

# Social Media Poems 2021

## Simeon Berry

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

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

—Diane Arbus

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

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

*Kathryn Nuernberger*

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

Dear P.

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

Victoria Chang<sub>2</sub>

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<sup>2</sup> [Victoria Chang, "Dear P.," \*Poem-A-Day\*](#)

## Gift Economy

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

The store is in another galaxy.

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

I let you fly the plane.

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

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

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

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

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

You give me the flash fire that begs an encore.

I give you me going up in smoke.

*Andrea Cohen*

3

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

## Just a Bunch of Received Ideas About Mazes

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

*Marc McKee*

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

## The Year Annie Lennox Released “Why”

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

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

*Aaron Smith*  
5

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

## First Narrowly Averted Apocalypse

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

*Paul Guest*

6

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

## Play Therapy

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

*Carmen Giménez Smith*

7

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

from "13th Balloon"

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

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

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

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

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

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

What was that trick  
How did you do it

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

*Mark Bibbins*  
8

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

## X

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

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

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

Who ain't waiting for that last severance check?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Can I get an X-ray Doctor?

Named J.

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

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

*Sean Thomas Dougherty*<sup>9</sup>

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

## The Cow

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

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

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

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

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

I found the note  
and showed it to no one.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On nights like this

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

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

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

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

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

*Michael McGriff*  
10

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

## Salat

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

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

You give what you give to reclaim it

\*

The fog a necklace around the bridge

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

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

\*

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

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

\*

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

introducing ourselves hurriedly—somewhere, a film reel unspools—

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

*Hala Alyan*

11

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

## Arsenic Kiss

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

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

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

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

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

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

*R. Bratten Weiss*  
12

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

## First Birthday

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Robin Ekiss*  
13

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

## Somewhere Real

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

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

*Shira Erlichman*

14

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<sup>14</sup> [Shira Erlichman](#), "[Somewhere Real](#)," [The Nation](#)

## Terror is My Business

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

Why so afraid of the stars and their denizens?  
I'm what mutates in *this* body. Which is to say,  
  
this space for lease. Nothing non-human is alien  
to me, or everything human is. What need to up  
  
the ante, call Hoover in his cocktail dress,  
the geniuses at No Such Agency. I mean *terror*  
  
*is my business*. Roswell is just dress-up for what  
we are, larvae in our sleep and when we sign up  
  
every a.m. with *der Kommissar*—so many leg-sets  
on the floor, antennae waving in the mirror....

*Rachel Loden*  
15

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

Four Months Along Primipara Song

Everyone starts with their ears in their necks

*Sing ho, sing hey*

Instead of eyeballs tiny black specks

*I'm off to Tallahassee*

I'd ruin him good in a pile of furs

*Sing ho, sing hey*

*Začne lézt na nervy* you're climbing up my nerves

*but I'm off to Tallahassee*

Drones in the sky, and an embryo in me

*Sing ho, sing hey*

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

*I'm off to Tallahassee*

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

*Sing ho, sing hey*

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

*and I'm off to Tallahassee*

*Kelly Morse*

16

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

## The Man Who Won't Pay Dues

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

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

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

*Forrest Gander*

17

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

## There Are Things I Won't Tell My Daughter

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and delirious, collecting the blue  
shards on my tongue.

*Kendra DeColo*

18

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

## Press

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

*Victoria Redel*

19

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

## Salvation Sonnet

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Steven Espada Dawson*  
20

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

## Call Her Vincent

*for & after Edna St Vincent Millay*

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

*Oliver Bendorf*  
21

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

Postcards Nos. 1-6

4.17

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

Don't forget to sleep.

xo,  
X

6.24

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

X

7.4

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

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

xxxxx,  
X

7.5

It worries me.

8.19

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

All my frustration,  
X

10.1

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

Yours, most likely,  
X

*Catherine Pierce*  
22

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

## Indiana Problem (Fear, 1983)

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

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

Julia Story  
23

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

## Light of Sleep

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

Carolyn Forché

24

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

## Touch

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

In stores where team logos hung  
Like animal skins.

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

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

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

They saw our game  
For what it was:

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

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

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

Blackness was the first.  
So they tackled me,

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

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

*Terrance Hayes*  
25

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

## Shameful

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

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

*Connie Voisine*  
26

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

Essay on *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Catherine Barnett*

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

## Pity the Doctor, Not the Disease

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

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

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

and neti pots, notably stingy with the better

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

Above his head, the flayed men of medical

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

of my truly happy hours, or nights curled

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

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

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

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

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

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

Free of the exam room now, I spot the same

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

for years, a mostly failed distraction

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

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

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

*Erin Belieu*  
28

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

## Vacation

my sisters come for dinner  
of lobsters cracked with a hammer

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

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

all night the fan goes  
sounding like a highway

in the fields bees refuse  
to return to their tiny cells

*Cammy Thomas*  
29

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

## Ancestry

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Laura Cronk*  
30

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

## Our Principal

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

Naomi Shihab Nye  
31

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

## The Ravens of Denali

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

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

*Dorianne Laux*

32

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

Gizzard

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

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

*Ariana Reines*  
33

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<sup>33</sup> [Ariana Reines, "Gizzard," \*blush\*](#)

Yolande Speaks

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

I know some call him  
“Doctor Dubious.”

I hear how people  
talk. I know

who’s called my marriage  
counterfeit. I know

who thinks me stupid.  
I would love

the peace and quiet  
of stupidity,

having witnessed  
the hot hiss of

true intelligence,  
a white noise, a

camphor that over-  
takes the globe.

I have laughed  
at my father’s gloves

and spats. My pace  
is my own. I am

a sputtering  
cadmium light

turning on  
like the R.K.O.

Radio Tower.

*Elizabeth Alexander*

34

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

Brazilian Wedding: Dream No. 4

Above: the filthy sky  
of an unrestored painting,

a hardcore before,  
as opposed to an after.

On the way to the church:  
dogs copulating,

lined up three thick,  
behind a mangy bitch.

So much for the dream—  
the stupefaction of love.

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

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

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

licking our sandals,  
wicking up our hems.

Families float by in sailboats  
to snap our pictures before

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

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

here. Waves start to crash  
against the church door.

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

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

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

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

pageant, flat-chested &  
awkward, stalking deathward,

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

*Kathleen Rooney*  
35

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



the collective noun for faggots is also a murder.

Heavens horizon, then bruise, then rust.

*Bradley Trumpfheller*  
36

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

## Riddle at 29,000 Feet

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

*Traci Brimhall*

37

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

A Portrait of the Self as Nation, 1990-1991

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the Yellow River becomes clean...

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

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

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

Marilyn Chin

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

Jesus said Will someone

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

in the morning, companions  
of the dew.

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

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

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

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

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

*Patrick Donnelly*

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

## Adult Entertainment

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

*Virginia Konchan*  
40

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

## Dollar General

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and the house goes dark.

*Erika Meitner*

41

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

## Come to Find Out

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*David Kirby*  
42

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

## Catching Copper

My brothers have  
a bullet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Natalie Diaz*  
43

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

## Poet at Twenty-Four

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

*Kai Carlson-Wee*  
44

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

## Nancy Drew

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

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

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

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

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

*Ron Koertge*  
45

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

Self-Portrait with Rabbit Ears and Seventeen

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

telephone cord  
triple-wrapped  
around my wrist.

outside the kind of sunset  
they invented color swatches for.

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

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

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

*Cassandra de Alba*  
46

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

## Evidence

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Randall Mann*  
47

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

## Aesthetics of Crying

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

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

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

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

*Heather Christle*  
48

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

Self-Portrait with Your Head Between My Legs

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

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

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

but the princess sleeps and sleeps.

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

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

*Rebecca Hazelton*  
49

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

## The Purpose of Poetry

1

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

2

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

3

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

4

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

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

5

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

6

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

*Fleda Brown*  
50

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

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

## In Galleries

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

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

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

*Sarah Galvin*  
51

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

Sweat Bee

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

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

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

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

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

imagine with names  
like Bluebell and James  
Dean sometimes I think

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

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

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

to the skating rink  
and play redlight greenlight  
whoever got caught

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Emilia Phillips*  
52

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

## Girl of Lightning

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Heid E. Erdrich*  
53

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

This is a Screwdriver, She Says

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

Karyna McGlynn  
54

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

## Story About the Moon

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

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

*Paul-Victor Winters*  
55

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

## Math

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The strippers will bend over you  
at your tiny round table

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

*rethink this,*  
*check your math—*

*I'm here for you, the ancestry says*

placing a gold star on your cheek

where an F should be.

*Bianca Stone*

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

## Black Coffee

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

*Ellen Bass*

57

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

Rough Draft as Caeneus Abroad

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

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

I.

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

of language Or acquisition  
of one language over another.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

no Poseidon ever makes good: I'm refused

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

*how could you possibly*  
over FaceTime & I have both

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

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

release? The dirtfloor arena waits

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

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

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

& that body, released  
dismissed    discarded    might

just become mine.

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

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

it matters what you celebrate

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

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

II.

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

My student talks about the hush  
that smothers a block

even weeks later.

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

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

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

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

& invention.

I try to search up the name  
of the child:

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

a god who hasn't plundered.

Tragedy & spectacle:  
these twin puncture wounds.

III.

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

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

*my life like a bell.*

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

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

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

I look tough and tired.  
This tradition

of the Narcissian pool  
obligates a final reflection—

*Chase down the name*

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

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

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

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

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

I never touched the wheel at all.

IV.

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

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

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

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

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

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

to *becoming*.

V.

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

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

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

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

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

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

the exposed rock of a canyon wall  
is what remains

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

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

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

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

An interplay,  
a margin: Space to remake,

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

chest cracked open like a seed  
in surgical—I deadname

*girl belle proper*  
*frailmeekthing deadname*

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

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

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

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

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

*Worthy animal*.  
I have learned

all sacrament rests on the tongue.

Victoria C. Flanagan  
58

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

## Coarse Gold

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Christine Gosnay*  
59

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<sup>59</sup> [Christine Gosnay](#), "[Coarse Gold](#)," [The Rumpus](#)

## Four Fights

1.

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

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

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

So much dark

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

2.

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

3.

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

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

WAS RIGHT ON THE MONEY.

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

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

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

4.

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

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

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

*Natalie Shapero*  
60

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

Love Poem: Just Then

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Kevin Prufer*

## The Lighthouse Keeper

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

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

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

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

I do.

*Meghan O'Rourke*  
62

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

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

from *Casting Deep Shade*

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

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

~

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

~

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

~

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

~

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

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

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

~

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

~

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

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

~

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

~

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

*C.D. Wright*  
63

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

## The Difference Between Science Fiction and Fantasy

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

Jay Nebel  
64

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

## Purple Heart

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

*Carrie Fountain*

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

## Quartet for the End of Time

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

1

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

2

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

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

3

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

4

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

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

*Alison C. Rollins*  
66

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

## Capacitor (Be Mine)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cindy King  
67

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

## Just checking in

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

*Bob Hicok*  
68

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

## Smoke and Mirrors

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Caki Wilkinson*  
69

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<sup>69</sup> [Caki Wilkinson](#), "[Smoke and Mirrors](#)," [32 Poems](#)

## Thinking of You

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

*Laura Read*

70

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

## Bullet (Lead + Alloy)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Adrian Matejka*  
71

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

## Black Box

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

*Sandra Lim*

72

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<sup>72</sup> [Sandra Lim](#), "[Black Box](#)," [Smartish Pace](#)

## Jefferson, Midnight

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

*Sandra Beasley*  
73

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

Verde

*For Lorca, for C.G.*

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

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

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

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

*Vickie Vértiz*  
74

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

## Meaning Well

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

*Jack Gilbert*  
75

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

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

My last long-term love, before my husband,  
had writer's block, and thank God  
he wasn't a writer just like my husband  
but a physicist whose goal was to explain  
something about the Northern Lights and CO<sub>2</sub>  
so he went to Alaska where he sat amid stacks  
of math formulas that looked like swear words  
in code and smoked and wrote missives  
in pencil about wolves he'd heard,  
his cabin's heater, how bad the fruit was  
and the dog he might take in since he was already  
feeding it peanut butter sandwiches at 4 a.m.  
The pencil and idea of me,  
a far-away ear silent as a half moon,  
freed him to write the mysteries of solitude  
but not those of the Aurora Borealis.  
I'm uncomfortable

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Nancy Krygowski*

76

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

To the Woman Crying Uncontrollably in the Next Stall

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

*Kim Addonizio*  
77

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

## Body in a Phone Booth

*The body in the phone booth*

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

*A body in the phone booth*

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

*This body in that phone booth*

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

you'd never call again.

*That body in this phone booth*

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

*Our bodies in a phone booth*

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

*The body in a phone booth*

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

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

*Jaswinder Bolina*  
78

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

David Naughton at Midnight, Full Moon, etc.

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

*Alex Green*  
79

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

Lackawanna

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Steven Cramer*  
80

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

## Nightwalk

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

*Jill Alexander Essbaum*

81

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

## Faint Music

Maybe you need to write a poem about grace.

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Robert Hass*  
82

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

## Elegy for the Modern School

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

a mass of naps  
& Vaseline knees  
before the promise

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

bleeding blackness  
all over & wayward  
shots meant

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

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

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

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

*Joshua Bennett*  
83

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

## ESL Students

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

*Lauren Shapiro*  
84

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

## The Lovely Voice of Samantha West

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*I am a real person.*

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

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

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

*Erin Hoover*  
85

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

## Memory Fed Me until It Didn't

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Diane Seuss*  
86

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Quan Barry*  
87

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

## The Jennifer Century

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

*Erin Adair-Hodges*

88

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

## Doubt

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

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

*Barbara Hamby*  
89

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

(Kiddie Pool)

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

*B.K. Fischer*

90

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

## Yellow Rubber Gloves

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Cate Marvin*  
91

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

*“A lonely man in his greatness”*

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

*Rebecca Seiferle*  
92

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

## The Grasshopper and the Cricket

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rick Barot  
93

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

## A Natural History of Columbine

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

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

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

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

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

Then intermission.

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

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

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

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

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

*Kathryn Nuernberger*

94

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

## Some Little Movie

Lousy with suicides  
the unicycle paths, lousy

with umbrellas  
the Olympic pool

and I am dismantled  
by the love I suspect

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

yeah, yeah and beside  
the crosswalk, a man

playing an accordion.  
This can be one movie.

This can tattoo  
one thousand little movies

like a window shattered  
into a delta of glass

teeth. Sequins. Freckles.  
The man is young,

the man is wearing  
a facsimile of the hats

worn by those bent  
on ascending the Alps

in movies about  
ascending the Alps.

I fix something  
and two other somethings

break. You know this,  
you know what it is

to walk all the way home  
carrying a live coal,

tripping through  
an upset reliquary

like a clumsy risk  
whose equilibrium

has never not  
been crippled.

You know I won't stop  
asking by breathing

to carry this cup  
as far as you want.

*Marc McKee*  
95

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

## Saint Monica and the Itch

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

Mary Biddinger  
96

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

## Death by Chocolate

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

Sandra Beasley  
97

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

## Smokey

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

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

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

*Amaud Jamaul Johnson*

98

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If you insist, I will leave you  
to your heavy-breasted troops

& climb back into bed  
where I'll resume my life's work.

*Katie Condon*

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<sup>99</sup> [Katie Condon](#), "[To the woman who accused me of not being a feminist. I'm sorry.](#)" *Narrative*, collected in [Praying Naked](#), [Ohio State University Press](#)

Florida Again

*I forgave myself for having had a youth.*  
—Thom Gunn

At the Fashion  
Square mall,  
back  
of Waldenbooks,

I see my younger self  
haunting  
the magazine rack.  
Ripping out pages

of *Blueboy*,  
tucking them  
in a Trapper  
Keeper.

Turn back.  
His eyes meet mine,  
animal  
and brittle,

a form  
of gratitude  
that a man  
kept his stare.

Any man.  
I half-smile  
some admission,  
and though

he cannot  
see it coming,  
I excuse him  
his acid jeans;

two Swatch  
watches,  
two guards.  
He, I,

must be  
nineteen:  
sex was “safer”  
then—

scribbles  
on the mall  
men's room stall;  
malaise

of saxophone  
and PSAs.  
How  
did I

even  
learn how to live  
in 1991?  
Landlocked,

cock-blocked,  
Spanish moss  
festering.  
I forgive him.

*Randall Mann*  
100

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<sup>100</sup> [Randall Mann](#), "[Florida Again](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [A Better Life](#), [Persea Books](#)

Ann Arbor, 1974

Sky bruising purple when I stuck out  
my thumb and caught a fast ride  
west in a spoke-wheeled Cadillac  
with three geezers who passed

a silver flask of Scotch, honeyed  
with age, and even I sang along  
with Sinatra on the car stereo, soprano  
blanketing their reedy tenors, all the way

to South Bend where the driver  
handed me a Hershey bar and a wad  
of ones. I played pinball for hours  
at the Greyhound station, high

on horsepower and whiskey,  
an eternity before the bus  
chuffed in. How is it that time  
is slow and heavy as an elephant

when you're young and impatient to get  
to the next second? Now, the merry-  
go-round of years, a heartbeat  
between Christmases. It's like you

go out a girl who can honky tonk  
all night and come home old, smelling  
of spiced apples and cat, fat  
with memories coding your bones.

*Sarah Freligh*  
101

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<sup>101</sup> [Sarah Freligh](#), "[Ann Arbor, 1974](#)," *diode*, collected in [We](#), [Small Harbor Publishing](#)

from "After Damascus"

5.

Your paperback of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*  
sank into the motel bathtub, was fat  
and seeping when you plucked it back. Outside,  
old people shrieked for the bus.  
Played games of chance with bones  
from the roadkill beside the curb.  
The bus never came. There was no bus.  
On desiccated stationery,  
you drew a square  
with knobby wheels and a few windows.  
Stick people stared out. At you.  
You threw the book out the door,  
praying they'd shut up or scatter.  
All night long  
no one noticed  
the hiss of oxygen tanks,  
the electric clack of wheelchairs,  
and the chirping alarms of the world's congestive failures  
at your door. You missed  
the book you'd stolen from a library  
in the next town over. Why  
you had picked it made no sense.  
Everything was pitiable. Above the bed  
the room's sallow light hummed  
and wouldn't shut off. The mattress felt like straw.  
You figured it wouldn't be long  
before you found work again  
in a mine or as a museum decent.  
Whatever that meant. *Decent*. You liked the word  
like the matches you kept  
in your pocket like identification.  
There was more to your story,  
you always said if you were asked.

*Paul Guest*

102

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<sup>102</sup> [Paul Guest, "After Damascus: 5," \*The Greensboro Review\*](#), collected in [Because Everything is Terrible, Diode Editions](#)

from "13th Balloon"

One of the only facts I can find  
online about you is wrong

You didn't die on a Saturday Night  
you died on a Tuesday  
It was a Tuesday morning the sun was frozen  
and Mars or Venus barely glowed somewhere  
or Mars was hidden in Tuesday  
or Venus had broken into a billion splinters  
of ice and covered the grass  
outside the hospital  
and the sun dragged with it your death  
from the frozen pit  
out of which daily it rises

Unless I too am wrong and Thursday  
was the day  
the nurse called and told us *It's time you should  
come now he's getting ready to go*

Ready to go after how many times we thought  
you were going or were ready  
to go or had gone  
                    after how many times I'd arrive  
                    at the hospital  
thinking it would be the last  
only to find you  
sitting up doped up cockeyed grinning

You'd lift your head a little  
and say *Hey what'd you bring me Boo*  
and I'd climb into the bed  
with you and say *Nothing good just me*

*Mark Bibbins*  
103

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<sup>103</sup> [Mark Bibbins, "13th Balloon \[One of the only facts I can find\],"](#) collected in [13th Balloon](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Midwinter

Midwinter.  
She lets the darkness  
sit down beside her.  
Some nights  
she walks through the pasture  
and out of her body.  
Some nights she sits  
in the Studebaker  
junked by the millpond  
and dials through the radio,  
the electricity of Jupiter  
hijacking the AM frequencies  
with its ocean sounds,  
its static code, a coyote  
whose mouth is stuffed  
with volts and rust.  
Tonight she sits at the kitchen table.  
She could be over the bay,  
high enough to see  
that it's shaped like a rabbit  
hanging limp  
from the jaws of the landscape.  
She hasn't spoken  
in days—she's afraid  
what comes alive at night  
will break if she talks about it.  
The wives of the Legionnaires  
bring her food once a week,  
and a Bible the size of a steam iron.  
She packs up her china  
each afternoon,  
then unpacks it before bed.

She could be flying  
the way it looks  
with all this fog gusting by.

*Michael McGriff*  
104

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<sup>104</sup> [Michael McGriff](#), "Midwinter," [The Missouri Review](#), collected in [Home Burial](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Someone Else's Mother

Helena Joy drank pickle juice from the jar, stole  
my green nail polish, egged her humping rabbits on, killed  
the basement light so I couldn't find my hands, cracked  
too many eggs into the batter, enjoyed the hatch & fester  
of a lie in her mouth, named every doll after herself, tore  
fake bills out of my fists & claimed the game, carefully laid  
three drawings on the rug: legs, torso, face of some man  
& ground her hips against him. In her dusty Victorian  
with nibbled chalk in the driveway & a circular pool in the back,  
chewed her long braid & poured syrup. When maggots galloped  
from the bottle's lip onto our pancakes her body chose  
a laugh. But unlike her I couldn't leave them, or, they wouldn't  
leave me. Later, I climbed the ladder & edged the lip of the  
pool, plastic blue tarp sealing it for autumn, & fell in, writhing  
in my sudden coffin. My useless hands grasped no rail until  
it was her mother, three hundred pounds lifting me,  
having heard the splash from the living room & run fast,  
fastest to me, my own mother behind her.

*Shira Erlichman*

105

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105 [Shira Erlichman](#), "Someone Else's Mother," *NAILED*, collected in [Odes to Lithium](#), [Alice James Books](#)

## Sentence

*after Don McKay*

I crawl back he unpacks his tools  
oils the wooden handles rinses the metal

fragrant his thighs fragrant his sneer

koi & eternity inked on his skin an ecstatic  
blue a bewildered green

some wounds are ovals some wounds are opals  
the ears of a white wolf pivot toward the moon

I flee now & then alone in the desert for months  
a nomad in a kimono of pressed-together dust

beautiful his throat his words even more beautiful  
“it’s my turn to ask for a bit more from you”

he likes it when I bleed strangers once

gently he hammers gold into a sentence gently  
the sentence enters me

*Eduardo C. Corral*  
106

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106 [Eduardo C. Corral](#), “[Sentence](#),” collected in [Guillotine](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Belfast Standard Time

*for Raymond Lennon*

Whenever I was born in Belfast. Whenever  
I grew up on the Shankill. The Falls.

Newtownards Road. Whenever  
there was a bomb threat. Whenever the RUC

barricaded the street. In security.  
Whenever I walked to school, I avoided

the wall. Whenever I met a Catholic  
for the first time, I was already at university.

Whenever we were burned out  
our house. Whenever we burned

our fingers lighting the Pope for King Billy.  
Whenever we hurled a petrol bomb.

Whenever we remembered the Somme  
on Remembrance Day. Whenever

we neared the wall to lay the wreath.  
Whenever we were spread-eagled and leaning

against the wall, the rifle spreading  
us further. Whenever I looked down to check

the time on my wrist. Whenever the bomb.  
I wished I could have told my father

whenever he was alive, how much  
I. Whenever I was thrown

three hundred feet. Whenever I was blown  
out of my shoes. Whenever I heard

a woman wailing, I thought, why don't you  
shut your bloody mouth? Whenever

I don't forgive them. Whenever I hear  
the likes of them are statesmen

shaking the hands of the Queen, I think  
of my father—whenever he met me

whenever I came home, he took my hand so hard  
my whole body quaked. Whenever

we came back from the funeral, my hand  
ached from shaking

everyone else's hand.

*Philip Metres*  
107

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<sup>107</sup> [Philip Metres, "Belfast Standard Time," \*The Rumpus\*](#)

## Miss October

If I have to be a playmate  
In my time on earth  
I want to be the girl  
Of drifting leaves, cold cheeks

And passionate regrets.  
I think Hef loves October best  
Because although he cannot  
Say so, he is *this* close

To death. December  
In its stealth has hung  
Long spikes of ice  
Around his sagging ears, his

Sex. So in October  
I'll be the centerfold of gay  
Pretense, the girl who says  
We're at our blondest

And most perilously beautiful  
Right before we check out  
Of the manse.  
Soon all Hef's dreaming

Will be ash, his favorite pipe  
And smoking jacket,  
Last vial of Viagra  
Safely under glass

At the Smithsonian.  
When my shelf life here  
Is done and all the damp  
Boys stealing glimpses

At the newsstands  
Are old men, I want them  
To remember how many  
Playmate-months

Are gone, how many rooms  
Stand empty, shutters  
Drawn, the last girls slipped  
Away in bright October.

*Rachel Loden*

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<sup>108</sup> [Rachel Loden](#), "[Miss October](#)," collected in [Dick of the Dead](#), Ahsahta Press

## Nursery

We opened the door to the fairy house  
& took our tea on matching pebble seats.  
Somehow we got out of there alive

though something crystalline of us  
remains in that dark, growing its facets.  
We opened the door to the fairy house

at the oak's black ankle. You asked  
*What could happen?* as you disappeared  
somehow. We got out of there alive

the strange tea still warm in our bellies.  
Inside, our hosts gave damn few answers.  
*Who built that door? Is this a fairy house?*

They had no faces yet. We spoke  
into their quince-bud ears. You wept.  
Somehow we got out of there alive

though we didn't quite return. Our life  
is different now we've drunk the tea.  
They're alive somehow. I got us out.  
Why did you open the door to the fairy house?

*Kiki Petrosino*  
109

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<sup>109</sup> [Kiki Petrosino](#), "Nursery," *Poetry*, collected in [Witch Wife](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Weaning, I Listen to Paganini's Concerto, No. 1

When I'm alone my tits scream  
while the refrigerator

hums like a man nodding  
off behind me on the bus.

There is never any food  
I want to eat and I am ravenous

all the time: soft-boiled  
eggs and mint tea. Milk

thick as leftover grease  
stored under the sink.

My friend is a dairy farmer,  
which means she delivers

cows, pulls velvety hooves  
from gaping maws like psalms

into the muck and wet  
hay. We haven't spoken

since my daughter was born  
but maybe our friendship

ended when I was eight months  
pregnant and she told me about

a stillbirth over the phone,  
how the mother

kept licking the calf's body  
drowned in dull light

and I couldn't un-hear  
her voice, no matter how much

I believed it might unstitch  
me from my own grief,

the way I became no more  
or less beautiful

when I became a mother,  
more like the perpetual

frost of astonishment  
across a windshield,

more like I was doubled  
and emptied, permanently

bent as if tending to a wound  
or some unspeakable joy.

*Kendra DeColo*

110

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<sup>110</sup> [Kendra DeColo, "Weaning, I Listen to Paganini's Concerto, No. 1," \*Tin House\*, collected in \*I am Not Trying to Hide My Hungers from the World\*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## At the Haunted Doll Market

<http://haunteddollsforale.com/>

They call buying them adoption.  
The seller knows Betty doll drowned  
in a lake because she told him  
through his radio scanner, said the words  
*water, Robert, boat, tree, under*, and her name.

And sometimes I listen to my downstairs neighbor  
beat his girlfriend. He did twenty-four  
years before the state admitted  
he was wrongly incarcerated. Pretty sure  
I'm not scared of him, but I don't call  
the cops either.

Some couples get a doll  
because they can't have children,  
and each handwritten purchase agreement  
begins with a promise that Betty,  
or Bianca, would love to join a good  
*spirit family*.

Every morning, my neighbor  
helps his daughter up the steep stairs  
onto her school bus. Sometimes his girlfriend  
comes running to the curb with a book,  
or forgotten lunch.

*Dresses and new hairstyles*  
*are essential to happiness*, reads the tag  
on Bianca; Betty's says she's *good with dogs*,  
*but hates birds*. Vendors have  
different theories to explain how  
a spirit can enter an object.

My neighbor's girlfriend isn't the mother  
of his child. I know because  
he calls her a *dumb barren cunt*.  
In nice weather, all three of them spend  
evenings out on their patio. He pumps iron.  
She braids his daughter's hair, yells at her  
when she won't stay perfectly still.

Keith Kopka

111

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<sup>111</sup> [Keith Kopka](#), "[At the Haunted Doll Market](#)," [The Journal](#), collected in [Count Four](#), University of Tampa Press

## The Wheel of Fortune

is flat and I don't have a jack  
or a tire iron, or a clue how to use  
one except maybe to kill a man

but it keeps spinning anyway  
all wobbly and with that *thwump*  
*thwump* of a thing that should  
be round but isn't

and the people passing me  
are gesturing wildly out  
their windows and I just  
wave back

gripping the wheel like the stem  
of a wine glass or a penis I don't  
know how to operate, and I'd like  
to buy a vowel

whichever one will allow me  
the longest uninterrupted scream  
I'd like to spin again and again  
until it's time to go back

to my dressing room, wipe off  
my eyebrows, shuck this girdle,  
and pour a glass of whatever will  
blur the letters

into a puddle of spilled ambition,  
and think about how I got here,  
what series of accidents led  
to these high heels,

this vacant smile, this shiny  
new car spinning on its lazy Susan,  
glittering and depreciating  
by the second,

its hubcaps gleaming under  
the studio lights, begging  
*take me, take me, I am yours*  
*for the taking*

*Suzanne Langlois*

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<sup>112</sup> [Suzanne Langlois](#), "[The Wheel of Fortune](#)," [Cider Press Review](#), collected in [Bright Glint Gone](#), [Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance](#)

## Berkeley in the Nineties

*again for C. & J.*

Too late for hippie heyday  
& too young to be yuppies  
we wandered creeksides & used bookstores.  
There were still so many movie theaters.  
Our parents marched against the many wars  
& fed us carob chips. We foraged  
in free boxes for old wrap skirts  
but had absorbed consumerist desire,  
& also longed for new J. Crew.  
There was no internet yet & so we listened  
to Steve Miller Band on repeat  
& cut geometry to skinny dip  
in the Essex Street hot tub.  
We knew the code, just as we knew  
to disapprove of America.  
We walked out of high school  
after Rodney King. We helped our mothers  
shop for bulk oats at the Co-op.  
We felt we could & couldn't  
solve it. We could say *systemic racism*  
but couldn't name yet how our lives were implicated.  
We drove our grandmothers' Volvos up Marin  
& watched the spangled world  
from Grizzly Peak. We climbed Mount Diablo  
in spring rain. We learned  
the meaning of the word *hegemony*  
but thought the word itself was hegemonic.  
We got high to the patter of the windchimes.  
When we missed our friends  
we wandered to the farmers market  
for bruised peaches. Bruised peaches were  
our kind of revolution. There was not internet yet & so  
we made elaborate cutout flyers to invite  
our friends to picnics up at Codornices.  
Bodies in space were revolution.  
Some of us were feminist & queer.  
Some of us wore wool sailor pants  
& passed out at bad university parties.  
Oh my god, that was embarrassing.  
Some of us cut class to spend  
days reading in the dank public library.  
Alone in our aloneness we fumbled  
with one another's bodies  
in dim alleyways near City Lights.  
Our revolution: under cherry blossoms,

reading Virgil. One of us made red  
mushroomy kombucha. One of us  
taught the others to eat burdock.  
The burdock eating didn't really take.  
Some days we paid the toll  
for people behind us  
on the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge.  
At Steep Ravine howled Whitman at the sea.  
Most days, we were a crumbling outpost. Nearby  
the street preacher, Paul of the Pillar,  
spoke in helter-skelter baritones from  
liberated air on the Cal campus.  
We too believed in liberated air & some nights  
bought Paul sausages at Top Dog.  
Under the Campanile, we discussed  
how Ginsburg was a sellout now because he posed  
for Gap ads in wide-legged chinos.  
Chinos were not the revolution.  
Trigonometry was not the revolution.  
We memorized short poems by D.H. Lawrence.  
We were quick fish who read  
Gary Snyder in someone's dad's Mendocino cabin.  
Some of us climbed ferny gullies  
on winter solstice & got topless.  
Decorated each other in white reindeer lichen.  
Recited the *Tao Te Ching*. Had sex on a cliff.  
Reindeer lichen was the revolution.  
Our new breasts in rain were revolution.  
We craved transcendental revelations,  
the radical & burning future:  
We lobbied for condoms in the high school bathrooms  
even though the bathrooms needed toilet paper—

*Tess Taylor*  
113

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<sup>113</sup> [Tess Taylor](#), "[Berkeley in the Nineties](#)," [At Length](#), collected in [Rift Zone](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

## Elegy in an Orchard

It's only now, in the spring of my forty-fourth year,  
that I come to understand there's a proper way  
to read a poet. Larry Levis, for example,  
is to be read late at night in bed by the weak flame  
of an old flashlight, while the plumbing  
aches in the walls and the branches of the oak  
scrape the upstairs window. Only this way  
can I lean into his California, its dusty vines and old stars,  
which, however dead they were then, were closer  
to being alive than they are now

in *this* California, where I lie awake  
in a red barn at the edge of Branciforte Creek  
as the coyotes proclaim their victory over the furred body  
of their latest kill, and the frogs crouch in the pond discussing  
their wet underworld of sex.

And I find I've begun to talk to him, the poet,  
who, I imagine, still attends to these lines  
the way the spirit of a river was once said to dwell  
in the river's bed. And so I tell him what I know about beauty,  
or, at least, what I'm thinking of it now—what I see  
outside the window when I get up to pee—a pear orchard  
by moonlight, the black shadows of bats  
swooping down between the trees

And something else—the yellow pickling jars by the shed.  
A tractor left abandoned within the field, adorned now, by its bloom  
of rust. *Isn't the heart, too, improved by a little wear?*  
I ask, as if he's listening, though I can feel him  
see his heavy-lidded eyes as he nods, stokes the stubble on his jaw.

But his mind is elsewhere, traverses a vastness I can't see,  
the rough particles of stars grazing his ghostly lungs.  
I want to know if he misses the crickets' steady dirge,  
the weight of a wool blanket, a pen's satisfying scratch  
on a clean, white page.

Once, a man told me he wanted to be near me  
because he wanted to make beauty, pull it from the world  
like a gold thread. Which we did—or tried to—for a while,  
sitting up late at night with our notebooks, knees almost touching,  
as we unfurled spools of language.

Which is why I am leaning into Larry Levis

at this hour, turning the pages of this slim volume  
and folding back the corners. Even his absence  
is a kind of beauty. Let me be a guardian  
                    of such absence, make a small altar to it  
in the center of my chest. Not for flame  
or proffered fruit, or even a wisp of scented smoke. A hole  
you can't fill with anything and so it fills with silence  
and dust.

*Danusha Laméris*

114

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<sup>114</sup> [Danusha Laméris, "Elegy in an Orchard," \*Miramar\*, collected in \*Bonfire Opera\*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## I Used to Be Able to Listen to Sad Songs

but that was before they started strutting  
around with rocks in their fists, started  
kicking the backs of my knees so that I  
crumpled right there on the asphalt,  
their faces streaming tears all the while.  
That was before they started showing me  
the switchblades in their boots. Before  
the twisted arms and sucker punches.

Once, the songs slept soft beside me.  
Their eyes were like moons  
and they never closed them, so all night  
I dreamed under lunar beams and woke  
each morning sky-lit. But then I learned  
that the earth is infinitesimally slowing  
its spin. Then I learned that we're born  
with more bones than we die with. The songs  
started growling sometimes when I wanted  
to cuddle. The songs started cracking their knuckles.  
One morning I caught one filing its teeth.  
That was when the problems started.

Now I armor myself in hand claps and tambourines.  
I've honed a trigger instinct with the radio.  
But sometimes I'm walking down a boardwalk  
in the safe, bright sun, seagulls dipping overhead,  
cotton candy spilling from every hand,  
and there they are, locking step beside me  
past the ring toss, the arcade. It doesn't matter  
how fast I turn away. *Hello again*, they whisper.  
*You can't run forever*. And then I know the ocean  
is there but damned if I can find its crashing.

*Catherine Pierce*

115

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<sup>115</sup> [Catherine Pierce](#), "[I Used to Be Able to Listen to Sad Songs](#)," *diode*, collected in [The Tornado is the World](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

For Ilya at Tsarkoe Selo

We stand at the casement window of Pushkin's Lycée.  
These are the desks where Pushkin wrote, his chalkboards, his astrolabe.  
Snow falls from here into the past and vanishes on golden minarets.  
Snow recedes from the birches. A lesson writes itself in winter chalk:  
On the day Michelangelo died in Rome, Galileo was born in Pisa.  
Isaac Newton was born the year Galileo died. When they searched for  
the poet Kabir, they found nothing beneath his shroud but a sprig of jasmine.  
Man is like the statue whispering about the marble chiseled from his mouth.  
You are the guardian of this statue, standing in your silent world.  
The year Isaac Newton died, there was a barn fire during a puppet show.  
Kabir says all corpses go to the same place, and the world has fallen  
in love with a dream. This life is not the same as your other life.  
We are here now in one of the shrines of the silver poets.  
You are one of the silver. The snow is a white peacock in a Russian poem.

*Carolyn Forché*  
116

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<sup>116</sup> [Carolyn Forché](#), "[For Ilya at Tsarkoe Selo](#)," [Poetry London](#), collected in [In the Lateness of the World](#), [Penguin Books](#)

The First Boy I Thought I Loved Was in a Band Called Romanticide

after I broke up with him He used to call me  
*dumb*  
as a way of flirting A man came  
uninvited  
to the house the other day  
and I stood  
on the other side of the locked storm  
door, the dog a low  
growl at my heel The man pleaded  
for me to *open up*  
and take  
the free gift of laundry detergent  
out of his hands  
so he could show me what else  
he had My father told me  
to always be in a position of leverage, to maintain  
a range  
of motion so I could always turn  
away or into  
an assailant's grip and get away Lately, my husband  
has been sleeping  
on the sofa and so I've learned  
how to

stretch my body out as far as it will  
go to the mattress  
corners to take up space and dream  
of her  
who made strong the wound by honoring  
the tender  
scar that men are  
always reaching out to touch without  
asking and asking, *did you*  
*get that in a cat fight, sweetheart* without a question  
mark at the end because they don't care  
about the answer only  
that they define the violence I was followed by  
a car for ten minutes and at a traffic  
light the passenger leaned  
out his window and yelled, *I'd love*  
*to pound your cunt to pulp*  
*while my buddy rips your ass*  
*apart* Some mornings when I wake  
I think I can  
unthink my body, to make it salt or sand—  
my head the top  
chamber of a halved hourglass  
spilling  
into the wind, but I'm trying

not to violence

myself as a way to protect *this*

*will make a kind of tongue*

*should mine be pulled out,*

I think while looking at the end

of my soft-worn belt and not at the blue-scarred abdomen

in the mirror in which I dress.

*Emilia Phillips*  
117

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<sup>117</sup> [Emilia Phillips, "The First Boy I Thought I Loved Was in a Band Called Romanticide," \*The Adroit Journal\*, collected in \*Embouchure\*, The University of Akron Press](#)

## Gifts from the Dead

A student said, I've been studying  
your line breaks and can't figure out  
how they work. I couldn't  
explain. All those years they  
fought their way to the surface  
like cats in a bag. But Lucille  
must have given me  
breath, because after she died, I  
noticed my lines  
started to look  
a lot like hers! She had told me,  
when you lose the flesh  
you gain more power. In fact,  
that's the only gold  
a poet counts on: the power  
to give it away. When Ruth Stone  
died, she gave me  
a new way  
to pick up words, like those  
silver claws in grocery  
stores that pick up  
stuffed animals and this time they  
don't leap away. Ruth had said, just  
put your hand  
up in the universe and a poem  
will jump in. It's crazy  
to trust yourself  
like that! But, now,  
I'm learning how  
to live.

Even when she was getting chemo  
twice a week, Lucille would go  
anywhere they asked—Australia, Alaska—  
carrying her thirty-pound purse, which she would never  
give up. No matter how we  
warned her, she  
did it for nothing! On her deathbed, she wouldn't leave  
until her daughters promised,  
*We'll be all right. You can let go.*

Ruthie, starlit, ribboned  
and silked, fragile-skinned, like a coat from a Chinese  
wardrobe in the Middlebury  
Goodwill, told us  
she wasn't going to  
die. That evening,  
after we sank her

down in the hole they had  
clawed out that morning,  
we sat around the table  
where Marcia had planed  
the pine slats of her casket  
just the day before (her last words,  
Marcia said, spoken really  
to herself, *Everyone  
has to die*), spooning her favorite—  
Kozy Shack rice pudding—  
right out of the plastic.

*Toi Derricotte*  
118

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<sup>118</sup> [Toi Derricotte, "Gifts from the Dead," collected in \*I: New and Selected Poems\*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Husbandry

The working cocker mounts my 10-pound Dachshund; earlier he humped his great-grandmother. It's for once not raining, and the two dogs are lit up from behind by the setting sun, the dying-Muppet sheep sounds so loud that we have to keep saying What? The ram is soon to be outfitted with a crayon that will mark the ewes he mates with because most of the lambs in the field were surprises. Though the ghosts of many farmers stand within me, I'm more Monsanto and McMansion-spotted bean fields than what is bred here. When I was a tired divorcee in Indiana, women young and old stood mightily between me and their husbands, afraid that when I stopped being sad I would be ready to mate. Now breeding permeates the air like an ocean of ground squirrels I saw once: writhing and undulating, each separate, but swarmed together into a sheet of tribal, comforted fur.

*Julia Story*  
119

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<sup>119</sup> [Julia Story](#), "[Husbandry](#)," collected in [Spinster for Hire](#), [The Word Works](#)

## Self-Portrait as Medic

I am stained by this war,  
and who wouldn't be,  
staggering into the traffic  
in the square, blood soaking  
my uniform, my mind poured out.

How to say what I could have  
asked for instead—a vase? A lovely scarf?  
How can I return to being  
pale, freckled and wanting?

You are my duty and my dulling;  
it's a row of you moaning.  
I hold all your greasy heads.  
I change my clothes, a little

more gone in the hourglass,  
in my shoes, in the radio,  
in the surgery, blood soaking  
the beloved warm and I love

your wounds more than my own,  
soldiers, with my clean hands,  
fresh apron, my neatly  
skewered curls and cap. All I have  
is yours. I bathe you again

in my drum of ribs, my cup  
of skull. I recall how the saint  
buried alive is released  
to be buried again in the  
hagiography, or, rather,

manual for losing beautifully.

*Connie Voisine*  
120

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<sup>120</sup> [Connie Voisine](#), "[Self-Portrait as Medic](#)," collected in [And God Created Woman](#), [Bull City Press](#)

## Egg

You take us down.

I'll ask a camera  
to capture the ruin.

Rupture the egg,  
master the sea,

you already have  
enough of me.

*Cammy Thomas*  
121

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<sup>121</sup> [Cammy Thomas](#), "[Egg](#)," collected in [Inscriptions](#), [Four Way Books](#)

## From This Distance

He would take a small folded paper from his pocket—  
“I have been diagnosed with schizophrenia”—  
the same moment you wanted to kiss him.  
What was he wringing in his hands all those years?  
The chicken refused to smoke a cigarette.  
Seven white stones circled a thistle.  
You would have gone with him,  
but he climbed a high fence.  
There was always this Y in the road.  
Red checkered jacket draped  
over picnic table.  
Arrangement of broken bottles  
in the doorway of the Paris Hatters.  
He would take a word and remove its shirt.  
The open heart of the o, the wink of an e,  
the long trapped mystery of the crossed t  
and the squirrel gathering what it needed,  
scrambling high into the branches,  
dropping shells on his face  
as he stood under the tree looking up.

*Naomi Shihab Nye*  
122

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<sup>122</sup> [Naomi Shihab Nye](#), “[From This Distance](#),” collected in [Fuel](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## Monument

I take off that winter like a sports bra  
eye bright woman with the roman nose, roman back-arch  
denim on denim on I take off my skirt  
in minutes and in front of no one  
what kind of my people is this  
a glass wren sweeping feathers from the museum floor  
how bone-rag, my time stutter  
how three-windless, our nightjars & nightsticks  
be serious

there was a boy, wolf's bane, bright  
dress, fifth grade, what was  
his name, worm  
moon with her twenty-sided hands  
and the milk-eyed curtain what room  
falling where we I wonder  
is he still a boy was he a boy then the mountain  
snow melts the mountain flowers, seabirds sling  
their diamonds, their syntax  
my people, my exquisite corpse-breath  
and pronoun and softly and sister  
forgive me

I'm trying I'm trying I'm trying I'm trying  
to write a history of us  
without writing a history of us  
being harmed

but when I think about that day  
it is not your name I remember first

*Bradley Trumpfheller*  
123

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<sup>123</sup> [Bradley Trumpfheller](#), "[Monument](#)," collected in [Reconstructions](#), [Sibling Rivalry Press](#)

Dear Thanatos, [Last week a pregnant woman...]

Last week a pregnant woman ate rat poison at dusk  
and feared the light she woke to.

The last time I stood in front of a mirror, a monster  
crawled out, forlorn and flailing, who looked like my mother  
when she dreamed of snakes.

I bit its neck until it stopped moving, split it open,  
and where its first heart should be. I found a model of the moon.

I never consented to this. The telescope lens cracked.  
I can't see the Pleiades.

This week, an auction house found a copy of Milton's *Paradise Lost*  
bound in the skin of a convicted murderer—

a ratcatcher by trade who poisoned his lover with roasted apples  
and milk, whose flesh now clothes a book about temptation  
and the architecture of hell.

Mine is a thrifty grief. It recycles its nails.

When I broke open the cupboard, I found the monster's second  
heart made of blank paper and burning.

*Traci Brimhall*  
124

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<sup>124</sup> [Traci Brimhall](#), "[Dear Thanatos, \[Last week a pregnant woman...\]](#)," collected in [Come the Slumberless to the Land of Nod](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Sacral

I creep east along Twenty-third Street, crooning to the wound  
the surgeon made, horizontal cut just above my right thigh,  
another swollen node removed, lesion in my sacral chakra,  
seat of sex and grasping, everything base and low.  
And here I've come to the Chelsea Hotel, its beautiful balconies,  
dead now, everyone who lived there:  
Dylan Thomas, Thomas Wolfe, Virgil Thompson;  
the self-destructive, the sarcastic, the charming;  
the late James Ingram McCarthy, all of these,  
my first New York love,  
first to exchange his beauty for a respirator,  
first person to die while I was still mad at him;  
and Curtis too is gone, who was a Quaker,  
who drank cheap wine from a coffee cup,  
who could lift me over his head, who gave me the clap (twice);

and Diego is dead,  
who brought me away from the Adonis in a cab,  
away from men leaning over the balustrade of the oval oculus,  
disappearing in pairs into the dark niches  
between the urns of dusty lilacs;  
who made me tunafish sandwiches in the middle of the night;  
who slept through lightning striking the building next door;  
who was too Latin to let any insult slide, especially the word *fag*,  
who smashed a bottle against a wall and gave chase to the thugs that spoke it,  
who paid with bruises, ribs broken and taped,  
who wanted to make love anyway only two days after,  
who was too Latin to lie back and let me do the work of it—  
who couldn't wait, who had to have it—  
fucking like poisonous starfish or porcupines—  
who finally crumpled with pain, with laughing, hankering and pain;  
whose head in his last days I held, whose deaf ear I told *You can make it*,  
then rinsed danger off my hands at the little hospital sink,  
as I had after fetching poison from the basement as a child.

Dear Diego, which Greek was it, the hero with a wound  
that stank to high heaven and would not heal?

*Patrick Donnelly*

125

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<sup>125</sup> [Patrick Donnelly](#), "Sacral," collected in [The Charge](#), Ausable Press

## Arcadian

I am in love with the way I see the world,  
but I am all alone there.

None of this matters.  
We make our meek adjustments:

we barter body parts for wine.  
All ecstasy is vertiginous.

There are times when I listened  
and heard no one saying no.

Learn the errata of the mouth.  
Learn the lesson of the pioneer.

O eros, put away your bully stick.  
O liberty, put away your crown.

My body does the burning:  
it's a kind of winning.

I am the loneliest planet,  
a vacancy sign hung askew

at a claptrap, seedy motel:  
my flesh is all I know.

You open your mouth wide enough  
for me to crawl in and speak.

If there is a place further from me  
I beg you do not go.

*Virginia Konchan*

126

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<sup>126</sup> [Virginia Konchan](#), "[Arcadian](#)," *carte blanche*, collected in [Any God Will Do](#), [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

The Wyndham Sisters (after Sargent)

Their satin shapes foretell an ambassador's ball,  
The fourth this season—such a dreadful bore. The long  
Hand of evening comes forward as if to enfold them  
Before the gas lamps go on. In the half-light their bodices  
Softly glow, wrapped in oyster and ivory  
Like expensive presents; their hair is pinned up  
By underpaid maids into towering birds' nests  
With steel grips and diamonds. How idle  
Their hands are when emptied of fans. How heartless  
Their eyes are in the looking-glass. Outside, the houses  
Stretch off to infinity, white and identical  
As a line of blank cards. The patrolman does his rounds  
Past the rows of gleaming windows each day  
As darkness falls. At night the trees cast  
Their shadows across the pavements, lean  
Their heads together, murmur about strange children  
And creeping moss. Far below in the basement  
The servants keep working. A colossal salmon mousse  
Droops on its platter, slowly melting. In the heat  
From the oven, a mound of roasted meat drips  
Greasy tears. They carry tray after tray upstairs  
Without stopping, as though their lives depend on it.  
They do. In the ballroom: whirling bodies,  
Rising voices. The sound of laughter in their ears.

*Jane Yeh*  
127

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<sup>127</sup> Jane Yeh, "[The Wyndham Sisters \(after Sargent\)](#)," collected in [The Ninjas](#), Carcanet Press, Ltd.

## Diaspora

I am riding the F train to Brooklyn  
with my son, who is Appalachian  
as much as anything, who is six and  
does not notice the Hasidic women  
reading Tehilim on their way home,  
praying psalms from worn leather-  
bound siddurim, moving their lips  
past Broadway, Second Avenue,  
Delancey, and he would not know  
to identify them by their below-  
the-knee skirts, the filled in parts  
of their sheitels where scalp should  
be visible, or the Brighton Beach men  
in gray fedoras with threatening hand  
tattoos speaking Russian, the occasional  
wondrous mosaic murals or regular  
green and white tiles spelling station  
names: Bergen St., Carroll St., Smith  
9th St., my son discovering he can see  
his own reflection in the windows  
of the cars when they plunge into  
dark tunnels while the women's lips  
keep moving, and I want to tell him  
I know their kind, though I know  
to say this is reductive or offensive,  
even if I might say it too about the  
bleach blond with the septum ring,  
or the old Russian mobsters, so  
when he says, *It's hard to believe that  
you got off here everyday*, I agree and  
think of all the times I climbed  
the station stairs or felt the give  
of metal turnstiles on my hips,  
the jangle of apartment keys or  
click of my own heels on pavement  
after a night out too late, the car service  
guys playing dominoes on overturned  
crates outside the bodega who didn't  
look up, and the way the trains still  
vibrate beneath the surface with exactly  
the same frequency they always did,  
blowing hot air through the grates,  
rattling me to the bone with foreboding  
joy, and I want to tell him I know this  
exact moment, the one where you finally  
learn the contours of your own face,

its beauty as it hurtles through darkness.

*Erika Meitner*  
128

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<sup>128</sup> [Erika Meitner, "Diaspora," collected in \*Holy Moly Carry Me\*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## Skeletons

So whatever's the opposite of a Buddhist that's what I am.  
Kindhearted, yes, but knee deep in existential gloom,  
except when the fog smokes the bridges like this—  
like, instead of being afraid we might juice ourselves up,  
eh, like, might get kissed again? Dwelling in bones I go straight  
through life, a sublime abundance—cherries, dog's breath, the sun, then  
(ouch) & all of us snuffed out. Dear one, what is waiting for us tonight,  
nostalgia? the homes of childhood? oblivion? How we hate to go—  
\*

Sundays I spend feeling sorry for myself I've got a  
knack for it I'm morbid, make the worst of any season  
exclamation point yet levity's a liquor of sorts,  
lowers us through life toward the terminus soon  
extinguished darling, the comfort is slight,  
tucked in bed we search each other for some alternative—  
oh let's marvel at the world, the stroke and colors of it  
now, while breathing.

*Deborah Landau*  
129

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<sup>129</sup> [Deborah Landau, "Skeletons," \*The New Yorker\*](#)

## Letters to Juliet

When Barbara calls from Verona, she says  
they're looking for a woman to answer  
    all the letters addressed to Juliet Capulet,  
because the woman who's answered them for years  
    is tired of the *problemi di cuore* and wants to retire.  
Problems of the heart: these, at least, haven't changed.

In the Dark Ages of my own life,  
I had fantasies of myself as a swashbuckler,  
    stuffing my pouch with the gems I'd sucked  
from the navels of dusky maidens,  
    though my search for amorous adventures  
just lead me into one utterly inappropriate relationship

    after another, such as the one with the woman  
who claimed she could make people disappear completely  
    except for their eyes. And that's love, sure,  
though love's also Pepi Deutsch hoarding three slices  
    of bread and slathering them with marmalade  
so she can make her daughter Clara

    a 17th-birthday cake in the hell of Auschwitz-Birkenau.  
And it's 50-year-old Antonio Delfini opening the bier  
    of his father, who had died when he was 30, and weeping  
as he gazes at the body of a man 20 years younger than himself.  
    Now who was he loving, his father or himself?  
Surely both, for while we love those we love

    almost with all our hearts, we love ourselves even more,  
which means we pity ourselves even more,  
    as I do now, for instance, because while I'm grateful  
for the silence in which to read and write for hours on end,  
    I can't help thinking, from time to time, that one day  
this room will be forever silent except for the sound of one person

    making coffee or pressing the collar of an old shirt,  
and that person could be either of us—  
    unless one day we're in our eighties, say, on a flight to,  
oh, I don't know, Prague, and we have a couple of icy martinis  
    on the tray tables in front of us, and one seat over,  
this nervous guy opens his carry-on bag, and inside it there's this bomb...

Maybe all love is self-love.  
Maybe, when the *New York Times* food critic said the best Wiener schnitzel  
he ever had wasn't all that much different from  
the worst Wiener schnitzel he ever had,  
he meant that, taken as individuals, we are all too much  
like Wiener schnitzel—too schnitzel-y, in a word.

Last night, as I sat in the piazza, I thought of Barbara,  
and as people opened and closed their shutters and lighted up  
this room and darkened that one, I pretended  
all the little flashes were the eyes of those who had disappeared  
and who'd come back to look for someone,  
though who it was, they couldn't remember.

*David Kirby*  
130

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130 [David Kirby, "Letters to Juliet,"](#) collected in [The Ha-Ha, Louisiana State University Press](#)

## The Cloudmaker's Bag

He shows me the camp stove he cooks with.  
Ten-dollar poker chips. Crystals he carries  
in small leather pouches, tied to his shoelace,  
his belt loops to harness the sun. He carries  
a matchbook, a cell phone and charger, a lighter,  
an old deck of playing cards with nudes  
on the backs of them, needles and balled thread,  
thin strips of tinfoil wrapped up in two yellow  
Ziploc bags. He carries his own wife's bones  
on a necklace. Fingers them round in the glow  
of the shelter lights. Nuggets he dug from  
the cremator's shoebox of ash. He is seven  
years homeless now. Living on handouts,  
gravedigger jobs he has only been fired from,  
free meals down at the church. He carries  
a homemade knife in his pocket. Dull gray.  
Whetstone for keeping the blade-tip able  
to break through aluminum cans. Watermark  
stains on the handle from leaving it drawn  
in the seaside rain. He carries a King James.  
He carries a loose gold tooth on a string. He  
carries a phony ID in his wallet. Stranger from  
Delaware, barely resembles him. Writes  
down the names of the good eucalyptus trees.  
Calls them his *Darlings*, his *Leafy-green Loves*.  
He carries an old pair of foggy binoculars,  
out-of-date passport, a penlight for writing his words  
on the night sky. Something he picked up in Bozeman,  
Montana. *The stars are so clear there, they beg  
for connections. For someone to map out  
their infinite faces. To draw the invisible lines.*

Kai Carlson-Wee  
131

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<sup>131</sup> Kai Carlson-Wee, "[The Cloudmaker's Bag](#)," collected in [Raj](#), BOA Editions. Ltd.

## Poetry Begins in Delight

“That panting on the wall”  
really was the most interesting line  
in the whole magazine.

But my pleasure in it was diminished  
by the abject apology in the next issue:  
Apparently the poet is still lying down  
due to the typo that turned *painting*  
into *panting*.

My disappointment was offset though  
by a new poet who went on and on  
about the waning light across harrowed  
fields and the long shadows of cedar  
and pine until finally everything  
was covered by “dorkness.”

*Ron Koertge*  
132

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<sup>132</sup> [Ron Koertge](#), “[Poetry Begins in Delight](#),” collected in [The Ogre’s Wife](#), Red Hen Press

Signs, Oakvale, Mississippi, 1941

The first time she leaves home is with a man.  
On Highway 49, heading North, she watches  
the pine woods roll by, and counts on one hand  
dead possum along the road, crows in splotches  
of light—she knows to watch the signs for luck.  
*He has a fine car*, she thinks. *And money green  
enough to buy a dream*—more than she could tuck  
under the mattress, in a Bible, or fold between  
her powdered breasts. He'd promised land to farm  
back home, new dresses, a house where she'd be  
queen. (*Was that gap in his teeth cause for alarm?*)  
The cards said *go*. She could roam the Delta, see  
things she'd never seen. Outside her window,  
nothing but cotton and road signs—*stop* or *slow*.

Natasha Trethewey  
133

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<sup>133</sup> [Natasha Trethewey, "Signs, Oakvale, Mississippi, 1941,"](#) collected in [Domestic Work](#), Graywolf Press

northern new england & nowhere else

i went to the woods  
and the woods said  
*you're a bitch.*

ice melting through my shoes.

i get told i'm wrong  
til i can't walk straight.

*how many stray cats  
won't survive the winter*  
is the kind of question  
i should stop asking.

the woods say nothing.  
i keep spitting blood.

*Cassandra de Alba*

134

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<sup>134</sup> [Cassandra de Alba](#), "[northern new england & nowhere else](#)," collected in [Ugly/Sad](#), [Glass Poetry Press](#).

## The Illustration

*Linda came in silently from the hall—she raised her finger to her lips and her eyes danced.*

*“Hist, comrades... she said, there’s mystery afoot.”*

—from a novel by Robert Ormond Case, published serially in *Country Gentleman*, 1936.

She’s a pink rose, flounce upon flounce, the set table  
behind her blanched. The brother, the father, all three  
enact their miniature gestures, their signals, the way  
the privileged do. Forever, the ancestors have kept to  
their frames, forever the chandelier has blinked  
its constellation, the chairs stiffened their backs. Forever  
the white-haired father has presided over the plot whose  
consequences will be amusing, will never cross the threshold  
into disarray and darkness. Their little mystery is a slight  
stirring of the air, a brushstroke. The world is made  
of glass and whispers. You with your boots, you with your  
hunger, clearing your throat, snorting like a cow, nothing  
will make them turn your way. Nothing will stop their play,  
even if you die, even if soldiers come and take you away.

*Fleda Brown*

135

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135 [Fleda Brown](#), “[The Illustration](#),” collected in [No Need of Sympathy](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Taco Time

Every couple has their Saturday night activity,  
like eating a dress made of tacos  
off a go-go dancer together.

Addiction is when a person wants every moment  
of life to feel that way,

which everyone does.

Our voltage is no lower than other mammals—  
pigeons dance and strut after each other  
even on footless stumps.

The mind capable of conducting an orchestra  
envisions being fucked with every instrument.

Most people die with an entire taco-dress  
in their bloodstream, still smiling  
at the crash of cymbals on the stereo.

*Sarah Galvin*  
136

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<sup>136</sup> [Sarah Galvin](#), "[Taco Time](#)," collected in [Ugly Time](#), [Gramma Poetry](#)

## Steve is on Top of Me

Steve is on top of me again. His hair keeps changing color: fluorescent red, bleach-streaked, Maui blue. “Wow,” I say, “You dyed your hair *again*?” He pulls away, wounded. “No,” I assure. “It looks hot. You’re so hot you can get away with anything.” I kiss him reassuringly. I give him a slice-of-cake smile. I’m always doing that. Is Steve my son or what? We go back to making out, but, really, I’m being half-assed about it. He wants to know why I’m not more eager for his dick. He keeps trying to press it into me, but I’m dry and he’s manic. Seriously. He can barely keep still or shut-up. His eyes are somewhere else. He’s babbling about Johnny Cochrane; he’s dancing in place. Jesus, I think, he’s so high. He gets up, so I get up.

We go on a mad sweep through the apartment building—imagined domesticity: *If we lived here. When we lived here.* For example, this bathroom has a spiral staircase leading to nowhere, and I’m showing Steve how I could/did/would lounge on it with a glass of Franzia while he shaved. I’m showing Steve this little statuette of the Space Needle I’ve found in the medicine cabinet. But he’s already off. If only you could keep men on leashes. And how am I with someone so unemployed and self-absorbed? So sloppy and unpredictable? I want to bring things down a notch now with indie rock. And I can. I will. I have to: Steve wants us to be “monog.”

I go outside. It’s the college quad in early autumn and everybody is spread-eagle in the leaves. The whole world smells like a refrigerated zucchini loaf and everyone is kissing. *You know, I think, this is exactly where I want to be.* But that’s just too bad, because Steve starts screaming my name from inside the apartment building. He doesn’t know where I’ve gone. Have you ever seen a little boy who’s lost his mother in Woolworths? Have you seen him scream holy hell into the towels? That’s what I mean. He’s flipping out. The Doppler effect as his desperate howls move through the building!—through other people’s apartments, just screaming my name. And to say the general vicinity is alarmed...? Well, they’re all out in the hall looking at one another in their bathrobes. What to do about the madman?

Of course I’m responsible, but by the time I get inside, it’s too late: he’s shot a girl. Everybody heard it. Everybody knows it. That girl. Right inside apartment 3C. Just then, a door opens and a tall goth girl steps into the hall. “Excuse me,” she says. She’s just passing through. I know it’s Steve escaping in drag, but, bewigged, Steve’s perfectly composed. Well, that’s ginger-peachy, but I’m the one who has to hide the dead girl’s clothes. I rip open her papasan chair with a bowie knife. I try to stuff all of her clothes & scabbards & candle sconces inside, but there’s just not room for all of it. I mean, if her mother sits here and all this metal pierces her corduroy tush? I’ll be found out. Now, where do I put all these old baby clothes? These water wings? Maybe in her mattress? I cut the ticking open with the bowie knife. Steve is on top of me again.

Karyna McGlynn

137

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<sup>137</sup> Karyna McGlynn, “[Steve is on Top of Me](#),” collected in [Alabama Steve](#), Sundress Publications

## The Lit Club Slaughter

Lost in the coatroom at the Gramercy lit club,  
in my sister's dress, feeling the pockets  
of famous writers, living and dead—their brittle balls  
of used Kleenex, their grocery lists  
and fragrant marijuana in tins, their loose change  
and half-done cough drops, cracked cellphones  
and hair brushes, their Mactaggart jewelry—holy  
amethyst and gold Egyptian talisman,  
their nips of Old Crow, letters of intent,  
trust documents and set lists—I'm too drunk  
to bargain. Instead, I'm hounding Patti Smith about her life.  
That punk-poet genius—I'm telling her about you.  
I'm making things up. It was  
a beautiful, caramel-colored evening, until I was  
slashing my wrists in the bathroom  
with a pair of scissors after I'd been led by Rosanne  
into the street and put into a cab.  
And I reached your voice  
across the veil. It said: *quit smoking.*  
*You're getting fat.*  
*Be nice to your mother.*  
In general, I am the life  
of the party. And it's always the eve of battle.  
In general, I am hard and quiet. Like a floorboard  
from a tree long gone. Like a floorboard  
sanded down, shellacked, hammered in a house  
no one lives in anymore.

Bianca Stone  
138

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<sup>138</sup> Bianca Stone, "[The Lit Club Slaughter](#)," collected in [The Möbius Strip Club of Grief](#), Tin House Books

## Subway in Madrid

When the old woman  
saw the two girls  
sitting on the tile  
beside the turnstile,  
shiny ponytails and skin  
dewy as cut melon,  
each dragging  
on a slim cigarette,  
she had to bend  
to their exposed ears and whisper,  
as though she were a shell  
delivering the message  
of the sea, an angel  
in checkered slacks  
and matronly shoes  
sent to tell them:  
*Sois preciosas*  
They giggled and leaned away  
as she strode through the gate,  
but one may remember those  
words when a boy enters her,  
spilling his river of stars,  
and the other,  
the first time he slaps her.

*Ellen Bass*  
139

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<sup>139</sup> [Ellen Bass](#), "[Subway in Madrid](#)," collected in [The Human Line](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

from "The Venus Hottentot"

2.

There is unexpected sun today  
in London, and the clouds that  
most days sift into this cage  
where I am working have dispersed.  
I am a black cutout against  
a captive blue sky, pivoting  
nude so the paying audience  
can view my naked buttocks.

I am called "Venus Hottentot."  
I left Capetown with a promise  
of revenue: half the profits  
and my passage home: A boon!  
Master's brother proposed the trip;  
the magistrate granted me leave.  
I would return to my family  
a duchess, with watered-silk

dresses and money to grow food,  
rouge and powders in glass pots,  
silver scissors, a lorgnette,  
voile and tulle instead of flax,  
cerulean blue instead  
of indigo. My brother would  
devour sugar-studded non-  
pareils, pale taffy, damask plums.

That was years ago. London's  
circuses are florid and filthy,  
swarming with cabbage-smelling  
citizens who stare and query,  
"Is it muscle? Bone? Or fat?"  
My neighbor to the left is  
The Sapient Pig, "The Only  
Scholar of His Race." He plays

at cards, tells time and fortunes  
by scraping his hooves. Behind  
me is Prince Kar-mi, who arches  
like a rubber tree and stares back  
at the crowd from under the crook  
of his knee. A professional  
animal trainer shouts my cues.  
There are singing mice here.

“The Ball of Duchess DuBarry”:

In the engraving I lurch  
toward the *belles dames*, mad-eyed, and  
they swoon. Men in capes and pince-nez  
shield them. Tassels dance at my hips.  
In this newspaper lithograph  
my buttocks are shown swollen  
and luminous as a planet.

Monsieur Cuvier investigates  
between my legs, poking, prodding,  
sure of his hypothesis.  
I half expect him to pull silk  
scarves from inside me, paper poppies,  
then a rabbit! He complains  
at my scent and does not think  
I comprehend, but I speak

English. I speak Dutch. I speak  
a little French as well, and  
languages Monsieur Cuvier  
will never know have names.  
Now I am bitter and now  
I am sick. I eat brown bread,  
drink rancid broth. I miss good sun  
miss Mother’s *sadza*. My stomach

is frequently queasy from mutton  
chops, pale potatoes, blood sausage.  
I was certain that this would be  
better than farm life. I am  
the family entrepreneur!  
But there are hours in every day  
to conjure my imaginary  
daughters, in banana skirts

and ostrich-feather fans.  
Since my own genitals are public  
I have made other parts private.  
In my silence I possess  
mouth, larynx, brain, in a single  
gesture. I rub my hair  
with lanolin, and pose in profile  
like a painted Nubian

archer, imagining gold leaf  
woven through my hair, and diamonds.  
Observe the wordless Odalisque.

I have not forgotten my Khoisan  
clicks. My flexible tongue  
and healthy mouth bewilder  
this man with his rotting teeth.  
If he were to let me rise up

from this table, I'd spirit  
his knives and cut out his black heart,  
seal it with science fluid inside  
a bell jar, place it on a low  
shelf in a white man's museum  
so the whole world could see  
it was shriveled and hard,  
geometric, deformed, unnatural.

*Elizabeth Alexander*

140

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<sup>140</sup> [Elizabeth Alexander](#), "[The Venus Hottentot](#)," [Callaloo](#), collected in [Crave Radiance](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

## In a Beautiful Country

A good way to fall in love  
is to turn off the headlights  
and drive very fast down dark roads.

Another way to fall in love  
is to say they are only mints  
and swallow them with a strong drink.

Then it is autumn in the body.  
Your hands are cold.  
Then it is winter and we are still at war.

The gold-haired girl is singing into your ear  
about how we live in a beautiful country.  
Snow sifts from the clouds

into your drink. It doesn't matter about the war.  
A good way to fall in love  
is to close up the garage and turn the engine on,

then down you'll fall through lovely mists  
as a body might fall early one morning  
from a high window into love. Love,

the broken glass. Love, the scissors  
and the water basin. A good way to fall  
is with a rope to catch you.

A good way is with something to drink  
to help you march forward.  
The gold-haired girl says, *Don't worry*

*about the armies*, says, *We live in a time  
full of love*. You're thinking about this too much.  
Slow down. Nothing bad will happen.

Kevin Prufer  
141

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<sup>141</sup> Kevin Prufer, "In a Beautiful Country," collected in *In a Beautiful Country*, Four Way Books

## The Happiest Place on Earth is Norway

Portland never cracks the top  
one hundred, though many  
move here after visiting  
between July and September  
when the sun is out,  
and those same people leave  
because the sun is never out  
the other nine months, and buy  
into the wrong neighborhoods  
because someone once wrote,  
*there are no bad neighborhoods,*  
and heroin is rampant here,  
as are antidepressants, and I use  
“rampant” because my mother  
always says “rampant” when talking  
about drugs and you know she’s  
never done drugs because she’s using  
a word that should only be used  
when speaking about murder,  
the spread of disease, or Godzilla,  
I have friends, Christ, I have friends  
who have inhaled pills and syringes,  
though most are dead now, my memory  
opening and closing  
like dryers in the Laundromat.

*Jay Nebel*  
142

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<sup>142</sup> Jay Nebel, “[The Happiest Place on Earth is Norway](#),” [Connotation Press](#), collected in [Neighbors](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

## The Cricket

I am sad for the cricket,  
Sadder for the late  
First century B.C. Tibetans  
Who tried to get rid of it.

Billions of yellow-black  
Herbivorous villains  
Devoured the Himalayan Valley,  
Now as good as the Dead Sea,

Moved prodigiously over  
The Yangtze, desecrated  
The shrine of the Gods  
Of Fruition and Harvest.

A cricket can be a friend.  
As individuals they're all right.  
Before her exile, Yang Guifei  
Held one in her palm.

No wonder the Grand Eunuch  
Of the Dowager Cixi said  
*Unleash it and it will kill;*  
*Cage it, it will sing.*

*Marilyn Chin*  
143

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<sup>143</sup> [Marilyn Chin, "The Cricket,"](#) collected in [A Portrait of the Self as Nation, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## Little Oaths and Apologies

By the time you heard it again,  
a therapy dog foiled the bank heist,  
the old covered bridge was washed out in the storm,  
the dictator was almost overthrown,  
and Tom, he almost survived.  
The man who slapped his child  
came close to saying sorry.  
*Sorry*, you can say it in just about  
any situation and feel practically absolved,  
better about how you've laboured in the yard,  
in a thunderstorm, yanking out ivy  
that will grow back again next year.  
Understand that these are Mother Nature's intentions:  
listen to the sizzle of rain on the blacktop,  
bacon as it weeps in cast iron,  
radio static, television applause.

For whatever it was they told you, forgive them,  
because it just isn't true—  
    mistakes were made, oversights and misunderstandings  
*Thank you for holding*  
    *your (desperate) call (for help) is being transferred and will be taken*  
*in the order in which it was received by the next available representative*

But he *did* complain about the back of the baby's head,  
about how it was blocking his view of her breast,  
    and the Cutlass Supreme *really did* fly  
across the river and antiquated ruins.

And the weeks progressed, coupons  
expired, milk spoiled in the dead of night—  
    substantiated, confirmed, corroded, ineffable,  
and unspeakably, beautifully sorry.

Cindy King  
144

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<sup>144</sup> [Cindy King, "Little Oaths and Apologies," \*Minola Review\*](#)

Poem with a Dream of the Future in It

I hear my children speaking  
with their future shrinks.

One says, *It was as if whining  
was a war crime and I was*

*always on trial.* The other  
remembers this one time

his mother made him cry  
asking him to stop playing

with his penis so she could  
close the diaper around it

and put him to bed. There  
are others in there, too, to bear

witness: the woman  
at the picnic who scolded me

for spraying Off! on my toddler's  
toes, asking through a mouth

full of potato salad, *You don't  
want to poison this little angel,*

*do you?* And the man who  
approached me in the bulk foods

section at the co-op during  
the last week of my first

pregnancy to ask if I'd have  
the baby in the hospital

or at home, and then, when  
I said hospital, went off about

the evils of Western medicine,  
right there, surrounded by

the silent nuts and grains  
and many kinds of silent rice:

he is there to testify that  
I, too, was silent, that I did not

tell him to shut up, seek help,  
fuck off, that I probably even

said thank you before  
I finally maneuvered my cart.

around him and escaped.  
*She was never brave enough,*

I hear my grown daughter  
say. *It took her too long*

*to recognize how deeply*  
*she'd internalized the patriarchy,*

*and even longer before she did*  
*anything about it. She wrote*

*poems about us and then,*  
*when people asked her if*

that really happened, *she'd get*  
*angry and say we were*

*metaphors.* I wait in the hall.  
I pace. I skim an article

containing dire warnings  
about the future in *Time*

magazine. I can't help  
myself. I peer through

the keyhole. The scene. Those  
I tried so hard to love

correctly. The wars I fought  
I thought were the right

wars, the sides I took I believed  
were the right sides.

And the shrink, nodding,  
furiously writing notes.

I cannot see what she is  
writing, not even here,

in my own dream. This,  
too, I must let happen.

*Carrie Fountain*  
145

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<sup>145</sup> [Carrie Fountain](#), "[Poem with a Dream of the Future in It](#)," collected in [The Life](#), [Penguin Books](#)

For love of the game

Early in the first quarter,  
after an incomplete pass, we gathered  
in the huddle and called Stephen Hawking  
to ask, In an entropic system, what's the value  
of ritualized violence? He thought  
it was the huddle itself, that men pretended  
for a moment a circle could hold them,  
then tried to kill each other, then returned  
to the circle, which is the moon, the womb,  
a symbol of perfection as well as our desire  
to achieve it. I tried to tell the cornerback  
covering me how noble life is, but he thought  
*A Brief History of Time* went on too long  
and wasn't about to be distracted by my idea  
that in failing to be perfect, we embody  
the slight disruptions in DNA or alterations  
in an environment that make evolution  
possible. He felt every play  
was a little version of the big bang,  
an explosion into barely ordered disarray,  
followed by collapse, and wished we'd go back  
to talking about women or Greek Mythology  
like in the old days, when football  
was football and men cried only  
when shot or their dogs died  
or they realized that war  
was their most memorable achievement.  
I was so moved by his wisdom  
that I could have kissed this guy  
but facemasks make that impossible.  
Fear of the homoerotic is why the facemask  
exists, Susan Sontag explained  
to the Green Bay Packers  
when they called her on fourth and one  
not long before she died  
and they couldn't decide what men  
are more afraid of, death or love? She said  
fear of death is fear of love,  
and to go for it, you nancy boys.

Bob Hicok  
146

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<sup>146</sup> [Bob Hicok](#), "[For love of the game](#)," *diode*, collected in [Hold](#), Copper Canyon Press

Prisoner No. 280

The Widow Capet,  
buried in a mass grave,  
quicklimed with her kind  
and ignoble others, found  
anonymity until her garter  
gave her remains away  
and they dug her up,  
placed her by her husband's side  
in the crypt for royal tenants.

There St. Denis stands with mitered head  
in hand, his halo still aglow above  
his raggedly chopped neck.

Saints before the time of guillotine  
bore less scientific execution,  
endured rough decapitations yet walked,  
some for miles. Their sermons they gave  
to the last, to the grave made on the spot  
where their bodies finally dropped.

Basilicas sprang up where such saints stopped,  
churches fit for kings, their widows, and orphans,  
who may have lost their heads, but none their hearts  
—customarily embalmed as souvenir.

Prisoner No. 280 had given birth in public,  
so execution merely brushed her dignity—  
her last words a *pardon moi* as she tread  
the executioner's boot.

The final words she left her boy asked  
he not avenge her death. He lived eight years,  
most in prison torture, forced drunkenness,  
t.b., then death found the Lost Dauphin.

She would have died to save him,  
and tried, when the military arrived to pry  
the child from his mother. That's what it took.

His heart did survive not embalmed,  
but bottled by the surgeon in alcohol  
until the days of testing DNA—  
Marie's own mother mitochondria  
identified the boy's heart as of the royal line.

In the year of her Lord, 2004,  
they put that pickled organ to rest  
with all the rest of the royals at St. Denis,  
guarded by the headless patron of headache,  
to whom we might now pray with all our hearts.

*Heid E. Erdrich*  
147

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<sup>147</sup> [Heid E. Erdrich, "Prisoner No. 280,"](#) collected in [Cell Traffic, University of Arizona Press](#)

Animus

We meet on a bridge in the rain.  
I know the perspective is wrong.  
You are larger than the building.  
Even from this angle.  
We marry dressed in lilac.  
Makes sense.  
A hive of bees slated to die exists somewhere.  
Through the glass it almost looks as if you love me.  
A red fox runs under the overpass.  
Your thigh fills most of the frame.  
We became ferocious at sunset.  
How many days will it last this time?  
The orange chaise, and half-dressed.  
You come up behind me with a whisper.  
A red spool of string means our time is running out.  
In the room you slip your finger between my breasts.  
I have never touched you. I would know it.

*Caitlin Bailey*  
148

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<sup>148</sup> [Caitlin Bailey](#), "[Animus](#)," collected in [Solve for Desire](#), Milkweed Editions

## Say the Word

To be apart, I'm told.  
To be asunder.  
To be a privative, negative, reversing force.  
To be reached only by oaths and curses.  
To have black sheep sacrificed in my name  
because I'm a god, yes,  
as we are all gods on occasion.  
To be bodied as I am bodied.  
To be rich of earth,  
which is to be chronically chthonic.  
To be where the gems are—  
underground.  
To be Dīs. To be Dīs. To be Dīs.  
To reject any pickaxe disguised as love.

*Sandra Beasley*  
149

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<sup>149</sup> [Sandra Beasley](#), "[Say the Word](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [Made to Explode](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Lover's Letter

*For Morrissey fans*

Because we craved permission to be despondent in English  
Desperate to hide erections for boys  
Behind Trapper Keepers  
To document Kotex leaks in our journals

We needed  
To be maudlin, to be untranslatable  
To do this in private, in the company  
Of someone with rank

We hunted for you in crates, battled mold and being broke  
Scraped pennies from grandparents who collected  
Cans to feed us  
We needed your '50s guitar in the key of sorrow

Mexican and not, born here or not, our duplexes  
South of the 60 freeway  
No Movement murals cushion our daily gray sky  
Our 99 cent interchanges

To your voice, we work our lives away in UPS trucks, as perfect  
Receptionists, in community college forever

This is how you hate the queen  
I seethed at the church for making me dirty  
So we were instant friends

You made me want a public transit death, so we  
Could be together

We saved you from the has-been dollar bin  
We're your American Manchester day dream, empty tire  
Factories, soot-covered eyelids, cracked front  
Teeth and bleeding lips

We fondled open your shirts and built a country around you  
Of sidelong glances and glum gladiolus

When you saw our tight black jeans and creepers  
You could taste our penchant for racing Chevys down  
Slauson with no headlights

We're your wistful twin, that boy you won't share  
You watched us make love in cemeteries  
Made us trim our sideburns, Las Vegas Elvis beats made  
Us jump like beans

We are fatalists by nations on all sides  
Death happy because it constantly raps at our door  
In the carcinogenic heart of this Manchester  
Our black lungs sing with you

Because every time we listen  
It's our last day too

*Vickie Vértiz*  
150

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<sup>150</sup> [Vickie Vértiz, "Lover's Letter," Brooklyn & Boyle, collected in \*Palm Frond with Its Throat Cut\*, The University of Arizona Press](#)

## Notes on the Notion of a Boundless Poetics

for Lyn Hejinian

Pierre Reverdy: All talk of poetics is more or less indiscreet praise of one's own methods.

But why not? Who is going to defend or explain, or for that matter take an interest in them, if the poet doesn't?

My first response to the phrase "boundless poetics" was to imagine putting on an old phonograph a 78 rpm recording of Mississippi John Hurt singing "Make Me a Pallet on the Floor" and lying down on the floor and listening to it.

Down, pretty baby, soft and low.

And then maybe getting up and putting on the Lucinda Williams versic from *Ramblin'*.

I think it might be the election. The word "boundless" calling up immediately the rhetorics of American exceptionalism. It makes me want a presidential candidate who would promise to make the United States the fourth richest country in the world, one that would take care of its elderly and of people who are struggling in their lives, and would try to learn from other countries, and would pay its dues to the United Nations promptly and gratefully.

The second thing that came to mind was a one line poem by entitled "On the need to draw boundaries." It goes, in its entirety, "Wretched and dishonest was the sea." In an English translation of the word order of the original, except that there is no "the" in Polish.

"Pallet," according to the *OED* is a very old word, came into English from medieval French in which a *paillet* was a bundle of straw. Chaucer's *Troilus*: "on a paylet / all that glad night by Troilus he lay."

There have probably never been more means available to poets ever, in the history of the written art in English than there are now. From intricate rhymed and metrical forms to prose to concrete poems, audio poems video poems. Perhaps not infinite means, but lots.

And in that sense, I guess, one could speak of a boundless poetics. And—but—to choose to do any one thing is to choose not to do everything you might have done instead and in that sense any poetics, any making, is bounded. So maybe *sustainable* poetics? An *adequate* poetics?

Connected in my mind somehow with manners. Politeness, consideration, civility. Some Swiss canton of the mind where the inhabitants practice an externalized disposition to kindness.

But also connected to what is one of the most thrilling things to me about an art or work of art—the way it traverses and embodies the energy of a gesture.

And gesture, like energy, in humans, is finite. And in a particular work of art finite also, but you might say, infinitely finite: done with and ongoing. Pound, Olson: poem as hieroglyph, etc.

The third thing that came to my mind was to wonder why the first thing that came to my mind was a lyric in which the speaker is a man who wants a woman's body very badly and understands that to act on his

desire would be a betrayal. Something about an intensity of need that drives you to your knees. How a poetics might imply it.

And I love Basho, so I am not drawn to the poetics of extremity. Basho would think the impulse vulgar. (Nabokov: *poshlot.*) A hard November rain after a stretch of mild autumnal days. Foaming gutters the color of potato skins, raindrops leaping off hard metal in a parking lot. One of those gusts of breath off the Pacific. He would have been satisfied to get that into language. And it wasn't exactly mimesis he was after, though he was certainly committed to a mimetic tradition. (Here a notion of manners comes in— what might be thought of as the basis of an eco-poetics, a courtesy.)

But representing an external world is not quite what he meant when he said “Learn about bamboo from the bamboo.”

The fourth thing that came to mind was the notion that obsession had the virtue of combining quite narrow boundaries and boundlessness. Eugenio Montale: *Per qualche anno ho dispinto solo roccoli. A ròccolo* is a bird-trap.

A lashing Pacific storm. Like the crack of a whip or a temperamental prince. The native peoples of this coast must have had myth names for kinds of storms, they must have had stories! Lower Manhattan in flood and the need to draw boundaries. A gasp in cold air.

There are probably lots of procedures to set a piece of writing in motion, a seriality that proposes no limit and that would be, in that sense, boundless, but it would seem, it always seems, to end up as a form, a footrace between the narcissism of the writer and the attention span of the reader or auditor. Or between the writer's diligence and the reader's; patience. Still a “boundless” poetics (i.e., he does “go on,” doesn't he?) and if the writer is having a good time, why not?

My own stumbling desire for lightness, and also necessity like a metallic taste in the mouth, and the civility of shape.

And I think of Gorky's story about Tolstoy in Yalta grabbing him by the back of the neck with his great hand and pointing his head toward an old woman in the street across from the café where they were having lunch with Chekhov. They had been talking about writing. And Tolstoy, he said, held his head and said “Her, her.”

So there is writing and there are ideas about it and the world full of rain, so many parts of it either tragic or brutal, any sense of responsibility to which would be a boundary as well as an entry.

And time as a boundary, e.g., the telephone just rang. Writing this I was missing a meeting.

Robert Hass  
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<sup>151</sup> Robert Hass, “Notes on the Notion of a Boundless Poetics,” *Lana Turner*, collected in *Summer Snow*, Ecco

## They'll Know When You're Gone

The people in the ad for the health club don't actually belong to the health club. The girl on the elliptical trainer is a singer from Portland who has written hundreds of songs about dead surfers. At night she stays awake listening to her hermit crab shift in his tank while imagining someone on the roof with a knife and a bad knee. The guy with the towel around his neck stars in movies about lifeguards and rock stars and people pretending to be rich and terrible in Malibu. He holds the record for most scenes shot in a hot tub (124) and most consecutive movies with the word "heat" in the title (9). The thing that troubles him most in the world is that he knows exactly how much time he has left to look carelessly handsome. The kids in the pool aren't related or even friends; in real life they eat candy the color of electricity, do sports that mostly bore them, and play video games about murder sprees in outer space. Not only are the couple in the sauna not married, the picture wasn't even shot with them in the same room. She does print work for clothing catalogues for an agency in Vermont, but her fake husband's shirtless picture was stolen from an ad in a European hospitality magazine and Photoshopped in to make it look like they were together. The real guy will never find this out. He'll continue to play a ski instructor on a German soap opera and his synth pop band, Klaberjass will do quite well. Their hit "Dance Ceramics" will stay atop the charts for a record number of weeks (34). A staggering number of people will fall in love to it on the dance floor (12,987). One of these couples will break up and the boy will take it very badly. He'll tell someone his heart feels like a house that has slid down a muddy riverbank and collapsed into the rapids. They won't know what to say. Years later he'll write an essay called "The Trouble with Love Is You Never Forget How You Thought You Felt." It will be published in an esteemed journal and the cover will be a drawing of a robot with a heart over its head offering a flower to a seal. The drawing will become very famous. It will make people feel terrible and hopeful. It will be called "It Doesn't Matter What Happens Next."

*Alex Green*  
152

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<sup>152</sup> [Alex Green](#), "[They'll Know When You're Gone](#)," [New Ohio Review](#), collected in [Emergency Anthems](#), [Brooklyn Arts Press](#)

## Halloween

There were a hundred wild people in Allen's  
three-story house. He was sitting at a small  
table in the kitchen quietly eating something.  
Alone, except for Orlovsky's little brother  
who was asleep with his face against the wall.  
Allen wearing a red skullcap, and a loose bathrobe  
over his nakedness. Shoulder-length hair  
and a chest-length, oily beard.  
No one was within fifteen years of him. Destroyed  
like the rest of that clan. His remarkable  
talent destroyed. The fine mind grown more  
and more simple. Buddhist chants, impoverishing  
poems. There are no middle tones in the paintings  
of children. Chekhov said he didn't want  
the audience to cry, but to see. Allen showing  
me his old man's bald scalp. A kind of love.  
Aachen is a good copy of a mediocre building.  
Architects tried for two thousand years to find  
a way to put a dome on a square base.

*Jack Gilbert*  
153

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<sup>153</sup> [Jack Gilbert](#), "[Halloween](#)," collected in [Refusing Heaven](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

from *Clangings*

First I denied the no-seeums speckling  
my dead boy. *Over here*, they called.  
I overheard *there*. My shoulder thawed,  
felt fine. I exhaled my unson's song.

Then came blame. Used up, I sued it.  
Anger management? I nail-gunned  
flies all over drywall. My tantrum  
plucked a geshrunken dish; threw it, it

pitched back, *threw!* Pawed hardball,  
return me his birthdays. I'll be prompt,  
promise, to Commencement. Unkempt?  
I'll kempt. But worms don't dicker a deal...

I resigned my shift; I mean, took a break.  
Blanket our dog wouldn't even adopt,  
I laid off apostrophes to the teardrop.  
His name sank, forsook all heartache—

no more pantomime palominos.  
If you can't stage miracles, curtain.  
It's not like you become Adam, even  
whistling to the herd in widow grass.

*Steven Cramer*  
154

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<sup>154</sup> [Steven Cramer](#), "[Clangings \[First I denied the no-seeums...\]](#)," [Memorious](#), collected in [Clangings](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## The Next Black National Anthem

Will naturally begin  
with a blues note.

Some well-adorned  
lovelorn lyric

about how  
your baby left

& all you got  
in the divorce

was remorse.  
& a mortgage.

& a somewhat  
morbid, though

mostly metaphorical,  
obsession with

the underground.  
With how it feels

to live in such unrelenting  
emptiness, unseen,

altogether un-correctable  
by the State's endless

arms. Just imagine:  
Ellison's Prologue

set to the most elaborate  
Metro Boomin instrumental

you can fathom, brass  
horns & pulsar cannons

firing in tandem  
as Aretha lines a hymn

in the footnotes. Twelve  
& a half minutes

of unchecked, bass-laden  
braggadocio. An owed

to the unwanted.  
The most imitated,

incarcerated human  
beings in the history

of the world & every  
nanosecond of the band's

boundless song belongs  
to us. It is ours, the way

the word *overcome*  
or *The Wiz* or Herman

Melville is ours. In every  
corner store & court

of law. Any barbershop  
argument or hours-long

spat over Spades. The Next  
Black National Anthem

will, by the rule, begin  
in blood, & span

our centuries-long war  
against oblivion, elaborate

the anguish at the core  
of our gentleness. How

that generosity is a kind  
of weapon.

This music, a blade  
-d criticism of a country

obsessed with owning  
everything that shimmers,

or moves with a destination  
in mind. Even the sky.

Even the darkness  
behind our eyes

when we dream.

*Joshua Bennett*  
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<sup>155</sup> [Joshua Bennett](#), "[The Next Black National Anthem](#)," collected in [Owed](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## I've Always Wanted to Say This

There was a time when mansions had so many rooms  
they had one just for fainting. If you had to faint,  
this was the best room for it—chairs the size of beds,  
shag carpet, cloud-scent, the whisperings of Enya.  
But when you woke up it was the worst room in the world,  
and such are the machinations of life. When I was little  
I wanted to be a truck driver and now, essentially,  
I'm a truck driver. I watch that show—what's it called?  
I forget—for eight hours straight. Then once in a while  
as I'm walking down the street a man's eyeball pops out,  
and we're both a bit surprised, and he cups it in his hands  
and blows the dust off, and puts it back in.  
At the dinner party I tell the story of the eye popping out,  
and then someone else tells about finding an ear in the gutter  
and everyone drinks more wine and Marty finally opens up  
about his little brother losing a hand in a table saw  
and Sarah admits that she once lost a nipple to a feral dog,  
and Tim, after some prodding, shows the empty area  
where his testicles once hung. And then we walk home and  
Jesus Christ it's cold outside! says my husband, and  
it's so cold it does feel like something huge is about to happen  
and that's when I see both of our features slipping off  
our faces and we go home anyway and make love  
and rub our blank faces together and I feel a deep  
and exciting newness welling up in my stomach  
and I think that I *will* bake muffins tomorrow morning after all.

Lauren Shapiro

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156 [Lauren Shapiro](#), "[I've Always Wanted to Say This](#)," *Thermos*, collected in [Easy Math](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## My Face Instead of the Virgin Mary

In an oxidation stain beneath the freeway overpass  
and in a smudge of oil on the window pane

and in the scorched surface of a slice of toast,  
my face instead of the Virgin Mary.

My face in Lourdes and in Clearwater  
and in Finca Betania.

The sun is not a rose.

Red helmet of evening,  
the sky is not a cornea.

My plain face instead of the Virgin Mary  
unable to relieve or to heal you.

The constellation above me  
is winking beacons of the radio relay tower.

The constellation beside me is the fizz  
in a ginger ale catching some light.

What appears cradled in my arms  
is only a loaf of rye.

Why would you tell me the things that hurt you?

*Jaswinder Bolina*  
157

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<sup>157</sup> [Jaswinder Bolina, "My Face Instead of the Virgin Mary," \*The Laurel Review\*, collected in \*Phantom Camera, New Issues Press\*](#)

## What Is the Sisterhood to Me?

Do you know yourself? I thought I did  
at nineteen, when my boyfriend called  
from the hospital to say he'd been hit  
in the face with a fire extinguisher  
and got kicked out of school *because  
of some dumb bitch*. And so I drove

to Westchester General that night,  
four hours, to see how bad it was,  
the muscles he used to grimace  
barely refit to his facial bones,  
his nostrils plugged with rust-colored  
gauze. Maybe I already knew a girl  
hit him, not a coked-out buddy  
or a crew from Yonkers, but I needed  
to hear, in person, why a woman  
would try to split the bridge  
of a man's nose like the seam  
on a baseball. My boyfriend knew

what so many men know: if you don't  
admit it, it's not true. That in a year  
I would still bake cookies for him,  
wrapping them in a coffee can bound  
for his boot camp at Fort Jackson.  
He'd never tell me who hit him.  
But I'd see her in the faces  
of other women at college, where  
we spun pots and talked about Plath,  
avoiding the story they all knew,  
that I was the one whose boyfriend  
tried to rape a woman.  
I didn't know what I was capable of  
at thirteen, when the softball captain  
cornered me in the bathroom, held  
my face in her hands and spat in it,  
sneering, *Why don't you talk?* Or when  
my father told me in the car one day  
he didn't believe I'd ever get married.  
But I was determined, the stringy  
teenager who picked out

“Stand by Your Man” on the guitar.  
I fucking *got* that song, its notes already  
chording in me, like the woman  
who lives, as Adrienne said,  
*in the queasy strobe light*  
*of the lie*. Don’t say you know yourself  
unless you’ve stepped outside of it,  
seen the shadow you cast  
in your own bronze light.

Take me, for instance—  
I never would have guessed,  
holding the fire extinguisher,  
how nearly weightless it is  
in my woman’s hands.

*Erin Hoover*  
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<sup>158</sup> [Erin Hoover](#), “[What Is the Sisterhood to Me?](#),” [Prairie Schooner](#), collected in [Barnburner](#), [Elixir Press](#)

The Abuser: from The Italo Poems

I was not beaten as a child  
but I was in the room my sister was  
and tried to pull our father off  
her single thrashing body  
to call for help the summer's  
open window told  
the neighbors and the hammered day  
made sequins of the screen  
the screams I couldn't stop my father's  
hand her legs the welts and all her sobbing

I was not beaten as a child  
but my mother's nose was broken  
the war was on her mother drove them  
to the hospital knowing that her father  
did it is a story tunneled through  
a culvert of the camp some sixty years  
my mother tells me with her hands  
of rationed gas and sugar you'll have to stop  
telling bad times just remember good  
I answer *no* I answer I will never

I was not beaten as a child  
but I was beaten down called *stupid*  
*clumsy smart* for talking back—for saying  
what I wanted I was shown  
pornography French-kissed by my  
accuser locked inside the room and later  
when a woman called I have hung up  
ignored her given goodness rage and  
mercy all the days of my life surely now  
the names will follow *yes* I promise I will tell

Patricia Kirkpatrick

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<sup>159</sup> Patricia Kirkpatrick, "The Abuser: from The Italo Poems," *Prairie Schooner*, collected in *Odessa, Milkweed Editions*

Cana

For weeks the dreams called you  
my husband. I hadn't the heart  
to correct them. Besides, dreams  
are often confused, anachronistic,  
analog to nothing. One minute,  
we're the way we are. The next,  
as in the dream where you fell  
shaking and sweating into diabetic  
shock, everything goes to hell.  
(When I tried to dial an ambulance,  
the numbers all turned to nines  
and ones.) If dreams are transmitted  
from a place where we've already  
happened and failed, then miracle,  
another form of imagination,  
has its limits. One minute: water,  
the acceptance of impossibility.  
The next: wine, the dreams all but  
calling me *wife* or *widow*, the moon  
soft and white as a wedding mint.

*Maggie Smith*  
160

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<sup>160</sup> [Maggie Smith](#), "[Cana](#)," [Roanoke Review](#), collected in [Lamp of the Body](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

## Black Hands

I wept when the rains came so soon,  
knowing how he hated to get his feet wet—  
now wrapped in a pillowcase  
in the cold ground. I wept on the question  
of his sleep, the vet closed his eyes, first  
the milky blind one, and then the one  
he used for pleading. He gave  
a small final mew when the air left,  
and his dark muzzle relaxed—she cupped  
her hand beneath that last sound and  
closed his jaw, dark face, dark paws,  
ivory and seal, his old dustbag of a body  
abandoned at last. We swaddled him  
like an infant. Since he's been gone  
every afternoon a tightening in my throat  
takes me out past the crumbling incinerator  
past the empty hutches, wood blanched  
silver by the wind, rusted screens sprung  
free, back into the sphere of the lemon, unshaped  
so many seasons now, its crown a bramble  
of dead branches. Too much fruit kills the life  
at the tip of the bough, darkness sets into  
the fingers, *black hands* my daughter calls  
them, the tallow won't reach, no,  
it's flowing into misshapen lanterns  
glowing sulfur yellow in the tangle  
and thorn. And everywhere the smell  
of waxy blossoms, faintly bitter zest  
of dew, the whole tree exhaling not just  
perfume, but breath of leafmold and  
compost—he used to stretch out  
like feline Egypt in its aura. Late  
afternoon, green air almost cold, and  
the black hands strain upward, reaching  
towards that indigo in the dome,  
trying to wash themselves clean, my life  
come to this disturbed earth in the shadow  
where cowslips grow, shade-lovers—  
my cowslips—like me, paper white,  
*simpletons* my daughter says,  
as if it's vulgar to crave to be  
first in your loose lacy whorls—  
crowding cyclamen on the mound,  
five petals drawn together  
like the clasp on a lady's handbag,  
and the color, cherry cider, but she says, *no*,

*darker, more like the hammered  
seeds inside a pomegranate, and suddenly*  
I want to be simple as cyclamen—  
pale horseshoe on its split leaf—  
*a stretched heart*—and underground, his small  
body hollowing out a chamber...

*Marsha De la O*  
161

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<sup>161</sup> [Marsha De la O](#), "[Black Hands](#)," [Miramar](#), collected in [Antidote for Night](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## Gloss

My mother said that Uncle Fred had a purple  
heart, the right side of his body  
blown off in Italy in World War II,  
and I saw reddish blue figs  
dropping from the hole  
in his chest, the violet litter  
of the jacaranda, heard the sentence  
buckle, unbuckle like a belt  
before opening the way  
a feed sack opens all  
at once when the string is pulled  
in just the right place:  
the water in the corn pot  
boils, someone is slapped, and summer  
rain splatters as you go out  
to slop the hogs. We drove home  
over the Potomac while the lights spread  
their tails across the water, comets  
leaving comments on a blackboard  
sky like the powdered sugar  
medieval physicians blew  
into patients' eyes to cure  
their blindness. At dusk,  
fish rise, their new moons  
etching the water like Venn diagrams  
for *Robert's Rules of Order*  
surfaced at last, and I would like to  
make a motion, move  
to amend: point of information, point  
of order. I move to amend  
the amendment and want  
to call the question, table  
the discussion, bed  
some roses, and roof the exclamation  
of the Great Blue heron sliding  
overhead, its feet following flight  
the way a period haunts  
a sentence: she said that  
on the mountain where they grew  
up, there were two kinds  
of cherries—red heart  
and black heart—both of them  
sweet.

Angie Estes  
162

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<sup>162</sup> [Angie Estes](#), "[Gloss](#)," [FIELD](#), collected in [Tryst](#), [Oberlin College Press](#)

## Poem

When I picture *1940* everyone poses  
for me, as though I had the one  
camera in the world. I cannot distract them  
from their studied, ghoulish jolliness.  
My grandmother is posing, yelling  
*Smile* and my grandfather is horsing around  
with a tire, making his biceps big. I  
can't know the past, because the past  
keeps arranging itself before my lens. People call  
out *Here*, and *Over Here*, striking  
their prewar, rural, easygoing stances.  
That night, when I try again, everyone  
is indoors, in parlors, reading quietly.  
A woman rocking in and out of lamplight  
studies me. The neighbor's  
middle child died this afternoon.

*Dan Chiasson*  
163

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<sup>163</sup> [Dan Chiasson](#), "[Poem](#)," [Slate](#), collected in [The Afterlife of Objects](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)

## Premonition

Just because it smells like popcorn does not mean today is a theater. The moles under your arms are exactly what you think they are: scalloped warnings, quick-stitched deaths. We can sit around a table and eat salads all day without feeling like we are full of it. Dad can still love tomatoes. Mom can still be overweight. I can still fail to tell you *Sister, I don't know you. Sister, you are cystic you are stranger you are stronger than every failing heart*. If your daughter was not dead I'd say let's go water skiing just to see how many arms we can break. I'd say let's relive the Renaissance to see how many errors we can make. If this were a movie it would be Russian and cold. If there were a soundtrack it would be cello and cello and cello. There is no better best seat from which to watch your world end. And here I am crying over my broken zipper which my psychiatrist would call the irreparable divide between desire and intent. My ear is housing a small beetle which all day clicks like a hard black dock—over, over, over. The previews are playing backwards which is the only way to hear the truth. The lights won't stop dimming which could mean it is nighttime it is our last time it is no time to keep complaining about our arteries. As a stand in, I predict you will be brown haired and motherly. I predict you will break your teeth on what you haven't done. If you paid me to dream clairvoyantly it would be another contorted poem.

*Meghan Privitello*

164

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<sup>164</sup> [Meghan Privitello](#), "[Premonition](#)," collected in [A New Language for Falling Out of Love](#), [YesYes Books](#)

## Eleven

It's the eleventh  
hour on the eleventh  
floor. We chose this  
apartment (if not  
this hour) for the light,  
though my father could,  
from any height, look  
back. Below are oaks  
and magnolias and tracks  
on which freight and passenger  
trains pass, and my father  
knows the difference by  
the blowing of their horns,  
both of which he prefers,  
he says, to that other one  
he's hearing, by which he  
means Gabriel's, disguised  
as tinnitus. He's remembering also,  
since it's fall, the shofar Herb  
Karp blew for the new year—  
a sorrowing sound, he  
always said, especially if  
you were a ram. That  
day we moved him  
from the split-  
level to the eleventh  
floor, we brought a few  
photographs and chairs,  
lamps to see the  
dark with, spoons,  
a cup. It was a kind  
of sky burial. He  
has his pocket comb.  
He has his wristwatch  
with the busted strap,  
he has his wallet  
with a dollar. He's getting  
smaller and smaller, his vast  
past vaster. Looking out  
from the eleventh hour  
is like looking from  
a hole punched to make  
a room into a camera  
obscura. Anything can  
be a camera. Anyone  
might be in this aerie,

but today it's us, watching  
on the compact TV what  
he watched, rapt  
at the Imperial Theatre  
in 1936—Buster Crabbe  
as Flash Gordon, trying  
to stop the planet Mongo  
from colliding with Earth.  
*I forget how it ends*, my  
father says, *but it ends*.  
And then we're looking  
from the small screen out  
the sliding glass toward  
dusk, where below us,  
on fluted, Spanish roofs,  
two men in straw hats  
are ambling the inclines  
of tiles without ropes  
or harnesses, without  
fear. One man is tossing  
bottles of water to the other,  
who's smoking a cigarette  
and catching the bottles,  
and I'm thinking danger  
and OSHA and laborers  
in the vineyard and my  
father from his eleventh  
hour says—*lucky devils*.

Andrea Cohen  
165

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<sup>165</sup> [Andrea Cohen](#), "[Eleven](#)," [The New York Review of Books](#), collected in [Everything](#), Four Way Books

September 10, 2016

In one version of the story, I find you by way of several minor accidents.

A girl in high school used to tell us *look for the guys who drive stick.*

*It means they know what they're doing.*

*Ask them for a ride, she'd say. Make them show you.*

That winter two boys nearly died speeding down the town's back roads.

That winter I bent over a boy in his borrowed car.

His became the first body I studied besides my own.

Alone after, I would reach for the electric toothbrush, the wooden spoon, and search for the places he lit for a moment, then darkened.

I thought myself the only animal in a frozen city full of men, but I was wrong.

I thought I'd starve, but I was wrong.

*Rachel Mennies*  
166

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<sup>166</sup> [Rachel Mennies, "September 10, 2016," \*Jet Fuel Review\*, collected in \*The Naomi Letters\*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

After Suicide [A hole is nothing]

A hole is nothing  
but what remains around it.

My brother stood  
in the refrigerator light

drinking milk that poured  
out of his head

through thick black curls  
down his back into a puddle

growing larger around him.  
My body stood between the

living room and kitchen  
one foot on worn carpet

one on cold linoleum.  
He couldn't hear his name

clouding from my mouth  
settling in the fluorescent air.

I wanted to put my finger  
into the hole

feel the smooth channel  
he escaped through

stop the milk  
so he could swallow it

but my body held  
as if driven into place.

The milk on the floor  
reflected the light

then became it.  
Floated upward and outward

filling every shadow  
blowing the dark open.

*Matt Rasmussen*

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<sup>167</sup> [Matt Rasmussen](#), "[After Suicide \[A hole is nothing\]](#)," [Oyez Review](#), collected in [Black Aperture](#), [Louisiana State University Press](#)

from "River House"

47.

I wake myself up repeating the same sentence.  
The kind of thing you think will change your life.

The next night I dream that I drag the body of my friend.  
I hold her tight because she has been shot. Some war is on.  
Underneath it all, I get the sense that she will be fine.

For many years I went on the same tangent in class.  
The problem with mirrors, I'd start, is the same with art:

You think you see yourself, but the world you know  
Never gets reflected back. Later, I tell my friend the dream.

At a dinner party, I take the side that literature  
Does nothing in the face of death. Not that I said  
Even a fraction of what I really thought.

Could it be true that we dream what we want?  
"The man in prison is not in prison" is the sentence I wrote.

The poem my friend writes, after my dream, she sends me.  
Inside of her poem, I am surprised to find myself.

*Sally Keith*  
168

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<sup>168</sup> [Sally Keith](#), "[River House \[47\]](#)," collected in [River House, Milkweed Editions](#)

## Miss Consolation for Emotional Damages

When the embarrassment began, no one could see it. It lived

in the closet, the basement, the attic, the brain. It was  
a moth at first, and then it was the hole a moth had made.

It had to do with unemployment: No! (Who  
cared that my father couldn't work?) It had

to do with the boy next door, who'd  
seen my mother drunk, whose  
own mother had explained to him  
that it wasn't our fault we were poor.

No.

It had been born  
in another country. It had come to this one on a boat.  
It couldn't speak the language. It had  
left a wolf  
on the other shore. (A tame  
wolf: someone  
had beaten the wildness out of it  
with kindness, and a stick.) It had

to do with paradox, that space was transparent  
and also dense.

It had to do with Einstein. The curvature of the world in a third dimension. It couldn't

take the contradiction, woke  
one morning as a careless  
American girl, mouth  
stuffed with pink  
fluff: When

she opened it, for centuries, nothing  
but pleasant inanities came out.

*Laura Kasischke*  
169

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<sup>169</sup> [Laura Kasischke](#), "[Miss Consolation for Emotional Damages](#)," collected in [Lilies Without](#), Ausable Press

*Get Thee to a Nunnery.*

When the woman asks the woman behind the counter  
if they have the current issue of *People*,  
she says, “I think all we have is the ‘beautiful’ issue,”  
and the woman says, “I want ‘regular’ *People*.”  
And before I can help myself, I’m blurting: “the ‘beautiful’ *People*  
is the ‘regular’ *People*. It still has articles; I saw it on *Wendy Williams*.”  
I hate how helpful I am even when not asked,  
how I need flight attendants to like me,  
so I watch their safety presentations  
though I know about oxygen masks and how to float after a crash,  
or I’m extra nice to the waiter, assuring him everything’s fine  
when everyone’s talking, so I’ll be his favorite.  
The woman looks at me with a face that says “weirdo” or “faggot”  
and in either case, she’s right. Her husband is waiting outside,  
looking at his watch, not watching his wife  
interact with the weirdo faggot in the magazine store at the airport.  
His muscle-gut and ball-bat forearms make me swell in my belly  
the way I swell when I listen to Fischerspooner’s *Sir*.  
I wish her husband was a faggot  
and we could have weirdo-faggot sex  
in the Terminal F bathroom where men aren’t washing their hands.  
I have a friend who won’t leave the house for a hand job:  
it’s oral or anal or he stays home.

Okay, all of my friends stay home unless it's oral or anal:

*If I'm giving up my parking space, I'm at least getting fingered.*

My therapist says I have agoraphobic tendencies.

I ask him if it's strange that I'm a man who dates men and am afraid of men.

He says it's only strange if I think it's strange, and I say:

"Wow," in my best fuck-you voice, "that's a thinker."

Then somehow we're talking about Nicole Kidman in *Big Little Lies*  
and the line between abuse and lust.

I say something like: "Is all lust abuse, and is sex by its very nature violent?"

He says the scenes where Nicole stands up, sits down  
are the best he's seen depicting therapy.

My shrink's my longest intimate relationship.

I just nod when he compares my life to a line in *Hamlet*  
because I haven't read it in years:

he's smarter than me, and I don't want to remind him.

But I have seen *Girls*, so I know what he means about the guy and girl  
who masturbate together on the couch without touching,  
proving sex doesn't have to mean fucking and can be what I need it to be  
and pleasurable, making my previous statements wrong.

Fischerspooner's limited-edition vinyl has a big, thick cock—  
we'd all leave the house for—on the cover.

P!nk is on the cover of *People*—beautiful and happy.

I love how Casey Spooner wears women's clothes.

I should mind my own business when I fly.

*Aaron Smith*

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<sup>170</sup> [Aaron Smith](#), "[Get Thee to a Nunnery.](#)" [Court Green](#), collected in [The Book of Daniel](#), [The University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Milk

That first winter coming back to our bed what did I want?  
My mother tits tongued, licked back to breasts again?  
Can I say that sometimes it came on me, a pleasure  
in that dark where I rocked, taking the clamp  
of the baby's bony ridged gums. How I came back  
to our bed one breast overfull and leaking,  
the baby fallen off the nipple and into sleep,  
I have still not said it—not just pleasure—  
a pulse in the cunt in the dark while the baby sucked.  
How you slept through the nights. How I wanted that too,  
to walk the corridor back and forth between your breath  
and the baby's hunger. How it was less walking  
than it was prowling, curling around myself  
and waking to find myself in different rooms.  
How every room that winter was a kind of leaving.  
A duct engorged or cracked, without even pleasure sometimes,  
a growth spurt so that all day was a frenzy of milk.  
I would waste the extra milk into the bathroom sink.  
I would look up to see myself in a spray of milk—  
some she-beast ready to kill for or kill her young,  
or I would not look at myself at all, walking  
back through rooms we did not have, waking in moss fields  
waking on avenues, sitting on dented car hoods to nurse.  
And what of it? What of wanting? What of milk  
and the bleaty hunger of this baby and that baby  
who have long left the tit? And what of avenues?  
What now to say to Jen, who calls  
to say she is having the baby no one thinks she should have.  
She says she wants to have it and give it up,  
I tell her how up in those other days Dick cooked  
and ate his wife's after-birth. I was not looking for that.  
I was looking for a way back.  
I was looking for the mossy tongue.  
What of that bed we left there, taking with us  
only the idea of the bed, sides we call yours and mine?  
I could show you how, even now, I can roll a nipple  
and thin drops of clear yellow milky fluid bead  
in the folds. I could show you this. Or I could,  
as I do, lick it off my finger and it is done.

Victoria Redel  
171

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<sup>171</sup> [Victoria Redel](#), "Milk," collected in [Already the World](#), Kent State University Press

## Appeal to Numbers

In the brief rented rooms of our randomized  
uncontrolled experiment

nights seem to last longer when I count  
one Mississippi two Mississippi

not doing much  
only watching you sleep now

your mouth a little bit open  
my mouth a little bit open

Why are you so uneducated you once asked  
It's true I can't read music charts spreadsheets

the future the signs the leaves your face  
the racing forms

But stats ok yes  
Statistic of impermanence

statistic of desire  
YOU WERE HERE

says the silvery green light of time  
breathing in and out like any mortal

eight Mississippi nine—

*Catherine Barnett*  
172

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<sup>172</sup> [Catherine Barnett](#), "[Appeal to Numbers](#)," collected in [Human Hours](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

In Which a Therapist Asks for the Gargoyle Who Sits on My Chest

Better say first,  
the gargoyle she's requested,

I doubt he'll appear.

A fragrant character at most,  
he's so wily, and hard to woo,

and God knows I'm terrible  
at therapy—

the pushy box of tissues,

and kindly on-the-clock  
neutrality. It's exhausting,

how the whole's designed to scrub  
our greasy pan of sorrows to  
a gleam in which we've actually paid

to see ourselves. Caveat emptor?

O, verily.  
To talk and talk like this is what  
the age calls progress—

that peculiar human rage for moving  
forward, like tourists walking off  
of cliffs while taking selfies.

But since I've come to talk,

and urged to use my similes:  
it's apt to say I *feel*  
most like a Fenian Incursion—

the third botched skirmish,  
specifically. God bless the Irish,

(those poets), for thinking they  
could hotwire Canada, then sell it  
to the British.

Though, this makes perfect sense

to me, another unsurprising  
outcome of an ill-considered plot,

conjured awkward in a haystack  
near a town namesaked for that  
rebellion's leader, one John O'Neill—

a man with such a gift for losing,  
he finally thought he'd really rather  
not die trying,

(and proving, therapeutically,  
it's best to recognize your limits).

Charged with speaking honestly,

I'll confide I think it late for  
custom-order hindsight, or rigged

stories spat into our mouths when we  
were only infants by the one bitchy  
fairy not invited to the party.

What patterns there might be  
emerged Cassandra-style,

with inner portents left  
for me to sort, then artfully  
ignore for half a century. Maybe that's

the weight we grown-ups mule, being  
untranslated books the book club  
never votes to read: its measure

heavy as the Easter Island glyphs of  
Rongorongo, a mystery bitten into  
wood by ancient shark's teeth.

Maybe it's enough to recognize

ourselves unsolvable, half trash,  
half glitter bomb, dropped along  
the trench by dying stars.

The French say, *who can say?*

And since they basically invented  
what we know of dread, and food,

and love, this seems a likely place  
to make like Ginger Rogers

forever waltzing backward down  
the stairs, partnered with a man  
who never liked her;

that feathered, practiced creature,  
bleeding in her heels,

her steps not what I'd call the act  
of any faith, but more a process

of elimination. Until she finds  
the bottom, searching for her mark,

spinning toward the promised spots of light.

*Erin Belieu*  
173

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<sup>173</sup> [Erin Belieu, "In Which a Therapist Asks for the Gargoyle Who Sits on My Chest," \*The American Poetry Review\*, collected in \*Come Hither Honeycomb\*, Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Thirst

Unclouded third eye and lush  
red wings. I'm pouring water  
from cup to cup.

This is the water we are meant  
to drink with the other animals.  
There are daffodils by the water,

a road leading from the water  
to the shining crown of the sun.  
My white hospital gown—

off-the-rack and totally sane.  
My foot unsteady, though,  
heel held aloft, missing its stiletto.

Nine months sober emblazoned  
on my flat chest in red  
below girlish curls and mannish chin.

You can't see my eyes.  
You've never seen them.

*Laura Cronk*  
174

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<sup>174</sup> [Laura Cronk](#), "[Thirst](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [Ghost Hour](#), [Persea Books](#)

Dear Utah

State in which I have lived longer  
than any other, state of my discontent.  
Horace said *skies change*,  
*souls don't*, although like most,  
I blame anything but myself.  
You are the place where I moved for work  
and the place I've complained about  
for one-third of my life,  
the locus I'm trapped in—  
an aging otter in an arid zoo.  
You are my theremin—vibrations  
and tremors I feel without touch.  
Sometimes a fly-over sense  
of being left alone, even though  
the bank teller calls me by my first name.  
We Utahns wear jeans to the symphony  
and use family as an excuse  
for not showing up. We drive streets wider  
than highways while the “blessed”  
call the shots, where one in five  
carry a gun. I roll my eyes at special  
rings and garments that mark  
me as having no ward. You are the state  
I must explain: watery beer  
or restaurants close to schools  
without liquor. You are also the state  
where I'm never lost: your over-the-top  
mountains breathlessly close—  
craggy grey rock brown-hilled in summer,  
whiter than my teeth in winter, green in May  
before drought—always tell me where and when  
I am. Along with the copper mine one can  
see from space, the salt lake too shallow  
to swim, the townhouses jammed  
into crevices of valley like trilobites  
procreating frantically in a tidepool,  
while humans are edged by wilderness  
where elk, coyotes, moose, and mountain lions—  
and no mosquitos! no mold!—roam.  
O Utah, you're a kinky rectangle and I'm a pear  
wasted on a December tree.  
We're both queer as cupcakes except you  
pretend you're white bread.

Natasha Sajé  
175

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<sup>175</sup> [Natasha Sajé](#), “[Dear Utah](#),” [Painted Bride Quarterly](#), collected in [Special Delivery](#), [Diode Editions](#)

## Against Detroit

Let's move to Detroit she said,  
her leg overtop of mine  
in the bar.

•

She said, *Use your phone*  
*as a flashlight*, the darkness turning  
purple beneath her hand.

•

Dark is the most common adjective  
found in poems. The second  
is silent.

•

Nothing is completely  
dark or absolutely  
silent.

•

The more boring a piece of art is  
the easier it is to explain it;  
hence also to praise it.

•

I've never been to Detroit  
but it sounds boring because  
everyone loves it so much.

•

I want to read  
a book of selected poems  
that contains only one poem.

•

By reading that poem aloud  
with a particular intonation. the reader unlocks  
another poem. And so on.

•

The best part of an orgasm  
is that afterwards, I don't feel  
like having another one.

•

Producing art doesn't seem to  
exhaust anyone. What exhausts them  
is talking about producing it.

•

Whenever I told you  
I was busy  
I was masturbating.

•

It was obnoxious when Boulez said  
the solution to opera  
was to bomb the opera houses.

•

Feldman also did certain things  
to get a rise out of an audience.  
Music wasn't one of them.

•

The sharpest turn I can think of  
in a contemporary poem is in  
Boland's "Atlantis."

•

Someone should define  
where a turn becomes  
a leap.

•

If you've read the book,  
no matter how you felt about it,  
it's one of your influences.

•

We fell asleep beneath  
the stuffed goose and woke  
beneath the stuffed goose.

•

Feldman had four wives,  
three mistresses,  
and no children.

•

I once made a list of everyone  
I'd slept with and realized later  
I'd forgotten about someone.

•

Lying to your therapist  
is dumb and a waste of money,  
but I do it anyway.

•

Scientists estimate you  
can only stay in love  
for eighteen months.

•

They should also specify:  
with the same person,  
consecutively.

•

In interviews, Feldman hardly  
ever mentions love  
or romance.

•

In *Distant Star*, the armless  
man turns the pages  
of the book with his tongue.

•

She asked me if  
I still loved her like crazy,  
or just regular.

•

Music's tragedy,  
Feldman said, is that it begins  
with perfection.

*P. Scott Cunningham*  
176

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<sup>176</sup> [P. Scott Cunningham](#), "[Against Detroit](#)," *Maggy*, collected in [Ya Te Veo](#), [The University of Arkansas Press](#)

## Off

Take that hair out of your mouth, paint it, shave your legs, look at boys all forlorn, take their last names in a notebook of curlicue move along the hallways of school with any sway you can muster, better yet, get face from the TV.

I forgot I wanted to be tiny and grew ten feet tall.

It was a mistake to forget, for I was left out of games I wanted like courtship and pageantry.

My mother reassured me only time, and sent me into the woods where dusk happened.

I became a small colony in the world upon request, a gauzy window into coy. I was hooded and set loose with my colored face, so that someone might say

uncharted and fresh. What I wanted: a way from the careworn. My stories were tattered rosary beads under my oily thumb. I could barely fall in without falling out. I could barely fall.

*Carmen Gimenez Smith*

177

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<sup>177</sup> [Carmen Gimenez Smith](#), "Off," collected in [Goodbye, Flicker](#), [University of Massachusetts Press](#)

## Democracy

When you're cold—November, the streets icy and everyone you pass homeless, Goodwill coats and Hefty bags torn up to make ponchos—someone is always at the pay phone, hunched over the receiver

spewing winter's germs, swollen lipped, face chapped, making the last tired connection of the day. You keep walking to keep the cold at bay, too cold to wait for the bus, too depressing the thought

of entering that blue light, the chilled eyes watching you decide which seat to take: the man with one leg, his crutches bumping the smudged window glass, the woman with her purse clutched

to her breasts like a dead child, the boy, pimpled, morose, his head shorn, a swastika carved into the stubble, staring you down. So you walk into the cold you know: the wind, indifferent blade,

familiar, the gold leaves heaped along the gutters. You have a home, a house with gas heat, a toilet that flushes. You have a credit card, cash. You could take a taxi if one would show up.

You can feel it now: why people become Republicans: *Get that dog off the street. Remove that spit and graffiti. Arrest those people huddled on the steps of the church.* If it weren't for them you could believe in god,

in freedom, the bus would appear and open its doors, the driver dressed in his tan uniform, pants legs creased, dapper hat: *Hello Miss, watch your step now.* But you're not a Republican. You're only tired, hungry,

you want out of the cold. So you give up, walk back, step into line behind the grubby vet who hides a bag of wine under his pea coat, holds out his grimy 85 cents, takes each step slow as he pleases, releases his coins

into the box and waits as they chink down the chute, stakes out a seat in the back and eases his body into the stained vinyl to dream as the chips of shrapnel in his knee warm up and his good leg

flops into the aisle. And you'll doze off, too, in a while, next to the girl who can't sit still, who listens to her Walkman and taps her boots to a rhythm you can't hear, but you can see it—when she bops

her head and her hands do a jive in the air—you can feel it as the bus rolls on, stopping at each red light in a long wheeze, jerking and idling, rumbling up and lurching off again.

Dorianne Laux  
178

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<sup>178</sup> [Dorianne Laux](#), "[Democracy](#)," collected in [Facts About the Moon](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## Teamwork Should Come from the Soul

They were projecting a hologram onto my snowsuit  
A hologram of nature A snowsuit of white  
Nature was not moving but I was moving and that  
was most of the plot We got good ratings  
They were going to release nature in Los Angeles  
Houston and Maine but I was never going to be released  
anywhere They were going to give me snacks and  
send me into the tundra and evaluate how long  
I survived it was our greatest collaboration  
I thought Only they were the ones with ideas and  
I contributed two things My body and the suggestion

*Heather Christle*  
179

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179 [Heather Christle](#), "[Teamwork Should Come from the Soul](#)," *The Believer*, collected in [What Is Amazing](#), [Wesleyan University Press](#)

## California

We often ate late by flameless  
candles and took turns choosing  
how best to be disposed of.  
I want to be buried. I want everyone  
to be buried. I realize there's scarcely  
a spare acre left in the ground, but I just  
can't do without the indecorous  
transit from parlor to plot.  
I need the array of daytime headlights  
jolting the arid access road,  
the only remembrance that matters.  
Don't make a speech.

For years I would wonder whether  
the man who attacked me—  
in his memory, did the event of it  
persist as a dull sort of flash? Then  
he died and became himself  
just a flash in the mind of the world.  
Now I wonder—is he anywhere?  
I don't believe in Hell and also I don't  
believe in nothing, so that leaves only  
Heaven. I have a couple  
questions. It is my understanding  
that the weather in Heaven

has only a single setting,  
which is PLEASANT. I haven't  
spent real time in California, but friends  
of mine who've moved there  
say it's challenging, absent the changing  
of the seasons, to remember when things  
took place. With reference to always  
the lodgepole pine and the low-bent  
needlegrass, you get confused.  
Dates and sequences, even the people  
involved. You can almost imagine  
the whole thing was somebody else.

*Natalie Shapero*  
180

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180 [Natalie Shapero](#), "California," [Brick](#), collected in [Popular Longing](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Introduction to Poetry

Professor Nordhaus assigned me  
Galway Kinnell's "The Hen Flower," section 2  
of *The Book of Nightmares*, instead of section 3,  
"The Shoes of Wandering."

Who wouldn't rather go with Galway  
to The Salvation Army to try on "these shoes strangers  
have died from"? But instead, I got the hens,  
unable to understand the ax or the eggs,  
and me, not getting why it was the hen  
who helped Galway know how little he knew,  
how we sleep on the feathers  
of hens, how these feathers are all that lie  
between us and darkness.

How hard it must have been to write  
"Listen, Kinnell," and then to stop writing and listen  
to the hens in their sawdust beds.

How hard it was to read and then go back  
to my room in Grace's house where she let me stay  
for free while I went to school  
so I could learn again and again that everything  
dies, even the poem, even Galway  
who died this week and brought me back  
to that classroom where I sat behind  
a dark-haired girl named Mona.

She only spoke once in class, the day we discussed  
a poem called "Breasts." I learned then that she wasn't  
shy, she just didn't care much for shoes  
or hens, but breasts she liked, she kept almost  
cupping her own under her sweater as she talked  
about the poem until I thought she was going  
to actually show them. Which is where I think  
the poem was going.

*Laura Read*

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<sup>181</sup> [Laura Read](#), "[Introduction to Poetry](#)," collected in [Dresses from the Old Country](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## The Female of the Species

They leave the country with gasping babies and suitcases  
full of spices and cassettes. In airports,

they line themselves up like wine bottles.  
The new city twinkles beneath an onion moon,

Birds mistake the pebbles of glass on the  
black asphalt for bread crumbs.



If I drink, I tell stories about the women I know.  
They break dinner plates. They marry impulsively.

When I was a child I watched my aunt throw a halo  
of spaghetti at my mother. Now I'm older than they were.



In an old-new year, my cousin shouts *ana bint Beirut*  
at the sleeping houses. She clatters up the stairs.

I never remember to tell her anything. Not the dream  
where I can't yell loud enough for her to stop running.

And the train comes. And the *amar* layers the stones  
like lichen. How the best night of my life was the one

she danced with me in Paris, sharing a hostel bed,  
and how sometimes you need one knife to carve another.



It's raining in two cities at once. The Vendôme plaza  
fills with water and the dream, the fountain, the moon

explodes open, so that Layal, Beirut's last daughter  
can walk through the exit wound.

Hala Alyan  
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<sup>182</sup> [Hala Alyan](#), "[The Female of the Species](#)," collected in [The Twenty-Ninth Year](#), [Mariner Books](#)

## Comfort of the Resurrection

One day everything that's over or dead  
will come back, oil painting & God,  
chivalry & the kings (even the mad  
old rotters, why not, while the heads  
of the plotters are removed  
from their iron spikes & carefully glued  
on again)—why not believe in the miracle—plaid  
has already come back so why not the starved  
& flooded corpses, why not fresh bread  
from charred toast, aren't the grubbers in the cupboard  
constantly churning up from the charnel the old  
ingredients, holy seed, holy blood,  
nothing is ever destroyed,  
but tell that to Marianna whose child  
lived for three days brainless & blind  
close by cheap factories on the filthy Rio Grande,  
tell it to all the ruined & annulled  
residents of the earth, everything  
& everyone will be restored  
& immortal diamonds will soon be yours.

*Kim Addonizio*  
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<sup>183</sup> [Kim Addonizio](#), "[Comfort of the Resurrection](#)," [James Dickey Review](#), collected in [Now We're Getting Somewhere](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## Lass / Let

*Lass*, which could mean many different things in English: sweetheart, young girl, a feminine darling. In German, it only means to “let” something happen...

The line that has carried me through my nights, companioned or no, my lyrical creation myth, begins as an imperative in both languages. It supposes obedience, wants to instruct. Like a master, this word heralds into the room with agency, with an agenda. Rilke wrote, “God talks to us before he makes each one of us”—what tameness brought him there?

Gott spricht mit jedem von uns ehe er in macht—

Rilke wrote *The Book of Hours* in Russia, where he was startled by God's presence. Like Nietzsche before him, Rilke thought God to be pantheistic, all-encompassing.

Marina Tsvetaeva said of Rilke that he was pure; poetry incarnate; that he was the only clean, and cleansing, soul among war-destroyed Europe, because his poetry refused to acknowledge that terror.

My mother let me happen to her. She let prison happen to her, simply because she believed in Women's Rights and Afghanistan as a sovereign state. She went to prison with her little sister, and she emerged. She was, I can say now, a political prisoner. She let it happen to her; then she decided to leave her family behind, move on for love, for family, for me.

This sacrifice let her become monstrous. She let monstrosity happen to her, then offered it back to me. When I ask, “God, who am I?” am I not just asking, *Mother who are you?*

Let me rephrase this—are there any mothers that aren't cruel, perverse, unbelievable?

Rilke's mother, to this day, is called “perverse” and “unbelievable” by many male critics. She is ostracized, her own monster. She was a woman, she had her tics. She had opinions.

Rilke, who writes as neither man nor woman, is influenced mostly by God. Rilke loves God endlessly *und* is not ashamed of it. Brecht called his relationship to God “gay.” I like to believe Rilke wouldn't have cared, would have said: “Let me be gay with God, then.”

As Ulrich Braer puts it, Rilke's God wasn't a fascist or heterosexist; he simply was, encompassing both the finite feelings of physical intimacy and his *Draufensein*, his being-outside.

The transitive verb *let* supposes danger; it is aware of the other, like paranoia. It is influenced by the other, only exists in relation. Let is only summoned when we want to be done away with: let me do this.

Meaning: give me permission. Let this happen to you. Let it go.

Meaning: I give you the permission to abandon it. *Let me go outside!*

Let me be

everything that happens to you.

*Aria Aber*  
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<sup>184</sup> [Aria Aber](#), "[Lass / Let](#)," collected in [Hard Damage](#), [University of Nebraska Press](#)

[I have slept in many places, for years on mattresses that entered]

I have slept in many places, for years on mattresses that entered my life via nothing but luck, as a child on wet sheets, I could not contain myself, as a teen on the bed where my father ate his last pomegranate, among crickets and chicken bones in ditches, in the bare grass on the lavish grounds of a crumbling castle, in a flapping German circus tent, in a lean-to, my head on the belly of a sick calf, in a terrible darkness where a shrew tried to stay afloat in a bucket of well water, in a blue belfry, on a pink couch being eaten from the inside by field mice, on bare floorboards by TV light with Mikel on Locust Place, on an amber throne of cockroach casings, on a carpet of needles from a cemetery pine, in a clubhouse circled by crab-apple trees with high-school boys who are now members of a megachurch, in a hotel bathtub in St. Augustine after a sip from the Fountain of Youth, cold on a cliff's edge, passed out cold on train tracks, in a hospital bed holding my lamb like an army of lilacs.

*Diane Seuss*  
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<sup>185</sup> [Diane Seuss, "\[I have slept in many places, for years on mattresses that entered\]," \*The New Yorker\*](#)

## Seeing Ex-Boyfriends

Sometimes you see the young man you knew  
inside the skin of this deflated one,

punk in pleats, bekhakied skater,  
as if he has been drugged and eaten

by a mid-level manager not out of hunger  
but rather boredom.

Sometimes, you look good, never better.  
Mostly you do not.

Once, it is in traffic, you singing along  
to Salt-N-Pepa, he in a car far nicer

than the rusting truck in which he took  
your good bra as a trophy, hanging it

from the antenna, donuting the Kmart parking lot  
the night you learned smoking was a good way

to kill time between disasters. Sometimes,  
it is at a party you did not want to go to,

hair unwashed, skirt unpressed, crust of spit-up on your neck,  
so that when you see him, though he is fatter and fading,

you think of why you stayed those extra months,  
the gentleness with which he parted you,

and your full breasts let down their milk.

*Erin Adair-Hodges*  
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<sup>186</sup> [Erin Adair-Hodges, "Seeing Ex-Boyfriends," \*Yes Poetry\*, collected in \*Let's All Die Happy\*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Bird's-Eye View

Earnest thinks shrimp do not have legs  
and I am holding folders with kittens on them. "I'm a poet,"  
I say, "I like poetry."

INT. A MOVING VEHICLE

His lunch in a paper bag,  
his lunch on the floor beside his feet,  
the apple on top of the peanut butter sandwich,  
the sandwich being crushed—see how funny it is? That sandwich is  
absolutely crushed.

This is an experiment: a pair of cross-tracked lovers.  
The shingles on the houses glisten in rain or shine.  
On the street, people furl and unfurl their umbrellas.  
It is raining, and as it rains, the raindrops turn round the wheels of trucks  
and rise as mist.

I'm dabbling in desolation, I'm dabbling in debilitation.  
A pair of cross-tracked lovers—and honestly—  
who comes up with this?  
He is going to stick his hand down my shirt when I see the plastic trash bag  
in the road in front of us, flapping in the wind and rain, a bruised eyelid  
and have to swerve.

I have been driving for a long time and haven't hit anyone yet, but, *baby—  
that's dangerous.*

I'm having trouble feeling anything, and he says, "You don't seem to feel  
pain, Eleanor.

You're numb and cold like some sort of lower, lower form of life."  
The shadows from the dumpsters fan out and slide down the hillside  
and the little pebbles that make up the hillside stay  
in their places—remain motionless—miles and miles  
of hearts of stone.

The tarantulas on the roadway and all the little animals in the forest  
freeze in the headlights—  
turn to stone.

I drive over the shadows on the highway.  
I'm terrible—don't forget that—I'm evil and was born it,  
but, Earnest, you do not think  
shrimp have legs.

This is an experiment to see if I can be kind—to see if I can lie—  
and I like words too much. I know all women do,  
but I'm not going to lie. I am a lower, lower form of life.

EXT. RESORT PARKING LOT

The shingles on the cabins glisten in rain or shine.  
This is the parking lot. This is our stop. And I get out  
    to have a cigarette. One car pulls from its parking spot  
    in the fading light; the car in front eclipses one headlight.  
It seems like an accident that we are here together. Perhaps it is  
    an accident that we are here at all. Already, men are trying to help.  
I know I won't be able to carry anything—  
    not my suitcase, not my remembered pain, not even this thought.  
I will be given a key. I will walk to a threshold that I will cross,  
then I'll be naked. They call this vacation.  
They call it recreation. I will not remember what  
    the weather was, but before I give it up,  
I point my umbrella outward and to the side and collapse  
    a single tooth. The silver ribs shut the black skin quickly. Like an eye.

*Eleanor Boudreau*  
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<sup>187</sup> [Eleanor Boudreau, "Bird's-Eye View," \*The McNeese Review\*, collected in \*Earnest. Earnest?.\* University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

In Response to My Mother When She Says Hearing Me Read My Writing's like Hearing God

In my world God is a crystalline superstructure, God  
is a molecular bond. God is the space, Mother,  
between Fibonacci's one and one. God is not my

word for good days—it's yours, and so "God"  
really makes no appearance. Exiled from all my  
first drafts, my rationales: Mother,

I wasn't sure how to tell you. And the truth is, Mother,  
that all those tiny prayers I whispered up to God  
were just the grotesque stories of a sleepless child, my

Sunday teachings warped to torture—Mother,  
Ruth and Athalia fought to the death for God's  
favor in my dreams, and neither won. When my

Sunday school teacher—Paul—went to jail for molesting my  
peers, when those five men in four years forgot all that their mothers  
never taught them—in an alley, in a hallway, in a field out toward God

knows where, right there in my bedroom, right there—tell me, why does God  
let policemen fuck—yes, I say fuck now, Mother—  
those in custody? Mother, it is legal in 32 states, and my God,

South Carolina is one of them. No, make no mistake: when I speak, my  
words are mine. You can call it bitterness, vanity, but it is only proof of my  
ability to care for myself—because when you were grieving, Mother,

the type of pearl-clad woman I would never be, I tended  
blotched, cancerous skin, a three-centimeter mass in my chest: God,  
what of that? What of what I have become? I had all the God

you'd given me, and I've sat in fourteen hospital chapels, God  
still a no-show. God is a no-show. God, as you call him, saw my  
MRIs, blood counts, and said this, give her this, too, but why, God,

do I feel that I should give thanks, stage communion with my  
every effort—I can't write around the rhythms, the mother  
tongue of the place I ran from. It's just language—Mother,

this is where we meet. How could you hear me and not remember a mother's  
covenant: I was born, then wouldn't breathe for weeks. God heard and God  
produced a debt: firstborn's life against all odds. I am grateful, I'm grateful, Mother,

it is just—they say the body remembers, and that must explain it. My  
body must remember how to fight, pluck must linger in the blood, haunt my  
white counts. Yes, it must be the numbers. It has to be in the numbers. God

cannot be remission, the clear scan, a bell's clang after my  
last treatment. God cannot be needle, drip bag, R-CHOP,  
God cannot be the clot I throw, the fourteen God-forsaken

calls I almost made from the waiting room, wanting  
to tell you, Mother, this—which I will not read to you—  
I am sick again, and I am sorry. Mother,

I just wasn't sure how to say it.

*Victoria C. Flanagan*  
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<sup>188</sup> [Victoria C. Flanagan, "In Response to My Mother When She Says Hearing Me Read My Writing's like Hearing God," \*Palette Poetry\*](#)

The Things-No-One-Knows Blues

after Wanda Coleman

I filed for bankruptcy in the borough of luxury.  
I suspect it's time to eat my poetry.  
My favorite turtleneck sweater, the green,  
50% rayon, 5% cotton (rest unknown) one,

shrank in a tub of hot  
bath water. A prisoner bit  
a chunk out of my step-daddy's smile.  
My mamma filled

her cancer with silicone  
& pity. My wife dwells in  
a house of critics. I'm younger than  
sugar, but older than

*NutraSweet* because I had a birthday in  
New Orleans.  
I suffer various degrees  
of wistfulness.

Honey,  
I guess it's time I eat my poetry.  
Cranked to ten my *Walkman* screams  
static. I believe B.B. fingered

Lucille like the back of a pretty woman's knee,  
but no one seems to agree.  
Need pecks at the latch  
of my *Wal-Mart* wristwatch.

The lines on my palms slope like portable ex  
& why graphs. Baby, I suffer various degrees of wistfulness.  
I suspect my penis will  
be fed to a swimming Gila

monster. Occasionally Death  
calls me collect.

Terrance Hayes  
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<sup>189</sup> [Terrance Hayes](#), "[The Things-No-One-Knows Blues](#)," collected in [Hip Logic](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## Self-portrait as Autopsy

I smell the way all dead things smell.  
I am a fish on the silver table,  
I am ineffectual and erotic as Ophelia  
and yes beyond help. He needs a saw  
to rip the skullcap my mother knitted  
from her femur, her fibula,  
the extra rib she deep-throated and stole  
from my father. There are sequins  
under my eyelids. He calls them *petechiae*.  
He says: *strangulation*, and the students  
take note like those old computers the size  
of whole rooms. *This does not mean murder*.  
I have *livor mortis*. My blood is  
10th birthday jelly pots under my skin,  
my buttocks are heathered moors.  
*This means she died on her back*.  
I am a prettiness of organs on the silver table,  
I am a wet glistening cornucopia.  
I am an arrangement of Christmas presents  
mutilated by fairy lights. Oh  
I am my grandmother's chintz tablecloth,  
the May Queen's garlands and garlands  
and gorgeous gorgeous gorgeous. The students  
take turns squeezing my lungs, trying on the rose gold  
rings of my trachea. He puts me back together  
apart from the ligaments he keeps for himself  
in jars of formaldehyde, lined up  
like nail polish, Hello Kitty red, for later.  
I am smiling like a beauty queen,  
the way all dead things smile.

Ellora Sutton  
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<sup>190</sup> [Ellora Sutton, "Self-portrait as Autopsy," \*The Poetry Review\*](#)

## The Pact

Mother, I have destroyed you. Forgive me as I am destroyed. The submarine of you, mother, has, underwater, shipped me off, has fired on me, is nuclear. Mother, the gold tooth of me is stolen, the frayed cord of me is broken, the scored record of me is frozen, the scratched recording of me is full. Fire on my self pulled from a pile of the wreckage, fire on my plumage-self planned in advance. And decorated for the homecoming and sheltered by the colors and the blending in with ending and the touch of a Cyclops to the backs of wool. Clinging to the belly of the sheep, I come home. Mother, my blood is the blood sum of you and my father. I have no choice. I need your rules. And now the tides come in and, like driftwood, I drift, and like summits I rest and like the Eucharist I am blessed, and like the lost reflection I am lit from below by what appears to be light. I say my name and it ignites. I say my name and it tires like a rower on a stolen ship or lags like a haggard sail. I lost my veil, I lost my bed, I lost what I thought had been said to you to make you understand. You, the shape eating waterfowl with bare hands. Mother, your grand chandelier of lies has so many eyes it sees like a spider or a fly in every direction; it decides, goes for miles. What opens before you is my smile. Empty as a room. Empty as a foot. Empty as a ruse. Empty as a lung. Empty as a tongue that has not said. Empty as a vein that has not bled. What am I, mother, but the undead walking the way you want me to walk, the way you want me to talk, up from the grave at your command. The zombie I am, covered in soot. Soon I swoon and faint and fall. But that is not all. I am the spoon you cook. I am the food you concoct. I am the line you lost with the hook at the end, meant to sink into a mouth. My cheek is set, my wretch is good, I am not what wooed you. I am no good. This I know. I had to sew myself shut. For years, I was the rut in the good old road. Do not trust the old, do not trust the new, there is nothing to do and nothing can be done. The two were one, now they are two. I was born, I was new, then I spoke, I was no good, I was me, I had flaws countless and contagious as disease, not the least of which grew. I was me, I was mine, I was not yours. I could not be you. Mother, you took from me the drought and gave it meaning, you smacked the pout right off my feeling, you kept stars lit on the ceiling so you could navigate out from my room. It was noon when the sun set in you. I felt the earth cool. I felt the fires lit so those of us who survived could go on living. I felt the beasts arrive when night was confirmed. You killed us off. You felt you'd earned it, the right to make us into what fears and what crouches and what grows cold. I could not grow older. I could not mature. I was sure there was nothing

left. What I felt in the end was the blow of yours  
sent across the miles to find me where I lay spent  
and desert-like in the heat. Keep me here. I serve  
your needs. The edges of me, mother. I cannot be  
until you let me recover. I cannot run to the subset  
of another. You are too wise, you know what the constant light  
means, you know what grows where and how to twist it  
when the darkness meets it so that it can moss over and meld  
into a growth that will melt it down. You fungi plus silk,  
the lurch of me is trying to unlearn all the confusions of you.  
Mother, mother, quite contrary, how does your deadliness  
grow? With a tooth and a rack and a craw and a sack  
and all the daughters caught in their rows.

*Jennifer Militello*  
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<sup>191</sup> [Jennifer Militello, "The Pact," \*American Poetry Review\*, collected in \*The Pact\*, Tupelo Press](#)

## After Aftermath

Orphaned boys plus my mean calculations.  
Orphan boys plus desire equals their long  
bodies. How they sucked summer-long water  
off a garden hose from beside the trailers.  
Their mean mothers weary of them sharing  
rooms in mental hospitals: I want to meet  
them with flowers, thank them for offering  
up their sons to this, our glazed Plexi-glas  
world. What would we do if not for them.

If not for them, *how could I breathe*. How  
would I know what to do, if I did not have  
to care for them because they learned how  
to not care for themselves because of you.  
Orphan boys make mean men. Because of  
them, I feel mean. I make my calculations.  
Because I love them, am loving how they're  
dropping off the other end of their phones.  
They hung up on them. You hang up on me.

*I am tired of your ultimatums, Skunk Mom.*  
My eyes squeeze. I'm unhappy with you, Mom.  
You're not my mom, but I'm calling you Mom  
now that I'm his mom, Mom. Your son can't  
say what he thinks because you didn't teach  
him how to articulate himself, Mom. *Shhhh,*  
*your beautiful baby's asleep.* I'm a mom too.  
You left him alone in that room that night he  
heard you rucking on the sofa, Mom. Said he

saw a ghost. It shoed him from the doorway  
so he would not see you fussed up on a sofa.  
He was just a little kid, Mom. But I get it. Kids  
forget. I've got your kid in my bed now, Mom.  
It's inky in here, where you forget him, Mom.  
I love him as stars lick our faces with the nose  
wet cold of cat kisses. I had thought of men  
as flowers. I picked a few. Then I met your son,  
Mom. He's still weeping flowers to that belt's

swish in your basement. And isn't it on nights like this, Mother, the thought of killing yourself looks you head-on, beautiful in the face, velvety and faithful in its gaze as that of the violet iris? This is men, Mom. Your mistake was begetting one. Mine was letting him in. He's asleep now. *Shhhh, your son is safe.* What about you, Mom? What about me? We're only daughters. Who's become our father? Your son, Mom, your son.

*Cate Marvin*  
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<sup>192</sup> [Cate Marvin](#), "[After Aftermath](#)," [The Rumpus](#), collected in [Oracle](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## A Great Place to Raise Children

I hardly feel anything these days beyond the boredom that makes it seem only a promotion with a raise could give a thrill now. I mean there is no such thing as sky or I mean I don't know how to turn myself back on. I mean I drink as much as is reasonable and it does make things a little more rosy-fingered than they were when I woke up in this pale pink dress of a gray morning's wheatfield. Stillness, of course, has its Andrew Wyeth retrospectives to recommend it, but I'm in my J. M. W. Turner and the tornadic sky phase. I spent yesterday in the company of small children. Small children make my small daughter so happy. If I look at her sky I can be a little kite on the wind about it too, but then her very annoying buddy is in what his mother calls "a Band-Aid phase," where sometimes, despite how there is no injury and no blood, he decides he needs a Band-Aid and wails in a way that wrecks the air down to the very molecules until someone runs out to the mini-van to raid the First-Aid kit and you better hope there are Snoopies on that unearthed Band-Aid or there will be no end. I tried to keep my refusal and disdain of this getting of Band-Aids to myself, because I know it only seems I can parse the difference between loving kindness and a spoiled brat. Can you believe the whole point of orgasms is this? From the nervous thrill of a kegger on East Campus to the feathery glitter of this pair of new earrings, it's all for the creation of a snot-faced wailing four-year-old in the ball pit at Going Bonkers? When I have a great orgasm the sky turns into Turner's portrait of Parliament on fire. When I just have an orgasm, I remember he chose the brightest paints he could find and didn't care that they start to fade the moment you brush them on. Dealers and critics complained, but he wasn't concerned about museums a hundred years out, so now you must try to imagine the riot of storm through the almost invisible serenity of pastels under glass. I don't know what the point is. Perhaps the point is drunk? Or high? Or—otherwise? Ruskin was the nineteenth century art critic who loved how Turner blew up the blue sky. To paraphrase his masterpiece, *Modern Painters*, Vol. 1: If you must prefer to savor a blue sky, at least notice there is no monochrome of blue; the painters lie to you. Ruskin hates lies. He hates the lie of order, the lie of geometry, the lie of serenity. Does the great Turner make you feel a chaos the chest of your eye can't contain?

Well, you wouldn't do well to stare directly into the sun  
either. Well, you know there is an endless sea of sugarcane  
fields on the empire's other horizon. Well, you know  
there are fires burning a constellation of islands across  
that long night of the Atlantic. A still life is just a portrait  
of things a rich man owns coupled up with a lie of meaning.  
All those fine landscapes foregrounded with English  
gardens and a well-dressed couple on a park bench  
are commissioned portraits too of the land the commissioner  
calls his own. How is it, Turner asks with each crimson  
stroke, that we even abide such pictures, much less pay  
to hang them on a wall and gaze in satisfaction at how we own  
them? We'd have to have no idea what a feeling was to take  
such pleasure. We'd have to think we exist for the sake  
of something else altogether. Well, I have a feeling, I have  
an idea, I know a pleasure. Fuck the sky, I say. Burn it down.

*Kathryn Nuernberger*

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<sup>193</sup> [Kathryn Nuernberger, "A Great Place to Raise Children," \*Tongue\*, collected in \*Rue\*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Public Health Response to a Rabid Kitten—Four States, 2007

Come here, throw pillow.  
Come here, tawny flame wobbling  
on the side of the road.

White coats come out of the building  
like kleenex after kleenex  
pulled from the tall box

by an invisible hand  
and they are making the sun hurt  
even more. Come here, little electron,

can't you hear the ice hissing at you?  
It is the year for this kind of bend,  
the things that the tumbling coats want

is taken away from them  
and given to some other fear-goosed thing  
and said fear-goosed thing

does not have the right hands.  
Come here, unhappy bean, I know  
you think you are a stone

with an itch inside. I promise you  
this is only a blanket.

*Marc McKee*  
194

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<sup>194</sup> [Marc McKee, "Public Health Response to a Rabid Kitten—Four States, 2007,"](#) *Anti-*, collected in [Meta Meta Make-Belief](#), Black Lawrence Press

Don't Be Bitter, Baby!

"Each one of my breasts," she cried, "is 3 lbs  
of pure gold  
    & if you don't believe me, tough!"

She thinks the secret to possessing  
beauty is to be nauseously overwrought about everything

& I hate to admit, occasionally she's right:

sometimes the only way to solve my hunger is to scream  
*I have a vast lust for beef!* as I drive through  
    McDonald's at 3 a.m.

& sometimes wearing a boa to the supermarket  
is the only cure for my sorrow.

She tells me I glitter  
& brags that the guy she took home last night  
    looked like George Clooney & God.

The world isn't ugly, she tells me, if you let it borrow your stilettos.  
She giggles, "Don't be bitter.  
    Eat lipstick. Sob onto your mirror."

& I do—

each tear ballooning the reflection of my grievances  
falling red from my hypocritical mouth.

*Katie Condon*  
195

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<sup>195</sup> [Katie Condon](#), "[Don't Be Bitter, Baby!](#)," [Blunderbuss](#), collected in [Praying Naked](#), [Ohio State University Press](#)

## The Lone Palm

*for Kevin Killian, 1952 - 2019*

The chatter,  
a little  
matter.  
The bas-relief,  
shallow grief.  
Décor, 1930s, or  
is it 1983:

neon signs;  
a deco dish  
of golden fish;  
real fronds  
and bottle  
blondes  
lit by George Platt Lynes...

My friend Kevin  
tells a story.  
It was 1982;  
he stepped into  
the Lone Palm.  
A bartender,  
tall and all  
alone,

eager  
to be of service:  
a nervous  
nod, some code.  
meager  
speech—  
doors locked,

the bar  
a makeshift  
bed—  
it was efficient,  
half an hour  
at most,  
and almost  
tender.

Time for the shift.  
“What’re you doing

next Saturday?  
Come by then..."  
A week passed;  
Kevin returned.  
"Where's so-and-so,"  
he asked,

starting  
a description.  
"He took a turn  
last week and died,"  
said the latest  
bartender, slow  
to answer.  
"The gay cancer."

Sometimes,  
that's how  
it worked—  
before the test.  
I'm out of luck,  
thought Kevin.  
We all were...

—It's sentimental,  
some say,  
to allude  
to the plague.  
The indignities  
of the Eighties  
and Nineties,  
an urn

on the mantel.  
Keep it vague  
because  
*it's over...*  
It's never  
over.  
If it were,  
we would all

be at the Lone Palm,  
white  
tablecloths,  
chrome shaker  
and a flask:  
no need to ask.

Mark has his vision,  
James scoffs

at the new  
religion,  
unmarred  
by a purple  
lesion—  
and right  
after last call,  
we stumble/fall

to 22nd and Guerrero,  
kiss each other  
on the corner:  
fading together,  
no one scared.  
The night  
simplified.  
*Good night.*

*Good night.*

*Randall Mann*  
196

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<sup>196</sup> [Randall Mann](#), "[The Lone Palm](#)," *Asian American Poetry Review*, collected in [A Better Life](#), [Persea Books](#)

## What We Remember

The holy roller girl who writhed with the fever of Jesus on Sunday while her pastor daddy twirled snakes like lariats over the heads of sinners crying to be cleansed. Who bused in from out-county on Monday, undressed for gym in a mop closet. Who stuffed a transistor radio down her pants while her pastor daddy handed out salvation in front of Sears. Who believed she'd ascended to heaven whenever Diana Ross sang in her ears, all gauze and sequins, whenever Smoky *baby baby*-ed her down rows of corn where she danced with her tall green partners. The nights her father came to sanctify her. The day she collapsed in gym class and sang to Jesus in her gospel tongue, an arpeggio of gibberish, all amen and hell yes. How she came back to us a ghost girl, rinsed of all but the hard, high notes.

*Sarah Freligh*  
197

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<sup>197</sup> [Sarah Freligh, "What We Remember," \*Milk Candy Review\*, collected in \*We\*, Small Harbor Publishing](#)

## Monticello

My grandfather would give me coins  
fished from stained denim pockets  
when I pestered him enough, or looked glum  
to the point of pity. Go buy some comic books,  
he instructed, but I feared  
he'd one day ask for cigarettes  
or wine or one of the skin mags  
that were sold beside *Richie Rich* and *Iron Man*,  
and to my ten years were  
terrifying. He'd quiz me:  
what did *anno domini* mean?  
What did *VJ Day* stand for?  
What was on the backs of nickels  
(Jefferson's Monticello,  
little hill in Italian,  
then not much more than architectural trivia)?  
Now I see each morning  
walking in to work  
its white roof throwing off sunlight.  
When he died last year,  
unable to speak following two strokes,  
I didn't attend his funeral  
ten hours away. I imagined  
the day was somber,  
lustrous with rain,  
appropriately mournful.  
A few wept and made romantic noise.  
I imagined I could tell him  
how close I live  
to Monticello, though this  
proximity has led me to visit just once,  
in autumn, as leaves  
fall away and the air turns to cool rain.  
I didn't stay long:  
I imagined the damage  
my wheelchair  
would cause if I spasmed,  
if my feet crashed  
through the double glass doors of the study,  
if I punched a hole  
in the wall's thick plaster.  
I left and it was dark  
outside and below us  
glowing ribbons wound into town.  
That night, the stars,  
this poem like apology.

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<sup>198</sup> [Paul Guest, "Monticello,"](#) *Monticello in Mind: Fifty Contemporary Poems on Jefferson*, collected in [Because Everything is Terrible, Diode Editions](#)

from "13th Balloon"

Here in the spectral academy  
here in the home of the freaks  
I devote myself to something  
Candy Darling said

*I will not cease to be myself for foolish people*

Yes but Candy what  
if foolish people's who I *am*

As the windows in the city sweat  
Candy's ghost collects  
herself behind one of them  
I know it  
running her lines  
her voice a raft  
of white flowers floating  
in a bathroom sink

Each day we are invited to try  
suicide by zoo animals  
or by eating a handful of ghost peppers  
thus triggering a laugh track  
over footage of a rainforest being razed

Ruin feasts on us  
pausing between bites to baste  
us with our juices

As a stopgap against never praising  
ruin enough we might praise the alien  
We might  
praise blood  
We might praise the blood of the alien  
as it sizzles through the floor  
while we're sat safe in our seats  
in the theater of money

we might believe as the child  
in its dark room believes  
it cannot be seen  
that nothing could touch us here.

*Mark Bibbins*  
199

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<sup>199</sup> [Mark Bibbins, "13th Balloon \[Here in the spectral academy\]," \*T Magazine\*, collected in \*13th Balloon\*, Copper Canyon Press](#)

## In the Break Room

The mill holds us  
in its mouth,  
the graveyard shift  
and its floodlights.

There's a stillness between us  
as we eat our sandwiches  
and leftovers.

Back in town  
someone's daughter  
stays up all night  
eating her own hair.  
A woman on Third Street  
applies makeup to a corpse  
she's recently washed.  
A cop drifts over a fog line  
in his Crown Victoria.

Todd thinks the foreman's  
new girlfriend looks  
like a country singer,  
her hair shines  
like broken glass.  
She rests her hands  
on the animal of sleep  
and it leans against her leg.

In fifteen minutes  
she'll crawl up a ladder  
into a metal cage  
where hot sheets of plywood  
will shoot out one after another  
like a satanic card trick,  
and she'll guide them  
by the edge, in midair,  
and let them drop  
to the sorter...

until she closes her eyes  
just long enough  
to float upon the waters  
where sleeps winds  
through the cattails.

When a sheet of veneer  
will tear her face open  
a corpse's hands  
will be placed together,  
the cop will drive  
his cruiser into the river,  
which will soon fill  
with a daylight our curses  
may never reach.

*Michael McGriff*  
200

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<sup>200</sup> [Michael McGriff, "In the Break Room," \*The Missouri Review\*](#), collected in [Home Burial](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Portrait of a Release

It was my mother who picked me up  
from the mental hospital—but only to drop me off  
at Kit’s. Kit is the type of friend who will not only  
let you stay at her house after you’ve been in a mental hospital,  
no questions asked, but will give you her bed  
instead of the couch. The car ride was silent.  
My mother didn’t dare speak.  
I stared out the window, boiling and frozen.  
There was no radio and autumn was Jackson Pollocking  
all over our windshield.  
The ride from McLean Hospital to Kit’s doorstep  
was forty-five minutes of foliage and breath.  
I remember when she dropped me off at the curb,  
my backpack full of clothes, wondering  
how she could just drive off.  
As if a car, if you were a mother dropping off your child,  
should just stop working, dry of gas or brakes cut,  
forcing mothering to take effect.  
But I got out, said a one-syllable goodbye,  
and the car pulled away with my mother inside.

•

Four days is a long time in a mental hospital.  
How do you even fill one day in a mental hospital?  
Where do you go? Who do you talk to?  
When the pay phone rang and some sleepy body shouted for me,  
I asked if it was my parents, and if it was,  
I wouldn’t answer.  
The one time I did answer, my mother spoke  
like a garden hose full of holes, spouting everywhere,  
“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, it should have been different.”  
And the sad thing is, the garden hose was trying,  
it was actually elegant in its miserable mess,  
it was trying.  
But the thing about “I’m sorry”  
when you’re hearing it from a phone booth  
in a neon hallway of a mental hospital, is that it doesn’t really  
mow your lawn, it doesn’t really cut your steak, you know?

•

Four days of avoiding the girl who wanted to tell me  
why she didn’t really belong in this ward.  
Four days of collaging papier-mâché to a journal  
and banging a stupid tiny drum in “Music Therapy.”

Four days of knowing your parents are paying  
the hospital bill and wondering if they resent you.  
Four days of irreconcilable boredom,  
which gives way to awe at the glory of autumn  
outside your barred window.  
Four days of reading Rumi by yourself in your room.  
Four days of bathrooms without locks.  
Four days of nurses with minuscule paper cups  
of experimental doses.  
Four days in which "I'm sorry" is like a bird  
thrashing against your window.

•

Kit's house is a twenty-minute walk  
from Faulkner Hospital, where I'll be an Outpatient,  
which basically just means I don't sleep there.  
For a week and a half, for six hours a day, I am  
a body in a chair listening and talking  
with other bodies in chairs. I don't cry.  
Not for myself. At least, not here.  
But I do cry for others whose stories undo my sense  
of capital J Justice. In all their stories  
there is a common thread: someone didn't listen.  
Sometimes it is a brother, or a wife,  
sometimes it is a mother.

•

On my morning walks to the hospital  
I am shellacked in beauty. Red leaves falter  
like prayer flags on the branch. Yellow leaves grin  
their good yellow teeth. When I start to think of my family,  
my father stewing somewhere in evergreen sweatpants  
and a private, heavy rage, or my brother  
ignoring his feelings, moving like a bolt of brunette lightning  
through his days, or most vividly, my mother,  
guilt eating her heart like a silkworm on the vine,  
I practice a Cognitive Behavioral Exercise  
the Group Therapist taught us.  
It's simple and it works:  
notice the colors around you.  
In ROYGBIV order.  
This will reroute your brain  
away from the emotional center, where mother happens,  
toward the logical center, where math happens.

•

Red: leaves, stoplight,  
jacket on a woman down the path,  
red fleck of paint on my brown boots.  
Orange is how headlights look when they're turned off midday;  
where are these cars going? To work? To family?  
Orange is a tree shaking its arms like a bad dancer.  
Orange is the sign advertising a new TV show,  
one lost orange glove near the bus stop bench.  
Yellow, slutty tree,  
oh cerebellum, oh Lithium,  
do your job.  
Oh cortex, oh frontal lobe, throw me into a logic  
that doesn't make me think of family.  
Yellow nails, yellow-pale cloud  
in an otherwise blue sky.  
Green trees losing to autumn,  
green grass with signs: *Keep Off*.  
Green jacket on a man walking toward me.  
Blue sky. Blue sky. Blue jacket on me.  
Blue car. Blue building with white trim.  
Indigo, what is indigo anyway?  
Violet's moody sister. Purple, let's just say,  
and it's nowhere.  
A car, dark purple, that'll do.  
A passing woman's cold lips.  
The hospital is not purple. If it was,  
it wouldn't be a hospital. It wouldn't be  
a serious place. Purple is a flower color  
and color, all color, is something my mother loves.

Shira Erlichman  
201

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201 [Shira Erlichman](#), "[Portrait of a Release](#)," collected in [Odes to Lithium](#), [Alice James Books](#)

## Cocktail Hour at the Petting Zoo

I want to go to cocktail hour  
at the petting zoo

where the fainting goats blackout  
on fainting couches

and miniature sheep rest their haunches  
on pillows made of human hair—

I want to feed beer nuts and ambrosia  
salad to the parrot who plucks

feathers from her grey chest  
and sings “My Baby

Just Cares for Me,” punctuated  
by a busted smoker’s hack.

I’d buy her an Old Fashioned  
and listen to stories

about the woman who kept her locked  
inside a tapestry

covered cage, taking her out  
at night to teach her how

to sing, and I’d tell her about the man  
who’d slip postage stamps

of acid under my tongue while I slept,  
waking to our room

needled with fire, the roots  
of my teeth extinguished stars,

repeating the story until I realize  
I’m drunk and take one

for the road—not before stroking the muzzle  
of Clementine, the cow who lived

strapped to milk machines for years,  
surrendered one calf after the other,

and now likes to stay perfectly still

in her green velvet corner,  
nuzzling the flowered astroturf  
as if she has all the room she needs.

*Kendra DeColo*  
202

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<sup>202</sup> [Kendra DeColo, "Cocktail Hour at the Petting Zoo,"](#) collected in [My Dinner with Ron Jeremy, Third Man Books](#)

## Monument

Since I've spent  
this hour perfecting  
a controlled arc  
of spray paint to enclose  
the giant red "A"  
scrawled across  
the clapboard siding  
of someone's vacation  
home, I decide it's  
a good idea to run  
when the police  
appear in response  
to the rattan patio  
bonfire I've started  
with a blowtorch  
of hairspray  
and lighter stolen  
from my mother's  
purse; but even though  
I fold myself, creep vine  
flat along the banks  
of the Bristol River,  
I am caught, zip-tied  
and foot stuffed  
into the cubby-holed  
backseat of an idling  
Crown Vic, my wrists  
shredding more with  
each strained shout  
through the window  
at the chubby rookie  
left behind to watch me;  
even then I knew  
he was the boy picked last,  
yet secretly too sure  
of himself in a body  
growing faster than  
the small world  
it governs. He was  
like the dinosaur  
sponges I bought  
at the market to ripen  
in kitchen bowls,  
until they capped  
their potential by  
sucking every

container dry. I swear,  
I can see that water  
on his cheeks  
as he pulls me from  
the car by my neck,  
getting bigger,  
and taller, and thicker  
in front of me, my  
compliant frame  
absorbing each swing  
of his nightstick,  
until finally I, too,  
start to take shape.

*Keith Kopka*  
203

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<sup>203</sup> [Keith Kopka, "Monument," \*Queen Mob's Teahouse\*, collected in \*Count Four\*, University of Tampa Press](#)

## Amorphism

There must be a song that birds use  
to describe a form of clairvoyance  
based on the motions  
of our human commutes,

or the family tree  
of a tree  
drawn in the shape of man  
recycling himself underground.

There must be an angler fish  
so deep in the squeeze  
of the ocean's core  
alighting its ancient leather face  
like a nightmare in the nightlight in the night.

I love the Komodo dragon sleeping in the zoo,  
his poison tongue locked in his jaw,  
his breath bluing the glass for a moment like smoke.

I love the Loch Ness Monster  
because I know she is a stick.

*Sarah Matthes*  
204

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<sup>204</sup> [Sarah Matthes, "Amorphism," \*jubilat\*](#)

## Undressing

I need help with the zipper on this skin  
suit. I can't reach the pull and all  
I want is to step out of it and drape it  
over a chair while I smoke a cigarette  
or light an orchard on fire. But it's just  
me here, and knocking on my neighbor's  
door to ask for a reason to stay in  
my body seems a bit forward. I mean,  
we haven't even exchanged cups  
of sugar yet, or had a blowout fight  
over who's been hogging the dryer.  
We've both lived in this building  
long enough to have raised a child  
together, if by raised you mean  
managed to keep it alive long enough  
to send it to school so someone else  
can have a go at it. But this is all  
beside the point. The point is I have  
an itch in the middle of my back,  
right where the zipper would end  
if I were wearing a strapless gown,  
which I'm not, but a girl can dream,  
right? A woman who once was a girl  
can dream she's still a girl, right?  
A sweet intoxicating thing, cherry  
run through with a plastic sword.  
But that skin doesn't fit me anymore.  
That skin was just on loan, anyway.  
That skin surely looks better  
on whoever is wearing it now.

*Suzanne Langlois*  
205

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<sup>205</sup> [Suzanne Langlois](#), "Undressing," collected in [Bright Glint Gone](#), [Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance](#)

## Passion Fish

*for Joe and Dorianne*

When we got there, Joe was expecting  
a deep red dining room, shadows flickering on the walls, the waitress  
with a husky voice showing just a little décolletage as she leaned in  
to take our order. Riffs of saxophone. A couple making out in the back corner.  
A sea bass mounted on the fireplace, its glistening scales and puckered lips.  
Codfish bladders covered in gold leaf, dangling from the light fixtures.

Instead, the place was plain as a train station.  
Painted a kelpy shade of grey, looked over by a somber hostess  
with a long face, and dark curly hair tied at the nape. I almost thought  
she might begin to cry as she led us down the narrow hall to our table.  
Or that maybe she'd been crying in the kitchen, already, wiping her tears  
on the creased cuffs of her starched shirt.

But oh, when it arrived—the fish! Flaky and soft,  
falling apart in our mouths. Arctic char, fresh wild salmon.  
Armando's came on a bed of mashed turnips. Dorianne's laid out  
on a sea of jewel-toned vegetables. "Try this," she said, offering us small,  
purple cubes of starch. Parsnips? Beets?

We never could tell. But still—the buttery flesh,  
a fat moon slung between the pines. "For me, this is as good as it gets,"  
said Dorianne, and we nodded in agreement as the waitress  
poured us more water from the endangered reservoirs of California,  
and we feasted on the sustainably harvested bounty of the Pacific,  
never mind the mercury quickening in our veins, the traces  
of radiation borrowed from Fukushima's sunken fires.

By then we were talking about the long poem,  
how you can tend it, bit-by-bit, keeping your nets in the water,  
allowing the accumulation of old griefs, your mother's pearl earrings,  
the paper cranes you kept in the closet for good luck, the crisp ten-dollar bill  
folded in the back of your wallet, tick of the fluorescent clock  
above your childhood bed, brush of fingertips against your neck,  
the stars' dusky breath.

And I wished the night would go on and on,  
a long poem drifting over the page, lines spilling out to the edge  
of evening and beyond, to this outcrop of the continent. And that  
all of us would live forever, so we could keep sitting down  
to plates of exquisite fish. And so Joe and Dorianne  
could keep talking about the line, how you've got to follow it,  
see where it goes, without imposing, without backing away.  
"It's *April is the cruelest month, breeding...*" said Dorianne,

lifting her glass to take another sip of Sierra run-off, the ice  
clinking time as she spoke. "Not, *April is the cruelest month.*"  
Only then,

I couldn't help thinking about how everything  
and everyone I love are slipping back into the sea, how voracious the abyss  
that holds our fingernails and soft, tender knees, the delicate  
bones of our feet.

The earth beneath us, indifferent, busy as it is,  
making and unmaking. Which, I suppose, is what makes April cruel.  
Because it's relentless, the way the world goes on, pushing out tulips  
and sparrows, with or without us.

And I don't want to back away from it  
with its polluted streams and sadness, and I don't want to grasp  
on with the tight fist of my heart.

I just want to let it all pass by, as if I were riding  
the North Equatorial Current, so in love with the ocean, each gorgeous  
surge, each pulsing saline rush, that I don't even care where I'm going,  
or what I leave behind. Only how sunlight filters through  
the dark water, flecks the waves with mica and silt.

*Danusha Laméris*  
206

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<sup>206</sup> [Danusha Laméris, "Passion Fish," \*American Poetry Review\*](#), collected in [Bonfire Opera](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Hue: From a Notebook

We went down the Perfume River by dragon boat  
as far as the pagoda of the three golden Buddhas.

Pray here. You can ask for happiness.  
We light joss sticks, send votives downriver in paper sacks,

then have trouble disembarking from the boat.  
Our bodies disembark, but our souls remain.

A thousand lanterns drift, a notebook opens in the dark  
to a page where moonlight makes a sound.

These soldiers are decades from war now:  
pewter-haired, steel-haired, a moon caught in plumeria.

We are like the clouds that pass and pass.  
What does it matter then if we are not the same as clouds?

There was then the whirl of stork wings, and bicycle chains ringing.  
It is still now the way the air is still just before the mine explodes.

Once we fired at each other. Now we pass silence back and forth.  
On the ten thousand graves, we lay chrysanthemum.

*Carolyn Forché*  
207

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<sup>207</sup> [Carolyn Forché](#), "[Hue: From a Notebook](#)," collected in [In the Lateness of the World](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Poem about Death Beginning with a Humblebrag and Ending with a Shower Beer

Today, for once, I did not think of Death. I avoided him like all men  
in public by pretending to read, by putting in  
my earbuds to drown out his *I still need you, babys* with Patsy Cline's  
*I go out walkin'*. I watched the unglued soles  
of his black Converse hightops pass in front of the bathroom stall  
into which I'd retreated when I needed to  
decompress from teaching. But I didn't say anything, only fished  
in my purse for a pink clonazepam  
that had spilled out into the bottom with all the pennies and single  
sticks of gum. *I have to take*  
*this*, I said when he later approached, and then I *helloed* into my phone  
although it hadn't rung. I tried to look busy  
all day. I answered emails I'd been putting off and I even remembered  
to say *thank you for your patience* instead of *sorry*  
*for my delay*. I invited students into my office to ask about their summer  
breaks, and I heard about a job  
petsitting four dogs, two cats, some Sea Monkeys, and a snake. I asked  
the student if she had to drop mice by their tails  
into the hot tank. They were brown and frozen in bags, with freezer burn  
on their noses. I remembered then  
that snakes smell with their tongues, remembered one flick against a glass  
enclosure. I remembered then what it was  
like to be kissed by Death—his tongue like an old, limp carrot left too long  
in the crisper drawer. Sometimes, I imagined  
sticking it into one of those old-fashioned pencil sharpeners mounted  
on the wall. The sizing guide, the little crank,  
the shavings coming out in coils, you know. Once, when we were  
together, Death forgot my birthday. I had  
to plan the party and smear the cake with buttercream myself, but Death took all  
the credit. He was often like that. *A man*

*of consequence*, some would say. He never laid a hand on me, but any time  
I told him he had hurt me he would say, *I don't*  
*know what you're talking about*. I began to think that maybe I was  
making it all up. *Maybe you are*, he said  
without moving his lips, and I began to worry he could talk to me  
telepathically. That seems like something  
Death could do, I reasoned. But maybe his voice in me was me too.  
It sounded funny after all, a little off, like Bob  
Dylan in the late 80s, his voice just starting to turn to wet concrete.  
Most of the time, I don't think  
about Death, except when he drunk-texts in the middle of the night  
or happens to run into me buying  
milk. Sometimes when we'd *make love*, as he liked to call it, I was too drunk  
to say *no*. Sometimes when I was under  
him, his sweat dripping off his brow and stinging into my eye, I  
would think about a woman and how she tasted  
after we walked around the city for hours, finding every excuse to delay  
returning to the hotel room we could  
barely admit we had for reasons we couldn't say aloud, even to one  
another, even though we both knew.  
Today was a small triumph. As I said, I didn't think of him at all. But I can't  
say he wasn't there. Isn't still. Here in the muscle  
after I've undressed. In the brown bottle at my lips, in my hand on my breast.  
And in the steam I inhale.

*Emilia Phillips*  
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<sup>208</sup> Emilia Phillips, "[Poem about Death Beginning with a Humblebrag and Ending with a Shower Beer](#)," *The Adroit Journal*,  
collected in [Embouchure](#), The University of Akron Press

## Ireland, To Bethlehem

The plane is packed and over sweaty heads,  
    rumpled hair, the movie glows in the transatlantic nighttime  
    murmur of priests and nuns and Riverdancers returning

home—a baby is cooed by an older mother, a boy feels  
    for his seat in the dark. I've read my books  
    already, 2 days traveling, the difficulties

technical. *I hate that money*, says the priest beside me,  
    and he orders another scotch, his third.  
    The Feast of the Epiphany tomorrow, he studies religious

journals for a message, writes in a notebook  
    impossibly small. *We are having problems*  
    *with sound*, the flight attendant announces,

*it is not your headset*, and so the oceans swell in silence,  
    bright blue tumbles across the screen mutely, foam  
    collapsing over a tiny nimble figure

but she darts through to a green glow,  
    sunshine through a veil of wave, her surfboard tense between  
    her feet and the world's largest ocean. Her ride

is long, impossibly long—her hips stay low, a friend  
    drops onto her wave and, together, they glide towards the shore  
    No music. Just water and that blue. I check the SkyMall catalogue

for something I might need and didn't know. There are  
    reasons I am flying over the ocean, reasons  
    I wish I were sure of. Someday I might say, *yes, I chose*

*him, and it wasn't wise*. Or maybe we'll be old and  
    surrounded by our own. The screen flashes;  
    the surf is wild, but the bright sky makes me whisper,

*Hawaii*, where nothing could be that beautiful  
    but is. The waves are bigger and she sets out, flowered  
    bikini, hair pulled back in a serious bun.

But too soon she's underwater, arms above her head,  
    spinning down into a champagne sea.  
    The priest asks would I like some English chocolate. I say *no*

at first and then say *yes*. I say,  
    *how many Euros for the scotch?* The baby Jesus

is a lot to be adored by black men, foreign kings, in  
fact, tomorrow. They're stumbling, the Magi,  
12 days across an ocean and through the desert.  
It's so hot they must travel at night—  
who wouldn't? And there was that star, sudden and perhaps a sign.  
*We've already tried to get there once,*  
I want to say to the kings. It's cool in this 747,  
which later the pilot will land with only one engine.  
A problem with  
compressors. But what a sweet,  
sweet ocean, and those few younger girls  
who try to ride it. And what a night,  
warmed by the sun-shocked smell  
of saddle and sweat, the strong breath of camels.  
What carved, fragrant trunkfuls  
born across deserts and ready to be opened before an infant god.

*Connie Voisine*  
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<sup>209</sup> [Connie Voisine, "Ireland, To Bethlehem," \*Hunger Mountain\*, collected in \*Rare High Meadow of Which I Might Dream\*, The University of Chicago Press](#)

## Obit

Logic—my father’s logic died on June 24, 2009 in bright daylight. Murdered in the afternoon. I hung up Missing Person posters of myself and listened for the sound of a tree falling. The sound of the wind through trees is called *psithurism*. There’s no word for the translator of wind. If the wind is words, the trees are exclamation points. The spears of moonlight, question marks. My father doesn’t realize his words always end in prepositions. *I have a problem with [the moon], there is a problem between [the moon and me], the problem is on [the moon]*. What if he can no longer find what is being modified, in the way snow would fall forever if there were no lip to die on.

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<sup>210</sup> [Victoria Chang, "Obit \[Logic—my father's logic died\]," \*Ploughshares\*, collected in \*Obit\*, Copper Canyon Press](#)

Bedtime Story with *Goodnight Moon* & CNN

Here, the now turns, the cardboard pages to telephones  
and red balloons. *Goodnight moon. Goodnight room.*

There, in the then, a scarecrow stuffed with a missing  
woman's hair. There in the web, a wolf spider

with a September hunger and blind in half her eyes.  
Back, back in your newest hour, a woman vanished

and no one looked for her. Dark, dark my stalk and tassel.  
Darker still my shadow's voice reciting newborn gospels,

ardent as the sing and saw of wind. *Goodnight nobody.*  
*Goodnight mush.* Rock, rock in a stippled field. Hush

as the rest of the woman is found in an abandoned building.  
with other bodies curled into positions of sleep or rapture.

*Who knows how many we could find,* the officer says as teams  
sweep the empty blocks. *He wanted women no one would miss.*

This motive relieves me—I would miss your nose, your ears,  
your sour breath; therefore you are safe. Emergency numbers

secure on the fridge, the reassurance of curtains. *Goodnight air.*  
*Goodnight noises everywhere.* Soft, soft the windfall apples. Softer

still the curled fists gripping the yes of the world, the television's  
cadence of tragedy and the sleepless months revised into happiness,

the yes of flies corseting a body, the yes of trees shepherding  
shadows closer to home. Yes, the moon, the bright unending.

*Traci Brimhall*

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<sup>211</sup> [Traci Brimhall, "Bedtime Story with Goodnight Moon & CNN," Narrative](#), collected in [Come the Slumberless to the Land of Nod](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Hat Trick

We are snowed in again so we watch  
Voldemort remove the Elder Wand  
from Dumbledore's tomb. How big  
my son's feet are when they stretch  
past the blanket we are sharing, past  
the slice of sunlight casting us in sharper  
and sharper light. I am keeping a list  
of what I did today. I have showered.  
I have stayed in my pajamas. I have  
typed on my laptop in the kitchen.  
I have bought Girl Scout cookies in  
my pajamas from the neighbor-girl,  
Isabelle, who rang the doorbell holding  
bright boxes of Peanut Butter Patties  
and Thin Mints. I do not tell my son  
about my mother's constant refrain—  
that Girl Scout uniforms reminded  
her of Hitler Youth each time we'd  
see a folding table of girls in their  
tan vests and pinned sashes outside  
Pathmark. This is not extreme  
given our family history, but I think  
other moms on the block who post  
memes like, "Technically you're not  
drinking alone if your kids are home"  
on the neighborhood Facebook group  
and sell handbags or weight loss  
shake mix in their spare time would  
maybe not understand this particular  
trigger. Voldemort is shooting green  
lightning from his wand again, and  
I have seen the frozen white face of  
Dumbledore, impassive, as the camera  
pans into his white marble tomb,  
lingers on his long white beard.  
*He pried it from his cold, dead hands!*  
shouts my son, at the screen, as if he's  
been waiting to use this exact phrase  
for a long time. I have washed escarole.  
I have made Italian wedding soup with  
tiny meatballs in it. I have wondered  
if we will run out of food before the town  
plows us out. Snowzilla, Winter Storm Jonas,  
or whatever we name this endless stretch  
of white. I have sketched a picture of my

son's favorite hat: a blue faux-fur-lined Russian bomber with ear flaps, which he refers to as *hashtag hat*. He often wears it around the house, though we keep the heat up. I get that. I have ordered myself a #hat on Amazon so I can wear it next time it snows. So I can go out at night when the whole block is orange-skied and quiet, and every house muffles itself from the street; their windows become faces I watch and watch. When it falls, the snow sounds like sugar on foamed milk, like turning a page in a delicate book. I haven't told my son the stories about my grandparents—the ill-fitting wooden clogs all the prisoners wore through the winter and stuffed with rags for the long walk from the camps to the factory and back in the snow. When my grandfather came to America he made sweatshop hats, then opened a factory and copied popular styles from movies: Barbra Streisand's leopard print fake fur number in *Funny Girl*, her plaid newsboy cap from *What's Up Doc?* He was not a milliner, but he taught me to sew, pressed puffed fabric down into a neat seam with his long pinky nail while his machine spit out fake mink pillboxes or folded Cossacks people wore to navigate the winter streets of Manhattan. Our neighborhood is whited out. *Hello gorgeous*, says Barbra.

Erika Meitner  
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<sup>212</sup> Erika Meitner, "Hat Trick," [Colorado Review](#), collected in [Holy Moly Carry Me](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Radioisotope Thermoelectric Generator Ode

Sure, lots of lousy poems have been written about Adam naming the animals and no doubt lots of lousy scholarship as well, but we're talking about lousy poems here and not lousy scholarship. We'll leave that to the scholars, though not the lousy ones.

And actually there's a bunch of hooley on creationist web sites about Adam naming the animals because there are so many of the little critters that, if Adam had started just a few minutes after Our Creator "breathed the breath of life into his nostrils," as it says in Genesis, he'd still be doing it today, unless he restricted his labor to, not the individual beasts, but to their genera, for each genus contains dozens, even hundreds, of species.

So if Adam named each of the 2,500 genera only, according to a web site I just consulted, "it would have taken him approximately three hours and forty-five minutes to complete the task if we include a five-minute break every hour."

Ha, ha! See? Poets and academics aren't the only idiots in the world.

Here's what we know about names, be they of animals or people or pianos (we'll get to that in a minute) or, from the viewpoint of marketing professor Tim Calkins, businesses. "It's always very tempting to name a company after yourself," says Professor Calkins. "It is simple. It is honest. And for a lot of entrepreneurs, when they're starting a new business, it's the place to start."

Also, it works: Procter & Gamble were people before they became a business, as were the founders of Bose, Duncan Hines, Doc Martens, and the Mayo Clinic, which is named not for the popular sandwich spread but for two brothers, W. W. and Will Mayo.

The Mayo brothers founded their clinic in 1892 along with Augustus Stinchfield, who was smart enough to go with the brothers' name rather than his own.

If your name were Steinway, you could found Steinway & Sons and make and sell high-end pianos.

Or your name could be Steinway and you could have nothing to do with pianos, though “if your name is Joe Steinway,” says Professor Calkins, “people will think you know a lot about classical music and have this association with you that isn’t true.”

My name is Kirby, and once I was dating this Jewish woman, and when things started to heat up, her father said, “David, I like you, but I wish your name were Greenberg.”

“David” means “beloved” in Hebrew—well, not to him.

I’m sure I have a number of the more admirable Jewish character traits and none of the unsavory Aryan ones, such as a fondness for torchlight rallies and the desire to annex parts of the former Czechoslovakia.

Still, I had the wrong name.

Or I was the wrong brand, if you want to put it that way.

In business, the right name can give a company a story, and that’s what a company needs to get its brand across, says David Aaker, vice chairman of Prophet, a branding firm.

“Facts don’t work,” says Mr. Aaker. “People counterargue. They’re skeptical. But if you tell them a story, all that goes away.”

Duke Ellington’s childhood piano teacher had the wonderfully Trollopian name of Marietta Clinkscapes. True fact!

Not that she had any choice in the matter, since her mother and father were Mr. and Mrs. Clinkscapes and thus relieved of the burden of coming up with a last name.

It’s hard enough to come up with a first: a neonatal nurse of my acquaintance tells me it’s not atypical for a patient to say something like, “My father is Terrell and my mother is Jennifer, so I want to name my baby Tennifer—how would I spell that?”

“Any way you like,” she tells them, “though before you fill out

a birth certificate, you should go out to the parking lot, get in your car, roll the windows up, and scream the baby's name as loudly as you can.”

It's not a name, but my new favorite word is *spurtle*, which is a sort of paddle used to stir soups, stews, broths, and especially porridge, which, considering that the spurtle is Scottish in origin, makes sense, given that a lot more porridge is prepared and consumed in Aberdeen, Glasgow, and Dundee than colcannon, haggis, neeps and tatties, sticky toffee pudding, black pudding, or grouse.

To the job let the tool be suited, be that tool a kitchen utensil or something else entirely.

I mean, you could stir your porridge with a regular spoon or a pencil or a World War II bayonet, for that matter, but wouldn't it taste better if you'd stirred it with a spurtle?

Verdi's little-known opera *The Battle of Legnano* has everything an opera needs: best friends who are in love with the same woman; a woman who loved one man once but is now totally faithful to the other man, who is her husband; a villainous third man who lusts after the wife; a loyal but weak serving woman who falls into the villain's clutches; a threatening army camped just outside the city gates; and a battle during which one of the best friends dies.

I'm sure you'd like to know which of the friends dies, though I won't say which in case you actually see *The Battle of Legnano*, which you won't because it's almost never staged due to its unpopularity.

There's also a letter slandering the once wavering but now totally steadfast wife, which, like every letter in every opera ever written, swoops in and out of the narrative as it is lost, found, hidden in someone's bosom, and left on some table on which it should not have been left.

Don't read that letter! you want to shout. But they do, and more misery ensues at least until such time as some milquetoasty plot device lifts the mood a little and the curtain comes down.

*The Battle of Legnano*, though. Who's going to see an opera called *The Battle of Legnano*? Okay, me. But it sounds like a history lesson, not an opera.

The other two thirds of the seats would have been filled on the evening I went if Verdi had called it *Love and Slaughter* or *She Chose the Right One*, *Alas* or *The Poisoned Letter*—anything but the name he gave it.

The ancient Greeks didn't name their children till they were three because they wanted to make sure they lived.

Maybe we shouldn't name ours till they're 26, since neuroscientists are confirming what car rental companies have already figured out, that the brain doesn't fully mature until age 25.

Till then, the prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that helps curb impulsive behavior, isn't fully developed.

This explains why a colleague of mine says she can teach her students about feminism as long as she doesn't use the word "feminism."

That would alienate a lot of the young men in her classes as well as the young women who think they can gain the respect of such men by agreeing with them, which they can't.

Ever been to Prague? The area in front of the train station is called Sherwood Forest because it's populated by drunks, homeless people, and panhandlers.

I would describe it as seedy rather than dangerous, but why pull the devil by his tail, as the wise people of that city say?

The name is lighthearted and even affectionate, in its way, though something tells me that any monies thieved from the pockets of tourists and passersby become the sole property of the thief and are not scheduled for redistribution to the populace as they might have been in the days of Robin Hood and his merry band.

I do wish my Jewish girlfriend's father had thought better of me.

There's nothing wrong with my name, even if it isn't as grand  
as that of Good King Wenceslas,  
who illustrates my point perfectly, since he wasn't.

Sure, he was pious, but he wasn't effective, which is why his  
brother Boleslaus stabbed him to death.

Boleslaus was also known as Boleslaus the Cruel.

Can you imagine letting your daughter date somebody  
named Boleslaus the Cruel?

I'd have had a chance if my name had been different.

But if my name had been different, wouldn't my life have  
been different as well?

At the May 4, 1990 memorial service for artist Keith Haring,  
actor Dennis Hopper referred to him as "my good  
friend Keith Harington.

That was bad enough by itself. But Hopper then added "and I  
mean that sincerely," which is what you say when you  
don't mean it sincerely at all.

Reader, be content with your name.

That said, do what you can to make it soar like a falcon or kestrel.

Let it be the Hope Diamond of names, the Everest, the Cadillac.

Live so that your name becomes a word known to the people  
of every country, like "okay" and "Coca Cola®."

Let your name be worthy of inclusion on the audio-visual  
discs aboard the Voyager space probes that were  
launched in 1977 and are now flying through the star  
systems of our galaxy and are expected to do so  
until 2025, when their radioisotope thermoelectric  
generators can no longer provide power.

Till then, should the discs be retrieved by beings from other  
planets, they will find photos of the earth and its life  
forms, greetings from the President of the United  
States as well as the Secretary-General of the UN,  
music by Mozart, Blind Willie Johnson, and Chuck

Berry, and your name.

Let yours be the fifth face on Mount Rushmore, and below it,  
your name.

Let the four faces on Mount Rushmore be dynamited to  
pebbles and dust. Let yours alone appear there and  
the mountain be named for you.

Let your name be lisped by nuns saying their rosaries and  
priests telling their pater noster.

Let it be on every prayer wheel, be it powered by wind, fire,  
water, or the hand of the devoted.

Let your name be such that when the sun streams through  
your window and you prepare to meet the day, flights  
of angels shall sing thee to thy single or double  
espresso, thy latte or cappuccino, thy tea of so many  
types that it would be impossible to enumerate them  
all, each more musical-sounding than the next, from  
chai and matcha to rosehip, spearmint, mulberry.

Let your name be such that each morning the devil says oh  
goddamn, she's up.

*David Kirby*  
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<sup>213</sup> [David Kirby, "Radioisotope Thermoelectric Generator Ode," \*Birmingham Poetry Review\*](#)

## I Wish I Were a Little More Oblivious

Or knew how to direct it outward, like the professor with the crazy hair said that time. I didn't realize the pained look on my face until he asked about it, and I said, "Oh, you know. Existential malaise." "Project it outward!" he said, and turned back to his chicken nuggets and orange soda. I thought he probably meant it kindly. It seemed very kind when he said it.

Maybe it's like the boys in sixth grade who looked calm only when they were furiously hitting drums in the band room. The one kid Roger loved KISS and took me to his room, past the stoner mom and her boyfriend in the dim macraméd living room, so that I could watch him take off his shirt and put on a new one.

Those were the boys I liked—the angry drum-hitting ones who looked like they wanted to cry when they talked to their fathers and sucker-punched bullies in 11th grade, back when being the only kid in school with a mohawk meant taking your life in your hands. Those were the boys I liked. Maybe wanted to be.

*Joanna Penn Cooper*  
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<sup>214</sup> [Joanna Penn Cooper](#), "[I Wish I Were a Little More Oblivious](#)," collected in [Wild Apples](#), [Ethel](#)

## Myths

Today my mother says she is afraid of turning into a vegetable. I know what she means, but the way she says it reminds me of Greek myths where people became poplar trees and cows.

I imagine being called to the hospital and there, under a light blanket, is a huge zucchini. I struggle to make sense of it even if that means embracing the randomness of willful gods.

But the doctor can't keep a straight face. He bites the inside of his lip to keep from laughing. I can hardly blame him. It's not his mother lying there with a stem.

Well, probably she won't turn into anything distressing. Not that Mom hasn't had her share of greed or ambition or longing, but she's very healthy. In fact, she's been in the hospital only once—the night I was born.

Halfway through the delivery, she thought she saw God's face on the ceiling. Then it turned into a Chrysler. "I didn't know which to believe in," she confides. "I still don't."

*Ron Koertge*  
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<sup>215</sup> [Ron Koertge](#), "Myths," collected in [Fever](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

This is a review for *Blue in Green* by Miles Davis

It's raining. Has to be raining. Someone in the corner room is in love with you. Loves you enough to touch her body, wants you to watch; pull up a chair. The horn asks: *How long has it been since?* There are a number of feelings you are in need of. You are not sadness, but near. Down one road in your mind you are walking alone; down another everyone is your wife. The horn asks: *temperance, obedience*. In the corner room, the daybed pressed to spark against the wall, she came. When you leaned in to know about it, you wished she would've slapped your hand away; wished to unhear your name falling out of her.

*Taylor Johnson*

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<sup>216</sup> [Taylor Johnson, "This is a review for \*Blue in Green\* by Miles Davis," \*Indiana Review\*, collected in \*Inheritance\*, Alice James Books](#)

## Letter to a Letter to the Editors

She clearly knew her melodramatic fears were groundless, and avoided challenge by expressing her invective through poetry—a multifaceted, intentionally cryptic medium through which she could conveniently deny unprovoked attacks upon those who loved her.

—Anne Sexton’s nieces, Lisa Taylor Tompson and Mary Gray Ford, in a letter to the editor, “Anne Sexton’s Vision of Reality,” *New York Times*, August 1991, after the publication of Diane Wood Middlebrook’s *Anne Sexton: A Biography*

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—  
—Emily Dickinson

Where Blanche saw reindeer on the roof, Santa, and expressions of love, Anne saw a particularly villainous season. Anne could “find a cloud in the sunniest sky.” These people from Scituate, Mass.—I know them in my head and heart. The way they say how it is interesting but not surprising, that everyone who is slaughtered (reputation-wise) is dead. The way one person took up so much static-electric space, and spread out. How could that sweet old man we loved have molested her? they ask. (Oh that’s how predators work, separating one from the rest.) The body cringing at the sight of the one who harmed it—the deep voice of it comes out, to balance the well-meaning upper-middle-class, the cherished, the sweet, loving facade. Nothing is accurate. Nothing is right. And who would see clots of blood for beautiful roses? (They ask.) Presuming the wet, real grass is just yours, the garden where everything is flourishing, the sidewalk where a chicken bone lies, the way the morning takes its time to unwrap, and the street begins to fill like a play—nothing you lay your eyes upon is just yours. And it is also all yours.

\*

Does anguish only come from within your own head? Yes. But so does the meaning of words, the depiction of a cloudless sky, where there is nothing, no sky at all, only an unbroken stream of water hoarded in it. And Anne went and ruined everything with her fucking chemical imbalance! Her strange and unsettled anger! Her “insistence on what she saw as brutal honesty”!

What is “brutal honesty” in poetry? How does that work?

Of course she chose a mysterious medium to talk about a cloud that existed in a sunny sky. The “pleasant memories were slashed.” ☹️ They assume that Anne assumed that poems were concerned with fact. But she knew the complicated presentation of existence. She didn’t write essay or memoir. She was all “imagination, without basis in fact.” Is imagination constrained by fact? The accepted social story must be consistent. The story must be sanctioned. The story must be liked. Must not upset great-aunts, carted off, screaming. Awe at death was what she had in the end. Sisters will hate one another, and nieces will always take their mother’s side. So normal, I know! My family is full of angry sisters who want to explain their childhoods in different ways.

\*

I had a vision last night of a massive heron with a shimmering rainbow neck that stood, in my mother’s backyard, on top of a machine that dug graves. And the heron’s chicks were gathered under her wings as the machine swayed and clanged; the man at the levers, indifferent in his control center, continued to dig

where the birds had lived—“But they are rare!” I cried up to him. “RARE! LIKE, ’NOT SEEN NORMALLY!”” But he continued on, saying he didn’t think they were rare. And I watched, there being nothing I could do about it.

What unwarranted conclusions can we draw? What horror provide? There was also the “accident of birth” hypothesis offered by Annes nieces.

Is it “a misfitted chromosome,” a “generic misfortune,” that makes a poet?

“Some families, confronted with a child like Anne, would have turned her over to state agencies for warehousing.

Our family chose to accept responsibility for one of our own.”

—this, this medium is not done with itself. And I’ll take her babble, her immature, completely unwarranted conclusions. And tell things honestly with a slant like a roof where apples roll down, and snow slides off, under which phoebes make weird hive nests and lay eggs—I think a poet will see truth through a distorted reverence for the underlying truth of shadows; “human decency” has nothing to do with poems—

And where do these poems’ truths come from? We are mistaken when we try to make broken things new; rather, we must proceed through the outrageous, cryptic medium of vision, which is only curiosity at being alive. When one has seen horrors in the midst of everyone’s enjoyment, to pretend to see reindeer and elves is to ignore a more powerful perception, covering it with a sheet, as over a wound that will fester. The ordinary conceptual system that we live by is governed by metaphors neither obvious to nor desired by most citizens. The automation of living is comforting. To closely examine the realities of germs, for instance, disgusts people, drives them to enthusiastically kill the vital bacteria necessary for a healthy organism. Purell™ and a set of agreed-upon concepts. It wasn’t that Anne was bad, just that, for whatever reason, she wasn’t let in on the agreed-upon system of understanding reality—and her madness was stayed a little with poetry.

So, dearest nieces of Anne Sexton, *I get it*. But I disagree.

*Bianca Stone*

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<sup>217</sup> Bianca Stone, “[Letter to a Letter to the Editors](#),” *The Brooklyn Rail*, collected in *The Möbius Strip Club of Grief*, Tin House Books

## loose strife

Embarrassingly it was just outside the tunnels. One American dollar bought you one bullet. Consequently I did it because I could. A few hundred miles west in Cambodia rumors that \$100 could buy you a single shot with a rocket launcher and a cow. In all my days

I have never met anyone who's done it or seen it done. The animal's essence geysering up into the blue. Muse, help me to understand why I paid the money and laid down in the dust, the thing pressed against my shoulder. What wrath compelled me. What narrative. "Barry, who was born in Vietnam

but raised in America, provides what is definitely a Western point of view. From her perspective, violence is a shocking misfortune that remains foreign, beyond her personal borders." Yes. That other time the way I balled it all up and left it behind in Guayaquil after we were robbed at gunpoint on a deserted road

in the national park, the local police stroking our faces and telling us in Spanish that we were lucky and how, as it was happening, a light went on and I realized I had the capacity to die, that capacity was the right word, that it was a power, an aptitude, an ability

which I possessed, a potential, and I wondered how others do it right here at home, how the worst thing in the world happens to people right in their own living rooms, on the street where they live, at the movie theater, the grocery store, at the rally to meet their congresswoman

or the place where they worship their loving god and for those who don't die, for those in whom the capacity remains unfulfilled, the gunman's thousand rounds somehow missing them, how they keep going day in and day out, how they ever feel safe despite the public's reluctance

to do anything to keep it from happening again,  
someone taking up a gun in the place where you sleep,  
where you love, the place where you educate your children,  
the spot from which you can't fly out  
like Andrée and I did, back to Miami and then onward,  
handing over your passport and saying please,  
  
just let me go.

*Quan Barry*  
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<sup>218</sup> [Quan Barry, "loose strife \('Embarrassingly it was just outside the tunnels'\)," \*Fusion Magazine\*, collected in \*Loose Strife\*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Indiana Problem (Mousetrap)

Wrapped in an afghan and playing  
Mousetrap, I worried that I wasn't  
giving enough attention to the stupider  
toys: Lite Brite with most of the pieces  
missing; life-size Barbie head smeared  
with red and blue, forever bruised  
and smiling; shoebox of rubber animals.  
Boredom was always a dim garden in  
the background, a place where twilight  
was described by adults, ears stretched  
toward the opening notes of sitcoms, eyes  
stretched toward the windows and the sketchy  
trees, dark Hoosier sadness, the houses  
so close we could hear their forks and knives  
if we left the door open. I didn't plan this  
second kingdom: not exactly in the mind  
or the heart but in the dullness between  
them, a waiting so long it made another  
body in case this one got too lonely.

*Julia Story*  
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<sup>219</sup> [Julia Story](#), "[Indiana Problem \(Mousetrap\)](#)," [The Rockhurst Review](#), collected in [Spinster for Hire](#), [The Word Works](#)

## I Live in an Actual Flophouse

built for destitute men in the 1920s,  
although it's 2015 and I'm  
made entirely of expensive marble,  
especially my enormous breasts.  
This may explain why,  
as my first romantic gesture to you,  
I played a song called "Party Time,"  
which is about an orgy of grandparents  
at a family reunion.  
See: it isn't true that stone hearts  
are always cold, as anyone  
who has smelled rain  
on summer freeways knows.  
My weird mineral heart  
sincerely loves reunions.

*Sarah Galvin*  
220

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<sup>220</sup> Sarah Galvin, "[I Live in an Actual Flophouse](#)," *Gramma*, collected in [Ugly Time](#), [Black Ocean](#)

## Saved

Once I burned a man's letters  
in a metal can in front of him

a wisp of that smoke returns  
in the clear breath of mountains  
his rueful look the flare of anger  
that struck the match

nothing we'd planned to happen did  
we have all been saved so many times

why I should think of this  
years later in such elegant air  
not wondering what happened to him  
or feeling regret but thinking instead  
how the signs on abandoned motels  
west of Langtry Texas have faded more  
each year

EXCELLENT BEDS  
just a pale red whisper now  
TILE BATHROOMS  
ghost of a promise  
receding into stucco wall  
SLEEP WELL HERE

*Naomi Shihab Nye*  
221

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<sup>221</sup> [Naomi Shihab Nye](#), "[Saved](#)," collected in [Red Suitcase](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## The Newspapers

How they tumbled down the snow-filled streets,

how they slept in battered vending boxes  
and hung from dowels in the public library.

How my father kept the memorable ones in his closet,  
among the dying shoes.

Then the power went out. The TV closed its eye

and the house felt strange in the new silence:  
a hush of snowstorm.

Because there was nothing else to do  
I went upstairs to read.

In his closet, I found an old newspaper  
in a language I couldn't understand.

There he was in uniform, just below the fold—but where?  
And who was that other man by his side?

I did not hear what my mother said in the kitchen  
that made him throw his wine glass at her,

cutting a stain on the wall behind her head.

*Let's go to the museum, my father said,  
Let's get outta here.*

He smelled of wine and sweat, familiar and good.

Newspapers fell from the clouds,  
clotting the rooftops and the branches as we drove.

At the museum, a giant brain turned on a gear.  
*Press a button, he told me. Now try another one,*

and for once I did exactly as he said.

Colored bulbs glowed on the surface,  
temporal lobe, hippocampus, neural highways,

the great brain moving in the silence—

but who was that other man by his side, a rifle  
propped carelessly against his shoulder?

And what had become of the gun my father held?

He was casually checking his watch.  
*She's cooled down by now*, he said,

but I was still pressing those buttons, I couldn't stop.

Thoughts blinked on the surface,  
bright networks of gold and blue,

the brain humming as it glowed in the vast gray room.

Back home, my mother wouldn't turn from the stove  
or look at us. The house smelled good.

I quietly stowed the newspaper with the others, behind the shoes,  
then came downstairs for dinner.

She'd cleaned the stain away.

That night, I couldn't sleep. My brain kept turning.  
Pinpricks glittered like cities viewed from an airplane.

From downstairs, a muffled conversation,  
then the TV changing channels

and, much later, the noise of sex.

To think he has been dead twenty years now  
and she can no longer feed herself. I am 48,

typing this on a hot June night  
1000 miles from there.

*Kevin Prufer*  
222

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<sup>222</sup> [Kevin Prufer](#), "[The Newspapers](#)," [The Paris Review](#), collected in [The Art of Fiction](#), [Four Way Books](#)

from "Testaments Scratched into a Water Station Barrel"

Far from highways I flicker  
gold the whispering  
gasoline

if I pinch her nipples  
too hard  
no joy for her

no joy for me  
so I practice on ticks  
press them

just so so they give  
but do not burst  
beneath

my boots  
thistle & puncture vine  
a wild horse

asleep on all fours  
its shadow still grazing  
my lips

black meat  
my tongue  
black meat

in my backpack  
sardine tins  
saltines

& a few cough drops  
the moon is my library  
there's a glacier

inside a grain of salt  
do you understand  
I'm sorry

my Albanian  
isn't very good  
tremble

if God forgets you  
tremble  
if God

remembers you  
out of clay I shape  
sparrows

I glaze their bills & claws  
I give them names  
like gossamer

inglenook lagoon  
she bathed  
a trumpet

in milk  
her tenderness acoustic  
& plural

her pupils perched  
in all that green  
there's nudity

around the corner  
bones cracked  
& iridescent

sometimes it rains so hard  
even the moon  
puts on

a raincoat  
zinc razz zinc jazz  
I notch my arms

I notch my thighs  
five six days  
I score

my skin but not  
the back of my knees  
two ovals

two portraits  
my son at ten  
his eyes ablaze

my son at one  
his eyes shut  
once

I dressed him in burlap  
once bicycles  
& marbles

once I tore rain  
out of a parable  
to strike down

his thirst

*Eduardo C. Corral*  
223

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<sup>223</sup> [Eduardo C. Corral, "Testaments Scratched into a Water Station Barrel \[Far from highways I flicker...\]", \*Poetry\*, collected in \*Guillotine\*, Graywolf Press](#)

## First

There is a holiness to exhaustion  
is what I keep telling myself,  
filling out the form so my TA gets paid  
then making copies of it on the hot  
and heaving machine, writing  
*Strong start!* on a pretty bad poem.  
And then the children: the baby's  
mouth opening, going for the breast,  
the girl's hair to wash tonight  
and then comb so painstakingly  
in the tub while conditioner drips  
in slick globs onto her shoulders  
and her discipline chart flaps in the air  
conditioner at school, taped  
to a filing cabinet, longing for stickers.  
My heart is so giant  
this evening, like one of those moons  
so full it's disturbing, so full that  
if you see it when you're getting out  
of the car you have to go inside the house  
and make someone else come out  
and see it for themselves. I want  
everything, I admit. I want  
a clean heart. I want the children  
to sleep and the drought to end.  
I want the rain to come down hard—  
*It's supposed to monsoon*, is what  
Naomi said, driving away this morning,  
and she was right. It's monsooning.  
Still I want more. Even as the streets  
are washed clean and then begin  
to flood. Even though the man  
came again today to check the rat traps  
and said he bet we'd catch the rat  
within twenty-four hours. We still haven't  
caught the rat, so I'm working  
at the table with my legs folded up  
beneath me. I want to know  
what is holy—I do. But first I want  
the rat to die. I am thirsty for that  
death and will drink deeply of that  
victory, the thwack of the trap's  
hard plastic jaw, and I will rush  
to see the evidence no matter how  
gruesome, leaning my body over  
the washing machine to see the thing

crushed there, much smaller than  
I'd imagined it'd be, the strawberry  
large in its mouth.

*Carrie Fountain*  
224

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<sup>224</sup> [Carrie Fountain](#), "[First](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [The Life](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## Getting there

Anas and I had Oreos this morning, as we do  
once a week, on the bench outside his store,  
sharing them so we don't get fat  
(ter). Now and then, for a change,  
Nutter Butters. Anas keeps a picture  
of his mother above the register.  
Right before he was shot three years ago  
by a thief, he focused on her face.  
Asked weeks later by a cop  
what the man looked like, Anas thought  
but didn't say, *Home*. He told me that.  
I told my wife, who told her mother,  
who told her mother, who said, How lovely.  
Even in her senility, her eyes sparked  
to the word *home*. Anas' wife is dead,  
his mother, grandmother, but I've leant him  
three generations of women  
admiring his thoughts. Below  
being a man, he's Anas. Beneath  
being Syrian, he prefers Paris.  
Under wanting to get even, he doesn't.  
Retribution is like playing catch  
with an egg. How far would we get with war  
if every man first asked his mother,  
Can I kill? Most of whom would say,  
"It's *may* I kill. And no, you may not."

Bob Hicok  
225

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<sup>225</sup> [Bob Hicok](#), "[Getting there](#)," [PoetsArtists](#), collected in [Hold](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Customer Service Is

We take pride in serving the  
We're accustomed to servicing the  
Please take the attached  
Please answer these six  
Please answer these eight  
This will only be a quick  
If microphones don't reach, then  
If ramps are required, then  
If you need audio, then  
If you need visual, then  
We request one week's  
We request one month's  
All reasonable requests will  
*A flock of surveys is a surveillance.*  
*A stampede of stairs is an architecture.*  
*An expectation of elevators is a favor.*  
*An "oh-crap" of crips is a caucus.*  
But I have an aunt who is  
I had a friend who was  
We practice best  
We follow the  
You have to see our  
You have to stand up for  
Your help is so  
Your answers will be

*Sandra Beasley*  
226

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<sup>226</sup> [Sandra Beasley, "Customer Service Is," \*Split This Rock\*, collected in \*Made to Explode\*, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## Smoking in Heaven

Watching young poets in the early evening  
Smoking on the terrace outside the poetry reading,  
I wondered if there would be a smoking terrace  
in heaven. I have a friend, dead now,  
A Catholic who was unimpressed by the prospect of paradise  
Until he discovered a group of medieval theologians  
Who had proposed that there was a special kind of time  
In eternity. They gave it a Latin name.  
Like my friend, they couldn't conceive of a God  
Who would force them to live forever  
Without sunrise and sunset. His wife, a skeptic,  
Called it decaffeinated time, at which he shrugged wryly,  
This idea of life after death made him very happy,  
Which was, as far as he was concerned, the point.  
He's been dead now for almost a decade,  
So I suppose he knows one way or another  
Whether there is nothing after death and no one there  
To know it or not. The smoking terrace would, of course, be out of doors,  
So it wouldn't be as depressing as those smoking rooms in airports  
Where people with grey skin submit to their addiction  
With religious humility. You could light up and walk to the edge of the clouds  
And watch the fragrant smoke you were expelling  
Drift into the decaffeinated sunset. It made me wonder  
If there were coffee in heaven. Or sex. I knew a woman  
Who said that the main reason for sex,  
As far as she was concerned,  
Was the cigarette afterward. And if there were sex  
In heaven, why would there be anything else? Probably  
So that you could watch Canada geese settle on a lake  
Just as the moon was twilighting the surface of the water  
In luminous little scallops. The young poets  
Should read Allen Ginsberg who said that poets should set an example  
By not submitting to what he called "the nicotine haze  
of capitalism." Probably in the heaven without tobacco  
The couples are walking by the sea, having already made love,  
And the moon, almost unnaturally large, is just coming up,  
And the color of the moon on the water is just like what  
Their bodies are feeling, contented but still tingling,  
And in the moonlight they can see a pack of feral goats  
With their beards and inhuman eyes grazing on the hillside, also contentedly,  
As if time and eternity were the wrong ideas altogether,  
And the women would have come in with their Greek masks on  
To walk the shoreline and dance what fate is.

*Robert Hass*  
227

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<sup>227</sup> Robert Hass, "[Smoking in Heaven](#)," collected in [Summer Snow](#), [Ecco](#)

## Crush the Smiling Nothing

Your girlfriend broke up with you the night the Oilers won the Stanley Cup. Gretzky and Messier skated like royalty, while the other team flailed and struggled to stay standing, like third-string astronauts. Because she told her parents she was sleeping at Katie Noreyev's, and you were too far from college to drive back, after she broke up with you in the lobby, there was nothing else to do but stay together in the room you rented at the Hotel McDonald. You fought for a little while, and then things went quiet. Later, when she turned away from you in bed, you wondered if she was crying, then wondered why she wasn't. Outside you could hear the hotel in flames of celebration. The walls shook, the floors throbbed, and the streets stayed steady with currents of horns. Things were being torn apart in the name of victory and romance, and you felt stupid about the note you wrote her. Maybe quoting a dead rock star and making a weird analogy about sharks navigating their way around the world by moonlight wasn't the right way to tell her you loved her. While she slept, you opened the bottle of champagne that was chilling in a bucket by the bed and drank it yourself. It went down cold and sharp, like a world that had gone to glass, a decade turned to ice.

*Alex Green*  
228

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<sup>228</sup> [Alex Green](#), "[Crush the Smiling Nothing](#)," collected in [Emergency Anthems](#), [Brooklyn Arts Press](#)

from "Act One. Our House Is Now Another House"

7. Salim

To lift my arms as if in praise / when they strap it beneath  
my shirt, to feel the ice-cold shell / against my chest, its promised

hatching into blood-heat. To imagine myself already  
dead, yet buoy in the wash / of capillaries pulsing like web,

every strand tensile, a gleam. To tread the streets now paved  
over my father's house & to be held / up at the checkpoint

between my village & what's left / of our groves of lemon  
& olive—razor-wired & identity card. To believe that

this will stanch his wound, this mad algebra dividing  
all numbers back to one, the columns on each side

of the equal sign equal again, if I can walk into a stranger's cafe  
& in a sudden illumination / join shard to skin, flesh

to flesh, & wake us / from a nightmare, unhooked  
from the wall like a clock / that needs to be wound again.

*Philip Metres*  
229

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<sup>229</sup> Philip Metres, "Act One. Our House Is Now Another House," collected in [Shrapnel Maps](#), Copper Canyon Press

My Friend Says I Should Be Thinking about “Masked Intimacy” When I Think about Leila Olive

I am making an exception for the tree that fell in the storm. And the guy I hired to clean up the tree. And the limbs he left plunged deep in the yard. And the shape they make: a V.

Everyone agrees. Restaurant workers are *very exposed*.

On Tuesdays late, so 3 a.m., I sign into a Zoom where we sit around and read Lacan’s *The Psychoses*. I am googling “what is masked intimacy?”

Cool your jets. Cool your jets. This is the phrase I most often think in regards to Leila Olive. And then. Cuddle with her. Something else with her. Ask her “Does this feel good? How about this?”

I don’t really see the need to think about *masked intimacy* yet. Leila Olive works in a restaurant all the time and has a boyfriend and yeah, she’s bi, and I’ve only seen her once. During the pandemic. In December.

First my ex was a watercolor above the fireplace. Then I moved her to the kitchen. I knew she’d hate that. But she’d like it better than being listed for sale on Etsy.

Having the hots for artists is a recurring problem for me.

When people say “recurring problem,” do we actually mean “chronic desire”?

There’s a squirrel on the V and he’s eating a nut. I’m just reporting the facts.

This summer I had a weather phobia. No, worse than that. My partner—you can have more than one—had to look up the weather every day. If it was going to rain or storm, I got on the floor between the sofa and coffee table and put a sofa cushion over my head.

You could lie in the bathtub covered by sofa cushions, my therapist suggested.

It is very unlikely you will die from a tree crushing you during a storm.

All this medical in the pandemic is reminding you of your childhood. You did not have much choice.

But I know the truth: Zelda Fitzgerald went to a party. She was getting drunk and watching Scott flirt and she called the fire department. The party carried on. This was in the 1920s. She had been to several parties, was rich, from Montgomery, died right up the road from here in Asheville, North Carolina.

Finally, I got on Buspirone and then I didn’t care about the tree that I knew would fall and which did fall, but not on my house, and I didn’t care about my lungs and I stopped taking the X-rays out of the closet to have a look at myself.

Are you practicing *masked intimacy*? Best I can figure you wear a mask and take off all your clothes. I don’t take off all my clothes for anybody. It’s not my thing. I like to have a long cape or tee shirt or latex thigh-highs still on me.

One person is not talking to me about *masked intimacy* at all: Leila Olive. The subject has not come up. Twice she said, *I'll get tested for you*. She said, *Send it to me. Send it to meeeeeee*. She said, *I missed ya today at work*. And, *Ugh yr so hot I love you*. The next morning: *So embarrassing. I was drinking tequila*.

Hey. Cool your jets.

You're thinking I have Leila Olive on a pedestal and you're right. I can hardly go anywhere outside my brain. But this isn't Ancient Greece, so I do not imagine her cast in marble on a column in front of a temple.

More like on a blue velvet chaise lounge in a living room—not mine: there's a guy here, he's my partner; this is not for him—where she's wearing whatever she wants and bored by the poem she's reading.

When Auden said, *Every critic should state his Eden*, he was basically saying, *Every poet should taste her Leila Olive*.

She goes into work at 3 p.m. and gets off at 10 p.m. and sometimes makes \$500 in tips.

I cannot actually imagine kissing Leila Olive through a mask. Okay, I have imagined it. If we must do it, we must. But I would like a pair of small <sup>[SEP]</sup>copper-handled scissors nearby so we can cut the parts out of our masks for our lips. You're thinking, "That defeats the purpose."

But there's not a purpose here. This is not a business meeting.

So many red flags I could build a castle behind them.

Zelda's at the party and she's flirting too. She has forgotten about calling the fire department. She's talking about jazz to someone in that way white women have of wanting, so badly, to be conversant in Black aesthetic. The firemen arrive.

Nothing seems to be on fire. "Who called the fire department?" some guy shouts, relieved to finally have a thing to say at a party. "I did," Zelda says, and then that guy, for the rest of his miserable life, tells everyone he talked to Zelda Fitzgerald once at a party.

I did not know my own heart around Leila Olive in the before times. I thought she was standoffish, very smart, and of course I, and everyone in the room, recognized her beauty. I did not ever think of kissing her.

She does not champion her own beauty. Does it grieve her? Has she come to grief? Will she come to grief? Am I going to be involved here, somewhere, in this coming or this grieving?

Let's say you're right and I did think of kissing Leila Olive. It was so far back in my mind that it was like one of those Lacanian books. I would've had to look my index up to find the page of the kiss I imagined.

Index fingers are highly underrated. Trigger, slick, button, quick.

"I did," Zelda says. "Where's the fire?" this one fireman asks. And Zelda points to her heart. "It's here. It's right here," she says.

I don't know. I'd wear a mask and go to coffee with her. I'd wear a mask and go to her place. I'd wear a mask and watch a movie. I'd wear a mask and say, "Plz take off your mask" and she'd say, "We really shouldn't be doing this."

That's the phrase people use right before they really want to do something.

It wouldn't be sad without the ending. But you have to know the ending. For once, you get to know the ending. Zelda was in a waiting room. In Asheville, North Carolina. A waiting room for electroshock therapy. That's when the fire broke out.

Did she know, in advance, at the party, that there would be a fire and she would need those firemen?

Auden wrote privately to a friend, *Of course, I know Sappho's work has homosexual valences. But it's not time.*

On man-time, it matters who presides over the money and the weaponry. On crip-time, I send a GIF of two women kissing. She hearts it.

*Jillian Weise*  
230

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<sup>230</sup> [Jillian Weise, "My Friend Says I Should Be Thinking about "Masked Intimacy" When I Think about Leila Olive," \*Poetry\*](#)

## Terra Nova

There is infinite space in the digital cloud,  
yet no one can inhabit it.  
It is cold and vacuous, like the moon.

If you disobey the higher laws,  
you then must obey the lower laws.  
Pick your poison, as they say.

Hyperbole will not protect you  
against diminishing returns.

Elms exist, spite exists, birds exist.  
What is a bird, but a handful  
of sinew and song?

Definitions terrify.  
Distinctions frighten more.  
What do you mean, this is better than that?  
Is language a boa constrictor or a valve?

Oh so this is what a boundary is.  
Oh so this is what it means, to cop a feel.

I, too, divide light from darkness.  
I, too, create animals of land and sea.

Why can't it all be opera, heroine  
dragging her voluminous dress  
across the floor? Captive me.  
Croon explicit lyrics in my ear.

I haven't had a thought worth  
thinking in three straight days,  
and yet still you love me.

I might be a junkie,  
and yet you draw ever near.  
I don't need proof of anything.

The only trial is by fire:  
the only fear is fear.

*Virginia Konchan*  
231

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<sup>231</sup> [Virginia Konchan](#), "[Terra Nova](#)," [Bennington Review](#)

Poem for Tucker Carlson's Face

So nothing anymore makes sense,  
let me tell you. Is it secret  
what you love, or loves you like  
a medicine. A flame. I am  
so committed to this moment  
in which it's easy to imagine violence.  
In movies, getting punched  
seems to hurt just a little.  
Mostly is impact, slap of meat on meat,  
then an instant sleep  
and no dream of crushed knuckles  
and blood and pain  
that will always linger.

When you're old, grows worse.  
When you press close  
to a future warmth  
and confess everything about a previous life.

I floated in space. I won.  
The ocean was lavish then  
and not dead and not memorial to this ruin  
that seems to be encoded  
within. I'm afraid of you. What you mean.

Last night the moon  
in the sky hung  
like a glowing fraction  
and a stranger asked me if I believed in fate.

I thought of the night  
I spent in an emergency room years ago:

a man lay sobbing  
with a hunting knife deep in his shoulder.  
My heart is broken, he sighed.  
Let me go. Let me die. Let me out of here.  
What he wanted, I did.  
I do.

*Paul Guest*  
232

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<sup>232</sup> [Paul Guest, "Poem for Tucker Carlson's Face," \*Southern Indiana Review\*](#)

## Not Part of Literature

Monolithos was four fisherman huts along the water,  
a miniature villa closed for years, and our farmhouse  
a hundred feet behind. Hot fields of barley, grapes,  
and tomatoes stretching away three flat miles  
to where the rest of the island used to be.  
Where the few people live above the great cliffs.  
A low mountain to the south and beyond that the earth  
filled with pictures of Atlantis. On our wrong side  
of the island were no people, cars, plumbing, or lights.  
The summer skies and Mediterranean constantly. No trees.  
Me cleaning squid. Linda getting up from a chair.

*Jack Gilbert*  
233

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<sup>233</sup> [Jack Gilbert](#), "[Not Part of Literature](#)," collected in [Monolithos](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

## Elegy to My Family

My middle name went down in the Tyrrhenian  
off Anzio Beach, life jacket filling with the sea.

After that, my father, split in half, would sing  
into the bathroom mirror, where his twin lived.

After she died, we found poems my mother wrote  
to her five dogs, each killed by a neighbor's car.

*You do what you have to do* was a motto she loved  
saying over and over. Her tailor's dummy,

buxom amputee, lived in the attic. The attic,  
said Bachelard, denotes the rational mind,

but the basement's where I find my brother,  
back from the hungry i, strumming his Martin D-18.

He came of age in the era of the pocket radio,  
The Kingston Trio, and public swimming pools

polio closed. Era when the sky might catch fire.  
To improve us, my aunt read uncensored Grimm—

Rumpelstiltskin danced until he tore himself in two.  
She'd write to Richard Tucker, and he wrote back

twice, and sang Verdi from a boom box in hospice.  
In a dream I hold my sister's hand. A walk, yes,

a walk would be good. New moon. Poplars circle  
the duck pond. New Jersey church spires blacker

than the black sky. What I tell her wakes me up.

*Steven Cramer*  
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<sup>234</sup> [Steven Cramer](#), "[Elegy to My Family](#)," [Salamander](#), collected in [Listen](#), [Mad Hat Press](#)

be all yr sins remembered

polonius is alive, fortinbras is alive, king hamlet  
is smearing on beard oil            still buttressing the world  
when i find ophelia bored as shit floating  
          on her back in the apartment complex pool.  
her nose is tinging red  
          & her hair's a sunburst  
& i'm like, *where'd you get your swimsuit? i've been  
looking for one with flowers but they're all tacky dayglow.*  
she's all, *ugh that means a lot my boyfriend's being a total  
drag today*            & no one's stabbed anyone yet  
or feigned madness—it's normal boy stuff  
          like he clogged her garbage disposal.  
in this world ophelia finds the perfect Bible study group  
          & starts painting her toenails emerald  
          & i tell her how the first girl i loved  
married a cop last april & the last girl i loved  
was a sagittarius you know what i mean.  
in this world we take fencing lessons at the y  
& talk about ghosts like            maybe they don't exist  
i guess today i'm bitter about the separate worlds  
we really got. my mind keeps ambling back  
          to [amy coney barrett]  
i'm scared i want to write a happy poem. about flowers.  
about me and ophelia buzzing our hair  
          & screaming down backroads to mannequin pussy.  
we're hanging our heads out the windows we will never  
crash the car  
          the muggy air curtsies all around us.  
but i can't stop meeting ophelia. i can't stop meeting  
her. every violet here withers.

Casey Smith  
235

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<sup>235</sup> Casey Smith, "[be all yr sins remembered](#)," [Tinderbox Poetry Journal](#)

With Gratitude to Those Who Have Made This Book Possible

*With the rich and mighty, always a little patience.*  
—“Spanish proverb” in *The Philadelphia Story*

I’ve got a story for you where I’m the asshole,  
and the other assholes in it are my friends. A story  
about the lives most of us will never afford,  
though their scuttlebutt details seduce us. Its subject  
is the people, and the parts of the city, that turn

the majority of us into Victorian urchins,  
our noses pressed against bakery windows.  
Among these friends is my college roommate,  
who every summer invites me to her French chalet,  
routinely forgetting that in order to eat

I heave my body daily into a Midtown office.  
She tells me I’m better than that job when I decline.  
But today I’ve been asked to a Prospect Park picnic,  
and when I arrive, I’m hugged earnestly, invited  
to sample citrus oil from someone’s endless

cache of gift bags. I’ve brought a summer salad,  
corn and heirloom tomatoes from the greenmarket  
I diced carefully to impress people that I’d hoped  
a decade ago to be like, girls whose fathers built  
pipelines in Africa while they wrote papers

about French Colonialism in school. Back then,  
I pretended to be them, though at night I joined  
the other scholarship kids to prank numbers  
from our school directory, roused gentle Bitsy  
from Potomac or dyspeptic Mortimer in Bel Air

at three a.m., because I could. Every distant  
family member of mine would have to die at once  
to inherit me into one of my friends’ second homes.  
Of course I felt inadequate. But we spent  
so much time together, it seemed I’d as easily

marry a Belgian prince or a hedge fund wunderkind  
as they would. That first summer after college,  
walking in Strawberry Fields, my dad asked me  
why I didn’t rent one of those little attics  
on Central Park West. He was unable to fathom

the duplex penthouse behind dainty windows,  
or that at sleepovers at ones like it, I hesitated  
to spit my toothpaste in Italian marble sinks.  
And now my friends can't picnic in Brooklyn  
without someone commenting on the park's

illusion of equality. Nearby, ordinary people  
are frying their plantains, circling the clumpy field  
in a game of pick-up soccer. From their vantage  
I am the rich person, coddled as a tiny duke  
or duchess in a Renaissance court painting,

or at least one of the glossy mastiffs they liked  
to pose alongside. I only exist by proximity.  
But it's proximity that grants me a peek  
into the bespoke panic room that generates  
so much of what we call art, and who gets

to make art. The fault of these friends I look  
at the acknowledgments of certain books  
and find I've been the plus one at birthdays  
for Brooklyn literati, people whose patios  
reminded me of the time needed to write a book,

how the sting of rejection might be reduced  
on a golden cloud. Of course I was dying to go.  
I've got a talent for noticing these friends'  
failures, their bakery scones staling in the sun,  
not an oily kernel left of my corn salad. My job

is to notice. I imagine the architects who sculpted  
the park's hills, believing the poor deserved  
their share of countryside, and how growing up,  
I bit into tomatoes we grew ourselves. We made  
our own pleasures, unprofitable as the hue

on a piece of fruit. Vendors push the day's last  
coconut ices, as the sun sets on a lawn strewn  
with chicken bones, soccer balls flattened to discs.  
They have been kicked so hard, and so often.  
How recently they amused somebody.

*Erin Hoover*  
236

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<sup>236</sup> [Erin Hoover](#), "[With Gratitude to Those Who Have Made This Book Possible](#)," *Scoundrel Time*, collected in [Barnburner](#), [Elixir Press](#)

## Crossing Over

This time of year I like the gnarled  
little sugar skulls  
like dolled-up potatoes,  
fingerlings with eyes gouged out,  
daisies growing through the sockets,  
this time of year always wondering  
about that baby I lost,  
otherwise don't look back,  
otherwise why think at all?  
When my body refused, his presence  
didn't dissipate right away,  
never meant any harm,  
just trailing after in the ether  
and now this ether-light's *shining*  
and the wind twitches,  
I can hear the ropes bite the macadam,  
crossing over,  
neighbor girls playing Double Dutch,  
chanting as they jump  
but can't make out their faces in the glare.  
Their ropes strike the ground in rhythm.  
When my baby girl was born  
sometimes she took it so hard just living,  
I crooned *don't come undone now, don't come undone*  
the way my grandma used to.  
She raised prodigious chickens  
out back,  
great-breasted matrons  
who laid huge eggs,  
most every one had two yolks  
and whenever one of us asked  
*How'd they do it?*  
she answered *they're double-souled,*  
*honey.*  
This time of year, gold lingers  
in thin autumn air  
ether-light shining  
*crossing over*  
ropes beat the ground in rhythm  
I can hear their voices  
but can't make out their faces.

Marsha de la O  
237

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<sup>237</sup> [Marsha de la O](#), "[Crossing Over](#)," [Solo Novo](#), collected in [Antidote for Night](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

from "Happinefs"

7.

At the choir leader's door  
I stood, offering guests  
chilled shrimp bites  
woody darts of rosemary.  
I waited with the tray  
she'd given me & peered  
back through her faculty Pavilion.  
Arrangement of deepening grids:  
silver, silver, silk. One whole  
chamber just for books. With  
my eyes, I robbed it bare. No one  
saw me chomp the chandelier.  
It went down, a carnival onion.  
My jaws grew: salt-sharp & strange.

*Kiki Petrosino*  
238

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<sup>238</sup> [Kiki Petrosino](#), "[Happinefs](#)," [Tin House](#), collected in [White Blood](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## My Whole Life I Was Trained to Deny Myself

to please my father who'd make me  
tiptoe from wall to wall then back again

to improve my lacking calves  
or worm the ground like a vacuum

palming the carpet for bits of trash  
he'd count in my little hands. When I spilled

a cupful of crushed chili flakes  
on my Chapagetti noodles, he forced

the whole hot bowl down my throat  
as I sobbed. And he ordered my hair pulled

back, always, in a ponytail. It wasn't until  
I neared forty that I discovered

them—the women I'd twisted myself into  
for the men I loved—all slumped in my gut

like a heap of secondhand costumes.  
Once, I followed a man into a hurricane

minutes before it stripped half of Manhattan  
from power. I trailed behind him

when the transformer line exploded  
and the night sky flashed a ghastly

green like God smothering the city  
with a neon sheet. Then the traffic lights,

streetlights, and every last lamp through  
every window flickered then snapped,

and in that alarming darkness, the city shrank  
into a closet so cramped I couldn't breathe.

Still, I stood in that downpour  
on a sixth-story roof to hold up his boom mic

as he recorded the storm. For another,  
I became a Ron Paul for President

groupie. I scanned Reddit in my homemade

campaign shirt while smoking weed

to white boy emo tracks about tommy guns  
and existentialism the same year

I voted for Obama. For yet another,  
I learned to ride a bike. Even managed one

from the Village to the GW Bridge,  
but when the path clogged

halfway up with bikers on three sides of me  
close enough to kiss, I forgot

how to brake. I threw out my hands  
to grab the highway divider and collapsed,

then I hauled up the rental to finish the trek,  
bloody knuckles and knees be damned.

And for hundreds of mornings, I woke  
each morning before the morning—

not even two hours after last call in the city—  
to blend spinach and strawberries

with flaxseed meal and hemp seeds for a man  
to take to work. And when one provoked

a drunk stranger then couldn't meet a deadline  
with his battered head, I let him

turn me into a comic book android.  
I wrote pages upon pages of a monologue

he fed to the robot, fashioned  
by a toymaker who loved her the way

he thought he loved me.  
He injected her with scene after scene

from my childhood, and in the final issue,  
haunted by my life, she screams,

*Stop inventing me!* before she claws open  
her chest and yanks out a fat blue gem

carved like a heart. And during a spell  
when I was shackled to no man, I got naked

in a room full of naked people, all of us  
drunk and stoned, seated in a circle

like schoolchildren waiting for some game  
to begin or for the morning hello song,

the kind that loops until you've hollered  
everybody's name. At daylight, I drove

the prettiest of the girls home. The one  
some men bragged they could bed

with a fat stack of C-notes, the one  
who eventually married the mayor's son.

She had a habit of laughing  
at everything everyone said and danced

with her hands above her head like someone  
panicking with a pistol pointed at her face.

For years leading up to that day,  
I thought she was the sort of woman

I was supposed to be—nonthreatening  
with a body that inspired valuation.

She insisted she ride with me  
instead of with the boys hovering over her

like a flight of hungry kestrels. And minutes  
into the drive, it became clear she wanted

something from me, something like  
absolution. Approval maybe.

And she said, *I feel sad*. And she said,  
*I don't know who that was, I don't know why*

*I did that—that* being what we'd all done  
all throughout the night, and I admit

I was rankled by her conscience, clanging  
louder than mine, which was bored

of my neglect by then and resigned  
to watching my life lurch forward without it.

When my father wasn't sculpting  
or smacking me, he said I was made  
  
in the image of God. So God I became,  
forging myself each time I found a man  
  
to die for. I was the creator, the crucified,  
the wildfire slamming against their chests.  
  
I read what they read, and I drank  
what they mixed. I bent the way they bent me  
  
to do what they invented. And how I charmed  
their brothers. How I disarmed  
  
their mothers—the lemony dolmas,  
the pink pork meatballs I rolled with them,  
  
the dough I pinch-pulled then dunked  
in anchovy broth. And when I married  
  
the last man I loved, as the woman  
I thought I was, I woke one night  
  
like a jinn horrified to find herself  
fixed in her final incarnation. I stopped  
  
recognizing myself to such a degree  
that some days I'd wake having forgotten—  
  
really, I'd forget—we had an actual child.  
I morphed into a serpent, a tempest.  
  
I struck myself against our domestic walls  
like a mad bat trapped in a coop.  
  
And my husband—who from the beginning  
looked at me like he understood  
  
I was not his, like he was willing  
to take what he could get  
  
for as long as I'd let him have it—refused  
to enter my war. How bereft I was  
  
left with no enemies. How I brawled  
on that battleground alone with myself,

punching at nothing until I conjured  
my multitudes. I wish I could say

I freed myself somehow. That I'd pried  
those shadow selves from me

with a hex, a needle, a healing quartz.  
Or that like the cloak of Bartimaeus,

they dropped in the dust  
when I stripped myself to sprint toward

the savior's voice. No. By then, I'd lost  
that appetite for discarding myself.

I carried them, one by one,  
like bride after bride across the threshold

and removed their boots. I drew baths  
loaded with salts, cooked meals in butter.

I let each one sleep when she needed to sleep.  
And in time, I thanked them.

I came to recognize their service.  
And in time, they let me love them the way

a father or a mother ought to have loved them.  
*Them.*

Yes, I suppose I do mean me.

*Eugenia Leigh*  
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<sup>239</sup> [Eugenia Leigh, "My Whole Life I Was Trained to Deny Myself," \*Poetry\*](#)

## Queen Anne's Revenge

The oldest child's favorite word is *detonation*.  
He turns foam bath letters  
into pistols and oranges into cannonballs.  
When you're a kid you can aim down the crosshairs  
and shoot another human being in the back.  
They can writhe around on the jungle floor, convulse  
and die, then get up to eat popsicles.  
I broke a grown man's cheekbone  
and was his best friend the next day.  
Two months later we shot bottle rockets  
and he burned the sweater right off my back.  
When I feel unimportant I imagine taking a bullet  
for a friend in a gunfight  
and then dying in a beautiful woman's arms,  
the whole town calling me a hero,  
but that's a whole different kind of violence.  
Today, I'm Captain Blackbeard  
and I am renouncing my retirement.  
I'm the King of No Mercy,  
the Scoundrel of Shark Teeth  
storming the deck of an unfamiliar ship,  
bow rusted and glistening with barnacles and sea water.  
I'm dying with eighteen holes in my chest.  
I'm watching, one open eye to the ground,  
as my son rips free  
from my arms, teeth bared, the breeze lifting  
his thin black hair, the ghost mast  
wavering above, the Queen Anne gone,  
only this ship now, a misty steering wheel  
with snot and apple juice stuck to it,  
and packs of four- and five-year-old pirates  
pouring over us, their gangly arms tangled in the chain rigging,  
exploding from the red play structure  
with fists full of bark dust.

Jay Nebel  
240

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<sup>240</sup> Jay Nebel, "[Queen Anne's Revenge](#)," collected in [Neighbors](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Nebbiolo

Gray patina covers the mature  
grapes like fog, the way breath  
from a mouth would bloom

on a mirror if the person were  
alive, if the *s* of *exist* still  
clouded *exit* or, as the British say

*Way Out*. For the Greeks, utopia  
could mean both a good place  
and no place, just as mist

backs away so quietly you don't  
even notice until it's  
no longer there. *How is it,*

Augustine asked, *that I remember  
forgetfulness?* Wine, like history,  
is the work of time: what it was

in its original state, but also what time  
has made of it. And what's missed  
is what the French call

*personne*—either no one  
or everyone. The three Fates never  
missed anyone: one spun the thread

of life, one measured how long  
it should be, and one decided when  
to cut the thread with her shears,

Just as the vintner decides in late  
October when it's time to snip  
the cord that dangles each cluster,

to release the scent of roses  
and tar. *I don't want hints  
of roses, of lilies of*

*the valley*, Coco Chanel told  
her perfumer, said that instead  
Chanel No. 5 should smell like *a bouquet*

*of abstract flowers.* At the end  
of her life, she no longer  
made sketches but cut fabric

right on the model, sometimes piercing  
the skin of the woman, who had to stand  
motionless for hours, smiling. At Chanel's

memorial mass in Paris, the models  
in the front rows dressed in Chanel  
and faux Chanel, placed

on the casket a spray of white  
flowers arranged in the shape  
of a tailor's shears.

*Angie Estes*  
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<sup>241</sup> [Angie Estes](#), "[Nebbiolo](#)," *FIELD*, collected in [Parole](#), [Oberlin College Press](#)

Ode to Airheads, Hairdos, Trains to and from Paris

For an hour on the train from Beauvais to Paris  
    Nord I'm entertained by the conversation of three  
American girls about their appointment the next  
    day with a hairdresser and if there is a subtext  
to this talk, I'm missing it, though little else. Will bangs  
    make them look too dykey? And layers, sometimes they hang  
like the fur of a shaggy dog. Streaks, what about blonde  
    streaks? "Whore," they scream, laughing like a coven of wild  
monkeys, and after they have exhausted the present  
    tense, they go on to the remembrance of hairdos past—  
high school proms, botched perms, late-night drunken cuts, the Loch Ness  
    Monster would be lost in their brains as in a vast, starless  
sea, but they're happy, will marry, overpopulate  
    the Earth, which you can't say about many poets,  
I think a few weeks later taking the eighty-four  
    bus to the hairdresser, where I'll spend three long hours  
and leave with one of the best cuts of my life from Guy,  
    who has a scar on his right cheek and is Israeli,  
but before that I pass a hotel with a plaque—  
    Attila József, great Hungarian poet, black  
moods and penniless, lived there ten years before he threw  
    himself under a train in Budapest. If we knew  
what the years held, would we alter our choices, take the train  
    at three-twenty instead of noon, walk in the rain  
instead of taking the Métro? The time travel films  
    I adore speak to this very question: overwhelmed  
by disease and war, the future sends Bruce Willis back  
    to stop a madman. I could be waiting by the track  
as József arrives in Paris, not with love but money,  
    which seemed to be the missing ingredient, the honey  
he needed to sweeten his tea. Most days I take the B  
    line of the RER, and one of the stops is Drancy,  
the way station for Jews rounded up by the Nazis  
    before being sent in trains to the camps, but we can't see  
those black-and-white figures in the Technicolor  
    present like ghosts reminding us with their pallor  
how dearly our circus of reds and golds has been purchased  
    and how in an instant all those colors could be erased.

Barbara Hamby  
242

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<sup>242</sup> Barbara Hamby, "Ode to Airheads, Hairdos, Trains to and from Paris," *Indiana Review*, collected in *All-Night Lingo Tango*, University of Pittsburgh Press

## Registry

They asked for what  
they'd need: one

cup and one plate,  
one day whose stunt

double would be  
night, and two miner's

lights, for when  
each was lost

to the other.

*Andrea Cohen*  
243

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<sup>243</sup> [Andrea Cohen](#), "[Registry](#)," [The New Yorker](#), collected in [Everything, Four Way Books](#)

## Marie Curie and the Isotopes, World Tour 1911

is what my new t-shirt that I got for Christmas says  
under her picture.

When I unwrapped it, my son was mysteriously  
exasperated and asked why I like Marie Curie so much  
anyway, which oddly I was unprepared to answer.  
I think I said that winter in Paris when she wore  
everything she owned to stay warm in her attic room  
while she nobly studied Chemistry  
for the good of all of us, or maybe Pierre's head  
crushed by the wheel of a carriage  
leaving her to raise Irene and Eve on her own  
or how she left them home alone at night  
while she went to the laboratory to finish the work  
she and Pierre had started or how she and Irene  
dragged their x-ray machine onto the fields of WW1  
to help the soldiers or maybe her hands rotting  
and killing her or the glowing journal  
she left in her drawer.

I mean, any one of these is a good enough reason.  
But he was right when he said that I was never good  
at science. Maybe I shouldn't have worn  
those flowered skirts and thought only of boys  
and suffering. Was Marie the antidote?  
Like my own mother to whom I wouldn't listen?  
Once someone asked her  
if she was a poet too, and she said *No*,  
with an expression of almost horror,  
*I'm a social scientist.*

I gave my nephew a *Mama Llama* book for Christmas,  
and my mother called to tell me she approves  
of *Mama Llama*. *Mama Llama* doesn't  
like melodrama. Well, of course she doesn't.

The rhyme was inevitable.

In the library at St. Aloysius Grade School,  
there was a section of biographies of famous women  
that included St. Theresa of the Little Flower,  
Florence Nightingale, Clara Barton, and Marie Curie.  
I checked them out again as soon as they were due.

Marie Curie was the one most famous  
for her mind. Kindness was what my mother said  
I had already, and this was clearly disappointing.  
I think it would help if I had a band.

Like the Isotopes. I have never heard them but imagine  
they are as clever as Bach's two-part inventions

which I always loved playing because you had to tell

one hand to do something completely different  
than the other, not just complementary but distinct  
and simultaneous. It is easy to think danger  
is beautiful when you're not in it  
or to love the thing you are discovering  
when you don't yet know it's killing you.  
I am discovering something. I can feel it coming closer.  
Like the new year that is about to begin  
in this late afternoon darkness,  
the Christmas lights beaming sadly  
after their time has passed, which is difficult  
to determine while it's happening  
but you know when it has.  
I wonder if Marie Curie was surprised  
when she learned that science had deceived her.  
I know she did not admit that radiation exposure  
could have had anything to do  
with her illness and death, which is in keeping  
with her character, and thus another thing  
I must admire.

*Laura Read*  
244

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<sup>244</sup> [Laura Read, "Marie Curie and the Isotopes, World Tour 1911," \*The Laurel Review\*](#)

you told me it worked & i've been doing it ever since

the feeling of the protagonist in a teen movie  
when she takes her glasses off & her hair down  
& descends the stairs in something sparkling—  
i will never be looked at like that. i will never  
have flowers i didn't buy for myself. i keep  
killing plants by forgetting to water them  
& then overwatering them all at once.  
i wanted to write something pale pink & sexy  
but my legs are loosely crossed. i can't  
stop hearing bells where there are no bells.  
i lie down extravagantly & get ash in my hair.  
i daydream about a frozen river.  
i am in a wind-up life waiting for hands.  
nothing about me is pale pink & sexy.  
everything about me is rubbery. growing mouths.  
i am trying to hurl facts out of my body  
& away from myself. to tie them  
with ribbons & drown them in the lake.  
cut the faces off every flower. i want  
to be softer but instead i would drink blood  
if anyone asked. no one ever does. i grow  
fractal with worry, triangles of fear  
pulsing out & out. in my fantasies:  
gauzy slip, floral sofa, the right kind  
of no. the man from craigslist who hauled  
my floral sofa through my second-story window  
had startling arms & talked about his divorce.  
i didn't consider it for a second. where is  
something rougher to break through  
all this noise? mostly i want to be left  
alone, to watch traffic from the overpass  
& walk back home. i'll never be pretty  
in an easy way but i match my cotton sheets  
to my uneven nails. i smoke on the roof  
& watch the low arcs of planes, pretend the light  
on that distant tower is mars. jess tells me  
i decorate like a protagonist  
& i don't believe her.  
protagonists eventually get what they want:  
or they don't, but it's spectacular.  
i'm going to sputter out  
like a dying vibrator battery  
i stole from a smoke detector.  
i'm going to clench my teeth & nothing's  
going to happen. who would run  
through an airport for me?

who would hold my turbulent hand?  
geese rising like smoke over the interstate.  
plane-scattered sunset the color  
of a just-formed bruise, of my bedroom walls,  
where the vaseline on the lens  
only blurs you walking away.

*Cassandra de Alba*  
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<sup>245</sup> [Cassandra de Alba](#), "[you told me it worked & i've been doing it ever since](#)," collected in [Ugly/Sad](#), [Glass Poetry Press](#)

December 17, 2016

The first winter storm has passed over me, Naomi.

Today the city issued a travel warning—the frozen streets *still in the process of treatment*—I left the house anyway and drove a long way under the heaviest white branches.

Not a flake moved in the air as I drove.

Do you know the Mary Ruefle poem about snow?

*Every time it starts to snow, she writes, I would like to have / sex.*

I remember a professor joking before class in Boston *I imagine none of you gets laid here in the wintertime—how do you even know what's under those coats, those hats?*

*You probably wish you went to college in San Diego, or in Miami.*

But the erotic survives longest as theory.

Your thick black scarf unwound from your black hair, still warm from your neck, would be enough.

The scarf on the chair's cooling back, waiting as long as necessary

Ruefle's poem ends *when it snows like this I feel the / whole world has joined me in isolation and silence.*

This is how I feel speaking to you so often without my mouth moving.

How the buckled branches lift and lower the weight of it until spring

*Rachel Mennies*  
246

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<sup>246</sup> [Rachel Mennies, "December 17, 2016,"](#) collected in [The Naomi Letters, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## Joy

I stayed in bed for days and watched  
a spider in the light spin  
an airy web above my head, something

cool and loose, without  
the use of force, or weight.

That time, I nearly died

of joy I was a child. Still alive.  
Relatives stood above me smiling. Summer  
was my sickness. Translucent

nurses brought me everything  
I needed, while I

swam in and out of sun, which  
unraveled its white knitting  
on the surface of the pool, and flew

above the orchards, which stretched  
in bloom  
from my mind to the end time—just  
above the branches, but at great speed

and thought I saw a small girl  
running like a madwoman beneath the trees.

I didn't even need to eat! I *drank* the beautiful meals  
my mother made for me

from coolness and silver spoons. My father

sat at the edge of the bed  
and prayed for the angels' protection. Like

talcum and masculine sweat, the smell  
of wet feathers as I slept. I got better

and better, listening...

But what was that sound? The clock? The toilet

flushing? Rain on the playground? The ocean  
choking on its own waves?

No.

It was a dog  
lapping at a bloody tray.

Childhood came and went in a day

and I woke on Sunday in the arms of a stranger.  
Oh, I realized then,

this must be joy again. Despite

the headache, the salty thirst, the shame—that

spinning above the bed, more  
light than thread, was

exactly, *exactly*, the same.

*Laura Kasichke*  
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<sup>247</sup> [Laura Kasichke, "Joy," \*The Southern Review\*, collected in \*Dance and Disappear\*, University of Massachusetts Press](#)



Kierkegaard says to love God without faith is to see  
only the self, and you think of the hospital across the street.  
All night, Mt. Sinai will sit quietly, its fluorescent hallways marked  
by every human grief—someone  
crying in a lobby chair, someone  
reciting childhood prayers.

Will God draw close  
if you call?

Tonight, another party. You hide in the bathroom stall. You are

thirsty, so you bring  
water to your lips,

you are careful  
and still, water

keeps falling through your hands.

*Megan Pinto*  
248

## The Necessary Preoccupations

*Cure* means something else to a roofer, as does *cant*.  
I just found out I've got no mansard and my underlayment is aging  
like my flashing, which were my eyes.  
Eyes has the word *yes* in it, have you ever realized that?  
I might have misheard the roofer's blue eyes.  
Is there plywood on that baby? he asked.  
And something about ferrule and bitumen,  
a word I imagine having been called under as many roofs  
as breaths. I like to say it with the British pronunciation.  
Bitumen.  
Hot stuff is bitumen, actually, I looked it up.  
I look up but can't see the roof and can't climb up on the roof  
to see the stars, which were his eyes.  
Weep hole is not an anatomical term,  
we looked for my weep holes but he couldn't find them,  
he gave up too soon, some men do.  
Doggedness is my hobby, that's what I wrote  
on the jury-duty questionnaire.  
Someone else wrote down happy hour.  
Happy hours, which were his eyes—  
He promised to send a bid last night but nothing  
except *Your pkg has shipped*  
came across the ether, through the skies,  
down through the three layers of old shingles I've got to haul away  
before anything new goes up.  
Most shingles have a lifetime warranty now.  
Who needs a lifetime?  
All of *Ulysses* takes place in one single bitumen flashpoint of a day.  
I see the words *yes* and *yeses* and *eyes* in *Ulysses*.  
Molly Bloom says *yes* eighty-seven times and the sky touches the roof.  
Yes, I would have said.  
In the package coming my way are new headlights.  
Those are headlights that were his eyes!  
And blue-tinted headlights aren't even legal.

Catherine Barnett

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<sup>249</sup> Catherine Barnett, "[The Necessary Preoccupations](#)," collected in [Human Hours](#), Graywolf Press

## As for the Heart

I am come to the age  
of pondering my lastness:

buying what seems likely  
my final winter coat at Macy's,  
or when a glossy magazine  
(so very blithely)  
asks me to *renew*. As for

my heart, that ever-pixilated  
tweener, how tediously long  
I've been expected to baby  
her complaint  
(unLOVED unLOVED),

alarmed and stubborn clock—  
refusing to listen even as  
the more intrepid tried.

Now she mostly mutters  
to herself, though  
occasionally there's  
some clanging, a tinny sound,

like the radiator in a Southie  
triple decker, fractious as  
a pair of cowboy boots  
in a laundromat's dryer,

It's always been this  
joke the old ones know—  
in such a state  
of nearly doneness,

the world grows sweeter,  
as if our later days  
were underscored with music  
from a nocturne's saddest  
oboe hidden in the trees.

Just yesterday,  
while standing in the kitchen,  
my son complained nonstop  
about his AP psych class  
while wolfing warmed-up

bucatini from a crazed,  
pink china bowl.

Shiny, kvetching creature.  
Even if I could tell him  
what he doesn't want to know,  
I wouldn't. But now

the pissy storm that's spent  
all afternoon flapping like  
a dirty sheet  
has wandered off  
to spook some other  
neighborhood.

There's one barbed weed  
pushing up greenly through  
my scruffy loropetalum.

And it falls on me, this little  
cold rain the day has left.

*Erin Belieu*  
250

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<sup>250</sup> [Erin Belieu, "As for the Heart,"](#) collected in [Come Hither Honeycomb, Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Boston Year

My first week in Cambridge a car full of white boys  
tried to run me off the road, and spit through the window,  
open to ask directions. I was always asking directions  
and always driving: to an Armenian market  
in Watertown to buy figs and string cheese, apricots,  
dark spices and olives from barrels, tubes of paste  
with unreadable Arabic labels. I ate  
stuffed grape leaves and watched my lips swell in the mirror.  
The floors of my apartment would never come clean.  
Whenever I saw other colored people  
in bookshops, or museums, or cafeterias, I'd gasp,  
smile shyly, but they'd disappear before I spoke.  
What would I have said to them? Come with me? Take  
me home? Are you my mother? No. I sat alone  
in countless Chinese restaurants eating almond  
cookies, sipping tea with spoons and spoons of sugar.  
Popcorn and coffee was dinner. When I fainted  
from migraine in the grocery store, a Portuguese  
man above me mouthed: "No breakfast." He gave me  
orange juice and chocolate bars. The color red  
sprang into relief singing Wagner's *Walküre*.  
Entire tribes gyrated and drummed in my head.  
I learned the samba from a Brazilian man  
so tiny, so festooned with glitter I was certain  
that he slept inside a filigreed, Fabergé egg.  
No one at the door: no salesmen, Mormons; meter  
readers, exterminations, no Harriet Tubman,  
no one. Red notes sounding in a gray trolley town.

*Elizabeth Alexander*

251

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<sup>251</sup> [Elizabeth Alexander](#), "[Boston Year](#)," collected in [Crave Radiancy](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Dear Apostrophe

I.

I'm a tad sorry for you floating mark  
often forgotten or in the wrong place  
trivial as lint

a currant in a muffin  
sweet in the way that being correct is sweet

II.

for years I circled *its'* on student papers  
explaining that *its'*  
like irregardless does not exist

now I often let error stand

marks only sometimes useful  
in this economy we've made

III.

in English the apostrophe developed a voluminous appetite  
for possession not just elision

swallowing *es*

*womman is mannes joye and al his blis*

IV

savvy printers saving time and type  
changed the way we scribe and snipe  
*til we be roten, kan we nat be rype*

V.

*you might understand  
when I rue myself*

*and turn  
neck tucked into torso  
limb at a right angle*

*flamingo sleeping on one leg  
still a body*

*a gust of wind could topple*

*Natasha Sajé*  
252

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<sup>252</sup> [Natasha Sajé, "Dear Apostrophe," \*Minnesota Review\*, collected in \*Special Delivery\*, Diode Editions](#)

After you were dead, I worked  
non-stop at night sewing  
your poems back together, or where  
necessary, pulling them  
apart, subsisting on tear-

and-eat items at the gas station  
on the corner, push-button  
milkshakes, microwaveable  
popcorn. My body  
was a suit I picked out

every morning and every  
night hung back up  
in the closet, surrounding by  
your weightlessness, at once  
heavy and useless,

one leg still a little longer  
than the other, a dead father  
and mother, the history  
of cinema before 1960 playing  
on loop inside my brain.

One day I'm Janet Gaynor  
in the Parisian sewers, another,  
I'm the mountain in *The Searchers*  
John Wayne is walking toward  
and then I'm the ranch house door

that closes on itself to consecrate  
the darkness, the border  
between the country of loss  
and the country of time.  
O, my mentor, my minotaur—

the hospital where you held  
my hand is gone, and with it  
the labyrinth and the latticework,  
the chandeliers of tubes,  
the horrible food, the buffet

of ways to be dead and still falling  
in love with how the light blinds  
the television, how the body stays

exactly where you leave it  
laid across the crux of sheets

like Helen Hayes in *A Farewell  
to Arms*, a pillow for an aureole,  
and no one to lift you up  
so I lift you up now—  
I take your body

to the cherry blossoms  
in the window, the bell choir,  
the lake thawing in the valley.  
You weigh almost nothing.  
My arms are giving way.

*P. Scott Cunningham*  
253

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<sup>253</sup> [P. Scott Cunningham](#), "[Bidart & Lowell](#)," [Okey-Panky](#), collected in [Ya Te Veo](#), [The University of Arkansas Press](#)

## Facts About the Moon

The moon is backing away from us  
an inch and a half each year. That means  
if you're like me and were born  
around fifty years ago the moon  
was a full six feet closer to the earth.  
What's a person supposed to do?  
I feel the gray cloud of consternation  
travel across my face. I begin thinking  
about the moon-lit past, how if you go back  
far enough you can imagine the breathtaking  
hugeness of the moon, prehistoric  
solar eclipses when the moon covered the sun  
so completely there was no corona, only  
a darkness we had no word for.  
And future eclipses will look like this: the moon  
a small black pupil in the eye of the sun.  
But these are bald facts.  
What bothers me most is that someday  
the moon will spiral right out of orbit  
and all land-based life will die.  
The moon keeps the oceans from swallowing  
the shores, keeps the electromagnetic fields  
in check at the polar ends of the earth.  
And please don't tell me  
what I already know, that it won't happen  
for a long time. I don't care. I'm afraid  
of what will happen to the moon.  
Forget us. We don't deserve the moon.  
Maybe we once did but not now  
after all we've done. These nights  
I harbor a secret pity for the moon, rolling  
around alone in space without  
her milky planet, her only child, a mother  
who's lost a child, a bad child,  
a greedy child or maybe a grown boy  
who's murdered and raped, a mother  
can't help it, she loves that boy  
anyway, and in spite of herself  
she misses him, and if you sit beside her  
on the padded hospital bench  
outside the door to his room you can't not  
take her hand, listen to her while she  
weeps, telling you how sweet he was,  
how blue his eyes, and you know she's only  
romanticizing, that she's conveniently  
forgotten the bruises and booze,

the stolen car, the day he ripped  
the phones from the walls, and you want  
to slap her back to sanity, remind her  
of the truth: he was a leech, a fuckup,  
a little shit, and you almost do  
until she lifts her pale puffy face, her eyes  
two craters and then you can't help it  
either, you know love when you see it,  
you can feel its lunar strength, its brutal pull.

*Dorianne Laux*  
254

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<sup>254</sup> [Dorianne Laux](#), "[Facts About the Moon](#)," collected in [Facts About the Moon, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight

1

You scream, waking from a nightmare.

When I sleepwalk  
into your room, and pick you up,  
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me  
hard,  
as if clinging could save us. I think  
you think  
I will never die, I think I exude  
to you the permanence of smoke or stars,  
even as  
my broken arms heal themselves around you.

2

I have heard you tell  
the sun, *don't go down*, I have stood by  
as you told the flower, *don't grow old*,  
*don't die*. Little Maud,

I would blow the flame out of your silver cup,  
I would suck the rot from your fingernail,  
I would brush your sprouting hair of the dying light,  
I would scrape the rust off your ivory bones,  
I would help death escape through the little ribs of your body,  
I would alchemize the ashes of your cradle back into wood,  
I would let nothing of you go, ever,

until washerwomen  
feel the clothes fall asleep in their hands,  
and hens scratch their spell across hatchet blades,  
and rats walk away from the culture of the plague,  
and iron twists weapons toward truth north,  
and grease refuse to slide in the machinery of progress,  
and men feel as free on earth as fleas on the bodies of men,  
and lovers no longer whisper to the presence beside them in the dark, *O corpse-to-be...*

And yet perhaps this is the reason you cry,  
this the nightmare you wake screaming from:  
being forever  
in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

3

In a restaurant once, everyone  
quietly eating, you clambered up  
on my lap: to all  
the mouthfuls rising toward  
all the mouths, at the top of your voice  
you cried  
your one word, *caca! caca! caca!*  
and each spoonful  
stopped, a moment, in midair, in its withering  
steam.

Yes,  
you cling because  
I, like you, only sooner  
than you, will go down  
the path of vanished alphabets,  
the roadlessness  
to the other side of the darkness,  
your arms  
like the shoes left behind,  
like the adjectives in the halting speech  
of old folk,  
which once could call up the lost nouns.

4

And you yourself,  
some impossible Tuesday  
in the year Two Thousand and Nine, will walk out  
among the black stones  
of the field, in the rain,

and the stones saying  
over their one word, *ci-gît, ci-gît, ci-gît,*

and the raindrops  
hitting you on the fontanel  
over and over, and you standing there  
unable to let them in.

5

If one day it happens  
you find yourself with someone you love  
in a café at one end  
of the Pont Mirabeau, at the zinc bar  
where wine takes the shapes of upward opening glasses,

and if you commit then, as we did, the error

of thinking,  
*one day all this will only be memory,*

learn,  
as you stand  
at the end of the bridge which arc,  
from love, you think, to enduring love,  
to reach deeper  
into the sorrows  
to come—to touch  
the almost imaginary bones  
under the face, to hear under the laughter  
the wind crying across the black stones. Kiss  
the mouth  
that tells you, *here,*  
*here is the world.* This mouth. This laughter. These temple bones.

The still undanced cadence of vanishing.

6

In the light the moon  
sends back, I can see in your eyes

the hand that waved once  
in my father's eyes, a tiny kite  
wobbling far up in the twilight of his last look:

and the angel  
of all mortal things lets go the string.

7

Back you go, into your crib.

The last blackbird lights up his gold wings: *farewell.*  
Your eyes close inside your head,  
in sleep. Already  
in your dreams the hours begin to sing.

Little sleep's-head sprouting hair in the moonlight,  
when I come back  
we will go out together,  
we will walk out together among  
the ten thousand things,  
each scratched in time with such knowledge, *the wages*  
*of dying is love.*

*Galway Kinnell*

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<sup>255</sup> [Galway Kinnell](#), "[Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight](#)," collected in [The Book of Nightmares](#), [Houghton Mifflin](#)

## The Panther is a Virtual Animal

*with a line from Tavia Nyong'o*

Anything that wants to be can be a panther. The black lion or ocelot, the black cheetah or cornrowed uptown girl sprinting up her neighborhood block just like one, in dogged pursuit of the future world. In this frame, I imagine Huey and Bobby as boys in the sense of gender and genre alike, an unbroken line reading: *my life is an armor for the other*. Before black berets or free breakfasts, then, there is friendship. Before gun laws shifting in the wake of organized strength, leather jackets shimmering like gypsum in the Northern California twilight—or else magazine covers running the world over, compelling everyday ordinary people across the spectrum of context or color to sing *who wants to be a panther ought to be he can be it*—there is love. The panther is a virtual animal. The panther strikes only when it has been assailed. The panther is a human vision, interminable refusal, our common call to adore ourselves as what we are and live and die on terms we fashioned from the earth like this. Our precious metal metonym. Our style of fire and stone.

*Joshua Bennett*  
256

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<sup>256</sup> [Joshua Bennett](#), "[The Panther is a Virtual Animal](#)," [The New York Times Magazine](#), collected in [Owed](#), Penguin Books

## Good Share

An airport—like a hog farm,  
like a landfill, like a graveyard—

has to go somewhere. An airport  
has to go somewhere, so  
why not here? I nominate you

and you and me to roil  
in our respective beds while planes

fly so low overhead we can tell  
what makes they are. The yowl  
of the Airbus, the Boeing's

Gregorian roar. At least they drown  
out the rest of this inexcusably human

night: longneck bottle greeting  
the side of a passing car,  
strange chanting, fistfight too close

to the tracks, the neighbors  
with their nonstop innovation

in the arena of sex-offender-registry  
drinking games. View the mug shot,  
guess the offense, drink a shot if

you're wrong. Eleven men in ten  
locations: guess which two guys

split a duplex. Drink a shot  
if you're wrong. Plug in the ocean  
in order to find out if anyone's

currently in the ocean and if  
we, consequently, should avoid it.

Do you think we should avoid it?  
Drink a shot if you're  
wrong. Drink while you can,

because I heard from a dead guy  
there's no alcohol in Heaven.

I also heard no alcohol  
on Earth. If you're drinking right  
now, buddy, you're in Hell.

*Natalie Shapero*  
257

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<sup>257</sup> [Natalie Shapero, "Good Share," \*Los Angeles Review of Books\*](#), collected in [Popular Longing](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Maidenform Museum

Downstairs there's a Dr. Pepper machine  
and an unplugged Ms. Pac-Man. A girl  
about his age—a little older—comes in, says

her name is Christina except she changed  
both *Is* to *Ys*. Her dad is a stuntman. If  
you go from the pool to the hot tub too fast

you can die from blood boiling. She starts  
to strip, arms in one at a time then disengages  
her head. Her breasts aren't like his mother's,

which hang away from her body, but puffy  
and beige like the round Band-Aids they put  
over the spot of a measles shot. She folds

her bra, cup to cup. You have to learn to  
undo it with one hand. He sneezes. She snaps  
the swimsuit over her shoulders. What are you

looking at? Upstairs his mother, irritable,  
drops her bra to the floor. Patent 1927.  
Ginghams, gossamers, missiles, snowcones,

push-ups, second skins. I Dreamed I Was.  
I Can't Believe It's Not Butter. Old fleshy duo,  
once so admired by a lover he named them

Coconut and Key Lime Pie. Or maybe everyone  
has a lover who does this. Afterwards: enormous,  
ovoid as a pigskin and slick with lanolin, nipples

raw, his infant fist jerking to find the edge  
of her nightgown, an underthing to grip as he  
drew his milk—resolute pulls from the jaw.

*B. K. Fischer*  
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<sup>258</sup> [B. K. Fischer](#), "[Maidenform Museum](#)," collected in [Mutiny Gallery](#), [Truman State University Press](#)

## On the Brighton Beach Boardwalk

On the Brighton Beach boardwalk men sit in the rain shelters smelling of piss, shouting drunk genius into the afternoon sun. Men play chess on small portable sets holding beach umbrellas for cover. Men take care of other men, raising them from wheelchairs and guiding them to benches and it looks just like slow dancing. So gentle. And someone has rolled blue carpets from the boards, over the beach, to the pale-blue water.

There are so many young mothers but my mother has hope for me too. She says *a beautiful girl like me, men must make advances all the time. A beautiful girl like me has to think of her future. A beautiful girl like me, well, cousin Lena turned forty and she quit that Los Angeles life and that Los Angeles girlfriend. Got herself a rich husband, an adopted baby. And, don't you know they love that baby? They love her despite how, in the wrong light, she's a little too brown.*

I'm furiously stuffing my mouth with black bread because this talk makes me angry and because I'm crying, staring down into my plate, thinking on last night—how you called me *difficult* when you could have called me *beautiful*. And here it is, *beautiful* tumbling out my mother's mouth like bad oil. More and more I imagine my dead body slumped beside me. It feels peaceful. *We're just having a heart to heart*, my mother comforts me, *you shouldn't get so upset*.

Gala Mukomolova  
259

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259 [Gala Mukomolova, "On the Brighton Beach Boardwalk," \*Boston Review\*, collected in \*Without Protection\*, Coffee House Press](#)

## Night in the Castle

I'm not sure what to do about that scorpion twitching on the wall  
Maybe I should slam it with this book of terrible poetry

or just read aloud to it until it dies of a histrionic metaphor  
bleeding out on the ancient stones in a five-octave aria

If I get a little drunker I might try to murder it with my sandal  
I gave up on mercy a while ago

That's what happens when you live in a castle on an artist's grant  
You look at the late-afternoon Umbrian light smearing itself over the tomato vines

& feel entitled—like an underage duchess whose husband has finally died of gout  
leaving her free for more secret liaisons with the court musician

She might even have poisoned the duke, the lecherous shit  
It's hard to remember what life was like before this

& I don't want to, I want to stay here & poison the king next  
I want to be a feared & beloved queen ordering up fresh linens & beheadings

locking up bad poets in their artisanal hair shirts  
torturing academics with pornographic marionette performances

Meanwhile the scorpion is still there twitching slightly  
reciting something about violence & the prison of ego

& I can hear the clashing armies on the wide lawn outside  
sinking down into history & then standing up again

*Kim Addonizio*  
260

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<sup>260</sup> [Kim Addonizio, "Night in the Castle,"](#) collected in [Now We're Getting Somewhere, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## Portrait of the Village

We believe in God the way the blind must believe in color,  
the deaf in rondo. We and the children are abundant and named  
after saints and angels. Lailah is dyspeptic, Ezekiel horny,  
Helena terrorizes Gabriel with a bullfrog commandeered  
from thick muck that borders the river. Our bodies cruise  
around in cars the way the mind cruises around in the body,  
the streets and boulevards named for famous bays  
we haven't sailed to. I own a colonial on Guantanamo Road.  
Theresa is a boarder at the women's inn on Bengal.  
To witness her arrival weekly at banquets in the village  
is a deluge of the sensory, a bottle of Chablis cradled  
like a musket in her right arm, her fingernails the hoods  
of ten red Edsels, her floral prints, her black Pumas,  
her cardigan clearly. I'm her devotee, in love in the village  
and with the village, which isn't to say life is so much better here  
than elsewhere but that it fits together like a prong in an outlet,  
silent and electric, which isn't to say life is so much better here,  
but that the horror is a delicate drone in the offing like gears  
of an elevator buzzing beneath the Muzak. We understand others  
in the elsewhere are lasing gazebos and strafing begonias,  
we understand the horror will not end in some bodies  
smooching exuberantly, but in the village sodium lights halo  
the grain silos, the firmament entwines with girders  
of the industrial bridge I'm not leaping from, a propane flame  
waves its pale blue banner over the verdant bulge of the landfill,  
and my arm parts the lazy pollen of afternoons with Theresa.  
All autumn we are unobtrusive as clean laundry left in a basket  
in a quiet apartment on a quiet corner of the village  
where no-one is waiting. When winter arrives belated,  
we walk out into the avenue into a snowfall so thick it's as if  
the whole scene's coming in over a faulty antenna.  
Our bodies in white noise. The village in a crystalline rainfall.  
The snow as one kind of atmosphere falling out of suspension.

*Jaswinder Bolina*

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<sup>261</sup> [Jaswinder Bolina](#), "[Portrait of the Village](#)," *Cavalier*, collected in [Phantom Camera](#), [New Issues Press](#)

[The problem with sweetness is death]

The problem with sweetness is death. The problem with everything is death. There really is no other problem if you factor everything down, which I was no good at when studying fractions. They were always using pie as their example. Rather than thinking about factoring things down I wondered what kind of pie. And here I am, broke, barely able to count to fourteen. When people talk about math they say you'll need it to balance your checkbook. What is a checkbook and what, indeed, is balance? Speaking of sweetness, for a time I worked in a fudge shop on an island. After a week the smell of sweetness made me heave, not to mention the smell of horses; it was an island without cars, shit everywhere. When I quit, the owner slapped me.

*Diane Seuss*  
262

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<sup>262</sup> [Diane Seuss](#), "[[The problem with sweetness is death](#)]," [Shenandoah](#), collected in [Frank](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

## Regeneration

Forgiven, my father says he struggled  
to not hit us the way his father  
had punched and smacked and kicked him

and so my father is a man who had thought  
of putting his boot to my head. When my son  
pushes me saying *not you not mama go away*

I think of giving in to him, leaving  
in the old way/cheap gas way, driving until all  
is borderless and taking with me

only impractical clothes. After he was born  
I did not want to die but nor  
did I exactly want to not-die so I imagined

escaping to Prague, getting skinny,  
and wearing knee-high boots  
as I walked the languorous walk

of those who have somewhere to go  
and all the time to arrive, over the city's  
storied skin bulging with violins

and sadness, kavarnas exhaling smoke,  
drunks spitting come-ons because it is late  
and I am beautiful and I am alone.

*Erin Adair-Hodges*  
263

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<sup>263</sup> [Erin Adair-Hodges, "Regeneration," \*Superstition Review\*, collected in \*Let's All Die Happy\*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Wedding Planning

I begin to dread the surf and turf. I cross  
then double cross another friend off of the list. Now this,  
“The jaws of leopard seals and grizzly bears are similar,  
except the leopard seals’ are twice as big. They’re also more intelligent.”  
God knows my mother likes to tell me things  
I do not want to know in restaurants.  
“This scientist, she studied icebergs in Antarctica.  
She watched them drift and scour the sea floor,  
and the ensuant loss of life and habitat—”  
This story I know cold and could deglove.

Snow settled round the research base, like a halo.  
The ancient face, the surface, of the bay  
under a layer of jostling, floating crags—“brash ice.”

Birds flew in fists into the teeth of sky.  
Whether she believed in god or anything below us,  
wind furred the shallows and she snorkeled out.

“The leopard seal attacked from underneath,  
and so she must have seen the open jaws, the teeth. She screamed,  
was dragged, her dive computer says, to a depth of 230 feet.”

I cross another friend off of my list.  
Punishment should be immediate,  
but accident cannot be reckoned with.  
This is the myth inside decorum—  
and what I’ve ordered never does arrive.

*Eleanor Boudreau*  
264

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<sup>264</sup> [Eleanor Boudreau](#), “[Wedding Planning](#),” [Copper Nickel](#), collected in [Earnest. Earnest?](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Odaxelagnia

When I sink my teeth into you,  
there is a taste, a satisfaction, the start  
of a match, the catch in your throat.  
We are rich with the exhilarations  
of our blood, we are rich with our  
print-blackened roots, like the crowns  
of my teeth in you cracked like dirt,  
enamel-fragile and eggshell-veined. I sink  
my teeth and they knit your history  
a coat. I shut the cold like a tap  
and lean like a trunk and we unravel  
as though thread and when we fall,  
the quiet is like a feather, like  
a bough. It was a God I held  
in the trap of my mouth, in you,  
my rabbit gone limp, my bite  
at your neck and me tasting fur  
like wind and me tasting the scent  
of you melted as wax. A wick lit,  
it was my path, it was a desire  
to solidify and start. At the front.  
At the back. In the lip. At its cry.  
No dry soul unsickened yet. I sink  
my teeth. I notch your depth. I prove  
it has terror, an Atlantic I've wept.

*Jennifer Militello*  
265

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<sup>265</sup> [Jennifer Militello, "Odaxelagnia," \*Boston Review\*, collected in \*The Pact\*, Tupelo Press](#)

The Destruction of the Piano Was the Destruction of Me

My problem is there is just not enough joy.  
Or, joy is too big to fit through my tiny heart-shaped door.  
Not just my joy. Your joy. Their joy. Our joy  
can't ever be shared. Like cocaine, in its small white envelope,  
or the cocaine tucked into that little pocket of your jeans—that coke  
will be my coke. I'll write my name with it on a mirror. Sometimes  
I have to chop things up to get them through and  
out my door: my heart door, my eyeball door, my brain door.  
Joy, as a guest, never stays long enough. Joy is rude,  
a fickle flat-leaver and too proud of its letters, which hang  
below the line. In some tongues, the letter “j”—  
that hooker—can sound like “y.” Why? My mother  
loved this letter desperately, like it just wouldn't last:  
couldn't have enough of us with joy: all “j”, all day.

*Jennifer Martelli*

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<sup>266</sup> [Jennifer Martelli, “The Destruction of the Piano Was the Destruction of Me,” \*Incessant Pipe\*](#)

Regarding Silphium, the Birth Control of the Roman Empire for 600 Years, Extincted by Careless Land Management in the Year 200 A.D.

When I was just about done being married and he was a blossomed-out nerve of seeing himself through the ugly eyes of how I had come to see him and myself for letting our lives get so Tupperware-fur-molded, for thinking I could lace and pinprick it back with just the right delicacy, when a good punch in the face was what a mess this bad required. (I know, you're thinking a punch in the face is never the answer, but that's the lace talking.) When I was just about done with the lace-throated maybe-violence, our daughter, who is five, told me how he broke—she didn't say he broke, she said he got really worked up—driving past all the protestors outside Planned Parenthood on Providence Ave., from which the university medical school had just withdrawn funding and also the option for residents to do training there, how he took a hard left into the parking lot and with our daughter by the hand marched in with an urgency that made the young man working the desk say, "Sir?" with some alarm. He took a breath to be more steady and said, "I'm so sorry about all of this—all of that out there—and I just thought I'd make a donation" as he pulled all the money from his wallet, some of it crumpled, a mixture of 5s and 1s and pushed it across the counter, our daughter watching and looking around the room, studying the faces of timid and nervous young women, I imagine, in those plastic chairs I remember from when I once sat in this exact waiting room myself, so many years ago, feeling embarrassed and ashamed because it seemed that's what I was supposed to feel, though if I could have felt my way beyond "supposed to" back then to my actual self, I would have known I didn't feel sorry at all, only annoyed by the tedium of appointments, the practical necessity of that clean smell, the chilly dustless air of a building with nothing soft except the aspect of the resident, who is the only

doctor I have ever had who joked as she put her gloved hand in my body. "I guess this is the most awkward thing you'll do today, huh?" It was funny and made me feel like we'd been friends a long time. My husband, who is still my husband after all, knew that story and I guess he wanted our daughter to somehow know it too. "Sometimes you'll feel very alone," I tell her on a day when I find her pressing her face against the window, watching the children next door play in the grass, wiping tears from her face as fast as they fall. "Other times you'll be so wonderfully surprised by the strange bridges people manage to build out to you when you never would have expected they could."

*Kathryn Nuernberger*  
267

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<sup>267</sup> [Kathryn Nuernberger, "Regarding Silphium, the Birth Control of the Roman Empire for 600 Years, Extincted by Careless Land Management in the Year 200 A.D.," \*The Account\*, collected in \*Rue\*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## Diamonds

Judith Butler, I am calling you out  
here in the kitchen where I'm unloading the dishwasher  
performing my gender as I'm wont to do  
My son yells from upstairs, How do you spell *probably*?  
My daughter plays a game on my phone  
caring for little green monster who needs a bath  
I need to buy diamonds so her monster can sing  
I need a sack of diamonds so I can work part-time  
to take care of my kids and still eat when I'm old  
performing my old lady tasks  
I hope I'm yarn-bombing an embassy somewhere  
Better start learning to knit or whatever  
Knitting performs femininity, apparently

We need diamonds to afford my house  
now that I'm a single mom  
Conflict-free ones for a conflict-free life  
To perform a single mom's gender  
is to need a chest of gold coins  
and my life is easy I am not hungry  
not beaten up working three jobs taking night classes  
not ill without insurance I have a good job  
I'm already leveled up! Got all my privileges  
I'm not floating on a raft to escape war  
not having sex with soldiers for food  
my children are not digging for diamonds  
we're not being exploited in any way  
"*Could Be Worse!*" is a book we love to read  
at bedtime, it's by James Stevenson  
It is, my son & I think, the plot to most movies  
It is I think the plot to most lives

I'm lucky, I get to teach you, Judith  
to students who eat up your words like candy hearts  
who return to the arms of their friends  
to dye their hair blue & fuck everyone & not shave  
and make manifestos & tweet witty protests  
who do drugs & sleep late & dance naked  
They seem so unafraid ahistorical dreamfull  
They stand outside the library smoking cigarettes  
as if we're not going to die!  
As if there aren't books to read!  
I have the greatest job in the world  
Could be a lot worse

But I'm lonely in debt there's no one to love me

I'm feeling sorry for myself & guilty for all my luck  
Mutually contradictory states of mind  
that's what Shakespeare invented, supposedly  
Gender, you say, is a performance  
continually created through *citational repetition*  
Daily rituals we put on again & then again  
as if we were born into a theatrical family  
putting on the same play that's been going on forever  
and there's no way out, so says Foucault  
Michel, my turtle-necked darling, I love you  
although you make me feel imprisoned  
docile and subject to self-surveillance  
Judith, Michel, I'm calling on you

I think I'm stuck in *Hamlet*  
in the role of Queen Gertrude  
but not at all royal I'm from Pittsburgh  
because if I mention any man's name  
my son says, I hate that guy  
I asked him if he thought I was pretty  
He said, Eh, you're okay-to-good

For his birthday he'd like a BB gun  
My daughter spins in the living room to Rihanna  
who has a pile of diamonds, probably  
This little Ophelia talks to her Legos  
and swims with water wings  
She wants to know if music is air  
She says my butt jiggles when I walk  
Yes, that's it, I am a single Gertrude  
in a little New England hamlet  
Yet there are no louche kings to marry  
no murderous uncles available nearby  
Yet in the porches of my ear has poured  
the poison of the wish for Reliable Love  
Marriage's a prison  
Then is the whole world one

What I want is someone, not a husband  
to perform the male gender around my house  
I need help stacking wood putting the garden to bed  
for the winter I need a man in my bed  
It goes way below zero in the winter round here  
The garage door is broken I don't know how to fix it  
Better learn to fix stuff, I guess  
Like Gertrude, I am the Interpreter of the men around me  
as I put snacks into little plastic bags  
and so disciplined plan another play date  
I play the Assuager I'm afraid

of being left with nothing for my future  
No castle no bolthole on this dirty planet  
No extra-small bag of gems  
I have unappreciated skills, it's true  
I know how to do a close reading  
I know where commas go  
I can spot phallogocentrism miles away  
in my cat glasses I'm laying it down

Yet I'm terribly lonely, Judith  
less lonely than Ophelia floating downstream  
clutching flowers and singing sad songs

I want someone to perform love on me  
Any kind of love any kind of role I don't care  
but I want the real thing Real Love  
To be a prisoner of Love, the songs say  
and to perform all the sex acts, too  
I want a masterful performance of that  
with repeat performances  
    Who's there?

I am sitting here folding laundry on the couch  
performing the pairing of the socks  
*In anxiety and pleasure*, you say  
In the porches of my other ear  
pours the poison of the wish for diamonds  
Could be worse  
My daughter spins her own tornado  
My son builds a house of diamond blocks  
I want the curtains to part now  
I want to be swept away

Camille Guthrie  
268

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<sup>268</sup> [Camille Guthrie](#), "[Diamonds](#)," [Boston Review](#), collected in [Diamonds](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

## Marriage Abstract

Arguments taint our mouths like spice.  
Opening and closing doors, we rhyme.  
The house creaks to pass, or mark the time  
under our bare feet, the mortgage like ice  
we balance upon above the bottomless water.  
It mustn't crack; we can't afford to fall.  
I love you like my hands, which haul  
the money in. Into our laps spill daughter  
and son. We are drowning in wine and beer,  
carrying each other across these rooms,  
glasses filled above our brims. We doomed  
ourselves to a big shared bed. Here,  
plans overrun our mouths, all synonyms.  
You used to be her; I used to be him.

*Craig Morgan Teicher*  
269

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<sup>269</sup> [Craig Morgan Teicher](#), "[Marriage Abstract](#)," [Colorado Review](#), collected in [Welcome to Sonnetville, New Jersey](#), BOA Editions, [Ltd.](#)

## Not a Mile

from where my students ask me  
why Sylvia Plath wanted to eat men,  
two men overdose. This is rural Ohio,  
and the new drugs from Columbus  
are cut with elephant tranquilizers.  
The police are nurses now.  
They don't dream. My students try  
to understand why the voice  
in the poem brags about death but  
never dies. Not a mile from here,  
two men regain consciousness  
in their living room full of litter boxes  
and Optimos. They are not particularly scared  
by the police or their I.V.s. They have both  
died before, and been revived with Narcan.  
It's November 6th, and the sky  
has been blank for so long its emptiness  
has turned supple. The men refuse  
further medical treatment. One dumps  
a baggie of crickets into a lizard tank.  
My students are sincerely trying  
to analyze death: its cadence and anaphora,  
its German origins. The police  
do not know how to speak  
to my students. They bark and lord  
over a scuffle or jaywalking  
because they are used to hauling the dead  
back to life and fishing names  
out of their mouths. They cannot help  
but see everyone as needing to be saved  
by force. Not a mile from where my students  
show me outlines of what they are trying  
to say about resurrection, one of the men  
pulls a phone out of his mesh shorts  
and calls Columbus. My students worry  
they cannot explain where Plath ends  
and death begins. Not a mile  
from our classroom, men dissolve  
like powder in water. Men so close  
we can't see them. Men like air.

*Andrew Grace*  
270

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<sup>270</sup> [Andrew Grace](#), "[Not a Mile](#)," [The New Yorker](#)

## What Long Ellipsis

It's not that I am lost but that I carry the ones I've lost inside me so much I forget exactly who I am the only world or such is sleep and fullness and hissing wilderness in alleys where raccoons rise to show their sharp teeth on East side streets where empty vials litter yards I stumble drunk from the Polish Falcons where I shot pool with a welder cranked out of his mind with an aloneness I don't even know was there the face of Matt with his late night binges and a window sill of pills he stole from the hospital where he lit people's bones with radiation, his imagined trephination, telling us "sometimes I can see another kind of light inside them" swallowed Percocet and valium and shared, or Roger with his cocaine and his crates of vinyl he carried spinning house parties and then the nose bleeds and the palpitations and the speed and the throwing things and the bad women and he was gone to a prison in somewhere Tennessee, his late night calls and rants. I bet you can name a dozen more. Is it guilt or grief we carry, married to the rain I walk in every downpour bearing shame. What city of amnesia do I search for? Delirium or laudanum. Oxycodone or valium lifted by stoned attendants from the old folks' homes that line the edge of the frozen lake. There is never silence to help me through the daily noise. The whispering of voices is a hallway in my head. I carry Ohio across my chest. Those older neighbor girls who beat me with a stick and took off my pants. Is this so incorrect? They beat me and beat me with a stick and still I did not tell or beg. Day after day, week after week they honed me into a perfect blade. And then we moved, and I was saved. I was six years old. I can still inside my head hear cicadas' violent blaring as the last time I walked up those stairs. I had survived to claim this life, despite what long ellipsis.

*Sean Thomas Dougherty*  
271

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<sup>271</sup> [Sean Thomas Dougherty](#), "What Long Ellipsis," [North American Review](#), collected in [Not All Saints](#), [Bitter Oleander Press](#)

## Volatile Elegy

I left a very convincing suicide note in the chrysanthemums.  
How I love pollen & my sticky fingers!

Is being dead all fun & games?  
This comet will sleep upon this park bench.

In my hair, tangled like the possibility of life elsewhere,  
God places a flower.

3 a.m. & the North Star writhing. A mourning dove. A glassy eye.  
The stars are what the dead get hard for.

*Sometimes I love god, & sometimes I love geraniums.*  
Take it, the sorrow my mouth makes.

A flower for the lady who is so beautiful.  
A lady for the ground that is so beautiful.

I hold my lust like a pool in my palm  
(some honey for the dead) (some nectar for my God).

Tonight the stars will share my bed.

*Katie Condon*  
272

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<sup>272</sup> [Katie Condon](#), "[Volatile Elegy](#)," [Blunderbuss](#), collected in [Praying Naked](#), [Ohio State University Press](#)

Day 4

I'm tired of everything  
and am getting old.

I'm unexcited by stealing pets  
and diagnosing strangers' loneliness  
by the way they move food  
around plates in low-lit cafes.

If my kindergarten teacher had told me  
that coloring pictures of squirrels would be the most satisfaction  
I would ever know, I would have run  
the dull classroom scissor blades against my wrist  
until the crayon fell out of my hand.

*Look, she's bleeding!*  
*Look, she's a rose!*

I am now so conscious of time  
that I have no choice but to sleep  
in a bed full of clocks, trying to find a way  
to love their voices enough  
that together we become a chord.

I've always loved at intervals.

Passion was most fresh  
when temporary.

The world, in its promise to end,  
has become so bland  
that when I am hungry and start to eat  
the thighs of a living cow,  
I could swear I was only talking.

*Meghan Privitello*  
273

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<sup>273</sup> [Meghan Privitello, "Day 4,"](#) collected in [Notes on the End of the World, Black Lawrence Press](#)

## Make-Belief

When I was a child, I could not imagine  
not being a cheerleader. At the edge of the road  
I stood imagining the components

of a routine. I would celebrate the semi-boiled faces  
of the volunteers looking out from the quiet  
fire truck, but I was never a child. When I was

never a child, I could not imagine not being  
a fire truck. The trees got in the way  
of my being a tiny messiah. First, think

of yourself as a tinker toy. Next, never  
don't. History was a line I could follow  
only follow down a hallway of a stranger's house

in the dark, and History is. Along its track  
doors open into closets full of ancient racquets  
estranged from the tennis for which they were cut

and strung. You can tell I'm talking about  
something else. History is a dotted line, an ellipsis  
is a clearing and now we are floating

ladies and gentlemen. Hello Laurie & Ian,  
hello all my other friends, tonight the xylophone  
sounds like a lilting belt of bones. A door

in this ellipsis History is again and I am no longer  
the dream of a cheerleader, no longer contained  
like the plastic explosion mimetic in the pom

pom that blooms from my wrist in the fire-forced  
drop of sweat on the passing cheek of a volunteer  
whose grit quotient got amped as she or he tried

and failed to save the family victrola  
from the heedless rampage of accidental flame.  
Where was I? Where *wasn't* I. Allow me

to tuck into these masks we float like stunned  
kites like last year's pinned-on fashion silvers.  
But I am not a cheerleader, I am not a pom

or another pom, or even myself. The split rock  
gushes water, the sky sweats manna, how else  
to know paradise except already here. History reels

pull backwards. A shout goes up. Whatever  
whoever whichever I this is rains ahead like a cloud  
with an irrational hope. Another closed door opens,

the closed door of the dead, upon entry of which  
more and more and ore and ore. When I was  
a spaceship I could not imagine anyone

not wanting to be a docking bay. Same way  
when I was a carrot and an ant farm.  
This is how we make our way into the day,

when-I-was-a-childing each moment. What comes  
after that is knowing better and what comes  
after knowing better is knowing you'll never know

better. Let the plastic trees come up,  
let the projector booths be giddy with the giddyup  
of projecting whatever they may be projecting

and only later we recognize such heartbreaking  
and putting-back-together tools, instruments  
of suturing light threaded with music

and faces that open the hive of trapdoors  
in us. What is this but the compartmentalizing  
of infinity, what are we but those compartments?

What can account for the aggressive radiance  
of our mortal decorations? When I was a kite,  
I was never going to die. When I was a child,

I knew better. But  
like I said—

*Marc McKee*  
274

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<sup>274</sup> [Marc McKee](#), "[Make-Belief](#)," collected in [Meta Meta Make-Belief](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

## Partial Genius

Being a cigarette girl was nothing like being a suicide girl but whatever. Try explaining to an eclectic readership that your only comfort is the sound of rain against a dormer window. Once I had a cold reading in a rehabilitation home basement. It reminded me of a shooting gallery with all that nodding and nobody particularly alarmed. Also the covert counting of small bills. You had to ask a lady to watch the door to the bathroom, and if you took more than ten minutes somebody started pounding. I was only able to offer customers two choices: kings or ultra-lights.

Things I could not get clean enough for you: politics, cuffs of trousers, the entire fleet of public transportation, air and water, tropes of fine literature, religion (but not mythology—that was okay), croutons lost in their shaggy wonderland, my past, the final page of your checking account register, peals of Bob Seger even though we were in an actual church rather than “the church of erotic ecstasy,” the sirens that you used as an excuse for walking faster, anything not related to the body because it wasn’t supposed to be clean, and alleluia at least I did that right.

I held the hand-sized radio in my palm and wished it could be implanted in my chest. Not instead of a heart. As a sort of companion to a heart. It could only play one song, however, or else it would bleed out. That’s a heavy commitment, presuming life has multiple decades. Multiple favorite sweaters dropped to the floor of someone’s living room. That’s a lot of living if it’s actually lived. Rolling down the stairs like spilled marbles. Exhumed from a backyard like a thimble that slipped away. Some Motown hit poorly remade several decades later.

We decided to name a certain hour *the melancholy hour*, but then fought over when it would be (morning was both sad and triumphant, there was most likely thunder at twilight, dinnertime was packed with morose wives and their dreams of increased square footage, middle of the night was only for trips to the loo). In retrospect, most of my memories are about novels. Did I even own a wing chair, or just the impression of one upon my back? Was that us, or a story about two characters with similar motivations? The novels never answered.

Confession: I was only a partial genius. Please don’t say it was the parts you left in me, because that wasn’t much. In between checking the knobs on my gas stove, I worried about immortality. We should have been the subject of at least one plaque by now, one tribute panel at a major literary conference. My first time at the major literary conference we just huddled on a couch touching each other’s badges. Then we got lost in our own city, like a couple of housecats. At least my genius was a little bit flashy and held market value. You were a wallet filled with questionable credit.

Mary Biddinger  
275

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<sup>275</sup> [Mary Biddinger](#), “[Partial Genius](#),” collected in [Partial Genius](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

from "Disintegration Loop 1.1"

A body falls much faster  
than the night

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You will forgive me won't you  
for the lines

I'm copying in  
I do not want to be alone here  
despite what I have said

•

And I have forgotten  
to mention the music

though it has this whole time  
been mentioning me  
I will say it is the sound of a clock  
which has had all of its hours removed

•

The screen is dark enough now  
that it can perfectly reflect  
the facing window  
a corner of morning

•

And some of the lights  
they tremble  
trying to decide  
whether they can go on

•

Lights like pronouns for the buildings

•

to remove to go through to withdraw  
to slowly walk into another room

What is legally an hour?  
The time it takes the king

to fall asleep  
the melting  
of a candle in the snow

*Heather Christle*  
276

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276 [Heather Christle, "Disintegration Loop 1.1," \*Everyday Genius\*, collected in \*Heliopause\*, Wesleyan University Press](#)

from "After Damascus"

3.

Stern-faced authorities suggested  
you develop hobbies unlikely to attract  
the attention of local apex predators.  
That made a lot of sense, you had to admit,  
so you began assembling  
quarter-scale models of sunken cruise liners.  
As you bore down on cheap plastic parts,  
locking each to each,  
you imagined  
what it must feel like to drown.  
The sea was awful.  
Infinite, as far as you were concerned.  
You made mustard sandwiches  
and watched John Wayne films.  
Wept when each was about to end.  
You felt tired but good,  
the way convalescence looks on-screen:  
lap shawls in abundance  
and guys in white scrubs  
pushing your made-of-wood wheelchair  
through Victorian gardens.  
Down the block  
a goldfish pond effervesced  
in a neighbor's weed-choked lawn.  
Whenever you passed, whistling like a pressure cooker,  
the blur of your body  
moving over the green water.  
followed you back home.  
You thought of North Carolina or Fifteenth Street.  
Anywhere that hadn't turned so oppressive.  
*I'll write when I arrive*, you said  
to the unfortunate, to the curious,  
who watched you wave from the ledge of the horizon.

*Paul Guest*  
277

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<sup>277</sup> Paul Guest, "After Damascus: 3," *Plume*, collected in [Because Everything is Terrible](#), Diode Editions

from "13th Balloon"

Scraps of magazines  
hoarded by boys  
in our fort in the woods  
The pictures were what nude women  
cavorting in a gym  
nude women lying on a tile floor

I told myself not to look  
at the boy next to me  
in the horny grim leaflight  
as he studied page after seedy page  
I told myself don't wish  
for us to be nude together now  
nude in the branches nude in the clouds

Don't look at the other boy  
in case he sees me looking at him  
    Look down at the dead leaves  
on which are projected  
nude photos of me nude photos of him  
nude photos of him all slippery with me

Don't look for the two  
of us nude on the rocks  
where the sunlight cuts through  
    the two of us  
nude at the edge of the stream

Don't look at him don't look  
don't look at his hand at his crotch  
better to look at the ground instead

*Mark Bibbins*  
278

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<sup>278</sup> [Mark Bibbins, "13th Balloon \[Scraps of magazines\]."](#) collected in [13th Balloon](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Dread

My name is Shirley Herlihy,  
but to the lowlifes on my beat,  
I am Officer Girlie.  
They do not mean to diss me.  
It is a sign of respect  
that I let them think is ok with me, and it is,  
when I am trying to do my community policing.  
After my brother disappeared  
at the World Trade Center,  
the word went out.  
The lowlifes even gave me a bouquet of flowers  
I could not accept.  
They came from the Korean store  
before somebody tossed a Molotov cocktail  
through the front door  
in retaliation for a "situation"  
that involved the girlfriend of a drug dealer  
shoplifting disposable diapers and Tampax.  
The fact is I appreciated the thought  
if not the deed.  
I mean the flowers were at least a sign  
I had not become a cop  
turning a blind eye on the misery of the street.  
I was known as someone who was tough,  
but fair in meting out justice.  
God knows it's hard to toe the line  
every single time a perp messes up, but I tried.  
If somebody's mother needed a ride  
to a bail hearing,  
my transportation specialist,  
Bobby J, the gypsy cab guy would oblige.  
I'd say thanks by slipping him  
tickets to a ball game, a movie  
or some lame excuse for entertainment.  
I kept the wheels turning,  
so I didn't fall under them.  
I only had to use my gun once in two years  
against a sonofabitch  
who murdered his uncle  
and hid his body in a dumpster.  
Original, huh?  
Stanko, the wino, found him on his garbage rounds.  
We cornered the asshole in an alley  
behind that shooting gallery  
in the building that's now been gentrified  
and is home to a decorator, six cats

and stacks of old cool jazz albums.  
Anyway, the asshole said he had nothing to lose  
fired and missed, fired again  
and clipped me in the shins,  
but I got him as I went down.  
He died, but the paramedics revived him  
and now he's in prison.  
He's born again and keeps claiming Christ has risen,  
as if nobody heard the news.  
Once in a while, he calls me to apologize  
and proselytize. I let him last time,  
even as I sat, holding the telephone,  
wishing my brother would come back.  
I keep telling myself he's gone forever,  
but it's so hard to accept.  
He was always rescuing things  
when we were kids—injured cats, birds,  
even a German shepherd  
who had been known to bite without provocation.  
I used to tease him by singing,  
“Patrick Kevin's going to Heaven.”  
I wonder if he made it,  
or if he's suspended between the life  
that didn't mean much to him  
and the death that means everything to me?  
He was such a good boy.  
He would have been a better man, if only...  
After our parents died  
when I was fifteen going on twenty-five  
and he was twelve, we raised ourselves.  
No one else had the time.  
It's a busy world out there  
the addicts tell me and I believe them  
because I know.  
I bet they're lining up at Smitty's  
crack house right now to score.  
I should be there to arrest someone,  
but I've turned in my badge and gun  
and come downtown to search this crater  
for some sign of Pat,  
even if it's only a feeling  
that he's still around in spirit at least,  
if not in body.  
There're just a few of us  
who won't give up.  
With our shovels, picks and garden tools  
we dig among the hunks of steel,  
the concrete and remnants of people  
who went to work one day

and vanished into our memories.  
I dread finding him and dread I won't  
as I choke from the fumes less poisonous  
than the hope that keeps me awake at night,  
but I can't give up.  
He'd do the same for me.  
Patrick Kevin Herlihy, I repeat under my breath  
as I uncover another credit card  
and a wallet with something that looks  
suspiciously like blackened flesh fused to it.  
I turn them in and return to digging  
until faint from the effort and fumes, I collapse.  
Two other searchers take me by each arm  
and help me to a chair,  
but I don't stay there long.  
After a candy bar and a glass of water,  
I'm back at my task.  
On the job, I never questioned what I was.  
I had my role to play  
in the day to day give  
and mostly take of the criminals  
who inhabited my world,  
but this sixty acres is a city of ghosts  
and I don't know where I stand with them.  
When I arrived this morning,  
nothing greeted me but the wind  
and a grackle making a din  
as it pecked and scratched  
at flat, charred patches of ground.  
Maybe it's a good sign  
that the birds have returned,  
a sign of rebirth. But whose? I wonder,  
as I stare at my bruised hands.  
Last year, I solved the robbery  
of a palm reader.  
As a lark, I let her read my lines.  
She said, "In the future,  
you'll find the one you lost,  
but it will cost you."  
Now as I stand above a hole seventy feet deep,  
looking down, I don't see Pat.  
When I call his name,  
my voice is swallowed up by the roar of machines.  
At first, that sound signified the possibility  
of finding him  
and made my heart beat faster,  
but now it's just the white noise  
I hear in my nightmares  
that always begins at the scene of a shooting

that occurred during a domestic disturbance  
between a man and a woman in Queens  
that left two teens bereft of a mother and father  
and made them cling to one another much too tightly,  
so that now the one left behind is frightened  
by her utter loneliness  
and drinks Irish whiskey at the pub  
where her brother, Pat, used to hold up the bar,  
promising the patrons he was going to quit drinking  
one of these days  
and to assorted laughter  
call for another round of drinks,  
knowing his sister would never let him  
sink as low as he wanted to go.  
He'd seen the fight. I hadn't  
but I was haunted too  
although I tried not to show it,  
especially to him.  
That day when I got home  
from basketball practice,  
I found Pat cowering under the stairway  
as I had so many times before  
when our parents fought,  
but this time, I knew something was different.  
He wasn't crying for a change.  
"Are Mom and Dad fighting again?" I asked.  
"They were," he said, without a trace of emotion,  
then he told me Dad had come into his room,  
hugged him and said goodbye.  
That's when I knew something terrible had happened.  
All the years since, I'd nursed him  
through the rough times, the blue funks  
and the highs that were too much  
and always ended in a rush  
of promises to stop drinking.  
He worked construction, he'd say,  
I wouldn't catch him falling off some scaffolding  
high above Manhattan,  
even drunk he could maintain his balance.  
The truth was he was often unemployed,  
but I supported him.  
I'd long since moved into our parents' room,  
but he stayed in his  
across the hall from where they'd died,  
surrounded by all his trophies from high school, comics  
and posters taped and retaped to the walls.  
The week before the attack,  
he'd told me he was going back to work.  
He'd stopped drinking for good

and I believed him, as I looked deeply into his eyes,  
and saw a boy who having barely escaped  
the inferno of family violence  
would still finally perish in fire's cold embrace.

*Ai*  
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<sup>279</sup> [Ai](#), "[Dread](#)," *Canary River*, collected in [Dread](#), *W. W. Norton & Company*

Mother, Expanding from the Piano, the Light, the Whales (1)

Dust and blackberry carried on the wind,  
sand moving hand over hand  
in the dunes, memory,  
like invisible paper, ribbons away  
from the dead pulp mill.  
The neighborhood is cold.  
Across the street an old friend leaves  
her houselights blazing  
through early widowhood.  
My mother sits at her piano bench,  
shuffling lieder. I listen, pressed  
to my bedroom wall,  
the hollow pedal-thump,  
dust and Chopin  
moving through the room  
on the back of the sun, parasites  
on a whale of descending light.  
My grandfather is dying, there's light  
around my mother.  
Georgia Pacific's closing its mills  
for the last time in the '80s.  
My father no longer raises  
stickered 2x4s into the machined night.  
What black keys does he hear  
as he waits at the D.M.V.  
for an endorsement to drive a cab?

*Michael McGriff*  
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<sup>280</sup> Michael McGriff, "Mother, Expanding from the Piano, the Light, the Whales (1)," *Exile: The Literary Quarterly*, collected in *Dismantling the Hills*, University of Pittsburgh Press

## Epidemic

Because Davie Gray is protected by the blood of Jesus and his scripture-spouting pastor daddy, he stays in the classroom practicing his times tables while the rest of the class waits outside the gymnasium, sleeves rolled, for the stern-faced nurses to swab and stab us with the biggest needles in the history of the world, according to Markie Wolf, who will faint at the very sight of it, or Judd French who Darlene Meadows will tell us *cried like a little baby* though he looked just fine by the time we break into groups of three and argue over what color to make the map of the Dakotas, *green or blue* I say, though Judd insists on brown because of the Badlands while Davie just sits there coloring and quiet.

Because we are inoculated, none of us will get the mumps that year or the next, though Davie Gray will spend a month in the hospital in eighth grade and come back to us a shadow, skinny as a scarecrow and sterile, according to Darlene who claimed she overheard her nurse mother say the sickness settled in his balls, which is how joke got started: *How is a starter's pistol like Davie Gray?* Answer: *Both of them shoot blanks*, something we will all ha-ha over until the day Davie shows up at school with his father's gun in his black backpack and shoots his way through the cafeteria before the cops cuff him and lead him away but not before he kills six people, Judd and some other jocks and a lunch lady, and for weeks the school will be lit up with television cameras and microphones tethered to women with glossed-on faces who talk about *never forgetting* what happened here but there will be a mall next week and after that a synagogue and a movie theater and a nightclub and a mall again until we lose track, an *epidemic of violence* say the glossed-on faces before tossing to the weather guy for tomorrow's forecast *more rain on the way*. And sometimes I think about hunting down Davie Gray on the Internet but I never do, though what I did do once was drive through North Dakota where I took a cell phone shot at sunset of the Badlands, which weren't bad at all, in fact, they were kind of lovely in their vast and shadowed dark.

Sarah Freligh  
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<sup>281</sup> Sarah Freligh, "Epidemic," *Fractured Lit*, collected in [We](#), Small Harbor Publishing

## The Two Things I Remember from Freshman Physics Class

1. Ms. Kissel's deep love for her cockroaches.
2. Relativity.

I'll start with Ms. Kissel: barely 5'2" with a red-headed pixie cut. It is her second year teaching public high school and it shows. The whole year Roc, a tall, freckled, hell-on-legs, calls her by her first name and only raises his hand to make fart noises. Quaking Ms. Kissel, bargaining with Roc to "Please, stop?" while he pops his gum, snorts. Then there is Crazy Willy, perpetually clad in black with floppy, unwashed hair. He was just Willy before The Incident, which should be solid foreshadowing for you.

One day Willy raises his hand and when called upon staples his middle finger. The class goes silent. Ms. Kissel shrieks, which is what any human being would do. But we are high schoolers, forever fronting. To us her reactivity is ludicrous, a delicious edge, our tiny teacher's face stretched beyond recognition in terror. Poor Ms. Kissel, begging Crazy Willy to go to the Nurse while he just smiles, bug-eyed, no one's child.

But the one time we all give her our undivided attention is after Thanksgiving. "How was your break?" she asks, and before we can answer she interrupts, begins describing a three-hour car ride to her parents' place for the holiday and how she took her pet cockroaches with her in the back seat because "no one could take care of them." Now we are riveted, and she is tall with story, her arms windmilling describing all six roaches freezing to death on the ride over because her heat was broken. How she wept all the way home, speeding, hands choking the wheel.

We are teenagers, judgmental, freakishly un-ourselves, but we are listening. We think we know how this goes. Some of us throw out a few real condolences, until Ms. Kissel twists to face Willy, her eyes glowing, her smile bucking. "When I got to my parents' house I put the little fish tank in front of the fireplace. I waited. Ten minutes passed. And then, one by one, their little legs began to twitch." Someone in the back throws a fist into the air. Another stops chewing her pencil to gasp. "They lived."

It's true. But what I remember most about the story is that she cried. As if her heart longed to kiss the vermin awake. No disgust. Lithium, my despicable stranger, you too have a hard shell, your own flawless antennae. Every morning and every night I swallow your bitterness, the imposed disgrace, the so-called proof of a shortcoming or defect or lack. Say what you will about roaches, what she loved would not die.

*Shira Erlichman*

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Love Letter with The Beatles, Lana Del Ray, and Julio Cortázar

I feel most like a mother  
at the coffee shop drinking decaf  
and eating a Costco-brand  
granola bar discreetly  
wishing it had a different name  
or something with Chia Seeds exuding  
a nonchalant kind of wealth  
when someone slides *Rubber Soul*  
on the record player and I stop  
what I'm doing because it's holy  
to give this album your attention

Have you ever wanted to be so rich  
your uterus is glitized as a luxury apartment  
lips Lana Del Ray swollen  
lifting every song from the ether of glamour  
and grief bee-stung  
with a hunger that keeps us honest  
so that we're bursting  
with it sometimes the hydraulics  
of ghosts jacked up on perverse longing?

The first song plays like a cigarette marquee  
blinking subliminal commands  
and I feel most like a mother  
when I'm disappointed no one else  
appears moved as if they've wrestled  
their demons at 4 am  
a dervish of fast food wrappers  
and tax returns  
spilling from the back of a garbage truck  
swishing through pre-dawn  
streets as when I would nurse my daughter  
and a bloom of lochia unfurled  
its salamander heart  
beneath us

The record skips  
like the synapse of recognition  
when I first spotted you  
across a field the feeling that says  
I would explode right now  
if I lingered too long  
on the thought of you

I read a thought-piece on Lana Del Ray

tits thrumming with urgency  
waiting to be pumped and wonder  
if selling oneself is a kind of authenticity  
or if ambition makes you less  
honest I mean attractive  
lord I am so tired

Most like a mother cataloging  
stints of grief the singe and hiss  
of a record making contact  
like the wheels of a car  
doing donuts in a parking lot  
remembering the smell  
of summer and rubber burning  
my tits full of ash

Pompei tits Burning Man tits  
just graduated and touring Europe  
tits my tits are not flashy  
but comfortable living just within their means  
happily married and paying taxes  
on time tits sometimes unwashed  
sometimes restless and wanting  
to masturbate with nowhere to go  
most like a mother when orgasms  
are ashy apparitions my body  
a phonograph leaking combustible notes  
most like a mother wandering the aisles  
of Costco the apples unholy and apoplectic  
with polish whose skins  
wince as I walk by tingling smugly  
in the vegetable locker  
like a morgue of refrigerated air

Most like a mother shaving my legs  
in the bathroom at Wendy's  
or not brushing my teeth most like a mother  
on the playground  
making small talk with other mothers and feeling  
worn out and hollowed  
among the rows of expensive strollers my inner tape deck ticking  
*I want to be rich I want to be rich I want to be rich*  
to win the contest of most motherly

*fuck mothers fuck target fuck*  
*listservs fuck nanny shares*  
*fuck blogs fuck Ivanka fuck registries*  
*fuck mother industrial complex*  
*fuck Scary Mommy fuck permission*

*to eat frozen pizza alone and cry*

If I hadn't met you  
I'd probably be in an open "relationship"  
with someone who wears a man bun  
and says things at 38 like  
I want children just not right away  
who plays in a band and lets me pay his rent  
who asks for ferret support  
a year after we break up

I feel most like a mother  
when I think of how lucky we are  
and still resent  
everything about you

Most like a mother  
wanting to hide my big ass and thighs  
wanting to celebrate my big ass and thighs  
feeling it's an accomplishment  
to go out in public and let myself  
be seen most like a mother  
when the young barista spills my drink  
and calls me ma'am  
and doesn't look at me

Most like a mother  
shapeless in the bruised light  
drenched in the pre-echo of another song  
about to play wanting to steal every line  
our daughter says and put it in this poem  
"emphatic yogurt" and "the fox is holding  
the moon"

I'm saying I love  
the soft reception of your body

how the night she was born  
you paced the room  
singing Wreckless Eric  
*I'd go the whole wide world*  
*I'd go the whole wide world*

the dimmed fluorescence  
of our singular heart  
clanging *more more more*

How it rained  
so hard one night in April

driving home from a cafe in Queens  
where we'd eaten sweet tamales  
I thought we might drown  
but we didn't and I want to say  
that was the night she was conceived  
I want to say

*Everything I'd want from you  
is finally so little  
because finally it's everything*

Husk and sugar  
an apartment filled with music  
hiss of damp clothes  
drying on the radiator,  
a prayer made with a record's broken needle  
to become beaming  
and undone

*Kendra DeColo*  
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<sup>283</sup> [Kendra DeColo, "Love Letter with The Beatles, Lana Del Ray, and Julio Cortázar," \*Columbia Journal\*, collected in \*I am Not Trying to Hide My Hungers from the World\*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## Drink to This

shake a pair of dice  
in the bottom of the wine glass  
stain the table cloth

why drink, if not to gamble  
if not to drop the reins  
and urge the horses on

adult behavior is a conscious act  
let's drink to unconsciousness  
we all take our clothing off too soon

the night starts with a flame  
that fits in the palm of a hand  
like a wine glass

and ends in a forest fire  
so many mistakes begin  
with wanting to be warm

*Suzanne Langlois*  
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<sup>284</sup> [Suzanne Langlois, "Drink to This," NAILED](#), collected in [Bright Glint Gone](#), [Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance](#)

## Etymology

We need a German word  
for when someone you love,  
or a celebrity, turns out to be  
a scientologist.

I know the Germans  
have already given us a word for the desire  
one feels climbing through a window  
to have sex with their first girlfriend  
while her father, a floor below, sharpens  
his ceremonial Prussian sword,

and another to describe the embarrassment  
we feel on our own behalves when our friends'  
dance moves look like their most sensitive  
parts have been hooked to a car battery,  
while an orthodox priest revs the engine.

But the word I propose is more intricate,  
acknowledges the choices we make,  
while still capturing

the post coital pleasure that comes  
when releasing small whiffs of judgment,  
like when you're driving  
and a squirrel darts at your car, so you break hard  
just as it turns back to the shoulder,  
and you think, *yeah buddy! Good call!*  
But as you speed up again, the contents shift  
in the tiny suitcase of its brain, and it turns  
and jumps right under your tire.

The meaning of our word is not in this moment,  
but, rather, in what comes after  
when you start to admit to yourself that you  
might have seen the squirrel starting to turn,  
but you couldn't be bothered to break again,

how you feel sad for a second, but then think  
you didn't invent the order of species,  
and how at this point in history the damn thing  
is designed absolutely to die.

So it's unclear whether you're upset  
about killing something, or because you've  
been trying to find parking for like, twenty minutes,

and now that you finally have,  
you're standing at the meter, and it keeps eating  
your money without giving you back any time.

*Keith Kopka*  
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<sup>285</sup> [Keith Kopka, "Etymology," \*Copper Nickel\*](#), collected in [Count Four, University of Tampa Press](#)

## Hyperbole is Underrated

A kid, I caught a cricket in Kelly's garage and shoved it down the front of her t-shirt. This was an expression of love, like swear words we practiced mouthing when our mothers'

backs were turned. But I'm more sorry than you can imagine. To this day, the cricket is her biggest fear. Mine? Fire while I sleep, lovelessness,

and octopuses. (Loneliness I can master.) The octopus at the fish counter is laid out on ice like a gray and many-rayed sun. Sometimes my belly feels full of shook champagne; this means I am

confronting desire. And what is desire but an anxiety of distance? How near, how far. I am the world's worst liar, which means I expect forgiveness,

always. A hyperbole-less world means we are too comfortable, unprepared for our failure. Yesterday, a grasshopper rode my cart all the way through the natureless

store. No one but me noticed it, not even the cashier who announced with envy that I'd bought the most beautiful golden beets she'd ever seen. I'm dying to see you, so I sent a picture.

*Emilia Phillips*  
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<sup>286</sup> [Emilia Phillips, "Hyperbole is Underrated," \*Great River Review\*, collected in \*Embouchure\*, The University of Akron Press](#)

## I Wake Thinking about Depleted Uranium

Lying here, looking out at the day—so much  
the way I left it when this part of the Earth  
turned away last night—not as one spurned,  
but as a woman in bed might turn her back  
to her lover, only to draw in closer  
to the body's curve. In early light  
the bare limbs of the great pines  
look painted on the sky—  
a Japanese monk, his brush thick  
with sumi ink. Only now I start thinking  
of depleted uranium, shaken over Iraq,  
a cook gone berserk with the salt,  
a crazed mother dusting talcum on her infant,  
raining it down over the chubby thighs, belly, face,  
the delicate nostrils, burying the child in fine powder.  
Except it's not. It's not any of these things:  
this poison with a half-life the age of the Earth.  
Babies born without heads, lumps of flesh.  
Soldiers returned with burning semen.  
*I had condoms filled with frozen peas in my freezer,*  
one widow said, *the only way I could bear it.*  
These days it's dangerous to wake,  
to try to make meaning,  
as when a parent stumbles away  
from the small raw grave  
and someone mutters, *She's with God now.*  
It takes four days for the dust to swirl  
around the planet, to reach these pines,  
their praying branches,  
as though it were a blessing  
they were about to receive.

*Ellen Bass*  
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<sup>287</sup> [Ellen Bass](#), "[I Wake Thinking about Depleted Uranium](#)," collected in [The Human Line](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Instructive Fable for the Daughter I Don't Have

Walk into the woods and keep walking.  
The tall pines swing like curtains in the moonlight;  
the moonlight swings like a drunk man on a ship.  
Search for the place the jewels are hidden, a.k.a.  
the dark-furred hollow. Search for the mirror  
in the old oak. Search for The Stag Who Can Speak  
to Girls Like You (his voice, the stories say, is like a river—  
low, and full of deaths it can't help). Small animals  
will serrate the silence with their chatter. Underfoot,  
roots will crack like bones. Wear your hair uncovered.  
Wear your mouth unset. You may not find  
the jewels, the mirror, the stag. But you may find  
a bare possum skull. You may find some eyeteeth  
in a damp log. You may find a berry patch, but  
with bullets in place of berries, silver sparks  
in the nightgleam. Put all these things into your pockets  
and keep walking. The grackles will tell you  
*This way out, this way out.* Don't answer. Don't be turned.  
You entered the woods lost. Leave that way.

*Catherine Pierce*  
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<sup>288</sup> [Catherine Pierce](#), "[Instructive Fable for the Daughter I Don't Have](#)," [Colorado Review](#), collected in [Danger Days](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

## Small Wonder

“Alf,” I think as I wake  
in the dark, feeling  
the presence of something  
animal and human, familiar  
and terrifying, ordinary  
and hidden. The dad,  
the only human character  
I remember, was puny,  
fussy: his worry powered  
everything, as the antics  
of the furry child became  
old quickly. On *Small  
Wonder*, the robot lived  
with the family like a real  
girl, not understanding how  
to hide her non-humanity.  
I don’t know if she slept  
standing in a closet,  
but that’s what I  
would have wanted.  
“Vicky”: Victorian, like  
the rolling-eyed automata  
in pharmacy windows,  
peddling kidney elixirs  
with their jerking. Sitcom  
children: tooth-filled, shrill,  
hiding loneliness with lessons  
about strangers, not getting  
stuck in abandoned  
appliances, pot and pills.  
And Reagan’s huge square  
head, a sick ghost but  
real, part robot and part  
live animal.

*Julia Story*  
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<sup>289</sup> [Julia Story](#), “[Small Wonder](#),” collected in [Spinster for Hire](#), [The Word Works](#)

## The Devotions

Hate gives all its reasons  
as if they were terms for something more  
I would do to you with a foot or a shovel.  
There is a certain peace in hate, a clear mountain  
that's high with a whitewashed H  
on its side which is all mine.  
The road is circular and steep,  
the stones roll onto it and the plants are  
low and ground-hugging and often  
appear to be dead. When I walk it  
I am always surprised  
at how the road drops off at the edge  
and how the garbage of others, not mine,  
stuns the land. The views are  
enormous and belittle.  
I would take you there,  
I have already many times  
thought about it but you are lazy  
and ungenerous of yourself and your time.  
The last stretch is the most tiring.  
I have seen some people sprint all of a sudden,  
laughing like it's a game. Not me.  
It's a long, ugly slog and the wind hits hard from  
all sides once I clear the last corner.  
At the top there are two things:  
a telescope with a locked door  
for all the scientists of hate, not me,  
and an altar for the pilgrims,  
which is wrecked and ugly, the silk flowers faded  
and the votives filled with dust or water.  
I saw a tarantula there, so lovely and slow  
with her haired segments.  
I saw a snake once, too, its rattle woke  
the bottom of my brain.  
How I hated what she taught me.

*Connie Voisine*

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<sup>290</sup> [Connie Voisine](#), "[The Devotions](#)," [Zócalo Public Square](#), collected in [And God Created Woman](#), Bull City Press

## Barbie Chang's Father Paid

Barbie Chang's father paid her tuition  
by intuition his brain

now shuns all logic the law is thin with  
rules about love but

if a person is so edited that they are  
unrecognizable can you

still love them is it possible to write an  
elegy for someone who

isn't dead yet what if a name no longer  
means what it used

to where does the wind go when it  
is not blowing

today Barbie Chang packs up his  
clothes again to move him

to a facility to mute him no longer  
able to travel to Italy or

the local deli he tells Barbie Chang she  
is demented his dementia

is self centered it has no more center  
his words have lost

what they are trying to signify she drives  
away from his house for

the last time it's cold outside he stands  
at the front door waving

saying that he's fine that he's put on  
his *long distance shirt*

Victoria Chang  
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<sup>291</sup> [Victoria Chang](#), "[Barbie Chang's Father Paid](#)," collected in [Barbie Chang](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Sleep Regression Lullaby

No matter, the moon will anoint its other princes,  
and you will remain Lord of Thwarted Sleep.

Your body with its endless appetite for stars and milk.  
My body with its groggy offering. When you were born,

my sister said, *Maybe now you'll write some happy poems.*  
But she's a mother. She should know better. Two by two,

dreams confirm their alibis, but you prowled painted blocks  
with sleepless intent. So I try to sing you something happy,

like balloons rounding the corners of your room, like daffodils  
who refuse to know the season and thrust through December

frost, like my mother's letter when you were nothing  
but a few cells, how she said it was God who was making you,

knitting you whole. Perfect, her faith that the unseen  
would prove its love through you. Enough. This night calls

for stronger magic, a song rigged for sleep, and so I'll sing you  
something I'd never dare say—some nights I switch off

the headlights and count to ten, some nights I get the urge  
to eat you and bite your cheeks. My sister reached into

our dead mother's mouth to tug her tongue. *Just to make sure,*  
she said, and I thought *Sure*, like praying even though

no one answers, how even if you pulled out his bloodless  
tongue, God still wouldn't know which mother was yours.

*Traci Brimhall*  
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<sup>292</sup> [Traci Brimhall](#), "[Sleep Regression Lullaby](#)," collected in [Come the Slumberless to the Land of Nod](#), Copper Canyon Press

## Factography: Hometown

down by the water who can even remember  
driving over the bridge at night

or cassette tapes: winding their unraveled  
innards with a pencil, this reinsertion

of a familiar, slightly mangled melody—  
the men with home-scratched

tattoos fishing the docks, a clear  
jellyfish the size of a dime bag

bobbing in a plastic bucket  
like a ziplock of organs, unmoored

resident, this moment of transit,  
of taking a body, this boundary from which

something begins its presencing

*Erika Meitner*  
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<sup>293</sup> [Erika Meitner](#), "[Factography: Hometown](#)," [The Ampersand Review](#), collected in [Holy Moly Carry Me](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## The Nematode

“I’m not drunk!” my student says, though her features sag  
and her speech slurs. “The doctor’s doing tests—I just  
wanted you to know.” She comes to class and talks about  
the assignments in her halting voice,  
the other students nodding and giving her the time she needs, even  
slowing their own speech so hers doesn’t seem so different. A month  
later, she says, “Do you know what amyotrophic lateral  
sclerosis is?” and I say, “Yes, Lou Gehrig’s Disease,”  
and we cry and hug each other and go  
to class, where she continues to talk, a little slower each time, until  
she can’t talk at all, which is when she begins to write down  
and give me everything she would have said  
had she been able to say it. There’s beauty in everything:  
in a man’s losing his sight and saying  
how lovely it is to have everyone come so close so he can recognize  
them, in the woman who decides to think of her demented spouse  
as a recent addition to the family and not the man  
she married years earlier, in the family that runs  
the same notice in the paper every year to tell  
their dead son and brother that his place in the circle of life still brings  
hope to others. We fall, but we fly first, as Jack Gilbert says  
in his great poem about Icarus. By the end  
of the term, my student is dead. No one escapes  
the bitter enemy, the unbeatable opponent:  
the old Greeks called it Nemesis, a word which always reminds me  
of the nematode or roundworm that attacks plants in the part  
of the country where I live. My student’s name  
appears on the grade sheet, and I give her an A,  
even though her final paper  
wasn’t the strongest—what else are you going to give a dead person?  
Just recently, I learn that there are two kinds of nematode,  
the root-knot variety that kills plants  
and the good or predatory nematode that attacks worse  
pests, like cutworms. When I go out  
into my garden at night, I look up at the sky, and sometimes I think  
of what I see there, and at others I think of the scariest painting  
I know, the one in which Van Gogh  
shows the heavens blazing as the little village sleeps below.  
Those stars are burning too brightly!

That fire you see can't last. Still, as it burns, it lights everything.

*David Kirby*  
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294 [David Kirby, "The Nematode," \*Southern Review\*](#), collected in [Get Up, Please, Louisiana State University Press](#)

## Bauhaus

When I was a teenager, I knew a thing or two. I stayed in my room being skinny and having bangs, listening to Bauhaus and lifting 3 lb. weights. I drew pretty good portraits of my own face. I learned to drive stick, and I would drive farther out into the suburbs to go to the mall and walk around drinking Dr. Pepper and chewing candy and being mildly disgusted with all the people, who seemed to be sinking of their own accord. On the way there I'd look for the Eagles on the radio, in order to demonstrate that the Eagles are always on the radio, and to further demonstrate that—for good or bad—my vocal range exactly matched that of one Don Henley. On the way back, I would listen to Heart or Fleetwood Mac, which reminded me of my childhood in the '70s, a time of honest belting and bad vibes. Boys at school would talk to me in class, and I guess I would just look at them or say something weird about *The Sorrows of Young Werther* or something, because after a while they'd get nervous and blurt out, "I guess that's how people dress in *Europe*." Then we'd both turn around, and class would start.

*Joanna Penn Cooper*  
295

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<sup>295</sup> [Joanna Penn Cooper](#), "[Bauhaus](#)," collected in [Wild Apples](#), [Ethel](#)

First Grade

Until then, every forest  
had wolves in it, we thought  
it would be fun to wear snowshoes  
all the time, and we could talk to water.

So who is this woman with the grey  
breath calling out names and pointing  
to the little desks we will occupy  
for the rest of our lives?

*Ron Koertge*  
296

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<sup>296</sup> [Ron Koertge, "First Grade,"](#) collected in [Vampire Planet, Red Hen Press](#)

## Peep Show

“Why does this even exist?” read the caption below photo of a flower on social media. The caption was a joke, but in an age when everything has a bird on it, the sentiment was refreshing. Birds are probably great, but the best peeps are silent, be they glimpses of nudity or marshmallows. Does anyone ornamented with images of wolves and owls even know these animals are not marshmallows? To be honest, the only time I’ve been totally convinced birds aren’t marshmallows was when I witnessed two male pigeons mating and was legitimately turned on. Directly obtaining a resource from another organism was so alarming I had to dress up as a combine harvester immediately.

*Sarah Galvin*  
297

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<sup>297</sup> [Sarah Galvin](#), “[Peep Show](#),” [The Alice](#), collected in [Ugly Time](#), [Gamma Poetry](#)

## Ones Who Got Away with It

I still fantasize I can do something about it.  
That girl in the outpatient-care facility for teenagers  
confided to me that she sneaked out to see a guy  
at his frat party, and he *shared* her with his three friends,  
to have a taste after he was done. “Is it supposed  
to hurt so much?” she whispered to me. “I mean,  
for this long *after*?” She was bulimic, and we both  
hated our mothers. The next day I said, *We should  
tell someone*. And she said, “I’ve talked it over  
with my best friend. She says  
I should be proud of it.” She was thirteen  
and I, sixteen, recovering from those endless nights of shrieking  
across the house, out into the yard and  
into the cold moonlight to wish myself into some  
other species; the endless silent Stooges’ bangs and thwacks,  
some self-preservation up against inherited solitude;  
bent almost in half, the copper piping of my family grief  
that always raked itself across me  
until I was deformed by it,  
until I was defined by it—  
but dammit,

I hope that girl’s doing well.  
I hope she can keep down food  
and it’s nourishing her. I hope her cells are cheering  
like parents in the stands at a game, even if those men still exist—  
important men, I imagine. Men who now run conglomerates  
and have well-to-do families. Or maybe men I see  
every day at work. Or whose books I read.

And how am I here? With my life intact?  
I’m painful to the touch only when I don’t light  
a candle and praise oblivion, give myself over  
to nothingness—and is it every day  
or was it long ago,  
that I’d slid shut my teenage self’s veranda doors  
and stepped  
onto the world’s fancy balconies  
and was prepared to do something drastic  
like live and live and live.

Bianca Stone  
298

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<sup>298</sup> Bianca Stone, “Ones Who Got Away with It,” *Pinwheel*, collected in *The Möbius Strip Club of Grief*, Tin House Books

The Translator

*A poem in translation,*  
the young man was fond of saying,  
*is like the dead body of a foreigner*  
washed up on our shores.  
Here

he usually paused to let the metaphor sink in.

Some members of the audience nodded thoughtfully.

*I will now read from my translations of a little-known ancient Roman poet,*  
he told them,  
shuffling his papers, then looking into  
the dark,  
half-empty auditorium.

+

The dead body refused to be still. The waves  
loved it too much,  
pushing it onto the beach, then rolling it  
seaward again.  
And so it made its way down the beach,  
alighting for a moment,  
or several moments,  
on the wet sand,  
then bobbing out  
among the American swimmers.

+

120 foreigners in a leaking boat  
is too many,  
so the ocean fills with poems. Some retain  
the qualities of their original language,  
but others sink  
into a new language.

+

*Here I am, out here! I can see your*  
*oil rigs glittering on the horizon,*  
says the young woman whom no one  
listens to. Or,  
she says nothing,  
clinging to the side of the waterlogged boat,

where she has floated all night  
among the drifting bodies.

A few of them became tangled among the oil rigs,  
while others arrived  
gently on our shore.

+

A poem that has floated some distance  
from its accident  
transforms—so the people  
ran away in horror  
when at last he came to rest  
on a crowded part of the beach.

+

*You foreigners in your many-sailed ships,  
come join the empire!* the translator intones  
from his spotlit podium,  
and the audience sighs.  
*Here I am, out here,*  
says a little voice in the translation,  
a voice no one,  
not even the translator,  
can hear.

+

The audience  
had come to hear a lecture on poetry in translation

and now the translator was going on  
about the ancient Roman tendency to absorb,  
and therefore transform,  
foreign cultures,  
their gods and foods.

Outside the auditorium, it had grown dark,  
a perfect summer night.  
The thousand vessels  
on the great black ocean  
glittered and loomed.

+

and for days, bodies

washed up on the beach.

Now, the American workers  
zippered them into vinyl bags,

which, in the translator's metaphor,  
constitutes a kind of publication.

+

But what is there to say  
about that young woman  
still clinging to the wreckage  
two days into my poem?

A gentle summer rain  
prickles her skin. *Here I am*, she says,  
looking toward the oil rigs hunkering between her  
and the shore.

*Here I am.*

+

She is a very fine woman  
and someone should translate her.

*Kevin Prufer*  
299

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<sup>299</sup> [Kevin Prufer](#), "[The Translator](#)," [The Paris Review](#), collected in [The Art of Fiction](#), [Four Way Books](#)

## Fall

Forbidden the shotgun, my father  
tried to kill the wounded deer with a crossbow,  
and then the shovel he asked me to fetch  
from the shed. Grass stiffened to spikes

beneath my feet. The season's first freeze.  
The toolshed was a skin of aluminum  
I was happy, for a moment, to  
wear. And still the trees were noisy,

even without their leaves. Squirrels  
clawed their faces and the fields  
ran loose in the wind. Among  
acorns and husks and leaves,

he stood. In sawdust and in blood.  
He chewed and spat. His chest  
rose and fell.

Nothing is redeemed until  
it remembers its fall. Unless it has  
no memory,

like snow, falling  
through clouds,  
branches and boughs, falling  
and forgetting my father and me.

*Cindy King*  
300

Watermark

In the dark only the Devil can cast a shadow.

she walked down the aisle holding a glass of milk.

is nicknamed Juan. The right, Diego.

with newspaper cones.

Lungs black with cancer,

before the wedding.

in my mouth: *Socorro, Socorro.*

when she was six months pregnant. Rain

the face of her child.

into beauty marks. Beautiful flaw.

I keep a spur under my pillow to ward off nightmares.

to afford lace,

Too poor to afford lilies,

Her left breast

Nightly she catches moths

Hammock Skipper. Southern Emerald.

her father was buried two months

*Co coo coo roo.* Her name a tassel

Rain pierced her womb

singed

The burn marks turning

Terrible ornament.

Too poor

on a cold afternoon, her breath a veil.

reads the wings

Nine of Swords. Knight of Corns.

a bolero. *Co coo coo roo.*

in pleated pants.

she folds and folds paper. Alas. Faros.

on my thirteenth birthday.

I put on the gold ring she leaves by the sink.

but presence.

was the rain. The dark of her knees

*Socorro, Socorro.*

with my hands, I wake up holding

she walked down the aisle

She arranges moth wings on a table,

like Tarot cards.

Her mouth waters when she hears

Her father was buried

Day after day

She gave me a pack of cigarettes

Often

Not cathedrals

The first man she saw naked

a watermark.

If I dream I'm cupping her face

the skull

of a wolf.

*Eduardo C. Corral*  
301

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301 [Eduardo C. Corral, "Watermark," \*New England Review\*](#), collected in [Slow Lightning](#), Yale University Press

from "Future Anterior"

2. *What is a ruin?*

They said it was a ruin so they expelled the families who lived there, mostly in the caves. Who's to say what's a ruin, and what's a home? On the day of a prominent Bar Mitzvah, which occupied the new members of the town, the Center for Jewish Nonviolence bought tickets for the families expelled from Susiya, hundreds of people and their children. They toured their town, entering the mosque (now a synagogue), and we brought chairs and tables and had a big feast together. When everyone was full and tired, they slowly climbed back onto the buses and left. I was the last one, cleaning up. Suddenly, an IDF bus pulled up, and soldiers came streaming out, all at the ready. But everyone was gone except me. A man with a JNF nameplate came up, put his arm around my shoulder, and said, "you win this round."

*Philip Metres*  
302

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<sup>302</sup> [Philip Metres, "Future Anterior \[2. What is a ruin\],"](#) collected in [Shrapnel Maps, Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Why Don't You Wear a Black Crepe Glove Embroidered in Gold, Like the Hand that Bore a Falcon?

You are describing how the transparent oval of my face seems to hang before you in the seconds before sleep. I peel off my gloves to eat from your paper cone of burning chestnuts even though they taste like bugs to me. You buy the chestnuts because you want me to enjoy this trip but then never to come back, not to your bedroom where I left my footprint in lotion on the hardwood, not to sit with you before your mother's scant bowls of *pastina in brodo*. We pass the newsstand next to the bakery next to the bus stop by the restaurant that used to be an orphanage. You're still talking about my phantom face, about the white light which you say surges into a beautiful tree-shape on top of my head. The clarity of this light magnetized your soul, or perhaps your soul already contained the exact spinning glob of sweetness that matched my own. It would be wrong to say precisely, it would be wrong to remember in any particular fashion. Our futures float by in their clear bulbs of breath, & I tell you the story again.

*Kiki Petrosino*  
303

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<sup>303</sup> [Kiki Petrosino, "Why Don't You Wear a Black Crepe Glove Embroidered in Gold, Like the Hand that Bore a Falcon?,"](#) [Memorious](#), collected in [Witch Wife, Sarabande Books](#)

## Not Holding the Gun

At this cookout,  
in a parallel universe,  
a version of me lifts  
the gun, considers  
its weight a handful  
of peanuts. But  
in this current  
rotation of speed  
and light, Pak's pump  
action is between us  
on the table.  
The cookout has been  
swell, and I'm glad  
his sister, my date,  
invited me. His mother  
is grilling cow tongue.  
The whole gang's  
here to celebrate  
Marshmallow's release  
after three years  
in Rahway.  
He's at the grill  
asking for a fourth  
helping, the word *Rascal*  
carved in his chest  
like a pacemaker scar.  
In the universe of  
wooden nickels,  
I am best friends with  
this blunt instrument. But  
it's not that universe.  
My date's brother  
is asking  
if I'm interested  
in a job, simple robbery.  
I'd get a part of  
the product. He needs  
me because it won't  
get back to his crew,  
or the black gangs,  
if a white man robs  
his own. I'm the only guy  
at the cookout wearing  
a shirt. Her brother  
has a tattoo of two devils  
balanced on the top of

a mountain range.  
It covers his whole  
stomach. He tells me  
if I shoot the guy,  
when I rob him,  
it's ok. But if I kill,  
there's nothing  
in this world  
he can do to help.  
Marshmallow settles  
himself in a deck chair,  
eyes closed. The meat  
on the grill smells like  
warm wood. *Hungry*,  
I think, is the only word.

*Keith Kopka*  
304

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<sup>304</sup> [Keith Kopka, "Not Holding the Gun," \*New Ohio Review\*, collected in \*Count Four\*, University of Tampa Press](#)

## Definition

How to describe what it felt like  
to be gay when I was young?  
I didn't feel *different*, a given  
for a boy who went to church,  
didn't cuss, and stayed inside  
all summer. The guy said,  
"Thanks for missing the football,  
faggot," after class, and I died  
inside the flood of lockers. Not  
*dead*, or *unborn*: a mercy I was  
afraid of, but wanted. Hiding  
in the corner to change for gym,  
they laughed at my soft, pimples  
back. Boys on one side of the field,  
girls on the other. "Aren't you  
on the wrong side, Smith;"  
even the coach laughed, and I was.  
Days I stared through three-pane  
windows at trucks gliding  
interstate to somewhere better,  
*stranger*, not quite right, but true.  
The gray-weather chest  
I carried the summer I rubbed  
the pillow between my legs  
and thought of the UPS man  
and neighbor's tight belly  
until the semen I wasn't sure  
how to clean, but God wasn't  
watching, he turned away,  
and I begged him like I would beg  
all men before I hardened to stone,  
not one rolled away, but invisible;  
*stone, invisible*, not right either.  
What do you call the kid of a dad  
a mother calls home from evening  
shift because she caught him  
watching "nearly-naked men"  
on television? He didn't spank  
me, but didn't love me anymore  
in the same way. "Don't tell  
your mom about this again,  
Dammit!" *Damaged, Damned.*

Aaron Smith  
305

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<sup>305</sup> [Aaron Smith](#), "[Definition](#)," [One Art](#)

## Step One: Admit Powerlessness

I loved the paper gowns, too, my slept-in body discarded  
and remade into jail bait, the ER doctor pressing a handful  
of brightly colored condoms into my palm. I won't call it rape,  
because a tree can't be killed twice; God,  
lurking in the X-ray of my abdomen, a single apostrophe  
between the bowed ribcages, capillaries like typewriter ribbon.  
I am most miraculous on my back, one earring lost on 148th,  
my mouth thin as the people I come from, each leg  
palmed astray, unable to ask for anything other than this.  
The word pulled through me like a needle's eye, daughtering  
into seventeen bruises, *no*, because Mama didn't even want me  
to get on that airplane, *no*, and I did it like America:  
what wasn't mine I took, ambulance lights red as peppers,  
two years starving on bread and lemon water, me  
at the door of somebody's wife, pulling electric bills from my purse.  
Arabi-girl, baba-girl. Rich boys, pretty boys, tell the  
boys as angry as Nevada, to own a thing you must want it.  
Out in the cold night I was a body renamed, emerging from a sea  
of white girls, my hoodie too thin, veins blue as hydrangeas,  
laughing with the Columbia boys on Morningside,  
chasing one tallboy with the other. Through the bar window,  
a lightbulb exploded like a white tusk in the evening,  
and when the sun finally rose, I believed in a different god.

*Hala Alyan*  
306

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<sup>306</sup> [Hala Alyan](#), "[Step One: Admit Powerlessness](#)," [Crazyhorse](#), collected in [The Twenty-Ninth Year](#), [Mariner Books](#)

## Geschehn / Happen

Geschehn or *happen*—both are verbs, which often presuppose a chance occurrence.

In the original, this verb is tied to the indirect object (*Dir*) and hence is conjugated into the Dative case.

What is so special about the Dative? It assumes passivity.

I am left alone in the happenstances of my profoundly average life. I like apples, my hair is black. I was born to refugees, political prisoners from a country where almost the entire educated middle class was imprisoned at some point—because they were educated enough to think of themselves as safe, and failed.

At the breakfast table of a family reunion, I sit with Rilke's collected poems in my lap and drink green cardamom tea with cream, meticulously prepared with ice cubes so that it has a pink sheen, sheer-chai.

Oranges, Afghan naan, sausages, poppy-seed biscuits, Swiss cheese, homemade sour prune jam, blanched almonds. I like to keep a list of food; it helps me remember who I am.

*Oh, yes, that happened to your aunt during her eight year prison sentence*, someone says, while the invisible badge of “heroism” grins at me from everyone's sleeves.

I wonder about your trauma—why is yours so much more pronounced than everybody else's at this table? What *happened* to you? You have a wound you carry instead of a badge, so you rip other people's badges off.

I touch you. I think of all the other *yous* my life is populated with. Mostly, they are lovers—I sometimes believe that only lovers and mothers can touch one to this extent, to the extent of branding themselves into you as a perpetual addressee.

Everyone at the table hushes when you mention the cousin who committed suicide, your favorite sister's son, whose name you hurl onto the table like a lit match.

Like good Afghans, we pretend it didn't happen, discard the match, put the tea pot on the place where there is a little tear now, the size of an eyelash.

If you happen to be a daughter, you are forced to live a double life. You will become a con master: the good girl who has acquired X degrees, serves tea to her parents, dances at weddings, sends money home; and the girl who dances on tables, exchanges kisses with strangers, drinks *Sharah*, etc.

That I am both variables at once, that it is *possible* to be both, is unheard of. My twoness—or merely the possibility of twoness—still looks like a Venus flytrap to them:

obscene, exotic, incomprehensible.

But I want to live.

*Your main objective shouldn't be to be a good person. Good artists can be horrible people,* said my father, the absent one.

Rilke left his wife.

What of Clara, Rilke's wife?

Even she abandoned her child, went on a pilgrimage to Egypt, made sculptures instead of attending to her newborn. She wasn't content with the role of the victim; and even the victim—the child—would continue to dedicate her life's work to remembering her father.

Rilke, my favorite asshole, my tempest, in my lap:

*Look, it happens to me,*

*That at times my hands become aware of each other,  
or that my worn face is visible to them.*

*But who would want to live for only that?*

*Aria Aber*  
307

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<sup>307</sup> [Aria Aber](#), "[Geschehn / Happen](#)," collected in [Hard Damage](#), [University of Nebraska Press](#)

## On Camping

For each person I've said *I love you* to, the lie  
was always there but wasn't understood  
until some later date.

Dormant, perhaps; some recessive gene that finally  
finds a part in this stage production. Sudden context,  
like reading the *Iliad* and realizing sure, there's anger,

but before that there's just a lot of camping.  
And what strikes me most is the scepter of Apollo,  
slowly slipping out of Chryses' hands as he loses

everything in the sounding sea; black ships.  
Or how he, like any other father, invokes revenge  
not as a single stroke, but a thousand bites.

*Smintheus*, the literal *mouse* god, or maybe  
just some flea that won't leave  
me. You need to understand

there's this particular tree, hemlock or poplar,  
at this particular campsite where she told me  
all of this: lectured through the long line of her lips

like ships parted and imparted. That *love* was a word  
that could be pushed like pumice stone in glass of water:  
light, and porous, and impossibly afloat.

*Matthew Minicucci*  
308

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<sup>308</sup> [Matthew Minicucci](#), "[On Camping](#)," [Copper Nickel](#)

[Somebody, please put something]

Somebody, please put something  
over that window with the star  
crack in the middle: some cardboard

bent into the intimate, maybe, some  
plastic stretched like an unnecessary truth.  
Guitar feedbacking its imaginary arc.

Please, somebody, cover it with  
whatever's close because I can hear  
the instinct machine scratching

the clothes line outside with asthmatic  
fingers. I can hear quadrophonics  
swinging in double digits: huffed up

harmonies fidgeting on the one  
like a wheeze still trying to breathe.  
Please, somebody put something

over that empty socket of winter.  
The bus never shows up on time.  
Blame it on lake snow. Blame it

on maladroitness: I can hear bleak  
squeaking coming around the block  
like a soloist on his last encore

for the evening. So many ambidextrous  
players, excess & rust in the mind:  
maggot brain, maggot brain.

Too much road salt & seasoning  
in Detroit this evening. Ain't you  
supposed to triplicate into more

than this mess like a breezy heart?  
Ain't you ready for this solo part?  
The chamber below your frets is just

the start of breathing. Put your guitar  
in its lung before the headlights  
spotlight your leaving. Put your hat

on, too, so you don't hear December's  
cold leanings: southward where  
notes ought to be—winged in bright

flight. It's nearly here: struggle buggy,  
sorry wagon of rickets & laments  
for the cricked necks & bird leery.

*Adrian Matejka*  
309

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<sup>309</sup> [Adrian Matejka](#), “[[Somebody, please put something](#)],” collected in [Standing on the Verge of Getting It On & Maggot Brain](#), [Third Man Books](#)

## Problems with the Early Times Poetry

Out with yard stars and the ragged tomatoes in coffins,  
the big houses and the grills throw smoke. Eat the whole  
grill, why don't you? Big country. We all loved younger  
poets. Let me tell you of the early days when the settlers  
lived in these log cabins and did nothing but make Alpo.  
They were writing folksy love poems. They were smearing  
Chia Pet seed all over the terra-cotta sculptures of Yoda.  
They missed the path through the dunes and wound up  
in the dunes with some biting brown flies and then pricked  
by cactuses and dune grass with secretive sawtooth edges.  
They filled housefuls with heads in the rain, piling creative  
anachronism shields and swords made from black foam  
wrapped in silver duct tape. Their beards and their armpits  
smelled like green lentils cooked with smoked ham hocks.  
There were hordes, and they lived cheap, but they slept late.

*David Blair*  
310

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<sup>310</sup> [David Blair](#), "[Problems with the Early Times Poetry](#)," collected in [Barbarian Seasons](#), [MadHat Press](#)

Poem without New Year's Resolution

Maybe it's no longer a pure kind of behavior  
you seek, with so much breathing in it  
  
and so much regret. What if you take with you  
only this dark morning and the insane thuds  
  
the giant dumpsters make behind the strip mall  
when they're tossed back to the pavement  
  
by the trash truck? Let Spanish go, let running  
go, let yoga do flawless back walkovers across  
  
the dead lawn in its very flattering leotard,  
let it just be gone. Let this body  
  
be the body you'll carry forward, at least  
into this day. Let the sound of the dumpsters  
  
wake the baby so she starts calling for you  
too early, *Come upping me right now!*  
  
in her new businessy voice. What if this is just  
your luck and all you need to do is let it  
  
come into the room—just let it come—let it  
take off its coat and talk to a few people  
  
before you reach for its elbow, kiss its cheek,  
and start telling it what it owes you?

Carrie Fountain  
311

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<sup>311</sup> [Carrie Fountain](#), "[Poem without New Year's Resolution](#)," [Ecotone](#), collected in [Instant Winner](#), [Penguin Books](#)

You can leave me & I will not kill you.  
That this needs to be said is insane  
but I am a man, & this is the world.  
Probably it should have been in our vows:  
in sickness & so forth,  
I will wash your coffee cups  
& do the laundry if you fold,  
I will walk the dog when it's my turn,  
& I will not kill you,  
nor will I ever fill your car  
with wet cement, which is a thing  
I read about today: a man hurt  
when a woman declined  
to wear his name.  
When we married, you kept  
your name; people told me  
I should be bothered. People  
told you that you were young  
& did not understand  
how the world worked. By people  
it should be obvious I mean men.  
I don't want to make a joke  
of all these wounded  
walking around among us  
dividing the world  
into Fuck Marry Kill  
which is supposed to be  
a fun conversation starter  
but the world reminds us  
over & over there's nothing  
funny about it. For every  
man who loves you  
there are eleven who love you  
& will still come to your job  
& shoot you in the head.  
For every body you have,  
there is a man willing to claim it,  
one way or another.  
The story goes that God  
spent five days making  
this amazing place, its cedar trees  
& canyons & its many egrets  
taking flight over so many  
grassy marshes, & then  
on the sixth day he created  
men. If God is reading

this poem, if God truly  
sees all & knows all,  
he's probably also thinking,  
*At least the shorebirds are lovely,*  
& I have to give him that  
even though out there  
right now some man  
is thinking, *Fuck the shorebirds,*  
*marry the canyons, kill*  
*everything else.* This is the world,  
in which, somehow, you  
& I found ourselves together,  
& in which we wake up  
every morning & pledge  
not to harm each other  
any more than we have already.

*Amorak Huey*  
312

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<sup>312</sup> [Amorak Huey](#), "FMK," [Four Way Review](#), collected in [Dad Jokes from the Late Patriarchy](#), [Sundress Publications](#)

## Think Starlight

Think containment. Think caseload. Think  
of your parents. Think of Lily, who taught you  
the etymology of *stanza*—  
a kind of stopping place, the room  
where we self-quarantine. Think  
of all the faces you've known by hand,  
the curve of your lover's skull, how no one  
ever admits they wish they'd worried more,  
so you keep your panic on you at all times  
like a passport. The paper reports the nameless  
score, tally marks on the wall of a white stanza  
where women in green speak a language  
you don't understand and decide who deserves  
the breathing machine. Think starlight:  
it took so long to touch us,  
we trusted we were spared.

*Leigh Stein*

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<sup>313</sup> Leigh Stein, "Think Starlight," collected in [What to Miss When](#), Soft Skull Press

## All My Boyfriends Love My Father the Best

He comes to pick me up on his Harley he shows up  
with his earring and his jean jacket and my boyfriends

sigh like they want a boyfriend too  
he's blaring Led Zepelin and smoking

a Marlboro and pretending he likes them  
as much as me asking who they're reading

*oh yeah, he's the shit* my Dad says and my boyfriends  
go a little sweet in the knees—*tell me again*, they say,

*what he did time for?* an ex con who reads who listens  
to Marley and drinks coffee like a grad student

whose hands are calloused from some romantic labor  
and all those tattoos—I can see them squinting

when they look at him, imagining he's Kerouac—  
he's everything

they ever dreamed and a Jungian too—and I know  
that love where you try so hard to get someone

to see you and it feels like you'll never be let in  
to the mysterious house you know from distant

observation is the most beautiful house, that you know  
from closest study everything  
but what it's like to step inside

*Katie Schmid*

314

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<sup>314</sup> [Katie Schmid](#), "[All My Boyfriends Love My Father the Best](#)," *The Spectacle*, collected in *Nowhere*, [University of New Mexico Press](#)

Interview with Phyllis Fromme

My sister didn't do those things to hurt us.

After you called, while I sorted out my pills,  
my mother's blond Danish Modern end tables  
flashed through my mind.  
I open the crisper, and there's Lynn timer,  
inside a dumpster, picking through freckled lettuce,  
bent on helter skelter.  
They ruined the Beatles for me.

Last night, I dreamed of a scarlet pond,  
an albino koi surfacing  
with the barrel of a .45  
poking out of its mouth.

Yes. Father. Not well.  
I took my first *full* breath the day he died.

Is it cold in here?  
Father kept our thermostat low  
and monitored Mother's odometer, leaving us  
just quarters when he traveled for work.  
I'd watch Mother and her shoulders march  
her empty purse next door to scrub linoleum.

I read Lynn timer said our own father  
abused her (sexually I mean).  
How was I supposed to know?  
When he'd unlock our bedroom door,  
she wouldn't hide welts that would darken, but—  
the year I started kindergarten,  
he stopped talking to her.  
I was so young.

Redheads with spark get beaten.  
I swallowed my peas.

Three years later, he spoke to Lynn timer again.

I wish your editor never found me.

Did you read she took a staple gun,  
aimed a line of punctures up her arm?  
Ground into her skin with lit  
cigarettes as if she were an ashtray?  
Father told her she was ugly.

Then she met Manson.

I kept quiet, learned to sew,  
traced patterns, left extra cloth.  
I'd smile back at Breck girls in study hall  
but couldn't invite them home,  
even when Father was away.

So I'm in high school, right,  
and there's Lynn timer on TV,  
an X carved in her brow.

I wanted my teachers to forget her.  
You're the only one who remembers  
she had a sister. I never corrected  
teachers who said our last name wrong.  
That always set Father off.  
He insisted on the German way:  
*From-ma. From-ma.*

I imagine Lynn timer hunched over,  
thinking, thinking, thinking in her cell.

No, I've never visited her—never will.  
No, the people at work don't know.

Now I have a question for you.  
Why couldn't I just have been Phyllis  
Fromme, the good girl  
who went to the prom?

*Steven Riel*  
315

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<sup>315</sup> [Steven Riel](#), "[Interview with Phyllis Fromme](#)," [Evening Street Review](#), collected in [Edgemere](#), [Lily Poetry Review Books](#)

## Poof

At the party she said she wakes  
every night 2:05ish and can't get back  
to being gone, comes down and puts  
five plates away, whatever's  
in the dishwasher, has a frozen  
or two daiquiris, takes a knife  
and works at the hole in her head  
until dawn and footsteps and lies  
to hubby and kids she slept fine.  
Too bad Sisyphus isn't here, I thought.  
He'd move the rock in her heart  
or at least offer insight  
on being stuck. But while I  
was thinking Greek, she noticed  
all she'd said and turned pink.  
Isn't it weird blushing  
draws attention  
instead of camouflaging the face  
to fit in with the drapes? Pink  
and looked down at her feet  
doing nothing, so made them move  
a little forward and back.  
I did the same with mine  
until I was tapping her shoe  
and saying I miss when kickball  
was a nutritious part of my day.  
She remembered running  
and sending a dragon on a kite  
so high, it was scary to look at  
far off and alone  
or think of pulling home  
and away from its new life  
in the sky, so let it go.  
I remembered that too  
from the day before, the tumbling  
feeling of reverse vertigo,  
of doing something wrong  
by trying to be free.  
There's an intimacy  
unique to the little tent  
two people can put up at a party,  
a species of speech as open  
as it is never  
to be spoken of again. I am almost  
as no good today  
as I was no good decades ago

at being human. The thing I like  
about Sisyphus—he gets us.

*Bob Hicok*  
316

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<sup>316</sup> [Bob Hicok](#), "[Poof](#)," collected in [Hold](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Elephant

On the Route 7 strip,  
next to the office supply store,  
next to the pool supply store,  
next to the Tower Records,  
next to the TJ Maxx,  
was the Ranger Surplus lurked

where I shopped only  
at the edges: iron-on patches,  
all-weather lighters,  
vintage plate pin-ups,  
never venturing into the groin  
of camouflage and camping gear,

until I began buying weapons:  
including a mace, a chained flail,  
several throwing stars, and the book  
*Contemporary Surveillance Techniques*,  
with its cover showing a man  
crouched in a stereo speaker,

all gifts for my father  
because what do you get the man  
who has everything—and by *everything*  
I mean a large-caliber shell casing  
upright and decorative  
in the living room, where you might

expect a potted ficus to be—  
and these, too,  
were the years he gave me  
t-shirt after t-shirt, souvenirs  
of every posting and deployment,  
including the one that said

*Hard Rock Cafe Baghdad—  
Closed—Kuwait, Now Reopening—*  
T-shirts that fit poorly  
over my new breasts, boxy,  
unflattering, and so I shut them  
away in drawers again

and again, each of us  
trying to say to the other  
*I see you,*

the way a blindfolded man  
takes the tail into his hands, believing  
from this he can see the elephant.

*Sandra Beasley*  
317

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<sup>317</sup> [Sandra Beasley, "Elephant," \*Waxwing\*, collected in \*Made to Explode\*, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## Orpheus in Greenwich Village

What if Orpheus,  
confident in the hard-  
found mastery,  
should go down into Hell?  
Out of the clean light down?  
And then, surrounded  
by the closing beasts  
and readying his lyre,  
should notice, suddenly,  
they had no ears?

*Jack Gilbert*  
318

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<sup>318</sup> [Jack Gilbert](#), "[Orpheus in Greenwich Village](#)," collected in [Monolithos](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

## Oracles

In the year of buzzcuts  
Mom and Dad gave me dinner-

money every morning.  
I never ate dinner. Instead:

bought secret hipster glasses,  
stash of hairgel, a tearaway

bravado; preened wet spikes,  
walked around Seoul

like I belonged there. I imagined  
I was someone's shadow.

I grew skinny with movies.  
In the dark, in the *bee-deh-oh*-booth—

the cathodes asked questions  
of current and fluorescence.

The VCR sighed and sybilled.  
From the next room

someone moaned like Cinemax.  
I thought I knew the future, then:

the round spooling of it,  
its generosity and malice,

the hiss of snow. How one day  
everything would become real.

*Sam Cha*  
319

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<sup>319</sup> [Sam Cha, "Oracles," \*Lily Poetry Review\*](#)

## Rave-Ups and Galaxies

Jimmer, there's a thing in the woods and they need you. The city's gone silver, like the west coast of the moon, and it's been dusk so long they're thinking of calling it a season. After the breakup backstage, and the long, late night drive up the coast, you remember the trees on the side of the highway, twisted blasts of sculpture, old champions with bulky hands trying to find their way back to a tragedy. When you're running out of time you say everything but *I am running out of time*. You become an expert on small university basketball programs and talk about the weather at parties like you really understand it. You have to keep telling yourself to stop thinking about the girl from Huxton; it doesn't matter if she's the best kisser in the world or not. It's winter, the water is frozen, and the neighborhood cats huddle on the doorstep like French orphans from a novel. There's a thing in the woods, Jimmer. You can hear it in the hoodoo of the turbines above the highway. And we're all turning gray like we have the same fever.

*Alex Green*  
320

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<sup>320</sup> [Alex Green](#), "[Rave-Ups and Galaxies](#)," collected in [Emergency Anthems](#), Brooklyn Arts Press

## Correspondence Theory

In Winn-Dixie, where I've never seen  
anyone buy flowers, a box of rose petals  
has been sweating inside a tiny refrigerator

all Valentine's week. I can't help but  
consider who would buy them, the unlikely  
art of their hands as they pullstrip

open the container to scatter petals  
like rubber lips on the bed, on the table  
before the romantic meal. I'm here with a basket

of ingredients for a hamburger bean pie  
you'll eat in silence. I saw an accident  
on the way, was listening to the traffic report

as the car in front of me swung into  
the opposing lane. I saw it coming,  
but couldn't stop the car's body erupting

as if discharged from inside. Then quiet,  
a still figure, indistinctly human. I've been  
inside that car, been that figure, asking:

*Is it broken? Is this my blood? Are these  
my hands moving?* I mistrusted  
my perspective. Now I know the inside

and outside of an accident are the same.  
I count the romantic gestures completed  
on my behalf on one hand, in the wine aisle.

I know we are not cars. But I wonder  
if your other woman appreciates  
the dulcet stink of your ear canal, like oil

on a switchblade. I read the covers  
of the women's magazines, drink in  
their exuberant defeat. I, too, know how

thin one can slice a word and still  
have enough to live. This is how it tastes,  
like sucking a dirty half-dollar, like

emerging from the car, as a radio announcer reports what feels like my accident in real time. He suggests another route to take.

*Erin Hoover*  
321

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<sup>321</sup> [Erin Hoover](#), "[Correspondence Theory](#)," collected in [Barnburner](#), [Elixir Press](#)

from *Clangings*

Back on my wings, wings became me.  
I banked, broke, beside myself. Besides,  
honeysuckle sang, and brooked words  
overran beds of pebbles, but see?—

no meadow. Never was a meadow.  
Lots of long division, and times tables  
where once there were standing pools.  
If you played into them you got polio.

Polished glass wading downstream,  
oaks barked spells, and hexed books  
cracked, spine-open. Those are *facts*.  
None of that sailor-ruby-sky eventime.

Red robin, red robin, bash again, again  
against my window, feathers in flame  
—a fireman's?—to get in. Or be calm.  
With lunatic squires in your bloodline,

your beak-and-pockings won't open  
more living room. You're so enamored  
of mates you don't know your mirrored  
yew from yew. So bloody your reflection.

*Steven Cramer*  
322

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<sup>322</sup> [Steven Cramer](#), "[Clangings \[Back on my wings...\]](#)," [Memorious](#), collected in [Clangings](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

## Coyote

The coyotes are wilding again, a frenzy of high-pitched yowls  
and quick staccato yips that wafts up through my windows after dark.

I thought they'd howl like wolves, or dogs left out too long  
in the backs of trucks, not this otherworldly keening, sound

that stirs up dust, slips through the black boughs of the pine,  
careens through the muck of the creek, its stony bed,

through the fetid water and old trestles, their thin sheen of rust.  
From down here, it's just so much ruckus, so much fury

lifted on the wind. Except nights they ghost, and all  
I can hear is the rain, falling in blank verse on the roof.

I do not care for the coyote's voice. It's like someone  
singing the blues in another dimension. Feral riffs

through the thicket, past hemlock and horsetail, through  
buck brush and oak—and I want to trot four-legged in the grass,

seek them out, nose skimming the duff.  
There is an animal inside of me that wants to tear

into the body of something soft and luscious, cracking  
small bones. To prowl the church of the dark, ragged

and dangerous, wearing my grief like a fur jacket.  
To test my tongue against the rough spines of blackberry

and prickly pear, feel the barbed prongs in the pit of my gut.  
Haven't I been good long enough?—kept my sorrows

tucked in a back pocket, folded like a Swiss blade.  
But now I want to lie down, press my spine to the pocked earth,

tear off my shirt and writhe 'til I loosen something at the back  
of my throat, make my own, terrible noise, hear it slip

into the iced air—is this how they do it?—when they open  
their trick jaws, tilt their heads up.

*Danusha Laméris*  
323

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<sup>323</sup> [Danusha Laméris, "Coyote,"](#) collected in [Bonfire Opera, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Killing Jar

There are days  
I go to the mailbox  
and find letters  
from my dead husband  
translating for me his suicide:  
the cold blade softened into cursive,  
his fear licked onto the stamp,  
as the return address: the date of his death.  
I look forward to these letters.  
Some are addressed to my son,  
I collect and keep those.  
I think at times this is a greedy act,  
but he is too young.  
I see my body asleep in my son's body,  
my eyes behind his eyes.  
But now I worry that there is distortion,  
like Parmigianino's *Self Portrait  
in a Convex Mirror*, his hand  
slightly reaches out to me,  
slightly curls back into itself.

When I was a girl, my uncle  
mailed to me framed collections  
of mounted butterflies.  
Blue morpho. Tigerwing.  
Malachite. Moon Satyr.  
These are all names my husband  
could take now. I imagine him  
as Goldman's Euselasia  
or the Great Eurybia.  
I know that to kill a butterfly,  
you use a killing jar.

Because they are so fragile,  
sometimes butterflies batter  
themselves in the killing jar.  
At night, this makes me wonder  
about the mixing  
spoons in the bowl,  
the tangles of the dough,  
such small, temporary fights.

For a clean kill, it is better  
to first stun a butterfly  
by pinching its thorax.

But you must practice to get  
this method right,  
so it is recommended to try  
it on common moths or butterflies  
you are not concerned about.  
Pinch smartly between your finger  
and thumb like tweezing a piece of sky.

*Didi Jackson*  
324

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<sup>324</sup> [Didi Jackson, "Killing Jar," \*The Common\*, collected in \*Moon Jar\*, Red Hen Press](#)

## Ordeal

The creatures throwing  
bran muffin at me  
from the back seat  
of the Volkswagen SUV

stopped talking to themselves  
and now take turns  
becoming dinosaurs,  
their happiest

of games. They are a torture  
I talked myself into,  
and as I ferry them, my favorites,  
I notice with my tongue

that I have managed,  
in my sleep, to lose  
the sliver of one side  
of a premolar:

a portioning out,  
a judgment, from the German  
*urteil*, that which the gods  
dole out, one arduous deal.

Most end up lucky  
never to have been  
marched barefoot,  
like Cunigunde of Luxembourg,

over red-hot ploughshares,  
nor forced to swallow feathers  
in dry bread,  
nor made to carry

through a hissing crowd  
the planks of wood  
their fate will nail them to,  
nor waterboarded.

Most of us are lucky,  
yet when we smile, we draw

attention to the contours of the skull  
beneath uneasy skin,

to the confusion  
polluting the eyes,  
startled like burghers  
in a painting by James Ensor,

whose work makes clear  
what scared him  
in the tranquil afternoon:  
the dignified

deteriorating faces smiling  
into him as he traversed  
a bridge or saw  
a mirror. And the skeleton inside.

Myself I prefer to retreat  
into the jellyfish dream factory  
of my open eyes, as we traverse  
the span allotted, each hillside

pedicured and tilled, a burst  
of starlings hurtling  
themselves in trapezoids  
at the clay sky above us:

the brontosaurus, the triceratops,  
and me, who loves them,  
if love is the right term  
for what the stand of hollow trees

feels toward its greening  
canopy, for how night rain  
scatters itself  
over the eager topsoil,

for the extent to which I'm able  
to luxuriate in light, inhaling  
steam, though I suspect  
I am succumbing,

gradually, to an identity  
deficiency, an overpowering  
lack of sense,

as I continue serving

(until it's time to ascertain  
if the accused will sink  
in innocence, or, obstinately, float)  
what's left of my life sentence

with all of you beneath this wire  
and bird, amid the tangled  
shadows, root systems,  
a congeries of slate rooftops.

*Michael Dumanis*  
325

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<sup>325</sup> [Michael Dumanis, "Ordeal," \*The Common\*](#)

## The Order of Things

Tonight, I smashed a spider  
with a nineteenth century Russian  
novel for crawling across my desk.  
I hate them the way I hated lectures  
in college, though I could sleep  
through the homosexual tendencies  
of monkeys, the industrial revolution  
or Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*.  
I hate walking face and teeth  
and nose into their webs  
where they spin and wrap and suck  
the blood from flies. My mother  
brushes them into her palms,  
escorts them like admirals to the sidewalk.  
I know. I'm upsetting the order of things.  
I'm drowning the wolf that hunts the deer that ingests the grass  
that wants to cover our graves.  
My wife says, *Think of something nice*.  
I daydream about punching the man next door  
for cutting down the hedge.  
I wonder if God feels repulsed by the sight of us.  
Before bed every night I sweep the sheets  
for legions of eight-legged creatures  
coming for me while I reach around  
hoping to touch my wife's breasts.  
One friend pours armies into her garden  
from a paper sack to save the tomatoes.  
*Miraculous!* she says. How they multiply, the waves  
of spiders growing over the leaves.  
My three-year-old came into the study last week  
in his Superman underoos, turned off my reading lamp  
and said in his tiny voice:  
*You don't need any more light*.  
This is what I tell a spider before I kill it.

Jay Nebel  
326

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<sup>326</sup> Jay Nebel, "[The Order of Things](#)," [Tin House](#), collected in [Neighbors](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Wine with Everything Was What I Said

when someone would ask me  
for the color of my lipstick.  
I loved the way it made me feel  
like a mad queen issuing a proclamation—

*Wine with Everything* and enough  
roasted squab for all the rowdy villagers.  
A festival of plums & harlequin roses—  
that color, I mean, the way it never bled  
in betrayal across my teeth. *Amative*—

(disposed to love), the gist of a shade  
too kitten-heeled and pearly for me,  
a shimmer lifted away by the wind  
while riding on the back of an older boy's  
motorcycle when you were supposed to  
be home babysitting your younger brother.

*Mars Rising*, a chroma too atmospheric  
not to leave what looked like a trail of blood  
across throats and earlobes, and let me just say  
*Desire Was a Blue-Eyed Man*, silky & humid,  
a taste that really left me wanting  
to be kissed down there by the river  
before I learned *Crush* was a color  
that meant avalanche, matte and opaque,

too heavy for a girl revved up on Revlon,  
a girl too impractical to sustain  
the momentum of anything but dancing,  
who thought there was nothing more  
hypnotic than moonlight darkening the hollows  
of a man's cheekbones. I tried them all—

by that I mean the lipstick shades, of course—  
the orchids and the mochas and the corals,  
the lacquered, the frosted,  
the ticklish feather coats of glossy nudes,  
the amber-golds and apricots—all  
imprints ghosting on goblets raised  
in the palette cleansing light  
between him and him and him.  
*Wine with Everything* clinging to the rim.

Laura Sobott Ross  
327

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<sup>327</sup> [Laura Sobott Ross, "Wine with Everything Was What I Said," \*Kestrel\*](#)

Elegy for a Youth Shot by Police on the Day Robin Williams Died

August 11 circles round again,  
and a new doc appears to celebrate  
Robin Williams's life and artistry.  
While *Spirits and the Muse* illuminate  
the web with clips from standup, interviews,  
random hilarity shared with the gaffers and crew

(concealing pain we should have recognized),  
there is a corner of the internet  
dedicated to your memory:  
your sister posted an In Memoriam page;  
the funeral home offers public space  
under your obituary

for heartfelt testimonials; there's also  
a dormant but unpurgéd Instagram  
account that once you made more lovely  
with selfies in flat cap, graduation gown.  
Someone could Google your common name and find  
your profile in the *Picayune* before

the paywall shuts her out. Of course complete  
transcripts from the failed investigation  
are in the public record, held in storage  
in the white radiance of a server housed  
somewhere in Oklahoma City. Have you  
seen his warm exchange with soldiers serving

in Kuwait? How many young men died that day?  
Half the jokes in *Good Morning Vietnam*  
were ad-libbed for the camera crew. No doubt  
he was the Sire of an Immortal Strain.  
And that was *after* he kicked cocaine, "God's way  
of saying you have too much fucking money."

What hard mishap hath doomed this blameless swain?  
Apparently you kept your hands concealed  
during an investigative stop  
for thirteen seconds from the moment when  
the felon winds appointed you their next  
and the bullets that would now themselves disown.

It must be said his Boston accent was  
not convincing. But the performance?  
Transcendent nonetheless, although some say  
his first success as a moving tragic clown  
was in *Seize the Day*, dir. Fielder Cook.  
You bled out from the misty dream of life,

choking your last in an asphalt parking lot,  
wasting your sweetness on the desert air  
while the blush on your chest expanded wide to take  
in the fresh paint, the dim streetlights, even  
the Gang Squad panting in their body armour.  
A heart once pregnant with celestial fire

now blown apart by superior ballistics.  
We will not be distracted. We will not be  
dismissive of depression and its toll.  
Let passion-wingèd Ministers of Thought  
forge memes and PSAs to keep us focused.  
Grief is mortal, the internet is not.

We are all guilty for his death because  
“we wanted more of him than he could give.”  
Let talk about depression now increase  
with its new famous patron saint and martyr.  
Let all accept responsibility  
for our sins of omission on August 11.

Let this day forever serve to remind us  
of those we could have saved, lauded or  
dishonoured, friend and foe alike. Let no  
more life divide what Death can join together.  
Sleep with comedians and kings, clear Sprites.  
Tomorrow to fresh pastimes and headlines new.

*Adam Sol*  
328

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<sup>328</sup> Adam Sol, “[Elegy for a Youth Shot by Police on the Day Robin Williams Died](#),” collected in [Broken Dawn Blessings](#), ECW Press

I'll Call You *This Afternoon*,

I'll call you *nowhere, now*  
    *here*: the cardinal's *almost almost*  
*almost, quite*. Until the winter solstice  
    there is less light  
    than night. Then a whole other  
manna, in a manner of  
    speaking. But darkness is so much  
faster than light. Have you  
    noticed that if you go into a room  
    that is completely dark and flip  
the switch, you see the light  
    enter the room but don't  
see the darkness leave? At dawn  
    we watch the light appear  
    while night slips out  
unseen like the tide before  
    it leapfrogs in. Chablis  
not only rhymes with *sea*  
    but comes from, remembers  
    the sea: its chalky, stony  
salinity. The best come from  
    grapes grown on a prehistoric  
sea, limestone and clay soils  
    full of fossilized shells  
    and marine skeletons. In the Middle Ages  
and Renaissance, the depiction of  
    the rotting body became  
an art form. Sculptors carved  
    cadaver tombs, double-decker like  
    the buses in London or the bunk beds  
I once argued over with  
    my brother: on top, the reclining  
effigy of a person as he appeared  
    in life—clothed and sometimes praying  
    or reading—and on the bottom  
a naked corpse laced  
    with worms. Ligier Richier, a pupil  
of Michelangelo, sculpted the *transi*—  
    the transition from body  
    to dust—of René de Chalon, still standing  
in the church of Saint-Étienne: unraveled  
    muscles and flaps of skin  
dangle from bones as he grasps  
    his rib cage with the right hand, his left reaching  
    up to hold a space that once held  
his dried heart. One of Dickinson's correspondents

likened her handwriting to the fossil tracks  
of birds. Where they were headed  
cannot be said, so I'll call you  
*what I was going to say*  
*was, what I meant, I always*  
*thought that* like Aeneas, clinging  
to the wreckage after the Trojan fleet  
has gone down: *Someday, even this*  
*will be recalled with pleasure.*

*Angie Estes*  
329

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<sup>329</sup> [Angie Estes, "I'll Call You This Afternoon," \*Plume\*, collected in \*Parole\*, Oberlin College Press](#)

Ode to Odor, Ardor, and the Queen's Chickabobboo

Harold Pinter is drinking a bottle of champagne  
during intermission at the Cottesloe, the rain  
of words ceasing for thirty minutes, so the skein  
of lies Chekhov's characters tell themselves while they feign  
desire or perhaps love, drink vodka shots, and complain  
about provincial life can soak into the terrain  
of our minds, though how we can possibly regain  
our hold on joy after watching Ivanov's insane  
hectoring of his dying wife I can't see. It's plain  
the great playwright feels the same as I watch him drain  
glass after glass of so-so theater-bar champagne,  
and I think of a group of nineteenth-century Plains  
Indians, visiting Paris and tasting champagne,  
calling it the Queen's chickabobboo, and may she reign  
supreme, because nothing can break the dreary membrane  
of November fog like a glass of Veuve Clicquot, vain  
thoughts exploding like a silly *Mikado* refrain,  
and even the most jaded, worn out demimondaine  
will raise her glass to what? Tomorrow? The last domain  
of hope until it takes its final dip in the Seine,  
though there is probably a French heaven of Gitane-  
soaked cafés, populated by Rimbaud and Verlaine,  
*poetes maudits plus*, or, even better, the Great Dane,  
Hamlet, nothing wrong with him that a little champagne  
couldn't cure, right, Sir Harold? Or did you choose to remain  
plain Mr. Pinter? Who knows or cares? I entertain  
so many idle thoughts that the inner cupcake of my brain  
has mounted an armed and, may I say, vicious campaign  
against itself and its thousands of questions, mostly inane,  
such as, Why do roses smell like mildew, and in Spain  
did the lisp begin with a lisp king? Does Bruce Wayne  
aka Batman have the best costume, and the quatrain,  
who would put a poem in box? For Macbeth, that Thane  
of Cawdor thing was a real problem. Oh, where is Jane  
Austen when you need her? Nursing a pulsing migraine  
or Francis Bacon shouting over shambles, "Real pain  
for my sham friends, champagne for my real friends." It's plain  
that pain's the problem—think of poor rich Citizen Kane  
whispering "Rosebud" with his last breath or Chekhov again,  
*I must be dying. It's so long since I've drunk champagne.*

Barbara Hamby  
330

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<sup>330</sup> Barbara Hamby, "Ode to Odor, Ardor, and the Queen's Chickabobboo," collected in *All-Night Lingo Tango*, University of Pittsburgh Press

To the Woman Going Up the Escalator at Columbus Circle at Five-Thirty Last Evening

You were holding  
a fortunate orchid.  
I was not  
the slob standing  
beside you. I  
was the slob behind,  
one who'd live  
happily on half  
an ice cube  
now and again  
to ascend once  
to a blue  
moon with you.

*Andrea Cohen*  
331

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<sup>331</sup> [Andrea Cohen, "To the Woman Going Up the Escalator at Columbus Circle at Five-Thirty Last Evening," \*Arkansas International\*, collected in \*Nightshade\*, Four Way Books](#)

January 22, 2017

I went to the imaginary bridge last night.

The gravity was pharmaceutical—the moony Ativan under the tongue, the whiskey passing over.

*I have let things slip.*

There's no way to tell you this without the story shimmering at the edges—and I don't mean to scare you, or to impress you.

Instead I report the numb night, the day's chemical thumbs smoothing my brain.

I report the eye flashing in twilight, in any dim light. I report wishing for a larger dose.

By the time this letter reaches you, maybe I'll have forgotten those lines in the middle of Plath's poem:  
*how free it is, Naomi, you have no idea—*

I don't know what I'm admitting to, but I don't want you to worry.

*Rachel Mennies*  
332

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<sup>332</sup> [Rachel Mennies, "January 22, 2017,"](#) collected in [The Naomi Letters, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

## Postcards

You'd love the stories they tell so often in these parts in which the fish monger dies and for weeks his dog doesn't eat until the dog also dies, everybody murmurs, of a broken heart. All the rickshaw men tell that story and young women in bonnets tell that story; it makes me feel so attached—like a ligament—to the whole of human experience, which is so much less complicated here.

---

No need to wire money, everything's fine, I'm having a wonderful time dawdling for hours on the mall among the noble truckers and pharmacists on Sundays or at the café beside the barracks where the artillery men indulge in spirits and brie.

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Somewhere, I found this photograph of the township in black and white in winter at night or this copy of a print of a painting of the township in sunlight refracted through the smog I've come to regard as lovingly as the egrets here regard their river homes, and I thought you might have it for the door of the fridge or for your cubicle wall.

---

The weather's been so gorgeous, and I feel so awful for the folks who work here through all this gorgeous weather, but they do work and do work hard so they all acquire the same sort of expression indicative of a quiet, native nobility though they wear such funny hats and tend to their rutabaga patches with an almost religious fervor.

---

Religion's very big here. As are tulips. They say this is suggestive of the something-of-divinity intrinsic to tulips, but they say it in a way impossible to translate, so forgive me, I won't bother.

---

On the mesa the other day I looked out across the tracts of amber hemmed together by rows of mangled vines and noticed some kids ditching school to neck in the fields that seem so much more lush than those I remember from home, the kids courting each other with such refreshing schmaltz: *I love you. Here is a tulip. Do you love me also?*

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It's all this fresh air here, I can feel myself changing, it's all the red mosses and hand-crafted hubcaps and moving walkways I glide down, I can feel myself utterly altered being here which is so unlike being there where everything's so complicated.

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I drink an aperitif distilled of wormwood every morning with a breakfast of baked bananas wrapped in palm fronds. I listen to the mayor on the radio make his daily pronouncement regarding crop height and the anticipated rainfall. It hardly ever rains, but when it does, it rains for months straight, so you never need carry an umbrella except for when you must always carry an umbrella. You see how much simpler everything is?

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I wish you were here you'd love it. We nap all through Tuesday and eat horsemeat marinated in lime juice and marmalade.

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Listen, I have to admit I wouldn't believe any of that hooey about the dog dying of a broken heart either, but they tell me it died at this very highway exit or in this very bath house converted into a dance hall or behind this very epitome of a Gothic cathedral, so I thought you should have this picture of a dog.

---

Why I even thought of you I don't know, it's so perfect here, though I did think of you and thought I'd send you some piece of my pristine life without dentistry or tax shelter.

---

And so you'd know that I and everything are really much, much better and life can really be so serene and simple, I wanted to send you this postcard of a tempest on the plateau, of this cut tulip pinned to a young girl's bonnet, of these regal horses en route to so quiet and so noble a butcher.

*Jaswinder Bolina*

333

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<sup>333</sup> [Jaswinder Bolina](#), "[Postcards](#)," [The Laurel Review](#), collected in [Phantom Camera](#), [New Issues Press](#)

## Show and Tell

Now begins the season of Minor Feasts.  
Easter's over. All  
that grief.

These are the first green weeks. May

opens it up to the public—the cathedrals  
& boutiques. The tourists

and the dumb animals come, the simple  
insects, and the very young—  
Beau McCallister is back. Beau

who brought to Show and Tell  
the news of his grandmother's death.  
I see him dearly still, walking  
with his small fists in his pockets, face

made out of tears and phlegm, taking  
his child-sized seat again.

White-blond hair.  
Big square teeth.

I was also a child then  
but when my grandmother died  
it hasn't occurred to me to tell. Outside,  
the willow facetiously weeped. The sloppy

needlepoint of lilacs in the breeze. Soon  
a hard rain would come  
to drive nails and needles into the ground

And here's another thing we don't yet know:  
In another decade. Beau

will die a boy's swift death  
by Jeep. He will

be driving too  
fast in the snow, too  
close to the side of the road. And this

old lady in France  
taking bad snapshots of the stained glass (*Grandma*,

*there's too much light, step back*)—this  
shadow in the corner of her last bright blur

will belong to me.

*Laura Kasischke*  
334

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<sup>334</sup> [Laura Kasischke, "Show and Tell," collected in \*Dance and Disappear\*, University of Massachusetts Press](#)

Landscape with Borrowed Contours

*If you've got it, flaunt it,*  
said a t-shirt my mother gave me,  
but what did I have?

Tiny batteries in my breasts,  
which hummed along, expectant.  
I did and didn't want to grow up

and into a woman  
so I tore pages out of *Mademoiselle*  
and the monthlies we found hidden

under our fathers' medical journals,  
photos I studied as I cut out a CV  
of eyes, mouths,

legs, hips, lips, nipples.  
What did I have?  
Farrago messages,

tomboy's body, irreconcilable gig  
of what it meant to be "liberated."  
More nipples than clouds, more clouds

than faces, more faces than mothers.  
I worked my way around each silhouette,  
made a collage,

and shellacked the whole rig with glue  
until it crazed, an amateur's map  
once but no longer kept pinned

beside the full-length mirror  
out of which unrecognizable landscape  
I sometimes stare.

*Catherine Barnett*

335

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<sup>335</sup> [Catherine Barnett](#), "[Landscape with Borrowed Contours](#)," collected in [Human Hours](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

## The Death of Humphrey Bogart

*This moment, I can't recall exactly which,  
but there's a sect of Buddhists who believe one's  
version of heaven lasts only as long as his  
name is remembered on earth. Then, if this watch  
truly times what's billed as eternal, add heaven  
to that list of life's disappointments—all hype,  
no finish. Women know the aphorism:  
it's easy to fall for an ugly man. Your type,  
Bogie, with your sad, gargoyle profile  
and fidgety pistol, the hair-trigger style  
of you sipping your gin with killers and dolls,  
lips curled back from the glass. Who'd call that a smile?*

\* \* \*

*Baby? Where are you?*

It's after Christmas time, 1956,  
when a young woman, eyes  
like a leopard's cub, lies quiet on the other side  
of the bed.

Nearly all this night she's watched  
her husband pick at his chest, the laboring itch  
of the very sick.

She doesn't know it yet, but already she's settled  
on Psalm 23, white roses,  
the fresh, green leaves of their own magnolia,  
to salt the ocean with ashes.

This morning the wind tangles  
a thin whistle in  
the trees outside their bedroom window. Soon

other women will rise, with newspapers and husband  
on their way to business...

\*

...During the service, her mind may drift, wondering  
if heaven has a kidney-shaped pool,

a barbecue, burgers grilled pink in the middle, a painted  
sunset eternally bobbing on  
a sound stage of perfect, pacific horizon:

Prayers are being read:

*...He will receive blessing  
from the Lord and vindication  
from the God of his salvation.  
Such is the generation of those  
who seek Him...*

...She can picture them together at poolside  
the Nivens coming for cocktails at five  
Frank soon to arrive with the broad he's brought

round; platinum haired, stacked like an angel,  
an attitude of kisses, well-placed  
and meaningfully red, forever at her hips.

*Erin Belieu*  
336

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<sup>336</sup> [Erin Belieu, "The Death of Humphrey Bogart,"](#) *The Nebraska Review*, collected in [Infanta](#), Copper Canyon Press

corporal

Best known in youth for its punishments, its poor  
Grasps at pleasure. As in fantasies of dates where chocolate & cola  
Do not later overrun the face with a crop  
Of pimples. It is the simple, but loco  
Motives. As in creeping through evening snow to croon a carol  
At a girl's window. It is not singing, but a roar  
That does not cease. The stench of imitation Polo  
Cologne on the breeze. It is shoveling coal  
Into the heart's mindless furnace. The lack of cool.  
The skin's burning color.  
The skull's charred parlor.

*Terrance Hayes*  
337

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<sup>337</sup> [Terrance Hayes](#), "[corporal](#)," collected in [Hip Logic](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Bakersfield, 1969

I used to visit a boy in Bakersfield, hitchhike  
to the San Diego terminal and ride the bus for hours  
through the sun-blasted San Fernando Valley  
just to sit on his fold-down bed in a trailer  
parked in the side yard of his parent's house,  
drinking Southern Comfort from a plastic cup.  
His brother was a sessions man for Taj Mahal,  
and he played guitar, too, picked at it like a scab.  
Once his mother knocked on the tin door  
to ask us in for dinner. She watched me  
from the sides of her eyes while I ate.  
When I offered to wash the dishes she told me  
she wouldn't stand her son being taken  
advantage of. I said I had no intention  
of taking anything and set the last dish  
carefully in the rack. He was a bit slow,  
like he'd been hit hard on the back of the head,  
but nothing dramatic. We didn't talk much anyway,  
just drank and smoked and fucked and slept  
through the ferocious heat. I found a photograph  
he took of me getting back on the bus or maybe  
stepping off into his arms. I'm wearing jeans  
with studs punched along the cuffs,  
a t-shirt with stars on the sleeves, a pair  
of stolen bowling shoes and a purse I made  
while I was in the loony bin, wobbly X's  
embroidered on burlap with gaudy orange yarn.  
I don't remember how we met. When I look  
at this picture I think I might not even  
remember this boy if he hadn't taken it  
and given it to me, written his name under mine  
on the back. I stopped seeing him  
after that thing with his mother. I didn't know  
I didn't know anything yet. I liked him.  
That's what I remember. That,  
and the I-don't-know-what degree heat  
that rubbed up against the trailer's metal sides,  
steamed in through the cracks between the door  
and porthole windows, pressed down on us  
from the ceiling and seeped through the floor,  
crushing us into the damp sheets. How we endured it,  
sweat streaming down our naked bodies, the air  
sucked from our lungs as we slept. Taj Mahal says  
*If you ain't scared, you ain't right.* Back then  
I was scared most of the time. But I acted  
tough, like I knew every street.

What I liked about him was that he wasn't acting.  
Even his sweat tasted sweet.

*Dorianne Laux*  
338

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<sup>338</sup> [Dorianne Laux](#), "[Bakersfield, 1969](#)," collected in [The Book of Men, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

## Hostile Platitudes

The walk-through model of the working heart  
will scare you—stay away. It is most honest

to speak in truisms if you also think  
in truisms, though if you dream in them,

to speak becomes dishonest once again.  
Because a stranger drinking and watching you sing

will likely pity you, it is wise to request  
a karaoke number full of sex

and kick. A heartsick plaint: a sorry scene.  
If I've learned anything, I must be certain

nobody cares for folk tales. All they like  
are hostile platitudes. Nobody wants

a history lesson, especially not now.  
In ancient Rome, a prisoner brought to death

could be released if he met a vestal virgin  
en route to execution. Had to be

by chance. The guys get hot for anyone  
who shows up like she didn't plan to come.

*Natalie Shapero*  
339

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<sup>339</sup> [Natalie Shapero, "Hostile Platitudes,"](#) collected in [No Object, Saturnalia Books](#)

## Fixed and in Flux

The cicadas swarm the pines all summer,  
the males flexing their tymbals to make  
the horrifying sound that will attract a mate.  
The new people are fidgeting in strollers,  
running on little piston legs  
hard toward the street, toward the breast  
and then the beer can, and soon  
the breast again. When one door closes,  
another floats downriver  
under the night sky. Nine planets  
seemingly forever and then suddenly  
Pluto's demoted. *The king is dead!*  
*Long live the king!* Existentially,  
we're either crawling toward  
a top-shelf margarita being perfected by  
adorable six-winged angels, or else  
getting puréed in a food processor  
on a decapitated mountain.  
Meanwhile, a sea worm slithers through a mortgage.  
72% of Americans believe in angels,  
no wonder that parasitic amoeba got elected.  
Meanwhile, a lake comes to realize  
it's now a grenade.

*Kim Addonizio*  
340

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<sup>340</sup> [Kim Addonizio, "Fixed and in Flux," collected in \*Now We're Getting Somewhere\*, W. W. Norton & Company](#)



## The Last Judgement

I come to you in all seriousness, reverent  
as a turtleneck—I am graceless but I am not depraved.  
I went to synagogues for a year because I had lost God

and was trying to find Him, following clues  
with my comically oversized magnifying glass held up  
to my giant eye, lashes collapsing like jaws, grilling congregants

under the naked lightbulb of my longing. I kept just  
missing him. He went thataway. Maybe I wanted to be Jewish  
to be done with Jesus but not yet break up

with God, as if moving into the guest room but leaving  
my clothes in the other closet, that version of myself  
a hallway away. I am the ghost of the house I live in—

old me-phantoms surround, fuck around with the furniture,  
make all the mirrors tell the truth. One night I have a dream  
my husband leaves and the nightmare part is that I'm

relieved and so I finally see who I am. It's not  
that I got used to loneliness, only that it was too late  
to learn anything else. The first time a man touched me

it was to lower me into the water and raise me out,  
new fish, the sin picked clean. I was saved, as if I could be  
spent—saved, I saved myself for God, or if not God

then a man God sent, posing us toward each other  
in a desert diorama, His Holy Homework,  
but the first two boys I loved are dead, so at night

I give myself to them, unzip the hollows, usher them into  
the pitch. The books inside me are blank. I birth the boys  
as my son, whom I love and whom I try to forgive.

*Erin Adair-Hodges*  
342

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<sup>342</sup> [Erin Adair-Hodges, "The Last Judgement," \*Painted Bride Quarterly\*, collected in \*Let's All Die Happy\*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Self-Portrait as Mouthpiece of an Anonymous Benefactor

Flocks of sparrows are waiting to be articulated.  
Like Bob Dylan after a concert in the middle  
of the night in a strange city, mount your mare  
of a motorcycle and ride her into the outer

township, or be Emily, who broke her seclusion  
to walk the moonlit fields, only after midnight,  
as she was a jazz musician, and only with her  
Newfoundland, Carlo. At some point, you must

unpackage your pen. Your hair like an unpeopled  
spring-fed pond full of small leeches. Your eyes  
like snails on the riverbank where colonial madmen  
sailed. At some point, be Arturo at the piano,

land hard on a note like Frank and listen to its echo.  
Don't think about things with any degree of largesse.  
Be the rock in the pocket that helps the weary poet  
sink. There are fawns in the fields: triplets and twins.

Some without lice, without meningitis. I'm giving you  
hope like a weird dessert whether you want it or not.  
Do you want it? Or not? By the way, the chickens  
need to be locked in their box. The fox is hot to trot.

The moon's on a suicide watch. Her swelling  
makes her nervous. No, she's not bulimic. It's genetic.  
Explore the long sentence. I mean the long prison  
sentence. Unmask syntax. So many ways to be a petty

linguist. Government cheese is an aesthetic. Gratitude  
for free food is an aesthetic. If you start to smell  
like a fish, you've gone too far. The best artists are gutted,  
their innards thrown to hungry dogs in a story

by Chekhov. In Chekhov, all the dogs are hungry.  
The hairdos are outrageous. There is no such  
thing as a personal lubricant. There is spit.  
There is something like cement made of tiny

shells and off-brand pearls, flora but no fauna.  
I'm not drunk. Are you drunk? This is elementary  
and I'm the custodian. I'm who swats the fly  
that buzzes when you die. That guy.

*Diane Seuss*

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<sup>343</sup> Diane Seuss, "[Self-Portrait as Mouthpiece of an Anonymous Benefactor](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl](#), Graywolf Press

from “The Ballad of Eleanor and Earnest”

*Part III—Literal Interpretation*

As the lovers near the West  
Tennessee State Penitentiary,  
the adulteress contemplates  
the signage.

Signage is largely useless.

that cannot be and cannot be  
unsaid. “You just have to.”  
And like the Bible, she wonders if  
this is literally true.  
“I want,” she says, “to leave him and  
I want to live with you.”

I agree. I think capital  
punishment is wrong, but  
whether or not God agrees is  
another question.

The signs along the road, she feels,  
loom large and numerous—  
FOR SALE, one reads, FOR SALE, FOR SALE!  
PECANS (with a phone number).

The signs are hard to comprehend—  
ANTIOCH      MISSIONARY      BAPTIST.

The prison she mistakes for a castle  
(for the seventh time), and cries.  
“You’re acting crazy,” Earnest says.  
He doesn’t spell out why.

CAPITAL PUN. IS      ALWAYS,      ALWAYS  
WRONG. Earnest says,  
“You have to tell me what you want.” Like the  
Bible,  
she fears the words once said

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<sup>344</sup> [Eleanor Boudreau](#), "[The Ballad of Eleanor and Earnest](#)," collected in [Earnest, Earnest?](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

## Felon's Logic

Dear body I do not resent,  
experiment with me.

I feel my mind grow broad as orchestras,  
I feel its oceans weep. How I fall

awake. How all the alphabet  
falls from my hands. I feel beneath my skin

the little needles of a life. I listen  
whenever an intersection calls, I obey

its schizophrenia, an understanding of the art  
in me that cries for me to act.

What I mean by hurt is that the hours,  
they lie to me. I have been, but am not limited to

a tense. Scars personify the mouth, too fragile  
to sing or be. At the sills, estuaries. At the sorrows,

speech. I drink at the dream's atmospheric  
embrace, I feed the mouth that bites me.

I become what is running through the woods.  
Like armor unworn, I pose my battle

along the wall, plain as a god, singing like a verb,  
sadistic. I wince and bleed with the world

and all its seamless ways to be rid of me,  
until its complications octopus in my irises,

until the moment becomes my mother's sleeve  
I once forgot to grasp.

*Jennifer Militello*

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<sup>345</sup> [Jennifer Militello](#), "[Felon's Logic](#)," [Gulf Coast](#), collected in [Body Thesaurus](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

## At the End of the Endless Decade

For years had anyone needed me  
to spell the word commiserate

I'd have disappointed them. I envy  
people who are more excited

by etymology than I am, but not  
the ones who can explain how

music works—I wonder whether  
the critic who wrote

that the Cocteau Twins were the voice  
of god still believes it. Why not,

what else would god sound like.  
Even though I know better, when I see

the word misericordia I still think  
suffering, not forgiveness;

when we commiserate we are united  
not in mercy but in misery,

so let's go ahead and call this abscess  
of history the Great Commiseration.

The difference  
between affliction and affection

is a flick, a lick—but check  
again, what lurks in the letters

is “lie,” and what kind of luck  
is that. As the years pile up

our friends become more vocal  
about their various damages:

Won't you let me monetize  
your affliction, says my friend

the corporation. When I try to enter  
the name of any city

it autocorrects to Forever:  
I'm spending a week in Forever,

Forever was hotter than ever  
this year, Forever's expensive

but oh the museums,  
and all of its misery's ours.

*Mark Bibbins*  
346

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<sup>346</sup> [Mark Bibbins, "At the End of the Endless Decade," \*Poem-a-Day\*](#)

## We Dive

Age 12, we dive and dive. For the girl playing dead by the drain in the deep end of the pool. For the pennies we toss in the water by the lifeguard's chair. From the diving board: three steps, the hurdle, the launch. We come up for air long enough to eat lunch, cheeseburgers and fries drowned in a murder of ketchup. Our bellies, humped and rounded, push against the elastic of our bathing suits as we dive and dive and dive.

At 14, we lie in the gutters of the swimming pool, basting our bellies in baby oil and the occasional wavelets of cool that slop up whenever someone dives in. We pick at burgers without buns, drink cans of Tab poured warm over ice that cracks like knuckles. We learn about calories and fat from the high school girls who shout warnings across the humid locker room. Sometimes we dive but only at the end of the day.

At 18, we arrange chaise lounges and serve up the buffet of ourselves, tasty swell of breasts basted to brown, a feast for the boys teeing off on the first hole. Later we pull out hand mirrors and paint alien faces over our own eyes and lips, wait by the 18th green while they putt out. We prop our feet on the dashboard of their cars, let them drive us to a rutted field off a dirt road where we unzip and dive as if we are starving. We hold our breath, but we've already smothered. Already drowned.

*Sarah Freligh*  
347

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<sup>347</sup> [Sarah Freligh, "We Dive," \*Cease, Cows\*, collected in \*We\*, Small Harbor Publishing](#)

My mother gives a man permission

to slit her throat. The incision  
no larger than a vulva's inner lips,  
the surgeon slips his slender tools in.

*It is simpler than her first time,*  
he says—the nodules curled in the throat  
almost at peace.

Rain, & in the late morning  
my knees scraped from kneeling  
at the mouth of the lake.

*Simpler, but not the last time,*  
he says—death growing again  
& again because it grew

the first time. My first lover  
forever dressing in my car's backseat  
by the lake. In her neck,

death's conception like a hand  
curling to a fist. In the hospital,  
my mother willing birth

& so I was. In the hospital,  
some man willing life  
& so she is, still.

Death curls & hardens, rain  
gaining speed, rising  
heat in the backseat

& I was—am—far  
from the edge of forgiving  
my mother for giving me

a body. Gaining speed, she  
wakes, sewn. Rain, late  
morning, shore

so familiar it bleeds.

*Katie Condon*  
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<sup>348</sup> [Katie Condon, "My mother gives a man permission," \*The Columbia Review\*, collected in \*Praying Naked\*, Ohio State University Press](#)

Owed to the Plastic on Your Grandmother's Couch

Which could almost be said  
to *glisten*, or glow,  
like the weaponry  
in heaven.  
Frictionless.  
As if slickened  
with some Pentecost  
-al auntie's last bottle  
of anointing oil, an ark  
of no covenant  
one might easily name,  
apart from the promise  
to preserve all small  
& distinctly mortal forms  
of loveliness  
that any elder  
African American  
woman makes  
the day they see sixty.  
Consider the garden  
of collards & heirloom  
tomatoes only,  
her long, single braid  
streaked with gray  
like a gathering  
of weather,  
the child popped  
in church for not  
sitting still, how even that,  
they say, can become an omen  
if you aren't careful,  
if you don't act like you know  
all Newton's laws  
don't apply to us  
the same exactly.  
Ain't no equal  
& opposite reaction  
to the everyday brawl  
blackness in America is,  
no body so beloved  
it cannot be destroyed.  
So we hold on to what  
we cannot hold.  
Adorn it  
in Vaseline, or gold,  
or polyurethane wrapping.

Call it ours  
& don't  
mean owned.  
Call it just  
like new,  
mean *alive*.

*Joshua Bennett*  
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<sup>349</sup> [Joshua Bennett](#), "[Owed to the Plastic on Your Grandmother's Couch](#)," collected in [Owed](#), [Penguin Books](#)

## Notes on the End of the World

Cold rainy days say *Do it, lie in bed with a stranger.*  
Even if a house is on fire, and a dog is inside burning, do not leave.  
I could almost believe the world planned for itself to fail.  
Then a wasp burrows in a fig. Then a baby is perfect  
in its inability to remember.

If you are a stranger, I am a stranger.  
Things are funny that way.  
Chameleons trying to blend into chameleons  
until the way to go unnoticed is to disappear completely.

And when the Deep South seems empty except for dead peaches  
and sallow fields, it is actually full of men and women lying in bed  
asking how much closer they have to get in order to define love.  
It is actually bustling with elbows and knees.

There are abandoned playthings everywhere you look.  
Under the bed where you lie, a tin horse on wheels eats the carpet.  
Underneath your bodies, the metallic neigh weighs on you.  
You could tell the man next to you about it if you knew his name.

*Meghan Privitello*  
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<sup>350</sup> [Meghan Privitello, "Notes on the End of the World,"](#) collected in [Notes on the End of the World](#), Black Lawrence Press

This is the Part of the Poem Where You Help Me Out

This is the part where I describe  
the edges of the lake  
but not the lake

so it will be your lake I tiptoe around  
with my scalpels  
and my markers,

with my masking tape and my staples  
and my ideas  
about all things

insisting their way into frame. This  
is the part  
where mountains rise

because pop-up book, because eagle-struggling-  
to-be-born-from-a-heart  
song, because bittersweet-battery

movie. In this part the parts depart and what remains  
is the echo  
of what's been played.

All the stage is a world. Staging the world  
is our awl,  
punching breathing holes

into the suffocations. This is the part  
where the hero barks  
his forehead

coming to too fast on the bottom bunk  
of the bed  
fronting The Brother Cave

floor display at Prepubescent Males 'R Us.  
This is the part  
where he limps

toward the exits, feeling  
whatever you think  
feeling wronged by inanimate

objects feels like: The smallest lightning.  
Seventh grade shame

in the face.

I leave it to you  
to determine  
how the hero came to be

here, what is indicated  
by *he*, the color  
of the unquestionably clean

shirt he wears. This is that scene. What you see  
tells you something  
about yourself, about

your relationship to a world that finds you  
in it. A door in you  
now and again swings open

and from the sea behind it  
something swims  
toward you.

The next part is the part where  
the camera of the I  
pulls back

and up: you can see that the bunk beds  
are shaking  
or they are trembling

or they are falling slowly apart, they are  
popsicle sticks or pillars  
on the verge of coming down

into a music  
it takes your bent / ear  
to make.

*Marc McKee*  
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<sup>351</sup> [Marc McKee, "This is the Part of the Poem Where You Help Me Out,"](#) collected in [Meta Meta Make-Belief](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

## Little Rabbit

Some mornings, I come to on the floor,  
my neck burned with moon tracks  
  
or fingerprints, my tongue swollen  
and split through, as if by an arrow  
  
though it could've been my teeth,  
or yours—I can almost feel the memory  
  
trembling in me like milk in a pail,  
or my throat when I'm scared to speak,  
  
so you speak for me—and I don't know  
how I came to be this skittish creature,  
  
shaking beneath your shadow, begging you  
to hold my wrist, hold it tight against  
  
the floor, and kiss my palm closed, tell me  
I'm here, tell me I'm good, or good  
  
enough, that the blood on your teeth  
isn't mine, and if so, that I taste clean,  
  
like sap tapped from an underwater forest,  
from an epoch when the Earth was only  
  
ocean, and the only sound the wind  
moaning across it—or is it a song?  
  
Is it a name you gave me, still rippling  
across my body from your mouth.  
  
Is that what's written in moon on my throat.  
Or is it your name. Are those your hands  
  
pressing hard against the bones of my neck.  
Do you dream of that crack, as I do,  
  
like lightning through a dark room,  
the puzzle box of my skull opening wide.  
  
And what do you see inside.  
What walks toward you in that light.

Is it gentle. Is it good.  
Tell me.

*Sara Eliza Johnson*  
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<sup>352</sup> [Sara Eliza Johnson, "Little Rabbit," \*Virginia Quarterly Review\*](#)

They Are Leaving You a Message

*for Arda Collins*

What they are trying to tell you  
is you are wearing the wrong bra  
for your shape and situation  
This might not even be your life  
and in the midst of my thinking  
to tell you this a fruit fly  
has begun to trail me through the house  
as if I were its mother or as if  
it were the other way around  
and it always is and the house  
is on fire at some point  
in the simultaneity and I am leaving it  
to buy all the things I do  
and do not devour

*Heather Christle*

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353 [Heather Christle, "They Are Leaving You a Message," \*Two Serious Ladies\*, collected in \*Heliopause\*, Wesleyan University Press](#)

## New Year

In the last year I've been unable to banish  
a single monster slaving in the light  
of the moon, or rid my days of this  
stupid old man in Washington that is president  
and is kind of amazing how awful  
he is. All these poems, hot as a glede,  
a word I learned from Tolkien,  
I think, and what have I accomplished?  
Love me, a little, they plead;  
they preen like birds so alive  
all around is a little dull  
and songless and colorless and near death.  
I care that Florida is ruined,  
mostly, that its aquifers are poisoned  
by metals I can't pronounce,  
that everywhere water is draining away  
and used up and no good  
to those who thirst. Right now,  
I'm starving. I want meat  
and fire and an ancient hearth  
and someone singing  
and no livestream of this stupid moment.  
I don't want right now,  
and tell me if this is nostalgia.  
How in my bones I feel  
entitled to some cosmic do-over.  
Of what? I can't say.  
When you see me, when you say hello,  
rehearse a sad joke,  
let me know what time it is, if it's raining.

*Paul Guest*

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<sup>354</sup> [Paul Guest, "New Year," \*Kenyon Review\*](#)

## The Last Temptation of Christ

I read the Bible literally. I believe  
waters parted and desperate people  
and a few stray animals crawled

through mud and over sea creatures  
that by now must be extinct. I believe  
men lived hundreds of years and continued

to please their lovers and wives.  
Christ walked on water.  
I believe in our most daily moments,

how we're cornered by angels, devils, ghosts.  
Why wouldn't I? I've watched my father  
rip lumber with a Skilsaw straight

as a table saw with a fence. Every winter  
watched men put in weeks of double shifts  
at the mill. My mother working until

her wrists had to be cut open, the tendons  
rewired. My friend slipped from my hands  
and fell like a pinball through a thirty-foot redwood

then just lay in the duff laughing at the Oregon rain.  
Maybe pain is the father of imagination.  
In the book of John, in pain

we seldom admit exists, we find you  
hoisted above Golgotha—raised  
in that Place of the Skull between

*I am thirsty* and *It has ended*.  
Between those two breaths  
you look inward, to a kingdom

of another world, where a possible  
brother-self goes through his life.  
As it turns out, you've carried him all along.

It was his feet you saw stitched  
to the soles of your own  
as you took those first watery steps

over the Galilee. It was his body  
that wandered into marriage and three kids  
and a gradual retreat from his wife.

He was a low-end administrator for the city,  
kept a concealed weapons permit,  
shot slugs into the clay bank

behind his house, had an affair  
with his secretary most people knew about.  
Spent nights in the garage smoking

Luckies and listening to the CB scanner,  
the voices of long-haul truckers,  
policemen, cab drivers, and drunks

scratching the empty air of insomnia  
over the citizens band. Is it so hard to believe?  
One night he overhears the 9-1-1 dispatcher

give directions to a bend in the road  
three pastures from his house. To take his mind  
off things he drives to the curve that mirrors

Coalbank Slough's sharp elbow. As if he himself  
is called. Before the fire department arrives  
at the turn known for its wreckage

and popularity among farmers for dumping  
livestock into the silt, before the engines scream  
through the listless dark, he finds himself

undressing by the busted guardrail and breaking,  
with his own body, through the skin  
of that November water. How many times

will he feel as close to it as he does  
swimming down to the half-sunken car, fumbling  
for her body? How many times will he return

to his mouth sealed over her mouth,  
to breath and ruined water passing between them  
with no hope of making a life,

to the blue and red lights finally arriving?  
Lord, that could have been you, weeks later,  
drunk and chain-smoking, weeping

in the arms of your secretary, the taste of metal  
in your mouth. She will say she doesn't recognize you.  
The man she knows used to comb her long hair

and talk about cashing in his 401(k)  
for a new life away from the coast.  
She says go back to your sad wife.

But something's filling you with bodiless light.  
You turn to the untouchable, invisible kingdom  
already decided for you and live forever.

*Michael McGriff*  
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<sup>355</sup> [Michael McGriff, "The Last Temptation of Christ,"](#) collected in [Dismantling the Hills, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

They Said I'd Never Be a Dancer

even though I was born into the family  
business—half-off Tuesdays at the Gilded

Cage—the club my uncle owned  
and kind of place that paid

in beer and arcade coins, where women's  
tasseled parts were out-glittered

by skee-ball prizes and slot machine  
music. My ankles were too thick

to work the club so I performed  
back-up moves at Bar Mitzvahs,

taught middle school boys how  
to two-step and fake the Cotton-

Eyed Joe while their parents observed,  
a naughty gleam in their eye, fisting

over the night's tip saying, "You girls  
really worked it tonight," and I didn't

even break a sweat but once  
got sentimental watching a girl

in braces get felt up for the first time,  
imagining the ride home in her father's

minivan, murmuring into the cold  
rolled-up windows when asked

about her night and all she remembers  
is the sticky residue, the glimmer

of contraction in her chest,  
how she'll never be good at math

again, concerned only with the shape  
of her stunted breasts after hearing

her groping-partner the next day  
tell a classmate that it felt like touching

skittles taped to a rock, and don't make me

tell you it builds character, don't make

me lie and say I intervened  
as he shoved her against the tinsel

walls of Sammy's Roumanian  
while the pitchers of chicken fat

gleamed and shivered on the table,  
that I took her hand and said

"Darling, let's hoof it," and we danced  
like lunatics until our ligaments shone.

*Kendra DeColo*  
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<sup>356</sup> [Kendra DeColo](#), "[They Said I'd Never Be a Dancer](#)," collected in [My Dinner with Ron Jeremy](#), [Third Man Books](#)

## Haha-Boohoo

When I keep crying long  
after I've started  
laughing my therapist  
says it's my body

grieving because I haven't  
grieved properly  
as if my body has  
unfinished

business like defecation  
after death but it seems to go on  
for hours and hours even  
days and I think maybe

crying will never end  
the way some people  
hiccup and then live  
the rest of their lives

sleeping and waking  
sleeping  
and waking their diaphragms  
skipping like a jump

rope a word  
I just misspelled  
just now before  
I corrected it for you dear

reader because I was told  
that's what you need  
When I was  
a kid I thought

damn was spelled  
D-A-M-B like *lamb*  
and a few years  
ago I asked my gynecologist

for an IED so  
I wouldn't get  
pregnant I wouldn't have  
to have... I talk too

much when I get nervous  
or when I drink too  
much which makes  
me nervous

which makes me  
drink too  
much which I did  
the other

night because I saw  
someone I hadn't  
seen in a long  
time and my heart

is like bubblegum  
chewed for  
the world  
record for which I am

crying for  
the record  
for the record  
I'm crying

*Emilia Phillips*  
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<sup>357</sup> [Emilia Phillips](#), "[Haha-Boohoo](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Embouchure](#), [The University of Akron Press](#)

How She Went to Salisbury Beach the Day Before She Died.

She wanted no cocktail.

No hypodermics on the beach; only one child  
tripped her as he chased, with a sucker, a seagull.

She loved children. She preferred to be  
where they were not.

She stood outside Eddie's bar, then in line for fried dough.

The disappearing sun on the water was oily  
and not special.

She wanted no karaoke or tarot  
as she walked.

She played one game of Ms. Pac Man  
and made it to the peach board.

And the mothers were drunk and danced  
to the eighties band.

And the skinny girls grew in numbers as they walked,  
and their screeches joined the Harleys.

And the tide went out and the feet disappeared.

And she wanted no one.

And she felt her back on the sand.

*Julia Story*  
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<sup>358</sup> [Julia Story](#), "[How She Went to Salisbury Beach the Day Before She Died.](#)," *Mount Island*, collected in *Julie the Astonishing*, *Sixth Finch*

## American Poetry

As if  
at a urinal,  
focus.  
But look  
both ways  
before  
you cross  
your streams.  
In dreams.

Repeat  
your  
reflection  
like a pop  
song,  
a bloodless  
erection.  
Or  
rejection.

Stir  
comparisons—  
cocktails  
of damage,  
ambition.  
Grovel.  
The devil  
in the details,  
your image.

Handshakes;  
tax  
breaks,  
or line.  
Limp  
facts.  
Your pimp,  
a public  
moan.

No embarrassment,  
a bloated  
bio  
or acknowledgment  
page—

the list,  
careerist  
*thank you,*  
your gauge.

Mister  
Malaprop,  
hand  
on your book,  
and  
on your ass,  
will look  
you in the eyes,  
*accustomize.*

In the indifferent  
corner,  
your map;  
your dunce-  
cap  
correspondence:  
three zs,  
like a laugh,  
or sleep.

The headlong  
performance,  
quivering  
voice,  
a loving  
unpunctuated  
self,  
five minutes  
since.

Type  
control-C,  
control-V,  
and *the sea.*  
Bend on trend.  
What's my type,  
you say.  
*Your boyfriend.*  
End.

*Randall Mann*  
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<sup>359</sup> [Randall Mann](#), "[American Poetry](#)," [On the Seawall](#), collected in [A Better Life](#), [Persea Books](#)

## Trinkets

The Hall of Mirrors in the Palace at Versailles is the most frightening room in all of Western Civilization. In this room some of the cabinets are doors. Some of the mirrors are windows. In a time when mirrors were the most expensive thing a king could possess, 17 arches tiled with 21 mirrors each lined a narrow corridor gilded by as many courtiers begging an audience with the passing king. Some of the kings were enamored by costumes, spying, and punishment. All of their names were Louis. The painted ceiling shows Louis winning one battle and Louis winning another.

The dauphiné lands were purchased in 1349; henceforth the eldest son of the king was called dauphin, which also means dolphin. There are no dolphins in the Rhone or the Seine or the Rhine. The kings of Britain and Spain owned the seas. Nevertheless, the candelabra are dolphins, as are the mantle clocks. The drawer pulls on the swivel desk are interlaced with dolphins, so too the ewers, the inkwells, the door handles, the towel bars, the crest, the flag, the fountains (of course the fountains), the frames, the tasterin, the table legs, the dinner knives, forks, and spoons, the teapots, even the chenets that hold the fire logs.

His name means dolphin. His name means sun. His name means two cockerels fighting. His name means lily of the valley. His name means crystal. His name means silver. His name means brass. His name means king who will be king.

Louis XV had a mistress who would buy him little dolphin knick-knacks to show she'd been thinking of her king and the boy he'd once been. The mark of excellence in her position was that he should never once contemplate the precise nature of her thoughts or why she had them. Have you ever tried to erase yourself? I think about her choice to assume the position of official royal consort as being very much like a nun's in terms of the extremes of self-sacrifice.

Louis XV loved Jeanne Antoinette Poisson to her death. He gave her many names, among them *mistresse* and *madame* and *marquise*, but it seems she always preferred *poisson*, which meant fish and which she had received from her father, an untitled merchant in the upper tier of the third estate.

Louis first seduced her disguised as a yew tree among yew trees dancing through the Hall of Mirrors at Christmastime. To be seduced by a King of France was to sign and see signed documents that made your husband rich enough and titled enough that the king could be permitted to know you in public. A woman who ran one of the most highly regarded literary salons in Paris knew what was coming, and chose for her costume Diana, Goddess of the Hunt. The *Bal des Ifs*, as it came to be known, was like a wedding made out of whispers. After, the king went to battle Austria, and she spent months learning the accents and nods and titles and corsets that were part of the duties of a woman in her position. She learned how to address differently a duchess with an adequate chef from a duchess with an excellent chef.

I've heard the arc of history is long, but bends towards justice. Which is another way of saying that you're going to have put up with a whole lot of bullshit.

In her favorite portrait, made by Delatour in 1788, her hand rests on a folio from the *Encyclopedia*, which her lover had banned for its seditious challenge to the principles of the divine rights of kings. To a point, it was erotic to be so provoked by a woman.

Jeanne had tried early in her career to interest her lover in her friends the writers, but they only knew how to bore and incense. She could hardly contain her disappointment at how they squandered the

opportunities she tried to create for them. Once Voltaire took Louis by the sleeve (the sleeve!) to tell him something. Once Voltaire insisted the privies in his apartment at Versailles have doors put on them. Once after a performance of his opera on the victory at Fontenoy, he asked of the king, “Is Trajan pleased?”

And then there was Diderot. In the article in his *Encyclopedia* on “Political Authority,” credit is given not to God or heritage, but to the people and their natural rights. In “Economic Politics” he lectures, “When the means of growing rich is divided between a greater number of citizens, wealth will also be more evenly distributed; extreme poverty and extreme wealth would also be rare.” What more could the official royal consort do after that but turn the King’s eye instead towards architecture and the stage and try to keep it there for the next twenty years?

Jeanne described herself as cold by nature. She was terrified the king might find out and tried to work herself up for his ardors using every known means. Her friends worried over the effects of so many dubious concoctions and elixirs. For a time she subsisted on a diet of nothing but vanilla, truffles, and celery. That she was always ill was a secret she kept well.

I ascribe to a brand of feminism I like to call You Don’t Know Me. It’s the wave that waved right after or maybe just before You’re Not the Boss of Me. I have to remind myself Jeanne Poisson didn’t know what her end game was either.

There were many who hated her and feared her for the control they thought she wielded. They called her a spendthrift and a whore.

“It is curious,” the Duc de Nivernois said at one of the little salons she organized now in her apartment in the king’s attic at the top of the king’s secret staircase for the entertainment of the king himself. “We amuse ourselves in killing a partridge at Versailles, and sometimes killing men, and getting killed at the front, without knowing precisely how the killing is done.” This according to Voltaire, who was not there but heard of the evening third-hand. A writer in an Age of Enlightenment couldn’t risk ignoring the gossip from court if he wanted to keep his head and his wits about him. To hear him tell it, this remark was how Nivernois skillfully incited that little debate about the way to make gun powder—equal parts saltpeter, sulfur, and charcoal; or one part sulfur, one part charcoal, and five parts saltpeter?

Jeanne interrupted then to exclaim, “We are all reduced to that about everything in the world. We are reduced to that about the rouge on our cheeks and the stockings on our feet.” She was the only woman in the room and she always knew which part was hers to play. She directed the king’s eye to her ankle.

“It is a shame,” sighed the Duc de la Vallière, in a way that could only have reminded everyone of Diderot’s *Encyclopedia* locked up in some cellar of the castle. Who hadn’t heard that Dennis had gone underground after his life’s work was seized by armed men? Before supper was over, Louis had called for the volumes, which fourteen footmen delivered with dignity and flourish, each like a duck on a platter.

Among Voltaire’s salon, the writers admired Jeanne, then missed her, then wondered who she had become after so many years in that palace of privilege. They may have heard the rumors that her private rooms in the attic were gilded all over with fish, that every document she signed included a flourish of carp. She put the fish of herself on everything, as if she was trying to remember herself and worried the effort was not working.

“Sire,” she said, after they passed the evening amusing themselves with that remarkable compendium of human knowledge and achievement. “If one possesses it, one has all the wisdom of your realm.”

Indeed, the *Encyclopedia* was very nearly comprehensive in its catalog and the entry on kings is only a few pages, hardly more than what was devoted to an ocean of ice at the end of the world or the construction of a mechanized loom. Some have said the lifting of the ban, followed by widespread printing and distribution was what undid the monarchy. To read—to even know that you could read—so much of the world, had the effect of snapping the peasants to their senses. If that is true, then Jeanne Poisson, Madame de Pompadour and the king’s whore, did something extraordinary with that little jewelry box of a life she had.

*Kathryn Nuernberger*  
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<sup>360</sup> [Kathryn Nuernberger, “Trinkets,” \*Tupelo Quarterly\*, collected in \*Brief Interviews with the Romantic Past\*, The Ohio State University Press](#)

## Cinderella's Diary

I miss my stepmother. What a thing to say,  
but it's true. The prince is so boring: four  
hours to dress and then the cheering throngs.  
Again. The page who holds the door is cute  
enough to eat. Where is he once Mr. Charming  
kisses my forehead goodnight?

Every morning I gaze out a casement window  
at the hunters, dark men with blood on their  
boots who joke and mount, their black trousers  
straining, rough beards, callused hands, selfish,  
abrupt...

Oh, dear diary—I am lost in ever after:  
Those insufferable birds, someone in every  
room with a lute, the queen calling me to look  
at another painting of her son, this time  
holding the transparent slipper I wish  
I'd never seen.

*Ron Koertge*  
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<sup>361</sup> [Ron Koertge, "Cinderella's Diary,"](#) collected in [Vampire Planet](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

## The Moment I Knew I Shouldn't Have Married My Husband

We were at a dark deserted rest stop.  
Somewhere between Minnesota and Santa Cruz.  
On the way home from our honeymoon.  
I guess we'd been fighting.  
Our fights could have been a measure  
of infinity—like grains of sand or stars.  
What I remember is the short walk back  
from the bathroom along the concrete path  
lined with scruffy, unkillable bushes  
and the sudden clarity:  
I'd made a mistake. But what,  
I asked that voice  
that wouldn't defend itself, what  
about the new orange towels  
we just bought? I'm not kidding.  
This is exactly what I said to myself.  
Even though now I can't stand that color,  
even though now there's nothing  
orange in my house.  
Not even a goldfish.

*Ellen Bass*  
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<sup>362</sup> [Ellen Bass](#), "[The Moment I Knew I Shouldn't Have Married My Husband](#)," collected in [The Human Line](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

## Porch Light

This Monday, before her morning appointment with her therapist where she discussed enabling tendencies, Hayley ate spinach salad with silvered almonds, as she did every day. She drove cautiously just minutes before confidently telling her therapist she was carefree. Hayley always walks quickly—even uphill—but decided to not talk with her therapist about obsession. At least not yet. She bought new clogs and thought about kissing her next-door neighbor, Tim. Instead, Hayley talked to her therapist about her husband, Donny—his grating interest in sports, his strange, new beard.

That evening, after they finished mowing their adjoining lawns, drank a beer over the fence, and listened to Nirvana's *Nevermind* on her screened-in porch—Donny off at a baseball game—Hayley kissed Tim. The music reminded her of the irresponsible time in her life that she described as carefree. Back then she obsessed over happiness, but was usually discontented. She enabled a string of boyfriends, enjoyed dysfunction. Back then she wore vintage prom dresses to clubs, drank until she fell over.

Hayley kissed her neighbor who seemed to kiss her back, but then nonchalantly finished his beer, propped his hands on his knees, pushed open the screen door, and ambled through her cleanly shorn lawn and onto his without a goodbye.

Pretty cricket noises, pulsing fireflies.

The moon and yard sounds took over after Hayley clicked off the table lamp. Sitting in the dusky dark she heard a moth's papery wings clobbering the dim porch light. Hayley knew she'd talk of stability at her next appointment, of changing attitudes, of the need for a new monotone wardrobe and a juicer—a juicer with a variety of settings.

*Sherrie Flick*  
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<sup>363</sup> [Sherrie Flick](#), "[Porch Light](#)," collected in [New Micro](#), W.W. Norton & Company

## Mexico

When he thought he was about to encounter Christ, the poet  
threw away the last of his heroin.

In Paris, he carried a knife beneath his shirt,  
and, without warning, would stab it into the nearest tree.

•

The other poets lied.  
They said the poet killed herself after falling in love with a boatman.

That wasn't true.

She grew old and died  
in her daughter's bed.

•

A shaman described the poet's body  
as *shot through with lightning*.

•

When the storm was at its worst, the poet undressed  
and walked out to address the lightning—

*Thou art the thing itself*, the poet said.

•

The poet believed the self was its own oracle  
and became the thing the oracle warned against.

•

To create an anthology  
the poet solicited two groups  
of people: his friends, and the people  
he wanted as his friends.

•

The movement died  
not because it went out of fashion  
but because the war killed  
all of its poets.

For the poet, becoming  
a good poet meant necessarily becoming  
a good person.

But as soon as he became a good person  
he ceased being a good poet.

•

*To excerpt someone else's words, the poet said,  
is a form of begging.*

*To bring dignity to poetry  
we must first bring dignity  
to other forms of begging.*

The poet said,

*More poets fail from lack of character  
than lack of indulgence.*

Which was certainly true of the poet.

•

The poet invented the alphabet  
and brought it to the king, saying,

*I have created an elixir that will make the people wiser.*

But the king replied,  
*No, you have created the opposite.*

•

When the banquet hall collapsed, the lone  
survivor was the poet.

The bodies of the other guests were crushed  
and mangled, and their families wept  
because they could not recognize their dead.

But the poet remembered where all four hundred  
had been sitting and, walking through the wreckage,  
named the corpses one by one.

•

The poet believed the body  
was a sunken ship

unable to prevent the ocean from passing through  
a place where even the sharks felt at home.

•

*There are some people for whom  
no real profession exists,* the poet wrote

in a letter to his father. *I count myself  
as one of them.*

•

The poet died while ice skating with a friend.

Some lumberjacks  
heard them screaming but by the time  
they reached the lake, no one was there

just a hole in the ice in the shape of an ear.

•

In the Talmud, the poet invented an angel  
and named it Forgetfulness.

•

By writing poems, the poet believed  
she could extract the madness from her head

like the doctor in the Hieronymus Bosch painting  
who augurs the stone.

And the poet did  
and died from doing it.

•

The poet got into the car with the intention  
of driving to Mexico

but at the entrance  
to the Golden Gate Bridge, parked  
and walked out to the middle.

Why drive all the way to Mexico  
when Mexico is just over the railing?

•

Every morning, in front  
of the mirror, the poet had a routine—

*I am a briefcase, he said.  
In a crowded train station.*

And he put himself down  
and walked away.

*P. Scott Cunningham*  
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<sup>364</sup> [P. Scott Cunningham](#), "[Mexico](#)," collected in [Ya Te Veo](#), [The University of Arkansas Press](#)