

# Social Media Poems 2020

## Simeon Berry

### Contents

What Happens in 1918 Won't Stay in 1918 ( <i>Karyna McGlynn</i> ) .....	1
In the Champagne Room with Grandma ( <i>Bianca Stone</i> ).....	2
A Morning Person ( <i>Mary Ruefle</i> ).....	3
Corpse Flower ( <i>Kerri Webster</i> ).....	4
How to Be Drawn to Trouble ( <i>Terrance Hayes</i> ).....	5
Translations ( <i>Kathryn Nuernberger</i> ).....	7
The Great Lakes ( <i>Keetje Kuipers</i> ).....	10
The Sky Wet with Signals ( <i>Alex Green</i> ).....	11
North of Manhattan ( <i>Vijay Seshadri</i> ) .....	12
Ruins ( <i>Laura Read</i> ).....	14
Dear Editor: ( <i>Amy Newman</i> ).....	15
Appeal to the Self ( <i>Meghan O'Rourke</i> ).....	16
Close Space ( <i>Natalie Shapero</i> ) .....	17
Paranoid ( <i>Jonathan Moody</i> ).....	18
The Conversation ( <i>Lauren Shapiro</i> ).....	19
from "In Search of Wealth" ( <i>Anna Moschovakis</i> ).....	20
Aphorisms ( <i>Charles Simic</i> ).....	22
George Clark across the United States ( <i>Lauren Clark</i> ).....	23
Study Abroad ( <i>Kiki Petrosino</i> ).....	24
Gender Bender ( <i>Jennifer Michael Hecht</i> ).....	25
Embarrassment ( <i>Carrie Fountain</i> ) .....	26
Conversion Party ( <i>Erin Hoover</i> ) .....	28
[Yes, I saw them all, saw them, met some, Richard Hell] ( <i>Diane Seuss</i> ).....	30
Pilgrimage ( <i>Erin Adair-Hodges</i> ).....	31
When a Man I Love Jerks Off in My Bed Next to Me and Falls Asleep ( <i>Morgan Parker</i> ) .....	32
Believing Anagrams ( <i>Kelli Russell Agodon</i> ) .....	33
A River in an Ocean of Space ( <i>Christine Gosnay</i> ).....	34
The Forgotten Dialect of the Heart ( <i>Oliver Bendorf</i> ) .....	35
How the Sausage Is Made ( <i>Joanna Penn Cooper</i> ).....	36
A Farewell to Shopping ( <i>Barbara Hamby</i> ).....	37
Everything is a Hat ( <i>Marni Ludwig</i> ) .....	38
Call Me to Prayer ( <i>Hala Alyan</i> ) .....	39

When I was Fifteen ( <i>Matthew Zapruder</i> ) .....	40
Again, Let's Do It Again ( <i>Meghan Privitello</i> ).....	42
Beatitudes ( <i>Mary Biddinger</i> ) .....	43
Aphorisms ( <i>James Richardson</i> ) .....	44
After You Have Gone ( <i>Kevin Prufer</i> ) .....	45
Don Pullen at The Zanzibar Blue Jazz Café ( <i>Major Jackson</i> ).....	46
from <i>Four Horaces</i> ( <i>Dan Chiasson</i> ) .....	48
J M ( <i>J.D. Scrimgeour</i> ).....	49
A girl brings me home to nothing ( <i>Gala Mukomolova</i> ) .....	50
Vision Test in the First Grade ( <i>Jennifer Martelli</i> ).....	51
Barbie Chang Has No Intention ( <i>Victoria Chang</i> ).....	52
Juneau ( <i>Dorianne Laux</i> ) .....	53
Bride of Tricky D. ( <i>Rachel Loden</i> ).....	54
After Reading That the Milky Way Is Devouring the Galaxy of Sagittarius ( <i>Erin Belieu</i> ).....	55
Beautiful Funeral ( <i>Monica Ferrell</i> ).....	56
Dark Girl Dressed in Blue ( <i>Robin Ekiss</i> ).....	57
from “Song for My Father” ( <i>Sean Thomas Dougherty</i> ) .....	58
Deposition: On That Night & All That Was After ( <i>Emma Bolden</i> ) .....	60
from “13th Balloon” ( <i>Mark Bibbins</i> ).....	61
Men Keep on Dying ( <i>Michael McGriff</i> ) .....	62
before it chooses you ( <i>Cassandra de Alba</i> ) .....	64
Night ( <i>Andrea Cohen</i> ) .....	65
& What Shoulder, & What Art ( <i>Marc McKee</i> ).....	66
Appetite ( <i>Aaron Smith</i> ).....	67
from “After Damascus” ( <i>Paul Guest</i> ) .....	68
Some of Us ( <i>Ann Lauterbach</i> ) .....	70
First Child Miscarried ( <i>Pimone Triplett</i> ).....	72
Nineteen ( <i>Elizabeth Alexander</i> ) .....	74
Antidepressant ( <i>Adrienne Su</i> ) .....	75
Swan Song ( <i>Kelly Morse</i> ).....	77
from “Life of Johnson/Upside Your Head, a Libretto” ( <i>Forrest Gander</i> ) .....	78
After Hours, Provincetown Cemetery ( <i>Kendra DeColo</i> ) .....	79
Three Rivers ( <i>Justin Bigos</i> ) .....	80
Dead Reckoning ( <i>Julia Story</i> ).....	82
Breaking the Air ( <i>Victoria Redel</i> ) .....	83
from “Coney Island” ( <i>Julie Sheehan</i> ).....	84

Anonymous Lyric ( <i>Connie Voisine</i> ).....	85
Still Falling ( <i>Jill McDonough</i> ).....	87
Aubade ( <i>Randall Mann</i> ).....	88
Alleys ( <i>Catherine Pierce</i> ).....	89
Accursed Questions, iii ( <i>Catherine Barnett</i> ).....	90
Aphorisms ( <i>George Murray</i> ).....	92
Aviary ( <i>Jaswinder Bolina</i> ).....	93
Ambitious Dream Number Twenty-Three ( <i>George David Clark</i> ).....	94
Tiny Shotgun ( <i>Ruth Madievsky</i> ).....	96
January 9, 1875 ( <i>Joe Hall</i> ).....	97
Sin Sandwich ( <i>Jim Daniels</i> ).....	98
Howlin' Wolf ( <i>Kevin Young</i> ).....	101
Palmistry ( <i>Chase Berggrun</i> ).....	103
Looking at Lucy's Painting of the Thames at Low Tide Without Lucy Present ( <i>Tara Bergin</i> ).....	104
The Final Episode ( <i>Caroline Bird</i> ).....	105
Brazilian Wedding: Dream No. 3 ( <i>Kathleen Rooney</i> ).....	106
She Returns to the Water ( <i>Erin Belieu</i> ).....	108
Symptoms of Aftermath ( <i>Camille Rankine</i> ).....	112
Spectacular, Spectacular ( <i>Bradley Trumpfheller</i> ).....	113
Dear Thanatos, [Goddamn the sweet ease...] ( <i>Traci Brimhall</i> ).....	114
Honey ( <i>Patrick Donnelly</i> ).....	115
Se Me Olvidó Otra Vez ( <i>Eduardo C. Corral</i> ).....	117
The Literary Scholar ( <i>Corinna McClanahan Schroeder</i> ).....	118
The Lesson ( <i>Paige Ackerson-Kiely</i> ).....	119
Against Nostalgia ( <i>Virginia Konchan</i> ).....	120
loose strife ( <i>Quan Barry</i> ).....	121
Curio ( <i>Angie Estes</i> ).....	122
A Kind of World ( <i>Jack Gilbert</i> ).....	123
Continuation ( <i>Erika Meitner</i> ).....	124
Bite Me ( <i>David Kirby</i> ).....	126
God's Plan ( <i>Mary Biddinger</i> ).....	129
from <i>The Crying Book</i> ( <i>Heather Christle</i> ).....	130
Miss Diana ( <i>Kai Carlson-Wee</i> ).....	131
High School as <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i> ( <i>Cate Marvin</i> ).....	132
Field Trip ( <i>Ron Koertge</i> ).....	134
A meditation on hoarding ( <i>Bob Hicok</i> ).....	135

Toad Circus ( <i>Julia Story</i> ).....	136
And a Lie ( <i>Hannah Sanghee Park</i> ).....	137
from “Torrance” ( <i>Allison Benis White</i> ) .....	138
Love Poem ( <i>Rebecca Hazelton</i> ).....	139
Talk Television: <i>Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom</i> ( <i>Lee Ann Roripaugh</i> ).....	140
Crusade ( <i>Sarah Galvin</i> ).....	141
For, Or, Nor ( <i>Fleda Brown</i> ).....	142
My First Kiss Was in a Room Where They Polish Lenses for Eyeglasses ( <i>Emilia Phillips</i> ) .....	143
Self-Portrait as Erotic Thriller ( <i>Karyna McGlynn</i> ).....	144
Manners ( <i>Kim Addonizio</i> ).....	146
Who Makes Love to Us After We Die ( <i>Diana Marie Delgado</i> ).....	148
Artichokes ( <i>Bianca Stone</i> ).....	149
Aphorisms ( <i>Dan Liebert</i> ).....	150
How I Became Miss America ( <i>Ellen Bass</i> ) .....	151
Elk Tooth Necklace ( <i>Taneum Bambrick</i> ) .....	152
Afterparty ( <i>Jake Skeets</i> ).....	154
For My 1st Ex-Lover to Die ( <i>Francesca Bell</i> ).....	155
A Little (more) About Me ( <i>Michael Teig</i> ).....	156
Junk Science ( <i>Kateri Lanthier</i> ).....	157
Brooklyn is Covered in Little Pieces of Paper ( <i>Matthew Rohrer</i> ) .....	158
American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin ( <i>Terrance Hayes</i> ) .....	160
The Crowds Cheered as Gloom Galloped Away ( <i>Matthea Harvey</i> ).....	161
Etiquette ( <i>July Westhale</i> ).....	162
The Island of Zerrissenheit ( <i>Kristin Bock</i> ).....	163
The Use of the Second Person ( <i>Alan Michael Parker</i> ).....	164
Visiting Russia ( <i>Vijay Seshadri</i> ).....	165
Scenes from an Imaginary Childhood ( <i>Elaine Equi</i> ).....	167
有識: Have Knowledge ( <i>Paisley Rekdal</i> ).....	169
How Russia Hacks You ( <i>Martin Ott</i> ) .....	170
from “Polaroids of God from My Eleventh Summer” ( <i>Emily Borgmann</i> ).....	171
Elegy ( <i>Maya C. Popa</i> ).....	172
from “Happinefs” ( <i>Kiki Petrosino</i> ).....	173
Broke the Lunatic Horse ( <i>Katherine Larson</i> ) .....	174
Man at His Bath ( <i>Natalie Shapero</i> ).....	175
Persephone (Unplugged) ( <i>Stephanie Burt</i> ).....	176
I Want to Know You All ( <i>Kathryn Nuernberger</i> ).....	177

Those Who Die in Their Twenties ( <i>Robert Hass</i> ).....	179
Donetsk ( <i>Keetje Kuipers</i> ).....	181
Outside Tucker Luminar ( <i>Alex Green</i> ).....	182
Hotel Party ( <i>Ladan Osman</i> ).....	183
Aphorisms ( <i>Kevin Griffith</i> ).....	184
Invagination ( <i>Laura Read</i> ).....	185
Sleep ( <i>Meghan O'Rourke</i> ).....	186
from "What It Means to Be Avant Garde" ( <i>Anna Moschovakis</i> ).....	187
Kim Kardashian and Ray J Sex Tape ( <i>Lauren Clark</i> ).....	188
That Half Is Almost Gone ( <i>Marilyn Chin</i> ).....	189
Hecht's Furniture Polish ( <i>Jennifer Michael Hecht</i> ).....	191
from "River House" ( <i>Sally Keith</i> ).....	192
Nostalgia Says No ( <i>Carrie Fountain</i> ).....	193
Matrons of the Ward ( <i>Cindy King</i> ).....	194
Restoring O'Keefe ( <i>Gregory Pardlo</i> ).....	195
A Burn So Bad It Requires Ice ( <i>Steven Cramer</i> ).....	196
Dirty Girl ( <i>Hala Alyan</i> ).....	197
Bent Syllogism ( <i>Lauren Shapiro</i> ).....	198
Upon Reading Tennessee Williams' Obituaries ( <i>Steven Riel</i> ).....	199
Livestock ( <i>Erin Hoover</i> ).....	203
[You know what living means? Tits out, tits in the rain. Tits] ( <i>Diane Seuss</i> ).....	205
Elegy at Twenty-Three ( <i>Lindsey Alexander</i> ).....	206
from "The End of September" ( <i>Erin Adair-Hodges</i> ).....	207
[Body—is dying a slow constant death] ( <i>Victoria Chang</i> ).....	208
Coming Up Next: How Killer Blue Irises Spread ( <i>Kelli Russell Agodon</i> ).....	209
Listening to Townes Van Zandt ( <i>Christine Gosnay</i> ).....	210
And When Ms. Pac-Man Eats All the Cherries, and When the Dentist Asks Me to Spit into the Bowl ( <i>Allyson Boggess</i> ).....	211
Earnest Postcard ( <i>Eleanor Boudreau</i> ).....	212
Backstory ( <i>Carmen Gimenez Smith</i> ).....	213
Minecraft Ars Poetica ( <i>Joanna Penn Cooper</i> ).....	214
Deception ( <i>Barbara Hamby</i> ).....	215
Evaporating Villanelle During a Time of Pandemic ( <i>Jen Karetnick</i> ).....	217
Pill Box ( <i>Marni Ludwig</i> ).....	218
Coordinates ( <i>Meghan Privitello</i> ).....	219
from "Essay on the Theory of Motion" ( <i>Cameron Awkward-Rich</i> ).....	220
Sakra ( <i>Adam Day</i> ).....	221

Our Lady of the Garage Band ( <i>B.K. Fischer</i> ) .....	222
Aphorisms ( <i>Alfred Corn</i> ).....	224
Ars Poetica ( <i>Kevin Prufer</i> ).....	225
<i>But, like, where is the body?</i> ( <i>Gala Mukomolova</i> ) .....	226
Clueless in Paradise ( <i>Rachel Loden</i> ) .....	227
Hostess ( <i>Laura Kasischke</i> ) .....	228
Holocene: Microfilm Reel 82 ( <i>Kristine Ong Muslim</i> ).....	231
Preface ( <i>Robin Ekiss</i> ) .....	232
The House of Fragments ( <i>Sean Thomas Dougherty</i> ) .....	233
The Plight Troth ( <i>Emma Bolden</i> ) .....	236
Shell ( <i>Jay Besemer</i> ).....	237
Aftertaste ( <i>Shira Erlichman</i> ).....	239
from “13th Balloon” ( <i>Mark Bibbins</i> ).....	240
Kissing Hitler ( <i>Michael McGriff</i> ).....	241
Field Trip ( <i>Andrea Cohen</i> ) .....	244
Kite Shepherd (1) ( <i>Marc McKee</i> ).....	245
i want to name all my oregon trail characters after you & drown them on purpose ( <i>Cassandra de Alba</i> ) .....	246
Love Means Never Having to Distinguish Between the Sound of a Clarinet and the Sound of a Crying Baby ( <i>Clay Ventre</i> ).....	247
Dr. Engel Survives the Blackout in New York City ( <i>Aaron Smith</i> ).....	248
1986 ( <i>Paul Guest</i> ) .....	249
Dar la luz ( <i>Kelly Morse</i> ) .....	251
Psychoanalysis of Water ( <i>Forrest Gander</i> ).....	252
from “Five Elegies” ( <i>Elizabeth Alexander</i> ) .....	253
Christian Camp for Troubled Girls ( <i>Kendra DeColo</i> ).....	254
Aphorisms ( <i>Ashleigh Brilliant</i> ).....	256
Smoking Cigarettes with Brodsky ( <i>Victoria Redel</i> ) .....	257
What the Boyfriends Teach Us ( <i>Jill McDonough</i> ).....	258
Homecoming ( <i>Sommer Browning</i> ).....	259
from “Insecurity System” ( <i>Sara Wainscott</i> ) .....	260
Horoscope (1) ( <i>Maggie Smith</i> ).....	262
A Partial Illustration of the Black Market Accompanied by the Scented Breath of Starved Alligator ( <i>Anna Journey</i> ).....	263
Uninhabited ( <i>Carolyn Forché</i> ).....	264
If I Should Come Upon Your House Lonely in the West Texas Desert ( <i>Natalie Diaz</i> ).....	265
Leaves of Grass ( <i>Justin Phillip Reed</i> ) .....	267

The History of My Body ( <i>Dara Yen Elerath</i> ).....	269
Graceland ( <i>Catherine Pierce</i> ).....	271
Sorry I Don't Like You ( <i>Connie Voisine</i> ).....	273
Lore ( <i>Catherine Barnett</i> ).....	275
Lexington ( <i>Randall Mann</i> ).....	276
A History of Romanticism ( <i>Rebecca Seiferle</i> ).....	277
Cracked Sycamore ( <i>Cammy Thomas</i> ).....	280
Darwin ( <i>Lorine Niedecker</i> ).....	281
Essay on Trees ( <i>Jenny Bouilly</i> ).....	285
Eleven Steps to Breaking up a Hart ( <i>Monica Ferrell</i> ).....	286
from "One on One" ( <i>Dan Chiasson</i> ).....	287
1978 ( <i>Adrienne Su</i> ).....	288
Already My Lips Were Luminous ( <i>Vickie Vértiz</i> ).....	289
So There ( <i>Naomi Shihab Nye</i> ).....	290
Who Makes Love to Us After We Die ( <i>Diana Marie Delgado</i> ).....	292
Conversation with Phillis Wheatley #7 ( <i>Tiana Clark</i> ).....	293
Primer (Brass + Lead) ( <i>Adrian Matejka</i> ).....	295
Superman ( <i>Dorianne Laux</i> ).....	296
Of the Impending Mission ( <i>Jillian Weise</i> ).....	297
Back in Seaside ( <i>Shanna Compton</i> ).....	298
from "Garden Quarrel" ( <i>Sandra Lim</i> ).....	299
Magazine Feminism ( <i>Ariana Reines</i> ).....	300
[Parties among strangers, punks, leather caps and straps, pressing] ( <i>Diane Seuss</i> ).....	303
Gold ( <i>Eugenia Leigh</i> ).....	304
Person, Woman, Man, Camera, TV ( <i>Eileen Cleary</i> ).....	305
Alcohol ( <i>Natasha Sajé</i> ).....	306
I Am Writing a Letter ( <i>Martha Silano</i> ).....	308
My Brother Doesn't Wake Up Wishing We Were Closer ( <i>Maya C. Popa</i> ).....	309
Hart Crane, on the Failure of Poetry ( <i>Miguel Murphy</i> ).....	311
The Monster Hour ( <i>Zachary Schomburg</i> ).....	314
How the Past Tense Turns a Whole Sentence Dark ( <i>TJ Jarrett</i> ).....	315
Midwestern Wedding: Dream No. 5 ( <i>Kathleen Rooney</i> ).....	316
Extreme Domesticity ( <i>Aline Dolinh</i> ).....	317
You Are Who I Love ( <i>Aracelis Girmay</i> ).....	318
Not Even This ( <i>Ocean Vuong</i> ).....	321
In Airports ( <i>Erin Belieu</i> ).....	324

Palinode ( <i>Bradley Trumpfheller</i> ) .....	326
Family Portrait as Lullaby ( <i>Traci Brimhall</i> ).....	327
Valentine for a Flytrap ( <i>Sally Wen Mao</i> ).....	328
Holiday ( <i>Wyn Cooper</i> ).....	329
Rookie ( <i>Caroline Bird</i> ).....	330
Malediction on an Iron Bed ( <i>Patrick Donnelly</i> ).....	331
White Flowers ( <i>Rosemary Willey</i> ) .....	332
Library of Small Catastrophes ( <i>Alison C. Rollins</i> ).....	333
Apocrypha ( <i>Virginia Konchan</i> ).....	336
Post-Game-Day Blessing ( <i>Erika Meitner</i> ).....	337
(Please note the jade is a genuine jade, not a plastic fake) ( <i>Jennifer Tseng</i> ) .....	339
Tige Watley’s Whoah ( <i>David Kirby</i> ) .....	340
Uncloudy ( <i>Heather Christle</i> ) .....	344
The Boy’s Head ( <i>Kai Carlson-Wee</i> ) .....	345
Let the Day Perish ( <i>Cate Marvin</i> ).....	346
In Medias Res ( <i>Chet’la Sebree</i> ) .....	347
American Wife ( <i>Ron Koertge</i> ).....	348
Indiana Problem (Three Dusks) ( <i>Julia Story</i> ) .....	349
Original Sin ( <i>Megan Pinto</i> ) .....	350
Portrait of the Minor Character ( <i>Jaswinder Bolina</i> ).....	351
Self-Portrait with Unsewn Shadow ( <i>Rebecca Hazelton</i> ).....	353
God Doesn’t Care Where You Pee ( <i>Sarah Galvin</i> ).....	354
Talk Radio ( <i>Fleda Brown</i> ).....	355
from “Phys. Ed.” ( <i>Kevin Young</i> ).....	356
Moonpie ( <i>Emilia Phillips</i> ) .....	357
The Devil Chains Me to a Microphone ( <i>Karyna McGlynn</i> ) .....	359
Romance ( <i>Kim Addonizio</i> ).....	360
The Moon is Trans ( <i>Joshua Jennifer Espinoza</i> ).....	361
Still Life with House Finch ( <i>Camille Rankine</i> ).....	363
On Patmos, Kneeling in the Panagea ( <i>Samuel Green</i> ) .....	364
La Plague ( <i>Matthew Zapruder</i> ).....	368
The Fall ( <i>Bianca Stone</i> ).....	370
Relax ( <i>Ellen Bass</i> ).....	371
You Can Call Me Ma’am ( <i>Francesca Bell</i> ).....	372
Merrily, Merrily, Merrily, Merrily ( <i>Kateri Lanthier</i> ).....	373
Noli Me Tangere ( <i>Quan Barry</i> ) .....	374

One in a Line of Many ( <i>July Westhale</i> ).....	376
Windscape ( <i>Kristin Bock</i> ).....	377
Palimpsest ( <i>Maya C. Popa</i> ).....	378
The Oranges in Uganda ( <i>Katherine Larson</i> ).....	379
I'll Show You Mine If You Show Me Yours ( <i>Kathryn Nuernberger</i> ).....	380
Ten What ( <i>Natalie Shapero</i> ).....	382
Condominiums ( <i>Kevin Prufer</i> ).....	383
The Open ( <i>Joshua Bennett</i> ).....	385
First Fall ( <i>Maggie Smith</i> ).....	386
Wight ( <i>Mag Gabbert</i> ).....	387
Hajar, First Woman on the Moon ( <i>Mohja Kahf</i> ).....	388
UDFj-39546284 ( <i>Rick Barot</i> ).....	389
No Hemlock Rock ( <i>Jennifer Michael Hecht</i> ).....	391
St. Aloysius Gonzaga, Pray for Us ( <i>Laura Read</i> ).....	392
My Mother ( <i>Meghan O'Rourke</i> ).....	394
New York, Summer ( <i>Jack Gilbert</i> ).....	395
Ways of Being Lonely ( <i>Kim Addonizio</i> ).....	396
The Mathematician ( <i>Jay Nebel</i> ).....	397
Procreation Myth ( <i>Mary Biddinger</i> ).....	398
Experience ( <i>Carrie Fountain</i> ).....	399
When Your Mother Asks If You're Seeing Anyone and No Longer Means a Therapist ( <i>Cindy King</i> )...	400
The World's Fair ( <i>Christine Gosnay</i> ).....	401
End of the work ethic ( <i>Bob Hicok</i> ).....	402
Pictograph: Bizarre Anthropomorph, Often with Interior Body Decorations ( <i>Melissa Kwasny</i> ).....	403
from "Testaments Scratched into a Water Station Barrel" ( <i>Eduardo C. Corral</i> ).....	404
Lisp ( <i>Sam Sax</i> ).....	406
Dark Spots ( <i>Angie Estes</i> ).....	407
At the Small Town Drag Show ( <i>Keetje Kuipers</i> ).....	409
Highlights from <i>Under the Sod</i> ( <i>Alex Green</i> ).....	410
Note to My First Wife ( <i>Steven Cramer</i> ).....	411
Real Estate ( <i>Richard Siken</i> ).....	412
from "Q & A" ( <i>Dan Chiasson</i> ).....	413
The Wistful ( <i>Jill Alexander Essbaum</i> ).....	414
Marigolds ( <i>Sumita Chakraborty</i> ).....	415
May I Just Say ( <i>Jay Besemer</i> ).....	422
An Argument About Poetics Imagined at Squaw Valley After a Night Walk Under the Mountain ( <i>Robert Hass</i> ).....	423

Dirt ( <i>Sean Singer</i> ).....	427
Persona Poem ( <i>Lauren Shapiro</i> ).....	428
What Kind of Deal Are We Going to Make? ( <i>Erin Hoover</i> ).....	429
Self-Portrait with Amy (Creation Myth) ( <i>Diane Seuss</i> ).....	430
from “Ten Nights’ Dreams” ( <i>Lee Ann Roripaugh</i> ).....	431
Song in the Key of Negged ( <i>Erin Adair-Hodges</i> ).....	432
While Watching Ice Dancing, I Contemplate Mortality ( <i>Joanna Penn Cooper</i> ).....	433
from “Happinefs” ( <i>Kiki Petrosino</i> ).....	434
Ode to Fear ( <i>Barbara Hamby</i> ).....	435
Please Wear Proper Attire ( <i>Meghan Privitello</i> ).....	436
Week 26 (St. Rage’s Vault) ( <i>B.K. Fischer</i> ).....	437
If Vasilyssa Is the Suitor ( <i>Gala Mukomolova</i> ).....	439
Ken ( <i>Ladan Osman</i> ).....	440
from “Guide to Imaginary Places” ( <i>Laura Kasischke</i> ).....	441
My First Husband Was My Last ( <i>Cate Marvin</i> ).....	443

## What Happens in 1918 Won't Stay in 1918

Her students say “nothing new” because they read it somewhere.  
She tells them to recycle. Jealousy is a kind of arthritis.  
She feels it in her hands when they make things.  
Here is a white girl who calls her headband creations “Oriental.”  
Here is a white boy who growls around campus on his restored Indian.  
Here is a couple in the commons sharing a Red Baron pizza.  
Here is a class shadow play: the *Carpathia* sinking into paper waves.  
Finger puppets, cute and gruesome: the Romanov family, shot.  
Claude Debussy, dead. Wilfred Owen, *doomed*.  
Guillaume Apollinaire leading a charge of zombie Spanish flu victims.

She dreams her students reintroduce sex to the public sphere.  
They hang it from giant chandeliers. But she is hysterical—  
a wandering womb in a grass-stained hobble skirt.  
Her syntax is a croquet mallet she swings unpredictably.  
They strap her to the bed. They don't understand  
what she needs. Still, they stand vigil.  
Their cinematic eyes never stray far. “Precociousness...”  
she mumbles, “is the name of this mutiny.”  
She shows them *Battleship Potemkin*. They break into her  
liquor cabinet. Round after round of White Russians.  
They get drunk and rename her Alexandra.

Karyna McGlynn  
1

---

<sup>1</sup> [Karyna McGlynn](#), “[What Happens in 1918 Won't Stay in 1918](#),” [Columbia Poetry Review](#), collected in [Hothouse](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## In the Champagne Room with Grandma

Where are the high rollers in the MSCOG?  
Tens and hundreds of thousands of dollars for a single visit,  
the hardest part of loving her.  
The water is deep. Too deep to touch  
the bottom; I have to swim around the rim of the glass  
holding on. Mourning doves in the chandeliers,  
with delicate ducks, gold lamé and plush control room,  
old lady without her pants on,  
incontinent beauty queen,  
peering out of a beaded curtain  
or lying back, reading Wodehouse on a black pleather couch  
chuckling in the yellow lightbulb spray—

we have your best interests at heart.  
We take you into the Champagne Room, blushing,  
looking lost and easy at the entrance to the peep show.  
Are you paying attention?  
We're way down on the food chain with the krill.  
And we're the only species left to die alone in bed.

The shadow grows long in the club.  
Swim into her, who hangs in your family tree,  
the plum tree that won't bear fruit.  
Drag the lake. Keep it coming.  
There are no limits.  
Premium content: Sappho, the essential Philip K. Dick,  
dead leaves around a daffodil  
too early to pick;  
coffee before dawn, rye bread with I Can't Believe It's Not Butter!  
everything tastes so real—  
maple leaves made of silver;  
we turn to swans,  
we wear black mourning brassieres—

Here, in the MSCOG, we love you just as you are.  
We pay your tuition.  
We overdraft for you.  
We write you check after check—for food,  
or a cord of wood, new paintbrushes—  
we'll pay for it, while we say, "I'm BROKE. I haven't *GOT* it!"  
But we got it. We always got it.

*Bianca Stone*

2

---

<sup>2</sup> [Bianca Stone](#), "[In the Champagne Room with Grandma](#)," collected in [The Möbius Strip Club of Grief](#), [Tin House Books](#)

## A Morning Person

What a beautiful day for a wedding!  
It was raining when we buried my mum,  
she loved lilacs and here they are,  
the lilac lilacs like pendulous  
large breasts dripping with dew,  
I am enjoying them alone with my  
mug of coffee, which I also enjoy  
with the intensity of a remark  
made in a surgical theater.  
Soon I will vacuum the day,  
not a speck of it will remain,  
I will suck it up like a bee  
at the tit, making a hoopla.  
But now it is quiet, hardly anyone  
is dressed, not a doggie is walking.  
I think flowers enjoy their solitude  
in the early dawn before the buzz begins.  
I think sprinklers annoy them.  
I hear one coming on.  
I hate my poems.

*Mary Ruefle*  
3

---

<sup>3</sup> [Mary Ruefle](#), "[A Morning Person](#)," collected in [Dunce](#), [Wave Books](#)

## Corpse Flower

June and the woman ties the blindfold  
around my eyes, leads me up a hill.  
Someone calls to tell me about the immaculate  
Ferragamos of the dead. On the hill,  
the grove unseen grows wilder  
than the grove made visible. The bark  
rough as punished skin, beetles  
shimmy up the vascular. Thrall, not  
thrall—all I want is to sit in the dark  
and not be the film about the lady  
empath. Air a message sewn into our  
hems, daylight brutes against my bad eye.  
The lady empath bleats, swoons. *You*  
*could smell it from the parking lot.* Spadix  
wrapped in spathe, right, ladies?  
Blooms one day a year. Let wolves  
suck marrow from the bones of boys.  
The aspens clone themselves. I take  
my clothes off. The cormorants  
come back. A star burns out.  
At Meteora, monks line the old monks'  
skulls on ledges. I slide my underwear  
down. Someone leaves food out for his  
dead—ribeye, soda, plum. The dead  
feast. I unhook my bra. My breasts spill out.  
The ceiling fan cuts heat into districts.  
Head on his chest. The aquifer quivers  
in the dark. At Stuttgart, at Basel, at  
Kagoshima, they open up the garden long  
into the night, and the crowds come.

*Kerri Webster*

4

---

<sup>4</sup> [Kerri Webster](#), "[Corpse Flower](#)," [Guernica](#), collected in [The Trailhead](#), [Wesleyan University Press](#)

## How to Be Drawn to Trouble

The people I live with are troubled by the way I have been playing  
“Please, Please, Please” by James Brown and the Famous Flames  
All evening, but they won’t say. I’ve got a lot of my mother’s music  
In me. James Brown is no longer a headwind of hot grease

And squealing for ladies with leopard-skinned intentions,  
Stoned on horns and money. Once I only knew his feel-good music.

While my mother watched convicts dream, I was in my bedroom  
Pretending to be his echo. I still love the way he says *Please*  
Ten times straight, bending the one syllable until it sounds  
Like three. Trouble is one of the ways we discover the complexities

Of the soul. Once, my mother bit the wrist of a traffic cop  
But was not locked away because like him, she was an officer

Of the state. She was a guard at the prison in which James Brown  
Was briefly imprisoned. There had been broken man-made laws,  
A car chase melee, a roadblock of troopers in sunblock.  
I, for one, don’t trust the police because they go around looking

To eradicate trouble. *T-R-oh-you-better-believe*  
*In trouble.* Trouble is how we learn what the soul is.

James Brown, that brother could spice up any sentence he uttered  
Or was given. His accent made it sound like he was pleading  
Whether he was speaking or singing. A woman can make a man  
Sing. After another of my mother’s disappearances, my father left  
Bags on the porch. My father believes a man should never dance

In public. Under no circumstances should a grown man have hair  
Long enough to braid. If I was a black girl, I’d always be mad.  
I might weep too and break. But think about the good things.  
My mother and I love James Brown in a cape and sweat  
Like glitter that glows like little bits of gold. In the photo she took

With him, he holds her wrist oddly, probably unintentionally  
Covering her scar. There’s the trouble of being misunderstood

And the trouble of being soul brother number one sold brother  
Godfather dynamite. Add to that the trouble of shouting  
“I got to get out!” “I got to get down!” “I got to get on up the road!”  
For many years there was a dancing competition between

My mother and father though rarely did they actually dance.  
They did not scuffle like drums or cymbals, but like something

Sluggish and close to earth. You know how things work  
When they don't work? I want to think about the good things.  
The day after the Godfather of Soul finished signing just that  
All over everything in the prison, all my mother wanted to talk

About were his shoes. For some reason, he had six or seven pairs  
Of Italian leather beneath his bunk suggesting where he'd been,

Even if for the moment, he wasn't going anywhere.  
Think about how little your feet would touch the ground  
If you were on your knees pleading two or three times a day,  
There are theories about freedom, and there is a song that says

None of us are free. My mother had gone out Saturday night,  
And came home Sunday an hour or so before church.

She punched clean through the porch window  
When we wouldn't let her in. I can still hear all the love buried  
Under all the noise she made. But sometimes I hear it wrong.  
It's not James Brown making trouble, it's trouble he's drawn to:

*Baby, you done me wrong. Took my love, and now you're gone.*  
It's trouble he's asking to stay. My father might have said *Please*

When my mother was beating the door and then calling to me  
From the window. I might have heard her say *Please* just before  
Or just after the glass and then the skin along her wrist broke,  
*Pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease*, that's how James Brown says it.

*Please, please, please, please, please, Honey, please don't go.*

Terrance Hayes  
5

---

<sup>5</sup> Terrance Hayes, "[How to Be Drawn to Trouble](#)," [Poet Lore](#), collected in [How to Be Drawn](#), Penguin Books

## Translations

I want to believe we can't see anything  
we don't have a word for.

When I look out the window and say green, I mean sea green,  
I mean moss green, I mean gray, I mean pale and also  
electrically flecked with white and I mean green  
in its damp way of glowing off a leaf.

Scheele's green, the green of Renaissance painters,  
is a sodium carbonate solution heated to ninety degrees  
as arsenious oxide is stirred in. Sodium displaces copper,  
resulting in a green precipitate that is sometimes used  
as insecticide. When I say green I mean  
a shiny green bug eating a yellow leaf.

Before synthetics, not every painter could afford a swathe  
of blue. Shocking pink, aka neon, aka kinky pink,  
wasn't even on the market. I want to believe Andy Warhol  
invented it in 1967 and ever since no one's eyes  
have been the same. There were sunsets before,  
but without that hot shocking neon Marilyn, a desert sky  
was just cataract smears. I want to believe this.

The pale green of lichen and half-finished leaves  
filling my window is a palette very far from carnation  
or bougainvillea, but to look out is to understand it is not,  
is to understand what it is not. I stare out the window a lot.  
Between the beginning and the end the leaves unfolded.  
I looked out one morning and everything was unfamiliar  
as if I was looking at the green you could only see  
if you'd never known synthetic colors existed.

I've drawn into myself people say.  
We understand, they say.

There are people who only have words for red  
and black and white, and I wonder if they even see  
the trees at the edge of the grass  
or the green storms coming out of the west.  
There are people who use the same word for green  
and red and brown, and I wonder if red  
seems so urgently bright pouring from the body  
when there is no green for it to fall against.

In his treatise on color Wittgenstein asked,  
“Can’t we imagine certain people  
having a different geometry of colour than we do?”

I want to believe the eye doesn’t see green until it has a name,  
because I don’t want anything to look the way it did before.

Van Gogh painted pink flowers, but the pink faded  
and curators labeled the work “White Roses” by mistake.

The world in my window is a color the Greeks called *chlorol*.  
When I learned the word I was newly pregnant  
and the first pale lichens had just speckled the silver branches.  
The pines and the lichens in the chill drizzle were glowing green  
and a book in my lap said chlorol was one of the untranslatable  
words. The vibrating glow pleased me then, as a finger  
dipped in sugar pleased me then. I said the word aloud  
for the baby to hear. Chlorol. I imagined the baby  
could only see hot pink and crimson inside its tiny universe,  
but if you can see what I’m seeing, the word for it  
is chlorol. It’s one of the things you’ll like out here.

Nineteenth century critics mocked painters who cast shadows  
in unexpected colors. After noticing green cypresses do drop red  
shadows, Goethe chastised them. “The eye demands  
completeness and seeks to eke out the colorific circle in itself.”  
He tells of a trick of light that had him pacing a row of poppies  
to see the flaming petals again and figure out why.

Over and over again Wittgenstein frets the problem of translucence.  
Why is there no clear white?  
He wants to see the world through white-tinted glasses,  
but all he finds is mist.

At first I felt as if the baby had fallen away  
like a blue shadow on the snow.

Then I felt like I killed the baby  
in the way you can be thinking about something else  
and drop a heavy platter by mistake.

Sometimes I feel like I was stupid  
to have thought I was pregnant at all.

Color is an illusion, a response to the vibrating universe  
of electrons. Light strikes a leaf and there’s an explosion  
where it lands. When colors change, electromagnetic fields  
are colliding. The wind is not the only thing moving the trees.

Once when I went into those woods I saw a single hot pink orchid  
on the hillside and I had to keep reminding myself not to  
tell the baby about the beautiful small things I was seeing.  
So, hot pink has been here forever and I don't even care  
about that color or how Andy Warhol showed me an orchid.  
I hate pink. It makes my eyes burn.

*Kathryn Nuernberger*  
6

---

<sup>6</sup> [Kathryn Nuernberger](#), "[Translations](#)," [Redactions](#), collected in [Rag & Bone](#), [Elixir Press](#)

## The Great Lakes

My wife, the one I thought I'd never have—  
because does any of us believe we deserve  
to be happy in this life?—lets my daughter paint  
her toenails a sloppy silver as my aunt smokes  
a second cigarette and pages through photos  
on her phone so I can see how the car looked  
after my cousin wrecked it last month  
in a past-midnight field near the poultry  
processing plant just a half mile from grandma's  
unsold house—high on meth or heroin  
or maybe not high at all but fighting  
her hunger—while I pick through this dead  
girl's jewelry just as starved for something  
to hold onto as those feckless gulls pecking  
the sand a few feet away. The sun is shining  
brighter than the gold-plated necklace  
I fasten around my neck and swear to wear  
forever, and even though scientists are finding  
nicotine in the water and oxy in the mussels,  
my cousin's kids are down there at the edge  
of the beach screaming their heads off  
with the pure joy of plunging below the surface,  
It's hard not to feel good watching the waves.  
But my aunt needs me to believe in the glass  
and the blood, and her daughter's body  
a thing unidentifiable, a thing none of us  
had really seen in years. She needs me to understand  
that her pain is water as far as the eye can see.

*Keetje Kuipers*

7

---

<sup>7</sup> [Keetje Kuipers](#), "[The Great Lakes](#)," [Tin House](#), collected in [All Its Charms](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## The Sky Wet with Signals

Even though he graduates from Juilliard with flash and promise, when the actor moves to L.A., he gets a part on a television series called “Malibu Silk” playing a lifeguard who rides a motorcycle late at night. He tries to make the character complicated and tragic, but there’s only so much he can convey when most of the scenes take place in a hot tub. Frustrated, he takes control of the direction and in one scene, instead of kissing the Senator’s daughter while sensual synth reggae plays, he stares up at the sky and delivers a monologue about dying in the rain. Shooting the scene takes most of the day. The real director could care less—he sits smoking in a chair with his headphones on, listening to an industrial band from Canada whose singer was killed in a bar over a disagreement about a girl he’d only known for two days. The director has rabies and is weak from the fifth round of shots; he’s barely eaten in weeks and falls asleep at traffic lights. Like a low, dense fog, a flush has permanently settled upon him, making his clothes sticky all day. A bat had flown in his bedroom window and bit him on the arm before finding its way back into the night. *Do you still have the bat*, the vet asked. *I never had the bat*, the director said. *It’d be better if we had the bat*, said the vet. The shots turned his blood hot and thick; it makes him feel like something big and heaving that drags itself across swamps. When people ask him what’s wrong, he’s never able to explain it right; no matter how many times he says, *Gothic fever, terrible moon, the sky wet with signals*.

Alex Green

8

---

<sup>8</sup> Alex Green, “[The Sky Wet with Signals](#),” collected in [Emergency Anthems](#), Brooklyn Arts Press

## North of Manhattan

You can take the Dyre Avenue bus to where the subway terminates  
just inside the Bronx  
and be downtown before you realize  
how quickly your body has escaped your mind,  
stretching down the tracks on a beam  
until the band snaps and the body slips free and is gone,  
out the crashing doors, through the stiles,  
and up the long chutes,  
to burn both ways at once down the avenues,  
ecstatic in its finitude,  
with all the other bodies,  
the bundles of molecules  
fusing and dispersing on the sidewalks.  
Ten to the hundredth power,  
bundles of molecules are looking at paintings,  
bundles of molecules are eating corn muffins,  
crabcakes, shad roe, spring lamb, rice pudding.  
Bundles of molecules are talking to each other,  
sotto voce or in a commanding voice—  
“I agree with you one hundred percent, Dog”;  
“I looked for you today, but you’d already gone”;  
“I’ve left the Amended Restated Sublease Agreement on your desk”;  
“I’m going home now, and you think about what you did.”  
The ear grows accustomed to wider and wider intervals.  
The eye senses shapes in the periphery  
toward which it dares not turn to look.  
One bundle is selling another a playback machine,  
a six-square-inch wax-paper reticule  
of powdered white rhinoceros horn,  
an off-season-discounted ticket to Machu Picchu,  
a gas-powered generator  
for when the lights go out,  
a dime bag of Mexican brown.  
It is four o’clock in the afternoon.  
The sunlight is stealing inch by inch  
down the newly repointed redbrick wall.  
She comes into the kitchen wrapped in the quilt  
and watches as he fries eggs.  
“After what just happened, you want to eat?” she says in disgust.  
Will she or will she not, back in the bedroom,  
lift the gun from the holster  
and put it in her purse? The mind, meanwhile,  
is still somewhere around Tremont Avenue,  
panting down the tracks, straining  
from the past to the vanishing present.  
It will never catch up  
and touch the moment. It will always be  
in this tunnel of its forever,

where aquamarine crusted bulbs feed on a darkness  
that looks all around without seeing,  
and fungus, earlike, starved for light, sprouts  
from walls where drops of rusted water  
condense and drip.

Don't say I didn't warn you about this.  
Don't say my concern for your welfare  
never extended to my sharing the terrible and addictive secrets  
that only death can undo.  
Because I'm telling you now  
that you can also take the same bus north,  
crossing over against the traffic spilling out of the mall  
and waiting twenty minutes in the kiosk with the Drambuie ad.  
There. Isn't that better?  
More passengers are getting off than on.  
The girl with the skates going home from practice  
will soon get off, as will  
the old woman whose license to drive has been taken from her.  
They will enter houses with little gazebos tucked in their gardens.  
And then, for just a while, the mind will disembark from the body,  
relaxed on its contoured plastic seat,  
and go out to make fresh tracks in the snow  
and stand and breathe under the imaginary trees—  
the horsehair pine, the ambergris tree,  
the tree that the bulbul loves,  
the nebula tree...

*Vijay Seshadri*  
9

---

<sup>9</sup> [Vijay Seshadri, "North of Manhattan," \*The New Yorker\*](#), collected in [The Long Meadow](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

## Ruins

The night is a black book, Dave  
a wet shadow. We're drinking like we were  
too young to do, in three different bars  
because Dave says we have to stay  
on the move, and we're talking about how  
we used to drive the freeway in the middle  
of the night, at the beginning of our lives,  
listening to music loud, leaning out windows.  
I run my hand over the surface of the table  
where someone has glued a page  
from the dictionary, and suddenly I want  
to read all the words, but the past is sitting  
across from me. For nights after,  
I don't sleep—you don't sleep if you're floating,  
no matter how soft your body feels  
in the water. It's still water. I never knew  
I could get to the bottom of this.  
My hand hurt when I was a child  
and we had to fill a white page with squares  
of different colors, cover all of it with black,  
and then use one blade of our scissors  
to carve out a design in the dark wax.  
This week we are going to a place called Ruins.  
I don't know who else will be there—  
my black-haired father taking up a whole booth  
in the corner, the daughter I never had  
rocking in her chair, her hair long and thick  
and caught in the slats. She is humming  
so loud the waiter asks her to be quiet.  
I tell him to bring her the drink  
Dave orders, a drink I've never heard of,  
dream drink, dark red. She's wearing  
one of the sweaters I left in my drawer  
in Paris. Black angora with pearls  
at the neck. I never wanted to see my head  
coming up out of it again.  
Let's get out of here. I know a field  
with an empty barn. You can see deer  
through the blown-out windows  
but inside kids have sprayed the walls  
with profanity. And isn't that  
what this is like?

*Laura Read*

10

---

<sup>10</sup> [Laura Read](#), "[Ruins](#)," collected in [Dresses from the Old Country](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

8 November

Dear Editor:

Please consider the enclosed poems for publication. They are from my manuscript *X = Pawn Capture*, a lyrical exploration of chess moves and the desire to know the world's inner workings in a language unencumbered by doubts. The patron saint of chess is considered by many to be Theresa of Avila, but recent scholarship disputes this and instead considers the possibility that chess is a trick my own grandfather played on me while my grandmother cried in the kitchen into an apron I myself have invented for the purposes of this story. For when that pretty and agonized Saint Theresa saw the Sacred, He showed Himself to her in flecks and hints, a leg here, an arm there, the holy hokey pokey where my doubt is never completely satisfied. As far as I'm concerned, Theresa might have had a better chance of convincing the doubters if she had on her person at the time a Nokia 3650 Phone with video playback, because evidence is everything, though then of course there would be those who said the whole series was Photoshopped. But still. I would have loved to have seen it. And maybe to know for certain would eliminate doubt or wonder, and would have explained the look on my grandmother's face when my grandfather came in the house with evasion and something I want to describe but cannot. Because it is not our privilege to understand the world, which is shown to us in such irritating dimensions and swatches, like the scratchy tweeds I would have preferred to the wrinkled handkerchiefs of my upbringing.

Thank you for your consideration, and for reading. I have enclosed an SASE, and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,  
Amy Newman

11

---

<sup>11</sup> [Amy Newman](#), "[Dear Editor \[8 November\]](#)," collected in [Dear Editor](#), [Persea Books](#)

## Appeal to the Self

Have the dowagers of delusion visited you again  
in their fat pink shoes,  
creeping softly over the Persian rugs  
of your creaking, boarded mind?  
It's time to get up and air the room.  
Once you were an explorer, now you are Elizabeth Barrett,  
only stupider and more prone to TV-watching.  
Outside, cell phones buzz like digital cicadas,  
and the air green, green. But you have come up here  
to rave inside the tower you call a brain.  
You might as well be daubed  
in mud and growing feathers. No one will ever notice  
the difference between what you say and what you mean.  
What you lost is what everybody else lost,  
the boy who first screwed you on a rug some way  
you can't quite remember. Who are you to mourn it?  
There's the rub: the plain old human emotions  
have become "clichéd."  
But they still exist. That boy  
is an actor now, proclaiming grief for art and money.  
The losses are yours for good.  
So come sing with me and be my love,  
there is no one else but you, the voices in my head.

*Meghan O'Rourke*  
12

---

<sup>12</sup> [Meghan O'Rourke](#), "[Appeal to the Self](#)," [The Kenyon Review](#), collected in [Once](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## Close Space

Because I am good at crying  
alone I watch my cousins' kids  
when there's a funeral. Spare  
the pamphlets, prayer and cakes—  
it's better on my own.  
The kids find sleep and then I watch  
the phone, with its rich history  
of shrill communiques, one mean  
love's shame, another one's rebuke  
to never call and what is it  
they say of whores? You pay  
them not for how they screw you  
but for how they go away.  
I so want to be a sweetheart,  
but I've never been able to stop  
the raw needling, haymaking,  
futile and forever by pain  
belied, as when I saw them  
suited and starched: WHO DIED?

This is America. Let me be  
sick of close space, shooting for  
bodies off and unknown.  
Let me say loudly: from the next  
exploration, men will not return.  
It must be just that far. It must  
be just that steep, bad shore  
of star where a theorist strangles  
vicious things for meals,  
then dies for theory and is burned.  
He wouldn't be the first.  
I know well the story of the noble  
dispatched for life to terrorize  
an island. He asked of his king  
only to guarantee there would be  
women. Would I were there  
to answer: DEAR DUMB BUCK,  
REQUEST WAS FILED UNDER YOU WISH  
FOR, BE CAREFUL WHAT.

*Natalie Shapero*  
13

---

<sup>13</sup> [Natalie Shapero](#), "[Close Space](#)," collected in [No Object](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

## Paranoid

I've passed down my fear  
of the police to my baby boy  
who always sleeps, frozen,  
with his hands in the air.

Corralling around dancing  
clouds, Lil' Bo Peep's  
sheep wag their badges  
behind them.

Avery Langston's  
funky cold congestion,  
probable cause  
he's trafficking crack.

Lil' Bo Peep squeezes  
air out of a blue bulb  
& places the tip  
at my son's left nostril;

the air coming back  
pulls out nothing  
but encrypted audio files  
of kisses good night.

*Jonathan Moody*  
14

---

<sup>14</sup> [Jonathan Moody](#), "[Paranoid](#)," [The Common](#), collected in [Olympic Butter Gold](#), [Northwestern University Press](#)

## The Conversation

There is always a woman eating a sandwich.  
Today she is large as everything  
that wasn't said. It is ham and cheese.  
Who cares. You're watching me, she seems  
to say. Being alone is unlike a chess move.  
It is unlike hanging out at the bowling alley  
with Dale Hickey. A hundred stuffed animals  
the size of a fist and I can't make the claw catch.  
Turkey, says Dale Hickey. The lights  
are making turkey shapes all over  
the place. Turkey. I heard you.  
The woman has finished eating her sandwich  
and is on to another one. Now she is tiny  
as a shrimp. She is eating the smallest  
egg salad sandwich in the world. I think,  
Maybe I will speak to her. But she does it first.  
I've wanted to talk to you for ages, she says,  
but instead I keep eating all these sandwiches.  
I know, I say. And I keep going to the bowling alley  
with Dale Hickey. It's been hell.

*Lauren Shapiro*

15

---

<sup>15</sup> [Lauren Shapiro](#), "[The Conversation](#)," collected in [Easy Math](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

from “In Search of Wealth”

When tourists attend a Dani pig roast, participants are compensated with an entry fee,

In translation, compensation refers to the attempt to make up for untranslatability between tongues. For example, by replacing rhyme, less prevalent in some languages than others, with alliteration. Or inventing a pun in line ten of a translation because the pun in line five proved impossible to render.

In the West the concept *compensation* is often linked to the concept *paycheck*. Or *payback*, in the case of accidents, wrongdoing, lawsuits, and the like.

In the East, the notion of karma seems linked to the idea of compensation. At least, that’s the understanding we have of it in the West,

We tend to have the idea that according to the laws of karma, a deed committed in one life will be punished or rewarded in another. Of course this is essentially a Catholic idea and karma, which means something closer to “work” is a more complicated thing altogether.

The work ethic called Protestant, or sometimes Puritan or Calvinist, was thought by Max Weber to have laid the foundations for Capitalism. It did so by encouraging the accumulation of wealth through its paradoxical emphases on asceticism and material success. Compensation was to be distributed in the afterlife. Stop.

When you learn about the Calvinists, you’re told they believed in predestination, that a person was saved or not from the day she was born. You could not, then, earn your salvation through good works; but success in work was a sign of being chosen.

According to Weber, the human trait that evolved to compensate for this lack of control over one’s fate was the trait of Self-Confidence. Because no priest could assure you that you were saved, you had to convince yourself.

The Calvinist paradox was that even as material success was a quasi-sign of salvation, conspicuous consumption still was seen as a sin. This, according to Weber, led to a culture of investment, in which the amassing of discreetly guarded wealth became the rage.

Scientology, on the other hand, seems to act as an apology for conspicuous consumption. Formally, it borrows from Calvin, though, with Celebrity acting as the sign of salvation and wealth its just reward. Following Weber’s idea that Rationalization replaced the spiritual underpinnings of Calvinism, we could be justified in calling Scientology a kind of Calvinism 2.0.

Your mother taught for decades at a college called Occidental, which was founded in 1887 by Presbyterian clergy and laymen, though it soon dropped its religious affiliation.

While known as a liberal campus, it did not change its name to “Western” even during the height of the Political Correctness movement of the 1990s—though it may have been then that it became increasingly known by its nickname, Oxy,

Barack Obama went to Oxy in 1979 but transferred to Columbia after two years. In 1979, the second-wave feminists were deep in their fight for equal pay. You suspect your mother’s compensation was never what it should have been.

It's hard to believe that in the West, compensation for women is still so far below par.

A successful Scientologist may receive above-par compensation, a portion of which of course will be distributed among agents, managers, and most likely the Church itself.

You do not know how much the Dani receive in compensation for their pig-roast performance, nor would you venture to guess how it's distributed among them.

*Anna Moschovakis*

16

---

<sup>16</sup> [Anna Moschovakis, "In Search of Wealth \(When tourists attend a Dani pig roast\)," collected in \*You and Three Others Are Approaching a Lake\*, Coffee House Press](#)

## Aphorisms

Truth is known at precisely that point in time when nobody gives a shit.

Everything of course is a mirror if you look at it long enough.

Every poetic image asks why there is something rather than nothing.

He could read the mind of a lit match as it entered a dark room.

Another century in which anyone who thought deeply found himself alone and speechless.

In the village church the saints have forgotten all about God and are watching the snow fall.

*Charles Simic*  
17

---

<sup>17</sup> [Charles Simic, Aphorisms](#), collected in [Short Flights, Schaffner Press](#)

## George Clark across the United States

George Clark is the smallest person on Earth, living  
in a hole with all his possessions. Five brightly painted  
tankards, all purchased on the Kansas side of Kansas City.  
A miniature wooden trolley. An armadillo of clay.  
His third most prized collection: wine corks  
by the thousands, each purpled on one end,  
held in a copper tub big enough to bathe in.  
Smoke drifts up from the hole, although George Clark  
does not smoke. It's simple: wherever he is, it gets colder,  
then he breathes. He keeps his second most prized collection  
high on a shelf: hot sauces from across the country, carefully arranged  
in a red and green phalanx. Liquefied habanero. Devil Drops.  
The one that had a naked woman posing with a whip which somehow  
always came back to the front no matter how far back you hid it.  
George Clark cannot move. He calls me exactly one month  
after my birthday and says Happy Birthday and I  
can hear his head bouncing off the sides of the hole.  
The men at the drive-thru window at the liquor store down the street  
know George Clark by face, by name, in secret. They throw a few  
lollipops in with the vodka when they see me in the passenger seat.  
Once he threw me down the stairs.  
Once he hit my sister so hard she slid down the wall  
from the top bunk. I watched from the bottom.  
George Clark's favorite food is barbeque sauce.  
His favorite city is San Francisco. His favorite color  
is blue. He keeps them lined up in a lit cabinet with  
all the antique toys he inherited from his mother.  
She also lived in a hole. And her mother too.  
Once he tried to run my mother over with his car  
in her own driveway. She never told anyone about it  
—the police never believed—but I saw it happen.  
I was there. His most prized collection: a slender  
bracelet gold on his gray wrist, the white hide  
of a little dog, some woman's tan slip-ons  
tossed aside, carelessly, at the earthen bottom of his hole.  
One night he drove himself to the highest point  
east of the Mississippi in his old burgundy sedan.  
When he got there he looked out over his land  
and whispered to it and put his face in it. There,  
George Clark is the governor.  
George Clark is the king.  
I have built villages around his absence.

*Lauren Clark*

18

---

<sup>18</sup> [Lauren Clark](#), "George Clark across the United States," *The Adroit Journal*, collected in *Music for a Wedding*, [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Study Abroad

*No chance you're pregnant* the English doctor asked. *No chance* you repeated slowly, then added *No chance*. That was the summer all Tuscan girls wore green cargo pants & orange camisoles. It looked one way, shopping at Esselunga, & another in the piazza with your tumbler full of strawberry liqueur & the first blue stars catapulting over the Arno. The doctor resembled a townhouse, his hair peaked narrowly in the middle. Your fingers, in their closed fists, made a subtle heat exclusive to your experience. You took the greenyellow pills, thinly coated with sweetness & punched into a paper card. Weeks later, you let your companion take you into the woods by the beach. In his family's summer house, you broke some old chairs to feed the fire, & the stem of your body unspooled in every room. Then you slipped your long feet into the green sandals you hadn't realized were python leather until the scales had already kinked & dulled. You will never have another pair like that. Not real python.

*Kiki Petrosino*  
19

---

<sup>19</sup> [Kiki Petrosino](#), "[Study Abroad](#)," collected in [Witch Wife](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## Gender Bender

Evolution settles for a while on various stable balances.  
One is that some of the girls like cute boys and some  
like ugly older men and sometimes women. The difference  
between them is the ones who like older men were felt up

by their fathers or uncles or older brothers, or, if he didn't  
touch you, still you lived in his cauldron of curses and  
urges, which could be just as worse. They grow already old,  
angry and wise, they get rich, get mean, get theirs.

The untouched-uncursed others are happy never needing  
to do much, and never do much more than good. They envy  
their mean, rich, talented, drunk sisters. Good girls drink milk  
and make milk and know they've missed out and know they're

better off. They might dance and design but won't rip out lungs  
for a flag. Bad ones write books and slash red paint on canvas;  
they've rage to vent, they've fault lines and will rip a toga off  
a Caesar and stab a goat for the ether. It's as simple as that.

Either, deep in the dark of your history, someone showed you  
that you could be used as a cash machine, as a popcorn popper,  
as a rocket launch, as a coin-slot jackpot spunker, or he didn't  
and you grew up unused and clueless. Either you got a clue

and spiked lunch or you got zilch but no punch. And you  
never knew. It's exactly not anyone's fault. If it happened  
and you don't like older men that's just because you like  
them so much you won't let yourself have one. If you did

people would see. Then they would know what happened  
a long time ago, with you and that original him, whose eyes  
you've been avoiding for decades gone forgotten. That's why  
you date men smaller than you or not at all. Or maybe you've

turned into a man. It isn't anyone's fault, it is just human  
and it is what happens. Or doesn't happen. That's that. Any  
questions? If you see a girl dressed to say, "No one tells me  
what to do," you know someone once told her what to do.

*Jennifer Michael Hecht*

20

---

<sup>20</sup> [Jennifer Michael Hecht](#), "[Gender Bender](#)," [The New Yorker](#), collected in [Who Said](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Embarrassment

That afternoon,  
while my parents and hers were inside  
using the Super Bowl as an excuse  
to get drunk in the middle of the day,  
I locked my best friend and myself  
inside the trunk of a car  
for reasons I can't remember now.  
I believe I was trying to prove a point.  
After a few minutes,  
when we realized there was no way out,  
the air got hot and personal.  
Our lives thrashed in us like rodents.  
Yet, what I remember most  
about the incident now  
was the great, dawning sense  
of just how stupid the situation  
would seem to other people  
if we died, how in a few hours  
we could be some story  
on the El Paso news, our parents  
getting sober on TV, our bodies  
laid on steel beds at the morgue,  
naked, imperfect, irrevocably  
embarrassed. How, in the beginning,  
we laughed until we thought  
we'd die laughing, and then stopped  
suddenly, because we thought  
we'd die, and then just lay there  
crumpled into each other  
like folding chairs and wept.  
It was humiliating.  
And an hour later,  
When the trunk wheezed open  
and my father was standing there  
in his Chicago Bears jersey,  
my mother behind him, her coat  
folded smartly over her arm,  
it was even more humiliating.  
They didn't seem surprised  
to find us there, turning blue,  
or particularly angry,  
though they did appear concerned.  
"My God," they were saying, "my God."  
Behind their heads, the pale  
winter evening was waiting  
like a pile of bones to be acknowledged.  
Oh, I wanted to explain.  
I wanted to start from the beginning

and account for each moment.  
But I could do nothing  
but breathe. My lungs  
took all they could. My life was a bird  
on a branch. There it was.  
I saw it, looking down at me  
with its unfocused eye  
from just above my mother's head.  
Oh, it wasn't beautiful.  
But I knew better than to hate it.

*Carrie Fountain*  
21

---

<sup>21</sup> [Carrie Fountain](#), "[Embarrassment](#)," [Crazyhorse](#), collected in [Burn Lake](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## Conversion Party

Sometimes I look my mother and father  
in their wet faces and don't understand—  
if they were good, if they were kind to me,  
why my tilted masonry, my facial gears

petrified into a smile? One night I wander  
to the river to watch fireworks  
for the Fourth, among strollered families  
tugging along their children, so many

big and little hands. I'm twenty-one,  
I've dropped out of college.  
And when I'm tamping my blanket  
down over the mud, a girl sits nearby,

offers me a ham sandwich from  
her bag. I do everything alone these days,  
all social interactions the binary  
of tolerating someone, or telling them

to go to hell. If I refuse her sandwich,  
I've shut down another's kindness. And when  
she invites me to a party tomorrow, if I don't  
accept, I've agreed to die alone. So as bombs

burst over us, I say sure, picturing the way  
other people who get asked to parties  
agree to go, effortless, believing they're  
wanted. The next day when I show up

in my shitty car, there's actually a cake  
embroidered with curlicue frosting,  
a glass etched with tulips thrust into my hand.  
At first it seems like a life I'd want,

a hearth decked out with children's photos,  
this glowing circle of wholesome,  
curious neighbors, all looking at me  
as if there were something I had

to give them, some part of me cached  
beyond my visible husk of afflictions.  
I hide the whiskey I've brought behind  
a stout philodendron. They'll never believe

my father was a deacon, my mother taught  
Sunday school. God and I are on  
a first-name basis. Everyone nods like they've all  
taken the same workshop on listening skills

as I confess I haven't run away, I have a job,  
if slinging plates at a vegan cafe counts.  
I'll eat my apportioned acreage of cake  
if it satisfies our bargain, where I pretend

smooth surfaces, an ease I don't feel. Maybe  
I belong back at the riverbank, wearing  
my nonsensical pain like a chainsaw wound,  
oblivious to onlookers. I leave the cake

on top of my friendly host's toilet, frosting  
melting to a smear, afraid I'll swallow it all.  
In a few months, my job will fire me when  
the night's take goes missing; easier

for my manager to believe I'd steal  
than that he dropped the deposit bag  
behind the utility oven by mistake. When  
will anyone ever bet on me,

that I can be trusted? For years, after each  
church service, I helped my father  
count the collection plate. We'd tip over  
the giant brass bowls, and I'd wrap

tubes of quarters, smooth out crumpled  
dollar bills, the way he taught me,  
as the dust stirred by our Bibles fell  
with holy industry. Every coin in its place.

*Erin Hoover*  
22

---

<sup>22</sup> [Erin Hoover](#), "[Conversion Party](#)," [Grist](#), collected in [Barnburner](#), [Elixir Press](#)

[Yes, I saw them all, saw them, met some, Richard Hell]

Yes, I saw them all, saw them, met some, Richard Hell,  
Lou Reed, Basquiat, Warhol, Burroughs, Kenneth Koch,  
and it all left me feeling invisible or fucked, fucked  
sideways, fucked by a john who stiffes you on your fee  
and doesn't leave a tip, it wasn't impressive, it wasn't literary,  
it wasn't titillating, I hope you are not titillated by it, their loathing  
of women was indisputable, sometimes leaving genuine bruises,  
more often just a sneer or no eye contact, the eyes wandering  
off like dogs looking for something worth peeing on, or rarely  
but potently and maybe worst of all something involving the word  
beautiful, weaponizing the word beautiful, finally I took a turn  
and made myself atrocious, like drag queens and anorexics, I did  
not want to be acceptable, I wanted to be alarming, hulk, colossus,  
freak, maybe not a great life plan but a step in the right direction.

*Diane Seuss*  
23

---

<sup>23</sup> [Diane Seuss, "\[Yes, I saw them all, saw them, met some, Richard Hell\]," \*Scoundrel Time\*](#)

## Pilgrimage

Haven't we all moved to Poland  
to be closer to seriousness

only to find it stuffed with puppets  
and Bon Jovi tribute bands?

Who among us hasn't ordered  
piñatas by the score, authentic

from the Mexican store, just  
to leave them sitting empty

as an operating metaphor?  
Every time we meet I learn new ways

to leave you, the goodbyes distinctive  
and precious as hurricanes.

It is someone's job  
to give these farewells names:

The Albuquerque Adios,  
the Budapest Buh-Bye, Tucson Toodle-oo.

I keep that gal in business,  
I've walked away from everywhere, left

lipstick smears through the Wild West  
and Europe's iron heart.

Maybe staying still is a way of giving up  
on yourself for someone else

and is in this way a kind of romance  
that is beautiful because it is sad

like a tsarist Russian novel  
in which there is dancing and suffering,

all that we are born to do,

*Erin Adair-Hodges*  
24

---

<sup>24</sup> [Erin Adair-Hodges](#), "[Pilgrimage](#)," *Elbow Room NM*, collected in [Let's All Die Happy](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## When a Man I Love Jerks Off in My Bed Next to Me and Falls Asleep

I think of my father  
vodka-laughing: *Aw shit,*  
*when Daddy said go pick out a switch*  
*from the lemon tree we knew*  
*that switch better be good.*  
My father was a drunk altar boy.  
My father was a Southern boy.  
My father is a good man.  
*When you grow up in the South, you know*  
*the difference between a good switch and a bad one.*  
Pick what hurts best. The difference between drinking  
to disappear and drinking to remember.  
Be polite. Be gentle. Be a vessel. Be ashamed.  
As a child, I begged to be whooped.  
I pinched myself with my nails when I was wrong.  
I tried to pull out my eyelashes. I said, *Punish me*  
I said *for I have sinned I am disgusting.*  
Here is the order in which we studied the Bible  
in second grade: 1: Genesis, or, God is a man  
and he owns you. You were bad. Put on some  
got-damn clothes. 2: Exodus, or, you would still  
be a slave if it were not for men. Also, magic.  
Magic or, never question a man's truth.  
3: Job, or, suffer, suffer because it is holy.  
During the classes on Revelation, I think  
I drifted to sleep. I think I dreamed  
trumpets when I touched my hot parts  
then touched the cold steel of my desk.  
I knew what it meant to be wrong and woman.  
When I walk into the world and know  
I am a black girl, I understand  
I am a costume. I know the rules.  
I like the pain because it makes me.  
I deserve the pain. I deserve you  
looking at me, moaning, looking away.  
Son of a bitch. My rent is due.  
No one kissed my tits and read the Bible.  
Good and evil. Pleasure and empty  
curtain grid of dawn light.  
I call this honor. I call this birthright.

Morgan Parker

25

---

<sup>25</sup> Morgan Parker, "When a Man I Love Jerks Off in My Bed Next to Me and Falls Asleep," *Gulf Coast*, collected in *Magical Negro*, Tin House Books

## Believing Anagrams

—after being asked why I write so many poems about death and poetry

There's *real fun* in *funeral*,  
and in the *pearly gates*—*the pages relate*.

You know, I fall *prey to*  
*poetry*,

have *hated*  
*death*.

All my life,  
*literature* has been my *ritual tree*—

*Shakespeare* with his hoarse speak,  
*Pablo Neruda*, my *adorable pun*.

So when I write about *death and poetry*,  
it's *donated therapy*  
where I converse with  
*Emily Dickinson*, my *inky misled icon*.

And when my *dream songs* are *demon's rags*,  
I dust my *manuscript* in a *manic spurt*  
hoping the *reader* will *reread*

because I want the world  
to *pray for poets* as we are only a *story of paper*.

Kelli Russell Agodon

26

---

<sup>26</sup> [Kelli Russell Agodon](#), "[Believing Anagrams](#)," [32 Poems](#), collected in [Letters from the Emily Dickinson Room](#), White Pine Press

## A River in an Ocean of Space

An astronaut tells us space smells like steel,  
like the sweet pleasant fumes from welding—  
for years, the only words we say are lemonquiet,  
hushed, the tapping  
of untrimmed claws. I never have shaken  
your politic, only sighed.  
There is no rainsoaked field,  
no wind beating stiff peaks  
out of the berryblue sea.  
The table bends to a currency of ink.  
Voices of men  
rush the opium smoke on the ceiling,  
the band of horses  
crested out of the woman's mouth, hair like a waterfall  
loosed on the rug.  
The old white wave under the waxing  
moon. The opioid receptor pulled so hard  
it set the cosmos on its end.  
The body feels what it likes, and when.

*Christine Gosnay*  
27

---

<sup>27</sup> [Christine Gosnay](#), "A River in an Ocean of Space," collected in [Even Years](#), [The Kent State University Press](#)

## The Forgotten Dialect of the Heart

Driving west with watercolor,  
I was a little skating pond.  
I left my accidental silence  
at the rug outside the back door,  
wrote my name in crayon  
all over my children's boots,  
got stuck on the tundra  
until the ache thawed out.  
I shall clean the wall of fruit.  
I shall wash the dishes once more.  
Road sign says OVID 9 MILES  
but you and I never arrive.  
Even so, no farmer is so  
inarticulately happy as me. We  
make perfect sense to the parsnips.  
Sometimes, home ain't my  
strong suit. Everyone can dream in blue.  
And as we drive across every state line  
I leave my name on it. *South  
Dakota: Oliver. Montana: Oliver.*  
Here's the bright side, the glass  
of hiccups, the world of good luck.  
Will you be a thing of glass for my body?  
The breakable thing I will not break?  
I know even without your smile  
you never get rid of canning jars.  
I've been home, where love is  
paper-thick with maple syrup.  
Just boiled down sap, and me  
earning the sound of your glory,  
live-streaming the hidden part.  
It's August in the body that I know.  
How to do with wood smoke  
and our newfangled type of ice.  
This is how you sleep, in skates;  
the thought of amber, archers,  
cinnamon and horses  
coming back to me like an analog podcast.  
*Idaho: Oliver. Oregon: Oliver.*  
What have you got? I've got snowstorm  
and a fast-talker. Got jittery  
and open road. Got more than  
sunlight for the detection of a sun.

*Oliver Bendorf*  
28

---

<sup>28</sup> [Oliver Baez Bendorf](#), "[The Forgotten Dialect of the Heart](#)," collected in [The Spectral Wilderness](#), [The Kent State University Press](#)

## How the Sausage Is Made

We start listening to *Little House in the Big Woods*, and E is disturbed by the pig butchering part. I keep waiting for it to end, but it keeps going on— Laura covers her ears so she won't hear the pig squealing, but then comes the "fun part," the actual butchering. The description of all the parts of the pig they could use. The hickory smoking. Pa blowing up the bladder for them to play with. The tail being stripped of its skin so it could be given to the girls to roast over the fire on a stick and gnaw down to the bone. Despite having read this book as a child, I remembered none of this.

\*

It's the Thursday before Easter—Maundy Thursday—and a teacher work day. E squirms at the table until we go outside. He climbs a playhouse with his friends. They play robber and murderer. "What's a murderer?" he says. He touches his friend's back with the bubble wand, telling him it's jailbreak liquid. The friend has been falsely accused, you see. He tosses a gun-shaped stick at another friend.

\*

A Catholic friend asks online whether anyone else's services skipped the foot washing. Another friend watches Zeffirelli Jesus, as is her custom. Later, I am at home thinking, "Maundy, Maundy. What does that mean?" I light a candle to the goddess in the form of Stevie Nicks for a friend who wants to live but also wants to die.

\*

Every day I write messages to my melancholy single mother compatriot. We are Vladimir and Estragon comparing notes. "I slept in a ditch last night." We take our boots off and shake them out. We put them back on and tie our children's boots. We rope the children to us and go on, having given up on Godot. "Men are so disappointing, anyway," I say, "but maybe I shouldn't keep repeating that, so that my thoughts don't create my reality." "They are mostly disappointing," she says, "and the non-disappointing ones are shocked to find out how useless the other men are." I slept in a ditch last night. My friend says that we think we want romance, but that we really want is care. We want someone else to be maternal for a change.

\*

At the end of Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*, the protagonist spies into the window of an Mennonite couple as the husband washes the wife's feet as a gesture of apology and reconciliation. My only instrument of spiritual technology is this candle and this smoothed-out amethyst the tarot lady suggested I buy to heal and tone my heart chakra. I keep setting it down on different surfaces and losing it. E is squirming in his seat, climbing onto my lap at dinner, pressing against me to know we are both here, until I snap that I just need space. The technology of comfort. The failure of energy. But how attentive he is when he asks for a word to be defined and then listens for the response, how our brain and heart waves level out and reach toward each other calmly. How I look up from my writing to see the amethyst where it fell at my feet.

Joanna Penn Cooper  
29

---

<sup>29</sup> [Joanna Penn Cooper, "How the Sausage Is Made," \*On the Seawall\*](#)

## A Farewell to Shopping

Arrivederci, shoes, the lavender silk sandals I bought  
in Venice and the dagger-toed love child  
of St. Teresa and the Marquis de Sade that made me feel  
like a nun/dominatrix in fishnet hose, the loafers  
that were too small, but I bought them anyway  
and cursed my feet for their toes. And the dress  
in London with the Fortuny pleats that was too tight  
across my bosom—what did I think?  
My breasts were going to get smaller? O breasts, how I cursed you  
when I owe you so much. Goodnight, eBay  
and all the parties I missed, bidding at 11:56 on Bakelite bracelets  
that went to women in San Diego and Kalamazoo.  
While my friends drank champagne I followed handbags  
in Japan, discontinued Louis Vuittons—yellow and black—  
even more perfect than when Junko and Yukio bought them  
in Paris ten years before. Good riddance, nasty shopgirls  
with your trim waists and your pointed teeth, who made me feel  
like my Aunt Frieda in Chattanooga to buy a hat  
for Easter at the First Baptist Church of Ducktown, Tennessee,  
and the lazy ones who smiled like fairy princesses  
and told me I looked good in the puce dress with yellow goring.  
O bless you, department store ladies, who told me  
not the yellow—always the blue, because they knew  
how your waist could betray you and your arms, too.  
Dasvidaniya, to the beautiful Russian woman at Ala Moana  
who picked out the black jacket I wore to threads.  
Sayonara to the kimono master in Kyoto, who made tea  
and talked about silk as if it were a holy sacrament.  
O farewell to trolling the streets looking for the dress, shoes, bag,  
earrings of my dreams, for night is falling hard,  
and I'm no longer a pirate pillaging villages on my way home  
from the wars, so put gold coins on my eyes,  
and launch me in a burning boat, and I will make a light  
on the dark sea as I rise into the smokeless sky.

*Barbara Hamby*  
30

---

<sup>30</sup> [Barbara Hamby](#), "A Farewell to Shopping," *Cincinnati Review*, collected in [Bird Odyssey](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

Everything is a Hat

Your wife,  
a teacup  
rattling in her head  
the night you wore her  
out to the banquet.

The moon,  
a chipped tooth  
confused  
with the room  
you died into.

Sleep,  
like a black  
kite soaring  
from your wrist.

Sleep,  
lying prone  
in the family  
position.

The rain  
that began in June,  
in a photograph  
I took to look  
exactly like you.

*Marni Ludwig*  
31

---

<sup>31</sup> [Marni Ludwig](#), "[Everything is a Hat](#)," collected in [Pinwheel](#), [New Issues Press](#)

## Call Me to Prayer

A cigarette burn on my forearm. Pink and round as a tongue tip.

There's Beirut when the floods finally come: bits of tinsel and hamburger wrappers floating through the streets. The city glazed like a donut.



In a whorehouse a man tells me to go home to my baba. A cigarette burn on his forearm. Three brothers he buried in Muslim soil.

In Jerusalem, in El Paso, every road repeats its own Bible name



The towers. Five thousand six hundred and seventy-five miles later, the tunnels.

In the exile's suitcase, a carpet of dead grass. Seven persimmons. A dandelion stem skinny as a grenade pin.



All night the wind muscled through the cypress trees, calls me to prayer with the bees.

There is no God but God. This is mountain country, this is evacuation country, this is land of American shrapnel and strip clubs.

No god but.



In a night trimmed with moon, lovers kiss their dead like lovers.

*Hala Alyan*  
32

---

<sup>32</sup> [Hala Alyan](#), "Call Me to Prayer," [Juxtapoz](#), collected in [The Twenty-Ninth Year](#), [Mariner Books](#)

## When I was Fifteen

When I was fifteen  
I suddenly knew  
I would never  
understand geometry.  
Who was my teacher?  
That name is gone.  
I only remember  
the gray feeling  
in a classroom  
filled with vast  
theoretical distances.  
I can still see  
odd shapes  
drawn on the board,  
and those inscrutable  
formulas everyone  
was busily into  
their notebooks scribbling.  
I looked down  
at the Velcro  
straps of my entirely  
white shoes and knew  
inside me things  
had long ago gone  
terribly wrong  
and would continue  
to be. When  
the field hockey star  
broke her knee,  
I wrote a story  
for the school paper  
then brought her  
the history notes  
in the snow.  
She stood  
in the threshold,  
a whole firelit life  
of mysterious  
familial warmth  
glowing behind her,  
and took them  
from my hands  
like the blameless  
queen of elegant  
violence she was.  
Walking home  
encased in immense  
amounts of down

I listened to  
the analog ghost  
in the machine  
pour from the cassette  
I had drawn  
flowers on.  
Into my ears  
it sang everything  
they told you  
makes you believe  
you are trapped  
in a snow globe  
forgotten in a dark  
closet where exhausted  
shadows argue  
what is sorrow  
cannot become joy,  
but I am here  
from the future  
to tell you  
you are not,  
all you must do  
is stay asleep  
a few more years,  
great traveler waiting to go.

*Matthew Zapruder*  
33

---

<sup>33</sup> [Matthew Zapruder](#), "[When I was Fifteen](#)," collected in [Father's Day](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Again, Let's Do It Again

Let's start over. I will be a pilgrim wife and you will drive the wagon. We'll give the oxen doomsday names like Steel and Ore. When the food runs out we will feast on each other's bodies like there was a hole in our brains where the word cannibalism should be, like we were trying to erase the old king's idea of love. I will brew tea over the fire until I singe my cheeks, you will call me a dirty wife without expecting anything extra when your pants are down. We will cry at brown rivers. We will fear any height greater than us. Let me start over. You are a husband. I am a wife. We are in love we are not in love. We eat sleep like it's something familiar. We starve ourselves for days. When we wake up we forget each other's names and spend the rest of the day flipping through the alphabet like it could make us assemble. We are too new-world to understand that our armoire's tongue and groove is what gets museums hard. You, what gets you hard? I am hardly a beast when it comes to bedrooms when it comes to you, bridegroom. I find it hard to believe that we were not made in a factory. The way we touch each other without improvisation. The way I always look at you, adoringly, on time. If we start over as two strangers whose history is written in lemon juice, how many nights are you willing to sacrifice trying to decipher my dainty code? How can we love each other with so much skin in the way? In an orange grove, we could be two oranges that touch. Finally, we could depend on the farmer to gather us in the same crate, on the child to be hungry enough to unpeel us and eat us both at once.

*Meghan Privitello*

34

---

<sup>34</sup> [Meghan Privitello](#), "[Again, Let's Do It Again](#)," collected in [A New Language for Falling Out of Love](#), [YesYes Books](#)

## Beatitudes

So basically I was a raccoon washing the same thimble  
at the edge of a creek day after day, hoping eventually  
it would turn into a crystal drinking glass. My previous  
life was similar, only it was a stone that I was washing  
with equivalent fervor and no change. Why didn't anyone  
alert me? Not even the horrid little monarchs bombarding  
every corner of the vacant lot with their announcements  
or the inspirational sayings you'd find in bubble letters  
on the ceiling of the clinic, next to a woeful clown face  
or tri-color diagram with *before* and *after* in Old English  
typeface. I was the rotten windmill that had terrified me  
as a child. Only I had no idea, and just kept waving arms  
around like it was a wedding reception, not the map room  
of the library. Walking home from school sometimes we'd  
snicker at the babushkas, but were we next? Hot weather  
stoop sitters never visited by their daughters, sprinkling  
paprika on handkerchiefs and shaming gentlemen into  
palming our elbows on the way into church? When did I  
become such an undesirable blanket? The donation center  
lady said maybe I would come in handy to put out grease  
fires or sop up deer blood in a truck bed. But I had spent  
years doing those things, and many others, without notice.  
One of the articles said okay, you've missed a few stops  
on the highway, but that doesn't mean you need to jump  
out the car window. But then that article saved a Sandhill  
Crane and discovered a woman bound up in the marsh still  
alive. The article fed her water and they moved to France.  
So when I attempt to distinguish the foot patters of one  
mouse in the cupboard from the next, I demonstrate hope.  
Or the hope for hope. Or just more unanswerable holes.

Mary Biddinger  
35

---

<sup>35</sup> [B.K. Fischer](#), "(Beatitudes)," collected in [Radioapocrypha](#), [Ohio State University Press](#)

## Aphorisms

Think of all the smart people made stupid by flaws of character. The finest watch isn't fine long when used as a hammer.

Only the dead have discovered what they cannot live without.

Everyone loves the Revolution. We only disagree on whether it has occurred.

A tornado can't stack two dimes.

The road you do not take you will have to cross.

Each lock makes two prisons.

The world is not what anyone wished for, it's what everyone wished for.

The first abuse of power is not realizing that you have it.

*James Richardson*

36

---

<sup>36</sup> [James Richardson](#), [Aphorisms](#), collected in [Short Flights](#), [Schaffner Press](#)

## After You Have Gone

The little red jewel in the bottom of your wineglass  
is so lovely I cannot rinse it out,  
  
so I go into the cool and grassy air to smoke.  
Which is your warmly lit house  
  
past which no soldiers march?  
When you reached across the table to touch my hand  
  
is not attainable. I cannot recapture it.  
  
And no gunners lean on their artillery at the city's edge,  
looking our direction,  
  
having shot the sky full of bright holes.  
  
The light bleeds from them.  
Long ago, they captured our city  
  
and now they are our neighbors,  
going about their business like they were one of us.  
  
Soon, like you, they will be asleep,  
having washed the dishes and turned out the kitchen lights.  
  
When I inhale, smoke occupies me.  
When I exhale—  
  
By morning the wine in the bottom of your glass  
will have clotted.  
  
I'm sorry I called it a jewel.  
It is not the soldiers who have shot me full of holes.  
  
It is not light that pours out.  
Love did this.  
  
I was filled with wine.  
Now I am drained of it.

*Kevin Prufer*  
37

---

<sup>37</sup> [Kevin Prufer](#), "[After You Have Gone](#)," collected in [How He Loved Them](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Don Pullen at The Zanzibar Blue Jazz Café

Half-past eight Don Pullen just arrived  
from Yellow Springs. By his side  
is the African-Brazilian Connection.  
If it were any later, another space,  
say “Up All Night Movie Hour”  
on Channel 7, he might have been  
a cartel leader snorting little mountains  
of cocaine up his mutilated nostrils  
from behind his bureau as he buries  
a flurry of silver-headed bullets  
into the chests of the good guys:  
an armlock M-16 in his right hand,  
a sawed-off double barrel shotgun  
in his left, his dead blond  
girlfriend oozing globules of blood  
by the jacuzzi. No one could be cooler  
balancing all those stimulants. No one.

She said she couldn't trust me,  
that her ladybugs were mysteriously  
disappearing, that I no longer  
sprinkle rose petals in her bath,  
that some other woman left a bouquet  
of scented lingerie and a burning  
candelabra on our doorstep, that she  
was leaving, off to France—  
the land of authentic lovers. In this club  
the dim track lights reflecting off  
the mirror where the bottles are lined  
like a firing squad studying their targets  
makes the ice, stacked on top of ice,  
very sexy, surprisingly beautiful & this  
is my burden, I see Beauty in everything,  
everywhere. How can one cringe upon  
hearing of a six-year-old boy snatched  
from a mall outside of London, two  
beggarly boys luring him to the train  
tracks with a bag of popcorn only to beat  
his head into a pulp of bad cabbage!  
Even now, I can smell them  
holding his hand promising  
Candyland in all its stripes & chutes.

Nine-fifteen, Don & the African  
Brazilian have lit into Capoeira.  
The berimbau string stings my eyes  
already blurring cognac, my eyes  
trying to half-see if that's my muse

sitting up front, unrecognizable,  
a blue specter. Don's wire fingers are  
scraping the ivory keys, off-  
rhythm. It doesn't matter, the Connection  
agrees there's room as they sway  
& fall against the ceiling, a band  
of white shadows wind-whipped  
on a clothesline. Don's raspy hands—  
more violent than a fusillade of autumn  
leaves pin-wheeling like paper rain  
over East River Drive in blazing reds  
& yellows—hammers away, shivers in  
monstrous anarchy. Don's arms arch like  
orange slices squirting on my mouth's roof,  
juice everywhere. His body swings up  
off his haunches. The audience, surveying each  
other's emotions, feel the extensions; their  
bodies meld against the walls, leaving  
a funeral of fingerprints as they exhale back  
to their seats. Ten minutes to twelve,  
I'm waving a taxi through holes  
in the rain. I will tell her about tonight,  
tell her how a guy named Don & his crew  
The Connection hacked harmonies,  
smashed scales, pulverized piano keys,  
all in rhythm as each brutal chord  
exploded in a moment's dawning.

*Major Jackson*

38

---

<sup>38</sup> Major Jackson, "Don Pullen at the Zanzibar Blue Jazz Café," *Callaloo*, collected in *Leaving Saturn*, The University of Georgia Press

from *Four Horaces*

### III. After Party

Helena, when you froth with the names of stars  
I wonder is it a star's kiss, a star's trace  
from last night's after party that perplexes me?

You can't buy the tears that adorn my eyes  
on eBay or in the diamond district. Those  
bruises on you aren't temporary henna tattoos.

Some star put them there after the after party,  
before you made him taste the back of your throat.  
I know what happens at those after parties, where

Absolut sponsors everything. Everyone puts a drop  
of honey somewhere up inside their body and  
the game is, where is it, who can find my honey drop?

Meanwhile, where is your Horace? Home. as usual,  
translating Dan Chiasson's  
petty agonies into his frantic, ancient Latin.

*Dan Chiasson*  
39

---

<sup>39</sup> [Dan Chiasson](#), "[Four Horaces](#)," [TriQuarterly](#), collected in [Natural History](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

J M

Two decades ago in my class,  
She wrote about Jane Kenyon being brave.

Even then, male poets annoyed her.  
She chewed gum and laughed nervously.

In the years since, she gave up smoking.  
Kitty Genovese texted her from the grave.

How lucky, I thought, as she wrote and wrote.  
She has someone who talks to her.

*J.D. Scrimgeour*

40

---

<sup>40</sup> [J.D. Scrimgeour](#), "[J M](#)," collected in [Festival](#), [Nixes Mate Review](#), [Incessant Pipe](#)

A girl brings me home to nothing

A girl brings me home to nothing. I thought it was her last name  
but it's her occupation. Peruke: archaic for wig. We're living in olden times

where every bar takes only cash, every window displays a bad invention.  
Once she worked in the Natural History Museum in a den of dead butterflies.

Now, wigs everywhere, head full of colors lying flat. There are drugs  
that call your body, graceful leaf, slowly to the ground. *Now you're talking*

*my language*, sipping beer and holding up opposite walls. I ask her why  
she's not kissing me. All the butterflies in the room are choking on pot smoke.

I'm penetrating her and we both have our clothes on. She wants to see my body  
and it's over before it started. That's the thing about any room

where the way in is also the way out. We midnight deli on the corner  
with no street signs, busted lights, get our bagels toasted with cream cheese

and salmon. It tastes like salty cardboard. I let her pay because I bought the beer  
and I like to be thanked in one way or another. Like girls are taught to.

Gala Mukomolova  
41

---

<sup>41</sup> [Gala Mukomolova](#), "[A girl brings me home to nothing](#)," collected in [Without Protection](#), [Coffee House Press](#)

## Vision Test in the First Grade

When my teacher told me to place my eyes against the box,  
she asked: *do you see the apple on the picnic table?*

I did see it, the apple, a ghost apple, more beautiful after its death:  
glowing like a Lite-Brite peg, hovering over a wooden table  
which floated, too, against a black velvet campground, so shadowed  
and deserted, I couldn't tell the trees apart. What if I saw,  
on that same table, against the endless night in that box,  
an amber pear, lit from within its skin. What if I saw a plum,  
dark as that midnight picnic, but new-moon illuminated.

What would my teacher mark in her green book? As a child  
I was frightened most of the time, and just bright enough.  
The apple was from someplace else and I saw it there, boxed.

*Jennifer Martelli*  
42

---

<sup>42</sup> [Jennifer Martelli, "Vision Test in the First Grade," \*Nelle\*](#)

## Barbie Chang Has No Intention

Barbie Chang has no intention of  
letting the heart win

it's the lungs that need her shelter  
her mother's lungs

sound like Velcro they crackle like a  
candy wrapper this

year Barbie Chang has wrapped up  
the past but no matter

how many times she cuts and pastes a  
new childhood over her

old one her hair color is still algebraic  
it is both  $x$  and the

solution it is metonymy for her whole  
being it is the most

economical way to identify her when  
you know someone

will die it is not economical to keep  
them alive but we try

and try because we don't know that  
good memories can't start

appearing until after someone is dead  
when waiting for someone

to die getting ahead seems foolish  
when someone is dying

there are always noises in the attic  
Barbie Chang hates the

status quo wants to go back to being  
quoted wants something

to happen cannot lie she has wished  
for someone to die

*Victoria Chang*  
43

---

<sup>43</sup> [Victoria Chang](#), "[Barbie Chang Has No Intention](#)," collected in [Barbie Chang](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Juneau

In Alaska I slept in a bed on stilts, one arm  
pressed against the ice feathered window,  
the heat on high, sweat darkening the collar  
of my cotton thermals. I worked hard to buy that bed,  
walked towards it when the men in the booths  
were finished crushing hundred dollar bills  
into my hand, pitchers of beer balanced on my shoulder  
set down like pots of gold. My shift ended at 5 a.m.:  
station tables wiped clean, salt and peppers  
replenished, ketchups married. I walked the dirt road  
in my stained apron and snow boots, wool scarf,  
second-hand gloves, steam rising  
off the backs of horses wading chest deep in fog.  
I walked home slow under Orion, his starry belt  
hung heavy beneath the cold carved moon.  
My room was still, quiet, squares of starlight  
set down like blank pages on the yellow quilt.  
I left the heat on because I could afford it, the house  
hot as a sauna, and shed my sweater, my skirt,  
toed off my boots, slung my damp socks  
over the oil heater's coils. I don't know now  
why I ever left. I slept like the dead  
while outside my window the sun rose  
low over the glacier, and the glacier did its best  
to hold on, though one morning I woke to hear it  
giving up, sloughing off a chunk of antediluvian ice  
that sounded like the door to heaven opening  
on a badly hung hinge. Those undefined days  
I stared into the blue scar where the ice  
had been, so clear and crystalline it hurt. I slept  
in my small room and all night—or what passed for night  
that far north—the geography of the world  
outside my window was breaking, changing shape.  
And I woke to it and looked at it and didn't speak.

*Dorianne Laux*

44

---

<sup>44</sup> [Dorianne Laux](#), "[Juneau](#)," [Orion](#), collected in [The Book of Men](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Bride of Tricky D.

*YORBA LINDA, California... Plans are afoot to exhume [Checkers] who died in 1964, and rebury him near the former president on the grounds of the Nixon presidential library.  
—<http://cnn.com/US/9704/27/briefs.pm/nbcon.checkers/>*

And the rest is taps, or reveille. Maybe  
he lies with dog & god

beneath the Yorba Linda pines, adrift  
in history. There is no way

he's mumbling on about the next  
campaign, how crack advance men

break & enter paradise while blase  
press fly back to Washington.

Somebody's shroud is in a twist  
but it's so deadly smug out on the new

world order battlements. "Let's  
slip the Constitution, Richard,

cut red ribbon on the virgin  
century. Teach me tonight...." I find

his fierce beard lovely and the shadows  
long. *Asleep with Pat & Checkers*

*by his side....* "We could do it,"  
he'll say, "but it would be wrong."

*Rachel Loden*  
45

---

<sup>45</sup> [Rachel Loden](#), "[Bride of Tricky D.](#)," collected in [The Last Campaign](#), Slapering Hol Press

After Reading That the Milky Way Is Devouring the Galaxy of Sagittarius

*at the Dorothy B. Oven Memorial Park*

I'm certain Mrs. Oven  
meant to be nice  
when she bequeathed that everything  
in her garden should be nice  
forever. This explains

one version of paradise:  
the tiny gazebo with fluted  
pie crust for a roof, the footbridge  
spanning a tinkly stream  
small enough to step over.  
Even this snail drags

an iridescent skid mark  
around the fountain's marble  
lip. His shell is an enormous  
earring like the ones my mother  
wore to prom in 1957,  
that large, that optimistic.

And because we're never alone  
in paradise, my son is here.

He's stolen a silver balloon from  
the wedding party posing for  
photos before a copse of live oaks,  
the trees shawled in moss like  
hand-tatted mantillas. Secretly,

I applaud my son's thievery. And  
the bride as well, five months  
gone I guess, wearing Mouseketeer  
ears with her stupendous  
gown. Good for her. Best to keep

two hands on your sense of humor.  
Best to ignore those other worlds  
exploding, how violently, how  
quietly they come and go.

*for Andrew Epstein*

*Erin Belieu*  
46

---

<sup>46</sup> [Erin Belieu, "After Reading That the Milky Way Is Devouring the Galaxy of Sagittarius," \*Virginia Quarterly Review\*, collected in \*Black Box\*, Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Beautiful Funeral

Tonight, you are thinking of heroin,  
Of the boy who pulled you to his lips  
In a blue room and whispered *heroin*  
So close you could feel it on your face like a cloudburst.

He makes you think of furs and Russia,  
Midnight sun and Petersburg canals, a sullen gun  
Where one bullet's lodged like something in the craw  
Of a drowned boy fished from beneath docks.

His limbs were white with blue veins  
Spidered beneath the light shell of his skin  
Open to the littlest bark, the tiniest trireme,  
His veins were vulnerable as a bruise-black mare

Just as the barn begins to spark. And once  
In the night that held its candle closer to see  
His needled flesh heaved beneath the sink  
Of a city bathroom, aching to vomit up its ore...

You would have dusted off those peacock rings  
Below his eyes with your sandpaper tongue,  
Lapped his form in camphor-drenched gauze  
Then washed him in waves of organ music.

You would have pressed down that black key  
By his spine's base to hear the deepest of tones  
A body can moan. Ah, invalid.  
We would have made a beautiful funeral.

*Monica Ferrell*  
47

---

<sup>47</sup> [Monica Ferrell](#), "[Beautiful Funeral](#)," [Guernica](#), collected in [You Darling Thing](#), [Four Way Books](#)

## Dark Girl Dressed in Blue

Night comes on in the city: that's the time  
of infinite sadness, the accidental marriage

of heat and air, when the bulbs of consolation  
light the sidewalks. In the museum's tomb,

many stone doors remain unopened.  
Does anyone here know "The Dark Girl

Dressed in Blue"? My mother used to sing it,  
wearing her midnight shift and piano face.

Afterward, the Emperor of Light  
walked her back to the wards with his hands

in his pockets, conducting their own heat.  
In the marbled dark her gaze resembled

Egyptian vases with their side-eyed views:  
not what they see, but what sees you.

*Robin Ekiss*  
48

---

<sup>48</sup> [Robin Ekiss](#), "[Dark Girl Dressed in Blue](#)," [New England Review](#), collected in [The Mansion of Happiness](#), [University of Georgia Press](#)

from "Song for My Father"

6.

Is your father a cantata  
the air blows in off the coast of Kalamazoo

a cantata made from the flames of Flint

made from blacktop and porch-rocking,  
a cadence of bootlaces and concrete slabs

a cadence of yard work and slaughterhouses?

A concerto of the UAW hall  
and the old neighborhood?

And who will compose the symphony  
for my father and the long hours

he traveled selling toilet paper, candy  
whatever money paid he took he gave

driving through the cornfield small towns  
of Ohio from supermarket aisle to aisle

in his corduroy jacket with his neatly trimmed  
black beard afro tie tied and wing-tipped, he was my father,

brown-skinned brown playing Miles on 8-tracks  
he sold he spoke polite to rude white managers

to keep his job he ate his anger, he rolled  
his left sleeve up and the window down

let the rain brush him lightly like the hush

of a brush across a cymbal's edge—the job

is not my father, but the job  
could eat my father, the men

who tell your father  
what he is, and the money

that isn't enough to fill the hand (now the horn bellows)  
that holds the glass when he comes home

as he drinks, the other  
on the shoulder



Deposition: On That Night & All That Was After

The sedan pushed its high beams over the county  
which was its roads & its fields & in them the animals,

who watched us with their invisible eyes. He said  
*do you want to just park here & I said are you serious*

& he said *no, I'm not serious, I'm Jeremy*. We were always  
going on like that. In the fields every ear of corn had its stalk

& nothing sounded like music. Did I want to take him  
inside of me or did I want to know if inside of me

there was an I that was me. There was an appreciable  
difference. When the temperature fell I knew no one

was a hero with a jacket anymore. He said *we might as well  
be a movie & I said well how do you know that we aren't*. Did I

want to take or did I want to know. Inside of me there was  
an I, there was a night with its mouth full of stars.

*Emma Bolden*  
50

---

<sup>50</sup> [Emma Bolden](#), "[Deposition: On That Night & All That Was After](#)," [Josephine Quarterly](#), collected in [House is an Enigma](#), [Southeast Missouri State University](#)

from "13th Balloon"

A few months after you died  
I came home on a black and freezing night  
to find a small cardboard box  
on the steps outside my building

I opened the lid and inside  
was a single newborn animal  
hairless pink and clean  
a rat a guinea pig I couldn't tell

Was it moving I don't remember now  
why can't I remember that now  
It can't have been moving  
it couldn't have  
been alive

I considered my cat asleep  
in my apartment would he  
kill this creature if it lived  
Did I have any milk  
and how would I get any milk  
anyway inside this tiny thing  
that surely could not be alive

What kind of person  
might have come and left  
a baby possibly dead  
animal there in a box  
on my stoop what kind

If this was a test I failed it

I carried the box  
three long blocks  
to the river and threw it in

I have never so much  
as in the moment the box went under  
the surface of the water  
stabbing and stabbing and stabbing itself  
like a million obsidian knives  
wished that I were dead

If death is a test I fail

If death is a test I pass

*Mark Bibbins*

51

---

<sup>51</sup> [Mark Bibbins](#), "[13th Balloon \[A few months after you died\]](#)," [Lit Hub](#), collected in [13th Balloon](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Men Keep on Dying

*to the memory of Denis Johnson*

The stranger bites into an orange  
and places the rind between us  
on the park bench.  
It becomes a small raft of fire.

I came here to admire  
the iron-lit indifference  
of the geese on the pond.

*The summers here  
are a circuit in parallel  
with everything I cannot say,  
wrote the inventor  
before he was hanged  
from the bridge  
this park is named after.  
His entire life devoted  
to capturing inextinguishable light  
in a teardrop of enamel.  
He was hanged for touching  
the forehead of another man  
in the wrong century.*

The only thing invented  
by the man I lost yesterday  
was his last step into a final  
set of parenthesis.  
I came here to watch the geese  
and think of him.

The stranger and I  
share the orange rind  
as an ashtray.  
He lights my cigarette  
and the shadows of our hands  
touch on the ground.

His left leg is amputated  
below the knee  
and the bell tower rings  
above the town.  
I tell him my name  
and he says nothing.

With the charred end of a stick  
something shaped like a child  
on the other side of the pond

draws a door on a concrete wall  
and I wonder where the dead  
wait in line to be born.

*Michael McGriff*  
52

---

<sup>52</sup> [Michael McGriff, "Men Keep on Dying," Poem-a-Day](#)

before it chooses you

by this age maybe  
I should have quit smoking  
but I can't seem to control  
the me who wants to stay  
an idiot forever. I want  
to open my chest & find  
all the dark moments  
playing there,  
flickering like a drive-in  
before the tornado takes it.  
here I am made up  
of my worst impulses.  
body lined with bar bathrooms  
and casual scars. It's no secret  
I miss the me who wore that skirt.  
the way the pinks and purples  
in the sunset used to open up  
my throat. the man who asked  
if he could punch me  
and then did.

*Cassandra de Alba*  
53

---

<sup>53</sup> [Cassandra de Alba](#), "[before it chooses you](#)," collected in [Ugly/Sad](#), [Glass Poetry Press](#)

## Night

Someone was talking  
quietly of lanterns—

but loud enough  
to light my way.

*Andrea Cohen*  
54

---

<sup>54</sup> [Andrea Cohen](#), "[Night](#)," [Terrain](#), collected in [Nightshade](#), [Four Way Books](#)

& What Shoulder, & What Art

Sing la la la. Sing huzzah,  
huzzah, motherfucker:

The weather's clotted with events  
increasingly, the piano you carry

has a piano factory on top of it  
and on top of that the city

futzing out in all directions  
like a busted hydrant.

The road thins sharply to wire.  
But look at the water, glinting

like steel like mirror pepper  
in the hard-breathing sunlight.

*I have been here before, you think,  
the sky full of zippers, the blood*

*in the trees, don't you feel  
like we've been here before—*

Five minutes ago, five billion years ago  
something realized

there had to be a first step  
before a proscenium arch could grin

upon a flautist talking to a fiddle player,  
a lover gone down into the earth.

Sing la la la, friend, sing huzzah  
like it makes shapes in the dark,

like the dark has to make way  
for the shapes that singing takes.

Marc McKee  
55

---

<sup>55</sup> [Marc McKee, " & What Shoulder, & What Art,"](#) *Artifice*, collected in [Meta Meta Make-Belief](#), Black Lawrence Press

## Appetite

That was the summer  
I carried a kitchen knife

for protection and slammed  
my car into the truck

of a man who stood me up  
at a bar. What else could

I do after so much  
religion? I got stoned

in the bathroom before  
work, and my roommate

spent our rent money on  
cigarettes and CDs. Dance

music and AIDS tests  
and married men: one

with a crucifix that dangled  
in my face when he

straddled me, who said *show  
me your dick* while his

kids slept on a foldout  
couch in the basement.

I fantasized every heat-heavy  
glance into a love story and

stole ice-cream sandwiches  
from a convenience store

on Murray Avenue. It was  
Pittsburgh. I was hungry.

*Aaron Smith*  
56

---

<sup>56</sup> [Aaron Smith](#), "[Appetite](#)," [Gulf Coast](#), collected in [Appetite](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

from "After Damascus"

2.

They found your severed thumb.  
A listless troop of Eagle Scouts  
far outside incorporated Halifax,  
where they had no business being.  
It was true, everyone had said so,  
though suspicious-looking aldermen  
lent the boys cheap carbines  
and sundry ammunition and mean-looking blades  
to clip to their belts like phones.  
*Come back*, they said. *Be safe*, they said to  
miniature sacrifices marching  
into the violence of everywhere else.  
And you were there already, shaving  
with a notched machete,  
a bit of surplus of a dim, disreputable war.  
Inside cast-off hammocks you slept  
when the nights were warm.  
It was easy to believe life  
was not an endlessly replicated series of visual puns.  
And then in your hands  
you held some blood,  
belonging to nobody but you.  
A bland nausea bubbled up.  
The stirrings of critters in the distant brush.  
Not much else to attend you  
and your stupid wound.  
No orchestral fanfare, no geysers of manic confetti.  
That would have been nice,  
but a mess within another mess.  
It was easy to bind up your thumb  
with some of the cellophane that was everywhere.  
To say a few sweet words  
and then leave it on the ground.  
Easier still to go,  
that much lighter in flesh  
and the blood that sped out of you.  
Wherever they found you  
hitching on the road's crumbling shoulder,  
there was no good light  
by which to see you  
swear your name was very serious.  
A few of them itched  
to unsling their borrowed guns.  
You're already dying,  
they muttered and coughed and kicked.  
You're almost out of blood.

You don't even know it.  
What would you trade for your life?

*Paul Guest*  
57

---

<sup>57</sup> [Paul Guest](#), "[After Damascus: 2](#)," [The Cortland Review](#), collected in [Because Everything is Terrible](#), Diode Editions

## Some of Us

See others of us. Some of us kiss others of us. Some of us  
have left home and believe in the commerce of belief  
and that writing will save some of us from harm and  
believe there must be a pony somewhere  
and some of us turn and turn again toward the fire  
and have fallen suddenly in front of some of us while  
the man-clown comes down the aisle  
and our elders cannot smile  
even as there are words to comfort some of us  
and not others, not others  
sitting in the rags of our life  
or writing to get us anywhere else while  
some of us stand like statues at noon  
imagining ourselves as history and some disapprove  
and some of us are always hungry  
and some of us are always happy and glad  
and some of us believe in witches  
and some of us cannot follow along the route but  
stay pinioned and alert having killed the beautiful  
beasts of the field, having waited for kingdom come,  
having flexed and watched and searched  
and taught and shown how some of us are joyful  
and some not, scribbling our tunes on the wall,  
some of us are perplexed among stones

and some of us have disappeared  
into the great conversation  
of being, its white light of shipwreck,  
and some of us are bored too soon  
and others of us are beyond salvation  
and some of us stare into hope  
and smile  
and prepare for the worst  
and are radiant among machines and graves  
and are radiant in the meadow  
while some of us travel and some of us stand watch  
as if we could reap  
as if there were no weathers to impede  
nor impassible routes and some of us  
hate others of us  
and some of us are easy and aloof  
and some are lost in a crowd  
or are always wanting more and some of us shout  
and some of us are just passing by others of us  
and want to remember  
this or that song.

*Ann Lauterbach*  
58

---

<sup>58</sup> [Ann Lauterbach](#), "[Some of Us](#)," collected in [Spell](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## First Child Miscarried

Out of blood bed  
and pelvic bone,  
out of the sex-shot ancient seas,  
  
out of egg cell  
and slime maze, sperm  
trip and secret code,  
  
you slipped from the spiral,  
saying *no*  
to the flushed luck  
  
of lung sac, the script  
in chromosome,  
amniot slush starting up,  
  
saying *no* to the song  
of labor and gestation,  
the hard taking form, *no*  
  
to vein tick and flesh time,  
*no* to ancestors branching  
from the family trees:  
  
a shoemaker in Minsk,  
a general's friend in Bangkok,  
*no* to broom-pushers in paper mills,  
  
to lid-fitters in canneries, saying *not-to-be*  
descended from the green-eyed girl raped  
by Cossacks, from the draft dodger  
  
of czars' armies, *no* to smithies in small villages,  
millions migrating for the sake of better  
rice pits, nomads passing over  
  
the by-now long-sunken land bridge—  
Oh my blotch and second heart-  
beat—saying *no*  
  
to evolution, the men come from apes come down from  
boars and frogs and lizards,  
rejecting the swill  
  
of molecules, the cluster of microbes—  
Oh let there be no amino acids,  
let there be no first star,

saying *no*  
to the *whowhatwhenwherewhy*  
saying *no reason*—

*Pimone Triplett*  
59

---

<sup>59</sup> [Pimone Triplett](#), "[First Child Miscarried](#)," collected in [Rumor](#), Northwestern University Press.

## Nineteen

That summer in Culpeper, all there was to eat was white:  
cauliflower, flounder, white sauce, white ice cream.  
I snuck around with an older man who didn't tell me  
he was married. I was the baby, drinking rum and Coke  
while the men smoked reefer they'd stolen from the campers.  
I tiptoed with my lover to poison-ivied fields, camp vans.  
I never slept. Each fortnight I returned to the city,  
black and dusty, with a garbage bag of dirty clothes.

At nineteen it was my first summer away from home.  
His beard smelled musty. His eyes were black. "The ladies love my hair,"  
he'd say; and like a fool I'd smile. He knew everything  
about marijuana, how dry it had to be to burn,  
how to crush it, sniff it, how to pick the seeds out. He said  
he learned it all in Vietnam. He brought his son to visit  
after one of his days off. I never imagined a mother.  
"Can I steal a kiss?" he said, the first thick night in the field.

I asked and asked about Vietnam, how each scar felt,  
what combat was like, how the jungle smelled. He listened  
to a lot of Marvin Gaye, was all he said, and grabbed  
between my legs. I'd creep to my cot before morning.  
I'd eat that white food. This was before I understood  
that nothing could be ruined in one stroke. A sudden  
storm came hard one night; he bolted up inside the van.  
"The rain sounded just like that," he said, "on the roofs there."

*Elizabeth Alexander*

60

---

<sup>60</sup> [Elizabeth Alexander](#), "Nineteen," collected in [Crave Radiancy](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

## Antidepressant

The purple pill rattles  
out of its tinted bottle,

makes my hands therefore my pen  
shake, cloaks me in thirteen

layers of delusionary fur,  
stunts my walk, and blurs

each stark moment so it won't  
be so stark. At last I don't

know what time it is  
sometimes. I like this

effect all right, although  
I'm still sad. Night goes

too fast, bringing sun,  
whose brash light comes

unwanted into each crevice  
of the apartment. This

could be a matter of life  
circumstance and pills might

be the wrong fix, but I know  
things won't change if I go

to Spain or take up fencing.  
I'd be the same wincing

Adrienne, only armed  
or in Spain. What harm

in staying by the window  
to think, wish, swallow

pellets of hope, and not eat?  
I'm not unrequited, don't need

company, haven't lost friend  
or family. I just tend

to be a sick plant,  
and no antidepressant

can shield me from the sun's  
burning; leaves drop one

by one to the sill. I'll win  
my war yet. My angel isn't

dead, just lost on the moon  
or snowed in, gone but soon

to come, nudged out of sight  
by another sleep's night.

*Adrienne Su*  
61

---

<sup>61</sup> [Adrienne Su](#), "[Antidepressant](#)," collected in [Middle Kingdom](#), [Alice James Books](#)

## Swan Song

When the final day comes I hope I am dead.  
Really dead—not angelic host dead, not resurrected  
in a sheen of fire with medusa hair dead.  
Having a baby ruins so many fantasies. Last minute trips to Paris. Final days.  
Yesterday from her carseat she demanded *moon have it moon*—  
If my daughter is alive on the last day, any day older than she is now  
I wish to be laid away and quiet. *No one can have the moon*, I said,  
*but that's okay because this way you will never lose it.*

*Kelly Morse*  
62

---

<sup>62</sup> [Kelly Morse](#), "[Swan Song](#)," [Entropy](#), collected in [Heavy Light](#), [Two of Cups Press](#)

from "Life of Johnson/Upside Your Head, *a Libretto*"

She had looked in the crib  
to see a brown  
                  recluse                   pulsing  
                  on her baby's forehead.

                  One of the cross  
                  staves supporting the coffin  
broke,  
so that it plunged  
                  forward, splintering open.

                  Between Calvary  
                  Baptist Church Parsonage and the grave-  
yard, the reverend's planking  
addressed a muddy washout

                  and the women in their meeting clothes  
                  walked over this now  
single file, their heads tilted  
down.

He arrived of an evening  
                  in a suit covered with road. Rags hung  
                  burning  
                  in a corner, for the mosquitoes  
were bad. She let go  
                  a kettle of hot water, smoothed  
                  calico skin to the backs of her knees.

Hilo, Dusty, she answered.

*Forrest Gander*  
63

---

<sup>63</sup> [Forrest Gander, "Life of Johnson/Upside Your Head, a Libretto \[She had looked in the crib...\]" \*Sulfur\*, collected in \*Lynchburg\*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

After Hours, Provincetown Cemetery

Tonight my dead are restless,  
    reinventing themselves  
    with names like *Glissando*

and *Surreptitious*. I want a tree  
    to be a tree again, not this trick  
    of light, chaos of muscle curved

into the neck of a violin.  
    Autumn welds itself  
    to the seams of August

and we are saddled by its heat,  
    the heart of silence  
    smooth as a gun.

You are somewhere  
    iridescent and unholy,  
    sharp horizon of a man,

traveling circus broken  
    into luminous machinery,  
    caravan pounding like horses

along the highway. You,  
    dog-toothed piano,  
    Queen whose glittered

lashes eat up the dark.  
    Your words are thumbprints  
    on the eyelids of the gods.

Your body is the book  
    I break into, hijacked  
    of meaning. Your voice,

ejaculation of moonlight,  
    your speeding ticket sex, gold-veined  
    heart—tonight you are

my only shelter. I inhabit you  
    like a squatter, burning my one small light  
    in this cemetery of thieves.

Kendra DeColo

64

---

<sup>64</sup> [Kendra DeColo, "After Hours, Provincetown Cemetery," Muzzle](#), collected in [Thieves in the Afterlife, Saturnalia Books](#)

## Three Rivers

The whole house is gone, burned in rainy Pittsburgh,  
where I used to sit wrapping sticky rice in nori,  
drinking whiskey, waiting for you and him to come

stumbling up the stairs, your body folded over  
his thick shoulder—laughing, asleep, crying. My days  
depended on which. I'd stay seated at the window;

on the table phyllo under a damp paper towel,  
porcini mushrooms in a bowl, a plastic pastry brush,  
a sauce pan of clarified butter; four strips

of dough, skin-thin, spaced an inch apart,  
dressed with brush, layered, dressed with brush,  
layered and dressed twice more, the table shaking

each time the train steamed along beneath it,  
each time that felt like forever. This morning, forgive me,  
I saw you on the blue wing of a raven.

Here, in the mountains of Arizona, the jays  
look shellacked, tar-stiff crests, black beaks and eyes  
polished by cinder. This is alpine desert, and it smokes

at the slightest touch of water. I have cooked this summer  
at the one white tablecloth restaurant for forty miles.  
Each night I clock out I hold up my apron—always

a new action-painting of demi-glace, butter and oil, blood  
already browned. No pattern, no theme, no face emerging  
at last with merciful news—just a pitch-thick

stain, something to be boiled and bleached, scrubbed out  
with both hands. I won't ask how you did it.  
Won't ask your husband if the police lifted, carried

your body before he could, or if he could have, given  
the chance. How the two planes must have lifted  
from the ground of Rochester, New York, at different times

but on the same path, to take each of you back  
to Pittsburgh, to bury you where you were born.  
Forgive me. All I want is to remember you

alive, to wake you from the couch where one night  
you lay beside me, blind with alcohol, your breath  
somehow sweet. I remember leaving you there

to wander the streets, the alleys, the hollow  
below the streets and alleys, then along the bank  
of the Allegheny, one of two rivers entering the mouth

of a third, the Ohio, deep and wide and a blue so close  
to black if not for the moon, behind the clouds,  
the rain. And I thought of you, and him, the short days

under one roof, and how, some nights, winter reaches  
the point of freezing the mind, like a block of ice  
in a river that tries to warm the ice, but can only

make it, for a little while, a little less cold.  
But I did not think any of that. No, I didn't wander  
the streets of a rainy city with the sole wish of being

swallowed whole. I simply went outside  
for a cigarette, and stared up at our dark windows,  
then down at the train tracks below the bridge.

It might have been ten minutes. Or less than a moment,  
a pulse. Or I stood there for twelve years.  
And now, when I turn back toward the house?

My dear, the whole thing is on fire, it is  
fire, burning itself from the inside out, a furnace,  
a ravenous blindness. And when I look again:

sunrise on glass.

*Justin Bigos*  
65

---

<sup>65</sup> [Justin Bigos](#), "Three Rivers," [New England Review](#), collected in [Mad River](#), [Gold Wake Press](#)

Dead Reckoning.

In the dream she did geometry with the dull panic that accompanied it in waking life  
Then in a vacant lot through rotating seasons  
In the back of the lot was the long flat building  
A teetering wheelchair ramp and beds of gold chrysanthemums in fall  
Picnic tables making long shadows on a winter morning  
When she went inside the body her heart dissolved in water  
Pieced itself together, twisted apart  
There was a sextant inside but it didn't work  
The whales came toward her every day and night  
The white whale that exploded demons when touched  
The black whale that moved through the waters like a slow moon  
Or old dog pulled grudgingly against a dark sidewalk  
Inside her the dead thing roared its complaints  
Listing them as separate wild winds  
Threw its head back into the hallway of her body

*Julia Story*  
66

---

<sup>66</sup> [Julia Story](#), "[Dead Reckoning.](#)," collected in [Julie the Astonishing, Sixth Finch](#)

## Breaking the Air

Now that you are here among us,  
I can see how it will happen.  
I watch pretty wives calling out  
to their husbands but saying Daddy.  
And the men spent with new exhaustion,  
I look and already he is less a lover  
than a father, prepared to spring up  
for any disaster. Already  
he touches me with too much respect.  
When we go out, they are everywhere,  
adorable and hungry.  
While the mothers and fathers talk,  
they wheel toward the curb.  
On the playground we watch the older ones  
swing dangerously, feet first breaking the air,  
and I feel you, already hatching a plan,  
where, pumping higher and harder, higher and  
harder, you jump out at us and we must fall  
to catch you with all available hands.

*Victoria Redel*  
67

---

<sup>67</sup> [Victoria Redel](#), "[Breaking the Air](#)," collected in [Already the World](#), [Kent State University Press](#)

from “Coney Island”

#### IV. HOT DOG INVENTED, 1868 (IN THE HIP-HOP STYLE)

You’ve been hustling for centuries  
    little spit  
    sand thumb  
screwing, grubbing, cheating at dice till dumb  
    luck had nothing to do with you  
Pickpocket, pocket liner, padded bill,  
    flinting finger in the till  
    of every Lunatic Steeplechasing dreaming  
        Dreamland  
    this side of Gravesend

You’ve been ratting out the Dutch, taxing religious nuts  
    flacking for Our Lady of the Unsuspecting Putz  
Even the locals been flimflammed

Remember the Canarsies? Fine folk  
    mowed down by Mohawks  
    for not paying up—  
(I’m paid up and shook down  
    hoodwinked evening gowned  
shimmied and whored  
    lease breaker to your slumlord

You can’t fire me, lover, I quit:  
Nobody tells me when to split,  
Least of all no how-long low-down habit  
    I been gambling  
        to break  
Truth on speed, what bleed, it bleed,  
but blood is just some makeup on the tart cheek  
    of greed)

Hip hop you can’t stop your con  
    no matter how high the heat is on  
You’re Coney: phony testimony  
    libel, defamation  
Doorstep to The Fifty States of Exploitation

*Julie Sheehan*  
68

---

<sup>68</sup> [Julie Sheehan](#), “[Coney Island](#),” collected in [Orient Point](#), W. W. Norton & Company

Anonymous Lyric

It was the summer of 1976 when I saw the moon fall down.

It broke like a hen's egg on the sidewalk.

The garden roiled with weeds, hummed with gnats who settled clouds on my  
oblivious siblings.

*A great hunger insatiate to find / A dulcet ill, an evil sweetness blind.*

A gush of yolk and then darker.

Somewhere a streetlamp disclosed the insides of a Chevy Impala—vinyl seats, the rear-view,  
headrests and you, your hand through your hair.

*An indistinguishable burning, failing bliss.*

Because the earth's core was cooling, all animals felt the urge to wander.

Wash down this whisper of you, the terrible must.

Maybe the core wasn't cooling, but I felt a coolness in my mother.

That girl was shining me on.

In blue crayon, the bug-bitten siblings printed lyrics on the walls of my room.

I wrote the word LAVA on my jeans.

*It must be the Night Fever, I sang with the 8-track.*

But the moon had not broken on the sidewalk, the moon

was hot, bright as a teakettle whistling outside my door,

*tied up in sorrow, lost in my song, if you don't come back...*

and that serious night cooled, settling like sugar on our lawn.

I wrote the word SUGAR on my palms.

*I shall say what inordinate love is.*

The moon rose itself up on its elbows and shook out its long hair.

*Connie Voisine*

---

<sup>69</sup> [Connie Voisine](#), "[Anonymous Lyric](#)," [Puerto del Sol](#), collected in [Rare High Meadow of Which I Might Dream](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)

## Still Falling

My friend's trying to stop smoking, and I say Oh cut yourself some slack, sick  
of pretending we're not going to die. We are going to die still falling

for crap about berries, a glass of red wine. It could be worse. We're not suicidal,  
smack fiends, Swazi. So we're still skipping the gym, still eating fries, still falling

to sleep with the TV on. Whatever. We're daily closer to dying, but  
it appears to happen slow. Nightfall, dusty snow, cold night still falling,

he laughs, long rope of smoke, warm breath rising. *Right. We each  
hang ourselves, but it's a long rope. Jill. See?* We're all still fine, still falling.

*Jill McDonough*  
70

---

<sup>70</sup> [Jill McDonough](#), "[Still Falling](#)," [Hobart](#), collected in [Here All Night](#), [Alice James Books](#)

## Aubade

Those who lack a talent for love have come  
to walk the long Pier 7. Here at the end  
of the imagined world are three low-flying gulls

like lies on the surface; the slow red  
of a pilot's boat; the groan  
of a fisherman hacking a small shark—

and our speech like the icy water, a poor  
translation that will not carry us across.  
What brought us west, anyway? A hunger.

But ours is no Donner Party, we who feed  
only on scenery, the safest form  
of obfuscation: see how the bay is a gray

deepening into gray, the color of heartbreak.

*Randall Mann*  
71

---

<sup>71</sup> [Randall Mann](#), "[Aubade](#)," [Salmagundi](#), collected in [Breakfast with Thom Gunn](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)

## Alleys

Because the proper *where* for an alley is *down*.  
Because down them we might disappear.

Because once you read a book in which  
a man with a top hat and a maimed hand

wept—not cried, not sobbed—in an alley,  
and you’ve been in love with that man

for 23 years now and have told no one.  
Because you secretly believe that being

Jack-the-Rippered is a rock star way to go.  
Because your father said not to. Because once

you saw a movie where lovers in black and white  
tangled in an alley in Venice, only the stone

walls keeping them upright, penned into the landscape,  
though when you went to Venice at 20, you found

catcalls and bronchitis. Because if ever the 21st  
century was going to open one way and end

another, it would be down an alley: enter  
from the blanched Midwest, overdue

library books, the mundanity of salons,  
and exit into blue, smell of jonquils, an old lady

with a strange accent scolding you *Child! Child!*  
Because you believe there are still mysteries

worth risking a throat for. Because sometimes  
your world is dim and smog-covered, and you

weary of it, the lamps never bright enough,  
the coffee weak, and so you force yourself

into the blackest alley in town, stride through it  
with your whole store of false courage, and emerge

into the same world, lit now by undark, unbrick.

*Catherine Pierce*

72

---

<sup>72</sup> [Catherine Pierce](#), “[Alleys](#),” [Copper Nickel](#), collected in [The Tornado is the World](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Accursed Questions, iii

My friend asks if I ask questions to stay in control, but I'm just not into the crossword puzzle or the Yankees or slow cooking or pornography, I don't know how to participate in the usual exchanges, so what is a loud noise you secretly like the sound of? I ask as we walk down the avenue and there I am controlling things again like I'm some kind of walking thermostat, or an intercom, yes, press mute and let me not hear doors slamming, not saying goodbye.

I love that sound especially, the sound of not saying goodbye turned all the way up loud, louder even than the trucks that shouted their way past us, louder than my friend who when it's time to go answers in his polite English murmur that he'd rather continue this discussion more discretely, upstairs, between the sheets.

—

I can't tell a joke but surely one of the best setups is how you men are always ready. What an appetite!

I rarely ask if you love me back or if you're there when the priest, the rabbi, and a juggler walk into the Vatican bar.

Will I ever admit my indiscretions?

Look for me in the heavenly bodies.

Or way up here on West 98th, stoned on negative capability, eating honeydew, taking these scholarly notes.

—

For example, the brain uses ten times more energy than any other body part.

Would we were octopuses, with brain cells in our arms!

—

In the most difficult logic problem on record, there are three gods, called True, False, and Random.

True always speaks truthfully. False always speaks falsely. But whether Random speaks truthfully or falsely is a completely random matter. The task is to determine their identities by asking three yes-no questions.

The gods understand English but answer in their own language.

—

Doctors agree I need to get laser holes made in my eyes. Laser pulses they call them. The pain will not be too great, they promise, though after it's over there's a chance I'll see more ghost images, nighttime halos around lights.

—

*Go Back: You Are Going the Wrong Way* say the highway signs in white lettering against a bright-red background.

I always wonder how they know which way we're headed.

—

The real question is not when but who, who will be there when you die?

Instead might I ask where you got your hat? I'd like to wear your hat—

And if it gets late again tonight, I might ask you the time, I might ask you a riddle or straighten my dress, I might commit a little crime or tell you the name of my press, My Body Up Against Yours, yes. My Body Up Against Yours Press.

—

To an event called "Poetry and the Creative Mind" I wore faux Spanx for the first time, discount Walgreens size L Spanx look-alike that kept me a little bit warm on a late April night. I was lonely when I took it off at home. I wonder if other women take theirs off in the bathroom before checking their faces and returning to the book, the bed, the optimistic erection.

—

Who put this old copy of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* beneath my *Thesaurus*? Both titles obscured by dust.

*Us, us—*

the books so artlessly repercuss.

—

Tellisa wanted to know how to stop yelling. Ashley wanted to know what to do about her son's tantrums. Christina went awol. Barb got pregnant again and left with her son.

The mothers are young and on their own, disappointed or abused or simply left by their babyfathers. Can you skip me? one asks. We were making an inventory of apologies and questions:

*Sorry, right?*

It was two days after Valentine's Day.

*Love is like the universe, could it be the tenth planet?*

*I'm sorry I missed it, what happened?*

*Catherine Barnett*

73

---

<sup>73</sup> [Catherine Barnett](#), "[Accursed Questions, iii](#)," collected in [Human Hours](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

## Aphorisms

The good news is: you're loved. The bad news is: so are your enemies.

Turning forty is like looking up and realizing it's two in the afternoon.

You can judge entire societies by the expressions on the faces of their dolls.

Models have that vacant look because they aren't allowed to stare back.

Falling asleep is not like falling down stairs; it's like falling up them.

In the city and the woods both, the scent of fire causes panic, but by the lake it only causes guitars.

*George Murray*  
74

---

<sup>74</sup> [George Murray](#), "[Aphorisms](#)," collected in [Short Flights](#), [Schaffner Press](#)

## Aviary

do you remember the time we didn't go to Topeka  
we were ready to go with our sandwiches packed  
and you had your harpoon and I had my headdress  
but we didn't go though we agreed it totally boffo  
we could go to Topeka whenever we liked  
but I said I'd rather live here than Topeka where  
all they have is a crummy zoo and whoever  
heard of Topeka anyway so we didn't go  
and spent the day instead alphabetizing  
the pantry quipping how this had become *going  
to Topeka* we composted our leftovers we purchased  
hand sanitizer and accreted a Volvo a toolshed  
some throw pillows we pressed 1 for more assistance  
we pressed 2 to return to the main menu we assembled  
in portraits accessorized the great room trimmed  
our azaleas until all of these became going to Topeka  
and we kidded everyday after how we were going  
to Topeka and going to Topeka but we never did  
see a prairie dog or a tornado and nobody ever heard  
of any of us lying awake in hammocks instead  
of going to Topeka or lit up by a television  
in the pallid dusk of not going to Topeka  
after returning home late in afternoons of not going  
to Topeka or to Tallahassee or Sault Ste. Marie  
so when I sit now on the stoop at night and watch  
seedpods helicopter out of our tree onto the sidewalk  
by porch light I wonder what the coral wants  
what the arroyo knows I wonder what the desert  
swallows and wonder too about the hills of Topeka  
the cliffs and canyons of Topeka its auroras  
and cyclones arcane canals and minarets  
its manta rays in clear clear water supple rubber trees  
its yeti and its swans breathing fire how when zephyrs  
run like lucent fabric across the spires of Topeka  
everybody there touches the flesh in the soft dimple  
above the sternum and hums an anthem  
in the language of Topeka which we can nearly hear  
as if it's barely past the yellow tollbooth  
beyond that blunt and glaring truck stop  
on the other side of a modest slope where its people  
greet each other in the customary manner genial  
and offering *We are real and death is not*  
or maybe it's *Death is real and we are not*  
it depends I suppose on whichever is the fairer grace

Jaswinder Bolina

75

---

<sup>75</sup> [Jaswinder Bolina](#), "Aviary," [The Offending Adam](#), collected in [Phantom Camera](#), [New Issues Press](#)

## Ambitious Dream Number Twenty-Three

Well, the thirteen-member search committee  
in last night's bourbon and coke  
dialed me up again at two AM  
to flatter the cut of my CV's jib  
and offer me an interview on campus.  
The chairwoman's voice,  
all honeysuckle and real sweet tea,  
told me they would very much like  
the chance to observe me  
teaching the good, the true, and the beautiful,  
and improving, meanwhile, the grammar  
of this spring's eighteen-year-olds  
in their unnatural habit,  
high on independence and video games  
and rookie sex, and aspiring generally  
to the smart life's wealth and leisure.  
This time I'd be headed to a lovely college hamlet  
on the moon of eastern nowhere, not so far  
from where an unemployed starlet  
and her handyman raised me  
in the 80s to put my pants on  
both legs simultaneously, broad jumping  
boldly into those waist-deep puddles  
of khaki. I had roots there—  
above ground maybe,  
like those of an oak laid low by tornados,  
but they were still fine roots  
and I made certain the right folks saw them.  
Y'all are too kind, I said.  
Dr. Sweet Tea smiled through the phone  
and explained to me how impressed  
they'd all been with the vulnerability  
I'd shown submitting a headshot  
with my bulbous nose and, in lieu  
of the traditional cover letter, a ten-page inventory  
of the many great shames  
I keep in my heart's refrigerator.  
She particularly responded to the juicier sirloins  
I've been marinating since high school:  
that athletic awards ceremony, for instance,  
at which, from the back of the room, I thought  
I heard Coach call my name  
for "most offensive player of year."  
I had climbed the stage  
and strolled partway towards him  
when I recognized my error  
and the rightful winner already there  
to shake the dignitaries' hands—

Coach, the principal, the bald AD,  
all of them turning to stare—  
*No*, I tried to interrupt her,  
*I sent you no such thing*. But she kept on,  
how they couldn't wait to meet  
my nose, how they knew in their spleens  
that I was going places  
even if I was only going there in poems.  
Tuesday evening after a sit-down with the dean,  
a brief parade in my honor  
would double as a tour of campus,  
all of it followed by a department potluck  
at the Medievalist's apartment,  
and if I could bring a side dish, that'd be great.

*George David Clark*

76

---

<sup>76</sup> [George David Clark, "Ambitious Dream Number Twenty-Three," \*The Southeast Review\*](#)

## Tiny Shotgun

There is a tiny shotgun  
behind both eyes.  
If not my eyes, my lungs.  
If not my lungs, an ambulance must be going by,  
its siren a hole I climb into,  
wondering about the person inside  
and whether he is coming or going,  
whether she will be making any more egg white omelets.  
I've been thinking about disinfectants in urinals  
and how they're called cakes,  
which is similar to the time I told Alice  
her boyfriend was a gentleman  
for driving me home  
and left out the part  
where he put his hand on my ass  
and also the part where I didn't tell him to stop.  
There is something about cheap wine and leather jackets  
I want nothing to do with.  
Let's play a game:  
you get to be anything you want  
and I get to be something that's not antifreeze.  
Let me be a slow dance  
or a dime in a fountain, something  
that won't leave you in a stairwell  
like a spit-laced cigarette,  
something more than the air in a fist.  
I don't know why my hands  
keep turning into asthma inhalers,  
why lately everything has been storm clouds  
and operating tables. I have locked myself  
in the pantry with three matches  
and a bag of ice. I guess this is winter,  
the breakfast, lunch and dinner of it,  
I guess I feel like an earring  
in a hotel parking lot,  
a blacked-out window  
in a community theatre  
where, inside, one woman is telling another  
the difference between pain  
and the idea of pain, and the man selling tickets  
is sucking on a jawbreaker  
and trying not to think  
about crash sites and government cheese.

*Ruth Madievsky*  
77

---

<sup>77</sup> [Ruth Madievsky](#), "[Tiny Shotgun](#)," [Harpur Palate](#), collected in [Emergency Brake](#), [Tavern Books](#)

January 9, 1875

In the morning, and in the night I am thinking  
an aristocracy of the Noyes blood  
is inconceivable, A spiritual aristocracy;  
of Christ: "they that do the will  
of my father." That we may bow down,  
George Miller has a greater measure of spirit  
but has few of the qualities of a leader.  
Constance—intellectual inferiority, arrogance  
imbalanced social and spiritual career.  
When Mr. Noyes dies how are we to exist?  
I am conscious at night  
that I myself have in the past seen Noyes  
held up to my view in such a light, a brilliant  
eclipse, actual polarity. Children  
belong to all with equal claims  
on our love. In the morning, and in the night  
I am thinking, continually thinking  
who has inherited anything like the original faith?

*Joe Hall*  
78

---

<sup>78</sup> [Joe Hall](#), "[January 9, 1875](#)," collected in [Someone's Utopia, Black Ocean](#)

## Sin Sandwich

I was in love with my girlfriend's  
sister, she rode her bike to the park  
to meet me, she didn't have snow tires  
we skidded on the picnic table  
she was fifteen I was seventeen  
I was losing track of my pencils  
breaking the leads in my back pocket  
her boyfriend had perfect hair  
and he knew it  
her sister my girlfriend well  
we were in a glum phase  
our eyes tuned to the same TV stories  
our friends all coupled up  
we squirmed under the pressure  
to be happy to powder our noses and buck up  
to not fuck up well  
to be good soldiers fight the good fight  
at least through the prom  
at least until the ink dried  
on the moustache on the picture  
of everyone who said it wouldn't last  
she was too straight  
I was too crooked  
she was too curly too bouncy  
I was too Moe too Larry  
we broke each other's hearts  
well we tried but it was like breaking  
a tomato we smushed each other's hearts  
we hurled them at moving targets  
through spring and into the dull summer  
between lives

\*\*\*\*

They were both beautiful  
I loved them both I had plenty to go  
around then the enthusiasm the stamina  
the station wagon but the sister  
felt bad and I felt bad  
finally we knew there'd be no  
smooth transition no ceremony no abdication  
no retirement no floats or parades  
no conciliatory press conference

she started seeing  
a fat guy with good dope during the time  
a fat guy with good dope was Mr. Big Stuff  
and I was thin and well I was skinny  
and had average dope I was an average dope

the thing with the fat guy  
had Mr. Hair scratching himself  
like a good ballplayer even seeking me out  
for advice all I could offer was average dope  
which he turned down he married a cheerleader  
pregnant it didn't last long  
if only they could have had  
perfect hair together first

the sister

I could have loved longer  
even if she couldn't spell  
or because she couldn't  
but had the street smarts street moves  
sweet smarts sweet moves  
her sister didn't have  
together we blurred all the edges we knew  
I loved the guilt part of me  
ate it up a meal I could finally digest  
that Catholic bug out of my system.

\*\*\*\*

Years later I dreamt the sister  
told me she still loved me  
I wrote her spelled out the dream  
not mentioning her sister the girlfriend  
she wrote back saying she was secretary  
of her church bowling league and was marrying  
Mr. Perfect Hair I'm not lying  
and I wrote back I can't believe I did this  
that it was romantic her getting back  
with her old boyfriend after all the years

her sister the girlfriend dumped me  
for some pretty boy who looked like my older brother  
go figure well also he was a friend of mine  
also they ended up married also they'd been screwing  
behind my back but I had a big back in those days  
oh it's always coming and going  
going and coming he was on crutches when I found out  
so I couldn't even kick his ass and who knows  
he might've been able to beat the shit out of me  
with one of those crutches I'm no tough guy  
and after all who's calling the kettle names  
or however that goes

the last time I wrote her  
was to congratulate her on her marriage  
hey no hard feelings  
hey, hey, no hard feelings though  
I still get hard feelings thinking of her sister  
wearing Mr. Hair's football shirt in the living room  
of their house while I sat on the couch with my girlfriend  
and watched zombie TV my girlfriend finally made her  
put a robe on just this long T-shirt  
over those perfect legs

hey come on  
I'm a human bean jumping bean  
hey you secretary of your bowling league!

\*\*\*\*

I know I know I'm all talk like the weathermen  
who like to predict snowstorms who like to gloat  
over record highs and lows they love natural disasters  
my life has been a natural disaster nyuk nyuk nyuk  
I have lusted in my heart and outside my heart  
I have not stepped behind the purple confessional curtain  
to lay out my sins in years let me keep  
my sins the first day of spring and it's snowing  
I'll take the sister over the girlfriend any time  
again I'll take the stupid crazy lust anytime  
give me that old-time religion give me those old-time  
hard feelings the religion of two bodies the religion  
of the Three Stooges the three of us troubled by love  
and blood and desire for blood and desire  
for the Curly shuffle the Curly scuffle  
on the floor in the back seat  
in the park our jeans grass stained  
our butts wet with dew there's no shocking the moon  
I know but I think we surprised him mildly once or twice  
oh lord lust has got to be okay or I'm in big trouble  
oh lord give me a rug-burn sandwich  
give me a wet tongue sandwich I'm thirsty  
for saliva and sweat straight up just give me a dark closet  
and let me be creative buried under a pile of coats  
just give me a quick hip shake a bump-and-grind burger  
lock me up put me out of my misery  
just slide a sin sandwich under the door  
just enough sin to live on.

*Jim Daniels*  
79

---

<sup>79</sup> Jim Daniels, "Sin Sandwich," *Colorado Review*, collected in *Blessing the House*, University of Pittsburgh Press

## Howlin' Wolf

In Parchman Prison  
in stripes standing  
guitar gripped like a neck  
strangled strummed  
high strung & hard.  
Mostly you moan  
see how heavy  
your hands hang with-  
out women or words  
we cannot  
quite know. How is this  
not hell being made  
to make music here where  
music only makes time  
go slow cloudy  
like blue  
Depression glass? Under  
the hard sun of your smile  
we see stripes like those  
that once lined the slave's  
unbent back  
blood & gunk  
spit it out  
a song low down  
gutbucket  
built for comfort  
not built for speed.  
Gimme the brack  
of the body the blue  
the bile all  
you sing or howl.  
If a wolf then lone  
then orphan then *hangry*  
enough to enter into town  
to take food from the mouths  
of low houses a hen  
a stray it is never  
enough. You don't need  
tell me why  
we here you know  
better black  
as an exclamation point  
the men all around  
you in stripes  
how long their sentences  
their dark faces ellipses  
everywhere accidental.  
The white man

in front proud  
or is it prideful  
he wears no number  
& now exiled under  
the earth no one  
recalls his name.  
Yours a dark wick  
waiting we burn  
wanting you to step  
into song  
to again howl  
till you sweat through  
your shirt & two  
white handkerchiefs  
a revival  
preacher waving  
praise no flag  
of surrender—  
the guitar a blunt  
instrument your hair  
your shoes even your  
voice shines.

*Kevin Young*  
80

---

<sup>80</sup> [Kevin Young](#), "[Howlin' Wolf](#)," collected in [Brown, Alfred A. Knopf](#)

## Palmistry

Go to the window, open  
the window, outside  
the window

there I am with you  
lying down, in the dead grass,  
reading you a sentence as long

as my life line. You kiss my  
forehead, I kiss  
your simian crease.

Go back to the kitchen. Go back  
to the magnets. Touch the wood handles.  
Touch the spoons

left in the sink, a sliced lime,  
a juiced lime. I won't wash  
anything that isn't mine.

The nightjar eats what it eats.  
The wide wave finally arrives.  
The wet moon leaves me so lonely.

You can't tell me what I want or don't.

*Chase Berggrun*  
81

---

<sup>81</sup> [Chase Berggrun](#), "[Palmistry](#)," [Poetry](#)

Looking at Lucy's Painting of the Thames at Low Tide Without Lucy Present

Water is terribly difficult to paint  
and to drink, also, don't you find?—it's terribly difficult  
to drink water. In winter in particular.  
Lucy says we must drink eight glasses a day,  
but the truth is I can't abide it.  
Lucy's face looks terribly bruised, do you find?  
Especially under artificial light.  
Is everything all right with Lucy, do you think?  
She seems quite abstracted, most of the time  
and artists will insist on painting water,  
despite its obvious difficulty  
and, above all, its secrecy  
(they say the marine world is notoriously "close-knit").  
I detest it, of course—the work.  
I simply can't stand the academic realism of the whole endeavour.  
That's not to say it isn't worth something.  
On the contrary.

*Tara Bergin*  
82

---

<sup>82</sup> [Tara Bergin, "Looking at Lucy's Painting of the Thames at Low Tide Without Lucy Present," \*PN Review\*, collected in \*This is Yarrow\*, Carcanet Press, Ltd.](#)

## The Final Episode

The 18th century bawd who sells her daughter's virginity to an Earl. The tired CIA operative who says, "just do it," then half a village dies. The plantation owner's wife. The lonely CEO of the pharmaceutical company who screams like a banshee when an employee's baby pukes milk on her pantsuit. The detective who clicks her Zippo underneath the incriminating photo of her boss. The "complex" one who lets her servant girl be whipped. Who dumps the radioactive material in the reservoir. Who is given a chance to apologize to a crying friend and instead pauses and says, "fuck off." Who is unable to report her violent husband before he murders someone. Unable to stop the drone pilot from pressing the button. Scared of losing her promotion. Covers her ears. Utters lines like "I believe you are mistaken, my dear" and "This is above your pay-grade, kid, keep your nose out." Who says, "Fine! Fucking fine!" when the partner who loves her but can't live like this anymore says, "I love you but I can't live like this anymore." Who thinks the truth would spoil everything. Who burns the crucial letter. Whose cleavage is angry and heaving. Who drinks miniature vodkas in the hotel bath and nearly drowns. Who wears her new husband's dead ex-wife's earrings to the christening. Who can't forgive her stepson for existing. Who lets the suicide call go to voicemail. Who walks to the AA meeting, is met at the church gate by the greeter who says, "welcome" to which she replies, "fuck you, creep" and keeps on walking. Who is sick in the sink. Who suddenly feels the weight of her actions. Who hyperventilates into a paper bag. Who splashes water on her face in a public bathroom, glares at the mirror and says, "Wise up." Who knows her narrative arc is peaking, knows there's goodness in her somewhere, the viewers have glimpsed it in close-ups and now they're halfway through the final episode and she's got twenty-two minutes to wrangle a denouement, fall on her dagger, hand over the list, clear her spiritual debt in a single payment. Look at her standing on your porch-step, holding out her heart like an injured bird and begging you to ruin her.

*Caroline Bird*

83

---

<sup>83</sup> [Caroline Bird](#), "[The Final Episode](#)," [Poetry](#)

Brazilian Wedding: Dream No. 3

Ambulatory sisters—  
sister somnambulists—  
sorority of sleep-hikers—  
we are crossing a bridge.  
We've crossed our uncle  
& our fiancés will be cross,  
but we've got a long list,  
a lot of items to cross off.  
We've crossed ourselves  
with the sign of the cross  
& we are crossing the span  
to the island of Valdares.  
Birds squawk aubades  
with Portuguese lyrics &  
cocks throw their crows  
from yard to dirty yard.  
Fishermen throw nets  
into murky waters. Sister  
sleep-walkers, we won't  
wake yet. The new church  
they're building looks like  
a ship, or a Bishop's mitre.  
As the sky gets lighter,  
I tell Beth, *it's beautiful*.  
She says, *be careful—  
the magic hours, twilight  
& dawn, are the best times  
to get beaten, raped, or robbed.*  
*As the street-lights flick off or on,  
your eyes adjust poorly to changes  
in motion. It has to do with  
the rods & cones in your eyes.*  
We are still over the river.  
Can it ever be crossed?  
I pop the G out of *bridge*  
& drop it in the bay. I say  
*bride* aloud. G is for groom,  
but R is for Rooney & R  
is for room. This is not  
a western. This is not  
a noir. Our grooms don't  
know where we are. All four  
of our eyes are closed, but  
I see Beth smoking, alone,  
in the cone of a streetlight.  
*Kathy*, she takes me by  
the shoulder. She shakes me,  
*Did you listen?* I'm just

the stenographer, but Beth,  
the photographer, knows all  
about the difference between  
man's light & God's light.

*Kathleen Rooney*  
84

---

<sup>84</sup> [Kathleen Rooney](#), "[Brazilian Wedding: Dream No. 3](#)," *RealPoetik*, collected in [Oneiromance](#), [Switchback Books](#)

## She Returns to the Water

*The dive starts  
on the board....*

something Steve  
often said,

or *Rub some dirt  
in it, Princess,*  
when in his lesser

inscrutable mood;

Steve of the hair gel,  
and whistle, a man  
who was her

diving coach,  
who never seemed  
to like her much.

Which was odd,

given, objectively,  
her admirable discipline,  
and natural gifts,

the years and years  
of practice, and the long  
row of golden  
trophies she won

for his team. The girl  
she was then,

confused, partly  
feral, like the outdoor  
cat you feed,

when you remember  
to, but won't allow

to come inside....

She's thinking of Steve  
now, many years  
later, while swimming

naked in her wealthy  
landlord's pool. Or

“grotto,” to call it  
properly, an ugly,  
Italian word for

something lovely,

ringed, as it is,  
with red hibiscus;

white lights  
in the mimosa trees  
draping their blurry  
pearls along  
the water's skin.

It's 3 am,

which seemed  
the safest time for  
this experiment,

in which she's turned  
her strange and aging  
body loose. Once,

a man she loved  
observed, *You're  
the kind of woman*

*who feels embarrassed  
just standing in*

*a room alone,*  
a comment, like him,  
two parts ill spirited,

and one perceptive.

But this night she's  
dropped her robe,  
come here to be

the kind of woman  
who swims naked  
without asking  
for permission, risking  
a stray neighbor

getting the full gander,

buoyed by saltwater;  
all the tough and sag  
of her softened by

this moonlight's near-  
sighted courtesy.

Look at her: how  
the woman is floating,

while trying to recall  
the exact last  
moment of her girlhood—

where she was,  
what she was doing—

when she finally  
learned what she'd  
been taught: to hate

this fleshy sack  
of boring anecdotes  
and moles she's lived

inside so long,  
nemesis without  
a zipper for escape.

*A pearl is the oyster's*

*autobiography,*  
Fellini said. How  
clean and weightless

the dive returns  
to the woman now;

climbing the high  
metal ladder, then

launching herself,  
no fear, no notion

of self-preservation,

the arc of her  
trajectory pretty  
as any arrow's

in St. Sebastian's  
side. How keen  
that girl, and sleek,

tumbling more  
gorgeous than two  
hawks courting

in a dead drop.

Floating, the woman  
remembers this again,

how pristine she was  
in pike, or tucked  
tighter than a socialite, or

twisting in reverse  
like a barber's pole,

her body flying  
toward its pivot,  
which is, in those seconds,

the Infinite,

before each  
possible outcome  
tears itself away

(the woman climbing  
from the water now)

like the silvery tissue  
swaddling a costly  
gift.

*Erin Belieu*  
85

---

<sup>85</sup> [Erin Belieu](#), "[She Returns To the Water](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#)

## Symptoms of Aftermath

Tonight, I dream the dead and how they want  
me. They scale the walls. They tear a skylight  
to the sky. I, requiring life, start a fire  
and burn them all up. Lady Luck arrives late, we drive our bodies  
to the dump. Afraid in the dark, I shake her  
by the shoulders. *Where will the survivors congregate?*  
*How will we have our eggs?* We ration out our breath  
in the bomb shelter. Luck doesn't make it. *There was nothing*  
*anyone could have done.* When I am saved, a slim nurse  
leans out of the white light. *I need*  
*to hear your voice, sweetheart.* I see  
my escape. I walk into the water.  
The sky is blue like the ocean,  
which is blue like the sky.

Camille Rankine

86

---

<sup>86</sup> [Camille Rankine](#), "[Symptoms of Aftermath](#)," collected in [Incorrect Merciful Impulses](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Spectacular, Spectacular

In any kind of two-way glass daffodil there's the night  
I put on my lover's dress & it fit me like a renaissance.

Snap the shoulder straps in time with the streetlights.  
Click click goes the clock I disregard on principle. My,

what a wick you have. What an ankle-length shadow  
I'm faking. My loud glade. My glued-shut bone gate.

Walk like this, go all the fairy lights. Put your hips  
into me. Who gets undressed in this kind of story?

Click click. It's so heaven of us to think of anything  
as untimely. My mom's thumb smearing the lipstick

off my collar, my mouth. I learned speech first  
as distance, second as costume jewelry. I don't have

a lover. Any poem I wear a dress out of is a lie.  
Who would remember me myself otherwise?

*Bradley Trumpfheller*  
87

---

<sup>87</sup> [Bradley Trumpfheller](#), "[Spectacular, Spectacular](#)," [Redivider](#)

Dear Thanatos, [Goddamn the sweet ease...]

Goddamn the sweet ease of night.  
Damn the daylight, too. Dream me.

Winter me. Sleep me somewhere numb.  
Somewhere God doesn't summon me

from the side of a man who begs me to dive  
the well and bring up the boat. I ate the liver

of a seal and a narwhal's arctic tongue. I shot  
a humpback with a harpoon. It struggled,

but it sang the moral mysteries, moaned  
its oral history to the submarines as it fell,

its body a hundred-year feast for the ocean floor,  
the testament in its belly gone so wild,

so wracked with doubt not all the fat on  
the whale's back could burn the meaning out.

*Traci Brimhall*

88

---

<sup>88</sup> [Traci Brimhall](#), "[Dear Thanatos, \[Goddamn the sweet ease...\]](#)," *The Los Angeles Review*, collected in [Come the Slumberless to the Land of Nod](#), Copper Canyon Press



while you wrote what you wrote. Yet still  
you bark at him the name of the bees treasure,

bellow *honey*, sometimes smothering, almost shaming

his mouth's sweet air, which swore  
that first, famous night how

you “carry sugar in the middle of your heart.”

*Patrick Donnelly*  
89

---

<sup>89</sup> [Patrick Donnelly](#), “[Honey](#),” collected in [Little-Known Operas, Four Way Books](#)

Se Me Olvidó Otra Vez

*after Donald Justice*

I sit in bed, from the linen your scent still rises.  
You're asleep inside your old guitar.

A mariachi suit draped on a chair, its copper buttons,  
the eyes of jaguars stalking the night.

I sit in bed, from the linen your scent still rises.

Through a window a full moon brings to mind Borges,  
*there is such loneliness in that gold.*

You're asleep inside your old guitar.

Are your calloused heels scraping its curved wood or  
are there mice scurrying in the walls?

I sit in bed, from the linen your scent still rises.

I flick on a lamp, yellow light strikes your guitar  
like dirt thrown on a coffin.

You're asleep inside your old guitar.  
I sit in bed, from the linen your scent still rises.

*Eduardo C. Corral*  
90

---

<sup>90</sup> [Eduardo C. Corral](#), "[Se Me Olvidó Otra Vez](#)," [Poetry Northwest](#), collected in [Slow Lightning](#), Yale University Press

## The Literary Scholar

the literary scholar lives alone the literary scholar is at work on a very important book of criticism and cannot be bothered a hired girl comes each morning to fry his egg at a dinner party, the literary scholar drinks a glass of port and corrects your transitive use of the intransitive verb *transform* language is a heavy book kept on his shelf, leather-bound with blinking eyes and purple teeth, the literary scholar tells the dinner table about the brilliant story he wrote at university, about its rich symbolism the truth is—the literary scholar thinks stories are only good for their symbols the truth is—the literary scholar doesn't much like novelists or poets or playwrights or dogs but oh would the literary scholar like to be loved her hair would be chestnut, and she would copy out his pages by hand on the list of things the literary scholar doesn't know: what he would do with a chestnut-haired lover's nipples and that he is writing the same book he already wrote—a book no one read *ever closer to a breakthrough*, the literary scholar promises (though you didn't ask), sweeping his thinning hair across his liver-white head

*Corinna McClanahan Schroeder*

91

---

<sup>91</sup> [Corinna McClanahan Schroeder, "The Literary Scholar," \*Blackbird\*](#)

## The Lesson

He was wearing a light denim jacket. The north wind was a whisper, egging him on. The girl had a high, anxious laugh. She was supposed to be in class, taking a math test. None of this matters: they were in an alley that belonged to the dogs and the trash that gathered against the back fence. Beyond the fence was a road that eventually swept past the farmlands. His Grandfather lived in one of the old farmhouses the town turned into elderly apartments. Once, when camping, Grandfather had thrown the snake he caught and intended to keep as a pet into the fire, where they later roasted hotdogs. He cried a little in the tent, but it was of no use. The girl was kicking pebbles, looking down. She startled when he grabbed her hand. He removed his jacket and she closed her eyes to a pasture dotted with buttercups. The lesson of enduring for the sake of someone else was one she had already mastered, so she thought of the little flowers and the snakes and bugs they fed and housed without pretension, and willed herself to blossom for the 5 minutes it took. Before she snuck from school that day, the teacher went around the room asking each student what they wanted to be when they grew up. When her turn came she said quietly, no—resolutely: *A mother*. Everyone laughed but the teacher. The teacher seemed angry.

*Paige Ackerson-Kiely*  
92

---

<sup>92</sup> [Paige Ackerson-Kiely](#), "[The Lesson](#)," [Ampersand Review](#), collected in [Dolefully, a Rampart Stands](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## Against Nostalgia

I am a master of none, save for  
the white mutations of dream.  
Items leak from my grasp.  
I have a mouth but cannot scream.  
Dear compass, dear variorum,  
I want the lion share  
of whatever spoils  
you deign to drop.  
The process is alluvial,  
sifting through sediment  
to find a saltwater pearl.  
In my off hours, I drowse  
behind mosquito netting,  
lured on by the metallic moon,  
aphrodisiac of oysters and champagne.  
This is the fourth state of matter,  
storm cloud of senescence threatening  
to break and flood the village again.  
History is redux: fungus stippling the rock.  
Where am I now, you think, now that  
you are no longer thought. You come to me  
in visions, peeling back the bark of a tree.  
Loss and compensation, compensation  
and loss. I am healed of indecision.  
Do not cast your aspersions on me.

*Virginia Konchan*  
93

---

<sup>93</sup> [Virginia Konchan](#), "[Against Nostalgia](#)," [Bear Review](#), collected in [Any God Will Do](#), [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

loose strife

As in loosely inspired by Aeschylus's *Orestia*  
(like watching a story play out at a great distance  
on the surface of a cloud)  
because the trilogy is replete with themes  
of statecraft & warcraft & family  
& from this bloody amalgam the birth  
of judicial law. In fifth-century Athens  
Aeschylus the first to significantly innovate  
by adding a second player in addition  
to the chorus, Aeschylus who fought  
the Persians twice & decades later  
was killed when an eagle dropped a tortoise  
on his head. Briefly, it was chosen  
both for the musicality of the phrase & the metaphor  
of invasive species, hills doused in wildest purple,  
the thing emigrating from Europe in the early 1800s  
when used as ballast in the hulls of ships  
packed with tainted soil, & most importantly  
for the classical sense of *loosing battle, sowing chaos*,  
which the last twenty-five hundred years  
have done nothing to diminish.

Quan Barry  
94

---

<sup>94</sup> [Quan Barry, "loose strife \('As in loosely inspired by Aeschylus's'\)," collected in \*Loose Strife\*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Curio

Six a.m., and already Pilate washes  
his hands, pendentive like the stems  
of tomatoes after the fruit  
is gone. And in the wide gold leaf  
border that frames the scene  
in *L'Heures de Marguerite d'Orléans*,  
not only have the pages in the book  
of nature come loose, but the letters  
have fallen out of the words and lie  
scattered on the ground, where peasants  
rake and harvest them in baskets  
and aprons on their lap: handfuls  
of red Ms, blue Ys, and Us, held  
by their stalks. Curious, how  
in the medieval Latin glossary  
*Verba Soli Deo Pertinenda*, my God rains  
but your God freezes, and God himself  
is thaw, the God of snow which is  
God of itself: *Deus sanctus*, thunder  
and hail, *Deus omnipotens*, the gleam,  
the flash, the light that lights  
the world because God gives  
everything, especially weather,  
which in the town of Cognac is called  
*angels' drink*, for the 25,000 bottles  
of cognac that evaporate each day  
into the sky above the city  
as the city walls darken  
with the patina of fumes. We'd drive  
through town after town when I was  
a child, and the roadside stands  
with jugs of cider, hams, and ceramic  
statues of farmers all had signs  
for *Curios*, something I could never find  
to take home. From Latin *curiosus*,  
careful, diligent, inquisitive;  
from *cūra*, care or cure  
when it is used ecclesiastically,  
as of a priest for his  
congregation: *the cure of souls*  
like hams, salt-rubbed and hung  
in the smokehouse to keep  
skippers from their flesh, their flesh  
from the weather, which is a word  
pertaining to the nature of God.

Angie Estes  
95

---

<sup>95</sup> [Angie Estes](#), "[Curio](#)," [Indiana Review](#), collected in [Tryst](#), [Oberlin College Press](#)

## A Kind of World

Things that are themselves. Waves water, the rocks  
stone. The smell of her arms. Stillness. Windstorms.  
The long silence again. The well. The rabbit. Heat.  
Nipples and long thighs. Her heavy bright mane.  
Plunging water flashing as she washes her body in the sun.  
“Perfect in whiteness.” Light going away every evening  
like some great importance. Grapes outside the windows.  
Linda talking less and less. Going down to the sea  
while she sleeps. Standing in the cold water to my mouth  
just before morning. Linda saying late in the day  
we should eat now or it would be too dark to wash the dishes.  
She going out quietly afterward to scream into the wind  
from the ocean. Coming in. Lighting the lamps.

*Jack Gilbert*  
96

---

<sup>96</sup> [Jack Gilbert](#), “[A Kind of World](#),” collected in [Monolithos](#), [Alfred A. Knop](#)

Continuation

And the neighbor's daughter shows my son  
the way her father let her hold his gun,

with bullets in it. She was on Adderall,  
and now Ritalin, and they're only in

Kindergarten but my son doesn't much  
like her—the way she brags and lies

and tries to destroy the plants or bugs  
around our house, which is the bus stop,

so we head out each morning in our  
pajamas, clutching coffee mugs, to wait.

The engine of the bus is huffing,  
unmistakable, and we can all hear it

before its yellow nose comes around  
the bend. The kids climb the high steps

like they're scaling a great peak.  
I can see my son fling his body

into a seat; he waves from the window  
while Sarah makes her way to her

mandated spot behind the driver,  
who waves to us too, then pulls the lever

to shut the doors and heads down Heartwood  
Crossing, though the sign says Xing

as the whole name won't fit. This cross-  
hatch, this target; X marks the spot

like those yellow and black novelty  
signs: Moose Xing, Gator Xing,

Sasquatch Xing. my son loves to watch  
the show *Finding Bigfoot*, where

a research team goes to Rhode Island,  
Alaska, New York, to investigate

a recent spike in Squatch sightings.  
Each episode is exactly the same,

save for the location: they go out  
as a team one night to look for bigfoot,  
  
call for him, and find signs. Next,  
they have a town hall meeting  
  
to discuss sightings with residents  
who tell stories, which they recreate  
  
using a giant guy named Bobo as a stand-in,  
and they always come to the conclusion  
  
that the resident did see a bigfoot—  
that bigfoot could definitely live in  
  
\_\_\_\_\_. We live in blank.  
Sarah's mother threw her father out  
  
for keeping a loaded Uzi on the floor  
of their garage. When Sarah aims,  
  
with her fingers, at the empty birds' nests  
in the eaves of our porch, I wait for her  
  
to say bang, but instead she repeats  
*It had bullets in it*, and there's the bus  
  
wheezing around the bend again,  
yellow as a road sign, a daffodil,  
  
a stretch of CAUTION tape.

*Erika Meitner*  
97

---

<sup>97</sup> [Erika Meitner](#), "[Continuation](#)," [Shenandoah](#), collected in [Holy Moly Carry Me](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Bite Me

I'm reading a non-fiction piece by a cable TV tech  
who says she told a customer that she needs  
to get into the basement to run a line, and the customer  
says, "You can't go in the basement—it's a mess,"  
and the cable TV tech says, "Look, I've seen it all,  
so unless you've got a kid in a cage down there,  
nothing will bother me," and the customer pauses  
for a beat and says, "Not a kid." Just then  
the phone rings, and it's a friend who tells me

he's thinking about taking up fox hunting  
but hesitates when I ask him if there are foxes  
where he lives. I tell him to go ahead, though:  
this way, he'll have all the fun of fox hunting  
and none of the barbarism, presuming some other  
prey appears, of course, like geese or skateboarders.  
Or your own thoughts: isn't being startled  
by some idea or feeling that you never knew  
you had in the first place just the best? Think how

smart you feel when you're crossing the street  
or walking through the woods and suddenly you see  
how the coadjutant power of an atom is determined  
by the number of hydrogen atoms that it combines with  
or what Kant meant by the categorical imperative  
or why your mom stayed with your dad even after  
he kept getting arrested, especially that one time.  
"To live is so startling, it leaves but little room  
for other occupations," says Emily Dickinson,

and surely that's how people felt at Elvis's first  
stage show, because here was a kid who wasn't  
playing country, said producer Sam Phillips,  
and he wasn't playing rhythm 'n' blues, and he  
looked "a little greasy," and the venue was "just  
a joint," and the audience was a bunch of  
hard-drinking folks who weren't about to settle for  
a tepid performance, but they didn't have to,  
because their reaction, said Phillips, was "just

*incredible.*" I'm so happy that those people  
had that experience. It must have been  
the best surprise. I think probably the worst  
surprise is to have a heart attack during a game  
of charades, because either people will think  
you're mimicking someone having a heart attack  
or else you're doing an absolutely terrible job  
of acting out the scenario you're supposed to be

acting out, such as transcribing a Beethoven  
 sonata but in a different key from the original  
 or knitting a muffler to give your granny for  
 Christmas or Hanukkah, if she's Jewish.  
 This one woman said her biggest surprise  
 was when she woke up after an unsuccessful  
 suicide attempt: she'd checked into a motel,  
 put a plastic sheet on the bed, lain down,  
 and swallowed what she thought would be  
 an overdose of pills only to be found by  
 the housekeeper the next morning and wake up  
 a few days later in a psychiatric ward. "I was  
 very upset I had failed," she said. Not me,  
 I say. Kill yourself and you miss out on  
 the eight million little surprises that happen  
 every day, such as the time last week when a tiny  
 slip of a student came to my office to drop off  
 some work, and we chatted for a minute,  
 and it turns out she's a German major,  
 and when I say why German, she says, "I want  
 to be a butcher, and the best butchery schools  
 are in Germany." Take that, you village explainers  
 who say that humanities degrees are worthless!  
 Lucky student. She'll be in Germany for a year,  
 and after that, who knows where? Anthony  
 Bourdain says, "Travel changes you. As you  
 move through this life and this world, you change  
 things slightly, you leave marks behind,  
 however small. And in return, life and travel  
 leave marks on you." Bourdain is also the guy  
 who said, "Your body is not a temple, it's an  
 amusement park. Enjoy the ride." Someone  
 who always enjoys the ride is Percy, the neighbor's  
 cat, who comes over every day to bite me.  
 There I am, having coffee on the deck  
 and reading the newspapers, and Percy settles  
 down between my feet and looks at them as  
 though he's studying the menu board at  
 a McFriendly's and trying to decide whether  
 he wants the Chocolate Chili Cheese Dog  
 or the Big Bubba Bacon Bomb. When my friend  
 who wants to take up foxhunting gets off  
 the phone, I start reading again, which is when  
 I learn that the cable TV tech goes down into  
 the customer's basement and finds, not a kid  
 in a cage, but a man, and actually a happy man

at that, if “happy” is the word you’d use to  
describe someone who is paying the householder  
to lock him up and starve him and beat him  
regularly or whatever it is that a sex worker  
does to someone who takes delight in  
a leisure-time activity that wouldn’t exactly  
make my heart leap up with joy, but then  
there you have it. Oh, go ahead and bite me,  
Percy. You’ll only surprise me if you don’t.

*David Kirby*  
98

---

<sup>98</sup> [David Kirby, “Bite Me,” \*The Florida Review\*](#)

## God's Plan

Occasionally I pine for a mild disaster such as a really loud cough of thunder followed by wind that tears the scarves off the lawn, throws patio chairs around and maybe a contaminated lake barfs up some sensitive documents or a dead hog. It's hard not to scream in church, library map rooms aren't much better, or the ice rink where music remains in 1982, nacho machine on the brink of a calamitous fire but somehow still producing its cheeses which I will never be able to eat, thanks to my ancestors who survived on boiled stones and shags of grasses and sheep's dreams. Real excitement is a hidden bee in a box of raspberries, putting the car in a wrong gear, then gunning it. As a child I had a placemat emblazoned with photos of nine different types of scat. Sometimes I recall it as I recline in the dentist's chair, pinned down by the lead vestments of joy.

*Mary Biddinger*  
99

---

<sup>99</sup> [Mary Biddinger, "God's Plan," \*Psaltery and Lyre\*](#)

from *The Crying Book*

I suppose some people can weep softly and become more beautiful, but after a real cry, most people are hideous, as if they've grown a spare and diseased face beneath the one you know, leaving very little room for the eyes. Or they look as if they've been beaten. We look. I look. Once, in fifth grade, I cried at school for a reason I cannot recall, and afterward a popular boy—rattail, skateboard—told me I looked *like a druggie* and I was so pleased to be seen I made him repeat it.

• • •

The pain is very bad. I do not shed tears. I moan, I try to find words for myself, an adequate image. *I am a giant bear riding a tiny tricycle of pain. I am a brown paper bag with no bottom and the pain is falling through me.* It does not diminish the pain, but it gives me something else to hold in my body: the satisfaction of having shaped an accurate description.

• • •

As far as words go, *crying* is louder and *weeping* is wetter. When people explain the difference between the two to English-language learners they say that weeping is more formal, can sound archaic in everyday speech. You can hear this in their past tenses—the plainness of *cried*, the velvet cloak of *wept*. I remember arguing once with a teacher who insisted *dreamt* was incorrect, *dreamed* the only proper option. She was wrong, of course, in both philological and moral ways and ever since I've felt a peculiar attachment to the *t*'s of the past: *weep, wept, sleeps, slept, leave, left*. There's a finality there, a quiet completion of which *d* has never dreamt.

• • •

At the funeral I do not see my father cry. The priest, whose clip-on microphone sputters in and out, riffs on his digital woes for several minutes, before a graceless segue to the subject of my dead grandmother: "But Margaret doesn't have to worry about technical difficulties anymore." When he invites her children each to share a specific memory of her, they respond with blank generalizations: she loved her family, she worked very hard. At the reception, in a bland community room, our little node of the family—my father, mother, sister, daughter, and I—sit together around one table. My sister, red and tired, cries that we do not really know our aunts and uncles, that we had shown our love for our grandmother poorly. We eat cold bagels. Someone asks my sister—a former Peace Corps volunteer—with grave concern what is to be done about "the people in Africa." I am wearing a black dress with vertical zippers over the breasts, so the baby can nurse discreetly. The slender pull tabs dangle and shine like nipple tassels on an inept stripper.

Heather Christle

100

---

100 [Heather Christle, "I suppose some people can weep softly..."](#), collected in [The Crying Book](#), [Catapult](#)

## Miss Diana

I wasn't always this way. I was raised in a house of religion. My parents were lovely and kindhearted people. They treated me fine. Just fine. Whatever I wanted to play with was mine. I ran in the backyard naked. I danced at the Veterans Hall on the weekend. Sang in the choir. I never did anything wrong. I rode my chestnut horse in the sun. My dad called him *Sweetness*. He lived for the prairie. For the big country sun in his face. The sun has its favors to give. It *rejoices*. People say, Miss Diana, why do you always sit in the sun? Why don't you sit over there in the shade? Why don't you sleep in the shelter with friends? Those people don't understand *freedom*. They take off their clothes in the bathroom at night. They are serious fuckers. They would burn down the house with a single lit match. A single lit match and the whole hotel would be gone. They would poison the well with a drop of blood. With a Red Bull. I am pretty much hateful of Red Bull. I lived with a man once. He would always drink Red Bull. Morning, afternoon, evening, night. He was addicted to methamphetamine. Speed. It was the worst four years of my life. He kept me in bondage. In psychological fear. The light changed only inside the house. The windows all blacked out. Music playing loudly. I was a *hostage*. I was a kidnapping victim of *choice*. An adult kidnapping victim. I write the words on my hand to remember. I write the words on my shoe so the road will remember my name. I was here. I existed alone in these streets. My name is Diana and I was born free and I am not his anymore to possess.

*Kai Carlson-Wee*

101

---

<sup>101</sup> [Kai Carlson-Wee](#), "[Miss Diana](#)," collected in [Rail](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

High School as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

*Can they feel, I wonder,  
those silent white people we call the dead?*

You are never not what you were, and queer  
it is to see your own cruelty rise in a mirror.  
It's not that masks themselves are lies, rather  
our masks are us, therefore uniform: fear us.

In high school, my head droops off the stalk  
of my wilting neck, lets its dolorous flower fall  
to rest a cheek on the merciful cool of a school  
room desk. I wake having no idea what century

I'm in, having dreamt myself Queen, a leaf, amid quailing  
sounds released inside dungeons. It's Homeroom.  
He walks in, refusing to recognize me, that's how  
ugly I'm considered: the first boy I ever kissed

says he was too drunk to remember anything.  
There is a factory that produces heads like his.  
One day, I'll hear he's died from an overdose  
and not feel bad. Like him, I won't feel anything.

It's long been my complaint: having a body. So  
what if I could remake the brain that conducted  
the lips that proffered to me my very first kiss?  
Would it be a reenactment or a revisit? *Want*

*to date rape?* We'd roll to/fro across the floor  
of that treehouse bombed on three different  
kinds of liquor. Or, reframe our fix, make our  
marriage prearranged, conduct an insistence

that each mouth return to the other mouth  
for a second kiss? Not having to know waking  
to my childhood bedroom, bubbling up, best  
friend weeping envious in the bed beside me,

nor thinking *such strange windows!* Should I  
now fashion that dead boy's head so it might  
whisper back to me a compliment? But I was  
just legs and nothing else. *You really should*

*go outside sometime, instead of staying inside  
reading books. You're pretty. You're pretty!*  
In that life I'd become an alcoholic. In another  
life I'd be much happier as an office machine.

*Cate Marvin*

---

<sup>102</sup> [Cate Marvin](#), "[High School as \*The Picture of Dorian Gray\*](#)," collected in [Oracle, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## Field Trip

They're good kids, rich and sheltered. Dutifully  
they hold the hand of the boy or girl beside them.

They file out of the library with their teacher,  
and there's Death eating a sandwich.

They can't help but stare. He's sitting right where  
that raccoon was a couple of months ago.

Their teacher told them all about raccoons, a medium-  
sized mammal whose original habitats were  
deciduous forests.

"Who is that person?" asks Tyler who will never grow  
up to be a senator and, in fact, will never grow up at all.

"Look at this!" the teacher cries pointing to an anthill  
at her feet. The children stare politely at the raised mound

and the lines of workers, some carrying crumbs twice  
their size, others the bodies of their fallen comrades.

*Ron Koertge*  
103

---

<sup>103</sup> [Ron Koertge, "Field Trip,"](#) collected in [The Ogre's Wife, Red Hen Press](#)

## A meditation on hoarding

Last Wednesday I murdered a bat  
with a window screen. It was in the house  
and swooping around and around  
like my worry that I have neither  
a porpoise or a purpose,  
until I felt I had to knock it down  
to get it outside and save it  
from the madness of a dwelling  
that has no sky in it. I didn't realize  
how tender bats are. It looked tiny  
on the floor and delicate as a note  
folded and passed from a boy to a girl  
in fourth grade that he likes her  
and will she marry him at lunch?  
She did, and they lived happily together  
until the end of school that day.  
I was the boy the boy who wrote that note  
asked are there two rs in marry.  
Spelling matters, as does the feeling  
I'm under a spell of breathing  
I don't want to end. Part of me  
expects to look up one night  
and find a tombstone where my favorite star  
was, the same part that got stoned and drunk  
and tied string around everything  
on the first floor of a house in Grand Rapids  
with John-whose-last-name-escapes-me,  
around chairs and fixtures and the toaster  
and doorknobs and the piano,  
as if holding the world together  
wasn't just for spiders anymore but a job  
for a man with no qualifications  
other than the suicide that was often  
on his mind but hasn't been for years.  
Killing me is cancer's job, not mine.  
It might sound funny, but I don't think  
about death nearly as much  
as my poems do: before the sun comes up,  
I give death a chance to breathe,  
and for the rest of the day, try to pile up  
as much as I can to miss.

*Bob Hicok*  
104

---

<sup>104</sup> [Bob Hicok](#), "[A meditation on hoarding](#)," collected in [Hold](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Toad Circus

The day after my toad circus the toads were all dead, crunchy and silent in their window well. I wanted to draw a doorway to walk through to get to the world of lilacs: purple, contagious green leaves and no movement but the steady invisible breathing of flowers. I knew I had to tell someone what I had done so I first walked to the park and stayed there until dusk, sitting on the glider or in the middle of the rusty and dangerous merry-go-round; I can't remember which. When it was nearly dark I walked home, certain that they were worried and maybe even out looking for me. When I got there I saw them busy in the kitchen through the window, so I hid in the back yard until it was good and dark, a living thing on a swing set in the gloom, the attic in my head cracking open for the first time and I went in.

*Julia Story*  
105

---

<sup>105</sup> [Julia Story, "Toad Circus," \*The New Yorker\*](#)

And a Lie

The asking was askance.  
And the tell all told.  
So then, in tandem

anathema, and anthem.  
The truth was on hold,  
seeking too tasking.

And the wool was pulled  
over as cover.  
No eyes were kept peeled.

My iris I missed  
the truth, now mistrust  
all things seen, and this

distrust, the sounded distress signal  
called and called and culled from your damsel.

*Hannah Sanghee Park*  
106

---

<sup>106</sup> [Hannah Sanghee Park](#), "[And a Lie](#)," [Poetry](#), collected in [The Same-Different](#), [Louisiana State University Press](#)

from “Torrance”

*You can speak of a writing sickness*—black and lunatic, each word escaping the cage. Once, I came to underneath a man with his hand over my mouth, a gash above my eye.

\*

A book is a nightmare. Lower your voice. In her robe and slippers, climbing the stairs, the violence is a kind of dream. Lower. A feather not an axe. Hush. His breath on your back.

\*

She is climbing the stairs to stay alive (he will die in my mind from boiling not ice). Kill him. Out loud: Kill him. If you open your eyes in the dark, the book ignites.

\*

*If this endless white paper burns out one's eyes.* If you go blind all your life (*which is why one writes*) trying to find the words for sight, the violence of the blank page is light.

\*

*I am become death, the shatterer of worlds*—I am climbing the stairs with her. You will die of reading. Please. You will die of writing. Again. What is a book? To survive.

*Allison Benis White*  
107

---

<sup>107</sup> [Allison Benis White](#), “[Torrance](#),” collected in [The Wendys](#), [Four Way Books](#)

## Love Poem

Sometimes you are the more elegant  
of the two cigarettes in the cut glass ashtray.  
Sometimes you are the smoke curling up

in the slow frame rate, cutting to mist  
on a dark road rising. I feel such elation  
when you grab my wrist and demand to know

about the diamonds or the carved falcon  
made of diamonds painted black or when my wrist  
in your fist compresses to diamond from this mess

of carbon I walk in. I wear my hair over one eye  
to avoid depth. I drive my sister's car.  
She'll take the rap for any wrong turns

en route to the rented flat where you photograph  
me in a dragon armed chair against chinoiserie.  
I was always an orchid coddled in the warmth.

It's not a problem that you cock your gun  
at the small of my sister's back. She has a way of walking  
that invites a man to try his aim. I don't mind

the shallow nature of our lines. They're still a pleasure  
to mouth. You don't need ropes anymore, or any  
restraint. You can leave your hat on the table.

*Rebecca Hazelton*  
108

---

<sup>108</sup> [Rebecca Hazelton](#), "[Love Poem](#)," [Tupelo Quarterly](#), collected in [Gloss](#), [University of Wisconsin Press](#)

Talk Television: *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*

She says the TV's been talking to her again. Malice and spoiled flesh squeezed through spectral Philco. Decomp greasing the cathode-ray tubes.

*You're my lifeline*, she says into the phone. Instinctively, you recoil. Curlicued wire of phone cord tenses its spiraled dangle. She's hanging on, she wants you to know, by a thread of string cheese.

Static. When you're not in the room, she clicks herself off like the TV and waits for your return. She says Captain Morgan's hiding in her closet again. She says she's taken twenty Klonopin.

*Adrenaline*: Pitying harrow of guilt.

*You're not here. You're going to leave me for somebody.*

*Dopamine*: Emergency thwarted.

Some body. Some (other) body.

Fish spilling over the lock at Yankton Dam, raining onto asphalt like a wet patter of feet on concrete. A rupture of entrails and brains. Scales a scattering of soft silver coins. Overhead, eagles and red-tailed hawks circle in ever-tightening parabolas.

Ice machine hums in the hallway. Exit sign a neon semiotic in the dark. Fire alarm an impossible red planet locked in its smudged glass box.

*Lee Ann Roripaugh*  
109

---

<sup>109</sup> [Lee Ann Roripaugh](#), "[Talk Television: Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom](#)," [Copper Nickel](#), collected in [Dandarians](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

## Crusade

When my friend and I dug a 10-foot-deep hole in a baseball field, I remembered a magazine article that compared two men fucking the same woman to digging a hole with complete concentration, neither guy looking at the other's shovel. The night my friend and I fucked the same woman, I woke up at 3 am and watched her sleeping between us. My friend slept turned to the wall. I thought of the things underground that no one existing had touched, bones, jars, porcelain dolls' legs, the unbroken bottle we held and looked at so carefully as the maintenance guy on his lawnmower roared through the sunlight above us.

*Sarah Galvin*

110

---

<sup>110</sup> [Sarah Galvin](#), "[Crusade](#)," collected in *The [Three Einsteins](#), [Poor Claudia](#)*

## For, Or, Nor

### *For*

“I’m leaving you,” she said, “for you make me sick.” But of course she didn’t say that. She *thought* the “for”; she admired its elegant distance, the way it’s wedged like an iron strut between result and cause, the way it’s almost “far,” and dire as a raised eyebrow. She liked the way it sounds like speaking through a cardboard paper towel tube, using it for a megaphone; not loud, but strong, all those compacted years shoving out the other end, as if she were certain she wanted to be alone.

### *Or*

The first four bars of Beethoven’s sixth, the *Pastoral*, repeat and repeat, always with variation: *or*, and *or*, something to violate expectations, not fully antiphonal, only an oar dipped into the measure to make an interior swirl, pulling the craft slightly to the side, yet ahead, still: little cupped trails alongside the mark where the mind turned, questions were asked, and shed before moving on, nothing that can’t be repaired.

### *Nor*

As a flower sheds petal after petal, as further tests strip away one after another of the last hopes for a cure, as a person shakes into the waste bin all her cigarettes and goes down the street not knowing who she is, the pure air of saints is achieved by abandonment: Jesus in the garden alone, cold moon disappearing, Buddha at the morning star, mind emptied of its snarl of ignorance. Neither to harden against loss, nor to welcome it. To let it be who you are.

*Fleda Brown*

111

---

<sup>111</sup> [Fleda Brown](#), “[For, Or, Nor](#),” [Poetry](#), collected in [No Need of Sympathy](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

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

My First Kiss Was in a Room Where They Polish Lenses for Eyeglasses

Against some kind of machinery he said was *for grinding*.  
Fourteen and thirteen, those ages of compendious entendre.

And there he was in black slacks, a black shirt, and a black tie  
on Christmas Eve. A Judas Priest tee under the whole ensemble.

And his great and deciduous grief? That his mother had ironed the sleeves  
of his shadow and then threshed his cowlick while he played

an unpausable game. A sneak with a comb between her teeth.  
A true pirate. His hair was parted faultlessly down the middle

like the Red Sea, and it was so black and so full  
of gel I couldn't help but think of those pelicans

and seals I saw on the news rescued from a gulf oil  
spill that were sudsed in baby pools with a dish detergent

named Dawn by scientists who were only yellow  
gloves. And I could taste his cologne before it happened—

as if I'd been frenched first by butane, a menthol  
cigarette, and Pine Sol, a comorbid smack that knelled migraine.

But there was something sweet underneath it all. (I was hopeful  
at least.) Something like lemon candy, a lozenge I let dissolve

on my tongue. (A yes, unspoken.) It was his family  
business—sight, frames, and glass. And, somehow, they had a private chapel

in the back, where I'd been given a communion of a single oyster  
cracker and grape juice from concentrate in a waxed paper cup.

I was at the age where I had stopped believing in most  
everything, except love. But that wasn't

what it was, even if that's what I wanted. I'd seen his grandfather in commercials  
shave off half his beard for a buy-one-pair-get-one-half-price sale.

But what then did I know of loss? And of losing  
part of oneself to someone else? That came much later.

(Although I couldn't see it happening as it happened.)  
It was there in my eyes, someone said. And then I saw it, yes, in my reflection.

*Emilia Phillips*  
112

---

<sup>112</sup> Emilia Phillips, "[My First Kiss Was in a Room Where They Polish Lenses for Eyeglasses](#)," *Quarterly West*

## Self-Portrait as Erotic Thriller

Natasha in her underwear on an old floral chair.  
Feet on the armrest. Look at her.  
Little sensual snail. Smoke in the sunlight.  
Now she is a passenger in his red Wagoneer.  
Feet on the dashboard. The same sunlight.  
They race to a lakeside house replete  
with Adirondacks and loons where someone is bound  
to die. In a Coeur d'Alene diner  
Their waitress is pretty with big breasts and black eyes.  
She deserves better than this.  
When she goes out by the dumpster to smoke  
they kidnap her. *Look at me*, says Natasha. *Look.*

Cut to sunlight on the empty dock.  
Grilled meat smell licking the side of the lake.  
Three figures in a Chester Yawl.  
Natasha feeds the waitress wedges of apple  
off the side of a knife. The waitress wears an  
old green bikini. Natasha is nude. One of them  
wears a necklace. A speedboat slices through  
the no wake zone. A spray of water in the sunlight.  
The droplets cling to their sunglasses. No one  
wipes them away. *Look*, says Natasha.  
*We all have an imperfect past.*  
*For instance*, says the Man, *I like to yank*  
*necklaces from women's throats. I am unconcerned*  
*whether I break the clasps or the women.*  
*...Does this make me a monster?*

They swim out to the untethered raft.  
The Man is showing off. He dives down under  
the cool shadow, hides between rusted barrels.  
He looks through the gray planks  
into the women's green and cherry crotches.  
Sunlight. He puts algae in his hair. He gurgles.  
*Look*, giggles the waitress, *the Monster.*  
A thing goes ping, ping, ping.  
His mouth. Her ear. Someone makes a wineglass sing.  
A spray of pearls in the sunlight. No comment.  
Natasha puts her thumb between her lips.  
She can't stop this. No, she *won't*.  
The camera is underwater, sinking fast.  
No sounds now. Wavery sunlight above.  
Two silhouettes, watching it happen.

Cut to October.  
A body washes up in a greening slip.  
It's waxen with cold and axes down  
everyone's Indian summer. A saxophone  
solo purls around the bruised breasts  
igniting a sickening bloom of desire  
we recognize in the new sheriff's eyes.

*Karyna McGlynn*  
113

---

<sup>113</sup> [Karyna McGlynn](#), "[Self-Portrait as Erotic Thriller](#)," collected in [Hothouse](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## Manners

Address older people as *sir* or *ma'am*  
unless they drift slowly into your lane  
as you aim for the exit ramp.  
Don't call anyone *dickbead*, *fuckface*, or *ass-hat*;  
these terms are reserved for ex-boyfriends  
or anyone you once let get past second base  
and later wished would be sucked into a sinkhole.  
Yelling obscenities at the TV is okay,  
as long as sports are clearly visible on the screen,  
but it's rude to mutter at the cleaning products in Safeway.  
Also rude: mentioning bodily functions.  
Therefore, sentiments such as "I went balls to the wall for her"  
or "I have to piss like a chick with a pelvic disorder at a kegger contest"  
are best left unexpressed.  
Don't say *chick*, which is demeaning  
to the billions of sentient creatures  
jammed in sheds, miserably pecking for millet.  
Don't talk about yourself. Ask questions  
of others in order to show your interest.  
How do you like my poem so far?  
Do you think I'm pretty?  
What would you give up to make me happy?  
Don't open your raincoat to display your nakedness.  
Fondling a penis in public  
is problematic, though Botero's black sculpture  
of fat man, in the Time Warner building  
in New York, his pee-pee rubbed gold,  
seems to be an exception.  
Please lie to me about your pedophilia  
and the permafrost layer.  
Stay in bed on bad hair days.  
When the pulley of your childhood  
unwinds the laundry line of your dysfunction,  
here is a list of items to shove deep in the dryer:  
disturbed brother's T-shirt,  
depressed mother's socks and tennis racket,  
tie worn by soused father driving the kids home  
from McDonalds Raw Bar. If you refuse  
your host's offer of alcohol, it is best to say  
"I'm so hungover, the very thought of drinking  
makes me feel like projectile vomiting,"  
or "No thank you, it interferes with my medications."  
Hold your liquor whenever it is fearful  
and lonely, whenever it needs your love.  
Don't interrupt me when I'm battering.  
Divorce your cell phone in a romantic restaurant.  
Here is an example  
of a proper thank-you card:

Thank you for not sharing with me  
the extrusions of your vague creative impulse.  
Thank you for not believing those lies  
everyone spreads about me, and for opening  
the door to the next terrifying moment,  
and thank you especially for not opening your mouth  
while I'm trying to digest my roast chicken.

*Kim Addonizio*  
114

---

<sup>114</sup> [Kim Addonizio, "Manners," \*American Poetry Review\*, collected in \*Mortal Trash\*, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## Who Makes Love to Us After We Die

I turn on the radio and hear voices, girls becoming women after tragedy. Talk about dreams! His heart was covered in a thin shell the color of moon and when touched, I grew old. The best movies have a philosophy (Dorothy, after being subjected to girl-on-girl violence, is rescued). Someone hanged himself on that set, a man who loved but couldn't have a certain woman. Management claimed it was a bird. The best movies begin with an encounter and end with someone setting someone free. In Coppola's *Dracula* the camera chases women across a garden until they kiss. The man I loved, after many years, asked me to choke him in bed; later, cleaning a kitchen cabinet, I found a recipe he'd carved into the wood, and I had a hard time believing him.

*Diana Marie Delgado*

115

---

<sup>115</sup> [Diana Marie Delgado](#), "[Who Makes Love to Us After We Die](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [Tracing the Horse](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## Artichokes

I bet I'll never appear in a dream or a summer dress  
or next door. Displaying on one hand my prowess, the other  
my difficultness, I bet there will be just enough pain  
to keep me alive, long enough for the moon to be mine,  
just as the sea is of women: the cockle, the star,  
and the movements of the earth. Just as  
the whale, stuck in its baleen grin, climbs up  
out of the depths and moves to its hidden  
spawning grounds—

I don't know. What is it to be seen? I can forget  
it's language I long for. Man and his ciphers  
cannot save me. Meaning cannot not pile me up  
with more meaning. I go off like a firework  
in the yard. I take the limbs off myself  
and club the air—for the dead women of television  
displayed artistically in the woods, for the details  
of their hair, for their pale skin, their now foul,  
ravaged cunts—do you have to be thus  
to be avenged? I don't know.

I've seen the last of it: an ache.  
To be saved. There are wildfires  
switching course to worry about.  
I take my daughter to the lake and watch her feel the tiny waves.  
A seagull lifts a sandwich right from my hands.  
I take out my tired breast. And of having felt  
like a small event for so long—having felt  
like an artichoke, scraped away at with the front teeth,  
one scale at a time, worked down  
to the meaty heart, but with the ultimate  
disappointment of meagre flesh—  
of being thus, I bet I will live again.  
I bet I will appear in full gear, the armor  
of ugly indefinite livability, the real body,  
alive or in decay—I'll appear  
like a thundering, I'll save  
myself. And you. And you.

*Bianca Stone*  
116

---

<sup>116</sup> [Bianca Stone](#), "Artichokes," [The New Yorker](#)

## Aphorisms

A man's silence is medieval; a woman's baroque.

When drunk, I become a child's drawing of myself.

Dressed in moss pajamas, stone sleeps in the rain.

The bottom half of a unicyclist is trying to escape.

*Dan Liebert*  
117

---

<sup>117</sup> Dan Liebert, [Aphorisms](#), collected in [Short Flights](#), [Schaffner Press](#)

## How I Became Miss America

*There she is*, Burt Parks is singing  
and I am weeping as her gleaming teeth shine  
through the wide open window of her mouth.  
When I grow up, I could be her.  
Though I can't dance or sing  
and the girls fool enough to do dramatic  
readings never win. But I've got time  
and tonight my tears are hers,  
falling like sequins down those lovely cheekbones.  
I've just embraced the first runner-up  
who pretends to be happy for me,  
sheaves of roses cradled, mink-trimmed cape  
waltzed over my shoulders.  
I'm starting down the runway.  
My mother sips her highball.  
My father leans back on the grease spot  
his wavy hair has rubbed into the sofa.  
We're six miles inland from Atlantic City  
in a railroad apartment over Hy-Grade Wines and Liquors.  
They worked all week selling Seagram's and cheap wine  
and this is Saturday night. Summer. The windows raised  
to catch whatever breeze might enter.  
No one could predict that twenty-five years later  
I'd be chanting *no more profits off women's bodies*  
at the Myth California counter-pageant  
where Nikki Craft poured the blood of raped women  
on the Civic Center steps, splashing  
her ceramic replicas of Barbies:  
*Miss Used, Miss Directed, and Miss Informed.*  
And Ann Simonton, former *Vogue* model, posed as *Miss Steak*  
in a gown sewn from 30 pounds of scalloped bologna  
with a hot dog neckline and parsley garnish.  
I'd just left my husband and come out as a lesbian.  
My lover, in a tie and fedora, marched  
with her poster, *Nestlé Kills Babies*.  
That night we didn't need a moon.  
From the minute my child fell asleep until we collapsed,  
exhausted on her waterbed, we made love  
as one of Nikki's statuettes  
in a glow-in-the-dark blue gown and tiara,  
watched over us, *Miss Ogyny*  
painted in gold across her sash.

Ellen Bass

118

---

<sup>118</sup> [Ellen Bass, "How I Became Miss America," \*Rattle\*, collected in \*Like a Beggar\*, Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Elk Tooth Necklace

The first time Ray lost a wife he didn't know why.  
At work he thumbed a scar on his forehead  
to show us where she'd split skin with a water glass—  
*the bitch*— he said the kids, by moving  
to Alaska, took her side. The baseboard lined  
with spent whiskey bottles. He'd walk barefoot  
in the snow. He sheeted the porch in plastic  
so that the house resembled itself,  
a stonefly rising from its molt. Around  
that time, elk took to staring through living  
room windows. Their yellow eyes pulsed in sports light  
hanging, ghostly, among hollow trees.  
Once, he dove at them hollering like you would spook  
a group of crows. *That's the gist of it,*  
he explained on lunch break. He didn't know how  
he stumbled into the Teanaway  
Wilderness or what became of his clothes. He woke  
facing an elk's bullet-torn throat. Smiling  
while eating in a circle around his truck, we found  
the story hard to believe. He'd only  
caved and offered up that much after months of us  
calling him gay, a handful of women's  
names for the necklace he kept under his work polo:  
a wooden corn nut latched to a silver chain.  
Ray claimed he'd gone back, sober, the next day  
and worked the tooth from the elk's hard mouth.  
*You should've seen the rack.* He held out his hands.  
Two saplings. *I could've froze to death,*  
he said, *just think, drunk off my ass, I killed that thing.*

The second time, he came home to find Darla  
cold at the TV. It was embarrassing.  
We didn't know him when he sobbed his face  
into a crust and kicked out the door screen.  
A neighbor cooked apple pie and roast beef. We fed  
him, took turns lifting the fork, letting him  
drink. Nobody else called or knocked. We, the garbage  
crew, were his only company. That morning  
he asked us to leave. Lifted the chain from his neck  
and handed it to me. When he said  
*I want you all to have it, but it's got magic*  
*you can't understand,* I thought he meant  
how it feels to save your own life by taking warmth  
from another body. The strength of having  
felt yourself bend. For the rest of the season,  
none of us spoke of his absence. We never  
went again. I hung the chain from the rearview mirror  
where it swung between our heads. We imagined

Ray would die, and every day we waited  
we felt we made it happen.

On the last shift we passed a cigar between us,  
a ceremony for the final bag of trash.  
We shut our doors, drove off in the same moment.  
Dirt shrouded the boxcar where we'd kept  
our things. While turning I saw the necklace, its chain  
catching light in the cab of truck 43.  
I dug through my pockets and remembered  
that we'd surrendered our keys. If they hadn't  
yet the guys would soon realize. Five cars taking  
the highway through the canyon. Their blocked  
music. I pictured them silently weighing  
the consequences of going back for  
the necklace, breaking in. Crossing the bridge  
over the gate where the river opens  
at 5:00 pm. Heading home, we used to stop there,  
above the water, and though the fall is too slow  
to see, we'd squint long enough to convince ourselves  
we were the reason the reservoir emptied.

*Taneum Bambrick*

119

---

119 [Taneum Bambrick, "Elk Tooth Necklace," \*The American Poetry Review\*](#), collected in [Vantage, \*The American Poetry Review\*](#)



## For My 1st Ex-Lover to Die

I heard this morning my old lover died, and I cannot say I loved him, though I may have said so at the time, cannot say he was a good person or lover or anything other than a man who called me in the small hours, driving back roads drunk in his Ferrari when I was 23 and he was 50, who bought me books and a Lalique clock that's been broken 20 years, who was the dumbest smart person I ever knew, crying in his car at 4 in the morning, wearing a coyote skin coat that reached to his shoes, and I didn't want his money or his cocaine or to be his 7th wife, and I've seldom thought of him except to remember a dark animal crossing his driveway at night, and the 2 staircases in his grand house, going up, going down, and how I held him, deep in my body, and he made a small, sad sound.

*Francesca Bell*

121

---

<sup>121</sup> [Francesca Bell](#), "[For My 1st Ex-Lover to Die](#)," [New Ohio Review](#), collected in [Bright Stain](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

## A Little (more) About Me

I am self-unemployed.  
I have another side of me also,  
all wussy.

Catapults into the darkness,  
I like to think,  
grave as a stranger.

My dread of my father  
is great. Also money  
and advice.

Also hammers and mistakes.  
That February when  
you stopped calling,

and the trees moped around  
like teenagers.  
As the maker of the motion

I can speak  
to the motion.  
It's fucked.

Handcart to the parking lot,  
I like to say,  
ghost ship to the horizon.

I am right now one centimeter  
from humming. OK.  
I am humming.

*Michael Teig*  
122

---

<sup>122</sup> [Michael Teig](#), "[A Little \(more\) About Me](#)," collected in [There's a Box in the Garage You Can Beat with a Stick](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Junk Science

I plan to leave this party soon unless they lower the tone.  
Each word of yours is an empty calorie sprinkled with pink sea salt.

Enough of your sympathetic magic, junk science and false gods!  
Poor bees. They tried and tried but failed to keep their deaths from us.

Oh, every snowflake's a unique star, a fallen fingerprint.  
And what do we do with these babies? We plow 'em like dirt and plant cars.

Your protests are as wind chimes when the hurricane blows in.  
While we pli  or chest-pump, the ice storm antlers each branch.

Denim sings the workers' blues, a French folk song *de N mes*.  
In case of emergency, tap the glass and your promises will shatter.

You can get all the news that stays news from a fashion magazine.  
Denim goes with everything: diamonds, bent rebar, blood lust.

*Kateri Lanthier*  
123

---

<sup>123</sup> [Kateri Lanthier](#), "[Junk Science](#)," collected in [Siren](#), [V hicule Press](#)

## Brooklyn is Covered in Little Pieces of Paper

This is extremely important  
what happened to me today  
so listen closely

I drew a very appealing  
picture of my daughter's  
beloved stuffed dog  
because she was going  
on her first field trip  
and was not allowed  
to bring the stuffed dog  
and I colored in  
the picture softly  
with a brown pencil  
and drew smell lines  
coming off his nose  
because that is her favorite  
aspect of the dog  
his smell

so she folded the picture  
and put it in her pocket  
which is very small  
because she is  
and we walked to school  
through the warm wind  
only to find  
she had lost the paper  
with the picture on it  
which was terrible  
just terrible  
as she insisted  
but what could we do?  
the green door  
was going to open  
in two minutes

and on the way home  
I thought half-heartedly  
I'll look on the ground  
for a folded piece  
of paper  
and when I did  
I saw Brooklyn  
is covered in little  
pieces of paper  
which fact I was contemplating  
in the bright sun  
and the wind pressing papers against  
the chain link fence

when I saw it  
and bent down  
and in my head  
a voice said  
fuck yeah!

*Matthew Rohrer*  
124

---

<sup>124</sup> Matthew Rohrer, "[Brooklyn is Covered in Little Pieces of Paper](#)," collected in [Surrounded by Friends](#), [Wave Books](#)

American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin

Suppose you could speak nothing but money  
And acrimony. Suppose all the sunflowers  
Van Gogh destroyed, all the stones in Virginia's  
Pockets & all the stones Georgia painted as vaginas  
Were simply a matter of making something greater  
Than money. Prince taught us a real man has  
A beautiful woman in him. Suppose we cannot  
Forget what happened in Money. Suppose  
You're someone who celebrates Thomas Jefferson's  
Birthday. Suppose he was someone whose love  
For a black woman was blinded by blackness,  
Hers & his, yours & mine. I ain't mad at you,  
Assassin. It's not the bad people who are brave  
I fear, it's the good people who are afraid.

*Terrance Hayes*  
125

---

<sup>125</sup> [Terrance Hayes, "American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin \[Suppose you could speak nothing but money...\]"](#),  
collected in [American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## The Crowds Cheered as Gloom Galloped Away

Everyone was happier. But where did the sadness go? People wanted to know. They didn't want it collecting in their elbows or knees then popping up later. The girl who thought of the ponies made a lot of money. Now a month's supply of pills came in a hard blue case with a handle. You opened it & found the usual vial plus six tiny ponies of assorted shapes & sizes, softly breathing in the Styrofoam. Often they had to be pried out & would wobble a little when first put on the ground. In the beginning the children tried to play with them, but the sharp hooves nicked their fingers & the ponies refused to jump over pencil hurdles. The children stopped feeding them sugarwater & the ponies were left to break their legs on the gardens' gravel paths or drown in the gutters. On the first day of the month, rats gathered on doorsteps & spat out only the bitter manes. Many a pony's last sight was a bounding squirrel with its tail hovering over its head like a halo. Behind the movie theatre the hardier ponies gathered in packs amongst the cigarette butts, getting their hooves stuck in wads of gum. They lined the hills at funerals, huddled under folding chairs at weddings. It became a matter of pride if one of your ponies proved unusually sturdy. People would smile & say, "This would have been an awful month for me," pointing to the glossy palomino trotting energetically around their ankles. Eventually, the ponies were no longer needed. People had learned to imagine their sadness trotting away. & when they wanted something more tangible, they could always go to the racetrack & study the larger horses' faces. Gloom, #341, with those big black eyes, was almost sure to win.

*Matthea Harvey*

126

---

<sup>126</sup> [Matthea Harvey](#), "[The Crowds Cheered as Gloom Galloped Away](#)," collected in [Sad Little Breathing Machine](#), Graywolf Press

## Etiquette

I once put my fist inside someone,  
fist the size of a heart,  
into someone who was looking  
for a heart for herself.

I am not a particularly nice girl—

I plant carrots, and pull them  
too early. They make sweet  
suckling sounds, like whimpers,  
a sucking of breath.

I've been careless. I've left  
diaries on trains, stockings  
in bathrooms, my smell  
on something casual. I've been  
casual. I've caused casualties.

My granddaddy is a man of God.  
He drove a busted truck, the color  
of menses, through Death Valley.  
Hundreds of miles, to give  
the word of quenching light  
to the parched. That must be nice.

*July Westhale*  
127

---

<sup>127</sup> [July Westhale](#), "[Etiquette](#)," collected in [Trailer Trash](#), [Kore Press](#)

## The Island of Zerrissenheit

The island pulls at you every moment  
without rest. You'll be rendered into pieces,  
torn apart by sorrow. The only creatures  
that escape are birds. They say even mermaids  
go mad, biting the bottoms of boats  
in the bay. In early morning, you can see them  
dragging themselves to shore. Mermaids  
with mouths bloody, full of splinters.  
Mermaids blinded by their own blue hands.  
I came to this island after the death of a friend.  
Actually, she did not die. She's still alive  
but I am dead to her. The island told me  
this is a special kind of sorrow. A sorrow  
with a light inside that never goes out—  
an inverse lighthouse at the bottom  
of a sea. They say your hands fall off first,  
most likely at the shore where it's windiest.  
No, those are not starfish scattered on the sand.  
They are hands curling in on themselves, making  
little nests on the beach. Sometimes, they scuttle  
away to cut off other hands. The abandoned  
always retreat or lash out, but never make it free.  
The island has three rules: Never try to warm  
the freshly dead. Never dismember a mermaid  
by moonlight. Never, ever, fall in love  
with a bird. I've come to know the difference  
between sadness and grief. Sadness  
is the knell of a bell on a buoy at night,  
riding the swells. Grief is a boat  
exactly the size and shape of the sea.  
I see you approaching the island, friend,  
but can no longer wave you in.

*Kristin Bock*

128

---

<sup>128</sup> [Kristin Bock](#), "[The Island of Zerrissenheit](#)," [The Rupture](#)

## The Use of the Second Person

You were never alone: we are all here too.  
You, who were always a boy in a brutal hat,  
head down over his geometry  
and a slice in a back booth at Franks,

were never all of the boys,  
never a symbol running away from its thing.

Maybe there wasn't a baseball bat  
swung at your life, and life  
wasn't a baseball bat swung at you,  
but you ditched anyway.  
From the doctor's waiting room,  
someone's grandmother inside,  
from the Spanish teacher, *no se*,  
from the new Thanksgiving war movie,  
even from what wasn't swung at you,  
you tore away.

We see you, sing the prices of the stuff.  
Welcome home, winks the keyhole.  
Wanna, says the psycho in the sex boots.  
Feel that, says the sun, finally going down.

You are beyond gesture, and still a beckoning.  
You are the wrong word in the wrong mouth,  
maybe in my mouth, maybe this word is wrong.  
You are tomorrow too soon, oh god.  
But someone is calling. That's your phone  
chirping and tingling in a back pocket.  
Your phone has been trying you all day,  
your phone wants to listen to you,  
your phone loves you,  
answer your phone.

*Alan Michael Parker*

129

---

129 [Alan Michael Parker](#), "[The Use of the Second Person](#)," collected in [The Ladder](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

## Visiting Russia

Another feast day, and the bells are ringing.  
The bells are ringing, and not more  
than a handful of versts from here,  
in the garden of dead hypotheses,  
Russia is rising from beds  
lavish with nettles and pokeweed,  
and from the stalks of fennel obscuring  
the mildewed statuary.  
Not more than a handful of versts from here,  
closer than we thought was possible,  
the Tartar ponies are pawing at their stakes,  
the tents of the Golden Horde  
are stretching from here to there.  
Closer than we thought was possible,  
Basil, Yaroslavl, the Pantokrator,  
the fifth of fifty five-year plans,  
the Vladimir Mother of God.  
Much has happened in the years between  
1200 A.D. and today, and it is  
happening again right now.  
To lighten the sleigh, a young girl  
is being thrown to the wolves.  
The Metropolitan is telling the Old Believers  
that only with beauty can we coax  
the divine into our nets.  
The bones of the young girl thrown to the wolves  
are half-immersed in strong moonlight.  
Thunder in the faraway altitudes,  
vacant and subliminal,  
is throwing off the rhythms  
of the villagers sheaving the rye.  
By the year 1200 AD,  
Joseph is little more than a memory,  
although threads from his coat of many colors,  
along with splinters from the True Cross,  
the icon, the censer, the axe, are being carried  
to the taiga, the tundra, the Baltic,  
flat today as a sheet of steel. A sheet of steel  
incised to the horizon with faint,  
steel-brushed semicircles.  
A five-year plan for steel.  
A region estimated to be the size  
of Australia, untouched by man, rich  
with fish and timber and tigers,  
iron ore, bauxite, gold, uranium.  
At no further cost to themselves,  
Peter's cartographers have been given  
the pick of the earth. The Caspian Sea,

the Aral Sea, the Sea of Okhotsk.  
Few rivers traverse the steppe, its soil  
is rocky and meagre, its apprehensive  
inhabitants are prey  
to princes, chief clerks, marauders,  
Kazaks, and holy men. The feet  
of their children are bleeding. Pushkin  
is standing on a chair in his study.  
He has just finished another stanza,  
polyhedral and perfectly joined.  
His thoughts stray to his faithless wife,  
Natalia, née Goncharova. “Nevertheless,”  
he says to the walls, “you’re one hell of a guy,  
Pushkin.” Another feast day,  
and in the rye field nearest the larger dining room,  
where a beautiful, archaic French  
is being spoken, where  
the candles have been lighted  
and the table furnished with soup and bread,  
a very old man is sleeping it off—  
Sasha, without a tooth in his head.  
When Stalin’s daughter,  
when Stalin’s daughter  
fled to Delhi, he was still there,  
still dreaming of fire and sword,  
rebellion and death.

*Vijay Seshadri*  
130

---

<sup>130</sup> [Vijay Seshadri](#), “[Visiting Russia](#),” [The Paris Review](#), collected in *The Long Meadow*, [Graywolf Press](#)

## Scenes from an Imaginary Childhood

1.

The devil dwelled  
in the basement.

Art books  
were his porn—

the pages where  
nude bodies glowed.

He had his tools.

His bathroom  
no one else could use.

A bar.

A red lamp

made from a gallon jar  
of maraschino cherries

to signal.      sin.

2.

In a cabin  
at a rustic resort

she turned feral  
and bit a neighbor's daughter.

The two girls were  
pretending to be bears.

She didn't remember  
doing it

but when she became  
herself again

there was blood  
on her lips

and everyone was yelling.

*Elaine Equi*

---

<sup>131</sup> [Elaine Equi](#), "[Scenes from an Imaginary Childhood](#)," collected in [The Intangibles](#), [Coffee House Press](#).

有識: Have Knowledge

—From the immigration questionnaire given to Chinese entering or re-entering the U.S. during the Chinese Exclusion Act

Have you ridden in a streetcar?  
Can you describe the taste of bread?  
Where are the joss houses located in the city?  
Do Jackson Street and Dupont run  
in a circle or a line, what is the fruit  
your mother ate before she bore you,  
how many letters a year  
do you receive from your father?  
Of which material is your ancestral hall  
now built? How many water buffalo  
does your uncle own?  
Do you love him? Do you hate her?  
What kind of bird sang  
at your parents' wedding? What are the birth dates  
for each of your cousins: did your brother die  
from starvation, work, or murder?  
Do you know the price of tea here?  
Have you ever touched a stranger's face  
as he slept? Did it snow the year  
you first wintered in our desert?  
How much weight is  
a bucket and a hammer? Which store  
is opposite your grandmother's?  
Did you sleep with that man  
for money? Did you sleep with that man  
for love? Name the color and number  
of all your mother's dresses. Now  
your village's rivers.  
What diseases of the heart  
do you carry? What country do you see  
when you think of your children?  
Does your sister ever write?  
In which direction does her front door face?  
How many steps did you take  
when you finally left her?  
How far did you walk  
before you looked back?

*Paisley Rekdal*

132

---

<sup>132</sup> [Paisley Rekdal](#), “[有識: Have Knowledge](#),” [Poem-a-Day](#)

## How Russia Hacks You

*March 30, 2017, Publication: CNN, News Headline:*

In Rasputin's day it could have been with wine,  
the intermingling of magic and mayhem, ribbons  
of blood, a drowning of senses. For some it was  
nuclear winter and monkeys launched into space,  
gymnasts and chess masters with dizzying moves,  
depressed masters of fiction in itinerant bloom.  
Once in a Moscow apartment I had twelve shots  
of vodka over dinner, skipping every other tumbler,  
a light weight in oblivion, laughter, and freezing  
rain. Your phone has the might of a Bolshevik  
when you are lost in multiple screens, windows  
shorn between estates of big lies and tiny spies,  
what your cramped fingers and the raw feet  
of ballet dancers have in common after the show.

*Martin Ott*

133

---

<sup>133</sup> [Martin Ott](#), "[How Russia Hacks You](#)," [The Opiate Magazine](#), collected in [Fake News Poems](#), [BlazeVOX \[Books\]](#)

from “Polaroids of God from My Eleventh Summer”

### 3: From the Seat of the Riding Lawn Mower

Vodka my body more than water by fourteen,  
but first, scotch at eleven, and the very first: beers,  
warm ones, left in the four-car garage  
filled with junk my mother screamed at my father  
about every time he came home for a weekend  
every other weekend or so, my hands alone  
flipping the tabs of eleven warm beers. Drinking alone,  
I saw you from the seat of the riding lawn mower,  
the one my mother didn't let us use since  
the gear stuck that summer, and she couldn't turn away,  
cut herself in half driving into the barbed wire fence.  
I want to ask you while I'm here, motionless,  
if you were ever the fence, or were you the gear?  
The scream my mother's guts bled onto the grass,  
or the scream she gave to warn my sister and me—  
*You girls stay away from me!* First, she'd screamed  
my father's name for help—we'd never heard her need  
him like that. God, you looked like scotch,  
like hell, like dusty old can metal drinking me  
empty empty empty—god, I admit I heard nothing  
when you spoke to the congregation, so I stopped  
listening, but I could still find you when whistling  
through a blade of grass on our house's grassy acre,  
I found you in the dizzy walk from forbidden  
machine to garage and back, swaying, that first hard drunk.  
My mouth the next morning stung, tasted of the fields  
surrounding me, my head a lightning bolt,  
finally oh finally I prayed without assignment,  
that morning the first time my head felt fit for my body,  
what was done to it, the answer to prayer is  
when you first know the size of your own pain, stop asking.

*Emily Borgmann*

134

---

<sup>134</sup> [Emily Borgmann, “Polaroids of God from My Eleventh Summer,” \*Waxwing\*](#)

## Elegy

M. C., 1988-2003

Lunch today is self-serve: cantaloupe and cold cuts,  
candy corn from last October's open house,  
*still chews*. Jam is a megachurch for wasps.

I swat, leave stingers in each purple sandwich.  
The kids with allergies won't approach  
the food station, fidget with EpiPens hidden

in their pockets. Humming near a blond boy's  
perfect ear—it's the kind of joke I want to play,  
dethroning his steeliness while I suck my own

stung tongue. I am thirteen. I take everything  
personally. Hark the lost angels with irreverent  
song lyrics. My friends and I weave box stitched key rings

our fathers will lose outside Hackensack homes.  
Windfall hours, huddle under canopies,  
curl our fists around foosball sticks and shove.

Love is missing a shot for someone cute.  
The moon transfigures, distinguishes  
our limits. West of here, September waits.

Maya C. Popa  
135

---

<sup>135</sup> [Maya C. Popa](#), "Elegy," *Fence*, collected in [American Faith](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

from "Happinefs"

3.

Blade upon blade upon blade  
a Cavalier grows. In here  
the colonnade *clink* of goblets.  
A Cavalier loves her universe:  
slashes, shadowed stripes.  
She looks center right, or center  
justified. She seeks that middle  
note some never reach. White heart  
of the page, where distinguished men  
appear in battalions of charm.  
They will not speak to thee. *How  
to write, with only thick white ink  
& not be thought a cheat? We think  
& think. We think & think & think.*

*Kiki Petrosino*

136

---

<sup>136</sup> [Kiki Petrosino](#), "[Happinefs](#)," [Tin House](#), collected in [White Blood](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## Broke the Lunatic Horse

The Milky Way sways its back  
across all of wind-eaten America  
like a dusty saddle tossed  
over your sable, lunatic horse.  
All the plains are dark.  
All the stars are cowards:  
they lie to us about their time of death  
and do nothing but dangle  
like a huge chandelier  
over nights when our mangled sobs  
make the dead reach for their guns.  
I must be one of the only girls  
who still dreams in green gingham, sees snow  
as *a steel pail's falling of frozen nails*  
like you said through pipe smoke  
on the cabin porch one night. Dear one,  
there are no nails more cold  
than those that fix you  
underground. I thought I saw you  
in the moon of the auditorium  
after my high school dance.  
Without you, it's still hard to dance.  
It's even hard to dream.

*Katherine Larson*

137

---

<sup>137</sup> [Katherine Larson](#), "[Broke the Lunatic Horse](#)," [Boulevard](#), collected in [Radial Symmetry](#), Yale University Press

## Man at His Bath

Six years ago, the big museum sold eight famous paintings  
to purchase, for unspecified millions,  
Gustave Caillebotte's *Man at His Bath*.  
Now it's hip to have a print of it,  
and whenever I see one hung for decoration,  
I'm almost certain that this is what Caillebotte  
had in mind when he broke out the oils  
in 1884: some twenty-first-century bitch in Boston  
catching a glimpse of a framed reproduction,  
recollecting a study about how washing oneself may induce  
a sense of culpability. What I remember

is he insisted I clean before leaving. That, and he was  
trying to be dreamlike. He took my jaw in his hand  
and said IN THE NEXT LIFE, WE'LL REALLY BE TOGETHER,  
and the clamp in his voice made me almost  
certain he knew something I did not. Now I eat right,  
train hard, get my shots. This life—I'm angling  
to remain in this life as long as I can, being almost  
certain, as I am, what's after—

*Natalie Shapero*  
138

---

<sup>138</sup> [Natalie Shapero, "Man at His Bath," \*Poetry\*](#)

## Persephone (Unplugged)

I wake in the dark. My face is a stunned  
Cathode-ray tube, a pomegranate  
Unharm'd. If I were a girl, I would be a girl.  
I hate my career, I want to go home  
To Avonlea. I am a tortoise shell,  
A bell on an alarm clock, a Les Paul.  
There are rarely men in my dreams.

The fear in your eyes is no less real  
For having bounded up from *Ariel*  
Than the disappointed stars on the movie channel.  
If I were only a girl, I could give you a hand.

Each afternoon the off-white trumpet-flowers  
I just miss touching on my way home from work  
Crumple like pillowcases, like antique gloves.  
It must be the dew that lifts them  
Before first light: clarinet, English horn,  
Querulous soprano saxophone.  
They are the hills in "Sheep in Fog,"  
Tight-lipped in their straight lines.

There are rarely men in my dreams.  
One time I became the famous skyscraper  
Whose windows littered Boston during storms,  
A sparkling skirt spiraling through updrafts.

I wake in the dark. The battle of frogs and mice  
Continues under my floorboards.  
Somebody from Reuters is there with a big flashlight  
And a microphone on her collar. Can't you leave?  
Can you take me with you to Avalon?  
Can you make a prediction for 1995?  
If I were a girl, I could follow you, I say.  
The woman from Reuters motions me to hush.  
A decisive skirmish is taking place.  
The bullfrogs are winning.  
All the mice are wearing my pink nightgown.

Stephanie Burt

139

---

<sup>139</sup> [Stephanie Burt](#), "[Persephone \(Unplugged\)](#)," collected in [Popular Music](#), [University Press of Colorado](#)

## I Want to Know You All

I was listening to this sort of ignorant blowhard go on about how teaching is a dumb profession and I did this thing I always do, which is feel smug about how smart and sophisticated I am, but my smugness is a little compromised lately by how I do almost nothing all day besides have an affair in my mind and then wring my brain over what a divorce would do to my daughter, who heretofore has been lucky to have a happy, close family, not even too far off from how we pretend to be in public. So I just kept listening without my hackles up so much and also was bemused about how alike we all are, admiring some people, judging others, thinking we're so special, and this guy had some good stories. One time a history professor in college told him to go hang himself after he wrote 500 words about pheasants in the French Revolution. He said he must have mentioned those fired up and pitchfork-wielding pheasants a dozen times in that paper. That exasperated historian screaming peasants in the margins always reminded him of his dad, who does probate, which is basically a ton of archival research into plat maps and deeds, birth certificates and death wishes. There are no secrets when someone contests a will. His dad once told him, "You wouldn't believe the number of cross-dressing farmers there are in Missouri" which made me laugh at first at the hypocrisy of this place, but then realize it's actually tragic how alone those farmers must feel. It's ruthless out here, I know. All the longing we till under and to let such a secret slip—probate means some cousin or sister or brother described the dress in front of a judge who considered it fit evidence against a claim. I laughed because I can't imagine who you are—the man in coveralls who mocks the foamy fern I like poured onto my latte, the one who calls me "hon" that condescending way? Could you be the man always with the sign in front of my doctor's office or the neighbor who mows the waysides of our country road down to stubble? Maybe you don't come to town if you can help it anymore either. I want you to know, whoever you are, as someone hungry for variety in the human condition, most especially my own, cross-dressing farmers, you light up the fields for me. I hope you walk into those

soybean rows some nights and your flowered skirt  
swishes your legs in a way that feels like falling  
in love when you didn't think you ever could,  
or maybe you feel rooted, belonging to this soil  
that made you. I don't know what's better, but  
I want for you such happiness and every last acre  
your bigot of a father left behind to go with it.

*Kathryn Nuernberger*  
140

---

<sup>140</sup> [Kathryn Nuernberger, "I Want to Know You All," \*The Florida Review\*](#)

## Those Who Die in Their Twenties

*Eyes, hands, and feet they had like mine*  
—Thomas Traherne

Joe was the first person I knew who cultivated languid boredom as a mark of superior intelligence, like the characters I'd read about in English novels. He was handsome, brilliant, gay, which you knew about him immediately and did not, normally, know about people immediately in those days. His grandfather owned factories in Cincinnati, it was said, and the New Yorkers I was getting to know teased him for referring to himself in California as an "easterner," as if in this one way this person whose style was acid frankness had fudged his vita to disown the ordinary Middle West. We told him he was rich. "Trust fund, not rich," he said. "It means I'll be another assistant professor of classics with slightly nicer things than everybody else." The impressive part of which was that, while most of us were worried about surviving graduate school at all or whether it was a fit and, if not, what then, Joe had, already, assumed a success that seemed to him second-rate, which in those days, oddly enough, like the clothes he wore so easily, gave him a silvery beauty in our eyes that the note he left when he killed himself confirmed. "It's Tuesday and overcast. It seems a thing to do." In the twenties a friend is a world, and a style of speaking or dressing, a social class or an ethnicity, a way of walking or thinking, if it shimmers, is almost erotically attractive, partly because it's an age when wealth or beauty or brains or brute force or swinging one's shoulders with a special grace seems like grace. If you leave the world you grew up in, which, if it happens, happens to most Americans at that age, there's something in that eros of the other that gives to the desirer or admirer another pair of eyes, sophisticates the world just when our appetite for glamour in its various forms is sharpest. And so, terrible as it is in a way to say it, the world we lose when we lose the ones who die in their twenties—I am not speaking of siblings or lovers—or parents—doesn't lose the brilliance of its luster. And even death, because it is terrible, does not taste terrible. Because the first adult grief makes us feel adult. His body, when they recovered it, was shipped home. We met to speak of him at parties and what we said to each other mutely, in the silence of the first exchange of looks was something like—so this is death, the real deal, and now whatever it is we're in is not just made up anymore. None of us knew him well enough to know what hurt him into the Pacific. It seems to me now that he probably died of being gay in the wrong decade. Then I thought that his death had a certain glamour,

even though its glamour was despair, which he'd have liked  
and probably imagined, and that he shouldn't have.

*Robert Hass*  
141

---

<sup>141</sup> [Robert Hass](#), "[Those Who Die in Their Twenties](#)," collected in [Summer Snow](#), [Ecco](#)

## Donetsk

The tragedy on today's radio sounds like my daughter  
trying to say "donuts" for the first time,  
or like the chirp of the two lovebirds I loved for just  
a year when I was fourteen, their eager  
hiccup when I took them from their cage  
and placed one on each shoulder. It could be  
the voice of the waitress at Cracker Barrel,  
a pen in the corner of her sour pucker,  
asking if I've finished with my plate of soggy  
pancakes, or the pop and crack of my old  
neighbor's knuckles as he grasps the axe  
and takes a swing. Or maybe it's the hushed  
suck when I pull the plug from the tub drain  
after the baby's shat in her bathwater  
and I have to wash it out and start all over again,  
It sounds far away, the way everything does  
here where it's always warm, always unseasonably  
sunny, where I'm always somebody's mother  
turning the pages of some forgettable picture  
book on the other side of the distant world.

*Keetje Kuipers*  
142

---

<sup>142</sup> [Keetje Kuipers](#), "Donetsk," [Construction](#), collected in [All Its Charms](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Outside Tucker Luminar

You're not like your grandfather who has kept every canceled check since 1937 in a fraying cardboard box that leaks a brown liquid when you move it. You write them and it's over. You throw away every love letter, you never look at old photographs, and you always give ten dollars to the guy on the street corner with the puppet. Inside your grandfather's bar, it always looks like Sunday afternoon. The bartender's arm has been in a sling for eight months; you help him by standing there and waiting for him to ask you to help him. Every morning you tear through the paper hoping to find that overnight the bar burned down. It doesn't matter how—an electrical accident, a sloppy suicide, a kid with matches—you just want to stand in the feathers of the foundation and lift the ashes into the air like a million dollars. But nothing ever changes. When you walk downtown everyone eats the same thing for lunch; men in suits try not to look like husbands, and behind you cell phones ring in relays of light jazz. Every day is the same. Your grandfather limps to the back office and pulls the shade; someone sobs over an old song on the jukebox from 1974 and the bartender reaches through his sling and pours. You have to get out of here.

*Alex Green*

143

---

<sup>143</sup> [Alex Green](#), "[Outside Tucker Luminar](#)," collected in [Emergency Anthems](#), Brooklyn Arts Press

## Hotel Party

James Dean must be escorted to a hotel party  
because that bored look means trouble.  
The cigarette is limp on his lips. He'll kill himself.  
His eyebrow is fuzzy but I won't smooth it for him.  
He smells like my father.

I take him to find Linda from high school,  
Linda who squinted and flirted with boys who didn't notice.  
I see her frizzy pigtails. She's not so special.  
I'm not so special. I, too, wear olive cargo pants.  
James Dean hugs her. He's so young. He's so tan.  
Linda doesn't squint.

I don't know any James Dean movies. So he's mute  
and wearing clothes from a poster.  
I can't see him in profile.

Then my husband is coming home. My mother is here to help.  
I must scrub the bathtub. Sweep the floor, no AC.  
I sweat until my pigtails are fuzzy.  
There's no time to ask why the hotel room is now my apartment,  
why it seemed I walked for miles to get here.  
"This powder smells nice," my mother is saying,  
waving a bottle from the bathroom.  
I almost slap her hand away.

The floors shine. So does my face.  
No time for powder now, my husband is home.  
Will he notice all these garbage bags?  
Scuff marks on the dining room floor?

*Ladan Osman*  
144

---

<sup>144</sup> [Ladan Osman](#), "[Hotel Party](#)," collected in [The Kitchen-Dweller's Testimony](#), University of Nebraska Press

## Aphorisms

Every word is a lazy anagram of itself.

Hope is the tree house you have been building in your basement.

Freedom isn't free. But you do get a large drink with every purchase.

I would live forever if it didn't have to be with me.

A sad house opens its windows to let the dark out.

The enemy of my enemy is sometimes the best I can do when dating.

*Kevin Griffith*  
145

---

<sup>145</sup> [Kevin Griffith, Aphorisms](#), collected in [Short Flights](#), [Schaffner Press](#)

## Invagination

My son tells me he's proud of his biology class  
because no one laughed when the teacher said  
*invagination*, the word that explains how a cell  
takes in food, and I ask what is the root,  
so he looks it up and says *vag* means *to wander*.  
Like a vagabond. Like how men used to say  
women were *hysterical*, meaning their wombs  
had come loose and were wandering around.  
And then I am singing *Build a stairway to heaven*  
*with a prince or a vagabond* with Rod Stewart  
who sang it at my prom where I wore a black  
and pink dress that I designed in my head  
while I cleared trays off tables at Taco Time.  
For a while, I thought maybe I'd keep working  
there instead of going to college, rolling burritos  
and laying them down in a bin, tucked close  
like sleeping children, that I'd keep dating  
my high school boyfriend, watching videos  
on the floor of his room. I didn't want to jump  
onto trains and rattle from one town to another,  
I didn't even want to go to the class where  
the British Romantics would embarrass me  
with their sincerity, didn't want to carry  
my thick burgundy book which held  
Wordsworth's abbey and Keats's nightingale  
and Shelley's heart refusing to burn  
out into the rain where the yellow leaves  
stuck to the wet pavement would look suddenly  
beautiful. One Romantic poem leads to another  
and soon you're wandering the moors  
and lying down under the stars, drinking beer  
and doing your astronomy homework  
and the world is falling into you and now  
you have a son who knows the word *invagination's*  
scientific meaning along with its potential  
to amuse, the same boy who used to jam  
his small foot up under your ribs so you had  
to press against it to try to make him understand,  
through the wall of your uterus,  
that he was hurting you.

Laura Read

146

---

<sup>146</sup> Laura Read, "[Invagination](#)," [Crab Creek Review](#), collected in [Dresses from the Old Country](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Sleep

Pawnbroker, scavenger, cheapskate,  
come creeping from your pigeon-filled backrooms,  
past guns and clocks and locks and cages,  
past pockets emptied and coins picked from the floor;  
come sweeping with the rainclouds down the river  
through the brokenblack windows of factories  
to avenues where movies whisk through basement projectors  
and children peel up into the supplejack twilight  
like licorice from sticky floors—  
there a black-eyed straight-backed drag queen  
preens, fusses, fixes her hair in a shop window on Prince,  
a young businessman jingles his change  
and does his Travis Bickle for a long-faced friend,  
there on the corner I laughed at a joke Jim made.  
In the bedroom the moon is a dented spoon,  
cold, getting colder, so hurry sleep,  
come creep into bed, let's get it over with;  
lay me down and close my eyes  
and tell me whip, tell me winnow  
tell me sweet tell me skittish  
tell me No tell me no such thing  
tell me straw into gold tell me crept into fire  
tell me lost all my money tell me *hoarded, verboten*,  
but promise tomorrow I will be profligate,  
stepping into the sun like a trophy.

Meghan O'Rourke

147

---

<sup>147</sup> [Meghan O'Rourke](#), "[Sleep](#)," [Poetry](#), collected in [Halflife](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#).

from “What It Means to Be Avant Garde”

I was in the park when they called — with my head on my knee and my nose in a book — the book was by David Antin, an American — there are many ways to follow a thought — when the phone rang they told me they wanted me — there was a voice on the phone that belonged to a man — it sounded like a man and him saying they wanted me — I read a book the other day by a circus performer — in my youth I read a book by an anthropologist's son — who ran off with the Gypsies with his parents' blessing — the anthropologist's son was not an American — the circus performer was unstable emotionally — she committed suicide at the age of forty-two — the man said we want you to come in for some tests — the parents hoped the boy would grow up to write a book — in which he'd detail the functioning of Romani culture — before the phone rang I was reading the bit in the Antin — about how it's a good thing to be on the fringe — the boy learned the Gypsies don't lie to their own — coterie makes you soft — when I went in for the tests they said I was normal — and only after I did a lot of research on the Internet — did I come to understand what they meant by that — was that my condition is unexplained

*Anna Moschovakis*  
148

---

<sup>148</sup> [Anna Moschovakis](#), “[What It Means to Be Avant Garde \(I was in the park\)](#),” collected in [They and We Will Get Into Trouble for This](#), Coffee House Press

## Kim Kardashian and Ray J Sex Tape

Waiter stops by our table. Here is some mango ice cream.  
Here is a samosa, on the house. My date is sweet, white,  
gets a little drunk, tells me about the time he was riding  
the school bus home and a cyclist threw himself in front of it.  
That night when I masturbate it is neither the new date  
nor the school bus nor the deadman nor the wine: I watch  
the aforementioned celebrity pornography and remember  
that celebrities' bodies are the same as my bodies and the  
bodies of the waiters and I hate them all quite equally. Then  
again, when the ice cream arrived it was orange and not  
unwelcome; when the pornography began, it was much  
the same. When I look down at my body in the dim purple  
restaurant light, I know what to say. I say here is some  
hot pussy. Hot damn Lauren put that pussy on the house.

*Lauren Clark*  
149

---

<sup>149</sup> [Lauren Clark, "Kim Kardashian and Ray J Sex Tape," \*Ninth Letter\*, collected in \*Music for a Wedding\*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

That Half Is Almost Gone

That half is almost gone,  
the Chinese half,  
the fair side of a peach,  
darkened by the knife of time,  
fades like a cruel sun.

In my thirtieth year  
I wrote a letter to my mother.

I had forgotten the character  
for “love.” I remember vaguely  
the radical “heart.”  
The ancestors won’t fail to remind you

the vital and vestigial organs  
where the emotions come from.

But the rest is fading.  
A slash dissects in midair,

*ai,ai,ai,ai,*  
more of a cry than a sigh

(and no help from the phoneticist).

*You are a Chinese!*  
My mother was adamant.

*You are a Chinese?*  
My mother less convinced.

*Are you not Chinese?*  
My mother now accepting.

As a cataract clouds her vision,  
and her third daughter marries  
a Protestant West Virginian  
who is “very handsome and very kind.”

The mystery is still unsolved—

the landscape looms  
over man. And the gaffer-hatted fishmonger—  
sings to his cormorant.

And the maiden behind the curtain

is somebody's courtesan.

Or, merely Rose Wong's aging daughter

Pondering the blue void.

You are a Chinese—said my mother

who once walked the fields of her dead—

Today, on the 36th anniversary of my birth,

I have problems now

even with the salutation.

*Marilyn Chin*

150

---

<sup>150</sup> [Marilyn Chin](#), "[That Half Is Almost Gone](#)," *Solo*, collected in [Rhapsody in Plain Yellow](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## Hecht's Furniture Polish

I am troubled, living proof of trouble.  
From a faraway hollow, still hollering.

In the 1930s a man mixes batches  
of furniture polish in the bathtub.  
Troubled, I am living proof.

Huge hot battles, long frigid wars,  
silent treatments for months  
without a guess what caused it.

As in a lot of wars, I was by turns  
bored and electrified, quite out of my  
mind. Where was I but in trouble?

Later, I arrive at life's banquet insane,  
always about to fry. After dinner  
I see the color of the room is blue.

Crazy is the proof of trouble.  
You come up troubleproof, not  
quite here, elsewhere. Not quite you.

Terrified. It takes that long to see it all,  
the walls, chairs, and wooden tables.  
Who'll be my grandfather mixing batches

of polish in the bathtub. He didn't protect  
father. Who'll be my grandmother beating  
who'll be my father, my father raged  
at us. The sun shone, no one came.

*Jennifer Michael Hecht*

151

---

<sup>151</sup> [Jennifer Michael Hecht](#), "[Hecht's Furniture Polish](#)," collected in [Who Said](#), Copper Canyon Press

from "River House"

20.

Kandinsky called the point a connection between two worlds.  
Calder put the point in action.

Three hundred and sixty five days in a year.  
Three hundred and sixty degrees in a circle.

Writes Dickinson, "You cannot fold a flood."

If any of us were to fall  
Into backyard ponds, full of dark orange fish,

It was me,  
My mother said, said my sister

Recently. In my dream  
The halves of the moon hung separately,  
The black of night in between.

To move without thinking is one goal.  
To put joy back is another.

Piggybacking clause, interruption, address.  
We did not need a book to know: the dying straddle worlds.

*Sally Keith*  
152

---

<sup>152</sup> [Sally Keith](#), "[River House \[20.\]](#)" collected in [River House](#), Milkweed Editions

## Nostalgia Says No

Your father is a man with a mustache  
and black hair sitting on his haunches  
in the sunlight unhooking warm cans of beer  
from a six-pack and forcing each  
with an easy shove into the white heart  
of the ice chest. But no, that was  
years ago. Where is the crunching sound  
the ice makes? Where is the slow melt  
of the passing day, the dead center  
of the birthday party, the piñata swaying  
heavily overhead? And the now-dead  
with their hands folded and their legs  
crossed in their lawn chairs—when did they  
stand and walk out of the yard, oblivious,  
saying, *Save me a piece of cake*, saying, *No*,  
*I'll be back, save me a piece of cake?*  
Is it really that easy? Remind me:  
*oblivious* is a word with no eyes or hands.  
It can't get far on its own, right?

Carrie Fountain  
153

---

<sup>153</sup> [Carrie Fountain](#), "[Nostalgia Says No](#)," [Iron Horse Literary Review](#), collected in [Instant Winner](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## Matrons of the Ward

A widow is sentenced up to fifteen years  
after the departure of her beloved  
to sleep with his clothes: the happier  
the marriage, the more complete  
her rehabilitation. Our institutions  
aim to protect the public after all.  
*Iron Lady* is a film about rust.  
And the one on disarmament is *Annie Get Your Gun*.  
The moon never asked for *Clair de Lune*.  
The moon was well, famous before.  
A woman must share her story as if every man  
has lived it in the great, grand history of the world.  
If only she could tell it in a way that those who heard it  
would literally explode—or spark just a bit,  
then leap overboard. Unremarkable still that a woman  
has never been known for sawing a man in two. Or for freeing  
herself from a straightjacket while chained to the floor of the ocean.

Cindy King  
154

---

<sup>154</sup> [Cindy King](#), "[Matrons of the Ward](#)," [Sou'wester](#)

## Restoring O'Keefe

Something of a cure lay  
in that rustic lodge, clear  
exhaust off Lake George, winter  
ticking intaglios across the pane  
and Jean Toomer tapping  
on his Underwood in the guest room  
upstairs. All week she shared with him  
her soups and the baskets  
arrived from New York, remarked  
the nub of the citrus fruit  
against his hesitating palm,  
his tawny raceless hand.  
Whether he leaked Gurdjieff's freedom  
of love into the frond of her ear  
or Georgia had the servant  
tincture a remedy with the herb  
used to seduce, she pulled together  
one night with a Calvados  
in the snifter like a handful of flame  
and Santa Fe whistling  
through the mind like a desert train.  
Tawny earth and the ineluctable sky,  
she thought, though the window held  
a pallor of snow and moon  
crusted to the clearing beyond a grid of gaslight,  
cold hushing the cantor of Harlem,  
eliding his orbit with hers.  
You have a feminine soul, she said,  
pooling his face in her hands,  
measuring his eyes against a gray  
scale of sexuality. She held his head  
to her skirted hip. Cleft  
of peach, he said with his hands  
at the small of her back.

*Gregory Pardlo*  
155

---

<sup>155</sup> [Gregory Pardlo](#), "[Restoring O'Keefe](#)," collected in [Totem](#), [The American Poetry Review](#)

## A Burn So Bad It Requires Ice

Sometimes I believe people with substance  
abuse issues have all the fun. After all,  
it's the ovaries and liver of the scrumptious

pufferfish that literally take your breath away.  
Today, during Opus 69, back comes Mozart's  
metaphor for passion I just made up: *a burn*

*so bad it requires ice*. For years, in my fridge,  
I kept my cocaine in glass vials the size  
of Lilliputian beer mugs—where did you

keep yours?—and entered the era's debate  
about which end of an egg a loyal citizen  
cracks first. I loved many things I didn't

understand: modern sculpture, fondue,  
that duct tape works least well on ducts,  
that beauty like *abattoir* means *slaughterhouse*.

Now there's a carrot ruining history, don't  
we need more words whose melodies can't  
mean their meanings—*pulchritude*, for one?

I'll never ride that lofty appaloosa...  
For years I thought *scherzo* meant *schizo*.  
For years priests turned cinctures into nooses.

So much about living is sadly mistaken.  
So much of living should be titled "Untitled."  
(For years priests turned cinctures into nooses.)

Some nights I go to my threadbare backyard,  
stand there, quiet as a sun dial, staring at the sky,  
and soon enough realize I'm looking at the stars.

Steven Cramer

156

---

<sup>156</sup> [Steven Cramer, "A Burn So Bad It Requires Ice," \*Plume\*](#)

## Dirty Girl

See, I knew I'd make my mama cry if I stole the earring, and so into my pocket it went. I asked America to give me

◇

the barbeque. A slow dance with a cowboy. Pop goes the grenade. Pop goes the Brooklyn jukebox. Give me male hands, oleander white, hard, earnest, your husband in the backseat of his own car, my jeans shoved down, the toxic plant you named your child after, a freeway by the amusement park that jilted girls speed across, windows rolled down, screaming bad songs at the top of their lungs.

◇

After the new world. Before the New one. The Peruvian numerologist told me I'd be trailed by sevens until the day I died.

Everything worth nicking needs an explanation: I slept with one man because the moon, I slept with the other because who cares, we're expats, the black rhinos are dying, the subway pastors can't make me tell the truth. Tonight

Z isn't eating, and five states away  
I'm pouring a whiskey

◇

I won't drink.

◇

I count the green lights. Those blue-eyed flowers your father brought when I couldn't leave my bedroom. The rooftop, the weather, the subway empties its fist of me, the red salt of my fear. A chalky seven stamped on the pale face of the sleeping pill.

What I mean to say is

◇

I'm divisible only by myself.

*Hala Alyan*  
157

---

<sup>157</sup> [Hala Alyan](#), "[Dirty Girl](#)," [Pank](#), collected in [The Twenty-Ninth Year](#), [Mariner Books](#)

## Bent Syllogism

There was a pattern to the way the mythical beasts  
flew over the dreary town, but we were too dreary  
to understand it. The psychologist, too, was in touch  
with extraterrestrials, but she had to stand on the spire  
of a church and wear 3-D glasses to see them.  
If Amy loves you, then Alice will bake a pie.  
But Alice didn't bake a pie.  
Therefore, moot point, no pie, no love, nothing.  
They say advanced math is like music  
but music isn't like advanced math—true—  
and yet all third graders in Miss Mathew's class  
must learn to play the recorder.  
Can't you tell the baby is extremely conflicted?  
Can't you see I've lost half a pound?  
I write about the polarization of grasses  
and the esteemed poet writes how impressed  
we are with the polarization of grasses.  
Once I'm in my place I start to believe  
all the postmodern theories, signs and cosines,  
pi, infinity, the artist formerly known as  
the artist formerly known as Prince.  
I take the symbol out of my pocket, brush it off  
and send it on its way. By the time  
I get to the gingerbread house I'm ready  
to be fooled. The birds twitter in the trees  
and the ghost of Bambi's mother arrives,  
dragging a bunch of cans behind her.  
The children understand this metaphor.  
They dance around in a lively pagan ritual.  
I have been away for some time.  
I don't speak the language any more.  
Please teach me.

*Lauren Shapiro*

158

---

158 [Lauren Shapiro](#), "[Bent Syllogism](#)," collected in [Easy Math](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Upon Reading Tennessee Williams' Obituaries

*"Deliberate cruelty is not forgivable... it is the one thing of which I have never, never been guilty."*  
—Blanche DuBois, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

i.

So, you were "an avowed homosexual."  
Sin you did. Dared to make a brazen shrine  
of it: *I*  
*hope to die in my sleep...*  
*in the beautiful big brass bed...*  
*associated with so much love*  
*and Merlo—*

ii.

Blanche had no use for facts.  
Neither do playwrights, but in the end,  
you penned The End, where blared  
at least some truths: four snapshots in your *Memoirs*  
of Frankie "The Horse" Merlo.  
What appalls one audience arouses another.  
Even two Pulitzers might not outshine  
a steed with thoroughbred haunches  
in a skin-tight bathing suit,  
giving you a cloudless grin at the beach  
when you drawled, *Now smile!*

iii.

You, Hercules squatted before you  
at the sea's edge, drawing something silly  
in the sand. Soft strongman  
one Freudian prescribed ditching.  
You tossed out that shrink instead  
(backdrop: electroshock  
for your sister, electroshock  
for inverts, your sister's lobotomy).  
Later you discarded Frankie.

iv.

Tennessee, I need to talk with you,  
to face your hung-over glare,  
then parry glib jabs & roundhouse retorts.  
I bet you'll nail my sins against a spattered wall,  
or curl like a pap & plea-bargain  
to trip up my lockstep.  
We both know the comfort  
of typing out judgments

of another fool's pratfalls,  
of marshaling rhetoric's blindered march,  
carriage return by carriage return,  
down an undefended page.  
Of leaving our blunders in shadow,  
though short runs humbled you in midday Manhattan  
as letter after letter came down from marquees.

Forgive & be proud of me  
for what I must do. Brandish a spotlight.

v.

Your soft strongman you unloaded later...

*Actually*

*he never denied himself to me  
but he created an atmosphere  
with which I, with my fierce pride,  
could not often compromise.*

Stanley wouldn't let Blanche pass  
without a once-over.

You set that scene up, remember?

Don't pretend to be unhinged

by interrogation: *Actually*

*he never denied himself to me*

(you never gave yourself to him, huh?)

*but he created an atmosphere*

(I know perfectly well what the likes of you

hide behind your gauzy atmospheres!

Blanche draping scarves over sharp lights...)

*with which I, with my fierce pride*

(Like you got anythin' to be proud of,

fresh out of a pig-sty!)

*could not often compromise*

vi.

That was the easy part. Let's call it Act One.

The conscience, casting stones at a mirror.

Who gets to land punches in this bout?

The jilted? The beer-slurping brother-in-law?

Or should our own echoes damn us?

*I am taking down addresses for reference  
when Frank goes home for Xmas.*

If I never kiss them it doesn't count.

*I'd like to live a simple life with epic fornication.*

I wasn't planning to screw up again, but  
the Brit stood near the pier's end, flexing it.

*One gets tired of begging for crumbs under the table.*

I never meant to hurt him.  
Yet we do it again & again.

vii.

So you nightly came to compromise with  
a coaster sopped with Scotch.  
Worn-out baggies full of pick-me-ups  
& quiet-me-downs.

Damn your grunting humpings  
in the room right off the party  
—your poetic blond knockouts  
he couldn't help hear about!

...as the motor started,  
Frankie ran down from the porch.  
“Are you going to leave me without  
shaking hands? After fourteen years together?”  
I shook hands with him.

viii.

Doses of cobalt thinned Frankie's stallion frame  
to a sparrow's wish-  
bone.

You took him in near the end:  
in one apartment but always apart,  
you tucked in the other bedroom with the blond—

During the night my sleep would be broken  
by the fits of coughing, loud through the wall...  
I didn't dare to call him.

ix.

When *you* died, Tennessee, catty critics grinned,  
couching insinuations in AP style,  
joining your detractors by quoting them.  
It wouldn't have surprised you: even Stella was guilty  
of sticking to a version of Stanley (& Blanche)  
that flattered herself. You knew how  
the others ran down a leading lady's  
every miscue once she left the stage,  
the cruelty they railed against, but could never resist.

x.

Rose-tinted light fades in. Act Three.  
A pair of men turn to each other, scriptless.  
Shards of a two-way mirror  
trace the truce line between them:

When the surgeon saw cancer too close to Frankie's heart,  
he stitched him up and didn't say squat.  
    After that, how could you look your Horse in the eye?  
    Who knows better than *belles* like us  
    when we were surrounded by lies?

*Nothing is asked past our measure—*  
    When you wrote that, my dear, you were on Mars.  
    Let's admit—no: avow: much more is asked,  
    & only rarely could we answer.

*Steven Riel*  
159

---

<sup>159</sup> [Steven Riel](#), "[Upon Reading Tennessee Williams' Obituaries](#)," collected in [Fellow Odd Fellow](#), Trio House Press

## Livestock

When Neil Diamond played  
the Farm Show in '66, somebody  
shoved my mother, standing first  
in the autograph line,  
into him. She must have regretted  
her broomhandle limbs,

flinching as her heel landed  
hard on his foot, his response  
the meanest thing a girl imagines  
she'll hear from a man,  
ever, in her lifetime: *Get this  
fat girl offa me.* That's one version

of intimacy, a body invading  
another's space, both recoiling  
from trespass as if scalded.  
For instance, my boyfriend  
stopped sleeping with me  
when I was fifteen. He said it felt  
like a false kind of worship,

and I agreed, not because  
we'd fashioned idols of each other,  
as he thought, but he'd left me  
unsure if my skin was still  
on, or rubbed off  
by his hands' dominion.  
I've learned since then

to be the sour note in the cream's  
churn, or condensation  
on the nose of a farmer, carved  
life-size from butter  
and reefered behind glass  
at the agricultural fair, so no one  
can touch him. Now, walking  
the Farm Show aisles among stolid,

bas relief cows, plain girls  
cupping the heat of day-old chicks  
to their chests, I've wondered  
how they judge a pig without  
cutting into it, goat  
without the milk. The measure  
turns out to be anatomy:

the level hip, foot alignment,  
jigsaw of fat and muscle fibers  
where every piece fits. We stand  
outside the pen littered  
with grassy shit and look  
and look. But no matter  
how perfect the form, we ask—  
as if it can't be helped—  
what the animal tastes like.

*Erin Hoover*  
160

---

<sup>160</sup> [Erin Hoover](#), "[Livestock](#)," [Sugar House Review](#), collected in [Barnburner](#), [Elixir Press](#)

[You know what living means? Tits out, tits in the rain. Tits]

You know what living means? Tits out, tits in the rain. Tits  
in the cereal bowl. Tits ablaze. What beauty there was is now  
on the wane. I've seen beauty tinkle in the spring its little  
breeze-borne bells. Summer's copper gong, heat frizzing  
the wisteria until all that's left is rat hair. Winter, I think  
there are ice flutes. I think blue lips of killed kids blow cold  
notes from ice flutes. You know what living's for? Tits  
sacrosanct. Declined. Tits blued by cold, insomnia, midnight,  
indigoed like collapsed veins, powder blue of the pillowcase  
of the blue-haired crone whose nightie won't be pulled up  
anymore. I saw mine once when I was young reflected back  
to me in a blue mirror on which were laid out lines of coke.  
Even then they were old, savant-tits, they knew things. Purpled.  
Milked-out. Mounded low and moving slow in the old way.

*Diane Seuss*  
161

---

<sup>161</sup> [Diane Seuss, "\[You know what living means? Tits out, tits in the rain. Tits\]."](#) *Gulf Coast*

Elegy at Twenty-Three

*for Brian*

Jon's brother's best friend died. She was twenty and likeable.

I made a hamboat and brought over some Bud Light.

Later we all went out to karaoke. I was sadder when my dog died,  
but I knew more what to do then, too.

I always wore my seatbelt until this happened,  
when I stopped.

What does all that even mean?

In the paper a while back, I learned how at the zoo in my hometown  
an elephant's fall resulted in cracked ribs and its killing—

We went to karaoke. But they would only show the lyrics in Japanese,  
so really we were just dancing with our breath  
of tequila and French fries. Pop song,  
pop song, pop song:  
whatever we wanted, we thought we took it.

*Eliza's hair was shorter than yours until you cut it then it was longer and she was dead.*

*Lindsey Alexander*  
162

---

<sup>162</sup> [Lindsey Alexander](#), "[Elegy at Twenty-Three](#)," [Forklift, Ohio](#), collected in [Rodeo in Reverse](#), [Hub City Press](#)

from "The End of September"

I turn an envelope in want of words.  
I turn an obsolete globe.  
The grocery store eye doesn't see me  
and so never opens the door. The hunger—  
pyramids of fruit inside that will rot  
unless I have them. There isn't always time  
to decide what is right, only what is not  
dying. You told me a secret it turned out  
everyone knew, a way of lying  
by telling the truth. A truth, truth  
a blue marble that rolls under the dryer,  
that chokes the curious child. I have hated  
my body enough to love anyone who wants it,  
which wasn't love at all but a dog  
glorying in the not-kick.  
The bonfire. The bar, the jukebox  
grinding its tinned longing.

\*

I show up to the party wearing only fog.  
I show up to the fog party wearing only my woman suit,  
the seams distressed.  
I seam up wearing only show, a one-woman party.  
I wear out into fog.  
I am suitable, a woman show.  
I fog through my seams, party-stressed and suited for onliness.  
Partly. Shown up.  
Unfogged, I woman up.

*Erin Adair-Hodges*  
163

---

<sup>163</sup> [Erin Adair-Hodges, "The End of September," \*The Adroit Journal\*](#)

[Body—is dying a slow constant death]

Body—is dying a slow constant death.  
When my sister used to visit, my father  
often told her she looked fat. I  
rummage through my purse for my  
lunch, 15 cashews. A fat body is dying  
in the same way a thin body is. Both  
aspire toward the earth while the mind  
disagrees. I wrestle with language in  
the same way I wrestle with my body. I  
eat language so I can find the right  
words and am now overweight.  
Sometimes I confuse being tired for  
being hungry. Sometimes I confuse  
being hungry for being alive. Now  
when I visit my father at the facility, we  
talk about his weight while he is sitting  
there, unable to understand. *He looks  
fatter*, I say. *Look at his stomach*, my  
sister says. And then we laugh, as loud  
and as hard as we can, until we are  
crying.

Victoria Chang  
164

---

<sup>164</sup> Victoria Chang, "[Body—is dying a slow constant death.]," *The Rumpus*

Coming Up Next: How Killer Blue Irises Spread

—*Misheard health report on NPR*

It's the quiet ones, the flowers  
the neighbors said  
kept to themselves,

*Iris gettagunandkillus*, shoots

and rhizomes reaching  
beneath the fence.  
The shifty ones,

Mickey Blue Iris, the tubers

that pretend to be dormant  
then spread late night into  
the garden of evil and no good.

They know hell, their blue flames

fooling van Gogh, the knife  
he stuck into soil before he sliced  
the bulbs in three, nights

he spent painting in a mad heat.

They swell before the cut  
and divide of autumn.  
An entire field of tulips,

flattened. Daylilies found

like lean bodies across the path.  
The wild blue iris claims  
responsibility, weaves through

the gladioli, into the hothouse

where the corpse flower blooms  
for a single day, its scent  
of death calling to the flies.

*Kelli Russell Agodon*  
165

---

<sup>165</sup> [Kelli Russell Agodon, "Coming Up Next: How Killer Blue Irises Spread," \*The Atlantic\*, collected in \*Letters from the Emily Dickinson Room\*, White Pine Press](#)

## Listening to Townes Van Zandt

We are of one mind  
and too much has not been said  
about all the quiet afternoons  
childhood offered us,  
lit gray like a cat, or blue,  
and cursed with an early moon.  
When father wore an apron  
or crept like a bear, we screamed.  
Nothing is so gone.  
Where is his record player  
or the channel that forked  
a distant year toward us,  
kind, slow magnet?  
There was a song we shared  
without your listening,  
you widowed soul crawling away on your elbows.  
I sing it to my child, with a full hand I  
flick its rapeseeds everywhere,  
clear, and slow,  
with all the sincerity its author indeed felt  
in his ten-gallon hat  
and his thin, whisky-soaked shirt.

*Christine Gosnay*  
166

---

<sup>166</sup> [Christine Gosnay](#), "[Listening to Townes Van Zandt](#)," *Poetry*, collected in [Even Years](#), [The Kent State University Press](#)

And When Ms. Pac-Man Eats All the Cherries, and When the Dentist Asks Me to Spit into the Bowl

The arcade table in the corner of the waiting room  
is rigged to work for free, no quarters necessary—

all we need is time before the hygienist  
sticks her head through the door, calls the name.

Dear sister, I will fight you for control  
of the game because I am always first

to take the mouthful of polish.  
They ask *which flavor*

and I say *mint please*  
but I never get it. I get the least-loved

fruit punch and an apology—  
*we are out of mint.*

And when you are out there fleeing ghosts,  
scoring points, I am in the chair

with my mouth open,  
staring at the reflection in his glasses.

*Allyson Boggess*  
167

---

<sup>167</sup> [Allyson Boggess, "And When Ms. Pac-Man Eats All the Cherries, and When the Dentist Asks Me to Spit into the Bowl,"](#)  
[The Collagist](#)

## Earnest Postcard

Dear Earnest,

The front of a motorcycle reminds me of my reproductive system—handle bars the fallopian tubes, mirrors, ovaries, headlight uterus, and front wheel vagina.

Working in the barn, I fit my sweaty fingers in a glove,  
and remember you at your cruelest,  
“Get thee to a nunnery. To a nunnery—go.”

I fit my other hand in the other glove and wriggle  
thumb to pinky.  
In the air in front of me, a little wave——

Say *bon voyage*.

I am searching for the objective,  
I mean the objective correlative,  
for the loss of a child that was not

a child—and it doesn't exist.

But E, I still can't help but feel  
I have something to say about the sonnet form.

My heart is in two pieces.

*Eleanor Boudreau*  
168

---

<sup>168</sup> [Eleanor Boudreau, "Earnest Postcard," \*The McNeese Review\*](#)

## Backstory

the plot: an owl-faced girl with a loud family  
engage in numbskull search  
for deliverance from dreary sack of it.  
a little something for the mind.

they try to cheap down food.  
the specter of such drudgeries,  
like housecoats and WIC,  
too heavy, yet she, a pearl, a rarest thing.

the owl-faced girl's got her eye  
on the curved security mirror.  
makes her wide. she sees the unfolding

of the store. everyone slowly  
in search. fingers brush against  
cans. pause over shortcake

desire everywhere, so giant.  
desire, a door in the security mirror,  
rimmed in black, shadowy like a carny.

desire, her eyes flashed. she'd  
go in but not in. leave and not leave.  
*no one would know*, she reasoned.

the physical way? goosebumps. the soul way?  
this one came from line of dreamers,  
her mother: to marry paul anka.  
her father: riches. no work.

blots out the obvious, scene by scene.  
like whiting out. she vanishes  
into her hands and *gets* vanished.

*Carmen Gimenez Smith*  
169

---

<sup>169</sup> [Carmen Gimenez Smith](#), "[Backstory](#)," *Little Red Leaves*, collected in [Goodbye, Flicker](#), [University of Massachusetts Press](#)

## Minecraft Ars Poetica

“How do you enchant an anvil?” my son calls. He’s playing his computer game. “Grindstones can repair *and* disenchant?”

I need to remember to live an actual life so I have something to write about. I’m holding this stone from the witch store—Ionite—and studying the one coppery fleck. Other than that it’s dark blue, almost indigo, with white veins... Oh, wait, here are a few smaller coppery flecks.

At the grocery store today, I turned down an aisle and away from a couple in dairy with an unhealthy disheartened look. Pale and slumped. Who am I to say? The landlord of a recovering addict friend once told him he had the “look of the damned.” Do I have the look of the damned? As I turned down the aisle, I felt a presence latch itself to my back, like someone coming up too close behind me. When I looked around no one was there, of course.

I almost said “wolf” before. “Unhealthy disheartened wolf.”

My son comes in to tell me he didn’t mean to kill another sheep in his game. Yes, he dropped it from a great height, but he didn’t know it would die. He can tell it died by the floating block of wool left behind.

I live in a bubble of small movements, grateful students, antidepressants, child support. After a year it started to hurt even more. Then that began to ebb and I was left on this floating rock, studying the glinting bits, wondering what they even were.

“I have to stop killing sheep, right?” my son says. “Even if just on accident?” Finally I reply, “OK... yes. I guess so.”

*Joanna Penn Cooper*  
170

---

<sup>170</sup> [Joanna Penn Cooper](#), “[Minecraft Ars Poetica](#),” [On the Seawall](#)

## Deception

I am at a party where the usual suspects  
are gathered around their usual subjects  
with their familiar gin and tonics, chardonnays,  
cheap beaujolais, and for the former drinkers  
and present vegetarians, club sodas.  
I am standing near a nice couple, really approaching  
them to chat when I see a woman pass,  
a woman I know well.  
She smiles at the man. That smile and the look on his face  
tell me immediately that some hanky-panky has transpired.  
A man does not look at a woman that way unless  
he has had sex with her.  
It's an expression with an equal mixture of lust  
and sickness unto death.  
This is a pattern I have seen over the years: her husband,  
a married boyfriend. Different husbands, different  
boyfriends.  
Freud would call this a repetition compulsion.  
Would this man care if he knew? Probably not.

Knowledge is funny and has very little to do  
with anything, except after the fact  
and maybe not even then.  
Do you think that Anna Karenina would have gone back  
to her husband if she had had the chance?  
Even as much as she loved her little Sergey?  
I'd say no, but then I'm not Tolstoy.  
I think of our first hideous years of marriage,  
the nadir of which was your three-year-old son  
screaming, "You're not my mother."  
I remember thinking, "No kidding,  
and what makes you think I want to be?"  
It was horrible, and I was happy. Which makes it a little  
easier to explain this party  
and my quickly mounting despair.

Half an hour later, I see the woman in the kitchen  
with her arm around her husband.  
Poor schmuck, she gives him the same smile that she gave  
her boyfriend, but at a considerably lower voltage.  
Well, I suppose someone has to be the husband.  
The boyfriend's a husband, too, but I don't think  
the husband is a boyfriend.  
I think he's a drunk blowhard  
who can be nice on occasion.  
Oh, what do I know? Maybe he's the love of someone's life,  
maybe even his wife's,  
but I don't think so.

The love of my life—  
how would this translate into Bantu, for example:  
    the one who brought seven cows  
    and forty goats to my house?  
Or Hindu: god who fathers a thousand sons?  
Or Inuit: citadel of blubber, quick as a silver fish?  
How would you describe me? I take my glass of red wine  
    and run off to find you,  
but you are talking to the former best friend  
    of your ex-wife,  
and I see an enemy, twice-removed, who I dodge  
    out of habit.  
Drink up, me hearties.

Later, on the patio, I see the same smile pass  
    between the woman and her former boyfriend,  
    who is a major blowhard but goodlooking  
    and smart if you like the know-it-all type.  
Oh, I am in a bad mood. It's the cheap wine and the underwire  
    of my only black bra, which is digging into the soft skin  
    of my right breast.  
What I wouldn't do for glass of Pouligny-Montrachet  
    and a kiss from your sweet lips,  
    a kiss like the first one,  
softer than any breast or breath, when we were deceiving  
    everyone—ourselves, perhaps, most of all.

*Barbara Hamby*  
171

---

<sup>171</sup> [Barbara Hamby, "Deception," \*Western Humanities Review\*, collected in \*Delirium\*, University of North Texas Press](#)

## Evaporating Villanelle During a Time of Pandemic

Grief arrives often into the middle  
of things, interjected like a comma  
that survives, woven into the saddle

of a list chosen by Oxford for battle,  
twanging every axon in the soma.  
Grief arrives often into the middle

and rarely softens,  
demagoguery  
that survives, woven

into the sodden  
season, sharp-eyed, spry.  
Grief arrives, sudden

serrated knives.  
Fabric frayed  
that survives—

defended;  
amended.  
Grief arrives.  
*That* survives.

*Jen Karetnick*  
172

---

<sup>172</sup> Jen Karetnick, "[Evaporating Villanelle During a Time of Pandemic](#)," [Under a Warm Green Linden](#)

## Pill Box

Every wife is a still-life.  
Here I am with the vacuum,  
my good arm reaching after time.

Half the apple tree is blossoming.  
A quick lark shakes a branch.  
A headache can be beautiful.

Little doll murdering her chores,  
how alike you look in the photo  
of you and your father.

How agreeable you are,  
lying cold on the bathroom floor  
thanking your mirrors and corners.

*Marni Ludwig*  
173

---

<sup>173</sup> [Marni Ludwig, "Pill Box,"](#) collected in [Pinwheel, New Issues Press](#)

## Coordinates

You, dog's wet nose. You, hard black eye. We are weaving in and out of what might be an aorta, what might be the heart's congested highway. This road-trip we've agreed to take blind makes electronic maps curl. We can't stop napping behind the wheel. Country, your landscape is an unmentionable. The way I look at you undressing in the hotel room is unconstitutional. You, disconnected telephone. Remember when thought bubbles were only for cartoons. What happens now, when I can see how whitely you don't dream of me. What do I do when my thought bubble for you is empty. There are cartons of milk stacking up on the stoop. How many animals can we seduce with the smell of something dying. How much of the smell will not be us. You, cowl neck. You, coward. You, wreck. We've been driving for years towards the same impossible flat line. We've been robbing the pincushion of its tender moments. I talked through dinner about the way certain animals hate the cold. You, dumb button. You, drunk alphabet. When I tell you about something dying, I'm reading from the very middle of myself. Whether we crash the car or make it up the icy mountain, you are trying to fold the map into a shape it cannot make, you are licking your chops for a game of charades. When I guess *hungry, killer, wolf* you say yes and no to all three. At the intersection of memory and the future, you are dumb, perfectly.

*Meghan Privitello*

174

---

<sup>174</sup> [Meghan Privitello](#), "[Coordinates](#)," [Pinwheel](#), collected in [A New Language for Falling Out of Love](#), [YesYes Books](#)

from “Essay on the Theory of Motion”

Anyway, you’ve begun to suspect that *theory* is less movement toward truth & more movement through a series of puns.

For example, a queer theorist—you don’t know who, but imagine their white spectacled face floating above a soft butch sweater—once wrote that they feel most at home in airports, because there everyone is *in transition*.

//

(Let’s get the obvious out of the way—you were a girl & then you weren’t. You moved into a boy & the girl moved into misplaced language, into photographs.)

//

*Get it?* Gender is a country, a field of signifying roses you can walk through, or wear tucked behind your ear.

Eventually the flower wilts & you can pick another, or burn the field, or turn & run back across the tracks.

Cameron Awkward-Rich  
175

---

<sup>175</sup> Cameron Awkward-Rich, “[Essay on the Theory of Motion](#),” collected in [Transit](#), [Button Poetry](#)

Sakra

Pinned to the lawn  
with croquet wickets. If he existed

she'd divorce him. Tree is gone  
but the shadow stands.

*Adam Day*  
176

---

<sup>176</sup> [Adam Day](#), "[Sakra](#)," collected in [Left-Handed Wolf](#), Louisiana State University Press

## Our Lady of the Garage Band

Parker lived behind me; our backyards touched  
Before we knew we were a boy and a girl,  
hopped the fence both ways, invented realms,  
aquatic and arboreal labyrinths to lay  
our scarabs in. He was a few months younger  
but a year behind in school, so when I  
came home that fall he was a senior vibrating  
at the point of extinction, hanging out  
in his parents' detached garage with the rest:  
Levi, Jake, Oscar, Danny, Jordan Cisco.

That was the actual band. The others came  
and went, but they were there—Jeff,  
Mike T., Mike R., Zack, Greg, Lorenzo.  
I don't remember any of them having  
steady girlfriends, but a few loner girls from  
the sophomore class called themselves  
groupies—Rachelle, Stacy, a blond named Kim.

Nothing had changed. Same lion-shaped  
oil stain they called Neruda, ping-pong table,  
TV, drum set, amps, gum wrappers,  
Cheetos, extension cords. Little Debbies,  
guitar picks. Nail points poking through  
the roof. Parker flopped on an orange couch  
with rattan arms he jabbed with a pencil,  
his acned chin on a pink pillow that seemed  
breaded and fried in the fur of a black lab.  
*Geraldo Rivera. M\*A\*S\*H. Goonies on VHS.*

Mrs. C. was always around—she bought  
or sold Amway, I can't remember which, to or  
from Parker's mom—and when she backed  
out of the driveway they turned up the speakers  
so the bass became seismic in the floor,  
harmonic squeals that stripped the rust off  
the center beam and stung the sinuses.  
I was sure the screaming would break a face  
or pop a vein, but what did I know,  
watching them swish their greasy hair around  
then tap a ditty rhythm on a trash-can rim.

Lorenzo flexed his double-jointed thumbs.  
Mike R. and Zack liked each other and  
everyone knew it but no one said anything,  
just kept on trying to write a song that  
would stop sounding like "Love in an Elevator."

*B.K. Fischer*

---

<sup>177</sup> [B.K. Fischer](#), "[Our Lady of the Garage Band](#)," collected in [Radioapocrypha](#), [Ohio State University Press](#)

## Aphorisms

In the twentieth century all the arts aspired to the condition of music, with the frequent exception of music itself.

The first deterrent to pointing out another person's failings is the certainty that we will then have to hear a long, heated defense of them.

People will, occasionally, forgive you for the wrong you have done to them, but never for the wrong they have done to you.

When, after several tries, we don't understand an author, the suspicion hardens that he didn't, either.

One of the chief earmarks of the coward is cruelty toward his subordinates.

Of the two phenomena, marriage and pornography, pornography is the more modern.

*Alfred Corn*  
178

---

<sup>178</sup> [Alfred Corn, Aphorisms](#), collected in [Short Flights, Schaffner Press](#)

## Ars Poetica

I slept in a far-away tent, I slept in a hollow log, then I slept in a crate abandoned in the snow,  
I built my shelter from garbage and branches, I slept in the truckyards pile of tires, I slogged through the marsh, upsetting the herons—  
before I knew you, I owned a gun, before I knew you, I kept a sparrow in a shoebox, I fed it ham and held it to my head to hear it sing,  
I called it a radio, it kept the blues away, I called it love and wrote down all the words,  
I loved sad songs and I carried a gun before I knew you, and, Lord, when they shipped me here,  
I roamed hotel hallways dazzle-eyed and strange, I pushed a cart full of towels, gun-in-my-pocket,  
I made the beds, I missed my friends, I missed my crate, my pile of tires, I had such friends  
before they shipped me here, Lord, Tampa, Cincinnati, Sparks, ear to my radio,  
I am old and wounded in the thigh, I listen to the ice machine's clinking thoughts, I push my cart  
while the planes take off, low and thundering toward the distant edge, Lord,  
there's no gun in my hand, it's a box of notes, a simple record of my time.

*Kevin Prufer*  
179

---

<sup>179</sup> [Kevin Prufer](#), "[Ars Poetica](#)," collected in [How He Loved Them](#), [Four Way Books](#)

*But, like, where is the body?*

Girl in Feminist Literary Theory wants to know. She's got  
precise long ringlets, tendency toward baby-doll shirts. *Yes, and opacity?*

PhDs round the table join in, *What is the opacity of the body?*

*And the writer... is she here in the text??*  
(Hermeneutics) *Where is the body? Where is the body?*

All poets on standby: we prod our bran muffins,  
plop baby carrots back into Tupperware, our underarms cold with irritation.

The professor trails white chalk across her grey skirt, filling up the blackboard with heteroromance. Oh?

Tell me more about that marriage plot,

I am licking my fingers and picking up crumbs.

I'm crying fruit tears inside the Goblin Market. I am Lizzie calling Laura up the garden. *Did you miss me?*  
*Come and kiss me. Never mind my bruises, hug me, kiss me, suck my juices.*

*Squeez'd from goblin fruits for you, goblin pulp and goblin dew.*

Gala Mukomolova  
180

---

180 [Gala Mukomolova](#), "[But, like, where is the body?](#)" collected in [Without Protection](#), Coffee House Press

Clueless in Paradise

*“Kenneth, what is the frequency?”  
—query to Dan Rather from unidentified assailants*

Sometimes, when you shake your head,  
it is like snow settling  
on the little village in the paperweight.

Other times, it's not—and that's why  
God made the Bradley Fighting Vehicle.  
He can't always put a plaque up

on the spot. Sometimes even He  
is forced to settle for a souvenir. Perhaps  
Flopsy the Bunny isn't what you want,

and yet you won her at the fair. Like we won  
a great victory against Iraq (applause).  
Tie a yellow ribbon 'round my eyes,

whirl me in circles, send me careering  
toward the map. I love humanity. I'll stick  
a pushpin into any random dot, and smile

endearingly. I'm a consultant. And nude  
—I mean, naked—aggression, is what this thing  
is all about, plus Bernie Shaw

quavering beneath a table when the smart  
bombs start coming in, and Dan Rather  
looking itchy in his sweater. Kenneth,

what is the frequency? Men on CNN  
are weeping and surrendering, kneeling  
while they kiss their captors' hands.

*Rachel Loden*  
181

---

<sup>181</sup> [Rachel Loden](#), “[Clueless in Paradise](#),” [Exquisite Corpse](#), collected in [The Last Campaign](#), [Slapering Hol Press](#)

## Hostess

One of the guests arrives with irises, all  
funnel & hood, papery tongues whispering little  
rumors in their mouths, and leaves  
his white shoes in the doorway  
where the others stumble  
on the emptiness when they come. He  
smiles. He says, "I'm  
here to ruin your party, Laura," and he does. The stems  
of the irises are too  
long and stiff for a vase, and when  
I cannot find the scissors, I slice  
them off with a knife  
while the party waits. Of course, the jokes  
are pornographic, and the flowers  
tongued and stunted  
and seductive, while  
in the distance weeds & lightning  
make wired anxiety of the night. But I'm  
a hostess, a woman who must give  
the blessing of forced content, carry  
a cage of nervous birds  
like conversation through my living room, turning  
up the music, dimming  
the lights, offering more, or less, or something else  
as it seems fit, using  
only the intuition  
of a lover's tongue, a confessional poet, or  
a blind woman fluffing up her hair. It is  
an effort, making pleasure, passing  
it around on a silver platter, and I'm

distracted all night  
by his pale eye

like a symbol of a symbol of something  
out of logic's reach forever, until

the soggy cocktail napkin  
of my party ends  
with this guest carrying  
an iris around the kitchen in his teeth, daring me

to take it out with mine. Perhaps

a hostess should not laugh  
too hard, or dance  
at her own affair. Frolic

is for the guests, who've now  
found their coats and shrugged them on. I hear

someone call "Good-night"  
sullenly to the night, disappointment  
like a gray fur lining  
in her voice. Someone

mentions to this guest  
that his shoes have filled with rain, suggests  
suggestively he wear  
a pair of my  
husband's shoes home when he goes. Of course, *of course* one

of the godmothers has always  
come to the christening for revenge. She  
leans over the squirming bassinet and smiles  
and sprinkles the baby with just  
a bit of badness. In his

white smock, he  
is prettier than we imagined  
he could be, but also  
sneaky, easily  
bored, annoyed  
with the happy  
lives of his dull friends. When

he grows up he'll go to parties just  
to drink too much, to touch  
the women in ways that offer

favours he can't grant. The women

will roll their eyes behind  
one another's necks. The men

will bicker about the wine. And  
after the party, and the storm, in the after-

quiet, the hostess will find  
herself standing  
a long time on the patio  
alone, as I

stand tonight, after  
a small song of embarrassment  
and regret, aeolian

in my white dress, the wind

feeling up  
those places again while I  
smoke a cigarette, which fills

my whole body with the calm that comes  
just after the barn  
has burned to the ground, and the farmers' wives  
in nightgowns stand

around in moonlit air, their  
breasts nearly exposed, their  
swan-necks warm. Perhaps

it was the wine. When I  
passed him in the hallway by the bathroom, I

thought I heard him say, "Laura, I want

to ruin your life," and, trying to be polite, I said, "That's

fine." I said, "Make yourself at home."

*Laura Kasichke*

182

---

<sup>182</sup> [Laura Kasichke](#), "[Hostess](#)," [The Southern Review](#), collected in [Fire & Flower](#), [Alice James Books](#)

## Holocene: Microfilm Reel 82

See the first *Homo sapiens* live alongside Neanderthals in areas later known as Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and Israel. See how the exact reason for Neanderthal extinction is still not yet known, how sometime later *Homo sapiens* begin to have elaborate rituals for burying their dead. See Mary Leaky find footprints in Tanzania, proof that early hominids walked erect on two legs. See Heron of Alexandria invent the steam engine and write the first known book about robots. See Apollonius of Perga devise the mathematics of conical sections for use by Johannes Kepler eighteen centuries later. See Buzz Aldrin talk about the issue of inertia while on the moon, saying “I had to plan ahead several steps to bring myself to a stop or to turn without falling.” See the docile birds, a gannet and a tern, that Charles Darwin discovered in St. Paul’s. See Gregor Mendel in the monastery garden as he tends to his cross-pollinated hybrid peas, the male flowering parts of which have been excised to prevent self-pollination; it won’t be long until he observes a familiar pattern emerge. See Darwin scrutinize barnacles for two-and-a-half hours every day for eight years—a routine that becomes so thoroughly ingrained in the minds of his children that they believe this is what men do, and so they ask kids in another household, “When does your father do his barnacles?” See part-time lab worker Alfred Sturtevant map out the distances between genes, laying out a scale for fruit flies’ chromosome number 2: There’s the gene for purple eyes, for short legs, for bent wings. See the stunned expression on the face of the first reviewer for Watson and Crick’s historic one-page paper detailing the spiral-staircase structure of DNA. See the court martial of Cpl. John Mayfield and Cpl. Joseph Vlacovsky, the Marines who refuse to give DNA samples, arguing that doing so is an invasion of their privacy. See Alfred Nobel accidentally stabilize nitroglycerin with cellulose. See a close-up of human skin with chemical burns and huge blisters produced by exposure to mustard gas. See Albert Einstein talk about nuclear fission in his letter to President Roosevelt, kicking off the Manhattan Project. See Little Boy on its way to Hiroshima. See the five firemen who died within thirty-six hours of preventing more catastrophic effects of the meltdown at Chernobyl nuclear reactor Unit 4. See Heinrich Himmler bite into a cyanide pill just before his interrogation; his right hand is no longer shaking. See the court stenographer in one of the thirteen Nuremberg trials keep a straight face while typing a testimony describing human bodies being dragged from a gas chamber. See into the room-size vault where the stolen gold bars of the Marcoses are kept, lit by a lone 10-watt bulb. See the Tagbanuwa tribe drive away Mrs. Teo, who wants to build a SpongeBob theme park on their coral reef. See the Subanon tribe mourn the destruction of their sacred ground, Mount Canatuan, during the gold rush. See the human zoo in Coney Island, the cage labeled “savages.” See Harriet Hemenway and Minna Hall, among the first refusing to wear plumed hats, file a petition in Boston to prevent the extinction of birds from unregulated hunting. See Jill Robinson in Sichuan province as she pleads for the lives of moon bears. See the Stetson family, one of them holding a selfie stick, pose with a lolling, drugged tiger seven months away from liver failure after repeated injections of sedatives. See the orcas of SeaWorld slowly driven to insanity by the stress of captivity. See the orcas of SeaWorld attack people when their counterparts in the wild have never done so. See the incinerator ash that used to be the bodies of people stricken by a deadly pithovirus strain, which lay dormant for thousands of years until the thawing Siberian permafrost uncovered it. See into the ward where the index cases of superbug 01588:H90 wait out their eventual deaths. See the calm after the great flood of September 18, 2080. See the world no longer sullied by your presence.

*Kristine Ong Muslim*

183

---

<sup>183</sup> [Kristine Ong Muslim, “Holocene: Microfilm Reel 82,” \*The Cincinnati Review\*, \*Forward: 21st Century Flash Fiction\*, \*Aforementioned Productions\*](#)

## Preface

I was raised in the company of dolls.

My mother, the miniaturist,  
made pies the size of thumbnails.

My father, the shadowboxer,  
talked only to the dark.

No one here remembers  
the love of a chair for its ottoman  
or the privacy of a shut door.

Windows grieve in their sashes.  
They burn with interior light,  
like blood oranges.

Imagine: a dollhouse in every room—

in every room, another room,  
in every girl another girl

looking out a tiny window,  
her face repeated on the glass.

As two who could not pretend  
to love each other,  
we stared through grief.

Pupil, poupée, little doll  
orphaned by the iris of my eye:  
what did you see, what did you see

but that other girl in me,

the door to whose post was nailed  
the smallest coffin,

hiding the name of God inside  
like rust in the mouth.

*Robin Ekiss*  
184

---

184 [Robin Ekiss](#), "Preface," [American Poetry Review](#), collected in [The Mansion of Happiness](#), University of Georgia Press

## The House of Fragments

That year of nothing but *weeping*  
Over pirogues for breakfast at Dombrowkis,  
Your grandfather crossed the river  
Back to the old country.  
The spires of cathedrals we'd count,  
Driving through the snow  
To nowhere. Ukrainians in leather caps playing poker  
At the back of the Pinochle Club.  
Like the silhouettes of wild dogs  
In alleyways. It was the year those children  
Disappeared and they found the man  
In a basement and he had an *accident*.  
The year the police shot how many Black boys dead.  
But this is more about *desire*,  
Mangoes on a plate, the Monongahela we swam in,  
Through condoms and detritus  
We dove through the green murk,  
Like discarding whole doctrines.  
Then the shifts grew. I loaded,  
You waited. *Weighted*, but what wind?  
The frozen lake, the fields of corn  
We ran in naked, through the grape vines.  
Nights in the rooms of distilled voices,  
A riff lisped with piano keys  
In the jukebox's pleading.  
High on chocolate martinis. Slurry on vodka tonics  
In a tall glass. Justin talked of catching a freighter  
For the summer. Hauling  
Anthracite across Lake Erie.  
Your grandfather's ghost photos from the mines  
In Poland, then the baking and the bread  
For the Jewish bakery, and your father  
Riding in the bread truck to church.  
The broken wings of birds, glued together.  
The stillness of the snow, *like a toothache*  
The old Russian man said.  
Walking his great black dog along the bay.  
Like a great bear, through the great stillness,  
Covering the ice. The grief song  
Gabriel blows, the weathervane spinning  
Above Malichevskis garage.  
*Where is this all going*, you ask? Back to you tracing  
The scars above my eyebrows, a  
One thin finger, you naked  
Except for your turquoise tank top.  
And the words like accidents,  
Or ornaments. What we said or were afraid  
To confess, like winter itself,

And the freezing rain slicking the roads black.  
     Who doesn't return?  
 From the warehouses and the factories  
     Now husks, you stealing copper  
 From the closed-down paper plant,  
     Trading it for dope,  
 Trading found cans. Or the hours  
     When she doesn't come home  
 In the morning. The Lackawanna, the Reading  
     She said, *like the cards from Monopoly*.  
 Trains hauling by with their graffiti, blue  
     And silver whole car murals gleaming.  
 Old men fishing beside RVs. *Everywhere*  
     *is elsewhere but here.*  
 Until the city of closed-down steel  
     And rusted water  
     Reveals its razored wings.  
 The young boys slinging rocks began to sing  
     The prisms that hide in the air.  
     *City of what part of you is going.*  
     City of what is inside  
     You begins to bruise.  
 Torn mattresses in vacant lots, stranger's kneeling.  
     A box cutter waved in the fat man's face.  
     Weaving the sunlight, praying  
 In fumes, hustling outside the truck stop by the interstate.  
     *Who disappeared?*  
     Abandoned by the side of the road,  
     Brown-bagged kittens. *Your mother weeping*  
     In her gray dress. *Lonely as a river.*  
 The pick-up trucks of Spanish grape-pickers,  
     The one with the guitar standing,  
 What they are saying you can almost translate:  
     Like seeing a body rise to the surface  
     Of the quarry, before it sinks again.

~

*And then what matters?* That city is so far away, and he is drowned,  
 The one you ran with. And the other is asleep this night of moon  
 Behind another cell. And she is signing to her deaf mother, before putting on  
 Rouge, to sing in the dives, *to shush*. And nothing matters but looking  
 In the right direction down the tracks, and the packs on her face are healing.  
 And the scars she's given herself, and her bare shoulders and the wind  
 That smells of garlic and weaves the starlings through the black trees. You sip  
 Your coffee strong, dark as dirt. This insomnia a blue glow behind battered windows.  
*To live there and here.* Without disclosure or confession,  
 But the slant of light,  
 Or a certain scent: gardenias, tulips, lilacs. The funerals forgiven, the failures  
 Or her voice to return. The anger is an ancient script that must become *hieroglyphic*.

~

And then you see the sky has opened over the skyline, and you are  
Sobbing for the reverie of the birds. The *reverie* of a broom  
Sweeping the way he moved. The janitor lifting  
His head. And then there are those evenings when everything ruined is revealed  
In the stillness of the snow, or the ushering of the rain, guiding you through the theater  
*Of blocks where you used to know people*, of the city of night and  
Refugees. The oboe player in the high window above Slomski's Funeral parlor. The weight of this music.  
Lilting with string.  
What is seamstress but a form of grieving? Sewing the black  
Seams. Sewing whiskey drank shot and the moon above the refinery plant. Sewing  
The rain into a shawl the babushkas wear, carrying bread. Sewing  
The taxis of yellow light as they ride empty through the city of  
Sorrowful songs. The sorrowful songs  
Of whiskey and the rain and why she is gone, *he is dead*. The radio sewing the wind,  
Sewing the walls between rooms where insomnia pins the eyes. Walking through  
The house of fragments. Nothing is whole.

*Sean Thomas Dougherty*  
185

---

<sup>185</sup> [Sean Thomas Dougherty](#), "[The House of Fragments](#)," collected in [Sasha Sings the Laundry on the Line](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## The Plight Troth

Language tasted like a trick laid bare  
as the back of an orchid huffing  
out hothouse fumes, extravagant  
as any freedom feels at first

unlike feeling, more like the numb  
a doctor gives as a gift to the skin  
before needling the vein

of an understanding, jelly pale,  
afloat & estranged as sea. He said  
he'd like to marry into innocence,  
said a virgin is a value blue as a bad

joke & inside the sweet humming circle  
of a she, humiliated, there quartzed  
a will sharp enough to slice

any blade from grass to flame to finish  
the fist that broke her like a horse  
who'll never loose the wild  
from her blaze of a mane.

*Emma Bolden*  
186

---

<sup>186</sup> [Emma Bolden](#), "[The Plight Troth](#)," [Nice Cage](#), collected in [House is an Enigma](#), [Southeast Missouri State University](#)

Shell

be a mechanism  
of longing

windup  
water moccasin.

my dead name  
makes trouble  
& i get the burn

my brain  
prints its own  
currency

& my skull  
is a shoe.

why not  
make a switch in  
sense apparatus

cyborg myself  
with a suitcase full  
of swarm

hot coffee &  
raw almonds,  
cultured milk

why not bathe  
to the neck  
in telepresence

reduce hands to  
fibres & ohms  
flax & pepper.

make the soul more

acceptable  
with a steel-knit

shell.

*Jay Besemer*  
187

---

<sup>187</sup> [Jay Besemer](#), "[Shell](#)," collected in [Theories of Performance, The Lettered Streets Press](#)

## Aftertaste

I wash you down  
with thick milk I bought today  
from a farmer with skin made orange-grey  
from the handling of ancient dirt  
whose eyes crinkle at their pretty corners when I drop  
my change into his palm, old pennies new dimes flickering  
nickels, uncorroded bright weight  
of metal slipped easy as a dog's kiss  
lapped up in the hand

It's true:  
everything  
on this brutal blue  
dot is constructed of elemental attraction  
& I wash you down with a tall glass of the whitest white  
wash you down, soak the salt of your body in my salt,  
thinking, sweetly actually, of the side effect  
*metallic aftertaste*

I know, right now, in a distant laboratory you  
are being mixed with aluminum, copper,  
manganese, cadmium to make  
planes strong yet featherweight  
they need you  
because you are famous  
for being the lightest  
of your cousins

It's because of you

something heavy should fly

*Shira Erlichman*  
188

---

188 [Shira Erlichman](#), "Aftertaste," *Prelude*, collected in [Odes to Lithium](#), Alice James Books

from "13th Balloon"

A few months after you died  
I came home on a black and freezing night  
to find a small cardboard box  
on the steps outside my building

I opened the lid and inside  
was a single newborn animal  
hairless pink and clean  
a rat a guinea pig I couldn't tell

Was it moving I don't remember now  
why can't I remember that now  
It can't have been moving  
it couldn't have  
been alive

I considered my cat asleep  
in my apartment would he  
kill this creature if it lived  
Did I have any milk  
and how would I get any milk  
anyway inside this tiny thing  
that surely could not be alive

What kind of person  
might have come and left  
a baby possibly dead  
animal there in a box  
on my stoop what kind

If this was a test I failed it

I carried the box  
three long blocks  
to the river and threw it in

I have never so much  
as in the moment the box went under  
the surface of the water  
stabbing and stabbing and stabbing itself  
like a million obsidian knives  
wished that I were dead

If death is a test I fail

If death is a test I pass

*Mark Bibbins*

189

---

<sup>189</sup> [Mark Bibbins, "13th Balloon \[A few months after you died\]," Lit Hub](#), collected in [13th Balloon, Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Kissing Hitler

I've tried to keep the landscape  
buried in my chest, in its teak box  
but tonight, awakened  
by the sound of my name  
strung between the trees,  
I see the box on my nightstand  
giving off the kind of light  
you never know you belong to

until you see it dance  
from a pile of metal shavings

or shaken loose  
from a sword fern's root-wad.

It's the same light that trailed me  
the entire summer of my sixteenth year,  
driving County Road 64  
toward Power Line Ridge,  
the three radio towers  
blinking in the Oregon dark.

Between each red pulse  
the dark hung its birthrights in front of me,  
a few dead branches  
crawling up from the ditch,  
a lost bolt of mooncloth  
snagged on a barbed-wire fence,  
shredding in the tide wind.

The light my oldest friends  
slammed into their veins  
or offered to the night  
when they made amends.

One of them,  
the tallest and toughest,  
the one who used to show up Saturdays  
for my mother's breakfast—  
he could juggle five eggs  
and recite the alphabet backward—  
he told me as he covered my hand with his  
while I downshifted to enter the gravel quarry  
that he wanted to punch the baby  
out of Jessica's stomach—

he's the one, tonight, whose carbide hands  
have opened the lid of this little box.

I can see the two of us now, kissing Hitler.  
That's what we called it—  
siphoning gas,  
huffing shop rags.

And we kissed him everywhere,  
in other counties,  
with girls we barely knew  
telling us to hurry  
before someone called the cops.

They can't arrest you for kissing Hitler.  
That's what we said.

The last time I saw him  
he sat on the edge  
of his father's girlfriend's bathtub,  
bleeding and laughing hard into a pink towel.

I can't remember—  
maybe it was a birthday party.  
Maybe we'd climbed in  
through the living room window,  
looking for a bottle or some pills,  
at the same moment the adults stumbled in  
from the Silver Dollar, hardwired  
to liquor and crystal.

That was the summer  
when people just went crazy.

And there we were, locked in the bathroom,  
someone yelling and throwing themselves  
against the door,  
my friend's blood fanned out behind him  
into points of red tar,

into points so fine they made me think  
that someone, somewhere,  
must belong to a family that passes down  
the art of painting immaculate nasturtiums  
along the lips of bone china,  
the smallest detail touched into place  
by a single, stiff horsehair,  
by a young father holding his breath,  
trying not to wake the child  
swaddled at his feet, his hand

steady as five white mining burros  
sleeping in the rain.

*Michael McGriff*  
190

---

<sup>190</sup> [Michael McGriff](#), "[Kissing Hitler](#)," [Neo](#), collected in [Home Burial](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Field Trip

Today we are going  
everywhere in our heads.  
To go you must show  
your underbelly and a note  
from your mother. You  
must, on your person (in  
your head) carry the  
following: everything.  
This should include but  
not be limited to: fire,  
earth, air, water, snacks  
for everyone and whatever  
fundamental elements have  
yet to be discovered.  
Choose a buddy. Choose  
from flora or fauna, from  
window or door. Choose  
wisely: orderly behavior  
will not be tolerated.  
Remember, you who  
resemble a yellow  
school bus: you are  
not a representative  
of the sun. You  
are the sun.

*Andrea Cohen*  
191

---

<sup>191</sup> [Andrea Cohen](#), "[Field Trip](#)," [Tin House](#), collected in [Nightshade](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Kite Shepherd (1)

I was a spark ferried by a catastrophe of wind  
then I was a little girl who loved the Beatles more

than dessert's inverted chandeliers.  
I pawed at the monster

slicking up the spooked conduit of my neck  
then stirred frantic, unwrecked, a little boy

in a little red incorrigible wagon. A tiger  
in a land of no tigers. The word was *careen*,

the word was *career*. Now

I am in love with my friends, they are distilleries  
funneling puddles into celestial bodies, O

and O: I am protective and aghast, pianos  
and necklaces so near the rotor blades,

so lovely and interfering  
with the dangerous methods

of ascent.

Marc McKee  
192

---

<sup>192</sup> [Marc McKee, "Kite Shepherd \(1\)," \*Southern Indiana Review\*](#), collected in [Meta Meta Make-Belief](#), Black Lawrence Press

i want to name all my oregon trail characters after you & drown them on purpose

if i am a bed!  
then the bed is on fire!

if i am a body!  
it is of water!  
and undrinkable!

if i mothered this anger!  
i hope it grows legs!  
so i can buy it boots!

*Cassandra de Alba*  
193

---

<sup>193</sup> [Cassandra de Alba, "i want to name all my oregon trail characters after you & drown them on purpose,"](#) collected in [Ugly/Sad, Glass Poetry Press](#)

Love Means Never Having to Distinguish Between the Sound of a Clarinet and the Sound of a Crying  
Baby

A grandmother undoes loneliness  
with the pyramids at Giza

and a miniature orange tree

She married a radio and withered a flag

She drove a car as big as the US space program  
without hesitation

Her acreage was obscene  
soft in summer

in winter a place for a dog  
to wander and die in

Everything merged with her bank account

She imported Christmas from Germany  
¿Did you find the bomb shelter behind the house?  
she asked

And a dog-less kid stitching a bundle  
of fingers into a fist

answers with suffocation.

*Clay Ventre*  
194

---

<sup>194</sup> [Clay Ventre, "Love Means Never Having to Distinguish Between the Sound of a Clarinet and the Sound of a Crying Baby," \*Lily Poetry Review\*](#)

Dr. Engel Survives the Blackout in New York City

and predicts the birthrate to sky-  
rocket and the amount

of gay boys needing penicillin

to increase

and increase until his waiting room  
is just a strobe light  
and cocktail

away from being a gay bar. He thinks of Alaska  
and how it's dark

there, though everybody  
he's talked to who's lived there says it's not what everybody  
thinks: not blue and moist  
like an orifice

or mysterious

like a virgin

birth or christ,  
for that matter, who instead  
is shaved and shiny, shaking it

like a lap dancer

working the bars of Alliance, Ohio  
and a few more towns beyond.

*Aaron Smith*  
195

---

<sup>195</sup> [Aaron Smith](#), "[Dr. Engel Survives the Blackout in New York City](#)," collected in [Blue on Blue Ground](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

The world hadn't yet gone up  
in cartoonish hellfire, which  
was what I imagined  
back then. The end was never far.  
Right now, I could find  
the street down which  
my father drove the day after  
Chernobyl. I could recite  
in the green shade the swiftness  
of everything ending. Of  
dominion. I have a mind  
for whatever is eternal. I am  
whistling in the darkness.  
I'm weeping. Am transported.  
Look at how the earth has changed.  
Look at the fallout of winter.  
Look at the dead that  
are beside the road like litter.  
All too closely, this fact:  
summer, and its golden heat,  
and my young body,  
never hurt before that day,  
just bruised and scraped  
and dappled by the pox of childhood—  
then in a ditch, unbloodied,  
but nearer to death than  
I am comfortable admitting. Tonight.  
Tomorrow. Next year.  
Imagining brokenness: imagining  
the radicalization of the flesh.  
Made dumb. Also: numb  
and burning in the flames  
of misapprehension. I thought,  
then, everything now is over.  
Like a movie. A song.  
Not sadness. Not the weight of things.  
I was still. Green branches  
fell over me and the sun  
was only burning up. A star  
that was not a metaphor  
for anything. When I say to you,  
I have seen the black floor of the ocean,  
you should know better  
than to believe me in that moment.  
My heart was broken, then,  
and my arms were no good  
at all. These words are what was left  
of my breath. I am

so very tired of time and of waiting  
for nothing to change.

*Paul Guest*  
196

---

196 [Paul Guest](#), "[1986](#)," [Waxwing](#)

## Dar la luz

### I.

Afterward, I have to look up my own condition listed on the printouts taped to the vitamins. Primipara, of *primus*—“first,” then *parus*—“bringing forth,” from the verb *parere*. But I prefer *dar la luz*, to give the light, from my Columbian friend Patricia. Key term “viable,” or maybe “to give.” To this one I give the gift of light, while to the other I gave nothing. Instead gave myself back to myself. When an egg attaches to the lining—this is how each of us started, don’t you dare dance away—blood vessels break and drip continuously, fertile blood swamp, while the egg sends its own corkscrew-shaped vessels into the wall. The world that made you delta and bolt. Technically parasitic, this growth; abortion labelled minor surgery. There is a prying apart. Surgery from the Greek *kheirourgos* “working or done by hand.” Harvest Moon on the radio in the clinic, a nurse holding my hand between both her own like one does a bird that’s accidentally flown into the house. I never know what to circle under *previous surgeries* each time I move towns and have to fill out new forms, the paper shift doing just that, shifting. The Latin *agentia* not so far from its current iteration, “to do, act, manage.”

### II.

The wrong word for me is primigravid—but was I not gravid, burdened with decision? When my daughter was pulled out of me *you will feel some tugging* I could not see her. No woman sees her child except by feel in that moment, but this was the chapter I had skimmed, uneasy. Before her head shifted, and we had to leave home, our midwives silent and not allowed in the room. A latex screen that smelled like Crayolas scaffolded my body. The anesthesiologist and nurse prepping remarked on its childhood smell, their familiarity loud to cover the lack of mine. The surgeon remarked *you’ll be ready for bikini season in no time*. Caesarean is major surgery, yet no one knows the roots of its name exactly. My child bellowed behind the screen, they would not let me hold her. It wouldn’t be sanitary. Was I not gravid, was I not grave, its linguistic sister? *You should sleep* they sewed up my body in the now-quiet room, until I awoke the next day frightened and demanding *but where is my baby?* Afterward, I thud against the plate glass of terminology. *Post* from “after,” plus the accusative of *partus*, “a bearing, a bringing forth.” Not a gift, then. *When she was taken out of me, I say, or she came into the light at 9:30 a.m.*

Kelly Morse  
197

---

<sup>197</sup> Kelly Morse, “[Dar la luz](#),” [Mid-American Review](#), collected in [Heavy Light, Two of Cups Press](#)

## Psychoanalysis of Water

The clock here is quiet.  
Into the rain's applause,  
a woman rises  
fatigued. Tablets  
dissolve in a glass by the bed.  
The wind lifts, branches  
animating inconsonant darkness.  
She undoes her gown,  
lays it over the bedpost.  
Seductive leg hair. Almost  
dawn, she makes coffee like that.

Low thunder, glints  
of lightning, the dog's  
concern. *Rain on the roof,*  
*friends walking across my grave,*  
her mother told her, *that's all*  
*I listen for.*  
And why not the hiss and wake  
of cars on the wet road  
bursting into transparence under tents  
of streetlight, winking out  
into afterglow. Glances that catch  
anonymous faces at windows  
in early lit houses like her own.

This way she drifts off, mesmerically.  
The bathtub overflowing.

*Forrest Gander*  
198

---

<sup>198</sup> [Forrest Gander](#), "[Psychoanalysis of Water](#)," [Five Fingers Review](#), collected in [Lynchburg](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

from "Five Elegies"

5. *Billy Strayhorn Writes "Lush Life"*

Empty ice-cream carton  
in a kitchen garbage can.  
Up all night with your mother.  
He beat her again. Up all night  
eating ice cream, you made your mother laugh.

*Life*      *is lone*      *ly*

Duke's hands on your shoulders,  
you play it again. Cancer  
eats moth holes through  
you and you and you.

*Life*      *is lone*      *ly*

Speeding upstate in the backseat,  
on the Taconic, cocktail  
in one hand, book in another  
as autumn leaves blur by.  
This life, New York, piano,  
love, then lonely, this life, love.

*Elizabeth Alexander*  
199

---

<sup>199</sup> [Elizabeth Alexander](#), "Five Elegies," collected in [Crave Radiance](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

## Christian Camp for Troubled Girls

I liked to get felt up by the blonde  
banker's daughter who wore overalls  
and had a smoker's cough, who kept  
a pet rat and folded Marlboro Reds  
into the cuff of a white shirt in a way  
that reminded me years later  
of a man I loved in Spain with wide  
shoulders and a slick ponytail  
who broke a goalie's jaw after a soccer match  
and we all drank beers together that same night,  
pissing behind the jasmine bushes  
on the hazy walk home. I've never known  
how to act around a man throwing  
a tantrum, weeping because his mother  
was a prostitute and made him chocolate  
sandwiches between jobs, how it still breaks  
his heart to look at a tub of Nutella, or the fit  
where something gets smashed, window  
or plate. I tried it myself once during a fight  
and it felt good to release the porcelain  
face, hurl it against the wall to make a point.  
We'd been arguing about his porn addiction  
again, or maybe it was his stinginess,  
how he accused me of watching videos  
without chipping in, even though I covered  
his rent. Maybe, I screamed, *I will not pay*  
*to watch a Brazilian woman get shit on,*  
as the dish flew from my glossy palm  
like a dove out of a magician's hat.  
Or I proclaimed, *I refuse*

*to be shit on*, and that's how I knew  
it was time to get out. They taught us

at camp how to make lanyards and bridle  
a horse, but all I want to remember is the ribbon

of sweat on my friend's upper lip,  
how she let me win every time

we arm wrestled, how she made me feel strong  
before she pinned me to the ground.

*Kendra DeColo*  
200

---

<sup>200</sup> [Kendra DeColo](#), "[Christian Camp for Troubled Girls](#)," *The Journal*, collected in *My Dinner with Ron Jeremy*, [Third Man Books](#)

## Aphorisms

At least we're all free to choose the inevitable.

What makes the universe so hard to comprehend is that there's nothing to compare it with.

I've learned to accept birth and death, but sometimes I still worry about what lies between.

*Ashleigh Brilliant*  
201

## Smoking Cigarettes with Brodsky

I don't smoke but here I am chain smoking  
with Joseph, July, 1984, Café Reggio,  
one of his village spots, not the Indian haunt

where he took Nell, told her she must write  
her Icarus cycle, though she wrote fiction.  
Leggy, leggy, blond Virginian, it's Nell he wants

but—best friend, poet, motley diasporan—today  
I'll do and do all right talking about young Musil  
then Frost until he threads the conversation back to her,

Why won't she ever call me? he asks, breaks  
the filter off one and then another cigarette,  
while he recalls her slouch, the drape of her

sweatpants, even her refusal is adorable.  
I'm 24, just back from Nicaragua on my way  
to New Hampshire where, naturally, I'll make love

or revolution in a field and everything this afternoon  
seems possible, has a future, the waiter bringing coffees,  
MacDougal Street bangs brilliantly with trucks,

even how Joseph this minute believes it's me not Sontag  
who must read the essays he's just finished.  
—And have your lovely Nell call, please, okay.

I'm just learning desire makes us sometimes lovely,  
always *idiotes*. And yet. And yet. And yet  
Joseph smokes another cigarette.

Victoria Redel  
202

---

<sup>202</sup> [Victoria Redel](#), "[Smoking Cigarettes with Brodsky](#)," [Harvard Review](#), collected in [Woman without Umbrella](#), Four Way Books

## What the Boyfriends Teach Us

Susan's boyfriend made a list, so at the store  
he'd remember to buy more *ice cubs*.  
The algorithm won't let this happen anymore.  
It knows if you are sleeping; it knows if you are dumb.

It knows if you've been bad and want offers from busty  
adulterers, hushed hotel suites in Montreal.  
When I text *its* the phone knows when to apostrophe.  
The phone's always right. I barely need to spell.

The strangers who wrote the algorithm help  
me every day: invisible guardian angels who turn  
*fuck* to *duck*, try to help me be some better self.  
I learned *it's* from *its* when I was nineteen, burned

when a college boyfriend corrected my flirty,  
wrong emails. Once I got a note in junior high,  
an apology, tucked in yellow and purple grocery  
store mums. Polo cologne-scented page, torn right

out of a spiral notebook, college ruled: *Dear Jill*,  
it read, in childish cursive: *I've been such a fuel*.

Jill McDonough  
203

---

<sup>203</sup> Jill McDonough, "What the Boyfriends Teach Us," *Bird's Thumb*, collected in [Here All Night](#), Alice James Books

## Homecoming

Chrissy invites me over  
to play Frankenstein. I am the monster  
in sneakers and baggy jeans

cinched tight so my hips and gut  
pillow out. She hides my bolts and scars  
like you hide the sickly, bald

branches of a Christmas tree with  
extra tinsel and lights. Chrissy  
would makeover

the entire school, if they made a blush brush  
big enough; her bedroom walls  
are covered with the confiscated

nose rings and taped glasses  
of our classmates. When I'm as pretty  
as I can get, we go to the football game

& sit on bleachers to watch  
pretty boys crush themselves against pretty boys—all of us  
with our fingers jammed

into the electrical outlets of adolescence.  
The cheerleaders are chanting *these days are easy*,  
the coaches scream

all we have to do is *live, live*,  
and as the band points to each other with huge foam fingers,  
babies are tossed into the air like confetti.

*Sommer Browning*  
204

---

<sup>204</sup> [Sommer Browning](#), "[Homecoming](#)," [Gulf Stream](#)

from "Insecurity System"

*Lovely as a rainbow trout* I imagine  
words you use to compliment my looks,  
though you neglect to. *Thou art a rose*  
you also neglect to use, though surely you mean to  
floralize me, for *I art*.

People who read poems know a rose  
is how the poet drags in genitalia.  
Let me save some trouble—I have it,  
a worn-out beauty of a cunt,  
folded, tanned, and stitched up  
tighter than a taxidermy cat.  
Of course I love you,

for love admires its reflection. My next life:  
brine collecting in a mollusk's shell.

~

The shine of a mollusk's shell  
is a living anyone can earn,  
though I prefer the richer temptations  
of regular pay. Other people I mistake  
for sculptures. Existence must be pristine

when living's not a bother.  
Everywhere waiting is expected  
I take a book, which doesn't bother anybody.  
Surgeons plant an ear inside an artist's arm,  
though listening isn't always an embrace.

My head has a factory face and inside  
a handsome white man screams into a microphone  
about salacious things that can result  
when girls sit in parked cars.

~

When girls sit in parked cars  
they turn to fish. The breath gets heavy.  
Soft! what light through yonder window

shows his cock on a public bus?  
A clown car generates another clown, and fear  
spit-shines the dime.

Looks are subject to other people's faces  
if other people can be trusted.  
Other people I despise

because self-loathing  
extends to anyone who appears to find  
the world a normal place to live.

The breath gets heavy.  
It's easy to pretend to be asleep.

*Sara Wainscott*  
205

---

<sup>205</sup> [Sara Wainscott, "Insecurity System \[Lovely as a rainbow trout\],"](#) collected in [Insecurity System, Persea Books](#)

## Horoscope (1)

Your dream: the word *forming*,  
then a woman unbuttoning  
herself from a white blouse.

Don't ask how I know this,  
Aquarius, who the woman is,  
or why the word lacked context,

as though projected onto a screen  
in space. Had it been written  
on a chalkboard, for example,

you may have leafed through  
your dream dictionary for *chalkboard*  
(see *blackboard*), all the while

missing the point: the word itself,  
breasts so pale they appeared  
to be lit from within. Aquarius,

there was something I meant  
to write down today, didn't, and now  
it is lost. But as the moon leaves

your house of knowledge  
for that of doubt, self-loathing,  
panic, I think of you waking,

feeling you should know  
something you don't. The word is  
forming in you. I can almost touch it.

*Maggie Smith*  
206

---

<sup>206</sup> [Maggie Smith](#), "[Horoscope \(1\)](#)," *Beacon Street Review*, collected in [Lamp of the Body](#), Red Hen Press

A Partial Illustration of the Black Market Accompanied by the Scented Breath of Starved Alligator

We'd see the girl in white cheesecloth as she walked  
her pet capybara on a blue dog leash through the humid  
blackberry paths in Austin. She'd bought  
the world's largest rodent from a smuggler  
and when it sneezed it was always three shivered times  
in a row. When we'd speed west on I10 from Houston  
with pot in tow, you'd ask me to slide joints under  
each of my breasts to keep the cops from finding them. Horizon  
numbed and nerve-colored as someone's gums  
rubbed with thumbprints of coke. Joseph,  
an old student of mine, once wrote an essay  
about the baby alligator his uncle gave him that soon grew  
too large for their kiddie pool. When he released  
the tame reptile it waited for weeks on the hill  
for raw hamburger until the family finally  
chased it from the clear water to a muddy stream  
studded in flat-leaved vanilla orchids. He could  
smell its newly wild breath for miles.

*Anna Journey*  
207

---

<sup>207</sup> [Anna Journey, "A Partial Illustration of the Black Market Accompanied by the Scented Breath of Starved Alligator," 32](#)  
[Poems](#)

## Uninhabited

night moaning in an open flue  
wings along the chimney wall

the house as it was, as winter drew  
*frost's white face* on the glass

and you, as then you were  
as old as you would ever be,

playing Schubert in the air,  
on the invisible keys

of a piano that wasn't there—

for the one who vanished near Voronezh  
for “shovels of smoke in the air”

for the wristwatch missing in the river  
from the walker who slipped from the edge

for a suitcase left in the Pyrenees  
for spectacles crushed at Portbou

for the shawl of stars that was night  
when the last of them spoke to you.

Carolyn Forché  
208

---

<sup>208</sup> [Carolyn Forché](#), “[Uninhabited](#),” [Poetry London](#), collected in [In the Lateness of the World](#), [Penguin Books](#)

If I Should Come Upon Your House Lonely in the West Texas Desert

I will swing my lasso of headlights  
across your front porch,

let it drop like a rope of knotted light  
at your feet.

While I put the car in park,  
you will tie and tighten the loop

of light around your waist—  
and I will be there with the other end

wrapped three times  
around my hips horned with loneliness.

Reel me in across the glow-throbbing sea  
of greenthread, bluestem prickly poppy,

the white inflorescence of yucca bells,  
up the dust-lit stairs into your arms.

If you say to me, *This is not your new  
house but I am your new home,*

I will enter the door of your throat,  
hang my last lariat in the hallway,

build my altar of best books on your bedside table,  
turn the lamp on and off, on and off, on and off.

I will lie down in you.  
Eat my meals at the red table of your heart.

Each steaming bowl will be, *Just right.*  
I will eat it all up,

break all your chairs to pieces.  
If I try running off into the deep-purpling scrub brush,

you will remind me,  
*There is nowhere to go if you are already here,*

and pat your hand on your lap lighted  
by the topazion lux of the moon through the window,

say, *Here, Love, sit here*—when I do,  
I will say, *And here I still am.*

Until then, Where are you? What is your address?  
I am hurting. I am riding the night

on a full tank of gas and my headlights  
are reaching out for something.

*Natalie Diaz*  
209

---

<sup>209</sup> [Natalie Diaz](#), "[If I Should Come Upon Your House Lonely in the West Texas Desert](#)," *Literary Hub*, collected in *Postcolonial Love Poem*, Graywolf Press

## Leaves of Grass

I was banished or else  
I was trapped. I couldn't move  
without a passport and several  
fingers on my scalp, four  
contouring my hips, two  
of a stiff drink. When I was fired  
and required by law to have  
my health insured, I fell  
ill. I assured my children  
they would live if they  
quit growing, kept moving, stayed  
out of the sun, stopped  
only in well-lit areas, rearranged  
their skeletal scaffolding.  
My mother was forced to have  
the child of her would-be killer,  
was thus archetypal, was  
historical then sterilized and made  
symbolic of progress.  
In the fouryear before  
it again came down to  
sycophant or psychopath  
I overused the word haunt.  
I had choices. Craft beer.  
French-pressed Sumatra each morning.  
A Prime membership  
to discount my Whole Foods.  
I had a deconstructed soul  
food renaissance to look  
forward to. New neighbors  
sweating through candlelit  
hip-hop yoga. In order to cope  
with mourning the money  
I earned but never touched  
I worked until I dreamt  
of work. I lived nowhere near  
nontoxic water. I walked  
and was accosted. I drove  
and was accosted. I gave  
up driving, but the poles  
had already begun to collapse.  
The infrastructure collapsed.  
The trains collided. The winds  
collided and nothing remained  
anymore of our time to exhaust  
a reversal effort. Only those  
in the business of killing efficiently  
could travel. Everyone else

was told to go back to a continent  
where the business of killing efficiently  
was booming. I was bombed  
and denied refuge. I was sent  
missionaries instead. I was given  
an immature god and told to be  
grateful. The faithful believed  
in bombs and not refugees.  
I slept in a bed and the children in cages.  
I slept in a bed and the children in cages.  
The children died in detention.  
I paid my bills and was therefore  
perpetrator. I paid taxes to be  
more effectively terrorized.  
Long-Range Acoustic Devices for all  
the local precincts. I had a gun  
because they had a gun  
because I had the manner of a thing  
on which a gun was found  
planted. The bodies of activists  
turned up shot in locked cuffs  
and burned in locked cars  
in the century after  
a century of lynchings.  
I was part of a citizenry  
ruled by corporations that were  
legally people who  
could tracelessly erase  
everything but plastic  
which outlived us all,  
but not before it became  
customary to swim home  
past flat fish and yard signs  
mumbling [resist] above the headlights,  
to emerge lotioned in a thin film  
of oil, to be a homebody  
and always on homeland  
security camera,  
shiny and pornographic  
while hunched fiendishly over  
the hot plate. I was not  
there, I told myself.  
You are not here, agreed  
the bluetooth headset newsfeed.

*Justin Phillip Reed*  
210

---

<sup>210</sup> [Justin Phillip Reed](#), "[Leaves of Grass](#)," [The Rumpus](#), collected in [The Malevolent Volume](#), [Coffee House Press](#)

## The History of My Body

I have given up the act  
of kissing. It is a task  
most taxing and involves  
tongues and the passing  
of saliva which calls to mind  
the motions of the sea—  
motions too unseemly  
to be described.  
Look, here is a box  
of lips I meant to use  
before I learned the frisson  
between lovers  
is a myth meant only  
to sell lotion and perfume.  
Excuse me please  
while I button  
this blouse wherein  
I keep my breasts.  
Excuse me while I close  
this drawer between my legs.  
Here is the history of my body  
in three parts: I was born;  
I wore a red dress;  
I was not caressed.  
Moreover, there is a law that states  
no body may touch another  
without crushing to death  
a handful of innocent cells  
and who can find this  
desirable? Better it is  
to preserve the body.  
Take for instance,  
this doll made  
to depict human beauty.  
See how placid  
the painted eyes, how  
her hands lie perfected,  
prayerful in her lap—  
is this not something  
to be admired?  
How often  
I have laid myself beneath  
the cellophane sheathing,  
folded the bell  
of my dress  
into the sides  
of the cardboard box;  
how often I have lain here

awaiting the rapture  
stricken on her face.

*Dara Yen Elerath*  
211

---

<sup>211</sup> [Dara Yen Elerath, "The History of My Body," \*diode\*](#)

## Graceland

is full of high school kids,  
angled and angry, who've come  
to see the golden jumpsuit.

They want pictures  
with the fur-lined bed, the den  
of seaweed shag. They want Love

Me Tender snow globes and pens,  
the perfect shimmering necktie,  
postcards with his bloated eyes

to send to friends back east.  
Their parents never explained.  
The kids don't know

that their fathers wept  
when he was found, their mothers  
fought screams. They never

saw him, all ass and knees  
and mouth, break TVs to pieces  
while the girls cried and cried.

They know only the radio song  
in their mothers' Volkswagens,  
the Technicolor movies

their fathers watch late at night.  
They know only his black  
pompadour, the snarl they've mirrored

in charades. The kids tour  
the house, see the gold  
records, the acrylic paintings

done by fans. They watch  
grandmothers drag toddlers  
through room after room

of display cases and spotlights.  
The kids begin to wonder  
why they came. It's tough

to laugh, though they do.  
When they reach the graves,  
the sky sweats. They compose

their faces carefully. No one  
can tell what they're thinking.  
They feel a strange weight,

their legs suddenly concrete.  
Their stomachs sink. *Fuck*  
*that* they say. They know

someday they'll be left.  
Their former selves  
luminous and gone.

*Catherine Pierce*  
212

---

<sup>212</sup> [Catherine Pierce](#), "[Graceland](#)," collected in [Famous Last Words](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

## Sorry I Don't Like You

It's old-fashioned, struggling  
with grace. Last night in the movie version  
of "Portrait of a Lady," Isabelle will not reveal  
that Osmond is cruel. Provoked,

she might, at the most, weep into her hands.  
O white skin and narrow  
fingers lit by tears, all that money  
was supposed to set you free.

Those days it was enough to worry  
about marriage—it was fate. End up  
with an Osmond and the rest of your life  
equaled grief and its awful seductions.

These days marriage's not enough  
so this world delivers  
lessons everywhere about humility.  
The doctor sends sound waves,

dyes, and tubes into you. A benign tumor  
is measured, your car fills with rain, a neighbor  
asks for money.  
There's a dark night and the edge

of what you feel is possible, a call  
to grace while the days give up their  
black yolks, the smudge that opens up  
nothing so dramatic as not living,

only the likelihood of doing without.  
The landscape shimmers with  
fear. You try to stay unemphatic.  
The oleanders are blooming

and heavy with hummingbirds  
and you should not have, ten years ago, done  
all those things which leave your  
hands empty now. On a Zen tape, the master says,

*when I was young I was a tiger  
and now I am a cat. It is better to be a cat.*  
I think of the brutal tiger,  
the slung hips and thumping tail,

the coiled rump, that mouth.  
I think of my ex-cat, neat whiskers  
patient at the door. What glamour,  
the tiger in all its teeth. I think I have

made a mess. I was reading  
some poems, a series addressed  
to the poet's friend who fell into a coma  
while traveling in China, one from which

he never awoke. The poems are  
about kindness: the times they carried his body  
to the garden to sleep in the trees, the music  
they played and the stories they told

what was left of a man named Steve.  
They are poems I cannot recall without weeping  
because if I were to stop living now—what regret  
I feel. It soaks me like a fog

imperceptibly heavier each day. The burden,  
what I should have done better, the opportunities  
I pissed away, like Isabelle Archer, given fortune  
(of a sort), beautiful youth

and desire. Am I Isabelle Osmond  
who now knows better as she kisses  
her dying cousin? Maybe regret is the final rebellion  
of the puny, the only grace we can manage,

the edge we worry between despair and stepping  
through. Maybe *I should not have done it* is how  
we can say to the ways things are now  
*sorry, I don't like you.*

Connie Voisine  
213

---

<sup>213</sup> [Connie Voisine, "Sorry I Don't Like You,"](#) collected in [Rare High Meadow of Which I Might Dream](#), The University of Chicago Press

## Lore

To think, to swear, and to jaywalk I learned from my father,  
who even now curses me if, his hand in mine,  
I want to wait at the crosswalk.  
I don't think waiting is such a dumb thing to do,  
but my father has other opinions.  
He's a thinking-man's jaywalker,  
he's a thinking-man's thinking man  
who can no longer think,  
an emeritus who loved taking us to the Oasis  
where we could borrow his penknife  
and carve any profanities we liked into the long dark bar.  
*Shit, I'd like to carve there now. Or Please explain!*  
Back at home he taught us little about the US tax code  
but showed us how to tie knots, pack a car, remove  
the washcloths our mother placed gently over our eyes  
when we took our first showers.  
Some things were inimitable, beyond a child's capacities.  
He moved his scalp back and forth with élan  
when we asked him to flex his muscles.  
Claimed he transplanted the hair from his head to his chest,  
which I have yet to try.  
Preserve your options, he often said.  
Put me out on the ice, he often said, as he grew older until he grew older.  
Adversity is when a hero's two options are both bad.  
What's next, he says.  
And then, he says.  
What is wrong, he says and then forgets what he wanted to ask.  
Old age is so profane.  
When I waited tables, my father told me to declare my tips,  
which I never did. I wore a floppy hat  
and worked under the table.  
Now I stand here with him dodging cars  
as if they, too, like him are only desperate engines  
saying slow down, or hurry along now.

Catherine Barnett

214

---

<sup>214</sup> Catherine Barnett, "Lore," [The Literary Review](#), collected in [Human Hours](#), Graywolf Press

## Lexington

There were horses in the field  
on Harrisburg Road; and, further,  
the adult theater. (*Look away*, mother said.) After

the incidents at the sitter's house—  
her son Jim; the *Hustler* in the basement;  
a red scratch on my neck—

my sister and I were made *latchkey kids*.  
And of course I loved the freedom:  
crunching sugar cubes until it hurt; *Guiding Light*;

masturbating just out of sight  
of my little sister. In the hours after  
the indignities of elementary school, before

the return of the parents—that opening—  
I started to feel something. It was contempt.

*Randall Mann*  
215

---

<sup>215</sup> [Randall Mann](#), "[Lexington](#)," [Fourteen Hills](#), collected in [Breakfast with Thom Gunn](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)

## A History of Romanticism

*Byron, Shelley, and Keats*, I said  
their names like a sweet resuscitation, saving  
me from the laundry room, the din  
of the washers, as I carried  
as many sheets as I could  
to the maids waiting to shape  
the billowing whiteness to a stranger's bed.

The powers of the dead were everywhere.  
I had heard them whispering  
in my lover's mouth. They were the crowd  
at the edge of the fourth-story roof, promising  
us wings. They dug a pit in the backyard  
of the house my parents rented, and slowly filled  
the rooms with the sewage of acrimony and loss.

*Byron, Shelley, and Keats*, almost sublime when chanted  
into the twentieth cup of the dregs  
of coffee, or while filling in the schedule books,  
our lives counting down at \$1.35 an hour,  
while the men who called for maid service—*Maid  
of Athens, milkmaids, dairymaids, housemaids, any sweet maid*—  
answered the door, stark naked, displaying a *Playboy* magazine.

“Peacocks” we called  
the insurance salesmen, the corporate VPs  
who arrived every week, fanning  
their newspapers and wallets,  
their cock-a-doodle-do of glittering  
watches and polyester suits. *Lord  
George Gordon Byron*,

I knew I knew nothing  
of the powers of the dead, though I could hear the clank  
forged to every ankle *reluctant in a fleshly  
chain* and had glimpsed the angel of division,  
*Lord Percy Byshe Shelley*, separating  
the look in every eye from what lived  
behind it.

While the supervisor went through  
the rooms like suspicion, I hummed  
*she walks in beauty like the night*  
with Mrs. Ham. At seventy, she couldn't  
afford to retire, and when her head grazed  
the bed she was making, she'd fall asleep  
still standing on her feet.

*And all that's best  
of dark and light meets in her aspect  
and her eyes, and I thought of thee,  
Augusta, and thee, mad Ottoline,  
when three Navajo sisters shared  
one husband, and how we'll go no more  
a-roving so late into the night,*

when Ann, the desk clerk, was embarrassed  
every morning as she exited a stranger's room,  
her hair still tousled by desire and,  
*how I would meet thee with silence  
and with tears,* when Mary Lou, the desk clerk,  
on the phone every morning as lonely as the abandoned  
Harriet, drove her car into the river.

I had gone to work  
to taste the iron bit in the jaw of the world,  
but hadn't counted on this. At the end of the day,  
*among the stones I stood a stone,* exhausted,  
waiting for a ride home, and felt my life draining away  
*into a sea of stagnant idleness,* and I remembered  
that woman who said, "Oh no, I'm fine, sweetie, just fine,"

when I was sent by her husband  
to check on her. I hadn't been able to see  
into the darkened room because she had chained  
the door, her voice so kind and muddy  
because her blood was draining  
into the tub, and *O God! it is a fearful thing  
to see the human soul take wing.*

Sometimes walking across the parking lot,  
I would hear the cry of the peacocks  
on the other side of the concrete wall.  
An eccentric widow  
kept a flock in her barren orchard—  
all that was left of a once thriving farm—  
and their cries erupted at random

throughout the day, a sound  
like something being pierced, or strangled,  
a sound like the power of death  
entering the larynx, though it was, in fact,  
the ruthless desire to go on, to perpetuate  
oneself at any cost that so  
tore, *filling their bare and void interstices.*

*Rebecca Seiferle*

---

<sup>216</sup> [Rebecca Seiferle](#), "[A History of Romanticism](#)," [Alaska Quarterly Review](#), collected in [Bitters](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Cracked Sycamore

cracked sycamore  
turn the moon blue  
kill the lights  
in this wish house

mother get more  
heavy blankets  
hot in the dark  
clock stopped

father goes soused  
outage mother  
crouch over your candle  
dreaming camellias

eyes shut ice picks

*Cammy Thomas*  
217

---

<sup>217</sup> [Cammy Thomas](#), "[Cracked Sycamore](#)," collected in [Cathedral of Wish](#), [Four Way Books](#)

## Darwin

### I

His holy  
    slowly  
        mulled over  
matter

not all “delirium  
    of delight”  
        as were the forests  
of Brazil

“Species are not  
    (it is like confessing  
        a murder)  
immutable”

He was often becalmed  
    in this Port Desire by illness  
        or rested from species  
at billiard table

As to Man  
    “I believe Man...  
        in the same predicament  
with other animals”

### II

Cordilleras to climb—Andean  
    peaks “tossed about  
        like the crust  
of a broken pie”

Icy wind  
    Higher, harder  
        Chileans advised eat onions  
for shortness of breath

Heavy on him:  
    Andes miners carried up  
        great loads—not allowed  
to stop for breath

Fossil bones near Santa Fe  
Spider-bite-scauld  
Fever  
Tended by an old woman

“Dear Susan...  
I am ravenous  
for the sound  
of the pianoforte”

### III

FitzRoy blinked—  
sea-shells on mountain-tops!  
The laws of change  
rode the seas

without the good captain  
who could not concede  
land could rise from the sea  
until—before his eyes

earthquake—  
Talcahuana Bay drained out—  
all-water wall  
up from the ocean

—six seconds—  
demolished the town  
The will of God?  
Let us pray

And now the Galapagos Islands—  
hideous black lava  
The shore so hot  
it burned their feet

through their boots  
Reptile life  
Melville here later  
said the chief sound was a hiss

A thousand turtle monsters  
drive together to the water  
Blood-bright crabs hunt ticks  
on lizards' backs

Flightless cormorants  
Cold-sea creatures—  
penguins, seals  
here in tropical waters

Hell for FitzRoy  
but for Darwin Paradise Puzzle  
with the jig-saw gists  
beginning to fit

IV

Years... balancing  
probabilities  
I am ill, he said  
and books are slow work

Studied pigeons  
barnacles, earthworms  
Extracted seeds  
from bird dung

Brought home Drosera—  
saw insects trapped  
by its tentacles—the fact  
that a plant should secrete

an acid acutely akin  
to the digestive fluid  
of an animal! Years  
till he published

He wrote Lyell: Don't forget  
to send me the carcass  
of your half-bred African cat  
should it die

V

I remember, he said  
those tropical nights at sea—  
we sat and talked  
on the booms

Tierra del Fuego's  
shining glaciers translucent  
blue clear down  
(almost) to the indigo sea

(By the way Carlyle  
thought it was most ridiculous  
anyone should care  
whether a glacier

moves a little quicker  
or a little slower  
or moved at all)  
Darwin

sailed out  
of Good Success Bay  
to carcass-  
conclusions—

the universe  
not built by brute force  
but designed by laws  
The details left

to the working of chance  
“Let each man hope  
and believe  
what he can”

*Lorine Niedecker*

218

---

<sup>218</sup> [Lorine Niedecker](#), “[Darwin](#),” collected in [The Granite Pail](#), [Gnomon Press](#)

## Essay on Trees

### Poplars

Poplars, known for growing in fertile and moist places, have, according to the OED, “tremulous leaves.” Homer, in the *Odyssey*, surrounds his nymph Kalypso with poplar trees. So too does Nabokov grow his nymphet Lolita in a house, an adolescent cave, surrounded by poplar trees; when she leaves for summer camp, we learn that Lolita waves goodbye to the trees, while Humbert notes, from his bedroom window, that Lolita will never see them again. Later, when they see the peculiar sights of America, Humbert, emerging from a post office, finds Lo gone: “The new and beautiful post office I had just emerged from stood between a dormant movie house and a conspiracy of poplars.” Later, “at a motel called Poplar Shade in Utah” we learn that there are “six pubescent trees” that “were scarcely taller than” Lolita. Poplars, trees that are known for their quick growth, their supple and light limbs, their silvery timber, and Lolita in the shadow of those trees. So too do we find Tennyson’s kept maiden Mariana in those shadows in the last stanza: “...and the sound / Which to the wooing wind aloof / The poplar made, did all confound / Her sense.” Mariana wishes that she were dead.

### Live Oaks

Among the rows and rows of live oaks growing in America’s South, a certain variety may or may not have been known to Whitman when he wrote “I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing.” Native to Louisiana is the Suicide Live Oak, which of course, creates an ironic tension for the living. According to the Historic Tree Nursery, the Suicide Oak “designates an area where victims of despair killed themselves. And, true to its name, the Suicide Oak is desperate.” (What then of the grove of the suicides in Canto XIII of Dante’s *Inferno*?) Spanish moss, evoking nooses, drapes low to the ground and reaches across to other

and old video games is the availability of *life*. In new games, the player can *die* as many times as he likes and still reach the *end* of the game. The disjunction between *knowing* and *unknowing* is thus disturbed, creating a false sense of the implications of *one chance* and *life* and *death* in their mere mortal terms. This false finality is further confounded by the fact that medical advances have progressed at the same rate of video game advances: how many people do we know walk out of the hospital when, even just twenty years earlier, their ailments would have surely killed them? (I remember once my little sister pausing from such a game to *pray for another life*.) I remember being in a maze, embodying a big dot that would have to eat an infinite number of smaller dots—an organic being eating an infinite amount of smaller organic beings. I remember that what killed us was *ghosts*, and we could never enter the houses of the ghosts. We would have to flee the ghosts or have the power enough to eat them only to have them come back to haunt us. So too do I keep espying luna moths, a familiar silver of an old moon, a letter I thought I had long since discarded, the dress I will never wear, a certain photograph, the signpost that spells out what never was.

Jenny Bouilly  
219

---

<sup>219</sup> Jenny Bouilly, “[Essay on Trees](#),” collected in [The Book of Beginnings and Endings](#), Sarabande Books

## Eleven Steps to Breaking up a Hart

II. *Those present eyed the boy with ever-growing interest*

Not here, but in that other country  
You taught me the meaning of *merciless*.

I was delicious: I was still soft inside  
And you hurt me like a pearl.

Come, let us tour the rooms where I bottled you  
And strung the tiny vials round my neck

Where they banged against my collarbone  
To drown out that other drum, the red one.

*Monica Ferrell*  
220

---

<sup>220</sup> [Monica Ferrell](#), "[Eleven Steps to Breaking up a Hart](#)," [Tin House](#), collected in [Beasts for the Chase](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

from "One on One"

#### 4. Tackle Football

Snow up to our waists and coming down still.  
There was a field here once, when we began.  
We marked the end zones and set up the goals.

Now nobody can even move, much less tackle.  
I am Ganymede fleeing on a temple frieze.  
We stand around like lovesick Neanderthals.

We're Pompeian before Pompeii was hot.  
We have the aspect of the classic dead  
Or of stranded, shivering astronauts.

It was early in the era of the pause button:  
We paused and paused the afternoons away  
Indoors, blasting our ballistic erections

At the blurred bikinis of celebrities,  
Then, splaying on the linoleum floor,  
Awaited the apportioned pizza delivery.

Now, someone has paused us, or so it appears,  
But they didn't pause the snow, or the hour:  
As the one gets higher, the other gets later.

*Dan Chiasson*  
221

---

<sup>221</sup> [Dan Chiasson](#), "[One on One](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [Bicentennial](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

Early summer. Yellow jackets hover  
 where an older girl makes sandwiches.  
 The boy with the frisbee is her lover  
 but we don't know it; she says she wishes

he'd leave her alone. This is one  
 strategy we've never played.  
 Other things we haven't done  
 include calculus, driving, moving away

from home, and crying silently all night  
 in rooms we paid for ourselves.  
 We are eleven. The sunlight  
 beats on our arms. When we're twelve

we'll think we know everything.  
 Dawn will drag at our ankles, drug  
 us with heat. Some far morning  
 one of us will wake in the snug

hold of a man she shouldn't have met,  
 the other trek from busy  
 day to night and back, and both regret  
 not having fucked the boy with the frisbee

because it was free. Under the evergreens  
 we crunch ice cubes and jeer the veins  
 in a mother's calves. We don't mean  
 to be mean, but we can't complain

about the heat all day, and we know  
 we'll soon be swollen and blue  
 and white ourselves, so now's  
 the time. Between the two

of us, we're twenty-two. We squint  
 at the volleyball game, where the sky  
 keeps getting in the way. Transparent  
 faces flit through the net and fly

toward church. Our mothers can't teach  
 us why; they can only give us the facts.  
 The time we escaped to wade in the creek  
 at midnight, we should never have gone back.

*Adrienne Su*  
 222

---

<sup>222</sup> [Adrienne Su](#), "1978," collected in [Middle Kingdom](#), [Alice James Books](#)

Already My Lips Were Luminous

My first kiss is with an uncle  
comforting  
me as Amá throws  
up two dollar wine  
after a pool party

I do not know the language of that place  
Sitting on the edge of a cracked red plastic couch  
I am grateful in an ill-fitting girl dress lavender roses dot the chest  
The embrace is short His breath is two cases of cigarettes and one  
aluminum beer  
He says good night; the songs of crows  
outside unspool  
When his sons leave for the Persian Gulf he kisses them too and  
I'm confused  
because men never embrace around me They shove each other's oil hands into  
car guts and machines that make glass  
Not tender not soft  
I understand, then there must be other ways to love  
your children

Vickie Vértiz  
223

---

<sup>223</sup> Vickie Vértiz, "Already My Lips Were Luminous," *Cobalt Review*, collected in *Palm Frond with Its Throat Cut*, The University of Arizona Press

## So There

Because I would not let one four-year-old son  
eat frosted mini-wheat cereal  
fifteen minutes before dinner  
he wrote a giant note  
and held it up  
while I talked on the phone  
LOVE HAS FAILED  
then he wrote the word LOVE  
on a paper  
stapled it twenty times  
and said  
I STAPLE YOU OUT

\*

memory stitching  
its gauze shroud  
to fit any face  
he will say to his friends  
*she was mean*  
he will have little interest  
in diagramming sentences  
the boy / has good taste  
enormous capacities  
for high-tech language  
but will struggle  
to bring his lunchbox home  
*I remember / you*  
*you're / the one*  
*I / stared at in the / cloud*  
*when / I wasn't paying / attention*  
*to people / on the ground*

\*

the three-year-old wore twenty dresses  
to her preschool interview  
her mother could not make  
her  
change  
take some off her mother pleaded  
and the girl put on a second pair of tights  
please I'm begging you  
what will they think of us  
the girl put all eight of her pastel barrettes  
into her hair at once  
she put on  
her fuzzy green gloves

she would have worn four shoes but could not  
get the second pair on top of the first pair  
her mother cried you look like a mountain  
who has come to live with me  
she had trouble walking  
from the car up to the school  
trouble sitting  
in the small chair that was offered  
the headmistress said  
my my we are a stubborn personality

*Naomi Shihab Nye*  
224

---

<sup>224</sup> [Naomi Shihab Nye](#), "[So There](#)," collected in [Fuel](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Who Makes Love to Us After We Die

I turn on the radio and hear voices, girls becoming women after tragedy. Talk about dreams! His heart was covered in a thin shell the color of moon and when touched, I grew old. The best movies have a philosophy (Dorothy, after being subjected to girl-on-girl violence, is rescued). Someone hanged himself on that set, a man who loved but couldn't have a certain woman. Management claimed it was a bird. The best movies begin with an encounter and end with someone setting someone free. In Coppola's *Dracula* the camera chases women across a garden until they kiss. The man I loved, after many years, asked me to choke him in bed; later, cleaning a kitchen cabinet, I found a recipe he'd carved into the wood, and I had a hard time believing him.

*Diana Marie Delgado*  
225

---

<sup>225</sup> [Diana Marie Delgado](#), "[Who Makes Love to Us After We Die](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [Tracing the Horse](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Conversation with Phillis Wheatley #7

*Have you ever been for sale?* she asked. *Yes* I said  
*at the country club for the Eve of Janus Debutante Ball.*

~

We were good at hiding our zip code and teeth.  
They wanted all white, floor length,

and preferably designer. My mother's best friend  
bought the dress on sale from a department store.

It was the kind of dress that looked expensive,  
but wasn't—shiny and pure and no one would know.

My mother promised to pay her back at the end  
of the month. Same for the dinner—\$100 a plate

for some charity. My boyfriend's mother was on  
the board of the ball and got me in. They wanted

the name of my father and only his name, kept asking  
and prying, reaching inside my little life to lift any lineage

to properly present my fresh body to high society.  
They wanted: *Mr. and Mrs. Whiter White III presents...*

I gave them the only name I had—my mother's:  
Verna Marguerite Knight.

I walked on stage, clean and dreamy as a cloud,  
a young girl in transition and paused as the master

of ceremonies stumbled over my data: Black girl.  
*Um*, no father. *Pause*. Mother's full name. *Um*, Senior

in High School (*COUGH*). College plans, etc....  
The hot spotlight on my galactic silhouette shot

through me as my blackness blurred over white faces  
in the crowd, except for my mother and her best friend

and the servers with thick, lily-white gloves. I walked  
down the runway, the auction block. Past the portrait

of Robert E. Lee into the blinding snow-bright circle  
of center stage. Half my face split by light, one half caught

in the beam, the other lost inside my shadow smacked  
against the wall, looking back on Belle Meade Plantation

at the kitchen's dirty dishes stacked like cairns for my kin,  
looking forward into a rich blizzard—a wealthy haze

of glittering tables, clinking china, a flurry of whispers.  
Old Money looked me up and down and back again, placing

and tracing my origin. All evening, they kept asking me  
who made my dress *Who made your dress, dear?*

And to repeat my last name: *Knight* I said. *Knight*  
as in black as the night sky above, everywhere stabbed

by blinking stars. Meaning: I come from the back  
of the store, disheveled sale racks, everything 70% off,

marked down, price stricken through

with a giant red slash.

*Tiana Clark*  
226

---

<sup>226</sup> [Tiana Clark, "Conversation with Phillis Wheatley #7," \*The Sewanee Review\*, collected in \*I Can't Talk About the Trees Without the Blood\*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Primer (Brass + Lead)

The bullet base is made from the kind of brass that otherwise would have been a classroom doorknob or cheap ring at one of those prequarantine gathering places with games of chance & lights that surprise & delight. Or molded into new French horns for the underfunded youth band—no solos for the hornists, but they are still vital to the orchestra. At the center of the brass base: an igniter made out of lead. An igniter is only good at exploding, but the lead might have scratched its love in meticulous notes with old-time penmanship. Or become part of the paint behind a Periodic Table of Elements in the back of a public-school classroom: Pb, atomic number 82. It's right there, lining Roman aqueducts & wine vats at the other end of the empire. It's right there, holding reactors & their radiations close as a friend in need. Walkman batteries running out in the middle of a slow jam again—the voices get thicker & deeper in the lead correction. In some other life, the primer probably would have gone in another direction.

*Adrian Matejka*  
227

---

<sup>227</sup> [Adrian Matejka, "Primer \(Brass + Lead\)," \*Four Way Review\*](#)

## Superman

Superman sits on a tall building  
smoking pot, holding the white plumes in,  
palliative for the cancerous green glow  
spreading its tentacles beneath his  
blue uniform, his paraffin skin.

The pot also calms him so he can look  
down through the leafy crowns of the Trees  
of Heaven to patches of black asphalt  
where a small dog chained to a grate  
raises his leg against a sapling.

It's 2010 and the doctors have given him  
another year in Metropolis. Another year  
in paradise when he's high, another year  
in hell when he's not.

A magazine falls from his lap. Lois  
on the cover of *Fortune*, the planets  
aligned behind her, starlight glancing off  
her steely upswept hair.

He lifts his head from his hands  
as the sun sets, the sound of muffled gunfire  
in every city of the world ricochets  
through his gray brain, He'll take care of it  
tomorrow, the thankless, endless task  
of catching dirty bombs and bullets,  
though like the dishes piling up in the sink  
there are always more.

365 dark days left to try to gather them all,  
tunnel through to the earth's core  
and bury them there. But for now he leans  
his wide back against the stove-hot bricks  
and stretches each long blue leg.  
Blissfully stoned he doesn't notice  
when his heel clips the chipped wing  
of a granite angel, can't feel the Kryptonite  
bending its rays up toward his scarlet heart.

*Dorianne Laux*  
228

---

<sup>228</sup> [Dorianne Laux](#), "[Superman](#)," collected in [The Book of Men](#), W. W. Norton & Company

## Of the Impending Mission

It is best not to talk about this  
which is why I am scribbling it  
on the sole of my Manolo.  
I met one of them in Plaidtown.  
His hair was bleached and he wanted  
to fuck Soxy but she wasn't into it,  
no matter how cool he was  
and I can tell you: he was pretty  
cool according to himself.  
One editor said, "Write a book  
and don't cuss in it and don't  
have any sex and if you must  
have sex, then have it with  
one person and let it be tragic,  
for example, he is only sleeping  
with you b/c you are disabled.  
You are very sad afterwards  
and take some time to be alone.  
This I could sell." How to deal?  
Thank you for your kind words  
on the execution tourists.  
I am nowhere near the target.

*Jillian Weise*  
229

---

<sup>229</sup> [Jillian Weise, "Of the Impending Mission," \*Bellingham Review\*, collected in \*Cyborg Detective\*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## Back in Seaside

Rain interchangeable with  
the walls it falls against  
alphabetless like a neon  
ring above an extincted  
window showcasing something  
formerly fabulous now kinda  
poignantly disappeared.  
I guess that means we're back  
in Seaside (since we must  
begin somewhere) and it's  
probably summer but  
can't be as long ago  
as the date you suggest  
since I wouldn't have been  
born, or quietly gagging  
at the sentence re: photographs  
being fairly far removed  
from sculpture anyway belied  
by a euthanized block  
of period tract housing  
the loading dock's pair  
of refrigerated trucks  
the blandishing panes of all  
those plate glass storefronts  
the corrugated doors rolled  
shut against a statement  
the curves of the cars  
as they throw back  
their throats to the light  
the furtive things people  
do in the night (or don't do)  
compiled screen by screen  
in perfervid surveillance.  
I just want to say yes  
to you, yes and  
watch this.

*Shanna Compton*  
230

---

<sup>230</sup> [Shanna Compton](#), "[Back in Seaside](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [Brink](#), [Bloof Books](#)

from "Garden Quarrel"

## 2. Reason Is But Choosing

Eve ate the apple  
she tasted the snake

Adam ate Eve  
he tasted the apple

Their hunger  
had the grandeur  
of a famine

A *tristesse*  
falls upon the scene  
like a light rainfall

There is something mysterious  
about lyric poetry

The long glare walls  
of evening  
were constructed in a spirit of play

Adam's a *tragédien*  
Eve opens and closes her legs like a book  
No one is waiting for life to begin

Their tears eventually  
turn back into  
the leaves of the tree

Sandra Lim  
231

---

<sup>231</sup> Sandra Lim, "Garden Quarrel," collected in [The Wilderness](#), W. W. Norton & Company

## Magazine Feminism

I could not be said to have “wound  
Up” anywhere but it was true

That at that time I was alone. Also  
True was that I had not been fucked correctly

In what was starting to feel like a long  
Time. I used the apps but did not

Show myself on them to be a person  
Sipping cocktails on an inflatable dolphin

Nor was I a person about to simply say  
Who she was and what she sought. I got

More attention, of course, than I could possibly  
Return, and at a rate of about one in a thousand

Encountered someone with whom I felt  
What is commonly termed “a spark.”

My appetite for self-advertisement having  
Become, admittedly, low since the period

I had to take the university to court and the time  
Before that when I was being stalked by several

Men and the ex-wife of an ex-boyfriend.  
I was certainly having a profound experience

Of myself and of the light that fell on me  
And my views, and the distortions of my views

And the cheaper versions of things I had done  
Which shone in the light my machines gave

I just don’t even have words for what it felt like  
I don’t have words for when you would rather work

Than fuck but to borrow a phrase  
From an old jazz song it can happen to you

I am tired of the ruse of emptiness that fills  
My sexual imagination when I feel beauty

Of a certain kind being done to me  
And tired also of the job of performing

Sovereignty according to these old rules  
Some of my favorite people seem to be fueled

By pure rancor. By rancor alone.  
I can't say I'm the same

The sun warms my writing hand  
I forget all the time

That the sun is our friend  
I often forget that I have friends

I taught myself to surrender  
It was strategic, like going out

Of your body while somebody fucks you  
And you don't want it

Every woman knows what this is like  
I don't know a single one who hasn't done it

But I taught myself another kind of surrender too  
I did it in the off hours, in whatever time and space

I could steal from my career. All I can say is  
Once you have surrendered like that

It becomes hard to care about magazine feminism  
Though I find myself looking back at it

Like the doomed woman from the myth  
And looking back at everything else too

My barbaric homeland, I beheld it from deep within a jewel  
I looked down at it from airplanes

I studied it with unkindness  
The way I had learned to study my own face and body

The bad ideologies through which we all  
Had to move could be shaken off, and our mutual

Dependence on the machines to fill the desert  
In our lives with music and bodies, ideas and fun

I would not change it for a mountain  
But so many mountains had already fallen

And it may be that my despair that day  
In a light of pale beaten

Gold, like something in an Attic  
Vision, while an eclipse progressed

That could not be seen, it may be  
That my despair was chemical or that

It was menstrual, but it was also  
Mensual. actual, or it was all a bad dream

I too a product of magazines  
And yet, I wanted to say, and yet

Some wild feature of my apparent docility  
Is even now filling my arms

As if it were a cayenne pepper soda  
I were talking to you through

But now I feel the other world pulling me down  
Again... Goodbye

*Ariana Reines*  
232

---

<sup>232</sup> [Ariana Reines](#), "[Magazine Feminism](#)," collected in [A Sand Book](#), [Tin House Books](#)

[Parties among strangers, punks, leather caps and straps, pressing]

Parties among strangers, punks, leather caps and straps, pressing  
Quaaludes between my lips. What was pressed in I swallowed.  
Is it hard for you to imagine me wearing gold lipstick? I did. Is it hard  
for you to imagine me stupid? I was passed like bread among strangers.  
For a couple of nights, I was the new thing. Then just a thing. Days I ran  
a vintage clothing store, sat at a card table with a cigar box for a cash  
drawer, the place too small for more than a couple of racks of old dresses  
and tuxedos. Every day a screenwriter newly arrived from Poland sat  
across from me, knee to knee, and read from his horrible screenplay.  
He asked for critique, but when I gave it he derided me, once even spit  
in my face. I quit the job to get away from him, or didn't quit, just didn't  
show up one day. That's how things worked back then. I was valueless, no?  
It seems strange now, when everyone is so intent on having value. I flitted  
in my stolen vintage clothes, topless. I was that writer named anonymous.

*Diane Seuss*  
233

---

<sup>233</sup> [Diane Seuss, "Parties among strangers, punks, leather caps and straps, pressing," \*The Adroit Journal\*](#)

## Gold

I've become  
the kind of creature who, on Sundays,  
fills seven small boxes with a bevy of pills

to stick it out another week.  
When will I be fixed enough  
to hear my kid scream without tearing

my father's phantom hands off me?  
How do demons, decades gone now,  
still ravage me? Tell me

I am not the thing  
my children will have to survive.  
Tell me

the mob I inherited will not touch  
my son. Yes. the cavalcade  
of all that's tried to kill me

may forever raid my brain, but know  
this: in my mother's first language,  
the word for *fracture*, for *crack*

is the same as the word for *gold*.  
Every Thursday for twenty-one months  
before my son was born,

a doctor trained me to put the gun down  
and write. I understand  
I am one of the lucky ones.

*Eugenia Leigh*  
234

---

<sup>234</sup> [Eugenia Leigh](#), "[Gold](#)," [Pleiades](#)

Person, Woman, Man, Camera, TV

The earth tests each person,  
like the Great Famine tested a woman  
who inevitably succumbed. A man  
later carved her image, having no camera,  
into wood. I watch her story on a T.V.  
that channels crowds of gasping people. No words

escape their chiseled throats. No words.  
No proper nouns. No names to tell which person  
might be the effigy on my T.V.,  
and no markers to signal where this woman's  
bones might be. More femurs as the camera  
pans a field to an ancient farmer, a man

who fled Ireland for America. In his diaspora, this man's  
tears, or mine, blur the screen. *Picture*, his words  
beg, *the pits they threw their bodies in*. His inner camera  
mutely records as each new person  
perishes in a fresh death toll, conjuring this woman  
as whole villages sicken and die on T.V.

*Stockpiles of grain to fatten the cattle*, the T.V.  
anchor adds, for export. The old man  
flinches. *Fish just offshore. This woman  
wasn't felled by potato fungus but by words*.  
He explains, *The contagion of each person  
who spread them*. The camera

in the man pings. So sensitive. His camera  
sharpens through the T.V.  
events we now witness in person,  
a terrible gathering in the gut. The old man  
scowls: *Let this thin the herd were the words  
the leaders levied against this woman*.

The newly dead, like this woman,  
carry their invisible lives away from the camera,  
the wider orb never turning to their words:  
*I was here*. Leaders stream on T.V.  
rarely naming each person  
as distinct and meaning it. One such man

was elected after boasting to every person who'd listen  
on camera or T.V., about savaging a woman.  
After aping a disabled man. I can barely speak these words.

Eileen Cleary  
235

---

<sup>235</sup> Eileen Cleary, "Person, Woman, Man, Camera, TV." *What Rough Beast*

## Alcohol

### I.

I remember the stale smell of urine and skin  
in the heat of the boiler room

my superintendent father's broom  
shooing out two men

bums he called them to my mother  
who scrubbed the floor with bleach

and years later a party where my father  
drank so much he  
couldn't fit the key into the car door

my mother begging *let me drive*  
me in the backseat not knowing

alcohol had reduced the force  
at which his heart beat  
and was seeping into his lungs  
to fill our vehicle with haze

### II.

in excess everything is poison  
even kale or water  
I could live without vodka brandy

rum without vanilla extract without beer  
and more sadly without wine  
and its inspiring

you've never hung me over  
although one night in a hilltop restaurant  
after a waiter plied me with five courses

and five glasses of wine  
I refused to pay a bet I lost

waving my arms like fumes  
I did not like the person I became

you are ready and waiting  
any time of the year or day

if only science would make yeast not  
ferment sugar surely easier  
than cloning sheep or curing ebola

leavened bread a small sacrifice  
for reimagining the earth

as ancient north America or Australia  
where tribes had no brewing

a clump of soft fur  
at the back of the throat  
music that shifts from ditty to dirge

I suspect my gripe is not with you  
but with the fact that humans  
are not only the animals

who often don't know when to stop  
but are also the only  
animals who understand why they can't

*Natasha Sajé*  
236

---

<sup>236</sup> [Natasha Sajé, "Alcohol," \*Southern Indiana Review\*](#)

## I Am Writing a Letter

to grief. I am thinking my letter will need a stamp,  
the one from when they landed on the moon.  
The mail carrier will arrive

in his royal blue shorts. I will hand him my letter,  
and he will hand me a small bundle  
of nothing I want.

The envelope will be neither heavy nor light.  
When the letter arrives, it will open  
like the swirling birth of a star.

Feverfew. A heart pin made of broken seashells.  
A cup of Roma. A crossword puzzle clue.  
I am writing a letter

to the last star because the universe will someday  
collapse. It takes a star 50,000 years to reach  
adulthood, but everything dies,

including stars. It is interesting to learn  
what is expected of me.  
My husband says

I am taking it very well. I told a colleague  
I am managing. Like when I managed  
an office, answered the phone

in a fake-pleasant voice. Grief is placing its lips  
on my hippocampus, that lizard part  
of the brain that still hasn't

caught up with her death-rattle breath.  
I am writing a letter to grief.  
A framed photo of her

and my dad keeps sliding off the mantle,  
which of course I'm taking  
as a sign.

I am writing a letter asking the mice to keep their distance.  
It won't be written in a fancy font. American Typewriter,  
like her gravestone, a limestone rock.

I told a colleague I am managing.  
My letter of grief will fill  
the mail carrier's sack.

*Martha Silano*

## My Brother Doesn't Wake Up Wishing We Were Closer

Years I aimed to be, if not beloved,  
then necessary: default accomplice

to summer violence, tadpoles shot  
along the lake, arrows sinking in soft skulls.

Our parents pandered to his power,  
his bored cruelty accepted as a boy's.

No one was surprised when he left,  
but no one could be sure what for:

reckless, premature death, or disappointment  
blurring its own shadow. It was June,

the hammock still some distance  
from the ground. I believed in that

internal life that silently weaves between two  
a kind of due, imagined holding our parents

like unbearable flowers while the years  
crept blindly through the garden.

What I believed would have kept me  
in a hopeless girlhood. He told me once

about a frat brother in the woods of Virginia  
(all had been drinking—no one could say

how he got there) who awoke to a deer  
peering over him, steam rising from soft

articulations in its flesh. And he followed  
to where nothing was expected, unexpected—

the creek bank, mossy shoulder, all attachment  
to plot unreasonable. Years, I mistook

the boy for my brother, palms flat to  
the earth to find a trail out of our family.

It was my listening that cost me, hoping

---

<sup>237</sup> [Martha Silano, "I Am Writing a Letter," \*Four Way Review\*](#)

to be heard. My compulsion for the confessor's  
tether, to feel his cool mouth at the shell  
of my ear, then to sleep all night in the gossip  
of grasses, where the breeze tallied the trees,  
and it was possible to wake him.

*Maya C. Popa*  
238

---

<sup>238</sup> [Maya C. Popa, "My Brother Doesn't Wake Up Wishing We Were Closer," \*The Adroit Journal\*](#)

Hart Crane, on the Failure of Poetry

I'd visited the sailors'  
quarters of  
the Orizaba, past Cuba.  
I'd read *The Tempest*

in Venice, a few eccentrics  
and gulls  
to talk Melville to;  
an incoherence.

It hasn't been easy.  
A cold shoulder  
in Pasadena,  
Chaplin's "Carcassonne."

At the same industry  
party urinal,  
Ramón Novarro  
came, swallowing me...

The first attempt  
by iodine,  
a few drops, and a bottle  
of mercurochrome,

leaving my inheritance  
to a sailor  
one Sunday brunch,  
having razored

my own face (by Siqueiros!)  
raving, incoherent,  
already drunk. Without  
an income—

Sailors. Plenty  
in fact, like Honeyboy,  
the stoker  
from battleship

Wyoming with  
coal-stained hands. And  
Alfredo, the *Maximo*  
*Gomez* docked

in Havana harbor.  
A hurricane—what luck!  
I never could stand  
so much

falsetto, this badinage  
about “flying” being better  
than “sailing,” since  
I’d been fisted by

a pilot in Los Angeles,  
that “great pink  
vacuum of marvelous  
blvds. and pink

sunsets” and rum,  
splashed  
with garden lime,  
stolen from

mother’s Sunset  
bungalow;  
birds-of-paradise!  
Uncensored,

raw, she’d burn  
my letters, the good ones.  
“That terrible virus  
of criticism,”

my affliction.  
My white Spitz,  
Paloma.  
A pet

parrot, Attaboy.  
Herman Melville;  
Poe. I did not  
love Wise,

that frail Millionaire  
gobbling caviar  
with port, and later  
in Mexico

the scandal of jailtime;  
an Indian  
servant boy...  
A Guggenheim. Oh Emil,

sailed to Los Angeles  
on *SS California!*  
A Bacardi quart,  
five “complete” men

attacked us leaving him  
sprawled across  
the docks, unconscious.  
Our reunion,

a hate crime—  
Hollywood.  
Fierce young  
faeries reciting

Rimbaud,  
a shadow.  
Nocturnal  
beatings,

binging, arrests;  
gravity.  
A mystical poverty  
before I folded

my coat, over  
the railing.  
Tropic of Cancer.  
My quarrelling

life, enthralled—  
You know, you already know,  
I’d vaulted  
into the byzantine

glittering metaphor...

*Miguel Murphy*  
239

---

<sup>239</sup> [Miguel Murphy, “Hart Crane, on the Failure of Poetry,” \*Sporklet\*](#)

## The Monster Hour

On the Monster Hour, there was this monster that used to come out and try to kill everybody in the audience. No one expected it, not even the producers who were told by the monster he would play a few blues tunes on the piano. The monster apologized after each show and asked for another chance. *I'm planning on telling a few jokes this time* he would say. But time after time he'd break his word and try to kill everybody. The producers finally replaced him with a gorilla dressed in people clothes that came out and played a Wurlitzer, but they never changed the name of the show. It was always the Monster Hour. I don't think anybody understood then what a monster really was.

Zachary Schomburg  
240

---

<sup>240</sup> [Zachary Schomburg](#), "[The Monster Hour](#)," collected in [The Man Suit, Black Ocean](#)

## How the Past Tense Turns a Whole Sentence Dark

Somewhere, it is night—a night in which you still love me.  
If you asked—*how long must suffering last*—I would say

*you loved me once* and lead you forward along the hedgerows.  
Ahead, the night where you loved me is a room in space.

Curtains drawn. Its door closed to us. Inside, my head above  
your heart. Your legs between or over mine. The silence we kept.

How I would open my mouth to break it, and you would  
shake your head, as if to say *no words* and turn my body to fill it.

It is night. We are outside ourselves, mouths filling with dark  
cinnamon smoke, outside the house of past tense. Inside, those bodies

do not belong to us. Inside, they will love unceasingly. When  
we are dead, the angels will gather, throw open the door, call out

to the night: *where shall they find rest?* Even the stars will be  
ashamed of us, point their fiery arms in all directions.

*TJ Jarrett*  
241

---

<sup>241</sup> TJ Jarrett, "How the Past Tense Turns a Whole Sentence Dark," collected in [Zion](#), Southern Illinois University Press

Midwestern Wedding: Dream No. 5

Amid cardboard coasters with the post number stamped on, we open presents at the American Legion. A leathery man in a uniform cap says,

*You two go together like wood paneling & carriage lights.* Slaps his pal on the back, adds, *Don't they, Emory? Ain't that right?* The boxes reveal things we were not hoping to receive:

towels monogrammed with "our" initials, though you won't change your name

& I won't change mine.

The same streamlined toaster three times in a row.

A Cuisinart iron that makes heart-shaped waffles,

& four mismatched highball glasses, premixed Old Fashioneds already poured.

Somebody flips on the icicle lights, our cue to rise & head to the wall:

a mysterious square, wrapped in brown paper. Inside? Honest Abe! Illinois' finest rendering of our 16th President, presiding benignly over our postnuptials. Abruptly, they start to play Pin the Stovepipe Hat on the Man Who Saved the Union. The portrait starts bleeding.

We flee the proceedings.

Outside, we try to give our presents away. Every car trails cans & streamers—gauzy, bloodstained—but they are all of them dreaming. None of them stop.

*Kathleen Rooney*  
242

---

<sup>242</sup> [Kathleen Rooney](#), "Midwestern Wedding: Dream No. 5," collected in [Oneiromance](#), [Switchback Books](#)

## Extreme Domesticity

Dear Lexie, I have a confession to make: in frat houses, I'm always just looking for an antique crown molding. I create inglorious exits all the time—tonight, I tell the whey-faced summer analyst that my twin Samoyeds have leukemia. There are good tears—I love to wring my face out, especially when I know it could make a nice boy uncomfortable. I am profoundly awful at heterosexuality and I think a disgrace to everything else. I cannot stop wanting the absurd things like minivans and rhinestone manicures. At midnight, I watch HGTV reruns and think about how we used to play that game at open houses—you were a varnished marble in those metallic skirtsuits when you pretended to be your boss, but I was better at improv. My favorite part was nodding sagely when they gave us an asking price—we'd always smile starchily and say, "*Well, we'll have to consult with each other, but we love a good fixer-upper.*" On the television, the bright-faced concert harpist and her sommelier fiancé repeat the same line. My heart genuinely swells for Lauren, 33, and Bradley, 36, as they perform agony over a flagstone patio and tile backsplash in a sun-slick kitchen. They want an open-concept floor plan and six bedrooms, you see, because they want to start a family someday. In the end, they go with the butter-colored gingerbread Victorian hovering on the waterfront. When the camera pans out, it looks like a dollhouse spectacularly unmoored on that fuzz of blue—

*Aline Dolinh*

243

---

<sup>243</sup> [Aline Dolinh](#), "[Extreme Domesticity](#)," [The Rumpus](#)

## You Are Who I Love

You, selling roses out of a silver grocery cart

You, in the park, feeding the pigeons  
You cheering for the bees

You with cats in your voice in the morning, feeding cats

You protecting the river You are who I love  
delivering babies, nursing the sick

You with henna on your feet and a gold star in your nose

You taking your medicine, reading the magazines

You looking into the faces of young people as they pass, smiling and saying, *Alright!* which, they know it, means *I see you, Family. I love you. Keep on.*

You dancing in the kitchen, on the sidewalk, in the subway waiting for the train because Stevie Wonder, Héctor Lavoe, La Lupe

You stirring the pot of beans, you, washing your father's feet

You are who I love, you  
reciting Darwish, then June

Feeding your heart, teaching your parents how to do The Dougie, counting to 10, reading your patients' charts

You are who I love, changing policies, standing in line for water, stocking the food pantries, making a meal

You are who I love, writing letters, calling the senators, you who, with the seconds of your body (with your *time* here), arrive on buses, on trains, in cars, by foot to stand in the January streets against the cool and brutal offices, saying: **YOUR CRUELTY DOES NOT SPEAK FOR ME**

You are who I love, you struggling to see

You struggling to love or find a question

You better than me, you kinder and so blistering with anger, you are who I love, standing in the wind, salvaging the umbrellas, graduating from school, wearing holes in your shoes

You are who I love  
weeping or touching the faces of the weeping

You, Violeta Parra, grateful for the alphabet, for sound, singing toward us in the dream

You carrying your brother home

You noticing the butterflies

Sharing your water, sharing your potatoes and greens

You who did and did not survive

You who cleaned the kitchens

You who built the railroad tracks and roads

You who replanted the trees, listening to the work of squirrels and birds, you are who I love

You whose blood was taken, whose hands and lives were taken, with or without your saying

*Yes, I mean to give.* You are who I love.

You who the borders crossed

You whose fires

You decent with rage, so in love with the earth

You writing poems alongside children

You cactus, water, sparrow, crow     You, my elder

You are who I love,

summoning the courage, making the cobbler,

getting the blood drawn, sharing the difficult news, you always planting the marigolds, learning to walk wherever you are, learning to read wherever you are, you baking the bread, you come to me in dreams, you kissing the faces of your dead wherever you are, speaking to your children in your mother's languages, tootsing the birds

You are who I love, behind the library desk, leaving who might kill you, crying with the love songs, polishing your shoes, lighting the candles, getting through the first day despite the whisperers sniping fail fail fail

You are who I love, you who beat and did not beat the odds, you who knows that any good thing you have is the result of someone else's sacrifice, work, you who fights for reparations

You are who I love, you who stands at the courthouse with the sign that reads NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE

You are who I love, singing Leonard Cohen to the snow, you with glitter on your face, wearing a kilt and violet lipstick

You are who I love, sighing in your sleep

You, playing drums in the procession, you feeding the chickens and humming as you hem the skirt, you sharpening the pencil, you writing the poem about the loneliness of the astronaut

You wanting to listen, you trying to be so still

You are who I love, mothering the dogs, standing with horses

You in brightness and in darkness, throwing your head back as you laugh, kissing your hand

You carrying the berbere from the mill, and the jug of oil pressed from the olives of the trees you belong to

You studying stars, you are who I love  
braiding your child's hair

You are who I love, crossing the desert and trying to cross the desert

You are who I love, working the shifts to buy books, rice, tomatoes,

bathing your children as you listen to the lecture, heating the kitchen with the oven, up early, up late

You are who I love, learning English, learning Spanish, drawing flowers on your hand with a ballpoint pen, taking the bus home

You are who I love, speaking plainly about your pain, sucking your teeth at the airport terminal television every time the politicians say something that offends your sense of decency, of thought, which is often

You are who I love, throwing your hands up in agony or disbelief, shaking your head, arguing back, out loud or inside of yourself, holding close your incredulity which, yes, too, I love I love

your working heart, how each of its gestures, tiny or big, stand beside my own agony, building a forest there

How "Fuck you" becomes a love song

You are who I love, carrying the signs, packing the lunches, with the rain on your face

You at the edges and shores, in the rooms of quiet, in the rooms of shouting, in the airport terminal, at the bus depot saying "No!" and each of us looking out from the gorgeous unlikelihood of our lives at all, finding ourselves here, witnesses to each other's tenderness, which, this moment, is fury, is rage, which, this moment, is another way of saying: *You are who I love You are who I love You and you and you are who*

Aracelis Girmay  
244

---

<sup>244</sup> [Aracelis Girmay, "You Are Who I Love," \*The Quarry\*](#)

## Not Even This

Hey.

I used to be a fag now I'm a checkbox.

The pen tip jabbed in my back, I feel the mark of progress.

I will not dance alone in the municipal graveyard at midnight, blasting sad songs on my phone, for nothing.

I promise you, I was here. I felt things that made death so large it was indistinguishable from air—and I went on destroying inside it like wind in a storm.

The way Lil Peep says *I'll be back in the mornin'* when you know how it ends.

The way I kept dancing when the song was over, because it freed me.

The way the streetlight blinks once, before waking up for its night shift, like we do.

The way we look up and whisper *sorry* to each other, the boy and I, when there's teeth.

When there's always teeth, on purpose.

When I threw myself into gravity and made it work. Ha.

I made it out by the skin of my griefs.

I used to be a fag now I'm lit. Ha.

Once, at a party set on a rooftop in Brooklyn for an "artsy vibe," a young woman said, sipping her drink, *You're so lucky. You're gay plus you get to write about war and stuff. I'm just white.* [Pause.] *I got nothing.* [Laughter, glasses clinking.]

Unlike feelings, blood gets realer when you feel it.

Because everyone knows yellow pain, pressed into American letters, turns to gold.

Our sorrow Midas-touched. Napalm with a rainbow afterglow.

I'm trying to be real but it costs too much.

They say the Earth spins and that's why we fall but everyone knows it's the music.

It's been proven difficult to dance to machine gun fire.

Still, my people made a rhythm this way. A way.

My people, so still, in the photographs, as corpses.

My failure was that I got used to it. I looked at us, mangled under the *TIME* photographer's shadow, and stopped thinking, *Get up, get up.*

I saw the graveyard steam in the pinkish dawn and knew the dead were still breathing. Ha.

If they come for me, ~~take me home~~ take me out.

What if it wasn't the crash that made me, but the debris?

What if it was meant this way: the mother, the lexicon, the line of cocaine on the mohawked boy's collarbone in an East Village sublet in 2007?

What's wrong with me, Doc? There must be a pill for this.

Too late—these words already shrapnel in your brain.

Impossible in high school, I am now the ultimate linebacker. I plow through the page, making a path for you, dear reader, going nowhere.

Because the fairy tales were right. You'll need magic to make it out of here.

Long ago, in another life, on an Amtrak through Iowa, I saw, for a few blurred seconds, a man standing in the middle of a field of winter grass, hands at his side, back to me, all of him stopped there save for his hair scraped by low wind.

When the countryside resumed its wash of gray wheat, tractors, gutted barns, black sycamores in herdless pastures, I started to cry. I put my copy of Didion's *The White Album* down and folded a new dark around my head.

The woman beside me stroked my back saying, in a Midwestern accent that wobbled with tenderness, *Go on son. You get that out now. No shame in breakin' open. You get that out and I'll fetch us some tea.*

Which made me  
lose it even more.

She came back with Lipton in paper cups, her eyes nowhere blue and there. She was silent all the way to Missoula, where she got off and said, patting my knee, *God is good. God is good.*

I can say it was beautiful now, my harm, because it belonged to no one else.

To be a dam for damage. My shittiness will not enter the world, I thought, and quickly became my own hero.

Do you know how many hours I've wasted watching straight boys play video games?

Enough.

Time is a mother.

Lest we forget, a morgue is also a community center.

In my language, the one I recall now only by closing my eyes, the word for *love* is *Yêu*.

And the word for weakness is *Yếu*.

How you say what you mean changes what you say.

Some call this prayer. I call it watch your mouth.

When they zipped my mother in a body bag I whispered: *Rose, get out of there. Your plants are dying.*

Enough is enough.

Body, doorway that you are, be more than what I'll pass through.

Stillness. That's what it was.

The man in the field in the red sweater, he was so still he became, somehow, more true, like a knife wound in a landscape painting.

Like him, I caved.

I caved and decided it will be joy from now on. Then everything opened. The lights blazed around me into a white weather

and I was lifted, wet and bloody, out of my mother, screaming

and enough.

*Ocean Vuong*  
245

---

<sup>245</sup> [Ocean Vuong, "Not Even This," Poetry](#)

## In Airports

It was the season for  
weeping in airports for walking

and bleeding in airports—

the white corridors their rocking  
chairs the ghosts and trains and strangers  
all overcast the windows

and buzzing of people and  
earbuds always the weather in airports

a stranger season she never knew—

It was the season for these and (what?)  
the lady said standing behind  
the long white counter

and hives and sores

what left their weeping nettled prints  
below her clothes

red like the ghost of maple  
leaves raked wet from the sidewalk—

It was the season of storm delays

and lightning clocks  
of . . . *shame* and ghosts on trains hanging

from the vinyl straps clinging to the stainless  
poles or buzzing in the long white rows of rocking  
chairs in airports—

a stranger season she never knew

what was gone and where and buzzing  
how it walked and wailing like

a ghost . . . *a shame* was something the lady said  
standing behind the long white counter

. . . *a shame* she said and looked concerned—

She heard her (what?) a stranger said  
and never knew—

it was always the weather in airports  
the season the weeping a wet buzzing  
sore she walked on board . . . *a shame*

a lady gone— a stranger flew

*Erin Belieu*  
246

---

<sup>246</sup> [Erin Belieu, "In Airports," Narrative](#)



## Family Portrait as Lullaby

Your father is the slow dance and I am the ballad.  
Or he's the nightclub and I am six tequila shots on the bar.  
I am the salt and lemon, too.

I am the snake and the apple. I am the tongue that says  
to your father—*Take. Eat. Do this in remembrance of—*.  
Your father, the monologue in the music box  
and I, the plastic ballerina in gold shoes.

Your father is the swaddle, the rock, the cradle.  
His potbellied heart loses its socks.  
My heart, a boondock opera.

You are Mars. Your father and I are its two moons orbiting.  
You, stardust on the telescope's lens,  
the ice in the comet's tail.

Your heart is a poppy—bright, forgetful.  
You are the first mayapple of spring, unripe and rising.  
And this is the hallelujah I asked the first star  
to sing at the quickening.

This is the dirty Eden, stalked by envious angels.  
This is the land of Isaac, and of knives.

We are the wish imperfectly granted, and this is the well.

*Traci Brimhall*  
248

---

<sup>248</sup> [Traci Brimhall](#), "[Family Portrait as Lullaby](#)," *Poetry Northwest*, collected in [Come the Slumberless to the Land of Nod](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Valentine for a Flytrap

You are a hairy painting. I belong to your jaw.  
Nothing stakes you—no fruit fly, no cricket,  
not even tarantula. You are the caryatid  
I want to duel, dew-wet, in tongues. Luxurious  
spider bed, blooming from the ossuaries  
of peat moss, I love how you swindle  
the moths! This is why you were named  
for a goddess: not Botticelli's *Venus*—  
not any soft waif in the Uffizi. There's voltage  
in your flowers—mulch skeins, armory  
for cunning loves. Your mouth pins every sticky  
body, swallowing iridescence, digesting  
light. Venus, let me swim in your solarium.  
Venus, take me in your summer gown.

*Sally Wen Mao*  
249

---

<sup>249</sup> [Sally Wen Mao](#), "[Valentine for a Flytrap](#)," [Cave Wall](#), collected in [Mad Honey Symposium](#), [Alice James Books](#)

## Holiday

Speak not of the weather, dear,  
but of whether or not we shall dance  
on this fine August evening, bombs  
falling nearby, guns in the streets,  
the sun going down through a haze  
of smoke and dust, and thunder  
that won't go away.

So we'll go away,  
we'll go sway for awhile, if we're allowed,  
on an island of green in a sea of blue,  
where waves like dogs lick the shore by day,  
and by night fade out that we may sleep.

Don't mention how fine the wine is not,  
or the food, or the band, because we  
can go, this little war can't keep us here,  
a little man with little boots  
means nothing to me, and still less  
to my country, which knows what to do.

The band is worse than ever—the drummer  
has only one stick. My wine's too warm  
and yours is gone. The man to your left  
is bleeding, though his jaw is set  
against concern. He must be one of ours.

*Wyn Cooper*  
250

---

<sup>250</sup> [Wyn Cooper](#), "[Holiday](#)," [American Literary Review](#), collected in [The Way Back](#), [White Pine Press](#)

## Rookie

You thought you could ride a bicycle  
but, turns out, those weren't bikes  
they were extremely bony horses. And that wasn't  
a meal you cooked, that was a microwaved  
hockey puck. And that wasn't a book that was  
a taco stuffed with daisies. What if  
you thought you could tie your laces?  
But all this time you were just wrapping  
a whole roll of sellotape round your shoe and  
hoping for the best? And that piece of paper  
you thought was your tax return?  
A crayon drawing of a cat. And your best friend  
is actually a scarecrow you stole from a field  
and carted away in a wheelbarrow.  
Your mobile phone is a strip of bark  
with numbers scratched into it.  
Thousands of people have had to replace  
their doors, at much expense, after you  
battered theirs to bits with a hammer  
believing that was the correct way  
to enter a room. You've been pouring pints  
over your head. Playing card games with a pack  
of stones. Everyone's been so confused  
by you: opening a bottle of wine with a cutlass,  
lying on the floor of buses, talking to  
babies in a terrifyingly loud voice.  
All the while nodding to yourself like  
"Yeah, this is how it's done."  
Planting daffodils in a bucket of milk.

*Caroline Bird*  
251

---

<sup>251</sup> [Caroline Bird](#), "Rookie," collected in [The Air Year](#), Carcanet Press, Ltd.

## Malediction on an Iron Bed

How can I curse the crook who crept through my broken bedroom window,  
leaving his blood on the sill, burgling my computer, the delicate shell  
that sat so many hours on my lap, magic lantern and tabernacle,  
and all my work inside it, out the window,

when, a month before, I had burgled myself worse,  
letting a suave Brooklyn bravo penetrate my little budget of health  
to hear him call me puppy and his angel—oh yes, for an hour  
of pretend love I let that adorable thug pry apart with a bloody, septic bone  
the expensive cells, vessels, organelles that formed those words.

*Patrick Donnelly*  
252

---

<sup>252</sup> [Patrick Donnelly](#), "[Malediction on an Iron Bed](#)," collected in [The Charge](#), Ausable Press

## White Flowers

Today my friend has the strength to walk.  
She wants burgers and shakes at a picnic table  
in Soldier's Field, Rochester, Minnesota.  
We're old friends, two girls in the park,  
in the high school photograph, in the blue Chevette  
we drove down to the dunes that lined  
the beaches of our town. We are the girls who  
burned a pentagram in the field behind  
the Mussleman's plant, pricked our fingers  
and chanted from the stolen library book.  
Girls mixing blood, swapping nicknames, slamming  
the front doors of our plain, inescapable houses.  
She blames her husband for the headaches,  
how nights he visualizes over video games,  
PacMen eating tumors in battles he wins  
for her. For her it's white flowers imagined  
in each dose of radiation. She whispers it,  
flicking her fingers open, *white flowers*,  
and I see them too, though she doesn't say what kind.  
She's wringing whatever joy she can from this  
dismal Oz, her four block radius from the clinic,  
the room she's rented in a cheap motel.  
But I am not that girl anymore. I don't use  
that old nickname. She insists on nothing  
but who we were, takes the strained, deliberate  
steps to lead us back. What's happening now  
we leave unnamed. On the morning before I go  
she sends me down for free donuts and I face  
the other tenants who linger in the lobby  
and I don't want to leave her here.  
Near the window where she sleeps I tape  
a silk bouquet. We take pictures  
at the car and she's left her hat in the room.  
The motel clerk snaps the picture:  
two girls shoulder to shoulder, squinting  
in the sun against the chipped stucco facade.

Rosemary Willey  
253

---

<sup>253</sup> Rosemary Willey, "[White Flowers](#)," collected in [Intended Place](#), [The Kent State University Press](#)

## Library of Small Catastrophes

### I

The pupil is a decimal point  
surrounded by white matter.  
The decimal place is a safe  
house of absence. Place is  
to home as story is to lie,  
and every word is a cock  
we teach to crow.

### II

In the MFA class I have never had  
the opportunity to take, they are dis-  
cussing meter. In my mind, I struggle  
to convert meters to feet.

The US is the only industrialized  
country that does not use the metric  
system. Beneath the desk, I use my  
fingers to silently

count the decibels of distance, this  
shame of being black and American.  
As a woman, I am either stressed  
or unstressed in theory.

Math is poetic in nature. You move  
the decimal point two places to the right  
to multiply black bodies  
by the hundreds.

Voiceless, I am qualified to write wordless  
poems. I use tongued commas, hangnail  
earlobes, peacocks, diphthong asses that  
don't sit well with readers.

### III

I now have my MLIS. I've learned  
the science to the system of classifying.

Repeat: *I know you are but what am I.*  
Language in and of itself indoctrination.

Dear Dewey Decimal System,  
How will I organize all the bodies?

The professor said that in judging  
women's bodies by their covers

we have a system for returning  
things back to where they belong.

#### IV

Once while working the closing shift  
in an Andrew Carnegie library,  
I watched a woman get searched  
for setting off the metal detectors.  
I faced the officer's back, his shoulders  
like the frame of a closed door.  
He asked whether she had needles in  
her pockets before he reached his  
hand inside her pants.

The tip of a needle is the width  
of a decimal point. A decimal is  
the size of a pinprick. A finger  
can resemble in look and feel  
a penis.

The woman was taken down-  
town, was booked for stealing  
urban romance novels.  
The ridges of her fingertips  
filled with ink that bled.

In the nineteenth century for the first time  
fingerprints were used to identify  
repeat offenders. I can no longer  
recall the woman's face, only  
the beauty in the way her hands

trembled. She thought she had  
removed the magnetic strips from her  
person. She had done so in secret,  
away from the cameras overhead.

In a bathroom stall, she broke  
books' spines. She ripped their pages.  
Her life a chapter of a book  
she did not buy.

In my car I washed my hands of her,  
the wave of terror that stained her face,  
her pleas through the window of the cop's  
backseat. The sound fell silent as the  
open mouths of traffic lights.

The officer—green.  
The woman, red bone  
or high yellow, sits

slant in a cell. As she sleeps  
with her head against the wall, the concrete  
imprints braille into her face. She is a vampire,  
each book a mirror she could not see her-  
self in. Her insides dog-eared by syringes  
that want to pick up where they left off.  
Like me she had always liked to read in the dark.  
Her mother had warned her, too. Said, *you need  
to turn off the light, before your eyes go bad.*

*Alison C. Rollins*  
254

---

<sup>254</sup> [Alison C. Rollins](#), "[Library of Small Catastrophes](#)," collected in [Library of Small Catastrophes](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Apocrypha

At best, life is hard. At worst, life is easy.  
I just want to edit out the heartbreaking parts,  
screen shot of me on my knees, scouring for change.  
Check out the pretty panties on that mannequin.  
Check out the sound of ice cubes rattling  
in my third whisky on rocks of the day.  
Is that mirror reflecting me? The eighth  
mystery of the world is when what is familiar  
does not lead automatically to contempt.  
Take marriage, for example.  
Take the three- and seven-year itch.  
I choose you, my escaped convict,  
running ragged in the midst.  
May someone prepare a hammock  
for your body and drooping head.  
I miss the church's indulgences, miss  
the days of traditional blessings.  
Pick up the goddamn phone.  
The sun is an education, but  
it will be hours until daylight.  
May the road rise to meet you,  
God-fearing, neutered by labor.  
May you not die alone.

*Virginia Konchan*  
255

---

<sup>255</sup> [Virginia Konchan](#), "[Apocrypha](#)," [Free Verse](#), collected in [Any God Will Do](#), [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

## Post-Game-Day Blessing

Bless the black G-string,  
abandoned on the sidewalk  
beside a green ginkgo  
sapling on Lee Street.  
Bless the girl who  
shimmied out of it  
before dawn, drunk  
on Curaçao or Triple  
Sec or Mike's Hard  
Lemonade. Drunk  
on lust and early autumn  
and our team's unexpected  
win over Georgia Tech.  
Bless our team, all defense,  
no offense. Bless every-  
one who must have been  
downtown last night  
with their car flags and  
war whoops, mesh jerseys  
and micro-minis. Bless  
our star quarterback, on fire  
with a 14-3 halftime lead.  
We are on the first grade  
class walking trip to the  
library so everyone can  
get their own cards. I am  
chaperone, which means  
herding kids out of traffic,  
back over the curb. Bless  
the curb, and the kids who  
use it as a balance beam.  
Bless the magical book drop.  
Bless the girl with knotted  
hair who tries to stuff orange  
leaves into the slot. And  
bless the librarian, too, who  
reads a book, loudly, clearly,  
to everyone about someone  
reading a spooky book. Bless  
the meta-story, and the mass  
of first graders, descending  
on the stacks like locusts.  
Bless the red solo cups  
on the return trip  
congregating like plastic  
flames, like oversized  
maraschino cherries on  
the early-morning lawns

of Phi Delt, Sig Ep,  
any dilapidated white  
house with a porch  
couch on East Roanoke  
Street. Bless the empty  
bottles of PBR knocked  
on their sides, mouths  
open in wondrous O's.  
O rushing yards. O Bud  
Light Lime in your crushed  
cardboard case resting  
on the elementary school  
lawn. Bless my son and  
his friend Major, who look  
past the blue Trojan wrapper  
on Jackson Street, the flattened  
Miller Lite can on Bennett,  
to the blue butterfly,  
to the giant mushroom  
blooming in the corner  
of someone's yard. *It looks  
like a piece of meat*, says  
my son. *Or a tree stump*,  
says Major, matter-of-factly.  
It is a mushroom worth  
blessing. And bless our team  
for escaping Bobby Dodd Stadium  
with a 17-10 win. Bless us for  
being able to hold on despite  
the onslaught.

*Erika Meitner*  
256

---

<sup>256</sup> [Erika Meitner, "Post-Game-Day Blessing," \*The Kenyon Review\*, collected in \*Holy Moly Carry Me\*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

*(Please note the jade is a genuine jade, not a plastic fake)*

Inside the first word  
There's a lease  
I have yet to sign.  
If you genuflect  
I may make note of it.  
Elastic enough to fit the ache,  
The blade is a genuine blade,  
Not a plastic fake.  
You can use it to cut steak  
& pound cake & human hearts.  
Your parenthetical has been noted, as has  
The authenticity of your gift.  
Its dog shape, its red string.  
Please note the everything  
Is a genuine everything  
Not a plastic fake.  
Like the jade, it  
Has been noted  
& came at a cost.  
Like the jade,  
It was not taken,  
But has been lost.

*Jennifer Tseng*  
257

---

<sup>257</sup> [Jennifer Tseng](#), "[\(Please note the jade is a genuine jade, not a plastic fake\)](#)," collected in [Not so dear Jenny](#), [Bateau Press](#)

## Tige Watley's Whoah

I'm laughing while I'm waiting in line at the FSU Credit Union  
because the woman ahead of me is talking  
in this thick southern accent that reminds me of a woman  
my parents knew whose name was S-u-g,  
pronounced "Shoog" and short for "Sugar," though my father  
didn't like her, so he called her "Sugh,"  
rhyming with "ugh," and her husband's name (or the name  
he used) was Tige,

for Tiger, so they were Tige and "Shoog" Watley, unless  
you were talking to my father,  
in which case they were Tige and "Sugh" Watley—anyway,  
at some point Tige, who was a dentist,  
started drilling his receptionist in addition to the  
various molars, bicuspid, and canines  
of the gentry of South Baton Rouge, and ever after  
Sug referred to the receptionist

as "Tige Watley's whoah," and even though I was only eleven,  
I used to bartend my parents' parties in those days, and Sug would come up  
to me and say,  
"This a nice pahty—is Tige Watley's whoah heah?" and I'd say,  
"Nope, not even Tige Watley!"  
Because he was too embarrassed to attend, which was too bad,  
those were great parties,

Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks  
and Katherine Anne Porter  
would be there, but then they could afford to be,  
because they'd behaved themselves  
or at least they didn't have someone as angry as  
Sug Watley dogging them.  
When asked to name the greatest French poet, André Gide  
said, "Victor Hugo, hélas!"

If Sug Watley were French, and someone said, Who's the biggest  
whore in Baton Rouge...  
no, wait, they wouldn't say that, they'd say, Who's the most  
desirable woman in Baton Rouge,  
she'd say, "Tige Watley's whoah—hélas!" And while I'm having  
a good chuckle  
as I remember all this, suddenly—holy shit!—  
my blood runs cold

as I see this harridan I know teetering on high heels  
as she flies full tilt  
through the credit union door and gets in line behind me,  
a woman who married a friend of mine,  
married him twice, actually, because they married and divorced  
and remarried and are about to redivorce,  
because all the things she couldn't stand about him  
the first time are things

she *really* can't stand now, plus there's a whole new list  
of character flaws, moral shortcomings,  
intellectual debits, irritating table manners, facial tics,  
and shoulder twitches  
that either she didn't notice before or that he has acquired  
since the first go-round,  
not to mention those late-night thigh-muscle spasms of his  
that leave her sleepless

and thus doubly cantankerous from the moment she lays eyes  
on him in the morning  
until the last disgusted stare she gives him at night  
as he lies next to her, eyes closed,  
legs convulsing like those of Count Galvani's frog  
as the celebrated scientist-nobleman  
slips the juice to him, mouth pursed in the O from which,  
soon, snores will issue,

and she's hanging over her husband's face  
and waiting for him to add snoring  
to his other crimes and just hating the liver out of him,  
even though he loved her once to distraction,  
couldn't get enough of her, and she liked him okay,  
but then she started finding fault  
with this, fault with that, fault with me,  
whom she sees as a bad influence,

a guy who drinks too much and tricks her husband  
into doing the same, and now  
she's behind me in line at the credit union,  
and I'm about to wet my pants  
because I've been afraid of this woman for so long  
and wondering now if she's going  
to shatter what a student of mine once described in an essay  
as "the thin vermeer of civilization"

and jump on my back and ride me across the lobby  
of the FSU Credit Union and knock my teeth out  
against the counter as the tellers yank the cash out of the way  
and the customers hightail it for the door.  
Sometimes I think we get around in our married lives  
the way Ray Charles did  
when he used to drive in Tallahassee—old-timers have told me  
he'd room near the club where he was playing

and he'd memorize where he had to go and people  
would see him coming  
and get out of the way or else shout, "Left, Ray!  
No, right, Ray,  
rightright! That's it, man, you got it!" And him  
not seeing a thing but getting there  
anyway and playing his set and then climbing in the car  
and driving home again.

When I was a college freshman, I fell hard for this senior  
whose name was Linda Fullilove  
(I tell no lie), who was this irresistible combination  
of Cajun-country *volupté*  
and buttoned-down cracker propriety, but she had a boyfriend,  
so I never asked her out,  
even though I became her confidant, sort of the way a knight  
becomes a queen's confidant

because he knows he's beneath her, and she does, too, and once  
Linda told me her psych class  
had gone on a field trip to the nervous hospital  
over in Jackson, and as the professor  
and the students were walking to the main gate, this drooler  
had come up to the fence  
and whipped it out, "and if all men look like that,"  
Linda said, "I'm never getting married,"

and at the time I thought she meant if all men's penises looked  
like that, but later I wondered if she wasn't referring  
to the whole picture—the dopey grin, the feet-apart stance,  
the firm overhand grip—though if she picked the right guy,  
which, by the way, I never thought was her senior boyfriend,  
a disdainful milksop of a fellow more infatuated  
with his own bland charms than with the musky deliciousness  
of what I thought of as the real Linda Fullilove,

the one operating just below the alluringly icy exterior  
of the Linda the world knew and gazed at longingly—  
if she picked the right guy, she wouldn't mind,  
she'd even want to see him that way.  
Or, like me, in line, with my friend's soon-to-be-ex-again  
burning laser-beam hate-holes in my back,  
she too could end up asking herself, Is it them,  
is it this vast tribe of ex- and recycled lovers

and husbands and sweethearts and all their quondam beaux and belles,  
or is it me? How do we pick these people  
and they us? What do they see when they look at us and we them?  
How do we become a Tige or a Sug Watley  
or a Tige Watley's whoah? Here's another Victor Hugo quote for you,  
this time from Jean Cocteau: "Victor Hugo was a madman who  
thought he was Victor Hugo." And I think I am myself, and he is himself,  
and she, she thinks she is herself, and you are you.

*David Kirby*  
258

---

258 [David Kirby, "Tige Watley's Whoah," \*Northwest Review\*, collected in \*The House of Blue Light\*, Louisiana State University Press](#)

## Uncloudy

Sitting in the tower munching clover  
with no roof  
    with encircled sky  
a dark hole the quick stars infest

I need these stones to quiet me down  
I need the quiet so nouns can collect

The clover's a pulp  
    as if I'm making paper  
lifting up linen strips from who else  
but the dead  
    And never has this star clutch  
been so silent  
    Forever have I darkly thee undressed

*Heather Christle*  
259

---

259 [Heather Christle, "Uncloudy,"](#) collected in [Heliopause, Wesleyan University Press](#)

## The Boy's Head

*after Roberto Bolano*

There was a year or two when none of it mattered. I woke up late, sat on the balcony porch with a cigarette, turned on the gas-light to scramble some eggs. Days seemed to flash and fold away like pages in a magazine. No one knew my name, and if they did, they didn't bring me up in conversation. I was living off the grid, in the gaudy retirement halls of the Mount Helix Apartments. My hair fell down in complete abandon, swinging from eye to eye. Usually tied in the back with rubber bands, or with shoelaces somebody left on the curb. Nobody cared about my style. On weekends I went to the skatepark in El Cajon and attempted to flirt with the girls. People came through, disappeared, made claims. The sun never altered its place in the sky. The floodlights came on and the metalheads listened to boomboxes perched on the stairs. I was down there one day in September, a day like any other day, when a boy's head was found in the playing field, cut with a hacksaw, circled in little white stones. Local authorities said it was a "gang thing" or a "satanic ritual kind of thing." They said it was a product of organized crime, an "underground collective," although no one really knew. The troubling part, to me at least, was that the boy wasn't even from town—he was on vacation with his parents from North Dakota, traveling by motorhome, headed for Zion and Flagstaff, Mount St. Helens, Vancouver, Rainier. For the first few days there was vague speculation, but no one came forward and no one was blamed. Weeks later, it seemed as though nothing had happened. The park flags waved in the same lacking breezes, the tennis balls hung in the chain-link fence, the skaters continued to circle the bowl, and the killer was soon forgotten.

*Kai Carlson-Wee*  
260

---

<sup>260</sup> [Kai Carlson-Wee](#), "[The Boy's Head](#)," [The Missouri Review](#), collected in [Rail](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Let the Day Perish

I was meaner than a flimsy dollar the change machine refuses.  
I was duplicitous as a Canadian dime.  
I slid through your town only to announce my prejudices.  
And only to slip my tongue into the slot of your mouth.

Bade you come over. Covered your hand with mine.  
Bade you lay down. Stroked your neck, allowed your story.  
Bade you pull my body down. Bore me half to death.  
This is where the what and when happens. Two

people on a couch, liquored up and lousy at the mouth.  
I dislike everything in your refrigerator.  
I criticize your cupboards, suggest you replace  
your glassware. I pick up a broom when you're not

looking (yet you were looking) and sweep your whole  
house out. I make a comment about your teeth.  
(Mine are very fine and straight.) I complain about  
the cotton/poly sheets. (They make me sweat.)

There was a light from your window that bore  
right through me. I wanted nothing more than  
to put my tongue to your teeth. I'd have licked  
your whole house clean, bought you a crystal set

of glassware, laid down the dinner table with new  
plates. I'd scrub your tub, your toilet. But perhaps  
you did not understand my critique as servitude.  
I was merely asking to be put into your employ.

I happen to like your mud-wash eyes. The mean  
bags beneath your eyes. The jitter your hand does.  
I don't actually care about anything but that.  
Everything's been lousy since I left. Someone

smashed my car window just for the hell of it.  
I am constantly harassed by thoughts of you.  
I have made a poor investment in real estate.  
When you took me out into your backyard

and showed me the koi pond you'd filled with  
cement, it made me sad.

Then you said you could bring it back.

*Cate Marvin*  
261

---

<sup>261</sup> [Cate Marvin](#), "[Let the Day Perish](#)," [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#), collected in [Oracle](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## In Medias Res

I turned 24 on the back of your motorcycle,  
after I smoked pot with your mom,  
after your dad took a bat to the dog,  
after we drove the North Cascades Highway—  
snow gripping the shoulder  
where we slept and woke together.

No one told me that this would be our climax,  
that we weren't at the beginning.  
Every part of the day was a surprise someone ruined.

*Chet'la Sebree*  
262

---

<sup>262</sup> [Chet'la Sebree](#), "[In Medias Res](#)," collected in [Mistress](#), [New Issues Press](#)

## American Wife

I have been reading Chinese poems.  
I like the ones where a woman makes  
love to her husband while thinking  
of a place beyond the mountains  
where even the snow is intact.

That's what I do. That's what I did  
just before the barbecue. When  
the boys drift indoors to caress  
the steaks, my sister-in-law  
does a line or two and cries.

I think of the poem where a girl  
named Ch'ang-O flees to the moon  
for refuge.

Now covered by men's footprints,  
we wouldn't be safe even there.

*Ron Koertge*  
263

---

<sup>263</sup> [Ron Koertge, "American Wife," \*Cider Press Review\*, collected in \*Fever\*, Red Hen Press](#)

Indiana Problem (Three Dusks)

Feet sort of  
on the ground,  
I walked through  
the silence of a  
clock radio, kid  
and dog voices  
and some wind  
retrieving its  
stupidity, flinging  
it back into  
the dull summer  
neighborhood.

\*

The trees on  
The Hulk  
were never  
more alive  
as they churned  
out pure green  
bird voices, their  
hearts inside-  
out ruins, their  
eyes connected  
to roots that could  
speak to both  
the living and  
the dead.

\*

I was scared  
that Jesus might  
come out of  
a cave to make  
peace with me,  
a gentle stroll  
through the sleep-  
shaped universe,  
the fraction-shaped  
universe.

*Julia Story*  
264

---

<sup>264</sup> [Julia Story](#), "[Indiana Problem \(Three Dusks\)](#)," collected in [Spinster for Hire](#), [The Word Works](#)

## Original Sin

Afterward, I would sit in Algebra and run  
my fingers over my calves to feel  
the skin the thorns scratched. Sometimes

I found blood. And sometimes I would press  
my sternum to my desk so hard  
I couldn't breathe. Math willed me into logic

but I wanted beauty. In High School, I thought  
my sorrow could transform me. My mother  
left her mother to move to North Carolina

because she married my father. She wanted  
to change her life. The first time my mother  
saw me act was the last. I was cast as Juror Eleven

and told to practice my Indian accent.  
After the play, my Mother stood  
without touching me, her blushed cheeks red.

Tonight, it is too late for love  
again—at 5:00 am, every bar has closed.  
I study my face against the black night sky.

In the window of the train, my face  
cuts through skyline. Jesus suffered, then rose  
from the dead. Wasn't I, too, blessed? Although

God sees us in the dark, even Jesus felt lost.  
In High School I would make out with a boy  
who said I smelled like curry. In the woods

behind the baseball field, his hands  
undid my bra. We would lean against the fence.  
I wanted to be an actor because I wanted to exist.

One night after rehearsal, I searched  
my mother's closet. The assignment was to dress  
in your character's best. I knew better

than to take my mother's things, but I stole  
a nude lipstick and her silk blue blouse.  
It had ruffles down the center, like a kind of spine

but softer. Like something trying to bloom.

*Megan Pinto*  
265

---

<sup>265</sup> [Megan Pinto, "Original Sin," \*The Margins\*](#)

## Portrait of the Minor Character

In my life as a novel, you're the haberdasher in tweed  
closing up shop in October on Oak Street who I nod to  
while I stride urgently to meet with urgent others.

Or maybe, my knapsack riding the conveyor,  
you're the woman at O'Hare security inviting me  
through the metal detector  
or the attendant admitting me when I arrive,  
breathless at the gate.

You ladle soup into my bowl in the hospital cafeteria.

You're Iowa in the novel about Chicago,  
are background radiation, invisible and pouring  
out of the perforated night  
onto the pier I walk to the edge of.  
Or you are the pier.

You're someone I mention in a story  
about my industrious past

or you're lounging in the afternoon  
of my industrious future  
on a boat on the water I wave to,  
and though you don't know me, you wave back  
because you're the sort who waves to strangers.

In my life as a novel, I hasten and blur

past you on the hotel escalator,  
or I shiver out of focus beside you

in the frigid evening of the Argyle Avenue Elevated  
on my way to a shindig at Tate's place or Enrique's place,

or I'm flotsam in your proximity in the saloon,  
days without eating, days without Suzie.

Or the other idea that you're not in the novel at all

but are somewhere over where you are  
where life is like what life is really like

in conversation with others in amusement or in consolation  
in the elsewhere of your real life

where you're doing so well and so much without me.

*Jaswinder Bolina*  
266

---

<sup>266</sup> [Jaswinder Bolina, "Portrait of the Minor Character," \*Third Coast\*](#), collected in [Phantom Camera](#), [New Issues Press](#)

Self-Portrait with Unsewn Shadow

See me as a boy in the window, never pleasing,  
    see me as the housebreaker, picklock, sick  
with longing to steal  
    you from your bedroom.

When my eyes cry that's salt—  
    but I don't. When you cry  
it's blackmail. It's girlhood. It's a plan.

See me as a thimble  
    deep in your pocket. See me as what's left  
    when the stitch is cut loose.

How did you brother the others? How did you button  
    the fierce right out?

When you shut the window  
it's the worst sort of adventure.  
    O Darling, love as I knew it  
    straddled me savagely,  
    was a wife, a wife, a wife.

*Rebecca Hazelton*  
267

---

<sup>267</sup> [Rebecca Hazelton](#), "[Self-Portrait with Unsewn Shadow](#)," collected in [Gloss](#), [University of Wisconsin Press](#)

God Doesn't Care Where You Pee

It must have been fun designing the hypno-toad,  
but since I'm not god,  
the last thing I designed was a quesadilla  
which had limited hypnotic properties.  
For instance, my mom designated the woman I made  
the quesadilla for as "daughter" on social media.  
The woman loves me though I'm not a god—  
proof that magic exists.  
Last night I drank Mickey's until I felt like a cloud  
of falling confetti,  
thinking of the woeful state of the animals I've assembled.

*Sarah Galvin*  
268

---

<sup>268</sup> [Sarah Galvin](#), "[God Doesn't Care Where You Pee](#)," collected in [Ugly Time](#), [Gramma Poetry](#)

## Talk Radio

On the conservative talk-radio show he asked me  
why I write poems, since no one reads them.  
I didn't like the ironic way he looked at me,  
as if the two of us shared a dirty secret.  
I wouldn't have a secret with him for anything.  
I wouldn't tell him about the poems if he tied me up  
with an American flag, how the poems and I  
look at each other with deeply yearning eyes  
as in the old movies that show only a bit  
of flesh, a half-second shot  
of a finger touching a nipple. How I get excited  
at even the thought of a poem,  
discouraged when inside it turns out to be  
all tensed up, full of itself. How the margins say to me  
in their ragged voice, "We could do this  
on our lunch hour and no one would be the wiser."  
*Stashed / fires thrash / and brighten,*  
*flare into blanks.* I want to lick those words.  
I would follow them up the dark stairs at noon.  
I would never tell him how I love even  
the frustration, the secret parts where rhyme upends  
or comes back with an unfixable rupture, bent  
words almost bleeding in their desperation to repent  
and satisfy exactly, as God intended.

*Fleda Brown*  
269

---

<sup>269</sup> [Fleda Brown](#), "Talk Radio," [The Georgia Review](#), collected in [No Need of Sympathy](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

from “Phys. Ed.”

[ WARM UP ]

Between Language & Health  
perched Gym or Phys. Ed.  
or whatever they called our removing

what fit & changing into our clashing  
school colors. My t-shirt dubbed me  
YOUNG, something barkable, one

syllable. Those without uniforms  
lost grades or got loans; those  
with boners in the showers

got beat up. Edsel, once caught  
beating off in a stall, would rub  
the backs of his knees with green

deodorant, he said to keep cool—  
this, long before we heard how to stop  
sweating & smell, lectured in the male art

of antiperspirant while the seventh-grade  
girls learned about blood  
during third period. That talk

we only got wind of later.

*Kevin Young*  
270

---

<sup>270</sup> [Kevin Young](#), “[Phys. Ed.](#),” collected in [Brown](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

## Moonpie

Some days I want to sit in my sadness  
like a parked car, engine still

hot but breathing, waiting for  
a song to end. But some never

do. I suppose I'll  
die with someone else's lyrics  
on my lips—something catchy  
but shallow like  
*do you believe*

*in life after love?*  
or *move*  
*that big ass 'round so I can work*

*on that zipper, baby—*  
and want to go out

that way. When there's joy  
sitting in me

like some impossible  
watermelon from an accidentally

swallowed seed, I know  
I'm just forgetting

something. On route 15,  
there's a barn called Gateway  
Candyland & Liquors,

and despite myself  
I trust a place with an honest  
name. Sometimes I want to crush

my joy like a bummed  
smoke I shouldn't have  
even had  
under my heel. I can keep

a crush tended for years  
unseen like a lantern  
with all its panes

boot-blackened out. Among the bins  
of sugar, and their dull musical

spill into sacks, the shelves of flavored vodkas  
and blue curaçao,

they must have a Moonpie,  
that featherbed

of marshmallow and graham-flavored  
sponge coated

in starched chocolate.

Yes, I belong to my excesses,

and still —yes, still—  
that kiss once

on the dancefloor of Allen Gold's, sweat and slick  
melted Jell-O  
shots—beyond

absolutes, everything  
or nothing, neither

all nor none of what I am—  
her teeth got in the way.

*Emilia Phillips*  
271

---

<sup>271</sup> [Emilia Phillips](#), "Moonpie," [Underblong](#), collected in [Hemlock](#), [Diode Editions](#)

## The Devil Chains Me to a Microphone

The man in the first row says, *Gimme a girl who smokes red cigarettes while asking us occupational questions.* So I ash into his hat brim & sat, What do you do, sir? Do you like being profiled by the entertainment police? The man hands me his bowler & says, *Gimme Liza in a backless vest perched on top of a chair.* So I draw him a picture of a glam mantis gone to seed & bookmark *The Unbearable Lightness of Being.* Here, I say, will *this* satisfy your lust for Prague? A woman in back says, *Sorry, we meant Magritte.* So I spackle my face with sky-colored greasepaint. The third row says, *But we're suckers for the phrase "candy apple red."* Fuck it, I say. They glitter with sweat & applause. *Now,* says the emcee, *I will strap you into a torpedo bra & staple you with flaming sheets of Prufrock.* Okay, I say, after the auto-da-fé will paper ephemera be collected in my memory? My audience goes, *Oh, no, no, no, oh, no, but you will wake up & wonder, "Where is that steamer trunk I kept my best vocabulary in?" & we will pretend not to know.* I say, Audience, O Audience! Why do you seek to destroy me? The man in the first row says, *This has become very tiresome. Give us the girl who smokes red cigarettes again.* Okay, I say, pass me the ashtray. *That "ashtray,"* he harrumphs, *happens to be my wife.* The emcee says, *Give us a French doll with removable britches!* So I put on Jelly Roll's "Black Bottom Stomp" & crisscross my lavender stockings. Look at me, I say. My doll parts move! A silence. The woman in back says, *It's just that you make us all very uncomfortable.*

Karyna McGlynn  
272

---

<sup>272</sup> [Karyna McGlynn](#), "[The Devil Chains Me to a Microphone](#)," collected in [Hothouse](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## Romance

Remember how you waited for your first French kiss,  
that exotic term for what turned out to be the shock  
of an oily eel entering your mouth;  
remember a boy's arm flung over your shoulder,

his sweaty hand inching down your blouse  
like a snail moving toward a cabbage leaf,  
remember being finger-fucked in some house under construction  
and the kid who spied on you masturbating in your bedroom

and how you grew up believing anyway that romance  
was going to tuck you under its tender white wing  
and carry you off to someplace where you'd never notice  
all the flies getting married to the corpses

of bloated deer and raccoons by the roadside,  
or the man outside the corner store, engaged  
to every dusty bottle on the shelf, or the penned cows  
yearning for the hammer to the skull, for something certain;

still here you are, in middle age, stunned  
to find yourself in a sushi bar in California  
with a man kneeling before you  
while the little wooden sampans drift past

with their cargoes of dead tuna and seaweed,  
and he is not asking you for anything  
but to stay exactly where you are, to please not disappear  
while he goes to feed the parking meter,

and the man behind the counter is nodding and smiling,  
raising his cleaver aloft and taking aim  
and letting it fall  
sharp and precise on the glistening bodies of fish.

*Kim Addonizio*  
273

---

<sup>273</sup> [Kim Addonizio](#), "[Romance](#)," collected in [What Is This Thing Called Love](#), W. W. Norton & Company

## The Moon is Trans

The moon is trans.

From this moment forward, the moon is trans.

You don't get to write about the moon anymore unless you respect that.

You don't get to talk to the moon anymore unless you use her correct pronouns.

You don't get to send men to the moon anymore unless their job is  
to bow down before her and apologize for the sins of the earth.

She is waiting for you, pulling at you softly,  
telling you to shut the fuck up already please.

Scientists theorize the moon was once a part of the earth  
that broke off when another planet struck it.

Eve came from Adam's rib.

Etc.

Do you believe in the power of not listening  
to the inside of your own head?

I believe in the power of you not listening  
to the inside of your own head.

This is all upside down.

We should be talking about the ways that blood  
is similar to the part of outer space between the earth and the moon  
but we're busy drawing it instead.

The moon is often described as dead, though she is very much alive.

The moon has not known the feeling of not wanting to be dead  
for any extended period of time  
in all of her existence, but

she is not delicate and she is not weak.

She is constantly moving away from you the only way she can.

She never turns her face from you because of what you might do.

She will outlive everything you know.

*Joshua Jennifer Espinoza*  
274

---

<sup>274</sup> [Joshua Jennifer Espinoza](#), "[The Moon is Trans](#)," *The Feminist Wire*, collected in [There Should Be Flowers](#), [Civil Coping Mechanisms](#)

Still Life with House Finch

I used to talk to you.  
In the middle of the day,  
  
the children still  
in school. What will  
  
the pink pills do? All over  
my mind there is this  
  
empty room. Pearls tight  
at my throat, pest of a bird  
  
pecking the window.  
Tell me you love me when  
  
you find me here.  
How lucky I have been.

*Camille Rankine*  
275

---

<sup>275</sup> [Camille Rankine](#), "[Still Life with House Finch](#)," collected in [Incorrect Merciful Impulses](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

On Patmos, Kneeling in the Panagea

we hear the sound of a woman's high-heeled  
shoes striking the stones of the floor,  
confident stride, strong hips, & I am  
back in a hospital bed at Clark Air

Force Base, the Philippines, September,  
1969, hearing a pair of shoes tapping their way  
down the corridor outside my ward. I'd been  
knocked off a motorcycle by a drunk jitney

driver in Cavite City five days before,  
left leg shattered, compound fractures,  
bone left on the street, flown to the surgeons  
at Clark who cleaned, debrided, sutured

& hung me up in traction. There were three  
of us in the ward. An air force guy  
had blown the fingers off his left hand with a  
homemade bomb. He'd been at Cam Ranh Bay

at a party on the beach. *Stupid, stupid*, he said.  
The other guy was army, only seventeen,  
right leg gone below the knee, left arm  
just above the elbow. Out on a routine

patrol his first week in-country, stood up to pee  
& the other newbie, pulling first guard,  
shot him. *We went through boot together*. He spent  
his days with a model ship, awkward

as it was to snap the pieces off & glue them into  
place one-handed. *If I can do this, maybe  
I can put myself together again*, he said. Each night  
after lights out, he cried for an hour, softly,

into the snot on his pillow. The staff shrink was pissed  
I wouldn't say yes to amputation, said  
I was immature. By that time I was hooked  
on Demerol, my butt cheeks already bared

at the stroke of each third hour, ready  
for the needle. End of that week,  
late, they wheeled in three gurneys, jammed  
them tight against the walls, woke

us up. One held an army captain, left leg just  
a stump. He was hyper. Twitchy. Talked  
a nurse into a telephone, called his wife. *I'm fine,*  
*sweetheart, just fine. I'm coming home,* voice cracked.

He didn't mention the leg. Second guy was nothing  
but plaster & gauze, both arms in casts, slits  
at eyes & mouth. He didn't move, didn't make  
a noise. Third man didn't have any sheets

over him, only a gown. Both legs gone, left arm missing  
nearly to the shoulder, rubber tubes in both  
nostrils, a pair of IV bags hung on posts  
from either side of the gurney. His mouth

was open, eyes glazed. He made a sound like a pair  
of house slippers shuffling across a bare  
carpet. His catheter bag was half full.

One of the volunteers came in the door

just as the orderlies left. They were officers' wives  
for the most part, helping out while their  
husbands flew supply runs or medevacs, stabilized  
patients, wrote long, exacting reports. The war

was far away, except for the wards. They fetched us  
decks of cards, looked for paperbacks,  
helped us fill out daily menus, poured out  
cups of water, let us flirt a bit, ignored our looks

of lust. This one looked tired. She talked with  
the captain, who still seemed buzzed, his hands  
fluttering like bats. His stump thumped up  
& down as he talked. His top sheet was stained

brown. He kept repeating *home, home, home.* I heard her  
say the plane would load & leave real early, he  
should try to sleep. She put a hand on his  
forehead. He settled, closed his eyes. She

moved on to the gauze man, but didn't do much  
more than stand. She reached a hand as though  
to touch, but stopped, adjusted the edge of a sheet  
& turned away. She murmured something low

to the third soldier, put her ear down near  
his face & nodded. She took a cup of ice  
from a stand, carefully placed a chip between  
his lips & let it melt. She did it twice

more. *Anything I can get you, soldier?* Her voice was soft. He made a groan, like a rusted nut coming loose on a bolt. *Yeah,* he said, *I want some cake, a chocolate cake.*

She watched as water dribbled down his neck, said *What?* He said it again. She shook her head. *I'm sorry,* she said, *but you can't eat.* She tried to give him one more piece of ice. *Lady,* he said,

*Jesus, lady, I don't wanna eat it. I just wanna look at it.* He clamped his teeth down hard grinding away at pain, turned his head to the wall. A minute more, she left the ward,

gone for the night. Then it was another shot for me, lights out again & sleep. They came before breakfast, the nurses, changing linen, bags, IVs, a single bed pan. The same

orderlies took the captain first. He waved at us when he left. Then they took the white ghost who never moved or spoke. That was when we heard the click of high heels out

in the hall & the volunteer walked in, dressed for a date, strapless bright green gown, blonde hair hanging over bare shoulders. She was carrying a cake in two hands, a big round

three-layer cake, a single candle lit. She walked to the soldier's gurney & stopped. He heard her coming & turned to look: the froth of chocolate same color as his skin. They didn't say a word.

The orderlies returned. One checked the blood pressure in his remaining arm; one changed the flow on both IVs. The soldier raised the stump of his arm, let it down

soft on the rumpled sheet. His nose & eyes were leaking. The orderlies released the gurney's brake & wheeled him out. She took a few steps back to let them pass.

We saw her shoulders shake. She stayed like that a long, long time, then turned & left without speaking. The candle had gone out, left a trail of smoke, like a fighter jet

leaves across a clear sky. The guy who blew off  
his own hand said, *She could have left us  
some*. But it was all right. We couldn't have eaten  
the smallest bite of that darkness,

as here, on a Greek island thousands of miles  
& more than forty years away,  
I wait for the bread of the body, kneeling  
beside a woman who feeds me every day.

*Samuel Green*  
276

---

<sup>276</sup> [Samuel Green, "On Patmos, Kneeling in the Panagea," \*Prairie Schooner\*](#)

## La Plague

The funniest thing that happened  
in high school french was not me bringing  
an elaborate buche de Noël i.e. a christmas cake  
shaped like a log and covered  
in chocolate whipped cream my parents  
stayed up all night making  
for my classmates who stared at what was  
suddenly all too unmistakably  
a massive poo I had to cut up  
and hand to them one by one their faces  
distorted in various attempts not to weep  
nor when Lars inexplicably fell  
out of his chair and shouted  
in perfectly accented Spanish mierda!  
nor the two weeks the substitute  
sat buried in a romance novel  
while he forced to be known as Pierre  
for his name without gallic equivalent  
was Brendan and I systematically threw  
every Victor Hugo one by one  
out of the back window onto the cars  
parked in the teacher's lot and each time  
they made the exact same most  
objectively correlated immensely  
satisfying thud yes those  
astounding moments still  
after 35 years shine but the best  
was when Eric was asked naturallment  
in French by the terrifying Mme. Kitzes  
what he thought of the book  
by Camus we were supposed to have read  
all weekend instead of imagining  
somewhere there was some party we almost  
got invited to instead of with grim  
determination masturbating to the soft  
tones of Aztec Camera and he called it  
La Plague instead of La Peste  
which made it absolutely clear  
that if he had considered reading  
anything at all it was that little red book  
in English we had somehow all  
managed to procure and Mme. Kitzes  
looked at him with absolute middle-aged  
homicidal grief I have many times  
felt myself now that I am what  
the leaders of this webinar I currently  
have the responsibility to watch  
call an educator and none of us could stop

laughing at ourselves which in those  
holy wasted days was everything.

*Matthew Zapruder*  
277

---

<sup>277</sup> [Matthew Zapruder, "La Plague," \*can we have our ball back\*](#)

## The Fall

If it happened at all  
it was the apes who won,  
shimmering stark-naked  
and sitting a little apart from Adam,  
who was deep into his clothing  
the cuff links and soft leather,  
pulling the zipper up Eve's back  
and she, clasping the bra shut like a jewelry box—

What to do with this mind?  
Throw everything  
into the fire and scream  
into the internet  
that there's nothing to do  
but stand in the dark recesses  
throwing a bright red dodge ball  
against the bone facade  
and fall in and out of love  
with suffering?

*Bianca Stone*  
278

---

<sup>278</sup> [Bianca Stone](#), "[The Fall](#)," collected in [The Möbius Strip Club of Grief](#), [Tin House Books](#)

## Relax

Bad things are going to happen.  
Your tomatoes will grow a fungus  
and your cat will get run over.  
Someone will leave the bag with the ice cream  
melting in the car and throw  
your blue cashmere sweater in the dryer.  
Your husband will sleep  
with a girl your daughter's age, her breasts  
spilling out of her blouse. Or your wife  
will remember she's a lesbian  
and leave you for the woman next door. The other cat—  
the one you never really liked—will contract a disease  
that requires you to pry open its feverish mouth  
every four hours. Your parents will die.  
No matter how many vitamins you take,  
how much Pilates, you'll lose your keys,  
your hair, and your memory. If your daughter  
doesn't plug her heart  
into every live socket she passes,  
you'll come home to find your son has emptied  
the refrigerator, dragged it to the curb,  
and called the used-appliance store for a pickup—drug money.  
The Buddha tells a story of a woman chased by a tiger.  
When she comes to a cliff, she sees a sturdy vine  
and climbs halfway down. But there's also a tiger below.  
And two mice—one white, one black—scurry out  
and begin to gnaw at the vine. At this point  
she notices a wild strawberry growing from a crevice.  
She looks up, down, at the mice.  
Then she eats the strawberry.  
So here's the view, the breeze, the pulse  
in your throat. Your wallet will be stolen, you'll get fat,  
slip on the bathroom tiles in a foreign hotel  
and crack your hip. You'll be lonely.  
Oh, taste how sweet and tart  
the red juice is, how the tiny seeds  
crunch between your teeth.

*Ellen Bass*  
279

---

<sup>279</sup> [Ellen Bass](#), "Relax," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Like a Beggar](#), Copper Canyon Press

## You Can Call Me Ma'am

Having turned forty-two, having menstruated  
lo these thirty years, most often  
on my hands and knees or curled, drugged  
and sobbing, around the hot water bottle.  
Having borne three children and been stretch-marked  
and bloated beyond recognition. Having pushed  
those babies from my womb as each skull crowned  
like live coals against my perineum  
and lodged for good measure up my ass.  
Having bled and sweated and nursed,  
breasts rock hard, nipples like paper  
doused in lighter fluid and each child's mouth  
a struck match. Having pled and dragged  
three children to inoculations and speech therapists,  
to grocery stores and Jiffy Lube and my gynecologist's office,  
to one hundred and eighty school drop-offs,  
and three hundred sixty-five whining, shrieking  
bedtimes every year. Having brushed, my God,  
so many reluctant teeth and forced the good,  
green vegetables down and been pissed, shit,  
and retched on until now, all are  
more or less righted and headed willingly  
where they ought to be going.  
Having, as I said, turned forty-two,  
I don't want you calling me *Miss*,  
or acid-washing even one line from my face,  
or lopping off the part of my belly  
my children made soft. I don't want you lifting  
the breasts they pulled down while  
they took my good milk or repairing  
the scar on my nipple where one  
bit down and left a searing infection, a wound  
that puckered like a mouth and oozed into my bra  
while I nursed through it. I don't even want you  
rinsing the new silver from my hair. I like its steel.  
I am as sharp as a thistle now  
no deer can lop into a nub.  
Let me tell you, at forty-two, it is a deep,  
delicious pleasure not to be dewy  
or fresh as a fucking daisy.

Francesca Bell  
280

---

<sup>280</sup> Francesca Bell, "You Can Call Me Ma'am," *Burnt District*, collected in [Bright Stain](#), Red Hen Press

Merrily, Merrily, Merrily, Merrily

I'm stamen-stained and pistil-whipped, forced to bloom by heart.  
Let's sew your shadow back on in the situation room.

I magicked you out of the morning roar. I sang you out of my hair.  
All this time I've only known you by your *nom de guerre*.

Your story has gone viral. An epic lie, pandemic.  
We had to go extra innings in an overlit diamond ring.

A babyless bathwater moon over The Silver (*burnt-out*) Dollar Room.  
How that a life was but a flower. You knew me by my petals.

Give me your educated guess. I feel embedded in ice.  
All thoughts, all pleasures, all delights must end in freezing rain.

Not for all the tea in teacher, all the harm in charm.  
I can't get warm this year, so I must wear the living room.

Last laugh to the laugh track that will outlast us all.  
My red lipstick: safety feature, sign of poison, bull's-eye?

*Kateri Lanthier*  
281

---

<sup>281</sup> [Kateri Lanthier](#), "[Merrily, Merrily, Merrily, Merrily](#)," collected in [Siren](#), Véhicule Press

## Noli Me Tangere

& I cried out in Aramaic, the  
tongue of the only god, Rabbi,  
it's me!

Noli me tangere, he whispered,  
& the world went black.  
Don't cleave to me.

Comfort me with apples is a  
mistranslation. What the J-  
writer meant:

Sustain me with raisins. Put  
down a bedding of apricots.  
Sleep with me.

The last time we spoke on the  
phone one final moment of  
connection.

Take care, he said, but I knew  
what he was really saying.  
Don't need me.

In the Semitic light I mistook  
him for the gardener,  
something in the look  
of his hands. Give me the body,  
I cried. I am of his flock.  
Believe me.

The email claims I am a lady  
who is very much at the top of  
her game.

Now if only I lived in  
Milwaukee, city of hops.  
A reprieve for me.

That a woman's touch would  
soil him. The white robe forever  
marred. So  
much of what he preached I  
still don't understand  
Sister, how it grieves me.

In my fantasies I imagine a  
dark man in a three thousand  
dollar suit,  
the man a heart surgeon with a  
love of poetry. Yeah yeah.  
It's beneath me.

When the world ends I will  
remember bits & pieces of my  
wicked ways. The seven demons  
of the head. The sound of our  
moans when one of them  
pleased me.

*& tell the others I am risen.*  
Then he points away from  
himself & out into the  
stony world. I imagine his heart  
beating *stay* but his face says  
*leave me.*

In that movie with the teen  
prostitute, how no one ever  
touched her yet  
the maniac took up a gun. So  
many ways to touch someone.  
Naïve me.

& what of it? A man nailed like  
a bloody flag to two pieces of  
wood.  
The duality of the word *cleave*.  
I get it now. He was trying  
to free me.

I don't know it yet but it's good  
advice. I should write it down  
somewhere.  
Star of the sea & the sea a sea of  
bitterness. Lord God,  
don't deceive me.

Quan Barry  
282

---

<sup>282</sup> Quan Barry, "[Noli Me Tangere](#)," collected in [Loose Strife](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

## One in a Line of Many

*for Eloise Klein Healy*

What is it, anyway, that fills you  
if not matter in a void? I never wanted  
to be one of those lesbian poets  
who writes about their mothers—*So don't*  
she says, and the line goes dead.  
What is the mole hill without the mole,  
a kitchen table without placemats, Sunday  
without the phone? This is a time when most  
are making long-distance calls if they have to  
and driving over for dinner if they don't.  
Add an 's', and it smothers, is what I'm telling myself.  
That reliable absence is a way to know  
you come from everything. This way,  
you make the map and the legend.

Today people, grown and not, are walking in stride  
with bodies who bore them, who bear them still,  
who bear them empty, who say they are the promise  
of everything, the gift of wanting, who let the phone ring  
once before answering, *I'm here.*

*July Westhale*  
283

---

<sup>283</sup> [July Westhale](#), "[One in a Line of Many](#)," [The Boiler](#), collected in [Trailer Trash](#), [Kore Press](#)

## Windscape

A great pain strafed the city.

The air was a tapestry weft with cries.

Everywhere, women bandaged  
the pietas of soldiers.

They washed their babies with sand.

They slept above enormous knives.

Finally, the sky erupted  
with little blue parachutes.

Torn from faces, veils  
waltzed across the plaza,

which was like someone  
leaving a wedding ring

inside the body of a bride.

*Kristin Bock*  
284

---

<sup>284</sup> [Kristin Bock](#), "[Windscape](#)," [The Massachusetts Review](#), collected in [Cloisters](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

## Palimpsest

Flower-bordered river  
where I fillet the hyacinths,

a Russian doll of places  
posing as one place.

Halogen me  
at a horse show in Florida

while another juliennes  
olives for appetizers.

A doll slipped in another  
till all dolls are dull:

versions of me  
with whistles for lips

reciting asterisks  
in the periodic table.

Collage of the unconscious:  
white flowers, lost teeth,

scarecrow with  
an aureole of straw,

basilica for everyone's  
best dresses.

I visit the public  
museum of clouds,

lithographs of sky  
posing as space.

Layers make monsters  
as shows the snapdragon.

Memory, you crooked thing  
I do to the page.

*Maya C. Popa*  
285

---

<sup>285</sup> [Maya C. Popa](#), "Palimpsest," [The Literary Review](#), collected in [American Faith](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## The Oranges in Uganda

Walking together, Death and I  
are shopping for *emicungwa*  
at night, in the market.  
Each careful pyramid of fruit  
is stacked on cardboard, illuminated  
by candles. Death's feet are bare  
and covered with dirt  
from the road.

We talk of small things.  
How the mosque and the half moon  
stand sentinel  
against the bloody sky. That mangoes  
will be in season soon.  
I tell him I know why  
people make love when they  
come home from a funeral. Why the pull  
of the body echoes the tides,  
eyes wide as graves. The way the stamens  
of a passion flower spin up,  
defy their stem.

Thinking all the while,  
fumbling with the prickly shapes of jackfruit  
and their sticky sap. *Yesu*,  
the death pulse ringing louder  
than talking drums, viral in the blood.

Cloaked in barkcloth, Death  
raises his ancestral spear, singing mouth full  
of ulcers and steel. He has known the Tombs  
of Kasubi,  
Home of Kings.

The street children are out  
stealing watches again.  
There are no stars to behold.  
*Nkooye*, Death says. *I am tired*.  
He rises like a swallow  
from the depth of grasses,  
leaving a rip no word can cover.

Katherine Larson  
286

---

<sup>286</sup> Katherine Larson, "The Oranges in Uganda," collected in [Radial Symmetry](#), Yale University Press

## I'll Show You Mine If You Show Me Yours

In the coffee shop was a guy with a really nice bald head and one of those sleek jackets with the zip-up neck that look great with a pair of well-cut jeans, which he also had. I confess, I was looking him up and down like a woman who has been reading Rumi and also a tome on the history of bear cults in Europe. I just turned 35, just got a promotion, just discovered the male gaze, by which I mean I gaze on men like some sort of man, by which I mean I'm hungry for my own hunger. I'm like a mountain, I sometimes think. and I'm afraid mountain is a symptom of menopause. When I became a gourd blossom of pregnancy, I didn't know what was coming. I died on that table and then woke up to a nurse putting a swaddled baby in my wind-battered petals. I won't be taken off guard twice. I know the time is coming when I'll grow a mustache and my calyx will turn to sandpaper. I'll be a volcano for a while, then a crater, then a little sack of dusty bones. It makes me fear-mad, like a man with a power tool and a tree that won't come down. It makes me good at sex and good at finding a guitar screaming in the interstices of the FM dial of the big fat car I drive down the rumble strip eyeing the men in hard hats on machines building a highway out of molten tar just beyond the line of wind-quivering orange cones. My man of this morning, I traced my eyes right down his runner's leg to the modest woman's pump he was wearing, black with a chunky heel and a Mary Jane strap. Like I used to wear before I got this feeling I needed boots with brown laces. I used to keep Mary Jane vows of silence everywhere I went. Now, when someone I work with is giving a presentation, I ask the follow-up questions. Sometimes the question is halfway out before I even notice I'm the one talking. This afternoon I heard myself saying to the woman who had just finished clicking her way through a Powerpoint, "You're doing great at being professionally objective, but doesn't it ever just piss you off?" The subject was the agency of heroines in Shakespeare's comedies and her thesis was Chastity. When I'm a mother in my own kitchen I tell my daughter, "You get what you get and you don't throw a fit." By which I mean "Apples and peanut butter." Poets I admire have been known to say, "First thought, best thought." But if that worked I wouldn't need to write at all. If that worked, I could just talk to people. I wonder if Whitman ever walked out of some Manhattan pub shaking his head at how hard it is to share a moment with another human being. How you have to keep backing up to explain yourself to your own fucking atoms. What I mean is, I was reading an important tract on women's honor

and the critic (she's a philosopher but for some reason we don't call her a philosopher) was lamenting how women have historically been expected to lie, to cheat, to keep their secrets. No one expects us to be honorable, only chaste. I'm asking you if we can tell the truth in front of a room full of people, and if that truth might not be that even Shakespeare, especially Shakespeare, doesn't know us at all. And also what I mean is, isn't it too bad we never really talk to each other. Like, for example, about how I've been thinking about women who have sex with horses. Because of Rumi's poem about just that. Because of the bear cults too. Because I feel I might be turning into a centaur. Because I feel I might want to be turned into a centaur. Because the last thing I want is to give birth to a centaur. Wasn't there a maiden in the forest who couldn't keep her hands off the ears of some enchanted donkey? Was it her chastity in the face of his bestiality we admire? Personally, I'm partial to the way she strains against such honor. Because I don't know how to talk to people, I guess. Because I'm lonely. I want to touch this man on the shoulder and say, "I like your shoes." But what I mean is, "I like what you are telling me with your shoes." Or what I mean is, "I like everything I know about you." But I don't say anything, because I think what I can hear you asking is if you can be allowed to pass unnoticed into the crowd of us. If that's what you want, of course. I won't say another word. I'll be quiet in my hope that I knew you as you wished to be known.

*Kathryn Nuernberger*  
287

---

<sup>287</sup> [Kathryn Nuernberger](#), "[I'll Show You Mine If You Show Me Yours](#)," *Poetry International*, collected in [Rue](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Ten What

The camera adds ten what, I can't remember.  
But the threat's enough to make me stay

away. I don't want any more of what I have.  
I don't want another spider plant. I don't

want another lover. Especially I don't want  
another clock, except insofar as each of us

is a clock, all hammers and counting  
down. And yes, I know by heart the list

of lifetimes. A worker bee will die before  
a camel. A fox will die before a pilot whale.

A pocket watch will die before the clock inside  
the crocodile—I think of this often, but never

tell my lover, as I do not tell him that,  
upstairs, a moth is pinned by the window

sash. I make no plans to free it. Everyone says  
the baby looks like me, but I can't see it.

*Natalie Shapero*  
288

---

<sup>288</sup> [Natalie Shapero, "Ten What," \*Kettle Blue Review\*, collected in \*Hard Child\*, Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Condominiums

What inspired the emperor Constantine

to murder his own son

and later

to have his name erased from monuments?

No one knows. Nevertheless,

Constantine was a benevolent ruler,

if can you believe

Church historians.

Late last night,

walking through the contagious city,

I came upon my demolished

high school.

Just like that,

they'd torn it down. Barbarians.

Once I sat in a tight desk

while an old nun lied

about American history.

Now it was a pile

of brick and glass.

A yellow bulldozer dozed

in the corner,

a fat tyrant.

The rumble

of commerce was continuous

from the nearby highway.

How I love you,

America. You are so

forgetful—

Constantine ruled for decades

after his forgotten son's demise

and died happy in Nicomedia.

We should murder history

to make room

for history.

No, I told myself. For truth.

No.

Condominiums.

*Kevin Prufer*  
289

---

<sup>289</sup> [Kevin Prufer](#), "[Condominiums](#)," [Waxwing](#)

## The Open

To be sure, there is a certain promiscuous relation  
between what Rilke calls, in his eighth & greatest  
elegy, *the open*, and what I meant in twelfth grade  
when I dialed Tiana's digits into my ultramarine

Sprint flip phone, said *you free this Wednesday*,  
*I got the open*, which was shorthand, of course,  
for *open crib*, or, *open house*, without the academic  
associations that attend the latter phrase.

In Rilke's mouth, the term connotes a way  
of seeing, the world as a blurring of body  
& shape, no discernible split between  
the water & its trout like broadswords

soft to the touch, lending their silver speed  
to the landscape. I have spent years yearning  
to be so close to the body of another  
my mind might pass like mist from me,

an albatross I might shed without penance  
or pain. Tiana leaves for the 64 bus  
eventually, & I am still only a boy  
alone in his childhood bed, watching

the hours improve. At school the next  
day, my dearest friends adorn me  
in their singular brutality, claim  
Tiana has me *open*, outlined

in marigolds, my body luminous, my body  
barely discernible, as if I had gazed  
upon the edge of the known world  
with all my eyes & yet lived

Joshua Bennett  
290

---

<sup>290</sup> Joshua Bennett, "[The Open](#)," [Connotation Press](#), collected in [Qwed](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## First Fall

I'm your guide here. In the evening-dark  
morning streets, I point and name.  
Look, the sycamores, their mottled,  
paint-by-number bark. Look, the leaves  
rusting and crisping at the edges.  
I walk through Schiller Park with you  
on my chest. Stars smolder well  
into daylight. Look, the pond, the ducks,  
the dogs paddling after their prized sticks.  
Fall is when the only things you know  
because I've named them  
begin to end. Soon I'll have another  
season to offer you: frost soft  
on the window and a porthole  
sighed there, ice sleeving the bare  
gray branches. The first time you see  
something die, you won't know it might  
come back. I'm desperate for you  
to love the world because I brought you here.

*Maggie Smith*  
291

---

<sup>291</sup> [Maggie Smith](#), "[First Fall](#)," collected in [Good Bones](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

## Wight

the dictionary says *living being*  
although until recently I'd believed  
this word meant *apparition*

a *shade* as in *specter* or *shadow* or *ghost*

the first story I wrote at age nine  
after I'd seen *an albino deer a beautiful*  
*wight creacher liveing nearby*

similar to a color  
that's considered *non-spectral*  
so not really a color but a *light*

one time the white deer came to my window  
and blinked at me with star-speckled eyes

in Dutch the same root forms *little child*  
in Old Saxon it creates *thing* or *demon*

*shade* as in *opposite* or *shade* as in *night*

not a color though  
it resembles the translucent  
breath against thin glass outside

*shade* as in *eggshell* or *bone* or *porcelain*

*shade* as in the distance  
between *scarce* and *scared* and  
*sacred* or *pigments* and *figments*

I didn't know what could happen  
yet to a moonbeam-like deer when  
it glitters fluorescently through the trees

in Swedish the root becomes *spirit*

but I watched this one standing  
there alone until the very  
sight of him numbed me  
like sucking on ice

like anything that dissolves over time

Mag Gabbert  
292

---

<sup>292</sup> [Mag Gabbert](#), "[Wight](#)," [Hobart](#)

## Hajar, First Woman on the Moon

Abraham is a just dot now,  
distant planet  
Sarah's laughter floats by in globules  
I grab, swallow one, laugh  
I am alone in a space  
no one else has ever inhabited

I'm not what I was before:  
Not Sarah's Hajar,  
nor Abraham's, not  
a girl of Egypt anymore  
Can't go back now

& I don't know  
what else to be  
What will anchor me?  
I somersault like hiccups  
There is too much noise on earth  
to hear God there  
In a life spent listening  
to commandments, I never  
had the luxury  
of this lunar silence

Things whiz by. Djinnns swing  
from galactic chandeliers,  
eavesdropping  
Was that a ram?  
Was that a lote tree?  
I hear the beating of many wings  
& someone being taken on a tour of heaven  
Will these weightless shapes  
be hewn into a cube  
solid enough to anchor earth?  
Did I touch that rock before?  
Seven times?

*Mohja Kahf*  
293

---

<sup>293</sup> [Mohja Kahf, "Hajar, First Woman on the Moon,"](#) collected in [Hagar Poems, The University of Arkansas Press](#)

In *bunraku*, when you are watching *bunraku*  
there is that sweet moment in your mind

when you stop noticing the three puppeteers hovering  
around each puppet like earnest ghosts

and begin to follow the story being told  
by the puppets. The chanter sitting off to the side

voices the love, connivance, outrage,  
and eventual reconciliation at the heart of each play,

though often what reconciliation actually meant  
was everyone banished, broken, or dead.

The seeing and non-seeing that make humans  
humans: I'm thinking now of the placid

English estates where the servants had to face the wall  
whenever anyone of importance was near,

where workers had to cut the lawns with scissors  
by candlelight at night, to save the master

the trouble seeing and hearing all that effort.  
What the mind does with this kind of information

is probably the knot within the *post-*  
in what we call *post-modernism*, knowing all we know

now about the cruelty that made modernism  
modernism. In the Philippines, growing up among

servants, I loved the servants the same way  
I loved my parents, with helplessness and tyranny.

Walking in the exhibit of the black artist's paintings  
of young black men in brocaded tableaus,

I am absorbed by their beauty as much  
as I am by finding out that the intricate backgrounds

were outsourced to painters in Beijing, taking part  
in the functional ambiguity between

one kind of labor and another. I guess all this matters  
only as much as you want it to matter,

the mind making its focal adjustments  
between foreground and context, present and past,

as well as it can. For example, this morning  
my sister sent me a photograph of my grandmother's

hands. Sitting outside in her wheelchair, taking in  
the gold sunshine, my grandmother

had her hands folded in her lap, and I looked at them  
until I had to stop. This is foreground.

For context, today I learned that the farthest galaxy  
we know of, located by scientists in 2011,

is 100,000,000,000,000,000,000 miles away.  
It goes by the name of UDFj-39546284,

for reasons that I haven't yet looked up.  
In the photograph you can see online, the galaxy looks

like the dusty stuff in the corner of a windowpane,  
something you could look at sometimes,

something that is nothing, and has nothing  
to do with what you know about distance and time.

*Rick Barot*  
294

---

<sup>294</sup> [Rick Barot](#), "[UDFj-39546284](#)," [Arroyo Literary Review](#), collected in [The Galleons](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

## No Hemlock Rock

Don't kill yourself. Don't kill yourself.  
Don't. Eat a donut, be a blown nut.  
That is, if you're going to kill yourself,  
stand on a street corner rhyming  
seizure with Indonesia, and wreck it with  
racket. Allow medical terms.  
Rave and fail. Be an absurd living ghost,  
if necessary, but don't kill yourself.

Let your friends know that something has  
passed, or be glad they've guessed.  
But don't kill yourself. If you stay, but are  
bat crazy you will batter their hearts  
in blooming scores of anguish; but kill  
yourself, and hundreds of other people die.

Poison yourself, it poisons the well;  
shoot yourself, it cracks the bio-dome.  
I will give badges to everyone who's figured  
this out about suicide, and hence  
refused it. I am grateful. Stay. Thank  
you for staying. Please stay. You  
are my hero for staying. I know  
about it, and am grateful you stay.

Eat a donut. Rhyme opus with lotus.  
Rope is bogus, psychosis. Stay.  
Hocus Pocus. Hocus Pocus.  
Work to not kill yourself. I won't either.

*Jennifer Michael Hecht*  
295

---

<sup>295</sup> [Jennifer Michael Hecht](#), "[No Hemlock Rock](#)," *The Awl*, collected in [Who Said](#), Copper Canyon Press

St. Aloysius Gonzaga, Pray for Us

Even though I went to St. Aloysius Grade School  
and Gonzaga Prep High School and Gonzaga  
University, the only thing I know about you  
is that you died at twenty-three so you are a boy forever.  
And the story Sr. Geraldine told us:  
Once you were playing a game of chess  
and someone asked you what you would do  
if you knew the world were about to end.  
You paused and held your pawn in the air  
and then simply made your next move.  
I imagined you in a room with a fireplace  
like in the films about boarding schools  
where the boys all have feverish eyes  
and one of them is going to die soon.  
Can I call you Aloysius? Was the chess board  
marble or wood? Sr. Geraldine was dusted  
with chalk and she brought the cold in  
from outside. We tried to learn the colors  
across from each other on the wheel and sketch  
the shadows of fruit but it was difficult  
because we'd seen *The Day After* and knew  
we could wake up in a world covered in ash  
like when Mount St. Helens blew. It wouldn't matter  
then that I'd told my mother to buy all those cans  
of soup because she would not be standing  
where I told her to wait for me outside  
the university named for you. No one can be  
that calm, Aloysius. You can take my Queen.  
But tell me you would have been scared too.  
I don't need a saint, I need a sinner.  
Let's go back to St. Al's and sit on the swings  
in the dark with the kids doing drugs.  
Don't you get tired of being the patron saint  
of teenagers, all of us followed by fear  
like the moon? And the saint of AIDS victims,  
the disease I learned about from a pamphlet  
my mother left for me on my pillow?  
Men were growing impossibly thin like the man  
who died of the plague in Rome in the 1500s  
whom you are forever carrying.  
My mother didn't want to talk about it.  
The way she stopped talking about my dad  
who also died young and who was always  
too good to be true. Aloysius, you had  
a beautiful name with the wind blowing  
through it and I'm sorry you died  
before anyone touched you but God.

Laura Read

---

<sup>296</sup> [Laura Read](#), "[St. Aloysius Gonzaga, Pray for Us](#)," collected in [Dresses from the Old Country](#), [BOA Editions. Ltd.](#)

## My Mother

Grew up the oldest of six in the nineteen sixties.  
Left home at seventeen in the company of a reprobate,  
my father, twenty-three, whose wavy hair  
was soon to grow long. Channeling his inner Irish aristocrat,  
he called himself the Prince of Breiffni.  
Irish too, black-eyed, she wore bell-bottoms  
and halter-tops, knee-high boots and a faux-leopard-spotted coat;  
she liked to bake, to smoke pot, to read Gogol,  
was quiet until she was not, rolling her eyes at  
a pun, a pretension, always happy to see her friends;  
wearing brown saddle shoes and a merit pin on her chest  
until the day she was kicked out of school.  
Favorite color, blue. Preferred practice to theory.  
Even when she was weary, even after the chemo,  
she liked horses and swimming, eating bread with jam,  
driving too fast in her leased BMW,  
making pies and quilts, always rejecting guilt, licking juice from her lips.  
O come down from your weeping cherry,  
Mother, and look at how we have scattered  
your ashes only in our minds, unable  
to let you leave the house—.

*Meghan O'Rourke*  
297

---

<sup>297</sup> [Meghan O'Rourke](#), "[My Mother](#)," [Brooklyn Magazine](#), collected in [Once](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

New York, Summer

I'd walk her home after work,  
buying roses and talking of Bechsteins.  
She was full of soul.  
Her small room was gorged with heat,  
and there were no windows.  
She'd take off everything  
but her pants,  
and take the pins from her hair,  
throwing them on the floor  
with a great noise.  
Like Crete.  
We wouldn't make love.  
She'd get on the bed  
with those nipples,  
and we'd lie  
sweating  
and talking of my best friend.  
They were in love.  
When I got quiet,  
she'd put on usually Debussy,  
And,  
leaning down to the small ribs,  
bite me.  
Hard.

*Jack Gilbert*  
298

---

<sup>298</sup> [Jack Gilbert](#), "[New York, Summer](#)," collected in [Monolithos](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

## Ways of Being Lonely

Like a haunted river no bridge wants to lay itself down over.  
Like a taxidermied grizzly in the student union.  
You cry at a frequency only subatomic insects can hear.  
That time with him in Houston.  
Sometimes you flame into a scary flower.  
An eruption of coherence in the postmodern seminar.  
You stand in a shallow creek and your reflection floats slowly downstream without you.  
Alcohol is your emotional-support animal.  
The fan hums erratically.  
An unclaimed suitcase of miniature toiletries, burst open on the baggage carousel.  
Like an amoeba without an e-scooter.  
An extra in an epic battle scene, trampled by a non-Equity horse.  
You're a red-breasted flute, but everyone else is a dowel.  
A Zen koan growing in the White House Rose Garden.  
Sun-damaged curtains in the parlor of an abandoned friendship.  
You're the queen, but you're a bee being swept into the pool's filtration system.  
Like a version, touched for the very last time.  
Spooky piano music rising from the dishwater.  
You wake up alone to a bird reciting Keats.

*Kim Addonizio*  
299

---

<sup>299</sup> [Kim Addonizio, "Ways of Being Lonely," \*The New Yorker\*](#)

## The Mathematician

Kurt Gödel refused food and starved himself to death  
when his wife was hospitalized for six months,  
his algorithms and formulas  
swimming around in his brain.  
Maybe as his ribs rose like serrated knives  
he envisioned the sun locked  
over the Black Forest, over Princeton Chapel,  
someone abandoning her pickup  
in the middle of an intersection, leading a chestnut  
mare into a clearing, the sheets  
doused with gasoline, madness  
galloping through the windows.  
He believed someone was trying to poison him  
and trusted only his wife to bring food  
to his lips. Maybe that's what it means  
to really trust a person, jettisoning the rest of the planet.  
I hired a woman I believed in  
then fired her three weeks later  
for coming to work high  
on meth. It should have been simple, the merchandise  
much too valuable, her jawbone  
clicking away at the clock  
as I took her keys and showed her the door.  
Five hours later we found her  
out in the parking lot on her knees,  
rooting through her purse, swiveling her head around  
and hissing at us like an animal.  
Gödel survived Nazi Germany  
but he could not escape the empire of love.  
My son would let the ocean take me  
if it meant his mother would live.  
We were wrestling, the three of us, on the bed,  
and when my wife jokingly let out a painful whimper,  
he climbed on top of me and punched me  
with both fists, over and over again in the chest.

*Jay Nebel*  
300

---

<sup>300</sup> Jay Nebel, "The Mathematician," collected in [Neighbors](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

## Procreation Myth

Let's not underplay the role that alcohol has in this equation. Two blue jays fighting to the death in the courtyard, and all you can think about is flinging the Ortho Tri-Cyclen pills one by one into a catfish pond. The next day, in line behind a mother of three at the grocery checkout, you're ready to mainline a week's worth of those candies.

Everyone told you *have faith*. Just wait. Put it in the hands of god, not in the hands of \_\_\_\_, who is only your god, but not universally recognized. A day or two after the surgery, you meet \_\_\_\_ at the coffee shop (neither yours nor his) and discreetly show him your zipper of staples. It makes him want a second cup of coffee. You're that metal.

A summer job in boudoir photography sounds great until you're suffering hell cramps and the clients need extra fluffing of their boas, or extra profound eyeliner. *I Hate Joan Jett*, or *Fuck Whitesnake*, the wrong lights pulsating at the wrong time, all the best props tumbling from the wall in unison, not sure if it's right to be relieved or not.

A few weeks into the poetry workshop and you let it slip. Of course, this is at the dance club where your professor and several classmates followed you after drinking Bass Ale and listening to reggae on the jukebox. Why did you carry a spare wig and sequined vest in your backpack? The same reason some people have two Chapsticks in one pocket.

It's probably too late now to mention this, but there was always a moment when I bucked my back in unison with the strobe light and felt I made my own sort of animal. My favorite movie will always be *Coal Miner's Daughter*, even if I am vomiting in a graffiti-frescoed bathroom. *Stop*, the poster declared, *the life you make may be your own*.

Mary Biddinger

301

---

<sup>301</sup> [Mary Biddinger](#), "[Procreation Myth](#)," collected in [Partial Genius](#), Black Lawrence Press

## Experience

When I think of everything I've wanted  
I feel sick. There was this one night in winter  
when Jennifer Scanlon and I were driven out  
to the desert to be the only girls there  
when the boys got drunk and chose  
the weakest among themselves to beat the living  
shit out of over and over again while the night  
continued in its airy way to say nothing. Sure, I wanted  
to believe violence was a little bell you could ring  
and get what you wanted. It seemed to work for those  
boys, who'd brought strict order to the evening  
using nothing but a few enthusiastic muscles.  
Even when he'd begun bleeding from his nose, the boy  
stayed. It was an initiation. That's what he believed.  
Thank God time erases everything in this steady  
impeccable way. Now it's like I never lived  
that life, never had to, sitting on a tailgate  
while Jennifer asked for advice on things she'd already done,  
watching the stars ferment above, adoring whatever it was  
that allowed those boys to throw themselves fists-first  
at the world, yell every profanity ever made  
into the open ear of the universe. I believed then  
that if only they'd get quiet enough, we'd hear  
the universe calling back, telling us what to do next.  
Of course, if we'd been quiet, we would've heard  
nothing. And that silence, too, would have ruined us.

*Carrie Fountain*

302

---

<sup>302</sup> [Carrie Fountain](#), "[Experience](#)," collected in [Burn Lake](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## When Your Mother Asks If You're Seeing Anyone and No Longer Means a Therapist

It's tough to find a cardiologist who dates  
patients from the Ward of Cracked Hearts, but  
there's always the bariatric surgeon  
who thinks you could drop a few pounds. If it's too late  
for the death row inmate, try the child predator, you too  
could date the would-be senator, or even the President of the United States.  
If you can't have the priest, don't give up.  
You too could fall for the charismatic cult leader. You too  
could try the celibate polygamist. Admittedly,  
you'd have to share, and you wouldn't know for sure  
if you're actually dating, or whether you'd ever "consummate,"  
but who's in it for that kind of thing anyway, unless,  
of course, you'd finally give me a grandchild.  
You didn't spend years in braces only to settle  
for a dental assistant, did you?  
We didn't correct your overbite just so you could eat  
your dinners alone. It took sacrifice to cultivate your eligibility, years  
of home perms and hand-me-downs, decades of clearance rack cosmetics.  
And yet the people you called friends were privileged  
enough to discover your brain and not your body. BTW, did  
you see that profile pic of the head floating in a jar?  
Though I'm not sure if it's really enough to love.  
But love you will as everyone does  
toward infinite grace, the axe  
into the olive branch, verisimilitude  
to abstraction, even the sarcophagus toward mummy dust,  
the intellect to its dementia. And I will support you as the mantle  
above the fireplace supports the little box, house  
to your spouse's ashes.

*Cindy King*  
303

---

<sup>303</sup> [Cindy King, "When Your Mother Asks If You're Seeing Anyone and No Longer Means a Therapist," \*The Slowdown\*](#)

## The World's Fair

When I'm up here thinking of my pockets, it's mostly canon about you.  
This is what I was meant to wear, even if I've got nothing to carry,  
Even if my hands are busy at their carnival fidgeting.  
I have something to hide, at least my age to prove.  
My glasses are missing and the too long, didn't read books lie  
Everywhere, the slim ones I love to squeeze all fled or filched away.  
Tomorrow you'd not know I slept with you below my tongue today.  
Come at me like a vandal while I'm squint-eyed in the sun.  
What colors will you find flushing between these arms of mine?  
Anything you've become can fit there. You entire can fit there, and your fireworks too.  
The ropes of personal freedom are coiled with absurdity.  
Put your ear to the candle shop. Listen to the Catherine wheel cry.  
This is how I greet you from the Ferris wheel. Now you light up your mouth and fly.

*Christine Gosnay*  
304

---

<sup>304</sup> [Christine Gosnay](#), "[The World's Fair](#)," [Thrush](#), collected in [Even Years](#), [The Kent State University Press](#)

End of the work ethic

(alternate title:

If Mick Jagger didn't exist,  
we'd have to invent him)

(alternate alternate title:

I am old and afraid)

Bum left foot. Gimp right hip  
& knee, elbow & shoulder. Blown-out  
left groin. Also dizzy a lot.  
The shooting pains  
of self-doubt. But Stratocasters  
don't smash themselves.  
Every night, I get up on stage  
and make love with my rage. Not  
that you notice. I see you out there  
yawning, checking for texts,  
your face haloed  
in phone-glow. You used to prefer  
the lyrics of my narcissism  
to yours. I should quit.  
Raise llamas or alpacas or whatever  
those weird animals are  
who look like sheep  
trying to be horses. Anyway,  
there's no such thing  
as a rock 'n' roll comb-over.  
All those pills. All that blood  
and cum. I got so much empty  
inside me, if you dropped a pebble  
in my mouth, you'd never hear it  
hit bottom. I won't even  
tell myself when I'm doing  
my last show. I'll find out  
like everyone else—when I read  
the suicide note.

*Bob Hicok*  
305

---

<sup>305</sup> [Bob Hicok](#), "[End of the work ethic](#)," [Conduit](#), collected in [Hold](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Pictograph: Bizarre Anthropomorph, Often with Interior Body Decorations

Note left foot with interior spiral. Note the torso, storehouse of resins and gums. We have been here before, counting as we step down. Counting: tool of the magicians. Perhaps the Hopi are right, that we emerged from the earth, like bears. Perhaps that is why we carry the earth-jars inside us. We recognize our companions as they pass on the left. By drift of sage, an indescence of throat armor. The gay men have cues, a plain or plaid bandana, in the front pocket or the back, as the gangs do. Erratic: the field of our remains. A scientist on the radio says that, contrary to past belief, the damaged brain can learn to heal itself. We can take back our pogroms, we could pray the blind to see, perhaps two leaders, enemies, who will stop now. Thoreau died whispering "Indians" and "buffalo," it is said. We do sometimes get to choose our lives. Set in motion, as it has been explained to me.

*Melissa Kwasny*  
306

---

<sup>306</sup> [Melissa Kwasny, "Pictograph: Bizarre Anthropomorph, Often with Interior Body Decorations," \*Willow Springs\*, collected in \*Pictograph\*, Milkweed Editions](#)

from "Testaments Scratched into a Water Station Barrel"

Bought my luck.  
Rabbit's foot.  
Hiked through paloverde.  
Thick heat.  
Bullet holes in cacti.  
Rested by a ditch.  
Sand littered with used tampons.  
Took off my sneakers.  
Ants crisscrossed my feet.  
Sandal straps.  
Passed around crackers.  
Tuna cans.  
Mustard & ketchup packets.  
Trekking over three hills.  
Dashed across a dirt road.  
Nearly stepped on a diamondback.  
Quiet coil.  
Squatted under mesquite.  
Drank hot water.  
Tried to forget the plazas of Hermosillo.  
Rose bushes.  
Roasted cashews.  
Tried to remember my uncle's phone number.  
A butcher in Iowa.  
Ames.  
Walked toward a mountain.  
Coolness fell through the heat.  
Guillotine.  
Rested.  
Fought off the oldest smuggler.  
Yellow teeth.  
Gums pink as horse cock.  
Woke with some Portuguese in my head.  
A morte nos absorve inteiramente.  
Icy dawn.  
Lanced my blisters.  
Put on three pairs of socks.  
Walked for six hours.  
Dunes.  
Orange wildflowers.  
Twisted my right ankle.  
Leaned against a boulder.  
Too long.  
Left behind.  
Took off my jacket.  
Sweated through my clothes.  
Puked tuna.  
Remembered my honeymoon.

The coast of Veracruz.  
Cheap hotel.  
Turned over Jesus before undressing.  
Holy velvet.  
Puked again.  
Took off my shoes.  
Wrapped belt around my ankle.  
Lurched forward.  
Gossiped with the heat.  
Laughed.  
Found this water station.  
Waiting.

*Eduardo C. Corral*  
307

---

307 [Eduardo C. Corral](#), "[Testaments Scratched into a Water Station Barrel \[Bought my luck...\]](#)," *Poetry*, collected in [Guillotine](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

## Lisp

there are more Ss in possession than i remembered /  
my name hinges on the S / is serpentine / has sibilance /  
is simple / six lettered / a symbol / different from its sign /  
sound shapes how we think about objects / the mouth  
shapes how sound spills out / how the speaker's seen /  
a sigmatism is the homosexual mystique / my parents  
sought treatments / i was sent to a speech / pathologist /  
sixth grade / a student / she gave me exercises / i was  
schoolled / practiced silence / syllabics / syntax / my voice  
sap in the high branches / my voice a spoonful of sugared  
semen / i licked silk when i spoke / i spilt milk when i sang /  
when i sang sick men tore wings from city birds / so  
i straightened my sound / into a masculine i / the S  
is derived from the semitic letter shin / meaning  
my swishiness is hebraic / is inherited / it's semantic / no  
matter what was sacrificed / the tongued isaac / a son  
against the stone of my soft palate / still i slipped /  
my hand inside my neighbor's / waistband & pulled back  
pincers / sisyphus with the sissiest lips / parseltongued  
assassin / sassy & passing for the poisoned sea / now  
when i say please / let me suck your cock / i sound  
straight / as the still secondhand / on a dead watch.

*Sam Sax*  
308

## Dark Spots

In the late nineteenth century, some photographers  
claimed not only to capture images  
of loved ones from beyond  
the grave but to be able to photograph memories  
of the deceased, their auras still glowing  
around the bereaved,  
as if to capture light reflected off a body could preserve  
that body over time, as Beatrice explains  
the presence of the dark  
spots on the moon to Dante in *Paradiso*: how  
the brightness of a celestial body  
reveals the angelic  
gladness that quickens the body, *letizia* that shines as joy  
shines through an eye. *Visit Fort  
Courage—Take Pictures  
of the Past*, the billboards across Arizona advised,  
and at the base of the mountain in  
New Mexico, a note taped  
to the gasoline pump read, *Hold tight to your money—the wind  
will carry it away*. In the snapshot of  
my grandmother in her  
casket, wearing the Elizabethan collar and permed  
curls she never wore, my mother  
gazes through her  
to a planet she always knew existed but which, without  
the darkness, she could never see  
before. They call  
some bruises *shiners* like the violet stars of the Rose of Sharon  
that come out in the morning and shine

all day in their leaf-black  
shade, shade carved into the yard like fish scales covering  
the sarcophagus in Sant'Apollinare in  
Classe near Ravenna  
or the stiff, veined hands of the sycamore stretched wide  
in applause, the Italian gesture  
of mourning.

*Angie Estes*  
309

---

<sup>309</sup> [Angie Estes](#), "[Dark Spots](#)," [Southwest Review](#), collected in [Enchantée](#), [Oberlin College Press](#)

At the Small Town Drag Show

Watching Daisy Pukes take the dollar bill  
between her teeth, shake her fake tits in each  
boy's peach-fuzz face, I recall my once-praised body  
as it comes alive again: long  
forgotten cat now raised from its shallow  
backyard grave. Cat with sweat on its fur, cat  
that nightly screamed below the kitchen's glass,  
cat whose backbend stretch of joy raised her pink  
pinhole to the sky. Daisy's high-heel boots  
scuff the floorboards, her nylon blend lashes  
flutter under fluorescents, and I feel  
a tingle somewhere—my knees? my tongue?—  
as I pour my sex, its proud performance,  
back into this dress I've worn like a shroud.

*Keetje Kuipers*

310

---

<sup>310</sup> [Keetje Kuipers](#), "[At the Small Town Drag Show](#)," *Hunger Mountain*, collected in [All Its Charms](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Highlights from *Under the Sod*

In the novel *Under the Sod*, there are no characters in the first 338 pages. There's a great deal of vegetation, a few passages about the ocean, and a long chapter about fog. The first line of the fog chapter is, "The fog is the quietest species of weather," and the last line is, "One can be mauled in secret." Finally, there's the appearance of a painter wandering through a city plagued by such a terrible curse, it will never be lifted no matter how much somebody loves somebody else. For the next 654 pages the fog stops, the landscape gets considerably greener and people do things: a wrecked sailor with a bony compass for a heart wheezes against the boiling waves, a princess disguised as a sword maker cries into the fire, and in a tavern there's a fistfight between a playwright and another playwright. One of them thinks it's about the bill, the other thinks it's about a girl, but it's really about neither. The book then lapses into what critics have described as "deep pastoralia": boys chase girls through meadows, birds glide through laurel trees and a man stands on a hill overlooking the valley and plays a wood instrument that makes flowers open so wide, their petals arch their backs and snap off in mid-air. The next section is too long for most people; it's the kind of dense, slow-motion prose that makes you want to kill yourself. The 2,098 pages of this section can be best summarized in one sentence: "A man crawls on his stomach across the riverbank." In the book's final ten pages, there's a clash between two armies, it's night forever, nobody's happy, etc. The book ends at dusk, in a coat of half-light and shadows, the sky a layer of crimson, the horizon made of murder. Below the cliffs something opens and closes its jaws; a sailor with a fatal spider bite leans back and has to wait for weeks to never make it home.

*Alex Green*

311

---

<sup>311</sup> [Alex Green](#), "[Highlights from \*Under the Sod\*](#)," collected in [Emergency Anthems](#), [Brooklyn Arts Press](#)

## Note to My First Wife

We leased a two-story coloring book.  
The peonies our neighbor planted

between our *recto* and her *verso*  
turned out plastic to the touch.

She even kept them watered: pretty  
funny, like the niblets we bought

in white cans named NO NAME.  
But it's the moon who found us

really hilarious that night—naked,  
well-oiled from head to foot—

we swam across Lake MacBride.  
No memories of you in snow...

I assume you sleep as I do, more  
or less. When I can't, can't you?

Ginkgo trees canopied our one-  
way street, no address to GPS.

Stopped for geese at Fresh Pond,  
or the news on mute, I hear you,

also turned down low, say *don't*  
*bother wondering if I'm dead*. I do.

Steven Cramer  
312

---

<sup>312</sup> [Steven Cramer](#), "[Note to My First Wife](#)," [New Ohio Review](#), collected in [Listen](#), Mad Hat Press

## Real Estate

My mother married a man who divorced her for money. *Phyllis*, he would say, *If you don't stop buying jewelry, I will have to divorce you to keep us out of the poorhouse.* When he said this, she would stub out a cigarette, mutter something under her breath. Eventually, he was forced to divorce her. Then, he died. Then she did. The man was not my father. My father was buried down the road, in a box his other son selected, the ashes of his third wife in a brass urn that he will hold in the crook of his arm forever. At the reception, after his funeral, I got mean on four cups of Lime Sherbet Punch. When the man who was not my father divorced my mother, I stopped being related to him. *These things are complicated*, says the Talmud. When he died, I couldn't prove it. I couldn't get a death certificate. *These things are complicated*, says the Health Department. Their names remain on the deed to the house. It isn't haunted, it's owned by ghosts. When I die, I will come in fast and low. I will stick the landing. There will be no confusion. The dead will make room for me.

*Richard Siken*

313

---

<sup>313</sup> [Richard Siken](#), "[Real Estate](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#)

from "Q & A"

Whatever Thibault was Thibault is:  
like a comet he appears  
blazing his stock car through the night sky:  
he circles us, a tetherball caught in orbit

while around and around the pole  
a dancer remembers her appendectomy  
as she lap-dances for a happy bachelor  
there by the grace of Fidelity and cocaine.

You see how even change is changed;  
a Skylark, stylish and reliable;  
you want something to lean on, lean on  
remembered swallow, remembered meadow:

our sources say there's no such place—  
rest on the nonexistence  
time force-feeds the agastache, alyssum,  
when up their little heads they raise

and look around like a periscope, and droop.  
Our sources say they leave no trace.  
Thunder Road echoes with roars  
from the quarry owner's sons' RX-7's;

they drown out the sound of boners going Boing  
in the Théâtre Superérotique de Québec  
where the dancer spritzed herself and laughs:  
another night, another dent in the appendectomy.

So change is changed, the most powerful force  
is powerless, it goes on and on;  
logic will not protect you, you have to have  
stock cars, a rash, false indigo, a rumor.

By the way: I know what you know about me.  
And by I, I mean me, the author, Dan:  
I know you know what I did, you spread it:  
I mean the innermost you and me—

the ones inside our brains. I'll have my revenge  
in the form of blossoming amsonia,  
amnesiac Orions with their belts undone,  
a hit list, a who's who, a spritz, a marquis.

*Dan Chiasson*

314

---

<sup>314</sup> Dan Chiasson, "Q & A," collected in [The Math Campers](#), Alfred A. Knopf

## The Wistful

A shirt is for unbuttoning.  
A name is for forgetting.

Drunk is for getting.  
And hillocks are for sitting on

and sighing, when, struck numb  
by the sun's delinquent shining,

you resign to a strychnine indecisiveness  
that's meant to discredit you.

You don't know what to do.  
Or how. Or who.

Or if it even matters now. to boot.  
And it suits you absolutely,

this languor, this drag.  
Such as they were, your lusts

have been scissored in half.  
And your heart.

That blood-blue slab  
of vena cava and ventricle,

receptacle of kept loves,  
villain, vile, and trivial—

it will take a final beating  
then throw in its towel.

Then brake. Then coast.  
Then slow to an almost

stock-still throb. Then—  
if you're lucky—it stops.

*Jill Alexander Essbaum*  
315

---

<sup>315</sup> [Jill Alexander Essbaum](#), "[The Wistful](#)," collected in [Would-Land](#), [Cooper Dillon Books](#)

## Marigolds

*Like oak trees swerving out of the hills  
And setting their faces to the wind  
Day after day being practically lifted away  
They are lashed to the earth  
And never let go  
Gripping on darkness  
—Alice Oswald, "Memorial"*

When I picture Robert, he is in the Public Garden,  
watching setting suns, like the ill-fated king, turn all to gold.  
Robert with the swans. Robert under the statue of Washington.

Robert amid the tulips. Without a childhood  
home, I made for myself a house of orchids, of sewer-grates  
with fishes on them, of forsythia and maple trees.

Of this I am sure: when Robert crossed the bridge  
between Boston and Cambridge, he saw Poseidon.  
In late summer, he alone could tell underneath

the sailboats is a god, mighty and to be feared.  
In mid-winter, he alone knew the ice  
could not long contain that god.

In the pipes in his home, he heard the gurgle of illness.  
I smell illness in the riotous orchid blooms.

What are midnight trees?  
I think that once I knew one such tree,  
if it is the kind owls gather on nightly

to fight, barking,  
eyes dim with bloodlust and the hiss of feathers.  
I built for myself a house of orchids, with a cave underneath,

a cave shaped into an armory  
brimming with tarantula hawks, giant sparrow bees,  
and admiral butterflies.

In place of stalactites hang treeless,  
inextricable roots.  
O sacred receptacle of my joys.

The day I first learned the word *argonaut*,  
I wrote it in a poem. I searched the seas for one.

I searched the skies. I searched a painting.  
In the painting, I found the word *spears*, which I drove slowly  
into my father's ribs. He I eulogized and he I resurrected,

reaching again for the spears. I have seen  
countless full moons fail. Each of them hollowed,  
flooding heart-first the craw-faced light, the bracken

underneath. Then, the sound of a wounded owl,  
a soft, sudden darkness in my throat. O, how this villainy.  
In mourning, the owls are replaced by hawks.

From one angle, broad-winged hawks  
seem to have two pairs of hollow eyes.  
*We are looking for you*, say the kettle of satellites

to the humans lost, to the plane  
disappeared, to what lives thirty miles below

the surface of Enceladus. On this morning in April,  
Haixun 01, Ocean Shield, and HMS Echo hear a thump  
that sounds like the colors inside an oyster shell.

The frequency of the noise can make a heart  
stop. Anxious as seaweed, over the sides of the ships  
creep hordes of trembling locators.

The satellites stare with breath hitching in their throats.  
Between the wine-colored hull of Ocean Shield and Enceladus  
lies eight times the distance between the Earth and the sun.

Thirty miles below the surface of that geyser-ridden, tiger-striped  
Saturnian moon lies life, report the satellites.  
The hawks steel their two pairs of eyes up

toward alien oceans on other planets.  
What I am is all that I can carry, wrote Deborah.

What can I carry? All that I caught I left behind,  
all that I missed, I carried.  
The hawks are not looking

toward alien oceans. I am.  
I am looking, too, to alien men and women.  
I picture hurtling into them, by turn, to serve my lust.

I picture us bent sideways, impaled,  
contorted and screaming. I picture  
the different shades of a moan.

The word *bed* fills the four eyes in my mind  
with the color gold, gold of the ill-fated king  
and the Garden sunset, gold glinting in a decaying tooth,

goldenrod, a haze of pollen, the dragon's treasure,  
a long necklace of many fine gold chains

reaching down to a woman's hips.  
Young man walks down to the river  
down to the river of gold.

Young man walks down to the river  
down to the river and drowns.  
In the word *bed* also joyously wail

*bed* the color of ashen near-death, *bed* the fleshly color  
of bodies broken for good, *bed* the color blue  
of heart-stopped lips. O, here I lift this one hand

up to heaven. The ghosts of the poisoned dogs  
live in the piano. The ghost of my mother, still living,  
lives in her excised tumor and stag-horn kidney stone.

The ghost of my ability to love without grief, still living,  
lives in this poem. All my pockets filled with stones

in the river I'll be found. Why, then, I am the devil's dam—  
Dangle me from a cliff, twelve thousand feet above sea.  
O, speak with possibilities. Build me a skin

of glass to cover the Grand Canyon,  
throw me on it. Summon a thousand wilding mares,  
restrain them with massive chains, foot-long links

of hardened steel. When the chains buck  
from fracture, let the mares stampede the glass,  
bid them trample my body.

Watch, from a great distance, as the glass cracks.  
Watch us beasts entangle. Watch me take a hoof  
to the mouth. To the skull. To the groin.

Hear us squeal, and bark, and howl,  
calling out, as wretches do, to failing life.

When at last we one thousand and one blood-filled creatures  
reach the bottom of the Canyon, throw yourself in.  
My voice in your ear will tell you that you were meant to die

like this, a beautiful and inelegant dive onto a field of reds,  
some bright and sun-kissed, some dark and pulp-dashed,  
your and our blood across the burnt-orange schist.

See, O, see what I have done.  
I fear neither the sight of nor the word for *blood*.  
HMS Albatross has joined the search for the plane.

It is May now, and there is no sign of it.  
The detritus lied. The home I made is of orchids,  
forsythia, barbed wire, and burnt metal.

In the bedroom I planted what I imagine  
a midnight tree to be. Its roots join the treeless roots

in the armory beneath. Ravished, my hands cut off,  
my tongue cut out, I put my home under the wisteria,  
craving owls at war under thick purple overhang.

No territory there is that is not mine.  
The Albatross, it is mine.  
Enceladus is mine. Your innermost thigh,

beneath the wisteria, mine.  
Poseidon is mine, and the river between Boston and Cambridge,  
and the one that snakes through Georgia, floods

into the Gulf. I am dreaming of a monument  
to moments colonized by theaters of the imagination.  
O monstrous. The O of a mouth without a tongue.

The O of two pairs of lips clasped,  
starving on one another. Horns and cry of hounds.

The ballet in my deadly standing eye:  
the arrow's flight into the neck, the horses' tumble into the canyon.  
A nation's search for a single tiger

with quills in its neck. A spilt cloud of felled bees.  
The elephant's horror in the flock of red-billed queleas,  
feathered locusts who from their first breath form

trembling caverns with their mouths, their aggregate force  
snapping branches off trees. The orchestra plays low drumbeats,  
a single singer carving the melody.

Do not, I pray, promise me  
an untroubled lake. Take me instead  
to the rivers with vengeful gods

under steaming and frozen waters.  
Take me instead for the stag, the rifle, and the hunter.

Promise me unending days in which I can picture,  
then picture again, a fire whirl,  
the slowness of the sea drinking

a ferry or a plane, the gasps of air bubbles  
around carapaces, the moons of Saturn.  
I myself am hells, and I prize them

as if they were the rarest blooms.  
Promise me I will always reach again for spears,  
await the horses on the glass

above the gaping, hollow O of the earth.  
ALL IS LOST. FLEE THIS HOUSE.  
So chants James's Ouija.

or perhaps in the palace of time  
our lives are a circular stair and I am turning,

writes Lucille's ghost-guided hand. Always in my mouth  
I hold the head of an axe with its bit at the back  
of my throat. O heavens, can you hear a man groan?

Here nothing breeds but we fazed and hungry. O wondrous thing.  
Worlds such as this were not thought possible to exist,  
writes the astronomer. It is June.

Deep beneath those golden waves  
of the river I'll be found.  
My sister has joined the list of those I mourn.

Her ghost lives in each powder-winged moth.  
In the ballet, the stage fills with a troupe of dancers in dusty gold skirts,  
shoes asphyxiation blue, hair the tones of flesh.

Center stage are six dancers who wear only red,  
moving in unison

so they throb as one bloodied yolk.  
The troupe around them shudders  
as though in blissful death throes.

The single singer quiets. The orchestra  
breaks down its instruments.  
For my brethren slain

I ask a sacrifice,  
O barbarous, beastly villains  
like myself.

Die. Die saying *please*,  
die longing, die helpless,  
die with your eyes fixed

to the most treacherous side  
of a mountain, to newborn stars,

to planes not found.  
Die with your throat stuffed,  
so that each moment hereafter

is a dream of a gasp.  
Die, so that my midnight tree might grow  
new branches, die, like a sapling struck by lightning

in an ash-ridden and still smoldering field,  
die amid the tulips, die smelling the orchids I grow,  
die in the mass of horses in a pied flock of shrieking birds.

From the oceans creatures great and small  
take to the land. From the land  
each parachuted seed

takes to the sky.  
From within my armory

comes a scent melodious and unearthly.  
A strain of moths, black, flies as though sewn  
each to each at the wing. Their flight path

blooms dark into the gray air  
like a print from a silvered glass plate.  
Soon we will learn our bodies are formed

of dead stars, so that if we made incisions  
from breastbone to rectum, the caves within  
would reveal themselves to house celestial ash.

As the stag, I fear the mouth of the rifle.  
As the rifle, I point my mouth, deadly, toward you.  
As the hunter, I execute myself so I may feast.

Worlds such as this were not thought possible to exist.  
My lord, I aim a mile beyond the honeyed moon.

*Sumita Chakraborty*

---

316 [Sumita Chakraborty](#), "[Marigolds](#)," *At Length*, collected in *Arrow*, [Alice James Books](#)

## May I Just Say

someone somewhere digs a  
visionary canal. my spoon,  
my buggy fall in.

crepey matter. light skirts  
the brightwork on the  
death-long barges. it isn't

to eat anymore. it's all  
developers & single-malt  
jargon. i don't do walruses

or pancake. i faint at  
the sight of aioli. may  
i just say the magic

words to buy my exit  
strategy. may i just say.  
my, how predatory

you look today, my sweet  
fuck-all, my usual  
suspect, my reflection.

*Jay Besemer*  
317

---

<sup>317</sup> [Jay Besemer](#), "[May I Just Say](#)," collected in [Theories of Performance, The Lettered Streets Press](#)

An Argument About Poetics Imagined at Squaw Valley After a Night Walk Under the Mountain

My friend Czesław Miłosz disapproved of surrealism.  
Not hard to construct, in imagination, the reasons why.  
Late night and late winter in Warsaw: two friends  
Are stopped by the police of the General Government  
Who speak atrocious Polish. Because of their leather jackets—  
Where would two young Poles get new brown leather jackets  
In the winter of 1943?—either they were black marketeers,  
The cops reasoned, or special enough to be left alone.  
The older cop who had been a policeman in Berlin  
In the quiet precincts of Charlottenburg where he had learned  
To go along and get along and who wanted now  
Only to do his job well enough to avoid being sent  
To the Russian front, where he'll either be blown up  
Or lose his toes to frostbite, wants nothing of this pinch.  
He's the one who lets the poet slip away.  
The other, younger, a machinist in Cologne before the war,  
Is more ambitious. He asks the second man what he does.  
Which for the young Pole is a quandary. Does he say  
He is a philosopher, which is what he thinks of his profession,  
Or a teamster, which is how he makes his living now  
To avoid collaborating with the Germans? And secondly  
Should he answer him in Polish or in his perfect German?  
He is completing, after work, in his drafty garret room  
A treatise on the Apollonian and Dionysiac personalities  
Described by Friedrich Nietzsche from a partly Marxist,  
Partly kabbalistic perspective. He feels instinctively  
That the danger lies in claiming a superior social status  
And so he says in Polish that he is a teamster, and the cop  
Thinks—aha! black market—and takes him in.  
He's interrogated, turned over to the SS, beaten,  
Interrogated some more, identified as a communist  
And an intellectual and sent east to Auschwitz  
Where he eventually dies, shot, some of the stories say,  
Wasted by typhus and diarrhea, say the others.  
The poet hears one of these versions of the news  
On the same spring day that he is contemplating  
A large, polished porcelain giraffe bobbing up and down  
To the strains of the Vienna Waltz on a holiday carousel  
While gunfire crackles on the other side of the ghetto wall.  
Warsaw had been a Russian garrison town for a century.  
Now it's a German garrison town and the pretty Polish girl  
On the giraffe is licking a pink cloud of cotton candy  
And flirting with the German officer on the zebra,  
Which is also bobbing up and down, and the sheen  
On his high black boots, the poet notices involuntarily,  
Has picked up the reflection of the sun in the small pools  
Of spring rain on the warped tarmac apron of the carousel.  
After that he doesn't want to read about French poets

Walking lobsters on a leash and doesn't want to seem  
 To celebrate the fact that the world makes no sense.  
 This is how, anyway, I imagine the state of mind  
 Produced by the fragments of the stories he would tell me.  
 And here inference and anecdote give way to argument.  
 I would quote Andre Breton to him in the English translation.  
*My wife with the armpits of nettletrap and St. John's Eve.*  
 And he would say, or, anyway, now, in my imagination,  
 He would say, "Well, yes, of course, I assent to armpits.  
 And metaphors, at which Breton excelled, just as Modigliani  
 Excelled at armpits. Who does not love metaphor? Its quickness  
 That gives us the world to taste with our common senses.  
 I'll tell you what terrifies me: it is the idea that 'this is like that  
 Is like this is like that' could be all of the story, endlessly  
 Repeated, the poor human imagination having evolved this  
 Brilliant swiftness of perception and then been stuck there,  
 Like a hamster in a cage, groping in the endless turnstiles  
 of resemblance. We are to celebrate this? As a final conquest  
 Of absurdity by absurdity? The armpits of those women in Modigliani,  
 On the contrary, are the hollows of their arms—like this, perhaps,  
 Or like that, but finally this woman exposing to us this gender nest  
 Or dark sweetness of a wet-duck's-feather rift of hair  
 In a gesture, notice, that lifts the breast slightly, indolently,  
 And lifts the rosy nipple and offers it to us, one of the gifts—  
 Also sunrise, the scent of linen, of the air before the first snow—  
 That the world has to give poor mortals among the terrors  
 And confusions of being what we are." "Well,"  
 I might have said, "if you permit me to get technical,  
 Modigliani is making a generalized representation  
 Of the idea of a particular woman." And he: "Exactly.  
 A particular being. General because being this and not that,  
 This is not like that, this one mortal thing, is what mortality  
 Has given us in common." "And that is the Miłoszian religion?"  
 "Yes," he laughs. "In my religion, if we are going to starve,  
 We will starve on the pears of Cézanne and the apples of Chardin."  
 He squints a little. "In my religion metaphor makes us ache  
 Because things are, and are what they are, and perish.  
 Let us not neglect to consider the slow withering  
 Of the pale skin of that girl and her nest of lymph nodes  
 And the pheromones of love and fear. And we mustn't fail  
 To mention lymphatic cancers, nature's brutally stupid way  
 Of clearing the earth for organisms freed, temporarily,  
 From withering and disease and the misfiring of that avidity  
 To reproduce which is the special trick of the cells we were made of  
 In some chemical slime. And, on the subject of armpits, let us not  
 neglect the distinctive smell of fear, which reminds us  
 That in Mr. Darwin's horrific scheme we are to find beautiful  
 The fact that, among the higher mammals, the sauce  
 That gives spice to their meat is the adrenaline of pure  
 Or worse, the adrenaline of the chase and then of terror,  
 And, for all we know, of despair, in the prey they are devouring.

Nature is, after all, chemistry and chemistry is this  
Becomes that becomes this becomes that endlessly  
Through endless witherings, endless contortions  
Of mammal and reptile and insect suffering and fear.  
What does it know of this armpit? That breast? Those lips  
Turned to the mirror for a glistening and reddening  
And the way she, a girl who did not feel pretty as a girl,  
Examines her plucked, arched, perfectly elegant eyebrow  
And pats lightly the slick set of her hair, a 1910s set,  
That decade's set, no other's, of her thick auburn hair?"  
"Do you know who she was?" I asked, suddenly curious.  
"Well there were two women. Jeanne Hébuterne  
Who killed herself—threw herself out a window—  
She was pregnant with his child—the year after he died.  
She was French. Our odalisque of the raised arms  
Was Lunia Czechowska. Modigliani's dealer Zborowski  
Was a poet, a minor one, and he introduced Lunia  
To the painter. Zborowski was a friend of my uncle.  
But he died the year I arrived in Paris that first time,  
So I never met him, though I did meet Czechowska."  
"You met Czechowska?" "She had me to tea.  
I was twenty-one. She must have been about forty.  
Thick in the waist, and looked it. It was winter  
And she wore tweed. She tested me by conducting  
Our interviews—mostly about my uncle's poetry  
And Zborowski's—entirely in French. I remember  
Thinking that her hands looked old, early arthritis  
Perhaps, and were somehow beautiful, something  
Delicate in the way she served the little Noël cakes  
And the tea, which I devoured. I was living  
On my student's stipend and then felt humiliated  
That I'd cleared the plate before she'd touched it."  
He laughed. "And I remember her scent. Amaryllis.  
The apartment near the bookstore on Rue Dupuytren  
Smelled of the ginger in the cakes and black tea  
And her scent of amaryllis like dry summer grass."  
Czesław was buried in a crypt—in the Krakovian church  
Of St. Peter of the Rock—among other Polish notables.  
I hated the idea of it and still do, that his particular body  
Is lying there in a cellar of cold marble and old bones  
Under the weight of two thousand years of the Catholic Church.  
(Thinking about this still years later, imagining this dialogue  
In the Sierra dark under the shadowy mass of the mountain  
And the glittering stars.) Not liking the fact that it is,  
Perhaps, what he would have wanted. "You should  
Have been buried"—I'm still talking to him—"on a grassy hillside  
Open to the sun (the Lithuanian sun the peasants  
Carved on crosses in the churchyard in your childhood)  
And what you called in one poem 'the frail lights of birches.'"   
And he might have said no. He might have said,  
"I choose marble and the Catholic Church because

They say no, to natural beauty that lures us and kills us.  
I say no until poor Modigliani and Zborowski  
And Czechowska, the girl of the raised arms and breast,  
And the grown woman with her ginger cakes  
And already liver-spotted hands, and Jeanne Hébuterne  
And her unborn child, have risen from the dead.”  
And I say, There are other ways of thinking about this.  
You described headlights sweeping a field  
On a summer night, do you remember? I can quote to you  
The lines. You said you could sense the heartbeat  
Of the living and the dead. It was a night in July, he said,  
In Pennsylvania—to me then an almost inconceivably romantic name—  
And the air was humid and smelled of wet earth after rain.  
I remember the night very well. Those lines not so much.

*Robert Hass*  
318

---

<sup>318</sup> [Robert Hass, “An Argument About Poetics Imagined at Squaw Valley After a Night Walk Under the Mountain,” \*Literary Imagination\*, collected in \*Summer Snow\*, Ecco](#)

## Dirt

Tonight in the taxi I got a call from one of the passengers. A man said “Who is this?” I said, “You called me... you have a wrong number.” He said, angrily, “Your number was in my wife’s phone and it said ‘I’m on the way.’” I said “I’m a taxi driver... maybe that’s what it is.” He hung up. When Jeremiah asked for a solution to stopping the Golem who was destroying Prague, he was told: “Write the alphabets backward with intense concentration on the earth. Do not meditate in the sense of building up, but the other way around.”

I thought of a night at an East Village hotel when I didn’t—but almost did—have an affair with the visiting poet. She was a pair of scissors cutting a silent letter out of a word. Though the Golem has a human shape, you could say external beauty has been denied him. Hillel commented: *Where there is no one, try to be a human being.*

Sean Singer  
319

---

319 [Sean Singer, “Dirt,” \*American Poetry Review\*](#)

## Persona Poem

I'm so tired of waking up in someone else's pile  
of dirty laundry. The brake light in my heart pumps  
YOU it's YOU it's YOU. Mission Control sends  
a robot tron to decipher the hieroglyphs  
etched on my left kidney. I've been waiting  
for someone to notice my incomprehensible tattoo.  
Sometimes one must shout without irony  
at an amusement park, It is I! St. Catherine of Assisi!  
This might add meaning to one's life, obliquely.  
The gravitron reminds us that we can use science  
to negate physical realities, if only for five minutes  
and two dollars a ride. Look at large pieces  
of colored plastic for too long and they become  
a metaphor for all that is wrong in the world.  
Being St. Catherine of Assisi is hard in its own way.  
Keeping a secret of this magnitude from my husband  
could be considered a huge betrayal.  
Now that St. Catherine inhabits my soul  
I find it hard to be angry. My husband disappears  
for a week and returns in a red Mustang convertible  
with a superior sound system.  
He has made some chatty girl friends and brings them in  
for drinks. Sometimes life is simpler than you think.  
There never was a St. Catherine of Assisi. I made that up.

*Lauren Shapiro*  
320

---

320 [Lauren Shapiro](#), "[Persona Poem](#)," collected in [Easy Math](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## What Kind of Deal Are We Going to Make?

As a teenager, I found the remains of a fetus  
in a plastic bag by the road. I wanted  
to take it to the police, but my boyfriend  
wouldn't let me put the bag in his car,  
though every day I allowed him  
to undress me in his parents' basement  
in between rounds of World of Warcraft  
and Doom, afternoons bursting the skulls  
of his adversaries open with a semiautomatic.  
*It's dead*, he said. *What are we supposed  
to do about it?* We drove away. Of course  
we did. What wouldn't I have traded then  
for the balm of male affection, its  
half-heart? Now I live on a bald scab  
of grass, a swingset's chains twisting  
figure eights, where I'll hide out until  
I am the last woman standing. Once,  
I followed a guy to a bar bathroom. Cutting  
out lines on the counter, he said: *What kind  
of deal are we going to make?* I pushed away  
his hand heavy on my belly, his eyes  
mugging my breasts. Running down  
the hierarchy of flesh, he asked me to lift  
my skirt, and I did, pulled it to the bloom  
of my upper thigh. It's what a girl's days  
are made of: What body part, this time?  
And what will I get for it? I'm not sure  
there's anything left of me, that palm-treed  
oasis of okay I imagine for other people  
always out of my reach. No inch  
unclaimed, except I did what I thought  
I wanted, and the reckoning that brought.

*Erin Hoover*

321

---

<sup>321</sup> [Erin Hoover](#), "[What Kind of Deal Are We Going to Make?](#)," [Tampa Review](#), collected in [Barnburner](#), [Elixir Press](#)

### Self-Portrait with Amy (Creation Myth)

The abortion I had in the late '70s grew up to be Amy Winehouse. The music of Richard Hell and the Voidoids fertilized the hell out of my green pear and threatened to turn it into a watermelon. Margaret Sanger herself did the procedure, which involved a bicycle pump and tweezers. By the time "Back to Black" came out, the twin village idiots of my ovaries had already committed themselves to the Island of Misfit Toys from the Rudolph Valentine special we watched every year on the town silent TV on which Mr. Lee had pulled an Elvis the first time he laid eyes on *The Rifleman*. The town blamed all of Mr. Lee's quirks on mustard gas. Yes, Amy was the spitting image of my aesthetic as expressed in my approach to eyeliner I'd invented in 1974 for my theatrical debut as Cleopatra as played by Theda Bara in the silent 1917 film starring Fritz Leiber Sr. as Caesar. All that's left are fragments as the last print burned in a studio fire, so my high school revived it the same year Art Linkletter arrived to give us an anti-drug lecture and I got nicely stoned before giving him a tour of the school's dank hallways and therefore led him down to the creek where he got stung by something due to the insect's attraction to his red sports jacket. I love you, I said to Amy Winehouse the first time I saw the black beehive she'd cooked up for herself. I wrote her a note on a cocktail napkin describing the intersections that led to her conception. That night, I'd kissed the wall over the urinal at CBGB, pee dribbling down my thighs as I'd found my way to the wrong powder room. The moon was starving itself again. Blondie's lips, whether through fate or accident, met mine. A Voidoid spit in my eye. Mikel called sobbing from San Francisco. He'd found a Kaposi's sarcoma lesion on his thigh. This is what made you, Amy. Nothing could kill you, though I tried.

*Diane Seuss*  
322

---

<sup>322</sup> [Diane Seuss, "Self-Portrait with Amy \(Creation Myth\)," \*The American Poetry Review\*, collected in \*Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl\*, Graywolf Press](#)

from “Ten Nights’ Dreams”

## 6. *Garmonbozia*

You’re standing on a sidewalk with a friend. The two of you wear orange hunting vests. There’s a yellow parking ticket on the windshield of your Jeep.

*I didn’t know I couldn’t park here*, you say, turning to your friend, who is no longer female, no longer your friend.

Closed captioning reidentifies her as: *Unidentified Male Companion*.

Now your Jeep’s been towed away, replaced by a Stop sign. An obese mouse clings precariously to the top of the octagon.

*What’s it doing up there?* you ask Unidentified Male Companion, *Is it a titmouse? Or a dormouse?*

Unidentified Male Companion shrugs.

*Don’t you think it’s odd?* you persist. *Much too Dante Gabriel Rossetti? Should we be drinking laudanum? Exhuming our exes?*

The dormouse shrieks, leaping from the Stop sign onto Unidentified Male Companion’s head, viciously biting off chunks of his face. Horrified, you cover your eyes with your hands.

*Delicate Flower*, closed captioning sneers.

A passerby intervenes. Dormouse removed, commotion subsides. You apologize to Unidentified Male Companion for not coming to his assistance. *What happened to the dormouse?* you ask.

*It’s all on film*, Unidentified Male Companion says. He sounds grouchy.

It’s true, a circle of onlookers has gathered, voyeuristically documenting the spectacle on their cell phones. One of them offers to show you, and when you look at the playback on the tiny LCD screen, instead of the dormouse attack, you see yourself with your friend from before, in your matching orange hunting vests. The two of you diffidently sashay, snapping your fingers to a languid and soundless music in front of a red velvet curtain.

*I can’t believe I’m not more upset about this*, you tell the onlooker, as you watch yourself dancing onstage in the video on the cell phone screen. *Normally I can’t stand to have my picture taken*.

Lee Ann Roripaugh  
323

---

<sup>323</sup> Lee Ann Roripaugh, “Ten Nights’ Dreams,” *No Tell Motel*, collected in *Dandarians*, Milkweed Editions

## Song in the Key of Negged

I check the mailbox every few minutes, but of course I mean I check  
my phone, grub for alerts, wait to be pinged into meaning. I am a good dog,  
good girl—rub my neck, palpate my belly. I'll chew the heart from a chicken

and offer you its meat—do you see it's not the meal I'd kill for but you  
don't see, Oedipus sans incest, all pomp and robes and ruin. I'd heard rumors  
of where you'd come from, what you'd do, and I thought what fools

to not break through to the nougat of potential inside, the real you  
hidden under anger like a man bringing up the rear of a costume horse—  
I saw codes in each tail twitch, every faux hoof stomp an answer to the only question

I've ever asked. I am putting my ear to a glass, the glass to the wall. I make the murmurs  
mean. Even in the silence I measure out a message, the longitude and latitude  
of where my body meets your need, a country where I am the name of the river,

you the mouth of the sea. You grab my neck and hold tight like a kiss  
you can't stop meaning, take me to the lake, watch me sink for want of salt.  
There was something else I meant to say, before you filled my throat.

*Erin Adair-Hodges*  
324

---

<sup>324</sup> [Erin Adair-Hodges, "Song in the Key of Negged," \*Spork\*](#)

## While Watching Ice Dancing, I Contemplate Mortality

We must endeavor to be our pastoral selves. I am looking into the refrigerator. I am thinking of Mr. Rogers. Before bed I listen to him being impossibly gentle through my headphones. I wake up thinking of my friends and their great powers. Ministry of the absurd. Ministry of sleep. Ministry of living very close to mortality, of races on wheels close to the ground. I sleep, when I sleep, in two halves most days. In this way I resemble my medieval forebears. In most other ways, I do not. My food is packaged. My lambs, figurative. If I ice danced, I'd dance to that Aimee Mann song that goes, *Call the cops, call the cavalry*. I would be on my game, but only my witch friends would notice. I emerge from my room two hours before school pick up. I tend to my face with sea salt and kelp. Here I should mention my curious childhood in order to break the bourgeois spell of the lyric poem. But I'm late to pick up my antidepressants, then almost late to pick up my child. He is small and Edwardian, in his green t-shirt and jeans. *What was the delay?* he asks. *I went to the pharmacy*, I say. *I got you Goldfish*. He is satisfied then. His world is as simple as getting to hold the whole bag of Goldfish, of getting a children's magazine in the mail. Really, at breakfast he looked at his father and said, *Are you black?* They discuss being mixed. *A long, long time ago, when Martin Luther King lived, black people were not given rights, and white people were given rights*, our son explains. We tell him what a short time this long time ago was, tell him his grandparents were alive. He is stumped. He watches cartoons after school, and I lift an aromatherapy package to my face and wonder about the word camp-horous. How mysterious. Camp Horous. Egyptian? I will cleanse the psychic field. I will be fresh, foresty, and camphorous. We must skate our routines while we can. Time is short.

Joanna Penn Cooper  
325

---

<sup>325</sup> [Joanna Penn Cooper](#), "[While Watching Ice Dancing, I Contemplate Mortality](#)," [Zócalo Public Square](#), collected in [When We Were Fearsome](#), [Ethe!](#)

from "Happinefs"

4.

To think! Of those white kids  
whose turn (some said) I took.  
I took it hard.  
My turn, my breath.  
My package of aid. I made  
a massive shape  
mid-traipse across the Lawn  
or hunched at lunch. I ate  
the beautiful books I bought  
with borrowed funds  
& swallowed down  
that twoness *one ever feels*.  
My body's debt: silent slab.  
I knew I was a living lab.

*Kiki Petrosino*  
326

---

<sup>326</sup> [Kiki Petrosino](#), "[Happinefs](#)," [Tin House](#), collected in [White Blood](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## Ode to Fear

Dear friend, how many dark alleys have you kept me from,  
how many bubbling potions, witches' brews with brown foam  
from chugging like an over-amped frat  
boy at a keg party on Saturday night, game lost  
that afternoon to unranked Clemson while his power-  
house number-one school choked again in double over-  
time? Or think of the doors you have locked, the deadbolts turned  
when I was too drunk to walk, talk, but not sing. You churned  
inside me like Barry Manilow riding a wave  
at Waimea or Maria Callas as a slave  
girl yodeling for her prince or poor Lana Turner,  
her fingerprints all over the gun but her sweater  
snug, while the DA struggled to make her admit her

boyfriend hadn't done it alone. Remember the first  
time I had sex? I used three kinds of birth control, wished  
I'd had four. Thanks for making it so much fun for me,  
and the boy, too—where did you pick him up? What a spree  
that was, though I did rededicate my life to George  
Eliot. How many times must a girl forage  
her way through *Middlemarch* before she is free to make  
her own decisions? More than twenty? Why don't we skate  
past that one? Ted Bundy was living on the next block,  
so your rules probably saved my hide, and I'm in hock  
to you for a hundred thousand "no's" that just tripped off  
my tongue like broken teeth after a fight. I was tough  
because of you, though I looked like a powder puff,

all pink and sweet. Thanks for hiding me when the slavers  
were scouring my village, for making me quiver  
in the shadows while my girlfriends walked the plank in white  
lace, for making me tremble before every damned flight,  
for the Friday and Saturday nights I didn't waste  
at the Pastime chatting up bores. John Keats was my date  
and Oscar Wilde and that paranoid hipster Ginsberg,  
who taught me to rant like Job. Thanks for the giant surge  
of adrenaline every night before sleep can chew  
a hole in my mind, and while I play peekaboo  
with death, you hold my hand. That's sweet, a bit of soft-shoe  
before the ax falls, because we're all living on the Rue  
Morgue, so come to mama, you big bad grizzly bear, you.

Barbara Hamby  
327

---

<sup>327</sup> [Barbara Hamby](#), "Ode to Fear," [River Styx](#), collected in [All-Night Lingo Tango](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

## Please Wear Proper Attire

I lost my virginity to a blue lake. I was trying to make love waterproof. Water is not the only tongue that can't resist short skirts. We can avoid the circumstances of beauty until we stand next to a waterfall and realize it speaks in sentences. Milk cartons were built in response to clapboard houses on the sides of mountains. In the surrounding farmland, cows were bored. They nearly milked themselves. This is just another circular story. The house, the cow, the milk, the carton, the house. Just like the woman, the love, the future, the failure, the woman. The safety of raincoats is temporary. How many times have you fallen out of love outside of a bar in the rain? How many times has your raincoat saved you? I swore off men who carry symbols in their front pockets. I know the excuse *My symbol hurts, not tonight & My symbol is running, I have to go catch it*. Everything is tired of trying to become everything else. If electricity has anything to do with it, I'll be a good wife and take the blender with me in the bathtub. The shape of the fire will depend on which one of us is turned on.

*Meghan Privitello*

328

---

<sup>328</sup> [Meghan Privitello](#), "[Please Wear Proper Attire](#)," *Redivider*, collected in [A New Language for Falling Out of Love](#), YesYes Books

Week 26 (St. Rage's Vault)

Here are your instructions: go down to a strip mall  
in Odenton, Maryland, and find a sparrow nesting  
in the G of the ST RAGE VAULT. Don't bother  
looking for the O. By touch, locate the pressure valve

and release the lock. You'll know me at once—  
I am the bone-white drum, the tauter-than-taut  
membrane of the throat. I'm the cigar, the celebrity,  
the troll beneath the bridge and tollbooth collector,  
the rabid paw and the hundred needles sunk in your gut.

You will lie awake nights and remember we're not  
talking about safety deposit boxes sacheted and lined  
with blue velvet, we're talking about burial alive.  
Repeat after me: two spaces after a period, one

after a comma. Lose a tooth, put it in milk. If  
stabbed, don't pull out the knife. No bronze booties,  
prom corsages, only casks and torchlight. I am  
mitered and vinegared. Here is the church, lay  
your damp cheek against the pew—acres of black

you rehearsed every young rage. Given the choices,  
take shelter here—where brains marinate in broth,  
where you can nibble on dubious mushrooms,  
jackhammer your teeth to bits. A bit is an eighth

of a dollar. In New Orleans the dead rot fast  
in tombs hot as bread ovens. Handkerchiefs  
come in handy. The phrenic nerve refers pain  
to the shoulder, white fiber inside an orange rind.  
I'm the one who sounds the alarm, snatches away

packages you never meant to steal, shakes you  
by the wrist until you hold yourself accountable.  
Persist. Open another. I can only lick the stamp.  
Coyote anagrams to oocyte. Pull the thread until

the vault unravels, detonates the eye of the needle  
so that somewhere the lily horizes. Make up  
any verbs you'd like. Look around for a button  
that will launch the ejection seat. Close cover  
before striking. This is not an ode, Dr. Manly.

The eggshell grit between your teeth sets you  
transmitting like a crystal radio, frequencies so high  
you hear yourself talking about millennial poetry,  
blackjack odds, and almanacs. Prepare, cover

your head. The rage will overtake you in a wave,  
pesticide fog from the mosquito truck, a routine  
you've practiced since you were fetal. I'd shrug,  
if I could. In the end it's a matter of detritus—  
caught in the gravel, the orange bits of fish shit

are the mad erasures of a paragraph. Be sure you've  
proofed and capitalized the names of the dead,  
mastered the rules of grammar, the finer points  
of meter. Put another coin in the meter, I'll tell you

why I was canonized: a girl with a sandy scalp  
goes down a waterslide, catches her straddle on a seam  
in the fiberglass and splits herself apart. Speed,  
the nylon rip, menarche and libation, aqua blue.  
Sketch the vectors, it happened. Or there's the boy:

a hammock peg snaps off, he cracks his skull, and  
while his face begins to warp and swell, I summon  
my networks Georgia to Maine. Before he dies,  
he sees their prayers alight in arcs of dashes, cities

bursting into daisies of intercontinental missiles.  
Ah yes, the freak tanning-booth accident. Teen feels  
dizzy, walks home. Her mother comments on her  
rancid sweat. She lies down, dead in an hour, cooked.  
I am her patron saint. Forget the Dewey Decimal.

Grope as they did in Waco for the buried school bus  
with a week's worth of air. Offer suet to the sparrow.  
But cut the whimpers. For the love of God, Fortunato,  
bellow with rage, become aware of the smell of your  
own breath. Go ahead, try, rub me back into the lamp.

*B.K. Fischer*  
329

---

<sup>329</sup> [B.K. Fischer, "Week 26: St. Rage's Vault," \*Western Humanities Review\*, collected in \*St. Rage's Vault, The Word Works\*](#)

If Vasilyssa Is the Suitor

The cock crows.                    Vasilyssa cuts her hair.  
Triangles dangle from the tips of her braids and  
she cries into them, a kerchief.

No dress or dressage                Vasilyssa makes off  
on a horse, in tunic.                Vasilyssa has 99 problems  
but needs one more to make an even number.

If there is a kingdom then Vasilyssa comes.

*Ride straight ahead, know hunger and cold.  
Ride to the right, live but your steed will die.  
Ride left and die, though your steed shall live.*

If there's no kingdom                the woods will do.  
If Vasilyssa wears a witch's cloak  
to the witch's clearing.                they are both crones.  
If the hut dances on two fowl legs, Vasilyssa calls  
from her deep, dark throat:

*Turn your door toward me little hut  
little hut. Turn your face toward me  
and away from the forest.*

If she enters the hut, she'll pet three cats, each time  
ask for a woman.

She'll expect a witch:  
dead hair, breasts to her waist, a chin that curls up,  
and nose that curls down.                Who comes?

A crescent-faced Baba, hair woven with blue roses,  
Oh Vasilyssa, the joke will be on her.

Gala Mukomolova  
330

---

330 [Gala Mukomolova](#), "[If Vasilyssa Is the Suitor](#)," collected in [Without Protection](#), Coffee House Press

Ken

You look nice in that polyester shirt, gleam on your hard chest,  
a perfect wave in your hair. You look like an anchorman or politician.

Oh, Ken. You are so dreamy.  
You're not too good to help Barbie do inventory.  
You're not too pretty to fight Brown Bear  
when he throws soup cans on the floor.

But there's something strange playing about your lips.  
Someone has drawn a pocket of peach flesh  
where there should be teeth.

I see you staring past Barbie. You cannot hold her cupped palm.  
You're tired of her pink car.

I know you hate stocking those cans of soup, your same white shirt,  
and Brown Bear in the alley trying to sober up,  
trying to get Barbie to look his way.

*Ladan Osman*  
331

---

<sup>331</sup> [Ladan Osman](#), "[Ken](#)," collected in [The Kitchen-Dweller's Testimony](#), University of Nebraska Press

from "Guide to Imaginary Places"

*Back of the North Wind*

I've never been,  
but once I was given a prescription for it  
and I still have the pills

in the medicine chest, in case.  
They say it's always May.  
Never any rain—

though the citizens look a little sad  
as if they're waiting to be happier someday. Don't

bother to ask how they got that way. It's all

roads, crossroads, roadside benches. If you ask for directions, what

can they say? Only

one drunken bus driver  
has ever gone and come back. He claimed

that time passed very slowly. That

the time it took to wink

at a girl lasted twenty days. He

couldn't quite remember  
its location, but  
thought perhaps he'd found it

in a dense forest in Brittany or  
somewhere in central Africa, or  
on an extensive peninsula off  
the coast of California, discovered

by a Spaniard in 1705.

They're always healthy.  
They wear crowns. There's

a tree at the center of the town, which  
if climbed to the top  
is tall enough

to look back at the rest of the world, and see—

nothing but a bit of mountain  
pushing out of the ocean, casting

a long, monotonous shadow on the water

between where we are and where we wanted to be.

*Laura Kasischke*  
332

---

<sup>332</sup> [Laura Kasischke, "Guide to Imaginary Places,"](#) collected in [Dance and Disappear](#), [University of Massachusetts Press](#)

## My First Husband Was My Last

If not for this one fond thought.  
Trees wave their violent weight.  
Heaved in air with storm's hand.  
They confiscated my hair elastic.  
They confiscate my bra, as each  
could twist into a noose, my bra  
wire sawed into a shiv. And we  
were both stubborn. Asleep side  
by side until the night before we  
would never again sleep side by  
side, neither of us was willing to  
be put out, sleep on the couch.  
Falling into bed, he dropped his  
mouth by my ear to mutter deep  
*You'll drink yourself to death.*

Yet, we had much in common. We were both  
nocturnal as bats. We both smoked furiously.  
We each had a tendency to interrupt people

mid-sentence though we each hated nothing  
more than being interrupted. We each had  
a tendency to hurl death threats. Enormously

seductive on first impression, once our targets  
succumbed to our wiles, we stared back at their  
love, appalled, our eyes dead diamonds.

We voted Democrat and loathed the rich.  
We considered our intelligence unassailable.  
We were unbearable. Yet my fondest memory

is when he arrived to bail me  
out of jail and I do not intend  
a metaphor. He was the only  
one who saw me wince when  
they tightened the handcuffs.  
It was for his ear I'd quoted  
Keats while being walked in  
to the precinct: *Forlorn! The  
very word is like a bell.* Never  
an early riser, he did not fail  
to arrive at the jail near-dawn.  
I saw him pacing before that  
Plexiglased partition serving  
as portal to the room in which  
I stood wearing the obligatory  
orange jumpsuit in an orange

blaze thick with the company  
of other women who had also  
done some bad things wrong.

(I'd run a yellow light—he wanted his late-night  
snack at the Country Kitchen—heard a siren stop  
us, thought in fright my bowels might run loose  
down the insides of my pant's leg, trying to walk  
true to the line, so scared shitless was I, I suppose  
any man who ever hopes to know me must know  
this about me, that that's why I drove that night.)

Yet it's also true that night foretold how a shadow can strive  
to overshadow another shadow (some of us, apparently, wake  
only for these sorts of battles), for though I lay silent, assigned  
to rest on the cell's concrete floor on a thin pallet, thrummed  
to sleep by my cell mate's snores, the thought that I'd arrived  
at a punishment so terrible it made me feel a certain kind of pride.  
Like my dear friend who died (who was not my ex-husband; *he*  
is, I'm told, still very much alive), told me how he threw him  
self off from trees he'd climbed to see how he'd bleed when he  
was a child, feeling the damp from concrete walls seep ache  
into me became just another way I found to feel myself alive.

Yesterday I received notice  
I'd failed to pay a civic fine,  
a "penalty" I incurred from  
an arrest that the court long  
ago "dismissed." Although  
I distinctly recall filling out  
a sum of 200 bucks for that  
particular money order back  
in 1999, payable to the Iowa  
Dept. of Motor Vehicles, no  
record of this payment exists,  
though judging by the clerk's  
sharp glee tickling the ether  
as she read aloud my crime  
from off a computer screen,  
although fourteen years have  
slipped beneath us all, and I  
can't remember that town's  
street names, I'll never buck  
the mean notoriety of that sad  
local newspaper's entry: DUI.

I was placed in a 48 Hour Lock-Down Program as reprieve, as a first  
time offender admitting my offense, a program operating, would you  
believe, out the Heartland Hotel in Coralville: a bunch of drunks under  
one roof being taught how to not use alcohol, reminded how each of us  
had fucked up to the point each of us wept, among us a sixteen-year-old

who drove herself into a snowbank well over the legal limit, and me, I was feverish to leave so as to be back with him, my first husband, who had scored a good lead on pot from a friend I made over that weekend.

Every bit of this is off-record. They confiscated my hair elastic. Even the mug shot, which I can only hope has been destroyed. Terrible-dark then, my hair rode its idiot storm atop my head. What's utterly queer yet remarkably clear in retrospect is how I felt a freak-urge to sneer or grin at the flash. They let me keep my underwear and socks. They confiscated my pocket change and wedding ring.

And if not for that one moment when I stood within the gaggle of orange-suited women (one of whom growled, *Drunk driving? You'll be back!*) that I saw him pass before the Plexiglas as he saw me, looked back, and he'd mouthed to me against it all, *You look beautiful*, my stare drained within the fluorescence, could I forget any of it ever happened?

*He told me I would die* as I lay beneath our shared coverlet. He told a shared acquaintance I did not care enough for the written word. This was, in itself, blasphemy. So I was the cunt who cut his vocal cords. Or I was rich and hid my treasure. He kept company with petty thieves. His one friend stole coins out of laundry machines. He's familiar to me as a dust mote. He's familiar to me as the carved wood masks we hung on our walls. He's agape, always agape.

My first husband was my last.  
He's my Love Canal.  
It's a miracle anyone ever married me.  
It's a miracle anyone ever married him.  
He's digging himself up in Transylvania.  
He's pulling the stake out of his heart with his yellow teeth.  
His awful teeth aren't his fault.  
He was raised inside a tin can.  
He was suckled with corn syrup instead of breast milk.  
I think of him at the polls.  
I feel his thoughts collect like chalk dust in my nose.  
I wake up in a sweat.

I wouldn't be surprised if I woke up next to him tomorrow. We are celebrating the Fourth of July. I have brought home a rotisserie chicken, which we enjoy pulling apart and licking its grease from our fingers, and later we'll find ourselves in our bed, the bed in which we will make death threats to one another, upon which we shall blame one another all our bitter long-lives.

I once slammed the door in his face so hard if he'd been standing an inch closer his fangs would have been knocked down his throat. Or,

rather, landing ass-flat at his door's parting slap, tailbone cracked, I chose to clatter back down the hall, my pincers snapping through

the smoke-waters we'd made of our habitat. The only reason we got married was because we didn't know one another. But it is not true

that I chased him with a kitchen knife, ever.

*Cate Marvin*  
333

---

333 [Cate Marvin, "My First Husband Was My Last," \*Harvard Review\*, collected in \*Oracle\*, W.W. Norton & Company](#)