

Social Media Poems 2022

Simeon Berry

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Jackhammering Limestone

You ask about the leaves and I tell you it's been so dry here
the leaves are just giving up, turning brown, falling off the trees,
which all look dead. This might be a metaphor for the election or
might be a metaphor for nothing—it's hard to say. Each morning
I wake up to machines across the street jackhammering limestone,
shearing away more rock-face and turning it to rubble strewn across
red clay soil so dry it heaves and cracks. It's been seven weeks of
drilling and blasting, drilling and blasting, and that's not a metaphor
for anything either except maybe my midlife crisis, which I'm surely
having as there's whiskey next to me and I'm up all night wondering
if I can be hairless again in some risqué places. Most days I refuse
to believe we're doomed, despite growing evidence to the contrary.
I mean, it's like the 1970s down there. Trust me. Most days, I listen
to NPR on my car radio and talk to one son or the other in the back seat
and ask them questions they sometimes answer as we drive home
past the pile of rubble and the leafless trees, which vaguely resemble
the girl I saw on campus wearing an entire shaggy outfit made from
flesh-colored plastic grocery bags campaigning on an environmental
platform for student council president. Her amazing bag-suit was rustling
in the breeze and it looked like she might take flight, just soar over campus
with the drones delivering burritos this week as a test stunt because
our motto here is *Invent the Future*, which I think about a lot—not as
“your future” in the sense of what I wanted to be when I grew up,
which I figured out by process of elimination was not a banker or a
computer programmer, and I never saw myself as a mother either but
here I am. More like I would invent a future where my black son will not
get shot by police for playing in a park, or driving, or walking from his
broken-down car. I would invent a future where there was always
enough chalk to leave notes for the next class: *we are starting a revolution
somehow; instructions to follow*. What no one told me about programming
computers for Merrill Lynch to keep their front-end trading systems
running past Y2K was that I was simply a dominatrix of code; the disaster

that would take our building down came later, and had nothing to do with language. My cashier at Kroger has an epigraph on her name badge

under “Paula” that says, “I Will Make Things Right.” I hope that girl wins her election. I hope that someday someone else will enter my

hairless palace and find it marvelous. The photos of broken glass; the piles of rubble. The future is throttling towards us and it’s loud and reckless.

Erika Meitner

1

¹ [Erika Meitner](#), “[Jackhammering Limestone](#),” [Tin House](#), collected in [Holy Moly Carry Me](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Georgic on the Boston Comma

Begin with knowing the comma
is a word and the word
is always *fuckin'*.² Forget the gerund,
then torque the lazy *u*
into an *a*, and let the vowel
kneel into the roof of your mouth
like a penitent against a church pew.
Now practice placing it in a sentence:
Ma, I stopped on the way, but fuckin'
the spa was out of papers. Notice how
the proper usage places the comma after
the conjunction, or at the start
of a new sentence, as in: *Fuckin' a horse*
cop had traffic stopped all down
Charles starting at Dorchester.
Never use the comma when speaking
to your boss, or to a church figure,
but fuckin' use it as much as you want
on Joan of Arc's feast day,
patron saint of profanity, who once
chastised a soldier for swearing
by reminding him that it's "foolish to sin
when one is so close to death."

But we're all close to death, Joan,
so fuckin' fuck that. This comma, handed
down from generations of working-class
parents to their knob-spined
children peddling knockoff sunglasses
on beach towels spread out
around the fringes of Jamaica Plain.
Comma that says yes, I believe
in heaven and hell, but I'm too broke
to be scared about it. Comma that admits
there are limits to your dreams
when you live in the same row house
you were born in. Never use the comma
out of anger. Instead, keep it as a prayer,
exalted in syntax. A promise to yourself
that God exists, and fuckin' somewhere out there
he's pretending to listen at least as much
as we're all pretending to talk to him.

Keith Kopka

2

² Keith Kopka, "Georgic on the Boston Comma," *The Cincinnati Review*, collected in *Count Four*, University of Tampa Press

Saint Monica and the Devil's Place

At school, they were too polite to call it *Hell* though she heard the word on her mother's eight-tracks seeping between damp towels in the bathroom, hovering in the silver of the old hall mirror. Monica knew who went there and why, regardless of time spent fluffing the chrysanthemums outside the rectory. She'd go to the Devil's Place herself if it meant one hour alone with Kevin McMillan in the falling-down barn. Sister Rita said it was hot, but Monica could live with that. Mrs. Dettweiler next door crushed cigarettes out on her daughter's back. She was on her way to the Devil's Place, along with the Simmons twins, and Monica's uncle who thought he could piss out an electrical fire, ended up burning down the Kroger instead. There were, of course, exceptions. If he was mean enough you could take a cinderblock to your husband's head in the middle of the night, as long as you called the police afterwards, produced the notebook of grievances when officers arrived. You could sign your husband up for a war, then dash your face with mauve lipstick on the night they handed him a gun. If you were married to one of the Simmons twins you could toss the car keys down a sewer grate, sprint to JC Penney for a white sale bonanza with the charge card, knowing you'd be safe until Randy or Ricky made it out of the sludge. Monica would not go to the Devil's Place over shoplifted Raisinets or hair gel, but she would sign away her soul for an afternoon swimming with Kevin McMillan in the pond at Raccoon Park, as long as they could both be naked and the water above 55 degrees. Perhaps there was hope for Monica's uncle, provided he sold the Firebird, wheeled the recliner to the curb and found a job. If they ever married, Monica would never torch Kevin McMillan while he read the newspaper in his slippers and flannel boxers, or dig a six-foot, three-and-a-half-inch hole in the backyard while the children planted daffodil bulbs. She would not include the Devil's Place on her college application list, as Rhonda Phillips did the day she broke her sister's arm playing darts. When the Simmons twins winked at her, Monica looked away. When Kevin McMillan winked at her, Monica unbuttoned her shirt, showed the hot pink swimsuit underneath.

Mary Biddinger

3

³ [Mary Biddinger](#), "[Saint Monica and the Devil's Place](#)," collected in [Saint Monica](#), Black Lawrence Press

We Are in Love

after Diane Arbus

He's tall enough, hair a sharp bay wave.
If I were sixteen, we'd be married. But for now
we walk down Hudson Street, not even cold,
me in my Ann-Margret coat and his mouth
sweet as Eddie Fisher's, but tough. We know
we will be famous. We carve our initials
in cement and no one catches us. In Woolworth's
we stuff our pockets with cigarettes and cherry candy.
No one sees; we're quick, and look like we belong
anywhere we go. See his neat tie his eyes
that catch whatever approaches. We've got plans.
Big money, big times. We'll knock this world out.
Already our hands are like bricks.

Catherine Pierce

4

⁴ [Catherine Pierce](#), "[We Are in Love](#)," [Arts & Letters](#), collected in [Famous Last Words](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Racing Through Pittsburgh with Annie Dillard

The Catholic Church *hated* perspective, I mean *hated* it because it distorted the distances between objects, as the Catholic Church saw it, not that the Church itself didn't make a change or two to the normal view of how things work. Let's start with virgin birth—let's end there as well, because this poem is not a polemic against the Catholic Church but an attempt to discover a rule

or rules for establishing the best distance between one's self and the thing that one wishes to master, appreciate, avoid, and so on, depending on whether or not that thing is your enemy, your baby doll, your lunch, the guy who bullied you in high school, a mime who is mocking someone else (which is funny) or you (which is not), a fire on a cold night. Author Annie Dillard could certainly tell you that there's

a right distance for everything, recalling in her memoir her tomboy days in Pittsburgh when she played tackle football with boys and, one day during a blizzard, pelted a passing car with snowballs and was chased ten blocks by the driver through alleys and backyards while feeling no fear, even when she was caught along with a kid named Mikey. It was as though she'd won

an Olympic medal, she remembers. What could the guy do? Nothing that mattered. "If he had cut off our heads," Dillard remembers, "I would have died happy," but the man just said, "You stupid kids," and went back to his car. The chase was a challenge, an honor, something that should happen to every kid and that every kid wants, whether he or she knows it or not, which is why I always

shout at kids when I see them fooling around outside my window. "You stupid kids get out of my yard!" I shout. "Get out of my yard or I'll grab a stick and knock your brains out!" They're poking at something, a dead animal or an anthill, and they look up when I yell and then at each other and they haul ass down the street to their own houses, to the next year of school

and an uncertain future. Sometimes the best distance is no distance, and here I am thinking of the hiker who has been told, when a bear approaches, to drop into fetal position so that the bear can sniff him or her, affirm his or her harmlessness, and shuffle off toward its berry bush or honey hive or whatever it is that the bear prefers to the human flesh in which it is no longer

interested. I don't care what the Catholic Church says,
its magnificent cathedrals and often overlooked
compassion for the poor and the sick notwithstanding:
in art, perspective is crucial. People say the proportions
of Michelangelo's *David* are all wrong because the statue
was originally intended to be placed on top of the Duomo,
meaning that certain parts of the sculpture would have

to be accentuated in order to be visible below, though
one wonders if this asymmetry may simply be due
to the demands of the stone. When the Temptations sing
"I Can't Get Next to You," what they're really saying
is that the "you" in the song doesn't really want
the "I" to get any closer than he is already,
which rejection the "I" should take in stride, since,

as my nephew said to his father when that father
was complaining that he'd been turned down by yet
another woman in a long line of women who had
turned him down and for good reason, though we needn't
go into that here, "Dad, if they don't like you, what's
the point?" Okay, but try telling that to the Temptations.
Take it from me, Temptations: it's only going

to work if she wants you as much as you want her.
The dog can't catch the car—what would the dog do
if it caught the car? The *David* has to step down from
its pedestal and show you how to find the right stone,
how to put it in the sling and whirl that sling over
your head without braining yourself and release one end
at just the right moment, Goliath looking on like the big

dumb oaf he is as the stone gets closer and closer, then
pow, right in the kisser. People, get ready, in the words
of the late Curtis Mayfield, another Motown genius, because
the world is coming at us a mile a minute, though it doesn't
know what it's doing any more than we do. Over here,
world! It's me, squatting down in my catcher's stance,
no chest protector, mask, shin guards, just this glove.

David Kirby
5

⁵ David Kirby, "[Racing Through Pittsburgh with Annie Dillard](#)," *Smartish Pace*, collected in [Help Me, Information](#), Louisiana State University

Wild Apples

She carried her yoga mat to the Sunday class that is mostly lying on the floor. If she could get to the class and lie on the floor, maybe her mind would loosen its hold on the rage threatening to subsume her late-40s body. She thought she would be exempt from such indignities as “aging” and “not being able to sleep at night because her hormones had turned against her.” She thinks of herself as striding forward in a determined fashion, but probably looks more like a shuffling mom-type, a woman of negligible age. Someone who lately is being aggressively “ma’am-ed” from all sides. Yoga pants and a thousand-yard stare. When a frat boy in a group walking three-abreast doesn’t yield to her on the sidewalk she wants to screech like a middle-aged banshee and never stop.

She had grown so used to seeing the narrative through men’s eyes—any narrative, the text that is culture—that as menopause approached and she began producing a smaller amount of agreeableness hormones, it was as if a veil lifted and she became astounded at what she’s put up with, all the witnessing that men require. All those times she was dragged to Tarantino movies. All the Lynchian bullshit she sat through. All the Bruce Lee movies boyfriends watched her watch. Only at the beginning of relationships would any man sit through Jane Campion with her, though it’s true that her son’s father went with her to the theater to see a new adaptation of *Anna Karenina* when she was nine months pregnant, the last movie she’d see for a while. But we know what happens to Anna.

She’d gone on a trip to New York the previous year to sleep with a poet and watch him read from a stage that she might have read from but was not. The poet remarked in bed that her breasts slumping toward her armpits as she lay on her back look like “wild apples” that his family used to drive to an orchard and pick. She was delighted by the absurdity of this extraneous lyric gesture, but also needled by the sloppiness of the analogy. “If they were in orchards, they weren’t exactly wild, were they?” she’d remarked. The poet ignored her. She began wondering if this trip had been the very last gasp of her womanly agreeableness.

Joanna Penn Cooper

6

⁶ [Joanna Penn Cooper](#), “[Wild Apples](#),” collected in [Wild Apples](#), [Ethel](#)

Imaginary Friend

I'm great at being an imaginary friend, but terrible at sexual torture. When I take my belt off to beat people, my pants fall around my imaginary ankles. I'm so insecure about it I have enrolled in Imaginary Friend Grad School to distract myself. I stay up all night on Adderall, turning invisible and putting ketchup in grownups' coffee. If I see people being beaten with belts on TV, I turn it off and continue researching renters' insurance. I still don't know what it is. This would all be fine if I wasn't so old. I've been researching renters' insurance for hundreds of years.

Sarah Galvin

7

⁷ Sarah Galvin, "[Imaginary Friend](#)," collected in [The Three Einsteins](#), [Poor Claudia](#)

from "Testaments Scratched into a Water Station Barrel"

Perro que no anda,
no encuentra hueso—
through summer, I
hurry. Blood soaks my sneakers. The handkerchief
around my head
reeks like sobacos.
If I don't cut into cacti,
If I don't chew the pulp to draw water out,
my shadow will
wander away.
Afternoons,
with nail polish remover, I clean the sores on my feet.
On the bottle,
in red print,
a proverb: beauty
can't be talked into speech. The sky isn't blue.
It's azul. Saguaros
are triste, not curious.
In México, bodies
disappear. Bodies, in the Sonoran desert,
are everywhere.
A headless corpse
sporting a T-shirt
that reads: Superstar.
A severed hand,
black yarn around
the thumb. Welcome
to the cagada. If I don't look for water under rocks,
my shadow
will wander away—
another wetback
veering too close to highways, too close to ranchos.
Coral alighting
on gold, yellow
alighting on rose.
Dusk, here, is stunning. Yesterday, I woke to ants crawling
over my body,
to ants crawling
over
the body on the cross around my neck.

Eduardo C. Corral

8

⁸ Eduardo C. Corral, "Testaments Scratched into a Water Station Barrel [Perro que no anda...]," *Poetry*, collected in *Guillotine*, Graywolf Press

House Sitter

After her fifth drink she felt lightheaded
and hadn't the strength to climb out of the hot tub.

So good
 just to rest there,
leaning back in the water.

And then she couldn't open her eyes—they'd grown
hot, her whole body emptied,
 soothed and glowing,

and lovely
 to listen to the water churn,
the gentle pulse that emptied her of words,

until a feeling, like static, overwhelmed her
and she slipped
 underwater.

+

The little yellow jewel in the bottom of her glass said,
That was easy.

The ounce of liquor that sweetened the bottle:
Too, too easy—

And the drowned woman in the hot tub shifted in its currents,
staring at the starry sky—

+

For a few nights, raindrops disturbed the water's surface.
So much rain that season,
 then dying leaves
thickening the lens she looked through.

A wind had toppled the wine glass
 that lived now in its surprising
shards. *Nothing to it*, the bottle replied
from the hot tub's edge.

The water turned her over in its mind
like an idea,
 easily grasped at first,

but later filled with complexities it hadn't considered:
What had powered her laughter

and where did it go?

Her cell phone long ago stopped ringing.
Why?

At what point
was she no longer herself?
At what point
did she become merely
the hot tub's contents?

+

She is a useful metaphor for me
when I think of people I have loved
who now are gone.

Memories of the dead
fill us as a body fills a tub. In the process, they displace
other thoughts and memories.

For instance:
listening to rain tap on the windows
or surprised by the first scent of fall,

I want my father back.
And so experience my father's absence
as a displacement
of volume.

+

Nothing to it, the bottle said,
half-filled with murky rainwater—

+

So the dead woman grows blue
and foreign as the leaves
cover her up. She changes
shape within the mind that holds her, she leaks.

I wish I could believe we are held within the minds of others
and never vanish.

+

And what about the owner of the house?
He had enjoyed a lovely time away
and now, after a month,
 returned to find
the hot tub churning and uncovered.

And when he swept the leaf rot from the water's surface
and looked down into the brown
 depth,
he felt only horror.

 A leg, atilt. Fingers split.
A swirl of half-concealing hair:
the water holding her in its thoughts.

+

I'm still talking about my father.
I think I've exposed myself too much here.

Kevin Prufer
9

⁹ [Kevin Prufer, "House Sitter,"](#) collected in [How He Loved Them, Four Way Books](#)

Survivor's Guide to Grief, Loss, Bereavement, Life-Imploding Tragedies, and Various Other Kinds of
Human Suffering (Abridged)

Eliminate action verbs
Say *deceased* not *dead*
Don't think that you'll ever remodel the kitchen
Even with the modifications to your diet,
the polar ice caps will melt,
the average surface temperature of the Earth will continue to rise,
and still, that dress will never make you look like a movie star

As the house burns, the stove confesses
its love for the refrigerator
(who would have known?)
For all of those years they stood side by side
To save on tissues,
do your crying in the shower
If your clothes are dirty,
throw them out. Spit
if it's hard to swallow
If it's ugly, close your eyes

The human brain is not symmetrical
That's not a rose, it's an axe
That's not music, but how were you to know.
That's no cemetery, it's landfill.

Your daughter may be my spouse's killer
Your diagnosis may be my tax return
When God falls asleep, it's difficult
for him to hear my prayers
Sometimes even the wind is confused
A few of us can pretend we're not looking,
or look as if we are not pretending

At some point comes the wisdom
You came for the insight
And stayed for the refreshments
 the drumroll
 the curtain call
It's coming, believe me
Let me tell you, it's coming

Cindy King
10

¹⁰ [Cindy King, "Survivor's Guide to Grief, Loss, Bereavement, Life-Imploding Tragedies, and Various Other Kinds of Human Suffering \(Abridged\)," *The New Southern Fugitives*](#)

According to This Midrash

for Rabbi Arik Ascherman

The midrash says, when Hagar and Ishmael are banished
into the desert, before God builds a well, the angels

cry, “What are you doing? Don’t you know the tsuris
the Jewish people are going to suffer at the hands

of the children of Ishmael?” And God, according to this midrash,
says, “Right now, in front of me, there’s a child. Right now

this child is innocent.” Look, I know some Palestinians
would want to kill me and my children. I know some Israelis

do not see Palestinians as human, and use the law
to keep us separate. But when I visit Palestinians, they waken

their children to meet us, in the caves where they live
after their house was demolished. We sit on packed suitcases

as they serve me tea. Their son who’d been tied to a windshield
by the army, and the man in a kippa who’d come to his aid.

Philip Metres

11

¹¹ [Philip Metres](#), “[According to This Midrash](#),” collected in [Shrapnel Maps](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

The Continental Divide

“Let me see if I understand you
correctly.” Those were the only words
I could beg from my guts

in asking him to explain the feelings
he’d waited

until we’d made it to the top of this mountain
to admit he was no longer having for me.

He explained. And while he explained,
I could feel the handful of air I’d coerced
into my body begin to escape,

as if I’d been pricked, and there, among
the cold top rocks

at the summit,
I thought of crying.

I thought of crying
in an abstract way; I thought of
really going for it—letting loose, crying

so much a little river of tears
would spring up
beneath our boots; and I wondered then

which side of America
a river of tears would choose, wondered
what it was that made me feel
not like he was leaving me

but like he was stealing from me,
like he’d been stealing from me

the whole time, ripping me off a little
each day, dipping his fingers

into my private stash—of what?
It didn’t matter. Only

that he’d taken it.

I felt the sloped
chest-bone of the country
begin to crack in two.

No such luck. The earth stayed
where it was, out of reach, and over

the dashboard, on the way back to town,
one tired fly hit and re-hit the windshield

in pursuit of the opening
that would allow it to return

to the huge, blue night.
As if that opening

inevitable. As if flinging one's body against something
over and over again
ever got anyone anywhere.

I wished then
to find some plant off the side of the road
I could stare at

while the formula for pain
was proving itself throughout my body, one bush

under which I could dig a neat hole
and empty the shredded documents
from my rib cage, a hole

to which I could return in fall, to dig them up
and sort them out. I wished to find one
supple pine into the shin of which I could inject

my vial full—of what?

It didn't matter. Only that
I might relieve the ache. No matter
if the tree
slumped over and died.

No matter trees around the world
are sick to death of pain
and metaphor, our underwear

slung into the high branches,
our forests dry, our desert floors

soaked, not with our blood,
but with the blood of those

with whom we felt
it just wasn't going to work.

Columbus, toeing the coast of San Salvador,
never went down on his knee
and thanked God.

He'd reached paradise!

He went to his ledger, tongued
his pen, and started working with the figures.

Gold, blood, love: what we call natural
we are in truth calling available.

And when we say available

we usually mean taken.

We were simply an example. "Love,"
we said, and planted our flag, and took stock
of our natural resources.

Then the bottom fell out
of the economy, and I was left

carrying fistfuls of bills that meant
nothing, could buy me
nothing.

I wished to be healed,
and I wasn't healed.

I wished to be compensated.
I wasn't compensated.

So then I wished I could simply forget
my time in that large

and violent country; I wished
I could go back

in a snappy little boat
to my homeland.

But there was no more ocean. There was
no going back. There was only

inland, the woods, and beyond
the woods, God only knows.

¹² [Carrie Fountain, "The Continental Divide,"](#) collected in [Burn Lake, Penguin Books](#)

Everything I Know About Life I Earned from 1980s Action Shows

If convicted of a crime you did not commit,
make sure they let you keep the car you did not steal.
Cars matter in a world that's cherry red and glistening,
that has its sleeves shoved to its elbows, sweatless,
eternally cool in the swamp of a Miami summer.
The synthesizer is the most magical of instruments,
is the soundtrack for any mood,
is the salt in the water, the bikini in the opening sequence,
the powder on the mirror at a glamorous party. You
will never attend parties like this. Every chase
ends in a warehouse, every warehouse
features a backroom that contains the tools and materials
needed to construct a handmade cannon
suitable for launching cabbages through the eye of a tank—
do not lock your enemies in this room
for they are clever and the hour is nearing an end.
Coincidence is an artform. You start
a decade at age ten, end it at twenty
and it's only later you see how little you changed.
Time travel fits in your pocket, sixty minutes
is long enough to rule the world
and even a blank cartridge can kill.
Homicide detectives are rule-breakers
though most of them played in the NFL,
passwords are guessable,
living on a houseboat is a thing adults do
and the sky is full of helicopters.
Fear the mustache. Fear the tiny tiny shorts.
If the guest star has a gold medal it must be sweeps month.
Narrative must work in black and white—
color is a luxury and never lifelike.
There is no problem that can't be contained
in 15 inches and three acts, no cliffhanger
or commercial that doesn't make you hungry.
All you have to do is show up and watch. Every series
has the soul of a western, even the president
is made for TV, everyone else in the world
has money, all the names are ridiculous,
the last word is a laugh line.
Sometimes the star is replaced. Sometimes
the whole cast. You pretend not to notice. This is
the covenant you make with each new season
as the cars crash and the neon credits roll—
if Ponch is fungible, we all are.

Amorak Huey
13

¹³ [Amorak Huey](#), "[Everything I Know About Life I Earned from 1980s Action Shows](#)," *Split Lip*, collected in *Boom Box*, [Sundress Publications](#)

Plague as Literary Motif

Spent all morning at my bookshelf searching
for something by someone who survived this.

I must be some basic bitch to click
“*Decameron* and Chill?” in *Town & Country*.

My first instinct is now *find out the death count*:
Boccaccio says 100,000. He names seven women

who were like, Even if we stop going to church,
we’re still going to see the sick in the streets;

we’re still going to hear all that dolorous wailing;
our dead servants’ ghosts are mad infectious.

Yo, what wait we for? What dream we of?
At a villa outside Florence (click for slideshow),

the girls spend a fortune on lashes and a fortnight
drinking red wine from copper glasses,

confessing malaise in sexy baby voices to pass the time
while three hot guys weep openly—not ’cause of plague,

but ’cause they don’t think anyone can see them
in their pods. This ten-day event poses the question:

Is love truly blind? The members of the *brigata*
slow-dance on their balconies and sing “Volare”:

Let’s fly. Once we accept futility
and the absurd as our new normal,

Jacques Barzun says that is when
we know decadence has set in.

Leigh Stein

14

¹⁴ Leigh Stein, “[Plague as Literary Motif](#),” collected in [What to Miss When](#), Soft Skull Press

At their first meeting, my first boyfriend asks my father, “So, what was prison like?”

When my boyfriend touches me
I feel the wings of my pussy flutter

in time with my breath—I kneel
between his legs in his laundry room

while his mother drinks white wine
in the living room and feel myself

holy when I am so wholly for his pleasure—
This is a love story about my boyfriend’s

laundry room and my Laundromat,
the SUV his parents buy him and my mom’s

Toyota Tercel with the headlight duct-taped on
like a punched eye—I am giving myself to him

because he has everything, and people
who have everything should have more,

and all the ways I have been told my milk-white
body is a most divine present, all the ways

I think I am made in his hunger,
what his eyes do as they track my body—
I am calling it love—

I am watching him play the piano for hours
and calling it love—

I tell him everything—I watch him—Everything—
I fill my eyes up, plush white carpet in the den—

I know I am placing my neck between the teeth
of a benevolent animal—

At dinner I shyly present the boy
to be viewed in the gloom of my regard—

I am giving him my father, greatest love, greatest
wound—He is shaking his hand—

The boy’s teeth elongate at the scent of blood—
I place the points of the animal’s teeth just

touching the flesh of my father’s neck—

Are you paying attention?

I am giving the animal my father—

Katie Schmid
15

¹⁵ [Katie Schmid](#), "[At their first meeting, my first boyfriend asks my father, 'So, what was prison like?'](#)," collected in [Nowhere](#), University of New Mexico Press

from “Happinefs”

5.

Since I was a living lab
I scythed, skull-clean
my crop of hair.
I buttoned up
my button-downs like tarps
& hummed, in botanical Latin
the notes of my glasshouse
erudition. Now I can’t stop
counting these dents in my ribs
system of stinging whorls
tiny rosettes stelled in my side
for I leaned
so long against that trellis
what I took for petals were scars.

Kiki Petrosino

16

¹⁶ [Kiki Petrosino](#), “[Happinefs](#),” [Tin House](#), collected in [White Blood](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Rosemary Woodhouse

Before pain
pinched me into a clenched
stick of chalk

Before my womb became a torture
chamber, & Dr. Sapirstein stood by
while the corkscrew turned

Before the words, *Not fair to Sapirstein?*
What about what's fair to me? spouted
from the chiffon that clouded my voice

Before I wailed, *If you won't pay, then I'll p—*
& realized Guy pulled the purse strings
though I shouldered the bag

Before I found myself mirrored
in the toaster's shiny side
scarfing down raw liver
when no one was around

Before I solved the anagram
with Scrabble tiles

Before I knew that the prince who pledged
to protect me from wolves
had traded my ovum for a good part in a play

Before I gathered that like the Blessed Mother
I was a baby machine
but she had murmured, *Thy will be done,*
while they had doped me,
kidnapped my choice

Before I looked
into the eyes of Satan

Steven Riel

17

¹⁷ [Steven Riel](#), "[Rosemary Woodhouse](#)," [Ethel](#), collected in [Edgemere](#), [Lily Poetry Review Books](#)

Perspective He Would Mutter Going to Bed

For Robert Duncan

“Perspective,” he would mutter, going to bed.
“Oh che dolce cosa è questa
prospettiva.” Uccello. Bird.

And I am as greedy of her, that the black
horse of the literal world might come
directly on me. Perspective. A place

to stand. To receive. A place to go
into from. The earth by language.

Who can imagine antelope silent
under the night rain, the Gulf
at Biloxi at night else? I remember

in Mexico a man and a boy painting
an adobe house magenta and crimson
who thought they were painting it red. Or pretty.

So neither saw the brown mountains
move to manage that great house.

The horse wades in the city of grammar.

Jack Gilbert

18

¹⁸ [Jack Gilbert](#), “[Perspective He Would Mutter Going to Bed](#),” collected in [Monolithos](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

After Tomaž Šalamun

Before I died, I could hear singing from under ash heaps.
Motor oil dripped a rosary on the blacktops.
I rose with vapor from August dew.
I dueled with oak branches.

I walked through the smoldering city, whistling.
Not one cloud, but you couldn't see the sun.
Keep going, I thought, *you can sleep under trestles and loot as you wish.*
Heat exhaled through cracks in the sidewalks.

Red ants stormed an apricot pit.
I stole an extra pair of socks off a dead man
Birds behaved like birds—that is,
like the reptiles from which they're descended.

Flashlights burned white, then amber, then not at all.
I carried somebody's mother on my back.
We sank into mud up to my knees, my thighs, my waist,
while God called out, *Get over here, and right this minute.*

Steven Cramer
19

¹⁹ Steven Cramer, "After Tomaž Šalamun," *New England Review*, collected in *Listen*, Mad Hat Press

Schöheit / Beauty

Did he not, after all, visit Rodin to find the perfect poet? To understand our obsession with beauty?

After *The Book of Hours*, Rilke unfolded his soul from his own body, undertook the journey outward—he derived beauty from the world of things.

Beauty is primal, beauty precedes the interpreted world.

Like mud, it's organic, always changing.

Today the editor in the white shirt asked me *What printing device did your mother use?* and I think that's when I saw, really saw for the first time, not the prison but the thing preceding it: a basement cluttered with paper, drabs and ink, the city peeled completely white, her black hair curled with soda cans, printing the magazine that fought the government—and it occurred to me that she was *beautiful*.

What else is beautiful:

Your hands, at the end of a long day, carrying a cup of tea.

A European goldfinch's warble quilting the song of my childhood, my youth: that verdant vibration, the smell of grass on my fingers, sandalwood.

To hear a droning in the distance and not suffer a sudden execution of your center, but think of bees drowned in jars of raspberry jam, their dead husks on the windowsill all summer, sweat pooling under your shirt, between your legs, face against the hum of the fan.

My mother's voice, when it doesn't tremble—her sitting on the black leather couch, reading something trivial in the news, unconcerned with her hometown, curlers in her hair, the radio on full volume. Her voice through WhatsApp, when it relates to me the story of a woman who abandoned her family, husband, children and moved into a cottage to write a book.

An angel filling the spaces between us—

Sometimes, my father's green eyes, speckled black matter, the pupils moving like the shadows of moons on a lake.

It was a beautiful country.

Aria Aber
20

²⁰ Aria Aber, "[Schöheit / Beauty](#)," collected in [Hard Damage](#), University of Nebraska Press

The Pond

You could come here every night and feed
your problems to the ducks.
The credit card payment and the stolen Trans Am,
the 45-year-old Russian housewife, so beautiful
she's made you into a peeping tom.
I've come to the pond for years
so I recognize the man with the pock-marked cheeks
who dips his head to the water like a giraffe,
the bald yoga instructor jogging in sweat pants
who asked me to fuck him in the ass last week,
and the old woman with the shopping cart
who places a clean dinner plate
next to the garbage can each night
and looks a little lighter under the moon.
They will leave the earth like burning Viking funeral barges!
I want to lie down on this park bench.
My body is heavy. I have carried it here
through thirty-five years of falling
snow. From this balcony tagged with paint markers,
I've witnessed the silent explosions
of countless stars, heard the adagio,
I have been dumb but lucky. I want to rest
next to the other animals making their way
out of the forest to drink. I want to drink with them.
Stare them in the eyes. The rooster
and the wolverine. The bullying geese.

Jay Nebel

21

²¹ [Jay Nebel](#), "[The Pond](#)," collected in [Neighbors](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

kill lies all

After his death, my hair did not grow, my nails peeled and flaked, my bones were lifted into a sack upon my legs. Even my muscles decayed from the lack of wild oranges and sweet tea.

This was the new myth of my life.

When visiting Spain, a cricket was loose in my kitchen, its chirp was like my name, like the words yes, yes.

But what could a dead woman know of yes? That summer, one cricket became two, two became four.

It was then I memorized the trill and grind of my name.

Like a vandal with a can of red spray paint I could scrawl the words kill lies all across my Guernica. Who will be the bull, the horse? Who the severed head and arm?

Under the bald lamp, like an eye,
I will expose old scars and breast-feed a shadow of myself.

Didi Jackson
22

²² [Didi Jackson](#), "[kill lies all](#)," [Ploughshares](#), collected in [Moon Jar](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

from "Final Poem for a King"

In undergrad, an acquaintance I had grown to love
told me her father had used the times of her mother's
absence to—

I don't know why she trusted me
to tell me this so casually in a burger joint.
And I remember wanting her to cry
because I wanted to cry but could not cry
and why could I not cry and how else do I
show her that I hear I care I believe her and she
thanked me for listening while I sat petrified
in half-smile like a delinquent who committed
a crime and almost got away thinking more
of myself than of her as is the way of men
who want most to be the unasked-for
white knight in an already-fought war.

Phillip B. Williams

23

²³ [Phillip B. Williams](#), "[Final Poem for a King](#)," collected in [Mutiny](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Those Notes We Compose

Across the bottle's lip
as if the dead are lurking.

White lilacs on the table
under the picture of Christ.

From a doorway,
the grotesque & the damned;

A menthol cigarette glowed.
A summer of cypress,

the silver dollar moon
above the back alleys

of broke, listening
through a fire-escape;

6c a steel door opened:
the third shift spilled

from the warehouse dock.
No one can tell you the cost

for the sins we've sawed
in half—for the toll

at the intersection of parable
& piss—fallen off a stolen rig

at a sharp turn long ago—
her face of the Black Madonna.

Her bandaged wrist,
outside of the Polish Falcons;

the dogwood blossomed,
the girl so high it hurt

to hear her ask, how much?
At the corner of 3rd & Parade.

But all she wanted was to sell
the plastic Dyngus Day beads

she wore. She was matted hair,
perfume facing intravenous ghosts.

She was thin as the drizzling rain.
She snapped a necklace from her neck.

The red beads scattered
across the AM asphalt

like some fast, rough music
even mercy could not stay.

Sean Thomas Dougherty
24

²⁴ [Sean Thomas Dougherty](#), "[Those Notes We Compose](#)," [Here](#), collected in [Not All Saints](#), [Bitter Oleander Press](#)

How to Know When the Dead Are Dead

Some crimes of early modern Europe were specific
to the night: keeping a public house open
too late, disturbing the peace, lantern smashing, dueling

at dusk or dawn, grave robbing, and walking
without a light. So fireflies, rising like embers
from the earth, members of the family

Lampyridae, Greek for “shining ones,” still blink
their way through the night. Although they obey
God’s first command, when the lights go out

do they stay?

Upon election, the Pope takes
a new name, his old Christian name never

heard in the Vatican again until he lies
dead: the chamberlain then comes to his side
and calls him three times by the name

he once bore.

To be sure the dead are dead,
Greeks would cut off a finger, Slavs rubbed bodies

with warm water for an hour, while Hebrews wait
for putrefaction because even without hands, the dove
still plays her flute. There are other ways,

of course, to know: the dead don’t place bets, leave
their dinner untouched. Then just before the sky goes
dark, bats fly out like a pail of water tossed

from the eaves.

Even and thin but yellow with age, there can be
pleadings, an appeal or trial, a letter, dispatch, or note,

something summarized or abbreviated: *brief*
which in Scotland is called
a memorial.

Angie Estes
25

²⁵ Angie Estes, “[How to Know When the Dead Are Dead](#),” *The American Scholar*, collected in [Enchantée](#), Oberlin College Press

The Lotus Eaters: Ode on My Pothead Nephews

One of my six nephews writes me a letter that talks
so much about my money, which he both wants
and hates me for having, not that I have zillions,
but I've been working for forty years longer,
so I have more than he does, but I understand
the red-hot volcanic fury of the young,
because until my late thirties it was as if I were running
through all the fires of Hell wearing a gasoline
nightgown, and this boy thinks he is being honest,
but really he's airing the phantoms released
by his bong into the scientific light of day,
and another nephew says he needs to relax,
and again I understand how the world can seem
to be working overtime to harsh your mellow,
though this boy is one of the most easy-going people
on the planet, and a third nephew has moved
from pot to craft beer, and I'm guessing the straight-A
engineering student doesn't have time for it,
but his brother may be taking up, at this very moment,
behind the bleachers at his high school,
and I've heard that my younger sister s tattooed ex
smokes the *pakalolo* with their son, so what kind
of DNA is working here, I ask you, but perhaps these boys
are looking into the future like Odysseus's men
being dragged back from the land of the lotus eaters,
seeing full well they'll never make it home,
will be eaten by a one-eyed cannibal or drowned
in the wine-dark sea, so isn't it better to loll
on a beach, visions clouding their brains, hallucinations
so incandescent they might be forgiven their tears
as they're dragged back to the waiting ships.

Barbara Hamby
26

²⁶ Barbara Hamby, "[The Lotus Eaters: Ode on My Pothead Nephews](#)," *Hanging Loose*, collected in [Bird Odyssey](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

Fontainebleau

We're in the library, high
as the kites that kites

fly, eying the massive globe
on which Napoleon lay

his hand, imagining
all the lands that would

be his. How that world
must have spun

to escape him. In
the winter gardens,

we lunch on blood
oranges. A train comes,

and one grey cloud. I
will forsake you.

Andrea Cohen
27

²⁷ [Andrea Cohen](#), "[Fontainebleau](#)," [Plume](#), collected in [Nightshade](#), [Four Way Books](#)

July 16, 2016

In school, the rabbi offered me the word *spirit* when I asked *should I already hate my body this much?*

Spirit is a woman who cannot leave a woman.

Spirit has weights in her feet that keep her in her body.

(Later the rabbi said *you've asked enough questions for today.*)

Naomi, I write to you at thirty. I carry around this muscular bag.

Shouldn't each spirit eventually accept her body?

I used to grab my inner thighs between my hands and clamp down until the spirit screamed.

I would study my bruising skin for clues.

Today I imagine *spirit* like a woman asleep in a pile of bones.

I imagine love like gnawing.

I wanted a body equally like and unlike my own and never found her.

Do I wear my grief more like a suit or a skirt?

My hands shake at the buttons. They struggle with the wire hook-and-eye.

When I was a child, the doctor called my hands *dainty*.

He told my mother I had *piano fingers*. Ones that could span an octave, or cover an entire face in its grip, palm to mouth.

If nobody has died, why do I grieve?

How do I dress the body I will not meet? How do I dress the body I cannot love?

We Jews adorn even the mirror when we mourn.

Our bodies become unfathomable.

The men and the women wear black for a week, keen from the waist in the widow's living room.

We become indistinguishable for seven nights.

When I close my eyes in the dark, my hands grow to the size of your back.

I open my fingers in the silent bed, fill the warming space between your shoulder blades.

When I close my eyes, Naomi, your body remains covered in light.

²⁸ [Rachel Mennies](#), "[July 16, 2016](#)," *The Adroit Journal*, collected in *The Naomi Letters*, BOA Editions, Ltd.

Miss Congeniality

There's a name given
after your death
and a name you must answer to while you're alive.

Like flowers, my friends—nodding, nodding. My
enemies, like space, drifting
away. They

praised my face, my enunciation, and the power
I freely relinquished, and the fires

burning in the basements of my churches,
and the pendulums swinging
above my towers.
And my

heart (which was a Boy Scout
lost for years in a forest). And my

soul (although the judges said
it weighed almost nothing
for goodness had devoured it).

They praised my feet, the shoes
on my feet, my feet
on the floor, the floor—
and then

the sense of despair
I evoked with my smile, the song

I sang. The speech
I gave

about peace, in praise of the war. O,

they could not grant me the title I wanted

so they gave me the title I bore,

and stubbornly refused
to believe I was dead
long after my bloody mattress
had washed up on the shore.

Laura Kasischke

29

²⁹ [Laura Kasischke](#), "[Miss Congeniality](#)," [New England Review](#), collected in [Lilies Without](#), Ausable Press

The Amenities

Enchantée, says the key in my hand.
When I try to turn it, it turns to sand.

Time is an upgrade, says the front desk,
reserved for our most valued guests.

Time is an anemone, says the new hire.
Enemy. Amenity. Profanity. Dire.

Whatever you've forgotten,
they provide. Loved one,

plotline, packet of minutes?
Glass eyes, false teeth, all sleep is gratis.

How sweet
we look in our hotel linens.

Catherine Barnett

30

³⁰ [Catherine Barnett](#), "[The Amenities](#)," [Poetry International](#), collected in [Human Hours](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

The Theoktistria

*You could speak Greek the word Theoktisti
in which case your hand will follow.*
—*Odysseus Elytis, "Theoktisti," trans. Carson & Sarris, 2004*

My hand will follow to filch figs, to catch
the holy water lapping kitten-like

the altar's underside, the abandoned-
because-of-pirates temple where she lived

for thirty years. My hand will make the sign,
"I have to pee," I'll run from Naoussa and

my kidnapers, I'll never see Lesbos
again, the nunnery they took us from.

Like her, I'll have the island to myself,
my skin burn-blistered black and raw, my hair

turned white from shock and age. When hunters come,
I'll remark that I am close to death, ask

in politest terms to have the sacrament,
to wrap myself against one in his cloak.

I'll rebel when after I am dead he
takes my hand as relic. I will get it

back. I can anchor boats even against
the Anemoi—I have her, she's a saint

gone wild in the Paros pines. I lived
near here once, when I was my happiest;

I take her as my patron saint of *then*,
her name that translates "made by God" from Greek—

redundant, isn't it, if you believe?
(My son's, "gift of God," perhaps the same?) On

proscenia her prosthetic metal
hands dance and sparkle in the votive light.

If I speak her name my hands will follow,
clasp a child who wasn't there before.

If I speak her name my hands will follow,
they'll buoy a boy's body in the sea.

If I speak her name, I won't need what the
museum next door says that amphora
was used for: "the burial of children,"
earthenware worn warm below black palmettes,
two oxen with plow, an archer's quiver
with four thin missiles fletched in brown finish.
It's probably how they lived, but could just
as easily be how they died. My son
abides the field, the forest, his falls.
My son I've claimed was a gift from God when
howled down by insomniac stars, when
Theoktisti caught him in her gilt hands
and grew him like a wasp in a fig's womb
and I plucked it from the roadside. Nights, I
shake awake my Theo, see he's breathing.
The moon is shaped from fontanelles closing.

Barbara Duffey
31

³¹ [Barbara Duffey](#), "[The Theoktistria](#)," [Blackbird](#)

We Are Crossing Soon

It was hot. We wandered on the pavement.
We knew that soon we would get there.

We thought we were prepared—one says goodbye
and looks for a knife and a proper comb,

and while doing so avoids a crying person.
Soon we would get there, or not soon, but

we would, the bridge not too crowded, the agents
distracted, and the water would not be too wet.

The desert weeping manna in the cool morning will provide.
The streets of El Paso will provide.

We surfed on the ocean and kissed blond girls named Melissa
with each other, astride the dumpsters

behind the TV factory. We were not smooth,
and we wouldn't like living alone, wondering what our

mothers were doing at that moment. At that moment
our mothers were sewing small pieces of old clothes.

Certainly we would arrive the way birds arrive, not through
maps and memory, but some other dark

knowledge, though we knew some would drop
dead from the sky. We had cousins. We smoked cigarettes

whenever we could and the avenues yawned, flustered
with feet—it was so hot—and beyond lay the river

in its cement trough, the highway, the fields
of onions. We shined your shoes with a vigor

unexplained by democracy, our boots crooked
but shining, then your shoes were shining,

spotless down the dusty streets, the quarters
in our hands were shining like a teakettle we would own.

Connie Voisine

32

³² [Connie Voisine](#), "[We Are Crossing Soon](#)," collected in [Calle Florista](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Abandoned Sestina

I found God in an abandoned laundromat.
I carved the history of coldness on the cold
linoleum floors. Wanted to crawl in the washer.

I said a prayer about the history of laundromats.
The way, when I pray in daylight, God feels cold
and I feel like an unwanted daughter. I wash

my eyes with the history of God showing up uninvited
in dreams. Telling me *I taught you better* in a cold
and God-like voice. Me: crawling into that reprimand.

I cry for the ways I've never heard anything from God
firsthand. Always had words passed down, God floating
like a left-behind sock in a washer. I told my aunt once,

I don't want God to see me in the shower. My aunt said
God will know when to see, and: *that's*
blasphemous and you're going to hell. I told God, later:

I feel like an abandoned laundromat. Something
that can never clean or be cleaned again. God said
nothing but the next day, I learned the neighbor's daughter

had died after swallowing detergent. I crawled
inside my grief and it felt like a laundromat. Abandoned.
I carved out the history of daughters in my dreams and God

did not show up to stop me. I found this telling
but not telling enough to stop dreaming. Last year,
I made a list of all of the laundromats in a fifty mile

radius. My father said: *what's with all the laundromats?*
I said: what's with the desire to find God, to crawl inside God,
to feel God the way I always feel cold but can never fix it.

In other words: I avoided the question. Last night,
I dreamt I rode my bike to the second laundromat
on my list. I sat on the floor, and wondered about the difference

between being dead and being abandoned. I said,
God: have you ever been abandoned? And I knew
this was a stupid question. I searched the floors

for some carved-out history. I prayed to the God
of cold linoleum and wondered if that God
was the same as my God and thought:

that's blasphemous and you're going to hell. I saw
an angel beneath the detergent dispenser and asked
why sometimes, it hurts so much to believe in something.

She said *that's history*, and then crawled in the nearest
washer. When I woke up, it was time for the funeral.
I cleaned my shoes and avoided questions and wondered

if God avoided questions for the same reason I did:
they hurt. I imagined the history of churches
and how unclean they must be. I wondered

what sermons would sound like in laundromats. Eulogies.
In the graveyard, a cold front delayed the grave
digging and I pretended: *she's not dead yet, not dead yet.*

I noticed a little girl abandoned on a nearby bench.
Her buttons looked like angels, her hands looked like angels,
her grief: angels. I thought, God knows when to see. I prayed I did also.

A.D. Lauren-Abunassar

33

³³ [A.D. Lauren-Abunassar](#), "[Abandoned Sestina](#)," [Rattle](#)

To Bring You News

I.

Great news! A hiker found in a broken clay pot
The complete, unexpurgated works of Sappho
I made a plectrum from your eyelashes
Somebody somewhere will stroke a lyre in tribute

II.

The troops of Caesar didn't burn the library of Alexandria
To save it a million librarians pushed it into the Mediterranean
From our bed we can browse its 700,000 scrolls online
Who plunged Europe into the Dark Ages? Not us

III.

We spotted the Dark Lady of the sonnets
Sporting tit windows and pleather hot pants
She nailed "Barracuda" on karaoke night
If you don't clap, she'll steal your man
And put your head on a spike on London Bridge

IV.

Milton is not for lovers in this postlapsarian world
Everybody gets punished, and it's no fun at all
Angels lecture and men labor and complain about it
Women suffer at men's hands and die in childbirth
Nobody gets to say they're sorry or make a joke

V.

If you want to be ravished by God, fine
But that impotence better be metaphysical, mister
We're so over the 17th century
No time for your closets or conceits
No room for your paradoxes and backtalk
We want to own property and vote

VI.

The Lake Poets paddle quite nicely
Do you think Coleridge was a fiend in bed
Especially when high & talking Shakespeare?
Shelley? Maybe a passive-aggressive Bottom
The worst, Wordsworth, a joyless Top
Blake? Bedding an angel never works out well

VII.

Such fetishists & shabby poets
The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood we admit was hot
I'm going to drown them all with my lush red hair
Then choke a knight with my bosom
I will need antibiotics after that frat house

VIII.

Doesn't anybody read Modernism anymore?
H.D.! Langston! Mina! Zora!
Please lay your fine visions before us
I don't want anyone else intoning at me
Lightly I step my sandals over the footnotes

IX.

Feeling sorry for the Confessionals lately
How many epiphanies can one have in a day?
Gosh, it's exhausting & suicide's not sexy anymore
Nor are asylums or alcoholic rages
I want to ride off on Ariel into the future

X.

I hung up my underpinnings in public
Constructed an ironic simulacrum
Post-poetry post-human post-time
Yet the real prevails
The sea level rises idealism falls
And ruthless ideologies abound
Put your head down
We have serious work to do

Camille Guthrie

34

³⁴ [Camille Guthrie](#), "[To Bring You News](#)," [On the Seawall](#), collected in [Diamonds](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Still

There's laughter in slaughter

J didn't see this coming
when 12 were shot
when 21 when 27
when I was a boy by a river
better than the Seine
at whetting my appetite
for rivers

then I wrote *slaughter*
on a legal pad
and for the first time wondered,
Are there illegal pads?
and noticed the sick message
in the bottle of the word
and decided language
is the funniest thing
the crudest April
I've ever put in my mouth

when 32 were shot
when 50
when the daily 1s and 2s
piled up I grew immune
to the measles but not this

I've written versions of this poem
as long as I've asked a pen to help me
be a better person
at falling down
at whispering to genitals
at going to Montreal
at cutting boards
into smaller boards
to make a house of what trees
do naturally

eventually I realized
the poems are all horrible
especially this poem
especially the next poem
due any tomorrow now
because rain
won't fall up
cats won't come
when dogs call them
Americans won't stop

ordering fries
with a side of .45s
and I won't give up
on the faith
of the Romantics
that a gentleman
always brings semantics
to a gunfight

Bob Hicok
35

³⁵ [Bob Hicok](#), "[Still](#)," collected in [Hold](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

I once had a good boss a National Guard kind of boss

I once had a good boss a National Guard kind of boss
soft as a flag tough as a pole I once had a
good boss a god boss who played me like
a good bass plucked all my strings now

my good boss is gone is a goner boss is a no-longer-
mine boss he is someone else's boss I once
had a good boss but didn't know he was a good boss
until I met my new boss my

good boss called me V the letter looks like a check mark
he checked me off each day with a soft
charcoal pencil he said V with such kindness the way
a cement sidewalk lifts itself up slowly year

after year for ficus roots if only I could hug
my once-good boss bug him each day once again
exceed his expectations set my objectives around his
goals be his shoal but it is too late I am

old now the land is cold now the owl on some nights opens
my window and waits for me to wake
in a wet sweat its gold eyes staring at me like
two ticking clocks

Victoria Chang
36

³⁶ [Victoria Chang](#), "[I Once Had a Good Boss](#)," *diode*, collected in [The Boss](#), [McSweeney's](#)

Some Crazy Dancing

I think I must have spent great chunks of those years
watching the girls and boys on American Bandstand,
the frug and the boogaloo shaking through their furious bodies.
I stood by the TV and danced along. I wish
I could say I was another girl, that my stories were those
of the girl who walked off-set, leading a boy—his license
snug in a back pocket—into shadow. I wish I could say
I was the girl who knew what to do with her tongue.
What I wanted in those years was mostly everything:
The neatly belted torsos, the girl's high tits,
all the worn places on the guy's jeans.
What I wanted was not to have to do one thing.
And in front of that TV as I shimmied, ponied and posed,
one afternoon I heard a man's voice somewhere close by saying
—and this I remember exactly—*Fuck me, fuck baby, do me.*
Of course the voice was inside me. Not hard to imagine why,
but harder to imagine how my own indecency undid me.
I flipped the channel, then shut it off and went out
into a nest of suburban streets; walking past landscaped
lawns, shaped bushes, cut-back flowering trees, the slate
front walks up to doors where anyone might emerge.
I know I believed it was finite:
the universe of sex moving inside me,
stars burning out, streaking through the sky, and me—
too afraid to look up or down. Under a neighbor's dogwood,
under the excitement of petals, I waited for that
insistent voice inside to step out and show me what was what.
I can't help it, it seems sweet now—desire—
can I even call it that?—more a demand,
like Dick Clark calling out some latest dance craze,
some new-fangled routine that you'd believe
might be the season's best.

Victoria Redel

37

³⁷ Victoria Redel, "[Some Crazy Dancing](#)," collected in [Already the World](#), Kent State University Press

Cenotaph

There is a reliquary on a ledge outside the bathroom.

No one really knows why. I mean, that was the winter my father tried to kill himself.

I was getting a haircut when I received the call. Then I kept receiving it forever.

I was talking about the Christmas preparations at the time. Debating the kinds of lights to get or something.

It must have been a muddy time, said someone. Actually, it was terrifying.

Later the doctor told us it was impossible to tell what anything meant, though he didn't use those words.

Someone used the metaphor of the iceberg. You know, what's showing and what's not. Someone else mentioned black holes. None of it made sense but I guess they were nice gestures?

I mean, at least they were trying?

Someone still had to buy the groceries and shovel the snow and all that.

Then my father cashed out the savings account and gave us each a check.

I kept trying to piece together events as though the questions could be answered logically. Then I realized I had all the wrong questions.

Someone strung yellow tape to the driver's side door of the car.
No one knew who had brought flowers.

Some actions are more meaningful. Like leaving a note.

Then I remembered the baby.

Oh no, where was the baby?

Lauren Shapiro

38

³⁸ [Lauren Shapiro, "Cenotaph," *Columbia Poetry Review*](#), collected in [Arena, Cleveland State University Poetry Center](#)

Bath Time

With both ears I hear
the dainty popping
of bath bubbles—
and a light rain
falling on my mother's grave
comes back to me,
how it seemed
on that sans-everything day
to be the very pins
she carried in her mouth
to unlink a knotted chain for me
or affix a foreboding note,
for even a small child
knows the affliction
of language.

Mary Ruefle
39

³⁹ [Mary Ruefle](#), "[Bath Time](#)," collected in [Dunce](#), [Wave Books](#)

Despite Its Promising Title, *The ABCs of Death* Proved to Be a Subpar Film

And so began my 30th year,
signaled by tiny explosions
out the rear of my cap gun; me,
standing in Tim's front yard,
shooting up into the dim screen
of the stars washed out
by city lights.

There are times when you want a new thing
so badly you might find yourself
screaming into your friend's couch cushion
while he's in the bathroom.

Without novelty or challenge
an organism more often than not
assumes its death shroud.

When a banana is more brown
than yellow, the *air* is all
that's bruising it.

When an organism perceives its inutility
it removes itself from the equation
for the greater good, just like when
I get really quiet at parties.

Why do *you* think so many
writers write about parties?
Probably because it's so hard for anything
to grow there. Parties are like
allegorical representations of everything
humans are capable of
but grown in the most shallow petri dishes.

Have you ever noticed how a thing
can mean two things?
I realized that on my 30th birthday,
when my friend offered me a salad upon which
he'd lovingly piled papaya
and also began to hate me a little bit
because I hadn't come inside sooner
to help him set the table.

Hannah Gamble

40

⁴⁰ [Hannah Gamble, "Despite Its Promising Title, *The ABCs of Death* Proved to Be a Subpar Film," *The Southeast Review*, collected in *The Traditional Feel of the Ballroom*, Trio House Press, Inc.](#)

Not

Not the girl in the rambler staring out her window every summer—not allowed out
Not the girl whose dad left his pistol under the pillow where we jumped on the bed
Not the girl who wore only undershirts at home on her daddy's lap
Not the girl who cleaned-dressed-bathed fed her little sisters dogfood if she had to
Not the girl who could not read who married the odd jobs man
Not the girl who parked with her dad on country roads then by bars—her mom stayed home
Not the girl who thrilled at the drop off kiss from the dad whose kids she babysat
Not the girl who got a car got a puppy got a trip when she gave her baby away
Not the girl whose cousin hit her with his rifle until she knelt and did it
Not the girl who never looked at me again who never talked to me again who never laughed
Not the girl who swore me not to tell who told me I would die who ran off and married
Not the girl another girl and then another girl then so many many girls while I was still a girl
Not the girl but a woman who was not has not did not would not could not will not not not

Heid E. Erdrich

41

⁴¹ [Heid E. Erdrich](#), “[Not](#),” collected in [Little Big Bully](#), [Penguin Books](#)

The Evacuation Shadow

Every disaster can be drawn
as a target on a map,
radial circles of streets and farms
round a compass point. Once,

that point was the colossal spun pots
of Three Mile Island, and me,
a child pinned to the evacuation
shadow my parents didn't

have the means to leave. Our yards
watered by clouds so absurdly
normal, our tomatoes grown
brawny, sullen fish hooked

from the river. I imagine someone
pulled my infant body close
as the countryside emptied
with its fear around us. Today,

in the still-standing block
apartments of Ukraine, where
Chernobyl permanently blights
the Soviet breadbasket, pictures

tilt on their walls, curtains
drag from their hooks,
backyards are seeded with dolls
and basketballs decades

flat. Those badlands are different
from Appalachia's weedy
hills where we remained.
In those years I remember playing

in the backyard, press of mating
insects so loud I could
disappear if they wanted me
enough. I began to leave the place

I lived from the day I was
born, when adults believed the air
poison, and the water, believed
in the death drive of nations

and worlds. But everyone
has to live somewhere, so like adults,
we children pretended the cornstalks
could be fine after that, the river

clear to its depths, still good
to swim. No choice but to count
our own bodies as safe to roam
inside, protected in our skin.

Erin Hoover

42

⁴² [Erin Hoover](#), "[The Evacuation Shadow](#)," [Sugar House Review](#)

Palindrome

There is less difficulty—indeed, no logical difficulty at all—in imagining two portions of the universe, say two galaxies, in which time goes one way in one galaxy and the opposite way in the other.... Intelligent beings in each galaxy would regard their own time as “forward” and time in the other galaxy as “backward.”

—Martin Gardner, in *Scientific American*

Somewhere now she takes off the dress I am putting on. It is evening in the antiworld where she lives. She is forty-five years away from her death, the hole which spit her out into pain, impossible at first, later easing, going, gone. She has unlearned much by now. Her skin is firming, her memory sharpens, her hair has grown glossy. She sees without glasses, she falls in love easily. Her husband has lost his shuffle, they laugh together. Their money shrinks, but their ardor increases. Soon her second child will be young enough to fight its way into her body and change its life to monkey to frog to tadpole to cluster of cells to tiny island to nothing. She is making a list:

Things I will need in the past

lipstick
shampoo
transistor radio
Sergeant Pepper
acne cream
five-year diary with a lock

She is eager, having heard about adolescent love and the freedom of children. She wants to read *Crime and Punishment* and ride on a roller coaster without getting sick. I think of her as she will be at fifteen, awkward, too serious. In the mirror I see she uses her left hand to write, her other to open a jar. By now our lives should have crossed. Somewhere sometime we must have passed one another like going and coming trains, with both of us looking the other way.

Lisel Mueller

43

⁴³ [Lisel Mueller](#), “[Palindrome](#),” collected in [Alive Together](#), Louisiana State University Press

The Sweet and Fleshy Product of a Tree or Other Plant

My sixth-grade teacher's grandmother held a grudge against bananas. When she immigrated from Poland, someone at Ellis Island handed her one, but didn't show her how to eat it. She choked the whole thing down, peel and all.

What kind of fruit makes the best filling for a pie graph? Globally, only 55 percent of people live in countries with adequate availability to meet the five servings of fruits and vegetables daily.

Growing up, I loved the fruit pizza in the buffet at the Nebraska chain Valentino's. The dough was just dough, but the sauce was icing, and the toppings were blueberry jam and little pebbles of streusel.

I heard on the radio that if we all ate enough fruits and vegetables, there'd be huge shortages. Diets are responsible for more deaths than smoking. People are simultaneously overweight and malnourished.

It can take quite a while for an idea to bear fruit.

Canning rarely improves what's canned, but fruit can be an exception. How the grapes in fruit cocktail bob like slimy eyeballs! How happily I would eat them all!

In English, the color orange is named after the fruit, which didn't arrive until the 1500s. Chaucer wrote about Chanticleer the Rooster dreaming of a fox invading the barnyard whose "color was betwixt yellow and red," mixing the color as a painter might.

We were standing in a kitchen, chopping up pineapple, when my friend Eileen turned to me and said with vehemence, "I hate it when somebody only eats a *little bit* of fruit."

My spouse's boss refuses to eat fruit because "It squirts in your mouth."

My favorite fruits are the ones for which seasons still matter. Good luck getting a ripe fig in Chicago in January. Fuck the expectation that you should be able to.

A tomato is technically a fruit but functionally a vegetable. Rhubarb is technically a vegetable but functionally a fruit. I don't find pedants particularly cute.

The "Hail Mary" is an otherwise beautiful prayer, but the line "Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus," feels cringey. Then again, a fruit is the ripened ovary of a flower with its included seeds, so more than likely the problem is me.

Fruit of the Loom is a decent name for a company, and a pretty good Bible joke.

The metaphors of business-speak are vacuous, but literal low-hanging fruit is fun to pick.

A grape vine takes five years to harvest, an apple tree six to ten, an avocado as long as fifteen.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

When life gives you bananas, make banana bread.

When agriculture collapses, fruit is what I'll miss the most.

Is Jesus the last fruit I should think of before I'm dead?

Kathleen Rooney
44

⁴⁴ [Kathleen Rooney, "The Sweet and Fleshy Product of a Tree or Other Plant," *Brevity*](#)

My Undertaker Wears a Sweet Cologne

I mean, I like it. He gets up close to you, real close—he has to. It's his job. You know he's probably going to say you belong under ground, but it's not the man's fault, not at all. Better him than some others I can think of. And if you're not dead you don't have to listen to him anyway, but just in case. The only advice he ever gave me was "never give a dog a tomato," but he didn't explain why. He looks like the kind of guy who has a falsetto. Not that he uses it, just that he has one. And if you ask him too many questions he will tell you he's been exhausted by the surreal that day and will have to get back to you. And he will. He's a gentleman after all, and I suspect a bit sad but not depressed. I glimpsed the inside of his Audi: filled with clouds. Last year he fell in love with and married one of his clients. He's a great guy.

Diane Wald

45

⁴⁵ [Diane Wald](#), "[My Undertaker Wears a Sweet Cologne](#)," [The Laurel Review](#), collected in [The Warhol Pillows](#), [Finishing Line Press](#)

*Vital Juices (1975 Version)

—for Eddie Hazel

Some things stay
red hot

& symmetrically
split. Yeah.

Vital & slick.

A whole silhouette
of smoke flipping around
itself like a tongue

stuck in the fishnet
of sweet intent.

What an aberrant

flock of us. What
an absolution pretending
to be patient minutes before

alchemy makes a guitar
where the tongue
should be. Indents on

both sides of the spine's
directive, half
circled into a hand-

drawn sky
between skirt grip & hem.
Incantations

of hair, dimpled

spectaculars on the low
back—what an exquisite

Saturday, backlit
by the spotlight
where the get-loose

strata better be.
In this glint-thick
insidious slip,
stomachs & the conga's

ass-slapped octave
in the blacklight strobe.

Adrian Matejka

⁴⁶ [Adrian Matejka, “Vital Juices \(1975 Version\),”](#) collected in [Standing on the Verge of Getting It On & Maggot Brain, Third Man Books](#)

Neighbors

During winter, the Swedes next door
made a sauna with hot rocks and a tent.

We would sweat, then run out,
flinging ourselves in the snow

while the grownups downed shots
of aquavit and fought. In blizzards,

they'd hitch up their black horse, Brandy,
ski behind him down drifted streets.

Once, our mother drove over to pick us up,
saw their mother and our father naked

in the lit bathroom window,
turned the big Chevy around.

Their bomb shelter had food and space
for their family only. Their daughter Christina

said they kept a loaded shotgun by the door.
If we tried to get in, sadly, they'd have to shoot us.

After their dad left, Christina used to open
the garage door, turn off the car,

and, swearing in Swedish, drag her mom out
onto the lawn. Then call 911

while her mom lay there turning blue.

Cammy Thomas
47

⁴⁷ [Cammy Thomas](#), "[Neighbors](#)," collected in [Tremors](#), [Four Way Books](#)

I want to tell you what poverty gave me—

a life outside capital, though I know it doesn't
seem to make sense, given my grandfather's knuckles,
cold-cracked and smelling always of kerosene,
my uncle's back permanently bent in the shape

it took to lay two decades' worth of brick.
Or afternoons spent shaking down sofas
and chairs, fingers slid between car seat
and console, seeking coins for a hotdog

at Susan's Market or a pack of my mama's
Merit Menthols or to pay the paperboy,
sometimes somebody's father who needed
the money, too. Maybe the early bus to subsidy

breakfast, first time I saw yogurt, heaping pans
of the stuff, that sweet, pale purple spooned
into its compartment on my tray next to a little
box of some cereal we couldn't get with vouchers,

Frosted Flakes or Fruity Pebbles, and my choice
of peanut butter gone warm and soft or a single
melted slice of cheese like a slick of cartoon
sunshine on white toast. Fresh delights I paid for

only in shame. And look—a line of rocks plucked
from the nearest ditch showed twelve shades
of earth from gray to pink, and Nana said
the one ringed with a stripe of quartz was a wish—

lucky, like the park with its pondful of tadpoles
or the library's shelf of mangled pop-up books
nobody could check out but anybody could touch,
flat paper and then—turn the page or pull the tab—

a world. Maybe it was Gram bringing me things
she found in the hotel rooms she cleaned:
transistor radio, abridged copy of *Kidnapped*,
and once a waist-high bowling trophy, me winning,

no matter whose name was etched in the plate.
Or maybe the way we ran a hot bath only once,
and together my mother and I dulled its sheen
with Ivory suds, our dirt, before my father lowered

himself into the gone-cool water, how this
necessary sharing somehow welcomed me nightly
to the difficult world. Maybe my mother holding
my hand while we, careless, walked through a near-dusk

blizzard from our place on one side of town
to her brother's in low-income on the other,
so we were swallowed and swallowed as we moved
through undifferentiated space, not knowing

whether the ground beneath us was front yard
or sidewalk or street, and when we arrived
in the warm somewhere of my uncle's apartment—
which might have been floating in the ocean

or moored on the dark side of the moon, judging
by the blackened windows and the scarcely muted,
cosmic howl of the storm—the local news was on,
and there we were, I swear it, in the weather report,

my mother in her old blue coat, and hidden
under mine, I knew, was a chain of red crochet
she'd made to join my mittens so they wouldn't
be lost, and if in that vast wildness we were

so tiny we could barely make out the specks
of ourselves, what was this wealth? Practically
fractal, nearly out-of-body. In this moment lifted
from time, we were famous to ourselves, beings

in the world not once, but—look—twice, so who
knew, who knew how many times we could appear
or where? Maybe that was the winter we lived
in a rental without a working refrigerator, cartons

of milk lodged in the snow outside the front door,
the stuff always a little frozen when we drank it,
those crystals too a magic we made because we could,
because we had to. I even ate the snow, in a big bowl

with Kool-Aid, scrappy sub for the Slush Puppies
I'd yearn for come summer, pick bottles to buy.
And here I am talking again about buying things,
but what I hoped you'd see is that so often—

for stretches of days—we didn't. Couldn't. *Free.*

Melissa Crowe

48

⁴⁸ [Melissa Crowe, "I want to tell you what poverty gave me—," *New England Review*](#)

Family Stories

I had a boyfriend who told me stories about his family,
how an argument once ended when his father
seized a lit birthday cake in both hands
and hurled it out a second-story window. That,
I thought, was what a normal family was like: anger
sent out across the sill, landing like a gift
to decorate the sidewalk below. In mine
it was fists and direct hits to the solar plexus,
and nobody ever forgave anyone. But I believed
the people in his stories really loved one another,
even when they yelled and shoved their feet
through cabinet doors, or held a chair like a bottle
of cheap champagne, christening the wall,
rungs exploding from their holes.
I said it sounded harmless, the pomp and fury
of the passionate. He said it was a curse
being born Italian and Catholic and when he
looked from that window what he saw was the moment
rudely crushed. But all I could see was a gorgeous
three-layer cake gliding like a battered ship
down the sidewalk, the smoking candles broken, sunk
deep in the icing, a few still burning.

Dorianne Laux
49

⁴⁹ [Dorianne Laux](#), "[Family Stories](#)," [Ploughshares](#), collected in [Only as the Day Is Long](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

The Hum

It's not a question
without the mark: How do we live
with trust in a world that will continue

to betray us. Hear my voice
not lift at the end. How do we trust
when we continue to be betrayed.

For the first time I doubt
we'll find our way back. But how
can we not. See how the terminal

mark allows a question
to dress as statement and vice versa.
Sometimes if I am quiet and still,

I can hear a small hum
inside me, an appliance left running.
Years ago I thought it was coming

from my bones. The hum
kept me company, and I thought
thank god for bones, for the fidelity

of bones—they'll be there
until the end and then some.
Now what. How to continue.

I've started calling the hum
the soul. Today I have to hold
my breath to hear it. What question

does it keep not asking
and not asking, never changing
its pitch. How do I answer.

Maggie Smith
50

⁵⁰ [Maggie Smith](#), "[The Hum](#)," [New England Review](#), collected in [Goldenrod](#), [One Signal Publishers](#)

To a Blossoming Nut Case

Why isn't Jesus' face ever described?

Because
in heaven unlike earth
it doesn't make a difference
what one looks like,
I suppose

face up
on the motel bed

And yes I've seen
my records
in three manila volumes
thick as the Boston white pages
It looks like a suitcase
you can't get to close
it looks like a bed that hasn't been made
in over a year

Face
up on the grubbled sea
of this infected unfamiliar
and infinite room, the sheet
tenting my nose

the toilet filled with blood

And I almost forgot
is my mind in this
room or this room
in my mind
all in my mind

Dark the computer dies in its sleep

Franz Wright
51

⁵¹ [Franz Wright](#), "[To a Blossoming Nut Case](#)," collected in [The Beforelife](#), [Knopf](#)

Cephalophore

—for Dennis

Halfway up Montmartre,
the German woman props herself
on a portable chaise
and slips off her bikini top
below the Holy Virgin, who prays
from Her burbling fountain shrine.

French Boy Scouts shimmy
along Her edifice, vying
for an aerial view,
and I, too, hump up the hill,

the steepest hike in Paris,
where St. Denis first lost and then
acquired his higher, patronly purpose—

dead, he walked the city's length,
carrying his freshly severed
head like a martyr's receipt of sale.
Denis: one of the *cephalophore*,
a category of stubborn saints
who don't lie down until
they choose the grave.

Erin Belieu
52

⁵² [Erin Belieu](#), "[Cephalophore](#)," collected in [One Above & One Below](#), Copper Canyon Press

Plastic Bag from Corner Store Laments the Self

When they finally find me
 all sprawled in the limbs of this tall oak
who can't look me in the eyes anymore,
 I'll ask that simple question of myself,
where I might be taken, or take myself,
 when the power lines quit humming their work songs
to the fading red & black & blue
 graffiti lining the underpass
where I spent my youth grazing,
 or when the moon turns blood-red & maudlin
& coughs me back up
 on the mangled Chesapeake shores.
And when they ask why I'm there, I'll slouch my shoulders.
 And when they ask where I'm going I'll quote the sky again.
I learned at birth to smile
 where my teeth are not. And I learned after:
everything that opens is a mouth.
 Every mouth will spit you right out.

Aliyah Cotton

53

⁵³ [Aliyah Cotton](#), "[Plastic Bag from Corner Store Laments the Self](#)," *Poetry*

The English End

Come to me now and I will, as the house
where Rilke wrote the Duino Elegies,
give you a place to sleep and make you sad.

I have done this more than was expected.

I have inhabited myself for years
like some old Gothic castle left in my care.
My heart, a bust I steadied myself against.
A bookcase spun. More than I knew was there.
If I love you,
 know you are also loved
by all the whisper rooms I've lived with, long
and unaware. Know it, please,

 in German.

Their word for change sounds like the English END.
I thought the Archaic Torso of Apollo
was instructing YOU MUST END YOUR LIFE.

Natalie Shapero
54

⁵⁴ [Natalie Shapero](#), "[The English End](#)," [Sewanee Theological Review](#), collected in [No Object](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Nothing Gets Crossed Out

Right now on the front porch
the blood moon is splayed across a newspaper of stars.
I feel their cortege of kisses.
I feel the bleached car lights driving past,
each face an anvil
I'll never know. I feel the color of confusion.
The roots of childhood buried in the backyard.
I feel the kite I let go of at Belmar beach
and the years it took to wash up on another shore.
I feel the dark alleyways of countries
I'll never visit, the imagined
tangings of their cuisine
and purple words for *lavender, iris, plum*.
I feel the books that stained my teeth
as I sipped slowly on fine lines like Sangiovese.
I like how drunk I can get from words.
I feel centuries of grief in the line
"wherefore art thou Romeo." I feel grief.
I feel this empty bottle of wine
sleeping between my thighs.
A green glass glowing by starlight.
Its contents I now possess inside me
possesses me to wrestle the phone
out from my pocket
and call you, but you can't answer.
I leave a voicemail. *Come back*, I say. Distance
is separated by two syllables.
One left in my mouth.
The other already in the ground.

Sean Shearer
55

⁵⁵ Sean Shearer, "Nothing Gets Crossed Out," collected in [Red Lemons](#), University of Akron Press

Civilization

You know that thing where you're someone's wife
and you're out someplace with faces
 and suddenly you're shaking with the room's potential for kindness
 or cruelty while also finally understanding the tragedy
of the dinner party, its reliance on food and talking and how
they both have to happen with the same hole, and this
 is a joke, both the truth and the awareness of the truth,
 and also humanness, how it happens just in one body
for each of us and there's no board to go to
should you wish to dispute the results, the where and when
 of this *you*, so you leave to the bathroom when the flan is served
and there is someone else's wife already there, smoking a cigarette
she found in the host's son's room, and when you put
 your lips where her lips have been and inhale
 sharply the tar, you know she is barely in her body
too, the heat of disappointment pearling the deep valley
of her philtrum, so what can you do
 but press your sweated chests together, letting her heart
 murmur to yours its own meaty iambs, your twin drums
announcing the coming war, the kind of war where you must shelter
from yourself in someone else, so you lean in together,
 your *linea nigras* humming into the other, seaming you
 into one, and when you kiss each of her tears you swallow
the memory of their making, the quiet bed, the uterine
collapse, the daughter whittled down to bone, and then her lips
 take in you, black birds moving in the field like a churning night,
 and you know how as this is happening you make a choice,
and how thinking it gives it shape, a pearl your longing has made,
you rolling it with your tongue against your expensed teeth
 so that the choice becomes a secret, and when a husband knocks
 on the door to see how one of you are, you separate,
each wife holding in her mouth what she has seen,
what she has chosen, and swallows.

Erin Adair-Hodges

56

⁵⁶ [Erin Adair-Hodges, "Civilization," *Quarterly West*](#)

Dressing for the Burial

No one wants to talk about the hilarity after death—
the way the week my brother shot himself,
his wife and I fell on the bed laughing
because she couldn't decide what to wear for the big day,
and asked me, "Do I go for sexy or Amish?" I told her sexy.
And we rolled around on the mattress they'd shared
for eighteen years, clutching our sides.
Meanwhile, he lay in a narrow refrigerated drawer,
soft brown curls springing from his scalp,
framing his handsome face. This was back when
he still had a face, and we were going to get to see it.
"Hold up the black skirt again," I said. She said, "Which one?"
And then she said "You look so Mafia Chic," and I said, "Thank you,"
and it went on until we both got tired and our ribs hurt and now
I don't even remember what we wore. Only that we both looked fabulous
weeping over that open hole in the ground.

Danusha Laméris

57

⁵⁷ [Danusha Laméris](#), "[Dressing for the Burial](#)," [American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Bonfire Opera](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Colette

I went through a Colette stage, did you?
Chéri, The Last of Chéri.
When I say *Gigi* I don't mean the supermodel.
I mean a novella by Colette.
Waist-length hair. Pert mouth.
Locked in a room by her first husband
until she produced enough pages to be liberated
for the evening. And then—get ready to be irked—
he published her novels under his own name.

You know the type? You know the type.
You know it's snowing? It's snowing.
To explain Colette is like rowing a heavy boat
across a cold lake whose far shore I can't even
begin to conceptualize.
It was a form of liberation,
writing of courtesans and gigolos.
Cutting off one's fat rope of hair. So fat,
it was said, so heavy, the braid required its own chair.

Colette sporting a men's suit. Musty. Frowzy.
I lived alone when I read Colette.
Picked small apples off a tree and ate them
in two chomps, like a horse.
The house had no running water. No power.
It was kerosene or sit in the dark.
Wood, or freeze. Outhouse with squirrels
and wolf spiders. Colette with her gray scrawl
of hair. Her hands twisted with arthritis.

Vanity bruised. Hers or mine? We're made
of the same meat. Little bow of a mouth
intact, but pulled a bit too tight with bitterness.
Her cigarette smoke so omnipresent
it was like a bent wire over her head.
To give you Colette I must limp across the century
wearing flimsy lace slippers. Just read her.
Just stare at the photographs. Then consult
Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. You will need him

in order to see what seeing her really means.
Then live without deodorant. Then pee in a hole
in the ground. Stack your books on a small raw wooden table
you found in a sweet potato field crawling with snakes.
Chéri, The Last of Chéri, Gigi, piled on a confiscated table.
Colette was an abhorrent kitten with a bony nose
and a thick jaw who died on a fur couch, talking
to herself. Even her book covers were ugly,

at least the editions I managed to buy used,
or steal. What kind of person steals books?
The kind who robs the apple tree of its apples.
Two chomps. Then throw the core in the meadow.

Diane Seuss
58

⁵⁸ [Diane Seuss](#), "[Colette](#)," [The Adirondack Review](#)

Animals

I think I could turn and live with animals
—Walt Whitman

O Walt you were wrong, they aren't placid or self-contained
I just watched a spoonbill make carpaccio out of a frog
& crocodiles dining on wildebeests trying to cross the Maro River

It's wrong to say *O* in poetry these days
which makes me want to have a loud orgasm right here
in an unashamed animal way

You must have been looking at some cows on a farm but who wants to live like that
standing around in a shed with sore tits, shitting claustrophobically
or standing around shitting & being tortured by flies & eating grass

I know you like grass but it's no fun to be a pricey pre-hamburger ruminating with no TV
If you'd had a cable subscription maybe you would have felt differently
watching *NatGeo Wild* & those exhausted herds on the Serengeti

Walt, I still love you even if in this instance you might have been a victim of the pastoral tradition
Let me tell you about animals: The green anaconda swallowed the young capybara whole

O o oh oh oh *OHHHH* Walt
Capybaras are the largest rodents on earth

I don't think I'd survive as an animal for long, even a large one—look at the elephants
Imagine being murdered & becoming a doo-dad
or furniture inlay

Walt, I actually like sweating & whining about my condition
Hot flashing & bitching in my cream satin sheets, lying awake drunk & weeping in the dark
I'd definitely like to own more things

An electric knife sharpener for instance would come in handy
for carving up the less fortunate on special holidays
I want to be lucky as long as I can

Walt, Walt, I don't think death is luckier or leads life forward like you said
I don't think I'm going to grow from the grass you love
I'm just going to have one last blackout in a dirty pink lace dress
& be eaten by tiny ugly legless larvae

Kim Addonizio
59

⁵⁹ [Kim Addonizio](#), "[Animals](#)," [American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Now We're Getting Somewhere](#), W. W. Norton & Company

A Dictionary of the Symphony in the Voice of Ludwig van Beethoven

It's dark and it comes/it's dark and it comes/it's dark and it comes and it's dark

It comes and it's dark and it comes a man on a horse and a falter in a cry and violins in the trees sequins of dresses and in the clouds it's dark it comes tasseled curtains and folded with seams

It comes it walks a bridge of skulls it wears a look it sees for miles it walks and walks it's dark it comes I can smell it I can fight it God

It's dark and it comes it's dark and it's dark it is the surface of a statue absent of limbs and the angels of coffins angels found at the mouths of graves and the men who curl soot from the root of a floor

It's dark and it will fling you over its shoulder tarnish you turn you into a schoolboy harness you the pages of it will random and fly up and its lion will fix on your sleeping face and its animal will cry at the entrance to your yard a house of cards and a stop of clocks a wing and drink of dry

It will marry you whether you accept or not it will enter your scream at the edge of the wood it will enter your color your sunset your mar it will hang as trousers do in noon's closet

You can see it if you peek into the lidlessness of flies into the filing cabinets and ashcans and books you can see it if you close your eyes you can see it if you balance or wind your features in a sheet

Close your eyes and you can see it death of mothers the mildew room

Close your eyes and it will court you run as fast as you can and it will catch you turn the present inside out illness hours occupants remodeled all of it will smoke you out

There is no closing its wound when it is a mouth and keeps you breathing with your wide mouth inspired by all that dark the mark of a lack's hand already upon you your green grave waiting your marriage to the flesh

Jennifer Militello
60

⁶⁰ [Jennifer Militello, "A Dictionary of the Symphony in the Voice of Ludwig van Beethoven," *Iowa Review*, collected in *A Camouflage of Specimens and Garments*, Tupelo Press](#)

from "13th Balloon"

During the storm your ashes drop
out of the sky in clumps
and birds with sutures for eyes
peck the outline of your silhouette
onto the trunk of a petrified tree and clouds
shit mud on the sheets at night
and the trees piss phlegm and weep blood
that covers the ground and we slip and we crack
open as faceless birds descend to drink
as they hideously flap their hideous wings
and gorge themselves on ashes and pieces
of teeth and fragments of bones
that once were yours
Featherless birds dive into the furnace
where you burned
They swoop in and out of the windows
of hospital rooms and heavily horribly swirl
against what could be clouds or could
be the ashes of others we've burned
until the last of the birds engorges
itself on so much of your death that finally it
bursts like a boil in the sky

Mark Bibbins
61

⁶¹ [Mark Bibbins](#), "[13th Balloon \[During the storm your ashes drop\]](#)," collected in [13th Balloon](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

In Which I Become a Mythology and Also, Executed

Sometimes I could see my parents
spiraling in the Americas,

in the opera rooms and dives,
in the bodega where the VCR

played Bollywood in Northeast Philly
near where my dad worked.

In January, I will visit India
and fail there too, because

I am childless
or because I am in America

where they gun down
babies

or because
I took too long

to come back. Somedays
I close my eyes and imagine

a body of land
without relatives, like Iceland

and her flagrant
light, flaring in dance

with those magnetic poles—
a green current whistling

across my eyelids.
I always arrive a little broken

to those scenes,
bundled, like a seer

peering into a bucket
and I want to throw myself

in and come out
dainty, come out graceful.

Grace is a word that stings.
Because if you don't have it,

you are not a lady.

And if you are not a lady,
then what are you.

Chucked meat.
Beast girl on speed.

My parents hardly ever let me go
on sleepovers

to any girl's house
unless she was an immigrant.

I had a Greek friend.
And Chinese.

We had curfews and got slapped
hard for mouthing off.

We grew into dragons
and ate too many pills in college

groveling on a floor
that could barely pass

for a forest
like a centaur that has been shot

and pulled along
by rope—

the weight of the horse's body,
offending everyone.

Megan Fernandes
62

⁶² [Megan Fernandes, "In Which I Become a Mythology and Also, Executed," *CURA magazine*, collected in *Good Boys, Tin House Books*](#)

Desire is a Sickness

Outside of the Super Gas in Cookeville, TN,
some guy in a Yankees hat says: *the trees are going apeshit*,
which means their leaves are red now and falling

but I don't notice them much. Instead
I'm thinking of the woman who wrote:
Amber Asan of Nashville is a home-wrecking whore

on the station's bathroom wall and I'm thinking
of Amber, too—whether either of them
is still in Nashville or cares about that man

they passed between them without knowing
which woman he wanted most. Near the pumps,
a little girl catches a leaf spinning from a maple

and says something about fire that I barely hear.
I've been called a home-wrecker
for welcoming Desire when it strut in
with a cigarette in one hand and an agenda in the other.

I've had the stupid thought
that men were meant to be with me
because they said so and because the sun

was hitting their faces through the trees
in such a way their skin was covered
in tiny seas of light. At the pump behind me

an SUV plays an impossible love song.
The trees drop more of their leaves—their
emboldened nakedness a ritual
that families park to watch.

Desire is a sickness we all want.

Katie Condon

63

⁶³ [Katie Condon](#), "[Desire is a Sickness](#)," collected in [Praying Naked](#), Ohio State University Press

The Minotaur

Whether or not it is a curse that I want you
does not diminish the way my body has become
a neighborhood stalked by perverts and thieves.

Some say a woman and her blender are inseparable.
That sheets and pans and vacuums are the children
of love. But if she says otherwise, says *I crave*

the hard meat of your thighs, who is to judge her
for being anything but a heartbeat wrapped
in tongues? Who is she but the lucky millionth

one whose want makes a snuff film out of the way
a bowl's lip cracks an egg? There is something
about a dark room that turns me animal—

clawing at the walls to learn what holds me in,
licking the carpet to know where you have
and haven't been. My life is an old sentence—

First comes love, then comes marriage.
The gods are tired of that story. They erase me
in parts. My heart is half-gone. It beats

half bovine, half she. If I were to build a body
around my body, an architecture that proved
a woman is not a church, or a train station,

or a county jail, would you see how I backed myself
up to the doorknob, how each of our openings
is nothing if not an otherworldly kind of light?

And if I asked you, lover, home-wrecking beast,
to try each of your keys in that gleaming lock,
would you? Would you turn me?

If in the morning, the plants have died and we feel
no different for having broken every heart
and heirloom in the hutch, know that ruin was our destiny.

We've been monsters all along.

Meghan Privitello

64

⁶⁴ [Meghan Privitello, "The Minotaur," *The Kenyon Review*, *One God at a Time*, YesYes Books](#)

What Isn't Rubble

There's so much poison we have to
dance. The bunny appears in bald daylight,
it's a warning! but we can't stop
pawing and why would we? Music
curls out of the air like the skin of a tree
becoming a canoe. What isn't rubble
was. In the zoo the bars are for everyone
and the rockets are in our eyes pulling us away
from even the ice cream drinks
we're using as the briefest of sweet anchors.
Remember when the porch swing creaked
a counterpoint to whatever we sang
and whatever we said in between
the singing? Even if we know better now
we still stand in a desolate parking lot
with a hand full of plastic flowers
or an accordion or a promise whispered
into a fist when sometimes what we need
is to go ahead and sink to our knees,
ruining this pair of pants forever.
What isn't rubble can be a garish sign
alerting you to the convenience of this store.
Just now you remember where you are
but not as well where you have come from.
The end is in anything that has
a chance of breaking your heart.
Sometimes it is Tuesday or you think it is
and difficult to stand as you are convinced
that swollen others rain broken stone wheels
on your kin and made family from a great height.
The sky sounds of awful laughter
but what is not rubble persists. The nipple
sings back to you on your tongue.
Her hair's a handhold lofting you above
such indifferent voids. You, also,
may be a ladder. On the wood bench outside
the bookstore the birds insist
like a frantic choir as you open
your friend's new book. All these cries
might be rubble. You might be
forgiven for backing away, and turning.
That's none of my business. Telling you
about being split open and building
a fortress of light into that split—Hell,
I have no business. Here, let me spit
that safety pin into your hand.
It's the key to a city to which
we must be on our way.

⁶⁵ [Marc McKee](#), "[What Isn't Rubble](#)," [Crazyhorse](#), collected in [Meta Meta Make-Belief](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

I Pump Milk like a Boss

I pump milk on the side of the road where the grass is biblical green
as if first cousin to the cow, her pink and swollen tits immaculate

as the plumbing of a church organ sending up calls to god, brassy mesh
of notes, fermented and dank as kush. I pump milk with my bare hands

into a bar's bathroom sink, above which is a mirror where someone's scrawled
I Love Cricket Pussy and below that, Everyone Deserves to be Loved.

I look at myself under the fingered smudge, the bodily fluids spattered
like haikus and I pump as if my milk is propaganda,

fingers bowing across my chest like a pawn shop violin,
milky graffiti tagging the spit-clogged drain.

I pump like I'm writing my name in blood
which turns to the milk my child sucks dry, which she turns into blood.

I pump like I have a tattoo on my pudenda
that says Aerosmith backwards, I pump

as if my hands have teeth, one combat boot hitched up on the toilet seat,
each hiss of milk chanting like a choir *yes bitch yes*,

my tits bitten and salt-veined, as when my baby
took her first gulp of air, humming

from the engorged crevasse of me
like a herd of wildebeest, as if the hive of me could have burst,

the infrared honey, the *glop glop*
of afterbirth dripping down my left leg,

spittle and amen, amniotic residue
fluorescent with prayer—

Do men lactate is a popular Google search and I wonder
what would happen if they could, our presidents

lifting their offspring to their breasts in the deep pockets
of night, listening to the dribble of milk

sipped from the pulpit of their bodies. Tonight my breasts
became so engorged I said I'd pay someone to suck my tits

half-joking. But a woman who heard followed me to the bathroom, read me
a sex poem while I pumped my milk, leaning away from the need in her voice

and the milk came slow and I pumped and waited for her to finish
and a street light scribbled in the parking lot

and I know there is a price we pay for loneliness
and a price we pay to forget it and I dedicate my libido

to my younger self and this is how I want to live, milk-stained, a little bit emptied,
a little bit in love with the abundance of my body,

my milk pale yellow with a layer of cream
which I will save long after it's turned, praising its curdled glow

every time I open the fridge, as if its presence is enough to keep me safe,
as if it's enough to make me invincible.

Kendra DeColo
66

⁶⁶ [Kendra DeColo, "I Pump Milk like a Boss," *Los Angeles Review*, collected in *I am Not Trying to Hide My Hungers from the World*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Make Believe

We will eventually be archaeology, but now in America

I tell my young daughter the new headlights are a bluish-white instead of the murky yellow of my upbringing.

She's busy with her bubble-making, her dig in the flower bed, her pantomimed banquet, phantom guests

dining on her small handfuls of weeds and grasses.

Precisely, the lit up jackrabbits appear in peculiar blue candor under the stoplight dusk,

pigeons hued reddish are garrulous and incomprehensible as drunks at the end of the cocktail hour.

It's that time in America when the air is overgrowth.

The piquancy of coriander neighbors allowed to flower mingles with fragrances we douse our clothes-lined laundry in each week

to cloister the body's reeking.

Truck smoke from the interstate.

I'm out-of-doors, which is to say nature is hemmed in by doors, which is to say nature is a category of my making, and I can't say why the skittish,

black bugs flit into the house when there's so much turf afforded them already, but tonight I'll crush a few with a *Newsweek* before sleeping.

Now, it's that time in America in the out-of-doors beneath tree and trellis

and vapor trails of overnight flights
fare-thee-welling to London and Morocco.

Brandy in soda water, a xylophone jingle of the ice, I sit in my Adirondack

without my minute, Midwestern wife
who Tuesday returns from her summit in Cleveland.

It's that time when I'm alone in America with my young daughter who startles

herself realizing the woodpile beneath that black oak is itself formerly a tree, and she wants to know whether these trees have feelings.

It's this acquaintance with death she so improves upon annually.

It's in this precise moment in America that I realize this acquainting, this becoming familiar, this cordiality with death is the entire task of her growing older.

Next year her ficus will die and the next year her minnow will die,
and it's in these moments in America

when my daughter's plump lip quivers in a preface to bawling,
when I'm alone and can do too little, I say,

I'm sorry life is too much, my love, I'm sorry my love, it isn't enough.

Jaswinder Bolina
67

⁶⁷ [Jaswinder Bolina](#), "[Make Believe](#)," [Ploughshares](#), collected in [Phantom Camera](#), [New Issues Press](#)

Wallpaper Everywhere Even the Ceiling

What is that thing that can happen A garden
is that thing You are walking around and sudden
Oh no dahlias You know that feeling like also
a family Oh no dahlias and you are giant with offspring
sudden all tethered in the world like zinnias dahlias
unabashed and blooming like another thing that can
happen love That is just an example Love is this
thing An example of love is the wind moves the warm
air square along a face and then love I love you tethered
like a rose sudden Oh no love and all alive in the garden

Heather Christle

68

⁶⁸ [Heather Christle, "Wallpaper Everywhere Even the Ceiling," *Harpur Palate*, collected in *What Is Amazing*, Wesleyan University Press](#)

from "After Damascus"

4.

You were still lost.
Inside your skull, vertigo hummed like
a piece of abandoned electronics.
A musty kazoo with no music left.
The old skatepark bowl
was full of standing water.
The side of the road
was belted with colorless flowers
and piles of squirrel pelts
and bottles of prescription medicine
and instruction manuals
for inscrutable prosthetic devices.
The yearning you felt made no sense.
You could see a man
set fire to his arm.
As he waved, it looked like a flag
announcing dominion.
Dogs were barking and
then they were quiet
and people in the street
passed questions
one to the other
as if this were a shared dream.
You wanted to tell them
what had happened.
To say, *go back inside*.
You wanted to leave.

Paul Guest
69

⁶⁹ [Paul Guest](#), "[After Damascus: 4](#)," collected in [Because Everything is Terrible](#), Diode Editions

from "Five for the Roofer"

I've been watching my father
all morning,
how he's pushed rolls of tarpaper
across the slope,
running the dark edge
down a chalk line
so carefully
it looks like he's been bending over
a star chart unrolled forever.

~

Only at night will she notice
the white crawling through his beard,
the sound of his knees like breaking twigs,
the old timbers of the house
settling on the foundation.

In bed, he thinks himself back to the roof.
Imagines working under the moon,
a glowing C-clamp of sky,
rain patch, metal-flashing.
He runs his hammer hand
along the peak of the roof,
the length of my mother's back.

Jawline. Cheekbone.

He reaches out to her
with the five hearts of his hand.

Michael McGriff
70

⁷⁰ [Michael McGriff, "Five for the Roofer," *American Literary Review*, collected in *Dismantling the Hills*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

“You should write a poem about that,” they say

No, I shouldn’t I’m ill-equipped to crack a Korbel bottle on the butt-end
of every sinking ship No, I don’t need to

torture-’n’-rack that amoebic memory of the time I lost my virginity, which I don’t
remember too clearly anyway—or that day

I got caught picking my nose in first grade, the trailing flower girls
petaling *shame, shame* I don’t want

to track how many steps it takes me to reach Chimney Rock, or bookmark every page
in my Browser History Believe me some secrets

want to leap from the Golden Gate and heave into the turbid bay, its anonymous
blue cresting into angels’ brief, shorn

wings I don’t keep a good record of all my losses, for casualties,
remember, are the dead *and* the injured

No, there’s really no place for my favorite word *landfill* or my old dog
who used to roll on dead animals A man

once told me I’m cold *for a woman* Another said I *don’t*
deserve No, I couldn’t solve the paradox—

how many griefs would I have to remove from my heap of griefs
until it no longer crushes me? At a rainy spring

graduation the commencement speaker says *I can’t wait to upload*
my consciousness to the internet I’m uneasy

with anything that stinks of the Singularity, of my heartbeat
becoming prosody Sometimes I think my doing

is more like *don’ting* moving always on the great American script
of interchanges and exits No, I don’t wish to make

more of the mouthful of my mother’s cigarettes I gulped from a Diet Rite
can, the dog with no hair she kept in the spare

room My poet’s coat of arms is a cowbird on a skittish
lamb No, thank you, I think I’ll just lie

down and shut the blinds Please bring me a sip of water my mouth’s dry
and yet you’d ask me to magnify the sun to fire?

Emilia Phillips

⁷¹ Emilia Phillips, "[You should write a poem about that, they say](#)," *The Cincinnati Review*, collected in *Embouchure*, The University of Akron Press

Hip Logic

Some shoot the soft bloodless
heads of basketballs. Shoes filled
with darkness. Skulls & dragons
stitched into biceps.
No standing still.
Some cruise with detachable faces
on their radios. The grief latent
in speed limits & zip codes.
The evening between evenings.
Stalls with locked doors.
Some leave their car windows
cracked & a boomboomboom
rustles the neighborhood.
No standing still. The law says
no stone will go uncrushed.
It won't make the news.
Some will be set free for lack
of evidence or imprisoned
despite it. Trying to catch
the soul here? Like trying
to slow light down to a trot.
Some dress in women's arms.
Perpetually groomed & grooming.
Hips are the cradle of logic.
Sperm hop in the trenches
blessed with an ageless memory.

Terrance Hayes

72

⁷² [Terrance Hayes](#), "[Hip Logic](#)," collected in [Hip Logic](#), [Penguin Books](#)

The Gazelle

Benjamin Franklin, always thinking, wondered, “Who can afford so to cover his Country with Troops for its defenses, as that Ten Thousand Men descending from the clouds might not in many places do an infinite deal of mischief before a Force could be brought together to repel them?”

It took longer than you might expect for the history of balloons to intersect with the history of warfare.

In 1870 it was a balloon that broke the Siege of Paris. The pilot left with baskets of carrier pigeons to send back in with microfilmed intelligence tied to their feet.

A decade earlier and a war apart, it was dangerous to put a balloon down south of the Mason-Dixon line. They’d hang you sure as shit for Yankee bedevilment and espionage.

Union balloons infuriated and frightened the Confederates. To them it was a sort of panopticon hanging there in the sky, and they wasted many bullets firing at it. Seeing it made them feel as if it were seeing you.

A balloon required too many resources to be practical, but the Confederate men loved to spy their own, *The Gazelle*, hovering in the distance. It was stitched together out of ball gowns they thought they remembered, though many of the soldiers were so poor and barefoot from dirt farms it was the dream of a ball gown they fought for.

Those boys had a way of putting their eyes on a distant fixed point and never letting them wander. You can call that courage, but it’s a lot of other things too. There were people all around in the field, dressing wounds or starving or humming an old song like there’s nothing else in this life. But the Southern soldier, as the story goes, only ever had eyes for the square patch of green silk that was his girl floating above the river line.

Kathryn Nuernberger

73

⁷³ Kathryn Nuernberger, “[The Gazelle](#),” [Lake Effect](#), collected in [Brief Interviews with the Romantic Past](#), [Ohio State University Press](#)

Flying to Nevada with Ten Thousand Dollars in My Sock

The man across the aisle from me looks like Henry James. He even writes without lifting his pen, glancing up every now with a frown, perhaps wishing he had gone a little easier on the assonance of “to be led to the marriage bed was to be dead.”

My students don’t like Henry James; the damage is too meticulous. And maybe they’re right. Maybe an explosion or two and a car chase would perk up *The Golden Bowl*.

I didn’t like HJ either when I was young. But after a few divorces and some rehab I am happy to follow his sentences like the paths of an English garden that lead to a bench with gargoyle arms.

The plane banks, and there are the lights of The Strip. Henry James called Italy “the vomitorium of America.” I’m sure Las Vegas has surpassed that by now.

Faux Henry adjusts his seatbelt. He glances over and licks his lips and I’m reminded of James’ letter to John Addington Symonds: “It seemed to me that the victims of a common passion should sometimes exchange a look.”

Ron Koertge
74

⁷⁴ [Ron Koertge](#), “[Flying to Nevada with Ten Thousand Dollars in My Sock](#),” 5 AM, collected in [Fever](#), Red Hen Press

Not Dead Yet

for Dan

The apricot tree with its amputated limbs
like a broken statue.

Condors. Bluefins. Lioness
at Amboseli, her bloodstained mouth.
She rises and walks beyond the shade of the thornbush,
crouches and pees.

My mother-in-law. Should I kill myself? she asks me—
her mind an abandoned building,
a few squatters lighting fires in the empty rooms.

Fire. Wildfires. The small animals running.

Paramecia swimming in a petri dish.

My son's rabbits nibbling grass. Soon
he'll cradle each one and speak to it
in a silent language
before breaking its neck. But today,
in the feverish heat, he wraps
his old T-shirt around a block of ice
for them to lean against.

Hair. Nails. Heart
carried in ice. Sperm
carried in a vial between a woman's breasts.

Bach. Coltrane. The ocean
even with its radiation and plastic islands.
Farmed salmon, even with their rotting flesh.

Two young women on the beach at Cala San Vicente.
One kisses the shoulder of the other
before she smooths on sunscreen.

Wind. The bougainvillea's shadow
shivering on the cold wall. Stone. The quiver
inside each atom.

Sappho: *mere air,*
these words, but delicious to hear.

Ellen Bass
75

⁷⁵ [Ellen Bass](#), "Not Dead Yet," [Poet Lore](#), collected in [Indigo](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder with Secret Knock

My hand, soaked in blood.
My head, cracked open. I tell

the five-year-old to fetch the phone.
The two-year-old to fetch a towel.

My hand, soaked in blood,
holds the towel to my head,

cracked open. The children—
their round eyes, black planets

smacked off their orbits.
And the hostess

to whom I say, *May I please*
speak to Jennifer, our mother,

who has left us alone
again. And the number, a number

we practiced. *For exactly this*, I think,
proud. And I, the oldest,

age six, calm, calmer
than I am now, a mother

who, alone with my baby, kills
the lights, hides in the bathroom

because someone is at the door,
and we must never answer the door.

And I scream at my spouse
because why the fuck are flowers

arriving when I am home alone
because I forget who I am or how old.

And the chair we keep by the door
for climbing, for bolting

the chain. And the wait, the length
of her shift, for the secret knock,

a knock (I now know)
everyone knows. And the diagnosis:

retraumatized. And the infant,
lifted from my womb split open.

And the stitches on my gut.
And the stitches on my head.

And the blood on my hand
holding my child brain bits in.

And the blood on the pads I filch
from the hospital. And the hospital

where our mother tells the doctor
a lie to keep them

from taking us away. And the hospital
where, between contractions,

they ask whether I feel safe
at home, safe enough

to take the baby back with me.
And by instinct, I say yes,

but for a second, I am tripped again,
six again, and I am lying.

Eugenia Leigh
76

⁷⁶ [Eugenia Leigh, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder with Secret Knock," *The Adroit Journal*](#)

from “Peregrinus”

VI. (FROM A STATE OF WRETCHEDNESS TO A STATE OF BEATITUDE)

There were women in hijab on every metro platform in Rotterdam: Stadhuis, Beurs, Rijnhaven. They belonged as much as anyone, which means they were mostly imperceptible due to numbers. Or at least not singular. They were from (t)here. Some accounts of the egg dance say it had to be performed blindfolded, or only on one foot, with hands at your sides. If a young couple finished the dance without breaking an egg, they were betrothed, and not even an obdurate parent could oppose the marriage. The Talmud (Shabbat 31a) tells of a man who asked the sage Hillel to teach him the entire Torah while standing on one foot. *What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor*, said Hillel. *That's it. All the rest is commentary. Now go and learn it.* Next to *Landscape with Shipwreck* by Frederik van Valckenborch, a note says, *Every attempt to recognize a specific story in this scene has failed.*

Erika Meitner

77

⁷⁷ [Erika Meitner](#), “[Peregrinus](#),” [Bennington Review](#), collected in [Holy Moly Carry Me](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

In Which I Imagine Myself into a Film Noir

What I love is to be behind things—
opaque glass doors. Smoke
rings drifting like fog. Dark glasses
large as eclipses. Schemes.
Leave your hat on. It casts
a distinctive shadow.
All the way down
the oil-slicked alley
I can watch you
watch me.

Catherine Pierce
78

⁷⁸ [Catherine Pierce](#), "[In Which I Imagine Myself into a Film Noir](#)," collected in [Famous Last Words](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

from “Accretion: What Breaks Becomes the Binding Agent”

x.

Joan dies as spring curls toward summer. I’m not there: I’m walking slowly across the field where I must pause.

I have been ill becomes my refrain.

First we till by hand, then we rent a machine.

Because Kieyoomia—a Diné sergeant, not a code talker—couldn’t interpret the codes, he was tortured. Perhaps faith, often confused with fate or destiny, is the best example of negative capability.

Dig your heels into the soil, and lean against the machine’s impulse to move forward.

When a stranger’s condo burned, Joan offered that woman a key, a place to stay. Years later, when the woman refused to leave, Joan sought a court order.

xi.

My language was my weapon, said World War II veteran, Joe Morris.

Tie your wrists to a forty-pound child, and ask that child to jump up and down erratically. This is the feeling of a rototiller.

In Panama, Joan lived with the women who established a cooperative in the mountains. When the Bishop came to visit, his robes made no sense. She was amused: *he thought they might impress the women who’d been working in the hills till their hands and faces were tight with soil.*

First we shoveled the soil into mounds, then we added manure.

There’s no room for ostentation in the story.

xii.

If you require guidance, mark the edge of the halo lightly, using a compass and a pencil tip.

Someone advises us to sell the furnace. Someone advises us to fix it. Two out of three repair-persons agree: the first has miscalculated the efficiency.

Before Joan’s wake, we walk until we find the Turkish restaurant, then order only appetizers—the best eggplant I’ve ever eaten.

To want is to want, says a woman in the grocery aisle.
She's studying the beans and talking to no one in particular.

Once we've tossed flowers onto the casket, no one knows what to do.

For a year we'd searched for a place she might live with us. I'd said, *If we have a child, we'll want you to be nearby.*

This is the summer I can't stop listening:

First the bodies of three Israeli children are found, and then the body of one Palestinian child is found.

According to the radio, these murders occur somewhere beyond the context of history. One might infer that order is important, but then I remember time's only a unit that stops everything from happening at once.

xiii.

Several years ago, in an emergency room in Providence, after three days of bleeding, we stared at a too loud TV: a childless Pakistani couple received a baby during Ramadan.

The anchor explained the child had been found in a garbage dump, rescued by an aid organization, then passed to the producers.

Other contestants won motorbikes.

Eventually, someone in a lab coat helped us turn off the TV, then advised us to return home till the bleeding stopped; see an OBGYN for a blood draw on Monday.

xiv.

When I finished a draft of my first manuscript (a thesis), I learned that I'd written things others would rather I hadn't.

Who would want their sadness displayed so publicly? What good can come of it? My father was ill at the time, dying though we didn't know it.

In a dream, I'd accepted a teaching job at a small college on the U.S. Canadian border. The town was and was not Moncton. There, everyone spoke Franglish.

How will I return to see my family and friends? That's one thing I wondered.

In the art building, a woman used water and a brush to remove paint from a canvas. She said she was painting backwards, uncovering a better picture.

xv.

In 1996, my father and I were stopped on the bridge from Juarez to El Paso.

My father made a joke, and so he had to present both his I.D. and his badge which was the only way we were allowed to cross.

For a while, S— drove with an atlas in his car. Eventually, most of New England fell out, leaving only the parts of the country that he would never visit, and now I'm thinking about all the objects we accept as documents.

My father had always imagined that he looked like a U.S. citizen, but the border agent did not imagine that.

I hook my hand through Eric's arm as we walk back to the car.
On the drive home, we avoid the BQE.

It's evening: I can't shake the feeling we're swimming through something.

xvi.

As we tread, a heron lifts its long body from a nearby boat and floats toward the dock.

When I wake from an accidental nap, I realize that the front door has been open.
For hours, not broken, but loosened by a gust of wind.

Heather Madden

79

⁷⁹ [Heather Madden, "Excerpts \(x-xvi\) from Accretion: What Breaks Becomes the Binding Agent," *Pithead Chapel*](#)

Now a Word about Twentieth Century Music

It rots. On its own tree
no less. False promises of love and worse:
rape; murder. Peace: a word
for something besides peace—a moment,
a respite, the cool flavor of a salve
poured across the tongue, fresh
raspberries and cinnamon wavering beneath
the surface, new wine into old skins.
Let it slowly fill your chest, Lost Soul,
fallen like the rest of us from the garden's
uppermost branches, left for dead, then
saved and given music, food and drink—
this is the tradition in which we are found.
This is Morton Feldman. This is Royal Crown.

This is Royal Crown. This is you
beside the roar of the family hearth,
feet stockinged and propped on an ottoman,
pipe shoved slantwise into your mouth,
your wife, beautiful and supine inside
the tasselled arms of a Turkish rug,
the children with their grandparents
for the weekend, an open bottle of RC
in the ice bucket. Now, throw on some
music: Morton Feldman's *Piano
and String Quartet*— 79 minutes
of shimmering near silence and woe.
Relax. Feel your heart's armor melt down.
Listen to Feldman! Drink Royal Crown!

Drink Royal Crown! Listen to Feldman!
Walk with him through post-war Berlin;
fans asking for autographs on albums
as if he were V. I. Lenin and not the Ringo
of the New York School, a Ukrainian
Jew who cannot take a step in Kreuzberg
without feeling what kind of voices pool
beneath the paving stone. *They scream at me!*
he says, and rides the tram staring at
the tracks, the wires tumescent with
electricity, pine trees bleeding sap
and every guttural voice—though friendly—
calling up the faces of the drowned.
(This message brought to you respectfully.)

Drink Royal Crown! Listen to Feldman!
Intersection for Magnetic Tape.

Feel bored? Confused? For \$19.99
our scholars will explain all hundred
and something scores to you
in the privacy of your own home with RC's
Feldman: It's Not an Inquisition! tapes.
Call the number on your television,
and in four to six weeks, we'll deliver
a lifetime's worth of Feldman know-how
in fun, easy-to-listen-to lectures
you can take to the gym, or let soak in
while driving to that job you're better than.
(Limited time offer: Copyright Royal Crown.)

Copyright Morton Feldman for all
the moments on commuter trains when
Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" faded out
and nothingness seemed to take its place—
a cavernous auxiliary silence hidden
in a kink in the headphone wires
but no, the screen says, "Cripple Symmetry"
whatever the fuck that means. Don't you
feel high-minded as you turn the volume up,
bending like a hummingbird to its flower?
But still the notes feel like stars
seem from underwater, in goggles, at noon.
You'd rather not work so hard for sound,
would rather eat, sleep, and drink Royal Crown.

Eat, sleep, and drink Royal Crown.
Eat, sleep, and drink Royal Crown.
We could say it a thousand times. We could
say it consecutively for four or five hours—
a minimalist score for double bassoon
and bass, and after a while it would mean
that you stopped listening, you were still
listening, would mean you're thirsty
for meaning, for an antecedent
to the thing you'd rather not admit:
you're bored of not believing and will
believe most anything if it arrives with
the right name and the proper asymmetry.

Episode four: "The Bittersweet Symphony"—
Elaine meets and dates a composer
who travels via old-timey bicycle,
wears a black beret that annoys Jerry,
takes Kramer to an avant-garde circus,
teaches George the finer points of carpet
weaving. During a surprise vacation to Boca
Raton, the composer proposes.

Elaine said yes. End of episode.
End of another evening alone, the computer
still open and glowing on the frameless
mattress in the smoke-ridden apartment—
Great heaps of light chaff before the whirlwind.

Things doctors once prescribed: opium,
cocaine, morphine, leeching, seizures,
lobotomies, Mercury, trepanation.
Sometimes people were pronounced dead
and buried alive—fingernail gashes
in the kids of unearthed coffins.
Doctors cut into the wrong thing: allergies
misrepresented on the forms, or the forms
mixed up and the patients poisoned;
doctors operating drunk or on drugs;
house keys and pens dropped into the body
then the body sewed up; the elderly
raped; infants mixed up, lost, or smothered;
bodies thrown into the ocean from cruise ships.

From cruise ships! In international zones,
and the families can't investigate or prosecute.
No one is responsible in an inter-
national zone. No one falls in love or
gets tenure and becomes professor so and so
teaching a zero-one, drinking chianti
at the dean's house with Salman Rushdie,
a rare book collection in the living room
next to the hi-fi and a painting of Jerusalem
at sunset. No one shows up late to a reception
with his name on the invitation. No one
teaches music for a living and declares
that music cannot be taught. No one drinks
Royal Crown or listens to Morton Feldman's music.

Feldman. Born: Queens, New York. 1926,
an artist who refuses to drink Pepsi
and composed a lot of quiet music, you might
recall he was friends with John Cage,
bonus points for knowing how many
children he had: none. So we are all
his children, sipping RC Cola from a straw
at a corner deli, our hair in pigtails,
reading Primo Levi. We can hear him now
telling us how little he cares for us,
itself a form of caring, a form of belief
in the future of being human. *You
do not have to be good*, the poet said.
Oh yes you do. Oh yes you do.

⁸⁰ [P. Scott Cunningham](#), "[Now a Word about Twentieth Century Music](#)," *Floating Wolf Quarterly*, collected in [Ya Te Veo](#), [The University of Arkansas Press](#)

Siberia

I'm not thinking of vodka or the czar or the Orthodox Church
or any other typically Russian topic
as I look out the window of the train
between Ekaterinburg and Irkutsk but of orgies, of all things,
which I assume occur here
at the same rate at which orgies occur in other countries

or maybe even a slightly higher one, given
the cold winters and general malaise
of a people living in what is still largely
a feudal society, which doesn't mean I'm thinking
of organizing or being in or even
watching an orgy, in Russia or elsewhere, but how,

according to an article I'd read by a guy who'd
been in one, they're pretty unsatisfactory,
on the whole: the people are pasty-skinned
and dumpy, and either you can't get the others
to do what you want to, or else you have people
trying to get you to do something you don't want to do,

and yet the whole time the guy was excited
because he was thinking, "I'm at an orgy!
I'm at an orgy!" And that's the way I feel as I look out
the window and think, "I'm in Siberia!" Only
Siberia is beautiful, not scary. The birch trees are
so slim and silvery that you expect them to thrum

like harp strings as the wind rushes through
their branches and tosses their green leaves
this way and that, and there are mountains
in the distance and rivers in the foreground,
and people are bathing in the rivers,
Russian people, and they're laughing and splashing

each other, not starving or freezing to death
or pulling their teeth out with their own fingers
or being beaten by sadistic guards, which is all
you can think about when somebody says
"Siberia" to you, but this is Siberia, and it's beautiful.
Well, not if you're writer Varlam Shalamov

who spent seventeen years in a camp there.
Shalamov's greatest story is "Cherry Brandy";
in it he imagines the thoughts of the dying poet Mandelstam:
"Life entered by herself, mistress in her own
home. He had not called her, but she entered
his body, his brain.... Poetry was the lifegiving force

by which he had lived. Yes, it had been exactly
that way. He had not lived for poetry; he had lived
through poetry.” When he was a boy, Shalamov’s
father tried to stop him from reading so much:
“Stop reading!” he’d cry, and “Put down
that book—turn the light off!” He didn’t, of course,

which is probably why he became a lover of poetry
even if he didn’t become a poet.
And it’s why he could write, in “Cherry Brandy,”
that “everything—work, the thud of horses’ hoofs,
home, birds, rocks, love, the whole world—
could be expressed in poetry” and “each word

was a piece of the world.” In his memoirs,
Shalamov says his father never spoke to him
of another poet, Batyushkov, and from this he concludes
that “my father did not like poetry, feared
its dark power, far from common sense.”
He praises Batyushkov’s poems for “preserving

the most unexpected discoveries” and then
quotes a line from him: “O heart’s memory,
you are stronger than reason’s sad memory.”
No wonder people love poetry and the powerful
fear it. “Poetry is respected only in this country,”
Mandelstam said; “there’s no place where more

people are killed for it.” I’m not afraid of you, poetry,
therefore I must not be powerful.
But you are. Poetry for president! Tippecanoe
and poetry, too. United we stand, divided
we write poetry. Poetry’s got my back!
Tread on me, somebody—go ahead,

I dare you. I think a poem must be like
an orgy—okay, you’re disappointed most
of the time, but you never know what’s going
to happen. Plus you can make the people
in your poem as handsome as movie stars.
Why aren’t we all poets? Why aren’t we all in jail.

David Kirby
81

⁸¹ [David Kirby](#), “[Siberia](#),” [Missouri Review](#), collected in [The Biscuit Joint](#), Louisiana State University Press

Suzi's Mother Does Nails

and comes home smelling like acrylic, hair limp, deflated like a paper bag. For her birthday, Suzi's mother and her nail lady friends sit on the front steps, give out French manicures in between Lucky Strike puffs. *In France they call this la French.* Suzi's mother doesn't allow sleepovers. *What if something happens to these white girls? How would that look? The neighbors won't mow our lawn.* The mothers come at 8 sharp and skim their daughters' nails, their tongue inside their cheeks like a hard gumball. *We've never been to this part of town before.*

Susan Nguyen

82

⁸² Susan Nguyen, "[Suzi's Mother Does Nails](#)," collected in [Dear Diaspora](#), University of Nebraska Press

The Room of Disembodied Excitement

No one wants to know about your
publications or your missing fingers or your
Dodge Charger. They have been waiting
all night, perhaps all their lives,
to tell you why their sister is a bitch.

No one wants to hear the nervous catalogue
of anecdotes that mean “I like you,”
they would like to know if
the beers in the kitchen are free.
Their sister just sent them another
text subtly mocking their apartment.

Do you really like this person
or does it just comfort you
to sleep next to someone?
You once thought sleeping near your parents,
even if the closest you could get
was the bedroom floor,
would ensure they lived through the night.

You remember Tom of Finland said,
“If I don’t have an erection
when I’m visiting a museum,
I know it’s no good,”
and you love the idea
of a room of disembodied excitement.

You take out a sharpie and draw a perfect ass
on the face of the person you’re talking with.
The lines extend to the edges
of their face, and onto the wall, and into
the air. They spread farther and farther
until you can’t see the ends anymore.

Sarah Galvin

83

⁸³ [Sarah Galvin](#), “[The Room of Disembodied Excitement](#),” [Pinwheel](#), collected in [The Three Einsteins](#), [Poor Claudia](#)

In Small Spaces

The man in the apartment next door
crawled through the air-conditioning duct
and made himself a space in the rafters
above her bedroom

+

and there he spent many evenings
watching her through a hole
he drilled in the ceiling.

+

One night, she sat on the bed
painting her toenails a shade of pink
he remembered years later in his prison cell.

He wrote her a letter about the color—
it was like a kitten's tongue, he said—

+

but she burned that letter in the sink,
and all the others, unopened,
having moved on with her life,

having taken a job in a new city,
married a good man, and, anyway,
that's one way into this story.

+

Don't think about the man in the rafters,
says my bottle of vodka on the coffee table.

Have another, says my empty glass.

The woman on TV with the blurred-out face says
they can't release him, she doesn't care

about his so-called rights, she's afraid
for her children, she says,
while the interviewer nods sympathetically,

+

and have another, another,
says the bottle. Such a godless world,

and I have always wanted
someone to watch over me,

oh, gentle benignity, and
the promise of drink, of blur, and

+

how he loved her, he told the TV interviewer,
in the prison's visitation room—
overwhelmingly,

+

and he didn't do anything wrong, not really,
he just looked at her, she was so beautiful,

though once or twice he removed a ceiling tile
and lowered himself into her room,

then stood over her bed
while she slept. It was nothing, really,
he never touched her,

+

except to move the hair out of her eyes
while she slept, and even then,
so gently and with loving-kindness. Stop it,

says the vodka bottle, you're inventing things,
alone here in the living room,

the television program over now,
the windows grown dark at last,

+

hard not to imagine how he brushed
that hair from her cheek,
then sat in the chair by her bed

to keep her safe the whole night long,
only crawling into the ceiling
when, toward morning, he sensed her stirring,

+

and isn't this how God works, isn't this exactly
what we expect of God, how in the world,
the vodka keeps asking me,

how in the world
is the man in this story different
from what people say about God?

Kevin Prufer
84

⁸⁴ [Kevin Prufer](#), "[In Small Spaces](#)," [The Southern Review](#), collected in [The Art of Fiction](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Immaculate Conception

Strawberry rhubarb
The baboon presents

And here's the little diner at breakfast time,
where she who is the-customer-
who-is-always-right hurls her
hotcakes back at the server

Will you live out the rest of your life alone

Wholly caffeinated
Wholly obscene

Aren't you tired of extraordinary

No one is really whispering about you
Their lips are wax

You check them out at the checkout
while the checker checks your items
10 items or less
you have 11 or fewer

You make a wish upon a star
then change your mind
but it's too late

You agreed to that date with a priest

Don't worry
He won't

There are only so many eggs
and then none

No reason to gawk at newborns
and their comically small,
grotesquely soft heads
that their mommies kiss
and slap once in a while

Stop calling your pet "baby"
She'll never make love to you

No need to paint my mouth with lipstick
nor my eyes into black peacocks
No need to purge the chocolate ice cream

though I'd very much like to

I want to be cherished and adored
My hips shout
as time moves throughout my body

The thought, I remember
but that feeling—
 What is it?

Cindy King
85

⁸⁵ [Cindy King](#), "[Immaculate Conception](#)," collected in [Easy Street](#), [Dancing Girl Press](#)

Getting Better

When his acne began to clear up,
my brother put on new cleats
and played one last year
of varsity football, his face
deeply scarred, running the field
with a rage people watching
could ease back in their seats
and fall in love with.
Resting, he'd bend at the waist,
hands on his knees, and suck
at the air like it was the enemy.
And in this way the days
of not knowing if things
were getting better or worse—
those days of waiting
for the storm of hormones
to pass—grew short and cold
until they were gone entirely
and he could begin forgetting them,
one by unforgettable one.
Of course, I could tell you everything
my brother has forgotten
about those bad years: the metallic smell
of his breath, how he became
meticulous about his clothing,
waking early to iron starch
into his T-shirts, how he'd plan
and execute small acts of violence,
once killing all my mother's
houseplants by pulling them up,
snipping their roots with a pair
of kitchen scissors, and then
sticking them back in the soil.
All he had then was tidiness
and cruelty, and he favored cruelty.
It was his last, dulled weapon—a hatchet
whose blade couldn't kill with one
blow, but could abuse, nonetheless,
to death, and I watched him use it
with great fear and interest.
I was his witness. Let me tell you
how the field mouse looked
when I pried open the can
of house paint to find it writhing there,
dying, eyes coated, face coated, mouth
opening and closing, and how
my brother had suddenly seemed
so lovely, so calm, as if he'd just

landed, handing the can to me,
saying, “Open it. Just open it.”

Carrie Fountain
86

⁸⁶ [Carrie Fountain](#), “[Getting Better](#),” collected in [Burn Lake](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Boathouse

Maybe twice in my life
I've held an oar.

I went in a kayak
with my sister-in-law

to the small pine-filled
island. The boat

hit the sand and we
stepped out self-

consciously, quietly
scared of the trash

and evidence of sex
and debauchery. We

found a rock to sit
on and ate cherries.

Then we floated back
on waterways made

of reeds and gnats,
trying to speak

or not speaking.

*

The boat of many years
of floating between words

to get to the right word.
The house not a shelter but

floating in your dream
so you can't get in.

*

If Jesus and the devil
exist simultaneously,

does that mean they
are the same? I rehearsed

the question in my
Philosophy of Religion

class the summer I
tried repeatedly to get

Patrick to spend
the night at my

house. The trick
was to ask without

using words. I came
up with this tactic

as I sat on a concrete
bumper block outside

Mighty Mart, my face
numb from drinking

gin out of a to-go
cup. When Patrick

returned with Twizzlers
I tried my plan.

I always planned
questions carefully

before asking them,
or even wrote them

in my notebook
to assess while

other people talked.
Patrick and I were

hungover. He wore
a white tank top

(he would never
beat anyone's wife)

and gently informed
the class of his agnosticism.

Afterwards we went
to the pool and tried

to read Aquinas.
But it was too hot

to think about evil.
If it does exist,

it is so God can
turn it into good.

The light on the water
shimmered like

a Jello cube, the only
clean water in Iowa.

*

Poolhouse: the sad
Midwestern equivalent.

Or the one from *Fast Times
at Ridgemont High*: brown

shag carpet, dim light
from one high-up

window, the removal
of bathing suits,

muffled splashing, shrieks.

*

In the movie of Lawrence's
Maurice, a Merchant Ivory

masterpiece that I watched
no less than 24 times,

the low-class lover of
Maurice sends a telegram:

*Meet me at the boathouse
without fail.* He fails.

The dusk on the pond,
the English countryside

doing its best to support
all the doomed literary

lovers by providing toolsheds,
dark woods, well-timed

and positioned horses
to pound them over

the soft forest floor,
taking them to places

we never see: the boathouse
door closes, the figures

lower into each other
before the fire. And

the scene changes.

*

The white house was built
in 1973, same as all

the others on the block.
I never imagined I'd end

up like this: one key
on the ledge above

the door, smelling the ocean
from my desk in a city.

Packed carefully into my
head is childhood: metal

roller skates stolen from
the yard, paper route,

big old men smoking.
Big old cars. Questions

asked and silence
following. Questions

unasked. Screaming "Just
a minute!" the time

the Barbie pool leaked
as I illegally filled it

with water in my room,
one Dixie cup at a time.

The Barbies were enjoying
plastic hot dogs on

a plastic grill. All of those
houses, born the same

year, swelling up with
children, retching them

onto the street where
we fought each other,

chased fireflies, ran
away from home.

*

I rent the sailboat
when it is nearly dark,

when there is little time
left. I don't know how

to do anything, so I sit
and watch the college

student sail us. The water
of the river is dirty, but

it is my water. When
we bring the boat in,

the lights have turned
on, and another college

kid docks it, doesn't
say anything. Then as I

turn to walk away—back to
the car waiting for me,

the dark house—
he says, "Beautiful night."

*

I swam away from
the pontoon, jealous

of my cousin who was
not ugly. I reached the wrong

shore and without glasses
wandered over beaches where

large Iowans blurrily
barbequed and drank.

The sun burned into my
scalp and shoulders—now I

was crying, I thought
I might wander there

for hours—I wandered
for hours. My eyes kept

returning to the lake, where
our boat was swallowed into

the bluish line between
water and sky. Which isn't

really a line at all, just another
blue space where I couldn't be.

Julia Story
87

⁸⁷ [Julia Story](#), "[Boathouse](#)," collected in [Spinster for Hire](#), [The Word Works](#)

Days

Because no
transaction
is repugnant,

I look
at the moon.
I look up

this moon,
called a *fish moon*.
It is perfect

if I don't arrange for
metaphor. I do,
like an awkward

transition to talk.
My philosophy
hollow

as a list,
or formalist.
I swallow

the word
empathy,
then awe.

(Must be
angling
for sympathy.)

Metallic
as a phallic
age

to go.
Don't go.
That hiss

in the ear?
Near-
miss;

dissonance.
Indrawn,
like a long con,

a marriage.
The yards,
medicated.

I take a nap:
shoegaze.
Chin up?

Days.
I myself am hell
if I know.

Go on, spoof
me with proof.
The least

I deserve.
This life apart
is clip-art.

Randall Mann
88

⁸⁸ [Randall Mann](#), "[Days](#)," [The Arkansas International](#)

Outside Time

I don't have anything to say about trees.
If you want trees, call Greta or the ghost
of Mary Oliver. An ongoing theme
in my work is readers accusing me
of writing books that won't be relevant
in the future—I want to live in that timeline,
too, where the influencers bore us so much
we stop paying attention and they go back
to trading their finite time on earth
for wages. Is Walt Whitman irrelevant
because his opium-eater, his lunatic,
and his quadroon girl make undergrads
uncomfortable? Back in the outside time,
fourteen-year-old Emily Dickinson pressed
flowers: jasmine for passion, a privet hedge
for privacy. Then she went inside basically
forever. Why are her poems universal,
not of a specific time and place?
She wrote about grief while living through
the Civil War. She was played by Molly Shannon
in a film re: her sexual appetite for her sister-in-law,
Sue. Do Emily's clandestine orgasms
not resonate with today's readers, who
have so much access to online porn?
The narcissism of small differences
is my universal theme. Outside, I walk
my routine loop through the landscaped
cul-de-sac, which is French for "road
to nowhere," observing all the flowering trees
that aren't verbal enough to reveal their names.
When I read that Sue put two heliotropes
in Emily's hands upon her death, I thought,
What a beautiful word, "to turn toward the sun"
in Greek. Like Emily, I prefer inside over out,
to sit in the same white dress, working overtime
on something that might touch the interior
of my beloved's mind—yours.

Leigh Stein
89

⁸⁹ Leigh Stein, "[Outside Time](#)," collected in [What to Miss When](#), Soft Skull Press

Prose for Sharon Mesmer

for Sharon Mesmer

Sharon Mesmer you're related to Franz Mesmer, from where we get the word "Mesmerize" I was right. I write that I was right because I'm glad about it. That and I'm a calligraphic sex-dentist chewing a train. My name's so long it's like Sharon Mesmer's name written 40 times for 40 nights every hour to "inferny." Infernal night-carrot I blog about how for my vision you are. The way I drive is abominable as I'm writing this while driving dazzled by the opposing beams. Big boobs of illumination like Sharon's. Her headlights I mean. Her car's beams—don't go dirty on me I'll girl fight you. O Franz Mesmer you invented Sharon. You also touted magnetism: a revolution as salubrious as Advil replacement. You and followers magnetized trees, turned them into magnetism ATM machines. A boy touched a tree and shook but the boy didn't exist. Only his commander existed. His bank commander, barking at him, "Boy I'll hold your feet until you tremble and then abandon you!" This man was his dad. His name was Ben (the man). His name was "Bad Ben I'll Get You Back Jackson." He had two nicknames: "Nick" and "I'll Get You Back Times a Billion." What do you call Nick when he's been nasty? I call him "cock." I literally knew a guy named Nick van der Kolk whom I call "van der Pussy" when I'm mad, that's not very poetic, he likes it. No one knows this poem is being written at the moment not even Sharon. Not Nick. Not Bad Ben and definitely not Franz Mesmer who's dead. Died of lying to people. Lied so long his tongue evolved into a flute. He lay in the ground looking lovely, as long as "lovely" means "not living anymore." Now his life is just a tall tale I tell in poems dedicated to his septuagint: Sharon.

Sean Cole

90

⁹⁰ [Sean Cole](#), "[Prose for Sharon Mesmer](#)" collected in *After These Messages*, [Lunar Chandelier Press](#)

Nowhere

I left work
and walked down Prospect
past the Long John Silver's,
the Mexican place, the Jiffy
Lube, the gas station, the liquor store
where, in the parking lot, a man
held his woman by the wrist
and steered her into the frigid
bounty of the shop. She could
barely stand. She sprawled,
belly down on the counter, laughing.
At the light a man rode up
on a bike and looked me up
then down. *Baby my car's
in the shop, but if it wasn't
I would take you anywhere
you wanted to go.* I thought
of the gas station, the cold
of it, the fluorescent donuts
in their case, the rows
of colorful, flavored gums
with heavenly names.
I once walked in there
to buy a pack of gum
and stayed for an hour.
The impossible choice.
The mango pineapple oasis,
the waterberry splash.
The cool mint melondream
breeze. So I jumped on the handlebars.
Down Prospect, the fast food
joints just fast rainbows now,
I could see the way cumulus
clouds of fry grease hung above
the places like the threat of a storm.
Faster and faster now the trees whipping
by in a fury of green. The city,
the highway, the exhale of farms.
Orange sun setting like a sick egg.
And into another state altogether.
No one knows us here he said,
and I held him tighter while we ghosted
slowly through humid neighborhoods,
warped houses that teemed
with dead cars, with guinea pig
colonies, with wan families
and their mashed potato dinners.
We set up home. We made Wednesday

night spaghetti night. He rode
his bike for pay and in the mornings
out back I tended to the guinea pigs,
their bodies moving through
the high grass like tiny housecats
stalking their prey. They were untame,
majestic. They were a horde of mouths
under the house. At dawn I saw them
teeming the ceiling. They'd scatter
like bugs when I got a glass of water
in the kitchen. They were dear to me.
And then one day the wind came
in the house. Nothing stayed put.
The papers, the pigs, the furniture began
to beat at me. Tornadoes in the kitchen,
tornadoes of fur and plates.
We have to leave, I said. *The wind
is in the house. The wind is
the house. Everything is wild
and cruel.* So he got his bike.
Past the grey houses, the cold lawns,
the dead cars, the wan little girls chalking
up the street. The pigs fanned out
behind us, a furry retinue. But in the end
they flagged. Short legs.
Past the city limits, the moneyed suburbs,
the miles and miles of inedible corn.
Where are we going now, he said. *Nowhere*,
I said. *They're still behind us*, I said.
Keep going, I said *Faster, faster
It's going to be great. It's going to be
like nothing you've ever seen.*

Katie Schmid

91

⁹¹ [Katie Schmid](#), "[Nowhere](#)," [Hobart](#), collected in [Nowhere](#), [University of New Mexico Press](#)

Textures

We had walked three miles through the night
when I had to piss. She stopped just beyond.
I aimed at the stone wall of a vineyard,
but the wind took it and she made a sound.
I apologized. "It's all right," she said out
of the dark, her voice different. "I liked it."

Jack Gilbert

92

⁹² [Jack Gilbert](#), "[Textures](#)," collected in [Monolithos](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

Hot Tears

Summer school is like a bikini worn in the place of underwear, so we both enrolled. It had something to do with loans, or preservation of health clinic privileges, or expedited graduation, or our resolution to combat ennui with extreme productivity. At first we decided on a poetry workshop, then changed our minds and took advanced memoir, which appealed to the one of us who was an extrovert much more than the introvert who blushed when a sliver of underwear was visible at the back of summer trousers. Around this time the abnormally large butterflies were spotted in various parts of our city, including the rooftop deck that made me cry every time I climbed up there, west side steeples being too much even without three glasses of Rioja on an empty stomach. My roommate wasn't from Chicago so it was just another deck with a view, but the butterflies evoked something primal, and we vowed to read *Love in the Time of Cholera* aloud to each other every evening before bed like mother and child. I was wearing my mint green sundress to death, despite my roommate's advisement. When we distributed the first round of workshop essays mine had a strong effect on several classmates' gag reflexes, which signaled success. But it was my roommate's essay that caused our professor to blast a round of hot tears onto the seminar table, like how my Polly Potty doll of yesteryear leaked with enthusiasm. Jack, who always sat by the door, stood up and put on his leather jacket—my roommate's essay was that compelling. The only other workshop triumph would be a case of contagious diarrhea experienced—I hoped—thanks to my second essay (“How to Blow Time”), but my roommate figured it was due to the undercooked dumplings Sondra brought as a sort of reverse ice breaker. On the way to class we'd observed one of the enormous butterflies deceased in a drained memorial fountain. It made me want to get plastered in its honor.

Mary Biddinger
93

⁹³ [Mary Biddinger](#), “[Hot Tears](#),” [DIAGRAM](#)

from *Clangings*

Okay, here's what we did. Dad was a quark.
I took my shogun out. And the jerk grinned!
Toads marched him to where the marshland
meanders, where woods gave such a bark

I still get a wince. Open fire, said Dickey.
We loaded him, black hole, in the swamp van.
It was premium cable! I aimed at his midline,
silver blanked into him. He'd been less empty,

I'd have hit a vital. Roses twined in a scythe,
me and Dickey grieved. "Thou Shalt Not"
and all that smearwort. On the hospice lot,
weeds sprouted tips, like: *get a life, take a life.*

We ditched the van at first intermission,
D. and me, we'd had our glister of venom.
There once was a time I'd have said scam.
This time a guilty sun gilded my stun gun.

"Hey you, what'd you do with your Dad?"
yelled the groundskeeper mowing—yawn,
at least I'm a living—hospitable grass. Then:
"can't dig here with that hole in your head."

Steven Cramer
94

⁹⁴ [Steven Cramer](#), "[Clangings \[Okay, here's what we did...\]](#)," [Crazyhorse](#), collected in [Clangings](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Ask the Rain What It Knows

About leaving, about trouble,
about a man and a woman?
The train pulls out of the station,
the rain knows the answer
as it blotches her white dress.
What ink is used to write your name
across an old man's letter?
He's been waiting so long in the rain,
on the Williamsburg bridge.
Where were you when I heard my name
through the half-yellow streetlight?
Outside the subway station
the year Jolie died,
and they scattered her ashes
beside Emma Goldman's grave
and I turned to find no one
but the rain darkening the platform.
What was it you were scattering
across Lake Michigan?
Spattering against the cracked pane
of some tenement
across from the El
weaving its way through the trestle
of voices?
You at the table reading
about the dying bees.
Where were you when we lit
a thousand lanterns above the dirt tracks
and the stock cars,
and the bald children
brought there for charity
reached up their thin arms
towards the embered dark?
What towers and tenements
collapsed?
What empty stairwells?
What schoolyard without rhymes?
And here you come tap tapping
at memory's strange city
bringing back what it was
we were asking
on the smudged platform.
Hands clapping across the sky.

Sean Thomas Dougherty

95

⁹⁵ [Sean Thomas Dougherty](#), "[Ask the Rain What It Knows](#)," collected in [Not All Saints](#), Bitter Oleander Press

The House in Good Taste

would be one way to think of
heaven, spacious waiting place
with mirrors cut in squares and held

in place by small rosettes
of gilt. Just beyond Versailles,
it's perfect for a tryst: lying

on taffeta pillows embroidered with *Never
complain, Never explain*, you can be in
and out of love the way Trieste was

in and out of Italy, making James Joyce
exclaim, *And trieste, ah trieste,*
ate I my liver, which, translated, means

triste était mon livre. My book,
too, was sad, called *Via Trieste*—
about one of the world's great

ports, a major connection between
Europe and Asia, "third entrance
of the Suez Canal," a city that no one

wanted—except Maximilian, who
just before dying in Mexico, ordered
two thousand nightingales sent

from Trieste. Like him
and Elsie de Wolfe, I believe
in plenty of optimism and white

paint, the keys of the maple turned
like parchment bats, chasing
themselves to earth, and the doves

riding their angled guy wire
up into the maple like St. John
in Giotto's *Assumption*, flying

into heaven. How many times have
you had to walk to the other side
of the store because you can't tell

which escalator's going up, which
one's already there? De Wolfe never
stopped renovating her villa outside

Versailles and left at her death
a tangled garden, the cemetery
for her dogs, each gravestone inscribed

The One I Loved the Best. At her first glimpse
of the Parthenon in Athens, she cried
It's beige, my color! She would

side with the keys of the maple, tell them
to keep their tryst with the earth, dark
and cool like theaters in the days

of continuous movies, when we would
turn to each other and say *this*
is where we came in.

Angie Estes
96

⁹⁶ [Angie Estes](#), "[The House in Good Taste](#)," [The Manhattan Review](#), collected in [Tryst](#), [Oberlin College Press](#)

Autobiography of My Hungers

His beard: an avalanche of honey,
 an avalanche
of thorns. In a bar too close to the Pacific,
 he said, "I don't love you,
 but not because I
couldn't be attracted to you." Liar—
 even my soul
is potbellied. Thinness,
 in my mind, equals the gay men
 on the nightly news.
Kissed by death & public scorn.
The anchorman declaring,
 "Weight loss is one
of the first symptoms." The Portuguese
have a word for imaginary, never-
 to-be-experienced love.
 Whoop-de-doo.
"I don't love you," he said.
The words flung him back—
 in his eyes, I saw it—
 to another bar
where a woman sidestepped his desire.
 Another hunger.
 Our friendship.
In tenth grade, weeks after
 my first kiss, my mother
said, "You're looking thinner."
 That evening, I smuggled a cake
 into my room.
I ate it with my hands,
 licked buttercream off
 my thumbs until I puked.
Desire with no future,
bitter longing—
 I starve myself by yearning
 for intimacy that doesn't
 & won't exist.
Holding hands on a ferry. Tracing,
 with the tip of my tongue,
a jawline. In a bar too close
 to the Pacific, he said,
"I don't love you, but not
 because I couldn't be attracted to you."
 His beard:
an avalanche of thorns,
 an avalanche of honey.

Eduardo C. Corral

⁹⁷ [Eduardo C. Corral](#), "[Autobiography of My Hungers](#)," *Poetry*, collected in [Guillotine](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

from "9 Sonnets from the Psalms"

Plead my cause, Max von Sydow, because you look like God more than most men, and because you outfoxed the devil in one of those rip-your-heart-out Bergman films that made my twenties so hard to bear. After *The Seventh Seal*, getting married and buying a house seemed pretty pointless, though I managed to overcome my reluctance, sex being the motivating factor in that dilemma, a quick caress more potent than any job, the deep jungle hex that leaves you panting for more. So you see, my dear Max, why I need a divine attorney, and not Mary, because women do not go for my BS. Here are the facts: my looks have skedaddled, I don't have a dime, I turn fifty-one tomorrow. I await celestial pipe and drums, though why, I have no idea. I'll take whatever comes.

Barbara Hamby
98

⁹⁸ [Barbara Hamby](#), "[9 Sonnets from the Psalms](#)," [Five Points](#), collected in [All-Night Lingo Tango](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

March 5, 2017

When I asked a friend yesterday how she was doing, Naomi, she said *Klonopin*.

We traded pill cabinets over the phone: *Oleptro. Ativan. Lexapro. Valium*.

My fingernail hurts from splitting the dose every day, she told me.

The melatonin gives me nightmares, I told her, *in which the women I love keep dying*.

The poem I wish to read you this morning mentions no pills, but I think of the poet anyway.

Poets are sitting in my kitchen, Sexton tells us.

Why do these poets lie?

My friend's nail presses down over and over, breaking into a new verse.

My breath slows as the dose kicks in until first light.

Rachel Mennies

99

⁹⁹ [Rachel Mennies](#), "[March 5, 2017](#)," collected in [The Naomi Letters](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Poem Misquoting Paul's Letter to The Corinthians

I'm beginning to equate God with nothing
but the tedious stammer

of Porky Pig's bald body popped
through the center of a bass drum, announcing

the end of another Merry Melodies
production. A vacuum

where no one dies until they look down
in midair. Years I've spent

writing a sight gag for the failure
of my kidneys, barrel

of a misfiring cannon I stick my head into
over and over. I make choices

I have seen other people make, but I don't
hope someone will stop me.

In therapy, this impulse is named
survivor's guilt, but religion says I seek

forgiveness. I spent last night doing cocaine
off my mother's Christmas china.

The body is a temple, I blurt at the cop in line
at the gas station Blimpie.

He'd denied himself bacon on a turkey melt.
Authoritarian glare, silent language

of law enforcement, meaning we both know
I'm still a little fucked up.

There's a hollow I carve into myself
where I keep what I know

to be holy. The burden of all flagellates
is that the answer is always God.

God in my sock or in the icebox, God
measured and balanced

on a plate or peaked along a key ridge.
Always patient, always kind. God without

envy who doesn't boast, God of trust
who gives hope, who will not delight in evil

but rejoice in the truth. If there is
knowledge, it passes.

Keith Kopka
100

¹⁰⁰ [Keith Kopka, "Poem Misquoting Paul's Letter to the Corinthians," *Solstice*](#)

Unicorn

When Cheryl was six her father went out
for a jar of mayonnaise
and never came home.
The reason could have been anything:
a pack of Lucky Strikes, a woman.
She told everyone in the neighborhood
her father was hunting
unicorns, his voice blood orange
and tentacled, echoing
through the bowels of the shot glasses
she lines up daily like prophets
on the bar. I want to tell her
that fathers have left their families
for far worse reasons.
What do you offer someone
who has lost half of her beginning?
Your father was a tyrant,
a minister of severed hands, a syphilis bringer
castrating the stones of animals.
Wherever he is, I promise you,
the natives are suffering.
Leaving crosses my mind, feigning
mental illness for a younger woman,
that tropical paradise of no responsibility
where mermaids reach up through silky waters
and pull off your boxers
and fire drugs into your veins.
Then a plate shatters in the kitchen
and my wife and son come banging
through the house like one of those furious parades
of dragons during Chinese New Year,
and I put my pants back on.
Once my son is asleep, my wife and I have sex
in the bedroom, not the wild
sex of Olympians thrashing around in the heavens,
but married sex, our shirts and socks
stuck to us like bandages, and, four feet from our window
the next door neighbor strangling
the choke on his lawn mower, kicking the thing,
yelling, *c'mon motherfucker*, when the engine won't start.

Jay Nebel

101

¹⁰¹ Jay Nebel, "Unicorn," *Narrative*, collected in [Neighbors](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Gray, as Flowers

Alma's husband comes to her
from beyond the grave to say

he hates the nurses who make her wear

those gray flowers & feathers in her hair.

The mirrors are shaded, the shadows of machines. All

morning the nurses move like
battleships through her dreams. Her
body's made translucent

by the artificial light, the artificial heat, the

timeless institutional wave of an old woman's days. But then

a bird of ashes settles on her shoulder, and begins its nest. Then

a strange arrangement of gray roses is tossed
onto a stranger's grave.

Laura Kasischke

102

¹⁰² [Laura Kasischke](#), "[Gray, as Flowers](#)," collected in [Fire & Flower](#), [Alice James Books](#)

The Material World

As the writer signed his name he said the drug
was taking away his nouns, but his name is a proper noun
and there he was signing it. And his face is a proper noun's face,
and I was looking into it,
and his hand holding the pen above the book
was a series of shapely nouns existing in time and place,
which we were both occupying while *Dear Katherine*,
he wrote, which he corrected a moment later
by writing a large blue *C* over the capital *K*,
adding *Lovely to see you* under the salutation,
a play on words I understand only now.
Many hard years have passed since he wrote
in an earlier inscription
There must be an aesthetic besides death
with the same hand now closing the covers of his *New & Selected*,
a collection organized not by chronology
but by the alphabet, a more manageable affair.

Catherine Barnett

103

¹⁰³ Catherine Barnett, "[The Material World](#)," collected in [Human Hours](#), Graywolf Press

from "A Concordance of Leaves"

)

& though some seaside café will split into glassy
shards of people these people

)

will have had nothing to do
with it, the bulldozers will doze their roads

)

so that every road ends in a wall
every car will off-road through olive groves

)

& though we won't see the sea the wind
will haul it & the whole village will arrive

)

at the village, until the village will be
a living map of itself, actual size

[...]

)

& though there is a boy whose cheek
is a scar & no father, his eyes like broken eggs

)

the children will flock to every flat roof
to watch the village become the village

)

& see the wedding from enough distance
it looks like a story that could be entered

)

& see the men pin paper money to the suit
of the groom, until he's feathered with future

)

& though everyone will eat, & eat again,
some miracle of lambs

Philip Metres
104

¹⁰⁴ [Philip Metres](#), "[A Concordance of Leaves \[& though some seaside café\]](#)," collected in [Shrapnel Maps](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Upon Reading Milton

*How shall I part and whither wander down
Into a lower world, to this obscure
And wild, how shall we breathe in other air
Less pure, accustomed to immortal fruits?
—Paradise Lost, Book XI. John Milton*

Students say *Say-in* when they read *Paradise Lost*
White girls from Catholic schools whither wander down
Good daughters forever long for the obscure and wild

Whichever way he flies the Lord of Darkness needs a hard *T*
I long to meet that blank verse to breathe its other air
But his daughter, Deborah, forced scribe, gets in my way

He turned her out & her sister, too, for his third wife
Happiness at last after the divorce tracts and Civil War
Two wives dead on the blood-soaked birthing bed

Blind Milton worked his great poem in a green suit and sword
Made his daughters milk his grand ambivalence
They sold some of his books, he didn't understand why

My dreams long for no tyrant shouting from a cloud-ship
Stuck in this lower world. I want this dented red apple
Less pure and plucked from a child's plastic grocery cart

Camille Guthrie

105

¹⁰⁵ [Camille Guthrie](#), "[Upon Reading Milton](#)," [The Volta](#), collected in [Diamonds](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Reunion

The story's that my great-aunt was killed by her mother
for having an affair with a married man, some
toxic concoction slipped into her tea
on a winter day when the wind came sharp as a convert's
revelation of the Lord's unconquerable might. It's still told

at family picnics, usually three beers into rummy
or at dusk on the beach as fire ravages
a century of wood, confided to someone's
new girlfriend or the nephew who's begun staring at the tidal
sway of women, an uncle kicking it off, outlining the depth

and color of her wild and unbreakable love before, tag-
team fashion, my sister or aunt slide in,
give a flavor to the tea, describe
the little farm painted on the cup, the print of the dress
torn as her body slid to the floor. Stories, more than eye

color, hemophilia, the DNA encoded with a taste for scotch,
are the genetics of clan, how blood subverts
the fascism of time, how flesh replicates
the icons and totems through which guilt is ritualized
and absolution gained, how we persuade our children

to wear wing-tips, vote the party line, do the right thing.
The year one of the living strayed, my cousin
Randolph caught in his car with a student
flunking Hotel Management, when we gathered just three months
after his wife loaded his Grand Am with the Palmer clubs

and McIntosh stereo and torched it in the drive, we talked
of the year's slow blooming roses, of baseball,
that form of collective meditation,
of ways to loosen rusted nuts and cleanse sheets of blood.
They came late and loaded with beer and potato salad,

held hands and smiled for pictures, pitched shoes,
cooed babies and looked away from the corners
in which their history was designed,
the details verified and fictionalized, betrayal graphed,
the edges between the acts of forgiveness and retribution

smoothed, the story worked in pockets until by cross-
pollination the family had decided which
bloom truth was, after which
there was nothing to say but what in essence we do every year:
how hard we are to love, how desperate to stay together.

Bob Hicok

¹⁰⁶ [Bob Hicok](#), "[Reunion](#)," [Tar River Poetry](#), collected in [Plus Shipping](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Silver Hill

I hadn't thought
it would be a country
club kind of place
he was resistant
to group therapy
the rich kids getting
off coke, my father
seemed not-at-all home
we sat in the sitting
room and said nothing
you could think forever
about an ocean
and never drown
a body might be
furniture after all,
the kind in a formal
room for receiving
guests we ask each
other nothing
questions like what
did you eat today
we imagine how
the weather might
change feels like
we'll be here forever
since no one knows
how to leave

Lauren Shapiro

107

¹⁰⁷ [Lauren Shapiro](#), "[Silver Hill](#)," collected in [Arena](#), [Cleveland State University Poetry Center](#)

Doubloon Oath

By dead gal or stove bones
by rainbow or red bird
red bird or cracked spine
by silk wrap or jaw jaw
by cold bodice, blush wing
tick tick or sunk ship
by tipped arrow, glass bite
by weird catch or *take that*
by chopped mountain, slick house
boatneck or gloss hog
striped awning, gold lawn
by *what's that* or *so much*
without me or full prof
full prof or nunchucks
blood orange, brain gob
time kill or toy star
by black doll or briar thorn
beg beg or gewgaw
by sweetmeat, or gunlock
or old maid or dreadnought
by weakness or whitecap
or grief-bacon, worksong
by fieldwork or field mix
slagged field or steel kilt
by bone-bruise or kneesock
I get my gift.

Kiki Petrosino

108

¹⁰⁸ [Kiki Petrosino](#), "[Doubloon Oath](#)," [Los Angeles Review of Books](#), collected in [Witch Wife](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Uncanny Valleys

When you pass a mannequin in a store window, and she looks exactly like your mother when she was young, without hands.

When you see sandbags about your size.

When, at night, the closet door left open like a coffin.

When you run up to the edge of a cliff, lie on your belly and look down at the tops of trees for the first time.

When you see a mannequin that looks just like your father but has no sex parts.

When his face through warbled glass.

When your whole family goes hunting for garnets and the rock face looks like blood spatter.

When you have sex for the first time, look in a mirror and are surprised you are still a girl.

When something freshly torn out twitches.

When dragged by your ankles down a rock face by your father.

When dragged by your ankles anywhere.

When no one comforts you crying in the woods and, at the same time, you are looking down at yourself crying in the woods.

When years later, you are chased through the woods by a boy you love, or think you love, and cry for an angel with the face of your mother.

When you finally grow up and just finish fucking someone you think you love, and shit pours from their mouth.

When you find yourself on stage next to a stripper barking at you on all fours like a dog.

When everyone is laughing.

When you bare your teeth like a dog.

When the tops of trees are beautiful for a few seconds, and then they are not beautiful, not beautiful ever again.

When the cigarette hanging from your father's bottom lip looks like a skinny white girl.

When you catch your reflection in dirty toilet water.

When dragged down a rock face, not just a few inches, but the length of many twelve-year-old girls strung together.

When you dream you are being crucified on a mountain and look down on the roof of your home.

When a heavy branch crashes through a tangle of branches and hits the ground with a thud and, for a split second, you think it's your mother.

When dusk casts a green light on your veined hands and you wonder if you've finally turned.

When years later, peeling eggs in the kitchen, a bleating goat startles the afternoon you thought you were happy inside.

When you can no longer tell if you were ripped from the trees or the trees were ripped from you.

When a maddening fluid takes you by the ankles.

When your hipbones are peeled eggs.

When a bleating goat.

When the animals of the forest swivel their eyes and ears away from the direction of the cliff.

Kristin Bock

109

¹⁰⁹ [Kristin Bock](#), "[Uncanny Valleys](#)," [FENCE Magazine](#), collected in [Glass Bikini](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

Cigarette

You are eighteen. You are back in your parents' house for the summer. You are smoking in bed because you've been in college a year. You light your bed on fire. The fire is an accident. The bed was constructed in 1801. You wonder when the mattress was made as you pour water on the fire. The burnt mattress cover reveals a pile of hand-teased horse hair. You know this is not the only creature that will suffer for you. You hear the horses in the barn snorting and stamping in the cold night. A boy gave you the green-leather-covered lighter on the nightstand. He stole it. You light another cigarette. You don't worry about getting in trouble. No one noticed when you burnt the rug in your room playing with your chemistry set years before. Dawn will be as cold as midnight again. These are not warm fires.

Landon Godfrey

110

¹¹⁰ [Landon Godfrey](#), "[Cigarette](#)," collected in [Inventory of Doubts](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

Earthly Failure

The copier grew tired of copying,
made a terrible, sick sound
and died.

I told my friends the poem was
blurry because the copier wept
while reading it.

That poem ruined the world,
it made everyone shy.

Now I've ruined the poem,
there's nothing left
but a knight sticking his sword
in a snail.

Mary Ruefle

111

¹¹¹ [Mary Ruefle](#), "[Earthly Failure](#)," collected in [Dunce](#), [Wave Books](#)

Empty Movie Theater

There are days when everything you think you are
decides to cool it.

You tell your friend to take you
to the suburbs so you can experience his dog and his house

and his parents who come home in time
to meet you and order a pizza.

Other days, you just want a vibrating cockring
and a friend who'll forgive

every sappy, desperate thing you say
while you're inside her.

You want to go to your college friend's wedding,
but there will be too many people there

who don't want to see you; no one will be able
to act normally—they are artistic and extremely

intelligent, living their lives with enough
self-awareness to electrocute a pig

and enough self-loathing to desiccate
all the fat and muscle of a fringe-wearing professional wrestler.

If you think there's no one more like a blister,
I ask you to consider the mental/emotional counterpart

to the greased-up wrestler's body;
and now we're back, in Houston, TX,

with the writers—everyone drunk, everyone
being all the funny smart allows.

You remember meeting them and thinking
you'd found what your stepmother would call "your tribe."

You'd learned about tribes in an anthropology class:
Sometimes it's the person who never shares

the meat he caught who's called a witch
and sent away to starve, and sometimes

it's the king who wasn't able to keep his promises.
Some tribes hate braggarts the most,

and some tribes hate the man who only knows one joke
or always tells the same story of the same girl

who loved him immediately, gave him happiness,
and never became any less wonderful.

You have to wonder how any tribe survives,
sending away so many of its own.

The answer: most tribes have a holy man who keeps a basket,
and inside that basket is every sound

the exiled make when stepping on a stone in the night
or being frightened by a tree branch.

The tribespeople are kept company by these noises and,
after listening, often feel as if they've eaten a large meal.

Hannah Gamble

112

¹¹² [Hannah Gamble, "Empty Movie Theater,"](#) collected in [The Traditional Feel of the Ballroom, Trio House Press, Inc.](#)

Our Father

he made a play
we went to see
and like a play
it saw us too

he made us stand
recite our lines
until we saw
no way to stop

we told each other
of the myth
he built for us
of blood and stone

our thoughts were not
our own
we shivered under
heavy manes

like horses running
from a blast
the stars the stars
fast slid away

took their noise
to other skies
left us here
without the play

how could it
be otherwise

Cammy Thomas
113

¹¹³ [Cammy Thomas](#), "[Our Father](#)," collected in [Tremors](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Owl Bits and Bits

The books she covets are labeled
with file folder labels she robs
from her father's desk. Owl builds a library
called *voluntad de oro*, which literally means,
Golden Desire or Golden Goodwill:
Gold for Wish or Wealth and Goodwill
for Desire or Love. The books were once
her grandmother's who had also lived
in the blue book and in the green book,
the leaves, the petals, the letters, the skins
in the books slip out and crumble like ash.
Those books told: her of north of the goose-girl,
of surviving caves and shipwrecks.
The words slip in and out like
the Wolf's tongue in Red's ear.

Carmen Gimenez Smith

114

¹¹⁴ [Carmen Gimenez Smith](#), "[Owl Bits and Bits](#)," collected in [Goodbye, Flicker](#), [University of Massachusetts Press](#)

Fair Trade Sonnet

A horse, a horse, my dumb king for a horse. My brand-new horse
—the naysaying centrist—for state senate. The suede backseat
of my thousand-horsepower hearse for a spare 10,000 hours
to practice basic survival, the fine art of making a slow exit
look painless. My last supper for an everlasting grain of salt
to dose my days with flavor. Act now, and they'll toss in tasting
notes for savoring every hand that feeds you—one pinch of insult
per punch of injury. Those better selves we're forever beta-testing?
I'm selling mine for parts: my collected minutiae, my C-minor mind,
my minus-sign smile, my my, I would lose it all. Pawn the nearest forest
for its trees. Trade in used gods for new models. On your command
I'd forfeit my firstborn, in whose colorless eyes I could be fairest
of them all. To be fair, to be fair, I always wanted to be fair.
What is there to say. I traded want away. I went with fear.

Christopher Spaide
115

¹¹⁵ [Christopher Spaide, "Fair Trade Sonnet," *Ploughshares*](#)

A Difficult Day

That the dog and my daughter both had their periods, and mine was nearing its end, just enough to believe I didn't need a tampon but to stain my panties anyway, and there was a bout of lice which I had given up on and so invited a woman I found on the internet into our home, even though we were at the height of a pandemic wave, and that we were all eating cookies, burned on the bottom, and maybe the woman had her period too. The house smelled like teenage pads with wings, and was decorated with shredded mouthfuls of bloody cotton from the strange diaper we'd try to pin on the dog, but which she ate. And that on this very night I was scheduled to read poems on Zoom with a man who says his own name in poems, like if in this poem I said, "Nicole, your dog and daughter are bleeding, and the whole house has lice." When my daughter started her period, someone said I should throw her a party, but I took her for pancakes. Of course it's embarrassing, all of it, this life. Syrup on your chin while you tell a child she's now a woman. And shortly after I tried to write a poem in the voice of Robert Browning called, "My Last Period," and I sent my "Menopause: An Index" out to several venues and was rejected, though I've stopped calling it rejection. Declined. I was declined. Yesterday morning I confessed to my other daughter, the younger one, that I had once eaten a scab, and this morning my friend sent me a picture of his healing thumb, and I responded, Bodies are amazing. Do I think bodies are amazing? That I nursed my daughters for years, and then had my breasts cut off, like in some kind of too-perfect novel. And the dog wouldn't wear her cone once we had her spayed, so I sat with her on the couch to try to keep her from licking her wounds. When she was young, my older daughter, the one who now hasn't gotten her period in quite a while because of stress or counting too many calories, her friends were all named after blood: Scarlett, Rose, that sort of thing. My god, how lonely life can be, how, mostly, Nicole, it feels like sitting on a toilet, wiping and wiping, until you can no longer see the blood.

Nicole Hefner Callihan

116

¹¹⁶ [Nicole Hefner Callihan](#), "[A Difficult Day](#)," *Witness*

Rich Friend

Hello sounded like a new language
from her mouth. Intergalactic sparkle
of passionfruit lip gloss. Stuck her finger
through the threads where my thighs
rubbing together, wore away my jeans.

New clothes much? she smirked. Her mother looked me up
and down in the doorway, worried. I was mesmerized
by the kitchen pantry. Gleam of hardwood.
In framed photographs: Gwen in black velvet riding helmet.
Gwen at art camp. Gwen on stage with other porcelain doll
children, tip-toe in pale tulle. Moon lowered
behind her on its rope. There was a time I would've been jealous
but, seventeen now, all I wanted was to obliterate
the parentless house of my body, glow white
under blacklights, blast my hair straight
on the highway, pierce any flesh I could pinch. To meet crushes
late night at the gate of her cul-de-sac. Gwen, in neon makeup
and Bjorkian rags, denim that was purposefully and expensively
ripped or frayed or bleached. I learned
glamorous damage, felt royal
in her clothes. And she gave generously—
purple bomber jacket with fox fur hood,
white corduroy bellbottoms, rainbow holographic
wallet with the silver unicorn zipper.
Even once, an antique locket, her grandparents'
portraits inside, frowning at me, a stranger.
Odd that she gave it away. Odd that I wore it.
We read how Yoko won Lennon's heart & we began
writing *yes* all over the walls. Across the dashboard, in the bathroom stalls
at school. *Yes, yes*. Our chant. I'd see one of her *yes*'s carved
into a desk when we were classes apart
and burn with our girlish devotion.

Yes to the tongue-ringed music video skater
rolling a blunt in slow-motion, *yes* all over Johnny's face
in her Cry-Baby poster, *yes*, on repeat, to the song that still transports me.
To the indulgently foamed push-up bras, ordering \$80 of food
on Mother's stolen credit card, just to throw it all up—
what we once called fun. To the roof where we sat
to watch night collapse over everything.
We were a spectacle
in her father's convertible, trading
seats so she could ride shotgun and pack the bowl.
Her chair tilted all the way back as I drove,
sound system vibrating the leather.
Gwen, I see you clearer now: her fascination with boys
she called *troubled*, who were banned from the mall,
who her father called *shitheads*, whose fathers punched
or burned them with cigarettes. The romancing of terrible wounds.

Gwen thought the work boots I duct taped together
when I was kicked out in the rain
were charming.
I still remember the mesh canopy of her princess bed,
like the room a willow makes inside.
Our den of hoarded cigarettes, bottles her parents
didn't notice disappear, hard candy, gel pens,
Adderall, packs of gum. On vacation with her family
in Bermuda, we tore pages out of the hotel bible
& burned them on the beach, dared God to curse us.
Set off fireworks and ran hand-in-hand
when the cops came. Our LSD eyes engorged
on the Grand Canyon: so willfully red
beneath the rawhide sun. Or Colorado, us half asleep in hot springs
in the snow. I just wanted to go everywhere with her
and she wanted to bring me, like a treasured stuffed animal
or a groupie, so easily-amazed. What did her parents see—
a parasite teen coaching their daughter toward risk?
Or a mangy stray their big-hearted only-child
brought home—*De-flea me, make me presentable!*
One night I asked, lying on the floor beside her bed,
both of us spun out on her mother's benzos,
Which of us do you think will die first?

Definitely you, she said.

Definitely. I agreed
and we fell asleep laughing.

Aimee Seu
117

¹¹⁷ [Aimee Seu, "Rich Friend," Philadelphia Stories](#)

Call Me

I don't like talking on the phone. I once liked talking on the phone when I was young, but only when making prank calls. This was before caller ID; this was when you could open the White Pages or the Yellow Pages to some random name or business and dial away. Once, I called a woman and told her I was lost at the mall. I was in my basement. The dog was beside me on the basement floor licking one of his hot spots. I was probably ten or eleven, but I said, in a babyish voice, "I have to poop, and I have been here all day, and no one looks like my dad." The woman on the other line said, "I'm on my way, sweetie. Stay right next to Cinnabon, you hear me? I'm leaving now." She hung up and I didn't laugh. I just watched the dog keep licking. I wish I could say I thought about calling her back to tell her it wasn't true, but I can't.

Once, I stood next to a man by the swings at the park and listened to him scream on his cellphone at his secretary while he absently pushed his baby in the toddler park swing, the one that looks like a rubber diaper. His baby looked like Pat Sajak. The baby's hair was dark auburn, shiny, and looked sewn on. I think he was asleep as his father screamed into his cellphone, "This is what serious shit sounds like. You dropped the ball, Beth." I stared at his profile, one hand holding the phone, one hand absently pushing his kid. I don't want to wear black wingtips to this day. I want to find both women, and say to both women, the children heard nothing that day. The children slept through it all.

Jordan Stempleman

118

¹¹⁸ [Jordan Stempleman](#), "[Call Me](#)," [Laurel Review](#)

Ten Months After My Mother's Death

I throw out four bottles of barbecue sauce
that expired three years ago, a jar of sour
cherries in rum, two boxes of graham
crackers and vegan jalapeno queso in a tube
all purchased before her valves broke down,
before the heart attack and the blooming stent,
before sepsis and spine surgery, before
the morphine drip and antibiotic infusions,
before the surgeon whose name,
Doctor Incognito, made us joke that
he was actually a character in a cartoon noir,
before the 3 am move from the rehab
to the hospital—they wouldn't tell her why—
before the afternoon phone calls when
I'd get the lowdown about the Ethiopian guy
from *90 Day Fiancé*, before the 6 pm call
about the nice nurse who would visit
even if she was working in a faraway wing,
before the 8 pm call about the mean nurse
who wouldn't change her bed pan,
before the 7 am call where she told me
her dream about the ICU as a wandering ship
(it didn't feel like a dream to her)
and the 5 am call where I pick up
and all I hear is breath.

Joanna Fuhrman

119

¹¹⁹ [Joanna Fuhrman, "Ten Months After My Mother's Death," *South Florida Poetry Journal*](#)

Bang a Gong Get It On

In history my teachers liked to tell me I'd be the first to get eaten
That I wouldn't survive a minute in the wilds of the ancient
I was always the smallest even if I was the tallest
Which I never was not even close
But whenever science said I was a dead end
I'd simply unfold & flail
My disproportionately lengthy limbs
& challenge anyone who'd dare mess with this long-armed baby T-rex
I'm the last of our kind
I know what happened to the rest all those stubbly stunted
Armed T-rexes who couldn't reach the top shelf
Died out in the endless aisles of walmart & costco
While with a pack of wolves under each arm
I'd take the group selfie
Panoramic-style
I've walked the olympic beam for all those couldn't-be T-rex gymnasts
All the positions at the barre I've taught in the name of T-rex ballet technique
When my kind were all but extinct well I just could hug myself
Twice around
For a very long time
I kindled the first fire & carved the first arrowheads
I even had a dalliance with a long-armed ancestor of the kangaroo
With whom I smoked black russian cigarettes with gold filters
& perfect gold rings we blew
& carved into savannahs our names so big you can see them from neptune
The best thing I ever did was come back as a little girl
Of little known weight
With a weighty top-shelf brain
I was the top-shelf T-rex in the schoolyard
No one dared mess with me
Even when they did
I simply lifted myself to the highest branch of the tallest tree
With tiny weighty roar I let them know their day was coming
Bravo not nearly extinct bravo to all the little dead ends
With their terrible sauros dreams

Rosebud Ben-Oni

120

¹²⁰ [Rosebud Ben-Oni, "Bang a Gong Get It On," *Copper Nickel*](#)

Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Sometimes, in the darkness
when no one is around I call my penis
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

I say "Life is very long."
I say "The meaning of life is that it stops."

Then one summer after the diagnosis
of degenerative discs and spinal
stenosis I drink Bloody Marys
and eat Percocet every day, feeling
self-pity, until I think of a man
I love dying of cancer, wasting away
in a small, book-lined apartment.

Like Pierre Glendinning, I take my Lucy
in disparate spaces: bent over in a dressing
room with her arm twisted behind, winced face
in the mirror, wet smack the only sound
until "oh shadow" escapes from her
mouth. And she ambushes me, straddles
my body and slaps my face—our smiles
a mirror as I lick the blood from my lips.

Gone now, I start to see "mysteries
interpieced with mysteries, and begin
to see the mere imaginarieness of
the supposed solidest principle of human
association."

Longfellow's wife burns in a blaze of hot wax.
Rivers of orange flames lick her until all
that remains is a charred husk. He no longer
shaves his beard, the rusty razor lies in a forgotten bucket.

Contemporary préoccupations rearrange
past events. "Whenever I find myself
growing grim about the mouth; when-
ever it is a damp, drizzly November
in my soul; whenever I find myself
involuntarily pausing before coffin ware-
houses, and bringing up the rear of every
funeral I meet..." I walk out to my
back porch at midnight in a tessera
of stillness trying to compose a mosaic
lotus. This is my substitute for pistol
and ball. Despite my will the body shakes.

Charles Kell

¹²¹ [Charles Kell](#), "[Nineteenth-Century American Literature](#)," collected in [Cage of Lit Glass](#), [Autumn House Press](#)

The State or Period of Being a Child

This morning my sister sent a recording of my nephew, five years old, standing on a stepstool at the kitchen stove: “Please enjoy this video of Luka watching popcorn pop. Little pleasures I guess!” I watched it five times in a row without stopping.

One of my favorite prompts to give to my students: *Pick a scene from your childhood and describe it in three sentences. Long shot, middle shot, close-up. Gradually zoom us in, really letting us see it.* Fascinating how other people depict their youth. Misty naturalism? Horror-movie fisheye?

In their classic book on fairy tales, Iona and Peter Opie write, “a man not given to speculation might as well walk on four legs as on two. A child who does not feel wonder is but an inlet for apple pie.”

What do I remember the most about childhood? An intense and often thwarted desire to be understood. Also struggling not to laugh with my sister in church, mint chocolate chip ice cream in pale green scoops, and calling milk “moo juice.”

How do kids acquire their shared body of folklore? Wherefore all of us at Humphrey Daycare Center in Shreveport disporting in the playground to the dirty rhyme: *There’s a place in France / where the naked ladies dance / There’s a hole in the wall / where the men can see it all?*

Child abuse, child molester, child care, child’s play.

The concept of childhood didn’t emerge in Europe until the 1600s. The birthday party didn’t start until the mid-nineteenth century.

Miss me with your gauzy nonsense about carefree innocence.

Every dad a glass tyrant, afraid to shatter. No truck with pluck or smarts or suggestions. Just a shush from mom. Just a fatherly slap in the face for lip and sass.

Childhood and its irrevocability. Childhood and its vulnerability. The ability to feel deeply rubbed away by something referred to as maturity.

Geographies of childhood! Riding bikes around the neighborhood until you enter the suburbs of adulthood. Before you know it, that’s where you have to live.

Parenthood? Hard pass. I never asked to be born.

“Anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days,” said Flannery O’Connor. She portrayed herself as “a pigeon-toed child with a receding chin and a you-leave-me-alone-or-I’ll-bite-you complex.”

How much is enough to pronounce an experience good?

The suffix “-hood” denoting “state, condition, character, etc.” or a body of persons of a particular class. The quandary of quantifying that which is qualitative.

What’s the statistical probability of possessing “a happy childhood?”

Kathleen Rooney

¹²² [Kathleen Rooney, "The State or Period of Being a Child," *Court Green*](#)

The First Time I Ask a Woman to Dance

It's a slow night, so C. and I decide
to close the bar early, and let the small crew
of regulars share whatever drugs
they have in exchange for beers and a space
to pretend our addictions are just one
hand-lettered clubhouse sign away
from our former innocence. This illusion
lasts until C. gets high enough to feel
generous and order a surprise buffet
of sex workers. It's a gesture that, at first, succeeds

only in tuning the room's existential thermostat
from sad dive bar to middle school formal.
Despite this fleet commissioned
to want us for the next two hours, here, too,
the boys stay surgically attached to their chairs
no matter how eagerly the girls smile at them,
hopeful to dance. But eventually, C. and the others
make their choices and disappear into a bathroom
or the back office. I envy how my friends

have aged more gracefully into loneliness
than I have, their ability to look at the darkened screens
we want to believe are the faces of these women
and see past their own reflections. Now, it's just me,
everyone else is fucking, or, more accurately,
it's me, a pile of cocaine, and one bored woman
named "Coral" staring at the Red Sox game on the bar TV
between the texts from her daughter who she says
is on spring break down near Myrtle Beach.
With naked parental worry in her voice she's sure
that I, of all people, can appreciate the danger
the girl is facing. Once, I thought courage

was what made that first boy manifest himself
from the safety of his dark gymnasium corner
to ask a girl onto the dance floor and grind
with her until a teacher separated them. But now,
I know what that teacher knew: it's not just biology
making that boy's decision. It's also the fantasy

of a free meal that haunts him into action.
It's Coral's daughter, on her knees
in a kiddie pool brimmed with hot dogs and Vaseline,
for whom she has every reason to be afraid.
Because in minute, I'm going to ask this woman
what her name is again and if she has a favorite song.
Then, before she can answer, I'll be at the jukebox

playing exactly what we both want to hear.

Keith Kopka
123

¹²³ [Keith Kopka, "The First Time I Ask a Woman to Dance," *Ocean State Review*](#)

Chronic and Nameless

The cat is dying—though I know we all are, since the day we're born or before that, when we're that cell-knot of embryo, that hoped-for thing or mistake. But the cat is dying more so than usual, and I have become a person who follows a cat around the house with a handkerchief, hoping to catch the strings of snot that trail so pitifully from his nostrils since cats can't say what they need. *And they hate to breathe through their mouths*, the veterinarian says, and she emphasizes the word *hate* the way preteen girls do when discussing their morphing bodies. In fifth grade we all wanted to be veterinarians, but by sixth we were over it and planning our pop-star careers. *Discovered so young*, the magazines would say. By then we'd learned something about animals, but nothing about death, except that sometimes a father will leave a note that reads *I didn't think any of you loved me anymore*, which they'll find with him at the beach cabin, the tide outside receding before it comes in.

Kathryn Smith

124

¹²⁴ [Kathryn Smith](#), "[Chronic and Nameless](#)," [Laurel Review](#), collected in [Self-Portrait with Cephalopod](#), Milkweed Editions

Application to Model for Helmut Newton

All I've ever really wanted to do
is stomp down Madison in nothing but
a full bush, a faux fur, a clutch
& a look of Horror.

I've shaken hands with some Hennessy
& held forth in an Oscar de la Renta.
I've been told my heels strike the sidewalk
like a pissed-off teacher
who already *told* you to Write in Silence.

I come with an attaché chained
to my wrist & a tennis bracelet
which makes a perceptible click
where its lips meet.

When I whistle for a taxi, two wolves
come running. My appetite for ennui
is enormous. Compare to my wasp waist.
Compare to this empty collins glass, this
sword skewering its cherry. Compare
to Crocodile Eating Ballerina.

It's time: I look sick in a suit.
My shadow: Vantablack at High Noon.
I prewarmed my thighs for you—
right on this terracotta balcony. I even
had the aesthetic sense to die
face-down in your pool. Dawn kisses
my temples with flame. Please
don't call this my Walk of Shame.

Karyna McGlynn
125

¹²⁵ [Karyna McGlynn](#), "[Application to Model for Helmut Newton](#)," *Matter*, collected in [50 Things Kate Bush Taught Me About the Multiverse](#), Sarabande Books

Form Is the Shape of Content

Today in the taxi I picked up a guy on Madison Avenue near 45th Street around noon. He was going to JFK. He was on the phone talking about his safari to Kenya, his deals selling a gold and silver mine. The Pope was visiting during the UN General Assembly, so the traffic was unusual.

Along the route he hollered: “Fuck!” then “This is fuckin’ unbelievable!” and finally “My flight is at 1:30! I’m fucked! This city! Fuckin’ unreal!” When we got there, around 1:00, he thanked me for keeping cool while he was screaming.

I thought of the fishermen on the boat Daigo Fukuryū Maru that moved under the mushroom cloud 80 miles from Bikini Atoll. They heard the explosion seven minutes later and were coated with the white ash of radioactive coral. The radio operator, Aikichi Kuboyama, died of atomic burn.

I wondered about the Lord’s illusion, a superimposition of waves separated by octaves. She keeps going up on a loop. The brain, tiny in the dark liquid, doesn’t see Her dust when it comes down.

Sean Singer

126

¹²⁶ [Sean Singer](#), “[Form Is the Shape of Content](#),” [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Today in the Taxi](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

On Poetics

POETICS OF CHICAGO

“You mean
Chicago
is in Illinois?”

POETICS OF LAKE MICHIGAN

It feels like
an ocean
until the next
time you’re
standing at
the ocean.

POETICS OF CANNABIS

Buttered bread,
lights out,
listening to your
favorite records.

Forget to lift
the turntable
tonearm when
you’re done.

Still spinning
tomorrow
morning.

POETICS OF CATS

Slap my ass
Bite your hand
Slap my ass
Bite your hand

POETICS OF SEX

“I think I’m monogamous,”
my wife said, “except for Stephen.”

POETICS OF SATURDAY NIGHT

Listening to
Sabbath’s
first album

watching
Boston-Columbus
hockey playoff
sound muted
revising poems.

POETICS OF THE POETRY COMMUNITY

“What would
our poems be,”
David says,
“without the friends
of our poems.”

POETICS OF POSSIBILITY

A phrase I used
too much
in my first book
of criticism.

POETICS OF MY GRADUATE POETICS SEMINAR

I
want
my
actual
poems
to
speak
for
me
instead

POETICS OF PO-BIZ

This thing I call
my career is me
making poems.

POETICS OF EVASION

Scared sometimes,
other people
reading intimate
batshit details
of my marriage
blowing up.
I can't abstract
the particulars
until they're no longer

recognizable
as a record
of one person
passing through
this brief moment
in 20th- and 21st-
century time.

POETICS OF THE END OF THE SEMESTER

“Yes, the words
will be there,”
I text David.

“Then you can
be beyond
words again.”

POETICS OF THE POEM I FORGOT

Should’ve texted
myself, like I do
when I wake
in the middle
of the night
after a dream
bestows
a line of poetry.
In the morning
a text
notification
and I wonder
who it’s from.

Tony Trigilio
127

¹²⁷ [Tony Trigilio, “On Poetics,” *Laurel Review*](#)

In a forest of question marks

In a forest of question marks you were no bigger than an asterisk.

O the season of mists! Someone blew the hunting horn.

The dictionary said you were a sign indicating an omission; then it changed the subject abruptly and spoke of “asterisms,” which supposedly have to do with crystals showing a starlike luminous figure. You didn’t believe a word of it. The question marks had valentines carved on their trunks so you wouldn’t look up and notice the ropes.

Greasy ropes with baby nooses.

Charles Simic
128

¹²⁸ [Charles Simic](#), “[In a forest of question marks](#),” collected in [The World Doesn’t End, Ecco](#)

A Covered Dish

Instead of attending
The End of Semester Holiday Potluck,
where Kimberly will hold forth
about the unmatched dexterity
of her cat and Jim will call together
his congregation by the hors d'oeuvres
to virtue signal about virtue signaling,
I will stay at home and bleach my mustache
and drink a dirty gin martini and read
the scene in *The Corrections* where Chip
throws cocktail parties for the academic elite
and I will laugh at them as Franzen intended
and you will laugh at me for reading Franzen
because no one is supposed to like Franzen
except in secret and to bring up Franzen
in conversation would be social suicide
at The End of Semester Holiday Potluck
where now, I presume, Kevin is misquoting
Nietzsche to talk about his sex life and Camille,
who up until this point has said nothing,
says nothing still, raising an eyebrow
with indecipherable anger because Kevin
is just another self-absorbed academic
who got his degrees thanks to grade inflation
in the early 2000s and has made a career
out of complaints and well-timed jokes,
which is more than I can say for myself
whose career is made merely of words
strung together in a clever order, saying
nothing much other than I am happy
I am not at The End of Semester Holiday Potluck
but that if I were I would find a way
to kidnap the cat, poor thing, quarantined
in the bedroom, forced to listen to the muffled
noise of a whole people who forgot about
the night outside, its utter size.

Katie Condon

129

¹²⁹ [Katie Condon](#), "[A Covered Dish](#)," [New Ohio Review](#)

Pity

Once I took it in my mouth, I had to
admit, pity tastes good, like the sandwiches
they make in French patisseries, the loaf smeared
with force-fed organs, crust that shreds the skin behind
your teeth. So bless the tongue's willingness,
for it chooses like a wartime whore and it's the picky
who end up dead against the wall. And bless also
the bouncers, who all last summer grew kindly
ashamed those nights I fell backward
off their stools. When A. said, "People are generous
with ugly things and you're the Goodwill drop box,"
I counted the turns I've taken on that swing—
the handouts I've offered the fucked-up
and broken. It's the playground rule,
everyone gets a ride: then you're the girl at the party
trashing the patio furniture, or the man, later
that night, pushing her down in the street.

Erin Belieu

130

¹³⁰ [Erin Belieu](#), "Pity," collected in [Black Box](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Totally Under the Water

He knew, he said, he was dying
when for two straight weeks he dreamed of
trying to switch on a swing-arm
lamp that wouldn't switch on. In baths
I've never gone—as they do in the movies,
to demonstrate crux and contemplation—
totally under the water, but if
I did, I would ponder the woman
flooring it into the cinderblock
wall from fifty feet away. I don't think that image
comes from the movies. I think it comes
from the future. The future, with its color
palette of airport whites and its
unrushed glance, its involute
beckoning. I see it. I can see it. At least
somebody wants me.

Natalie Shapero

131

¹³¹ [Natalie Shapero](#), "[Totally Under the Water](#)," [The Believer](#), collected in [Popular Longing](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Happiness Report

I was happy when I was drunk one night in 1985
squatting in the already pee-wet grass next to Jill Somebody
outside the graduate student poetry reading

And in spite of going off my medication
I was happy today under the hot shower, and again licking cappucino foam
in front of the air conditioner before I went outside
and sweated through my new shirt like a lying politician in a TV interview

I felt happy while buying the shirt though it wasn't a pure happiness
stained as it was with a price tag
It's hard to find a happy artist because art
requires suffering, goes one theory nearly everyone buys into
getting free subscriptions for their friends

On the wall of the museum, patrons could finish the sentence
Before I die, I want to _____.
and someone wrote *be happy*
and another *eat KFC*
but a third wrote *cancel my life* and I bet that person was an artist
or at least more sensitive than the one with a bucket list
that included tortured chickens
I hate the term bucket list
which sounds to me like molded plastic instead of stainless steel and pocked
with little holes your feelings fall through

Some artist said it's better to fall from a great height
but I don't know about that
Maybe great happiness is an abyss
Maybe looking down all you see is a big lake and your own face floating there
looking back self-righteously
so it's probably best to crawl under a sympathetic rock

I don't know why the Declaration of Independence talks about the pursuit of happiness
when Jefferson originally wrote property
Life, liberty, and property
Maybe I would be happier if I owned some
Some of my ancestors owned slaves
and some were impoverished Italian peasants
Maybe all freedoms are stained

Before I die I'd like to see some changes made
but it's probably too late
just as it's too late to drink myself to death at a young age
That day at the museum I thought *I want to climb to a great height and then fall through myself
the way a man falls through me when I'm happy and in love*
Now I only want espresso and a little foam
To stay in bed all day, Christmas lights blinking against the August heat

Pigeons landing outside on the air conditioner walking around making soft noises
and then fucking off
Someone screaming in the street who isn't me

Kim Addonizio
132

¹³² [Kim Addonizio, "Happiness Report," *Southword*, collected in *Now We're Getting Somewhere*, W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Reading My Valentine's Poem to Frank X. Gaspar

In the poem, I stand behind the counter,
stripping leaves and thorns from long-stemmed roses
flown from Ecuador, tossing them into a pile at my feet.
Leaving only the blooms: the ruffled pink
of Precious Moments, the dusky Black Magic,
Wanted, its crisp, scalloped edge. *I don't care,*
he says to me, *about the men who come to buy the flowers.*
What I want to know is what is this woman doing
to the sex organs of these plants?
I'm thirty-two, and in love, again, this time
with a man whose name rolls off my tongue
like water. I'm afraid of hope.
A husband gone, a lover buried in the waves.
And what about the men
who buy the dark petals that say
this is how I want to open you. This flower
reminds me of your flower.
I wrap bouquet after bouquet in bright tissue,
give them to boys in frayed jeans,
to businessmen talking on their cell phones,
who walk away, bearing the weight
of these intricate ambassadors, these small failures,
bred, not for fragrance, but their ability to endure.
There are pinpricks of blood
along the flesh of my palm.
There is so much we cannot say.

Danusha Laméris

133

¹³³ [Danusha Laméris, "Reading My Valentine's Poem to Frank X. Gaspar," *American Poetry Review*, collected in *Bonfire Opera*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Pastoral with Rosé

I assume my life remains on a trajectory toward
a 1983 Riuniti on Ice commercial:
shrimp cocktail & chilled sweet wine on a patio
with a crowd of well-dressed friends.
These beautiful people. What having money
must look like. I imagine the jokes
I would make, how they would earn me
praise from the assembled wives & husbands,
I imagine myself easy to envy. To be happy
ought to be enough. It is not. One must be
seen being happy, one's happiness
the sort of thing that sparks arguments
between couples on their drives home,
neither of them honest about the source
of their irritation as they bicker
& fall quiet, their silence in the darkness
a kind of privacy. I am entirely invested
in this nonexistent Amorak. I imagine him
lingering outside long after everyone has left
as cigar smoke & perfume melt into the dusk
& ice fades to water in copper buckets.
Chorus frogs. Fireflies. I imagine him lonely.
I pity him, though surely he has more sex than I do,
has hair he doesn't have to think about,
a slimmer waist, stronger calves.
The moon rises. He vanishes.
I am left to wonder how he pronounces our name.
Is it the same? Or have I been saying
it wrong all these years, every version
of myself in disarray, even on my own tongue?

Amorak Huey

134

¹³⁴ Amorak Huey, "Pastoral with Rosé," *The Southern Review*, collected in *Dad Jokes from the Late Patriarchy*, Sundress Publications

The potato sack filled with toys was beautiful

though the toys were evil. A wooden, jointed snake.
Not a cowboy gun but a black revolver. A jack-in-the-box
that played a warped Chopin nocturne, and you don't

want to know who leaped out of the box. There were
features to be pressed into a potato to make a face
but the essential ones were missing. What was left?

A pipe. A monocle. A pair of juicy female lips. No wonder
the old woman kept the sack in the attic where the flying
squirrels hung from the rafters. But when I visited,

which was often, she'd creep down the narrow stairway—
all the woodwork in the house was a slick, lacquered
walnut—and deliver the sack into my open arms.

Out of those few objects I built my dubious lexicon.
There was a hand mirror, and a naked baby doll.
And a pink-nippled bottle for the child filled with what

had long ago been a milky liquid but was now the color
of absinthe, once known as “a fée verte,” the Green Fairy.

Diane Seuss

135

¹³⁵ [Diane Seuss, “The potato sack filled with toys was beautiful,” *Tar River Poetry*, collected in *Four-Legged Girl*, Graywolf Press](#)

Afterlife

Even in heaven, when a former waitress goes out for lunch, she can't help it, can't stop wiping down the counter, brushing crumbs from the bottoms of ketchup bottles, cleaning the chunky rim around the cap with a napkin, tipping big. Old habits die hard. Old waitresses die harder, laid out in cheap cardboard coffins in their lacy blue varicose veins, arches fallen like grand cathedrals, a row of female Quasimodos: each finely sprung spine humped from a lifetime hefting trays. But they have smiles on their faces, feet up, dancing shoes shined, wispy hair nets peeled off and tossed in the trash, permed strands snagged in the knots. You hover over their open caskets with your fist full of roses and it's their hands you can't stop staring at. Hands like yours, fingers scarred, stained, rough, muscles plump between each knuckle, tough as a man's, useless now, still as they never were even at shift's end, gnarled wings folded between the breasts of faceless women done with their gossip, their earthly orders, having poured the day's dark brew into the last bottomless cup, finished with mice in the rice bags, roaches in the walk-in, their eyes sealed shut, deaf forever to the clatter, the cook, the cries of the living. Grateful as nuns. Quite dead.

Dorianne Laux

136

¹³⁶ [Dorianne Laux](#), "[Afterlife](#)," [Quercus Review](#), collected in [Facts About the Moon](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Dear B,

Two months of spasms and still I am not well. Awake is more knives than I can count. I was the one who shut the window. But all the dead flies had already come in. All I remember already got out. You are not the proximity I wait for. You are not real. I am small, but need to be watched. Have I told you a thunderstorm is like getting a million letters from you? Only better. Only more like beginning, not ending, in rain. Today, the cold is beating down the bats from their wings. What I say isn't even close to what I think. It is much worse. Anguish grows gray as it waits in my throat. Like just before snow, when I can smell the holding back.

Jennifer Militello
137

¹³⁷ [Jennifer Militello, "Dear B, \[Two months of spasms\]," *Fusion*, collected in *A Camouflage of Specimens and Garments*, Tupelo Press](#)

Feral

When I am with the animals, I am a thousand lives and unabashed. I saw a red-faced lamb on the roof and I don't know which one of us was the hallucination. When I am hungry for what is too crude for a diner menu, I order myself a blank field and make myself throw up bowl after bowl of nothing. I tried to sell myself at a yard sale as a slightly used leather purse. The women said I was broken in all the wrong places. It's true that I am unable to hold more than a pushpin. My uterus refuses to make me a mother because it is too tired to hold a tiny pair of hands, a half-formed head. The she-wolves at my door dance to the metal sounds of me stirring rice in a pot. They are so full of moves and milk I become an abandoned baby with a puckered mouth. At night, I lay the pieces of myself on a sheet. This is a mechanical display of failure, of a woman charging double for half a self. When a rat drowns in a puddle, it is still, proudly. A woman with thoughts tosses a coin in a fountain to decide whether or not to take off her pants, whether to allow every lamp and nightstand to become the image of a child. When I go to bed with men, I dress as a tiger. I show them my teeth as if they've never seen a dying star. I hold them down until they have no excuse for their small hands, until they know a woman who runs as fast as the cats is the opposite of love.

Meghan Privitello

138

¹³⁸ [Meghan Privitello](#), "[Feral](#)," collected in [A New Language for Falling Out of Love](#), [YesYes Books](#)

Fan Mail 2: Nanny Time Approacheth

After the nuclear war, the only people left
will be ex-celebrities and out-of-work nannies

I expect, and my intuitive calculations
concerning nannies are never wrong, totally—

mildly errant would be a better way to describe
my intuitive calculations concerning nannies,

a gift I discovered after your turn as a nanny
who brokers a cessation of hostilities

in the Middle East—a farce with no superheroes
in it, in this day and age, oh my god—via

much toughness and falling down
and exaggerated accents and a fat, gold,

democratic heart. Or brain. It must be said,
I am less accurate when it comes to

ex-celebrities. Sometimes at work I find
I am drawing a picture of your heart

only it looks like a fat brain, it's gold
but it's damned democratic and then

I am inventing new colors for it, gold
is not enough, oh my god. The *Times* found you

cloying, I find the *Times* a cinderblock
covered in moldy oatmeal and anyway

those of us who understand
the secret hardness of true nannies

know better. Now: who writes your red carpet?
What will you say after the nuclear war?

When it happens I think everyone
should pretend it never happened—red carpet

will chase the horizon, and we will need
to say many meaningless things.

Sometimes you seem sweaty
and completely dry at the same time

and I feel that this will come in handy
as we begin to rebuild. You might say

that nuclear winter is where nannies
separate the wheat from the chaff, the nannies

from the baby-sitters. Life will grow
more competitive: fewer children, greater

tasks, the gathering of groceries
suddenly Herculean and violin lessons

an exercise in nerve-harsh
that would dismantle utterly

the most frozen-veined black operative.
You know, like the one you played

in your first comeback, the one
whose dismantlement by a random children's

violin recital first made me feel
like all the missiles could launch

and still something would be, in the end
or after, okay. Or that we could act like it was

so convincingly, it almost
would be.

Marc McKee
139

¹³⁹ Marc McKee, "[Fan Mail 2: Nanny Time Approacheth](#)," *The Offending Adam*, collected in *Meta Meta Make-Belief*, Black Lawrence Press

On the B Side

The song ends because the beginning
doesn't jump-start again: red smudge

of a mouth, lipstick all over the place
like the afterthought a comet leaves

on its way out. What makes this moment
unfold like a woman raising herself

up from an unfamiliar couch? Honky-
tonk in the blue honey of an eyeball?

Perfume & its circus of heart-shaped
introductions? Innuendo always

stumbles in the lead-in, like a man
pawing around for his busted spectacles

after waking up in the world's stubble.
Hand over hand he paws, through

guitar picks & record changers, busted
gut strings & clothing strung with

familiar vibrato outside the window.
He could be Bowie himself, exhausted

by skyscrapers cracked in the aftermath
of a smile. His eyes aren't different

colors. They just have different focuses.
He could be a whole lot of nothing:

thinning hair, low change in his right
pocket jingling down the stairs.

He was given all of it & stole the best
of the rest. Even without glasses,

he sees her nearly dressed: 33 1/3 rpm
stacticky in the lead-out's harmony.

Adrian Matejka

140

¹⁴⁰ [Adrian Matejka](#), "[On the B Side](#)," [Poetry](#), collected in [Somebody Else Sold the World](#), [Penguin](#)

The Cold Before the Moonrise

The moon is alone,
always in the first person.
The days are dark. When
it shines on my face, it leaves
white scribbles. I used to think
the moon was illiterate.

Victoria Chang
141

¹⁴¹ [Victoria Chang](#), "[The Cold Before the Moonrise](#)," collected in [The Trees Witness Everything](#), Copper Canyon Press

Oracular

In the year of Ferraro, I loved my drugs, my runic-ludes,
loved to dance under those mirror balls,
thought I was beautiful, thought I was heard.

I carried a skinny mirror back then—
wet my gums, shaped my brows. Saw the sky,
saw an 8-ball moon. I saw The Cure.

The First Lady loved astrology, loved Chanel.

She loved her little body all wrapped in red—
a real picker-upper, she said. The cut-glass mirror beads
on her de la Renta sheath refracted light, all crystal
white. She read the stars. She loved
her husband's moons, his metal pig, his licorice beans. On a mirror

I wrote my name in powder, deep-
bellied beneath a night club floor. I heard
half disco/half punk feet dance over me, beneath the mirror ball.

Could you hear me?

Whole nights and into the next spent dancing—
we loved our drugs, we loved our ludes, we tossed back
the luminous runes:
you are heard, they said: they said, *you are beautiful*.

Jennifer Martelli
142

¹⁴² Jennifer Martelli, "Oracular," *On the Seawall*, collected in *The Queen of Queens*, Bordighera Press

Ode to My Prison

This morning I read about a couple arrested
for selling hundreds of tickets to heaven
which they said were made from pure gold
and all you have to do is hand yours over
to St. Peter and you are ushered into paradise. Tito Watts,
the mastermind of this scheme, told the police
Jesus gave him the tickets in the parking lot
behind the KFC and told him to sell them
so he could pay Stevie, an alien Tito met at a bar,
to take him to a planet made of drugs.
“You should arrest Jesus,” said Tito. “I’ll wear a wire
and set him up.” His wife agreed they both
wanted to leave Earth, and I know how she feels,
because most newspaper stories are such a bummer—
the sexcapades, the lying, the Russians—so Jesus, where
is my golden ticket? Not that I’m all that keen
to go to heaven, but I would like to go to Vietnam
and Cambodia, though I guess a travel agent
could set that up for me, and I’m always fantasizing
about dropping in on Haydon’s immortal dinner
and eavesdropping on Keats and Wordsworth or spending
a fortnight in London in 1601, seeing Shakespeare
as Hamlet’s father’s ghost, taking in the general squalor,
and maybe picking up some manuscripts
from the printing house floor, tucking them in my farthingale,
and then taking off to Chawton Cottage to stalk
Jane Austen for a while, though in that dress it’s going to be hard
to go incognito, so maybe I should wear black jeans,
and you may be forgiven for thinking that I’ve touched down
on that planet of drugs, but who needs them
really when your mind can spin out its own delirium,
a dream here, a phantasmagoria there, and right now
I’m fixated on Tito wired to bust Jesus, and doesn’t it seem
sometimes as if we’re hanging around the KFC
waiting for something supernatural to appear, not Jesus,
but maybe Walt Whitman walking to New Orleans
with his brother, a cloud of words crowding out Stevie
and the other aliens as Walt fuels his own dream
of America where we’re looking after each other instead
of grubbing for all the moolah we can stuff
up our backsides, though a friend of my sister’s says that Earth
is an alien penal colony, and we’re all doing time
for crimes against the universe, so I guess Stevie’s a rogue
guard in the Florida penitentiary, and sometimes
my body does seem like a prison of sprains and back pain,
my mind like the trenches at Verdun—the mud,
the mustard gas—yet when the war is over, I’m still alive,
seem to have all my limbs, every cup of tea

is ambrosia, and if that's not enough, it's May, jasmine
and roses are blooming, my heart clambering
over the clouds as if on wings, and I can't help but think
of Solzhenitsyn looking back on his years in the gulag
saying "Bless you, my prison, for having been in my life."

Barbara Hamby
143

¹⁴³ [Barbara Hamby](#), "[Ode to My Prison](#)," [Literary Matters](#), collected in [Holoholo](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

On the Cusp of 36 I Remember the Only Republican at My College Gave Me Head and I Didn't Come

1. not because a mediocre hippy band
leaked from cheap speakers
2. the kind of record you play
when you want to seduce someone
3. but you're also in a hurry
and a bit lazy
4. not because I wasn't into muscles
or his politics which were vague
5. and uninformed like a precursor
to Jordan Peterson subreddits
6. or the funk of loneliness
that pervaded the room
7. his and my own dappled scent
clanging together which is not the same
8. as solitude but the ways we try to escape it;
going home with someone because
9. they are strong enough to flip you
over their shoulders like a prize
10. I was sober and 19 and carried Valium
in an Altoids case my mother gave me
11. after my first panic attack
where my heart flapped against
12. itself and I never felt cozier
than that night
13. swaddled in my childhood bed
the drug pinning me to the earth
14. pleasure not an escape
but an anchoring of the self
15. a bearing down and lifting
out of the fizzled murk
16. he twirled his shirt above his head and went in
for the plunge and I felt nothing

17. I am writing this poem on my phone
at the airport waiting for a delayed flight
18. listening to Lou Reed sing "Here She Comes Now"
like music to a funeral procession
19. taking in the verdict we knew was inevitable
and I can't stomach the kindness
20. in his voice or the finality of him
being gone and maybe it was fatigue
21. maybe I'd had enough
pleasure that day and wanted only
22. to be close to a body
to have someone hold me down
23. to be hummed toward uncertainty
like a half-made resolution
24. praising what is messy and obvious
25. that he didn't ask for anything in return
26. that his chin was raw
27. that I kissed the cleft where it gleamed
28. that I walked back to my dorm
29. and didn't care who saw
30. that I did a heel-kick midair
31. like Fred Astaire's spirit
32. gilding my cheek
33. that I danced in the cold
34. my whole self lovely and stained
35. shimmering with fluids
36. entirely my own

Kendra DeColo

144

¹⁴⁴ [Kendra DeColo, "On the Cusp of 36 I Remember the Only Republican at My College Gave Me Head and I Didn't Come,"](#)
[Great River Review](#), collected in [I am Not Trying to Hide My Hungers from the World](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

from "After Damascus"

6.

You once dreamed of bedding down in elevators.
Maybe your young life had been touched
by prolonged contact with suburban commerce.
Maybe you had been sexually confounded
by the strain of cinnamon in the air,
or bleating saxophones beamed from low orbit.
Maybe you skipped pennies across
the dimpled waters of the fountain
and recited under your breath
wishes so desperate you recanted in that instant.
Teenagers veered about in misery.
Mall-walkers hissed like adders.
There were grandchildren, there were balloons
they had all let go of, screaming;
there were anatomically indistinct
iterations of the human body
wearing suggestions of life behind glass windows.
It should not go unsaid
how happy you were.
How free of predatory lending practices.
Your ligaments creaked
like ropes in a storm.
You dreamed of dreaming about nothing else.
Only this: rising, descending,
over and over until no one would come in,
and you were alone in a box.
You thought of coffins
as you waited for the doors to shut and motion to resume.

Paul Guest

145

¹⁴⁵ [Paul Guest](#), "[After Damascus: 6.](#)" [South Dakota Review](#), collected in [Because Everything is Terrible](#), Diode Editions

My Uncle Would Visit

and talk about sleeping
on the trains of Europe,
railway stations
named for dead generals
where the lamps
were lit by hand,
He'd bring weeks
of unopened bills and junk mail,
grocers' coupons,
a dishrag soaked in kerosene
he kept folded
neatly in wax paper,
My uncle, who never left
Oregon or the town limit,
who would leave
State Hospital and take a cab
to our house.
He talked about the skies
of Kansas City,
how they would fill
with carrier pigeons
and eclipse the sun,
He knew the secret codes
of shortwave radio,
and once lay
with his ear to the throat
of a dead Indian
for a week and heard
the sound of boot soles
dancing in an empty barn.
He would light the corner
of each envelope
and wait for the flames
to climb his fingertips:
*This is a love letter
from a French school teacher.
This note passed
between a street fighter
and an orchard keeper.
This was sent twenty years ago
and has arrived
exactly today.*

Michael McGriff
146

¹⁴⁶ Michael McGriff, "My Uncle Would Visit," collected in [Dismantling the Hills](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

Troposphere

Hosanna to the gracious and eminent genius I never heard of.
Hosanna his opera opening in Minsk, his art exhibition in Zurich,
his graceful field theory and double album of great hits.
Collegiate bohemians must tack portraits of him in lucid reverie
to walls over their futons, over secondhand BarcaLoungers
in wisps of incense above the clutter of ashtrays on cardboard boxes
doubling as end tables. Their instructors might pant after
his endorsement and their boyfriends probably swoon,
but I never heard of him. I've read dozens of books
and never once encountered his sequence of fractured sonnets,
never once his instructional manual. I never rode in a Bentley
or wore a TAG Heuer or had his skill for dismantling his critics
so magnanimously, but this theme of not doing, of not achieving
is one I return to often driving past the pale motels that flank
the tollway west of Aurora or when I'm deliberating
between heads of lettuce in the Dominick's grocery store or when
I'm digging into the pouch of peanuts on a shuttle to Annapolis
conceding to myself I never will have cause enough
to purchase a tuxedo, how this is true for most of the lot of us,
most of us fungible bodies thrown at a problem not altogether
certain what the problem is, as in war only less heroic, as in revolution
but less righteous. No confetti or bunting will greet me.
I suppose it's good to arrive at this early, too, so as not to feel
threatened by it at some critical juncture as when attempting
to grease the palm of a maître d' or contest a traffic violation
or when children are watching. No atrium is filled with any experts
awaiting my expert opinion, and it's this sense of feeling finished
with the self I return to most on warm, overcast evenings
in my minor apartment listening to the high-pitched locomotive
of cricket noise, buzz of the high-tension wires, the neighborhood
of intermittent elms, how far away everyone is, and me nearly dozed
on the sofa watching the ball club drop another series to Houston,
the squat shortstop up for a day or two to take the place
of one of the extraordinary wounded before returning to the minors,
to the slow crawl of bus travel across Carolina, to a spot on the bench
in a rainout, slouched and spitting sunflower seeds into a puddle.

Jaswinder Bolina

147

¹⁴⁷ [Jaswinder Bolina](#), "[Troposphere](#)," *Qualm*, collected in [Phantom Camera](#), [New Issues Press](#)

My OB/GYN Suggests I Consider Cosmetic Labiaplasty,

and all I can think about is my mother
throwing out
in-date food because she wanted something
else to eat. Even
though we barely had enough. Even
though moths
the size of fingernails bathed in the pantry
flour, its moon-
cool dunes in dry shadow, and rose at
opening
in a cloud of fine, powdered grain bleached
as the ideal
asshole, their wings in perfect symmetry—
complete
in dividing. I admit that sometimes I get
pinched
by my panties' elastic and taffy-twisted when
he pushes
in, full as a drunken cucumber in monsoon
season, but
one of my feet is larger than the other. A breast, too.
And, there's also the modern wing
of my face, newly reconstructed after melanoma
razed
it down to the skull. *I want to be normal,*
a friend
says. *Why do I always laugh when someone gets*
hurt, is
hurting? My doctor insists: *It will be painful,*
but you'll
appreciate the revision. Rephrases: *Yes, you'd be*
pretty

*tender, but, soon, you'd forget
to complain.*

Emilia Phillips
148

¹⁴⁸ [Emilia Phillips, "My OB/GYN Suggests I Consider Cosmetic Labiaplasty," *Grist*, collected in *Embouchure*, The University of Akron Press](#)

Letter Home

I've been leaving and I'm not done leaving yet. I pretended for almost ten years that I was a farmer's wife and I liked sinking into seventeen acres. I tried to believe I could make a life out of watching what those grasses in the meadow would do next if we just kept not mowing them down. I tried to distract myself with novelties like goats and eggs and flowers it's surprising you can eat and other flowers it's surprising you can use for an abortion or aspirin. I tried to believe I could stay for a baby, so I had a baby, but babies need you to pretend you're all the way home and you always will be. They need you to say about 2000 words an hour and smile at them often, the parenting book experts told me in the quiet empty of that home two hours from anybody who likes me, or else they won't learn to talk or process emotion in a developmentally appropriate way and they too will end up people who often stare with no emotion at a wall hours away from anyone who likes them. I don't ever go in the bathroom and cry, but I think about how I could if I really had to and that takes the edge off. My husband is so sweet, cutting onions as he says, "Let's just move to California. Or let's just move to Ohio. Or Spokane. Let's pack the car for Spokane." He's trying to make up for a time when he didn't love me this much, but it's enough and it's made up. I'm just afraid we'll get wherever and wherever will be here again. "I don't think it will work," I say. "Of course it won't work," he says. "You're trying to outrun death. But the ocean, the boxes, the little fears of starting, it will be years before you feel it again." He means home's hot breath on the back of our necks. "This is what people do?" I ask, wiping my eye quick, so our five-year-old, skipping through the kitchen doesn't see. "It's one of the things they do," he says. And then while the little she is stuffing a cracker in her mouth, he passes behind her head so she can't see him as he says, "There's also this," and holds his finger to his temple as he fires his thumb. I'm laughing with my head on the table so she can't see I'm crying that he knows so much.

Kathryn Nuernberger
149

¹⁴⁹ [Kathryn Nuernberger](#), "[Letter Home](#)," [32 Poems](#), collected in [Rue](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Rumplestiltskin

Music from indoors, a punch line
about nuns, smokers in the cave
of the garage point their doobie
at the moon.

A shirtless boy canters by, his
girlfriend on his back. The cranky
niece leaves a trail of Saltines as

she disappears into the part
of the yard held in place by two
dignified trees. Here comes
someone

who wants us inside for an
incoherent prayer and potatoes
white as talcum.

We're agreeable but in no hurry.
The nachos make their rounds.
Somebody opens a beer with
his teeth.

There's a bougainvillea next
door that's red enough to be
annoying. "All right. We're
coming in,"

someone lies. But really we're not.
It's lovely here. The straw of the day,
bushel after bushel of it, slowly
turns to gold.

Ron Koertge
150

¹⁵⁰ Ron Koertge, "Rumplestiltskin," *Oh No*, collected in [The Ogre's Wife](#), Red Hen Press

In Memory of the Rock Band Breaking Circus

You were whiny and socially unacceptable even
to loud young men whose first criterion
for rock and roll was that it strike someone else
as awful and repulsive and you told
grim stories about such obscure affairs
as a man-killing Zamboni and a grudge-
laden marathon runner from Zanzibar

who knifed a man after finishing sixteenth

Each tale sped from you at such anxious rate
sarcastic showtunes abject similes
feel like a piece of burnt black toast
for example *threaded on a rusty wire* followed
up by spitting *too much time to think*
by fusillades from rivetguns by cold
and awkward bronze reverberant church bells

percussive monotones 4/4 all for

the five or six consumers who enjoyed
both the impatience of youth
and the pissiness of middle age
as if you knew you had to get across
your warnings against all our lives as fast
as practicable before roommate or friend
could get up from a couch to turn them off

We barely remember you in Minnesota we love

our affable Replacements who modeled a more
acceptable form of rage who thought of girls
and cities boys and beds and homes and cars
as flawed but fixable with the right drink
right mates and right guitar strings whereas you
did not and nothing in your songs resolved
except in a certain technical sense as a drill

resolves contests between drywall and screw

Your second bassist took the stage name Flour
your second drummer copied a machine
Somebody else in your hometown took credit
for every sound you taught them how to use
I write about you now since nobody else
is likely to and since even appalled
too-serious flat compliments like these

are better than nothing and because to annoy

perseverate and get under everyone's skin
beats the hell out of the real worst thing in the world
which is to fade into silence entirely which
will never happen to *The Ice Machine*
to "Driving the Dynamite Truck" to *The Very Long Fuse*
to *Smoker's Paradise* such hard sticks thrown
in the eyes of any audience that is

I should say not until it happens to me

Stephanie Burt

151

¹⁵¹ [Stephanie Burt](#), "[In Memory of the Rock Band Breaking Circus](#)," collected in [Belmont](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

A Child Is Born

Shoppers crowd into booths, shiny bags clustered at their feet.
A tree is lit, a small crèche tastefully arranged by our table.
We're three old friends, eating lunch, drinking decent merlot.
Between us, we've raised seven children. Our job was easy
back then—a pity we couldn't appreciate it, exhausted
and fighting with our husbands.
Now our kids are adrift across the globe
and we're counting the ways in which they are not happy:
One is etching the skin of her inner arm, a cuneiform
no one can read. One's lain in bed for months, spooning cold cereal.
The youngest, who was never any trouble, swallowed Ecstasy
and climbed out on the balcony, his arms raised to the lashing rain.
I've walked the city alone, at a desperate speed,
all day and into the dark because I could not hold
the two thoughts... *my child, suicidal*.
But here we are, eating sweet crepes, laughing even.
My friend turns to the ceramic figures gathered in the open stable,
picks up the tiny baby Jesus from his lump of straw.
"It's the whole *a-child-is-born* thing," she says
"We think he's going to save us,
but he's headed for the cross."

Ellen Bass
152

¹⁵² [Ellen Bass](#), "[A Child Is Born](#)," collected in [The Human Line](#), Copper Canyon Press

Mr. T—

A man made of scrap muscle & the steam
engine's imagination, white feathers
flapping in each lobe for the skull's migration,
should the need arise. Sometimes drugged
& duffed (by white men) into a cockpit
bound for the next adventure. And liable
to crush a fool's face like newsprint; headlines
of Hollywood blood and wincing. Half Step 'N Fetchit,
half John Henry. What were we, the skinny B-boys,
to learn from you? How to hulk through Chicago
in a hedgerow afro, an ox-grunt kicking dust
behind the teeth; those eighteen glammering
gold chains around the throat of pity,
that fat hollow medallion like the sun on a leash—

Terrance Hayes
153

¹⁵³ [Terrance Hayes](#), "[Mr. T—](#)," collected in [Hip Logic](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Too Strong

is what the announcer dubs Steph Curry's flubbed shot that bounces diagonally off the backboard. This is game seven of the NBA finals, and Cleveland goes on to defeat the Golden State Warriors, but we don't know this yet, because we're still watching the game, jammed into an alcove where it's live-streaming from someone's laptop onto a wall at an artists' colony, since a surprising number of writers and composers and painters are basketball fans, so when the sportscaster reels out descriptions of plays, Nate the jazz critic says, "Someone should write a poem called *Too strong*" and Stephen Dunn isn't interested though he's sitting behind me also rooting for the Cavs, saying things like *my goodness* and *he's the best closer for his size*. "You have to give context in your poem," mansplains Nate, who points out that 'too strong' is a hyper-masculine way of saying Curry basically just fucked up the shot. It's important to note here that Cleveland hasn't won a championship in any sport since 1964—that's a 52-year curse in case you're anti-math. I am well-versed in the sadness of Cleveland—skies hanging like lead most of the year, husks of buildings, smokestacks pumping raw flame over downtown. My husband grew up in the sadness of Cleveland, and we return there every Christmas to more unemployment, more foreclosure, more poverty, more shitty weather. When LeBron left Northeast Ohio, my husband actually burned his replica jersey in the yard, wouldn't mention his name for three long years of anger and mourning. He uses Cleveland sports teams to teach our sons about failure and perseverance, with a heavy emphasis on the failure. But here's LeBron on screen, lugging his city's championship dreams like a bag of rocks. Forget Tamir Rice, age twelve, gunned down by police for being black, for playing with a toy gun in a park, left to bleed out on a sidewalk. Forget that Cleveland is the

poorest city in America other than Detroit. LeBron's stuffed this game with thunderous dunks, fadeaway jumpers, and blocked shots, towing his teammates along in his ferocious wake. And when LeBron goes down in the final minute of the game, writhes on the court in pain after landing on his wrist we all want him to get up—even the artists rooting for Golden State. *Get up, LeBron!* Nothing comes easy to Cleveland. The next morning's paper sports a photo of LeBron embracing power forward Kevin Love, next to headlines about Venezuelan food riots, triple-digit temperatures in the West, vigils for victims of the Orlando massacre, and the Colorado woman who fought off a mountain lion attacking her five-year-old son—literally reached into the animal's mouth and wrested his head from its jaws. Too strong. In the belly of fear and rust and shame there is no such thing. To pry open something with your bare hands, look into the gaping maw of the beast that eats your sons—the lion, the bullets, the streets, racist cops, heroin, despair, whatever is most predatory and say, *Enough—we will triumph, motherfuckers*. At the game's end, LeBron and the Cavs' coach Tyronn Lue sobbed without shame. "I've always been tough and never cried," Lue said. And LeBron at the post-game mic, wearing a cut-down net like a necklace says, "I came back to bring a championship to our city. To a place we've never been. We've got to get back to Cleveland. We're going home."

Erika Meitner

154

¹⁵⁴ [Erika Meitner, "Too Strong," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, collected in *Holy Moly Carry Me*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Lesson

The lemon-and-new-shoe odor of the clean linoleum.
Your footsteps echoing against the walls
that weren't your home. How you dreaded recess,
where children shrieked and skinned their knees raw.
The treachery of the milk carton, its mouth that refused
to pucker. The day you made a birthday crown
for your teacher, asked her age for the gold numbers,
and she snapped, "A lady never tells."
Another lesson, like alphabetical order. That year
you adopted a red maple, trunk no wider than you,
and learned *deciduous*, *photosynthesis*. Your front teeth
knocked out in a wall-ball collision. Your mother taught you
pig Latin on the way to the dentist, your new blue dress
blood-soaked. Near Christmas, your teacher made you
try red Jell-O and you threw up. But you also
made a paper stocking—stitched with green yarn,
its symmetry perfect—and the warmth you felt for it
swelled you the entire bus ride home.

How did you do It? How did you learn in one year
that plants eat light and that the plural of *sheep*
is *sheep* and that when you cut a worm in half
you can watch its split body squirm away from itself,
how did you hold all of that while also the sky was starting
to take on a personality—benevolent on blue days,
aloof on gray—and you were finding that certain
Elvis songs made your insides pull taut in a way
that felt like an hour before dinner, and you found
a naked red bird on the sidewalk and tucked it in a shoebox
for your kind neighbor to nurse back to health but
it died anyway, two days later—how did you do it?

And now, here, decades into the fast future, here
with your knowledge of statistics and research
and Experts in the Field—do you feel any calmer, any less
like the sky could unfold at any moment and reveal more
hitherto unconsidered possibilities? Even now
can you believe zeppelins, anglerfish, all the people
you love who are every day out in the fracturing?
When you hear "It's Now or Never" on the radio,
don't you still sometimes pull over and sit there
on a side street of some neighborhood, clutching
the steering wheel and wondering when everything
will finally, finally settle into that stoned equanimity
you've never been able to enter? You know it exists.
You've glimpsed it, in the cracked leather spines
of old books, in the sunlight that ripples on the pool's
turquoise surface, but vanishes the instant you dive in.

¹⁵⁵ [Catherine Pierce](#), "[Lesson](#)," [diode](#), collected in [The Tornado is the World](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Dear Goose

No one had to hear you sing to know
you'd be killed in an accident.
It was your name, it was those Ray-Bans
you wore like a Halloween mask.

Lorca said, *Whoever fears death
carries death on his shoulders.*
But death carried you.
Death has a yellow moustache

and plays volleyball with Lorca
shirtless or in unbuttoned shirts,
the dog tags of his beloved
dangling from a chain of sins.

Death's specialty is omelets
and karaoke from bar's old piano.
He can open up a man
like an egg, a song, or a parachute.

P. Scott Cunningham
156

¹⁵⁶ [P. Scott Cunningham](#), "[Dear Goose](#)," [Abe's Penny](#), collected in [Ya Te Veo](#), [The University of Arkansas Press](#)

Talking Angel

It was an American Bluebird—painted turquoise, racks for backpacks, hash rolled with tobacco. It got stuck overnight at the Swiss border. She says she watched an Australian woman fuck the bus driver. It is my roommate's story from her trip across Europe. I keep asking her to tell it to me. She says the driver said something over and over. The seats, covered in green plastic, made a damp popping noise. A word starting with the letter D. Tonight I tell her he was cooing *Mon Dieu*, though other nights it has been *doucement* or *diable*. Last time they were sitting up. She was crouched above him. Now he is kneeling, her back to him, an outline of moisture where her hands press on the window. Her brother is on the bus asking questions. "Where is the food?" "Where is the extra blanket?" At dawn the bus continues to Athens. They all get off. Now my roommate wants to tell me what else she saw. It is all monument and historic event. I say, "The popping noise, that's the Australian girl." If months later the girl tried to lift the driver's face up to the face of her imagination, I could not say. And could I say if later the brother and sister spoke of the night or could never speak of the night? I want to know who my roommate would be if she could be any of them. "But I was there," she says. I tell her I am the girl. I am her shadow flung across other seats. I am that girl talking angel. She is talking angel rising, blue wing net, angel updraft, wing beat. He says this time in slow American, "Damn baby, that's nice." My roommate says, "One more time. And then that's that. There was snow. That was why we waited out the night." "By the end," I say, "it wasn't really sticking, just flurries settling on the window sashes. The driver could have continued." Think of the shushing sound that cars make, tires passing over snow, yellow light from headbeams slicing through the bus. Think of the light slipping over the spent couple. That is something, don't you think? To wake for a second, see a thing all lit up. What was it? Whatever it was, now it is everything.

Victoria Redel

157

¹⁵⁷ Victoria Redel, "Talking Angel," *Shankpainter*, collected in [Already the World](#), Kent State University Press

We Are Not Getting Anywhere

On the telephone there was a new message
It could have been anyone It was the shark
The shark was calling to express his feelings
on his ugliness and his mortality
The two seemed related but the message was choppy
Where was he calling from
The shark said to call back He was dying
He regretted that he would die soon
I did not want the message to happen
but it was too late I'd already heard it
There was a right action How could I take it
Perhaps I could go rent a boat
He sounded sad on the phone with the dying
He was calling maybe from a boat

Heather Christle

158

¹⁵⁸ [Heather Christle](#), "[We Are Not Getting Anywhere](#)," collected in [What Is Amazing](#), [Wesleyan University Press](#)

The Voice in the Other Room

The woman in room 1027 says. “Oh, God!”
 over and over, and I, who am in 1026, think,
Good for you, darling, until I realize that she
 is crying out in pain, not ecstasy, and that there
 are two others with her, a second woman who
murmurs, “There, there” from time to time

but also “Oh, come on, get over yourself” as well
 as a man whose words I can’t make out, so low
is the timbre of his voice as well as its volume—
 why, it might as well be the voice of Whitman
 or Ginsberg oozing up through the fissures
of the earth, or that of Blake, say, or before him,

Euripides, whose dithyrambs speak of things
 more wonderful and terrible than mere heartbreak:
a woman burned to a cinder by the god who is
 her lover, a god who stitches another into his thigh,
 a king torn to pieces by his own mother, a mother
driven mad by a god. “It’s so good to hear your voice!”

people say when you call them, but what does
 that mean? Some widows leave their husbands’
voices as the phone message, but the tape
 of my father reading Chaucer brings me to tears,
 the way old photos do: he was so handsome then,
so slim, and his hair was dark, and then he got old

and white-haired and, if not fat, then thick-waisted
 and slow in pace the way old men are.
In Florence once, the Arab men in the apartment below ours began
 to argue, and one slapped the other, and I braced
 myself for a fight, but there was only silence,
and then the one who was slapped started to cry.

When we bought our house, the house next door
 was occupied by three “old maids,” as Colonel Donovan,
our neighbor on the other side, called them,
 and before that, by three other old maids, one of whom
 taught at Wesleyan College in Macon, and one of her
students there was Soong Mei-ling, whose parents

had sent her to the States to be educated,
and once she came to Tallahassee to have her teeth
worked on by her teacher's dentist but later returned
to China and married Chiang Kai-Shek,
generalissimo of the army and U.S. ally
in World War II, though later he lost to the communists. It's said

that Soong spoke English with a Southern accent,
and sometimes when I'm in my backyard listening
to the owls in the wood, I wonder what
it would be like to hear the voice of the slender
Chinese girl who went on
to become the Dragon Lady, one of the world's

most powerful women, though in those days she stood under
this oak tree I can touch with my hand, her jaw swollen,
and wondered if she'd ever see China again.

The opening of Cole Porter's "Night and Day," a girl
in an attic listening
to the rain, a boy at his violin: the world taps its key,

and out come the dots and dashes,
the grief and the love, the bad news or good news or both,
the poem that is written every day if we're there
to read it. The next night, I hear the woman
in 1027 again, and she is with a different man,
a high-voiced fellow, and there are murmurs at first,

then humming, gasping, sighs, their voices together
making chords almost, like an orchestra tuning up,
then more and louder, and at the moment of delight,
the woman utters her joy: "Oh, God!"
she cries, and it's a hymn of praise
this time: "Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, Jesus! Oh, Jesus! Oh, God!"

David Kirby
159

¹⁵⁹ David Kirby, "[The Voice in the Other Room](#)," *Southern Review*, collected in [The Biscuit Joint](#), Louisiana State University Press

Syntax

Those were the flannel days, after
the Gainesville slayings, before the state
turned permanent red, AIDS still a reason
to cash in your 401(k)—in other words,

the early nineties. Yikes. And I
was a raver in Florida—whistle, bad skin,
snazzy backpack. I learned that the rope
isn't velvet; there never was a rope,

just some feral queen at the door:
Miss Thing, there is no guest list tonight!
Once in, one ate, in designated order,
a few choice letters of the alphabet...

I took a choking drag of a clove.
The letters tasted bitter, like love.

Randall Mann
160

¹⁶⁰ [Randall Mann](#), "[Syntax](#)," collected in [Breakfast with Thom Gunn](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Victorian Ladies

If a well-dressed Victorian lady burst out of the floor in your basement and said, “Excuse me, can I ask you a question?” would you call poison control about the bottle of Robitussin you just drank? Would poison control call you, and tell you you’re smart and your hair looks good? Because I would. You should take off your shirt.

Sarah Galvin
161

¹⁶¹ [Sarah Galvin](#), “[Victorian Ladies](#),” collected in [The Three Einsteins](#), [Poor Claudia](#)

how did that happen

in just an instant?

Those men lived inside
a flickering screen

+

that the rest of us can't inhabit.

But let me tell you this:

back when I was taking
that film course
I had a friend named Adam. He was real,
an obsessive cyclist,
studied chemistry,
kept a neat row of *Star Wars* action figures
on a shelf in his dorm room—

+

then, one day,

he died.
He was watching TV in his room,
and then he was not

anymore—
It was my first experience
of the death of someone

I loved.
I was sitting on the porch studying German verbs
when I heard.

The porch tilted entirely
upward
so I couldn't hold on,
and all of me kept tumbling
sideways, toward the yard—

+

He has been eighteen
and unpredictable
for thirty years now.

I have many
anecdotes about him,
which is to say he now exists
within the conventions
of the anecdote—a funny kid

I knew
when I was a serious kid,
a guy I last saw
shirtless and asleep on a sunny Tuesday

on the quad,
 making of his yellow frisbee a pillow,
while sunlight filtered through the trees
sending mottled shadows
 across his chest.

+

For the dead,
 death is the entire truth.
What else
 could there be?

But like the dead,
 those two men waiting in that woman's
apartment,
 screwing silencers onto their handguns,
also exist in the minds
 of those who remember them,

+

where the fictional and the dead
become, over time, similar.
 He was my best friend
We sat together in film class
 quietly making fun
of the professor
 who paced back and forth
in the lecture hall
 waving her dry erase marker over her head
talking about Scorsese's
 clever manipulation
of the passage of time
 in that scene
where the woman bleeds to death
 on the tiles.

+

Conventions
 that make the unreal
real,
 the security distance provides—

+

It was as if the porch
 lifted up completely
and tilted sideways
and all the furniture and I

into the weeds.

tumbled over the rail

Kevin Prufer
162

¹⁶² [Kevin Prufer](#), "[Into the Weeds](#)," collected in [The Art of Fiction](#), [Four Way Books](#)

What It Is

Dear Varla Jean: I too favor floral, like it charmeused,
organza'd, chiffoned. I don't especially care for black
at a funeral and care more and more
for the undergrowth, motherboard, and guts
that go unchanged. Everything's flimsier than feeling.
My mother used the cake I baked
to feed what looked to her like pigeons.
After the wake my brother came
to the door in a dress designed
for a senator's daughter. As I always say
if it quacks like a duck...
My sympathy, for instance, is mostly a kind
of self-pity, a projection of my big-budget
disaster onto decidedly unenlightened victims.
After all, salt looks enough like sugar—
it only calls for a pinch.
This is a summary of the end
of my father's life. *Kneel, nawthentic, noncrete*
may be understood as *not real, not authentic, not concrete*,
though carried perhaps in the chromosome we share
or measured by the distance between trigger
and finger. That home movie of Gavin skeet shooting
with my father when he was 10 is *nawthentic*. What it is
is the banana man and his son who dart into traffic
to make fruit into bread, exhaust and heat rippling from the street.
Spanx are real, so are spray tans. *Kami*
is Japanese for both *god* and *paper*
and that seems about right: white, transparent, something
through which you can see light.
Fold God into an airplane and launch him
back into the ether. As I say
if it quacks like a duck...
If you're feeling me, Varla,
you won't wind up like that tramp
Desdemona (was she a tramp?). Haven't you
ever loved someone then changed your mind?
You are true to your grit like the general's wife
who roams the battlefield in search of a husband. And it's a problem
when no one will tell her she's already married,
and no one really wants a wife.

Cindy King
163

¹⁶³ Cindy King, "What It Is," collected in [Easy Street](#), Dancing Girl Press

War on Fun

In a deceitful time with a deceitful friend
I stayed at sea for days called *sea days*
on a vessel with casinos for hallways
as triumphant waves licked the ship's
sides in blackest night and luscious wet

bodies leapt to smack balls over nets
on the pool deck. It was my birthday
and poor cellphone service disguised
the lack of a call or text from a man
I longed back then to call *my boyfriend*.

I drank in Dazzles, a lounge like a theater
that morphed from dance party to game
show within an hour, ordering double
whiskeys by the dozens, the bill accruing
invisibly, almost like a portent, a receipt

unspooling into the fathoms of a sky
that seemed to move its length like a giant
cat alongside the wind and water whipping
up at me from the deck side where I stood
smoking one cigarette after another.

My dreadful friend, latent back then
like a disease, claimed seasickness, chewed
on Dramamine, cluttered our berth
with products designed to make her privates
hygienic, worthy, chemical, or, as she

said, because she was so *sensitive down*
there. The only reason I was on that ship
was due to a conflict between her and her
rehab friend, who cut her off after the fatal
discovery of stolen pills. This friend

had booked the trip for her birthday,
and my birthday happened to be one
day after, the all-costs-paid trip was a mere
\$400, so I thought I may as well experience
it, the lower level art gallery with art so

ugly it stood in direct opposition to
notions of art, and what I was doing there
was due to my being in a weak position: I was
lonely. The purpose of the journey, it soon
became apparent, was to experience *fun*

which was doled out in many formulas
and flavors, none of which agreed with me.
It was, I saw, a metaphor for the life I had
not yet lived and avert at every corner
I turn: a friend's whose sleep is malicious,

who concocts tales of having once seen
a ghost in your attic, which is described
unremarkably as attired in a long white
nightgown, a candlestick clutched in her
hands, her hair wild and white. Was that

me, wandering my attic, just above my
own head? I'm not the medium, I have
no funnel to prop open to the essence
of the other world. I failed to distinguish
between a friend who is devoted to me

and the friend now approaching as I stand
by the railing, smoking, pouring myself
into the task of regarding the voluminous
carpet of the sea, her hand gentle at my
back. On those sea days and nights how

she smiled, as she smiled at me often,
watching me trip and tasting my shoe on
the step in the back of her throat. Now
that I have experienced so much intentional
fun, I have given up on fun, now that

this venal friend has made her apology
years after, I do not accept. I do not
accept fun, the fun that is for liars,
peering down and over the ship's side
from which hundreds of lifeboats hung.

Cate Marvin

164

¹⁶⁴ [Cate Marvin](#), "[War on Fun](#)," [Fence](#)

Robert Frank: The Americans

The road bends through the land, worn and frayed
as a pant cuff torn by a dog,
stretches between the luncheonette and backyard,
between the end of the rodeo
and the funeral for New York,
between the public park and the bar.
The cocktail party where hopefulness
is a middle-aged divorced man
boxed up in a black tuxedo
parading women around the room in sequin
dresses, with powdered faces and moles.
And taking them home, lifted on champagne bubbles,
raising their bodies to his in the gray New Jersey light
before smoking a cigarette at the mirror
and asking them to leave. Between the gas station
in Santa Fe where the sun sears the dust on the backs
of the pumps and the elevator in Miami
where a dark haired woman in a milky jacket
raises one eye as she hits the button for the lobby.
The Jehovah's Witness grips a pamphlet, back to the wall,
white knuckled, mercurial. Three drag queens boast
fresh manicures. The shoe shiner, bent over
near the urinals, blackens
a pair of scuffed wing tips.
You know us. We've always been here.
Our elbows tacked to the diner counter, our hair greased back,
cigarettes hanging from the corners of our mouths,
half eaten BLTs and Coke bottles resting
in front of us. We wear Stetsons and lean
against fire hydrants, or we pass by in Cadillacs
and on city buses where we stare forward, hypnotized
by the sound of water slipping from the roof.
We raise combs to our scalps or stand with our hands
in our pockets, attending the dead
wrapped in wool blankets by the roadside
between Winslow and Flagstaff. We've earned rest and work,
this loneliness that flares around us.
At the Chinese cemetery white flowers spread like hair
across the grass and along the parade route
a tuba engulfs a man's face. On the assembly line
a joke is drowned by the bell hammering out the clock,
the whole place flush with dusk. Men in fedoras
hold newspapers over their eyes. From the hotel window
Butte, Montana, fans out charred and burnt.
All around us people mouth,
we've survived, and lose their way
in the mall, forget what they said
just yesterday, the man on Hartford Avenue

who bound a seven-year-old boy
with fishing wire before burying him in the basement,
the schoolteacher who bled herself to death
behind the gymnasium. A woman in a striped skirt
sits in an oak chair in a field overgrown
with blonde-headed weeds,
settling her black hand on her hip.
She is our mother, watching her sons and daughters
pile into convertibles and convention halls, in Belle Isle
and Chattanooga, Detroit and Venice Beach,
the drive-in movie where the wind flaps at a giant figure
pointing a gun in our faces. The trolley crawls
out of the fog, trailing coffee and gin,
aftershave. We're not going anywhere.
Under our fingertips the jukebox glows.

Jay Nebel
165

¹⁶⁵ Jay Nebel, "[Robert Frank: The Americans](#)," [Southern Humanities Review](#), collected in [Neighbors](#), Saturnalia Books

Cautionary Film

When I was declared free of scoliosis, something lifted out of me. I wrote in my small notebook: you will enjoy a life of mostly clear diagnoses. For once, I cut through people's back yards instead of sticking to the sidewalks with the other milquetoasts. At the Walgreens, I exhibited radically poor posture and candy cigarettes, which never made it out of my sock drawer.

It was 1987, and if you had sex you would die of AIDS. It was extra tragic considering all the illegitimate babies you would inevitably leave behind. I tried to combat this by eating an excess of asparagus and throwing myself into the rhododendrons. My childhood dollhouse had a tiny father with a sleek, eventless crotch. Once I discovered him buried to the cheeks in a litter box.

In the cautionary film, it was always an art teacher or school photographer who took inappropriate liberties. I found liberties completely appropriate when my art teacher cold-cocked a star hockey player in the parking lot. I wrote in my small notebook: you have a gift for traveling undetected. But then I resented the invisibility, and considered purple hair.

Later I would hold a modest role in a small production that almost made it to select art houses. My character folded a pair of khakis and then cried a little. Too bad Miss Blaine would never have a chance to retract her criticisms from the high school theatrical arts clinic. My character had no name or face, but her command over the scene was irrefutable.

Mary Biddinger
166

¹⁶⁶ [Mary Biddinger](#), "[Cautionary Film](#)," collected in [Partial Genius](#), Black Lawrence Press

Poem Made of Revisions

The hot-air balloon hanging over
the now-distant mesa of my childhood

was something else before; it was
the ultra-fat wrists of my babies,

maybe, the creases where flesh met
flesh and sometimes, impossibly,

met flesh again, and before that
it was a confession, or was it a brag

revised into a confession, that once
or twice I've fallen deeply in love

with someone I made up entirely
in my imagination, and that one time

it turned out the one I'd made up
was living in the body of a man I did not

love, and yet sometimes when I slept
with that man there'd come a moment

when I'd feel this great disorienting
displeasure—or was it pleasure?—

as the real one gave way, shook and fell
beneath the weight of my love

for the made-up one, until the real one
was nothing, dust that blew away

from me, which was fine because
it turned out he was a dipshit, and now

it's the last time I walked over the bridge
into Juárez with my cousins, to drink

at the Kentucky Club the night before
my grandfather's funeral, and how

sitting in that booth, looking toward
the bar in smoky light, it felt like

we'd snuck into another time,
my grandfather's time, when he'd

drive to Juárez to buy produce
for his restaurant, stop at the Kentucky
Club for a drink, and then, on the way
back into America, would have to park
and get out and sit at the border
and slice open each avocado, remove
the seed, throw it away, and then
carefully put the two pieces
back together again, all under
the watchful eye of some customs
agent, and I remember that night
so vividly, maybe because I know now
what we didn't know then: that it'd be
the last time we'd walk across
that bridge like that, together, and how
the next day, at the funeral, a dove
hit the window above the altar
with a great thump just as the priest
began the heated whispering
that accompanies the preparation
of the host, and that he never
looked up—he never even looked up—
and I have for all these years
imagined the attention he gave
to the body and blood of his savior
was for him so real—so immaculate
and so very real—as to be
impenetrable, and that he believed
that if he stopped even for a moment
he'd lose the thread of his faith,
and break the promise he'd made
and believed in, which was the gist
of his lifetime's work: making one
thing become another.

Carrie Fountain

¹⁶⁷ [Carrie Fountain](#), "[Poem Made of Revisions](#)," collected in [The Life](#), [Penguin Books](#)

from *Clangings*

A finch in my chest flinches to get
heard. Wingman sewed it in. I hear
the *chi-chuwee chuwee* achew in there,
tiny beck beating the big heartbeat.

Mind you, it takes brains to slice
open a hide, scoop out the marble
muscles; craze a rib cage; uncoil
an aorta; slide in a gift like his:

the elf chirruping in my self, itself
elfin (the self's wit-part part want).
Pity I'm not someone else's heart!—
elf elsewhere, another body's grief.

I don't mind my beater's a warbler,
or how in-the-skin is the finch's cry.
Eat sweat, wet seat: its homunculi
pinions ping in a rock tumbler's

cavity. I place my ear to my chest.
Finch-flitters from the solar-plexus,
beaky reminders keep keeping pace.
Oh my minute pecks, tend your nest.

**

Iris of the one-eyed Satan—see it?
X-ray of a horse pout about to eat me.
Amputee kissing a double amputee.
Exploded nova; no, what an idiot

I am: fly gotten crushed by a shovel.
That black is somebody's childhood
shit spread on a microscope slide.
If e cuts in line, vile becomes evil.

A woman's shadow on her back, legs
open, like pudding's been splattered
by a bullet-train's million-mile second.
Take away the veins, that's the bags

I stuffed my faces in before their faces
mixed each other up and made mine.
What a kid drew in Art Class, a brain-
dead kid. Not sure what that clot is—

or they're smudges, maybe inkblots?
Somebody dripped ink on paper, folded
the paper top to bottom or side to side.
The ink blotted and created inkblots.

**

The circulars blued under my eyes
from lugging salt sacks across a river
over a fire. One blinkered the other.
Almighty, they blazed with furies.

They were a sight. In Lord School,
my retinas uprooted. Not funny, I
tell you, spotting clots in eye jelly.
I've seen things. Threaded red pencil

threats, delivered. The pupils shrank.
Bobbing in floaters, I squinted right
at the nuns, white as off-white paint.
Faces have fifty-two muscles to spank.

Could've sworn I'd rubbed out all
that rubble. Could've sworn I saw
trouble swell into an eyeful of awe.
Awl, hack, rip, jig. Two-hand radial

Father Joseph. Touchy amen man.
Ass-burned the children out of sight.
Jesus's analgesics didn't conceal shit.
A hymn is one crummy physician.

Steven Cramer
168

¹⁶⁸ [Steven Cramer](#), "[Clangings \[A finch in my chest flinches...\]](#)," [Slate](#), collected in [Clangings](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Indiana Bardo

Haunted house, duplex
where the landlord threw out
my bike, limestone box

in the trees, yellow house
with red shutters.
The collie did a fear dance

near the driveway of the 90s
mansion, the electric fence
keeping him from his questions:

Me? You? Help. Food.
I floated in a pool filled
with dead leaves and watched

the green light from the window
on silent afternoons. Even the air
was polite. The opinions of the park

were far away and the dark stairs
to the basement offered themselves
with no strings: come down or don't.

Julia Story
169

¹⁶⁹ [Julia Story](#), "[Indiana Bardo](#)," collected in [Spinster for Hire, The Word Works](#)

Riprap

I was thinking of Tolstoy's Austerlitz—
how the soldiers at first were merely tired
of marching in their shredded boots
before the bombs whistled into earthworks;
the hussars needling their horses between
missiles; some troops laughing as they loaded
mortars and tamped their musket shot
down errant barrels. Then, the sudden
amputees begging to be flung upon a cart
and stacked in hospitals. How someone forgets
to burn a bridge and the empire flickers eastward
after that. I'd love to see some cities before
they're cinders merely. In Srebrenica
the water towers scored black as winter
oaks. In college, I wanted to go to Baghdad.
My friend's dad was in the embassy
in Istanbul, and said he went "There" once
on business before "all this messiness."
His prudish diction and clean fingernails. "I loved
the markets There," he said, careful not
to remember much. Poor loud-mouthed
spook, selling fake explosives in some shattered
souk. He probably believed they believed
he was Russian. I was thinking of Tolstoy's
princes, and how the most beautiful passages
are less about peace than dailyness:
a wolf hunt, say, or waiting for horses
in some forgotten inn, a duel between
two idle rivals. I was thinking about this
when I was laying riprap at my father's house,
packing stone into the soft banks
of my father's ditches. The gnat-busy
misery of summer labor, the work
I hated with childish force. How in a moment
of swelter I blamed him for the sad fact
of work itself, the drone and sacrifice,
and went home hot and silent. He called me
later and said he'd finally killed the deer
that ate his marigolds. Next spring, he said,
they'd bloom much better. He's getting better
at promising things. His history sinks down to me
after after-dinner cups of tea: a paper route
from fifty years ago, or the cost of cigarettes in Idaho,
in 1971, when he spent the summer sawing
lumber and daydreaming about the draft. Poor
bland Canada, he thought, thinking of his future.
When Nixon ditched the draft, my father
was free. Poor kings, thought Tolstoy,

the slaves of history. When my father
flicked his cigarette at the dry weeds
like a curse, I thought of Moscow's fires,
the trampled winter wheat, and all
the wrecked estates in the vast October
pages of *War and Peace*. He seemed happy
then, my father. He said he liked his new wife
better than the last. But he is agony
to read. What would you think, he asked
me once, if Nixon saved your life?

Gregory Lawless
170

¹⁷⁰ Gregory Lawless, "[Riprap](#)," [Salamander](#), collected in *Foreclosure*, Back Pages Publishers

St. Elmo's Fire (1985)

Near the nurses' station, Emilio Estevez asks Andie MacDowell, "Do you still like Woody Allen movies?" and the alarm system you've built inside your body to track cultural offenses goes off, but you're safe, Emilio Estevez isn't in love with you; he didn't get a new job just so he could stalk you in a chauffeured car, or call the hospital where you work to find out which ski resort you're at so he could drive up there and humiliate himself before a stud in a Pendleton blanket. *What is the tone of this movie*, you might be asking yourself, as Ally Sheedy's eyes brim with tears (again)—the girl never takes off her pearls, not even for shower sex. St. Elmo's fire is an electric phenomenon that tricks sailors into thinking they have to become Republicans to make bank, when there are infinite other ways to sell out. Rob Lowe's face demonstrates the inverse relationship between sex appeal and net worth in this universe—an empath from a good family doesn't need a rich boyfriend; she wants a lost boy, a reckless saxophonist she can financially support until they negotiate the terms and conditions of canceling her virginity.

Leigh Stein

171

¹⁷¹ Leigh Stein, "[St. Elmo's Fire \(1985\)](#)," collected in [What to Miss When](#), Soft Skull Press

white horse and the moon

They got to the campsite late, and the father had to set up in the dark.
His daughter slept in the car, her mouth open
as if about to sing.
The horses came, escaped from their fences. They ran,
strong & trembling
through the camp, so close to the father. In the night,
the white horse began to glow.
Look, said the father, who fetched his sleepy daughter
from the car.
And she stared at her unafraid father and his happiness,
which hung like a moon.

Katie Schmid
172

¹⁷² [Katie Schmid](#), "[white horse and the moon](#)," collected in [Nowhere](#), [University of New Mexico Press](#)

from "Testaments Scratched into a Water Station Barrel"

In the desert, the moon
shivers. Tonight, to stay awake, I'll cut my feet
with glass.
Outside Oaxaca, in a clinic, my mother said,
"I hate your Indian face."
In the dream I'm running. My limbs skeletal
and scabbed.
After my mother's death, I found, in a box,
her wedding dress.
As I lifted the lid, a stench corkscrewed
into my nostrils:
the dress had curdled like milk. During the day
I gather tinder.
Paper. Shed snakeskin. When the last light
above the mountains
knots into stars, I crouch under mesquite,
make a fire.
Sometimes the moon stops shivering. Sometimes
I tally what I owe.
In the dream I'm running through a hallway.
The floor uneven.
The walls green. Last month, as my son blew out
the candles
on his cake, I noticed, for the first time,
the hideous shape
of his nose. Tonight I'll pinch my thighs to stay
awake. My mother,
in the clinic, said, "The rain has a fever, it
needs plenty
of rest, it needs to drink plenty of water." The doctor
scribbled in a file
then asked for more money. If my mother
could see me now!
My feet bloody. My face darker than ever.
Tonight, to stay awake,
I'll sit close to the fire. In the dream I stumble,
but I never let go
of my right breast: an urn heavy with my own
ashes, an urn
I'm lugging God-knows-where.

Eduardo C. Corral

173

¹⁷³ [Eduardo C. Corral, "Testaments Scratched into a Water Station Barrel \[In the desert, the moon...\]"](#), *Poetry*, collected in [Guillotine](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

In Dispraise of Poetry

When the King of Siam disliked a courtier,
he gave him a beautiful white elephant.
The miracle beast deserved such ritual
that to care for him properly meant ruin.
Yet to care for him improperly was worse.
It appears the gift could not be refused.

Jack Gilbert
174

¹⁷⁴ [Jack Gilbert](#), "[In Dispraise of Poetry](#)," collected in [Monolithos](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

from "The Dead Are Everywhere Telling Us Things"

She picked up a pencil off the table. She wasn't writing

a grocery list. She was making notes for something
small sentences like algebraic equations.
The cardinals were still sitting on the tulip tree.
Our oldest daughter can't stand the sound of a pencil.
She is autistic & will scream.
But she was at school. My wife continued to write.
It wasn't raining. It was early, the mail had not arrived yet.
My wife was gathering every scrap of paper she could,
writing it down, the sounds she could hear.
I no longer existed. I quietly stood & left the room.
I faded into the white page of the day. Afternoon arrived,
then evening. She is still down there writing.
I put the children to bed. She has not eaten.
The moon has changed from crescent to full.
Soon the snow will fall. Verbs have replaced
where my fingers were. My daughters
are metaphors of dead trees,
kites & tangled ribbons. The house caught fire
& burned to ash & then resurrected in the steam
of the rain. Our daughters are grown
& have moved away. Piles of bills
stacked by the door. The sheriff arrives
with his eviction notices. & still her pencil
scratches. We had become old as orchids
or a city. She was writing the story
of all our long days together.
For only love guards the gates
of such great aloneness, she said,
our bodies somewhere vanishing.

Sean Thomas Dougherty

175

¹⁷⁵ Sean Thomas Dougherty, "[The Dead Are Everywhere Telling Us Things](#)," collected in [The Dead Are Everywhere Telling Us Things](#), Jacar Press

Who Do Mambo

A sports writer complained to Joe Louis about another boxer who didn't like to take punches to the body. Louis replied, "Who do?"

Mon Dieu, said the Hindoo, *I don't want to stop drinking*. Who do?

But sometimes you have to put down your glass so you can pick it up for another round. At the University Ladies' Tea with the pill-popping dean's wife and Marxist shrews, you don't want to talk to them or anyone else. Who do?

But like Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady* you say How do you do, call on Andrew Marvell and George Herbert to rescue you, but you draw the short straw, and there's Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music* with her igloo smile and Christmas sweater. You are the Sioux in this cavalry charge, and you need some firewater pronto, gin and lighter fluid or a gun, but that's so American, and who would you shoot but yourself, so you try to spin some voodoo around this vampire soirée. Where are the chicken bones and bat fangs when you need them, Miss Nancy Drew?

Face facts, you don't have a clue. Let me preview my upcoming bout of spinal meningitis for you, or shall I invoke Bob Dylan, mathematician and Hebrew troubadour, for I am tangled up in glue or something like it, goo or ooze. If I were a cow, I'd be bigger than I am, say moo and pray to Shiva, but as it is, I am a fourth-rate kangaroo praying for rescue in a bottle, my mind a zoo, a giraffe popping out my left ear, a zebra out my right. Whew, that hurt, but so much does these days. *Much Ado About Nothing*, that's my play, Beatrice and crew. Let's review.

Everything I adore is either forbidden to me or taboo, which is pretty much the same thing. O Alice, I grew an inch with that one, or was it my nose? Hey, Pinocchio, you want me to chop you for firewood? Who do? Wait, I have a few things to say about hue. I'm orange but, *carissimo*, you are as blue as you were the day Picasso, or was it Braque, drew you in Montmartre in the Bateau Lavoir, and now that my shoe is wedged in my mouth again and my underpants askew, I'll take this opportunity to bid you an affectionate adieu.

Parting is such sweet sorrow that I would pitch some woo with you till next Wednesday; O Shiva, the queue to your divine brain is teeming with supplicants, so in lieu of the old one-two, I'll sign off. Something nasty just blew in from Kazakhstan, and my electric bill's twenty years overdue.

Mirror, mirror on the wall—Oh, God, not you.

Barbara Hamby
176

¹⁷⁶ Barbara Hamby, "Who Do Mambo," *Boulevard*, collected in *All-Night Lingo Tango*, University of Pittsburgh Press

All I Know

The Statue of Liberty was packed in crates of lentils
and there is a species of catfish with scales
so tough that piranhas can't chew through
to red softness. I'm thinking of what is vital,
today. The willow tree in my dreams that sways
and a little girl singing quiet approximations of hymns.
To the night. To the flames which are
tragic and kinetic and aren't ever receding.
I was the other day looking out over
what I believe is a river—forgive me
for not knowing the vague taxonomies of water—
and it was all noise, which is good
for some who struggle to sleep
or forget or change or learn or have any time
that isn't quilted by pain.
I was attempting to memorize the wet folds going by,
imagining the smoothness of rock
that was hidden beneath it all,
and composing another version of this poem.
One which has no complaint
inside its sour heart. No unanswered questions.
No bitterness for how it's turned out,
this life. My own. In the news this morning:
the death of a very great baseball player
and I shouldn't be so sad, I know.
Not when I'm agreeing with the girl in the elevator
that we have decades left, maybe,
before the world becomes even more of an irredeemable hellscape.
Before we're nostalgic for the Kardashians.
Before it wasn't so bad, then,
when nobody was heaving up
the bloody rags of their lungs
and nobody had figured out how to clone Henry Kissinger.
I have never figured out
what happiness is
or how to be in it. Never learned what is behind
door number three, if I want
a better life. If at this point one is even possible.
If this desperation is viral. If my name is good before any door.
I don't think so, not tonight, when
I'm trying to pretend that winter isn't real
and there are trees which glow
in the night and insects that sing beneath the bone light
of the moon. O alternate heart:
who could I be in another life,
and upon whom could I visit harm
like a storm? To dream of potency
is to write this poem and feel no pain whatsoever.

Remember me, I'm always saying
to the air as if it were listening,
sympathetic, capable of the idea of mercy.
One summer I taught myself
how to announce in Latin
to the world that I wanted nothing at all
when, in truth, I was desperate
to be heard, understood, loved, my name a warm memory.
There was the wind and the ocean
and in it there were whales
that lowed in the darkness like the onset of collapse.
There was this dark will
and what could I say but my name and what hurt?

Paul Guest
177

¹⁷⁷ [Paul Guest, "All I Know," *The American Poetry Review*](#)

from "A Concordance of Leaves"

)

& having been warned to tell the truth
& nothing but the truth,

)

I, the undersigned, do hereby swear
the sun-cured page

)

of each tobacco leaf awaits
to be crushed & burned into lungs

)

each olive tree has a thousand eyes
that ripen into sight

)

& the pomegranates of Toura
are planets

[...]

)

If to Bethlehem we must pass through Wadi al-Nar

)

If your license plates are painted blue & black

)

If your permit permits no passage across bypass highways

)

If from a distance the road carves alephs or alifs

)

If no-man's-land is where men live who have no land

)

If you lower your sunshield & block the hilltop settlement

)

If Wadi al-Nar is the Valley of Fire

)

If we must travel beneath the level of our eventual grave

)

If we arrive & they ask *how are you*, we are to say *thank God*

Philip Metres
178

¹⁷⁸ [Philip Metres](#), "[A Concordance of Leaves \[& having been warned\]](#)," collected in [Shrapnel Maps](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

December 3, 2016

Everything inside of me has changed, and everything outside of me has changed.

The first time this happened I was too young to understand it, Naomi.

My body experienced both longing and worry like a series of small electrocutions.

Unsleeping, I read in my mother's books all night, a light clipped to my head—the sort a miner might wear, or a surgeon.

Today I search for language in the dark, textless until the morning when I write to you again.

(Nothing before your eyes at night, the doctor says, and I am trying to listen.)

When Maggie Nelson teaches, she scans the room *for a face that also shows signs of being worried.*

For this I return again and again to the mirror.

Here the gate swings open between everything inside of me and everything outside of me.

Nelson writes *We cannot read the darkness, who cannot read it.*

A lesson nobody told the child with the lamp on her head.

A lesson learned too late to become useful.

Rachel Mennies
179

¹⁷⁹ [Rachel Mennies](#), "[December 3, 2016](#)," [American Poetry Review](#), collected in [The Naomi Letters](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Forensics

For a few years I studied the faces of malefactors and con men.
The quick zigzag of the colonel,

for example, who took pictures of himself
in his victims' lingerie.

I was mesmerized by such dioramas,
having fallen in love with one once

a long time ago,
and can still picture the vermilion border,

the lips and hands that debouched right into me
who must have wanted to be misled.

Now my eyebrow is perpetually raised,
I can't bring it down.

I changed lovers,
changed the lock on my front door,

locked the car where there were no signs
of intrusion other than my missing clothes

and the passenger door left open
on the city street where I'd parked.

Only he and I had the key,
which is lost now

and cannot be duplicated.
Do not resuscitate, I say to my mind.

Do not duplicate.
Dupe, we say as verb and noun.

Sounds like what it is, what I am—
I hope the city where this happened

has filed the truth somewhere in its archives.
Who'll tell the other stories?

Not I, say the lampposts.
Not I, say the dogs.

Not I, says the I
who's scanned everything

and scanned the scans onto memory cards
and locked the memory cards in a safety-deposit box.

I did it late at night
as if I were the criminal

and maybe I was, and am.
Often I dreamed he dismembered someone,

hid her in the walls,
and in these dreams I was participant and observer

as I am again now, dreaming of writing this.

Catherine Barnett

180

¹⁸⁰ [Catherine Barnett](#), "[Forensics](#)," [Poetry International](#), collected in [Human Hours](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Iggy Pop Died For Our Sins

Or so Sid Vicious believed when he said
he wanted to live hard and die young
like Iggy, a martyr for rock and roll.
He would not be persuaded that Iggy was
thirty by then, living in Berlin, working
with Bowie on his third or fourth comeback.
A friend who grew up in Ann Arbor lived
for a while in the trailer park where
Iggy—who was Jim in those days—grew up.
He recalled Iggy shuffling around
in torn jeans and gold lame slippers
like your grandma might wear when
her bunions hurt. I've never had
a chance to see Iggy in concert,
and Sid and the Sex Pistols came and went
so quickly they were done almost as soon
as we heard about them. My wife got
to see Iggy before we met and so have
various friends over the years; they have
their stories though Iggy never spit at them
the way Henry Rollins did at me (he missed),
and as long as Iggy and I are alive
there's hope. The fact is, Iggy was always there,
never fully in the limelight or completely
obscure. I was fifteen when
Raw Power came out. I looked for it
but never found in stores overloaded with
the Allman Brothers and Steely Dan.
So Iggy Pop has not died and at 70 can
still go shirtless in public, a move
most men avoid after 50 or so.
I began to hate The Sex Pistols when
a neighbor who fancied himself
a devil worshipper began putting
his speakers in the window on Sunday mornings
and blasting *Never Mind the Bollocks*
at inhumane volumes. That was in the years
I claimed "Better living through chemistry"
and believed it. Young men behaving badly
need role models so we had Keith Richards,
Harry Crews, Bukowski. Iggy was already
an anachronism by then, a name
mentioned only in conjunction with
Bowie's Berlin albums. He had not died
for our sins, so we had to forge
our own paths to redemption. The romance
of the drug life evaporates and then
it's just the drug and the withering veins.

And I was never so in love with
my own demise that I planned anything
other than a long life. Eventually
the drugs slipped away and I had to grasp
that I couldn't drink as I did in my twenties.
In fact, I couldn't drink at all.
About the time I sobered up, I began
to listen to Iggy and now I heard
not a role model but a fellow survivor,
someone whose tracks I could follow
even if he walked in gold lame slippers.
Some I knew never found that path,
others hang on in bodies older than they are.
More than once my buddy Tom has said
he wonders why he was able to unwrap
the tie from around his arm, to put the cap
on the tequila bottle and walk away.
Sometimes when it's too late to blast
The Stooges or the MC5, I feel it too,
and run down that list of the missing,
aimless notes you might hear from
the band as they twiddle knobs, test
chords, pretend the audience isn't there.
Iggy always knew the audience was there.
Why else would he stage dive, smear himself
with peanut butter, roll in broken glass,
taunt bikers into beating the shit out of him?
Why else if not to bring people who hoped
he would do those very things
so they could tell stories about it later?
Sid Vicious died not long after saying
he wanted to be like Iggy. I wish
he could have been. Destruction requires
an effort, as well as someone
to monitor the wounds, to warn
how close you came this time
and tell you not to do it again. But
you always would. We had to kill Iggy Pop
so we both could walk away.

Al Maginnes
181

¹⁸¹ [Al Maginnes, "Iggy Pop Died For Our Sins," Birmingham Poetry Review](#)

Magical Object

It's a little-known fact
One of the most magical objects in the world
Is Sylvia Plath's prom dress
Strapless white duchesse satin
Full-skirted with a thousand layers of tulle
And a pleated heart-shaped bodice
I put it on
 I put it on
To cut an exquisite debutante silhouette
Because I need its power today
My marriage is over and my youth is gone
I need knowledge facility vision
And I don't want to drive into this tree
I zipped up the back by myself
And said, I want to live
 Pouf went the dress into a wide circle
Of vibrating luminous threads
Now I'm flying over my house
Where icy clouds blow over the roof
In a severe white winter sky
The sky is blue on Pluto I've read
Two hundred and thirty degrees below zero
Cold as the hearts of the enemies of poetry
 Nothing can pull down
The froth of this décolletage
As I hitch up the floor-length chiffon
My blue ankles peek from the hemline
As I soar over the ice fields of Pluto
Nothing can tear apart
These radiant waistline seams
 Plath knows what I mean
She who lived through the coldest London winter
Who wrote at night with chilled fingers
And made a rough decision
Her poems thrust from a scorched heart
Her line breaks slice through
 I put it on
My shoulders point above the glaring satin
To hold up the bodice my breasts fill out
The spotless tulle propels my body forward
Where are we going now, Plath?
What shall I do with your prom queen power?
Nobody nowhere can say

Camille Guthrie

182

¹⁸² [Camille Guthrie](#), "[Magical Object](#)," [Interim: A Journal](#), collected in [Diamonds](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

from "Happinefs"

9.

Ha ha my heart, red feather of joy.
Ha! Academical Village! *Ha ha*, diversity.
Ha! Direct Loans. *Ha ha*, poetry!
Ha ha ha Eurydice's pierced foot & *ha!* My ears
pierced with white stars. *Ha*, thesis! *Ha ha ha*
Distinguished Major! My parents divorcing, *ha!*
Ha! My mother's secret apartment, plastic smell
of burnt-out headphones, *ha ha ha*, diploma, *ha ha!*
Ha ha, library, where I cried for a year & *ha*
Financial Aid, where I cried for two. *Ha ha!* My aid
disbursing a few late coins. *Ha*, cutting my hair & crying.
Ha ha! My Grandpa laid out in his black suit
his collar pinched too high on his neck, remember
in Camelot, how the great thorn trees wept?
Words & blood, words & blood, *ha ha!*

Kiki Petrosino

183

183 [Kiki Petrosino](#), "[Happinefs](#)," [Tin House](#), collected in [White Blood](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

The Life

The first time I watched he lifted his shirt
to reveal the .45, drew a finger to his mouth
in a gesture of silence and ignored me

until today. Seventy degrees and squirrels
swarming over trees like fluffy maggots, spring
floating up through their blood, making them twist

in the air as if two winds are being reconciled
within their bodies. Torpid glide of cars,
Escorts and Caddys making the pilgrimage

to his drive, today his business conducted
outside, grams and bills passing hands
beneath the improvisation of silver chimes,

a few staying for a beer and toke, smoke
giving the air topography, shapes that molt
into dreams, into nothing. When it was my turn

for such a life I was good at finding veins
and cutting lines, knowing when to smile
like the gates of heaven swinging wide

or touch the handle of a bat, the slow
caress of vengeance. One week
I made five grand on the couch, saying yes,

saying no, whispering numbers to the phone
while Billy flitted between the windows,
interrogating both light and dark

for what didn't belong, shaking and promising
to graduate from the next high into detox.
When I came home from getting baggies and beer

to find Billy separated from himself, the blast
up close, I was half an hour from the airport
and four days in New Orleans finishing

everything I had, half an hour and four days
from sitting in a wicker chair and staring
at the ocean, convinced it was breathing,

that the land was sweating and soon to open
its mouth. I watch my neighbor like anyone
who's done a certain job and moved on, hands

sensitive to the gestures, mind alert in
unexpected ways, how I can still tell
from a distance if there's something in a sock,

by the quaver in a voice if what's really
being said isn't *What's up* but *motherfucker*.
Neighbors talk about burning him out or blowing

him up, pet their shotguns as if they'd scatter
what scares them like a puff on a dandelion.
Today in this fine weather I watch

as he fades into the corner of his porch,
white skin eclipsed by shadow, a man habitually
invisible. When he leans out and points

finger my way, it's with an arrogance
I'd forgotten, the high of living
with the faith you know precisely how you'll die.

Bob Hicok

184

¹⁸⁴ [Bob Hicok](#), "[The Life](#)," collected in [Plus Shipping](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

When

When I stopped taking the medication
When I opened the window and saw
the long shadows on the lawn and saw
myself in the shadows forever
When I had a coffee and popped an antihistamine
and gazed onto the expanse and saw myself as a worm
When I saw myself as less than a worm
As a blade of grass on the artificial lawn
that a happy man had created and enjoyed
cultivating every Saturday
When I stopped taking the medication
When I knew that I could allow
myself to be manufactured
to be happier
When I knew with certainty
When I thought of my family
It made me sad
It made me sad

Lauren Shapiro

185

¹⁸⁵ [Lauren Shapiro](#), "[When](#)," collected in [Arena](#), [Cleveland State University Poetry Center](#)

Marriage

Marriage, our problem solving system, transforms stale breath, stuffed blue recycling bags, soap slivers, and internet porn into stale bags of internet soap, stuffed blue breath, and recycling porn. Look at those split wet candy wrappers. If the problem solving system recognizes danger, it asks, *Will you act like your mother or father? Will you smoke cigars for breakfast, fuck your secretary, buy ten new pairs of shoes and redecorate the living room again, unzip that other man's pants while admiring your manicure?* The problem solving system can make you wear a toupee, hostage your children or dog, stuff your secretary slivers into a stale bag of porn breath, smoke the unzipped living room of admiration, manicure your secretary danger, dog your hostages, and children your mother and father into a pair of blue candy cigars, your ten new toupees redecorating the breakfast soap or fucking the internet dog in another man's pants. The problem solving system problems your system solving till you recycle smoke, till you breakfast on secretary, porn a toupee, candy a split—till you're unzipped by death, that wet wrapper.

Landon Godfrey

186

¹⁸⁶ [Landon Godfrey](#), "[Marriage](#)," collected in [Inventory of Doubts](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

Southern Cone

I wept with my grandmother when Reagan
was shot because that's what she wanted.
At night, she'd tell me about a city built
by Evita for children in Buenos Aires, the city
of her first exile. Children went about
municipal duties in the small post office
and city hall to learn to be good citizens.
In Argentina she sold bread pudding
and gave French and English lessons from her
home for money to buy shoes. She promised
we'd go someday, but we never did. She'd say
Peruvians were gossipy, Argentineans snobbish, but
Chileans were above reproach. A little bit migrant,
a little bit food insecurity, she was the brass bust
of JFK on her altar, the holy card of Saint Anthony
on her TV. She was her green card and the ebony cross
above her bed. The lilted yes when she answered
the phone, and the song she liked to hum about bells
and God that ended tirin-tin-tin-tirin-tin-tan: miles
and ages away from her story, she sang it.

Carmen Giménez Smith

187

¹⁸⁷ [Carmen Giménez Smith](#), "[Southern Cone](#)," [Harper's](#), collected in [Be Recorder](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Clauses After Verbs of Fearing

She said, *Sometimes it's good to forget*
to remember: you can think it
but it doesn't make any sense—like the cortège

of names of 77,297 Czech Jews
murdered in World War II that winds
around the walls inside

the Pinkas Synagogue while the hands
of the old Town Hall's Hebrew clock keep
turning back. When St. John of Nepomuk

was thrown off the Charles Bridge
for refusing to divulge secrets
of the confessional, a cluster of stars

appeared over the spot in the river
where he drowned, but should my mother
become synonymous with epilogues

in Prague, there would be
no more stars—not for ships
that triangulate their way to ports

they've never glimpsed—and birds would have to
find their way with words to some distant leafing
branch. Before she slips from consciousness

like a slip of the tongue, becomes only
the shell of *she'll* or a camellia's
flushed cameo, consult the Latin grammar

on the use of clauses after verbs of
fearing: how to conjugate something that is
not wanted, as in *I fear*

lest she fail. Silhouette
is the hardest word in the English language
to spell because it is intentionally made

incomplete, something of ephemeral
value, and because it is not
English. It's so early, morning, the world's still

an x-ray clipped to my window
like the photograph I took of stone pines
at night on the grounds of Villa Aurelia, teased

and coiffed—a forest of brains—taken
on the grounds that we can't say
what darkness looks like

any other way: sweet as the hollow-stemmed
honeysuckle, sheen of gloss when
it can't remember its g.

Angie Estes
188

¹⁸⁸ [Angie Estes, "Clauses After Verbs of Fearing," *The Plume Anthology of Poetry, 2013*, collected in *Parole*, Oberlin College Press](#)

Barn Burning

I was sixteen, driving
home from sweet wine

and fucking in the far fields.
When I opened the door

to the burning barn,
my lips, raw from kissing,

stung, swelled from the heat.
I was the devil

staring
from the edge of the woods

at over one hundred horses
fleeing from their stalls,

my long red hair
snaking in hot wind.

Out of the smoke,
a mare walked up to me,

slowly, as if she knew me—
as if we weren't on fire.

Kristin Bock

189

¹⁸⁹ [Kristin Bock](#), "[Barn Burning](#)," *Aperçus*, collected in [Glass Bikini](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

My Timid Eternity

I am thinking how lonesome it will be in Heaven
with only George Washington and me there.
I suppose we will recite the Beatitudes
and wonder when they are coming—
the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers,
those who are pure in heart.
Roasting marshmallows in the evening
I will broach the subject of lies.
He will hand me a wig
and some leeches, which I will decline,
still thinking about the others—
if they went to the Babies Camp by mistake
we could maybe get a letter out.
Heaven should not be full of worry
but if anyone knows more about it than this,
if you have your own version—
leafy, airy, full, fountainous—
bless you, you are more lonesome
than either the General or I.

Mary Ruefle
190

¹⁹⁰ [Mary Ruefle](#), "[My Timid Eternity](#)," collected in *Indeed I Was Pleased with the World*, [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

Alabama Pace

When two teenagers sit in a pick-up truck in a Wal-Mart parking lot smoking weed and
talking in hushed tones and jumping at the sight of headlights and
When some little skinhead spray-paints a friend's trailer bright red all-caps Q-U-E-E-R-S and your first
thought is to call the cops and your second is to do anything but call the cops
When a shiny black silverado rolls down a tinted window to shout at two kids walking on the highway,
“What are you?” and damn could you give us a break it's two pm on a Tuesday
When I'm slinging burgers and an old man in a Korean war vet cap reaches through the
window to grab my uniform shirtsleeve, touch my tattoos with purple fingers, and
When a deer carcass rots on Highway 98 for a few days before anyone gets out to it
and we swerve to miss it but still run over the legs, when we feel it through the tires,
When church gets out and little old white women flood the streets in their Lily Pulitzer and
wide-brim straw hats and shout-speak gossip about other old white church ladies and
When we all squeeze into a bathroom stall to shave a girl's head, laughing and maybe breathing
in a little hair, rubbing our hands over her scalp, closed away from the outside, and
When the rat snakes in my basement start creeping up the stairs in the summer and when
love bugs paint the front of my car and when stray cats sun themselves on the porch
When the kudzu chokes the live oaks and the bays and swamps sparkle and we jump from the
dock in t shirts and khaki fast food uniform shorts and get a break from the heat and
When we all donate a little bit to our friend's go fund me for surgery and we bring jugs of clean
water to his apartment with the bad pipes and watch each other get to our cars and
When we gather and cook for each other and talk about a different place, somewhere with
giant trees and seasons, a farm with no overtime or church ladies or spray paint,
When we can walk together for miles on a gravel road and never see another soul, never have to
confront how we might be seen by a passing car glimpsing only our hair and our walk,

When we can kiss each other goodbye every morning at dawn, and know we will kiss each other hello
at sunset.

Em Palughi
191

¹⁹¹ [Em Palughi, "Alabama Pace," *Black Warrior Review*](#)

Holy People

After a very bad thing happens
it may feel like you will never
call your mother back.

The bathroom was quiet and well-lit,
and you hid there.

It's not that anyone was being unkind,
it's just that it had been hours of talking
without intensity or connection.

Newspaper articles
are beginning to discuss
what it means to hide in bathrooms.

Hiding because someone insulted you in a faculty meeting
is different than hiding because there's been too much talk
and too little of everything else.

When you wake up,
that's when the mosquito begins.

You might be a holy person.

Holy people never feel at home,
so they make trouble for everyone
while looking exhausted.

In any case,
I hope you'll come outside again soon.

Mostly you have to stop worshipping the idea
of you being horrible.

I like you better than almost anyone,
and the fact that you don't agree
that you're worth something
hurts my feelings.

I've never had to tell you
why we write—you always seemed to know it.
But I guess there are other things
you think you know,
and it's not really up to me to change your mind.
I still tried, though, didn't I?
A prehistoric woman with swinging breasts,
banging and banging on a coconut.

Hannah Gamble

¹⁹² [Hannah Gamble](#), "[Holy People](#)," [The Ampersand Review](#), collected in [The Traditional Feel of the Ballroom](#), [Trio House Press, Inc.](#)

It's Sadder If You're a Girl

so consider becoming one
before you die. Would it be
the worst thing? You could
defy expectations by being fast,
tall, sure of foot. You should
befriend a boy by making him king.
Stay away from the rope swing
as long as possible. Let someone see
you pray in private. Maybe memorize
all the poisonous plants. Stay out
of the woods, even if you're pretty
sure you know the way. Never go
when it's wet & windy—air rapt
with electricity! What do you *think*
happens when you wield your powers
alone & pit them against the weight
of a more compelling storyline?

Glitches, water sprites, your very womb:
a Whirlpool of Fate. Might as well turn
the hose on the whole endeavor.

It's sadder if
you're a strong swimmer,
a climber—child hexed
by Hubris, or kissed
by Hecate. The fallen tree
straddling the ravine
can fall again & damn that
rope is slick & brittle.

You know this.
You'll show them.

Where the branch creaks,
or current calls. When the wet rope
swings back for you, you'll catch
your death. Hear that
foghorn in the distance? God,
look at you: you're practically
trembling for it.

Karyna McGlynn
193

¹⁹³ [Karyna McGlynn](#), "[It's Sadder If You're a Girl](#)," collected in [50 Things Kate Bush Taught Me About the Multiverse](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Bonfire Opera

In those days, there was a woman in our circle
who was known, not only for her beauty,
but for taking off all her clothes and singing opera.
And sure enough, as the night wore on and the stars
emerged to stare at their reflections on the sea,
and everyone had drunk a little wine,
she began to disrobe, loose her great bosom,
and the tender belly, pale in the moonlight,
the Viking hips, and to let her torn raiment
fall to the sand as we looked up from the flames.
And then a voice lifted into the dark, high and clear
as a flock of blackbirds. And everything was very still,
the way the congregation quiets when the priest
prays over the incense, and the smoke wafts
up into the rafters. I wanted to be that free
inside the body, the doors of pleasure
opening, one after the next, an arpeggio
climbing the ladder of sky. And all the while
she was singing and wading into the water
until it rose up to her waist and then lapped
at the underside of her breasts, and the aria
drifted over us, her soprano spare and sharp
in the night air. And even though I was young,
somehow, in that moment, I heard it,
the song inside the song, and I knew then
that this was not the hymn of promise
but the body's bright wailing against its limits.
A bird caught in a cathedral—the way it tries
to escape by throwing itself, again and again,
against the stained glass.

Danusha Laméris

194

¹⁹⁴ [Danusha Laméris](#), "[Bonfire Opera](#)," [American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Bonfire Opera](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

The Problem of the Domestic

Should be easier this morning
since you've kept me up all night
with your allergy attack,

forgetting to take your pill
until it's too late
and petting the cat because
you're a stooge for her slutty ways,
letting her sleep on your lap when
you know you shouldn't.

And there's me, knowing soon
you'll wake up and come find me

here, in the garage,

where I'm smoking and trying
to write a poem in which you appear,
to peevishly announce we need
to quit smoking while reaching for
the pack. But even this perfectly

annoying entrance is bad for
business:

Who better than you,
topless in your plaid pajama pants
which are, as ever, turned inside out?

And to those who'd say
there's worse than the trouble
of an irritated man standing hairy
in the January grace of

a fine north Florida morning—
kudos to you for knowing
what I'm talking about.

Erin Belieu
195

¹⁹⁵ Erin Belieu, "[The Problem of the Domestic](#)," *Prairie Schooner*, collected in *Slant Six*, Copper Canyon Press

Antivenom

Today in the taxi I got a fare from Parkchester to the Bronx Zoo. She finally came out of the building, put her baby in the car seat, and said “I forgot something upstairs.” Then she left the baby in the car and went back inside for about seven or eight minutes. I couldn’t believe it. I’m a safe person to leave a baby with, but she didn’t know that.

I was nervous. Some people live without contradiction. I remained calm though the situation was beyond the job description.

Don Byas had a serpent’s tooth affixed to the octave key of his tenor saxophone. Perhaps it helped him push into the wilderness, or to ward off evil.

One sunny July Kafka says he wept over the report of the trial of Marie Abraham, who, because of poverty and hunger, strangled her nine-month old with a man’s tie she used as a garter.

Sean Singer
196

¹⁹⁶ [Sean Singer](#), “[Antivenom](#),” collected in [Today in the Taxi](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

The Lone Acceptable Application of Daylight

is in the expression PUT A LITTLE
DAYLIGHT between you and what's
troubling, set out moving,
distance yourself from the pharaonic
shade of the household names and the power

couples. The quality of cloud in one locale
or another, solace of the contrail
noon—who cares? Why even
look up, when all we'll see is people
looking down? Their grapefruit juice

on the balcony. Their news. Their delight
at the sight of us. We entertain them.
We kiss and spit and strike. We're always
changing. They like it when
we fight: I'LL KNOCK THE LIVING—

Natalie Shapero
197

¹⁹⁷ [Natalie Shapero, "The Lone Acceptable Application of Daylight," Narrative](#), collected in [Popular Longing](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Stray Sparks

There goes the lightbulb filament—
another soul uploaded to the ether.
cigarette hissing in a plastic cup,
the party on the deck entering the hour
of ominous sounds in the woods. Maybe
wild animals, maybe lesser demons—
strewing the garbage, thieving chickens
and itty dogs, clawing at the sliding doors.
The crash cart is rolled from the room.
The daughter looks at her drunk father
slumped in a hospital chair. Something flowers
in the air above the bed but no one
can say what. Even with a full box of matches
no one can get the pilot relit,
the oven stays cold, but at least the burners work.
The meal is spoiled, but at least there's wine.
The party guests disappear one at a time
into the trees. The two who are left
take off their clothes together.
There goes a candle wick
into a sea of melted wax. For an instant
it flames on the surface. Hot lights above
the amusement pier, screams and laughter,
then everything's frozen solid.
Step out carefully. Take an ax.

Kim Addonizio

198

¹⁹⁸ Kim Addonizio, "[Stray Sparks](#)," *The Dark Horse*, collected in [Mortal Trash](#), W. W. Norton & Company

Dungeon Master's Guide to Eight Grade

*"As long as your campaign remains viable,
it will continue a slow process of change and growth."
—Gary Gygax*

When you come back in the fall of 1983
your friends listen to Z-103 instead of KIX-106,
Luke Skywalker isn't cool anymore
and they might still watch *The A-Team*
but no one talks about it. Will you search each room
or move on quickly? Roll for traps. Boys swear
like their uncles. Armpit hair is a status symbol.
The lunchroom is an unguarded wilderness
of potential humiliation. So is conversation.
This is when *every* girl is out of your league,
when you realize such leagues even exist.
It's Panama Jack shirts and parachute pants,
it's when neatness begins to count
in algebra and Earth science
and how you part your hair. It's when art
is no longer for everyone. When size matters.
Roll for attributes. Choose alignments.
Every outcome will matter forever.
The halls smell like hairspray and belch.
The Cold War heats up, there are drills
for when the Russians attack—basically, duck.
This is when curve balls actually curve,
the kid who used to play short is in right,
the kid who played right field is in the band,
some new kid the star of every team.
The answers are all behind the screen.
You stop mentioning your interests,
start planning evasive action
to survive from homeroom to history.
Life happens one period at a time. It's turn-based
and someone else's move. Roll
and roll again. Each day's final bell
is a tally mark scratched into painted cinderblock.
The world is populated with non-player characters.
Later you'll see there's always a Cold War somewhere.
Not every dragon lives in a dungeon.
The last to realize this dies first.

Amorak Huey
199

¹⁹⁹ [Amorak Huey](#), "[Dungeon Master's Guide to Eight Grade](#)," [The Collagist](#), collected in [Boom Box](#), [Sundress Publications](#)

[Lately, I've been feeling about poetry]

Lately, I've been feeling about poetry like sex. Now and then I'm in the mood but then the mood doesn't bloom. The thought of it makes me a little sick to my stomach. Lead-up, lead-in, cleanup. Mixing of martini, metaphor, or the hard bangery of no metaphor at all. Cumbersome *I* like a big dick you have to handle. The *we* with all that *we are getting ice cream, we are thinking about getting a cat*. How does *we* think about stuff? Is it a brain stem thing? An art I never mastered. I have met people who would bang Ted Hughes on Plath's grave and then write about it. *I, too, bit his cheek*. That sort of crap. Yeah, I, too, have been that person. I want to say *at times*. *Long ago. I'm better now*. Really I'm just tireder. A guy, I'm going to name him Delaney, once said to me when I wanted to be done with him, *now that you've had your little orgasm*, murder in his eyes. I called down all the angels from the skies to get him out the door so I could bolt it and wash him off of me. His big hand reaching for my throat. The prayer I prayed. That was sex and poetry.

Diane Seuss
200

²⁰⁰ [Diane Seuss](#), "[\[Lately, I've been feeling about poetry\]](#)," [Guesthouse](#), collected in [Frank](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Staff Sgt. Metz

Metz is alive for now, standing in line
at the airport Starbucks in his camo gear
and buzz cut, his beautiful new
camel-colored suede boots. His hands
are thick-veined. The good blood
still flows through, given an extra surge
when he slurps his latte, a fleck of foam
caught on his bottom lip.

I can see into the canal in his right ear,
a narrow darkness spiraling deep inside his head
toward the place of dreaming and fractions,
ponds of quiet thought.

In the sixties my brother left for Vietnam,
a war no one understood, and I hated him for it.
When my boyfriend was drafted I made a vow
to write a letter every day, and then broke it.
I was a girl torn between love and the idea of love.
I burned their letters in the metal trash bin
behind the broken fence. It was the summer of love
and I wore nothing under my cotton vest,
my Mexican skirt.

I see Metz later, outside baggage claim,
hunched over a cigarette, mumbling
into his cell phone. He's more real to me now
than my brother was to me then, his big eyes
darting from car to car as they pass.
I watch him breathe into his hands.

I don't believe in anything anymore:
god, country, money or love.
All that matters to me now
is his life, the body so perfectly made,
mysterious in its workings, its oiled
and moving parts, the whole of him
standing up and raising one arm
to hail a bus, his legs pulling him forward,
all the muscle and sinew and living gristle,
the countless bones of his foot trapped in his boot,
stepping off the red curb.

Dorianne Laux

201

²⁰¹ [Dorianne Laux](#), "[Staff Sgt. Metz](#)," collected in [The Book of Men](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Personality State: Persephone

I have seen the silhouettes that bring me heavens,
I have seen my torso, in hours of torn,
ripple laden with captivity, rent with cries
and the sky's white sheet drying in the wind,
weeping, a splash of oceans gone by, reeds,
and rains reciting an archery of wounds.

The twinned nights. In one I cry, in one
I recite historic tales. In both I never sleep.
My hands have the skulls of hawks. They prey
on those small bodies; they are blind, eyeless,
stars show them the way. Their sockets
see four winds as the directions of the earth.
Men on horseback. Forests asleep with the drums
at their hearts. The sky tells of its hooks.

Cast the spells that wend me shut. Sew cloaks
of cartilage for gathering courage. Bend the hand
where it moans in place. Pry open the jaws
of an average wolf and infest it with your breath.

Do not speak in riddles. Do not speak for days.
I have seen myself dead at the hands of the sea.
I have seen myself trembling beneath a streetlamp
while my waist cried out, while my eyes were black
as mandolins and dawn was the fall of breaking glass.

Punishment: carnivorous, its sunflower's wilt.
The caged bird empties its image into wind,
its small heart a tambourine, its black tongue
a gypsy cymbal counting out the rain
into the gloom ripening at a gull's pupil.
My hands, pale as ferns underwater.

I know the hours' mummification by heart.
Some mornings, chaste as corners, leave behind
their murmurs like nostalgia or need, to ghost them
with my own mudless scatter. When the sea runs barren
as the possible bones, when the names are gone
from the gravestones and cliffs, when the long dry dune
can decay us at last, November: a rhythm of bells.
Images of distance burn to death. Weathervanes
lean. The wheat has a wind-violence in it yet.

²⁰² [Jennifer Militello](#), "[Personality State: Persephone](#)," [Midway Journal](#), collected in [Body Thesaurus](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

It Was Over Way Back Then

because of want & tumble?
Because of word crumbles

in the kitchen's halogen?
No. Separate bedrooms for years

& here I am again:
up top in the kitchen light,

out front with a burnished
stove & the microwave's

immaculate readouts. Up
here, my crosscut hands

greet the butter knife before
the big spread. What I want

now is a better ideogram
for *instead* after the skull

& crossbones on the pill bottles.
What I want is a bucket for

my panics & justifications.
My coddled addendums

downtagged on the sales table
each & every spring. Here

we go with that old seasonal
bullshit again. Earphones on

so your eardrums don't get
punched out near the exit.

Tom Fords on, too, just
for the flex of it. Is it

too much to ask for quiet
after all my losses in this

insistent chorus of renew?
Is it too much to be momentary

in the morning grass, suede
kicks beaten up by the dew?

Adrian Matejka

²⁰³ [Adrian Matejka](#), "[It Was Over Way Back Then](#)," *Tin House*, collected in [Somebody Else Sold the World](#), [Penguin Books](#)

To the Face in the Mirror

Today I saw three
crows fighting on top of the
trees. I looked at myself in
the mirror. I no
longer looked like a poet.
I had a crow's face. Now I
know where all the dead birds go.

Victoria Chang
204

²⁰⁴ [Victoria Chang](#), "[To the Face in the Mirror](#)," collected in [The Trees Witness Everything](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Honeymoon During the Reagan Administration

Three martello towers stood round and abandoned on a dried field within the walls of Old Quebec City. There were no wars anymore, no need for garrisons, no need to hide men. (My new name meant hammer, too, or little hammer: his sister wanted me to share a surname with her, or she felt this was important, after a night of cocaine, when everything was manic and important.) Later, at the Argentinian steakhouse, below the sidewalk, where the walls were brick and cool, he and I ate raw meat and potato shoestrings. I wore chunky necklaces: fat, fake rubies, glass emeralds and topaz. My poor body was sore. (The clitoris, aroused and exposed, was described once as a tower or hill made of red mud and spit housing termites.) The cold ground had seeped through my cracked Doc Martens, made my legs ache in tight jeans—you'd think we did it right there, on the field, on my military coat (the one with shoulder pads like a tin soldier).

Jennifer Martelli
205

²⁰⁵ [Jennifer Martelli, "Honeymoon During the Reagan Administration," 3 Elements Literary Review](#), collected in [The Queen of Queens](#), Bordighera Press

Ode on Killing Sadness

In the nursing home in Havana I can't help but think
of my mother who would be 91
as I take each old woman's hand and say "Hola,"
or "buenes tardes," and I notice one lady
who is sitting off to the side with a look that says,
"No one is going to say hello to me,"
so I walk over and take her hand, and she sits up
and kisses me on the cheek, a hard peck
just like the kamikaze kisses of my mother,
and through my tears I hear her say,
"You're weak like your daddy," and I am weak,
because I still miss her so much
after five years, and I kiss the woman's cheek
and I want to take her home with me
but we don't even speak the same language,
which you could have said about me
and my own mother, and all these women in Havana
have raised better daughters than I was,
and I feel like the creatures in Roberto Fabelo's
drawings, a woman with wings, yes,
but with the head of a bird, and a couple of nights
before we saw the Buena Vista
Social Club, and the emcee said at the start
of the evening, "Here we are killing
sadness," and the music did take the sting
out of the night, and I'm thinking of this
when we go to the cemetery and see the tomb
of Amelia Goyri, who died in childbirth
and was buried with her son between her legs,
whose husband came every day
with flowers, and two years later when his own
father died, and the tomb was opened,
he begged to have his wife's coffin unsealed
so he could see his beloved once again,
and when they pulled back the lid the child
was in his mother's arms. A miracle?
Who knows, but hundreds of plaques surround
the tomb in gratitude for miraculous
births, restored eyesight, dissolved cancers,
and the man who takes care of the site
says he has seen men step out of wheelchairs
and women throw away crutches,
and on top of the tomb a marble woman
is holding a child, and a living woman
with bright red hair shuffles up to the statue,
touches the baby's bottom, and backs
away from the tomb praying for her own
miracle, and I say a prayer

for my mother whose hard kisses were so sweet
and ask her to let me tell her story
as I know it, and when I stand near her grave
in December on an island in the Pacific
I will thank her again for the hard kiss she sent
special delivery through the little grandma
in the rest home in Havana, Cuba, another island
in the middle of a great sea.

Barbara Hamby
206

²⁰⁶ [Barbara Hamby, "Ode on Killing Sadness," *The American Poetry Review*, *Holoholo*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

I Don't Think Neruda Was Thinking of My Tampon

when he wrote
“Body of a Woman”
how it bloats and swells
with urine every time I pee
or the diva cup I consider buying
in the health food store while
Paganini’s First Concerto for Violin
pierces through my ear buds
with arpeggios I first heard
on the car radio when I was 17
and the music inked into me
its gauzy ambition
I choose Size Two
“for women over thirty who’ve given birth”
which is a polite way
of saying LOOSE
but tonight I’m feeling romantic
thoughtfully tearing
into a package
of cherry pie
in my parked Subaru
and imagine what it might
feel like to be rendered
under the glow
of the CITGO sign
which is so much like the moon
I can’t tell the difference
There was the lover
who said my body was
as good as Drew Barrymore’s
another who said I was better
looking naked than he predicted
and another who said
I looked like a child
and prostitute combined
and the one who hissed
I was so beautiful
it made him want to hurt me
Is this what you meant, Neruda
when you wrote *you stretch out
like the world*
the jetty of curls
that thickens with blood
on the last day of my period
Did you mean
the shimmer and molt
the near-death stink
of a movie theater’s

overflowing dark as the credits
unfurl and entrails
of crushed candy
scribble over the plush carpet
or a banquet hall flashing
with half-filled BINGO cards
or the IHOP sign off Storror Drive
like a church marquee
announcing I'm almost home
Did you mean rows
of Slim Jims
gleaming in their packages
of synthetic skin
a beard of neon dust
sprawling across my chin
hunched in the dark
of a gas station bathroom
where the attendant
keeps vanilla scented air freshener
plugged into the wall
could you have imagined me
pulling a cup of blood
from my body and if so
was there a word you felt
and was it envy

Kendra DeColo
207

²⁰⁷ [Kendra DeColo, "I Don't Think Neruda Was Thinking of My Tampon," *Columbia Journal*, collected in *I am Not Trying to Hide My Hungers from the World*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

The Residence of the Night

It's always night inside the whales—

even when they heave themselves
onto the shore
where they death-hiss, wheeze,
and balloon with gas—

even when we dynamite them
back into the night.

The night inside a barn owl's wing-hush
is the handshake
of a secret order.

It's inside the way
we pass one another
at the grocery store,
the feed lot, the way
we lower our wet ropes
into each other.

It's night inside the peacocks,
whose cries cut through us
like the prow of a ship
whose cauldrons of whale oil
shine their darkness up
to the floating ribs of the moon.

It's in the way we tend
to the churches of our skulls,
where the night swings
its smoking chains
and arranges its candles.

The tractor, of course,
is filled with it.
It won't start
until you summon
the lampblack
in the river of your blood,
where the sturgeon
are decimal points
moving upstream
zero by zero.

Michael McGriff
208

²⁰⁸ [Michael McGriff](#), "[The Residence of the Night](#)," *American Poetry Review*, collected in [Home Burial](#), Copper Canyon Press

Love Song of the Assimilated

The moon's a doubloon over the bay where we live in our
houseboat. Bunny razzes I'm a busboy on account

of my black moustache, because of my cowlick and color,
because my name, she knows, is Sergio Al-Ekaterinoslav,

but I say, *I'm no busboy, Bunny, I'm a yachtsman.* She says,
Somos mismos, sailor, when we're necking in the blue shade

of the blue tarp bluing the deck, seeming inveterate
as market forces, unassailable there as the Federal Reserve.

Still, I tell her, I bathed as a tyke in floodplains outside Jalandhar
and stewed later in tenement flats and thought once of drinking

from a rifle. *Life frightened me, Bunny,* but now my day labors
are ended, all my water buffalo are in escrow, my laundries

automated and taxi cabs dispatched, I'm the crack proprietor
of seventy-six motels between here and Virginia.

Now I get paid, I get paid, and get laid, which isn't alien
to the arc welder, the cocktail server, or stone mason,

to the lavaplatos, dhobi whalla, or gunnery sergeant 2nd class,
but what they call a mountain in the valley, Bunny, we call a hill

on the mountain. What they call a prayer in their temple
is an algorithm in our commodities exchange.

Better a loose tycoon, I say, than the wick in a workman's lantern.
Better a natty cummerbund for a tool belt, our wine flutes

sweating in a tuxedo heat. Better not bother conserving
our resources for the next life. *This is the next life!* she says.

No reckoning is coming. No, only New Year's is coming
and Oscar night and Derby Day and the balloon-drop

ballyhoo of the delegate conventions I'll do up dashing
in linen suits and pocket squares, in blazers and chinos.

I'll pass dapper as a Dixie lawyer. If anybody asks, *Where*
is he from? Bunny, tell her Baton Rouge, or say South Carolina.

If anybody asks, *Where's he really from?* meaning the Rangoon
Nebula, meaning the seventh moon of Guadalajara

or the ice planet Karachi, tell him I come in peace or I pledge
allegiance. Tell him, those tyrants beat their keep tonight,

and widows wail in wilds where the nascent widows wail,
but I let Allah triage the bodies in his Red Crescent stations,

let Abraham play arbiter, Jesus raise the dead, I'm not a tyrant, Bunny,
I'm a citizen, that land is their land, I lie with you now

on the bay in our houseboat I dream in English,
algorithm, algorithm, let no cussing widow wail at me.

Jaswinder Bolina

209

²⁰⁹ [Jaswinder Bolina](#), "[Love Song of the Assimilated](#)," *Guernica*, collected in [The 44th of July](#), [Omnidawn Publishing](#)

Paradise by the Dashboard Light

When I think of what I know about you
I think of the way mirrors in a dressing room
can do that trick with each other
that makes a single person go on forever.
I think of a private hole in the ground
where a kid drops an acorn and we don't
expect to ever see it again. I think of how
I should see a therapist. Or maybe
get a CT scan, in case this feeling isn't
a feeling, because really, it's excessive,
don't you think? I think of what I know
about you, which is to say, I think about
how small a day is and then I count them
on my fingers. Then I count down the years
to menopause while I'm at it. Then
I think about what it was like to be 16,
that stupid prom dress with the purple
sequins, not unlike the wedding dress
I grabbed off the rack because a costume
is a costume. I'm thinking about you
when I hear one of those rock anthems
on the electric guitar with the lyrics
about how great and tragic it is
to have sex in the back of a car and I
almost run my sedan with the empty
booster seat in back off the highway
I'm laughing and crying so hard at what
it was like to be a virgin dancing
to that song and when I think of what I know
about you, I remember my old best friend,
Amanda, under a strobe light shaking
her booty like someone who knows how
to be happy, then motioning with her finger
to get me on the dance floor. And sure,
I'm the kind of girl whose legs don't work
right when it comes to getting off the bleachers—
I don't think that has changed—but I love
watching her grab her boyfriend by the tie
in a cheesy choreographed way
and sing the words straight into his face
as loud as she can. "Will you make me
so happy for the rest of my life?
Will you take me away? Will you
make me your wife?" I think I love
growing up and knowing I'll never again
have to pretend to be 16 and then I think
about how a 16-year-old would have
kissed you all night long and then

written a very silly song about it.
She would have believed all the words.

Kathryn Nuernberger
210

²¹⁰ [Kathryn Nuernberger](#), "[Paradise by the Dashboard Light](#)," *Hobart*, collected in [Rue](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Future Farmers of America

The girls are cute as all get out: ropers
boots edged in cow shit, tight white jeans,
rough hands, and those long poles
for humiliating cattle.

The boys look like tough little fuckers:
sleeves rolled up, belt buckles big
as relish trays, ominous mushroom-shaped
laughs—the kind of kid I was afraid of
in sixth grade on my way home from school.
Another A essay riding inside my Percy
Shelley lunchbox.

Ron Koertge
211

²¹¹ [Ron Koertge](#), "[Future Farmers of America](#)," collected in [Vampire Planet](#), Red Hen Press

Sleeping in My Mother's Bed

Though she left by ambulance
my mother's bed is smooth, the sink dry.
It's like a depression in rock,
the mortar where women ground
their grain, now scoured clean.
I brush my teeth with her toothbrush,
pull her nightgown over my head,
bring my miniature Jack Daniel's
to the freezer, but there's no ice.
All the little squares lined up
empty. So I drink it neat.

Every night at ten when she locked up
the store, she'd slip on a gown like this,
then pour a highball and relax
with a handful of pretzels or nuts.
I lie in her bed
like a fork on a folded napkin,
perfectly still and alone.

Here I am, I think, as close
to my mother as I'll ever get.
The imprint of her body lingers
as if she'd just gotten up to pee.
I am she, sleeping or not sleeping, the thread
of my life unwinding, only a few loops
still curled around the spool.

When my mother dies, there'll be nothing
between me and mortality. The hip
that bothers me slightly now
will whine like a wire in high wind
and be replaced, like hers—all those years
she shut the door of the walk-in icebox
with a swing of that good bone.

And I'll be awake in a bed like this.
The clock with oversize numbers ticking,
the phone with its alarm, the wheelchair
and commode surrounding me like sentries.
On my bureau, these very same photos
will sit propped up, smiling—one section
for the dead, one for the living—
more and more crossing over.
The low ache of the day
diffused through my body like salt—
but far from sleep,
as though sleep were across the ocean

and I were just setting out
adrift on my primitive raft.

Ellen Bass
212

²¹² [Ellen Bass](#), "[Sleeping in My Mother's Bed](#)," [The Seattle Review](#), collected in [The Human Line](#), Copper Canyon Press

American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin

Why someone would crowd into a church is beyond me.
I would remodel Alabama. Why there is a science
For God is beyond me the way the word *wallop*
Is beyond me. And when my id is arrested, I am usually
Thinking of the tragi-comic implications of the word
Mall & eyeballing midriffs. Why youth seems to be
My only requisite for beauty now is beyond me.
The interiors of the words *botox* & *toy box* are beyond me too.
History is beyond me. I will need a black suit & umbrella now.
The carpet along the aisles will be so thick, our shoes
Will never touch the floor. Limousines tinted with flowers
Will be parked in front of the church. Ma will say "Good God,
Good God," dipping money in her eyes. But why
Give God your money? Why give good money to Death?

Terrance Hayes
213

²¹³ [Terrance Hayes, "American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin \(Why someone would crowd into a church\),"](#)
collected in [American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin, Penguin Books](#)

The Seeming Impenetrability of the Space Between

after Colin Blakely

Your message says *I still remember what
your pussy tastes like*, and I blush then
delete it stat, because there's no way,

after twenty years, that you can conjure
that sea of whatever, the down-there-
in-the-dark—not with all the bodies

we've put between us. Whatever's passed
into you, through you, from
then until now: you can keep it.

My secret is still your starched shirt-
tails entwined with your half-erect cock,
the tile on my back, what the woman

who saw us coming from the ladies'
room all those years ago when she was
going in must have thought. My secret

is that no matter what you might tell me—
the two girlfriends in Miami, the OxyContin
addiction (now kicked), that your wife

thinks you're in Philly—all of it—I don't
give a shit. When we were young and
stupid, and maybe beautiful as a beer bottle

shattered on a moonlit sidewalk, we'd
fuck all night and I knew if I opened you
below the rib-cage you'd be filled with

jewels or whatever gave off the most
light, so if we made out like bandits
stealing time back, if you paused

to press your forehead to mine in guileless
moments—if our breath caught in
the gears of our chests, your hands

on my breasts and everything shooting
off sparks, it seems possible to skip
forwards and back in time at once

because none of the fundamental laws
of physics that govern the Universe
state that time has to go in one direction,

—that even if we're arrows pointed at
the sky, or a target, or a road winding no-
where I can follow you, we're drawn to

entropy, disorder, a release of energy,
from the Greek *entropia* —a turning
toward—our bodies in that bathroom

stall—when an incoming train, still
invisible, lights up the end of a tunnel.

Erika Meitner

214

²¹⁴ [Erika Meitner](#), "[The Seeming Impenetrability of the Space Between](#)," [Poet Lore](#), collected in [Useful Junk](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Gestational Size Equivalency Chart

Your baby is the size of a sweet pea.
Your baby is the size of a cherry.
Your baby is the size of a single red leaf
in early September. Your baby is the size
of *What if*. The size of *Please Lord*.
The size of a young lynx stretching.
Heat lightning. A lava lamp.
Your baby is the size of every dream
you've ever had about being onstage
and not knowing your lines. Your baby
is the size of a can of Miller Lite.
Apple-picking. Google. All of Google.
Your baby is also the size of a googol,
and also the size of the iridescence
at a hummingbird's throat. Your baby
is the size of a bulletproof nap mat.
Cassiopeia on a cold night. The size
of the 1.5-degree rise in ocean temps
between 1901 and 2015. Your baby
is the size of the lie you told your mother
the night before Senior Skip Day, and
also the size of the first time you saw
a whale shark glide by, its gray heft
filling the tank's window, and also
the size of just the very best acorn.
Your baby is the size of the Mona Lisa.
The size of the Louvre. The size
of that moment in "Levon" when
the strings first kick in. Your baby
is the size of a baby-sized pumpkin.
A bright hibiscus. A door. Your baby
is the size of the Gravitron, and your fear
the first time you rode it that your heart
might drop right through your body,
and then your elation when it didn't,
when the red vinyl panels rose and fell
and you rose and fell with them.

Catherine Pierce

215

²¹⁵ Catherine Pierce, "[Gestational Size Equivalency Chart](#)," *The Shore*, collected in *Danger Days*, Saturnalia Books

And from the Chimney Issues the Smoke

In 1958, when Cardinal Roncalli was appointed
pope, he wrote in his diary,
Today I was appointed pope.

What is a song?
A rat fleeing a burning building.

Songs, by definition, don't know
how to defend themselves.
Even when claiming power
songs are damaged and powerless.

It has been said that the people of Königsberg
set their watches by Kant's daily walks.
It has been said is the problem with music.

The laziest critical move circulating today
is the comparison of music to other art forms, especially poetry.

Music is at least fifty years behind poetry
and slipping further and further behind.

I heard a boxer on TV once defend the brutality of his profession
by saying: *99% of boxers would give you the shirt off his back.*

I feel the same way about musicians
only the percentage is reversed.

*The only convincing reason to put your name
on a song is so that you can sell it.*

In the 80s, I read surf magazines
even though I didn't surf.

There was a recurring ad in them I always liked.
It said, *If you don't surf, don't start.*
If you surf, never stop.

Many musicians have stopped composing
because they no longer wanted to do it,
describing it as a dehydration, a drying up
of the notes inside them.

How many surfers have stopped surfing
because it no longer felt good to do it?

*I can't remember how it felt to write music
before I started thinking about writing music.*

On a talk show the host and his guest, a porn star,
get into an argument about whether there is enough
porn in the world already. Why make more?

*I think there's enough, he says.
No, there's not, she says.*

I think there should be enough music in the world already.
No, there's not, says the composer.

When the annual story about music not mattering appears
the musicians emerge to defend their art form.

Only by music are we saved from nonsense.

Listening to music is like eating nothing but sugar.

When a critic asked Morton Feldman why
he put only one moment of real beauty
into a composition that lasts four hours, he said,
How many more do you need?

One should be enough, right?

Today I was appointed pope, the Cardinal wrote.

On what day, on what page of your diary
did you appoint yourself?

Maybe it wasn't you
but a collection of your selves.

Do you see them now? Putting on their robes and hats
and locking the door to your body?

There they are, casting their votes,
throwing the paper into the fire.

And from the chimney issues the smoke.

P. Scott Cunningham
216

²¹⁶ [P. Scott Cunningham](#), "[And from the Chimney Issues the Smoke](#)," collected in [Ya Te Veo](#), [The University of Arkansas Press](#)

Watching Love

During the time I had a man and a woman
and believed I loved them both,
mostly I felt lucky.
Sometimes after love, holding her
it was like holding a hummingbird,
some internal motion so rapid
that like wings she appeared blurred.
She'd hover in my arms
then go home to a live-in lover.
It wasn't so different for me, riding uptown
to a man with roommates who hoped I'd make him happy.
Once she asked me to strip for her.
I did it. Without music or a moon.
There were dogs in the hallway and elevator doors.
And because she wanted to hurt me,
or because it was true,
she said I did the getting dressed better.
Afterwards we walked to where she disappeared
into the geography of subway sounds.
I waited, half believing the old trick—
a bird stuffed in, a rabbit yanked out.
I waited for what would emerge,
rising up the stairs to me.
The truth is I wanted transformation,
for anyone's love to change me beyond myself,
like waking to the miracle of ice—
coated phone wires, roads slicked,
branches weighted to the snapping—
and the world suddenly dangerous,
at risk and beautiful.
In fact it had stormed all day.
There were teenagers snowballing cars,
sliding, throwing each other down, falling
as if the snow could spare them everything.
Watching two men in winter coats
stop walking and begin to kiss,
I thought how I might have done it over.
Left a sock on. Spoken to myself as if she wasn't there.
I watched the men move off the street,
move beyond the ragged air, into the universe of mouths.
And what was left was only their burden
of arms and legs and clunky boots,
which looked as permanent as anything I had seen.
I see now it was already changing.
The danger is that from this distance
I could make it all seem easy.
As if that night I knew to ask
who has wanted release from her own life

and heard my name unleashed inside like driving rain,
or understood that I could continue shuttling
back and forth, claiming for myself
only the dark breath between stories
I only know I walked all night
through streets of melting snow.
Looking up, I saw or didn't see,
as I do tonight, this bulging moon
on its steady sufficient course.

Victoria Redel
217

²¹⁷ [Victoria Redel](#), "[Watching Love](#)," collected in [Already the World](#), [Kent State University Press](#)

Hospitality

On my first day at the new job I scanned my whole body and could not find a name
I felt like a biblical error, I had to lie down
Etiquette says a young widow must not dress in flashy jet
Etiquette says children under 8 in black mourning are too sad
I felt like any words I spoke would take the form of a confession
I confessed pages of telephone numbers but nobody picked up
It was the night shift
The night like a long room with windows in inconvenient places
I did not know how to arrange the furniture in a beautiful way
I had been trained in how to love people a little
Though I worked many hours there was nobody there
I mean I never saw another soul, least of all my own

Heather Christle

218

²¹⁸ [Heather Christle, "Hospitality," *The Missouri Review*](#)

High School

It would have been a joke if prisons were jokes.

We read the usual in English class—Steinbeck,
Hemingway—and our science teachers meant well,
but for all they taught us, we might have lived
in the eighteenth century, when universities focused
mainly on theology, and science was conducted

on weekends by gentlemen with hand-cranked
electrostatic generators and butterfly nets. As far as
social studies, forget it: the teacher scolded me
when he didn't know who the Chief Justice was and I did,
and when he tried to say *quiet*,
it came out *quite*. *Be quite, Kirby! Bertrand and Kirby,*

be quite now! The girls were beautiful.

I was sixteen. Even the plain girls were beautiful.
But they didn't know how to kiss, and I didn't know
how to teach them. About that time, the folk music
craze hit, and when the Kingston Trio's *Close Up*
dropped in October of that year, Al Edwards

and Bob Spain and I figured the road to glory
was paved with sheet music, and since Al already
owned a guitar and Bob a banjo, that left the bongos
to me, it remaining only for our mothers to starch
and iron our look-alike shirts, white half-sleeved
affairs with blue stripes that appeared to be made out

of the cloth usually reserved for window awnings,
the kind of shirts worn only by hot dog vendors
and folk singers, meaning they were the kind
the Kingston Trio would have worn had they been us.

After we played our first show in the cafeteria,
four of the bustiest girls in our school ran up

and squealed, "You sound exactly like the Trio!"

What were they talking about? None of us could
sing at all. We should have practiced more
and squabbled less. The best thing you could say
about us is that we didn't forget any of the words
and that we more or less began and ended together.

Other than that, we were terrible. I'd never been
happier in my life. We played another dozen dates
or so, and then Al's uncle proposed he take us
on the road for the summer to play in the school gyms
of towns so isolated that people who couldn't make it
to Vicksburg or Montgomery to hear real musicians

might actually pay to hear us. But our mothers said no;
they gave no reasons, but I'm guessing
they saw us falling into the clutches of hard women, desperate
small-town divorcées who'd introduce us to cigarettes,
underage drinking, and worse.

I wanted worse. I wanted to kiss an older woman, somebody

who was twenty-eight, say, even thirty, a blonde
in capri pants and heels, her top sliding off
one shoulder, her smoky breath in my face
and then her lips on mine like a hot wind, the one desert dwellers
call *samoon*, which means *poison*
because others drop dead at its approach, but not me,

who is wrapped by it, lifted, my mouth sprung
by a kiss like lightning, a flash that spreads and spreads
and stays as I feel each thing that will
happen in my life from this moment on, the way those wrecked
and under water follow a train of images
until they sink, and the darkness returns, and they're free.

David Kirby
219

²¹⁹ David Kirby, "[High School](#)," *Missouri Review*, collected in [Help Me, Information](#), Louisiana State University

Happy Birthday

The sounds outside my window
suggest that this season everyone
is really into ping pong and mental illness,
but the older I get, the less
convincing suggestions become.
If I lived to be 1000, nothing short of
an exhaustive state-funded study
could convince me
that anyone enjoys anything.
I listen for longer each time
to the beloved's racing heart,
I am a geologist who slowly
turns into a seismograph.
The relief when I open my blinds
and see the hail of ping pong balls
and the howling business man
caressing a parking meter
is like icing on a cake
that says "Happy 28th birthday."
It's not a real cake,
but when I love a dark room
I know I've blown out the candles.

Sarah Galvin
220

²²⁰ Sarah Galvin, "[Happy Birthday](#)," collected in [The Three Einsteins](#), [Poor Claudia](#)

Archaeology

I went to the basement where my father kept his skulls.
I stood before the metal utility shelves. Skulls to the ceiling.
I looked into the eyeholes. I looked into a cranium's tomahawk hole.
Down there, it was nothing but his lab. I held
those skulls like empty pots. What did I know about Indian pots?
Some days, we went to the bars. I swung my legs from the barstool
and drank my Coke. Some days, he dug the fields.
Then it was skulls in the sink, skulls in the drying rack.
The fields are full of skulls. You have to know where the plows
turn them up. What did I know, then, about digging?
The dark inside the eyeholes. He wrote his notes on them
in indelible ink. 2.7 pounds. 2.5. The fields are full of pots.
It's true. He told me, packing his shovel into the Volkswagen.
What did I know about Indians? He kept a lab in our basement
because the university was too cheap. I went to the basement
where he kept his skulls. I looked into their eyeholes. I loved
their weight, but what did I know? When I lay in bed,
they glowed down there. It was many years ago. I closed my eyes
and the skulls talked in the basement. Indian pots. Teeth.
The noise of sex from his room. At the bars, farmers told him
what their plows turned up. I drank my Cokes. Cheap university
without a decent lab. The skulls spoke a language no one knew.
Look at this, my father said, rinsing another one in the sink.
This one took a bullet to the head. History, then, was silence.

Kevin Prufer
221

²²¹ [Kevin Prufer](#), "Archaeology," collected in [The Art of Fiction](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Early Morning on Market Street

The moon, once full, is snow.
The line of transplanted trees,
thin and bloodless. the pink neon
bakery sign, *Sweet Inspiration*,

a mockery of loneliness—
but no one cares to eat, we souls
of this hour jacked up on what-
ever, and though desire

is a dirty word these days, what
else to call the idling car, its passenger door
pushed open; or the shirtless man—
he must be mad, tweaked out on speed—

outside his door
at Beck's Motor Lodge, staring
for hunger or mercy. Or me,
rubbing dirt from my eyes, wanting,

again, a man I do not want.

Randall Mann
222

²²² [Randall Mann](#), "[Early Morning on Market Street](#)," *Poetry*, collected in [Breakfast with Thom Gunn](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Crescendo

Consent, however, there was never such a thing.
As if when a boy teased you, it only meant he liked you,
And if you teased back, you'd disappear. As if
being called *slut* made you taller,
and *whore* restored your voice—magic, see?
As if your fear of men could make you
walk on water, their touch could split you in half—
Long division (cherry pie filling), two selves never to meet again.
As if you could no longer breathe underwater,
surfacing, no longer an option. You'd spit
and sputter and do the math. The equation adds up:
Asking for it + asking for it = deserving it. If A, then B.
Add. Subtract. Divide. Go forth, multiply.
Let them spin lead into gold,
speak their secret names for God,
antiseptic, wind, water on your skin, eroding your hoodoo body...
It's all perfectly sane, normal even: predator/prey, Kingdom Animalia.
As if rape is never really rape,
As if you were quiet, quite quiet, then very, very loud.

Cindy King
223

²²³ [Cindy King](#), "[Crescendo](#)," [So to Speak](#)

Trying Too Hard

Back when you'd spin my friends like a record player, I wore my role
of confidant like a fur coat. Slice a finger while opening a beer can,
fizz the gin high in tumblers, I'd cling to the edge of my raft, dangle
my gashed leg into your salt water, a phosphorescence of jazz I can
still feel licking my blood. I can't remember how long I stood aglow
in your midnight kitchen with my heart pinned to that picture I can
still see stuck to the refrigerator: your best friend. Always your chum,
we were done, pressing our mouths at the edge of lover, playing *Can't*
We Be Friends over and over. Crack open an oyster and see its spit's
a pearl in a pair of earrings my grandmother couldn't afford. How can
I expect you to relate? Your grandfather owned a department store.
Did you ever love me? Fingers that wish to tremble above digits can
not dial, compliments of that second self who erased your number.
I'm the Staten Island to your Manhattan, your Brooklyn, you can't
cross a bridge to visit me, even though the ferry is free. You don't
take mass transit, naturally. You'll be staying in Tribeca, why can't
I just meet you at the Odeon later, you're paying. Plates of oysters
I'll return to the water in the ladies room, it's the richness I can't
keep down. Words like *unfortunately* encroach on this poem, sharks
smelling blood in water. I poured myself out like a beer can: it began
with my love for your best friend, years before you turned beautiful
again. But there was a picture of me on your fridge too. Now I can
see that I was your best friend. I want to call you to let you know
I just read that the Odeon has closed, forever, due to COVID. Can
I ever admit my feelings became a phantasmagoria you couldn't
handle? I am far too delicate. I've erased your number and can't.

Cate Marvin
224

²²⁴ [Cate Marvin](#), "[Trying Too Hard](#)," [Narrative](#)

Rain on Tin

If I ever get over the bodies of women, I am going to think of the rain,
of waiting under the eaves of an old house
at that moment
when it takes a form like fog.
It makes the mountain vanish.
Then the smell of rain, which is the smell of the earth a plow turns up,
only condensed and refined.
Almost fifty years since thunder rolled
and the nerves woke like secret agents under the skin.
Brazil is where I wanted to live.
The border is not far from here.
Lonely and grateful would be my way to end,
and something for the pain please,
a little purity to sand the rough edges,
a slow downpour from the Dark Ages,
a drizzle from the Pleistocene.
As I dream of the rain's long body,
I will eliminate from mind all the qualities that rain deletes
and then I will be primed to study rain's power,
the first drops lightly hallowing,
but now and again a great gallop of the horse of rain
or an explosion of orange-green light.
A simple radiance, it requires no discipline.
Before I knew women, I knew the lonely pleasures of rain.
The mist and then the clearing.
I will listen where the lightning thrills the rooster up a willow,
and my whole life flowing
until I have no choice, only the rain,
and I step into it.

Rodney Jones
225

²²⁵ [Rodney Jones](#), "[Rain on Tin](#)," [Five Points](#), collected in [Salvation Blues](#), [Mariner Books](#)

Men

We're in the middle of it, in the middle
of the backyard barbecuing steak
and chicken. Telling stories

with our wives and girlfriends away,
red and blue psychedelics, Coors Light
and breasts falling into our mouths again

like basalt cliffs into the sea.
Jeremy says, *I did CPR on a gorilla once.*
A girl gorilla, a big one.

*I kept thinking, she's going to wake up
and she's going to fucking kill me.*
But she just peed all over the floor

*before dying on her back
in a room full of humans.*
What do you think happens

*to the male gorilla back in the cages
somewhere waiting for her?*
Do they give him the news?

*Slide her body into the cage
so he can smell her dead hand?*
Zookeepers, Bill says. We should grow

mustaches. And we're gone,
the Apache helicopter of our middle
age flying out over the dunes.

It's not the gorilla that scares me.
It's waking up alone. And I am not a man
anymore but a paper bag someone's blowing
into to keep from hyperventilating,

the camels long since sunk down
into their kneecaps, the sand everywhere.

Jay Nebel
226

²²⁶ Jay Nebel, "Men," [Ploughshares](#), collected in [Neighbors](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Tarot/Death

I.

There's no name for this part of the moor,
it's too far east for the Brontës to have wandered
and no farmers come with their quadbikes and dogs

to graze sheep and tread any name into the hill.
The topsoil is too thin to hold anything
except dry grass and a few browning ferns.

There isn't even any mud to freeze into ruts,
the earth hardening and splitting flatly
under the weight of the cold sky.

I'm walking to its centre,
the crack in the moor
where the earth drops down

and water comes sloshing
out of the hillside, frothing white
and streaked with dirty weeds.

I think: it has always been coming to this.
Sometimes I think
this thing people call grief

has always been folded inside me—
just as each fig holds
the pollen-stained body of a wasp,

needs its flesh to fruit—
I've been holding this grief
and headed here.

The first time I did tarot we used the Celtic Cross spread
and I drew "Death" as my origin card.
This was an actual thing that happened

under Ikea ceiling lights.
Obviously, the death card doesn't mean death.
Obviously.

There is nowhere else for me to go now—
this is as close as I can get,
lowering my body

into the strip of rock and water
at the centre of the moor, close
as I can get to everything under it alive:

pores in limestone, air suspended in liquid rock
that hardened and all the shale gas Cuadrilla want
to get out, picking up the hillside

like it's a box with everything rattling around inside
because the moor itself is thin and hard
like a Christmas tin. There is nowhere else for me to go.

II.

I think I see my dad, you know,
a little boy stomping around this moor he grew up on.
He told me about breaking ice on horse troughs when he was thirsty

and finding a human skull in a bag
at the centre of the flooded quarry
when all the water had dried into white sludge.

In his stories he's always alone,
and when I close my eyes I can feel his life
running just below my own, but when I try to see his face

it whitens like a roll of film burning up in a projector feed.
Out of the hole on the cinema screen come:
steam trains, space suits, cowboys, cap guns

and they're dribbling out of his mouth
except he's a little boy in a man suit
babbling on about the EU and sovereignty like

it's something that matters,
except to him it does, absolutely—
he wields it like a toy gun

and the pain flakes off him like old paint.
And I could say *you're not even really British*
and all he'd say is *British? British?*—

punctuating the air with his hands.
I am supposed to understand
that this outrage boiling off his skin

is a complete argument
with no way into it, no way out.
And if I could bring him here

he'd talk about the fucking rock cycle
except he doesn't call it the rock cycle
because none of his knowledge was learned in school.

Here he is out on the moorside,
trying to teach me how the millstone grit is formed
and because when he talks about these rocks

it's like a sunrise breaks through his body
I can't say anything. I think I might hurt him,
might make him feel a fool or take away

what little joy is left in his life—
but the truth is he wouldn't listen if I tried.
The only way of loving him that works

is to let the light he gives off
warm my face.
The light he gave off.

III.

I've tried to find something
to explain him here.
I have to keep editing his story—

I invent him as a little boy
being harmed in ways
he didn't recognise

as harm, running under the wind
as it grinds into the East side of the moor,
moving like a sick cat

slipping under a porch.
I have to invent him as a little boy
because loving him was grief-stained.

Because living with him was like—
and here I give you a house full of bees.
Honeycomb drips from the ceiling

and soft bee bodies dribble over each other
filling the room with their humming.
There is bee-fur against your skin,

wings touching your eyelids, cheek, lips—
and because your body remembers
how it feels to be stung you begin to keep very still.

You find ways to lower your heart rate,
learn how to remove too many stings
but also how to harvest honey.

Its sweetness was there when the hospital
forgot to give my uncle his insulin,
and when my grandfather fell back on the bed

holding his big chest with his hands,
and when my brother slipped into death, right up to his neck in it,
and my mother disappeared after him

leading him back with her eyes
on the light ahead. There was no need
to keep my body very still

because we went outdoors.
He took me out across the hills,
he took me out to learn what the rock cycle was,

although he didn't know it was called that.
There was my dad ankle-deep in the cold water
frothing out of the hillside,

pulling different stones out of the stream.
He put them in my hands
and as I held each cold, wet rock

he traced their layers and swirls
to make each one a map
you could follow backwards through time

to explain where it came from, and what had happened to it.

And when he was sweet like this,
how could he have been anything other than sweet?
And now I am living in a body

infested with honeycomb—
all I have is this honey and these holes,
but once, when I misjudged a dive at the swimming pool,

the burn of chlorine at the back of my nose
was the same as the smack of my skull into the hallway door
when he shoved me into it.

I floated in the water
churning with the kicks of other people's feet
and felt a child's skull inside my brain

and what shocked me
wasn't that this child felt this happen
but how she knew in every part of her body

it was her fault. Here on the moor,
I'm that little girl again. I reach out
to touch the white wall under the hall light:

I touch it and nobody dies
so I keep touching it—the same white spot every day
until eventually I have to do it to keep everyone alive—

this is my magic power.
But I don't know if these are things are true
or stories I dreamed in the hours he took to die.

IV.

More girls than boys are diagnosed
with OCD. Boys' symptoms
are comorbid with religious-sexual complexes,

aggression and physical tics, whereas girls
tend to develop contamination fears
and eating disorders.

Boys push everything out,
girls take everything in.
It's not about shame,

I've done nothing
to be ashamed of, but the fear of it—
the fear of doing something and being seen

has kept me
prowling the edges of my own life.
I didn't want to keep everyone alive

because I loved them.
I wanted to keep them alive because their death
would be my fault.

I couldn't live with that kind of collapse.
My body became a hillside,
my body became like this moor

with everything inside it tilting
and pressing against my skin. Sometimes
I think I have been walking my body

the same way I walk from my car to the front door at night,
taking the longer well-lit way, holding my key
like a blade between my fingers.

And when I'm home I keep the chain on
and before I go to bed I walk through the house switching on every light
believing that what I have seen—

the four plain walls of each room—
means the same thing as being safe.
I've convinced my husband

I live with him. I lay my body next to his in the dark
and feel the bed creak under my enormous weight.
Sometimes, I think he knows

he lives with a woman whose body
is a house crusted with dead bees and empty wax-comb.
Sometimes I think he knows

that I know this and am sorry.
And when I make myself come beside him in the dark,
thinking about ex-boyfriends,

I think he understands that I do this
to keep everything inside—
because to slip under

into the room where I still love these boys
and move outwards opening doors and climbing
into the nerves that line my body

gives all this broken furniture and soft walls
the space they need. It stops the ground from splitting open,
and though I drag this house around

like the bloated abdomen of a queen,
I have kept myself on-time and well-presented,
infinitely reliable.

But now there's nowhere else for me to go,

I have lowered myself into the centre of the moor
thinking I was chasing my dad
when all this time I have been living with the dead,

sleeping beside the dead every night
for as long as I can remember.
I have brought that into our home.

V.

The death card made everyone very polite
and I can understand why.
When we say: *Obviously, the death card doesn't mean death*

it's a spell we say to make it true,
something we say to each other in our good-sized dining rooms.
I thought the death card came to me

because that was what my life had been:
I had sat in so many corners on stiff-backed chairs
wearing a navy-blue dress and eating cold sausage rolls.

I had watched rooms fill with black shoes
and black tights and black suit-legs
nosing towards each other.

I knew how to let myself be left
with people called Aunty who were not my aunty
and how people will leave you alone

if you keep yourself quiet, grateful and mostly outdoors.
But I have begun to think
that when I drew the death card

my body turned into a tarot pack
with a seam of death running through it.
It has always been here—

this grief spot, dead spot,
slit where I have passed through
and lived. Yes, I have brought the dead

into my home every night,
and yes, I have lied about where I live to my husband,
but haven't I also lived knowing this body

came out of nothing and will fold back into it in the end?
And because this has been written in my bones,
haven't I been kind because of it?

And if this kindness is something I've pulled on
like a good winter coat over a dirty jumper
to get me up and out the front door, well—

there are worse ways of doing that.

But there is nowhere else for me to go now
and this kindness has become a skin that will not do.
It will not keep everything inside.

I lower myself into this crack in the moor
to sink my hands into it.
To stand ankle-deep in the cold water

and pull out all these rocks and mud and worms.
And if this makes me messy and vicious,
I'll be messy and vicious enough to say yes,

there is honey, there are holes,
and there is my head smacking
against the hallway door

and that was not my fault but his.
I do not say this is what happened
but this is what my body remembers.

Mariah Whelan
227

²²⁷ [Mariah Whelan, "Tarot/Death," *At Length*](#)

After Tolstoy

The man has a mark under his left eye, a small abrasion, cut as if from his fingernail. Did you scratch yourself in your sleep? “No,” he says, and touches the mark with two fingers. “It was the bird,” he says. “I was dreaming the bird came. But the bird wouldn’t sing. The bird said, I will leave you a birthmark. This is how we will know you when you are born again with wings.”

Sean Thomas Dougherty
228

Viewing Car

I'd been lucky. Once on the Amtrak, a pale, bald man watched me for days. I was uneasy, not afraid. But one day an older woman asked me to take the seat beside her. She told me she had been watching him watch me all that time—that she saw as he followed me down to the changing room. She went down after him, grabbed his arm, said I know what you're doing. She told the man to get off at the next stop, and he did. I sat with her for two days. We were headed west, then, through Colorado—fields dropping suddenly into granite canyons which seemed flecked with gold in the light. Then mountains. She was on the train because she was dying, she said, of Lupus. She didn't want a hospital—she was traveling to spend her last months in a little cabin, surrounded by flowers and animals. I used to be pretty too, she said. She looked much older than she was, and so ill. She was Native, from New Orleans, practiced voodoo. White Magic. I still have the protective charms she left me with: necklace of beads carved from crocodile bones, porcelain angel. Why did she have these things, just to give away? She read my palm. I slept with my head on her shoulder. Seven years ago. I have forgotten her name. All those years her charms had kept me safe.

Emily Lawson

229

²²⁹ [Emily Lawson](#), "[Viewing Car](#)," [The Adroit Journal](#)

Saint Monica at the Oakleaf Suites

Somewhere she heard: *kiss all four walls*
if you want to return. She won't be kissing

any of these walls tonight, or stroking the side
of the bathtub like a child's sweaty forehead.

She once dared a man who checked in,
duct-taped the shower cap over his face

after eating an entire ham on a paper plate,
the Clio motel room rented for three hours.

As a teenager she slept propped in a tub
while her best friend snored into linoleum,

the daybreak wake up call, recital of lies
when parents asked about the junior prom.

Tonight she's the older sister with a charge
card and the girl waiting in the backseat

of the Thunderbird, her date down the hall
with the ice bucket and hitchhiking upstate

in search of mean weed at the same time,
both Stan and Brad, in certain light a Gary

until his shirt comes off and tattoos are gone.
She is the station wagon cruising 32 in a 55,

the next minute driving a Ginsu Bakelite
into the table saying *don't forget to breathe*

when the lights go out. She collects magnetic
key cards in her photo album, crushes the tiny

Dove soap with her heel. She'll be on top
if she isn't already on the bottom.

Mary Biddinger
230

²³⁰ [Mary Biddinger](#), "[Saint Monica at the Oakleaf Suites](#)," collected in [Saint Monica](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

The Change

I swear the year my mother
stopped having her period
was the same year I started

having sex, the year
I spent my evenings
parked by the river, getting good

at revealing my breasts
to my sensitive boyfriend,
my ass, my armpits, learning

the idiom of his body
as well: the slight, stern curve
of the man's waist, the slope

of the shoulders, the comic
sag of the testicles; learning
the feel of sex, painful

and reassuring, as if the two of us
were slowly being sewn
together while my mother

was going away, to be sad
beyond the capacity
of her heart because the time

of her life had commenced
to dry and harden, like stucco
against the walls of her body.

And didn't she start to shrink?
I think so. In fact, I think
she began to disappear

that fall, from the face
of the earth, though I didn't
really notice

and wouldn't notice
and had made a high
art out of not noticing.

I didn't like talking to her.
Her dust-colored bangs
had a tendency to fall

with absolutely no grace
into her gray eyes,
and I couldn't bear to see her

push them, again
and again, out of the way.
She was her own

planet by then.
One afternoon in winter
she came to my bedroom door

holding a fistful of tampons,
standing there in the doorway
holding them out to me,

her mouth saying jovially,
"I guess I don't need
these things anymore,"

though by the time
the sound reached me
from those many light-years

away, what I heard was,
"Take them, you fool, and run
for your life."

Carrie Fountain
231

²³¹ [Carrie Fountain](#), "[The Change](#)," collected in [Burn Lake](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Kindly

There are cases where a fact cannot come at all
and a leaf falls
down in front of me
and I steal this leaf
because I need it
and don't want to think
about the future.
Just this leaf.
By looking at it.
Looking at it
regularly, then maybe
under a microscope.
Hours pass in this fashion.
When you got your first microscope
do you remember
how it came with four or five blank slides
packed in Styrofoam
and because you couldn't resist
you picked your freshest scab
or ran the slide across your finger
so you could see
inside your own blood? Love
is an emergency.
And every decimal of dew is.
And every time that we are careless.

—

Love is an emergency
that slips like a deer
from the wound of Christ
to land on the water
without bitterness
in a glister of accident
and won't think twice
about climbing that tiny staircase again
in ice
to board a plane
again to fly
back into the kiss
of the same disaster

no recompense
no flotation device

the kind of suicide mission
where you're not even free
after you've died

like how

when you hang yourself
in prison
they cuff you
before they cut you
down.

—

Attaching a bird wing
to a fishing line and pole
and dragging it along the ground
trains hounds to trace game.
The name of the game
is kill what you love.
The name of the game
is kill what you hate.
The wings are bait
to teach the dogs to love their fate
which is to find what someone great
shot out
of the sky forever
and point: and it's my heart
that is the convict.
I have to get the convict
what he wants.

—

Someone dressed as Santa
shoots everyone
at the Christmas party,
beginning with the child
who answers the door.
Santa shoots everyone
then self.

In Spain, swordfish in the sea
do the seguidilla
and some make youthful mistakes
and some guffaw
and some are forced into slavery
and some are bedsores.

Some have beauty that is obscene.

We work in shifts
to be equivalent.

He was happy one minute.

12 a.m. to 12:01:
everyone turns to everyone
in their sequined dress
in a snow of silver dots
and kisses everyone's champagne
mustache.

Someone's false eyelash
floating in everyone's glass
can only be distinguished
as unwishable and untrue
by the tiny bead of glue
that had been holding it in place.

You reach for my face.

A leaf falls down.

It is a featherless bone;
it is the sound of steel on stone;
it is the siren in the dial tone
rinsing out your brain before bed.
The leaf is green but it is red
in the microscope.
When all words contained all others, I said, I hope.

Ashley Capps
232

²³² [Ashley Capps, "Kindly," *American Poetry Review*](#)

Self Portrait with Eraser

I drew the eraser
first because I knew

it better than I knew
myself and because

it had been around
the block before me

and because it would,
after having its way

with me, rub up against
everything I'd ever loved.

Andrea Cohen
233

²³³ [Andrea Cohen](#), "[Self Portrait with Eraser](#)," [Kenyon Review](#), collected in [Everything](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Admissions Essay

I am a good student. Voted most likely to try harder. Not voted most likely for fairytales, though I have been both hooded and wolfed. My honors thesis on the role of motherlessness and love hunger brought the candied house down.

I could've been valedictorian if the metric was ardor and potential for transformation. I recognize the chemical structure of oxytocin and how to calculate my best chance for a free drink from across the room, and both have strong angles.

I know how it feels when that hormone unlatches my ribs, silks my legs. I don't confuse that with love because in each unit of intimacy, I enter slow. Adjust my breath. Recognize the accusations that are confessions.

I excelled in the serious ethics of kissing, how it makes the body more image than idea, but I admit that sometimes I like to lick mezcal and grapefruit from a hero's morally ambiguous mouth. I'm sorry.

That's how I know I'm a successful candidate. The temptations. The failures. The ever afters of forgiveness I have already lived. For so long I offered others the love I wanted to receive, the cursive letters and lost slippers. The balanced equations and checkbooks. Years of service in the scales of care. Change my story. Accept me.

Traci Brimhall

234

²³⁴ [Traci Brimhall](#), "[Admissions Essay](#)," [SWWIM Every Day](#)

About Love

You need to do
something for yourself

is what she used to
say to me

while I stood washing
the dishes or folding

the children's pile
of warm clothes.

Now I believe that
she was talking

to herself like a knight
staring off over

the hay roofs of
some unimportant village

into the doors of a
dark and unknown

castle, saying I'm meant
for more than this.

I don't understand
why bravery

so often comes with
cruelty. I would be happy

staring at my kids
all day. I would be happy

watching snow fall
onto the green glass

of a greenhouse
until the glass broke

and the tomatoes inside
froze hard as baseballs.

My mother tells a story
about bringing her

sons to the mall when
we were eight

and says I saw how
people looked at you

and your brother, you
were such pretty

children I was worried
something would

happen to you. I only
remember her looking

at us, saying I could have
looked at you all day.

The last time I talked
to my father

was the night of
my older brother's

cremation. He was sitting
on a couch staring

into an empty fireplace.
I hadn't seen him

for years but just
then I wanted to sit next

to him like you would
a child you found

lost in the mall,
and say it's ok, let's

find your parents, they
must be here somewhere.

I think I said, Allen,
I'm sorry Darin is gone.

And he made a sound
like a child might make

when reaching up for
a mother's hand

only to realize that it's not their
mother. He sighed

and said it's so strange
not having a son anymore.

And my father was right,
his son was dead

and gone and that
was the beginning and

the end of any story
I might ever tell

about love. Yesterday,
going to the store

to buy nighttime diapers
for Owen, I found myself

so happy that everyone
had to wear masks.

That I didn't have to
look at anyone's face.

That I didn't have to
look at mine. I watched

as boxes of different
kinds of cereal glided

by, watched cans
of vegetables become

cans of fruit. The music
playing in my head

was so beautiful
it was like the sound

my children's mother
made when she used to

walk through our house
in her socks.

Matthew Dickman
235

²³⁵ [Matthew Dickman](#), "[About Love](#)," collected in [Husbandry](#), [W.W. Norton & Company](#)

What I'm saying is that the planet is on fucking fire,

says Bill Nye the Science Guy, and I want to say
Amen, Bill, I am half-witness to this, our superlative
rain storms, the river always swollen past its banks,

the wide stretches of sand from my childhood
just gone at the beach-lifeguard shack meets
ocean meets parking lot all within a few feet

of each other. I walk my mountain neighborhood
in spring dusk and notice the gaps where cemetery oaks
stood before the derecho—straight-line wind event

that took them out along with power for a week.
That year I had thousands of dollars of out-of-pocket
fertility drugs in our fridge and had to move all the vials

to campus, powered by the university's coal plant,
which endured the storm and kept running. My office
is downwind so books get coated in a fine sheen

of black dust in minutes when I open my window
and this week my cough won't quit. This week, Bill,
I watched you take a blowtorch to a globe on television

to illustrate global warming to the viewing audience
while the radio news was all fetal heartbeat bills—
near total bans on abortions in Kentucky, Louisiana,

Georgia—and I thought of the time I waited for a friend
under the gold clock in Grand Central Terminal
while a bevy of women wearing red-hooded cloaks

and severe white bonnets walked past in pairs. I gawked
with tourists as the women slowly circled the station
before I realized they weren't actual nuns or a cult

but a promo stunt for the Hulu version of Atwood's
The Handmaid's Tale. This week in Harlan County
a group of miners are blocking a coal train to protest

unpaid wages owed to them. My friend Christine
was a women's clinic nurse before she became
an anthropologist and offered to teach a group

of us academics how to perform abortions.
It's just suction, she says. Bill, we all know
what will happen to us when the temperature

rises: floods, fires, crop failures, extinction.
In Alabama girls will be forced to carry their
rapists' babies and, Bill, do you even know

how to date a pregnancy correctly? One fifth
of coal miners in this region—a place that's
been stripped and fucked over limitless times

by corporations—have black lung disease.
You add 280 days to the first day of your
last period. In Ohio, the state legislature

introduced a bill that requires doctors to re-
implant ectopic pregnancy into a woman's
uterus, which is physically impossible. There is

every reason I should be anti-abortion, Bill—
the years of peeing on sticks and injections,
the IUI and IVF, the adoption. But I believe

in bodily autonomy—my colleague who locked
herself to an excavator to stop the Mountain
Valley Pipeline from tearing through our streams

and forests to bring fracked gas right past us
from West Virginia, to sell abroad. On TV
you say, *you're adults now and this is an*

actual crisis, and Bill, I want to burn this whole
motherfucker to the ground but I don't have to.
We are in cataclysmic decline and you're here

with me, your blanket, fire extinguisher, bucket
of sand lined up next to you. I am failing to find
productive uses for my rage—for the hard and

dangerous work of having a body in the Anthro-
pocene, so I shear butterfly bushes and barberry
back from my vinyl siding and hose spigot, tend

to my fig tree whose branches are dead—
whose leaves, new and green, cluster
around the roots.

Erika Meitner
236

²³⁶ [Erika Meitner, "What I'm saying is that the planet is on fucking fire," *Oxford American*](#)

Tours

A girl on the stairs listens to her father
beat up her mother.
Doors bang.
She comes down in her nightgown.

The piano stands there in the dark
like a boy with an orchid.

She plays what she can
then she turns the lamp on.

Her mother's music is spread out
on the floor like brochures.

She hears her father
running through the leaves.

The last black key
she presses stays down, makes no sound,
someone putting their tongue where their tooth had been.

C.D. Wright
237

²³⁷ [C.D. Wright](#), "[Tours](#)," collected in [Translation of the Gospel Back Into Tongues](#), State University of New York Press

Mingus at The Showplace

I was miserable, of course, for I was seventeen,
and so I swung into action and wrote a poem,

and it was miserable, for that was how I thought
poetry worked: you digested experience and shat

literature. It was 1960 at The Showplace, long since
defunct, on West 4th St., and I sat at the bar,

casting beer money from a thin reel of ones,
the kid in the city, big ears like a puppy.

And I knew Mingus was a genius. I knew two
other things, but as it happened they were wrong.

So I made him look at the poem.
“There’s a lot of that going around,” he said,

and Sweet Baby Jesus he was right. He glowered
at me but he didn’t look as if he thought

bad poems were dangerous, the way some poets do.
If they were baseball executives they’d plot

to destroy sandlots everywhere so that the game
could be saved from children. Of course later

that night he fired his pianist in mid-number
and flurried him from the stand.

“We’ve suffered a diminuendo in personnel,”
he explained, and the band played on.

William Matthews

238

²³⁸ [William Matthews](#), “[Mingus at The Showplace](#),” *Poetry*, collected in [Time & Money](#), [Ecco](#)

Dear Bruce Wayne,

My parents are dead, too.
A dirty, self-cannibalizing Gotham—
I also claim it, its city limits
built by my skin. I slough
and slough, but the city remains.
Tell me, if you'd watched
your mother's face go
a slow yellow after they cut
off her breast, if you'd watched
your father's mind get chewed down
to spasms, who would
you fight then? What broken
string of pearls would you chase
into the gutter? Lucky boy
to have an enemy.

*

Admit it—what bugs you
the most about the Joker
is his drag. You suspect
his crayoned mouth a lampoon
of your dead mother.
But don't you crave,
sometimes, to be a little
tacky? Doesn't the all-black
bore after a while?
Even your sweet ride can't help
but leave a little fart of flames
in its wake.
How many others
glare from the shadows
at a one-man parade
in a loud costume, blowing
glitter kisses at grim Justice?
You just think you want
to kill him for better reasons.
What kind of person would trade
laughter for righteousness?

*

Every woman goes out
knowing what you think
you alone had sussed:
the world is a dark alley
hiding a gun in its mouth.
It has more than enough

reasons to make you
cover your face.
The moon waxes. The bruise
waned. Every woman
is Batman.

Nicky Beer
239

²³⁹ [Nicky Beer](#), "[Dear Bruce Wayne](#)," [Cherry Tree](#), collected in [Real Phonies and Genuine Fakes](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

Nikki Lyn

*...in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes
—William Wordsworth*

The minute I saw you I felt like ducking into
the bathroom together and getting so high.
To go back to before we had driver's licenses
and steal my mother's car again.
Sprawled on the trampoline in the dark, deep July
eaten alive, its rusted springs and uneven legs.
Was I that wisp of twirling smoke?
The empty yearning air in a littered bottle,
back when a little got us a long way.
Painting our nails on the floor as the cats
walked around us. Blowing bubbles
beside the halfpipe, little perfect disappearing
things. What a prize to make boys weep
our names as they jumped from high bridges
into the reservoir. What a pleasure to let them descend
into violence: our bodies like bloody steaks dangling
over the lion pit. I can admit now in adulthood
that men are more often handed the world.
But they'll never know the feeling of being eighteen
with your best friend, hair like two blinding cyclones.
Sunning in bathing suits, our belly button rings
and pelvic bones were like the engines
of drag racing cars propped open for show.
Each of our limbs a tendril of iridescent panic.
I'd hate to see what men would do
with the power of being a woman.

Dear, dear sister, a hacked-off portion of my soul
will always be in your mother's house where we
are falling asleep in our towels after a shower passing
a spliff between us. Sitting on the counter in pajamas
talking shit as the ice cream rapidly melts. And later
sneaking out, one leg extending silently
through a first-floor window, then the other.
Who could have stopped us at the chain link
with the wire cutters? At the gas tank with the sugar
and spice and everything nice since
that's what girls are made of. And three a.m.
in the abandoned ballet studio, all those
broken mirrors ground down to glitter.
Something we spent gluttonously then
I've been paying back ever since.
Our sparkling heydays, a haze.

Sometimes I miss your fingers' swan dive
down my throat to help me break open.
People said we hurt each other
but imagine having been alone
with the breathy acetone and flat iron,
eyelash curler and other devices of torture.
I think now we were miserable
and didn't even know.

Years after
when we each circle back to this shitty blue town
for a night, I drive to meet you and see ghosts
of us on every corner. In the bar I know
your cosmic amber freckles, your laugh
a little hoarser. Chewing on the silver
name necklace you've had since six years old.
I say you look just the same, but you don't.
Your thick acrylic nails like bedazzled talons
stupefy me, as they grip the gold hunk
of a Louis Vuitton. Your hair dyed irreversibly dark.
I'm wearing long sleeves to hide the tattoo you gave me
in tenth-grade with a demented electric toothbrush
all blacked out now by roses and feathers.
I don't mention grad school. Our lives
thrown in opposite directions
the way two bodies might be
flung from the same explosion.

But say the name of a boy whose face I've forgotten
remind me of a party I carried you out of
or some girl you decked in the dark for me.
Because when you look at me over the last garnet sip
of your old-fashioned, I can feel my face reflected
back to you in the deep well-water of knowing
how monstrous we've been. What kings
of some small world long ago
that got so very out of hand.
Where we stripped out of our hand-me-downs
and got into the principal's pool wasted
as the night and the water and the gauzy light
pollution would have been if we hadn't.

Aimee Seu
240

²⁴⁰ [Aimee Seu](#), "[Nikki Lyn](#)," collected in [Velvet Hounds](#), [University of Akron Press](#)

The Cat Is Black

*or what someone said Vievee Francis says
to write when you reach a wall*

Reader, having reached the wall,
and finding the cat, black,
and the frigate stalled in the harbor,
and my mother, whom I've worshiped,
though with complications, sneezing
in Oklahoma, or only in the poem,
sneezing, the spray spreading blue
ink, the sallow font, reader, without
pretense, I say, I have loved, and been
loved, reader, but what to do after
the acknowledgement? The cat is black,
and I've yet to eat. The cat is black,
and the tiny violin plays its sad song.
The cat is black, and the cashmere bleating,
which is to say, I've made this thing
from the living thing. I've lived
and made the thing, reader, and what more
might I mention but the clipped fingernail
of a moon? There is nothing new,
Nothing is new, and it's nearly a new year.
Only the year is new, and New York City.
I am reckless with the arcane. I am not
the first hungry woman, not even
in this poem am I the first hungry woman,
but god, the hunger, reader, and the cat
with the broken spine dragging itself
to the back room to die alone. My brother,
afternoons, boiled the skin off raccoons,
and I steal this too. It was not my water
that boiled. These are not my walls,
reader, nor does the cat belong to anyone,
not even itself, or does it? Z says she stood
in the shower and patted down her body.
This is the space that I inhabit, she said.
Meanwhile, I smell the stench in my robe.
Meanwhile, the cancer drugs, the paper cuts.
The little bowl of milk I leave out
for the cat, should he choose to return.

Nicole Callihan
241

²⁴¹ [Nicole Callihan](#), "[The Cat Is Black](#)," [Sixth Finch](#)

from “A Season of Provocations and Other Ethnic Dreams”

3.

English for Black Eagle Childs,
Pat “Dirty” Red Hat once noted,
is saturated with linguistic pitfalls.
For example, he once asked
a coy waitress at an old German-
style restaurant on Interstate 80,
“Do you serve alcoholics?”
“Yes, we do,” he was told
that Sunday morning. At a Sears
auto garage the manager peace-
signed when Pat asked about
“Hallucinogenic” rather than
halogen headlights. And at
the Youth Services Facility
co-workers oft-reflected when
he “applied a Heineken” on
a muskmelon pulp-choking
girl. That singular misapplication
had more notice than the turbulent
adolescence saved. But no one quipped
at the line given when he mis-dressed
himself: “I am completely reverse
of what I am.” Because that term
could fit anyone, ethnic—
or otherwise.

Ray A. Young Bear
242

²⁴² [Ray A. Young Bear](#), “[A Season of Provocations and Other Ethnic Dreams](#),” collected in [The Rock Island Hiking Club](#),
[University of Iowa Press](#)

Breasts

If I were French, I'd write
about breasts, structuralist treatments
of breasts, deconstructionist breasts,
Gertrude Stein's breasts in Père-Lachaise
under stately marble. Film noir breasts
no larger than olives, Edith Piaf's breasts
shadowed under a song, mad breasts raving
in the bird market on Sunday.
Tanguy breasts softening the landscape,
the politics of nipples (we're all equal).
A friend remembers nursing,
his twin a menacing blur. But wait,
we're in America, where breasts
were pointy until 1968. I once invented
a Busby Berkeley musical with naked women
underwater sitting at a counter
where David Bowie soda-jerked them
ice cream glaciers. It sounds so sexual
but had a Platonic airbrushed air.
Beckett calls them dug, which makes me think
of potatoes, but who calls breasts potatoes?
Bolshoi dancers strap down their breasts
while practicing at the barre.
You guess they're thinking of sailing,
but probably it's bread, dinner,
and the *Igor Zlatik Show* (their
Phil Donahue). There's a photo of me
getting dressed where I'm surprised
by Paul and try to hide my breasts, and another
this year, posed on a pier, with my breasts
reflected in silver sunglasses. I blame
it on summer when flowers overcome gardens
and breasts point at the stars. Cats
have eight of them, and Colette tells
of a cat nursing its young while
being nursed by its mother. Imagine the scene
rendered human. And then there's the Russian
story about the woman... but wait,
they've turned the lights down, and Humphrey
Bogart is staring at Lauren Bacall's breasts
as if they might start speaking.

Maxine Chernoff
243

²⁴³ [Maxine Chernoff](#), "Breasts," collected in [New Faces of 1952](#), Ithaca House

So Thick?

*Freud, presented with a copy of Wilhelm Reich's
book The Function of the Orgasm,
is said to have remarked "So Thick?"*

As thieves, as clotted cream, molasses poured in March,
or dullards duly quizzed, as thin's mate in
the marriage vow, or black fly hoverings
upon Katahdin, ketchup in the kitchen's
bottleneck, or traffic's slow red ooze
on I-5 every dusk, as musk
in the mind of an elephant,
or malice in the minds of men,
this treatise on the uses
of the human love-cramp

isn't surely anywhere as thick.
But what's the use of use, at this

imponderable juncture? Just
how practical are practices? Is poetry
poetic? And to what high end
the spondee's spasm? If the seizure leaves us
sobered up, we're lucky. Lucky

(after the humpback's beached) to have a bath
of modest aftermath, a tristesse to
redress the tryst! We're lucky to escape
the clutch of Sophocles' "furious master" (feeling's fist),
for the rest of the evening. A breather from breathing!
If the world for a merciful while be spared our craving,
or if spilling brine by brimfuls can
(for only the blink of an animal eye)
undo a few of our meaning's demeanings,
our siring's desirings, and give us one
pure moment's peace, I'd say the fucking
function's clear. One fewer war for now!

(Meanwhile, in the wombs
engorged with worm,
the drumroll starts
its endlessness again.
They'll come from some
deep months away,
the humped-up little beating forms of men...)

Heather McHugh
244

²⁴⁴ [Heather McHugh](#), "[So Thick?](#)," collected in [The Father of the Predicaments](#), [Wesleyan University Press](#)

Girls, Look Out for Todd Bernstein

Because after sitting out for a spell
he's back with a degree in accounting and a high
paying position in one of the leading
pharmaceutical corporations in the country
and aspirations of owning that exotic yellow
sports car, license plate EVIL.
And like Dennis Meng at Sycamore Chevrolet
stakes his reputation on his fully reconditioned
used cars. I stake my reputation
on telling you Todd Bernstein means business
this time, girls. No more of this being passed over
for abusive arm wrestling stars. He's got
a velour shirt now. No more of your excuses—
if he wants you, you're there. None of this
I'm shaving my pubes Friday night nonsense—
come on, you think Todd Bernstein's
going to fall for that? He knows you're not
studying, not busy working on some local
political campaign, not having the guy
who played Cockroach on *The Cosby Show* over
for dinner, not writing any great American
novel. He's seen your stuff and it's nothing more
than mediocre lyric poetry with titles
like "The Falling" and "Crucible" and "Waking to Death"
that force impossible metaphors, despairing
about love and womanhood and how bad
your life is even though you grew up happily
in suburban America, or at least as happily
as anyone can grow up in suburban America,
which normally, you know, consists of
the appearance of happiness while your dad is doing
three secretaries on the side and your mom
pretends not to know and brags to the entire
town about how you're an actor about to star
in a sitcom about the misadventures of a cable TV
repairperson who, while out on a routine
installation one day, accidentally
electrically blasts herself into the living room
of a family of barbarian warlords on a planet
near Alpha Centauri who force her into slavery
before sending her on a pillage mission
to a planet of Cloxnors who capture her and place
her in a torture institution where she meets
a vulnerable Meeb whom she convinces, because of
her cable TV repairperson skills, to let her
become nanny to its impressionable Meeblets just
before it's about to rip off her limbs
with its ferocious abnons and devour her.

The results, according to your mom, are hilarious, but come on, you and I both know the story is just so *predictable*. And Todd knows your writing doesn't pull off any metaphors for the happiness taken from you by some dude who played bass and called himself a musician when all he could really do was play a couple of chords and sing about true love and alligators and how the alligator represents true love which somehow explains the legend where the guy cut open an alligator one time in Florida and found a golfer. There's just no fooling Todd. Sure he'll act like he's interested, that's Todd Bernstein, and he'll make claims that he too has written or been artistic at some point in his life, but Todd Bernstein knows all you girls really want is a piece of good old Todd Bernstein. No longer will any strange auras enter the bedroom during sex and keep him from maintaining an erection, no longer will any women walk out on him repulsed. If anybody's walking out after sex, it'll be Todd Bernstein, I can assure you. He won't be humiliating himself by falling down a flight of stairs in front of a group of Japanese tourists anymore, but rather coaxing entire masses of women into his bedroom. Because that's Todd Bernstein. He's on the move. And he wants you to know, girls, that he's well aware you certainly can't learn Korean sitting around here which is why he's out there right now, preparing for the slew of women just beyond his sexual horizon, spray-painting GIRLS, LOOK OUT FOR TODD BERNSTEIN on the side of a Village Pantry.

Jason Bredle

245

²⁴⁵ Jason Bredle, "[Girls, Look Out for Todd Bernstein](#)," collected in [Standing in Line for the Beast, New Issues](#)

Why I Hate Martin Frobisher

Because he says I look like Deborah Kerr
Because he leaves wet towels on the bedspread
Because all mothers, waitresses, and bank ladies love him on the spot
Because he wears T-shirts with girls on them
Because he never gets parking tickets
Because he never breaks the Sorrento wineglasses
Because when he's mad we duke it out, and when I'm mad I need to calm down
Because he looks at me when I reach for the Land O'Lakes unsalted when Breakstone's on sale for a dollar fifty a pound
Because he watches sports on TV
Because he works and I just read books
Because when I'm screaming like an ocean liner, he can answer the phone and say, "Sure, no problem"
Because my mother thinks he's the spotty pup and I'm Cruella de Vil
Because he plays with his food, cuts curlicues into my 4-hour crème brûlée
Because he's always wrong and I'm the first to say sorry
Because he tries to placate me

Because he buys generic fabric softener instead of Downy
Because he does not want to go to the Red Party and gives me a 15-Watt excuse and we do not go to the Red Party
Because when he's stupid I'm too tired to point it out and when I'm stupid he's all there
Because he strains to hear *All Things Considered* while I'm biting his ankles
Because when I'm weepy and refuse to get out of the car it's time for the shrink, but when he puts his fist through my grandmother's beveled mirror he's just getting things out
Because he's glued to *The MacNeil/Lehrer Report* while I preview my upcoming suicide
Because he never trips me up

Because he made me his grandmother
Because he notices water spots on the glassware but hasn't an inkling about the man I've been sleeping with for over a year
Because he's so unlayered he doesn't know when I'm being mean
Because he no longer puts notes in my pockets for me to find later at the office by the Mr. Coffee machine
Because he no longer reads me to sleep from *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*
Because in front of the judge he looks like Clark Gable and I look like the stepmother
Because he's got a heart the size of a chipped acorn, the brains
 of a squirrel, he's a jerk,
 a little girl's blouse,
 a felon, but straight-seamed,
 a cream-faced, two-penny
 scoundrel and a kitten kicker,
 a real badass and
I want him back, oh yeah.

Phyllis Moore

246

²⁴⁶ Phyllis Moore, "Why I Hate Martin Frobisher," *Tri-Quarterly*, collected in *Seriously Funny*, University of Georgia Press

The Wrestler's Heart

I had no choice but to shave my hair
And wrestle—thirty guys humping one another
On a mat. I didn't like high school.
There were no classes in archaeology,
And the girls were too much like flowers
To bother with them. My brother, I think,
Was a hippie, and my sister, I know,
Was the runner-up queen of the Latin American Club.
When I saw her in the cafeteria, waved
And said things like, Debbie, is it your turn
To do the dishes tonight? she would smile and
Make real scary eyes. When I saw my brother
In his long hair and sissy bell-bottom pants,
He would look through me at a little snotty
Piece of gum on the ground. Neither of them
Liked me. So I sided with the wrestling coach,
The same person who taught you how to drive.
But first there was wrestling, young dudes
In a steamy room, and coach with his silver whistle,
His clipboard, his pencil behind his clubbed ear.
I was not good. Everyone was better
Than me. Everyone was larger
In the showers, their cocks like heavy wrenches,
Their hair like the scribbling of a mad child.
I would lather as best I could to hide
What I didn't have, then walk home
In the dark. When we wrestled
Madera High, I was pinned in twelve seconds.
My Mom threw me a half stick of gum
From the bleachers. She shouted, It's Juicy Fruit!
And I just looked at her. I looked at
The three spectators, all crunching corn nuts,
Their faces like punched-in paper bags.
We lost that night. The next day in Biology
I chewed my half stick of Juicy Fruit
And thought about what can go wrong
In twelve seconds. The guy who pinned
Me was named Bloodworth, a meaningful name.
That night I asked Mom what our name meant in Spanish.
She stirred crackling *papas* and said it meant Mexican.
I asked her what was the worst thing that happened
To her in the shortest period
Of time. She looked at my stepfather's chair
And told me to take out the garbage.
That year I gained weight, lost weight,
And lost more matches, nearly all by pins.
I wore my arm in a sling when
I got blood poisoning from a dirty fingernail.

I liked that. I like being hurt. I even went so far
As limping, which I thought would attract girls.

One day at lunch the counselor called me to his office.
I killed my sandwich in three bites. In his
Office of unwashed coffee mugs,
He asked what I wanted from life.
I told him I wanted to be an archeologist,
And if not that, then an oceanographer.
I told him that I had these feelings
I was Chinese, that I had lived before
And was going to live again. He told me
To get a drink of water and that by fifth period
I should reconsider what I was saying.
I studied some, dated once, ate the same sandwich
Until it was spring in most of the trees
That circled the campus, and wrestling was over.
Then school was over. That summer I mowed lawns,
Picked grapes, and rode my bike
Up and down my block because it was good
For heart and legs. The next year I took Driver's Ed.
Coach was the teacher. He said, Don't be scared
But you're going to see some punks
Getting killed. If you're going to cry,
Do it later. He turned on the projector,
A funnel of silver light that showed motes of dust,
Then six seconds of car wreck from different angles.
The narrator with a wrestler's haircut came on.
His face was thick like a canned ham
Sliding onto a platter. He held up a black tennis shoe.
He said, The boy who wore this sneaker is dead.
Two girls cried. Three boys laughed.
Coach smiled and slapped the clipboard
Against his leg, kind of hard.
With one year of wrestling behind me,
I barely peeked but thought,
Six seconds for the kid with the sneakers,
Twelve seconds for Bloodworth to throw me on my back.
Tough luck in half the time.

Gary Soto
247

²⁴⁷ Gary Soto, "[The Wrestler's Heart](#)," collected in [Home Course in Religion](#), [Chronicle Books](#)

We Take Our Children to Ireland

What will they remember best? The barbed wire
still looped around the Belfast airport,
the building-high Ulster murals—
but those were fleeting, car window sights,
more likely the turf fires lit each night,
the cups of tea their father brought
and the buttered soda farls, the sea wall
where they leaped shrieking into the Irish Sea
and emerged, purpling, to applause;
perhaps the green castle at Carrickfergus,
but more likely the candy store
with its alien crisps—vinegar? They ask,
prawn cocktail? Worcestershire leek?
More certainly still the sleekly syllabled
odd new words, gleet and shite,
and grand responses to everyday events:
How was your breakfast? Brilliant
How's your crust? Gorgeous.
Everything after that was gorgeous,
brilliant. How's your gleeted shite?
And the polite indictment from parents
everywhere, the nicely dressed matrons
pushing prams, brushing away their older kids
with a Fuck off, will ye? Which stopped
our children cold. Is the water cold,
they asked Damian, before they dared it.
No, he said, it's not cold, it's
fooking cold, ye idjits.
And the mundane hyperbole of rebuke—
you little puke, I'll tear your arm off
and beat you with it, I'll row you out to sea
and drop you, I'll bury you in sand
and top you off with rocks—
to which the toddler would contentedly nod m
and continue to drill his shovel
into the sill. All this will play on
long past the fisherman's cottage and farmer's
slurry, the tail hedgerows lining the narrow
drive up the coast, the most beautiful
of Irish landscapes indelibly fixed
in the smeared face of two-year-old Jack—
Would you look at that, his father said
to Ben and Zach, shite everywhere, brilliant.
Gorgeous, they replied. And meant it.

Lynne McMahon

248

²⁴⁸ [Lynne McMahon](#), "[We Take Our Children to Ireland](#)," *The Southern Review*, collected in [Seriously Funny](#), [University of Georgia Press](#)

Harryette Mullen Lecture on the American Dream

Mud is thicker than water. Pull your head up by your chin straps. Put the pedal to the metal. Peddle to the middle. Put the medal on the pedestal. I pledge Sister Sledgehammer & Father knows beds, but I am not my breather's keeper. I pledge to earn every holler & if found guilty, I pledge to repay my Bill of Rights to Society. From me to shining me. Money, money, money, monkey. We're number none. Our number's done. *E pluribus Unnumbskull*. For wares & several fears we go. Praise be to Guard. Slops & Slobbers. Maladies & Gentrifications. Don't kill us, we'll kill you. With lobotomy & Jesus for all.

Terrance Hayes

249

²⁴⁹ [Terrance Hayes, "Harryette Mullen Lecture on the American Dream,"](#) collected in [Wind in a Box](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Canada

By Canada I have always been fascinated.
All that snow and acquiescing.
All that emptiness, all those butterflies
marshalled into an army of peace.
Moving north away from me
Canada has no border, away
like the state its northern border
withers into the skydome. In a world
full of mistrust and self-medication
I have always hated Canada.
It makes me feel like I'm shouting
at a child for letting a handful
of pine needles run through his fist.
Canada gets along with everyone
while I hang, a dark cloud
above the schoolyard. I know
we need war, all the skirmishes
to keep our borders where
we have placed them, all
the migration, all the difference.
Just like Canada the Dalai Lama
is now in Canada, and everyone
is fascinated. When they come
to visit me, no one ever leaves me
saying, the most touching thing
about him is he's so human.
Or, I was really glad to hear
so many positive ideas regardless
of the consequences expressed.
Or I could drink a case of you.
No one has ever pedaled
every inch of thousands of roads
through me to raise awareness
for my struggle for autonomy.
I have pity but no respect for others,
which is not compassion, just ordinary
love based on attitudes towards myself.
I wonder how long I can endure.
In Canada the leaves are falling.
When they do each one rustles
maybe to the white-tailed deer
of sadness, and it's clear
that whole country does not exist
to make me feel crappy
like a candelabra hanging
above the prison world,
condemned to freely glow.

Matthew Zapruder

²⁵⁰ [Matthew Zapruder](#), "[Canada](#)," collected in [The Pajamaist](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Outdoor Chef

Nobody believes my high school offered a class called OUTDOOR CHEF. The yearbook carried a picture of us firing up the barbecue in the parking lot. This was before the Invention of the Gas Grill. Before they raised the drinking age back to 21. Jimi Hendrix burned his guitar at Monterrey then died shortly after, bumming us out in OUTDOOR CHEF. It was only a one-semester course so we had to cram. Charcoal lighter was routinely abused. We spelled our names on the sidewalk and lit them, like pissing in snow. Our teacher was Mrs. Reynolds. Enormous and cheerful and in retrospect willfully ignorant and alcoholic. It was a difficult class to teach—no textbook. Mr. Farwell, our principal, needed higher graduation rates, courses to shunt problem kids into. Not one fight in OUTDOOR CHEF, despite having the toughest guys in the school bunched together around the grills. Class was often outside, even in winter. Class was often cut, long wild hair disappearing into snow toward the parking lot. Joints often snaked between us, smoke blending with burning meat. I learned a lot about cooking chicken and pork. See, those are important things. You can get sick not cooking them long enough, and make others sick too. Neighbors would never come over for a cookout again. My apron had some crude joke about a hot dog on it. So did everyone else's. I can't begin to express how clever we were. We cooked a whole turkey for Thanksgiving and served it to Mr. Farwell and Mr. Stark, the Assistant Principal/hit man. He said he could've used a course like that when he was in school. They did not get sick. It was a festive occasion until we let a live turkey loose in the main hallway. No girls in OUTDOOR CHEF, though you might have guessed that. The jocks were subdued and serious about remaining eligible. Our school had few jocks to spare. The rest of us were lighting each other's long hair on fire, and thinking that was a fine joke. Okay, Eddie Bucco did get stabbed with a skewer but we all agreed it was an accident. We enjoyed waving our hands above the hot coals—none of us bothered with winter gloves. The last day of class, Jackie Smoker brought in his cheap electric guitar and tried to imitate Hendrix blasting from his nearby car radio. He messed up his hands bad, but for awhile, it was beautiful. Even now, I am full of self-mockery and loathing. The truth was that for many of us having our own barbecue would indicate

a successful life. Mrs. Reynolds had gone to college to teach Home Ec. We should have treated her better. Her and everybody else. Yes, it's on my transcript with a C—our final had some math on it. The wind blew ash and smoke into the air just like at the factory down the road. We had to provide our own briquettes. There's an enormous number of things you can cook outdoors. The only class in which we believed what the teacher told us. Because we could see. That, and Gym. We chewed gum outside and threw it against the school building. Mr. Farwell gave most of us diplomas. I don't know how many years OUTDOOR CHEF was offered. You could not burn your marshmallow on the test. That, when all we wanted was to go up in flames.

Jim Daniels
251

²⁵¹ [Jim Daniels](#), "[Outdoor Chef](#)," collected in [Waiting in Line for the Exterminator](#), [Wayne State University Press](#)

Failing the Republic

Back when I was fifteen faking older and working at Pizza Hut
for two-dollars-an-hour plus tips, taking an order was like Sartre in German

and the whole history of the horrible world in sand-sketches hieroglyphics
though all I had to do was write a *P* for Pan or a *T* for Thin.

All I had to do was mark the squares designating toppings—
did the people want green peppers, onions, mushrooms, bacon?

But the multitudes standing at the door
couldn't wait to tap the tables for Coke and beer and salad bowls.

Did the people want me to say how good they looked in their hair?
Did they want me to lick their gaping places?

All I had was quarters for the jukebox and an inkling that I was a calamity.
All there was was the phone that wouldn't stop ringing

since the people were after Take Out since their babies were hungry
and their husbands missing or in high-rise apartments in distant Chicago.

Hunger in this two-faced train town
was always an opus of woe wadding my head with the needs of the people

until what could I do but pronounce them all asses
and walk out the door? I could have taken a taxi or called my mom,

but it was far more dramatic to run down Hershberger
and turn on to Peters Creek

and keep on going past the 7-Eleven and the whole city heaving

until I came to the hungry and sulky-hearted populace of the graveyard.

Good riddance, haughty, baffled girl, the unappeasables must've thought.
Good riddance, unappeasables, I the imposter-waitress of the insatiable ire

(these twenty-five years later) bark back.

Adrian Blevins
252

²⁵² [Adrian Blevins](#), "[Failing the Republic](#)," collected in [The Brass Girl Brouhaha](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Decorum

She wrote, "They were making love
up against a gymnasium wall,"
and another young woman in class,
serious enough to smile, said

"No, that's fucking, they must
have been fucking," to which many
agreed, pleased to have the proper fit
of word with act.

But an older woman, a wife, a mother,
famous in class for confusing grace
with decorum and carriage,
said the F-word would distract

the reader, sensationalize the poem.
"Why can't what they were doing
just as easily be called making love?"
It was an intelligent complaint,

and the class proceeded to debate
what's fucking, what's making love,
and the importance of the context, tact,
the bon mot. I leaned toward those

who favored fucking; they were funnier
and seemed to have more experience
with the happy varieties of their subject.
But then a young man said, now believing

he had permission, "What's the difference,
you fuck 'em and you call it making love;
you tell 'em what they want to hear."
The class jeered, and another man said

"You're the kind of guy who gives fucking
a bad name," and I remembered how fuck
gets dirty as it moves reptilian
out of certain minds, certain mouths.

The young woman whose poem it was,
small-boned and small-voiced,
said she had no objection to fucking,
but these people were making love, it was

her poem and she herself up against
that gymnasium wall, and it felt like love,
and the hell with all of us.
There was silence. The class turned

to me, their teacher, who they hoped
could clarify, perhaps ease things.
I told them I disliked the word fucking
in a poem, but that fucking

might be right in this instance, yet
I was unsure now, I couldn't decide.
A tear formed and moved down
the poet's cheek. I said I was sure

only of "gymnasium," sure it was
the wrong choice, making the act seem
too public, more vulgar than she wished.
How about "boat house?" I asked.

Stephen Dunn

253

²⁵³ [Stephen Dunn](#), "[Decorum](#)," collected in [New and Selected Poems: 1974 - 1994](#), [W.W. Norton & Company](#)

Fork

Because on the first day of class you said,
“In ten years most of you won’t be writing,”
barely hiding that you hoped it would be true;
because you told me over and over, in front of the class,
that I was “hopeless,” that I was wasting my time
but more importantly yours, that I *just didn’t get it*;
because you violently scratched out every other word,
scrawled “Awk” and “Eek” in the margins
as if you were some exotic bird,
then highlighted your own remarks in pink;
because you made us proofread the galleys
of your how-I-became-a-famous-writer memoir;
because you wanted disciples, and got them,
and hated me for not becoming one;
because you were beautiful and knew it, and used it,
making wide come-fuck-me eyes
at your readers from the jackets of your books;
because when, at the end of the semester,
you grudgingly had the class over for dinner
at your over-decorated pseudo-Colonial
full of photographs with you at the center,
you served us take-out pizza on plastic plates
but had us eat it with your good silver;
and because a perverse inspiration rippled through me,

I stole a fork, slipping it into the pocket of my jeans,
then hummed with inward glee the rest of the evening
to feel its sharp tines pressing against my thigh
as we sat around you in your dark paneled study
listening to you blather on about your latest prize.
The fork was my prize. I practically sprinted
back to my dorm room, where I examined it:
a ridiculously ornate pattern, with vegetal swirls
and the curvaceous initials of one of your ancestors,
its flamboyance perfectly suited to your
red-lipsticked and silk-scarved ostentation.

That summer, after graduation, I flew to Europe,
stuffing the fork into one of the outer pouches
of my backpack. On a Eurail pass I covered ground
as only the young can, sleeping in youth hostels,
train stations, even once in the Luxembourg Gardens.
I’m sure you remember the snapshots you received
anonymously, each featuring your fork
at some celebrated European location: your fork
held at arm’s length with the Eiffel Tower
listing in the background; your fork
in the meaty hand of a smiling Beefeater;

your fork balanced on Keats's grave in Rome
or sprouting like an antenna from Brunelleschi's dome;
your fork dwarfing the Matterhorn.
I mailed the photos one by one—if possible
with the authenticating postmark of the city
where I took them. It was my mission that summer.

That was half my life ago. But all these years
I've kept the fork, through dozens of moves
and changes—always in the same desk drawer
among my pens and pencils, its sharp points
spurring me on. It became a talisman
whose tarnished aura had as much to do
with me as you. You might even say your fork
made me a writer. Not you, your fork.
You are still the worst teacher I ever had.
You should have been fired but instead got tenure.
As for the fork, just yesterday my daughter
asked me why I keep a fork in my desk drawer,
and I realized I don't need it any more.
It has served its purpose. Therefore
I am returning it to you with this letter.

Jeffrey Harrison
254

²⁵⁴ [Jeffrey Harrison](#), "[Fork](#)," collected in [Incomplete Knowledge](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Fieldwork

There are two kinds of people and five hundred
seventy-one thousand, three hundred
ninety-six species of beetle but who's
counting? Technically a small tribe
concerns itself with this number and the colors
and types of jaws that make up this number,
like my friend who returned from months
in the treetops of the Amazon with a fever
and a jar and a beetle that looked like Jimmy
Durante. She's one of the two kinds
of people and I'm one of the other
so we get along very well providing we don't
tie our bodies into a position that leads
to dilated pupils and the shared
obsession of a self-cleaning lint trap.
By the time she got off the plane the fever
had her saying things about milk
and rayon and Mr. Magoo that make
as much sense as a harpsichord played
with an anvil. This led to my driving
in a way that proved you can be
in two places at the same time
and to the removal of plastic coverings
from innumerable plastic devices
the doctors knew reflexively
how to use and a few days of her face
imitating the maps of clouds
they show us each night on TV as the one
kind of person she is
tried not to die. When something
like spring came back into her hands
and the flower of a sound
rose from her tongue it was the word
jar, which she repeated until I found
the cylinder with its yellow liquid
and little tank-body of a beetle floating
like Michelangelo painted it
on the same day he finished the finger of God
as it lazed toward the finger of Man.
And everything that would come
later, the taxonomy and papers
and extension of her grant, had nothing
to do with her gratitude toward the jar
and the black and red, the fierce creature
inside, which she set on her pillow
and touched from time to time to remind
her body of its life in the trees. Maybe
there are seven kinds of people and three

kinds of beetle and two
delicatessens where you can get a fried-
tuna sandwich on waffles but only one
reason she was back in the Amazon just
two months later writing in her small
script that looks like cuneiform
run through a blender. And if your sanity's
too highly calibrated or you wear
slippers to get to your shoes or need
to label the drawer in which you keep
your labeler, you're probably not
the kind of person who'll understand
sleeping in the green canopy of frenzied
sounds with nets strung about you
and a harness around your body because every
kind of person eventually must fall
but how many
get to touch and name and adore
a fraction and flutter of life not even
the jealous eyes of God have seen?

Bob Hicok
255

²⁵⁵ [Bob Hicok](#), "[Fieldwork](#)," collected in [Plus Shipping](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

The Book of Lies

It's true. I lied. Isn't that how
we stay alive? Dr. Metz in Old Testament
101 said Moses parted the reeds on a lake,
not the Red Sea. The orgasm was a fake
like the waves of applause and the wing beats
of one hundred birds lifting from our hearts.
Give me a break. You call this love?
Outside the sky is white, not blue, and the only
person who calls me is from Purple Heart.
Have you any spare parts to give away? I do,
I do. The sign says cook wanted, not cock
wanted. And when I said I love you, I meant,
Get lost, Asshole. The man with red hair
and green eyes cleaned me out of orgasms long ago,
and silk underpants too. He left for Chattanooga
in a red Camaro with six boxes of All Bran
and a blonde bimbo so gorgeous she made me cry.
The archangels never blew their trumpets.
Silence is the music of the spheres
and the messiah's dark scream. The witch ate Hansel
and Gretel, too. I live in a chocolate house
in Berlin. The red-haired man was never here.
When they tore down the wall, he left
with a suitcase full of bricks and my twin.
Her name was Faith. I never knew his.

Nin Andrews
256

²⁵⁶ [Nin Andrews, "The Book of Lies," *The Paris Review*](#), collected in [Why They Grow Wings](#), Silver Fish Review Press

Bad Girl

She's the one sleeping all day, in a room
at the back of your brain. She wakes up
at the sound of a cork twisted free
of a bottle, a stabbed olive

popped into gin. She's prettier than you
and right now you bore the shit out of her,
sitting there sipping when she wants
to stand on the rim of the glass, naked,

dive straight to the bottom and lie there
looking up, amazed at how the world
wavers and then comes clear. You're not
going to let her. You've locked her in

with her perfume and cheap novels,
her deep need for trouble. She's the one
calling to you through the keyhole,
then sneaking away to squirm out

a window and tear her silk dress.
You can't guess where she's going,
or who you'll wake up with
when you finally wake up,

your head throbbing like a heart.
She's the one you're scared of,
the one who dares you to go ahead
and completely disappear. It's not

you the boys are noticing, not you
turning toward them and throwing off light.
You're crouched in a corner, coming undone.
She's in love with you now. She's the one.

Kim Addonizio

257

²⁵⁷ [Kim Addonizio](#), "[Bad Girl](#)," collected in [What Is This Thing Called Love](#), [W.W. Norton & Company](#)

The Devils

You were a “victim of semiromantic anarchism
In its most irrational form.”
I was “ill at ease in an ambiguous world

Deserted by Providence.” We drank gin
And made love in the afternoon. The neighbors’
TVs were tuned to soap operas.

The unhappy couples spoke little.
There were interminable pauses.
Soft organ music. Someone coughing.

“It’s like Strindberg’s *Dream Play*,” you said.
“What is?” I asked and got no reply.
I was watching a spider on the ceiling.

It was the kind St. Veronica ate in her martyrdom.
“That woman subsisted on spiders only,”
I told the janitor when he came to fix the faucet.

He wore dirty overalls and a derby hat.
Once he had been an inmate of a notorious state institution.
“I’m no longer Jesus,” he informed us happily.

He believed only in devils now.
“This building is full of them,” he confided.
One could see their horns and tails.

If one caught them in their baths.
“He’s got Dark Ages on his brain,” you said.
“Who does?” I asked and got no reply.

The spider had the beginnings of a web
Over our heads. The world was quiet.
Except when one of us took a sip of wine.

Charles Simic
258

²⁵⁸ Charles Simic, “[The Devils](#),” collected in [The Book of Gods and Devils](#), [Mariner Books](#)

Blasphemy

A girl attacked me once with a number 2 Eagle pencil for a whynylisping impression of a radio preacher she must have loved more than sophistication or peace, for she took the pencil in a whitened knuckle and drove the point with all her weight behind it through a thick pair of jeans, jogging it at the end and twisting it, so the lead broke off under the skin, an act undertaken so suddenly and dramatically it was as though I had awakened in a strange hotel with sirens going off and half-dressed women rushing in every direction with kids tucked under their arms; as though the Moslems has retaken Jerusalem for the twelfth time, the crusaders were riding south, and the Jews in Cadiz and Granada were packing their bags, mapping the snowy ghettos of the north. But where we were, it was still Tuscaloosa, late summer, and the heat in her sparsely decorated room we had come to together after work was so miserable and intense the wallpaper was crimping at each seam, the posters of daisies and horses she had pasted up were fallen all over the floor. Whatever I thought would happen was not going to happen. Nothing was going to happen with any of the three billion women of the world forever. The time it would take for the first kindness was the wait for a Campbellite to accept Darwin and Galileo or for all Arkansas to embrace a black Messiah. The time it would take for even a hand to shyly, unambiguously brush my own was the years Bertrand Russell waited for humanism, disarmament, and neutrality. And then she was there, her cloth daubing at the darkly jellying wound. In contrition, she bowed with tweezers to pick the grit. With alcohol, she cleansed the rubbery petals. She unspooled the white gauze and spread the balm of mercy. Because she loved Christ, she forgave me. And what was that all about? I wondered, walking home through the familiar streets, the steeple of each church raised like a beneficent weapon, the mark of the heretic on my thigh, and mockery was still the unforgivable sin.

Rodney Jones
259

²⁵⁹ [Rodney Jones](#), "[Blasphemy](#)," collected in [Transparent Gestures](#), [HarperCollins](#)

Fubar

For Paul Guest

For starters, scratch the woman weeping over her dead cat—
sorry, but pet death barely puts the needle in the red zone.
And forget about getting brownie points
for any heartbreak mediated by the jukebox.
See the leaves falling; isn't this the trees' way of telling us to just buck up?

Oh they are right: their damage is so much greater than our damage.
I mean, none of my body parts have actually dropped off.
And when the moon is fat and handsome, I know we should be grateful
that its face is only metaphor; it has no teeth to chew us out.
In fact, the meadow isn't spattered with the tatters of our guts.

But in last night's hypnagogic dreamscape where I went
to collect some data. Where I was just getting into the swing of things
tranquility-wise. Then this kid came rolling through the moonlight
in a bed with lots of Rube Goldberg traction rigging.
And it was a kid like you, some kid with a broken neck.

And maybe beauty is medicine quivering on the spoon
but surely you have noticed—the goat painted on the famous old Greek urn
is headed to the slaughter. And don't get me started
on the wildflowers or they will lead me to the killer bees.
And that big ol' moon will lead to a cross-section of the spinal cord.

And the trees to their leaves, all smushed in the gutter.
And the gutter to the cat squashed flat as a hotcake.
And the hotcake to the grits, and the grits to the South,
where the meadows were once battlefields.
When a full moon only meant a better chance at being shot.

But come on, the sun is rising, I'll put a bandage on my head,
and we'll be like those guys at the end of the movie—
you take this crutch made from a stick.
For you the South is a mess, what with its cinders and its smoldering.
And looky, looky here at me: I'm playing the piccolo.

Lucia Perillo
260

²⁶⁰ [Erica Wright](#), "Truth or Dare," [Cimarron Review](#), collected in [All the Bayou Stories End with Drowned](#), Black Lawrence Press

Notes for My Body Double

The plot hole by which you must enter in
to the story is a doozy, a real humdinger,
if you will, and it is all made of fire,
the way the stars are made of fire,
though we dream them to be utterly cold
and prickly with a sad light. Nothing
ever stops in my world to hear me
singing to you. I have always loved you,
sweet twin, beloved doppelgänger,
alien lump of word in my mouth,
language I spent three years learning
only to forget when it grew too hard
the phrases that meant something:
Dear, I am your long lost butter cookie;
and, I am sorry, it was accidental,
but I have dipped the poodle in laudanum.
Let us do away with digression
for the night, though to me
it has always seemed the heart's core,
and think on our motivation
for the lines to follow:
the suddenness of our sorrow is shocking
and the day is hollowed out
and here at this moment,
this crucial hinge of the breaking heart,
I think of the day years ago
when I was a boy and came upon my uncle,
a fish's tail clamped in his teeth,
tearing the skin from the fish with such force
I could hear it—
and I felt so strange and empty
I have never spoken of it
to anyone, or let myself on a day
whole with sun think of it.
What he was doing, and why,
I never asked; there is never
an answer large enough for a world
so huge with meanness.
And I was pulled from myself
but couldn't feel a thing,
and this is your motivation,
mirrored self, speaking back
the words I make wrongly,
lifting the heavy, crude lot of anything
I can't. You must know me
exactly, apart from yourself,
to give back to the world what I can't.
You must know the angles

of light so well the shadows
will accept you like a brother.
You must not choke back my breath
when the ashes on the wind
blind even the birds in the trees.

Paul Guest
261

²⁶¹ [Paul Guest, "Notes for My Body Double,"](#) collected in [Notes for My Body Double, University of Nebraska Press](#)

Chicken Bucket

Today I turn thirteen and quit the 4-H club for good.
I smoke way too much pot for that shit.
Besides, Mama lost the rabbit and both legs
from the hip down in Vegas.
What am I supposed to do? Pretend to have a rabbit?
Bring an empty cage to the fair and say,
His name's REO Speedwagon and he weighs eight pounds?
My teacher, Mr. Ortiz says, *I'll miss you, Cassie,*
then he gives me a dime of free crank and we have sex.
I do up the crank with Mama and her boyfriend, Rick.
She throws me the keys to her wheelchair and says,
Baby, go get us a chicken bucket.
So I go and get us a chicken bucket.
On the way back to the trailer, I stop at Hardy's liquor store.
I don't want to look like a dork
carrying a chicken bucket into the store—
and even though Mama always says
Never leave chicken where someone could steal it—
I wrap my jacket around it and hide it
under the wheelchair in the parking lot.
I've got a fake ID says my name's Sherry and I'm 22,
so I pick up a gallon of Montezuma Tequila,
a box of Whip-Its and four pornos.
Mama says, *That Jerry Butler's got a real wide dick.*
But the whole time I'm in line, I'm thinking,
Please God let the chicken bucket be OK.
Please God let the chicken bucket be OK.
Please God let the chicken bucket be OK.
The guy behind me's wearing a T-shirt
that says, *Mustache Rides 10¢.*
So I say, *All I got's a nickel.*
He says, *You're cute,*
so we go out to his van and have sex.
His dick's OK, but I've seen wider.
We drink most of the tequila and I ask him,
Want a Whip-It?
He says, *Fuck no—that shit rots your brain.*
And when he says that, I feel kind of stupid
doing another one. But then I remember
what mama always told me:
Baby be your own person.
Well fuck yes.
So I do another Whip-It,
all by myself and it is great.
Suddenly it hits me—Oh shit! the chicken bucket!
Sure enough, it's gone.
Mama's going to kill me.
Those motherfuckers even took my jacket.

I can't buy a new chicken bucket
because I spent all the money at Hardy's.
So I go back to the trailer, crouch outside
behind a bush, do all the Whip-Its,
puke on myself, roll in the dirt,
and throw open the screen door like a big empty wind.
Mama! Some Mexicans jumped me!
They got the chicken bucket,
plus the rest of the money!

I look around the trailer.
Someone's taken all my old stuffed animals
and Barbies and torn them to pieces.
Fluff and arms and heads are all over the place.
I say someone did it,
but the only person around is Rick.
Mama is nowhere to be seen.
He cracks open another beer and says,
What chicken bucket?

Well, that was a long a time ago.
Rick and I got married
and we live in a trailer in Boron.
We don't live in a trailer park though—
in fact there's not another house around
for miles. But the baby keeps me
company. Rick says I'm becoming
quite a woman, and he's going to let Mama know that
if we ever see her again.

Jennifer L. Knox
262

²⁶² [Jennifer L. Knox](#), "[Chicken Bucket](#)," collected in [A Gringo Like Me](#), [Bloof Books](#)

Fallout

When it begins to rain, we run home
with our hoods up and laughing,
muddy patches of grass

giving beneath our boots like fontanelles.
I boil the water for the pasta
while you prep the chanterelles,

scrub the maps from their skullcaps
but *shhh*: a tiny sun breathes through
my palm, through the hole

in my hand (or is that your breath,
right after you've kissed it?).
I'm bleeding, washing the glow

down the sink, which swirls
like my voice in this air,
its white warp, little flame that needs

its wind to root, to flower our skin,
the field, the forest,
the whole earth

with light. And was there
a detonation of pollen, a radiant
cloud? Am I inside

out? Have I at last been
flayed, scraped clean, made
worthy of mercy?

Sara Eliza Johnson
263

²⁶³ [Sara Eliza Johnson](#), "[Fallout](#)," collected in [Vapor](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

One Authorized to Perform the Sacred Rites

Like gold brocade on a priestly garment, ritual renders the everyday festive.

I might still be Catholic if they let women be priests. I might still be Catholic if they let *me* be a priest.

My Granny Marie was one of six kids, two thirds of whom took religious orders. Her sister Elizabeth became a Sister, and all but one of her brothers went into the priesthood: Father Fran, Father Henry, and Bishop Alfredo. Faith of a kind most people never witness in person, let alone know in their souls.

My childhood parish, St. Scholastica, was named for the patroness of book fairs. But altar girls were not welcome there until I was too old. A sign on the tree house: NO GIRLS ALLOWED.

Some posit *priest* comes from the Latin *praepositus*, person placed in charge. The language of the conquerors becomes “the” language.

Who wouldn’t want the opportunities for advancement? To don the vestments? To grant the sacraments, especially penance?

Being a nun seems like zero fun.

I am not trying to be offensive.

Examination of Conscience: not the best quality, but I’m pretty all-or-nothing.

There is no system that a clever person with bad intentions can’t abuse.

No finer line between beauty and kitsch than you find in Catholicism. To wit: the pink crucifix that hung above my girlhood bed, which used to belong to my mom, affixed with the glow-in-the-dark body of Jesus.

The feminine noun *priestess* wasn’t coined until the 17th century to refer to female presiders over the religions of antiquity. Even then, many of them had to perform sacred prostitution.

Outside now in the gray daylight, life and death do-si-do as usual. Faith makes the facts less maddeningly casual.

A little less agog, a little more ecstatic. Less “Oh My God” and more “O My God!”

Prester John was a legendary medieval king and priest said to rule over the Far East when the Christian West was militarily threatened and culturally backwards. Who doesn’t dream of a mythical deliverer?

We should be searching for a priest who can perform an exorcism on America.

Priest’s crown is another name for dandelion. *Priest hole* sounds dirty, but only means a secret room or place of concealment for a priest (as in an English house during the Reformation).

Who doesn’t want this grim slog to be going somewhere?

During the Enlightenment, *priestcraft* took on the pejorative sense of “arts and devices of ambitious priests for attaining and holding temporal power and social control.”

Growing up, there was always a priest around when we needed one. When my parents bought a new car, Fran or Henry would bless it with holy water. A birthday? Holy water. Saying goodbye after dinner? Holy water.

Forget calling my Senator; I would like to dictate policy requests directly to God.

The legend of Pope Joan: a learned woman who disguised herself as a man and ascended the papal throne, eventually exposed by giving birth during a procession. I got in trouble for even talking about it.

In Sunday School, aka CCD, we gazed at religious paintings. One-point perspective makes faraway objects recede.

How long before we walk through the pearly gates of peace? No more Satan’s spawn spouting nonsense on TV. A heavenly jukebox ready to play everybody’s favorite song.

My faith remains gone. And yet my ears strain. A longing to hear someone in the beyond explaining:
Follow the sound of my voice. Rejoice when you get to the end of this hallway.

Kathleen Rooney
264

²⁶⁴ [Kathleen Rooney](#), “[One Authorized to Perform the Sacred Rites](#),” [Cimarron Review](#), collected in [Where Are the Snows](#), [The University Press of SHSU](#)

Bent Tones

There was a dance at the black school.
In the shot houses people were busy.

A woman washed her boy in a basin, sucking
a cube of ice to get the cool.

The sun drove a man in the ground like a stake.
Before his short breath climbed the kitchen's steps

She skipped down the walk in a clean dress.
Bad meat on the counter. In the sky, broken glass.

When the local hit the trestle everything trembled—
The trees she blew out of, the shiver owl,

Lights next door—With her fast eye
She could see Floyd Little
Changing his shirt for the umpteenth time.

C.D. Wright
265

²⁶⁵ [C.D. Wright, "Bent Tones,"](#) collected in [Translations of the Gospel Back Into Tongues](#), State University of New York Press

When You're Seventeen Everything Sounds like a Secret Anthem to Doom

Death is everywhere. There are flies on the windscreen.
—Depeche Mode

And the sea's grief swings its heavy fringe forth
each time you bend over in silver sequins, or a boy howls out
the moonroof of a borrowed Nissan Maxima. Blood surges.
Blast the synth. Take the dark, twisty roads fast. Flick off
the headlights deep in the sticks. Take long swigs
of cinnamon liquor, soar past the graveyard—
hands off the wheel, feet off the floorboard.

Don't make too much meaning of the fact
Depeche Mode is playing each time you
should but do not die.

Listen: There's a kind of drunk boy who will jerk
the wheel on a slick road on purpose, because you
can't sing the Right Words.

The night it ices over, for instance—
trees spangled in crystalline Love Code:

late page lit match *Let's have*
a line of blow *a black celebration—*

Even as you crash through the guardrail he will swear he is joking.

A slice of you will always be caught in the dead
air of this joke.

Will always be forked in this creek: headlights cracking
the ice crust, glowing the river stones. Always the same
rap on the glass with a fat Maglite, and the way
he wheedles the police, wild-eyed.

Of *course* he becomes a coke dealer who joins the Navy. You even live
long enough to buy him a model Porsche from Sharper Image.
You ghost him in college.

What did you expect?
The part where Death oozes up his spiral staircase to claim you as Bride?
Who were you anyway? I mean to crash into an icy river & walk away.

Do it. Slip the memory all the way up your arm like an opera glove

& through the glass of a plummeting Maxima. Reach out & touch
the cold down of Doom's Cheek. Hear his huge horse snort.
Attend to the warm wound of Dave Gahan's voice.
Make sense of a single black feather smothered in snow.

Karyna McGlynn
266

²⁶⁶ [Karyna McGlynn, "When You're Seventeen Everything Sounds like a Secret Anthem to Doom," *Poetry*](#)

Today is like yesterday.
 The courthouse fills up.
 We wait to be called before the judge.
 We learn of each other's crimes.
 We answer questions.
 The judge laughs at a woman.
 She stole a three-pack of boys' underwear from Kmart.
 The electrician left his girlfriend's kids in the back of his car.
 He had to make a quick deposit at the bank.
 He left the windows cracked.
 But not enough for a hand to get in.
 He was only gone a few minutes.
 I drank too much and pissed against a bank's picture window.
 This was after my friend hanged himself.
 Maybe it was the same bank.
 Bodies became things they were never supposed to be.
 I agree to pick up trash on the side of the highway.
 I go back to work moving boxes around in a walk-in freezer.
 Sometimes I turn out the lights and harmonize with the compressor.
 Someday we'll colonize the moon.
 I wonder if it will have pioneer graveyards filled with the names of children.
 The ones who died at birth or never grew old enough to speak.

Michael McGriff
 267

²⁶⁷ [Michael McGriff](#), "1995," [Terrain](#), collected in [Eternal Sentences](#), [The University of Arkansas Press](#)

Dedicated

The way I remember it,
I caught beauty
Like a flu,

Via handshake or high five
Or a thank-you-
For-your-service

Between the guys at the VA.
The one who lurched
Toward me, touching

Me, saying:
You like poetry,
More vision than question.

The one who said,
Overhearing me correct
My Korean conflict-era dad:

Go easy, you won't have him
Long. Or the one
Who said: *You watch*

Him like a hawk;
Just let him go.
In the molecular

Biology lab, each tank
Full of impossibly
Small fish bears

A sign that says: You are responsible
For your own deads.
Plural. Sure.

The older I get, the more
I am reminded of song
Dedications on the radio.

I called Cousin Brucie
To send out "I've Got You,
Babe" to my parents

On their wedding anniversary.
When he played them
"Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves,"

Bob and Mary Anne
Were understandably confused,
But appreciative nonetheless.

I myself have
Had three partners
In my lifetime,

And what I still love best about
Two of them
Is how I never had to explain

That joke. There was all that
Time listening
To radio or TV,

TV turned internet.
I wish I could
Dedicate those spent hours

Now to my mom,
So she could come back awhile.
She wouldn't have to know

She was dead,
Like we didn't know then
How much time was passing.

I would play
With her hair like I used to,
And tell her stories until

She began to doze off
Like she used to,
Waking only to say:

*I didn't ever know you
Loved me, Kath. You never
Wanted affection from us, Kath.*

Just like she used to.
The wrong song, somehow
The right song, playing on and on,

Like a perfect virus.

Kathy Fagan
268

²⁶⁸ [Kathy Fagan](#), "[Dedicated](#)," [Pleiades](#), collected in [Bad Hobby](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

from “Missing File #7: Nomen Nudum”

Red ochre is a pigment found in Tuscan clay. Its painstaking procurement is described by the fifteenth century Italian painter Cennino Cennini, who, having hunted and dug for it in the mountains, says it runs through the land *like a scar on a face*. He used it to paint flesh, buildings, draperies. It’s easier to excavate metal from the earth and grind it into pigment—you *actually cannot grind too much* Cennini says—than to excavate a skeleton and shape it into a story, especially without eradicating evidence which is, as we know by now, another word for history.

Once I overheard a docent at the Chicago MOMA explain to children how x-rays revealed Picasso’s *Old Man with a Guitar* was painted onto a canvas originally painted with the figure of a woman. One could, she explained, just barely make out the woman's hip with the naked eye. Though the paint making out her hip is literally under the old man's leg, in a certain light it appears she is sitting on his lap. In her talk the docent uncovered two things at once: the woman beneath, and, as such, the ironic impossibility of the man’s loneliness. The painting was begun during his Blue Period, so it’s likely the woman was a prostitute; during this time Picasso painted prostitutes, beggars, and drunks in varied shades of blue, sinking into a depression worsened by the fact that no one wanted to buy his paintings of sad and poor people, leaving him, tautologically, poorer and sadder.

When analyzing the sketches of large game found in ancient cave systems, scholars have determined that some scrapes and dents in the stone surface indicate that the paintings were attacked, possibly *in the belief that harming the image would wound a life animal*. Thinking about this is like thinking about the holes in Francis Bacon’s paintings, which can never be entered, and that is all right because they are terrifying.

When I was in middle school all the girls wore Wet n’ Wild 501 lipstick. It was the color of a dangerous bruise, and like this we signaled we were not whores but witches.

Alison Powell
269

²⁶⁹ Alison Powell, “[Missing File #7: Nomen Nudum](#),” [Hayden’s Ferry Review](#), collected in [Boats in the Attic](#), Fordham University Press

When my daughter tells me I was never punk

I say, hon, my being alive is punk. I made my life
out of grudges when I saw the odds placed against me,

when my role was to marry a man who'd kill me
and give me my hot young death, a guy named Charles

who would have and nearly did—the day I said *fuck you*
and threw his keys in the snow? That was punk.

When I called a nice guy who'd loved me steady
and thought *what if I can try staying alive*, that was punk;

when I had my last drink and surrendered the scene, that too was punk,
and yes I miss the me who would be dead

because I was a bottle rocket, a pipe bomb of a good time
but my being alive is the middle finger I never put down—

I did not let these days go by, I clawed each one from dirt,
and when I get my nails done I am cleaning weapons,

when I buy food, when I fill the tank,
I am threatening to survive long enough to piss off

a million awful people to be alive in spite of,
I am promising to stay flagrantly alive:

This is my beautiful house. I am this beautiful wife.
How did I get here? I say, *By my fucking teeth.*

Jessica L. Walsh
270

²⁷⁰ [Jessica L. Walsh](#), "[When my daughter tells me I was never punk](#)," [Nixes Mate Review](#), collected in [The Book of Gods & Grudges](#), Glass Lyre Press

The Paper Anniversary (2)

Paper gowns are not as soft as cloth gowns are not as soft
as dirt this insidious hurt and this and this and that

that and that and that a rat on the grave of a spouse
a mouse two mouses so mice so fuzzy dice

in a sky blue van I should've been a man and I wuz
and I wan and wane am as sane as a sanitary

napkin adhered to your big fat beautiful forehead
bring me your dead let them dance in my bed

let them swoon and spin and spin and tap tap
tap

Nicole Callihan
271

²⁷¹ [Nicole Callihan, "The Paper Anniversary \(2\)," *Heroin Chic*](#)

Berkeley

And then there were those winters in Berkeley
(if you can call them winters) rain falling sideways
against the brown-shingled houses along Benvenue,
La Méditerranée with its little wrought iron tables
covered in tile. Sipping lemon chicken soup
and reading Vonnegut. I loved the decay
of Telegraph Avenue, its street vendors
hawking cheap silver pendants, the old Gypsy
whose name meant “good with horses”
who told me someday I’d have a string
of feminine men as lovers. Across the world,
the wall was falling in Germany, the Soviet Union
collapsing. Men and women with PhDs
and Russian accents arrived selling colorful scarves
and offering to do odd jobs. What I remember
is walking into the wind, holding my wool coat
tight around my chest—how you could almost feel
the world tilting on its axis right beneath your feet.
I’d pass the ramshackle cottages off Euclid
with their dark rooms and disarray of roses
and dream of the lives hidden within.
It’s not that I was happy. I was too young
to be happy, knew only its first blush
not the darker tones that come after
and give it shape. But somehow
I found the small, almost unnoticeable,
gateways that led there: the torn edge
of a baguette, hot from the oven,
the acrid smell of the gingko
when you walk underneath
and step on the broken pods.
Sitting at Café Roma, watching
a beautiful man lean over a pile of textbooks
as he sips his coffee and almost,
but doesn’t quite, lift his head to see you.

Danusha Laméris

272

²⁷² [Danusha Laméris, “Berkeley,” *American Poetry Review*, collected in *Bonfire Opera*, University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

“Fire Unknown Even to Yourself”

Today in the taxi I got a fare on 19th and Fifth. She was going to the World Trade Center. I noticed after I dropped her off that she left a can in the door pocket. When I went to pick up the garbage it was a can of wine.

I didn't even know they made wine in cans. I wondered how people get through the day. Pablo Casals practiced the six Bach cello suites for 12 years before performing one in public. I get that it's important to control her sensory ups and downs, on the way to what? A first date? An interview? No one knows which bowings and dynamics Bach intended, so cellists can leave it up to their own interpretations.

One time a passenger exited the car and said: “I like your driving style.” Janos Starker smoked 60 cigarettes a day. Imagine the smell of his beloved cello. He recorded the Bach cello suites five times. I thought of blue flames that are neither liquid nor solid, the quick rust like a jewel.

Sean Singer
273

²⁷³ [Sean Singer](#), “[Fire Unknown Even to Yourself](#),” *Jewish Currents*, collected in [Today in the Taxi](#), Tupelo Press

Ohio on TV

Crucifixes on layaway. Absence of dead bolts.
Deep-fried sucralose.

Whole families living out of abandoned pianos.

Sometimes in cerebral hour-long dramas,
the characters must go to Ohio,
and this is the way it looks. How do they not know

it's the same here as anywhere else:
the poverty is mundane, the wealth outrageous?

And no one is nice.

I myself return here only to party
with people who pummel me, to follow
them around like a patchy

dog in a TV scene that takes place
in Ohio. We walk by the oblong enclosure
where the city is staging its summer fling.

You can drink a daiquiri out of a pineapple rind.

I think it's supposed to make you feel
like you are a part of something, connected back
by the long straw in your mouth.

I'm desperate to travel in time

to before we all started treating each other
so poorly, but I know I would be like the character

whose power is she can wind back the clock,
but only for three minutes.
It's not long enough to prevent anything.

It's only enough time to tear through the downtown
bawling and then watch it happen again.

Natalie Shapero
274

²⁷⁴ [Natalie Shapero](#), "[Ohio on TV](#)," [Mississippi Review](#), collected in [Popular Longing](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

The nineties

Some of us long for the hypocrisy again.
—Arundhati Roy

We gathered in mall atriums, smudged
our gum under benches. Around us,
our leaders unleashed markets yearning
to breathe free. I skulked outside
the candle store. I wanted a boyfriend
with long, straight hair like a girl, wanted
punk rock and to be called feminist,
not Dr. Hill's testimony mocked
by macho senators, but three chords
and copyshop zines. Our history books

ended at D-Day and we made up the rest,
mourned animals whose stuffed replicas
cluttered our bedrooms. Some believed
in the necessity of a planet, others
practiced easy detachment. Our problems
were one-note, easily reckoned, the poetry
of CFCs and acid rain and the opaque
beige skyline of L.A. We caught national
abuses on video, like granular tape
of police baton-beating a Black man

prone on the ground, evidence I saw
and didn't see every day. On Wall Street,
extremists blasted a hole at the base
of our tallest shrines, smoke twisted skyward
and the tag "radical Islamic terrorists"
wormed into our minds like advertising.
Oh, we'd hear it again. By pen stroke
our nation joined the largest free market
in the world. We couldn't see sweatshops,
didn't even try, as retail spaces filled

with bright, cheap objects. Untraveled outside
our great white middle, I was impressed
by unlimited salad and breadsticks.
I babysat kids who raised leaden soldiers
to their mouths, as our parents attended
their last union meetings. At the doctor,
insurance paid. Good teeth, good shoes,
good psych drugs, the last mild summer
before wildfire. We watched as cynics
stripped the welfare state, like pulling down

the walls of someone else's house to rip
out the fixtures as they tried to live inside.
I spent my grandma's social security
on compact discs and retro housewife
dresses, I ate burritos and mini
microwave bagels decorated to look
like pizzas. No one asked more from me,
yet I was dissatisfied. To live then
was like hitting a drug, all consequences
saved for another day. On the prairie

a veteran blew a federal building
wide open, children inside. The paper
printed the word "penis" for the first time,
and we gawped at Lorena and Tonya,
aired the O.J. verdict in French class.
Clerks shot up mailrooms, workplace
shootings morphed into teenaged boys
decked out with semiautomatics,
the trench-coat myth easier to buy
than the thrall of guns on tap. The dot-com

bubble became the housing bubble
turned to this festering boil we live inside
but haven't named. Like some others,
I had a modem that screamed into
the night. In chat rooms, I told strangers
my intimate personal details, spoke deeply
about my core beliefs, and that benign
audience, both transparently decent
and brand new at this, put the data
to no use. The Internet that would change

our human synapses had awakened,
but this wasn't its ascendancy. Not yet,
as we persisted in trading real goods, real
services, real dollars. I knew how much cash
I carried. The court convicted one doctor
for euthanizing the ill while others
delivered patients to amber-bottle narcotic
death. I wanted a girlfriend. I wanted
to learn about Marxism at a college
to bankrupt my parents. Across the world,

future autocrats scrounged blood lucre
melted off colonial skeletons,
flattered over caviar, dug in their heels.
Always rubles and riyals to be made,
always another dollar. Imagine how
confident we felt in our unquestioned
virtue, how we shied from the webcam,

our future closer than it appeared.
We hugged our own hollow surfaces.
We would never be this perfect again.

Erin Hoover
275

²⁷⁵ [Erin Hoover](#), "[The nineties](#)," [Gargoyle Magazine](#)

America

America the footsteps of your ghosts are white stones weighting my center

America the old girls' campus in the heart of Oakland where I teach
Grows quiet as glass marbles rolling between my feet

I pick one up, I say *It's pretty*
And my students laugh, cheering *Welcome to America*

I have no one to look to this summer, I light a candle, burn the proposedly holy wood

And God does not come when summoned

Just the scent of bonfire in my hair
Gold light flooding the bay window sure as a divination

America I divine nothing

In the other country, my parents wear their silence like silk robes each morning, devoted to the terrible sun

Day after day, I weep on the phone, saying *Even the classroom is a prison*
And still my father insists *But it is good to become an American*

And so I cement my semantics
I practice my pronunciations, I learn to say *This country*
After saying *I love*

I rinse my aquiline face, wring my language for fear

I feared what had happened in your forest, the words that pursued the soft silk of spiders

The verbs were *naturalize, charge, reside*
The nouns were *clematis, alien, hibiscus*

America I arrived to inhabit the realm of your language
I came to worry your words

What you offered is a vintage apartment, an audience for poems
Pills the color of dusk
To swallow so as not to collapse when I read the poem about my uncle

The reading of which I owe him, to everyone who antecedes me

No, I mean who *haunts* me

The haunting of which is a voice

The West is too young to be haunted, an ex-lover assures

Still, every night I listen to your voice scraping against my walls
And in the mornings, trivial offerings on my pillows
 I pick the spiders from my bed, flush their curled transparence down the drain
America I don't know what to make of my ordinary cruelty
 Or my newly bourgeois pain
Venom lacing each crack of the historic apartment
 Venom lacing the porcelain plates we hand out at parties
In the hallway I let someone touch me under my mask
 Three fingers in my mouth
 My back pushed against the door, the cold sink
The mind plays where it leads, a dark hour, the weight of a body on indigo tiles
America the scale says *not thin enough*
America my lawyer suggests to keep quiet about certain things
 About you and me
So I write in my notebook your name, I write *Country of
Cowboys and Fame*
America I have no cowboy
And I have no fame
All I gather is the scratching of ink against paper, the laugh of a skeptic
There are nights we hear something likened to fireworks lighting up the humid campus
And my students cheer, they laugh *Welcome to America*
Later in the empty corridor, the disembodied voice of my uncle
Saying *The classroom is not a prison*
Saying *Go, go home now* and so I go
Past vetiver and cedar, past eucalyptus declaring the shoreline
Until I shiver on the soft-stoned coast on which my father once lay
 And I proclaim what he did, I say *This land is my fate*
America who am I becoming here with you
 If I wander the same as without you, barely visible amid your indigenous trees

Aria Aber
276

²⁷⁶ Aria Aber, "America," *Poetry*, collected in [The Best American Poetry 2022](#), Scribner

Let Me

Let me tell you, America, this one last thing.
I will never be finished dreaming about you.
I had a lover once. If you could call him that.
I drove to his apartment in a faraway town,
like the lost bear who wandered to our cul-de-sac
that summer smoke from the burning mountain
altered our air. I don't know what became of her.
I drove to so many apartments in the day.
America, this is really the very last thing.
He'd stocked up, for our weekend together,
on food he knew I would like. Vegetarian
pad Thai, some black-bean-and-sweet-potato chili,
coconut ice cream, a bag of caramel popcorn.
Loads of Malbec. He wanted to make me happy,
but he drank until I would have been a fool
not to be afraid. I'd been drinking plenty, too.
It was too late to drive myself anywhere safe.
I watched him finger a brick as if to throw it
at my head. Maybe that's a metaphor. Maybe
that's what happened. America, sometimes it's hard
to tell the difference with you. All I could do
was lock myself inside his small bedroom. I pushed
a chest against the door and listened as he threw
his body at the wood. Listened as he tore apart
the pillow I had sewn him. He'd been good to me,
but this was like waiting for the walls to ignite.
You've heard that, America? In a firestorm
some houses burn from the inside out. An ember
caught in the eaves, wormed through the chinking, will flare up
in the insulation, on the frame, until everything
in the house succumbs to the blaze. In the morning,
I found him on the couch. Legs too long, arms spilling
to the carpet, knuckles bruised in the same pattern
as a hole in the drywall. Every wine bottle
empty. Each container of food opened, eaten,
or destroyed. "I didn't want you to have this,"
he whispered. If he could not consume my body,
the food he'd given me to eat would have to do.
Have you ever seen a person walk through the ruins
of a burnt-out home? Please believe me, I am not
making light of such suffering, America.
Maybe the dream I still can't get over is that,
so far, I have made it out alive.

Camille T. Dungy
277

²⁷⁷ [Camille T. Dungy](#), "Let Me," [The New Yorker](#), collected [The Best American Poetry 2022](#), [Scribner](#)

from "Trash"

I.

All the men I loved were dead
-beats by birthright or so the legend

went. The ledger said three
out of every four of us were

destined for a cell or lead
shells flitting like comets

through our heads. As a boy,
my mother made me write

& sign contracts to express
the worthlessness of a man's

word. *Just like your father,*
she said, whenever I would lie,

or otherwise warp the historical
record to get my way. Even then,

I knew the link between me
& the old man was pure

negation, bad habits, some awful
hyphen filled with blood. I have half

my father's face & not a measure of his flair
for the dramatic. Never once

have I prayed & had another man's wife
wail in return. Both burden & blessing alike,

it seemed, this beauty he carried
like a dead doe. No one called him Father

of the Year. But come wintertime, he would wash
& cocoa butter us until our curls shone like lodestone,

bodies wrapped in three layers
of cloth just to keep December's iron

bite at bay. And who would have thought
to thank him then? Or else turn

& expunge the record, given all we know

now of war & its unquantifiable cost,

the way living through everyone around you
dying kills something elemental, ancient.

At a certain point, it all comes back
to survival, is what I am saying.

There are men he killed to become
this man. The human brain is a soft

gray cage. He doesn't know what else
he can do with his hands.

Joshua Bennett
278

²⁷⁸ [Joshua Bennett, "Trash \(All the men I loved were dead\)," *The Kenyon Review*, collected in *The Study of Human Life*, Penguin Books](#)

Study Abroad

Hefei, China

Your white classmates treat you like a dictionary with legs
& sometimes you like it.

Some nights, a taxi driver treats you like a local & you love it.
& then you speak

a full sentence. Then he says, *Ah, you're from
Fujian province.* Then you nod because nodding is easier

than saying, *Well actually & Massachusetts
& close to Boston & also Amherst & all*

*five Backstreet Boys & originally my father was considering Australia
& the exoskeleton of a wronged lobster & Costco & my mother*

*in Costco considering a lobster & a year
or so in Texas & I was born here but grew up there & I grew up there but*

*was born of soup, both mung bean & primordial
& in the future*

*when I'm writing this, I'll be back in Texas, where some will say,
Welcome back, some, Go back,*

& now it's time to get out of the taxi, begin to walk back
to the dorms.

Walking, you whisper lines from the Dao De Jing,
then from the latest pop song. In lamplight,

you soft-sing to a tall audience
of trees. You're in touch with The Way,

as well as The Wants of boys, flaunting such
innovative hair. & the trees give off a silvery

smell that's become your entire
summer. You walk slowly. You want,

you try to ask the smell
what these trees are called.

Chen Chen

279

²⁷⁹ Chen Chen, "Study Abroad," *City News*, collected in *Your Emergency Contact Has Experienced an Emergency*, BOA Editions, Ltd.

A Scene Destined for the Cutting Room Floor

The director eats can after can of SpaghettiOs
& demands more vulnerability.
The leading man has dysentery.
We all have dysentery.
No doubt this scene
is intended to explain
something essential
about the nature of life.
It also must keep the plot moving.
It has been rewritten six times
by eight writers. No one cares.
Someone spent hours
sewing these curtains
in the name of authenticity.
No one cares. A man with strong
hands arose early
to build this floor
we're standing on
so carelessly.
We've gotten so much right.
Our ad-libbing has never been better.
The light is magnificent.
We are hitting our marks.
But this is how it goes.
It is, in the end,
beautiful enough
but extraneous.

Amorak Huey
280

²⁸⁰ Amorak Huey, "A Scene Destined for the Cutting Room Floor," *Apple Valley Review*, collected in *Dad Jokes from the Late Patriarchy*, Sundress Publications

&

Darling, you are my boxed-in place, my razor blade,
my vinegar state. We aim for crazed, we go

to waste. Darling, together we tether and take.
Nightly, I am the game you plate, the scorched-raw

meat, too tart for taste. We sip and savor,
simmer and baste. We lick the spoon,

we boil the trace. Clean-strip the bones, permit
their grace. I creep and creep. I crawl and pray.

How little can a poor girl take? You hemorrhage
my breath, you leech my ache. You vampire me,

estrangle, my freight. You ravaged average. Bloody break.
You then engender my disgrace. Darling, you are the neck

I brace: we hit the wall, we slam the brakes. You are
the maw, the clamp, the rake. Bootlace, foothold,

briefcase, bass. I claw the windows, claw the grate.
You snap the whip and clasp the gate. I want it now,

the great escape. My own Houdini, chains
tensed straight, doors torn open: I cradle and drape.

I want to lapse, to rage and wake. Real me now til I am fake.
Hold me now until I quake. God, this hour, moth-eaten

stain, this ringlet shell, this deadly strain. My windpipe
is your souvenir, my heart a stone, a sealed keepsake.

Jennifer Militello

281

²⁸¹ [Jennifer Militello](#), “&,” [American Poetry Review](#), collected in [The Pact](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

Calling Late

The men used to call
at all hours, but what I miss
most are the late-night
talks, ones where I held the phone
so close, it pressed like a gun.

Victoria Chang
282

²⁸² [Victoria Chang](#), "[Calling Late](#)," collected in [The Trees Witness Everything](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Considering the Unit of the Day

Found myself unable to retrieve my laundry from the basement
Oscillated between the poles of self-beratement and forgiveness
The words appear in any order and I read them: *why I am my wasting life*
Viewed a lot of pictures posted on Humans of Late Capitalism

Viewed a trove of products
Added to my cart a single pink stain
Considered the optimal time to cancel Prime
Concluded the time wasn't now

Considered curtailing my presence
Gathered evidence by examining my presence
Scrolled until I felt my body rise in temperature
Tried to get a racist fired but was unable

Returned to reading *The Idiot*
Continued reading *The Idiot*, though my laundry was occupying public space
Texted *where are you* to anyone
Wished I had a life where I read

But I *am* reading
Recalled the mannequin's nipples, protruding up out the bra
Decided to masturbate but mandated a waiting period
Noting I had been reading about various cases of rape

Began masturbating but thought about what she'd said about the flowers
That they were beautiful despite being dry
Was our love also dry? And was it also still beautiful?
Ceased masturbating to consider

Applied to a job in Kurdistan
Considered whether I wanted the job or wanted to want it
Considered the difference between these; its shape, dimension, texture
Searched for images of reverse sandwiches throughout duration of this consideration

Read about Avicii's last days
Read about the Golden State Killer's identity
Considered the ethics of using ancestry data to identify criminals
Concluded I needed more time for opinion-formation

Listened to my most-listened-to songs of the past year compiled by an algorithm
Considered how others' outfits altered my opinion of them
Considered what I could supplement my regular masturbation routine with
Rejected all options

Developed a desire for books to include images of each character
Immediately unwished this
Masturbated with the non-routine hand
Began to sweat and considered this a positive supplement to pleasure

Recalled the time I masturbated wildly in my first adult apartment
Its new wood floors, and me on them, at last, free of my roommates
I incorporated this picture as evidence of my desirability
Back then, I still believed everything was adding up to something

Placed a leather choker doubled on itself between my teeth
Writhed around my prized pile carpet until I started crying docile tears
Imagined myself as a cartoon and crying sharp white diamonds
Filed this image away to the database of my self-concept

Considered my dead grandmother, to whom the carpet once belonged
Considered my child-self propped up on elbows upon this very carpet
Considered the story my grandma told of a Mohamed sent to steal this carpet from her
Felt a slick of sweat arise beneath each breast but left my heavy sweatshirt on

Considered the role of memory and agony in pleasure
Told myself that I deserved to be in hot discomfort
Asked myself why I was crying
Well, I was missing someone. I was missing my self, too

Tracy Fuad
283

²⁸³ [Tracy Fuad](#), "[Considering the Unit of the Day](#)," [Pigeon Pages](#), collected in [about:blank](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

Weaning, I Listen to Tyler, the Creator

sing about boredom, the edges
of my body punctured & rife

with gold as if his syntax
might blunt the crude untethering

that makes me monstrous,
my desire to be milkless flecked

with curled rinds of clementines
found behind the radiator

like little asphyxiated moons,
How much longer will there be music

in me? I believe sometimes
the government listens

to me & my husband fuck,
a census of every slop-induced

breath, each stitch in my rib
plucked to a glossy *amen*.

There is no simple way
to say I am ungovernable.

My laughter drinks & unearths
the heart underneath my heart,

feral & delicately ambushed
by the sun-smear of her breath

my body no longer a love song
but a loudspeaker reverberating stolen time

Kendra DeColo
284

²⁸⁴ [Kendra DeColo, "Weaning, I Listen to Tyler, the Creator," *Tin House*, collected in *I am Not Trying to Hide My Hungers from the World*, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Ultrasonic

Mother, that's my batty consciousness assembling inside you.
Comprised as it is now of meat and diction,
in the lunar hues of this image, subaquatic, parasitic,
ungoverned by any syntax,
it's an organ without any function. It becomes and becomes
until it becomes a thing excreted,
like an utterance, like a dispatch addressed to no recipient.
In the future it'll drive a big car.
It will amble and brood and canoodle too in the funny buzz of
afternoons in the beer garden
in an altered state, we say, as if the mind is performing
an acoustic version of its electric album
or is a foreign lingo in bad translation, but in this early portrait,
the soma poses schematic,
a charcoal sketch of the self, this inkblot anatomy
without music, without politic,
without ethnic or epistemic, no language bickers and rambles
in its braincase, no neural parliament
in session in its soft tissue, this mute floret,
dumb as deity, dumb as moon.

Jaswinder Bolina
285

²⁸⁵ [Jaswinder Bolina](#), "[Ultrasonic](#)," [Qualm](#), collected in [Phantom Camera](#), [New Issues Press](#)

Christmas Night

The morning I was reading the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova who said of the terrible years of the Yezhov Terror when she spent seventeen months in the prison lines in Leningrad, "I was with my people then, / there, where my people unfortunately were" was the same morning I was listening to the news about the use of chemical weapons on a village in Syria. We're not at war with Syria, you could say, but most people were saying, "We're not at war with Syria yet."

A lot of what I know about Syria I picked up from a relation of mine in the Secret Service who did one of his hardship tours there and says to this day it was his favorite country because of the kindness and hospitality of the people. His brick walk-up is filled with brass heirlooms and rugs from Damascus. His position is not as romantic as a post at the White House, but Dick Cheney once gave him a pin at Christmas and it meant a lot to him because he really liked Dick Cheney. He said no one treats guys like him better. I have a hard time reconciling that with my political ideology, but I try. I try not to file it away in the category "Banality of Evil" because how you treat people who serve you and under you is important and not just a decoration of personality.

So Dick Cheney is good to the people he meets.

I used to write polemics for leftwing newspapers we printed at Kinko's when we could raise the money. Dick Cheney is one of the people I did not hesitate to call evil.

I still think it is his fault a lot of people died, and a lot means not a number you can count, but at least 919,967. Mercifully it is not a number that includes my cousin who did two tours in Afghanistan. One Christmas in the middle of it, he was on Skype telling about last night's duty with an Afghani soldier, and because of how the hand-off was going, my cousin was armed and the Afghani was not, but Jesus Christ, for the last week now guys had been attacked in the night by monkeys. Actual goddamn primates that get on your face and fuck you up.

My cousin and his mom lived with us for a while when things got bad, and I've always thought that makes him my brother. When he was sixteen, he came to visit me on campus and we got stoned together and went to see the Tibetan monks making a sand painting in the Anthropology Department. He agreed it was totally like the green sand they tapped out of their spoons turned into a blossoming morning glory right in front of our eyes. Not long after he was expelled from high school and in rehab and then living out of his car and then he was just missing and then Army, if he could get his juvie record cleared up, which he could because everyone who signed up then knew where they were going. What he said to me before he left was "If somebody's got to die for this, it should be somebody like me."

He was wrong about that of course. Just one reason he is wrong is that, against regulations, he gave an Afghani national his knife because he thinks nobody should have to stand in the dark next to an American with a rifle waiting to get his face ripped off by a macaque.

What I wish is that we were kids again and he's pretending to be an alligator like he always did while I pretend to be a wild warrior queen and we're in the treehouse eating Barbie legs, which we pretend are hot dogs, and I wish I wasn't crying about my poor beautiful Barbies and that instead of getting him in deep shit with my mom I'm sitting down next to him, chewing on that dismembered beige plastic as we tell each other how delicious it is. I wish my Facebook status wasn't a meme with a Gandhi quote, and I wish his wasn't a picture of the son he hasn't seen in the year since he deployed.

Another cousin joined up too after the housing bubble burst couldn't find work. He was done with Basic and didn't know where he was going next, but since the surge had come and gone, Okinawa was most likely. My grandfather raised a glass to the hero in the family. I really can't stand that naive and pandering line of bull, but later, after more drinks, my grandfather will tell how in 1945 his platoon set sail at night, ground forces bound for the Pacific front and the bomb hadn't been dropped yet, so they didn't know they wouldn't have to be heroes. He'll tell how it was so dark they thought they were sailing straight into the end of the world. He could cry for his mother and no one would know, it was so dark, the sea and the sky.

When they finally landed in Korea, everything was different and it was his job, he said, to guard the perimeter and shoot at those poor bastard communists starving as they tried to steal food from the trash. His eyes are watching them even now.

When it's Christmas night and my relation in the Secret Service wants to lighten my grandfather's mood, he tells stories about famous people he has watched. When he was guarding the Dalai Lama at a ball game, his holiness saw him smiling behind his dark glasses to see the Cardinals make an RBI and asked him to sit down and explain the game. He and the Dalai Lama talked ball for an inning, and apparently the Dalai Lama is a real stand-up guy. The stars were shining over the moths crackling in the stadium lights, and to hear this man describe how carefully he filled in the boxes of a scorecard reminds me of how the monks in their robes were like red and yellow birds darting among the trees as they poured all of those lacings of sand into the creek, and I was there then where my cousin was and he was there with me.

Kathryn Nuernberger
286

²⁸⁶ [Kathryn Nuernberger](#), "[Christmas Night](#)," [Ninth Letter](#), collected in [Brief Interviews with the Romantic Past](#), [The Ohio State University Press](#)

Traffic

I was kissing this woman
I didn't know very well.

"I really like this," she said.
"My husband never kisses
me. He does you know
what and that's that."

"I like this, too," I told her.
"The other is just okay."

From the cars on her
street, one after another,

love songs. Some brutal
and full of bad grammar,

others enamored of
themselves.

Ron Koertge
287

²⁸⁷ [Ron Koertge](#), "[Traffic](#)," collected in [The Ogre's Wife](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

Reinante

Dust of wheat
when there was wheat
and on the hill, smoke—the pines

burning on their own
or set on fire.
Next to the burro, a goat,

next to the axe, a scythe.
In a town this small,
no one forgets.

The sunflowers know
what winter is—
frost on the lemons,

a burnt taste in the air.
You drink slowly
at night, alone.

The weight of the unsaid
unfurls a dark
lily in your heart.

Jennifer Barber
288

²⁸⁸ [Jennifer Barber](#), "[Reinante](#)," [Harvard Review](#), collected in [Rigging the Wind](#), [Kore Press](#)

Squawk

Under the spell
Of the doctor's blue polka-dot sweater,
Big Bird revealed the horrors of his life.
His love had always been easy,
He'd left lush clouds & Florida vacations
To teach us goodness & the alphabet,
He'd spent nights dreaming of swans
& feathering a lonely erection.

“I only wanted to be a bird like any other bird,
I used to wander flock to flock but found
the chirpish love any star receives from fans.
When I showed up at dinner parties,
the guests whispered: Who invited the bird?
They giggled at my yellow afro, my Jewish beak.

Look at me!
King of the Muppet rejects:
Oscar & his can of rust & sour trash,
The Cookie Monster & his greedy Negro mumble,
Bert & Ernie the secret lovers, Kermit,
the Unenchanted frog!
We've spent our lives making you laugh,
and I'm tired of it,
tired of this prison of make-believe!”

He began tearing at himself.
Feathers flew.

The doctor sneezed & his sweater dazzled.
Big Bird yanked til his skin was uncovered,
Twisted til his big head popped off,
And when the yellow cloud settled,
Only a tiny black man remained.
Tears fluttered from his eyes & he sang,
Freeeee! I'm free at last.

Meanwhile, the doctor tugged
A magic button on his magic sweater,
And a giant rushed in carrying a straightjacket
—a big yellow-feathered straightjacket.

Somewhere Tweety was being eaten by a cat;
The Road Runner was running out of road.
The black man ruffled & squawked with rage.

Terrance Hayes
289

²⁸⁹ [Terrance Hayes](#), “[Squawk](#),” collected in [Hip Logic](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Participation belly button

Attention. Poke. _____ Bad signal. Redo.
(attention getting noise)

Here's where we fit once. And when we play we'll always
remember we did. Remember how hot it was. That summer.

Stuffed animals _____ faced each other prone on the
(adverb)

floor. And you said that was just OK. Birthday presents? No. The
universe gives us one present: flesh, to remind us.

Black hole belly button. _____ ice cream
(your favorite nebula)

swirls. You're poking me, I said. No, you said. Present thyself if
you're so born. Here's my belly button. That's how you know I'm
real and not a clone or anything. This is the Savage Land or
Magneto's space base. Or the outer space parts of The Infinity
War; those comics have some X-Men in them, I said.

I've never watched X-Men, you said, and then I was watching X-
Men cartoons inside. I'm being a boy. And my Ultimate Warrior
plush and I were warriors in war. That _____ could
(noun, green)

only smell like chlorophyll, and everyone laughed. Thanks,
nature, for memories and green so we can separate ourselves
from outer space. I'm being a boy again, rushing through spaces of
stone suburb backyard shed meteor _____ poop
(large pet)

walking paths. I count myself as spider webby as crystalline
hornet's nests. Technicolor void ice cream hot day childhood
_____ Eventually you come back to that

(something that spirals)

walking shape. Like how taking a summer road trip together, my

_____ was like driving at night through the
(pet name)

_____ roads versus looking at the light green hash
(noun, boundary)

mark section of a map. Dad has to work outside, so come in. I was

little, and I did. And my parents, like yards, chores, and dinner

around mosquitoes that hung in the air like Styrofoam ball

mobiles of find-it-yourself galaxies, were around. The war is

waiting. And you were back to your _____ in your
(craft project)

childhood basement near a wooded area upstate. And as you slept in

your mother screamed at your father.

How she screamed. And you clutched a _____. But
(stuffed animal)

here's what was unsettling about that story of that summer you

told this summer: It's the kind of non-human origin story of

a(n) _____. By being _____, it makes me.
(object of worship) (you)

A Bedazzler is still a gun. Action figures faced off. That

weapon-scented artillery pounding of the head, those fingernails

against the glass eyes of plush friends. Faster _____.
(artillery)

Pounding on the wall. Pounding wake up on the door. Cannons

blasting again and again. The human belly button. Touch the hole

left alack, feel kaboom. And it was unsettling because you learned

to roll your eyes. Touch touch. And you were never afraid. You

and your mother. And room and the hallway. And that was a

decade ago. Actually, you decide: pit them. That was X ago. That
was you-choose-now: The stuffed toy is a funny friend. Thus
we're allies. The _____ . The summer infinity conflict.
(warzone)

The _____ war. The X war. The X X.
(gender)

Russell Jaffe
290

²⁹⁰ [Russell Jaffe](#), "[Participation belly button](#)," collected in [This Super Doom I Aver](#), [Poets Democracy](#)

My List of True Facts

I am 43 and I just drove to CVS at 9:30 p.m. on a Sunday to buy a store-brand pregnancy test two sticks in a box rung up by a clerk who looked like the human embodiment of a Ken doll with his coiffed blond hair and red smock even though I wished there was a tired older woman at the register this once even though I am sure I am not pregnant this missing my period is almost definitely another trick of perimenopause along with the inexplicable rage at all humans the insane sex drive and the blood that when it comes overwhelms everything with two sons already what would I do with a baby now even though I spent four long years trying to have another I am done have given away all the small clothes and plastic devices that make noise just looking at toddlers leaves me exhausted this would be a particularly cruel trick of nature the CVS was empty there was no one in cosmetics or any aisle including family planning which is mostly lube and condoms I didn't know Naturalamb was a thing "real skin-to-skin intimacy" there's just one small half of one shelf of pregnancy tests and some say no/yes in case you don't think you can read blue or pink lines appearing in a circle my grandmother was a nurse-midwife during the war in the Sosnowiec ghetto her brother ten years younger *a change-of-life child* she called him when she told me finally she had a brother when the archivists came around for her testimony years after her brother was gassed alongside her mother in Auschwitz years after my grandmother euthanized her own daughter whom I was named for because the SS were tossing babies from the windows of cattle cars *change-of-life child* the name for a baby born to an older mother past forty I peed on so many sticks over so many years gave myself scores of injections took pills went under anesthesia and knives since there's an unspoken mandate to procreate when all your people your family were actually slaughtered I gave one son my grandmother's brother's name and the other was called King Myson by his birth mother on the page of notes we got that she filled out before she gave him up it took me an hour of staring at the form before I realized it was *my son* she was claiming him before she let him go and I think the morning will bring nothing just one blue line but right now it is still night and I am sitting in my car under the parking lot lights which are bright and static like me and beyond them there's the clerk in the red smock locking the doors

Erika Meitner

291

²⁹¹ Erika Meitner, "My List of True Facts," *The Believer*, collected in *Useful Junk*, BOA Editions, Ltd.

Give It Up

The message in the cereal box says
You Must Love And Not Ask For Love In Return.
Throw away the box.
We can't be well. There are millions
of neurons connecting and no one knows
what, or why. So we invent antiviral serums
but the side effect is fatal. Give it up.
The watermelons are stacked in the kitchen
at Big Boy's. The breakfast bins are empty.
It doesn't matter.
We vainly attempt escaping
by acrobatics but it becomes
an exercise in vanity.
The bell rings its inexplicable sound
saying Brigitte Bardot, Howdy Doody,
Tony Bennett. Give them up. They're no longer
in the news. Their names surface like a clear light
from the muck. Margaret Atwood. There's nothing
wrong with her. She's fine
but we'll forget her too.
These words and all words reflect
the nature of the work
to the extent that they're not used. Relax.
Describe Something Without Mentioning It, said Alice Toklas.
Gertrude Stein replied When A Jew Dies. He's Dead.
Then William James told how he was against greatness and
bigness in all forms. Who cares.
There's nothing to save. The magazines
keep collecting their dates
piled in the corner. The recipes aren't cut.
I hope you are all well and warm
but composition is the quilt
over the blood and
the only suspense is in following its trail.
There is a moment when we opened the box. Oh yes, and
the sound came out
where we all began.
How it becomes a hiss from the lips saying
It's Over.
Human hair in the trenches will make
beans grow tall. But how much
do we have to give for tall beans?
The waitress mistakes my poem for paper and
throws it out with pizza, burgers, fries,
kleenex, pickle juice.
I love you and expect no love in return.
I've given that up.
The garbage man finds my poem and says he's the

only garbage man who ever found one.
I take it all up again.

Grace Cavalieri
292

John Donne and Leonard Cohen at the End of the World

In the unholy light
stripping the horizon bare
the poets eat oranges and olives,
the kind Donne grew a taste for in Cádiz.

I didn't think the end
would come so bright, says Leonard
in that voice like smoke settled in rafters
or a rockslide paused. At his touch, oranges melt.

Out of golden lines
at last, Donne nods, cleaning
his oily fingers on a bit of shroud.
He pours them both another ruby glass.

From where they sit—
could be a pulpit, or a tower—
they watch the slow sky of beaten gold
collapse, like a high note held until it thins.

World drunk and bottle dry,
they are two rakish hats receding
into the dark. Leonard lets slip a bit of peel.
Like a lover or a saint, it falls forever on its knees.

Carolyn Oliver
293

²⁹³ Carolyn Oliver, "John Donne and Leonard Cohen at the End of the World," *BOOTH*, collected in *Inside the Storm I Want to Touch the Tremble*, The University of Utah Press

Our Sister, Who Is Anger

My brother and I wake to smashed lightbulbs and a bathtub full
of piss She says the world is covered
in spines One eye is brown the other she keeps closed
all the time we spend pulling batteries from her mouth
wiping away her unforgivable language from the neighbors' windows
she's begging for her favorite lullaby again
the fucks rain down
from town to town
fuck you little lamb
fuck you little bird
fuck you
Her allergies are contagious we breathe in
static cough out mosquitoes
On her worst days even the air around her head draws back
with a shudder I ignore her He coddles her
We both fail to make a difference still her thumbs
pressing at the backs of our necks still the restless satellite of her gaze
What else to call her footsteps pacing the floor
above us but the sound of shame
We have memorized it perfectly Oh how we have
Her hands surprisingly small fit so inexorably into ours
like sunlight into a sleeping eyelid
like teeth clamping onto bone
I say he's her favorite He says I'm hers

Nicky Beer
294

²⁹⁴ [Nicky Beer](#), "[Our Sister, Who Is Anger](#)," [The Journal](#)

Bring Me My Arrows of Desire

Barbara tells me that her friend asked her sister—
her friend's sister—what she wanted for Christmas,
and the sister told her, the friend, that she wanted
some leg warmers, and when I say, "So?"

Barbara says, "Isn't that the kind of thing you buy for
yourself?" But what if leg warmers are the thing
you want more than anything else, more than love,

a roof over your head, a hot meal? Barbara is telling me
this as we are having lunch, and just then a beautiful
young woman bangs down her tray next to ours,
and the beautiful woman is not only beautiful
but also dressed to the nines, though she is tearing into
her food as though she's wearing a pair of pajama pants
and a faded t-shirt from some band that only recorded

one album and succumbed to drug addiction
and mismanagement and hasn't been heard from since,
and Barbara says, "There's something wonderful about
watching a pretty woman eat her lunch like a wolf,"
which she, the woman, is, just shoveling it in,
smearing a bit of mayo off her face or blouse and scowling
as she dabs at it. What else does the pretty woman want?

Romance, I'm so sure, or at least sex. We all want sex.
Old people do. Priests, nuns... take a look at Fra Filippo
Lippi's *Madonna and Child*, and you'll probably agree
with me that your mom and my mom and Jesus's mom
are not the same mom. No, in this painting there's
a Malibu yumminess to Jesus's blonde and blue-eyed
mammy whose babeliness is totally at odds with what

you might assume would be the appearance of your
average first-century Nazarene hottie, her teeth dark
or missing, her skin tattered by incessant Old Testament
insect infestations and scalding desert winds. "That'd be
Lucrezia Buti," says Barbara, "a novice of the order
of St. Mary Magdalene whom Filippo abducted
and became not only the model for his many madonnas

but also a madonna herself, since she was also the mother
of Filippo Lippi's son Filippino Lippi, subsequently
a famous painter in his own right," and I say, "Dang,"
and Barbara says, "Well, if you'd had a nun like her
in your convent, what would you have done?"
Barbara took a lot of art history classes. Anyway,
that's the way it goes, isn't it—I mean, doesn't it?

For years we wander lonely as a cloud, and then we meet
someone we love, and we make all these compromises
so we can live with them till death do us part and build
a life together, sure, but also have all this fabulous sex
with just this one beautiful person instead of poisoning
ourselves in these smoky bars and going through one
scummy hookup after another and all the emotional

chaos that goes with that as well as any number
of sexually transmitted diseases, including several
the urologists haven't even heard of, and we now have
this one absolutely adorable darling we can have sex
with almost any time, it seems, and then the kids
start coming along, which means sleeplessness
and late-night trips to the ER and early-morning alarms

to get to day care on time and then soccer and jiu jitsu
and pointillism class and chess camp and extra hours
at the office to pay for the college tuition that looms over
a bank account that's going to start spraying dollars
like a fire hydrant with the cap unscrewed once Tyler
and Hope and Bethany enroll at the private universities
their friends are going to instead of the community

college whose brochures you've left on the dining
room table and kitchen counter and front seats
of the late-model cars they had to have because
their friends have them also, and, well, that's the way
it goes again. Some religions say sex is terrible,
just awful, whereas others say it is the highest expression
of the divine. The Khajuraho temple climax in India

is bedizened with sculptures of women and men
having sex that can only be described as gymnastic.
The women are broad-hipped and high-breasted,
and they twist their generously contoured
and bejeweled bodies into the most impossible positions,
whereas the men look as though they're just happy
to be there. And you may snicker all you like,

but some scholars of Hinduism say a woman
and a man in close embrace symbolize a reunion
of that which never should have been put asunder
in the first place. When B. B. King was a little boy
in Itta Bena, Mississippi, he made money by playing
the guitar and singing on street corners, and when he sang
gospel songs, people gathered around and clapped,

but nobody gave him any money, so he kept singing
the same songs, but every time he got to the words
“my Lord,” he sang “my baby” instead, and from then on,
passersby paid him. Another entertainer, Nathaniel
“Magnificent” Montague, said there’s only a thin line
between “I need you, Jesus” and “I need you, baby.”
Okay, yeah, but the line’s not even that thin.

David Kirby
295

²⁹⁵ [David Kirby, “Bring Me My Arrows of Desire,” *South Florida Poetry Journal*](#)

Jocks

The back row in American History,
already wearing away uniforms
under our warm-ups, popping purple gum,
some of us in lipstick stolen from our mothers,
others mistaken for our younger brothers,
with buzz cuts, cornrows, jacked-up ponytails,
we didn't care about the presidents.
We cut out early in a seamless blitz
of nylon sheen. Our thighs were staggering,
our stretches legendary: counting *four*,
five, *sex*, we swore we saw the bleachers flinch.
We licked our palms and rubbed our sneakers clean
and couldn't stand the Pentecostal teams
with their set shots and culottes—what was worse
than modesty? And who could top our coach,
destroying clipboards, screaming, GET YOUR MAN!,
whose fury was the only compliment
we'd ever trusted? Most of us believed
that suffrage meant *collective suffering*.
We weren't discerning but we weren't unsure.
Our trick plays worked. We wore each other's sweat.
Our pregnant captain didn't know it yet.

Caki Wilkinson
296

²⁹⁶ Caki Wilkinson, "Jocks," [Kenyon Review](#), collected in [The Survival Expo](#), Persea Books

What No One Could Have Told Them

Once he comes to live on the outside of her, he will not sleep through the night or the next 400. He sleeps not, they sleep not. Ergo they steer gradually mad. The dog's head shifts another paw under the desk. Over a period of 400 nights.

You will see, she warns him. Life is full of television sets, invoices, organs of other animals thawing on counters.

In her first dream of him, she leaves him sleeping on Mamo's salt-bag quilt behind her alma mater. Leaves him to the Golden Goblins. Sleep, pretty one, sleep.

...the quilt that comforted her brother's youthful bed, the quilt he took to band camp.

Huh oh, he says, Huh oh. His word for many months. Merrily pouring a bottle of Pledge over the dog's dull coat. And with a round little belly that shakes like jelly.

Waiting out a shower in the Border Café; the bartender spoons a frozen strawberry into his palm-leaf basket while they lift their frosted mugs in a grateful click.

He sits up tall in his grandfather's lap, waving and waving to the Blue Bonnet truck. Bye, blue, bye.

In the next dream he stands on his toes, executes a flawless flip onto the braided rug. Resprings to crib.

The salt-bag quilt goes everywhere, the one the bitch Rosemary bore her litters on. The one they wrap around the mower, and bundle with black oak leaves.

How the bowl of Quick Quaker Oats fits his head.

He will have her milk at 1:42, 3:26, 4 a.m. Again at 6. Bent over the rail to settle his battling limbs down for an afternoon nap. Eyes shut, trying to picture what in the world she has on.

His nightlight—a snow-white pair of porcelain owls.

They remember him toothless, with one tooth, two teeth, five or seven scattered around in his head. They can see the day when he throws open his jaw to display several vicious rows.

Naked in a splash of sun, he pees into a paper plate the guest set down in the grass as she reached for potato chips.

Suppertime, the dog takes leave of the desk's cool cavity to patrol his highchair.

How patiently he pulls Kleenex from a box. Tissue by tissue. How quietly he stands at the door trailing the White Cloud; swabs his young hair with the toilet brush.

The dog inherits the salt-bag quilt. The one her Mamo made when she was seventeen—girlfriends stationed around a frame in black stockings sewing, talking about things their children would do;

He says: cereal, byebye, shoe, raisin, nobody. He hums.

She stands before the medicine chest, drawn. Swiftly he tumps discarded Tampax and hair from an old comb into her tub.

Wearily the man enters the house through the back. She isn't dressed. At the table there is weeping. Curses. Forking dried breasts of chicken.

while Little Sneed sat on the floor beneath the frame, pushing the needles back through.

One yawn followed by another yawn. Then little fists screwing little eyes. The wooden crib stuffed with bears and windup pillows wheeled in to receive him. Out in a twinkle. The powdered bottom airing the dark. The 400th night. When they give up their last honeyed morsel of love; the dog nestles in the batting of the salt-bag quilt commencing its long mope unto death.

C.D. Wright
297

²⁹⁷ C.D. Wright, "[What No One Could Have Told Them](#)," *Sulfur*, collected in [String Light](#), The University of Georgia Press

Homage to Sharon Stone

It's early morning. This is the "before,"
the world hanging around in its wrapper,
blowsy, frumpy, doing nothing: my
neighbors, hitching themselves to the roles
of the unhappily married, trundle their three
mastiffs down the street. I am writing this
book of poems. My name is Lynn Emanuel.
I am wearing a bathrobe and curlers; from
my lips, a Marlboro drips ash on the text.
It is the third of September 20**.

And as I am writing this in my trifocals
and slippers, across the street, Sharon Stone,
her head swollen with curlers, her mouth
red and narrow as a dancing slipper,
is rushed into a black limo. And because
these limos snake up and down my street,
this book will be full of sleek cars nosing
through the shadowy ocean of these words,
giving to the street,

(Liberty Avenue in Pittsburgh, PA),
and to the book I am writing, an aspect
that is both glamorous and funereal.

My name is Lynn Emanuel, and in this
book I play the part of someone writing
a book, and I take the role seriously,
just as Sharon Stone takes seriously
the role of the diva. I watch the dark
cars disappear her and in my poem
another Lexus erupts like a big animal
at the cool trough of a shady curb. So,
when you see this black car, do not think
it is a Symbol For Something. It is just
Sharon Stone driving past the house
of Lynn Emanuel who is, at the time,
trying to write a book of poems.

Or you could think of the black car as
Lynn Emanuel, because, really, as an author,
I have always wanted to be a car, even
though most of the time I have to be
the "I," or the woman hanging wash;
I am a woman, one minute, then I am a man,
I am a carnival of Lynn Emanuels:
Lynn in the red dress; Lynn sulking
behind the big nose of my erection;
then I am the train pulling into the station
when what I would really love to be is
Gertrude Stein spying on Sharon Stone
at six in the morning. But enough about

that, back to the interior decorating:
On the page, the town looks bald
and dim so I turn up the amps on
the radioactive glances of bad boys.
In a kitchen, I stack pans sleek with
grease, and on a counter there is a roast
beef red as a face in a tantrum. Amid all
this bland strangeness is Sharon Stone,
who, like an engraved invitation, is asking
me, *Won't you, too, play a role?* I do not
choose the black limo rolling down the street
with the golden stare of my limo headlights
bringing with me the sun, the moon, and
Sharon Stone. It is nearly dawn; the sun
is a fox chewing her foot from the trap;
every bite is a wound and every wound
is a red window, a red door, a red road.
My name is Lynn Emanuel. I am the writer
trying to unwrite the world that is all around her.

Lynn Emanuel

298

²⁹⁸ [Lynn Emanuel](#), "[Homage to Sharon Stone](#)," collected in [Then, Suddenly—](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Marina Abramović's Gaze

I find her seated at the kitchen table at two a.m.,
her red dress a large heart in the dark's chest.

I flip the light switch: she stares past the empty

chair across from her, over the swan-necked faucet
curving moonlight, then beyond the bay window

where time and space continuously trade places

above the slow-rising slope of my neighbor's roof.
It's expected that I sit, that we submerge ourselves in

each other's presence, the blue silence of two a.m.

I sit. Her gaze shifts, softest of shovels, a tender
excavation to see the why of my sleeplessness,

my wandering in socked feet, pulling moans

from floorboards, moving air into other rooms.
A cricket chirrs behind the refrigerator: gold spark,

gold spark, gold spark, goes quiet, cold dark.

§

*You, Lisa. Exam table. Swivel stool. Taupe cabinets.
Framed Degas print—pastel ballerina, folded in half*

to grip her foot. Door swings, doctor enters. So young.

*Wheels the stool behind. To sit closer to your wife.
Faces her. Leans toward. Speaks to. Her face, yours—*

how they change. Cloud shadow without the clouds.

§

In my city there comes the sound of someone's
death wish, of reckless velocity, the car engine's cry

thinning with distance. From Marina, this distilled

empathy. Warm gold fire. And this conflagration
of time, of seconds becoming ash. The hush of that:

sparks springing out from nothing, then returning to it.

8

*Late evening. Livingroom couch. Lisa, you. News on
mute. Don't blame you. Tortoiseshell cat alert*

against the sliding glass. Tail twitching—something

*outside, alive in that dark. Third drink in your hand.
Careful. Her hand swirls inside her hair, gathering.*

Palm open—to show you. Little brunette bird's nest.

*She rises, resolute. You follow. Roll your old
office chair into the hall. In your hand, scissors*

shine. Careful. She sits, head already dipped,

*meaning—Begin. Your eyes tell. Pink, glossed.
You sway, careful, snip. Dark brown locks fall*

slow. Scraps of shadow land randomly. Now

*clippers, nape to crown. Peach white shock of scalp.
Such gentleness—how you brush away the filaments*

crosshatching her forehead. Your unhurried

*hand considering her skull. One fingerpad skating
across stubble. Around the hair whorl. Clockwise.*

Again around. Don't make something of it—this

*spiraling outward. Don't imagine me gliding into
your bedroom, my nothing-like-a-heart dress*

whispering on the floor. It cannot whisper. Just as I

*cannot lift the bedcover. Slip in like an open door.
Cannot hear the soft ocean of her breathing*

or feel the flame of her body beside mine. Look—

*I'm not here. I'm saying good-bye. Vanishing
from your mind. Cloud shadow without the clouds*

uncovering your moon-blued world.

8

When I climb in, scoot close, she stirs: my girl,
my gold, my glow, my dream inside the dream of my
life, these seconds, these breaths blessing my neck.

David Hernandez
299

²⁹⁹ [David Hernandez](#), "[Marina Abramović's Gaze](#)," [Zócalo Public Square](#), collected in [Hello I Must Be Going](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Love Poem to Sinister Moments

You are the dead swan
floating in the Susquehanna.

The red moon before a storm.
You are the series of scars

on a daughter's arm. The tidy
pool of blood on the 7-Eleven counter

and the small white-haired woman
who wipes it away.

You are, when I'm driving,
the sweet smell that may

or may not be poison
gas spilling over the city.

You are cartoons interrupted
by war, the odd-tasting

drink at last call. You are
the gunshots I mistake

for celebration. Lancaster
cornfields, and behind them,

Three Mile Island, smoking
against purple horizon.

Your confidence astounds me.
You arrive uninvited,

grind glass into the pâté, spit
in the gin, and are gone. I want

your perfect broken backbone
for my own. Your long, thin fingers

that always know exactly
which string to pull,

which card will send
the house tumbling down.

Catherine Pierce

300

³⁰⁰ [Catherine Pierce, "Love Poem to Sinister Moments," *Mid-American Review*, collected in *Animals of Habit*, \[The Kent State University Press\]\(#\)](#)

Against Surrealism

*A cripple passes by holding a child's hand.
After that I'm going to read André Breton
—César Vallejo*

The trees are blackened with trash bags, and the sidewalk is black. At the door is an Argentine composer. In 1978, after a heart transplant, she woke with a mild case of amnesia, enough that she didn't recognize her own music, declared it the work of an insane person, and started over again. Don't get confused. You have not entered Shea Stadium. Snow is not falling inside. Those boxes are not going to fold themselves. All the children are wearing striped polos for a reason known only to the girl you are in love with, who has a gigantic gap between her front teeth and holds a lacrosse stick across her collarbone like an ax. Every year, four hundred people die by accidentally getting rolled into carpets and forgotten. You have lost the hand you were holding when you entered. Did you let go of it, or did it let go of you? This question is written on the ceiling. Your body is a mannequin made from the spare parts of horses. The girl is twirling the lacrosse stick. Is she beckoning you with it? Pine needle after pine needle falls through the horizon, each arriving in the shape of a car. The Argentine opens the doors and tucks each child in, buckles the belt, tests the belt. The girl you love stands and smooths her skirt across her legs. She is going to leave you. She is going to leave you the lacrosse stick. Instead of going down, the sun disappears. There are no cars anywhere now; all the children are gone and the buildings are dark. The Argentine is smoking on the corner. *Are you leaving, too?* you ask. *More than anything*, she says, *I don't want to start over again.*

P. Scott Cunningham
301

³⁰¹ [P. Scott Cunningham](#), "[Against Surrealism](#)," *Maggy*, collected in [Ya Te Veo](#), [The University of Arkansas Press](#)

Factoryville Eclogue

Morning, I ate five slices of browning apple, and then, hunger gone, walked into the field, mindful all the while of ticks and scrap.

I remembered the stories: boys gouging their feet on the teeth of a junked thresher, one dying days later.

The bites of nightmare spiders.

People gathered in the grass to fuck or smoke from glowing foil.

I went to find my uncle's starter pistol, snub-nosed, black, with a dull red snout.

He threw it there, one drunken twilight, after he pretended to shoot his second wife, for her insolence, in the face.

(This was 1993. I was fourteen. Nothing could be explained to me.)

(Maybe that is how my uncle felt about his wife, that only demonstration would suffice.)

Afterward, he walked into the woods, which he knew like a strange neighbor who does things, in silence, the same way, hour after hour. Months later he came back, looking for his gun. He said, *I need it to scare the pigeons from my barn.*

You can blame anything on uncles. Footfalls in the brush. A crumpled aunt. A year you'd like to forget.

The grass was heavy. The waste stretched as far as I understood.

Acres of metal, freaked with dew, all looked the same in the wet sunlight. And I bent to seize each gleaming thing I could.

Gregory Lawless
302

³⁰² [Gregory Lawless](#), "[Factoryville Eclogue](#)," collected in *Foreclosure*, Back Pages Publishers

My Brother

True perfection seems imperfect, yet it is perfectly itself.
—Lao Tzu, translated by Stephen Mitchell

When he bursts through the door moments before dawn
and turns on all the lights, and puts on a record he loves,
when he high-fives the homeless man, sipping cider
from a Tupperware container, when he can't stand
the thought of me being angry at him, when he walks
up 6th Avenue the wrong way through traffic,
when he couldn't wait for his baby brother to be born,
when he tells me I am all that matters, when he autographs
the night outside the bright theater, when the word *us* closes
my eyes, scrawled thick on the lip of my bedroom shelf
as he steadies himself, looking closely at his handiwork,
when he wakes me to say I must do better by myself,
a moment he will not remember, when *us* knocks
in my mind, the poem is already written.

Soren Stockman
303

³⁰³ Soren Stockman, "My Brother," [The Louisville Review](#), collected in [Elephant, Four Way Books](#)

When the professor asked the workshop, Who among us now will speak about poetry ideologically? I
thought with abandon *ME!* & then

I googled “ideology” that night when I got home. Who am I
kidding? I know nothing about bodies of theory, though I read
as much Kant as I can. At the end of the day, all I can recall
is the way the light tripped down from the fluorescent bulbs
onto my mother’s face when they wheeled her past us
into post-op. How the sutures they used to close the slit in her neck
looked less like lifelines than I assured myself they would. Teach me something
about the ideology of women: how we can crave motherhood
& autonomy at the same time, knowing both are gardens for loneliness
despite our daughters or our lovers leaving our face damp with reckless kissing.

I’m sure Freud has opinions about why daughters & lovers & mothers share
the same hotel room in my unconscious, but my intentions are pure: I want to learn
the path my mother’s finger traveled down the sternum of the first person she fucked
but didn’t love so I can grieve her not as a nation grieves its commander, but as a woman
grieves another woman. We all know we turn into our mothers, & hers died young
in the grip of her body’s disease. Please, tell me one more time
what Derrida said about language—was it that we can deconstruct it
as we do a cadaver: cut into a word to understand
what prevented it from keeping itself alive? I don’t know. I don’t know
much beyond what language does when I fuss with it
& put it all in tidy rows—that a word can walk toward me then
like my mother’s ghost. That it can be dusk all day. That we are self-taught
in the philosophy of our own desire. If I speak ideologically,
it’s because I desperately want to know the exact stitch
memory & language used to weave each other into the dress
my mother picked out special, knowing how beautifully it’d fall to the floor.

Katie Condon
304

³⁰⁴ [Katie Condon, “When the professor asked the workshop, Who among us now will speak about poetry ideologically? I thought with abandon ME! & then,”](#) collected in [Praying Naked](#), Ohio State University Press

Accursed Questions, iv

In place of self-delusion, positive thinking, and medication, I'm ready to try obscene riddles, which apparently helped cure Henry VIII of dangerous melancholy.

The only one I remember is what did the zero say to the eight?

Nice belt could be the beginning of something and might (for a few moments) cure my melancholy.

Life, too, is dangerous.

Even days are dangerous. I'm serious. The ones around here can climb the apple tree and shake it to make the apples fall.

Sometimes my questions come out as if I were interrogating you, which is not my aim. My sister, who has the same upbringing, asks her questions gently.

My dog used to cock her head when I asked, You wanna go for a walk? Now she is ash on my ex's shelf.

In *King Lear*, *nothing* is often the answer. In Augustine's *Confessions*, *thou* is never far.

I don't think we're supposed to question God.

Into the Pacific crashed a plane years ago. They never found any piece of one of my sister's daughters and so there's the hope we try not to indulge that the girl is alive somewhere.

Is that you, I sometimes ask under my breath when I pass a beautiful child on the street, though of course she is no longer a child.

Is that you, I sometimes ask.

I am blue this morning. High winds again.

Get up, I tell myself, and then I say you need to sleep, look at you.

Should I lie on the floor here for ten minutes and sleep or storm ahead, some brief exhalations, these hands at the ends of these bent arms.

Tomorrow I'll go through the *when's* and try to understand something more about time, which is at the heart of the sonnets, along with love.

There are places in the world where people never ask riddles except when someone has died.

To be riddled with is to be made full of holes.

Jean, in "Sanctuary," asks:

You who I don't know I don't know how to talk to you

—What is it like for you there?

More than any other speech act, a question creates an other.

What are days for?

Days are where we live, writes Larkin. But who dreamed up this experiment? Are we in it or are we conducting it?

In clown class I was funny exactly once, when I walked through an imaginary square made out of four hats placed on the floor saying awful awful awful awful.

The only way to manage all this not-knowing is to hope in my next life everything will be clear, just wait. In the meantime, let me spend mornings here at Malecon, on 97th and Amsterdam, bent over these pages.

What are you writing, the Bible? the waiter asks. Why are you always working?

The novelist ordered a second glass of wine before he'd finished his first, a third before he'd finished his second. Red wine. Big steak. Two kinds of potatoes. Quite beautiful crooked hands. But what was he saying about sentences? Leave out the *and* if you're in a hurry. Solitude, and misery, may be necessary for a certain kind of work. You have to feel it first and if you've felt it you can just write the thing without explaining anything about it.

We said goodbye. We kissed on both cheeks. The subway wasn't working at that hour so I ran until I ran out of breath or the late-night bus stopped. Which was it? Which will it be? Solitude, misery, love?

Here in the city we have buses that kneel.

Catherine Barnett

305

³⁰⁵ [Catherine Barnett](#), "[Accursed Questions, iv](#)," collected in [Human Hours](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

And He Will Guide My Craft

that is not a burning building it is a bonfire on the beach
and those are not soldiers they are fishermen
I am rowing us closer you will see
how those are not guns but fishing poles
a star is not a fighter plane
an island is not an aircraft carrier
and can you see the fishermen cooking their catch in the fire
I am rowing us closer
do you hear their laughter on the wind
yes it sounds like people crying but it is not
do you hear the fire popping yes it sounds like pistols
taking prisoners to the afterlife but it is not
I have always been with you
these are my hands rowing your boat
we shouldn't be on open water when the sun rises
we will dock here this is a peaceful island
you can rest you can eat
that is not smoke it is mist wrapping the cliffs
while the fishermen tend their fires
those are not bodies they are people sleeping
we will leave our boat behind when I say run
we will run as fast as we can across the sand
don't look back you will disappear into the woods
and I will disappear into your mind

Kevin Prufer
306

³⁰⁶ [Kevin Prufer](#), "[And He Will Guide My Craft](#)," *AGNI*, collected in [The Art of Fiction](#), *Four Way Books*

World Peace

Everyone's dying. More than ever,
dying from plastics in baby bottles, from war
and AIDS and drunk drivers, all of us ingesting
death like hot dogs in one of those eating competitions
championed by a wiry Japanese guy in an AC/DC t-shirt.
During the Miss America pageant
one of the contestants announces she wants world peace,
the audience so silent you can hear
two million groans going off like shotguns
across the continent. More than world peace
I'd send Superman
counterclockwise around the planet like a tether ball,
my grandfathers and grandmothers
raised into kitchen chairs
with aces and hearts in their hands.
Tracy and James and Steve roaring back, the collapsed veins
in their arms and legs climbing like alligators
out of the mud. I'd be in the living room
with Charlie, purple and yellow butterflies exploding
from his rifle, swarming his face and chest.
We would go down to the station
and watch the trains, and when offered,
I would tell him I no longer drink.
He and I and the rest of the world
would do the awkward high five reincarnation.
We'd lie down in our beds and listen
to our dead cousins breathing like iron lungs,
the ones we didn't like, the loud ones
come back from war and heart attacks and car crashes,
the young woman in the swimsuit and red sash,
raising her lips to a microphone, the ram sliding towards the gutters,
the mice scratching their way into the basement,
my unborn sister glowing in the womb again like a bottle of milk.

Jay Nebel

307

³⁰⁷ [Jay Nebel](#), "[World Peace](#)," collected in [Neighbors](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Battle Hymn of the Roommate

Sunday morning, and I was up early crying over a carpet shampoo named The Final Touch. Even the aggressive windowsill pigeons couldn't cheer me. People still had their flags out. I'd fallen asleep in full stage makeup. My roommate situated a heap of stargazer lilies in a vase and they were bleeding pollen onto untouched copies of *The New Yorker*. The issue on top boasted a dreamy purple cover but nobody wanted to read the story by Jonathan Franzen. We were collecting enough volumes to make a footstool. I wanted to wash some grapes but had trouble turning on the lamp, which had been recently bedazzled and then stripped of bedazzling. My roommate was blasting Prodigy and I uttered something about the security deposit, which might as well have been a sword, but then I needed my roommate to assist with removing the enormous set of adhesive eyelashes we'd experimented with the night before. Students kept bragging about opulent foam parties downtown and I wanted in. Ever the buzzkill, my roommate insisted on being my "date." The foam-shooter erupted on a dais and my flimsy shift turned into the skin atop a forgotten pudding cup. Ian with the omnipresent pack of Big Red passed me a weird unlit pipe. The rest was fuzz, but somehow I made it into my duckling pajamas and removed my contact lenses (even wearing the skullcap of smack and bleeding from the mouth into a snowbank in high school I remembered to take out my contacts). So there I was, nauseous in the utility closet, cradling a bottle of The Final Touch like a dehydrated elderly cat. Many graduate students would need to explain such tears to a roommate: Dear Roommate, the name "the final touch" speaks to the liminality of existence, as one day we will deposit our last rent check in the red metal box, and hug each other before departing in separate directions, or maybe you'll be on a train and I'll be standing on the platform and realize *oh fuck, this is it*, and slap the glass but with gloves on so it makes no sound. My roommate knew this without a word, however, and never purchased that brand of carpet shampoo again.

Mary Biddinger

308

³⁰⁸ [Mary Biddinger, "Battle Hymn of the Roommate," *DIAGRAM*](#)

Starting Small

At sunset on the Fourth of July,
just as the Shriners began shooting
fireworks over the football stadium,

the first McDonald's in Las Cruces
switched on its lights and unlocked its doors
and shone there harshly

against the nothing, like a shrine
to itself, a prize we could claim.
And that same evening,

while my brother and I were waiting in line
to place our orders,
by some act of grace

the vacant lot across the street
caught fire, starting small,
then gaining, tossing everything—every tumbleweed
and paper cup—into its sack of flames.

We were children.

We'd walked three miles to get there.

We'd walked across the interstate
just like we said we wouldn't.

What a pleasure—
I'm tempted to say *what a relief*—
it was to see it: fire

dancing around in front of us
like a trained animal.

We ate our burgers on the sidewalk.

They were all right.

Behind us, in the sky,
the city of Las Cruces
was explaining its independence

the best way it knew how.

We knew very little, almost nothing,

though at some point that evening,
when the fire was at a peak
and the heat coming off it

made us squint from across the street,

my brother leaned into me
and said, with the satisfaction of someone
who has won a long, ongoing argument,

“This is a miracle.”

His mouth was an O
of grease and ketchup,

his cheeks red
with heat and admiration.

He looked—I’m tempted to say—
like an angel.

He looked like
he’d never recover.

The fire lifted its big,
meaty tongue as if to speak, then fell over
and kept burning.

It got late. We had to go.
We walked home along the ditch,
kicking each other, grown tired once again
of each other’s company.

We grew up.

Something big was built
on that vacant lot, something
indestructible

that wasn’t big enough
and was torn down
so something bigger

that would go immediately out of business
could take its place.

Now I see what he meant.

The miracle
wasn’t the fire.

The miracle was no one
called the fire department,
no one thought to,

and the miracle was that, allowed
to continue, the fire grew,

caught up with itself
every few yards

and grew. And the miracle was

no one stopped it, and the miracle was

no one wanted to stop it.

Carrie Fountain

309

³⁰⁹ [Carrie Fountain](#), "[Starting Small](#)," [Cimarron Review](#), collected in [Burn Lake](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Who's Who

1

Yeats saw a fish
as a mysterious girl

which made the world seem
more fuckable.

He wanted to follow her
home
after he killed her,

but, of course, did not.

2

“Here’s the thing,”
says the brand spokesmodel

waving her Diet Coke

and sounding beleaguered
yet defiant,

“just do *you*”

Rae Armantrout
310

³¹⁰ [Rae Armantrout](#), “[Who’s Who](#),” collected in [Finalists](#), [Wesleyan University Press](#)

Pastoral

My bravery is a daydream that comes from grass I guess
and from the first biography I ever wrote on George Washington Carver
who I chose to forever-love in the third grade
and also to persistently analyze because George was gutsy and brawny
and neurologically elastic and good at knowing about crop rotation
and at mixing things together into a nutritious mash. As a matter of fact
I did write about George in longhand in a little diary with a silver key
and though I couldn't spell any of the words like "Tuskegee"
I didn't care and neither did he because we had the mocking birds
to keep us company and not too far away a waterfall we could climb
if we were brave enough, which of course we were. Yes that was
a slippery slope but I loved going to the falls with George
even more than I loved the slick moss and the snakes and cheese sandwiches
my mom would make with Wonder bread since this was forever ago
and Whole Foods hadn't been incorporated yet
and was as it happens nothing but a series of woebegotten brothers
making molasses on a mountain with a mule and a Granny
who was their mother as well as a stereotype. Yes I have gone
to great lengths to explain myself by way of George to you
and still I feel provoked to continue or maybe just start all over
with my book report on Susan B. Anthony but since that would require
feats of memory and feistiness far beyond me
I'll just assume you've had enough and wander off to the periphery
where all my people live amongst themselves

in an invisible little sachet of thirst-quenching derring-do.

Adrian Blevins
311

³¹¹ [Adrian Blevins](#), "[Pastoral](#)," [Copper Nickel](#), collected in [Appalachians Run Amok](#), [Two Sylvias Press](#)

Noah's Nameless Wife Sees a Golden Bust of Joan of Arc

Sometimes we lose a woman to water

+

sometimes to fire.

+

I tell Noah's Nameless Wife that Joan of Arc is the patron saint of WAVES—

+

Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service.

+

It takes four minutes to drown, she says, how long does it take to burn

+

alive?

+

A woman armed with a sword is a saint. A woman with a husband is a smudge.

+

I try to tell her it's not true.

C. T. Salazar
312

³¹² [C. T. Salazar](#), "[Noah's Nameless Wife Sees a Golden Bust of Joan of Arc](#)," collected in [Headless John the Baptist Hitchhiking](#), [Acre Books](#)

The Fall of 1992

Gainesville, Florida

An empire of moss,
 dead yellow, and carapace:
that was the season
 of gnats, amyl nitrate, and goddamn
rain; of the gator in the fake lake rolling

his silverish eyes;
 of vice; of *Erotica*,
give it up and let
 me have my way. And the gin-soaked dread
that an acronym was festering inside.

Love was a doorknob
 statement, a breakneck goodbye—
and the walk of shame
 without shame, the hair disheveled, curl
of Kools, and desolate birds like ampersands...

I re-did my face
 in the bar bathroom, above
the urinal trough.
 I liked it rough. From behind the stall,
Lady Pearl slurred the words: *Don't hold out for love*.

Randall Mann
313

³¹³ [Randall Mann](#), "[The Fall of 1992](#)," [Poetry](#), collected in [Straight Razor](#), [Persea Books](#)

Ice Cream in February

Sitting in this car like a worn-out century,
an ashtray on wheels—my fingers direct
its wheels to pull into this lot as tears creep
from their ends to lacquer the steering wheel.

I've positioned myself to face this faded
storefront without the foresight to see it
is what was formerly the Babies "R" Us that
swung its doors open before my feet
when all I bought was diapers and my arms
hailed plastic bags freighted with formula
and pacifiers, the cruel weight of the car
seat that hung from the crook of my arm
held suspended the jewel that was my
daughter whose cries were like ribbons
at midnight. Back then, I was always in
the market for pacifiers, diapers, and baby
formula. I'd buy cloth bibs by the dozens
because, just like I got smart about breast
milk, I got smart about all the spitting up:
if I just kept a bib on the kid and swapped
it out each time the formula dribbled up
out the baby mouth, I wouldn't have to
change the whole outfit. Baby hacks,
I guess you could call them. Mother's Day,
I happened to be in there because I was
always in there, stocking up on disposable
diapers, diaper creams, teething rings
molded out of plastic from a factory in
China, and while checking out the nice
young man I saw practically on a daily
basis said, "Happy Mother's Day, I hope
your husband got you something nice."

And in the way I had back then, one eye
always asquint, circles practically drawn
with markers beneath my eyes, hands
trembling not because I had to climb fifty
steps to my apartment with the fifty-
pound car seat encasing the fifteen-pound
baby, but because I only got to sleep in
2½ hour increments and was therefore
actually insane and even hallucinating,
I said, “My Mother’s Day present to myself
is that I’m not married.” Now Babies “R” Us
is shuttered forever. Now I dip the plastic
spoon into the frost, eat a barrel’s worth
of sugar, which will reach down to my blood
as a stranger offers his hand to an old lady
to help her off the bench at the bus stop.
My daughter orders a pumpkin spice
latte at the drive-thru. I am alone again
in this world. For years, she spared me
from my own self-interest, got me used
to bending down for the bedtime kiss,
to waiting while she learned to manage
shower faucets, on hand to rescue her
from water’s scald. Now she disappears
into steam, shutting the door behind
her. I, too, dissolve. The drive-by sky
in this nowhere lot is worse than a fat
policeman fattening himself on baked
goods inside the heated cubicle of his
vehicle’s interior, as I watch him while
I eat an ice cream cone in winter, tears
leaking from the ends of my fingers, my
one lost mitten somewhere on some
road behind me, a three-lane boulevard

along which buses constantly drag
their plumes of exhaust and stores

heave a sigh and roll over onto their
sides to die their brick-and-mortar

deaths before the president of a land
in which I never requested citizenship

and the dying woman under a blanket
at the ferry station curls up inside my

ear murmuring that she forgives me
for the morning I almost dropped

a dollar into her cup but stopped when
I only found a twenty in my wallet and

did not have the time or compassion
to break it at the coffee shop because

I did not have time. The best part
of being alone is being alone, is being

able to enjoy an ice cream cone, but now
I'm starting to sound like someone who

thrives on simple pleasures, which
just isn't true. I've always despised

those women who think trespass is
sneaking an extra chocolate, or hoarding

a favorite cookie. Come on, bitches, let's
fall down some stairs! No one calls

me to see how my day at work is going,
and I'm always hauling the trash cans

out to the end of the drive, and at this
point in my life I just look like an old

woman to people who drive by, which
is better I guess than being harassed,

but why can't you get something in
between a leer and a disgusted smirk

for having a body that carries you to
the mailbox to find out there is no mail?

Cate Marvin

³¹⁴ [Cate Marvin](#), "[Ice Cream in February](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Event Horizon](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

There is One Blue River

*"No one knows where it is
We know little but it is known"
—Mak Dizdar*

There is one blue river we must cross. I read that in translation. I wondered if it was the Blue Danube. Perhaps it was the Volga, or the Vardar we walked beside in Skopje, among the Roman ruins, where I taught, where we gave the gypsy boy what we had every day so he could buy his tiny sister the pastry and dance his little dance. The joy we felt when his mother returned that winter and we saw her tussle his hair and he was able to go back to doing what older brothers are due. Or the Mississippi in Saint Louis where John was nearly shot trying to score, the bullet casing rang against the dark, or was it the Ohio where old Tony lost his job when the mill closed, he left to no one knows where the river takes us, the same with Timmy and the Allegheny, or was it the Susquehanna, or the Merrimack, alongside the closed down red brick mills, where we drank, where me and my friends would sit beside talking about leaving. Until we did, until we disappeared from that life and into another *no one knows where it is. We know little but it is known.* Or did I misread those words that were written decades ago in another language, in a country that no longer exists, was it not a blue river but did it say, *There is one blue cross we must climb*, like the one that rose high on the mountain above that city from another life, or the one we own inside our chests. How we make the sign when we touch our foreheads and our hearts, *beyond foreboding beyond doubt*, when we kneel and pray, we bow our faces to the dirt of our dead and offer the sky the nape of our blue veined necks.

Sean Thomas Dougherty
315

³¹⁵ [Sean Thomas Dougherty](#), "[There is One Blue River](#)," [Nine Mile](#), collected in [Not All Saints](#), [Bitter Oleander Press](#)

It Don't Mean a Thing if It Ain't Got That Swing

On the wine label, monks, towers and wimples.
The boy with damp hands and the girl with damp
panties. The spring air is a little drunk
on itself, after all, on its aftertaste of wet
pewter and on the flecks and spangles of light
it sifts through the shadows the oak leaves toss
this way and that, as though dealing cards.
A grackle unrolls like a carpet of sandpaper
its brash lament. A car with an ulcerated
muffler stutters past. Inside, the girl has on
those panties, the pale color of key lime pie,
and two comical earrings, one a rabbit,
one a carrot. He'd thought her body hair
might be darker, so that, let's say, the sluice
of hair from her navel to her pubic floss
would be like a file of ants showing
the way to a picnic, but it was pale
enough to catch, and to toss, the light. She's
all detail and all beautiful. So much to observe.
He hates being so inarticulate. He hates being
so inarticulate. First she removes the carrot,
then the rabbit. He bears them to the bedside table...

From what follows we turn away,
for we have manners
and our lovers need privacy to love
and talk and talk, for love is woven

from language
itself, from jokes, pet names and puns,
from anecdote, from double entendre
(already invaded by *tendre*) until

our lovers are a kind of literature
and sole mad scholiasts of it.
Inventors at Work, a sign on the bedroom
door might say.

It wasn't from the gods fire was stolen,
but from matter
(decay burning so steadily who'd think to speed
it up? It knew what it was doing). I think

it was language Prometheus got from the gods.
Isn't a tongue a flame? If I remember
the story right, he sailed
to the island of Lemnos, where Hephaestus

kept his forge, stole a brand of fire
and carried it back in a hollow stalk,
like smuggling music in a clarinet.
Who'd think to look

for it there? Who'd plan ahead to ask
Language how she'd fare far from gods?
She? For purposes of fable I've made her
a young woman.

She pined and waned,
she scuffled from kitchen to porch, she
sighed and each sigh seared its smoky
way from lung to mouth to the cornflower-

blue air toward which all spirit rose
and from which,
like logs collapsing in a fireplace, all
matter sank. This was long before writing;

Language was young and sad. She could
implore and charm, she could convince and scathe,
pick laughter's lock,
she could almost glow with her own powers,

but she was the wind's,
like jazz before recordings. Deep into
the pockets of her smock she thrust her fists.
She stamped a comely foot (and on one ankle bone,

it's worth mentioning, she bore the tattoo
of a butterfly—
Nabokov's Blue, unless I miss my guess,
O.D., F. Martin Brown, 1955), she raised

a quizzical shoulder and let sag languidly
a pout.
Oh, I'd give anything, she cried,
if I could be memorable.

Anything?
intoned the opportunistic devil from
behind a papier-mâché boulder. *Yes,*
anything, she said, and thus the deal

was struck, and writing was invented.
But to be written down she gave up
pout, toss, crinkle,
stamp and shrug, shiver, flout and pucker,

the long, cunning lexicon of the body,
and thus what we lazily call “form”
in poetry,
let’s say, is Language’s desperate

attempt to wrench from print
the voluble body it gave away
in order to be read.
(By the way, my sweet, I think you’ll

recognize “between the lines”—
talk about form!—
not the generic “young woman,”
nor Eve nor muse nor other bimbo,

but 100 lb. you, smoldering demurely
under one of your ravishing hats
like a brand in a hollow stalk, let’s
say, on a twilit porch...)

Where was I? Oh yes, our lovers. Which ones?
Ha ha. We’ll not eavesdrop, but if we did we’d
hear them murmuring. Those aren’t sweet nothings,
they’re the very dial tone love’s open line makes.
Even the gruff swain in the neighboring car
that night at the Montgomery Drive-In thirty
years ago, in panic as mute love spread through
his body like a willful shapelessness, went to work.
I love you baby (two-beat pause), *no shit*.
When you’re so terrified you call a beloved
institution like the Montgomery Drive-In
“the finger bowl,” and we all did, you’ve a long
way to go and his cry was a fine beginning.
A snowflake sizzles against the window of my
hotel room. Ann Arbor, late at night. My bonnie
lies not over the ocean but over a Great Lake
or two. Now I lay me down to sleep, I used
to say, the first great poem I knew by heart.
Could I but find the words and lilt, there’s some-
thing I’d tell you, sweetie. I don’t know what
it is, but I’m on the case, let me tell you,
the way convicts can tell you all about the law.

William Matthews
316

³¹⁶ William Matthews, “[It Don’t Mean a Thing if It Ain’t Got That Swing](#),” collected in [Blues If You Want](#), [Ecco](#)

Kite Shepherd (2)

You lounge dapper in the ante-room.

The ante-room is full of things
that seem, like afterthoughts, to mean you

no harm. Seemed. There,

before you entered the conditions
of the larger room, the narrowing elaborations

of the house, one could be or care for

anything, even when anything was catastrophically
aloft, more than enough

to make one feel one's interior life as a city

that had already been burned
to the ground, and so one's body then

a vehicle pushed into soaring

by rushing shoulders of dark smoke.

Marc McKee
317

³¹⁷ [Marc McKee](#), "[Kite Shepherd \(2\)](#)," collected in [Meta Meta Make-Belief](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

Monstress

My face: talking signpost
or locked door to a ballroom

in a derelict hotel. I walk
alone through the woods

to the house of another dead
Englishman. There are families

and clots of children exclaiming
over a live cat in a bedroom;

then silent but shoulder-to-shoulder,
they read about 18th century hair.

For all to see I clonk my head
in a tiny doorway, exclaim in

American while everyone looks away.
Before there were humans

there was darkness: dark swaying,
a mist, a lake of blood, but

everything was a lake of blood.
And born of the blood were even

creatures like me, who make mothers
run from every direction, who sleep

as open-hearted as the newly dead.

Julia Story
318

³¹⁸ [Julia Story](#), "[Monstress](#)," [Mount Island](#), collected in [Spinster for Hire](#), [The Word Works](#)

My Therapist Gave Me Permission to Want to Lose Weight Without Bringing Gloria Steinem into It

I hit my goal weight during the pandemic,
not because I got sick or was too anxious
to eat, but because I've been counting
every clementine since December
using an app they advertise on the subway
alongside poetry I was too cynical
to ever appreciate. I'm a feminist,
I got the memo: I'm not allowed
to post how much weight I lost, or
even that I *wanted* to cut back
on drinking every night
until I no longer felt guilty
about what I was doing
to shut up the first shift worker
who thought she could just tell
second-shift me what to do.
The evening crew works on different
problem sets, she should know that.
I tried leaving a Post-it on her desk,
Body positivity, ever heard of it?
I'm supposed to love the body I have
now, not the one I had six years ago,
before my J-O-B became drinking to get through
all the Facebook messages from women
telling on one another for not censoring their thoughts
enough for the sake of the community. Sick,
I know, how much I tried to pleasure the impossible-
to-please, like the Nobel Peace Prize was mine
if I could just figure out how to end the internecine
warfare of freelance feminists. Another glass
of Chenin Blanc got me closer to solving for x .
The third shift was when I used to lie in the dark
on the couch, scrolling for anything to distract me
from my ugly *déjà vu*. Now my body is a woman I remember;
we both clicked *yes* to accept the new terms of service.

Leigh Stein

319

³¹⁹ [Leigh Stein](#), "[My Therapist Gave Me Permission to Want to Lose Weight Without Bringing Gloria Steinem into It](#),"
collected in [What to Miss When](#), Soft Skull Press

Another Immigrant in Love

He spent most of his time in the downstairs den, building replicas of houses and rooms. He never built entire towns, never a church or a general store, never a library. His neighborhood block, with its five candy-colored houses, resembled the one he saw through their picture window. The rooms he built from memory: boys' sleeping quarters at a church camp in Fresno, kitchen like the one his mother had. The boys' room was filled with stained mattresses and the kitchen was empty. When he was not in the den painting houses or mixing the grey substance he had concocted for the roads, he was out driving the quiet streets in search of materials. He bought chicken wire for the window grates, fishing line for the telephone wires, artificial turf for the lawns.

One day when the man was busy painting a shutter black, a tiny girl walked out of the lemon-colored house carrying a book in her hand. He was surprised to see her but he didn't show it. Instead he began talking to her as if he'd been waiting for her ever since the day he'd been born in Brazil. *What are you reading?* the man asked, though clearly the book was not a story at all, but several postage stamps glued together to look like a book. *I'm just carrying the book, I'm not reading it,* she said. She wore a red sundress and her black hair was in braids. *What are you doing?* she asked. *That's a good question,* the man answered.

The tiny girl and the lonely man talked for hours. She asked him questions and he told her things he never even told his wife. When the sun went down and the man and the girl found themselves in the dark, the girl said, *It's my dinnertime.* And she disappeared into the lemon-colored house. He could have peered inside one of the plastic windows to investigate, but he resisted.

For the next several months, the tiny girl reappeared, wearing the same red dress, holding the same fake book. She let him carry her in the pocket of his robe when his wife was home, so that they could be together always. The man's wife noticed that he seemed happier, but she had no idea about the pocket-sized girl. His wife encouraged him to work on his models. She thought he needed to find himself.

One day the girl had a present for the man. She had sewn tiny coverlets for two of his stained mattresses. They were the color of raspberries, laced with gold thread. *One for you and one for me,* she said. *For when you come to visit and we take a nap.* Being in love with the girl hurt the man because he also loved his wife. He felt torn in half and often wished he could make himself small enough to inhabit the model world he had created. Other times he dreamed the girl was the same size he was and still other times he wanted to walk out into the night with the girl in his pocket and never come back.

In order to save his marriage, he decided to destroy the things he had made. Because he could not bear the thought of setting fire to the girl's body, he dismantled the houses carefully before throwing them into the flames. Afraid she might be trapped inside, he pried the roofs off slowly. But she was already gone.

Jennifer Tseng
320

³²⁰ Jennifer Tseng, "Another Immigrant in Love," *Hawai'i Review*, collected in *The Man with My Face*, [The Asian American Writers' Workshop](#)

Group Therapy Lounge, Columbia, South Carolina

*What is the past, what is it all for?
A mental sandwich?
—John Ashbery, “37 Haiku”*

In the end it all comes back
and lucid as this, O sad drinker
of a thousand boo-hoo beers,
O pinball ringing
toward oblivion: oblivion
with its wide white arms and short attention span
will never hold you for long.
Now morning is here. It comes
precise, brutal,
a CPA shaking loose his ledger
of sunlight and bad debts, and you
wake on the sidewalk, still
pretty much hammered.

Never has your breath creaked
with so many fossils.
Your bones ache older than the hills
and there are no hills in Columbia, South Carolina,
just birds in the crape myrtle
singing a song of rubber bands
stretched to breaking.
In the gutter, a few pigeons
bobbing for a lost contact lens.

Isn't this the oldest story?
Sunday, the day we care least about the world
and the newspaper is the fattest.
A Plymouth burns down Bull
to Confederate, rocker panels rusted
and swinging wide—
it barely slows to pitch
a bundle of comics & coupons by your head, right there
on the sidewalk where you've slept
and where you wake, still pretty much hammered.

History repeats itself. Big deal.
You have more pressing problems, for instance,
this cockroach driving by
with grand determination.
He's an emissary from the one species
unafraid of the atom or the anvil, and you
can't move or stop watching.
Doesn't it bring tears to your eyes,
the thought that every minute lying here
you're learning something about yourself,

some news on hot winds borne
across the chapped lip of Southern horizon—
the green spores of remorse
taking root. Soon, you think,
even you will rise under your own power,
vertebrae stacking
much like seasoned cordwood
for the day's big fire
and your brain issuing directives
to the whole body: go forth, be a man, et cetera.

Soon, not yet.
Imagine the God of gills.
Imagine the time it took those gills to burn
through closed, crude flesh.
Then mud, lungs, twelve or twelve hundred spears
jabbed in rough circles at the sun.
Imagine catfish lately
sprouting legs for the pages of *Scientific American*.
Hope is like that. Blind and bleached white,
it revises itself every million years
to climb out of the crazy swamp and live.
At the Used Car Lot
day-glo flags are snapping and popping 24 hours,
and you ride that rhythm
in a prone position. They wave
their mutant arms to you,
and you can't help it, down on the mortal sidewalk—
you wave back, astonished as anyone.

Dorothy Barresi

321

³²¹ [Dorothy Barresi](#), "[Group Therapy Lounge, Columbia, South Carolina](#)," *Poetry Northwest*, collected in [All of the Above](#), Penguin Books

You Were Only Waiting for This Moment to Arrive

The boys stole. They stole sunglasses and Alfred E. Neuman tee shirts from the thrift store, a half-broke umbrella to twirl on the playground. Everyone made fun of them but what did they care? They stole malt balls from the penny candy jar at Roma Jane's and the coin purse their teacher kept in her desk and Robbie LeBlanc's coveted X-ray specs.

They were cagey and bored and unloved.

On the playground the Little One told fortunes for a quarter, employing a crystal ball that was just his mom's snow globe with a leaping deer inside it. The Little One prognosticated and the Big One collected the money and in this way, and for only a while, the two enjoyed some social currency. If you wound up the key on the side of the snow globe it played a plinky version of Silver Bells, which they did when business was slow. One day the Big One requested his own fortune told. He even gave the Little One a quarter to show he was serious. The Little One curled his fingers around the cold glass and peering into it, said, *Today you shall enter another realm.* It felt right. The Big One couldn't wait.

After recess, the teacher tapped the Big One on the shoulder and told him to go to the principal's office. He shook his head when Mr. Dankworth offered him the green Lifesaver. He remembered the Little One had told him the green ones gave you worms, so Mr. Dankworth just rolled it across his desk like a tiny green tire.

The way he remembers it, the principal flat out said, *Your parents have been murdered,* but it couldn't have happened that way. Anyway they were dead. A woman from social services came and got him and dropped him off at a new house with a basketball hoop and a sister.

On his first day at his new school, the teacher announced to the class that he was an Orphan and should be Treated Special and the kids hoisted him up on their shoulders and paraded him around the room, and for a long time he could still see them all smiling up at him, but it couldn't have happened that way.

Years later when the world was changed and exactly the same, the Big One collapsed in line at the post office. As he fell, he was a young man again, then a teenager, then ten going on nine, rushing to greet the thing he'd always known was coming. The Little One was there in his What, Me Worry? tee shirt. He shook the snow globe and twisted the key and together they watched the glitter settle on the leaping deer's shoulders. He heard shouting over the plinking notes of Silver Bells, saw snowflakes behind his eyelids. It was all so much faster than he imagined, and so easy.

Kathy Fish

322

³²² [Kathy Fish](#), "[You Were Only Waiting for This Moment to Arrive](#)," [Ghost Parachute](#)

After a Miscarriage, My Daughter Asks

Why did I lose another one?

And so I reach for her,
remembering
how she would
warm the bruised bodies

she'd find beneath
the sparrow's nest,
tuck them inside her
sweater, so they could feel

the heat of her breast,
though they
were already dead.
She would look at me then,

as she's looking at me now,
gaze frozen
as if she's holding
a bowl of spilled bones

that she wants
to put back,
though the bowl
is filled now with blood.

W.J. Herbert

323

³²³ [W.J. Herbert](#), "[After a Miscarriage, My Daughter Asks](#)," collected in [Dear Specimen](#), [Beacon Press](#)

In a Dream, I Get Married in an Abandoned Mall

We don't order cake. I see a dragon
graffitied on a wall. In the distance,

Archie the Snowman melts
and a guy named Fred places CAUTION

signs everywhere. We don't speak
about the bullet holes,

or the broken carousel spinning
around and around. My fiancé

is the type of Arab man
who thinks smoking double apple hookah

is a personality trait, probably
can't find the clitoris, and went to school

to become a surgeon but later settled
on dentistry. At one point, I look at him

and whisper, *I don't remember agreeing
to this shit?* He tells me not to worry,

reminds me he's a doctor, knows a lot
about cavities. There are birthday

balloons scattered everywhere and I spot
a blimp through a small window.

My wedding dress is short, so my mother
reminds me to close my legs. But I remember

I'm on my period, so I'm jamming
a \$5 bill into vending machines

to purchase tampons and Snickers.
When the machines die, I punch my fiancé

in the face, and we're both shocked
at how cathartic it all feels. Shortly after,

I hijack the blimp. My teeth become a white picket fence.
I wake up as a tattered coat hanging

in the closet of my parents' first home.

Noor Hindi

³²⁴ [Noor Hindi](#), "[In a Dream, I Get Married in an Abandoned Mall](#)," *Crazyhorse*, collected in *Dear God. Dear Bones. Dear Yellow*, [Haymarket Books](#)

Non-Tenured

The day is HOT. I can feel myself not getting tenure. To write a book on Frost or whoever is as far from me as Alaska and I see me in ten years—not a professor, and not a lawyer and not an editor making firm decisions on the twentieth floor in Manhattan. No,

one of those faintly smelly people you meet occasionally at a party or more oddly in a restaurant or theater—they recognize you from somebody’s poetry reading, maybe your own—and suddenly you’re up to your neck in claustrophobic conversation about Rimbaud with whole stanzas quoted at you in both languages and those eyes on you with a red burning look that seems to comment on your prudent success. Now the subject is Pasternak while the hand shakes a glass, the drink is spilling and you don’t know Pasternak, how did this start? Those eyes burn and you sense the job at some banal agency or warehouse or peculiar local publisher or messenger service, the elbows of the dark jacket shine unpleasantly, already you see stacks of manuscript back in the tilted dustball apartment: a novel called *Skunkamung Creek* “about the buzzing of flies in summertime, and a sister who vanishes, and the way reality decomposes,” another novel called *Dex Lango’s Revenge* “about a detective being hunted by the robber he once sent to jail, but really about how language always escapes the speaker’s intention and points toward his death” and five full-length plays—the “most polished” is called “Thyroid Rodeo” while one called “The Bed in the Brain” needs “pruning”—and incredible pounds of verse: free verse, “painfully free” but also an entire fat folder of nothing but villanelles...

And now somehow you really are visiting this person: sidestep jerrybuilt pagodas of piled paperbacks, Nietzsche catches your eye inevitably and a history of Hinduism and *Reflections on Violence*; the portable turntable bears an LP entitled “Jar of Lips” but Berlioz and Stravinsky lean against one speaker and apparently you’ve agreed to read this person’s new thing, “Ode to Three Animal Lovers”... There’s a nuance of rotting spaghetti sauce in the air

as this person hands you a Rolling Rock and utters
a line you'll locate later in "The Witch of Coös,"
handing you the beer and smiling not calmly...

Suppose a vastly kind and patient reader were to read
all the works in that apartment—
countless clauses of real force might well be found, unless
the stains on many pages prevented a fair appraisal...
You say you have to get home.

—Abandoning ME, damn you,

you smug commissar of compromise,
ten years from now—
I'll follow you down to the front door
speaking of Dirck Van Sickle
and I'll grimace at your receding taillights
and baby I'll know something you don't know.

Mark Halliday
325

³²⁵ [Mark Halliday](#), "[Non-Tenured](#)," collected in [Selfwolf](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)

None of This Happened

Babies in pots on the windowsill you forgot to water. Men pushing on the door as you push them back from the other side. They have knives. They have big hands. They cling to the hood of the car as you drive. A wall of lockers with bodies spilling out. Your job is to stuff the arms and legs back in and shut the doors. The red and slippery floor. The squeak of your shoe. The emergency line will call you back. The back of your head is blown open. The nurse doesn't care. The phone is dead. No one wants to hear about your dreams. Baby in a milk jug you left in the fridge where it is dark and cold. Hauling trash bags of babies up a hill. Someone you know is still alive with broken legs. You try to carry him, but beyond the doors, the world is on fire. Opening the doors to a wing of the house you never knew was there but has been here all along. The treehouse waits for you. Another baby you forgot to care for. Balancing on rocks by the river as the sun sets. More beauty than you have ever seen in real life. Going down the water slide in the rain. You miss the bus. You take the wrong train. Years later, the stickiness of your own blood is still on your hand.

Cynthia Marie Hoffman
326

³²⁶ [Cynthia Marie Hoffman, "None of This Happened," *Smartish Pace*](#)

Aubade with Attention to Pathos

I.

Wine drunk, ham-faced on the duvet. Cue feelings talk.

Should I have been more detached? Should I not have draped myself
on the heat vent wearing only my socks—like so?

Because he addressed me always by both names. Cooked for me when I wouldn't eat.

Making Thanksgiving food for himself in October. Patron saint of the head start.
With his dog who spoke English, possibly other languages.

Trailing a red robe in the kitchen like he was waiting for coronation.

If I loved someone like that. A figure of questionable authority
figuring out which relics to preserve under cling wrap.

For the way he smelled like cedar. Mispronounced the names of plants.

II.

There's an airport & then there's The Airport
From Which He Called Me On Our Second Anniversary
To Say He Couldn't Love Me & Would Never Marry Me Ever.
At some gate there's a specifically culpable airplane he was on for 12 hours, no contact.

There's another woman & then there's The Woman
I Knew He Would Leave Me For, there in a hotel with him—
there to soothe him, to believe, as I did, in redemptive sadness.

There's regret & then there's being so angry at myself
that I drove all night until I found the water & walked into it, March lakewater
gray & stinging. Muscovy ducks in the shallows, their strange low muttering.

III.

What is this impulse in me to worship & crucify
 anyone who leaves me—
I have tried to frame up the cavalry in gravel,
 in rectangles, in an honor code
of stamping out the fire. I'm paying attention. Look.
 There's an exchange rate
for bad behavior. It begins with the word *until*
 I agreed to affirm small kindnesses
until disaster. A risk I could keep now & pay for eventually.
 A contract that begets blame begets
guilt. I had to say at every stage *I give permission to be hurt*. Until.

Once he agreed to stay the night with me
& by morning a small ding in the glass had spidered over
his windshield. The cold shattering it completely.
It's not anyone's fault that this world is full of omens.

By all accounts, history is a practice
of ignoring things & hoping for the best. You can drive
yourself crazy with looking. You can expect
bad luck to mark you unfooled, fooled.

Light to mark you with light.

IV.

I know in this system I am not blameless.

I used to promise myself
that when we broke up I would tell him

I love you. I thought of it as a punishment.
I dreamed I let him look for me in the woods.

I stayed perfectly quiet. I was covered in rough scales
& my eyelashes dropped burrs when I blinked.

In the dirt below I watched him search for me.
He said *Is it enough that I want to be different.*

Maple seeds spun out from my hair.

V.

I divorce thee history
of looking at him in the fog
coming up over Scotland.

I divorce thee, North Sea
longing by boat.

I divorce thee, insomnia.
I divorce me driving to him
five hours over ice

& then picking a fight.
I divorce him introducing himself

as my friend, never wanting to be
on the phone; I divorce thee
roasting pan & HGTV, I divorce

staying quiet willing him
to speak. Music for saying things

I wanted to ignore.
Anguish—I divorce thee.
I divorce thee, I divorce thee whole heart:

from the wingbone of a vulture,
I've made you a harp.

Emily Skaja
327

³²⁷ [Emily Skaja](#), "[Aubade with Attention to Pathos](#)," collected in [Brute](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Nothing's Branch

There are wicked tricks
in this life, said the rooster,

dismounting the duck,
which is to say the streets

have changed, but I'm
still the same, which is

to say, fuck you Gloria,
I'm not a goddamn

son of a bitch. I am depressed,
of course, or if death

is a long sleep then I'm
damn tired. I lack the courage

to slip the cliff, and still
somehow night never goes

quickly enough. I am
no longer the man

I fell in love with. I'd like
to have been born wearing spats

and a dickey, already towering,
gnawing squares of broken crockery

and cherry blossoms. I'd like
to play at being the bakery's

scrolling security door, or the kind
of woman a man might need,

hips like Cinderella, and wander
about in the thickets

of inelegant freedom.

Adam Day
328

³²⁸ [Adam Day](#), "[Nothing's Branch](#)," *Descant*, collected in [Nothing's Branch](#), [Bottlecap Press](#)

Motherfuckers Talking Shit About American Sonnets

I know what you want: to waggle your tongue
in the old ferment, the pure Elizabethan
product, hundred proof, guaran fucking teed
to make you go buckwild, flushed, knock kneed,
toe-curl'd, blank-eyed, blank-vers'd, brain all snow-white
till you spill your thin blancmange down your tidy-
whiteys and come—back to yourself. I get
it. Sometimes I'd also like to forget
that I'm no longer young. But the sonnet doesn't
belong to you. There's nothing to own. Not a spit
of land nor spicurl of rivulet for your chickenwire, your snares,
your chickenshit sneers—where's the rhyme scheme? Who cares.
Not Shakespeare. Not Keats, not Drayton, not Donne.
It's not your lawn. (Yawn.) Stop yelling. Be done.

Sam Cha
329

³²⁹ [Sam Cha](#), "[Motherfuckers Talking Shit About American Sonnets](#)," *Clarion*

Sexy Is the Least Interesting

thing I do, but it's the thing I've done the most,
and now that I can glide through a supermarket
without a stock boy's notice, now that I am
indistinguishable from the day-olds and the must-gos
and the bend of my waist above the cheese bin
brings not a one to their knees—I must confess, Allen G,
that the stacked peaches are more fuzz for me than flesh
these days, the eggplants less turgid, swelling gleam
than a problem of use. In the dream of the produce aisle,
all was emoji. The carts slid inside the other carts
without a hitch. The bins held their contents tightly.
All was desire and surplus—once I touched
a cellophaned cube of meat and felt it gently give
beneath the pressure. I was a woman who left a mark.
I lived dangerously. Now the store detective marks me
as yet another white, suburban mother. My God, Allen,
yesterday I shoplifted a turkey and no one noticed. I wish I could
close my eyes and see you on aisle C17 once more—
Speak to me again of out-of-season
asparagus—the girth of them—I want to feel
the parsnips thick beneath my hand, I want to bite
the sliced orange sample and let the juice drip, and see
another person's eyes gaze hungrily.
Allen, I have been considering the cost of things
and ideas. Allen, my queer shoulder is bared
in an off-the-shoulder sweatshirt.
Above the lettuce, false lightning
and simulated thunder. Tinny Gene Kelly
sings out about rain and joy from across the century,
and the mist that sprays does not spray for me.

Rebecca Hazelton

330

³³⁰ [Rebecca Hazelton](#), "[Sexy Is the Least Interesting](#)," [Poetry](#)

On Seeing and Being Seen

I don't like being photographed. When we kissed
at a wedding, the night grew long and luminous.
You unhooked my bra. *A photograph
passes for proof*, Sontag says, *that a given thing
has happened*. Or you leaned back to watch
as I eased the straps from my shoulders.
Hooks and eyes. Right now, my breasts
are too tender to be touched. *Their breasts
were horrifying*, Elizabeth Bishop writes. Tell her
someone wanted to touch them. I am touching
the photograph of my last seduction. It is as slick
as a magazine page, as dark as a street
darkened by rain. When I want to remember
something beautiful, instead of taking
a photograph, I close my eyes.
I watched as you covered my nipple
with your mouth. Desire made you
beautiful. I closed my eyes.
Tonight, I am alone in my tenderness.
There is nothing in my hand except a certain
grasping. In my mind's eye, I am
stroking your hair with damp fingertips. This is exactly
how it happened. On the lit-up hotel bed,
I remember thinking, My body is a lens
I can look through with my mind.

Ama Codjoe
331

³³¹ [Ama Codjoe](#), "[On Seeing and Being Seen](#)," [The Common](#), collected in [Bluest Nude](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

Goodbye Fugue

I've been saying goodbye and goodbye and
a lifetime ago I said goodbye to my brother
but goodbyes never happen once.

One goodbye in Berkeley California
where he lived with his skinny, blank-eyed girlfriend,
with her junky debutante manners and his cat.
I forget the name of his cat

although I never forget cats, even
my Siamese runt, Gudrun. who slept
around my neck, she lived only
a month before the boys next door killed her.

I must have said goodbye to my brother with his cat,
before I said goodbye in Times Square,
on a corner somewhere
where I got angry, about drugs,

he'd broken his promise,
people are always breaking promises
and our last phone call, his voice slurry,
he asked me to buy tickets to a Dylan concert,

we weren't saying goodbye at all.
But that was a lifetime ago and
at my brother's funeral, I delivered his eulogy
or that is what people say.

I thought I was saying goodbye,
but goodbyes keep on coming,
they won't let go.

Carla Sarett

332

³³² [Carla Sarett](#), "[Goodbye Fugue](#)," [Anti-Heroine Chic](#), collected in [She Has Visions](#), [Main St. Rag](#)

February 26, 2017

Naomi, I woke this morning thinking about my friend ••••, who lives in South Dakota.

How she told me weeks later, when I asked her *why didn't you come to see me, why didn't you tell me, I would have come with you* that she picked the closest clinic she could find, even if it meant going alone.

I think of those hours •••• drove by herself in the dark.

•••• awake in the nearest motel during the waiting period—flicking through the channels, watching the network fuzz.

I think of the abortion I watched on a Netflix drama last night: nineteenth-century London, the nurse warming a thin hooked wire between her hands.

How the other nurse, in lieu of anesthesia, whispered *God forgives all* to the woman screaming in the bed.

I think of my mother's stories from the clinic where she worked in Wilmington, the man whose spit she rinsed from her black hair before her shift.

How the guards walked her to her car once each day ended.

On each flight I take, there is a moment before the plane leaves the gate where I think *this is your last chance to disembark*.

You are still in the city in which your body awoke.

Do you wish to stay, Rachel? Do you have to leave?

This morning I remembered the plane had departed without us, Naomi.

We will awake again, tomorrow, in America.

Rachel Mennies

333

³³³ [Rachel Mennies](#), "[February 26, 2017](#)," collected in [The Naomi Letters](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

A Young Daughter of the Picts

To Do

Strut around the shire like I'm all that in my new flower tattoos.

Linger near the travelers from Northumbria to catch up on Seven Kingdom gossip, casually holding my spear in case they get mouthy.

Give the side-eye to that Angle hussy showing off her pelts like no one ever skinned a wild boar before.

Why does everyone hanging out in a *broch* have to sing all the time? Can't a girl have a little quiet in a *crannog*?

Bury everyone east of the Forth-Clythe isthmus in the cattle-breeding contest this fall.

Promise the Viking tied up in my hut that he can return north to his mama if he obeys my every word.

From my secret cove on the coast, swim way out. Relax in the Viking's boat. Comb hair out in the sun.

Paint my face with woad and leap out at that newcomer, Ninian, when he comes back from that altar he's building. Press foot on his face until he shuts it. Tell him: I'd rather tattoo *Pagan* across my face than convert to what he's selling.

Wonder, while I'm milking my goat, why we have kings when we insist upon matrilineal succession? Pat her flanks fondly, gaze at the distant green hills.

Invite the new witch over, the one who makes good mead. Stay up late talking about stuff and teasing the Viking with our braids.

Build a bonfire to send signals to the Romans. I hear they have cool haircuts.

Strangle that hermit with my tresses if he steals from my nettle patch again. If I don't have a cup of tea in the morning, I'm irritable.

Make out with that Gael fellow if I get bored. Ah, that bushy beard! Meat & milk, those bulging thighs!

Ninian says Roman women can't do this and can't do that. Just try to take my spear from me. Just because you can build aqueducts doesn't give you the right.

The Viking wastes his mornings knitting me a wool sweater. Do I look like I'm cold? Idiot. Get some sand between my toes. Why don't I take a boat and float south to see what the Britons are up to? That would be something different.

Order a double-ringed metal choker for the human sacrifice next month.

When I'm hiking with my dog, Hero, I want to be alone. When I'm making leek soup, I don't like to share. When I go to bed, I like to ride a Viking.

Inform Ninian that he smells like cabbage.

Enjoy his discomfort. That's what he gets for insulting my polytheism.

Sharpen spear. Consider revenge on the Angles of Bernicia. who need to be reminded who's boss.

Spit from the top of the cliff. Ponder clouds.

The insignificance of it all. Ponder if pirates will come this way. Ponder becoming Pirate Queen.

Ninian waited for me when I was out gathering wild garlic. He said his god said he could fondle my ass. I said my gods said you better not fall into this here wolf trap.

In a swap—boar jerky for a vision—the witch warned me of things to come: Christianity, Colonialism, Cops, Capitalism. A sad, terrible future.

Force the Viking to build me a fabulous funeral boat. Preparing ahead.

For good luck, paint pebbles with some pentacles and crescents. Pass out charm stones at the goat roast this weekend. It can't hurt.

Find a worthy pirate. Birth a new nation.

Camille Guthrie

334

³³⁴ [Camille Guthrie](#), "[A Young Daughter of the Picts](#)," [The Iowa Review](#), collected in [Diamonds](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Don't Go There

You walk into oncoming traffic.
The pool of blood is black, black, etcétera.
Your brother throws himself from a bridge
onto a playground. He holds a plastic bag
over his head. It is a grocery bag, the same kind
you use on Sundays, etcétera.
Your mind is black like the blood.
You never walked into traffic, but you thought about it.
And jumping from the parking garage, etcétera.
Your body and mind are two trees
in the same yard, casting shadows on each other.
The children have picnics there, and run around, etcétera.
No, that's not right. There were no picnics,
no summer, etcétera. You never stayed in one place.
An ocean couldn't hold you. You disappeared
every morning when you woke up.
I walked in at breakfast and didn't understand.
The waves came in, in, in, etcétera.
The pile of rocks in the yard became a furnace
no one could crawl out of, etcétera.
From my place in the black corner
all I could see was myself. I was a child.
I didn't know anything, not even
etcétera, etcétera, etcétera.

Lauren Shapiro
335

³³⁵ [Lauren Shapiro](#), "[Don't Go There](#)," collected in [Arena](#), [Cleveland State University Poetry Center](#)

from *Clangings*

So I left my apartment, got down where
I tried getting going outgoing. You know,
taking control, like when you say “hello
there, Blue Beautiful.” Bossed me over

to the bar to make noise out of nonsense.
Why do people love hair? Because it twirls.
Why does my stucco computer store girls
who say o god not him? Frankensense,

my eyes bled resin, hardened to tears.
Out of her rocks, or at least rocky soil,
I wanted the quality of her bloom; smell,
aroma. How *her* was mine; *mine*, hers?

Since you asked, please remember not
answering is no odder than Nevada’s
name. Nevada, my muskalot sonata’s
non grata. Called her after her street.

Goodnight kisses, traded in ice trays.
What’s my touch? A zillion electrons
rejected by somebody’s other zillions.
Lay down light, dear gone-as-always.

Steven Cramer
336

³³⁶ [Steven Cramer](#), “[Clangings \[So I left my apartment...\]](#),” [Sugar House Review](#), collected in [Clangings](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Nation

Sorry, the coastline is closed today, but we can accommodate you offshore. Our stevedores will help carry your belongings. This way please for a complimentary spray of DDT. No jewels allowed in quarantine, leave them with me, but when you're free, we'll give you a house with a chain-link fence, an orange grove and an AK-47. Forget where you came from, forget history. It never happened, okay? We need soldiers on the front line. Of course we can coexist. We say potato, they say potato. We give them their own ghetto. Listen, sometimes you need to dance with whoever is on the dance floor, which means, sometimes you need to drive large numbers of their people in a truck across the dark. A few may die, but then ask, If I'm not for me, who is? It's absolutely forbidden to touch the women's knickers. If things go awry (shit happens), better to dump their bodies in the desert. No drowning allowed on international TV. No talking about jasmine-scented streets either. Understand friend, the conscience is a delicate broth. Sometimes it feels good to be bad. Step over this field of bones. Here's where the wall is going to go. If you're not happy, you can leave, but tell the world we're building a new country. Entry is free and we welcome all!

Tishani Doshi

337

³³⁷ [Tishani Doshi](#), "[Nation](#)," [Granta](#), collected in [A God at the Door](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

from "The Lost Boy"

III. Memoir: Entropy

Headless statues float in a broken
open Cornell box, past last call.

In a small room off the water,
wind bums through empty bottles

making neon green headstones
that stare back from the windowsill.

Even before your brother died,
you felt like an only child crawling

in the dark. Under the bed you shared
for twelve years he built a herbarium,

cigarette butts planted on the periphery
with faces drawn over them. This

was your family. To lure the structure
away, clouds inside the closet, shirts

shrink over your scratched shoulders.

Charles Kell
338

³³⁸ [Charles Kell](#), "[The Lost Boy](#)," collected in [Cage of Lit Glass](#), Autumn House Press

Heart

*Ox heart has an honest
beefy quality, lamb's heart
rubs up against you, said the chef*
of the restaurant St. John: *Each heart
tastes like the animal that depended
on it.* Members of the Fore tribe
in Papua New Guinea contracted kuru
through the practice of eating
dead relatives. Universally fatal,
kuru, which in the language of the tribe means
“trembling with fear,” derives its name
from the trembling that is a symptom
of dying brain tissue. It was also known
as “laughing sickness” because the muscles
of the face constricted in a way that looked
like a smile. Where I
come from, we don't eat the bodies
of our dead, although my mother
always said *It takes two
to tangle.* The disease was more
prevalent among women because women ate
the brain of the deceased. The white matter
of the cerebellum, little brain — not to be
confused with the antebellum South
which I kept trying to visit
as a child on the battlefields of
Chancellorsville, Manassas, Bull Run,
Spotsylvania, while my parents
waited, daguerreotypes in the windows
of the car, a scarf hugging my mother's
head, ends tied beneath her chin, like Mary
at the Lamentation—this *what's the matter*
of the cerebellum is called *arbor vitae*
because in cross section it looks like
a tree: the *tree of life*, or cross.
Outside, the lower branches
of the arborvitae dip and nod
in the wind like the head
of a black cat in the underbrush, licking
its front paw. I see now
that in fact it is a black cat
waiting to spring and crucify
a sparrow: neither
the cat nor I will ever know
the taste of my mother's heart.

Angie Estes

339

³³⁹ Angie Estes, “Heart,” *Cerise Press*, collected in *Tryst*, Oberlin College Press

Black Annie Hall

in a black wool hat
and black suspenders
in line to see *Within*
Our Gates again

with khaki slacks
and an afternoon free
Black Annie has trouble
hailing a cab
after seeing her analyst

on her roof,
black Annie
drinking white wine
after tennis
and dewy

Black Annie, living alone
calls for help to kill
a black widow spider
in her bathroom

Black Annie's white
boyfriend asks her
not to smoke
that marijuana cigarette
in bed and out-
of-body

Black Annie is bored
so she takes adult courses
and can't decide
between philosophy
or poetry

lucky today, Black Annie
driving eighty on the West
Side Highway with the top
back, hair unmoved

Rio Cortez
340

³⁴⁰ [Rio Cortez](#), "[Black Annie Hall](#)," [Prairie Schooner](#), collected in [Golden Ax](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Broken Mirror

Three is slippery staircase.
Two is a head-on collision.
One is a burning kitchen.

When I count my reflection
in shards of glass, a small light
pitches in the skin of everything.

It's four in the morning,
the electric hour.
And this is no accident—

this is what will be.
There is little warning
when the countdown begins.

A great mirror falls
and you will wake
just seconds before.

Kristin Bock
341

³⁴¹ [Kristin Bock](#), "[Broken Mirror](#)," collected in [Glass Bikini](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

Lightly, Very Lightly

It was raining.
I could hear the rain
taking the pins out of her mouth.
Soft rain became hard rain
so that hard things became soft things.
The wet leaves under the trees
became heavy as diapers,
the book left open
on the grass
could finally sink in her bath
without a word,
the way, after a hard day,
I rest my head on the edge
of the claw-foot tub and
my mouth falls open, empty
at last.
Actually I saw that in a painting
when I ducked into a gallery.

Mary Ruefle
342

³⁴² [Mary Ruefle](#), "[Lightly, Very Lightly](#)," collected in [Dunce](#), [Wave Books](#)

On Being Fired Again

I've known the pleasures of being
fired at least eleven times—

most notably by Larry who found my snood
unsuitable, another time by Jack,
whom I was sleeping with. Poor attitude,
tardiness, a contagious lack
of team spirit; I have been unmotivated

squirting perfume onto little cards,
while stocking salad bars, when stripping
covers from romance novels, their heroines
slaving on the chain gang of obsessive love—

and always the same hard candy
of shame dissolving in my throat;

handing in my apron, returning the cash-
register key. And yet, how fine it feels,
the perversity of freedom which never signs
a rent check or explains anything to one's family.

I've arrived again, taking one more last
walk through another door, thinking "I am
what is wrong with America," while outside
in the emptied, post-rushhour street,

the sun slouches in a tulip tree and the sound
of a neighborhood pool floats up on the heat.

Erin Belieu
343

³⁴³ [Erin Belieu, "On Being Fired Again," *The New York Times*](#), collected in [One Above and One Below](#), Copper Canyon Press

Blue-ish

I bought a blue knife.
I couldn't help
myself. It did not change
my life. It cut
the same as any other
knife, though blue,
which for a while felt new,
and I could define myself,
if I needed to,
as a person who chose
a blue knife, who lived
with a blue knife, who cut
quite a figure
with her blue knife,
though it was ordinary
in every way beyond its hue.
I have a drawerful
of knives like other knives,
and some of them cut surprisingly
well, straight through.
But know me not by my blood
but by my blue.
Have you seen, my intimate ally,
the light inside an ambulance?
It is not dim as you might think.
No pink or yellow tint. It is bright
white, like a wedding cake.
Everything is exposed. Your head rolling
back and forth on the padded cot.
The spinning light on top
of the ambulance is blue,
or the color of a rose.
Inside, Diane, you suffer,
and your suffering is exposed.

Diane Seuss

344

³⁴⁴ [Diane Seuss](#), "[Blue-ish](#)," [lterant](#)

from “Happinefs”

10.

In Camelot, the great thorn trees wept
over the green page of land. Remember
how light dawned in chapters.

There, the hems of our garments soaked
in promissory rain. Deep within those
snake-bright grottoes, many vines bore
their fruits of salt & wood. Water &
salt & the smell of books—in Camelot
we cannot live without books.

All of us runaways know
each other by our paper-cuts. Our blood
inks the dark map of the mountains.

You ask me if I believe in forgiveness.
I do, I say. But it is rare.

Kiki Petrosino

345

³⁴⁵ [Kiki Petrosino](#), “[Happinefs](#),” [Tin House](#), collected in [White Blood](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Hot Things to Me Are Not Dark

—*Nurse Wolf, Dominatrix*

I saw her on Donahue in the '90s, began my slow transformation
into a blotched cow, learned to line dance on the molecular level: this is how
I recovered from self-injury, from being a girl-child among girl-children.

When I had my daughter, my fears were lonely: I unzipped them
as if they were cattails by the pond where the snakes go. Unzipped their whole
velvet torsos, their tight girdles, let loose fear fear fear into the warm autumn sky.

Tonight, the gray moths stay stone still as angel hearts all night on my screen door,
gush dumb tragedy from their arterial wings. The moths are collective: come
as one thought to their deaths at the porch light.

Jennifer Martelli

346

³⁴⁶ [Jennifer Martelli](#), "[Hot Things to Me Are Not Dark](#)," [The Coop](#)

Ode to a Chickadee at Troy

“Call me Elizabeth,” says my former student Natasha
when we meet in Istanbul, because the city
is teeming with Russian prostitutes, and everyone calls
them “Natasha,” so I can see how a school teacher
might want to use her middle name, although her mother,
when she named her daughter after Natasha Rostova
in *War and Peace*, could not have imagined this chain
of events, as Leda sitting in her garden and attacked
by a giant swan could not have foreseen her daughter’s role
in the sack of Troy. I tell Elizabeth that I want
to see a nightingale on this odyssey of mine, and the next day
at Troy my wish is granted slant as they so often are
when a chickadee lands on a broken wall and begins a diatribe
so pointed and scathing that the other people milling
around laugh, and I’m sure my mother has broken through
from the afterlife to give me *a piece of her mind*,
a phrase that seemed so hilarious to me as a teenage girl,
but I see that she has accomplished her mission
for all those pieces have coalesced in my brain
in such a glorious array that I carry her with me
wherever I go, not to mention seeing her in every mirror,
and she does not seem to need a body
to pick a bone with me, because I have become her
with certain significant differences. The day before
Elizabeth told me about one of her favorite students,
who said to a friend, *Ahmed, you magnificent bird*,
and I can’t help but think of my chickadee as an eagle,
for her message seems enormous as I step into the ruins
of the temple of Athena and look down to the plain
where the Greek army camped. *This is where Helen,*
Cassandra, and Hecuba stood, whispers my mother, and my arms
are covered with that chill no fire can warm, but then Hamlet
sneers, *What’s Hecuba to him that he should weep for her?*
Later I see Helen in the parking lot of a café,
walking through the exhaust of tour buses, a blond
Teutonic beauty, who sits down next to an older man,
who is, I’m certain, her father and not Menelaus, and she flicks
at her iPhone, perhaps looking for an oracle
or a direct line to her Paris in Dusseldorf or Berlin. Elizabeth
says the same student when fussed at by his father
for being lazy said, “Mystic forces are keeping me on this couch,”
which is how gravity sometimes seems. My chickadee
flies away, and I walk beside the walls I read about in the fourth grade,
never imagining I would grow up much less see
the ramparts Schliemann uncovered, now the focus of a group
of Japanese tourists with a Turkish guide speaking Japanese,
and I conjure up the ghosts of Priam, Hector, and Hecuba,
standing on the ramparts with Cassandra,

who is saying everyone will die, and no one believing her
as we open the gates and step into Charon's boat.

Barbara Hamby
347

³⁴⁷ [Barbara Hamby](#), "[Ode to a Chickadee at Troy](#)," [Cherry Tree](#), collected in [Bird Odyssey](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

I've heard the cat who may be alive
or may be dead should expect
to live forever
 progressively growing
sicker and sicker

This is for my husband
whom I expect to come home
some time between now and the future

Let me date this very clearly
This is the year after the year
when people with cable began
to pile Christmas lights into glass jars

the year of evidence of chemical warfare
clear or uncertain
 depending on where you live

One beast lives one grows sicker and sicker
One dies one yowls at the door

Two days from now I will either
bleed or not bleed
 I will remember
that four years ago we wed and asked
for Divine Assistance
 though we neither of us
pray to any god

This is for him on the occasion
of the Olympian's indictment

They say he shot
the one he loved
 Shot the one
who through a door
 he could not see

None of this has been right
but maybe a tiny electrical god
has cut and spliced us together

And in this moment yes and in this moment no
and in this moment all the lights
go off at once and it is a bomb
or it is a daughter

And this great sound replaces the others
so I can hear nothing but the brightness
of the field
 where I am waiting for the warm chest
of my husband
 for its occasion
and if they say a word now
it would take years for me to know

Heather Christle
348

348 [Heather Christle](#), "[How Long is the Heliopause](#)," collected in [Heliopause](#), [Wesleyan University Press](#)

from "Around Every Circle Another Can Be Drawn"

In tenth grade, I kissed a guy who called me a faggot once or twice a week.
I still see his voice:
six hummingbirds nailed to a wall.
In an olive grove, outside of Fuente Grande, in 1936,
a teacher, two bullfighters &
Federico García Lorca were shot to death by fascist soldiers.
During the Reagan years,
I sweated out new language.
Kaposi sarcoma. Febrile. Oral candidiasis.
Last summer, in Sevilla, I flirted with a stranger.
He pinched my belly, walked away, laughing.
Later, along Calle Arjona,
a remix of "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" poured out of a passing taxicab.
"Shut the fuck up, Cyndi Lauper!"
I yelled. Mala copa. Joder.
The soldier who shot Lorca bragged he fired two bullets into his ass for being queer.
For years, I desired a man who didn't desire me.
He was gentle with my lust.
(I never thanked him. I'm thanking him now.)
But once, in a splinter-rich booth, he held my hand.
A kindness I can't forgive.

Eduardo C. Corral
349

³⁴⁹ [Eduardo C. Corral](#), "[Around Every Circle Another Can Be Drawn](#)," *Poetry London*, collected in [Guillotine](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

O my pa-pa

Our fathers have formed a poetry workshop.
They sit in a circle of disappointment over our fastballs
and wives. We thought they didn't read our stuff,
whole anthologies of poems that begin, My father never,
or those that end, And he was silent as a carp,
or those with middles which, if you think
of the right side as a sketch, look like a paunch
of beer and worry, but secretly, with flashlights
in the woods, they've read every word and noticed
that our nine happy poems have balloons and sex
and giraffes inside, but not one dad waving hello
from the top of a hill at dusk. Theirs
is the revenge school of poetry, with titles such as
"My Yellow-Sheet Lad" and "Given Your Mother's Taste
for Vodka, I'm Pretty Sure You're Not Mine."
They're not trying to make the poems better
so much as sharper or louder, more like a fishhook
or electrocution, as a group
they overcome their individual senilities,
their complete distaste for language, how cloying
it is, how like tears it can be, and remember
every mention of their long hours at the office
or how tired they were when they came home,
when they were dragged through the door
by their shadows. I don't know why it's so hard
to write a simple and kind poem to my father, who worked,
not like a dog, dogs sleep most of the day in a ball
of wanting to chase something, but like a man, a man
with seven kids and a house to feed, whose absence
was his presence, his present, the Cheerios,
the PF Flyers, who taught me things about trees,
that they're the most intricate version of standing up,
who built a grandfather clock with me so I would know
that time is a constructed thing, a passing, ticking fancy.
A bomb. A bomb that'll go off soon for him, for me,
and I notice in our fathers' poems a reciprocal dwelling
on absence, that they wonder why we disappeared
as soon as we got our licenses, why we wanted
the rocket cars, as if running away from them
to kiss girls who looked like mirrors of our mothers
wasn't fast enough, and it turns out they did
start to say something, to form the words *hey*
or *stay*, but we'd turned into a door full of sun,
into the burning leave, and were gone
before it came to them that it was all right
to shout, that they should have knocked us down
with a hand on our shoulders, that they too are mystified
by the distance men need in their love.

³⁵⁰ [Bob Hicok](#), "[O my pa-pa](#)," collected in [Red Rover Red Rover](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Theories of Revenge

I think about the man who must be dead
by now and his undifferentiated son
and how they sat beside one another
that morning I nearly died in their yard.
I never learned his name, hair color,
where he went to church if he did,
and this morning I'm thinking
about the ethics of giving him a minor limp.
Some old wound that healed
wrong in another life. Tendon
that snapped in a filthy alley in San Juan.
1967. The light was different,
then, because the sun was.
Everything was. Years before my birth.
Years before Elvis died
on the toilet, his body ruined and ruptured,
and even though I grew up
in Tennessee I've never been to Graceland.
There is so much in life to regret.
To desire unto pain. To ignore, also.
There I lay in the weeds
of the ditch like garbage,
my body harmed forever,
though nobody then would really believe it,
and I felt little: some ache,
but mostly nothing, a spooky lack of weight
on the summer-hot ground.
I think there was panic
in the air above me like a ghost
and I struggled to breathe.
Do not move me or pick me up or touch me,
I begged the old man.
Something is wrong. Something was
wrong with the bicycle
and now inside me was something terrible
and lasting and final
and I think I wanted it all to be a bad dream.
The way my head fell over
when they stood me up. The horror when I collapsed.
There was no blood anywhere.
No visible wound. Just a boy in yellow surrounded by strangers.

Paul Guest
351

³⁵¹ Paul Guest, "Theories of Revenge," *The Missouri Review*, collected in *The Best American Poetry 2022*, Scribner

Art of Poetry

Between coffee & fentanyl, between Love Me & Go Fuck Yourself
there's so much life to be gotten through
So many mirrors to challenge in your ragged robe & collagen essence Korean facial mask

Eventually you have to go out & walk around in the world like you belong there
You have to smile at work, & buy things
when you just want to crawl into a closet & live in an old cowboy boot & write witty unhinged verses

which sometime before the death of the sun
an advanced civilization will discover, etched into the ancient leather, preserved in a rock formation
& display in a luminous floating interdimensional sphere

Q: Ever notice how many writers write about writing?

A few centuries ago Horace wrote approvingly of a poet
He intends not smoke from flame, but light from smoke
which I think is good advice if you can follow it
but he also said that to paint a dolphin in the trees or a boar in the waves
is an unnatural distortion & I thought about how much I'd like to see that
& how unrealistic it is to expect things to stay in their places
Why not someone's grieving widow consoled by a nebula
A suicide vomiting flowers

In the twentieth century Pablo Neruda wrote his own "Arte Poetica"
lamenting all the things that called to him without being answered
& reading it, I thought about that time in a tiny fishing village in Mexico,
a third mangorita waterfalling through my liver
the waitress coming toward me in a white T-shirt with black lettering that said
I HAVE NO TITS

which was clearly a lie although her stomach was kind of big which had the effect
of making them appear to recede
like the single taillights of two antique Model A Fords sputtering together toward obsolescence

Q: Does she even know what it says?

I HAVE NO TITS

What is the message, is this perhaps a code, could it be from the future
Is it a "Ceci n est pas une pipe" situation like in that painting of a pipe
or a new far-reaching campaign from the U.S. Ministry of Enlightenment & Propaganda
The thieving president wearing a golfing shirt that says I HAVE NO CLOTHES

Q: Who killed poetry again & who cares?

Between false flags & homeless laundry lines
Between long-lasting eyebrow gel & little-known destinations profiled in the *New York Times*
I don't know where anyone is going or where there is to get to
The days & nights keep drunkenly arriving, the guests are all dying

& I'm starting to feel pretty sick

Kim Addonizio
352

³⁵² [Kim Addonizio](#), "[Art of Poetry](#)," [Five Points](#), collected in [Now We're Getting Somewhere](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

from "A Concordance of Leaves"

)

& our family will ask so many questions we will
be called The Question Factory

)

& you my future brother will write your answers
with my slowly disappearing hand

)

The Question Factory asks: what is a dunam?
Answer: *slowly disappearing land*

)

The Question Factory asks: what is that line
on your skull? Answer: *a failed poet*

)

*by one who tried to write over everything
already scratched out, written over*

[...]

)

The Question Factory: why do you smile?
because I still have my teeth

)

: where are the doll's missing eyes?
in the back of my mind I believe

)

: in what?
I believe I hear a song

)

: why do you laugh?
because I still have my tongue

)

there is a song, & yet
I hear no singing

Philip Metres
353

³⁵³ [Philip Metres](#), "[A Concordance of Leaves \[& our family will ask\]](#)," collected in [Shrapnel Maps](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

A century of gathering clouds

A century of gathering clouds. Ghost ships arriving and leaving. The sea deeper, vaster. The parrot in the bamboo cage spoke several languages. The captain in the daguerreotype had his cheeks painted red. He brought a half-naked girl from the tropics whom they kept chained in the attic even after his death. At night she made sounds that could have been singing. The captain told of a race of men without mouths who subsisted only on scents of flowers. This made his wife and mother say a prayer for the salvation of all unbaptized souls. Once, however, we caught the captain taking off his beard. It was false! Under it he had another beard equally absurd looking.

It was the age of busy widow's walks. The dead languages of love were still in use, but also much silence, much soundless screaming at the top of the lungs.

Charles Simic

354

³⁵⁴ [Charles Simic](#), "[A century of gathering clouds](#)," collected in [The World Doesn't End](#), [Ecco](#)

Home

All the trees in the backyard have my disease,
all crooked, sad things that shake and bend
at the threat of teeth or touch, bleed sugar
and rust. I think I'm afraid to stop bleeding
because it means sleeping forever.
On one island grows a tree called *dragon's blood*
that bleeds red sap, and arthropods bleed blue
threads, the blackfin icefish bleeds clouded milk
and far south a glacier bleeds iron oxide
that still feeds an ancient ecosystem.
Even flower stems bleed latex. Everything bleeds.
Still, nothing so beautiful lives inside me,
nothing like the tenderness of horses,
their trembling eyelids and tangled manes.
Sometimes I cry in the cafe bathroom, the car,
behind a tree, so no one will see.
Sometimes I drive out to visit a stranger's horses
just to be near them, stand with them awhile
with my empty hand outstretched
like another animal, dark and small, coming out
into the light for the first time.

Sara Eliza Johnson
355

³⁵⁵ [Sara Eliza Johnson](#), "[Home](#)," collected in [Vapor](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

Western

My favorite flavor of Western is revisionist; my second favorite flavor, spaghetti.

Unforgiven is the best Western of all time; don't at me.

An acidic landscape, accelerated, unstructured. How long before no vestiges of wild country remain?

The Best Western motel chain began in California in the 40s, but can now be found all around the nation.

I really liked *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, but I could not stop thinking how all three of those guys needed to drink a lot more water. The sun above a red-hot poker, stoking greed, stoking wrath.

One of Custer's many nicknames was Old Iron Butt.

Fistful of dollars, fistful of fists. The best revenge is not living well; it's simply not wanting revenge to begin with.

"This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend," said a minor character in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. Entertaining for sure, but bad for democracy.

The noun meaning "a book or movie about the Old West" is first attested from 1909.

I like when a character lays his ear to the rail to listen for the heartbeat traversing the train tracks.

Bemused fatalism may be the most effective bravado.

The sun may be unforgiving because we are unforgivable.

According to Evan S. Connell, the early Mandans believed "there was not only a benevolent spirit but an evil spirit which came to earth before the good spirit and whose strength was greater." Seems pretty accurate.

Abolish the Second Amendment.

For the notorious Mexican standoff scene in the cemetery, Leone told Morricone to compose a track "like the corpses were laughing from inside their tombs," and that's what it sounds like. It sounds exactly like that.

Kathleen Rooney
356

³⁵⁶ [Kathleen Rooney](#), "[Western](#)," [The Best American Poetry Blog](#)

I Wake Up in the Underworld of My Own Dirty Purse

My stage name is Persephone.
I perform nightly for a smattering
of ill-informed Tic Tacs.

Now that I'm finally tiny,
I only have two fears:
that someone will leave
my Whole World in the sun
unattended & gravity's strap
might one day strain & break.

Down here, no one desires me,
but there are relatively few decisions:
what flavor gum to huff,
how many grains of granola.

I spend my time rolling around
with lipsticks: matte nudes
& cabernet mistakes that looked
better on the models. I bind
my thighs with dental floss,
finally learn the aerial arts.

There are bobby pins.
I have to watch myself. I become
begummed, magnetized.
Things stick. Sometimes I can't
shake them. For a whole week
I was Working Shit Out
with a broken necklace that had me
ensnared by the hair.

In my dark bordello,
Bic lighters are barges
out in deep water. I taste
the tang of their flint sharpening,
receding, hear the cargo
sloshing, the boatswain's call
at the far edge of my sanity.
Sometimes keys wash up to me—
all faint numbers & silver teeth.
I no longer know what they open.

More than once, I've considered
setting the place on fire.
So easy. Plenty to kindle:
petrified pretzel logs, illegible receipts,
& sometimes, incredibly, a tampon

escaped from its casing—string
like a fuse on a soft stick of dynamite.

On hot nights, I unscrew my purse
perfume & move my naked body
like a question across the cool
roller-ball. She is a Silent Oracle
who only answers in spirits
& fumes: pomegranate, lily
of the valley, amber, wet fern,

African violet. I have eternity
to translate this Olfactory Code
into a working escape plan.

For lack of space: Please Help.
This is what I've been reduced to.
I hope someone Up There is looking
for me. I hope my Mother is
burning the goddamn crops.

Karyna McGlynn
357

³⁵⁷ [Karyna McGlynn, "I Wake Up in the Underworld of My Own Dirty Purse," *Arts & Letters*, collected in *50 Things Kate Bush Taught Me About the Multiverse*, Sarabande Books](#)

1986

I took a knife to school.
On the morning bus ride I'd sharpened it with spit and a rock.
I cut the Levi's tag from Christian's denim jacket.
I couldn't say all the months in a row.
I couldn't spell remember or narwhal.
At night my mother set up her sewing machine on the counter.
She attached the tiny red flag to my jacket.
She didn't say whatever it takes.
She didn't say anything at all.

Michael McGriff
358

³⁵⁸ [Michael McGriff](#), "[1986](#)," collected in [Eternal Sentences](#), [The University of Arkansas Press](#)

Highest

I'm the highest in the room
—Travis Scot

I rise up, therefore I must be like Descartes
if he didn't finish all the reading. I raise up

like the highest Black hand in history class.
I am risen like the blood pressure of anybody

Black mimeographed in the chronic textbook
of this monochromatic year. That's infant

mortality rate high. That's high-top fade high.
Most everything up here hangs threadbare,

squarely in the redline of summery excuses.
Everything else up in here, from the cop

apologies to the solidarity statements: a double
tap of distraction for somebody else's

high sign. That's unemployment high. That's
Machu Picchu high. What a relief hardly

anybody stuck around to see me on the low
side of the mountain. What a reprieve because

I kept rising stealthily—past my historical
anxiety, way past all my inherited hearsay

until I am so high up on the shelf I eye-
level alchemy. Even up here, I'm adept

at shrinking myself for safety. Even up here,
my shoulders hunch like a small analogy.

Adrian Matejka
359

³⁵⁹ [Adrian Matejka](#), "[Highest](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Somebody Else Sold the World](#), Penguin Books

Animal Prudence

Mice drink the rainwater before dying by
the poison we set in the cupboard for them.
They come for the birdseed, and winter
is so grey here the sight of a single cardinal
can keep us warm for days. We'll justify
anything—and by we, I mean I, and by
I, I mean we, with our man-is-the-only-
animal-who and our manifest destiny, killers
each of us by greater or lesser degrees.
Instead of a gun or knife in my pocket
there are two notes. Unwhichever the//
dandelion, reads one. I don't know what
it means but cannot throw it away;
it is soft as cashmere. The other says:
coffee, chocolate, birdseed. I should be
extinct by now, except I can't make it
on to that list either. Like toothpicks
made of plain wood, some things are
increasingly hard to find. Even when he was
a young drunk going deaf from target practice,
my father preferred picking his teeth
to brushing them. My mother preferred
crying. They bought or rented places
on streets named Castle, Ring, Greystone—
as if we were heroes in a Celtic epic.
Our romanticism was earned, and leaned
toward the gothic, but lichen aimed
for names on gravestones far
lovelier than our own. It seemed to last
a long time, that long time ago, finches
pixelating the hurricane fences,
cars idling exhaust, dandelions bolting
from flower to weed to delicacy,
like me. Egyptians prepared their dead
for a difficult journey; living is more
—I was going to say, more difficult,
but more alone will do, imprudent—
unlike art—always falling below or rising
above the Aristotelian mean. In France,
a common rural road sign reads:
Animal Prudence. Purely cautionary,
it has nothing to do with Aristotle,
but offers sound advice nonetheless.
These days, I caution my father more
than he ever cautioned me. He hears
his aural hallucinations better and shows
greater interest: sportscasters at ballgames,
revelers at the parties he insists on.

He's got all his own teeth, so toothpicks
must do the job. His pockets fill with them.
There are always half a dozen rattling
like desert bones in my dryer. I think
of the mason who chiseled his face
in the cathedral wall; he couldn't write
his name. The yellow bouquets I'd offer
my mother by the fistful also got their name
in France: *dent de lion*, meaning teeth of the lion.

Kathy Fagan
360

³⁶⁰ [Kathy Fagan](#), "[Animal Prudence](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [Bad Hobby](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

Introduction to Trans Literature

If later on you want to read a good novel it may describe how a young boy and girl sit together and watch the rain falling. They talk about themselves and the pages of the book describe what their innermost little thoughts are. This is what is called literature. But you will never be able to appreciate that if in comic book fashion you expect that at any minute someone will appear and pitch them out of the window.

—Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*

Comics is a form about visual presence, a succession of forms, that is stippled with absence, in the frame-gutter sequence.

—Hillary Chute, *Why Comics?*

A young boy falling and a young girl in the rain
are together in a fashion. Their little thoughts
pitch through them like the rain, and at any minute
they expect someone you will never
appreciate. This is what is called young. The rain
keeps pitching down the curtains, against the selves
the boy rubs between inner windows, talking about
the panels in their little wants, and the innermost rain
you will never be able to describe:
you may never be a girl, but you can be good
if a novel in fashion describes you. Later, you appear.
The boy and the girl want to describe themselves.
Instead they expect that some literature will appear
to rain them out of the window. Their pages
describe. You can't pitch the rain. They can only want
to appear in the book of themselves, and if they sit
together they may call a window. Rain talks
to the gutters. The falling boy, who may be a girl,
may never be out till later, but the girl's book
will be good, it will be a comic book,
it may be a boy and a boy and a girl together,
a girl and a rain boy and their innermost girl,
whose pitch is falling together, so that they are all able
to be young. No one pages them. No one appears
to pitch them out in the rain, or into the gutter
they may later appreciate. There will be pictures
of frames together, and falling, and stippled minutes,
and comic book windows, and pages about themselves,
and this, this—this is what is called literature.

Stephanie Burt

361

³⁶¹ [Stephanie Burt](#), "[Introduction to Trans Literature](#)," *FUSION*, collected in [We Are Mermaids](#), Graywolf Press

from "Missing File #1: Woolly Rhinoceros/Ancient Cavity Tooth"

Here the artist has made a place for you to encounter the woolly rhino. You may touch its nose. You may not feed it. It is a mummy; it has organs but they are sleeping. Here, please:

To surrender is a way to say to give oneself. To give oneself is a way to say one's self can be gifted, like the hollowed out horn. To compare land to a woman is a cliché of the highest order. It is laziness punishable only by the death of the poem. To say a poem is like a body is to say one's self is a machine. To say a body is erasable is to say extinction is a temperate clicking. And the howl is a hum, the wail a whirring.

These are the wrong things to say. These are pretty things to say. And like that, with one hand on the glass and one gloved hand inside the mouth of the woolly rhino, you have done it.

Alison Powell
362

³⁶² Alison Powell, "[Missing File #1: Woolly Rhinoceros/Ancient Cavity Tooth](#)," *A Public Space*, collected in *Boats in the Attic*, Fordham University Press

In Collection

On a shelf in Grand Rapids
maybe there's a thick plastic bag
of dirt and shit, a bag of ash:

the remains of my grandfather,
whose six children gathered quietly
for what looked exactly like mourning.

They stood around a low-budget urn
my uncle had filled with kitty litter.
He said it feels the same.

He couldn't leave it empty but money's tight
and do you know what they charge.
Each said to the next *yeah, money's tight,*

maybe in a few months, and from that moment
no one spoke of him again.
He'd left his trailer to the daughter

he fucked the most
and she sold it for heroin, the biggest buy
she'd ever made.

When it was gone,
she licked the inside of the bag
until it opened at the seams.

Jessica L. Walsh

363

³⁶³ [Jessica L. Walsh](#), "[In Collection](#)," [Ample Remains](#), collected in [The Book of Gods & Grudges](#), [Glass Lyre Press](#)

The Burial

After I've goosed up the fire in the stove with *Starter Logg* so that it burns like fire on amphetamines; after it's imprisoned, screaming and thrashing, behind the stove door; after I've listened to the dead composers and watched the brown-plus-gray deer compose into Cubism the trees whose name I don't know (pine, I think); after I've holed up in my loneliness staring at the young buck whose two new antlers are like a snail's stalked eyes and I've let this conceit lead me to the eyes-on-stems of the faces of Picasso and from there to my dead father; after I've chased the deer away (they were boring, streamlined machines for tearing up green things, deer are the cows-of-the-forest); then I bend down over the sea of keys to write this poem about my father in his grave.

It isn't easy. It's dark in my room, the door is closed, all around is creaking and sighing, as though I were in the hold of a big ship, as though I were in the dark sleep of a huge freighter toiling across the landscape of the waves taking me to my father with whom I have struggled like Jacob with the angel and who heaves off, one final time, the muddy counterpane of the earth and lies panting beside his grave like a large dog who has run a long way.

This is as far as he goes. I stand at the very end of myself holding a shovel. The blade is long and cool; It is an instrument for organizing the world; the blade is drenched in shine, the air is alive along it, as air is alive on the windshield of a car. Beside me my father droops as though he were under anesthesia. He is so thin, and he doesn't have a coat. My left hand grows cool and sedate under the influence of his flesh. It hesitates and then...

My father drops in like baggage into a hold. In his hands, written on my stationery, a note I thought of xeroxing: *Dad, I will be with you, through the cold, dark, closed places you hated.* I close the hinged lid, and above him I heap a firmament of dirt. The body alone, in the dark, in the cold, without a coat. I would not wish that on my greatest enemy. Which, in a sense, my father was.

Lynn Emanuel
364

³⁶⁴ Lynn Emanuel, "The Burial," collected in *Then, Suddenly—*, University of Pittsburgh Press

First Taste

1.

When you are twenty, walk to the bedside
of the second classmate who attempts suicide
that fall. Walk past Linsly-Chittenden,

Old Campus, to the hospital. Yale's stony
Gothic buildings mark an edge. Cross Crown Street,
walk a nether zone of warehouses, highway

overpasses and the occasional, forlorn storefront. Feel
the severe opulence of the campus and the poverty
of the city in your bones. The sadness of the ice cream shop

in the December half-light of 4 p.m. George,
the friend, has taken a bottle of Extra-Strength Tylenol
during exam week after he is rejected by a friend.

The ambulance driver told him only 7 are necessary
to kill the liver and then one is less likely to vomit them up.
File away the knowledge. With his square block of a body,

strong arms and one of those pretty Protestant faces,
George can present his desperate act with an elegant,
well-bred humor with which you are infatuated. In the solarium,

the place where people can smoke, he crosses his legs slowly,
gestures towards the windowless walls. *Solarium*, he says.
And you laugh. You smoke too, try not to look concerned.

George says the doctors test him daily. Voices, sense of self,
inkblots for Christ's sake. He has to do this so they will release him
in time for Christmas. But this is not the hard part for George.

This is before miracle drugs like Prozac, before smoking is illegal
in public spaces, before you, George, and most of your friends,
know grief is something you can pass through.

2.

You will never be so lonely as you are that first year
in New York City. You sublet an apartment
with a daycare worker on the Upper West Side.

You live in a curtained-off alcove of the living room of the
small, dark one-bedroom on 99th Street. You work at a school
with much older women, and each way, a long subway ride—

the train shoots up out of the ground for the last ten stops,
over warehouses, endless parking lots full of busses, and
meat warehouses by the river. All the way there, you nibble

a donut and sip coffee to stay awake as you chug against
the traffic to that outer borough. The downtown train rushes
past too close, full of men and women crammed together, hanging

on the straps, leaning against the doors, falling on each other
as their train hurtles south. On your uptown train,
you always get a seat. Terrified of falling asleep, you think

someone might slip something awful into your slackened mouth.
But you must have closed your eyes. The Italian anisette
from the cookie factory perfumes

the nearly empty car. Just a couple more stops.
You meet one new friend that winter, a friend suggests
you call her. Elise is a native New Yorker and proud of it

in that rustic, narrow way New Yorkers have. She lives
with her mother in a large, rent-controlled apartment
about 20 blocks south of yours and tells you in your first phone call

she has over 70 pairs of shoes, no small effort since her feet
are unusually narrow and long. She is the first you meet
who refers to herself in other than first person. She talks about

her comfortable life. She tells you about her immigrant boyfriend
who goes to Columbia, his family, how much they love her.
How she goes to Hunter and is saving money for law school.

Many times that night and during many dinners afterward,
you hear her announcers what type of person she is. She describes
all her qualities to you and you listen, hypnotized by her self-

involvement. You want to understand what it means
not to suffer. You are beginning to learn you had a different
kind of childhood, and the shock is only starting to sink in.

so you see suffering everywhere. People
you don't even know tell you their troubles; each woman
at your school has her own well of sorrow. One has a child

who will eat \$200 of groceries a night so she can throw it up.
One has breast cancer, another has a severely disabled
adult child. The subway is a study hall of suffering.

You watch and intuit, read faces, bodies with your high-powered lens of pain. And the skateboard man, legless with bulging shoulders and arms,

rolling down the subway car, and the man with eye sockets of scars, but even the ruined shoes of the man reading a bible in a home-sewn case can make you feel like sobbing.

Elise becomes the stay against the knowledge that everyone, rich or poor, suffers. Years later, you hear an odd rumor about her. She did go to law school and there she began to be “sick” often.

When her illness were questioned by her professors, she told them she had AIDS. They eventually required documentation. Elise is either being sued, the friend said,

or is negotiating a settlement with the university for her deception. It is a long time before you can feel pity for her, a pretender, you believed her to be, simple and lucky.

3.

One night that first fall in New York, you go to see Geraldine Ferraro, listen to her through the loudspeakers set up on the sidewalk because a woman

has been nominated. For her, you have been stapling democratic materials at the headquarters. The idea of her is bright that fall, though hers is a losing campaign and we all

know it. All kinds of women stand on the sidewalk with you. It’s cold and most are still in work clothes with uncomfortable office shoes. A group of teenaged girls

pour from a church bus, meander through the crowd. You feel a beautiful, fatalistic hope and lost, on a wide, open-air platform in the south Bronx,

you wait for a train. The buildings are burned or have grates or scrap metal over windows or window-gaps. Men and women

stagger in and out of the station, thin enough to slip through the turnstiles without the ease of a token. They have white lips, knotted hair and their clothes

are irrelevant to them. These people are persistent, plead with you while other passengers stare straight ahead. You can’t bear such naked need. It makes you feel ashamed, you

who walk through your new city exhausted.
You can't stay home much since your roommate
has already decided yours is a relationship.

of convenience. Wanda is from Oneonta, upstate,
and goes to square dances. Wanda majored in home economics
and wants to marry. You wear vinyl or 1950s housedresses

over stunningly unshaved legs and seldom comb
your hair. You refuse to wear underwear. She has a garden,
for god sakes, you say over the phone when Wanda

isn't there. She sews her own clothes!
And at work, during naptime, the kindergartners know
all your songs, their voices rising from their mats,

stronger on the refrains of all the folk songs you know
about longing, Cole Porter songs about longing, Beatles songs of longing.
After the grilled cheeses or chicken nuggets,

we all should just sleep, you say. Shhhh.
You sing, *Blackbird singing in the dead*
of night. Take these broken wings and learn to fly.

All life you were only waiting for this moment to arrive.
Thin, whispery singing rises again. But they keep
their eyes shut and faces to the floor.

4.

Wanda makes you scrub out the tub after every. You don't
cook since you can't maintain the cleanliness
she requires. No matter how hard you try, she will,

with a tight look on her face,
say the wooden spoon is stained.
So, at night, four or five times a week, you fall in

love with all the uglier ones at the Thalia. Jimmy Cagney's
small, explosive body in *White Heat*, *look at me Ma*,
I'm on top of the world. Jean Marlowe's pudgy stomach

and unglamorous nose. She was famous
because she'd do anything—look at *Red Dust*, 1931 and she's
naked in the tub. *Gilda*, and you almost can't bear

Rita Hayworth's long curling hair,
quick hips, long limbs. *If I were a ranch, I'd be Bar Nothing*,
Rita growls into the camera. You stumble

from the dark having rehearsed and survived danger
and suffering. You approach these films like an addict, bingeing
on feeling. *Nanook of the North* you watch many times

one Saturday, to see Nanook grin, to see his children
play with knives, their tiny sled, and see the whole family
finally go to sleep together in a pile of furs.

The original *Nanook* was shot on early,
highly combustible film stock and Robert Flaherty,
a chronic smoker, when editing it, dropped a spark into

the open canister and lost everything. Flaherty returned
to the North, found Nanook, and asked him to recreate
what Flaherty remembered and liked. What you loved was

the notion that Nanook was performing the ordinary.
But unlike you, Nanook has the smile
of someone who is just about to laugh out loud.

You say but there's nothing to be sad about in my life.
You've merely learned actions have consequences.
If you have sex, you can get pregnant. If you don't go to class,

you do not pass, and if you drink too much you get sick.
Why this is such a devastating revelation, you're not sure.
But you mourn this knowledge terribly. What confuses you,

separates you from understanding grief, is
your father, your mother, your sisters, all trigger

a mounting lightness, a pressure behind your eyeballs,
the ache in your windpipe. How could it
be grief when the thought of the living makes you cry?

Dogs don't kill themselves; they live and that's all
they do. You say to yourself *just decide you want
to live—a leap of faith*. A price of money, of patience,

of pain—what cost to the soul is this enduring.

5.

Spring in New York is a fabulous thing. You stop worrying
so much about where the homeless can sleep; the trees bloom
within their concrete skirts and chicken wire sleeves.

It is easier to sit on the subway, with no big coats
and muddy boots. Stepping up out of a station into
sun makes a person feel lucky. Sandals start appearing

and those bare toes, tender bones on the city streets are giddy acts
of faith. The wind from the ocean is warm and the few
tulips planted in the meridians of the avenues are nature enough.

Wanda, one afternoon, windows open, curtains roiling on the wind,
announces spring-cleaning. You have to be told
you are expected to participate. Boric acid kills roaches

and Wanda is diligent in battle; the floors look dusty
with it. She arms you with a toothbrush, a nail file,
a pastry brush. Soon the satisfaction of a chore—

that beginning, middle and endness of it—takes over.
Wanda puts on one of her records,
Carly Simon or Billy Joel and you scrub side by side,

announce your achievements or sing along with the music,
you're so vain. I bet you think this song about you.
Finally, you oil the old wood floors, trap yourselves

on the square of linoleum in the kitchen. Wanda
pulls a couple little green packets from the freezer.
The last of it, she sighs, putting a large pot of water to boil.

No more pesto. What's pesto? you ask at the table, strangely
comfortable with Wanda in the fresh, spring-filled room.
She wonders how good these last couple of bags can be.

She can't wait to grow basil again because, she says,
there's nothing like it. You have walked by
her community garden—an abandoned lot by the housing projects

on Columbus. Vegetable gardens, where you come from,
are too necessary to be sport, but a New York City garden
is more festive—the lot criss-crossed by bright string

and homemade signs announcing each gardener's little square
of earth. When you taste that first bite of pesto,
you cannot believe such a green flavor can exist.

6.

You find a packet of photographs, later
by years. That New York winter, after so many black-and-white
movies, you spent some of your money on a camera.

On weekends, you and your camera
would head over to Central Park and take pictures
of people without asking. A man in a thick coat

and a tail fur hat. A lone bicyclist, an old woman in high heels
feeding birds by the reservoir. Most of the time, however,
you shot photos of shadows, piles of sticks, graffiti. All in New York's

severe, high-contrast winter light. Now you wonder,
what are these images of? These photographs, once perfect expressions
seem boring. Your physical distance from your living

subjects indicates how scared you were, that's what they document,
when you now wish for an image of the kids at school,
naptime, or the igloo city you helped them build

after a snowstorm trapped you all at school. That distance you stood
in your photographs in inverse proportion to the power
this world had to wreck you—but you entered it as one enters

water in the summer, without fear or guile—and the brief glory of the door
flung open, the whoosh of air through the subway car,
the in and through of every suffering you felt fully and well,

this is what you try to recall, organize.

Connie Voisine
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³⁶⁵ [Connie Voisine](#), "[First Taste](#)," collected in [Rare High Meadow of Which I Might Dream](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)