

# **Social Media Poems 2019**

## **Simeon Berry**

### **Contents**

A Vision for the Coming Year (Joanna Penn Cooper) .....	1
Triage (Adrian Blevins) .....	3
In Praise of Wax (Landon Godfrey) .....	4
August (Sandra Beasley).....	5
Oracle for the Violin's Daughter (Erica Wright) .....	6
In the Dream (Jenny Johnson) .....	7
Our Lady of the Hair Cattery (B.K. Fischer).....	9
Kowalski: A Historiography (Sean Thomas Dougherty).....	10
The Cartoonist in Hell (Paul Guest).....	11
A Simple Lesson on the Buried Spirit (Lisa Olstein) .....	12
Writing Poetry Is Like Fielding Ground Balls (Tara Skurtu) .....	13
Tongs (Gregory Lawless) .....	14
"Since I Fell For You": A Deposition (Ed Pavlič).....	15
Late Twentieth Century in the Form of Litany (Justin Bigos).....	17
from "Brahms's Requiem" (Joel Long).....	19
Fish & Duck Skills (Metta Sáma).....	20
Annie Oakley Misses the Kaiser (Robert Archambeau).....	21
breadcrumbs (Jamie Mortara) .....	22
Winter Stars (Larry Levis).....	24
from "Terroir" (Jon D. Lee).....	26
Red Wreck Learns Through Secondhand Experience (Jenny Irish) .....	27
Rewinding an Overdose on a Projector (Sean Shearer).....	28
Seven Minutes in Heaven (Melissa Stein) .....	29
When You Told Me Your Father Was Dying (Aaron Smith).....	30
Tracking Shot (Marc McKee) .....	31
Iceland (Dorianne Laux) .....	32
The Thirty-Years Minor Skirmish (Jim Daniels).....	34
Bertolt Brecht in Eternity (Adam Zagajewski) .....	37
In the Graveyard of Fallen Monuments (Rachel Loden) .....	38
from "On Tour with Rita" (Nicholas Christopher) .....	39
from "Interlude: A Real Life Fiction" (Julie Carr) .....	40
Slight (Elaine Equi).....	41

Origins of Violence (Jenny George) .....	42
A History of Something (Arda Collins) .....	43
38 (Layli Long Soldier) .....	45
On Dissonance (Virginia Konchan) .....	50
After the Poet From Kentucky Tells Me My Poems Are Not Considerate to Their Audience I Try to Teach Him What I Know About Etiquette (Kendra DeColo) .....	51
The Small Husband (Heather Christle) .....	52
from <i>Baby, I don't care</i> (Chelsey Minnis) .....	53
People, the ghosts down in North-of-the-South aren't see-through (Diane Seuss) .....	54
from "Territory" (JD Scrimgeour) .....	55
Day 5 (Meghan Privitello) .....	59
Dangerous for Girls (Connie Voisine) .....	60
Shooting Range (Erin Belieu) .....	62
Dear Fire (Laura Kasischke) .....	63
Breach Year (Mary Biddinger) .....	65
Let's Live in the Books of My Childhood (Catherine Pierce) .....	66
Layover (Kristin Bock) .....	67
The Illusion of Choice (Kate Hancock) .....	68
from "The Canal Diaries" (Maggie Nelson) .....	69
Where We Feel It The Most (David Daniel) .....	70
Who Were Frederick Douglass's Cousins, and Other Quotidian Black History Facts That I Wish I Learned in School (Morgan Parker) .....	71
Accursed Questions, i (Catherine Barnett) .....	72
American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin (Terrance Hayes) .....	75
Poetry Machines (Cate Marvin) .....	76
Someone's Utopia: Love as a Fountain (Joe Hall) .....	77
The Body in Pain (Jillian Weise) .....	78
Which makes me, I guess, the muddy Colorado (Patrick Donnelly) .....	81
from "Neonatology" (Elizabeth Alexander) .....	82
from <i>Julia the Astonishing</i> (Julia Story) .....	83
from "At the White Quay" (Monica Ferrell) .....	85
Between the Tongue and the Warm Salt (Alicia Jo Rabins) .....	86
from "The Lumberjack's Dove" (GennaRose Nethercott) .....	87
What Was Left of the Angel (Victoria Redel) .....	89
Etymology of butch (Kristin Chang) .....	91
from "Dear Miss Hamilton," (Michael Martone) .....	93
Ultrasound (sam sax) .....	94

Many Hats (Lena Khalaf Tuffaha).....	95
Romeo Collision (Lisa Coffman).....	96
from <i>I'm So Fine</i> (Khadijah Queen) .....	99
Tattler (Hala Alyan).....	100
The Poem of Fountains (Rodney Jones) .....	102
Folding Chairs (Paige Ackerson-Kiely).....	105
The River of Bees (W.S. Merwin) .....	106
John the Conqueror (David Kirby) .....	107
The Gods at Three A.M. (Reginald Shepherd) .....	109
<i>Our Completion: Oil On Wood: Tino Rodriguez: 1999</i> (Eduardo C. Corral) .....	110
Cardinal (Victoria Chang).....	111
Medium/Message (Erika Meitner) .....	112
The New Sincerity (Karyna McGlynn).....	114
'Round Midnight (Kim Addonizio) .....	115
Dorothy Wordsworth (Jennifer Chang) .....	116
South Belknap (Steven Cramer) .....	117
Movie Night (Sarah Rose Nordgren) .....	118
Mine Is the First Rodeo, Mine Is the Last Accolade (Jaswinder Bolina) .....	119
How We Respond Is What It Means (Marc McKee).....	120
Alphabet Street (Randall Mann) .....	121
Mental Health (Kai Carlson-Wee) .....	122
Black Umbrella (Sarah Galvin).....	124
Mary Donner (Salem Dockery).....	125
Sagittarius (Hannah Stephenson) .....	126
Clinic (Marni Ludwig) .....	127
from <i>On Imagination</i> (Mary Ruefle) .....	128
Here I am, (Martha Silano) .....	129
Donor (Wind) (Hadara Bar-Nadav) .....	130
Untitled (Imagine) (Paul-Victor Winters).....	131
Note (Angie Estes).....	132
Rounds (Eileen Cleary).....	134
from <i>What You Have Heard is True</i> (Carolyn Forché).....	135
craft (Quan Barry).....	136
Ringling (Joe Fletcher).....	139
Sex Dream with Transit Warning (Terri Witek) .....	140
Excursion Susan Sontag (Maureen N. McLane).....	141

It Is To Have Or Nothing (Olena Kalytiak Davis).....	144
Cinema Verité: The Death of Alfred, Lord Tennyson (Tom Andrews).....	147
Mistrust of Bronze (Jack Gilbert) .....	148
Alliance (Patricia Smith).....	149
You Really Killed That '80s Love Song (Analicia Sotelo) .....	151
Lullaby for a Good Friday (Jill Alexander Essbaum).....	152
Barista (Emilia Phillips).....	153
We'll Fix It in Post (Rebecca Hazelton) .....	156
Pedagogy (Bob Hicok).....	157
Pope Joan on Film (Dana Curtis).....	159
Gentrification (Tiana Clark) .....	160
The Order of Things (Matthew Dickman) .....	163
And This is Rare (Libby Burton) .....	164
Asphyxia (Brad Trumpfheller).....	165
Skin on a Dime (Eleni Sikelianos).....	166
The Green Word (Bianca Stone).....	167
September 10, 2016 (Rachel Mennies) .....	169
“And now brightness falls from the air...” (Kathryn Nuernberger) .....	170
[ Death’s Dictionary ] (Kevin Young) .....	172
Baby Grand (Kateri Lanthier) .....	174
from “What It Means to Be Avant Garde” (Anna Moschovakis).....	175
solstice poem: somerville, massachusetts (Cassandra de Alba).....	176
Invocation: The Third and Fourth Generation of Them That Hate Me (Natalie Shapero) .....	177
from “Natural History” (Dan Chiasson) .....	178
Yes (Carrie Fountain) .....	179
For and After Federico García Lorca (Sara Lefysk) .....	180
Science Fiction: A Love Poem (Erin Hoover) .....	181
The Discount Megamall (in memorial) (Eve L. Ewing) .....	183
Ode to Men of the Service Industry (Christine Gosnay).....	184
Self-Portrait as Banshee (Erin Adair-Hodges).....	185
Verbatim (Ed Pavlic) .....	186
The Cuckoo Cry (Chen Chen) .....	187
from “Study for Love’s Body” (Katherine Larson) .....	188
Life, with Eyeliner (Kathy Fagan) .....	189
Exam (Kelli Russell Agodon) .....	190
[Margaret Sanger did the first one, I was awake and felt terribly sorry] (Diane Seuss) .....	191

Deception Story (Solmaz Sharif) .....	192
The Dream of the Red Drink (Barbara Hamby) .....	193
Bermuda Triangle (Joel Long).....	196
Jesus Wasn't a Refugee. He Just Wanted to Pay His Taxes (Martin Ott).....	197
The Adulterer (Kevin Prufer).....	198
Transcript (Angie Estes) .....	201
Gathering Firewood on Tinpan (Anders Carlson-Wee).....	202
Affect Theory (Joanna Penn Cooper) .....	203
The Doctor Told Me the Shots Would Make Me Spin Silk (Oliver Bendorf).....	204
The Crystal Lithium (Aaron Smith).....	205
Little Gals (Kiki Petrosino).....	206
Wrestling Season (Sean Shearer).....	208
Compositions in Grey and Grey (Landon Godfrey) .....	209
The Good Life (Justin Bigos).....	210
Fireproof (Sandra Beasley).....	211
Instant Courage (Mary Biddinger).....	212
The People's Republic of Sleepless Nights (Robert Archambeau).....	213
Day 7 (Meghan Privitello) .....	214
Losing It (B.K. Fischer) .....	215
Rain, Gas, Boone County, West Virginia (Sean Thomas Dougherty).....	216
Sammy Davis Jr. (Morgan Parker) .....	219
Mortuary Man (Erica Wright).....	220
Audio Commentary Track 2 (Paul Guest) .....	221
from "Rag" (Julie Carr) .....	223
State Fair (Gregory Lawless) .....	224
American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin (Terrance Hayes).....	225
Red Wreck's Sexual Education (Jenny Irish) .....	226
Oh, the Water (Dorianne Laux) .....	227
Wayward Girl (Erin Belieu).....	228
#2, Parking Lot, Ford Sterling Plant (Jim Daniels).....	229
Orange (Elizabeth Alexander) .....	230
Dear Lonely Animal, (Oni Buchanan).....	231
Blues for the Evil Empire (Rachel Loden).....	233
The Great Physician (Virginia Konchan).....	234
Paper Crown (Heather Christle).....	235
Red Lemons (Sean Shearer).....	237

Self-Portrait Beside a Dead Chestnut Horse (Oliver de la Paz).....	238
from “Restaurant Art” (Elaine Equi) .....	240
Notes Toward a History of Imperialism (Nicholas Christopher).....	241
After Seeing <i>The Misfits</i> (Kendra DeColo).....	243
Oklahoma (Hala Alyan).....	244
How She Forced Visions Upon Herself. (Julia Story) .....	245
Cheerios (Joe Pan) .....	246
Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (Eduardo C Corral) .....	248
from “The Bower” (Connie Voisine).....	249
Kitchen Song (Laura Kasischke) .....	250
In Which I Am Famous (Catherine Pierce) .....	251
from “A Montage of Brick and Water” (J.D. Scrimgeour).....	252
Binding Spell (Kristin Bock) .....	253
How Much (Victoria Chang) .....	254
The Sonnet (David Daniel) .....	256
Calamity Jane on Etsy after the 2016 Election (Catherine Barnett) .....	257
No, I Do Not Want to Connect with You on LinkedIn (Emily Skaja).....	259
The Middle Ages (Jennifer Chang).....	261
Late Moon (Robert Bly).....	263
Amnesia, 2000 / Dawn, Third Shift (Joe Hall) .....	264
The Old Questions (Jillian Weise) .....	266
Midwestern Wedding: Dream No. 4 (Kathleen Rooney).....	267
Ekphrasis, I Guess (Bradley Trumpfheller) .....	268
High School as a Dead Girl (Cate Marvin).....	269
My Mother Confessed I was Conceived to Ravel’s “Bolero” (Emilia Phillips) .....	270
Federal Scene (Jaswinder Bolina).....	272
Callas as Medea (Patrick Donnelly).....	273
The Magic (Alicia Jo Rabins) .....	274
Forever (Randall Mann).....	275
from “The Lumberjack’s Dove” (GennaRose Nethercott) .....	277
from “What Was On My Mind: Face to Facebook with My Mother’s Death, July 2012” (Michael Martone).....	278
The Small Town (Lisa Coffman) .....	279
Laconia (Paige Ackerson-Kiely).....	280
Threat Assessment (Erika Meitner) .....	281
loose strife (Quan Barry) .....	286
Review of Possible Signs and Symptoms (Kim Addonizio) .....	288

The Werewolf (David Kirby).....	289
Community College in the Rain (David Berman).....	292
The Girls I Grew Up with Were Hard (Karyna McGlynn) .....	293
Swallow (Donika Kelly) .....	294
American Freight (Kai Carlson-Wee).....	295
The Only Light Source Should Be a Scented Candle the Size of a Trash Can (Sarah Galvin) .....	303
My Hour with Jorie Graham (Martha Silano).....	304
Wet Specimens (Terri Witek) .....	306
Run Round and Round a Room (Hadara Bar-Nadav).....	307
from “Phys. Ed.” (Kevin Young).....	308
Au Revoir (Maureen N. McLane).....	310
At the Fernald School for the Feeble Minded (Eileen Cleary) .....	312
You Can Lead a Horse to Water. Repeat. (Judy Westhale).....	314
“The days that were have now” (Emilia Phillips).....	315
Summer Was Forever (Chen Chen).....	316
I’ll Try To Explain About the Fear (Jack Gilbert).....	317
I Animal You (Rebecca Hazelton).....	318
“Never Let Your Reader’s Attention Wander.” (Ron Koertge).....	319
Mess Hall (Solmaz Sharif).....	320
A poem in which I am dreaming (Kelly Forsythe) .....	321
from “Hybrida: A Zuihitsu” (Tina Chang) .....	322
The Big Chill (Laura Read) .....	323
Duplex (Jericho Brown).....	325
A Brief Topography of the MSCOG (Bianca Stone).....	326
Our Last Vacation (Keetje Kuipers) .....	328
This is Manifest (Kerri Webster) .....	329
When We Dead Awaken (Kathryn Nuernberger).....	330
Trailing Clouds of Glory (Vijay Seshadri) .....	332
The Tenor of Your Yes (Mary Ruefle) .....	333
For Max (Sarah Blake).....	334
from “Death as a Way of Life” (Anna Moschovakis).....	336
#0 earth (jasper avery) .....	339
I Don’t Sleep in White (Natalie Shapero).....	340
Terror Management Theory (Emma Bolden) .....	341
from “Epithalamion” (Lauren Clark).....	343
Please Use This Against Me (Jennifer Michael Hecht) .....	344

Confession (Kiki Petrosino).....	345
How to Find a Robber (Emily Pettit).....	346
Waitress (Sarah Freligh) .....	347
from “Dappled Things” (Jenny Johnson).....	348
Combustion (Sara Eliza Johnson).....	349
The Parable of the Talents (Carrie Fountain).....	350
Matt (Morgan Parker) .....	352
from “We Are Hopelessly Small and Modern Birds” (Sara Lefsyk).....	353
The Valkyrie (Erin Hoover).....	354
Mouth Full of White Flags, (Lauren Yarnall).....	356
Once (Jeni De La O) .....	358
Lookback (Erin Adair-Hodges) .....	360
Nat King Cole on the Amalfi Drive (Elizabeth Alexander).....	361
[How will I leave this life, like I left my job, drifting off without] (Diane Seuss) .....	362
Grandfather Outside (Katherine Larson) .....	363
Plastic Mirror (Christine Gosnay).....	365
Dune Primrose (Kelli Russell Agodon) .....	366
from <i>I’m So Fine</i> (Khadijah Queen) .....	368
In California (Kathy Fagan).....	369
Ode on My Sharp Tongue (Barbara Hamby).....	371
Hunger (Tara Skurtu).....	373
In the Kingdom of Shade and Silence (Marni Ludwig).....	375
Hexagenia Limbata (Kathryn Nuernberger) .....	376
Inventory (Oliver Bendorf) .....	378
Existential Kink (Joanna Penn Cooper) .....	380
Leviathan (Suzanne Gardinier) .....	381
It Doesn’t Matter Who You Are or What You Do, Something in this World Will Make a Fool of You (Emilia Phillips) .....	383
Truth (Hala Alyan).....	385
Landscape with Dialectical Materialism and Milk (Landon Godfrey) .....	386
The Panic of Birds (Olena Kalytiak Davis) .....	387
American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin (Terrance Hayes).....	388
Day 12 (Meghan Privitello) .....	389
(Litmus) (B.K. Fischer).....	391
Self-Portrait as Milk Hare in Active Shooter Alert (Traci Brimhall) .....	392
Giving It Back (Kevin Prufer) .....	393
Cousin Josh on Doomsday (Anders Carlson-Wee).....	395



Self-Portrait with a Schlitz, a Pickup, and the Snake River (Oliver de la Paz).....	396
Ars Poetica as Corporation and Canary (Victoria Chang).....	398
Here Follows an Account of the Nature of Birds (Dan Chiasson).....	400
Portrait of My Father as John Clare: “Skunk’s Nest” (Justin Bigos).....	401
Because the Moon Is a Cliché & Not Exactly Steadfast (Amy Dryansky).....	403
Red Wreck Watches PBS (Jenny Irish) .....	404
Music History (Aaron Smith) .....	405
The Tooth Fairy (Dorianne Laux).....	406
Premillennial Tristesse (Rachel Loden).....	407
Of the Poet’s Youth (Erin Belieu).....	408
Poem Made of East Sides (Sean Thomas Dougherty) .....	409
Sidewalk (Ruth Madievsky) .....	410
All My Darlings (Jaswinder Bolina).....	411
Paradise for Strangers (Gregory Lawless) .....	412
Dear Lonely Animal, (Oni Buchanan).....	413
Temple in a Teapot (Aquí Está el Detalle) (Eduardo C. Corral) .....	416
<i>How Meta is This?: An Essay</i> (Marc McKee) .....	418
Inaugural Poem (Paul Guest) .....	421
Heavy Light (Kelly Morse).....	424
Rorschach (Virginia Konchan) .....	426
The Retired Contortionist Inside You (Kendra DeColo).....	427
Posted Limits (Jim Daniels).....	429
Abandoned Landscapes (Randall Mann) .....	430
from “Marginalia” (Lisa Jarnot) .....	431
How She Was Saved. (Julia Story).....	432
from “De La Soul Is Dead” (Kevin Young) .....	433
Numbers (Ellen Doré Watson).....	434
Attar (Melissa Kwasny) .....	435
Manners (William Matthews) .....	436
Good Night (Rosa Alcalá) .....	438
On the Motion of Animals (Camille Rankine).....	439
The Presidential Debate (Victoria Redel) .....	440
And God Created Woman (Connie Voisine) .....	441
Dear Earth (Laura Kasischke).....	442
Adolescence (Catherine Pierce) .....	444
Hate Poem (Julie Sheehan) .....	445

Among Sorrows and Stones (Kristin Bock).....	446
Planet Theory (Tyree Daye).....	448
Accursed Questions, ii (Catherine Barnett) .....	449
1873 (Joe Hall).....	451
The Devotee (Jillian Weise).....	453
Brazilian Wedding: Dream No. 2 (Kathleen Rooney) .....	454
Hearing Loss (Bradley Trumpfheller).....	455
craft (Quan Barry).....	456
I'm in Room 927 (Michael Earl Craig).....	459
In Nabokov's Memory (Katia Kapovich) .....	461
Blood Moon (Patrick Donnelly) .....	462
from "I'm afraid the house we're in will explode—" (Joe Jimenez) .....	464
Urine Sample (Sean Shearer).....	465
In the Museum of the Nineteenth Century, the Lights Are Coming On (Corrina McClanahan Schroeder) .....	466
Sea of Japan (Zachary Schomburg) .....	467
Heaven and Its Atmosphere (Mary Biddinger).....	468
from "Heat Waves" (Cassie Donish) .....	469
Fast Skirt Blues (Honorée Fanonne Jeffers) .....	470
Simple Story of Illumination (Paige Ackerson-Kiely).....	471
Cathedral (Laura Read).....	472
Bourrée (Angie Estes).....	473
And Still We Gather with Infinite Momentum (Erika Meitner) .....	474
Calling Robert Bly (David Kirby) .....	476
Funding the Arts and Sciences (Heather Christle).....	478
A Brief History of Now and at Least a Good Elbow's Worth of Headroom (Ed Pavlić) .....	479
Vertigo from an Open Window Overlooking a Sodium Light (Nicholas Christopher).....	482
Freddy Krueger (Kai Carlson-Wee).....	484
Thoughts on Wisteria (Cate Marvin) .....	485
Cincinnati, 1947 (Ron Koertge).....	486
The Planet of Dandar (Lee Ann Roripaugh) .....	487
House of Stars (Diana Marie Delgado).....	488
In the Lonely Universe (Kim Addonizio) .....	489
When You Didn't Call (Martha Silano).....	490
The Sun Also Lonely (Hadara Bar-Nadav).....	491
Sword Fight (Cecily Iddings).....	492
Having Left (Tommy Pico).....	494

Bombshell (Sarah Galvin).....	495
Terrible things are happening... (Maureen N. McLane) .....	496
In Portuguese (Terri Witek).....	497
On a Late-Night Encounter with a Barefoot College Student Wearing Only a Party Dress and a Man's Blazer (Emilia Phillips).....	498
Seven Beds Six Cities Eight Weeks (Rachel Zucker).....	500

## A Vision for the Coming Year

I have in the past thought of becoming a professional fortune teller before it became very trendy to think that.

Instead, four days before Christmas, I float through Target, oracular, out of mind.

There are no nightgowns left. There are women's pajamas with a Gryffindor theme—velour romper with a necktie. I pause before these pajamas, then float on.

\*

Before winter break, my son is at school doing his “works.” He is armed with a clipboard and instructed to do one language work and one math work. He is four. He is pointed toward the letters and pictures, where he is to lay them out carefully and evenly on a mat and match beginning sounds. This is a task he knows how to do, but the C is missing and he refuses. Instead, he dumps the “work” on a friend's head and laughs. He comes home, where he reads Shel Silverstein poems to himself, refusing to look up. Later he reads a list of astronomy words aloud: dwarf star, Sirius, yellow star, black hole, neutron star, international space station. Supernova. I will call the school again.

\*

I am afraid my astronomer is doing too much. Astrologer, I meant to say. My astrologer may be doing too much. She may burn out. I pay a small fee for her new moon workshop, but by the time I look at it, the moon is very much waxing. I look at the PowerPoint slides about setting intentions for the new year. I am supposed to write down the following:

*This year, I have given up... I have given up... I have made room for...*

\*

My astronomer comes to the table to eat his bites of turkey and applesauce. He is too excited about gifts to sit still. Finally he sits on the edge of a chair so he can plant one foot firmly on the floor. He begins eating his roll. The astronomer's father hunches over to ask him to sit right in his chair, asks him if they have a problem. Glares. I want to dump “works” on his head. The astronomer gets up and wanders away. The glaring man harrumphs out. I make a gesture as if my head is exploding. The astronomer comes back to the table to finish his roll.

“You can put your brains back in your head,” says my mother. “It's over.”

“Askew,” I reply. “They are permanently askew.”

\*

As the new year approaches, I give myself a tarot reading—8 of wands—approaching news, arrows hitting their marks. *Allow them to hit the mark before they hit the mark*, I murmur to myself throughout the day. *Thwock thwock thwock thwock thwock*.

\*

I go see *Star Wars* with my mother and brother. Halfway through, my mother is restless and wants to leave, but my brother has seen it and tells her it gets better. (I'm remembering talking my grandmother into taking me to the first *Star Wars* when I was six, how she muttered through the entire movie.) I study Ben Solo intently. There must be some term for the draw of the wounded man-baby. Animal magnetism. Animus. Jung had an idea that women's psychic wholeness depends on integrating such fascination, as it was a projection of an unintegrated segment of the Self, how we're drawn to the Warrior-Athlete, the Poet, the Professor-Cleric, the Prophet.

I once got into an argument with the astronomer's father over who was the real artist between the two of us. I knew then it was over. It was nunh.

*This year, I have given up... I have given up... I have made room for...*

*Thwock.*

*Joanna Penn Cooper*

1

---

<sup>1</sup> [Joanna Penn Cooper](#), "[A Vision for the Coming Year](#)," [On the Seawall](#)

## Triage

Each time I fly I look a little longer out the window, so that's good, that's maybe upgraded depth perception, but who knows since I didn't take physics

on the Smoking Block as a girl in overalls in a Mustang at the fair  
sitting cross-legged in the back with a joint or a bottle or some other joy thing

illegal, alien, licked, fringed, and laced. It was Frank O'Hara. It was D.H. Lawrence.  
It was Lawrence Ferlinghetti in my purse with me trekking the sweet fodder.

It was not needlepoint. It was never Einstein. It may have been Darwin  
somewhere in the back of the little skull but more likely it was condoms.

More like it was a party in the hunting shack up on the parkway where we went to fuck  
because it was fucking because it was forgetting because it was rural America on drugs in the 70's

and not me or about me by any means but just another way of not dying on the spot  
as in a last ditch effort or a tryout or a rabbit hutch with a ragged hole to jump swift

and brutal out of—just a country way of being urban when all we really had  
was just a rope and a goat and a feral but ramshackle old heart, that sick antelope.

*Adrian Blevins*  
2

---

<sup>2</sup> [Adrian Blevins](#), "[Triage](#)," [Blood Orange Review](#)

## In Praise of Wax

Neither solid nor liquid,  
a transient,  
drinking a martini  
in the dining car of a train  
pitching slowly through a snowy pass,  
sun blazing in a postcard sky,  
the temperature not unfamiliar to a well-stamped passport,  
a temperature unable to deter  
a quiet prostitute from putting on  
her sparkling red shoes  
and tucking her secret  
between her legs before the mirror's  
blasé doppelganger,  
the fervent dusk outside her apartment asking  
*train station or cinema?*  
those red shoes like two ventricles impersonating maracas,  
anticipating the predictable heat  
of a well-worn routine,  
footsteps on stairs, key unlocking door,  
icy covers thrown back in an hourly room,  
the trick remembering his train ride  
and a cold olive plump on a cocktail napkin,  
shining green in a low angle of sun,  
like a clever frog that's escaped a heron's  
hungry science, the olive rolling  
as the train pulls into the station,  
the prostitute waiting there, no cinema tonight,  
the traveler thinking how sexy,  
how like an advertisement she looks  
with that cigarette smoke dry-icing around her breasts,  
but never speaking to her,  
continuing on to the hotel alone,  
stopping along the way in a church  
to light a candle—for her soul?  
for his? for mine? how can we know which?—  
none of us distinguished from another  
in prayer, transient.

Landon Godfrey<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Landon Godfrey, "[In Praise of Wax](#)," *Orbis*, collected in [Second-Skin Rhinestone-Spangled Nude Soufflé Chiffon Gown](#), Cider Press

## August

Sooner or later, the thing you value most will beg to be burned.  
*Trust me*, says the phoenix, *I'm immortal*. Watch your childhood  
home—how the wires fray, how the baseboards splinter to tinder.  
Your nights are split open by steam and the writhing of hoses.

Your sister learns to thicken gasoline with jelly, collects canisters;  
the man you love shares a mouthful of smoke with someone else.  
*Trust me*. Even Joan of Arc, age ten, tanned her arms as she tended  
the sheep. *I'm immortal*. Tomorrow will rise to a full boil but still

you'll strip down, lay out, you'll slick the thin oil over your chest.  
For six night before the city blazed Nero could not sleep, pacing  
the palace balcony. He fiddled to ease his nerves. *Pretty tune*,  
whispered Rome: lips licked with flame, mouth readying to sing.

Sandra Beasley  
4

---

<sup>4</sup> Sandra Beasley, "[August](#)," [Barrow Street](#), collected in [Theories of Falling](#), New Issues Press



## Oracle for the Violin's Daughter

In a basement cold enough  
to store meat, you assemble boxes.

Your fingers go numb,  
and you fumble each fold,

but still make origami  
from cardboard, imagine giraffes

in the backyard, stretching themselves  
into gutters to nuzzle at run-off.

You remind me of the girl  
who gathered oysters

until the tide took her away.  
You're that kind of deserter,

a master of moving, the envy  
of every knocked-up teenager,

every hounded spouse.  
Touring tabernacles a decade hence,

men will stare to the right  
of your right ear as if heaven

resides over a stranger's shoulder.  
They will speak of medicine

and its limits, how a child could  
survive amputation and soldering.

"What do prophets know and how?"  
they'll ask. You will say nothing

then describe the alchemy,  
how the story ends with pieces

of the body being tossed  
from a convenient window

*Erica Wright*  
5

---

<sup>5</sup> Erica Wright, "Oracle for the Violin's Daughter," [The Philadelphia Review of Books](#), collected in [All the Bayou Stories End with Drowned](#), Black Lawrence Press

## In the Dream

I was alone in a dyke bar we'd traversed before  
or maybe it was in a way all our dives

merging together suddenly as one intergalactic composite,  
one glitter-spritzed black hole,

one cue stick burnished down to a soft blue nub.  
Picture an open cluster of stars

managing to forever stabilize in space  
without a landlord scheming to shut the place down.

Anyways, I was searching for someone there  
whom we hadn't seen in years—in what

could have been Sisters, Babes, the Lex, the Pint,  
the Palms, or the E Room? but the room

had no end and no ceiling.  
Though I could see all of our friends or exes

with elbows up or fingers interlocked  
on table tops zinging with boomerangs.

Maybe the tables were spinning, too. I can't be sure.  
But just as a trap that trips before

hammering a mouse is not humane  
the dream changed—or the alarm

that I carry in my breast pocket in my waking life  
was sounding. Because in the dream,

three people on bar stools, who were straight  
or closeted? but more importantly angry

turned and the room dwindled  
like a sweater full of moths eating holes

through wool. Or they were humans, sure,  
but not here to love

with jawlines set to throw epithets like darts  
that might stick or nick or flutter past

as erratically as they were fired.  
You could say their hostility was a swirl

nebulous as gas and dust,  
diffuse as the stress

a body meticulously stores.  
Like how when I was shoved in grade school

on the blacktop in my boy jeans  
the teacher asked me if I had a strawberry

because the wound was fresh as jam, glistening  
like pulp does after the skin of a fruit is

peeled back clean with a knife.  
I was in the dream as open to the elements,

yet I fired back. And I didn't care who eyed me  
like warped metal to be pounded square.

I said: *Do you realize where you are?*

And with one finger I called our family forth  
and out of the strobe lights, they came.

*Jenny Johnson*  
6

---

<sup>6</sup> [Jenny Johnson](#), "[In the Dream](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected [In Full Velvet](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## Our Lady of the Hair Cattery

If you put an ear-piercing gun on the dash  
in the first act, it's going to go off  
in the car. For the record I only have two  
additional holes in myself besides  
the ones I was born with—I missed out  
on pierced noses and navels, tats.  
I was Keds, leggings, over-sized cable knits,  
Big Hair up-bangs, which was harder  
on some of us than others—mousy fine wisps

meant a curling iron crusted with hair  
spray and back-combed roots teased stiff  
with gum arable and damage, submission  
to the polymer burn of the perm—all for a fan  
rising from the forehead a few years  
past Farrah Faucet but indebted  
to the shoulder-padded ethic of gel.

Walk-ins only—I put my name on the pad,  
studied the bale of cotton batting used  
to wrap the face, scissors and combs in blue  
cylinders of disinfectant, salon products,  
pomades. Senior stylist Candi and a scarlet A.

Donna Callahan was the last woman  
in America to sit under a globe dryer paging  
through *People*. If she recognized me  
when I sat down in the chair and was lunched  
up three pumps, gowned and clipped  
with a paper bib, she didn't say so or smile.

Candi cleared her throat. Trim up  
the split ends, hon? No, I said, do a big chop.

Bob, pixie, wedge, I don't care what  
you call it. Take it off. Take it up to my ears.

*B.K. Fischer*

7

---

<sup>7</sup> B.K. Fischer, "[Our Lady of the Hair Cattery](#)," collected in [Radioapocrypha](#), Ohio State University Press

## Kowalski: A Historiography

A Polish paratrooper or pianist, grade-B movie director, Polka king—Kowalski the hip-hop artist crosses his arms on the peeling poster outside the Budapest Opera coffeehouse, bent-knuckled young intellectuals in metal-rimmed Kowalskish-gazing glasses scribble in furious Hungarian as I declaim Polish Hip Hop—O Kowalski Rhymes Krakow, crack or Post-Communist Angst? How do you emphasize *Ice cold* in Polish I ponder? The Danube's frozen waltzes, far from the Detroit River & Cobo Hall where the ghost of Killer Kowalski, the legendary wrestler grimaced—*Pimas Grimas* cry the posters for Kowalski the rapper whose syllables I mumble on the yellow subway, whole car graffiti like Bronx disciples splayed in bubble-lettered Hungarian. Graffiti scarred the crumbling facades of old stone SS headquarters. Peasant Kowalski fed the survivors outside the camps, trudged through the mud lifting the barely living. In Budapest our breath bloomed like Piotr Kowalski's silver spheres, 8 degrees by the Danube, we leaned into the razored wind my greatgrandmother struggled through—Perhaps a Kowalski knelt before Our Lady of Czestohowa in the Polish church, a sanctuary from the sleet icing the cobblestoned streets, trams silvering electric lines, teenagers in headphones, westernized Budapest the most modern city in the world in 1900—my great-grandmother wrestled sunlight into her shawl, waited to catch a glimpse of Bartok, rain like sequins across her shoulders. In Yonkers years later she watched the reels of war, pomaded horseman marching to die in ditches. My grandfather would reach to eat the rain. My son scripts bubble letters across his notebook, blue graffiti like on these Israeli teenagers outside the Dony Cathedral. Graffiti is style without speech here—without translation the tags on stone remain unspoken, lines without noise. I touch the marker on the subway seat—politics or profanity? One of my students in Detroit explained, graffitiing the title to his story, about his father drinking Pabst, screaming at Killer Kowalski in Windsor, those joinings when his father held his hand, graffiti of his father's blue-veined fist turned tender. Archeologists found Hebrew graffiti on stones from fourth-century Pest, Jewish centurions buried defending the walled city. The ancient rabbis uttered the psalms. Budapest where the dead speak the syntax of Torah, a graffiti of what could have been—now a backdrop for spy flicks, cold-war nostalgia. In the black-and-white reels the children board the trains. *The last of us will soon be gone*, Suzanne utters outside Saint Stephen's cathedral. *It began with the graffiti, the arrow crosses—I've never seen any of the films they've made these years. Nothing made of celluloid can explain—it is like the weather. How can one really describe snow to someone in the desert?* These fictions we survive. She sips her coffee, *Survivor*—name for a mindless television game, a bad pop song, what meaning remains? She: one of the last witnesses, a reel that will soon unravel. We searched Budapest for some evidence of Kowalski's CD, flipped the stacks, the blank-faced clerks. Bernard Kowalski directed *Attack of the Killer Leeches*, a grade-B classic, or Lech Kowalski: punk underground director, DOA, son of Auschwitz survivors. These gritty Polish-American scripts. In Budapest my great-grandmother worked for the revolution, Budapest before the wars, the red pamphlets, the Zionists. Ady's black stone figure turned Budapest toward the 20th century. Ady's Budapest of erotic alleyways, opium cafes, and yellow trains. *Someone should make a movie of this*. My greatgrandmother spooned pudding in the coffeehouse where we split a Dobos pastry, scribbled notes like rough graffiti sketches for whole car murals. We slept beside the hissing radiator, breath of Budapest graffitiing my hands with steam—*Think: the rain was still the rain back then—Can you feel your great-grandmother running to the market beneath a black umbrella?*—this rain of funeral roses, Budapest city of roses, raindampened ripped poster of Kowalski you tried to peel from the subway wall. We never found Kowalski in the city of broken hallelujahs, Kowalski's Eastern European scratch. Budapest, where I unburied the murdered past. Rewound the reel of what could be—unvarnished the black paint to reveal the graffiti: *Regina Moskowitz forever running through the city of cobblestoned psalms*.

Sean Thomas Dougherty

8

---

<sup>8</sup> Sean Thomas Dougherty, "Kowalski: A Historiography," *Cimarron Review*, collected in *Broken Hallelujahs*, BOA Editions, Ltd.

## The Cartoonist in Hell

Jonny Quest, no one remembers you. Sad,  
but I've asked. No one likes to dwell  
in the genial weather of befuddlement  
for very long so I change the subject  
better than any mercury-addled alchemist ever  
and say *my belt buckle is in retrograde*  
or *if only I could knit for you*  
*a sweater made of one spider's silk*  
*then you would consent.* But,  
it's a lonely light I hide like an injured  
thing. The rust-colored kids  
stampede like flame along cartoon gunpowder.  
That's their sky but not mine  
as they pelt the hanging hive  
with rocks, the bees' industrious drone  
spilling out. Tonight, maybe,  
I'll dream of each comb's cataract  
of honey. Or the red-haired  
girl I lost. Both amount to the same sick  
sweetness. Tonight, maybe,  
I'll tweeze her name  
from my life at last  
and to the clockface,  
irradiated and sickly,  
keeping count like a stunted child,  
I won't confess the clinical histories  
of the stars or admire  
the misknit bones of the denuded dawn.  
I drew this on a map  
I never needed,  
I drew this vacant swirl of lines  
and later added eyes  
so that something might blink back for me.

*Paul Guest*

9

---

<sup>9</sup> Paul Guest, "The Cartoonist in Hell," *LIT*, collected in *Notes for My Body Double*, University of Nebraska Press

## A Simple Lesson on the Buried Spirit

This morning, Whistle, I overheard a man say on what could only be some kind of an audition, if you ask me do I believe in a power, yes, but it's not some old guy with his hand on the joystick and if you want to call that god, sure. The woman he was talking to nodded and said nothing and one day, Whistle, we will ask you what you believe, but this is a dirty trick because really all any of us has to believe in is what we've been taught. On a hilltop in Galilee a red heifer is guarded around the clock and her burnt-orange coat every day is parsed with a fine-toothed comb while several pairs of sanctified eyes scour the plains, the hills and valleys of her body searching for what they hope desperately never to find. Among my peers, there are parents who believe that the new generation, the one we're giving birth to, will arrive specially equipped to save us and Whistle, I sympathize, but this seems the dirtiest trick. We've lost the eyes of god, so don't look now but we're looking at you. I used to read mention of the poem in a poem as a self-aggrandizing gesture, but now I feel it as an admission of guilt. Every butterfly in this conservatory I escape to was raised by hand to die on the altar of our enjoyment or each lived a charmed and protected life in these hallowed halls, a perfect melting pot, an ideal microcosm under a protective dome as on the moon or Mars or wherever we may one day soon be heading. Today I stopped reading, Whistle, but I lingered to look at a picture of a full-grown Siberian tiger, three hundred and seventy-five pounds, bowing its head and placing the enormous pink palm of its paw to the tiny pink palm of a toddler pressed to a pane of zoo glass. Innocence to innocence, a benediction, forgiveness, a warning? It bowed its head and pressed its paw and rubbed its cheek against the glass in front of the little girl's face before turning away, an animal in some places believed to be son of the same mother as man, in some places worshipped as a god, an animal smart enough to hunt us not for meat but for vengeance, Whistle, if given the chance.

*Lisa Olstein*

10

---

<sup>10</sup> [Lisa Olstein](#), "[A Simple Lesson on the Buried Spirit](#)," collected in [Late Empire](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Writing Poetry Is Like Fielding Ground Balls

Someone is smoking in the lavatory  
and one of the flight attendants says  
*shit* and she gets on the mic and says  
*whoever this is will be prosecuted*  
*to the fullest extent of the law*  
*upon landing* while I'm writing  
*I hate ballpoint pens*  
with a ballpoint pen because  
they don't spray my period-brown  
ink all over the white designer jeans  
of the gorgeous Miami woman  
to my right—which was how I learned  
not to write poems in a metal box  
in the sky with a 1930s Sheaffer  
fountain pen—and I was the one  
waiting at the lavatory door  
when we all smelled the smoke  
and didn't know what to do and I'd  
already been between two bombs  
at a bombing, so after being ordered  
back to my seat with a full bladder  
of wine, I order a whiskey, and this  
turns the Romanian flight attendant on,  
who winks and gives me nuts and olives  
on the house, and by now I know  
again we aren't about to explode  
this time, and swallow my nip  
and eat my snacks and continue,  
with this ballpoint pen I hate,  
working on what will, nineteen days  
short of two years from now, become  
a poem, and we land in Bucharest  
and everyone but me claps in perfect  
post-communist unison and  
the smoking man gets away with it.

Tara Skurtu

11

---

<sup>11</sup> Tara Skurtu, "[Writing Poetry Is Like Fielding Ground Balls](#)," [AGNI](#)



## Tongs

I was burning  
a bin of scrap wood  
by the porcupine-  
killed evergreen  
in early spring. The final cones  
and needles fell  
on his red seat and tail  
tracks in the snow. I blew through  
my hands like a password  
into fog, then shook a bucket  
of coals back  
to the house, tossing  
in a wood rat's nest  
and some trash  
from the woods  
as I went. The fire  
was for my wife  
who had a spare barrel  
of hardwood she  
didn't want to waste.  
I brought her fire  
even though we fought.  
It's hard to burn  
the last thing  
but she did it  
with a pair of gloves  
and tongs that hissed  
if you spit  
on the tips. Spitting's  
just kissing from far  
away, she said, half gone  
with wine. By then  
it was maybe  
warm enough for bed.

*Gregory Lawless*

12

---

<sup>12</sup> [Gregory Lawless](#), "[Tongs](#)," [Cimarron Review](#), collected in [Far Away](#), [Red Mountain Press](#)

## “Since I Fell For You”: A Deposition

was the night I dreamt it rained feathers  
from Vesuvius & a hawk crashed  
the window & swept a mouse from the floor  
it was Drop Dead Fred on hollow bones  
behind Hollywood Paul's trumpet  
under glass Dish Dirty on broken broom  
& bootlegged poppies back before August  
prayed into the airshaft for a last breath  
thru the bars twelve choruses with a blade

under his tongue when the spit valve gave

him away one of those night's should  
have ended before it began I played upright  
between sets faced the wall & tore paper  
lips from the keys took a break out back  
& fed another ten-dollar fillet to Hole Card's  
Siamese blood & mud Dobermans  
that dogs fuck me up joined at the nuts  
& a big blind eye in the middle  
of its heads swear those dog do everything but sleep

at the same time anyway yep I saw them

kick old Hole Card down the back steps gave  
him a choice take the first swing or mine  
gold dust in a sewer trench play church bells  
with one of the dog's ankle bone or get up off  
some of that time he owed the county  
graveyard figure he held his breath  
long as he could before he gave in to the fire pit  
behind his eyes that first right cut the air  
like a switch either I heard it land or someone threw

a sack of dinner plates in the street

ever heard laughter hit a man right  
between the eyes an icicle in one ear lightning  
out the other that's the sound rather be  
caught by The Rain under the trestle  
pockets emptied five keys from different motels  
& a stranger's wallet on a cruiser's  
hood better kick your own heart down  
in the ditch with nothing in your ear  
but the sound of the sky hung up by its hind

hoof someone's shadow broke a window

& rats left prints in the Hole sang "Scarecrow  
Blues" to the back of a burnt silver  
spoon "fish eye closed & a bag full of glass  
mystery scent & the first'll be last pop the steel  
one out & a whiskey colored tongue smash  
the bottomless bottle don't want to been  
where I'm from" flashed a g-flat  
harmonica & called that dogs home said he stole it  
fair & square said they told him they'd double

the money if he lived to spend his half

*Ed Pavlič*

13

---

<sup>13</sup> Ed Pavlič, "[Since I Fell For You': A Deposition](#)," [The Cortland Review](#), collected in [Live at the Bitter End](#), Saturnalia Books

## Late Twentieth Century in the Form of Litany

The box spring smoldered in the dumpster the first time I died.  
My father tore tissue into tissue tiny as drops of blood the first time I died.  
I pushed the movie theater's back metal door out into the sunlight the first time I died.

There was the hissing mouth of the Canada Goose inches from mine the first time I died.  
There was the marsh of cattails and rain and gnats and horseflies and mist the first time I died.  
A bucket of bluefish—baby snappers—drowning on the warped wooden dock the first time I died.

I wanted to say he can't hurt us now the first time I died.  
I helped her roll pink plastic tubes into her long bleached hair the first time I died.  
Her eyes less brown than brown with flecks of green and amber and cheap clover honey if you look really close right before the first time you die.

She wanted to say he's far, far away the first time we died.  
In the summer the box fan melted on the windowsill until we died.  
In the winter the gas man came and we had no money and hid in the closet and she lit another cigarette and blew the smoke through the slats in the door until he died.

We slept in the car with the motor running and the heat at full blast the first time she died.  
She took her kids to the eighteenth floor of the housing project where another nurse's aide lived and where he'd never think to look for us and she died.  
She opened the oven door before sunrise and we sat before it rubbing our hands near the blue flickering flame until it died.

Neil Sedaka on eight-track tape the first time I died.  
Neil Diamond on eight-track tape the first time I died.  
We slept in the car and she lit a cigarette and thunder only happens when it's raining because no one admits it when they're only pretending to sleep.

I ate Reese's Pieces and a boy and his alien flew on a bike across the moon the first time I died.  
I ate Charlie Chans and watched a man run and run on the beach toward Paris, France, or maybe it was Jerusalem, the first time I died.  
She held my hand in the dark and a man named Rambo oiled his gun like each muscle of his body the first time I died.

My father picked me up in a car he called a Gremlin the first time I died.  
My father pulled up slow in a small limousine and I wondered why we never see baby pigeons the first time I died.  
The judge revoked custody is what I heard her say and I wondered if he could fit a small flock of Canada Geese in his limousine or if they would die.

Ronald Reagan shot in the armpit the first time he died.  
Travis Bickle mohawked and mugging for the mirror the first time he died.  
Mark David Chapman caressing the signature on John and Yoko's *Double Fantasy* and why did rat poison look like candy?

It was a hearse not a limousine my mother told me and she didn't know where he got such crazy ideas. She didn't know the story of the boy who hid in the coat rack at Sears and who was beaten for nineteen minutes until someone called the police. She didn't know and then she did

and when my father died years later, he refused: the chemo, the radiation, the nurse, the doctors, the orderlies, the turkey and peas, the white walls and white curtains, and his brother, I have heard, massaged his feet and read dogeared passages of scripture on sheets of paper thin as my father's eyelids.

I didn't see it coming, the gray waves of the Atlantic rushing toward me, inside me, the undertow, then after blackness my father's proud arms around his boy who he had just taught to swim, even if it nearly killed him.

The first time I died I looked out from the tower at my city beneath me and could swear there was no way it could nearly fit inside both my palms.

When I died I heard your cry, I swear I did, my child, and I went to the windows of whatever we were lucky enough to dwell inside, and opened them, one at a time, and waited for the light that comes slowly, more slowly than we have been told, but comes.

*Justin Bigos*

14

---

<sup>14</sup> Justin Bigos, "[Late Twentieth Century in the Form of Litany](#)," [Tupelo Quarterly](#), collected in [Mad River](#), Gold Wake Press

from "Brahms's Requiem"

*Blessed are the dead...*

Out on the grass the light was yellow,  
the dogs barked like taxi cabs,  
and Elvis got down on one knee,  
while in their tuxes, the masters of ceremony  
from the animal shelter benefit looked on,  
grinning. Elvis with his belt buckle  
and plastic jewels, knelt down on stage,  
moaned like the king of the dead,  
his brown hair dyed black. "The sideburns  
are real baby. They're real like everything else."

He held out his red cape. Viva Las Vegas.  
Viva Elvis. No lights and the sun was going down.  
I looked up from the drums and saw the mountains  
through the trees, through the crowd of twelve.  
The peaks loomed into the late hour of twilight  
like granite clocks, like strings through the forehead  
and out the back, like a string of absolute gold,  
original cold, steadying itself in my throat, steel  
willing to support the air but instead  
is the skeletal structure for the seconds. Elvis unclear,  
Elvis dead but duplicated like a duck call,  
like Will Rogers at the cultural center,  
like Aunt Madeline's cubism, like the only thing  
we have that can remain is a wasp nest,  
a storm of gray paper filled with what it's made of.  
Elvis said, "Uh huh." Elvis said, "Well."  
A terrier barked on a leash. The living have it all.

Joel Long  
15

---

<sup>15</sup> Joel Long, "Brahms' Requiem," collected in [Winged Insects](#), [White Pine Press](#)

## Fish & Duck Skills

Sometimes it pays to go to Bojangles. To drive out of the parking lot, see the red awning: Fish & Duck Skills. A man walks out and it is broad daylight. Back when I was a new adult in Chattanooga I'd dare myself to go to the Adult Book Shop on Market Street in the daytime or to the gasoline station that my parents frequented, the one close to our old house, where pornography was stored in plastic. Back then I only dreamt in violence. & living was an act of deliberate volatility. Likely, I could trace it all back to Vaughn who laughed in my face when I told him I'd been molested that this was the reason having sex with boys was an act of self-hatred, how Vaughn shared not his story of sexual assault, but my story, with any Tyner Junior High teen willing to listen. So much was going on back then: the little race riots between us & Ooltewah, the White gay guy who thought he was Prince and was terrified of being found out that he wasn't Prince & that he was gay, the boys who would store their guns in our lockers, my girl friends and I pretending we were gay, kissing each other in the hallway, on the lips, in front of the teachers, because designer clothes were expensive and scandal was free. I didn't bother telling anyone that I was queer and that just about every single day I didn't wish I was White, I just wished that White people weren't. But I fished for the Whitest voice and duck tailed my hair knowing that one day no one would remember that I put a gun in my locker, that I kissed Deidre on her lips, that I sang "the freaks go out at night" at the top of my lungs & thrust my hips to "Candy" on my way to the pep rally. No, what people would remember was that I was Black. The end.

*Metta Sáma*

16

---

<sup>16</sup> [Metta Sáma](#), "[Fish & Duck Skills](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#)

## Annie Oakley Misses the Kaiser

and what if she didn't?

In a clover field somewhere in September in a war  
a corporal finds three cigars and a master plan for all the south—  
Lee's team of victory—left by a dreaming young officer dreaming of  
peace and what if he didn't? Wilkes Booth in the wings steels his nerve,  
waits for the cue, and the curtain drops before the play begins. *Exeunt*.  
Annie Oakley misses the Kaiser.

Annie Oakley misses the Kaiser, who pulled,  
from the gold case, his cigar, waved off the police. In a clover field somewhere  
Wilkes Booth dreams at peace, the great Khan's son is dead—  
brilliant, drunk, humane and dead, back in twelve-hundred forty two,  
and armies flee unravaged Vienna to attend his funeral and  
what if they didn't? At the Wild West Show, wild applause.

Annie Oakley sweats in her buckskins when the Kaiser rises  
from the grandstand before the planted volunteer. Wilkes Booth sails  
for sweet Vienna, strides on the quarterdeck, lights his cigar. *Lusitania*  
painted on the prow, the torpedo-trail foams white and far to stern  
and what if and what if and what if it didn't?

The train pulls in at Finland Station, risen  
from the troubled dream of final peace the bearded man  
in London dreams, his child's hungry crying curbs his sleep,  
he dozes at his desk, cigar ash down his jacket-front, dreams  
the dialectic, inevitable peace, nowhere to go but freedom,  
nothing to lose but nothing to lose but what if he didn't dream what if he didn't?

Annie Oakley misses the Kaiser, blasts the cigar from his clenched teeth.  
Her sweet relief to wild applause. Writes, in 1914,  
“may I take a second shot?”

Robert Archambeau

17

---

<sup>17</sup> Robert Archambeau, “Annie Oakley Misses the Kaiser,” collected in *Home and Variations*, Salt Publishing



## breadcrumbs

1.

you experience the sudden realization that you are alone  
a drunk person is told he can stay as long as he keeps his head above the bar  
a TV show features this married couple that fights way too often  
each time they fight one of them says something funny  
they laugh at the funny thing  
they kiss and make up  
you sleep with the lights on

2.

you have this horrible gut feeling that Something Terrible is about to happen  
a medicine is being marketed for Rheumatoid Arthritis in one TV commercial  
and for Crohn's Disease in another commercial  
you purchase a lavender-scented can of Raid\*

3.

Hansel and Gretel left breadcrumbs behind thinking: *Foolproof*  
you imagine yourself eating the breadcrumbs as they hit the ground  
you are crawling along the forest floor eating the breadcrumbs  
some old couple on TV is finally understanding  
the life-changing effects of the Swiffer Sweeper\*

4.

in this other commercial a cartoon lady realizes she needs a new prescription  
that will make this old prescription actually do its job  
you wish for a prescription that would make you actually do your job  
you try to remember the first time you said *i'm sorry*  
when you should have said *fuck you. you hurt me.*

5.

you are touching your bottom lip at the exact point where it meets normal skin  
you look at a pile of laundry and your entire brain turns into needles  
your best friend walks you through basic chores  
like doing the dishes or feeding your body  
it feels like your friend is more like a hired "fixer" kept on retainer for real-bad fuck-ups  
you feel like you are a Real-Bad Fuck-Up

6.

you sob on the phone to the Red Cross  
you beg them not to call anymore  
your blood is just too dirty now  
you swallow a beer without noticing the brand

7.

a little girl cradled in her father's arms points directly at you and says *what's that*  
the father whispers to the little girl and says *um, that's... a man.*  
he folds his hand over her pointed finger to hide the shame

8.

a stranger at a bar tells another stranger

*i don't get it and i don't give a shit.*

you take an empty bottle from their table and start chewing on the glass

you tell the strangers a little story about how

*Forgive and Forget*

got lost in the forest a long long time ago.

you tell them how you cooked and ate those two words whole

*Jamie Mortara*

18

---

<sup>18</sup> [Jamie Mortara](#), "[breadcrumbs](#)," [Ampersand Review](#), collected in [GOOD MORNING AMERICA I AM HUNGRY AND ON FIRE](#), [YesYes Books](#)

## Winter Stars

My father once broke a man's hand  
Over the exhaust pipe of a John Deere tractor. The man,  
Rubén Vásquez, wanted to kill his own father  
With a sharpened fruit knife, & he held  
The curved tip of it, lightly, between his first  
Two fingers, so it could slash  
Horizontally, & with surprising grace,  
Across a throat. It was like a glinting beak in a hand,  
And, for a moment, the light held still  
On those vines. When it was over,  
My father simply went in & ate lunch, & then, as always,  
Lay alone in the dark, listening to music.  
He never mentioned it.

I never understood how anyone could risk his life,  
Then listen to Vivaldi.

Sometimes, I go out into this yard at night,  
And stare through the wet branches of an oak  
In winter, & realize I am looking at the stars  
Again. A thin haze of them, shining  
And persisting.

It used to make me feel lighter, looking up at them.  
In California, that light was closer.  
In a California no one will ever see again,  
My father is beginning to die. Something  
Inside him is slowly taking back  
Every word it ever gave him.  
Now, if we try to talk, I watch my father  
Search for a lost syllable as if it might  
Solve everything, & though he can't remember, now,  
The word for it, he is ashamed....  
If you can think of the mind as a place continually  
Visited, a whole city placed behind  
The eyes, & shining, I can imagine, now, its end—  
As when the lights go off, one by one,  
In a hotel at night, until at last  
All of the travelers will be asleep, or until  
Even the thin glow from the lobby is a kind  
Of sleep; & while the woman behind the desk  
Is applying more lacquer to her nails,  
You can almost believe that the elevator,  
As it ascends, must open upon starlight.

I stand out on the street, & do not go in.  
That was our agreement, at my birth.

And for years I believed  
That what went unsaid between us became empty,  
And pure, like starlight, & that it persisted.

I got it all wrong.  
I wound up believing in words the way a scientist  
Believes in carbon, after death.

Tonight, I'm talking to you, father, although  
It is quiet here in the Midwest, where a small wind,  
The size of a wrist, wakes the cold again—  
Which may be all that's left of you & me.

When I left home at seventeen, I left for good.

That pale haze of stars goes on & on,  
Like laughter that has found a final, silent shape  
On a black sky. It means everything  
It cannot say. Look, it's empty out there, & cold.  
Cold enough to reconcile  
Even a father, even a son.

*Larry Levis*  
19

---

<sup>19</sup> [Larry Levis](#), "[Winter Stars](#)," [Blackbird](#), collected in [Winter Stars](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

from “Terroir”

V

Leningrad starved for 900 days until the Germans retreated. Citizens ate bread made from sawdust, shoved away shrapnel to suck water from shell-holes. Families boiled their dogs and cats; single mothers were rumored to have cannibalized their young. 100,000 a month simply fell as they walked, and lined the streets with mounds of snow and dust. & through this a group of botanists walked daily to a secret vault where, before the war, they’d assembled the largest mass of seeds on the planet: an assembly they’d intended to crossbreed & solve hunger, but now guarded against the end of everything, hoping that when it was over, someone could rebuild what was lost. They starved one by one, rather than eat their hope. & in the end, were found dead at their desks, surrounded by bags of rice.

*Jon D. Lee*

20

---

<sup>20</sup> [Jon D. Lee](#), “[Terroir](#),” [One](#)

## Red Wreck Learns Through Secondhand Experience

Once, Red Wreck stood behind a girl in the tight space of a toilet stall, twisting her long blond hair to keep it clear from her face while she vomited. They were not friends—Red was a sophomore, and the other older, a senior—but a sudden, temporary bond was formed. When school let out, Red walked home with the girl through a cold spring rain that fell like pencil lashes, gray lines from cloud to earth. There was still snow on the ground, gritty and off-white, breaking down around their boots. They bent to pick up lost things loosened by the melting—buttons, a set of eyeglasses, single, matchless mittens and gloves. The girl found a sapphire earring. Red found a fake pearl necklace, shiny paint peeling from plastic beads.

“You know what a pearl necklace is?” asked the older girl. More, from her tone, than a necklace made of pearls. Red shook her head. The girl said, “I’ve got pictures.” Water beaded in her blonde eyelashes. Dry they’d been nearly invisible though they were thick. She said, “Come on. I’ll show you.”

The girl’s room was decorated with a pink Hollywood bed, a white dresser, and side tables that matched. On each was a porcelain lamp, painted with roses and gold-veined leaves. “My mother picked it all,” the girl complained, crossing the room, to wind herself in the long lace curtains. Muffled, she said, “It’s like Grandma’s house in here.”

Red thought it was beautiful, like what she imagined a room in a bed and breakfast would be. Tidy. Each thing paired with its proper partner.

The girl’s window looked out over a field where the snow had drifted in waves shaped by the tail grass underneath it. Everything was the gray of animal fur when it’s called blue or lilac. The rain stuttered and was gone. Snow was falling.

From inside the curtains the girl told Red she’d never done it with all her clothes off, but that sperm were like vampires, “You know—“ behind the lace she moved in a way that suggested a pair of hands gliding and affected a spooky, accented voice —*a mist, a vapor.*” She said there were a dozen virgin births a year. “Goes right through your underwear,” she said. “I swear.”

She unwound herself from the curtains. Her hair clung to them, alive with static electricity. When she touched Red’s arm a charge jumped between them. “I’ll show you my stuff,” she said.

Down on her hands and knees, the girl crawled across the floor. Dropping her shoulders, swaying, she lowered her chest until it was flush with the carpet, her back in a sharp curve. “Sometimes,” the girl said, “I pretend I’m a cat.” She stalked to the bed then lay flat, lifting the dust ruffle and wiggling the top half of her body underneath. She came out with a photo album full of swampy Polaroids.

The first page gave Red an old feeling—that wanting to go home that comes at a slumber party when everyone else has fallen asleep. The feeling of being alone in an unfamiliar dark.

Jenny Irish  
21

---

<sup>21</sup> Jenny Irish, “Red Wreck Learns Through Secondhand Experience,” collected in [Common Ancestor](#), Black Lawrence Press

## Rewinding an Overdose on a Projector

Black. Black. The foam drools back  
up his chin, over his lips and behind his teeth.  
The boy on the floor floats onto the bed.  
Gravity returns. His hands twitch.  
The heart wakes like a handcar pumping faster and faster  
on its greased tracks. Eyes flick open.  
Blood threads through a needle, draws into a tube.  
The syringe handle lifts his thumb.  
The hole in his vein where he left us seals.  
The boy injects a liquid into the cotton  
that drowns inside a spoon. He unties the leather belt  
around his arm, pushes the sleeve to his wrist.  
The wet cotton lifts, fluffs into a dry white ball.  
The flame beneath the spoon shrinks to a spark,  
is sucked inside the chamber where it grows cold,  
then colder. The heroin bubbles to powder.  
The water pours into a plastic bottle. The powder rains  
into a vial where it sleeps like an only child.  
All the contents on the bed spill into a bag.  
The boy stands, feeds his belt through the loops.  
This is where I snip the film and burn it.  
What remains are the few hundred frames  
reeling: the boy unlocking a bedroom door,  
a black jacket rising from the floor, each sleeve  
taking an arm like a mother and father.

*Sean Shearer*

22

---

<sup>22</sup> [Sean Shearer](#), "Rewinding an Overdose on a Projector," *Beloit Poetry Journal*

## Seven Minutes in Heaven

It's all the rage to sport waxed moustaches  
and cure your own sausages  
in some mildewy basement that formerly  
would have hosted convulsively  
awkward parties with spin the bottle and seven  
minutes in the dark and terrifying closet  
(aka heaven) but now boasts soppressata  
strung on repurposed vintage drying racks  
and fat clay pots of kombucha and curdling hops.  
Personally I've never recovered from the sex-shaped  
void left in those closets by all the groping  
that should have occurred to me but didn't:  
right under my nose kids my age were creeping  
into adulthood one clammy, trembling palm  
on one breast at a time. There was also  
the horror of not being chosen in gym.  
It is conceivable that learning intricately  
how to butcher an entire hog  
and render every morsel might give one  
a feeling of mastery one lacked in childhood.  
*It is the greatest immaturity to believe suffering  
entitles you to something* someone wiser  
and grayer than I once said.  
But in those basements and carpools and  
playgrounds as I assassinated one by one  
clandestinely my torturers  
abandoning their foul normal  
bodies to compost the astonishing  
tedium of the wending suburban lanes,  
I was transubstantiating to supernal  
fame and beauty and such eerie genius  
that entire books were written about my  
books. In fact it takes a long time to realize  
your suffering is of very little consequence  
to anyone but you. And by that time the future  
is already happening and you're pickling okra  
and starfruit and foraging for morels in urban forests  
and suspending artisan mozzarella in little wet nets  
and crafting small-batch, nitrite-free data  
and maybe even thinking about having  
children, which you swore in a million  
billion years you would never do.

Melissa Stein

23

---

<sup>23</sup> [Melissa Stein](#), "[Seven Minutes in Heaven](#)," [The Yale Review](#), collected in [Terrible Blooms](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)



## When You Told Me Your Father Was Dying

I didn't tell you my suicides  
were visiting me in dreams:  
the grandfather who took a gun  
to the desert, the aunt who moved  
all the furniture into the bushes.  
People I'd come from, ran from,  
pushed back. Others invented  
in sadness: bullet holes in the tops  
of their skulls, heads hollowed  
out like pumpkins. When they opened  
their mouths, moonlight shone through  
making their smiles tiny flashlights on a hillside,  
a search party emerging, calling my name.

*Aaron Smith*

24

---

<sup>24</sup> [Aaron Smith](#), "[When You Told Me Your Father Was Dying](#)," [LIT](#), collected in [Primer](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Tracking Shot

Whose anti-aircraft battle station this is  
I think I know, the deliquescing snow  
falling like the tears of a floating motorcade. Night

builds its walls: outside its badminton nets, inside  
its jury boxes full of foxglove and ash. It is all right,  
says the sunlight stapled to the floor

but was I not just in an anti-aircraft battle station  
and then suddenly in an empty courtroom  
with lickably-named flowers sitting at night

in the place where citizens once fanned themselves?  
More and more, I am certain I have ruined  
Christmas. More and more, everywhere

through which I move seems condensing  
as if I'd been called upon to swim through lead.  
Whose auburn-lit afterparty this is

I think I have reason to fear. Where for instance  
are the chips, and am I right to be suspicious?  
The world does not expand like we think it does.

The miles it makes it cannot make  
except that they are inside us.  
More and more whose light-pen I seek

I wish I knew, whose architectural digest were fit  
to fit the outsides crowding me  
into the marble sack of beautiful snow globes inside of me

I long for, as I long for you, your touch  
like a swirl of choreographed pine needles  
dimpling a hot water bottle,

a charm against the feeling  
I will never be home.

*Marc McKee*  
25

---

<sup>25</sup> [Marc McKee](#), "[Tracking Shot](#)," [Zocalo Public Square](#)

## Iceland

Berkeley, California

The girls' bathroom is tiled in pink  
up to the shoulder, then yellow paint takes over,  
smeared in circles toward a ceiling of pockmarked  
slab insulation. Monique unlaces her skates  
on the rim of a chipped sink, sloughs off her socks,  
leans near the air freshener that reeks fake pine,  
hung from rusted brackets, encrusted  
with seepage leaked in fern patterns.  
Nyeema walks in to wash her hands.  
Faucets bleed mineral deposits. Powdered soap  
in slogged heaps beneath fuchsia dispensers,  
floor black and tacky with cola and gum.  
Wobbly hearts and penises unscroll down the walls,  
an inky graffiti collage: *Andrea Loves Wesley.*  
*Myron and June. We own this dive.*  
*Martin was here 2/15/85.*  
The light switch is stuck, Tampax vendor  
stuffed with spit wads in the quarter slot.  
Ice skate tips kicked into the walls.  
*OUT OF ORDER* signs on half the stalls.  
Locks torn from doors, hinges sprung.  
The trick is to lean back, stretch out a toe  
to hold it closed, then try to pee.  
The bell rings on the rink and girls  
squirm through the doors. Wanda  
fishes in her bra for a smoke, lights up  
in a corner, gray rings breaking to nothing  
on the spiderwebbed vent.  
Sandy gets her period in stall four  
and outside the ice truck scrapes  
the chewed rink smooth.  
Sharla and Kyanne clap a hand-jive,  
slap thighs and knees as the loudspeaker sings  
*I just called to say I love you.*  
Melanie knots her slip above the waistband of her skirt.  
Aurora lines her lips with an Avon sampler:  
Dusty Rose. Barbara jimmies for mirror position,  
parts her bangs, slicks them down with spit  
and bobbie pins, glares back at the cracked glass.  
In the bathroom at Iceland, Clara announces  
she might be pregnant, bends over one knee, drops  
ladybug dots of red nail polish  
onto a run in her tights. Jasmine is crying.  
Her dad's new girlfriend hates her.  
Darla stops carving *FUCK* into a door,  
slings advice over her shoulder like a clot of wet hair:  
Screw her. Who cares? She's not your goddamn mom.

Peregrine twists crust from her pierced earrings.  
Tanya repairs an unraveled cornrow  
with a glass bead. The bell rings on the rink  
and they swing out the doors.  
Darla and Doris meet Troy.  
Jasmine shows off in new skates, the sequins  
on her Dorothy Hamill skirt a constellation  
as she spins on thick ice. Monique stays back,  
stares out a gap in the chicken-wired windows,  
picks at a blister on her heel, peels  
the yellow skin away from the pink, and drops  
the withered scraps, like petals, into the sink.

*Dorianne Laux*  
26

---

<sup>26</sup> [Dorianne Laux](#), "Iceland," [Red Rock Review](#), collected in [Smoke](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## The Thirty-Years Minor Skirmish

She wrote the blow-off letter in exploding lipstick.  
It took thirty years recovering from powder burns  
before I could appreciate the sentiment.

Did you ever get hit one more time than you deserved?  
Enough is enough only when you're both spelling it  
the same way. Kisses vs. Kiss-offs, 8 1/2 rounds.

She promised a box of Band-Aids  
patterned with pictures of my favorite rock stars  
then delivered a can full of splinters.

Even if they were from the True Cross,  
it was still a cruel joke. Now that I am more cruel  
myself, I can laugh. Ha, I laugh. Ha, ha, I laugh.

I changed the name of the star I named for her  
and didn't even tell her. So when she wishes  
on that star, it's just going to, you know, sneeze

or something. I built a catapult in the backyard.  
It's better than an ark, I told my wife. The kids  
enjoy shooting each other into space.

The Original Plans for Revenge deteriorated  
like old leaves, fell out of the book,  
and nobody missed the pages.

I cross-breed hyphens in the garden. Just  
a hobby, though I have a cult following  
on the inter-net. Two hyphens=one dash,

that's for amateurs. See how much she's  
missed without me? I once attended the Convention  
of the Wronged Parties and was ejected

for fake credentials. How's your sister,  
by the way? I hope you two have reconciled,  
had a good laugh at my expense.

Perhaps you were the ones who stole my wallet  
while I was seducing that nun during a rough patch.  
The Bygones attacked just the other day,

refusing to be bygone. So much for old expressionism  
and dainty olde timey rusticana memorabilia.  
I put the catapult on eBay, and my Eiffel Tower

constructed from splinters of the True Cross,  
so you see, I've moved on. Next time you're  
in the neighborhood, stop by and spit on my grave

for olde timey's sake. At least we didn't get married,  
I say some days, but then I remember that we did.  
Happy Negative Anniversary, by the way.

At least I didn't burn our house down,  
right? At least the clown I hired for our divorce  
got lost on his way to the courthouse.

Ah, but you should've seen that guy juggle  
I was banking on him making you laugh,  
but never bank on a clown. My current wife

thinks I'm a reality TV star in my own mind.  
If you knew me now, you wouldn't not disagree.  
Thirty years ago, you decided the moon landing

was fake, and my tap dancing was no longer cute.  
Oh. It's a long oh, like ooooooooooh—a little ache  
at the end. They say they make cards for all occasions,

but I can't find one for this. Nothing in that shade  
of lipstick you liked, surreal and bright, like a mutant crayon  
snuck into the box, a crayon I'd use to sign

my life over with again, given the chance,  
knowing how I'd sit stunned in the corner,  
throwing in the matching towels.

Did you know the moon has a little door in it?  
Okay, we won't get into that again. Just knowing  
that you know that I know that you don't know

that I know is a comfort, with or without cheese.  
Oh, look at the time. I'll have to orbit out  
to retrieve the kids soon. And hyphens—

did you know this?—can only be harvested under, well,  
when that big thing up there, we call it full,  
whether we've sullied it with our footprints

or disappeared behind its door of Wistful Resignation.  
How could we be imposters when we were wearing  
costumes to begin with? Do not be frightened.

This is just a test. Now, we return to our  
regularly scheduled programming.  
I'm locking the door behind me.

*Jim Daniels*  
27

---

<sup>27</sup> [Jim Daniels](#), "[The Thirty-Years Minor Skirmish](#)," [Bayou](#), collected in [Apology to the Moon](#), [Batcat Press](#)

## Bertolt Brecht in Eternity

Your grave lies right in Berlin's heart,  
in that elite, philosophical cemetery  
where they won't bury just anyone, where

Hegel and Fichte rest like rusty anchors  
(their ships sink into the abyss of textbooks).

Your bizarre errors, your worship of doctrine  
lie beside you like axes and spears in Neolithic graves,  
equally useful, equally necessary.

You chose East Germany, but also kept  
an Austrian passport just in case.

You were a cautious revolutionary—but can an oxymoron  
save the world?

You wrote a poem “To Those Born Later”—you hoped the future  
too would yield to your persuasion. But the future has passed.

Those born later drift indifferently through the graves—like tourists in museums  
who look mainly at the labels under paintings.

It's April, a cool and sunny day, black shadows cling  
to the tombstones, as if detectives were the true immortals.

*Adam Zagajewski (Clare Cavanagh, trans.)*

28

---

<sup>28</sup> [Adam Zagajewski](#), “[Bertolt Brecht in Eternity](#),” [Clare Cavanagh](#), translator, collected in [Asymmetry](#), [Farrar, Straus and Giroux](#)



## In the Graveyard of Fallen Monuments

*Moscow, near Gorky Park*

Sometimes I like to think about Leonid Brezhnev  
whose white marble torso stands here dreaming

in the Graveyard of Fallen Monuments. Leonid,  
I say, it's Dick. Where are your goddamn legs?

Seems like yesterday you broke out the Stoli  
at your dacha, and we laughed about detente.

Those were good times. The world on a razor  
of our mutually assured destruction, and yet—

comrade! you remember—we felt strangely free.  
Today not a single statue of Dick Nixon

stands astride an American city, but there are  
National Guardsmen at the glittering bridges

and Citizen Corps tipsters behind each tree.  
Leonid, they miss me. And the impoverished gray

pensioners in Gorky Park, endlessly pining  
for “The Kuznetsk Metal Workers’ Supper,”

they carry a wild red blowtorch for their Leonchik  
too. So *dosvidan'ya*, you sweet old bastard—

I'm late to catch an Elks convention shambling  
through my Library in Yorba Linda, California,

laden with cheap “Elvis Meets Nixon” keychains  
and a queer uneasiness they cannot place.

*Rachel Loden*

29

---

<sup>29</sup> [Rachel Loden](#), “[In the Graveyard of Fallen Monuments](#),” [Denver Quarterly](#), collected in [Dick of the Dead](#), [Ahsakta Press](#)

from "On Tour with Rita"

#10        Wine

Ever-amazing to Rita:  
Vine anagrams to vein  
Producing endless nighttime solutions  
Of blood and vino.  
That erratic half-moon lights  
Bloodstreams tangled on a trellis,  
Stained hands bandaged with grape leaves,  
"Th' future," she mumbles into her glass,  
"Is somethin' else altogether."  
A bare bulb throws the room  
Into sideshow, pipes knock with steam;  
All's well—bottle of A-positive in the refrigerator,  
Rita's heart pumping a dry Bordeaux '57.

#13        Boston

Wonderful that she's surviving  
The July evenings, suede hat  
Pulled to her eyes, the humidity  
So dense it could be raining  
And no one would know; her cat,  
The one that walks in sentences,  
Paws at a mirror in the kitchen  
While Rita sprawls out, naked cool legs  
On the coffee table, a scratchy Ravel  
On the phonograph and vodka spilled  
Down her breast; her one open eye  
Sees string from wrist-to-ceiling, ankle-to-ceiling,  
Then she feels her neck for rope, but nothing yet.

*Nicholas Christopher*

30

---

<sup>30</sup> [Nicholas Christopher](#), "[On Tour with Rita](#)," collected in [On Tour with Rita](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

from “Interlude: A Real Life Fiction”

One cannot tell the story of a pregnancy without first speaking of sex. But it’s exactly sex that I don’t want to speak of. In one model, sex is the “power that tears experience from ordinariness,” in another, it’s the “founding of a being-in-common.”

There was, at any rate, a dream from which I woke with an intense feeling of shame, rekindled by the face of any man I encountered that day and for the two or three days after, during which we were staying in a commercial campground in Key West, celebrating the dawn of a new century among the flamingos, the pelicans, and the pink T-shirts and faces of Floridians and tourists alike. It was sunset, and I was pregnant, but not with either of the daughters I now have. I was pregnant with a non-one, a person who had already removed itself from the scene of new modesty and soon to be destroyed Pax Americana into which we wheeled our then two-year-old son. This non-one had already died, and I wore my hair in braids, as if to say, “No problem! I’m nothing but a girl!” while the dream followed me with its charcoal sketches flung under a bed, its dim windows, the one arm circling. I won’t describe further, but I will say it hinted at “a new form of dividing up the common world.” I was pregnant and the baby inside me was dead. I was married and had dreamed of a man who, like the baby, did not exist.

But all stories of the body ought to begin much earlier. There was the time I stood from my chair and walked directly into a wall.

%

After the death of the youngest one’s friend, a five-year-old boy named Destin Self, she tells me she now knows that the dead do not float up into the sky. “No?” I say. “No,” she answers, “they just turn away from the other persons.” The non-one inside me had truly “turned away from the other persons.” As we drove past a strip mall in Northern Florida—a Chinese restaurant, a dollar store, a yoga place—I felt it die. I was no longer nauseous. No longer anything. I wore my hair in braids.

Was this, the family I was making, nourished by the embodiment of its own idea? I don’t know. But I can tell you this: during a period of ten years, I was pregnant five times. When added together, these pregnancies occupy a full three of those ten years. The nursing that followed three of those five pregnancies filled seven and a half of those ten years.

That which did not exist had to be made manifest. This was the message my body imparted. “This opposition between death and life was too simple.”

*Julie Carr*

31

---

<sup>31</sup> Julie Carr, “Interlude: A Real Life Fiction,” collected in [Real Life: An Installation](#), Omnidawn Publishing

## Slight

A slight implies  
if not an insult  
(real or imagined)

at least something  
unpleasant—

a slight cold,  
a slight headache.

No one ever says:  
“You make me slightly happy.”

Although this, in fact,  
is often the case.

*Elaine Equi*  
32

---

<sup>32</sup> [Elaine Equi](#), “[Slight](#),” collected in [Sentences and Rain](#), [Coffee House Press](#)

## Origins of Violence

There is a hole.  
In the hole is everything  
people will do  
to each other.

The hole goes down and down.  
It has many rooms  
like graves and like graves  
they are all connected.

Roots hang from the dirt  
in craggy chandeliers.  
It's not clear  
where the hole stops

beginning and where  
it starts to end.  
It's warm and dark down there.  
The passages multiply.

There are ballrooms.  
There are dead ends.  
The air smells of iron and  
crushed flowers.

People will do anything.  
They will cut the hands off children.  
Children will do anything—

In the hole is everything.

*Jenny George*  
33

---

<sup>33</sup> [Jenny George](#), "[Origins of Violence](#)," collected in [The Dream of Reason](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## A History of Something

For the pilgrims, turkey was what was in style.  
They dressed up like guns.

Tonight, it's macaroni with oregano,  
tomato, and ham, and the kitchen light  
comes from the butter and cheese. You're  
sitting where you always sit. Every night  
at dinner you're sitting with  
the phrase, "down the hall," because  
you look down at the dark hall  
from your chair at the kitchen table  
and wonder if it's snowing.

Your toes turn a certain way  
and you say, "ears."  
You sit on the floor  
and try to play cards, but  
before you know it,  
you're smushing the Jack  
of Diamonds and the Queen  
of Hearts together and  
making them have sex and also  
making the Queen of Clubs  
watch, thinking, Jack's got that  
weird little beard I always knew  
he was up to no good—  
the Jack of Hearts  
would never do it with the Queen of Spades she's  
in a totally different plotline wait  
till the king finds out.

You go to your piano lesson. You  
stink. You try to play,  
"Surrey With The Fringe  
On Top," for the entire  
no one that will ever listen.  
Walking home  
at twilight, the city  
buses you have no reason to ride,  
you feel immoral,  
just from walking  
in the cold, smelling something  
like smoke, and maybe if you  
had a bus routine,  
where you waited, and used quarters  
to buy just rice to eat for dinner,  
you'd be closer to god?

*Arda Collins*

---

<sup>34</sup> [Arda Collins](#), “[A History of Something](#),” *GutCult*, collected in *It Is Daylight*, [Yale University Press](#)

Here, the sentence will be respected.

I will compose each sentence with care by minding what the rules of writing dictate.

For example, all sentences will begin with capital letters.

Likewise, the history of the sentence will be honored by ending each one with appropriate punctuation such as a period or question mark, thus bringing the idea to (momentary) completion.

You may like to know, I do not consider this a “creative piece.”

In other words, I do not regard this as a poem of great imagination or a work of fiction.

Also, historical events will not be dramatized for an interesting read.

Therefore, I feel most responsible to the orderly sentence; conveyor of thought.

That said, I will begin:

You may or may not have heard about the Dakota 38.

If this is the first time you’ve heard of it, you might wonder, “What is the Dakota 38?”

The Dakota 38 refers to thirty-eight Dakota men who were executed by hanging, under orders from President Abraham Lincoln.

To date, this is the largest “legal” mass execution in U.S. history.

The hanging took place on December 26th, 1862—the day after Christmas.

This was the *same week* that President Lincoln signed The Emancipation Proclamation.

In the preceding sentence, I italicize “same week” for emphasis.

There was a movie titled *Lincoln* about the presidency of *Abraham Lincoln*.

The signing of The Emancipation Proclamation was included in the film *Lincoln*; the hanging of the Dakota 38 was not.

In any case, you might be asking, “Why were thirty-eight Dakota men hung?”

As a side note, the past tense of hang is *hung*, but when referring to the capital punishment of hanging, the correct tense is *hanged*.

So it’s possible that you’re asking, “Why were thirty-eight Dakota men hanged?”

They were hanged for *The Sioux Uprising*.



I want to tell you about The Sioux Uprising, but I don't know where to begin.

I may jump around and details will not unfold in chronological order.

Keep in mind, I am not a historian.

So I will recount facts as best as I can, given limited resources and understanding.

Before Minnesota was a state, the Minnesota region, generally speaking, was the traditional homeland for Dakota, Anishnaabeg and Ho-Chunk people.

During the 1800s, when the U.S. expanded territory, they "purchased" land from the Dakota people as well as the other tribes.

But another way to understand that sort of "purchase" is: Dakota leaders ceded land to the U.S. Government in exchange for money and goods, but most importantly, the safety of their people.

Some say that Dakota leaders did not understand the terms they were entering, or they never would have agreed.

Even others call the entire negotiation, "trickery."

But to make whatever-it-was official and binding, the U. S. Government drew up an initial treaty.

This treaty was later replaced by another (more convenient) treaty, and then another.

I've had difficulty unraveling the terms of these treaties, given the legal speak and congressional language.

As treaties were abrogated (broken) and new treaties were drafted, one after another, the new treaties often referenced old defunct treaties and it is a muddy, switchback trail to follow.

Although I often feel lost on this trail, I know I am not alone.

However, as best as I can put the facts together, in 1851, Dakota territory was contained to a 12-mile by 150-mile long strip along the Minnesota river.

But just seven years later, in 1858, the northern portion was ceded (taken) and the southern portion was (conveniently) allotted, which reduced Dakota land to a stark 10-mile tract.

These amended and broken treaties are often referred to as The Minnesota Treaties.

The word *Minnesota* comes from *mni* which means water; *sota* which means turbid.

Synonyms for turbid include muddy, unclear, cloudy, confused and smoky.

Everything is in the language we use.

For example, a treaty is, essentially, a contract between two sovereign nations.

The U.S. treaties with the Dakota Nation were legal contracts that promised money.

It could be said, this money was payment for the land the Dakota ceded; for living within assigned boundaries (a reservation); and for relinquishing rights to their vast hunting territory which, in turn, made Dakota people dependent on other means to survive: money.

The previous sentence is circular, which is akin to so many aspects of history.

As you may have guessed by now, the money promised in the turbid treaties did not make it into the hands of Dakota people.

In addition, local government traders would not offer credit to “Indians” to purchase food or goods.

Without money, store credit or rights to hunt beyond their 10-mile tract of land, Dakota people began to starve.

The Dakota people were starving.

The Dakota people starved.

In the preceding sentence, the word “starved” does not need italics for emphasis.

One should read, “The Dakota people starved,” as a straightforward and plainly stated fact.

As a result—and without other options but to continue to starve—Dakota people retaliated.

Dakota warriors organized, struck out and killed settlers and traders.

This revolt is called The Sioux Uprising.

Eventually, the U.S. Cavalry came to Mnisota to confront the Uprising.

Over one thousand Dakota people were sent to prison.

As already mentioned, thirty-eight Dakota men were subsequently hanged.

After the hanging, those one thousand Dakota prisoners were released.

However, as further consequence, what remained of Dakota territory in Mnisota was dissolved (stolen).

The Dakota people had no land to return to.

This means they were exiled.

Homeless, the Dakota people of Mnisota were relocated (forced) onto reservations in South Dakota and Nebraska.

Now, every year, a group called the *The Dakota 38 + 2 Riders* conduct a memorial horse ride from Lower Brule, South Dakota to Mankato, Mnisota.

The Memorial Riders travel 325 miles on horseback for eighteen days, sometimes through sub-zero blizzards.

They conclude their journey on December 26th, the day of the hanging.

Memorials help focus our memory on particular people or events.

Often, memorials come in the forms of plaques, statues or gravestones.

The memorial for the Dakota 38 is not an object inscribed with words, but an act.

Yet, I started this piece (which I do not consider a poem or work of fiction) because I was interested in writing about grasses.

So, there is one other event to include, although it's not in chronological order and we must backtrack a little.

When the Dakota people were starving, as you may remember, government traders would not extend store credit to "Indians."

One trader named Andrew Myrick is famous for his refusal to provide credit to Dakotas by saying, "If they are hungry, let them eat grass."

There are variations of Myrick's words, but they are all something to that effect.

When settlers and traders were killed during the Sioux Uprising, one of the first to be executed by the Dakota was Andrew Myrick.

When Myrick's body was found,

his mouth was stuffed with grass.

I am inclined to call this act by the Dakota warriors a poem.

There's irony in their poem.

There was no text.

*"Real" poems do not "really" require words.*

I have italicized the previous sentence to indicate inner dialogue; a revealing moment.

But, on second thought, the particular words "Let them eat grass," click the gears of the poem into place.

So, we could also say, language and word choice are crucial to the poem's work.

Things are circling back again.

Sometimes, when in a circle, if I wish to exit, I must leap.

And let the body  
swing.

From the platform.

Out

*Layli Long Soldier*  
35

---

<sup>35</sup> [Layli Long Soldier](#), “[38](#),” [Mud City Journal](#), collected in [Whereas](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

## On Dissonance

### I.

Jabés, on the sea: “If the sea had no ears to hear the sea,  
it would be a gray sea of death. It would be a mined sea  
whose explosions would threaten the world in its elephant memory.”

### II.

Historian Édouard Ganche: “Chopin’s skin was very white,  
his cheeks sunken. Even his ears showed a form particular  
to consumptives.” Teacher Józef Elsner: “I was reluctant  
to constrain Chopin with narrow, academic rules, so as  
to allow the young artist to mature according to his nature.”

### III.

George Sand’s nickname for Chopin, while alive:  
Beloved Little Corpse.

### IV.

1831: Chopin learns, while traveling, that the November  
Uprising against Russia had been crushed, and pours  
blasphemies into a journal that he kept secret  
to the end of his life. Biographer: “These torrential outcries  
found musical expression in *Revolutionary Étude in C Minor*.”

### V.

Like Kafka, Chopin proposed marriage, but never wed.  
Maria Wodziński, dismissed from his life with quiet ceremony:  
after placing her collected letters in an envelope,  
he wrote across the seal *My Sorrow*.

### VI.

1849: Chopin’s Paris funeral, delayed for weeks.  
Mozart’s *Requiem*, the score he desired to accompany  
the service, required female singers, then banned  
from The Church of the Madeleine. Compromise  
between Church and death-wish: the female singers  
could sing, but from behind a velvet curtain.

### VII.

Major Innovations: sonata, nocturne, waltz, prelude.  
Invention: ballade. Poet, be seated at the piano.  
Strike the black, otherworldly chord.

Virginia Konchan

36

---

<sup>36</sup> Virginia Konchan, “On Dissonance,” collected in [The End of Spectacle](#), Carnegie Mellon University Press

After the Poet From Kentucky Tells Me My Poems Are Not Considerate to Their Audience I Try to  
Teach Him What I Know About Etiquette

When a lover waits for me to come,  
I say thank you. When a lover  
comes in my mouth,  
I say you're welcome.  
He runs his hand across  
the pages like a priest,  
breath full of bourbon  
aftermath, crooked rows  
of teeth like pews  
in a musty tabernacle.  
He jams his thumb again  
at the misplaced simile  
as if to say *straighten out darlin,*  
*join the right side*  
*and get a Camry.*  
Something about misogyny  
makes my clit grow  
seven throbbing inches.

Kendra DeColo  
37

---

<sup>37</sup> Kendra DeColo, "[After the Poet From Kentucky Tells Me My Poems Are Not Considerate to Their Audience I Try to Teach Him What I Know About Etiquette](#)," collected in [Thieves in the Afterlife](#), Saturnalia Books

## The Small Husband

If you want to talk to your husband  
and your husband is very small  
you lie down on the floor  
and the floor is cold  
but you warm it  
and you look at the wall  
where it meets the floor  
You are five to eight inches  
from the wall  
and there are no other noises  
Traffic everywhere has stopped  
for the holiday  
but the parade does not come by  
for another couple of hours  
and you are neither hungry  
nor too full  
and your body is a long silk bag  
full of lightweight batteries  
arranged on the floor  
so it touches the floor  
in the maximum number of places  
and math has real world value  
it turns out  
which is not all that surprising  
and there are weekends and desires  
gestating in your throat  
pink and hairless  
like mammals  
and you close your eyes  
and say things to your husband  
but he is small  
no make him even smaller

*Heather Christle*

38

---

<sup>38</sup> [Heather Christle](#), "[The Small Husband](#)," [Front Porch](#), collected in [What Is Amazing](#), [Wesleyan University Press](#)

from *Baby, I don't care*

What do you want with me?  
I'm just a dirty little shoplifter.  
I'm like a woman in a sequined gown in a dark cave.  
Can you tell me I'm worse than others?  
OK, yes, I'm worse than others, but can you say I'm the worst of all?

Now let's be reasonable with ourselves.  
If you show me a man in a turtleneck sweater on the beach,  
then that is beyond my resistance.  
If you show me a liquor cart on wheels,  
I will just climb on.

[....]

You've got to love someone abominably, don't you?  
Then why are my cheeks all wet?  
I am ready for my row of drinks!  
This poem is so fucking showy.  
But you're going to take it.

You're a tigerskin rug of a man.  
You're just some man I beat at chess.  
So why can't we leave each other alone?  
Now fix me a drink.  
Later we can try some wrestling moves.

[....]

Someone says they're going to buy you a drink but they just *pour* you one.  
Please don't shout after I've had my daiquiris!  
I like to curl up on the couch in high heels.  
I love you, darling, but don't you think it's immaterial?  
Dynamite couldn't get me out of this chair.

I've tapered down to two quarts a day now,  
Isn't it wonderful?  
My whole outlook on life has changed.  
Licentious, profane, obscure, and contrary to the good order of the community.  
Who wouldn't come to their senses?

Chelsey Minnis  
39

---

<sup>39</sup> Chelsey Minnis, "[Baby, I don't care](#)," collected in [Baby, I don't care](#), [Wave Books](#)



People, the ghosts down in North-of-the-South aren't see-through

They don't wear nightgowns or whisper or sing  
or want hazy things from the ones of us who are living.  
They have skin, bones, people. They're short in stature  
and they don't walk through walls. They come in our houses

by kicking down doors, wearing porkpie hats and smoking  
those My Father cigars. Yellow sweat stains  
on their sleeveless undershirts, my people. I'm sure  
there are other kinds of ghosts other places,

sad angels wearing bloomers and fanning their wings,  
but here their faces are made of gristle and their eyes  
red from too much Thunderbird. They want to steal  
our valuables, mess shit up, drop a match and burn

down the house. I don't know any other way to say it,  
people. They walk right into our kitchens without being invited,  
tracking mud, lifting the fish by the tail out of the fryer  
and stuffing it in a cloth sack the color of a potato

just pulled out of the ground, and if there was a potato  
pulled fresh out of the ground they'd take that too.  
Their pee sizzles when it hits the floor. They don't hear  
prayers or heed four-leaf clovers. We have to give

our bodies to the task. I mean we push back, people.  
Harder than day labor. Harder than shoving a bull  
out of the cow paddock. Two bulls. We have to say  
leave my goddamned house. Go, motherfucker.

My fucking house. Shouting while pushing, like breach birth,  
or twins. They slap on that corpse-smelling aftershave  
and come calling, holding a bouquet of weeds. They want  
our whiskey, our gravy, our honey, our combs, our bees.

*Diane Seuss*

40

---

<sup>40</sup> [Diane Seuss](#), "[People, the ghosts down in North-of-the-South aren't see-through](#)," [Ecotone](#), collected in [Four-Legged Girl](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

from “Territory”

I was thinking about the sting of Gabe’s stubble  
I when I walked into the kitchen’s harsh light.

Mom was there, in a Christmasy sweater,  
green and red and white with blocky reindeer,

and before I said anything, she said—  
I’ll never forget this—“I’m going to ask

you one question and I want the truth.  
Are you gay?” I looked at her and thought,

here it goes, and said “Yes,”  
and she threw the toaster at me,

and then dishes, mugs,  
anything she could pull from the cupboards...

The cops said I should get some of my stuff  
and leave. It still kills me that I couldn’t take

my aquarium (“Long gone,” she said a week later  
during our last phone call). The bruise on my cheek

wasn’t serious enough to press charges.  
I didn’t want to press charges anyway, that night,

though, looking back, I kind of wish I had.  
“Do you have someplace to go?” one cop asked

as I stood on the lawn. I could see my mother  
through the front window, calmly talking

to another cop. “Bitch!” I screamed, and the cop  
with me put one hand on my chest, the other

on my shoulder. “That’s not gonna help things,”  
he said, “Do you have someplace you can go?”

I looked at him. I could feel his palm pressed  
against me. His eyes gave me no sympathy,

but no hate. He’d seen this shit before.  
He drove me to Gabe’s place and took

my two duffle bags out of the trunk, set them  
on the pavement like a taxi driver and said “O.K.,”

and I was standing deep in the Lowell night,  
shivering outside Gabe's beat-up apartment.

My folded paycheck from CVS in my jeans pocket,  
the only money I had. I was sixteen.

\*

The spring after my mom threw me out  
Gabe graduated and we moved in with his sister,

an apartment in South Boston. Gabe started  
looking for work, and I wanted to do that, too,

but he said, "Jared, if you don't get your diploma now,  
you'll be fucked for your whole life,"

so I spent a week going into South Boston High  
and telling my story to different people.

There was this one guidance counselor—she  
was wearing jeans, I remember, because

that seemed too casual—and after she heard me  
she said, "You've got a year. Let's get you through."

I wanted to hug her then. Instead, I nodded.  
I couldn't speak. And when I walked out of the school

I ran into a McDonalds bathroom, locked myself  
in a stall, and sobbed. I was sitting on the toilet lid;

and the flimsy plastic felt like it might crack.  
It was there that I really said goodbye

to my mother, that I just didn't care anymore  
what she had said, all the "faggots" she spit at me.

"Let's get you through," rinsed off the venom.  
Someone opened the bathroom door.

I flushed the toilet to drown my sniffles  
and stood. There, on the wall of the stall,

someone had scraped, "Fags Die." Honestly,  
I laughed—to see that message *then*.

I took out my apartment key and scratched  
a "t" after "Die"—"Fags Diet." I don't know

what I meant by it, but it felt good  
cutting through the paint and metal.

[...]

Homeless. I never thought of the word  
that summer I would sleep in the park

near Harvard. Gabe had found someone else,  
and one day I just loaded up a dufflebag,

grabbed a couple oranges and bagels  
and left. I haven't seen him since.

Homeless. I never thought of it in Buenos Aires,  
Austin, L.A., Newark—all those cities

after Capilla where I hustled myself  
for a bed, a room, food. Some stories

I won't tell, even now. The shade  
of the overpass, the raid on the shelter,

all the men with broken teeth, the blood  
on the blade, drops crusting the dirt.

When the word came up in Sociology  
this year, I mentioned that I'd been homeless,

and the professor treated me like I was  
an expert. I told her I didn't know

much, had never studied it...  
She just wanted to hear my stories.

I started to share one, and the other students  
looked at me like I was on a reality show.

Who needs that? "You don't want to know," I said.  
I couldn't explain it then, but now I get it:

I'm in school to find out what happened to me.

[...]

Sometimes I joke and call Jeffrey my Sugar Daddy  
Of course, he is. I was sharing an apartment

with three women, going to school, and working  
full-time at Stop & Shop when we met.

Now I'm in a house, a fucking house!  
He's thirty, five years older than me.

I don't get his job—selling pharmaceuticals—  
but it pays a lot better than mine.

We've been together almost two years.  
I haven't really gotten monogamy either.

After all those johns, it just seems like a con,  
but Jeffrey and I talk about it—a lot.

He wanted to give me flowers after the dance.  
I told him if he tried, we were over.

We were both probably joking.  
We hung around the reception, and a few

queers told me how fab I was,  
and, of course, the women in their spandex

&om the other schools couldn't stop gushing about me.  
Carl, I could tell, was proud of me, and proud

of himself, for having picked me,  
for having noticed my talent and supported me.

I sound like I'm ungrateful, but I'm not.  
It was all good. And when it was over,

Jeffrey, Carl and I walked through the chill  
April night back to Jeff's car. Carl had asked

for a ride to South Station. The city, beyond  
the closed windows, felt silent, full of lights

and shadows, and I couldn't help but notice  
the haunts, the corners, the sidewalks that I knew

from that time after high school and before  
the Dominican. Jeffrey and Carl were making

awkward small talk... How calm the world.  
How *calm* my world. I fingered the pack

of cigarettes in my jacket pocket,  
anxious to light one up once we'd dropped Carl off.

*J.D. Scrimgeour*  
41

---

<sup>41</sup> [J.D. Scrimgeour](#), "[Territory](#)," [Thought & Action](#), collected in [Lifting the Turtle](#), [Turning Point Books](#)

Day 5

Every barn has become a church  
to worship storms in.

If I gathered all the unsharpened pencils  
from backpacks, I would build a golden silo  
that worshiped lemons or sunlight,  
whichever lasts longer.

The first time a boy took off my shirt  
was in a tractor for sale on the side of a road.  
Inside of it, we felt so human we cried.

If I told his friends about this, he said, he would die.

He worshipped me.  
Until I married, I only made love in machines.

A storm is coming.  
Or my grandfather is tuning his radio  
from the afterlife.

If I stayed awake for weeks, I could take down every fence  
left standing and build a church so large  
the living and the dead could hold hands in it  
as they told each other the truth.

A storm is dividing the sky into sections like an envelope.  
I want to lick it and seal it shut.

I remember, though, my mother telling me about a girl  
who wrote a letter to the moon every night before bed,  
the same question each time: *If you can see everything from there,  
aren't you the real god?* She only loved the taste of the envelope's glue  
and died of hunger.

The storm is big enough to destroy imaginary churches.

An emergency announcement was sent from my grandfather,  
or another sweet dead man:

*Close your doors and pile your belongings in the center of the room.  
Eat your photographs. Bury your dogs. Find one object  
and memorize it. This is your angel.*

I memorized ten.

Meghan Privitello

42

---

<sup>42</sup> [Meghan Privitello](#), "Day 5," [Jet Fuel Review](#), collected in [Notes on the End of the World](#), Black Lawrence Press

## Dangerous for Girls

It was the summer of Chandra Levy, disappearing  
from Washington, D.C., her lover a Congressman, evasive  
and blow-dried from Modesto, the TV wondering  
in every room in America to an image of her tight jeans and piles  
of curls frozen in a studio pose. It was the summer the only  
woman known as a serial killer, a ten-dollar whore trolling  
the plains of central Florida, said she knew she would  
kill again, murder filled her dreams  
and if she walked in the world, it would crack  
her open with its awful wings. It was the summer that in Texas, another  
young woman killed her five children, left with too many  
little boys, always pregnant. One Thanksgiving, she tried  
to slash her own throat. That summer the Congressman  
lied again about the nature of his relations, or,  
as he said, he couldn't remember if they had sex that last  
night he saw her, but there were many anonymous girls that summer,  
there always are, who lower their necks to the stone  
and pray, not to God but to the Virgin, herself once  
a young girl, chosen in her room by an archangel.  
Instead of praying, that summer I watched television, reruns of  
a UFO series featuring a melancholic woman detective  
who had gotten cancer and was made sterile by aliens. I watched  
infomercials: exercise machines, pasta makers,  
and a product called Nails Again With Henna,  
*ladies, make your nails steely strong, naturally,*  
and then the photograph of Chandra Levy  
would appear again, below a bright red number,  
such as 81, to indicate the days she was missing.  
Her mother said, *please understand how we're feeling*  
when told that the police don't believe she will be found alive,  
though they searched the parks and forests  
of the Capitol for remains and I remembered  
being caught in Tennessee, my tent filled with wind  
lifting around me, *tornado honey*, said the operator when I called  
in fear. The highway barren, I drove to a truck stop where  
maybe a hundred trucks hummed in pale, even rows

like eggs in a carton. Truckers paced in the dining room,  
 fatigue in their beards, in their bottomless  
 cups of coffee. The store sold handcuffs, dirty  
 magazines, t-shirts that read, *Ass, gas or grass*.  
*Nobody rides for free*, and a bulletin board bore a  
 public notice: *Jane Doe, found in refrigerator box*  
*outside Johnson, TN*, her slight measurements and weight.  
 The photographs were of her face, not peaceful in death,  
 and of her tattoos *Born to Run*, and *J.T.* caught in  
 scrollworks of roses. One winter in Harvard Square, I wandered  
 drunk, my arms full of still warm, stolen laundry, and  
 a man said, *come to my studio* and of course I went—  
 for some girls, our bodies are not immortal so much as  
 expendable, we have punished them or wearied  
 from dragging them around for so long and so we go  
 wearing the brilliant plumage of the possibly freed  
 by death. Quick on the icy sidewalks, I felt thin and  
 fleet, and the night made me feel unique in the eyes  
 of the stranger. He told me he made sculptures  
 of figure skaters, not of the women's bodies,  
 but of the air that whipped around them,  
 a study of negative space,  
 which he said was the where-we-were-not  
 that made us. Dizzy from beer,  
 I thought, *why not step into*  
*that space?* He locked the door behind me.

Connie Voisine  
 43

---

<sup>43</sup> [Connie Voisine](#), "[Dangerous for Girls](#)," collected in [Rare High Meadow of Which I Might Dream](#), The University of Chicago Press



## Shooting Range

Aren't you just like the Daddy every girl dreams of, with your handgun cocked and your pants pockets full of dirty peppermints? You taught me to aim at nothing, but a bullet likes to bury itself and we're all equally worthy—this ridge of drought-colored trees, concrete backstop pocked with ammo, redneck in a camo bikini fondling her boyfriend's Glock—everything thrilled to surrender, asking the same question we've always had in common: Who's the better killer? You've had more practice, but I'm a natural. So step a little to the left and I'll do you the favor. Then you do me. Wasn't that the deal? This day's so blue, so pretty, let's smash it under glass—a last, weepy moment you'll remember someday, living in your future, another hit man gone to wind and belly, selling your glory-holed stories to a new ingénue on the final installment plan.

*Erin Belieu*

44

---

<sup>44</sup> [Erin Belieu](#), "[Shooting Range](#)," collected in [Black Box](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Dear Fire

Every night my father dreams he golfs in Hell  
with you. The woods  
lick the sky

above my father's game  
with flames, and he

is trapped alive  
for eternity in the place  
where his hope starts  
and his patience ends, losing

his ball in the burning  
thickets again and again—the burning

thickets into which  
everything we hurry through

in this life is lost. When

my father wakes, the grass  
is sweet and long with spring. The sprinkler

whirls across the street, and leaves  
fall like cool  
compresses out of the trees. But even

then you're there. Pennies

on his dresser, his hot pocket  
empty of copper. He

shaves too fast, and a trickle of his blood boils  
luxuriant as a woman's  
red hair down the drain. My

father drinks his coffee  
at the kitchen window, pacing, while  
the red face of a geranium strains

its brain toward the sun, blooms  
its aneurysm, waiting, shouts

*Fire* in the crowd, which surges

as one body of vivid oxygen against  
the jammed door of the microwave.

*Laura Kasischke*

---

<sup>45</sup> [Laura Kasischke](#), “[Dear Fire](#),” collected in [Fire & Flower](#), [Alice James Books](#)

## Breach Year

The world does not need any more music  
or teenagers. My life was not hard  
  
so I made it hard the only way I knew  
how. Someone was selling color televisions  
  
on the street corner. I used my calligraphy  
skills to trace square boxes in razor  
  
on glossy magazine pages. I was nineteen  
and had a permanent coin locker  
  
at the bus station. Sometimes benches  
smelled of bleach, like the Chinese laundry  
  
behind our old apartment. For a few weeks  
my crumpled sweaters were charming.  
  
If you wait for a city bus long enough  
it will begin to rain. I was neither the best  
  
nor the worst, somewhere between  
haunted caterpillar and sexy beginner witch  
  
in the costume section. I was skipping all of  
my classes but was not signed up.  
  
I packed beer cans into a pillowcase, traded  
imaginary bracelets for cab fare.  
  
In some neighborhoods, I was a census  
taker, not statistic. I once owned a gloomy  
  
old saddle horse. I once had much more  
black tea than I could ever drink.

Mary Biddinger  
46

---

<sup>46</sup> [Mary Biddinger](#), "[Breach Year](#)," [Revolution House](#), collected in [Small Enterprise](#), Black Lawrence Press

## Let's Live in the Books of My Childhood

“Presently they came to a freshly painted, white house overlooking the surf. It proved to be cool, clean, and inviting.

Although it was late for luncheon, the woman in charge assured the girls she could serve them.”

—*Nancy Drew: Mystery of the Tolling Bell*

Let's climb together up rickety stairways,  
let's scramble through briars, let's dart  
around carnival tents, the gypsies always  
at our backs, the coarse-voiced caretaker  
rounding the corner in his black sedan (yes,  
don't panic, I know the tricks of escape),  
let's speed off in your clanging jalopy, your hand  
never on my knee, our pulses never slowing  
to resting, and then drive me home under  
an unspoiled sky (yes, we'll keep watch  
for the jewel thief with the scar, don't worry,  
I'll know him) and let home be decked in white  
and cornflower blue, let it be oak and old lace,  
let there be a narrow bed where I'll lie when I leave you  
at the door, let the bed be cool when I slide in  
(yes, I'll be fine, my father's here and crooks  
turn in early), while you drive home  
through the lamplit night, and then  
come back the next day and let's do it again,  
and yes, yes, I know there's the mystery to be solved,  
but it always gets solved, and I wish you'd stop  
missing the point, which is to live here, in this world  
of sailboats and chums and exclamation points,  
where luncheon is always served, where we'll never  
vote or clean or fade, and we both know to tauten  
our wrists when bound so we can twist free later,  
and there, at the end, will be your jalopy again,  
and a picnic at the seashore, maybe a palm reading,  
maybe a boat race (never a wedding, never a death),  
and the end will be no end but only a teaser  
for the next summer-stung installment,  
each plump blonde friend, each sallow-skinned man,  
each telegram and flat tire and chloroformed rag  
already in place, always, check, check, check.

Catherine Pierce

47

---

<sup>47</sup> Catherine Pierce, “[Let's Live in the Books of My Childhood](#),” collected in [The Girls of Peculiar](#), Saturnalia Books

## Layover

A woman tears my ticket with her teeth.

I walk in and out of my body.

I am told my soul has taken flight  
like a bird startled by invisible whistles.

I understand it's circling the mountains of Peru,  
where spilled water flows back to its vessel,

and the hands of the water-gatherers are blue.

*Kristin Bock*

48

---

<sup>48</sup> [Kristin Bock](#), "[Layover](#)," collected in [Cloisters](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

## The Illusion of Choice

*"And what would you like to be when you grow up?"  
"Elsewhere."*

Say you could have been raised  
by wolves—shrunk, feral,  
starving for the last thrash of a rabbit,  
or the more calculated ambush of a deer.  
Or say the opera had adopted you at birth,  
the final aria of a dwindling company  
gone bankrupt with passion, your sable  
coat the only remnant of their worth.  
But no, you chose to be born here, among  
towns like Flagler, Bovina, Seibert, Bethune,  
places you pass through on your way  
to somewhere else, unless you happen  
to live here, then you stay,  
thinking the name on the water tower  
means you, or that oil mixed with rain  
in a hubcap is beautiful, which it is  
because you own it, or think you do, in your  
hand-me-down jacket and the galoshes  
you wear for cowboy boots, galloping  
along past Hedgecote's Grocery, Eunice's Cafe,  
on your way to face some stranger.

*Kate Hancock*  
49

---

<sup>49</sup> Kate Hancock, "[The Illusion of Choice](#)," [New Virginia Review](#), collected in [The Lazarus Method](#), The Kent State University Press

from “The Canal Diaries”

*Green*

Screams from an Italian family up the street  
That stupid kid hitting rock after rock with his metal bat.

*I'd be a shitty boyfriend*, you said, as if  
making a promise. I said, *It's not the content*

*I'm in love with, it's the form*. And that  
was tenderness. All last year

I planned to write a book about  
the color blue. Now I'm suddenly surrounded

by green, green gagging me  
pleasurably, green holding onto my hips

from behind, digging into  
the cleft, the cleft

that can be made. You have no idea  
what kind of light you'll let in

when you drop the bowl, no idea  
what will make you full

*Maggie Nelson*

50

---

<sup>50</sup> [Maggie Nelson](#), “[The Canal Diaries \(Green\)](#),” [BOMB](#), collected in [Something Bright, Then Holes](#), [Soft Skull Press](#)



## Where We Feel It The Most

The man was cockeyed, so when he asked  
“Have you ever really known true love?”  
all of us mumbled something at once, thinking the question  
was personal for our ownselves, as we used to say,  
and then we all felt awkward, like we’d maybe revealed  
mumblings we might not ought’ve.  
All of us, you see, are from the South, and from a time  
that might also be called the South, a polite time not far from here,  
one you can catch now and then on the radio still....  
Anyhow, the cockeyed man was a bartender  
and we were his drunks, so it should have been funny  
and familiar since no one ever knows who the hell, exactly,  
Scott means when he says, “What are you having?”  
We’d been chatting about Lear, wondering if finding true love  
*his own self*, as we used to say, at the end of the play  
was enough to give meaning to his life, redeem, redeem, all that—  
him with his dead daughter in his arms, and really old too. That’s  
when Scott chimed in with his question to whothellknows,  
as we used to say, after saying that true love between  
a father and daughter was one, weird, and two, an unsatisfactory  
reading of a play that’s really about learning to lie better  
in order to survive, more or less, in a godless universe.

Well, even a fucking blind squirrel finds a nut  
now and then, as we used to say, we thought, and then  
out came that question from Delphi there,  
and I just looked at you, love, after you mumbled  
your whatever that looked like yes, put a napkin to your lips  
and looked around at everyone else just looking around....  
I mean, how are we supposed to answer a question  
like that in mixed company, as we used to say,  
meaning godknowswhat, meaning shutthefuckup, really.  
And there we were, a shuffling herd at the chute  
like for an instant there was a .22  
between those big cow eyes of ours, waiting for that little snap  
and collapse, the almost truth, all that nonsense, that meaningless shit,  
and it took a while to settle back into the drinks and Lear,  
how Cordelia suggests both heart and rope,  
that surely someone must have been redeemed by now  
after four goddamn hours and centuries of talk on top of that.  
Anyhow, Scott had a way of giving it to you where you’d feel it the most,  
even if you weren’t sure, as we used to say, it were you.

David Daniel

51

---

<sup>51</sup> David Daniel, “Where We Feel It The Most,” *Connotation Press*, collected in *Ornaments*, University of Pittsburgh Press

Who Were Frederick Douglass's Cousins, and Other Quotidian Black History Facts That I Wish I  
Learned in School

I have a body. It sits in a desk.  
Every day is bitten with new guilt.  
My teacher can see right  
through me, all the way  
to Black History Month.  
It is my fortune to be  
ashamed, and from nowhere.  
How can I concentrate  
on *photosynthesis* when  
there is a thing called *Africa*?  
When my teacher talks about slaves,  
I become a slave. I know too much.  
I raise my hand. American flag  
and family tree. Is it my fault  
my stomach aches? I wait  
in my desk and try to be still.  
I lie and immediately confess.  
I grow a plant in a paper towel.  
I get in trouble for talking.  
At recess, I pretend.  
The mountains are closing in.  
I am good, but too curious.  
What happened to the Indians?  
How do we know about heaven,  
and dragonflies?  
Where did Harriet Tubman sleep?  
Who did Harriet Tubman kiss?  
What about the Africans that stayed?  
Why are they hungry?  
Did Frederick Douglass's mother  
brush his hair in the morning?  
Was he tender-headed and afraid?  
Is this how I am supposed to feel?  
Are you sure? How do you know?

*Morgan Parker*

52

---

<sup>52</sup> [Morgan Parker](#), "[Who Were Frederick Douglass's Cousins, and Other Quotidian Black History Facts That I Wish I Learned in School](#)," collected in [Magical Negro](#), Tin House Books

Accursed Questions, i

A doctor suggested I spend four minutes a day asking questions about whatever matters most to me.

Four minutes, that's how long it takes to boil an egg, get from 96th to 42nd on the express train, initiate an irreversible apocalypse.

—

How do I get out of here? is the question my father asks most frequently. It takes him three or four seconds to say the seven syllables, there are frequent glitches in his speech but it's a perfect mantra.

What next? And Jackie? are his other inquiries.

Jackie what next Jackie what next Jackie—

If you count repetitions, they add up to at least four minutes.

—

At dinner I asked my mother which wh-question she'd keep if she could only use one, and she said *why*.

I remember when she first told me she reads the obits to see how old people are when they die. A young man was recently in love with her, but she stayed loyal to my father, who's lost his memory. He doesn't ask who we are but often he wonders if we have something to do with him. Oh that's grand, he says when I explain who I am to him, and he to me.

—

Each time I read *He will never ride the red horse she describes* I feel sad until I remember the red horse is the sun, the same sun that will rise too soon tomorrow morning right here over my left shoulder.

My son is sleeping on the couch with all the lights on. Nothing bad can happen.

How long does it take? he says in his sleep

—

Lying together a friend and I tried just to speak in questions. It was as intimate way of passing time as any, except sex, I think. He asked why glass bowls on the bookshelf. I didn't answer because I was only listening.

When my son was little, they were filled with Halloween candy.

---

What is an ending? the students sometimes ask. Ah, the answer to that question brings the priest and the doctor running over the hills.

---

Maybe best not to ask when will what take whom where and to do what.

Jean once told me she's not interested in writing about getting older but about getting dead. In *Lucy*, she speaks directly to the oldest and most complete human ancestor. There is no boundary between the living and the dead:

Or what do you do now Lucy

for love?

Your eye-holes.

Those of us who are scared just chronicle the slow path. The scar where they pulled my son from me is starting to sag now, etc., etc.

Turns out *when* is a question children learn late, after *where*, *what*, and *who*. *Why* is perhaps the latest, and it can go on incessantly.

*Why* and *when* and *where* and *what* all go back to the root *who*.

Lately I've been walking around talking to myself, who is full of swearing and disbelief.

---

Without much hope I opened my first small bottle of 3-in-one oil and applied it to the hinges of my front door that apparently keep my neighbor up at night. Squirting the oil on the wildly overpainted hinge was like throwing seeds on a blacktop and expecting a garden. But it worked, and that cheered me up.

Imagine if Augustine had been addressing 3-in-one oil instead of God:

Do the heaven and earth then contain Thee, since Thou fillest them? or dost Thou fill them and yet overflow, since they do not contain Thee? And whither, when the heaven and the earth are filled, pourest Thou forth the remainder of Thyself?... Oh! that Thou wouldst enter into my heart, and inebriate it, that I may forget my ills, and embrace Thee, my sole good!

---

Can't we let him sleep all winter?

He wants to be set free. He wants to be set free upon the waters.

So much depends upon the kindness of questions. And the questions we cannot not speak of.

---

The radio is playing "Blowing in the Wind," which was one of the first songs I learned on the guitar. At the age of ten, I couldn't get enough of the questions. I played it for anyone who'd listen, I played it in my nightgown, in my hand-me-down red Speedo, in my mother's sunglasses, in the reflection of my father's martini glass. I got so good at it I could play it while balancing on a bongo board in the middle of the living room. I got so good at it I can still feel the precariousness underfoot.

*Catherine Barnett*

53

---

<sup>53</sup> [Catherine Barnett](#), "[Accursed Questions, i](#)," collected in [Human Hours](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin

For her last birthday I found in a used New Jersey  
Toy store, a six inch Amiri Baraka action figure  
With three different outfits: an elaborately colored  
Dashiki with afro pick, a black linen Leninist getup,  
And a sports coat with elbow patches & wool Kangol.  
Accessories include an ink pen & his father's pistol.  
If you dip him in bathwater, he will leak  
The names of his abandoned children. Pull a string,  
He sings "Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note"  
Sweeter than the sweetest alto to ever sing  
In the Boys Choir of Harlem. The store clerk tried  
Selling me the actual twenty volume note LeRoi Jones  
Wrote the night before Baraka put a bullet in him.  
I would've bought it. But I had no room in my suitcase.

*Terrance Hayes*

54

---

<sup>54</sup> [Terrance Hayes](#), "[American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin \(For her last birthday I found...\)](#)," collected in [American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin](#), Penguin Books

## Poetry Machines

I saw your new book today. Just after I saw your new book.  
The day after I saw your last new book. It kind of looks like  
all you do is write books. It kind of seems like a rose grows  
out your mouth each day: on the bus, the subway. In your  
bed, in the germs you spread when you forget to cover your  
mouth while coughing. And it kind of seems like you've got  
locked in your office some kind of automatic poetry machine.  
Out your ears, daffodils and smokestacks. Or out your nose,  
a poetry balloon grows. Out your eyes, an odd image is cast:  
a wolf's head consuming an ice-cream cone. It seems like  
this is poetry. What am I coming to poetry for? A gnat sunk  
in a bowl of milk? I did not know I wished to relive with you  
that morning you sat across the kitchen table from your father  
in 1978. He took his black. He will, in a later poem, have you  
working on the car out back. A bolt falls from the underbelly  
of the car to *plink* into a dish like *a tooth extracted*. This is a  
metaphor. We need more cold-sores, need more of what you  
won't give us; give us some true ugliness. Your books arrive  
annually, slick events appearing like the latest model of a car.  
It would seem you do not consider the writing of poetry very  
hard. Couple swan and cell phone. Pair two paralytic kids in  
wheelchairs, hand the sharp light from hospital windows back  
to them. Descend an imaginary ladder, climb link by link down  
from out the window of your tiny apartment. March into your  
local bookstore and demand to know why they aren't carrying  
your latest volume. Shoot the cashier with your poetry gun.

Cate Marvin  
55

---

<sup>55</sup> Cate Marvin, "Poetry Machines," *Boston Review*, collected in *Oracle*, W.W. Norton & Company

Someone's Utopia: Love as a Fountain

How could the news come?  
We drove with my second cousins to  
The orchards at the feet of the Catskills.

We cut three names into a tree.  
And when I burned my wrist in the cannery  
So badly it began to bubble,

You were there with a bucket of cold water.  
Among tons of softening apples  
You smelled like cinnamon burning. That night

I watched you play the piano with Jamie and Evan  
Who were both, at some point, your lovers—  
My heart in such a confusion,

Their bows drawing diagrams in the air.

*Joe Hall*  
56

---

<sup>56</sup> [Joe Hall](#), "[Someone's Utopia: Love as Free as a Fountain](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [Someone's Utopia](#), [Black Ocean](#)



## The Body in Pain

For a long while I was with you & faithful  
as I was to the black hair dye on aisle eight,  
as good at covering-up.

For a long while I gave you to the stage  
in exchange for Aunt March in *Little Women*,  
Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*.  
It felt entirely like an act, but wasn't.  
The curved back of the spinster, the clunky leg.  
I read the lines like hell I read them loud  
and clear I read them well.

•

This is the spine )  
A closing parenthetical.  
What did my body mean to say as an aside?

•

All states of being have referential content:

ashamed of  
belief in  
devotion to  
gratitude for  
hunger for  
longing for  
love for  
relief from  
pity for  
struggle for  
thirst for  
tired of

*except* pain.

•

A friend calls, her brother shot himself  
in Tennessee. She says,  
I need to talk to you  
because you & he  
both are were  
disabled.

•

Now it is Saturday night & I am writing  
another letter to Lucy Grealy, who I will never meet.

Dear Lucy,

You do not know me. It feels wrong  
for me to know about the heroin, the bags  
of mail you kept, the bolt in your face.

For what it is worth, I have a bolt in my hip,  
a hook along my spine. I don't want to talk  
about any of this. Tell me: what was your last

good thing? Can we stay there?

•

The boy, nineteen, in his car driving through  
Tennessee, left a note taped to the rearview mirror:  
*I am always in pain.*

•

Elaine Scarry writes that pain is simultaneously  
a thing that cannot be confirmed & cannot be denied.

In me, a shooting like a flash like a planet like a fire.  
In you, a question mark.

•

The boy & I both with a bird in our lungs.  
Ribs press in, constrict. The medical  
dictionary describes it as *crab-like ribs*.

Even they resort to figurative language.  
The boy's sister on the phone asks,  
Are you also in pain? How does it feel?

She means to say, Tell me why this happened.

•

For a long while I was with you & faithful.  
I did not mind, you shooting, you itching  
as if you did not know we lost that foot.

Someone would have played lover to her brother  
& meant it. This happens all the time:  
When mine said, I am getting used to  
your body, it sent me batty, bawling, bastard,

how could he love this husk? Then I flipped  
that switch. I no more notice the twitch  
of a lover's eye because it is *my* lover & *his* eye.

•

Descartes was always partial to cross-eyed women,  
because the object of his first love had such a defect.

This doesn't explain  
the boy the gun the car the drive the mountains  
the woman the drug the skin the face the floor

•

Dear Lucy,

I am angry with you. Which was it?  
Did you abdicate to beauty or pain?  
Say pain. It is easier for me to understand.

*Jillian Weise*  
57

---

<sup>57</sup> [Jillian Weise](#), "[The Body in Pain](#)," [Painted Bride Quarterly](#), collected in [The Amputee's Guide to Sex](#), [Soft Skull Press](#)

Which makes me, I guess, the muddy Colorado

*...carved with the curious legend of my youth...*  
—Stanley Kunitz

What we learn from most pornography is  
that a great many primates so professionally beautiful  
as to make one's teeth ache  
have had congress with a great many other such primates,  
though only a few seemed really that into it.

What only a specialized, expensive or amateur category of porn  
reveals is that occasionally one of the immortals will,  
as in Cavafy's poem, condescend to love up  
an ordinary person. Even the Grand Canyon  
was full before it was empty: over the eons

many breathtaking, sometimes medicated concavities  
have been filled to overspilling by unexceptional convexities  
who just happened to lean into the right gloaming, urinous doorway  
at a lucky small hour of the night. Even I,  
who about 1981 heard a boy I loved at summer camp in Maine

tell a girl, when he thought I was asleep, that he might have loved me  
*except that I was not good looking—I, even I, in time*  
came to have such regular traffic with gods lovelier than he  
as to shake my teeth all but loose. Was this because  
I got better looking, or just that even the gods' hungers

have their reasons *que la raison ne connaît pas?* Whatever.  
This fluid exchange lasted so many years that  
even what was often over-praised as "hard as rock"  
wore down by degrees to the deep ditch you see  
before you. (I began tall but was brought both low and deep.)

Though I don't recommend  
the vulgar glass overlook, still, *camerado*,  
if you step to the edge of this  
strange history, I promise you'll thrill  
to the vast, acrophobic layers of emptiness—

Patrick Donnelly  
58

---

<sup>58</sup> Patrick Donnelly, "[Which makes me, I guess, the muddy Colorado](#)," *Plume*, collected in [Little-Known Operas](#), [Four Way Books](#)

from "Neonatology"

All of my aunties chatting like crows on a line,  
all of my aunties on electric breast pumps,  
the double kind, one for each exhausted tit.

Mommy, the baby's head popped off! A tiny head,  
white, wet, bloodless, heartbeat still on the soft spot.  
She tells me, Stick it back on, Girl. Don't be afraid.

You can't show your children you're afraid.

A paraffin seam bubbles on his scalp.  
A pink cicatrix lines his lovely neck.

*Elizabeth Alexander*

59

---

<sup>59</sup> [Elizabeth Alexander](#), "[Neonatology](#)," [TriQuarterly](#), collected in [Antebellum Dream Book](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

from *Julia the Astonishing*

### How She Would Return from the Dead.

The body brought out like empty wood,  
silent as a dark whale in dark water.  
The body a citadel in trees: getting there was  
land-swimming, pushing aside loneliness,  
a white man in rubber boots and all  
his little dogs, the sun flashing in and out  
like god's face upon the water before  
the invention of cardboard and radio  
transmissions. And then the second before  
she knew she was going to give it all up—  
everything, all of it, until she was walking  
down the road in the dark with lungs full  
of the scattered, old-fashioned promises  
of beginning again—the house  
of her body would light up, the feet  
marching as they had been instructed to do.

---

My fugue state, but brittle.  
Pieces of me broke off,  
each one a little you.  
That night we washed our  
socks together in the hotel  
sink then watched an old  
Murder She Wrote. A blank  
face as white as breaths on  
the screen. I wept because  
I knew it was my face.  
Then together we went  
into the painting of the ocean.

---

We approach the defunct  
nudist colony.  
Worn chorus of evening  
doves, no naked folks.  
Every moment  
an ossuary.  
I'm a body.  
You are dead  
like the invisible  
nudes. But you  
walk with me.  
The moon  
mothered in clouds.

---

As you know, I am no one's  
bride. And yet I belong to you  
and you are like me, a suit  
of armor made of mercury.  
The creatures lilt and gambol  
when they sense our hovering.  
I am a wraparound porch  
bound to my own heart  
and you an afternoon  
filled with street corners.

---

The smaller I am, the easier it is  
for people to dream of me.  
I go into their heads like a seed,  
planting my tiny doorway  
and crudely through it come  
these awful resurrections.  
They gave me a homestead by a little lake,  
rustling itself in the breeze.  
But the land rustled up three corpses  
by the end of winter.  
How industrious this sadness is,  
making its ramp into me every day.  
Building its house and also its saw,  
its level, its nails, and whatever  
substance makes these walls.

*Julia Story*  
60

---

<sup>60</sup> [Julia Story](#), "[Julia the Astonishing](#)," [The Best American Poetry Blog](#), collected in [Julia the Astonishing](#), [Sixth Finch](#)

from "At the White Quay"

V.

I woke at dawn, my resolution cold  
As a silver pistol in the bed beside me.

Shadows passed bluewhite on the street:  
The dissolve of the modern city.

I washed; I dressed. I checked my reflection,  
Wavery as one already beginning to disappear.

*Today you are acting a tragedy*  
A girl has grown sick of her happiness  
And overturned her plate, she wants to read  
The verso of the world.

Then like the one  
Lowering herself into a dry stone well,  
I kissed a Trojan Horse, tonguing that whole  
City of night.

VI.

For three days, half out of mind, I set  
The iron clock to my ignorant ear. *It barely breathed.*  
Old noble thing: what kind of world is this?  
I assure you, you hardly want to live in it.  
Even I, the bearer of your beating body  
Do these things bequeath. And then—if you believe it—  
He gave up his tick. I could not weep  
But turned back to the tinker shop  
Where I was welding together a terrible robot.

All the sisters holding their faces in bowls  
Of laughter, as the Mother Superior counts down the row  
After the Devil's been for a visit.

Monica Ferrell

61

---

<sup>61</sup> Monica Ferrell, "At the White Quay," *The Canary*, collected in [Beasts for the Chase](#), [Sarabande Books](#)



## Between the Tongue and the Warm Salt

Dearling. Sweatheart.  
In the quantum spaces between words  
people understand each other.  
They meet in a central square  
and have a hot pretzel.  
They taste the same salt.  
Don't be scared because  
we are ghosts to each other.  
I'm sorry I will leave you.  
Put your finger inside me. Taste my salt.  
We snap at each other  
while bombs kill people elsewhere.  
You put on a skirt and ride your bicycle away.  
I'm sorry! I shout.  
When you turn around at the corner  
and start riding back,  
two journals will merge:  
the one I'm writing now, from birth to death,  
and the one my life's writing backwards.  
Their lines appear to cross  
but a scientist would see space  
howling between the tongue  
and the warm salt.

*Alicia Jo Rabins*

62

---

<sup>62</sup> [Alicia Jo Rabins](#), "[Between the Tongue and the Warm Salt](#)," collected in [Divinity School](#), [The American Poetry Review](#)

from “The Lumberjack’s Dove”

At the hospital, Lumberjack is still waiting & still bleeding. The dove begins to mince magazines in its beak. It gathers the bits into a pile. So far, it has accrued a heap of twelve shredded tabloids.

---

There is only one other patient in the waiting room. She is mostly bald, with a few bright patches stealing up from the scalp. *I cut it all off*, she says, *but it was a mistake*.

*Will the doctor stitch it back on?* asks Lumberjack. He knows little of what doctors can & cannot do. He knows little of the rules of removal & replacement.

---

The woman pets the mass of her own hair, piled in her lap. It growls, nips at her thumb. Once a part of the body is removed, it belongs to itself.

---

The surgical technician wraps the dove with moistened gauze & floats it in a plastic bag of ice water. The anesthesiologist inserts an intravenous line.

Lumberjack is alone in the forest. Trees are telling him to sleep. A doe finds a bullet in her belly. A red-tailed hawk coughs up a cradle of bones.

---

The surgeon needs to know now: Can the hand be saved? So the technician unwraps the dove—cool & silvered with wet, wing tips sagged, its eyes galaxies, its heart a land mine. The dove’s wings are spread open by blue rubber gloves. It is laid on its back. Tackboard slides beneath it. Then, with two soft pops, one through each wing, it is stapled to the table.

---

I'll make this quick & honest.

The surgeon inserts a scalpel into the dove's trachea & slits down towards the pelvis. The dove's stomach grins open. Its lungs go dark. It wants for nothing.

---

Back in the truck bed, Axe feels a shift. It begins to snow. The snow falls directly onto the truck & nowhere else in the parking lot. The snow is not snow. The snowflakes are feathers & they are falling faster. They fill the truck bed until Axe is buried & gone & reaching up for a surface she cannot touch.

*GennaRose Nethercott*

63

---

<sup>63</sup> [GennaRose Nethercott](#), "[At the hospital, Lumberjack is still waiting...](#)," [The Lumberjack's Dove](#), HarperCollins

## What Was Left of the Angel

It's only now when you were speaking about morning hats that  
I suddenly thought about the girl from who knows  
how many years back and thought—now I understand—  
it was a *mourning* hat.  
God knows, I probably have it all wrong.  
And not just about the hat. "It is not right,"  
that's what the girl kept saying and the boy,  
I think he said it too. At least  
that's what I thought they were saying.  
Of course, in French. In fact, in French Canadian French,  
which only, God knows, made matters worse.  
*Quelle plume*, I wanted to say. But wound up saying something  
like, *C'est une chapeau* and even  
that with worrying over the *une* or *un* of it.  
They were with me because that is how  
it was back then. I was the one with the biggish place.  
I would come back and find a girl sitting on my bed  
with a plate of buttered toast. We drank wine  
left from a Chilean who had gone on to Switzerland.  
Luy, that was his name, the boy, not the Chilean,  
and it was pronounced like Louie and her name  
I'll think of it—it's right there—a French name too.  
The child's name I remember. It took me  
a while to figure it out. They kept saying "Didiet,"  
like a kind of punctuation. "Didiet" they would say.  
They kept going out and coming back with shopping bags.  
She bought a pink hat. And then another—this one  
with a feather. He bought colored pencils, a chocolate angel.  
More wine. I came to understand they had lost the child,  
this Didiet. That it was a window. They stayed three nights.  
I lived alone then or with whomever, friends' friends passing  
through, for some time with a Salvadoran boy, and that Chilean  
who sent a postcard from Biarritz and another from Nepal.  
I gave them my bed. During the night I heard them, the girl  
and the boy—or really, just the girl—  
her crying in my bed, her crying that grammar  
I had come to understand was the child.  
I remember how it sounded so French, her crying,  
and how I worried that if I fell asleep she would step  
out my window. He offered me a piece of the chocolate angel.  
I am sure there was more wine. Even, perhaps, another hat.  
Exactly what happened to the child, I never was sure, though  
Luy and Anise—that was the girl's name, Anise, I knew  
I'd remember—they told me and told me more than once  
in those three days. There was the problem of the French.  
They left in the morning. By evening I had finished off  
what was left of the angel. I heard from them sometime—  
a few years later. They had a new baby.

A girl, a boy, I can't remember. When she kissed me goodbye,  
she was wearing that hat. They had so many packages to carry.  
With all the everything going on, at some point  
the dyed orange feather fell from the hat, floating  
to my floor where it stayed until I swept and tidied up  
which I always eventually did, God knows.

*Victoria Redel*

64

---

<sup>64</sup> [Victoria Redel](#), "[What Was Left of the Angel](#)," collected in *Already the World*, Kent State University Press

## Etymology of butch

### I. *Butch*: Possible abbreviation of the word “butcher”

A. I am the granddaughter of a butcher. A knife plotting meat is audible ancestry

B. Asians are known to eat every part of the animal. Balls and all. Tongue

1. her wet deity. My salted chin. Meat-monger, I am bowl

2. of howl. Every bride is a basket

C. we fill with fresh eggs. My grandfather once butchered a chicken that laid no eggs

1. but still ate from his palm. He called this theft. He said every animal must atone

2. for its hunger

3. in usefulness. The year I said no

4. children, I fled the house. When I say house I mean

5. body. Tower of my wife’s wrist, bone-keyed locks. Language is the fugitive

D. of meaning: my name is the knife my voice unsheathes. Draws on its own throat.

1. In bed, we wear a fur of fathers. The stars like knocked-out teeth

2. I lock braces with the first girl I kiss. The sparks smell like

3. the soap of a sun.

E. My grandfather eats even the bones of things. White is the color

1. emptied of bodies. A scar roves my skin like a pink search party.

2. We waste not. No part of my body uneaten, unused

3. to butchery. With a handsaw I hack my hair a holy length

4. blunt as a crown. Asian-bangs. The bowl haircut

5. my first boyhood. My blade identity. Bungled

F. beauty: beast I aimed to skin

1. but carved bone-torches of instead. Night

2. I exaggerate like a hole, master my meat

3. a moon's mistressing.

II. *Butch*: nickname for a boy, possibly derived from the name George "Butch" Cassidy

A. Crimes:

1. Robbery (I ferment her hands in me. Now they're foam & wrists of water

2. Hijacking (I wear my brother's hand-me-downs. My mother says when we're not so poor she'll dress me like her girl. My first dress is patterned with fishes & hooks. I grow out of it in less than a year. My breasts absolve themselves of fabric. My first English teacher invites me to sit on his lap

3. Banditry (we play family. I ask you to call me *father*. I make you serve me dinner first. Dirdumplings & slugs for dessert. Take my name. Be the son in my lineage of losses. Be the law to my longing. The lap to my ass. The sound to my

B. slurs / nicknames:

1. *Dyke*. I sizzle the river with my spit. I wade without legs. I keep my hair long as a fishline. I fill my lungs with birdlife. Feathers are femme. My wings rest in her chest

2. *Lesbo*. the island of Lesbos is not an island but a boat. The oars are enormous arms. The boat itself is a belly. It swallows its own sail. It sells wind to women who return as pickled swans. Some heroes, before leaving home, carry their mother's sweat in a vial around their necks. They sniff the vials to keep from straying. Daughterhood is something like dogness

3. in that we eat what is fed. We sniff our enemies' asses. We run after cars belonging to fathers. We fetch sticks to be beaten with

4. White girls call me *fish breath*. The doubleness of this: my mother at the Chinese grocery rips the gills off fish. Prepares them for the afterlife in our bodies. I'm never allowed

5. to eat out. My mother says we've got leftovers at home. The gut parts golding our sink. The inedible spine. We share the stink. My mother says swallowing fish bone will grow a girl in me. Puncture me openings. Like a bead's twinned mouth I necklace a lineage through. With a hot sword, she cauterized the hole I widened then widowed. First of many betrayals: my refusal to resemble, to reassemble rain into a cohesive water, daughter. To disown all salt in a series of bleedings. My masculinity a factory. An assembly line of mothers unmaking me. Wageless warfare. What god criminalizes creation? Mine

divine. Mine of my own hands. Mine of a prayer arrowheaded in silence, my body a steed I ride to sabotage

C. gods:

Kristin Chang  
65

---

<sup>65</sup> Kristin Chang, "[Etymology of butch](#)," [BOAAT](#)

from “Dear Miss Hamilton,”

Miss Yurka played a cow, a cow in such a classic theatrical production. Such stock livestock is always a result of a fallout between Zeus, who desires, it seems, anyone and everyone, and Hera, the constantly betrayed and vengeful wife. Hera was known as the “Cow-eyed One,” so perhaps being a bovine was not that bad? But the speeches are only mooing travelogues of the cow’s flight to Asia, the gadfly stinging her on. It reads almost like modern advertising. “Be sure to stop at this sacred grove.” “This water nymph is standing by to help you.” “That temple is open late.” No, these bits and pieces were all expendable.

*Michael Martone*

66

---

<sup>66</sup> [Michael Martone](#), “[Dear Miss Hamilton](#),” collected in [Brooding](#), [University of Georgia Press](#)



## Ultrasound

it's not that we're all born  
genderless, though we are.  
rather, once we were all small  
women inside our mothers.  
something about science  
& sex organs & hormones  
& god. no wonder she wept  
red negligee when she walked in  
on me at ten in her worst dress  
spinning before her dead  
father's mirror, my eyes made up  
into science fictions, felt me  
again inside her, my pig thirst  
threading her blood & body  
mass into another veil i'd wear  
& not care for. seeing mother  
cry i found myself  
into manlier fabrics, when i am  
a boy again she tells me  
it's not that she hated me fey  
rather, that day she swore  
she saw the mirror sob. fetal lady,  
little daughter, tiny apology.

*sam sax*  
67

---

<sup>67</sup> [sam sax](#), "[Ultrasound](#)," [The Beloit Poetry Journal](#), collected in [bury it](#), [Wesleyan University Press](#)

## Many Hats

*For Renda, whose favorite hat is a tiara*

Six is that year when all the world's magic is still within reach  
and language can rise and reveal it.  
Science and sorcery hold equal sway for explanation  
and the drudgery of budgets and aging are as yet undetected UFOs.  
Six glistens like spun sugar in sunlight.

At six, career day has her considering infinite choices ahead.  
A pink bedazzled cowboy hat catches her eye and leads to:  
"I'm going to be a sheriff who designs cities and has four kids!"  
Her older sisters take this in with the dignified skepticism of middle schoolers.  
On the drive home, she tries on many hats.

As a shower of pink petals falls over our car, our conservationist asks:  
"Can we find a way to save some of these cherry blossoms from the wind?"

At home, as we rush past one another, our patrol officer insists:  
"You can't go back to work unless you know the magic word!"  
Whispering now: "It's dessert."

At the end of a very long day, our doctor prescribes:  
"Two hugs are not enough. Bedtime is a very long time."

Listening to the radio on the drive to school the next morning,  
our literary scholar speculates:  
"Do you think he's leaving on a trip, or like, forever?"  
Providing textual evidence from the lyrics,  
"I think forever. This sounds really serious."

*Lena Khalaf Tuffaha*

68

---

<sup>68</sup> [Lena Khalaf Tuffaha](#), "[Many Hats](#)," collected in [Water & Salt](#), Red Hen Press

## Romeo Collision

1.

Say there are two emotions, love or fear,  
one casting out the other like the winner  
in rock-paper-scissors. Some mornings (this one)  
fear takes up the bed and windows, takes up  
my human shape and walks it room to room—  
when I'm alone, so later can't be proved.  
Related subject: X let her husband's girlfriend,  
who boasted to beforehand, begin  
to make love with her. Some party guests looked on.  
Of the two asleep, feet touching, their pattern—  
hips cupped, or opening opposite, sweat  
strong on the sheets by morning—we have let  
their habits shelter us, shoulder or bureau  
in outline, nights. X knows. I know.

2.

*See where the weeds are pink*, I show the child,  
her chin dug in the seat back. Outside Newark  
the Meadowlands swung, heavy-tipped, between track  
sections, car glass, canisters. Your good eye  
assembled what I love: a pelt-  
colored land cut by bridges, cracking tower's  
fire. Or found one afternoon, in a bar,  
a child's shoes thrown among petals  
of a torn-up rose. The fish, huge,  
*with two great dead rotten eyes*  
you came running to report, stride  
mismatched, a tall man's, two kinds of music.  
Unlike you, I can sit and stare,  
for hours, see nothing, like a passenger.

3.

Take the char taste of fight to bed,  
or better, defer till morning with beer, rum,  
then throw it up. Not that I slept.  
(Recall the acres near my parents' home  
ruined in fire, dead trees like knives  
upright for years.) One night while I burned,  
wanting the house still, the last lights  
in the kitchen out, I heard father and son  
go over lessons, the deep voice first with *walk*  
or *blue*, the other, soft, as in question,  
answering *azul ...jugar...* they seemed to talk  
like two long familiar, who didn't listen,

spoke when the other stopped, but at a peace,  
one asking *will you*, the other *yes*

4.

“Better dead than in some basement.” The locksmith  
shows how the bolt will fit. To sleep, I use  
left-over medicine, locks that take keys  
both sides of the door. The alleged stayed with  
his mother, not two months out of prison  
when he *raped a city* (read: *black*) *woman, beat*  
*her with a pipe*. The next woman, white,  
made headlines for the dailies, Page A1.  
I begin to think she was mine. Leaflets  
aging on store fronts show date missed,  
her eyes and hair, REWARD FOR SAFE RETURN.  
Police with dogs search the Raritan  
for the published coat *last seen*  
for the form *female, matching description*

5.

Speak of the peace, its strangeness, a country  
seen first at dusk. Of the plane tree  
not taking its shape back from the dark yet.  
Speak of the wet pad spots tracked to the bed  
and the wrung towels thrown and the two soup bowls.  
And of the chests and hips, slightly apart, to cool.  
And of the great, great quiet, the wordless lips  
shaping only the many shapes of kisses.  
And the slackened legs and back stroked for their work.  
And the near-sleep shiftings, and lone work  
steps of the first on the sidewalk. Then daylight came  
the way a dancer will begin lifting her arms  
and lift them without any music. I kept  
one hand on your chest, whether I woke or slept.

6.

I squat beside a crate that stays buried  
in what won't go elsewhere: notebook  
I bought in '88 to hold my worries,  
slides of the Rhineland (borrowed). Near work  
I took this pamphlet: *The First Nine Months*  
with photos. Barricaded, rubbing prayer beads  
one shrieked *she rips babies from their mothers*  
To the near-girl, going in, *miss, please miss, please*  
At school, one child less: Miss Charlene sent  
the oldest (reads the note) to foster care.  
She's taken three in from her children,  
writes here *too much with this one more*

I study the paddle hands, mud bit of eye,  
gauze sac across the face. And want that child.

7.

The title's Brooklyn's, of thin floor and wall,  
of Sunday's *hate-you-fuck-you-listening? I'll  
leave!* They didn't. Not the new ones down the hall,  
the landlord and wife who'd kept it up for years.  
Mid-block, ROMEO COLLISION could repair  
what broke an auto body. The title's yours:  
Quick step across the stoop, quick look up  
to see if I looked. Fear or love?  
Which is it moving us who move  
the way the tamer steps in the cage, alone—  
(In the air above your coat you drew cartoon  
hearts, great bursting ones. Then came in.)  
who say *Beloved*. Lay out the wrapped  
pears, two colors of flowers. Who accept.

*Lisa Coffman*  
69

---

<sup>69</sup> [Lisa Coffman](#), "[Romeo Collision](#)," [Beloit Poetry Journal](#), collected in [Likely](#), [The Kent State University Press](#)

from *I'm So Fine*

The same year I found out who Audie Murphy was I got stretch marks I was 12 & living in a battered women's shelter in Long Beach with my mother & sister & noticed the light striations after my first shower there I was filling out too fast & eating too much junk food I put on sandals & a loose pale blue summer dress that tied at the shoulders & saw the woman in the bunk across the room organizing pictures in a raggedy green photo album she lay there propped up on a thin elbow looking at Audie Murphy so hard her inch-thick glasses fogged up & chattered to herself about his movies I think it bothered her son who was my age & very smart but he didn't complain he took really good care of her she would kiss the pictures & say in a clear voice I might be tall and you might be short Audie Murphy but you'd better tell those Western girls you're all mine

*Khadijah Queen*

70

---

<sup>70</sup> [Khadijah Queen](#), "[The same year I found out who Audie Murphy was I got stretch marks](#)," collected in [I'm So Fine: A List of Famous Men & What I Had On](#), [YesYes Books](#)

## Tattler

In Europe an ex-lover left me to eat alone. A shy busboy brought me an extra macaron, pink in his hand. His eyes dart around before he mutters in Arabic, *Ana min Iraq*.

<>

the bar where a man said

*I'll fuck the Arab out of you*

the news report where a man said

*O Allah my daughter's daughter*

(a braid without a head to swing from)

<>

I tell the busboy I'm sorry, sorry, sorry. His eyes the color of cognac.

We shred the cocktail napkins into a pile of white. He says when the Americans came to his town, they *didn't care who*, they asked the women to stay in their houses, *even when I say I am good man*, they still shot at the neighborhood trees. His favorite birds, *the chattering ones*, fell in branches.

*Like this*, he says. The white fluttering from his fingers.

<>

birdsong:

the things that wash up on white shores  
panties and televisions

jukeboxes and toddlers

<>

I am honoring my script. I remove my shoes carefully. I let the Israeli soldier run her fingers through my hair for a long time, until it feels more like love than anything else, and for a moment I wonder what she'd do if I shut my eyes, started singing until it was over. She follows every curl. She smiles thinly when I tell her not to worry, she couldn't brush it if she tried. Don't you understand, I want to say.

<>

Wasp like my husband's father. The right spoon, salty gimlets, a lake house in Maine. Wasp like plane, nosedive.

<>

Don't you understand, my hair *is* the army.



Two soldiers at the border. *You can throw a rock if you want.*

One of them pretends to read my passport.

He wants me to remove my belt. He wants to know why I'm here.

*Hala Alyan*  
71

---

<sup>71</sup> [Hala Alyan](#), "[Tattler](#)," collected in [The Twenty-Ninth Year](#), [Mariner Books](#)



## The Poem of Fountains

1

Bill Turley asked me to sit on the board of the Lilac Basin Sewage Corporation—  
I was working on a poem about fountains,  
but Bush had just claimed Florida; it felt timely to say yes and wax respectable.

2

The annual meeting brought neighbors who typically kept to themselves:  
world citizens, impresarios;  
the union man, Morteza Daneshdoost; the rocket scientist,  
Tsuchin Philip Chu.

3

The system, said Chu, works by gravity: at the nadir, an electric pump;  
three eight-by-fourteen  
reinforced-concrete holding tanks; a control panel of switches and capacitors.

4

A brisk day, everyone chatting, we pulled on boots and walked the line.  
In the flow field beyond the lagoon,  
I noted three varieties of fountains: willow, buttercup, wild iris.

5

Over coffee and beignets, the board traced its origins to a Marxist  
historian, a descendant of John Adams.  
Come officer-selecting time, I accepted the vice presidency.

6

In the event of an obstruction I would greet the city truck  
and chat with the crew while they slipped  
a hose into a cleanout and blasted a channel through the roots.

7

A few weeks into my tenure, our president, Jean Boehne, on the phone—  
The obstetrician had ordered bed rest  
for her pregnant daughter-in-law. Soon she would fly to Colorado.

8

Three days into Boehne's absence, a red light flashing. Tanks  
erupting. Sewage backing up  
in basements, the suddenly outed air of the underground.

9

In times of extraordinary stress, wrote the *New York Times*  
of W and his administration,  
the ordinary man may summon unprecedented greatness.

10

But moments of high valor remind me of fountains, the ego cresting  
as the surge of dailiness falls back.  
When I see myself at that time, I am like a fountain as I rush to the phone.

11

And as I start to dial, *plumber?*, *electrician?*, the two numbers run together  
and I remember Turley's caveat:  
"It can prove interesting, in this neck of the woods, which Williams to call."

12

Events to regard dispassionately: the concrete lid of the last holding tank  
would not sustain a man on a Bobcat;  
the truck full of bilge was too heavy for the bridge by the Hickman-Porters.

13

A friend said "shit patrol" to describe the board of the sewage corporation,  
probably not meaning anything pejorative—  
"Turd blossom, high prophet, Quasimodo," Bush addressed his cabinet.

14

Though mostly when I think of Bush, I see Li'l Abner's idol, Fearless Fosdick,  
blowing away innocent bystanders  
and capturing the mayor while the actual thugs smirk down the back stairs.

15

If the young jazz guitarist Bill Frisell was making too much of a burlesque  
of comping beside him,  
the maestro, Jim Hall, would say, "Don't just play something; stand there."

16

Some are no good with decisions. Boehne is good with decisions. I am effective  
with the snake when the line  
to the flow field stops up; also, I do not hesitate to put my hands in the stuff.

17

When Jung observed that the human being remains three years old all its life  
perhaps he meant  
that the imagination never stops constructing the behavior of the mythical adult.

18

How far shy of this great one we fall. But how like a fountain our vote  
to restore the control panel. How uplifting  
the thrust of the second pump. How elegant the waste pooled in the lagoon.

*Rodney Jones*  
72

---

<sup>72</sup> [Rodney Jones](#), "[The Poem of Fountains](#)," [River Styx](#), collected in [Imaginary Logic](#), [Houghton Mifflin Harcourt](#)

## Folding Chairs

The folding chairs are separated while mating,  
and lined up around the table for a different duty.

I splash my face with water from the chafing dish—  
when has there not been an event requiring my sobriety?

The paper plate on top is covered in dust and discarded.  
I'm 40 years old and I am just like everyone else

as Echo said whatever was said to her—  
come forth, you among us who can discern a true apology.

Little blonde children cut each other's bangs  
in the church bathroom.

For now it's all a big joke;  
the ham blushes in strings from the carving station.

But the anger will surface once families get home,  
kick off their boots in the mudroom. I am afraid

I will continue to burn the supper. I am afraid  
I have not made enough for everyone.

*Paige Ackerson-Kiely*  
73

---

<sup>73</sup> [Paige Ackerson-Kiely](#), "[Folding Chairs](#)," collected in [Dolefully, a Rampart Stands](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## The River of Bees

In a dream I returned to the river of bees  
Five orange trees by the bridge and  
Beside two mills my house  
Into whose courtyard a blindman followed  
The goats and stood singing  
Of what was older

Soon it will be fifteen years

He was old he will have fallen into his eyes

I took my eyes  
A long way to the calendars  
Room after room asking how shall I live

One of the ends is made of streets  
One man processions carry through it  
Empty bottles their  
Image of hope  
It was offered to me by name

Once once and once  
In the same city I was born  
Asking what shall I say

He will have fallen into his mouth  
Men think they are better than grass

I return to his voice rising like a forkful of hay

He was old he is not real nothing is real  
Nor the noise of death drawing water

We are the echo of the future

On the door it says what to do to survive  
But we were not born to survive  
Only to live

*W.S. Merwin*  
74

---

<sup>74</sup> [W.S. Merwin](#), "[The River of Bees](#)," collected in [The Lice](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## John the Conqueror

In the kitchen, the women are saying things I don't  
understand: *He was as mad as a mule chewing bumblebees,*  
*she's as happy as a dead pig in the sunshine, you're so*  
*stuck up you'd drown in a rainstorm.* And they'd talk  
about other women, like my mother's Aunt Julia,  
who wasn't her real aunt but who worked in my grandfather's

house for years, ministering to the farm animals  
and the humans, too, when they had a touch  
of the dropsy or just weren't feeling well. And once  
the women were talking about another woman, one  
they knew, or it might have been a woman in a song,  
and she was a big woman, and she'd done something

only big women do or maybe something that all women  
do, though she'd done it in such a big way that she'd  
been arrested, but when her case came up, she *shook it*  
*so fine* for the judge that he let her go and sent the cops  
to jail, and while I didn't know what *shook it* meant  
or even what *it* was, I knew the women in the kitchen

were talking about something more powerful  
than anything I'd come across yet in my short life,  
something I'd find out about later, when I was a man,  
if then. Aunt Julia wore two corsets, the one to do  
what any corset does and the other to hold all the plants  
and shoots in her backwoods pharmacy, from the alfalfa

leaf that prevents poverty to the tonka beans that stop  
your enemy's heart and the white sage that keeps your  
enemy from stopping yours, and of these, there was none  
more powerful than the herb the women called John  
the Conqueror that would make the one you love  
love you and that took its name from an African prince

who was sold as a slave, though his spirit was never  
broken, and who survives in folklore as a trickster  
of the type who appears in the works of the Zora Neale  
Hurstons who said he is like King Arthur of England,  
that is, not dead at all but waiting to return when  
his people call him. Late in life, the Freud who called himself

*a godless Jew* embraced monotheism because belief  
in many gods meant you had to invoke a hundred of them  
every day to banish spells, open locked boxes, get a man's  
attention, win at cards. No, no, better to believe in a single  
deity, as the Jews do; this allowed them to see  
the Big Picture, Freud said, and make advances in difficult fields

like law and medicine. John the Conqueror, if I had to pick  
one god, it'd be you. Not only would you lead me to love  
but you'd also help me avoid the bad love that can look  
like good love until it's too late. And you'd help me love  
myself as much as did the mother of, yes, the Sigmund  
Freud who said there was no advantage in life greater

than being the first-born male child of a Jewish mother, who,  
in his case, dandled him on her knee and called him *mein*  
*goldener Sigi*. My golden Siggy: what words could be  
sweeter on a child's ear? In the kitchen, the women laugh  
about their own mothers and how old-fashioned  
they were and how they'd complain about the women's friends,

whom they considered "fast," and say things like  
*Look at her, she's putting on that beauty makeup*  
and *She's just wearing that brassiere so her bosoms*  
*will stick out and men will look at her*  
and *You bait a trap with meat,*  
*honey, and you ain't gonna catch nothing but a dog.*

John the Conqueror, you're my Jewish mother.  
You're my Aunt Julia. You're my big woman,  
even though you're a man. In the kitchen,  
the women say *You can put a cat in an oven,*  
*but it won't lay biscuits.* They say  
*Why are you smiling like a goat in a briar patch,*

*he's as useful as a screen door on a submarine,*  
*her pants were so tight I could see her religion.*  
John, there have been times in my life when  
I might have called you out of the swamp,  
watched you step past  
the sleeping birds until you reached me and took my hand.

Where are we going? You don't even know what I want.  
Out on the lake, we hear the loon's cry, long  
and mournful; it says, *I'm here—where are you?*  
You start to speak, and I don't know what you're saying, but I think  
you mean *wait, wait, listen,* and then,  
sure enough, from the other shore, there's an answer.

David Kirby  
75

---

<sup>75</sup> David Kirby, "John the Conqueror," *Terminus*, collected in *Get Up, Please*, Louisiana State University Press

## The Gods at Three A.M.

The foolish gods are doing poppers while they sing along,  
they're taking off their white T-shirts and wiping the sweat  
from their foreheads with them, the gods have tattoos  
of skulls and roses on their shoulders, perhaps a pink triangle  
above the left nipple, for them there's hope. The gods  
are pausing to light cigarettes while they dance, they're laughing  
at private jokes while the smoke machine comes on,  
one of the gods told you they put talcum powder  
in the artificial fog, then walked away, how could anyone  
breathe talcum powder, but it makes their skin shine  
with the sweat and smell of cigarettes and Obsession. Don't try  
to say you didn't know the gods are always white, the statues  
told you that. The gods don't say hello, and when you ask them  
how they are the gods say they don't know, the gods  
are drunk and don't feel like talking now, but you  
can touch their muscled backs when they pass.

The gods in backwards baseball caps say  
*free love*, they say *this is the time*, and disappear  
into another corner of the bar, they're always moving  
to another song. The gods with their checked flannel  
shirts unbuttoned under open motorcycle jackets,  
hard nipples and ghost-white briefs above the waistbands  
of their baggy jeans, say *get here*, the gods say *soon*, and you just  
keep dancing because you don't know the words, you hope  
the gods will notice small devotions and smile, maybe  
a quick thumbs-up if you're good. The gods  
whose perfect instances of bodies last only  
for the instant, or until last call (and then  
they disappear into the sidewalk), gods who are splendid  
without meaning to be, who do they need  
to impress, say *this could be the magic*, they say  
live for tonight, and then the lights come on.

Reginald Shepherd

76

---

<sup>76</sup> Reginald Shepherd, "[The Gods at Three A.M.](#)," [The Iowa Review](#), collected in [Angel, Interrupted](#), The University of Pittsburgh Press



*Our Completion: Oil On Wood: Tino Rodriguez: 1999*

Before nourishment there must be obedience.  
In his hands I was a cup overflowing with thirst.  
Eighth ruler of my days, ninth lord of my nights:  
he thrashed above me, like branches. Once,  
after weeks of rain, he sliced a potato in half  
to remind me of the moon. The dark slept in the small  
of his back. The back of his knees: pale music.  
We'd crumble the Eucharist & feed it to the pigeons.  
Sin vergüenza. Escuintle. He Who Makes Things Sprout.  
In the margins in a book of poems by Emily Dickinson  
he scribbled: *she had a pocketful of horses/Trojan/  
& some of them used*. Often I mistook him for a storyteller  
when he stood in the rain. A su izquierda, huesos.  
A su derecho, mapas de cuero. When I'd yawn,  
he'd pluck black petals out of my mouth.

*Eduardo C. Corral*

77

---

<sup>77</sup> Eduardo C. Corral, "[\*Our Completion: Oil On Wood: Tino Rodriguez: 1999\*](#)," [\*Post Road\*](#), collected in [\*Slow Lightning\*](#), Yale University Press

## Cardinal

The cardinal's crest, crown of spark, of fire,  
its body flitting

side to side, wings enjambling the air, Christ of  
little bones,

fluttering against my car's side mirror, resting  
briefly,

then attacking its own image again. I had meant  
to be over there—

a worker laboring in a fish commune in Guizhou,  
with skin

like a silver carp and hands cut like gills, pond silt  
through my vessels,

feeding parts of haddock to hake, sea bream to  
flounder, gathering duck feces

for feed, the fish humming in my walls at night.  
I had meant to have my mother's hand

around my throat for being a girl or meant to beat  
my own daughter

with a broom, all the mirrors I looked into,  
reflections missing.

*Victoria Chang*  
78

---

<sup>78</sup> [Victoria Chang](#), "[Cardinal](#)," collected in [Salvinia Molesta](#), [University of Georgia Press](#)

Medium/Message

The rains came last night around sunset,  
after a day of grill-heat, a day of persistent

Code Orange air-quality warnings.  
Here, there is always a rainbow.

It is slightly biblical, like the yellow bus  
that comes every morning to take my son.

I assume he arrives at school, a building  
with no interior walls. *Mama can you come*

*make a giant skyscraper?* he asks,  
while I'm writing this. He has inserted

our cat into his family tree, though the teacher  
said she doesn't belong there. Or he says

she said that. He is not a reliable witness.  
My cousin posts a story on Facebook

as a status: *Yet another neighbor's dog  
started barking excitedly at me and the family*

*as we strolled down the street. But this time  
the dog had a seizure mid-bark and died.*

I have nothing profound to say  
about pets. I have very little to tell you,

except that everyone is not finally asleep.  
They are bracing themselves for the start.

We've been watching the Olympics,  
and the crickets and rains have been violent.

Look at that face—completely placid,  
completely relaxed. The announcer

is speaking about the runners. There is a bell.  
One falls, has fallen on the final lap.

Someone moves to take over the lead.  
The man with no legs is running as anchor.

His face is like the sun, and his legs  
are pillars of fire. Another man

who had been shot in both legs runs  
the start of the relay for our country.

He has to keep the baton from falling  
to the ground. We are on our third rainbow

this week. *And when I saw it, I fell on my face,*  
*and I heard the voice of one speaking,* said Ezekiel,

who witnessed the fulfillment of his prophecies.  
The single most important factor contributing

to wrongful conviction is eyewitness  
misidentification, which is to say that

I think I hear my son calling, wakeful,  
but it's only the whine of the air conditioning system,

mechanical, almost-human. Everyone  
is up tonight to watch a rover land on Mars,

while upstairs, the Lego skyscraper project  
is in progress. A sign of the covenant it's not,

but if there is a traumatic event, Legos will survive it.  
My son is the cleanup crew in a shaky empire.

Somebody's got to do it. He says, I don't see  
a battle going on anywhere, then picks up a small hammer.

Before we knew it, the entire building was gone.

*Erika Meitner*  
79

---

<sup>79</sup> [Erika Meitner](#), "[Medium / Message](#)," [At Length](#), collected in [Holy Moly Carry Me](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## The New Sincerity

Adam says he *can't* because he's trapped in a sleepy mimosa dungeon. We're full of champagne & starch & can't rise up out of ourselves. It takes us ten minutes to remember the word "glib." Thinking is like climbing into a short-sheeted bed: familiar enough, but *I don't know—just fucking Wiki it when we get home?* A character on one of our Hulu shows tells another character, "I think you've been watching too many '80s sitcoms on Hulu." I'm supposed to believe we live in a world where fifteen-year-olds know the theme song to *The Jeffersons*? I guess *Gossip Girl* grants us brief economic reprieve, but Adam says he misses the halcyon days of crab rangoon & non-ironic corduroy. When we go out drinking on Easter, there's a bevy of UT law students. One guy is wearing pastel pink chinos & loafers with no socks. After three pecan porters I can't help myself: I go tell the guys, *This is a little weird but I have this blog where I blog about one Totally Awesome Thing every day, so I was wondering if I could take a picture of you for my blog? Because I think your pink pants are Totally Awesome.* The whole party breaks into cheers & back slaps. One bro tries to start "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," but fails. Pink Pants asks, *Can I run to my Land Rover real quick?* He returns sporting a plaid cardigan & his preppiest pout: To Be Young & Rich is Pure *Misery*, by Ralph Lauren. I tell myself this is something I do in the name of New Sincerity. At 4 a.m. I wake to the sound of Adam retching in the bathroom. I curl up outside the door & tell him about my dream where C+C Music Factory was an *actual* factory, where "Gonna Make You Sweat" (Everybody Dance Now)" was our one earnest anthem. It played on repeat all night long. We knew every word. We worked there.

Karyna McGlynn

80

---

<sup>80</sup> Karyna McGlynn, "The New Sincerity," collected in [Hothouse](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## 'Round Midnight

In the book I'm reading: hard rain,  
spike heels on pavement,  
a man waiting in a rented room

to draw a woman down onto his bed.  
She's the wrong woman,  
she's a car wreck in a silk dress

and he can't wait to touch her.  
No plot without desire,  
the more desperate the better.

I look up to find that here, too,  
it's raining. And now that I'm back  
in my own quiet life

I feel like a character who's barely  
been imagined yet, just a name  
wearing a faded T-shirt,

reaching for her glass of cold wine.  
If only the river would surge into the streets,  
if only a tree would uproot itself

or the roof fly off in a funnel of black wind.  
Such is my life: A minute ago I was happy,  
immersed in a book. Now I feel misery

only violence could cure. Now  
I have to invent a story  
to drag me out into the city,

toward music and grainy light  
and the wrong men, I have to discover  
what it is that I want

And who I'm going to have to hurt to get it.

*Kim Addonizio*

81

---

<sup>81</sup> [Kim Addonizio](#), "'Round Midnight," collected in [What Is This Thing Called Love](#), W. W. Norton & Company

Dorothy Wordsworth

The daffodils can go fuck themselves.  
I'm tired of their crowds, yellow rantings  
about the spastic sun that shines and shines  
and shines. How are they any different

from me? I, too, have a big messy head  
on a fragile stalk. I spin with the wind.  
I flower and don't apologize. There's nothing  
funny about good weather. Oh, spring again,

the critics nod. They know the old joy,  
that wakeful quotidian, the dark plot  
of future growing things, each one  
labeled *Narcissus nobilis* or Jennifer Chang.

If I died falling from a helicopter, then  
this would be an important poem. Then  
the ex-boyfriends would swim to shore  
declaiming their knowledge of my bulbous

youth. O, Flower, one said, why aren't you  
meat? But I won't be another bashful shank.  
The tulips have their nervous joie-de-vivre,  
the lilacs their taunt. Fractious petals, stop

interrupting me with your boring beauty.  
All the boys are in the field gnawing raw  
bones of ambition and calling it ardor. Who  
the hell are they? This is a poem about war.

*Jennifer Chang*  
82

---

<sup>82</sup> [Jennifer Chang](#), "[Dorothy Wordsworth](#)," [The Nation](#)

## South Belknap

Jake says: “first time I recall wanting to die I was eight.  
When I tried and nearly did I really wanted to live.”

The room has gone around the room, first names  
only, and favorite foods. Danielle says: “I hate food.”

Lois says: “I know what happened happened only once.  
I also know it’s happening all the time.” In jogging shorts,

his knees scabbed like an eight-year-old’s, Seth says:  
“I hope to radically accept distress from now on,

and maybe bear it skillfully?” Blue of two spruce trees,  
the burnt-orange brickface of Admissions, summer green

of the lawns. Mark writes on the whiteboard: “Men are not  
disturbed by things, but by the view they take of them.”

While most scribble this sentence into notebooks  
on their laps, two or three look out the one window.

They see water from a fountain surge, plume, crest,  
then fall into a pond no bigger than a toddler’s pool,

and a boy with sinewy clots of hair, still as a page  
in a picture book, bows to read his cell phone,

two sparrows fly into and out from the azaleas,  
and roses flicker, fire from a magician’s fingertips.

*Steven Cramer*

83

---

<sup>83</sup> [Steven Cramer](#), “[South Belknap](#),” [Massachusetts Review](#)



## Movie Night

Easter Sunday, and it's just  
the two of us here  
on the guest cabin's sofa where  
no one would think to look for us.  
We've been reenacting  
our favorite horror film from the 70s,  
the one in which my baby  
climbs out from the deep  
slice in my abdomen too early,  
and I hold you still  
attached by your cord  
through the cut that split me in half  
like a gourd. You try to nurse,  
but my mother on the telephone says  
you'll never get what you need  
out here in the air. The rest  
of the film follows me  
as I wander through McDonald's  
screaming for a clean sink.  
It's an emergency. I have to rinse  
the urine off of you before  
my hands can spread apart  
all my wet layers to find the right  
pocket to put you back in.  
Now the movie ends  
and without taking a break  
we trade our roles and start again  
from the beginning. This time  
you play the distant voice while I  
heave myself, heave myself up  
from the bitter lake.

*Sarah Rose Nordgren*

84

---

<sup>84</sup> [Sarah Rose Nordgren](#), "[Movie Night](#)," [Bennington Review](#), collected in [Darwin's Mother](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Mine Is the First Rodeo, Mine Is the Last Accolade

I'm grateful to the man now sleeping with my ex-lover.  
It's true I loved her, but it's right that someone be with her now  
in the dark hour of our republic. Life is no good anymore.  
There are no jobs and no money, so it's good  
that someone be with her now under street lamps filtered  
through sheer curtains at night, the pale approximation of daylight  
illuminating the outer slope of my ex-lover's left thigh  
and the asymmetric birthmark located there I thought  
resembled the bust of Martin Van Buren,  
which that man should smooch now and cherish  
as I did those tender hours on the other side of time and the republic  
when in the opulence of waking I'd move to the window to squint  
at the dapper bodies passing which seemed then to know  
where they were going. What awaited  
when they arrived there. No job, no money,  
I'm grateful for the man now nuzzling and elating with my ex-lover,  
how she survives with him this dark hour, its sad redundancies,  
the human condition like a phonograph skipping,  
which is the condition of urging the same thing over  
and anticipating a different result. How dull it is,  
its mimeographed disasters, dull how the bankers are  
offing themselves now in morning again, leaping from windows again,  
the republic fretting as if it's the first republic, the first dark hour,  
and dull the way the man drives daily at daybreak away from my ex-lover  
in an extravagant light believing that if he does, that when he does,  
he'll be the first to hurt her. O enduring sun.

*Jaswinder Bolina*

85

---

<sup>85</sup> [Jaswinder Bolina](#), "[Mine Is the First Rodeo, Mine Is the Last Accolade](#)," [Black Warrior Review](#), collected in [Phantom Camera](#), [New Issues Press](#)

## How We Respond Is What It Means

At this time it is impossible not to love  
at least one monster. Venom laces the air,  
you are in a house with

the feeling of every light in every room  
turned on and so to turn them off  
is to discover again and again

what makes a house. In this land  
where the couches wax voluptuous, it takes  
but a broken cup to make celebration lisp

into curse. I know no more the shards  
tearing through the soft convoy vehicle  
outside a city that seems eaten

than I know what is in the bag  
the woman stares endlessly into on the bench  
as the wind picks up the sharp dust.

Still. I have these eyes, this laboratory  
for a head—.

We are led to believe always

that each house *there* breaks apart  
and the rooms scatter horribly.  
The rooms are darkened by shatter, they are close

and they are cold. You must be careful  
trying to walk into them. The way  
they have been torn from trying

to hold on to each other  
can carve from you in garish ways  
what you need to walk out of them.

It is difficult to bring someone breakfast  
in bed under these conditions—  
almost nothing lives. *Mercy*,

one cries out in the night,  
*mercy*.

*Marc McKee*

86

---

<sup>86</sup> [Marc McKee](#), "[How We Respond Is What It Means](#)," [Phoebe](#), collected in [Consolationeer](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

## Alphabet Street

*Prince Rogers Nelson, 1958–2016*

“Adore” was my song  
Back in ’87—  
Cool beans, I liked to say,  
Desperately uncool.  
Except for you.  
Florida, a dirty hand  
Gesture; the state, pay dirt.  
Headphones on, I heard,  
In a word, you were sex,  
Just in time. Who was I  
Kidding? Then, as now,  
Love is too weak to define.  
Mostly I just ran,  
Not yet sixteen,  
Overreaching. Track star,  
Pretty uniform.  
Queer, of course. Adore.  
Rewind: my beloved teammates  
Sometimes called me Cinnamon  
Toast Crunch, or CTC, being neither black nor white.  
Until the end of time.  
Vanity would never do it for me.  
Would you? You were definite, the  
X in my fix. And now,  
You’re gone. The old, on repeat. The new  
Zeal: zero.

*Randall Mann*

87

---

<sup>87</sup> [Randall Mann](#), “[Alphabet Street](#),” [Poem-a-Day](#)

## Mental Health

One pill in the morning with breakfast. Orange juice and oatmeal. Brown sugar melted on top. No coffee. No cigarettes. One multivitamin with extra niacin for stress relief, natural. One St. John's Wort and a dab of Valerian Root extract under the tongue. Hold it for ten seconds and swallow it down. Leave the house in the rhythmic rain. Two blocks waiting for the city bus under the awning of M&H Gas. Two-dollar fare for the next four hours. The crowded seats and broken black umbrellas against the edge. You can ride all day if you know the right driver. Half an Ativan under the tongue for stress relief. Hold it until it dissolves. Chew the powder from molar to molar. Swallow the excess down. Ride the rain-soaked streets of fog. The rising fog and drifting fog that slithers on the lake. The parking lot fog and cemetery headstones, branches of maples and swerving commuter cars finding their way to the fastest lane. The folding doors open and people continue to climb the lighted stairs. Stop after stop and the plastic goulashes and shopping bags dripping with rain. The man behind you selling a rock of crack to a younger man, homeless. They shake the plastic bag and all goes on again, normal, with real affection. Weather and breakfast and Halloween costumes and where the bus might stop next. Open your backpack and take out a racquetball. Squeeze it between your thighs and remember to count your breaths. Think of your favorite places to hike. The mountains extending beyond you forever in four different fields of cloud. Decide to get off the bus and walk. The driver nods and rain beats down and the uptown businessmen shuffle beneath the bulbous roof of glass. All your steps are washed away in the smallest shining flood. Walk the blocks and count the squares and count the endless passing cars. The lights are red and liquid gold and fog continues to touch your legs and search for a way inside your brain. Your ears, your open mouth, your nose. It moves itself toward every hole. Open your backpack and take out a Seroquel, morning and night, for distorted thoughts and hallucinations. Hold the taste against your tongue and count your breaths and close your eyes and remember to watch the graceful gait of mule deer crossing the ridge. Barely a year old, lonely together, they move through paintbrush and dew-soaked heather and alder and aspen and down through larches and gold-tinted boulders to drink from Railroad Creek. You watch the cars divide the fog. Water rolls between the lanes. You cross the Kmart parking lot, the Lake Street bridge

and drowning lights. You count the weight of every  
breath. You know it can't go on like this. But here you  
are. This is life. This is the way your day begins.

*Kai Carlson-Wee*  
88

---

<sup>88</sup> [Kai Carlson-Wee](#), "[Mental Health](#)," [Frontier Poetry](#), collected in [Rail](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## Black Umbrella

I don't know anything about life, except that I'm terrified of my massive financial debt, and the only thing that calms me down is a naked girl with two beers. The beers have to be either both for her, or both for me. I rarely have the opportunity to explain this. Most of the girls walk out of my apartment before they're even completely undressed, saying things like, "Summer makes me feel like a black umbrella is opening in my chest." Maybe they're in more debt than I am.

*Sarah Galvin*  
89

---

<sup>89</sup> [Sarah Galvin](#), "[Black Umbrella](#)," [Dogzplot](#), collected in [The Three Einsteins](#), [Poor Claudia](#)

## Mary Donner

Mary Donner dies a year before the Civil War. Florence Nightingale opens a school for nurses. Wild Bill Hickok kills a bear.

Mary Donner gets mad one day and tries to count backwards from 83. All the numbers are names. She isn't mad anymore.

Your tinder date, queer Mary Donner, winks at you from the bar. You tremble when she first kisses you, and later, and then when she says you taste good.

Mary Donner reads in the paper about the Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571 and hums *Happy birthday*.

In the afterlife, Mary Donner bumps shoulders with Robert Frost. She tells him his poetry is bullshit.

Mary Donner visited my high school to talk about eating disorders. For weeks afterwards, the vending machines promised gold and dispensed ox bones.

Dominatrix Mary Donner makes her lovers boil down and eat the leather of her whip, still dripping from the lashes.

When Mary Donner is about to come, she thinks of her feet and how they crept into the fire as she slept.

In January of the year of Mary Donner's birth, the first picture is taken of the moon. OK enters the lexicon. By December, the moon is photographed again.

*Salem Dockery*  
90

---

<sup>90</sup> [Salem Dockery](#), "[Mary Donner](#)," [BOAAT](#)



## Sagittarius

*Horoscope for my son not yet born*

This is the sign you will be  
I hear you are the explorer sign I hear you  
are half-human half-animal although right now  
you gallop in place because you are still dreaming  
yourself into being Or maybe you are the dream  
My body the sleeper You are the unleashed arrow  
of the zodiac Baby you will be blunt  
This week you are the size of a squash  
and so in vogue On every menu squash this  
and pumpkin that This week little horse you may  
flip and prop your feet up on the headboard  
of my ribs As the month ends you will  
be ready to finish and ship a professional project  
Baby when you are born you will be so unprofessional  
thank God This is the week we paint your room  
and I've ordered stars to introduce you to the sky  
Meteors will come this week but the clouds  
will keep them from us Sunburnt rocks will stream over  
and although we cannot see them we will know  
they are there There is nowhere I can read about you  
to learn who you will be

*Hannah Stephenson*

91

---

<sup>91</sup> [Hannah Stephenson](#), "[Sagittarius](#)," collected in [Cadence](#), [The Kent State University Press](#)

## Clinic

How beautiful we are in the afternoon of hands.  
We trade our shadows for days  
of suddenness. A bird got in my blood,  
a tricky one, with a split tongue.  
Now it doesn't get dark  
because you shut your mouth.  
There's too much water here.  
I wish you were dead  
or near. My paper slippers  
glide down the shining hall  
where my friends on the walls hang  
their names. The shift clock blinks.  
I don't think I'll get better. Outside  
itinerant clouds nod and the lilies  
twist in their beds.

*Marni Ludwig*  
92

---

<sup>92</sup> [Marni Ludwig](#), "[Clinic](#)," collected in [Pinwheel](#), [New Issues Press](#)

from *On Imagination*

When I was a child I thought—imagined—that my parents did not love me because of all the terrible things they said and did to me. I was not yet experienced enough to imagine you could love someone and still do terrible things to them for reasons having nothing to do with your feelings for them. I could not then imagine having compassion for the people who did terrible things. I still, in many circumstances, cannot. But I know my parents loved me, despite the terrible things, and this has been a great leap forward.

Common sense, or rational thinking, is often opposed to the imagination, or magical thinking. This, too, is deeply troubling in its complexity.

Robert Frost said that writing free verse was like playing tennis without a net. But it is easy to play tennis without a net, you simply pretend it is there. Or, if you prefer, you can play tennis without a ball or a racquet, I've seen people do it, they play without a ball or a racquet at the end of Antonioni's film *Blow-Up*, and it is very beautiful to watch. Even the spectators turn their heads back and forth in awe.

I can imagine there being a god, an organization to the multiverse we love. I can imagine there not being a god, no organization at all to the multiverse we love.

And now, if I might depress you for a moment, I want to remind you that it is imagination that kicks in every morning when you wake and every night when you go to sleep and tells you that you are safe and all your loved ones are safe and all your belongings really do belong to you and are safe as you are safe.

Of course you are not safe nor is anyone you know safe and nothing really belongs to you, not forever, your most beloved keepsake will one day belong to another. But who wants to live in insecurity and fear?

Mary Ruefle  
93

---

<sup>93</sup> Mary Ruefle, "[When I was a child...](#)," collected in [On Imagination](#)," [Sarabande Books](#)

Here I am,

weed-whacking with a spatula  
flipping hash browns with an emory board  
filing my nails with a knife

Suddenly I know precisely  
what to do with these tears  
though already they're smoldering

Here I am  
hedge clipping  
the wine-stained flutes

shard-scatter like a flock  
of merlin-shocked sanderlings  
With a needle I'm digging up

the something stupid I said  
to the sand crabs  
to the rising tide

Here I am  
with the spoke before I thought  
with the sizzling sea

with this most unhelpful implement

*Martha Silano*

94

---

<sup>94</sup> [Martha Silano](#), "[Here I am](#)," collected in [Gravity Assist](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

## Donor (Wind)

The throat is optional,  
as is the larynx.  
What small object  
can you pull  
through the pink?  
Many things died here:  
a nest, an oil leak,  
a typewriter ribbon's  
language of bile  
and thread. Spread  
my useless parts  
in the city dump,  
spleen fondled by  
seagulls, vertebrae  
plucked by lonely men.  
Tape my useless  
parts together again  
and I'm your dis-  
-appearing shatter.  
Your snowflake  
in heat. Now feed  
me to the wind  
where I belong.

*Hadara Bar-Nadav*

95

---

<sup>95</sup> [Hadara Bar-Nadav](#), "[Donor \(Wind\)](#)," [Prairie Schooner](#), collected in [Lullaby \(with Exit Sign\)](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

## Untitled (Imagine)

Imagine being lost at sea, only it's not a sea and you aren't lost, just sort of sad. It's a small town with a hardware store and an empanada shop. You're either fourteen or fifty-four, but it doesn't matter. The litter in the street gutter is much the same. Something's askew in the cosmos. Hint of rain in the air. Misaligned heavenly bodies. Imagine the sum of your melancholia automatically deducted from your paycheck. You see, Monday is a perpetual afternoon. February turns into autumn. 1994 becomes 2018 and then it's St. Patrick's Day all over again. And the good cholesterol is taking the bad cholesterol out for drinks. But it's only Thursday and loan payments drop water balloons from hotel windows, next to a hardware store, next to St. Cloud's Motel, where alcoholic grandfathers go to die. Something's askew. And Friday waits at the pizza shop counter with bad news in his linty pocket.

*Paul-Victor Winters*

96

---

<sup>96</sup> [Paul-Victor Winters](#), "[Untitled \(Imagine\)](#)," [Unbroken](#)

Note

They wrote to say they'd found my mother *wondering*  
*in the garage*—like entering the ethereal sphere,  
I thought: *drawing near to its desire, so deeply*  
*is our intellect immersed that memory*  
*cannot follow after it*, as if desire were a fugitive  
dye made from the blue stars of the forget-me  
not and hell could be defined as that which cannot be  
forgotten, the damned condemned to go on  
like Paolo and Francesca in desire but unable to  
recognize what could move them so

\* \* \*

When I was a child, my mittens were attached  
to each other, their cord running under  
my coat from hand to hand like the blue  
veins in the clear plastic Invisible  
Man I assembled in the basement, and after  
he left assisted living, my friend's father  
kept asking. What if my mother dies  
again? What, I thought, if she slips off  
like a glove

\* \* \*

In paradise,  
Dante says, we will have only a memory  
of having had a memory, now lost  
like the photograph of my mother's great  
grandfather printed from a negative made  
from a photograph of a negative, which we  
Xeroxed for keeps: it's the same old  
story of the Perseids, their gray hair  
streaking the sky the way ethereal  
is streaked by real

\* \* \*

Like denizens  
of the cadenza, cicadas scratching  
their cicatrices, a star shines until day  
begins to lighten the sky, the shining  
gone though the star remains, not  
shining but not yet gone, still  
moving across the heavens right up  
to the moment the sky turns  
sky blue.

---

<sup>97</sup> [Angie Estes](#), "[Note](#)," [Poetry London](#), collected in [Enchantée](#), [Oberlin College Press](#)



## Rounds

Outside, two men I pronounced dead visit as crows  
on telephone wires. Their voices as soft as a morphine dose.  
Parking lot pines don't mind returning as pines. Then, a third death.  
A woman I find in a Murphy bed under a skylight. Her eyes absorb an  
unprocessed snapshot of stars arranged two thousand years ago.  
I thought about the spaces the dead occupy, like my friend  
whom I did not pronounce, though I felt her pulse wane  
while my ear pressed against her chest. I can't find her.  
One crow is an old man. Now a younger man with my friend's eyes  
is a crow in the space of a few hours. The sky's shedding its skin.  
A woman is waiting for me to look for signs of life. This one  
may not have let go living yet. So I do this for her. Stall.  
Keep her family occupied. Give her time to leave. Tuesday morning  
another pine carves a black swan into its bark while six hawks hold up the sky.

*Eileen Cleary*  
98

---

<sup>98</sup> [Eileen Cleary](#), "[Rounds](#)," [Incessant Pipe](#)

It is summer we are driving along a highway that turns into a mirage of water ahead of us there are now two weapons one of a caliber strong enough to stop a vehicle he had taken me finally to the coffee finca where he showed me how to breathe while shooting how to brace the weapon in both hands a bottle set upon the rock in the distance finally shattering and then it was time to take apart the weapon with eyes closed then put it back together rain ticking on the banana leaves and above the shimmery highway the birds almost too heavy to fly rising and falling from something on the side of the road it was a man lying facedown but the birds were also interested in something on the other side of the road and as we slowed we drove over what appeared to be a water hose but it was the man's entrails stretched out across the road maybe carried across by the carrion birds and I think I cried out stop but we couldn't stop he said not anymore and there was nothing we could do for that man and other things happened like that it was the time of the death squads the time of the devil's door where the bodies were dumped the time of "the beach" where they lay sprawled, skulls half-stripped flesh half-eaten torn clothes and nearly in each other's arms they lay the stench hanging there the ground giving off the whine of flies so we covered our mouths it was no use they are unrecognizable it is no use this is how the end will come if you are taken do not be taken make your own decisions Margarita said what he is doing is dangerous and he knows it and you should know too and learning to shoot won't help you are a poet there is the sound of gunfire at night near the garrison we can hear it as we lie on the floor talking between the beds a skirmish they said the guerrillas are training now in the mountains using sticks for rifles they have had enough do you know why it has come to this do you understand how innately cautious these people are what would get them to fight am I afraid yes will I continue yes will I die it is likely so tell me what better gift to give than one's life?

Carolyn Forché

99

---

<sup>99</sup> Carolyn Forché, "[It is summer we are driving along a highway...](#)" collected in [What You Have Heard is True](#), Penguin Books

craft

The first great poet of  
the crisis the one whose  
generation was left as if  
firebombed though if  
you look back at the  
seminal work you will  
see that only a handful of

of the poems explicitly  
touch on that dark time  
the blood filling with  
virulence and the night  
always black and  
spangled with stars says  
when faced with

difficult material the  
poet should begin  
obliquely creeping in  
from the edge a square  
of light moving  
imperceptibly across the  
floor as the earth turns

and so I will tell you  
that ever since I saw the  
footage of the  
journalists hiding in the  
attic the rope ladder  
pulled up after them  
only the one with

foreign papers left to  
stand her ground down  
below the journalist at  
first calmly sitting on  
the couch but then  
huddling in a cabinet as  
the soldiers enter the

apartment next door,  
the cries of the mother  
floating through the  
wall *ib'ni ib'ni* the  
language ancient like  
something whetted on  
stone the way I imagine

language would have  
sounded in the broken  
mouth of King David  
*Absalom Absalom* the  
man-child hanging by  
the shining black noose  
of his own hair in the

fragrant woods of  
Ephraim *ib'ni ib'ni*  
next door the sound of  
a body being dragged  
from the apartment as  
his mother wails  
into the dark how

many mothers and how  
many sons dragged out  
into a night spangled  
with stars where  
everything is a metaphor  
for virulence *my son*  
*my son* and ever since I

saw a clip of the footage  
the foreign journalist  
managed to smuggle out  
of the country images of  
the journalist herself  
hiding in a space meant  
for buckets and rags as

next door the soldiers  
drag away a young boy  
please hear it again a  
child of no more than  
twelve his mother's  
lamentations forever  
seared in the blood of

this thing I call my life  
but really what is it  
what is this light I hold  
so dear it wants to move  
imperceptibly across the  
floor as the earth turns  
so as not to become

too aware of itself?

*Quan Barry*

---

<sup>100</sup> [Quan Barry](#), “[craft \('The first great poet of the crisis'\)](#),” collected in [Loose Strife](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Ringin

After the death of my brother's tutor, a great astrologer who drowned himself in a pond near Montpellier, I heard less and less from my brother, despite my frequent and perhaps over-anxious missives. I was told by my mother, swollen and sagging with dropsy, that he was living with a soprano, with whom he had purchased an abandoned beet farm.

In July a deep purple weariness penetrated my head. I found myself in bed until midday, a film of sweat coating my brow, the papers on my desk greened by a layer of breeze-borne pollen that had infiltrated the open windows of my study, outside of which raucous jays plucked slugs from the garden walks. A cruel sun swerved, uncoupled from its elliptic, over distant forest fires, which I could smell. My pack of pornographic playing cards, the concertos of Liszt, failed to rouse my viscous attention. "I will find my brother," I said one evening to my slumbering cat, and reached into the bedside drawer for my knife with the garnet-encrusted hilt, once grasped by a marquis.

I set out at night. The moon glazed some deer sleeping so close to the road I could have prodded them with a lance. They did not move as I passed, barefoot, snacking on a handful of thistle. By evening the next day my gout was inflamed. I stole a willow-wood crutch from a maid who let me climb into her room on the second night.

Does travel enrich one? Yes and no. Did it wake me up? No. I dreamt that I drifted up to a statue of the Baron d'Holbach beneath a riverside willow. It bled from its nose. Galaxies swiveled in the waterfunnels spun from my willow-wood oar.

On the fifth day, I bent my path from the thoroughfare and plunged through a furze meadow. I found my brother within hours. Our father—who is in heaven—had always said that conception had dropped a kind of magnet in each of our heads, around which the breezes spun our reciprocal flesh.

My brother was in an extreme position. It took my eyes some time to believe it. Some crows flapped away from picking at him as I approached for a better look. Was he alive? Yes and no. He had been crushed by a massive bell engraved with shapes that shifted as I moved. Its top was black and smooth. It had made a pit in the earth and from beneath its weighty lip my brother's head and some mangled limbs protruded. His mouth was open and some cables snaked out, far across the meadow, into a treeline, beyond which rose a white windmill, its three blades ponderously spooling the air. His eyes were open and I stepped into his gaze. "Now," I said, and it was true.

*Joe Fletcher*

101

---

<sup>101</sup> [Joe Fletcher](#), "Ringin," collected in [The Hatch](#), [Brooklyn Arts Press](#)

Sex Dream with Transit Warning

JB says they're all sex dreams  
and because he's the tour guide

we jot down XOX.  
Thunder. For ominous minutes

we're clattering into a train  
and the note, distracted,

reads "sex with a coin."  
What a long dream.

At one point I balance a bowl of tap water.  
Later I swallow a copperish moon.

Finally the coin shivers, gleams.  
Maybe it's a fraction of rain.

Maybe I'm already damp on the train  
and sliding my hand into your pocket, you fool.

*Terri Witek*  
102

---

<sup>102</sup> [Terri Witek](#), "[Sex Dream with Transit Warning](#)," collected in [Body Switch](#), Orchises Press

## Excursion Susan Sontag

Now Susan Sontag was famous  
among certain people—you know  
who I mean—urban informed culturally  
literate East Coast people and some West  
a few in Chicago in Europe and elsewhere although  
Susan Sontag came from Arizona  
which is remarkable  
only if you hold certain prejudices  
about Arizona which I do  
having been there twice  
and disliking it both times  
not that this was Arizona's fault  
it is majestic strange lunar orange desert  
flat and then ravine-ridden but Phoenix  
is heinous unless you have a certain  
po-mo sensibility I associate with men  
of a certain age and race and while  
I share the supposed race I'm not a man although  
there are men in Arizona but I forgot  
to ask them what they thought  
about the state or Susan Sontag  
whose writings between 1964 and '67  
are marvels of incisive thought and style  
so much so that you have to wonder  
what happened to America  
what happened to Susan Sontag  
who later published historical novels  
in a realist mode when earlier she  
championed the *nouveau roman*  
oh where art thou where art thou Robbe-Grillet  
and did her execution fail  
her once-held prose ideals  
oh is it our fate thus to lapse  
if lapse it was and where is Sontag  
to show us how to read Sontag  
a professorial enthusiast  
ringingly declared one Sunday Susan  
"is always of the moment"  
and thus we must conclude that in 1965  
the new novel and criticism and sexy brains and France  
were of the moment and now degraded realism  
is of the moment as is "ethnic cleansing"  
which Susan Sontag denounced indeed "put her life  
on the line" (viz. enthusiast) producing Beckett  
in Sarajevo she among the few  
who spoke truly after 9/11 while torpor  
overtook so many everyone waiting



for American Special Forces to “smoke”  
Osama bin Laden “out of his hole”  
on this matter Susan Sontag  
held strong views e.g. about the president’s  
speech but she properly oriented us  
to the club of men and one woman who advise him  
since as she observed in an interview  
on salon.com we are living in “a regency”  
and we all know that regents are puppets  
of their wily advisers cf. The Prince Regent  
in England 1819 when aggrieved workers  
gathered in Manchester and police agents  
shot them tens hundreds dead maybe thousands  
the papers covering up the massacre  
whither media complicity is history now  
and in England the people I met read several papers  
expecting to compare and contrast each paper’s  
“take” on the news they didn’t simply succumb  
to the infantile American fantasy of media  
“objectivity” the English and Irish  
and Scots were like Burke unafraid  
of prejudice they understood  
you read through/with/against others’  
prejudices and your own and thus Burke  
against himself may be seen as an Enlightenment  
theorist he supported the American Revolution  
after all though he hysterically denounced  
the French long before they guillotined anyone  
o sweet Marie your fair chopped head  
your luscious body the French pornographers  
delighted in fucking tormenting reviling there  
is a long affair between Enlightenment  
philosophy and pornography as Cathleen Schine  
explored in her spiky novel *Rameau’s Niece*  
as Sontag explored in a brilliant essay  
of 1967 why are we so afraid  
of porn there are many reasons the obvious  
Freudian ones the “porn is rape” ones  
the “protecting our children” ones the fear  
of desire for the tabooed the “*jouissance*  
of transgression” the world could blow up  
any time but at the end  
of the day it may all come down  
to this our desire for knowledge  
rips open the throat whole countries  
have been seized with murder when threatened  
with free inquiry not that those  
who affiliate themselves self-righteously  
with knowledge are not guilty of their own  
simplifications because knowledge cuts  
and opens wounds and distances

between lovers parents children citizens the world  
feels different for example if you know  
that somewhere people think god is dead  
if the earth revolves around the sun  
if you have stolen the gift of fire  
if you know where your clitoris is and what  
it can do and if you've seen Mapplethorpe's  
whip stuck up his ass or his little devil's horns  
perkily perched atop his mop of hair  
why does he look so innocently rakish  
is it because he's dead or that moment is or  
is it my own perspective makes him so  
not everything can be domesticated  
or can it why did Proust avoid discussing  
really discussing the mother now there is a crucial  
evasion in an otherwise exhaustive  
registration of the movements of consciousness  
in society must old rockers and ACT UP veterans  
and the Situationist International and Sontag all go  
gentle into no that good that no that raging

*Maureen N. McLane*

103

---

<sup>103</sup> [Maureen N. McLane](#), "[Excursion Susan Sontag](#)," collected in [Same Life](#), [Farrar](#), [Straus and Giroux](#)

## It Is To Have Or Nothing

Of all the forms of being—

I like a table

And

I like a lake.

The excitement of an upandcoming

Mistake:

Do not send word to your lover

If you cannot decide which one.

Involvement, like war, is a form

of divination. Think

About what you said—or didn't—

That's why it hurts to swallow.

My first word is French?

Cruche, olivier, fenetre,

Et, peut-être,

Pilier, tour.

Yeah, for a while they were “involved”—

Then they “delved” into

“Abjure.”

Uncertainly more exciting than sex!

We could do serious, but

My lover was NO FUN.

Oh creamy cloud, indecision, I love you. I love you. I love you.

So badly. So slowly

I want to enter you  
From behind.  
O ignorant protagonist  
The lineaments on my face—  
We had an internal, a ludicrous  
“Us,” the most fleeting  
Of all.  
I was  
A tachiste, a revenant;  
He a revanchist.  
Yeah, what felt at what saw.  
Listen: the next time you cry it won’t be  
At a train station  
In France—you died at that scene—  
To leave is to leave—  
Well enough.  
I am so—  
Not lonely.  
Worn and dark was my...  
Bright blue my...  
Sometimes you just wanna press send, thinking  
If this is what ends it all, so I am.  
I will send you gluck’s *Purple Bathing Suit*—  
even if it kills us.  
That’s how I tell the story—“we were involved for a while—long was

our distance—and, mostly—wrong—finally  
I sent him louise gluck's *Purple Bathing Suit*—  
Never to hear from him again.”  
The train schedule was an etude.  
Was I no longer eager  
To study my lover?  
In my lap coleridge's constancy to an ideal object.  
In the end:  
A newly cleared  
Table.  
And, if cleanly forgotten, a little lost  
Lake.

*Olena Kalytiak Davis*  
104

---

<sup>104</sup> [Olena Kalytiak Davis, "It Is To Have Or Nothing," \*Green Mountains Review\*](#)

## Cinema Verité: The Death of Alfred, Lord Tennyson

*The camera pans a gorgeous snow-filled landscape: rolling hills, large black trees, a frozen river. The snow falls and falls. The camera stops to find Tennyson, in an armchair, in the middle of a snowy field.*

TENNYSON:

It's snowing. The snow is like... the snow is like crushed aspirin, like bits of paper... no, it's like gauze bandages, clean teeth, shoelaces, headlights... no, I'm getting too old for this, it's like a huge T-shirt that's been chewed on by a dog, it's like semen, confetti, chalk, sea shells, woodsmoke, ash, soap, brillium, solitude, daydreaming... Oh hell, you can see for yourself! That's what I hate about film!

He dies.

*Tom Andrews*

105

---

<sup>105</sup> [Tom Andrews](#), "[Cinema Verité: The Death of Alfred, Lord Tennyson](#)," [FIELD](#)

## Mistrust of Bronze

The sun is perfect, but it makes no nightingales sing.  
The violence of light suppresses color in these fields,  
its glare masking the green of the white grapes  
and masking the heavy purple. Just as the moon now  
finds no tinge in the giant oleander. Perhaps it is  
bronze models for the spirit that endanger us.

I think of my years on the Greyhound bus, living with  
the blank earth under the American sun day after day.  
Leaking away into those distances. Waxing again  
in the night while everyone slept and I watched  
the old snow by the fences just after the headlights.  
I used to blur in the dark thinking of the long counter  
at Rock Springs day after tomorrow, my pleasure  
of hunger merging with the bad food.  
Memories make me grainy and distinct somewhere. Where  
night shudders with a black fire of which Dante tells.

I begin the long inaccuracy alone.  
Loneliness, they report, is a man's fate.  
A man's fate, said Heraclitus, is his character.  
I sit masturbating in the moonlight,  
trying to find means for all of it.  
The sea collapses, again and again, faintly behind me.  
I walk down the dirt road, touch the cold Aegean,  
and come back slowly. My hand drying in the night air.

*Jack Gilbert*

106

---

<sup>106</sup> Jack Gilbert, "Mistrust of Bronze," collected in *Monolithos*, Alfred A. Knopf

## Alliance

All I wanted that year was one of those tall blonde dolls, always pale-named Susie something, a doll that bolted forward (*"She's magic! She walks! She looks just like you!"*) when you squeezed her hand just so, one of those dolls with flat nightmare hair the color of exploded corn and a dress that glowed and crinkled and sparked. I wanted a perfect friend to stumble ahead with, an unyielding plastic to wrestle and wake against, all I wanted was blue flutter-lashed eyes flapping little voodoo, I wanted to fall in love with and be horrified by her, to search her mouth for a full tongue, to grow to resent her, to grant her mysticism and fury, to lock her up in my closet and watch the doorknob all damn night, waiting for that slow *Twilight Zone* twist. All I talked was Susie this, Susie that, scrawling her in tortured block-lettered pleadings with Santa, taking my father by the hand and leading him past rows and rows of her shelved at Kresge's. I said I'd never ever ask for anything else again ever, not knowing that Barbie, just one aisle over, was sharpening her fashionable talons, sniffing the air for fresh breasts and menstrual blood. I wanted, wanted and prayed for something hard and possible. My fresh mute walking baby woman.

But on Christmas Eve, when I snuck a peek through my wishing window into the starry, slanted snow and saw Daddy pull a want-shaped box from the trunk of his Buick, it didn't stun my belief in the annual gospel of a porky, apple-cheeked Santa. You know, I wasn't stupid—at eight, I'd already signed on for the miraculous black art of white men. They danced in my cereal, sold detergent to my mother, this one shimmied down tenement chimneys. I knew Santa was still coming, tugged by huffing reindeer, fooled again by my wide-eyed vow that I'd been an angel. This gift came from another place, for another reason.

I folded my little body into the dark, kept watching. When I glimpsed pink knees and a sunshiny coif through the box's cellophane front, I thought it was only right that my father loved hard enough to introduce Susie to the dim, resigned sigh of his daughter. All that frosted night, they must have huddled, plastic against pulse, discussing my sad soft, the out-loud mistakes in my walking. Actually, only my father spoke. Susie simply nodded, her stout legs thrumming, a warm purpose trembling behind her slammed-shut tempera smile.



---

<sup>107</sup> [Patricia Smith](#), "[Alliance](#)," collected in [Shoulda Been Jimi Savannah](#), [Coffee House Press](#)

## You Really Killed That '80s Love Song

Now someone else is kissing him  
on a wrought iron balcony  
above a karaoke bar,  
and it's not animal,  
exactly, not pretty either,  
the drunken howling behind you  
as you act like you're not watching,  
like you're talking on the phone  
on a wet, Texas night  
instead of doing  
what you should have done before.  
Now it's raining harder.  
Now you're driving home at 2 a.m.  
on a road that's slick as sex  
and you can still hear your friend David  
saying there's no way you could be in love  
if you've never been loved in the first place.  
Now you're curled in bed.  
Now the sun drifts to your knees.  
Now you've discovered  
humiliation is physically painful:  
the crown-like stigmata of a peach  
that's been twisted, pulled open  
and left there. The juices must run somewhere.  
You can't help but imagine the knife in his body,  
her body, the pink, cloudy aubade  
you were waiting for.

*Analicia Sotelo*

108

---

<sup>108</sup> [Analicia Sotelo](#), "[You Really Killed That '80s Love Song](#)," [Waxwing](#), collected in [Virgin](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

## Lullaby for a Good Friday

What is it like to be nailed to a tree?  
They beat your face until it was  
No more a face. Catastrophe  
Becomes you, Christ. Amid the buzz

Of fools and faith, it is another  
Good one wasted on ourselves.  
Your retinue wears black, your mother  
Weeps, and Joseph builds a shelf.

Did you pray for steady hands,  
A room of your own to go and to think,  
A place to hide from fishermen,  
A heart of coal, another drink?

The weight of day lies on your shoulders.  
How dark these hours from noon to three.  
Forget the crucifix and boulder—  
Close your eyes and fall asleep.

*Jill Alexander Essbaum*  
109

---

<sup>109</sup> [Jill Alexander Essbaum](#), "[Lullaby for a Good Friday](#)," *Rather-vue*, collected in [Heaven](#), [University Press of New England](#)

Barista

—after Laura Kasischke

Andrew, an evening regular, rattled

the mint tin he presented from his pocket like a carat  
promise or faith in the face

of doubt, and set it on the counter  
where I counted tills, replacing payday  
twenties for coin rolls and lower

denominations. “I did this  
for you,” he said, Herod Antipas to my oblivious

Salome. He asks me to  
open the box, and so I do—to chalk-

white burrs, four, from pencil  
eraser to the size of a sugar

cube. Kidney stones.

Of course, my co-workers’ voices slur

on the headset: “Oh, Emilia, I want  
to show you where these

passed.” But I’m only a server then, a junior

in college who’s learned less about  
saying no than how to seduce  
bills into the tip jar from men’s

wallets that smell animal, like a horse

that sweat under the heat  
of a saddle that once rocked me flushed and wet before I’d ever been

fucked—  
All these ways our phrases twin toward  
opposites. He looked

expectant, his eyes always  
reflective as if he were crying but not

letting go  
of the salt,

the way one fragments, reassigns  
part of one's own body to

become the body  
of the lover one desires  
but cannot have  
in a room alone tonight, window open, not so much

with a distance between them, but

within that distance,  
which is amnesiac as horizon and blue  
in the way we say water

is blue, although it has  
No color except in its depths. I wanted

to say *yes*  
only so that our humiliation  
was complicit, a coat  
in which we each had an arm. My boss

leaned his shoulder  
into mine and whispered, "Is this guy  
bothering you?"  
but the sun was  
setting, and the milk hissing under the steam wands like a white

mouse with fangs set  
in it, and there is no other devotion  
as real as separateness. I  
tossed off a joke about how unhealthy I was  
for him, which he liked. Just months

before I'd pleaded with  
a tweaked-out vagrant to stop  
snorting the Splendas  
and Equals he  
ripped and poured  
out on the condiment  
bar. But when I asked

him to leave, he said he  
couldn't because  
I couldn't see him—he was

invisible, or not there at

all, he insisted, as he started  
for the Sweet-n-Lows. I didn't

see Andrew for a long time after  
he brought his gift, and after closing,

I quietly stacked the safe full  
of what we'd earned  
and then chained together the chairs  
on the patio, picking

up cigarettes butts with my bare  
fingers so I could smell the razored acidity later as I fell

asleep without feeling

guilty. But the wind, strong

from the west in  
warning, like all ineffable forces,  
gave me back

my body—my belly sour, all rewind  
and glower, the way  
memory of grief has no cause, only the lyric  
shove that sends the ground

up to us, fuming the  
smell of rain, ozone, grain—  
He spit on the sidewalk

as he left. When I  
told him to put his ruins away and turned to get his usual, I

thought I heard him say, "Emilia, you *will*

love me," and, playing toward my pocket money, I said, "Is that  
a promise?" I said: "I already do."

*Emilia Phillips*

110

---

<sup>110</sup> [Emilia Phillips](#), "[Barista](#)," [Banango Street](#), collected in [Empty Clip](#), [University of Akron Press](#)

## We'll Fix It in Post

Please ignore the leopard. The leopard is a continuity issue we're aware of. We're aware the lead actor has one leg in the first scene and two legs in the second. There are issues with setting in the third. There is no possible way the light across the kitchen table could be that golden, or the lead actress could look so—the notes here say bereft?—when learning of her husband's affair. The affair feels cheap. Let's give him cancer instead. No. Keep the affair, and give her cancer. We'll begin with a close-up on the shunt in her chest. So brave. Her first tattoo a black pinprick for radiation. Now let's have that golden light again—can she be a blonde? Get makeup on this—then pan out to the other sad sacks in the chemo chairs. Then farther. Let's take a tour down the hospital halls. I want suffering front and center, but clean. No bedpans. No vomit. A few marijuana jokes here. Maybe a wacky doctor. Then let's have the lead actor show up to say he's sorry; he's so sorry that he's had a leg removed to show solidarity. I think we can make this work. Let's cut in the leopard stalking the halls but keep it clear of the children's wing. The leopard isn't a metaphor for death. There's nothing stalking us. This is a standard three-act structure. The craft table is always replenished. Everyone here is union.

*Rebecca Hazelton*

111

---

<sup>111</sup> [Rebecca Hazelton](#), "[We'll Fix It in Post](#)," [Missouri Review](#), collected in [Gloss](#), [University of Wisconsin Press](#)

The red haired green eyed woman to my left is alone  
she tells me in a note and tired of being the only lesbian  
in this room. I look around. Of the thirteen other  
possible lesbians, I rule out eleven based on purses  
and shoes. I write this back to her and she agrees.  
I'm the teacher so passing notes is fine  
with the authorities. We're both bored  
with the presentation on Charles Olson.  
I seem to remember that "Projective Verse"  
wasn't reprinted in a volume celebrating his work,  
as if the editors recognized a fart disguised as an essay  
when they smelled it. The presenter would have done better  
to twirl flaming machetes. His voice sounds like a shoe  
being drowned. She writes that the two possible lesbians  
would make an attractive couple. I marry them  
in Tahiti and get a little drunk on sunshine  
in my thoughts. I don't know what to write to her:  
that everyone is alone like a key to a safe in the safe  
at the bottom of a well at the bottom of a sea?  
Her solitude is not my solitude, which can wear  
a live alligator on its head and still hide in the open.  
I'm trying to get her to say what she says to me  
in these notes in her poems, but a note  
is the most private genre after the shopping list.  
I finally suggest that she open a gay bar  
in the northeast corner of the room. She asks  
what to call it and I tell her I'm just an idea man,  
execution is up to her. But I have no guillotine,  
she writes back just as the student finishes  
hurting me inadvertently with his passion.  
The red haired green eyed woman is next. The note  
she gives me as she stands confesses that she'd rather  
eat a rat while it's shitting out the remains  
of the smaller rat it ate than stand in front of people  
who probably hate her. As she writes "Audre Lorde"  
on the board, I write "Audre Lorde" in my notebook  
and underline her name twice. I try to make the word  
"theater" out of "hate her" but need another t  
and one less h. I really want to read the poems  
in which her solitude speaks to mine like two new kids  
in first grade sharing potato chips on the edge  
of a playground while throwing their carrots at a turtle.  
We'll see what happens in this life and the next.  
I don't know how to teach people a thing, I write on a note  
I give myself. That's OK, I write back: what you lack  
in intelligence you make up for in sly hug  
of the gravity of body mass. I wish I believed him  
but he'll say anything to suggest that everyone's



running around with a parachute on their back  
and a hand on the rip cord so why not help each other  
find the escape hatch or ground the plane due to the fog  
we're in. As if life's as simple as levitation  
or the perfect martini: eighteen parts gin  
and three parts gin and gin and an olive orchard  
and don't bother with a glass and gulp and gin.

*Bob Hicok*  
112

---

<sup>112</sup> [Bob Hicok](#), "[Pedagogy](#)," [On the Seawall](#)

## Pope Joan on Film

Sleepwalking, she takes the ashes  
to bed, becomes colder  
than the wedding dress,  
her acquiescence.  
Her fingers tight on the jumprope in-  
volute: (the tree where he hanged).  
Too cold before the relics, too  
perfect, cutting  
the cards numbly: conventional  
beggars at their last supper and  
it might as well have been...  
the funereal road, the fine  
and ruined crystal...

*Dana Curtis*  
113

---

<sup>113</sup> [Dana Curtis](#), "[Pope Joan on Film](#)," collected in [The Body's Response to Famine](#), [Pavement Saw Press](#)

## Gentrification

I had a dream

I was still in that shitty house  
in East Nashville, or East Nasty as some would say  
with the racist bumper stickers that read:  
*37207 Over the river  
and through the hood.*

In the dream,

I hear your father coughing up phlegm, his chest  
a wet and broken trombone,  
his chest in that room with the all the newspapers, piles of old newspapers,  
your father in his disheveled bed, with his newspaper: sheet,  
and open at the corner,  
wedges of golden light trying to spray through, dust churning  
steamy particles—the daily shadow play of ink  
and I would sneak past  
on the way to the bathroom.

This is your father in his velvet, red robe, always a little bit open  
and inappropriate, always his raucous throat slackening  
mucus from the pockets of his slick esophagus, hocking loogies  
throughout the shotgun house,

and I had never tried cocaine before,  
until you tricked me by sprinkling  
this new drug like dirty snow  
inside our communal blunt,  
which you called a *Heavy Chevy*  
and other men laughed and you laughed and I laughed too,

but I didn't know what was so funny. I didn't know  
when something was at my expense. I was the only girl there too.  
I've always been the only girl there  
inside a house with men, being duped by men, waxing their backs  
in the middle of the night or laying on my stomach, pretending at pleasure  
and calling that pleasure too.

In the corner,  
a crumbling stick of Nag Champa,  
glowing at the tip like a nipple laced  
with lava, disintegrating—I became a single wisp.

Remember when you called out of work  
because you said the sex was *that good*, but I don't even remember  
what your penis looked like, just that it felt obnoxiously big

like the neck of giraffe. Have you ever seen two giraffes fight over a female...  
fight to fuck? It's wild.

          Your house, I mean our house, for a couple of months  
has been remodeled, the whole neighborhood gentrified  
except for that dumpy gas station up the road

where we sometimes bought lottery tickets and Cheetos in our pajamas, scratching  
at our luck with orange dust gunked up under our fingernails,  
and I don't remember your chest  
          exactly, only that when you touched me, I shuddered.

Remember  
  when you placed tater tots on my tongue  
  one by one           like a priest papa from Sonic

and then called me fat after I finished them all  
                          like a good girl you said.  
                          I've always wanted to be a *good girl*,  
and then we did *whip-its* in the backseat  
  of some faceless person's car. I can still hear the canisters  
    of nitrous oxide clinking and rolling around our feet, quacking  
    like little steel ducks as the car turned and turned everything foam,  
a seemingly endless loop of right turns on Briley Parkway,  
                          which was a concrete circle hovering  
                          over the city anyway

I don't recall the fight we had that night,  
                          because that early aught summer  
there was always a party in someone's backyard full of sticks  
                          I wanted to break  
                          against the bark of some awkward tree

                          and there was always a party  
                          with people that did not seem to love me  
                          or themselves and no one knew  
                          how to make a decent drink.

I was outside and it was good and giant  
  baseball stadium-night-warm-weather  
  and the smear of streetlights struck me   peculiar  
    as I was trying to break up with you.  
                          I was always trying to break up with you  
  that summer and you wouldn't let me  
  as you grabbed the crotch of your khaki shorts  
broadcasting to the dogwoods: *Thank you for the busted nut!*

                          Which at the time I did not understand.  
I didn't know about the hard heel of shame           but I do now.

My body made your body explode. So what?

But I just kept laughing  
as I drunkenly bit your lips, giggling about ball sacks,  
jealously singing about flying squirrels jumping  
from branch to branch—they knew how to land  
on what they wanted with such swagger.

I draped my body over beautiful girls, whispering in their ears, for anyone,  
anyone to take me home. *Please*.

I don't know where I end. I don't know where I ended up that night either.  
The memory is garbled, appears in flashes,  
then poof—

I stopped laughing and talking so fast

but the hem of my grief slipped through  
as I passed our old house it looked bright  
and brand new, new porch and everything.

I use to grasp at white men for attention.  
There is still a vulnerable part in my neck  
that needs clutching,

but I don't plead anymore.

*Tiana Clark*

114

---

<sup>114</sup> [Tiana Clark](#), "[Gentrification](#)," [The Southeast Review](#)

## The Order of Things

Now when I think of the second grade I think about fall leaves,  
black oaks, and urine.  
I think about being caught in the bathroom, swinging  
from the bar above the door to the whitewashed stall and how I was  
dragged out by my arm  
and how it felt like my arm was an avocado  
someone had stabbed with a knife to remove the pit,

and how I was  
made to stand before each of my teachers and tell them  
I couldn't go to the bathroom by myself, *Tell them*  
*you don't know*  
*how*—said God's adult, the nun  
who found me, who now leads me  
to each classroom,  
like following the Stations of the Cross.

And at each station—  
the girl who'd been forced  
to stand the whole day  
over the spot where she peed  
in the library, the kid who was made to wear a piece  
of pink string  
around his wrist,  
a reminder

not to pee in his pants,  
the boy who was marched through the mail, past the food court and arcade,  
pushed along  
by his father  
who had made a sign,  
made it from scratch, a sign  
the boy was wearing around his neck, that read *I wet the bed*, and how  
no one tried to stop it.

Matthew Dickman

115

---

<sup>115</sup> Matthew Dickman, "The Order of Things," collected in [Wonderland](#), W.W. Norton & Company

## And This is Rare

My name means a promise, one made to God. And where  
is your mother tonight? Her head like old leaves left in the yard.

Before I knew you, each night I would walk under the orange-bellied limbs,  
past the ratty houses and toward the brick set, solid as love.

We are at the point where we need sympathy and a little more blood.  
Trust me when I say everyone you care about has committed a crime.

The overturned oyster shells were smoke caught in a sunset  
over some Asian city we'll never see. The wine like every glass of wine.

I started to love you because you could list the things that make you tremble  
on your hand. But tonight the moon wears a blue suit, and somewhere nearby

someone is laughing. The restaurant down the street is almost empty.  
The woman at the bar clings to her own beautiful hair.

*Libby Burton*

116

---

<sup>116</sup> [Libby Burton](#), "[And This is Rare](#)," collected in [Soft Volcano](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

## Asphyxia

the day i realized i was already dying i dared myself to blood, took turns tonguing ropeburn & threshold.  
as a boy, i'd watch my cousins stand by the reservoir & drape their hands around each other's throats, see  
who would buckle first, same spot the home guard hanged a man for desertion.

of course the future is still stupid w/ bones, so tonight i'll be the best girl dressed in limejuice & lingerie.  
my whole face a sundown, pink prom frock left fetal on the tire pile, shuddering southern bellicose vein.  
according to my uncle, the word *redneck* comes from coal miners in west virginia

who wore red handkerchiefs around their collars when they shot cops for the right to unionize. when i say  
this to the man making an exit of me at the club, he asks why i care about people who want me dead. still,  
how I'll buck under his hand, spit scythed & sweat into pretense, my neck

bled to pass for paradise. i guess everyone knows utopia means no-place, the gates gilded & graffitied on  
graves. & i guess let's bless his dead, decked in their expensive independence, let's bless the boy who  
beat a chest of rubies from my lips behind the gas station, bless the gas bedazzled

& traded for prisons & bombs, but first let's bless this man, choking me into my ancestry: distant uncle  
trapped in a collapsed shaft, cousin coughing up her stomach after her dealer cut pills w/ rat poison. show  
me the place where no one wants me dead & i'll show you a girl

with my name dragging a door from the water. show me the man i can't make a song of & i swear i won't  
resist.

*Brad Trumpfheller*

117

---

<sup>117</sup> [Brad Trumpfheller](#), "[Asphyxia](#)," [Washington Square](#)



## Skin on a Dime

Charlene puts skin on a dime  
leather on a dollar  
food on her face  
money on the table

Charlene  
I'm a homemade monster  
& you're a homemade oyster

Your circle has a poppy hole

*Eleni Sikelianos*  
118

---

<sup>118</sup> [Eleni Sikelianos](#), "[Skin on a Dime](#)," [GlitterPony](#), collected in [The Loving Detail of the Living & the Dead](#), [Coffee House Press](#)

## The Green Word

In a dream my twin brother was telling me a word  
for the sudden appearance of green—when, in spring,  
it comes, exploding from branches the way college boys explode  
out the doors of their frat house onto the cool, wet grass at dawn. He was telling me how this was the key  
to understanding human suffering. This one word, which,  
he said from the floor, he had to tell people about, his turned-up face perspiring from his earnest emphasis  
on this point;

and he looked just like he did when we were nineteen years old and backpacking in Italy. It was so hot  
and humid in Florence we couldn't sleep.

Terrible nights on hostel bunk beds visited by a little old woman  
who would come in with linen piled in her arms  
and point her finger angrily at my boots on the bed.

I had no taste for wine then, no feel for maps. I was always stopping  
and staring for too long at sculptures,  
which were everywhere—I didn't even have to know where I was going,  
they came to me, those statues—men with their swords up in the air  
and severed heads in their hands, women with small perfect gray breasts—  
and my brother would disappear into the crowded streets  
as if he'd lived there for decades and was late to work.

It would take me all day to find my way back to him. I had no sense of direction,  
no grasp of etiquette. I loaded film in our camera, gave both of us haircuts.

He was already becoming older than me,  
the towers had just fallen, and he'd watched from his dorm rooftop, his faculties  
slowly guillotining, slamming shut, and—where was that word then?

That word for when the green comes like Swamp Thing  
when he hallucinates himself across the bayou in torn ligatures of moss  
and plant matter, transforming his intellectual pain into carbon-based superpowers?  
Now, on the weekends my brother and I get together on the internet.

We talk about the importance of nonbeing, of reactions.

When I think too much, I think the words "everything is as it should be," very loudly.

He works at a hospital answering phones and directing people;  
he meditates every morning;

I visit him in Portland

and he meets me at the airport, even though I can get to him on my own now, and he always comes with a  
sandwich and iced tea,

and he shows me gateways on his smart phone and the best places  
to watch birds. His wife comes back from work and uncovers a book on souls  
and lights sage. There's a poster of the body's flailing chakras facing you  
when you sit down on the toilet; and my brother and I walk and walk and walk, endlessly through

Portland's parks, and long streets going nowhere in particular  
but the general direction of water—  
the smell of it hits you first, acrid and mossy.

And I still walk too slow to keep up with him;

I still walk with a clinical leisureliness. I feel

like Mom's Subaru that is always breaking down.

I feel like we're a couple of human sandbags at a levee,  
like we're lying down together  
at the base of a shuddering dam.

---

<sup>119</sup> [Bianca Stone](#), "[The Green Word](#)," collected in [The Möbius Strip Club of Grief](#), [Tin House Books](#)

September 10, 2016

In one version of the story, I find you by way of several minor accidents.

There was a girl in high school who would tell us *look for the guys who drive stick*.

*It means they know what they're doing.*

*Ask them for a ride, she'd say. Make them show you.*

That winter two boys nearly died speeding down the town's back roads.

That winter I bent over a boy in his borrowed car.

His became the first body I studied besides my own.

Alone after I would reach for the electric toothbrush, the wooden spoon, and search for the places  
he lit for a moment, then darkened.

I thought myself the only animal in a frozen city full of men, but I was wrong.

I thought I'd starve, but I was wrong.

*Rachel Mennies*  
120

---

<sup>120</sup> [Rachel Mennies](#), "[September 10, 2016](#)," [Jet Fuel Review](#)

“And now brightness falls from the air...”

There is no question of ascending without the Bengal Lights, since slow burning baskets of blue glow hanging around the gondola are the only way the audience might see Sophie Blanchard's white dress and hat of ostrich plumes wind-whipped in the night sky as she stands free-ballooning in her basket the size of a child's cradle. Napoleon didn't name her the Chief Air Minister of Ballooning for nothing.

The reporters said she had an ugly face and nervous disposition. Nothing so startled her as a horse-drawn carriage. They said of this first lady of the air, proud of their cleverness, “A woman in a balloon is either out of her element or too high in it.”

In daylight she carried up little dogs in parachutes to drop back down. In night, she had a boom ring of rockets and cascades around her basket. Who can look away from someone so flamboyant and vulnerable holding on to an invisible string?

She once climbed so high to avoid a hailstorm she lost consciousness and spent fourteen-and-a-half hours airborne.

She once put down in Turin with a nosebleed of icicles across her face.

If it is true and not English propaganda that Napoleon asked her to prepare for an aerial invasion by balloon, her assessment was the simple truth that it was not feasible.

On her first lift, her husband was standing next to her in the basket they shared, heavy and clumsy beneath the huge patchwork canvas of the old balloon that had made him Jean-Pierre Blanchard, Professor of Aeronautical Spectacle, the kind of man who could leave a wife and four children to balloon across the continent and then, when the dogs of bankruptcy would not float, take a Sophie out of the crowd and into the sky. She described it as “une sensation incomparable.”

Or maybe she pursued him. In the only extant portrait of her, her visage is carefully shaded to fill out her nose and cheeks and the shadow cast by her fringe of bangs, while her neck, dress, and balloon are etched in simple lines, so that her head looks like an oval photocopy from another picture glued onto this one. The effect is not aesthetically pleasing, but it is confusing enough to keep you looking.

In his youth, Jean-Pierre ascended on horseback to make an impression. Another time he and Sophie crashed together. He suffered a serious head injury, and she was rendered mute for several weeks.

He was old and she was young when he had a heart attack in the basket. In some accounts it is said he fell from the air seizing at his chest and died a year later of injuries related to the fall.

To be in a balloon at night is to seem as if you are part not only of the wind but of the darkness. It is as if you yourself were without substance or shape.

Once he was gone, Sophie could ascend in a much smaller balloon, using significantly less hydrogen. The fireworks were her idea. Never rich, she paid off his creditors and had savings enough to spare.

She offered to ascend as a benefit for a home for fallen women, her profession having much in common with the work of prostitutes, but the director declined, because she could not bear to see another woman risk her life.

The full-color print of her crash from the roofs of Paris as her balloon sets the block on fire is stunning. This is because the deep orange of the flames is perfectly offset by the deep blue of the night. Her white dress of a body cleaves the foreground of flames. “Beautiful! Beautiful! Vive Madam Blanchard!” someone shouted. And then later: “It lighted up Paris like an immense moving beacon.”

*Kathryn Nuernberger*  
121

---

<sup>121</sup> Kathryn Nuernberger, “[And now brightness falls from the air...](#),” *Lake Effect*, collected in *Brief Interviews with the Romantic Past*, Ohio State University Press

[ Death's Dictionary ]

A shack made of ribs.  
A house made of out.

A car made of rust.  
A smile made of doubt.

A house made of fire.  
*A magician's gesture.*

Of cards. Of the Lord.  
*As preacher, pats his brow.*

A joint made of juke.  
A twist. A night away.

A wood made of green.  
Of blood.

*The kerchief now a bandage.*  
A place in the sun.

A house made of railroad.  
A shack of shotgun.

*Kevin Young*  
122

---

<sup>122</sup> [Kevin Young](#), "[[Death's Dictionary](#)]," collected in [Brown](#), Alfred A. Knopf

## Love Prodigal

I make love when I am bored.  
That's how I know I'm an intelligent  
animal. It's easy to tremble—a pistil  
brushed with a bumblebee's fur—  
and who doesn't want to be golden,  
like pearls of fat glistening in an artery  
or a mother's first milk? I want  
to send you photos of dead fledglings  
on the sidewalk, those perils of the lavish  
season, but we are wrong, a news story  
tells me so, explaining beauty drives  
evolution, not a mate with an advantageous  
beak. I wish I could tell you this. Letters  
and novels keep seducing me with  
their fantasies of closure, but I like  
the way your silence wastes inside me.  
I am a grieving animal. Let's not pretend  
souls are beautiful. They're as ugly  
as white petals wilting, crisping  
and curling in on themselves  
in cloudy water and green-rot. But let  
them fall into me like loose change  
in a leg cast. What's broken cannot be  
healed with anything but superglue  
and imagination, but let it be tended to.  
Let it be tender. Let's imagine a miracle  
together at a distance, the reunion  
of a pronoun and its first verb. I'm not  
over it—the elk's blood blackens the bottom  
of the fridge, and when I wipe it, it leaves  
a pink quarter, blood-ghost, hunger stain  
in the shape of your birthmark.  
I'm a regretful animal. My heart tries  
to grow as fast as velvet in May.  
It's trying to attract an ending with  
a crown of daisies, an archive  
of spring, of wants, of waterfalls,  
of woods, good God, I know you  
won't take me back.

*Traci Brimhall*

123

---

<sup>123</sup> [Traci Brimhall](#), "[Love Prodigal](#)," [The Nation](#)



## Baby Grand

But I followed instructions! *Wring blood from a stone and use the drops as lip gloss.*  
My new job is branding mascara. This one's called "The Tracks of My Tears."

At the baby grand, my pearly whites dissolved to box-office poison.  
Sawzall, Adderall, bias-cut satin: recipe for trouble.

You can let yourself down from the ceiling. My name is no longer Miss Muffet.  
Now I'm known as Queen Charlotte II. In my memoirs, your chapter is "Some Pig."

A thousand years after disco died, we gaze at the glittering sphere.  
Every ceiling fixture we own is a *folie de grandeur*.

I might have known we'd come unglued in the Palace of Particleboard.  
The baptismal river of tears flows to an azure ocean playground.

From Formula One to formulaic before the engine cooled.  
Headless torso, knees and toes in the bullet-ridden sky.

Round three and the love is off. My fingertips are numbskulls.  
A right-handed woman is always in search of a missing right-hand glove.

*Kateri Lanthier*  
124

---

<sup>124</sup> [Kateri Lanthier](#), "[Baby Grand](#)," [Green Mountains Review](#), collected in [Siren](#), Véhicule Press

from “What It Means to Be Avant Garde”

My condition is rare but it still affects thousands — it’s easy to feel like I’m being punished by god — not believing in god can have damaging consequences — the source of punishment tends to revert to the self — self-punishment is the base of many social dynamics — a sense of conscience can be wielded from within or without — the Gypsies hold a Kantian belief about ethics — this according to the European who spent his youth among them — wherein stealing is judged permissible according to intent — it is possible that I can make peace with my condition — if I can convince myself its intent is benign — there’s a mediation technique called nonviolent communication — conventionally known as NVC — I try to use it in relation to my desire to be cured — the goal is to do away with judgments of value — and focus on everyone’s needs being met — the relation of the “Gypsy code” to Kant is as follows — for Kant a right action is spoiled by impure intent — this aligns well with the NVC model — in which an act of generosity is immediately voided — if revealed to be spurred by resentment or guilt — for the boy’s Gypsies, stealing was morally neutral — as long as nobody’s needs were denied — take one chicken from the farmer but not the whole coop — there are many ways to think about dessert — this neutrality was voided if greed entered the picture — NVC holds a broad understanding of violence — it would encompass even my own relation to my condition — my conscience tells me empathy for the self is undeserved — the website contains an inventory of needs — which are neatly divided into seven subsections — that begin with connection and end with meaning — this positioning of meaning calls out my condition — my needs are out of date

*Anna Moschovakis*

125

---

<sup>125</sup> [Anna Moschovakis, “What It Means to Be Avant Garde,”](#) collected in [They and We Will Get Into Trouble for This, Coffee House Press](#)

solstice poem: somerville, massachusetts

ivy crawls through the bricks  
like spring sneaks into summer

every bathtub in the neighborhood  
full of holy water & lemonade  
same face just visible below the murk

if mary won't fix your troubles  
then at least she'll watch

storm cut the power  
so the women are on their porches

clatter of lighters  
and ice in chipped mugs

block after block of dioramas of women  
who are over your bullshit—

in this one  
a too-long tweety bird shirt  
and dirty chanclas

in this one a fur collar  
detached from a coat  
used to mop up a child's vomit

in this one the smell of fire  
and the sound of a window  
breaking from the inside

*Cassandra de Alba*

126

---

<sup>126</sup> [Cassandra de Alba](#), "[solstice poem: somerville, massachusetts](#)," [IDK Magazine](#)

Invocation: The Third and Fourth Generation of Them That Hate Me

All you need for a piano is a tree  
and an elephant. I sit up sick and humming  
K381, which means I am like Mozart,  
having heard the music once and now  
it is in me. Mozart had his harpsichord,  
I have my ugly mouth. I whistle  
at my plants to make them smarter.  
I learn from them that Sistine  
is the adjective of Sixtus. I learn from them  
that Mozart was atrociously behaved,  
and the pope was always angry, and the devil  
was always angry, and you can't make  
something flower using force, and the sins  
you undertake alone will only turn you coarse.

How difficult to be a rare animal,  
the pressure to stay alive. Even colors find  
themselves in danger, blue eyes  
that should have died out by now,  
spare in their occurrence to begin with  
but passed on against the odds. This can only  
mean it's common to seek a blue-eyed lover.  
Yes, I too have done it. I am, as the Icarus  
unveiled at the wax museum, highly  
lifelike. I highly like life, though in a faraway  
and pent-up manner, in the way of the assassin  
pining for the actress. His common  
letters I have sat up reading, mouthing out  
the worst of them as though  
in peaceable worship of a genius teen oh  
DON'T  
YOU MAYBE LIKE ME A LITTLE BIT? YOU MUST  
ADMIT IT I AM DIFFERENT.

*Natalie Shapero*

127

---

<sup>127</sup> [Natalie Shapero](#), "[Invocation: The Third and Fourth Generation of Them That Hate Me](#)," collected in [No Object](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

from “Natural History”

XXI. From the Life of Gorky (III)

On the boat I ate watermelons and cantaloupe in secret. There was a man on board, forever drunk, dressed like a policeman, who forbade the eating of fruit. If you got caught with fruit, he scolded you and threw it in the river. This he called his “wild justice.”

\*

Was it justice when, one night, approaching shore, he threw himself overboard?

\*

More vodka for Grandmother. Another of her saint-devoured-by-a-wild beast stories.

\*

In a corner of the cabin, wrapped in a white sheet tied with a bright red ribbon, my newborn brother Maxim—who caught death, Mother said, his father’s dead hand.

\*

A storm. Rainwater whips the horse’s eye of the porthole I look out from.

\*

When my uncle said, *Alexei, why do you cry?* I answered, *For Maxim: the storm tosses him to and fro.*

*Dan Chiasson*

128

---

<sup>128</sup> [Dan Chiasson](#), “[Natural History](#),” collected in [Natural History](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

## Yes

I am done smoking cigarettes, done waiting tables, done counting tips at two a.m. in the neon-dark dance hall, done sleeping with young men in my apartment, done facing them or not, thinking of oblivion, which is better than nothing. I am done not wearing underwear because *it's so Victorian*. I am done telling men I don't wear underwear because *it's so Victorian*. I am done with the night a guy spread my legs on a pool table, all those balls piled up in the pockets. I am done. I am never going back. When I see that night on the street I will drive past and never even glance over. I am done going to grad school, nodding in your workshop. I am done teaching English as a second language, saying *I* pointing to my chest, saying *you* pointing to them. I am done teaching the poetry class where no one talked and no one listened to me and outside the window the cottonwood wagged its sun-white leaves in the breeze as if to say, *I give up, I give up*. I am done being a childless woman, a childless wife, a woman with no scars on her body. I am done with the wide afternoons of before, the long stare, the tightly closed door. And I am done, too, for the most part, with the daydream of after. I am after for now. I am turning up the heater to see if that will make the baby sleep another fifteen minutes so I can finish this poem. I am done thinking of the past as if it had survived, though sometimes I think of the past and sometimes I see it coming, catching up, hands caked with dried mud, head shaved clean.

Carrie Fountain

129

---

<sup>129</sup> Carrie Fountain, "[Yes](#)," collected in [Instant Winner](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## For and After Federico García Lorca

It was the hour of sleeping crocodiles. Federico, you tossed a wilderness of bleeding pigeons into my heart. I said: take me to the friend of dead-smashed butterflies. Take me to the miniature priests of idiot-brains.

And Federico, you climbed the great mountain of burnt-up flowers in the dark saying: "One must wait a thousand years under the cancerous moon to touch the dried-out body of the moth.

And because blood has no sadness, one must drown her gods in a sea of infinite kitchens."

Federico! Seller of the sky and of gutted-out horses, of the lost landscape of the apple, and the eyes of dogs and skulls and of dug-up roots. You wore a night-mask of phosphorus and sharp lilies and tore the hem of my gown.

And I said, Federico of a million granite buildings and of tears, I want a strand that will tremble in the presence of your stillness. But it was the moment of live fish and broken microscopes and you lifted the black curtains of air. Your face a bud of light, you smashed the mute fossil of living air and gave to me an earring and handfuls of rope.

But I wanted to sleep the sleep of the infinite crocodile inside your golden chest, so I tied eight ghosts and a thousand sequins to your hair and wore the gloves of one hundred sadnesses under the lemon shadow of your actual dreams.

Federico of torn cloth and murdered grass, of the terrible violence of ants and the nocturnal rooster of madness. Federico of a thousand tiny birds.

*Sara Lefsyk*

130

---

<sup>130</sup> [Sara Lefsyk, "For and After Federico García Lorca," Poetry Crush](#), collected in [We Are Hopelessly Small and Modern Birds](#), Black Lawrence Press

## Science Fiction: A Love Poem

My junkie best friend,  
M., hoards sci-fi pulp mags,  
files them in tubs in his basement.  
On one of our good nights,  
he digs up curling issues

of *Analog* and *Asimov's* for us to read  
on his parents' porch, smoking  
and searching for a favorite poem

about giant crabs attacking  
Atlantic City. We're on fire  
as only high people can burn.  
In our subdivision, all the green  
is curbed and contained, a handful

of gravel can be scooped up  
and launched like a satellite, hurled  
at the dew-stippled siding  
of our parents' houses. But it's easier  
to hit our veins, the beauty

and danger of them  
yawning like plumeria  
on the moon. I don't need to read

the story M. shares, I know the human  
fear of Paleozoic consciousness  
aimed at our destruction. I've read

scientists have proven  
a crab feels pain when it's boiled—  
shocked once, it retreats in its shell  
at the signal of another. Only people  
keep going back for more. Tonight,

painkillers wrap my skin in angora fur.  
My mind, a knife in the velvet bag  
of my body. M. is talking about  
his favorite philosopher, Wittgenstein,  
how he berated a colleague's wife

on a walk. She'd simply said,  
*What a beautiful tree*, and he  
started in, *what do you mean*



by "beautiful," what do you mean  
by "tree." I listen from my slab  
of concrete under the overdetermined

sky at the edge of our Northeast  
megapolis. I think our land  
will be frontier again  
someday, as the writers foretell,  
when what we've built

falls down. M. puts a story in my hand,  
in which the machine asks his creator  
why evolved responses beat  
coding *If A, then B*. But what if

there is no evolution,  
beyond the good days  
of the dope we share and its reliable  
result? Other days we're mute,  
pacing his garage, waiting for

an asshole dealer who never calls. Both  
resigned to be the other's version  
of love on offer, which is

a kind of score, but cut  
with floor cleaner. If Wittgenstein  
could see us, he'd say there is no  
ordinary language for what we are,  
nothing to tie us

to this manifold of planets  
stamped in the pulp we read. Sci-fi  
requires the rules of any given

universe follow logic, like rules  
on Earth. No world will  
recognize us otherwise.

*Erin Hoover*

131

---

<sup>131</sup> [Erin Hoover](#), "[Science Fiction: A Love Poem](#)," [Pleiades](#), collected in [Barnburner](#), [Elixir Press](#)

The Discount Megamall (in memorial)

for you  
i trace  
the  
letters  
of my  
name  
in the  
air  
with my  
pinky  
like a  
gold  
necklace  
like a  
signature  
on a  
grain  
of rice  
in a  
little jar  
*eve*  
the night  
before  
like a  
dusk  
like  
the end  
of things beloved

*Eve L. Ewing*  
132

---

<sup>132</sup> Eve L. Ewing, "[The Discount Megamall \(in memorial\)](#)," collected in [Electric Arches](#), [Haymarket Books](#)

## Ode to Men of the Service Industry

I have bad thoughts, bad. But I am good to you, in my thoughts.  
Without impulse, without imp of the perverse.  
When you see to me, another world opens its weightless hands,  
A dead land where I eat, sleep, savor the strange  
Because of you, innkeeper, tender, serving man.

You know what to do when I notch knife over fork,  
When to come for what I lay aside.  
What do I say? You speak for me, it is your pleasure.  
For some little while, you make me your empress  
and I am your thrall, you bring what I ask.

And I recline alone in the places you set, bright gust of your sweat  
Riding the back of yesterday's cologne, with the thought of your hands  
Working their dead charm around my neck—  
To clear the dishes, to unscrew the lights—  
Serving me, and under the table, I smile with my legs.

*Christine Gosnay*  
133

---

<sup>133</sup> [Christine Gosnay](#), "[Ode to Men of the Service Industry](#)," [Linebreak](#), collected in [Even Years](#), [The Kent State University Press](#)

## Self-Portrait as Banshee

The then-boyfriend driving my car back from Vegas  
hits an elk outside of Gallup, twilight bruising the cliffs,  
and we spin around just once before the ditch opens  
to take us, “Superfreak” the soundtrack to the splintering,

and a twang in white socks stops to perform his human  
duties, saying he saw us clip the buck’s ass but it up and ran,  
*you didn’t get to keep the horns or nothing.* So for months

I bus to work though scores of questionably intentioned men  
stop to ask if I need a ride, the daily slide up to the curb  
and chivalric offering of lances. Sirs! I am the direct descendant  
of Robert the Bruce, Scottish king, liberator from English

tyranny! Lords of Annandale and Spennithorne! They  
were born in Highland castles and I am sitting on gum! Oh,  
sad apple. Switchblade men size me up for a bite. Wasn’t I born

on this bus, or have I not been born yet? Is this the blood tunnel into  
my becoming, or out of it? For someone alive I am good at death—  
not the elk but everything else, the boys I touched to dust.

When I love you I see your bones, the stones

around your name, and I learn what I am for, not to long for  
but to warn, to throat out some keening over the city,  
diaphanous and combing my long red hair.

*Erin Adair-Hodges*

134

---

<sup>134</sup> [Erin Adair-Hodges](#), “[Self-Portrait as Banshee](#),” [Pleiades](#), collected in [Let’s All Die Happy](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Verbatim

By the time the second tower fell the Humanities lounge had filled up with staff and professors and students. I stood there and stared into the dust on TV. I was suddenly conscious that I'd spent years coaxing what I saw and heard, charting it as it traveled oxbow routes thru me. The dust disappeared the building. As I went thru the doorway, Bill said, "It's gone." I left the lounge and walked cross campus, the upstate sky unbroken blue. Kids on the library steps weeping in groups. I'd had a recurring dream where the students and faculty of the college paraded between classes holding their brains in glass jars, suspended in clear fluid. My thought then, "I guess neither approach is much good." Jackson Garden is back behind the Campus Center. I walk thru the stone gates feeling the towers and the dust and the broken glass of bodies pulse in my arms and legs where I'd coaxed the world to go. I see Thanhha Nguyen, an exchange fellow in Modern Languages. When we met she'd told me that she grew up in Hanoi during the American War.

Last Spring, we read *Dien Cai Dau* in my seminar. I'd invited Ms. Nguyen to attend the class. I bought her a copy of the book and got Yusef to sign it for her. Her English wasn't great. She said it was hard for her to read in English when she missed her children like she did. I asked. A boy and a girl, 9 and 13. She read the book and came to class. She didn't say much. She turned to the poem "Tunnels" and told us that her school had been moved to a village outside Hanoi because of the bombings and that, for the first term, the teachers had worked with the students to dig tunnels like the ones in the poem. They were told to hide in the tunnels when they heard the sirens from the city. She said, after a few weeks, the tunnels filled with water and rats lived in them and none of the students would go in.

Instead, they stood there around the opening to the tunnel listening to the sirens wishing the rain would stop. That's what she said. And, she turned to the poem "Prisoners" and asked if this writer was for or against the war. She asked why he wanted to bow to the enemy. I explained that the book's not really about enemies. It's about kinds of power and how they interact. Military, cultural, ancestral, erotic, psychological, masculine, feminine. I could tell she wasn't really listening. I pictured her standing in the rain. I stopped. She said, why did he want to bow to the enemy?

By the time I entered the garden I'd concluded that only a real fool would coax this fucking world into his body like I have. Naïve. My legs feel like they were sketched in pencil and then, mistaken, worked over with a wide eraser. I walk up to Ms. Nguyen and say hello. I can't decide if the burnt rubber smell is from the city or the scatter of tiny, hot twirls of the eraser burning my legs. She's staring into flowerbeds that bristle and hum with bees in the perfect sun. She : how are *you*? I ask if she'd heard. Heard? I say terrorists attacked New York City. Terrible. Could be ten thousand dead. No one knows. Ms. Nguyen's eyes turn to mine, she hands me her camera, "Would you take my photo with these flowers?"

Ed Pavlić  
135

---

<sup>135</sup> Ed Pavlić, "Verbatim," collected in [Visiting Hours at the Color Line](#), Milkweed Editions

## The Cuckoo Cry

Lost the milk, spilled my marbles, *our thoughts are fragile*  
says the Russian prof, & I try to gather, hold tender  
both spilled & lost, my ugly diptych of spring,

every spring my windows open & ugly happens,  
I try to hold it together, though maybe should let it go,  
gush, let spring bark & heat rain from pit-stained

clouds, let the lark, no, the cuckoo cry.  
Let spring say (the truth) I called my mother  
a bitch. Said everyone in the neighborhood knew.

She had almost struck down my door, asking who  
was on the phone, who, she had struck me,  
called me names, forbidden me from talking

(WHO) on the phone, some boy wasn't it,  
sick boy spreading his sick musky spring,  
American spring, beastly goo of wrong wanting.

Spring says I told my mother she was living in  
a dream, could never go back to the way things were.  
& she said, *Not even here? I can't say what I feel,*

*here, the one place I have in this stupid country,*  
*I can't just be, rest, I have to fight, even at home?*  
Spring says it doesn't want to be personified,

wants to be forgotten. Doesn't want to be trigger  
for memory. Spring says it & fall are retracting  
their contractual smells & birds, their unlimited

catalogue of liminal spaces. Fall says, *Stop*  
*naming children after me.* I say, *People name*  
*their kids Autumn, not Fall.*

Chen Chen

136

---

<sup>136</sup> [Chen Chen](#), "[The Cuckoo Cry](#)," [Southern Indiana Review](#), collected in [When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities](#), BOA Editions, Ltd

from “Study for Love’s Body”

### III. *Gardens Without Bats or Moss*

Gauguin writes to Theo van Gogh that in his painting he wants to suggest the idea of suffering—without ever explaining what kind.

### IV. *In Stone Archways*

The light is spilt green milk, which is languorous  
as the red monkey Gauguin painted

by the brown body of Anna  
the Javanese. At the Chinese Market

I buy two red teacups and a can  
of coconut milk. I think—

Gauguin wouldn’t know  
how Anna loved that monkey

and sang to him late at night.  
Everywhere the sea screams

at me. A great pink slab of octopus arm,  
beside it, babies seasoned in orange spices.

Such symmetry! Surely they swam  
through the night like thirsty

flowers. I think you had it right  
when you said love is the mathematics

of distance. Split like a clam on ice,  
I feel raw, half-eaten. I rot

in the cold blue of the ego,  
the crushed velvet of Anna’s chair.

*Katherine Larson*

137

---

<sup>137</sup> [Katherine Larson](#), “[Study for Love’s Body](#),” [AGNI](#), collected in [Radial Symmetry](#), Yale University Press

## Life, with Eyeliner

after *And the Ship Sails On*, by Federico Fellini

Fellini's ship sunk in undulant lamé. The soprano sung an aria through it, and later, wore it to the wrap party. Nor did the refugees drown, but emigrated and multiplied, bequeathing nothing to their children but their wiles and animal magnetism.

The rat lying drowned at the curb near the storm drain is not a rat but a puppy. Is one duty of art, likewise, to turn repulsion to sympathy?

When the Gulf receded, Katrina survivors widely tattooed themselves with fleurs de lis, an emblem of New Orleans. Hospitalized for hepatitis, one citizen said, I like my tattoos like my disasters: homemade.

French monarchs adopted fleurs de lis from the Florentine Medicis; its upright stem, standards and falls, like a sword or a cross in a field. Some see penises, uncircumcised.

The Capuchins of Rome arranged the bones of their dead to resemble French scrolls and rosettes. The original Corvette bore the fleur de lis logo as a nod to the heritage of Louis Chevrolet; Detroit displays it on its flag.

The eye Fellini cast on life, on death, was less cold than kohled: grotesque but sweet. When the water rises, working men and women know to park their Chevies aimed uphill, for the good it does them, gassed to the golden hilt.

Kathy Fagan  
138

---

<sup>138</sup> Kathy Fagan, "[Life, with Eyeliner](#)," [Connotation Press](#), collected in [Sycamore](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)



## Exam

Sometimes I still dream about their pink bodies  
floating above my nightstand in jars of formaldehyde.

To calm our nerves the teacher told us these pigs  
were never born, but salvaged from pregnant

sows after slaughter. I sliced carefully  
with an Exacto-knife, opened the lids of its eyes.

Though I never spoke it, I wanted to  
remove its organs and christen them

in the stainless steel sink. There was a girl  
in my class who found her newborn sister  
face down in the tub while her mom slept

drunk on the bathroom floor. I wondered  
if death was the puddle of water beside her

and life was the spider that passed by.  
The teacher asked us to find the pig's heart,

remove it and place it on the tray. I placed  
my fingers inside its body and turned to the boy

next to me who was cutting off the legs of his pig,  
one by one, and placing them in a line.

*Kelli Russell Agodon*

139

---

<sup>139</sup> [Kelli Russell Agodon](#), "Exam," [Southeast Review](#), collected in [Letters from the Emily Dickinson Room](#), White Pine Press

[Margaret Sanger did the first one, I was awake and felt terribly sorry]

Margaret Sanger did the first one, I was awake and felt terribly sorry  
for myself, then when I didn't learn my lesson for I was dumb and hazy  
about how babies were made and girl, I needed love, I set up the second one  
with the breezy efficiency of Mr. Drysdale's secretary on *The Beverly Hillbillies*,  
I'm going to do it right this time, I actually said that out loud, and borrowed  
some dough so I could be knocked out cold and wouldn't have to feel anything,  
the medical staff was young and encouraging with good teeth like members  
of a college vocal jazz ensemble with an optimistic setlist, and they gave us  
cookies when the anesthesia wore off, those crisp little butter cookies  
with a hole in the middle, my eyes were like a cat's, they were actually as round  
as dimes but I created the illusion of a cat with liquid eyeliner, I once stabbed  
myself in the eye with the wand, what an awful mother I would have been, girl,  
I was so loused up I didn't even grasp how lucky they were, those fairytale  
urchins who could scrape themselves free of me and not end up in jail.

*Diane Seuss*  
140

---

<sup>140</sup> [Diane Seuss](#), "[\[Margaret Sanger did the first one, I was awake and felt terribly sorry\]](#)," *Scoundrel Time*

## Deception Story

Friends describe my DISPOSITION

as stoic. *Like a dead fish*, an ex said. DISTANCE

is a funny drug and used to make me a DISTRESSED PERSON,

one who cried in bedrooms and airports. Once I bawled so hard at the border, even the man with the stamps and holster said *Don't cry. You'll be home soon*. My DISTRIBUTION

over the globe debated and set to quota. A nation can only handle so many of me. DITCHING

class, I break into my friend's dad's mansion and swim in the Beverly Hills pool in a borrowed T-shirt. A brief DIVERSION.

My body breaking the chlorinated surface makes it, momentarily, my house, my DIVISION

of driveway gate and alarm codes, my dress-rehearsed DOCTRINE

of pool boys and ping pong and water delivered on the backs of sequined Sparkletts trucks. *Over here*, DOLLY,

an agent will call out, then pat the hair at your hot black DOME.

After explaining what she will touch, *backs of the hands at the breasts and buttocks*, the hand goes inside my waistband and my heart goes DORMANT.

*A dead fish*. The last *female assist* I decided to hit on. My life in the American Dream is a DOWNGRADE,

a mere DRAFT

of home. Correction: it satisfies as DRAG.

It is, snarling, what I carve of it alone.

Solmaz Sharif  
141

---

<sup>141</sup> Solmaz Sharif, "Deception Story," *Poem-a-Day*, collected in *Look*, Graywolf Press

## The Dream of the Red Drink

This story begins, as they so often do, with heartbreak.  
I am at a party for a young man whose wife has left him,  
so he's abandoning graduate school to join the navy.  
There is a lot of despair at this gathering,  
the young man's and the impoverished students'  
and, of course, mine, which has less to do with money  
and more to do with time,  
which is running out, in case you haven't noticed.  
And then there is the red drink.

Our host looks as if he has just stepped out  
of a Trollope novel, a nineteenth-century cleric  
in rumpled chinos and a tee shirt.  
He and a friend have driven to Georgia  
to buy grain alcohol and have mixed it with red Kool-Aid  
in a styrofoam container on the back porch.  
Later when this party is famous, I learn the red drink  
eventually ate through the styrofoam,  
but this was not discovered until the next day  
or maybe the next week when heads had finally cleared.  
My host warns me not to drink much.  
I don't, but I drink enough.

I don't know anyone at this party but the red drink  
makes me intrepid.  
I talk to many people, make jokes, see God.  
How many times can you see God before you realize  
his face is different every time?  
Is this a revelation? Maybe.  
Not only do I see God, but I see through him  
to the other side, though probably it's a vision  
of cerebral matter being sloughed off,  
and I have a tête-à-tête with my most persistent epiphany,  
that is, life is nothing, *rien, nada, niente*.  
I find it incredibly comforting to know  
the world is transparent,  
insubstantial, without meaning.  
I think of Niels Bohr's assertion that there is no deep  
reality, and I know exactly what he means.  
I am looking through the woman I am talking to,  
seeing through her  
to the soft bank of azalea bushes behind.  
It's a nice effect, rather like a double exposure.

My husband is at this party, but I am avoiding him  
for a reason I can't really remember.  
Oh, I remember, but it's too tedious to go into here.  
I look at this man whom I love to distraction  
and wonder how he can be so utterly dense,  
and I know if I say anything he will say  
I've had too much to drink, which is entirely correct,  
and that there's alcoholism in my family, but show me a family  
that doesn't have a drinker or two....  
My beloved is in a cluster of beautiful students  
who think he's marvelous, which he is.  
Wait a minute, girls, I could tell you things,  
but the red drink has turned ethereal on me,  
and it's two-thirty in the morning and the young man  
who's going into the navy is delirious or dead,  
and the lovely students have disappeared  
into their enchanted student hovels.

So we leave and the car seems flimsy, as if made from  
cardboard, like the East German cars about which  
I saw a documentary in a hotel room in Tampa:  
after World War II the East Germans didn't have any steel,  
so they made cars out of cotton wool compressed  
between layers of organic plastic  
that has proved to be almost completely unbiodegradable.  
I look out into the night and think, this could be East Berlin,  
except it so obviously isn't, unless magnolias  
and enormous oaks dripping with Spanish moss have been sighted  
on the Alexanderplatz.  
But we are in motion and I sit in my seat, pulled through  
the night as if by a magnet  
to an intersection in which I see that a low-slung black  
Oldsmobile will run a red light  
and plow into my side of our flimsy East German car  
and the metaphysical and the physical worlds will have  
to come to some kind of decision about my corporeal frame,  
and I think that maybe I don't want to walk  
into that good night just yet.

I say to my husband, "That black car's not going to stop,"  
and he slows down, even though we have the green light,  
because I have authority in my voice,  
authority bestowed on me by the red drink; in fact, I believe  
the red drink has made me slightly psychic,  
because the black car doesn't stop.  
We watch it sail through the deserted early-morning  
intersection with wonder and astonishment,  
or at least I do  
for Death has passed me by, its chariot zooming toward Perry,  
Florida, driven by a laughing young man with an Elvis

haircut and his blonde teenaged girlfriend.

Time passes, probably a few minutes, but it seems  
interminable hours have stretched out before us.  
We continue through the now-empty intersection,  
down an oak-lined street,  
and turn to drive through the park,  
but a red fox is in the middle of the rumpled  
asphalt and stares into our headlights.

He has a message for me and for my husband  
and the pretty spellbound students  
and our Trollopian host  
and the unconscious soon-to-be ensign,  
and I should be able to hear it clearly,  
but I'm too giddy with being alive,  
my arms still chilled from the sleeve of death.

*Barbara Hamby*  
142

---

<sup>142</sup> [Barbara Hamby](#), "[The Dream of the Red Drink](#)," [The Southern Review](#), collected in [The Alphabet of Desire](#), [NYU Press](#)

## Bermuda Triangle

I went to this party and all the ones who had disappeared  
in the Bermuda Triangle were there, getting drunk.  
There was First Sergeant Walter Smith who commanded  
the twenty-seventh squadron into the sun, four planes  
whose radios all went dead at once, and the last thing  
he said to the air was "It is beautiful." There he was, swilling rum  
and Coke, holding an unlit cigarette between his thumb  
and forefinger, gesturing wildly to some middle-aged gal  
in sunglasses. She told him she had been on a cruise with her husband  
whom she had grown not to love, especially when he crooned  
and played the guitar in the back of the boat as they drifted  
over the base of the triangle, and his tropical shirt exerted the fire  
of its colors. And behind her, Daniel Malkovich sat  
in the corner with a look on his face as though he were  
pulling one over on all of us, his black bangs forced  
into a curl above his forehead with shining Brylcreem.  
I felt like telling him his mother is dead,  
that his wife had children with another man and died herself.  
And then I felt like telling the Spanish explorer Ernesto Tortosa,  
who disappeared with his crew and Spanish Galleon  
in 1510 when a soft breeze lifted the boat from the water,  
that half a continent is dead, that there is no more wilderness.  
I felt like shouting to them all—as they sucked booze from ice,  
as they told stories from the great war, as they bragged  
about seeing Lincoln in Chicago and leaned toward  
one another as though they actually had the bodies  
through which desire could have some meaning—  
I wanted to tell them that we left the questions of missing things  
behind us, that we went on without them.

*Joel Long*  
143

---

<sup>143</sup> [Joel Long](#), "Bermuda Triangle," collected in [Winged Insects](#), White Pine Press

## Jesus Wasn't a Refugee. He Just Wanted to Pay His Taxes

*February 1, 2017, Publication: Huffington Post, News Headline*

The apostles liked to share his boyhood  
tales in the desert, from the manger to the cradle.

*Is the bible original fake news?*

My ex-wife was mad when I got our accountant  
in the divorce. Passion is a story that is told

over time. So is religion. So is fear,

*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's.*  
God is paid in sacrifice: the small

and the tragic. Many were driven from homes.

*Genocide* is not the name of a rock band.  
Jesus loved taking road trips. So did my ex-wife.

Memory is an escape without borders.

Love is not hard. It is a shelter from lies.  
Fables are whips in the hands of the master.

*Martin Ott*  
144

---

<sup>144</sup> [Martin Ott](#), "[Jesus Wasn't a Refugee. He Just Wanted to Pay His Taxes](#)," [Barrow Street](#), collected in [Fake News Poems](#), [BlazeVOX](#)



## The Adulterer

Thinking to have their fun, those boys  
set a match to the kerosene-soaked  
rabbit  
    then watched it blaze across the lawn  
and into the garage.  
                where it thumped  
and smoldered behind the wheelbarrow—

+

and so it also entered the memory  
of the girl who watched  
from her bedroom window

but never spoke of it to anyone—

+

and, *They were going to skin it and eat it, anyway,*  
I told myself, having stopped at my desk  
to think about the scene  
I'd just invented.

*Don't mind me,* said the little voice  
at the back of the garage.

Then, silence. Tools and a ladder.

*I've done terrible things,*  
I said into the black garage.

+

The rabbit's scream stayed in the boys' ears  
long after the scuttling in the garage  
had ceased.

    One of them laughed  
uneasily. Then another. *Who's going*  
*to go in there and fetch that cooked rabbit?*  
the first asked.

+

Her parents kept many rabbits in cages on the porch.  
The girl had learned not to give them names.

Sometimes she even went with her mother  
to sell their meat at the market—

so why was she crying?

+

*I forgive you,*  
said the little voice from behind the wheelbarrow.

*It's not right,* said the girl in her room,  
looking out the window at the boys  
who stood beneath the porch light  
laughing.

You, whom I have wronged, are in the kitchen  
making me dinner. A clatter of pans,

and now you're singing, your voice  
drifting up the stairs, I can hear it where I sit  
at my desk

+

in the black garage.

*That's how love*  
*works,* I said to the wheelbarrow and tools,  
being, at that moment, in love  
with someone,  
not you.

+

And after another moment, the smallest boy  
was made to carry the charred and smoking  
meat

out into the open on a shovel.  
They buried it in the garden where no one  
would ever find it—

+

For many years, the girl and her mother  
brought meat faithfully to the market.

And when she was older, she snapped  
and skinned the rabbits herself.

*There's no explaining a marriage,* I said,

+

hunched behind the wheelbarrows  
among cobwebs.

*Stop rationalizing,*  
said the voice from its hole.

You had finished cooking our dinner.  
*Hello*, you called from the bottom of the stairs. *Hello?*

By now, the girl had turned off the bedroom light  
and the boys had crossed her black lawn  
into memory.

It burned for a while, and then I felt  
nothing at all.

*Kevin Prufer*  
145

---

<sup>145</sup> [Kevin Prufer](#), "[The Adulterer](#)," [The Paris Review](#), collected in [How He Loved Them](#), [Four Way Books](#)

## Transcript

*la vérité est en marche et rien ne l'arrêtera*  
Émile Zola

Where were you on the evening of  
1786, when Agnus Dei, the Lamb  
of God in Mozart's *Coronation*  
*Mass*, turned out to be the Countess  
in *The Marriage of Figaro*?  
She still sings *Dove sono, where*  
*are those cherished moments*  
*of sweetness and pleasure, where*  
*have they gone*, her lips touching  
then parting like the wings of  
a butterfly in light that is difficult  
to describe. After the cobalt blue  
turns black in the transept  
window, does St. Agnes go on  
holding the lamb to her  
chest? Sometimes the rabbits lie  
so flat in the grass I can't  
tell if they're there. The Countess'  
shawl was paisley—once a flowering  
plant in Kashmir—its overripe  
comma tapping her shoulder  
the way the butterfly named *Comma*  
lights on a sentence, breaking  
its heart like Neil Sedaka's  
*comma comma* in *Breaking Up*  
*Is Hard to Do*. Silly you,  
blessed with a sign, not dead  
until pronounced, while the hawk  
on the branch above  
your head unlaces  
a finch as if it were  
a shoe. Zola said *truth*  
*is on the march and nothing*  
*can stop it. J'accuse*  
the iris of unsheathing  
its purple tip with no intention  
of taking it back; I accuse them,  
lop-eared after the squall, of  
impersonating rabbits.

Angie Estes  
146

---

<sup>146</sup> Angie Estes, "Transcript," *The Manhattan Review*, collected in *Tryst*, Oberlin College Press

## Gathering Firewood on Tinpan

I bundle them against my chest, not sure  
if they're dry enough. Gauging how long  
they'll keep me warm by the thickness.  
I step around carefully, looking for  
the deadest, searching the low places  
for something small and old that will catch.  
I pick up the dander loosened  
as my father folds his hands, lowers his head.  
The rolling thunder on the surface of a nail.  
I pick up the cross that seesaws his chest  
with each step. The day I lost my faith.  
The night my dog ran away and came back sick.  
The battery pump of her final breath.  
Still wondering if she left alone,  
or if my father walked her out of this world.  
Still wondering what he used for a leash.  
I go further into the trees and find  
more fuel. My friends faded on oxy  
and percocet. My cousin Josh  
buried young in the floodplain.  
My brother and the ways I burden him.  
Living it over and over each night.  
My father walking into every dream.  
My fire not bright enough to reveal anything.  
Not even his face. Not even the leash.

*Anders Carlson-Wee*

147

---

<sup>147</sup> [Anders Carlson-Wee](#), "[Gathering Firewood on Tinpan](#)," [The Journal](#), collected in [The Low Passions](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

At night I peer into the scrying mirror of my phone to learn news of the full moon just outside, how the Scorpio moon continues to reverberate, and we'll be feeling love spread outward like spilt treacle, which is just how British people say molasses. Once I was fifteen and climbing into the bucket of a Ferris wheel with some kid from one of my classes. I think he was a wrestler. The moon: huge & I caught a mania, a spell of longing about it. The trance, I guess, of a teenage poet. That and the size of my new hoop earrings must have scared him, and he got off the ride metaphorically shaking his head. Right Ferris wheel, wrong boy. Who knows how I came to be there that night, seated next to some Mike and his neck. That was the fest in Heidelberg, and we were kids from the American school, stumbling around all new. That was the same spring Crissy's mom picked up some British teenage boys hitchhiking and made them stay the night. She felt sorry for them, how they'd spelled "Heidelberg" on their sign. She fed them dinner and turned them over to us, who subjected them to *Harold & Maude* and feelings in a darkened living room. Oh, boy. All morning I dreamed of a poet boy who tried to engage me in an elaborate game of charades, when I just wanted him to spit it out already. Later I would see him rising naked from his mother's bed, and have a fit of longing for a back that I had known.

Joanna Penn Cooper  
148

---

<sup>148</sup> Joanna Penn Cooper, "Affect Theory," collected in [When We Were Fearsome](#), [Ethel](#)

## The Doctor Told Me the Shots Would Make Me Spin Silk

Along with muscling out my shoulders and dropping my voice,  
they'd let me hang by my own fibers,  
invade distant islands with my gossamer webs.

If I didn't want to ask for directions, I could leave a trail  
of silk by which to find my way back. Along with  
narrowed hips, caught flies. Along with increased sex drive,  
anchors. The doctor said my silk would be  
as strong as high-grade steel in six months flat,  
that *man* would not be right—I might  
covet my neighbor's grill, and I'd still  
burn toast every time, but spiders would begin  
to read me as themselves and expect certain things.

Humans prone to arachnophobia  
would come at me with wads of newspapers,  
even a vacuum, while I dangle in my own abode.

Do you understand? The doctor asks. Do you still consent  
to the shots? Yes, I say, comes with the territory.

I already know what I will want to catch.

*Oliver Bendorf*

149

---

<sup>149</sup> [Oliver Bendorf](#), "[The Doctor Told Me the Shots Would Make Me Spin Silk](#)," [Redivider](#), collected in [The Spectral Wilderness](#),  
[The Kent State University Press](#)

## The Crystal Lithium

James Schuyler thought to call his book *The Crystal Lithium*  
when he was my age without knowing he was going to die,

or *knowing* as much as he could because death was still  
far away—the way I know *I'm* going to die.

I'm talking too much about my mother's cancer, her fear  
proof we don't all come to peace or understanding.

Even though the pain is terrible, the dying like it better  
than somewhere they don't know, away from us, in the dark.

Ammons says in "Speaking" his lover will come close  
after he dies, and his body, *not knowing how to speak*,

will *say nothing*. I didn't know I didn't understand  
that poem until one night high, eating cookies in the kitchen,

my body finally understood what my mind had been reading for years.  
I took my mother to Eastern Point Lighthouse

in Gloucester, past the *Residents Only* sign to the shore.  
We walked as far as she could on the rocks toward the jetty.

Across the water, Boston floated on the horizon like we're taught  
heaven floats: foggy and distant and glowing.

In that far-off city we were younger, walking the South End,  
actually smiling for the camera when my sister said *smile*, a mother

and son not understanding they wouldn't always be—and hadn't  
always been—happy. Then we stood like that, our past

in front of us, my arm wrapped around her shoulders  
because it was colder in September than we'd expected.

Aaron Smith  
150

---

<sup>150</sup> Aaron Smith, "[The Crystal Lithium](#)," [The Baffler](#), collected in [The Book of Daniel](#), The University of Pittsburgh Press



## Little Gals

They come at night  
skittering their pink  
claws across my  
soul-slab. I'm a soft deer  
browsing the woods with  
strands of willow  
in my pelt. They lean in  
to call me out  
of my name; I shiver  
& shine in my thicket  
of one. Do they know  
about the botch  
in my belly? I think  
it's a gel  
where the white light  
rots. One says  
It's past time  
you quickened & I want  
to hoof along  
the dark. You must have  
some kind of hatch says  
another or hole says a third  
in her kit fox voice.  
That one hangs  
her face like a slip  
on the nearest branch  
the better to scoop me  
with her humming  
snake-throat, to snap  
my ribs like nail rod  
bite from bite, but  
I rear back from her  
slow egg tooth bent  
like a steel—open up—  
comma. Then all three  
slide down & click their  
surgical jaws, tongues  
burning identical red  
straps of steak. I gallop  
til I'm fetlock-deep in shade  
of grease-marked trees  
March mud dashing its black  
rankness up my legs  
then I feel algae fruiting  
into stoneflies, nymphal  
bodies sweet with flab  
in my undercoat I know  
inside me is no good

in the good  
lake.

*Kiki Petrosino*  
151

---

<sup>151</sup> [Kiki Petrosino](#), "[Little Gals](#)," [Wave Composition](#), collected in [Witch Wife](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## Wrestling Season

I was made from Hawaiian Punch ice cubes  
chicken breasts & cauliflower ear Sir Newton's  
Law of Motion drilling double leg takedowns  
sprawls shucks fireman's carry I was made from  
garbage bag T-shirts cherry Skoal black spit  
filling water bottles in the back of classrooms  
I was made from ritual a bouquet of boys  
pissing on the other freshman & I that lettered  
in the locker room showers I was made from  
HOME & AWAY meets jogging up & down  
a bus aisle to sweat out the last half-pound  
before a whistle blew so I could try to pin  
the same weight of bones & meat to shoulder  
blades the crowd cheering in one collective  
mouth of thunder the spotlights above pouring  
down on all this strategy to make a shadow  
disappear

*Sean Shearer*

152

---

<sup>152</sup> [Sean Shearer](#), "[Wrestling Season](#)," [The Iowa Review](#)

## Compositions in Grey and Grey

1.

Ice on the sidewalk from a snowfall five days ago.  
The dead drink black scotch in front of a heatless fire.  
Downtown cavern filled with drunks who don't open their mail.  
Televisions around the city whinge.  
Even the dogs have asthma!

Last night I dreamt a limerick about a guy called Darius—my louvered eyelids rhyming—and his  
amorous positions which were—unfortunately—various. I don't remember the rest except—someone was  
furious.

There is no cure.

But once we ate lemon icebox pie in the afternoon and I can say we were happy.

2.

Some of the dead shimmer  
in their silver lamé gowns  
and silver lipstick  
and silver blunt-cut wigs,  
twirling like wind chimes in a storm.

And the others glisten  
in their silver lamé tuxedos  
and silver carnation boutonnieres  
and silver bowling shoes,  
spinning like water rushing down a drain.

A mirrored ball revolving,  
forever memorializing the moon.

*Landon Godfrey*  
153

---

<sup>153</sup> [Landon Godfrey](#), "[Compositions in Grey and Grey](#)," collected in [Second-Skin Rhinestone-Spangled Nude Soufflé Chiffon Gown](#), [Cider Press](#)

## The Good Life

*after Jon Davis*

Learn yourself a trade. Plumbing, carpentry, electrical work, butchering, doesn't matter. That's what my father said. Learn yourself a trade then get a job. 9-5, 8-5, 7-3, 7-5, don't matter. Take the hours, as many as they'll give you. The hours aren't for you. They're for your wife and kids. Of course, he said, find yourself a wife. Not these harlots in the colleges. Good girl, girl you meet at church, girl who makes her own apple butter, knits little caps to keep the kids warm in winter. Pay your gas bill. Pay your electric bill. If you have a chimney and fireplace, chop your own wood. Shovel your own snow. You're making enough money to hire a kid to shovel your snow, you're making too much money. Give it to the church. Give it to the bums. You got extra give it to a man who will shine your shoes on a box he made by hand. Polish your work boots. Carry a briefcase. Man don't need a hoity-toity job to carry a briefcase. Put your tools in it, your lunch. Other guys at the plant make fun, let them. Carry a briefcase and give anything extra to the shoeshiners and the bums. Jesus Christ was a bum. Don't mind me saying. A wandering holy bum, with no wife, no kids. Some say he had a harlot, but they had no colleges back then. Back then a man learned on his own. How to live the good life. A trade, a wife and kids, biscuits and homemade apple butter, and unless you were the son of God himself, only as much snow as you could shovel.

*Justin Bigos*

154

---

<sup>154</sup> Justin Bigos, "[The Good Life](#)," [diode](#), collected in [Mad River](#), [Gold Wake Press](#)

## Fireproof

Leaving you was a matter of walking away, I thought,  
then walking further. His grease, teeth, his wolf breath: I took him in.  
What if there was wine? There was wine. What if there was vodka?  
It wasn't that much wine. What if he had a gun?  
There was no gun. I took him in and trotted back to you, obedient,  
holding this sin like a dead bird in my mouth, dropping it at your feet,  
this gift. Now make the bitch of me, my love:  
Turn loose my eyes, let my jaw drop. My tongue, a leash on the bad mutt.  
These marble knuckles, fatty and loud. Punch the sweat  
from my collarbone—rainwater off a cheap awning, blood untunneling.  
Evict me. I am stubborn with tenants no one will miss.  
I am a basement of dumb boiler parts, sometimes mistaken for a plan.  
I am down to my last lightbulb, landlord pounding at the door  
with your fists, your voice: Even fireproof buildings have their escapes.  
Even the tame dogs dream of biting clear to the bone.

*Sandra Beasley*  
155

---

<sup>155</sup> Sandra Beasley, "Fireproof," *Coconut*, collected in *Theories of Falling*, New Issues Press

## Instant Courage

I had the dream again, the one with all the outdated clip art. We didn't know any better than to present our milky slates bedazzled with Z-marks to colleagues wearing the harshest shoulder pads in American history. It was hard to imagine them fitting through the doors of their dwellings, which looked like a series of glue traps for mice or roaches, set out by an inhumane god. I was too busy searching for my own likeness among the thumbnails. I would know me by my hair and my ass, both of which were abundant. I would know me by the way my two-dimensional likeness would want to be animated, but that was not available yet, kind of like how I listened to *Pretty Hate Machine* for years before any of my friends took notice. When seeking a bottle of instant courage, the following items were available for insertion: ink + quill pen, poison bottle with ill opossum, empty fish bowl, a Pacific ocean (not to scale), one capsized thimble in a mending box. It goes without saying that none of this was in color. Not the blood on my knee when I tripped on the hastily-sketched mall Santa, or the eyes of my nemesis when we exchanged the only physical congress available: an aggressive handshake in front of two fictional flags.

Mary Biddinger

156

---

<sup>156</sup> [Mary Biddinger](#), "[Instant Courage](#)," [Waxwing](#)

## The People's Republic of Sleepless Nights

As if in a cold war spy flick, it is a foggy night.  
You pull up to the striped and lowered roadblock  
and the checkpoint guard, fat in his overcoat,  
breathes gin down your neck as he thumbs through your passport.

He stamps it with the black and oily barn-owl crest.

You know what's through that mountain pass, you've been before.  
Insomnia speaks a harsh and stuttered language—  
in it all your answers sound like questions—  
and on her cobbled capital streets all friends are strangers.

You know what you'll find among the natives:

their milk is black, storms rage in their living-rooms,  
bones grow in the tongues of the old, who cannot speak.  
The sun burns out his days in exile, pacing a poor and sweaty chamber,  
and you, the black-gloved master spy, you light another cigarette.

The guard has waved you through. Your headlights glare like lidless eyes.

*Robert Archambeau*  
157

---

<sup>157</sup> [Robert Archambeau](#), "[The People's Republic of Sleepless Nights](#)," [Rattle](#), collected in [Home and Variations](#), [Salt Publishing](#)



## Day 7

Somehow, we've all been given the same fate,  
which means our lives are ordinary.

I can't come to terms with the fact that the astronaut who stood on the moon  
and compared the earth to his pregnant wife's stomach  
will die in the same dismal flames as the man who is too large to leave his house  
without removing the roof and hiring a crane.

I could have spent years in bed  
listening to books on tape and masturbating  
until I fractured my wrists.

I could have found the similarities  
between fractures and fractals and applied the math  
to the unsolvable equation of loss.

I could have let my wrists heal crooked, waited  
to find a man who loved acute angles over obtuse.

He would love how slivered my world is,  
explaining that some spaces are fixed,  
that he loved me enough to create a symbol  
to stand for me.

I have spent years trying to be more  
industrious than the bees.

Queen, you have no separate savior.  
Honey is no longer a reasonable bribe.

Haven't you heard?  
Our god is diabetic.  
Arthritic.  
Hypoallergenic.

Give god a reason, he'll break out in hives.

*Meghan Privitello*

158

---

<sup>158</sup> [Meghan Privitello](#), "[Day 7](#)," [Drunk in a Midnight Choir](#), collected in [Notes on the End of the World](#), Black Lawrence Press

## Losing It

virginity / virginité

*There is generated in me (a contradiction in terms)  
a kind of alert fascination: I am nailed  
to the scene and yet very wide awake.*

You have nothing to lose. For decades, across  
continents, the elders will say you are losing it—

your innocence, your mind, your temper, your  
grip—but here on this fall day, windbreaker

tossed over mountain laurel, shoes off, lying  
on your back on pine needles, seeing chandeliers

in the trees while the boy you like fumbles  
with his fly, you are nothing if not good, intact.

Trust me on this. Keats didn't die a virgin. Years  
later you'll argue this point with a lover, insist

on the likelihood of unreported sex, even if not  
with Fanny. Off the record, off the scent, off

a leaf-mulched path behind the elementary school  
like any young animal, even one who dies at 25,

choking on mucus, surrounded by bloody rags.  
The boy you like will lay his head on your chest,

slide down to the soft belly. It gets chilly. You  
reach for your jacket but it won't cover you both.

*B.K. Fischer*  
159

---

<sup>159</sup> B.K. Fischer, "Losing It," collected in [My Lover's Discourse](#), [Tinderbox Editions](#)

Rain, Gas, Boone County, West Virginia

There is only a roof & one pump

There is only the dark road

There is only the grocer Mel

I hear a man ask Mel

I'll take that can of Longhorn & his shelves of dusty cans

Chiclets & RC Cola

Jerky & yellow-edged maps

There is only a key

That someone turns in the sky

To open it & let the dark pour down

The mountains are smoldering

With machines

Bearded men are buying cigarettes

I pump my gas in the absence of light

On a road that belongs to dead men

I will drive toward nothing straight

I hand the cashier

A packet of jerky & ask for a pack of Camels

I wish I could say more

I wish I could tell you about the gun

I wish I was more than a body

That I was growing that my collarbones

Were not hollow

As my grandfather's before he died

This man has duct tape on his work boot  
The kind of rip says you lost a toe  
And I recall the dust of the newspaper plant  
Used to turn to shimmering gold flecks  
When we'd work the night shift to dawn  
The light pouring in around the machines  
The silence  
Of sleeping houses  
Far from the road  
I can almost hear  
The snoring of strangers  
I do not need directions  
Since I am headed nowhere  
My mother would say my hair is unkempt  
I haven't changed in days  
How our lives are rewritten  
Until they say nothing  
That matters  
More than leaving  
As a story is anyone  
We all have a beginning & an end  
The men surprise me as I turn  
*Good luck young fella*  
And go on talking about some kind  
Of accident high up the mountain

In this world where a man's life  
Is worth less than the weight of anthracite  
I try to forget the load I carry  
Is what can't be left behind  
I drive through the rain's wreckage  
Despite the evidence my headlights  
Open a door in the dark.

*Sean Thomas Dougherty*  
160

---

<sup>160</sup> [Sean Thomas Dougherty](#), "[Rain, Gas, Boone County, West Virginia](#)," collected in [The Second O of Sorrow](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Sammy Davis Jr.

There are no dressing rooms for you

snickering in golf pants

they regret to inform

stirring bloodies with celery stalks

a clan by any other name

growing slowly in the courtyard

the life of a thief, a spider bite

dead between the eyes

belly-round with misfortune

you remember your mother, fireflies

smear your cheekbones in whiteout

you wait outside until you are called

A fountain lights up, you forgive, again

heaven drools with indifference

*Morgan Parker*

161

<sup>161</sup> Morgan Parker, “**Sammy Davis Jr.**,” collected in *Magical Negro*, Tin House Books

## Mortuary Man

Corpse-dust spills all over the floor,  
and twenty brooms and bins

cannot erase the gray that settles.  
The twenty crocodiles in the bathroom

eating from my hands do nothing  
but nothing. Those scaly bastards

with their teeth spilling all over the floor—  
beads for necklaces, if anyone cared

for the undertaker. Mr. Guts-Face,  
boys sneer on their way to baseball

and sheds stocked with 1970s porn,  
full bushes like they will never see

in their lifetimes, though they will dream  
of single brown curls on the sheets.

Their wives will crow about this and that,  
but at least they have wives in this future.

At least there are more  
than hours, oak, stain, and bleach.

*Erica Wright*  
162

---

<sup>162</sup> [Erica Wright](#), "[Mortuary Man](#)," [B O D Y](#), collected in [All the Bayou Stories End with Drowned](#), Black Lawrence Press

## Audio Commentary Track 2

As you can already see, everything is fucked.  
The shark wasn't working and Linda  
had to be replaced by a homeless man  
we cleaned up and taught crude  
phonetic Russian. The Thai embassy threatened  
dire things, canings and worse,  
extraordinary rendition to French Canada,  
if we refused to swear fealty  
to their epileptic despot. He was deposed  
in a coup while we were there  
that everyone we met agreed  
was fantastically bloody. I sent word  
for the street urchins we'd chained  
to a truck to be given cameras  
and ankle bracelets that satellites can track  
so we could find them  
if they didn't return with the footage  
I wanted. That's coming up  
in just a second, though mostly all you see  
is the road and a lot of running  
and sobbing. The amount of viscera surprised  
the crew, though to be fair,  
I'd hired them off the back  
of a loading dock in San Clemente  
the week before. Scrappers, all of them,  
and the severe language barriers  
gradually thinned their numbers  
as the shoot went on. Some we buried  
within sight of a graveyard  
out of respect for what we thought  
their mother's stricken wishes might have been.  
Some we tried to burn with  
gasoline we siphoned from cars  
or paint thinner we lifted from construction sites.  
But it was all hypothetical  
and in the heat we lost a few more  
before we had a chance to pretend  
our sadness was debilitating  
or at least an emotion which passed for sadness  
in that part of world. Look,  
you can spot the shark again—  
we made it out of packing foam  
and spray-painted it ourselves  
to make sure the job was done right.  
We named it Bruce.  
No one can say we didn't reasonably value *verité*.  
And I do think it resembled  
something a child or person recovering



from massive head trauma  
would find dangerous or scary  
or at least uncomfortable to be around.  
We never did find Linda  
though I left the number of the hotel  
none of us were staying at  
because we were sleeping in the jungle  
taking turns at watch just like  
this scene though the suspense is muted  
by incorrect matting  
so all you see is knees and fire  
and some dialog about love  
and honor and taking a stand  
which was very moving to us all  
though none of us wept  
with our eyes on the trainee chimp and his chainsaw.

*Paul Guest*  
163

---

<sup>163</sup> [Paul Guest](#), "[Audio Commentary Track 2](#)," collected in [My Index of Slightly Horrifying Knowledge](#), HarperCollins

from “Rag”

Was that it then? The muscular pattern of an adult day? Slice fruit. Lift the phone and wash someone’s hands. A girl, I sat in a theater. Yellow flash of light on the screen. The father was dead but I didn’t get it. My father breathing beside me. Two kids walked into a desert. Dad asleep right by me. In another one, kids at school. Another one, kids on bikes. Was I watching for something to focus? Was a body. A body that was breathing.

If a man put his hand there, you’d done something to him, something bad so you could hate him. Allow me to adjust that. If a friend’s father sneaks a pat, you could tell if you wanted to or just take it. In one movie two boys compete for the piano teacher’s kiss. These are boys in a war and one won’t make it. Woods are a place for hiding under leaves. Leaves won’t do it. In another a boy sleeps with his mother. But what did that flash of yellow mean. My mother had a tongue or a temper. Does your father ever smile, one kid said. Was up in a tree or down in the mouth. Snapping heads off flowers or robbing stores. Something under my shirt to be found. If a father put his hand there you could hate him.

One boy on our couch had a mother who was dead. This was an installation. I wrote everything that mattered down. When the car flamed up, the kids walked off. When the war came, they went to a monastery. Every story gets kids alone. In the car with my father I ran out of comments. The river fled beneath the bridge to remind us about time. Was that it then? A series of smells and a long wait for what. A series of films like flashes of light. Was “sick of my face.” Said my mother, ruefully, a slight roll of her eyes, “don’t worry. It’ll change.”

That’s it then, the dark theater in which I heard a father breathing, the suicide father blowing himself up before me, his car exploding into amber light. A sister and a brother walk away from that death. Little lift of her chin, blue skirt blurred by sun. Was waiting on carpets and couches—for the muscular pattern of an adult day. “Sick of my” car rides and corners of grey. The city smells of its river. Don’t try so hard, said someone taking my picture in a tree.

*Julie Carr*

164

---

<sup>164</sup> Julie Carr, “[Rag \[Was that it then\]](#),” collected in [Rag](#), [Omnidawn Publishing](#)

State Fair

*For Trent*

Fried world, sun-sick  
kids, an arena rock riff  
spills from the Tilt-A-Whirl.

I'm throwing rings  
at a pegboard of yellow  
duck bills, trying to nab

a stuffed mallard  
for my love. Girls in denim  
shorts like a water park

of lust. What would Dante do  
with a blue-ribbon pig?  
Grease facts: black tattoos

giving up, dogs lapping  
at the mud. Muzzy bumblebees  
and where's my EpiPen?

I'm dead drunk enough  
for the dark night of rodeo  
that's about to begin.

The riders are strong  
and broken. The animals  
too big for their pen.

*Gregory Lawless*

165

---

165 [Gregory Lawless](#), "[State Fair](#)," [Poets/Artists](#), collected in [Far Away](#), [Red Mountain Press](#)

American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin

In a parallel world where all Dr. Who's  
Are black, I'm the doctor who knows no god  
Is more powerful than Time. In a parallel world  
Where all the doctors who are black see cops  
Box black boys in cop cars & caskets, I'm  
The doctor who blacks out whenever he sees  
A police box. In a parallel world where doctors  
Who box cops in caskets cry doing their jobs,  
I disappear inside a skull that's larger on the inside.  
Question: if, in a parallel world where every Dr.  
Who was black, you were the complex Time Lord,  
When & where would you explore? My answer is,  
A brother has to know how to time travel & doctor  
Himself when a knee or shoe stalls against his neck.

*Terrance Hayes*  
166

---

<sup>166</sup> [Terrance Hayes](#), "[American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin](#)," [Connotation Press](#), collected in [American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## Red Wreck's Sexual Education

At the start of the fifth grade, Red Wreck had a friend whose mother sat the girl, her daughter, ten years old, down at the kitchen table. "I want talk to you about your changing body."

An extended silence followed, ending when the mother said, "You're excused." Later, she gave Red Wreck's friend a book. The girls were still playing with pony figurines, still took them, sometimes, into the baths they still took together. Alone in the friend's bedroom they flipped through the book's shiny pages, stopping to read the cartoons. In them, anthropomorphic sperm cracked jokes beyond the girls' grasp.

The same year, another friend's grandmother took the girl, her granddaughter, ten years old, to the park for a hot dog for supper, and while they sat on a bench pinching off bits of roll for the pigeons that came down to bathe in the dust at dusk, her grandmother recommended that a girl wait, not for true love, but for a boy with lambskin condoms. Her grandmother reasoned the purchasing of lambskin—which, when the girls were older, and looked it up, were nauseated to learn were made from the shaped membrane cut from intestines—was a genuine way to gauge interest. She, the grandmother, said, "No one's getting one of those for a quarter and a crank at the gas station."

Kept behind the counter, like batteries and cigarettes, in theory, only the truly committed would go through the hassle of procuring them. This became the girls' phrase for years. Seeing a dress they wanted, they would say, "No one's getting one of those for a quarter and a crank at the gas station."

All this was in a place where, if a young woman showed up at her mother's or with double black eyes and an iridescent ring, like a pigeon, around her neck, her mother would say to her, "What did you do this time?"

*Jenny Irish*  
167

---

<sup>167</sup> Jenny Irish, "[Red Wreck's Sexual Education](#)," collected in [Common Ancestor](#), Black Lawrence Press

## Oh, the Water

You are the hero of this poem,  
the one who leans into the night  
and shoulders the stars, smoking  
a cigarette you've sworn is your last  
before reeling the children into bed.

Or you're the first worker on the line,  
lifting labeled crates onto the dock,  
brown arms bare to the elbow,  
your shirt smelling of seaweed and soap.

You're the oldest daughter  
of an exhausted mother, an inconsolable  
father, sister to the stones thrown down  
on your path. You're the brother  
who warms his own brother's bottle,  
whose arm falls asleep along the rail of his crib.

We've stood next to you in the checkout line,  
watched you flip through tabloids or stare  
at the face on the *TV Guide* as if it were the moon,  
your cart full of cereal, toothpaste, shampoo,  
day-old bread, bags of gassed fruit,  
frozen pizzas on sale for 2.99.

In the car you might slide in a tape,  
listen to Van Morrison sing *Oh, the water*.  
You stop at the light and hum along, alone.

When you slam the trunk in the driveway,  
spilling the groceries, dropping your keys,  
you're someone's love, their one brave hope;  
and if they don't run to greet you or help  
with the load, they can hear you,  
they know you've come home.

Dorianne Laux  
168

---

<sup>168</sup> Dorianne Laux, "[Oh, the Water](#)," collected in [Smoke](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Wayward Girl

During their weekly outing, the girl drifts  
around the Dairy Barn parking lot,  
as the others adjust their plump  
figures onto benches at a picnic table.

It is late summer and a dribble  
of ice cream spots her maternity dress  
where a pattern of washed-out daffodils  
wants to decorate her belly.

A transistor radio fizzles out  
Motown dance hits.  
The girl bums a Pall Mall  
off the take-out window boy.

She could be the official model for  
generations of trouble, the daughter sent  
away, to any place with parentheses,  
which, in 1965, lay behind the gates of  
the Salvation Army Home for Wayward

Girls. Euphemism suits the plains of her  
imagined face, a Nordic face with angles  
that conjure nothing more than snow,  
deep snow. So her child is born

into trouble and expects to go out  
unchanged, cursed with the urge to wander  
all troublemakers carry, like a gene  
soldered at conception:

in the back of a candy-red Corvair,  
on the coat pile in any blue suburban bedroom  
as the party music drifts down the hallway:

*You don't own me,  
I'm not just one of your little toys.  
You don't own me,  
don't say I can't go with other boys...*

*Erin Belieu*  
169

---

<sup>169</sup> [Erin Belieu](#), "[Wayward Girl](#)," collected in [One Above & One Below](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

#2, Parking Lot, Ford Sterling Plant

Empty pallets stacked against the fence,  
a few cars scattered across the blacktop,  
a barren landscape decaying under grey sky.

*167 days since the last work-loss accident*  
*This lot under closed-circuit surveillance*  
*Authorized personnel only*

An empty bag blown flush against the fence.  
A set of keys in the middle of an aisle.  
A flattened oil can, a lottery ticket,  
a paperback with no cover.

There's a man in this picture.  
No one can find him.

*Jim Daniels*

170

---

170 [Jim Daniels](#), "[#2, Parking Lot, Ford Sterling Plant](#)," collected in [Places/Everyone](#), [University of Wisconsin Press](#)



## Orange

The doctor has diagnosed cancer, sees  
“shadows” and “masses” in the sad, damp bags  
which are my lungs. I have three weeks at best.

I am running through Idlewild airport, wheezing,  
as I race to catch the evening flight to Paris.  
I want to be bumped up to first class, I have cancer,  
want champagne, toasted nuts and extra legroom,  
crave comfort, however it comes.

Miss one train,  
catch another, said a friend’s wise mother,  
meaning, keep on keeping on, meaning  
get back on the horse, meaning it ain’t over  
'til it’s over, 'til the fat lady sings.  
Can the baby now quickening inside me  
survive on its own? I’d asked the doctor.  
This was my first thought, my first such thought.  
Yes, he’d reassured me, she’ll be tiny,  
but babies, like cancers, grow and grow.

I can’t run fast enough. I miss that plane.  
A man dressed all in orange whisks me  
to his mother’s, shows his first-edition books,  
autobiographies, of Angela Davis, Joe Louis,  
Muhammad Ali. Then he lifts his mother’s mattress,  
displays a million dollars in small bills.  
He tells me wise things, wise things I can’t remember  
but take in like mentholated steam:

I’m dead,  
he said, I died at 37. It’s not so bad.  
I come back when I need to, walk amongst you  
leaving signs that I passed through. The dead  
wear orange when they come back to visit.  
That is how you know which ones we are.

*Elizabeth Alexander*

171

---

<sup>171</sup> [Elizabeth Alexander](#), “[Orange](#),” [Callaloo](#), collected in [Antebellum Dream Book](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Dear Lonely Animal,

I miss you. The other animals  
are looking at porn again.  
I will never dress or disrobe

in front of the other animals  
ever again. Skin is different  
than that. Bodies are different;

they're filled with eternity.  
They exude rapture and light. Lonely  
Animal, the other animals

are wearing black masks and  
storming the press room toting  
heavy weaponry and strapped with

belts of ammunition. The other  
animals sport flouncy hair extensions.  
They are taking each other on cruises

with that kind of caviar I can never  
remember how to call.  
The other animals are text-

messaging one another. I'm writing  
to you, Lonely Animal. I will  
never be a part of this world.

I should have built a  
long-ago tower and lived there.  
I've made mistakes, thinking

I found another animal  
with whom I belonged. But  
now where should I live?

Should it be the old factory  
filled with broken glass?  
I could manufacture tears

for the world and make  
a million bucks. Jeweled  
silver tears, crystal tears,

adhesive tears to gem to the face.  
Beautiful long tears like  
liquid metal cooled. So slender,

exquisite. Animal, there is a puddle  
I love to step in: Splash!  
The other animals talk so

important and stuff. I make  
the cat and the sheep and the  
pig sounds. I'm sad and I

make the sounds like the snail  
and sometimes the clam. At least  
the snail carries his home on his back.

If you put a snail down in a huge, wild  
meadow filled with thistle and lace and clover,  
insects, snakes, and mice, what are the chances

that that snail will find another snail  
during his lifetime in all that terrain?  
Even if two snails meet, what would they do?

I saw a documentary where the two snails  
met and just mated right away.  
They're all the same; everybody.

*Oni Buchanan*  
172

---

<sup>172</sup> Oni Buchanan, "[Dear Lonely Animal, I miss you. The other animals](#)," collected in [Spring](#), [University of Illinois Press](#)

## Blues for the Evil Empire

*with a line by Unamuno*

Consider the late *Eurasian entity*, how it lumbered  
into the groggy arms of history where it was

buried. Which is more than you can say  
for Lenin's body, chilly like a mammoth

in an ice floe, if less hairy. An old man in the square  
asks "Who is laughing at us?" then drifts unevenly

away. The czar's nephew comes alive  
in Finland like some cyborg, sent into the future

with a mission to annoy; there are the plagues:  
evangelists, economists, and experts

of all kinds, Americans who read the future  
in a glass of tea, and analyze "the Slavic mind."

At home, cold warriors, like dying jellyfish,  
grow dim. Why no joy in Washington, no dancing

in the streets—we "won," but sleep uneasy  
in our victory. The evil empire, vanquished, seeks

a plusher berth within—a red and rising sun?  
A few blocks from the White House, my city twists

and keens, and someone's child is bought and sold.  
—*We do not die of darkness, but of the cold.*

*Rachel Loden*

173

---

<sup>173</sup> [Rachel Loden](#), "[Blues for the Evil Empire](#)," collected in [The Last Campaign](#), Slapering Hol Press

## The Great Physician

Spring's bright paradise has come to this.  
The stethoscope of the sun is on my breast.

The string that holds me is crazed and flayed.  
I hold a leash, but there is no dog.

A myth is not a fact. It's a haystack, Canada  
stuck beneath. *I still exist*, she whispers

to the crowd. When the fog lifted, I took  
a tugboat out to sea, and married it. The sea.

Apart from that, Wellbutrin steers me  
through the shipyard of sleep. Aphasic,

I languish on an operation table. Doctor  
thinks the unwell soul is a machine.

*Virginia Konchan*

174

---

<sup>174</sup> [Virginia Konchan](#), "[The Great Physician](#)," [The Wallace Stevens Journal](#), collected in [The End of Spectacle](#), [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

## Paper Crown

Outside, the cold is a kingdom  
sitting for a portrait, preening

its pale blue snow on its black branches.  
Weeks ago my child began a story

*Once upon a time there was  
a Queen Mama and a Princess Papa.*

*They lived in a big monarchy on a hill.*  
A monarchy is an imaginary house

with real toads in it, they say,  
by which I mean someone

said Marianne Moore borrowed the idea  
from something William Carlos Williams

said in a letter. *Marianne the magpie*  
I think, *she of the glittering eye.*

In a draft of his autobiography  
WCW wrote that if we were looking

for an account of the women (or men)  
he had slept with, we wouldn't find it there

and then he crossed out the parenthetical.  
Somewhere there is a party full of crossed-out guests,

invitation-only. I have this other idea  
of a service that would deliver, each morning,

a report of all you did in the night  
in other people's dreams. I understand

it would be at first embarrassing  
and even dangerous, but I like to believe

over time it would change us for the better.  
I have fucked so many people in my sleep!

A Venn diagram I will never draw: the circle  
of physical lovers and its slim overlap

with the circle of lovers in dreams.  
But nor will I cross it out. The rising sun

has vanished the blue from the snow;  
no kingdom lasts forever. *We will pick up*

*where we left off tomorrow*, says the painter,  
who packs up real paint with imaginary hands.

*Heather Christle*  
175

---

<sup>175</sup> [Heather Christle](#), "[Paper Crown](#)," [American Poetry Review](#)

## Red Lemons

My friend kisses  
a silver Jesus hanging  
below his throat—  
My sister's friend  
wore a pond like a crown;  
he handwrote her a letter  
before fading  
beneath water.  
If god were a spider  
I'd toss the Big Book at it.  
In the sober house  
I puked bricks  
for an entire year,  
stacked them  
until they took shape  
of a normal kind of me.  
I'm soft as tomentum.  
There's a woman  
I'll always love  
in a cave's-mouth-  
sipping-moonlight  
kind of way.  
Her face is a guillotine.  
How I love sharpness.  
There are no clouds  
swollen with souls  
in outer space.  
An artist carved  
the underworld  
onto stone. My niece  
draws lemons  
in red marker.

*Sean Shearer*

176

---

<sup>176</sup> [Sean Shearer](#), "[Red Lemons](#)," [Foundry](#)



## Self-Portrait Beside a Dead Chestnut Horse

I am seven and in a field facing a dead horse.  
Flies pucker around its open eyes like black-green oil  
and as I walk to it, they alight. You are reading  
my comic book aloud behind me with one hand  
extended, batting back long grasses.

The afternoon rains have stopped and the front  
of your denim culottes are dark with water. You do not  
look up until the breeze pushes the tang past.  
I am here because of a dare: to stab the heart  
of a dead horse before a witness.

The whole town is marooned to this act,  
the handle of the deer knife taken from  
my father's dresser, moist.  
I squeeze it to wring the last of me  
out of its sharpened tip.

Grasses, hills, birds, the metallic smells of earth—the dead  
tongue of a horse, barely visible between  
its slightly opened mouth—I know I have been asleep.  
Do it, you say, pushing me with your fall weight  
so that I almost fall on the cadaver.

Do it or I'll tell everyone that Oliver's a girl. I see  
the paleness of your ankles. Your freckled wrists.  
I see your breasts, barely flickering out of your shirt  
as you thrust your arms out, still too young for a bra.  
I would not know you now, with your son

and your past neatly tucked into drawers,  
settling easily into quiet hours.  
We do not know how it is we are called, only  
that we hear the beautiful sweep of wind through our hair.  
We do not know how it is to burn the name of a horse

into the air while riding across an ever-narrowing pasture.  
The chirr of redwing blackbirds  
thins me out, and the creek nearby fills  
the watering hole where the other horses  
stand and regard us like a crowd come to witness

an act of divinity. Overhead,  
I hold the knife above the dead horse's flank—  
how the will shines in it, perfect, cruel, and without doubt.  
How it mirrors our deathlessness and the break  
in the dark and distant sky. How it catches,

in air, the angle of the great brown body,  
soft on impact as if to cushion us as we fall off the world.

*Oliver de la Paz*  
177

---

<sup>177</sup> [Oliver de la Paz](#), "[Self-Portrait Beside a Dead Chestnut Horse](#)," [The Chattahoochee Review](#), collected in [Requiem for the Orchard](#), [The University of Akron Press](#)

from “Restaurant Art”

*The Indie Café*

White Italian lights  
loop around  
exposed pipes.

Brick wall, bare bones  
low-budget chic.

Sloppy paintings  
of sock puppets say:

“Fuck Art that tries.”

Must be the work  
of the inner child  
of a friend of a friend.

A wobbly skyline melts  
like hot fudge sauce  
above a table in the corner.

*Elaine Equi*  
178

---

<sup>178</sup> [Elaine Equi](#), “[Restaurant Art](#),” collected in [Sentences and Rain](#), [Coffee House Press](#)

## Notes Toward a History of Imperialism

Our captain Gonzalo Pizarra  
ate of the Indians' mushroom  
beneath a branchless tree  
on the 12th of November 1559  
in the jungles of Amazonia  
by the River of the Jaguarundi  
and glimpsed an army of God's  
angels ascending a waterfall  
in which fish with transparent wings  
fluttered in clouds, like butterflies.

From the west, the rain blows in  
sheets, hotter than blood, stinging  
like salt, as it lashes our faces  
and riddles our boots with worms.  
With muskets, sabers, and bare  
hands we have committed terrible  
crimes in the name of King Philip.  
Where villages stood, we left charred  
ground: men and women slaughtered;  
children enslaved and sold downriver;

the girls raped, out of earshot  
of the priests in our party,  
who have witnessed all other  
atrocities without blinking an eye  
(and who insist on Fridays  
that we abstain from flesh  
and eat the river's eyeless fish).  
Drunk by noon, with fevers scalding  
our brains and birds clattering,  
we slash corridors through the swamps.

We suffer no remorse, but, still,  
we are afraid to pray: what  
would become of us if we did  
open our hearts, even to a god  
who (apparently) forsakes the innocent?  
Somewhere coals await us that will  
make this heat feel like ice.  
In his pouch, with its royal seal,  
Pizarro has a map of El Dorado,  
where the streets, impregnated with sun,

shine gold through the night,  
and every window is a mirror,  
reflecting only the good in men—  
even men like us—and the stairways  
in its towers lead directly to clouds  
where music, not water, rains down  
and makes the gold flowers grow.  
In this green maze we come back  
on ourselves a hundred times—  
our own scorched faces unrecognizable.

At night, if men could fly over  
the trees' canopy, our fire—  
the hub around which we sleep in  
a wheel—must seem like a match  
struck at the bottom of the sea.  
Only Pizarro lies apart, his pouch  
for a pillow, his sword across his chest,  
uneasy in his sleep; tonight we can  
hear him crying out to his brother  
who crucified Atahualpa on a mountaintop.

Perhaps it is the mushroom he took  
from the belt of an Indian we hanged  
that makes him scream so, filling  
his dreams with volleys of arrows  
and those man-sized vipers that hang  
like vines, waiting to seize us at dawn.  
With his commission beneath his head  
(to pillage the City of Gold for Spain),  
Pizarro knows as we plunge into this  
blinding sunlight, like snow rushing

into a flame, that he will be first  
to die when we reach our real destination,  
beside boiling waterfalls, and angels  
with the faces of children surround us,  
their eyes flashing like knives.

*Nicholas Christopher*  
179

---

<sup>179</sup> [Nicholas Christopher](#), "[Notes Toward a History of Imperialism](#)," collected in [In the Year of the Comet](#), [Penguin Books](#)

After Seeing *The Misfits*

I want to taste the grit  
in Marilyn's throat, her breath, shattered  
and sapphire, guarding the edges of things. I want the hive  
of panic in her lungs, the rim of a hoof planted in the Earth's  
skull, to pull at the root of a feeling and see its shimmered tip  
spasm with grief. There are rooms  
in my heart I still cannot enter. One  
belongs to my sister, wearing teeth around her neck  
and selling glimpses of a carved universe, her veins  
pierced with phosphorescence.  
Listening to the bodies of horses tremble in the half-dark  
I want to remember the smell of her hair,  
its blue star radiating my chest. To reach through  
the scrim of milky light  
and touch the injured mare who cradles us in her muzzle.  
To believe in a god so obscene  
she cannot stop loving us  
is to believe in our own goodness, no matter  
how rough and unearthed, that one day I will love  
back with the indigence of my body. Will hear the roar begin  
in my palms and catch fire.

Kendra DeColo  
180

---

<sup>180</sup> Kendra DeColo, "[After Seeing \*The Misfits\*](#)," collected in [Thieves in the Afterlife](#), Saturnalia Books

## Oklahoma

For a place I hate, I invoke you often. Stockholm's: I am eight years old and the telephone poles are down, the power plant at the edge of town spitting electricity. Before the pickup trucks, the strip malls, dirt beaten by Cherokee feet. *Osiyo, tsilugi*. Rope swung from mule to tent to man, tornadoes came, the wind rearranged the face of the land like a chessboard. This was before the gold rush, the greed of engines, before white men pressing against brown women, nailing crosses by the river, before the slow songs of cotton plantations, the hymns toward God, the murdered dangling like earrings. Under a redwood, two men signed away the land, and in history class I don't understand why a boy whispers *sand monkey*. The Mexican girls let me sit with them as long as I braid their hair, my fingers dipping into that wet black silk. I try to imitate them at home—*mírame, mama*—but my mother yells at me, says they didn't come here so I could speak some beggar language. Heaven is a long weekend. Heaven is a tornado siren canceling school. Heaven is pressed in a pleather booth at the Olive Garden, sipping Pepsi between my gapped teeth, listening to my father mispronounce his meal.

Hala Alyan

181

---

<sup>181</sup> [Hala Alyan](#), "[Oklahoma](#)," [Poetry](#), collected in [The Twenty-Ninth Year](#), [Mariner Books](#)

## How She Forced Visions Upon Herself.

There was a sound like white noise  
with flies in it. She took the giant  
pill from her pocket

and swallowed it and stood  
until she felt dizzy. Then  
she could safely tell

Ms. Coleman she felt  
sick and was soon walking  
off the playing field,

then on the cot in the nurse's  
office, breakable as a violin,  
then on her bike home

to the empty house, the matted  
greasy fur of the dog, the dense  
carpet. On the sofa with

Sally Jessy, doors began to flutter  
and she went in and out  
and in the spaces

where information went missing  
roots appeared, gently  
escorting her underground.

Then the composer of her life  
came out and silently embraced  
each threadbare musician,

instruments hanging  
at their sides, and sirens  
in the street said

a speechless  
sorrow. And she went  
into the periphery.

*Julia Story*  
182

---

<sup>182</sup> [Julia Story](#), "[How She Forced Visions Upon Herself.](#)" [Rockhurst Review](#), collected in [Julie the Astonishing](#), [Sixth Finch](#)



## Cheerios

We're sharing stories  
Tonight after maybe too many drinks  
But among friends mostly  
& with some good jokes behind us  
We move into a new space  
Of realness & the problems  
Our world is facing,  
& all the good communication  
We are having in our lives  
Making sure some miseducated others  
Understand the ways they are *wrong, wrong, wrong*  
& I am cornered by my own adamancy  
& by the questions of a stranger  
Into the telling of a story  
& am soon relating (why? to complicate  
This image of me, wine glass in hand?)  
How my mother raised three kids  
Alone on weekdays  
On a hundred dollars a month  
& refused food stamps  
For as long as she could  
Out of what I mistook as pride only,  
Until one morning she collapsed weeping at the table  
Over the last packet of dehydrated macaroni & cheese  
& crumbs of Cheerios collected in the hip of a plastic bag  
& admitted without words some final terrible loss  
Before her stunned & unsure children,  
& this guy suddenly beside me  
Nods & says, "Whatever doesn't kill you—"

& I'm remembering this conversation  
With more than a little guilt  
On the corner of 76th & Lexington at 2 AM  
Rousing a young, seemingly newly homeless woman  
Out from under her hard stare  
Over leveled kneecaps  
As behind her the others sleep on, layered in thin blankets  
& broke-backed corrugated cardboard  
In this seven-degree night of perfect  
Chill, this solid block of death,  
& I'm offering her a sleeping bag  
Which she will refuse  
which she will refuse  
& I will ask again, please,  
it's only going to get worse,  
& she will refuse  
with a look I'll never forget  
because it showed me who I was to her

in no uncertain terms,  
ending with a final exhalation  
that was a curse  
on this the coldest night of our year

realizing why I grew so angry  
so quickly  
& turned upon this stranger  
in the once friendly apartment, announcing  
*What doesn't kill you*  
*kills you*  
*motherfucker*  
*That you is fucking dead*  
*motherfucker*

knowing, yes, this isn't always true  
but I in that moment  
was already someone's child, again,  
my fists on the table  
watching this woman I love more than breathing—  
her sobbing tenor stirring me to rage—  
take a beating for me  
as she collapses  
into the unforgivable arms  
of another's service

*Joe Pan*  
183

---

<sup>183</sup> [Joe Pan](#), "[Cheerios](#)," [Operating Systems](#), [Spork Press](#)

## Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

I approach a harp  
abandoned  
in a harvested field.  
A deer  
leaps out of the brush  
and follows me

in the rain, a scarlet  
snake wound  
in its dark antlers.  
My fingers  
curled around a shard  
of glass—

it's like holding the hand  
of a child.  
I'll cut the harp strings  
for my mandolin,  
use the frame as a window  
in a chapel  
yet to be built. I'll scrape

off its blue  
lacquer, melt the flakes  
down with  
a candle and ladle  
and paint  
the inner curve  
of my soup bowl.

The deer passes me.  
I lower my head,  
stick out my tongue  
to taste  
the honey smeared  
on its hind leg.

In the field's center,  
I crouch near  
a boulder engraved  
with a number  
and stare at a gazelle's  
blue ghost,  
the rain falling through it.

*Eduardo C. Corral*

184

---

184 [Eduardo C. Corral](#), "[Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome \[I approach a harp\]](#)," [Indiana Review](#), [Slow Lightning](#), [Yale University Press](#)

from “The Bower”

*No rest until Ireland is united*, says he, the young one,  
assured, calm. His grandfather and father’s fight will be

his own and so on. The empty folding tables are surrounded  
by empty folding chairs, and sugar sloughs across the desk

where tea was made. I write it down—upstairs office  
and butcher shop below, the murals of masked men

with machine guns, the razor-wired gardens. *We’ll not forget*.  
I want to know more, what is this kind of remembering?

I know this fever, intractable. The symbolic thrives in Belfast:  
a melancholic dove nests in barbed wire twined with slogans.

The wall behind is painted light blue and white, presenting  
that rarest thing, a sunny day; a memorial lit from 10 p.m. to dawn.

William, a musician, says. *It’s in our* (whose?) *DNA to*  
*march, we must parade*. The example is his (Protestant) niece

who tantrums to march on St. Patrick’s Day. *A fecking diplomat*,  
mutters Mícheál who visibly shrugs it off. *In those days*

*people face-to-face playing music with you one day, the next*  
*might bomb your car*. He rolls another cigarette, brushes

the tobacco off, heads home to carry his sick wife to bed.

Connie Voisine  
185

---

<sup>185</sup> [Connie Voisine](#), “[The Bower](#),” collected in [The Bower](#), [University of Chicago Press](#)

## Kitchen Song

The white bowls in the orderly  
cupboards filled with nothing.

The sound  
of applause in running water.

All those who've drowned in oceans, all  
who've drowned in pools, in ponds, the small  
family together in the car hit head on. The pantry

full of lilies, the lobsters scratching to get out of the pot, and God

being pulled across the heavens  
in a burning car.

The recipes  
like confessions.  
The confessions like songs.  
The sun. The bomb. The white

bowls in the orderly  
cupboards filled with blood. *I wanted*

*something simple, and domestic. A kitchen song.*

They were just driving along. Dad  
turned the radio off, and Mom  
turned it back on.

*Laura Kasischke*  
186

---

<sup>186</sup> [Laura Kasischke](#), "[Kitchen Song](#)," collected in [Dance and Disappear](#), [University of Massachusetts Press](#)

## In Which I Am Famous

This endless room is deep blue, dark red.  
I'm wearing my Valentine gown, vintage silhouette  
but hand-stitched for me. It's the same purple  
as my favorite twilight, just as I requested.

Everyone is here—I can see across the way  
the black-rooted starlets and reality queens  
drinking açai cosmos. And I can see the disgraced  
congressman studying his notes at the bar,

his tan tie loosened. Slow-dancing in the corner,  
the large-haired, button-eyed parents of the dead  
pageant girl. I ignore them all. I am leaning elegantly  
against a banister. My drink is a gin martini (up, very dry,

with a twist). My lipstick is sunset-cruise red.  
All night, handsome, craggy men have murmured  
things like *Hello, cupcake* and *You will be responsible*  
*for the resurgence of the marquee* and *Your nose*

*is so legitimate*, and I've blushed in my practiced  
unpracticed way. My three gold bangles clink lightly  
as I tell about Monte Carlo last May (the passport  
mix-up, the boa constrictor). Everyone laughs,

and their teeth gleam like china. At dawn, I know,  
we'll head to Zuma Beach. One of the starlets,  
hoop-eyed on Percocet and vodka, will drown  
in her faux-fur boots, and we'll all be questioned

at the station. The congressman will slip away.  
The pageant-girl's parents will weep large,  
professional tears. Later, there will be a movie  
about the incident. I will be played by a no-name

Australian actress with an exquisite doll-like nose.  
It will be her big break. Soon, when she enters  
the room, the dance floor crowd will part and she  
will be the mirror ball, shining on us all.

Catherine Pierce  
187

---

<sup>187</sup> Catherine Pierce, "In Which I Am Famous," *Ploughshares*, collected in *The Tornado is the World*, Saturnalia Books

from "A Montage of Brick and Water"

### The Family

Lynn smokes a pack a day. She married Peabody when she got pregnant. Now they hardly talk. Her children have stolen from her, sold her VCR for drug money. She sits on the stoop each morning, smoking, her bleached hair drying in the sun.

Peabody works in the aged coffee shop. A stained apron. Balding. His brother works with him, and they each plot who will take over the business once the grandmother, who speaks no English, dies.

Salem is the grandmother, tottering, senile. She calls for her sister, long dead, when she wakes in the night. Her hands gnarl the cross round her neck Teenagers furtively bring her babies to strangle in the shadows of dawn. No one knows what happens then. No one has ever told.

Beverly is ashamed of his brother but also of himself. Growing up, he was teased for having a girl's name. He's hated working in the shop, him with a college degree. He won't speak Greek claims he has forgotten but he listens closely to grandmother's mutterings at the Thanksgiving table.

*J.D. Scrimgeour*  
188

---

<sup>188</sup> [J.D. Scrimgeour](#), "[A Montage of Brick and Water](#)," collected in *The Last Miles*, Fine Tooth Pressa

## Binding Spell

I make a doll of you. I make a doll of me. I stuff us full of feathers, fingernails and fur. Stitching us up, I drop a dollop of blood in our trunks. I light a candle with a lock of your hair, sprinkle salt. I coat our poppets with oil and slip your little wooden hand up my woolen skirt. Pinch my tiny nipples with clothespins. I strike our sex parts together like flints and say, *Anima Animus, this is how we truss, truss, truss*. I wire our wrists, our knees, our navels, our tongues, our flirting shadows. I pierce your red wax heart with a bouquet of pins. I fasten the exact angle our last breaths intersect on the Table of Improbable Sums. I hobble you. I drive a nail through us both. Forgive me, beloved. If only I could keep you in a chair by my side, always forming a word, I'd refrain from cutting off your hands and stitching them in reverse. I know it hurts to bear your palms to the world. But there's no better way to reach me when I'm burning on the other side.

*Kristin Bock*

189

---

<sup>189</sup> [Kristin Bock](#), "[Binding Spell](#)," [inter|rupture](#)



## How Much

A boy drowns in a lake. Another opens  
his head against a steering wheel. Another  
goes downtown. Into a board room. Into  
leveraged buyouts. Into Italian shoes.  
Into spearheading something. *Hi, you've reached  
Victoria Chang. I'm not at my desk right now.  
Please leave a message at the beep.* Never mind  
the kickbacks, passing the sound barrier in  
the Concorde, its hypodermic body. How much  
mahogany we all had. Cheese stabbed with  
sticks our teeth tugged on. How many drivers  
in black cars we said *Happy Valentine's Day* to.

\*

Each morning, I put on those shoes, legs,  
nylons, sex, black briefs with texts. Each  
dusk, there were martinis, starters, soup and  
salad, main meal, dessert on trays, coffee in  
thimbles, men scraping bread crumbs off a  
table. Business models. Pigeons on ledges  
I watched. Dimmed rooms with white  
screens, a man with a pointer. No one stops  
him. Someone make him stop. My watch gets  
tired from looking up at me. The next table is  
once again pioneering something. I can shake  
a hundred hands in an hour. Watch me.

\*

\$13 a share. The man on the phone line  
has a rope in his throat. The closing price is  
rouged. We can believe in God again. The banks  
are full. The streets are hungover. The man on  
my left is rich. The man on my right is a month  
from dead. The champagne ditches its bottle.  
The London air free-falls in the hotel room.  
There are plates of carved fruit. New York is  
cheering through the phone. Heaven must  
be this way. Tomorrow, Germany. Then Paris.  
*Hello. Goodbye. Where's the bathroom? I don't  
understand. I am lost. How much?*

\*

A man carrying a tray of sandwiches.  
A woman on a cell phone. The doorman  
on California Street. The cable car driver.

No one knows how beautiful the check  
looks in my wallet. \$94 million. Tomorrow,  
\$106 million. From: IV Drip. To: Bob  
Dell. From: Ivy hiccupping up a wall.  
To: John Hedge. Everyone is drunk today.  
Everyone is preparing for sex today. Little  
turquoise boxes with white ribbon are hand-  
delivered around town today. The smell of  
beef is powerful. The cemeteries are still full.

\*

The first sound of the stitched ball finding  
its glove. The corporate seats. The Samsung.  
The Solelectron. The Synopsys. The Pitch.  
Positioning. Presentations. Summer that  
can't stop its inverting. The cartoon ball  
under the cartoon hats that keep moving.  
*One, Two, Three*, the crowd shouts. Some day  
the big screen will dangle in rust. The headless  
field will become untethered. Some day  
the last rain will dry on the sleeping dog.  
Somewhere in a kitchen, a mother will watch  
the last piece of beef fall off a bone.

*Victoria Chang*  
190

---

<sup>190</sup> [Victoria Chang](#), "[How Much](#)," collected in [Salvinia Molesta](#), [University of Georgia Press](#)

## The Sonnet

God I love sonnets! I think of them every day  
Just as I think of my father, who was,  
In fact, a sonneteer: he wandered twelfth-century  
France or Italy—wherever, grief fogs such things—  
His huge head full of song: God I miss him:  
But he clearly wasn't meant for war: They say  
He stood up in the trenches to recite poems  
In the enemy's direction: *love*, you know, *love*:  
Then the red laser sight-light found his forehead,  
Reminding his commander, for a moment,  
Of a beautiful Indian woman he wished to love:  
Bang Bang. Sometimes love is like that, just  
As you reach for it, it runs away, or else it puts  
A bullet in your head. This may be the wrong kind of love.

Sonnets are as mathematical as music, as elegant  
And sensible as the universe, and God I love music!  
It was, I think, Pythagoras who, in the birthplace of democracy,  
Sort of, hearing the harmonies of a blacksmith's hammer,  
Determined that pleasurable resonance grew from metal slabs  
Bearing precise fractional relations, and thus, for the first  
And only time, discovered a physical truth of an abstract notion;  
Despite many attempts, despite even the mighty sonnet, love  
Remains adrift.

Sonnets, like the universe, are ruled by just six numbers,  
Metaphors, really: Galaxies spin according to them, neutrinos  
Blink and whirl, matter collapses, they suckle us  
In some stellar nursery, deliver gravity to break our hearts,  
Hearts filled with love, love and blood—the better kind of love.

I know it would have been clever if this had been a sonnet,  
A *double-sonnet* or some such. Yes, well, I'll leave that to my sons  
Who miss me already; they're very busy mapping out our future  
In the glowing digital domain: There will be conquests  
And certainty, end stops and appropriate formal turns.  
It won't be long now: They have the tools: They have the proofs!

David Daniel

191

---

<sup>191</sup> David Daniel, "The Sonnet," collected in [Ornaments](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

## Calamity Jane on Etsy after the 2016 Election

As we lay together under the gabled roof, a lover  
called me solicitous. That's me,

I thought, straightening my mussed-up hair,  
Solicity Jane, anxious version

of Calamity Jane, the only female action figure to show up  
on the UPS truck filled with soldiers and presidents

manufactured by my grandfather and sent out west  
to my sisters and brother and me.

We were only five of his many grandchildren,  
five kids who wanted to make-believe.

Often I find her at vintage stores, priced out of my range,  
but today Calamity's cheap,

lying face down in the Etsy pixels.  
Blond, wearing turquoise blue and an empty lasso,

she doesn't look a thing like me  
unless you count the pose.

Right about now I want to wake up.  
I want a round of shots, straight up.

And one for all my sisters,  
and one for all my brothers.

And one for all my mothers.  
At least she's only polymer.

No man can grab her by the smooth blue patina  
between her unspreadable legs.

How long will she be lying here?  
As I find myself again now,

saying god help us into the fitted sheet.  
Hey, you there, Calamity, wake up!

It's not too late to fight back.  
Calamity et al!

Get up, we love you!  
I solicit you!

Calamity ends with amity,  
amity save us all.

*Catherine Barnett*  
192

---

<sup>192</sup> [Catherine Barnett](#), "[Calamity Jane on Etsy after the 2016 Election](#)," [Poetry International](#), collected in [Human Hours](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

No, I Do Not Want to Connect with You on LinkedIn

Of all the washed-up terror prodigies in all the Underworld——  
I need you especially to stay the fuck out of my iPhone.

So you're still king of that shot-up little roach house on Cat Piss Ave,  
still hung up on that time I didn't let you stay my dearest  
threat? Look at you. So mad you'd @ anything.

Wanting me taken down, taken out. Lolol, rage-cake. You *tried*.

In the years since I was last light-starved, hell-bent on your half-cocked lure,  
I have kept the moon on all night in my own way,

by listening, by not forgetting it is there. Small witchery.

And by the way, your shit is not a secret. This here is girl country.  
Trust me when I say we know *all about* your kind in our ranks.

All you motherfuckers make it easy—you wear the same shitty face.

Rude to the end, you missed my victory scene. I wore blue lace  
& wolf spit, I sang torch songs, I was carried up into the trees by waves.

The moon knew me. It took my side. *Duh*, I thought, & I gave you the finger.

One day, I woke up such a force, I watched your name fall  
right out of the language. Did you feel that?

How you are now girl dust? Shipwreck? Bone muck? *Ghost*?

It's only in another life that I could be damned  
back to hell for your half-look, that I was

ever your jilted bride, sweating it out

Aqua-netted in a farm field down by the interstate  
under a goddamn willow bower, eye-deep

in a rabble of no-account drunks.

You once thought to make me afraid, to consider  
what that might do to me. I think now:

*how unimaginative*. To kill a tree, any asshole

can hammer a ring of nails into the trunk.  
Already, you don't know me, & one day

I will be even stranger, one day I just may fall  
to my knees in church to say *Reverend, my God, what  
were Eve's other choices* & I trust you will not  
be there as my witness. I admit I once believed  
I could be anything, & didn't you say to me then "That's true  
for some people"—? When I was 7, a boy slapped me  
& I was punished for "inciting violence."  
So it began: when I bled, I thought I deserved it.  
I wanted one brightly colored warship; I wanted  
a grief with my name printed right there on it.  
To have & to hold—there is, after all, a difference.  
Before anyone fucked with her, Eurydice was just a woman walking alone  
through a field of snakes. It's late now, much  
too late to hold us back—you know that——  
pay attention this time when the hiss of our names  
ribbons off, white flame against the dark.

Emily Skaja  
193

---

<sup>193</sup> Emily Skaja, "[No, I Do Not Want to Connect with You on LinkedIn](#)," [The Rumpus](#), collected in [Brute](#), Graywolf Press

## The Middle Ages

Nothing is right and nothing is wrong,  
my neighbor admits. She's smoking  
Winstons on her stoop. I point

to the 2 p.m. cardinal  
who's made a habit of our telephone wires.  
My neighbor yawns

out a cloud. How does one  
get over a hurt? Red bird swaying  
on a fiber optic swing, red bird hapless

and no doubt male. A clock  
of my wonder, the cardinal escaping.  
I am holding onto the root of an unknown

plant. Not even winter explains  
why cold precipitates despair or why  
the parks department razing an acre of oaks

reminds me that pastoral fails yet again.  
A hurt is as senseless, rising  
from decay, this sequence

of trees. I'm out of season,  
headless, and wormy with a forest  
seizing my sad-sack gut, the cloud-

crowded sky performing a future  
I refuse to claim. Smoke or sorrow,  
flame or rage, this change

of landscape cannot be another  
radiant loss. A yellow cat naps  
in the window while at the curb

a girl twirls through wintering  
azaleas and sings,  
*Olga, my Olga.* I have no one

to forgive but myself, living here  
where the past meets me  
at dusk: the echo of an Olga,

my Olga, for example, who once stole  
my longtime chum by being better  
at jumping rope. That's one



old woe, the tiniest plaint,  
that like a minute or two of bad traffic  
measures a road

that might go nowhere or, better,  
marks time, for once, as  
immeasurable, never to end.

*Jennifer Chang*  
194

---

<sup>194</sup> [Jennifer Chang](#), "[The Middle Ages](#)," collected in [Some Say the Lark](#), [Alice James Books](#)

## Late Moon

The third-week moon reaches its light over my father's farm,  
Half of it is dark now, in the west that eats it away.  
The earth has rocks in it that hum at early dawn.  
As I turn to go, I see my shadow reach for the latch.

*Robert Bly*  
195

Today, I am the developer's office, I am Mr. Jupiter

Today, I receive the box I stack it up

to "improve" old neighborhoods

U St., Bloomingdale, Fruit

Belt—white union workers lit by naked steel

—is that what you want? in Buffalo's official mouths  
that's what it means—then fuck those plans, those billions

spike them while flocks of data caw

against the manufactory work floor the walls

stumble through beer cans on the lawn

look up into the light, whose paradise to come  
meat in topiary shapes will not keep

swaddled in burlap, the nursery bed

in the form of the house in the form of the street  
you follow a poem that weeps into the reeds

that paradise a greenhouse growing  
into what I can shutter—trailer

of an eighteen wheeler, whatever furniture

a picture a jellied piece

don't forget words receive  
as much to stones and stumps

a chalk mark on the resurrection belt

of the blade, its tight housing turns aside  
men and women to watch it shear

flower delicately to dwell

means to leave so many alone

like bowls open alive  
to be cruel in

between your arms but it flowers  
where I develop I butcher

in bridges in overpasses in my rancid gold foil

all the casings where you want I see the entity

or “staffed clouds” in the tank your eye my lips  
10 on the shift in the palace of grime

in pictures in his underwear feeding

shined behind high up  
light floating into a machine

—with fire and flood menacing  
enormous need—to step

into the shower I should have showered

so much demolition, obscene joy  
you were struck by scalding water

light without warmth

comfort without pleasure  
“heaven” poured gasoline over

as “economic development”

what does our distance mean?  
the drive up Rt. 5

waiting in work clothes

I’m sure you understand what I do

so give it to me

*Joe Hall*  
196

---

<sup>196</sup> Joe Hall, “[Amnesia, 2000 / Dawn, Third Shift](#),” [PEN America Blog](#), collected in [Someone’s Utopia](#), [Black Ocean](#)

## The Old Questions

When I asked you to turn off the lights,  
you said, *Will you show me your leg first?*

I heard Rachmaninov through the wall,  
a couple making love without prerequisites.

*Do you sleep with it on?* I forgot  
there would be this conversation.

*Do you bathe with it on?*  
I need to rehearse answers to these questions.

*Will you take it off in front of me?*  
I once stepped into a peepshow in New Orleans.

Over the door, signs read: Hands off our girls.  
*Is it alright if I touch it?*

I am thinking of a hot bath, a book.  
The couple on the other side of the wall laughs.

She has found the backs of his knees.

*Jillian Weise*  
197

---

<sup>197</sup> [Jillian Weise](#), "[The Old Questions](#)," collected in [The Amputee's Guide to Sex](#), [Soft Skull Press](#)

Midwestern Wedding: Dream No. 4

Here we are, dearest, in the darkling reception hall,  
lined with linoleum, aswarm with veterans.

*For God & Country & Bingo Every Tuesday*  
crawls the LED above the double doors.

By the light of the PBR sign above the bar  
it's hard to tell one bride from her sister,

but I assure you, darling, I'm pretty sure I'm me.  
There's the circle on the wedding program

where I've set down my glass accidentally,  
& there's my sister, my shining mirror,

standing near her groom as they cut their cake.  
Their knife falls through the layers. Ours

does the same through a glass darkly. The room  
quakes with flashbulbs. In that strobe, you can see:

my father, the rhadamanthine Post Commander.  
The bartender clad in her epicene vest.

Uniformed men with hectic complexions,  
survivors of wars of various kinds, dying slowly

of lolling old age. See their fake legs? See their glass  
eyes? See the powdery widows they leave behind?

The tuxedoed DJ takes a request to play Pat Benatar:  
*Believe me, believe me, I can't tell you why*

*I'm trapped by your love, I'm chained to your side.*  
American Legionnaires &c their American wives

take to the floor & dance. In the picture, snapped  
with somebody's cameraphone, you look askance,

& I look at you like you are a flare, a sign.  
You are the weird light over my battlefield.

Kathleen Rooney  
198

---

<sup>198</sup> Kathleen Rooney, "[Midwestern Wedding: Dream No. 4](#)," collected in [Oneiromance](#), [Switchback Books](#)

Ekphrasis, I Guess

*after Ewan Hill*

Turning like any good daughter I spit  
on the wedding picture I took from her  
  
closet so they both seem to bend. Time is  
so time. Let's say I put the sky to sleep  
  
even if the stars are still in their sheds.  
Okay. & someday, yeah. I do wanna  
  
verb things like they looked good up there all  
altar on their own, like I've swallowed too  
  
many peach pits to not bolt any windows  
this winter. Maybe I'm scared of heritage.  
  
Or not. But I got these looks & locks  
like I'm debutante. Where's my dance.  
  
My model & make. It's true: I would make  
a nightmare bridegroom. All disco lipgloss  
  
& soft how I'm undoing. Call that our kind  
of work. I got taught to tongue fruit  
  
I found bleeding in the sheets. Like any good  
headstone they bow so I'm catgut. They split  
  
& I'm high-strung. They left, she's right, Dad's  
half seconds from stitching me into his collar  
  
so I bite down past the peach fuzz, leave a mess  
behind my neckline, plunge my ring fingers  
  
in the stove pot like bloodthinner. Mom won't  
say where she left what was left of her dress  
  
so I put a third moon in the poem  
to have enough dead light to dig by.

*Bradley Trumpfheller*

199

---

<sup>199</sup> [Bradley Trumpfheller](#), "[Ekphrasis, I Guess](#)," [BOAAT](#)

## High School as a Dead Girl

High School was us and we. We learned our grammar there.  
Became devised by bells sawing halls sharp as number two  
pencils: we grew thin, grew dark as men in its hallways, we  
grew up on men, our breasts their beards, their beards our  
breasts, while we cracked open beer cans in the Girls' Room,  
swug down foam minutes before walking into Homeroom.  
I was known to be dumb, detentioned, a kill myself kind of  
girl, but it was you who shot herself in the head. What kind  
of girl shoots herself in the head? You wanted a quality kill?  
Take some sleeping pills, spare your mother the blood-grief.  
You always took the hit for me. Turned around in your seat.  
Did you hear what they said? *Yes, some of us are intending  
to go to college.* Loser grief. Then the tarry hot of the parking  
lot rose up, black, promising me any boy's face bent to crack  
against my face that was becoming a face: when we wanted  
what we all wanted. To be *pretty*. Which then meant *famous*.

Cate Marvin  
200

---

<sup>200</sup> Cate Marvin, "[High School as a Dead Girl](#)," [The Awl](#), collected in [Oracle](#), W. W. Norton & Company



My Mother Confessed I was Conceived to Ravel's "Bolero"

And so began the formality  
of my embarrassment. The nightly

polishing of the borrowed brass  
buttons that open & close

my heart like a soldier's  
jacket. In time, I learned

how to tie the bluesilk  
ampersand (under, over, & in)

at my throat, just below the absence  
where a crabapple would have

bobbed if I had swallowed  
one in the womb. Now

I wear white gloves when attending  
to my worry's tripletting:

*what if what if what if—*  
I am made of a man who took himself

too seriously, whose naked chest  
was an advertisement

for undershirts, & of a woman  
who made him a season,

only to despise his storms.  
If I had been a boy, my name

would have been *Alexander*.  
(If I had been a boy, my father would've excused my behavior.)

Sometimes I fool myself  
into believing my eyelids crash

like cymbals when I refuse to  
look dead in the mirror, silkblue

in the seemly dawn. Sometimes  
I imagine myself with a third leg, pantomimed

with the butt of a rifle, so I can dance  
properly in time to the murmured 3/4.

*Emilia Phillips*

---

<sup>201</sup> [Emilia Phillips](#), "[My Mother Confessed I was Conceived to Ravel's 'Bolero,'](#)" *Poetry International*

## Federal Scene

I launched my Conestoga unknowing the menace in the marshlands. I ran into an abutment. I mired my shabby white coach. I waded and scampered, crawled and bewildered. I arrived at your embankment and became enamored then with you, your tank tops and conscience. You were the most beguiling stenographer I'd ever met, the way you'd diligently take down the proceedings adding a judicial directive compelling flamenco or a sidebar on the valor of finch song in a nuclear age, an entry in which the lead counsel declares, *Forsooth!* at that moment during the cross when she really should've declared, *Forsooth!* I adored your anatomy. I said I'd like to get gin drunk with you and pass out on the sofa. I said, *Please do permit me.* You did permit me. So I poured a lake around your dock and strung a line for my laundry. I plucked my banjo on a window seat in sun and was content then with you, our pinkies interlocking on walks on the promenade. In the heady seconds in which a breeze would lift your cuff enough to expose an ankle, I wanted my dust mingled with yours forever and forever, etc. I wanted joint checking. And all through the quick and early hours of our daffy affection, the city grew into the city of a calendar's photograph of the city. The pollen blew into a perfect wire-frame model of the wind. I grew unable to distinguish your spirit-fish from my idea-bird. You'd claim you didn't photograph well, and I'd counter, *Darling, my darling, but what photograph could contain you?* and become convinced our municipal banter played a critical part in the federal narrative. I'd blurt, I feel patriotic on the tollway! I'd announce, *I feel industrious in the grocery store.* It seemed any strife that blossomed then would falter, the national anxieties quickened then slowed to a saunter, all our coffers swelled, and I'd insist unto morning that these were the first days. I'd say, *These are the first days in the new life*, as if the statement was a gift of rice and morning a broke and wretched country. I'd say, *I am born again in the new life*, but not in that arcane, religious way. I'd declare, *Forget Jesus, I'm amazing in the sack!* I was an enlightened animal. I was a delicate bear. The afternoon tinted honeydew. The afternoon a balm that spread itself over the empire so that departing the breezy loft on Catalpa in afternoon you'd check your reflection in the stainless steel of the toaster, hold the glint of the box with one hand and solve the jigsaw of your hair with the other, and you and I and America would be thinking, *This goes here*, or, *This goes here*, and how certain this seemed, and how certain we seemed.

Jaswinder Bolina

202

---

<sup>202</sup> Jaswinder Bolina, "[Federal Scene](#)," [Explosion-Proof](#), collected in [Phantom Camera](#), [New Issues Press](#)

Callas as Medea

Never type in the comments section  
that “she had the voice of an angel.”

Please, fool! What angel ever cried  
*wronged, wronged, wronged* from all six tits

while warming her feet at a fire  
made with the other soprano’s pretty hair?

One feather of the firebird, it’s said,  
could light a darkened room.

If you must type something, type “a voice  
of white phosphorous, of ichor,

of the Centralia mine fire still burning after fifty-four years,  
of a cloak made with flayed angel skins

with their caroling tongues still attached.”  
Because what you see when with her nightshade

Callas X-rays the dark room where you thought  
you were alone,

is the feathered gods at work,  
bringing death to the living

and raising the dead to life.

*Patrick Donnelly*  
203

---

<sup>203</sup> [Patrick Donnelly](#), “[Callas as Medea](#),” collected in [Little-Known Operas](#), [Four Way Books](#)

## The Magic

My students visit me in the basement.  
I hand each one a small well  
of ground-up letters  
the color of crushed pearl,  
a cream base for lids.  
We study the magic of powder,  
shadow, wand, brush  
until beauty beats their faces  
with its little tendrils  
and red butterflies  
settle on their cheeks.  
Let my thighs sag, girls,  
let my belly distend.  
Let me teach you about beauty:  
a slanted shipwreck  
draped in its own torn sails.

*Alicia Jo Rabins*  
204

---

<sup>204</sup> [Alicia Jo Rabins](#), "[The Magic](#)," [The Cortland Review](#), collected in [Divinity School](#), [The American Poetry Review](#)

## Forever

Friday was big  
data night,  
the gig:  
athletics  
and analytics,  
acute  
age disparity,  
Brut,  
and faking  
I mean fucking  
autocorrect.  
For clarity.  
We came  
correct.

Brunch?  
Details.  
We adored  
potatoes  
made with fallen  
wild parrots.  
Cocktails  
at Holy Mountain  
named for  
dictators!  
Twenty-four  
carats.  
I ordered  
the Stalin.

Tan blonds  
in tight jeans,  
featuring basket,  
meet  
on Valencia Street—  
years ago  
this was mortuary row,  
the dead above,  
the dead below.  
Nothing shows love,  
morticians say  
but never say,  
like a bronze  
casket.

The boy-band  
in a booth  
onstage,  
oozing  
rage?  
Cruising  
is a sidelong  
look  
at a lifelong  
souk.  
The truth  
comes out  
like trout  
in the hand.

Nothing  
is forever.  
Traffic.  
Forever  
is just a weekend,  
more  
or less,  
a star's  
ghost wrote.  
The night,  
cool as a store.  
Green  
as a pornographic  
door.

*Randall Mann*  
205

---

<sup>205</sup> [Randall Mann](#), "[Forever](#)," [Court Green](#)

from “The Lumberjack’s Dove”

This is the part of the telling when the storyteller pauses. You remember your grandmother or your sister’s best friend or the bus driver quieting & turning away. Your grandmother gets a glass of water. Your sister’s best friend decides to put on a cooler dress, & you watch her change in the corner, peripherally. The bus driver unwraps a piece of Big Red chewing gum. Sun catches on the paper, silver like a fish. Suspense. You are a mantis caught beneath a cup. You powerless thing.

---

To be a proper houseguest, you must never leave your clothes around the house. You mustn’t give gin to the cat. Avoid bleeding on the furniture. If possible, do not touch the furniture at all. Do not touch the floor or walls. Leave no marks. No stray hair on a pillowcase. No breath condensing on windowpanes. Take up no space. Never let the hostess know you are there. This assures that when you leave, you do not leave a gap.

---

Incantations can be written on diner napkins, sheepskin parchment, envelopes, in the margins of instructional manuals, or in the dust on a back windshield. The words vary—could be a poem, or an address. Could be a hymnal.

This incantation is a number.

108.0

---

108.0

A mourning dove’s average body temperature.

Peak human body temperature before death.

A radio coordinate.

*GennaRose Nethercott*  
206

---

<sup>206</sup> [GennaRose Nethercott](#), “[This is the part of the telling...](#)” [The Lumberjack’s Dove](#), [HarperCollins](#)



from “What Was On My Mind: Face to Facebook with My Mother’s Death, July 2012”

You kids today, you don’t remember that The March of Dimes was once The Mothers’ March of Dimes and that it consisted of mothers going door-to-door collecting change to combat first polio and then, after the vaccine, aid in neo-natal and well-baby health. My mother, after she got home from teaching at Central, took me along as she made the rounds on the March. She let me ring the doorbells. Many of them were lit from within and painted with crescent moons and when you pushed the button, the soft bell sounding inside, the light would dim. And up in the sky a real gibbous moon looked like a vaccination scar on your arm. And later she would let me count all the nickels, dimes, and quarters. She asked, “What’s the take?” And I’d tell her. And then she “changed” the change into paper and let me take all the coins to my room in a Toni Dairy (“Toni Dairy—Always Ahead!”) milk bottle. On the dresser, the change in the glass bottle sparked in the moonlight. It seemed to me then that we had walked for miles and touched \$4.44 worth of moons. And I retraced the journey, step by step. Cars springing on Spring Street. Through all the twitchy dreams and the copper-scented night until moon rise, the rosy-fingered yawn, the next morning.

*Michael Martone*

207

---

<sup>207</sup> [Michael Martone](#), “[What Was On My Mind: Face to Facebook with My Mother’s Death, July 2012](#),” [Stone Canoe](#), collected in [Brooding](#), University of Georgia Press

## The Small Town

*Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing?  
And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father.*

*But the very hairs on your head are all numbered.*

—Matthew 10:29, 30

Its summer is a boy in red swim trunks  
head shaved like his Daddy's lawn  
and who has never wept at a whipping.  
And who kicks in the walls of his sand tunnel  
and must be unburied and whacked  
out of that still sleep by a hysterical mother.  
Its summer is the crotch-shaped joining  
of Emory into Clinch into one brown river  
laced with child pee, cut by boat propellers  
and upstream chemical dumpings. And it is the fish  
the river receded from and the fish flesh rotted  
to the spine that gleams like a knife.  
And the sex-stricken Baptist Youth Choir  
singing of God's Grace. And the car that tips  
past ruined rail on the bridge and the grinning  
mask of the drunk's face beginning to scream.  
And the dinner potatoes whipped in the pot,  
the forked roast, and steam off the plates.  
And the hidden cove's rope knotted for swinging,  
boys on the sloped bank, and the curled-up toes  
and *iiiiieee* of the fall. And it is the languorous  
black snake, having survived the garden hoe.  
And the man who sees God and is told  
to dig at a fence post. He finds a tiny stone cross  
for his dead son and holds this up in church.  
And the girl who bends to her first cock,  
sword curve unzipped from the boy's rented tuxedo pants  
while her lavender wrist corsage sweetens the dark car.  
And the boy who sighs as one going to sleep.  
And the softball field lights coming on  
over government houses at Flourmill Flats.  
And the lights of houses on the mountains.  
And a woman hoeing the tangled bean rows near sunset  
when the river has lost all color and is only shine.  
And she grumbles at a husband who plants but won't weed.  
And the river drags a fermented smell with it.  
And the powerful flanks of the mountains darken first.

Lisa Coffman  
208

---

<sup>208</sup> Lisa Coffman, "The Small Town," *West Branch*, collected in *Likely*, The Kent State University Press

## Laconia

I know what you're thinking right now. It's true she took the first job after high school. What can you do. Sometimes they come from a black scribble, words like couch, too many long-nippled hounds rushing the driveway. I know what it looks like to you. This is her peak. The bonfire by the lake. It's fall, everyone wears the same navy blue hoodie. Yes, it's exactly how you are picturing it. I want to go on, but what's the point: She arrived with a man, slightly older. They screeched into the pull-off, dust like a smoke machine heralding their duet. He heaved the cooler from the truck bed. She touched her face nervously, linked her arm through his. I watched them walk the narrow path to the pit. Occasionally this time of night you hear loons calling across the water, the sound is foggy, sad, the way it fades toward the end, like a dinghy sighing before it turns to face a storm. But not quite yet. The wind picked up and he pulled her into him, unzipped his sweatshirt and wrapped it around her, too. There was nothing we could do. Sometimes they come from thirst, the way lips meet and separate, a last sip of flat soda shook onto the asphalt, bottle turned in for a nickel then crushed. You don't need me to tell you what happens next: 25 of them drinking and layering on twigs and brush. The night had become black like the space where a tooth used to be. Like the absence of tools. Chiseling the hard ground with your bare hands or maybe just kicking out a hole. You know what I mean. It's hard to think about a life before. He had an idea. Sometimes they come from a need to keep warm, or watch, in the face of problem. Sometimes the problem is fixed, the way your organs stay inside your body even when you've lost everything else. It seemed like the fire had always been roaring. He grabbed a beer from the cooler, it felt like a flagpole in his hand, like it had rained and it was March. When was the last time he shimmied to the top of anything—couldn't remember—chucked the can whole into the blaze. You know the rest. Tell me what you heard. Did you hear the explosion. It started as a hiss, then burst with such force—sometimes they come from anger, sometimes ignorance, the end result is the same. The can unfurled under the pressure, the sharp blade of it into her eye, blood from her socket petaled her cheek. We could feel her breathing, beating, see her red eye, black hair plastered to her neck, and the pike dive, face first to the ground. The loons suddenly screaming: *where did you go? Tell me where I am!* The loons screaming and screaming, trying to locate a familiar, trying so goddamn hard to know something about love and a place before you go extinct.

Paige Ackerson-Kiely

209

---

<sup>209</sup> Paige Ackerson-Kiely, "Laconia," *Pinwheel*, collected in *Dolefully, a Rampart Stands*, Penguin Books

## Threat Assessment

is a violence prevention strategy, says the online document for school administrators and crisis teams, but the document doesn't address what I'm meant to do when I open my email to find a short note entitled "Warning" that says verbatim: *I am here to inform that in the next couple of days I will break into the campus and will kill as many people as I can until the police arrives.* The message is from someone named Robert Birdman, and when I google him the first hit is a photo of Robert Franklin Stroud, the "Birdman of Alcatraz," a federal prisoner who was one of the most notorious criminals in US history and a convicted murderer, who also made important contributions to avian pathology while serving a life sentence in solitary confinement after finding a nest with three injured sparrows in a prison yard in Leavenworth. My friend Katie rehabilitates injured turkey vultures—birds considered scavengers that feed exclusively on carrion. When my second son came to us via adoption she sent a stuffed turkey vulture and a book with the birds soaring alongside rhymed text: *Wings stretch wide to catch a ride on warming*

*air. Going where?* Around  
the same time we began  
reading to our new son,  
police spotted circling  
birds of prey above a  
nearby farm and found  
the remains of a college  
student who had been  
missing for months, used  
DNA evidence to indict  
a local man on charges  
of abduction and murder.  
Grainy video of the girl  
on her last night alive  
shows her running down  
a hallway in a shiny gold  
crop top, booking past  
the Shell station on  
Preston Avenue in the  
dark. I know that part  
of town, used to walk it  
past midnight to visit a  
guy I was sleeping with  
in graduate school who  
was maybe an addict  
and played in a local  
indie rock band. We  
would sit on his porch  
drinking beer and watch  
the windowless patrol  
wagon circle the block  
and sometimes stop for  
cops to load neighbors  
into the back. What I've  
left out is that we were  
white and this neighbor-  
hood was black. When  
I went jogging at dusk,  
one guy on his porch  
would usually shout  
*white girl* at me, and at  
night helicopters circled  
then landed at the hospital  
up the block, painting  
Nalle Street with sickly  
vibrating light. In July  
and August, you could  
sometimes hear gun-  
shots puncturing the  
humidity. I've also  
left out that the man

indicted for the murder  
of the white female student  
is black. The turkey vulture  
lacks a syrinx—the vocal  
organ of birds—which  
means its only sounds  
are grunts or low hisses.  
Murderer Robert Stroud  
was sent to Alcatraz after  
guards discovered he had  
been secretly making alcohol  
in his cell. Stripped of his  
birds, he wrote a history  
of the penal system called  
*Looking Outward*. Stroud  
served 42 of his 54 years  
in solitary confinement,  
is considered the most famous  
case of rehabilitation  
and self-improvement in  
an American prison. Each  
year a turkey vulture raises  
two chicks, which it feeds  
by regurgitation. I have  
two sons. My older son  
is white and my younger  
son is black. Colin  
Kaepernick, once the  
San Francisco 49ers  
backup quarterback,  
refused and still refuses  
to stand for the national  
anthem before games  
in protest of wrongdoings  
against African Americans  
and minorities in this country.  
One year, my older son,  
who watches a lot of football  
on television, added Colin  
Kaepernick to the penciled  
Christmas Cookie list I left  
on the kitchen counter—  
tucked his name between  
Mr. Tom (school bus driver)  
and Bridget (administrative  
assistant). Kaepernick is  
biracial, identifies as black,  
and like my youngest son,  
was adopted by a white  
family when he was an  
infant. The first time our

youngest son mentioned  
the color of his skin  
on his own was at the stables  
where my mother took him  
to ride ponies because  
he's obsessed with them.  
He pointed and said,  
"That horse is brown  
like me!" I have a shot  
of him on the brown  
horse in a blue helmet  
with a serious expression  
on his face. His helmet  
is the same color as those  
of the riot police I see  
in every city, lined up  
across from protesters  
holding signs that say  
No Justice / No Peace  
or I Can't Breathe or  
Black Lives Matter.  
Once I discovered  
the death threat email  
from Robert Birdman  
had gone to many others  
on campus, I was relieved,  
felt the bad grammar  
meant it was a hoax  
because who actually  
gives warning of these  
things, and what really  
stops my heart is walking  
past the open doors of  
the massive auditorium  
my husband lectures in  
three times a week from  
a raised stage to 500  
students about principles  
of microeconomics: supply  
and demand, efficiency  
and equity. How easy  
it would be, how efficient,  
for a lone gunman  
to target that one room.  
So when I receive a call  
from my older son's  
school which says,  
"This is a test of the  
Emergency Alert System—  
all of our schools are  
currently participating

in a lockdown drill,” I  
think of my son huddled  
with the rest of his class  
in a supply closet trying  
to be quiet in the dark.  
I have two sons, and  
I can’t protect either  
of them from anything  
at all. Colin Kaepernick  
has many tattoos including  
the words of Psalm 18:39—  
you armed me with strength  
for battle—and 27:3—  
though a mighty army  
surrounds me, my heart  
will not fear. Those  
injured sparrows  
Robert Stroud found  
in the Leavenworth  
prison yard—he raised  
them to adulthood.

*Erika Meitner*

210

---

<sup>210</sup> [Erika Meitner](#), “[Threat Assessment](#),” [Columbia Poetry Review](#), collected in [Holy Moly Carry Me](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.



loose strife

I will not say its name.  
The way it ruined me.  
The body halved, a kind  
of mitosis, suddenly

everything on the  
cellular level as if  
sentient, the potatoes  
growing eyes in the dark

under the sink. The way  
Lysimachus, for whom  
the invasive is named,  
walked and walked

through the terrible  
burning, the emotion  
openly disfiguring his  
face the way a lover

will sometimes turn  
directly toward the  
beloved in that other  
language, the thing

shuddering under the  
skin until it floats up into  
the light with all the  
colors of ephemera

and bursts. There was a  
maze. There was a  
photograph of the night  
sky taken over several

hours, the stars like  
scratches on a record. As  
far as I know there is no  
unified theory as to why

it exists except the  
theory of the animal,  
the theory of glands and  
secretions. It comes

when it comes and if  
fortunate it comes  
without end. The lesser  
vertebrates  
rub

themselves in its musk,  
coat themselves in its  
glory. It ruined me and I  
let it. Hands held above

my head as if under  
arrest.

*Quan Barry*  
211

---

<sup>211</sup> [Quan Barry](#), "[loose strife \('I will not say its name'\)](#)," collected in [Loose Strife](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

## Review of Possible Signs and Symptoms

I wonder if it's a problem  
that I still believe what I did at five:  
my stuffed animals are conscious beings  
and love me with their big plastic eyes.  
And is it okay that today I can't get to the grocery store?  
What about not being able to orgasm  
thanks to the drugs that usually help me get to the grocery store—  
I should feel worse about that than I actually do.  
I probably shouldn't have mentioned the orgasm thing.  
There is definitely something wrong with me.  
My piston can't connect with my spark plug.  
My kitty can't leap to the branch of that tree  
the way the squirrel does so easily.  
Once I saw one run straight up  
the four-story wall of a senior center.  
Was that normal? It's normal to start out  
as a small, helpless creature and end up  
bigger. Cane, walker, wheelchair: pretty standard.  
My mother couldn't speak at the end,  
only look at me with one dazed eye.  
It's normal to cry, lying in bed  
with your dying mother. I wonder  
if everyone's head sometimes feels  
like it's pumped full of Styrofoam pellets.  
When I last checked my heart  
it was plush and burnt straw.  
Should I order a different one  
or send it back to the kitchen for reheating?  
According to this pamphlet  
there are several signs that death is near,  
but what about that unmarked stretch of highway  
that's been washed away? It's normal to drive  
forward slowly in fog and rain, to keep  
the radio on for company and love  
the disembodied voices saying *Now*  
*for a little music, thanks*  
*for staying with us, we're going to be here*  
*all night long.*

Kim Addonizio

212

---

<sup>212</sup> Kim Addonizio, "Review of Possible Signs and Symptoms," Mead, collected in *Mortal Trash*, W. W. Norton & Company

## The Werewolf

I first started giving poetry readings  
about the time I rediscovered Whitman—  
I'd been writing like Dickinson and Gerard Manley Hopkins,  
and people would say, "Hmm, nice!"  
or "Now that's some interesting language there!"

But then I started reading Father Walt,  
he of the tousled locks and the vast, unkempt beard,  
progenitor of all those bastards (or so he said  
to woo the homophobes of his day),  
and, after that, *his* fathers, the Hebrew poets

of the Old Testament with their towering accretions  
of rhetoric that just built and built and built,  
and my own poems started getting longer and—  
well, damn it, *better*, I thought, only if there's nobody there  
to hear them, then what's the point?

So I began to write letters to the newspaper denouncing myself:  
the first time I did it, I was Rollie Butkus,  
the Pensacola shop teacher who'd been  
driving back from the shop teachers' convention  
in Tampa and who'd got sick from something

he ate at the Roy Rogers on I-75 and had decided  
to spend the night in Tallahassee and had started  
feeling better but had then wandered into the damned reading  
by mistake, which just made him feel worse again,  
but at least now he was back in Pensacola

and wasn't spending every day sitting on the pot  
all the time, though the thing he still can't get over  
is that for the life of him he couldn't find  
a single American value in this Kirby's poetry,  
and this bastard is a professor, damn it!

And the next time I was Muffie Winkelberry, the sorority girl  
who didn't want to go to the reading but went anyway  
with one of her sisters who didn't want to go either  
but had to for the extra credit,  
and she, Muffie (not Jingle, this other girl

who needed the extra credit because even though  
she'd turned in all her assignments on time,  
she'd missed too many classes on account of  
having been up all night painting banners  
and leading singalongs and doing all the stuff

that somebody's got to do if she's assistant rush chairman,  
which is a big job for somebody who was just a pledge herself  
a semester ago), had always heard that poetry was pretty,  
but there was nothing pretty about this so-called poet's poetry  
as far as she, Muffie, was concerned!

And some people would tell me  
they couldn't believe that stupid idiot who wrote  
that stupid letter to the stupid newspaper,  
and others would stop me in the hall and say,  
"David, you wrote that letter, didn't you?"

I didn't care whether they knew or not;  
in fact, it was better if they thought I did, really,  
because then either they loved me more  
for my inventiveness and sense of humor  
or hated me more for calling more attention to myself,

either of which was fine by me,  
since I pretty much loved and hated myself  
in equal measure, much as the werewolf does,  
this repulsive creature that everybody loathes  
but that's also savage, well-muscled, omnipotent,

just as each of us thinks of himself  
as this wild-haired beast that's sure  
it deserves the contumely and spittle of passersby,  
even as we revel in the secret knowledge  
that we can rip the bastards' throats out

with a single swipe of our filthy paw.  
Yes, folks, poetry is powerful shit, all right:  
it can cure ya or kill ya.  
And the poet himself:  
he's quite a fellow, isn't he? Or a gal, if it's a her.

I believe it was Marie-Jean Hérault de Séchelles  
who said, "Tell many people that your reputation  
is great; they will repeat it, and these repetitions  
will make your reputation." Of course no one knows  
who Marie-Jean Hérault de Séchelles is today.

It could be he chose not to heed his own counsel.  
Bad mistake, that: if you've got a good idea, best put it into  
practice so people can see you talk the talk *and* walk the walk.  
Poor Marie-Jean: he sacrificed himself,  
the way the truly great ones do.

The werewolf also is a kind of Christ figure: he drools for our sins.  
And what are those? Let's see, excessive self-love and...  
oh, come on, reader, I love myself sure,  
but don't you know I love you, too—  
don't you know I'm Mr. Walt's boy, li'l Dave?

*David Kirby*  
213

---

<sup>213</sup> [David Kirby](#), "[The Werewolf](#)," [Five Points](#), collected in [The Ha-Ha](#), [Louisiana State University Press](#)

## Community College in the Rain

Announcement: All pupils named Doug.  
Please come to the lounge on Concourse K.

Please join us for coffee and remarks.

Dougs: We cannot come. We are injured by golf cleats.

Announcement: Today we will discuss the energy in a wing  
and something about first basemen.

Ribs will be served in the cafeteria.

Pep Club: We will rally against golf cleats today.  
The rally will be held behind the gymnasium.

There is a Model T in the parking lot with its lights on.

Dougs: We are dying in the nurse's office.  
When she passed before the window, she looks like a bride.

Karen (whispers): We are ranking the great shipwrecks.

Announcement: In the classroom filled with dishwater light,  
Share your thoughts on public sculpture.

All: O Dougs, where are you?

Dougs: In the wild hotels of the sea.

*David Berman*  
214

---

<sup>214</sup> David Berman, "[Community College in the Rain](#)," collected in [Actual Air](#), [Open City Books](#)

## The Girls I Grew Up with Were Hard

& inscrutable as mirrored cop glasses—  
they reflected your fear right back at you.  
The girls I grew up with were high-shouldered  
& French-cut & had skin like a copper skillet.

They had buttresses in their bangs  
& shins like weapons & weren't afraid  
to hurt you. They were gleaming, high-busted  
& knew their way around a pool table.

They moved down the court of my adolescence,  
all muscle & hair & high-five. They passed  
pre-calculus & clattered down those awful halls  
like the air of the high school was hugging them.

Their retainers glinted when they grinned  
& when they laughed hard, you could sometimes  
see the whole firmament of sparkly blue plastic.  
They two-stepped & were top-heavy with God.

The girls I grew up with had cliques & Clinique  
& wanted to study International Business.  
Without intending to, their limbs sawed at the new  
wood of me. I was soft & easily outdone.

I flung myself in the path of their collective  
Jeep Cherokee & said my dad had stranded me.  
They didn't stop—even though I smiled,  
even though I said, *Please*. Even though

I'd baked them lemon cupcakes  
& daubed Love's Baby Soft between my knees.

Karyna McGlynn  
215

---

<sup>215</sup> [Karyna McGlynn](#), "[The Girls I Grew Up with Were Hard](#)," [32 Poems](#)



## Swallow

The first time you swallow—  
the light, lurid and cold—

you know you mean  
to swallow—again and again—

a woman's voice crawling and heavy  
in your body, trying to escape.

Stay calm. You cannot let go.  
There isn't an abstraction  
you believe in and you are sad for it.

You need a mission to return to,  
you need a flock to follow.

*Donika Kelly*  
216

---

<sup>216</sup> [Donika Kelly](#), "[Swallow](#)," [Virginia Quarterly Review](#), collected in [Bestiary](#), Graywolf Press

## American Freight

Under the bridge in the Midtown Yard  
where I slept three nights and eventually caught my train,  
you can read the graffiti of all the itinerant hobos  
who hunkered there, out of the rain,  
smoking their filters and waiting for rides  
in the north Minneapolis night.  
You can read their names: Spider Eyes, Doorknob, Stitch,  
in the faint black lines  
of a permanent marker the pigeon shit slowly erodes.  
Bedrolls and cardboard boxes for mattresses,  
half-gallon bottles of Schnapps.  
If you look hard enough  
you can make out the poem I carved in the truss overhead,  
left there to fade with drippings  
and winter exhaust turning everything slowly to rust:  
*I dream of journeys repeatedly. Westbound to Seatown. 2010.*

\*\*\*

Moving now. Under the tower light dropping industrial glow  
on my head. River beside me,  
swallowing all of it, blending the real invisible stars  
with the red-blinking light of the FRED.  
Stone Arch Bridge and the Metrodome rooftop.  
Gold Medal Mill sign flickering orange, on and off,  
and beyond it the high glass hospital walls  
where my mother looked down at the wide Mississippi  
and sang to her firstborn son. Held me up  
jaundiced and covered in dew,  
my lungs just beginning to wheeze.  
It is all there. High in those floating glass squares  
where the sick are being treated and privately  
dying, and the mothers are waiting  
and new fathers waiting and wandering down  
to the vending machines where the windows look out  
at the factory stacks  
and the big muddy river of iron and blood  
where my train disappears in the night.

\*\*\*

The anti-psychotics I took that year made the world  
inside me sublime. My eyes moved over the shape of a face,  
the delicate wind in a tree.  
I felt nothing. I wrote no poems.  
The language of beauty divided itself into basic descriptions  
of fact. I wandered from place to place,  
stoplight to stoplight,

waiting for something to break from the skyline,  
force me to finally stay.  
I gained weight. I measured my sadness in lies.  
In small medications. Doses.  
I smelled things that couldn't be there,  
convinced I was dying from an airborne chemical  
someone had blown in my ear.  
But then there were moments of pure  
unexplainable light. Clouds held signs  
in their elegant swells. You could feel them rubbing  
their moon-lit backs on the fields  
of darkness behind. Sometimes I noticed a face in the glass,  
in the polished aluminum wall of a downtown bank,  
and for a moment of sweetness  
I knew I was gone. I was nothing to speak of,  
no one at all. And the stranger I saw  
looking back in the dark  
was a man with no future, no name to remember,  
no place in the world but this.

\*\*\*

Over the clay dirt. Over the fields of unthreshed wheat,  
the sun-white skulls in the railroad ditch. Over the rattling  
weight of this train. The silos in Dilworth. The Williston  
oil rigs fracking the unmarked Chippewa graves. Over  
the lonely cry, lost now. Miles of dark stars, dirt roads  
leading in every direction away from whatever you are.  
Midtown to Mandan. Dilworth to Butte. Highballing  
west on a wheel of sun dogs, prayers, and no goodbyes.

\*\*\*

Who are you? Stranger who gave me the last of your  
laughter. Waited all night  
for the Eastbound departure, your Rottweiler guarding  
the dark. Rolling your cigarettes one-handed,  
knowing the story is always the same,  
no matter how far you are  
from home. Traveling poet,  
songwriter busking for left-over pizza and posting your lines  
to a blog. Your history made up and sketchy  
at best. Your lovely, obedient dog.  
I fed her granola bars out of my backpack,  
made sure the water stayed full. The moonlight ignoring  
your tattooed face, the skeleton hand on your neck.  
We are shadows now,  
born to the shape of departure. The engine  
a feverish bird underneath me. Wing beats. Gathering speed.

\*\*\*

Storm clouds again outside Fargo,  
again outside Glasgow. Now trailing off into thunderheads breaking  
in great gray flowers above the road.  
Flecks of blue. Passionate rain in the underswells.  
Minor flirtations of sun.  
Man covered head-to-toe in oil outside Williston.  
Unreal.  
Flares in the distance and windwheels  
carving the sky.  
Decapitated dog on the ballast rock. Still wet.  
Chest flashing under the train-line shadow  
and seeming to secretly breathe.  
Somewhere in the distance a lazy alarm sounds off  
in a four-four beat. Bull frogs sing as if trying  
to return the call.  
Tricoloreds fly and the slow sashay of cottonwood branches above.  
The day is born with each new feather,  
each fern leaf bending to touch the ground.  
Each minor vibration. Each river of heaven  
I lower myself in to drink.

\*\*\*

The Cloudmaker tells me the name of the train,  
the number of engines to look for,  
the exact bush to bury myself in shade.  
You know by the speed and direction it exits,  
the number of minutes it waits.  
Orange hats for yard workers, Oakleys for bulls—  
you can look at the bones of those old prehistorics.  
Suicide buckets and gold forty-eights.  
You can find it by watching the axle-bolts turn.  
Soo Line. Norfolk. Union Pacific. Amtrak. CSX.  
Kansas & Western. Burlington Northern Santa Fe.

\*\*\*

Are all roads endless? Do all roads blend  
into one wide road, which ends in a field of unmowed grass  
and returns to itself forever?  
The Cloudmaker stands on a corner in Minot,  
talking a prayer to himself and the rain.  
The Cloudmaker rides out of Staples and Whitefish,  
filling his bag from a dumpster at Walgreens,  
watching the traffic lights  
turning for blind cows—crickets in Dunsmuir, dust in the dreamery,  
plastic-wrapped chickens in grocery store aisles  
and thresher dust bleaching  
the stars. The wayward Canadian geese.  
The painted facades of train station depots, murals

of Crazyhorse, shit-stained pewter of dead or dying soldiers  
clutching their bodies in Custer,  
oxidizing softly, deeper  
and deeper green,  
climbing a hill in their permanent imaginations—  
grassfires, vast plains, fields of buffalo thundering under the ground.

\*\*\*

We enter the storm. Cattlebirds calling out, thunderheads  
bleeding a thin green light on the corn.  
Feeling of rain and then rain itself,  
streaking the railroad dust on my arm.  
Lightning breaks out.  
I let rain fall into my open mouth, fill it up, tasting  
the unfiltered sky. I am made  
of a dark matter now, elemental.  
I dance at the edge of all singing and leaving.  
I shiver myself to joy.

\*\*\*

Showroom Cadillacs. Soybeans and corn feed. Shipments of ball bearings  
packed in Detroit. Scrap iron filings. Two hundred kilos Peruvian cocaine  
stashed in a shipment of soap. Olive oil. Crude oil. Blue Mountain coffee  
imported from Kingston, flown out, trucked up the Allegheny range. Crate  
and Barrel dish sets. Purses from Tiffany's. Things I could never afford.  
Knock-offs from Thailand, Myanmar, China. T-shirts from sweat shops  
and fair-trade organics all riding along in the same rusty car. Plutonium forged  
in a Tennessee factory. Nikes and import Adidas from unnamed factories  
south of the Rio Grande. Whole wings of airplanes strapped to the open decks.  
Turbines. I-phones. Evergreen cars for the sawblades in Portland. Bound  
for the dealerships. Bound for the freightliners leaving the Puget Sound,  
blowing their horns at the Golden Gate Bridge. The weight of it. All of it.  
Rolling away from its origin, down from the mountain pass, down from  
the bankrupted silver mines leaking, down from the Black Hills, down from  
the timberline, down from the flatland to finally rest in the sea.

\*\*\*

The road goes on. With or without us.  
It writes itself into the walls of our passage, scratches its name  
on the shoulders of mountains,  
concrete embankments, picnic bench tables,  
the tear-away bark of a young summer sapling,  
stenciled in four-foot ridiculous tags  
on the bridge overlooking the line.  
It is written in brandings,  
in torn leather scraps of a boat cover, faded tattoos,  
in the high-ball train and million-layered skywork,  
glimpsed momentarily in clouds.

\*\*\*

Somewhere near Havre the rain disappears.  
The beat slows down and the sun spreads two  
red parallel flames on the tracks. Weird  
benediction. Beautifully there for a moment  
and gone. A calico horse bows down  
to the barbwire, kissing the stalks of grass.  
Darkness comes down as we enter the yard  
and I pack up my gear for the bull.  
Nothing moves. Only the fishplates  
settling cold. I lean to the shadow. I wait.

\*\*\*

When the Crew Change is finished,  
the bull drives by with a floodlight  
shocking the walls. Stopping to walk  
down the blue forty-eights. I can feel  
his boots on the ballast beside me,  
searching the rideable wells. All my luck  
and starless fate and prayers are his  
alone. I know he knows I'm here.  
Still, tonight, the flashlight turns.  
The airbrakes start their slow release.  
The U-locks lurch and slam in place  
and the whistle redeems me, washed in time,  
in the fine-silt clay of the Red River,  
washed in the unrelenting wind. It is washed  
in the blood of thieves and outlaws,  
washed in the wild drunk calls of bandits  
and minor dealers and riff raff apostles  
and all the ragged crews of my youth.  
The ones who ran and the ones who wandered back,  
swearing to never return. It is washed  
in the words of my father's sermon, my mother's  
sermon the same, and I hear it sing  
in the mainline metal and curse and anoint  
the American prairie and ride my crooked veins.

\*\*\*

Butterfly caught in the backwind, dancing a dead loop.  
Friends now, I give him the end of my finger,  
shelter him under my shirt.  
Pink Floyd plays from a trailer home window.  
Tie dyed curtains. Tall pines drowsy  
with sun. Fly fishers casting their lines on the Kootenai,  
breaking the rainbows in half.  
Boy at a crossing in Libby, Montana. Ten feet away

from my face. I smile and wave  
but he stares right though me. Sees only motion and size.  
Bats turn soundlessly under the stars.  
I sleep in waves, in rocks  
and waves. I barely sleep at all.

\*\*\*

Water towers assert themselves on the morning.  
Voices arrive out of nowhere, depart,  
trail off into other conversations, other music entirely.  
A sequence forms. Songs move out of it,  
audibly, over the flapping flags, over the pleated greens  
and lawn decorations and all the tragic  
factories of the Midwest steaming inside my blood.  
All the neon bars. All the faded-out  
industry logos. Hot rod cars on the downtown strip.  
The family-owned wheat farm my grandfather,  
during the thirties, hopped trains down to Beaumont,  
South Dakota, to work. The men in those days  
all clad in the black and white sadness of silent films,  
sated on hard tack, riding the blinds  
where the boilerman shoveled the coal.  
Over the tender hearts of their future wives,  
dead now. Over the grandchildren selling their land  
and the fracking rigs taking their place,  
on fire. The country they came from  
chasing a dream and the actual dream defined.  
Over the shores of silent seas, the massive  
unsinkable ships. Over the Iron-range, Driftless,  
last great depression and boom-town  
closing the mine. Over the Chinese immigrants  
dying for nothing, hammering holes in the hearts  
of mountains, joining the east and west with a golden spike.

\*\*\*

Dark eye. Darkening into the Cascade Tunnel  
I sing myself into a zone. Low down,  
sweet and familiar sounds. Train I ride is ten miles high.  
Train I ride is two miles wide. Ride on,  
Babylon, ride. I see the entryway fade to a bright coin,  
blue in the circling stone. Sounds are thick  
and pictures of gone lives float  
on the calcium walls. Gently rocking.  
Absolute black. Holding my fingers in front of my face  
there is nothing. Only the diesel exhaust  
in the airflow, my brother and I  
in bunk beds hearing the freight trains buckle  
and shift. All night changing  
their mile-long loads on the field roads leading away.

We could tell by the whistle if one  
was a coal train or one was a mail train  
headed down south. We knew by the rhythm  
and clack of the joiners, the speed  
they were taking the turns. We knew  
there was something important inside the sound.  
We crawled to the window to look  
at the crossing guards flashing their red-blinking light  
on the road. Low drone beneath it.  
Malt-O-Meal smoke stacks leaching off pillars  
of heat. We spoke to each other  
in whispers, the snore of our father asleep down  
the hall. We felt the walls tremble, the weight  
of a thing that could sever a man's hand,  
cover the distance from New York to Portland,  
from ocean to free range. Cut through  
the Rockies and prairieland west of us.  
Flatten the president's face off  
the pennies and nickels we placed on the tracks.

\*\*\*

You forget your name. You forget your body  
has form. Half in dream, half out, you are carried  
in memories only, dull shades, consciousness  
born to the basal proximities, there for a moment  
and gone in the dank hole, gone to the deeper earth,  
not really caring whether you live or die.

\*\*\*

On the north side of Cloudy Pass,  
skirting the edge of Mt. Ridley and Sawtooth  
my dad and I hike through the heather with no map,  
matching each other step for step,  
rock for rock, signaling faintly without words,  
hoping to make it downstream before dusk.  
I offer the water. He hands me the peanuts  
and brushes the circling flies from my back.

\*\*\*

Where are we going? What door are we  
entering now? Purely alone  
in the long half-hour of turning ourselves to dust. Scraps  
of a lost cause, fragments, small unexplainable seeds  
of grief and all our futures gone.  
I don't want to see beyond the hills,  
the crumbling walls of barns,  
the great herds of elk and boneyards of cattle  
we passed in the Flathead Range.



I want to remain in mystery now, in the musty spiritual dark  
of this cave, where nothing is lost,  
and nothing begins or ends,  
or turns around,  
or dissolves in the blood's dark tide.  
The river rolls. The ocean throws its tired chain of waves  
against the shore. The road goes on,  
in darkness, falling rain,  
before our birth and after we fade like so much windblown sand,  
the light that finally comes  
is warm, and all at once,  
and blinding.

\*\*\*

*Train I ride is ten miles high.  
Train I ride is two miles wide.*

\*\*\*

Over the single direction of time. Over the now and forever,  
the long gone. Over the bright orange Burlington cattle guards  
blasting the mule deer clear to the weeds, steam lifting up  
from the Washington apple farms, swirling their magnified spells  
in my face. Over the grinding gears. Over the endless arrival,  
departure of light. The whistle calls us back. It rises from ragweed,  
ballast and black tar. It moves us. It carries us home.

*Kai Carlson-Wee*  
217

---

<sup>217</sup> [Kai Carlson-Wee](#), "[American Freight](#)," [Atticus Review](#), collected in [Rail](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## The Only Light Source Should Be a Scented Candle the Size of a Trash Can

We sat in a cemetery drinking a mixture of wine and bleach, with the sun as a light source, until everyone called me goth. We injected Novocain into people's mouths in a sterile room, under fluorescent lights, until everyone called me a dentist. I wasn't really either of those things, I just thought if I did what you did I would understand why I will take the bus a great distance to see you, and why I don't care that you usually have no face, and when you do its only feature is a beard. Finally I replaced all the lights with an enormous candle whose scent of vanilla was so powerful all anyone could say was "My eyes are burning," and no one could see me kiss you.

*Sarah Galvin*

218

---

<sup>218</sup> Sarah Galvin, "[The Only Light Source Should Be a Scented Candle the Size of a Trash Can](#)," collected in [The Three Einsteins](#), Poor Claudia

My Hour with Jorie Graham

1.

I was supposed to buy her lunch.  
All she wanted: the juice  
of apples.

2.

Too ripe fruit  
slit with a Henckels.  
Moths surrounding  
the runoff.

3.

Her mouth at a bottle shaped like an apple  
(my mouth mute as an apple)

4.

My poem my pomegranate my brand new outfit  
(The poem asking *whose poem is it?*  
The poem unsure)

5.

Hadn't I read Keats  
Hadn't I heard of the objective correlative

6.

*Let the siskins and the artichokes speak for themselves!*

98,000.2

God I hate this  
(God in my mind of no mind God in the (swollen) sea & me without oars)

♂

Just-butterfly—the wet & vulnerable hour

Butterfly shirking the worm's pedestrian hunger...



all those layers  
so many folds of gauzy black  
I never did find where the fabric ended  
(the fabric the thing concealing, the feeling untoward)  
Draped like the partial torso of Iris  
((((((of being wrong altogether, of her being altogether right))))))



what it must've been for Helen...  
(war of the seeking not to estrange, war of the coveted apple)



We paused on the sidewalk  
talked course loads, needy students, summers in Wyoming  
I asked did she still find time to write  
(in this ivy rancor in these halls washed free of sepulchral leisure)



She smiled the smile of transcendence

13.

Goddess of tossed back hair & dirt-smudged pumps  
Pulse's impulse  
Some first-year's wettest dream  
Damned if I'd consciously take your advice  
Damn if I still don't find the finest powder  
where I brushed against your wings

*Martha Silano*  
219

---

<sup>219</sup> [Martha Silano](#), "[My Hour with Jorie Graham](#)," [Green Mountains Review](#), collected in [What the Truth Tastes Like](#), [Two Sylvias Press](#)

## Wet Specimens

The investigation links sweat on a boot tongue  
to me, a label's lick to you.

Offshore, creatures solder themselves together,  
build long, evidentiary reefs

that swiftly confiscate beach.  
So though each vintage has its legs, bottle,

we can't run—which in our common delirium  
suggests treading water.

Recall that the Civil War amputations  
by Dr. Bliss were perfect save for the sepsis.

Another recommendation to stay bottled up:  
“All the time he was out of his head

not one bad word or idea escaped him”—  
thus Walt Whitman wrote Corporal Irwin's mother

after the boy, wounded near Fort Fisher, succumbed.  
Thirty years later a Pennsylvania man

donates a limb which has outgrown him;  
it's still a nightmare swagger jamming glass.

After we've been rescued, bottle,  
We'll visit it at the National Medical Museum

along with the dry thigh bone of Private Oscar Wilbur,  
wounded at Chancellorville, who, as he malingered,

asked Whitman if he “enjoy'd religion”  
and was told, at least in the water-rippled

account of this I stole from a library,  
“Perhaps not, my dear, in the way you mean.”

Terri Witek  
220

---

<sup>220</sup> Terri Witek, “Wet Specimens,” *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*, collected in *Exit Island*, Orchises Press

## Run Round and Round a Room

The head like an oubliette. Forget. Forget. How to escape your medieval form? Shave the scalp, chisel and drill. Excise a square of skull. Pain awaits when you wake. *Obscure with Fog* and pills. Nervous and nervouser. We have loved too long. Believed in words and spheres. Scalpels make a paper cut-out of your former self, silhouette stitched to wind. Let them scour the edge, search the unguent inch while you radiate, glow from within. Let them ogle the permutation: a doorway where a man once lived.

*Hadara Bar-Nadav*

221

---

<sup>221</sup> [Hadara Bar-Nadav](#), "[Run Round and Round a Room](#)," collected in [Lullaby \(with Exit Sign\)](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

from “Phys. Ed.”

[ CITY ]

In his office, Coach De Mann said  
I had it made & could win  
City if only I put my mind

where my body was, applied  
myself. That season I lifted,  
ran stairs, wore three layers

of sweats to slim sleep. All winter  
in trash bags I jogged to Russia & back,  
dreamt steak, no fat. The drinking

fountain we ran laps past  
ringed in launched loogies  
stayed unsipped.

On the meet-bound bus  
I watched boys spit out pounds  
in Kwik cups—heard tell

of magic saunas & miracle,  
ten-pound  
dumps. One Coach made my friend

drop a whole class, cutting  
from 112 to 105 overnight;  
Tim bought PMS pills to lose

water, the cashier staring back  
at him blank as his Biology  
test the next day

when he passed out cold. Watched  
another kid shave—rusty razor,  
no cream, no mirror—

when some ref deemed  
his teenage stubble  
a weapon—

in the warped  
metal of the paper towel dispenser  
his chin bloomed stigmata.

After I told Mom I knew I’d win  
she only half-  
believed me, said hope

was good to have. Later I waved  
to her from the podium  
after winning City, my smile as long

as the shot she'd thought I had.

How I loved  
Coach & his belief,

the medal mine. Earning  
my letter jacket's giant T,  
I was called to his office, I thought

to shake hands. Instead he asked,  
*You can dance, right?*  
Why don't I moonwalk

for him & the boys?  
A ring of fellow coaches grinned.  
Stunned, I did not laugh

or dance or do that backwards  
glide he wanted—I still haven't a clue  
which race he thought

he'd have me run—my medal  
long lost—that sunny morning  
right before Life

Science, long after History.

*Kevin Young*  
222

---

<sup>222</sup> [Kevin Young](#), "[Phys. Ed.](#)," collected in [Brown](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)



Au Revoir

We did not go to Versailles.  
The ocean did not turn over.  
The moon remained unmanned  
And two teams called out in turn Red Rover Red Rover.

Did Fisher-Price furnish our minds  
with a transportable *imaginaire*?  
George Bush the first said he liked pork rinds.  
My name not Mary my self contrary.

Things are always terrible  
for some people. The question  
is the ratio of the palpable hurt  
to the general session

of life in an era. Narcissism  
the Hall of Mirrors multiplying  
me and you and me no schism  
between ourselves and our lying

ideals. This is another first-world poem  
annoying in all its presumption  
its feckless tourism presupposing a home  
and its hubris misregarding itself as gumption.

Autobiography cannot anymore be spiritual  
and the obviously sexual dimensions  
of experience laid out before all  
a spatchcocked chicken the cook mentioned

she'd make you for dinner  
after she serviced the young monsieur  
on the staircase. *It's hierarchy or chaos*  
*mister* sd the structuralist seer

a woman no friend  
to women but no enemy  
either. How to end  
the impasse. How to be

perfectly complicit to just the degree  
you deserve asked the dominatrix  
by which I mean post-structuralist  
for whom the question of rubber vs. latex

moves us far beyond rational choice...

*Maureen N. McLane*

---

<sup>223</sup> [Maureen N. McLane](#), "[Au Revoir](#)," [The New Yorker](#), collected in [Same Life](#), Farrar, Straus and Giroux

At the Fernald School for the Feeble Minded

*For my brother*

Parental consent is asked  
for boys in the Science Club.

(Off Camera, Quaker  
competes with Cream of Wheat

and pays for MIT  
to spoon radioactive

oats to boys coaxed  
with Red Sox and butterscotch,

a Mickey Mouse watch,  
extra milk, a toy boat—

no one mentions isotopes.)

( )

Panicked, Johnny wolfs a bowl  
before a hungrier boy snatches it.

( )

Where brother means once  
a year on Christmas

or his birthday. At the asylum  
for children, thirty-six boys

in bare dorms. Cots  
crammed together.

( )

Afield, grass blades  
fluoresce the milkweed,

in whose their anthers, angels breathe.  
Who else might care

for the alumni  
of the *School for Morons?*

( )

Through dorm windows,  
deer appear.

Their withers wet with river.  
The boys watch until they vanish.

*Eileen Cleary*  
224

---

<sup>224</sup> [Eileen Cleary](#), "[At the Fernald School for the Feeble Minded](#)," [The American Journal of Poetry](#), collected in [Child Ward of the Commonwealth](#), [Main Street Rag Publishing Co.](#)

You Can Lead a Horse to Water. Repeat.

*I want to say, you're good girls,  
wanting to leave your names behind like that.  
—Louise Glück*

I'll tell you  
I'm a working girl, I'm a *girlfriend experience*.  
I dance incurably and damned on stage.

I'll tell  
you I love you more than the moon.  
You hang it, I'll shoot it.

I'll say I  
adore you more than it orbits,  
blanks out, steals the diamond  
dartle from the sun.

I'll say, point  
me to that old swoln rock,  
and fly me there. I'm over it.

The truth is,  
I mist my panties with a spray bottle.

The truth is,  
I rarely see the sky at night.

I've been ridden hard, and put away aching.  
That thing about horses is false.  
You can give them salt, and they will take it  
willingly. They can't forsake salt.  
They lick it until they blister, and then  
they wear it proud, but secret, inside  
their mouths.

*July Westhale*  
225

---

<sup>225</sup> [July Westhale](#), "[You Can Lead a Horse to Water. Repeat.](#)," [Thin Noon](#), collected in [Trailer Trash](#), [Kore Press](#)

“The days that were have now”

—Gilgamesh

in all eyes a witness.  
In every mouth, lies. The truth is  
a broken bone that can't be  
set. Tender are the breasts' proprietary  
bruises from the steering  
wheel. Nothing is more sexual  
than being trapped. Just ask,  
  
and a politician will sign anything,  
even a cast. The body's made  
real through habit, the body's made  
real through habit. Two blips  
meet on the street, in love or conspiracy—  
motives so close from 60  
thousand feet, they're almost

indistinguishable. Dear G-O  
-D, dear satellites; dear  
Voyager and able dead  
light: no lyric exists anymore  
except in the spam folder. Perhaps our secrets are  
safest with those we don't know. In all  
eyes a witness. In every lie,

a mouth. After the accident  
one man will say to another,  
*She could be bleeding internally,*  
*don't move her.*

Emilia Phillips  
226

---

<sup>226</sup> Emilia Phillips, “[The days that were have now](#),” [Boston Review](#), collected in [Empty Clip](#), University of Akron Press

## Summer Was Forever

Time dripped from the faucet like a magician's botched trick.  
I did not want to applaud it. I stood to one side & thought,  
What it's time for is a garden. Or a croissant factory. What kind  
of work do I need to be doing? My parents said, *Doctor,*  
*married to a lawyer.* The faucet said, *Drip, drop,*  
*your life sucks.* But sometimes no one said anything & I saw  
him, the local paper boy on his route. His beanstalk frame  
& fragile bicycle. Our work would be simple. Our kissing would rhyme  
with cardiac arrest. Birds would overthrow the cathedral towers.  
I would have a magician's hair, full of sleeves & saws,  
unashamed to tell the whole town our first date was  
in a leaky faucet factory. How we fell in love during jumps  
on his tragic uncle's trampoline. We fell in love in midair.

Chen Chen  
227

---

<sup>227</sup> [Chen Chen](#), "[Summer Was Forever](#)," [Pank](#), collected in [When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## I'll Try To Explain About the Fear

I'll try to explain about the fear  
Again  
since you think my trouble with the whales  
and elephants is a question of size.  
I'm on the other inhabited island  
of the Tremiti group,  
looking across evening on the water  
and up the enormous cliffs  
to San Nicola.  
I've been watching the few weak lights  
Begin,  
thinking of Alcibiades  
and those last years at Trebizond.  
I've been looking at San Nicola  
huddled behind the great, ruined  
fortifications,  
and thinking how the dark is leaking  
out of the broken windows.  
How the doors on those stone houses  
are banging and banging and banging.  
I've been remembering the high grass  
in the piazza.  
And Rimbaud in the meaningless jungle.  
I know the business of the whales  
may bring me there.  
That trying to understand about the elephants,  
about my stunned heart,  
may require it.  
May choose that for the last years.  
A bare white room  
overlooking the cathedral.  
High up there  
with the pure light  
and the lust.

*Jack Gilbert*

228

---

<sup>228</sup> Jack Gilbert, "I'll Try To Explain About the Fear," collected in *Monolithos*



## I Animal You

In the formerly our future, I saw a note  
you passed to a passing animal. That animal  
was not the quiet sort who could keep a secret.  
The note said I was an animal and you were sick  
of my musk. The note accused me of eating  
the rosebush, of bounding over streams  
and fouling them in the crossing, and that the dead  
hound nailed to your kitchen door was not the act  
of cruel boys but one of my crude attempts  
at communication. What you write is true—  
the cows won't give milk, and the cat comes home  
with one ear. I am what you took me for  
when you banished me to the backyard,  
where I read your note by the moon, which is not  
your face but tears the mad out of me all the same.

*Rebecca Hazelton*

229

---

<sup>229</sup> [Rebecca Hazelton](#), "[I Animal You](#)," [Compose Journal](#), collected in [Gloss](#), [University of Wisconsin Press](#)

In *Cat People*, Oliver marries Irena, but she says they can’t go on a honeymoon because of a gypsy curse. If they have sex, she’ll turn into a panther and kill him. In one of the great understatements in film he says, “I wish you’d told me this before we were married.” That’s not true. He’s a modern husband, so he sends her to a shrink. Oliver has a co-worker, Alice, with tremendously hot pants. Actually, no. She’s just a normal gal who likes Oliver. When he tells Alice about Irena and the curse she says, “Holy shit!” Not really, Alice would never talk like that. In 1942 nobody in the movies talked like that. Meanwhile, the shrink can’t seem to think of anything but Irena and the way she padded into his office and curled up by the fire. Oops. Not the part about the fire. At their next session, he tries to kiss her and she claws him to death. Now she has to die. The Legion of Decency says so: virtue rewarded, evil punished. The Catholics even banned excessive and lustful kissing. Well, that’s why I frequent prostitutes. An hour of excessive kissing for \$75. \$65 with the discount regulars get. Just kidding. I don’t go to massage parlors or houses set back off the road with covered parking. I’m just trying, dear reader, to keep you interested. This is poetry, not an exciting movie with huge Cokes to keep everybody alert. But you’re still with me, aren’t you? I’m so glad. Just a few more sentences. At the end of the movie, Irena dies at the zoo by panthercide. Alice and Oliver find her body and he says, “She never lied to us.” Well, she didn’t have readers with a dozen other things on their minds. And he only had Alice who, with Irena out of the way, unbuttons her blouse to reveal a florid tattoo set off by a midnight black bra. Not really. I just made that up.

*Ron Koertge*  
230

---

<sup>230</sup> Ron Koertge, “[Never Let Your Reader’s Attention Wander.](#)” collected in [The Ogre’s Wife](#), Red Hen Press

## Mess Hall

Your knives tip down  
in the dish rack  
of the replica plantation home,  
you wash hands

with soaps pressed into seahorses  
and scallop shells white  
to match your guest towels,  
and, like an escargot fork, America,

you have found the dimensions  
small enough to break  
a man—  
a wet rag,

a bullet, a bullet  
like a bishop  
or an armless knight  
of the Ku Klux Klan,

the silhouette  
through your nighttime window,  
a quartet  
plays a song you admire,

outside a ring of concertina wire  
circles around a small collapse.  
America, ignore the window and look at your lap:  
even your dinner napkins are on FIRE.

*Solmaz Sharif*  
231

---

<sup>231</sup> [Solmaz Sharif](#), "[Mess Hall](#)," [Blackbird](#), collected in [Look](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

A poem in which I am dreaming

I have stickers on my arms by Lisa Frank.  
Glitter on my shoulder. I turn & reflect  
against a trophy case. Something else—you—  
also in reflection. Two boys, boy, boy.

You both have hair like warm carpet.  
I could hide under your hair.  
I am shining with holograms of fake bears.

I walk to the exit talking excitedly.  
I open the door and throw myself out  
of a window. The window was broken or  
I broke it with my cheek. I land at two

pairs of shoes. I look up to your  
eyes but they are headphones. You  
play music from these about adhesive.  
My arms and legs are stuck together,

nothing is moving except my hair. It  
is blonde with glue. Both of you  
lay down beside me. We watch clouds  
to find bear shapes. I can feel us

wanting to hold hands. I roll onto  
my side and fall off a chair, under-  
neath a table. On top a biology  
book next to a yellow name tag.

Many yellow name tags, tags  
on the floor next to caution tape.  
You both are gone down some stairs  
with the carpet torn out.

*Kelly Forsythe*

232

---

<sup>232</sup> Kelly Forsythe, "A poem in which I am dreaming," *DIAGRAM*, collected in *Perennial*, Coffee House Press

from “Hybrida: A Zuihitsu”

&

List of the times my son has registered hurt:

- His friend kicks him in the spine. The mother of the boy does not notice.
- A neighbor asks him if he has a gun in his hoodie pocket.
- He walks up to a group of boys in his class. Turns back to me, asks me to say goodbye one more time.
- He mentions under his breath that I never listen to his stories.
- When I defend him from other boys too fiercely, he storms away. Slams the door.
- A white boy steals his school snacks and he is hungry. When he tells a head teacher, she doesn’t believe him.
- My mother calls his hair crazy. She asks me to cut it each time she sees him.
- My friend tells me that all the girls like the blonde, blue-eyed boy in the class. When I’m silent she says, “They like your boy too, of course.”
- The owner of the convenience store asks me if my children are my own. I say, “Yes, they are.” She looks them up and down and demands, “Where is their father?”
- I ask him to get out of bed. Instead, he stands on his mattress and raises both arms up.
- Outside his window, he views police officers surround a man. He doesn’t know if he should feel for the officers or the man standing at the center, panting hard.
- He often tells me he doesn’t understand the meanness of boys. Mentions maybe it’s better to stand somewhere in the middle or somewhere alone.
- In the basement of my home, his friend straddles him, punches him in the head over a dozen times. He does not sound out or call for help. Later, he said my husband told him never to hit a girl so he lay there waiting for the punches to stop.
- I was far from the house.
- I was not home.

*Tina Chang*  
233

---

<sup>233</sup> Tina Chang, “[Hybrida: A Zuihitsu](#),” collected in [Hybrida](#), W. W. Norton & Company

## The Big Chill

I am keeping a list of all the good things  
that will happen when I die,  
like not having such small sinus passages  
or feet so cold I have to sleep with a hot  
water bottle like I live on the prairie  
with Laura Ingalls, tapping the trees  
for maple syrup and sending Pa to town  
for flour and sugar and yards of calico  
and those peppermint sticks in the glass jars  
at the counter. When I'm dead,  
I won't have to worry whether he'll get home  
safe in the snow.

And I'll finally be done with this hair,  
curly and red, never letting the rest of me  
go unnoticed, and all those bottles  
lined up on the bathroom shelf to tame it  
like in the movie *The Big Chill* when one  
of the characters regards her own mousses  
and gels and says, *Every morning,*  
*another chance to be pretty.* When someone  
is dead, you don't think about their hair.  
Like my dad's whose picture I pass  
every night when I put my sons to bed.  
I forgot how rough it felt until Ben's soft hair  
changed to the stuff of sponges.  
When I watched *The Big Chill* with my mom,  
I kept asking who was married to whom  
until she was exasperated, but really  
it was confusing, they were all there  
for a funeral, and no one could tell anymore  
who they loved.

At my funeral, I will be done with all of it.  
Like that girl I saw walking down a busy street  
one cold day last spring.

She did not seem to notice she was naked,  
her breasts fantastic, her pubic hair dark  
and sudden as a small animal.

She was holding a book, the kind girls  
carried to school with their lunch pails,  
the kind with a ribbon to mark your page,  
something to hold in your hand because  
you liked the shape. She didn't look up,  
just kept walking and reading, her cold  
fingers turning its pages, the paper  
so thin you could see right through it,  
the print coming off on her hands.

*Laura Read*

---

<sup>234</sup> [Laura Read](#), "[The Big Chill](#)," collected in [Dresses from the Old Country](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Duplex

Don't accuse me of sleeping with your man  
When I didn't know you had a man.

Back when I didn't know you had a man,  
The moon glowed above the city's blackout.

I walked home by moonlight through the blackout.  
I was too young to be reasonable.

He was so young, so unreasonable,  
He dipped weed in embalming fluid.

He'd dip our weed in embalming fluid.  
We'd make love on trains and in dressing rooms.

Love in the subway, love in mall restrooms.  
A bore at home, he transformed in the city.

What's yours at home is a wolf in my city.  
You can't accuse me of sleeping with a man.

*Jericho Brown*  
235

---

<sup>235</sup> [Jericho Brown](#), "[Duplex](#)," [American Poetry Review](#), collected in [The Tradition](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)



## A Brief Topography of the MSCOG

Over the door there's the iconic ice-pick in a human heart. You have to show a scar to the bouncer to get in: the old suture holes, a common kneecap, the shy smile of a cesarean, spattering of long-gone acne—any scar will do. And you have to tell a story about your mother. Something she suffered through. But once you're in, you're in forever.

Then there's only the horizon, lush carpeting through cigarillo smoke, coats on hooks, worried aunts, croquet—grand as a yard sale, a ghost, her eyes like thumbs pointed down, her laugh like an almost perfect test score—

leave your inhibitions at the door. There is no room for modesty.  
Your magnum opus will start

in the dim alcoves of grief.

### II

Main dance room: frivolity, managed by a House Mom, who sits in a high swiveling chair, making sure no one breaks the rules of solitaire.

*Lay me out on the floor and win me. I have nothing to give but my songs no one knows, on my album no one bought.*

The DJ is the world, spinning and spinning.  
On the loudspeakers it's Rubinstein at the piano, remixed with sick beats.

—and there's Grandma, half-blind, naked but for an open XL flannel and Birkenstocks. She peers out from behind the bar, squinting into the faces, trying to figure out who is ordering and what, her hand up behind her ear like a sail. *Don't let the cats out!* she screams, whenever someone comes in.

### III

You want privacy with your dead?  
Follow the nameless great-great-grandmothers through the screen doors.  
Cross your hands over your chest like a coat of arms.  
I will ravish you with songbirds.  
You'll see angels bathing in dust.  
Let there be something for you in one room or another.

And there are so many glow-in-the-dark galaxies to look upon.  
Like you're all alone in your childhood bedroom,  
but totally restored  
in the adult entertainment industry's moral center.

### IV

For the masochist, nothing quite hurts like the truth.

Farther in the cavernous club  
where the bend in the strip fakes an edge,  
I engrave my lunatic memorial:

I WAS HERE!

The dungeons of the mind, the most defeated cells,  
wherein cruelty cums.

Let go and there is nothing  
tethering you to the stake  
that is always driven  
into the soft center  
of your vampiric world.

VI

The great cosmic cow gyrates her stomachs on stage. The tall grasses sway at her knees. The people moan. The sun sinks. The band wraps up with “Gloomy Sunday”—

Oh, Billie. Billie, do not leave us again—it never ends, it just lies down and weeps, because it can’t get ahold of anyone. *HELLO?? Is anyone there?! Why aren’t you answering your phone??*—lost in a magazine from 1998 about the sky & telescopes. Let the moths land where they will. Feel their powdery legs against your own. *Gloomy Sunday. Gloo-my Sun-day*. Would the angels be mad if I thought of joining you? Bright midnight moon, gloomy Sunday through the glass ceiling—better yet, Mars: that raving nipple, that red goddess who demands from the eaves to be worshipped.

Bianca Stone

236

---

<sup>236</sup> Bianca Stone, “[A Brief Topography of the MSCOG](#),” collected in [The Möbius Strip Club of Grief](#), Tin House Books

## Our Last Vacation

It was the season of dead moles,  
black silken pelts like evening purses  
abandoned along the forest path,  
We collected mushrooms on a charred hillside,  
smudged ourselves in soot, marveled  
at the way bones crumble when they've been  
burned, then played Keno in a bar  
where spent chainsaws, those chewed teeth,  
hung from the ceiling while we listened  
to your father's wife describe her time at the slots:  
cherry, cherry, cherry, pineapple. We met a man  
who owns a mortuary and we shook his hand.  
You said geese mate for life, so if you shot one,  
you'd have to shoot them both. The leaves  
kept coming down, knotting the air into thin  
ropes of light, spinning their green palms  
like wide roulette wheels on the river's muddy face.  
The odometer's dials turned over and over,  
just like they do in ambulances. I told you I thought  
we'd know when it was time to go home.

*Keetje Kuipers*  
237

---

<sup>237</sup> [Keetje Kuipers](#), "[Our Last Vacation](#)," [Connotation Press](#), collected in [The Keys to the Jail](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## This is Manifest

What I needed to survive was, currents  
moving over my body.  
Also, bourbon.  
Saw a light through the trees:  
serum? Lantern?  
Baby, I said to the man kneeling  
between my legs, there are kit foxes out there  
and they hum when they learn a new thing  
like ledges or stream-fording.  
For years my soul was little more than an embassy.  
I was lush, and then lush, and then more lush.  
In all of my opening, who had I actually saved?  
I was no one's bodhisattva. And so  
I removed my body from the systems.  
Walked the hills by night.  
My blisters filled with sticky fluid.  
A swan made a freakishness of its neck.  
I was a woman of such secret knowledge  
as you may think mad.  
I don't know why, when we die,  
all our skulls aren't jeweled.  
Sometimes I was so enamored of sky  
I felt my milk might come in.

*Kerri Webster*

238

---

<sup>238</sup> Kerri Webster, "[This is Manifest](#)," [Los Angeles Review](#), collected in [The Trailhead](#), Wesleyan University Press

## When We Dead Awaken

When you look at a long wave of kelp stretched out  
as if it were a mess of some drowned girl's hair, you won't  
be thinking of the functionality of the ovoid bladders  
like tiny buoys holding the flat wide blades toward  
the sun for maximally efficient photosynthesis.  
You'll be thinking of that time you almost reached  
to hold the hand of a man as he told you that story  
where two teenagers don't fuck on the beach, but do  
find the corpse of a pregnant girl washed up on the sand.

The wind on the bluffs of we didn't made everything  
feel really clear, but down below on the gray beach  
sand fleas would swarm you as you walked among dumps  
of seaweed and shore-battered crab husks. I know  
because I walked the lip of it alone at the end of this.

If you feel like you're in love, you have to either remember  
or forget that a feeling can only last a little while.  
What you should do with your little while, I can't say.  
The history of should is the history of honorable men  
discovering Caribbean beaches with white sand and water  
as blue as a mermaid's eyes, where they dragged human beings  
down the gangplank in chains to finance the invention  
of coffee shops and decorative buttons on ladies' shoes.

The coast I have in mind was so ashen and the pines were  
brown with the fire-drought of the end of our present world.  
I should have taken his hand. I've already been a pregnant girl  
washed up on shore twice. The bull kelp are so big I thought  
I was looking at a dead squid the first time I saw one. I asked  
the shoulder of him I wanted to lean my head against if he  
thought that was even possible. He said anything is possible.

You don't understand how long it was I had been dead  
by that night of the day Maya took me to her lake at the edge  
of the peninsula daggering this gray sea. It is a lake so old  
a glacier carved it right down to the bottom of the basalt earth.  
When you jump in—and you have to jump in—the cold  
stops your heart for a second and then it comes back  
in a seizure of beating that makes your vision blur.  
That is also a feeling that can only last so long.

A boyfriend threw his dead girlfriend in Maya's lake once  
and the mineral waters iced over that night. When spring came  
nine months later, the fishermen found her floating in the water  
as perfect beautiful as when she went in. They call her Lady  
of the Lake and she haunts the place as a ghost or a witch  
or a very old god who still remembers how to want and how  
to grasp what she wants with the ice of her hungry fist.

It was night. I couldn't get the stars to hold still. I couldn't  
catch my breath. I was 1000 miles outside of my life. How long  
since I felt anything? And now there was nothing  
I could not feel. I could see beyond the sails and red lights  
of the coast guard buoys, the flashing tentacles of a hundred  
squid rising up to taste the silver of that strange moon  
before the surf hurled them in lumps at our feet.

I have a dead daughter I carry like a smell of salt spray  
in my mind and I have an alive daughter who is home running  
with her kite straight into the wind. I have but also  
do not have the rest of you. I don't see how we can be  
longer than a story to each other. It's not me. It's the waves.  
My arms are so tired, I just need to float for a while.

There were no squid. It was a wrack of seaweed bulbs,  
their squish stems wrapping in each other, strange creatures,  
soft as leaf, firm as fish, forming of themselves a forest  
against the physics of diffusion and drift. If I had that night  
back, I'd do it wilder this time. Not like the silent mist  
of a ghost maiden, but like a red-eyed revenant who has  
figured out at last how to reach across the veil of breakers  
and grab the girl of some dying woman by the heart  
and make her beat until she's gasping once more.

*Kathryn Nuernberger*  
239

---

239 [Kathryn Nuernberger](#), "[When We Dead Awaken](#)," [The Collagist](#)

## Trailing Clouds of Glory

Even though I'm an immigrant,  
the angel with the flaming sword seems fine with me.  
He unhooks the velvet rope. He ushers me into the club.  
Some activity in the mosh pit, a banquet here, a panhandler there,  
a gray curtain drawn down over the infinitely curving lunette,  
Jupiter in its crescent phase, huge,  
a vista of a waterfall, with a rainbow in the spray,  
a few desultory orgies, a billboard  
of the snub-nosed electric car of the future—  
the inside is exactly the same as the outside,  
down to the m.c. in the yellow spats.  
So why the angel with the flaming sword  
bringing in the sheep and waving away the goats,  
and the men with the binoculars,  
elbows resting on the roll bars of jeeps,  
peering into the desert? There is a border,  
but it is not fixed, it wavers, it shimmies, it rises  
and plunges into the unimaginable seventh dimension  
before erupting in a field of Dakota corn. On the F train  
to Manhattan yesterday, I sat across  
from a family threesome Guatemalan by the look of them—  
delicate and archaic and Mayan—  
and obviously undocumented to the bone.  
They didn't seem anxious. The mother was  
laughing and squabbling with the daughter  
over a knockoff smart phone on which they were playing a  
video game together. The boy, maybe three,  
disdained their ruckus. I recognized the scowl on his face,  
the retrospective, maskless rage of inception.  
He looked just like my son when my son came out of his mother  
after thirty hours of labor—the head squashed,  
the lips swollen, the skin empurpled and hideous  
with blood and afterbirth. Out of the inflamed tunnel  
and into the cold room of harsh sounds.  
He looked right at me with his bleared eyes.  
He had a voice like Richard Burton's.  
He had an impressive command of the major English texts.  
*I will do such things, what they are yet I know not,*  
*but they shall be the terrors of the earth,* he said.  
*The child,* he said, *is father of the man.*

Vijay Seshadri  
240

---

<sup>240</sup> Vijay Seshadri, "Trailing Clouds of Glory," collected in [3 Sections](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

## The Tenor of Your Yes

If you were lonely  
and you saw the earth  
you'd think *here is*  
*the end of loneliness*  
*and I have reached it by myself.*

If you were sad  
and you saw the kitchen  
you'd think *here is*  
*the end of sadness*  
*and they have prepared it*  
*for me.*

Turner painted his own  
sea monsters, but hired  
someone else to do  
“small animals.”

Apparently he could do  
a great sky, but not  
rabbits.

Much like god at the end.

Mary Ruefle  
241

---

<sup>241</sup> Mary Ruefle, “[The Tenor of Your Yes](#),” collected in [Indeed I was Pleased with the World](#), Carnegie Mellon University Press



For Max

Ok, so you know someone who died horrifically  
Ok, so you know an animal who died horrifically  
In a fire let's say or a building's collapse  
Or, ok, so you know someone who's dying right now  
Except maybe not horrifically  
Except your idea of horrifically is changing  
Like a gun death seemed less horrific than the gas chambers  
Until the country kept ignoring gun deaths  
Now they seem horrific  
And then I really try to think about the word *horrific*  
And horror and I think about how I only watch horror movies  
In black neighborhoods where they make jokes  
The whole time about the dumb white girl that's going back into the house  
Until I'm peeling with laughter in my seat  
And I think so much of my country is dumb white girls going back  
Into the house, except they're men, too, and I'm offended by  
The attribution of feminine qualities or I'm offended  
By the qualities deemed feminine because I am one tough bitch  
Who never has to be one because I don't leave the house  
I don't know if I'm mourning you before you die  
I don't know if language can write me away or into anything  
*I'm a butterfly. I'm a pig. I was never in a body to begin with.*  
I remember as a child trying to think of what animal  
I wanted to come back as and not being able to think of one  
Because everything is prey to something and my luck  
As a human seemed too great, irreplicable, next time I'd for sure  
Be a child kidnapped or molested or abused  
A mother on her way out of the Y last night told another mother  
How she pinches her son because she doesn't know what else to do  
And then makes a joke about how she's going to kill him  
And it's not a fucking joke, it's not one  
And I wonder if that would be a horrific death just because  
it's his mother committing the act  
That seems like enough even if the death itself isn't torturous  
Or inhumane, and I don't know what to do with that word anymore  
Because almost every action I've seen lately lacks compassion  
And every life I've seen lately has misery in it  
Last night a man in my area tried to run a woman's child over  
Then got out of his car and said, "You dirty Jew, I should kill all of you.  
I should come back with a gun and kill all of you."  
There are a lot of reasons for people to point a gun at me I guess  
I might die before you I guess  
Because that's our country right now and either way  
We'll die without each other a little  
And if I come back as a cricket, I'll seek out the bird  
If I come back as a mouse, I'll seek out the fox  
I could do this cycle a hundred times and still enjoy it

Sarah Blake

---

<sup>242</sup> Sarah Blake, "[For Max](#)," *The Rumpus*, collected in [Let's Not Live on Earth](#), Wesleyan University Press

from "Death as a Way of Life"

*Ancient man, and we have ample evidence of this,  
used to drive whole herds of animals over  
cliffs when the individual beasts were too formidable  
or too fast to handle*

an admirable technique  
with a dubious result

In 1755 Louis XV  
assembled 13 hunters  
for an 18-day excursion

Among them was a woman  
Princess Charlotte  
who fired 9,010 shots  
to the king's thousand

They returned with:

19 stags  
18,243 hares  
10 foxes  
19,545 partridges  
9,499 pheasants  
114 larks  
353 quail  
454 "other birds"

for a total 48,237 killed

The carcasses came home in bags  
the nobles came home drunk

I want to know about the "other birds"

Were they species unknown to the hunters  
or insignificant birds not worth noting by name  
or mutilated  
beyond recognition  
by the princess  
*an obviously staunch lady*

Then there is the Jewish thinker Emmanuel Lévinas  
who wrote about violence and the Other  
who once made me think of Emmanuelle Béart  
in her role as *La belle noiseuse*,  
in which she is in the nude most of the time  
an object for art  
some would say violence

But think of *noiseuse*  
and its origin  
could be *noire*  
or *nuire*, a verb meaning “hurt”  
or *noise*  
and its uses

When I first saw the film I thought it meant hazelnut  
but the French word for hazelnut is *noisette*, and *noiseuse*  
it turns out is a person who likes  
to pick a fight, a gadfly

Emmanuel Lévinas was a gadfly, too  
though not only when naked like Emmanuelle Béart  
and he didn’t have “art” in his name like she does

He didn’t have “philosophy” or “ethics” either  
or even, or especially, “theology”

The theologians

(“The theologians” is an attractive phrase sounds laughable but with an underbelly like all my subjects)

(It also reminds me that the words “theology” and “logic” are related by the root word, “log” and that  
when I was young. a log was a bridge that got you safely to the other side)

*Man dies in excess but not  
naturally for in all his genius  
he is still to find a better way  
to solve his differences  
than that used by his ape<->man  
ancestors*

And so the log becomes a weapon  
the weapon a float  
to fight over

(Competition the spice of life  
when I was young  
I was a gadfly, too)

There are no theologians in my family  
my ancestors  
held by a string  
to the map

*Anna Moschovakis*  
243

---

<sup>243</sup> [Anna Moschovakis](#), "[Death as a Way of Life](#)," collected in [You and Three Others Are Approaching a Lake](#), [Coffee House Press](#)

#0 earth

before a place of before being  
before anything  
your first memory may be a crib  
or garish fluorescent lights  
as you choke on an apple in kroeger's  
or smell of goatsmell and hay  
holding hands with a french canadian woman  
who will move to ontario  
before you know your own name  
or the humid and humming air conditioning  
and cicadas as you are sweating  
for the first ever time  
or learning about fear in september

whatever it may be  
is definitely a lie and  
if we are so easily able to lie  
about our first memory being  
a place of safety or comfort  
why can't we decide  
that memory of this morning groggy  
or 3 a.m. gravedigging exercises  
are also this place of comfort  
before knowing it at all  
before unlearning to cry  
an open hand open fingers  
before closed hands or mouths  
tight as first clothespin  
you put your dumb finger into  
and cried and cried

before even this  
an earth of first foggy moments  
preconceptual ease  
we can keep this earth but never return to it  
small pocket mirror you were given  
by girl in second grade before  
she moved away away

*jasper avery*  
244

---

<sup>244</sup> [Nicholas Christopher](#), "[Heat](#)," [The New Yorker](#), collected in [On Tour with Rita](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

## I Don't Sleep in White

Religion being defined as the expectation  
of future punishments, my people  
sat in prayer. They sat on thatch and slashed their hair  
in marriage, traveled under Gothic names  
with papers sewn in the lining of their coats. I came  
late, talked late, misunderstood their jokes,  
those punch lines that entailed a working  
comprehension of old world exchange  
rates. I never prayed to God, but begged the clouds  
to meet my needs: not rain, form scenes  
from favored books. I was put into acting as a child,  
carried by other children over the lake  
of fire we were instructed to imagine. Student of ash,  
I grew up fleck-complected, short of breath. I set  
out seeds for small birds, watched them eat  
their weight, watched others do the same. Though  
I've been told white suits me, I don't sleep in white.  
My bad eyes in the morning can't discern a shirt  
from bedding. I am through with needing  
to have such fabric handed to me, turned out  
like the turned out feet of birds. Cloud, have mercy  
on these small destructions. Send me to a war, I'll leave  
the war. Sharpen my want of dying, I won't die.  
Cloud, believe I once believed in justice.  
I thought it was a bird that I could wait for: coffee  
thermos, special lenses, drabbest coat at dawn.  
I thought if I was quiet, I would see it. Cloud, forgive  
the error. Cloud, forget the branches I have broken  
in my terror. Cloud, have only patience with the lover  
presenting his nakedness like the unpainted  
puzzle they gave in grade school  
to test if we were smart. Cloud, I was always  
smart. Where has it gotten me? Haven't I  
lived correctly? Haven't I fed whatever asked to be,  
felt only fear of creatures whose refusal to fear me  
evinced a rabidness? Why can't I be  
like my grandfather, wear a heavy hat,  
play Baltic anthems on the violin and just expect  
that those with whom I share my life will know  
how many kopeks in a ruble? My error was trusting  
in acting, and sleeping in white, and building homes  
for shadow birds, which means I have built homes for  
many hands. There are so many kopeks in a ruble.  
Cloud, there are more than you can ever know.

Natalie Shapero

245

---

<sup>245</sup> Natalie Shapero, "[I Don't Sleep in White](#)," [The Progressive](#), collected in [No Object](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

## Terror Management Theory

To think when I was a child all of my adults  
walked into & out of doors like I now do, fearing  
death & taxes, tasting the bitter tongue of some

ending I'll be forced to kiss. When I was a child  
on beach vacations I counted the number of days  
we'd already been there & the number of days

we had left & it scared me in the same way the sea  
scared me. All of that, unfathomable. An endlessness  
both empty & full. When I hold a shell to my ear

it tells me its best rumors in a language inexplicable  
except to say it does not belong to me. What does  
belong to me. Can I try hard enough to believe I am

living with this body like a very good pet, can I  
believe that if I care for it well this body will follow  
my will, quiet, quiet, will heal & heal & stay, stay, stay.

As a child I kept a glass tank full of goldfish who  
swam & shat & worked their best at their job, which  
was dying. Later my mother explained the aquarium

as the place where children gently learn about death.  
No matter how many or much we love. No matter  
the treasure chest no matter the castle no matter

how neon the gravel no matter how many Saturdays  
my father cussed the glass & the hosepipe & the sun  
that pink-stained his skin to mark each hour he spent

cleaning the tank. Sun translated as burn as bad mole,  
as cells making their own decisions. To die. To share  
their dying. Every moment we believe we are living

without believing we are also dying is a very good lie  
like alchemy, like any theory regarding the beautiful  
preservation of gold. The first second third & every

time I looked into the fish tank & saw death—  
bloated sacks of scaled skin, rot-gunned, reeking—  
I couldn't get over. I couldn't stop hearing what

the shell told me, which was all that I would never  
understand. A life is always both empty & full

*Emma Bolden*



---

<sup>246</sup> [Emma Bolden](#), “[Terror Management Theory](#),” [Parentheses](#)

from “Epithalamion”

*Reception*

Cover the walls with white sheets  
and project Swedish pornography onto the ceiling.  
As the night wears on, break potted plants open  
and throw dirt everywhere, especially at your loved ones  
—no. Rename everyone who walks through the door.  
Their name is now George. Resurrect the great many misogynists  
who bore that name. Invite only strangers. Serve only petit fours. No,  
no: it is spring. Decorate with snow made of warm feathers,  
order ice sculptures in the shapes of motorcycles  
so the guests can ride, can feel the power  
of a thousand pounds of frozen water  
between their thighs! No! The theme  
is Absolute Last Night On Earth.  
At a party like that, you can’t come back  
once you leave. Everyone knows it’s forever.  
Which is the message you want to send. That’s it.  
That’s the theme. Run with it! Run  
with it. Cover the walls in butcher paper  
and attach markers to the wall with festive ribbons  
so your guests write their own epitaphs. This is the theme!  
Bake it into a creatively-shaped cake and  
smash it into your partner’s face like,  
here, eat it.

*Lauren Clark*  
247

---

<sup>247</sup> Lauren Clark, “[Epithalamion](#),” [NAP](#), collected in [Music for a Wedding](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

Please Use This Against Me

How can I get future me  
hamstrung from joining forces with the fiends?

They may offer fruit or office. Or use me  
after I am dead. In defense, I'll tell you  
now, aloud: my résumé's a ziggurat of evils

villagers are keen to read but don't elect. In life,  
wit wedded weed and had exotic bedtimes.

Of the sexton's hex, a hero and a wreck.  
El Porto Folio, at sight of me diversified  
and hung its lanterns. Not now

and again: for twenty years I locked lit lip  
on every girl with whom I thirteen times

broke bread. Were there a Satan, huge and red,  
formed in excellence, near Michelangelean  
of gravid mass, he I would befriend,

because I want to do what he does. Who doesn't?  
Many are too lazy for misbehavior, or too afraid.  
That, I have not been. My pets have been base

wolves and acidic cats. I hate to lie, but do.  
Also, I am pacifist with no respect for money.

*Jennifer Michael Hecht*

248

---

<sup>248</sup> [Jennifer Michael Hecht](#), "[Please Use This Against Me](#)," collected in [Who Said](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Confession

Every month I decide not to try  
is a lungful of gold I can keep for myself.  
Still, I worry you'll come to me anyhow

& hitch your hiccuping bud. My dear  
I don't want to be got. I just want to get done  
with this month. I decide not to try.

I decide on a wine. You keep spinning  
through the woods on green stars of pollen.  
Still, I worry you'll come to me anyhow.

Your small breath troubles the flour  
I'm spilling. Did you leave sweet jam on the sill?  
Every month, I decide not to try

to find out. Late sun butters the glitz  
in my guts. My dear, I'm already botched.  
Still, I worry you'll come to me anyhow.

Lately, I've dreamed of quilts stuffed  
with hair & bees; it's a thing. Yet I don't see  
why I worry & worry. You come to me anyhow  
every month I decide not to try.

*Kiki Petrosino*  
249

---

<sup>249</sup> [Kiki Petrosino](#), "[Confession](#)," [Under a Warm Green Linden](#), collected in [Witch Wife](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## How to Find a Robber

Don't look. Don't look anywhere.  
I am behaving like such an animal.  
I found a field full of crows.  
I am selling people bad transit tickets.  
I am sure of it. Row boat row boat.  
Brain chemicals boat style rocking.  
There's your voice. There are some  
well given instructions. When it comes to  
performing some of the most difficult  
and laborious operations of abstract thought,  
I fail. *Hey person, I love you!* I kick at rocks.  
I pretend to be a very treacherous fox.  
Foxes will also eat vegetables  
when they are available. Are you available?  
I am learning this skull. Ants all over  
this small broken blue egg.  
Because I might be in a boat.  
Because it made me feel different.  
Because I don't want to be a fool.  
*Hey someone, I want to want less.*  
I stand in corners. I am not corrected.

*Emily Pettit*

250

---

<sup>250</sup> Emily Pettit, "[How to Find a Robber](#)," collected in [Goat in the Snow](#), Birds, LLC

## Waitress

Wednesdays I waited on women golfers,  
endless four-tops just in from playing  
a hot eighteen. They drank gallons  
of unsweetened iced tea, demanded refills

for free and complained when the brew  
wasn't cold or strong enough.  
I ran on cans of Tab,  
kept a lit Newport perched in the crotch

of a black ashtray, lucky to get  
three deep drags between cocktails  
and order-ups. The grill cook pointed  
a knife at me, threatened to cut off

my tits if I didn't speak up. The bartender  
screamed at me for garnishing  
a dry Manhattan with a maraschino cherry.  
I leaned on the roll warmer and cried.

No one paid attention. Every week, at least,  
someone untied her black apron and said,  
*fuck it*, walked out in the middle of a shift  
never to be seen again. I dried my eyes.

In the nineteenth hole men slipped bills  
in my pocket, eyed the V-neck  
of my uniform whenever I set down  
another round. An hour after my shift,

I was shit-faced in a bar that didn't card me,  
paying for cold Molsons with quarters left  
by the lady golfers. I don't remember  
walking home on those nights, only

the mornings when I woke to a wink  
of coins on the bureau, hours before  
I had to punch a clock again. I had nothing  
but time and I was rich.

Sarah Freligh  
251

---

<sup>251</sup> Sarah Freligh, "Waitress," collected in [Sad Math](#), Moon City Press

from "Dappled Things"

Like an extinct frog who brought life by opening her mouth,  
    many froglets bursting out, I brood a quiet storm  
at the water's edge, a bloated cloud, all the roe I've swallowed whole  
    I brood and brood, feeling old Hop in his final state  
crying out, *I am gall, I am heartburn*  
    Until I feel a blaze unknown

Feel first my lungs deflate, then like a sharpening harp  
    the stomach acids start to transform  
I'm breathing through my skin, as an army grows in full  
    Will all things return—if I so choose to burp  
        —in nameless forms?

*Jenny Johnson*  
252

---

<sup>252</sup> [Jenny Johnson](#), "[Dappled Things](#)," [The Los Angeles Review of Books Quarterly Journal](#), collected in *In Full Velvet*, [Sarabande Books](#)

## Combustion

If a human body has two-hundred-and-six bones  
and thirty trillion cells, and each cell  
has one hundred trillion atoms, if the spine  
has thirty-three vertebrae—

    if each atom  
has a shadow—then the lilacs across the yard  
are nebulae beginning to star.

If the fruit flies that settle on the orange  
on the table rise  
like the photons

    from a bomb fire miles away,  
my thoughts at the moment of explosion  
are nails suspended  
in a jar of honey.

    I peel the orange  
for you, spread the honey on your toast.  
When our skin touches  
our atoms touch, their shadows  
merging into a shadow galaxy.  
And if echoes are shadows  
of sounds, if each hexagonal cell in the body  
is a dark pool of jelly,  
if within each cell  
drones another cell—

    The moment the bomb explodes  
the man's spine bends like its shadow  
across the road.

The moment he loses his hearing  
I think you are calling me  
from across the house  
because my ears start to ring.  
From the kitchen window

    I see the lilacs crackling like static  
as if erasing, teleporting,  
thousands of bees rising from the blossoms:  
tiny flames in the sun.

I lick the knife  
and the honey pierces my tongue:  
    a nail made of light.  
My body is wrapped in honey. When I step outside  
    I become fire.

*Sara Eliza Johnson*  
253

---

<sup>253</sup> [Sara Eliza Johnson](#), "[Combustion](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [Bone Map](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)



## The Parable of the Talents

The man in the pig suit is back,  
standing outside the gates  
of the state capital, holding a sign  
that reads LAWYERS ARE SWINE,  
his bitter face only just visible  
inside the soiled pink vinyl, his outrage  
clambering over westbound traffic  
on Eleventh. It's so heavy, believing  
there is a story in every moment, every  
person, all those spots you press  
to find they're rotted straight through,  
all those ropes of thickened  
scar tissue—the divorce gone bad,  
the drunk driver gone free; it's always  
complicated, even when the message  
is *fuck it*. He makes me think  
of Susan, beginning to cry, asking,  
*Who do you think Jesus will come to first,*  
*if not the insane and the depraved?*  
See, that was a complicated moment  
for me, as my jealousy of Susan's faith  
was exactly equal to my jealousy  
of the insane and depraved to whom Jesus  
would come. The light stays red long after  
I expect it to turn green, so I watch  
the cars as they turn south  
on Congress, as they go on with  
their lives. In the backseat, the baby  
is silent. No words yet, not a single  
word, only sounds. She is pure  
of story, sitting, facing backward,  
looking up, maybe, to the rotunda,

where the great woman of Texas stands  
all day and night in her robe with her arm

extended elegantly toward heaven,  
holding that one big star above her head.

Strange woman, I read somewhere that  
to make her recognizable from this far

her features had to be exaggerated  
and that close up

she looks like a monster.

*Carrie Fountain*  
254

---

<sup>254</sup> [Carrie Fountain](#), "[The Parable of the Talents](#)," collected in [Instant Winner](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## Matt

For all intents and purposes and because the rule applies more often than it doesn't, every white man or boy who has entered and fallen away from my particular moderate life has been called Matt. Not Dan. Rarely Ben. Never Matthew. Matt smokes unfiltered Pall Malls because Kurt Vonnegut did. We talk on Myspace because he goes to a different high school. Matt's in love with someone else but I can tell he's still interested in me, Matt and his girlfriend aren't really together. Matt doesn't have a condom so we can't. Matt also doesn't have a condom so we can't. Matt loves Modest Mouse. Matt loves Kanye. He loves whiskey. He brings a flask to the park. He tells me I'm beautiful. He likes me. He follows me into the bathroom where I once found a bag of coke. I tip sideways onto the tile trying to steady myself on top of him while his legs are spread on the toilet lid. I say what about you and Anna. He says hold your ankles. I made Matt a really good mix cd. Matt's writing a novel. Matt's also writing a novel. Matt says I'm a really good kisser. My friends say I'm too good for Matt. Matt loves his Mom. Matt's moving to Berlin. Matt's moving to California. Matt's quitting smoking again. Matt rolls his own cigarettes. Matt has depression. He listens to sad songs. Matt wants a big family. He seems like he would be a good dad, His family is so white. His favorite novelists are white. His ex-girlfriends are white. He said he would call me. His ex-girlfriends are really skinny. He has this thing where he seems like he doesn't care about anything. Matt's in love with someone else. He thought I was way older than him. He got a new tattoo. He has bad dreams. I miss him. He loves foreign movies. He's stoned all the time. He pulls me into another room. He has a beard and he also has a beard. He kisses me in the other room. He loves my dog. He flirts with me all the time, I think just for fun. Oh, Matt. He knows he's a white man but doesn't think of himself as a white man. He doesn't know what to do with his life. He floats. He is young. He can afford to be cool. He wears a lot of flannel. We're just friends. He's nervous about commitment. He's nervous in the elevator when he touches the small of my back. He's nervous on the roof. I'm nervous taking his hand because people can see us. His roommate walks in on us, then gives us shots of gin we all sip in silence. After that we smoke on his fire escape and make out. We smoke in front of the bar and make out. We make out on an empty subway train, my back slips around on the hard plastic seat. He pays for my brunch. He texts me all the time even at the airport. He's breaking up with his girlfriend. He and his friends are drunk in someone's apartment in Queens, what am I up to? He hates his job but he's totally a genius. He lost his phone so he has a new number. He hates his job and what he really wants to do is make art and be happy. He needs to live abroad for a while. He used to be really dumb. He swats his hair from his forehead and says of course he will call. I always ask but I'm going to stop asking. I'm nervous he doesn't understand. He didn't grow up with many Black people. He knows he is part of the problem. He just believes in love and knowledge. Matt, Matt, Matt, Matt. Each one more beautiful than the last. Each one more with more intricate ennui. I could never love him. He floats. I can't stop loving him. Matt knows the bartender. Matt studied comparative literature. He still loves his ex, I just know it. He says I like talking to you. He says watch your head as I ride him in his dorm room bunk bed. He's so sorry he didn't call, it's just that things have been busy and weird. Matt and I sneak out of a movie to hook up in his car. He is afraid of me. Matt and I are hanging out this week I think, to watch movies or something, I guess, maybe. He's never met anyone like me. Things are just super casual with us. Neither of us are looking for a relationship. Matt loves relationships. He slept with my friend. I can't tell if he's into me because I'm Black or because I'm not that Black and either way I feel bad. I feel it in my stomach's basement: Matt can't want me. I am not forever. Matt has kissed me hundreds of times and he kissed my ancestors too. He held them down and kissed them real good. He was young and he could afford it. When he touched them, they always smiled, almost as if it had been rehearsed.

*Morgan Parker*

255

---

<sup>255</sup> [Morgan Parker](#), "[Matt](#)," [Sixth Finch](#), collected in [Magical Negro](#), [Tin House Books](#)

from “We Are Hopelessly Small and Modern Birds”

Oh, I says to a small man, I had not yet been born but I knew someday I would wear a ruffle gown and whore’s makeup. And still, after all these years, it feels as if I am not born and no matter what shoes I wear I still cannot get my feet to touch the ground. It is as if I am Mark Epstein’s patient and he keeps trying to get me to wear his clothes. Maybe if I just put on a pair of his pants and a tie he will teach me the art of fiddle-carving.

All I ever wanted was to fiddle in a hardcore band.

*Sara Lefsyk*  
256

---

<sup>256</sup> Sara Lefsyk, “[We Are Hopelessly Small and Modern Birds](#),” collected in [We Are Hopelessly Small and Modern Birds](#), Black Lawrence Press

## The Valkyrie

Strapped to the wheel of perpetual  
awareness, I listen as my boss says, if I want  
to keep my job, I'd best think hard, not about

the minutes I waste, but the seconds. So when  
a man catches the ATM door behind me,  
each blink I take feels like a good, long

sleep I've earned. I don't notice, at first,  
the worm of his moustache, butter-colored  
arms starred with moles, or the side-pocket

protrusion of his gun until he motions  
at it, then me, to hand him the single crisp bill  
I've withdrawn to help me get hammered

tonight. It's already growing soft as I wad it  
into his palm, relieved to comply completely,  
to be sure of doing it right. But then he says,

*Take out the rest.* Now, with the barrel nudging  
my left lung, there it is on the screen,  
in the certainty of 1s and 0s, how little

I have left. Only last night, I went home  
with a guy who asked me to strangle him,  
so I put my hands on his neck and squeezed,

said, *No one will even notice you're gone*  
in the stony voice I usually reserve for myself.  
The words came easily, but how loud they were

in that musk-hot room, how his body tensed  
felt new. So I move to snatch back the bill,  
and my robber's hand opens as if he expects it,

the rule that anything given in the world is soon  
retracted. The gun there, still. And me,  
banking on him as the kind to shove a girl

down a flight of stairs, that they'll do enough  
work to shut her up. But there are no stairs,  
no hypothetical falls, just my explanation

to him that today I turned off the lights  
in the supply closet to cry. How pieces of me  
remain in my office cube long after security

sets the night alarm, and that some part  
of me is always there, two eyes under a desk—  
the same hapless Valkyrie hitching up my skirt

each morning to ride into Port Authority,  
drawing against the water torture of a system  
that owns my sword, portions out my rations,

and his. His hard face breaks into pity, eyes  
and jaw relaxing. He puts the gun away,  
a teenager in dirty jeans, skin of the innocent,

and says, *Don't tell anyone. Please.* My eyes  
close against the war drum of our twinned  
pulses. The wheel stops for us. It finally stops.

*Erin Hoover*  
257

---

<sup>257</sup> [Erin Hoover](#), "[The Valkyrie](#)," [The Awl](#), collected in [Barnburner](#), [Elixir Press](#)

Mouth Full of White Flags,

I ask permission to spit:

a sphinx

a barn owl

a boy who bums a smoke

they look away      //at me//    I hate this, I hate men yelling and not//

not knowing their danger

People talk about a proper time and place, but sometimes you end

up talking about death at a Chili's over a plate of chicken tenders

//and that's just how shit goes

Most people think bodies are mannequins

when they see them where they don't expect to

like when you see dried-up petals

and think someone must've spilled a bag of chips//

Can we just order a pizza

It's always better cold and in the morning like

light pillows sex coffee what

have you

When I blow a man, I like to be over him

while he's flat on his back

like I'm looking cautiously into a well

and when I'm about to gag, I think of England

and gag anyway, because that's what you like—

because                      in a lot of ways, you'd like to watch

my head explode like a slow-motion watermelon

dropped from someplace very high//

But you'd also like for me to swallow the thing

like the moth larva from the bottom

of a bottle of Mezcal

never give it back

Wake up. There's a rapist on the loose.

Pushed a woman into her apartment as she unlocked it.

I leave myself  
at home. I walk around past  
midnight w/ Ken doll lump,  
mons-pubis-only, and go  
grocery shopping, blind drunk  
w/ power and fluorescence.  
I tie a plastic bag around my head.  
I'm your Scary now. I'm your clown  
standing in the dark.

*Lauren Yarnall*  
258



Once

Once I read about Nazi Germany and how glamorous actresses with pencil thin brows dipped white rose petals in ether and chloroform and sucked them dry for breakfast while their country burned.

Once I wrote a story where hair was braided so tight, it pulled the scalp away from the body.

Once I saw a girl dragged under a trailer by her feet; we were in second grade and at school and to this day when I climb an open stairwell in the dark I race from what might be lurking, even in my locked house, even though the sun was shining that day.

Something I have never been is a runner.

Once nine-year-old me scrambled away from a voice in the dark opened doorway of a van that called,  
“hey, little girl”

Once thirteen-year-old me scrambled up a fence as an unknown van veered off the road, towards me,  
and wouldn't stop,  
I tumbled,  
and it kept coming  
I ripped the flesh off my own hands  
and it kept coming  
danger bubbled in my gut, stung my chapped lips  
and it kept coming,  
but it wasn't danger.  
It was my mother, in a different car, and she was laughing.

Once fourteen-year-old me was a zoo animal, caged with other zoo animals, watching a weary zookeeper nod at our wildness and blink back the sun.

Something I have always feared is dying without an audience.

Once I heard about three sisters in a field, and a boy took the first home, then the second. The last sister was sad and crying, so the boy took her home too; and all three made themselves useful to him, and lived long happy lives.

Once I sold a poem about how well I scurry and climb. How honorable all the scurrying! How noble my bloody hands!

Once I told a lie about Icarus and his feathers. Every boy is Icarus, and every girl a ball of wax. I wonder what our mothers think, watching us plummet; I wonder if they ever dreamed about the ocean floor.

*Jeni De La O*  
259

## Lookback

I thought I loved God and His son  
and all of that stuff  
but I may have just liked being good

at Church, A-pluses in verses, hymns,  
virginity-maintaining, I was always The Mary,  
The Angel wearing white bedsheets and gold

bric-a-brac, bringing God's lava voice  
to bunkering stables of men. I loved Him  
like a savings account, feeling holy

in my asceticism but waiting for the day  
I could go to the Bank of Eternal Good Things  
(main branch), cross its marble floors,

slide the withdrawal slip to the teller and cart off my bags  
of dry humping and smooth skin.  
Tolstoy believed something else

about the loving of this God, but by the time  
I knew who Tolstoy was I didn't care  
what he had to say about gods, only people,

the reasons they wake up in the morning  
to seas of golden wheat  
then burn the country down. But God

cannot be separated from Tolstoy  
just because He was separated from me.  
Did Lev love God because he walked around

in His holy likeness, white man with white beard:  
wise, unpredictable, and given  
to the wearing of linen? Would I still love Him

if He were Her—cranky and jealous,  
redheaded and bored? But isn't that God?  
My whole dumb life I have loved people into leaving,

flooding my heart's high school with a fire  
I stand inside, alone and made of salt.

*Erin Adair-Hodges*  
260

---

<sup>260</sup> Erin Adair-Hodges, "Lookback," *Horsethief*, collected in *Let's All Die Happy*, University of Pittsburgh Press

Nat King Cole on the Amalfi Drive

He sings after making the beast with two backs,  
something low-down and dirty, fried liver and onions,  
put your hands on your hips and let your diction slip.

We do it real quick. I am “that kind of girl.”  
He shakes out his marcel, calls Yes!  
to the Lord, caretaker of bliss, maker of figs,

the good Lord of smothered chicken and biscuits  
who gave us five senses, said, Go forth and taste  
for your time on this earth is not long.

We keep our pleasure secret, dahlias  
underneath my skirt as I watch from the studio audience.  
The Negro crooner sings of “Eskeemos.”

Wild applause from the flush-cheeked fans.  
My dahlias rustle, brush. A wink for me,  
a smile for me, for me in black and white.

*Elizabeth Alexander*  
261

---

<sup>261</sup> [Elizabeth Alexander](#), “[Nat King Cole on the Amalfi Drive](#),” collected in [Antebellum Dream Book](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

[How will I leave this life, like I left my job, drifting off without]

How will I leave this life, like I left my job, drifting off without  
comment, like mother took off to get schooled, shut the door  
hard on my crying, she had books to read, or father in an ambulance,  
rotating light swept red over oak trees, then the hospital bed,  
hallucinating war ship and sea, or the way my ex left us, dragging  
his clothes in a garbage bag through snow like fresh kill, or like I left  
K, I had twenty minutes before he'd get home to try to change my mind  
or kill me, out the red door with my dad's briefcase full of all my poems  
and the typewriter and seal skin coat, and then the airplane home,  
so freaked by the years with him in New York I broke when I stirred  
up a grouse in the woods, will I leave like a grouse leaves, drumming  
the air with its wings, or like Freddie left the stage when Queen played  
Live Aid, glossed like a racehorse, top of his game, or like I leave parties,  
no valedictions, out the door like smoke from extinguished candelabras

*Diane Seuss*  
262

---

<sup>262</sup> [Diane Seuss, "\[How will I leave this life, like I left my job, drifting off without\]," \*Waxwing\*](#)

## Grandfather Outside

*There are sadnesses which cast in one's soul the shadows of monasteries.*  
—E. M. Cioran

We arrived too late for the sundial.  
The monks were bats circling  
stone paths: we watched

the glow of their lamps in the garden  
as they pulled the onions  
for our meal. That night I dreamt

you and I were walking  
underwater. Orange jellyfish  
rose like suns. We couldn't speak.

So slowly, we moved together  
against the tide. Until you  
disappeared into a submarine wood

not unlike the one bordering  
the monastery  
that long night in Romania.

\*

Near midnight, the monks sang  
through blue corridors of incense  
as if tuning the dark

to the low note of their devotion.  
The halos of each painted saint  
glowed like winter wheat.

They said they kept their mass  
through the dead of night  
so that Christ, crying falcon,

plummeting alone  
through Gethsemane  
would be caught by the threads

of a net so loyal it stretched  
backwards through time. I never knew  
that days were held together by singing.

Or that those who suffered  
    could be attended to  
long after they had gone.

\*

Now, one year after your death  
    the radio crackles Rachmaninoff—  
a nocturne that won't end.

Alone in the sacristy, I found the ankle  
    bone of John the Baptist. Displayed  
in a carved foot of wood. I could

imagine his ghost walking those  
    grounds. Wild in the garden, baptizing  
piles of raw beets as they split in the sun.

Maybe tonight he'll bless me.  
    With a simple gift, one a ghost could  
give. Something like snow falling

over the morning you died. Emptying  
    yourself into the exhausted  
arms of a hospital bed.

*Katherine Larson*  
263

---

<sup>263</sup> [Katherine Larson](#), "[Grandfather Outside](#)," collected in [Radial Symmetry](#), Yale University Press

## Plastic Mirror

In my spare time I swim laps at a public pool.  
In my spare time I check up on my childhood. I slip  
mint cookies under its door. I give it a new toothbrush  
every six months. I am my childhood's dentist.  
I am the general practitioner who palpates my childhood's abdomen  
and spreads my childhood's legs to look for rashes.  
My childhood does not want to continue these appointments.  
It has a poor understanding of maths and histories. My childhood  
will not let me teach it to divide. My childhood  
wants to huddle in a mound of blankets under a blue polyester  
bed tent with a Barbie pattern. It wants to sleep.  
My childhood is endlessly fascinated with its Barbies. It collects  
them in a cardboard box that I empty every so often and  
shake clean of dust. My childhood cat's toys are commingled with  
my childhood's dolls. I do nothing for my childhood cat, nothing  
that would involve elaborate recursion and ritualistic crying,  
crying which I never do in my spare time, which  
I divide between my childhood and a public saltwater pool  
that is heavy and lovely dark at the bottom.  
My childhood cat watches the movements of my childhood's fingers  
from behind the closet door.  
My childhood cat is a dangerous predator.  
My childhood leaves its tent and crouches on the floor and now  
I brush my childhood's hair. My childhood's hair  
is long and thick and pulls free easily and bunches in the brush,  
because my childhood is not getting any exercise or sun.  
I rub my childhood's back. My childhood  
is holding a doll with bright auburn hair that  
shines in the light  
from the lamp on the little vanity in the corner. My childhood  
sits on its haunches and turns the doll in its hands, she twists  
and felts the hair of the doll into her own hair  
and she wishes for something nice.  
I watch her push a hand into the box, no doubt looking  
for a small, plastic brush and a small, plastic mirror  
that will distort my childhood's face.  
I abandon my childhood  
to its wide expression and its memories, which I am forgetting.  
In my spare time I go swimming in a public pool,  
where I conceal my brittle hair with a rubber cap. I am a bad diver.  
I watch myself slipping a gray border on the deep blue plain.  
I am nothing but a skip rope hanging from a dogwood tree.

*Christine Gosnay*

264

---

<sup>264</sup> [Christine Gosnay](#), "[Plastic Mirror](#)," collected in [Even Years](#), [The Kent State University Press](#)



Dune Primrose

She carries brushes  
and bone,  
skulls and stones

wrapped tightly  
in a towel.

She will carve a cross  
from soap,  
float

a small tombstone  
in her bath.

There is a painting  
she thinks of  
while she bathes,

*Black Cross,  
New Mexico—*

opposite of the white  
soap she moves  
across her breasts.

Her town is a room  
without light.

She opens the window  
and the scent  
of the desert disturbs her.

When she trusts  
a painting enough

to bathe with it,  
the canvas wrinkles  
like her skin.

But this does not  
return her

to her hometown,  
to her history  
buried with each

dead aunt, each name  
carved in stone.

She places her hand  
    between her thighs.  
Her bath

is a cold grave. She thinks  
she's the ground

women rest in, but  
    she's the small leaves  
sprouting from their palms.

*Kelli Russell Agodon*  
265

---

<sup>265</sup> [Kelli Russell Agodon](#), "[Dune Primrose](#)," [Crab Creek Review](#), collected in [The Hourglass Museum](#), [Two Sylvias Press](#)

from *I'm So Fine*

### My Other Name: A Postscript

Khadijah means wife of the prophet. Nothing about my name is casual. Your mouth has to make an effort. You have to commit to all eight letters, all three syllables, no nickname. It means something Uber drivers, the Muslim ones, all men, want to tell me about even after I say yes when they ask do I know.

They want to know how old I am and where I'm from they want to get in my business where is my husband. Some men can't stop telling me who I am or what exactly is so incredible about me or what they had to take or offer without asking. They still say it's my fault I am beautiful. I was raised as a Muslim. *In the name of Allah Most Gracious Most Merciful* shouldn't I thank God for the kind of beauty that makes me so desirable an object so in demand by strangers you might say my name cursed me to solitude. I don't see any around, do you? If so, pass out my number tell him I said where have you been all my life. I know it's a line but people like familiar things like fellow boring straight people hey

I'll be 44 in a few years and I have a tradition to live up to a prophecy perhaps. Chop chop. I cut off my hair because I wanted to begin again with something on my body no man has touched. I wanted to press rewind. I still want the kind of purity that cures men of acculturated entitlement. I want a little silence when I walk down the street or get into the back seat of a hired car in any city I travel to. Maybe I have to marry myself. Maybe I am my own prophet. I want to stop reacting and keep creating and to do that maybe I need a new kind of hijab that makes me safer unseen, free of both sound and adornment. I could use that kind of safety.

Sartre said hell is other people and by the token of time through the ages, surely a French philosopher knows whether man equals less than desire *and surely man is in loss, except those who do good works, and enjoin one another to the truth, and enjoin one another to patience and constancy*. My mother told me I should keep some things to myself. She should have said keep yourself to yourself but it was in her nature to be generous. I learned that kind of giving leads to further taking and it's a light that attracts parasites. What's an ex-Muslim girl to do

keep praying. The world of prophets is elite. They don't just let anyone in, lol not wives and sometimes I want to cut myself out of all possible institutional pictures. Sometimes I am in a collage I made myself and I have a new name. I have a name I have given myself and I'm the only one who knows what it means. But that doesn't make sense *Bismillah ar-rahman ar-rahim* like the first time I was taken from myself my father asked me what I learned and that is what I learned. I learned I had no father but I could walk in the rain and let my hair rise up in the night become a black halo *aaameeeeeeeeeeen* curling closer to my head as if to love it,

softly greeting as if saying peace be unto me. A man can break you with your own love if you don't remember who you are among the nonbelievers. All praises due to the part of me that listens to herself first. The first time I drew a rose I couldn't stop layering in new petals. My small right hand filled the flimsy newsprint with red Crayola spirals, the lines unbroken, the endless making as sweet as being out of the order other people like to think you are born to.

*Khadijah Queen*

266

---

<sup>266</sup> Khadijah Queen, "[My Other Name: A Postscript](#)," collected in [I'm So Fine: A List of Famous Men & What I Had On](#), [YesYes Books](#)

## In California

one either believes in God  
or believes one is  
God. Like the freeway, you can't drive on  
both sides at once.  
Medians themselves are horticultural  
phenomena. And from every direction there is  
vista, there is grande.  
There are places called  
Vista Grande.  
I have seen them myself,  
have the photos to prove it.  
I have stepped from my car in a glockenspiel  
shirtfront and conducted  
orchestras.  
I have held in my hand a baton of sky,  
while the hills looped gold  
green silver black,  
and the automatic tollbooths rang and rang,  
lifting and letting fall  
their braceleted arms.

In California there is more  
land than ocean; we will not  
discuss then, in this poem, the ocean.  
Let us place coins where its eyes used to be  
and insist instead,  
as wisteria insists—  
the insistent part of the wisteria—on  
architecture. Consider  
the bungalow, the overpass, the balcony  
balustrade as muscular as any Mister  
Atlas, tiny kites wound round  
his triceps. And the palms:  
it's not just headdresses with them  
but mufflers, full-length  
raccoon coats, that trailing  
perfume of fennel and sage, a dust  
that will not dust  
off. Not off the palm, not off the grape,  
not off the live oak or  
the dead. Rolling the piers and streets and orchards,  
only the fog can slick it down.

I take it back  
about the kites. I see now the five points,  
the pentagons of morning  
glory choking the balcony,  
and potted nasturtiums on the landing  
dreaming. How our grandmothers favored them,  
the old flowers, old edible  
flowers. Like the old  
stories, they have it all:  
feet of clay, suits of mail,  
coats of brine, hoops of gold....

*Red Aster, who made you?*  
The Sun made me.  
*And who, Red Aster, ringed you with gold?*  
You have, Maestro, who planted me here.

*Kathy Fagan*  
267

---

<sup>267</sup> [Kathy Fagan](#), "[In California](#)," [Gulf Coast](#), collected in [The Charm](#), Zoo Press

## Ode on My Sharp Tongue

Being a cocktail waitress did nothing for my eternal,  
most high and holy inviolate numinous soul,  
because it took me almost no time to figure out  
that by being mean I raked in more loot,  
my only aim in working in these smoky dens  
of iniquity, and as a vegetarian  
and nondrinker, you can imagine how much better  
I thought I was than the office workers  
and politicians who swilled gin deep into the night.  
These men liked my sharp tongue, my absolute  
boredom with their admiration. Like Beatrice  
in *Much Ado* I was Lady Disdain but with twice  
the venom because my mind was filled with Keats, Donne,  
their Truth and Beauty, sonnets, holy and un-

while I spent nights serving martinis and Manhattans,  
to a crowd of orangutans in the guise of men  
and women, too, though they were rarely a problem. They'd  
down their drinks quietly, faces sliding to one side,  
smiles gooey with something other than lust  
as they talked to these utter baboons who must  
have had something to offer, if only sperm and a paycheck,  
in the biological roundelay. But the thick necks  
and clumsy hands, more like the paws of some forest  
creature than a man—how could they bear it?  
“Wake up,” my mother used to say, “you’re living  
in a dream world.” Oh, Mom, I was waking  
to a world where Beauty meant nothing, my heart hard  
as if I were eating bacon and eggs fried in lard

each morning before going off to class to talk  
about Yeats and Maude Gonne and then walking  
to the Mecca to drink coffee that was bitter and weak  
at the same time. How unspeakably  
beautiful my life was then, though how was I  
to know, being young and insufferably high-  
minded, most nights going out into the parking lot, to yell  
into the black sky, “blow your trumpets, angels,  
and arise, arise from death,” as if anyone, even Donne,  
could change the world with something so one-  
dimensional as faith. I had none, and nothing  
to take its place but poetry, my shining  
girl, too radiant for any mortal man, though some tried,  
even the goons I served drinks to on Saturday night.

I had a pop quiz for men who wanted to date me, one  
no one could pass; some would even  
ask to take it home, and I'd say, Sure, knowing  
each hungover one would wake the next morning  
and think, "I'm a lawyer, and I'm taking a quiz  
written by a cocktail waitress?" Then his  
ego would assume its natural splendor and go consume  
its day, and I was left feeling like some  
character in a novel by Dostoyevsky, mostly Prince Myshkin,  
though sometimes Raskolnikov or even  
Alyosha Karamazov. Beelzebub had left Moscow  
with Uncle Joe and come to our little cow  
town, his acolytes walking the streets, appearing in  
public places, the cat, the redhead, these men,

like the law professor coming in with his wife, then  
returning alone to ask me out, the shmendrick.  
Towering over him, I said I would if he'd bring a note from  
his wife, and he did. So this is what I'd come  
to in my search for Truth and Beauty. I understood  
Keats's last days in Rome, his heart wooden  
with bitterness, feeling as if his name were "writ  
in water." Where is that girl today? It wouldn't  
surprise me to pass her on the street, braless,  
in bell bottoms, a stack of Russian novels  
in her arms, furious at Tolstoy for killing Prince Andrei,  
thinking she is some kind of modern day  
Elizabeth Bennet, sneering at the older woman she's  
become. But she doesn't see me in her daze

of books and words. Oh, I'd love to kiss her face,  
my glimmering girl. How stupid she is, graceful  
and young. Would she believe that one day she might  
feel for Mr. Casaubon or Mrs. Bennet  
or even Mr. Collins, those villainous or comic  
characters, who never play the romantic  
leads but toil at unfinished books, fall in love where  
no love waits for them. She'd laugh, I'm sure,  
and I want it no other way, for sometimes late  
at night, bitterness will clutch my heart,  
and that unhappy girl rises up from my throat,  
enamored of Keats, Rimbaud, his drunken boat,  
shouting poems at the sky, drunk on words,  
in a sea of men drinking what she serves.

*Barbara Hamby*  
268

---

<sup>268</sup> [Barbara Hamby](#), "[Ode on My Sharp Tongue](#)," [Western Humanities Review](#), collected in [Babel](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

## Hunger

I stared at my favorite foods and ate  
the words for them. Just yesterday I ate  
ten sarmale, a pile of mămăligă cu brânză  
și smântână, had room for more. Now  
my mind was a mouthful of anaphoras,  
and you were a man incapable of natural  
love. At your parents' house, your father  
forked a piece of crispy fried brain  
onto my plate and waited. I rolled  
the salty custard around on my tongue  
and swallowed. I didn't want to like it—  
I liked it. The coffee was sweet, the garden  
ungardened, and the dog dug a honeycomb  
fractal in the dirt. We stood beneath  
the tallest evergreen in the village—  
all the birds in the village in this tree.  
It was November, outside Bucharest,  
but sounded like spring in Boston,  
birds in the bamboos outside my window.  
Your father drove us back, 101.9  
Romantic FM aired songs of loss  
in English. We passed a jail, some  
plowed fields. We unpacked, sorted  
leftovers. I could feel that small bite  
of brain acidifying in my stomach.  
I wanted to shit it out, be done with it,  
didn't want to think about thinking  
or feel the thinking inside me. Later,  
in a living room of friends, no one  
spoke, and you were in charge  
of the music: *And you already know,*  
*you already know how this will end.*  
My thoughts were thick with rooms.  
We went to separate beds. At dawn  
I woke to a man in the apartment  
below belting out in broken English  
the chorus of "Bad Romance." Outside  
the window, a woman on the fifth floor  
shook out an area rug, beat it with a broom.  
Your cat came over and sat on my chest.  
I lay awake thinking of the brain in my gut,  
and repeated a line of verse scribbled  
on your bedroom wall: *O how long*  
*it's been since I've seen the sun*  
*glowing above the sun.* You were still  
sleeping. You slept well.

Tara Skurtu



---

<sup>269</sup> [Tara Skurtu](#), "[Hunger](#)," [spoKe](#), collected in [The Amoeba Game](#)

## In the Kingdom of Shade and Silence

I trusted her. I wanted him.  
Winter showed itself  
as a symptom.  
I took myself down  
the path of needles,  
the path of pines  
to consult the woodsman  
blackening his boots  
behind the woodshed.  
He had painted the trees.  
There was blood in his hair  
when he said  
without looking at me  
the one word  
that would annihilate all others.  
Then how did I walk on—  
my skirt of starlings  
kicking in the wide, white field.

*Marni Ludwig*  
270

---

<sup>270</sup> [Marni Ludwig](#), "[In the Kingdom of Shade and Silence](#)," collected in [Pinwheel](#), [New Issues Press](#)

## Hexagenia Limbata

This bug with a needle out the back that might be its stinger or a body's length of genital or just the endlessness of an unlikely thorax has translucent black-leaded wings and picks its way across my table in this bar, lifting its skinny ass up and down in a way you'd have to agree is sexy. What shall we call it? A man I know who likes to read archaic Latin just came in and didn't recognize me, so I watched him walk away in his humble slouch of cargo shorts and bald head, a little overweight, thinking to myself that if he were to sit down next to me and read this passage or that from some very old tract on Roman property law for no other reason than he likes what language can do, I would kiss him up and down his throat and into his mouth, one sentence at a time. Among other reasons, to help me forget how earlier today I read the transcripts of that poor girl's testimony against a Harvard-bound ambassador's son and how she just couldn't believe what was happening to her was happening to her, so she was quiet when he did it, and tried for two days after to believe she had asked for it and there was nothing to report. Because how do we live in the world if it wasn't our fault? Easier if we should have just said or done something different. I'll walk home alone and tipsy tonight, as my friend who never even got to testify did, because it's a great pleasure to be by yourself, drunk with the night. Though it's hard not to think about how she was grabbed by the throat under just so many stars. She was afraid and she wanted to get away, so she offered to blow him instead, because, she said later, we've all done things we didn't feel like doing just to get it over with. I'll remember how I tried to explain this to my dad once at the end of a long drive. That I too really love to walk home alone in the dark, but he didn't get it. Words never seem to live up to the promise they make us. Why would I want to do something so stupidly dangerous? he asks. Another night we were talking about politics and transvaginal ultrasounds and I said nonchalantly that I've had six of them because once you've had six you can't help but be nonchalant about it. He was shocked so I explained it was the miscarriage and the retained placenta. They call the thing a wand, but it looks just like a dildo and the nurse puts a condom on it for hygiene and practicality. "No need to reinvent the wheel," she jokes as she rolls the latex down in front of you.

But since language can't reinvent what happens  
to you, it still feels really screwed up to lay on a table  
with a lube-soaked, condom-covered dildo in your body  
watching the movie it projects onto a flat screen TV  
of your larger-than-life dead baby who isn't really a baby  
or other times it's just the emptiness inside yourself  
the doctor is pointing at. There's language again,  
twisting what is into what isn't. It was a baby to me—  
I don't expect it to have been to you. This time  
my dad is wiping his eyes, I can't believe it,  
but he is. Maybe because, and this hadn't occurred  
to me before, but maybe he loved that child  
who never was and maybe because he loves me too.  
My stranger with his Latin writes about linguistics  
and philology and charmed me once by saying  
he likes the puzzle words make, how he can  
take them apart and apart and apart and then  
reassemble them into a language more familiar  
while he drinks alone at this bar in this private life  
of his with no woman and no man. All the while  
that strange, unknown insect with a body like lace  
has been crawling along my arm. I didn't notice.  
Does it even have a mouth at this stage in its life?

*Kathryn Nuernberger*  
271

---

<sup>271</sup> Kathryn Nuernberger, "Hexagenia Limbata," *Tin House*, collected in *Brief Interviews with the Romantic Past*, Ohio State University Press

## Inventory

They said there would be spiders,  
    & there are—cobwebs appear  
  
in my home like apparitions,  
    ghosts of a heaven they said  
  
there would be. And I have found  
    good people here & even  
  
fewer ways to feel alone,  
    here where the tundra  
  
swans make their layover  
    from the Arctic: I  
  
hiked to them after the limnologists  
    announced their arrival.  
  
Afterward, a friend thought I  
    said *tender* swans, not tundra,  
  
& the truth is, I couldn't say  
    either way—were they  
  
tender? I have no carnivorous  
    sense of humor, but I  
  
have been prone to talking  
    about the heart, I admit,  
  
which they said would be broken  
    on arrival, though it  
  
is not broken now, not  
    anymore. I like to see  
  
the white glue in places. I  
    have lately devoted  
  
hours of my self to learning  
    how quickly a crayon  
  
will break between my fingers,  
    & it doesn't take long,  
  
but God, it feels good  
    to treat my brain

to cerulean, scarlet,  
tangerine & red

for it has snowed  
five days in a row

and everything I see  
is white, white, white.

And I have decided  
with regard to the swans

that they were tender  
like a snowplow,

or warm breath  
on a frostbitten hand.

*Oliver Bendorf*  
272

---

<sup>272</sup> [Oliver Bendorf](#), "[Inventory](#)," [Toe Good Poetry](#), collected in [The Spectral Wilderness](#), [The Kent State University Press](#)

## Existential Kink

I'm not sure what the trick to it is. One minute I'm telling jokes—"existential word problems"—and the next I'm looking up actuarial tables for poem research and really, truly freaking myself out. When I don't know what to do, I sit on a child's green stool in the kitchen and drink half a glass of wine because that's a funny image I enjoy and the witch newsletter I get says to lean into your misery for fifteen minutes a day, and in that way to trick your shadow into integrating. This witch lives in Pittsburgh and has a lot of ideas. I write a friend to tell him I'm freaking myself out, and he says to breathe. My son comes home crying in his Batman face paint and doesn't want to tell me why, saying, "I must have an audiobook. It's the only thing that will satisfy," the saddest miniature Edwardian superhero you ever saw. My whole life has been one long creative exercise a Life Prompt, if you will. Try it. Go from something kind of funny to something kind of sad and back again. Repeat. Keep repeating. You have no choice.

*Joanna Penn Cooper*  
273

---

<sup>273</sup> Joanna Penn Cooper, "[Existential Kink](#)," collected in [When We Were Fearsome](#), [Ethel](#)

## Leviathan

Leviathan many tentacles  
Leviathan cover choke with bluff  
Leviathan talk out it mouthside  
Leviathan make every trigger  
Leviathan up to it in blood  
Leviathan General Manynames  
Leviathan President Hundredflags  
Leviathan keep the meetplace empty  
Leviathan got many lookout  
Leviathan backstroke in swag  
Leviathan swallow up what due you  
Leviathan suck up it own  
Leviathan a graveyard covert  
Leviathan deep-six it friendlies  
Leviathan leave hair and bone  
Leviathan a scrannel papa  
Leviathan buy you wholesale cheap  
Leviathan paper and green numbers  
Leviathan hundred million footed  
Leviathan say what shit you eat  
Leviathan give you it pink story  
Leviathan hide it rack roadshow  
Leviathan fill the Friday packets  
Leviathan real-real clean-fingered  
Leviathan deal out ears and toes

\*\*\*

Leviathan ubiquitous  
Leviathan touch every place  
Leviathan hand on the channel panel  
Leviathan 24-7  
Leviathan hide it barrel face  
Leviathan scepter make you jabber  
Leviathan ducats make you sing  
Leviathan hiss pretty fiction  
Leviathan bribe you with cadavers  
Leviathan jerk the puppet string  
Leviathan Captain of Contusion  
Leviathan Electrode Chief  
Leviathan kick and leave no footprints  
Leviathan debride it loyals  
Leviathan break legs and teeth  
Leviathan push and say you jump  
Leviathan hang and leave you note  
Leviathan skiver storytellers  
Leviathan stitch the asker mouth up  
Leviathan make you dig you hole



Leviathan scatter what you gather  
Leviathan burn what you make grow  
Leviathan the rabble smelter  
Leviathan the marrow foundry  
Leviathan Suzerain of Smoke

\*\*\*

Leviathan the bullet bulwark  
Leviathan squat on death silos  
Leviathan unstint the onslaught  
Leviathan give no benison  
Leviathan wear the Führer clothes  
Leviathan deal poppies and coca  
Leviathan buy guns for sale  
Leviathan blur the money faces  
Leviathan the laundry expert  
Leviathan strafe it flimflam trail  
Leviathan Dean of Wooden Legs  
Leviathan the Orphan King  
Leviathan engineer of craters  
Leviathan the soldier vendor  
Leviathan lie you what it bring  
Leviathan ventriloquist  
Leviathan prestidigitate  
Leviathan make assemblies rackets  
Leviathan slit question committees  
Leviathan interrogate  
Leviathan the Ribcage Regent  
Leviathan the Ashes Lord  
Leviathan Chancellor of the Boneyard  
Leviathan make the folk spit bitter  
Leviathan Conquistador

*Suzanne Gardinier*

274

---

<sup>274</sup> [Suzanne Gardinier](#), "[Leviathan](#)," collected in [The New World](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

It Doesn't Matter Who You Are or What You Do, Something in this World Will Make a Fool of You

Mr. Bolton, the girls' health teacher, gave us some advice about what to do  
when we got into an inevitable argument with our future

husbands. *Lift up your shirts, girls,*  
*and flash him your boobs.* Apparently, that was the tactic

of Mrs. Bolton,  
my geometry teacher, who, earlier that year, had interrupted a lesson on triangles

to turn on the news. We watched the planes crash  
again and again on a loop, and I couldn't help

but want to calculate the surface area of all that steel and glass  
before it crumbled. Fall was sex and spring was physical

education, and some of the girls told Bolton  
they were on their periods

every day, every single one, so they wouldn't have to  
do laps around the track. But I did them always, often

alone, while the others watched from the bleachers,  
braiding each other's hair or doing homework. I didn't want

him to know when it was or wasn't. I didn't want him to know anything  
about my body, but he measured our waists

and weighed us and mock-whispered a secret—  
*Bench presses will make your breasts more firm.*

He made us read *Song of Solomon* to learn  
about *intercourse*, and stuck yellow happy faces to our chests

when we played an extra rough game of dodge  
ball. He loved his whistle, and stroked it like a pet hermit crab. I refused to undress

in the locker room in front  
of the other girls, even though someone called me

a prude, and I averted my eyes whenever a girl lifted her  
t-shirt above her head or slipped her Umbros. I was afraid

of what I might find there,  
especially desire. And so I shimmied into my skirt

and buttoned my oxford as slowly as I possibly could,  
listening to the others

laugh in their single voice  
from inside the locked stall I chose.

*Emilia Phillips*  
275

---

<sup>275</sup> [Emilia Phillips](#), "[It Doesn't Matter Who You Are or What You Do, Something in this World Will Make a Fool of You](#)," *The Rumpus*

## Truth

I'm allergic to hair dye and silver. Of the worlds,  
I love the Aztecs' most of all, the way they lit fires  
in the gouged chests of men to keep the world spinning.  
I've seen women eat cotton balls so they wouldn't eat bread.  
I will never be as beautiful as the night I danced in a garage,  
anorexic, decked in black boots, black sweater, black jeans,  
hip-hop music and a girl I didn't know pulling my hips  
to hers. Hunger is hunger. I got drunk one night  
and argued with the Pacific. I was twenty. I broke  
into the bodies of men like a cartoon burglar. I wasn't twenty.  
In the winter of those years I kept Christmas lights  
strung around my bed and argued with the Italian landlady  
who lived downstairs about turning the heat off,  
and every night I wanted to drink but didn't.

*Hala Alyan*  
276

---

<sup>276</sup> [Hala Alyan](#), "[Truth](#)," [diode](#), collected in [The Twenty-Ninth Year](#), [Mariner Books](#)

## Landscape with Dialectical Materialism and Milk

All day I thought about disgust,  
meditating on pus, boils, infidelity,  
the idea of saliva, and words like *orifice*,  
until the cold milky coffee in my cup  
tasted like blood  
and my toast and raspberry jam  
congealed into a small child's body left  
outside in humid summer air  
to protect others of the house  
from fever. Instead of chopping  
down pine trees to make beds,  
we chopped them down for coffins,  
the forests sleeping under ground,  
and beneath a noon sun, we fed curdled milk to the hungry dogs.  
Look how their grey fur gleams in the light  
and the wet spectrum pierces the slaving jowls.  
How will you answer the desert's inexhaustible question?

*Landon Godfrey*  
277

---

<sup>277</sup> [Landon Godfrey](#), "[Landscape with Dialectical Materialism and Milk](#)," collected in [Second-Skin Rhinestone-Spangled Nude Soufflé Chiffon Gown](#), Cider Press

## The Panic of Birds

The moon is sick  
Of pulling at the river, and the river  
Fed up with swallowing the rain,  
So, in my lukewarm coffee, in the bathroom  
Mirror, there's a restlessness  
As black as a raven  
Landing heavily on the quiet lines of this house.  
Again, the sun takes cover  
And the morning is dead  
Tired of itself, already, it's pelting and windy  
As I lean into the pane  
That proves this world is a cold smooth place.

Wind against window—let the words fight it out—  
As I try to remember: What is it  
That's so late in coming? What was it  
I understood so well last night, so well it kissed me.  
Sweetly, on the forehead?

Wind against window and my late flowering brain,  
Heavy, gone to seed. Pacing  
From room to room and in each window  
A different version of a framed woman  
Unable to rest, set against a sky  
Full of beating wings and abandoned  
Directions. Her five chambered heart  
Filling with the panic of birds, asking: What?  
What if not this?

*Olena Kalytiak Davis*  
278

---

<sup>278</sup> [Olena Kalytiak Davis](#), "[The Panic of Birds](#)," collected in [The Poem She Didn't Write and Other Poems](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin

I cut myself on some glass in the water.  
I was out driving around the stars.  
I was chopping wood out back.  
I was at the abattoir grabbing a snack.  
I was grabbing my phone in the truck.  
I was smoking below the boat deck.  
I was practicing electric guitar.  
I was listening to aspiring laughter.  
I was on the toilet with a magazine.  
I was home awaiting a limousine.  
I was bargaining with the mortician.  
I was laying a great foundation.  
I was practicing trumpet while drowning.  
I was grinding my hooves to nails.

*Terrance Hayes*  
279

---

<sup>279</sup> Terrance Hayes, "[American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin \(I cut myself on some glass\)](#)," collected in [American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin](#), Penguin Books

Day 12

Any cup of water  
can become an ocean.

The ocean can be filled with girls  
in white dresses  
paid to act as clouds or ghosts,  
whichever you find most arousing.

If you have never believed in ghosts,  
start now. They are the best  
at braiding wet hair and showing you  
that lopsided breasts are normal.

We are so lonely that we bite  
at our elbows hoping a tear in the body  
will become a door to a room  
filled with everyone we've loved.

We think the room will smell  
like butter and wool, but it will smell  
like spit and blood. It will be full  
of boarded up windows,  
amnesia, infection.

It is summer, but cold.  
I confuse my blue lips  
with death.

When the teapot on the stove starts to whistle  
like a siren, I think *This is it*.

I imagine my body being taken away  
by a violent rising ocean and wish  
I had found a man who would have strangled me  
with the ocean's same wet hands.

With minutes until disaster,  
what do you gather? How quickly  
can you navigate your own useless fear?



I remember what I learned  
as a Girl Scout, how to survive  
in the dark world alone:  
pour water out of a pot,  
create a current  
with your nervous seizure,  
do the dead man float  
to make sure you are spared.

*Meghan Privitello*  
280

---

<sup>280</sup> [Meghan Privitello](#), "[Day 12](#)," collected in [Notes on the End of the World](#), Black Lawrence Press

(Litmus)

You think you can hold a piece of pH paper up to a person and tell if a taste of him will burn the tongue? Dilute your fear. A dye extracted from lichen: blue turns red in the presence of an acid; red turns blue in the presence of an alkali. Boys of the border states, you seem to forget we're south of the Mason-Dixon in a swamp that would have seceded if Lincoln hadn't held it under martial law. Draw a sip of the sample into the paper and see. No, I don't have a perm. What the hell is wrong with you, Jordan—we don't go around touching people's hair like it's a petting zoo. I've dined with drummers against my better judgment. I've tried to titrate this poison one drop at a time. I've tested eighty drams of antidote. We need a deluge. Nobody believes me, but Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana, and Korey Wise, held tonight in the 20th precinct in Manhattan, are innocent. We need a water-soluble mixture. We need the rate of forward reaction to exceed the rate of reverse reaction. In a state of equilibrium, reactants and products come to rest in concentrations that have no further tendency to change. No further tendency to change with time. Equilibrium is not peace.

*B.K. Fischer*

281

---

<sup>281</sup> [B.K. Fischer](#), "[\(Litmus\)](#)," collected in [Radioapocrypha](#), [Ohio State University Press](#)

## Self-Portrait as Milk Hare in Active Shooter Alert

We plan our escape from our basement classroom.  
My students share memories of school shooter drills.  
I share what police advise—run. Trees blush and undress,  
but the scratching outside our window is not the dead

we fear to be. Today in the news I read rediscovered stories  
collected by Irish schoolchildren of household medicine  
and hags who became rabbits to lap milk from cows, though  
I don't know why a witch would need to, why she couldn't say

*I'm a mother like you*, hold her own cream in her cupped palm  
for the cow's rough tongue, and ask for the kindness returned.  
The moon occults the stars in Taurus, and my son performs  
his sadness over an otter that died at the zoo. He blinks slow

and sniffles back octaves of salt. I don't know where he learned  
to do this, to be an understudy to the keening of trees planted  
too close to houses. I read him *Runaway Bunny* and say I would  
chase him though all his transformations—be the gardener

to his crocus, the wind to his sailing ship, the tightrope walker  
when he learns the trapeze so we can both be creatures of air.  
One student says we can use him as a stool to climb from  
the window well to the lawn. I am glad someone wants to die

for the rest of us. I don't want to give my son a hero  
for a mother. I want to go home to him. I want him to lose me  
after years of hugs, arguments, and medically acceptable suffering,  
and I would take this student's offering to leap from his back,

like the milk-hare a farmer shot, and then went to confront  
his neighbor for stealing, only to find her in bed, human again,  
holding her bleeding head. The farmer warned her thirsty tongue  
though he knew, as everyone did, that bullets won't kill witches.

I will not die for these students. Or kill for them. I would draw  
on whiskers and pull myself from this concrete burrow, dodge  
cracks in the air, aim for the gentle corrections of trees' shadows.  
My body small enough for hiding. My ears so large they can hear

my name in my son's prayer—red as the fear that will keep me  
on earth, black as blood in moonlight, in the fur that twitches back  
to skin again, my son's arms safely around my neck, his milkteeth  
and bubblegum cheeks breathing, breathing, oh, still alive.

Traci Brimhall

282

---

<sup>282</sup> Traci Brimhall, "[Self-Portrait as Milk Hare in Active Shooter Alert](#)," [Crazyhorse](#)

## Giving It Back

An abandoned child by the gas pumps who said nothing,  
a child who stared down the highway into the sun.

My life, which I have to give back.

*Didn't see who left her*, the station owner told the very young cop

while they walked her into the convenience store  
and she ran her fingers over the brilliant candy rows.

My life, which I'm supposed to give back.

The cop unfolded his cell phone and  
*What kind of people would just drive off like that?* the station owner said.

Such a pretty child, such a breath—  
and my life, which I will have to give back,

which I'm supposed to return to You—

+

Everybody gives it back, Augustus blue-lipped in bed,  
an unusual chill that summer, endless light rain,

or the hard winter of Aachen and Charlemagne at his window  
admiring the snow, he'd felt so good that morning,

but now the fever returned.

Julian speared by his troops in the blinding sun.  
Strychnine-veined, sweat-addled in his tent, Alexander among Chaldeans—

I could have given mine back under the fluorescent lights  
where I came to buy cigarettes,

where that little blond-haired girl  
has been growing wings this entire poem—

+

My father gave it back in Cleveland while snow  
buried every car beneath the hospital window.

I watched the nurses grow winged,  
watched them hover whitely above his body.

We must return what we have taken,  
we must give back what we received,

and when he exhaled at last—  
like an animal, low and guttural—

the nurses fluttered at the window,  
they took his breath into the snow.

Thus, even my father returned what had been lent him—

and that little girl grows more beautiful  
as she recedes into memory—

how they set her on the counter,  
and she never said a word.

How I stood beside the magazine rack, five dollars in my hand,  
and watched her flex those blinding wings,

how an hour later they would find the note in her pocket,

and would learn the way her father gave his life back  
two miles up the road by the lumberyard,

site of personal despair, site of his return.

That little girl rose quietly into the air,  
and her wings obscured the ceiling, they canceled out the lights.

I must give it back, I must return it to You.  
I cannot hold onto this life forever.

*Kevin Prufer*  
283

---

<sup>283</sup> [Kevin Prufer](#), “[Giving It Back](#),” [AGNI](#), collected in [How He Loved Them](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Cousin Josh on Doomsday

*Fargo, North Dakota*

It don't matter what you believe. Could be a chunk  
of the sun wipin out the grid just as likely  
as the Lord Himself snuffin us out one by one  
like a bunch of candlewicks. Could be a oil shortage.  
Or the souls of the dead come back to reckon.  
My buddy Critter figures it'll be the Lake of Fire—  
all the flesh dripping off our dicks while we drown  
at the same time over and over forever.  
But most folks won't tell you what they believe.  
My ma, she never broke silence on the issue.  
My old man, he says I'm crazy. Says I'm gonna drink  
myself to death before anything else gets the chance.  
Me, I got my chips pushed in for somethin natural.  
A meteor maybe. Or a polar flip, But like I said:  
when you're throwin pies, it don't matter much what the flavor is.  
It's more folks thinkin like me than you'd think.  
And like most of us, I got a bug-in plan for stayin put,  
but I also got a bug-out plan for gettin gone.  
Not that I'm gonna tell you where I'm goin.  
It's high in the mountains—I'll say that much—  
but that's all the scat this cat's gonna leave in the sand  
for you to track by. Ah, who am I kiddin?  
I'll be stuck in this town till God sucks  
his last breath. Let me ask you somethin:  
You think I'm crazy to have a hundred pounds of Spam  
buried in caches? You think I'm crazy to have Critter  
shoot me with a .22 so I know what it feels like  
to get hit in a bulletproof vest? Well, you know what?  
I hope I am crazy. I hope I'm the craziest son of a bitch  
you ever met.

*Anders Carlson-Wee*

284

---

<sup>284</sup> [Anders Carlson-Wee](#), "[Cousin Josh on Doomsday](#)," [New Ohio Review](#), collected in [The Low Passions](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## Self-Portrait with a Schlitz, a Pickup, and the Snake River

To be honest, I did it for a girl. And wouldn't you  
choke down bad beers with the varsity high school  
running back and the all-star wideout for one glimpse  
of a thigh, a blond braid, a smile unmercifully cast  
from the cab of a Ford pickup truck? The year  
was perfect from the first, and I was happy  
to linger in the tall grasses along the banks  
while the saviors of Ontario, Oregon, toasted each other  
for brave fights and even braver indiscretions.

We were plunging headlong into autumn  
and loving our fall. We were bastards and we were  
pissed. In love with ourselves and in love  
with the long hormonal surge, sharp as a clarion call.  
I was full of average tragedies: the fouled test,  
the one betrayal at homecoming. Nothing  
went better than planned. Skinny, quite linear,  
I rocked back on my heel, tipping the can  
for the last ounce of elemental prowess.

The girl in the truck clicked in disapproval  
at the boys reduced to tree-stumps, their shoulders  
pressed against each other as they slept off  
the case. Cursing her luck she killed the engine  
and handed me the keys. Both of us knew  
the dangers of drunken boys. So I took her home,  
the one sober boy, smelling faintly of beer and the river,  
slightly metallic like the firing of a gun.  
And we knew with the surety of a hand on a belt

there'd be hell to pay in the morning.  
The steam from the Ore-Ida factory stunk up August.  
From the dash, I could see lippy clouds fold and unfold,  
making the whole valley smell of tilled earth. The Snake  
was low and fumes dangled from months of no rain.  
The pickup was not mine and neither was the girl.  
Neither was the time, which swung around the curve  
of the steering wheel. The day-warmed asphalt curled beneath  
the Ford's near-bald tires and I could feel

the girl crying. Her head back and off to one side,  
the stars, muddy in the swath of factory steam, I felt  
something like joy, something like running in sleep  
on that silent drive. What was there to say  
to her? To the drunken football captains?  
To the town I'd leave because of my minor loves?  
Leave it to youth to make joy out of nothing.  
The river, hard at work, kept pace with the truck.

It was the only thing keeping pace.

*Oliver de la Paz*  
285

---

<sup>285</sup> [Oliver de la Paz](#), "[Self-Portrait with a Schlitz, a Pickup, and the Snake River](#)," [River Styx](#), collected in [Requiem for the Orchard](#), [The University of Akron Press](#)



Ars Poetica as Corporation and Canary

Now I see the thin body of glass,  
the corpus for what it is,

a breathing corpse—as the moon  
confesses light

from the sun, but can never truly  
have it. I am

a corporation, a for-profit stock one.  
A stout fist on a table.

I want to generate something but  
I don't want

to spend anything. I have read,  
understood, and disagree

with everything. But I am authorized  
to execute on nothing.

I have received a copy of this  
agreement in the rain.

The rain is always looking for a way  
into my mouth.

My body holds pushpins. This one is  
yellow. This one red.

They tack memorandums to my  
skin. That cover my sores.

That cover the canaries that lie  
beneath, little birds that

fly into the window, fly farther and  
fluster, that fly back into

the window. The window clarifies.  
The building bunts

the birds. The building envelopes  
the birds.

The window loves me. I love the  
building. I loathe the building.

The building is a headquarters that holds  
me, that I return to, that

I report to. And I can't see myself  
on the glass until it's too late.

*Victoria Chang*  
286

---

<sup>286</sup> [Victoria Chang](#), "[Ars Poetica as Corporation and Canary](#)," collected in [Salvinia Molesta](#), [University of Georgia Press](#)

Here Follows an Account of the Nature of Birds

Here Follows an Account of the Nature of Fish.  
Here follows a description of an unknown town.  
Here follows the phoenix-flight from human eyes.  
Here follows the friendship fish and langouste.  
All the marvels of erotic danger follow here.  
Here follows the phone number of a dead person.  
Here follows a game based on perfect information.  
Five minutes have passed since I wrote this line.  
I mistook my baby's cry for the radiator hiss.  
Here follows the address of a place to buy cocaine.  
Big sadness come your way, sunrise, skyline.  
Let's do it some new way next time we try.  
Do you have anything you can put inside me?  
Here Follows an Account of the Nature of Birds.

*Dan Chiasson*  
287

---

<sup>287</sup> [Dan Chiasson](#), "[Here Follows an Account of the Nature of Birds](#)," *The Paris Review*, collected in *Where's the Moon, There's the Moon*, Alfred A. Knopf

Portrait of My Father as John Clare: "Skunk's Nest"

Well, in my many walks, I rarely found  
a place less likely for a skunk to make  
its nest—or bed—or home—than a dumpster  
in the parking lot of the Westport cab stand,  
where on so many nights I'd tossed the news.  
Now little Smiley—it's what I've named him—  
keeps warm among those tattered inky pages,  
styrofoam cups, shredded lottery tickets,  
diapers, disposable cell phones. Slept there  
myself one night, or should say, tried to sleep.  
In the woods, I'd found my car burned: some kids  
probably, bored or stoned, and so I salvaged  
what I could, couple handfuls of nickels  
and dimes, the tire iron, a few pine cones  
I could now use like charcoal, to sketch  
fairer scenes than this. And as the snow  
came down slow and pond'rous  
I traversed paths named and unnamed and,  
when nearly blind, stumbled upon the dumpster.  
Quiet. So quiet and dark. Like being in a skull  
inside a skull. Like that. Now, listen: Smiley  
has a nose like a grape. The purple kind. And I know  
that means he will not last the night. I feed him  
McDonald's burgers but he only eats the bread.  
I once ate grass along an old ditch road,  
and it tasted like dough. Now when I eat bread,  
I tasted fields, sunlight. The dog I used to chase  
and let chase me was named Smiley. When bit  
by a 'possum Ma put him down. He made  
one noise. She said go out and find the wretched  
animal and kill it with the same clam rake  
she used on Smiley. I searched for it two days  
and two nights, or pretended to. Finally found  
a raccoon dead from cold at the edge of the road,  
tied it inside a plastic bag. Ma said damn  
me for bringing it inside the house, wasn't her  
who taught me to be so stupid, go bury  
the thing outside. I carried the raccoon down  
the old dump road and kept walking. Hours  
later, found myself at the edge of the marsh,  
at the factory where they make helicopter wings—  
or talons—or blades. In the sky, nothing  
but a few gulls, a robin. I threw the animal  
in a dumpster. The noise it makes? A church bell,  
if you are hidden inside the bell, praying.

*Justin Bigos*

---

<sup>288</sup> [Justin Bigos](#), "[Portrait of My Father as John Clare: 'Skunk's Nest,'](#)" [North Dakota Quarterly](#), collected in [Mad River](#), [Gold Wake Press](#)

Because the Moon Is a Cliché & Not Exactly Steadfast

Moon, hearts, stars, flowers.

All of the above. And by above I mean where the stars are pinned, winking as they burn.

Because I'm not allowed to talk to the moon anymore.

Because the moon has amnesia. A sideways smile that always becomes a blind eye.

The moon is a recurring mistake, history's dumb rotation.

If you're going to touch me that way, I want you to look at me.

If you're going to touch me. Which we've agreed will never happen.

But let's say I could address you. Let's say a rag-rich page lay before me, blank and white  
as your deckled skin, and I'm the one in the morning coat, a velvet collar for my chin  
to brush against, consumptive quill in my grip, blood spot on my handkerchief.

What would I say to your vacant expanse? Something like, *Moon, this time, take me with you  
when you go. Or, Moon, are you really that cold?*

Isn't heartache sweet? It tastes of everything you ever wanted. The rain-soaked lilacs

I pressed my face into as a child, knowing, even then, something I needed was there,  
unreachable.

If you're going to touch me, I want you to drink the water from those lilacs.

Amy Dryansky  
289

---

<sup>289</sup> Amy Dryansky, "[Because the Moon Is a Cliché & Not Exactly Steadfast](#)," [Waxwing](#)

## Red Wreck Watches PBS

Red Wreck is a wreck. She has been for many years, unnoticed since early girlhood when she was a little throb and pulse no bigger than a Chihuahua's bulbous eye. Alone, she watches daytime talk shows featuring bad kids who are brought out on stage to be put in their place by a huge man in camouflage who can take them away to a camp where they will lie on their bellies holding golf balls in their mouths for being disrespectful. These men have nothing on Red Wreck's father, who so terrified her that she would take down the shelves from inside a cabinet to make herself a secret hiding hole to ride out his tantrums. Once he was winded, heavy, exhausted breaths shuddering the house, she would emerge to get him a nice cold glass of milk that he would drink in one long gulp before collapsing into his chair to stare at her. Blood now a rapid rush. Red Wreck changes channels, settling on PBS. She likes the ancient history shows the best, calls her vagina, "The Pharaoh's Tomb," fondly and without irony. Today there is a documentary about the Nazca Lines. On the reddish floor of the Peruvian Desert ancient geoglyphs of birds, animals, insects, and not-quite-human figures stretch for almost miles. Red Wreck's father did a lot of drugs. From boyhood up he smoked marijuana, and before prescription pills were a popular high, he raided the medicine cabinets and bedside tables of his rickety aunts and cousins and the decrepit woman on the street of no blood relation, who everyone called Granny. From ten onward, there is not a photograph of him where he doesn't look freshly concussed. The documentary is full of theories: alien technology, early hot air balloons, exquisite mathematicians. Watching, Red Wreck thinks of distance functioning like height. Look back, she instructs. How much more do you see now? How has your understanding changed? With the distance of years, do the events of your life fall into patterns? From these patterns, can you glean understanding? She asks herself, "Of what?" and can imagine only two possible answers: everything—or—nothing. She tests each, but finds neither satisfactory.

*Jenny Irish*  
290

---

<sup>290</sup> Jenny Irish, "[Red Wreck Watches PBS](#)," collected in [Common Ancestor](#), Black [Lawrence Press](#)

## Music History

I can still see Debbie Harry leaning over a stone wall  
in a city I knew was Paris or Rome or anywhere  
away from that place in the hills I was sewn to:  
“The Tide Is High” was the first record  
I bought with my own money,  
my allowance stashed in a can beneath the bed  
where my father used to store his rifles.

My music collection grew like a white lie,  
the splashy covers sliding off shiny discs  
that were larger versions of buttons  
I could never fasten.

I stacked pennies on the arm to keep the record  
from skipping while I posed like the Go-Go’s  
on their water skis: hairbrush a microphone in hand,  
one foot on a pillow, singing: *vacation, had to get away*.

Or nobody home and music loud enough to hear  
in the bathroom, I was the “King of Pain”  
knowing more than anyone what Sting meant  
because I too was inside the rain of my shower  
with the circling world *running round my brain*.

Tonight I could go on like this,  
singing fragments of tunes, a kind of permission  
for a way to be behind the wooden door of my room.

But then I’d have to tell how memory plays those records:  
the day Steven Combs called me faggot on the bus,  
and I smuggled dad’s pistol to school to kill him,  
the day my mother caught me wearing  
her lipstick and wouldn’t speak to me for weeks,  
the time Jason told his mom that I made him  
take his pants down and lie on the ground beside me.

I’d rather stay here in the spotlight,  
in an empty house, with a hairbrush and a box of music,  
years before the pennies skipped off,  
the records were scratched and lost, and the world  
in that room stopped spinning.

Aaron Smith  
291

---

<sup>291</sup> Aaron Smith, “[Music History](#),” collected in [Blue on Blue Ground](#), University of Pittsburgh Press



## The Tooth Fairy

They brushed a quarter with glue  
and glitter, slipped in on bare  
feet, and without waking me  
painted rows of delicate gold  
footprints on my sheets with a love  
so quiet, I still can't hear it.

My mother must have been  
a beauty then, sitting  
at the kitchen table with him,  
a warm breeze lifting her  
embroidered curtains, waiting  
for me to fall asleep.

It's harder to believe  
the years that followed, the palms  
curled into fists, a floor  
of broken dishes, her chainsmoking  
through long silences, him  
punching holes in his walls.

I can still remember her print  
dresses, his checkered Taxi, the day  
I found her in the closet  
with a paring knife, the night  
he kicked my sister in the ribs.

He lives alone in Oregon now, dying  
of a rare bone disease.  
His face stippled gray, his ankles  
clotted beneath wool socks.

She's a nurse on the graveyard shift,  
comes home mornings and calls me,  
drinks her dark beer and goes to bed.

And I still wonder how they did it, slipped  
that quarter under my pillow, made those  
perfect footprints...

Whenever I visit her, I ask again.  
"I don't know," she says, rocking, closing  
her eyes. "We were as surprised as you."

*Dorianne Laux*  
292

---

<sup>292</sup> [Dorianne Laux](#), "[The Tooth Fairy](#)," collected in [Awake](#), [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

## Premillennial Tristesse

Nixon is slipping  
in and out of consciousness. My father  
sputtering in Canada, forty years  
after the blacklist—

We hear there is this love that moves  
the world, the sun and stars,

that makes the apple on the Kazakh bough  
fall for a reason. *My age, my beast,*  
*my fingered rosary of disbelief....*

It seems that something red as love  
is bleeding through the centuries,

that a reservoir of silky human grease  
is oiling those celestial machines.  
I don't want to see the zeroes turn

as on a clock about to wake us  
from a murderous dream, confetti falling

helplessly into the fissured past.  
I don't want them to unload the gurney  
from the festooned ambulance:

the revelers in all their unforgiving  
fury, the new patient in her bandages.

*Rachel Loden*  
293

---

<sup>293</sup> Rachel Loden, "[Premillennial Tristesse](#)," collected in [The Last Campaign](#), Slapering Hol Press

## Of the Poet's Youth

When the man behind the counter said, "You pay  
by the orifice," what could we do but purchase them all?

Ah, Sandy, you were clearly the deluxe doll, modish and pert  
in your plastic nurse whites, official hostess to our halcyon days,

where you bobbed in the doorway of our *dishabille* apartment,  
a block downwind from the stockyards. Holding court on

the corroded balcony, K. and I passed hash brownies, collecting  
change for the building's monthly pool to predict which balcony

would fall off next. That's when K. was fucking M. and M. was  
fucking J., and even B. and I threw down once on the glass-speckled

lawn, adrift in the headlights of his El Camino. Those were immortal  
times, Sandy! Coke wasn't addictive yet, condoms prevented herpes

and men were only a form of practice for the Russian novel  
we foolishly hoped our lives would become. Now it's a Friday night,

sixteen years from there. Don't the best characters know better  
than to live too long? My estranged husband house-sits for a spoiled

cockatoo while saving to buy his own place. My lover's gone back  
to his gin and the farm-team fiancée he keeps in New York.

What else to do but read Frank O'Hara to my tired three-year-old?  
When I put him to bed, he mutters "more sorry" as he turns into sleep.

Tonight, I find you in a box I once marked "The Past." Well,  
therapy's good for some things, Sandy, but who'd want to forgive

a girl like that? Frank says *Destroy yourself if you don't know!*  
Deflated, you're simply the smile that surrounds a hole.

I don't know anything.

Erin Belieu  
294

---

<sup>294</sup> Erin Belieu, "Of the Poet's Youth," *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, collected in *Black Box*, Copper Canyon Press

## Poem Made of East Sides

I trace the stitching of clouds in the blue sheet of sky stretching above the long slab of our lives, this autopsy I start with words, toe tagging the people we were.

Zip guns and the zigzag clothesline across the East Side sky. Your grandfather riding his bike, humming in Polish, Kishka and a loaf of bread in a bag. Before and after the wars, we are always riding our bikes in the rain.

The only light we have in our lives is the light from broken glass.

Nothing that is whole is art.

That woman I passed waiting in the rain, in her Wendy's uniform, sitting on an overturned shopping cart someone had wheeled from the Plaza, tired of standing one time too many waiting for the bus.

Scoring in the Safeway parking lot.

The tight noose along the arm, the pockmarked wrists. Michele, you haunt me lately,

30 years ago, in an East Side three flight tenement (we used to walk up three flights of outside stairs to get to your room, to get to how many rooms? We didn't question anything back then.)

"I think of my mother, the chemo, the endless tests, her packed arm."

The difference is when I see a hypodermic I don't see my childhood

doctor, the visit, the memory of first shots, I see my dead.

I walked by a doorway in Cleveland Heights, an addict or runaway or both, a girl with a nose-ring, the wisp of her thick eyebrows, her dirty dreadlocked white-girl hair, with the face of someone

I used to hold, a name I uttered softly as the rain falling on both our heads.

The shine of a stranger's hand as she reaches towards me.

The bruises on our elbows and shins. We are two lanterns burning our own inexhaustible oils.

We are the outstretched autobiography of our razored limbs.

*Sean Thomas Dougherty*  
295

---

<sup>295</sup> Sean Thomas Dougherty, "Poem Made of East Sides," *Matter*, collected in *The Second O of Sorrow*, BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Sidewalk

You are probably alive  
somewhere in the world,  
and I don't know how I feel  
about that. You're tightening  
the screws of a run-down swing set  
in an apartment complex in Hollywood  
and winking at the girls  
who are waiting on the grass for you  
to finish: girls with Lisa Frank notebooks  
in their backpacks and macaroni and cheese  
in their teeth, girls who  
don't have breasts yet,  
girls with mothers  
who fishtailed their hair  
before school that morning and fathers  
who won't let them see  
PG-13 films. Or maybe  
you're eating a peanut butter sandwich  
in a prison cell, peeling the crust  
like a bitter store clerk  
tearing the dress off a mannequin.  
You're buying extra-small  
thongs at Victoria's Secret. You're sinking  
your nails into the skin of a peach.  
You're licking your fingers. I think  
I need to stop thinking. I think this sidewalk  
is made of the same material as tombstones.  
I think that if you ever  
met the moon, you would  
grab her by the throat.

*Ruth Madievsky*  
296

---

<sup>296</sup> [Ruth Madievsky](#), "[Sidewalk](#)," [The Paris-American](#), collected in [Emergency Brake](#), [Tavern Books](#)

## All My Darlings

I'd even now been thinking of you very deeply. I'd seen a Corvair  
rusting on a Tuesday and recalled that summer we spent driving.  
I noticed a drawbridge drawn tall and remembered  
you drinking a Pete's Wicked arguing the relative merits  
of the founding fathers. How you lauded Alexander Hamilton.  
How your eyes accounted. Even now the drunk-seeming sway  
of birches evokes you collecting leaves to press between  
pages of a dictionary, a you so vaguely you in a top hat  
and the sleek sheen of vinyl boots. Now that gloomy metal cross  
atop every steeple in town makes me think of you  
thinking of the birds as crossing through crosshairs.  
You were a woman of so elegant a candor. You were a man  
of such good measure. Blue was the light of your hi-fi display.  
Green, the distortion of your tv screen. Soft, the dilly-dally  
of your hairdo. I contain you now the way the ringing ear retains  
the thunderclap. Do you still eat three cuts of meat on marble rye?  
Do you still get rowdy on Arbor Day and tear down the corridor  
scattering your dossier all over so no-one can know you  
or tell you apart? Even now,  
all the ratty hipsters become you, and all the blonde diplomats  
become you, a you with domestic accoutrements, a you with parcels  
on the Elevated gliding through a vapid fog. You who merengue  
without me, who see me when I don't see you among the dithering  
crowd on the parade ground in your new pair of shoes.

*Jaswinder Bolina*  
297

---

<sup>297</sup> [Jaswinder Bolina](#), "[All My Darlings](#)," [Jet Fuel Review](#), collected in [Phantom Camera](#), [New Issues Press](#)

## Paradise for Strangers

They were never supposed to talk  
to each other, but now they've gathered  
together in a brightly lit office building,  
or hotel, downtown, in an icy metropolis,

which they traveled to by moonbeam,  
though none of them remembers this.  
Warily, some of the strangers begin  
gazing at their neighbors' knees

or breasts, their wedding rings  
or lack of them, and now they start  
elbowing for space  
as they settle into metal chairs

in the auditorium, cold, bannered  
with white crepe-paper signs of welcome,  
each of them afraid of some  
mandatory confession-session, like

AA, and introduction. They hold  
their vague faces  
in their hands, dreaming  
through the tedium of convocation, of diamonds

falling off from stars, of white palaces,  
angels with hideous swords  
and fresh smiles; but no one

can explain their dreams to them,  
which is the only world they have  
in common. So they brush

against each other, apologizing for being  
and for being alone  
together, and for god knows how long.

*Gregory Lawless*  
298

---

<sup>298</sup> [Gregory Lawless](#), "[Paradise for Strangers](#)," collected in [/ Thought I Was New Here](#), [BlazeVOX Books](#)

Dear Lonely Animal,

Sometimes I could just  
burst into tears. I found some friends,  
but they don't understand

I just don't care about baseball  
and cupcake bakes and  
beer pong. And I don't "hang out."

I don't like hanging out.  
And I don't like bowling.  
Sometimes I get in these moods, Animal,

and I become intolerable even to myself.  
But I become very anxious  
about my brain cells.

I feel that I need  
all the brain cells I have.  
Because I need to remember all the things

I saw and heard, and I need to remember  
all the things I memorized.  
And mostly all the people, especially

the people whom I miss the most.  
I need to remember their voices and faces,  
their real faces talking and laughing and not

some face from a photograph of them.  
It's like all the real faces, when they're  
gone for a while, they always

tend toward those photo faces and then  
they become the photo faces and then I know  
I've forgotten. And I could just bury myself

in the ground! I could just burst  
into a million tears, sharp tears  
like daggers that turn back on my body

and stab, stab, stab—tiny piercings  
like tiny mouths biting all at once.  
Like that Canadian goose somebody found

sitting by the side of the road, just  
sitting there. Somebody lifted up  
that huge bird and brought it in to us



at the Bird Rescue. The goose didn't  
so much as honk or give even the slightest  
whisper of a honk. It didn't

flap its wings or snap at anybody with its beak.  
It looked tired, Lonely Animal.  
Very tired. My aunt extended

one of the goose's wings to see  
if the wing was broken  
and there, under the wing, in the dense

body of the bird, was an injury  
where some car or other  
had hit it and driven away.

And in the injury there were  
scores of maggots, teeming there,  
boring into its soft body, devouring it

alive, mouthful by mouthful  
with their tiny, smacking  
maggot lips. You know that sound

maggots make when they're eating,  
and mealworms too. A tiny wet smacking  
like that gross sound when you stir up

macaroni and cheese. I have one friend  
who does a great maggot impression.  
But mostly my friends go on big

road trips and have dinner parties.  
They talk about NPR. They ask me if I read  
Billy Collins. NO I DO NOT

READ BILLY COLLINS. And anyway,  
how can they forget their work like that?  
Walking down the street with me,

one friend yelled "Fuck you"  
at a stranger because he drove by  
in a Hummer. Well, I hate all this

political bullshit and I could just  
cry a million billion tears but what  
good would it do? If one person

does not know how to treat  
one other person, what good  
are my million tears then?

*Oni Buchanan*  
299

---

<sup>299</sup> [Oni Buchanan](#), "[Dear Lonely Animal, \[Sometimes I could just\]](#)," collected in [Spring](#), [University of Illinois Press](#)

Temple in a Teapot (Aquí Está el Detalle)

She grew marijuana  
in the garden.

If chickens  
ate her crop,

she strangled them,  
made a stew.

§

to cure her insomnia  
she crushed a few verbs  
into dust,  
scattered the dust  
around the bed

to soothe her broken heart  
she burned the photos and letters,  
kept an adjective  
as a memento

§

Her specialty? Satin, lace, sequins. Plunging necklines. Once, eight years old, I stood on a crate near the stove. She walked around and around me—a joint in her mouth. Each time she exhaled she placed her lips close to my skin. The smoke clung to my body. She slowly worked the sketch out in her mind. Slowly, she dressed me in a gown of smoke.

§

After her left foot was cut off,  
  
still a little groggy,  
  
she asked a nurse if she could take it home,  
  
wrapped in foil.

§

those who refused to eat fruit  
were scolded *a map*  
*a day keeps the doctor away*

each time she'd break up  
a skirmish she'd yell  
*this is nothing but a temple*

*in a teapot*

§

In a photograph she's a mound of salt.  
In a photograph she's a slaughterhouse, a rack of meat.  
In a photograph she's an umbilical cord.  
In a photograph she's a little mirror moving through a forest.  
In a photograph she's a scattering of jade.

§

I said: Oh  
the things that  
come out  
of your mouth.

She said: Oh  
the things  
that go into your  
mouth.

§

canaries flit from branch to branch in a pear tree  
wing bones knitting the blood inside their bodies  
into the ruby handkerchiefs in the breast pockets  
of the handsome men who shouldered her coffin

§

*Eduardo C. Corral*  
300

---

<sup>300</sup> Eduardo C. Corral, "[Temple in a Teapot \(Aquí Está el Detalle\)](#)," *The Journal*, collected in [Slow Lightning](#), Yale University Press

*How Meta is This?: An Essay*

Impossible to determine a singular *this*  
that *how meta* “*is*.” That 90s show about nothing  
has a show within a show that starts to be  
about nothing but has to be about something  
and is terrible, making the show without  
the within show victorious  
and in the midst of that arc my father loses  
his job, all our lives change, but that’s real,  
not about the real except there is no real  
that isn’t also *about* being real, cf. so many emcees,  
hiya hip hop, personae personae personae  
like to flip Ezra Pound’s bones, so very  
vampire slayer, the first episode of *BtVS* I see,  
for example, pivotal season 4 finale,  
a kind of vision/conspiracy board  
that retroactively laces up what’s come before  
and prophecies what’s to come only what’s come  
before are prophecies that didn’t pan out,  
failures in determinism that stay warnings  
even now, *even now* one of the only things I like  
about prophecies. There was that one song  
by NOFX, remember NOFX? remember that song,  
it was its own kind of essay, anything can be  
an essay if you take the time to call it an essay  
and did it ever get played on the radio?  
Are there not like 1000 desperate, sloppy  
9/11 metaphors masquerading  
as hour-long serial melodramas  
but then maybe 2 come correct, right, are  
right, right? Write your guess on two postcards  
and send one postcard to someone  
you are sure will disagree with you  
and one to one you are sure will not.  
There’s the scene in *Safety School*, not its  
real name, where the fallen, above-it dick  
with a terrified heart names a pencil, breaks it,  
and the woman whose involuntary, audible reaction  
is audible in a precisely performed way.  
Two characters from that show have 30 seconds  
at the end of most of the first three seasons  
to pitch a diamond at us that chases  
the pleasing fossil fuels of the other 21:30. So TV,  
so all day, Tom Stoppard, but Shakespeare all day  
every day, the part where the fool I am  
mistakes the fool I am with Lear’s, with Hamlet,  
with Will his hack self hooting, cutting eyes, cutting  
eyes to the penny rabble, one minute  
he’s romancing the break with the pretense

of the kingly body, then a snark follows hard upon  
that rolls out like a carpet  
down the whole mercy-forsaken plank we walk  
then a dick joke / balls joke / vagina terror  
joke but let's be clear: it is Philip Seymour Hoffman  
in that one movie that I love just enough more  
than all other fellow meta instants:  
Can you see him there? Hospice nurse,  
paging through soul-scurvying porno mag  
classifieds. How on the phone he is.  
How barely patient. How *for* his patient, so  
*This is a movie* he says, not in so many words,  
and in movies even when the sky rains  
amphibious catharsis, even  
when all the characters sing the same song  
where some of my best friends just know  
there should be an intermission instead  
or a fire of napalm and petrol  
that dials this movie back to "never happened"  
even then, the most artificing  
of an artificial thing lays out things true,  
it is like the field dressing game of true things  
happening. *This is a movie* he doesn't quite  
say, but the movie says hey,  
how about this movie, being a movie,  
and Philip Seymour Hoffman never does anything  
less than make you believe. Please pretend  
you know this is a movie and act like it  
because if that means to you anything like  
what it means to me, you will help me  
like I believe I would try to help you. Who  
is even saying this. He wants you to believe  
even art at its most absurd can lead you, propel you  
into intervention, like "the lady blackmailer"  
in another movie I love that you've almost certainly  
never seen. Do we have all night, all we have  
is night. Sometimes all we have is all the night  
we have. Right. Allusion, Michael. Fake it till  
etcetera. I have loved so many cartoons  
reminding me they are cartoons, how they take  
my hand. I once thought any move to meta  
was a cheat. Just one bobble and meta  
is meat. How meet. My son, 3 ½, says  
we can read this book just skip the dragon.  
I say I won't skip the dragon, but  
it's make believe, you don't have to be afraid,  
I'm right here, and make believe  
can't hurt you. He knows better already  
and I have to keep remembering to know  
better. The dragon comes, I narrate triple-time,  
slow down and draw out the victory

of those menaced, who come through  
mortal risk that in the moment can only ever be real  
and in the end, no casualties. How rare.  
Big smiles, relief, still he put his head  
under the pillow while the danger reared up,  
real. Okay, but also making believe can save you,  
your friends, your cosmologies, making better  
belief has to be the beginning of beginning  
to save you I will tell him one day, should we  
get so lucky the sun rises on that day. Oh,  
all along I have forgotten to say welcome.  
How meat this meta cute becomes.  
Welcome to these poems which are all  
this, all the time, often differently, welcome  
to these poems which expect you to be  
in this movie with them, welcome  
to this poem that knows you're a movie,  
welcome, welcome to being on my sleeve,  
welcome to being my heart, look  
it's got a megaphone in the least  
of its ventricles, another ventricle entirely  
stuffed with masks and the other two,  
what am I, a doctor? I miss you already,  
welcome, welcome, welcome  
to the belief I make, no need to stay awake,  
I don't think it was your cinnamon roll  
I ate, but so sorry am I nonetheless  
and when I say that I trust you know  
my stick figures even as they go on  
bend over backwards  
to say *thank you*.

Marc McKee  
301

---

<sup>301</sup> Marc McKee, "[How Meta is This?: An Essay](#)," collected in [Meta Meta Make-Belief](#), Black Lawrence Press

## Inaugural Poem

America, I haven't slept  
in weeks. What is up

with the new airport  
and all the rental cars flashing

like explosive devices  
counting down to dawn? America,

did you get my text?  
This morning I fell

in the shower  
and so my soul is sore to touch.

This morning I set fire  
to private property;

I rented pornography  
from a kiosk painted with shadows.

I recited from  
this wretched, busted memory

a dialectical hymn  
that goes something like this.

America, don't tell me  
it is raining outside

when, really, everything  
in this fever dream

is smeared with flop-sweat.  
I left my banjo

on a park bench in Chicago  
and what I sang

still shivers  
in this wintry air

like pig-steel that will last forever.  
I grew up on

a dead-end street  
where a dappled horse munched on dry grass



behind wood fencing.  
To this day,

I imagine the grandiosity of its boredom.  
I gave it desiccated apples

from the best part  
of my seized-up heart.

I wept for girls, I whispered their names,  
I pretended to be lost

inside the buzzing hive of summer.  
America, spare me,

would you, this blinding headache  
and this sense

that nothing will be again  
as it once was. America,

I am not a smart man.  
I cannot lie, except later on.

I've failed more than should be allowed.  
I confess: once,

I shoplifted from a toy-store  
shaped like a castle.

Once, I fed hovering gulls  
torn-up bits of bread

as they bobbed and screamed in the salt air.  
Once, I witnessed

a man fall from a tree  
while he held a chainsaw.

It tore at him  
the whole way down.

The grass beneath him was ruined.  
America, you

may be asking yourself,  
what does this have to do with anything.

You may be full  
of acute dread

for all the miles home,  
and the darkness, and the whistling of the wind.

America, you know  
the words; sing them with me.

*Paul Guest*  
302

---

<sup>302</sup> [Paul Guest](#), "[Inaugural Poem](#)," collected in [Because Everything is Terrible](#), [Diode Editions](#)

## Heavy Light

Pulling the white thread

with your mouth,

bobbin whirling in my breast      unspooling  
fiery wire of my own un-  
weaving, this is

what it feels like to be un-

wound for happiness and hunger

my fat to your fat

my childhood stored  
the pesticides too    yes  
I poison you a little

but mostly I give      red, red apples of autumn  
which have lain in me as heavy light

now making some small bone in you

littlest stitch.

Protein of today  
fat of yesterdays  
mineral core of my white teeth

brushed and carded together    my body spins for you

daily nightly

you are spinning yourself  
little steady machine    marvel

of the oldest kind

you examine your hands for hours    a fashioning

seamstress' meticulous eye  
and I    awestruck and curious and sometimes bored

you turn and nuzzle my bones  
small hand rummaging again

opening your mouth

asking me to translate the world bodily    the ache of it

asking that I thread myself again for you and I do

I do.

*Kelly Morse*  
303

---

<sup>303</sup> [Kelly Morse](#), "[Heavy Light](#)," [Cincinnati Review](#), collected in [Heavy Light](#), [Two of Cups Press](#)

## Rorschach

Goodbye, starboard.  
Goodbye, feral kitten in a box by the sea.  
I like the feel of this sanatorium.  
Its walls are papered with orange moons  
and rakish persimmons, once blighted,  
now ripe. On the subject of paranoid  
hallucinations: the body of my brother  
is crippled and Christ-like. A tin can  
communication device is stretched  
between us, though the distance be  
the stuff of reverie. With regard  
to the visual field, I see the crossed  
eyes of a former rival divided out  
in the constellated field above me.

*Virginia Konchan*

304

---

<sup>304</sup> [Virginia Konchan](#), "[Rorschach](#)," [Third Coast](#), collected in [The End of Spectacle](#), [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

## The Retired Contortionist Inside You

Sprawled atop the bed  
of a truck where high school boys

suck tequila from your neck,  
your body anonymous

as a lesser comet,  
nipples smeared like emergency

flares, it takes three men  
to fasten the jacket,

hold you while a needle  
spits serum

into your blood  
but I remember how we slept

feather boa and margarine-  
hearted, evicted

from every karaoke bar  
and dormitory, absinthe-

lit and rolling under bad  
sound systems, the rash

of synthetic underwear  
and static staining our skin.

I didn't know what was  
waiting when I cupped

my ear to your ribs,  
a constellation of sores

and glands rasping between us,  
how I would be the one

you'd call, years later, your voice  
dry and reaching through

the hospital payphone  
asking for help, a retired

contortionist unfolding  
inside you, waiting

to spill back into the world  
like gasoline.

*Kendra DeColo*  
305

---

<sup>305</sup> [Kendra DeColo](#), "[The Retired Contortionist Inside You](#)," [Copper Nickel](#), collected in [My Dinner with Ron Jeremy](#), [Third Man Books](#)

Posted Limits

Startled by night weeds  
    and a lost semi moaning  
up the hill on the boulevard into the park  
    as I walk for milk at the mini-mart

escaping weather reports and talk radio  
    falling into desire for reckless destination  
and nostalgia for the glow-speck  
    of cigarette and dream remnant

before I started taking those dream-  
    erasing pills. Maybe the truck  
is not lost, simply breaking the law  
    late-night running on forbidden streets.

Just milk, and the twang of regret watching  
    the straggle-stumble of closing time  
at Uncle Jimmy's. I strangle sobriety  
    into a withered candle.

I cup my hands around  
    the imaginary match  
    and blow.

*Jim Daniels*  
306

---

306 [Jim Daniels](#), "[Posted Limits](#)," *Fat City Review*, collected in [Apology to the Moon](#), [Batcat Press](#)



## Abandoned Landscapes

1.

So Kansas City tucked its cock, spritzed its wig,  
drove to the drag show at Missie B's.

2.

Night. A heater groused, a fan belted out. Oh—  
and there was fever and there was rash.

3.

In the john, I focused heroically on the urinal cake; I tried  
to flush without flourish. But my gestures betrayed me.

4.

I fell for the Seville-style tile of the Plaza, the oldest  
strip-mall on the continent. Commerce was history.

5.

Fuck it. Let's smoke a pack of cloves and play  
the Decemberists—*Picaresque*, perhaps—one last time.

*Randall Mann*  
307

---

<sup>307</sup> [Randall Mann](#), "[Abandoned Landscapes](#)," *Spork*, collected in *Breakfast with Thom Gunn*, The [University of Chicago Press](#)

from “Marginalia”

Paris fucked Helen fourteen hundred times. There was a war going on. No one mentioned the Lucky Pierres, or Agamemnon, or the city of Troy.

We were driving. In a car. And stopped at a rest stop. And bought condoms. I was brushing my teeth.

At the time, Paris was living with a lovely nymph. The ties between guest and host were strong.

I walked into a large room. I said, no, it’s not my birthday and you showed me how to paint a sunset in the tent. I came home and you were on fire.

Her rulership over instinct, to build such homes in stone and wood, simply worded instructions: my mother is insane. Places of safety and peace. Because she yells at me and freaks out. Protectress of young defenseless creatures, pomegranate seeds, large diagrams showing you

He is a businessman and I am his wife. We watched nature shows about New Guinea.

What I always wanted. She has a lion and some wavy grass. To go back to the womb where I was born.

Paris was a weakling and something of a coward. He felt safe for six or seven seconds. Tucked up against me. In a curiosity shop. Like the plans of the quiet guy next door who builds bombs.

*Lisa Jarnot*  
308

---

<sup>308</sup> [Lisa Jarnot](#), “[Marginalia](#),” collected in [Some Other Kind of Mission](#), [Burning Deck](#)

## How She Was Saved.

She was a virgin in all senses, including hypothetically. Her relationship to other ascetics ended there. She was venom, mystery, and tears. She told a Jewish girl at school that Jews did not go to hell but stayed in the ground forever, same as Catholics.

When other girls played with a Ouija board or watched a Jason movie or reenacted the scene from *Poltergeist* with a fuzzy TV, she left the basement and prayed that demons would not possess her. She remained demon-free and lived among a family and children, school hallways and lockers and swimming pools, but she spoke rarely and few spoke to her. When alone, her head would flower into love.

She grew up in the white bosom of Covenant Presbyterian Church and took her first communion in the chapel in 1986, where the very tall pastor handed her a white Bible. She kept and studied it until she turned eighteen, at which time she put it into her bedside table and then she left Indiana almost for good.

*Julia Story*  
309

---

<sup>309</sup> [Julia Story](#), "[How She Was Saved.](#)," [Rockhurst Review](#), collected in [Julie the Astonishing](#), [Sixth Finch](#)

from “De La Soul Is Dead”

PEOPLE WHO DIED [ JIM CARROLL BAND ]

No one was dead yet.  
Not that some didn’t try.  
Often, friends of mine—  
*These are people who died*

*died*—weekends drank too much  
then broke into the pool & swam  
though I was barely good at that.  
The bottom I never did touch.

Home, almost dried, we’d listen  
for the dawn, or to *Mista Dobalina*,  
*Mista Bob Dobalina*—*gloryhallastupid*  
doused in eyeliner or lycra

& that was just the boys.  
Our favorite song was noise.

*Kevin Young*  
310

---

<sup>310</sup> [Kevin Young](#), “[De La Soul Is Dead](#),” collected in [Brown](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

## Numbers

≠ First, I have only one rule: face front.  
≠ Secondly, I lied.  
≠ Besides, 2 is my—well, right now my least favorite #.  
≠ Though it has been pleasurable several many times.  
≠ Two can be really-fine, really-fine, fractious, fractured, finis.  
≠ Do platonics and occasionals count?  
≠ We won't speak of their quality or #s, which I have  
no desire to reconstruct. No *desire*, really—of that sort.  
≠ Lie #2 (what I just said).  
≠ What I mean is, I'm single but I've never played so much music.  
≠ Many gods is more confusing than one, but maybe that's for the best?  
≠ The man talking about the discovery of zero lost me.  
≠ Well, to be fair, I was distracted—in one of my favorite ways. You know, when qualitative and  
quantitative converge.  
≠ Why does the photo of three horses in the field  
pierce me more deeply than the ones and twos?  
≠ The power of three—sheets to the wind, blind mice, BLTs, French horns, stooges, the # of bones in the  
human ear.  
≠ Still lifes: how many nouny-things are required to create pungency?  
≠ I seem to be avoiding big #s.  
≠ How many is too many: choices, vices, ladybugs, heroes?  
≠ Whatever money is, there are many grubby digits in it.  
≠ Casualties, too. Too many and counting...  
≠ ...vs. countless laughs if we're lucky.  
≠ Infinite?—oh, pishposh. Let it go.  
≠ I admit for a time I watched *One Life to Live*, and it's true.  
≠ Finite. Finito.  
≠ Rule #2: I have three life-or-death requirements:  
≠ The first knows her name,  
≠ The second's what I'm doing,  
≠ And the third—leave me with at least three out of five senses.  
≠ Admittedly, for x # of years, touch has been let us say subtle.  
≠ And while (a minimum of five sprigs of) lilac equals intoxicating—perhaps not as utterly as the other  
three.  
≠ Fuck, I refuse to choose between the last ones.  
≠ Is this universal?  
≠ What about memory? How much would I trade for more now?  
≠ Right now, one browning leaf falls onto the piano, which remains silent.  
≠ I admire them equally (doing what they must), and think to turn on the radio.  
≠ Rule #3: sideways has its merits.  
≠ *Will I disappoint my future if I stay?* asks breathy Sade.  
≠ Me, I'd change the verb to *go*.  
≠ For the *n*th time, *Yes*.  
≠ And one more thing. Whichever end of the spectrum,  
≠ There's no # for how I feel.

Ellen Doré Watson

311

---

<sup>311</sup> [Ellen Doré Watson](#), "[Numbers](#)," collected in [pray me stay eager](#), [Alice James Books](#)

## Attar

Night blooming. Suckle of honey. What the mockingbird wears to keep his balance. Hair-thin like the girls here who skip dessert but allow themselves real cream for their coffee. The man who combs his beard while praying, the Sufis say, is not admitted to heaven, though he repents by tearing it out. Silly man, see how he is still obsessed with it. This evening, after dinner, I go walking, the perfume Irene has given me sprayed on my wrists. I start with the trees, more simply with the leaves. I walk my way in, scenting the grasses. Where the country begins: fox left like a dirty rag on the road, folk who handle snakes to heal themselves. Better than drugs and cheaper, Irene said. Everyone has a need for transcendence. William Carlos Williams knew nothing of what it is takes for a woman to stand naked in her own house. Cancer in her bones, dancing to Roy Orbison. No, I won't ever be cured, Irene told the thin girls. It's in the nature of the disease.

*Melissa Kwasny*  
312

---

<sup>312</sup> [Melissa Kwasny](#), "[Attar](#)," [Interim](#), collected in [The Nine Senses](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

## Manners

“Sweetypants,” Martha Mitchell (wife of John Mitchell, soon to be Nixon’s attorney general) cried, “fetch me a glass of bubbin, won’t you?” Out of office, Nixon had been warehoused in Leonard Garment’s New York law firm and had begun to clamber

his way back toward Washington.  
The scent of his enemies’ blood rose  
hotly from the drinks that night.  
Why was I there? A college class-  
mate’s mother had suggested he invite a few  
friends; she called us “starving scholars.”

It’s hard to do good and not advertise  
yourself, and not to need the needy  
even if they don’t need you. I’d grown used  
to being accused of being somewhere else.  
I plied my nose, that shrewd scout, into book  
after book at home, and clattered downstairs

for dinner not late but tardy. I dwelt  
as much as I could at that remove  
from the needs of others we call “the self,”  
that desert isle, that Alcatraz from which  
none has escaped. I made a happy lifer.  
There is no frigate like a book.

“Outside of a dog, a book is a man’s  
best friend,” said Groucho Marx. “Inside of a dog,  
it’s too dark to read.” So what if my friend’s  
mother was a fool. So what if Martha  
Mitchell would later rat on her rat  
of a husband when Nixon’s paranoid

domain collapsed under its own venal  
weight and it took Nixon all his gloomy  
charisma to load his riven heart  
onto a helicopter and yaw upward  
from the White House lawn. He might have turned  
to Pat and asked, like a child on a first

flight, "Are we getting smaller yet?"  
I was too young to know how much I was,  
simply by being born, a hostage  
to history. My hostess's chill,  
insulting grace I fended off with the same  
bland good manners I used to stay upstairs

in my head until time had come for food.  
A well-fed scholar, I sought out and brought  
back a tall bubbin for the nice lady.  
Yes, there's a cure for youth, but it's fatal.  
And a cure for grace: you say what you mean,  
but of course you have to know what that is.

*William Matthews*  
313

---

<sup>313</sup> [William Matthews](#), "[Manners](#)," [Five Points](#), collected in [After All](#), [Houghton Mifflin Harcourt](#)



## Good Night

Good night, optic tiles shuffled  
or lost. Good night, fractions syllables,  
so poorly spent.  
Good night, Brazilian bellhop  
paparazzi and valet  
gossip columnist. Good night, restaurant  
workers hidden from view.

Good night inexhaustible  
boyfriends. You are in  
the film credits.  
Good night, floating particles  
of psychic debt. Good night, IOU.

Good night, Spanish  
and your endless demands.

Good night, apostrophe.  
Good night, English. I belong to you.

Good night, humanoids  
visiting from a paper universe. Good night, arson.

*Rosa Alcalá*  
314

---

<sup>314</sup> [Rosa Alcalá](#), "[Good Night](#)," collected in [Undocumentaries](#), [Shearsman Books](#)

On the Motion of Animals

I am trying to tell you  
something but my mouth  
won't move

I want to hold you  
but it comes all wrong  
I am marooned

in this body  
with no gift  
for puppetry

I want to  
know you I think  
I could

love you like you  
probably should  
be loved but my love

is a fish  
in the wrong  
kind of water

where I want  
to hold you but  
there's someone else

in the room  
the radiator's screaming  
and my arms won't move

*Camille Rankine*  
315

---

<sup>315</sup> [Camille Rankine](#), "[On the Motion of Animals](#)," collected in [Incorrect Merciful Impulses](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## The Presidential Debate

Last night after watching the candidates debate—  
their paired cameos, their accusations  
of debt and deficit—I stood at my window.  
Lifting it, I hoped to hear some fevered sounds,  
the diligent practice of pleasure. I wanted  
a private cry to pull me from my national loneliness  
into insurgence, ecstatic and patriotic.  
I was certain that somewhere above the mesh of streets  
a man opened the back buttons of a woman's blouse  
and reached under her arms to balance  
a breast in each hand. She turned her face  
and found him unexpectedly profiled in the mirror.  
*Now*, she said and watched her own hand  
guiding his fingers till they opened inside her.  
Last night I went and stood at my window.  
The dark buildings rose against the dark sky.  
The moon was fastened at the throat of the city.

*Victoria Redel*

316

---

<sup>316</sup> [Victoria Redel](#), "[The Presidential Debate](#)," collected in [Already the World](#), [Kent State University Press](#)

## And God Created Woman

He made her some great hair,  
full of body and a lovely reddish-blonde,  
and then he gave her great tits—  
large and ebullient,  
like twins of a gazelle that feed  
among the lilies, actually.  
He made her smell fresh as lilies  
and a few other things like  
Summer Mist, Sweet Romance.  
Her bed was green, it was said.  
And then he gave that #1 3-D  
printer, her womb, but he gave  
her only one, unfortunately,  
with which to produce the loads  
of progeny to be faithful,  
inspiring even, to bring wealth  
to their families and God. Some  
women did not get the hair,  
or the chest or a womb programed  
to function properly, which became  
a management issue. But God created  
her eyes to be like those of doves  
and she was comforted with apples  
and perhaps Cheetos. In the secret places  
of the stairs, she eats those Cheetos.

Woman printed out two sons,  
in pain she bore them, and later,  
much later, that fratricide, another  
management fail. God gave her  
other wonders, like the flaming  
swords barring her from the garden,  
a nice set of earrings, and the recent  
regional victory of a basketball team.  
Much later, God's son was very kind  
to her, though she had slipped a bit,  
what with the poverty and prostitution.

*Connie Voisine*

317

---

<sup>317</sup> [Connie Voisine](#), "[And God Created Woman](#)," [New Ohio Review](#), collected in [And God Created Woman](#), Bull City Press

Dear Earth

This is a love note from the sky: All  
year I've watched you with my big eye, watched  
the muscles in your back as I  
stood behind you in the payroll line (those

muscles, are they roads, could they lead a woman into  
the shadows of 5 o'clock  
where she's always wanted to go?) I've

seen you in the parking lot  
up to your knees in snow, scraping  
the windshield of your white truck, which  
spit a riddle of silver thumbtacks

into the silver night. When

you emerge from the Xerox room, I've  
seen your conifers  
tipped with light. I've

watched you sip  
from the water cooler, too, tasting

its cool blue, seen  
you pour your coffee  
into styrofoam

until it overflowed.  
And this I know:  
The view

from here is too removed, diluted  
as it is  
with flirting & pollution. I want  
to fall all over you like a farm, to bless

your fields with weeping, fists  
of hail, black  
feathers in a frenzy  
out of their wrecked nests—simple

gracious rain on your white grapes, or

a holy blizzard of pain: My

tornadoes tearing up your prairies. My

red wind licking its initials in the dust.

---

<sup>318</sup> [Laura Kasischke](#), "[Dear Earth](#)," [Willow Springs](#), collected in [Fire & Flower](#), [Alice James Books](#)

## Adolescence

The girls are the words  
from the stories: *willowy, lissome, lithe*.  
Their hair *black as ebony wood*, or  
*fine as spun gold*. They have gifts.  
Voices like water. They move like light

through leaves. But in the world  
you imagine, you have your own story.  
Your name is *Vivienne* (or *Eva*,  
*Lavinia*; there must be Vs  
and hints of red). You dream yourself

into every fairy tale, the grisly  
versions where the prince's eyes  
run blood and the girl disappears  
into the wolf's dark throat.  
You understand the good

must be punished, and this  
is why you are never  
the red-capped girl or the princess  
in the briar-wrapped tower,  
but the queen whose word

is *wicked*, who conjures smoke  
and poison. You know the forest  
in the dark. You were meant  
to wear beasts' pelts. To lure  
the golden girl to your spinning wheel.

You have no sister like a rose,  
no brother to lead you out.  
What you have: a castle  
to yourself. A lying mirror.  
A bear's heart, salted, on a plate.

Catherine Pierce  
319

---

<sup>319</sup> Catherine Pierce, "[Adolescence](#)," collected in [Animals of Habit](#), [The Kent State University Press](#)

## Hate Poem

I hate you truly. Truly I do.  
Everything about me hates everything about you.  
The flick of my wrist hates you.  
The way I hold my pencil hates you.  
The sound made by my tiniest bones were they trapped in the jaws of a moray eel hates you.  
Each corpuscle singing in its capillary hates you.

Look out! Fore! I hate you.

The little blue-green speck of sock lint I'm trying to dig from under my third toenail, left foot, hates you.  
The history of this keychain hates you.  
My sigh in the background as you pick out the cashews hates you.  
The goldfish of my genius hates you.  
My aorta hates you. Also my ancestors.

A closed window is both a closed window and an obvious symbol of how I hate you.

My voice curt as a hairshirt: hate.  
My hesitation when you invite me for a drive: hate.  
My pleasant "good morning": hate.  
You know how when I'm sleepy I nuzzle my head under your arm? Hate.

The whites of my target-eyes articulate hate. My wit practices it.  
My breasts relaxing in their holster from morning to night hate you.  
Layers of hate, a parfait.  
Hours after our latest row, brandishing the sharp glee of hate,  
I dissect you cell by cell, so that I might hate each one individually and at leisure.  
My lungs, duplicitous twins, expand with the utter validity of my hate, which can never have enough of you,  
Breathlessly, like two idealists in a broken submarine.

*Julie Sheehan*

320

---

<sup>320</sup> [Julie Sheehan](#), "[Hate Poem](#)," collected in [Orient Point](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)



Among Sorrows and Stones

Who remembers the letter  
trembling over a flame?

*I do. I buried Isolde in her black sail.*

Who accompanied the bride with a scar  
to a parking lot swept with paper roses?

*It was I who gestured to the scissors as she mended.*

Who, then, will write a cosmogony bereft of stars?

*I will, but first I'll form two tombstones into lovers.*

How will I know them?

*Wormsongs, wakefulness,  
artillery hauled up a great hill.*

Then, with your great lungs, will you fill  
the silver petals  
of a pinwheel stranded on the moon?

*I will not, no, never.*

Will you shelter me?

*My umbrella is made of rain.*

What will you do if I exchange  
this ancient tear bottle  
for a guitar choked with daisies?

*I will gnaw my wrist in the corner until you return.*

But what if I devour what I love most?

*I will bend over you like a wave bends over a wavelet.*

Is this the Hymn of the Pearl to the Moon?

*No, far from it.*

How will I recognize you?

*Red hills and sky  
Red hills and bones  
Among sorrows, among stones*

Will you sit upon my creaking breast?

*No, but you will learn to bear anything.*

Anything? Even the dollhouse softening by our brook?  
The doorways billowing, the wallpaper creeping? breathing?

Yes.

Even the rose-velvet miniature camelback sofa?

*Even that.*

What about the tiny varnished pie?

*Especially the small and the sweet.*

And the doll stiff in her bed?  
Her pinksweet face—haunted, cauled, bitten?

*You will bear it all.*

Then blow into the ear she's turned from me.

*I will blow into the ear she's turned from you.*

*Kristin Bock*  
321

---

<sup>321</sup> [Kristin Bock](#), "[Among Sorrows and Stones](#)," collected in [Cloisters](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

## Planet Theory

It scares me to think  
once the moon wasn't there.  
That it's nothing but debris.  
I galloped twelve miles in leftover snow and footprints  
because a friend said he would give me a cigarette,  
all I had was my stolen flask,  
the time you said *I don't love you anymore*  
and I walked to the library in the rain  
to find books on depression.  
The hunger I had when I didn't  
want to ask you for food  
because my pride slept  
where my hunger was muscled over  
by smoke.  
My leftover loves.  
My fuck the man, sleep all day.  
My Uncle Boo Boo gripping  
a rifle in our back yard,  
the rabies running through  
our dog's body like the gin in his.  
My mother's mouth. My good times  
in a plastic bag. The things we do for money.  
My father's nose.  
Some broken things.  
The brother I haven't spoken to.

Last night I named the moon *Glitter*  
after the first stripper to wrap  
her legs around my own  
and blow smoke in my face.  
Her dance faded like anyone's smoke  
once all the blue starts dying  
as any day's blue does.

*Tyree Daye*  
322

---

<sup>322</sup> Tyree Daye, "Planet Theory," collected in [River Hymns](#), [The American Poetry Review](#)

I can't stop reading *Happy Days*. It's so perfect I understand it no better than the theory of relativity or the meaning of love hand-painted on signs held long ago by students down on the campus where we sometimes skinny-dipped in the fountain and stole fancy pens from the bookstore, genuine Montblancs that still don't work.

*Guaranteed... genuine... pure... what?* Winnie asks over and over in the first act, as if knowing will help between the bell for waking and the bell for sleep.

One weekend between the bells you and I kissed and kissed and the questions begin again.

Oh let them last at least until we are decanted from the vessel containing the fluid of future time to the vessel containing the fluid of past time, agitated by the phenomena of hours.

Are you allowed to ask that question? he said mid-morning with the blinds drawn.

Yes. I nodded, but instead I asked, what are days for?

In the space between interlocutor and addressee, there is something erotic, responsive, uncontrolled.

No one likes to be interrogated, though I have to admit I have sometimes enjoyed being frisked. It hasn't happened in a while. In fact, recently I was allowed to pass through security without taking off my shoes. The man behind me wore boots I thought I could love, so I waited for him at the exit, pretending I was just tying up my flipflop. Flimsy and inappropriate for where we were both headed.

I have always, all of my life, writes Elizabeth Hardwick in *Sleepless Nights*, been looking for help from a man.

As the boots glided past, I tried to think of a question, any questions for my thoughts.

On a first date, my dinner companion seemed bemused I was doing all the asking. Sorry! I said. I can be quiet, I'd like that.

Then it was nice listening in to other conversations, noticing the sweat on the water glass, letting time pass all on its own, sipping a little wine while he ate more squid.

What do you want to ask me now, he said after a few slow bites, that you didn't want to ask me before?

The interrobang was invented just a few decades ago and is a mark I've never been tempted to use though it's mostly what my eyes say.

Four minutes? Is that a long kiss?

Were you a piece of punctuation, wouldn't you just love to be the sexy little round black curve of the question pressed up against a lanky exclamation,

like this?

Even pressed against you I'm trying to read lips.

The closer you are to your addressee the more fragile language is.

It took me a long afternoon to memorize Shakespeare's *When in despair with fortune and men's eyes*. Sitting in my old car on Roosevelt Island watching my son play baseball, I felt the ache that comes when you commit something beautiful to heart. Then I looked through the rest of the sonnets and counted. I saw nine others begin with *when*.

When I think of *when*, I think of the simple one-word question.

If I don't dawdle, don't pause between recitations, don't get up and start making dinner or rereading your old letters, I can recite sonnet 29 four times in four minutes.

Starting when? Now.

It's amazing. For someone who thinks she's so smart. Until this very moment, I thought *haply I think on thee* meant *happily*—

Why did I so rarely mention love when we were holding each other?

Does Anbesol work on the heart or only on the mind?

Did I misuse everything?

Did Kant really have a parrot?

What was the punchline?

Are sex and death the only rafts out of here?

Where did we think we were going?

Unasked questions hover between us.

Catherine Barnett

323

---

<sup>323</sup> Catherine Barnett, "[Accursed Questions, ii](#)," collected in [Human Hours](#), Graywolf Press

—breeding in and in. Circular full of stirpiculture  
 Jamie joined the community by marrying Mother.  
 J.H.N. said I was just the one to lead off.  
 With black spots and bright circles before my eyes  
 said involuntary thinking about those we love is the same  
 as nocturnal emissions. We had women who  
 Could occupy such a position. My own faith.  
 His father attributes. Theodore's apostasy.  
 Mr. Noyes was very kind, and told me not to trouble myself  
 About the Circular (of which I am editor);  
 [Here the memoir jumps back two weeks.]  
 He said the Community would inevitably go  
 and that when that occurred he meant to be  
 on hand to see justice was done  
 but I must throw off the cloak  
 left to last sense should teach  
 the devil the rock  
 of unfaithfulness  
 education is a good foundation  
 It is like the death of a cherished friend  
 the angels through my intellect  
 straight down to the office  
 between father and Theodore all day  
 so much farther than I had gone  
 [Here the memoir jumps back two weeks. No explanation is given.]  
 Left music for writing  
 Circular [sic] full of stirpiculture—breeding in and in.  
 Mr. Herrick and Mother's wedding,  
 “Man ought always to pray, and not to faint.”  
 Walk with J.H.N. on the Hill east of our house. Nice time  
 when we got home. I think I have been unbelieving  
 about my social experience. I am going to make a new start.  
 Music is to be abandoned. J.H.N. had no objections.  
 Here I am at Joppa with my eyes feeling badly  
 yesterday morning—spots and bright circles.  
 Couldn't help smiling. I must learn to make  
 quick repairs, as he might hurl me  
 against Theodore again. Stood in the distributing room. Gazed a moment.  
 The image remained like a sun-spot on the retina  
 growing fainter and fainter, but the exact outline of my friend  
 I felt a mighty force within me  
*Our Father, on these two who kneel,*  
*Our blessing with thy blessing seal;*  
*And grant in coming joyous days*  
*A noble child may lisp thy praise.*  
 Is it possible that there should be a sensation in the womb  
 the very next day? Found on his table: “Sunday,  
 May 11, 1873. The last are first, the first are last—

the very last!"  
 [Here the memoir jumps back two weeks. No  
 Explanation is given]  
 Circilur [sic] full of stirpiculture—breeding in and in  
 What will my darling, my dearest say?  
 The exact outline  
 I never talked with anyone more earnestly  
 If we have an atom of faith in God  
 He declared he would never give up his faith and  
 the community,  
 How was it possible I could inspire such idolatry?  
 [Here the memoir jumps back two weeks. No explanation is given.]  
 Circilur [sic] full of stirpiculture—breeding in and in,  
 The dear baby begins to assert itself It kicked me  
 quite vigorously. Best time E, and I ever had  
 Between my sense of duty and my natural inclination  
 I must make a holocaust of what I have received  
 Superb! Accident with the horse.  
 Father Noyes said to me this evening: "When are you and I going  
 to have some more of our good long talks?" Into special  
 spiritual drill. Talk to Homer.  
 "Who is your pap?" I asked surprised.  
 My death-warrant. What a beautiful,  
 radiant smile! I awake this morning  
 to find myself again editress of the circular.

*Joe Hall*  
 324

---

<sup>324</sup> [Joe Hall](#), "[1873](#)," collected in [Someone's Utopia, Black Ocean](#)

## The Devotee

This man, short, balding, in his forties,  
approached me at a reading & asked if  
I would sign his book. His hands shook.

I thought he had some kind of condition.  
Three days later, he sent this email:  
“I was at your reading in Louisville.

I loved the way you limped to the stage.  
Do you know you’re beautiful? Do you  
feel beautiful during sex? What’s it like?

I bought your book, which is about,  
you know, this topic. I deserve a reply.”  
I looked out the window for the birds

& the deer other poets are always seeing.  
I want to be another poet, I thought.  
I want to be any other poet but me.

*Jillian Weise*  
325

---

<sup>325</sup> [Jillian Weise](#), “[The Devotee](#),” collected in [The Amputee’s Guide to Sex](#), Soft Skull Press



Brazilian Wedding: Dream No. 2

On the night before my wedding  
I decide to become a nun, roaming

favelas in my nurse-white nunfit.  
I weigh other people's babies:

babies like sacks of pudding,  
babies like clouds, babies so loud

I have to wear earplugs,  
alien babies curled like shrimp,

limping babies with toothless mothers.  
Mothers carrying their babies in slings,

flinging their breasts out like udders  
to feed them. A pregnant girl walks by

in an English T-shirt, purple on white:  
*Why do we learn what we learn?*

*Sempalavras*—Without Words—  
a huge photo firm comes to take

my picture to run under the headline:  
*American woman overcomes her ego.*

When you read word of my decision,  
you don't say anything, but your

nostrils flare: that sharp intake  
of air you used to make while fucking.

No one is declared unfit for help.

Kathleen Rooney  
326

---

<sup>326</sup> Kathleen Rooney, "[Brazilian Wedding: Dream No. 2](#)," collected in [Oneiromance](#), [Switchback Books](#)

## Hearing Loss

I assume a boys voice is what unquiets the world

I matter to the lips which matter back to me /

the lions mane means the lions manly  
/ the boys ring means the boys married

& in my mouth in the parking lot means I have been  
a bad bad bad girl

these satellites we misdiagnose as starlight these  
cars passing effortlessly / I assume every  
sound I make & can't distinguish  
was beautiful

even the cardinal I saw ruined  
with windows was not unlike the cardinal

/ its red instant of form  
/ & how as a child  
kneeling in leaves I knew each animal  
by voice / his legs

tense against my hands is  
how I know what Ive done

& tonight I would like to leave him  
speechless / I write

the dogwood their goldish proof  
/ my gown its drag of vows

how again I slip on his wedding  
ring & wife / myself

to its girlish shard of noise

*Bradley Trumpfheller*  
327

---

<sup>327</sup> [Bradley Trumpfheller](#), "[Hearing Loss](#)," *jubilat*

## craft

The man in the Hawaiian shirt says there are four kinds of time inherent in narrative: 1.) story-time, or simply how much time

elapses in the story 2.) narrator-time, specifically the narrator's relation to the events in the story, i.e. think of the Cheever classic

"Reunion" where the now adult character of Charlie narrates the story of the last time he saw his father many years before

3.) physiological-time, how much time it takes the reader to physically read the story, and 4.) breath-time, the length of time

it takes the reader to form the words in the body. "Don't ask me how time works in poetry," says the man in the Hawaiian shirt.

"That I don't know." Here's what the man in the Hawaiian shirt does know: at the most dramatic moments in a narrative, the ratio

of time slows down so that the action seems to occur in real-time. Consequently all dialogue is inherently dramatic in that it is

a one-to-one ratio, which is to say the amount of time it takes the reader to read a dialogue is the same amount of time

it would take for characters to speak it. If the most dramatic parts of a narrative occur at the pace of real-time events, then sadly

today you must live through it. The sound of the buzzer that signifies you've reached your floor. In story-time this is either

a story of seconds or a story of years—the first time she saw him riding his rust bucket of a bicycle around the neighborhood

collecting cans, the moment of action set in motion by the Germanic verb "riding," the word two breath units in the mouth, or depending

on point-of-view, the story of the villain, what made him silently acquiesce for more than half a century, riding his bike

on a continuous loop around the park looking for cans, harming no one until he did, the people playfully calling him "The Recyclist,"

or cutting to her again what scene transpired in her life to make her see goodness in him, in all of them, *she wasn't afraid of no one*,

says a relative in real-time, the time it takes the photon to strike the retina and the retina to fire the electrical impulse up to

the brain through the fibers of the optic nerve and for the brain  
to descramble the information received, that the bell has rung  
  
and you have reached your floor, that you're almost home, my home,  
the place I have lived and opened to strangers for too many years  
  
to count until the one I invited in to do odd jobs and make some  
money stole a VCR and a cake pan, *good things*, says the relative,  
  
feel the heft, the worth of these objects in the mouth though  
it was never about value—it was about trust, the doors sliding open,  
  
the arrow light blinking off to signify arrival and tell me,  
Man-in-the-Hawaiian-Shirt, what about writer-time, the length  
  
of time it takes the writer to choose the words, to order them,  
to decide on tone, to shoulder the horror that will mark each of us  
  
forever because this is our world too, our-time, the elevator doors  
sliding open because how long is narrator-time when I am on  
  
this side of the narrative, how deep the despair of writer-time,  
not to beautify the thing, to avoid the impulse to say  
  
I was my own pyre, a comet, a star, to describe the unimaginable  
in a time and a place when sadly everything is imaginable,  
  
the heart with a bullet hammering through it imaginable, the baby  
found cold and dead on the trash-strewn beach imaginable,  
  
Grandfather on fire one snowy Wisconsin morning, the sleeves  
of his cotton pajamas like fiery wings imaginable, the nurses  
  
at the house every day for weeks debriding the skin, literally  
scrubbing the charred skin off so that the new skin  
  
might sprout imaginable, but this I cannot imagine even as it is  
happening to me in physiological-time from the moment  
  
the arrow blinked off and the doors opened and he filled the space,  
my dress growing heavy with oil then *whoosh!* breath-time, the metal  
  
box too hot to touch, the fire in my mouth and lungs, the burn-  
depth going all the way down to the blood, the flames depriving me  
  
of air, the mind still at work even when it doesn't want to be  
like the morning I woke to the radio story of the seaman's memory  
  
of Pearl Harbor, how from his lifeboat he saw another man floating  
in the water and said *I have to get you out of there*

and the floating man said *don't touch me* and the seaman said  
*I have to get you out*—slow the moment down, he is spraying me

a second time with accelerant and there is so much light and space-  
time in the sense that I am not the first to suffer like this—a seagull

circling overhead, *I have to get you out I have to get you*  
and when the seaman leans over and reaches for him how the flesh  
comes away in his hand like over-cooked meat from the bone.

*Quan Barry*  
328

---

<sup>328</sup> Quan Barry, "[craft \('The man in the Hawaiian shirt'\)](#)," collected in [Loose Strife](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

I'm in Room 927

With thumb and forefinger I examined the ball-peen hammer.  
The sparrow slid violently into third base.  
Night after night it was NASCAR, kettle corn, karaoke.  
Wendy wore burlap, clapping her hands.  
Zinc divided the men from the boys.  
My mind made a snuffling noise.  
The forest absorbed us, knowing all along.  
Peg slid her girlhood toward us across the ages.  
When I say indigo bunting I fucking mean indigo bunting.  
The kiln was a metaphor Joan was fond of.  
The greased hog loved the attention.  
The orphan snapped me in the groin with his towel.

\*

The lump in Jim's pants was his ball-peen hammer.  
The sparrow was a piece of meat with wings.  
Night laid us all face down naked in the grass and "flossed" us.  
Wearing burlap Wendy stepped into the phone booth.  
Brad had a funny little zinc limp.  
My mind drank from its tank.  
The forest was full of gongs.  
Girlhood, down the chimney.  
Did I not say indigo bunting.  
Joan talked on and on about the kiln, gesturing.  
I stood at attention, which many felt unnecessary.  
The orphan recommended the steak tartare.

\*

The ball-peen hammer was spending the century at the bottom of Lake Baikal.  
The sparrow swept crumbs with one wing, slapped at the cat with the other.  
Night with some spit on its chin.  
Wendy allowed herself to be shot from a cannon (wearing burlap).  
It was zinc that they found in our long Johns.  
My mind undressed itself a little.  
Don't believe what you're told in a forest.  
Girlhood tore the month of May a new one.  
Kurt stepped a little too honestly toward us from his robe of indigo bunting.  
We'd decided the kiln had a soft spot, and searched for it.  
You suggested I pay attention.  
I cried out to the orphan. To all orphans.

\*

With pigeon shit from the '80s the ball-peen hammer'd been carefully caked.  
The sparrow was walleyed; he looked at Denise coldly.  
Night was crawling toward me like some kind of injured kitten.

If it looks, feels, and smells like burlap it still could be canvas.  
The bar-top was made of zinc; the gerbil sensed this.  
My mind kicked twice at the stall wall.  
Jim walked into his closet as if it were a forest.  
The chapter on girlhood upset us.  
All November babies were covered in indigo buntings.  
I set my beer on Joan's kiln and she smacked me.  
Attention, waning.  
The nightjar was an orphan, and sat in the highest branches.

\*

After rewinding, the police watched again what Eileen's eyes did when she said *ball peen hammer*.  
The sparrow ate pulled pork for fifty minutes.  
Night foamed at the mouth—not good.  
They say Christ wore both socks and a shoulder bag made of burlap.  
We ran through the museum sucking zinc lozenges.  
A low voice said *you have broken my mind* into an omelet.  
When they slit open the unicorn it was full of forests.  
Girlhood stopped the mowers that were idling in the lilac.  
I ask to have only indigo bunting pulled over my eyes.  
The kiln is loose now, and alone, and rolls unsteadily across town.  
Jim is demonstrating what heightened attention looks like.  
The orphan can only play the Liszt sonatas with a paper bag over her head.

Michael Earl Craig  
329

---

<sup>329</sup> Michael Earl Craig, "I'm in Room 927," *Gulf Coast*, collected in *Woods and Clouds Interchangeable*, Wave Books

## In Nabokov's Memory

Dead roses, plastic tulips, dry immortelles—  
he hated them in the German hotels,  
drinking coffee from cups whose shiny backs  
had been designed with swastikas of cracks.

He never settled down to sink his roots  
in any fathermotherland. Old bear,  
he wore the same old-fashioned English suits  
that had traveled so far during the war.

His wife, his alter echo, read him books  
as he lay ill in bed, prepared to die.  
He knew by name all foreign lakes and brooks  
as they passed by.

A man forgets men rather than forgives.  
Laugh, Mnemosyne, healing muse of those  
whose heads are crowned, but not with laurel leaves—  
with the whispering reeds of other shores.

*Katia Kapovich*  
330

---

<sup>330</sup> [Katia Kapovich](#), "[In Nabokov's Memory](#)," [Big Bridge](#), collected in [Cossacks and Bandits](#), [Salt Publishing](#)



## Blood Moon

Came a red moon the night between the Easter vigil  
and the morning of the resurrection and that shade  
made a horizontal of the window rail and a vertical  
of half the curtain, *a cross*—and because I wasn't well  
(some spring distemper) lying alone in the guest room  
where we also kept a small shrine and our mothers' ashes  
Stephen sleeping on an upper floor but I wasn't asleep  
the moon too bright and part of me knowing I had begun  
to see a cross only because it was almost Easter 2015  
and another part said *but I'm not the kind of person who sees  
crosses in curtains* long finished with The Church or churches  
but nevertheless here at first seemed to be *three* shadows  
three crosses just like in the story which after a time became  
one and then O shit a tree The Tree the World Tree the tree  
of the world and behind my eyes came a kind of light  
and I thought to myself I have not recently taken drugs  
have I or gone strictly-speaking crazy like Philip K. Dick  
who experienced his *Vast Active Living Intelligence System*  
as a pink illumination bearing the message that his infant son  
had some kind of knot in his gut that could kill him (which  
a reluctant doctor confirmed and saved him from)  
and have I anyway gotten my antidepressant dosage right?  
My light too though not pink was somewhat real because  
after a while it went away which is the test of real things  
and then it was night again *noche oscura* as St. John of the Cross  
might have put it and I knew I was in danger of making of all this  
*a meaning* because it was Easter and outside the rabbits  
fucked in the chamomile wearing burdock burrs like crowns  
but still could there have been any part which was not just

of my making Christ the vertical and the horizontal Christ

Ygdrassil the Allfather hanging nine days without food or drink  
Christ the plane tree *Platanus orientalis* with lights in it

that Xerxes stopped his armies to adore and away from which

he would not move again until his goldsmith struck the image  
on a medal which afterwards he wore always next to his heart.

At 11:11 in the morning from this vision I awoke I who do not

have visions or want any but for all that is the sad world not yet  
utterly emptied of parable? Does the young corn still put

his ear above the soil like a flute?

—April 4, 2015, Blood Moon

*Patrick Donnelly*  
331

---

<sup>331</sup> Patrick Donnelly, "[Blood Moon](#)," *Tikkun*, collected in [Little-Known Operas](#), *Four Way Books*

from “I’m afraid the house we’re in will explode—.”

I don’t know how else to say it. | I don’t think a metaphor would be apt, | no vehicle to split open the hum:  
but the body will not always tell how it connects to what it wants or how. | so I don’t know I believe this,  
even when I say it twelve times a day, | even when I write it on the skin of my lung’s hand | but I tell him  
the day our food stamps arrived— | we called it “Mother’s Day” & rejoiced & ate whole bags of chips &  
bananas, | weenies & drank soda & purple Kool-Aid all at once, | but he chuckles, | bc why on earth  
would anyone feel joy on a day like that? | shame, that’s what he’d feel. | | perhaps like me, you fell in  
love | before they hurt us with syllables & ideas about food | & electric bills & sounds like gritos & want, |  
not knowing it would matter that they be able to grasp | our lack | like an apple, | how it means to know  
absence | like need | like the pit of some gnawed plum, | a bite made of kindness. | a gulp of welfare &  
impossible sums. | |

& I still fear having nothing. | do you? still petrify | at having to spend the last modest sum | I’ve saved—  
to eat that last egg. | I want to save everything, | bc some bad unforeseen shit is likely to occur at some  
point in my life. | you know how this works, | after all, you heard lessons in your mom’s salt | when she  
showered | or sobbed in the backyard alone, | a dark tree, & no moon, holding a bill, | wanting no one | in  
that house to hear. | how then | would you deal? | |

*Joe Jiménez*  
332

---

<sup>332</sup> Joe Jiménez, “I’m afraid the house we’re in will explode—,” collected in [Rattlesnake Allegory](#), Red Hen Press

## Urine Sample

M fills a condom with clean piss,  
ties it off around a rubber band.  
He takes off his pants and shimmies the band  
up his thigh like a garter.

A wolf walks in on hind legs.  
It howls its intestines out.  
The wolf is a body with important holes.

I am in Saint Paul,  
far from home, three months sober.  
My body feels desiccated.

M is shedding his body. His body,  
one giant peachbruise dribbling venom.

Anyone can buy clean piss online.  
M buys it from the sober house next door.  
An old man peddles twenty-ounce Gatorade bottles for ten bucks.

M is filled with holes (he is not the wolf).

Beneath his blanket he shoots heroin  
between his toes, within his fort  
he floats toward the yawn of light.

*Sean Shearer*  
333

<sup>333</sup> Sean Shearer, “Urine Sample,” *Beloit Poetry Journal*

In the Museum of the Nineteenth Century, the Lights Are Coming On

Green moon of arsenic soap,  
waning. Anti-masturbation rings  
in nickel-plated steel. Scissors-grinders  
and chimney sweeps. Whalebone corsetry.  
In the orphan farm, cradle rows  
of babies  
    teething on gin-soaked rags.  
Girls selling watercress, girls  
selling sex. Another lowered down  
the coalpit's throat, bucket chained  
to her wrist. Little curtain  
over the keyhole  
    to keep out the dust.  
A little chlorine in the drapes  
to ward off the river's stench.  
In back-alley porno shops, photographs  
of bare-legged women swinging  
in ivy gardens. Cholera  
    in the slum water again,  
a palace being built of glass. Pages  
of a yellow-backed novel spilled  
like maple leaves. On a mid-century  
fainting couch, women's pelvic massages.  
Carefully trimmed shrubbery, the front steps  
scrubbed clean. Newsboys calling out  
the latest smash. A dose  
    of cold beef tea jelly  
and the marriage market's meat:  
Claras, Lavinias, Maudes.  
Teeth chattering in the cotton mill's  
din. All-day admission to the freak show  
for sixpence. In a closet, a crinoline petticoat  
stuffed tighter than a jack-in-the-box.

*Corinna McClanahan Schroeder*

334

---

<sup>334</sup> [Corinna McClanahan Schroeder](#), "[In the Museum of the Nineteenth Century, the Lights Are Coming On](#)," [Blackbird](#)

## Sea of Japan

*Ichi.* You have the Sea of Japan all over your face.

*Ni, San.* I seemed to have left my Sea of Japan on the nightstand at your mother's place last night. When she called me this morning, she was excited to tell me about her new death trap (Sea of Japan).

*Yon.* Don't blame me, I voted for the Sea of Japan.

*Go.* In last night's ball game, the pitcher was the Sea of Japan. And in the seventh inning it turned its attentions inward. It found everything to be black there. It wouldn't let anyone have the baseball.

*Roku, Nana, Hati.* There was nothing behind the curtain except for some great Seas of Japan and a few thousand Seas of Japan. Then behind the Seas of Japan were some dark forests secretly controlling everything, including laughter.

*Kyuu, Juu.* What I need to pick up at the store: clouds, a few thousand skulls, faces of old ghosts in the clouds, plastic pool-side slide, plastic clouds, human ghosts haunting ghosts of bears, winter ghost clothes, a bigger fridge for M, plastic Sea of Japan, the Sea of Japan.

Zachary Schomburg  
335

---

<sup>335</sup> Zachary Schomburg, "[Sea of Japan](#)," collected in [The Man Suit](#), [Black Ocean](#)

## Heaven and Its Atmosphere

I think of this weather as “our weather”  
and the shudder of blood down my lip  
  
as our weather, and when bulldozers  
rip the faces off houses and pitch birds  
  
into the clouds it’s into our atmosphere,  
and the bathtub I pretend-drown in is our  
  
mock shallows, like when we projected  
a movie onto my thighs, or when you ran  
  
to the store in my jeans for pearl onions,  
and that was our bodega where I drew  
  
one twenty dollar bill from the ATM or  
dropped a handful of change from our  
  
envelope, and I think of countless bus  
commutes with a lake over my shoulder  
  
and my purse wedged between our hips,  
how as an early adopter of our madness  
  
I was ready for you to undertake multiple  
sketches of my night feet in your notebook  
  
which looked like one of our sandwiches  
from back when we worked in separate  
  
kitchens across state lines, where weather  
was just another damp apron in the grass.

*Mary Biddinger*

336

---

<sup>336</sup> [Mary Biddinger](#), “[Heaven and Its Atmosphere](#),” [Black Fork Review](#)

from "Heat Waves"

These thoughts are not  
Poetic, death is not  
Answerable, in the bay  
On the night  
Of the 4th of July, a friend's  
Boat capsized, the body  
Not found, in my mind  
He's everywhere that touches  
This sea out the cabin  
Window—that bay  
This sea, the sound—  
Six days later we're  
Out on a similar  
Boat in the strait  
I start seeing the word  
"Dead" in quotes when I  
Hear it  
His body still  
Exists somewhere  
Beneath the blue  
Corruption, a storage  
Of stars

*Cassie Donish*

337

---

<sup>337</sup> [Cassie Donish](#), "[Heat Waves](#)," collected in [The Year of the Femme](#), [University of Iowa Press](#)



## Fast Skirt Blues

*for V.*

You Mama's son. You  
sister's brother. You  
baby's Daddy. You  
woman's husband. You,

take me someplace.  
Help me burn off a midnight crazy.  
The tune in this head as hard

to hold as smoke in my clothes.  
Tell me what ails me, baby.  
I ain't got no shame—that's  
what I say to myself.

I want to teach you the pigmeat  
story this evening. I'm an angel  
stabbed by the point I dance on.

I need the sanctified blues.  
I need the hallelujah nasty.  
Take me there.  
I don't care where we go.

Out past County Line Road  
and a dark field shout.  
On a cracked backseat.

On my big brass bed.  
I don't care.  
I'll sing you the gap-legged  
words the last man heard,

explain how I got born  
with this sorry caul on my face.  
You know a bad girl's gone

pay for her sugar one day:  
I know it,  
God knows it.  
Now, the Devil do, too.

*Honorée Fanonne Jeffers*  
338

---

<sup>338</sup> [Honorée Fanonne Jeffers](#), "Fast Skirt Blues," collected in [Outlandish Blues](#), [Wesleyan University Press](#)

## Simple Story of Illumination

If you press a flashlight to your palm your hand will glow. All stories of illumination are basically the same. It was March, raining bitterly, and I was drunk. You came up behind me. Ear splitting bells rang and a bright light flashed in the North. After this I beheld, and lo, I couldn't count how many times I had waited to be touched in the rain, behind the barn, fingers of wet matches striking softly. No one could number the tall grass purring against my calves. I looked into a foggy distance: The farmer held an old bath towel with which he rubbed, one-by-one, his flock of lambs dry. I wondered how I might come to his aid, but thought instead to be left alone, wet and catching cold. Then I heard beasts and men alike, and all that is in them, singing. Who are these mad creatures we refuse to put down, and why was I so affrighted to abandon my mind and rise up in song? I walked home, drew a bath, then disappeared into the couch. Later, I followed you to the bedroom and undressed. Before me you made the shadow of a man and I was not afraid.

*Paige Ackerson-Kiely*

339

---

<sup>339</sup> [Paige Ackerson-Kiely](#), "[Simple Story of Illumination](#)," collected in [Dolefully, a Rampart Stands](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## Cathedral

My summer quarter students loved that story's  
ending when the blind man puts his hands  
on the narrator's as he draws a cathedral  
to show him what it's like.

When I see Cory at the elevator, this is what  
I think of. Here we are in coats and boots  
after only seeing each other when  
it was 100 degrees and we couldn't believe  
we had class. Blindness kept coming up,  
not as something real, but as a symbol.  
Like in *Oedipus*, which Cory liked  
but didn't believe. How could Oedipus not  
have seen? I don't think I believed it either,  
but then I dated a man addicted to drugs  
and checked out books with titles like *Cocaine*,  
thinking I could fix him. One night,  
I had money in my purse, and when he left,  
I didn't, and still I had to lie down  
and stare at the light fixture until I saw spots  
before I could admit it.

Cory has PTSD and can't sit close to other  
students. I know the kind of thing  
that sets him off, like when Steve comes in  
late and tries to participate even though  
he hasn't done the reading and halfway through  
takes some pills and walks around the room.  
Cory wants to kill him. I liked that class.  
Linda brought Michael rhubarb, John's shirt  
kept coming open. It was the hottest July  
we've had, and the sky was full of smoke  
from all the fires. I almost told them.

Laura Read

340

---

<sup>340</sup> Laura Read, "[Cathedral](#)," [Rock & Sling](#), collected in [Dresses from the Old Country](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Bourrée

At the opening of Act II  
in *Giselle*, everyone dancing is  
dead or soon will be, and because  
dancers pound new pointe shoes  
on concrete to muffle the sound  
made when they touch the floor,  
the Queen of the Wills bourrées  
across the stage without appearing  
to move her feet—like the hands  
of a clock that say *six*, then *eight*,  
though we never see them shift, never  
hear them speak. Across the photograph,  
my great-grandparents and their twelve children  
arrange themselves in rows, hieroglyphs  
I can't read or pronounce, although behind  
them to the right is firewood they have  
gathered—loosely stacked, limbs  
overlapped—and my grandmother's  
elbow nudges the gray sparrows bathing  
in dust. St. Erkenwald discovered  
the tomb of someone buried before the time  
of Christ, and since the body was  
incorrupt, he and the dead man discussed  
whether people who lived before Christ  
could be saved; when a tear from Erkenwald  
fell on the body, church bells rang,  
and the body withered to  
dust. After her bath,  
my mother would paw the white  
powder with her puff, then pat  
between her legs, beneath  
her arms and breasts the way  
a ballerina's pointe shoes strike  
the stage, deer running through  
duff in the forest or rain  
hitting dust, on which, if your ear  
is close enough, you can hear  
the rain pronounced.

Angie Estes

341

---

<sup>341</sup> Angie Estes, "Bourrée," *Green Mountains Review*, collected in *Tryst*, Oberlin College Press

And Still We Gather with Infinite Momentum

The Promised LAN is the name  
of a wireless network that pops up  
on my phone as we drive 250 near  
Wooster in flurries, in almost-dark,

while cops wave us past with  
lighted batons that signal incident,  
that motion please-look-at-this  
catastrophe. And there it is,

framed by silent fire trucks  
banked on the side of the road:  
a candy apple red car flipped  
in a ditch and crushed,

roof flattened, windows  
blown out. The lights  
of emergency vehicles  
flash yellow, blue, white,

make the night dangerously  
festive, give the surrounding  
houses, with their inflatables  
and LED icicles, their luminaries

and their radiant nativity sets  
a run for their money. The men  
with neon flares windmill  
their glowing arms to assure us

we are all under the care  
of strangers—earlier, the IHOP  
waitress with the whiskey voice  
named Mary who told us

we brought the sunshine,  
then the hostesses dressed  
as elves smoking in the parking lot  
of the next-door Pilot, flirting

with truckers. Was it an Amish  
buggy that distracted the driver  
of that car? Deer prancing  
across the asphalt at dusk?

It is almost Christmas  
and everyone is in on the act,  
even the radio, even this accident.  
On an overpass nearby in red

spray paint: I LOVE YOU BABYDOLL.  
We love you babydoll. We love you  
person on a gurney. Get well soon.  
We drive past your wreckage

without stopping while everyone's  
signals cross: default, linksys, virus,  
GodisGreat, youfoundme, getlost,  
JEMguest, batcave, funkchance.

*Erika Meitner*

342

---

<sup>342</sup> [Erika Meitner](#), "[And Still We Gather with Infinite Momentum](#)," *Forklift, Ohio*, collected in *Holy Moly Carry Me*, [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## Calling Robert Bly

We're reading "In Danger from the Outer World"  
in my graduate seminar and somebody asks,  
    "I know what all the bad stuff in the poem is—  
the fire, the water, the plane crash, the grave—  
    but what's this 'shining thing' inside us  
that 'shakes its bamboo bars'?" and I say,

    "Ummm, the unconscious mind?" and somebody else says,  
"Maybe it's the soul," and a fourth person sneers  
    and says, "A poet like Robert Bly wouldn't believe  
in a stupid idea like that," and the third person  
    says, "You're not Robert Bly, how do you know  
what Robert Bly believes?" and the fourth says,

    "You're not me, how do you know what I know?"  
so to keep the peace, I interrupt with  
    the standard English professor's joke:  
"Hey, too bad we can't just call the poet up  
    and ask him what he meant, huh?"  
and then I think, Wait a minute,

    we're not talking about Wordsworth here,  
and since it's break time anyway,  
    I say, "Okay, everybody, come on up  
to my office, we're gonna call Robert Bly!"  
    and I leg it upstairs with my students  
shuffling along behind and grab my copy

    of the *Directory of American Poets* and sure enough,  
there's a Robert Bly in a town called Moose Lake,  
    Minnesota, and I dial the number,  
and a woman answers, and I say, "Can I speak  
    to Robert Bly!" and she says, "Just a minute!"  
and then this voice says, "Hello!"

    and I say, "Mr. Bly?" and the voice at the other end says, "Yes?"  
and I introduce myself and we chat a bit and then  
    I tell him we're reading this poem of his  
called "In Danger from the Outer World,"  
    only nobody gets this one image, and can he  
explain it to us, and he says, "Aw, you know!"

    It's the soul of the human spirit—something like that!"  
I turn to the students, but by this time most of them  
    have drifted away to the bathroom or the coffee machine,  
so I cover the receiver and say to no one,  
    "Mr. Bly says I'm right—it is the unconscious mind!"  
and I look out the window as far as I can

and imagine Robert Bly sitting there with his phone in his hand  
and all of America between us, the line  
    going out through Benevolence, Georgia, where a woman  
who has just finished baking a buttermilk pie  
    for a family dinner the next day  
decided it isn't enough and starts to make a second;

then on to Difficult, Tennessee, where one man  
has just sold his car to another and is now taking  
    a photo of the new owner alongside his new vehicle;  
then Knob Lick, Kentucky, where a man is having sex  
    with a woman who is younger than he is  
and doesn't love him anymore, though she hasn't told him yet;

and Goreville, Illinois,  
where two men tell a third they're going to whip his ass,  
    and he startles them when he shrugs and says,  
"Go ahead"; and then Vesper, Wisconsin,  
    where a child is dying of acute myeloid leukemia,  
and his parents can't do a thing about it.

In the darkness outside Robert Bly's cabin, a moose  
is cropping ferns, his leathery flap of an upper lip  
    closing over the fronds as delicately  
as a lady's hand picking up a tea cake,  
    and he looks up, startled, when Robert Bly  
laughs at something I've said, and then

Robert Bly says, "How are your students—are they any good?"  
and I say, "They are, though they seem  
    a little tired tonight," and he says,  
"Are they good writers?" and I say,  
    "Yeah, most of them," and he says,  
"How about you—you a writer?"

and whatever I say makes Mr. Bly laugh again really loudly,  
but this time the moose just keeps eating,  
    finishing its little patch of ostrich ferns  
and sniffing the night air and thinking, Umm—asparagus!  
    and then stepping off, graceful as a skater,  
toward the lake it can't see but knows is there.

David Kirby  
343

---

<sup>343</sup> David Kirby, "Calling Robert Bly," *Salt Hill*, collected in *The Ha-Ha*, Louisiana State University Press



## Funding the Arts and Sciences

Don't be a baby  
about the bugs behind the leaves  
*Oh no I am thinking about the bugs behind the leaves  
at the same time that I am looking at the bugs  
behind the leaves and I am even thinking  
about looking at the bugs behind the leaves  
Surely I shall perish!*  
That is your problem, child  
Baby it's not a real problem not like my problem  
of wilting desire  
and I am the fucking sun  
Your problem is like you find a dent in your can  
My problem is like an electric can opener  
It turns on and it buzzes forever  
in the expensive space station  
No one can go home

*Heather Christle*

344

---

344 [Heather Christle](#), "[Funding the Arts and Sciences](#)," [Southeast Review](#)

A Brief History of Now and at Least a Good Elbow's Worth of Headroom

It was heaven there for a minute  
without you  
but let's not talk about me.  
Let's talk about the year  
of nights that left scars  
soft as a finger down new suede.  
You talk first & I'll listen  
to music pulse thru invisible hair  
inside my veins. Let's talk  
about a tongue's open sky drawn  
full of holes left by glitch-gone stars  
across lips smooth as knots  
in lemonwood & cast iron tea  
cups full of molten silver. Let's talk  
about that ox bow vein I love  
under your tongue & the ghostly taste of elm  
you say I leave in your mouth. The night

sky spins pink into spiral shells and moonless fields

of fluid in the inner ear. Let's roll backward  
as if the last Golgotha moth  
might still lift up  
off the dusted tip of Ptolemy's  
cat nose. Let's keep key insights  
in mind. The day you couldn't recognize  
yourself & we tried to repair  
the antique mirror. Let's flip a coin  
for who wears the satin mask  
we found behind the glass.  
Let's talk as if all that's behind us  
is an empty web & a blind hole  
where lead wore away.  
You be the bent nails. I'll be the rusted wire.  
You **BE?** wind that caught a wing of eyes  
in dawn's hollow-boned chest & I'll be  
the death-song of the flightless  
bird. Let's both talk at once, the crimson monsoon  
of 1021 that salved the mad mind of Caliph  
Al-Hakim & reversed the flow  
of the Nile. I'll persecute the astrologers  
& burn all the women's shoes. You be the sister  
with the knife at my throat. Let's play a game  
& go on under our breath ad infinitum  
back til gull-winds expose the tomb door

& cursive drifts of white feathers

veil openings to the cave.  
Let's dive in the leaves on the count of three  
& use any voice we can for the miracle  
that we both fell  
between bamboo spikes in the pit. Recall  
Rimbaud's father outside Tunis  
holed up at the walled fort. You take the voice  
that could crack a skull & turn  
it on a heavy wheel in his son's head.  
I'll take wet clay  
& fire pitched by yellow wings glazed in arsenic.  
Inch close if you're going to talk me down  
when I'm whipped wild & half-hinged,  
a busted shutter  
blown thru by mad light  
in the brain. Speak low when your voice shifts  
like torchlight  
on a herd of stolen camels  
painted with tar & doused with paraffin.  
Let's change these fool minds  
between every syllable  
like they're bareback on a roan  
riding a death-bright web of flame

thru the drop-gate of the Sultan. Let's use aesthetics

of the past like "everyone goes deep." Pass routes  
in a street ball huddle  
go thru along dirt paths  
on the palm of the biggest boy's hand.  
Let's ride for the black crystal  
crown of flint & attack  
the equilibrium Sirius before it dawns on us  
that it blew long before dawn  
in the human head.  
Let's play charts of lost scales  
from Shiva's flute, songs  
of Somnath in flames & the truce  
between Seljuk & Mahmud of Ghazna.  
Let's charge and sing ourselves blind  
& numb as sunlight on bleached femurs.  
Let's surrender like perfect critics  
stutter-stunned  
back into this rag tag dance of stolen flesh  
laced with tongue-along-feather  
songs drawn back by clan archers turned musicians  
& Firdawsi's miracle-field metered

by raw knuckles & the rhythm of poppies

in bloom. You were saying? I'm there & back  
here like hell & gone again & your hand up  
under my jeans worn-torn & soft  
as the faded fringe of blue.  
Look, you hum me, I'll find  
your pulse like we're lost in the dark,  
like blood in a green vein, the dead taste of money  
& a sharp whiff of cordite & opium  
khaki-packed on a donkey  
& led untouched through a stone maze  
in Ishkashim on its way to a high path  
thru Pamir. "C Major Wars" from last week's TLS  
enfolded in a burka's secret  
pocket. Quiet as an elbow-cradle  
for a GPS grip duct taped on a Kalashnikov stock,  
the silent slide of a tongue along  
skin tone  
from across the room til every cut's been cut  
again with the vibrato of piano  
wire strung across the path of an eyelash  
blown from the back of a stranger's  
hand. Let it all course in us & touch me  
like Doppler drone  
from a neon cell phone  
  
thrown from a balcony at the first blood on dawn's open lips.

*Ed Pavlić*  
345

---

<sup>345</sup> [Ed Pavlić, "A Brief History of Now and at Least a Good Elbow's Worth of Headroom,"](#) collected in [Labors Lost Left Unfinished](#), Sheep Meadow Press

## Vertigo from an Open Window Overlooking a Sodium Light

1.

In a book published in Buenos Aires  
at the turn of the century, I read  
that Columbus was convinced the New World  
was the site of the Garden of Eden.  
He had dreams in which he picked  
oranges off overloaded trees,  
bit into them, and tasted the milk  
of paradise—sweet and bright.  
And other dreams in which Oriental  
girls in silk pantaloons, with small,  
rounded breasts, dug for gold  
in deep mines under his direction.  
By day, gout-ridden, besotted with rum,  
he stamped the quarterdeck,  
railing at his men and cursing the sun.  
On the ceiling of his cabin  
his brother Bartholomew had painted  
as enormous octopus, perched on  
a mountaintop, a gleaming, upright  
sword in each of its tentacles;  
over the swords, eight angels hovered.  
I lost this book on an airplane  
and could never find another copy.

2.

Last night on the subway a man  
in a bowling jacket, his cheeks  
pockmarked, was reading a book  
entitled *Sex and the Outer Planets*,  
using an orange gum wrapper as a page-marker.  
The gum he was chewing vigorously.  
On the back of his head, reflected  
in the window, the shadow  
of a spider crawled rapidly—  
like a tattoo come to life.  
A puddle was forming around his scuffed  
boots, the rainwater dripping from  
his cuffs in an irregular syncopation,  
each drop setting off a ripple  
that caught the violent yellow lights  
flashing through the windows  
as we screeched along the Lexington  
Avenue tunnel deep within  
the bedrock of Manhattan Island.  
When he got off at Twenty-third Street,

he left his book on the seat;  
at Fourteenth Street another man  
sat down, opened it to the page marked  
by the gum wrapper, and started reading,  
tapping his foot in the puddle.

3.

Up and down the narrow street  
the trees are black and blue.  
Mist drifts in from the river.  
The streetlight hisses softly, with a pink glow.  
A remote, tingling current runs from my groin  
to the base of my skull.  
In the tight cave of my thorax  
my organs—kidneys, liver, spleen,  
and lungs—seem to be pressing  
up hard against one another.  
No room down there tonight for “feelings,”  
for “the soul” in any of its subtle forms.  
Is this the first manifestation of serious illness?  
A quick foreshadowing of you-know-what?  
More to the point, I’m growing dizzy.  
Ashes under my tongue.  
Wrists pulsing.  
In my hand there is a black book  
I have never seen before,  
which I found on the windowsill  
beside my bed.  
It is opened to an unnumbered  
page containing a single  
sentence, vertically:  
*You*  
*are*  
*falling*

*Nicholas Christopher*  
346

---

<sup>346</sup> Nicholas Christopher, “[Vertigo from an Open Window Overlooking a Sodium Light](#),” collected in [In the Year of the Comet](#), Penguin Books

Freddy Krueger

Fuck this rain, man. You want a smoke?  
Here, take one. At least it fills you up with  
something. Gives you some heat. I'd give  
you the shirt off my back if you needed.  
I'd buy you a house if I won the prize. I'm  
a generous man underneath it. For real,  
I was bullied by this guy once. I let him in  
my apartment. He said he was a friend,  
an acquaintance. He took my body apart.  
Fucked up my room real good. Broke  
all my shit, shattered my glass plates. Now  
I walk with this gimpy leg. I know I look  
homeless. I know I look like a weirdo to  
people. I've got this shoulder blade thing.  
I can't feel my face on the right side. It's  
useless to try and press charges. It's just  
Freddy Krueger, man. It's some kind of  
nightmare I can't get away from. I've been  
punching air, I've just been swinging. It's  
like I'm not even here. These citizens  
look right through me. They walk and  
keep walking. I could have been a real  
person. I could have changed my life.  
I'm not retarded. I know what I see when  
I look in the mirror. I met the devil, man.  
Straight up. He said he was looking to  
buy some weed. Hang out. I used to do  
music. I used to have a hip-hop thing in  
Detroit. This was back in the day. Like  
1996. We used to do shows. We used to  
play skateparks and run-down houses,  
anyone's party. I heard him knock and I  
opened the door. He broke me in half,  
took all my records and shit, my widescreen  
TV. He did what he wanted. The floor  
of my room started shining. It looked like  
a layer of stars. Like a hole made of liquid  
glass. Sometimes at night there's a shine  
over there on the street. I can see it from  
my window. Right under the taco stand.  
It's safe over there when the shine comes  
down. At least then I know I'm not dreaming.

*Kai Carlson-Wee*

347

---

<sup>347</sup> [Kai Carlson-Wee](#), "[Freddy Krueger](#)," [AGNI](#), collected in [Rail](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## Thoughts on Wisteria

You were my Maud Gonne. When black ink won.  
Ran down my page like a throat slashed: attack.  
You were my bassinet. When the bough swung  
down came our rock-a-bye, baby, and all those  
blue-reds swum their orb-lights against fences  
as cop's cars pulled their immediacy alongside  
my house when you were the fence the drunk  
driver smashed into in that ice-age, knocked at  
an angle that cracked the frozen plastic of PVC  
fencing jaggedly, still in half, it was your winter.

Once, you were nearly mine, bar lights dimmed,  
but the mode of attack I always relied on dumb.  
Another drink, this time a mojito. You sniffed its  
sugars, downed it, then turned to grind the hip  
of the girl the room liked least. I'm still shoveling  
snow. I stubbed my toe. I fell down some stairs.  
One might have thought I was no one. No matter  
the nightgown. I was never meant to be your girl.  
The snow plows are out. They are coming for me.  
And how my envy grows like a tree. Summer me!

The wisteria begins as a vine, becomes a tree,  
though needs more years than our species has  
for it to give us notice of its blossoms, allow our  
noses to ride its fine fragrance as delinquent bees  
do now on hovering my neighbor's heavily piling  
of growth, a vine that centuries into a tree. It is  
terrible sweet. Who decides that which is flower,  
that which is weed? I'm begging its trespass into  
my yard, ply its errant length along my fence, try  
tying it to me. Yet, long ago the stink of a polluted sea

found its own accommodation, long moved its lank  
figure within our orbit, as smoke from my cigarette  
crawled in wisps through our final barroom brawl.  
Can I not be anything but maudlin. Snow's never  
over. Nor are blossoms gone. Glasses forever itch in  
cupboards to be filled with wine as mouths in dark  
plot to be kissed. Recall how you once suggested I  
sit by the sea to relax? I failed to admit the beach  
here is littered with syringes. This is my good-bye.  
I wish I lived in a little house by the sea. But I do.

*Cate Marvin*

348

---

<sup>348</sup> [Cate Marvin](#), "[Thoughts on Wisteria](#)," [Tin House](#), collected in [Oracle](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)



Cincinnati, 1947

Jackie Robinson knew what he was in for when he signed with the Dodgers. He'd talked to a few other Negroes. They said it was the same everywhere so he might as well get paid to take it.

Teammates passed around petitions to get rid of him. He sat by himself. Ate alone. Sometimes on the road he'd go into Darktown just to shoot some pool and be slightly famous.

One day in Cincinnati, the fans spit on him, swear at him, throw bottles. Pee Wee Reese trots over, puts his arm around Robinson's shoulders and the stands go quiet.

Reese says, "Don't let em get to you."  
Robinson replies, "What the fuck do you know?"

Reese's hand comes off the shoulder and the jeers start again. He puts it back and they stop. Off/on. Off/on.

Robinson could tell Reese liked it. The power he had even if at that moment he was barely batting .200 and every cheap twist in every city said he wasn't called Pee Wee for nothing.

*Ron Koertge*  
349

---

<sup>349</sup> [Ron Koertge](#), "[Cincinnati, 1947](#)," [Slipstream](#), collected in [The Ogre's Wife](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

## The Planet of Dandar

Prismed through the scrim of my mother's Japanese accent, I think dandelions are *Dandarians*. *Dan-dare-ee-uns*. Futuristic, alien—like something named after late-night B-movie space creatures from an undiscovered planet.

Maybe this is why the disturbingly lurid fronds seem *too* yellow to me. They *seethe*, I believe, with a feverishly incandescent radioactivity. I'm convinced this explains the obsessive, anxiety-laced fervor with which my parents uproot them from our lawn. As if under threat of colonization.

(Years later, reading Ray Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine*, I'm shocked at the thought of imbibing dandelions as alcoholic libation. I always secretly assumed dandelions were *poisonous*. I'm convinced it must be a hoax. I begin to distrust the boundaries between Bradbury's literary fiction and his science fiction.)

Because I'm the only one in my kindergarten class who can read and write, there's shock and fallout when my confusion over *Dandarians* and *dandelions* is discovered. I receive special coaching. Slowly and loudly, as if I have suddenly become impaired: "You say *dandy*. Then say *lion*."

At home, because it seems important, I pass this secret knowledge on to my mother: "You have to say *dandy*," I tell her. "Then say *lion*." Her slap flares a stung handprint on my cheek like alien handprints in the TV show *Roswell*. "I'm the mother," she says. "You the daughter." As if that explains everything. As if in another year or so I won't make phone calls on her behalf, pretending to be my own mother so she won't have to struggle to make herself understood to hairdressers, pharmacists, the PTA. Can they really *not* understand her? Or do they simply willfully refuse to *comprehend*?

I am five. I understand I've hurt my mother's feelings without meaning to. I understand Dandarians are toxically radioactive. Just not in the ways I'd originally thought.

And so when I tell you I'm an alien—a Dandarian, hailing from the planet Dandar—I am, of course, mostly joking. But not entirely. When I tell you I'm radioactive, it's mostly a posture. But not entirely. On Dandar, we are partial to the theme song from *Hawaii Five-O*. We like the color yellow. All the best dresses chosen by mothers for daughters come in the color yellow. We eat *osembei* and sometimes *mochi* after school with hot green tea, speak our very own pidgin English at the kitchen table when my father's at the office. My father doesn't approve—maybe because our pidgin's sometimes laced with the best new swear words I've learned at school. We never, ever answer the phone without proper deployment of the Secret Code. Here's my universal translation device. Although when fog threads the streets like a rough, shaggy yarn too unruly to slip through the eye of a sewing needle, the reception becomes white static and everything garbles to Babel.

Half-life.

Decay.

This is my ray gun.

Do you know the Secret Code?

Lee Ann Roripaugh  
350

---

<sup>350</sup> Lee Ann Roripaugh, "The Planet of Dandar," *Platte Valley Review*, collected in [Dandarians](#), Milkweed Editions

## House of Stars

Maria's standing like a man,  
one hundred pounds

poured into a slippery T-shirt  
the color of mushrooms,

helping Joey tune the  
'67 Pontiac

he'll sell for two thousand  
the year he's out of work.

They build pyramids  
in our home, teach

why the Aztecs  
held so many hearts.

In the bathroom,  
a motor roars,

Dad's body  
constantly oiled.

*Diana Marie Delgado*

351

---

<sup>351</sup> [Diana Marie Delgado](#), "[House of Stars](#)," collected in [Tracing the Horse](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## In the Lonely Universe

the moon gets up as usual,  
heads for the refrigerator or bathroom,  
then lies awake, longing for  
the Xanax it resembles.  
Sex is a fantasy and a spasm.  
Music is a slasher movie,  
beauty stalked by horror.  
Single notes aren't really single;  
they're out on the sidewalks sipping lattes  
with their flats and sharps,  
their invisible naturals.  
That song about Galileo and reincarnation  
sends you into hysteria  
at warp speed.  
So do green Toyota trucks,  
each with your ex at the wheel.  
You open the box with the new lamp  
and the packing explodes  
into Styroflakes, clinging all over you.  
It's white in the lonely universe.  
Also, you have to assemble things  
following instructions in a language  
that doesn't quite exist.  
Please rate the last movie you rented  
using our system of stars. Upstairs  
the newlyweds vacuum late into the night.

*Kim Addonizio*  
352

---

<sup>352</sup> Kim Addonizio, "[In the Lonely Universe](#)," collected in [Lucifer at the Starlite](#), W. W. Norton & Company

## When You Didn't Call

I listened to a woman on the bus (*three billion heartbeats equal a lifetime*). I fell in love with Puccini, every *isole*, every high-pitched

wail. In a drugstore a man approached me, holding a bottle: *Is this for the hair?*  
What confused him were the words *builds body*.

I can't believe it, I barely heard, beneath my bedroom window. You didn't call and I reached for my Magic 8-Ball. All

it could say? *Try again later*. It poured. It poured and got colder. A flock of birds squeaked in a tree. I dreamed

of a high place, miles of granite.  
We are like that, I thought, black like a starling, white like a flowering hawthorn.

Martha Silano  
353

---

<sup>353</sup> Martha Silano, "[When You Didn't Call](#)," [Hanging Loose](#), collected in [What the Truth Tastes Like](#), Two Sylvias Press

## The Sun Also Lonely

When I drink milk less lonely  
When I hear the upstairs neighbor walk across my bed less lonely  
Or take a shower in unison with him less lonely  
And keep the nightlight on though I'm well past childhood  
Though I have an encyclopedia and a globe  
And stash KY Jelly in my nightstand  
And have chapped lips from kissing the back of my hand  
Though I fall in love with a good nut-bread  
Though I have a picture of a woman on a keychain  
Though she's smaller than a thumbprint and already dead  
Though I sometimes share my bed with a poodle less lonely  
And convince myself less lonely  
That ultra-white teeth and wrinkle cream less lonely  
And strip my bikini line less lonely  
And stand too close to strangers on the elevator  
And go to a tailor who touches my breasts  
Though I eat breakfast with the television  
And have a limitless cellular plan  
Or listen to my earbones crack  
Or chew the insides of my cheeks  
Or hear my neighbor hum during sex with someone less lonely  
Or wait less lonely for the sun to break

*Hadara Bar-Nadav*

354

---

<sup>354</sup> [Hadara Bar-Nadav](#), "[The Sun Also Lonely](#)," collected in [The Frame Called Ruin](#), [New Issues Press](#)

## Sword Fight

Well fuck: These my thrusts: Aren't smartest

Like those: Though true they too try hard:

You don't do it once: You do it

Badly and as to: How to fold:

I call my ma: My finger glows:

I have a home: I see a show:

When what you have is sex to sell:

You sell the sex: Seamy under

Best-dressed dukes: Oh alien go

Back: If back you have: And I my

Socks put on and never cry: Can't

Be the meds: Cause it's all gone:

We call it strong: Who cares might call

It cold: You learn it how it's told

Around the TV when you're small:

To make comfort: Necessity:

A sewing of the thumb into

The glove: A trying to make work:

For hands: Which quit their selves to creep

Across the road: And ugh poor: Them:

Creatures dumb: Defenseless: We grab

The nearest chance: Why do we: Dream

Bad: Why selfish mutter: Mother:

Pronounce: If the children vary

Their sentences: Very well then eat  
The children up: A real nightmare:  
I slipped a rock in through my nose:  
It reached my brain where turned my mind  
To stone: The scan shows a statue  
Strict uncondutor in the storm:  
Sword raised: Lucky worker: Sings out:  
Why do it small: Why it at all:

*Cecily Iddings*  
355

---

<sup>355</sup> [Cecily Iddings](#), "[Sword Fight](#)," [The Volta](#), collected in [Is To: As: Is To](#), [Spooky Girlfriend Press](#)



## Having Left

Like my grandfather, I keep eagles.  
Who believes in spiritual horseshit?  
There is a common misconception  
about Indian people, namely everything,

but especially sadness. One summer  
the pepper tree rotted, black and twisted  
licorice crawling up the ground  
of my grandmother's garden—a reminder

my grandfather was not my grandfather  
by blood. Bikini Kill had an album called  
*Reject All American*, which was not as good  
as the CD *Version of the First Two Records*

or *Pussy Whipped*, but yielded "R.I.P."  
People die. Sometimes a song reminds  
us about pink peppers. I feel inexorably  
American, in Paris, Brooklyn, Berlin,

the reservation, despite vodka and liberal arts.  
There is a common misconception about  
Indians, namely everything, but especially  
when pink pepper trees grow cagelike  
in the valley, eagle screeching steward,  
and he in a graveyard

and I'm not there.

Tommy Pico  
356

---

<sup>356</sup> Tommy Pico, "Having Left," collected in [Brooklyn Poets Anthology](#), Brooklyn Arts Press

## Bombshell

I know I'm a man, with my bulldozer and my dozens of illegitimate children, and the way I explode in the microwave and glow under a black light, but all I really want is to be your pretty lady. I used to look in the mirror as a child and imagine myself as a princess, a princess with hair made of cotton candy like Princess Lolly from Candy Land—the kind of lady with a liquid metal exoskeleton and a hypotenuse whose length is impossible to calculate, who comes down the chimney once a year and metastasizes so quickly that radiation can't stop her.

*Sarah Galvin*

357

---

<sup>357</sup> Sarah Galvin, "[Bombshell](#)," collected in [The Three Einsteins](#), [Poor Claudia](#)

Terrible things are happening...

Terrible things are happening  
in Russian novels!

Just yesterday I heard  
in the cafe

of two peasants, long friends,

one in sudden possession  
of a watch  
hanging  
from a gold chain

which so disturbed his compadre  
he stole  
upon the other unsuspecting, prayed  
to god

and slit his throat, fleeing  
with the watch—  
and that's not the worst of it!

Just yesterday my love and I too  
had not exactly a "fight"

but a "reckoning"  
perhaps, or no—a

"conversation" which opened the ocean  
of grief

and now she is in another city  
perhaps crying

and not because of Russian novels

*Maureen N. McLane*  
358

---

<sup>358</sup> [Maureen N. McLane](#), "[Terrible things are happening...](#)," [The New Yorker](#), collected in [Same Life](#), Farrar, Straus and Giroux

## In Portuguese

the word for suicide is suicide, but the most heavily accented syllable is the third—su-i-CHEE-day. So until someone stops me I'll translate suicide as "your city." Where you have gone. Where I won't send this.

Leading away from the city, a suicide note = footprints in snow. No one shelters in forest opposite the last house (an A-frame with lights still burning). No one presses into the pattern differently-weighted boots. When a suicide doesn't leave a note, the porch light finds only snow.

Historical Note 1: Another delicious note goes the rounds. Virginia Woolf's, por exemplo—she sounds so like herself. At another day's end we redact finance, war, something about shoes. Music drifts through. I've got scissors in hand but haven't killed Virginia. She can't seem to kill me. I guess we're friends now, even though she's dead.

*Terri Witek*  
359

---

359 [Terri Witek](#), "In Portuguese," [The Ilanot Review](#), collected in [Body Switch](#), Orchises Press

On a Late-Night Encounter with a Barefoot College Student Wearing Only a Party Dress and a Man's  
Blazer

For blocks my shadow held her  
and when I turned, she jumped

behind a telephone pole or a wall  
until she decided she wanted me to know,

feet slapping the pavement as she came up

behind me and put her hands  
over my eyes to say "guess who"

I greeted her as if nothing was  
wrong, but asked what she was doing

and where she'd come from

Her words, beveled edges,  
her sentences uroboric—

A party A jerk Day drinking

then all of a sudden it was  
night and she wanted to

walk alone, like a haunt

I offered to drive her home  
My friends, to buy her something to eat

"Can we go to your house  
and hang out?" she asked "I don't want to  
go back"

No No, but let's get you home  
No, but I think you're done

She wanted to keep walking then  
if I was going to be like that

The town locked up, windows  
Light-quiet

except for the Lincoln Diner, 7-11, and the frats

spilled onto the lawns and Battlefield  
park and campus twos and threes passing

with jeers when her dress fell down  
and revealed her

We pulled it back up I thought of her classmate's

poem about a girl  
getting raped by a soccer player then

We insisted We got saltines and Advil and ginger ale  
at the 7-11 and we got her in the car

The poem was about a freshman who had gone  
to a party and has had a hard time

leaving since,  
another girl in the class said, "Girls

get raped all the time here I don't know why  
this time was so special"

After class I cried in my office

We offered to take my student

to the campus police or home—

her choice She cried in the back seat wanting

to know if I was going to fail her  
I said I wasn't I didn't

but in truth I really don't know

*Emilia Phillips*  
360

---

<sup>360</sup> [Emilia Phillips](#), "[On a Late-Night Encounter with a Barefoot College Student Wearing Only a Party Dress and a Man's Blazer](#)," collected in [Empty Clip](#), [University of Akron Press](#)

## Seven Beds Six Cities Eight Weeks

Yesterday I began writing a poem in The Book of Nothing called

“Facebook or the End of Espionage.” The first line, “They already know all about you,” is all I wrote. Then, nothing.

By “yesterday” I might mean last year. This is a characteristic problem with reportage.

Many true things are difficult to write or offensive to others but The Book of Nothing is not intended for a general audience so I can write anything but I suspect the idea of a “general audience” might be offensive & fallacious.

For example, I got into trouble with a collaborative, collaged, lyric essay that I wrote with AG. We hurt B’s feelings so we apologized & took out all references to B. (B’s not even her real initial.) Even so, B said she was shocked & saddened that we’d used her story as “creative fodder.”

I take The Book of Nothing with me when I leave the city. It isn’t heavy, is hardly anything. Even so, everything is changed by its presence.

Once I told someone, Poetry is my way of making sense of my surroundings, of paying attention.

I might have said that more than once or never. I can’t remember. And to whom?

Fodder:

- 1) something fed to domestic animals; especially: coarse food for cattle, horses, or sheep
- 2) inferior or readily available material used to supply a heavy demand

Whereas writing prose, I said, requires that I shut out the world. I could be anywhere.

Supposedly, Jonathan Franzen wrote *The Corrections* blindfolded in his basement. Or was that David Foster Wallace writing *Girl with Curious Hair*?

Jim Galvin said, Writing prose is just typing. He said it right after I’d told him how much I liked his book *The Meadow*.

The Book of Nothing briefly adopts a pastoral soundtrack but cannot maintain it.

The Book of Nothing is not a poem. It is also not not a poem. It is nothing, after all.

My friend Ilana has fluid in the tissue around her lungs & heart that cannot be drained. Also a tumor in her brain & several metastases. But she is living. Not nothing. Not for nothing. Nothing to sneeze at. Nothing is as nothing does.

I knew something was wrong but didn’t want to ask anyone for fear of seeming like the stupid city girl. The cow’s belly was twitching & convulsing & her eyes were closed, her neck at an odd angle. The other three cows in the pen gathered around her as I approached & then scattered to the far edges when I came closer. Finally I worked up the courage to ask the young woman sweeping out another pen & she told me the cow had been treated earlier in the day & just as she said that the cow keeled over & fell, with a thud, on her side.

Thud, I thought, “Thud” is the name of that sound.

The cow had been treated for pneumonia & was lying on her side in the mucky pen. One thousand pounds down, I thought. Her breath was white vapor around her snout. Labored breathing, someone said. The cow grew quiet, then shuddered & relaxed.

Might not make it, said the camp director who’d been called over by a counselor.

That cow’s dead, I thought.

Might not make it till evening, he said.

The poet John Ashbery is nowhere in sight but as far as I know, living.

My friend has decided to decide by the end of June whether to get married or break up. What if the fact that I have so many doubts means getting married is the wrong choice? he asks. I try to explain the idea of a characteristic dilemma. I say, How could you not have doubts?

I’ve been married for eleven years & thirteen days.

I am asked to write a blurb for a book by a poet I know slightly.

I like the lines, “this room / will always be the ghost of right now for as long as we carry it.” I like the whole book, which has a spooky, sensual immediacy. But I hate writing blurbs.

CNN online reports that a seven-year-old boy went swimming with his family at a local pond. On the way home the boy seemed unusually tired & asked to lie down. A few hours later the boy died, in his bed, from drowning. The story says unusual fatigue or changes in behavior can be signs of water in the lungs.

I decide this story has no place in The Book of Nothing but it’s too late now.

I decide to write a series of prose poems about everything I can remember from my childhood. Each poem will be a distilled snapshot of my past which disappears as I watch. I cannot think of a single memory.

I write: Does one’s memory degrade more quickly and more completely if one has children?

The director climbed into the pen & patted the cow’s belly & then kicked the cow. Not gently, not hard, in the side. He covered the animal with a blue tarp just as the Peapods & Seedlings entered the barn to pick up their backpacks.

Yesterday I saw a cow die, I say to my friend Erin on the phone. I’m sure that will end up in a poem, Erin says.

I decide that this exchange is how I will begin the essay about teaching poetry workshops that I’ve been asked to write, if I decide to write that essay. I might decline the assignment in which case I should stop wasting time thinking about how to support my argument that description is fundamental to good writing.





The Book of Nothing would address the question “what is work,” if there were time for such investigations.

I have nothing nice to say about Denver.

The poet likes the blurb I wrote. The microessay is still one sentence, but I changed “yesterday” to “today” for a greater sense of immediacy.

What is work?

As instructed, I have registered my treatment for a reality-TV game show with the Screen Writers Guild. It has been six weeks since the prospective agent promised to call me the next day. I am also waiting for a response from a parenting magazine about an essay I wrote about teaching poetry to young children. Tomorrow we leave for Wisconsin.

On Ilana’s caringbridge.org site she describes her treatment & symptoms & state of mind. In The Book of Nothing I write: “REALITY SHOW.”

Specifically I am trying to decide whether or not to return to the novel I began writing four years ago & dropped after sixty pages & two years or whether to work on my nonfiction memoir that three agents praised & rejected. Or to start something new. Or not to write at all. Hence or instead, The Book of Nothing.

Wayne says this is a characteristic problem.

Arielle says I’m a whiner. She likes to hear my new poems over the phone but finds my angst over what to do next exhausting. I have no new poems, which exhausts me.

What is work?

Poetry is a way of connecting to the world, of noticing, of placing myself, I said to someone while teaching or in an interview or else I read it somewhere in which case: plagiarism.

My memory. This memory.

Perhaps eventually I will forget my own characteristic dilemmas at which point memory loss will be the only characteristic dilemma left.

I read somewhere that fetal cells remain in the mother for twenty-seven years after birth. Or seventeen. I can’t remember what conclusion or analogy I was about to draw from this fact. It’s true that my body has a quality of excess, unnecessariness, but is, at the same time, useful, productive.

Feeling is part of the form, of proper form. Is that an argument? Or a desire?

You can’t eat a diseased animal so in this sense the cow is wasted. If the purpose of the animal is to provide sustenance for other animals, which is not its purpose.

Fodder.

I have nothing to say about “the speaker.” Instead I go swimming in the pool on my husband’s grandmother’s property in Lakewood, Colorado, in my ill-fitting swimsuit. Unshaven, untuned, slightly panicky in the goggled blue, the muffled solitude of submergence. City girl with poor form & pale skin—spectacle for none to witness.

What I like is the long underwater glide as I push off from the front wall.

What I like are the amoeba-shaped blue tiles along the bottom & sides of the rectangular pool. The chipped tiles, the places where a tile is missing.

In the car my son reads to himself. Every once in a while, he spells out a word he doesn’t recognize. I like how the possibilities of the first few letters narrow with each subsequent letter until the word takes shape & becomes meaningful.

I go to a yoga class but the chanting & call-&-response prayer agitate me. After chanting we sit in silence, breathing & then the teacher reads a long passage from a book about the difference between experience & experiencing. Experience is between life & experiencing. Experience is time-bound, on a continuum. The mind is a product of experience. Thought is a product of the mind. The idea is to rid oneself of thought, of memory, of mind, of all time-bound experience so as to approach experiencing the here & now. It is hard to follow all this because I am thinking of *The Book of Nothing* & how I will describe all this nonsense in *The Book of Nothing*, which is a way of thinking about the future (now present) & therefore a failed moment of experiencing.

Brunswick, Denver, Sturgeon Bay, Greenport.

Last night I dreamed my husband was carrying a blond child about three years old. The child was crying. I took the child in my arms but could not comfort her. Around five a.m. I heard someone say Mother, clearly & out loud. The sound woke me. I looked at the clock & at my sleeping husband thinking I’d never heard him talk in his sleep & how funny it was that he’d said Mother. Just as I was dozing off, I heard the word “Mother” again. It was not my husband’s voice. I heard whispering. I sat up in bed & put my ear to the wall that separated our bedroom from the room our boys were sleeping in—all quiet. Neither of them has ever called me “Mother.”

I keep a dream notebook & often write down my dreams. By often I mean rarely. By rarely I mean lately.

Only now, writing this down, do I make a connection between the child in the dream & my friend Ilana, who is dying.

My mother forgets things. Small things like where she put her glasses or camera & bigger things like my husband’s last name. But she denies this. I did *not* say Gordon—you misheard me, she says. Or, You never told me that! When clearly I did. On the other hand, she memorizes long stories that she tells to rapt audiences.

I meant: forgot, denied, said, memorized. I meant, May her blessing be a memory. I mean, May her memory be a blessing.

How memory is equated with caring. “Thanks for asking.”

I take the baby to our apartment to pick up our mail. The baby seems to have no recollection of our apartment & makes no effort to see his room while I sit by the front door sorting junk mail. Some people call this *The Wonder Years*.

What the baby remembers is me. And his father. And his brothers. This is an important survival skill but annoying when I want to leave him in the care of others.

When I write “the baby” it is like writing “yesterday” or, one day, “years ago.”

I still think of the pool in Lakewood as Emmett’s pool. He kept it hot & after his heart-valve replacement surgery, walked back & forth along the short side of the shallow end for hydrotherapy. I think about sitting with his coffin in the basement of the funeral home & how I spent my allotted hour agonizing over whether to open the coffin to see his body one last time.

Whether I opened the casket or not is recorded in *The Book of Nothing*. For prosperity. I think I mean posterity.

In an email Ilana tells me that her childhood dog has come to be with her & has been by her side all morning. This is not a dream. Neither the dog nor the email.

Good to remember: one can die from poisoned berries. See the movie *Into the Wild* based on the book by Jon Krakauer based on the story of Christopher McCandless whose name I had to look up when I typed this three months later. The original text of *The Book of Nothing* says, “based on the life of .”

More & more I am drawn to the literal. Is this a fad? A developmental stage? A characteristic dilemma?

On my favorite radio show there is a piece about a woman in her thirties who asked, at a party: Are unicorns still endangered or have they finally become extinct? The silence that followed was what clued her in.

Or perhaps I mean the surreal. It’s hard to tell.

By radio show I mean podcast

Seven beds in six cities in eight weeks including the Newark airport hotel when we missed our connecting flight.

Now here.

A lack of childcare changes *The Book of Nothing*. Lessens it. Increases its appeal. The baby puts things in his mouth & cannot be trusted.

By “baby” I mean “when.” When there was/he was a baby.

It is five a.m. It is still 5 A.M.

Last night on the way home—[the baby swallows stories, words, all my language with his promiscuous mouth]

—what was I saying?

This morning Ilana died.

Ilana died, this morning.

I write: "Ilana died." I cross it out. I write it again.

Perhaps The Book of Nothing is a notebook not a book. One small note changing everything.

On the ferry home my son says, I hate you. He'd battled his brother over the crinkly paper around his cookie & lost. When he pulled away from me, I yanked him close. Not safe, I said.

Evening. Half moon, hidden stars. The ocean again.

What will I wear to the funeral? I ask The Book of Nothing. Nothing, it says. Or, it says nothing.

During the service, The Book of Nothing sits quietly in the passenger seat of the rented Kia. Later, during the shiva, lies in the trunk with the clothes & diapers.

Three houses down from the one we're renting two houses catch fire. We watch. There is no one, thank god, inside. A neighbor hoses down everything between her house & the ones on fire. We watch as the first house burns. We watch as the house next to it goes up in flames. We watch as the volunteer squads arrive from Greenport, Southold, Cutchogue, Orient, Riverhead. We watch as a special laddertruck arrives & lowers a firefighter onto the roof. We watch as the firefighter sits astride the gable & tries to cut through the roof with a handheld chainsaw. The buildings burn.

The Book of Nothing is

The very bad smell as the vinyl siding collapses away from the wooden bones.

nothing if not.

When it is all over a firefighter puts a helmet on the baby, who is wearing only a diaper, not even shoes & who is not afraid of the fire or of anything because he knows so little, almost nothing & we take a photo.

The stars last night, after a clear day.

A week ago Ilana died.

Now I mean a month.

Later I will mean years. I cannot make sense of this.

The baby has words: "wawa" (water), "haa" (hat), "zeze" (zebra), "heh" (head), "baw" (ball), "moe" (more), "nuh" (nurse), "tees" (trees), as well as names: Mawma, Dada, Bruba, Bapah & many animal sounds.

"Baby" once meant today or yesterday. Now means years ago.

On one side of us is a house, then two burned houses. On the other side, just across the street, a graveyard. The house is musty & filled with knickknacks & junktoys, screens off their tracks, doors swelled past closing. Here, I sleep well. The nights are cool. The stars.

Called out of yoga, I'm at the hospital waiting for A to have her cesarean. It's too quiet. Will I be able to hear the baby cry through the dosed door of the OR? I am A's doula. I am supporting her by standing outside the closed door. This is what I am permitted. Ilana is still dead.

The city.

October is almost over & I have not written a novel or part of a novel or a series of poems about memory. I have not written a microessay about teaching. I have not written a microessay about the line but have promised to do so. I wrote one new poem about waking up early with the baby but it's a silly little song-poem & its sweetness bothers me. I have not written an essay about Alice Notley or the email to the agent outlining the "what happened" version of my nonfiction book, which according to her is weak on plot. I spent a few weeks making a nine-minute movie about the baby's home birth & posted it to youtube. It's gotten 49,580 hits in the past four weeks, which makes it my most successful publication.

New York is gray & bleak.

This morning I woke up & thought, Ilana, are you *still* dead? I write: "Today David Foster Wallace hung himself." That's what day this was. Later I will change this to "hanged" but doing so won't change anything for David Foster Wallace.

Once I attended a tribute reading for Elizabeth Bishop. Jorie Graham helped John Ashbery onto the stage & John Ashbery cried when he read Bishop's poem. Did I dream that? No. Can't remember when or where it was & which poem of Bishop's Ashbery read. It was at least ten years ago. Ashbery seemed old then. I remember thinking, as I looked at him, He's next. But he wasn't.

I gave my books of poetry to Ilana as gifts but doubt she read them. This has to do with the problem of a general audience.

The summer disappears into photographs. Houses & hours on airplanes.

The City blocks out almost everything I am.

Meanwhile: Obama, the economy, famous & less famous suicides, the Library of America publishes Ashbery's collected poems on the day the baby I miscarried would have been two years old & my living baby turns sixteen months & two days. So what?

Like a fish I grow to fit my environment in this case apartment in which I sit at my computer & listen to the MP3 of Cat Stevens singing "if you want to be me, be me" from Ilana's favorite song while I do not write anything for my panel about the relationship between self & poet & do not work on my novel or poems about memory or from memory. I do not write about Ilana who was my doula teacher or John Ashbery who is a poet, one of whom is dead & one of whom is alive, or about David Foster Wallace who is dead or about Alice Notley who is alive & who was not my teacher but who said, There has to be a way to talk about oneself without narcissism & said, That's only one story: what you remember.

Rachel Zucker  
361

---

<sup>361</sup> Rachel Zucker, "[Seven Beds Six Cities Eight Weeks](#)," [At Length](#), collected in [Soundmachine](#), [Wave Books](#)