-way into
snow. I watched it fall.) (It never snowed there,
pine needles on red clay and heat-reek of the paper mill
for months. Mere decor, you might say, caves of kudzu
and no sidewalks. I missed sidewalks
most of all.) Some Thursday's drift of cloud stole forty years
in passing, and an extra for good luck. Some other spring
I'll give them back.

Days spent
curled around a tattered name, erased: white
piss-smelling flowers, intimate
spring air against the throat, some warmth
not far enough away. My little sister said
we'll have to find another...; we were named
after each other, before the fact. Who isn't her these days?
Hat boxes and a closet full of coats with fur collars,
someone to betray over and over. (The personal effects
incinerated, with no one to say
mine. I'll take the rhinestone buckles on the shoes.)

When death comes he'll be a fine young man
and I will kiss his rotten lips and find her there.
Here I go, singing low.

Reginald Shepherd

137

¹³⁷ [Reginald Shepherd, "Until She Returns," *Massachusetts Review*, collected in *Some Are Drowning*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Slant

which codes the luminous tree at your gate
which broad night renders its own wild leap

and to name the record of that as MEMOIR, i.e.
exemption from certainty,

spilt onto the belly
whose girth is a path through the dunes

this is allowed as is, as is
losing the name of the organ you lost to necessity

the small pinging sadness of that:
you, veiled so deeply in each poem

that for a moment, I forget the truth of your body

the blast radius
the dearth of guilt

the cipher that shifts
from line to line

after a threat, a wait leaving

separately from any crowd who knows us;

morality a thing to be caught
and no man born with it

MEMOIR: form of doubles, of squinting, of lifting the dress;

the skittering of years

one woman melted
down from two

or three

repeat: your crooked teeth / a pattern of birds
as doubt, the chatter under our time

the steady mistake of strangers
believing me your wife

as I remember it / all this is true

Sophie Klahr
138

¹³⁸ [Sophie Klahr](#), "[Slant](#)," [The Rumpus](#), collected in [Meet Me Here at Dawn](#), [YesYes Books](#)

from *The Lawn is a Social Construct*

If you look hard enough you can see wild hops Sarah says.

They look like weed and smell like weed.

This farm was a hops farm before prohibition then it was a dairy farm.

It's hard to make money dairy farming because the government determines the price of dairy.

Sarah tells me.

I didn't know.

I know nothing about farming or what to call the sounds.

What are these white miniscule flowers bursts they're all over.

Today's the summer solstice & a full moon—a Strawberry Moon.

First time since 1967 the summer of love whatever that means.

I build a fire.

Write down what to let go of on small rectangles.

Burn them.

The moon is low, the wind a natural accelerant.

I hear a low voice speaking in sentences.

The neighbors want us to mow our lawn.

The neighbors mow their lawn twice a week.

The neighbors don't know what to make of three women living together.

The plumber the electrician the repairman all ask Iris about husband.

Inquiring about husband.

Did I meet your husband?

No husband she repeats.

No husband.

We write a song NO HUSBAND.

I make a necklace of my accomplishments.

Living things ask me if I'm lonely.

I wake up and dig a grave behind the hops barn where the grasses are thick and sharp and up to my chest.

One of the hens was hit by a car.

This is my first time alone at the farm.

I text Iris to tell her what happened.

It's a bad summer to be a chicken Iris says.

The Canajoharie Library calls to say the book I requested has arrived: *The Lawn: An American Obsession*.

On its cover a white man wearing a Panama hat and pleated slacks with a hand-pushed lawnmower.

THE LAWN IS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION I yell from the deck topless and sweating.

A section titled "The Democratization of the Lawn" concludes: *Lawns were not a need expressed by consumers that was then met by producers. The need was fostered by producers, who continued to raise the standards of what constituted a good or acceptable front lawn.*

So the lawn and the engagement ring have something in common.

I drive forty minutes west to meet a man who lives in a straw house and wears no shoes.

We fuck on his lawn.

In the morning he says something vaguely insulting then gives me a tour of his shipping container, offers me a cookie and a thumbs up as I leave.

Changed (stoned?), I forget my shoes.

Ali Power
139

¹³⁹ [Ali Power](#), "[The Lawn is a Social Construct](#)," collected in [The Lawn is a Social Construct](#), [Sixth Finch Books](#)

Insect

Listening to my neighbor's
record—all techno traffic
beats and outer space—it's
like borrowing someone
else's thick skin. Like

when I wore your Red
Sox coat and followed you
into porch smoke, because
I thought I saw a light on
in our loneliness.

Sarah Green

140

¹⁴⁰ [Sarah Green](#), "[Insect](#)," collected in [Earth Science, 421 Atlanta](#)

First Wife

As I was leaving he called me Lilith.
His first act of erasure: my name
reduced to a lotus—a part
he went to when he tired of coupling

with beasts. He wanted me
to lie there beneath him—smother
the smell of wool oil and sweat, his tongue
a hard slug crawling over me. Yes,

I left. And when a woman leaves,
she becomes a scandal. His sons said
I coupled with Satan—bore him
a hundred new demons a day—

said I flew around at night, looking
for newborns to strangle in their sleep.
The people hammered amulets above
the beds of pregnant women

to warn me away. Still, mine was a slow
attrition into apocrypha. After
they smoked my eyes, they sealed my dark hair
in an urn. They buried the well of my throat,

left my nipples to dry, like figs in the dessert.
The long columns of my legs were eroded
by rumor. Only my dark aria
sang through. For centuries, celebrants

slept with one hand on their crotch, one hand
on a crucifix—afraid I might conjure
a sweet dream. Finally, they took me
out of the story. Perhaps you think

I'm exaggerating. But consider that poor, docile girl,
pulled from Adam's own rib to replace me—
She tried to leave, too. You've heard
what they say about her.

Danielle Deulen

141

141 [Danielle Deulen](#), "First Wife," *Fleeting Magazine*, collected in [Lovely Asunder](#), [University of Arkansas Press](#)

I am Thinking About the Movie *Con Air*

I am thinking about the movie *Con Air* and my love
for Nicholas Cage, which is profound and focused

on the abundance of his hair, the way it trickles and recedes
to the middle of his scalp, chorusing down his back

with an unevenness that mirrors the body's swollen
inadequacies, one of my breasts

whistling with milk while the other sleeps
flat against my chest, the asymmetrical

splendor a speaker swelling with fuzz and odd
time signatures, like half of my body

restored to its original form. I never met Nicholas Cage
but watched *Con Air* so many times I can conjure

the chiaroscuro dribble of his voice, blue smoke
lapping the edge of an extinguished star,

and imagine he, too, knows how to disguise
the body into something less fragile,

the tired meat of his heart striated
into a thousand directions like a smoldering compass

as when I gave birth the midwives praised my composure,
said their last patient clawed the bed like a raccoon,

and I wished instead to have given birth like a squid
shooting an ombre cage of ink and ovum

out of her orifice, ragged and deranged
with hormones, because didn't I hold my daughter

and wish to be as feral as a raccoon
who knows love is the blunt metronome

of rummaging through trash, who doesn't
think but throws her body into the labor of it?

In the last scene Nicholas Cage grips the pink bunny
he bought from commissary,

ripped-up and dripping with fuel,
and hands it to his daughter anyway

and I will watch it over again
to see him stand there bruised and lit

with the one good thing he has;
my left breast emptied while the other

floods with music,
soothing the vowel-starred tongue.

Kendra DeColo
142

¹⁴² [Kendra DeColo, "I am Thinking About the Movie Con Air," *Waxwing*](#)

The Loop

The silences are copulating again. Look,
a woman so hungry her insides eat her other insides.
What are you crying about now? See, a black hole
of a mouth: eat, eat, eat. The cupcakes
are porno pink and they make you feel sexy!
It's the everyday accretion
of desire—the American
glory hole. A boss-man yelping and yelping
in a corner. Who are the office harpies?
(So many mouth-breathers!) Beelzebub flaps
his frozen wings and it's getting chilly in here.
What has the television taught the girls to say?
With their lips all plumped with hot goo.
Pixel this. Pixel that. Pixel your ugly face!
Your silence is a sealed jar of water,
little pariah. Outside, men and women
carry pictures of dead fetuses.
The children hold them, too.
Every day, you say, I am a person, I am a person.
It's winter and your feet are wet again.
You say hello to the friendly rats.
Why do you flounder so easily in holes?
Do you suffer from cholera of the brain?
Check yes or no. The day goes on picking
the meat from its teeth.

Erika L Sánchez

143

¹⁴³ [Erika L Sánchez](#), "[The Loop](#)," *Anti-*, collected in [Lessons on Expulsion](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Dolores Haze Disappears in a Kidney-Shaped Pool

I stand at the chop-block,
goggles fixed, waiting for the pistol
shot, slapping noise of teenage
bodies going aqueous,
thrashing their way into form.
After the meet, the girls turban
their hair, stomp around with
pixelated eyes and sturdy thighs
before going for pizza. Jesus,
the mundane life shimmers
like an oasis to my felon
heart, made black
in fealty to my lord.

Virginia Konchan

144

¹⁴⁴ [Virginia Konchan](#), "[Dolores Haze Disappears in a Kidney-Shaped Pool](#)," *Sixth Finch*, collected in *The End of Spectacle*, [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

Bowl

We work at the factory until it shuts down and then we work in the deli section or the meat counter. If a girl gets pregnant we throw her a baby shower with ice cream cake if we're all chipping in. No matter if it's the second marriage or the third we hire a party bus and all us girls go out on the town, barbeque, bowling, and a Black Sabbath tribute band. If, in the photos, our faces look sad, it's because you caught us at a bad moment. We are not sad. When the baby is born we'll ringlet her hair. If it's a boy we'll cover him with socket wrenches and fire trucks. If the siren makes him scream we will distract him with a tit until he's too old for tit and then we'll distract him with a slice of ham and some American cheese. We do not want to be strange with one horn growing out of our foreheads. We want to be what the others have been, sit on the same stool the others have sat on when our ankles swell. All of our ankles swell. We are usual. We are like bowls. There have always been bowls. They're shaped the way they are for a reason. Yes some have curlicues or paintings of angels but a bowl is a bowl and it has always been a bowl and it was here before you came and it will outlast you.

Diane Seuss

145

¹⁴⁵ [Diane Seuss, "Bowl," *Michigan Quarterly Review*](#)

Fire Blight

Def: A plant disease that has destroyed pear and apple orchards in much of North America, parts of Europe, New Zealand, and Japan... Pears, apples, crab apples, and quinces appear as if scorched by fire.
—*Encyclopedia Britannica*

You're sixteen. You carry a camera—a real one,
you're learning words like *aperture* and *F-stop*.
You're sixteen. You've stopped brushing your hair,
and would like someone to ask why you've stopped
brushing your hair. You're thinking of dyeing
the tangles plum. You're thinking of. You're sixteen.

Last year you weighed more. This year you're as tall
as you'll get, and there's a boy whose eyes are poisoned
marbles. You've photographed him again and again
but you can't get the poison right. You're sixteen.
You say this again and again but you can't believe it.
In Bio, your friend shows you her bruised stomach.

We didn't use a condom, she whispers, so I was careful.
You blink. Down the rabbit hole. Your teacher
drones about splitting the atom and you imagine
your imperfect young skin melting and feel a tenderness
for yourself that surprises you. Slides of destruction
flash on the cinderblock wall. A girl missing her face.

A fetus in a jar. An entire orchard stripped and blackened.
Once, your grandfather's apple tree had sickened and died,
The grass littered with apples, shining brown and wrongly.
A fairytale curse, you'd thought. You think it now.
The poison-eyed boy ruins everything with words.
He wants you to be a dropped fruit, a twisted vine.

But you're not ill. You're not twisted. You're sixteen.
You're fire-clean. You're purified. You know when
to shut up and look. Who could snap the shutter
on the missing-face girl? Who could stand
in the half-light of the floating fetus and document?
Someone impervious. Someone already in flames.

Catherine Pierce

146

¹⁴⁶ [Catherine Pierce](#), "[Fire Blight](#)," [FIELD](#), collected in [The Girls of Peculiar](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Risk Management Memo: Member Appreciation

The mushrooms were only college mushrooms.
My baton was homespun, ineffective.

Let's say somebody builds a boat from scratch.
Someone else arrives home scratched

or otherwise altered. I took in an inch or seven
along the bust line. Let's say five

and call it almost even. I wish I still had that
body, though this one knows more

important things: how many sighs in a night,
why never salt, tarantula math.

I was in love with a man because of his brick.
At this point I was made of lake.

Maybe I had stolen a sled, left my very best
cardigan on a westbound bus.

Perhaps I showed him both breasts, upside
the angriest half of his head.

He had a mind of politics, a crooked red
house with stiff chairs, shameful

blankets like a spinster. Let's say we made
the idea of a fountain feel wet.

At a certain point I stopped going to work.
Then I even stopped calling in.

Mary Biddinger
147

¹⁴⁷ [Mary Biddinger](#), "[Risk Management Memo: Member Appreciation](#)," *Thrush*, collected in *Small Enterprise*, [Black Lawrence Press](#)

Memory is a Disease of Animals

This is the shirt you wore
when someone you'd hurt wore sunglasses
in an airport at night
and told the woman at the counter
that everything was fine. *Fine.*
We are populated by each other
and this is a disease of animals.
Whose means include syllables,
and *Jean Cocteau*
would have loved this evening,
it's 1930 in Paris somewhere—we are populated
by each other's each other
and this is a disease of animals.
This is the shirt you wore, right?
This is a disease we airplanes have,
chasing bells rung by sense memory, bells
hooked into the ribs of such wind-licked causeways.
These are the sunglasses
upon which such scars of streetlights.
We are each alone. You play a fiddle
you play a violin, you make the garrote wire
bend resonant and pretty over a box of shadow.
It is like burning in water.
You get the hot fries from the vending machine
like it's nothing. There is a mouth
on either side of you while a ghost mouth
leopards past your neck.
Take / your make-up / off.
We are in this together. Kind of.
This is a city where you lived.
A girl sits cross-legged with her guitar
beside the last window you will have to yourself,
all is well, all is well then the calm snaps.
A boulder sighs down the stairs.
None of the lights are right
but someone mercurial turns a grin out of the ruckus
and it is enough. Before before
you let your foot push hard against the floor,
the silver-slivered night shivering above you
so you nearly thought it would be beautiful enough
to be enough. This is not hell, the night
laced with neon, neon another version of blood,
this is not the same shirt.
If I started saying *Sorry* or *I love you* now
I would never stop.

Marc McKee

148

¹⁴⁸ Marc McKee, "Memory is a Disease of Animals," *The Journal*, collected in *Consolationeer*, Black Lawrence Press

The Bride's Warm Breast in Her Groom's Warm Hand

He is holding this grenade he's found
in the clammy fog of five am
and he's pulled the pin somehow on accident.
To let it go will spring the lever.
That, or he's clasping an ornate doorknob,
warm from fire in the room beyond,
and he can't decide if he should enter.
Doing so might be heroic
though he can't imagine where
the door might lead or what he'd find
inside to rescue: an orchid maybe
from a massive steel-frame greenhouse
where the flames turn cartwheels
in the countless panes of glass;
a Kama Sutra signed by Rati
and mis-shelved among a great library's
hundred thousand volumes
on their crackling way to ash;
or just a couple top-shelf fifths
of bourbon as the sprawling liquor store
there in the red light district
of the heart ignites to sear the fragrances
of gravity and fine amnesia through
the fiercely hissing air. Her breast
is warm. So much so that he won't be able
to keep hold of it much longer now
without discomfort, the brilliant nipple
in the center of his palm particularly heated,
though perhaps he only fancies that.
A little rivet of ardor, that nipple,
a nail, like the tack by which some fool
might post outside St. Peter's
three or four or ninety-five
brash theses on indulgence, on desire,
as he will if he ever learns the sweet
calligraphy required to lay them down
on vellum. Her breast is warm and more
than warm. And his mouth is dry—
her long hair on and in it slightly.
He would cough, but that might wake her.
Instead, he lets his arm go hollow. From her breast
to his shoulder and on up through his throat
he becomes a contorted chimney,
her black hair spooling out from his red lips
like smoke. He is holding an ember,
but soft, not an ember but a globe
of gently worn-in dusk light—
what a frugal god might use to read by.

A lamp then, only now it's shaded
by the bed sheet and his warming hand.
Her breast is warm, his hand
has made it warmer, and at last he must
release it. There's a nimble grayness
at the hotel window. Bride and groom
unspoon and he rolls slowly over
to the nightstand where a tumbler waits.
The ice from last night has melted,
but both the glass and the water
inside it are still extremely cool.

George David Clark

149

¹⁴⁹ [George David Clark, "The Bride's Warm Breast in Her Groom's Warm Hand," *The Cincinnati Review*](#)

The Window

Streak of world blurred charcoal & scarlet, the El slows,
brakes near the platform, Little Chinatown,
& there's that window, peeling frame, screen split

to rippling raingusts. A curtain breathes
through busted glass, a glimpse of hallway
enameled green, rows of numbered doors, nothing more,

and then the train lurches forward sparkling
its electric signature above slick, hissing rails.
Soon, soon, I'll stop there, the window's pull

irresistible as the force of a star collapsed
to black gravity. I'll step through the window,
take up again the key for the one room to which

I keep returning. Let me wait again there by the sill
as I wait still. Here's the steeple of the burnt church,
beloved of vandals, the sooty block of

old law tenements where chipped tubs rise
porcelain on their feet in coldwater kitchens,
unashamed, small gray animals, the startled

array of insects we lived with.
Where are you? In the hallways, bodies passing
smell like bodies, unwashed, ginsoaked, dopesick,

the musk & salt. Where are you?
Hear with me the slant beat of that orthopedic shoe
striking pavement a few stained facades away.

With each echoing step, feel again the raw acceleration,
hope, or is it fear looming, receding?
Streaming hellmouths in the asphalt. If each of us

contains, within, humankind's totality, each possibility
then I have been so fractured, so multiple & dazzling
stepping toward myself through the room where

the New Year's dragon lies in its camphored sleep.
In the days I lived here, a thousand rooms
like it, making love was a way of saying *yes*,

*I am here, these are my borders, hold me down
a little while. Make me real to myself. One more shining
thing gone after in the night that disappeared*

with morning. No substance. But I'd like you
to place your hands, cradling the neck's swanny
arch, stand here by the copper dormer window

that's like an endless gallery of such windows
with fire escapes burdened by doves' insatiable
mourning. Then let it happen, the desire to be out

in the world, more than in it, wholly of it,
trammeled, broken to neon figments.
All it takes is a few adjustments—

purple those lids, the lips as we did then,
that old mirror clouded with vague continents. We're
ready to inhabit the sequined gowns, martini glasses

pouring their potions over the street, the milky syringes
& oh, those ravening embraces, the ravished streets
& whispered intersections. Slick back

the hair, and then the wig. I could never face anything
without the wig. Transformed, the old vaudeville desire
struts & kicks its satiny legs, the desire to be

consumed by ruined marquees, these last drifting hotels,
to be riven, served up singing, arched & prised
from a thousand damp boulevards. Those things which shine

in the night, but what vertigo to surrender, falling
through the elaborate winged buildings they only have
in neighborhoods like this anymore, January's bitten snow

cold about the ankles. Let me move again, a wraith,
past these windows – bridesmaids' gowns the color
of casket linings, flammable, green

as gasoline poured from the can to flame the alley
outside the Welfare's fluorescent offices,
police stations, the shabby public hospital's endless

waiting rooms. How exactly pinned-to-the-wall
love was in that harsh economy, the world, the world, the world.
What I remember is the astringent sting of air.

Living on nothing but injections & vodka, a little
sugar. The self, multiple, dazzling. What I remember
are the coral husks of lobsters broken clean

through restaurant windows, steaming. Through these
windows tumble fragments, the stories, lavish
vertical fountains of opera. Dressed as death's-heads,

crowds demonstrate against the new war
with placards before the marble stairs. Like a wraith
let me move among them, through the rooms

of this building, home of my fondest nightmares, let me
stay the hand twisting in rage, let me crush
the white & violet petals of sleep, the black sticky heart

of sleep over the delicate eyelids, over the bodies'
soft geographies, over the sorrow, the grandeur
of columns & esplanades, the soot-shouldered graces

outside the museum. Rude armfuls of orchids
fill the florist's windows, these lunar ones
curved like music staves above dissolving aspirins

I might bring back to the room for you. Oh phantoms.
Oh the many lives that have fountained through
my own. Soon, soon, I shall stop upon that platform

& you will meet me there, the world rosegray beyond
the scalloped tops of buildings & we shall seek
that thing which shines & doth so much torment us.

Lynda Hull

150

¹⁵⁰ [Lynda Hull](#), "[The Window](#)," [Blackbird](#), collected in *The Only World*, [HarperCollins](#)

Poem Not to Be Read at Your Wedding

You ask me for a poem about love
in place of a wedding present, trying to save me
money. For three nights I've lain
under the glow-in-the-dark-stars I've stuck to the ceiling
over my bed. I've listened to the songs
of the galaxy. Well, Carmen, I would rather
give you your third set of steak knives
than tell you what I know. Let me find you
some other, store-bought present. Don't
make me warn you of stars, how they see us
from that distance as miniature and breakable
from the bride who tops the wedding cake
to the Mary on Pinto dashboards
holding her ripe, red heart in her hands.

Beth Ann Fennelly
151

¹⁵¹ [Beth Ann Fennelly, "Poem Not to Be Read at Your Wedding,"](#) collected in [Open House, W.W. Norton & Company](#)

from "The Encyclopedia of Sexual Positions with God"

The Communion

Take into your mouth everything but the beef of the other. Curtains, bird nests, bridges, smoke, etc. Kneel at the altar of your own godly breasts. Hold out your hands to egrets. Pleasure will travel through sawmills and swamps to nest at your hind. In the meantime, your mouth. Let it speak in tongues. Let it maraud the man. As a woman, you've swallowed enough of God's currency to have an ocean behind the teeth, salty enough for any wrongful bones to float. Watch God bob up and down in the cold current, his shrinking cock the first promise of all the things he was never willing to give you.

Meghan Privitello

152

¹⁵² [Meghan Privitello, "The Encyclopedia of Sexual Positions with God," *Waxwing*](#)

Four Long Years at Court

I really miss the forest. And how
I used to hide there with the Queen.
I miss how we used to dance
and how we'd run from Court.

I miss the buttons (Oh, her buttons)
how they'd shine in the late light
when she wasn't looking at me
arriving in the thicket—

where she'd somehow gotten first.
I wish she'd step down for the first time
again to greet me. In the great hall
where all the beasts' heads hovered.

All the torches lit her from within.
I was looking at the white bat cup the buck's rack,
swinging in the firelight like a lantern.
I saw its bones. Saw the fingers

hook onto to the antler. There she was.
Beside me. Watching me not see her.
You look to your right and time becomes
a torch blown huge. It was like that.

The bat looked like an otter's stomach
blown into a lamp. I told her so.
The way you will. If I had turned away.
Toward the ladies dancing. Toward

the door and walked out to the courtyard.
Toward the axes lined in rows and clean.
I miss how we'd walk into the clearings
and the caves. The deer walked up from the ravines

and stared. I wasn't scared of them or me
even with the things I'd done. Not when
she was there. I was so enamored
of the bat. Swinging. I could see its body

through the thin shroud of its wings.
I thought, *I could kill it with one hand.*
There she was. Watching me think it.
Watching me shake the thought of other

things into the darkness of the hall.
She touched my shoulder. Did I sing?
Sometimes to myself. Sitting by the river
or in the night to keep me safe. Sometimes

my name softly to myself to remind me.
Once beside my mother who'd swelled
to the size of a sheep. *The deer
is in the thicket. The fox is in the glade.*

Like that 'til she stopped breathing
and after as I watched the women
wash her. Not scared anymore,
neither one of us. I told her so.

How I sang. Of the fox and of the deer.
She held me in the clearing.
We could see the Towers
from there. It feels so long ago

and also like it's yesterday. Stepped down
from her throne and then together
in the forest. That fast and also
through the hours beside the King.

Turn toward me. I'd think it as she sat.
Turn. All the beasts' heads waiting.
The boar's mouths open. The lynx
with its pink tongue. The deer,

the deer, the deer one after another
on the walls. The hinds and harts.
The ten point stag I took down
as a mercy after the King missed

its chest seven times. I killed him
as he tried to crawl away. I sang
*Stop. Sang, The deer is in the thicket
as his eyes rolled. The fox is in*

the glade. I took his antler in my left
hand and pulled back, *hey lolly lolly,*
pulled back until he groaned. I miss
the moment before it started.

Stepped down and stood beside me.
I could have walked into the courtyard
and kept going. I could have bargained
with the groom for the finest horse,

Passed the axes glistening
untouched all along the hallway.
Turn around. Who? Myself
or the Queen? The stag?

My arm held straight up
and brought down. To the left,
to the right. Your friends are there
for one moment. And then they're gone.

The lass gets loose and double.
She leads me to the hills. I want it back.
Her there. Beside me.
Was I dreaming?

It's a thing I ask myself. Did I dream
the stag's head, the bat's translucent
wings? Did I dream the Towers?
Sometimes I'd like to think so:

Loose and double in the glade
above me, beneath the break
in the trees where the sun
beat down upon us. A dream,

her body just a figment, and the deer
nothing but a song I sang beside
my mother as she died. It can
take forever. You can make a life

up in the time it takes to watch
your mother die. I was in the glade,
no I was in the bedroom, no
I was nowhere in the story.

Was nowhere to be found. I want
her back. I want the castle
and the bat. I even want the stag
who couldn't make up his mind

if he should die or not. If he should
let me pull his neck back. Or not.
Get loose and double, I'd sing
alone in my room or on the train

or as I walked to work. The world
around, a tapestry. I'd cock my head,
I'd see the stag. I'd cock my head,
I'd see the men in business suits.

I miss the Queen. I want her here.
Beside me. The null point's like a glade
where she'd lay me down beside
the stream. The beetles' armies

resting on the rocks. The Towers
in the distance. Your friends are with you
then they're gone. Your mother's with you
then she's gone. My armor shone

all morning, by nightfall it was blood and ash.
Hey lolly lolly. The fox is in the glade.
The debt collectors and the cans of soup.
One minute you're a castle. The next

you're just a cloud. Turn around.
turn around in the late light.
If I cock my head I see the armies.
I could have walked from Court

and just kept going. Did I sing?
Ask the fox or the stag with his neck
pulled back. I want it back.

Gabrielle Calvocoressi
153

¹⁵³ [Gabrielle Calvocoressi](#), "[Four Long Years at Court](#)," *The Rumpus*, collected in [Rocket Fantastic](#), [Persea Books](#)

New Story

This time we will get it right
and we won't have to make
any more poems.
Then we won't need to exist.
We will be one of those
endless canaries.
I don't remember anything
about my father.
He was a lighthouse full of blood.
When we don't exist we won't be like him.
Let's pool our numbers.
Papercuts, dud seeds.
It's time to go.
No, you can't take anything with you.

Heather Christle
154

154 [Heather Christle](#), "[New Story](#)," [Fence](#)

I Heart Your Dog's Head

I'm watching football, which is odd as
I hate football
in a hyperbolic and clinically revealing way,
but I hate Bill Parcells more,
because he is the illuminated manuscript
of cruel, successful men, those with the slitty eyes of ancient reptiles,
who wear their smugness like a tight white turtleneck,
and revel in their lack of empathy
for any living thing.
So I'm watching football, staying up late to watch football,
hoping to witness (as I think of it)
The Humiliation of the Tuna
(as he is called),
which is rightly Parcells's first time back in the Meadowlands
since taking up with the Cowboys,
who are, as we all know,
thugs, even by the NFL's standards. The reasons

I hate football are clear and complicated and were born,
as I was, in Nebraska,
where football is to life what sleep deprivation is
to Amnesty International, that is,
the best researched and most effective method
of breaking a soul. Yes,
there's the glorification of violence, the weird nexus
knitting the homo, both phobic and erotic,
but also, and worse, my parents in 1971, drunk as
Australian parrots in a bottlebush, screeching
WE'RE #1, WE'RE #1!
when the Huskers finally clinched the Orange Bowl,
the two of them
bouncing up and down crazily on the couch, their index
fingers jutting holes through the ubiquitous trail of smoke rings
that was the weather in our house,
until the whole deranged mess that was them,
my parents, the couch, their lit cigarettes,
flipped over backward onto my brother and me. My husband
thinks that's a funny story and, in an effort to be a "good sport,"
I say I think it is, too.

Which leads me to recall the three Chihuahuas
who've spent the fullness of their agitated lives penned
in the back of my neighbor's yard.
Today they barked continuously for 12 minutes (I timed it) as
the UPS guy made his daily round.
They bark so piercingly, they tremble with such exquisite outrage,
that I've begun to root for them, though it's fashionable
to hate them and increasingly dark threats
against their tiny persons move between the houses on our block.
But isn't that what's wrong with this version of America:
the jittering, small-skulled, inbred-by-no-choice-
of-their-own are despised? And Bill Parcells—
the truth is he'll win
this game. I know it and you know it and, sadly,
did it ever seem there was another possible outcome?

It's a small deposit,
but I'm putting my faith in reincarnation. I need to believe
in the sweetness of one righteous image,
in Bill Parcells trapped in the body of a teacup poodle,
as any despised thing,
forced to yap away his next life staked to
a clothesline pole or doing hard time on a rich old matron's lap,
dyed lilac to match her outfit.
I want to live there someday, across that street,
and listen to him. Yap, yap, yap.

Erin Belieu
155

¹⁵⁵ [Erin Belieu](#), "[I Heart Your Dog's Head](#)," collected in [Black Box](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Welcome Wagon

O, it only seems
we've never met before. This
cool well from which you draw
your daily cup
has caused you to forget. We

were strangers
in your dreams. Passengers
on delayed flights. Gardeners,
glimpsed from passing trains. We
were on our knees. We

were flowergirls, painted
by Impressionists. Boys
you passed on the beach. We'd

been fishing. We were carrying
our heavy buckets full of fish and blood, happily.

Or, you saw us briefly in magazines, flipping
the pages fast. A pregnant

woman stepping
carefully out of her bath. A child,
barefoot, riding
a donkey through still water. We were

the excavators, lying
in the sun beside our tools
as you jogged by. The teenage girl sulking
beside her mother at the mall. In death

you clawed us up
through the lacerated
satin, hauled

us from the lake
with a chain, waving
away the silver

flies on our faces, surprised

to find we'd been here all along, waiting

for you on the other
side of yourself

in our nameless patience.

Laura Kasischke

¹⁵⁶ [Laura Kasischke](#), "[Welcome Wagon](#)," collected in [Lilies Without](#), Ausable Press

A Camera Crew Films a Telenovela Based on the Miracles at Puraquequara

I rehearse my lines as I palm a maracujá to test its tenderness
and say, *Não, Comandante*, and *More rum, cadela*. Day in, day out,
we eat the same fried bread and ripe plantains, wash the same sheets,

keep saving the saved, the baptized rising from the river,
awed and dripping, living their scripts. Though my memory
of the execution differs I stand on my mark and clap.

I try to recall my insincere lamentations in the funeral parade.
An extra in my own story and envious of the ingenue's unmuddied
shoes and air-conditioned hotel room, I say, *Ajudar, ajudar*,

and cry on cue. Between scenes an actor shares imported cigars
with the prostitute playing me. When cameras roll, he bites
her nipples with his prosthetic teeth, and my milk lets down.

Sweet white ache. After the mayor hangs himself and bequeaths
his second-best bed to his horse, I write romantic obituaries
and send his wife signed photographs of myself. I make love

to avoid sweeping the sidewalk, to practice geometry, to satisfy
the voyeur and come with uncertain pleasure. Only when the film crew
leaves do the dead reappear, drinking, dancing, whipping each other

with TV antennas. They burn with more heat than light.
Pictures from that night reveal a black horse dragging a priest
through paradise, the crowd weeping, at last, with happiness.

Traci Brimhall

157

¹⁵⁷ [Traci Brimhall](#), "[A Camera Crew Films a Telenovela Based on the Miracles at Puraquequara](#)," [The Believer](#), collected in [Saudade, Copper Canyon](#)

There Are Two Magics

he said describing the fantasy novel he was reading
as they walked the drizzled streets she was listening
& laughing & realized she'd been walking through one city
or another next to this man for more than twenty years
longer of course than their kids were old
their smart alecky sons who hadn't yet met the person
with whom they might walk through rain discussing
ridiculous books with great sincerity & pleasure
Seriously he said *I can't stop reading it* but when they went upstairs
to the good bed in the good hotel he did stop reading
& found a place where her shoulder met her neck
& touched it until her mind finally went away for a while
& they became bedraggled & he went out like a light
but not even the good bed at the good hotel after good sex
could put her to sleep not the meditation app or the long online essay
about the White Supremacy of Conceptual Poetry
she missed her dead mother & her middle-aged cousin
who'd died the summer before she wondered if miles away
her youngest was whimpering was her oldest awake texting
was her middle son worrying she wanted the husband
to tell her the plot again but didn't want to wake him
he lay over the covers on his back his breath audible & regular
folded hands rising & falling peaceful & fearless as if she'd
never once meant him harm as if she'd always loved
this warm animal as if this were not the same summer she'd said
If that's really how you feel this isn't going to last & he hadn't said
anything anger sadness doubt & disappointment was a wave
that slapped them down & under so many people had died
& life felt shorter than how long they'd been together they had
through so many omissions & commissions hurt & been hurt
it was that same summer but she was alive & awake he was
asleep & alive they were weak but still there

Rachel Zucker

158

¹⁵⁸ Rachel Zucker, "There Are Two Magics," *Poem-a-Day*

A Violence

You hear the high-pitched yowls of strays
fighting for scraps tossed from a kitchen window.
They sound like children you might have had.
Had you wanted children. Had you a maternal bone,
you would wrench it from your belly and fling it
from your fire escape. As if it were the stubborn
shard now lodged in your wrist. No, you would hide it.
Yes, you would hide it inside a barren nesting doll
you've had since you were a child. Its smile
reminds you of your father, who does not smile.
Nor does he believe you are his. "You look just like
your mother," he says, "who looks just like a fire
of suspicious origin." A body, I've read, can sustain
its own sick burning, its own hell, for hours.
It's the mind. It's the mind that cannot.

Nicole Sealey

159

159 [Nicole Sealey](#), "[A Violence](#)," [The New Yorker](#), collected in [Ordinary Beast](#), HarperCollins Publishers

Notes from the Boat Docks

As the boats believe
in their sighing boathouse,

and two black dogs struggle
for the same tossed stick,

I have faith the statue of a young woman
(that cast of solitude in the garden)

will one day drop her book of stone,
and forgetting an afternoon of suicide,

step down from the ledge
and dip her fingers in cool bright shoots.

I believe in the hunger of slim bathers,
in the calm face of the daymoon—

in the Saint of Lost Causes
as he floats by, face-down

in his clear robe of water,
in the duck feigning a broken wing,

and in the one black dog
as her jaws finally close

around a duckling
in her daydream on the grass.

I believe in passing clouds
as they darken a page of Yeats,

in tiny laughter ringing across the water
like a chandelier of spoons,

in two girls approaching
in rowboats, no longer dolls.

Closer, I can almost brush
the rounder one, blushed

from working the current,
wounded even—like the pear

smoldering
with bees at my feet.

I'd compare the girls to us,
but we are more like the bees—

seized by a dark perfume of things,
thirsty and drowning

together in sweetness
under the red bridge I believe

always within reach even
if you cannot.

Kristin Bock
160

¹⁶⁰ [Kristin Bock](#), "[Notes from the Boat Docks](#)," [Gulf Coast](#), collected in [Cloisters](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

Zodiac

You kissed me once and now I wait for more.
We're standing underneath a swollen tree.
A bridge troll waits to snatch me if I cross.
Your bicycle handles are rusted blue.

My mouth has lost its flavor from this kiss.
I taste of warm apple. My lips are fat.
If these blossoms fall they'll mark our faces:
Gold shards of pollen or flower-shaped dents.

Is it bird wings that bat between my legs?
Is there a myth for trolls? Bulfinch says no.
My mother has a friend who reads the stars.
I am fourteen. "My dear, you look in love."

Your fingers stained dull orange from the bike.
Svetlana eyes and hands, no crystal ball.
White ripe blossoms on a trembling tree.
Again, I think. I want you to kiss me.

Elizabeth Alexander
161

¹⁶¹ [Elizabeth Alexander](#), "[Zodiac](#)," collected in [The Venus Hottentot](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Philadelphia, 1893

Lake Huron

The ship sank with a load
of cast-iron stoves, which tumbled,

lopsided, through white foam,
green water, teal water, water

as dark as coal, then darker.
From deck to lake floor,

they dropped 200 feet,
plummeting past the white faces

of lost men, who stared, gaping.
One man, hit by a stove, grasping

for something, swung his legs around the belly
of another stove sinking beside him

and rode it to the bottom.
When it settled in silt,

he slipped off—an arm floating across his forehead—
and slumped, exhausted, near the hearth:

wreck of a boy in November
done with chores.

Cindy Hunter Morgan

162

¹⁶² [Cindy Hunter Morgan](#), "[Philadelphia, 1893](#)," collected in [Harborless](#), [Wayne State University Press](#)

Feelings, by Ashley Higgins

For every true emotion there is an objective
correlative. A rainy day, for instance,
might mean a person feels a little gloomy.
Or the convertible that carries the Peach Queen
from the parking lot of Kroger West
to the front lawn of the junior high school
could suggest a person's innermost feelings
about how the war goes on right in front of her
every night on CNN and all the other channels
and no one says what a dumb war it is,
the way no one comes right out and says
that the convertible girl became the Peach Queen
because she slept with one of the judges, Roy,
who maybe happens to be the ex-boyfriend
of the person writing the poem. I mean
many poems do not come right out and say
the feeling. They just give you the things.
A guy falls asleep in a bed of fire ants.
A girl with fake boobs rides in a convertible.
Another point is use things from real life.
As a child, when I felt moody, I would eat
half a caterpillar, and the other half
smashed up on my lower lip, the objective
correlative, I would show to the adults
who had made me sad, which reminds me
how later, if I hurt a child by accident
and the child began to cry and attack me,
I would throw myself against a tree or wall
and fall down and cry awhile myself
until the kid saw it and started to laugh,
though of course this did not work
for some people, like my cousin Dick,
who don't like poetry and never will—
they don't get it—the kind of people
who expect real smoke from a toy tractor.

Rodney Jones

163

¹⁶³ Rodney Jones, "[Feelings, by Ashley Higgins](#)," *New Ohio Review*, collected in *Imaginary Logic*, [Houghton Mifflin Harcourt](#)

Self-Portrait with Tumbling and Lasso

I'm drumroll and voyeur.
I'm watermark
and fable. I'm weaving
the snarls
of a wolf through my hair
like ribbon. At my feet,
chisels

and jigsaws. I'm
performing
an autopsy on my shadow.
My rib cage a wall.
My heart
a crack in a wall,
a foothold. I'm tumbling

upward:
a French acrobat. I'm judder
and effigy.
I'm pompadour
and splendid. I'm spinning
on a spit, split
in half.

An apple
in my mouth. I know
what Eve
didn't know: a serpent
is a fruit eaten to the core. I'm
a massacre
of the dreamers,

a terra cotta soldier
waiting for
his emperor's return.
When I bow,
a black fish leaps
from the small of my back.
I catch it.

I tear it apart. I fix
the scales
to my lips.
Every word I utter
is opalescent. I'm skinned
and Orphic.
I'm scarlet

and threshold. At my touch,
a piano
melts like a slab
of black ice. I'm
steam rising,
dissipating. I'm a ghost undressing.
I'm a cowboy

riding bareback.
My soul is
whirling
above my head like a lasso.
My right hand a pistol.
My left
automatic. I'm knocking

on every door.
I'm coming on strong,
like a missionary.
I'm kicking back
my legs, like a mule. I'm kicking up
my legs, like
a showgirl.

Eduardo C. Corral
164

¹⁶⁴ [Eduardo C. Corral](#), "[Self-Portrait with Tumbling and Lasso](#)," collected in [Slow Lightning](#), Yale University Press

Night of a Gazillion Squirrels

The chimney crumbled off the roof.

It was starting:

The rain, the way things collapse, snow flurries,
wine in a box,
my name pasted to a cereal crisp, emojis, interns, bloodhounds,
phonographs, my love on ice skates, the name of
Penelope,
a Dorito encased in enamel, something alive in a
fake tree,
someone devouring a tin of Altoids, the history of socks,
pin-ups, a cat named Smaug, the dragon named Wilson, a note,
a bankruptcy, the apple in the pot of fondue, an oven, an oven
made of glass inside an igloo, an igloo made from
ore,
a woman in an orange top squeezing limes, no mojo
in the house of my capital.

The tree is crazy with noise.

The noise of trees like the howls in Yellowstone,
or the later noises which never drown even in sleep,

where lies a looseleaf binder peppered
with diagrams of salt.

James Grinwis
165

¹⁶⁵ [James Grinwis, "Night of a Gazillion Squirrels," *Arcturus*](#)

from "Someone"

forgive me for not sleeping
this city is all spinning all sky

this city is dry and the people all wanting
each with a coin purse each with a thirst in her mouth

dear someone I put a shimmer on for you
tonight I am all sequins all lies

for you I've slit my skirt
made a neckhole of longing

I am always nighttime on the inside
barefoot and heretic

I need god or at least the police

say there are no more empty places
say you will sleep again in my bed

lie down

let the night pour up through us
fluid cherry dark

others are lying down

bedrooms are going red with it
all over this town

Deborah Landau
166

¹⁶⁶ [Deborah Landau](#), "[Someone](#)," collected in [The Last Usable Hour](#), Copper Canyon Press

Obit (Hope)

Hope—died on October 15, 2014 when the FDA approved two drugs, Esbriet and Ofev, for pulmonary fibrosis. I did what I was trained to do, researched, read, asked questions. I taped articles to my wall that now look like tombstones. Hope is the wildest bird, the one that flies so fast it will either disappear or burst into flames. On my mug from Japan, it says *Enjoy the Happiness Time*. As if it knows happiness is attached to time somehow. The drugs could slow down the disease but not reverse it. We chose hospice. In my child's homework: *Which of the following happens eventually? a) you are born, b) you die, c) a long winter comes to an end, d) practice makes perfect.* I no longer know how to answer this.

Victoria Chang
167

Rich Girl Camp Revenge Fantasy

We all know where you're from & where you're going
in your dingy wind shorts & knockoff Keds:
the rival tribe's hillside, fired up in the night.

Stop stealing our hair ties.
Just shake the spirit stick like you give a shit.

After taps, not even a flashlight,
ass-deep in the creek, you give the Houston girls
a body scrub & check *down there* for leeches.

We're just making *s'mores*.
But you call it a Witch Picnic & put a pox on our ponies.

You're the one who's allergic to yarn.
You're the one who gets bloody noses & can't clean the cabin.
You're the kickball spaz, the K-Mart kid
who wants too badly to climb in our war canoe.

It's after reveille & we can't find our shower shoes.
You're ruining this for everybody!

Snake in the drain, you say. Dead girl's ghost in the cypress.
You've started a séance & can't come to chapel.

You say you want to
get our occult loins going like diving boards
& string us up
in the fume noose of our own puff-paints.

Now the counselors can't find you.
We know you're smoking with grounds crew
at the edge of the range where the dark belongs
to the three-legged maniacal gnasher!

Where care package trash & dirty words
spill out on the grass with splintered arrows.

You're not even *good* at nature!
With your sneer & your bowl cut.

The PA pages & pages you. You pretend not to hear.
You're up in the branches clutching a pitcher
of barbeque sauce. Below, our parents snake
through the oaks in a line of seersucker
& clean, white Suburbans.

Karyna McGlynn

¹⁶⁸ [Karyna McGlynn](#), "[Rich Girl Camp Revenge Fantasy](#)," [Black Warrior Review](#), collected in [Hothouse](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Dear Eros,

I have found you where I shouldn't—in the wrong bodies,
at the wrong time, and once on a subway platform
with my feet stuck to a pool of dried soda taking gum
from a near-stranger's mouth. That night you were spearmint
and the 6 train. I have been woken by you, put to bed by you.
Had you serve me coffee in my favorite mug with milk
and just enough sweetness. An easy gift. A debt of pleasure.
My therapist said: *Sometimes it's better to be understood than it is
to be loved.* I believed her because I am better at understanding
than I am at feeling. I have said *I love you* to men whose names
I can't remember now. And who's to say it wasn't true?
Who's to say I couldn't have tried forever with any of them?
Couldn't have tried learning to sail and opened a sanctuary
for elephants, or perfected the tambourine and followed the band
on their bluegrass tour? *I don't know why anyone stays in their marriage,*
my therapist said. *Love is illogical.* A man I loved once raped me.
I did not leave him. At least not then. But the next time I loved,
I chose someone kinder. I thought it would make a difference.
I stopped looking people in the eyes when talking to them.
I kept wanting to kiss them, the intimacy of language turning
into metaphor and urge. Everyone. I wanted to kiss the cashier
handling my poblanos with such gentleness and curiosity.
To kiss the person next to me on the bus with bad taste
in music and vanilla and bergamot in his cologne. Kiss
the woman holding the door, saying: *Have a good day.*
Her smile so goddamn bright and real and meant for me.
You're trapped, my therapist tells me. *Only you can break this cycle.*
But I want exactly this kind of trouble. I have sweat between
my breasts that needs licking. I have an iamb in my chest that keeps
skipping. I have stockings on my thighs. Oh, I've got stockings
on my thighs that need ripping. I read my way through all
the paperback romances and need a more adequate fiction.
I need my hair pulled, mean and gentle. I dressed you up in
every excuse and black gloves past the elbow. You open
the silk in me with zippers and buttons sewed on with breakable
thread. I have pulled tinsel from your hair and called it mistletoe,
led you into the woods wearing cheap underwear and handed you
the switchblade from my boot. I worshiped the myth I made of you,
but I'm off my knees now. I want your hands to become language
and make me offer you one thigh at a time. Let it sting loud
and sweetly. Let bruise be proof. Let the smell of your hands.

Traci Brimhall
169

¹⁶⁹ Traci Brimhall, "Dear Eros," [Virginia Quarterly Review](#)

Saint Catherine of Siena

Short and frail. *Sweet curmudgeon*. Hairshirt clad. Bed of thorns.
When forced to eat, stuck a goose feather down her throat
till she puked. Willingly kept down only her daily communion wafer,

though for her friends she whomped up loaves of *foccacia*, *contucci*,
panforte, prayed for miraculous multiplicities—truffled *funghi*
pork loin *alla romana*. Made an empty barrel gush Chianti, but her drink

of choice? Pus from the putrefactions, sores, and boils of the jailed
she freed with the gospel. From a great distance, sniffed out rancor:
three priests oversaw the confessions of her penitents.

I'm trying to make sense of her, her and her letters imploring her brother
to assume the armor of patience, referring often to afflictions, to the nectarous,
to the fruit of the soul, to great burdens lightening beneath *this most holy yoke*.

Attempting to imagine constantly courting pain, mutilated breasts and hips,
attempting to couch its 14th century context, not divorcing
the spiked whipping chains from the desire for immolation in the furnace

of salvation, that leap to faith akin to Adam's vault toward eternal
damnation, as all scab-munching saints bound toward the conundrum
cauldron (hating to love, following to lead, meeking it out to shine).

Snags in the fabric of accepting His mercy: (1) *great sins, great cathedrals*;
(2) why did it take Him eight billion years to arrive?; (3) respect for Buddhists,
Hindus, followers of the Koran; (4) opiate. And yet, and yet, who knows

the power of fighting one's fleshliness, one's appetite for, say, *porchetta*,
anatra all'arancia; who knows, maybe what oozes from pustules rivals
the custardy sweetness of *zuccotto*. Concetta Sabina Santaniello Tambini—

who at age 14 took the sacrament of confirmation at Our Lady of Sorrows Parish,
reminds me of the irrelevance of my pantyhose-with-a-run attempts at reasoning out
God—suggests Pascal's Gambit. But I'm already betting, I tell my friend,

though I'm not, keep dissing Him, about which dissing He shared with his mystical, monastic
wife: *this is that sin which is never forgiven, now or ever*. Infinite mercy
with a louse-sized caveat: surrender to be victorious; reject sin, befriend

the trespasser, be in the world but not of it, endless paradoxical paradise
like the colossal falling-leaves poncho my grandma Concetta would have knitted
if she knit, grabbing from a skein continuously transforming from yellow

to orange to red to brown, back to yellow again; slip 1 knit 1 *for you*
created my innermost being, knit me together in my mother's womb, row
upon row between the kindled and the damned, the now and the next.

Martha Silano

¹⁷⁰ [Martha Silano](#), "[Saint Catherine of Siena](#)," [Southern Humanities Review](#), collected in [Reckless Lovely](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Pareidolia

(*perception of pattern and meaning from natural randomness*)

The skillet burns that appeared on the tortilla
rolled by Maria Rubio in 1977
looked just like the face of Jesus.
In the bathtub this morning,
a few strands of my hair
formed a wavery peace symbol.
Would you pay to see this miracle?
What about snowflakes—
the cloud they fall from this afternoon
resembles another cloud
which resembles a tennis ball
served by my dead mother in 1947.
Surely that proves that all life on earth
is in a big intergalactic bath towel woven.
Somewhere a snowflake pukes on its shoes
in a convenience store parking lot.
At *Jiggles*, a half-naked snowflake
pole-dances in panties on the bar.
Across the world, another little snowflake
blows itself up in a crowded cafe.
Snow everywhere descending.
It gathers to a whiteness.
Why don't we lie down together,
wing-bones touching?
You look like someone I used to love,
only colder.

Kim Addonizio

171

¹⁷¹ [Kim Addonizio, "Pareidolia," *Los Angeles Review*, collected in *Mortal Trash*, W.W. Norton & Company](#)

from "Born"

We begin
 with this Rorschach
 of blood on thigh:
 first, a gravedigger
shoveling earth
into our bed,
 then the rotting barn
 we once undressed in.
Beneath this wet duress, we beg
 in unison
 to be born.

What's the word
for the soft white belly

after the harpoon,
but before the hooks?

Last month, we bought the books
that told us what to buy.

Then bought none of it.

That August, when the river dries up
and the cattails sway like torches

waiting to be lit, we miss
the mud most.

We call it a crick, then dip
our toes into what's not there.

Our little god-gone-
cannibal, our little omnivorous
accident, our little shit storm
of surrender, our little meaning-
cum-mercy, our little ball
of lightning, our little life-
boat hell-bent
 on being held.

After the first deep freeze,
the elm leaves seal themselves

beneath the puddles:
each leaf blackened red

like a wound
we step carefully over.

She will unstitch you,
our mothers say.

The days pass: ocean,
ocean, accident.

Here a cave of prehistoric
fear, there a nest of teeth.

When you won't sleep,
I lay you down on the floor

and kneel at the altar
of you altering me.

Fritz Ward
172

¹⁷² [Fritz Ward](#), "[Born](#)," [Fogged Clarity](#)

The Radio Show

Jefferson High airs a classic rock radio station,
and this morning on my way to the grocery store
two seniors have the chemistry teacher on, to thank him
for all that he's taught them over the years, and everyone
is blubbing, the microphone sounding wet
with snot and tears, every three words punctuated

by a deep, flapping snort, and before you know it I'm crying
too, just thinking about Mr. Salton and his beakers,
the safety goggles. What drama for a can of beans.
Inside the sliding doors they arrange the finest fruit
at the front, but a watermelon is a hard sell
when you live alone and don't eat. The iron cart's

back wheel wobbles as I push, the steady *thum-thum*
thum-thum calming. On the radio, Mr. Salton
explained why chemistry, why, of all things,
giraffes and julienned onions and meatpackers,
why chemistry. *I like the way things always*
carry the ability to change, and I thought, *Wow,*

what horseshit. In my high school choir I knew a boy
named Preston whose sharp tenor cut cleanly
over the sweaty blob of boys and girls. He wore
a blue sweatshirt almost daily, his *I'm fucked up*
sweatshirt, and if that dirty cotton crossed
the carpet you could expect slurs and pinpoint eyes,

all the symptoms of dope before we knew the drug
or how the bags under his eyes were really
perennial bruises from his father's hands. But, man,
could Preston sing. Now he's in prison. Stole
a taser from an officer and robbed a gas station,
which is the dumbest way to do it unless you want

to touch whomever you threaten to kill, which I guess
is family some days. I said this to my sister,
and she dropped a toenail into my coffee.
She's a gorgeous painter, but her shower has a ring
of acrylic around the drain. Once in college
I took a girl home from a bar, stumbled

through the back streets to my house, when a man
slipped through the bushes, his knife glinting
in the streetlight, and all he could ask was
Chuck? My luck, that the mugger had shared a cell
with me in county, that my mistake saved
that slash across the gut. I wake each morning

at quarter to five. I put the coffee on, pull meat
to thaw for my dinner. Pork chops on sale
today, and I fill my cart. Before they signed off
the air, Mr. Salton said, *I can't wait to see who
all of you become*, as if they don't already know.

Charles Nutter Peck
173

¹⁷³ [Charles Nutter Peck, "The Radio Show," Booth](#)

John Henry's First Real Swing

I stood hungry near dead and the man said
my hammer'd give us shelter keep us fed.

That's what he said. But instead I was drove
up these craggy mountain roads. I was gave

another hammer and a crust of bread
and not-enough slop to anger my plate.

I ate what I could. I practiced on wood.
I split rocks as the nights stretched long. I chipped

blocks of ice when I couldn't sleep. Couldn't
keep—listen—whether it kills me later

or now I'm gone. I know how. I know why.
I got these forty pounds of fire-bolt the

color of sorrow smoked eyes that I lift
and drop. Lift and drop. Lift and drop. Lift and—

Samiya Bashir
174

¹⁷⁴ [Samiya Bashir](#), "[John Henry's First Real Swing](#)," collected in [Field Theories](#), [Nightboat Books](#)

Trumpets Up in Here

—after *Trumpet* (1984), Jean-Michel Basquiat

The sprawl & broken crawl
of Basquiat's paints, the thin cleft

of villainous pigments wrapping

each frame like the syntax
in somebody else's relaxed

explanation of lateness: *What had
happened was...*

Below blackened crowns,

below words crossed out
as a remainder of what is underneath:

potholes, ashy elbows, & breath

that, in the cold, comes out in red light

& complaint shapes—3 lines
from Miles's mouth
in the habit of tardy remunerations.

All of that three-triggered agitation,

all that angry-fingered fruition

like Indianapolis's three-skyscrapered
smile when the sun goes down & even

the colors themselves start talking

in the same suspicious idiom
as a brass instrument—

thin throat like a fist,
flat declinations of pastors
& teachers at Christmas in the inner city.

Shoulders back & heads up when
playing in holiday choir of hungry

paints, chins covered
in red scribbles in all of the songs.

Adrian Matejka

¹⁷⁵ [Adrian Matejka](#), "[Trumpets Up in Here](#)," *Poem-a-Day*, collected in [Map to the Stars](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Geography of a Bad American

so you say you're finished with this country and the city
finished with the bludgeoned buildings and the couple screaming
outside your apartment window this morning you find five orange seeds
in the pocket of your jeans put a thong on backwards sit in butter

you throw out an old blouse because it smells like Brooklyn Lager
then watch a woman balance clear bags of tin cans
on the ends of an unscrewed broom
she rifles through your trash because you are wasteful

you buy coffee too often this morning the trains gasp in the tunnel
and you see steam rising from cracks in the pavement and think
soon the street will bust wide open better move along better get to where
you're going across the borough crowds have gathered at the airport

and lawyers station at unfolded plastic tables in the papers you read
the words *pro bono* and *habeas corpus* and have no idea what they mean
but really who reads papers anymore you saw it on your Newsfeed
and now you keep thinking the name's kinda misleading

but you certainly still feel like it's feeding you something
the way you used to stuff beignets in your mouth until
your pants were covered in powdered sugar and you began
to feel sick you are still just a girl getting fingered

in front of the bar in a town between Mobile and Galveston
along the coast of Apollinaire's Texas you still flirt
with women who'll never kiss the back of your neck
and want tattoos of gators hugging the Louisiana boot

they want nothing to do with you because you are bad
at puzzles and American geography you know
the names of more airports than capital cities and this afternoon
men in blue suits push by you so they won't be late

for lunch reservations at Delmonico's and you walk uphill
to the ramen shop by the Federal Reserve not making eye
contact with the guards holding assault rifles in their arms like small
children not looking at the slits in the stone twenty feet up the wall

that believe they're windows but the bars stare down
at all the passing people like your mother on the day she said
you're a terrible human on the way home from school parked
at the corner near the house with white paint and leaning pillars

where you'd fuck a weed dealer in college who stashed all his buds
in large mason jars and hid them behind the sofa every time
there was a knock at the door he used to pull out the sticky green plugs
with a pair of tweezers but in New York the ramen is warm and you pretend

you're far from men who'd do you harm you fumble with chopsticks slurp
noodles discuss Godzilla poems with a friend and this time you do not call
your ex when the Scot who followed you home one night from the bar
stalks you online from Dumfries you could disappear anywhere

could look in vain for the source of the Mississippi as if it were a virgin
spring walk along its tributaries or bash in a hornet's nest
with a baseball bat to see the insect's angry swooping
and feel the rush of hopping onto the bed of a friend's pickup

banging on the roof yelling *drive drive* you blink your dumb eyes
at a computer screen for five hours then leave you are tired
of being part of the mass of bodies moving into the unconscious
underground you retweet a video of Trump holding up

an executive order that's been photoshopped with a toddler's
scribble of cat and when you laugh it makes the white men
sitting next to you shift their weight from one hip to the other
one of them is reading the personal protection issue of *Shooting Times*

you've wrapped your scarf around your head to shield your ears
from the cold wind and he keeps staring and that makes you want to spit
bigot before you dash through the subway doors but you see the magazine
and decide instead to look at the floor on the stairs there's a woman begging

but you turn the other direction and make up some reason to give her nothing
this evening there's steam leaking from the radiator in a hiss and you open
the kitchen window two inches to feel the chill on your shoulders and you notice
your roommate's cat only wants to rub against your calves

after digging through litter you play "Dreams" by Fleetwood Mac
then find yesterday's unfinished baguette try to reconstitute the bread in butter
and the yolk of a fried egg you love breakfast for dinner then a bourbon and sugar
you drink too often here wonder if yellow pills are growing in your liver last week

when you called your mother she was making arrangements for death in the woods
in Natchitoches waiting for your father at shelter number six shielded from
a few big drops of water then sudden downpour and she told you how the air
soaked her with petrichor and how she could distinguish

seven kinds of rain by the way the air felt on her chin this evening it reminds you
of the way she says *hurt* instead of *heart* as though her pericardial sack
drapes over the chambers like a torn mosquito net sometimes you're mad
at her and dad for not warning you about the whipstitch of disappointments

you find in yourself while sitting in the shower and somehow the tap of water
against the curtain sounds like the slow opening of crumpled paper
in your bedroom you rub the towel over your belly and thighs light a geranium
candle then blow it out you want to dream of paintings by Kerry James Marshall

whole canvases of black paint against a white gallery a girl who lowers
an American flag between two boys reciting the pledge and almost
blocks out their faces you make a nest out of pillows and a duvet
and suddenly you are the boy who lies down in a black ellipse

you are the pink bubbles of smoke that signal the sacred aldermen of the sun
the sighs of the garbage truck and the workers moving slowly through the blue
morning in their orange vests that will lift you into a fever tree
swing you into sutures of peach light that tighten all around the skin

M'Bilia Meekers

176

¹⁷⁶ [M'Bilia Meekers, "Geography of a Bad American," *The Rumpus*](#)

Self-Portrait With Emily Dickinson (Rebirth of Mourning)

- I lived on that granite edge
- Likened to lichen
- Rain streamed down the fascia
- One pink cyripedium
- Folded like cards or a vulva
- Trillium erectum
- How's that for lonely?
- Crow was cawed out
- Trailed at her hem an unnoticed protégé
- ~~White dress of fog~~
- Pooled in the lower curve of the D like tea in a spoon
- It was the dog that broke her
- Pitcher plant pressed in the herbarium
- If Ginsberg levitated in her attic, I'll eat her Aeolian harp
- Upended a dash to make a headstone
- Weak urine stream
- Vanilla heliotrope lugged through buttercups

Diane Seuss

177

¹⁷⁷ [Diane Seuss, "Self-Portrait With Emily Dickinson \(Rebirth of Mourning\)," *The New York Times Magazine*](#)

Outside

A worsening snow. And a sense that someone's coming. (Or, no?) Losing is an orgy of the solipsistic sort. You fuck yourself over. And over again. And every woe you've ever known joins in. Outside, a thousand apple trees are growing, growing, gone. (Or maybe only one?) Last year, I clambered branches just to peek from the perch where waxwings sing. I saw a house, a town, a street. There was a farm. There was a park. A child's swing keened in apoplectic breeze. Outside, the wind's an imp. A trickster who spins jokes at my expense. In winter nobody wins. The driveway is a ring, a rink. Your car's gone missing again. You hate me in a glacial way. Over eras and in sheets. The air affixes sleet to sky. I stand in the center of my blizzard. I wait for a sign.

Jill Alexander Essbaum

178

¹⁷⁸ [Jill Alexander Essbaum, "Outside," *The American Poetry Journal*](#)

About Trees

What I would say about certain trees

is that to master love one must be devastated by it.
Certain trees know.

A poem has nothing to do with fact,
though both are made things.
I explain that certain trees know
certain facts, but what poems.

Our son is a rutabaga.
To him, everything
is a rutabaga.

What were we talking about last night,
listening to the fan, falling asleep?

I've been thinking about things
as the source from which all thought rises.
Not as omens, signs, talismans, tokens, symbols,
figures of speech, or ideas.

A thing introduces a thought and is never more than a thing.
Yes, that sounds right.

The E detached from my silver love ring;

there was no meaning to it, though now I know
the saleswoman was likely false. Her calming nod

against fragility. It will tarnish,
but it will not crack
as the plates will crack. The thought

of you not listening when I ask again
what it means.

Family heirloom plates I hate. These small windows
bring in no light.

I've stared at what's most broken in you.

An unintelligibility

to the flat sheet sliding off of me,
a silent body is not always asleep.

Even when happiest I think about dying.

I want to remember how

his face turned down

and took away our light

to become a first order of love.

A woman once opened my hand in her smoked palms
and told me I would be dead in a week.

Then put out your cigarette right here,
I dared, pointing to
my truth spot

or whatever she called it,
a whisper of a wrinkle on my skin.

That's the story you'd like me to tell
as our son naps fitfully in the other room.
Also the one about swimming

on a high floor of the Hancock Tower.
Both stories end the same way.

Crust of sugar at the bottom of your glass.
Keys to whatever doors we've forgotten.
Mostly used lipstick in Shanghai Nights,
a garish red. The paper sheath of a straw
which for a precious five minutes served as his toy.
Little notes to myself I can't bear to throw away.
All waste we shall bequeath to our heir. Our air.

Envoi

Trees older than your father and me
line the trail on which we lose ourselves.
I think they are maples. Their leaves wave to us,

a rapt audience to our stolen afternoon.
I think you said father before mother
in Chinese, *Bà ba*,

already I cannot remember.

The hills are older, too, and may outlive you.

The sky is eternity, but the clouds are brief.

New logs cleared from last week's storm,
their moisture forms new fungus,
new sights for you, the things that make

whatever words I choose stranger
and more true. Often

I'm struck dumb by knowing
that until recently you did not exist,

the way I know one day I won't exist,
and that's a kind of prayer

I don't have the words for. Your father
and I are atheists, but you are free

to measure the sky as you will and decide
accordingly. I never thought there'd be a you:
fact or poem, you're child to a thought
we once had.

I remember standing

in the cemetery with your father,
his long black coat, a woolen harbor

against that relentless winter,
wondering why love is harder
than speech. When we were so quiet.

The wind knew before we knew, and then the wind was gone.

Jennifer Chang
179

¹⁷⁹ [Jennifer Chang](#), "[About Trees](#)," *Orion*, collected in [Some Say the Lark](#), [Alice James Books](#)

The Town of Hill

Back of the dam, under
a flat pad

of water, church
bells ring

in the ears of lilies,
a child's swing

curls in the current
of a yard, horned

pout sleep
in a green

mailbox, and
a boy walks

from a screened
porch beneath

the man-shaped
leaves of an oak

down the street looking
at the town

of Hill that water
covered forty

years ago,
and the screen

door shuts
under dream water.

Donald Hall
180

180 [Donald Hall](#), "[The Town of Hill](#)," collected in [The Town of Hill](#), [David R. Godine](#)

from “Not from the Italian”

3. The Tower

Once the water supply had been poisoned,
the children got busy knitting mufflers
and swapping morbid stories in the tower.

Soldiers in smart uniforms arrived
with equipment to dredge the canal.
They chatted and smoked and stank up the joint.

One day, like a singing shot of lightning,
your mother will kill you and you won’t even know it:

This ham is too salty, you’ll think,
or perhaps I need a facial scrub.

4. Palermo

Riding around in this clown car, we can’t even see
through the dirty rain pouring down the windshield.
Another tremor in the volcano district. It’s unimaginable—

The danger, the cost of electricity, labor. It all adds up.
Like Jane Bowles, we need to change hotels. Ah, if only
you had walked away, what distance there could be between us now.

April Bernard
181

¹⁸¹ [April Bernard](#), “[Not from the Italian](#),” [Epiphany](#), collected in [Brawl & Jag](#), [W.W. Norton & Company](#)

Cigar Box

There's no difference between women and men.
The characters all disappear into the plot,
except for the French girl hiding her canary
in a ukulele. They both sing at weddings.
They have always shared the same body.

We agree athletes get into the best accidents.
You'd prefer to be deaf and too warm,
and your mother insists you were calm as a child.
In school I was good in death and math.
I practiced your name on yellow scratch paper.

Marni Ludwig
182

¹⁸² [Marni Ludwig](#), "[Cigar Box](#)," *Assembly*, collected in [Pinwheel](#), [New Issues Press](#)

Do You Speak Virgin?

This wedding is some hell:

a bouquet of animals wilting in my hand
while my closest friends, sitting on a bar bench,

stir the sickles in their drinks,
smile up at me.

The moon points out my neckline
like a chaperone.

My veil is fried tongue and chicken wire,
hanging off to one side.

I am a Mexican American fascinator.

Let me cluck my way to an empty field
where my husband

stays silent most of the time
and the stars are like the arachnid eyes

of my mother-in-law: duplicitous,
ever-present in the dark.

I'm not afraid of sex.

I'm afraid of his skeleton
knocking against the headboard

in the middle of the night.

I'm afraid I am a blind goat with a ribbon
in my hair, with screws for eyes.

I'm afraid wherever I walk, it's purgatory.
I meet a great lake with rust-colored steam

rising, someone somewhere
has committed murder, is hiding

in the bushes with an antique mirror.

~

The virgins are here to prove a point.
The virgins are here to tell you to fuck off.

The virgins are certain there's a circle of hell
dedicated to that fear you'll never find anyone else.

You know what it looks like:

all the lovers cloaked in blood
and salt and never satisfied,

a priest collar like a giant tooth
in the midnight sky.

I want to know what's coming in the afterlife
before I sign off on arguments

in the kitchen, and the sight of him
fleeing to the car

once he sees how far and wide,
how dark and deep

this frigid female mind can go.

Analia Sotelo
183

¹⁸³ [Analia Sotelo](#), "[Do You Speak Virgin?](#)," [The Collagist](#), collected in [The Virgin](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

My 1987

I listened to boys I no longer wanted to know
debating the hotness of movie stars, but I
wanted nothing more than my hand in a training bra.

Once I told Annabelle, over the phone, that I loved her,
I hurtled downstairs to play Billy Joel on our spinet,
which I did, beaming or grinning, until dinnertime.

I had another life, in which I wore plate armor,
and another other life, which I preferred,
where I wore a form-fitting tunic and Mary Janes

whose contours I drew on graph paper, over and over.
In that life my chief power was reading minds;
though useful in battle, my power was tragic

on schooldays, because I had no way to turn it off.
My name was Psyche. She was melancholy,
with oversized eyelashes. She, in turn, wished she could fly.

I told myself that I would tell myself years later
that this was how I saw myself, back then.
I felt that I had become “unstuck in time,”

like baffled, wise Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.
When I heard a trio of seniors who wore
black jeans and Dr. Martens and janitor’s-key-ring chains

say they wanted a keyboard player, I put down my spoon
and sprinted across the lunchroom to tell them that I
could play the piano, and would get a keyboard soon.

Stephanie Burt

184

¹⁸⁴ [Stephanie Burt](#), “[My 1987](#),” collected in [Advice from the Lights](#), Graywolf Press

From the Desire Field

I don't call it *sleep* anymore.
I'll risk losing something new instead—
like you lost your rosen moon, shook it loose.
But sometimes when I get my horns in a thing—
a wonder, a grief or a line of her—it is a sticky and ruined
fruit to unfasten from,
despite my trembling.
Let me call my anxiety, *desire*, then.
Let me call it, *a garden*.
Maybe this is what Lorca meant
when he said, *verde que te quiero verde*—
because when the shade of night comes,
I am a field of it, of any worry ready to flower in my chest.
My mind in the dark is una bestia, unfocused,
hot. And if not yoked to exhaustion
beneath the hip and plow of my lover,
then I am another night wandering the desire field—
bewildered in its low green glow,
belling the meadow between midnight and morning.
Insomnia is like Spring that way—surprising
and many petaled,
the kick and leap of gold grasshoppers at my brow.
I am struck in the witched hours of want—
I want her green life. Her inside me
in a green hour I can't stop.
Green vein in her throat green wing in my mouth
green thorn in my eye. I want her like a river goes, bending.
Green moving green, moving.
Fast as that, this is how it happens—
soy una sonámbula.

And even though you said today you felt better,
and it is so late in this poem, is it okay to be clear,
to say, *I don't feel good,*

to ask you to tell me a story
about the sweet grass you planted—and tell it again
or again—

until I can smell its sweet smoke,
leave this thrashed field, and be smooth.

Natalie Diaz
185

the deer become stoners

they're hotboxing a van
by the river with the bad kids again,
fur reeking of bong water,
eyes glassy and narrowed.
later they'll roll out the door
through a cloud of smoke
and give the chipmunks
a contact high, show up at 7/11
hungry for cheese puffs and gummy bears.
sometimes they end up smashing
through a trampoline or breaking
into a backyard pool, but most nights
it's the same burn run over
and over, a loop through woods
and fields, through a haze
of human smog.

Cassandra de Alba

186

¹⁸⁶ [Cassandra de Alba](#), "[the deer become stoners](#)," *Drunk in a Midnight Choir*, collected in [habitats](#), [Horse Less Press](#)

Why We Must Support PBS

“I didn’t think of it as killing them,” the executioner from the late eighteenth century said to Charlie Rose, still wearing a hood, his ax resting on the wood table I’ve assumed is oak. “I don’t know how to put this: it’s as if I loved them in the moment I swung, loved them and wanted to offer them peace.” Charlie Rose was smiling, excited. Even more than usual, the joy of an otter seemed to be swimming through the long river of his body when he put a hand on the man’s memoir and said, “But then something happened that made you question your entire existence up to that point.” It was hard to see the man all in black on Charlie Rose’s black set, as if midnight were speaking, saying, “Yes. One day I looked down and there was the son I’d never had staring up at me from the block, I could tell by his eyes, this was my boy, this was my life flowing out, reaching beyond the sadness of its borders.” “You knew this,” Charlie Rose said. “I knew this,” the executioner replied. “Even though you’d never been with a woman.” “Never. I was all about career.” “You knew because the eyes tell us something.” “Because the eyes tell us everything.” “And you couldn’t go on.” “No. I couldn’t go on.” They changed gears then and honestly I drifted off, half dreamed I’d arranged a tropical-themed party on a roof without testing how much dancing and vodka the roof could hold, people were falling but still laughing, falling but still believing there was a reason to put umbrellas in their drinks, that otherwise their drunkenness would be rained on, rained out, when I heard the executioner say, “We were running and running. Finally we made it to the border and I put my arms around my son and told him, you have a future but no pony. Get a pony.” Charlie Rose smiled like he was smiling for the otter, for whatever is lithe and liquid in our spirits, and repeated, “Get a pony.” “That’s the last time I saw him,” the executioner said. “And that’s why you’ve refused to die.” “Yes.” “To keep that moment alive.” “Yes.” “And you believe eternity is an act of will.” “Yes,” Mr. Midnight said. “Will. Will and love. Love and fury.”

Bob Hicok
187

¹⁸⁷ [Bob Hicok](#), “[Why We Must Support PBS](#),” *FIELD*, collected in [Sex & Love &](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

The Ex-Girlfriends Are Back From the Wilderness

The ex-girlfriends are back...
emerging once again from the tree shadows...
into the primordial burlesque of autumn
with their low-cut...
reminiscences... and soft, double ironies...
trembling once again into their
opulent... seasonal migration patterns
a corsage of wilting apologies
tethered to the bust...

The ex-girlfriends are back...with their
hand-beaded inconsistencies...
& various unhappy motives...
dragging their heart like a wet cape through leaves...
and they go on hurting...like the lit windows
of a dollhouse in winter...
with a too big horse outside...

The ex-girlfriends are back
but in a romantically ambiguous way...

The ex-girlfriends are back and have transcended
the patriarchal limitations of romance...
unlike the new girlfriends...
still handcuffed to monogamy...
slowly writhing...
with their naughty...post heterosexual fatalism

The ex-girlfriends are back
with their unfounded soviet aspirations...
and anti-hegemonic arts initiatives...
draped over a piano on the edge of the thicket
playing the lonely upper hand of chopsticks...
in their vague tropical displeasure...

The ex-girlfriends are back...
and the post-girlfriends...
and the "let's not put a label on this" girlfriends...
all of them at the same time, walking out through
a beaded curtain of water...
like too much Persephone and not enough underworld...
wearing nothing but an arts degree...
and the soft blowtorch of their eyes....

You can feel their judgments come down upon you
like too heavy butterflies...
but there's nothing you can do about it!
and worst of all
they don't even want anything...
they're just standing there...performing many
enigmatic life blinks
re-mentioning Deleuze and Guattari
in loneliness and natural lighting

The ex-girlfriends are back
with their sanity pangs
and various life fatigues...
like a stuffed crocodile exhibit
still begging for death relevance
in the glass case of your heart
But you are the museum director now!
walking talent on a stiff gold leash
& there's nothing anyone can do about it!

The ex-girlfriends are back
like the liquidation sale of an imported rug megastore
that's been liquidating for centuries...
getting rich off all that...tasseled goodbye money
as they grind your face yet again into
the hand knotted...
semi Persian wool blend... of their hearts
begging once more for closure...

The ex-girlfriends are back
with their pre-distressed sadnesses
and their...talent
unlike yourself
who is both undistressed and talent-free!
yet somehow still above them all
like the grand arbiter of happiness
laughing in your ermine neck ruff
as you push them one by one
down the waxed farewell chute
of their bad erotic failures

Hera Lindsay Bird

188

¹⁸⁸ [Hera Lindsay Bird, "The Ex-Girlfriends Are Back From the Wilderness," *The Spin-Off*, collected in *Hera Lindsay Bird*, Penguin UK](#)

Float, Cleave

Like most everything, the history of hot air balloons is a history of sex and tragic death. In response to a suggestion that “the desire to float passively upon the currents of the air represent[s] the female principle while the urge to cleave through them upon aggressive wings typifies the male,” L.T.C. Rolt, author of the seminal history *The Aeronauts*, insists, “The fact is that the floaters were the first to win the skies and it is with their victory that we are here concerned. It could not be claimed as a victory for feminism.” His tone is one of revulsion at the very suggestion a man’s gambit might take a woman’s form. “To be borne aloft for the first time by a frail envelope of paper or silk a man needed as much courage as a tower jumper.”

I try not to talk about being a woman because I don’t want to be defined that way. I try not to talk about religion or politics because I am at odds with the people where I live. I try not to talk about my opinions, because who cares. I try not to talk at all, but sometimes I find myself saying just anything. Did you know, I once told the men at the coffee shop who wring their hands over socialized medicine, that there have been times being a woman was so different from being a man it was easier to imagine yourself a drifting balloon than the man below trying to steer?

A well-known poet read at our university and one of her poems was a metaphor for the female orgasm as a bird beating its wings like a second heartbeat. I returned to my office to find one of the professors of the old guard waiting in the hallway to ask if this is, in fact, how the female orgasm feels. I had been a professor myself for less than two months at this point, so I changed the subject. He asked again, and I suggested he ask his wife. Not one to be put off, he said, “I’m not asking my wife. I’m asking you.”

He’s a jolly and affable man, and urgent curiosity about questions related to the pleasure of others is to be commended. Nevertheless, I told him to leave my office and take his sexual harassment with him. I didn’t know what kind of person I was going to have to be then. I was wearing a new pair of dress slacks and never spoke of my still-nursing child who I sometimes could see in a fountain at the center of campus beside her father, who gave a little wave towards my window.

That night I was impatient for my daughter to go to bed, so I could ask my husband, “Can’t you feel it for yourselves? The bird pulsing to the nest?”

“I thought I was the bird.”

Tomorrow I will eat in the school cafeteria with this professor and my now kindergarten-aged daughter, who says he is her best friend. He will ask her difficult questions, like, “What is it like to be young?” “Well,” she’ll say, chewing her French fry like a cigar she’s been contemplating as the sun goes down, “Sometimes it can be exasperating to be five, but mostly it’s pretty good.”

Then we’ll talk over the child’s head for a while about his wife’s diagnosis, which he is right to worry about. Everyone in this little town we all share adores her for how she often appears at a convenient moment to pull her husband out of an intense conversation by his elbow. I’ve lived inside my careful silence so long, though, I prefer not to see him nudged away. When he told me about her prognosis, it was a secret. If she lived, there was still a lot the disease could take from her. Some things are harder to tell than that you are going to die, but some things are also hard to know alone. I write the history of aeronauts instead.

When Benjamin Franklin's gout got so bad it took four strong men to carry him into assembly, he made sketches for the patent office of a hydrogen-balloon-chair apparatus that would require only one man lightly steering. How can you not admire a person who thinks of air before wheels?

I wish I had told my friend that of course an orgasm is like a second heart beating a wing-flapping bird. That's why the poem was so good. Even I didn't know there was a bird in there, but now I feel it every time. I should have thanked him for asking.

Kathryn Nuernberger
189

189 [Kathryn Nuernberger, "Float, Cleave," *The Journal*, collected in *Brief Interviews with the Romantic Past*, Ohio State University Press](#)

Hamlet Texts Guildenstern about Playing upon the Pipe

True that. Rue that.
That which wld cause us 2 mscnstrue
that which we alwys hve knwn 2 be true,
that we r a part of an unholy crew
that drms we cn do whtvr we do.
2 be honest eschw that. Chw that
fr a while. Msticate. Xpctorate.
Engnder only that which will elevate. Do that.
Elminate that which invites u 2 speculate,
pooh pooh that. Untrue that. Undo that.
At least try. Set ur azmuth 2 aim at what-
evr sky will allow u 2 prsue that.
And avoid at all csts the truths ur uncouth at,
squndring ur youth at, growng long in the tooth at,
7 a.m. drinkng vermouth at, 9 a.m. flyng to Duluth at.
Fnd that hue in the sky. Thn cry. Boohoo that. Hew 2 that.
True blue that sky course, that heart settng. Few do that. Sail 2 that.
And 2 anything that wld skew that, u know what to say. Screw that.

John Hodgen
190

¹⁹⁰ [John Hodgen, "Hamlet Texts Guildenstern about Playing Upon the Pipe," *The Antioch Review*, collected in *The Best American Poetry 2017*, Scribner](#)

Heat

The first man in the last
row is waving his arms
so they blur a cleaning woman
listening to the recital by the door.
Someone is saying that time is
a broken shore, more light than rock
except in bad weather. Heat. The raft
with the dangling legs and the polyglot
girls; the meridian shadows—just off-
white; the leaping fish with hearts
compact and cold as lemons; the groves
of unfalling fruit, drunks in the ditches.
A forger is working in a back room
on a bill honoring the General's birthday:
mauve flowers wreathing a sweating horse.
A girl who tends the well
and has never left either of the two towns
(three miles apart) swears she has seen
two moons in one sky, swears also that she never
dreams and that her mother was a Red Cross nurse
who took to a ship's carpenter and jumped
off a roof on Christmas Day, Rio, 90 degrees and windy.
Crashing chords. Rachmaninoff's shadow. The glassblower faints.
Of our dozen strains of blood only two enter
our head and spring into voice—only one intelligible,
melodic, if you want to call it that. Nobody's moving,
everybody's talking. The lone thermometer on the island
runs the Kelvin scale, indecipherable, but hot.
The haze thickens, the flowers remain odorless,
crowds are occupied at their cross-purposes,
their especial preoccupation with the heat
and, after that of course, with sex. A vagrant girl
shimmies clear of her skirt at the well,
the cleaning woman slinks off with a retired carpenter,
no one cares any more about the forger
or the General; there are even two moons in the sky
and even the dreamers see them. The air whirls
green and black. It is finally so hot that nothing
melts, not the ice, not the music,
because that would be impossible.
And that man in the last row is gone now,
before the applause, his shredded program
on his seat, on fire.

Nicholas Christopher

191

¹⁹¹ [Nicholas Christopher](#), "[Heat](#)," [The New Yorker](#), collected in [On Tour with Rita](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

from "Mental Cases"

3

I was having lunch in the diner
near the library
when I started to hear voices.

Not like the voices you hear
when you're trying to write something, and you
hear the words you're going to write.

I thought someone was talking to me.
I even looked around.
No one was there.

They were familiar voices, voices
I could almost identify...
pleasant, soothing voices. I thought,

"Am I crazy?
This is what it must be like
to be crazy."

But I was certain I wasn't crazy.
I could think perfectly straight. I was
aware of what was happening.

Everything made sense.

•

The voices told me to
avoid the person sitting at the counter
who didn't like me; and go home.

They suggested I clean my apartment
(which was a mess). I immediately
started putting things in order.

Stacks of papers and books.
All my notes. I arranged them
by language; then by author.

I worked all night
and all the next morning and afternoon.
The voices encouraged me. They

seemed pleased. I stayed awake three days!
(They let me eat, but made me
throw out any food I didn't finish.)

Before I finally fell asleep, they
told me to call the man at the diner—
tell him I knew what he was up to, and that

it wouldn't do him any good.
I called him—he wasn't home. Then
slept a couple of hours...

When I woke up, the voices were
still there.
They were in my dreams.

They woke me up.

•

They told me to go out, see a movie.
I forget what I saw—a foreign film. I watched it
over and over, till the theater closed.

I went back to the diner, *starving*.
All through my sandwich, the voices
decided what I should do next.

Burn all my photographs; smash
the mirror; disconnect the telephone;
move!... I was lucky,

the next day I found a smaller apartment
in the same building.
A week later I was moved in.

I took only what I needed:
mattress, kitchen table, books.
And my notes—which they made me put
into another new order.

I read Greek tragedies, and
saw a lot of movies the next few months.
I avoided people.

Before the phone was disconnected, I
called the man at the diner—warning him
that I was disconnecting my phone.

He knocked at my door once.
I didn't answer.
They wouldn't let me.

I was sleeping
two hours a night. I
couldn't eat.

I stopped going out.

•

All at once, I was overwhelmed by a
terrible black cloud. I was
suffocating. I didn't know how to get out.

I got very scared.

The voices got angry with me. They began
hammering at me that I
didn't deserve to live.

I didn't know what to do—
I was convinced
they were right.

I didn't "do" anything. I would
just lie there—sweating and shivering,
thinking I should die.

I didn't *want* to die. I wanted
to see a doctor.
They wouldn't let me.

They kept getting louder. And
angrier with me.
Then suddenly, they turned

on each other... They started
disagreeing. Violently.
There were bitter arguments.

In a strange language. I couldn't understand
the words. My head
was aching. The noise was unbearable.

THEY WERE TEARING ME APART.

•

I had to get away. Apparently,

I took a bus to Canada.
In Montreal, I was arrested.

I was apparently
walking the streets all night,
yelling obscenities.

My mother had me
transferred to the hospital
here.

It's all a blur.

•

Even in the hospital, drugged,
I could hear them.
They told me to brush my teeth.

I can still hear them.

Sometimes they're so mild, I'm not sure
if they're there or not—
my own breathing drowns them out.

When I stop taking
the drug,
they go wild—screaming at me to

kill myself! throw myself
through the window!
Twice, recently, they predicted

someone was going to die...

I've aged. My joints ache.
My hair is falling out.
The drug makes me talk funny.

I don't have any friends.

It's finally sinking in
that I'm not supposed to be
"hearing Voices"...

that they're not *separate* from *ME*.

The doctors tell me they
don't know what else they can do.
Nobody seems to know

why this happened to me.
They say there's
"no guarantee"

I will ever completely recover.

Lloyd Schwartz
192

¹⁹² [Lloyd Schwartz](#), "[Mental Cases](#)," [The Massachusetts Review](#), collected in *These People*, [Wesleyan University](#)

Crustacean

What would you like to call
this place that we've invented
Kissing Meadow, Arboreal Splendor
I was hoping for darker start
lightning struck here last year
I pulled a gun on the waiter once
& there was a brush with perjury
so let's agree to disappoint each other
from here on in, this place is fake
even the chimney is not real
it's just an after image
from the movie I shot here
chronicling my life
as a sea urchin

Diana Adams
193

¹⁹³ [Diana Adams, "Crustacean," *The Laurel Review*](#)

Emily Dickinson

Some nights she comes to act as courier,
midwife to our own skills.
Emily, come like a UFO to implant her genius in us.
Our Queen Mab, condemned to be the only woman mentioned
in the lyric omnibuses of her epoch;
easy scapegoat of men's centuries,
she stood in for all women.
So now, of course, she comes to blow off steam
in the privacy of the green room.
All those living years she walked from yard to yard,
gardens flourished in opium poppies;
went out at night to see the owls and wed her genius.
She applied her passion like a hot iron sword.
And no one can take off her clothes, ever—she comes
and her language takes them off of *us*,
not piece by piece, not fumbling buttons,
but all at once in a single shot,
her tiny poems like grenades that fit in the hand.
And we here bask in the debris,
stripped down to our private parts,
the snow white of the bone, the authentic corpse in heat.
The absolute original.

Bianca Stone

194

¹⁹⁴ Bianca Stone, "[Emily Dickinson](#)," [The Brooklyn Rail](#), collected in [The Möbius Strip Club of Grief](#), Tin House Books

Their Favorite Author

I come across this now, it's even stamped.
Rat face, round wire-rims, mustache. Staring
too intently from under his felt hat. A postcard
I'd meant to send, the writing on the back:

*Ever hear of this Joyce guy? Life is alright,
busy. How is the house holding up?...*

I still don't have the address of the house
I visited that August night, front rooms

eight inches lower than the back, old paneling
peeling off the walls, cracked ceiling
in the living room. Steve led me to the attic,
empty except for an old chair. "Check this out,"

he said and lifted the sheet draped
over the rotted cushions. Among the springs
and bits of fluff three kittens lay, all gray,
all sleeping in a lump. Downstairs we drank beers,

Jenny talked of teaching English in the prison:
Better than high school, she said, "'cause you can
send them to the hole." Later, we walked the dirt road
to the river. Where the elms thickened, Steve pointed

to a spot—"this awful stench right around here.
It got so bad we finally went into the woods—
there was a large cardboard box. Inside,
a Doberman's corpse, decapitated,

head between the feet."

"We think it was a cult,"

Jenny said. "The box was taken from our garage."

I felt I'd seen that dog's head, too.
Maggots in the mouth and ears, film over the eyes,

stained cardboard like a map. Something
about the dark twists of the leaves, the curve
in the road, still marked the place as sinister.
When we reached the river, slow, moonlit,

sat on the jutting rock. Jenny
said Steve was sleeping on the couch some nights,
and he stared at her, then glanced at me.
I should have known then she'd move out

in a month, leave him to the unfixable house.
But I thought only of the Doberman, and how
Steve stooped, unthinking, to pick up a stone
as he described the tail, hairs stiff with blood.

Steve and Jenny Reynolds was all I'd written
in the space where the address was supposed to be.
The only way to send this now is back through time,
to that night, that river, have the current

carry it past our feet, a flash they both see
and recognize—their favorite author
before the water thrusts it forward,
and away.

J.D. Scrimgeour
195

¹⁹⁵ [J.D. Scrimgeour](#), "[Their Favorite Author](#)," collected in *The Last Miles*, Fine Tooth Press

There's no way this can end well,

I tell the movie people who are laughing
in relief at what seems to be unfounded fear.
Someone else is always watching.
They won't get one word out.

My zebra panties in the wash again.
Obligation does not equal invitation.
Sentences become drawn-out affairs
but I am doing what I can
to answer one word every day.

Enormous pine cones club the lawn.
A child creeps into a cave.

I levitate at will and would
come home were this my name for it.

Sara Wainscott

196

¹⁹⁶ [Sara Wainscott](#), "[There's no way this can end well](#)," [Grimoire](#)

You Look Like I Feel

Dirt on my chin and I wonder: Am I already
in the ground? Like a toy turned real, I cannot shed
the sense that I have died. The German word

for heaven's the same

as the German word for sky. On hearing a cruel
prince was in danger, I prayed for him to thrive,
not for his own sake, but for the concubines,

sure to end up buried

along. To my real face, a man once crowed
IRUINED YOU, and though he did, the joke's
on him: he ruined me only for this world,

and this world is not long

for itself. The earth, that ever-loving
but distrustful kin, keeps leaving us just a little
pocket money when it dies, never the land—

Natalie Shapero

197

¹⁹⁷ [Natalie Shapero](#), "[You Look Like I Feel](#)," *Poetry*, collected in [Hard Child](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

How to Talk the Manic Away

I used to be so mad—I had daggers coming out
of my puffed sleeves. I decorated Easter baskets
with the plastic daisies of my Fury & mounted
them on Playtex-pink three-speeds.
Every bike I ever owned suffered
a spectacular death: hit by a grey Grand Am,
tossed like a stone into the quarry, snatched
through a broken window, found mangled
in a ditch. I shook my swampy sobs
out of their frames & ironed my playbills
for breakfast. I mounted my miscues
on the walls of a rocket. I covered
my mistakes in neon & called it Art.
I charged people to listen to me scream.
I moved to the desert because I'm supposed to
be capricious like that. Some people said
my hubris would be better in the mouth
of a dinosaur, or as the silhouette of
a disgraced news anchor. In a West Texas bar,
some girl asked if I'd seen the Marfa Lights.
I stood up whiskily on my stool & said,
“Bitch, I AM the Marfa Lights!”

I used to collect lace collars & white gloves
made for the Nervous & the Consumptive.
I stalked old ladies' estate sales.
Some of still had boxes of seamed stockings
wrapped in tissue paper
& lavender water & bakelite hair combs.
None of this stuff ever fit or endeared me
to others. Imagine going through life
with white cotton seams around
your fingers. Imagine the Whole World
saying, “Don't Touch.” Still, in several
nightdresses I clambered over
a field of sods. There was a desk
in the distance with one light in its
Top Drawer. The night was open to me.
I took out my loudest shears
& cut a hole in the landscape
to make a space for the Silence
I was immediately accused of violating.
My afterlife was a trial of ill-
fitting hats, spilled sugar & Little Girls
who loved their pet bunnies too much.
So much, they squeezed their lights out,
nestled their bodies in the doll carriage.
What shall I paint for the mourners:

an old schooner marooned in a field
of clover? A corpse that stinks its way
to the Truth? A bottle of warm
poppy milk? A dumbshow? Shall I
keep up appearances even though
I am slowly losing my sawdust
through an open seam? I know:
I *should*.

Karyna McGlynn
198

¹⁹⁸ [Karyna McGlynn, "How to Talk the Manic Away," *The Best American Poetry Blog*](#)

Mouths at the Party

For a second, the light
made that glass in her mouth
look like a knife.

I'm embarrassed I thought it.

The woman's injury
in my mind before she'd even
undone her lips.

But my shame is not my
violent tendency,
though I hide them the same,

near my heart. Which is to say,
in my breasts, large
like hers. Who would notice

the blood in our mouths?

Sarah Blake
199

¹⁹⁹ [Sarah Blake](#), "[Mouths at the Party](#)," [Storyscape](#), collected in [Let's Not Live on Earth](#), [Wesleyan University Press](#)

My Ravine

How will you know what my poem is like
until you've gone down my ravine and seen
the box springs, mattresses, bookcases, and desks
the neighboring women's college dumps each year,
somebody's hairdryer, someone's Herodotus
a poem's dream landscape, one-half Latinate and
one-half shit, the neighboring women's college's shit?
Wheelbarrow upon wheelbarrow a humpbacked
custodian hauls old dormitory furniture down
and launches it watching it roll into the pile.
You won't know how my poem decides what's in,
what's out, what decorum means and doesn't mean,
until you follow him home after work and see him
going wild all night imagining those girls' old beds.
You won't know what I'm trying for until you hear
how every fall in my backyard a swarm of deer
materializes, scavenging where the raspberries touched
the radishes, now ploughed under, itching the lawn
for dandelions, stare at each other and wander
bewildered down my ravine and turn into skeletons.

Dan Chiasson
200

²⁰⁰ [Dan Chiasson](#), "[My Ravine](#)," [The New Yorker](#), collected in [The Afterlife of Objects](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Disorientation Psalm: Tohu Bohu

&c. _____ &c.

*Life is good. Strongly disagree _ Moderately disagree _ Slightly disagree _
Slightly agree _ Moderately agree _ Strongly agree _
—The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire*

Here among your barbed et ceteras, next week's Thanksgiving
and I've been reading, of all things, you,
who couldn't give thanks if your guts depended on it.

The sky today is downright Schopenhauerian:

dim and glum, light-sucked,
as if its purpose were to obfuscate the revealed.

Write with me a Psalm of Disorientation, Schopenhauer.
It annoyed you that God declared things good:
His compulsive ordering and self-congratulation,

His *fiat lux*. You stayed stuck in the *tohu bohu*, the waste-and-void.
Like a chaos god, you'd have left us all there,
starved—without even being able to know it—of Being.

Still, there's praise to be had, and we'll huddle
around its whitecrumble of coals,
rub and puff at our hands,

give our skin-friction and lung-warmth
back to ourselves
as if from some beneficent somewhere-else.

&c. _____ &c.

Wretched, miserable, you liked
to pile aspersions on our lives: *full
of trouble, devoid of pleasure*. I hear you

as I used to hear my father's
goddamnitalls and *to hell with its*
as he stood by the medicine cabinet

that housed his whisky bottle,
waiting there self-cursing till his drunk
could take.

&c. _____ &c.

Life, you said, was a disagreeable thing
so you'd decided to spend it
reflecting on it.

Smear it, more likely. Turn it
against itself, like a psychometaphysical
autoimmune disorder. Autoantibodies

in the bloodstream
Tearing cell from cell, as if
they had entered only to destroy.

That deepenmarrowed muttering
these tissues which at bottom ought not to be...

&c. _____ &c.

It isn't you I'm praising, you get that, don't you,
you who wanted
so fervidly

to *be* praised
for your "prize-winning essays"
when yours was the only entry,

whose publisher told you he feared
he was only printing wastepaper.
Your mother wrote, "Dear Arthur,

you are not an evil human;
you are nevertheless irritating and unbearable...
thus as you are, you are highly annoying."

She kept telling you your books would sit
in stacks unread,
and she was, if not maternal, at least right.

I'm reading you now, though: your "prize-winning essay"
on the Will. Highly annoying
thus as you still are.

&c. _____ &c.

The Will's your demiurge:
preexistent, unbegotten.
You say your rosaries on it:
Dolorous Mystery, Dolorous Mystery, Dolorous Mystery.

&c. _____ &c.

Life is good, you thought,
at teaching us

not to want it.

That's a lesson I keep learning
and forgetting, like a test
I'd flunk the day after I aced it.

&c. _____ &c.

What's the matter, Schopenhauer, after
a hundred and fifty years of being dead, isn't
anything yet mattering

enough? They found a planet yesterday
without a solar system, drifting through the cosmos,
unloosed from orbit's Will.

I thought of you. Said a little prayer.
Tohu bohu, it went. *Tohu bohu*
tohu bohu, waste and void,

void and waste. I don't know who heard me. The Will's
still implacable
as any god.

Bruce Beasley
201

²⁰¹ [Bruce Beasley](#), "[Disorientation Psalm: Tohu Bohu](#)," [Poetry Northwest](#), collected in [All Soul Parts Returned](#), BOA Editions, Ltd

In My 31st Year

*...once you turn 30, it's like they take
the heart and soul out of a man—
out of a black man—in this country,
and you don't wanna fight no more.
—2Pac*

OK, so it's true
that last week I let Andrew,
half in the bag, a little crumpled,
cuff my wrists, then
perhaps, too familiar, wing an arm
around my neck, &
then, he even called me his
boy. Yes, regrettably
I let it happen,
near the butler's pantry
in the dean's peat-green Victorian
with the mansard roof—
a mere eyeshot from
the visiting poet, black
(why'd I tell you that?), &
yes, I could have dug hard
my measured nudge—
could have drummed a song
of scotch & wind from his chest
with one thudding blow, Brother
Pac, were it not for my chronic
misfirings in mixed company.
By which, I mean: me, at those dry-
ass parties. & too,
that pesky other thing.
One thing worse than being too
seen, is the not being seen, in profile.
Ellison said something like that at 38.
I say, it is still very much like that.
Which is to say I waited,
until all the peanuts from the gallery
had gone. All the olives, the brie,
the mango chutney co-opted
from proper serving trays & safely
out of range to say, *Are you okay?*
Which, I'll admit, was weak.
Dear Pac, if there's a heaven
for a G, the red Rorschach splotches
of cop-shot bodies you must stomach,
floating toward the kingdom
each sunset. Yes, I know I don't see
what you see. But I read the internet
& history. Stand at rallies, weep

openly. I metabolize rage,
almost all of the time.
You're right.
I should know better
than let an old white man too close
to my throat. That's true.
But Pac, what would you do
for love in southern Indiana?
Maybe not ride or die, but a friend
who compliments your Goodwill tie,
when you miss the memo
about a customary cummerbund?
It's a slippery slope, & I know
I shouldn't let Drew slide.
You throw certain folks a rope
& they turn into cowboys.
Holler if you hear me,
sometimes it's hard to tell
the mozzarella from the brie.
O, say can you see
I'm warring inside? & who am I
even really talking to?

Marcus Wicker
202

²⁰² [Marcus Wicker, "In My 31st Year," *Boston Review*](#), collected in [Silencer](#), Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

Some Requirements

At lunch we will make a list
for things that exist.
Names ending
in hard consonants.
Concrete walls
without doors painted red.
Depictions of anatomical joy in textbooks
that have glossygreen covers.
Film sequels
that are cheerful.
Tomato plants that have almost flowered,
of the heirloom variety Black Krim.
The place where we'll eat
has a big menu that we can share, something like we have done before.
Otherwise I will stay home from lunch
and do a list of things that could easily get started.
Boastfulness expressed in shy mammals
whose legs may touch.
A broken whelk smelling of clean mittens
and mahogany that I will pull from near the sea.
Predictions about a hand of baccarat
that come nearly true when I lean forward in a sequined red gown.
A photograph of rose baskets in Morocco.
Nothing on earth could keep me from pressing it to my face.

Christine Gosnay
203

²⁰³ [Christine Gosnay](#), "[Some Requirements](#)," collected in [Even Years](#), [The Kent State University Press](#)

RSVP

The scribbled Bible verse in lieu of tip;
the table talk that grins and lays the blame;
the condom on the bed, its little rip.
The numbers in your phone without a name.

Randall Mann
204

Wartime

*The soul is always beautiful,
The universe is in order, everything is in its place.
—Whitman, The Sleepers*

i.

Oranges, Clementines, green daffodil stems, yellow horns, good light. Our mahogany table.

I wonder how many loaded bombers
flew from Maine.

I wonder what the ground trembling
felt like within it.

Here in Belmont, the paperboy rings our bell saying he's got the flu,
and could we call his Dad to take
him home. It is wet,
January, but Dad does not thank me.
He is disappointed in Mikey.

One line that stays from the Agamemnon is about the storm that brought
the Argives home from Troy:
"the sea bloomed with corpses."
The way wildflowers in the
desert overnight spring.

ii.

The premiere. Snow
in oversized flakes.
Predictions way too low.

In the room of negotiation
ministers defter than ghosts
touch for the cameras.

We joke, the student and I:
he needs a design, a logo
for the cover of his magazine.

I suggest *Death Before*
Dishonor, in scrolled letters,
heraldic, under crossed daggers,

or maybe it's only one,
the memory is dim: blue
and green lines of bright tattoo,

with red ink inserted
under the skin and shaped
to look like perfect drops.

“That’s the one you want, right?”

iii.

Years ago in the deserts of Utah
I would go days without words,

drugged with red rock, hiking in the Maze,
relieved of my life, touching the rock wall,

a chipped Kokopelli flute, fingertips
tracing the curved arch, the brittle spine.

Now this: printed on grainy manila,
page three, an earnest, moonfaced G.I.

at the window of a burned-out truck,
a corpse fried to the seat springs. Caption:

Iraqi Dead . . . No shit.
The G.I.’s lips teeter on the edge of hilarity.

Thinks he’s really seeing something.
How solemn the shape, stretched and still.

Two of us: pausing, gazing, bending, stopping.

iv.

Like the commanders from their maps
I leave the television and take to bed
the play-symbol derricks, tanks, planes,
the corridors of regimentally shaded terrain.

Out of the white nub of the earphone
I siphon in the talk radio. *Traitor*,
a woman flings the word as if
it could flare in our common night.

When I wake, the *Quick boys!*
of Owen’s nightmare
circles over the low, undisturbed
places where the poison has settled.

In the morning paper's quippy
column I catch a whiff:
"As for the old conscientious objection...
better leave it off the resumé."

v.

On the television, the fishbone-lean little general who is fond of the metaphor, "the fog of war." No one, he says, can see the whole picture. No one knows what the other fellow is doing. Sometimes, he says, it's not even clear to yourself what you are doing.

I remember my first morning in the Marine Corps. Long before sunlight, we were outside standing at attention, eyes locked straight ahead, feet at a forty-five degree angle, heels touching, and soles on the painted footprints which told the platoon how to form itself. The drill instructor announced that on his command each of us would turn right and step off with the left foot, and that thereafter the left foot would always be striking the deck to the sound of *Laeouff*. The right foot, he said, would be landing to the sound of *Heidle*. Strung together, they composed a marching cadence which sounded like this:

Laeouff—heidle—laeouw—heidle—laeouw—heidle—louw
...*laeouff—heidle—louw*
...*laeouff—heidle—louw*

Cadence, in other words, began with four beats, followed by a pair of trimeter lines. Yet every drill instructor put a signature on his cadence by cutting and twirling syllables like a scat singer. Along with the feel of improvisation, there was a thread of the joyful, as if the instructor were an outsized woodthrush presiding over a scale that nature had allotted and commanded him to sing. It was a beautiful sound floating over our heads and governing, guiding us to the mess hall in the early morning darkness.

Had I been asked that morning I would have said I understood Billy Budd. I would have said it was a parable about how the world cannot tolerate the persistently innocent. I would have said it was the archetypal "inside narrative," about wars in the soul, not wars of the European imperium. In pidgen, "Christ and Billy, same-same."

Today, though, I think of the strangest moment in that story. Just before Vere signals the hangman, Billy shouts without a trace of the fatal stammer, "God bless Captain Vere." Despite being appalled at what is happening to Billy, the crew repeats his blessing in antiphonal response. Maybe they are being ironic. Maybe they so love the Handsome Sailor they will repeat whatever he says. As Billy's body rises in the fleece-lined dawn, the warship beneath them cuts through moderate seas, a nation unto itself, ponderously cannoned.

vi.

A woman on the radio describing her mother's wounds:
World War II, the Philippines, an airport strafing
left her with six scooped-out, star-shaped scars
on her back and thighs, each with a rough ridge
of flesh the child who then believed in the sweet,
oily powers of Jergens hoped she could make vanish
if only she worked the lotion in deeply enough.

*These were wonders we had no
account whereof. Thus we questioned
the child vigorously...*

How many times, she was asked, did you try this?

*and in time
she admitted slipping through keyholes,
and had upon occasion been a cat,
a mare, a stoat.*

War, she answered, disfigures everyone.

All matter is dead. We know this.

vii.

What is it then between us?

Is it a cold snap, the Square empty, a taxi breaking
from line and heading straight at me,
its wake whipping into chill benzene wind?

Is it the newsstand in silver light, tail glossies
declaring the war in thick, opulent letters,
announcing we are stoic and firm?

There is something in us that loves this.

It lances a pressure, leeches a poison,
shades the trivial in lurid color: O sweet
portents, O death which helps us feel!

This is how our uneasiness works,
all our goods waving like the legumes
of the prairie under an utterly empty blue.

Imagine the pearly chenille on the bed,
the Smith & Wesson revolver oiled,
the polished holster glinting with prohibition,

the miraculous blue tint of the forging,
the sweet heft, the woodpanel grip,
almost human to the touch, notched.

Or think of your own foot hard on the accelerator,
eight lanes from Logan down to two in the tunnel,
and the fenders nosing near, *Fuck you!*

Or the subway roaring under the city on the hill,
the gold dome of the State House rising
like a mortar shell from its tube.

Step off the train and ride the escalator up,
into the cold snap, the Square,
the taxi heading straight for you.

Sometimes I think there's nothing left between us.
Not even words.

viii.

What was the state of your knowledge concerning eternal life last spring?

I knew the spirits of the dead were around.
I believed, but did not know for certain,
that they inhabited the forms of the beautiful.

Please be more specific.

In certain slants of light, in sea-feathers
on a jetty, in the rustling of palms.
Perhaps there were others less congenial.

Did you recognize any?

Of course not. They were anonymous,
abstract. More like rhythms.
I gave them names of those I loved.

Go on.

I remember they were plentiful that year,
a swarming light and shadow play,
abundant, yet easy to ignore.

Fred Marchant

205

²⁰⁵ Fred Marchant, "Wartime," *AGNI*, collected in [The Tipping Point](#), [The Word Works](#)

To Have No

What could it be?
Friends? Purpose in life? To live
And breathe, I don't know
The sun's out but it's in
The center of the galaxy or swarm
Or pickaxe, I've got more pizzaz than you
Land? Oil? Universe?
I can rise from the dead, can you?
I got up too early, I'm falling asleep
My father told me to have sex to prove
I'm not gay, my mother told me
To eat, eat, eat famous cucumbers
Resting in a box of snow
Selected by movie stars

Bernadette Mayer
206

²⁰⁶ [Bernadette Mayer](#), "[To Have No](#)," collected in [Works & Days, New Directions](#)

Love Poem Ending With Typewriters

And maybe no one's happy,
I think to myself, usually during
the plane ride home or as I read dead French
philosophers on the couch,

only a child's height away
from my girlfriend, who, for real
for real, is a Platonic ideal in her own
right, all any reasonable citizen

of desire might dare
to imagine in these times
of breakup over text message
& earnest tweets left

unanswered for days. We fit
like the grooves on a bullet.
We both love Rilke & want
children & think furniture

design is pretty important.
Three months into our tour
of the human condition,
I dropped half my rent

on a Corinthian leather sofa
because it sounded cool
& she didn't eat anything
with preservatives in it,

so I figured, *No biggie.*
This is what all
functioning adults do. They lie
extensively. They lie

awake. They lie
on their side, eyes ajar,
lover dreaming of cormorants
right next to them, counting

the minutes until even this bows
to the sovereignty of rot. Beloved,
if I came from anything unworthy
of shame, I would say so. I wouldn't

brood across the country this way.
If I knew how to stop calling
your presence pity,
my therapist's couch would grow cold

as a slaughterhouse.
And is that what you want?
To break such a flawless routine?
To stop screaming at typewriters, expecting rain?

Joshua Bennett
207

²⁰⁷ [Joshua Bennett](#), "[Love Poem Ending With Typewriters](#)," collected in [The Sobbing School](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Housework

If noon weren't wrapping me in a mothy cardigan,
if coffee stains on the butcher block counter
didn't stutter, *Rorschach, Rorschach*,
if four of the maples out front were lilies,

if I'd thought the second blow job
I ever gave was as daunting as the first,
if the curtains were Polish lace
instead of olive green cotton duck,

if fashion magazines prayed to God,
if Jennifer and Brenda and Karen weren't bitches,
if cemeteries had ballrooms with calliope bands
and graves had fainting couches and twinkling lights,

if hours robbed banks or sang whiskeyish arias,
if Simone Weil had fallen in love
with a makeup girl at Harrods—red lips
kissing red lips, rough hands, pink powder—

if the television weren't in league with the toaster,
if two o'clock weren't the same as six,
if six didn't rhyme with *alone*, if the phone rang,
if the bed could imagine a cleansing by fire.

Landon Godfrey
208

²⁰⁸ [Landon Godfrey](#), "[Housework](#)," collected in [Second-Skin Rhinestone-Spangled Nude Soufflé Chiffon Gown](#), [Cider Press](#)

Chandler Brossard

When I was twenty years old
and desperate and broke,
I worked part-time in a used bookstore
in Middletown, CT.
I hated my job, hated the cramped store,
hated the paperbacks
that came there as if to die

+

and more than anything,
I wanted to write something lasting,
a novel I scrawled in notebooks
called "Black Wing"
about a dark-haired girl,
prized during the day for her beauty and intellect,
who by night
killed off poseurs, the ill-read, the clumsy-of-mind,
the bombastic, thick-fingered, and mean.

+

Somehow, through incompetence or charity,
the young woman who owned the store
never quite fired me

+

though one morning, I found an old man
at my place at the cash register.
He wore a tight leather jacket, a turtleneck,
a thick moustache,
and when he saw me,
he took off his glasses
and set his book on the dust-speckled counter.

This is Chandler Brossard,
the owner told me.
You'll work with him now.
He looked pale and sick.

+

It was meant to transcend mystery,
it was meant to
live in contradictions, to be existential and enigmatic—
the dark-haired girl
destroying what was not beautiful
and the ugly, one-legged detective who pursued her,
but could never apprehend her—

+

Chandler Brossard,
thin-faced and coughing,
Chandler Brossard tilted back in his chair,
reading a book in the sun-lit dust motes, *What are you writing?*
he asked me one day,
and I closed my notebook.
Nothing, I said,
looking at what age had done to his hands—

+

He was, the owner told me,
a famous writer once,
but now he was dying. Chandler Brossard's
We Walk In Darkness grew yellow
on the shelf.
And he smelled like an old man, sweet
and thick,
Vicks VapoRub and snuff
and mint—

+

How the knife comes down, I thought,
typing away that night
while one of my roommates
burned his fingers on a joint
and the other
practiced his guitar—
the knife comes down
in the flesh of the critic,
in the sycophant, the vulgar,
and the room grew colder
because no one paid our bills—

+

and I wanted Chandler Brossard
to say something wise
but he was just an old man.
And when I finally told him about “Black Wing”
the plot seemed suddenly
contrived,
ugly truth pursuing beauty, beauty
making our foibles
clear, the dark-haired girl
who posed the horrible bodies
for the one-legged detective to discover—

+

By then, I’d read one of Brossard’s novels
and found it full of squalor,
familiar—

And he’d grown sicker, pale and unsteady,
though he still walked from the hospital each morning
and sat behind the counter selling paperbacks.

My boss didn’t know I’d been kicked out of my apartment,
that when I couldn’t find a friend to put me up,
I unrolled a sleeping bag in the bookstore

+

and what I remember most about those sad days
is lying on the floor
among stacks of dying books,
the sense of them rising above me in darkness.
So many minds at work,
so much captured
Thinking,

+

while at his apartment,
Chandler Brossard had a few months to live

+

and I slipped into sleep, dreamed of dark-haired
angels,
angels of squalor, angels of anger and forgetfulness
and strange mercy
in the black air above my head,
angels descending
to smother me with beauty
and ambition and paper wings—

+

and even if the detective
caught her, what then?
Would he know something more
about immortal beauty?

+

He would still be nothing,
a dying, childless old man
who had preserved a bit of himself in a book—

+

Immortality figured as the workings of a mind
of prose—
how I wanted that to be true—
caught in the sunlit trap

+

that sense of eternal light streaming
through store windows,
its fingers playing over my
face,
warm and gentle, the scent of books and dust—
how lovely to lie there without meaning or ambition,
how deathless—
and Chandler Brossard
standing over me,
kicking me gently awake
with his boot.

Kevin Prufer
209

²⁰⁹ [Kevin Prufer](#), "[Chandler Brossard](#)," [New Ohio Review](#), collected in [How He Loved Them](#), [Four Way Books](#)

[If the dead have preferences...]

If the dead have preferences they must prefer the future tense

Will you be sitting by a window in this year
As though asking affirms

What wouldn't they affirm
Shirt hung for a curtain

Having washed it in the sink each night
My ship will be the turning one

Its sail is shining rain

Zach Savich
210

²¹⁰ [Zach Savich](#), "[\[If the dead have preferences...\]](#)," [Under a Warm Green Linden](#), collected in [Day Bed](#), [Black Ocean](#)

Kid Charlemagne

On the paper's front page the crimes of gang leaders
spoken of as newsworthy in Appalachian locker-rooms
and Utopia Ave. workshops, but back of the Metro section
half-forgotten Owsley Stanley 76 "the artisan of acid"
dead in Queensland Australia, crashed— jewelry design
learned in prison & eclipse-proof audio engineering
the twin skills of his life beyond brews of LSD—
his children— pining, devastated—have planted
an oar in the sandy embankment where inexplicably
he'd ditched his car into a tree, the piper
paid at last for having picked the celestial locks.

Some of us get to burn on the obituary pages
like moonlight on the Ganges burning the bodies already
burnt to ashes by untroubled fire in earlier sunlight—
each man's story is the story of a rake's progress,
each woman's song is chickenskin music & curses
raging against the rake who cowers inside a commuter.
You have to live once & for all as a character
inside whatever remains of who you were—
your zest for cherry pastries, your snake-free face,
your prior convictions & inventions & bad
penmanship & demands for meat at every meal.

Each story is the story of someone in a comic strip—
his speech balloon over-inflated he floats above
those who think they knew him, listening:

"His was the acid behind the Acid Tests," "He
believed that a coming Ice Age would annihilate
the Northern Hemisphere," "In a song he hated,
the singer called him Kid Charlemagne,"

"A heart attack he suffered in the 90's he ascribed
to eating broccoli as a child, forced on him
by his mother"—avatar of the melting horizon
he leaves behind an ocean where an empty rowboat
drifts slowly on the indecipherable water.

David Rivard
211

²¹¹ [David Rivard](#), "[Kid Charlemagne](#)," collected in [Standoff](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

lotto motto

first thing, i'm gonna paint the toothbrush red. i'm gonna quit my jalopy. i'm gonna whip up a few dead horses and put them out to passion, i'm gonna wash up on some distant score, first thing, i'm gonna get the expel outta dodge, i'm gonna run like the wound, i'm gonna wash away our skins. i'm gonna blow this icicle point, first thing, first thing i'm gonna do, i'm gonna freeze dry my clown wig. i'm gonna stumble under your breath, yeah, i'm gonna make like elvis and exit the gilding. i'm gonna spit out that taste of punch, then wash my mouth out with hope. are you kidding me? first thing, i'm gonna hit the toad, i'm gonna get down to brass tracks, i'm gonna head for the thrills, if it's the last thing i do.

Evie Shockley
212

²¹² [Evie Shockley](#), "[lotto motto](#)," [Boston Review](#), collected in [semiautomatic](#), [Wesleyan University Press](#)

Strology Cancer

Quiet the dead are these days, yeah? For the watchmaking
Cancers, at the end of the month, watch her get a
manicure. How her four fingers caress the back of the
manicurist's hand while her thumb is being shaped into a
coffin. Count that embrace: count on your fingers, count in
your head. Count eight clocks, they don't talk back. The
clocks will keep working. Cancer keep working. Keep
time. Time don't talk back. One clock says she will have
your baby. Another sees you by the curtains listening to
jazz in REM. The dead let light in; they use your terror.
The universe wants you to stop throwing up. Three
whiskeys, four hours, and later, you will find yourself over
a monocle five minutes too long. For the watchmaking
Cancers, at the end of the month, count eight clocks, count
nine. Take a shot. With your ten fingers, tick her mouth;
watch her two hands that won't hold yours. Between the
14th and 18th, lie next to her, your lesser frame a lesson.
The moon is a hammock. A hammock is a moon. Loosen
up, Cancer. Lie down without moving, ask how she's
doing, and let the dead come.

Shauna Barbosa
213

²¹³ [Shauna Barbosa](#), "[Strology Cancer](#)," collected in [Cape Verdean Blues](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

The Library

I cut my father's nails to the quick.
First the left foot, thick with paralysis,
then the brittle right. His feet tend
towards one another like the pages
of a flipped paperback.

So many half moons litter the floor,
this summer I am thirty, kneeling
at my father's feet to stanch the seep
of red with both my thumbs.

Like my father, Whitman suffered
a stroke at fifty-three. His body electric opens—
If anything is sacred the human body is sacred—
the summer we move my father's library

and load the books into shelves in the
family case whose carved mahogany face hangs
above the milky glass. I turn and turn
its key—not stripped after these years

of reaching for ghost stories, local
histories—my parents' old Joy of Sex camouflaged
in brown paper to hide its dirty spine.
Now I take what I want,

that's how I know what I've lost.

I don't ask permission;
I soak in the mysteries,
arcana of old wars, his self-help from the '70s:
Games People Play, I'm Ok, You're Ok.

As after his death the boys
Whitman favored, who bathed
and drove him, his pretty friends
—those beasts—
the housekeeper said,
broke into the basement and drank all
the dead man's best champagne.

Rebecca Black
214

²¹⁴ [Rebecca Black, "The Library," *Meridian*](#)

“I’m Never Drinking Again for Two Days” —D. Wagner

My friends are sad a lot. How did that happen? Rename the Dead Sea the Shut Up, It’s Fine Sea. Lobsters do not live in the Shut Up, It’s Fine Sea. Lobsters are full of trash & live forever. However, they only carry very small amounts of immortality at a time & can be killed by external means.

To cling like moss is to cling in two distinct ways: like the sporophyte, ephemerally; like the gametophyte, structurally, persistently.

Salt water can be the driest thing. I am told in the salt desert, “The king of town is whoever receives the largest check from the government.” Three girls swing their legs on a tailgate. Like wind chimes. There is much laughter here.

Bradley K. Meyer
215

²¹⁵ [Bradley K. Meyer, “I’m Never Drinking Again for Two Days’ —D. Wagner,” *decomp*](#)

Vanitas

Striated stones returned to the wrong river, blue house
falling into the sun, all the systems refusing to be allegory—
when I was fully present I thought presence would
kill me, vines forcing through windows and the soul-
sucking slowing of time when I broke inside. Here
is your weighted blanket, here is your poppy, I know
a woman just waiting for elegy to show up in her brain,
alive only for that, and then she can go. Sometimes
I pretend form will save us, and sometimes I worry
about the way the reiterative soothes me, stones lined
on the sill so my mind stays still in this realm. Here
is the landmass tattooed on my body, here are the flowers
we've planted to cover up what we've done, creeping
myrtle, creeping phlox, creeping thyme, none of this easy,
what with the man shoving the girl's face into the ground,
what with the world burning down, creeping alyssum
shock-yellowing everything, sea of stems pinning down
absolutely nothing. Daily I wake inside expiation's
failure, bee brooch pinned to my breast instead of
a cross, testament to the foolishness of placing pleasure
before all we could not bear, tamarind whiskey and silk
bras, our souls the color of propolis but our monkey hearts
marbled with folly. The way a command can also
be a plea: Fuck me, the imperative our truest tense because
who doesn't want to top from bottom, really, rule and
abdicate all in one breath? I know a widow who didn't
make love for ten years, slow death my mind can't quite
grasp, glancing then glancing away. The very air tastes
of sugar and my hilly body's one hell of a gateway and when
I first saw the statue of the great god Pan I wanted very
much to mount him, lick that sweet spot where pelvis
meets furry haunch. I gray splendid, I come in palms, and
I would never, ever be a girl again, despite all the years'
terrible knowledge. Here is a necklace of hummingbird
feathers, here is musk from the just-shot deer, here
is the honeybee leashed on the reddest thread. We move
through these long last days touched, which is to say
fingered, which is to say moved, which is to say mad.
The stranger carves a gold tunnel through the gold book.
The river faces up neon, glows and glows. I set
my glasses by the bed, walk the river path. Show me
the gold tunnel. Show me where the gold tunnel goes.

Kerri Webster

216

²¹⁶ [Kerri Webster](#), "[Vanitas](#)," [Grimoire](#), collected in [The Trailhead](#), [Wesleyan University Press](#)

Angel's Trumpet

In order to tell him he would die
a few weeks shy of 28, I needed only
to place two vials of brown glass
on the bedside table, in front of his tissues and tulips.

“Which are they?” he asked.

“Angelica,” I said first, reading from the book,
“*angelica, archangelica*,
protection of the angelic realm.”

Then the other (almost casually)
“*datura candida*, Angel's Trumpet” and did not read
“for when the soul must utterly surrender.”

It was not my place, was it?—
to put the cold embouchure to my lips
and blow.

Patrick Donnelly
217

²¹⁷ [Patrick Donnelly](#), “[Angel's Trumpet](#),” collected in [The Charge](#), Ausable Press

from *Ironstone Whirlygig*

After the conversation tonight, I wanted to be outside, naked. I put on the kimono a friend's mother made me and went down toward the dock.

I am sure when I do things like this that I won't come back.

I wanted to go to the dock, to be close to the water. I was sure on the way down that I was alone, just like I wanted to be. But as soon as I started down the ramp a door opened somewhere on Cambridge Avenue. A light flickered up near the top of the hill. The tide was going out. Still, there was enough water to swim away if I needed to. But it's the water I am afraid of. For years I have thought that if I should go it would be the water that would take me. I don't want to be afraid of it anymore.

I stood there on the dock for some time, gathering courage. It's not that I am afraid of being naked. I am afraid of being naked alone with the ocean. By this time I am shaking. I don't feel safe. I haven't felt safe for years. I was determined not to give in to it. This summer I will no longer be afraid of the ocean. I will go in on the first count of three. I dropped my kimono and stood there, in the moonlight, for only enough time to know I was there.

Tired from the heat of almost-summer. Windows still shut and fans still away. Afternoon rain in car windows. Baby crying upstairs.

Clean the spiders off of the new bookcase. Clean up puzzles. Move a speaker. Listen to that song. When I go deaf. When I go deaf.

Wash the dishes. Sneak dolls and Teletubbies into the wash. Slip mother's MRI behind the new bookcase. Think of that song. When I go deaf.

Pick up newspapers. Consider gardening at night. Doll's head against the washer. Think about water. Deep water. Hang clothes to dry.

Find a box. Fold a blanket. Try to find things I don't need. When I go deaf.

It's hard, these days, to find a thing to say. I mean to find a thing to say that someone might say something back to. It's hard to have someone say something back. It is all too much.

Last night there were six drummers waiting to play. They each had their own style. One a little more upright, another had jazzy flick of the wrist. One played earnestly. One without a care in the world. I was happy listening to each of them.

Today at the kitchen table we talked about words and poets and people. The sun was shining through the dirty window behind him. That window is my window, I thought. I am a housewife with dirty windows. I should clean that window, I thought. I know I won't.

I don't know what makes better words or better drummers or better poets or better people. I know what makes a window dirty. It is dirt on the window.

Two days after Christmas and the emergency room is full. She didn't know what she was doing, a week's worth of pills. Forty-two pills. A week's worth.

In the next room a man has taken something and fallen off of a fishing boat. He is cold. He screams for two hours while they try to figure out his name. Down the hall a little girl is so sick they send her straight to Children's. An old woman wanders from room to room doing EKGs. We watch as her heart speeds up and slows down. We wait to be moved. A woman with chest pains sits and waits alone. A man with a blown-out knee waits on a stretcher.

The next day when I go to the hospital to visit I find a slide on the wet pavement. The corner of the Public Garden by Beacon and Arlington. The corner I sat in so many times. The edge of the statue shows and I remember what it says. Neither shall there be any more pain.

Amanda Cook
218

²¹⁸ [Amanda Cook](#), "[After the conversation tonight...](#)," collected in [Ironstone Whirlygig](#), [Bootstrap Press](#)

Look

It matters what you call a thing: *Exquisite* a lover called me. *Exquisite*.

Whereas *Well, if I were from your culture, living in this country*, said the man outside the 2004 Republican National Convention, *I would put up with that for this country*;

Whereas I felt the need to clarify: *You would put up with TORTURE, you mean* and he proclaimed: *Yes*;

Whereas what is your life;

Whereas years after they LOOK down from their jets and declare my mother's Abadan block PROBABLY DESTROYED, we walked by the villas, the faces of buildings torn off into dioramas, and recorded it on a hand-held camcorder;

Whereas it could take as long as 16 seconds between the trigger pulled in Las Vegas and the Hellfire missile landing in Mazar-e-Sharif, after which they will ask *Did we hit a child? No. A dog*. they will answer themselves;

Whereas the federal judge at the sentencing hearing said *I want to make sure I pronounce the defendant's name correctly*;

Whereas this lover would pronounce my name and call me *Exquisite* and lay the floor lamp across the floor, softening even the light;

Whereas the lover made my heat rise, rise so that if heat sensors were trained on me, they could read my THERMAL SHADOW through the roof and through the wardrobe;

Whereas *you know we ran into like groups like mass executions. w/ hands tied behind their backs. and everybody shot in the head side by side. its not like seeing a dead body walking to the grocery store here. its not like that. its iraq you know its iraq. its kinda like acceptable to see that there and not—it was kinda like seeing a dead dog or a dead cat lying—*;

Whereas I thought if he would LOOK at my exquisite face or my father's, he would reconsider;

Whereas *You mean I should be sent MISSING because of my family name?* and he answered *Yes. That's exactly what I mean*, adding that his wife helped draft the PATRIOT Act;

Whereas the federal judge wanted to be sure he was pronouncing the defendant's name correctly and said he had read all the exhibits, which included the letter I wrote to cast the defendant in a loving light;

Whereas today we celebrate things like his transfer to a detention center closer to home;

Whereas his son has moved across the country;

Whereas I made nothing happen;

Whereas *ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life?* It is even a THERMAL SHADOW, it appears so little, and then vanishes from the screen;

Whereas I cannot control my own heat and it can take as long as 16 seconds between the trigger, the Hellfire missile, and *A dog*, they will answer themselves;

Whereas *A dog*, they will say: Now, therefore,

Let it matter what we call a thing.

Let it be the exquisite face for at least 16 seconds.

Let me LOOK at you.

Let me look at you in a light that takes years to get here.

Solmaz Sharif
219

²¹⁹ [Solmaz Sharif](#), "[Look](#)," [PEN Poetry Series](#), collected in [Look](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Festival Circuit

Crowned beauties smile with their teeth
strong enough to bite through the necks
of prey or even the predators
they sometimes grasp behind their heads,
nonchalant about the venom.
Who has time for poison
when shotguns gleam twice as bright,
sometimes fire of their own volition?
“People first,” Carmen trills
while keeping tabs on her neighbors,
their penchants for novelty mailboxes.
She’s a girl raised on raw beets
and paperback horror, so nobody trusts her
alone with their pets. Yesterday, her motto
stumbled, stuck in the news cycle of pop star
chemical weapons, and she hummed
theme songs, anything to keep her knees
and feet facing the same direction.
It’s not that far to Los Angeles.
This town wants a hoodwink,
a hint of what little concrete keeps out.
Instead it gets hootenannies and fair booths
in praise of turnips, of grits,
of local creek water moonshine.
In praise of livestock, of machine operators,
their clavicles protruding like rusted-out gutters.
In praise of the makeshift parking lots,
of grease, of Carmen saying “*Buenos días, ya’ll*”
to the hooting of glamour-starved whistlers,
lust making the pigs nervous in their pens.

Erica Wright
220

²²⁰ Erica Wright, “Festival Circuit,” *Dialogist*, collected in [All the Bayou Stories End with Drowned](#), Black Lawrence Press

In Which I Fail, Again, to be Vestal

Her body is a temple—

by which I mean monks
sluice her floors clean
with buckets of wastewater;

by which I mean her toenails
glitter, her skin freckled in marble,
sparrows nesting behind her ears;

by which I mean the crease
between breast and rib is anointed
with sweat and safflower oil

in which she bathes her
confessional twice a week,
untangling her sacraments;

by which I mean I envy her.
This body could be a temple
but would rather have its ass

slapped: the only gild on my calf
a rising bruise of bite marks.
I am the dog at her front gate

whining after the gutter fight,
tapping what washes down
those stone steps with a tongue

afraid to know its name.

Sandra Beasley
221

²²¹ Sandra Beasley, "[In Which I Fail, Again, to be Vestal](#)," collected in [Theories of Falling](#), New Issues Press

Swimming Hole

You can stand on the brink of the gorge and jump
if you like your bathing suit. If the water's not too far,
too hot, too fat with the pee foam of cattle or fish
and the soggy bodies of boys, girls, men, women
and the Spartan elderly with their floating picnic debris
of supple infant charges and *their* toy guns
and other bright orange pacifiers floating in the creek
you went to in '78 sometimes for the sake of fun you guess
or really because you were after negligence
as in to find a joint and smoke it, a beer and drink it,
a boy to do him with a Chevy to speed in
or a Ford to get way down and hide in
since in point of fact your bathing suit was kind of
nasty, came from Texas or some other trash heap
or discount barrel or psychotic middle drawer
of birthed-out cat blood and fur ruminant
and just try to say otherwise, you nebulous little idiot.
you long-ago fuss I think of poof I think and whoosh.

Adrian Blevins
222

²²² [Adrian Blevins](#), "[Swimming Hole](#)," collected in [Appalachians Run Amok](#), [Two Sylvias Press](#)

Why I Hate the Internet

When one is on the Internet
In the middle of fear
You can find a Mashable article
About abandoned shopping malls

Each image more horrible than the last
Each click to a burned out neon room
To an article then
About Courtney Cox and Pennzoil

Why am I tired of the Internet
I have no friends here
I write down words in my room
For a thousand hours and no likes

So, instead of the Internet I will make a little shop
In an art gallery and tell no one
In my dirty leopard coat it will be 1992 forever
Burned out hamburger sign in the foreseeable distance

Why am I tired of the Internet
Well where is my pussy, my old old pussy
No, my pussy belongs in the hallowed books of yore
Not in this time, or online

Dorothea Lasky
223

²²³ [Dorothea Lasky](#), "[Why I Hate The Internet](#)," [The Brooklyn Rail](#), collected in [Milk](#), [Wave Books](#)

The Oldest Animal Writes a Letter Home

To That Mutter and That Fodder:

What ayls me? Maybe a revolupshun is in my hearts and my hearts is loosing? Send bayonets. Let the bayonets be the kyndness that shall foughts to keeps me here. How good are bayonets at foughting? The CollekTorah sayeth "Very, very good." I am scayred. If my hearts loose is that my End or is that my Enter Mission? Alpsy I am wonderling how many moufrasps is between an ayl and an end? Eleventh? That is so lyttle. Alpsy I am wonderling how my hearts could loose if my hearts beliefs in so muchly? For instance, byrds. For instance, That Mutter. For instance, byrds again. Why is it feeling inside my firs like I (The Oldest Animal) is abouts to leave this Foryst for the Uver Foryst? Send one plain ambeless. Maybe wif a sirens to scayr the loose away. I am not ready. Remember that nights when That Mutter wored around my necks a scarf and letted me outs because auf that rule? Who belongs to that rule? The marmalades? The marmalades sayeth "No, it is the herrings." And the herrings sayeth "No, it is the marmalades." Whoever is beholdens to that rule shall driveth that ambeless with bayonets in its hoofs. Those isn't even my wyrds. Those is the wyrds of the bible. That is how I know I isn't alone. The bible was thinksing auf me when it got wrotted. The bible alpsy thinkses auf who is begat and who is slew. That is how all the begats and the slews is alpsy not alone. That maketh me a lyttle hapsy. I herd in the Uver Foryst there is a Mutter who would never wore around my necks a scarf and letted me outs because auf that rule. I herd That Mutter is alpsy called Abegill. I herd her hayr is yellow. I isn't ready for her yellow hayr.

Sincerply,

The Oldest Animal (sighted in contents)

Sabrina Orah Mark

224

²²⁴ [Sabrina Orah Mark](#), "[The Oldest Animal Writes a Letter Home](#)," *diode*, collected in [Tsim Tsum](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Kafka's Axe & Michael's Vest

for Michael Burkard

Still winter. Snowing, still. Can it even be called action, this patience
in the form of gravity overdressed in gray?

Days like this, the right silence can be an action, an axe,
right through the frozen sea, as Kafka calls for. A necessary smashing,
opening. Though silence can also be a shattering, closing.

Think of peace & how the Buddhists say it is found through silence.
Think of silence & how Audre Lorde says it will not protect you.

Think of silence as a violence, when silence means being made
a frozen sea. Think of speaking as a violence, when speaking is a house
that dresses your life in the tidiest wallpaper. It makes your grief

sit down, this house. It makes you chairs when you need
justice. It keeps your rage room temperature. I've been thinking

about how the world is actually unbearable.
About all those moments of silence we're supposed to take.
Each year, more moments, less life, & perhaps

the most monastic of monks are right to take vows
of silence that last a decade.

Though someone else (probably French) says our speaking
was never ours; our thoughts & selves housed
by history, rooms we did not choose, but live in.

Think of Paul Celan, living
in the bone rooms of German. Living, singing.

What does it mean, to sing in the language of those
who have killed your mother,
would kill her again? Does meaning shatter, leaving

behind the barest moan? This English, I bear it, a master's
axe, yet so is every tongue—red with singing & killing.

Are we even built for peace? I think of breath & my teacher,
Michael, one of the least masterly, most peaceful people I know,
& Kafka's number one fan. I think of the puffy blue vest Michael wears

when his breaths turn white. Even when I'm doing my best
to think axes & walls, brave monks & unbearable houses,

the thought of Michael in his bit-too-big deep blue vest
leaks in. & I don't think I will ever stop trying to sneak
into casual conversation the word "ululation." If only all language

could be ululation in blue vests. If silence could always be
as quiet as Michael sitting with his coffee & his book, rereading.

Chen Chen
225

²²⁵ [Chen Chen](#), "[Kafka's Axe & Michael's Vest](#)," *Narrative Northeast*, collected in [When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities](#), BOA Editions, Ltd

DiVida I am's

after John Berryman

I am crooked petticoat jamboree
a tall girl whose balding bleeds

I am the magistrate's fool
so smart I do public school

I am a terrestrial body float
ocean the tsunami broke

I am the enemy of the sublime
slow move tractor slime

I am civil service blow
Wall Street man who hugs your dough

I am transformer queer in surplus drag
A woman whose tits sag

I am Afghan soldier with two hands clear
peace-keeping deaf ear blind ear

I am the homeless who wash in sinks
whose full-bodied veils chink

Decorated soldier in parade
the war on democracy terror raids

I am the off-key subway balladeer
who cries *foul uncle* on TV

I am uptown bodega snow
twin-tower afterglow

I am Zip Car stalled in park
leap year evangelist's bark

It's all clear at the family barbeque
why grandpa spews tobacco
why kissing cousins snake and break
why global greedy bastards gape

In vain in vain in vain it's all the same
I am DiVida. My every name.

Monica Hand

226

²²⁶ [Monica Hand](#), "[DiVida I am's](#)," collected in [DiVida](#), [Alice James Books](#)

The Resurrection: Sweden

The idea that there is such a thing as the elemental
is an old one. Why resist?
There's fire, and then there's water. Earth and sky,
Simon says. At the center of the park a scale model of a ceremonial kiva, sealed
except for one secret entrance the carnies use for smokes.
They've been taking my money all day
and I'm tired of it.
Every seduction duplicates a gesture
the real world vends for free:
vertigo, weightlessness, the texture of corduroy
on an autumn night somewhere downstate, in the sticks,
with the lights coming on
the same way they are right now.
I can hear them laughing.
I'm tired of it. Bursting through the sod & stucco won't help.
Remembering that Marsden Hartley sketched the two crucified thieves
as a bodybuilder & a clown comes closer,
only his Christ had no face.
Hartley was, essentially, a landscape painter
who remembered, periodically, how much water there was in the human body.
He was ugly. He liked garish colors.
All summer he cruised the county fairs of Maine.
His brutalized Christ had no face.

G.C. Waldrep
227

²²⁷ [G.C. Waldrep](#), "[The Resurrection: Sweden](#)," [New England Review](#), collected in [Disclamor](#), [BOA Editions](#)

from *On Imagination*

What irks me: that artists of all kinds are always praising the imagination and telling us that it is the single most wonderful and important thing in the world of the human psyche; they speak as if there were nothing pejorative or destructive about it. But the imagination is a full, rounded, complex thing, and, like any daimon, has more than one aspect.

Shakespeare imagined Othello and that was a good thing. Othello imagined that Desdemona was unfaithful to him, and that was a bad thing.

I once sat next to a young woman at dinner who believed that the CIA had bugged her salad, and it terrified her, and she was unable to live a normal life because of her imagining this terrible thing, and I think this is a negative aspect of the imagination.

Later I thought: well, she had a marvelous point after all, because very often when washing lettuces I find a slug, and my lettuce really is “bugged,” and I thought my thought was a positive aspect, because I was using my imagination when I had this thought.

When I was a child I talked to my dolls and my dolls talked to me and we were very happy together. Sometimes too I would talk to flowers or stones and we were very happy together. I know a man who when he was a boy played with marbles and each marble had a name. One day one of the marbles was lost, never to be found again, and all the other marbles, along with the boy, held a funeral for the marble who was gone for good.

Perhaps you are thinking “ah, play, the robust imagination of a child at play, we must regain that and engage in it as often as we can,” but that would be naïve, for it is far more complex than a game of marbles: the imagination has its own life and its own autonomy, the imagination is not what you play with, the imagination *plays with you*. It has the power to both create and destroy, in form and deform. The funeral made the boy very sad, even sadder than a real funeral, he said.

Mary Ruefle
228

²²⁸ [Mary Ruefle](#), “[What irks me...](#),” collected in [On Imagination](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Teddy Agonistes

Summer after high school I lived alone on my family's farm in Carpinteria, California.

I didn't know a hoe from a spade but still reveled in the new role, begging my mother to send money so I could rent a tractor and disc the field.

I disced the field, had my neighbor take pictures of me discing the field, then sent those pictures to my ex-girlfriend.

Right before the photo I mashed hay into my hair.

At night I put on my Walkman and drove the tractor up and down the lightless street, the speed of the machine shocking, the sycamore branches raining down their sweet womanish incense.... I'd listen to Emmylou Harris sing, *You think you're a cowboy but you're only a kid*, never once thinking I was a kid.

During the day I spent hours not working but prayerfully wandering the barn trying to be spellbound by every mote in every last shaft of light, then scrawling T. S. Eliot on the walls of the hayloft.

Once I found a dead owl and for some reason washed it with a hose.

And late at night, lying on my back, the sounds of the coyotes pinned me to my bed till I became an infinitely petalling blossom of strange clear dread.

Teddy Macker
229

²²⁹ Teddy Macker, "[Teddy Agonistes](#)," [New Ohio Review](#)

Our Lady of Cinderblock

You've seen the made-for-TV movie: a fling
on a fall weekend with a fencer, not one
of the frat boys but still too cool for me—
upperclassman, upper class. I was
beer-sloshed in the whiplash of first failure,
a test that afternoon I couldn't finish,
questions that swerved from comprehension,
blank page handed to the morbid TA.

I sat on a stoop in unseasonable warmth, studied
his calves and triceps while he stood near
the keg. I wanted to see if I could do it, deliberate,
not the way it was with boyfriends,
the patient fumbling, the hapless consent, but zero
to flesh in a single hour, from a stranger to
hands in hair, shoulders, breath. Turns out I could.

At Thanksgiving I was late. I chewed
the string of my hooded sweatshirt on the train back
to campus. Finals week I started to shake—
night sweats, vertigo. I slept. I stopped going
to the dining hall or the lounge on my floor.
Three or four days, no more, watching the light
change the color of the cinderblock wall
from almond to almost rose to gold, a packed wall
where I made out a haloed matron's face.
I lay there on the bed rolling a piece of putty
between my fingers, pushing my foot where
the corner of the poster kept coming up. Then

there was pain and I lay on the floor. I tried
to spell *gelatin*, *sacrilege*, *hemorrhage*, wondered
if it had a head and a tail. My roommate's
lime-green water bottle had rolled under the bed
and I thought she'd be happy I found it.
She was on the swim team. When she came back
from weight training she thought I'd tried
to kill myself, climbed over the bed to avoid
the puddle and get the phone. Campus
EMS seemed eager to have something to do.

B.K. Fischer
230

²³⁰ B.K. Fischer, "Our Lady of Cinderblock," collected in [Radioapocrypha](#), Ohio State University Press

Trust Me

I would never hurt you, at least
not today. Just about any time
after four tomorrow would be okay.
I will be waiting naked at the door.

I will be waiting on the floor with
a sock puppet and a cardboard box
as a stage. I'm writing a one-scener,
a short play. It's either called
"Pretty Little Pickaxe" or "I'll Bite You
If You Stay." How long will this take?

I don't stick around for pain,
not the kind that scars, anyway,
at least not on my face. I trust you

brought the incriminating audio tape,
the heavy breathing from last Tuesday,
a confession involving a garden rake.

I lied about bronchitis, lied about the lamp
I never really gave to the neighbors,
its lame stem leaning into the trash can
like the cracked neck of a dead crane.

You don't believe me? I don't blame you.
I never tell anyone about our sex play,
or at least, I never mention

your name. You could be anybody. Which is
why I'm boss in this game, the kind
of boss who would never fire you, more like

the kind with a horse whip and a bullhorn.
More like a muzzle than a chain.
Come over. I've been waiting all day.

There's a bottle of wine on the counter
that we might never open, that might be better
broken. There's trouble written all over
my face.

Tracey Knapp
231

²³¹ [Tracey Knapp, "Trust Me," 236](#)

Despair Fire

Whistle, today I sat in a crowded room and listened to children accompany one another to the songs of their parents' youth. We wept and we cheered and we were relieved when it was over. Nothing is uglier than a parent's anger at her child, nothing floods a person quite like the terrible tenderness, the desperate hope that he be spared. Later, my mouth was full of chocolate when I cried out alone in the car upon hearing the hostage's father explain that for all the years of his son's captivity, he lived according to the captors' time, waking, eating, sighing, sleeping out of sync with everyone around him as a way to stay connected, or maybe it was a form of distraction, the way my friend teaches terrified children to put their ears in the water by getting them to say aloha and other silly-sounding Hawaiian words or maybe the Hawaiian words are to distract him during the endless hours in the pale, lifeless pool or maybe they remind him of the blue sea day he knew he wanted to devote his life to water, which he does, but not in the way he imagined. The father's son has come back, Whistle, but not in the way he imagined. Guilty, was the verdict reached in the trial held by stolen candlelight in a court of starvation and depravation over a series of Auschwitz nights. God is guilty as charged, they said, then, let us pray.

Lisa Olstein

232

²³² [Lisa Olstein](#), "[Despair Fire](#)," collected in [Late Empire](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Audio Commentary Track 1

As you can already see, everything is fucked.
I really can't remember why
but we hadn't slept in three days,
downing rubbing alcohol by the bottle
and falling into stuporous public sex
at skating rinks and professional wrestling matches.
And there were the strange dares:
someone had heard lethally ascetic Canadian monks
were able to cause their intestines
to erupt in horrifying geysers from their abdomens
and all of us wanted to be the first
to figure out the trick of it.
So maybe in context you'll understand
why most of the movie is missing sound
as we come to know this painfully shy woman.
Why Samantha weeps during sex
or is emotionally unavailable
to the people who need her most—
the dullards in the inexact change lane.
That we all forgot to rig the microphones
really does challenge the audience
to stay with the story by reading lips.
Or by accurately guessing her thoughts
as she naps on the sofa under general anesthesia.
And her feelings for this man
unlike any she's known before
with his toothless optimism and total amnesia.
If you're able to overlook how close
we all were to massive organ failure,
you'll see some magic. Like this shot
of a tear streaking down her cheek
and through the precipitous ravine of her cleavage.
They were real, I should add, the tears.
The producer would call from Bogotá
where he had arranged
for her children to be tutored in cages.
The shoot was hard on everyone
and the parasites didn't help
so I tried to keep the atmosphere light.
Which was hard to do
when everyone suffered from 106 degree fevers
and clinically undiagnosed paranoia.
But we pushed through
because we cared about the story
and eventually bothered to look at the dailies.
The only scene with sound was the last.
Which seemed almost poetic.
Above the landfill and their naked bodies,

above their clothes left in hurried heaps,
a choir of gulls are sadly cawing.
To me each convulsive sob sounds like joy.

Paul Guest
233

²³³ [Paul Guest](#), "[Audio Commentary Track 1](#)," collected in [My Index of Slightly Horrifying Knowledge](#), HarperCollins

Scranton Prayer

On the ash-sifts and pig-iron
heaps, by the shale piles
and sheet ice, by the frozen furnace
door; near the sheared ore

in humps, the buried girders,
the blown out balks
of timber; by the flanks
of the coke stove, by the railroad ties

steeled down with snow. I wait
out the wind in the shack
at the cross-tracks, frying the wick
of a dead lantern; with snow dampened
matches, with the chink

chink of a lighter folding
to stone. I wait here, blear god
of the shopping cart, half drowned
in low river, where you turn
your one cracked wheel in the air.

Gregory Lawless

234

²³⁴ [Gregory Lawless](#), "[Scranton Prayer](#)," *Stride*, collected in *I Thought I Was New Here*, [BlazeVOX Books](#)

Virgil, Hey

Ah me! I find myself middle-aged divorced lost
In the forest dark of my failures mortgage & slack breasts
It's hard to admit nobody wants to do me anymore
Not even Virgil will lead me down to his basement rental
Take a look at my firstborn son
Who put me on three months' bedrest
For whom I bled on the emergency room floor
Who declaims his device sucks
Stabs holes in his bedroom wall
Complains his ATV's too slow
Who plots to run away to join terrorists
He'd rather die than do math
And the little one ripped
From my womb in the surgery room
I pierced my nipples to unblock her milk
Who pours lemonade on the floor for skating
Howls in rage cause her cake isn't pretty
Carved No Mom on her door with scissors
Who says, No fence but you're kinda fat
She'd rather die than wear underpants
Virgil, hey! Send me down
To the second circle of hell where I belong
With those whom Love separated from Reason
Where an infernal hurricane will blast me
Hither & thither with no hope ever no comfort
Rather than drive these two to school this morning
And suffer forever with the other mothers

Camille Guthrie

235

²³⁵ [Camille Guthrie, "Virgil, Hey," *The New Republic*](#)

History

after Tomaž Šalamun

Katie Rauk is an adjunct instructor.
Katie Rauk is a supernova eating up lesser stars in the sky.
She corrals her cart in supermarket parking lots.
She forgets to keep Kleenex in her purse.
People and I, we shake our heads.
Maybe she is a lion.
Maybe she once skied 55 kilometers with a baby on her back.
They say she will maybe qualify for health insurance
during spring semester. Possibly
she's a comma in the wrong place at the wrong time.
Possibly she should be punished.
Her photo taken. She often stands in line at post offices
and sees her faces on the wall.
Next year, she will burn the fields.
Next year she will be the field.
Each one of her classes is a revolution
of sentences, their tiny gears whining like seeds dreaming in earth.
What do you get when Katie Rauk sits in a cubicle wearing winter boots?
History.
Look! This is Katie Rauk!
She cuts words out of magazines. Some she shares,
some she keeps to herself.

Katharine Rauk
236

²³⁶ [Katharine Rauk](#), "[History](#)," [32 Poems](#)

Blessings

May your harvest fit in a sack
may none of your apples be
sweet may barbed wire tear off
the snouts of your pigs may the
mirror show the scarecrow's
face the moon shine on your
wedding-day may the milliner
embroider your bonnet with
nettles the blackberry fell your
dog may your every joy grow
a carbuncle may your eyes go
to milk may the moth make
its nest in your bedclothes the
wind blow sickness in your
ears may your husband leave
you for a crone may his mother
season your cooking from the
grave may corncrakes gnaw
your sour bones a shadow fall
across your shadow the mice
lay their eggs in the mouths
of your children your children
have the blacksmith's eyes may
tracks lead hunters to your door
your fingers melt like candles
may you succumb to god's
terrible kittens may the wolf
carry off the heart of your heart
and the swans swim thrice
by your grief

Melissa Stein

237

²³⁷ [Melissa Stein](#), "[Blessings](#)" [Narrative](#), collected in [Terrible Blooms](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Still Lives in Detroit: #1, Rome Street

Chalk runs like mascara
over the pitted cement
fades in the rain:
Cindee is a Hore.
Who is a whore tonight?
This cement gives back nothing.
Scars on her knees as she reads it.

Mitch Ryder screams from a car radio
a razor cutting through
the night's wet skin.
A kid slumps against the door
smoke rising out the window.
He spits into the rain.

Across the street a car rusts.
On blocks. For years.

Jim Daniels
238

238 [Jim Daniels, "Still Lives in Detroit: #1, Rome Street,"](#) *Carnegie-Mellon Magazine*, collected in [Places/Everyone](#), [The University of Wisconsin Press](#)

The Death of Checkers

*Grant that the old Adam in this Child
may be so buried, that the new man
may be raised up in him.
—The Book of Common Prayer*

This is the new socialist brain. This is the statue
of Dzerzhinsky falling over. This is my wife Pat.
This is an ode to the Bratsk Hydroelectric Project.
And I just want to say [abort, retry, fail...]

the kids, like all kids, love the little dog.
This/is/your/brain/speaking.... So I want you all
to stonewall it. Because gentlemen, this is my last
dance contest, last waltz with Leonid

around the Winter Palace. This is the Kommissar
of Moonbeams, this is the Soviet of Working People's
Reveries. This is the new man born out of Adam.
These are the new world order mysteries—oh,

Republican cloth coat. Oh gallery of Trotskyist
apostasies. Tricia and Julie do not weep for me—
I live and flourish in the smooth newt's tiny eyes,
my new brain fizzing with implanted memories.

Rachel Loden
239

²³⁹ [Rachel Loden](#), "[The Death of Checkers](#)," *New American Writing*, collected in [Hotel Imperium](#), University of Georgia Press

Portrait of My Father as John Clare: "Common Loon's Nest"

I think of Ma stretched out like death
in Room 42 of the Pequot Motel,
the television static rain,
not snow, as they say, the whole room soaked
through like a rag before it's squeezed.
I'd left the faucet on, indeed, a quick shave
before work, my twelve-hour shift
driving a cab—then coming home after fries
and a Double Whopper with cheese
in a parking lot lit up like some firefly
graveyard, wing dust on my windshield,
stardust in my head. And that's what they called it,
trying to be kind, perhaps, doctors
and nurses, not in white suits but suits with neckties,
flowered dresses and scarves of gold.
Stardust—as if I were Brando
or Paul Newman rocking away his last days
at the Connecticut General Hospital
for the Insane. Yes, quite a name
for a place serving pot roast with plastic knives,
pressing hot towels to faces
of tenants not allowed to shave themselves. Ma
told me to not forget her soup
and crackers. Meals on Wheels had lately been stale
as my jokes. I wiped the bloody
foam from my face, made sure the TV was set
to channel 9, PBS, left
without saying goodbye. As I did tonight,
though we have no TVs, only
the large one like some aquarium lighting
up the lounge. The other men stare
and moan all night as if it's God Himself,
as if God played golf or dropped bombs
on hospitals in ancient lands
still here, its people wailing for their newborn
dead, a sound I carry with me
everywhere, even here, this pond I've named
Hidden Loon Pond, whether it's my right to name
God's pond or not. I am Adam
as much as Eve, though, it took me my whole life
to figure that one out. Listen:
the loon, what's called the common loon, yodeling
across the pond. They make their nests
with marsh grass and sedge, in the coves
and dark bays of the pond, if it's big enough.
I once saw a loon in the lot
of Circuit City after a heavy storm.
It must have mistaken the slick

asphalt for pond, the neon glare for moonlight.
It took nearly twenty minutes
to find enough runway, like a propeller
plane before, finally, it levels
its wings and lifts from the ground. The common loon
is named for its hobble, from the Swedish word
for *lame*. I myself can barely
walk a mile and, worse, tonight when I escaped
that prison I forgot my shoes.
Yes, prison, that's what I called it, the first room
I could have stayed in forever,
no rent, no hollering Ma, and as much food
as an idle man can eat. Now
look at me: sitting barefoot by the cattails
of this marshy pond, listening
for the common loon, hiding, which is the sane
thing to do in this whirlpuff
of a world. Some of us, like the brown mallard,
can only fly against the wind.
Most of us can't fly at all, and so we turn
away, pray for a mighty gust.

Justin Bigos
240

²⁴⁰ Justin Bigos, "[Portrait of My Father as John Clare: 'Common Loon's Nest,'](#)" *Forklift, Ohio*, collected in *Mad River*, [Gold Wake Press](#)

Three Poems

EVERYTHING

Everything's
defined
by everything
it's not.

By
what's kept out.

You
are my password;

avant garde
is a military term.

WHAT

A body
is a forgetting machine,
regenerates with
what hasn't left—a net
increase
in uselessness
on the way
to equilibrium.

Post-consequence,
post-
extinction
entropy (β).

Functional poverty,
magic relies
on any number
of ignorances—I am in
none
of my favorite categories.

A truth
always leads
to its
logical conclusion.

And so does
what's false.

I've never
been able
to distinguish between things.

I've always
given myself
the -ish.

MURDERER

I promise
not to drink coffee
after 3 pm
ever again.

In the dark,
I am a father.
In the dark,
I am a murderer
not murdering.

I get up
to check on my son;
the lawn
has my house
surrounded.

Chris Tonelli
241

A Western

Our locker room was not like those in movies,
the girls carrying their breasts
like men hold guns under a table—as if they don't
have them but all the while do,
pointing at their rival and waiting for the cue.
I dressed behind the open door
of my locker that smelled like a rifle, and I would've
dressed inside if I could, except the girls would've looked
at me for doing something so strange, so
stupid. Someone shoved someone else,
her name like a cloud of smoke, into the wood
paneling the color of blue
raspberry and painted center with a black-bearded
buccaneer. Our rivals were the South
Pittsburgh with their Halloween colors, though they misspelled
their name on the stadium, *Home of
the Pirats*, which always caused me to think
of the photograph I didn't remember being
taken, where I'm dressed in a blue-felt
cowboy hat, a red bandanna at my neck, my jeans with their elastic
waist, pinned at the heart
with a cardboard star my mother made,
Sherriff. Sometimes when I remember
myself speaking, it's as if I was always talking
into a fan, my voice diced to buzz
and legion. *Termites!*
(did I scream?) as the girl fell into the paneling
that cracked open like Calvary, like cavalry
charging a line of heavy artillery, as the moving
darkness emerged from the walls like a rumor, toothed
in wings. Topless or in their starred
briefs, the girls ran up the stairs into the gymnasium
into the arms of our teacher, Mister H.,
like the whores in a movie
brothel fire, dumb and jiggling,
though I continued to dress down there, and later,
at home, found a termite
on my breast, pressed in my bra like a violet
in a Bible, and the last girl in the shower stayed
too, like a marshal who locks himself in a cell with a wronged
prisoner to keep the mob from hanging
a man with his own rope.

Emilia Phillips

242

²⁴² [Emilia Phillips](#), "A Western," [Green Mountains Review](#)

Pill

You die by drowning
and worship the sea,
Blond anodyne.
Chemical god.
Come quickly,
pool in the blood.
I have been waiting
for you, please,
insatiable and brittle
as a chalk-eater.
Promise me a bleach-
clean soul
and obliteration.
Order the orders,
the hours, the next,
like my family marched
to their shoeless deaths,
Pull your gauze
coverlet over my head.
To sleep finally
in your arms,
smell the snow
on your breath—
I bow to a moon
that fits in my hand.

Hadara Bar-Nadav
243

²⁴³ [Hadara Bar-Nadav](#), "[Pill](#)," collected in [The New Nudity](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Amicus Brief: Friends Who Know Don't Ask Anyone Who Asks Doesn't Really Want to Know Anyone
Who Knows

what? it's some kind of crime now to be happy
it's someone else who's dead? everyone's got
an alibi but how many can use them? :
my client happened to be nowhere
alone doing absolutely nothing at all
was a time I'd have 6 or 7 alibis
like him on a good Saturday night ask Judge
Woolsey what harm in honest sex less a few standards
of punctuation like any teenage boy dying

to interview a stain on Molly B's sheets drooled

& mumbled when he come what was the phrase? said
it was a Cancer's translation from the Vedic
little fool'd collapse on me breath hot
in my mouth & gasp "Evil
does not exist" came to where he'd pay me to hold
myself open with the lights out & whisper it three times
into the mirror over the wash-pot
when I heard he was dead I won't lie I saw
what he meant I can see him now smooth as a jigsaw

stuck in pine sap sharp as any maggot dancing

the fine line between live flesh & dead meat a
zip-locked paladin with a freezer bag
for a stocking cap ladies in the jury know the type :
fingers barbed like fish hooks & a Dakota blizzard
in his chest suit & tie by day at night :
says he wants stow away on a steamer
cause he's convinced his brain's the burning
bush busts in the door & builds a shrine
to his cranium out of upturned shot glasses

get this : one told me he'd studied death

in translation at a private college
up North said the smell in the Cedar Bar
is the sound of the Roar that takes the motionless
thing apart stiffness : fluid
from anything that disappears had one thing
right: those maggots in the alley are nothing
but milk-spots on God's tonsils said
he knew a deserted beach
where waves pound black coral back into glass

& sunrises pull salt-wind thru bleached ribs

of a cage made for two from there it's clear :

10,000 tides sweep like one giant wing

& each night fossil albatross rise from the sand

Ed Pavlić
244

²⁴⁴ [Ed Pavlić, "Amicus Brief: Friends Who Know Don't Ask Anyone Who Asks Doesn't Really Want to Know Anyone Who Knows," *The Cortland Review*, collected in *Live at the Bitter End*, Saturnalia Books](#)

Bad

“What lets a 80-pound dog
run offa 200-pound man?”
Vernie asked me my first week
on the job. “Pull a knife, show
your .357, your karate card,
warn he could get the chair:
dog don’t give a shit,” he said,
nodding faintly toward a bald guy,
sleepy-eyed, baby-cheeked,
smoking alone beside
the pop machine. “Nobody
fucks with him,” said Vernie,
like we were seeing Jesus
or the tripwire on a Claymore.
“Not even Ed. That’s Hurbert:
he don’t give a shit.”

William Trowbridge
245

²⁴⁵ [William Trowbridge](#), “[Bad](#),” collected in collected in [Put This On, Please](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

The Less We Know

Like when some poor grunt disappears off the face of the earth in an explosion and you can't help think that maybe somehow he's hitchhiked down to the Gulf. Flip-flops and shorts, surf to his knees, watching the horizon. A scout in Bravo lost one of his buddies that way. One minute he's there and the next... dust. They searched three days, found a helmet and a foot in a boot and some other pieces. Wasn't more than a few weeks after that the scout went to take a piss and heard his old pal's muffled voice calling to him from deep down in one of the PVC pipes sticking out of the ground where everyone in camp went to relieve themselves. And so when he recognized his buddy's voice coming out of that three-inch pipe, he wouldn't let anyone else near the place and even locked and loaded his M4, that's how serious he was. His first sergeant and a few other NCOs finally had to get involved and when they tackled him he hugged so tightly to that one piss tube he pulled it out of the ground as they dragged him off.

Brock Jones

246

²⁴⁶ Brock Jones, "[The Less We Know](#)," collected in [Cenotaph](#), University of Arkansas Press

Marriage

When she was waiting tables, she used to marry the ketchup bottles. That's what they called it, *marrying*. Taking two bottles that are less than full, making them one. But the joke was on her.

She figured the punchline while the veil was perched on her head like a ghost sparrow. While she was still waiting on him, off on a beer run with the best man, sure he had at least thirty minutes to burn before he had to hit the altar. But it was too late by then, the dress like a Portuguese man-o-war and the fifty-six chicken dinners were bought and paid for.

It's not like there's this third bottle. There's the bottle with the least left to give, upended. And then that bottle is empty, the other gets it all.

Anna Lea Jancewicz
247

²⁴⁷ [Anna Lea Jancewicz](#), "[Marriage](#)," [matchbook](#)

Catalog of Divine Encounters in Mobile County, Alabama

One man says he saw god at the pain clinic on Lafayette.

Untucked shirt. Knife-white bandana, shadows boxing
under each drowned eye socket. There's never been a record

of his hands, but that's never stopped me from painting
my nails. Some days we still find water jugs

in the crawlspace, already licked clean. Once I watched
someone shoot a stray dog in the parking lot.

Across one page someone has only written *Before the storm*

How the neighbor boy felt pressed sweating against me.

Outside the liquor store, one of my cousins took a picture
of a cross-shaped water stain.

At last this lack of landscapes.

The moon rises, then wheels, then steps
into a bathtub, slick with its own shine.

Alligators laze in red mud, hunting their tails.
Emptied lakes. A wake of widening eyes.

On the bus back to the sticks, Uncle Buck met a girl
with a back-length braid who claimed she could heal the sick.

A woman wrote that god shops at the Winn-Dixie
in cowboy boots & likes to click his spurs

against the carts. Bullwhips of wind.
Don't ask me about acrylics.

Between where he happens on my tongue & a window.

Battlefielding. Bone up.
Nobody saw my grandfather

cadaver himself. Even birds no longer sound
useful. When I pray for rain I pray

the trees die before it comes.

Brad Trumpfheller
248

²⁴⁸ [Brad Trumpfheller, "Catalog of Divine Encounters in Mobile County, Alabama," *The Adroit Journal*](#)

Real Housewife Goes Home

You are the moany mama of lust, growly mama,
the groany matriarch of desire.

Sweat sultrying slut of lust, bawling bitch of lasciviousness, you are.
Girdle full of hurt, thong full of wrong,

your bust is all honks and tonking.
I will never fault America for loving you too much

or too little, nor do I blame the chickie ranches
or bunny mansions of Beverly Hills.

I have no reason to be green. Who could blame
the purple cheetah or Day-Glo zebra in the you-toned lingerie?

No red-light, nighty-night pucker, no prepubescent drag,
I will not blame showgirls, working girls,

or mean girls, nor gossip girls, dirty girls, nor the little girl
who lives down the lane. And certainly not the golden girls, no,

they are not to blame.
You drink cosmos, drain cartoon bottles of real wine

until again your heart bursts so open
you blow your neighbor's husband

and dream of her teenaged son,
which is what Carmel, Indiana, looks like

long after midnight,
your eyes pressed into the ecru of a monogrammed guest towel.

Cindy E. King
249

²⁴⁹ [Cindy E. King, "Real Housewife Goes Home," *Bat City Review*](#)

Personal Affect

To my wife in France this Belgian lace.
To my wife in Lisbon a penny whistle.
My wives, with your rag curls, your box braids,
your pin straight hair scraped tight, you who laid me
down like a dress with the seams ripped out, studying
the pattern to remake me in a different cloth,
I cannot give enough of me to keep a cold night warm.
To my wife in the Carolinas her letters and this nightgown,
still crushed with her scent. To my wife in Belize,
a fresh Bay leaf. Far from their arms I am unlaced and loose.
Someone else had my measure. Someone else
stitched me back into a woman's fit.
In Amsterdam there is a woman who lives above a spice shop
and whose white pepper skin burned my lips.
She shared her bed with me but would not let me kiss,
only pressed my face to hers to marry our breaths.
She declined to wear a ring. To her a lump of cake
soaked in rum. To her a bag of soft brown sugar.
I have been drunk and I have ached with sweet.
My English wife has the keeping of this document.

Rebecca Hazelton
250

²⁵⁰ [Rebecca Hazelton](#), "[Personal Affect](#)," [Tupelo Quarterly](#)

Yonkers

We were children of the gods of iron and smoke.
We made love in dinosaurs that decayed beside the river.

There was a clue somewhere, a key, a prompt, several
signs in a row, like smokestacks or water towers.

We sat in our qi and defied the horsemen who rode by
in tugboats, salivating at our industry.

We fished the shoals between Allied Chemical
and the Jack Frost plants. We grew like lilies.

The streaks in our young hair turned white. Our bones
glowed as we gutted small fish and devoured them.

I left you then, gauntly sexual beside the Hudson,
and stepped back into the betrayal of suburbia,

where my mother and father seemed slapstick.
Even my siblings failed to recognize me.

Maureen Seaton
251

²⁵¹ [Maureen Seaton](#), "Yonkers," collected in [Fisher](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

Bat House

Turn out the light and I'll explain.
—James Fenton

It's where I'm heading
It's what I overheard
The lines in the corner
The flaming word.

It's what you expected
Your greatest fear
A chip in the teacup
Bills from last year.

It's dark in the bat house
Beetles stuck on the screen
It's cold in the crawl space
Slow quarantine.

Don't lie to the drunkard
Question each doubt
Shadow the cat
Turn the light out.

If you meet me halfway
I'll tell you what for
Where it begins
Open the door.

It's the news in the paper
Same as last week
The sirens at midnight
Why you can't sleep.

The dog's in the basement
You lost the phone
The father keeps calling
Bury what's known.

Elise Paschen
252

²⁵² [Elise Paschen](#), "[Bat House](#)," [The Virginia Quarterly Review](#), collected in [The Nightlife](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

We Are Both Sure to Die

And then the anonymous bouquet
of peonies arrives making room
for a little kindness before
everything starts to smolder in
an attractive way. I feel a sort of awful
regret about animals I have never
seen in real life. Worse, do you worry
you'll stop caring? My friends glue
peonies to the dashboard and we go
for a ride. We stare off into space for long
periods of time to mean please God let
us be real! I am here and love
to tell you. I am wearing that feeling
of being wrong like an old scarf.
Please tell me and tell me and tell
me about the river. Tell me what
birds mean to keep it.

Wendy Xu
253

²⁵³ [Wendy Xu](#), "[We Are Both Sure to Die](#)," *Red Lightbulbs*, collected in [You Are Not Dead](#), [Cleveland State University Poetry Center](#)

Harm's Way

After the Halloween work party
wearing a black slip, a picture of Freud
taped to the front (*a Freudian Slip! hahaha!*
a brainy skank!), after I proved my dominance
at flip-cup, after the turtlenecked
Amelia Earhart asked if I was a stripper
(*hahahah!*), after how my body looked in lace,
and I said I used to teach in the Ivy League
and drank faster and didn't say when
I was sixteen I traded my body for beds
all summer, a pretty Black Swan drove me
home. Probably Vince was smoking
menthols on our shared porch,
belly gurgling with stolen wine,
a chef's easy loot. Probably I walked
sloppy in my heels, a chicken
with my head hacked off bumbling
senseless. Probably his long arm
draped around my shoulders harmless
as a dead snake. After he left my torn
stockings atop of the washing machine—
I asked if he'd used a condom after I asked
if he'd fucked me and he looked down
at his feet, scarred from spilled roux,
and said no he didn't like using them. I said
very little for a very long time until
I woke in my skin in an old state,
my parents' garage piled with boxes, my body
spread like an X across a queen mattress
marking what's mine in the dark.

Stevie Edwards

254

²⁵⁴ [Stevie Edwards](#), "[Harm's Way](#)," [Underblong](#)

Zsa Zsa Gabor Learns to Read

I touch the platinum helmet
of my head, call out to my daughter,

Constance Francesca.
In my bedroom closet

is a threadbare blouse
I purchased in Hungary.

I don it, tie a sash around my waist.
How does one represent thinking?

I am a European idyll.
Motherhood keeps me sane.

When Jesus appeared at the murky well
I was there with my five hundred husbands.

The blue volt of my illiteracy made manifest
in my butchering of the vowels in his name.

Virginia Konchan
255

²⁵⁵ [Virginia Konchan](#), "[Zsa Zsa Gabor Learns to Read](#)," *Rhino*, collected in [The End of Spectacle](#), [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

After the Hospital

He took me to the Big Fancy, that grocery store
where illusion back-lights the dairy case & everything

pulses with blue light. I shuffled the store, still unsteady,
still in my pajamas. In the snack aisle, fifty-seven kinds

of chips, all so beautiful, shiny & wet. I had insisted
that I be able to get whatever I wanted after the procedure.

Still groggy from the anesthesia they had used to get inside
me, to cut it out, the olive bar seemed obscene the longer

I stared at it: many wet nodes! wet eyes! Everything in here
glistens. I should be able to have anything, anything I want.

Where is it? My hospital band means absence. It collars
my wrist where I am a dog to my lack.

Katie Schmid
256

²⁵⁶ [Katie Schmid, "After the Hospital," *decomp*](#)

Heart

A child of, say, six knows you're not the shape
she's learned to make by drawing half along a fold,
cutting, then opening. Where do you open?
Where do you carry your dead? There's no locket
for that—hinged, hanging on a chain that greens
your throat. And the dead inside you, don't you
hear them breathing? You must have a hole
they can press their gray lips to. If you open—
when you open—will we find them folded inside?
In what shape? I mean what cut shape is made
whole by opening? I mean besides the heart.

Maggie Smith
257

²⁵⁷ [Maggie Smith](#), "[Heart](#)," [Tinderbox](#), collected in [Good Bones](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

Rodney Dangerfield's Ex Writes Him a Letter

*"I tell ya, my wife likes to talk during sex. Last night, she called me from a motel."
—Rodney Dangerfield*

How I fell in love with you: your eyes
wild as the moon, pocked and studded

with heaven. I liked to suck
smoke from your mouth. It tasted

sharp as a field of onions. Spaetzle.
The inside of a boot. I was happy

to be the bad cook, slut, fat lady
giving directions to her body

as if I were notes spilled through
a giant horn, conjured from your lips

like a dark feast. I remember that night
how your voice swung disembodied

as shoes from a telephone wire
when I called to tell you I'd just

made love at the drive-in. We watched
Easy Money and wrecked the insides

of one another, tussling in the sweaty
weather of your image, his fist

a star breaking inside my liver.
I became a telephone booth, open

as an observatory for watching
galaxies huff like horses. Your voice

was lost and everywhere.
Most of all I knew I did not

want my body back. I tell you
and already hear it aching

inside a joke. Don't think I ever
wanted more than this.

Kendra DeColo
258

²⁵⁸ [Kendra DeColo](#), "[Rodney Dangerfield's Ex Writes Him a Letter](#)," *Tupelo Quarterly*, collected in *Thieves in the Afterlife*, [Saturnalia Books](#)

What Is Amazing

1.

That man thinks he is a man
but he is a candle.

Who will tell him?
He will be destroyed

and his wife will be on fire.
Life is tough for that man especially.

It is also tough for animals
who think they are lighting up

a lounge or ballroom
when in fact they are eating

and shitting like any other
chicken in the rain.

2.

Take two rocks
and knock them together.

That will be the new candle.
Who said chivalry is easy?

The drawer where they keep
flashlights is empty

and the room is full
of quivering animals.

Safety is unreachable from here
but it is possible to reach one another.

3.

If you laid out your wishes
from head to toe

you would be so far from home
you would need years just

to measure the distance.
Might as well start now

while it's still raining
and the governor's

meeting with friends.
Some animals

are friendlier than others
like roosters

who would destroy your face
if they could only remember

which one is you and which one
the source of all fire.

4.

Do you know anything about
how to stop disaster?

If yes go home and save
what little you have.

All of this rain
and nowhere to keep it.

You need one dozen buckets
and an extra box of candles.

What is amazing is how
the animals won't stop sleeping.

It's like sleeping is where
they hide their goals.

One's goal in life sounds like
a match put out in water.

You might not know you've done it
but for the sudden lack of light.

Heather Christle
259

²⁵⁹ [Heather Christle](#), "[What Is Amazing](#)," *BOMB*, collected in [What Is Amazing](#), [Wesleyan University Press](#)

The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

*Trust me:
my happiness
bears no relation to happiness.
—Taha Muhammad Ali*

At thirty, a woman wants to have a child, but
she will never have one.

Doctors will pump her empty belly with air, make

the small incisions, put a camera in. More than once,

she will drive a hundred miles with her husband's sperm
in a glass vial warmed between her thighs
& inject herself with
hormones

distilled from the urine of mares. Month in, month out,

the twin engines of the ovaries work a follicular double-time.

The woman
behind the counter at Unique Copy Center calls me *baby*.

I'm not the kind of woman who'd call anybody *baby*,

not even the baby I never had. *Baby*, she asks, *is this clear enough
for you? You know, we can make these real*

high resolution, if that's what you want.

She's wearing a shiny pendant with the face of a little girl
printed directly onto the disc.

It looks

like an archaic daguerreotype—although Daguerre's prints,

on their polished silver surfaces, were so much harder to see.

What does Benjamin tell us

about *the aura of the authentic*? It bears,

he says, in its singularity the terrible wear of its past. If I ever wanted

a child, I wanted what I was taught to want. This is how we re-read
our lives. I read that I never wanted a child. You may read

I am only telling myself I didn't want what I could not have.

But we have words: we recognize

correspondence, conception, rationale, repair.

One poet says *we need names*.

Every child must know all the birds in the yard. For what would we do
if we did not know the names of the ten thousand things?

Another says,
When I go into the wood and see a flower I do not know, I consume it.

I bring it into the womb of the mind, where it can grow.

And when it has grown, I bless it. I give it the name

I think it should have. Cabinet des Mirages. Passage du Desir. Luna.

Looking Glass. For Benjamin, the names are never merely signs. A woman
in her thirties wanted a child; the woman in her forties can barely recall her.

Perhaps it's not words that fail, but memory—
the amber ampoule, the brittle bulb from which we struggle
to extract the drug. Not memory that fails, but
the needle of our grammar.

I have no rhetoric for this woman
I carry inside me. She had no syntax for the woman inside her.

Daguerreotype, Szarkowski says, we must approach *in private*,

by lamplight,
because it is
elusive—a secret, its case half-closed. Take it in.
Trust me:

the woman I am bears no relation to the woman I am.

Kathleen Graber
260

²⁶⁰ [Kathleen Graber](#), "[The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction](#)," *Arts & Letters*, collected in [Correspondence](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

[On what day you think Jesus was actually born he asks]

On what day do you think Jesus was actually born he asks,
and do you think Billy Idol is talented but dumb or smart
but talentless, I love the cold, he says, I love it to be as cold
as it can possibly be, I want snow as high as the rooftops,
which is why he swears he'll never come home from the north,
never back over the bridge, not for holidays like the false birthday
of the so-called Lord, throw out my stuff, all of it he says, so
cold I can spit and it freezes, makes a chhh sound like Billy Idol
pronounces s when he's really rocking, did you see him live he
asks, did you see the Clash, yes to the Clash, no to Billy, I spat
and it froze in November, he says, rare these days, never home, not
for funerals or to sleep in his old room where I used to find empty
quarts of vodka, needles, pipes, but he's clean now, clean, gorgeous
word like snow like cold, if I were Jesus, he says, I'd make it colder

Diane Seuss

261

²⁶¹ [Diane Seuss, "On what day you think Jesus was actually born he asks," *Waxwing*](#)

Saint Monica and the Devil's Place

At school they were too polite to call it *hell*, though she heard the word on her mother's eight-tracks, seeping between damp towels in the bathroom, hovering in the silver of the old hall mirror. Monica knew who went there and why, regardless of time spent fluffing the chrysanthemums outside the rectory. She'd go to the Devil's Place herself if it meant one hour alone with Kevin McMillan in the falling-down barn. Sister Rita said it was hot, but Monica could live with that. Mrs. Dettweiler next door crushed cigarettes out on her daughter's back. She was on her way to the Devil's Place, along with the Simmons twins, and Monica's uncle who thought he could piss out an electrical fire, ended up burning down the Kroger instead. There were, of course, exceptions. If he was mean enough you could take a cinderblock to your husband's head in the middle of the night, as long as you called the police afterwards, produced the notebook of grievances when officers arrived. You could sign your husband up for a war, then dash your face with mauve lipstick on the night they handed him a gun. If you were married to one of the Simmons twins you could toss the car keys down a sewer grate, sprint to JC Penney for a white sale bonanza with the charge card, knowing you'd be safe until Randy or Ricky made it out of the sludge. Monica would not go to the Devil's Place over shoplifted Raisinets or hair gel, but she would sign away her soul for an afternoon swimming with Kevin McMillan in the pond at Raccoon Park, as long as they both be naked and the water above fifty-five degrees. Perhaps there was hope for Monica's uncle, provided he sold the Firebird, wheeled the recliner to the curb and found a job. If they ever married, Monica would never torch Kevin McMillan while he read the newspaper in his slippers and flannel boxers, or dig a six-foot three-and-a-half-inch hole in the backyard while the children planted daffodil bulbs. She would not include the Devil's Place on her college application list, as Rhonda Phillips did the day she broke her sister's arm playing darts. When the Simmons twins winked at her, Monica looked away. When Kevin McMillan winked at her, Monica unbuttoned her shirt, showed the hot pink swimsuit underneath.

Mary Biddinger

262

²⁶² Mary Biddinger, "[Saint Monica and the Devil's Place](#)," [New Ohio Review](#), collected in [Saint Monica](#), Black Lawrence Press

The women from the '70s are beautiful

in photographs, their eyes always wheel-large and dark,
rimmed with charcoal in the way no one does anymore except
embarrassed and angry 10th graders but in photographs
the women from the '70s don't look embarrassed,

unless it's in a slight, elfin way that makes you think of cocaine
lines and white lies, and anyway, most of them look
instead like deer, like aspen, like anything too leggy and proud

to ride in lumbering Chevys but unafraid in their height and angles
and always the huge dark eyes, the hair somehow long and big at once
and draped like sealskin over their shoulders, and the women

are always laughing toward something out of frame,
a mirror ball or a Ferris wheel or the boy they someday divorce
and what is most beautiful is how they are always looking
away, how very much they don't need you at all.

Catherine Pierce
263

²⁶³ [Catherine Pierce, "The women from the '70s are beautiful,"](#) *Court Green*, collected in [The Girls of Peculiar](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Girls Overheard While Assembling a Puzzle

Are you sure this blue is the same as the
blue over there? This wall's like the
bottom of a pool, its
color I mean. I need a
darker two-piece this summer, the kind with
elastic at the waist so it actually
fits. I can't
find her hands. Where does this gold
go? It's like the angel's giving
her a little piece of honeycomb to eat.
I don't see why God doesn't
just come down and
kiss her himself. This is the red of that
lipstick we saw at the
mall. This piece of her
neck could fit into the light part
of the sky. I think this is a
piece of water. What kind of
queen? You mean
right here? And are we supposed to believe
she can suddenly
talk angel? Who thought this stuff
up? I wish I had a
velvet bikini. That flower's the color of the
veins in my grandmother's hands. I
wish we could
walk into that garden and pick an
X-ray to float on.
Yeah. I do too. I'd say a
zillion yeses to anyone for that.

Mary Szybist

264

²⁶⁴ [Mary Szybist](#), "[Girls Overheard While Assembling a Puzzle](#)," [Kenyon Review](#), collected in [Incarnadine](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

from “Dappled Things”

Our days are charged by so much nature—

The succulents we carry to Alexis in a plastic bag after her surgery

A cat pawing at a mantis behind a windowpane

What we didn’t wash from the lettuce, dirt that’s good danger

Not pristine, not a baseline to harken after romantically

Instead, I read that snowy cities should ready for rising heat, harder rain

Have I come to terms with dominance—what I have trammed

and fogged with my breath? Flush cut, a redesigned ecology

The dead won’t say how the forest was before we came

And the pheromones I bury my face in under your arms

make me a hazy archaeologist

Jenny Johnson

265

²⁶⁵ [Jenny Johnson](#), “[Dappled Things \(Our days are charged by so much nature\)](#),” [The Los Angeles Review of Books Quarterly Journal](#), collected in [In Full Velvet](#), Sarabande Books

Ornithology

Gone to seed, ailanthus, the poverty
tree. Take a phrase, then
fracture it, the pods' gaudy nectarine shades
ripening to parrots taking flight, all crest
and tail feathers.

A musical idea.

Macaws

scarlet and violet,
tangerine as a song
the hue of sunset where my street becomes water

and down shore this phantom city skyline's
mere hazy silhouette. The alto's
liquid geometry weaves *a way of thinking*,
a way of breaking
synchronistic

through time

so the girl

on the comer
has the bones of my face,
the old photos, beneath the Kansas City hat,

black fedora lifting hair off my neck
cooling the sweat of a night-long tidal
pull from bar to bar the night we went
to find Bird's grave. Eric's chartreuse
perfume. That

poured-on dress

I lived days

and nights inside,

made love

and slept in, a mesh and slur of zipper

down the back. Women smoked the boulevards
with gardenias after-hours, asphalt shower-
slick, ozone charging air with sixteenth
notes, that endless convertible ride to find
the grave

whose sleep and melody

wept neglect

enough to torch us

for a while

through snare-sweep of broom on pavement,

the rumpled musk of lover's sheets, charred
cornices topping crosstown gutted buildings.
Torches us still—cat screech, matte blue steel
of pistol stroked across the victim's cheek
where fleet shoes

jazz this dark
and peeling

block, that one.

Vine Street, Olive.

We had the music, but not the pyrotechnics—

rhinestone straps lashing my shoes, heels sinking
through earth and Eric in casual drag,
mocha cheekbones rouged, that flawless
plummy mouth. A style for moving,
heel tap and

lighter flick,
lion moan

of buses pulling away
through the static
brilliant fizz of taffeta on nyloned thighs.

Light mist, etherous, rinsed our faces
and what happens when
you touch a finger to the cold stone
that jazz and death played
down to?

Phrases.

Take it all
and break forever—
a man

with gleaming sax, an open sill in summertime,

and the fire-escape's iron zigzag tumbles
crazy notes to a girl cooling her knees,
wearing one of those dresses no one wears
anymore, darts and spaghetti straps, glitzy
fabrics foaming
an iron bedstead.

The horn's
alarm, then fluid brass chromatics.

Extravagant
ailanthus, the courtyard's poverty tree is spike
and wing, slate-blue

mourning dove,
sudden cardinal flame.

If you don't live it, it won't come out your horn.

Lynda Hull

²⁶⁶ [Lynda Hull](#), "[Ornithology](#)," [Ploughshares](#), collected in [Collected Poems](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Day 6

It is no dream to live in a house
with blown out windows and molting snakes.

Any child's drawing would tell you so:
the driveway, the garden, the smoking chimney.

I sleep with a pistol between my legs so often
that any man would be a soft nuisance.

This quiet is the quiet of watching a living thing
die, when you hit yourself for having believed the heart
could ever resemble a red bird.

I would give up all of my memories of trains
if one passed through the foothills as I watched.

All to say, there is enough emptiness to be buried
wherever the weathervane stops.
There is enough emptiness to feel holy.

At night, the wind upsets the shutters, the shingles.
And although I knew a bucket of morphine
and a glass of scotch would kill it,
I killed it.

Meghan Privitello
267

²⁶⁷ [Meghan Privitello](#), "[Day 6](#)," [Drunk in a Midnight Choir](#), collected in [Notes on the End of the World](#), Black Lawrence Press

Via Dolorosa

What I took to be a sweet little toad
with the kindest of smiles
turned out to be my awkward yearbook photo
when I had not yet done anything wrong, really.

What I took to be my yearbook photo
turned out to be a ticket to a movie about a girl
who indirectly causes a car crash, a dying.

What I took to be a ticket
turned out to be some kind of evil sprite
who might fill my mouth with cement,

and what I thought was merely a gap
in my memory turned out to be an impossible
chasm into which my meager beauties disappeared.

The baby I saw crawling across
the four-lane highway turned out to be a coyote
with a crooked leg, while the loss of a friend
turned out to be only the first chapter.

Connie Voisine
268

²⁶⁸ [Connie Voisine](#), "[Via Dolorosa](#)," [Shadowgraph Quarterly](#), collected in [And God Created Woman](#), Bull City Press

Girl Chooses Flight

She bought a black dog
because she wanted bad luck. She drove south
as far as the dark mood would move her.

And on the radio—nothing but Christ & zydeco.

*Once in heaven—once in hell—
you don't get to come back & try it over.
You don't get to call back Lazarus.*

She drove long hours through the parched towns
& two-pump truck stops of the northern parishes,
the highway striped with blown-out tires,
her hood & windshield black with love bugs
locked in mating.

And then the swamp before her
like a ballroom with the lid torn off.

The air at that first hour
had the sheen & hue of polished silver.
Slender tree trunks, weathered gray & splintered,
poked through still water.

A voice said *stay*. She stayed.

•

The girl seemed to stay like that for days, a fixed star
in the emergency pull-off lane.

At night the black dog blanketed her & at dawn
they pressed their faces to the glass. Hard to say
what she thought of then. Or what she waited for.

Then the god appeared to her in denim.
He asked her for one kiss & when she dodged

he spit into her mouth.

After that, the girl's hair grew golden
& sticky as corn silk. After that
the girl spoke only lies.

Nancy Reddy

269

²⁶⁹ Nancy Reddy, "[Girl Chooses Flight](#)," [Connotation Press](#), collected in [Acadiana](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

Loser Bait

Some of us
are chum.

Some of us
are the come-hither
honeycomb

gleamy in the middle
of the trap's busted smile.

Though I let myself a little
off this hook, petard
by which I flail,

and fancy myself more
flattered—
no ugly worm!

Humor me
as hapless nymph,
straight outta Bullfinch, minding
my own beeswax,

gamboling, or picking flowers
(say daffodils),

doing that unspecified stuff
nymphs do
with their hours,

until spied by a layabout youth,
or rapey God
who leaps unerring, staglike,
quicker than smoke, to the wrong idea.

Or maybe
the right?

For didn't I supply
the tippy box, too?
Notch the stick on which
to prop it?

Didn't I fumble the clove hitch
for the rope?
Leave the trip lying obvious
in the tall, buggy grass?

Ever it was.
Duh.

Be the mat,
and the left foot finds you welcome.

Though there's always a subject, a him
or herself. But to name it
calls it down, like Betelgeuse,
or the IRS.

It must be swell
to have both deed and
the entitlement, for leaners who hold our lien,

consumers who consume like
red tide ripping through a coastal lake?

Who find themselves so very *well*
when gazing in that kiddie pool, or any
skinny inch of water.

That guy, remember? How tell this tale
without him? A story
so hoary, his name's Pre-Greek.

What brought Narcissus down?
A spotty case
of the disdains, I think,

a one-man performance
where the actor hates his audience.

Erin Belieu
270

²⁷⁰ [Erin Belieu, "Loser Bait," Poetry](#)

In the Dream You Have Babies Now

your town is toy town and I am pterodactyl
I am small business saving for a parklet

I am crack addict reincarnated from king of Ur
I am on the beach growing mythical

I'm that damn mermaid swimming in the recyclables (again)
I'm an amphibrach found in nature (awaken)

I am a piece of hopeful soap and I have to go,
must escape the jaw of home, lit hearth, your abstract arms (anyway)

are backdropped by slow motion—
I am wistful plaster snow storm

Kelly Jean Egan
271

²⁷¹ [Kelly Jean Egan, "In the Dream You Have Babies Now," *The Laurel Review*](#)

Hag

I saw her once
when I was very young—an old
woman with a melted face. She
was standing in the doorway
to my bedroom,
and when I screamed, she walked away.

Suppose

the beauty of the moon
could be held against you? Suppose

the air always smelled
exactly this way—all

the flowers of spring on the breeze
caught in a wine skin, the wine having been

spilled freely
as you laughed about its spilling
years and years before? *Listen,*

the way

we wasted those days

on that green lawn—

the way our friends—

and the way—

and the way the graves—

and the way—

Yes. And the horses
faltered during the parade.
And the couple making love
on a blanket in the sun
were in the process of becoming
a thing with one bald wing between them.
And then

a small boy running through a forest
carrying in his hands
a red-hot coal, while,
overhead, a bird flew south, and

in its beak, a bit of your soul.

And then, of course, all
the tangible, divine just-loosened
hair of nuns
spiraling toward you, and all
the uncontrolled laughter of twelve year-olds, all
the hydroelectric power of the Atlantic seacoast
in you, all

the songs written on envelopes
accidentally tossed
onto raging fires.

And the winning
lottery tickets. And the flippant
remarks of sorority sisters. And

the wedding dresses stuffed into dumpsters:

It threw off sparks.
It lit up the abyss.

Once, it was of you,
and you were of it. O,

imagine, you
were a middle-aged woman once
at the supermarket with a secret. That

secret was like supernal light, like
light flowing peacefully
back to its source, speaking

French, made of pleasure. And you

disdained no creature. You loved them all. You
threw the fish you caught back into the water. You
walked your neighbor's dog. And,

all that time, the ocean churning
all that reluctance
out as it churned.

You never even heard
the halfhearted warning
of the woodpecker tapping its bill
on the roof of your house as it burned. Yes,

you decided, you

would live forever if they let you, like
a snail at the equator setting out that very day
to make a silvery circle around the world
by standing still as it turned.

And the way—

And the way—

One season tossed

sloppily onto another. Tomorrow
you said, you'd

write those thank-you notes. Tomorrow
you'd call it off with your lover.

But tomorrow you ran through the sprinklers
on the courthouse lawn instead, because
tomorrow you could be dead. O,

your life, so long, it became I

a lovely punishment made
of pale blue feathers and cashmere sweaters.

And the way—

And the way—

The fluorescent silence of a coral reef
dying under the sea.

To find yourself
finally
lingering in a doorway:

A woman with a question,
and moss in her hair, who, when she
leaned in to say to her younger self, *It's me,*

simply turned quietly away
when I began to scream.

Laura Kasischke
272

²⁷² [Laura Kasischke](#), "[Hag](#)," collected in [Lilies Without](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Medical History

I've been pregnant. I've had sex with a man
who's had sex with men. I can't sleep.
My mother has, my mother's mother had,
asthma. My father had a stroke. My father's
mother has high blood pressure.
Both grandfathers died from diabetes.
I drink. I don't smoke. Xanax for flying.
Propranolol for anxiety. My eyes are bad.
I'm spooked by wind. Cousin Lilly died
from an aneurysm. Aunt Hilda, a heart attack.
Uncle Ken, wise as he was, was hit
by a car as if to disprove whatever theory
toward which I write. And, I understand,
the stars in the sky are already dead.

Nicole Sealey
273

²⁷³ [Nicole Sealey](#), "[Medical History](#)," [The Account](#), collected in [Ordinary Beast](#), [HarperCollins Publishers](#)

Scarecrow

Inside my chest an apple darkens.

Inside the apple a wind barely sleeps.

Inside the wind hayforks pitch.

I burn with songs of the beginning,
Before birds.

Go back to your life beyond the cornfield,
Back to the farmer's wife and her faraway heart,
To the garden clouded with flowers—

You'll make no friend here.

Kristin Bock
274

²⁷⁴ [Kristin Bock](#), "[Scarecrow](#)," [The Cream City Review](#), collected in [Cloisters](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

Reduced Sentences

I Come From a Long Line of Modest Achievers

I'm fond of recalling how my mother is fond of recalling how my great-grandfather was the very first person to walk across the Brooklyn Bridge on the second day.

Practical

Bought a bag of frozen peas to numb my husband's sore testicles after his vasectomy.

That night I cooked pea soup.

I Knew a Woman

Everything she had was better than everything the rest of us had. Not by a lot. But by enough.

Married Love, 1

When we snuggle, my left hand finds purchase on his back cyst. My home button.

Why I'm Switching Salons

"We can put on a topcoat with glitter," said the manicurist. "We all know how you feel about glitter."

Copulation Couplet

—for the birds and other open-minded parties—

Birds without penises do it like this:
press vent to vent and pass the sperm, called "the cloacal kiss."

"If You Were Born Catholic, You'll Always Be Catholic"

My husband sits up after changing the van's busted tire, grease on his forehead, and I think—though it's been thirty years—it's Ash Wednesday.

Married Love, 2

There will come a day—let it be many years from now—when our kids realize no married couple ever needed to retreat at high noon behind their locked bedroom door to discuss taxes.

No, It's Not a Coincidence

In every book my husband's written, a minor character named Colin suffers a horrible death. This is because the boyfriend I had before I met my husband was named Colin. In addition to being named Colin, he was Scottish, and an architect. So it's easy to imagine my husband's feelings of inadequacy. My husband cannot build a tall building of many stories. He can only build a story, and then push Colin out of it.

Returning from Spring Break, Junior Year at Notre Dame

Swapped the rosary on my bedpost for Mardi Gras beads.

Still Have the Playbill

I peaked early, fourth grade. I had the lead in *Mary Poppins*. Mr. Banks was played by Vince Vaughn. Yes, that Vince Vaughn, though at that point he was just a kid, just another nobody like the rest of us. He didn't go to Hollywood until after high school.

I don't recall him as being particularly talented.

The Sum of What I Recall, One Year Later, from the Prague Walking Tour

Kafka was not the unhappy person we generally assume him to be.

When They Grow Up

My oldest child will hate me because I wrote an entire book about her. My middle child will hate me because I wrote hardly a word about him. But the baby; ah, the baby. When I write about him, I call it fiction, and I'm always sure to mention he has a big penis.

(Don't Think About the) Pink Elephant

Sometimes at the end of yoga I'm finally relaxing into that calm where I've forgotten my to-do list. That's when the instructor says, "Don't think about your to-do list." Suddenly it's back, and it's longer, because now it includes forgetting my to-do list.

A Few Weeks Later, the Recorded But Not Yet Released "Dock of the Bay" Would Become History's First Posthumous #1 Hit

It was storming, that December day in 1967, when the two-engine plane containing twenty-six-year-old Otis Redding and his back-up band, the Bar-Kays, took off from Cleveland. Just a few miles short of the Madison, Wisconsin airport, the plane crashed into Lake Monona. The crash killed Otis, his pilot, his manager, and four out of five Bar-Kays. Only the lonely trumpeter survived.

He was the one who played Taps.

Married Love, 3

As we lower onto the December-cold pleather seats of the minivan, we knock hands: both of us reaching to turn on the other's seat warmer first.

Beth Ann Fennelly
275

²⁷⁵ [Beth Ann Fennelly](#), "[Reduced Sentences](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Heating and Cooling](#), [W.W. Norton & Company](#)

Last Aerogramme to You, with Lizard

Kovalam, India

I found a bat today—its belly full of bloody mosquitoes.
If I squint, the shoreline of coconut trees becomes green star
lights strung across a patio. On the other side of this window

you and our dog sleep on packed bright earth. Follow
the leggy cats in this village, some curled up in bars
tucked up in tea and smoke. Newspapers here report callow

boys sneaking into nearby huts with machetes—all for easy dough
to finger in the sweaty pockets of their jeans. Can you smell the cigars
in this place? I sit on one of the boys' spinning chairs—some fellow

still warms me and it's not you, not even a nicked photo
of us ankle-deep in a lake I swore was full of snakes. The sandbar
sinks lower when I try to walk across, so I spread my toes

for extra balance. I have followed you for years, sent jumbo-
sized letters smudged and slicked down, but this I swear
is the last aerogramme to you. Now even my saliva glows

in the dark. Cats pool near the bed but I know there is one gecko
left to thrill my sleep. I know it won't bite, but the bizarre
way it skitters a loop around my wrist—exploring each elbow—
makes me weep for you. My cheek is wet. A lizard makes it so.

Aimee Nezhukumatathil
276

276 [Aimee Nezhukumatathil, "Last Aerogramme to You, with Lizard," *New England Review*, collected in *At the Drive-In Volcano*, \[Tupelo Press\]\(#\)](#)

In Which the Chorus Acts Out What May Be a Love Story

MARIA DE LOURDES

Once there was a village of stunned lunatics who fingered their navels as they stared at the moon's gray and abstinent seas.

MARIA MADALENA

Hard to believe we mean nothing to the stars.

MARIA APARECIDA

One day a nameless pink dolphin came to the village.

MARIA HELENA

His body a curse.

MARIA THEREZA

His beauty the least of it.

MARIA APARECIDA

His body as unsure of itself as a hypothesis.

MARIA DE LOURDES

One day he realized each child in the village was his, and he died for them.

MARIA HELENA

And everyone wept.

MARIA THERESA

And everyone gave his body to the tide's restless lispings.

MARIA APARECIDA

And every romance they repeated concealed a shame.

MARIA DE LOURDES

Once there was a daughter bewitched by the darkest lullaby pulled from a fairy-tale wet nurse.

MARIA MADALENA

In the refrain, a spell breaks and vowels heal around it.

MARIA APARECIDA

One day, a messenger was born in retrograde, ecstatic and sexless.

MARIA HELENA

She wandered like an angel curious about its source.

MARIA THEREZA

She wandered like a pilgrim smitten with wine.

MARIA APARECIDA

She wandered like orphans in search of a plantation to call an ending.

MARIA MADALENA

The message survived the flood. Then, the fire. Then even the jaguar let her live, and we knew she was ours to hunt, ours to worship or subdue.

MARIA THEREZA

One day, we loved what was easy—a grand piano half-drowned in the river, parakeets mating in a minor key, inventing history rather than recording it.

MARIA DE LOURDES

Now we love what is more beautiful than us, which is the weightlessness of fire, which is the amputated girl learning to write with her left hand, which is light is terror is coming for us.

Traci Brimhall
277

²⁷⁷ [Traci Brimhall](#), "[In Which the Chorus Acts Out What May Be a Love Story](#)," collected in [Saudade](#), Copper Canyon Press

Hostage

As far as we can
determine they have been
unharmmed.

Heads will roll, motherfuckers.
I'll chop 'em off.
I'll throw 'em in the street.

Taxicab, monkey mask, black lace brassiere,
condom, alligator, Seminole Indian,

the Western Hemisphere,

geranium, flowerpot, Oyster School,
coconut bra, unmarked vehicle, stretch limousine.

I am from DC,
therefore responsible.
I am terrified of heights.
Exciting things like this never happen to me.

Elizabeth Alexander
278

²⁷⁸ [Elizabeth Alexander](#), "[Hostage](#)," [Fence](#), collected in [Antebellum Dream Book](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Crash

As a boy, angels appeared at my window,
They would open it, like a window, to my parents' dying:
The jangling car crash, the spinning, that moment frozen,
Then the next: Such terror and beauty mixed:
The angels' hilarity. They crept up the glass like frost....

When I asked questions, the angels lied,
Or else they'd fidget like parents talking of sex;
Or they'd open the window farther, revealing more pain,
More spectacle: whole worlds churning in war, in fire—hysterical.
It was dizzying. Or else they'd just vanish, like fireworks—
Worms of light in my head—leaving the darkness I knew:
Fields bristled and shagged, the Negro church beyond glowing,
As it did, above the frog pond silent with the cold.

+ + +

This is a fact: I live between Blake and Milton Streets in Cambridge, Massachusetts,
Amid, no doubt, a confusion of ecto-activity: Both streets lead nowhere—
Or, rather, lead to other streets, their imperturbable houses hunched
Like mourners taking a handful of earth from a sextant's shovel:
It's laughable, a joke, really: the houses' wings tucked close to their sides,
The night's sirens, the snapping at insects that whirl, like planets,
Around the lampposts' suns....

+ + +

At thirteen, talking with my girlfriend on a beige Princess phone stretched to my bed,
I put a Ruger .22 revolver to my temple and did not pull the trigger, then or ever.
Blake says, *It's funny, isn't it, seeing through that hole and not with it?*
I say to him, and it's kind of a joke, *These are Milton's eyes.* With all eyes closed
I see the red worms always: they turn into faces: Blake's, Milton's, everyone's I've known...

+ + +

There is madness in this method: Many questions plaguing the late eighteenth
And early nineteenth centuries have, in our century, found answers
In rural Tennessee: The Picturesque: A Negro church perched in the red light
Of a sunset above a frog pond within a field slightly fogged. The beautiful:
My motorcycle ripping through that field as a car filled with parents
Spins off the road into the church and all into flame. The sublime:
The church's wings spread, it rockets into the night, its windows filled
With the faces of the dead mouthing all our names....

+ + +

At twenty, I fell in love with a dying woman, or else with her dying, I don't know.
Nothing had ever been so sad, so vivid: Holding her as she threw up beside her car
On Green Hills Avenue or else making love and then stumbling to mass....
Her name was Laura, *the dawn*, you know, a joke it turns out. I begged her
To marry me: I wanted what little she had left, wanted to hold it, eat it,
Stuff it down my throat.... The angels still torment me for this; they shut the sky
Around me and say, *Nice work, Keats*. I beg them: *I was just a child*, I say, *I thought*
I loved her. She is an angel now, earth, whatever, a little sun in my head, in many heads,
Rising. In Paris, near the end, her spleen hard as a melon, we made love
Like it was the last time, which—and this is funny—it was. Then drunk and driving
Through the madness of Paris I crashed into a parked car—a carnival of sparks—
And, it was hilarious, we just kept going—nowhere, it turns out.

+ + +

Blake gave me a souvenir of Claude Glasses, a rose colored mirror for framing
Our world that once belonged to Ginsberg, and briefly to Woolf, Lennon, Cobain,
And various others, etc. With them I wander the fields of houses blossoming
Across America, in search of love, or beauty, something: It's hysterical—and
Pointless, of course. So Milton gave me Blake's skull, which I wear over my own,
As Milton did, and God: It's hilarious what you see:
Look. It's a beautiful joke, sublime even.

+ + +

At nine, my son, lovesick, considers death. At nine, obsessed with my parents' death
My parents brought me to a shrink in a green glass brick office in Shreveport, Louisiana.
He said, *What if they really did die in a crash, what then?*
You mean, I said, *they really could die?*

Twenty years later, another shrink, hearing this, bursts into laughter—Blake, too,
And Milton, & all the angels—the whole world laughing.

Thirty years later, my son stares, weeping, of course, at a screen of pixels
That opens like a window to an evening long ago.

David Daniel
279

²⁷⁹ David Daniel, "[Crash](#)," collected in [Ornaments](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

Someone's Utopia: Love as Refusal

How could the news come?

My wife stares at the sun. Her scabs turn to birds
Dyed red after red until black,
An opossum tooth is in my fist. In my mind is the man

Choking on his nephew's fingernails
After eating the liver from his belly.
Polished metal: friable sky, pulverizing sky,

Town floating on the cymbal of the sun
My sisters take turns carrying

On their backs the rotting brother
They love, the rotting husband who I love
But will not touch.

Cold and golden,
We wait at the mountain.
Our neighbor cuts off our Lord's head

And throws his body into the ocean
The birds fly away,

The drum my husband beats is laughter.
He has not eaten.
I will not eat.

A golden, octagonal mansion
Rises from the mountain while I speak.
The world is flies.

My husband is flies.
I am flies
in a revolution

around a corpse
I cannot enter.

Joe Hall
280

²⁸⁰ [Joe Hall](#), "[Someone's Utopia: Love as Refusal](#)," *Bat City Review*, collected in *Someone's Utopia*, [Black Ocean](#)

#Mania

we're not on speaking terms

i shout curses into the skeletal
awnings of pay phones

parking meters vomit coins
as i pass : mad presidents

at my feet, embossed
in silver & nickel & copper

the sewer grate's yawning
in the floodwaters

i take my shelter where i can
get it dance in the street

light's spotlight, move so quick
even rain can't get me wet

text everyone—everyone text
get a few messages back

spread me across the city tonight
finds us in a man's apartment

with a bottle of old crow deranged
& flapping blackly below my jacket

i take my shelter where i can
get it his face is full of puncture

wounds & dead stars shine
through him tonight i don't have

a father no matter what
this man wants me to call him

when the street greets me after
i'm half calamity & half bitter cream

i am beating the morning forward
with the wilderness of my sneakers

i am belting unbearable songs
from the penthouse of my lungs

i am taking my shelter & tearing it
open in my gums

i am watching my father spill out of me
all over this city's waking radios

sam sax
281

²⁸¹ [sam sax](#), "[#Mania](#)," [The Southern Review](#), collected in [madness](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Roderick Hudson / Callery Pear

Before you disappeared the air smelled like sex:
it wasn't the not being adored which was clear

enough pale blitzkrieg of semen flowers callery
pear: molecules pouring out of you starving

artist with all the velocity of someone being
chased—pouring out of you. In whom—until

just after you leave—I was the last red chip, your
redundant snowy Alp gone rosy in the empty

open palm of your hand; even as with homo-
graphs or crystals we were sometimes not

distinguishable to ourselves—what I would have
given lives on as a rhetorical question but not

your arrows not this boat of marble armor
abiding the statues holding us at bay where sea

and sky reportedly repeatedly are disappearing
into sky and sea.

Michael Snediker
282

²⁸² [Michael Snediker](#), "[Roderick Hudson / Callery Pear](#)," collected in [The New York Editions](#), [Fordham University Press](#)

When We Were Fearsome

Are atoms made of lots of circles? is the first thing my small son says when he wakes up. My mind swims around, trying to remember if molecules are bigger than atoms. *In models of atoms, when they show what they look like, there are lots of circles,* I say.

The new chair of women's studies at my alma mater is a man. He writes me without using my professional title to ask what I've been up to since graduation. His work, the letter says, has been mentioned on NPR.

Quarks? I think, imagining electrons swimming in circles around neutrons.

Before bed, I tell my son a story about when he was a small bear living with his bear family in a remote part of the forest. I describe the white snow, the black branches, the brightness of the cardinal on a top branch who greets him when he leaves his cottage. This is meant to be lulling.

Bears hibernate in winter, he says. *Do you want to be hibernating?* I say. *No!* he is seized by a narrative impulse, his little body trembles with it. *Tell how I could turn into a polar bear when I was cold and into a fearsome desert bear when I got hot! Tell how surprised everyone was.*

I tell all about it, the fearsomeness and the changing fur. How he once sat there half-polar and half-desert bear, sipping hot cocoa with marshmallows by the cozy fire.

In the morning, I leave my son at school. I am dissatisfied with how they greet him. The teachers do not know of his powers. His fearsome magic. *Have a good day,* I say, kissing his crown. *Have a good Friday at home,* he says, following me to the door. *Have a good shopping trip.*

At home I straighten my bed, turn it down, and slip back in. I lie very still, with pillow levees on either side of my body. *My son is safe at school...* I think. *Most likely safe at school...* I try not to think about what the ER doctor said, what machine guns do to human organs. I only tremble a little bit.

A molecule, an atom, a particle, a quark, I think. A mourning dove calls, and it is lulling. Particle was the word that I forgot.

This is what I've been up to since graduation.

Joanna Penn Cooper

283

²⁸³ Marni Ludwig, "[Cigar Box](#)," *Assembly*, collected in [Pinwheel](#), [New Issues Press](#)

Prayer for the Lost Among Us

I wish we could let him
sleep all winter,
sleep all the way back to Elko,

Nevada, where forty years ago
we watched him take sleeping pills
and drink martinis

and pass out like a dead man
in the back of the station wagon
while we wandered the slot machines

and casino diners
wondering if he'd ever wake up.
We'd had a plan, then.

We'd agreed ahead of time
on a plan though we were too young
to give consent, wanting only

to please him, we were a little scared,
a little in awe,
you understand, he was our father.

When I look at him now
I see all of the fathers
he's been—

a funhouse mirror of fathers.
It's not a tragedy, my friend tells me,
and she's right.

The car was parked
far from the casino lights
and the plan was he'd wake up,

which he finally did, and we'd go to sleep
and he'd drive and drive
without having to listen to us

complain as the miles
passed beneath us on our
ongoing uncertain journey

into this gray morning.
Now we are the drivers,
he the sleeper who sleeps

standing up in the moonlight,
his legs cramping.
He the sleeper at the breakfast

table, folding and unfolding
his dirty paper napkin.
He the sleeper whose antacids

I wish we could replace
with sleeping pills and let him go to bed
without his oxygen mask

and fill his lungs with the mattress
where he sleeps beside my mother,
apart from this world.

His hair is the color of ashes
not yet set free upon the waters,
and his mouth is open,

the mouth of a gambler
who cannot speak
but shakes the dice in the glass,

the pills in his hand,
as if listening for something
and does not know why.

We had a plan for this
but he is not really here to enforce it,
and without him we lack the courage.

I was always afraid of his plans
and am relieved not to have to follow through,
relieved that only the pillows reproach us now

as I lay my head down
for another night as a child.

Catherine Barnett

284

²⁸⁴ [Catherine Barnett](#), "[Prayer for the Lost Among Us](#)," collected in [Human Hours](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin

I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison,
Part panic closet, a little room in a house set aflame.
I lock you in a form that is part music box, part meat
Grinder to separate the song of the bird from the bone.
I lock your persona in a dream-inducing sleeper hold
While your better selves watch from the bleachers.
I make you both gym & crow here. As the crow
You undergo a beautiful catharsis trapped one night
In the shadows of the gym. As the gym, the feel of crow-
Shit dropping to your floors is not unlike the stars
Falling from the pep rally posters on your walls.
I make you a box of darkness with a bird in its heart.
Volts of acoustics, instinct & metaphor. It is not enough
To love you. It is not enough to want you destroyed.

Terrance Hayes
285

²⁸⁵ [Terrance Hayes, "American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin \(I lock you in an American sonnet\)," *Poetry*, collected in *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, Penguin Books](#)

from *The Lumberjack's Dove*

Lumberjack clutches the absent space at the end of his arm. He looks up at the dove, who in turn, looks back at him, already forgetting it was ever anything but sovereign.

Lumberjack starts his pickup truck. He keeps the windows closed as he drives & the dove floats up to bounce against the glass. The road is slick with rain. Worms boil up from the earth. Now there is a shirt tied around the wound, the fabric growing sticky & dark with ache. A bootlace becomes a tourniquet. A terrible yank settles in the basement of his heart, the lowest stair.

The horizon swallows the highway. Tarmac stretches onwards, flat & straight & blistered with sun. On either side of the road, barbed wire is nailed between wood posts. Atop each post is an animal skull. There are hundreds of posts & hundreds of skulls. Rabbit, gull, deer, bull. Then the unrecognizable: One with black antlers webbing from cheekbones. Another with an eye socket in the center of the forehead. Another with no mouth.

A mouthless jaw implies the following:

- a. The creature did not eat.
 - b. The creature did eat, but nothing that could be ingested traditionally. Not the sort of food one can touch.
 - c. The creature had a mouth once, which at some point, the witch took away.
-

Roof alive with prairie grass & sod. Stained glass windows. The house squats on seven wooden legs, knee-bent & spidered. A rope ladder uncurls like a fern. Bone chimes hang above the door & sing, though there is no wind.

Crows blacken the ground in front of the house. The dove is a pinprick in the center of a great dark pupil. It is the only star alive.

GennaRose Nethercott
286

²⁸⁶ [GennaRose Nethercott](#), "[Lumberjack clutches the absent space...](#)," [The Lumberjack's Dove](#), [HarperCollins](#)

Separating

*there is blood in the morning egg
that makes me turn and weep
—Audre Lorde*

Between the work at work and the work at home, I rush
inside a grocery to buy the bits for quick breakfasts
that leave me hungry by the time I return to my office.
It is an organic market, and as I shop I can hear my mother—
her mouth full of pennies—mocking each cent I overpay
for staples. But time's expense burns black holes in pockets,
so no detour to a cheaper store. So honey priced like wine.
So six eggs for what would buy twelve. All in the name
of time. It will be days before I have a moment when I can
pause my pre-commute to click on the electric kettle, boil
water for steeping rooibos and poaching eggs. Eventually,
I reach inside the refrigerator, revisit the words “cage-free”
“pasture-raised” which, in my earlier haste, read like gibberish
strings of dollar signs. When I crack open the brown pods,
what glops into the ramekin is a yolk-yellow so plump and lucent.
I tear up thinking of all the weak or sallow suns I have dropped
into water, of the stressed existences that made those eggs.
What of my thin shell or my own yoke unbroken within me
(both functions of money, time, deficits)? And I know nothing
about industrial farms. And I understand so much of blackness
as what I do in spite of my caging. But I know I cannot buy
another egg not laid by a bird I believe foraged, walked freely
under the sun—deciding how to value her motion, her blood.
A bourgeois privilege, I know. But if not to make that choice,
why else am I grinding myself down for these wages?

Kyle Dargan
287

²⁸⁷ Kyle Dargan, “[Separating](#),” collected in [Anagnorisis](#), Northwestern University Press

How to Graduate

God wrote me a letter in invisible ink. But I got overwhelmed:
the parchment, the lemon juice the light and the candle. I
accidentally set it on fire. For forty days and nights, the smell
of caramel surrounded me, and when it receded, I sent out my
only dove.

Alicia Jo Rabins
288

²⁸⁸ [Alicia Jo Rabins](#), "[How to Graduate](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Divinity School](#), [The American Poetry Review](#)

Girl on Girl on Fire

On fire I'm unfuckable, I'm war
bridegroom, the knife piloting
the wound. I'm the eye

bleeding sight. The screen scabbing
over me, the camera angled
for entry. I hook you

like a lure. I storyboard origin:
where a girl grows from god's side
wound & my mouth

mentors her pleasure. Turn down
your eyes. I've little-spooned
the moon & screwed the stars

back into my skull. Whoever
said fear is a foothold
has never climbed

me. Mount an axe where the sky
should be. Mountains are named
for their view, what you want to see

atop me. Expect to bleed
today. I trade my feet
for a landscape of losses:

a sea made of teeth, your nipples
roaming my mouth. My thumbs
wet thorns, my threefold thighs

& double-dog hunger, each barkless
tree I skinned alive with my teeth. God
bills me for my birth & I pay

back with my life. I'm alive
now that I'm dead, I look
like my mother's mother, the one

who skipped her face like a stone
across three seas, the one I receive
like a bullet to the bone, my breasts blown

glass. My knock-out ass. You can't
convince me history isn't
pornography. I have a body

but nowhere to bury it.
I have a harness but no horse
to breed for it. What we call

tame you call talent. What
you call country I call
no one picking up. Tonight

my mother shipwrecks my fantasies, rains
my bed into a riverbank, turns
my girl back into a pyre, my body back

to a movie birth scene, false
blood & stagelight, my mother calling *cut*
her out of me, the camera

my father & I
its foundling.

Kristin Chang
289

²⁸⁹ [Kristin Chang](#), "[Girl on Girl on Fire](#)," [The Adroit Journal](#)

from “Key Notes”

Reliquary

I searched using the key words: relics, St. Nicholas, World Trade Center, nine eleven. To no avail. I must have dreamed this: the priest on the mound of rubble of the South Tower piled on the ruin of what had been the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Nicholas, looking for the church’s altar reliquary and the relics kept inside. A church’s relics, the enduring bits of bone, the stains of blood, the splinter of the True Cross, are the key to the church’s ignition switch. Its consecration on the dashboard altar charges the church, changes it from a secular space to a sacred one, a key fit into its casket snug in its stone. And it was this image of a priest scrambling over the wreckage of that day that lodged in my mind along with all the other images indelibly inscribed in bits and bytes. While scores of others searched through the ground-down ground of Ground Zero, recovering the remains, the remains of the newly martyred, the horrific forensic evidence, and, yes, the new relics of the dead, this priest was looking for old bones, evidence of the persistence of catastrophe and hope with all its benign evil. He needs to find the right relics in this vast landscape of relics. I think of this now every time I misplace my keys in the clutter and neglect of the things I have accumulated. The frustration of not being able to proceed, go forward, do anything until this sliver of cheap metal is back in my hands. As I search I think of that search and the way tiny keys turn everything—time and space—inside out as they turn in the lock. And I think of Elizabeth Bishop’s line about how losing isn’t hard to master and how she rhymes that word, with sorrowful irony and paradox, with disaster.

Michael Martone
290

²⁹⁰ [Michael Martone](#), “[Key Notes: Reliquary](#),” collected in [Brooding](#), [University of Georgia Press](#)

Running Orders

They call us now.
before they drop the bombs.
The phone rings
and someone who knows my first name
calls and says in perfect Arabic
“This is David.”
And in my stupor of sonic booms and glass-shattering symphonies
still smashing around in my head
I think *Do I know any Davids in Gaza?*
They call us now to say
Run.
You have 58 seconds from the end of this message.
Your house is next.
They think of it as some kind of
war-time courtesy.
It doesn't matter that
there is nowhere to run to.
It means nothing that the borders are closed
and your papers are worthless
and mark you only for a life sentence
in this prison by the sea
and the alleyways are narrow
and there are more human lives
packed one against the other
more than any other place on earth.
Just run.
We aren't trying to kill you.
It doesn't matter that
you can't call us back to tell us
the people we claim to want aren't in your house
that there's no one here
except you and your children
who were cheering for Argentina
sharing the last loaf of bread for this week
counting candles left in case the power goes out.
It doesn't matter that you have children.
You live in the wrong place.
and now is your chance to run
to nowhere.
It doesn't matter
that 58 seconds isn't long enough
to find your wedding album
or your son's favorite blanket
or your daughter's almost completed college application.
or your shoes
or to gather everyone in the house.
It doesn't matter what you had planned.
It doesn't matter who you are.

Prove you're human.
Prove you stand on two legs.
Run.

Lena Khalaf Tuffaha
291

²⁹¹ [Lena Khalaf Tuffaha](#), "[Running Orders](#)," *Vox Populi*, collected in [Water & Salt](#), Red Hen Press

Dunst

Since you can't seem to avoid it, you submit
to being seen in a long plaid skirt and stockings
and low-heeled goatskin tan leather shoes.
And hair. An effusion of thick growth cropped
just below the ears, with a gaze that goes
all the way back to the back of the camera,
into the future. That's me, over there
(you can't see me), pretending to look at,
let's say roses, pinks, maybe daffodils,
anything to make it seem possible
to have been there when you let the mask
fall away for a moment and be the dream
dreamt so far back words stumble catching up.

She's thin. Eating disorder she'd tell me
years later. This, the woman I would wed
years later, standing on some grass, a lawn
in Austria. A village near the border
with Hungary. You can't see Hungary.
Or Austria, either. Only the grass
at her feet, that and something I'd call mist,
if I didn't know better. There's a word for it
in German, stuff that's neither cloud nor smoke,
that burrs the view, softens what you look at.
Distance, maybe. Time, certainly. She looks
at the camera as though it were a confidant,
someone she could trust with a secret.
Not the one she knows already, that he
will leave, the man behind the camera.
She will want that later. In fact, may now.
The secret she confides in us, the one
she doesn't know herself, but senses, is,
is the one given her at birth, the self
that gets to be the perfect thing it is
for the short time its aura burns around her.
It weighs nothing. It is nothing. But she
holds it in her gaze, knowing without knowing
that this would be what she came here for, here
being a small village on the downward slope
of history, mysterious origin
and fate. I stand outside the picture. I wait.

Roger Mitchell
292

²⁹² Roger Mitchell, "Dunst," *Wabash Watershed*, collected in *Reason's Dream*, Dos Madres Press

Problem

The two boys win three fish at the end of the summer fair. The one boy names his two fish Buddy and Malcolm and the other boy names his one fish Fred. By the time the boys get home with the three fish, fill a soup bowl with water, Fred, they decide, is sick and needs an immediate operation which leaves him one hundred percent dead. But the boys keep cutting him up in the interests of science, slitting out what they say is intestines, carving out a tiny black eye which gets left on the table while they toast bread for fish food to feed the remaining two fish, Buddy and Malcolm. Some time later. Buddy dies when no one is watching which leaves only Malcolm who, by now, moved to a real fishbowl with a shake a day of real fish food, lives on for many months on into and right through the fall without showing any sign of being a weak goldfish from a summer fair. One boy, in winter, wakes in the night, "Fred is dead," he weeps to his mother. "And he has no eyes left to find his two brothers or to make his way home in the dark."

Victoria Redel

293

²⁹³ [Victoria Redel](#), "[Problem](#)," [Epoch](#), collected in [Swoon](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Punctuating the Living

It would be easier if the world were built
from commas, but instead we're high
on exclamation points, someone
slamming the brakes of the van in the driveway,
someone walking into the house
and shouting, *We're done!*

What we travel through daily is a period
of time, a minute black hole, a steady
waltz, as if we are slow dancing
with death, the lover who never understood us.

My closet holds a world built
from semi-colons, everything
is a full statement; everything is a part
of everything else. If my life depended on it,
I'd find a push-up bra and a pair
of stilettos to lure death into a dirty bar,
but in my town, we survive
in socks and sandals, a book
of poetry in our bag. *I'll take God for \$100, Alex,*
whether or not He or She wants me,
whether or not, I've made
His or Her list. Maybe prayer is what comes after
the exclamation point and the apology
is the ellipses in another person's voice.

Life is saying *we're done* and falling back in love
after the black hole closes shop,
and we're all left slow dancing
each other into another decade. And the flicker
of God, I saw it in the shoes
of the other dancers,
saw it in the slight glare of the questionmark
saying, *Hi, I'm new here, is this how we begin?*

Kelli Russell Agodon
294

²⁹⁴ [Kelli Russell Agodon](#), "[Punctuating the Living](#)," *Waxwing*

Catholic Teenager from Hell Goes to Italy

Jock DuBois found out in our senior year
that one out of every seven Americans was Catholic,
so he figured if each of us would rise up
on a secret signal and kill seven non-Catholics,
we could take over the whole country in,
like, three or four minutes, a hypothesis
that cost us several jobs,
since Jock couldn't stop talking about his plan,
and even devout Catholic bosses
had no desire to see their employees
doff their brightly-colored paper caps
or throw down their mops and brooms
and start killing customers who had come in
for a burger, shake, and biggie fry,
not to have their throats cut by pimply fanatics.

That didn't stop Jock from talking,
even though I said the plan might work in America,
but what about the rest of the world,
including our immediate neighbors?
It just didn't seem like something
the Canadians would take lying down.
I wasn't sure I wanted Catholics
to run the world anyway, even though
JFK had just been elected president,
and some people were saying he was already
getting secret orders from the Vatican,
and others were passing out what they called
"Kennedy quarters," the ones
where Washington is wearing a papal skullcap
they'd painted on with red nail polish.

A year later, none of it mattered.
Oswald slew Kennedy in Dallas,
and my faith died, too, shot in the head
by college, by pretty gids and cheap beer
and philosophy professors I loved more
than my own parents, who wept when I told them
I wasn't going to mass at St. Aloysius anymore,
that the church had no connection with my life,
was another planet, really,
even though it was just a mile from our house,
a miserable cavern I languished in
every Sunday morning as I checked the exits
and listened to the shotguns racketing in my mind
and wondered, How many guys
would I need to take over this place,

a thought I hardly have in mind this summer
when Barbara and I stop at the church
of La Madonna delle Lacrime on a hill near Trevi
to see Perugino's *Adoration of the Magi*,
and at the time we are the only people there
besides this other guy and his wife,
and Barbara has taken a sketching class
this summer and is just irritating
the living crap out of me by drawing
virtually everything she sees—
like, we'll be having breakfast in some piazza
and she'll use a packet of sugar
and then take a napkin and start drawing
the empty sugar packet on it—
so, as usual, she wants to sketch the Perugino,

and I'm standing around checking out
the other paintings, which are pretty much nothing,
and the guy comes up to me and says
you speak Italian, and I say, A little,
and he hands me a key and says,
When you're through here, lock up
from the outside and take the key over
to the convent next door and give it
to the blind nun who answers the bell,
and I say, So I lock the door and take the key
over to the convent and give it to
a blind nun? and he says, Exactly,
and gets in a yellow Opel Corsa with his wife
and drives away, so I walk back to look
at the Perugino for a while

and to look over Barbara's shoulder
at her drawing, and she's done, like,
one of the legs of one of the Magi,
and she says. Quit looking at me,
so I walk outside and toss the key up and catch it
for a while and then start playing
a little game I made up in the States,
which is to toss your keys behind your back
and over your opposite shoulder
and catch them in front with the same hand
you used for the tossing,
and people always like to see you do that,
because if you catch the keys, they're happy,
and if you miss the keys, they're even happier,
only there's no one out here on this hill,

so I start thinking about the Perugino again,
and thinking, Here I am, in charge of the future
of Italian art, or at least one considerable piece

of it, and while I wasn't going to steal it,
I could have drawn the biggest, fattest dick
known to mankind on one of the shepherds
or given everybody sideburns and mustaches,
only I'm not angry at the Church
any more than I was ready to kill for it
the way Jock DuBois had been, so that when
Barbara finally comes out and says, Let's go,
I just lock up and go to the convent door
and ring the bell and hear the blind nun
shout, *Eccomi!* (Here I am!)
as she bats her way down the hall

and finds the door and yanks it open
and grabs for the key, which she misses,
because I have already moved my hand
to where hers had been, and we do that
several times until she finally takes
a lucky swing and grabs the key and gives me
a hearty though, now that I think about it,
almost certainly ironic *Arrivederci!*
and we set off to Urbino,
and that night I'm reading the paper
at a table in the Piazza Centrale
while Barbara sketches the table next to ours,
and I see where Giulio Andreotti,
the former prime minister now on trial
for corruption, told a journalist

that his solace came from "the old Catholic wisdom
of the Roman people" that an aunt had taught him,
namely, (1) never overdramatize things;
(2) everything, over time, can be fixed;
(3) keep a certain detachment from everything;
and (4) the important things in life are very few,
and I think, well, that makes more sense
than anything I ever heard as a boy
back at St. Aloysius, even though these truths
didn't keep Andreotti from becoming a rascal,
but then that's the nature of wisdom,
Catholic or otherwise. I love the Church today
for preserving all those fabulous art works,
and even though I hope I don't have
a deathbed conversion, if I do,

and there is a heaven, I wouldn't expect to get in,
since I serve poetry now and not God,
but maybe I could be, I don't know, *transferred*
to Perugino's fresco, sort of slowly starting
to appear in outline and then more and more,
and not as one of the Wise Men, of course,

or even a shepherd, but just, you know,
 a lout, neighborhood guy who hears a commotion
and goes over to see what's going on,
 and there is this mother and father,
and there's an ass and a cow and a dog,
 and in the middle of it all,
there's this baby, and the mother is thinking,
 Maybe he'll grow up to be somebody,
a rabbi or a healer or just a person everyone loves,

but then what if people don't understand him
 and try to hurt him or even kill him,
and she'd look around, and her eyes
 would meet mine, and I wouldn't say anything,
but I'd give her a look that would say,
 I can't help you, lady, I couldn't get anybody
to be my friend in high school
 except Jock DuBois, who wanted
to kill the non-Catholics,
 and she'd be thinking, We're all non-Catholics here,
and the father would be thinking,
 We'll head toward Jerusalem,
there's work there, things will be better,
 and the baby would be thinking,
This is going to be one long day.

David Kirby
295

²⁹⁵ [David Kirby](#), "[Catholic Teenager from Hell Goes to Italy](#)," *The Ledge*, collected in [The House of Blue Light](#), [Louisiana State University](#)

Private Access Network

Once i moved
my whale
bone things just
weren't the same

They sent my pony
to prison They
said my Shetland pony
was too young
for a smartphone
so they sent him
to prison

The relation of land
to culture is not
dissimilar to
the relation of body
to mind

No one writes
me get well cards
anymore

There's
nothing to say
about welfare
in this poem

Jos Charles
296

²⁹⁶ [Jos Charles](#), "[Private Access Network](#)," collected in [Safe Space](#), [Ahsahta Press](#)

Central Casting

Having said as much
with a wandering
megaphone, my teenage boyfriend
(the coke fiend), pointed
to the armory, hinting
at explosives hidden
there. Even then,
the movie producer,
and I without a score.

Gorillas are my game,
I smarted. In one big hand
I'll place my bet. Then north
I'll strike
like my mother before me
and build my fortunes
in those industries
of instinct or what you call
a skirt.

Rosa Alcalá
297

²⁹⁷ [Rosa Alcalá](#), "[Central Casting](#)," collected in [Undocumentaries](#), [Shearsman Books](#)

from *I'm So Fine*

Montell Jordan came to the drive-thru as I was clocking out the day before I quit so I went outside to get his autograph for one of my nieces who thought he was soooooo fine he was in a black Suburban with 50-11 dudes & was really cool about it & didn't try to hit on me I probably smelled like Fat Fries even though I'd changed out of my uniform & into khaki shorts he turned the music way down to hear me better & seemed really tired I knew that feeling I still had to take two buses home & get up at 5:30 the next morning to make it to 8am statistics class in Santa Monica & try not to get flashed like earlier that day by a barefoot homeless man in a filthy cloth diaper-thing I was too tired to be anything but mad that I had to stop studying & leave my seat on the bus bench as he swung his pale penis around like a stripper tassel I screamed get the hell out of my face! & he sagged like an empty burlap sack & walked away revealing the thong quality of the diaper which made me throw up in my mouth a little bit & a cop strolled out of the nearby Winchell's sipping a large cup of coffee & asked if I was all right he said do you want me to arrest him I said no I just want to keep reading *The Salt Eaters*

Khadijah Queen

298

²⁹⁸ [Khadijah Queen](#), "[Montell Jordan came to the drive-thru](#)," collected in [I'm So Fine: A List of Famous Men & What I Had On](#), [YesYes Books](#)

The Moons: Notes on the Formation of Self

An old couple in Wednesday-night Bible study—
the Moons, David and Ella, they would be dead now,
I can write about them. We were discussing the Apostle Paul,
a single man, with many ideas about marriage
and one or two about divorce, and the Moons,
recent converts—they had both been married before—
began to cry, as many cried in those services
because they believed they were going to hell.
Ralph Alexander was our pastor. For us, his flock,
his congregation, in addition to preaching,
he built cabinets and tuned-up cars. Because of him,
I try not to get too excited about the idea of being dead.
In the air, particularly, when the turbulence happens
on a vacuum and the plane drops precipitously,
as long as the jolt softens and the carry-ons
stay in their bins and the stewards are not crying.
It helps, also, to think of Wallace Stevens writing near
the end of his life, “It is an illusion that we were ever alive.”
The Moons fly with me, too, on the wing crying,
and maybe I put them here because the Moons,
in their intensity, remind me of suicide bombers.
What do you think? Do you have a self, a soul, an option
all your own and not just what others received
and passed on, installing it in you as one ape
will cry and another ape take it and make the same noise—
And is it fair to include the Moons’ cries among the ape cries?
Are you one of the ones gravely offended
To hear the human creature, made in the image of God,
Represented as an ape? Would you prefer coyote?
Last year coyotes ate one of our neighbor’s dogs,
A little gray and white terrier, Bandit—one night
chained to the doghouse with his name on it,
and the next, just the chain and the gnawed-on spine.
I hear them at night, a chorus of otherworldly fatwas,
fugues, and arias, and sometimes one of them
will shift and take the voice of another
the way the Moons shifted when they read Paul’s letter.
No one has told me this, I have thought of it on my own.
The rain is falling and the gutters do not hold all the water—
Friends, anything all your own?—a scrap, even
a whole indiscretion you whisper sidelong to your buddies—
Do you secretly want them to pass it on to others?
Do you want them to use your name in connection with it?
Do you sometimes lower your voice to be overheard?
I pass the Moons on to you, the virgins in paradise,
and three of the men who flew the planes into the towers
who visited strip clubs the week before their martyrdom.
When the people I think of as myself talk to me

of the suicide bombers, the one with the muscle car
and the tattoo of General Nathan Bedford Forrest
suggests to the one pretending to be Mahatma Gandhi
that when a person carries a bomb strapped to his chest
into a market and sets it off, or releases sarin
in a subway tunnel, it might be a good idea,
since the person cannot be stripped naked
and dangled upside down in a freezing room,
and since there will never be a chance to take a file
and grind away the teeth or to tie the body down
and douse it in honey and set it near a bed of fire ants
or to open little wounds and pour in mercury or Liquid-Plumr,
that it might be a good idea to kill first the bomber's
mother and father, then all the children, the mates,
all the uncles and the aunts, the cousins to the seventh remove,
that this would be humane, less murderous than war.
Because of what I heard that Ralph Alexander told the Moons,
I resolve that there are many selves, some bad,
some good, that it is important to hear them all
and say their names in secret and let them go.
I did not see the Moons enter the parsonage before dawn.
I do not know what to believe, but I believe
that Ralph Alexander told the Moons to disregard
that one instance of holy scripture, no matter—
They would not have to separate in order to go to heaven.

Rodney Jones
299

²⁹⁹ [Rodney Jones, "The Moons: Notes on the Formation of Self," *Five Points*](#), collected in *Imaginary Logic*, [Houghton Mifflin Harcourt](#)

Orion

Well, he was a hero, wasn't he? And now
he's dead. Another corpse to smear with myrrh
and resin, and then a pyre all to himself.
Into the wound especially, I guess. Just goes
to show, that's what a god will do to you

if you're not smart. Who knows what
she'll be hunting next. That Orion:
duty and loyalty sewn up tight
in his thick skull, but not a thread
of sense. Fitting and sweet, indeed, but not

for me. The moon's flat as the coins
we laid into his dumb, loving eyes, stars
have been hammered into his belt
up there. Stitched into place. No good
ever came from some sky mourning you, and you

tell anyone I said so. But what a sword
he's got. The arms still give me shivers
going up in smoke, wishing they were wrapped
around me. Some things aren't worth dying
for, though. Sleep well above the countryside,

sweet lunk. Crushed bone and ash might flower
somewhere (packed him with incense, for the smell,
you know): like for that pretty kid who pined
away. Whatever his name was. Somewhere. Thrace,
maybe. They sing well there, I hear.

Reginald Shepherd
300

³⁰⁰ [Reginald Shepherd](#), "[Orion](#)," [Prairie Schooner](#), collected in [Angel, Interrupted](#), [The University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

My Hands Are My Heart: Two-Part Cibachrome Print: Gabriel Orozco: 1991

1. Often I catch him playing doctor with his shadow.
2. For arriba, por abajo.
3. With duct tape he mends his favorite jeans.
4. The way stubble salts his chin.
5. A saxophone is nothing like an ampersand in his hands.
6. Hound & brassbound.
7. Above his mattress there's a poster of a Ferris wheel.
8. Ripped jeans. Paint-streaked boots.
9. Las tardes aquellas.
10. In his wallet a fake driver's license.
11. Plumed initials.
12. To make an animal out of tenderness.
13. Aztec. Trekkie. AZT.
14. To run through the corridors of a corrido.
15. Like bitter water, like burning water.
16. ¡Que jale!
17. The way the light touches him, like a priest.
18. Thumb to chin, thumb to forehead.
19. Du wah. Du wah.
20. He believes a pomegranate is a thesaurus.
21. Each seed a synonym for the color red.
22. Gamet. Puce. Claret.
23. To dig a little in this world.
24. Like the song-limbed.

25. His mouth is nothing like a cup.
26. Impossible to drink from, impossible to shatter.
27. Pero que necesidad.
28. After a meal he plucks a cigarillo from his pocket.
29. Though rain collects in the small of his back.
30. Even music can bleed.
31. To crash a quinceañera just for the quesadillas.
32. Codo. Baboso. Pendejo.
33. Sometimes I gather the vowels in his last name.
34. Acquired. *Acquired*.
35. He carries the scent of musk around like a musket.
36. My minuteman.

Eduardo C. Corral
301

³⁰¹ [Eduardo C. Corral](#), "[My Hands Are My Heart: Two-Part Cibachrome Print: Gabriel Orozco: 1991](#)," [Salt Hill](#), collected in [Slow Lighting](#), Yale University Press

The Silence Will Be Sudden Then Last

Sybaritic afterlife I don't crave you.
I like daylight. I like crowds.
I don't think it will be charming underground.
The silence will be sudden then last.

What's chic will shrink.
There won't be any pretty, pity.
Will never peaches there, or air.
We'll be so squashed and sour there.

I don't want a cold place.
Don't want a threadbare
clamp and consequence all old.
Our loneliness will be prolonged then go too far.

Oh fuck it's true.
Then nothing left of you.

Deborah Landau
302

³⁰² [Deborah Landau, "The Silence Will Be Sudden Then Last," *Poetry*](#)

The Boss is Not Poetic

The boss is not poetic writing about the boss is not poetic
a corporate pencil doesn't gallop
dactyls one foot two feet six feet seven the boss
only has two feet the rain taps its

trimeters all over my roof the boss can only jump up and
down in one spot the boss cannot do the
splits the rain splits into pieces the rain slants into
my face into my eyes that are not really

slanted the boss only rhymes with *cross* and *loss*
poem rhymes with *palindrome* and *loam* a desk is
not poetic either it has four sides hard and stiff a
Herman Miller chair loses question marks

through its holes as it holds a Herman or a Miller one day
I watch a shrill pelican dive straight down into
the water a waiter brings us fish on a plate a pelican
swallows a fish whole a pelican is the boss

with its endless office of sky I could stand on the pier
the whole day and peer at the pelicans that fall
from the sky with their briefcases of fish in their
oily grey suits and shined black shoes

Victoria Chang
303

³⁰³ Victoria Chang, "[The Boss is Not Poetic](#)," collected in [The Boss](#), [McSweeney's](#)

(In Medias) Res

...that stops before my house each morning, the one the man who drives the white pickup with no door to protect the bed depends on. Somehow, they let him ride w/out pay, his tool belt enough for the price of admission. But me: A messenger bag says nothing or everything @ once. One failing testimony: A man w/a messenger bag has the coin to catch a ride. Pay up. I do & find a seat in the front. Out of spite, I tell all the white men that they will be giving up their seats to black women today: young, old, w/or w/out child—no excuses. Your seat, sir. Then I laugh, retract the sir, replace it w/“your wackness,” & now everybody is confused. “I believe that relates to Hip-Hop, but his use of the messenger bag points to a more professional Negro who would know nothing of that music,” says the freeloader w/a tool belt, like he’s some damn authority. Professional? “Who you calling a professional?” I protest, let the “Negro” slide. “Let the Negro slide,” Mr. Tool Belt says. OK, now I can’t ignore that shit. Yes, the proverbial fan was involved, all hell was loosed, my spine still standing, everything else: a pile. The conductor announces Michigan St, four blocks past where I intended to exit, but I have no proof other than my nerves. I ride the train...

Mitchell L. H. Douglas
304

³⁰⁴ [Mitchell L. H. Douglas](#), “[\(In Medias\) Res](#),” collected in [dying in the scarecrow's arms](#), [Persea Books](#)

HolyMolyLand

In *The Odyssey* there's mention of a plant called moly, which is sacred and harvested only by the gods.

The gods are vengeful but they are also good to us, though we have given up sacrifices and burnt offerings.

With regard to burnt offerings, the following is a concise statement of the Levitical law: these were wholly animal, and the victims were wholly consumed.

The Animal Gang was a marauding group of hooligans who used potatoes studded with razor blades during pitched battles on the streets of Dublin in the 1930s.

Which is to say that the moly was an ordinary potato, its surface jagged with metal edges.

“Holy moly!” was Captain Marvel’s characteristic exclamation of surprise. Because the oath might have been offensive to some, “Holy Moly” was used in the late 1920s as a jocular euphemism for “Holy Moses.”

Holy Moses is also a German thrash metal band, known for its lead singer Sabina Classen—one of the first and only women to use a death growl.

Moses demanded the release of the Israelites from slavery, and led them out of Egypt and across the Red Sea. After 40 years of wandering in the desert he died within sight of the promised land.

In *A Dictionary of the Underworld*, “moly” is preceded by “mokker”—Yiddish for maker.

“Mokker” is a variation of “macher,” which also means someone who arranges, fixes, or has connections. The person who could miraculously produce a visa or get an exit permit for a Jew was known as a “macher.”

The story in *The Guardian* of an Austrian Jewish shepherd who drives Syrian refugees across southern Hungary to eastern Austria, hidden under blankets in his car—*All my shoes got torn to pieces at the Hungaaaaaarian border*, he sings, to the tune of a Jewish wedding song, to cheer everyone in his vehicle up.

In *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi writes, “Perhaps 400 yards from the camp lay the potatoes—a treasure. Two extremely long ditches, full of potatoes and covered by alternate layers of soil and straw to protect them from the cold. Nobody would die of hunger any more.”

Concerning the unblemished animals from the herd or the flock: the fire which consumed the offerings was never allowed to go out. Every morning the ashes were conveyed by the priest to a clean place outside the camp.

Many boys in the Animal Gang worked as newspaper vendors—a line of employment that would have given them an intimate awareness of the city and its machinations.

In order to transform into Captain Marvel, homeless newsboy Billy Batson spoke the wizard Shazam’s name—an acronym for the wisdom of Solomon, the strength of Hercules, the stamina of Atlas, the power of Zeus, the courage of Achilles, and the speed of Mercury. Speaking the word produced a bolt of magic

lightning that transformed Billy into Captain Marvel. Speaking the word again reversed the transformation with another bolt of lightning. This is the way some people believe prayer works.

We are frightened by everything, says one of the Syrian refugees, sitting in the darkness. *Please can we just keep driving*.

“Border Song” is a gospel ballad first performed by Elton John, with lyrics written by Bernie Taupin—except for the final verse, which John wrote himself: *Holy Moses let us live in peace / Let us strive to find a way to make all hatred cease*.

Captain Marvel battled many villains, including Adolf Hitler’s champion, Captain Nazi, who was part of the Monster Society of Evil. The Society tried many plans, such as attempting to use Captain Nazi to steal magic fortune-telling pearls, using a film to intimidate the world, and even trying to use a giant cannon to blow holes in countries.

There are holes in all of these stories—open-mouthed gaps in the fence, a singing presence. Holy moly, *please can we just keep driving*.

The phrase “Holy Moley” might have also come from political jingles referencing Professor Raymond Charles Moley, an American economist, and an ally of President Franklin Roosevelt. He served as part of Roosevelt’s Brain Trust until he turned against the New Deal and became a conservative Republican.

Our entire country’s collective genesis: those who were persecuted, who survived, who fled. My mother was stateless until she was six. She still remembers the rocking of the boat. The *General Harry Taylor*, a converted American troop ship, carried post-war refugees—carried my family—from German displaced persons camps to America in 1952.

Conservative Republicans are generally split on how to handle the Syrian refugee crisis. Senator Ted Cruz (R-Texas) indicated he’s against the idea of taking in refugees, saying there are logistical and other challenges. Senator Marco Rubio (R-Florida) has said he’s open to the idea of accepting more refugees, as long as security is a top consideration.

Moley wrote the majority of Roosevelt’s first inaugural address, but he is not credited with penning the famous line, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” though he did write, “only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the moment.”

Holy Moses has released the following class thrash metal albums: *World Chaos*, *Terminal Terror*, *Too Drunk to Fuck*, *Master of Disaster*, *Disorder of the World*, and *Agony of Death*.

Holy holy holy is the Lord of Hosts. Holy holy holy is the Lord on high.

In 1947 Eleanor Roosevelt visited the DP camp at Bergen-Belsen. The story goes that my grandmother, in the crowd, held my mother up high in the air because she wanted Eleanor to see her red-headed child, born from the ashes.

And in his speech celebrating the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, Ronald Lauder, a big masher in the World Jewish Congress said, *When they begged for help, all they got was silence*. And when he said, *from the ashes of this terrible place*, he meant the large swath of land known as the Field of Ashes, which stretches behind the gas chambers.

And the priest shall take off his linen garments, and put on other garments, and carry forth the ashes outside the camp unto a clean place.

When a reporter interviewed Aphrodite Vati Mariola, whose family owns the Aphrodite Hotel in Lesbos, about the boats of refugees washing up on the beach, she said: *One boy yesterday, he had with him the Bible written in Arabic. It was from a friend of his and he said he was taking care of it. He just kept crying, bursting into tears. And we kept saying, are you OK? And he said no, no, no—I'm OK, I'm just thanking God I'm alive.*

In 1933, when Franklin Roosevelt was sworn in, he wore a morning coat and striped trousers for the inauguration, and took the oath with his hand on his family Bible, open to I Corinthians 13.

Holy Moly, if I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

There are things I will never know. There are stories past telling.

No matter how much testimony we gather. No matter how many details we proclaim.

The space between the hole and the holy, the torn passports, desperation and possibility, the exclamation, the slow vanishing of everything including memory.

Erika Meitner
305

³⁰⁵ [Erika Meitner, "HolyMolyLand," *Fourth Genre*, collected in *Holy Moly Carry Me*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

I Can't Stop Being Performative

and won't, *won't* be naked until this movie is over
because moving images are ultimately greater than—
because sleeping alone is ultimately greater than—
some grunt want whetted and done. And now
I'm crawling across the bed, over the comforter
plashed with huge purple flowers—to you, but not
for you—for my fourteen-year-old self reeking of
controlled heartbreak and watching me do it.
This is why I put on a nightdress and call it
a nightdress, a show. This is the difference
between Karyna and a light bulb: a screw.
Why I make all the ghosts go round and
give your penis the shivers. Because *won't*.
Because *will not* and *will, too*. Because that
little center with the tall fence around itself
can't stick to her script. Lift up your shirt,
I say. Let me smell your armpits, I say. Don't
pretend this is weird. I'm doing it for her,
not you. Shut up, I say. *Let me*. They smell
like pennies, like newsprint, like cumin-stuffed
canaries. Listen to her slow-clapping from her
velvet seat like she's not squiggling down
into the wool of herself. I'll undo your belt
with my teeth, but only this once. I need
to smell your junk, I say. I say we're on
a houseboat. I say we have nothing to wear
but wet sheets, nothing to play with but this
old Scrabble board, missing half the letters.
I'm dying, I say. Open the window.
I'm dying, I say. Bring me all the water.
Go away. I need to dress the set like, *Oops*,
was I wearing these pearls in the shower?
Did I misbutton your button-down when
I threw it on quick like I just heard a crash
in the kitchen? If you loved me you would
see her there in the front row and snap off
the footlights. If you loved me you'd call this
costume a costume. You'd make me pick up
all the seed pearls with my baby teeth.

Karyna McGlynn
306

³⁰⁶ Karyna McGlynn, "I Can't Stop Being Performative," *The Kenyon Review*, collected in *Hothouse*, Sarabande Books

This Poem is in Recovery

If you think I'm going to raise one single frosted martini glass
or a rocks tumbler in whose liquid the reflection
and noise of a pinball machine trembles, *chink-kachink-ka-ka-ka-chink*,

or even a little Herradura shot glass from Mexico
or a goblet etched with the name of a winery
and a rearing horse, if you think a green or amber bottle

is going to make an appearance, or you're holding out
for a can of Miceys Big Mouth or hopefully a charming leather flask,
forget you. I'm not even going to reminisce about all the vodka—

drink of a tragic people—
that I consumed beside the Neva,
watching the drawbridges ratchet up and down
and the elaborate fountains at the czar's palace foam

like the champagne my new husband shook and let explode
all over us, or—forget me—I won't even hold forth
on the Victorians' justified condemnation of gin

(mothers abandoning their newborns in gutters, etc.)
or the large numbers of pifflicated Japanese monks
gazing syllabically at the moon or the river of blossoms.

I'm going to forgo my usual subject matter, along with much
of history and literature, in favor of the present,
absolutely alcohol-free moment. Here it is:

Here it is again:
I'm not going to get drunk and take off my clothes
in order to sign my book for you, or bite you on the mouth

in a bathroom with the light off so it's as black in there
as an entire case of Freixenet bottles
while the raucous party goes on in the hotel suite.

And I am definitely not going to climb the stoplight
or fall through the sliding glass doors
or try to pole dance on the stripper's night off.

None of that nonsense here. Here we're all recovering.
Chamomile, or lemon? Plain or sparkling?
How about decaf? Here comes another moment

attached to nothing. Here comes too much
peace and quiet, while we wait for our demons
to shake off their hangovers and pay us a visit.

307 [Kim Addonizio, "This Poem is in Recovery," *The American Poetry Review*](#), collected in [What Is This Thing Called Love, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

I Never Wanted to Speak

of the house facing Cowboy Park
where my childhood pets are buried.

Eight small skulls scattered, each
a burned-out bulb keeping the fig tree

company, guarding the needles
I'd eventually unearth. My neighbor,

the infected queen, taught me
how to shoot down pigeons.

Think of them as compliments, he'd say.
By the time I was old enough to know

what he meant, it was too late
for him. Still, he slept inside me

for many seasons, cocking
his shotgun at a flinching sky.

Disguised in pill and sneer,
he waited for warmth to enter the body.

Eduardo Martinez-Leyva
308

³⁰⁸ [Eduardo Martinez-Leyva](#), "[I Never Wanted to Speak](#)," collected in [Nepantla: An Anthology Dedicated to Queer Poets of Color](#), [Nightboat Books](#)

Self-Portrait as Kitty Pryde

I have been identified
as gifted & dangerous. People fight over me
but not in the ways I want. Who would expect
it in a girl from Deerfield, Illinois,
town of strict zoning, no neon & quality schools?
I pass through difficult physical laws, cement,
flames, cupboards, crowds, tree trunks & arguments,
precociously, like something to protect.
I am always going through some phase.

My best friend spent apprentice years
alone inside a study like a star.
My wide eyes & Jewish hair
are shyness, a challenge to artists, &
untouchable. I can slip out of the back of a car.
When I am tired I dance, or pace
barefoot on the civilian ground
of Salem Center, where rain falls through me.
I have begun to learn to walk on air.

Adventures overemphasize my age.
In my distant & plausible future I will bear
one child, scorn, twenty-five pounds
of technology on my back, & the further weight
of giving orders to a restless band
of misfits who save America from its own rage
but cannot save themselves, & stay up late.
My friends & the fate of the world will have come to rest,
unexpected, staccato, in my sophomore hands.

Stephanie Burt
309

309 [Stephanie Burt](#), "[Self-Portrait as Kitty Pryde](#)," [Free Verse](#), collected in [Parallel Play](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

From the Meadow

It isn't that you were ignorant:
star thistle, bloodroot, cruciform...
beautiful words, then as now,
unlike pain with its wooden alphabet,
its many illustrations, which are redundant.

You had imagined vistas, an open meadow:
on the far side, water trembles its lights;
cattle come down from their shadow lives
beneath the trees;
the language of childhood is invented anew.

But you know, right? what lies ahead
is nothing to the view behind?
How breathtaking these nostalgias rising
like hazy constellations overhead!

little to go by, surely,
though from the meadow where you stand looking
over your shoulder, that tiny figure you see
seems to be calling someone,
you perhaps.

Peter Everwine
310

³¹⁰ [Peter Everwine](#), "[From the Meadow](#)," collected in [From the Meadow](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

The Last of All Suppers

It is bone-cold the night of all betrayed,
as shadows in the shape of thieves play
against the linens of the tent—quiet, odd
figures moving as fingers over old wood,
searching for splinters. The sound
of money changing hands,
as doves coo *fool, fool* from rafter nests.
A rustling noise, swift
as paradise, then it is a falter of a scream,
firestarter, perhaps, or the seam
of someone's papyric arms beginning to unravel:
Drink it. This is neither me nor miracle.
Hide him in the quiet marrow of your bed
where dozens eat no poetry and Jesus weeps no bread.

Jill Alexander Essbaum

311

³¹¹ [Jill Alexander Essbaum](#), "[The Last of All Suppers](#)," collected in [Heaven](#), University Press of New England

The Fall

It was after the harvest. It was before
the first frost. Everything living had
something dead to thank. Bloody
November, season of beasts. The boys
sneak off to the forest, smoke anything,
sharpen their teeth on bedrock. We know
nothing, say nothing. Whittle down
to our whites at the mouth of the river.
We open our legs. The first frost.
Everything living is dying. White
November. The mouth of the boys
& whatever crawls out. We know
to say nothing, whittle down, open
the legs of the river. If a girl screams
in the forest & no one's around to hear,
did the tree fall? Do we make a sound?
Everything living is dying. White,
merciless beasts. The boys sneak off,
a few hours. Bone against bedrock.
We wait by the river, open our mouths,
whittle our tongues. A girl screams
& the trees fall. Everything dying.
We know the sound. When the boys
crawl out of the forest dangling dead
things from their teeth they scream
at the river. No one's around.

Lauren Sanderson

312

³¹² [Lauren Sanderson, "The Fall," *The Adroit Journal*](#)

Again a Solstice

It is not good to think
of everything as a mistake. I asked
for bacon in my sandwich, and then

I asked for more. Mistake.
I told you the truth about my scar:

I did not use a knife. I lied
about what he did to my faith
in loneliness. Both mistakes.

That there is always a you. Mistake.
Faith in loneliness, my mother proclaimed,

is faith in self. My instinct, a poor Polaris.
Not a mistake is the blue boredom
of a summer lake. O mud, sun, and algae!

We swim in glittering murk.
I tread, you tread. There are children

testing the deep end, shriek and stroke,
the lifeguard perilously close to diving.
I tried diving once. I dove like a brick.

It was a mistake to ask the \$30 prophet
for a \$20 prophecy. A mistake to believe.

I was young and broke. I swam
in a stolen reservoir then, not even a lake.
Her prophesy: from my vagrant exertion

I'll die at 42. Our dog totters across the lake,
kicks the ripple. I tread, you tread.

What does it even mean to write a poem?
It means today
I'm correcting my mistakes.

It means I don't want to be lonely.

Jennifer Chang
313

³¹³ [Jennifer Chang](#), "[Again a Solstice](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [Some Say the Lark](#), [Alice James Books](#)

You

You never told her about Jesus. The way
the truth plants itself in good soil
only to come forth later into the sun
is like the path to salvation. The serpent told
you to take her—you made love near the sheep's gate
where small stones, like ticks, burrowed
into her backside, and you asked about her husband.
It was nearly dawn when she returned to him.
For a while, you whistled to yourself.
The ears of a ewe nearby twitched once,
then once again, its two eyes
lit sharply against its black face.

Duy Doan
314

³¹⁴ [Duy Doan](#), "You," *Amethyst Arsenic*, collected in [We Play a Game](#), Yale University Press

Garden Party

The day makes its final appearance,
the sky rubbed out in places
with a blue so understated it's nearly
a memory of blue. Forget the vase
arranged on the table, the tulips
are too vague. Even the white
tablecloth is an erasure.
Imagine the pale drone
of dinner conversation,
the politics of brie, cold soup.
The good china infects everything.
Even now the knife falters,
the wine glass can't be saved.
Think of the blank mirrors
of spoons, the fish
whose whiteness is a given.
Consider the ravenous napkin.

Silvia Curbelo

315

³¹⁵ [Silvia Curbelo](#), "[Garden Party](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Falling Landscape](#), Anhinga Press

Palmdale Area

A salesman flings keys from a pier.
A toddler sleeps on the sticky floor among popcorn buckets at the cineplex.
A clicking is heard from the scrapyard.
A satellite is reflected in the hotel pool.
A cook fondles himself at a bus stop.
Bacteria spread in waves through the bowels of a shrimp.
An addict's parents, over a bottle of Tempranillo, nurture the vacancy between them.
An orchestra eats yellow food from paper bags on a lawn.
A vagrant beneath a bridge swipes at the shadows with a windshield wiper.

A wailing ambulance screeches to a halt in the driveway of 135 Mimosa Lane. Paramedics force their way inside. No one home. The dishwasher is running. One paramedic finds a book entitled *The Choice of Valentines* in the arms of a doll in an upstairs room.

The mute boy carries a bucket of orange paint through the marina at dawn.
The kidnapper breakfasts alone in the atrium.
A cell phone tower marks the intersection of three skies.
A monkey whispers to a monkey in red laboratory light.
An electrode plunges for answers in meat.
Hornets pry the head from a caterpillar on the asphalt outside the bank.
A man shouts at his child after driving beneath power cables.
A parrot chokes on an almond in a botanical garden.

A flight attendant vacuums her own earring in the aisle of a deboarded plane. The jetway retracts with a whirl before the attendant can exit. She sits in first-class, fingering her earlobe, looking over the tarmac to the nuclear plant smokestack on the far side of the fake lake where a man was electrocuted to death while swimming during a storm.

A grandmother speaks into a monitor.
Ants infest a rain-soaked pizza box in the strip mall parking lot.
Gloved fingers brush debris from the skeleton of a camel.
Wrestlers grapple on a grid of television screens in a darkened appliance store.
An arrow points at itself.

Joe Fletcher

317

³¹⁷ [Joe Fletcher](#), "[Palmdale Area](#)," collected in [The Hatch](#), [Brooklyn Arts Press](#)

Lullaby (with Exit Sign)

I slept with all four hooves
in the air or I slept like a snail
in my broken shell.

The periphery of the world
dissolved. A giant exit sign
blinking above my head.

My family sings
its death march.

They are the size of the moon.

No, they are the size
of thumbtacks punched
through the sky's eyelid.

What beauty, what bruise.

(What strange lullaby is this
that sings from its wound?)

Here, my dead father knocks
on a little paper door. Here
my family knocks, waits.

Come through me, my darlings
whatever you are: flame,
lampshade, soap.

Leave your shattered shadows
behind. I'll be the doorway
that watches you go.

Hadara Bar-Nadav
318

³¹⁸ [Hadara Bar-Nadav](#), "[Lullaby \(with Exit Sign\)](#)," collected in [Lullaby \(with Exit Sign\)](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Bonnard on Painting Marthe Bathing

Exemplary,
this time of day:
light bends, dappling
the drab tiling
as my wife's limbs,
pale scissors limned
in gold, ease open,
love's flawed clothespin
or cul-de-sac
made hingeless fact
of gravity.
A theory
which fails in such
a room, unclenched
by sun and not
by desire's hot
breath, the spittle
of which, scumbled
into color,
I also rub
in morning's tub
so she won't get
older, nor wet
through, nor colder.

Terri Witek
319

319 [Terri Witek, "Bonnard on Painting Marthe Bathing,"](#) *Pierian Springs*, collected in [Carnal World, Story Line Press](#)

Nocturne

Tomorrow won't be the same, each step
farther from the border. Gin and tonics.
Tequila grapefruits. I threw that black mug
at your face after gin, after tequila,
I'm sorry. I drank too much. I drink too much,
I know. It wasn't me who threw it,
I said, but it was. I was four. I saw Mom
between Grandpa's gun and Grandma.
I was four. He chased every single
one of his daughters with his machete
in the middle of the day, in the middle of the night,
I didn't know what to do except climb
the water tower across the street
with Red Power Ranger. He's chased us
to this country that trained him to stay quiet
when "his boss" put prisoners in black bags,
then pushed them out the truck, "for everyone to see
what happens to bad people here." Gin,
straight up. Tequila shots. No one understands why
Abuelita never left him. It's mid-June,
Venus and Mars the closest they've been
in 2,000 years, but I've never seen grandparents hug,
or hold hands. I make an excuse.
You kept rubbing your hands. When I turned six
Grandpa quit drinking. He stayed at home at night
but never talked to us. He didn't like gin.
Didn't like writers. Didn't like leftists.
Everyone gone except one aunt. You're not here.
Tomorrow, tan poco. These walls snore
like Grandpa's slurred shouts. I thought
the border would take him. All my aunts,
my mom, thought so too. We're all running
from the sun on his machete.
The moon on his gun.

Javier Zamora

320

³²⁰ [Javier Zamora](#), "Nocturne," [Poetry](#), collected in [Unaccompanied](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Refrigerator

I am liking you leaning in
for yogurt and morphine.

You've decided to die again.

—and the milk ticks
off the blue seconds
at your wrist—

—and the eggs hum
to the insect
in your chest—

One is frightened
and spins all night
in its carton.

Tell me now how you love
to look at your life
in pale yellow light.

Marni Ludwig
321

³²¹ [Marni Ludwig](#), "[Refrigerator](#)," collected in [Pinwheel](#), [New Issues Press](#)

After the Fire, I Ask Myself

After the fire
I breathe standing up.

He was not a good man, but
every villain and hero loved

once—long-haired woman, white dress
billowing in the sea.

Love note penned
on the back of my hand:

*Little girls prefer
pink, gentlemen.*

*Cowards
put their hands up.*

I struck the match
on a bitter day.

Thick black drug
in a paper cup. Two cigarettes.

One for you.
One for you.

The sun really does
shine this way.

It's too cold for
my fingers, my fingers

say:
We've had enough.

Your rose-apple face.
My coal-black eyes.

Ashes.
That's why.

Camille Rankine
322

³²² [Camille Rankine](#), "[After the Fire, I Ask Myself](#)," collected in [Incorrect Merciful Impulses](#), Copper Canyon Press

Hammond B3 Organ Cistern

The days I don't want to kill myself
are extraordinary. Deep bass. All the people
in the streets waiting for their high fives
and leaping, I mean *leaping*,
when they see me. I am the sun-filled
god of love. Or at least an optimistic
under-secretary. There should be a word for it.
The days you wake up and do not want
to slit your throat. Money in the bank.
Enough for an iced green tea every weekday
and Saturday and Sunday! It's like being
in the armpit of a Hammond B3 organ.
Just reeks of gratitude and funk.
The funk of ages. *I am not going to ruin
my love's life today.* It's like the time I said yes
to gray sneakers but then the salesman said
Wait. And there, out of the back room,
like the bakery's first biscuits: bright-blue kicks.
Iridescent. Like a scarab! Oh, who am I kidding,
it was nothing like a scarab! It was like
bright. blue. fucking. sneakers! I did not
want to die that day. Oh, my God.
Why don't we talk about it? How good it feels.
And if you don't know then you're lucky
but also you poor thing. Bring the band out on the stoop.
Let the whole neighborhood hear. Come on, Everybody.
Say it with me nice and slow
no pills no cliff no brains onthe floor
Bring the bass back. *no rope no hose* not today, Satan.
Every day I wake up with my good fortune
and news of my demise. Don't keep it from me.
Why don't we have a name for it?
Bring the bass back. Bring the band out on the stoop.
Hallelujah!

Gabrielle Calvocoressi

323

³²³ [Gabrielle Calvocoressi, "Hammond B3 Organ Cistern," *The New Yorker*](#)

Simon the Good

I'm the matron-king of hell
In yoga pants and a disused bra for a laurel
& shatter the scene inside your simmering year

Like a ransom scene filmed through shattered transom
I smear in my glamour
I make as if
to justify the ways of God to man
That's my ticket in
That's why God lets me speak here
Crystostoma'd
on his couch
Even though I'm derived from Hell
Hellish Helenish Hellenic

I'm the hanged man
in this version
pegged up
in mine pegged jeans
by mine ancles, an inversion
mine manacles are monocoles
I spit out the key
and squinny through the keyhole
back at the unquittable world

In my rainment
of gummy sunglasses
and crows wings for epaulets
I delicately squawk from the edges of things
balance unsteadily on the bust of the goddess

squawk:
Aeschelus Euphorion Aeschelus Euphorion

&:
I'm going to tell you something so bad that when you hear it you're gonna know it's true.

Like all the worst stories
It comes from the heart
& it goes there too.

Back here in St. Joseph County
a struck duck flies crown first into the asphalt and is stuck there
with its brains for adhesive
like someone licked the pavement and sealed it
a postalette
with its cartoon feet in the air and its Jeff Koon wings
that's roadkill for you: realer than real
and the cars mill by with their wheels in reverse
heavy as chariots
in a dealership commercial
and I am walking my dog by the river
a matron from hell

look on me and despise
I am like the river:
thick as beer and with a sudsy crown
there polyethylene bags drape the banks like herons
and a plastic jug rides a current with something like the determination
that creases mine own brow
as I attempt to burn my lunch off
the determination of garbage
riding for its drain
hey-nommy it's spring
and everything wears a crown
as it rides its thick doom to its noplac

gently brushed
by pollen
by the wings of hymenoptera
like a helicoptera
performing its opera
all above Indiana
bearing the babes away
from their births to their berths
in the NICU in Indie-un-apple-us
Unapple us, moron God,
You've turned me Deophobic
the greasy tracks you leave all over the internet
the slicey DNA
in the scramblechondria
the torn jeans
panicked like space invaders
in an arcane video game
oh spittle-pink blossom
the tree don't need nomore
shook down to slick the pavement like a payslip
you disused killer app

each thought strikes my brain
like the spirals in a ham
pink pink for easter
sliced by something machinic
each thought zeros in
flies hapless and demented
festooned like a lawn dart
finds its bit of eye
spills its champagne
split of pain

then we come to our senses
suddenly alone
in the endzone

Joyelle McSweeney
324

Long Beach

Ralph W. Mann, 1909-1982

Was it one,
was it two
families
he had walked
out on before
the affair
with my grandmother,
Ora?
Lies
no one knew.
No one talked.

His father,
William,
sheriff and engineer,
was a semi-pro
failure
with the San Pedro
Pilots,
where he played
with the great,
hated
Babe Ruth.

William
banned
his son
from sport—
punishment
of a sort.
Grandpa
dropped
out of USC,
with his friend
Marion Morrison,

for baseball.
William
pointed
a Remington
at him,
the shortened
barrel.
Grandpa's Mexican
mother
in the background,
never mentioned.

His pitching arm
was just shy
of enough.
But he was strong;
this was Long
Beach:
he worked
his way up
to supervisor
of Crescent Wharf
and Warehouse.

There were three
types of men:
loaders
as the pallet
came in,
jitney drivers,
and the guys
who played cards
and pulled the boards
out from under
the crane.

He didn't go
to WWII:
he ran the docks.
Tick, tock.
At a strike,
union men
on his left
and right
got shot.
The higher-ups
looking down.

He retired
as supervisor,
nowhere to go.
Enraged
at change,
alcoholic,
with a pension
for life.
Not to mention
a wife
to overlook.

In 1975,
the Shah
brought
him to Iran
to organize a port.
He felt
half-alive.
He thought
like an engineer—
better than one—
but wasn't paid

like an engineer,
which benefited everyone
but him. No one.
He barely made it
out, before
the Revolution.
A few coins,
the dictator
in his pocket.
He showed me
on a visit.

He spent
his last years
as a volunteer
umpire,
youth baseball.
Behind a mask.
Ask
what he meant.
Dying horribly
of esophageal
cancer,

in Long Beach.

Randall Mann

325

325 [Randall Mann](#), "[Long Beach](#)," [On the Seawall](#)

The Fog and the Sound

Volunteers in kayaks and other small boats searched Saturday, June 6th, for two men who have been missing since their sailboat capsized near Chuckanut Bay. Friends gathered where the sailboat washed ashore south of Post Point, breaking the boat apart with an electric saw and a sledgehammer.

—Bellingham Herald, June 7th, 2009

My brother lived with a girl on and off until that girl broke his heart and rode Greyhound nine hundred miles to live with a dancer in San Joaquin. There was no explanation, he said. Just a few weird months and the ocean in back of their house still rolling the fog off Chuckanut Bay.

In early May the two of us walked down the railroad tracks toward the nude beach, stopping to spraypaint our names on the outcropping rocks, the anonymous driftlogs, the sweating cathedral-like slabs of cement near the train-tunnel entrance, which no one could see.

A storm had just passed and the jet-skiers cruised through the inlets and low-tide estuaries looking for Gunther, a snowboarder left by his friends in the capsized shell of his grandfather's yacht. The front end sank. The sail fell down so the motor-blades cried in the wind.

He said he had loved her forever. The time in the mountains, the time in the Red Canyon pledging their lives. The loss of her touch, he told me, was not the loss of her vein-lined hands, her body's weight rolling against him in bed. It was the loss of a thing he had loved in himself, as he turned his head hearing her voice. *Do you know what I mean*, he said, *that difference?*

On Monday we went to the blood-bank with Duncan and looked at the holes in the ceiling expand. The pattern of checkerboard squares in the bathroom, the sad diabetic man turning away from the desk, going back to his truck, getting in. For an hour the blood moved in clear plastic hoses between us.

The Cloudmaker showed us the scars on his arms where the cops pulled the real bones out of him. Surgically opened his forehead. Fixed him with circuits and gold-plated grommets designed to control him and steal his dreams. *Smells like a woman's arousal*, he said, *the weather itself is a burden of shame, the dust in my pocket, the atmosphere bleeding.*

We skated downtown with the rat-tailed hipsters who showed us the dumpster behind the museum. Sallow-eyed, practicing shiftys. We skitched on the door of a broken Mercedes. We shouldered them over the barbwire fences and jumped off the guardrails into the sea.

The fog seemed to thicken our bodies the way it divided the ground from the trees. Fattening up our hair, blowing the sweat-trails out of our jeans. Wavering gulls in the airwaves above their own shadows. A dusting of salt we could taste on our skin.

He showed me the painting she painted him in. The pallet of blues and raw umbers she used for the pavement, the signpost, the bike he had just finished riding from Portland to Havre, from Havre to Nashville, from Nashville to Kitty Hawk North Carolina to sleep in the wind-torn dunes.

We stayed awake talking of winters in Fargo, the riverside houses condemned or abandoned, a mutual friend who had recently died. I tried to remember the last time I saw him, placid from heroin, walking the bar with the overheads glossing the flat-looking bowls of his eyes.

On Friday we went to the food-shelf and stood with the homeless and gutter-punks feeding their dogs. How many, they asked us. We filled up our boxes. The Mexicans shuffled their children in silence. The Cloudmaker juggled his oranges and sang us the ballad he knew by heart.

There were pockets of sandstone carved by the high-tide waves where the girls would take off their clothes and dissolve in the sun or watch freight-liners crawl through the haze. A wake-line dividing the shore from the shore. A dander of lotion I peeled away from the stone.

The morning they found him we walked down the railroad tracks toward the shipyard, stopping to throw a few rocks at the mile signs, tossing the starfish from pool to pool. His body was found in a box-trap, bloated and skin-torn by schools of minnows, eyes eaten out of his head by the crabs.

It wasn't the fact of her leaving. The winter he spent with a sprained ankle, limping. The spear-point of rebar she pulled from his hand after bailing a still-moving train. It was more like the fog, he said. Like fields in winter, dust in the air when the street-sweepers watered the roads.

Before I drove back to Seattle we hiked up Mount Fernow, carrying our sleeping bags under our arms. We sat on the roots of a dead ponderosa and looked at the ships troll the narrows in fog. There were lights on the city shore shining and burning. Beach fires fading and pushing like strobes.

When lightning came over the harbor we stood at the back of his house and rolled smokes. We counted the seconds, predicted the levels of thunder. For a while we lay with our elbows just touching. The blown-away screens. The sound of the wind and the rain coming down on the roof.

Kai Carlson-Wee
326

³²⁶ [Kai Carlson-Wee](#), "[The Fog and the Sound](#)," *The Lumberyard*, collected in [Raj](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

loose strife

Listen closely as I sing this. The man standing at the gate tottering on his remaining limb is a kind of metronome, his one leg planted firmly on the earth. Yes, I have made him beautiful

because I aim to lay all my cards on the table. In the book review the critic writes, "Barry seeks not to judge but to understand." Did she want us to let her be, or does she want

to be there walking the grounds of the old prison on the hill of the poison tree where comparatively a paltry twenty thousand died? In the first room with the blown up

black-and-white of a human body gone abstract someone has to turn and face the wall not because of the human pain represented in the photo but because of her calmness,

the tranquility with which she tells us that her father and her sister and her brother were killed. In graduate school a whole workshop devoted to an image of a woman with bleach

thrown in the face and the question of whether or not the author could write, "The full moon sat in the window like a calcified eye, the woman's face aglow with a knowingness."

I felt it come over me and I couldn't stop. I tried to pull myself together and I couldn't. They were children. An army of child soldiers. In the room papered with photos of the Khmer Rouge

picture after picture of teenagers, children whose parents were killed so that they would be left alone in the world to do the grisly work that precedes paradise.

And the photos of the victims, the woman holding her newborn in her arms as her head is positioned in a vise, in this case the vise an instrument not of torture

but of documentation, the head held still as the camera captures the image, the thing linking all their faces, the abject fear and total hopelessness as exists

in only a handful of places in the history of the visible world. For three \$US per person she will guide you through what was Tuol Sleng prison, hill of the strychnine tree.

Without any affectation she will tell you the story of how her father and her sister and her brother went among the two million dead. There are seventy-four forms

of poetry in this country and each one is still meant to be sung.

Quan Barry
327

³²⁷ [Quan Barry](#), "[loose strife \('Listen closely as I sing this'\)](#)," collected in [Loose Strife](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

from "Money Road"

Cotton planted
in strict rows
for show. A quiet

snowglobe of pain
I want to shake.
While the flakes fall

like ash we race
the train to reach the place
Emmett Till last

whistled or smiled
or did nothing.
Money more

a crossroads
than the crossroads be—
its gnarled tree—the Bryant Store

facing the tracks, now turnt
the color of earth, tumbling down
slow as the snow

Kevin Young
328

³²⁸ [Kevin Young](#), "[Money Road](#)," [The New Yorker](#), collected in [Brown](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

End of Adolescence

October, 1985

In my bag, I carry
my womb of possessions.
It's the same black leather strap
I belt over my shoulder.
The music of change rolls inside
a Fairfax trolley.

Why did you go?

I waited where the gallery
collected pigeons and leaves.
The sun stayed with me. The moon
rose and glowed like a silver potato,
the moon you can no longer see.
Seagulls on Melrose entered clouds
like Sanskrit numbers.

You call me

in my dream, my room. My brother's
voice calls to the concrete,
I hate October.

I stand where we stood
under soured streetlights.
No one is wearing yellow
on Melrose today, except
in their hair.

Claire, Claire,
Where are you?

I'm here
by the wall of graffiti,
over there on that apricot hill,

riding your dirt bike. The sky
showered your footprints
with ashes and snow. The wind
buried the rest in a layer
of dust.

It rained inside
our living room the day
we got the call. We closed
the lid to your box
of belongings.

South Texas Persephone

Someday the ground will open up
and swallow me.

Someday I'll be swept

through the sand, and the grass
will become my crown
of burnt paper.

And he will be there: tall
steel-toed, eyes like ice in whiskey,

handing me my first drink.

In the bar, we'll dance to a song I hate,
but I'll cling to him anyway.

This is the darkness of marriage,

the burial of my preferences
before they can even be born.

This is my set of sins reaching out

from a frozen lake, where
the smoke of his breath is interrupting.

Look now: my heart

is a fist of barbed wire. His heart
is a lake where young geese

go missing, show up bloody

after midnight. I don't say
a single thing.

My dress is deep green, knotted,

feathered at the seams.
O, isn't this

what my mother never wanted?

Now I have three heads: one
for speech, one for sex,

and one for second-guessing.

³³⁰ [Analia Sotelo](#), "[South Texas Persephone](#)," *Missouri Review*, collected in [Virgin](#), Milkweed Editions

With the Time She Had Left

The goats in the photo were all dead
As was the grandpa with his bowed legs and cigarette
His tall sister and their Ford
Most of the trees were dead
Having burnt up with the rest of the house
And the corn was most certainly dead
Digested by cows and rotated through so many miles
Of intestines who knew where it could be now
Dead was easy
Had always seemed easier than living if you want to know
The simplest truth of her life
Not the mad pull from
Hell they talked about in Sunday school
Or with a pale circle of family around when she was old
She would have no family when she left
And it didn't matter as she held
Her own hand through the dim mansion of her head
There were mirrors everywhere leading
Her to the end and they alone wanted her
Even the floor was her mirror
Singing into her from underground

Julia Story
331

³³¹ [Julia Story](#), "[With the Time She Had Left](#)," *Tupelo Quarterly*

Sling

Voices carry across the courtyard.
A sax cries out in the night, pleading.
Another innocent has been betrayed.
The sax sounds like it's bleeding.

When laughter is heard the music stops.
The voices cease as if on cue.
The radio goes on about the crops,
so dry this morning there was no dew.

A man in a suit presents his case,
his tie a landscape struck by lightning.
The flash of a camera brightens his face.
His eyes are wide, his mouth a sling.

The sling shoots stones into charts
which measure the time we spend apart.

Wyn Cooper
332

³³² [Wyn Cooper](#), "[Sling](#)," collected in [Chaos is the New Calm](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

A visit to my pantheon reveals a hole in the sky

My body's been traveling fifty-eight years
to look at the light of as many stars
as I can devour on the same night I learn
Maggie Roche died last year and I didn't cry
or lay a white dress on the snow
to commemorate her shyness.
Even if you don't know who she was
or can't hold a tune or started using
meth again after promising yourself
no more falling down the stairs,
I hope you're kissed tonight
for real, not like people at midnight on TV
pretending time is a dog
we've taught to sit. I think I mean
we scream Happy New Year
as if we can tell the future
what to do, trying hard to look
as if we feel the way champagne tastes,
and I don't believe for a second
we've got such beautifully lit
chandeliers inside us. My resolution's
to leave Roche sister albums
and turntables lying around the universe
for people to hear a more reasonable version
of joy, harmonies congregating
around the language of insurmountable distance,
people who'll come home
and gather a child or man or ukulele
or mountain in their arms
and hold tighter to knowing everything
we get now is a give
on the other end, for I am indeed
a wistful motherfucker, as predicted
by the sky of my birth and noted
by Denis Johnson after I read poems
decades ago in Kalamazoo, when he was still
what the living call incredible and I said
I'm sorry, I couldn't hear you,
just to make him say again
that little thing we ask of life,
that a god or anyone
notice us at all.

Bob Hicok
333

333 [Bob Hicok](#), "[A visit to my pantheon reveals a hole in the sky](#)," collected in [Hold](#), Copper Canyon Press

the new fashion

the new fashion is for lying naked in a tub of deer's blood

the girls lead deer up to pastel bathrooms
and slit their throats over stopped drains

the girls lower themselves into the bath
with the deer's opening neck lolling on the toilet
its hard black eyes staring pointlessly at the tiles

now that the girls are doing this
the men have decided that killing forest creatures
is women's work
and they have hung up their shotguns and crossbows
and gone back to fishing

the girls don't mind and in any case
they use different tools

the girls hunt deer with patience
and a pocket full of sugar cubes
and a long, glistening knife

Cassandra de Alba

334

³³⁴ [Cassandra de Alba](#), "[the new fashion](#)," *Smoking Glue Gun*, collected in [habitats](#), [Horse Less Press](#)

Conversion

—for sam, on the title of my next collection of poems

sam says you can't name your book good boys without a dog
but sam doesn't know that i am the dog
i am the ultimate mutt and i am telling him this story
at the bar called college hill tavern which looks like a front
for some operation where all the bar stools appear as if
they were staged in under ten minutes and
the girl with the fake lashes knows
i like a double gin and i am telling sam
that i am a dog who was converted
when i was seventeen and my mother found an essay
about how i was in love with a girl
and there was a portishead reference
in case you need me to date it
and this was way before the liberation of the young and the white
twins on youtube who come out to their dad
and everybody cries and transforms.
when i see those kids all i think is that they never had parents
who were immigrants and who sent you to a lady
and told you that you had to solve it all
in one session because this therapy was expensive.
it wasn't so traumatic. rather funny. and i remember the couch
there were multiple couches and i had to choose a spot and i sat
on the couch furthest from her and this wasn't the first nice lady
who looked at me like i was a dog
and sam, when i said it is called good boys
what i meant was that i was a good boy
and loved good boys
and good men and still love them
but you see, i was seventeen and alone
and nobody gave me anything except one book by dickinson
and she was so neat, so precise, so human
and i wasn't. i just wasn't.
i was just a dog. i wasn't even that good.

Megan Fernandes

335

³³⁵ [Megan Fernandes](#), "[Conversion](#)," [The Adroit Journal](#)

The Unchosen Twin

My twin died for me;
I sucked away all the milk
while horses stomped outside
the window, eyes spirals of wind
shattering the wheat, twisted yeast.
I'm bleeding, drowning
my twin and a dance is
collapsed in a circle until
the sacrifice is made.
She's coming for me now
and I'm glad, almost
a dream of paralysis.
The dark house glares
white as milk. She
rides bareback, blind on
a blind horse. Drink me:
I'm your deformity.

Dana Curtis
336

³³⁶ [Dana Curtis](#), "[The Unchosen Twin](#)," collected in [The Body's Response to Famine](#), [Pavement Saw Press](#)

Minimum Wage

My mother and I are on the front porch lighting each other's cigarettes
as if we were on a ten-minute break from our jobs
at being a mother and son, just ten minutes
to steal a moment of freedom before clocking back in, before
putting the aprons back on, the paper hats,
washing our hands twice and then standing
behind the counter again,
hoping for tips, hoping the customers
will be nice, will say some kind word, the cool
front yard before us and the dogs
in the backyard shitting on everything.
We are hunched over, two extras on the set of *The Night of the Hunter*,
I am pulling a second cigarette out of the pack, a swimmer
rising from a pool of other swimmers. Soon we will go back
inside and sit in the yellow kitchen and drink
the rest of the coffee
and what is coming to kill us will pour milk
into mine and sugar into hers.

Matthew Dickman

337

³³⁷ [Matthew Dickman](#), "[Minimum Wage](#)," collected in [Wonderland](#), W.W. Norton & Company

First World

The West was an un-storied mound my mother rose out of. It was a backlit mountain and cold stove at dawn my father rode toward in the beginning of his adult life

from a clapboard place called Ridgefield. Nineteen sixty-eight or nine, and her hair was longer than the road to Flagstaff, her eyes brown as broken ground.

A train took them back east, and I was born under an organized sky in the arms of fences and small birds. My sister came with pretty hands like orchard peaches and eyes

like passing through a forest toward home. In late light, I met a man but was unable to tell him, *I like you in sentences and on fire*, knowing only to take off the words

like a blouse. Why did we enter the story like this? My mother couldn't articulate the small coffin they laid the body of the neighbor girl inside. That is it. That will always

be it. How wrong to ask for the gift of a little grief. I'll say a cold prayer for the knives whining in the drawer, for my sister's yellow head asleep at my feet instead.

I have seen the ruthlessness of skies cut open, the devastating nothing of some men, and the sweet heavy brow of a few good ones. In the season of steam coating the air,

and of cracks rising in cups, I think my sister may be the only breathing thing formed of wings. My mother and I, we have different types of ghosts. Out of the grand mouth

of the dirty kitchen sink in morning light, I see the loved world is not far away, and we are more than a tiny stirring of strings. There is nothing less difficult than that. No secret

outside of town, no bruise-painted lip, stained sheets to fold, to put away. Just the ache of the tiniest gestures, the tanned calf of my father, the steely face of Flatirons, rising

to drink coffee at dawn. Born to a world of coin and book, our faces are broken by blue. My sister eats the best of them like dust, while in my quiet mouth rests an open hand.

Libby Burton

338

338 [Libby Burton](#), "[First World](#)," [Meridian](#), collected in [Soft Volcano](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Ichthyphobia

Two of the bad girls from the neighborhood got drunk,
climbed the fence into the Botanical Garden
to skinny dip, and drowned.

My brother said the koi pulled them down.
Their funerals were closed casket because of what
the fish did to their faces.

This was at the pond with a zigzag bridge where
my brother gave a push and said not to cry,
to be such a girl.

The zigzag prevents evil spirits from giving chase.
Evil spirits like the kappa, who is the size
of a ten-year-old boy.

Sometimes he sucks the flesh of a girl—
her shoulder, her wrist—a nip. And sometimes
he sucks her whole life

out with heaving breaths. Don't believe? Play a game
of pull-finger with the face swimming in the water
and just see

if he doesn't drag you in. For a quarter we could feed
the koi bread crumbs, which is how they'd grown
to the size of possums.

I threw the pieces quickly and looked away
from the clamor of fleshy pink yawns jostled
by waves and slick bodies,

but still felt the fish set upon my skin, mouths everywhere,
dark water closing in. If the kappa has stolen your daughter,
there is little to do.

But if she is your precious daughter, your only one,
try carving her name into a Yubari melon. The kappa may
make the trade,

or he may keep both fruits. According to Freud,
the child who wishes to join society must repress
the memory of infancy's

unfettered genitals. The kappa never forgot.
When he comes, your only chance is to bow and bow.
He cannot resist your manners,

even though the crown of his head is an indented bowl,
even though he knows it's the clear broth of his brain
spilling into that cold, dark water and its gathering fish.

Kathryn Nuernberger
339

³³⁹ [Kathryn Nuernberger](#), "[Ichthyphobia](#)," [Cream City Review](#), collected in [Rag & Bone](#), [Elixir Press](#)

Retreating Knights and Riderless Horses, or Poem with Another Poem Halfway Through It

I keep a box of illegal paraphernalia on my table. I keep a knife
in a pet rock. I hire men to come to try to remove it.
The one who does will be king of my life. I keep my life
right here by my other life. My other life keeps to itself.
I have two guitars. One expensive dress. Too many lamps. I take myself
very seriously. My name is permanent. I cut a hole in the wall
and watch the neighbor watching TV. It's not even
sexy. Cracking open a bottle with my bottle of pills
prescribed forever like sunlight.
I'm going to a new restaurant in town
to lay waste
to its reputation.

*

Halfway through the poem another poem took over.
The two poems fought. It was
a bloody battle that lasted seven hundred years.
Big choices were made
and gods among men died.
While stained sheets were wrung out in the wind,
cannons roared.

After seven hundred years the two poems were mangled.
They couldn't tell the difference anymore between themselves.
And they became, then, masochistic:
self-inflicting on the battlefield their rage.
On a glorious morning, high up on a hill,
in hussar boots and mauve silk vest, the poem raged on—
infantry in massed columns—
the trillium of chivalry
ridden to its final thing.
It wore itself
into a bonfire, dying down. You have
to stand very close to it
with your hands or ass
even closer.
In the dark it's like porn,
beet red
and bright orange, flecks of engorged blue veins,
humping in the ash for eternity.

Bianca Stone
340

³⁴⁰ [Bianca Stone, "Retreating Knights and Riderless Horses, or Poem with Another Poem Halfway Through It,"](#) collected in [The Möbius Strip Club of Grief, Tin House Books](#)

Today is Work

I'm searching for the right verb
for a dead frog. I want one
large but not so full it floods
my eyes. The verb should stand
on its own without support
from viewers like you & you
really are a viewer, it's just
I'm concealed by a series of
tall buildings & significant life
events. If I reach you, call it
lifting a finger & driving
into your skull. I like surgery
to be light. I like a cradle
overflowing with baby gifts &
stuffed-animal aliens, lime-green
to the touch. I'm really happy
for you, for your off-screen
special effects. I want you
exploding like a bridge.

Ben Purkert
341

³⁴¹ [Ben Purkert](#), "[Today is Work](#)," collected in [For Love of Endings](#), [Four Way Books](#)

from “In Search of Wealth”

Tom Cruise has been dubbed the Christ of the Church of Scientology according to its leaders.

In Europe Scientologists are persecuted but in Los Angeles they own more property than God.

When you were looking for an apartment in Hollywood you found out how many of the buildings were owned by the Church; there were always low-level Scientologists hanging around the dumpsters in dirty frocks. Outside a bar once you saw hundreds of them climb onto an unmarked white bus at 5:00 a.m.

The reason you were at a bar at 5:00 a.m. was your job as a set-decorator for the movies.

You once occupied the former address of a high-level Scientologist who’d neglected to forward his mail. You were tempted to order one of the three-cassette-tape advancement courses but you couldn’t spare the thousand bucks.

That address was in Baltimore, where your job was to teach composition at the community college.

For much less than a thousand dollars, you can buy *Dianetics*, which outlines “a thoroughly validated method that increases sanity, intelligence, confidence and well-being” and “gets rid of the unwanted sensations, unpleasant emotions and psychosomatic ills that block one’s life and happiness.”

You have heard that to advance in Scientology, you have to turn your back on anyone who will hinder your progress toward your goals—sick parents, needy friends, persons to whom you might owe a debt of gratitude.

You have heard that the concept of guilt is a product of religion, but you don’t know where religion got the idea.

Walter Benjamin said that all history is the history of guilt; to advance in Scientology you have to become ahistorical. Stop.

The kind of guilt that Scientology seems to alleviate has its origins in the West, so does that mean the allure of a-historicity is also Western in origin?

Of course the concept of guilt goes back at least to the Sumerians, but that was the kind of specific guilt that could be relieved by punishment, and only 12th-century Europe was the concept of ineradicable guilt swallowed whole.

There is another tribe from New Guinea called the Massim, in which the villagers are fully-clothed and base their society on the gesture of responsibility toward one’s neighbors.

In Baltimore your neighbors were all white like you but at the community college you stuck out in the halls. The students called you Miss and you couldn’t do a thing to stop them,

From the Church of Scientology web site you can sign up for a course on Personal Integrity and Value, which teaches you how not to compromise your ambition by kowtowing to the needs of others. The course goes for five to six days, part-time, and has no prerequisites.

Anna Moschovakis

³⁴² [Anna Moschovakis, "In Search of Wealth \(Tom Cruise has been dubbed the Christ\),"](#) collected in [You and Three Others Are Approaching a Lake](#), Coffee House Press

montage in a car.

I am two I am in a car seat my mother and my grandfather have gone to pick up photos from a drive-through pharmacy they complain because the photos are not ready I say 'are you angry?' // I am four my father says 'damn it' I say 'Dad' // I am ten reading the classifieds in the last section of a *Reader* father left in the back seat there are many women, with no shirts on // I am eleven and we are going to a neighborhood where I have never been to stay with a woman I have never met because we cannot go home anymore all of my books and stuffed animals are in a box beside me I am hot // I am twelve coming to the last page of *Flowers for Algernon* sobbing silently while we cross the Allegheny Mountains // I am sixteen the snow is so bad all we can see are the red lights of a truck in front we follow without knowing where it is going on the side of the road are so many dead cars covered all covered up and tracks leading into the woods // I am fourteen I say where are we going he says it's a surprise // I am seventeen the Remix to 'Ignition' is playing he is smoking a cigarette out the window I keep my window down too we look at Christmas lights it is two in the morning // I am twenty-three this battery is dead there is nothing I can do I gun it to the top of the ramp put my hazards on and coast into the right lane just let it happen // I am twenty-five I don't know where anything in Cambridge is yet I call his best friend and say he is so drunk I had to leave tell me what to do I call Lo he tells me to come over I don't come over // I am twenty-eight it is raining I scream 'I will kill us I will kill us both' // I am twenty-nine we are going back to Pilsen from New Harmony the moon is high I stop they are both asleep they are grown but look like babies when we were babies our problems were grown they do not wake up even when I cut the ignition and step out into the night

Eve L. Ewing
343

³⁴³ [Eve L. Ewing](#), "[montage in a car.](#)," collected in [Electric Arches](#), [Haymarket Books](#)

Arranged Hours

The low moon rattled me. Sobered, through with the good life, it arrived
papery and urgent as Marley, the ghost in the chains, the ghost always

omitted in the wrong answer THREE to the question HOW MANY GHOSTS
APPEAR IN A CHRISTMAS CAROL? I remember a thin book, ratty blanket that,

when I held it, chilled me as the anterooms of the starving
or haunted. It is unbecoming to believe in ghosts, to believe what one reads,

what one writes. With a vegetable knife, I excised my long-gone love
from a sheet of photographs, but I couldn't remove the shadow

he'd cast without doing violence to others. I packed my albums and drove
back to Chicago; in my absence, it had snowed incorrigibly, and I returned

to my city as though to a burgled home, the streets upended, piles of weather
and trash everywhere and the cars strewn in odd spots, no use to anyone. I am

not particularly interested in living bent on vengeance, the murder
victim who spends her last moments scrawling in sand the name of the sap

who killed her. I heard an accomplished scientist refer to the practice of autopsy
as QUESTIONING WITH THE KNIFE. He kissed me in a library

for special books that had no dedications. That is the idiom
of my generation. I can't speak for anyone else. I wax ever sharper,

harsher, or unchanged, I cannot say. Am I seeing things? How do
we decide who should be hurt? That moon, it was so low it was the Earth.

Natalie Shapero
344

³⁴⁴ [Natalie Shapero](#), "[Arranged Hours](#)," [The Offending Adam](#), collected in [No Object](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Vital Signs

The moon in a manuscript,
A man on a monument,
A tree on a tapestry:

Everything valuable
Hidden away;
Everything visible
Visibly empty.

I turned the pain up
In my poetry,
And now the beat won't stop:

The tic-toc of the lunatic,
The man in the manslaughter,
The moose in the museum.

Dan Chiasson

345

³⁴⁵ [Dan Chiasson](#), "[Vital Signs](#)," [Society](#), collected in [Bicentennial](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

Suicide Prevention

New signs at all the local train stations—
Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

I'm glad my son can't read yet.

Yesterday morning he made up a friend, Lofty,
who was captured by bad guys.

My husband asked, *Loffy?*

He said, *No, with a T.*
If it was a v, it would be Lof-vee.
He's starting to get it.

If it was a circle, it would be Lof-circle.
He's almost starting to get it.

Today he tells me he's dead. He's a ghost.
He misses his ghost family.
Something's wrong because they're inside
the wall but he can't get through.

Then he walks into the wall to show me.

Then a ghost ladybug shows up who can get
through the wall, and he saves everyone.

My son bends down to hug a family
of very small ghosts.

I don't know how to talk to him about death.

When I told him about his great grandfather,
who he's named after, and that conversation
led right where you think—*He's dead*—

he told me, *Only bad guys die*, and I
could only argue that so many times.

Before I tell my son about suicide, I want to
tell him about murder, I want to tell him
about dying of an illness, about dying in sleep.

It feels awful to hold that plan inside me,
to know this ranking of death.

Do I tell him about genocide last? Or
how you keep hearing for a few minutes
after you die? How I'd like him to play me
a nice song and repeat that he loves me.

How he better tell me first
if he wants to take his life because
I would understand that.

I've understood that for a long time.

Sarah Blake
346

³⁴⁶ [Sarah Blake](#), "[Suicide Prevention](#)," *Slice*, collected in [Let's Not Live on Earth](#), Wesleyan University Press

Cobalt Noso

Morning dew draping the Iroquois
PJs. Hood rats in the back;

rollin' up a tree, green leaves
and all. High summer

prints their shadows
on a peeling wall. Slate-gray weeds.

Bulls. Blackberries.
Damn the lottery. Neighbor

has the sex drive
of a cicada. So, her husband's left hand

is his own wife. Neighbor
steps out to the communal porch,

invites night
into her house robe. Birds sing

all the wrong words. The skunk
is fucked: horned

owl can't smell. This today is all
that I can tell you: What I am not;

what I do not want.

Adam Day
347

³⁴⁷ [Adam Day](#), "[Cobalt Noso](#)," [Posit](#)

Anticonfessional

M. called me every day this week. That is this poem's most important fact. I say it first, before I tell you he is a junkie.

We all know not to trust what a junkie says. But I was going through some small lunacy over a man and M. was the only friend

to call me on it. He said he had research: minutes after the head detaches from the body, brain circuits still flare, so if I laid down

on the tracks I had better be ready. That's porn, though, so I'll stop. I won't describe the first time M. shot up, how he made

me do it for him. I'd had five years of allergy shots, and besides, I knew, if a man wants something, I'm not the girl

to say he's wrong. *The best way to die*, M. said, *is always heroin. How many dead geniuses prove it?* As if we too could

be geniuses. He told me that yesterday he'd run into Smalls in the parking lot at Topps' bar, told him I'm on the market.

Bootleg sage who's kept M. in Mind Fuck and Rat Poison and Body Bag for years, Smalls said, *She'll be okay. Girls like that*

take care of themselves. Smart men see this, but the world's loaded with dumb men. The guy with Smalls, teeth flaying the skin

from a chicken thigh, kingpin who met me once in a parking lot and cited the street value for my car's parts, said to M.,

next time I'm in town, I've got a free bag, just come by the bar. Evidence, M. said, of my options. M. and I share a past, a snag

of memories locked together like hair tangled in a drain. I saw, in middle school, when a gang of boys paid a trumpy girl

to sit on M.'s lap, stroke his face, and whisper,
Sexy, the boys' payoff the revulsion
she tried to squelch looking into his fat face.

None of us is good at hiding that look.
And he knew me in the years revulsion
was my turn-on, fucking on the rusted asses

of navy-yard ships or in nursery school
broom closets. Have I said enough?
Tonight M. calls me from a strip mall

where I waited with him dozens of times,
talking Foucault or robotics, any subject
besides the tangible fact of our lives, the wait

inversely proportional to the quality
of the eventual shit. He thinks he can save
my life with phone calls, with words.

I tell him: junkies are the only people
worth talking to about love, because junkies
are the only ones who ever felt it. Like

our hometown sinkhole on Front Street
that sucked down parked cars,
implosion we always suspected,

as kids riding past, before it opened.
A place to junk the feelings we had.
The ones we didn't believe, the ones we did.

Erin Hoover
348

348 [Erin Hoover](#), "[Anticonfessional](#)," [Narrative](#), collected in [Barnburner](#), [Elixir Press](#)

On Flesh

Not the body,
but its bad
alibi. Its black
& blueprint.

Whole summers spent
at Messiah Baptist gave me
a hundred ways to kill the creature
that lived in & as my skin.

St. Paul had a whole thorn bush
in his. Whether this was metonym
or mere approximation of the shape
& texture of a wound too florid

to forego mentioning, I was never quite sure.
But what is sureness to the shoreless?
When certain certainties fade
& every part of you poses

itself as open question to a world
it knew best through the lens of legend
(myth & maps & dead men with one name)
how do you re-frame the body's conversation

with itself or other selves? And where is the self these days?
And what is the body but a bag of blood? And what is love
but an excuse to melt into mad, wet math? And who can stomach
the math of meat? What does the animal have or not have

which makes its body not a body, its death *not death*
as-such as Heidegger or a devout Heideggerian
might say? Who is to say where outside begins
& flesh ends? Perhaps we are all just webs

of blue information intersecting, collapsing
across strata & calling it something else,
something other than entropy or decay, a turf war
with time. So many names for breaking into this life

at angles unplanned & unknowable. It's true.
There is much to be praised in this house
of lightning & dust, this sloppy armor
we yearn to move more beautifully in.

Joshua Bennett

349

³⁴⁹ [Joshua Bennett](#), "[On Flesh](#)," [Blackbird](#), collected in [The Sobbing School](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Prescription

Under the blazing nanny of a halogen bulb,
I keep a password memorized for years and years.
It crawls like a scarab behind my eyes toward Jerusalem.
I follow it places where nothing goes.
Through my drinking glass,
A page widens and swarms toward Sumer
And I see the words I am reading better.
There is no use naming anything until it's gone.
I have smiled like a child at the simple red fruit,
Old habit to bare the least tooth in the dark.

Christine Gosnay
350

³⁵⁰ [Christine Gosnay](#), "[Prescription](#)," collected in [Even Years](#), [The Kent State University Press](#)

Of Yalta

Sure, it's all *Chekhov this* and *Chekhov that*,
and I am far from the only one
to keep myself up at night
thinking about his gun,

but the man was a dreamboat,
gray eyes and smirking beard
and lips—those lips. The kind of man who,
if he were now alive at the age he died,

would walk into the party, see me,
slide his eyes over the temperate steppe of my body,
and then talk to my pretty friend.
Better for us both then that he's dead.

I've been rejected in two centuries, lonely
in millennia, pride of my generation.
This old story. Women who like men
love them until the men are holes

and the women turn back to bone.
Every time a man left me, I burned
something I loved until I was left
with only the gear knob of a Dodge Omni

and wine stains round my mouth.
Maybe that is not all true, or quite true,
or true in the way that you want. All I know
is that we do not have to have a thing

to lose it. I mourn the children
I am too sad to have, and the disappointment
of the lover I am too tired to take.
All day I feel them, their ghost limbs' need

and heat, the echo of their bodies
against my teeth—absences expanding inside me
like the flower behind a bullet,
the blood inside a lung.

Erin Adair-Hodges
351

351 [Erin Adair-Hodges, "Of Yalta," *The Georgia Review*](#), collected in [Let's All Die Happy](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

Playroom

I never had enough kens
so I made my barbies fuck
each other
or fuck beanie babies.

I never had more than one
beanie baby per species.
they were rarer
that way

& like some
perverted noah's ark
kept
from multiplying.

No one with skin
colored like theirs, *freaks*
like me. Lucky the barbies
needed their bodies.

I controlled
in my playroom.
Whole cities of beautiful
women, boundless

tits, fucking
sacks of animal. Plastic
legs thrusting until
the beanie said *yes*

balls
of beans spilling
to the floor. The ladies fucked
their corpses until Auntie A

made me throw them out.
Legions of identical
white women, skin glowing
like pearl milk, magnificent

as they stormed the gates
of the zoo
conquered each animal
one limb at a time.

Fatimah Asghar
352

³⁵² [Fatimah Asghar](#), "[Playroom](#)," [Gulf Coast](#), collected in [If They Come for Us, One World](#)

Dad Jokes

You're rolling your eyes already.
Nice to meet you, Rolling Your Eyes
Already, I'm Dad; did you hear
what the zero said to the eight?
Nice belt & also I'm gonna need to see your passport.
If you're American in the living room
& European in the bathroom
what are you in the airport holding cell?
Don't worry, I've got like a million of these.
You seem to have an allergic reaction on your skin
but let's not make any rash decisions,
health care is complicated. What
did the fish say when it swam into a wall?
What do you call an immigrant with no eyes?
What do you call someone
threatening to blow up Jewish daycares?
Why do I take peanut butter
on my morning commute?
I think you know. Sandwich
walks into a bar, bartender says
sorry we don't make gay wedding cakes
here. Secretary of Education
walks into a school, bartender says
sorry we're so poor. Chicago walks
into America, bartender says
look at all those black people killing each other.
Electoral college walks into November,
bartender says thank you for saving
us from Chicago. I'm starting to dislike
this bartender. You might think this
isn't funny. I get it. I didn't like the beard
either, until it grew on me.
At some point I came to understand
my job was to make the world
more bearable for my children.
It's possible I was wrong & anyway
I don't think I'm very good at it.
You pick your battles, you pick your nose,
but you can't pick yourself up
off the ground in a cloud of teargas.
No one's laughing. I'm not laughing.
I have broken my arm in several places,
now I'm thinking it would be best
not to go to those places anymore.

Amorak Huey
353

³⁵³ [Amorak Huey, "Dad Jokes," Gulf Coast](#)

Your Mom Tells You To Stop Writing About Race

so you punch buttons. so you side-part
your hair. so you flip thru TV channels
and watch monkeys howl with their bare
monkey lips, so you are reminded of your
father. a gas station, a black nozzle, a man
in the adjacent car pinching his eyes, his
wide, blue face: telling you to go back
home. you draw shark teeth on your
american culture homework. you raise
your hand in class. your house becomes
a zoo filled with peaches, watercolor
roosters. each year, you walk and you
walk and your feet perform quietly
in the grass. everybody asks you for
tricks, their name in black calligraphy.
everybody coos and coos. there
are cages, and there are your eyes.
there are your ten-thousand days, eggy
and glorious, stuck thru the teeth of
a comb. your skin is sticky and yellow.
your tongue is ancient and sweet. when
a boy plumps his lip on your throat
and asks you to say *something dirty*
in CHINESE, you flip the sheets
and bite down, tasting trouble
and rage. in the kitchen, alone,
you devour a pickle. your white
classmate sees you. does not.
white men claim you. do not.
you are small, fierce and evil: with
two palms and a chest. there are
boxes made for you to check. *Chinese /*
American. Chinese / American.
your mom calls. she tells you to stop
writing about race. *You could get*
shot, she says. so you yank your hair
into a knot at the back of your neck.
so you cinch your belt tight
at the waist.

Carlina Duan

354

³⁵⁴ Carlina Duan, "Your Mom Tells You To Stop Writing About Race," *Tinderbox*, collected in *I Wore My Blackest Hair*, Little A

Misfortune Cookies

Expect a run of good luck
in Gary, Indiana.

Your abundant gifts will be rewarded
by a local philatelic organization.

Your cat often has bad hair days and curses at life.

You possess an unrequited love of language.

We all fall down a rabbit hole
but that doesn't mean we all get tea afterward
or good advice.

What would you do with a pomegranate if you had one?

You are passionate and hirsute.

Without briefs, how will you plead your firm case?

Creative people are attracted to you
because of the metal plate in your head.

Your dermatitis makes you a popular party guest.

You piss people off but they can't say why.

Stick to your current path and you will find
pant suits at discount prices.

A little personality would do you good.

It is a well-established but widely under-reported phenomenon
that molecules in women over 40 destabilize,
often rendering them invisible to the naked eye.
In fact, all your dinner companion sees now
as he looks across the table
is a large fortune cookie cracked open in your place.

Never shout fire. Always stay calm.

Everything will fall into place in the days to come.

The sledding hill will remain closed.

Those born prior to 1972 will not be permitted to purchase
the Jimi Hendrix T-shirts.

That boy they call Chud will be famous one day,
so you should get an autograph and maybe a pair of his socks
while you still can.

Measure twice, marry once.

Look ahead.

Watch your back.

Chin up.

Stomach in.

Straighten out.

Blend well, not ignoring the hairline.

Shut up and repeat this to no one.

Kathy Fagan
355

³⁵⁵ [Kathy Fagan](#), "[Misfortune Cookies](#)," collected in *The Charm*, Zoo Press

Almost a Figure

Every time I see you I'm reminded of Akhmatova
describing Leningrad burning. The flames a funeral pyre

of feverish poppies; their reds a requiem for bone. I imagine
the disbelief, exquisite

fascination of fire and the Winter Palace consumed.

People stuffing jewels in coat pockets and mouths
everyone suddenly aware of what it means to be a
body.

I wonder how many of them
descending through the city

turned back to their houses. Locked themselves in

and watched plumes of smoke sliding up
to the sky
weightless
ambivalent

without grief, or need to hold *anything*

or *anyone* at all.

I was in Belfast, you were hospitalized and
tested. I kept dreaming of doctors with enormous hands
abusing flowers.

And of a sericulture room, dimly lit

where the single
long filaments of silkworms
were drawn from empty cocoons
by machines—

My entomology professor once said:
*On the cephalothorax of the brown recluse
there is a pattern like a violin.*

Forgive me this old habit. There is a danger
in making suffering beautiful.

This is what I realized that night in that divided city.
After playing the wretched hostel piano, I wrote:

Dear N,

*I want to cut off my hair
and tie it into brushes
so I can paint the city of Belfast
in its true humanity.*

*All day long I passed an artist's studio
where the clay arms and bands of women
were displayed in the window.*

Small hands to hold such a city.

*Love,
K*

Katherine Larson

356

³⁵⁶ [Katherine Larson](#), "[Almost a Figure](#)," [Poetry](#), collected in [Radial Symmetry](#), [Yale University Press](#)

Raskolnikov Rates the Plays

Right off the bat, I hate the cross-dressing comedies the most. There's nothing funny about life on earth, as you very well know. Let's start with the pawnbroker's brow—X marks the spot where my ax smashed her head, a wavy zig-zag of blood staining the floor. There's nothing a boy loves more than mayhem. *Titus*—now there's a comic dish to set before the king. Or *Richard III*. My God, he fought like a cossack. Part monster, part bulldog; he took the Plantagenets down with him. Of course, I just adore *Macbeth*, but forget that mealy mouth *Hamlet*—book loving malcontent. Give me a tyrant any day—Saddam, Nebuchadnezzar, both king and bottle of champagne. O pop a cork for Babylonia—now, I believe, called Iraq.

Barbara Hamby
357

³⁵⁷ [Barbara Hamby](#), "[Raskolnikov Rates the Plays](#)," [Waccamaw](#), collected in [All-Night Lingo Tango](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

In the City

for Monica Sok

These bridges are a feat of engineering. These pork & chive dumplings
we bought together, before hopping on a train
& crossing bridges, are a feat of engineering. Talking to you, crossing bridges
in trains, eating pork & chive dumplings in your bright boxcar
of a kitchen in Brooklyn, is an engineer's dream-feat
of astonishment. Tonight I cannot believe
the skyline because the skyline believes in me, forgives me my drooling
astonishment over it & over the fact that this happens,
this night, every night, its belief, glittering mad & megawatt like the dreams
of parents. By the way, is this soy sauce
reduced sodium? Do you know? Do we care? High, unabashed sodium intake!
Unabashed exclamation points! New York is an exclamation
I take, making my escape, away from the quiet snowy commas of Upstate
& the mess of questions marking my Bostonian past.
In New York we read Darwish, we write broken sonnets finally forgiving
the Broken English of Our Mothers, we eat
pork & chive dumplings, & I know, it's such a 90s fantasy
of multiculturalism that I am
rehashing, bust still, in New York I feel I can tell you how my mother & I
used to make dumplings together, like a scene
out of *The Joy Luck Club*. The small kitchen, the small bowl of water
between us. How we dipped index finger, thumb.
Sealed each dumpling like tucking in a secret, goodnight.
The meat of a memory. A feat of engineering.
A dream of mother & son. Interrupted by the father, my father
who made my mother get on a plane, a theory.
years of nowhere across American No's, a degree that proved useless.
Proved he was the father. I try to build a bridge
to my parents but only reach my mother & it's a bridge she's about to
jump off of. I run to her, she jumps, she's
swimming, saying, *Finally I've learned—all this time, trying to get from one useless
chunk of land to another, when I should've stayed
in the water.* & we're drinking tap water in your bright Brooklyn kitchen.
I don't know what to tell you. I thought I could
tell this story, give it a way out of itself. Even here, in my fabulous
Tony-winning monologue of a New York, I'm struggling to get
to the Joy, the Luck. I tell you my mother still
boils the water, though she knows she doesn't have to anymore.
Her special kettle boils in no time, is a feat of engineering.
She could boil my father in it
& he'd come out a better person, in beautiful shoes.
She could boil the Atlantic, the Pacific, every idyllic
American pond with its swans. She would.

Chen Chen

³⁵⁸ [Chen Chen](#), "[In the City](#)," *Poem-A-Day*, collected in [When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities](#), BOA Editions, [Ltd](#)

Maria and the Halls of the Perish

She loved dandelions
but hated the circus.
She wanted to know where eggs
came from, really came from,
where came the body of the body
of the body they came from.
And when her heart made
that sad little oboe note
she wanted to know where
the mind came from,
and was as answerless
as if she sat in the middle
of a beginningless river.
The beginning of the universe
reminded her of the time
the toy factory blew up
and she found a little clown
on the shore, and then another,
until she was determined to find
them all, the whole shebang,
though she never did, and night
fell over the ocean, and eye-popping
children of all ages slept in a sleep
brimming with irresistible attractions,
giving them a taste of what
awaited them when they woke,
though it was nothing compared
to the massive arrays of adulthood.

Mary Ruefle
359

³⁵⁹ [Mary Ruefle, "Maria and the Halls of the Perish," *Bennington Review*](#)

Fragments of a Dissected Word

Because it's easier to rename,
to change what I can't fix—
now *depression* belongs

to someone else, I mix up
the letters and say,

I'm just taking care of *Red's ponies*,
instead of having to say
I'm falling apart.

And I take this word further,
say I am filled with *sin or speed*,
piss or need, or deep sins—

deep deep sins.
But this word—*depression*

—I read it inside out: *persons die*,

a ripened SOS.
And when it's around, I become
a side person, posed, risen,

I am *opened, sirs*.
I can rearrange the letters
but I cannot arrange it

from my life.
Like playing Clue:
it was *sis* in the *den* with a *rope*,

I keep waiting to find out
the ending,

Rose, I spend my nights awake
and all those years I didn't tell you,
I pressed on.

Kelli Russell Agodon
360

³⁶⁰ [Kelli Russell Agodon](#), "[Fragments of a Dissected Word](#)," collected in [Letters from the Emily Dickinson Room](#), White Pine Press

Text Message

oni, u rancorous scam, u r no rare ace.
no common sense. no sure win.
no amour. no sex. no career.
no suave swimwear, size six.
no amazonian eminence.
no renaissance in consciousness.
mere ire over asinine nuance.
u r so mesozoic era.

u rinse romaine + secure onions.
u use sour cream on venison.
u season noxious wieners.
coarse carnivore, u even wean + crisco sows
+ worse, simmer simian viscera
+ savor maximum cinnamon.
moreover, u evince ruinous manners.

ever since u came,
nauseous raccoons swoon + swerve near cars in manassas, va.
immense moose rave averse in maine.
monas wince in cameroon + zaire.
caimans careen in irreverence in so. american rivers.
nice vicunas amaze in serious cusses.
ewe emissions serve as severe consensus.
vermin vow never near.
even sea anemones voice censure.
wrens, vireos, caracas, anis, emus, swans, macaws, canaries + cranes
maroon u, swear avian au revoir.
messiaen concurs.
eminem weaves mean verses on u.

o, oni, scorn us now,
now ur careworn carcass awes us.
a carrion-crow carves ur cameo, no
novocaine. incisive. immune.
nerve minus nerve is zero, or
noose, noon, nirvana: an
oceanic oasis, a rearview mirror.
can u recover now, oni?
can u crown ur cranium now,
can u rise in ur worm ascension?

we are ur vice, ur versus, ur
vice-versa, ur mesmeric new avarice,
ur concussion, ur amnesia (a caesura is u now, oni.)
(a caesura is ur new maison, ur caisson casa.)
we are ur arsenic, ur assassin,
ur anemia, ur anorexia nervosa.
we consume u, corrosive. we assess u.
we are ur vision, ur rescue mission, ur anima,
u. we use u. ur winsome camera crew:

coroner, commence exam, + camera man, zoom in:
a waxen woman, wear-worse.
corneas, ears + nose aswarm.
some recession on cranium.
venomous incisors, enormous.
varicose veins.
cursive arms over cavernous core.
nurse: scissors, ammonia.
carve in, coroner: mince, examine:
carmine amnion. uranium in urine.
in marrow, one amino amiss.

Oni Buchanan
361

³⁶¹ [Oni Buchanan](#), "[Text Message](#)," collected in [Spring](#), [University of Illinois Press](#)

The Master's House

To wave from the porch
To let go of the grudge
To disrobe
To recall Ethel Rosenberg's green polka-dotted dress
To call your father and say *I'd forgotten how nice everyone in these red states can be*
To hear him say *Yes, long as you don't move in next door*
To recall every drawn curtain in the apartments you have lived
To find yourself at 33 at a vast expanse with nary a papyrus of guidance, with nary a voice, a muse, a model
To finally admit out loud then *I want to go home*
To have a dinner party of intellectuals with a bell, long-armed, lightly-tongued, at each setting
To sport your dun gown
To revel in face serums
To be a well-calibrated burn victim to fight the signs of aging
To assure financial health
To be lavender sachets and cedar lining and all the ways the rich might hide their rot
To eye the master's bone china
To pour diuretic in his coffee and think this erosive to the state
To disrobe when the agent asks you to
To find a spot on any wall to stare into
To develop the ability to leave an entire nation thusly, just by staring at a spot on the wall, as the lead-vested agent names article by article what to remove
To do this in order to do the other thing, the wild thing
To say this is my filmdom, The Master's House, and I gaze upon it and it is good
To discuss desalinization plants and de terroir
To date briefly a banker, a lapsed Marxist, and hear him on the phone speaking in billions of dollars, its residue over the clear bulbs of his eyes, as he turns to look upon your nudity
To fantasize publishing a poem in the *New Yorker* eviscerating his little need
To set a bell at each intellectual's table setting ringing idea after idea, and be the simple-footed help, rushing to say *Yes?*
To disrobe when the agent asks you to
To find a spot on any wall to stare into
To develop the ability to leave an entire nation thusly, just by staring at a spot on the wall
To say this is my filmdom, The Master's House
To recall the Settler who from behind his mobile phone said *I'm filming you for God*
To recall this sad God, God of the mobile phone camera, God of the small black globe and pixelated eye above the blackjack table at Harrah's and the metal, toothed pit of Qalandia checkpoint the same
To recall the Texan that held the shotgun to your father's chest, sending him falling backward, pleading, and the words came to him in Farsi
To be jealous of this, his most desperate language
To lament the fact of your lamentations in English, English being your first defeat
To finally admit out loud then *I want to go home*
To stand outside your grandmother's house
To know, for example, that in Farsi the present perfect is called the relational past, and is used at times to describe a historic event whose effect is still relevant today, transcending the past
To say, for example, *Shah dictator bude-ast* translates to *The Shah was a dictator*, but more literally to *The Shah is was a dictator*
To have a tense of is-was, the residue of it over the clear bulb of your eyes

To walk cemetery after cemetery in these States and nary a gravestone reading *Solmaz*
To know no nation will be home until one does
To do this in order to do the other thing, the wild thing, though you've forgotten what it was

Solmaz Sharif
362

³⁶² [Solmaz Sharif, "The Master's House," *Poetry*](#)

from "Deadout"

Gets out his dab rig and shatter
At once at its mercy and in control of it

The bull snake lifted the terrarium cover
About three feet six from snout to vent

Youngbloods metaphorizing death
What kind of clue do they have

Her scent: vinegar, zinc oxide, and hinoki cypress
He dreamed of it awake dreams of it

Watching another season of Spanky Wankers
Only made his fillings ache

So now he's got reptile dysfunction
Me too, says the dust.

Motorcycle parked in the handicapped spot
He regards the forest of standing dead snags

Forrest Gander
363

³⁶³ [Forrest Gander](#), "[Deadout](#)," collected in [Be With, New Directions](#)

Wasn't the Minotaur Buried Horns First: Vulnerability and Identity in the Mythic Body

Abstract:

Throughout the course of contemporary classic studies much scholarship has been done on the triumph of Theseus in his traversing of the labyrinth and his ill-fated sails. As a result, this poem is concerned with the symbolic significance of the lineage of the semi-bestial mythic body as a contemporary site of identity politics. Throughout this poem it can reasonably be assumed that some discussion of the symbolic barrier of placing a shameful beast inside a series of intraversable walls can stand as a place marker for a decidedly unpopulated and, it follows naturally, unmirrored existence. What can we, as citizens of the poem, learn from a son who has never seen his own face not caked in gore and other casualties of loneliness? In this vein, the poem eschews a beginning in the Aegean Sea in favor of an image of a Biracial child sitting in a lunchroom in Omaha, Nebraska being told by alabaster colored children, who could barely be troubled to acknowledge the beast otherwise, all the sports his blood will make him “a monster” at, and then the boy’s fingers weeping scarlet onto the linoleum his skull freshly crowned with the beginnings of horns.

Julian Randall

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³⁶⁴ [Julian Randall, “Wasn’t the Minotaur Buried Horns First: Vulnerability and Identity in the Mythic Body,” *the Shade Journal*, collected in *Refuse*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Afterlife

My exes shall rise up from their Mazdas
& adorn themselves in denim.

I'll take their hands & we'll wander
among the silver asparagus.

Though all are present, it seems to each
that I'm walking with him only.

One brings five white roses again
petals curling in soft paper.

Another comes with a mixtape & drawings:
heart, suitcase, shape of his country.

We'll sit at the stone table & eat
from the same jar of strawberries & mint.

Each will tell about his wife. The golden hikes
they take after lunch with their dogs.

I'll show them my books & the healed mark
over my ribcage.

We'll enter the cottage where our babies sleep
forever in their small beds.

I'll hum to them in many voices until just
one brightness occurs.

Then, I'll go alone to the curve of the lake
to see what will jump for me.

Kiki Petrosino

365

³⁶⁵ [Kiki Petrosino](#), "[Afterlife](#)," [Tupelo Quarterly](#), collected in [Witch Wife](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

The Old Poets

The vampires were climbing the hill.

+

The little boy, awake late in his tree house,
watched them attain the summit,
first one, then another, then several vampires
silhouetted in the moonlight.

+

I am reminded of my father,
how he walked a similar path through his dusk
while the autumn leaves fell around him;
I was, I fear, one of many small disappointments for that modest man,
one of the vampires said.

+

Soon, the area below his tree house
was crowded with white-faced vampires
looking pensively toward the distance.

+

A lovely moon half-concealed
by the chimneys of that power plant
is also a small disappointment,
another vampire said.

+

Regret, a third whispered, is the rain in the trees,
is those lightning bugs obscured by that bush,
is an empty car left by the side of a busy freeway
far from this hill.

+

The vampires smelled like the warm meals
of their vanished childhoods.

+

They sniffed the air. The boy, they sensed,
would grow old one day, would sit on his porch
looking over the back yard, toward the blinking lights
of his mortgaged youth.

+

Some of the vampires wrote this on little pads
they otherwise kept in their breast pockets.

+

In the tree house, the boy had tacked a cat's pelt
to the wall. He'd spent all day gutting and cleaning,
smoothing it with stones. Now he smiled
as he stroked it with his fingertips.

+

Of all his many pelts, this was the finest.

Kevin Prufer
366

³⁶⁶ [Kevin Prufer](#), "[The Old Poets](#)," collected in [How He Loved Them](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Irony Is Not Enough: Essay on My Life as Catherine Deneuve

saison qui chante saison rapide

I. *Beginnings*

Beginnings are hard.
Sappho put it simply.
Speaking of a young girl Sappho said, *You burn me.*

The woman imagines
herself and the girl
together in a hotel room. But cannot imagine what they would say.

Perhaps she would brush
as if by accident
her backbone. When (later) she is seated in her professor's chair

surrounded by seminar students
listening to her expound
Solonian monetary reform, this accidental brushing action

races on her nerves
like a bit of electricity.
What is interesting about Solon's reform of Athenian money

is that Solon introduced a coinage
which had a forced currency.
That is, citizens had to accept issues called drachmas, didrachmas,

obols, etc.
although these did not contain
silver of that value. These are token coinages.

This is money
that lies about itself.
The surface does not match what is going on inside.

The surface (for example) does
not stream with bits of fire.
The girl is one of the students in the seminar. She usually comes late.

II. *Years*

Years later
she will remember
apples splitting open inside her. But the fact is she sits

in a dark church
trying to listen
to an old priest shouting like a treetop. *Devils!* He shouts.

Desire! He shouts.
*Pluck your
garment of flesh!* Blueblack heat is—*error!*

III. *Days*

Days when the girl does not
show up for the seminar,
blockages of ice form along the woman's veins. She sits

at the head
of the seminar table
under the neon ceiling, under the shadowless hands of the hours

stretching ahead
that lack her.
The seminar meets MonWedFri. This is Mon.

Forty-seven hours until Wed.
The woman unclenches her hands
from her lecture notes and begins to talk. Fragment I of Sappho

has been described by scholars
as a hymn
Or a parody of a hymn. Or literary use of the hymn form.

Or the literary use
of the parody
of a hymn. Genuine? Droll? Solemn? Conventional? Hot? Private?

It is a poem
about an old person
who loves a young one. The young one says No and the pain

shines like nails.
Sappho calls out
to Aphrodite who was herself once caught in a gold cage.

But Aphrodite is immortal.
Her smile is immortal.
She flashes it. She mentions justice. And she is gone.

Sappho stands alone
at the end of the poem
under the neon lights with both hands raised. *Here!*

she cries
after the goddess.
Loose me! You! Sappho is nailed to a moment in time.

Aphrodite,
far off by now
on her chariot of whirring sparrows, looks back and sees

human time
as a system
of perpetual patterns of recurrence. *Don't worry!*

(calls Aphrodite)
The wheel is turning!
Someday your beloved will grow old like you

and love
someone else
who is cold—I call that justice! The woman is asking

the students
if they know
a Ray Charles song called *Here We Go Again* when the girl

slouches in
mumbling *Sorry*
as she brushes past and sits on the left. Heat

distresses
that side
of the woman's body. Seminar is almost over.

She shuffles her notes
and hastens to conclude,
the eyes beating on her like a wind. Bell rings.

Everyone is rustling
and rising
and shrugging on coats. An earnest boy pins her

with a question
about epithets.
Aphrodite "of the painted chair"? Aphrodite "of the spangled mind"?

Aphrodite "who loves laughter"?
"who loves genitalia"?
(the etymology is disputed) and before she can finish

with epithets
the girl is gone.
Edge of her glance as she slides out the door. Forty-six hours.

IV. *Parts*

Parts of time fall on her
and she does not apprehend them
on the days inbetween MonWedFri. Snow wanders slowly
through the afternoon.
The woman sits in her office
working on an essay about Sokratic irony. Dark blue darkness

grows down
gradually over the snow,
then starlight. She switches off the lamp. Sokrates

uses “irony”
to draw a veil over
the question that is jutting out from him. The veil

is made of feints
and lesser proofs
and half-burnings. Why not just ask the question?

She rises from the desk
and goes out,
closing the office door behind her. Any particular fantasy

about the girl
gets tiresome (she notices)
after 30 minutes. Then she has to elaborate or move on.

*Mother I cannot
work the loom
(Sappho says in a fragment). Aphrodite has parted me*

*with longing
for a girl.*
The woman is turning over this translation in her mind

when she realizes
she has ridden
the train 4 stops in the wrong direction. I will imagine

a great many things,
she thinks,
climbing back up the stairs from the platform, and none

of them
will happen.
Other things will happen. Her hip slams hard into the metal arm

of the turnstile.
A red sign
pasted on it says NO EXIT.

Sound is far away.
All around her
strange lamps burn brightly and human tongues press the night.

V. *Awake*

Awake too early
and dry from fantasy
the woman lies on her bed under the window. Stares out

at the stale 4 AM sky.
No help there.
Switches on the bedside lamp. Its greenish glare

shows a Lobel edition
of Sappho
lying open on the floor. Fragment 58 is a torn 3rd-century papyrus:

*by mouth
beautiful gifts girls
songlover lyreclear
all my skin old age already
white becomes the hair after black
knees do not carry
like fawns
but what could I do?
not able to become
dawn with arms of roses
ends of the earth carries
takes
deathless one in the bed
contemplates
but I love delicacy and this to me
this bright thing of the sun this beautiful thing
Eros has allotted*

The woman closes
the book.
Outside ice is general. Say someone had it, the courage.

VI. *Weekends*

Weekends are long and white.
Snow drifts against the door.
Distant threads from the piano downstairs. Footsteps creak

back and forth
across the ceiling.
The woman slides slowly from hour to hour, tracing

with one vague finger
at the back of her mind
the girl, on the other side of the city moving parallel to herself

through these same hours.
She reads. Writes. Eats.
Answers the telephone. Sleeps. Wakes. Folds up

the sleeping bag.
Checks the ice.
Starts over. So does the other, somewhere.

On the big map
of the untraceable world event
two parallel red lines, of differing lengths,

inch forward
a weekend's worth of lifetime,
not touching. Chalice ripen in the shadow do they not.

VII. *Shame*

Shame too
is a relation.
That fact that the girl has been absent from the seminar

for a week now
is a rusty edge
that the woman collides with repeatedly as she sits in her

Monday office
paging through
lecture notes and looking out on snowstreaked slate roofs.

A flag shreds itself
in the icy wind.
Telephone rings. Jagged pause. Girl's voice,

which she has
never heard before
on the telephone, is surprisingly dark and a little wild,

Animal lopes through her
and turns at the wall.
Claws rake it. *Not coming to the seminar today. Thought you*

should know.
Girl stops.
She waits. And then, *Do you care?* with a torn laugh.

Stairs
drop away
from the woman's life. Dangling and lightless she grabs for an answer

to that.
Yes. No.
No answer. Wrong answer. Wrong question. Trick question!

They grapple
in the void,
firing badly. It spins, they slip off, then hold.

I plan to come
Wednesday,
girl says. *Do that,* she answers. Dial tone.

The world sags
and swings back
against the rock at the middle of the void. Fifty-two hours.

VIII. *Presence*

Presence can be
like a sunset
that breaks open. They sit opposite one another in her office.

Colours flood
in a backrush
from the bookshelf to the desk, up the wall and down the other side.

Hard work
to keep the conversation
steady on school matters—the girl likes digressions:

about boyfriends
(two,
in different cities) and her theory of monogamy

(its folly) and
a judgement
of now (*You're someone I talk to*).

Phrases from this conversation
will stream past the woman's mind
for days and nights after. *Life is really very simple.*

The door closes behind her.
Blood is jumping.
She tries to read, eats a carrot, rips up something, goes out.

Over snowdrifts
to the church.
The priest is putting ashes on foreheads. Light oily pressure

of his thumb
on her brow
makes her begin to weep. Little red thread jerks the raw heart alive.

IX. *Damaged*

Damaged crop—what
the body brings in
through its double lens of living and watching oneself live.

The girl stops her
on her way to the seminar.
Do you mind if I come to class when I haven't prepared the text?

Rage spins her.
Another trick question.
No, she says coldly. Fawns are made of lies! Who

is immoral
in this fluidity
of inside and outside? Who could tell,

reading this,
that she was not
one step ahead of it? Trick questions

(she notes in passing)
have a structure
akin to Sokratic irony. Why this calms her she cannot say.

X. Reading

Reading Week means 7 days
of no girl.
She sits in her office till evening working on irony. Blueblackness

pools in the air.
Lights come on
all over the city. *Free as a flame that devours* is how

one German philosopher
describes the irony
of Sokrates, moving over human errors and human knowledge.

To swap a Yes for a No
is its action,
he says. Sokrates might have enjoyed a girl who told him,

Life is really very simple,
Who knew how to run
knife after knife along the edge. A cold rarity like blue peaches

is soaking
out of the sunset.
Evening you bring back to me (says Sappho) *everything*

dispersed by dawn.
Sappho was one
who understood how simple life is. And she was unsurprised

when certain people
became for her,
by their very existence, a trick question. Sappho

called these people
fawns.
The woman faces into clearing winds all the way home. Ice

going black
underfoot—what
is that smell?—it comes stinging into her,

sudden bitter memory
of pushing her face
hard into the black leather shoulder of a girl,

hipbone grinding her hipbone,
under a streetlamp
one cold February night years ago. How simply time carries us.

A familiar block
thuds into place
in her chest as she climbs the stairs to her house. Inside

it is dark.
The floors are silent.
Moonlight slides in. Voices of the world grow fewer and quieter.

XI. *Snows*

Snows all night
snows all day.
Still snowing in midafternoon when the woman looks up

from her Greek lexicon.
The girl's ears
are bright red. Eyebrows snowplastered. She leans

in the doorway
and holds up
her glasses by one broken earpiece. She accepts

the mending tape,
mends the earpiece,
drops her coat on the floor, sits beside it. Takes out

her Greek book
and they begin
to translate, as if it had been prearranged. Had it?

The woman feels like
something hooked
or washing out to sea, but the force of life coming off this girl

is too strong
to think what
day it is or what was supposed to happen. Dusk reaches

them.
She switches on
the desk lamp. But now the girl is lifting her coat,

in the doorway,
gone.
Thanks, floats back along the hall. Looking down

she sees
her feet
are naked. Boots and socks propped on the radiator to dry.

How strange
to have read Greek
barefoot with a girl in a snowstorm, how strangely burning.

XII. *Tools*

Tools of the educator include
repetition and irony.
The woman sits in her small night kitchen working over

an ancient fragment
of the poet Alkaios
who lived in the 7th century BC and wrote many pages

(most of them lost)
about the hungering
haze of desire, unto which no fortress is secure, no wail avails:

*me wretched me the whole of evils sharing
in my house
shameful lot
for incurable maiming comes upon me
and the belling of a deer inside my chest
grows in its fears
going mad
by reason of infatuations*

Why study the past?
To illumine the present.
Why study the present? The woman is groping as mortals do

to get hold of
the edge of
herself in time. In time. You have to repeat the important words

until you
understand them.
Amid this indignity, in this ridiculous late fire, without

wall or fortress
or food to stop
the belling of the deer, she is struggling to see it lit

by whatever floods
the momentarily
open lens—an old woman's love is a coin

rattling
in an empty cup
making the sound KISHKUSH. The pandering stars look down.

XIII. *Truth*

Truthfully white is Friday.
Marchblasted open on raw winds.
Quite early the girl arrives at her office, closes the door

and starts to cry.
Is having trouble
with her boyfriend in Paris. Most important

thing in her life.
This, the girl adds,
gesturing toward the woman's books, chairs, shelves

and desklamp,
is the second most important.
The woman nods. Painful to see the girl cry but in truth

she can hardly
feel anything
above the blast of happiness this presence affords,

Fire is ripping
inside.
She presses both hands on her chest. Murmurs a phrase of comfort.

The girl moves stiffly to the door,
knocks over a chair
with her knee and leaves. She sits. Wheels of hot magma

are riding
up the pipes
and want out. Do you know how diamonds get to us?

Three hundred miles
underground
are heats and pressures that crush carbon

into sparkling shapes.
These are driven
to the surface along volcanic corridors called diamond pipes

and extruded
onto a crater
at the top. The journey may take months

or days
or hours.
No human has ever witnessed a diamond eruption. For reasons

that elude science
diamond pipes are found only
in the most ancient volcanic regions. No crater less than 1.5

billion years old
will give you
a diamond. So long it takes to make a beautiful thing

out of interior fire.
Later in the seminar
she avoids looking at the girl's red eyes. And after class

when she comes
to her office
it is pure pain—there she sits telling of her love

in Paris
while the woman nods
and tries to force her lungs closed—uprush of diamonds

shearing
the breath off.
If I could just be in the same room with him! the girl is saying

and the woman
turns to stare hard
out the window where deep blue night dye has begun

to saturate
everything.
The girl is lifting her coat. *Gottago.*

Pauses.
Turns.
You help. I don't know how. She is gone.

The desk lamp
sputters, goes
out. The woman is lacing on her big boots for the long walk home.

XIV. Sokrates

Sokrates died in jail.
Sappho died in a leap
off the white rock of Leukas for love of a girl, so they say.

Sokrates is ironical
about two things.
His beauty (which he calls ugliness) and his knowledge

(ignorance).
For Sappho
irony is a verb. It places her in a certain relation

to her own life.
Silk and bitter.
How very interesting (the woman thinks) to watch myself

construct this.
She is at work
on her essay. *Irony contains and excites a feeling of insoluble*

opposition
between
the unconditional and the conditional,

between what
it is impossible
and what it is necessary to say, says the German

philosopher
Schlegel.
Latin rhetoricians translate the Greek word *eironia* as

dissimulatio,
which means
“mask.” Just so (Sappho notes) in time

one’s mask
becomes
one’s face. *Irony is no joke*, Schlegel warns her. A miniature

smoke of grief
climbs
her throat and escapes into the room, turning dark

now and sulphurous
in the confused
ash of evening, in the drifting ash alone. *With the best*

will in the world
I believe that
I would only make myself ridiculous! remarked Sokrates ironically.

XV. *Poor*

Poor idea this girl fantasy,
the woman is thinking
as she packs up after the Friday seminar. Girl has missed

the last three
assignments.
Bare clarities of March afternoon ache in through the wide glass

of her window.
The big boots
feel like two tombstones. Then unexpectedness happens.

Ducking out the main door
onto the street
she stumbles against the girl rushing in. Girl thrusts

today's assignment at her.
Glad I caught you, she says.
The woman pulls her eyes away. Folds the assignment twice.

Pushes it down
in her briefcase.
Cannot think of a thing to say. The world is like champagne,

crosses her mind
as they circle
one another in the doorway in a wash of light. Girl is looking

at her oddly.
Never saw you
in this state before, she says. *What state is that?*

Tongue-tied, the girl grins.
The woman has
a sensation of being flicked on a hook.

Eyes grip
and untie.
The girl starts to talk about her love in Paris

who thinks her
too dependent.
You? the woman says, hitting the bottom of a volcanic pipe

at top speed,
all her diamonds
going the wrong way. The girl touches her arm and departs.

Later at home
the woman sits
by a dark open window. Smell of night so different

than smell of day.
Frozen darkness
like old tin. Like cold cats. Like the word *pauve*.

XVI. *Questions*

Questions are not all tricks,
are they?
The woman gives a dinner party for the seminar students.

She cooks
all day
while fantasies of herself and the girl fill every room.

Hot stones
murmur, hiss,
dash, churn and clatter upon one another then drop

perpendicularly
back
to the molten conical mount forming at the pit.

It is a snowy spring evening.
Night comes.
The Students arrive. They pile up plates of food. They pour

glasses of wine
and sit on the floor
and say miraculous things. She watches each one. She

waits.
She sips.
Night moves on its way. The food is all over the room,

then gradually disappears.
The students gather
and separate and regather in different doorways,

then they too gradually
disappear.
It is almost 2 AM when she closes the door and switches off

the porchlight
and returns
slowly along the hall. Out the window she can see

snow flying
diagonally
under the yellow streetlamp. The woman folds her

trick question
back up into
her heart and closes it. Why had it not occurred to her

that the girl
just
wouldn't show up? Life is, as she says, simple.

The woman almost laughs.
Begins picking up cups
and plates and odd bits of food. Puts away chairs.

Blows out
candles.
Lines up bottles beside the door. Loads the dishwasher

and sits down
to watch
the rest of the night go by. *Everything*, she says to herself

as darkness turns
to red fog along the hall,
Everything we can think of to fend off decay just warms the pearls.

XVII. *Weaponry*

Weaponry is her subject
on Monday
when the girl flashes into the seminar 20 minutes late and sits

on the left.
Out the side
of her eye she can see she is white-faced, uncombed,

shirt half tucked
in and half out.
She continues to speak about hoplite armour of the 7th century BC.

The class
is sleepy.
They are reading a poem of Alkaios about a silent room.

Plumes nod mutely
from helmets
nailed to roof beams. Greaves hang brilliant and motionless

on pegs
along the wall.
Tunics and hollow shields are piled on the floor beside heaps

of breastplates
and belts and
Khalkidian swords. So says Alkaios. *Why is he telling us this?*

the woman asks.
No one
answers. Not a bee buzzes. Haunted old phrases

stare up at them
from the book.
What—she begins but the girl interrupts. *It's about a war*

not happening.
She turns.
Their eyes thwack in mid air. *That's right,*

the woman says.
Nothing is happening.
The bell rings. She leaves the room without looking back.

XVIII. *Desire*

Desire historically
is not a choice.
A girl, a deer, a woman, ropes—all day Thursday she

sits grading
midterm exams
(girl failed) and observing desire's ropes within her,

what frail
strips
they are, just strikings of light really. Girl will never know

this half-life
they lived
together in the complicated lake. By the irony of the lake

every rope doubles.
Every love halves.
But the woman is aware of a cold rusty smell. She is

tightening
the ropes
herself. This girl is already stale in her. And what feels wrong

now, as she
looks at it,
is the shamelessly *general* nature of desire. It blows

through the body
like a sunset wind.
Slant and childlike errors (for example, this girl)

reveal themselves,
but the immensity
of the wind does not abate, nor our sense of bending to it

as roots
bend
in the dark underground, blindly and heavily

toward some
smell of light
that drops down matter—who can claim to have chosen love?

XIX. *Counterlight*

Counterlight is
flooding the room
when the woman arrives on Friday. A note is stuck

under her door.
From some
student who says she can't come

to the seminar
today *But at 5 PM*
I would like to see you scrawled on a page torn out of

Der Spiegel
showing
Ingeborg Bachmann playing chess. The woman studies

Ingeborg
Bachmann
whose wonderful clear gaze falls straight down on

the little knight
at the centre
of her gameboard. Whose shiny bangs are those of a 9-year-old girl

swept by hand
to the left.
Whose smile is immortal. Due to strengthening thoughts of

Ingeborg
Bachmann's
bangs, the woman is able to conduct an allusive and slightly

sarcastic seminar
at top speed on
fragment 286 of Ibykos. She discourses

calmly on male desire
and female
desire, the difference. Ibykos describes a springtime garden

of watered boughs
and uncut girls.
Time holds them deep in its amorous pinch, soaked buds

of pure use
as female
clockwork goes. But what is this black thing that comes

parching
down
like lightning out of a north wind from Thrace: Eros has

neither season
nor reason (so
Ibykos claims) in a man's life. Male desire is gears gone mad

Anywhere
Anytime
without warning or water it shatters his lungs.

"Lungs"
stands
in manly exposure as the last word of the poem. The woman gives

a short
summary
of ancient respiratory theory, avoiding the gaze

of the girl
who today
is seated directly across the table from her, wearing

a new
silver
earring. *Thank you*, she says after the girl translates

a Greek phrase
with extreme
vulgarity, making the others laugh. At the bell

the girl leaves
abruptly.
She packs up her books as the room empties. Farcical,

she thinks,
is the life
of desire and yet—access to the human may be rare enough

to justify
it, overall.
She sits down and leans her head on the table and starts to laugh.

At any rate
it is good
to exercise the lungs from time to time. Is it not Sappho who says:

*not decay nor rust
nor shadow
not winds nor fear
nor failure of winds
not silence
nor sleep not betrayal
can pull my heart away
from praising
the beautiful thing that love was
when love was the world*

Late and deep
the woman goes
back down the hall. Inside her office the light is stopped silver,

old ice of April
unlacing its fast. She turns,
hearing the bell ring 5 o'clock. Comes a knock at the door.

Anne Carson
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³⁶⁷ [Anne Carson, "Irony Is Not Enough: Essay on My Life as Catherine Deneuve," *Seneca Review*](#)