

Social Media Poems 2023

Simeon Berry

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The Petty Politics of the Thing

I was surprised by the teeth and meat-breath
of myself. We're adults in an office. All the blue
computer screens hold very still and pretend
to be a beautiful view. It was not the kind of fight
a poem can understand, so I'll tell instead
about the cat who drug the newborn rabbit
from the nest under my porch. I'll tell you
that a bunny losing her throat screams like a panther
from within the fluff of herself. In a department
where everyone says they admire our collegiality
towards each other we file forms to chart
our feats of such-like professionalism. If
someone is testy another someone might
even say, "Thank goodness this is just a job
and we're not alley cats stalking a nest of rabbits."
And the vegetarian among us takes it hard,
because it's not collegial to ignore her sensitivities.
And the veteran among us who fought in a war
he can't talk about says under his breath,
"You think that's gruesome." But if anyone heard
him, they pretend not to. I don't know if it is
the cat in us or the rabbit that keeps so silent.
Sometimes in the course of a day I hear
the cat-rabbit in the back of my mind whisper,
"I will fuck you up." Oh, I love her. I love her
for how real she is. She can see through
even the most tangled bramble of rhetoric.
We are not animals, you learn over and over
in school, which is where they break you to
the fluorescent lights and geometry of so much
empty furniture in a room. Hush, little cat-rabbit,
I say. Thank you for reminding me, little cat-
rabbit, I say, it's enough just to know.
In that place I'm sad I'll have to die for a life
that was only ever a metaphor. I'll explain
to you what I mean as that little whisper
of a voice explained it to me. Money is
a symbol. Books are a symbol. The office
is a symbol. Your clothes may or may not be
a chain of severed heads around your neck.
Your diplomatic tone is the sharpened tip
of an obsidian stone. Don't feel mean,
I have one too. And when you say
I'm being melodramatic and not so much
is at stake in this silly bureaucracy
we idle our days through, little cat-rabbit
rumbles her stalking purr of *so-close now*.
To her it is the very meaning of our lives

we squabble over and she's just been waiting
for someone to let me sink my teeth into it.

Kathryn Nuernberger
1

¹ [Kathryn Nuernberger](#), "[The Petty Politics of the Thing](#)," [32 Poems](#), collected in [Rue](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Doubt

Tonight in the taxi I brought a guy from 6th Avenue and 23rd to West 92nd Street and he was complaining that his wife promised their three-year-old blue gum and how sugarless gum gives you cancer.

His wife wanted him to stop and get gum before he came home and he didn't want to. I drove him to a CVS as he praised himself for his tolerance and good judgment in the face of his enemies.

A Cathar fragment said: *If the world were not evil in itself, every choice would not constitute a loss.*

Who knows if the Lord, with one flask of ammonia and another of tin, deliberately added a chemical, vinyl acetate, that could harm later humans. She snapped a blue bubble into nothingness. What did She mean by injecting that sugar into the bloodstream?

Sean Singer²

² Sean Singer, "Doubt," collected in [Today in the Taxi](#), Tupelo Press

The Beach

In theory I don't
like it but then when I'm there

I remember how in so many
other locations
it is not considered permissible
behavior to splay facedown
and speak to no one

the beach

is one of the few spots left
where you get spared
where you may excuse yourself
from the performance of
these clabbered conversations

one person saying the fortune
teller on Highland Avenue
couldn't make rent and hammered
the storefront shut

the other spouting back SHOULDN'T
SHE HAVE PREDICTED, BEING
A FORTUNE TELLER AND ALL, THAT WAS
GOING TO HAPPEN

sour pattern

anyway that's not what they do
it's not like they're in there informing
people which semiconductor
stock is fixing to split or in what
year they'll get divorced

it's more silhouetted
it's not like they're in there

cautioning walk
with another person that night

keys will be hardly, the fortune
reader isn't in there screaming,
weapon enough

the beach

the terns and the metal detectors
the sensation of combing
through sediment witlessly

another person
would not have been knocked

into the air and propelled
toward the copious bramble
would not have stayed there all night
would not have required returning
the next day
in hopes of retrieval

kneeling
scrutinizing the thistle

Natalie Shapero
3

³ [Natalie Shapero](#), "[The Beach](#)," [Memorious](#), collected in [Popular Longing](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

The power of passive voice

On a news loop, the FBI director crossed
the Blue Room, his face arranged
in a recursive “oh shit” expression, like
my questions of what to do, how to act,

now that this man is president. I know
my own grandiosity, I am no patriot, and
on that day, I drank house merlot,
unemployed Florida parent drowning in

terrifying but common quicksand. Even as
the Watergate lawyers cited, again,
a new and historic end to precedent,
that afternoon, the security-cleared translator

called Reality Winner had already left work
at the Whitelaw Building in Augusta,
report on Russian election interference
stuffed in her tights. Or should I say

the file *was printed* and *was removed*
from a facility, *was sent* to a journalist,
a chimera appearing by invisible hand
before us, because who was Reality Winner

but our collective, passive-voiced American
conscience, too naive not to breadcrumb
her own espionage conviction? The passive
can be a change agent that obscures

responsibility, might even enable action, but
we know how it’s used in this country,
because Reality Winner is in prison and
everyone else in this story walks free. I suspect

she wanted what I had, a version of family,
my anonymous face frozen in the TV strobe,
all my Lean Cuisines and breastfeeds and job
applications. Where each day is an

exercise in additive futility, concealed
by believing so hard in it. At her arrest,
CNN used an aerial of the federal building
where our offhand mole once worked, all

fluid lines, walkways paved into a series of
curves. The planners might've pictured
ocean waves, a current in which to lose
ourselves, day after day of the relentless

neutrality of water as it slips through
so many fingers, strong-armed
double H joined to a single culpable O
shaped like a needle's eye.

Erin Hoover

4

⁴ [Erin Hoover](#), "[The power of passive voice](#)," [Gargoyle Magazine](#)

The School of Eternities

Do you remember the two types of eternity, how we learned
about them in a Wegmans parking lot, when you turned

on the radio, the classical channel? Why
were they even talking about eternity, what

did it have to do with the suddenly
broody guitars? You had a peach

Snapple, I remember the snappy kissy sound of the lid
coming off in your hand. *One type of eternity*, they said, *is inside*

of time, as endless time—life
without death. We were inside our Toyota. I said, *We need*

a new umbrella. Do you remember
when we first rhymed? Do you remember the first time I asked

you about the rain, the expression,
“It’s raining cats & dogs,” whether it was equally cats & dogs,

falling? Can you remember when you learned the word
“immortality”? The hosts on the classical channel

were okay, I thought you’d do a much better job. I remember saying
so, while you drove us home. Our apartment, our

third. Remember the day we moved
into our first? The boxes of books & boxes of

books? My books? Our sweating up three flights of the greenest
stairs? & you said, *Never again?* & the again, & again,

&? *The other type of eternity is outside of time, beyond it,*
no beginning, no end. I remember. Your hand, the lid, your hands,

the steering wheel, your lips, your lips. The way you took a sip,
gave me a kiss, before starting

to drive.

Do you remember the first time you drove
me home, before “home” meant where we both lived, the books

on the shelves, the books in the closet
when I ran out of shelves, the second apartment, West

Texas, remember the dust, the flat, another type of eternity, that dusty
sun? & driving

to the supermarket, what was it called
there? & that hand soap we'd get, which scent

was your favorite? I don't remember what it was called, can't
remember exactly the smell,

but your hands, after washing, I remember
kissing them. Don't you remember when we thought

only some things were ephemera?
Can you remember when you learned the word

"ephemera," the word "immortality"? Probably the latter
first, & isn't that something,

immortality first, then menus
& movie tickets. What was the first nickname, the fifth

umbrella, the type of taco you ordered on our sixteenth
trip, remember driving, remember when we thought the world

of the world, remember how I signed the letter
exploding yours, do you remember you

were driving, we were halfway home, only eight minutes
from Wegmans, remember when we measured distance

in terms of Wegmans, like it was a lighthouse
or pyramid or sacred tree, remember when your name

was Fluttersaurus Vex & mine
wasn't, remember when I lived like a letter, falling

in cartoonish slow-mo down four flights of stairs, did you picture
a letter of the alphabet or a letter I'd written

to you, remember when I asked you about the rain, when
the wizard jumped out, when I lied & you laughed, when I lied

& I lied & I lied, can you remember
last night, how I crossed my arms

as though dead & arranged just so, how I pictured my face
polished, as though alive, &

no, you can't remember
that, since it happened while you were sleeping & I

wasn't, I was up, wondering why people always talk about death
as sleep, & how much I love sleep, hate death,

& have I told you about the student who said, *I'm really,*
really afraid of death, just like that,

in class, it was fitting, because it was poetry
class, ha ha, & I loved it, her saying that, I wanted to say I loved it,

but couldn't, I was thinking about you sleeping
& me not, about me sleeping

& you not, & what even is outside of time, beyond
then, now, no

thanks, I'd prefer the type of eternity where we
are inside, are

us, & last night's movie good,
not great, a stray piece of popcorn still under

our coffee table.

Do you remember when the world
signed the letter *yours* *ephemerally*?

Remember when I asked you about the rain,
the cats & dogs of it,

if it was 50% cats, 50% dogs, 100%
falling, & you said, *Of course*?

& you said, *She's gotten, the flight's not till, I'm going*
to drive. I remember you

driving to your mother. West Texas
to Upstate New York, you didn't make it in time, she had little time,

then none. I remember your face pressed
into my shoulder. I remember your mother was an endless,

a question your face asked into my shoulder. How I wanted it
to answer because I couldn't. I didn't go

with you, when I could've, I chose a poetry reading
instead, thought, she'll be there, you'll be, memory the best

eternity we can make?
The only?

& you said it's equal, the cats & dogs raining
down, though in terms of overall

volume. The rain, it's all the different breeds of cat, of dog, & see,
there are more individual cats, since there are more

very large breeds of dog,
the cats have to balance things out

with their number, but the dogs, don't you worry, they're raining
down, too, & they're rain,

absolutely, they're still rain, the cats & dogs,
lots of water for the plants, for the flowers, for the whole street

& our dusty car windows, for the cats & dogs
on the ground, the cats & dogs

that aren't rain, at least
not yet, & maybe that's another

eternity, the rainy type.

I remember you drove us home.
The radio was on. We made a sound like a lid coming off.

Chen Chen
5

⁵ [Chen Chen](#), "[The School of Eternities](#)," [Ploughshares](#), collected in [Your Emergency Contact Has Experienced an Emergency](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

At the Memorial Service for the Way Things Used to Be We Talk About Zombies

At the memorial service for the way things used to be, we ask the usual questions, have the usual conversations until we run out of words. *How are you? How's it going?* I am healthy, I have a job, I hate everything, my daughter spends 22 hours a day in her room. My friend says he started *The Walking Dead*. My friend says it's too gory. My friend says it's great. My friend says isn't the metaphor too spot on. My friend says he quit in the middle of the second season but heard that was the worst part and the show got better later. You never know the right time to give up. In 1892 a doctor marveled at how that year's flu set fire to different parts of the body with "malicious caprice." Brain, lungs, legs, heart, you never know. Only that's not true. How predictable this all was, is the worst part. It's all the worst part. It's a gift that the numbers of the dead are too big to comprehend, is the worst part. My friend's aunt died. My friend's father had it but recovered. My friend's father has it right now. My friend had it. My friend had it months ago and can't walk up a flight of stairs without lying down in the middle. My mother hasn't been to the post office in 11 months. She hasn't been anywhere. We don't know the long-term effects. I'm sorry this isn't more uplifting. Autopsies don't teach us much. In most cases by the time the body dies the virus is already gone.

Amorak Huey
6

⁶ Amorak Huey, "[At the Memorial Service for the Way Things Used to Be We Talk About Zombies](#)," *Had*

Empathy

I wait for the pity to take effect.
It comes in a pill like a jewel
one only wears to church. It comes
like the fish killed to measure
the depth of the river. It comes
as a voice filled like a glass
with all the forgery such animals
can drink. They see themselves
in it. They mistake themselves
for gods, with the stars in the background
erased. They mistake themselves for
women who dance like half-moths
at the sill. Tense with it, I wait.
The pity begins to take effect.
The darknesses inside me shape,
like a village of soldiers asleep
in a horse. Armed to the teeth.
Armed with such faith.
The little flame begins in me.
I feel it like a bride. I feel it
like drops of blood in the snow.
My skin changes with the suffering
of others. My skin grows changed
with the process of awake.
I love the leap and the touch of day
as it hunts me from the window.
Summer takes effect. A crash
of poppies. The mowed fields like
a smother of elegies. I sip at
the photograph I make sitting
silent, crying someone else's pain,
my name forgotten, my mouth
a fat remember always saying what
it wants, nerve endings mapping all that's
offstage as reactions disaster my face.

Jennifer Militello

7

⁷ [Jennifer Militello](#), "[Empathy](#)," [So and So Magazine](#), collected in [Body Thesaurus](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

I Write Poems About Motherhood

Tonight I can write the most motherly lines,
for example: it's true, my asshole will never be the same

after giving birth, not its shape, but its soul, small wick
of shadow I once called *home* and *dream*. Tonight

I can write how it burned like a votive, the whole
inverted star a series of grievances from which another

self grew, séance and seam, split off
to live parallel lives like vaporish twins. I can write

that I gave birth and died and came back to life
and my asshole will never be the same. It wore

a haunted look those first few weeks. Claimed
it needed to "take fresh airs" in the country, wore

aggressively Victorian clothes and strutted
around naming geodes like a gentlemen

farmer. *Shut up, asshole*, I admonished. Tonight I write
my daughter emerged and split me into two selves. It did not hurt

the way they said it would. I rocked on my knees
singing a song like hurtling my voice off a cliff.

My husband's hand disappeared into mine
and for a moment I left this world, a hem of blood

between us. I broke onto the shore of a fixed
note. I helixed and drank the urine of starved

apparitions to keep me afloat, slapped the shit
out of my reflection, squatted and squeezed

a rocky planet out from the blue horizon
like a ship bifurcating a labial sky. But my asshole,

to whom I must now give credit where credit is due,
taught me how to anchor to the earth, locate the hot center

which I always knew was there but never saw
shining in my sacrum like Orion's belt

when they stitched me shut in a ragged,
casual way, even though I wished

to stay open a little longer,
unhinged and full of silences. Tonight I can write

that I would give birth a million times
over and not tell anyone about it

if I could feel that kind of way again:
one hollowed self opened wide

enough to swallow my own body
then spit it back out onto the earth.

Kendra DeColo
8

⁸ [Kendra DeColo, "I Write Poems About Motherhood," Los Angeles Review](#), collected in [I am Not Trying to Hide My Hungers from the World, BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Learning Money in Reverse

My mother can still afford to retire.
She withdraws her offer on the foreclosed house.

My drunken signature vanishes from a receipt.
Friends dodge disappearing plates of sushi.

The word *bitcoin* has never buzzed in my brain.
Boxes of takeout repackage themselves.

I return my first pair of full-priced boots.
I un-sign my first lease. I go home.

My parents remarry. I have not yet chosen
the school that will cost their life savings.

I close and seal the scholarship rejections.
My first paystub folds back into the letter.

My forehead unkisses the floor and I pass
the red envelope back to my mother.

We move into a smaller, more crowded house,
where I fry sesame seeds with Lao Lao, and the HOA

reprimands us for growing winter melon on the porch.
I pedal backwards on my sister's bike. I hand back

her worn clothes. We put coins from our palms
back into our father's coat, having just told him *good job*

because we think this is what he earns in a day,
and it is enough. He's about to come home.

Stephanie Niu
9

⁹ [Stephanie Niu](#), "[Learning Money in Reverse](#)," [Copper Nickel](#)

The Rivers Runneth Black with Mascara

The widows soar-eth with parasols of flies,
with pressed-powder desert faces, the widows runneth over.

With pillbox hats and fascinators,
the widows runneth,

widows behind blind glasses and tinted windows,
broken widows runneth, widows streaked with rain.

The widows walk-eth the widow's walk in button boots,
widows wear-eth corsets to train their sighs.

In bustles and petticoats, widows rustle-eth,
shower-eth earth with the feathers of ravens.

They bring-eth their lips together, hide-eth their lipstick teeth.
Merry widows will work-eth to please you.

With belladonna, with nightshade, widows
Coif-eth their hair with the precision of angels.

The widows watch-eth pornography
and are-eth not ashamed.

They do-eth the Hustle, a spinoff
of a spinoff that is twice as good as the original.

Ever certain of the finale,
widows will always see-eth things through.

She's a killer, killer queen, gunpowder, gelatin...
they sing-eth, and you may block your ears

but still, you can hear the widows. Widows
surround-eth you, pass-eth you between them

like a pink tetherball. They drop-eth you in a basket,
push-eth you through reeds

down rivers that runneth black with mascara.

Cindy King
10

¹⁰ Cindy King, "The Rivers Runneth Black with Mascara," *The Cincinnati Review*, collected in [Zoonotic](#), [Tinderbox Editions](#)

The Paper Anniversary (5)

Paper gowns are not as soft as cloth gowns are not as soft
as the skin of the pear pelt of the bear the felt thing

the svelte and sung wrung out to dry draped
over the faucet just so just so you know I've lost

it all or am losing unloosing a viper
candy-striper sunbeam and swish the unwashed

dish the woman at the sink is sinking is thinking
to abandon a body is a different sort of thing welcome fright

this flight the sonorous water amorous lover
what a lark this dark to couple and waft drain

these noodles I wonder how many times I've said
brush your teeth as if mattering begins in the head

we'll all be dead we'll all be dead just brush your teeth
and go to bed

Nicole Callihan

11

¹¹ [Nicole Callihan](#), "[The Paper Anniversary \(5\)](#)," [Calyx](#)

Sadness: the poem: the ride

I was reading about plane crashes today. Is there any more
beautiful a eulogy than “He had a passion for small, experimental
aircraft?” Is there any afterburner more _____
(adjective, explosive)
than teenage notebooks with pop star names etched in
marginalia? The awful truth is that I found Lindsay Lohan’s CD in
a _____ bin. I found my teenage notebooks. You are a
(thrift store)
butterfly. You wear pretty makeup.
“I hope I am as pretty for you as you could dream”—Grandma, in
her teenage letters. Grandma, _____, actually referred
(age, over 85)
to herself today as “old fashioned.” “Hey, just writin u back
_____.”
(writing)
Bla bla bla. I can be gone. I repeat my hands into
_____. Today a package came for
(fluttering animal)
_____. I left it for her. It was more makeup.
(girlfriend name)
She had begun to buy tons of makeup. It covered every room.
Towers of makeup boxes topped with open missile silos of
lipstick. “I love our armistice,” I wrote to her. I left the letter in her
pile of CDs and aerial photography books. “All this makeup?”
I asked. “Did you read my letter? Will we be forever in love?”
_____. “Flight,” she said. “These are boxes of me.
(sound of loud tears)
These are all could-bes,” she said.

¹² [Russell Jaffe](#), "[Sadness: the poem: the ride](#)," collected in [This Super Doom I Aver](#), [Poets Democracy](#)

Body Shop

When I come in, my mechanic is eating
lunch. He doesn't look over the top
of his newspaper.

I glance around, hoping that Miss July
with her sassy fife will distract me,
but his calendars

feature only a vernal wrench, perky
timing belt, naked carburetor:
things that might make a robot humid.

Sitting across from his headlines, I feel
like the mechanic's wife: virtues ignored,
faults magnified, taken for granted...

It's all I can do to not clutch
the lapels of my robe and run into
the bathroom weeping.

Finally he listens. Intently. Leaning closer,
one hand on my trembling manifold.

Ron Koertge
13

¹³ [Ron Koertge](#), "[Body Shop](#)," collected in [Fever](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

Corned Beef and Cabbage

I can see her in the kitchen,
Cooking up, for the hundredth time,
A little something from her
Limited Midwestern repertoire.
Cigarette going in the ashtray,
The red wine pulsing in its glass,
A warning light meaning
Everything was simmering
Just below the steel lid
Of her smile, as she boiled
The beef into submission,
Chopped her way
Through the vegetable kingdom
With the broken-handled knife
I use tonight, feeling her
Anger rising from the dark
Chambers of the head
Of cabbage I slice through,
Missing her, wanting
To chew things over
With my mother again.

George Bilgere

14

¹⁴ [George Bilgere](#), "[Corned Beef and Cabbage](#)," collected in [The Good Kiss](#), [The University of Akron Press](#)

Aquarius

Your bra, left in snow,
smells of electricity.

These are the makings of a muse:
undergarments forgotten in frost.

Yes, circles are suspicious.
Ovaries, globe. (Barrenness, exile.)

An early plane. Quartz morning.
The hostess hands you a napkin,

pitiful, gossamer-thin.
Even the weakest menstruation,

it will not sponge.
You are always in danger of

overflow.
The plane lands. You disembark

with the nausea of the limp-blooded.
Like an anorexic woman,

Boston is dry,
sadly enviable,

and with a collarbone you could set
a teacup on.

Hala Alyan
15

¹⁵ [Hala Alyan](#), "Aquarius," [The Journal](#), collected in [Atrium](#), [Three Rooms Press](#)

Wagner & Nietzsche

They first met in Wagner's office.
He showed Nietzsche the view of the water.
The younger man looked down and felt dizzy.
Distance is what makes a god.
They could see every border of the city.

Nietzsche must have looked like the water, too:
a thick coat of sunlight across the chrome
of surface and the mystery of depth.
To Nietzsche, Wagner was an office:
the perfect chair, the perfect desk.

The oldest crime on record is a young man
falling in love with an older one.
Another word for it is *fatherhood*.
We know the world is flawed for good
because the world requires it.

Let us gather to celebrate
our fathers, our father says. The world
was better before we entered it.
Every son is a curse carrying
the antidote inside of him.

When Nietzsche stopped coming
to Bayreuth, Wagner's wrath
was sad and comical. In public,
he rebuked his adopted son. In private,
he missed everything about him.

O Father who is not my Father,
I forgive you, Nietzsche wrote.
I forgive what love coerces you to do.
When the Good Father finds your door,
I will feed his horse a sugar cube.

P. Scott Cunningham

16

¹⁶ P. Scott Cunningham, "[Wagner & Nietzsche](#)," [Okey-Panky](#), collected in [Ya Te Veo](#), [The University of Arkansas Press](#)

Children are the Orgasms of the World

This morning on the bus there was a woman carrying a bag with inspirational sayings and positive affirmations which I was reading because I'm a fan of inspirational sayings and positive affirmations. I also like clothing that gives you advice. What's better than the glittered baseball cap of a stranger telling you what to strive for? It's like living in a world of therapists. The inspirational bag of the woman on the bus said a number of things like "live in the moment" and "remember to breathe" but it also said "children are the orgasm of the world." Are children the orgasm of the world like orgasms are the orgasms of sex? Are children the orgasm of anything? Children are the orgasm of the world like hovercraft are the orgasm of the future or silence is the orgasm of the telephone, or shit is the orgasm of the lasagne. You could even say sheep are the orgasm of lonely pastures, which are the orgasm of modern farming practices which are the orgasm of the industrial revolution. And then I thought why not? I like comparing things to other things too. Like sometimes when we're having sex and you look like a helicopter in a low-budget movie, disappearing behind a cloud to explode. Or an athlete winning a prestigious sporting tournament at the exact moment he realizes his wife has been cheating on him. For the most part, orgasms are the orgasms of the world. Like slam-dunking a glass basketball. Or executing a perfect dive into a swimming pool full of oh my god. Or traveling into the past to forgive yourself and creating a time paradox so complex it forces all of human history to reboot, stranding you naked on some rocky outcrop, looking up at the sunset from a world so new looking up hasn't even been invented yet.

Hera Lindsay Bird

17

¹⁷ [Hera Lindsay Bird](#), "[Children are the Orgasms of the World](#)," [Minarets](#), collected in [Hera Lindsay Bird](#), [Penguin Books](#)

The Experience

I hadn't meant to go grave robbing with Richard Dawkins but he can be very persuasive. "Do you believe in God," he asked. "I don't know," I said. He said, "Right, so get in the car." We cruised around the cemetery with the headlights off. "Here we go," he said, pointing to a plot edged with clean, almost luminous white stone. I said, "Doesn't it look sort of..." "Sort of what?" "Sort of fresh?" I said. "Pass me the shovel," he said. Then he threw a square of canvas over the headstone, saying, "Don't read it. It makes it personal." He did all the digging, holding the torch in his mouth as he chopped and sliced at the dirt around his feet. "What the hell are you doing?" he shouted from somewhere down in the soil. "Eating a sandwich," I said. "Bacon and avocado. Want one?" "For Christ sake, Terry, this is a serious business, not the bloody church picnic," he said, as a shower of dirt came arcing over his shoulder.

After about half an hour of toil I heard the sound of metal on wood. "Bingo," he said. Then a moment or two later, "Oh, you're not going to like this, Terry." "What?" I said, peering over the edge. Richard Dawkins's eyes were about level with my toes. "It's quite small," he said. He uncovered the outline of the coffin lid with his boot. It was barely more than a yard long and a couple of feet wide. I felt the bacon and avocado disagreeing with one another. "Do you believe in God?" he said. I shrugged my shoulders. "Pass me the jemmy," he said. The lid splintered around the nail heads; beneath the varnish the coffin was nothing but clean chipboard. The day I found little Harry in the bath, one eye was closed and the other definitely wasn't. Flying fish can't really fly. With both feet on the crowbar Richard Dawkins bounced up and down until the coffin popped open. But lying still and snug in the blue satin of the upholstered interior was a goose. A Canada Goose, I think, the ones with the white chinstrap, though it was hard to be certain because its throat had been cut and its rubber-looking feet were tied together with gardening twine. Richard Dawkins leaned back against the wall of the grave and shook his head. With a philosophical note in my voice I said, "What did you come here for, Richard Dawkins?" He said, "Watches, jewelry, cash. A christening cup, maybe. What about you?" "I thought it might give me something to write about," I replied. "Well, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, we've got a murdered goose in a child's coffin in the middle of the night, and mud on our boots. How would you finish this one?" he said. I looked around, trying to think of a way out of this big ugly mess. Then I said, "I've got it. What if we see the vicar over there, under the yew tree, looking at us? He stares at us and we stare back, but after a while we realize it isn't the vicar at all. It's a fox. You know, with the white bib of fur around its neck, which we thought was a collar. A silent man-size fox in a dark frock coat and long black gloves, standing up on his hind legs, watching."

Simon Armitage
18

¹⁸ [Simon Armitage](#), "[The Experience](#)," collected in [Seeing Stars](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

Things I Left You

A blue blanket embroidered with bears. A burnished stone. The bones of our family dog. A plastic bottle, a patchwork doll, zwieback crackers, baby shoes. A bracelet carved with your name. My nursing blouse stained with milk. The cotton sheets I lay in with your father. The sound of his mumbled voice at night. My cutting cries, the broken plates, the night-light shaped like a handful of balloons. The ripped comforter, the ruined walls, the two-dollar lottery ticket. The handmade birthday card, the bar of almond soap, the rope he chose to hang himself with. The glimmer of two candles on a cake. My bills: gas, sewage, electric—late. The rain-licked streets I walked along in search of money. My voice this morning telling you, *Wake up, it's time to go*. The glow of my headlights painting snow. Your ruffled, pink jumper. Your new mother, her young hands clutching you. The air, free of my soured perfume. A silent cradle. An empty room.

Dara Yen Elerath

19

¹⁹ [Dara Yen Elerath](#), "[Things I Left You](#)," [Poetry](#)

A Day That Was Mine

*We were all searching for something
you'd enjoy, my mother says of the opioid void
I'd become, and I could hardly walk,
but it was my birthday.
My mother drove us
to a city on the water. She loved
her almost-dead daughter
and she wanted
to see me try to smile.
She stood to the salon's side,
held my cane while a lady
lifted scissors and made me
almost recognizable.
On the phone now, we both try
to recall the weather, that afternoon
trauma-dimmed at its edges,
the salon receptionist who must've had
no idea what a miracle was,
how much devastation
it cost us, why God had bothered
to bring me back to my mother,
who paid for the cut, then
helped me stand outside by a wall
made entirely of leaves
so I could pose for a picture
and years later, see my life
handed back to me. We remember
the cobblestone street, the sounds
of viable ships ill at ease
mere feet from where she ordered me
a coffee, nervous about whether
I'd ever feel anything again.
Look at my heartbeat
and its consequence,
that cup warm on my palm,
the street so close to the ocean,
every brick got drenched.*

Brandi Nicole Martin

20

²⁰ [Brandi Nicole Martin](#), "[A Day That Was Mine](#)," [Boston Review](#)

Completion

I am done living.
Wanting accelerates time.
When I lift the soft
grass up, I see you are bald.
So I go back to
living. But when I return,
it's a different season,
the woods are now a mall, my
children have gray hair.

Victoria Chang
21

²¹ [Victoria Chang](#), "[Completion](#)," collected in [The Trees Witness Everything](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Psychic Healers

I never liked the anteroom of my analyst's office,
all those Indian relics against beige, an
ashtray from Harrah's in Reno, swag light
on dim, and piles of old *New Yorkers*,
which I flipped through furtively for the captions
under the cartoons, for any kind of humor.
The quiet was palpable, and I could feel the weight
of the San Francisco fog lean against her office door.
Once she fell asleep in a session. I did not
wake her. Compliant, complacent, I allowed her to dream
her own Jungian dreams—dark men in four o'clock shadow;
a red hibiscus opening; anima, animus. I merely
sat there in the leather chair, studied the bones
in her wrists, and yammered rhythmically on and on,
mantra-like, about sex, death, and my pathological
tardiness. The Navajo rug as a backdrop,
her cocked head could have been the perfect
Andrew Wyeth; Helga lines around the eyes.
When she woke, I did not mention that she'd dozed,
nor for how long, because of (you know) the transference-
counter-transference thing. I merely said at the end
of the session: My dead father stands each night
at the foot of my bed. Every day I walk through
a different Bay Area shopping mall in a tennis skirt.
I hate summer. Things die. And just last week
I put my sleeping infant on a cot inside a display tent
at Big Five, and left her there. Am I having a nervous
breakdown? "No," she said, standing dim and fatigued
next to her shelf collection of cactus and succulents,
"You are experiencing what we call a personality
disintegration."
"Oh, good," I said, "I feel so much better, and what
do you advise?" Be good to yourself, she offered,
take a friend to lunch, long walks to the beach,
hot baths, and go to a good Chinese restaurant. So I did.
That hour. I walked back to my car, and drove along
the panhandle of the park, along the boulevard
of churches, down into the Tenderloin, past Macy's
and the flower carts on the comers of Union Square,
down into the financial district. I parked the car
in a tow away zone, phoned Mary on the 16th floor
of the Transamerica Building, and while waiting for her
to descend, watched a stunt man scale the outside
of the pyramid, as if it were one of the high peaks
in the Himalayas. Mary emerged through the double
glass doors wearing a fabric of roses. She looked like a
Queen Anne chair, and I needed to sit. She insisted
instead that we walk through Chinatown. The walk would

do me good, so we strolled up Grant—windows of whole chickens and cheap silks, back alley smells of wet garbage, fried won tons and dim sum, tables of trinkets and souvenirs: Chinese pajamas, carved elephant tusks, flimsy flip-flops, until we came to the restaurant. “This is it,” Mary said. I half-expected an epiphany. We sank into a red vinyl booth, unwrapped our chopsticks. I fingered the chrome napkin holder. “Mary,” I said, staring down at the sweet and sour, “I am experiencing a personality disintegration.” “A what?!” she asked, cupping her tea. “Just shut up, and open your fortune cookie.” So I did. But nothing was in it, not a single strip, and my purse was gone. Mary picked up the tab, and when we walked back to the car, it was gone, too. I looked up. The gray sky was immense. The man on the outside of the building was a mere speck.

After that day, I quit seeing my analyst.
Summer was summer, and her rates went up.
But two weeks later, a man phoned to say he’d found my purse. It had been left on a bench in Washington Square. He was calling to return it. Imagine! to return it!
I drove into the city to meet him, stood on the corner of Columbus and Broadway with a hand-scribbled sign that read: The missing purse lady. A man with a pink face, a cherubic smile, and a bottle in his jacket pocket shuffled up and handed it over. Of course, I expected everything to be gone, a sign of further disintegration. Instead, when I unzipped the oversized bag, everything was there. Everything—and more: white finger bowls, spoons, fireworks, rubber snakes, Chinese slippers, a deck of cards, three watches, and a jade snuff bottle. A shoplifter, a purse-snatcher, crafty as hell, moving right up through Chinatown with my purse! How propitious! I kissed the wino, handed him two of the watches, the snakes, the snuff bottle, a full deck, and slapped down in his palm the only twenty I had in the bag. He smiled and slurred abundantly. We embraced on Broadway. “Thank you,” I said, “thank you.” The late afternoon sun bounced off the windows of the distant office buildings. Light fell over the pyramid. Someone switched on the neon, and I felt fine, just fine.

Kathy Evans
22

²² Kathy Evans, “[Psychic Healers](#),” [Southern Poetry Review](#), collected in [Don’t Leave Hungry](#), [The University of Arkansas Press](#)

Identification of the Hawk

"It is a joy to be hidden and a disaster not to be found"
—Donald Winnicott

I am the tattered hawk eating the little songbird
God left behind to ponder desire.
Ideation is a pastime, and I pass it.
Haggard in the mirror. I held something terrible in
for so long. Crouched, vengeful as Tybalt in the closet

with oilcloth and stiff boots and fossilized dog shit,
a leather belt around my neck at age twelve
I throttled in but gave up, mutilated thief,
drawing boobs on the vintage airplane wallpaper pattern
rocking to the music of a synthesizer drum demo.

And once, in summer, I handled a frog for hours. Still
and disturbed, it floated like a toy
when I put it back in the water—wouldn't even try
to get away anymore. I watched and watched, then bored, went
and smashed the community garden's tomatoes in the road

and felt the hot rough mouths of jersey cattle
with a handful of grass, my arm flung over the barbed wire
nailed to rough logs running a line through the marsh
and asters—burdock in my hair and my thighs cut up from
blade grass; I knew all the songs from *Oliver!* having played
the small role of housekeeper. Made maps that led out; wanted
to be met by the streetlamp, but never did

feel brave enough in the proceeding dark—yes, we were joyfully *hidden* then, and
I could always be found, in the shed out back, barefoot and
bent, eating the flushed heads of red clover and
tying up the dolls again.

Bianca Stone
23

²³ Bianca Stone, "Identification of the Hawk," *The Rumpus*

from “Inventory of Doubts”

Houseguest

*I once thought: Oh, God.
I want to live in every house.
—Esther Freud*

Stained throw pillows crowd you on the sofa with friendly obstinacy like someone else’s old aunt repeating a long story at a party you didn’t want to attend. A one-hundred-year-old wool blanket spreads out its stripes on the bed like biotech crops planted where an ancient forest has been felled. And when you try to sleep, the house whispers like a guillotine blade on a business trip cooing reassurances to the impatient basket below: *Back soon, Darling.*

Dog

DOG

A man says his dachshund, obviously in pain and noisily so, fakes injuries for sympathy. Her cries extend the horizon of her back, and the owner of the suffering animal refuses even a postcard view of this blazing sunset. We can begin to make some preliminary notes towards a maxim about anthropomorphism: If a dog cries out in pain, it is a dog. If a dog snuggles you, then it is more human. But any creature can fake love. Which is a form of pain. So maybe the man was right.

Atoms

ATOMS

When the antique inkwell arrives after making the journey from its dead owner’s estate, the other objects in the atomic ranch house observe it with cool attitudes. Clearly, they think, those curves and etched filigrees bespeak an affection for philosophy or power. Therefore, they shun the inkwell, keeping their own straight lines and unadorned exteriors to themselves. What they never guess: the lonely inkwell is illiterate. Only the masterful sterling silver pen can read.

Landon Godfrey
24

²⁴ [Landon Godfrey](#), “[Inventory of Doubts \[Housequest, Dog, and Atoms\]](#),” collected in [Inventory of Doubts](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

Exclusive Interview

.....?

People might be surprised to learn that, in certain cultures, the theft of a hat is considered to be a sign of respect. So given the circumstances, I think my actions were perfectly justified.

.....?

Strawberries, hazelnuts, bee stings, 3 p.m. in November, a windy sigh issued by a man with an asymmetrical beard, nylon, certain varieties of cumulonimbus, and Bach's Sonata No. 2 in A Minor.

.....?

Oh no—certainly not. Such organizations, with all their mystic rituals and mummary, really do more harm than good, don't you think? And the font on their application form is far too small.

.....?

I would probably have to say my mother. She was a loving, tender-hearted woman, who always felt terrible when her divinations would keep us up at night, or if one of her numerous scabs fell into the porridge, or if her shoes would start walking about the house on their own. But no matter what demonspawn she might have been summoning, she was always there to meet us at the bus stop after school, discreetly wiping the viscera from her hands.

.....?

Only once, and I have to say that I didn't care for it. You have to remember that in my day, only truckers and ornithologists did that sort of thing.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....?

Yes.

.....?

Shit-sucking-motherfucking-cock-gobbling-cunt! Oh wait—no. Capricorn.

.....?

I think that's when my work really took off. Suddenly ordinary corridors became catacombs, their spaces reaching beyond themselves into the histories of the dead, where last words wait to be excavated from between long-abandoned teeth. No wonder the critics hated it.

.....?

It's not so much that I regret it, it's that I wish I could pull certain years out of my body with a slim, silver hook, watching them painlessly emerge from my skin and dissolve like blue fog rising off a pond.

.....?

I think the best piece of advice I've ever gotten was from—she was a childhood friend of my aunt's, you know. She told me—this was before all that business about and in the was made public—“never a when you can a larger” Words to live by.

Nicky Beer
25

²⁵ Nicky Beer, “[Exclusive Interview](#),” [Tupelo Quarterly](#), collected in [Real Phonies and Genuine Fakes](#), Milkweed Editions

Fine Gentleman

Did you know that, when two people are about to whale the tar out of each other, you can calm them just by standing close to them?

Today in the playground where I go to do my pull-ups, a man and a woman with some kids were having an argument—well, he wasn't, but the woman was losing her shit left, right, and sideways, and you could see the kids were upset.

So I walked up to, oh, say, fifteen feet away and just stood there silently, which prompted the woman to say *What are you looking at, fine gentleman*.

Actually, she didn't say *fine gentleman*, which I regard as a moral failing on her part.

Not ten minutes earlier, I had passed a fellow on the sidewalk who is someone I see almost every day, and he's this gangly guy who always wears a drip-dry shirt with a pocket protector and a clip-on tie, meaning he's either going to or coming from his job.

Thing is, there are no stores or offices within miles of that playground, meaning he's got quite a trek either ahead of or behind him.

Or both: who'd take a sweaty two-hour hike to or from work and, when it was time to go in the other direction, call a car service and be picked up by a limo with a variety of liquors in the passenger area as well as surround-sound stereo and one or more flat-screen TVs?

In other words, this is a guy with an unmistakable career assistant manager vibe about him.

If anyone's entitled to feel like Ishmael in the Book of Genesis, of whom it was said *he shall be a wild ass among men, his hand shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him*, it's this guy.

Yet every time I see him, I say *Hello*, to which he always replies *Sir, I hope you have a great day today and an even better one tomorrow*.

See what I mean? *Fine gentleman*, indeed.

Other creatures are thoughtful and kind to each other. Why aren't we?

Naturalist Barry Lopez says geese fly in a classic V formation with a single leader and everybody else following behind, so if the leader fails, so does the flock.

But when cranes migrate, each searches simultaneously for a thermal, and when one crane finds a thermal, the other cranes zero in, everybody benefits, and off they go as one.

Too, did you know that "Chapel of Love" by the Dixie Cups shot to #1 on the Billboard Hot 100 in 1964 because of the strategic use of a single pronoun?

When the Dixie Cups sing *we're going to the chapel and then we're going to get married*, you don't have to have a PhD in Advanced Song Lyric Interpretation to figure out that, initially at least, the *we* refers to a pair of young lovers.

But here's where it gets interesting: the audience for romantic ballads has always been teenage girls, a demographic that, in the era during which "Chapel of Love" was released, bought 45 rpm records by the millions.

So about the third or fourth time the Dixie Cups say *we*, the song starts to come across as, not as one person's boast that her boyfriend proposed to her and yours didn't, but the anthem of a nation of hopeful young women.

The young women are like the cranes! Off they go to an uncertain future, yet their hearts are bursting with hope.

Or they're like the phlebotomist who drew my blood last week as part of a routine physical and whom I always praise lavishly.

Why? Because, one, everybody likes praise; two, nobody ever gets enough; three, the

phlebotomist deserves it because she's very good at her job; and four, I'd like her to think well of me and be gentle and efficient in the future rather than harsh and clumsy. So I say *You have such a professional touch* as she sticks labels onto four little vials of blood, and the phlebotomist replies *Couldn't have done it without you*.

When the woman at the playground asked me what I was looking at, I said *I'm not looking at anything, I was just hoping you weren't going to whip this fine gentleman's ass here*.

The man laughed, and one of the kids shot me a vee sign, and the woman didn't do anything, but at least she stopped escalating.

Now I wouldn't have walked up on a bar fight at 3:00 a.m. and done the same thing, but this little trick works just fine at playgrounds.

And I actually did say *fine gentleman* when I referred to the man.

Other than that, I was just talking.

David Kirby
26

²⁶ [David Kirby](#), "[Fine Gentleman](#)," [One](#)

14 Dubious U-Turns

Parked at the chicken plant the bluebells bloomed behind
We'd witnessed bigger hissy fits but this was dire
Nobody he said wants your dirty stick of gum
It's not the only time she set her hair on fire
Another factor might have been strip-mall karate
And metal bands for instance Loathsome Drone was one
That's why we talked so much about the Visigoths
What kind of person knocks a windshield out for fun
Those days our moms were always having sinking spells
There are a million ways you learn to cut a loss
While passing trains compounded what the darkness held
I started biting back my accent but you know
The way she filled the tub with empty shells the way
We kept those pictures of our houses in the snow

Caki Wilkinson
27

²⁷ [Caki Wilkinson](#), "[14 Dubious U-Turns](#)," [Horsethief](#), collected in [The Survival Expo](#), [Persea Books](#)

In Which I Imagine Myself into a Slasher Flick

The Jennies get it first.
The Trishes. The Ambers.
Never my silhouette through
shower steam. Never my red
mouth in close-up. I've got
straight As and no boyfriend.
I've got Friday nights
and sleeping neighbor children.
But worry. Because I've got
an unadorned name. Sharp
vision by moonlight.
My father's rusted hatchet
and a jetliner scream.

Catherine Pierce
28

²⁸ [Catherine Pierce](#), "[In Which I Imagine Myself into a Slasher Flick](#)," collected in [Famous Last Words](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

If I Persisted for Seven Lifetimes, I'd Spend Six of with You

but something in me would
desert you

the way I lie
awake and wait for the turbine

of your breathing
to whirl steady and deep

until in your sleep
I feel simple again

like myself
and reckless again

outside the road is the apparition
of a bridge deck suspended

by cones of light
from the lampposts

a drone of rotors and axles
semis about

the slow groan
of departure

but our two sniffers sit
in the sink

so a prowler come
purloining might picture you

glad and drinking beside me

our toothbrushes daily
and crowd each other daily

in a cup in the bathroom
so he might wonder

at our life as trajectory
pristine and decoded

and on hearing the warp
of a floorboard

the murmur of our bodies
stirring above him

he might think to drop
deftly out of a window

with a few items to sell
or to barter

for airfare and a room
overlooking a square

so he might step out
of that room

onto his balcony
alone in a foreign light

and feel simple again

feel reckless and modern
and himself again

Jaswinder Bolina

29

²⁹ [Jaswinder Bolina, "If I Persisted for Seven Lifetimes, I'd Spend Six of with You," *Columbia Poetry Review*, collected in *Phantom Camera*, New Issues Press](#)

My daddies have voices
like bachelors, like castigators & crooners.
They have busted kneecaps.
They stand behind my mother
in the kitchen pretending to count the hairs
on her neck. One of my daddies
was a carpenter. One lost his tooth
in a fistfight with Jesus. One went to prison.
No, two went to prison. One daddy sits beside me
telling jokes dull as mouthwash.
One can guess how many catfish swim
in every pond. Here is my scar
from a summer working in the glass factory
across from another daddy's home.
My daddy with the pretty gold-tooth smile taps
my shoulder & says, "Look at the booty
on that gal." My daddy, Mr. Blacker-than-most,
wears shades in the house. He says
"Nobody's blacker than me, Boy."
Each of my daddies asks, "Are you writing
another poem about me?" They covet secrets.
No, my daddies covet work above secrets.
We are watching an action movie now,
my daddies & me. There are guns & damsels
& camouflage. There are car wrecks
& cusswords & blood. But my daddies are tired.
Some of them sprawl on the carpet.
Some of them go upstairs to the bedrooms,
or through the front door to the porch.
My daddies fell asleep in all the rooms
inside & outside the house. I want to sleep too,
but their snores make the wind chimes tremble.

Terrance Hayes

30

³⁰ [Terrance Hayes](#), "[Ars Poetica #789](#)," collected in [Hip Logic](#), [Penguin Books](#)

The Real Self is Very Scary

Last night I woke up from a great sex-dream
that wasn't a dream at all. I was scared of myself
for even when I was unconscious I was willing.

The real self is very scary is a line I stole from a poet
who, I'd bet anything, has also been awakened
by her lover in the middle of the night, half aroused
& half terrified because she wasn't in control.

But when am I in control?

Half the time I am dreaming of my students
sprouting a second set of arms & wrapping them around me—
of their being so strong they carry me without a struggle
down the hall to the principal's office, where I am reprimanded
for showing them a poem about human grief.
Half the time I am clawing my way out of a dream
about my mother growing flowers
from her chest so she'll look *pretty in her casket*,
& her hair falls out by the handful.

I don't know if there is a God
despite my mother trying to convince me of him for nearly 30 years.
If there is a God, then I've definitely never been in control.

Or have I—

I am thinking of certain men who I have awakened
& stolen from their static lives. Of men I've laid down in groves
of poison ivy & pleased under the moon, which was cliché
until just now when I reclaimed the moon.
Moon, you have seen me control the hands of men, have you not?
These men, who I have let have me.
To whom I have said, *the real self is very scary*.
& I wasn't lying, was I.

Katie Condon

31

³¹ Katie Condon, "[The Real Self is Very Scary](#)," [Nashville Review](#), collected in [Praying Naked](#), Ohio State University Press

Comic Morning

What's funny about this place
is us regulars coming in with our different
accoutrements, mine lately the little void
of space I call honey, days
I can barely get through I'm laughing so hard,
see? In the back a woman squeezes oranges,
someone presses the fresh white bread
into communion wafers or party favors.
In the window the chickens rotate blissfully,
questioning nothing—
Sometimes I flirt with the cashier, just improvising,
the way birds land all in a hurry on the streetlamp,
which stays warm even on cold nights.
Guillaume says humor is sadness
and he's awfully pretty.
What do they put in this coffee? Men?
No wonder I get a little high. Remember
when we didn't have sex on the Ferris wheel,
oh that was a blast,
high, high above the Tuileries!

Catherine Barnett

32

³² [Catherine Barnett](#), "[Comic Morning](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [Human Hours](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Not Thinking

When the spy shot that woman,
we both saw her last thoughts

sprayed across her car's window.
You want another glass of wine? you asked.

There was a commercial
for breath mints, then a kind of pill

to cure sadness. *Yes, thank you.*
When the show continued, that woman was not

any longer. The detective tweezed
a bit of lint from the car's seat. *Interesting,*

he said, dropping it into a plastic evidence bag.
Her empty body lay twisted in the seat.

What I meant to say is the actress held her breath
and kept perfectly still until they completed

the scene. I held my breath with her.
Once, I read that death is the absence

of thinking. You can hold your breath
all you want. That's not death.

You can tell yourself,
Think nothing. Think nothing. But, no.

The commercial for the pills comes on all the time.
In it, animated birds

fly off with another actress's sadness
until she smiles brightly. Then music.

I finished my drink
much more quickly than you did,

and poured myself two more. The detective
eventually brought his case to a conclusion,

but death lived inside the actors
even as they put on their jackets

and got into their cars. *Think nothing,*
said the ever-expanding blackness in the room.

I love you, I love you, I said,
but you were going upstairs to bed.

Then, you were not anywhere.
and the TV talked only to me.

Kevin Prufer
33

³³ [Kevin Prufer](#), "[Not Thinking](#)," [Prairie Schooner](#), collected in [The Art of Fiction](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Fast, Hard, and Rated R

I've been working on the right finale,
pulled the rip cord from a blown 747,

an angry brunette at my side
and a case of miniature vodka bottles

under my arm, survived the moon
of 900 werewolf ninjas with a billy club.

I'm the patron saint of driving trucks
into colossal waves of churned earth,

the director of my own disaster,
the soundtrack more frenetic than piano

and strings. I watched a television show
in which a man died while trying to pick up

a newspaper. Now *that* is Mozart for you.
I refuse to be remembered as the mangy

dog that crawled back under the porch
to die, coat pearled with maggots, tiny asteroids

of dried shit and blood. Give me heavy
metal and a long-haired guitar. Give me

John Wayne, four ribs and a lung removed,
pistol cocked and blasting fireworks

over the country like loops of pink intestines.
I want it out in front of everyone,

the aliens touching the foreheads of their black warships
to mine, skulls littered across a field.

Jay Nebel

34

³⁴ [Jay Nebel](#), "[Fast, Hard, and Rated R](#)," collected in [Neighbors](#), [Satumalia Books](#)

the experience we are thrust into

I am stuck at a middle school band concert where the conductor is getting weepy about Jesus on the cross while announcing the next song in the program—"Eloi, Eloi" which he first heard performed post-tsunami by a Japanese orchestra, and before the kids begin, the teacher-conductor butchers the Hebrew phrase Jesus shouts at the ninth hour, which should be *eli, eli, lama azavtani*: my god, my god, why have you forsaken me? and I'm wondering about separation of church and state—this Jesus concert, which is not unlike my 8-hour flight from Dublin last week where the Irish man next to me headed to Arlington for training in computer coding showed me his book about Mary Magdalene, told me about his conversion experience at Lourdes which involved his dead mother and falling to his knees and weeping, then burning his books on yoga and Buddhism, his heavy metal albums too. He was insistent there is only one truth—that Jesus was the messiah and whatever I said about Judaism was irrelevant. My discomfort was palpable, and it wasn't just our cramped tray tables with their basic economy pretzels. I wanted to tell him I was spilled like water too once, but I did not find Jesus, wasn't even looking, though I did weep on the plane next to him while watching *Crazy Rich Asians*. I wanted to say we're all driven by desire and bodily experience, and occasionally guilt, but instead I thought of the photo an ex once sent me of himself in an airplane bathroom in a gray hoodie—the one he wears, he said, so he can cry undisturbed on planes because we are untethered and powerless at altitude, and often we grope around for matter to breathe our spirit into. His face was not in the photo; his zipper was halfway down exposing his dick, which was out just over the sink like a conductor's wand, or those satellite photos of an astronaut tethered off-ship and about to float into space. To allow—to permit—to forgive—to forsake—to abandon—each time I open my phone my heart is like wax melting in my chest, a saint candle from a supermarket shelf and the band is trying to play the theme song from *Mission Impossible* now—they're on their third start—the conductor is apologetic, but they can't get the rhythm right: 5/4 time and percussion didn't rehearse with winds due to class scheduling so the instruments sound like they're racing each other in a relay where someone keeps falling behind, has dropped the baton. We are failing each other in every possible arena, this auditorium of listeners, a metal tube throttling through clouds, the spectacle of love or crucifixion or vulnerability, a conversion experience at 40,000 feet. *Do you not know your bodies are temples of the holy spirit?* I think, each time I look at my phone glowing like a flame I cup in my hands.

Erika Meitner

35

³⁵ Erika Meitner, "[the experience we are thrust into](#)," [Poet Lore](#), collected in [Useful Junk](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Yes

I am done smoking cigarettes, waiting tables, done counting tips
at two a.m. in the neon-dark dance hall, done sleeping with young men
in my apartment, done facing them or not, thinking of oblivion, which
is better than nothing. I am done not wearing underwear because
it's so Victorian.

I am done telling men I don't wear underwear because
it's so Victorian. I am done with the night a guy spread my legs
on a pool table, all those balls piled up in the pockets. I am done.
I am never going back. When I see that night on the street I will
drive past and never even glance over. I am done going to grad school,
nodding in your workshop. I am done teaching English as a second
language, saying *I* pointing to my chest, saying *you* pointing to them.
I am done teaching the poetry class where no one talked and no one
listened to me and outside the window the cottonwood wagged
white leaves in the breeze as if to say, *I give up, I give up.* I am done
being a childless woman, a childless wife, a woman with no scars
on her body. I am done with the wide afternoons of before, the long
stare, the tightly-closed door. And I am done, too, for the most part,
with the daydream of after. I am after for now. I am turning up the heater
to see if that will make the baby sleep another fifteen minutes
so I can finish this poem. I am done thinking of the past as if it had
survived, though sometimes I think of the past and sometimes I see it
coming, catching up, hands caked with dried mud, head shaved clean.

Carrie Fountain

36

³⁶ Carrie Fountain, "Yes," collected in [Instant Winner](#), [Penguin Books](#)

My Father's Daughter

It was lonely like that, sitting there, ugly-like.
Sat down sudden on the stoop and lit a cigarette.
She wore a beard of smoke. She heaved with evidence.

The surveillance van hauling bones of Cold War
enemies twisted round the corner of Moody onto
Morning, its wires within conducting an analysis

of the outrageous slowing of her pulse, marking
now her departure from sense, into the freeze.
The neighbor's curtains twitched with evidence.

A middle-aged lady with her head in her lap.
Across the street, curtains twitched with neighbors.
Who does that? She once cried on the subway.

This was way worse. A young woman was pushing
her baby down the same street, past the stoop
upon which her bent legs were bent, her head

dropping its dead weight against the soft denim
sheathing her knees. Dogs moved jubilant, autumn
thrilled, pleased to be alongside so many legs.

Head set heavy as a metal plate atop her bent
knees, she sensed the plastic flowers stuck in
window boxes across the street were menacing

the gods. All the world was bent on a limb, was
elbowing in with its analyst crouch, hinting at its
covert codes, tapes pregnant to unspool sobs she

could spill down the step of her stoop, leak onto
the streets. How she'd liquefy dogs' happy howls
as they lapped the greasy pools of her discontent!

She sits now on a stoop atop bones like shards,
her flabby ass, as his laugh comes back up her
throat, thinking back to a dinner party when she

was ten, his one friend from work chortling as
he poured his face into a glass, *The poison gas,*
my favorite project! She looks like anybody.

Cate Marvin

37

³⁷ Cate Marvin, "My Father's Daughter," [Birmingham Poetry Review](#), collected in [Event Horizon](#), Copper Canyon Press

In the Room Next Door How Many People Have Died

I think often of that white man
who ate it seems nonstop
when you were NPO, the one who called
out for his mother.
Or the old teacher with dementia
who chastised her imaginary students.
Or the pool player Hank I knew
who played a miniature game
on his bed tray with wadded up paper
& straws, I said see you tomorrow
& next day he died in surgery.
I took care of a white woman
named Eliza who snored
so loud I could hear her down the hall.
Sometimes someone can snore
& have their oxygen level drop
toward dead, as if drowning
in their sleep. I witnessed
my Haitian friend Garry drown
when I was seventeen.
We thought he was waving not drowning,
then down he went, twenty feet in a quarry.
After he was pulled up & CPR'd
his heart would not start.
The police & paramedics stood around
telling raunchy jokes,
casual as if it were a picnic.
He lay dead on the dock
with his mouth open,
like a carp caught on a hook
or this picture I saw in a book
of a Black man lynched,
his mouth open & slack.
The white women
standing for the photo in a line
smiling in their big, flowered hats.
The grinning white men,
the white children laughing at the camera
as a nameless corpse
dangled above their heads.
So many decades ago, those children
in the photo are all dead.
I wonder if they died old
& happy, if they married,
if I live beside their grandchildren?
I wonder if they have that photo
in their scrap books.

Sean Thomas Dougherty

³⁸ [Sean Thomas Dougherty](#), "[In the Room Next Door How Many People Have Died](#)," *Cultural Daily*

The King of Staten Island (2020)

Tried to think of the female equivalent of Judd Apatow
and couldn't. More opportunity for me, I guess.
Can you imagine a woman going to pitch
the inspired-by-true-events tale of a young man
who lives with his mom and smokes a lot of weed
to anesthetize his grief? I know this subject intimately,
if Hollywood would just give me two hours
and sixteen minutes to execute my vision.
My bona fides include the time I did an event
at a community college and a student told me
how much he related to the scene in my novel
where two guys play *Super Mario Kart*—
finally he saw his lived experience represented
in art. I remember what it was like to be twenty-two,
sitting on a couch, waiting for my real life
to start, just like the girls on Staten Island,
whose love language is impatience,
whose pity is corrupted affection.
They want to go dancing but no one
will acknowledge their bodies exist
beyond the walls of this basement
bong purgatory, who has any Xanax,
show her your tattoo, turn off the lights,
stop touching me with your feet,
put on a horror movie so the screams
of these idiots make us feel as high as kings.

Leigh Stein

39

³⁹ Leigh Stein, "*The King of Staten Island (2020)*," collected in *What to Miss When*, Soft Skull Press

Mr. X

All my Ex's

live in Texas, so the country song says and no excuses,
it's mostly true for me too that the spade-shaped extra
big state with its cotton lints and Ruby Reds holds the crux
of my semi-truck-I've-never-had-any-kind-of-luck-deluxe-
super-high-jinx-born-to-be-unhappy-if-it-ain't-broken-don't-fix-
it loves, for example, there was the snakebit mudlogger who fixed
himself forever diving off that hexed bridge, and that foxy ex-
patriot who imported exotic parrots, he'd pump me up with his deluxe
stuff, the salesman who felt so guilty for the wide-eyed excuses
he told his wife that at the Big Six Motel just outside Las Cruces
he spent the afternoon hunched over Exodus, bemoaning the sin of extra-
marital sex, and the harmonica player, his mouth organ could extract
an oily bended blues, on sticky nights we'd hit the 12th hole pond with a fix
of Dos Equis and a hit of Ecstasy and I'd wrap my legs around his lanky crux,
as moonlight cut through the water like a giant X-ray, his Hohner ax
glistened in and out. And then there was the feckless shrink. No excuse
for his fixation, the tax man, the cute butcher from the Deluxe,
the Kilim dealer, the defrocked priest. So what if my mother was a deluxe
lush, my father Baptist and weak, I can't blame them, I was born just extra
affectionate. Don't ask about the abortions, and who can ever make excuses
for the time I spent holed up with the Port-O-Can tycoon my friend fixed
me up with, or the Mexican sculptor who made cathedral-sized onyx Xs,
twisted crucifixes. Art, he quoted Marx, was history at its crux.

Then there was the Ph.D. who took me to Peru and showed me Crux
(the Southern Cross), Centaurus, Musca, Vela, Lupus, and another deluxe
equatorial constellation that I forgot. For fun I ascribed each sparkly X
a name and date, so now I have a star chart to exalt each of my extra-
ordinary, heavenly bodies. But that night I dreamed the stars were fixed
on stacks of pages: pica asterisks to indicate omission, footnotes, excuses,
explanations. I stood there, Ms. D. Giovanni, with a million excuses.
Now in exile I journey on the Styx with Mr. X in our boat the Crux
Criticorum. I wear an aqua slicker, he a sharkskin suit. He's non-fiction,
never incognito. We've got our sextant and spy manual open on our deluxe
waterbed. I can just make out the tattoo above his boxers in this extra
dark, there's the curve of his back. Now we'll break the code and go beyond X.

Catherine Bowman

40

⁴⁰ [Catherine Bowman](#), "[Mr. X](#)," *Chelsea*, [1-800-Hot-Ribs](#), [Gibbs Smith, Publisher](#)

Pasco, Barbara

I find I am descending in a propeller plane upon Pasco
in the state of Washington. I accept this;
I have reasons for participating in the experiential sequence
that has brought me here. Down below the land is printed
with huge circles, doubtless an irrigation system,
doubtless it makes sense. There are people who understand it
living with dignity in square houses
and the result possibly is one billion radishes.
Now some so-called time has passed. This nation
is a huge nation in which the infinity of for example
Washington State
is just one segment of an even less thinkable hugeness
and yet *zim zim zim zim* United Airlines has me
here in my Eastern metropolis
with its ten thousand makers of third-rate pizza
uncannily far from the possible radishes of Washington State.
The taxi driver experiments with narrow streets
to shorten our detour caused by sports fans and he says
the Eagles will out-tough the Steelers.
I defer to his judgment, I am conserving my powers.
After “a while” I have this unsettlingly smooth tuna salad
with a pale pickle
in a drugstore designed by Dwight D. Eisenhower,
reading a few poems by David Rivard. I have thoughts.
I have my Uncle Ralph's jacket soft and droopy giving me
a Sense of the Past. The rain out there
on the roofs of retail outlets is saying No Guarantee
and in a way I am nowhere, in another way maybe
definitely not. In a wide wet parking lot
I turn back toward the store to explain to the cashier
that she charged me for six cans of seltzer when in fact
I only had one *from* a six-pack
but the idea of justice seems so fatiguing
I would rather read a surprisingly serious detective novel
so I vibrate with indecision in the parking lot
till all the car windows rattle imperceptibly. Then
an alleged interval ostensibly intervenes, at the mall
a woman at a piano has played 1800 songs from memory
according to the radio personality who stands with a mike
explaining her bid for the Guinness Book of Records.
I am walking away at an unplanned angle singing “Tiny Montgomery”
which I bet she wouldn't have been ready to play.
I have this inner life, I think of my father
lonely in Vermont, I think of myself lonely in Syracuse
and my old poem about a detective who can't solve his biggest case
and as a result I have feelings—but my teacher said
the future of American poetry can't be merely
the notation of sensibility. When he said that I felt

a chilly fear at the edge of consc-consc-consc-consciousness
 like an ice cube in the corner of my stomach.
 That's how I felt. So then, so then consequently
 I thought "I must gather up some serious ideas" but then
 Ashbery phoned and left a message after the beep,
 "Don't be a sucker, ideas are where it *isn't*."
 This made my throat get sort of dry so I drank a Classic Coke
 and then another Classic Coke two hours later
 as time so-to-say passed. What was always there?
 Texture, that's what, how it was/is, the how of how;
 when I pick up my color prints at the camera shop
 the disappointment I always feel is actually a blessing
 is it not? I can say "I'll go along with this charade
 until I can think my way out" even though I'll never
 think my way out. I've come this far;
 that day in 1971 I hitchhiked all the way to Montpelier
 didn't I? And here I am.
 Suddenly I have a son
 who focuses with tremendous insistence upon
 dogs, balloons, air conditioners, hats, clocks, and noses.
 To him I convey that the world is okay:
 life is good: we accept it. Your dad is a little mixed up
 but your shoes got tied, right?
 As Barbara Cohen in high school said about politics
 it's interesting, giving the word four earnest syllables, in-ter-est-ing.

Mark Halliday
 41

⁴¹ [Mark Halliday](#), "[Pasco, Barbara](#)," [AGNI](#), collected in [Selfwolf](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Necking

I remember the Arabic numerals on the dashboards,
aquarium green, like the paintbrush tips
the watch-girls licked, licking the radium—
we were there above the Cyclotron,
in the hills, the Rad Lab under us
enclosed in its cyclone fence. The interiors
of the cars were shaped like soft flanks,
the cloth front seats plump as some mothers'
laps. I remember the beauty of the night,
the crisp weightless blackness, the air
that rose up the slope straight from the sea,
from Seal Rock—we slid slowly
along each other. Berkeley, below,
without my glasses, was like a bottom
drawer of smeared light. The rape
and murder of our classmate had happened in these hills,
so the fragrance of the dirt, porous and mineral,
—eucalyptus and redwood humus—
that had buried her body, was there with sex,
and one gleam down there was the doughnut shop
where he had picked her up—as if the intimate
pleasure of eating doughnuts, now,
for all of us, were to bear his mark.
And the easy touch of the four thousand volts,
that was in the car with us
with everything else—the rivets in boys' jeans,
their soldered clothes, the way they carried
the longing of the species, you could not help but pity them
as they set you on stunned fire. I would almost
pass out, my body made of some other
substance, my eyes open in the green darkness
of some other planet. And in some other
car, on some other skirt of the mountain,
a boy I secretly adored. I remember
how it felt, eyes closed, kissing,
streaming through the night, sealed in a capsule
with the wrong person. But the place was right,
mountains on my left hand,
sea on my right, I felt someday I might find him,
proton electron we would hit and stick and
meanwhile there were the stars, and the careful not
looking at or touching the boy's pants,
and my glasses, wings folded, stuck
in a pocket. I can hear the loud snap
when we leaned on them and they broke, we drove down the
hill, the porch-lamp blazed, I would enter
below its blurred gem, it seemed
endless then, the apprenticeship to the mortal.

⁴² [Sharon Olds](#), "[Necking](#)," collected in [The Wellspring](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

And the Waters Prevailed

The golf course is flooded again;
a dead deer floats in the Wabash.
The smell of the corn syrup plant
is pretty much what you'd expect:
burnt corn with a hint of cotton candy,
but also something underneath that.
A death, but not human or animal.
A general death. Indiana: death in general.

The repetitions that occur in nature
are boring today. One spiral on top of
another, the rain adding nothing but more
rain to its monologue about rain.
Underneath its constant muttering
is the anthem of the ground: Until further
notice, I'm alive.

Julia Story
43

⁴³ [Julia Story](#), "[And the Waters Prevailed](#)," collected in [Spinster for Hire](#), [The Word Works](#)

All the Way From There to Here

From my hill I look down on the freeway and over
to a gull lifting black against the gray ridge.
It lifts slowly higher and enters the bright sky.
Surely our long, steady dying brings us to a state
of grace. What else can I call this bafflement?

From here I deal with my irrelevance to love.
With the bewildering tenderness of which I am
composed. The sun goes down and comes up again.
The moon comes up and goes down. I live
with the morning air and the different airs of night.
I begin to grow old.

The ships put out and are lost.
Put out and are lost.
Leaving me with their haunting awkwardness
and the imperfection of birds. While all the time
I work to understand this happiness I have come into.

What I remember of my nine-story fall
down through the great fir is the rush of green.
And the softness of my regret in the ambulance going
to my nearby death, looking out at the trees leaving me.

What I remember of my crushed spine
is seeing Linda faint again and again,
sliding down the white X-ray room wall
as my sweet body flailed on the steel table
unable to manage the bulk of pain. That
and waiting in the years after for the burning
in my fingertips, which would announce,
the doctors said, the beginning of paralysis.

What I remember best of the four years of watching
in Greece and Denmark and London and Greece is Linda
making lunch. Her bloneness and ivory coming up
out of the blue Aegean. Linda walking with me daily
across the island from Monolithos to Thira and back.
That's what I remember most of death:
the gentleness of us in that bare Greek Eden,
the beauty as the marriage steadily failed.

Jack Gilbert
44

⁴⁴ Jack Gilbert, "All the Way From There to Here," collected in *Monolithos*, Alfred A. Knopf

The Cat

While you read
the sleepmoth begins
to circle your eyes
and then—
a hail of claws
lands the cat
in your lap.
The little motor
in his throat
is how a cat says
Me. He rasps the soft
file of his tongue
along the inside
of your wrist.
He licks himself.
He's building
a pebble of fur
in his stomach.
And now he pulls
his body in a circle
around the fire of sleep.

This is the wet
sweater with legs
that shakes in
from the rain,
split-ear the sex burglar,
Fish-breath, Wind-
minion, paw-poker
of dust
tumbleweeds,
the cat that kisses
with the wet
flame of his tongue
each of your eyelids
as if sealing
a letter.

One afternoon
napping under the light-
ladder
let down by the window,
there are two of them:
cat and cat-
shadow, sleep.

One night you lay your book
down like the clothes
your mother wanted
you to wear tomorrow.
You yawn.
The cat exhales a moon.
Opening a moon,
you dream of cats.
One of them strokes you
the wrong way. Still,
you sleep well.

This is the same cat
Plunder.
This is the old cat.
Milk-whiskers.
This is the cat
eating one of its lives.
This is the first cat
Fire-fur.
This is the next cat
St. Sorrow.
This is the cat with its claws
furled, like sleep's flag.
This is the lust cat
trying to sleep with its shadow.
This is the only cat
I have ever loved.
This cat has written
in tongue-ink
the poem you are reading now,
the poem scratching
at the gate of silence,
the poem
that forgives
itself
for its used-up lives,
the poem
of the cat waking,
running a long shudder
through his body,
stretching again,
following the moist bell
of his nose
into the world
again.

William Matthews

45

⁴⁵ [William Matthews](#), "[The Cat](#)," collected in [Sleek for the Long Flight](#), [Ecco](#)

Victim of Love

It may be true
that I'm limerent
for you another victim
of love I've got all
the relevant symptoms

At the Dairy Bar waiting
for fries I see you
lunching with a friend
mood-dependent I'm ready
to pour vats of ketchup
onto her head, yet when
you say hey I order
rainbow sprinkles
for everybody

I remember every bit
of how you explained
the ancient trade routes
so cute! I tried concealing
my need to sob into
your shoulder to disguise
my longing for reciprocal
feelings—denied

Oh, you know that Tuesday
you pressed me hard
up in the hallway below
the Manet print and kissed
me till Doomsday and promised
me true love halfway? That's
a day I often replay

The tears haven't ceased
because you didn't invite me
to watch a John Candy movie
but you asked Lucie and Abby I
hate you I hate every lady
ever born I hate everything
from the eighties I'm going
to run a film fest of Italian
revenge films from the sixties
and not invite you especially
not Abby nor Lucie

Like a tween the moment
Zayn left the band
my love's intensified by

adversity like when
you left for a seaside vacation
and never sent one
postcard I cried so bad

Oversensitive to random
interactions I hope to bump
into you at the Rite Aid
that shampoo and shaving cream
in your basket quite attractive
I want action in the aisle of lotions
Who are the condoms for?
Me? Better be

Sometimes you pass me by
in your little rusted-door car
your quick wink at
the stop sign fills
me with religious
adoration

Upon waking much
aching in the heart
at four in the morning
snow's coming down hard
I'm aging alone
online dating's
not for the weak
I'd rather be mating
for life like wolves
or prairie voles but
you're ice-skating arm-in-
arm with a waitress it's just
degrading heartbreak

My feminist friends
think I'm insane
to wait for you
endlessly my nemesis
at yoga thinks you
merely feign interest
Even my therapist so patient
when I complain says,
Do we need to
talk about this again?

There's an election
presidential there are wolves
moving south from the ice melt
floods left Louisiana
a disaster area dire world

affairs but tonight you
brought bubbly wine
called me honey and
I am walking on air

Camille Guthrie

46

⁴⁶ [Camille Guthrie](#), "[Victim of Love](#)," [Iowa Review](#)

I Married a Horseman

for his straight jaw & dark jackets.
For he gave me his ring to wear as a cinch.

My markings, he called *faint star, white boot*
& drew a line of rain

down the side of my cheek. I married him
for the silence in his speech, for

his black kerchief. All the time
he drew & in this drawing, we married.

Now I live in the timber scent & tall
smoke of his shadow. Evenings, he returns

to me from his work, with his fine coat
haltered in frost. This house

has no doors. We pass each other
crossing our necks in Hello.

Kiki Petrosino
47

⁴⁷ Kiki Petrosino, "[I Married a Horseman](#)," collected in [Witch Wife](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

November 30, 2016

Today after the lorazepam fogs my tongue, I write to you in the steam.

Today I want to read Adrienne Rich to you.

(—I didn't tell you, Naomi—I feel so afraid of intervention, like Sexton and her Thorazine:

Thorazine, they say, is supposed to make the rhymers go away.)

The poem begins easily enough:

There's a place between two stands of trees where the grass grows uphill.

Each time I read this poem I imagine myself standing among these trees, eyes cast toward the meeting-house, waiting for the wreck to arrive.

How many times have I already failed you?

Or myself—how death sucks his teeth at me from inside the bottle of pills.

A friend tells me *you must take care of yourself, now more than ever.*

Some nights I spin the round white moon on the counter before dissolving it in my mouth.

I imagine it guiding us to safety.

After all, Naomi, *why do I tell you anything?*

Because you still listen.

Rachel Mennies

48

⁴⁸ Rachel Mennies, "November 30, 2016," [Kenyon Review](#), collected in [The Naomi Letters](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Feast

My mother puts the platter in front of me
and without thinking I take a bite
It's Christmas after all and we're at the end
of a holiday movie
When I used to imagine your death
it was so cliché
I would picture your absence
like an underground tunnel
taking me into a lonely woodland clearing
where a single bird chirped her red song
but now I imagine your body
floating in the Quinnipiac River
with your wallet in a Ziploc duct-taped to your arm
now you are sprawled in an impossible star
by the pay station of the tallest parking garage
and some idiot finds you first
you are dredged from the bottom of the icy lake
where we used to take the dog each Sunday
there are so many ways
to be angry I mean
lonely when I open
the glass box on Christmas
it's just air inside I mean
it's all air inside the box is bursting
you have to think hard
to see anything at all
to see the air I mean

Lauren Shapiro

49

⁴⁹ [Lauren Shapiro](#), "[Feast](#)," collected in [Arena](#), [Cleveland State University Poetry Center](#)

A Cosmography of Melancholy

The three years I spent on Mars
mainly I felt bored.
Which is to say Mars might as well be Hell.
Next to boredom, shame's
the feeling most akin to a sweat-
heavy hair shirt previously owned by Satan.
With each new breath I took in the red ambiance,
Earth looked more like one of those trick paintings—
first a skull,
then a lady at her vanity,
then a skull again,
then a shaving mirror clouded with shower steam.
As a species we want *gravitas*, I thought,
and got more bored trying to remember
who invented prayer, which is to say
don't we all need some way to shut up
the troll within the troll within the troll?
Other than the Sea of Crises,
which anyway's a landmark on the Moon,
or the Plain of Judgment and the Vale of Mourning
and the Elm to Which False Dreams Cling,
which anyway are sites to see in Hades,
about my sojourn in the brutish atmosphere of Mars
there's nothing more to say—
other than, Do you know the mosquito
eater doesn't eat mosquitoes?
It drinks from the Sea of Nectar—then, when it's all
grown up, has sex and dies. Bitterly, bitterly.

Steven Cramer

50

⁵⁰ Steven Cramer, "A Cosmography of Melancholy," [Sugar House Review](#), collected in [Listen](#), Mad Hat Press

Monday

While you wait for the J train, for work, think
of your new boyfriend, who loves apostrophes,
sizzle-pants, and you.
Who pointed out the “Andrew Lloyd Webber” house

and said his feelings have started to “Escalade.”
You’ll forgive him for now, smarty pants.
(Your last, the crisp progressive, declawed
his cat to save his Ethan Allen chairs.) Besides,

there’s such promise, such furniture and new sex!
Look: wildflowers bloom in the streetcar tracks;
a syringe lies in the grass. It isn’t
beautiful, of course, this life. It is.

Randall Mann
51

⁵¹ [Randall Mann](#), “[Monday](#),” [Subtropics](#), collected in [Breakfast with Thom Gunn](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Pastoral

It happened so fast. Fenya was in the straight
Chair in the corner, her youngest sucking
On her breast. The screams, and a horseman
Outside the cottage. Then, her father in a blue tunic
Falling through the door onto the boards.
Fenya leaned over him, her blouse
Still at the waist and a single drop of her yellow milk
Falling into the open eye of her father. He dies
Looking up through this screen, what he sees

Is a little lamp-glow,
Like the poet describes less often even than harness bells
Or the icon with pine boughs. He sees snow
Falling into a bland field where a horse is giving
Birth to more snow dragging its placenta all over
The glaze which is red; all the snow is red, the horse's
Blood is white. He sees tears on Fenya's face and
Milk coming like bone hairpins from her breasts.
The straight force in the twig that makes a great black
Branch. Two of which are crossed over his chest. Terror is

The vigil of astonishment.

Norman Dubie

52

⁵² [Norman Dubie](#), "[Pastoral](#)," collected in [In the Dead of the Night](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Pandemonium

My head was flashing
from side to side,
watching the game.
I could not tell the diff—
I could not tell offense
from defense.
Every time I tried
I was wrong.
Finally I sat very still,
shredding something in my lap.
It was depressing,
to know so little about anatomy,
about astronomy, about everything.
I saw the winners were hoisted up
on shoulders, like children who refuse
to walk, while the losers
were left standing,
poor gaseous acid which
must tomorrow roam in space.

Mary Ruefle
53

⁵³ [Mary Ruefle](#), “[Pandemonium](#),” collected in *Indeed I Was Pleased with the World*, [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

Great Things from the Department of Transportation

My mother desires to track my location on her phone.

My mother announces that she's "latex intolerant."

My mother is horrified that the children's cartoon character Caillou is bald.

My mother to the server at a terrible restaurant: *I don't want a box—I want a flamethrower.*

One's mother might be the most famous person one knows.

My mother says, *There is no Denny's, only Zuul.*

My mother on penises and traffic cones: *On occasion they're both orange, aren't they?*

The young lungs of my mother fill with fine particulate matter on the streets of Clairton, PA.

My mother on the X-rated hypnotist: *He was only concerned with having the hypnotized persons act sexually stupid.*

One night in the 1970s, in the Mojave Desert, my mother ceases to feel apart from the world.

My mother pays my sister and me \$40 each to not have birthday parties.

My mother's soulmate is not my father but her dog, Six.

The only thing I don't like about John Wick is that he never washes his hair.

My mother's father, a bipolar beer distributor, laughs at least once that I know of because it echoes through me for 40 years.

On the whole my mother likes Miranda July's novel *The First Bad Man* but could have done without the sex parts.

I listen to my mother tell my child a story as if I were my own daughter.

My mother tells me there were some skanks on *America's Next Top Model*.

My mother asks, *Didn't someone famous say, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger?"*

My mother prays for her children every night.

My mother prays for children every night.

I bet you never thought you'd marry, have a baby, and get divorced before you're 40, she tells me.

My mother expects great things from the Department of Transportation.

Sommer Browning

⁵⁴ [Sommer Browning](#), "[Great Things from the Department of Transportation](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Good Actors, Birds, LLC](#)

from “A Plate of Chicken”

Take your pants off, Creepy, *and be my love*.

Another day tucks itself into the sky.

Richard Brautigan lies dead, like deer tracks.

The Puritans do not want me to read him, or please you.

The self-righteous all smell the same.

They are trapped in ice. The ice is in their minds.

They are exactly like the jello salads they love.

~

Tertullian was subtle but he hated himself.

It is possible to force yourself to feel joy.

The gate to hell is through the loop of the necktie.

The girl is sometimes scared of me.

When I don’t look at anyone on the subway I emanate peace.

Even a cruel woman is no more than a sparrow.

How can the man who swats her love himself?

~

He gave me the keys to his illegal occupation.

I was the only Caucasian in the court room.

He said “It’s well known the ancient Chinese used to parade yetis through their courts.”

He is thin, and in love with a woman on a television show.

Whitman hated his president too, who was a thief.

God really screwed us, everyone has to sleep on their roofs.

Being my own best friend is only part of my mysterious occupation.

Matthew Rohrer

55

⁵⁵ [Matthew Rohrer](#), “[A Plate of Chicken \[Take your pants off, Creepy\]](#),” collected in [A Plate of Chicken](#), [Ugly Duckling Presse](#)

To a Mojado Who Died Crossing the Desert

After a storm saguaros glisten
 like mint trombones.
 Sometimes a coyote leaps
over creosote.
 Hush.
The sand calls out for more footprints.
 A crack in a boulder
can never be an entrance
 to a cathedral
but a mouse can be torn open
 like an orange.
Hush.
 The arroyo is the color of rust.
 Sometimes a gust of snow
floats across the water
 as gracefully as a bride.

Eduardo C. Corral

56

⁵⁶ [Eduardo C. Corral, "To a Mojado Who Died Crossing the Desert," *Web Del Sol*, collected in *Slow Lightning*, Yale University Press](#)

Last Trip to the Island

You're mad that I can't love the ocean,

but I've come to this world landlocked
and some bodies feel permanently strange.
Like any foreign language, study it too late and
it never sticks. Anyway,

we're here aren't we?—
trudging up the sand, the water churning
its constant horny noise, an openmouthed heavy

breathing made more unnerving by
the presence of all these families, the toddlers

with their chapped bottoms, the fathers
in gigantic trunks spreading out their dopey
circus-colored gear.

How can anyone relax
near something so worked up all the time?

I know the ocean is glamorous,
but the hypnosis, the dilated pull of it, feels

impossible to resist. And what better reason to
resist? I'm most comfortable in

a field, a yellow-eared patch
of cereal, whose quiet rustling argues for
the underrated valor of discretion.

And above this, I admire a certain quality of
sky, like an older woman who wears her jewels with
an air of distance, that is, lightly,
with the right attitude. Unlike your ocean,

there's nothing sneaky about a field. I like their
ugly-girl frankness. I like that, sitting in the dirt,

I can hear what's coming between the stalks.

Erin Belieu
57

⁵⁷ [Erin Belieu](#), "[Last Trip to the Island](#)," *The Electronic Poetry Review*, collected in [Black Box](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Rhapsody

I like to call marriage state-sponsored
fucking. To return
to the world I must learn
how to love the world again. My problem
is with the word *again*. I don't like repeat
performances. I come from a long line
of hungry people who hate leftovers.
The only movie I can watch more than once
is the original *Frankenstein*. I like the present
tense of spectacle. It's like eating

an over-sour pickle. Wakes you up but hurts
your gonads. I got good
at romance early by choosing to wear pink
knee socks to the funeral. I sat on the floor
of the hearse on the ride from the church
to the cemetery, "making the best of it." That's
romance. It's like when my mother took me to see
Mary Poppins for my eighth birthday and it turned her
into a flaming bitch. I understand why you didn't like it,
I said to her, but I really loved it because I'm a kid.

Actually I hated it as much as she did.
That's romance. Or when she went to the slaughterhouse
to pick up a cow heart for my science project.
It was still warm, wrapped in white paper.
They handed it over like a newborn and she gagged
all the way home. That's romance. Some poet wrote
that he adores economy and requires precision.
I actually looked for antonyms:
extravagance, ignorance, imprudence, negligence, squandering.
I felt like a poor kid who finds a quarter and gorges

themselves on penny candy. From then on, everything
I created or promoted would be Rococo. Bows
and beams of sunlight festooning the candelabra
of the bewigged swing set. I have oppositional
poetry disorder. I want to express
my opinion about people expressing their opinions.
If only I could jump on the back of a motorcycle
and ride into the sweet potato field where the mother
deer flash their hooves and roar, and lay flat on the snake-laced
ground at midnight and watch the empty spectacle of the numb

satellites' mindless circling that looks a lot like a boob
who thinks they've found nirvana. And to observe
with a jaundiced eye the skunk family march in a line
out of the cedar swamp and eat crayfish from a washtub. I want a papa

bear to split the Tree of Life down the middle scattering
the wormy apples. His furry berry-stained maw
such a display of what used to be called reality.
I want the next turn I make to be unearned.
Like getting gang-banged in a greenhouse at age fourteen
and calling it a honeymoon. I guess now that would be called

trauma, a word I've grown to hate. It's like a cute puppy
who got old and whose only new trick is shitting in the house,
or a Band-Aid they call "flesh colored"
that only matches the flesh of the owner of the Band-Aid
company. A word can be overused into emptiness,
which is also a banality, so don't tell anyone you love them.
If you call fucking making love I'll kill you in your sleep.
Don't say I do. It's what suckers say, what liars say,
never take an oath wearing clothes that have to be hung
on padded hangers.

When women are murdered
people on TV always comment on the victim's cheerfulness.
Like being a songful canary should have kept her
from getting her throat slit. My advice is to live on a street
in which no one will say, when you're murdered,
things like that don't happen here. Live in a neighborhood
where every house is considered a scar on the face
of France. My adult son calls me at noon to ask
if I ever loved his father. How can I
express that marital love is twelve banalities ago?

It's like asking if I liked the taste of peaches
when I was a toddler. I preferred
smoke, catalpa worms, bowling trophies,
and using tweezers to remove the lit-up ass of a firefly
so I could smear it around my finger like a wedding ring.
The adage is that a cynic is a broken romantic
except for Arthur Rimbaud who was born and died
a misanthropic shrew. I would like to conjecture
that a romantic is a cynic who has been infected
with resurrection metaphors and believes in the integrity

of a good
line break. I know
someone who saw a famous
lounge singer carried out
of a Vegas hotel
on a stretcher with a broken
light bulb in his ass.
Be that guy.
Don't be Jesus, be the Shroud.
Don't be the savior, be the stain.

Diane Seuss

⁵⁸ [Diane Seuss](#), "[Rhapsody](#)," [Ninth Letter](#)

Salle des Départs

The tongue of a blue whale
weighs as much as an elephant, its heart
is the size of a car, and its blood vessels
wide enough for a person to swim through
like the morgue of a hospital known
for treating highway accident victims
in the suburbs of Paris. Designed
by Ettore Spalletti, the morgue blooms
in azure blue with music for
the moment you see a loved one
for the last time, composed with the hope
that no one will ever have to
hear it. Three cellos and women's voices
float out a work that can never be
performed live, something past
the ability of human beings to play: one long
tune, created in a recording studio, a vocal part
that no one could sing because
it is unending and there is no way
to take a breath. The instruction
on the score reads *play like angels*
although who would know
what that means, unless maybe
St. Luke, whose image of Jesus hangs
in the Sancta Sanctorum in the old
Lateran Palace in Rome: the *Acheiropoeton*,
a "picture painted without hands," which an angel
finished for him. When a monastic scribe
found a parchment page with a hole, he wrote
his text around it, circling the hole
in whole, trying to find out if absence
really does make the heart grow
fonder. Who, for example, could love
the Colosseum when it was full
in 248 A.D. during the games held to mark
the thousandth anniversary of Rome's
founding with the deaths of hundreds
of lions, elephants, hippopotamuses, zebras,
and elks? Better to stand in the crater
of an extinguished volcano while redbuds
rise on the Palatine Hill and on the arch of
the ceiling in the bedroom of Augustus, painted
diamonds meet and point to each other.
At the foot of the hill, a fountain was left
flowing for so long that it turned
into heaps of moss and ferns and leaves
that still cascade and flow while the water
slides beneath. All roads lead to this

room, which is how Rome was
pronounced in Elizabethan times. A word,
like Rome or redbud: just the memory
of touch and it bruises
into bloom.

Angie Estes
59

⁵⁹ [Angie Estes](#), "[Salle des Départs](#)," collected in [Tryst](#), [Oberlin College Press](#)

What I Believe

Last night my mouth filled with blood
and I had been falling forever
in the darkness. Down the street
an old skating rink burned
up. There was lightning and fire
and a bored crowd
and a school bus speeding into the distance.

Where: the chalk shadow
of near-by mountains
and in the wet air the metallic plunk
of banjos. Everything
is too fast, just now.

Birds drop from ratty nests
in a dream
that is unsettling years later:
a peacock coughing,
blue-green feathers lousy with plague.

Forgive me. I'm scared
of the news. That Australia is aflame
and may be dead before
up-jumped real estate magnates from Queens.

My legs hurt. A molar
on the left side of my mouth
sings like I'll care, soon enough.
That I'll heal. Love,
do you have change for a jukebox
that exists inside
the sick tide of fever
and is filled entirely with old country songs?

Despair in its way
can be quaint
when there are no ashes in the wind.
When the water
isn't thick with lead
and this reference isn't punishingly obvious.

Paul Guest

60

⁶⁰ [Paul Guest](#), "[What I Believe](#)," [Copper Nickel](#)

from "A Concordance of Leaves"

)

& though the border guard will advise us
this is a dangerous time to visit

)

& though we had to lie & say we were tourists
& not guests at our sister's wedding

)

to spare ourselves the special interrogation
in Ben Gurion / & beyond the wall

)

emerge blinking into the light of a modern Oz
blooming with sprinklered English lawns

)

the dancers in their purple spangled parachute
pants will turn wheels in the dust until the dust

)

is a violet fire & though the checkpoints hunker
in bunkers & Uzis with Uzis will raise them

)

at our unwitting arrival & cause us to lower
cameras & though hawkers hawk songbirds

)

at Qalandia checkpoint where empty bags tumble
free between the fences of No-Man's-Land

)

& the lines of the people are mute with waiting
the *ataaba* singers will arrive in the village

)

& name-check our families *marhaba Metres*
marhaba / marhaba Abbadi marhaba

⁶¹ Philip Metres, "[A Concordance of Leaves \[& though the border guard\]](#)," collected in [Shrapnel Maps](#), Copper Canyon Press

The point of life

is to go out and put my arms
around a horse. While it might appear
from the road I'm cheating
on my wife, I'm cheating
at not being sad that I'm a person
by holding the pulse of a horse
against my ear. I've also rested a cloud
against my ear at the top of a mountain,
and the bottom of a mountain
against my ear by laying down
and listening for the Earth
grinding its teeth. I usually
bring a carrot I pulled up myself
from where it was hiding in the ground,
the horse always eats the carrot
I usually bring, this is certainly
almost certainty in a world famous
for making up its mind every second
who lives and dies, who looks good
in plaid or in the back of a squad car,
crying. The owner of the horse
doesn't know I've stolen her dew
on my pants or kissed her horse's neck
while wind stirs the shadows of grass,
I don't know if I flew as a boy
on the horse outside the grocery store
my mother always let me ride,
she'd put a coin in and go shop
and the horse would try hard
to run away and set both of us free:
when it couldn't, I'd settle
for finding my mother a little later
holding a can of something
trying to keep us alive.
I'd like the woman who owns the horse
and my mother, who'll always
have dibs on me, to meet.
While they talk, the horse and I
will continue our thought experiment:
if a man only seems himself
clearly in the brown mirror
of a horse's eyes, is he reborn
every time she blinks?

Bob Hicok

62

⁶² [Bob Hicok](#), "[The point of life](#)," [diode](#), collected in [Hold](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Still Time

in Severn's letters Keats is still alive, though coughing blood,
one day he's better, then things look very bad and if you stop
reading he's still lying there, calmer again and clearer
before they take his body out and burn the wallpaper.
In books you fall in love with, you always slow down
a few pages before the end but then there you are
with only the back-cover blurbs that say
This story will make you cry and maybe an outdated photo.
When you photograph the famous fountain the water
stops moving, but water never really stops moving.
Your plush lion swirled away, your parents floated off, okay but also
that wine stain on your shirt only looked permanent.
After the horrifying bats in the cenote, little gold-flecked fish appeared.
You finally stopped sobbing in the bathroom at weddings.
You can't go back to 1821 and invent streptomycin,
or stop the poet's kindly doctor from bleeding his patient,
but you can climb the stairs to that room in Rome
and see the flowers on the ceiling, the same ones Keats held
for weeks in his fevered gaze. That's as close as you can get.
Go home. Your miserable bitch of a neighbor is gone, carried out and never to return.

Kim Addonizio

63

⁶³ Kim Addonizio, "Still Time," *Southword*, collected in *Now We're Getting Somewhere*, W. W. Norton & Company

Ghost stories written as algebraic equations

Ghost stories written as algebraic equations. Little Emily at the blackboard is very frightened. The X's look like a graveyard at night. The teacher wants her to poke among them with a piece of chalk. All the children hold their breath. The white chalk squeaks once among the plus and minus signs, and then it's quiet again.

Charles Simic
64

⁶⁴ [Charles Simic](#), "[Ghost stories written as algebraic equations](#)," collected in [The World Doesn't End](#), [Ecco](#)

A Place Set Aside for Burial of the Dead

Alone in a graveyard I feel like Medusa, everyone around me turned into stone.

Nowhere's more peaceful than a cemetery to stroll. The dead pose no threat, and technically every walk heads graveyard.

Rosehill Cemetery is the largest in Chicago, its beautiful name the result of a typo. It was supposed to be Roe's Hill, after a local farmer who refused to sell his property until the city promised to name the boneyard in his honor. It contains 350 soldiers killed in the Civil War and 61 victims of the Iroquois Theatre Fire and a lot of dead from other tragedies that nobody remembers.

Open the book of nature and read. Lichen on granite. The sheltering trees. A few brown leaves, raspy as pencil shavings. Woodsmoke drifting from somebody's chimney.

My sculptor friend who lives in Rome wrote me: "I have a small collection of human bones that date back to when I used to study anatomy." He plans to bury them in the vacant lot next to his studio if anyone decides to develop it, in the hopes the resulting investigation would hold up construction.

Cemetery from the Greek for *sleeping place*.

"Tireless" people are often quite exhausted.

The deer here seem to hold the dead very dear, grazing near headstones to leave the carvings clear. The cottontails hop softly, as if they know beneath their feet are the ceilings of the deceased.

Morbid to have a fave grave? Maybe. Anyway, mine is Lulu Fellows, dead of typhoid at 16 in 1883. MANY HOPES LIE BURIED HERE, says the engraving at the base of a life-sized statue, encased in glass, of Lulu reading, book in lap.

As a kid, I gravitated to St. Mary's Cemetery in Hubbard, Nebraska, on a bluff south of the town of 300 souls. Packed with Rooneys. More dead people than live ones. A few tall pines, dying like Dakota County was dying. It felt incredibly remote, but wasn't even a mile. Across Pigeon Creek, not far from the reservoir.

There was another one called Epidemic Cemetery, but you needed permission to hike there. High on a hill above Highway 35, it began during a diphtheria outbreak and housed mostly kids.

Better by far to travel than arrive. Because what's the point of anything when it all ends up here?

Necropolis. God's acre. Potter's field. I would like my headstone to read DEAD TO PERFECTION.

I used to hold my breath when passing a cemetery, lest I inhale the spirit of someone recently dead. Now I march right in and breathe as deeply as I can.

In the year 2000, the meaning of life was sold on eBay for \$3.26.

Graveyards tend to generate generational thinking. If only I could be a grandparent without being a parent.

Saint Vincent de Paul wrote in a letter to his friend Claude Dufour. “Alas! Monsieur, there is no lot in life where there is nothing to be endured.” That was in March of 1647.

Graveyard shifts. Shifts in perspective.

Like Carl Sagan said, the pale blue dot of earth and everyone on it—every young couple in love and all the rivers of blood—are no more than a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

Meaningless suffering is the aim of Satan.

Guess we’d better find some meaning.

Kathleen Rooney
65

⁶⁵ [Kathleen Rooney](#), “[A Place Set Aside for Burial of the Dead](#),” [Sporklet](#), collected in [Where Are the Snows](#), [Texas Review Press](#)

Love Notes [Do you love...]

Do you love the way we sound off in the wheelhouse?
Us in a brainpan party, circumnavigating the double-
talk on heels made out of feathers? The sky is right there,

closer to the sun than our upward etiquette. Yes. No.
On the incandescent dais of embarrassment, did you

check both ways to see if the stiletto got bent? Did you
check into the hotel of strong choices? This is the big eclipse
remixed as melody: harmonie, egalitarian, until eighth notes

give up their facade & beaks & necks show themselves
to be breaks & wrecks. All the familiar faces: they flap

upside down, cheeping the habitual tunes. They're dull
as Monday morning. Sometimes love is mundane that
way. Other times it spins as gently as Icarus's night-light.

Adrian Matejka
66

⁶⁶ [Adrian Matejka](#), "[Love Notes \[Do you love the way we sound...\]](#)," *Wildness*, collected in [Somebody Else Sold the World](#), Penguin Books

Buying and Selling

This father and daughter
sell wood by the cord
in an empty lot
by the nickel plant.
They sell rugs
that hang like cured skins.
Wolves, dream catchers,
rebel flags. They sell
bumper stickers
and used fishing poles,
They buy mushrooms
and they sell mushrooms.
They sell butterfly knives.
The daughter
can make one dance.
They sell the Buddha
and Mexican leather.
She has scraped knees
and heavy eyelashes,
a shirt that says
Speak English or Die.
They sell big American flags
and little American flags.
MIA. POW.
They sell under a blue tarp.
Chinese throwing stars,
switchblades.
They sell bowie knives
with hollow handles,
places for wire and flint
and whetstone.
They sleep in a Buick
near the edge of the mill yard
and watch the sun
turn from orange to red
as it rises
through the nickel dust.
It's almost November.
Frost spreads across everything
like the universe
blooming from its origin.
In the oldest story he tells,
he's commissioned
by Kublai Khan
to sail one hundred bolts of silk to Jerusalem
and return with a vial of holy water
to the Empire of a Million Horses.
But this is the story

he doesn't tell: a girl
 on her father's shoulders,
how he trades
 a heap of copper wire
for a full bottle of penicillin,
 so the girl
eventually drifts back
 into the port of her body
on the edge of the charted world.

Michael McGriff
67

⁶⁷ [Michael McGriff](#), "[Buying and Selling](#)," [Missouri Review](#), collected in [Dismantling the Hills](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Tiffany Conditioner

“My name is Tiffany Conditioner,”
I told my mother one day. “Tiffany,”
I told the mailman, “*Conditioner*,”
shaking his hand. Everyone was always
“disappointed” but kind of faking it
because I saw them laughing.

I brought down the stepladder so I could
reach my adolescence faster. I bought
a dress that made me look like a statuette
but nobody wanted to win me.

Even though I brushed my hair
100 strokes before bed & made everyone
stuffed rabbits for Easter. Everyone said
I was weird & wanted to kiss them.

So I wore a lamé stole & shone inside
its bright lie. I slumped across
the flimsy sets of Seventh-Grade Drama
like a malingering child movie star
forced to smoke. My teacher said I didn’t
understand the difference between glamour
& humor, so I went to the chalkboard
& powdered my face with erasers.

I sold more Poinsettias than Anyone!
I still don’t understand why that doesn’t count.
I packed my navel in a crate & gave it
to charity so I wouldn’t stare at it.
Still, everyone was So Disappointed.

Karyna McGlynn
68

⁶⁸ [Karyna McGlynn](#), “[Tiffany Conditioner](#),” collected in [50 Things Kate Bush Taught Me About the Multiverse](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

My 1993

I lived in a closet. Also I lived in a closet
Belonging to my then-best friend's then-beau

Who lived with three other men in a Central Square
Walk-up, spacious and sunlit, except

For the closet. The closet abutted Horace's bedroom
(Horace is like, but not quite, his real name).

Horace lived as a rent boy for a B-school professor.
The others did—I never knew what they did,

That is, "consulting." I was proud to be the new
Coat check girl at a cavernous bowling alley

Recently made over into a cavernous rock club.
I was working for tips. I wanted to say

I was working. Really I was playing
At self-sufficiency. Mostly I was playing

Records nobody else liked for two hours a night
Or four if the next DJ never showed up. I liked

To pretend that other people were listening.
Sometimes they called me up. I felt at home

Where no one could see me. I liked the Verlaines
And Treepeople, Small Factory, Circus Lupus

And Some Velvet Sidewalk, the Dead C and the Spinanes,
Who sang about thirsty anomie in a voice

Like sour cherries, sweet with overtones
Of sharp and ripe and bloodstain. When I moved out

I lost two crates along with a cardboard box
Of 25 ten-year-old vinyl LPs I took home

(Home meaning the closet) when the former producer
Was throwing them away: wrapped, black-and-white,

With a picture of a naked toddler running.
Their most famous song was about not being

Famous, not being in school or employed, just "hanging
Out in the Boston rock scene." The band was called

Sorry. They broke up before
I could see them. The album was called *Imaginary Friend*.

Stephanie Burt
69

⁶⁹ [Stephanie Burt](#), "[My 1993](#)," [Scoundrel Time](#), collected in [We Are Mermaids](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

from “Missing File #3: Panthera Leo Leo, Or, A Civics Lesson”

Journalism, fourth period. I sit at my green melamine desk and record the objects in the room: “The yellow ribbed border paper is torn slightly in the left corner. Below it is a faint chalk mark, roughly an inch in length,” etc. I do not write about Shelley, with her satin jacket, skunk mane of black hair, and thin black eyeliner, who has threatened to beat my ass at the trailer park across the street after school any day now. I do not write about the baseball hat-wearing Christian girl who was my science partner and who recently shot herself. I do not write that I think it was because she loved girls or wanted to be a boy or both, I’m not sure. Nor do I write about the pockmarked Civics teacher who invites me to sit on his lap or to swim with him after school and counts aloud the days until his retirement at the start of each class.

Anyhow, description does not involve, but is itself, a type of movement. The movement can be of an accidental or strategic kind; most often it is a combination, as when one jokes about their childhood while a little bit drunk at a party. More naming means more strategy, more accidents, more baiting. *Gold Block. Science Partner.*

I wonder where Shelley is now. She lives in my brain and sparkles with her violence.

Alison Powell

70

⁷⁰ Alison Powell, “[Missing File #3: Panthera Leo Leo, Or, A Civics Lesson](#),” collected in [Boats in the Attic](#), Fordham University Press

Black Lead in a Nancy Meyers Movie

Aging, at all. I want that. And to fall
perhaps most honestly in love
beside the ocean, in a home I've paid
for by doing as I like: drinking good
wine, dusting sugar over a croissant, or
the stage play I'm writing myself into.
Aging Black woman in neutral summer
turtleneck. Known. And jogging. Lonesome
enough. Eating homemade lavender
ice cream, the moon blooming
through the kitchen window. The distant
sound of waves. Learning
French as a second language.
Votre pâte merveilleux, I smile back.
And then, just like that! Falling, cautiously,
for my busy, middle-aged lover,
who needs me, but has never truly seen me
until now. Our Black friends, celebrating
with hors d'oeuvres. Our Black children
growing older.

Rio Cortez

71

⁷¹ [Rio Cortez](#), "[Black Lead in a Nancy Meyers Movie](#)," collected in [Golden Ax](#), [Penguin Books](#)

What Kind of Mother

At a Chinese restaurant in Michigan
my sister and I are kicking each other under a long table
while my dad and all the aunts and uncles talk serious.
Their voices are low and boring.
My dad says *Still, mom should've done something.*
She had to have known about Dad. Our house
was so small. She couldn't not know.

My youngest uncle changes the subject.
He's the one who almost became a fireman
but got kicked out because of drugs
which my sister and I know are scary things.
He talks about meeting an old firefighter
whose arms were quilted with burns and grafts,
whose worst memories were bodies just inside
unlocked doors, the near-survivors.
Smoke, the old firefighter had said, sure,
but sometimes panic.
You never know what you'll do
in a fire
till you're in it.

Once he heard a woman's dying screams
as she ran away from his help
to get her bathrobe.
She was a lady, I guess.
Had to be decent.

My dad and all the aunts and uncles
are never at a table again,
not all at once, and in her death
their mother is sainted
like a lady in a beautiful robe
dusted lightly with ashes.

Jessica L. Walsh

72

⁷² Jessica L. Walsh, "What Kind of Mother," collected in [The Book of Gods & Grudges](#), Glass Lyre Press

A Difficult Woman

I left the metaphor of myself I like best
in the rabbit warren and went to the office
to seem like the kind of person another person
might hire because it is a true fact that some
committee of persons hired me and this
because I pretended to be a Professionalism 4
once for an afternoon and that metaphor
was convincing enough to calcify over the flesh
of itself with a stiff-sleeved shirt and knee-length
skirt, and become the myself of myself now
who owes the office better than a Professionalism 3,
since the office is not the one who pretended
their way into this. The office is not the one
who didn't realize people really believe you are
how you pretend to be. The office is not
responsible for the fact I think curse words
bring flavor to any conversation and gossip
is a form of social capital essential to the building
of relationships because it makes a person
vulnerable and powerful with information
at the same time and forges a feeling, if not
the fact of trust and authenticity. In pursuit
of Professionalism 4, I use a lot of smiley faces
and exclamation points in my discourse to iron
myself disarming. Professionalism 5 needs no
emoticons, for it is already ironed. I'm sorry
not sorry I left the metaphor of my uncomfortable
work clothes in the rabbit warren and decided
to wear jeans every day to every meeting
regardless of the pomp because no one asked
at the interview what I think about pomp.
I think pomp is maladaptive. That is
a Professionalism 2 sort of opinion to hold.
And anyway, I think pomp is fucking maladaptive.
I don't know why it is Professionalism 4
to keep that sort of opinion to ourselves.
I don't know why it is Professionalism 5
to love pomp. What if I fucking love pomp?
Would they have to create a box for 6?
Every little box is a warren and I try to stay inside,
but my haunches are itching springs and I want
to fuck over everything like it is May
and the oak leaves have just uncurled to the size
of squirrel ears. They billow more open, I think,
to try to hear the wind of all the discarded
metaphors for what I am and you are too.
The whole green lawn around the cinder block
of our days is buzz and bloom for somebody to,

I want to say *Kick up a tempest of themselves*
getting fired, but really I just mean *Tell me something*
I don't already know and must swear never to repeat.

Kathryn Nuernberger
73

⁷³ [Kathryn Nuernberger](#), "[A Difficult Woman](#)," [Poetry International](#), collected in [Rue](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Schism

Today in the taxi a passenger got in and she was crying. I don't know why. We left Astoria for Williamsburg. I gave her a little package of tissues and she went on her way.

Kafka said *crying is especially alarming for me. I cannot cry. When other people cry, it seems to me like a strange, incomprehensible natural phenomenon.*

I thought maybe she was going through a breakup, or perhaps it was a passage in a novel.

Some people think of Williamsburg as the “hipster apocalypse” and others, the Orthodox, know the Lord is there with them. She's pushing a shopping cart full of plastic bottles rescued from trash cans.

Crying literally means “to ask for loudly.” She mumbles through a drop of saltwater, but She's really saying: You are worthy of asking and having your question heard.

Sean Singer
74

⁷⁴ Sean Singer, “[Schism](#),” collected in [Today in the Taxi](#), Tupelo Press

from “Don’t Spend It All in One Place”

Give them what they want. But what do they want?
Ultimately, I find this place to be a fully predatory
city. Electric fences, post-op sepsis, the insult
NO ONE EVER SAW HER FIRST. You can’t even stand
and wait for your train without someone suffering
from an acute case of undercongratulation
praying for you to shuffle to the edge of the platform
and teeter over, so that he might intervene and be seen
as a savior. Moving through an intersection
the other day, I passed a young child who was deep
in a screaming fit: NO NO NO NO, and I suddenly
suspected the child was me—the child I used to be,
transported somehow ahead and horrified
to find what the future brings. She did have my eyes.

[...]

Really, though, I’m losing track of time. In the film
depicting a bygone war, everything feels
like the future, even the scene where a luminous
woman appears in a doorframe and all the troops
goggle and shove: OUT OF MY WAY—OUT OF MY WAY—
I SAW HER FIRST. People are so preoccupied
with looks. I remember how the tract against suicide
posited exposure to art and plants as antidote
to despair, making the argument that beauty will buoy
the hopeless. What a jab at the scarlet moss
and slender pine of the woods, at hundreds of years
of portraiture and plein air. I take it they just weren’t
pretty enough to convince anyone to abandon
their plans. I take it NO ONE EVER SAW THEM FIRST.

Natalie Shapero
75

⁷⁵ Natalie Shapero, “Don’t Spend It All in One Place [Give them what they want],” collected in [Popular Longing](#), Copper Canyon Press

Poem Not Ending with Blossoms

Think of an oar, the cop said, & I pictured one
above the waves, how it slices through water or, if you turn it,
it'll slam against the surface instead, the metaphor intended
to explain the difference between hollow point & round nose
bullets, although the more
I imagined the gripped oar, its dip
or clumsy splash, the further I seemed to drift from the work
of any gun, yet without ever gliding
from here, this once-
bustling, fluorescent-lit seventh floor space that used to be
Police Headquarters but had been gutted after the move to county,
leaving behind only a few detectives to wade through decades
of rape kits & Fed-Ex boxes of narcotics in a storehouse maze
that ended in what had been
a communal shower, now crowded
with trash bags stuffed with heroin & guarded by a display
of horror hostess Elvira adorned with a respirator mask. He offered
another comparison—it's a choice between
an icepick or hammer
passing through your chest—cued perhaps by the Property Room
we had toured upstairs, a place where everything linked
to a violent crime was grouped
by semblance in untidy heaps:
toasters crowding shelves next to microwaves, laptops stacked
near rows of flat screen TVs, & sledgehammers tossed
on a cord-tangled mess
of nail guns & drills. There were guns,
of course—more than forty thousand, piled into filing cabinets,
shopping carts, or rain barrels, depending on their size. Over here—
he pointed to a mannequin head perched on six prosthetic limbs—
we're trying to make a full body,
but only have a head & those legs.
Why, I asked—since it seemed worth asking—are there so many
baby swings in here? Sometimes,

you don't want to know. But
because I'd wanted to know how a bullet works for reasons

I can no longer explain,
he led me downstairs to Bertha,
a test-fire tank made from plexiglass, pool liners, & iron beams.

The name just suits her. She's sturdy, reliable, & takes bullets
all day without complaint. Industrial gray, with a tiny flag

tucked between her exhaust fan & switch, Bertha reminded me
of something
from the off-limits corner of shop class where

instead of building birdhouses, we spent our time folding
sheets of metal until they became
blade-like things we loved

to hold, wield, jab, content to wound
nothing but air. And how
did it feel to test fire thousands of guns each year? Boring,

he said. It leaves you deaf
& stuck with a bunch of water
too polluted to dump. Then he loaded two hollow points,
slipped his Glock into Bertha's PVC pipe,
called out Ears for two!
& fired both rounds. The sound of gunshots were chased

by the metallic chime of cartridges dropping to the floor,
a slow slosh of water, one screw rolling in half circles

across the tank's trapdoor. Call that an American song
& nothing happens
or worse. Although perhaps it's worse

to admit that after he netted the metal nubs & placed them
into my hand, their split tips
curling back in petal-like shapes

extending from a center copper speck, the word blossom was all
that came to mind. Even if,
months later, I saw some earrings online

made from the same kind of bullets, each one flower-shaped
& described by the artist as clear coated & tumbled

to a smooth finish, that doesn't change how much I'd wished
for a different word to hold
in that cramped room as little waves

moved, then stopped. It's possible
the figurative ran its course
here a while back. Do we really need a personified tank
& metaphor of an oar smacking the surface
of a lake where
they pour Bertha's lead-tainted water each week to understand
we're paddling nowhere at all? Once, the cop told me, they received
a call about someone bleeding on a bus. They pulled the vehicle over
& found a guy holding a tree branch
he was using to dig into
his calf. I'm still trying to picture this, still trying to form
the image of the man & the branch
he held. It was November.
Nothing was blooming in Cleveland yet again when he told them
hell yes, he'd been shot, a few blocks back. Fuck off, kindly
leave him alone, & he'd just get the hell on with his day.

Matt Donovan
76

⁷⁶ [Matt Donovan](#), "[Poem Not Ending with Blossoms](#)," *Copper Nickel*, collected in *The Dug-Up Gun Museum*, BOA Editions, Ltd.

A Poet's Poem

If it takes me all day,
I will get the word *freshened* out of this poem.

I put it in the first line, then moved it to the second,
and now it won't come out.

It's stuck. I'm so frustrated,
so I went out to my little porch all covered in snow

and watched the icicles drip, as I smoked
a cigarette.

Finally I reached up and broke a big, clear spike
off the roof with my bare hand.

And used it to write a word in the snow.
I wrote the word *snow*.

I can't stand myself.

Brenda Shaughnessy
77

⁷⁷ [Brenda Shaughnessy](#), "[A Poet's Poem](#)," [Columbia Poetry Review](#), collected in [Human Dark with Sugar](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Lady of the Canal

We're on Lake Shore Drive, in one of those SUV taxis with flames painted on the sides. Next stop: every museum, followed by the architectural boat tour only booked by tourists with zero knowledge of architecture. Under the blue awning, riverside, I crack a joke about "Wacker Drive." My outfit a cross between accidental soft butch and academic drifter. Overalls pocket stuffed with food co-op receipts. Boots a little too industrial. My roommate is dressed as a French nanny who smokes Djarums and speaks shockingly proficient English. We leer at couples redeeming coupons torn from the Entertainment Book. It's probably a two-drink minimum. Back then nobody looks at their phone unless placing a call. I worry that I forgot to wear deodorant, then brace myself against a bench, laughing. My roommate pesters the captain with targeted questions about the *SS Eastland* Disaster. He's disquieted, but into it. A waterlogged pair of sweatpants licks the gangway. We're code switching into French, then heading to the bathroom, which is more like an ice fishing shanty. I'm peeling off my corset while guarding the door. My roommate and I swap wigs, and I become a silver blonde who owns a speedboat named Lady of the Canal. In the distance: hairy thigh of the Swissôtel, where someone's husband drops his watch into an ashtray, unbuckles his belt while thinking of me. We've exceeded the two-drink minimum and I order a cider, having no knowledge of which kind fits my persona except *hard*.

Mary Biddinger

78

⁷⁸ Mary Biddinger, "[Lady of the Canal](#)," [Always Crashing](#)

Primrose, Orchid, Datura

To say I lived on honeycomb is not enough. I lived
on milkfat, garnets, whiskey bottles under the bed,
lotion pearlescent on pink skin. I slept half the day,
woke late, ate ridiculous bouquets, milked austerity
for gorgeousness—blossoms collected in jars,
granite thieved from silt. I napped and architected
a decadent inwardness. I did not know the Christbody
would take up residence in the next room, in a hospice
bed, until the whole house smelled like nightblown
Gethsemane, or that this would go on until the world
ran out of sponges from its acrid seas. Once I was a girl
who wore feathers and ivory, a woman who let
the tap run in the desert past all decency. Forgive me.

Kerri Webster

79

⁷⁹ Kerri Webster, "Primrose, Orchid, Datura," *The Los Angeles Review*, collected in *Lapis*, Wesleyan University Press

Science Fair

Under the microscope, I watch my mother
light a very tiny fire in her very tiny

bed. Her very tiny cigarette has fallen
from her hand. She doesn't know it.

She's dreaming very tiny dreams.
The tiny fire, though, is growing.

She used to tell me that she dreamed,
sometimes, of being tall enough to whisper

in the ears of satellites. She was so tall
in these dreams, she said, she had to duck

to keep from shattering the lit bulb of the moon,
I hope she's having that dream now.

Under my microscope, she's burning.
In her head, she's grown so giant

she's holding God between her palms.

Lloyd Wallace
80

⁸⁰ [Lloyd Wallace](#), "[Science Fair](#)," [Passages North](#)

In a Land Where Everything Is Already Trying to Kill Me, I Enter a New Phase of My Life in Which It
Would Be Very Bad If I Died

because now there is a child and her mother is burning
with rapture and terror and has my eyes and teeth.
She is parasite, doppelganger, and I would die
if she unmothered me. She holds my breath as I pass
a speeding truck. She holds my breath when we see
a mother duck and a duckling that would not know
if she died. We are not that kind. Our kind keens
for a long time and the sadness accumulates in our bodies
like lead or tapeworm eggs. I feel sorry for all of us,
the leaving and the left. Everything is bearing down,
bearing down. For “bereft,” make a tearing sound,
which is different from a tearing sound, which is made
behind the face instead of at the base of the throat.
I hold my breath so I can’t choke to death. A child
watches me not eat my sandwich. It is my child,
it is my own watchfulness, we are the same kind,
the sandwich is stale, we stare at it balefully.
It would be kind of the world to let us live until
we are tired of it, until it is stale and unpleasurable.
But that is called *heaven*, not *world*. Once I am dead
I won’t know it, but that doesn’t help. I already miss living—
all its bells and tulips and feelings. There is *maybe death*
and there is *death death* and that’s all. I will spend
the rest of my life *maybe dying* until I actually do.
I have practiced and practiced. I have tried to drive out
the sugar that attracts the sadness. But the mother in me
has fallen in love with everything. I want to tell her
to shut her eyes, to keep her hands in her pockets,
but she must hold the child’s hand as she crosses the street.
She must eat if she wants to see the child, which is better
than eating. I have not left her any white stones
to follow out of this forest. There is only the sweet
dangerous darkness and the fire at the end of it.

Claire Wahmanholm

81

⁸¹ [Claire Wahmanholm, “In a Land Where Everything Is Already Trying to Kill Me, I Enter a New Phase of My Life in Which It Would Be Very Bad If I Died,” 32 Poems, collected in *Meltwater*, Milkweed Editions](#)

Virginia Woolf

On mornings like this I often think of her
lying in bed all day in her pajamas,
the room striped in sunlight and cats
like a painting by Matisse.

Virginia writing newsy letters to her friends:
“The light through fog is convalescent,” she said,
and, “The main requirement for public life
is overacting.”

On a morning like this,
when I walk the fields behind the house,
I feel that she is still alive,
sipping from her second pot of tea,
notebook propped up on her knees—

nose deep in language
like a thoroughbred horse,
like an endangered species
brought back from extinction.

I think of her and
I would like to know she is all right,
though I know she suffered terribly
from too much sight.

But who will talk to the petunias now
on Finchley Lane? Who will stand
and look out of the window for hours?
Who will tell the sunlight
not to be so vain?

Who will inform the piece of toast
on the small blue plate
with one bite taken out of it

that she will not be coming back?

Tony Hoagland
82

⁸² [Tony Hoagland](#), “[Virginia Woolf](#),” collected in [Turn Up the Ocean](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

A Private Education

Bonnie and Charlie had Sex there is what
I told Shane, pointing to the cage, the day

after I watched my rabbits breed. Charlie
got on top of her—an electrocuted

cotton ball when he finished. *She likes it*
as much as he does, Dad said, and tried to explain.

It's nobody's business what you do in your bedroom.
You might get a wet spot if you're excited with a girl.

A woman should never deny her husband.
I know your Aunt Carol holds out on Uncle Joe.

For years he bragged, proud he gave me *the talk*,
and for years I jerked off to pictures of men

in my bedroom—figuring it out on my own.

Aaron Smith
83

⁸³ Aaron Smith, "A Private Education," *Allium*, collected in *Stop Lying*, University of Pittsburgh Press

Oak and Moon

A woman grows antlers so heavy she's bent
by the weight of an idea balanced
in the cleft.

The pearl in her mother's ring
falls out of its prongs.
Bounces twice.

Her navel protrudes
dried and umbilical and useless. Her legs hang
over the early dark.

We've turned the clocks back,
given light over. She's falling
into the hour I've gained.

She is falling into the night
by way of the oak.
Maybe she's glad it's turned out like this, maybe not.

Jennifer Martelli
84

⁸⁴ [Jennifer Martelli](#), "[Oak and Moon](#)," *Plath Poetry Project*, collected in [All Things are Born to Change Their Shape](#), [Small Harbor Publishing](#)

Still Music

"Reminiscence of the Tempyo Era" Ishibashi Museum of Art, Japan

How long til this water evaporates?
 There is rain & beauty everywhere
Tonight. Hanging from the train straps,

Nodding with exhaust in the seats.
 Women in with wet scarves
& hair, faces which have grown,

These last months, more beautiful
 To me. Last week I saw a woman
From the Tempyo Era hanging without a name

On a museum's wall, a strange string
 Instrument held in her hands
The way the neck held her face. Still music.

There are tunnels guiding each note
 Tonight, these women's murmurs,
Soft, indiscernible, away from me.

What do you call desire in a married man?
 Women's bodies shine
In the buttons on my coat. Women lean

From the train straps above me,
 Women are anchored
To the seats. The rain falls as if to wash

Away their stations of fatigue.
 I know nothing about this place,
But, Wife, tonight I don't want to sleep.

I want to rise into your lungs,
 Linger like a music in your throat,
Vanish like water under heat.

Terrance Hayes
85

⁸⁵ [Terrance Hayes](#), "[Still Music](#)," collected in [Hip Logic](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Stephanie

She was eighteen, used “party” as a verb, lashes
like the whiskers of an oil-soaked seal, devoured
books with names like *Steamy LA Nights* under
the duvet by flashlight. I was twenty-three, brooding
over John Ashbery between therapy sessions, hunched

at the smokers table like a misunderstood genius.
I was recovering from a bout of “goodbye world.”
We were both diligent pleasers. I fell in love
with the reflection of someone charming in her
sunglasses. I always wanted to be charming.

I forgot we were ill. When I finally touched her,
her skin dilated. She shuddered, licked her teeth
and crawled towards me across the bed.
It was like watching a child possessed
by the vengeful spirit of a murdered porn star.

I locked myself in the bathroom and then strode
to the nurse’s station to “confess.” Afterwards
my counselor said, “We really dropped the ball
on this one, placing a sex addict in a room
with a lesbian.” It’d never occurred to them.

She wrote me a ten-page love letter in red ink.
The nurses tried to lull my guilt: “If an alcoholic
screams for a whiskey, it’s not the bartender’s fault
if he pours.” I didn’t like being compared to booze,
like I could’ve been anyone—that acne-scarred chef

who grinned at her once, the mouthy car-washer
at the NA meeting, the pin-eyed new boy—like it was
just because I was her roomie and she was a nympho
and nothing to do with real electricity or Stephanie
somehow spying the part worth saving in me.

Caroline Bird

86

⁸⁶ [Caroline Bird](#), “[Stephanie](#),” collected in [In These Days of Prohibition](#), [Carcenet Press](#)

Cross Garden

Glare ice on the asphalt north of Macon
kept the back road deadly where acres
of whitewashed crosses shaped Reverend Tice's
holy ground. Upstairs the stars were waking,
and a car taking this curve would need wings

to keep from losing the earth if a foot
touched the brake. It was pine slopes and red
clay the self-made preacher laced with Christmas
lights and splashed with scripture. It was his
nightmare not even Bosch or Jimmy Swaggart's

TV scare team could have dreamed up: scarlet
Barbies dangled from a gibbet painted
dead from sex, a Kenmore refrigerator
read *NO ICEWATER IN GEHENNA*.
Ab Tice was beet-faced, carrot-haired, always

angry on call-in radio. "You're all
evil," he'd say, "Jesus will reap. He will
fall on you like a storm." Bobby Sims, Junior,
was drinking Rebel Yell from the bottle,
listening to rockabilly, as usual,

when he took wing and lost it, his Maverick
slashing sideways through makeshift altars.
Sparks flew, till the death car bucked the ditch
and slammed into a crosstie crucifix.
Blood sprayed. The county rescue crew had to

cut him out. Chavelle Wilson said she heard
Tice raving at the volunteers, "Heathens
make these cars. Detroit Yankees, Jews and Darks.
They bear the mark of Satan." Blue bathrobe
flapping above his skinny shanks, he waved

his Bible like a weapon and didn't
pray a note for the boy from the paper
mill who lay split open on the snow.
He was old-time hard-shell, a foot washer
from Eufaula who clerked at the feed

and seed till his Edna died. He'd haul a red
Stratocaster he couldn't quite play to Sunday
service till they cast him out. He quit work
for apostleship, gimcrack carpentry
and raising shrines: castoff ovens filled

with plastic soldiers—*the soul wars in hell*.
A lawn lackey was wrapped in chains—*Cain sinned*.
Years after Bobby brought fire across the ice
and died, his friends kept heaping wildflowers
on the site. Around the nest of dead stalks

the Reverend raised a fence of pitchforks.
The sign read. *Behold the lilies*. He built a pulpit.
You'd see him out there, fierce but feeble,
telling some local zealot where to raise
the next exhibit. Rumor had it *Praise*

the Lord got wind of his ministry and sent
mission money, but it wasn't enough.
The garden fell to ruin and was auctioned
for back taxes. Now they say he cruises
the Food Lion parking lot for converts, his hair

just a rusty wisp, sharp jaw unshaven.
His blue eyes are ice set deep in fire.
He'll single out some unwary shopper
and grip the Maverick steering wheel
he wears slung on a guitar strap. He'll sing,

"Follow along the Holy Ghost parade," or,
"Hallelujah by and by, I'll fly away."
Rumor has it he's got a cache of tithes
squirreled away in a Sanka can. Biding
his time, he's nursing a surplus Xerox,

planning out a series of rabid tracts
he's worked up for the local apocalypse.
He's raring to bring Sweet Jesus back
from the cross garden to tend his flock.
He swears he's been named one of the elect,

in frost and fire, Born Again once again.

R.T. Smith

87

⁸⁷ R.T. Smith, "[Cross Garden](#)," *Poetry*, collected in [Brightwood](#), Louisiana State University Press

[Boot Ceremony]

If you die, they set your boots down
as if you still stand inside them,

fix a bayonet and sink it into dirt
then set the skull of the helmet,

on the rifle butt,
the tags hanging.

If you enter ether, there are words
they say and don't say, all scripted,

US Army Field Manual.

But if you live, there's no ceremony
for waking and feeding the wood stove,

for pouring coffee,
bagging the kid's lunch.

No one is saluting you for not losing your shit
on some guy at a gas station

or not eating a round

while you soak in a lithium bath,
trembling with ghosts—

Some squat like fists in your chest.
Some burn like barrel fires beneath skin.

If you sleep, *you never sleep*,
there are words you say and don't say,

and the woman lying next to you knows
you are holding your breath,

the sky around you soot dark.

James Hoch
88

⁸⁸ James Hoch, "[Boot Ceremony]," collected in [Radio Static](#), [Green Linden Press](#)

Dinkytown

For Phil Terman

You could have been one of the few present that afternoon
deep in some memory crafted to separate that hour
from the blue fog of every other espresso-tarred hour
you spent deep in the haze uttered from the poisonous
black cigarettes you loved then, huddled above the endless chess battle
you fought all that year with Carlos, the two of you matched too evenly
for either one to claim victory, the matches themselves pretext for
more vigorous jousting over being and existence, over books
and the deadly politics of the day, your endless presence permission
to lean in the seen-it-all-and-so-what slouch of a regular while you gave
less than half an ear to the endless flow of bad folk singers who had begun
to replace the bad trios and quartets that had spent seasons mangling
the jazz you loved. At least the bad renditions of “Wild Mountain Thyme”
and “Tom Dula” didn’t make you swear to catch the train to Chicago next time
Miles or Dizzy was appearing there. The power hindsight offers could
let you claim that you roused yourself from the mechanics of pawn-to-queen-four
the moment the boy blew an asthmatic wheeze on his harmonica and bumped
into “Gypsy Davey” or “Man of Constant Sorrow” in a barbed-wire gargle
too old for his soft face. By now you’ve told the story
so often you can’t recall if it’s invention or memory that something, a quick stroke
on the guitar, the voice bending to meet a chord, lifted your head a moment
to see who was singing because you’d heard something old, dark, some mystery
you’d thought confined to the dust-smoothed grooves of 78s you bought
in pawn shops for pennies, like the Skip James record your ex-wife asked you
not to play when she was around, mystery still locked in the long sentences you read
and in rooms more shadow than wall, more the notion of a coffeehouse
than a coffeehouse, that mystery the single thing in your life you did not have
to share, perhaps could not share, a pleasure that did not become dust, powder,
something spit ruefully from a mouth no longer willing to taste, the way wine, coffee,
cigarettes, even flesh can sour. If you could recall which tune he played, it might
all return in the odor of the candle guttering on the table next to yours, in the drawl
of the waitress telling the man behind the counter of the endless troubles she had
with her lover, her prairie-flat accent, the bend of a brow across the room
as someone frowned over the cigarette he was lighting, the pattern of whorl and scar
in the wood of the table where you sat, pattern endless and embellished as memory,
all might return in the recollection of that song though it would vanish within
the changing of a chord, the noise of someone’s cough, in whatever happened to remind you
it was late afternoon, when sun made its unwelcome entrance into the room,
flattening all it touched and you were a student in philosophy, sucking the marrow
from the bones of the G.I. Bill, your wife gone to get a quick divorce on her way
to becoming a dancer or marrying a lawyer, and page nineteen of your thesis had been
rolled in the carriage of your Underwood for two weeks, frozen in the time
you came here to find, time to read the armloads of books you bought during two years
of working turns in the steel mill, closer to an earthly vision of hell than
fourteen months in Korea or three months healing in a stateside hospital,
rooms of fever and infected flesh. The short hours of class, the sprawled-out
afternoons and evenings of talk, of large ideas you knew would land you somewhere

so far had only led here, to this slow-warming afternoon, the choreography of chess,
and now the kid was offstage and Carlos was picking up his bishop like he meant
to do real damage this time. You could claim to have seen all along
that the kid had it, but you weren't there for his next performance or the next.
You were in your tiny apartment with your books and records, swimming
in the slow-moving waves of your thesis, the troubled accumulation of each paragraph
letting you trust language a little less, so when you found yourself at a party
a few weeks later, dazed from typing all day, trying to put into words
all that has for centuries resisted being said, a little wine-stunned you, and you dropped
into a chair near a circle of singers playing pass-the-guitar, and the kid
you'd heard at the coffeehouse was there, cocky, out of place, and when you stood
to get more wine, someone told you his name was Bob Dylan,
and he'd been a rock and roll piano player or a rodeo clown before ending up here,
and watching him, you knew how a few years later, the Nashville pickers would
lift their eyebrows when he arrived, these players who could lay down
two-and-a-half of the smoothest minutes that ever rolled out of a car radio
and who could do it every week, hired now by this mumbling Yankee hippie
who arrived without charts or finished songs, just a Canadian guitar player
to flash them the chords before a take.

You could have been there,
but of course you were not. You were two when Bob Dylan got onstage in Dinkytown,
nine when he recorded in Nashville, and by the time you got to the party,
he'd vanished, his sly exit still on everyone's lips, and you were watching the stage
when he came back in the side door, still possessed of the conjurer's trick
of making your eyes move over here, then back here in time to show you
exactly what he wanted you to see, hiding, then half-showing the newly-remembered mystery,
the swamps and foggy hollows that were his to summon because the greatest mystery,
the subject of all songs, is not what we don't remember but what we do,
and in this life you imagine for yourself, the kid is leaving the stage,
and Carlos took the bishop, and your defense is crumbling, the entire game changed by a single move.

Al Maginnes

89

⁸⁹ Al Maginnes, "Dinkytown," *Lake Effect*, collected in *Ghost Alphabet*, White Pine Press

The Old Room

Whose hands do I have?
The general from the Union,
the child dead of mumps,
the girl who died on her back,
the man over her?
The past is never finished,
the future is scared.
What if we aren't descendants
of anyone but ourselves?

Victoria Chang
90

⁹⁰ [Victoria Chang](#), "[The Old Room](#)," collected in [The Trees Witness Everything](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Family of Origin Rewrite

My father teaches ethics at a university.
My mother teaches ethics at a university.
They save. Their money. Buy
a large bungalow in Connecticut.
They continue. Saving. Enough
to support the San Francisco AIDS
Foundation *and* their baby.
They read the news and wish kindness
into our laws. One of them will say
Sweden hasn't been to war since 1812.
The other says you can start a business
in Sweden *and* get free healthcare.
They're excited. About my arrival.
They remain. Calm. When
midnight cries wake them.
My father waits. For my mother to heal.
Before asking for sex. She's good.
At saying no. She throws meditation
and exercise and intense therapy
at her trauma. Still goes to AA.
When wrong. She promptly admits.
It. Every night she arrives home from
the university. Her soft. Low voice.
Builds a replica in my throat. She wears
minimal. Makeup. Cuts her nails down
because *who needs the fuss*. When I walk.
Into a room. And see my father.
I continue walking in. When my father
and I leave. The house. Lots of women
introduce themselves. When we get back
he tears. Their numbers over the trash.
On weekends my father and I dig
in the dirt. I watch him plant
lilac bulbs around the spruce. He lets
my small hand pack the ground.
Affirms it as help. When my father puts.
me to bed with true stories of him
sewing clothes for new mothers
in Ukraine. I fall asleep fast.

K. Iver
91

⁹¹ K. Iver, "Family of Origin Rewrite," *The Common*, collected in *Short Film Starring My Beloved's Red Bronco*, Milkweed Editions

A Bar Called Nostalgia on Route 22

Your hometown, like a photo negative
on top of a photo negative.

Standing outside the bar in the parking lot
of a strip mail, light a cigarette,
imagine it will taste like pine and winter air,
and instead, it just tastes like a cigarette.

Two old high school friends make out furiously
against the alley's back wall
while their respective families
sleep at home to the light of bedside laptops.

There is the temptation to treat
this whole town like a grave,
and the one woman dancing to
the local cover band inside, its angel.

And that might make you tough, imagine
you are steel through brick,
but you are here, of course,
pulled by the gravity of habit and history.

The cigarette is done, and it wasn't even good.
The tree across the state road is a cell phone tower
disguised as an evergreen. Everyone is back inside
and the bass a muffled heartbeat through the walls.

Your hometown, a secret tattooed on your back,
never to be seen as you walk forward,
each step based on what you think
it says, and what you know it doesn't.

Robert Krut
92

⁹² [Robert Krut](#), "[A Bar Called Nostalgia on Route 22](#)," *Moria*, collected in [Watch Me Trick Ghosts](#), [Codhill Press](#)

What use are you?

In our final poetry class
my student says his parents who
pay for his education
are making him change his major,
that what I teach is of no use, and waits
for my protest. I am not the person
to ask. My god is so small,
he fits inside a Scantron sheet.
Each bubble opens like his mouth
to wail an ancient lament.
Actually, he is quiet.

According to a middle school test,
I should work in Administration.
Instead I am a teacher
in a school with few resources.
We took the test in the orchestra room,
among the ductwork and violins,
upright basses draped with dustcloths.
We had to carry our heavy instruments
to school and we did not complain.
We were in the art wing,
falling down, holes in the wall
where we crammed Wendy's wrappers
until the borders of the room fell in.

Projections will say we all need
nurses and HVAC techs and actuaries
but I was told by my parents
not to do those things and so today
I am quiet. I won't tell my student about
the law school where I almost
but didn't go because no one I knew
who went got an actual lawyering job.
This is a pyramid scheme
and for it to work
you've got to find out too late.
Some of my friends got Hospitality.
Some got Human Services. The best
got doctoral degrees we learned
to regret. The worst understood early
what "con man" is short for.

My student says he's switching
to Psych and when I ask why,
he looks despondent. My god
is so large he shakes the earth
in that imperceptible way that is simply

the earth moving. Ice melting.
Our heart-calving when the Provost
talks about cutting any program
that will not sustain itself.
The Provost is a kind man
but it is too late. We are finding out
what the verb means,
to use, and about the edges
on the noun, *use*, its humble slide
into the question
with our bodies at the end.

Erin Hoover
93

⁹³ [Erin Hoover](#), "[What use are you?](#)," [Gargoyle Magazine](#)

On the hotel's terrace in the rain I smoked
an illicit cigarette, tried to record a poem
but the recycling truck's clink and glitter;

but the wind cycling through the palms.
Before that: the dive bar with bathroom
graffiti—*condoms don't protect the heart*

on the ladies room toilet paper dispenser
and *they sure don't* on the wall beneath it,
then the whole bar singing John Denver's

"Take Me Home, Country Roads." I came
from the mountains, hips thrust forward,
for warmth and commerce. I came for my

body's momentary impression in the sand.
No good can come from this neon center-
fold bar filled with strangers and lovers.

No good can come from the bodega after,
with its fluorescence, its couples stumbling
in, entwined, to peer at rows of beer and

yogurt behind glass. I am not an abstracted
self in the wet night. I am not a static
enterprise either, and as I move through

time and space, many things are vanishing
in exchange for a wanting with no end that
takes up residence inside me like a squatter.

Since I have no home here, I drive through
neighborhoods photographing For Rent signs
staked in lawns before entering a museum

with a Carolee Schneemann photo of herself
as Eve—look at the way snakes straddle
her breasts, how her lush 70s bush

runs up her belly. The skin of your room
must be breathless—I can taste the salt
and spit. This trip, I am all the daybreak hotel

beds in South Beach, Ocala, St. Augustine,
covers peeled back, pillows slightly dented.
Lover / Stranger you are not here and I miss

you—your body in every building, frame and
scaffolding, in the shushing of cars driving
the causeway, in the cigarette butts loosed

from lips and stubbed out in the sand, in the
hole of every doorway. If I execute works
in the dark by mouth would that be considered

an intervention? If I put my finger in whatever
divot? Yet no illumination is available. Yet
to lie down and become invisible, even under

the camera's eye. Yves Klein's blue women
pressed their nude bodies against sheets
of paper at his command. And his blue is not

night sky, not rubbed out dusk over the bay
stocked with cruise ships—definitely not the
moon under sodium vapor glare, even if it is

a Super Blue Blood Moon tonight hanging
above every neon parking garage in Miami.
Those women's bodies left behind a rocket ship,

a flower with wilted petals and erect pistil
(or is it stamen?), a blue-on-blue dildo
with a skirt around it. Yves, listen: we are making

art because we want to inhabit everything
and not fear it. Yves, we are television sets,
and how can I touch you—you're so far away.

We are all singing *take me home*, my head
on your bare chest, my hand down my own
pants. The bar, the screen saver, the night

where the air is like skin, a black hole, an
aperture, open, opening—my body a barrier
against light.

Erika Meitner

94

⁹⁴ Erika Meitner, "Médium Adam 25," *Swamp Pink*, collected in *Useful Junk*, BOA Editions, Ltd.

Early English History

Was too early: 8 a.m. Tuesday/Thursday, Elizabeth Hall.
I slouched half-asleep, first-rowed, demarcated
from the frat boys sitting in back so they could see
up the professor's skirt. In the mead hall after,
they surrounded, let me close if I shared my notes.
I was in love with the black-haired outfielder,
his backwards Braves cap, until he called me *fag*
for refusing to rate our teacher's underwear.
I didn't know how to fight back. I learned that semester
about the rebel queen Boudica, whose revolt razed
three Roman forts and the emperor's temple.
Tacitus provides motive: her husband dead, kingdom
annexed, Boudica flogged, her daughters raped.
The armies she led tortured its captives
but he doesn't say why. Some pain is negligible;
its survival cancels the wound of its birth.
Most accounts say she poisoned herself,
facing defeat. Cassius Dio gives her longer:
secreted away to the south, living unrecorded
for years with her daughters. The boys in my class
drew stick figures fucking on the wall by my room
after I came out. I woke at night to wash out
the crooked glyphs, the caption proclaiming

"AIDES kills faggs dead." I scrubbed until
what remained was fist-sized, vague and pink,
a map of the possible world. Our final project
was to cook an authentic English banquet,
eaten family-style at the professor's house.
At the appointed time in the year of our lord,
I came with dessert but did not see the moat
she'd installed in her foyer. The strawberry pudding
flew like an arrow, pink spurting everywhere,
especially across the faces of those boys whose names
were lost the moment I joined an insurrection
begun in AD 61 by a dissident queen. In the years
since my disappearance, I have cemented
my escarpments, foddered my canon, sewn up
my flag. I am painting my face, bluing my body
with woad. Warn them. I am coming
to punish my Romans.

James Allen Hall
95

⁹⁵ [James Allen Hall](#), "[Early English History](#)," collected in [Romantic Comedy](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Postcard with Photo of Samuel Beckett, Sent by a Friend

Samuel Beckett is unimpressed.
There was no delete key in his day.

He sits low, smoking inside a house,
not an ashtray in sight.

No one does that anymore, Sam,
I say. Who is going to sweep

your ash? He says nothing
but takes note, ashing instead

into my open mouth.
Sometimes I pose as if I'm screaming

and don't let any sound pour out.
I make the scream with my eyes

until what I'm afraid of becomes
afraid of me. He eyes me, sizing

my dirt skirt, but I'm done
with the past though it's stowed

itself like a mouse inside the ship
of my skin. If I was a man, I'd snap

my suspenders, I'd marry a broom.
I'd ash to watch her dance.

Erin Adair-Hodges
96

⁹⁶ [Erin Adair-Hodges](#), "[Postcard with Photo of Samuel Beckett, Sent by a Friend](#)," collected in [Every Form of Ruin](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

which surely comes as no surprise to anyone
in the town where I grew up. I hated
that place. All those two-story New Deal homes

laid out in grids between churches.
The town mall where we practiced baseball
in summer, football in fall,

learning early the value of muscle
& God: a prayer before every game.
I've never felt so vulnerable, my bowed head

a lie. We had moved there
from 700 miles away & I always knew
I would leave. My first girlfriend

dumped me because of God.
She was right. Our mailman stopped by
to witness to my mother

about the nature of love.
My friends slipped New Testaments
into my bag at sleepovers.

This isn't the whole story.
I still don't listen very well
though it's not true

that I hated it there.
That girl did teach me to kiss,
after all, the possibilities

of tongue & the small miracle
of holding hands in the dark;
she taught me to believe

in innocence. Each spring, the river
flooded. So much time has passed
& now I watch my own daughter

ignoring me. I wonder
who she will break up with & why.
Where will she feel at home?

I drove her through that town once
on our way to the ocean.
Predictably, everything was smaller

than I remembered, the whole
experience less meaningful
than I hoped. An entire town

in need of a fresh coat of paint.
If God was still there,
we did not see him.

Amorak Huey
97

⁹⁷ [Amorak Huey](#), "[Amorak Autocorrects to Amoral](#)," [Rogue Agent](#), collected in [Dad Jokes from the Late Patriarchy](#), [Sundress Publications](#)

Dear B,

This black trance where I lie like a cat, these arrows living naked in the after of my hands. Such resonance tempers the dark. I fever with impossibility. I fiddle with the antithesis of love. What lies in me is an armored starvation: I cringe at night. I go wild and pathological, schizophrenic as fire. The hiss you hear is my desire. I live on what exists before me, and I thrive. Nothing amounts to much. There are many of us, shaped brazen in the dark. Limbs bereft of significance. Visions within us weighing our hearts. Careless with the stampede in me, bleeding freely from the mouth, bellowing the anything down, risk practices taking my fingers delicately in its teeth. To kill me while I sleep. To sin differently. To kiss the hand of fate. Mute movements door my hands. Numb atoms dust my lovely death.

Jennifer Militello

98

⁹⁸ Jennifer Militello, "[Dear B. \[This black trance where I lie\]](#)," *Fusion*, collected in *A Camouflage of Specimens and Garments*, [Tupelo Press](#)

The Good Girl

Small humiliations: hair pulled, spanked
by her father, entered roughly by her husband,
mocked for her whimper. How did she stand it?
When she needed to kneel to the priest, when her mother
served crust dipped in milk: *poverty bread*.
Cardboard covered the holes in her shoes and she found
her peace in a rosary, mysteries on the large bead, murmurs
on the small. She was not there. She is not here.
I am holding her anyway for the first time at age 66
where she is: in a near-blue sky pinned with a gold star.

Joan Houlihan
99

⁹⁹ [Joan Houlihan](#), "[The Good Girl](#)," collected in [It isn't a Ghost if it Lives in Your Chest](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Thinking About How I Never Say the Word *Cunt*

Even though it fits neatly on the tongue
Like a penny or compressed tab of Diet Coke
Even though it is the kryptonite of syphilitic dictators
But never fiendish poets or burnt out actors
Callused invective of the heart
Stammering like a fleet of frat boys' loafered hooves
Thinking of Richard Burton
Who described Elizabeth Taylor's
Asshole with such tenderness
As if it were an injured fawn, tended to it
When it became infected
Enchanted by its geography and hymns
And learned to call it by its thousand balmy names
But never once uttered a syllable about her immaculate cunt
As in dream thief, spell
To protect what I love
As in tic I will acquire
When I am old and tired of holding the demons in
I will stutter *Cunt Cunt Cunt*
On the bright carriage of my unraveling
The word a sip, infusion
Safety valve, a reckoning
Palm of nickels clicked into a payphone
Mouthful of smoke blistering the air

Kendra DeColo

¹⁰⁰ [Kendra DeColo](#), "[Thinking About How I Never Say the Word *Cunt*](#)," [Great River Review](#), collected in [I am Not Trying to Hide My Hungers from the World](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Study in White

The sheriff grinds a breath mint between his molars,
his limestone thoughts, deep as the flooded quarry,
clouded as its water after hard rain.

He passes a hand across his chin, stubble
more salt than pepper now. Powdered with dust,
the squad car expresses his exhaust:

donuts sugar its dash,
a half-moon of ice wanes
in a Styrofoam cup of bourbon.

An officer inspects her French manicure,
then stretches to its limits a latex glove.
Pages of a notebook flutter
in a failed attempt to fly from her pen.

Socks lose their grip on the pale fact of shins.
Boot prints brim with ruin,
at the quarry's milky shoreline.

Hands of a watch meet at noon:

a face goes blank,
another loses its color

as a dark figure floats to the water's surface,
becomes tangible, the sun's mouth, open,
the moment it bites through the overcast.

Cindy King
101

¹⁰¹ [Cindy King](#), "[Study in White](#)," [Hawaii'i Review](#), collected in [Zoonotic](#), [Tinderbox Editions](#)

from “Deracination”

8. CANON

An artsy chick, she dressed
herself in “ethnic” patterned

skirts, read Plath, Sexton.
She scoured the library stacks

for Asian poets, seeking
a racial exemplar, an icon.

The sole result of her research,
one anthology: PAPER CRANES—

cherry trees, cheongsams,
celadon teacups: *Orientalist*

cliché, she snorted in disdain
(she had recently read Said...

or at least the introduction.)
At her high school commencement,

she received the Agnes Starcross
Poetry Award—THE AMERICAN

HERITAGE DICTIONARY
and a hundred-dollar check.

Then off to college. *Write what
you know*, said her workshop instructor.

Here’s some Seamus Heaney.
She tried writing about her dad,

her childhood, family dinners (instead
of *gim*, she wrote *nori*).

She studied critical race theory,
took part in a sit-in to coerce

the university to teach Asian-
American studies. (the upshot:

no dice.) She dated an initiate
of a college secret society,

then unearthed his cherished
stash of yellow-fever skinflicks

(NAKED ASIAN NAUGHTY HOTTIES
TAKE IT IN THE FACE!!!"). *It's erotica,*

not just porno, he insisted
when she ditched his ass,

*What, it's not politically correct
to have a type?* In her post-colonialism

seminar, she was taught to distrust
the commodification industry,

attempts to package Asianness
for Western consumption.

*As an artist of color, always ask
yourself: Who is my audience?*

the prof cautioned. *Is this authentic
interiority? Am I self-othering?*

Her new suitor was concentrating
in English (but pre-med!): ardent,

sincere. For the holiday season,
(nondenominational)

he gifted her a signed edition
of BEST AMERICAN POETRY (1996)

(editor: Adrienne Rich.)
Omigod, I adore her! Thanks!

In the introduction, Rich critiqued
the legions of columnar

*poems in which the anecdote
of an ethnic parent or*

*grandparent is rehearsed
in a generic voice*

*and format, whatever
the cultural setting.* She shut

the reader, cringing. A rush
of blood tinted her cheeks,

but (since she used self-tanner)
wasn't noticeable from the outside.

¹⁰² [Monica Youn](#), "[Deracination \(8. Canon\)](#)," [Pleiades](#), collected in [From From](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Making Love to Roget's Wife

We'd meet in a different cheap room.
Every time I had to swear I worked
with horses and used books to kill flies.

But nothing happened until
we heard Peter from the courtyard
below: "Strumpet, demirep, courtesan,
jade, wench...!"

Then she closed and barred
the whitewashed shutters
and stepped out of her only dress.

Ron Koertge
103

¹⁰³ [Ron Koertge](#), "[Making Love to Roget's Wife](#)," collected in [Vampire Planet](#), [Red Hen Press](#)

Below the Rim

Ants are hard at work
on the cicada at my feet.
It looks like the scorched husk
of a Humvee
swarming with insurgents,

a simile
which is about as close to the war
as I'm likely to get
unless somebody's shampoo blows up
my flight tomorrow, and I fall
in a sticky rain over Kansas,

where Intelligent Design is the hottest thing
since the Old Testament, where now and then
a coffin comes home

and a slumbering farm town breaks
into little explosions
of flags and roses.

One of my students
is spending a few weeks there,
back home in the cornfields,

before shipping out to Baghdad.
We all got a box in the sand
waiting for us, is the reason

he gave me for signing up last May,
and I was too stunned by the phrase,
this former offensive lineman's
borrowed eloquence, to tell him

how full of shit I thought he was,
how stupidly young
and in love with the thought of his doomed beauty.

And besides,
I was remembering Vietnam,
how my stomach shriveled,
how the yellow acid

seeped through my guts
as I watched the Tet Offensive
on the 6 o'clock news in the numb weeks
before my college deferment came through.

And so I said to the kid, whose grade
in my American Authors course
was a kind-hearted C,

Good luck to you then, feeling both
ridiculously old—the graying teacher
sending the young warrior to battle—
and simply ridiculous, for he was heading to Baghdad
and his box,

and I was heading over to the school gym
for a pick-up basketball game
with some other old guys
who gather there in the summer evenings,

still in love
with the smell of varnish and sweat,
the ancient insults, the give and take,

as we play our games, our elegies
for our own lost beauty,
with a cautious, measured devotion,
well below the rim.

George Bilgere
104

¹⁰⁴ [George Bilgere](#), "[Below the Rim](#)," collected in [The White Museum](#), Autumn House Press

Orange and Life in General

Noise does no good. The good makes no noise.
—Niccolo Castiglioni

The night the news about the blizzard came
he paid a friend to sleep inside his car
so that in the morning, when the car was buried,
someone would be inside to honk the horn,
and he would be outside to record what a car horn
sounded like buried beneath snow.

Parable #1: a man gets stuck inside a blizzard—
something that cuts the world down to its essence.
Afterwards, he says, I've haven't been living.
From now on, the whole world is my blizzard.
But the world is the world, and he spends the rest
of his life reminiscing about the blizzard.

Parable #2: At a party in New York, she's
the most beautiful thing in the world to him.
*I wouldn't sleep with you if you were the last person
on earth*, she says. *Then don't sleep with me*,
he says, *but come over and have some tea*.
And she does. And that's when the blizzard hits.

When the power returned after the New
York City blackout, sixty thousand
people had left their spouses for coworkers,
neighbors, nannies, and doormen.
Does the world teach us our essence? Or is
our essence what we teach the world?

Note to self: Watch more *Boy Meets World*.
Note to world: imagine if, instead of
ringing, a phone made the sound of a person
screaming. Every car horn, someone
screaming. Every television. Music
would be the sound of two people screaming.

He used to fall asleep at the movies
and then have to guess what was happening
when he woke up: she's an orchard's caretaker,
he's a textbook salesman who has run out
of textbooks. They're walking to an aquifer.
All the horses are gone from earth.

When the phone rings, how does he know
that it's you? Is it you? Or is it
the thing inside of him that wants it
to be you? If he picks up the receiver
and hears your voice, will he be able
to tell the difference? Parable #3.

At the party they go around and name
their favorite color and their greatest fear.
Mauve Death goes home with White Wilderness.
Green Drowning wants Black Marriage
but settles for Blue Acid. Pink Failure
spills merlot on Orange Life in General.

The phone rings. It's the voice of someone
who isn't afraid of anything, but to you
it sounds like screaming. If it doesn't
start snowing soon, she is going to leave you.
People used to make it snow by dancing.
You can make it snow by falling asleep.

P. Scott Cunningham
105

¹⁰⁵ [P. Scott Cunningham](#), "[Orange and Life in General](#)," collected in [Ya Te Veq](#), [The University of Arkansas Press](#)

Pastoral

Where did it start? In a city of gardens & muck.
When I held someone close, in watery light.
We drank & I bled all the way home.
Red-orange light on my legs. Oh, wow
that blink-blink of bright, that flip of the pulse.
Where did it start? In the garden, the muck
where insects jumped in starry arcs. My body
took shape, then. A greenhouse I entered alone.
We drank & I bled all the way home.
I wore so many clothes. Cotton, cotton, wool.
I burned in my skin like a stone. How, exactly?
Where did it start? There, in the muck
no one saw how we blazed into poppies.
Light raked through our bellies like combs.
We drank & I bled all the way home.
Now, I put myself to bed. My dreams
are coins to dispense as I like. On water. On light.
In a city of gardens & muck, you can start
to feel rich. You can start to feel right
& tumble for years down the hill of your life. You ask
Where does anything start? In muck. In a garden.
You drink the drinks & bleed. You're foam.

Kiki Petrosino

106

¹⁰⁶ [Kiki Petrosino](#), "[Pastoral](#)," [Pangyrus](#), collected in [Witch Wife](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Waste My Life

sleep, boredom, gossip, cruelty
imaginary feuds and small resentments
various, complex plans that amount to nothing
at some point, every poet has to admit art is just a distraction from the
boredom of life

every morning I get dressed
and I walk past the road outside the Salvation Army
overflowing with toys and clothes and plastic crap
I think they probably deserve it for being so explicitly
homophobic in their core organizational values

I work all day in a bookshop
each night when I come home
it's dark, and the rain is falling
covering the world in black diamonds
some days I feel so deep inside my life I don't think I'll ever
get out again

I never read the Russians but I have read most of the
Babysitters Club
I can't remember the meaning of poetry
other than it's a broken telephone
with which to call the dead
and tell them a joke

life is great
it's like being given a rare and historically significant flute
and using it to beat a harmless old man to death with

I used to think the more something hurt, the more
meaningful it was
but I never learned anything useful from pain
I just drank a bottle of wine and tried to fall asleep
when you're unhappy you can't think
pain is just boredom with the stars turned up

there's not much I like in this world
I'm always walking away too early in a conversation and
having to yell apologetically
back over my shoulder

I don't think good art comes from happiness either
but who said good art was the point

Hera Lindsay Bird

107

¹⁰⁷ [Hera Lindsay Bird](#), "[Waste My Life](#)," [The Nation](#), collected in [Pamper Me to Hell & Back](#), [The Poetry Business](#)

Does Life Exist Independent of Its Form?

What is immortal?
And if it is immortal how is it that
it has an incurable disease
and wanders around
a total aberration, a mutant, while
the catamount vanishes from the species.
Is it that we live at the top of the food chain, alone
with no link to anything above us,
no elegant forfeiture in the mouth of the tiger?
Or is our problem that
we do not actually live
at the top of the food chain.
And are devoured daily by thought. And time.
Holy and obscene; unmentionable.

Time does not go beyond its maiden name.
And anyway, right now, everything tastes good.
All the male poets' poems, and dirty, dirty chocolate layer cake.
I swallow it with a glass of milk.
The crumb crawls down my throat
and enters me. The power of Christ compels,
 not I—but the wish to be changed—
everything is challenged
by the sudden flame of joy—
how uncomfortable we are with happiness.
But Darling, you're staggering.
Your temple mouth is being forsworn.
Sister, crying in the hammock
because your lover will not come—
the children are screaming and running with blue guns
in the air, with little cuts on their feet.

And you, little mole angel, restless song,
smashed idol, bronzed cat head
on the hood of a car headed into the ravine
driven by our ancestor's dark awe of a comet—

how can someone *not* become
heartbreaking in one sense
of the word—not find
they are a stranger in their own household
of truly
 unnamable need?

Bianca Stone
108

¹⁰⁸ Bianca Stone, "[Does Life Exist Independent of Its Form?](#)," collected in [What is Otherwise Infinite](#), Tin House Books

The Stereoscopic Man Takes a Lover

It's an orgy	with the mirror
in the room	She asks it
to tell her	whose shoulder
she has	between her
teeth	Or could it be
her own	Is the ceiling
getting	closer
Whose name	is being
moaned	against
the mattress	Why
did the blinds	stroke their
shadows over her	mons
When	did she come
How	did she come
Who	did she come

Nicky Beer

109

¹⁰⁹ [Nicky Beer](#), "[The Stereoscopic Man Takes a Lover](#)," collected in [Real Phonies and Genuine Fakes](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

Local Woman Makes a Casserole

"Clark Ford would like to share that his wife is still mad at him for no reason." —Radio announcement, somewhere between Birmingham and Memphis

So I turned a little feral.
Turned a little burn it to the ground.
The bridge. The nest. The rubber to your glue,
what have you. So I put a cone of shame
around his roses. Chopped the parsnips
harder than I really needed to.
So I called the mushrooms motherfuckers.
Started using words like *squamous*.
Tombsome. *Slew*. And saying *stop*.
Stop picking at your snake tattoo.
Stop playing "Mr. Soul." Stop jacking off
in front of the dog. Stop asking me
where's *tombsome* in the dictionary.
Did I turn a little vicious? Sure.
Mixed sawdust in the breadcrumbs.
Printed out his history.
Made a shirt that said *Well boo fucking hoo*
then made the dog one, too.
So I went a little crazy with the sage,
I'm talking floor to ceiling, smudging every room.
Ask me how long I'd waited
for the right occasion. Ask me
how long I stayed the same, the same.
Like a plate commemorating
Time's Big Bummer. Like the placid lake
of someone else's summer.

Caki Wilkinson

110

¹¹⁰ Caki Wilkinson, "Local Woman Makes a Casserole," collected in [The Survival Expo](#), [Persea Books](#)

Reception

Our students, paid to cook,
drizzle yellow batter.
They manage not to look
at us as if we matter.

The table talkers switch
from code to crude to gun.
A colleague mutters, “Bitch.”
Mascara starts to run.

Harmonicas like dust,
a fire like a saint—
and academic lust,
conventional as paint.

A ragged, tweedy cat
lies on the Murphy bed.
Goodbye to all of that,
the weak; the chic; the dead.

Randall Mann
111

¹¹¹ [Randall Mann](#), “[Reception](#),” collected in [Breakfast with Thom Gunn](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)

This Is Not an Elegy

At sixteen, I was illegal and brilliant,
my fingernails chewed to half-moons.
I took off my clothes in a late March
field. I had secret car wrecks,
secret hysteria. I sipped anger
and called it cream. In backseats
I learned the alchemy of guilt, lust,
and distance. I was unformed and total.
I swore like a sailor. But slowly the cops
stopped coming around. The heat lifted
its palms. The radio lost some teeth.

Now I see the landscape behind me
as through a Claude glass—
tinted deeper, framed just so, bits
of guilt edging the best parts.
I see my unlined face, a thousand
film stars behind the eyes. I was
every murderess, every whip-
thin alcoholic, every heroine
with the silver tongue. Always young
Paul Newman's best girl. Always
a lightning sky behind each kiss.

Some days I watch myself
in the third person, speak to her
in the second. I say: I will
meet you in sleep. I will know you
by your stillness and your shaking.
By your second-hand gown.
By your bruises left by mouths
since forgotten. This is not
an elegy because I cannot bear
for it to be. It is only a tree branch
against the window. It is only a cherry
tomato slowly reddenning in the garden.
I will put it in my mouth. It will
be sweet, and you will swallow.

Catherine Pierce

112

¹¹² [Catherine Pierce](#), "[This Is Not an Elegy](#)," [Blackbird](#), collected in [Famous Last Words](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

At Poetry Readings I'm Always Drunk

I put on lipstick & ride my bike to the reading for the erotic juxtaposition.
I have conversations & pretend I smoke cigarettes by smoking them.
I rise from my chair with Holly-Golightly-type-laughter-&-grace
& hope I am being sexualized by everyone.
I knock back a shot & sit somewhat still listening to people read
like capital-P-poets & buy their books mostly out of confusion.
Sometimes, the poems aren't afraid of mystery
& people get dense with quiet.
On coasters, I write down the lines I'm convinced I'll reuse later, like:
I write to be ancient and alone.
To the readers, I speak ineptly about how happy I am
to have met them. How honestly I want to live
& not too quickly. From the other side of the big room,
I watch myself mumble self-consciously. Smile
stupidly. In my mind, I'm already riding my bike into the old night,
like a drunk astronaut toward the moon.

Katie Condon
113

¹¹³ [Katie Condon](#), "[At Poetry Readings I'm Always Drunk](#)," *Bloom*, collected in [Praying Naked](#), [Ohio State University Press](#)

The Skin of the Face Is That Which Stays Most Naked, Most Destitute

But it's in perfectly fine shape, the face in the mirror said—

When I first acquired you, yes, ok, years ago,
on a lark, and you were just something to wear then,
to the store, or the park, not alone in the dark.

Catherine Barnett

114

¹¹⁴ [Catherine Barnett](#), "[The Skin of the Face Is That Which Stays Most Naked, Most Destitute](#)," collected in [Human Hours](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Wet Leaves

But by Sunday
the old cat had slipped into a black torpor
and would not move from the sofa

though the children stroked her and spoke to her softly
and gave her bits of ham,
which she only wheezed at.
That's how he knew it was time to put her down,
what else could he do?

+

Outside, the leaves fell,
ticketing the cars parked along the avenue,
sweet hum of flies over a decayed black mass of leaves,
how he'd once loved autumn,
the smell of distant
burning, the neighborhood suffused—

+

The cat turned her green eyes
upward
toward the lamp-like faces
of the children bending over her,
if only she could
move her legs, if only she could float
across the room and up the stairs
as she'd done a thousand times before,
into the linen closet—

+

though it was Sunday,
and the vet closed tomorrow, too,
a rainy Christmas.

It seemed a cruelty
to prolong the cat's suffering until Tuesday,

he could barely stand the gasping at night,
it sounded human

+

how his older brother fought for air
nights in the bunk above him,
that deep whistling,
even in sleep, his brother never could breathe;
finally,
he'd die of that—

+

as sometimes a falling leaf
stuck to the wet windowpane, and then another, leaves
gathering on the sill
in a light rain late in the year,
Such oak trees, he'd thought years ago,
when first he saw the house he now shared
with his two daughters
and a dying cat—

+

When the girls went to sleep at last,
he took the cat to the garage
and set her in the corner, wrapped in a blanket.
For a while, she closed her eyes and seemed to sleep,
and he was glad of that—

+

He'd made such a leaf pile,
all the leaves from the yard,
and then he'd raked leaves from other yards onto a tarp
and dragged those over, too,
and all the boys leaped
into them,
and even his older brother came out
and jumped in, too—

+

The smell of rain and leaf rot, it's the best solution,
he told himself
as he turned the engine on
and let the car idle in the closed garage.

Then, in the living room,
he poured himself a drink,
it was the most humane way,
what else could he do? And another drink—
shoot it in the head?—
as the room grew small—

Tommy? he'd said into the evening,
Tommy? but Tommy didn't answer,
and the leaf pile
loomed in the moonlight, larger now than it seemed before
and black, and deep.
He was almost crying, because
he was alone,
their parents out for dinner and Tommy
in charge, and it was so late, the leaves
shifting in the wind,
they shifted again,

the car idling in the garage,
how long would it take?
The sound of ice melting in his glass.
How he loved his daughters, upstairs—

and then there was Tommy at last
rising from the leafpile, laughing, *Scared you*, he said,
Scared you,

leaves in his hair, on his sweater,
and what could he do but pretend, *No*,
no, I was just wondering where you were,
and Tommy laughing,

You thought I was dead.

So an hour later, when he opened the garage,
the cat wasn't on her blanket,
and it took him several minutes to find her carcass,
squeezed into the corner
behind the rakes.

157

Ceremonial

Delirious,
touch-starved,
 I pinch a mole
 on my skin, pull it
off, like a bead—
 I pinch & pull until
 I am holding
a black rosary. Prayer
 will not cool
 my fever.
Prayer will not
 melt my belly fat,
 will not thin
my thighs.

A copper-
faced man once
 called me beautiful.
 Stupid,
stupid man.
 I am obese. I am
 worthless.
I can still feel
 his thumb—
 warm,
burled—moving
 in my mouth.
 His thumbnail
a flake

of sugar
he would not
 allow me to swallow.
 Desperate
for the sting of snow
 on my skin,
 rosary
tight in my fist,
 I walk into
 a closet, crawl
into a wedding dress.
 Oh Lord,
here I am.

Eduardo C. Corral

116

116 [Eduardo C. Corral](#), "[Ceremonial](#)," [Poem-A-Day](#), collected in [Guillotine](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

A Blessing for the Neighborhood

The ceiling fan in my bedroom warms up
like an old person, complains for awhile
before its blades chatter and cough air.
A working fan can make anyone religious
and when I feel religious I say things:

 bless my mighty neighborhood,
 bless the morning glory, and God bless
 the fucking PTA. Bless the conspiracy
 of socks and underwear disappearing
 from my bedroom, bless the ice cream

truck's music scratching its nails
down the neighborhood's alleys.
Bless the hummingbird's brain
and the colonies of seeds slipping deeper
under the surface of the watermelon.

The Hawaiian shirts inside my closet
beg to be left alone.
The maggots fashion intricate
kingdoms out of the chicken
bones and diapers overflowing

my garbage. Across the street
my Vietnamese neighbor hums Elvis
while picking butter lettuce from her garden.
This world, so much brighter
than the one I left behind,

that freighter of oil and insomnia
overrunning the docks, ripping
through shipyards, dragging men
and women into the air.
I'm writing a letter to the children

in my neighborhood who refuse to sleep,
the little ones in monkey pajamas
who believe in skeletons on the roof
pulling up shingles as they advance
on the upstairs windows. A letter

to my friends climbing the porches
of strangers' houses carrying cleaning solution
and the ghosts of polar bears. My colleagues
and confidantes, my fighter pilots, my organs
wrapped inside where it's warm

and cabinet-dark. To anyone
who will listen, in the kingdom
where I am little more than a mosquito
dropping its landing gear
on the forearm of the beloved.

Jay Nebel
117

¹¹⁷ Jay Nebel, "[A Blessing for the Neighborhood](#)," collected in [Neighbors](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

How has motherhood changed the way you write?

The baby sleeps
and cries and sleeps

and cries in fifteen-
minute increments

for three hours
and wakes, unrested,

wanting something,
something I cannot

give him. Meanwhile
the sheets hold their

famous crumple,
their human scent.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen
the enchilada casseroles

wait in the freezer
for their big moment,

though casseroles
cannot wait

because casseroles
have no desires.

Look at the oranges
in the white bowl

on the table. Suddenly
they've been there

for weeks and have
hardened, been

rendered inedible,
despite appearances.

Suddenly a smell
comes strongly

from a hidden place
in the backyard

and we cannot
discover it and will

never discover it.
All we can do is say

Something died
out there every time

we go in or out the back
door. Suddenly it's deep

winter and the baby
has produced one crude

tooth and the trees
in front of the house

across the street
are bare of leaves

and the people we knew
have moved back

to Houston and the house
has been on the market

for going on three months.
One day, the blinds were

open all day and all
night, the empty house

emitting light, staged
by experts, soft

throws folded
over armchairs. Still,

no takers.

Carrie Fountain

118

¹¹⁸ [Carrie Fountain](#), "[How has motherhood changed the way you write?](#)," collected in [The Life](#), [Penguin Books](#)

The Teacher Says Poems about Dreams Are Boring

for Richard Howard

But I dream about my teacher. We're reading Tennyson
who falls out from his train car in ecstasy to see the sand
that is the sea. Were we not aware that he could not see?
That this fact blurs the quality of his images, which is his

particular beauty? We drop down into the Kraken then.
It gets to me. Everyone is writing down everything. I never
used to take notes but now can't stop writing everything
he says down. My cheeks pressed so hard now against

my pillowcase my face will surely wear these lines once
it wakes. But in sleep you feel no shame. Richard could
take you into Tennyson and make you feel a man carving
his mother up in a bathtub was okay. In this dream, a man

is carving a Mother Mary scrimshaw into his mother's
thigh. It makes perfect sense to me, his need. I'm wanting
him to go harder at her. I'm not worried he's hurting her.
Richard Howard is still alive. I'm lying in bed next to one

of my husbands. By this point, I have had many husbands.
I hear that nowadays Richard can't remember anything.
A friend on the phone after we lost Adam used the word
aphasia. Richard says, *High school is, as everyone knows,*

a waste of time. I never got the lotus-eaters until I realized
I went to high school with them. Now I feel sick thinking
about them. I block them on my social media. I want to live
past 50. I'm only 24. As usual, I'm drinking too much. My

boyfriend at the time lands in jail. I don't have the cash or
know-how to bail him out. His crime is he didn't pay a bunch
of parking tickets. He calls and calls. My face acquires a tic.
I'm taking notes across from Richard at that seminar table

in 1994. We write down everything he says. We cannot get
over the luxurious Rossettis. Now he's taking us deep into
Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Richard says, *But, my dear, you*
are of course aware that ? We are not. He knows

so much more than any of us. The rumor is Richard learned
the entire French language in the backseat of a car on a road
trip from Ohio to Florida as a kid. Richard is now furious with
me. I've accidentally messed up the order of photocopies he's

passed around, and his eyes stab me from behind their round frames. *Maybe someday you should go to the library.* Now all our eyes drop to floor and hands. I'm so angry I almost walk out. Then I apologize. During class break a classmate says it

happens to everybody. *Kiss the ring*, another friend says. I am terrified of Richard. Should I go back to class? *You have to kiss the ring*, the friend insists. Years later I'm sitting in Richard's apartment in New York. He says he has not heard from my ex-

husband, the fish, in years. Who adored Richard. This husband owes much of his career to Richard. Who is hurt. It seems odd to me, disgraceful even, he has neglected Richard. All the while he's been persistent as a roach in my dreams, appearing nightly

in the kitchen of my mind, fluorescent in the audacity of his pain. Last night he lay on my bed with his shirt unbuttoned while we chatted about which rivers are the hardest to swim up. What scales feel like when they loosen. He's wearing the expensive

watch I gave him. I slop on the bed, roll in moistened sheets. Getting older, the skin gets hot and wet, spills out its regrets from a bank account of sweat. Back then, I worried all the time I wasn't smart enough. Back then, I was worried I didn't have

a husband yet. Which bores Richard, making it hard to explain how my ex would do this thing where he'd jut his chin at me in emphasis, causing this barely discernible tic beneath my left eye. Richard shrugs. I wake up to pee. The last time I ran into

Richard, at KGB, he shrank from me as if I moved with a disease. Did he not recognize me? I wanted to press my flesh beyond its reserve, embrace him, but I was still afraid of him. It's 1994 again. I'm 24. *You have improved*, Adam Zagajewski says, after

months of our meeting weekly over coffee in the bookstore café. He has seen all the poems. He says it like a coroner examining a corpse to identify the cause of death. My writing is still very bad. I'm sitting on Richard's red couch while he reads my poems. His

dog, a pug named Maude, licks my hand. He asks what Cynthia said in workshop. *She didn't like them.* He says, *Well, I think they're quite good.* And just like that he says he's going to publish one in the *Western Humanities Review*. Decades later, explaining to

a student how to better describe the plunder of panties from a dresser drawer in his poem, I feel Richard's stare land like a beam on my shoulder. He stands in the doorway. I am 49. I kiss his ring. I kiss it hard. Now he cannot not recognize me.

Cate Marvin

¹¹⁹ [Cate Marvin](#), "[The Teacher Says Poems about Dreams Are Boring](#)," collected in [Event Horizon](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

One Sentence on Pain

I wanted to write one sentence about pain I woke up and my knee and back ached from the cool fan and I was trying to explain it to my wife who said her stomach hurt and my father in law limped in with one elbow bent into an el on his back and pushed us all out of the way with his slow I can't see anyone else in the world walk and his hearing aids left on the bedroom counter to make his morning toast and jelly and our daughter was doing her morning pacing back and forth that made me ask her do your ankles ever hurt as I worry about feet since her brother was born with an ankle deformity that makes his feet stick out like some marvelous aquatic creature and her sister was born with hip dysphasia and shortened muscles so she walks up on her toes like a constant ballerina about to go into point but no no she says my daughter her feet never hurt though she says my eyes hurt and I say why do your eyes hurt and she says because I'm looking at your face and I raise my hand and joke I'll teach you about respect for the elderly I'll teach you about pain which was of course the initial thesis but she's already running away laughing she is so fast she could probably win the special Olympics or the regular one she has so little feeling for pain at least the physical kind which I read is common with Asperger's children, though I know she feels a pain a long aloneness at times when she was growing up but now she has a lot of friends the girls her age in the neighborhood who oddly seem to cling to each other's eccentricities a sort of tribal protectiveness against the things of this world so I know at least these years, these brutal years with her mother often in the hospital where they ask her mother about her pain what number is your pain and is there a number she once shouted that means just shoot me and I said like horses which made her laugh and the nurse laugh a little and then they gave her some morphine which if you go off it too soon will cause you immense pain as the pain of the world which has no number for even though it is in the body pain is an abstraction like the cold my wife asks me is the room cold and I say no I'm not cold and she says I think it's freezing it's not not freezing when I say I'm ok it's an abstraction temperature to a point of perception that can be measured measured to dismiss what you feel to quantify your suffering and give it a shape so when she says she's cold and I put the blanket on her and I put my arms around her shoulders and press my body against hers giving her my degrees and how every day I can only hope in the same way I can take some of the pain she carries and add it to my own the pain of this world which is why I tell my daughter we are here not for ourselves and she said I'm not here for you I'm here for the snacks I know she is one of the shards of light from the first vessel shattered that we are and that these words, well I don't know if I ever got to what I wanted to say, except to say we laugh together despite the pain and if I ever knew or know except to tell you a stranger out there suffering you are not alone and despite the aches and growing old let us wheel or cane or limp out of the rain and the ground covered with worms and the dark earth drowning let us sit simply on the unfolded chairs under the awning and tell stories of the people we were and if we moan or cough it will be shared and never any of us the kind of people who shoot horses.

Sean Thomas Dougherty

120

¹²⁰ [Sean Thomas Dougherty](#), "[One Sentence on Pain](#)," [Spoonie Journal](#)

from "A Concordance of Leaves"

)

& though the bride's arms & legs will itch
with arabesques & scripts

)

a second skin won't be scratched away
& though her mother will be angry

)

the women & children will wait
until all the men have been served

)

& even the bride plays a role she only
learns on hennaed heels

)

& though tradition is an invisible
author only the old hands hear

[...]

)

& though the sun will be too bright for the bride
to see beyond her own eyes

)

& though the bullet in the groom will begin
to hatch in his side, & the stitches in his skull

)

will singe another verse in the book of dreams,
& though the bride's questions will beak their shells

)

years from now, now, now let there be dancing
in circles, let the village become arms flung

)

drawing bodies to bodies & let heads nod
& eyes widen, which we translate as meaning:

Philip Metres
121

¹²¹ [Philip Metres](#), "[A Concordance of Leaves \[& though the bride's arms\]](#)," collected in [Shrapnel Maps](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Dance Party at the Public Glasshouse

Wine between cacti and carnivorous flytraps,
our bodies syncing to the DJ's bad decisions,
I can't stop getting turned on

by the idea of myself
somewhere without neighbors,
out by a river called Rogue or Big something.

I'm in a greenhouse corner with K,
her perfect American jeans
and baby-eyes that widen

when she sees something surprising.
Lights, snaked through the pots,
color our faces with neon blinks.

There are lots of petable leaves
and she would like to get married
to a hypothetical being, grow a human, the whole shebang.

We talk about how frightening this is to want
and we talk about horses,
a topic I know as an idea and she knows actually,

kind of like how we both know marriage,
but opposite. And Out There like ideas
the bears are. And the solitudes are.

And her future spouse. And the fish I could stab in the head
myself to gauge if I should ever eat flesh
again. In Here is a pleasure

I'm allowing to continue. O Cowardice,
there's one plant in this conservatory
made of glass, and I've found it.

Gabrielle Bates

122

¹²² [Gabrielle Bates](#), "[Dance Party at the Public Glasshouse](#)," [Virginia Quarterly Review](#), collected in [Judas Goat](#), [Tin House Books](#)

The Week of Bombs

I tell my friend anything on Beacon.

That I found 1983 beach novels so sexy
with embossed letters and vertical cracks,
the alphabet of love, for horn dog kids.

That I freak out all night about different things
and feel glad that the birds make a racket.

Days after the bomb, we drive around town
and are still hopeless sad jokers,
still starting a strange momentum.

W C. Fields is still funny. Og Ogilby is.
The whole look of cowboy boots
and sundresses seems good for the human spirit.

I remember a lady who put one boot on a trunk
and pulled her dress over head
with practically no hands.
Her boots were blue
and her hair was brown,

I would rather lose one arm
than a leg, but would take two
arms over two legs. Who gets to choose?

The talk, the actions, the deeds, the desires
are all that remain, the important stuff.
The glove compartment is a good idea.

To say otherwise is a demonstration.

David Blair
123

¹²³ [David Blair](#), "[The Week of Bombs](#)," collected in [True Figures](#), [MadHat Press](#)

The Romantics

I can't see all of human experience
in a bird's nest and if I were to describe
something as "romantic," most likely
what I mean is "damp." Beauty is less
important to me as the jagged coastline
of my heart stretches out into a long
thin line: more surface area where birds
can rest, where anything can rest. When
I was married I fantasized about calling
the numbers on For Rent signs: "One BR w/
W/D all utilities incl" was a dark, magical wood.
The still and empty windows; the dream
of scratched blank wooden floors and appliances
that were mine, mine, mine; a view through
trees for no face but mine. Now my head
is filled with as many empty houses as I dream
as I creak around their closets, dangerous balconies,
the dark tragic corners of their basements.
There is even one cathedral. I don't worship
there, but sometimes I go inside to listen
to the rain, the grass flattening on the hill,
the bloodthirsty wind.

Julia Story
124

¹²⁴ [Julia Story](#), "[The Romantics](#)," [Xavier Review](#), collected in [Spinster for Hire](#), [The Word Works](#)

It's Just a Guess

so the record diminuendos
on its own & the old notes
in the lead-out seem
less summery. The latch
relatching its familiar up
& in as the LP stops.
It's easy to overlook
the arm returning since
it doesn't have any place
else to go. Local spiders
corner their satisfactions
& the hallway is less lavender,
fewer love notes bleating
in the wind ensemble.
Nobody talks about
adolescence's actual smell
in the preamble. One
weekday you're sniffing
in a food court way up
on the north side, ordering
a crummy slice & a pop
while the teenage version
of you behind the counter
checks sexts on a greasy
phone. "Let's Stay Together"
is playing & the kid doesn't
know any of the words.
The next: you're slow-
dancing inside another
country's consonants
as its mountains stand
back in an unpronounceable
stack. Somewhere between,
the record begins its wet
yesterdays again. I guess
I'm doing fine, I say whispery
as static behind the door
I'm still closing. All nine
volts in the vocal cords went
out again, so there's not
a lot to say while music
circles this way. Maybe
love is more vernacular
than secular anyway.

Adrian Matejka

125

¹²⁵ [Adrian Matejka](#), "[It's Just a Guess](#)," [Great River Review](#), collected in [Somebody Else Sold the World](#), [Penguin](#)

This Spud's For You

1.

Of *solanum tuberosum*, that vagrant vegetable,
the Odysseus of tubers, the lumpy pill of the poor
and starving, the shape-shifting and soothing potato,
I sing. For all the long years it lay locked
in the cool vault of the Andes, above 11,000
feet, where maize won't grow, where the Indians
ate the fattest and best and planted the runts,
so that when the first Europeans held one
it was but a starchy pebble, the Indians
no doubt had a potato song, but the Europeans
brought back to those who had hoped for gold
a mute, misshapen, marble-sized seed crop
and it was reviled. How many times have we met
the news that would save us with contumely?
Thus did Europe greet the immigrant potato.
Not mentioned in the Bible, cousin to nightshade,
it was *flatulent and indigestible... , pasty*
and naturally insipid; it might prove good to swine.
It was an Egyptian fruit whose cultivation
may possibly have some value in the colonies,
and it was a lurch on the path to hell,
according to Nietzsche: *A diet which consists*
predominantly of rice leads to the use of opium,
just as a diet which consists predominantly
of potatoes leads to the use of liquor.
It was Ireland's *lazy root*, and it ruined
Irish cuisine: *Bread is scarcely ever seen,*
and the oven is unknown. It was, in short,
the durable food of the poor and swarthy,
the bread of vegetables, not scarce, a stay
against famine, bland, despised by the rich.
But in Saxony and Westphalia, 1640,
when all the earth around lay acrid
from twenty-three of the Thirty Years
War, when human and animal corpses lay
swarming with worms, gnawed by birds,
wolves and dogs, for there was nobody
to bury them, pity them or weep for them,
Spanish soldiers arrived with a few potatoes.
When they gave potatoes to the peasants,
these unfortunates began by eating them
just as they were. A little later they planted them.

2.

I sing of Pedro de Cieza de Leon, one
of Pizarro's men, who first among Europeans
sang our rustic root crop in his *Chronicle*

of Peru (1553). And of Sir Francis Drake,
who took unknowingly on board at Cartagena,
in 1586, a few potatoes, and later took on board
in Virginia one Thomas Hariot, who noticed them,
and gave some to John Gerard (his famous *Herball*,
1597, thus misnamed “the Virginia potato”).
Did Hariot give some to his boss, Sir Walter
Raleigh, who may then have become first
to plant them in Ireland, on his land
at Youghal, near Cork, late in 1586?
Did Raleigh make a gift to Queen Elizabeth
of some potatoes, and did the befuddled
royal cook discard the tuber and serve
the leaves, tasting like nasty cress?
Of what I do not know I do not sing,
for I have seen what foolish things
many a famous man and fancy writer said
about the potato, and am chastened.

3.

Thus I do not sing Antoine Augustin
Pamientier, the publicist of the potato,
a military pharmacist and pamphleteer,
hero of much Gallic potato lore,
almost all of it wrong, for he did not
charm Marie Antoinette by twining
potato flowers in her hair, nor give
Louis XVI potato flowers for his birthday
(August 23—those would have been wan blooms),
nor did he serve to Benjamin Franklin
a meal in which every course was concocted
from potatoes, though he probably
presided over a like feast once at least.
The tireless potato flak was born to hustle,
that’s all, and thus odds were he’d find
later in life a better project than
getting himself noticed by the great
with, as his dull escutcheon, the blunt
lumpy, uningratiating spud. Later
he introduced vaccination against smallpox
in the army, and today his name survives
attached to a soup, a hash and an omelet.

4.

I sing the canny potato, already buried
and thus not burned or trampled by invading
armies. The submarine of the loam,
it bears silently its cargo of carbohydrates
while soldiers and hunters of grouse
and tax assessors conduct important
business overhead. No wonder the poor

love the obdurate tuber, for they share
with it many a survival skill and enemy.
When the knell of the potato blight
rang and rang through starving Ireland,
the potato hunkered down, the lumpy *arriviste*,
blind as a thumb, soft cousin to the stone,
the mineral wealth of the Emerald Isle,
the dull, bland, satisfying food
that Brillat-Savarin proclaimed
only a protection against famine
(only?!), and it spent its three heroisms—
it waited, it grew a little, it flourished—
and the blight was defeated. The plump,
misshapen stowaway, the wily, lumpy
little *picaro*, the extender of stews
and thickener of soups, the sturdy,
reliable, ugly and invincible potato,
who would not sing this manna among tubers?
We have heard them quoted in this very poem,
and there may be others like them,
though perhaps they are not good singers,
and in any case, you and I, gentle readers,
we can lift our voices. All together now....

William Matthews
126

¹²⁶ William Matthews, "[This Spud's For You](#)," [New England Review](#), collected in [Selected Poems and Translations](#), Ecco

I Am Giving Up Poetry

*But he that writes of you, if he can tell
That you are you, so dignifies his story.
—Sonnet 84, Shakespeare*

I am giving up poetry for kissing you, I mean it
When your body nears mine, metaphors are tedious nitpickers
Similes as useless to me as an IUD from the seventies
I don't want representation I want to make out in parking lots

When you touch my breasts, sonnets are painfully brief
Epics dull and long, too many battles, I long to be alone with you
For just an hour, no allusions to Yeats, just your weight on mine
There's no subtlety to my intentions, no puns, no ambiguity

There's no time for rhymes! The ice shelves have slid into the sea
Total hive collapse, don't you know I want to embrace you
Not ennobling truths? I don't want prizes or to be read by future girls
My words mean only what they say, this is my New Realism

It's not very political yet it's urgent and you are you
I have critical work to do like licking your sweet face

Camille Guthrie
127

¹²⁷ [Camille Guthrie](#), "[I Am Giving Up Poetry](#)," [Interim: A Journal](#), collected in [Diamonds](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Projection

Ten tons of loss are couched within the beaming old lady.
Where you see them is not where things are.
Where you go looking is not where they are.
Read Heidegger, he'll tell you better than I could,
if you can get through the bric-a-brac.
The rain turns to snow then back to rain.
I project truth and honor and pity onto the weather.
The earth begins its apology.
I put a magnifying glass to my husband's sleep mumbling.
People have been doing this forever.
Another student begins *Since the dawn of mankind*,
which is another way of saying *I don't know where to start*.
The wedding gushes like a waterfall of brackish water.
When I was young, I would vomit all the time,
but now my body stores anxiety deep in its bedrock.
As I run the dishwasher and take out the recycling,
I can hear a distant bird chanting its sad song.

Lauren Shapiro
128

¹²⁸ [Lauren Shapiro](#), "[Projection](#)," collected in [Arena](#), [Cleveland State University Poetry Center](#)

The Slimness of Our Chances

The delicate status of our couches.
The easily offended elbows of favorite sweaters.

A sudden note that reminds you of fifteen years ago.
Hovering in the first snow outside Hawkeye's.

Lost like a bus in fog. Lost but still dance-ready.
Trying to memorize distinct coordinates.

Giving up in approximately seven minutes.
The unyielding nature of thinking, the hot of glass.

Battle between feeling and reason and feeling.
They call it the upper hand, but it's always down low.

Was there even a DJ, or was the music internal?
Nightmare of an empty hive in a women's restroom.

Nightmare of conversations in a women's restroom.
Don't ask me about my dress or hip bones.

Sometimes it's downright impossible to be authentic.
Every new sentence begins with *Can I talk?*

I was a hair model not a hand or helmet model.
Even my bed was from the Rent-a-Center basement.

Panic about junior high locker combinations.
Will we ever go back into a disconnected payphone.

Mary Biddinger
129

¹²⁹ Mary Biddinger, "[The Slimness of Our Chances](#)," [Court Green](#), collected in [Department of Elegy](#), Black Lawrence Press

First

He stood in the sulphur baths, his calves
against the stone rim of the pool
where his half-full glass of scotch stood, his
shins wavering in the water, his torso
looming over me, huge, in the night,
a grown-up man's body, softer and
warmer with the clothes off—I was a sophomore
at college, in the baths with a naked man,
a writer, married, a father, widowed,
remarried, separated, unreadable, and when I
said No, I was sorry, I couldn't,
he had invented this, rising and dripping
in the heavy sodium water, giving me
his body to suck. I had not heard
of this, I was moved by his innocence and daring,
I went to him like a baby who's been crying
for hours for milk. He stood and moaned
and rocked his knees, I felt I knew
what his body wanted me to do, like rubbing
my mother's back, receiving directions
from her want into the nerves of my hands.
In the smell of the trees of seaweed rooted in
ocean trenches just offshore,
and the mineral liquid from inside the mountain,
I gave over to flesh like church music
until he drew out and held himself and
something flew past me like a fresh ghost.
We sank into the water, and lay there, napes
on the rim. *I've never done that before,*
I said. His eyes not visible
to me, his voice muffled, he said, *You've been*
sucking cock since you were fourteen,
and fell asleep. I stayed beside him
so he wouldn't go under, he snored like my father, I
tried not to think about what he had said,
but then I saw, in it, the unmeant
gift—that I was good at this
raw mystery I liked. I sat
and rocked, by myself, in the fog, in the smell
of kelp, the night steam like animals' breath,
there where the harsh granite and quartz dropped down
into and under the start of the western sea.

Sharon Olds

130

¹³⁰ Sharon Olds, "First," collected in [The Wellspring](#), [Penguin Books](#)

The Refrigerator

There is the sound of the refrigerator being on.
There is the sound of god beating inside my heart,
which is a strange sound since he does not exist.
There is the sound of a stone sent years ago
which was never answered.
There is the sound of handwriting on a human forehead.
There is the sound of forty-three ducks flying through glass.
There is the sound of a feather duster.
There is the sound of dust heard over the telephone.
There is the sound of a piano with a faint heart
coming from below, a hell where people are happy.
There is the sound of someone standing on the grave
of someone they do not know and do not care about.
There is the sound the same person makes
standing on their own grave.
I love the sound of the iron on the ironing board
turning on and off, waiting for someone to come.
There is the sound of an electrical bill.
There is the sound of a book lying closed,
which is the sound of the storm-painter in his dungeon.
There is the sound of someone saying your name
which, if they did not have to, they would not want to.
There is the sound of peaceful breathing in a far cranny,
where mouths all over the body break into smiles.
There is the sound of a razor traveling with a hair.
There is the profound sound of plates being stacked.
Or is it the sound of dinkiness I hear?
There is the sound of the refrigerator being off.
There is the sound of everyone thinking the same thing
at the same time, and the sound of one
leafing through a magazine, looking for a lifestyle.
There is the sound of a cat on a hot tin roof
which is the imaginary sound of silk.
The two greatest Egyptian gods made love in the womb
(they were twins) so the sound of their birth
was the sound of a pregnant baby.
And this baby gave birth in turn, which is time,
to the sound of the world in which you live.

Mary Ruefle

131

¹³¹ Mary Ruefle, "The Refrigerator," collected in *Indeed I Was Pleased with the World*, [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

Life: A Draft (Prologue)

I want those trace amounts of narcotics in the water supply to take effect.

I want to write a memoir in one-liners.

I want to start a marketing company that unmarkets everything.

I want to start a party bus company but instead of buying a party bus I'll use the city bus & instead of partying we will just be commuting.

I want to write a book so disgusting it makes over-the-shoulder-subway-readers puke on the people reading it.

I want this to be a very, very serious joke book.

I want to start saying numb nuts a lot more.

To me, life is an infinite jerk off motion, without beginning or end.

To me, quantum entanglement is untrue, though it proves the existence of love.

To me, more wives wish their husbands dead, and more husbands actually do it.

To me, I'm surprised I'm still alive.

An aphorist who hates aphorisms. A self-helper who hates the self. Every tornado begins as a cartoon dog fight.

The joke is you're born.

That's why they call it a delivery.

Numb nuts.

Sommer Browning
132

¹³² Sommer Browning, "[Life: A Draft \(Prologue\)](#)," [The Volta](#), collected in [Good Actors](#), [Birds, LLC](#)

American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin

When I am close enough, I am reminded
Of the mythic orchid called Lorca's Breath.
Named by Salvador Dalí a decade after the poet
Was killed, the flower is said to sprout petals
The shade of a swollen moon but once or twice
Before it dies. Also lost was the painting
Dalí painted of Lorca's writing hand: a long
Almost animal shadow crawling over land shaped
Like a man with the body of a woman. A cuff
Of celestial texture. A button of ruby. The orchid's
Mouth is the shade of pussy, its leaves hang
As if listening to a lover whisper with her back
To you. Rumor that this flower first appeared
Near wherever Lorca is buried, I know to be untrue.

Terrance Hayes
133

¹³³ [Terrance Hayes](#), "[American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin](#)," [Tin House](#), collected in [American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin](#), [Penguin Books](#)

from “A Plate of Chicken”

Again tonight I will eat a can of black beans.

I’m in no hurry.

The horribles have taken themselves away today.

I know it is exquisitely hot in Brda now.

In a dim crypt eating *prsut* and drinking cool wine.

Contemplation places all of this inside me.

All of this and beans.

~

Brief trip to Staten Island to check page proofs.

Small clusters of the French and 3 identical drunks.

The city disappears into the sea.

I see the magazine kiosk as if it were in another country.

They are boy crazy in the humid confusion.

The fish are confused.

A golden pigeon walks up to reassure those who need proof.

~

The sun sets into the moon.

Cats switch allegiances.

There is a sled in the supermarket.

A highway in the sky.

I live directly beneath it.

A cool breeze comes from space.

I have to go up to the roof to polish the moon.

Matthew Rohrer

134

¹³⁴ [Matthew Rohrer](#), “[A Plate of Chicken \[Again tonight I will eat a can\]](#),” collected in [A Plate of Chicken](#), [Ugly Duckling Presse](#)

Below Zero

Every day was a wrong holiday
in your cobalt-colored rooms,

your rented catacombs
laid in with toys and whiskered candy,

a collection of dead men's hats,
dead monkeys and tuxedos, the rot

of expensive cheeses and drugstore
milk fuming in your sink—

where the fan chopped like a guillotine,
where the sheets were always clean,

and where the white fairy appeared nightly
riding Western on De Quincey's

crocodile, crossing her beautiful legs,
batting her wet mosquito wings.

She spoke fluent Irrawaddy. She tickled your
Vandyke. She topped you off for free,

your crystal highball filling like
the well above a pure gin spring.

Who could compete in that marketplace,
that bazaar of happy endings and

endless dunes of blow? If I was the black
diamond of your narcoleptic dreams, then

she was the wish you make for more
wishes, a vicuña-lined pussy

with extra slots for your credit cards.
What mortal could win you? Not I,

my love, no better than any junkie,
the scab fondling your infection,

or worse, the bored lifeguard
jonesing for someone to drown.

Erin Belieu

135

¹³⁵ [Erin Belieu](#), "[Below Zero](#)," *Can We Have Our Ball Back?*, collected in [Black Box](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Modern Poetry

It was what I'd been waiting for my whole life,
but I wasn't ready for poetry. I didn't have
the tools. Roethke,
I appreciated the greenhouse poems,

and decades later saw his bed, toilet, upright
piano in that desolate town where he was raised,
not unlike the desolate town where I was raised.
No greenhouse in my town, but the Green Giant

factory, where mushrooms grew on cow shit.
Wallace Stevens, I wrote a paper on "Loneliness
in Jersey City" having no clue
what he meant by "the deer and the dachshund are one"

and got an A anyway by faking it.
The professor made us read
"Sunday Morning," which struck me
as long. I couldn't focus yet, I was 18. A poem

against heaven, he told us. "Is there no change of death
in paradise? Does ripe fruit never fall?" That I could
understand, having known some plums,
and that icky-sweet smell of a dead mouse in the wall.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, not modern per se
but my professor said, one of the first modernists,
so what did modern poetry really mean, maybe
just fucked up, as Hopkins was for sure, and tongue

twistery, and depressed, Jesuit, maybe bipolar.
I stared at his photograph, the long nose and cleft
in his chin, noticed that even in "No worst, there is none"
he had the wherewithal to put in the accent marks

to school us as to how to hear the thing. And WCW.
Williams. My roommate and I called him Billy C. Billygoat.
I knew something of wheelbarrows, old women,
and as I said, plums, but the prof showed us

how complicated it all really was, the whole "no ideas
but in things" thing, the near-rhymes,
depends and *chickens* and *red*, again, I was not yet
capable of being smart and wondered if I ever would be,

though I kept getting A's on the papers, maybe
because the professor felt sorry for me, and I'm not just
saying that. The final modern poet was Sylvia Plath,
a woman, blonde, and I didn't trust blondes,

smart, angry, angry at men, I was told, depressed, cheated
on, dead. I imagined her being in Modern Poetry with us,
mopping the floor with us, with her developed
mind, her ooh and ahh sounds, her thesis, "The Magic Mirror,"

on the double in Dostoevsky. I pictured her calling me
a charlatan, like Gaylord did in class the week we studied her.
He called her a charlatan psychopath, and me a charlatan
for sticking up for her. I had to go back

to the dorm and look up "charlatan" in the dictionary.
A fraud, the dictionary said. A quack, which yes, I was,
though so was Gaylord. Who isn't a quack at 18?
I wanted to love Sylvia, but to love her would mean

loving someone who would have hated me.
It would be a few years, after I flunked out
of college, until I took a class called Women's Literature
at the public university down the hill with a teacher

named Stephanie who looked a lot like Françoise Sagan,
teenage author of *Bonjour Tristesse*, but older and with a cap
of gray hair. Margaret Atwood. Toni Morrison. Adrienne Rich.
Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Plath. Sexton. Lorde.

Kate Chopin. Alice Walker. Djuna Barnes. I was beginning
to understand, but barely. To ask a pertinent question
now and then, like where the hell was Langston Hughes
in Modern Poetry? Dickinson, in 19th Century American Lit?

If Hopkins was a Modernist, how about Dickinson,
with her weird rhymes and what Galway Kinnell called
her "inner, speech-like, sliding, syncopated rhythm,"
a counterpoint to her iambic lines. A horse straining at the bit

in the direction of free verse. A woman who drove
a motorcycle to Women's Literature, wore a fringed
black leather jacket, and worked at the Kalamazoo airport
in the cubicle where people pay for parking was shot and killed there

by her ex-boyfriend. From then on the class became
something else. Stephanie had us over to her house,
a damp place in the woods. She roasted a goat
and served it to us, shredded, on blue plates.

The books had become more, and less, important.
We spoke of them, huddled on the floor by the fire.
I remember most of all the bushel baskets
of apples and grapes for winemaking, drawing fruit flies.

I'm not complaining. It was all more than I deserved,
The goat. The greenhouse. The liberated blonde badass
on her motorcycle. *Sula*. *Surfacing*. Sunday Morning.
Ripe plums. My education.

Diane Seuss

136

¹³⁶ [Diane Seuss](#), "Modern Poetry," [The Adirondack Review](#), collected in [The Best American Poetry 2022](#), [Scribner](#)

Turning

My mother is dead.
The lemons still turn yellow,
the trout still stare emptily,
desire is still free.
We still love many people,
eat peaches as if kissing.

Victoria Chang
137

¹³⁷ [Victoria Chang](#), “[Turning](#),” collected in [The Trees Witness Everything](#), Copper Canyon Press

Rented Dark

Even priapic bouts of sexual insanity
were no match against that winter
which dropped snow like cement
for cement's sake. I came to think
of the weather as one of the leering
prison guards in a *Women in Chains* flick,
cast for his ability to produce
terrifyingly profuse body hair
and an admirably effortless mien of depravity.
Breakfast became bananas
and anthropomorphizing the storms
or thoughtfully vetoing
each other's baroquely murderous impulses
or speaking to each other
in the flat affect of hostages
denouncing the moral and ethical whatever
of wherever. I dreamed
of understanding the sky
or touching your skin somewhere
beyond the bit of darkness we rented
on Olympic Street
without fearing we'd lose a thumb or toe
or dawdle into hypothermia
like lost children.
But that was when I dreamed
or slept at all. At night by light of the busted TV,
it was easy to see how
your face fell into sleep
and the rest of you followed
while each infomercial taught me
how to be wowed
by borrowed yachts
and stock photographs of Italian roadsters
and grimly orgasmic headcases
who waved cancelled checks like stays of execution
while swilling soda water
with Pentecostal fury.
There were *secret methods*
and *proven techniques*
and when I closed my eyes
it sounded like birth control from an alternate dimension.
Supplies were low.
I had to order now
but I never did,
letting the night run out
like the special offer each one was.
While we made love
in a frozen world, operators stood by.

¹³⁸ [Paul Guest](#), "[Rented Dark](#)," [New Orleans Review](#), collected in [My Index of Slightly Horrifying Knowledge](#), [HarperCollins](#)

No suicide is an island

We were on different schedules.
As my failed attempt was putting me in the hospital,
she was learning from my mistake,
crossing out *Valium* in her head
and looking seriously at buying ludes
from Tony and stealing them from Jane.
The day I was released I went to her funeral
despite the rain's advice,
sat a hundred yards away behind an oak
to spare her parents thinking of killing me
and me thinking of offering her parents a gun
to put to my head. Boxes in the ground
is one of our few inspired ideas. I'm talking space,
not hygiene: imagine us stacked
like shoes, wing tips and pumps,
loafers; we'd run out of room for the sun.
Her note to me was the kind of thing
a piccolo would say to a drum: *Shhhh*.
I've taught my depression to tiptoe, whisper,
sit in the back of the movie
of my life, its head in the hands of the dark.
Hardly a day goes by
that I don't get out of bed, or mean to,
or wonder why I ever would.

Bob Hicok
139

¹³⁹ Bob Hicok, "[No suicide is an island](#)," collected in [Red Rover Red Rover](#), Copper Canyon Press

Wishbone

It's bad luck to break a cricket
or a baby, bad to open an evil spirit
in the house or refuse a kiss
if it's offered with a pot of gold.
Better to wear your underpants inside out
on your head, sing at the table,
wet the bed blink years pass
and you stand in a circle passing an apple
from which you can smoke hashish
while your parents sleep
in their bedroom in the next galaxy.
Your fate is written on the stairs
to the rec room and on the doorjamb
where your brothers outgrew you.
You've got a magenta rabbit's foot
on a keychain but no keys yet
to anything, the locks are confusing,
and you may have been misinformed
about rainbows and how to keep lightning
out of the house. Blow out the mirror,
one day it will hate you. Eat a lot
of garlic. When a dog howls,
someone is near. A cat has several lives
and so do you; look, a bird at the window
has eaten your youth but what luck,
all these years later
and you're still a beginner.

Kim Addonizio

140

¹⁴⁰ [Kim Addonizio](#), "[Wishbone](#)," [The Café Review](#), collected in [Mortal Trash](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Thoughts on Punctuation

Staple the ghost to the page
with your favorite symbol
and you might find out too much
or end up prosecuting
wind for lack of commitment
when it blows the clouds around
describe the wind with precision
torture it for a while
it will tell you what you know
sometimes I see the future
is just the past in a suit
that will never be in style
it wears your father's trilby
shadowing a face that answers
you with a semicolon
linking unrelated facts
like a modern oracle
a conglomerate employs
when I rattle on like this
saying useless things are true
such as the Egyptians used marks
shaped like cats to divide words
please slap me with a hyphen
put me back on the shelf
next to that old wooden game
it had complicated rules
for diagramming our thoughts
about who we should become
so we could leave them behind
we played it one whole winter
so deeply absorbed we died
then were reborn as commas
happy to go on and on

Matthew Zapruder

141

¹⁴¹ [Matthew Zapruder](#), "[Thoughts on Punctuation](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#)

Marie Germain (1776–1831)

What is the mathematical formula
for frozen ink? Can math warm
my ink so I can write? What math
will stop my parents from stopping me,
at thirteen? They have subtracted
my blankets, the fire in the grate,
all light but stubs of candles I've hidden.

They cannot subtract me, though.
I'll warm this ink with my body.
I'll call myself *Leblanc*, earn my degree
and surprise them all by proving
that something can hide
behind nothing.

Jessy Randall
142

¹⁴² [Jessy Randall](#), "[Marie Germain \(1776–1831\)](#)," collected in [Mathematics for Ladies](#), [Goldsmiths Press](#)

The guy my girlfriend ran off with
 in 1983 drove a rusted-out Beetle
 and carried a .22 pistol for runs to the bank
 to drop off nightly deposits from the General
 Cinema, where he was Assistant Manager
 and where I worked and saw Rocky Horror
 about 20 times more than I wanted to
 in egg-and-tp-drenched midnight shows.
 He lived in a rat-trap, roach-infested, leaning-over
 shack on the edge of The Heights,
 a few streets over from the house where,
 in 2004, a local TV reporter was murdered
 in her bed, her face beaten beyond recognition.

*

In 1988, on my first night as Assistant Manager
 at a restaurant in Dallas, a fight broke out
 between a pimp and a private investigator,
 who also may have been a pimp. A group
 of frat boys decided to jump in and knocked
 the whole scrum over onto the floor
 just on the other side of the bar from me.
 The pimp came up pointing a .22 semiautomatic
 directly at the closest object, which happened
 to be my forehead. He didn't shoot—
 just waved his gun around until everyone
 cowered under their tables—then
 calmly walked out the front door and down the street.

*

My best friend in sixth or seventh grade
 moved to Arkansas from New Mexico.
 Ron's skin was lizard-rough.
 He raised hamsters and hermit crabs.
 I struck him out for the last out of the Little League
 Championship. We went out to his father's farm
 and shot cans and bottles with his .22 rifle.
 Back in New Mexico, he'd had some health problems
 and his mother had shot herself in the head.
 A few years ago, a dead body was found
 buried on his father's property. Ron's son
 ended up shooting himself in the head as well.
 He was 22.

*

On December 14, 2012, an armed gunman
 entered the Sandy Hook School with two pistols,
 a Bushmaster .223, hundreds of rounds of ammunition,
 and a shotgun in the car. Rather than turn right,
 toward my wife's classroom where she pulled
 two kids into her room from the hallway,

he turned to the left, murdered twenty children
and six adults, including the principal
and the school psychologist, both of whom
went into the hallway to stop the gunman,
and shot two other teachers, who survived.
After that, a lot of other things happened,
but it doesn't really matter what.

Brian Clements
143

¹⁴³ [Brian Clements](#), "[22](#)," collected in [Bullets into Bells](#), Beacon Press

twenty

there was rice
in the saltshakers
I married

the ketchups
rubbed spots
off silver wear

mostly wore
my hair down
back then

or didn't but
remember it down
kept my money

in a sock
only had a fan
still prayed

mostly I saw
windows flying by
a little snow

if you dropped
pennies in me
you'd hear them

hit the bottom

Nicole Callihan
144

¹⁴⁴ [Nicole Callihan](#), "[twenty](#)," [Poetry Northwest](#)

The Sexual Revolution

In that time of great freedom to touch
and get in touch,
we lived on the prairie amid polite
moral certainty. The sensate world seemed
elsewhere, and was.
On our color television the president's body
admitted he was lying. There was marching
in the suddenly charged streets,
and what a girl in a headband and mini-skirt
called *communication*. A faraway friend wrote
to say the erotic life was the only life.
Get with it, he said.

But many must have been slow-witted
during The Age of Enlightenment,
led artless lives during The Golden Age.

We watched the revolution on the evening news.
It was 1972
when the sixties reached all the way

to where we were. The air became alive
with incense and license.
The stores sold permission and I bought

and my wife bought until we were left
with almost nothing.
Even the prairie itself changed;

people began to call it the Land, and once again
it was impossibly green
and stretched endlessly ahead of us.

Stephen Dunn

145

¹⁴⁵ [Stephen Dunn](#), "[The Sexual Revolution](#)," [The Kenyon Review](#), collected in [Different Hours](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Metamorphosis with Milk and Sugar

Every day I pump 84 ounces of milk from my body.
Every day I am filled with, and empty myself of,
the liquid equivalent of a small baby. My eyes sting
as the milk leaves my body. That is the prolactin,
sweetening everything my brain touches. That book
is sweet, those peonies on the table are sweet, the baby
is so sweet that my eyes leak when they brush against her.

I have spent so much time putting so much milk
into the baby that I don't remember when water started
to taste bitter. Like drinking from a hot, reedy pond.
More and more I find myself standing before
the open refrigerator. The milk is 38 degrees and sweet
as ice cream. The faucet rusts over. I cover it
with a dishcloth. I only have eyes for milk.

My brain finds this craving a little too neat,
but that doesn't matter. I am almost always in
the dairy aisle. I am almost always in the parking lot,
lifting the jug to my mouth with both hands.
It blocks out the sun like a sweet cold moon.
I can hear my throat squeezing in my ears as I swallow
and swallow. I imagine myself filling with milk
from the feet up: my ankles cool to the touch,
my knees sweetening, my stomach a marble sea.
When I look at myself in a windshield I see it is real,
I see my face is pearly and trembling.

Though I am made of milk, I can still walk
to the store. I walk very slowly, as if at the bottom
of a swimming pool. I walk slowly so I do not spill.
I am so cold that my eyes fog up when I step outside.
My skin beads like a cold bottle. I am slick in my shoes.

Whenever I see the baby, my eyes frost over
like snow cones. They leave a dusting of sugar on
everything they touch. In my new sugar house, I pick
rock candy grit from the corners of the baby's eyes,
wipe syrup from her nose, brush brown sugar from
her velvet hair. Each night I flick more and more ants
from behind her ears. Each morning more and more
of the baby has disappeared.

Claire Wahmanholm

146

¹⁴⁶ [Claire Wahmanholm](#), "[Metamorphosis with Milk and Sugar](#)," *RHINO*, collected in [Meltwater](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

Gin

The first time I drank gin
I thought it must be hair tonic.
My brother swiped the bottle
from a guy whose father owned
a drug store that sold booze
in those ancient, honorable days
when we acknowledged the stuff
was a drug. Three of us passed
the bottle around, each tasting
with disbelief. People paid
for this? People had to have
it, the way we had to have
the women we never got near.
(Actually they were girls, but
never mind, the important fact
was their impenetrability.)
Leo, the third foolish partner,
suggested my brother should have
swiped Canadian whiskey or brandy,
but Eddie defended his choice
on the grounds of the expressions
“gin house” and “gin lane,” both
of which indicated the preeminence
of gin in the world of drinking,
a world we were entering without
understanding how difficult
exit might be. Maybe the bliss
that came with drinking came
only after a certain period
of apprenticeship. Eddie likened
it to the holy man's self-flagellation
to experience the fullness of faith.
(He was very well read for a kid
of fourteen in the public schools.)
So we dug in and passed the bottle
around a second time and then a third,
in the silence each of us expecting
some transformation. “You get used
to it,” Leo said. “You don't
like it but you get used to it.”
I know now that brain cells
were dying for no earthly purpose,
that three boys were becoming
increasingly despiritualized
even as they took into themselves
these spirits, but I thought then
I was at last sharing the world
with the movie stars, that before

long I would be shaving because
I needed to, that hair would
sprout across the flat prairie
of my chest and plunge even
to my groin, that first girls
and then women would be drawn
to my qualities. Amazingly, later
some of this took place, but
first the bottle had to be
emptied, and then the three boys
had to empty themselves of all
they had so painfully taken in
and by means even more painful
as they bowed by turns over
the eye of the toilet bowl
to discharge their shame. Ahead
lay cigarettes, the futility
of guaranteed programs of
exercise, the elaborate lies
of conquest no one believed,
forms of sexual torture and
rejection undreamed of. Ahead
lay our fifteenth birthdays,
acne, deodorants, crabs, salves,
butch haircuts, draft registration,
the military and political victories
of Dwight Eisenhower, who brought us
Richard Nixon with wife and dog.
Any wonder we tried gin.

Philip Levine
147

¹⁴⁷ [Philip Levine](#), "[Gin](#)," [ZYZZYVA](#), collected in [What Work Is](#), Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Selfie with Airplane Voyeurism & References to Your Body

The woman across the aisle from me
reading *The Celestine Prophecy* has a
tattoo on her foot in Latin but I can't
make out the exact phrase as I am not

magic or wearing my glasses. Before
boarding, I ate a sausage biscuit in a
plastic clamshell at a table where
we were all plugged in to a greater

current, charging our appendages.
I close my eyes and when I open
them again we are still on a runway
waiting for the propellers to lift us

past the tarmac. *Alis grave nil.*
The clouds as we rise sit low over
the warehouses and electric towers
holding up wires to the sky as offerings.

We travel across them as pixels,
uncladded rooms of light carved
from rock, naked mess of cable
and tendons, construction of bone.

Luceat lux vestra. Your skin. I drove
all morning through a fog so thick
the highway was a twisted white
sheet. I tailgated an 18-wheeler,

red signals outlining its container
as it sped. Steel-clad body. Body
cutting the fog. It's actually 4/20
and everyone should be high and

holding a bowl of something in our
lungs or hands. Everyone should be
looking out the window hoping for
more spring, which is glorious if

you are loved or love yourself.
The woman reading *The Celestine
Prophecy* is filming the girl next to
her in the window seat who is

freaking out on the ascent with joy
and fear and awe combined, saying
wow wow wow wow. This plane
is not rote for her. I've seen

your body over and over on screen,
carpe noctem, and I am headed
toward you, your inimitable tattoo
flush with trouble. The most famous

quote from *The Celestine Prophecy*
is this: *We must assume every event
has significance and contains a message
that pertains to our questions*. What

should I ask? Here I am throttling
forward, temporarily indenting a space
of plastic and foam, where the body
has a total lack of concealment

or shame. How can a body resist
the forces pressing against it?
Later, what will the girl think
of that recording, her mouth

an O of wonder and terror
and pleasure?

Erika Meitner
148

¹⁴⁸ [Erika Meitner](#), "[Selfie with Airplane Voyeurism & References to Your Body](#)," [Forklift, Ohio](#), collected in [Useful Junk](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Every Now and Then

Sometimes a friend posts a photo of their newborn and it's all I can do not to type, *Welcome to Hell!*

Is the fuckedness quotient really on the rise, or was it ever thus?

Sometimes I stop by the mirror and redden my lips, making myself hotter though no one can see me. Like Diana Vreeland said, "I loathe narcissism, but I approve of vanity."

One of the earliest known uses of the F-word appears in a 16th century collection of poems compiled by an Edinburgh merchant named George Bannatyne during an outbreak of plague.

Is the weather weird today? Is the sky not clear enough or is it too clear? This year feels especially endless this year.

Sometimes I sit and think, but mostly I just sit—who was it who said that? And was it always true, or only sometimes?

Sometimes I wake up and the morning light is like, *Welcome back to your absurd reality!*

What might happen if I signed my emails "derangedly" sometimes?

Sometimes I like to do things on my own, which is lucky, because sometimes the cavalry isn't coming.

Once in a while, the pigeons undulate across the blue void in such a way that I wish I could join them.

What might happen if I signed "still me, unfortunately"?

Sometimes you can get out a red pen and revise your mood. Maybe most times.

Kathleen Rooney
149

¹⁴⁹ Kathleen Rooney, "Every Now and Then," collected in [Where Are the Snows](#), Texas Review Press

Mikey's in Jail

They caught him on camera.
They showed it on TV.
He shouldered in the door at Gas Qwik.
He took a package of diapers.
He took a log of Kodiak.
He emptied his pockets.
He left what he had on the counter.
As he ran through the store a freezer door opened.
Small handprints flared up on the glass.
The camera doesn't lie the State will say.
Mikey will say it sure as hell don't.

Michael McGriff
150

¹⁵⁰ [Michael McGriff](#), "[Mikey's in Jail](#)," collected in [Eternal Sentences](#), [The University of Arkansas Press](#)

Lionhearts

One very cold night in Ann Arbor
I went to a party where “Kate Bush”
was the password. I put on my Uggs
& trudged through the slush.
I climbed the fire escape to an attic apartment
where five other writers & I
sat around a Crosley turntable
& a box of Bordeaux Blend
& a stale bâtard with expensive butter
& listened to Lionheart
& talked about line breaks
& grew increasingly drunk
& complimentary & eager
—for aesthetics’ sake—
to investigate each other up close.
Some of us kissed. Kate stalked us
from the cover—crimped mane
& lion-skin suit—as two people
with silk scarves tied someone
to the radiator & danced madly,
leaping on chairs, licking paws!
Leo rising, downward dog!
Candles sputtering their last magic
into the rafters as we sank straight
through the secondhand loveseat:
floral flickering, ticking undone.
This is one of my fondest memories.
The whole room a gold & rolling
ship of girl flame! But there—
in the dark, catholic corners
where I can’t quite see—a stowaway
sometimes darts. Imagine such a creature:
subsisting all this time
on the dusty crusts & vinegars
of someone else’s slight
& misplaced shame.

Karyna McGlynn

151

¹⁵¹ [Karyna McGlynn](#), “[Lionhearts](#),” [Poetry](#)

from “Deracination”

5. SCIENCE

In Life Science, they studied
genetics, the experiments

of Gregor Mendel. He took anthers
from pea plants with green seeds,

rubbed them against the stamens
of yellow-seeded peas. This account

left her strangely aroused.
She surreptitiously brushed

the tip of her breast
through her brand-new training

brassiere. Her nipple went erect,
as if on cue. *The results were consistent;*

replicable. Each cross was yellow-seeded.
But in the next generation, twenty-five percent

bore green seeds. What’s the reason?
Her hand shot up. *Anyone except*

Monica? No? She took stock. *Okay then.*
—The yellow seeds were a dominant trait.

—Yes, that’s correct. The yellow seeds
were dominant. The same calculus

applies to human traits: hair and eyes.
Black and brown are dominant,

and blue- and green-colored eyes,
blond and red hair recessive.

If these two strains cross,
these recessive traits die out,

replaced in the next generation.
The teacher drew some squares

on the chalkboard. *Now, this handout*
is your homework. On these charts

*retrace your family tree.
Go back four generations.*

*Then color in which of your ancestors
had blue, green, or brown eyes,*

*who had blond or red, brown
or black hair. There's a chance*

*you'll have to do some research
into your family's genetic history.*

The bell rang. Her friend Annie
tapped her shoulder. *Holy shit,*

*you totally lucked out!
This is going to take me hours,*

*calling my Nana, my great aunts.
But you don't have to ask anyone,*

*you can color in the whole sheet,
the same answer all the way down:*

black/brown, black/brown, black/brown.

Monica Youn
152

¹⁵² [Monica Youn](#), "[Deracination \(5. Science\)](#)," [Pleiades](#), collected in [From From](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Learning to Read

If I had to look up every fifth or sixth word
so what. I looked them up.
I had nowhere important to be.

My father was unavailable, and my mother
looked like she was about to break,
and not into blossom, each time I spoke.

My favorite was *The Iliad*. True,
I had trouble pronouncing the names,
but when was I going to pronounce them, and

to whom?
My stepfather maybe?
Number one, he could barely speak English;

two, he had sufficient cause
to smirk or attack
without prompting from me.

Loneliness boredom and fear
my motivation
fiercely fueled.

I get down on my knees and thank God for them.

Du Fu, the Psalms, Whitman, Rilke.
Life has taught me
to understand books.

Franz Wright
153

¹⁵³ [Franz Wright](#), "[Learning to Read](#)," [The New Yorker](#), collected in [E](#), [Alfred A. Knopf](#)

Love Poem with Comic Books on Saturdays

(Greek Anthology 5:219)

It's better when you blush
 before you kiss me, better
if they don't find out.
 Let's tie each other's shoes.
Let's run a race we mean to lose.

 Let's have a crush
that violates the spirit, but never the letter
 of the Comics Code,
where what you almost
 see is more important than what you can.

Let's run together like melted butter
 under our shared cotton coverlet
tonight, and never let
 anyone tell us we're brave, or foolish, or bold,
nor give each other reason to doubt.
 Let's make each other toast
tomorrow morning. Get out your pocket
 calendar. Let's make our sleepover plan.

Stephanie Burt
154

¹⁵⁴ [Stephanie Burt](#), "[Love Poem with Comic Books on Saturdays](#)," *Moist*, collected in *We Are Mermaids*, Graywolf Press

The First Word

of the Book of Revelation
is *apokalypsis*

meaning *unveiling*

In the Book there is
great equality of number:

twelve thousand of this tribe
twelve thousand of that tribe

If one third of trees burned
one third of the ocean became blood

If one third of the sea creatures
died and floated to shore

then one third of the ships sank

(equality but for the grass—
the blades were comprehensively burned)

The sea draws in a breath of salt
revealing its floor—

a flat labyrinth of bleached coral
and divested wrecks—

and a red horse comes
expressly to take peace
from the earth

during which one might hide
with the children
or light a fire

and wait for someone
to come home

for good

Alison Powell
155

¹⁵⁵ [Alison Powell](#), "[The First Word](#)," collected in [Boats in the Attic](#), [Fordham University Press](#)

The Pain Scale

I knew for a decade just one way to die
the one that took my uncle, my cousin, all the kids
from my high school who didn't leave town.
I'd see them gaunt and purpled outside of the Wesco.
They'd call me Jennifer or Julie and ask for a five.
I heard I was the last person one guy talked to,
and I have never stopped knowing I killed him
with an embarrassed twenty and a good luck, man.
When my ex died in a wreck I said it every time:
No, his bike, an accident on his bike, like I could prove
another way to go young, like I could break a spell.

Jessica L. Walsh

156

¹⁵⁶ [Jessica L. Walsh](#), "[The Pain Scale](#)," [Lunch Ticket](#), collected in [The Book of Gods & Grudges](#), [Glass Lyre Press](#)

Plutarch's *Parallel Lives of Virtue and Failing*

When Charlotte Corday left for Paris after the September massacres, she was carrying a copy of Plutarch's *Lives* and a kitchen knife with a six-inch blade.

Plagued by a chronic and debilitating skin condition that is never depicted in portraits, Jean-Paul Marat was known for conducting much of his business from his bath. There were rumors he bathed in the blood of his enemies. Jacques-Louis David's 1793 painting, *The Death of Marat*, shows only his own reddening the tub. The picture is described as the first modernist painting for how it "took the stuff of politics as its material and did not transmute it." To be sure, this is a painting with some journalistic integrity, although the artist moved the knife from Marat's chest, where Charlotte Corday left it, to the floor. And he moved Charlotte Corday, who waited in a corner to be arrested, from the scene entirely. In Marat's hand rests the note he had been reading: "Citizen, my extreme misery gives me a right to your benevolence."

So ended the summer of 1793, when, fearful of what would happen if the invading armies of neighboring monarchs freed the prisoners of France, who would no doubt turn on the people in a murderous rage, Marat of the Mountain, as he was known, called on the draftees to kill the prisoners before they marched to the front lines. By September half the prison population of Paris was dead.

At her trial, Charlotte Corday said, "I killed 1 man to save 100,000." Everyone in the room understood she was echoing Robespierre who said, "With regret I pronounce the fatal truth: Louis must die so that the nation may live," and who would soon replace Marat at the head of the Terror.

Harper's Weekly, covering the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in 1865, observed that Corday is the only assassin history has forgiven. And even she was a fool and a tool of her enemies. "The heart recoils, whatever the excuse, the instinct of mankind curses the assassin." In the famous painting, Marat's arm is draped over the lip of the tub like a mother whispering *pieta*. No one in the room of David's portrait suffers except Marat.

When the executioner brought the red shirt and scissors, she cut her own hair and handed a lock to the court room artist who had been completing her portrait, begun at the trial only hours before.

There was much debate after her death about the color of her hair. Her passport says chestnut, but people wanted to believe it had been lightened by powder. In the portrait it is brown and covered with a bonnet.

After her decapitation, a carpenter who made repairs to the guillotine lifted her head from the basket and slapped her on the cheek. Witnesses reported an expression of "unequivocal indignation" came over her face. This man was imprisoned for three months for his actions by order of the Jacobin councils, which also called for her body to be autopsied for the purpose of determining if Charlotte Corday had been a virgin.

Reports indicate she was intact, which is one more fact that tells us nothing about whether she was virtuous or whether she failed.

Kathryn Nuernberger
157

¹⁵⁷ Kathryn Nuernberger, "Plutarch's *Parallel Lives of Virtue and Failing*," *Heavy Feather Review*, collected in *Brief Interviews with the Romantic Past*, The Ohio State University Press

Scarlet

Long ago, I was a *figlia* with a fever.
Little filly, foaled in my dark star-bed
where I thought I'd die pretty soon.

Lying there, my fists held candy eggs
of logic, molten math. My pink death already
long ago. I was a *figlia* with a fever

& I doubled in the neck. My neck?
Rather my baton, spilling white glitter.
Pretty. I thought I'd die soon

& warp to World 8-4. I'd take
a running jump up orange broken steps
to find my long-ago *figlia*. Her fever

thinner than her thin dress falling
past her tender baby-knees. I knew her.
I thought I'd die pretty soon

& leave the shadow of my rash
hot patch of strawberry skin for her to keep
from long ago. Dearest *figlia*, my fever
was so soon. Thought I'd die pretty.

Kiki Petrosino
158

¹⁵⁸ [Kiki Petrosino](#), "[Scarlet](#)," [Prac Crit](#), collected in [Witch Wife](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Bottomless Vat

Today in the taxi I realized I had been driving the taxi for four years. I looked into my former life and didn't know where it was, and I looked ahead and couldn't see anything.

I picked up two teenage girls on Amsterdam Avenue who were going to Barney's. They were talking about Chloé handbags. Then one said, "Did you used to teach?" She recognized my face from my year working as a substitute at many private schools.

I thought of the petrified forest in Arizona where the logs became rocks. Groundwater dissolved silica from ash and changed the wood into quartz.

No one looking down at the green and yellow spherules in the trunk's matrix believes it was wood that is now a rock. Fear pressed through fear into the stone's wheel, as Kafka said *not only in innocence, but also in ignorance*.

Sean Singer
159

¹⁵⁹ Sean Singer, "[Bottomless Vat](#)," collected in [Today in the Taxi](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

Implausible Travel Plans

He said, the water down there, it's so clear
you can't see jellyfish. That indicates
nothing, I said, and he said, I don't care

is the hardest line to deliver in all of acting,
as though he knew of an acting laboratory
where researchers developed hardness scales

and spattered across them devastating fragments.
SHOW ME THE STEEP AND THORNY WAY TO HEAVEN.
I liked to rehearse my Ophelia during blackouts,

the traditional time to make the worst mistakes
and, later, soften the story. Nothing working
but the gas stove. God, I felt so bad

that time we used the crock instead of the kettle
and watched it smoke and shatter. I was the one.
I was the one who wanted stupid tea.

Natalie Shapero
160

¹⁶⁰ [Natalie Shapero](#), "[Implausible Travel Plans](#)," *FIELD*, collected in [No Object](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

A dog with a soul

A dog with a soul, you've got that? You apes with heads of Socrates, false priests' altar boys, retired professors of evil! I imagine cities so I can get lost in them. I meet other dogs with souls when I'm not lighting firecrackers in heads that are about to doze off.

Blood-and-guts firecrackers. In the dark to see, you ass-scratchers! In the dark to see.

Charles Simic
161

¹⁶¹ [Charles Simic](#), "[A dog with a soul](#)," collected in [The World Doesn't End](#), [Ecco](#)

Geometer

Teenage me admired the rules + proofs
as told by Mr. P, who played *Pure Moods*
to soundtrack every test with his translucent
boombox (it was the style at the time).

He taught me to make as much meaning
as I could from what I knew. If one failed
to label X as whatever, inches squared
or milliliters, he'd shout at them:

what is X? Support hose? Oven puffs?
which lowered the pressure while teaching
the lesson. Mr. P, I was a mess of meth
+ cobwebs who slept through class til you

slapped my skull. I haven't mentioned how
gay your lilt sang, how much you loved
to prove all shapes congruent to their peers,
or how the pink triangle on your door

made us feel safe. + I say us because
I was a freak. I hung with them
on Mellon street. The day the jocks
sent Wes + John to hospital I hid

behind the neighbor's barn.
The day that followed I couldn't prove
anything but acute bloodstains
still on the ground, on my left hand

that S-- had stepped on while I sat
behind a car to smoke a cig.
I doubted schoolyard bullies were really
erstwhile lovers or anxious parallels.

Your class had proved a hundred times
what I could know about Euclidean space
was often not enough to keep
from messing up. But still I proofed

+ listened to your teasing us until
it started making sense. *Adding up*,
you'd say, + the whole class would groan.
S— had started driving me home

in mirth. He touched the scar
he'd made + you were who I told.
You asked if we were "side-angle-side"
+ I hadn't considered sides like his.

*Oh, honey, it's like a proof, you said:
you use what you have learned, go
step by step, then check your work
for errors. You learn about his shape.*

Joey Gould
162

¹⁶² [Joey Gould](#), "[Geometer](#)," [Miniskirt Magazine](#)

Causes of Death

In the records we can find
not one fatality
from reading the novels of Charles Dickens;

no obituary that reports
the cause of death
as “too much intuition.”

So far no one mentioned in the *New York Times* has perished from grammatical errors.

No one—though it seems strange—
dead from “outrage and pity
at the mistreatment of nature.”

So many gone down
from color of skin,
from lack of fair chances,
from lifelong deficiency of love.
If we are to be frank, let us say so.

Let us acknowledge that the popular singer
perished not from Jim Beam and cocaine
but a toxic infection
of fame and money.

Make it publicly known that Mr. Johansson died after eighty-five years of refusing all treatment for his progressive condition of hate.

And then there is my sister,
that good-hearted woman,
who I like to tell people

relocated to Canada.
No reason to mention death.
If we don't hear from her much,

it must be because
she is very busy.
Somewhere in Ontario, possibly.

Outside of Banff, I believe.
I believe, and I remember,
and I miss her.

Tony Hoagland

¹⁶³ [Tony Hoagland](#), "[Causes of Death](#)," collected in [Turn Up the Ocean](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Rhapsody

1.

Pollen.
Fallen
on
men
like soot,
snow,
ash,
cash.
Avoidance
of eye
contact.
I
redact
any chance
in advance.

2.

Mottled
sheets;
bottled
dets.
Since
when
is urban
hiking?
Get off
my
intellectual
property.
The fog
a feral
dog.

3.

Recession:
hairline,
gumline.
Bread-
line.
Passive
regression.
He played
the pup;
he played

tricks.
Politics
the infamous
stray
under the bed.

4.

Night,
a sex
site
of white
boys
with an
aversion
to latex.
Or, a version
of that.
I bet
not one
of them
has ever
shat.

5.

We pause
to disarticulate
our jaws.
Living
Dead
giving
head.
Backdoor
Chip,
my step-
hipster,
my go-
go:
find her
on Grindr.

6.

Numbers
in love,
affairs
with shares:
big pharma.
Our age
a gag,

a mouthful
of knowledge.
Fierce.
Karma
is workin'
a Birkin
colostomy
bag.

7.

He held
an associate's
degree
in manipulation.
His existence,
consonants;
the vowels
like bowels,
no movement.
Beat off,
he yelled;
I think
he meant
buzz.
I did both.

8.

I resist
the urge
to rhapsodize:
boys
in blue
pills;
the poor;
the purge.
Honor
kills.
At least
his
“grooming
injury”
was “minor.”

9.

It was:
the butt-
dial
of relationships;

two ships;
philosophy
& pot
brownies
with townies;
a half-
mile
from
thought.
It was
not.

10.

I do
as I
am told.
When
he blinks
I call;
when
he smiles
I fold.
I do
it on
a dime.
What's
a dime?
Old.

11.

Nail
and donut
and dildo
shops:
a full
life.
Become
the dead.
And yet.
Sunset;
pre-cum
spread
with
a dull
knife.

Randall Mann

164

¹⁶⁴ [Randall Mann](#), "[Rhapsody](#)," [Court Green](#), collected in [A Better Life](#), [Persea Books](#)

How to Describe What It Felt Like

to be gay when I was young?
I didn't feel *different*, a given
for a boy who went to church,
didn't cuss, and stayed inside
all summer. The guy said,
"Thanks for missing the football,
faggot," after class, and I died
inside the flood of lockers. Not
dead, or *unborn*: a mercy I was
afraid of, but wanted. Hiding
in the corner to change for gym,
they laughed at my soft, pimpled
back. Boys on one side of the field,
girls on the other. "Aren't you
on the wrong side, Smith?"
Even the coach laughed, and I was.
Days I stared through three-pane
windows at trucks gliding
interstate to somewhere better,
stranger, not quite right, but true.
The gray-weather chest
I carried the summer I rubbed
the pillow between my legs
and thought of the UPS man
and neighbor's tight belly
until the semen I wasn't sure
how to clean, but God wasn't
watching, he turned away,
and I begged him like I would beg
all men before I hardened to stone,
not one rolled away, but invisible;
stone, invisible, not right either.
What do you call the kid of a dad
a mother calls home from evening
shift because she caught him
watching "nearly-naked men"
on television? He didn't spank
me, but didn't love me anymore
in the same way. "Don't tell
your mom about this again,
Dammit!" *Damaged? Damned?*

Aaron Smith
165

¹⁶⁵ Aaron Smith, "How to Describe What It Felt Like," *One Art*, collected in *Stop Lying*, University of Pittsburgh Press

2 AM Feeding

On which I, / White cigarette / Burn
—Sylvia Plath, “Eavesdropper”

I was a menthol cigarette—
new milk decoupaged down
moonish back blades, down my breast bone.

My mind was the burning tip, lit red
on the electric stove’s
uterine coils.

The long labor was the smoke
curling, calcifying in cold:
mica, cocaine, talcum, blue.

(The February stars stared
through the kitchen window,
through fifteen French panes of glass.

These were the constellations on St. Brigid’s night:
the big dog, the twins, the rabbit,
the newborn, the unblinking newborn eyes.)

The night was a telescope
tamped down between my palms.
I was a cigarette left dangling on the porch rail.

Below me, the frosty chalk glyph of the feral cat glows
on the pitch-black tar pitch.

Jennifer Martelli
166

¹⁶⁶ [Jennifer Martelli](#), “[2 AM Feeding](#),” collected in [All Things are Born to Change Their Shape](#), Small Harbor Publishing

Ubi Sunt

Where are the good ones:
the beautiful, strong, and
virtuous figures of yore?
Probably where the moon is,
hung aloft in effulgent skies:
eating nails for breakfast,
dying in childbirth, then
resurrecting to give it all
away, cyclically, once more.
I don't want to be the moon,
I said to Dick on the casting
couch: I want to be a flower
no one can touch without dying
of hope of touching it again.
Something rare and exotic:
throaty stamen, purple pistil.
Something that just stands
on the stage and screams.
Alas, that role is taken,
said Dick, by Suzanne.
Figures, I said. How
about the wild river,
he suggested, kindly.
Or a creek, brook,
rivulet, rill, stream?
But where do I empty,
I asked, before agreeing:
in an ocean, sea, or lake,
or do I just flow into the
ground, a dried-up shrew?
That's between you and your
character to decide, he said.
The river, you mean, I said.
Yes, he said. For god's sake,
you're a woman. Just be you.

Virginia Konchan

167

¹⁶⁷ [Virginia Konchan](#), "[Ubi Sunt](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#)

Adultery for Atheists

It's lucky I'm not Catholic or I'd be clawing the beads at my throat, genuflecting, whatever genuflecting is, fielding vivid nightmares of petrified firemen paralysed by heat, hose in hand at Lucifer's gate, or a Jehovah's Witness packing her carry-on case for The End, lucky I don't press my brow to prayer mats imploring the sky or suffer long sit-downs with a disappointed moderate Rabbi or imagine my next life as a crippled cockroach, don't believe in indelible blots on a mortal soul and know of no rational reason to carry these pellets in my heart absorbing shame like tampons somehow expanding inside me, no cause to shuffle on shins in useless placation anxious to wipe my celestial tab, the invisible stain on my name, what luck to be Godless thus so unperturbed by reproaches like felled trees blocking all roads ahead or this very peculiar black cat sitting on my bed after midnight just staring at me calmly.

Caroline Bird

168

¹⁶⁸ [Caroline Bird](#), "[Adultery for Atheists](#)," [The Rialto](#), collected in [In These Days of Prohibition](#), [Carcanet Press](#)

The Subterranean Audience Takes Notes, or Philip Marlowe Retires to Woodland Hills

The quiet vein that is Ventura Boulevard at four a.m.,
just waiting to be slit open—

every shop a frozen wink, neon asleep,
I slump in the shadow of a shadow,
my car resting soundly across from

the Movieland Motel, which promises
adult movies free with every room,
eventually coughing up a dude who stammers

to his red car, standing out
like a fire underwater at this hour,
the door to his room open just enough

to make out a leg on the bed,
the bath of TV light across the room,
the tousled comforter on the ground.

The levitating snake of his cigarette smoke
dissipates as he drives away.
That door's not shutting its mouth.

His disappearing car moves on,
swallowed by the pavement that turns
glass-like in the moonlight,

a double mirror for the people
underneath, watching, taking notes
and laughing hysterically.

Robert Krut
169

¹⁶⁹ Robert Krut, "[The Subterranean Audience Takes Notes, or Philip Marlowe Retires to Woodland Hills](#)," *Longshot*, collected in [This is the Ocean](#), Bona Fide Books

from "Testaments Scratched into a Water Station Barrel"

Sister, we crouched
behind boulders, dove
into bushes
to avoid
patrol jeeps. Sister,
we drank ditch-
water, caught of your favorite skirt
a rabbit. Sister, Sister, the long ears
if he didn't enter & yellow teeth
your room, of the rabbit
he entered mine. reminded me
I'd stare at the glow- of the piano
in-the-dark decaying
constellations. in our yard. Ivory
His mouth keys, felt hammers.
carnivorous Sister, to avoid smugglers,
& slow. Sister, we crawled
I'll be hiding out through thorns,
in Raleigh, scrambled over
a few blocks barbed wire. Sister,
from our cousins, as he skinned
in a trailer the rabbit,
the color he dropped
the switchblade. I grabbed it,
slashed his throat. Sister, his blood sprayed
into the air. Each drop pitch-
black & slick. Each drop
an effigy
of God.

If you think I look good naked wait until you see me dead

Eduardo C. Corral
170

¹⁷⁰ [Eduardo C. Corral](#), "[Testaments Scratched into a Water Station Barrel \[Sister, we crouched...\]](#)," collected in [Guillotine](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Poppies in October

Interstate 70 is a charred artery through Ohio
until we reach Columbus and its Ten Commandments
billboards: italics singed red against black,
lit up at night. Brimstone, sobering scripture.
Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's ox, nor his ass,
our first laugh in two hundred miles.
Two states away, our grandmother is dying.
My brother is driving because he is good
at passing the truckers, good at spotting cops
concealed in cornfields. I should know by now,
but I'm ignorant as a husk. You can't see through a dark
you haven't lived. Can't understand the poppy
unless you've been a seedhead in an unfastening wind,
can't understand the wind unless you've entered a room
blued by smoke, two men in their underwear
crushing crystals saying. *It isn't for you, pretty boy,*
so you wait for them to leave, then lay fire to the pipe's bed,
my brother's first time high, becoming a man
trying to unhear the gospel ugly. Even this poem can't help
becoming a billboard I want to whitewash.
But it's the truth. And it is a sin to say it here,
where just anyone can read it. My brother tries so hard
to keep between the lines, intent, fixed on piercing
through the coal-shimmering dark to whatever lies beyond.

James Allen Hall

171

¹⁷¹ [James Allen Hall](#), "[Poppies in October](#)," collected in [Romantic Comedy](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Sad Cartography

Bad men loved me barren
so I went with women awhile

stewed roots til they tendered
up their vegetable hearts and we ate

each other's softness
into pink's nervous nudging

against the night, rubbing
at the edges as if it was
a mistake.

All doors clank
the same no matter the sex

of the hand that slams.
As good as I got at leaving

I got better at being left, the sorting
chore a charm, my own body's blood
smeared over a door.

I have been
a ribbon, a kind of snake. I've lured

two poets to their gloom.
Bread, flesh, sun through

the knot of forest.
What any body wants,
another to cling to it

like bracken,
chanting its salt song to ships

passing it up
as an island of the dead.

Erin Adair-Hodges
172

¹⁷² [Erin Adair-Hodges](#), "[Sad Cartography](#)," collected in [Every Form of Ruin](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Well-meaning but befuddled, that's how we find ourselves in a house slightly too big for its occupants. A surprise fourth child, an apron to wear at the grill. All this smoke & we're overcooking everything. No one wants raw meat. *Don't kill the family* is the only rule that's written down. Everything else we're supposed to sense. Not that it's brain surgery. Some of us are better at disappearing into the role. Imagine having to act like this all the time. Imagine it's the only thing people will remember you for. Every day you get dressed up & sound out the first sentence of your obituary. On our walk after dinner, one of my fathers & I find a dead raccoon. *Can I take the tail?* I ask. He hands me a knife. He says, *Cut as close as possible to the body.*

Amorak Huey

173

¹⁷³ Amorak Huey, "[Steve Keaton & Dan Conner & Bob Saget & Alan Thicke & Both of My Two Dads](#)," [Quiddity](#), collected in [Dad Jokes from the Late Patriarchy](#), Sundress Publications

You will see such pretty things

"You will see such pretty things"
—*Wyoming Incident*
(TV station hijacking)

I like signals. I like _____.
(you)

You will see such pretty things.

I like the idea of DOOM more than the actual video game, which is
terribly repetitive. I wrote in the booklet under the notes section
"every pixel a _____."
(something precious)

kinds of pretty things. There are others. You fell asleep on your
stuffed pony. Daffodils in empty vodka bottles. Wet grating above
basement storm windows. Indoor kid smells. Playstation. A
station where you can play? Pretty. Basement walls. I remember
how pretty you looked. Don't worry, I remember. I'll have
a(n) _____ implanted into my
(electronic/reminder)

_____ to remind me.
(unselfish body part)

Russell Jaffe
174

¹⁷⁴ [Russell Jaffe](#), "[You will see such pretty things](#)," collected in [This Super Doom I Aver](#), *Poets Democracy*

Ode to the Stroller We Bought from Facebook

At the football game I whisper *They don't know*
how cool my stroller is to my husband as the girls

trot past us up the hill, their orange crop tops
flashing bright above their so-called mom jeans—

the stroller gifted by divine algorithm, named
for the nursery rhyme *Mama's gonna buy you*

a mockingbird. Well, Mama fucking did,
and it is glorious: brown leather, cupholders,

teal seat, sun shield for your seashell skin.
You scrunch your brows at the light, and my body

moves to cover you. The adjustable seat promises
to grow with you. If I could, I would buy all

birds for your amusement: red-shouldered hawk,
greed-soaked hummingbird nipping flowers,

crabby vultures hopping in the street. I point
out geese to you—*Look August, where do you think*

they are going? I want to know your consciousness,
how you see a goose, what makes you laugh

at the dog when he rolls in grass. I want
to feed you forever—I finally see why

my friend let her three-year-old run up to her
in public and lift her shirt like pulling plastic

off a juice box: the white bird whistling
through my glands is a song only the two of us own.

Dorsey Craft
175

¹⁷⁵ Dorsey Craft, "Ode to the Stroller We Bought from Facebook," *Blackbird*

Body Thesaurus

In your dream, the act of breathing is a red-headed girl
with a body lactose-pale and livid against the skin
of water. A crack along the porcelain cup of this,
colored all absinthe with you. The closed white shutters

of your backbone as you sleep toward wrists spilling
their listless snowflakes farther south. Mouth:
night's lilacs branching insolubly. Hair hissing, stems.
Mouth: the hospital: your houses are asking chemicals

out of the dark. Your lids are the lime-lined,
impromptu graves of thieves. As a mind,
your body is a wall of leaves; let its edges whisper
a collage of liquids singing, lips, the sangria weeds.

Jennifer Militello
176

¹⁷⁶ [Jennifer Militello](#), "[Body Thesaurus](#)," [The Laurel Review](#), collected in [Body Thesaurus](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

from “Act Three. The Matter of One’s Flesh”

1. Miriam

at shore’s edge I watch a mother holding vigil
surf detonating against the sand / her toddler

hobwobbles as if his legs were stumps or numb
the tide tugs his feet / he bends to test its chaos

to grasp & grapple with ungraspable silver
ever-breaking mirror / offering to swallow

the magnet-shimmer & rupture of salt-white froth
drawing him in / she won’t let her / eyes meander

& so much like my son so much like myself
on this same beach years before the detonation

there is the matter of the flesh of one’s flesh
& its audacity to wander unhindered

as if blind to its ten thousand tethers / all stitched
into his mother’s breast / she’s waiting for the pull

Philip Metres
177

¹⁷⁷ Philip Metres, “Act Three. The Matter of One’s Flesh [1. Miriam],” collected in [Shrapnel Maps](#), Copper Canyon Press

Gold Soundz

For E.M.W.

I can't stop singing that Pavement song,
the one that sounds like an old lime green
Volvo and bottles of Old E, like autumn
in the suburbs where rich kids do bad things
to each other in their enormous empty houses
and are still friends the next day. The truth
is that most of us would be fine, except
the ones who weren't, the guy I dated
with the shaved head and rotten front tooth
who lived in the woods with two pitbulls,
Honey Bear and Jack, and punched a hole
in my bedroom wall before he disappeared.
Or the friend who stopped taking her lithium
after college and married a man who months later
stabbed her in the backseat of a car, left her
bleeding to death on the side of an unmarked road
and I think we used to sing this song sometimes
on our drive to Walden Pond where we'd swim
topless and yell at the lurkers, the man
who once pulled it out and we laughed
at his sad gesture, and it's her laughter
I'm hearing now, her head resting on my shoulder
on the drive home, eating an apple
that had rested between my legs.
She was the kind of friend who'd laugh
that the apple smelled like pussy
and eat it anyway.

Kendra DeColo
178

¹⁷⁸ [Kendra DeColo](#), "[Gold Soundz](#)," [Thrush](#), collected in [My Dinner with Ron Jeremy](#), [Third Man Books](#)

Speech time

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

That's how Abraham Lincoln started the Gettysburg address and he got murdered in a theatre.

That's also how I have started my speech but I won't be murdered in a theatre
When I die, it will be an old-time injury, like falling into a threshing machine.

I am always making speeches, but speeches are a waste of time

The only useful speech is one where you enumerate someone's many failures until they burst into tears

But if anyone is bursting into tears today it will be me

I just want to lie naked on a deckchair, fanning myself with divorce papers

I have called this speech "speech time" so you will know it's time for speeches.

Anything can be a speech if you say it out loud for long enough

This is not freedom of speech, this is just extreme oratorical leeway

It's hot piss, melting the toilet ice

Speeches exist for the purpose of making other people think what you think

But I don't want just anyone to be able to think what I think

It's like if paisley were a natural resource, and people had to mine for it

You have to be stupid enough to want to

I've been making a lot of speeches recently because I published a book

And more than a book people like to hear you talk about your book

People don't like books they like speeches

But not this speech

People don't want to hear poetry, they want to hear people talking about poetry

People don't want to hear poetry, they want to go home and not read poetry and so do I

The only reason for poetry is to have a meadow in which to burn yourself alive in

A picturesque meadow, with bonus violets

I am bored of making speeches

I have to say so many things I don't care about

It reminds me of life

It reminds me of when you are a cowboy and your hat gets too heavy

There is nothing in this world really worth saying

Being clever is a waste of time

I just want to sit around in Swarovski earrings and let old men debate my literary merits

...but I don't even have my ears pierced

A speech is the opposite of a poem

A speech is telling people what to think, but I don't know what should be thought

Sometimes it seems to me like other people aren't even trying to tell the truth

Like, when I watch porn I like it to be the retro kind when you can't see the dick go in

Forget this speech, I'm changing the title

The new title of this speech is "poem time" because this is poem time not

speech time

It's like when it's your first day as a soldier and you show up to the wrong war

Or like sexily cleaning the coliseum with a black feather duster

It's like panicking because your castle is too beautiful

Or an advent calendar for atheists full of empty windows

It's like pouring cold champagne all over your thighs

Or an evil piano that can only be played at midnight

A poem should never be a tourniquet

You have to let the blood goes where it wants

It's like trying to log into your email account but your password makes you too sad

It's like Shakespeare etc

I love writing poetry because it gives me casket pleasure

I can feel my death somewhere far off

It's like doing a shot of semen after sex and calling it a chaser

Or when you're a ghost and can feel the wind blow in through your sheetholes

Poetry is like a tuxedo that zips off at the knee

It's my pet boredom.....

I sit in my room with the rain coming down

And I start to wonder about my life

Poetry is like pushing a pram through the dawn

But the pram is on fire, because the fire is your baby

It's like having an orgasm every time you hear middle C on a piano

Mozart is just elaborate foreplay to you

It's like upgrading your horse drawn carriage to a better, more technologically advanced horse drawn carriage

Or squeezing your mop into a tropical fish tank

It's like being the Monet of blow jobs and losing your boyfriend to the Toulouse-Lautrec of blowjobs

Or a bedside drawer packed with snow

Poetry is a luxury behaviour

Like crying because you're too clever and nobody understands you

It's like cutting your hand at a party and referring to your blood as "party blood"

It's like: welcome to good behaviour town, population 0

Hera Lindsay Bird

179

Second Marriage

Mother crying on the marriage bed.
Impermanence, the noisy one, trying to keep its voice down.

Like vinegar poured into milk they were:
A coming together at the expense of a separation.

Like a deed freed from a strongbox in the basement.
A lock's combination suddenly remembered.

Out slid the snake with the egg in its belly.
(Just like that)

A big bright department store empty of stepsons.
Mothers in the fitting rooms unhooking their bras.
(That's how she looked that night)

My old man punching the register's keys
As if typing his life story.
So funny, it made everyone cry.

A chick called out from the nest. A snake answered.

The terror of that first time
Like a black sail on a moonless night
In a windless, waveless sea.

Or like the Eye of Horus
Forsaking the deity
To roam the world of her face on its own.

Cindy King
180

¹⁸⁰ [Cindy King](#), "[Second Marriage](#)," collected in [Zoonotic](#), [Tinderbox Editions](#)

Haywire

When I was a kid,
there was always someone old
living with my friends,
a small, gray person
from another century
who stayed in a back room
with a Bible and a bed with silver rails.

They were from a time before the time
the world just plain went haywire,

and even though nothing
made sense to them anymore,
they'd gotten used to it,
and walked around smiling vaguely
at the aliens ruining the galaxy
on the color console television,

or the British invasion
growing from the sides of our heads
in little transistorized boxes.

In the front room, by the light of tv,
we were just starting to get stoned,
and the girls were helping us
help them out of their jeans,

while in the back room
someone very tired
closed her eyes and watched
a wheat field where a boy
whose name she can't remember
is walking down a dusty road.

No sound
but the sound of crickets.
No satellites,
or even headlights in the distance yet.

George Bilgere
181

¹⁸¹ [George Bilgere](#), "[Haywire](#)," collected in [Haywire](#), [Utah State University Press](#)

This Narrator is Approximately Sixteen

I'm not poor, I'm punk rock. Anyway, it's not what you think. When I was 13 my dad & I lived in an 8'x8' shed & he invited an aging-out foster kid named Axel to live with us, but I had a horse. I think I had a horse. Our neighbor didn't want to feed the horse after her kid grew up & moved away, so she gave the horse to me. Ostensibly. The tent where Axel slept was meant for hay but he made himself a nest with sleeping bags on top of the bales. I didn't mind because people, like horses, aren't supposed to be disposable, even if you get tired of feeding them. But it was awkward when my horse was hungry & Axel was hungover. The tent smelled of old alcohol steeped in sour teenage boy sweat with a subtle backnote of sweet clover as I pulled a flake or two from his nest bales around his sleeping body. We'd no running water or anything like a bathroom, but we had an outdoor kitchen, which was a tarp, a cooler & a picnic table. I brushed my teeth with ditchwater. Dad & Axel drank beer & played ball. I read books in my miniature loft in the tiny shed or rode my horse. She loved to gallop & I let her because she was big & old & willful. When I was 15, my neighbor's kid came home to visit & took my horse one day without asking. I was doing community service, dusting tin cans and washing lettuces at the Co-op store. I'd broken into the Co-op late one night some months before & stolen stuff. Spent the days after the heist hiding out on the mountain with a cute boy who'd just moved to the island & moved away soon after & died of an overdose soon after that. My neighbor's kid walked into the *Employees Only* area behind the dairy cooler with my horse's bridle in her hand and said *she's dead, I think she had a heart attack, she's on the beach*. The person who was supervising my community service thought I was legitimately shitting her when I said *I have to go because my horse is dead* & unexpectedly I walked to Mum's & she helped me call a backhoe to scoop up my horse with its largest digging bucket before the tide came in & excavate a huge hole beside her driveway & drop my horse in with a bone-shattering crunch & refill the hole with ruddy earth, tapping the mound lovingly with its bucket at the end. Then Mum and I went to the nursery in her Volvo station wagon that was rank with cigarette smoke & I picked out a purple-leafed plum tree that promised to bloom pink every spring & Mum paid for it which was really nice & the backhoe guy said no charge which was really nice & we planted that tree on the mound of red dirt. So I guess she really was my horse. Mum & I weren't on speaking terms but we apparently had a moratorium that afternoon & given the circumstances the Co-op said I didn't have to finish my community service either. The funny part was I didn't actually break into the Co-op. I was one of the kids on the porch, waiting for the cigarettes, chocolate bars, potato chips, rolling papers, and *hey grab me some chocolate milk & tampons*, but afterwards I'd declared that I'd broken in—yes—I'd done it, and I think I said that because Mum worked there & what I was really trying to say is that kids aren't supposed to be disposable, even if you get tired of feeding them. Maybe what I mean by punk rock is it's better to be a hooligan than feel expendable & it's easier to wear safety pins in glittering rows across the rips in my jeans than admit that nobody has ever bought me pads or tampons or remembers I need clothes.

Petra Chambers

182

¹⁸² Petra Chambers, "This Narrator is Approximately Sixteen," *Pithead Chapel*

Picnic

A boy once told me *I was thinking about fucking you when
you said that thing about wanting to be emotionally annihilated.*

What I'd really said was *I want to emotionally annihilate myself
with an image*, standing on my knees in the grass.

We were talking about writing, and I was on my knees
for emphasis, slicing the air above the pizza.

As he thought about fucking me, I thought
about the head of a snap-pea, dog-eared,

then torn. In my hand was a ringlet, as if I'd held
its spine against a scissor blade and pulled.

The vessel fell open
with no reason not to.

Inside were three green peas lined up like lightbulbs
on a ceiling, waiting to be turned on.

Lena Crown
183

¹⁸³ [Lena Crown](#), "[Picnic](#)," [Poet Lore](#)

During the Nap

A ball of light at the perineum
makes its way to the skull
like an air bubble in the vein.
Your daughter is sleeping.
Her lashes down
like the fringe of piano shawls.
Her fingers point at an angle
like a Giotto. She is sleeping
and for a moment
you are free.
But all you can do is wait
and watch.

It is all your fault.
That she is stunning
and innocent.
You are the battery
inside the frightening bear
that speaks and sings
like an evangelical when shook.
You're the freak at the gate
who will do anything
for the tiny mad queen.
The sniper in the tower
with no name.

Bianca Stone

184

¹⁸⁴ [Bianca Stone](#), "[During the Nap](#)," [Isele Magazine](#), collected in [What is Otherwise Infinite](#), [Tin House Books](#)

from "The World Doesn't End"

They wheeled out the ash blonde who believes herself already dead into the spike-fenced garden of the hospital for the insane. Her name was Amy or Ann, but she didn't answer to either one. She kept her eyes tightly shut. She was pushed by a nurse in white.

Some of it was told to me by a shivering young man who insisted that it's been raining for years, even indoors. "Coming down real hard," he said.

~

Lover of endless disappointments with your collection of old postcards, I'm coming! I'm coming! You want to show me a train station with its clock stopped at five past five. We can't see inside the station master's window because of the grime. We don't even know if there's a train waiting on the platform, much less if a woman in black is hurrying through the front door. There are no other people in sight, so it must be a quiet station. Some small town so effaced by time it has only one veiled widow left, and now she too is leaving with her secret.

~

Everything's foreseeable. Everything has already been foreseen. What has been fated cannot be avoided. Even this boiled potato. This fork. This chunk of dark bread. This thought too....

My grandmother sweeping the sidewalk knows that. She says there's no god, only an eye here and there that sees clearly. The neighbors are too busy watching TV to burn her as a witch.

Charles Simic
185

¹⁸⁵ [Charles Simic, "They wheeled out the ash blonde..., Lover of endless disappointments..., Everything's foreseeable..."](#)
collected in [The World Doesn't End](#), Ecco

Molly Is Asked

to be in the Christmas pageant. She tells me this standing in the door of what we laughingly call my study.

“But I don’t want to be Mary,” she says.
“I want to be the guy.”

That makes me look up from my bills.
“Joseph?”

“The innkeeper. I want to slam the door in Joseph’s face.”

She’s eight. I wonder if we’ll look back on this next year and laugh. Or will she want to be Herod and we’ll have to take her little brother and flee.

Ron Koertge
186

¹⁸⁶ Ron Koertge, “[Molly Is Asked](#),” collected in [Vampire Planet](#), Red Hen Press

While You Sleep, I Watch Myself Die

It happens all sorts of ways:
spinal meningitis, a lump I've ignored
for too long, a lung collapsing

sudden as gunshot. My vanishing plays
like a reel-to-reel movie—I never
stop going away. In the library-

quiet of the bedroom, I hear the rush
of sudden stillness, the scrape
of the lowering-down. And so many

details to consider: the embalming,
the makeup, the oak or maple
casket. I want none of it. But

when is it closer than now, our bodies
glistening, the old-book smell of sex
still on us? I'm not nearer

to the earth, or ethereal, or holy.
I'm jagged. The next step
could splinter bones and bring me

to my knees. In the corner, the lamp
leans like a crutch. I leave you
dropping through sleep and move

to the window. The moon
shimmers, a placebo. As it falls,
I close my mouth around it.

Catherine Pierce
187

¹⁸⁷ [Catherine Pierce](#), "[While You Sleep, I Watch Myself Die](#)," collected in [Animals of Habit](#), [The Kent State University Press](#)

Test of Fortitude

Wherever you've gone I hope you're still hot
and reading novels the way some attack puddings,

the city slightly more aloof but still desperate
because of all the phone light. Maybe an adolescent

like yesteryear-you is gazing at the ice trash
in Lake Erie thinking it's a ladder lying about depth.

I wonder if shoes have become progressively
quieter or if that's just me, situated on the outer edge

of the opposite of a half-pipe, witnessing coupons
expire or spreadsheets corrupt, pining for the plastic

grapes that decorated each table in the old pasta
joint. We pinched them because they bounced back.

I recall tests of fortitude that involved a shaker
of red pepper flakes, Whitney cranked scream-level.

Whatever new occupation you have, besides
the coffin you always aspired to, and wrote heavily

about back when still alert enough to catch
a tennis ball lobbed over a bus by an alcoholic nun

you befriended at the Osco, I hope you're cool
enough to replace your corduroys seasonally, conceal

an empty container of Old Style in the petunias
while conducting official business at 24 Hr Cashland.

Or maybe you've fallen off the screen, flushed
and traded for someone who looked better on paper.

Mary Biddinger
188

¹⁸⁸ [Mary Biddinger](#), "[Test of Fortitude](#)," collected in [Department of Elegy](#), [Black Lawrence Press](#)

In the Studio at End of Day

From my mother I've inherited dark eyes
and the desire to spend hours alone in a room
making things that might matter to no one.
She paints canvas after canvas, so many

she doesn't know what to do with them all.
Would you like one? Please,
come down to her studio,
she's giving them away now, as I write,

as I watch her and write and revise draft after draft
while not twenty feet from me she's spilling her paints
on the floor. She has more courage than I,
painting's not like writing, you can't get back

to earlier versions. Failure is hot right now,
said one of the children of her children,
and I think my mother was consoled.
I was, and then we were in it,

celebrating my mother and my father, both.
She made us laugh as she looked around the table
at the mutable world, her vast progeny—
so many of us she doesn't know what to do

with us all, and two already lost—
then raised a glass to my father
and their ninety years together.
Who's counting? Time passes

while my mother stands before the painting
as if it were a mirror
and paints the woman's face purple,
tilts the woman's head, blurs her outline.

She paints with whatever's at hand.
Chopsticks. Fingers. Elbow.
If she had a gun she'd use that.
My father built the storage racks

but there's no more room.
Try to hurry, try to get here fast,
before she leaves. Last night
she went home early,

and I was by myself in her studio,
which is like a womb. Everything
pulses. I turned the lights out
at the circuit breaker, as she taught me.

When they go off they make a kind of bang,
a shudder through the walls.
Tonight let's leave my mother
working here, she says she's not finished yet,

but take a painting on your way out
—tomorrow there will be another.
Read this draft, tomorrow there will be another.
Kiss her face.

Tomorrow there will be another.

Catherine Barnett
189

¹⁸⁹ [Catherine Barnett](#), "[In the Studio at End of Day](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Human Hours](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

The Living

This is not about my life. I was reading the menu,
I was part of a *Résistance*, someone dropped a glass of wine.
The singing of glass was everywhere
and the clear leaves were all over the bar.
Sleep, sleep, somebody said

but it was part of a conversation I couldn't get the gist of.
Did I know the lines at Arles had fallen?
Had I heard about the swamps outside St. Pierre?
Each day, I read the lists in the newspaper

and his name was never among them.
There are reports that our retreating soldiers
saw red leaves shuffling strangely in the winds
until angels rose through the highest branches
and saved them with their wings.

The man who spilled his drink was singing now.
He raised his broken glass to the lights.
In the jagged stem was the tiniest red stone of wine,
which he swallowed. The crowd applauded.

Every day, more names.
We all pretend to believe the story about angels.
I think the world takes place on the surface of a brilliant red leaf.
When the wind blows and the tree shakes,
things fall closer to that leaf's black veins.

Kevin Prufer
190

¹⁹⁰ [Kevin Prufer](#), "[The Living](#)," [Fourteen Hills](#), collected in [The Finger Bone](#), [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

The Dun Cow and the Hag

Beside the river Volga near the village of Anskijovka
On a bright summer day

An old woman sat sewing
By the riverbank. If asked she would say

She was lowering the hem of a black dress.
All the while she sewed

A cow stood beside her. They were ignored
As the day passed; by evening, a merchant

From Novgorod arrived with his family
At the riverbank carrying baskets.

And his eldest daughter down beyond a clump
Of white birches undressed and stepped

Into the river, the girl's breasts
Are large and moved separately like twins

Handed from one serf to the next
Down to a river for baptism. The merchant,

His wife, and their son are seated
In the grass eating chunks of pink fish

That they dip in scented butter. The fish
Spoiled as it rode in the sun on the top

Of their carriage. These three have been poisoned
And can be seen kneeling in the grass.

The daughter who was bathing in the river
Is now, crying for anyone to help her: the hag

Leaves her cow to walk down to the floundering girl:
Just her arms above the water

Working like scissors.
She cut the thread for the old woman.

It was summertime on the river Volga, and the old woman
Told the cow

That this could happen to anyone and that
It *had* happened once to them; and

It was summertime on the river Volga,
The black water

Ran off her dress like a lowered hem.

Norman Dubie
191

¹⁹¹ [Norman Dubie](#), "[The Dun Cow and the Hag](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [The City of the Olesha Fruit](#), [Doubleday](#)

Paradise

Yesterday a woman walked into a Moscow subway
with explosives taped to her chest
and blew herself and 40 others to pieces.
There was a spark and then,
as if someone had folded the station
in half, they were gone.
Her first name meant *paradise*
though it sounded more like *doesn't it*.
You can find paradise anywhere.
I whisper names when I want a cigarette:
Huntington, Pasteur and Nijinsky,
Bruce and Jane, Paradise. One of my coworkers enjoyed
branding my arm with a burning metal spoon.
His name was Scott, so plain and American
sounding, so abbreviated, though Scott
read Foucault and rolled his own cigarettes
and played electric bass. In high school
he sold acid to the same football players
who'd beat him up outside McDonald's.
After turning their eyeballs inside out for 13 hours straight
they never touched him again.
We will do crazy things.
Sometimes I would wait inside my apartment lobby
with the lights turned off
so I could scare the manager
out of his skeleton. He and I like Clouseau
and Kato, attacking each other for months
at odd hours of the night. One of my neighbors loved
pissing on his wife, and another worshipped
the smell of manure and licking envelopes
until her tongue bled. I discovered paradise
while smoking pot in a minivan,
until my friend mistook a Buick Skylark
for a police cruiser, shoved my head down onto the lighter
and burned off an eyebrow. At his last public viewing
Abraham Lincoln's eyebrows
had also disintegrated. This is the picture
his enemies would have loved
to keep in the breast pockets of their tuxedos
while floating downriver
on a Sternwheeler. My ideas about paradise
have changed. I feel better knowing
that my friend who seared my eyebrow
weighs over four hundred pounds.
Her paradise sizzles at the all-you-can-eat
Mongolian grill.
Paradise in the aisle next to the grapefruit,
next to the cough medicine.

Paradise sucking another man's toes over sheets
of tattoo flash. In the lightsaber and the dinosaur
in your nephew singing Wayne Newton
through the child monitor, Paradise
entering the station alone,
kneeling down and opening her jacket.

Jay Nebel
192

¹⁹² [Jay Nebel](#), "[Paradise](#)," [Tin House](#), collected in [Neighbors](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

A Supermarket in Tennessee

The morning after my cousin Hope won \$200 for beating the crap out of a woman onstage at Blanchard's, I went to Kroger. I used to worship her—older, taller, tougher, my very own ego's fog machine—but there I was, freezing my ass off while I looked for what she needed. It'd been a week of new laws, headlines reading WINE IN GROCERIES, GUNS ON CAMPUS, both sides still buzzing, righteous, neither one appeased. Hope called to say her eye was swollen shut, and who was I to judge? Hadn't I huffed my share of duster? Didn't I make a boyfriend sexy magnets, of me in hot pink underwear and different outfits he could change? He stuck them on his mini fridge, and there's no telling who all saw, but even then I knew I'd never run for office. Hope took the pictures for me. This was before I left for college, before the Kroger was a Kroger, just a rundown store where Hope got caught stealing blueberries. My mother said that was the moment things went south, as if someone suddenly starts stealing blueberries. I want to claim I haven't been unkind. There is so much that mortifies us later. I don't think about what happened to the magnets. I don't think about the students I should arm myself against. Who knows what's worth \$200 once you're six drinks in at Blanchard's. They call it Foxy Boxing. Hope's face was puffed up worse than I expected, but of course I lied and said it wasn't bad. I brought her what she wanted: a box of white, and ice. As kids, our favorite game was diner. I cut and glued the menu's paper food, and we'd spend hours taking orders.

Caki Wilkinson

193

¹⁹³ [Caki Wilkinson](#), "A Supermarket in Tennessee," [Sewanee Review](#), collected in [The Survival Expo](#), [Persea Books](#)

William H. Johnson

—a letter home, circa 1933

Forgive this letter covered in paint.
There are no rags around me.
I cannot tell you where I am, but where I ain't.

I am not where the color of my skin taints
Everything. Remember the way folks looked at me
When I walked through Florence covered in paint?

There, I was less than nothing. I took a train
To Harlem; a ship to Denmark to be free.
I can only tell you that here, I ain't

Who I used to be. I am a Negro who has lain
With a white woman in a foreign country.
Mamma, forgive this letter covered in paint.

I ain't coming back. Here, no one complains
When Holcha & I kiss in the street.
Color doesn't tells us what we are & what we ain't

Never going to be. I have left my name
On the walls of a dozen museums & galleries.
I have covered my face in paint.
I cannot tell you who I am, but who I ain't.

Terrance Hayes
194

¹⁹⁴ Terrance Hayes, "William H. Johnson," collected in [Hip Logic](#), Penguin Books

The Eyes of the Neighborhood

The man whose girlfriend I saw moving small with the heavy laundry basket from the Laundromat to pile herself and her little dog into his junky car, the man whose girlfriend posted a picture of herself with bruised wrists and eyes asking that we fund her given she could no longer earn a living cleaning the summer people's houses, the man whose girlfriend died from an overdose just after she took out a restraining order against him is sitting behind me at the market deli, still alive, and no one is doing anything about it. He talks into his phone, he is unencumbered, at ease, casually jabbing his fork at his pasta salad, this man whom I've been introduced to three times but who pretends he does not see me now that I have sat down near him. Is no one amazed? He is at liberty. But how can it be that the screams have been washed from the air, my goodness.

II

The screams grew out the windows like flowers mad to rise up from the ground, the wretched ballerina with her twisted mouth. Rampant, out her house she is flexing her body down this street, the jugulars pumping in her neck like live ropes. She smashes her face into the air, now stares down her target at the dock where people sluggish wait for a ferry to depart, a jetsam of pending lawsuits laces the air intricate as if etched with the tip of a small knife by a skilled hand. Crowds coagulate by the humming metal case of the soda machine, the bicycle rack, the wooden benches baking in the sun. Just beyond, the water clamors with excitement, rushing its froth from between the propeller blades like blood squeezed from a closed fist, this is her language, not the language of pirouettes but threat: *so shut up and take the grim future in your mouth.*

III

This child playing in a ditch beneath this afternoon sun has no teeth, is all gums. They fed him so much sugar the roots sucked

the calcium back, withdrew their potent future, turned entirely black. Language is coming hard for his brother, who visits, who

mostly nods, and eats what we give him with his hands. Mother sulks, smokes, seemingly scowls from three doors down, but I

do not wear my glasses anymore as they are a hindrance against believing this world might be interrupted any minute now by

a commercial for laundry detergent. It is a well-known fact that when you see a certain truck turn onto the street you're walking

down, the driver is drunk, will step out while the engine idles to stoop and piss roadside in tall grasses in daylight outside

the ballerina's house, the meth head's shack, the famous author's porch. The sea chews its swimmers like tobacco, the stained sun.

IV

That game you played when taking the train, fixing your eyes on the shoddiest house to conjure some other more impossible

existence. Or that palpable loneliness that had your eyes reach for other eyes from out your car into another person's car: that

shack is what you are looking at now as you sit on the peeling picnic bench in the backyard of the man you've tied your mouth

into a bow for. There must be a way to clean it up, plant some flowers, impose derelict chic, boho fuckaroo, scrub the fuck out

of the floors, so you scrub until the floors give way, and it's like getting to know someone better and better, their eyes change,

were once green, are now green but not the same, and years later you hear that floor you scrubbed with no success was torn up,

all that house's floors plain rotten. But it was fun in that seaside town, sticking ditch lilies in a vase on the kitchen table, wasn't it.

V

Arranging those ditch lilies in a vase you've placed on a table you wouldn't bother donating to Goodwill, you're all loved up now,

aren't you? Scrubbing the floor until it disappears beneath your actual hands, scrubbing the stain out to which you can claim no

association—honest! How'd you get here, and why won't this spot disappear? You've tried all the cleaning solutions. You find him

on Instagram, the greasy pictures he last left on Facebook. You see he has once again begun, his presence reassembling itself,

his knowledge slow and certain as blood seeping into a carpet. Recall the wreath of prints around your neck, his pomegranate-

stain necklace. You are yet another woman who thought she had to protect her husband more than herself. And like the batshit

ballerina, you too lived beneath a roof upon which moss accrued almost kindly, with a man for whom you tied your lips into a bow.

Cate Marvin

195

¹⁹⁵ [Cate Marvin](#), "[The Eyes of the Neighborhood](#)," [The Kenyon Review](#), collected in [Event Horizon](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

And Even After All That, No Epiphany

Pubic hairs float up the strata of my bath and I remember being confident I was going to be a good mother of many children

When a boyfriend said, “I want a big, loud family” I lied and said, “*Same*”

A friend said to me once, “I’m good at sex, that doesn’t mean I should be a prostitute,” and I began reconsidering a lot of things: cows, mostly, but also tax evasion

A child in my charge wrapped my hair around her fists like boxing gauze; I let her—

This was maternal as hell

If I shaved my head, you’d see that baby’s grip burned among the stubble like a brand

Don’t question the farm where you were born, why it was there, why it belonged to an oral surgeon

Every MD in AL owns farmland for tax write-off purposes (buy a cow, sell a cow—keep it legit)

It helps if you can get a cheap hand

Find a young father with an infant daughter and nowhere to live

Give them rent of the property shack, kudzu lapping the sides all night like a tide pulled up by the moon

No need to grow anything

The cows are few

and only need to survive

You won’t be the first to be disturbed by what you find, or don’t, in a bovine’s eyes

My father climbed ladders, pitched hay down into truck beds, and it fell unlike snow, shot up a shadow when it landed

Lately I’ve been reading a lot in the bath about two women who are friends

Power pours from one to the next; there is only so much,
and it can only be shared, one up, one down, how simple and clean

I like The opposite, in my experience, of becoming a person, which

in the way, back in school, I liked grinding, which everyone but me suddenly seemed sexually comfortable enough, one winter, to be into, mostly in hot, dark garages

I went to the parties and stood at the edge eating stumpy little carrots

People thought I was judging, but I was just trying to figure out how to be sexy
without bringing my body into it

Parents didn't want to know what was happening with us, and
neither, frankly, did I, but I felt I had to, watching a boy hold a girl's pelvis to his, swinging her limp form
back and forth offbeat in the dark; they looked like an ear of corn somebody gave up trying to shuck after
peeling back one husk leaf, the leaf at the mercy of the shank

When a friend says, over the phone, "You got the life I expected to get, and I got yours," I think we're
appreciating irony, so I laugh

I often laugh when I'm in charge of sharing bad news (ie. *We*
(ha ha) *had to put our dog to sleep*)

Boyfriend: *Sometimes I consider driving into oncoming traffic*

Me: *ha ha ha ha*

In the book, both friends hope and fear they are the more intelligent.
They love the same man and have daughters by the sea

We were sitting on her blue couch the day before tax day, and she said "My womb aches for a baby," and,
laughing, I said, "like... literally?" and she said, "Uh, yes..." very suspiciously, as if she'd just discovered
I might be an eel

I see them at the beach, sneakily studying each other's stomachs when they flip a page

God bless the IUD, that little white anchor with its little white string—three
years is a long time to be upside down eating semen

Later I'll walk an hour to the bookstore and my boss's kids will be there in the back: one boy, one girl,
watching me

Gabrielle Bates

196

¹⁹⁶ Gabrielle Bates, "[And Even After All That, No Epiphany](#)," *Ambit*, collected in [Judas Goat](#), [Tin House Books](#)

The Well

I couldn't sleep and stayed up most of the night on Oxycodone, watching horror movies and placing my body into the weird contortion that turned the pain from a nail gun into a moderately-smoking campfire. Then it was morning and I had to go to the basement but I was too scared. The last time I tried, I fell down the rotting steps and landed with my cheek in a puddle, a displaced bug scurrying by my eyelash. I had stopped going to work and lived in a voice-structure: instead of walls and floors and my third-floor view of roofs, every step seemed to place me on paths of braided invisible limbs as I went from bed to bathroom to hunch over the stove. I heard voices in these creatures, and before long it was easier to stay in bed, folded into my V-shape. For most of my life I couldn't watch horror movies because I believed in real demonic possession, but now I don't mind the stupidity of horror movie people: their underwater movement, their staring and staring into indifferent caverns of nothingness. In one movie the angry dead girl wanted the people to learn a lesson, but what they needed to learn was the worst kind of exhaustion and they wouldn't learn it. They finally found the well under the floor but finding it only made things worse. One ended with no eyes while another was cursed to live this life over and over again.

Julia Story
197

¹⁹⁷ [Julia Story](#), "[The Well](#)," [Sixth Finch](#), collected in [Spinster for Hire](#), [The Word Works](#)

Passing

Someone said, at first
we want romance, then for life
to be bearable,
at last, understandable.
I am frightened, now
that the trees look like question
marks, how the moon makes
strange noises but it's daytime.
Bells have begun to notice me.

Victoria Chang
198

¹⁹⁸ [Victoria Chang](#), "[Passing](#)," collected in [The Trees Witness Everything](#), Copper Canyon Press

Vasectomy

After the vas deferens is cut, the constantly
manufactured sperm cells die into the bloodstream
and the constant body produces antibodies

to kill them. Dozens of feet of coiled wiring
need to be teased out and snipped at the right spot,
and then, local anesthetic winding down, the doc

has to stuff it all back in like a flustered motorist
struggling to refold a road map. But never mind,
you'll fire blanks forever after. At first you may feel

peeled and solitary without your gang of unborn
children, so like the imaginary friends of childhood
and also like those alternate futures you'll never

live out and never relinquish because they're company,
and who'd blame you preferring company to love?
Most of the other animals live in groups we've named

so lavishly we must love them. Lions: a pride.
Foxes: a skulk. Larks: an exaltation. And geese:
a skein in the sky and a gaggle on the ground.

Venereal nouns, they're called, for the power Venus
had to provoke allegiances. But the future comes
by subtraction. The list dwindles of people

you'd rather be than you. Nobody in a dream
is dead, so when you wake at 5:00 A. M. to scuffle
across the hall and pee, to lower your umber line

and reel it back in dry, and then to lie back down
and bob like a moored boat two hours more,
you think how if you brought them all—the dead,

the living, the unborn—promiscuously on stage
as if for bows, what a pageant they'd make!
They would. They do. But by then you're back to sleep.

William Matthews
199

¹⁹⁹ [William Matthews](#), "[Vasectomy](#)," collected in [Foreseeable Futures](#), [Ecco](#)

Hitchhike

Hell isn't endless suffering, says French philosopher
and political activist Simone Weil, it's endless monotony,
the same thing over and over again. Think Liverpool, think 1963,
and there you are: you married too young and you have too many
kids and either a dead-end job or no job and an ocean of beer
to drown it all in, and suddenly four guys from your neighborhood—

your neighborhood!—shout “Please Please Me” and “Love
Me Do” and “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” and like that,
you're free: sure, the bills and backaches will still be there
in the morning, but you're free for two minutes and change,
and if you can be not simply your own person but something
like a god on this earth for these two minutes now, then why not

more tomorrow, the next day, the day after that? Just because
a song is fun doesn't mean that it can't be serious:
the Beatles are still in short pants when Little Richard
records “Tutti Frutti” in New Orleans. It's 1955 now,
and a year later, Allen Ginsberg writes “America” in Berkeley,
and if that “queer Jewish commie anarchist dope fiend can refuse

the internal exile his country has offered him,” as cultural critic
Greil Marcus says of Ginsberg in his book, *Mystery Train*,
then the gay black crippled anarchist dope fiend can do the same,
only with a drum kit and saxophones. Imagine a portrait
of the Founding Fathers, including the John Hancock whose
name is evoked daily as millions of patriotic Americans jack up

the gross national product by signing contracts, loan agreements,
and credit card slips for everything from a pack of cigarettes
to a new automobile, only this time Little Richard and Allen
Ginsberg are in the picture with their crazy hair and loopy
facial expressions, Richard with his arm around the shoulders
of a startled Button Gwinnett and Allen about to pinch

the bottom of Francis Lightfoot Lee, whose name, like
Gwinnett's, is itself the essence of both poetry and rock 'n' roll
and who has no idea what's about to happen. Ah, uncertainty!
How we fear and need you. Now picture these same men
nervously fingering their quill pens as they wonder whether
or not to sign the Declaration of Independence which will certainly

change their world and might even change the world as a whole
and is also a document that bolstered the citizens and soldiers
to whom it was read aloud, just as “Tutti Frutti” bolstered us
teenagers as we tried to figure out what we were doing, where
we were going, who we loved, who loved us. Younger reader,
that is, any reader of this poem who is younger than me, which,

come to think of it, is likely to be almost every reader, have I lost you
already? Your music and my music are not the same music.
My music is the artists and groups I have already named as well as
a thousand others—Jackie Wilson, the Clash, Otis, Etta,
Aretha, all doowop, most early rap/grunge/punk/psychobilly,
and, hovering over them all, beautiful doomed Marvin Gaye—

whereas yours consists of musicians I won't even try to name
because (a) I'll pick the wrong ones and (b) I'm certain that,
if what I've written here is read a month or a year or ten years from now,
the wheel will have turned by then, the seasons changed,
the sun risen and sunk and been unhorsed by the moon
and risen again, and musical tastes, too, will have evolved

so radically that what your children listen to will be as different from
your music as yours is from mine. Whoever your favorites are,
swear on a stack of 45s that you listen to them in your car. Young people's
music was meant to be listened to on Sunset Strip, Route 66,
the New Jersey turnpike, A1A all the way from Jacksonville
to the Keys, and the best songs all have cars in them,

from Robert Johnson's "Terraplane Blues" to Chuck Berry's
"Maybellene" to Janis Joplin's "Mercedes Benz" and Tracy
Chapman and pretty much everything by Springsteen and the Beach Boys.
But say you don't have a car or don't have a car that works
or do have a car but someone else has borrowed/stolen/wrecked it:
you can still stick out your thumb and get picked up by some stranger

who will take you where you want to go or, if you're really lucky,
to someplace you've never heard of but that's better than where
you were going in the first place. Of course, that same person
may saw your head off and leave it by the side of the road
and the rest of you in a dumpster behind the Waffle House in
the next town, because that kind of thing does happen from time to time,

but it happens a lot less often than the other thing, and besides,
you're not looking for something anymore but someone and not just
anyone, either, you're looking for the one who will do for you
what a great song or a great poem does and free you, turn you
into a god, take you off your feet and away from home, then lead you
back, and not just for the time it takes you to listen or read but forever,

and besides, a car has just pulled over, and the engine's idling,
and you look through the window, and the driver has a half smile
and is chewing on a toothpick or a stick of gum or maybe
a sliver of his last passenger's soul, and you think *I'm going*
to do this and then *I'd have to be crazy to do this* and then *I've got*
to find that girl if I have to hitchhike around the world.

David Kirby

²⁰⁰ [David Kirby](#), "[Hitchhike](#)," [Birmingham Poetry Review](#), collected in [Help Me, Information](#), [Louisiana State University](#)

Out of Metropolis

We're headed for empty-headedness,
the featureless amnesias of Idaho, Nebraska, Nevada,
states rich only in vowel sounds and alliteration.
We're taking the train so we can see into the heart
of the heart of America framed in the windows' cool
oblongs of light. We want cottages, farmhouses
with peaked roofs leashed by wood smoke to the clouds;
we want the golden broth of sunlight ladled over
ponds and meadows. We've never seen a meadow.
Now, we want to wade into one—up to our chins in the grassy
welter—the long reach of our vision grabbing up great
handfuls and armloads of scenery at the clouds'
white sale, at the bargain basement giveaway
of clods and scat and cow pies. We want to feel half
of America to the left of us and half to the right, ourselves
like a spine dividing the book in two, ourselves holding
the whole great story together.

Then, suddenly, the train pulls into the station,
and the scenery begins to creep forward—the ramshackle shapes
of Main Street, a Chevy dozing at a ribbon of curb, and here is a hound
and a trolley, the street lights on their long stems, here is the little park
and the park stuff: bum on a bench, deciduous trees, a woman upholstered
in a red dress, the bus out of town sunk to its chromium bumper in shadows.
The noise of a train gathers momentum and disappears into the distance,
and there is a name strolling across the landscape in the crisply voluminous
script of the title page, as though it were a signature on the contract, as though
it were the author of this story.

Lynn Emanuel
201

²⁰¹ [Lynn Emanuel](#), “[Out of Metropolis](#),” [The Antioch Review](#), collected in [Then, Suddenly...](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Love Notes [Do you love...]

Do you love vague commitments?
Do you love bad news in crooning shapes?
Whole or half, tattoos mooning on

conjoined rib cages? Check this box &
like a breath, you'll feel mostly bygone.

Like one of those early recordings, you'll
be scratchy & demystified. Untranscribably
confessional until the last quarter note

is a processional. You'll be absolutely fine,
flipped to the B side of this note's high-lined

referendum. Magnificent & stark inside
the addendum, like a big breath exhaled
through the smart part of a question mark.

Adrian Matejka
202

²⁰² [Adrian Matejka](#), "[Love Notes \[Do you love...\]](#)," [Wildness](#), collected in [Somebody Else Sold the World](#), [Penguin](#)

When things repeat

the daily pattern. The paper arrives. There is the mail lady, and I wave. I pull the curtains open and there is the day. The night has gone home to Beijing and Manila. I write things down to keep the light from disappearing. A photo with my phone of something Hopper might have painted. The hajib'd fruit sellers. I love downtown in the in-between time changes. I remember the market near the waterfront in Boston at day's end, the ground covered with smashed produce: lettuce, tomatoes, eggplants, fresh dropped eggs, the spillage of glistening ice, stray dogs lapping up the smell of day-old fish and human labor. Behind the stalls, the fishmongers count their oily cash into the lock box, unlatch their guns. Or the times at dawn in old cities when shops open, pushing up their steel grates, opening for the day. The fresh market vendors setting up tables of blood oranges, ginger, pots of curry, the scent of cinnamon, unhusked corn, great heads of cabbages on carts. The zookeeper tossing huge slabs of meat to the lions. "Roar," he says. The gleaming trumpet bells, cymbals, guitars, and cell phones, motorcycle helmets, a basketball signed by Jordan. Flat screen televisions, old gumball machines and gold chains that are too heavy to put on a neck catching the early light in pawnshop windows. All the common daily wage, the night shift—caregivers, office cleaners, nurses, heads down headed home. I never wanted my poems to be perfectly trimmed. More like a tattered and weather-worn and frayed flag, flying over a country that no longer exists. Like the old grandmother in Haviaras' novel who tells us, "When a tree sings, it's because somebody dies. Or because somebody comes back from the dead." The one who is left (behind) takes the longest path leaving. Where do I begin but in the long after it has happened. This late hour unfolds a fold in the veil. This late hour a fold in the veil unfolds. Is it that every pair of lovers believe in Fate, or do they create it? Too often I face the tragedy or temptation of turning my life into myth when it is really all piss and marrow. To regret the tragedy you have already long traveled. If we have the lamentation of regret, why do we not have a meaning for gret in our language? And if we did, what would it mean? At work the wall clock tocks the time of my steps—this dance I do—what room to check—med to pass. It speaks through walls, shifts, my grandfather's voice speaks of the men he cared for, his round clockface face, coffee black eyebrows, slight clocklike grin, and what was time to him, he who cared and gave, who lifted children from the street and offered them a warm cup. A small plastic cup fills with moonlight streaming through the med room window. If I give this cup of moonlight to the man, he will drink it down. Drink the moon I say, and he giggles, puts the plastic rim to his lip. Blue light of memory streams from his mouth and eyes. Later when he falls to sleep, he will slowly rise, till he is full.

Sean Thomas Dougherty

203

²⁰³ Sean Thomas Dougherty, "When things repeat," *Hobart*, collected in *Death Prefers the Minor Keys*, BOA Editions, Ltd.

The Bodies

The bodies on the battlefield
in the documentary aren't really
dead of course they position
themselves for sunrise I'm told
the bodies get \$25 and free lunch
the bodies are trying to make it
in Hollywood or just anywhere
being a lawyer or a sanitation worker
the bodies might be feeling exhausted
or just done with it all before
I was born the body put a bag
over its head and disappeared
I was six when the body forever
jumped from a bridge thirty when
the body tried again and again
to fly from the top of the parking
garage the bodies make a pattern
of loss they can't see or stop
after the movie shoot the bodies
pick themselves up and wash off
their wounds the bodies take
a sandwich then it's the easiest thing
the bodies just get in their cars
and drive home

Lauren Shapiro
204

²⁰⁴ [Lauren Shapiro](#), "[The Bodies](#)," [Copper Nickel](#), collected in [Arena](#), [Cleveland State University Poetry Center](#)

The Island, Part Two

It's active as a lunar volcano; to find, then,
use a moon map. The islanders bury their kin,
always a Crockett or a Pruitt, in their front lawns,

feet toward the sea that reared them; but most
keep indoors now, like orphans with head lice,
and peer into the mirrors of old photographs.

In a brogue believed to sound Elizabethan,
the one teen left who plays guitar is singing—

talents he nurtured on the island's outer dyke,
where gigantic sheep that bite still propagate.

Steven Cramer
205

²⁰⁵ [Steven Cramer](#), "[The Island, Part Two](#)," collected in [Departures from Rilke](#), [Arrowsmith Press](#)

Good Night

Threading the silver crust
of a nightmare with stars, I stitch
& pull my mother's name
through white stones that do not burn
in the riverbed of blood
beneath my tongue. The moon
is a knuckle, the crown of a nightly fist
pressed against my mouth. Tears
pour from my mouth. In absentia
someone votes for my life.

The night climbs my spine. My head
wrecked with involuntary stars.
May sorrow carries the good news
to every door
the body has marked
with blood.

Our visits go on inside
my skin, existing like the light
of planets whose extinction we have
yet to memorize. How do I remember
which forever is my mother's truth?

Her god bursts like rain
behind the earth's skull.
In water, our alphabet
sinks &

our arms, bare as ghosts,
drift

like thin ships of paper. Love persists
within my gold bones. I kneel
in the hull of memory.

My flesh is a syntax of dark grammar
sunken beneath my tongue.

*For years & for years you had her, I say
with blame.*

Squealing & indigo, I take
my mother's words again.
Examine the fontanelles
of syllables, pressing
& striking
the echoes of her voice

until I scream & shriek
inside the lonely gauze
of my rebirth.

Newborn with sorrow,
I can see the shining
veins
we share when the world
leaves every face &
surface beatified
with suffering.

Tell me, I say.

I can't remember the thunder
that cracked my head
into stardust
above the hospital bed.

Tonight, my mother gets up
from her own silence
to tell me she believes
that we were all
the living she ever
wanted to say.

Rachel Eliza Griffiths
206

²⁰⁶ [Rachel Eliza Griffiths](#), "[Good Night](#)," [The Cortland Review](#), collected in [Seeing the Body](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Something of a Tractate

It was gone now, the boring summer,
and those who survived it were stuffed
with famous haiku. Now they were asked
to eat bold and dangerous amounts
of macaroni. They were taught to say
“he died” instead of “he is dead”
and given a couple of sweaters.
And now the air seemed to be at least
partially composed of mothballs
and so preserved something of a tractate
when the last red leaf fluttered
helplessly into the water
but seemed, too, to be joyfully dissolving
in tears, as if to say I, too, am a Swabian,
born of carbon in the black pine forests,
where the essence of all conceivable beauty
is to watch the little snowflakes
melting on a foreign tongue.

Mary Ruefle
207

²⁰⁷ Mary Ruefle, “[Something of a Tractate](#),” collected in *Indeed I Was Pleased with the World*, [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

Nude Selfie Ode

Listen, you didn't ask me to do this but what I want to tell you is that I wish we had this kind of technology years ago, because instead of calling one night to say meet me on the corner of Henry and Court where we sat on the curb and I said I actually like you that way and you said you didn't I might have just sent a photo

You would have sent one back (or not)

I still worry about where they might end up

"The concept of 'the beautiful'," says Wittgenstein, "has caused a lot of mischief." (Marjorie Perloff)

Another ex who is not dead and in Dubai writes me after Iftar and too many gin and tonics to say when he moved to the suburbs he would walk around the lake near his house and yell into the wind as loudly as he could

In retrospect this was a sign that maybe his marriage wasn't working

His message says *I almost sent you a photo, but it was inappropriate*

In the morning he writes *I'm sorry—I was drunk*

"Desiring-machines are neither imaginary projections in the form of fantasies, nor real projections in the form of tools." (Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari)

In the morning when the house is empty, I aim for posterity

I don't know who you think you are the photo says

The photo says *I'm beautiful and have some regrettable tattoos*

The photo is taken in the best possible light

The photo is taken from above

The photo is taken with my back to the window so I have a halo

Outside the clouds are low and diffuse in the trees

The photo is taken with the self-timer

I don't care if the neighbors who shoot and four-wheel at the same time see me

The photo has a serious filter

Lark, Reyes, Juno, Slumber, Crema, Ludwig, Aden, Perpetua, Amaro, Mayfair, Hudson, Valencia

A composer I'm collaborating with found out that I secretly love the band Asia, so he held his phone to the mic in our 3D black box sound space and let "Heat of the Moment" play from all 138 speakers

Those power chords at the start of the song are the same as loving your own broken-down body—the holy jolt of electricity, then the way the song settles into itself, mellows but still preens a little at the bridge

“An act of touch may reproduce itself as an acoustical event or even an abstract idea, the way whenever Augustine touches something smooth, he begins to think of music and of God.” (Elaine Scarry)

A look from you and I would fall from grace

Objects become larger when you move the phone closer—for example, ass becomes Kardashian in lace and my cleavage an endless National Park canyon, until I remember none of this is real—just pixels

Architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe popularized the phrase *less is more*

In the best one, my face is turned away and my hair falls over my breasts

In the best one, I am touching myself

Secret ecstasy—I am shameless

“I look at you and a sense of wonder takes me” (Homer, *The Odyssey*)

In the best one, my mouth is open when I come

I keep it for a month in the trash on my phone and sometimes I pull it up and look at it after I park my car in the Target lot

Everyone around me is always looking at their phones too

Their faces are turned toward the light

Victor Turner called it *liminality*

This is the threshold of the world

We go through this doorway and we are changed, immeasurably, illuminati, things of wonder and desire

my body my body my body

“An object, already within the horizon, has its beauty, like late luggage, suddenly placed in your hands.” (Elaine Scarry)

Erika Meitner
208

²⁰⁸ [Erika Meitner](#), “[Nude Selfie Ode](#),” [Poet Lore](#), collected in [Useful Junk](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Choose Your Garden

When we decided on the Japanese,
forgoing the Victorian, its Hester
Prynne-ish air of hardly mastered urges,

I thought it would be peaceful.
I thought it would relax my nerves,

which these days curl like cheap gift wrap:
my hands spelling their obsessions; a nervous
tic, to wring the unspeakable from
a silent alphabet.

I thought it would be like heaven: stern,
very clean, virtuous and a little dull—

but we had to cross the bridge to enter
and in the crossing came upon a slaughter
of camellias, a velvet mass-decapitation
floating on the artificial lake,

where, beneath its placid surface, a school
of bloated goldfish frenzied, O-ing
their weightless urgency
with mouths too exact to bear:

O My Beloved,

they said to the snowy
petals and to the pink petals soft as
wet fingers.

O Benevolent Master,

they said, looking straight up at us
where we stood near the entrance, near
the teahouse half-hidden in a copse of ginkgo,

where even now, discreetly and behind
its paper windows, a woman sinks down
on all fours, having loosened the knot
at the waist of her robe.

Erin Belieu
209

²⁰⁹ [Erin Belieu](#), "[Choose Your Garden](#)," collected in [One Above & One Below](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

As a child, I ate and mourned

Now I will not eat. I will not mourn.

Bowls of glistening peaches.

Bowls of them, I tell you.

Golden, with a menstrual stain where the pit was pulled away.

On one of my daily strolls into the next-door cemetery
I encountered the hog snake, which even then was put on earth
to represent the antithesis of the working stiff.

The funeral director set a house trailer
on the cemetery edge to serve as a chapel
for griever. It was cold in there, even in summer,
the paneling warped.

A cheap box of tissues on the card table.
I slid one out and balled it up, stuck it in my mouth.
Those were paper-eating days.

The gravedigger, his shovel carried over his shoulder like a musket.

I was pure of soul. I was.
Chosen to play the angel in every drama about God.
I had things in the right order:
i.e., the body is but a playhouse for the soul, all that.

Diane Seuss
210

²¹⁰ [Diane Seuss](#), "[As a child, I ate and mourned](#)," [Blackbird](#), collected in [Four-Legged Girl](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Rain

is what I can't bear going on & not
easing all day hitting the windows like someone
throwing shovelfuls of dirt onto a
coffin keeping me in bed sick but not physically only
reading a poet's lines about Vietnam thinking of
Harry & Danny & Ron how long ago it was now
I don't know them or only my body remembers
lying beneath Harry on the hard
ground of the field frozen with little stars
of frost his hands holding an M16 or a woman
with black hair or my shoulders as he
came inside me crying & Danny strapping on
his wooden leg to teach me karate saying *Don't*
be afraid to maim his naked thigh scarred
& oddly beautiful & his one foot the divot of flesh gouged
out or Ron talking bitterly about America & the night
I pushed his wheelchair too fast ran it
off the sidewalk into a tree & we laughed &
how I'd grow so tired of listening to him & never
knowing if he cared what I thought all of it
gone into my history of loss a litany I need
to sing I don't know why today it's just the rain
keeps up & I feel so cold inside I can't get out
of bed or understand why these ghosts
of men come back to press me down I couldn't
help them or I did maybe a little tenderness a
breast or kiss what I could offer not knowing I was
so young believing I could heal them the rain
relentless against the windows when will it stop oh when

Kim Addonizio

211

²¹¹ [Kim Addonizio](#), "[Rain](#)," [Another Chicago Magazine](#), collected in [Tell Me](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

All-Purpose Elegy

For the sun, which will burn out or run down
or dramatically implode in a future
epoch about as awful as this one. For
the one-antlered deer that expired en-route
to an upstate sanctuary because
why not. For the sequoia tunnel tree
which was uprooted in a storm
the other day. For my boyhood fantasy
of driving through it. For California.
For this sadness. This joy. This
bucket on the floor. For the industry
which will most harm you
upon its inevitable demise.
For the pet rabbits who died
in grotesque cages
in our backyard. For the school
that burned down. For the lake
in my dreams which is always frozen.
For the pained myth
of your birth. For this new year.
Which isn't new at all.
Which will be the same
as last year and the one before it.
And so on. For the air

inside my mouth shaped like nothing.
For the bell ringing
through the early rain.
For each unheeded warning. For sweet
love, which seems ever more
impossible. For Norway,
which has shut down all its FM broadcasts.
For silence, which nobody
truly values. For the song
I couldn't recognize in the elevator,
though all I could do was ache.
For the night, which becomes more immense
and depressing and utter
and the voices in it which argue and argue.
For this conflict with the stars.
For ashes. For the wind.
For this emergency we call life.

Paul Guest
212

²¹² [Paul Guest](#), "[All-Purpose Elegy](#)," [Guernica](#)

Cover Story

My boyfriend did not die in 1991. I told a lie and it turned into a fact, forever repeated in my official biography. He died on Christmas Day, 1990, when his family disconnected the mechanical breathing machine. He was a composer in the school of music. We were working on a piece for voice and strings. I liked writing the words under the whole notes, hyphenating them to make them last. I liked sitting on the bed in his apartment, writing on the sheet music—bigger paper, thicker, how it sounded when it fell to the floor when we got tired. It was winter break, friends in town, we hopped from party to party, catching up but separately. It was late, the night was clear, the roads were empty. The four of them were sober, the driver in the other car was not. I was a few miles away, in a bar, waiting. When the bar closed, I left him an angry message for standing me up. A few hours later, a friend called and told me. He suggested I break into the apartment and start removing things before the family arrived. For several minutes I didn't understand, then—evidence. He hadn't told his family and it didn't seem right to tell them now, to suggest that they didn't really know him. I drove in the darkness between the accident and dawn. I climbed through the window. I couldn't figure which things looked suspicious and which things would be missed. I was sloppy, rushed. I grabbed the wrong sheet music. It was a piece that had already been performed. A few days after Christmas there was a memorial. I sat in the back. As part of his speech, his father mentioned the missing music and made an appeal for its return. I couldn't give it back. On New Year's Eve, in a black velvet jacket, at a party in the lobby of a downtown hotel, with a drink in each hand—one for him, one for me—I kept asking where he was, if anyone had seen him. I had his passport in my back pocket. I shouldn't have taken that either. It was the only picture of him I could find.

Richard Siken

213

²¹³ [Richard Siken](#), "[Cover Story](#)," [Pithead Chapel](#)

Ode on My Grandmother the Mohel

When I tell my mother that a man I know pickets the local hospital
about what his wife calls “his topic” that is, circumcision
and its evils, she tells me that this was my grandmother’s specialty
as a nurse, and I say, “You’re kidding.” “No. The doctor
she worked for couldn’t stand it, so she did all his circumcisions.
She loved it!” Loved it? I think—cutting the foreskins off
boys’ penises? Loved what? The precision? The power? The cries?
And I remember sitting with my mother and grandmother
when I was seven or eight, pretending to play, so I could listen
to them talk in front of my grandparents’ house
in Washington, 328 Maryland Avenue, and down the tree-lined street
you could see the Capitol dome looming. A couple
were walking on the sidewalk, and they waved at my grandmother,
who smiled and waved back. “Are they married?”
my mother asked when they passed. “No,” my grandmother
answered, “they’re just shacked up.” The cups of my ears
gathered around those words like ravenous Venus flytraps,
because this was just what I had been waiting for,
though I had no idea what it meant and knew I couldn’t ask
or my doll dressing and tuneless singing would be exposed
for the subterfuge they were, and I’d be exiled into the house,
and this was before my grandfather died, who didn’t think
a woman should drive, but my grandmother taught herself,
her two little girls in the back seat screaming
as the car jerked over the dirt road behind their house in Kentucky,
and then after he died, she went to school and became a nurse,
but fifty years later I’m chatting with a man on a plane, who’s returning
home after spending the day in New York because
he’s a mohel and has made this long trip to snip some skin off
a little boy’s penis, and I think of Mantegna’s painting
of the circumcision of Christ at the Uffizi and kosher laws which
forbid eating crustaceans, which would mean a sacrifice
of gumbo, bouillabaisse, cioppino and fish soups the world over,
and the fried Apalachicola shrimps that broke
the back of my vegetarianism, what in Louisiana they call
“sramps,” and I’ve heard them called “pinks,” “scrimps,”
and sometimes when I’m standing over the stove making a roux
my life seems to be a kind of gumbo, and if you don’t burn
the water-and-flour paste, then it doesn’t much matter what else
you throw in, but okra is a must and a couple dozen
oysters, andouille sausage—all your dark mistakes mixed in
with the brilliant medals and diamond tiaras.
My grandmother told me she went to her wedding
in a horse and buggy, a seventeen-year-old girl,
probably a virgin and little did she know where that road
would lead her, from canning tomatoes and corn
to snipping the tips off thousands of penises to the nursing home
where she died, shacked up with all her selves,

that particular gumbo stewing in a body withered by 93 years,
not knowing anything but that she'd rather be eating
ice cream, driving to Memphis, frying chicken, mashing
potatoes, baking a cake with blackberries her daughters
picked that morning before their dawdling walk to school.

Barbara Hamby
214

²¹⁴ [Barbara Hamby](#), "[Ode on My Grandmother the Mohel](#)," [New Ohio Review](#), [Holoholo](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

from “Elizabeth Blackwell (1821–1910)”

1. In the Mind of Elizabeth Blackwell

I lie on the hard floor. I am
six years old and need to know
how much I can suffer and still
survive. I go days without eating.

Because they tell me it is impossible,
I decide to become a doctor. This way
I can never marry, never see a man
naked unless he is dead. I can get
inside him, take him all apart and
bury him, never lose my name.

I am very upset about all this
licentiousness. I am a prude. I am a
lesbian. I am a hero, a pioneer.
I am obsessed by sex. I am bored by it.
I am the victim of a tragic love affair.
I am a snotty old woman who fights
with my sisters about mother’s china.

I buy myself a daughter who will be
my only friend. I lull her to England,
then Scotland, then death. I cannot go
any farther north.

Jessy Randall
215

²¹⁵ [Jessy Randall](#), “[Elizabeth Blackwell \(1821–1910\) \[1. In the Mind of Elizabeth Blackwell\]](#),” *Zuzu’s Petals*, collected in *Mathematics for Ladies*, Goldsmiths Press

The Last Hours

There's some innocence left,
and these are the last hours of an empty afternoon
at the office, and there's the clock
on the wall, and my friend Frank
in the adjacent cubicle selling himself
on the phone.

I'm twenty-five, on the shaky
ladder up, my father's son, corporate,
clean-shaven, and I know only what I don't want,
which is almost everything I have.

A meeting ends.
Men in serious suits, intelligent men
who've been thinking hard about marketing snacks,
move back now to their window offices, worried
or proud. The big boss, Horace,
had called them in to approve this, reject that—
the big boss, a first-name, how's-your-family
kind of assassin, who likes me.

It's 1964.
The sixties haven't begun yet. Cuba is a larger name
than Vietnam. The Soviets are behind
everything that could be wrong. Where I sit
it's exactly nineteen minutes to five. My phone rings.
Horace would like me to stop in
before I leave. Stop in. Code words,
leisurely words, that mean now.

Would I be willing
to take this on? Would X's office, who by the way
is no longer with us, be satisfactory?
About money, will this be enough?
I smile, I say yes and yes and yes,
but—I don't know from what calm place
this comes—I'm translating
his beneficence into a lifetime, a life
of selling snacks, talking snack strategy,
thinking snack thoughts.

On the elevator down
it's a small knot, I'd like to say, of joy.
That's how I tell it now, here in the future,
the fear long gone.
By the time I reach the subway it's grown,
it's outsized, an attitude finally come round,
and I say it quietly to myself, I quit,
and keep saying it, knowing I will say it, sure
of nothing else but.

Stephen Dunn

216

²¹⁶ Stephen Dunn, "The Last Hours," *The Southern Review*, collected in *Different Hours*, W. W. Norton & Company

Family Collection

Art is a naked boy waiting for permission to move
High art is a twenty-dollar ticket times four
For me a friend and the kids to have an outing
A painting is a lush woman kneeling naked
Before us ripe breasts pushed forward
Pleased in her to-be-looked-at-ness
My daughter says, Yuck
Everything by Renoir displeases my friend
Who prefers the muddy world of Modernism
I tell my son to count how many naked people he sees
As we wander through the spacious galleries
Flesh captured in hushed brushy hues

Art is a French woman reading
Which I like because I like French novels and alone time
I would not like a man peering at me while I read Proust
An afternoon out is curried carrot soup with pepitas
A large salad of local feta and foraged fiddleheads
That my friend and I of twenty years share
Six-dollar grilled cheese for the kids with chips
Three-dollar sparkling waters also from France
My old friend smiles at me ironically
About all the bodies on display
Which bore the kids and she frowns
At *Slave Market* (1866) in which four men
Painted by Jean-Léon Gérôme examine
A nude young woman in a dingy courtyard
Her lit body faces us she wears a necklace
With one hand the man in the richest robes tilts
Her head toward him and with the other
Pokes two long fingers into her mouth
To test her teeth and her docility
The other women wait in a pile on the ground
A child squirms from their arms
A European “fantasy of rape” that allows
The viewer to frown upon faraway slavery
Outlawed in Europe by then, so says
The curator’s note, and the worst detail
For me is that her pussy is bare

A day off takes two visits to the gift shop
To ponder if we need a puzzle of Van Gogh’s face
Or a thirty-dollar rubber necklace in cerulean
An Impressionist apron or a Rembrandt tote
Fine art is a woman draped in a white cloak
Spreading a sail-like mantle over her face
She gazes down upon a silver censer
Burning the *Smoke of Ambergris* (1880)

Widely thought to be an aphrodisiac
A pale white wax that sperm whales vomit up
A fragrant bile duct secretion used in lotions and food
This I know from reading *Moby-Dick*
Alone in my bedroom with no man watching me
Or sticking his fingers into my mouth
Unless given explicit permission
Begun in Tangier and finished in Paris
Acquired by the museum in 1914
John Singer Sargent's model surely was a prostitute
The art historian says and quotes Henry James:
"I know not who this stately Mohammedan may be,
Not in what mysterious domestic or religious rite
She may be engaged; but... under her plastered arcade,
Which shines in the Eastern light, she is beautiful
And memorable." The historian explains that this mix
Of North African costumes and objects is a Western fantasy:
"The scene must be viewed as an imaginary one"
What captures me is the trajectory
Of her slender pinkie escaping
From the tip of her weighted hood and her calm arm
Vanishing into the complexity of her sleeve
What worries me is the grave silver necklace
Slung heavily across her breast
Orientalism to please the family who collected it
To enchant the visitors to their museum
Recently renovated for plenty-million dollars
For a relaxing afternoon to sit on the terrace
And walk through the sculptured grounds

I go out for a stroll with my kids
So my friend can take her time with the Van Goghs
A storm over a field has snatched her attention
The birds she later says hurt her feelings
Under the trees on the needled path
My son hurls rocks at tall trunks
My daughter follows the chipmunks
My thoughts fill up with the Rembrandt
Man Reading (1648) in its own dimly lit room
What thrills me is his thick index finger roughly
Stuck into the book to keep his place and the metal pin
Struck through his rumpled black jacket
And his riotous whiskers, which prove
That the exquisite exists in the particulars
Beneath his assertive dark hat
The man's left brow dips in concentration
His eyes focus on the warmly colored soft paper
His mouth quiet he is reading he is in another world
Rembrandt van Rijn's tender disgruntledness
Makes me feel wildly pleased I feel
Delighted to have been in its proximity

A few minutes to stare at a man reading
While my children get antsy and move on
Bored by the dull browns that say nothing to them
To me he says that life is utterly disappointing
Even if you are fucking Rembrandt
So you may as well read a good book
And for crying out loud
Be precise about whatever you do
I find it powerfully comforting
Since I'm middle-aged, crying, utterly disappointed
Divorced with a part-time job no savings
My future family collection made up of
My Little Ponies Warhammer guys Legos
And a Hilma af Klint poster I ordered from the internet
I love its humming blue pinwheel infinitude

I know not who I may be
Leaving with my two beautiful children
Who think I'm a bitch much of the time
I buy them a pricey rainbow of pencils
So I've done something right, but I keep
As we drive home about *Snake Charmer* (c. 1879)
Also by Gérôme in which stands
A naked boy waiting neatly on a rug
Before a motley crowd huddled against
A wall in a blue-tiled room
Inspired by one in a palace in Istanbul
The stone floor like one in a Cairo mosque
With "a mishmash of clothing and weapons"
This boy who looks eight has seized
The attention of the onlookers by sporting
A thick snake wrapped round one shoulder
And his waist with one small hand he holds
Up the creature's head with the other its tail
Performing to the music of a seated boney flutist
The white-bearded leader glowers
As he lounges in his robes for the show
His long sword slung from his crotch
My friend had elbowed me and said,
That's literally the cover of Orientalism
Gérôme, certainly the dick of this collection
Traveled Egypt and "ensured his success"
By centering the soft butt of the boy

My kid tosses more rocks against the trees
On the path back to the museum
I'm scared they will ricochet and hit us
In the head we will be concussed
And not be able to look at any more paintings
My friend will have to drive us to the ER
I'm lucky we have family coverage

We won't be sent away we won't bleed internally
We won't be mishandled we won't be sold
I don't want my children to stand
Naked before a cruel man to be offered
To travelers for their pleasure
Or to rich people to be their servants or worse
Like the thousands of Syrian children
Gone missing in Europe
So says *The Guardian* online this morning
An unbearably cruel fact
"The scene must be viewed as an imaginary one"
Does not apply here
I read this news and go about my day
Taking my family on a lovely outing
I cannot bear for my children to be sad
To be slightly cold or the least bit hungry
Even if I am the worst one in their lives
Doing the most damage as mothers are said to do
I don't want them to be bored.

Camille Guthrie

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²¹⁷ [Camille Guthrie](#), "[Family Collection](#)," [At Length](#), collected in [Diamonds](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

from “The Itinerant Girl’s Guide to Self-Hypnosis”

I dreamed the moon was the hugest it had ever been, which helped explain our behavior. The real things, though, were the hawk on a near tree when we woke yesterday, and, last night, wind like wind from *Close Encounters*, shaking our front door five flights up. All these shifts in weather and bird, all this feeling of winter being rent by which I mean *tearing, torn*, but I guess there's that other kind of rent, too. Did you ever read *Howards End*? For Forster, you go on trusting at the risk of being robbed. Whatever you lose is “rent to the ideal.” This is all a workshop I'm paying for. The rent is slush and chill and knowing we will die, which is also part of the workshop. The cost of the class is the subject of the class, a seminar called “Difficult and Wondrous: The Costs and Rewards of Walking on Through.” Syllabus forthcoming.

Joanna Penn Cooper
218

²¹⁸ Joanna Penn Cooper, “[The Itinerant Girl’s Guide to Self-Hypnosis \[I dreamed the moon was the hugest...\]](#),” collected in [The Itinerant Girl’s Guide to Self-Hypnosis](#), Brooklyn Arts Press

Will You?

When, at the end, the children wanted
to add glitter to their valentines, I said no.

I said *Nope, no, no glitter*, and then,
when they started to fuss, I found myself

saying something my brother's football coach
used to bark from the sidelines when one

of his players showed signs of being
human: *Oh, come on now, suck it up.*

That's what I said to my children.
Suck what up? my daughter asked,

and, because she is so young, I told her
I didn't know and never mind, and she took

that for an answer. My children are so young
when I turn off the radio as the news turns

to counting the dead or naming the act,
they aren't even suspicious. My children

are so young they cannot imagine a world
like the one they live in. Their God is still

a real God, a whole God, a God made wholly
of actions. And I think they think I work

for that God. And I know they will someday soon
see everything and they will know about

everything and they will no longer take
never mind for an answer. The valentines

would've been better with glitter, and my son
hurt himself on an envelope, and then, much

later, when we were eating dinner, my daughter
realized she'd forgotten one of the three

Henrys in her class. *How can there be three Henrys
in one class?* I said, and she said, *Because there are.*

And so, before bed we took everything out
again—paper and pens and stamps and scissors—

and she sat at the table with her freshly washed hair
parted smartly down the middle and wrote

WILL YOU BE MINE, HENRY T.? and she did it
so carefully, I could hardly stand to watch.

Carrie Fountain
219

²¹⁹ [Carrie Fountain](#), "[Will You?](#)," [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [The Life](#), [Penguin Books](#)

No Bond, No Levy

They closed all the country schools that summer.
Ours was beyond the pavement where the gravel begins.
Roads with numbers instead of names.
They said we could keep any books we wanted from the school library.
In July the fire department burned it down for practice.
We sat on the tailgate and watched.
It was like reversing the footage of a horse rising to its feet.
Come September we got bussed into town.
I fought every kid who laughed at my green rubber boots.
I'm home now and it's low tide.
I haven't spoken aloud in two days.
Black water falls apart against the jetty.
Like the long ash of my grandmother's cigarettes.
How doomed to the obvious water makes me feel.
How seen-through I've become.
The ocean so unlike us.
It only lives in the present tense.
When I was nine I rebuilt the carburetor in my dirt bike.
I forgot to repack a tiny spring into a chamber of its aluminum heart.
Muddy smoke followed me.
My name became fouled.
I cleaned it with gas and a rag.
I held it wide open until the piston warped.
Until nothing looked the same.

Michael McGriff
220

²²⁰ Michael McGriff, "[No Bond, No Levy](#)," *Terrain*, collected in *Eternal Sentences*, The University of Arkansas Press

I Was Born in a Cloud

with the rest of you.
Don't you remember?
I lived Down the Cloud
& was just as rare as you. We loved
to make love over British Columbia.
You loved to make it rain
over the Dark Fir Forest.
I flashed at you through the inky
limbs of the universe & you flashed back.
We were full of ourselves.
We simply brimmed.
Blurred our edges with Orgone,
switched boxes, got locked
in the libido broom closet. Took root
in the ruins of portable schoolrooms.
DNA was a constant scribble.
We dropped colorways into
the genetic Spirograph, watched them splash & chatter.
We untangled our yo-yos, said sorry
for our rude gesticulations.
We were weird sluts
in liquid gowns. So what?
The World (as we saw it) was Dry:
so we rained & we rained & we rained.

Karyna McGlynn
221

²²¹ [Karyna McGlynn](#), "[I Was Born in a Cloud](#)," collected in [50 Things Kate Bush Taught Me About the Multiverse](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

No Trees for Shade

In the last months, I brought to her
the man I would marry. She didn't know me anymore
but she'd remembered her lipstick.
She asked about his family, and promised
twice that *We are from good people*.
How hard she worked to believe herself
when we all knew our blood ran bitter.
Even when our people set out to make peace
they came home carrying heads.
Our people went to church with knives
in their boots, bodices, sleeves,
their giant unruly hair, and they rode away
on stolen horses they sold in the next town.
Our people didn't care about fine linen
unless it was time to bury their dead.
Our people kept going even then,
taking only their stories, a few true,
and the memory of the road they were on
when it came time to lay them down.
Our people were hard to love.
Every year it gets harder to keep track
of the toll and count of their sins.
Grandmother, I'm sorry
we are not from good people.
I carry from them blade, hymn, tale.
Let's bury the rest,
your white church gloves
marking the pile of sunburned dirt
beside an old Indiana road.

Jessica L. Walsh
222

²²² Jessica L. Walsh, "[No Trees for Shade](#)," collected in [The Book of Gods & Grudges](#), Glass Lyre Press

Heed Not the Milk Hare

The princess of Hesse-Rhinevelt was among the most beautiful and eligible on the list of ninety-nine who might become queen, but was cut in the first round because her mother had been in the habit of giving birth alternately to daughters and hares.

This was not a problem without precedent. In 1726 in England Mary Toft was startled into miscarriage by the sight of a rabbit. Later that day she “delivered of a creature resembling a Rabbet but whose Heart and Lungs grew without its Belly.” About fourteen days hence she was delivered of “a perfect rabbet.” “From that Time,” it was said, “she hath not been able to avoid thinking of Rabbets.” A few days after came four more, until there were nine, all of whom died “bringing into the World.”

For all this she was attended by her mother-in-law, who was also a midwife, but John Howard, a man-midwife of thirty years experience was called to account. He delivered from Mary’s body “three legs of a Cat of a Tabby colour, and one leg of a Rabbet: the guts were as a Cat’s and in them were three pieces of the Back-Bone of an Eel.” It was supposed the cat’s feet were formed in her imagination from a cat Mary was fond of who slept on her bed at night.

I think we need to pause here and discuss miscarriage. If you know a woman who has had a baby, you probably know a woman who has had a miscarriage. If you have not had a miscarriage, you likely do not know that Dilation & Curettage is a standard procedure now, performed under anesthesia to remove the material of the pregnancy so that you do not bleed and bleed for weeks and do not develop an infection in the uterus as material of the pregnancy begins to decay.

Doctors have a great many words that are meant to sound almost but not quite like the experience you are having. I think of this as a specialized form of politeness. I try to be polite in return, so I did not say anything about the strange and hurtful words “missed abortion” on my paperwork as I left the emergency room. I did not say, “I am too sad to let you cut and suck ‘the material’ of my pregnancy out of my body.” I did not ask if the baby would still have a body after it was done. I did not explain that I had been shown horrific animations of abortion in Catholic school sex ed that were very much on my mind right now, but also that I could still tell the difference between my life and another woman’s. Since it was not a symptom of anything, I didn’t mention I was having trouble separating the idea of tissue they wanted to clean out of me from the ultrasound picture I still carried in my wallet. I just went home and bled and bled and suffered a great many oddly shaped things to pass from my body that were clots and pieces of placenta and a little mew of a 13-week fetus.

By 1727 John Howard was offering to deliver these rabbits from Mary before anyone who asked. According to one account, “The last leap’d twenty three Hours in the Uterus before it dy’d.” Elsewhere it was written, “As soon as the eleventh Rabbet was taken away, up leap’d the twelfth.”

By the time the British Royal Family had grown interested in the case, Mary Toft was strangely squeezing her legs together, complaining of a severe pain in her right side, and Howard would not let anyone assist in the deliveries. The royal surgeon, Sir St. André delivered of her what he thought was a hog’s bladder. He was fully convinced and quick to publish an account, as it proved his theory of sympathetic medicine. Keeping pets in your house, he cautioned, would give your child a dogface, or harelip, or otherwise allow the mind to inflict its impressions on the body. He wrote of Mary herself that she possessed a healthy and strong constitution, a fair complexion and was “of a very stupid and sullen temper: she can neither write nor read.”

In general doctors dislike their patients. I understand why and try to be polite and use the words they prefer to be used and be as nonplussed about my condition as they are, but nevertheless I can feel in the room our distaste for each other. After six weeks passed we were all beside the ultrasound machine once again, looking at some material we had started to call the circus peanut. I wouldn't ever stop bleeding until it was gone it seemed, so the surgery was scheduled for the next morning. I lay in the bed that night telling my body all through my body, "It's okay to let go now, it's okay to let go now." And in the morning there was the peanut, not wavy and gray on a screen, but gelatinous and rounded on this side of the world. When I arrived at the hospital explaining it was done on its own after all, I had never seen a person so irritated with me as that doctor was.

Members of the Court deliberated at length over this strange case. One position was, "If it be a Fact, a Veil should be drawn over it, as an Imperfection in human Nature." Others, who wished to know all things, sent the scientist and doctor, Samuel Molyneaux, to investigate further. He found on the rabbits drawn from her body evidence of cutting with a man-made instrument, as well as pieces of straw and grain in their droppings. Then Mary Toft's husband was caught buying live rabbits at the market. I'll admit, I was a little surprised to discover it was really just a hoax. I thought she'd also reached the limits of language.

Faced with so much evidence, Mary confessed an old woman passing through the edge of her town had promised her a way to ensure she'd never want for anything again. After the miscarriage of a baby who did not look like a baby but did look like some sort of soft creature a mother could love, her cervix was still open and malleable. And so she took heed and began to insert various animal parts into her body to be born anew.

She went to prison for a year at Tothill Fields Bridewell and when she emerged in 1727 she had given birth to a human daughter. While she was away Dr. Molyneaux died of poisoning and Dr. St. Andre eloped with his widow. Everyone believed St. Andre poisoned Molyneaux, but no one could prove it, so he lived happily ever after.

It was suggested Mary Toft's old woman might well have been a milk hare. A milk hare is a witch who takes on a rabbit's form to steal milk from the neighbors' cows in the night. The only way to catch such a one as her is to shoot or otherwise wound the witch-in-hare. You will know her later by how you find the selfsame wound on her woman body as you put on that dash of a wretched rabbit you never could catch.

Kathryn Nuernberge
223

²²³ Kathryn Nuernberger, "[Heed Not the Milk Hare](#)," *DIAGRAM*, collected in [Brief Interviews with the Romantic Past](#), Ohio State University Press

Break-Up-A-Thalamion

You don't share
your scenes with me anymore
even though you said
I'd have all your *buon*
sostegno per sempre.

I don't care
for your bakery smug.
I'm crying you out.
My tears are cold cubes
springing off my face
like cartoons.

Hey.
You're a punch
in the head. Nobody
will tell you so
but me.

Kiki Petrosino
224

²²⁴ [Kiki Petrosino](#), "[Break-Up-A-Thalamion](#)," collected in [Witch Wife](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Strawberry

Tonight in the taxi I started on West 120th Street and went to Hoboken, Secaucus, and all over midtown. The friendliest passengers were two drag queens I picked up after their performance in Astoria, Queens.

Their zebra prints and glitter reflected violet light in the moon's grape. They said they were "sisters of the cloth" and wanted to make it to television.

The night ended with a summons because I made a U-turn on 116th Street. You can't ask of the city more than it can give you. When they left, their feathers flew into the wind and they ran after them.

Sean Singer
225

²²⁵ [Sean Singer](#), "[Strawberry](#)," collected in [Today in the Taxi](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

Good Description

Lord I am such a narcissist—I couldn't
even give a good
description, having been thinking only
of myself and what
in my body was breaking and how unmendable
the break, thinking only of
myself and with what archaic charge
was I complying, crying over and over NO,
as though to reduce confusion
as to whether I'd given permission,
when nobody, for that, would give
permission—I mean only
a true narcissist would expect to be faithfully
obeyed, and Lord I
am such a narcissist—I think I am so
charming, so kittenish and cultured,
uproarious at parties,
enlivening conversations with my extensive
knowledge of strangling,
how pressure around a person's neck
will cause a contact lens to dislodge from the iris,
making it hard to see, but that's not funny,
not funny to anyone
except the company that slices
and sells the lenses—they never turn down
a chance to sell replacements,
so at least somebody's
smiling, cozying up with a cup of cream
of potato, flipping on the money
channel, watching that arrow soar—

Natalie Shapero
226

²²⁶ [Natalie Shapero](#), "[Good Description](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Popular Longing](#), Copper Canyon Press

Weather of Pain

This week I'm reminding myself
to elevate my chin and walk with my head held straight,
attempting to follow the advice of the doctor,
who says I have spent too much time

with my face bent over papers and charts
so my C7 vertebra has become a protuberant knob
that sits in the upper back like a radio station
broadcasting on a channel called pain.

They say, "Listen to your body,"
but I have found that pain doesn't
speak in complete sentences;
its grasp of grammar is weak. Its pronunciation is unclear.

Pain is a sort of information
that arrives like a wave
and stays as a tidal action
surging around your foundation

in an erosive corrosive process
that slowly dissolves your notion
that you are more real than the world.
And pain has its mysteries, I think.

If you can hold out long enough
I suppose pain might eventually teach you
not to complain,
and if you are not killed by the tutorial,

you might come to see pain
as a kind of weather—
like the sun, the wind, and the rain
that fall through everything
and constantly change.

I can imagine a morning some day in the future
when I might wake up,
and remove the blue knit hat I sleep in,
and then the rest of my clothing

and go outside and stand in the pain
that is falling upward
from somewhere down inside of me.

I will stand there naked
as it flutters and fluctuates in waves
and paints all its colors on my skin

and how it dazzles and shines.

Tony Hoagland
227

²²⁷ [Tony Hoagland](#), "[Weather of Pain](#)," collected in [Turn Up the Ocean](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

True Blue

The whine
of the 24-
line—
anymore,
what's
it for?
Like a sale
on sale,
I bought
the thought:
I'm not
staying.

Was I
trying
to fit
California
into
Connecticut?
Without
doubt.
The body
settles
itself—
I lie

on the right
side
of the bed
instead
of hope.
I pick out
and lay out
my workout
outfit
the night
before.
To cope.

Lotions
and potions
lance
emotions.
A boil.
Silence
your new
humiliation,
a stylistic

tic.
No pic,
no dial.

We'll
always
have Russian
dressing
at the mall,
TGI Fridays.
My oligarch
after dark.
Our plans
second-
hand
fashion.

Middle-
class as
a buffet,
my gay
life measured
out
in Madonna
LPs—please
play
True Blue.
Admit it.
You hate it.

Does that
hurt.
It's not
a question.
Your face
transformed
into a bird's.
You changed
your thoughts
and had
the haunts
of birds.

I scour
the street
for meat.
Controlled
transparency,
the hours.
Flies,
sated

elsewise.
My pump-
and-dump
romance:

goodbye.
You once
said
your safe
word
was *sneeze*
guard—
that's two.
That's us.
Please.
You
are gorgeous.

Randall Mann
228

²²⁸ [Randall Mann](#), "[True Blue](#)," *jubilat*, collected in [A Better Life](#), [Persea Books](#)

This Room

The room I entered was a dream of this room.
Surely all those feet on the sofa were mine.
The oval portrait
of a dog was me at an early age.
Something shimmers, something is hushed up.

We had macaroni for lunch every day
except Sunday, when a small quail was induced
to be served to us. Why do I tell you these things?
You are not even here.

John Ashbery
229

²²⁹ [John Ashbery](#), "[This Room](#)," collected in [Your Name Here](#), [Farrar, Straus, and Giroux](#)

Cooper's Hawk

That afternoon, out running errands
on a road filled with others like me, the sky
bent a moment with a hawk and its prey.
I remembered her then, not at the sight of them—

the driver to my left saw, too: the flap and glide
a few feet above traffic, air made visible
between the wing feathers and the finest hairs
of the limp squirrel's fur—I remembered her

because she'd taught me their names. This one,
Cooper's hawk, raids the nests of birds and small
mammals in spring. Unlike others that bite
to kill, it squeezes prey to death in its grip;

they've been known to drown their catch,
preferring to use their beaks for eating, never
as a weapon. My tolerance for "Nature, red in tooth
and claw," rose as my estrogen fell. The wish

to die died with my hormones, and with all that
powering down, I could finally hear myself
not think. Held tight in the hawk's talons,
the squirrel looked already dead, or maybe

dazed as it rode the sky above me. It looked
like the wet ponytail my neighbor's child wore
that night. She'd been in some sort of trouble
and was crying. When her father came

after her, she tried to defend herself.
No words, he said. No words.
I don't want to hear you speak with your mouth.

Kathy Fagan

230

²³⁰ [Kathy Fagan](#), "Cooper's Hawk," [Blackbird](#), collected in [Bad Hobby](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

from “The World Doesn’t End”

Are Russian cannibals worse than the English? Of course. The English eat only the feet, the Russians the soul. “The soul is a mirage,” I told Anna Alexandrovna, but she went on eating mine anyway.

“Like a superb confit of duck, or like a sparkling littleneck clam still in its native brine?” I inquired. But she just rubbed her belly and smiled at me from across the table.

~

A week-long holiday in a glass paperweight bought at Coney Island. The old lady wipes off the dust every day. I call her an “old lady,” but actually she looks like a monkey when she peers into the glass. We wear no clothes, of course. I’m getting a fantastic tan and so is my wife. At night there’s a bit of light coming from the aquarium. We turn green. My wife is a wild fern with voluptuously trembling leaves. In goldfish heaven there’s peace and calm.

~

Ambiguity created by a growing uncertainty of antecedents bade us welcome.

“The Art of Making Gods” is what the advertisement said. We were given buckets of mud and shown a star atlas. “The Minotaur doesn’t like whistling,” someone whispered, so we resumed our work in silence.

Evening classes. The sky like a mirror of a dead beauty to use as a model. The spit of melancholia’s plague carrier to make it stick.

Charles Simic
231

²³¹ [Charles Simic](#), “[Are Russian cannibals worse..., A week-long holiday in a glass paperweight..., The Art of Making Gods...](#),” collected in [The World Doesn’t End](#), [Ecco](#)

from “Delicious”

Black Phillip Interrogates the Soon-to-be-Giant Woman, Once Called Thomasin

Define the word cloven.
Define cleft. How many milk teeth
rooted in your baby brother’s jaw?
What to do with the bones
you can’t grind down? The thigh. The clavicle. The moon
reflects off the greasy riding stick: the broom.
Coat the whole branch cleft
from the apple tree with Mercy’s fatty butter—
isn’t it delicious between your lips?
Your cunt is cleft. Is it velvety deep red and gold?
Cleave to the warm knotty branch
with your tight thigh muscles. Do you
still cleave to God? Your father’s cleft
mind, his cleft chin. Did he lie? Did he lust?
How many cords of wood did he cleave with his ax?
Is he beset with the silver cup of pride?
Did your mother drink from it? Is her milk
bloody? She can’t tell a crow from a child. In her womb
twins cleaved, were cloven, were born and cleft.
Her golden hair cleaved down the middle, cloven-tongued
snakes, she lactated black milk and blood. Cleave.
Can you see the tops of the trees? The low
yew, the apple trees, the maples, the white pines
with soft nuts deep within the bone-hard
brown cones? See the branches lit
by the moon big as Salem. Do they scratch
your belly and gore? My horns curl introspective and fatal,
they point back. Do you see my irises? Split and
gold and cleft, they let in dark dilation. A small loom—
a tatting shuttle will fit in the palm of your hand.
See how it fits snug as your labia majora like a
constellation twisting in the sky orgasmic over the Puritan
night. Can you tat lace for your pretty red dress? Define cleave.
Do you like mulled cider? Define clove. Can you
smell it? Here, see? In the clearing—
your legs spread like the cloven limbs of the high
trees. Can you stand it? Do you know
what it is to be cleaved and gigantic?
Rise rise rise rise up and up and up and up
cleft from the breathing ground of this place.

Jennifer Martelli

232

²³² Jennifer Martelli, “[Delicious](#),” collected in [All Things are Born to Change Their Shape](#), Small Harbor Publishing

from "Inventory of Doubts"

Aviatrix

She sits between two men who touch her arms with their arms a steward drops multiple things on one coffee stirrers ice a sugar packet in his crotch the other man's cowboy hat says he'll kill you on a dusty road when she falls asleep the plane falls in fact the plane is always falling and the engines work hard to keep it aloft and the coffee service is always falling too and the violent man chews his banana gum and the smell falls and he and his violence fall and fall one way or another the ground will meet us all

Champagne

I am buying eggs and tomatoes and lettuce and bleu cheese and North Carolina bacon and apricot juice and a chicken and two bottles of champagne and the cashier asks about them I tell her this wine is the original champagne that it was created by monks it tastes nice and dry the 86-year-old bagger whose birthday's Monday and who will not be celebrating he'll be going to get some cord wood from his sister in South Carolina starts to describe to the cashier how I'll drink the wine in a small glass I will pour it after smelling the cork I will stick out my pinky and take sips fancy and dainty he says he doesn't have wine in his house just MD 20/20 my mad dog days are over I say which prompts him to imagine my five houses and two cars and he's naming more things while wrapping the champagne in individual brown paper bags I walk away from his fantasy of my life I walk away he's either flirting with me or he hates me so often impossible to tell in the mountain's bruised shadow

Landon Godfrey
233

²³³ [Landon Godfrey](#), "[Inventory of Doubts \[Aviatrix and Champagne\]](#)," collected in [Inventory of Doubts](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

Wedding Guest

to be read in an indignant voice

I refuse to curtsy with flowers to the shrine
of getting comfortable on the sofa with a sure-thing.
Tonight I shall be sleeping in a roadhouse
with an individually wrapped bar of soap.
I'm a writer! I lick the curb to taste the whispers
of the pigeons. I drink pints of ketchup.
I don't choose partners by their brand of golf shoe,
Dodgy Harry, he's my friend.
He always keeps some mystery pills in his sock.
"I think this one's a mood stabiliser," he says,
"How you do feel?"
"I feel alright."
You can get married if you like. I don't care.
I don't have time for gentle bliss.
I don't have time to poke holes in a potato.

Caroline Bird
234

²³⁴ [Caroline Bird](#), "[Wedding Guest](#)," collected in [Watering Can](#), [Carcenet Press](#)

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome [At a Quarter to Midnight]

At a quarter to midnight,
blue beetles crawling
 along the minute hand
of the wall clock,
 I awoken, panicked,
 next to my lover,

 caramel-hued cello asleep
on embroidered linen.
 A light bulb blazes,
burns out,
 a doe's flash of white tail
 that instructs

 the fawn to follow its mother
in flight. I hurry down
 a hallway, through a door,
into a pasture
 where mules are grazing.
 Moonlight

 floats in the air like coarse cloth,
silver-speckled
 & woven on the looms
of mirrors. Once
 I tore into the torso of my cello
 & discovered

 its heart: a pair of horse shoes
caked with red clay.
 The mules surround me:
necks bent,
 nostrils pluming out different lengths
 of breath.

 I toss off my robe. A mule
curls its tongue around
 my erection. I throw
my head back,
 & stare at the slowest lightning,
 the stars.

Eduardo C. Corral
235

²³⁵ Eduardo C. Corral, "Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome [At a Quarter to Midnight]," *Quarterly West*, collected in *Slow Lightning*, Yale University Press

Cannibal Women in the Avocado Jungle of Death

They say it's the iron in the blood that resists transformation.

It is also said that no creature can learn that which his heart has no shape to hold.

When she left him alone he found women who douched,
women with eel-skin legs and simpler schedules,
women obsessed with pumice and Q-Tips.

It is said that she lay in bed three days and two nights while her body slept off enough pills to kill a horse and he entered her regularly, and on the third day she awoke to the sound of water breaking and left her bed to begin a new life. The best casserole in the world has no avocado. Therefore the following is written:

1. Chop some leftover meat.
 2. Cook some noodles.
 3. Saute some onion and green pepper.
 4. Mix it all together with a can of Campbell's Cream of Something Soup and a small amount of horseradish.
- Bake at 350 degrees for one hour.
(Do not forget the horseradish or the casserole will be ordinary.)

There were nights of apple pies made with macs from upstate and enough cinnamon to make you cry. Days of attic living on Maple down the street from the folks with the Disney characters on their front lawn and the artificial deer. Near the river where you could see the nuclear power plant and get the willies thinking about it. And Bear Mountain where they went on their first date and she couldn't wait to have sex with a man who made love as if his life depended on pleasing her and it did.

It is written that only a pig can see the wind and that the wind is red.

Cannibal women in the avocado jungle of death step from behind the waterfall and their breasts are enormous. You could hide in those breasts for days, thinking only of guacamole. (Add chopped tomatoes, doves of garlic crushed beneath a pestle made of stone, juice of a lemon, and you have the kind of guacamole men die for.)

He thought: casseroles, chipped beef, shrimp if you can get it.

She thought *guacamole*—and disappeared like garlic into avocado, piquant as death, quiet as the whoosh of creation.

Maureen Seaton
236

²³⁶ Maureen Seaton, "[Cannibal Women in the Avocado Jungle of Death](#)," [Indiana Review](#), collected in [Furious Cooking](#), University of Iowa Press

Summer 1935

We three spent a lovely afternoon and evening
in Brooklyn Heights, taking a swim at the St. George Hotel
and more or less destroying in the broiler at my parents' apartment
the filet mignon we had extravagantly purchased for dinner
along with a bottle of cheap red wine
that John selected, in view of our depleted funds,
with exquisite care.
It was me and Jane and John

in the flickering light of summer remembered,
we three in the laughter of the narrow kitchen,
there in an actuality of what was
with the noise of dishes and the smell of burned steak
and the sense of giving oneself up to life
in the dark taste of the cheap red wine.
Afterward we went up and sat under the canopy on the roof,
watching the Staten Island ferries whose lights
were like the things we said, sparkling bravely
in the darkness of summer remembered.
It was John and Jane and me.

Fifty years later I tell my son a little of it,
talking about friendship, and he tries to listen,
but he doesn't hear the slam of the broiler door,
Jane's smart giggle on the steps to the roof, or
John's oddly high-pitched laugh constricted by
his next allusion to Shakespeare.
My son remembers that kitchen and that roof
as places of grapefruit juice and balsa-wood airplanes
in his own life. In my life, one day in Brooklyn Heights

it was me and Jane and John
cooking expensive meat and drinking cheap red wine
and creating together one more eventual chance
for me to be naturally lonely
as the only person who ever lived my life—

but the lights out there on the Bridge and on the Chrysler Building
were lit for us.

...I say that, and I feel the Poetic Truth in it.
But I know that to say it is a kind of work—

it's the work of keeping down the other truth,
the one about how a decade is ten minutes,
the one that points to bottles and cow bones in the trash.

At the edge of the great level dark roof we stood,
we three, telling stories about our absent-minded teachers
who forgot damn near everything except what they really loved.

Mark Halliday
237

²³⁷ [Mark Halliday](#), "[Summer 1935](#)," [Sycamore Review](#), collected in [Jab](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Bypass

The sky is an overcast bruise all winter in Indiana,
where I was born. My father sits in his wheelchair
and asks, *Why didn't you let me die?* repeating it
for my brother when he enters the room.
We didn't think he'd come back from the stroke,
the coma, the quadruple bypass. We didn't know
he'd come back cur-tongued, racist, refusing
to eat, frightening in his hospital bed at home,
sheets sharpened by piss. In the days before
the hospital, we were his caretakers. *Don't call
the ambulance*, he begged. *Ok, dad*, I'd said,
until one day I motioned for Dustin to call
as I massaged our father's shoulders, encouraging
his blood. His heart was blocked. My mother was gone.

Once, my father told me he loved me. I was eight.
I hated him for the nights my mother left the house
in red silk, trailing spice. *You're my son*, he said.
His hug insisted harder. My forehead right-angled
against his chest, blacking out the blue Florida sky.
I hung my arms straight at my sides. I didn't know
the story you try hardest to avoid passes into you,
forms an interior weather, arranges your veins.

James Allen Hall
238

²³⁸ James Allen Hall, "Bypass," collected in [Romantic Comedy](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Extinction

The class president pinned me to the inside
of the Ford pickup's door. There is a price to be paid
for even the heeded *no*. Your fish birth
heralds the drought. Your blue eye sees
only trees. It is possible
that it is not wanting which is wrong
but rather wanting what is wrong that all songs
are about. This is a song too
in a way. How it seeks to mirror
the rhythms of life and also like life
must end. But before that, who knows?
Consider the megalodon, long-extinct
forebear to sharks whose fossiled teeth were mistaken
for the black tongues of dragons.
I'm saying people will think what they want.
But the megalodon doesn't want to be
a metaphor. It wants oceans of blood.
Most days I make a list of who I'd kill if I had to,
then I redefine *had to*.

Erin Adair-Hodges
239

²³⁹ [Erin Adair-Hodges](#), "[Extinction](#)," [AGNI](#), collected in [Every Form of Ruin](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Relic Hall

Off Swan Falls Road, the deer boneyard, the soiled blanket used to wrap the doe draining to lavender.

Someone has a box of cotton and lightning and it kills them,

Someone has a pad of scribbled night dreams and it doesn't save them.

Born on the date two of my great-great-grandmothers died, wondering which I am or if I'm some sort of Zillah-Allen hybrid,

The hoof not bone but keratin and fur, and stinks—

“Writing down my foolish name upon the sea” / the names my name contains...

Disassembled spine in my car trunk.

You there. I am dead and you are reading this?

A sea of sunset dahlias.

Kerri Webster
240

²⁴⁰ Kerri Webster, “[Relic Hall](#),” collected in [Lapis](#), [Wesleyan University Press](#)

She

When they take my life apart,
on the back of one board
of everything I've built,
they'll find "I love Eve"
written in whatever pencil
I had in my mouth
as I hammered and sawed—even

on the inside of my skull—

along with ochered handprints
and a few scratches
to get out—her name—
two letters, one word—
my answer to the question,
Does light arrive
or darkness leave?

Bob Hicok
241

²⁴¹ [Bob Hicok](#), "[She](#)," [Boulevard](#), collected in [Sex & Love &](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Roommates, Florida Street

Billy let a spider live in the strings of his piano. He was learning to play from scratch. Listening to him dinking out ragtimes made her remember her parents' Scott Joplin albums, rainy Saturdays dancing around the rug's rectangle. Billy only called himself Billy—it wasn't his real name. He lived on savings and herbal tea, seemed more content than her. Billy, she said to herself, tired from the train ride home, hungry and smelling his potato scrap soup, hearing his maple leaf rags, Billy, she said—as he carved off a heel of his home-made soda bread, Billy, she said with her mouth full, you're good for nothing.

Rebecca Black

242

²⁴² [Rebecca Black](#), "[Roommates, Florida Street](#)," [Pithead Chapel](#)

A Primer

My complaint about life is it happens
only in order: a thesis of sorts,

a kind of argument
that might seem out of place here.

But I have seen a man ride his bicycle
into beltline traffic & die.

I have seen my grandmother coughing blood
after a lifetime of menthols.

I have seen the closed casket of a friend
who asked the wrong person

for a ride home after a long shift.
The end of a story

is the shape of a hole in the fence
the story runs through

on its way to the end.
Spielberg filmed *E.T.*

in chronological order
so his young cast could deliver

an authentic emotional performance;
it helped them bond with the alien

in the natural course of the narrative,
leading to the weepy climax

he wanted. This anecdote suggests
something about art, youth, loss;

something about believability. Or
the cruelty of a man who knows what he wants.

Amorak Huey
243

²⁴³ [Amorak Huey](#), "[A Primer](#)," [Guesthouse Lit](#), collected in [Dad Jokes from the Late Patriarchy](#), [Sundress Publications](#)

Sommersonnenwende

After vermillion curlicues
sky's all spick and glitter
in Garmisch, while on the steep
town, bonfires in the shape
and hearts burn constellations
is thought to come
look like small, plump
according to Sappho, for pulling
told the same stories, invoked
the names to protect
his eye on them, by late
of the pussy willow rise
beak of a sparrow: find a verb
what the lilac wants
in his black mask, riding
wine from grapes picked fully
than never and whatever rhymes
to *lacere*, to allure. See *delight*. To intertwine,
See what the boys in the backroom
they name. In Fellini's *Intervista*, Anita Ekberg
flashing in darkness, watch
and white in *La Dolce Vita*:
are you, a goddess? She turns
slipping over her body like
a caul bursts into a spray of buds

at dusk above the Alps, the span of
over *spätzle mit speck* at the *gasthaus*
black slopes surrounding
of stag heads, crosses, crowns,
through the night. The word *spätzle*
from the fact that the dumplings
sparrows, *spätzen*, which were responsible,
Aphrodite's chariot. Greeks and Romans
the same gods, changed only
the innocent. Although God keeps
December, the white moons
from their cup of shellac into the open
to lacquer that, find out
whose branches hold the cardinal
bareback into winter. Late harvest
ripe is called *spätlese*: better late
with that. *Lace*: to assail or attack, related
to add liquor to a beverage. Dietrich sings
will have and give them the poison
and Marcello Mastroianni watch the light
their young bodies wading black
he lifts her and asks, *Who*
in the Trevi fountain, and the water
a caul bursts into a spray of buds

Angie Estes
244

328

Personality State: Prophet

I asked to be made in the image of the Lord,
as an ode to a god I'd forgotten.
I paled like a throat of birch.
I paled at the thought of such fast wings.

I preferred the god of beating to the god
of flightless limbs. I chipped bit by bit
at the bones of this until I had a voice to take me
by the hand. I preferred the god of fragments.

Each small animal fallen wild. What I thought
was cold cried in the night like an abandoned well.
Snow falling not far from here, the verb of
what will listen. The cold stretch of terrace

in the moon. Away where evening sings
its wet leaves clustered like flint, its font
an insomnia from which we crack, its retinas
as clock-beautiful as logic. I remembered the name

of the closeness of dark, its carriages rolling
back through time to yoke the ghosts of oxen.
I could see its cry already like a weapon at the anvil,
its stethoscope that cannot find the heart.

Jennifer Militello
245

²⁴⁵ [Jennifer Militello](#), "[Personality State: Prophet](#)," [The Kenyon Review](#), collected in [Body Thesaurus](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

from “Act Three. The Matter of One’s Flesh”

3. Aaron

My flesh has swallowed an entire dream of heaven:
I’ve got a dozen screws floating around my spine,

casings & shells, mortar & construction nails
holding nothing forever. For legs I wheel

this chair. My body’s locked in the pitying gaze
of strangers, family, in the moment he froze

our fates together. I recall trying to rise
slipping as if on ice, unseeing my eyes,

my father’s voice screaming something—what was my name—
but I could only see his mouth moving, the pain

in his eyes. I could not feel a thing. Every day
I try to stand again. Sometimes I’m filled with joy,

sometimes I want to die. Myself devour.
For his wish to be remembered. I’m raked with fire.

Philip Metres
246

²⁴⁶ [Philip Metres](#), “[Act Three. The Matter of One’s Flesh \[3. Aaron\]](#),” collected in [Shrapnel Maps](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

爾 Your

Sir Richard Francis Burton, *The City of the Saints*

Your republic is a land of misnomers: “America”
not one nation but a continent, your “Indians”
no denizens of any mislocated East.
Even your transcontinental throws its yoke
not across one imagined country
but several: you unable to claim
this territory even of the Mormons, those bloody
hashshashayim, their Brigham Young a Shaykh-el-Jebel
plotting to liberate another newborn Mecca.
Just as in Egypt, I believe this Zion, too,
was plagued by locusts, its Asiatic fields
demolished of maize, the limpid waters so polluted
with carcasses, a thirsty mullah in this desert
would long for beer.

Your nation
built a railroad to draw you closer
to the East; now I find the East
already within you. But such a disappointing
version of it! I look in vain for Mormon
out-house harems and find nothing
but farmhouses in which the wives are stored
like any other stock or grain. Polygamy
is conducted with an air of business, the women
married not for sex but because the servants
are more costly here. And yet its women
over which they would revolt,
these Mormons bedeviled by a government
declaring polygamy and slavery sister
institutions. Congress cannot attack one,
they say, without infringing on the other,
thus “Dixie” do I hear some locals call this place,
their favorite toast, “We can rock
the cradle of Liberty without Uncle Sam
to help us!” Absolute
independence, absolute sovereignty
is their aim, this Deseret exclusive as Tibet
to their defensive faith. Your government fears
a war with China. But the men out here all know
the war will come within.

How can you subdue
what you do not truly know, how circumscribe
this globe without a clearer eye for truth?
These Mormons do not even celebrate
your “glorious” 4th, transferring those honors instead
to a later date that recalls their city’s survival
from the locusts. On that day, I walked out
of Great Salt Lake to see its cemetery:

the one place both sinner and saint reside
together in peace. There, I found a row
of women tending crosses, heads tucked
as they swept the stones, each one carved
with a gull wheeling in its marble.
Such pretty, powerless things! No hunters
like your famous eagle, though according
to local legend, it was the gulls that came,
and devoured all the locusts.

Paisley Rekdal
247

²⁴⁷ [Paisley Rekdal](#), “[Your](#),” collected in [West: A Translation](#), Copper Canyon Press

Anthem

"I Heart Pussy"

Whoever believed these words
 enough to carve each letter
 into the green paint

of a bench drizzled with leaves
 one autumn, must have loved, too, the heat
 of the word

as it flushed from heart to finger,
 slipped through the throat like a koi
 in a corporate pond,

how you can say it sober
 on a clear morning
 and let the murk sprawl

open the inner eye, the mouth
 stunned with the church-musk
 of syllables,

each cut and stroke
 made holy with gush
 and ephemera.

He or she must have felt the word
 pierce the core of their lopsided
 heart until it gleamed

in the gouged wood, must have
 stood on the bench like the president
 of all the strip-malls

of America, dressed in smoke
 and aftershave, wanting to shout:
 Praise the under-shimmer

and bisected vowel! The world
 belongs to the panty-less
 and unshaved.

God bless the subwoofer and carnival
 ride-hitching, the jukebox
 junkies, five-and-dime

store thieving laureate
 of all things counterfeit
 and candescent.

He or she must have
 believed in a world where Pussy
 is king, where all day Pussy

rides the subways of the heart
 illuminating the anthems
 scrawled there,

what is too precious
 to be said out loud,
 what is so beautiful it's a sin.

Kendra DeColo
248

²⁴⁸ [Kendra DeColo](#), "[Anthem](#)," [The Collagist](#), collected in [Thieves in the Afterlife](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Getting Over

Ivy moves the cursor over the catastrophe,
Vanishes the canoe and the man who paddles it
Up the flooded street. The sky throws
Down what must feel like needles of rain.
Dean mistunes his viola. Scordatura.
Water falling from the ceiling onto the electrical fire.
Signifying. Semaphorical. Now's
The time to listen to Beethoven.
Each note a novel that can be read
By pressing one's ear to it.
I brought my own oxygen and bible. The other
Planet is a great green too-hot-to-inhabit
Gas ball, home of the 12-ounce pound cake,
A burning answer to what troubles
The mind. Feel free to spend days
In the bath counting bubbles, marking each
Hour by pulling the plug. I once knew
A plumber who lived in a house made of plungers.
It's hopeless to believe that this weather
Will clear. You're either a victim or survivor.
It's no longer "turbulence" but "rough air."
Floating in the cathedral on a leaky life raft
Until it's capsized by the barbed trident
Of a god, the music of which
I must transcribe—each time
A little less alive.

Cindy King
249

²⁴⁹ [Cindy King](#), "[Getting Over](#)," collected in [Zoonotic](#), [Tinderbox Editions](#)

Anna Karenina

My mother was long dead
before I was old enough to ask her
who she was. But I'm reading
Anna Karenina, which I recall
her burning through late nights
after a double shift, after
the insertion of suppositories
and the emptying of bedpans, after
she fried us up some pork chops
and opened a can of applesauce
and a can of hominy, and a can
of fruit cocktail. She'd sit down
with her cigarettes and red wine
and read these big novels
that took her away from thinking
all day about money and into
whatever Emma Bovary or
Elinor Dashwood was dealing with.
She disappeared into French
winters, she walked down
London streets or sat quietly
with Anna in her parlor.
I look around in the novel
for her cigarettes tonight,
her glass of wine. Anything
she might have left behind.

George Bilgere
250

²⁵⁰ George Bilgere, "Anna Karenina," *Tar River Poetry*, collected in *Central Air*, University of Pittsburgh Press

Drunk during Creation

You rise naked from all things chaos
to tear the sea from the sky;
you rub your hands together
to make fire—mountains, rivers,
metal, the reefs and crows
wandering for a name.
Your sloppy hands forge
luxurious breasts, balls
tight in a Babylonian fervor,
no memory whatsoever
of the invention
of what now
is only the platypus:
pelt and quilt with a duck bill
born with ankle spurs
of venom and an electric eyeball—you were
a sadist even then, knowing
the structure of pleasure and pain.
In those inspired moments
you hardly knew
what to call yourself.
In those blackouts
joy sat upon your face
like a loose mask
and you feasted on the last
of the unicorns
and licked the wings off Man.

Bianca Stone
251

²⁵¹ Bianca Stone, "[Drunk during Creation](#)," [Powder Keg](#), collected in [What is Otherwise Infinite](#), Tin House Books

Since You Asked

I'd say my style is conversational, or maybe loquacious like someone trying to pledge a good sorority, someone who can't stop talking about her stuffed animals.

Still, I'll bet there's plenty of what people call hidden meaning in my work. Not that I'd know. I've heard Frost's "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" is about Death, but why couldn't it be about Weather or Real Estate?

I'm terrible at ferreting out meanings, though I admire people who can lean into a sonnet with their stethoscopes and then deliver the news with the same grave expression as physicians.

For the kind of poems I'm writing now, I'm glad I wasn't born in Japan. I can see my haiku master fanning himself as I count the syllables and say, "Two hundred and ten."

No, I'm an American, and a long-winded one. I just go on like one of those blue highways through Montana with an occasional joke or simile like a roadside attraction.

Other poets tug on the reins and pause in the dark. Inside their mittens they count perfect iambs. They think deep thoughts while snow fills the ruts the sleigh left and collects on the brims of their somber hats.

Ron Koertge
252

²⁵² Ron Koertge, "Since You Asked," collected in [Fever](#), Red Hen Press

Heroines

The world was rich and wild
because we invented it.
Days were movies with ourselves
as tragic heroines. This copse of elms
the place the body was found.
This bridge by the schoolyard
the one spanning the Tallahatchie,
the one Billy Joe threw our baby from
as we watched, angry and complicit.
We twisted our hair and rubbed it
to breaking for the tangles we thought
were beautiful. What we knew about
lust was that it could make us shine
and that it would leave us empty.
We thought about what we would say
when the strange man approached.
We thought about what we would do
when the sirens swelled. We had plans
for escape, for Oaxaca, for Iceland.
We were, in fact, already gone.
We were riding a boxcar west.
We were changing our names.
We were scrubbing our blood-stained
hands in the creek while our mothers
called from countries away.

Catherine Pierce
253

²⁵³ [Catherine Pierce](#), "[Heroines](#)," [Pleiades](#), collected in [The Tornado is the World](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

The Claw of God

Our second thought was, how do we stop all this blood? The radio cranked
to cover the neighbor's nonstop porn bass, a monochromatic lentil soup

lung in somnambulist funk of the crock pot. Did you hesitate? Did we both?
And weren't you supposed to have once been a lifeguard at a country club

where bikini tops and teeth frequently churned up in the filtration system?
It reminded me of the time we arranged to see a condo on the far west side.

Anything can be a bandage a goth song's lyrics claimed, or maybe blood loss
was putting records in my mind. It was literary, but not an imagined event in

a book where someone could shut the cover, take the elevator downstairs,
and walk into a crowd of people never to return. I wondered if you'd wait

one week before writing about this—whether I lived or died right there—
and if you were imagining how you might howl at the angels of my grave.

As soon as the agent opened the front door we knew the condo was wrong.
I would never slice my hand open on a pint glass again, and I would not die

because like an ancient machinery coming to life under the claw of god
you tore your shirt in half and launched into a masterpiece of tourniquets.

The shirt smelled like some other woman's armpits. I kept asking for rice.
My cat became agitated like a ringing phone. I was a do-it-yourself type

which was why I had researched all the condos by pulling public records.
The taxi to the emergency room was steeped in patchouli that made me

nostalgic for the gentle creeps of Ann Arbor. They were pushing people
out of their neighborhoods to gut the buildings and make them condos.

I didn't have to try to push blood out of my hand—it was in your hair
and frescoed on the back of the taxi driver's seat. You said a poem you

were reciting was by Yeats, but it was really a billboard on the horizon.
Maintenance-free living is not a fiction you said into my free shoulder.

Mary Biddinger
254

²⁵⁴ Mary Biddinger, "[The Claw of God](#)," collected in [Department of Elegy](#), Black Lawrence Press

Uncertainty Principle at Dawn

Come morning I'll make a list of obsessions and
maybe you won't still be on it,
only five-dollar bills, telescopes, anonymity,
waiting, beauty, silent comedy,
the silent comedy of beauty—
of waiting. Could I forswear

all these things and just crawl back
into the bed you and I once slept in?
What would happen then?
Play any film backward and it's elegy.
Play it fast-forward and it's a gas.

Catherine Barnett
255

²⁵⁵ [Catherine Barnett](#), "[Uncertainty Principle at Dawn](#)," collected in [Human Hours](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

Hope and Neoliberalism

While I was reading Mary Wollstonecraft, Hope picked up shifts at Wendy's, presiding like a weather system over the lunch rush. We hardly ever talked. The fall was one long get-to-know-you picnic. I didn't want to be so out of touch. I made a PowerPoint on Mary Wollstonecraft. I learned the shapes of several viruses, and how to recognize the harpsichord. Some of the company I kept could speak at length on neoliberalism. Others drew dicks, in Sharpie, on the cheeks of anyone who passed out drunk. There was more overlap than you'd expect. I didn't have the greatest reputation, despite my reading Mary Wollstonecraft, but I got all A's that first semester and the next semester, too. I saw Hope in the interlude, and things were normal once we found the script. She asked me if I knew Dave Thomas had three other daughters. I admitted that I didn't. *And a son!* she said. We were parked behind the Supercuts, bringing dinner to a barber she'd been seeing. She had a knife and Midol in her purse. She said, *A Frosty isn't even ice cream either.*

Caki Wilkinson

256

²⁵⁶ Caki Wilkinson, "[Hope and Neoliberalism](#)," collected in [The Survival Expo](#), Persea Books

Days of 1994

That was the year *depression* first began appearing on billboards.
I read the advertisement as a pharmaceutical ploy to ease the bills
from out my wallet. Making \$10 an hour typing up medical reports,
I spent each day in a cubicle, wincing beneath fluorescence, bored,
sure, but paying my rent. How else could I afford spending night
after night at the Grand Tavern? I couldn't really. You paid the bill.
Tumblers of Bloody Marys chunky enough to count as a meal, crisp
celery stalks staking the icy heart of the glass, strong enough to bore
several holes in one's ambitions, its lip dusted with Old Bay. Back
then I cried all the time. You dropped that you were getting *bored*
with me always complaining that I was tired. I didn't have the balls
to mention a check I'd seen on your dresser from your mother made
out for more than I made in a year. *Depression*. The thought of taking
mind medicine was unthinkable: it might knock down all I'd built
out of words with the blueprints of tears. Take your Welch and this
question: Why is every book on your bookshelf written by a man?
But sometimes I wish myself back there with you right now to lick
that glass lip's edge for its salt. What did I have to complain about?
Now I take 10 mg. of Lexapro daily for anxiety. And pop Klonopin for
panic episodes. Self-medicate with Vodka seltzers for mania. Bill
me for the hours you listened to my plight, my dreams of vengeance.
You can take your Whalen, your bookshelf overlords: B-O-R-I-N-G.
It's taken me forever to give up on you. Now take your medicine.
You'll find Willa Cather in the library. She's not in your collection.

Cate Marvin
257

²⁵⁷ Cate Marvin, "Days of 1994," *Narrative Magazine*, collected in *Event Horizon*, Copper Canyon Press

Montgomery Inn

Two old people are quickstepping across freshly lacquered parquet. It's been years since I've been stuck at some celebratory banquet counting calories and facelifts. At the one I remember best my sister and her brand-new husband were dancing at arm's length because she was six months gone and he a large guy himself. We all wore dusty pink and my mother sniffled compulsively into a coordinating handkerchief with joy or shame or both, I never knew. My dad had shaved off his mustache for the first and last time. My uncle drunk again, an incandescent bulb. And so was I. I can't remember what I drank—chardonnay? Vodka concoction? Champagne?—but I took off early in my Corolla and swerved home blasting Joy Division and the Cure. I was twenty-four and headed soon to graduate school to get three thousand miles away and write some poems and learn to hike the California hills and have anxiety attacks. I suppose this is where I get back to the two old folks dancing like young folks and draw some conclusion or parallel like how my parents never once touched so tenderly or if I ended up like this pair I wouldn't mind so much and that's how I know I'm getting old, too, since when I was twenty-four and somehow simultaneously suicidal and invincible I vowed I'd never wind up old or writing poems in this flaccid, middle-aged key. But maybe he slips and drops her on her back during some particularly fancy dip and the paramedics are called and the Sternos are sheeted and we all go home loving and fearing ourselves a little more desperately.

Melissa Stein

258

²⁵⁸ [Melissa Stein](#), "[Montgomery Inn](#)," collected in [Terrible Blooms](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Painting the Christmas Trees

In my odyssey of dead end jobs,
cursed by whatever gods
do not console,
I end up
at a place that makes
fake Christmas trees:
thousands!
some pink, some blue,
one that revolves ever so slowly
to the strains of "Silent Night."
Sometimes, out of sheer despair,
I rev up its rpms
and send it spinning
wildly through space—
Dorothy Hamill
disguised as a Balsam fir.
I run a machine
that spits paint
onto wire boughs,
each length of bough a different shade—
color coded—so that America will know
which end fits where.
This is spray paint of which I speak—
no ventilation, no safety masks,
lots of poor folk speaking various broken tongues,
a guy from Poland with a ruptured disk
lifting fifty pound boxes of
defective parts,
A Haitian
so damaged by police "interrogation"
he flinches when you
raise your arm too suddenly near,
and all of us hating the job,
knowing it's meaningless,
yet singing, cursing, telling jokes,
unentitled to anything but joy,
the lurid, unreasonable joy
that sometimes overwhelms you
even in a hole like this.
It's a joy rulers
mistake for proof of "The Human Spirit."
I tell you it is Kali,
the great destroyer,
her voice singing amidst butchery and hate.
It is Rachel the inconsolable
weeping for her children.
It goes both over and under
"The Human Spirit."

It is my father
crying in his sleep
because he works
twelve hour shifts six days a week
and can't make rent.
It is one hundred and ten degrees
in the land of fake Christmas trees.
It is Blanca Ramirez keeling over pregnant
sans green card.
It is a nation that has
spiritualized shopping,
not knowing how many lost
to the greater good of retail.
It is Marta the packer
rubbing her crippled hands with
Lourdes water and hot chilies.
It is bad pay and worse diet and
the minds of our children
turned on the wheel of sorrow—
no language to leech it from the blood,
no words to draw it out—
a fake Christmas tree
spinning wildly in the brain,
and who can stop it, who
unless grief grows a hand
and writes the poem?

Joe Weil
259

²⁵⁹ Joe Weil, "[Painting the Christmas Trees](#)," *Red Brick Review*, collected in [Painting the Christmas Trees](#), Texas Review Press

Resume

After Michael Torres' "Down II"

I put in two years at the Jack O'Lantern factory,
awarded nose-hole-cutter of the month
ten months running. I priced freight at a drugstore
where cruise ship workers bought instant noodles
by the pallet. I was Head Assistant to a reverse
pest removal expert, working overtime putting bats
and raccoons back in attics, coaxing possums
and skunks back under crawl spaces.
For a long time I've been angry.
One summer I was a living mandala,
folding t-shirts all day on one side of a table
while tourists unfolded them on the other.
If beauty is impermanence, my table and I
were the most beautiful couple the dock had ever seen.
I was a museum docent for a culture not my own,
telling stolen stories while the totems listened in.
I was a photo-model for an illustrated pain scale,
making every face from 1 to 10,
no acting required. I was an apprentice librarian,
new to Dewey's ways. Once I went on vacation—
so my coworkers say—working from home
for a seven pound boss, on call as a living buffet
all hours of the day and night.
Then I was a professional bathroom poet,
hired by the coolest bars and coffee shops
to cover low lit stalls in clean limericks
for obscene prices. I have frequently been
a complication, a wrench in the spokes.
I was an AM DJ, spinning theories into facts
after midnight, giving equal air time to Sasquatch
truthers and moon landing deniers. I keep applying
for a position at the All Better Business Bureau,
any opening, any department: Miraculously Healed,
Finally Over It; I even put in for an entry-level spot
in Road to Recovery. I leveraged every relationship,
networked my ass off, called in every favor.
All my resumes bounced back, the rejections kind
but dismissive: you'll be a great candidate, they say,
once you get some experience.

Frances Klein
260

260 [Frances Klein](#), "[Resume](#)," [Sheila-Na-Gig](#)

After My Brother's Death, I Reflect on the *Iliad*

The water cuts out while shampoo still clogs my hair.
The nurse who swabs my nose hopes I don't have the virus, it's a bitch.
The building across from the cemetery calls itself LIFE STORAGE.

My little brother was shot, I tell the barista who asks how things have been,
and tip extra for her inconvenience. We speak only
to the dead, someone tells me—to comfort, I assume, or inspire,

but I take it literally as I am wont: even my *shut up* and *fuck* and *let's cook tonight*,
those are for you, Stephen. You won't come to me in my dreams,
so I must communicate by other avenues.

A friend sends an image from Cy Twombly's *Fifty Days at Iliam*
—a red bloom, on the words “like a fire that consumes all before it”—
and asks: Have you seen this? It's at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

If I have, I can't remember, though I did visit
with you, when you were eleven or twelve, when you tripped
silent alarm after silent alarm, skating out of each room

as guards jostled in, and I—though charged with keeping you
from trouble—joined the game, and the whole time we never laughed,
not til we were released into the grand air we couldn't touch and could.

You are dead at twenty-two. As I rinse dishes, fumble for keys, buy kale and radishes,
in my ear Priam repeats, I have kissed the hand of the man who killed my son.
Would I do that? I ask as I pass the store labeled SIGNS SIGNS.

I've studied the mugshot of the man who killed you; I can imagine his hands.
Of course I would. Each finger, even.
To hold your body again. And to resurrect you? Who knows what I am capable of.

If I were. Nights, I replay news footage: your blood on asphalt, sheen behind caution tape.
Homer's similes, I've been told, are holes cut in the cloth between the world of war
and another, more peaceful world. On rereading, I find even there, a man kills his neighbor.

“Let Achilles cut me down, / as soon as I have taken my son into my arms
and have satisfied my desire for grief”—this, my mind's new refrain
in the pharmacy queue, in the train's rattling frame.

The same friend and I discuss a line by Zbigniew Herbert
“where a distant fire is burning / like a page of the *Iliad*.”
It's nearly an ontological question, my friend says, the instability of reference:

The fires in the pages of the poem, the literal page set afire.
We see double.
You are the boy in the museum. You are the body consumed, ash.

Alone in a London museum, I saw a watercolor of twin flames, one black, one a gauzy red,
only to learn the title is *Boats at Sea*. It's like how sometimes I forget you're gone.
But it's not like that, is it? Not at all. When in this world, similes carry us nowhere.

And now I see again the boy pelting through those galleries,
a boy not you, a flash of red, red, chasing, or being chased—
Or did I invent him? Mischief companion. Brother. Listen to me

plead for your life though even in the dream I know you're already dead.
How do I ensure my desire for grief is never satisfied? Was Priam's ever?
I tell my friend, I want the page itself to burn.

Elisa Gonzalez
261

²⁶¹ [Elisa Gonzalez](#), "[After My Brother's Death, I Reflect on the *Iliad*](#)," collected in [Grand Tour](#), Farrar, Straus, and Giroux

Four Weeks

Conscripted cells tunnel slip roads
through lining, making space apace
for blood to shush and nourish. I hear
the work's begun in earnest. I hear
you've got a primitive streak,
so to speak, like your mother.
My micro-morsel, does it feel more
seam or fin to you, this fine line
of yours winking dorsal in the still
still waters? In other words, are you
my plaything or my predator?
I know—it's too early now
to say, and certainly to speak
to you. Flickering ember's false
etymology glows in every
embryo, but even the fact
of your future's still unclear, less
crystal ball, more drifting snow
globe flake, a weather of whether
and maybe. So far, so far, as *mine*
divides *in me*. See you later,
party favor. Blip, meet radar,
sure, but it's all blasts building
on a toy horn, unless—shh.
You're just a guess. No symptoms
yet except this pesky tenderness.

Dora Malech
262

²⁶² Dora Malech, "Four Weeks," *Plume*, collected in *Flourish*, Carnegie Mellon University Press

The Opposite of Love

Someone is wrong. Light travels slow.
The sun's already dead

for all we know. In Fargo, North Dakota,
my sister and I think we'll die

on a Tilt-a-Whirl. The carnie won't
let us off. Each time we scream past him

he just grins.

Sometimes, it's the world that's inadequate.

I'm worried how many more times I'll tell the story
about peeing in a cop car before someone loves me.

Sommer Browning
263

²⁶³ Sommer Browning, "[The Opposite of Love](#)," *New York Quarterly*, collected in *Either Way I'm Celebrating*, Birds, LLC

from "Calaveras"

5.

I was two
in a ruffled blue tuxedo

when Donna Thomas
and David Martinez
exchanged vows
and traded rings.

In a decade
their marriage misfired,

their hearts stopped
spinning and roses
rising from vases
slouched.

My grandmother grew
roses and cactus

on the side of her house;
in a front yard of dirt
grew half-sanded cars
blooming with Bondo.

On the porch,
I listened to my grandfather
sing in a rusted tongue.

His sharpest tool was tomorrow.

The ice cream man's song
was my jam;

I'd jump the low,
leaning fence surrounding the yard,
slapping the light pole as I went by.

At night, young men
huddled under the yellow light,
their pants sagging,

their homemade tattoos
thickening with age.

I laughed at how
their underwear in jowls
hung past their belt,
at the broken belt loops
toothed with dirt.

Me and my primas played
under the kitchen light,

our bodies bumping against the table,
tipping the chilies and spilling the salt.

Outside, blue and red rotated
on the sheet over the window,
the tied ends on the curtain rod

flickered like Christmas
while cruisers converged

and black men ran and slid
across hoods. When
everyone was braceleted,

cops talked into their shoulders
in squawks and pauses,

picked up the spilled pockets
and tipped-over bottles,

laughing as they nudged
the boys against
the hoods of their cars.

David Tomas Martinez

264

²⁶⁴ [David Tomas Martinez](#), "[Calaveras \(5\)](#)," collected in [Hustle](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

The Moon

A web of sewer, pipe, and wire connects each house to the others.

In 206 a dog sleeps by the stove where a small gas leak causes him to have visions; visions that are rooted in nothing but gas.

Next door, a man who has decided to buy a car part by part excitedly unpacks a wheel and an ashtray.

He arranges them every which way. It's really beginning to take shape.

Out the garage window he sees a group of ugly children enter the forest. Their mouths look like coin slots.

A neighbor plays keyboards in a local cover band.
Preparing for an engagement at the high school prom,

they pack their equipment in silence.

Last night they played the Police Academy Ball and all the officers slow-danced with target range silhouettes.

This year the theme for the prom is the Tetragrammaton.

A yellow Corsair sails through the disco parking lot and swaying palms presage the lot of young libertines.

Inside the car a young lady wears a corsage of bullet-sized rodents.
Her date, the handsome cornerback, stretches his talons over the molded steering wheel.

They park and walk into the lush starlit gardens behind the disco just as the band is striking up.

Their keen eyes and ears twitch. The other couples look beautiful tonight. They stroll around listening to the brilliant conversation. The passionate speeches.

Clouds drift across the silverware. There is red larkspur, blue gum, and ivy. A boy kneels before his date.

And the moon, I forgot to mention the moon.

David Berman
265

²⁶⁵ [David Berman](#), "[The Moon](#)," collected in [Actual Air](#), [Drag City](#)

Street of Dreams

Whoever covered García Lorca
never identified his shallow grave

but finally one summer the mystery is told
it turns out he is likely very nearby

as a red poppy with a black heart
a field of him enchanted the site

until he was gathered
god is my witness thrown into a sack

and swung like a bag of cement into a trench
dug by some old soul seeking water in the countryside

huddling close by pomegranates or figs and possibly lemons
almonds and olives too are not uncommon

far enough from the villages to be out of sight
but you get there by car

since they would have needed headlights to shoot people at night
a firing squad of career policemen and volunteer executioners

half-afraid for their own lives murdered three others
and a poet for five hundred pesetas

one skank bragged
I gave that idiot a shot in the head

irony of ironies
while you attract fireflies gnats and other pests

nearby your own head

a hacked melon of red flesh
sweetens an empty marketplace

Jane Miller
266

²⁶⁶ Jane Miller, "[Street of Dreams](#)," collected in [Thunderbird](#), Copper Canyon Press

Rosification

By its head, it's clearly dead
or almost. The blush the petals once were
drifts along the edge.
Maybe the rose wants to die,
and I am forcing it to stay with me.
I had a teacher once
who would say, if he read this, "A rose cannot want."
Because I cut whatever
they told me to, they praised me,
teachers; my "lack of ego."
Now my head is swollen,
heavy on its stem. I hold it between my hands
while I bend in place. Lately,
I use my phone to look up etymologies. The word
person comes from a Latin phrase
that meant "false face." My false face
is loosening; "we are two roses here"
is more and more how I think.
Meanwhile my friend across the country is thinking
about suicide. Last night she wanted
to reminisce about the boys,
the ones who rifled their way
or jumped from the parking deck.
There were pills sticking to the swamp of her palm
when she typed *I'm not going to take them*.
We lie to each other all the time. What else
can we do? I bought this rose months ago.
That day, in my pocket, I had a poem
on which a teacher had written
"pathetic fallacy" in pink ink.
Two young women in love
sat close together at a table nearby,
hands on the fabric
covering each other's thighs.

Gabrielle Bates

267

²⁶⁷ Gabrielle Bates, "Rosification," [Washington Square Review](#), collected in [Judas Goat](#), [Tin House Books](#)

Houses.

She wondered about the genitalia
of dolphins, ducks, horses, insects.
The terror of one horse mounting
another like a monster.

The icicles in the trees clicking
like a sad movie in the woods.

And black ice on the ground.
It didn't mean anything
if you didn't know how to drive.

The round careful voices of
other children. One of them
spent an hour coloring a frog red.
"He's poisonous but he's not real,"
he told her.

When she grew up she read
that depression is like your body
is a house you can't leave.
A monk wrote that.

Her house was her body:
all houses swallowed her,
stunning her, filling her
with a stale poison.

Someone knocking on
the door. "We're setting up
the Christmas tree. We're
setting it up now."

Ash-blond light from behind
the closed blind, smushing
a winter sunset.

Julia Story
268

²⁶⁸ [Julia Story](#), "[Houses](#)," collected in [Julie the Astonishing](#), [Sixth Finch](#)

What Can We Call It

You can't stop someone
from adding an *s* to a
word. Loves. Depressions.
Deaths. Grievs. Gods. Most of the time,
the plural of something is worse.

Victoria Chang
269

²⁶⁹ [Victoria Chang](#), "[What Can We Call It](#)," collected in [The Trees Witness Everything](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Patience

His first marriage annulled due to chronic impotence
(though he could masturbate, he said, telling his friends
he had become another Rousseau), he puts it aside forever:

the loneliness, the desire to have someone to come home to,
to take tea with, someone to see. Then the meeting with Effie Gray,
the courtship and engagement, the long ride after the ceremony,

he with a bad cold, she with her period, and, worse, the hair:
Ruskin had seen it in pictures of naked bawds,
but a wife should be as white and smooth as a statue.

They put off consummation, agree to it, put it off again,
associating the act with babies, whom Ruskin finds too... *small*,
until Effie ends the marriage, later entering

into a conventionally happy union with the painter
John Everett Millais as Ruskin finds his head turned increasingly
by the thirteen-year-old Irish girl Rose La Touche,

whom he is to court by letter.
Getting no satisfactory reply, he seeks messages from her
through random openings of the Bible,

dreams of her, sees her name hidden within other names,
carries with him one of her letters between thin sheets of gold
and offers it to her at a chance meeting in the Royal Academy.

Rose, anorectic now and soon to die, says “no” as he offers
the gold-wrapped pages, “no, Mr. Ruskin,” again and again.
Seven years later he finds that he cannot stop thinking of her,

and one night he flees Oxford for an inn in Abingdon
where he leaves the door open and, on returning,
sees that the wind has blown the melting candle wax

into the shape of the letter “R.”
Beginning a new cycle of hope and despair,
he journeys to Venice, where he takes as gondolier

a horrid monster with inflamed eyes as red as coals
and, setting out for the Convent of the Armenians,
becomes lost in the fog, landing at the madhouse on the island

of San Clemente. There he waits for something, anything,
a voice from the outside. Suddenly there are fireflies!
The black water seems measureless as they flicker and reappear.

David Kirby

²⁷⁰ [David Kirby](#), "[Patience](#)," collected in [/ I Think I Am Going to Call My Wife Paraguay](#), Orchises Press

Bullet Parts: *Rim (Brass)*

Big-brimmed accomplice,
castoff of copper & zinc.
Ballistic of tough talk

& easy pickup. You might
have been the lower lip
of a brass mouth that never

learned its own etiquette.
Still crimped, still pinched:
you could have been alloyed

as a rib for caging some
other, amended fauna
in the arboretum of murderers

where out-of-season hunters
line up for hours just
to ogle your affable flange.

Adrian Matejka
271

²⁷¹ [Adrian Matejka](#), "[Bullet Parts: Rim \(Brass\)](#)," collected in [Somebody Else Sold the World](#), [Penguin](#)

Nostalgia

I would be so much more manageable as memory. Like my mother. Like the blue house I grew red in. Like the four days in Delphos with you. New, like nothing of the sort. Faculty I'm mindful of; mortified in flesh. Made mighty by little nothings you do not say. Never, like your hair once traced on my chest. Nor, not, neither of these things are true because there aren't two things. There's you. There's this notion of red which is caught like my hand on the throat of the world. There's a street between you and I don't know what else to do. You dark sidereal glance. You spot in the sunshine succumbed to so many holy days. Ray, like this current cathode. Even my heart misunderstands the nothing as it is wont to do. I have something to say about science. I feel prescient in this previous iteration of anger. I finally, after all these years, feel between. What might these imperfect hands be for, you ask? I would say the once broken culled from their girders, garters, the white nothing of each memory. *All these things have thus found an end*, Circe said to Odysseus. Fair-tressed, dread goddess. Yes, when we leave this river of ocean, what sea to see left? There is a question, and I ask it. And then I ask to bury the body. And then I ask for single day, this *journeé*. And then I ask for one more night. And then I ask for this.

Matthew Minicucci

272

²⁷² [Matthew Minicucci](#), "[Nostalgia](#)," [Pithead Chapel](#)

Patience, Patient

Once I was driving for a long time
by myself, tediously, as people do
when they have to get between two
distant points in a country that thinks
it is not at war and I was listening
to a radio show about how little
compassion Americans seem to have,
how silent and insular they become
before erupting in a firework of bullets.
President Obama said *I don't think we have
a monopoly on crazy people*. The woman said
she was trying to make a point by banging
the loaded shotgun on the floor before
blowing off her jaw. Of course we must
think about the deer population and terrorists
in the wilderness next door as well as
the stupidity of most people trying to make
a point about rights, etcétera. Then the show
ended and some classical music came on
which reminded me how long some things
can endure, for example a sonata written
before radio or this country really existed,
how we still find it beautiful. I considered
how I could have this thought alone
in Ohio, the blank highway a pointless
connection between two extremes.
Then I paid the toll and drove on.

Lauren Shapiro
273

²⁷³ Lauren Shapiro, "Patience, Patient," *Forklift, Ohio*, collected in *Arena*, Cleveland State University Poetry Center

On the Beach

Much like god at the end.

Soon we will no longer be surprised
by anything at all.

Fog, water,
shape of the black dog
washed ashore.

The world is a good blue ball.
Throw it to me—
I cannot catch.

The song that sustains me
has inaudible lyrics.
In all beauty and honesty,

Your guess is as good as mine.

Mary Ruefle
274

²⁷⁴ [Mary Ruefle](#), "[On the Beach](#)," collected in *Indeed I Was Pleased with the World*, [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

The Replication Machine

Hillary, I miss taxis at night—do people still use them, or is it all Lyft?

The way their yellow bodies shush down Houston or Broadway especially the rain and you raise your hand and there's one sidling up and ready to take you nowhere predetermined with their lighted hats of ads perched jauntily on top at your service

I also miss my unlimited MetroCard, though pushing through turnstiles with my hips never had the same slick cachet as sliding across a backseat then telling the driver an intersection, and was often hard to swipe when drunk, but I loved its lack of accountability and the fact that my final destination was a mystery sometimes even to me

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" Walter Benjamin talks about Eugene Atget's photos of deserted Paris streets—that he photographed them like scenes of crimes, for the purpose of establishing evidence

I'm positive the whole alcohol-soaked photographic tour you sent me last night of your walk from the Lower East Side to the West Village was not a crime, but I loved seeing that woman in the tight white cocktail dress and heels in a fluorescent pizza parlor eating a slice standing up from here in my perch in the Blue Ridge mountains at 1 a.m.

And I also loved the animated red-headed dude in the cheetah print overalls with no shirt underneath talking to you in the video with no sound

The photo of the Weed World truck parked on the corner of Bleecker and Lafayette

The pic of you with your THC lollipop

I'm going to say this though it makes me sound old AF: back before Y2K we didn't have this technology (obviously)

The best evidence we could gather from a hard night of drinking was a body next to us in the morning (or not)

"The city is a huge monastery," said Erasmus

There's the corner of Washington Square, Broadway and Mercer, the Water-Soda-Chicken-Kebab-Hot-Dog-Truck on video playing street music I can't name in a language I can't decipher—maybe Arabic disco or Spanish rap

In the last frame you sent, tail and brake lights of cabs shine extra bright with halos flaring red as lips or emergency flashers, a cluster of want and accidents

An aura is a *unique phenomenon of distance* (Benjamin again)

You are far away and I am a beholder—one who beholds

We all have a desire to bring things closer

The photo leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a friend, a lover, a stranger, whomever
Don't we all have auras / halos / glares that obscure the thing beneath, our outlines and shapes
Don't we all have imperceptible apertures where the light gets in

Erika Meitner
275

²⁷⁵ [Erika Meitner](#), "[The Replication Machine](#)," [Southern Indiana Review](#), collected in [Useful Junk](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

The Last of the Gentlemen Heartbreakers

Southern romantic that you always
were, what fallacy recalls you better

than the pathetic one?

If lightning fried a single swampy
pine anywhere south of Cincinnati,

you were gassing up the bagpipe and
drinking to your fallen comrade

before it hit the ground.

You had the knack I admire for self-
satisfaction, a gift for the dubious

backward—your cask of port in every
port and a woman in every storm.

Oh, True Love and Subject of My Late
Juvenilia, there wasn't a ribald

particular I didn't come to know:

the yoga instructress on Valentine's Eve,
the xeroxed erotica files

arranged by body part. Did you think you
were the only mastermind with

a stoned cat purring on your lap, a loyal
death squad on retainer? Count it

a child's Christmas miracle that I let
you live. Sources report you're still

irresistible, a waltz-step elegy
with a showy limp, the same

theme-park pirate in a soiled black
patch, but why did you insist on

covering your good eye?

You know I don't mean this,
as some girls say, in the *bad* way.

To be fair, you were generous with
a camellia and were born knowing

when to offer a lady your handkerchief.

Erin Belieu
276

²⁷⁶ [Erin Belieu](#), "[The Last of the Gentlemen Heartbreakers](#)," [Virginia Quarterly Review](#), collected in [Black Box](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

It seems, back then, there was a mythic teapot

A napkin holder shaped like a garden gate with painted trumpet vines. The old couple whose goodness was unassailable. They slapped their knees when they laughed at our antics, which were really not that funny. Chewing graham crackers into the shapes of guns. The old couple, Mr. and Mrs. Riddle.

Their drab mouths, their teeth in a jar, their dishes and glassware the color of the amber that traps mosquitos. Their house edged in yellow gladiolas I called flower pokers. My father's tumors bloomed like thought balloons in cartoons but inside them was only a sigh. My mother set her hair on fire leaning over a lit

cake and it seems her hair was on fire for many days. Or was that the lady with the red bouffant whose big thighs shook when she walked up the sidewalk toward the place called Beauty, where she got her hair piled and pinned. The mice in our house were tame, willingly incorporating themselves into our games. Tail hanging out

of the dollhouse window. A wasp hid in my underpants and stung my biscuit. My mother called it my biscuit. My father said that's the way of wasps or he thought it and I read it in the big white moonflower that hung above him, attached by a green umbilical cord. He'd walk to work every day, thin suit, boot polish hair.

Hope was a vinegar-colored halo that formed around our heads. It came and went, like fighting and fireflies. From the schoolyard, I could see my mother holding a basket of wet laundry with clothespins in her mouth. It was strange to watch my own dresses and blouses swaying on the line. As if I'd been skinned alive.

Diane Seuss
277

²⁷⁷ [Diane Seuss, "It seems, back then, there was a mythic teapot," *Columbia Poetry Review*, collected in *Four-Legged Girl*, Graywolf Press](#)

Nothing

There's a riddle my daughter tells,
I don't remember all of it, but the end
goes like this: *Dead people eat it,
but if you eat it, you die.*
The answer is *nothing*, she says,
and tells the whole thing over, saying *nothing*
until it's something—food of the dead,
heaping plates of nothing set out before
the graves, detergent stains on the butter knives,
the shallow spoons, the tiny, special forks
for prying out the smallest shreds
of nothing, nothing ladled into urns
to float the ashes, the blue bits of bone,
hot steamy nothing sloshing over the tureen
no one carries across the cropped grass,
glossy substance the dead devour until
they're sick and groaning, toxic nothing
the living die from,
nothing in the fridge, in the house,
nothing that satisfies this hunger;
so eat.

Kim Addonizio

278

²⁷⁸ [Kim Addonizio](#), "[Nothing](#)," 33 *Review*, collected in [Tell Me](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Ode on the Moon, Pontormo, and Losing My Mind

My sister calls me, "You are never going to believe
who I just talked to," and it's an old boyfriend
who said, "I heard about Barbara," and my sister
said, "What about her?" and he said Walter
just called and told him I have Alzheimer's, and my sister
said, "Who told him that?" though we both know
Walter is the friend of our brother, who dropped
off the deep end when our mother died,
so my sister says she set the old boyfriend straight,
but I have to wonder what's going on,
and if they know something I don't, because sometimes
I end up in a room and can't remember
why I'm there, but my husband's brother, who's a scientist,
says we all lose our keys, but you know you're in trouble
when you can't remember what a key is for, so maybe
my mind is still my friend because my meditation
is cleaner, not so much trash piling up in the corners
of my cerebral cortex, and I just finished reading
A la recherche du temps perdu, in English, of course,
since I'll always struggle with those pesky French verbs,
and I'm memorizing the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*,
O moon, swear not by the inconstant moon,
but I do worry about how stuffed to the gills my mind is,
like the attic of some crazy grandmother
who has trunks of her own memories and thousands of books,
and that summer in Florence when I first saw
Pontormo's *Deposizione* at Santa Felicita and thought
I had died and gone to heaven, the pinks and greens
and blues so bright and translucent, and nutty little
Pontormo peeking out of a corner, and they say
he lost his mind, but what a mind while he had it, or there's
the once brilliant scientist I run into all over town
who is accompanied by his beautiful wife, both in their eighties,
and he's like a child, but he seems happy,
which you can't say about my brother, who has nothing
better to do than to spread rumors about my mind,
which seems to be humming right along, and Walter
told my former boyfriend that my brother
crowed, "They're all dropping like flies. I'll dance
on their graves," and I think of him as a boy
with his funny little face and his crazy tantrums,
which we all got used to, but every summer
when he went to Boy Scout camp, around Thursday
someone would say, "Wow, it's quiet
around here," and when he's dancing on my grave
what kind of music will be playing—
a tarantella or maybe a samba, because at one time
he loved "The Girl from Ipanema" so much

I had to hide the CD when he came to my house
so we wouldn't spend the whole evening
listening to it, I mean a hundred times, but dancing
seems to be a good idea, and as I'm juking
to my grave, what will the soundtrack be, maybe
"Purple Haze" or "Sunshine of Your Love"
or *Le Nozze di Figaro* from beginning to end,
because love is such a mystery, someone
you once adored becomes a distant phone call
to someone else or a toxic specter
predicting your brain turning to pineapple Jell-O,
which, of course, it will either outside or inside
the crypt, or will I wake like Juliet as from a sleep
only to see that everyone I love is dead?
So dream on, my dearest mind, stuff yourself
like delicious tortellini with music
and poetry and love because the phone call
is coming or maybe it's the car that swerved
when you were eighteen or the wave that almost took you
when you were seven at Virginia Beach,
back again to carry you out into the moon drunk sea.

Barbara Hamby
279

²⁷⁹ Barbara Hamby, "[Ode on the Moon, Pontormo, and Losing My Mind](#)," [American Poetry Review](#), [Holoholo](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Fight Night

At Christmastime Father gathers us all
round the old radio to outline
the reasons he hates Bruce Springsteen.

In summertime Dave breaks his hand
on the hood of a Thunderbird, we take
cocaine and drive over to Mike's where Olivier,

wearing a bandana around his neck,
steals Dave's Grand Am
and crashes it into a ravine. Mike's lying

in an icy bathtub, I'm nearby
vomiting orange juice and blood—O
dulce Corazón de María, sed

mi salvación. A series of tornadoes
fast approaches and we're wearing bandanas
around our necks and walking mongooses who

are also wearing bandanas around their necks.
Afterwards, Big Lots has been destroyed
quite brilliantly by the hands of our hateful God,

shirtless idiots appear on Channel 2
wearing bandanas around their necks
recounting their own personal discounted hell,

and we sit round the old radio
tirelessly listening to local personalities
explain the importance of boiling water. How

are we supposed to boil water without
electricity? the bandana wearing townspeople
ask. There's a live wire dangling

from my tulip tree, should I remove it
with my bare hands? the bandana
wearing townspeople ask. I think

my daughter may be dead! cry the hysterical,
bandana wearing townspeople.
Well, just throw on your bandana

and have yourself a barbeque, because you ain't
going nowhere, the pundits respond.
You can't go anywhere after this devastation

even though you're already on your way
to Mooresville to purchase emergency bandanas.
This just in! The regional bandana

supply has become dangerously low! Please,
for the love of Christ, conserve your bandanas!
At Christmastime we're frantically opening

packages of new bandanas to put
around our necks and around our mongooses'
necks. Otherwise, here comes Father in his soiled

bandana with a sermon denouncing the Boss
himself. In summertime Dave and I
take cocaine in the blood stained apartment

of a stranger. The airplanes make their constant
approaches, one after another, and I'm thinking
about Sarah's abortion. Je vie un vrai calvaire.

Somewhere right now, God
is being copiously thanked. Somewhere
right now, God is spinning violently in his grave.

Jason Bredle
280

²⁸⁰ [Jason Bredle](#), "[Fight Night](#)," [DIAGRAM](#), collected in [Pain Fantasy](#), Red Morning Press

Springfield

Get a room, the dude in the blue Camaro yells.
He's made of rage and tinted glass, and we're
made of desire and what if and what I want
to say is, Dude, we have a room, but we
got hungry. Every three days we have to eat
or get mimosas or get yelled at by you. Get
a room, he yells again, maybe because he thinks
we're hard of hearing, or because it pains
him to see our affection. Maybe he thinks:
what a waste—two women who could have
loved him instead. Instead, we get sandwiches to
go and go back to the room we call our room, which
could be in any motel near any off-ramp in any
Springfield, with its anonymous white walls and towels,
with the empty drawers you love, and the flat-screen
TV that seems to keep getting bigger and flatter.
And since we're taking inventory, let's don't
forget the bedside Bible and the red pen
tucked inside, as if we might be inspired to
make corrections. And come to think of it, I would
like to make some changes in how things turn
out, how they turn on a dime, or over time
crumble. Instead, I listen to you read aloud
from the pamphlets you found in the lobby.
Fun fact: basketball was invented in Springfield, Mass.,
as was vulcanized rubber. The man who wrote
"The Cat in the Hat" was born here, and perhaps
most importantly, this is the birthplace
of interchangeable parts—or at least where
they first caught on. Think assembly
lines, think mass production. I'm thinking
about the fun fact of you, about how
much I love origin myths, about how people
aren't things. We can't be vulcanized, we
can't, like faulty chains, be replaced. And
I'm thinking about that guy in the Camaro,
how what really drives him is loneliness,
how we see iterations of him in all
the Springfields we find ourselves in,
because that's your fantasy: you and me
in every Springfield in America, in Nebraska
and Ohio and North Dakota, in townships
in Jersey and Michigan, always in a motel
bar, pretending we've never met. And after
a while, after Idaho and Maine, after that
Springfield in Kentucky and the one in East
Texas, the myth rings true: it's old hat, old
cat in the hat: the white walls and small

bars of soap, the falling asleep in the middle
of a life, the waking to one place named
for another—not a fun fact exactly,
just what the Russian novelist not
immune to Springfields knew
about unhappiness.

Andrea Cohen
281

281 [Andrea Cohen](#), "[Springfield](#)," [The New Yorker](#)

What It Look Like

Dear Ol' Dirty Bastard: I too like it raw,
I don't especially care for Duke Ellington
at a birthday party. I care less and less
about the shapes of shapes because forms
change and nothing is more durable than feeling.
My uncle used the money I gave him
to buy a few vials of what looked like candy
after the party where my grandma sang
in an outfit that was obviously made
for a West African king. My motto is
Never mistake what it is for what it looks like.
My generosity, for example, is mostly a form
of vanity. A bandanna is a useful handkerchief,
but a handkerchief is a useless-ass bandanna.
This only looks like a footnote in my report
concerning the party. *Trill* stands for what is
truly real though it may be hidden by the houses
just over the hills between us, by the hands
on the bars between us. That picture
of my grandmother with my uncle
when he was a baby is not trill. What it is
is the feeling felt seeing garbagemen drift
along the predawn avenues, a sloppy slow rain
taking its time to the coast. Milquetoast
is not trill, nor is bouillabaisse. *Bakku-shan*
is Japanese for a woman who is beautiful
only when viewed from behind. Like I was saying,
my motto is *Never mistake what it looks like*
for what it is else you end up like that Negro
Othello. (Was Othello a Negro?) Don't you lie
about who you are sometimes and then realize
the lie is true? You are blind to your power, Brother
Bastard, like the king who wanders his kingdom
searching for the king. And that's okay.
No one will tell you you are the king.
No one really wants a king anyway.

Terrance Hayes
282

²⁸² Terrance Hayes, "What It Look Like," collected in [How to Be Drawn](#), Penguin Books

The Same Cold

In Minnesota the serious cold arrived
like no cold I'd previously experienced,
an in-your-face honesty to it, a clarity
that always took me by surprise.
On blizzard nights with wires down
or in the dead-battery dawn
the cold made good neighbors of us all,
made us moral because we might need
something moral in return, no hitchhiker
left on the road, not even some frozen
strange-looking stranger turned away
from our door. After a spell of it,
I remember, zero would feel warm—
people out for walks, jackets open,
ice fishermen in the glory
of their shacks moved to Nordic song.
The cold took over our lives,
lived in every conversation, as compelling
as local dirt or local sport.
If bitten by it, stranded somewhere,
a person would want
to lie right down in it and sleep.
Come February, some of us needed
to scream, hurt ourselves, divorce.
Once, on Route 23, thirty below,
my Maverick seized up, and a man
with a blanket and a candy bar, a man
for all weather, stopped and drove me home.
It was no big thing to him, the savior.
Just two men, he said, in the same cold.

Stephen Dunn

283

²⁸³ Stephen Dunn, "The Same Cold," *The Southern Review*, collected in *Different Hours*, W. W. Norton & Company

Wise Woman

Wise woman of Vermont, come out of the forest
Assure me I won't die lonely in these woods, show me
How to keep owls out of my hair, tell me how
To stack wood, to shoot trespassers, to seal the cracks
In my heart to keep the ice out, promise me
A catamount won't think I'm food
Make me a pot of venison stew
While you describe what to expect during the Changes
When you no longer sleep and my sorrow seems girlish
Teach me how to trim my whiskers when I get witchy
Advise me which mushrooms won't kill us quickly
Suggest stapling my kid to the wall till he's twenty-six
Tell me of your childless aunt who died asking for her kids
How do I make it in this cold hard land?
Tell me, where is the treasure buried?
What's the song I have to sing to myself?

Camille Guthrie
284

²⁸⁴ [Camille Guthrie](#), "[Wise Woman](#)," [Pleiades](#), collected in [Diamonds](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Siren

I became a criminal when I fell in love.
Before that, I was a waitress.

I didn't want to go to Chicago with you.
I wanted to marry you, I wanted
your wife to suffer.

I wanted her life to be like a play
in which all the parts are sad parts.

Does a good person
think this way? I deserve

credit for my courage—

I sat in the dark on your front porch.
Everything was clear to me:
if your wife wouldn't let you go
that proved she didn't love you.
If she loved you
wouldn't she want you to be happy?

I think now
if I felt less I would be
a better person. I was
a good waitress,
I could carry eight drinks.

I used to tell you my dreams.
Last night I saw a woman sitting in a dark bus—
in the dream she's weeping, the bus she's on
is moving away. With one hand
she's waving; the other strokes
an egg carton full of babies.

The dream doesn't rescue the maiden.

Louise Glück
285

²⁸⁵ [Louise Glück](#), "[Siren](#)," collected in [Meadowlands](#), [Ecco](#)

Working Mother Poem

All I want to do is go home
and take off these pants
and make Tuscan bean soup,
carefully following the recipe
stained darkly with soups
of the past, dicing celery
with the news on while the baby
sits balanced on her
outrageous thighs and plays
Making Tuscan Bean Soup,
which involves pouring all
the tea bags out of their boxes
and into the giant pot I will
eventually have to squat down
and take away from her.
When I do, she will cry,
and her crying face will be
a house with its garage door
rolling open at four a.m.,
flooding the dark street
with fluorescent light.
When I apologize to my daughter
it won't be like the apologies
of my past.

Carrie Fountain
286

286 [Carrie Fountain](#), "[Working Mother Poem](#)," collected in [Instant Winner](#), [Penguin Books](#)

Why I Am Obsessed with Horses

Because when I saw a horse
cross a river
separating two countries
it said *My name is 1935*
because it also spoke in tongues
as it crossed the black tongue
of the water
because it still arcs through me
with its zodiac
of shrapnel-bright stars
because the river's teeth
still gnash
against its flank
and its eyes
still have the luster
of black china
glowing black-bright
in the glass hutch of memory
because a horse's skull
is a ditch of wildflowers
because a horse's skull
is a box of numbers
a slop bucket
resting upside down
under barn eaves
wind in an empty stockyard
orange clay that breaks
shovel handles
because a horse is the underwriter
of all motion
because a horse is the first
and last item
on every list
of every season
and because that night the air
smelled green as copper
and lath dust
and that night as it scrambled
up the bank and stamped past me
it said *I am the source of all echoes.*

Michael McGriff
287

²⁸⁷ Michael McGriff, "Why I Am Obsessed with Horses," *Poem-a-Day*, collected in *Early Hour*, Copper Canyon Press

I Stand Outside This Woman's Work

& watch Kevin Bacon conjure fake tears in a Real Hallway
& I am Real Tears in a fake hallway
& "Procreation is *gross* though"

I'm nine & a half, watching "The Miracle
of Life" on my mother's bed

Stirring my shells & cheese
I see that Big '70s Bush split in twain!
I drop my spoon
Surely, I am not this Bloody Meat

I march down to the kitchen
& make an announcement:
"I am *never* having a baby!"

My mother takes me to a Sunday
matinee of *She's Having a Baby*

In the dark, we share a giant pickle
in wax paper & weep openly
for Poor Kevin Bacon

There's been a complication with the birth
 & Kate Bush croons
 "Ooh, it's hard on the man, now his part is over..."

In line to buy the soundtrack at Sam Goody
 my mother tells me a secret—
 "Women who don't give birth
 tend to get cancer."

Everything begins to split:

Maybe the mother's body	splayed on the table
or the pregnant calico	unseamed by coyotes
or the way I learn my left	splits before my right
how sometimes at night	my dead dance
teacher hovers over my bed	with a black magic
marker & keeps score	on my headboard
<i>Suck it in, suck it up</i>	she hisses & squints

I get addicted to split-	screen sex comedies
starring impossible people	from the '60s
leading Double Lives	in Twin Beds

Every adult I know is in a trial separation

The End of Pink

My nipples are brown now.
One way to describe me is mouse-
like. Like fur on the one decapitated
in the silverware drawer this morning.
Once we set a trap for a mouse
so fat the hinge could do no more
than pinch his neck contorted.
For hours he clinked around the spoons.
If you survive your own execution,
the only justice is that you be permitted
to walk away with your decapitated
head in your hands, as Saint Denis did,
up the hill into the chapel of the rest
of his life, where we would come
to eat sandwiches on a bench,
holding hands as we would when we took
the mouse to a grassy lot in the alley
behind the First Presbyterian.
Because a hawk noticed and became
restless on his branch, we stood guard
watching the mouse try to organize
himself. It's disgusting to touch
a rodent, so we used tongs to straighten
the sideways spine trapped so
unaccountably wrong. The fat creature
limped himself into the yellow grass
and further, the bird moved on,
and we went home to dinner happy,
knowing happy for the mouse was
unlikely, but then so was Denis—
how wide-eyed he must have been!
When I told Brian about my nipples,
he told me a little joke: A boy was in
a terrible accident. He finally woke
in the hospital and cried, "Doctor!
I can't feel my legs!" The doctor
was reassuring, "Of course you can't.
We had to amputate your arms."

Kathryn Nuernberger
289

²⁸⁹ Kathryn Nuernberger, "[The End of Pink](#)," collected in [The End of Pink](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Souvenir

The glass lady doesn't know anything
about Sally Hemmings except she was young
& got to live in Paris for two years. It doesn't
sound half bad, not when you think about it
straight-on, which nobody does, & *didn't*
they dig up a jar of French cold cream near one of the cabins
out there? The glass lady lifts candelabrum
after candelabrum in the shop whose windows
admit nothing but pewter sky. *She could've stayed*
in France & been free, but instead she got right back
on that ship with him. The glass lady's voice hums
with a harpsichord quality just as she arrives
at *free will, she had it just like everyone.* Only now
I'm aware of the glass garden party hovering all
around us—pearl onions, champagne, & that sharp
makeup smell of grown ladies. *Isn't it really to his credit*
that she came back to live here? I feel my champagne
hatching its tiny mirrors. Perhaps it's the lady
who moves me. Amid the glass faces, I lift
my empty flute as if it's mine, as if I started it
as if I pulled, with hot tongs, a whole
orchid from the air.

Kiki Petrosino
290

²⁹⁰ Kiki Petrosino, "[Souvenir](#)," collected in [White Blood](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Glands and Nerves

Today in the taxi I brought two women from 19th Street and 6th Avenue to 48th Street and Broadway. Unfortunately they worked with Fox News, talked about Fox and Friends, and were excited to see the new Chik-fil-a and took pictures of it. They were polite, visiting from Nashville, and awful.

Charlotte Salomon, before she was gassed in 1943, wrote that *culture and education are laughable entities that we have constructed only to see them helplessly destroyed by a ferocious power.*

I thought of a trench at the bottom of the ocean, filling with darkness and impurity, what Kabbalists call “offsourcings.” Shells crack open like vessels, and loose sparks of light.

Driving in a way has taught me to accept people for who they are, but other times I wish for an asteroid crashing into the city from the cold drain of space.

Sean Singer
291

²⁹¹ Sean Singer, “Glands and Nerves,” *Jewish Currents*, collected in *Today in the Taxi*, Tupelo Press

Palette

From a love poem by Montale
I learned about a *bug*—*cochineal*—

A parasite that eats the red
Fruit of prickly pear

And then becomes the color carmine.
In another book I found

Rose madder: softer
Red, fugitive, from a root

Remnants of which were found in King Tut's tomb.
The teacher who translated Montale also

Loved Indian speeches and Greek plays,
Antoniono's films. He liked us—I won't

Say love, his mixture of respect
And interest. *Bildung* is

Reading with feeling, culture
And history. Education is love,

For something beyond the self
Nietzsche said. My love

For color is so intense
I dream of shoes to complement

A dress. Eggplant edged with
Daffodil or pale blue

Striped with hickory. And I recall
My teacher's voice: a cello well

Played with a horsehair bow.
Twenty-five, sipping tea in his living

Room and introduced to—what?
I had no garden then. But studied:

Pallet from straw, palate
For the roof of the mouth.

I know the difference between
These words—and so? Someday

I'll forget the color Vermeer used
For Mary's blouse or why it matters.

My teacher died at the age I am now
Thirty years ago. I wish I could tell him

I've eaten prickly pear and seen
Cochineal. And that he made

Me feel a pull like gravity
But from the sky.

Natasha Sajé
292

²⁹² [Natasha Sajé](#), "[Palette](#)," [The Georgia Review](#), collected in [The Future Will Call You Something Else](#), [Tupelo Press](#)

Weekend

Some people despise doing laundry, but I don't
mind it, and I think we can all agree it feels so good
to engage in something you don't
mind. To have a neutral feeling. My only two childhood
memories are hearing the song EVERYBODY'S WORKING
FOR THE WEEKEND and seeing the bumper
sticker THE LABOR MOVEMENT: THE FOLKS WHO
BROUGHT YOU THE WEEKEND. I gathered
the weekend is the portion of life that is understood
to matter. Now that I'm grown, I know that just means
sex. THE LABOR MOVEMENT: THE FOLKS WHO
BROUGHT YOU SEX. Though of course
there are other things to be enjoyed. I DON'T WANT
TO BE PITIED said my neighbor, after explaining to me
she hated her children—not children in general,
just her own. Her idea of a weekend
is not being pitied. Is someone else having about her
a neutral feeling. Our neighborhood is overrun
with garbage, and the summer makes it reek,
which ruins the otherwise neutral
feeling I have regarding the sun and the sense
of it on me. It's not that I think of myself as my own
child—it's more that I think of my body
as an animal that, having been bred with abandon,
requires a human steward, like those dogs unable
to give birth without assistance, without someone
snapping on gloves and boiling the kettle
and cleaning the cotton sheets like I'm doing now,
clipping them up to dry in the sun. It feels so good.

Natalie Shapero
293

²⁹³ [Natalie Shapero](#), "[Weekend](#)," [The New York Review of Books](#), collected in [Popular Longing](#), Copper Canyon Press

Barbie

Gone are the days of scalping you.
Post-

feminist, let's meet for tea.
Velcro-

lipped skirt, polyester undies,
beneath

your skull a sphere wobbles.
Chamomile

steams your mug. You killed your
husband,

you say, whistling. Hung him from the
chandelier.

Now your home is overrun with pets.
Zebras

chew on the rugs, horses jaundice the
grass

with urine. The lion cub, mercifully,
suffocated

in the closet. You perk up: *In
reincarnation,*

I will inherit skin the sun burns.
You

sleep with the blankness of machines.
Watching

you order biscotti, I am
sad.

The teratophiliacs got you.
Cactus

prickle for hair, arms puckered with
match

burns. Your porn doesn't work. The best
limbs

can be jerked out of sockets and I
never

wanted your fishbowl tits. Still, we have
made

myths of less. I'll keep you as half-
sister,

cuntless confidante.

Hala Alyan
294

²⁹⁴ [Hala Alyan](#), “[Barbie](#),” collected in [Atrium](#), [Three Rooms Press](#)

Blue Plate

After the porno theater became a revival house,
the neighborhood began to change.
The Blue Plate, a designer diner, opened,
all aluminum and curves. Inside,
the menu featured revived comfort foods--
meat loaf, mashed potatoes, a glass case full of pies.
Young families moved in, the drawn shades
of the elderly replaced by window boxes
and Big Wheels in the yards. Another revival.
Then a Mexican restaurant opened--
though not one run by Mexicans.
A pizza place whose specialty is a pie
made with Greek, not Italian, cheese
called *The Feta-licious*.

But what is real? In time, everyone
came to depend upon the diner. Packed
for breakfast, lunch, pie, and coffee.
If you need a good plumber,
go to the Blue Plate and ask for Carl
who's there talking politics
with the other long-suffering followers of Trotsky.
If you want a sitter, ask the waitstaff,
Who has a younger sister?
If you're invited to a potluck, stop
and buy a whole pie.

In the town where I grew up,
there was a diner too, *Bev's*,
named after the cook and owner who,
my mother whispered the first time we went there,
was a Holocaust survivor.
When we went for breakfast or a hamburger,
Bev would wait on us, her tattoo shining
on her thick, damp wrist. She was not Jewish,
but Czech and Catholic. She kept an Infant of Prague
by the cash register and changed
his tiny satin outfits to match the seasons.
But she didn't make pie and her mashed potatoes
came from the same box as my mother's.
Bev's food wasn't good, only better than nothing.
Just like being a death camp survivor,
Bev told my mother, wasn't a good thing to be,
only better than not being.

My mother is dead now. Bev too.

My mother wasn't a good cook either, rarely made pies.
I can, but I like the ones at the Blue Plate
better. *Dutch Apple, Three Berry, Lemon with Mile-
High Meringue*. The trouble with meringue,
my mother said once, is that it weeps.

Amazing, I thought, sad pie.

Jesse Lee Kercheval
295

²⁹⁵ [Jesse Lee Kercheval](#), "[Blue Plate](#)," collected in [Dog Angel](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

For the young who want to

Talent is what they say
you have after the novel
is published and favorably
reviewed. Beforehand what
you have is a tedious
delusion, a hobby like knitting.

Work is what you have done
after the play is produced
and the audience claps.
Before that friends keep asking
when you are planning to go
out and get a job.

Genius is what they know you
had after the third volume
of remarkable poems. Earlier
they accuse you of withdrawing,
ask why you don't have a baby,
call you a bum.

The reason people want M.F.A.'s,
take workshops with fancy names
when all you can really
learn is a few techniques,
typing instructions and some-
body else's mannerisms

is that every artist lacks
a license to hang on the wall
like your optician, your vet
proving you may be a clumsy sadist
whose fillings fall into the stew
but you're certified a dentist.

The real writer is one
who really writes. Talent
is an invention like phlogiston
after the fact of fire.
Work is its own cure. You have to
like it better than being loved.

Marge Piercy
296

²⁹⁶ Marge Piercy, "For the young who want to," *Mother Jones*, collected in *Circles on the Water*, Alfred A. Knopf

Nothing

My mother is scared of the world.
She left my father after forty years.
She was like, Happy anniversary, goodbye;

I respect that.
The moon tonight is dazzling, is full
of itself but not quite full.

A man should not love the moon, said Milosz.
Not exactly. He translated himself
into saying it. A man should not love translation;

there's so much I can't know. An hour ago,
marking time with someone I would like to like,
we passed some trees and there were crickets

(crickets!) chirping right off Divisadero.
I touched his hand, and for a cold moment
I was like a child again,

nothing more, nothing less.

Randall Mann
297

²⁹⁷ [Randall Mann](#), "[Nothing](#)," [Poetry](#), collected in [Proprietary](#), [Persea Books](#)

love poem (you're a little too good at speaking on my behalf)

you're a little too good at speaking on my behalf
at the holiday dinner I sit between you
my mother, her husband, reproduction
everywhere and wonder why we pass
or do we pass? for what? lumpen, wifeish
I know when they ask now tell us
what's been going on at work they can't listen.
only men have jobs. why do I care. even though
we agreed on this tactic in the car on the way there
or after we fucked in the bed my sister grew up in
next door to a brass headboard I leaned against
as a child and had bad dreams about touching myself
or being touched as I came, it still feels horrible.

I love to talk
I really love to talk

I like to appear as a person

Stephanie Young
298

²⁹⁸ [Stephanie Young](#), "[love poem \(you're a little too good at speaking on my behalf\)](#)," *The Nation*

from "Katelyn"

5.

I had my second revelation

The thought planted in my head in usable language when I woke from sleep

Was not a novel idea

We are supposed to recreate our lives the way a little child would

Inside the realm of your imagination

And the small realm of your control

Pronoun incongruity is retained because it was a revelation

I do not love the revelation

Which pretends to know the way a child's mind works

So many adults do that

Even I talk to the children this way sometimes I say

We aren't yelling today, my love

When that's clearly what we are doing

The people who made up that revelation

Are the same people who think every kid loves the Beatles

We make our own music here

Oh my word / I love that bird

All the same it was my revelation

If someone else has a revelation I get to keep mine

I have had a revelation

And I will have no other worry

Well I have one

My love being weak

Courtney Bush
299

²⁹⁹ [Courtney Bush](#), "[Katelyn](#)," collected in [/ Love Information](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

Beauty School

Dad said if I didn't graduate from high school
he'd buy me my own beauty shop. And that's pretty
much how it went. I worked on heads.

My students gave me wise advice.
One said the best critique came from a friend
who just wrote Wonderful! Keep going!
on every poem. Another said his favorite mentor
simply put a giant X on any page he didn't like.
Some had studied with lyric pooh-bahs
who taught them to be coffee wallahs.

Do birds theorize flying? I believe the best poetry
instruction leans toward the oblique.

"This seems to be a ransacked candle.
This tastes like Iowa. This reads
like the shortest building in the world
trying to be tall. This syntax feels kissed.
This is like a bandage
that takes the skin off with it.
These lines look laser-cut;
these need to be debrided, flayed.
Forget Esperanto. This is written
in Blackwatch Plaid. Did you use a protractor
or a pen to compose it? That school
of poetics is called ellipsograph tech.

Lyric poets give their words to the wind.
It's how the wind stays alive. To riff
on Miles Davis, you don't have to write
your poem every day.
You just have to touch your poem
every day. Even if it sounds like mucus
made for the glory of God
or twinkles like a pissed-off
harpsichord. Even if it groans like a medieval
cathedral, eroded at the grains. You've heard

how flaws authenticate a gem? Usher in a stir
and weird the real. Forget the celestial

and remember the celeste—
an organ stop that's tuned to dissonance
to torque the note. Tone
is the soul of poetry.

If you need a title 'Lonely Consort
Of Wandering Phenomenon' works

for almost anything. When revising think
 how a robin throwing himself against the glass
won't change it into air."
Poetry is never finished.
Only poets are. Some must be
 wrapped in burlap to survive.

Some must flash their stitches ==
though the deepest scars
are hidden, the damaged infra-
 trauma they intend to tell.
One bent her lines backwards
like the ankles of a sandhill crane.
One unzipped his surface to reveal
 his furtive fretwork. They all held their breaths
until their tongues turned blue.
Wonderful! Keep going!

Alice Fulton
300

³⁰⁰ [Alice Fulton](#), "[Beauty School](#)," collected in [Coloratura On A Silence Found In Many Expressive Systems](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Parataxis

My housemate's girlfriend has a kid who stays with us half the week. He is reckless and unkempt. He swerves and lunges. He flops on the couch and wiggles and pitches fits until the throw pillows are on the floor and he is upside down. He wants me to be a ninja with him but I am already a ninja and I am doing it fine by myself. I skim the wall with my good hand to steady myself when I walk down the hallway. I walk through the living room with a blanket over my head to stay invisible while he is watching cartoons. He eats sugared cereal and cheese sandwiches, like the rest of us, but he has to use plastic cups and plates because he is clumsier than I am. It doesn't matter. When the dishes are safe the toy rocketships break apart. There is no winning. Little pieces fall into the garbage disposal and it hurts my heart when I turn it on without digging out the pieces first. He is, I insist, not my problem, but we share a wall so it's difficult to remain uncontaminated. It would be nice to have two kitchens and two front doors so I could enjoy the story of him without the performance. *Strong kicks smash tomatoes with kicking.* He is trying to teach me how to make pasta sauce but I am not having it because today I am a cowboy. *Kid, I have a horse for that.* He stops side kicking imaginary tomatoes with his strong kicks and looks at me. *Is he mean? Can we have a meatball party? Where are your boots?* And I think to myself: yes, no, and outside. *Kid, where's your mom?* He is still looking at me. *She's in the living room.* I get a box of penne out of the cabinet he cannot reach. *That's not spaghetti. You're doing it wrong.* I take two pieces and put them in my mouth, like fangs. *Listen, you have to stick to the program. You don't want to be a villain, do you?*

Richard Siken

301

³⁰¹ Richard Siken, "[Parataxis](#)," [The Adroit Journal](#)

Standing in the Forest of Being Alive

I stand in the forest of being alive:
in one hand, a cheap aluminum pot
of chicken stock and in the other,
a heavy book of titles. O once, walking through
a cemetery, I became terribly lost and could not
speak (no one living knows the grammar).
No one could direct me to the grave,
so I looked at every name.

A heavy bird flapped its wings over someone's
sepulcher. Some of us are still putzes
in death, catching bird shit on our headstones.
Some of us never find what we're looking for, praying
it doesn't pour before we find our names; certain
we're headed in the right direction, a drizzle begins,
and what's nameless inside our veins
fluoresces, fluoresces in the rain.

Katie Farris
302

³⁰² [Katie Farris](#), "[Standing in the Forest of Being Alive](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Standing in the Forest of Being Alive](#), Alice James Books

Sturnella Neglecta

We went downtown on a lark. A meadowlark. A western meadowlark. My friends all wanted to drink ale but I told them I would die. I was waiting for the bartender to bring me hot black tea when a woman in a skirt sat on my lap. I pointed at the baseball game on TV and she laughed as though at something I hadn't heard. When it was time to smoke cigarettes I joined my friends on the filthy balcony. They scoffed when I remarked on the structure's unstable scaffolding. After the accident, the woman in the skirt joined me in the ambulance, and we shared an emergency blanket. She showed me a tattoo of our state bird on the inside of her thigh. *If we had wings like this bird, your friends wouldn't have died.* I don't have any friends in this city. A western meadowlark.

Alex Tretbar

303

³⁰³ [Alex Tretbar](#), "[Sturnella Neglecta](#)," [Pithead Chapel](#)

Spatula

I had this friend who had a nervous tic I guess you would call it, whereby if he heard the word “spatula,” he would turn and bite the person nearest him. I have no idea, that’s just what he did. But the word “spatula” is pretty uncommon, so most of the time, no problem. But this one time we were sitting in a restaurant booth, and someone said, the way you will, being funny or smart-assed, “Oh, bite me,” and my friend started crying, really wailing, gushing, it was horrible. Clearly, I thought, the antidote here would be to shout “spatula,” but then you’ve got the biting thing and maybe an assault and battery charge, who knows. I thought about backing away and shouting it as I went out the door, but, well, cowardly to say the least. Kind of funny, though, a guy shouting “spatula” in a restaurant. But then how about “egg beater” or “blender.” So many people in the world, that could very well be happening somewhere right now. At Kevin’s Big Burger in Clyde, Missouri, “Egg beater!” and somebody’s got a sore shoulder and that look of surprise on their face that really makes you want to laugh. But you don’t. That would be impolite of course. But you want to. What kind of animals are we, laughing at other people’s pain? What my pretentious English professor called “Freudenschatten,” “Schadenfreude,” who gives a damn, I certainly don’t, I was just thinking about *my friend*. So, long story short, I said “spatula,” and he stopped crying. But that’s what friendship’s really all about, isn’t it? Your friend’s crying, and you know what needs to be said, you know the word and he knows it, too, but doesn’t want to hear it, but you say it anyway because you have to, somebody has to, somebody has to bear the pain, somebody, it’s the only way, and there you are at the doctor’s office, and he’s saying, in a state of shock, “My God, man, those are *human* bite marks.”

B. H. Fairchild

304

³⁰⁴ B. H. Fairchild, “[Spatula](#),” [River Styx](#), collected in [An Ordinary Life](#), W. W. Norton & Company

Sonnet for Where We Are Now

My neighbor is stockpiling Tiki torches and shovels.
He waves like a salesman. Suspicious and friendly.
I wave back but do not smile. My son is sick and uninsured.
His cough is as deep as a sinkhole. My mother once entertained
a bomb shelter salesman. She bought a Cadillac instead.
Drove it to California. Drank lemonade under a lemon tree. I spend
sixty dollars at Whole Foods. Quinoa was food for the poor elsewhere.
My neighbor is keen on the wall. Hoards should be allowed nowhere.
Jesus has not been to our church since January. Strange.
My husband complains about no milk in the house. I am deranged
by the cost of everything. A sinkhole opens in my backyard.
My neighbor has never smiled so hard before.
Today he unloads more shovels. And rope.
Maybe we will get that pool we hoped for.

Jacqueline Allen Trimble
305

³⁰⁵ [Jacqueline Allen Trimble](#), "[Sonnet for Where We Are Now](#)," [South Florida Poetry Journal](#), collected in [How To Survive The Apocalypse](#), [NewSouth Books](#)

B&B

Before North took a seasonal job
fishing for kings in Alaska
I'd never admitted to myself
that he was my only friend.
For a little income and to cope
with the lonely summer, I rented out
his room at a nightly rate, listing it
online as a bed-and-breakfast
so I could charge more. I hid
all his stuff in the closet, took photos,
and at the top of the post I wrote
eco-friendly, but never explained
what that meant. Evenings
I'd check-in tenants, then leave
on my rounds to various
dumpsters, keeping ahead
of the week's trash pickup schedule.
Back home, I'd wash
the food I'd found and count
our stocks—staying above a hundred meals
was important to me. Over bacon
and blueberry pancakes
my first tenant told me it was only
after his wife died that he could finally
pursue his lifelong passion
for gambling. Catnapping
on a Monday afternoon, I missed
another call from my mom,
who was retiring soon and wanted
me to hear her preach
one last time. She was good
at justifying my lifestyle, calling it
stewardship of the Earth,
the saving of small parts of God's
creation. As if she didn't know
how cheap I was, how greedily
I clung to each free hour
of each free day. Running
the B&B was the most work I'd done
in years, and that was nothing
but living how I always did
plus keeping the lights low
so the sheets looked clean.
July brought windless days, air so thick
you could feel yourself passing
through it. Unprecedented highs,
the weatherman said, sweeping
his arms apart as if to make room

for the heat. All the dumpsters
became ovens, spoiling
the food and plummeting
our stocks below sixty. Whoa,
one tenant said during a Pepsi commercial,
I forgot how beautiful what's-her-face is.
Even after I started skipping
a meal a day, the stocks
kept dropping, so I simplified
the B&B's breakfast menu.
I knew I'd lose stars online,
but with North coming back at the end
of summer it wasn't like I was trying
to build a presence. The end
of the world already happened,
another tenant told me
as I made her a PB&J. Now
the most important thing is to avoid
contact with trees. Think about it,
she said. We mustn't touch them.
Both of us had sweat rings
in the pits of our shirts, and as we spoke
they spread. I cut off her crusts
and served her sandwich on a blue plate.
She tapped the windowpane:
Watch for unnatural colors
in the sky—that's the mood ring
God's wearing. Each week,
another historical record
was broken. If tomorrow
is like today, the weatherman said,
I'll see you folks at the beach.
Online, a tenant gave me one star
because I didn't have A/C.
Another, because I had a cat
and hadn't said so. In August
a salmonella scare fed the dumpsters
and shot our stocks into the black.
Upon arrival, my guests found
complimentary Clif Bars
on their pillows. My stars went up.
I ran out of Ziplocs.
I could have gone back
to three square meals, but I froze
the bulk of it, wanting to impress
North when he got home.
Sometimes I heard footsteps
in his bedroom and let
myself pretend it was him.
On her final day in the pulpit
I took the 17 to see my mom preach.

After the service, members
of the congregation kept touching
my shoulder—I'd been dragged
to enough funerals to recognize
the gesture. My mom
looked tired, her eyes sad
but also full. She hugged everyone.
She knelt down and hugged
the children, her bright vestment
enwrapping all but their tufts
of hair. There was no question
about what mattered or if
she loved me. I excused myself
to the bathroom and cried. In the end,
August shattered all previous Augusts.
I stopped looking at my stars.
My final tenant talked
about a series of inventions
he claimed to have come up with
that would all but put to shame
our current way of life.
Patents are pending,
he explained over coffee and toast.
Now it's only a matter of time.

Anders Carlson-Wee
306

³⁰⁶ [Anders Carlson-Wee](#), "[B&B](#)," [Virginia Quarterly Review](#), collected in [Disease of Kings](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

from "13th Balloon"

A person I knew for a short time
a short time after you died
guessed incorrectly that I would sleep
with him and furthermore that I slept with
a copy of *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*
next to my bed Though wrong
on both counts he was right
when he said I blushed absurdly
 and too easily
but when I told him about you
he was taken a little aback
perhaps surprised that I had lived
through anything

I should remember now
what Velvet Underground song
after I turned him down
for the last time he left
on my answering machine in order
to convey that I was no
longer worthy even of his disdain
 I never told him the book
that was next to my bed was the copy
of *The Selected Poems of Frank O'Hara*
you had given me before you died

Yesterday someone told me that Frank's friend
the painter Mike Goldberg had died
and from here I can see myself
in my tenement room
on a night more than two decades gone
opening to Frank's birthday ode to Mike
when I reached down
to the floor next to my bed
to pick up the book that had been yours

Mark Bibbins

307

³⁰⁷ Mark Bibbins, "13th Balloon [A person I knew for a short time...]," collected in *13th Balloon*, Copper Canyon Press

Aztlán

I cannot explain
this luxurious farm

of losers, or these girls
who drink Two Buck

Chuck all night. How our
cups are always full

of crimson, or why
I mistake water for wine.

This patch of women's
bodies rattle the ash trees.

Each ripple moves
the plot like a chapter

in a disappearing book.
A red barnyard door

builds another red
barnyard door.

A pot of menudo
simmers inside

another pot of menudo.
One girl is getting

fingerbanged
on a diesel flat.

Another croons along
to the Temptations

as they play
from the open window

of a teal Silverado.
God is on a beer run.

Jesus and Mary argue
about who's driving

them home. Eve's
phone is dead.

The mothers lie awake
on a busted trampoline,

thinking. No one
said it was wine

that would save us.
Still, we lick the lip

of a heavy chalice.
We like how in

the books, it's blood.

Sara Borjas
308

³⁰⁸ [Sara Borjas](#), "[Aztlán](#)," collected in [Heart Like a Window, Mouth Like a Cliff](#), Noemi Press

Self-Portrait Following a Trail of Reese's Pieces

I am never sure whether I am the alien lost far from home or the kid who befriends the alien. This is the year I learn protagonist and sidekick are not always properly labeled, the year filled with Marlboro smoke and divorce, the year I refuse to tie my shoes. I wait for my body to betray me, to announce my hunger to a disapproving world. Until it reaches the screen and turns back toward the audience, a movie is only moonlight and soundtrack. Light is invisible but without it so is everything else, and maybe this moment is not my life but the reflection of my life. "Penis breath" is the best insult ever written, it's exactly what we waited in line for. In the dark, no one sees how uncomfortable I am in this body.

Amorak Huey
309

³⁰⁹ Amorak Huey, "[Self-Portrait Following a Trail of Reese's Pieces](#)," [Radar Poetry](#), collected in [Boom Box](#), [Sundress Publications](#)

The red-haired green-eyed woman to my left is alone,
she tells me in a note, and tired of being the only lesbian
in this room. I look around. Of the thirteen other
possible lesbians, I rule out eleven based on purses
and shoes. I write this back to her and she agrees.
I'm the teacher so passing notes is fine
with the authorities. We're both bored
with the presentation on Charles Olson.
I seem to remember that "Projective Verse"
wasn't reprinted in a volume celebrating his work,
as if the editors recognized a fart disguised as an essay
when they smelled it. The presenter would have done better
to twirl flaming machetes. His voice sounds like a shoe
being drowned. She writes that the two possible lesbians
would make an attractive couple. I marry them
in Tahiti and get a little drunk on sunshine
in my thoughts. I don't know what to write to her:
that everyone is alone like a key to a safe in the safe
at the bottom of a well at the bottom of a sea?
Her solitude is not my solitude, which can wear
a live alligator on its head and still hide in the open.
I'm trying to get her to say what she says to me
in these notes in her poems, but a note
is the most private genre after the shopping list.
I finally suggest that she open a gay bar
in the northeast corner of the room. She asks
what to call it and I tell her I'm just an idea man,
execution is up to her. But I have no guillotine,
she writes back just as the student finishes
hurting me inadvertently with his passion.
The red-haired green-eyed woman is next. The note
she gives me as she stands confesses that she'd rather
eat a rat while it's shitting out the remains
of the smaller rat it ate than stand in front of people
who probably hate her. As she writes "Audre Lorde"
on the board, I write "Audre Lorde" in my notebook
and underline her name twice. I try to make the word
"theater" out of "hate her" but need another *t*
and one less *h*. I really want to read the poems
in which her solitude speaks to mine like two new kids
in first grade sharing potato chips on the edge
of a playground while throwing their carrots at a turtle.
We'll see what happens in this life and the next.
I don't know how to teach people a thing, I write on a note
I give myself. That's OK, I write back: what you lack
in intelligence you make up for with biting the inside
of your lip. I wish I believed him but he'll say anything
to suggest that everyone's running around with a parachute

on their back and a hand on the rip cord
so why not help each other find the escape hatch
or ground the plane due to the fog
we're in. As if life's as simple as levitation
or the perfect martini: eighteen parts gin
and three parts gin and gin and an olive orchard
and don't bother with a glass and gulp and gin.

Bob Hicok
310

³¹⁰ [Bob Hicok](#), "[Pedagogy](#)," collected in [Red Rover Red Rover](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Clitoris

More alarm clock than emergency
lever. More Muzak than jazz. Between fields

of iridescence and a kingdom jaundiced
with heaven you choose to live

incognito. Your rap sheet is decent
as a prisoner earning good time

in the library, eating pages of the dictionary
to stay alive. What rocks have you pocketed,

wanting to be more mineral than flesh, opal
tongued, inefficient machine invented

to stave off loneliness? Why won't you
admit you're selfish, that you'd rather

live lit by your own flame and burn
out than sustain a collective glow?

You're as interesting as the cracked
molar wincing every time whiskey

passes my jaw. You live in a strip
mall where old people overdose

on pheromones. When chain-smoking
girls flick their cherries, you seethe

with envy, to be that shade of power,
narcotic and smoldering a croon.

Kendra DeColo

311

³¹¹ [Kendra DeColo](#), "[Clitoris](#)," collected in [Thieves in the Afterlife](#), [Saturnalia Books](#)

Ten-Piece Dark

There you go.
You had to.
Either sooner. Or later.
Closer. Far away.
You had to leave. Or stay.

You were the first in line.
The last in line.
By yourself. With everyone else.
In the street. On the stairs.
A consequence of night. A consequence
of light shed by the moon.

You did your best—there was rain.
You did your best—your shoe was untied.
You did your best with a rock, a fist, your fingernails, and the dust.

Punch, slap, scratch, and poke—you did your best
in the hour when the wind roared by.
Due to, because of, nevertheless, as a result.
How it may have been otherwise if by chainsaw or axe.
The almost, the nearly, the roughly, the just shy...

You did your best, holding your breath, hand
stilling hand in a makeshift prayer.
Keys in the ignition?
Keys on the dash?

Hear me.
My head in the back seat,
My body in the trunk.

Cindy King
312

³¹² [Cindy King](#), "[Ten-Piece Dark](#)," [Hawai'i Review](#), collected in [Zoonotic](#), [Tinderbox Editions](#)

Moxie

After my mother on her hands
and knees begged him into driving down
to the St. Louis Clinic for a month
of drying out they must have parked
in front of what I'm envisioning
as one of those gray, 1930s monstrosities,
what my mother called Depression Egyptian,

a hulking old mastodon of a building,
smelling of medicine and floor wax
and the peculiar odor of men and women
punching each other in the reeling kitchen
at 3 a.m. as the kids cried upstairs. Also
the stink of a washed-up marriage.

And there was another smell, mixed in
with the fragrance of the lilies
on the admission desk, and I think it was
the ground-beef-gone-bad sickliness
of what this had done to his father.

Anyway, he stood there at the desk
with my mother getting checked in
and he smelled all this, and then
shrugged his big shoulders, and winked
at my mother as he used to wink,
and very deliberately turned and walked out,

passing through the same massive
swinging doors he had entered by
just a few minutes earlier, only now
they weren't doors but a great bronze portal

into death, which he recognized,
and strode through with some of the old
swagger, some of the moxie my mother
fell for in the first place, and what
a beautiful day it was turning out to be.

George Bilgere
313

³¹³ George Bilgere, "Moxie," *Tar River Poetry*, collected in *Central Air*, University of Pittsburgh Press

Artichokes

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

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

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

Bianca Stone

314

³¹⁴ Bianca Stone, "Artichokes," *The New Yorker*, collected in *What is Otherwise Infinite*, Tin House Books

Trivial

The word comes from tri + via: three roads. And it came to mean things of no importance because that's where women would stop and talk.

A man made that up, don't you think? He'd be riding a fine horse, his head full of important thoughts about his life, his sons, his money.

There would be these women standing where three roads met filling the air with weather and babies and recipes.

He would look them up and down, and lick his fat lips as they whispered to each other how easy it would be to make it look like somebody else killed him, some man driven by the things men talk about—envy, rage, revenge.

Ron Koertge
315

³¹⁵ [Ron Koertge](#), "[Trivial](#)," collected in [The Ogre's Wife](#), Red Hen Press

She Considers Trading Her Secrets

These girls, she says. These girls, I could smite them.
These girls, if they knew about the tree inside me, or
the rabbit trap, or the plastic doll parts. If they knew
about the dog I walk each night in my dreams, her big
teeth showing, her paws like dinner plates. If they knew
how I like knowing she could eat me but chooses not to.
That is how I feel safest. These girls. If they saw me lit
by the dome light of my station wagon. If they saw me under
his hands during the ice storm. What would they say?
Would they kiss me? Would they share their licorice
and chlamydia? Would we talk about equations as if
they held the world? Oh, these girls. They are dumb
as bicycles. Their eyes like tree knots. Their smiles
like paper. If they knew that my world is not their world,
is gloaming-colored and damp, echoes with howls and bells,
floats in the space between the desert and the past—
would they ride the carousel next to me? Would they,
for once, give me the best horse?

Catherine Pierce
316

³¹⁶ Catherine Pierce, "[She Considers Trading Her Secrets](#)," *Anti-*, collected in [The Girls of Peculiar](#), Saturnalia Books

A Backpack Full of Knives

Even the songbirds that usually lurked our yard
were vacationing in France or posting montages
of crumbles baked from scratch with fresh-fallen
stone fruit. Imagine: a decade ago I'm declared
"a nascent Chekhov" and "a thunderstorm without
the cliché of lightning." Then today, marooned
in a coterie of damp dishrags, unsure which way
to hold a restaurant menu. My former roommate
sends a birthday note all the way from Mykonos:
all emojis. Double entendre, perhaps unintentional.
Also in my inbox: screenshot from notorious Cori.
My apron is wet and this time I don't want it to be.
Email from Brian of the Tennessee encounter, rest
stop where he asked me to guard his caged quail.
I was the Lake Superior of our workshop: forgotten
and cold, always on top. When I passed out photos
to accompany my story, you could smell developer
on my fingers. Not the cocaine or patchouli or Cori
who my classmates believed was a pet mouse, not
a backpack full of knives. My high school English
teacher is now vacationing for six weeks in Slovenia,
despite a salary the size of a mini bag of pistachios,
and she boasts about a simple scallion and rye toast
lunch. I'm still figuring out how to sharpen a blade.

Mary Biddinger
317

³¹⁷ Mary Biddinger, "A Backpack Full of Knives," collected in [Department of Elegy](#), Black Lawrence Press

The Obscure

It's the poor first light of the morning.

The woman still sleeps in her unheated room.
The man in his nightshirt stands
In the kitchen burning
Dry sunflower-stalks in the open stove.
There's not a single lamp working.
The orange light from the stove
Shows just the things in the far corner.

Outside the window it is still snowing.

The harvest is finished. The time has come
For killing the pig.
They have been starving him (or a week;
Yesterday, emptying him completely
With a wet portion of barley meal.
The pig is hungry and squeals in his corner
By the garden.

The man has dressed in an old canvas coat.
He stands inside the branch-fence
Beside the sty, and with a broom sweeps
A clearing in the snow.
He lays out the knives, the rope
And a black stool.

Birds stream from the tree above him.

The pig is stuck in the windpipe, he hangs
By the rope from the tree, and upside-down
Spins slowly above the stool.
His eyes never leave this man
Who brought him so many warm vegetables.

The man's thoughts never leave the woman
Who is still sleeping up in the house.
She walked through the woods in the snow
For most of the evening. For the second night
In their lives she wouldn't be touched
By him.

The pig is ready for the scalding. He has
Never before been this heated and pink.
A high window opens in the house. Icicles fall
From the windowsill. The woman looks out
Opening her eyes to the bright snow:
The pig hangs in the tree like an ornament of wax

Stuck with a few red jewels, she had not
Been warned about the killing at all;
There's her scream and then
Just a silence leaving the man to himself,

To little else but the thought
That her breasts filled the window like a mouth.

Norman Dubie
318

³¹⁸ [Norman Dubie](#), "[The Obscure](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [In the Dead of the Night](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Juvenilia

Up front the beauty queen said TURN OFF, Y'ALL,
LET'S GUN IT DOWN THE RUNWAY, NO JOKE—HEY,
I'VE DONE IT TONS OF TIMES. And listen,
that we didn't listen was the one right thing
about my night, the country airport winking
as we passed, half-spun, in a borrowed car
with a guy called Nuh-Uh at the wheel.
We never said his real name, he didn't have
a license, he wore a backpack full of pills,
and that was all I really knew
about him, a friend of a friend I spent
a very crummy fall with, years ago
when I was living next to Burt's Bird Barn,
a chicken farm, the stink so thick it got in
my sweaters. This was where I landed
after my boyfriend came unglued and drained
his savings at the World's Longest Yard Sale,
hauled home a fencing mask, a two-man saw,
a rusted Huffy, crates of dusty jars,
and a painting of a Rebel general—
he guessed, based on the cold proud stare alone—
and that's just the first load. He'd given up
hygiene, he started seeing things in trees,
and there went our big plan to move to Arizona,
which was his plan anyway. I kept surrendering
my uncertainty to more uncertain forces
like an echo caught in louder sound,
though people thought I was a lot of fun,
up for anything and so on. I still slept
in my retainers, my ears were triple-pierced,
it was an in-between time.

Stuck behind
a counter serving lunch till dinner, I tied
my apron tight and gave away too much
food, reeking of grease and my own stale air,
pretending I liked jam bands. This was the fall
I started writing poems that rhyme, inventing
characters with more resolve or else
like me but men, and it's hard to think about
how sad I was, how ready to forget
myself, and my luck, too many foggy nights
like the night when Nuh-Uh drove us, straddling
the yellow line, his whole arm out the window,
reaching to catch the weeds or high beams, something
over and over he kept missing.

They found him dead in a hotel room in Nashville
three weeks later. We slammed beers

on the way to the visitation. I stood in line
and shook his father's hand, absorbing the scene
like evidence of a crime I helped commit.
Though I'd have the means to move away by winter,
if not the sense to see how much I wasn't
fixing, that fall in the damp death-smelling house
I wrote a poem about a woman named Miranda.
Miranda was standing, where else, on a veranda,
discussing the mating habits of mosquitoes.
I used a bunch of scientific terms.
I did my research from a mattress on the floor,
tapping uneven syllables while a cat
I wasn't meant to let inside eyed
my hand like prey. I was trying my best not to
think of them as signs, the possum in the pond,
frogs mashed against the gravel by my own tires
or one of Burt's meth-head sons, there were several,
there was always so much traffic. When I woke
to find a chicken carcass on the porch,
wings folded stiffly like the classic gag
but dirty white instead of marigold,
it was the sort of correspondence
between life and art you can't anticipate,
though of course I wasn't thinking about art.
In the poem, which probably went on too long,
Miranda never left the cramped veranda,
just rattled on in interlocking lines
that didn't sound like anyone I knew,
but what she said about biology, how little
we can do to change what makes us incomplete—
that was an ending I could reckon with,
it was my bravest work to date.

Caki Wilkinson
319

³¹⁹ [Caki Wilkinson](#), "[Juvenilia](#)," [The Hopkins Review](#), collected in [The Survival Expo](#), [Persea Books](#)

Nostalgia is A

ghost just now walking into my room
wearing real clothes. Before the knock,
the truck slides softly onto its side in
snow. I was waiting for his knock. My

body falls against his body as all bodies
fall. All this long while, my ear pressed
to the door. Truck stuck fast in snow,
we pull our warm bodies out into ice air.

Ghosts require hosts, as does memory,
as does that slide grateful to gravity
of a body fallen softly on top of a body
toppled sideways in a truck so gently

swerved into a snowbank. Snow is all.
Blank and cold: mutual accounts froze.
Snow is always what we were not, no?
A ghost is no one we know if we decide

to ignore it. I am waking up. When we
give it our eyes, it takes on our bodies.
A ghost walks out, leaves its chill behind.
When I finally wake up, the first thing

I see, naturally, is light. Against fabric's
weave of floor-length curtains shot
through with filament, light sears raw
mouths open, beams amber bluffs.

Say that no matter how my steps stagger
their blood ways along this page, as my
hand, unused to script, aches along, he's
not one of any of those moons I forgot

because *because*'s a weak word, because
on that night there was no accident, yes,
we could say, of the stars, the stars who
themselves contrived to know us better

than we ever knew ourselves. Accidents
are an idea. Interrogate the scene, you'll
find there's no such thing. Yet, now falling
softly on our faces, this snow's supreme.

Cate Marvin

320

³²⁰ [Cate Marvin](#), "[Nostalgia is A](#)," collected in [Event Horizon](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

How She Was Tempted.

It was a dark night in a dark bar. He told her he was from Grand Rapids, Michigan. They played darts and had a belch contest. Later in bed, she learned he kept ears, teeth, noses, fingers in an old heart-shaped candy box. He fixed her Ford Fiesta, but he made it worse. The muffler never quite worked. She went off the road into a ditch in darkest New Hampshire. The couscous she made for a potluck went all over the windshield. It was so dark she couldn't see the hundreds of trees. A relief, at first, when she realized it was all a kind of dream. That she was a dream: one of many layers inside the mountain. Spiraling up and up, pulling her one way into the green voices of earth, and in another way toward sleep. She stretched between both, slowly becoming a hard-rooted tree, and then he reached in, pulled her out, and shook her.

Julia Story
321

³²¹ [Julia Story](#), "[How She Was Tempted.](#)," *diode*, collected in [Julie the Astonishing](#), [Sixth Finch](#)

from "Collision"

4.

The men are pressing stone onto a gate,
they are singing to a song on the radio from
the 1950s, cicadas can't make out the words
so they buzz louder. A boy watches *Dial M
for Murder* during a Hitchcock marathon.
He puts on an old pair of 3-D glasses but the
bodies only become darker. A mother holds
a wooden spoon, the red sauce swells, a man sits
upstairs, a dog gnaws on a dead bone. The man
is sweating, the gun is rusting. The police are
coming. He looks down at them. And at
the peaches in the trees that look like ears.

Victoria Chang
322

³²² Victoria Chang, "Collision," collected in [Salvinia Molesta](#), University of Georgia Press

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof or Liz in Lingerie

In the era when air conditioning was placed only in movie theaters
and hospitals, the house set is filled with fans.
Big overhead whirling casting light and shadow in equal parts.
Atmospheric. Southern nobility in a last romance.
Sweat, swoon, the clink of ice cubes in well-cut crystal.
New money and good lighting. And if lucky, the movie fills up with
Elizabeth Taylor dressed in slips and bras
with masses of black hair piled high on her regal head.

Sleek as a panther.
Violet eyes and red lipstick.
The bathing beauty apotheosis.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof in light and shadow.
Light fills out the big house where Big Daddy growls,
another kind of cat. He's in pain.

The camera pans a well-appointed bedroom
where a very healthy looking Paul Newman
tries to look drunk and crippled
by some accident of bad writing. He's in pain.

And then there is Liz in shimmering bra and slip.
She looks as if she stepped out a magazine advertisement
"I dreamed I launched a thousand jerk offs in my..."
Oh what a dame! She strokes, screams and purrs.
Everyone's a cat in this movie.

At first this seems to be about S. E. X.
whenever Liz and Paul mark each other's
considerable scenic territory
but then Big Daddy roars and it's about C A. N. C. E. R.

Out of nowhere arrives the pregnant sister in law
and many well-dressed, unappealing children who occasion
snide remarks from the desperate Maggie,
the writing gets better.

All these female creatures with their shining surface beauty
are licking themselves in anticipation of some greater reward
the Big House, the Big Life but first they have to get past the Big Lie.

So there is Liz at her loveliest stroking the reluctant Brick.
He's got his bottle and his crutch and his memories of some poor schmuck
who died young (in his arms?).
So much guilt, so little time.

Poor Brick, whose screen name anticipates a multitude of male nom de soap operas
will succumb to the magnificent Maggie before the final scene.

Maggie wants her baby and money and a better decorator
for this House of Pain.

Meanwhile, Jack Carson gives the performance of his career,
but no one notices because Liz wears clinging lingerie.

As if spectral. Black servants come and go
see all, know all, stash the good china and the heavy silver.
They'll cash in their patience and their secrets and move north.

They will buy property in Kansas or Wisconsin
and enjoy long stretches of storm and snow.

Patricia Spears Jones

323

³²³ [Patricia Spears Jones](#), "[Cat on a Hot Tin Roof or Liz in Lingerie](#)," [Court Green](#), collected in [Femme du Monde](#), [Tia Chucha Press](#)

It's Okay

I go to the farmer's market
to buy a thirteen-dollar pie. I hate the president
for different reasons than you
hate the president. There's a tiny unmanned plane
that's in charge of all our nightmares
now. It used to be the nukes
and getting old. I'm not afraid of being afraid
of something. The only thing to fear
is tripping quietly on a big stick. In the medieval
marketplace, there was raven shit
on everything. You had to wash your cheese
wheel in the moat where everyone
took a piss. It's okay to hate me
for buying a seven-dollar loaf of bread
and throwing away the ends. I have a car
from medieval times that's good
on gas because it's pulled by goats.
They say the tiny plane sounds kind
of like a lawnmower falling
through the sky. What is it about the past
that we'll never learn? If they didn't die
of farming, my ancestors, they probably died
while being born.

Gregory Lawless
324

³²⁴ Gregory Lawless, "[It's Okay](#)," [Souvenir](#)

In the Confessional Mode, with a Borrowed Movie Trope

...and then there is the idea of another life
of which this outward life is only an expression,
the way the bag floating round in the alley
traces out the shape of wind
but is not wind. In a fleabag hotel
in Worcester, Mass., a man is dying,
muscles stiff, their ropes pulled taut,
his voice somewhere between a honk and whisper.
But float down through the years, many years,
and it's us, meaning me and the man
as a boy upstairs in the house
where I've finagled my deflowering.
Maybe finagled. Hard to say if it's working.
It reminds me of trying to cram a washrag
down a bottle neck—you twist and twist
to make it reach, but it does not,
and in the end the inside of me
was not wiped clean. Oh I was once
in such a hurry. The job had to be done
before the pot roast was, his stepmother
thumping the ceiling under us: *Whatever*
you're doing, you better get out
of your sister's room. But her voice
carried more of the wasp's irritation
than the hornet's true rage, so we forged on—
while our jury of trusty busty Barbies
perched on their toes, their gowns iridescent,
a sword of gray light coming through the curtain crack
and knighting me where I contorted
on the rug. And it's clear to me still,
what I wanted back then; namely, my old life
cut up into shreds so I could get on
with my next. But the boy was only
halfway hard, no knife-edge there,
though the rest of him looked as if it were bronze,
with muscles rumpling his dark-gold skin.
Meaning this is a story about beauty after all.
And when the roast was ready, I slipped outside,
where November dusk was already sifting down
into the ballrooms underneath the trees.
It was time to go home to my own dinner,
the ziti, the meatballs, *Star Trek* on TV,
but how could I sit there, familiar among them,
now that I was this completely different thing?
Sweat was my coat as I flew from his house
while the brakes of my ten-speed sang like geese.
But now it's his voice that resembles a honk
in a room where the empty amber vials

rattle underneath his narrow bed. Meaning
he's trying hard to take himself out.
And while I have as yet no theory
to unlock the secret forces of the earth, still
I think there's a reason why the boy and I,
when we grew up, both got stuck
with the same disease. Meaning the stiffness,
the spasms, the concrete legs—
oh I was once in such a hurry. Now
my thighs are purple from all the drugs
I'm shooting in, & I don't even want to know
how the boy looks racked and wrecked.
Sometimes in the midst of making love
that kind of body will come floating in,
but quickly I'll nudge it away in favor of
the airbrushed visions. But not him,
the young him, the brass plate of whose belly
would be more lovely than I could bear,
though in chaster moments I will visit
that alcove of me where his torso is struck
by all the dark-gold light that still slants in.
Oh we are blown, we are bags,
we are moved by such elegant chaos.
Call it god. Only because it is an expletive that fits.
His body, his beauty, all fucked up now.
God. Then the air cuts out, and then we drop.

Lucia Perillo

325

³²⁵ [Lucia Perillo](#), "[In the Confessional Mode, with a Borrowed Movie Trope](#)," collected in [Luck is Luck](#), Random House

Night Ocean

Seven months after his funeral
I leave a party simmering
at two in the morning without telling
my friends I am a little drunk and
therefore surprised to find St. Mary's
Street dark as the night ocean
little lights like plankton tipsy
in the diver's flash and I realize
halfway to Beacon I'm going the wrong
way so I pass their building again
how upset my sweet friends if they knew
my knuckles not spiny with keys
phone sunk in my bag no
feel for the cold or my heels slamming
the sidewalk already I'm past the bridge
slack across the Charles like a useless rope
but don't worry dear friends don't worry
grief makes me invincible I am
the sleekest fucking shark in this ocean
eyes open asleep teeth ready I mean
there is nothing anyone could get from me
worth taking

Carolyn Oliver

326

³²⁶ [Carolyn Oliver](#), "[Night Ocean](#)," [Nimrod](#), collected in [Night Ocean](#), [Seven Kitchens Press](#)

My mother who though she was not herself an eater of crackers in bed often brought a ginormous bowl of popcorn which she would eat undaintily like just a fistful of popcorn shoved near her mouth the way I eat popcorn unless I am not alone which I do not really prefer and always in her other hand was a novel usually a thriller never a romance always either a woman killing several men or a sister stealing another sister's kidney or a surgeon purposefully botching a heart procedure and I would be at mother's side also fisting popcorn and reading the big horoscope book because there was so much information like what would my sex life be with an aquarius or why to avoid earth signs and also career how according to the stars with my attention to detail I should be a phlebotomist or an instructor of ballerinas and sometimes I'd bring her a warm washcloth or I'd be hungry and she'd say just let me finish this chapter or there'd be one of those magazines with famous people and even of the mildly attractive famous men mother would say well I wouldn't kick him out of bed for eating crackers and I'd imagine that flat paper face fat and fleshy in bed with us a couple of sleeves of saltines and the crumbs different from our hard little kernels and then I'd go into the kitchen and stand at the sink hollowing out the strawberry stripe of the Neapolitan before checking the windows for strangers. There: my glassy face, the indifferent moon, the treeless street.

Nicole Callihan

327

³²⁷ [Nicole Callihan](#), "[103 Pine Ln.](#)," [Whale Road Review](#)

Runaway

Four months until eighteen and no one to be
an orphan with. In a town named for its heat

I shivered on strangers' couches, gave each
a different name. Couldn't sleep until I saw them:

my dead friends sprawled on the coffee table
eating lavender ice cream by the pint.

I spent days charting the insides of my eyelids
like I was building a cartography, a star map

swirling outwards, lit by the flares
of exploding satellites. I didn't go outside

in daylight, not even to clip my shirts
to dry in the sun. I was terrified

of being found. I don't remember anything
from those months except

what other people captured
in pictures. I barely ate. When I dislocated

my shoulder I punched it back into place.
I was trying to be all I needed but my need

kept leaking out. For months it was sour rain
and sleet and I covered my teeth when I smiled.

Gaia Rajan
328

After the RN Warns Me About the Blood

—so much the pap smear might not be able to catch cancer—after I push myself onto my elbows alone in the room and try to clean off the red smudged across my belly, after the masked phlebotomist cinches a strip of black medical tape around my arm and tells me her plans to go home and cook dinner with her brother when her shift is done in five minutes, after I keep thinking about the nurse who offered to sterilize me because I knew best if I wanted another soft fontanelle breaking into the world through me, after I fold my diagnosis of *menhorragia*, > *three months* and walk almost all the way home by the highway during the 4:30pm Friday rush hour, after a man with a rattlesnake tattoo gives me a ride the rest of the way, after I don't tell my mother, after I walk to work the following Monday on a sidewalk so slick with wet pink petals I nearly slip on their sweet skin, after I crouch in my office with the door closed and open my knees to try to push the clots through, after I watch a young man in glasses wrestle and sweat to plant young plum trees in the parking lot median, after I think about my compromised immune system holding me open to each thing that could kill me—each way someone doesn't care enough about this to change some small thing in their day, in the way their palms or their breath touch—after I start crying into my keyboard, after my boss offers to drive me home and admits he was not well sheltering in place this winter either, after he says it is okay not to be okay, after he tells me to sleep in a dark room and take the next day off too if needed, after I put my arm across my eyes and remember dancing with girls in the armory, how I saw my pale face nerveless and remote as a moon in the bathroom lights, after I remember the girl who kissed each of her palms and pressed them to my cheeks, after I remember the six-foot-five boy who cupped his gentle hands like two halves of a pomegranate when he sat on the edge of my roommate's bed, after I remember hearing he was gone, when I had to pull over onto the dirt shoulder of the road beneath the billboard with Jesus on one side and a pregnant belly on the other above the field of harvested dusk, and I remember all the times I begged god to keep all my friends alive just another hour just another day, like the words could hold onto the bunched backs of their shirts and keep them here just like this—stay, stay with me, please, just another minute—after I name each thing I can't save but before the results come back I text you: *please tell me*

you're on your way.

Kelly Weber
329

329 [Kelly Weber](#), "[After the RN Warns Me About the Blood](#)," [Waxwing](#)

Those Graves in Rome

There are places where the eye can starve,
But not here. Here, for example, is
The Piazza Navona, & here is his narrow room
Overlooking the Steps & the crowds of sunbathing
Tourists. And here is the Protestant Cemetery
Where Keats & Joseph Severn join hands
Forever under a little shawl of grass
And where Keats' name isn't even on
His gravestone, because it is on Severn's,
And Joseph Severn's infant son is buried
Two modest, grassy steps behind them both.
But you'd have to know the story—how bedridden
Keats wanted the inscription to be
Simple, & unbearable: "Here lies one
Whose name is writ in water." On a warm day,
I stood here with my two oldest friends.
I thought, then, that the three of us would be
Indissoluble at the end, & also that
We would all die, of course. And not die.
And maybe we should have joined hands at that
Moment. We didn't. All we did was follow
A lame man in a rumpled suit who climbed
A slight incline of graves blurring into
The passing marble of other graves to visit
The vacant home of whatever is not left
Of Shelley & Trelawney. That walk uphill must
Be hard if you can't walk. At the top, the man
Wheezed for breath; sweat beaded his face,
And his wife wore a look of concern so
Habitual it seemed more like the way
Our bodies, someday, will have to wear stone.
Later that night, the three of us strolled,
Our arms around each other, through the Via
Del Corso & toward the Piazza di Spagna
As each street grew quieter until
Finally we heard nothing at the end
Except the occasional scrape of our own steps,
And so we said good-bye. Among such friends,
Who never allowed anything, still alive,
To die, I'd almost forgotten that what
Most people leave behind them disappears.
Three days later, staying alone in a cheap
Hotel in Naples, I noticed a child's smeared
Fingerprints on a bannister. It
Had been indifferently preserved beneath
A patina of varnish applied, I guessed, after
The last war. It seemed I could almost hear
His shout, years later, on that street. But this

Is speculation, & no doubt the simplest fact
Could shame me. Perhaps the child was from
Calabria, & went back to it with
A mother who failed to find work, & perhaps
The child died there, twenty years ago,
Of malaria. It was so common then—
The children crying to the doctors for quinine.
It was so common you did not expect an aria,
And not much on a gravestone, either—although
His name is on it, & weathered stone still wears
His name—not the way a girl might wear
The too large, faded blue workshirt of
A lover as she walks thoughtfully through
The Via Fratelli to buy bread, shrimp,
And wine for the evening meal with candles &
The laughter of her friends, & later the sweet
Enkindling of desire; but something else, something
Cut simply in stone by hand & meant to last
Because of the way a name, any name,
Is empty. And not empty. And almost enough.

Larry Levis
330

³³⁰ [Larry Levis](#), "[Those Graves in Rome](#)," collected in [Winter Stars](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

Procession

it was a procession / it was a march / we walked through the snow to the funeral home / we walked single file / our teacher was dead / we were going to see the body / the funeral home was four blocks away / it was February / it was a march / a procession through the snow / we sat on folding chairs in our coats and boots / we took turns kneeling before the casket / we were told to say a little goodbye / we were instructed not to touch / the snow on our boots melted into the carpet / it was a thick shag pile / a chic sad pile / the principal apologized to the man in the suit / our teacher had long straight hair one might call dishwater blond / she wore bellbottoms and hoop earrings and eye shadow that sparkled / she arranged our desks in pods / she arranged our pods in desks / she encouraged collaboration / she called us collaborators / she'd say attention collaborators! / she turned the picture of President Nixon upside down / she left Pope Paul right side up / she wore maternity tops with big bows at the neck / like a Christmas present / we'd been waiting for her that morning / the second bell rang / the principal came in and told us / we were allowed to read and play checkers and talk quietly amongst ourselves / three days later we marched to see the body / it was a procession / it was like a field trip / we marched single file in the snow / at the funeral home we stayed inside our coats and our boots / we weren't sure what to do / our teacher didn't look right / it was our first dead body / she wasn't wearing a top with a bow / she was wearing a white dress like a wedding dress / her hair lay in two long braids on either side of her boobs / she looked like a pioneer woman / a woman of the prairie / she'd always kept sanitary napkins and sanitary belts in her desk drawer just in case / when I bled down my leg during the Christmas recital she was prepared / when I bled down my leg into my anklet / I jumped off the back of the bleachers / some of the other girls jumped too / I ran into the stall and locked the door / I sat bleeding into the toilet / the girls stood around outside the stall / they offered wetted tissues under the door / they didn't really like me / they were enjoying the drama / one of them thought to go tell our teacher / she came with a sanitary napkin and a sanitary belt in a brown paper bag / she talked me through it / she said do you feel fresher now? / she put my socks into the paper bag / in her class we were allowed to talk all we wanted / she wanted to feel our energy / she wanted a free exchange of ideas / she called us collaborators / after we said the rosary we were herded into another room / there were ham sandwiches and cookies on plates / we were told to take one ham sandwich and one cookie / we were told to eat them on the way back / the principal led the way / the kid who always cried was crying / and the kid who always threw up threw up in the snow / the principal led us back / it was a procession / it was a march / we were little soldiers now, marching home / the snow was melting and there were patches of exposed earth and the air smelled like wet black dirt the way it sometimes does in February / the way it sometimes makes you glad / when we got back, our desks were in rows / President Nixon was right side up / a man in wire rimmed glasses was writing his name on the board

Kathy Fish

331

331 [Kathy Fish](#), "[Procession](#)," [swamp pink](#)

March, 1969

back at the church the best man draped the groom's shoulders, passed a flask of hundred proof, a mother fondled her fake pearls, walked the aisles in search of a soloist to replace the cousin who canceled an hour earlier, *will you sing His Eyes on the Sparrow or Amazin' Grace*, she asked each guest.

across town on Hanover Street,

a young woman in a taffeta and lace gown huddled on the cold tile of YWCA bathroom stall. she heard the lobby phone ring incessantly. the receptionist trumpeted her name over the intercom. she balled up wads of Angel Soft and blotted the Revlon fleeing her lash. for the last two hours, the cost of the dress, flowers, drinks, the soloist, the hall, and her mother's second mortgage to fund the matrimonial circus paraded across an embedded reel. thoughts of a fatherless baby pushed her to decision.

that inevitable bride called a yellow taxi to deliver her to fate. outside, a homeless prophet touched her shoulder while she waited, reassured: *it's better for the baby girl. Honey.*

three hours later, an understudy organist played the sorriest wedding march. the bride tripped down the aisle, busted her knee wide open. bled through her stockings and silk slip. her groom, many swigs in, balanced by his best men, could barely stand. her mother ran to the altar to lift her daughter, her sole investment. while an unholy congregation craned their necks and swished their church fans, advertising a local funeral home, to watch a lovely commodity reluctantly agree to her own barter.

Airea D. Matthews

332

³³² Airea D. Matthews, "[March, 1969](#)," [Women's Studies Quarterly](#), collected in [Bread and Circus](#), [Scribner](#)

Memory

*In the end, she forgot everything
except how to play the piano.*

*The nurse sat her at the keyboard
and she played for all the residents
in the recreation area*

*but when it was time to stop,
she couldn't remember where she was
and became afraid.*

*Sometimes art finds a way to preserve
the pleasures of consciousness*

*but more often it's the same bars of Chopin
over and over until the mind is dust*

+

is a fragment of a poem I found
in the back of my desk drawer.

Had I written it?
I must have written it because it's about my grandmother—

+

but I don't remember writing it.

Down the block, the high school is letting out.

I can hear the school bell chiming, chiming

and the revving of those lunatic engines
that have idled too long beneath dying oaks,

and I think of Tommy driving fast
down the backstreets of Cleveland

+

and all I can do is hold onto my seat
and close my eyes

while the music plays loud and Tommy shouts,
Fuck, yeah,

speeding past the garbage cans that line Lee Road.

+

I like to think my youth lives inside me
as memory lives inside time.

Wayne, sipping his Diet Coke
one rainy afternoon in the university parking lot,

told me poetry is a kind of memory,

is a way the soon-to-be-dead
can talk to the not-yet-born.

Just then,

+

a black chasm opened in the asphalt
and I fell into it,

down, down
toward the hot and glistening center of the earth

+

and I've been falling
for decades now

into memory and fire and the deep
subterranean caverns,

the steaming lakes far below the rumpled crust

+

of the slowly rotating plastic brain

at the science museum, its pink folds glowing
as it turns on its platform

while my grandmother looks at her watch,

says, kiddo, it's time we got you back home,
time we got you back for dinner,

+

those snowy Cleveland weekend afternoons
when things were bad at home

and she drove me to the museum
to see the fossil trilobites and dinosaurs

and the model brain that glowed when I pressed the buttons
hippocampus, amygdala, prefrontal cortex,

pink and yellow lights
until dinner and the quiet remonstrances
that went with it—

+

Tommy, these days, is also dead. He drove
right out of this poem

into an embankment near Fort Bend.
Now he's circling the moon

like glittering dust. Or so I like to think.
I want to live

+

inside my poems
like a tapeworm.

+

Anyway, this fragment I found
crushed in the back of my desk drawer:

she panicked because where was she?
Where was she?

She didn't know, and when she looked at me,
I was no one she could recognize.

She shrugged my hand off her impossibly thin shoulder,

until the nurses soothed her
and led her to her silent room.

I never finished the poem about her
because it was too sad and none of it

was helpful to anyone.

Kevin Prufer
333

³³³ [Kevin Prufer](#), "Memory," [Southeast Review](#)

Tourists

In Tunis we try to discuss divorce
And dying but give up to lounge

With rug merchants under a plum tree.
From its corner the lamb's severed head

Watches the flies drink from its eyes
And its fat disappear into the fire.

The light rinses the edge of your sandal,
The two wasps that ornament the blur

Of screened window. My grandmother
Would have loved a night like this.

In the wind chimes I can hear her tea cart
With its china rolling through Cook Street's

Stony yard one summer when I was always
Thirsty, and she moved like a figure

On a clock from my lawn chair to the cart,
Or swabbed me with alcohol, or cut

My hair with the straight razor.
I was a week out of the hospital.

Beneath my breasts an incision was crossed
With stitches of surgical thread.

The scalpel came so close it gave
My heart a quick kiss. I nearly died.

Years later I can still see the skin
Flutter on the inside of my left breast

And my heart limps like a great uncle
Who, because he was a Jew and lame,

Was dragged by cossacks across the steppes.
He became a friend asking a favor

Of a horse who ran so hard, so perfectly
Hard, that the green grass rose to meet him.

Lynn Emanuel

334

³³⁴ [Lynn Emanuel](#), "[Tourists](#)," collected in [Hotel Fiesta](#), [University of Illinois Press](#)

As a Man Thinketh

Thirty years of thoughts
have been organized
into plain brown folders,
the main idea marked boldly
on each cover.
I rise from my job,
which I have done well,
and it has exhausted me,
the way a gardener
after a whole season of labor
just stands there, strangely clad
and in the dumps, eating his own onion
and it hurts.
I look out the window and
don't know what to think.
I see red sunflowers.
I see a baby crawling next to the eternal ocean.
I see someone standing on the corner
dressed as a blood drop.
Slowly does the scene become more
and more beautiful, more personal
and intricate, focusing on such small details
as my ganglia being crushed.
Then I lie down in the bathtub
where for a long time I pretend
I am in a field of ducks.

Mary Ruefle
335

³³⁵ Mary Ruefle, "As a Man Thinketh," collected in *Indeed I Was Pleased with the World*, [Carnegie Mellon University Press](#)

On the Road

We are trying to get pregnant
so everything makes me weep:

the amorphous metal sculpture
shaped like a tree on fire

outside the regional airport.
A young woman with prosthetic

legs standing in baggage claim.
And at the gate in Detroit, a father

stroking his daughter's hair while she
sleeps, head in his lap. My motel

is in a strip mall, next to Lowe's
Home Improvement, and when I walk

out into the world, into the acres
of parking lot which reek of fertilizer

and blacktop, I am ashamed of my own
impatience, which drives me to CVS

for a First Response Rapid Result
pregnancy test stick, which will pink up

to one line or two. Next, the Denny's,
where a pair of day laborers in from

Mississippi drink sweet tea at the counter,
tell the waitress they renovate houses,

ask where folks go to party around here.
They both have home-done tattoos; the one

with Thug Life on the side of his calf
lost all his money riverboat gambling,

says, *Didyouhear about that nineteen-*
year-old kid who jumped from the top

of that floating casino? The men
came in together but sit a few stools

apart, and both look when a petite blonde
runs in late muttering about her class

going till 6, pulls her apron over her head,
calls the brunette *Pickles*, which momentarily

wrenches the melancholy from my body.
Pickles. I am waiting. I am waiting

for my salad-to-go. I will walk back
across the strip mall parking lot,

CVS bag tucked into my purse,
past one blue shopping cart, knocked

over, joy-ridden. There is no part
of the reproduction process that is not

fraught, and as soon as the automatic
motel doors part, I will feel stabbing

cramps, get my period in the elevator up.
In my room, beyond the blackout curtains

lighted signs on sticks raise their hands
in the dusk: Marathon, Schnucks,

McDonalds golden arches tenting
the night with overwhelming sadness.

There are questions no one can answer
for me, no matter how long

I wait patiently. O vacant space.
O single-lined body of flesh and blood.

Erika Meitner

336

³³⁶ [Erika Meitner](#), "[On the Road](#)," [The Kenyon Review](#), collected in [Holy Moly Carry Me](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Brother

Thirteen hours into my first visit
home in three years I'm mopping
mama's kitchen floor
when my baby brother demands *how far*
up the academic food chain you plan on going
before you come home and
take care of mama?
And in my head I been cursing him out for twenty minutes
for the grease caked on this linoleum
and the plastic bag sitting up
on the counter filled with garbage,
for quitting school anyway and moving back
into her house a grown man,
for the marine corps training book in his room
open to diagrams for hand-to-hand killing techniques
and the receipt for a tattoo of a skull
with crossed knives stabbed up through the eyes
marking the page, money gladly spent
though he begrudged me twenty dollars
to put some groceries in her house
this morning. I spit *fuck you*
and fear I've lost the last
black man in my life.

Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon

337

³³⁷ [Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon](#), "[Brother](#)," collected in [Black Swan](#), University of Pittsburgh Press

In the Graveyard

Conceited boy, even here, in the angels' waiting
room, where the dead win all the beauty
contests by default, you arrived with the sun
behind you, working your counterfeit halo,
true as a tin star. It's a fine effect. But today,

for once, you take second to the ugly
jailbreak of azaleas rioting behind us, where
I kiss you again and we linger on the bench
of a long-gone husband's plot. Though,

if you are what I think you are, with terrible
friends in sublime places, explain to me your
cold kind of heart, unmoved by the inappropriate.
Teach me to survive you. Tell me, what kind

won't choose these awful flowers? Who
refuses this bleating, urgent pink?

Erin Belieu
338

³³⁸ [Erin Belieu](#), "[In the Graveyard](#)," collected in [Black Box](#), [Copper Canyon Press](#)

Threnody

I don't cry on the outside.
I haven't reached that level of liberation
from the granite my angel is trapped in.
I do cry inside. Imagine taking a sunset cruise
and watching purple waves brew.
That's what I do.

Tears make the boat lurch.
Violet waves, they claw the shore.
Silly, to write of tears. Small
as drops of oil in a cold pan.
As grains of rice, or lice,
or misplaced punctuation

in a poorly worded entreaty pleading
for mercy. Ministers
used to say that without release (I'm trying
to be clean here) men would explode
and die. According to witches, the same
can be said of tears. An insipid subject

for poetry. I wrote a poem about that word,
insipid, so long ago it could have been penned
by a cherub etched on the sarcophagus
of a child. But the dead, in their vast
merriment, egg me on. Write the motherfucking
poem. See why I love them?

And why my big body holds not a pond
or an inland lake but an unabridged salt green sea?
Swells taller than Gothic cathedrals.
Pretty people dressed in chartreuse eveningwear
dancing like eels through the matroneum.
The music of sea-roar,

and the Reagan-era deinstitutionalized,
wearing seaweed hospital gowns, set loose
in a concert hall blowing into their enormous
wind instruments. Do you carry
this grief inside yourself too? No, Diane,
I imagine you say. But you do.

Diane Seuss
339

³³⁹ [Diane Seuss](#), "[Threnody](#)," [The Adirondack Review](#)

Friday Night

The wind picks up, and a few raindrops
flick the river's surface.
Through trees unmodified by leaves
a makeshift town takes shape
from tents, RVs, and caravans
strung with Christmas lights and equipped
with all the comforts of home.
Section One has filled,
a stolid cul-de-sac
of bicycles and woodsmoke,
parakeets and radios,
a garden gnome beside one truck,
its cursive legend burnt in pine:
Welcome, stranger, to this place.

In darkness at the outer edge,
two teens have pitched their tent,
ill prepared, a little stoned,
discordant over poor provisions
and the wet scrape of a match.
*—Why'd you even come
when all you do is bitch?*
—I wanted us to be together.
They pass an apple back and forth
and toss away the core,
then cede their picnic table
to a family of raccoons,
crawling through tent flaps
to the gentle whirr of zippers
and whispers of remorse.
At the edge of quiet hours,
the girl begins to moan
Fuck me! Fuck me! over and over
across adjacent sites
for everyone to hear,
command or exclamation,
goad or shame, asking and getting
simultaneous but not the same.

Devin Johnston
340

³⁴⁰ Devin Johnston, "Friday Night," collected in [Mosses and Lichens](#), [Farrar, Straus, and Giroux](#)

Beginning with His Body and Ending in a Small Town

It's true I can't forget any part of him,
not the long vein rising up along the underside of his cock,
or the brushy hair around his balls, dank star of the asshole,
high arches of his feet, strawberry mole on his left cheek—
imperfection that made his face exquisite—
and the freckles scattered over his back,
white insides of his wrists, I remember those too,
and the scar on his belly oh I'm kissing it now,
he belongs to me so purely now he's left me,
he'll never come back, his face as he lets go inside me,
I'll never see it again, I stand dripping
in the shower where I once knelt
before him to drink whatever came
out of him, sometimes he would watch
me as I walked naked around the room,
here I am, it's the same room, I'm still
seeing his face the night it closed
to me forever like a failed business, iron grillwork
across the door, dirty windows, trash scattered
over the floor and the fixtures taken out, I turned
away and stumbled down the street, the one bar
was open, the saddest bar in the world, filled
with painted clowns and a few drunks, the owner had passed out
in a booth, covered by his coat, his girlfriend was working
and said *The usual, right?* and I couldn't say a word
except *Please*, and I took a stool and drank
what she served and served and served.

Kim Addonizio

341

³⁴¹ [Kim Addonizio](#), "[Beginning with His Body and Ending in a Small Town](#)," *Another Chicago Magazine*, collected in [Tell Me](#), BOA Editions, Ltd.

Some Things I Would Like to Forget about America

Include the fact of Ronald Reagan, that he had a birthday,
that so many of us wandering around, loosed
like starving beasts, were glad of him and his starchy life,
when I felt a brief pang of sadness for him
when his disease had progressed so far
it was no longer safe to sit a horse like a country lord
and a secret service agent, one that had been with him a long time,
was the one to tell him no, those days
were over. Goddamn him. I felt that.
I imagine the day was hot,
good, pleasant, free of the constant apocalyptic miasma
that defines all the time now; is in the water,
must be, like runoff from Something Horrible
in West Virginia, a state which is achingly lovely,
and terrifying, how the mountainsides run down
into the woe-begotten parking lots of fast food places
one stops at only because inside there are
grim restrooms. Twenty years ago
I was failing at so much: my first real work,
which was alarming for all the time
it gobbled up like a monster
and the little good it did anyone, anywhere;
I was failing at love, then,
and the young woman who drove from Alabama, there.
I think I'd like to forget, if
this poem is about what's wishful,
my arms: how they've not worked in thirty-six years,
and are, mostly, the sad loci of pain and stupid dreams
and alternate histories. I think of the kid
I went to high school with,
whose pitching arm was strong and rare
and worth millions of dollars;
how he was scouted by old men who all said to him,
we can change your life,
if you sign this contract,
if you ignore your mother's edict you get your education first.
I need tell nobody he lost it all
the following year due to a common injury
and now our lifetime earning potentials aren't so far apart.
I once taught where Newt Gingrich
first appeared to the world like a pale warning.
There was a plaque in the hallway
so that no one would ever forget
he lectured the young on the cyclical evils of history.
How there was always fire
wherever there was death
and the world was pretty much immune to so much suffering.
That sounds pretty good, I think,

as if somewhere, anywhere,
at least the potential for quiet is there.
It exists. The way large sums live in the smoke-sour air
of finance and mathematics
and clever suppositions about event horizons.
What the invisible looks like.
How our bodies flatten and stretch,
infinitely, a parlor trick on the edge of everything,
where no guarantee exists
of pleasure, of course. Just weeping, I bet.
I wish I could sing. I wish I were capable of such beauty:
blank and limitless and shocking,
dependent only upon the air.
I want to forget myself. My place. My manners for a night.
To just barge in, not to applause,
that's silly, too much, the stuff of screwball comedies
starring Cary Grant. My name: let me not recall
who I have come here to be.

Paul Guest

342

³⁴² [Paul Guest, "Some Things I Would Like to Forget about America," *Poetry*](#)

The Art of Sanctification

*The Arch of Sanctification, St. Louis Cathedral,
depicts the Holy Spirit as a dove in God's chest.*

I could use a dove in my heart.
I could use this God of Italian tile,
Lee Marvin in dreadlocks, light surging
from head and hands, Zeus-circuitry
spewing gold and only slightly
less prophetic than St. Louis sun.
Go now, His heart says, and be plain
all your years: Scheherazade awaits.
Go now and live mute among lepers:
their suffering is also song.
Go now and kiss your enemies
hard at the lips like the clasp
of revelation: the taste of malice
is also sacred. You, Holy Spirit,
were the one I never got, a pixie,
to wound the Catholic lexicon,
though without pranks, Trinity's wisp,
carrier of sanctification. Meaning what?
This is the fog the Sisters offered: walls
must be led to faith, stones softened
to belief. This the confounding sincerity
of the Priest: through the Spirit
our poor bones were created. I lower mine
into the creaking music of a pew.
I could use a dove in my heart
because wanting's made it small, no room
for wings or a civil wish. Even now
I want this mosaic, to carry
and adore it to pieces, down to sketch,
down to the artist's hands mapping the tiles,
sweating until he hears the voice of God
and why not. I hear the voice of God
all the time, god of an agnostic, a whisper
that says you must love better, must love
more. I devise the moment's theology:
Spirit's the comfort of vanishing
into the palm of a cathedral
where I'm mixed, part and parcel,
woven back into the father and son,
the word of myself. In an hour
I'll come apart in a hotel room,
bad habits and ice, one window and finally
me in a chair staring at the red lights
of an antenna, writing the list
of whose fault this is. Against that time
I memorize the sweep of wings, let

white feathers stain my eyes.
Saints in designer robes look down,
thin as Byzantium. If I pray
it's to taunt, to beg them to speak.

Bob Hicok
343

³⁴³ [Bob Hicok](#), "[The Art of Sanctification](#)," [Poetry Northwest](#), collected in [Plus Shipping](#), [BOA Editions, Ltd.](#)

Catskills

I see a shooting star
and don't
make a wish.

Is this fucking Buddhism,
I ask Dan
who is passed out

in the grass to my right.
He has an app
that shows a giraffe

in the sky.
A gladiator. Mars.
Yesterday,

I stalked
rabbit tracks
in the snow

until I felt the animal
didn't want
to be found.

I don't want
anything
except Zolof

but stop short
of ingesting.
I am so controlled

this year.
I fuck no one.
I don't drink

myself
into any emergency.
I pass on acid.

I do a little blow.
Tonight,
I bow to a choir

of trees, a majestic
grove of evergreens
who feed

nightly
on stars.
I like you, I say

to a Douglass fir,
which is a joke
because I like

no one
and can't remember
that feeling,

the one like
awaiting
your lover's figure

in a polaroid
to emerge.
I am an '80s myth.

I go
to basketball games
on Christmas,

eat Chinese
and worry
over all the Catherines

I know.
I thought
the rabbit print

was a bear's at first
because
I'm a city kid

and an idiot.
There was panic
and then

disappointment
that
it belonged

to a body so slight
when
I just want

to be dwarfed
by everything
these days.

³⁴⁴ [Megan Fernandes](#), "[Catskills](#)," [TriQuarterly](#), collected in [I Do Everything I'm Told](#), [Tin House Books](#)

from “Elizabeth Blackwell (1821–1910)”

2. Elizabeth Blackwell Loses Her Depth Perception

Sex wrecked my eye.
Don’t pity me. Pity the infant,
sick with gonorrhea, being treated by
a student, and a woman student at that.

She had no chance. The world went flat.
My world did. Her world was not—
not just not flat—*not*. I stole
her world and only lost a little.

Wait. No. I was not the thief.
Gonorrhea took that baby’s life.
I think about her every day.

Depth perception—a funny term.
As a deliberate spinster, a sort of
sometimes mother, a doctor, a teacher,
do I need it? The kind I lost?

I’ve had enough.

Jessy Randall
345

³⁴⁵ [Jessy Randall](#), “[Elizabeth Blackwell \(1821–1910\) \[2. Elizabeth Blackwell Loses Her Depth Perception\]](#),” *Zuzu’s Petals*,
collected in [Mathematics for Ladies](#), Goldsmiths Press

Balcony

No one cared until the underside of the balcony collapsed. The concrete, stucco, and steel lath fell on the patio set and crushed it. That was the last day the dogs went outside. There were too many sharp edges in the debris. They used fabric spray and paper towels to clean up after them and had new carpet installed every few years. The homeowners' association made threats but the man who was not my father ignored them. He said they would be dead before the rest of the balcony fell down so he wasn't going to spend good money on upkeep. In the afternoon, he would take out his teeth, drink scotch, and watch sports while my mother played solitaire on the computer in the other room. In the evening, she would defrost something and they would eat together in silence. They didn't seem unhappy but I kept finding my mother's pills under the kitchen table. She said some days she didn't need them. I convinced her to move to assisted living. The man who was not my father couldn't take care of himself but refused to leave. I had no leverage. I wasn't related to him. I offered to get him an emergency button that would call an ambulance in case he fell. He said if he fell, he would crawl to the gun case and shoot out the sliding glass doors and someone from the homeowners' association would call the police. *They were nosy*, he said. He had lung cancer, which he would not treat and hadn't told anyone about. He wasn't going to shoot out the sliding glass doors, he was going to die quietly at home, alone. But he didn't die and the pain got too great so he asked me to help him move to hospice. I think he had been in some kind of pain his whole life. I don't think he knew that pain management was an option. He suggested that I give up my apartment and move into the condo since it was empty. He was really high when he suggested it. I moved in anyway. The collapse of the balcony had left holes in the wall and shady, covered spaces in the remaining parts of what used to be a nice place to sit. Of course the bees moved in. They got into the wall and the space between the first and second floor. I had stripped out the carpet in the upstairs bedrooms. The subflooring was hot in the places they had built their hive. What was left of the balcony leaked honey. I had them removed but they came back like the drunk girl who broke into my apartment on 9th because she used to live there. She was just trying to get back home and what do you do with that?

Richard Siken

346

³⁴⁶ [Richard Siken](#), "[Balcony](#)," [Wildness](#)

Ode to Laundromats

A minor theme of my twenties was collecting quarters
for the apartment complex laundromat
across the street from my duplex, which was not quite a hovel,
but I could see through the floorboards
of my bedroom to the earth beneath, though I covered
the hole with a rug, but a determined possum
or raccoon could have breached that beachhead
in seconds flat. I had two sets of sheets,
so I had to do laundry every two weeks, though it seemed
as if every two minutes, and it was such
a colossal bore, even though there was a pool where I could
loungue and read my current huge novel. O Clarissa,
how could you even think that Lovelace was a possibility,
but then I myself had been tricked by a yoga teacher,
and my girlfriend was pining for two musicians (a drummer
and a lead singer) while living with a typesetter.
O Dorothea—Casaubon? Mrs. Bennet—Mr. Collins? Really?
Ahab, go home! It will end badly for everyone
except Ishmael. The washer took quarters, but the driers
gobbled dimes, so I'd lug my sheets and towels
across the street and hang them on the line and sleep
that night in the bliss of fresh linen, my dreams
unpacking the flotsam of the day—slotting the coins
into the metal grooves, hearing them ka-ching
into the infernal cavern of Polyphemus, and I, Odysseus,
would plot how to escape into the light of morning,
which always came, although Einstein had declared Time
an illusion, if a stubborn one, but let's jump
ahead forty years, and after dinner with Mark and Karen
on our first night in Florence, we pass a laundromat
that could double as an entrance to hell, and Mark says,
"If you wanted to kill yourself, that would be
a perfect place to get into the mood," the fluorescent lights,
bomb-crater cement floor, obelisk eyes in the row
of front-loading machines that have taken more than one
poor Orpheus into the depths of the Underworld
in search of his Eurydice or just a clean shirt to wear
on the quest for his Francesca or great white whale.

Barbara Hamby
347

³⁴⁷ Barbara Hamby, "Ode to Laundromats," *Holoholo*, University of Pittsburgh Press

Who by Fire

And who shall I say is calling?
—Leonard Cohen

Leonard, can I call on you again
in the night? The stars say I am to burn.
My friends say I'm not a true Sagittarius,
after all. I mix it up. Sometimes I prefer smoke
to flame, hoof to sole, arrow to reason. My mind opens
its hostile constellations & the sky of my skull
flickers wetly to black. Leonard, could you stand
how the light begged you to laugh in the dark? Did you
ever try to love a woman while standing up? I saw you
only once in flesh. On your knees, singing, the microphone
of your heart between your long hands. The shadow of
a blade-black hat holding you apart, above the lover
you tasted behind closed eyes. Whenever I listen to you
I can't help but hurt in grace. I want to say
Hallelujah again & again. I want to believe
my voice is a famous road or tower. Tell me:
where are the miracles now, Leonard? Do I believe
my dead mother's voice is a young cry
in the ground like a root? Is the end of grief
a tongue rolling over its own noise
to drink from a clear spring? What, darling,
about longing? How do I answer
these uninvited guests? Speech, love,
suffering, time & hunger. I wanted nothing
for years after her death. But now?
Well, I am some breed of music
singeing the wires. A flame returning
the anguish of a stranger who, by need,
holds my attention in the mirror.
Leonard, isn't language a lonely slip?
Or is it a drug so distinct it tames
our tongues with faith, so that God's
voice won't fall apart in a mutter? Black
diamond in the gutter, gorgeous flash of
clarity lost in the veins. Leonard, tell me
if I should ever answer the hush of my unlit
matchsticks in this endless wintering.
Or, if from need, I must strike & strike.

Rachel Eliza Griffiths
348

³⁴⁸ [Rachel Eliza Griffiths](#), "[Who by Fire](#)," collected in [Seeing the Body](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

from "The World Doesn't End"

My father loved the strange books of André Breton. He'd raise the wine glass and toast those far-off evenings "when butterflies formed a single uncut ribbon." Or we'd go out for a piss in the back alley and he'd say: "Here are some binoculars for blindfolded eyes." We lived in a midtown tenement that smelled of old people and their pets.

"Hovering on the edge of the abyss, permeated with the perfume of the forbidden," we'd take turns cutting the smoked sausage on the table. "I love America," he'd tell us. We were going to make a million dollars manufacturing objects we had seen in dreams that night.

~

Lots of people around here have been taken for rides in UFOs. You wouldn't think that possible with all the pretty white churches in sight so well-attended on Sundays.

"The round square doesn't exist," says the teacher to the dull-witted boy. His mother was abducted only last night. All expectations to the contrary, she sits in the corner grinning to herself. The sky is vast and blue.

"They're so small, they can sleep inside their own ears," says one eighty-year-old twin to the other.

~

An arctic voyager with a room to cross. A large white room spectrally bright and speckless in the morning sunlight.

Far-off kitchen noises... If only he could impersonate the look of a stranger arriving on foot in a remote, snowbound region, its sky dazzlingly empty and blue.

It was quiet in the room. He could feel the pins and needles in his new black suit as he waited for the arctic seamstress, the zero on the tip of her tongue.

Charles Simic
349

³⁴⁹ Charles Simic, "[The World Doesn't End \[My father loved the strange books..., Lots of people around here have been taken..., An arctic voyager with a room to cross...,](#)" collected in [The World Doesn't End, Ecco](#)

Foreshortening

The man I'd hired cut the mower's engine, shouting
uphill to me he had to go pick up his son. *Lost his license.*

*DUI. He's a Afghan vet with that post-partum stress
depression. Seen things you and I can't even phantom.* I thought I could,

so waved him off as understanding people do and turned away.
Skype and middle age had made me wary of being

looked at from below. Zelda Fitzgerald drew everything
from that perspective, as if seated always in the orchestra,

or a child at the foot of a drawer at the morgue.
When the neurologist illuminated my father's brain

scan at the VA, I had to readjust my own perspective
to understand that we were viewing from below.

Through jawbone, nostrils, eye sockets, a series
of curtains parted to reveal, finally, his frontal lobes,

twin prosceniums so dark, nothing could be seen.

Kathy Fagan
350

³⁵⁰ [Kathy Fagan](#), "[Foreshortening](#)," [Numéro Cinq](#), collected in [Bad Hobby](#), [Milkweed Editions](#)

Last Night

I am ten with my father
in a St. Louis hotel.
It is late, the TV a black
and white campfire.
The marriage has been
pronounced dead. He says
to the phone a bottle
of scotch and a set up. Where
are my mother and sisters.
There is just the one lamp
on the table and a Camel
fumes in its ashes.
Daddy's a few months
from that photo
of the wake and more
flowers than I'd ever seen.
He lifts the tumbler,
ice clinks immensely.
The last one he says
to me, this is the last one
I promise you, the sweat
on his forehead and
tonight is the last time
I will see him which
in a strange way I think
explains my sense of humor
which friends have described as
"quirky" and "unpredictable."

George Bilgere
351

³⁵¹ George Bilgere, "[Last Night](#)," collected in [Central Air](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

You Were About

to speak, like the *village perché*
of Gorbio in Provence, its houses
perched on the cliff. You were
about face, about
time, streets cobbled
with diamonds like the bodies
of birds in Lalique's
ornament de corsage, Oiseaux
chanteurs, their gold beaks opening
forever like Beatrice
in the *Paradiso*, just opening
her mouth to speak
some truth. Dante compares her
to a bird at the end of
night, waiting for the sun
to rise so that she can
go out and gather food
for her young. Each June
a procession marks
the Penitents' ritual up
through the winding lanes of
Gorbio lit only
by the light of oil lamps
made from the shells
of snails—was each soft self
better with garlic and butter?
Neither snail nor sheep, Mary too
had a little *I am*, its edge
woven so that it would not
ravel, clean selvedge of
a self like the pink hide
of the hog pressing through
the holes in the side
of the truck that transports it.
Within each shell, a light flickers
like the occasional headlight
in the eye of a passing
hog. According to Dante, everything—
Inferno, Purgatorio,
Paradiso—everything ends
with stars: like old sins
or selves, their fleece is all of white
we know, and they lead, then
follow, everywhere we go.

Angie Estes

352

³⁵² Angie Estes, "You Were About," collected in *Tryst*, Oberlin College Press

from “Act Two. This Tide of Blood”

1. Adina

First the sudden / deaf as in a dream / people & their mouths
open & moving not sounding out. / Plaster & glass dress.

Frame of the face frozen in & you running. In place.
This was my store, my plate / glass, my café, turned in

-side out. What is tumble & shard? You see your mouth
before you hear it, wax of the explosion now unplugged

& bleeding ear. Smoke the mouth / the door. Everything now
shaken, the salt of plaster & silver no time

to make of this anything but the rubble of the human.
& where are you, the one I love, who serves everyone—

That is not your leg. Bloodslick & shatter. Is there nothing,
no clock to wake us from this dream? I’m standing

in someone else’s brain.
My love, I have no mouth.

Philip Metres
353

³⁵³ Philip Metres, “Act Two. This Tide of Blood [1. Adina],” collected in [Shrapnel Maps](#), Copper Canyon Press

The Videos

Someone gave me a video of your entire life.
There's a twist at the end
when you discover that you and your mother
are actually the same person
and I drop out of the picture in about two months' time,
only to return as a busboy
who steals your handbag and uses your passport
to smuggle loads of rabid dogs into the city.
I'm one of those strange comic characters with a dead tooth.
You get married to an organisation junkie
who sells your hair to buy a stash of pocket calculators
and your daughter falls in love with me
and I break her heart over a plate of tagliatelle,
then you get addicted to cough mixture
and sleep in a sodden nightie with the windows open
before buying a lovely house in the country.

Caroline Bird
354

³⁵⁴ [Caroline Bird](#), "[The Videos](#)," collected in [Watering Can](#), [Carcenet Press](#)

Gift

Dora's coming, Larry, let's get some pants on,
the home-nurse says to lure my father
into civilized behavior. Forty years since
he saw the girl he was baptized Mormon for,
since he sat beside her in his first serious car,
parked at high tide on Daytona Beach,
desire taking them past the white lifejackets,
shedding clothes, naked into the tide,
bodies flashing like Polaroids in the dark
Atlantic. When my father tries to remember,
he raises his good hand as if he might draw her
out of the Lethe, but memory has sewn shut,
made a mannequin of the girl he lost
his virginity to. A month ago, I found
his leftover Cialis, one blue pill rattling
in its plastic orange ossuary, and under his bed,
a Mason jar of moonshine, all formaldehyde
and no brain. I swallowed the pill
with the booze, to feel what he wanted
to save. For Dora, he allowed his hair washed,
combed, his face freshly shaven—no struggle,
no punches if the nurse caught a tangle.
My resuscitated father, sitting up straight
in his wheelchair, practicing his posture.
Stroke-stricken, heart-attacked, hip-replaced,
my toothless father, trying not to soil
his diaper, delivered back from the erasing foam.

James Allen Hall

355

³⁵⁵ [James Allen Hall](#), "[Gift](#)," collected in [Romantic Comedy](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Olivier Bergmann

Olivier Bergmann. Hotel owner, war veteran, reader of Kafka—

I remember the twinkle fierce in your eyes beneath your bristling brows
in the dining room of Hotel Le Clos in 1967. Twinkle
is a word that can't be used seriously in poetry but
what is the good alternative? Gleam won't do.
What is the French word, it seems to *pétillement*—
that may be fine in French but here I don't feel how to use it—
payteemonh... Olivier:

your fierce eyes—your glance was tough on adolescent reverie;
not many people now can remember *le pétillement de vos yeux*
but I can, Olivier Bergmann.

As a seventeen-year-old waiter and porter in your hotel
I was such a bumbly American boy giraffe
and you were so impatient with me but you strove honorably
to contain your impatience so I wouldn't be terrified
and your twinkle, though fierce, somehow saved me from cowering.
Tell us, Mark, what kind of twinkle was it exactly?
It was a twinkle that said:

“It is true we have strange infinity within us;
my own is darkly strange; but we have to live
in the physical world of shops, onions, coal, beef,
we cannot disdain the actual for then the actual would
triumph over us, we must refuse to be humiliated by the actual,
hence we will prepare and serve *le petit déjeuner* to our guests
with maximum efficiency and it will arrive at the rooms *hot*.
This we will do with a graceful kind of brusqueness
because death is in the world, our only world. *Jeune homme*,
we will do this work never forgetting
the absurdity known to Kafka
nor the evil done by sick envious preening cowardly politicians
nor the beauty of not surrendering. Now
go on, go!”

And I grabbed the breakfast trays
which I had prepared too slowly and lurched off
along the narrow corridors to do my job hoping I might
slightly briefly please Olivier Bergmann.

Impatiently blinking beneath those bristling brows
now in my mind Olivier you seem to say
“No true twinkle gets caught in such easy words, Mark”
or maybe you're saying
“*Donc, voilà, c'est un poème, et bien, what next?*”

Mark Halliday

³⁵⁶ [Mark Halliday](#), "[Olivier Bergmann](#)," collected in [Jab](#), [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Love Song as Iphigenia in a Teen Movie Asked to Prom as Part of a Prank

Mornings I wake to see what body the night has made,
praying the measuring tape to click out happiness's
thrice-spun locker code. Dear Diary. I scrawl my lamentations

in an alphabet of swirls, burn them at the altar
of straight hair, of the moon loving this blood away.
I was born and then I waited. Bounced around like an asterisk

in other peoples' stories. The pre-prom days an endless siege,
eyeing the beach for some boy to break through.
That bitch Helen, the school turned dogs for her

but still copying my math. My father hectors
the football field, whistle swinging round his neck
like a pendulum, counting down to something

he thinks I can't understand. What I should have known
I did not suspect. The invitation into my life. Into his, this boy,
gleaming from some god-river inside him. That he knew my name

meant happiness could learn it, too. My mother
brushing my hair, burnished like armor. Last-minute, the dress,
the clinging revelation. I leave my glasses off, scent my wrists

and neck. The pinned corsage of ecstatic amaranth
tasseling my breast like my heart's own blooming.
The crowd surrounds. They round their mouths in shock.

Erin Adair-Hodges
357

³⁵⁷ [Erin Adair-Hodges](#), "[Love Song as Iphigenia in a Teen Movie Asked to Prom as Part of a Prank](#)," [Gulf Coast](#), collected in [Every Form of Ruin](#), [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)

from “Inventory of Doubts”

Boa

Like a benevolent queen, the armoire loves all her inhabitants. So when a shoplifted pair of grey trousers starts to boast and question the street cred of other clothing bought with money earned by labor, counted by accountants, and remunerated by management, the armoire reminds everyone there’s no telling what cruel whim of fashions about to rule the world. *I know a pink feather boa that could tell you some weep-sad stories. Put it this way: one minute you’re drinking Manhattans and talking to Warhol, the next you’re hoping to be anywhere but a thrift store on October 31st about to be laughed at and stained with fake blood.*

Feet

Feet love no one, not even themselves. They demand the most expensive shoes and then object when asked to go to the post office. They beg to be seen at the disco, then don’t want to dance. They’d prefer to flirt and play footsie and get drunk. The feet don’t love you. If you ask their philosophy, they say something stupid about Mecca or Calvary. Feet obviously didn’t pay attention in history class—they tapped out a Morse Code of impatience all their years in school. Just wait till they’re old. They’ll start spouting ideas from fifty years ago. Suddenly toe cleavage is slutty. But look at their photo albums full of low-cut shoe vamps. Beware the advancing political conservatism of feet. When the generals come, you might want something other than fuzzy slippers to run in.

Boulder

Unable to fit in anyone’s pocket, a jealous boulder considers cures for loneliness while it pauses on a cliff.

The phrase *churchless infinity* will try to mean something to me during my hike today. I will ignore it, distracted by a pebble in my shoe. Nor will I hear what’s next. But, in my own defense, it is very difficult to hear silence.

Landon Godfrey
358

³⁵⁸ Landon Godfrey, “[Inventory of Doubts \[Boa, Feet, and Boulder\]](#),” collected in [Inventory of Doubts](#), Tupelo Press

Failed Essay on Privilege

I came from something popularly known as “nothing”
and in the coming I got a lot.

My parents didn’t speak money, didn’t speak college.
Still—I went to Yale.

For a while I tried to condemn.
I wrote, Let me introduce you to evil.

Still, I was a guest there, I made myself at home.

And I know a fine shoe when I see one.
And I know to be sincerely sorry for those people’s problems.

I know to want nothing more
than it would be so nice to have

and I confess I’ll never hate what I’ve been given
as much as I wish I could.

Still I thought I of all people understood Aristotle: what is and isn’t *the good life*...
because, I wrote, privilege is an aggressive form of amnesia...

I left a house with no heat. I left the habit of hunger. I left a room
I shared with seven brothers and sisters I also left.

Even the good is regrettable, or at least sometimes
should be regretted

yet to hate myself is not to absolve her.

I paid so much
for wisdom, and look at all of this, look at all I have—

Elisa Gonzalez
359

³⁵⁹ [Elisa Gonzalez](#), “[Failed Essay on Privilege](#),” [The New Yorker](#), collected in [Grand Tour](#), [Farrar, Straus, and Giroux](#)

from “Calaveras”

6.

I shall wear my Chuck Taylors
beige guts aglow,

crease my khakis
to a sharp shank.

I will swing first
or shoot my mouth

at any tremble
of trouble.

A bandana grows
from the soiled edges

of my right pocket. Look how
it grows. Look.

When the moon slicks the night
motherly, me and my boys nibble

our beer bottles. And know
the slant of pride, the hubris

of a first tattoo: walking shirt off, chest out,
the edges raised on a fresh brocade of name.

And my family didn’t recognize pride:
being a father before seventeen,

running in a black gang, and
losing my tongue—burying it in the dirt of our yard.

When brought home in the back of cruisers,
lights let the neighbors in—on what was up.

David Tomas Martinez
360

³⁶⁰ [David Tomas Martinez](#), “[Calaveras \(6\)](#),” collected in [Hustle](#), [Sarabande Books](#)

Oklahoma City

The accused chose to plead innocent
because he was guilty. We allowed such a thing;
it was one of our greatneses, nutty, protective.
On the car radio a survivor's ordeal, her leg
amputated without anesthesia while trapped

under a steel girder. Simply, no big words—
that's how people tell their horror stories.
I was elsewhere, on my way to a party.
On arrival, everyone was sure to be carrying
a piece of the awful world with him.

Not one of us wouldn't be smiling.
There'd be drinks, irony, hidden animosities.
Something large would be missing.
But most of us would understand
something large always would be missing.

Oklahoma City was America reduced
to McVeigh's half-thought-out thoughts.
Did he know anything about suffering?
It's the innocent among us who are guilty
of wondering if we're moral agents or madmen

or merely, as one scientist said,
a fortuitous collocation of atoms.
Some mysteries can be solved by ampersands.
Ands not *ors*; that was my latest answer.
At the party two women were talking

about how strange it is that they still like men.
They were young and unavailable, and their lovely faces
evoked a world not wholly incongruent
with the world I know. I had no illusions, not even hopes,
that their beauty had anything to do with goodness.

Stephen Dunn

361

³⁶¹ [Stephen Dunn](#), "[Oklahoma City](#)," [American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Different Hours](#), [W. W. Norton & Company](#)

Foaming Doberman

Ever see the episode of *Batfink*
when Mr. Evil invents brain wash?

Ever see the episode of Increasing Stasis
when the axolotl cries and you wipe away

your tears? There are three easy emergencies.
One: maple tree and sugarfreak. Two: little

girl swallows typewriter. Three: music box
meteorite shindigs its way toward deaf planet.

Send the wood chipper ambulance. Send the
Charles Bernstein ambulance, call an ambulance.

Sommer Browning
362

³⁶² Sommer Browning, "[Foaming Doberman](#)," collected in [Either Way I'm Celebrating](#), Birds, LLC

Somebody Else Sold the World (When I was a kid...)

When I was a kid,
I watched *Poltergeist*
on a Tuesday & it scared

me so much I was afraid
of the weekday itself.
& still each Tuesday,

the long-fingered trees
outside of my head
are missing some bark.

Antagonists all over,
mostly maskless
as underprepared burglars.

They cough without
covering their tracks.
They leave their shoddy

fingerprints everywhere.
On their self-congratulatory
neighborhood walks,

they acquit their own
nondescript hearts until
they burst & resurrect

inside the TV's particled
white. All voice & hardly
any body. It will be weeks

before anybody cares enough
to change their channel.
In my imagination's spring

forward, the last antagonist
in his foldout throne feels
just like a Black man

for a minute: everyone
crosses the street as soon
as he gets near. His pockets

are turned out to their white
parts. & still, everyone
acts like he sold the world.

Adrian Matejka

³⁶³ [Adrian Matejka](#), "[Somebody Else Sold the World \[When I was a kid...\]](#)," [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Somebody Else Sold the World](#), [Penguin](#)

Piss Starshine

What leaves the bodies of boys with skin
the same as the skin of the ocean

they piss in—sour streams making them
howl so loud I forget how to

know—turns to stardust, loose constellation
hovering back, over my swimming father...

how those stars, piss atoms, rain over him,
as the boys laugh & laugh, wanting

the sparkles to shower more unsuspecting
white heads. But the bright

falling shivers move over the night waters
where no body swims, where only the boys can

see what leaves, never to come back the same.

Maya Pindyck
364

³⁶⁴ [Maya Pindyck](#), "[Piss Starshine](#)," collected in [Emoticoncert](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Doomstead Days

today's gender is rain
it touches everything
with its little silver
epistemology
mottled like a brook trout
with a hundred spots
white as bark scars
on this slim trunk
thrust up from
one sidewalk square
the four square feet
of open ground
given a street tree
twiggy perimeter
continually clipped
by parking or car door
or passing trash truck
that snaps an actual
branch I find haunting
the little plot
its winged achenes
auto-rotate down to
it's not that I don't
like a wide sidewalk

or the 45 bus
that grinds right by
but if organisms
didn't insist on
forms of resistance
they'd be dead
of anthropocentric
technomechanical
systems whose grids
restrict the living
through perpetual stress
that elicits intense
physical response
like an animal
panic hitting
the psoas with cramps
or root fungus sunk in
the maple's allotment
of city property
as tolerably wide
as the migraine
that begins at the base
of my skull & pinches
with breadth calipers
my temples until
the feel of flay arrays

the dura's surface
inside the bones inside
the head the healer holds
in her hands & says
the occiput is shut
flat & irks the nerves
that thread through its
unappeasable shunt
into the spine I see
a white light I keep
thinking about the way
long drought dries out
topsoil so deep beneath
its surface the first
hard rain wreaks flood
taking the good dirt
with it the way today's
wet excess escapes
its four square feet
of exposed root
& rivers out
a flex of sediment
alluvial over
the civic cement
of the anthropocene

in currents a supple
rippled velvet dun
as Wissahickon creek
in fall's brief season
of redd & spawn
when brook trout
in chill quick shallows
once dug into gravel
to let nested eggs
mix with milt
& turn pearls
translucent as raw
unpolished quartz
each white eyed ova
flawed by a black fleck
my eyes close over
at the height of migraine
fertile error waiting
with incipient tail
ready to propel it
deeper into nausea
until the healer halts
its hatching & calms
neuralgia between
the heels of her hands
pressing the occiput

back open into
the natural curve
the bones forget
the way the banks
of the Wissahickon
have forgotten rapids
rinsing schist shaded
by hemlock that kept
the brook trout cold
each patterned aspect
of habitat lost
first to dams & mills
& industry runoff
& plots of flax
Germantown planted
for paper & cloth
made with water's power
& hauled out of
the precipitous gorge
up rough narrow roads
south to the city port
before adelgids
took the crucial dark
from under hemlocks
sun heating the rocky

creek down steep rills
to the lower Schuylkill
wide in its final miles
dammed at Fairmount
for two centuries
of coal silt & dredge
fabric dye & sewage
that gave rise to typhus
& refinery spills
that gave rise to fire
rinsed by this gender
that remembers
current's circuit
anadromous shad
& striped bass
leaving the Atlantic
heading upriver
shedding saltwater
for fresh in runs
whose numbers turned
the green river silver
if color counts as
epistemology
spring sun on the backs
of a thousand shad
is a form of knowing

local to another
century & the duller
color of ours
is the way the word
gender remembers
it once meant to fuck
beget or give birth
sibling to *generate*
& *engender* all
fertile at the root
& continuous
as falling water
molecules smoothing
the sparkling gnarl
of Wissahickon schist
until its surface
mirrors their force
the fuel element
& fundament alike
derive thriving from
being at its biggest
when it's kinetic
energy headed
toward intensity
everything's body

connected by this
totally elastic
materiality
I feel as ecstatic
wide dilation
when the shut skull
gives up resistance
to the healer's hands
& the occiput
opens its bones
my mind's eye goes
okay I'm awake now
rowdy with trout
psoas relaxed
my body's a conduit
it roars with water
passing from past
to present through
pipes & riparian
ecotones alike
all of my fluids
pollutants cycling
back into my own
watershed toxins
& heavy metals
bonded to blood

stored in liver & fat
C8 glyphosate
mercury & lead
it's awkward okay
I keep thinking about
the man who asks me
to visit his doomstead
which seems kinky
for a first date
what's the safeword
for men with genders
built for the world's end
men with weaponized
genders hoarding solar
power & canned goods
bottled water genders
tending small vegetable
gardens out back
behind the chickens
concrete genders sealed
in lead their doors
secured from inside
with thick steel bars
fringe libertarian
endtimes genders

hetero girlie
camo gun calendars
apocalyptic tits
pinned on brick walls
by lone bunks
so the men can cross out
each day once
civil society
ends with a pathetic
snivel like *please help*
doomstead men live
doomstead days already
sealed in extreme fiction
as if there were
ever a way to stay
safely self-contained
by which I mean
the anthropocene
is its own gender
biospheric in scale
its persistent flux
from fossil record
to Antarctic ice core
so uncontainable
we all exhibit it
with a local sense

of personal chosen
expression strategic
or contingent
like fertility
medicalized tracked
managed or casual
happy fucking
without a condom
risky given the odds
leveraged against us
& the blameless
microbes seeking
homes in our nooks
& tubes so I don't
visit his doomstead
a psychic structure
I feel in my head
as blocked thought
I watch play out
in the Schuylkill
where it pools wide
shallow with silt
above Fairmount dam
I stand on the bank
& know I'm not

supposed to posit
an analogy
between the river
& my body but
courtesy of this dam
the city siphons
its water into me
another human
intervention
diverting its path
each of my cells
a little prison
the river sits in
so we're related
on a molecular
level so intimate
I think I can say
it wants speed
& movement free
enough to jump
the strained relation
to human needs
it serves without relief
without the hands
that hold my bones
& tend my fascia

that remember
a different posture
without blockage
or pain a model
for undoing harm
done by capital
empowered to frack
during record drought
millions of gallons
of toxic wastewater
injected into earth
or kept in open ponds
prone & porous
in western counties
where river otters
have rebounded after
last being spotted
in the Allegheny
in 1899
otters are raucous
& chirp chitter
chuckle & grumble
when wrestling together
or sliding on ice
playful biophony

rivers have missed
for a whole century
like brook trout rooting
in loose cool gravel
or the plash of insects
fallen from hemlocks
the intact eastern
riverine biome
one serious mess
of sound enmeshed
in sound enmeshed
in biotic patterns
as heavy as traffic
when the weekend
weather is nice
& I ride the early
27 bus
to the Wissahickon
it's not that I don't like
the city it's just if
biodiversity
is a measure of health
a city is
by definition sick
with people & built
structures crowding

out other lives
though I love signs
species persist
this sidewalk moss
probably *bryum*
argentum native
to guano-covered
seabird rookeries
this fertile ginkgo
stinking up the street
with stone fruits
crushed underfoot
this nameless fern
in a downpipe drain
so modest in scale
like the simple songs
of house sparrows
everywhere though
this chubby one
is hustling a fallen
everything bagel
of seeds & crumbs
& it's not that I don't
like people either
our sociality

genitals & smells
interesting diction
surprising privacies
revealed at parties
bars & in bedrooms
our genders in acts
various & wet
as thought product
of dissolved salts
washing our brains
in rich cognition
that falters without
water which can't be
taken by the head
in the hands & held
in the hopes of healing
its body is too vast
its mind boundless
by definition
the world is awake
be careful my dears
it is the gender
that remembers
everything

Brian Teare
365

³⁶⁵ [Brian Teare](#), "[Doomstead Days](#)," [Oversound](#), collected in [Doomstead Days](#), [Nightboat Books](#)