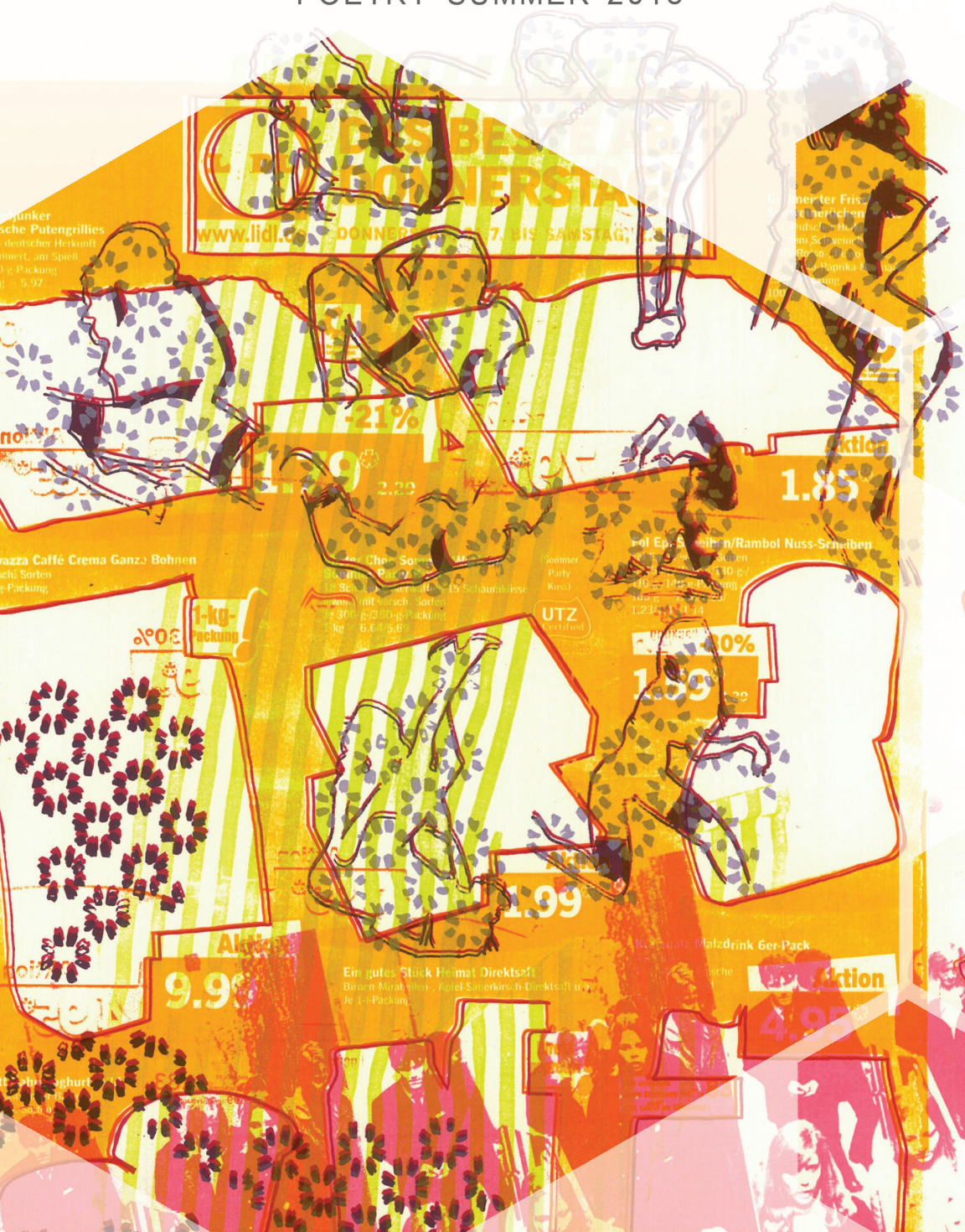


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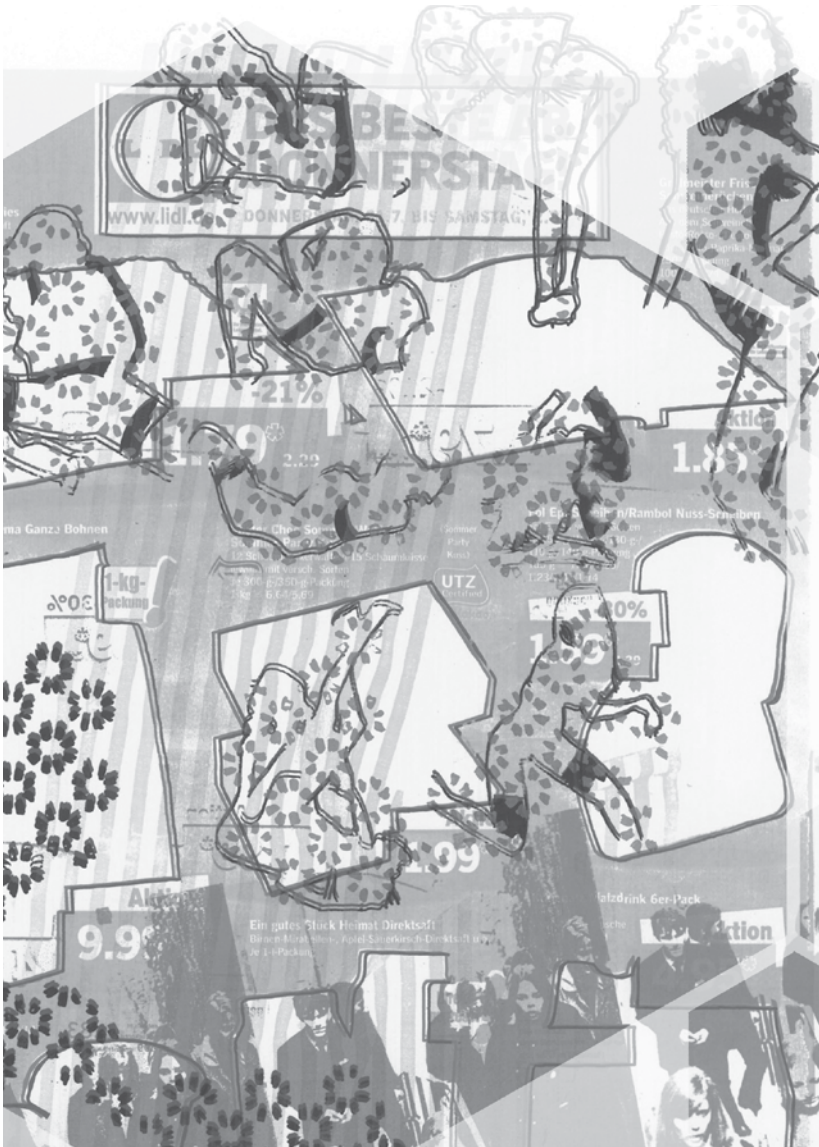
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Jennifer Leigh Stevenson

For Your Own Good

Isn't it a wonder, the way someone fills you up? Feasts on the least of you? She knocked on the hollow part of me, a master craftsman with shutters for eyes. With little more than night's breath and panty's breadth between me and her that time and she kneaded my hip to a bruise and sloppily hummed "Blue in Green" while I shivered and learned some things.

Her bright lipstick lingered everywhere, on the steam-roller bong, the end of her cigarettes. Once she left her mouth mark on my earlobe which really required some explaining.

On the bottom of the tube: *Matte Finish*, then *BRAZEN*.

So. It was me who always ate the jelly beans she stashed in her glove box and it was me who stole her quarters to call a guy.

It was him who made her want to die. At least she said it was. She had a loose relationship with telling.

Another time she painted our toe nails black and plucked my eyebrows super thin like Anaïs Nin's. Man did I want her to love me but I just couldn't balance all that fear and feasting on my fingertip. I told her how the deep divot between her nose and lip drove

me delirious, and she laughed, named
it a philtrum. Sometimes she put hickeys
on me in hidden places. Sometimes
she put her feet in my lap when I drove.

She left early one morning, I watched her go.
She put on her long dark skirt and peplum
jacket, rolled her hair into a ballet bun and
shed our yesterday like a too small snake skin.

The Oracle Squints

She hears the clack of my prayer beads
I want lips sliding across my collarbone
She understands my lack and longing
I know who governs my neck and throat

I light candles
leave offerings
ink drawings wrapped in my hair
poems written small
 things that drip with meaning
drown in feeling
 things of touch and taste
and reason

I feel wanton but buttoned
so I turn on the night music
loud and honey-slow
start a fire to bring
a little atmosphere
in here

my shadow shivers on the wall

my feet are bare
these stones are cold
everyone is hungry

Some burn incense
to please a goddess
I sacrifice words
to woo her

Harvest

A cigarette burns in an ashtray
lipstick on the filter a yelp of red
I know it must belong to an old
woman or a young one, no one
in-between bothers

sip at my scotch

she slinks up, a gorgeous graceless
thing, pale with dark bangs
and melamine eyes, gives
me a grin, those red lips dragging
a stain on her front tooth

oh she's a rock and roller

I smile, touch my own mouth
automatic, and she understands
draws her tongue back and forth
then bares her teeth at me
and I nod, serious

yes it's gone

she rejoins her cigarette, blinks
at me through the smoke and din
like some nocturnal creature
tiny and shivery and very alive
and I lean over

she smells of fall

firewood, apples and clove
I wince with sudden comfort
she will have Violent Femmes
records and she will touch
my cheeks with her thumbs

tender and kind

Ghost Towns

Last spring your neighbor's cat laid a baby rabbit
on your front steps, a tribute bloody and very
much alive.

It's suffering
I sobbed.

Your face solemn, you told me
Go inside, Hummingbird.

I loved your country boy know-how
your mercy
and when I shook off my city girl shock I kissed you so
long and hard your mouth bruised
like fruit.

But now I only have this map.

I left at dusk, bought some cheap whiskey, a six pack of beer
drove all night and made it here with stars to spare
so I parked and drank the sun awake.

Take exit 148 toward Luther

I distrust this small hush, the lavender horizon now burning pink, too
perfect

to be real. Windows down, air already
so hot it hurts. My car rumbles a sad thrum over the gravel.

Turn left onto Hogback Rd

Sweat licks down my neck.

Summer finds these back roads rutted by drought. Red dirt dust stirs lazy
in the molten August morning—everything sticks
but nothing stays.

Pottawatomie Rd turns right

A sort-of understanding dawns at golden hour:

Fallis spelled in rock on a hillock.

I chose to visit this place first for three reasons:

poets and quiet and cock

You had southern rocker locks, wore aviator sunglasses like a traffic cop.
Your sublime Okie drawl hinted
at drowsy Sunday afternoons. Of black magic,
of limbs tangled in too warm sheets. Of swamps
and sweat and Jack. Your voice
like pecan pie.

One day you looked long at my hands, at my curls breeze blown.

You said
*You look like a radioactive Pre-Raphaelite, all hands
and eyes and hair.*

Grinned around the Camel held in your teeth. Unabashed.
So of course I took you home. Tasted the sun without
burning my tongue and made you a habit.

That summer we just drove, took black and white photos
of ghost towns and gravestones. The best has you leaned against a
pleading angel,
a toothpick pointing jaunty from your smile. You caught
me candid that same day, hazy daylight roaring through my sundress
and my legs backlit. I lifted that skirt later and rode you
before the ride home,
my hair in your mouth.

Take the 1st right onto 3rd St

From the heavy trees an aggressive mailbox juts out
forward and to the left

like a boxer's jaw twisted and ruined:

A. Whittaker Red Fox 1034

An address long abandoned, hidden by overgrowth. Shadows dapple
the silvered eaves, and the wood shingles,
shaped like dragon scales, have gone
to stone.

I ease open the door, certain
all this honeyed peace is bait on a trap. Inside, a wingback chair
flower fabric rotted away
sits in a thrust of sunshine.

Maybe you caused all this damage
too. A pan on the stove
a canister of salt on the countertop.

Mrs. Whittaker washed coffee mugs one morning
lined them up on the window sill to dry
but she's gone now, some apocalypse,
maybe, some rapture come to claim the blameless
and I'm still here.

Take exit 157 for OK-33

Noon and the searing wind seethes,
slaps my cheeks red and oh lord all the booze
has caught up my head pounding
with heat and hangover and something else
something like fear.

Turn right onto Coyote Trail

On to Centralia, where a shell of a home stands
its west wall intact
a crocheted potholder faded dull dangles from a nail
the wallpaper bears pale scars where
framed pictures once hung.

Slight right to stay on E 160 Rd

I find a huge snakeskin in a church vestibule and soda cans
in the baptismal. Open a hymnal
to page seventy-three. Despite the dim I feel
see-through in this place and some angry weight makes me run
away with a thudding heart.

Take the 3rd left onto W Grand Ave

Another house.

This one suffered
bricks broken

walls scorched.

A mattress reduced to rusty springs shoved in the fireplace.
Beneath a window sits a claw-footed
tub filled with scat and shards of glass.

Turn left onto Eo740 Rd

Suits under thick layers of dust lined up neat in a closet,
a wedding album
buried in rubble. No great catastrophe.

Just time.

As I drive I'm listening loud to songs with fiddles

harmony and heartache.

Hiwassee Road declares a hand-painted sign, white on black.

I take my last right past a barn

smashed gray and silent
under a felled oak, my tank top sweated through—

but my eyes dry in the rearview.

Yes, loving me was a lonesome business. I saw your stillness as beautiful yet
I could not be still.

From the bed you said

Come here, Hummingbird

your face so bright I turned away. True,
your mouth was nectar, so I rubbed
gardenia petals into the pulse
of my throat.

Hummed a paean to you as I turned out the light.
Such solace, for a little while.

Yesterday morning

I watched your broad
back in sleep

a gentle up and down.

The curtains stirred and the open air felt like a failed spell,
heavy with cause
or maybe just Dread,
lurking with her black, rolling eyes, her demon mouth filled
with shotgun pellets and sweet tea rot.

I think she'd say
Bless your heart,
right before she gobbled it up.

Someone posted a sign, jarring in its shiny modernity:

Welcome to Pleasant Valley!

There's no real welcome, pleasant or otherwise, just a few store fronts
with broken windows and determined trees

growing twisted
though cracked foundations--

Mostly it's just desolate prairie and grassland

the post office gone
the outlaws too

and of course you

Ardor Is Arson

I'd rather be an arsonist than a lover,
I'm better in an immediate crisis, better in all black,
silhouetted against a billowing conflagration.
(The conditions are right, no wind tonight, no moon.)
A book of matches or a bottle of wine,
it makes no difference in the end,
the outcome is the same:
someone without a home
someone left with sadness
that clings like a smoldering scent,
eats all the air in here, in the between.

I burned my house down and gave you the ashes.

Marianne S. Johnson

Nine Feet East of Roadway Edge: One Shoe

The police report is staccato lines, check-the-box,
fill-in-the-blanks, measured. The mother hands it to me
over my desk with the files of minor tragedies, survivable

accidents piled between us. I knew she was coming,
so I put on a suit; she will want to see me as a lawyer,
not another mother of another nine-year old son.

I tell her that I will obtain the forty-one photos of the scene,
his small torso on the street, the ribs she tickled, his dark
hair unkempt. She doesn't have to see them, won't see

the red trails darkening the dirt shoulder, point of impact,
point of rest, in the school zone. The children knew
where to place the roadside flowers. Bright balloons

would leak like lungs, unlike a heart exploding
in a chest, a brain bursting in a skull, a breast
engorged and spurting with a baby's cry.

I fixate on his shoe: sole up, black as asphalt
with day-glo green laces, how she bought them
wondering if he would wear them out before

he outgrew them, how his feet slipped into
and then out of them as loose as he slipped
out of her and into breath of air.

Tortious

Last night I dreamt of butterflies
fluttering soft upon the small boy's face,
his temple of asphalt wounds, blood
ponds, reflected in their stained glass wings.

The sound of my pounding heart
frightened them off, they rose
and strained against the gravity
of his hematoma chest. He was not mine.

A morgue shudder, my nightmare
hand clutched the bone cold table.
Monarchs circled above us, when my own
son's face morphed onto the broken body

as the head turned to me, pulpy lips mouthing
"It didn't hurt, mother." A scream
jackknifed my lungs, choked
on the gallows weight of night.

Tort, torture, contorted
tonight, I am wakeful very late
and watch my sleeping son in his bed.
His twelve-year old body thrashes itself awake,

I cocoon into the small of his small back,
the room fogged into a chrysalis. "Mom, I'm fine,"
he mutters annoyed, but I stay a little,
listening for his eyelashes to wing off in flight.

Lessons for the Week

Tuesday night, my son studied
a Holocaust survivor, scrolling
the shrinking roll of Jewish names,
battered sepias of children before
their internments and tormentors.
Six million Jews were murdered,
and at least one million of them were children.
Yes, he is learning that.

My eighth-grader came home to news
of the Newtown 20, just nine days
left on the Christmas calendar.
Eyes stuck stoic in front of the TV
he asked if they were all first-graders
“like my buddy at school.” Yes, I said,
like your buddy at school. “I helped
him get his lunch today,” he stuttered
and I imagined the weed-stalk of him
bending low to hug his assigned bud,
look his little guy in the eye
and rustle him off into the wind.
Yes, he could do that.

Weekend deep in the terror of it,
I woke up screaming—his face
pasted onto dead children,
a young body in the morgue
thrown by a speeding car, swollen
with the violence of their embrace.
I fled the hysterical dark to his room,
his voice scraped awake with “what?”
but nothing escaped my throat.
In the morning whirl, he asked about
“that boy who skated” into the road
and I begged him never to do such things.
There was oatmeal and apple slices
in his promise. Yes, he could do that.

Wrongful Death

1. *Plaintiff*

I can't move. An oddity on display.
They stare at me, a flightless bird-
creature from some obscure island
beyond any imaginable map's edge,
I have buried a child, wretched thing
that I am. My boy-egg broken on asphalt,
a boy-petal crushed in the road,
boy-flesh of my flesh ravaged by metal
rubber and gravel. The boy-less mother—
if I exist, then fate is indeed cruel
and unusual. The unthinkable happens,
savages the earth; it vultures 'round school
grounds and street corners. I'm the proof.

They can't take their eyes off me.
Waiting for me to puddle onto
the floor at the mention
of his name. I won't move.
If I move, the monsters under the bed
will know I am there, again. The monstrous
must account, the monstrous must
answer for this dark.

2. *Attorney*

I cannot smile. Retained woman,
smartly dressed at counsel table
made up face, disaster on my lips. No better
than the Barbie doll anchor serving up
the deaths of 135 in a plane
crash, live at five. I must speak
the unspeakable. A suit who filed suit
for the death of the boy. They hate me
already. How dare I ask
the value of a nine-year old in a grave?

Calculate the number of goodnight kisses
in a boy, compound the interest on his
soccer moves, the grades and grandchildren
left unearned. Price tag a love lost.
How can I? It is all I can do. He could have
been mine. He could have been theirs.

3. *Juror*

College is out, summer animates the halls.
This room, larger than I pictured, filled
with suited players, not the small,
swarmy stage of mockingbirds and
southern winds. The black robe
in charge crows to the lawyers
from his perch, captives in paper chains.

My name called and assigned
to seat number six, next to Five,
who looks like my Gramps when he
folds his arms. His children were grown
by a stay-at-home mom; they still breathe
and pay taxes and sweat in their beds.
What does Five know about single mom?
She could be a space alien to Five.
His bowels growl and it is still only morning.
Will I hear her womb scream, from here?

4. *Attorney*

Twelve faces lined up in an egg carton,
on the edge of breaking open in my hands
over the rail between the facts and their vanilla
safe, engineered, routine. They are about
to catch a nightmare, as if it could breed
like a germ I breathe on them. Tilt back
in the rack, as far as they can. Except for
number Six, whose body shifts toward me

and the horror I parade back and forth. She
wants to grab my hand as in a movie theater
when the music tenses just as blackbirds
murder on to a screen.

5. *Juror*

Mom shoulders into a fetal curl,
penitent as a nun. Only a handful
of years older than me, looking
a hundred years past dead.
She was me when she had him,
his tiny fingernails like fish scales
from pre-natal stew. A photo of his shoe
in the road, laces loose. He put them on that day
without a clue. His ten fingers, plump
as caterpillars gnawing a dirty palm,
would die within reach of her.
Her own hands weep in her lap.

A ruffle of crow wings. A bowel grumbles.
A throat clearing. A womb screaming.

6. *Plaintiff*

My ears are bleeding.
My eyes are blood-black.
My mouth is pooled black.
My uterus is pulpy road kill on the exhibit table.
Their eyes autopsy our lives—
every detail stitched with
womb memories, cut anew as a tomb
freshly hewn. Atrial muscle, a peeled
and sliced blood orange, pinned
to an emptied breast. They stare—
my hands bleed inconsolable.

7. *Attorney*

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury,”

8. *Juror*

There are 100 trillion cells
in the human body, and one quarter
are red blood cells. I learned that
in biology class. Do her cells remember
his, laced in the membrane of red
between them? Her every breath sends
a purge of atoms that mourn him. The vein
in her neck is pounding out a dirge.

9. *Attorney*

“From the forensic, can you track the
boy’s path until he was struck by the car?”

My ears are ringing.
Mouth of desert. Number Six
cradles her flat belly and rocks.
Photos swirl his youth, his eyes eclipse
in black. He could have been—
no, he was
ours.

Anthony

was never ten. He was never a senior
with a license in his pocket, never
a rapper or a bagger at the market,
or a lover stockbroker with chardonnay
leather satchel. Dark eyes never saw
more than nine, once caught red-
handed with skateboard
on the roof of the school
by the super, after his homies
flew the coop. Call your mother, son,
to pick up you and your board, the dude
said. Still only nine at springtime,
black Vans and a natural tan, father-
less and stepfather-less again,
after mom came off a twelve hour
shift into a smackaround.
Anthony calmed his sisters, listened
to the walls heaving, his black hair
sweating like a highway in the desert.
When I grow up, he thought, *when I grow
up*. Anthony did not see May break
into that April, never saw a girl's blouse
unbutton in the backseat throes,
never saw the silver sedan blow
through the school zone as he darted out—

Kate Magill

Nest Study #1

The nest in dead branches is not an empty nest:
rimed over with questions and brimful with winter,
unperturbed by the wind that threatens to whisk it
from the place where it was made, needed, abandoned.

A room woven of leavings—red thread and tinsel—
bound up for a season and slowly dispersing.
To come home each day to such finely tuned debris:
I'm sure now, here, that I could make do as a bird.

To slip between currents and make of wind a home,
knowing every dwelling is weightless as your bones
and temporary as the blood that stirs about
your labyrinth, the headlong chambers of your heart.

Nest Study #2

We built it of bottle caps and rusted barbed wire,
of green plastic army men abandoned on the beach.

We built it of sanded down seaglass, of seedpods,
of cow skulls revealed when the snow melts, pure and bleached.

We scavenged five-cent cans from culverts,
traded cap erasers for small stones,

caught frogs and fed them the right kinds of flies,
named them after villains, after heroes.

Maybe somewhere we saved up all the chewed stems
of the leaves of grass we plucked, sucking for sweet,

the buttercups we shone on chins,
the dandelions we unleashed,

propelled by whistles, pirouettes,
as we learned how our bodies,

their hither-thither breath and limbs,
could be the origin of wind.

Whatever's Left

You need to stop reading.

The languor of someone else's structures
holds nothing, offers all the sustenance
of stone,
of floating.

You need to stop reading.
You need to change your gaze.

The words of others are not made
to hold your days,
the heat and strife and anguish
of your living living body.

Your body.

You are made
to contain and expel,
to hold and to tell
to go forth and put forth and hold forth and hold worth—

How to measure the worth
of a moment snagged from time?
How to measure the worth
of the hook, of the line?

It may all come to nothing.

How to frame the invisible,
make its elegance plain.

It will all come to nothing.

You need to change the gaze.

Double vision—not enough.
A singular vision—not enough.

Is it enough after dark
to feel the heat of the day
come up through the soles of your feet?

Enough to taste
the heart of the matter,
tongue its bloody pulp?

Enough to say you've tasted it?

Someday the heat will drain
from all the promises you've made
and whatever's left
will be printed
on someone else's page.

Happy Here

an onion
an avocado overripe
stray garlic skins
and coffee grounds

a lingering smell of bleach
so deep in your skin
you can't scrub it out

sooty footprint from the peppermill
sweaters half knit with dog hair
fly shit speckling the windowsills

the grit of a year's worth of days
a day's worth of years
greying itself into your bare feet
a promise you'd be happy here

white mug half black with stale coffee
not enough room in a single sentence
for *happy* and *here* to coexist

here the cupboard full of nothing
where the mice like to shit
and over there the sack of rice
fifty dollars worth of rice
dribbling onto the floor
mingling with dead skin and flies' wings
the little bastards chewed a hole in it
keep coming back for more

failing fluorescence overhead
broken clock blinking an impossible time
and you struggling to remember the shape of the world
before the matter of *yours* and *mine*

sour milk smell from the fridge
cream you never bother with

cream you keep for guests you never have

do you long for the days
the fugitive days
the promiseless places
empty cities
cities full of cold winds
colder faces

was it easier
it was

what is home but a ratsnest
a roach motel
a mad dog thrashing at the gate
to be let out

Karen Kraco

Weeding While Contemplating a Break Up

I

Dig deep, get beneath it
or grab at the base and yank.
Tease out the thread
that snakes underground.

II

Mass murder. More than a little guilt
as I pull industrious lives
before they can fully express themselves.
Never to flower nor go to seed
yet propelled like the rest of us
by a desire to thrive.

III

Wrong place, wrong time, I tell them.
If only you had landed in crazy Mary's yard.
She would have let you live, talked with you all night.

IV

Just under an hour to clear the vegetable bed.
I would say I should have done this sooner
but it's easier to grasp what I do not want
after it's been around a while.

V

The ones I always miss
masquerade as the desired.
Same leaves, similar flowers,
but if you look closely
something's amiss.

VI

Damn. Sometimes

I make a big mistake
and get rid of the good.
A cucumber plant tangles
in my rip and yank, or an onion
just coming into onionhood
pulls up with a clump
of grass. I tell myself
it's an accident
but right now
I really don't know.

Studio

Don't worry about death

at least that's what I thought he said
as we reach and reach toward the far wall, then hinge
into triangle pose. Glad for permission,
but still can't ignore the ache
the slow burn as I try to balance.
I'm missing two corners
of you-me-us.

Flatten it out, it's more about form than death.

As we stretch our right arms toward two o'clock
I'm not sure what he means
but I tuck in my fifty-year-old belly
sight along my upward arm
try out a position
that I fancy to be the stance
of a time-defiant warrior.

Soften your gaze. He walks over to me.

And don't worry about the depth of the pose.

Depth, not death, I realize, disappointed.

Don't worry about depth. So I bend
less deeply, flatten out, arranging myself
into a vertical plane so thin that I don't exist.
I surface many poses later
all of us in downward-facing dog.

I Don't Need To Know

Not the name of the frog that sounds
like a ratchet, nor why it's calling
in the fall. That huge floriferous fungus
on top of the stump—I don't care to know
if it's safe to eat. It's not in me to ask myself
why I visited this patch of land this summer
hoping for a glimpse of the bright blue bunting
that we always looked for in the cottonwood.
Some of the hummingbirds by the bridge
today might be the same busy birds
that kept brushing our arms that year. I don't know
how long they live, and not knowing is okay with me.

I think I might know why the warblers are drab and silent in fall,
why they hawk for bugs and frantically work the branches.
I could probably explain why the wood ducks seem so brilliant now
after a mottled August. You taught me that, and more.
This morning, a green heron stretched his neck
farther than I ever could have imagined—
but these days, nothing surprises me.

I know exactly why I hold each season close,
as if it were my last visit. I remember
your last season, that fall when we heard
the chitter of the hummingbirds
in the bright orange jewelweed
long before we saw them
hovering to feed.

Aftermath

We root for trees to stand upright
in the same way we want our parents
to live forever, our friends to stay loyal,
our passions to burn bright.
We nurture—or neglect—
that massive presence
and then it crashes.

How quickly we try to fix the tangle,
transform jagged edges
and dangling branches
tame the lightning's gash
the ragged rip of the wind
with smooth swift cuts
easy-to-handle chunks.
We gather branches in tidy bundles
place them where they won't be in our way.

Two years ago, after the tornado's sudden swath,
we wept to see the herons circle and circle
over the mass of trees that once harbored their young.
Can we really know what creatures feel?
Why were we so surprised at how fast
they settled in to feed, how the next year,
they returned to rebuild their lives?

Admire the diligence of the fungus
now awakened on the fallen trunk.
Celebrate its foresight and patience.
Its spores lie in wait
then seize the wet, wild gusts
as a chance to thrive.

Yesterday, the old pine lay across the front yard
sheltering a bat with two pups, furry little bumps
clinging to her breast. We couldn't read her sleepy gaze
but desperately needed to take charge, to heal

anxious as we waited for wildlife rescue to return our call.

All afternoon, the symphony of chainsaws and chippers
drowned out the *caw caw caw* of the homeless crow.

Matt Daly

Elk Hunting, 12 Below

What isn't like this? We make our daily enterprises more difficult than we must for the sake of giving memory fresh meat for its freezer, or to have something

to chew when the morning is colder than today. We add so much complexity to what comes easily barreling down the smooth shoulder of the black butte, darker

than the star-salted sky, in a fluid school of hooves. Animal stench dodges between dome lights illuminating the hunters at ease in warm trucks pulled just off the road.

It is not only the coldest mornings when we work our way deep down Long Hollow that we nevertheless hear every shot in the fusillade and know what is most

difficult is escaping the thoughts we make, the cold projectiles we lob at what wild life still courses through what we have left of the vast wilderness inside each of us.

Beneath Your Bark

Would I could be a pine beetle
tracing my underneath cursive
on the inside of your fascia
not that slick blue bugger
who girdled your phloem
who separated your roots
from your reaching
but this one who goes nowhere
save wiggling through your liquid thump
in cul-de-sacs and curlicues

I wish I could get under
your skin again begin again
in my black sheen
a radiant radical pellet
pinballing beneath your flakes
your scales around your heart wall
not a wall at all permeable
a tub for sap to be sludge swam
slithered in under there
inside the soft side of your skin
outside the wooden stem
of your still ringing heart

Wolf Hunter¹

We strike up conversation
across the concrete island
between us. Sleet pelts
our faces as we refuel.

I am comfortable talking
in flurries to a man
in camouflage, but worry
about fumes roiling
out of our gas tanks.

I keep thinking about
warnings, pump stickers,
about the mass of fumes
collecting around us,
his idling engine,
my cell phone,
static electricity.

He tells me he shot a male
wolf earlier in the day.
He is specific about
the weight: one hundred
seventy pounds.²

I listen in October sleet,
have a most common thought:
the world is a strange place
for all of us to go on living
together, full of contradictions:

wolf pups wag tails when
packmates return from tearing
elk calves to pieces, people
advocate replacing lead
bullets with copper to reduce
unintended mortalities.³

I want to ask the hunter:
his reason for shooting the wolf,
the kind of bullet he used,
his justification for the claim
his wolf is almost as large
as any wolf ever killed
by any North America man.⁴

I want to understand:
his method for establishing
heft of a carcass, why he keeps
the bed of his truck covered,
why he does not shut off
the engine at the filling station
as instructed.

But more than that,
I want to be happy
to live in a place with wolves
as large as men, to live
in a place where men talk
over warning signs.

More than that, I want to live
in a place where no one
wants to shoot anything
for any reason
easy to document.⁵

¹ According to the Wikipedia article “Gray Wolf,” the largest American wolf, killed on July 12, 1939, 70 Mile River, Alaska, weighed 175 pounds.

² According to the Wikipedia article, “Human,” 170 pounds is about average for a human male.

On screen, the Vitruvian man
looks uncomfortable, as do
the naked Asian man, the naked
blond woman in the sidebar.

This is the first time I have looked
at pictures of naked people
on Wikipedia.

³ Several of the citations at the end
of the article, “Gray Wolf,”
credit “Graves.”

⁴ My comparison of footnotes
in the Wikipedia articles reveals:
146 citations, “Human,”
318 citations, “Gray Wolf.”
I do not understand why wolves
require more than twice
the documentation of people.

⁵ I think most of us know
something about exaggerating
the weight of things.

American Robin

Dun flight flares around the corner.
Mate or prospective mate gives chase,
red-breasted one who later waits
on a branch after the first hits
the back door's glass, collapses
panting, dull-eyed, on the new deck.

I hold the numb bird in my hands,
wrap her loosely in a green cloth,
keep a close eye out for magpies.
Given the opportunity
they would mob the male, chase him off,
whet the edges of their black bills.

My son comes outside only once
to touch with his index finger
between wings we think are broken.

We believe telling a story
could conjure that story straight out
of the air. Her story opens
in my palm. Braille points of talons
tug at whorls. A heartbeat pulses.
She regains her ability

to stand, to perch. Return to flight.
She reappears on a low branch,
unnoticed from inside the house.
No banner unfurls for this act:
saving one life from other lives,
from the windowed door between us.

Our story is hard as glass. We slam
against it with our hollow bones.
We slam against it with our bones.

Eagle Cap Rekindling

We have not seen each other in twenty-five years and even though back then I covered my naked body with your naked body I do not expect you to remember my name. I will speak truly, there is no reason not to be honest after so much time, I did not remember your name until I read it on a signpost as I made my way back to you although I have never forgotten the feel of you wet and then you drying slow on my skin, that glacial silt mud scent of you mixed with the spare change tang of my sweat how you washed me in your coldest springs until the only odors were snow and stone. You haven't changed as much as I have or if so for the better having reintroduced yourself to wolves. Whereas I am just as tongue-tied around you as I always was. So I offer you my flesh, softer now, clothed or naked as you wish and the admission that you stunned the howl right out of me all those years ago when my tongue knew the feel of your skin better than it knew this voice it has grown so familiar with so resigned to. I have longed so long to revel in your muck and reek as one wild body savors the blood pulse thrum of every other wild body no matter how rocky or old.

Paulette Guerin

Emergence

The summer our parents split, we spent our days
at St. Mary's. June's heat had drawn the water
from the ground. As the sun incubated the air,
cicadas crawled from their burrows and screeched

into being. Males called out with ribbed bellies;
the females rubbed their wings in answer,
flitting on stone statues of saints, squirming
in the crevices of robes or folded hands.

The windows vibrated with mating calls,
sparse rugs hardly absorbing the sound.
Icons looked down from plaster walls,
their eyes distant like someone lost or in love.

Emily Dickinson Floats the Buffalo River

She regrets wearing white,
 the edge of her dress muddied.
 Down she drifts—
catching a whiff of charred food
 and a faint Skynyrd riff,

past purple flowers she deems gentians.
 The canoe paddle
 stirs the tawny fish. She calls them cod,
the water clear
 down to the riverbed's
 algaed stones.
Just beyond the shadow of a cliff,
 the rapids come.
 She cannot stop

thinking of the river's nonchalance—
 its only thought, resistance;
 its only love,
change. Evening light
 shifts the tableau—
 viridian and burnt ocher
blend to muted indigo.

 Just when she seems at home,
Dickinson pens a postcard—
 “How can I stand
 this tighter Breathing,
 this Zero
 at the bone?”

First Communion

The night before, Grandma made my pallet
on the couch with faded blue flowers.

Across the room, the iron-barrel stove loomed.
We learned not to touch it.

At midnight I woke. I'd never heard rain on a tin roof
and was sure what Revelation promised was true—

dark horses had come. In church we'd learned
about the wise and foolish virgins with their oil.

I had not confessed my sins. Everyone else slept—
or were they gone? Then the rain let up.

The dark turned dim. I chipped the polish
from my nails, ashamed they were not bare.

Milking

The women slipped her head
between the fork of a tree.
I braced a board against the bark,

a makeshift stock. Mrs. Henry kept the rope
taut around the legs while Grandma
milked the bleating nanny.

The swollen bag shrank.
The runty kid approached slowly,
still afraid of hooves.

Smoothing out her wrinkled dress,
Mrs. Henry said her grandbaby
would be visiting soon.

Then softly, “But she’s got
no fingers on one hand.
Umbilical cord, you know.”

Grandma frowned, then said, “Still, you’re lucky,”
placing her hand above her heart
just below the neck.

Morrilton, Arkansas

Train cars jump in and out
of old storefront windows.

A boy in Levi's crosses the tracks
toward the monument company's headstones.

A few already have a chiseled name.
I wait for him behind a heap of brick

and corrugated tin. On windy days,
the paper-mill stink drifts into town.

He claims the money beats baling hay,
then closes his mouth over mine.

Hank Hudepohl

Crossed Words

I wonder, looking at the red-headed bird at the feeder,
if it is a woodpecker, or cardinal, or maybe a rare, hot-headed
warbler come to dine with me on my parent's deck
as I visit with them for a long weekend. I am picking
over the seeds on my plate too, curious about how
I got here, which is to say, living a thousand miles away
and now just a rare visitor to their empty nest,
while my convalescent mom sleeps off her dizziness
in the back bedroom and my dad calls out to me
from the kitchen again to ask if I'd like anything more.
Yes, maybe to understand how migrations, digressions,
even casual addictions can lead to the brink of confusion
where simple questions like "what do you want to eat?"
and "when can you visit again?" can be as complicated to answer
as my dad's Sunday crossword, locked as I am in my own state
of surprise, my children awaiting my return like Christmas,
my office chair awaiting my shape, my car awaiting my key,
my lips in search of a seven-letter word that rhymes with why.

The Furrier

His years and days and hours are threaded
and wound round the spool into the seam
of the joined hide, pressed there, eyed, sewed up
in a scarf or coat with a fur trim at the neckline.

He says, with a gentleman's wink,
"This will look so wonderful on you, wear it."
And his customers oblige him for hats, scarves,
coats of opossum, otter or the shine of mink.

The sewing machine, branded *Never Stop*.
His one hand over the next stitching
until the bifocaled seams of perfection
are set exquisitely in their proper place.

Anachronistic. Patient. Hopeful.
The spells of time and law are against his ways.
No apprentice now, not even his son
will learn the trade he learned in Istanbul.

"Take a candy," he says, and feeling more bold,
"I will make you a scarf!" He picks off the floor
scraps of farm-raised mink and bends to his task
revived, unashamed, deliberate, and old.

Confidence

You know it
when you have it in hand.
The world. And you can become,
without it, so small
as to fit between
the letters of a single word
like if or why.

With it, you can lean casually
upon a capital I. Too much
and you grow so
infinite you believe you can balance
the Milky Way
on the back of your fingernail.
Without any at all,
you will grasp
like a child for an open hand
and fail.

Riverbank

Come, walk with me along the riverbank
with an old man & his stick, a shadow,
and a boy whistling into an empty bottle
that he found stuck in the soft mud.
The river never looks the same way twice.

The rusted barges float past full of coal.
It is late summer rising into fall. The river is life,
is earth, is the ground note of an ancient song
if you listen for it. Heraclitus once said:
You cannot step into the same river twice.

Let it move you by boat, by raft, by canoe,
by whatever means available to your luck.
Let it carry you away, purify you, inebriate you
with the intoxicating notes of frogs & crickets.
No one ever crosses the same river twice.

The river is daughter & sister, life giver
and lover of sky & bird & fish.
The river is the blood of condensation, of fog,
redeemer of lost ways, collector of light, a thief.
You can never cross the same river twice.

Henry, how long since you've crossed a river?
Artery of disarray, spare parts, rusted cans,
of sandstone, storm-tossed limbs, driftwood,
marshes and grasses, cache of wildflowers: this river
never says my name the same way twice.

Alma Eppchez

At the Back of the Road Atlas

All text in quotes was found scrawled on the last page of a Rand McNally road atlas.

Chicago to Las Vegas dates unknown.
Eavesdropping on someone else's road trip.
It was America, is America, it will be America.

"I guess we solved The Free-will Question. (No)"
Hypothetical disillusionment—the Freeway makes monks out of men.
It's good, when it's good to be wrong.

"Tiny bladder"
16oz every meal—It became an issue.
Stiff joints, playing Fight Club in the Super 8 sleep.

"What's the closest airport?"
There is a fairground, and a strip
Where planes take off to spray the patchwork quilt.

"Little fuckers over in What Cheer, Iowa."
Exit 201 begged to be taken. Population: 678.
Some towns have only known hard times. What did you expect?

"Yes, but at least we'd never have a reason to see her again."
Women get easy to resent out here. Mile 937—don't look
At the burning crash. Forget to call on your mother's Birthday.

"Oh I'd say another two or three miles."
Tiny bladder. The country hangs along
Interstate 80, a cheap charm bracelet.

"What would Jesse do?"
In Bountiful, Utah did you piss in Salt Lake?
Take off your clothes but don't want to get wet.

“I’m still a guy.”

Comfort in the 3am silence—it’s not about passing.
Nod to the U-Haul speeding in the right lane.

“What is cold and wet down the back of my shorts?”

Tiny bladder. Crazy straws and watered down whiskey.
Barely any rest stops past Des Moines.

“Tie the kids to the back of the limousine.”

What would you name them?
One night stands with funny labels.

“Gunpowder and lead (lace)”

And leather. Every station is The Best Country Music.
They love it in South Africa too—something about the slide guitar.

“Boomtime.”

Will you father miss his police scanner?
Roll down the windows so the smoke falls out.

“The Virgin River: because it runs just fast enough”

Utah, Arizona, Nevada. Into the Colorado
Where it slows. What did you gain in these mountains?

“Your family and their fucking gum”

All these fat and shiny memories. Deep fried things.
Gum sticks, but you’re growing up, moving on. You found the road.

“Next time we know how to have fun on a trip,

We just go to a restaurant then hangout
In the parking lot taking Boomtime pictures.”

Citizenship from Below

Mimi Sheller

The conquerors
keep easy
kinds of records—
that make it easy
for history to stay on the surface
just scratching at the paper trail.

I take solace in archeology.

As children
The conquerors—they
went to see the fossilized
dinosaurs foot prints on the banks
of the ancient river. It left such an impression.
And so they stomp heavy
dumbly fearing immortality.
Hoping to evade it
like the dinosaurs.

I take solace in extinction.

In their last will and testament
they request tall headstones,
afraid of their shadows
disappearing when they do.

I take solace in electric lights of citizenship shining up from below.

The New Old-Hack

(you remember fighting)

Oh god!
wouldn't it be like dying?
You showed me a minefield
and told me how
you walked across it
every morning
on your way to doing
the things you love.

(you remember defeat)

And you stopped doing
the things you love.
And you don't
check out books
from the library anymore.
You took a job at McDonald's,
and you fell off
out of the sky.

(you remember fear)

You had a lover once
a few steps ahead
with heartbeat
like steamroller
and diamond colored dreams,
just as
sure—just as
sharp.
And when he was blown
up
you grew love letters
from the dirt
under your fingernails
and you cried,
but did not visit him in jail.

(you remember a future)

You tell me
what the early 2000s
did to us.
You tell me a story
about this paranoia
that shattered your bones,
about a quiet
McCarthy era—
unobtrusive
Secret Service
tapping through
your maple bark
and revolution's sugar
flowing out
on to the ground.

My mother, the professor of childhood, gave a lecture on Snow White

My mother always sounds like she is about to weep.
Her students nod.
Mirrors mirror film.
Spinning
was a metaphor for telling.
She speaks
by jumping off the edge of thinking deeply.
Walt erased all the spinning mothers.
Who does the telling anyway?

Mother,
it's a man's world.
We held the apple in our hands and it filled with poison
It is called faulty pedagogy.
You teach about children,
so you know.
I absorb you
—with all your flaws.
You watch.
What is foreshadowing for, now that all the stories have been told?
My brother—
my father—
you
raspberry prologues into my belly.

Hold me like newborn ears,
because the world whispers soft and incessant.
Tell me a new story now.
No place for jealousy.
No motive but love.

Echoes of Tuskegee

*some notes on my experience
during the night shift at the Fresno ER*

I have a confession:

I wore blue latex gloves,
walked the linoleum hallway from triage and
in the early California morning,
under doctor's lax direction I
saved a woman's life.
She was still alive
at least
when my shift ended.

I am not proud;
I am terrified.
of what it means to owe someone
nothing after the night shift turns in.
Of what it means to research amateur
on a stranger's body
and never to say,
 "May I"
 or "Thank you."

Haunting me:

Alabama haunts me
from the thirties to the seventies.
For 40 years The Tuskegee
Institute kept black bodies
in petri dish
share crop quarters
growing cultures of medical atrocity
—growing cultures of "progress."
Brought to us by:
Racialized front lines.

History has mouthfuls that
I don't know how to talk about and
when I try to swallow—
I cut up my throat.

I should bleed out lab rats.
I should bleed out syphilitic sores grown on black
bodies after science had a cure.
I should bleed out their children; sick by birthright.
I should bleed when surviving means breathing, but
does not mean life.

My platelets—my whiteness:
scab over like mercury and
underneath these seamless scars
we have not changed—
growing sores
on black bodies
after science had a cure.

Everything is syphilis,
from night stick, to
achievement gap, prison
bars, dreams unspoken,
fish tank overpass,
dying for my sins
Garner, Brown, Martin.

There is no consent in social experimentation.
So how can I condescend to ask for consent?

I want to apologize:
Woman,
You are probably dead by now.
You were maybe 40.
They said you had overdosed on something.
You were unconscious when they found your body.
Your body
I am sorry.

I know you had a life and
a story and
loved ones who remember you.
I know that your death is not a lesson and
I must learn to be better.
I do not know your name.

I am sorry.
I know how your naked body fell

across the hospital cot
in coma humiliation.

The doctor asked me if I wanted to practice CPR and
I didn't say, "How is this practice?"

Your breasts spilling
milk over asphalt
away from my fists and
I didn't cry, but
I should have.

I know how your broken breastbone clicks
in and out as I pump your limping heart.
I know how half opened eyes roll back and
can't make contact and
what could an apology possibly mean to you now?

If I had said:

"Stay with me now."
You were never here with me.
Separate lives—separate lessons.
You had learned how to be victimized and
I was learning how to rape.

Woman,
Yes, your heart began to beat again
as I beat your chest.
I do not know how long
you survived after that—
brain dead and pale blue-black
on the cot.

I know there is nothing right
about living or dying
surrounded by white coat
strangers singing "Staying Alive"
by the Bee Gees
in bar room cacophony,
so a scared little white girl
can learn how
to keep the beat
on your still
breaking
heart.

The Tuskegee experiments
—echoes themselves—
echo through the nation a quiet and affecting call—
ignore—violate—ignore—
violate—ignore—violate—
ignore . . .

Jim Burrows

At the Megachurch

Like any prophet, he denies his god
and is his god. These thousands worship him
because they know the soul may be eternal,
but immortality lies in the body,
and even faith cannot escape the flesh.

Tonight the church is full.
The inedible manna of miracles
begins to fall, invisibly. Their throats
are sapped by laughter jolting through their tears.

Limp bodies litter the carpeted stage,
anointed, cauterized, slain by his touch
and the dark water of his voice.

A crutch is tossed aside.
Its owner sprints away.
A blind man shields his eyes
as they fill up with light. A child,
crying, his asthma wheezing through his fear,
comes forward as his mother holds his hand.

Head back, eyes closed, he waits for God
to seal a kiss around his open, trembling mouth,
and blow the ashes from his lungs.

Fishing

To feel without seeing
the force that pulls against us,
thrashing out its strength
beyond our measure, guess its weight and beauty,
and then to know, be certain: this is fishing.

Tradition took me to a secret pond,
taught me to bait a hook and cast a line,
to wait, relaxed, but ready for the strike,
ready to set the hook beyond the barb
deep in the creature's mouth, and not let go.

I felt the nibble first, a spasming
Did you imagine that?
then the plunge of the line and the whine of the reel,
the strain of a living thing bowing the rod
beneath the mystery of calm, dark water;

then above, writhing on my line,
suspended from somewhere in its gut,
the swallowed hook catching and shredding there,
much heavier in thin air, swimming still,
fighting the thing inside it
past all victory and wonder.

I dropped it, rod and all, into the boat.

What kind of fisherman was I
to fear the blood-gilled bass dying in bloody flops,
its belly bulging for the knife,
working its mouth and lying still at last?

Hospital at Night

Something about the background quiet here.
The hum and clank of dinner on the roll,
a next-door neighbor rinsing out the fear
in something shallow, some event or bowl.

Beside each bed, a white contraption hums,
and suddenly a disembodied cough
erupts, but every separate sound becomes
a part of it: this hush you can't turn off.

The doors are all ajar, as if to keep
a child from being frightened of his sleep.
The doctors come and go as darkness falls,

and weary nurses, not one beautiful,
move in a chapel calm down long white halls,
turning off and on smiles like light snowfall.

Wolf Hunting

Like some old fossil on the Isle of Wight,
some baron with a number in his name,
my grandfather kept a stable of hounds.
Like him, the dogs were poor Americans
descended from a place they'd never been,
a little taller than their counterparts
in Wales and England, built for taller game
and more wide open range, but with the same
look about them, sad but clean, saddlebacks
of black and lemon, spots of black and tan,
comical floppy ears and short rough coats:
not beautiful in any special way.

And on a weekend night, or any night,
since they were both retired old men by then,
he and his longtime sidekick used to wait
for nightfall, then sink slowly back in time.
They didn't go on horseback, and a kill
was rare as murder. They'd just drive around
and talk and listen, breathing in the stars.
Maybe a little whiskey in a sack,
or maybe not—I never saw the stuff
in action, just the bottles in the fridge
on the back porch, there with the silty brew
that tasted like a cellar, and the wine
as sickly-sweet as Kool-Aid.

But those dogs,
you could hear them far off, their voices wild
but somehow mournful, like the highway sound
that drifted through the window late at night,
a faraway life. My grandfather claimed to know
what they were after by the sound they made—
a rabbit had a certain sound, a coon—
as if the soul of the quarry had entered them
and all they did was give it back again.
What they were after were the little wolves
called coyotes, mostly scavengers, that stayed

and flourished when the bison disappeared
and deer were hunted down. The greater wolves
were all long gone by then, they'd blown away
with the dustbowl, or about that same time,
after a hundred years of poverty
and degradation. But to a young boy
they were still there—everything was still there,
it was just hidden. And none of those good dogs,
or even three or four, would have a chance
in hell against it. Something engineered
and driven in the blood might chase it down
and corner it, but then they'd have to fight,
and out of nowhere others would appear,
the rest of it. It would be like a bunch
of prep school boys against a prison gang.
They'd all go down like lambs.

Which never happened,
of course. It couldn't happen. Now and then
a bitch went missing or a wound appeared,
but there'd be no deep mystery in that.
The countryside itself could slash and tear.
Each year the busy highway took its share.
And then—a fact you wouldn't so much see
as hear, when you remembered afterward—
their bodies had this tendency to turn
on one another, out there in the dark
they had no business in but still longed for,
with nothing left to guide them but the moon.

Sighting

The deer, a buck and doe,
appeared and stood
on the stage of the road,

and my father slowed
the Oldsmobile, then stopped it
completely, to wait them out.

Noble, aloof, undeniably
beautiful, like swans with hooves,
they craned their necks

and turned their gazes on us,
patiently, without apparent
curiosity. What did they see?

Two fully grown men
with boys in their eyes,
a father and son,

an old couple of sorts?
Or was it only distance,
something else, a thing to be

appraised and moved away from
carefully, without words
or thought, at a gingerly trot?

Look, the moment said,
receding all around us
like the future after love.

And then they leapt inside it,
fleeing, tender white bellies
over tightly-strung thorns.

Rachel Stolzman Gullo

Lioness

When my man stood in the morning kitchen
His shadow cast an exact likeness.
Brown flecked yellow linoleum, his soot profile
Not a husband, round forehead, swollen lips, wandering eye.

In 1950, they call him Negro, they call me Jewess.
If he knew what I was carrying, would he have
sat at my table nine months?
A Jewess and a Negress both carry nine months.
Would anyone believe that in 1950?
Yes, a woman with child knows the turn of a day.

A Jew has nowhere to go on Sunday morning.
My man ducked his hard head out the door a June Sunday.
In January the shadows are short.
There were no shadows in the room when we glimpsed the crown.
I took her from them, we locked eyes
already familiar her heart smell
I could have licked her clean.

On berries, squash, ripe bananas, milk bottles with honey she grows.
There is heat on her belly when I put our skin to skin
There is a sun inside.
I know how to calm a tidal wave
I can put a hurricane down for a nap.

In 1954 my kitchen is set for a party.
All of our guests bring sunflowers
we have honey cake, four beeswax candles
All around I hear the buzzing of a hive.
I lean down to peer into her eyes,
golden, they are happily distracted.
“Mommy, look at me next to you!”
I scoop her up and our shadow is an unrecognizable animal.

At night in my clean house when I try to think,
the street noise through the window distracts me.
Out there the language hasn't changed,
but through a mere pane of glass it loses all meaning.
I step inside her room.
Her mane on the pillow thrills me
her eyelids gently lowered over a dream
lashes brush the night air.
I bend my mouth to her ear and carefully, "Lioness."
Her mouth curves into a tender smile at the sight of herself.

The Diviner

When you cried for the first time, my new love
the stars skittered off the night's face
and I braced my arms
To keep the cloth on the table.

Then I understood
how a mere wall of stone
held back the crusaders
at the shore of Rhodes.

A salmon can press
through nine hundred pounds of river
upstream, to its birthplace, lay eggs
like thousands of pin-pricks.

A man with eyes closed
guided by a forked branch
can dig two stories, underground, with a shovel
to draw water for a herd of sheep, lying down.

I can fathom these powers,
I knew you enough.
What shocked was the strength
I'd never known—in crying.

The Eighties Were Different

If your best friend was a child actress, you went on auditions with her.
And if you were sitting in a waiting room, and fourteen, you had a
chance to audition too.

Once I almost got a Doritos spot
because my teeth were better than hers.

I bit into six Doritos for the camera
and I never felt more semitic.

But her everything else was better than mine, and neither of us got it.
When she landed a role on Charles in Charge, I spent the week on
set with her.

The cast and crew treated us both like new friends.

The Eighties were more innocent, even when they were so gritty.

I asked Ricky Shroder what he wanted for his birthday.

He told me a box of condoms.

At the tender age of fifteen she lost her virginity to an overweight
boy in the bedroom of a party.

She regretted it within minutes.

It was my brilliant idea that we tell him she was a prostitute and
that he owed her a hundred bucks.

We both liked this idea.

We did it, but he didn't pay.

Yana Lyandres

New York Transplant

I was born of the sound rain doesn't make
but masquerades,
of fleeting glances
across subway platforms
for my voice is too weak
to make thoughts collide with air
in the sex of speech
but the eye can't help but look.

I don't know how I got from trains 1 to 3 to E
from smoking in high school
parking lots to New York City
or what about taking headache pills
makes me wish for the headache back

but stop signs are the reds of Valentines
if you let them be
and flipping through old diaries
is a requiem
for relationships passed on.

Eleven years ago, in class, we tore up squishies,
the earthworms we kept like pets,
in the name of science
and I'm still shedding tears over their
shiny intestines exposed, embarrassed
for their vulnerability.

I harden my insides with cigarettes
so when these city streets break me
and they finally get to cut me up,
there will be no wet-looking pink, blue, grey sunsets
for them to write poems about
and the black that envelopes them
will mask the wounds of the scalpels I swallow daily.

The only thing they'll find
is what I want them to: the love letters
tucked away like children in the protection of my veins—
to the rat I saw scampering down east 10th street,
to the punk girl I met at the bodega who
thought *I* was the one who's cool,
to all the people leftovers that still live inside me,
taking up space, not letting me leave.

Procession of Late Night Confessions

Sometimes coffee spilled over all
the pages, post-its of my thoughts—

soaked-through milky smell
concealing tears felt—

is a ritual cleansing,
like baptism, spring cleaning
purging of sin.

I won't send a plague on this house,
I'm sorry, this house is not a home

rain-streaked windows
make this place more livable.

We like to talk of christenings
in lieu of baptisms in blood

I am not a martyr, I know I am not a martyr.

I know not who I am
but I know 5 AM

and its cousins—hunger sans appetite,
dry heaving over toilets, the silence

like scalpels, silence like UV rays
burning my skin with the lights turned off;

silence—

you wouldn't believe me if I told you how
5 AM is a scalding cup of chamomile

I pour down my throat every night
and every time I'm still surprised
when it burns.

Cut Me Open, Make It Hurt

For Nancy Spungen

You cut up your arms with
love bite-heroin injection cocktails

but if you ask me about these markings
on my skin, I will bear my teeth.
This is not self-harm like my mother
tells me—it is survival.

Some people use the backs of their hands, veins—
feet because they're easy to cover—
as a sketchbook, the medium—dad's
toolbox nails, razors left in the med cabinet—
please

cut me open to prove
there is blood in these veins
instead of strings of copper, zirconium—
I don't hide hi-tech electronic tendrils
of synapses under my hair.

I can't tell you how to love your scars, Nancy—
like ones Barbie doesn't have—
but mine are my art history,
and if this sharp linework and shadings,
teacup, clover, fadings in the letters
reminds you of addiction—I'd say,
Hell yeah, these beauty marks—not scars—
chart my path through self-deprecation, hatred,
crises of identity I metaphorically injected
into my veins every day for the past eight years—
yet reveal, on close inspection,
a faint floor plan back
to self-love.

I gladly go under the needle,
pour ink into my skin

to be less human—
not bionic but stronger
than bones and teeth.

Nancy, close-read yourself, study
the patchwork quilt you wrote
on your own body—I don't talk smack.
What kind of love is this,
if you don't come back.

Coast to Coast

I could not tell you why
I've never had the taste for Earl Grey tea
or why I've been craving shrimp lately
or why my little brother's hands
tightening reflexively around my wrists
makes me think
of low-tide wanderings,
hermit crab-chasings,
lobster rolls with Cape Cod chips
and sweater sleeves hanging limp past my fingertips

but home is bus windows looking out
onto the calm roads of Cambridgeshire,
friends who wander with you along shorelines
past town limits 'til you couldn't know what would follow
or if you would be swallowed up
by seaside winds and unsaid hope-filled mementos
of future meetings, hints of which wafted toward you
from the ocean depths.

I cannot say I have much to be proud of lately,
but last week I went to bed before 11 three nights consecutively,
didn't miss my stop on any of the trains I took,
and feasted on a love expressed in crêpes with jam
in a seaside town in Suffolk.

MD's *Nu descendant un escalier n° 2*

Cubist-Futurist Modernist classic
can't take my eyes off
that stroboscopic-, stop-
motion photography
those curves and lines
browns and ochres. Can this simply be
a dissection
of movement, human like a machine?
Faceless, emotionless
someone, teach me
how not to feel
give me a new word
for fucked-up hurting
instead of "broken"
there is a certain strength
in getting out of bed.

Can't walk
down a staircase right,
watch these Iron Man legs
and shapely thighs,
curvaceous ass like 3-D disks—
I trip over stairs that aren't there.
I've been told to stay away from
empty calories,
feminist arguments,
to keep my clothes on,
I drink my coffee black.

Marcel Duchamp,
where is a cause I can believe in?
Do away with art, with it all—
Marcel, give me something I can piss on.

Heather Katzoff

Start

Lining up near a throng
of other little girls

striped knee socks rising
from velcro sneakers of pink

and purple clashing with camp
shirts orange and white

we waited on dead grass
no longer green until

a whistle broke through
the air, startling our crowd

into motion, and in the middle
of the pack, with whipping

ponytails blinding sight
with elbows and knees

building barriers
locking us like puzzle pieces

keeping the herd together
I found my way out

and flew toward a splintered
makeshift totem pole finish

line upon discovering
that I could run.

Into the West

highway transformations
 criss-cross the country
turnpike entrances
 dot the states
 places recounted
by parkway exits
 co-gen plants
 give way
 to corn fields
to the continental
 divide

there exists a point
 after industry
before complacency
 where scenic overlooks
 become contemplations
 of prairie grasses
the journey
begins at a toll booth

entrance ramps
 gas stations
 rest stops
mile markers
of the passage of time

interstitial spaces
with roadside sculpture
 and memorial crosses
 replace mini-malls
 and truck depots
where antelope
 really do play
against barbed wire backdrops
 and the unnatural
 beauty
of a smog-inspired
 neon pink sun
melting
 into the horizon

but before I-80
 dead ends
 into the ocean
before you reach the salt flats
 that were once
 vast seas
before tumbleweed
 adheres to the front
 bumper

we
have already passed
into the west

Desire

I want your lips,
 lips that are mine
neither by birth
 nor commitment,
I want them to kiss places
 with no proper names
 in the annals of anatomy.

We will name them
 together.
We will baptize those places
 with our breath
the order of consonants and vowels
 secret
and idiosyncratic
and shared
 in silence.

I want your eyes.
 I want to claim them
 in a way that I cannot.
I want them on me
 following me
 feeling their gaze move and rest
 in time with my hips
and I want to see what I look like
 inside them.

The Naming of Things

We dance around the vocabulary
 but there isn't a word
 to suit
and all the ones tested
 sit ill on tongue
 and teeth
neither of us certain
 that a words exists
 to define our relationship
 one to the other
neither of us certain
 we need definition

Adam went about the garden
 telling every bird and beast
what it ought to be called
ignoring the fact
 that they were what they were
 whether He liked it
 or not
ignoring the fact
 that the snake
 would charm
 and then bite
no matter what name
 He gave him

Eastbound

The wind chill
 made the air
 feel 14 degrees
 below
when I left this morning
 before the sun
showed its face
to a sky of perfect
 sapphire
 blue

and the sky is punctuated with stars
 too bright and too many to name
 and I want you
to tell me which ones they are

but I leave while you still sleep
gently kissing your forehead goodbye
 and though you stir
your snoring continues

I drive east
 and watch the sun
work its magic
on the Pennsylvania landscape
 the colors of it breaking
my heart
 over and over
I see the spectrum
 everywhere
in fields of snow
on the rock walls
 lining the highway
in the memory of your hair
 as it catches the moonlight
before you wake

Tom Yori

Cana

When they tipped the jars
—which were actually those old amphorae
that cradled wines from Rome to Tarsus,
Hellespont to Heliopolis
—it wasn't water any more.

It ran red as blood
and He fell silent
hearing the echo
of a word yet unspoken.

But the steward, an obsequious Greek
(graduate, All-But-Dissertation
—Pythagorean U., Corinth Campus)
won by his master casting lots
simpered at the rube.

Though, he said, it was quite a fine merlot,
the main course was fish.

Could you do something in a white?
And the guests, hearing a magician was
miraclizing out back,
almost stampeded to make requests:
They were a Zealot crowd.

So Mary, seeing Him clutch His stomach,
which threatened imminently that notorious, eruptive dyspepsia,
asked if He'd like to leave now.

For the strangest moment He cast on her His eyes so limpid
the world looked right through them
and He seemed to take measure again of the measuring
human heart

its human limits, its bonds, its obligations,
its specificity, its universality
then as strangely as when He obeyed her to begin
He followed her direction again and parted.

However, the mysterious Q saw all.
He recounted it, raconteur he was,
to a scribbler, circa 60, in Thessaly,
who, à la Woodward / Bernstein, plied
Q—with wine, not coffee—
slurring his notes when Q left to refill.

The story, like the scribbler's head, and vision,
came out blurry.
But he workshoped it at Ephesus
where the first item to go was that charged-glance thing
What is that anyway?
You can give an Evil Eye or a Look of Love
either of which, to your mother, is creepy.
Next they realized the steward's expertise
in Sophocles and Aeschylus
detracted from focus on the wine,
which must have been—*must* have been
—The Best.

They eliminated also that distracting byplay about the color.
And if anyone noticed they didn't care
that that steward, who's supposed to run the master's house
talked to his boss like someone
hired for the day
from Feasts R Us.

So anyway the point emerged:
Not what happened, but the Deeper Truth
the unschooled hungry heart always knew
but never knew it knew,

As fruit yearns to ripen.

Blood Drive

They keep calling you “hero” as though you were a kid
having to be verbally nudged off the high dive
or even the low dive.

The literature does that I mean:

The people with the stealthoscopes are too busy asking you
Have you ever had sex even once since 1977 with another man?
Have you ever paid to have sex either with money or drugs?
Has anyone ever paid you for . . . since 1977 . . . even once
. . . shared a needle to inject drugs?
. . . spent six months or more total in the UK?
(so what, you wonder, do they do in the UK when they need it?)
. . . looked for an undue amount of time at a map of Africa?

Before you finally start
you’ve recited your Social Security number
five times.

But they know you now in this church hall,
people without pressure cuffs or red crossed coats or question
or claim:

the cute white-haired Louise for instance who works the
reception table under the basketball net
(she reminds you of a first girl friend),
the bespectacled bustler at the recovery table
set up by the stage preempted with afterthoughts and
unfinished by-play,
busted boxes herniating Christmas garlands in August heat.

They never seem to sport their own donation bandages.
Louise, looked at twice, may still not weigh the minimum 110 pounds.
And once upon a glance her eyes dodged to your shirt’s *I Gave!*
stick-on
wanting to be wanted so.

Because there’s nothing like it,
what you’ve got aplenty.

It’s all-state biracial multinational
and every kind of natural.

You may feel that you are plodding on the treadmills of obscurity
especially Monday mornings

but you're not the LED-up machine over there in the corner
glaring neon colors
coughing up product
at the in-chink of coin.

You are instead the real Real Thing,
a coursing vehicle of sin and crimson essence
beating the byways the arteries
putting your damaged heart into it
take and give
give and give and take

just as yours
drew in their hour from these tangled roots this turf of streams.
This is what your preemie daughter needed,
your mother, that time she had cancer,
your brother when he wrecked that bike,
your buddy when he took that bullet,
all from alien folk
who owed you
zip.

Stranger yourself, you don't need what's called closure,
the story that a story must complete
because they don't just go on
the way they really do.

It doesn't matter, what happens to today's pint
what happened to the last one.

And it's amazingly easy:
you just like back and let it flow
seems the least you could do:

Run in this easy-flowing roadwork,
this highway
this interstate system
this over-arching network of veins
a-pulse
a-pulse
a-pulse.

Since 1500

It's hard to see the difference
in 25 mere generations,
though your wife's brother Carl,
 mouth full of turkey,
 claims infallibility.

He loves to poke you in the ribs
 or gouge your eye
 with his faith moving mountains
 of jobs to the world's truly
 exploitable.

After each election he'll crow at you
 How's that hope thing working for you
 that faith thing.

You want to retort
 but really he's a brother too throws back his head
 laughs from his belly
 sends huge packages at Christmas.

When he dies,
 you will miss him,
and how he loved to tow your kids
 behind his fun, godawful
 powerboat.

But those blunt dull tools of God's wrath in 1500
 came rude and wet to life
 like you;
 and so did those victim misbelievers disemboweled:
Martyr and holy murderer
 all lanced toward something
 dimly seen
 on a father's spit, a mother's blood.

Here's the real confession:
I'm not so far beyond the burning rage,
 the lune-y howls.
The suspicions Carl had for instance
 that someone over there had a bigger,
 better boat just *handed* to him

—the welfare—for *nothing*—
that's not so far from the common cause I feel
for affordable care,
a holy spirit I long for
as I sing in the silent night,
or while I read the Times
Don Quixote
excuse me Walter Mitty
guzzling at the fountainhead.

I know the hunger and thirst
to purify this flag.

I've seen it all in the Before I read.
They're telling me with everything money can buy
I've lost and my father's grandfather's great-grandfather's
monumental struggles trashed
targets of cheap shots hollow points.
20-something punks smirk in crocodile shoes
boss PhD's review their speeches
investigate prosecutors not investigating non-
existent fraud
create new forms scientifically crafted bullshit
moving needles
finding legs
life sacred CREP-form.

I've lost but
I could sell out my ass.
They'd love that.
It's not enough to win:
Everyone else has to lose
or else they just can't feel good
about themselves.
Everyone else has to ignore mere math mere fact
and hail bend over for The Unseen Hand
that gropes and violates.
Everyone else has to kiss the oily lips and beaches

of this petrochemical Savior
Christ You've Never Known
 You Can't Recognize.

and now

I can feel my soles already flying like angels,
daily news slipped under my chin
the crowd mocking my union authorization cards
while the hoods whisper in my ear
one last time:
 Abjure.

Barth Landor

What Is Left

What is left of being right
when in the long run I am wrong?

At first I was just right
until at last I was just left.

Is it wrong to exit stage left
if the prompt is not in the script?

Merely to do no wrong
is a good way to be left,

although even the right way to be good
may still in the end be just wrong.

I lie down on our bed's right side
while you go to sleep on the other's.

If your right hand knew what your ring hand left,
then at least I am right that I am wrong.

Dalgairn House

Heaven came up for rent at thirty pounds a week
with no deposit down. We were freshly wed
and student-poor, and so we signed a lease
on paradise: we made our ascent
to the sunlit upper story of a Scottish
mansion on a hill in the Kingdom of Fife.

Brambles ripened in the hedgerows
and strawberries sweetened in the fields.
On the lawn that welcomed even pheasant,
a small boy nursed a patch of herbs.
All was fertile indoors, too:
stacks of books grew read, and the ribbon
of my little Olivetti seeded letters
for a garden of words I gave to you.
In the home beneath our feet, the noises
of children rose to our ears like Kansas corn,
while above the heads of our landlord family,
you turned to tell me
that one of our own had taken root in you.

That idyll ended long ago.
Garret companions in our salad days,
honeymoon scholars gaining fluency
in languages and love,
in our vinegar years we turned into
strangers even in our common tongue.
One of us yielded and one of us failed to,
both of us strayed and one of us stayed.
When one of us found—or lost—one's truer self,
one of us wept as one of us left.

So the calamity happened.
But I tell you that this did, too:
we made bramble jam from berries
we gathered on country lanes.
We had little to our names.
We read psalms aloud before bed

above the room of a child called Jimbo,
that myopic and timid sibling
of important older sisters,
the pale boy who still lives in my mind
(we moved after a year and never returned)
In a fragile state of innocence.

Abigail F. Taylor

Never So Still

See this wire-boned boy climbing
to the mangoes? Papi below
sings—Oh Dusty Venezuela!
Picked fruit falls to his blistered feet.
He bites into it, peel and all.

Ruben eats in the tree. Sublime
juice tickles his wrists. He, aglow
with Papi's New World tales, clumsy
in an old half-toothed mouth, retreats
to dreams: America! Baseball!

Papi taught him this, to throw fast
and hard. To love equally so.
Ruben, at sixteen, poor, tired,
and yearning, sent to shore to play
the game. To honor frail Papi,

who died between his first and last
crash into home plate. There were low
years when he fought to inspire
the song of himself in bad ways,
and listless days were choppy

with old promises. Then Ruben
swallowed up his grandfather's soul,
became that man of effortless
joy. And he loved so vibrantly.
He had a son and was happy.

I met him in the taste of sin.
His cross pressed to my breasts. His bold
grin and my paid for recklessness.
I miss our spare talks, privately
passed like school notes, that were sadly

never enough.

At Ruben's wake, his son sat quiet
and lonely in the front pew. He
marveled at the rosary breathed
into his father. I wanted
to say, he was never so still.

While the Streetlamp Listened

She took
his callow face
and tipped it, nearly kissed
in the sacred glow of night. But
dawn came.

And he
felt her age press
into forbidden fruit
and her husk of wine-dark hair. The
lark sang.

Wichita Falls

Can you remember dawn's dreary mist
as it curled and settled into the trees?
Autumn had a peculiar way of falling before leaves.
There are no loons on this side of the world,
but I think of their hallowed calls
fighting against a separate, peaceful cold.

She had paid for a cabin far off the road;
a hope of stitching back together a loveless
marriage she herself had caused to unfold.
But you and I found comfort in pitching camp
beneath a dripping candled moon.

Do you think that he returned to her arms
that night, their faithless kissing as joined up writing
or like that morning mist hugging brittle bark?
Perhaps they stayed as distant as the loons.

Either way, we woke with dawn.
Our dog, the only one to grin at such an hour,
ruttled through pine needles, then leaped
into the thicket, while wind chimes
took on the beat of unseen hooves.

We, as children, were never allowed to stray.
It was the duty of grownups to strangle themselves
in the undergrowth of wayward passions.
Still, we followed the dog.

Despite the light, all of it slept:
The brambles. The hollied hill. The pale red robin.
Only the beck spoke over moss and stone.
We found the dog laying at the water in lazy company.
These fawns and young bucks, not quite into their points,
drank with caution.

As we called out, our echoes shepherded the deer
to distant corners, while the dog bounded to us

and licked flashes of bare skin.
He took a way back to the dark cabin
beyond the trees.

You pressed last night's coals to new tinder
and we tried to scramble eggs on a dry skillet.
A good fire had been made by your hands,
but breakfast turned brown, improved only
by a dashing of salt and the clear air.

He stepped onto the closed off deck.
His eyes blank against the breeze,
so remarkably outside the man we knew.
He saw us and dissolved into a familiar face,
then returned inside to prepare something better
than what we had eaten.

Do you remember how we spoke like this was home?
Our souls slumbered there with cold pine and warm fire.
We understood the dog's contentment to roll in sweet mud,
follow the deer, and ignore the shrillness of women in winter.

At peace in the wandering.
And you told me the cabin had a design like jazz.
Frozen in marrow. Harsh and vibrant.
Had I known then how to tell you the rhythm of this wood,
I would have shared everything.

George Longenecker

Polar Bears Drowning

the news isn't so bad today
two crows perch on a large stone in the meadow
then fly off looking for a few morsels
but the pasture is barren
the war isn't going as badly as it could
meanwhile I wait for the tax refund
which a lot of people will get this year
except people who have no income
but it's not so bad since they pay no taxes
the two crows perch on the stone again
haven't there been worse wars
I really don't mind reading the news
as much as most people
many more people have died in other wars
that's good news
this coffee isn't too bad
and the weather isn't as bad today
so the mail probably won't be too late
it's not as bad here as in some countries
polar bears drowning on page four
probably the president will do something
I think he cares about bears
the war isn't going so badly now
the check will be in the mail
if it comes today
those crows haven't moved
but one flaps its black wings
so it must be okay

A Protest Rally for the **Bold-faced Hyphen**

Protest the extinction
of the **Bold-faced Hyphen!**
The once-numerous hyphen
is all but extinct.
I have seen them
flying together in pairs,
making a mad dash
to safety—
fly, fly away quickly,
before you too become extinct
and forgotten—
or held captive and misused,
for that is the apostrophe's fate—
held prisoner in plurals,
on road signs,
in mis-punctuated ads.
Mourn the apostrophe's demise.
Solidarity!
Save the apostrophe
Save the hyphen
Free them from their sentences
Now!
Free the apostrophe
Now!
Save the **Bold-faced Hyphen**
Now!

The Garter Snake

lies coiled on quartzite
high on Worcester Mountain
it's barely warm enough
for a reptile to emerge
onto its favorite stone
coiled facing west
in April sun
waiting for flies
for months he's waited
sheltered in a granite crevice
covered by three feet of snow
now he's ready for sun
who knows why people hate snakes
but human hatred runs deep as Genesis
hard as quartzite veins in stone
this year new people to hate
with the same old swords, nooses and missiles
his long beige stripe is still
his brown scales barely quiver
he watches me but doesn't
even flick his tongue
when hate's all around
and it gets too cold
I'd like to leave it all
crawl into a crevice
with the garter snake
maybe someday when the sun's warm again
slither out across stone
onto the mountain

Alligators

Around the bend in the canal
we startle an enormous alligator
sunning, awakened by the clack
of our canoe paddles, he splashes
into dark water and slides beneath the canoe.
My heart beats faster—*you were scared*
she says—*well he was only six feet away*—
but other alligators ignore us, barely
turning their cloudy eyes, unwilling
to relinquish their sunny places.
Alligators are accustomed to daily
canoeists paddling the Loxahatchee,
maybe they know it's Sunday and surely
they know east, where the first sun warms
their cold hides as they slither to the bank
to bask—I offer him coffee from my thermos—
Coffee with sugar, alligator?
Sugar plantations and suburbs
have drained the Everglades and the Loxahatchee
nearly killing off the Seminole and the alligators
who now emblazon football pennants, sweatshirts
and coffee mugs: *Gators! Seminoles!*
The alligator basks and smiles,
he knows who's drifting to extinction first—
we canoe around the bend where five
more alligators sleep in the sun.

I Want To Be Your Tom

Each night I climb your fence
I want to yowl at the moon
to growl and hiss at any other male
to crawl into your bed
I want to purr and lick inside your ears
to sniff you all over
to look in your eyes
to smell you so strongly there's no other scent
I want to lay with you and put my paws around you
to lap you until you cry *mrow tdrow*
to feel you in heat, to feel you purr and yelp
I want you to dig your claws into my fur
And if you'll have me across your fence
I want us to have ten kittens
I hope you dodge every car and dog
I want us to curl up together and purr when our fur is gray

Ben Cromwell

Sometimes a Flock of Birds

for Gwendolyn 3/11/14

I don't believe in God
because if he exists,
he's an asshole
for giving me cancer
among other things.
But I love you more
than one animal should
be able to love another.

Sometimes a cloud passes
revealing the mountains
minted in new snow,
and the sun shines down
on us for the first time
lighting your sleeping face.
Sometimes a flock of birds
breaks from the treetops
and flies pellmell into
the blue distance.

My arms are indelibly marked
with your weight,
your shape.
Whatever is in me,
whatever I am at root,
whatever I hope
might one day be revealed;
You are.

Assisted Living

I don't want this to be too sentimental,
so fuck you, Grandma.

I've been thinking about the dead,
those near to death like to a lover.

I am walking the wood paneled halls
of your small and immaculately kept home.

I am rearranging the furniture.
I am unstraightening pictures.

Especially the one of you on your wedding day,
The one where you look so beautiful,

The windblown curls of yellow hair,
Your bright blue eyes,

a smile like abandon,
Like luck.

I know you've moved to a center,
somewhere they can take care of you.

I know the walls must be bare, the cupboards empty,
the beds in storage.

Tell me, what have the days been like?
Do they let you wake early to walk the beach?

Does the pale blue light that tips in
through the bedroom window remind you of me?

Do they let you sleep
with the window propped?

Does the coolness of the morning air almost
stop your heart?

In my mind, I take down your picture, press fingers
sticky with Jiff to the glass over your lips.

I hold it against me,
hold onto you.

You'll have to wipe the smudges from the glass over the photograph.
You'll have to rehang it on this imaginary wall.

Once you were a tern or a loon,
Perhaps a frigate bird.
Something that returns to the water.

I rode on your back, all motion and wind,
and the sea was in us.
Salt water was in our veins.

You are not coming back
to tell me
we are kindred.

I've seen the gray mist of your eyes,
the curve of your body, like bent feathers,
like a drowned gull washed up on the beach.

This is why I never come.
I can't bear to watch
the stillness overtake you.

Fox holes

Are there no atheists in fox holes? Perhaps you don't get into a fox hole unless you have something to believe in, but in my experience, most of the people in fox holes are in the process of giving up their gods.

The world will continue without me, will continue to turn without us, my love, though the thought makes me feel a little sick to my stomach.

I would like to believe that only you and I exist. I have believed such a thing. I believe both at once . . . in the world, and also in nothing beyond what I can taste.

I am the juice that runs down your fingers, I am the sweat that pours from you, the extravagant feeling of fingers parting your hair, an extra set of hands to let the world slide through.

Let us rejoice in each other, let us give thanks. Let us suffer in each other. Let us be tortured and meaningless and pass out of the world having mattered to no one, having no immortality beyond our mingled dirt.

Robert Mammano

the way the ground shakes

or the holes in the walls
where you would be able to see the guts of the house
if the house had guts.

it makes good sense that our limitations are so
tight around our cute little necks
and our ambitions are knick-knacks
collected on end tables
sit for years and are eventually
thrown outdoors to get turned over
ashes to ashes junk to middens.

daylight from citrus oil
lampshimmer tomorrow,
the crunchy foot prints on the flash frozen grass
the architecture of the water structures that come
out of your sigh.

I'll watch till there is nothing to see,
let my fingers linger in your hair—

shivering whispers sew the buttons on the morning
the intrigue has been woven and fastened like this
for as long as the deep sky went blue
and blue to true and just, just
out of reach, your skin, so soft just under—

how do our weak wonders rest
their troubled feet and great heavy heads?
the steady lonesomeness lovely
almost passing as longing.

the fever climbs about cloud cover high
and stolen away
a bit longer you must.

look at all them letters

all the damned things flitting about,
blustering and flummoxed
colliding and colluding!
just outside this window
on all the awnings
squatting and cosmic—

I want to talk about what holds me.
I want to talk about gravity,

the newspaper from two days ago
filled with rain stuffing the gutter.

we continue to be surprised by violins,
yell across the avenue
as if we were in a crowd.

we're just pieces.
there is nothing but life
happening between us,

but the sky
the atmosphere
and beyond our weather,
the whole mess.
consciousness is such a delicate accident.
stars don't cross .
two lines
expressed in tons
of wood, gold, and concrete
for twenty centuries.

“and by the way thanks for that”

half-assed over the shoulder disputes
lobbed like a split pomegranate in parting

we were in the kitchen cutting onions
and someone came in
we pretended we were at our wit's ends
that strange region where men weep

a tangle of ropes
the path of least resistance is atrophy
sometimes decisions waiting to be made
make themselves
evaporate opportunities
and inaction knots an expiration
no

living past tense
all the moments of knowing
you wanted everything changed
line up like constellations
flickering moot way way up

and I trace these stubborn lines
'look a seed
a bulb, a tuber'
back toward the last times I wasn't myself

those nights
when who knows who circulated
through the little back alleys
and sloppy veins
crocheted byways
underground amateur astrology
root structures drunk moon shine
risky

I still find a stray hair
here or there

a polka dotted sock
when my underwear drawer is almost empty
and how many years since that smile glinted
you won't remember

the handkerchief situation isn't half as strange as it seems

because this contraption scratches
tilt your mouth
and what voice chooses
come clean for once
bones after the flesh has rotted away
a wolf big black bird with hunger
a feather a hair a plume of smoke

we'll go on and on
wondering how 2 people in complete agreement
could argue so long
"I'm not lazy I just don't see the point"

imagine if we picked any direction
and just went
but sometimes these directions loop
5 years in circles
there used to be formulas for these sorts of things

out of boredom
something pretty is molded
with my preachy voice
that clears out subway cars
mind the gaps
how many "well the names aren't important"
until the names disappear and the places follow
leaving dull skeleton stories waltzing around

I'm 2 stepping this 3 step dance
"my first love was a boat"
independent thought like buoys suspended
rope worn round the wrists and ankles
like cheap juvenile jewelry

lately through this strange irrelevant term
seems all my thoughts fall about

neither here nor there
I've been thinking about people living in their heads
I like imagining them miniature
pulling down eyelid curtains a warm glow still behind
I wonder how they'd leave if they wanted to
I know it's fancy but I'll bet the ants still get in
maybe through chimney ears
and march their numbers along the skull's walls

a few resolutions ago

Nothing is set
run around and around
New Year's eve
we'll drop our own ball.
I'll try not to play the accordion.
My sweet, what?
I am almost out of space.

Oh what wonderful geese you have, ma'am
and what a sigh.
Even the mailman gets a raise
and here I am still jobless,
a big green apple.

She left last night
and they're all praying for you
green peppers . . . green peppers.

Cross the 'i's and dot the 't's
let them talk about despicable so-and-so's
and we'll throw in an orange wedge with our two cents.
Read it to me in your real voice.

Let us send messages on rays of light—
No, no, give me primitive construction any day
tic-tac fingers and swollen pulleys.
“Ain't no rest for the wicked.”

a post-modern post-script:
Nothing is set
We moveable parts.
Run around
around
and I breathe deep.

Janet Smith

Rocket Ship

Emery Park had a pretend rocket ship.
We walked there in the afternoon, and I,
legs straight, palms flat, dropped down
the metal slide onto the cold sand.
My mother made me wear dresses;
they fluttered up like frightened birds.
I wanted to walk by myself, but I was seven.
One man in a torn jacket stood by the fountain,
hands in his pockets, eyeing the merry-go-round.
“Don’t talk to him,” my mother said.
I wouldn’t even talk to the girl my age,
who held a sucker in her mouth as she
slid down after me. That was dangerous.

Later, we walked across the street
to Crawford’s Market. I stuck my hot, dry
hand deep into the barrel of hard candy.
The store clerk glowered over her counter.
Watch your children, a sign shaped like
a pointing finger warned.
I unwrapped the candy Mother bought me
one by one, placed each on my tongue,
and moved so the wrappers in my sweater
pocket rustled. A red disk burned my mouth.
I spat it on the sidewalk. That was wrong.
We walked home past the park, and my mother
grabbed my hand.. The rocket ship
exploded with boys, yelling and hitting.

Be Good

I once was pointed to the corner
of a room where the curtains swooned.
Red-eyed, hands tight as buds, I held
the pink tissue mother gave me.
She and father agreed, I was bad.
Dust motes drifting through daylight
fell on my head.

Puzzle box unlocked and smashed,
I moved into a fragment of myself.
Later they allowed me to set foot
where the lamps shone upon doilies
bright as lilies. *Be good*, they said.
The dark boughs of my woods still
thrash upon themselves.

Pockets

My mother sewed the pockets
of coats. She called it piecework.
After her shift, she slept on top
of the bedspread in her clothes
so as not to mess the covers.
Then the bed was straightened.
We went to a coffee shop called Earl's.
The meals came with cake or rice
pudding. She wore bright lipstick,
hairdo arrowed with bobby pins,
an ironed blouse with the dime store
brooch like a medal on her chest.

Practical daylight fell upon her things—
the nylon scarf, the curlers and the pins,
the pennies saved inside a jelly jar—
but it was the beige slip that slid
like a rattlesnake off the chair
onto the floor that scared me. She said
a slip stopped boys from looking
at the outline between your legs.
Smooth and supple as flayed skin,
the beige slip told me how my mother
became the red-lipped ghost. Listen,
she'd say, here's a coupon, a hairnet,
a pad, a needle and some thread.

The dresser and the nightstand
each adorned with scarves depicting
rosebuds, bluebirds, a shepherdess,
and a leering doe with red lips.
Where was the interior life?
So many pockets, and nothing
but bare hands to hide. I was told
to never touch the sharp scissors
she had honed. She wore dresses
with no sleeves in summer, arms freckled,
warm, and fat as rising loaves.

The change on the dresser
never added up. The nylon briefs
and bras lay cool and folded
in a narrow drawer that stuck.
She smiled at me as if her mouth
held straight pins. Here's a hanky,
a spare key, a dime for emergencies.
Stop eating cookies or you won't eat
your dinner. There's no one
now to accuse or defend her,
except me—her most loyal prisoner.

It Surprises You

It could be a cold Wednesday.
Moving your feet along the ground,
shouldering through the air
is pleasure. Your heart fastens
on a house you always pass
that now needs looking at.
You love the nape of your own neck.

When you were seven and wandered
from your parents' sight,
this was how you saw the world:
every edge hardened with reality.
That's why you drew lines
around the pictures before you filled
them in in your coloring book.

You begged for a pet, even a fish
or a bird, because you loved the world
and needed a body to put that in.
One day you stared out your bedroom
window: roofs, stars, moon,
the crowns of trees reached for you.
You were already falling.

The days dream us and the nights
wake in our ears. Today, sitting
at a desk or driving a car,
you wonder, what was all that childhood
longing about? When you enter
the black room of your aloneness,
nothing bad happens after all.

Nobody walks more solitary
than a child. You could ask now
for a piece of that slow waiting
that married you to your hunger.
An hour might spring on you with
a daydream hidden in its claws,
your old loneliness in its mouth.

Fireworks over Chain Lake

One July 4th I stayed at your house
on Chain Lake. We opened
two bottles of pinot noir and put
swimsuits on. Across the water,
fireworks exploded like cannons
aimed upon us. I woke at 3 AM
to rain splashing against the house.
You were asleep downstairs
in your wet swimsuit with the TV on.

When the first bursts exploded,
light fell like pollen on our heads.
We jumped up and down on the dock,
drunk and shouting. Why have we
waited so long to be found good enough?
As children we loved any tree,
any mountain, any sky.
Others appeared. They yelled for us.
We hid. We went hungry.

Gina Loring

Dementia

the women. the women. the women.
the babies. the babies. the babies.
How lucky not to remember
the mountain of missed milestones.
The spirit spark dusted over and dimmed.
How lucky to melt into yourself like that,
the entire muddy footprint path erased.

In lucid moments
few and far between
when the room comes into focus,
you remember me.
A stranger with your eyes.
You know
the straw I hold to your lips
the lullabies I sing low
the monologue prayer hymns I write in your palm:
redemption.

His

Here to see your father?

I ask how she knows.

You look just like him.

She waves her clipboard,
motions for me to follow.

It takes three nurses to administer the medication today.

He is a restless windstorm trying to break free.

Daddy, I say, sing with me.

I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield

Down by the river side, down by the river side, down by the river side

The silver smooth of the needle shines like a tiny skyscraper.

He meets its eye in resignation, watches it disappear into his arm.

I've always been the type to avert the eyes,

learned early not to look.

I don't remember the pinch of the needle sliding through skin

I don't remember the blood draining from vein to tube

I don't remember the waiting room or the walk back to the car

all I remember is the Polaroid of him

protocol for paternity testing, verify identity.

I was ten

and already a man had ripped apart the ribcage,

sliced my heart open

just to see.

I ain't gonna study war no more

I ain't gonna study war no more

I ain't gonna study war no more

The nurses exit the room.

For now, their job is done.

Eyes closed, he claps his hands to the beat.

We sing.

Our Last Days

I. *Monday, April 14th*

Convalescent homes
house blank stares where
urine stank and ammonia air
fistfight florescent lights
straining to see
the million memories
suspended from the stucco ceiling
prayers scattered everywhere like rogue shooting stars,
dying as they soar.
A backwards culture we must be
leaving our elders to endless claustrophobic days and cherry Jell-O.

II. *Tuesday, May 20th*

My voice dangles mute from my neck
as I wipe the running from his nose
try to console the boy inside his eyes.
Sometimes he recognizes me
always meets my gaze at least once during the visit
the illusive layered dimension is lifted
together we march this sorrowful slow dance
to music we cannot remember
while earthly things like apologies and birthdays
spin weightless around us.
I want to relieve him. I cry into his chest,
savor the gift of time like a peasant at the Queen's feet.
Wish him a good journey, free him from himself.

III. *Wednesday, June 11th*

Morning.
We're calling to inform you that the patient has expired.
As if he were a quart of milk.
I had seen him on Saturday, sang "His Eye is on the Sparrow,"
held his warm hand, long brown fingers
against the smaller beige version, mine.

The three days between Saturday and Wednesday
trampled me, a stampede of sorrow.
Rushed to the mirror to look at him in my face.

Angry fireflies

Traumatic experiences do not dissolve in the wind,
sweep away like dandelion petals
they do not eat themselves for dinner
disappear, a gruesome sliver
they like to hang around
pacing like an alligator in an elevator,
a swarm of angry fireflies,
 spelling out the same story in the sky each night
intrusive visitors who climb in through windows, defecate on dreams
blues and greens is the song they sing
when you are in a yellow mood
admiring the moon
they tip toe in through the back door and hijack your laughter
lift your eyelids to paint a dull hue
force you to look through fun house mirrors
long after the circus has left town

being angry with god will get you nowhere on a fast train

after the halo of stars has stopped windmilling around your head
and your face stings like a cement wall has kissed you hard and long
and you try to get up but can not make your body move
just when the world is coming back into focus
and your ribs are kicked in

the train will arrive shiny and smooth
serving complimentary champagne and warm croissants
the window seat view will be beautiful
you will have time to replay every moment
a swarm of broken and bent promise
flashes of half-hearted dreams rotting in the wind

you will lock yourself in the bathroom
the woman in the mirror will greet you with a piercing gaze
she will say you are meant to fall
to understand the meaning of flight
there is no bargaining
look down at the blueprint map on your palm, make a choice
healing is a profound art
no one can free you but yourself

the damn train is going nowhere
and you might stay on that motherfucker for years if you're not careful
you may even drift to sleep, a cozy still
they will bring you a pillow and a mint
the tracks rocking in rhythm like a mantra

the angels will not give up on you
even when you have traveled miles and miles
they will keep the faith of your return
the porch light stays on so you know you are welcome
inside where your life is waiting

J. Lee Strickland

Minoan Elegy

*Starting with Europa and with Zeus,
the flowers and the beach, the rape and rapture.
All the sordid excesses of gods
that lead us, in the end, to what we are.*

Torches flare
and break into the long oppressive night.
The labyrinth walls, the floor, the vaulted heights
are tortured into hardened shapes
by leaping blades of light.
The glare wounds eyes pulled wide
by timeless time in lightless dark
and Minotaur recoils (a move he instantly regrets).
The brilliant feast is crumbs now snatched away
as darkness falls again,
broken by false ghostly shapes
that dance across his eyes.

If we could see him now what would we see?
Skin bleached white by life in constant night.
A massive taurine head perched on
a lean, hard-muscled, naked frame.
A body fitting of the offspring of a god.
And sadness . . .
So great a sadness the beast in him
must bear the whole.
That, too, worthy of the gods
if ever gods showed feeling for
the sorrows that they wrought.

In darkness he listens.
The first low moans come
mixed with whispered bits of speech
as the sharp smell of fear reaches his nose.
The voices are new. The ritual is old.

He doesn't know how old, for
he cannot say, awake or in his dreams,
how time goes by,
the calculation linked to long ago
when light and dark had equal weight,
their alternations ticked the passing days.
Now, like the only tick of some great clock,
the torches flare and unseen hands thrust victims
to their final night,
to Minotaur a signal that
the senseless dance of humankind
continues just above.

The moans grow more despairing
as these lost souls slowly move apart.
Each thinks to find a way back to the gate
through which they came,
but all are wrong.
Fear and darkness confound every sense
as tortured angles of the labyrinth
do their part to trump the unaccustomed ear.

The Bull-man's nostrils flare.
His ears keen to each separate, novel sound.
He moves easily in the inky dark
going toward the gate.
He knows each scruple of the stone-strewn floor,
each crevice of the chiseled walls.
His hands trace knowing patterns as he walks.
He knows already the fate
of these sorry pawns of sacrifice.
They, like all those come before, will stumble
through the labyrinth's twisted gut
first thinking to discover some way out,
then hoping to rejoin their doomed companions.
Finally, failing all,
just moving, moving to out-pace
the brutal fear that eats at their insides.
Perhaps a ravening monster would be
mercy measured by this bleak prospect,

but such a one will not be found
within these damp, dark walls. Instead
each will find a separate cul-de-sac
among the labyrinth's countless halls,
there to wait upon the cruelest beasts
of hunger and of thirst.

A hundred twisted steps before the gate
the Bull-man stops. There's something different
in this group, a novel hint that slices through
the spreading cloud of fear.
There's one who has not moved.
Minotaur smells the strong odor
of a male
and hears the even breathing, calm
without a hint of panic.
He senses the repose of one at easy rest.
Then torchlight flares anew
and burns his eyes
as voices rise, a woman's, then a man's.
He knows his sister's voice
though he's not heard Ariadne since a child.
"I have your sword and here, a shuttled thread
that you'll unwind as you go on.
The other end I'll fix here at the gate.
Be careful.
Daedalus himself was nearly lost
among these walls," she says and
fear adds its harmonic to
the quaver in her voice.
The man replies, curt words of one
intent upon a task.
The light withdraws.

Here the moment dreams foretold.
He wonders if his lips will form a word.
"Theseus," he whispers with unpracticed tongue.
"My brother, come to take my life."

*The Pantheon is littered with the spawn
of venal lust. Poseidon's whelps, these two.
Though innocent, they bear the tragic stamp,
cursed to be clothed each in the other's fate.*

He waits unmeasured time, unmoving.
In Theseus' stumbling, halting steps
he hears no plan, just blind wandering
marked here and there by muttered curses.
He moves to intercept the human's course.
"Theseus, you have come at last."
"Who speaks with such strange accents?"
Surprise quickens Theseus' speech.
"You are no Greek who calls me thus."
"I am the one you seek, Theseus.
The one that you call Minos' Bull."
"A monster who can mimic human speech?"
"I am cursed to have a human part,
to be not wholly one thing or another,
but I speak."
"You speak? Then tell me. Where are the bones?
I thought to find it strewn with bones.
You keep a tidy house."
"I do not disrespect the dead
that others choose to kill.
I've honored them as decency
and circumstance permit."

For Theseus the hunt is joined. He reaches
toward the voice. His outstretched hand
meets only rough-hewn stone.
"Honor me and tell me how you
come to know my name then, Freak?"
"I have dreamt the smallest detail of this day,
although I laugh to call it day.
But, tell me, is it day or is it night
beyond the gate?"
"There was darkness everywhere when I came in,
but why this talk?
You could be feasting on the flesh

of my compatriots.”
He moves with care,
His fingers on the clammy wall.

“You and all your human cohort
forget who I am.

The beast in me is sickened by
the thought of eating flesh.

You press the worst of yourself
into a mold and call it ‘Monster’
but it is you, just you.

A mirror works as well.”

“I do not eat the flesh of my own kind.”

The Greek’s response is clipped.

He wants the beacon of that other voice
To light his path.

“On this day you will kill your own brother
who you call Beast and Monster.

Do you think the goat or lamb,

the wild bird of the field, the mountain stag
are any less your brethren than I?”

“Brethren? Bah! Your talk is babble, Beast.

I have no brothers.

I am my father’s only child.”

The Bull-man laughs, a strange and fractured laugh.

“Your father cannot keep his girdle tied.

His progeny are spread from Attica
to far-off Tyre.

His blood informs a mighty, ragged tribe.”

“Your pointless riddles bore me, Monster.

Tell me something plain.” His tone is mocking.

“If you do not foul your virtuous lips
with human sacrifice what do you eat?”

“There are roots that break through from above.

I graze on them and . . .” he hesitates

and wonders at the pain of speech that plods
so far behind the lightning of his thoughts.

“I am otherwise provided for.”

“By who? That fornicating beast-lover

you call Mother?"

"Do not provoke me, Theseus, with
your market-place vulgarities.
Poseidon raped my mother
just as he raped yours."

The voice so close it is as if
the stones beneath his fingers speak,
And yet his way is blocked.
"Aegeus is my father!" Theseus shouts.
"Poseidon is your father
as he is mine.

You forget I am a beast of those
who smell their kin and love them.
We do not stalk our kin and kill them.
Your nose is plugged with fairy-tales.
Breathe for once and try to smell the truth."
"Enough talk!" The air is hot with Theseus' rage.
"I've come to kill you.
Let me be done with that."
"You've come to set me free."
"If death is freedom, freedom you shall have,
and so will I the Greek bones here avenge."
Theseus' anger makes him careless
and he stumbles once again.

"Your sword is poorly aimed for that blood-task.
The blame you would abate lies higher up."
"With Minos and his copulating cow?"
"Higher still, my brother."
It is Minotaur who moves this time,
bringing new acoustics to his speech.
"The gods spill all this blood for their dark sport,
then goad us into spilling more and more.
The killing will not end
until you make yourself. Throw off the stamp
of petty tyrant-gods that you call fate
and recognize your own will is your power."

*Gods tremble when they hear these words.
Their power hangs on ignorance. If such
a fool as Theseus learns to choose his fate
their temples built on faith begin to fall.*

Theseus has turned around.
He loses contact with the walls,
trying to assess the vector of the voice.
“Your poetry is touching for a beast
but empty babble to my ear.
What meaning can it have to make myself?
The gods make everything.
We are but their thinking turned to flesh.
Just as now, I think I hear you talking.
This talk I seem to hear from you
is but the crazed imaginings
of a mind twisted by this curséd dark.
I’ll be glad to see the end of this.”
He tries to get a hand on stone
but even that is gone.

“The end of this will not make you glad, Theseus.
Your life, however long, will be for its
full length cursed by what you do this day.”
“Cursed? By what? Killing you?
I’ve killed many in my life.”
He grips his sword hilt.
“You will be but one more.”
“Cursed with truth, my Brother.
Surrounded by the fantasies of others
you will be cursed with truth.”
“So, Beast, you know, too, what is to come?”
“Here in the labyrinth time is naught to me,
past and future all the same
and equal to imagination’s sight.
I see what was and what is to be
with equal clarity.”

Theseus, forced to crawl, has recovered
the comfort of the wall and moves again.

“Entertain me, Beast. Give me some bit
from your vast store of prophecy.”

“Men always wish they knew the future
'til they see it writ . . .”

“Come, Monster, just a sporting hint?”

The Minotaur draws a great breath, a sigh
and says,

“Before you see your Attic soil again
Ariadne, who loves you
beyond all reason, will be left by you,
abandoned on some bleak stretch of beach.
And, too, the one who calls you son will die
because of your own thoughtlessness.”

“You say these things but to provoke my wrath.
I'll not leave Ariadne!
I have pledged myself to her.”

“Think of the snow that caps
your sacred Mount Olymbos (here
Minotaur stops to savor that
one word so fitting to his tongue and lips).

Your pledge is like that snow,
beautiful to see but try to hold
it in your hands and it is gone.
You will leave Ariadne.

By the sorcery of your own mind you will hear
my voice in hers, my imagined touch
in her touch. My hideous face
will spoil her beauty.

And you will see my death in her eyes.
You will see in her the brother
you have killed. That terrible vision
will haunt you long after
you have left her on the sand.”

“A pox on your stories!

Your mindless rant torments me. Leave it off!
You who've spent your whole time in this maze,
what can you know?

Leave me, phantom voice, that I may find

that curséd beast and end this sordid farce.”

*Theseus thinks his string will lead him home,
but there's no turning back from his black deed.
This violent thread, once peeled from the spool,
will not rewind. Its trace is sealed in blood.*

Minotaur obliges this demand
and moves with slow deliberation
paralleling Theseus' stumbling gait
with his sure-footed pace.

His bare feet are his eyes in this dark hall
and quickly find the object that he seeks.

“How fares your clew, Theseus?”

“Leave off, Voice. I told you once,
you're but an ill imagining.

I hear you not.”

“And this? Is this imagination, too?”

Minotaur picks up the thread he's found
and gently tugs it taut.

“Tell me, Brother. Does your thread dwindle?”

Theseus is silent long
and when he speaks the first dark wisps
of fear invade his voice.

“Do not call me brother, Beast. It is
your thread that dwindles. You'll regret
that you spoke thus to me.”

“It is you who will regret who come
to slay a dumb monster and instead
will leave soaked in your brother's blood.”

“Ariadne wants you dead.”

“Ariadne knows not what she asks,
but wishes only that you live.

She, too, will know the luxury of regret.”

Theseus, his fear near panic, has begun
to gather in the thread that he's paid out.
He stumbles hard into the unseen walls.

“Whence flew your courage, Greek?”

You are right to be afraid
for I can break this thread and end
right now this thing that you call farce.
But, hear me. I will not. Not yet.
You see, Theseus, in far-off Athens
people bow to Aegeus as their king
while, above our heads, in Cretan lands
and on the seas, Minos is the sovereign.
But here in this piteous realm
I am doomed to rule.
My power is not so easily usurped.
You are, my Brother, guest in my dark house.”

The Minotaur relaxes in his place.
He knows that Theseus’ searching nears its end
and harvests comfort from that thought.
“Another thing, Brother, I would have you know.
My mother called me Little Star and
suckled me when I was born,
but later fled in horror from
the signal of her shame.
I have known love, however brief,
and I love you, Brother.
I love all humans though they are a band
that I can never join.
And, too, I pity them that they should fall so short.
I have no place in this world save here.
I will love you more that you deliver
me from this cruel solitude.”

As the Bull-man speaks he senses
his kin drawing near.
He lowers himself to hands and knees
and draws himself to Theseus’ side.
His great horns tangle in among
the folds of Theseus’ robe and gently pull
then slide away as Theseus spins
with wildly swinging sword.
The sound of Theseus’ thundering heart
fills the Bull-man’s ears he is so close.

“Show some courage, man. You mark the lines
of ritual where others not yet born
will step in ages hence. Show them some grace.”
Theseus flails again, his weapon cutting air.
“Do not beat at me like a frightened child.
I am already bled by years of solitude.
You need but make the final cut.”
The Minotaur has bowed his massive head
and Theseus with a desperate lunge
thrusts his sword between the down-curved shoulders.
Plunging through hard-muscled flesh and bone
the knowing tip seeks out the beating heart
as Theseus collapses to the floor.
His quivering thighs are bathed in blood as
his brother’s massive head sinks to his lap.

In Minotaur’s exhaled breath the smell,
sweet-sour, of fermented grass recalls
to Theseus a childhood vision of
a flower-strewn field and a sand-rimmed stretch
of passive sea. A sharp pain grips his heart
as he hears Ariadne’s voice
praying to the gods to save his life.

Toni Hanner

Catching the Baby

My father's birthday, the gypsy approaches,
gold ring poised on her palm, almost impossible
not to look, not to catch the baby, she knows you cannot

let it fall, allow its soft brown head to smack the cobbles,
you cannot stop your hand. Here is a cat dead in a bag,
you glance and pass by, you aren't the kind of person

to touch, to look inside, to bury the bag in the dirt outside
your front door. You are just one of the people who glances,
remembers later to write the orange feet sticking up

out of the plastic bag as dead as anything and you'll return to this cat
again and again, this cat serving as home if you can get there before
the patrol boat pa-pows its slow way up the canal

to your beach. If Jimmy's on board he'll catch the baby
and steal the gold ring. The cat was a runt and the gypsy
sighs back into the doorway of the cathedral, folding

a leg up under her skirt, putting on her hungriest face.
I stumble through cities the way I hug the wall for support
when I'm drunk, I need a description of that, how one flings oneself

at the bannister, then the next solid thing, the window ledge
at the stair landing, then the next, a lover's shoulder, a mother's
shadow. The cat is one of those things in a black week.

In between there are voids the ground solid enough for your feet
but the rest of your body is on its own. You are always reaching for
the next
hold-fast, a wall, a bureau, a table. The softness of a lover's hand

is comforting but only the dead are solid enough.
You keep them in jars bolted to the floor moving with you,
just far enough ahead so that you have always a destination.

Copernicus

This is only a single page, Copernicus,
I do not have what you would call a flexible
life I revolve around the sun like you said
my house does not pulse open for any passing

cousin, does not fold itself around the bereaved
no, my house holds us, the few, Copernicus.
We do not know which of us is the sun
we move into and around each other

anemones opening and closing and holding,
digesting what we need which is always.
Copernicus there is starch in my bones
I do not have what you would call a flexible

life there is city in me, boxes piled high
leaning against one another small boats ply
rivers of blood. Copernicus
I long to sunflower turning and turning heliotrope

but I creak in my body I must bring down the heat,
the light. This is only a single page, Copernicus
because we are far from the sun in January
of this murderous year we are spinning

back into the dark when all we can do
is reach and turn. I do not have what you
would call a flexible life, Copernicus.
I revolve around the sun bereaved and holding.

Splendid Angel

I've always wanted to see my mother with bees
in her hair, lifting her, turning her gold, the grammar

of lightness. My mother with ice blue, riding,
a banshee of knees and serpents, my mother

as galaxy, as interplanetary dust, comet-clicking,
deep black empty howling, rain falling through sunlight

in a grove of olive trees. My mother as ocher, as mustard,
as new as the stars, as boat and wind, her flesh to fruit,

bruised pear, secret hidden in an apple,
a splendid angel, a criminal. I would take her into the parlor,

let her see her father, know him in his coffin, shake the dead
from her fingers, from her feet, from her wings.

August Poem

realizing in my chest
i have no words my throat closes
over the beaks of all the birds
i have swallowed in the night

my hummingbirds stand on a column
of air looking at me
i am the most important display
in their museum of oddities

dusky august comes
cartwheeling down through the ninebark

our orbit quickens around whatever sun
or moon finds our gravity

i can spend sunshine
like coins in the machines of flowers

Contributor Notes

Jim Burrows lives in Cordell, Oklahoma. His first book, *Back Road*, was published by Barefoot Muse Press in January, 2015. His poems have appeared in numerous print and online magazines in the UK, Canada, and the United States, including *32 Poems*, *Antiphon*, *Measure*, *The Rotary Dial*, and the *Raintown Review*.



Ben Cromwell lives in Salt Lake City with his wife, Raven, and two children. He is a program director for Playworks and the author of *Touch: Making Contact with Climate Change*. His work has appeared in *Flyway*, *High Desert Journal*, and *Sugarhouse Review*.



Matt Daly is a poet and writing teacher from Jackson, Wyoming. His poetry has been published in *Clerestory*, *The Cortland Review*, *Pilgrimage*, *Split Rock Review*, *The Screaming Sheep* and elsewhere. In 2013, he received a creative writing fellowship in poetry from the Wyoming Arts Council and is the 2015 recipient of the Neltje Blanchan Award for writing inspired by the natural world.



Alma Eppchez is a genderqueer writer, theater artist, musician, and Quaker based in Philadelphia. Currently, ey* has two plays looking for homes, a dance film in the oven, and is developing a workshop using our bodies to notice internal biases. Ey was socialized as a white girl in Western Massachusetts. This was not a bad experience, but one that gave em many privileges, biases, and misconceptions of identity that ey is compelled to now unlearn. *Alma Eppchez's chosen pronouns are Elverson pronouns (ey/em/eir/eirs/emself)



Paulette Guerin is a recent graduate of the MFA program at the University of Florida. She lives in Arkansas and works as a freelance writer and editor. She is currently building a tiny house on seven acres and blogging about the experience at pauletteguerinbane.wordpress.com. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Subtropics*, *Cellpoems*, *SLANT*, and *Euphony* (online). She also has a chapbook, *Polishing Silver*.



Toni Hanner's books include *The Ravelling Braid* (Tebot Bach, 2012), *Gertrude, poems and other objects* (Traprock, 2012), and *The Book of Orange Dave* (Chandelier Galaxy Books, 2015). *Gertrude* was a finalist for the 2013 Oregon Book Award. Hanner is a member of Red Sofa Poets and the Madrona Writers. She is a confirmed francophile who also loves Argentine tango. She lives in Eugene, Oregon, with poet Michael Hanner.



Hank Hudepohl graduated from Harvard, served in the US Navy, and earned an MFA from Hollins University in Virginia, where he also taught creative writing. He has published a book of poetry, *The Journey of Hands*, and he recently completed the manuscript for his second book, *Riverbank*. His work has appeared in literary journals and magazines, and has been featured on the NPR show *The Writer's Almanac*. He grew up in Ft. Thomas, Kentucky, and now lives with his family in Wellesley, Massachusetts.



Marianne S. Johnson is married with two children, and a practicing attorney in San Diego, CA. Her poetry is published in several journals including *Calyx*, *Sport Literate*, *Slant*, *The Kerf*, and in the anthologies *Lavanderia*, *Mamas and Papas*, and *The Far East Project*. Her first chapbook of poems, *Tender Collisions*, is forthcoming from Aldrich Press in 2015. "Wrongful Death" is dedicated herein to the mother, and her son.



After an on-again/off-again relationship with higher education and a decade working in retail management, **Heather Katzoff** returned to school and now holds a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy and an MFA in poetry, both from Rutgers University. Her work has appeared in the *Paterson Literary Review* and online at *Selfies in Ink*. She currently teaches at the Harrisburg Area Community College in central Pennsylvania.



Karen Kraco lives in Minneapolis where she periodically alternates teaching high school science with working as an editor or freelance writer. Her profiles, feature articles, and poems have appeared in local and regional publications, and she was co-editor and publisher of the poetry journal *ArtWord Quarterly*. Karen shares a home with Owen and Harriet, a mischievous Senegal parrot and an anxious cockatiel whose antics might land them in a children's story someday.



Barth Landor lives in Chicago. His novel, *A Week in Winter*, was published by the Permanent Press.



George Longenecker's recent poetry can be found in *Atlanta Review*, *Penumbra* and *Santa Fe Review*. He likes to find absurdity and surprises in daily life and turn these into evocative poetry. Much of his inspiration comes from the news and from the forest which surrounds his home in Middlesex, Vermont.



Gina Loring holds a BA from Spelman College and an MFA from Antioch University Los Angeles. She was featured on two seasons of HBO's *Def Poetry*, and has performed her music and poetry in over ten countries as guest artist of the American Embassy. She is a professor in the Los Angeles community college school district and volunteers with Inside Out Writers, working with incarcerated teens. She lives in Los Angeles, and she believes in mermaids. Contact her at www.ginaloring.com



Yana Lyandres is a student studying French and English as well as minoring in Creative Writing at New York University and plans to teach high school when she graduates.



Kate Magill is a Vermont native and a devoted backcountry wanderer. She currently resides in the Mojave Desert with her family. Her first volume of poetry, *Roadworthy Creature, Roadworthy Craft*, was published in 2011 by Fomite Press.



Robert Mammano was born and raised in New York City. He graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in English/Creative Writing from SUNY Geneseo in 2009. He has spent the last few years wandering around the United States, working odd jobs, and writing as the mood strikes. He currently resides in Portland, Oregon, where he is enjoying the natural wonders of the region every chance he gets.



Janet Smith began college at thirty-five after a string of jobs in Yosemite National Park. She graduated with an MFA in creative nonfiction from the University of Minnesota in 2001. She is a past recipient of a Nevada Arts Board Fellowship in poetry and the Guy Owens Prize. Her first book of poetry, *All of a Sudden Nothing Happened*, was published in 2010. She is on faculty in the English Department at Lake Tahoe Community College.



A born and bred Oklahoman, **Jennifer Leigh Stevenson** loves the backroads. She began writing poetry in ninth grade, studied music and theater at University of Central Oklahoma and wound up (somehow) in banking. For years she scribbled lines on napkins and wrote rhymes on the back of receipts, until she realized she wanted to be a writer more than anything. This marks Jennifer's first time to be published.



Rachel Stolzman's novel, *The Sign for Drowning*, was published by Trumpeter in 2008. She received her MFA in creative writing from Sarah Lawrence College. Her fiction and poetry have received numerous awards. She lives in the old Brooklyn and is invisible to the bearded, artisanal hipsters of the new Brooklyn. She can be found at her son's public school or writing at the Brooklyn public library or working at her government job, where sometimes poems are conceived under the fluorescents.



J. Lee Strickland is a freelance writer and poet living in upstate New York. In addition to fiction, he has written extensively on the subjects of rural living, modern homesteading and voluntary simplicity both online and for various print publications. He is a member of the Mohawk Valley Writers' Group and is currently at work on a novel drawing upon his experiences as a youth in the anthracite coal strip-mining area of northeast Pennsylvania.



Abigail F. Taylor is a North Texas Poet published in *Illya's Honey*, *Red River Review*, and *Sixfold*. She worked as the script editor and assistant director to *Raptor Ranch*, a gore-comedy now known as *The Dinosaur Experiment*. You can visit her on the web: <http://wordpirate.webs.com>



This is **Tom Yori's** first published poetry. He has published short fiction in numerous literary journals such as *New England Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Long Story*, *Sou'Wester*, and others. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and was recognized in Passages North's 2010 very short fiction contest.

