

# SIXFOLD

POETRY SUMMER 2019



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Sixfold is a collaborative, democratic, completely writer-voted journal. The writers who upload their manuscripts vote to select the prize-winning manuscripts and the short stories and poetry published in each issue. All participating writers' equally weighted votes act as the editor, instead of the usual editorial decision-making organization of one or a few judges, editors, or select editorial board.

Each issue is free to read online, to download as PDF and as an e-book for iPhone, Android, Kindle, Nook, and others. Paperback book is available at production cost including shipping.

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# Laura Apol

## Elephant Ears

She loved them—

the two glass-blown elephants from my childhood turned into a collection I bought for her, brought to her: brass, carved teak, gold-gilt; one made of cloth, one of jade—each tiny, intact—trunk raised or curled, solid circles of feet, and ears flapping, like those green heart-shaped elephant ears in the garden, leaves—wide as my outstretched arms—that still flap, alive, in wind. *Can she hear me now?* She packed her

collection, wrapped in newsprint, with such care. *Fragile—Elephants* on the box in her script. *Our writing is so much alike, Mom*, she used to say. I've hung her elephant print on my bedroom wall, where I'll see it: Mama and—protected by the Mama's solid front legs, stroked by her trunk—child. Over the years: she'd hold up her hand to mine, palm to palm, to see how her fingers were almost the same as—were longer than—mine, her elephant ring

too large for me now, elephant earrings, necklace, there is nothing she will write again and those lovely fingers loaded that gun, pressed the trigger, the silence ear-splitting and what, after all, did she know about fragile—about handle with care?



# Easter Morning

*When the wave rises, it is the water;  
and when it falls, it is the same water again . . .  
—Rabindranath Tagore*

The cherry trees are in full  
bloom, the grass around  
strewn with petals that have fallen  
in the night. Is this the mystery  
of life? Of death? I try to believe  
in heaven—some days  
yes, some no. This morning,

I do. When does water  
turn to wave, and wave to sea?  
My conversation with her is forever  
unfinished. Don't tell me someday  
it will be complete—by then  
I will have forgotten what I meant  
to say,

and what, after all,  
will it matter?

# And On

For three hundred sixty-five days I have tried to make her  
make sense—ripped out every seam, pulled nails,  
dug up roots, sanded wood to raw. I have opened turned  
drained clawed, gone to sleep praying she would come to me,  
waked in disappointment or tears.

I have looked for her in every eagle, heron, hummingbird;  
every cardinal, oriole, fox. Each startling blossom. Each bit of color  
I did not expect.

My tongue trips over tenses: have/had, is/was, present-or-past  
the flip of a coin. Both and neither, my empty hand still my hand, scars  
and blue veins, long lifeline and her silver ring.

I have spread the name I gave her—like seed, willed it forward,  
supple as wheat fields in wind, a knife that sharpens with use. Our stories,  
just mine now—each a shaky bridge, foot traffic only, how many crossings  
before it gives way?

I know where I have stored the locks of her hair, what remains  
of her muscle and bone. They pull to me from the chest, pull at me  
in my chest, a wound she inflicted that afternoon

one year ago

—right now—

a day filled with trillium, trout lilies, blood root. Last year's leaves  
rattle in the trees, the creek rushing over itself  
to the river,  
to the sea.

# Taylor Dibble

## Lessons on sleeping with poets

Don't.

Don't make love to a poet.

Do not caress her thighs with dandelion soft fingertips  
if you don't own a watering can.

For the seeds you plant on her hip bones, through kisses,  
will lust for your honey-sweet watering.

She will pluck flowers from the gardens that grow in your molars and  
plant them on her neck,

leaving botanically influenced bite marks.

Leave your gentle kisses at home in an envelope,  
high atop a counter,  
away from her muse-hungry hands.

Don't make love to a poet because

she will kiss every door frame you walk through.

Peel fingerprints off the doorknob and

place them where the ghosts of your touch last danced.

As your tongues tango,

she will write the chord progression of their song.

But don't *fuck* a poet either.

For she will hear a grand symphony in your growl at her to bend over.

Don't fuck a poet because she will search for constellations in the  
freckles she can connect on your chest.

She will moan your name into pillows made of angel wings and  
beg you to pull bible verses from her hair.

Do not push her up against a brick wall and

claw at her body hiding under her shirt

unless you're ready to experience

her throaty howl to the man in the moon.

Refrain from dragging your snake-like tongue across her raised  
collar bones

until you've tamed your own, inner Medusa.

Do not fuck a poet because she will write about the  
    threesome you two had with  
your personal, childhood trauma.  
She will become a scribe of nasty details like,  
how, shower sex is your favorite because you  
can't tell when you're crying.

Don't fuck a poet because she'll ask you to choke her  
and while it may restrict her airflow,  
it will not keep her hand from paper.  
She'll trap your blissful curses in her ink  
and tattoo them across her journals.

She will bury half your body under a daisy meadow and  
the other will be stored in the mausoleum next door to the  
    local gentlemen's club.

# Yellow.

It's hard to write some days,  
with the beehive behind my sternum violently rattling.

my pen throws his ball-point head back, away from the paper.  
Writing poetry is a skill my anxiety has not yet mastered.

It is hard to put words together when you're struggling to find  
oxygen.

When you swallow the paper bag and your square breaths cut the  
inside of your cheeks.

I've learned that shaky hands cause accidents and that  
attempting to calm down without release is like trying to cut  
yourself with wet cardboard.

When I am anxious, I want to rip my chest apart.

Let gold, gooey honey spill out.

I want to tear off bee's wings and shove them into my eyes to use  
as contact lens.

I want the relentless buzz to rattle my bones and wipe my brain of  
all but static electricity.

I want to let it consume me.

I have become far too familiar with the feeling of my lungs folding  
themselves up like lawn chairs.

Of my heart yanking on its muzzle and slamming into the back of  
my chest.

Of the way rumble strips feel to the unsuspecting blind and  
sewing needles filling my throat with dream catchers.

# Sixth Grade Biology

The one thing I retained from sixth grade is about geese.  
My biology teacher explaining the V Pattern of flight they take is  
permanently ingrained into my brain.

*It's a survival skill*

she said,

*they can save their energy and take turns being the leader.*

That year we learned about camouflage and poison  
and which snakes were safe to pick up in your backyard.

Geese seem to have instructions pattern tattooed to their wingtips,  
but it is all instinctual.

For hundreds of years, geese have been born knowing how to stay safe.

Growing up, you are not taught a foolproof method of avoiding rape.  
You're told your thumbs can puncture eyes and that your voice is the  
loudest siren, but

you are not given an escape route or born with a V pattern to save you.  
In a moment of panic you don't remember your hands can fight back.  
You forget the banshee trapped in your throat and how to tie your  
shoelaces into anything but a noose.

I don't remember his name but

I still remember how his calloused hands felt as they brushed my cheek  
as he pushed my hair behind my ear.

How it felt to have N's and O's clawing their way up a closing throat.

How my limbs felt like wet laundry and how easily I became a rag doll.

It's been nine months since spider legs tugged at my jeans and I still  
dream of my chest collapsing.

My ribs disintegrating into an hourglass.

I dream of the sweat dripping into my eye and

a gritty,

*you're such a pretty girl*

spat out with the scent of cigarettes and fry grease.

Desperation greets me when I jolt awake in a cold sweat.

He guides my clumsy, half awake feet to a desk in the pitch black.

He helps me block the stench with crushed opiates via a rolled up  
biology flash card.

You don't think you'll become a statistic until 1 in 3 isn't just a set  
of numbers.

You don't think you're the only one who sees victim branded across  
your forehead.

You don't think a white ceiling will ever be interesting.

But in that moment it was.

And the only thing in my mind was flight patterns and the geese.

# Handfuls

When I was younger,  
I used to collect fireflies.  
Tiny drops of sunlight drifting through the black blanket of night.  
Once they were in my cupped hands,  
I would slide them into clear mason jar kingdoms out on the back porch.  
I'd lay my head next to the jar  
and watch the bright yellow flickerbees blink kisses to me.  
I caught well over a million baby lightening bolts throughout my  
    seemingly endless summers.

Now, there are seams tearing in white dresses  
and every postage stamp I see is torn in two.

I can't tell you when it happened,  
and I sure as hell can't tell you why,  
but sometimes vending machine lights flicker at the gas station by my house,  
and for a split second I swear I can see fireflies behind the glass.  
Maybe it's because I noticed one day my hands were leaving too many  
    cracks to keep light in.  
Too many holes that cannot be filled.

Someone mailed me a pair of hands last week.  
They were packaged in a cardboard box.  
No paper.  
No bow.  
I haven't stopped shaking since I peeled the tape off the crease.  
Not because of the present,  
but because I couldn't remember the last time I had held them.  
But more importantly,  
when was the last time that they had caught a firefly?



# A Masterpiece in Progress

When the question “How do you identify yourself?” is shot up into  
the class like a starting pistol,  
the class is off to the races.  
The scratching of pens and pencils father together like a pack.

Did you know wolves howl at the moon to find each other?  
Did you know I cry at night because I can no longer even find  
myself?

I am a deserted island full of faceless dolls,  
a museum with no artwork,  
I am self-baptized in a dirty bathtub,  
a link in a broken chain  
and thrown away pizza crust.

There’s a guitar that sits in the corner of my bedroom and I have no  
idea how to play it.  
I spend more time staring at the curves than I do learning how to strum.  
I wonder if you played me correctly if I would finally sound  
beautiful.

I know I talk a lot,  
it’s only because I don’t want to forget what I sound like.  
According to my doctor, I am medically overweight.  
I try to tell him those extra pounds come from the  
grenade clipped to my tongue.

I’m told poets have switchblade words,  
but lately my mouth has been so full of my own damn blood that I  
can barely speak.

A poet once told me,  
they used to get “rapper hands” when they performed  
and that it was completely normal.  
But the only wrapping I do is at Christmas.  
Boxing up fake smiles for everyone.  
A season of giving but lately all everyone does is take.  
Did you ever think twice before you swallowed me whole?

I have given away parts of myself I am still searching to get back.  
The smell of my back was in the flash of a camera.  
My dignity and dependence had been camping out in the hum of a  
    fluorescent light.  
Making love to the memories of when I saw myself as a good person  
    has become habit.  
I am a nymphomaniac of defeat.

A poet once told me,  
to not make myself the monster in my poems  
and although that's hard,  
I have started to believe him.

Because my suicide date was set for May 1st,  
but now the first thing I think of when May is said aloud is another  
    reason to live.

Because May has a special place in my heart for giving me  
a reason to live.

    Two reasons to live.

        A million reasons to live.

            Enough reasons to live that god dammit

*Here I am.*

I am going to be me no matter what metaphor I lend to myself  
    through poetry,  
so I better make it a good one.

## Binary Comfort

Cinnamon can chase away ants if you sprinkle some along their trails,  
lavender deters scorpions and  
a honeybee will not fly in the rain.  
She must simply rest on a raised window ledge til the clear.

Guided by sunlight,  
her navigation is halted in the peak of the downpour.

The sky releases liquid sadists who stretch themselves wide to  
reach for her wings.  
Demobilizing bullets threaten to weigh her means of travel down.

But I will keep her safe,  
tucked under my tongue.  
As she softly dances across the surface, I will  
rearrange my tastebuds to hexagons and  
regurgitate sweet words to make her feel at home.  
I'll force my tongue to work the night shift to leave one side of my  
mouth vacant,  
until the storm passes.



times like these I can't help  
thinking about when

I overheard a man  
say to his friend *she must've been drinking  
beer because her*

*pussy tasted sour* & we  
meaning my sisterhood of ancestors  
have been here constantly  
emptying ourselves or preparing to  
empty ourselves

trying to explain  
to you what it's like to watch  
what you are made of slither  
down the drain

like oil &  
know you have lived  
another unrewindable  
month with so much  
& so little  
~~control over what's~~  
inside you

## The Last Scraps of Cape Town

I went to a winery with the best bathroom in the world. Opposite the toilet, an entire wall of glass framed a hill quilted with autumn-honeyed grapevines. So quiet I held my breath while I peed.

I needed a gate code and three skeleton keys to unlock my apartment. To sleep I needed two blankets, a fleece jacket, a hat. I bought electricity at the grocery store to feed my apartment's hungry circuits. I shut myself in an armoire once when I felt alone.

I watched a bunch of poached eggs float around and around like jellyfish before being scooped onto a bed of hash browns and smoked salmon for a couple bucks a plate.

The neighborhood bars looked like vigils with so many lit candles. When the power went out, conversations flickered and chins tilted up. Placing bets on the length of darkness. A friend leaned across the table to listen and her hair caught fire. I am embarrassed, now, to remember this when I forget so much else.

I skipped work because there was no hot water to shower. I wasn't unclean, I was just afraid of the train and the cold and meaninglessness.

I was afraid of the train held together with stickers screaming HEALER DEON: MONEY IN ACCOUNT, BRING BACK

LOST LOVER, PENIS ENLARGEMENT  
and DR. GRACE SAFE ABORTION.

There was one of those bright red tour buses where you could hear them talking over a loudspeaker from the sidewalk. You could buy tickets to ride it around a Real Live Township and gawk at the scrap metal houses and the people who live inside them. Not a secret or anything.

I went to a market/an aquarium/a café. I climbed a mountain with a lake/a cave/a cloud right on top. It almost seemed like I could understand a place from above. Something about planting flags/ownership/altitude deluding you. It was such that, for a moment, I thought I deserved understanding.

# Rick Deckard Fucks Rachael the Replicant

It begins with Rachael trying to run  
Rick chasing  
slamming the door  
shut with a closed fist  
locked arm  
shoving Rachael back  
into the apartment  
clattering her against  
the film noir blinds

In the script this is all reduced to  
*[a little rough-housin']*

Dick is kind enough  
to give Rachael instructions: *say kiss me*

After all—she’s a programmable thing

And I’ll never know the end of the sentence  
she begins with *I can’t rely on . . .*

because Dick cuts her off, demanding she say it,  
*say kiss me*  
with him coding her desire, she complies, says  
*kiss me*  
but he’s unconvinced, needs her  
to say more, say *I want you*

And maybe she thinks she does  
or maybe Dick is a convincing teleprompter  
or maybe she’s programmed with an alternate  
definition of want, but either way she repeats  
*I want you*

And he commands—  
*again*



And I know how she feels when she recites,  
from some distant index of sexuality,

*I want you. Put your hands on me,*

playing repeat after me instead of breaking  
the arm that's slamming the door shut.

# Jamie Ross

## Ceaseless Wind. The Drying Sheaves

heave in their twine. A man can only  
tie so much, and then move on. How often

have I found this road—two simple tracks  
curving into darkness. They don't explain

their readiness, or their appearance. I don't  
forget who lined this face. Every step I take

I learned from you. Every match I strike  
trembles with your light. The old stone barn

sighs in its ruin. Carla's two gray burros  
flick their tails, doze against a wall. The ancient

towering cacti around my mother's grave  
wave back and forth, with spiked

familiar fingers. We all have nails  
embedded in our hands. Every village

has a bus arriving from the distance,  
each window with its curtains, TV's

that play movies hours after dawn. So long  
I've heard their rumble, deep along the river.

Turn back, my love. Look again, at me.  
Let me comb your hair.

—*Ajuchitlán, Guerrero*

# Last Stop on the Chili Line

—*Rio Arriba, New Mexico*

Now the tracks are gone at Taos Junction  
but the stones remain—hammered plinths  
and stelae that marked a freight train's passage,

some still upright, others down to rubble,  
each one etched with miles and chiseled towns,

a distant whistle moaning from Servilleta station,  
the iron clack and thunder of drive-rods  
and wheels, pine-fire steam and pistons  
wheezing up the steep from the Embudo drop.

Henry Wilton in his vest and flannel shirt  
smiling at the door, Susie in the kitchen  
with her two-buck enchiladas. Brown-bottled  
beer stacked in a machine: Ice Cold Coke 5¢.

How it got there is our story  
with its lines bent and fractured, pounded  
seven decades up from Silver City,  
through Socorro, Antonito, Huerfano and north,

how wood became the coal, how the world  
becomes its own harder instrument—  
a two-man broadsaw gone pneumatic,  
a river's floating logs to a hopper freighting ore,  
smoke choking Pueblo and gas fires

smelting steel. How the rails, cars and boilers  
were shipped into the furnace, poured  
into molds, the Rio Grande & Santa Fe  
now just names for history. Where a stop

becomes a family or a lifeline or a place of  
deep transference—the vanished town of Stong  
with its rock-wall platform, houses and hotels

where Henry went to school, learned his  
figures and the tonnage, surveys

for the highway, dorm rooms for workers  
and headstones for the failures the war  
would leave in fragments. Where a man like  
Henry Wilton would still hold on, as Susie

ladles chile; while a group of boys  
in pickups, beards, hemp and desperation  
take their barstools with the others  
at the flask-lined mirror—women  
weaving horsehair, babies wrapped in burlap,

torn men in leather, soot-covered pants—  
waiting with their whiskey, Schlitz  
or soda, waiting for the sawmills, or foundries,  
a hospital in Denver, a shack in La Petaca,

waiting, as we all wait, for the next train north,  
or the next train south. *Who was my father?*  
*When can we go home?*

## Passers-by

—San Miguel Allende, Guanajuato

Many have flown or bussed  
to escape the thrall of blizzards, frigid  
months of erasable light.

But the stooped man  
herding two burros past these café doors  
has never seen snow.

His beasts are stacked with bulging  
sun-bleached muslin sacks, from  
the nearby *cerros*—hand-dug planting soil.

They amble easy, slow, through  
robust mango, laurel and banana trees,  
new-blossom lemon, redolent

gardenia. Every small front yard  
a universe of roses, lily, starburst gladiola  
and bird-of-paradise.

The *campesino* carries a mesquite switch  
which he rarely uses. The burros  
know their route by heart: each corner

and *callejón*, each entry that will open  
at the moment of arrival; the woman,  
man or child who'll emerge

with the weekly five pesos, a saucer  
of *galletas*, mug of hot *atole*, two ripe  
apples—or, by fortune, a dish of figs.

For burros, figs are special. Perhaps  
it's in their blood, an ancestral  
taste from their time near Bethlehem.

Always, they've carried gifts,  
human needs, and needed humans  
across the desert. Burros know winter

all too well, and this way of service.  
Once it was Mary, about to birth Jesus.  
Today it's snow white sacks of dirt.

# The Road Calls

Again. As much as I  
deny her, as much as the red pickup  
squeals in its belts, rattles  
in its rust. I love you, says the truck. Always

the two mesas blue in the distance, always  
this wracked highway, steep  
in its declension, whipping like a rattler  
down to the village. Always the café

with its wood-fired Ashley, stacked  
split cedar, planked pine tables  
for Mona's enchiladas, her pinto beans and chile  
for the stream of tourists, long-haul freighters;

a family from Chama with their 1950's hay-rig  
tow-rope to the trunk of a Ford LTD,  
Jake Mora's son Merle on his gas-route to Ratón;

two kids from Questa, with a yellow  
bashed Camaro parked behind the dumpster,  
her smeared day-glo lipstick, his left, swollen eye.

Always the dishes, scratched and steaming,  
served in celebration—by Ronnie,  
Mona's sister, hair swept back, who knows  
me like my sleep, every stock word,

knows every idling semi, every awkward gesture  
of the teenagers' hands. They don't reach  
for their sodas, or napkins, but for one another  
as I once reached for her. And the engines

simmer quiet for one blessed moment, while  
I sip my coffee, with a front moving in.  
Until the crack of thunder, a school bus  
rumbling by, the money and the tip. The one

she's knows by now, more or less—  
with a flip in her hair, the wave of her hand,  
and mine, on the shift; half-turn of the wheel.

I love you, says the truck. Hey Ronnie,  
says the truck. Headed up a mountain  
in the oncoming rain.

—*Rio Arriba, NM*



# Nicole Yackley

## Knoxville

To explore a city, you must leave the apartment.  
To leave the apartment, you must have gas in the car,  
you must know where the car keys are,  
you must leave the dog behind. To leave the dog behind  
without her crying, you must give her something to eat,  
you must move everything else that a dog could eat  
out of reach. At this point, you've thought about food  
too many times not to be hungry. To find something to eat,  
you must look in the fridge and close it again.  
You must open the fridge. If there's still nothing  
you want to eat, you must go to the grocery store,  
but not right now—today is reserved for discovery.  
You open the pizza app but have forgotten your password.  
You go to reset the password but what you type in won't work  
because it's the previous password. You order a pizza.

The dog scratches at the door. She's bored,  
so you ignore her. To explore a city, you must know  
how to get there. You must open up Google  
and type in parking, find an address, fall down  
the wiki wormhole of when the parking meters  
were replaced, their fancy new interface touch sensitive.  
You must know if they require quarters, if you must pay  
on the weekend or after 5. To save the change,  
you decide to wait till after 5. The pizza hasn't arrived.  
It must be any minute now, so when the dog whines,  
scratches lines in the paint of the door with nails  
you meant to trim last Thursday, you ignore her.

To explore the city, you must be in the right mood,  
convinced the buzz behind your eyes means  
excitement, not anxiety. When the knock comes  
and the dog wets the carpet with excitement  
or anxiety or because the pizza is twenty minutes late,  
when the person apologizes, you must say it's fine

because you don't know how to be angry  
to someone's face. Before you eat the pizza,  
you must take the dog out. You must clean the carpet.  
It will be after 5 and the buzzing behind your eyes  
is no longer anxiety, but you don't know where  
the car keys are and there's always tomorrow.

# Mea Culpa

2016

An election ago we thought the world was ending. That its last legs might last a month, a month and a half, after the votes were cast, but the scales tipped in the right direction for once, and the year was redeemed as non-apocalyptic. This year cannot be redeemed. All the photos of suffering have been rereleased in color on the widescreen.

Overexposure eats the heads off anyone who tries to lift them. Was Paris this year? Turkey? Nice? We're marking time in new disasters, each worse than the ones before because there were ones before and it happened anyway. Each somehow more and less real.

I toured campus the second week of June,  
slept in an unfamiliar setting and woke  
to too-familiar news closer to home  
than I was: 50 lost—  
in the city where my brother taught—  
No, not lost, shot—  
in the state where my sister taught—  
50 dropped whose brother's blood  
wasn't good enough to save them—  
50 coopted into sad sounds by "saints"  
who made it anything but what it was.  
How is this much blood not enough  
to name it? (homophobia, transphobia,  
xenophobia, Islamophobia—) Our Fault.

I learned about Alton Sterling and Philando Castile  
only when I learned about Dallas. I didn't watch the video.  
I didn't want to witness a murder the way I would a movie of a  
murder.

I didn't want to be reminded I was useless. I was selfish  
and didn't want to be reminded I was selfish.  
I told myself my tongue wasn't good enough to save them.

We set the bar this year at non-apocalyptic and tripped  
long before we reached it. No matter how apologetic  
or apoplectic the politicians pretend to be about  
the ever-increasing number of horsemen  
(racism, sexism, ableism—as if our friends  
needed new ways for us to hurt them)  
horsemen who kicked sand in our faces, and made  
the ground uneven, yet we keep building stalls  
in which to house them.

Mom called me crying three days after Dallas.  
She'd sung "Here Comes the Sun" as a friend  
walked down the aisle and her cousin  
died in a restaurant in Alabama.  
We had to put my dog down  
the same day we drove to the funeral and it felt  
fitting. Appropriate for this clusterfuck of a year.  
How many days, how many hours between shootings?  
How many have I ignored because I can't mourn them  
separately anymore? In my family  
I'm the heartless one, and here I am, still crying.

# Triage

I excise my anger through scalpelwork—  
to get the quiet back, I'd carve down to bone.  
Remove the moment to remove the hurt.

I lay you out, slice the belly first,  
slip my hand inside to find the growth—  
I excise my anger through scalpelwork.

Before the tumult that shook our secret world,  
I trusted your heart as if it were my own  
removed. To halt the momentum of hurt

I unearth the organ, scrape off the cells that burst  
from your raised voice. As all good doctors know,  
when speech is not enough, a scalpel will work.

The eyes I cannot meet, I cleanse of dirt,  
rinse the residue of ire from your throat.  
As I relive the moment, the more it hurts.

I'll stitch up the body and act, as I've rehearsed,  
as if there were no wrong. Change is always worse, so  
I've excised my anger through scalpelwork.  
Remove the moment, remove the hurt.

## The Minotaur Gets a Nose Ring

The Minotaur gets a nose ring to be  
ironic. A septum piercing to be  
exact. He goes to the bar to be  
a little less himself and dances with anyone  
who doesn't mention it. To be  
gilded with a symbol that meant follower  
but doesn't mean follower anymore.  
To remind himself when he feels too bee  
fy that he is bull, is bovine—that he half rhymes  
with divine and is alive from divine inter  
ference. To embrace his wild side  
and by wild he means too be  
autiful for human skin to hold.

# Undressing My Mother

*after Robert Hass*

I talk in storms, in myth  
to skirt the subject. What I have to say  
is said in whispers in closed rooms  
while my brother or sister  
stand guard at the door.

The worst of it is  
                                  she's going to read this  
The worst of it is  
                                  she reads everything I write

Her body is not novelty. I have seen  
the mirrors of my mother  
stacked endlessly upright  
as she undresses in the evening.  
I have followed the trajectory of my own shape  
as it parades past windows I imagine  
the Lommens have been shocked into ignoring.

Look at my mother in the mirror,  
where she's harmless.  
Did this power of hers      to meet  
your eye    as she removes her bra,  
to hold a conversation stepping out  
of lace underwear,   begin in hospital?  
Leave your hand too near,  
unattended, and   she will press it  
                          to the hollow in her breast  
where the port was following the blood  
clot. What   does   she   want  
me to believe? I have come to know  
it doesn't take a wholeness to survive.

Pray for us sisters, now and at the hour of

I was the one who found her. My dad adding more Italian seasoning to the burgers than he could get away with with her in the kitchen, leaving out the Worcestershire sauce altogether. The three of us in the living room, close enough to smell the sizzle, far enough not to have to help and my brother volunteered for me to check on her—

Looking back, she was naked. She couldn't have been, looking back, just woken from a nap, a stop by the bathroom before dinner, but her presence in my mind feels naked, pale against the red against the tile, slumped on the floor, as pale as the tile—

Dad told me to call 911; I handed him the phone.

Pray for us sisters that now is not the hour of

What is secret? What is s a c r e d?  
Who gave you the right to enter  
the bathroom, to soak your socks  
in my mother's blood and track it  
on the tile? Did I  
open this door to avoid my anger?

This was after the surgery. After my parents' banquet without my  
parents,  
my brother making me laugh on the drive, absence drowning in  
denial.

There is a letter hidden in my drawer where she says goodbye.  
There have been too many times my brother watched me cry.

A year to the day, my mother drove us to the banquet and she was  
cruel and I cried. She made me hug her and in my mind she was  
anesthetized and under a knife and I wanted to hug a different her  
and I didn't want to hug her.

The worst is  
she's going to read  
The worst of it  
everything I write



My mother is most vicious when she feels turned upon—  
don't look at her directly. In the mirror,  
she is breakable and therefore human.  
Follow the silver of her scars—she jokes  
they should put a zipper in, for next time.  
I am not afraid of her nakedness or the seam  
where they took the cancer out, gave her a metal heart.

How is it continually surprising  
that my mother isn't nice?  
Sickly sweet, sure, southern belle,  
sure, birdwatcher, naturelover, yes,  
all these things and more,  
I have been blest with the best  
of parents. It is sacrilege  
to speak against her.

What gives me the right to unzip her for you?  
To shove my mother to the center of the room  
and turn the AC on until the point is clearer.  
Does stranding her in the cold afford us clarity?

I love my mother. After the cancer and the surgery,  
the chemo, radiation, the blood clot and the bypass.  
After the cruelty and the tears and the distance now to say this  
without a sibling at the door, standing guard.

There have been too many times we almost said goodbye.  
This is a catalogue of when you made me cry.  
Stay for us sisters, now and forever.

# George Longenecker

## I'm sentimental for the Paleolithic

since I'm kind of a retro guy  
who's never much liked the Neolithic,  
or those neoconservatives with their guns,  
bombs and money, telling me to get a job,  
when I'd rather be reading Whitman or  
Thoreau and sitting under  
    a tree on a spring day in Lascaux,  
    really—life was easy,  
    plenty of leisure time and—  
    as long as your flints were sharp—  
enough food to go around,  
we had time to paint,  
enjoy a cup of Bordeaux,  
eat roast trout and fresh strawberries—  
    that Neolithic was too damned much work,  
    growing grain 8-5 every day,  
when we could be picking Chanterelles  
and spearing goats in the woods—  
oh they make fun of us now—  
    *savages, cave men*  
but we lived longer and stronger,  
we Paleolithic men and women,  
    yes, back then women had some power,  
    and those cave paintings were damned good—  
we had time to draw flowers, to watch stars,  
we counted seasons by the night sky,  
knew when solstice was coming,  
then we'd make love all night;  
    our world was empty then,  
    yet so full of everything we needed—  
wrap me in fur and take me back  
to the Paleolithic any day.

## Skull in the passenger seat

of a '33 Dodge, its rusted metal worn smooth  
by 80 years of blowing sand and dust  
across the high Nevada desert.  
A rancher with a sense of humor and art—  
O'Keefe with a little Picasso and Warhol—  
has set this steer's skull  
in the seat atop a rusty steel shaft  
sticking up where the brain used to be.  
The steer stares east  
(at least as well as a steer can stare  
with only eye sockets and no brain)  
out across the village of Baker,  
and east to the Great Basin of Utah.  
Tourists on their way to a national park  
stop to take photos of this macabre desert traveler—  
a steer with no legs or hooves  
in a car with no wheels.  
Maybe we're fascinated because it's so stark—  
like the high desert,  
or maybe it's because we'll be there someday—  
our own bleached skeletons  
in silent cars rusting into desert,  
prickly pear cacti poking through where once  
there were wheels that could speed us anywhere,  
skull sockets where once were eyes that could see  
snow on mountains high above this desert.

## Nana remembers

a frozen lake where she skated  
under clear winter sky with pink clouds,  
where chickadees called.  
She felt free on ice,  
and could glide forever into western light.

Nana tells of winters  
when there was snow,  
summers when a girl  
could wade in ponds,  
where painted turtles basked on logs.

It's one hundred ten at noon.  
The sea laps eaves of cottages like a huge seal—  
but seals are gone—  
sun, hot by dawn as it rises purple  
and orange over the Atlantic,  
chews away at seawalls and beach houses,  
then washes its way inland to the lakes.

The future's begun, Nana said  
that first year the big storms came.  
She shows us her skates,  
tells us of frozen lakes,  
how she cut long lines,  
and perfect figure eights.

## Ghost Dancers at Wounded Knee

Rifles cracked,  
blood turned to ice on snow,  
west wind blew knife-cold  
out of Black Hills.  
Ghost Dancers' shirts  
embroidered with porcupine quills,  
frayed by bullets,  
still clothe their bones,  
colors long-since faded  
after a hundred twenty seven winters,  
a hundred ninety seven Lakota  
in a trench at Pine Ridge.  
Silent except for echoes of rifles,  
pleas of Hunkpapa and Miniconju,  
children's cold screams,  
Ghost Dancers' voices on the wind.

# Liquidation

A shoe store at the mall,  
which hasn't been doing enough business,  
has a dozen signs plastered over its windows:  
*Liquidation 50% Off—End of Season Clearance*  
The manager unlocks a security gate,  
the store is open; customers file in.

Piles of shoes: sneakers, sandals,  
baby shoes, oxfords, loafers,  
running shoes, hiking boots, high heels,  
moccasins, yoga shoes, work boots  
too many to shoes to count—  
everything cut.

***Liquidation:***  
***to do away with especially by killing;***  
***to convert (assets) into cash.***

Treblinka, Bosnia, Guatemala, Rwanda,  
a security gate is unlocked,  
they are ordered to enter  
single file for processing,  
half to one side, half to the other,  
eventually all will go.

Sand Creek, Warsaw, Katlyn Forest, Kosovo—  
there's always a reason,  
why all must go efficiently,  
there's always a reason for liquidation, for clearance.  
Afterwards:  
piles of shoes.

Large shoes, baby shoes,  
piled as though they might be worn again,  
but other shoes lie forgotten  
by the side of a dusty road somewhere,  
too many shoes to count,  
too many places to remember.

# Taylor Gardner

## molding (kinship with the eldritch)<sup>1</sup>

honeysuckle cherubim wings were  
shaped from the petals crushed in between god's  
hands. soft like pulp, they still bleed when they hear his voice.  
seraphim wings were torn into crow feathers  
were carved from thorns and the edges  
of leaves. they bent and cut and survived and  
god's hands still wear the scars. they hurt to look at.  
god didn't make the archangel's wings.  
they made themselves from the  
chaos left behind. they stole the dark, the  
before, and held the horror sharpened from  
the light. god smiles when he looks at them  
and the wings shiver back. there is nothing  
beautiful in misshapen petals. the book did not say beauty,  
god did not say bloom, he said creation and  
everything is ugly about that.

<sup>1</sup> An atheist looks at the biblical version of angels and feels a kinship

## **we are different parts of the same thing**

a girl is told she was made in the image of  
god and she wonders which part, wonders  
how it is good to be part of scraps.  
god pulled out his herbivore teeth one molar  
at a time, left nothing left but ripped flesh and  
blood and us. he carved angels out of the  
bone, peeled them into flowers,  
and made them into the carnivore  
he couldn't bring himself to be. twisted  
demons from nerves and they are nothing but  
pain, eating the leftover bone shards in  
a surgical endeavor to try and  
not feel such agony anymore.  
god smiled, sunken mouth and gums and all,  
holes where we're supposed to  
be, and said "eat. think of me in the hunger  
and know that to be hollowed is to be  
hallowed, that there is beauty in the  
emptiness and that you are empty with ache."



## lost cause

she felt too much and saw too much in a  
world that would not look back—in a god who  
would not answer. she was created without  
wings, only a force of fury; beautiful  
and beastly, a dragon inside of a snake,  
and she wondered if it was because he  
knew she was to fall. she feels too much  
and she cannot believe that there is something  
larger—how could anything exist  
in a greater magnitude to what she feels?  
she does not believe but she will blame.

## short observations by angels<sup>1</sup>

i. that ringing in my ears when the sky takes us sings like ecstasy cradled in their throats—i am bound by the vibrations in my bones—by the angels digging into my skin—by the altar i'm being pried open into.

ii. absolution tastes like finishing silence, clementine and salt—it's pinned by the wings on god's bed—spilling hallelujahs to the sheets and feeling the light leave marks bruised onto its thighs.

iii. god belongs to the devil in the way you moan his name—the way you carve desire into a halo—and how you then break it into horns—god and desire are hidden claws that drag down your back and into your hair—mouthing prayers and verses down to the skeleton beneath your flesh.

iv. when god said kneel—lucifer was the first to say “kinky” and was the first to say “no”—all glowing hoard before a dragon—and then he was the first to take power while on his knees and make a crown out of bowing—make dragon wings out of gold.

v. saints lick constellations onto your lips and novas in your mouths until you are bursting—they have no wings—just names they make you scream until they feel like they can fly

vi. creation, creation, *creation*—

<sup>1</sup> The atheist rewrites Genesis into an orgy

## **god is just a personification of things we're too scared to say**

she learned how to pray through the mouthful of words  
caught in her throat by spitting onto the paper  
and turning the shards into lines that spoke  
to her better than any other god ever could.  
yes, she worships. yes, she aches. but isn't that just faith?  
that she's still coughing up slivers and loose thoughts,  
that she's not letting her blood drown her from the inside,  
is just faith in a day where she won't have to hurt to write.  
dandelion seeds and sun stretched rays will  
be all she needs to grow a confessional instead of being one.  
she believes—in herself.

# Greg Tuleja

## Escaping

When we still had voices we used to sing  
in two parts, our favorite rounds and folk tunes,  
perhaps an aria, but then the slipping,  
the wavering began, and we knew that soon

we would become nonessential, unknown  
and invisible, obliged to silence  
our own breathing, a distant, muffled groan,  
a gasp, a sudden slash of dissonance.

When they drew their knives we felt the high breeze  
that spun itself down toward the hard foothills  
and whistled through a bend of chestnut trees  
where we could hide, so penitent and still,

so insignificant in the thin air,  
huddled behind a shallow spray of leaves,  
a sanctuary where they would not dare  
to look, a place where we might start to grieve.

But the slim tendrils parted, on a cloud  
of gray mist, and they did look, they did see  
their wayward daughters, resonant and proud,  
but damaged by a brilliant memory

of blood screams and the bright, blazing chaos  
to which we must return, bearing the pain  
of renunciation, and a last loss  
of hope, two songbirds trembling in the rain.

## The Woman in 302

This morning the woman in 302  
rolled the piano toward the window again  
and this time out it went, from three stories up,  
a didactic gesture, she later explained,  
rather than an aggressive one  
although she did admit to being surprised  
and perhaps disappointed  
that no one was hurt.

She must have been more singularly determined  
this time, and able to command the resolve  
that is needed to do such a thing,  
but we always knew that she possessed  
enough leverage of spirit and control  
of her imagination to reach  
for grand, existential achievements,  
drawing on a cunning strength of personality,  
pushing through a tangle of ethical contradictions,  
and finally getting it to go,  
a great black blur against the yellow brick  
and indifferent silences of our building.

Afterwards we were told that she had no regrets  
for so dramatically annihilating convention  
in order to grasp a dream,  
and watching her, in this her finest triumph  
we all realized that we were in the presence  
of greatness, even the poor, shaken, anonymous  
pedestrians on Madison Avenue, who might eventually  
be persuaded, she had often said,  
to take more responsibility  
for where they walk.

# Spontaneous Human Combustion

Not many would, I think, believe it true  
that Auntie might explode while pulling weeds.  
Ridiculous! Impossible, they'd say,  
there must be other reasons, deeper clues,  
as fire trucks careen to intercede,  
too late for Auntie, who has burned away.

But let's not close our minds, it could be true  
that high metabolism, added to  
a taste for ion-busting alcohol  
might cause a spark, a flame, a fireball!

It's not as bad as swarms of killer bees,  
or being mauled by raving chimpanzees,  
dismemberment by packs of wild boars,  
that open window on the eighteenth floor,  
a trash compactor that we might be crushed in.  
I'd make the choice: spontaneous combustion.

## Dear Oscar

The tomb in Pere Lachaise surrounded,  
a murmuring crowd of ardent admirers,  
cameras zooming, tiny stones clicking on stone  
to anchor scribbled messages  
to this imagined friend, the florid celebrity poet,  
stopped now, here in this shadowy corner  
far from home, the Dublin pubs and lecture halls,  
the London prisons.

They seem young, these French groupies,  
non-readers, I suspect, unfamiliar with Lord Savile  
or Lady Windermere, as they aim their cell phones,  
and with blue chalk and black marker  
ignore the warning, Please Do Not Deface The Monument,  
affectionate tributes scrawled to dear Oscar,  
You will shine for us always, with Truth and Courage,  
Your Life imitated your Art, How I wish I had known you.

Stepping back then, the full view of the strange sculpture,  
an odd creature without category, stretching forward,  
leaning out defiantly toward the world,  
a bizarre figurehead sailing into the wind,  
attended by these faithful pilgrims,  
his name obscured by intricate strands of lipstick kisses,  
pressed to the cold marble like a wreath of roses.  
Dear Oscar we love you.

## No Thomas Hardy

Shocked by another birthday, I dreamed of books  
I will never read, nearly out of time  
for Margaret Atwood and Rupert Brooke,  
and all the abstruse Russians. How, through crimes

of idleness that I dared to commit  
did I squander a rare and precious chance  
to discover the daring, lavish wit  
that seemed to glimmer in the dry distance,

and how so fiercely did I remain blind  
to breathless, dying fires, year after year,  
to be finally defeated, resigned  
never to know Count Vronsky or King Lear?

What might be heard through all this glorious burning?  
Just the low, plaintive sound of a page, turning.



# Joanne Monte

## Nowhere on the Map

We're driving through  
the plains of an untold story,  
heading west into a country that is ours  
and not ours, into a rural sense  
of lost spirit. We pass cautionary signs  
authorizing: "USE OF DEADLY FORCE,"  
where in the distance, a chain-link fence  
marks an underground silo not shown  
on the map. We continue to follow  
this road, looking ahead into the daylight  
glaring back at us and the landscape,  
our eyes excavating the bones  
of one lone farm. We see the barn  
stranded in the middle of nowhere  
in the arms of a broken-down fence;  
a one-time plow; contaminated well water;  
and the old homestead, stripped bare,  
and bending down in the dirt.  
Every now and then the sun's rays  
will strike like a match; each one  
a tiny bomb of flame bursting  
in the wind and chill of lost promise;  
a desire less visible, but scrolling  
on either side of us through the archives  
of faded color. We see the relics  
of a ruined renaissance,  
the machinations of the political  
that were never put on record,  
a ritual of too many mistakes  
concealed in the evolving sorrow  
of lost tribes. We are somewhere,  
and nowhere in the heart  
of sheer memorabilia lingering  
on the corner of Main; the church  
anointing the sick, the disabled,

the crumbling walls of the courthouse  
and jail; and on the other side,  
a school, no longer in use, but holding  
within its walls the day's lessons.

# The Source of Our Power

Living with the havoc  
of every generation:

annihilation

diffusing a blast of mushroom clouds,

unwanted testing grounds,  
for years blitzed and salted with radiation,

the newsprint of the world tossed  
on our front lawns, pages ripped out

by the gut, smeared on our hands, our shirts,

even our children

as they race through the past  
flying airplanes and kites

with the earliest perception of power

stored in the genetic code.

Prior scenes had divulged—  
as later scenes will—a race

to sharpen the implements of destruction.  
In cool, white-washed laboratories,

stainless steel counters hold secrets  
steaming in beakers, test tubes, crucibles—

these being the solutions

that defy the true source of our power.

# War Casualties

I

When it was reported  
in the news that rebels had been killed  
in an ambush, and that cargo planes

from the north had bombed  
that part of the country not protected  
by barbed wire or walls,

two million people had already been lost  
in a fire ignited by oil and water.  
Many children had to crawl into a thorn forest.

Others were left under the scalding sun  
of a war zone. A map of that country  
had revealed nothing of its past but borders.

Cities had been founded and lost  
where even the thorn bushes lay siege.  
Below that wilderness, there exists another,

of dark and pastel greens to be burned  
again and again until the day  
it surrenders itself to the desert.

II

It's been proven—to be proven again  
that the clubs of outrage breaking windows,  
ribs, the laws of continuity,  
shall become the spades of history,  
digging the ground to place us there—  
and yes, we are still enslaved, chained,  
overworked: a deck we stand on,  
the rope we reel into the wind  
like a clothesline to hang out our memories

of the white shirt our father wore,  
ripped open and slashed with his blood,

the torn flesh in the overalls of childhood  
that our mother wept over, clung to;  
her blue dress whipped on the line with intensity,  
still stained with sweat, blood, semen;  
the dress in which she pleaded  
on her knees; hid our faces in,  
telling us to be still,  
*do not look back, do not . . .*

### III

Where it begins, it will end  
with the torched house, the slaughtered cattle;  
at the well, digesting the raw flesh of the children  
in its subterranean gut; at the river  
coughing up the mucus of toxic waste,  
the garb of ethnic cleansing  
scrubbed on its rocks.

It will end  
at the cemetery in Dragodan;  
in the village of a chosen language,  
suffocating from smoke; in the fields  
that have orphaned and killed our children—  
it will end at the border of the imaginary line  
drawn between the state and the shadow-state.

But what country is this  
and what will it take?

*Guns—(as in any country at war)  
It will take guns . . .*

# Nathaniel Cairney

## Bumblebee Children

Black-and-yellow fuzz stirs  
sparkling swords of emerald grass.

This one was trapped on her side,  
rolling like a wounded buffalo

felled at the foot of a mole mountain.  
Something heavy weighs her down.

Leaning over at the knees,  
I extend a bent white metal rod

that once kept curtains from falling.  
She climbs aboard,

then looks at me as if to say,  
“Well? Now what?”

I lift my stick toward the fence,  
toward the close-cropped bushes,

toward the neighbor’s house,  
toward the horizon,

toward forever,  
and murmur, “There you go, sweetheart.”

My youngest son, wooden saber in hand,  
cocks his head to one side.

“You call it ‘sweetheart’?”  
Truly, I did not mean to.

The words emerged on their own,  
without thought.

This is what happens  
when one spends years of a life

helping to lift smaller creatures from the ground.  
Spring's first bumblebees become your children.

# Each a Wildflower

See  
this bowl of wildflowers, each  
plucked by my son's small fingers,  
placed on the counter,  
chosen for a new existence  
in clean, cool water.

See  
them bloom, thirsty,  
dying as soon they are born,  
aging, molding, decaying,  
a darkening mass shriveling,  
staining, returning to earth.

Remember  
what each was and still is,  
an idea, a germ, a seed,  
one among trillions  
selected for love's service,  
a child carving one beautiful scar more

On his mother's flowering heart.



# Gravel

The moon brought light but not heat.  
Shivering men chained wagons to idling tractors,  
numb fingers shaking.

Exhaust growls filled the darkness.  
With a clank and a rumble  
the whole mess of everything began to warm.

Inside the cab, he dreamed of gravel.  
Just last week, he and his father  
turned a roadside pile into a driveway.

Their calloused hands gripped shovels,  
their boots the ground,  
their voices the grit from last night's cigarettes.

His father spoke of the sea,  
a strange naked moment of unrepressed longing.  
The old man had seen it once, decades ago.

If you missed it that much, the boy asked,  
couldn't you have gone again?  
If only it were that easy, son, his father had replied.

In the darkness,  
waiting for the diesel to thaw,  
he wondered: why wasn't it that easy?

# Potato Harvest

Fallen potatoes litter  
the rond-point's southwest gutter,  
rootless,  
lost and jostled  
from towering wagons  
into mud and puddles,  
huddled and crushed like victims  
from some civil war  
unfolding inside  
dusty ash-filled tractor cabs.

Gleaners slip into fields,  
ghosts in ragged sweaters,  
naked hands grasping  
pitchforks and sacks,  
hunting scraps next to highways.  
Brussels-bound black sedans  
roar past.  
They disappear  
into the crushing gray.

# The Last American in Belgium

Crunchy maple leaves  
stir in the garden,  
turned over and over  
by something unseen.

Beyond the fence,  
beyond the pasture,  
a solitary figure haunts  
a narrow broken road.

Two headlights reveal  
a man, holding something  
in his right hand.  
He twirls it without thinking,

as if he has done it  
a million times before,  
as if the thin dull object  
were an extension of his body.

The car passes,  
obscuring the man for a moment.  
When the street is clear again,  
he is gone,

swallowed by shadows  
that stretch toward the village  
where women huddle  
in dim tidy rooms

and grip prayer beads  
as the harvest moon rises.  
It was only three generations  
ago, they remind us,

that nothing on earth could stop  
what had no wish to be stopped.  
And so,  
we were invited.

My creased-brow neighbor  
turns from the window.  
Wind flusters shutters  
and rattles glass panes.

A single light illuminates  
his green chair.  
His steady hands  
offer a thick book

with bone-white pages  
and a brown leather cover.  
Here lie the dead, he tells me,  
yours too.

Each page a catalogue  
of ghosts,  
a waning light's gift,  
a generation's warning.

# Steven Dale Davison

## A Sleepless Sense of Found

Fog gathers all night on the oak above us,  
in the meadow all around us.  
As the stars step back behind the mist,  
the curled brown wetted leaves  
stutter down through the branches of the tree.  
We lie close together in our bags, talking.  
We steep there, we sink deeper into the share  
as points of correspondence pile up  
in layers from our stories.  
My hungry tongue and lips turn demure,  
my wonder rises without peak  
until a sleepless sense of found enfolds me.

## Sowise

In cooldim of greygreen a beenman  
is grinseen, a newway to followfoot.  
The woodsing a feeltune. The moonroots  
of shoots an liveseed are wingloose  
and bringhymn to yoursideside in loomlight  
in mineseye. Tremblesure, our wesong  
is heartlong, rises in treebreezes and leaves,  
is strong and sowise, so . . .

# You Are Leaving

This monstrous looming,  
distant but oncoming,  
like the smoke of a burning  
village cloaking the landscape,  
promises a razing.

Ash falls,  
thickening in the non-light  
in a courtyard deserted of footfalls.  
The fountain is dry.

Night draws nigh.  
The scent of ends chokes out “Soon, too.”

# O My Heart

You and I will be very good.  
We will let her get round the corner,  
wait two beats, maybe three—long enough  
to know for sure she's not coming back.  
(Then I don't care what she hears.)  
You will lunge, then, I know.  
And I will throw my arms around your neck  
and grapple your howling desperation  
until I've reattached the chain.  
But I won't let you go; no,  
I will murmur something soothing,  
some wordless, tuneless, hopeless—.  
    I will cling to your quivering  
until I feel it's safe to merely rest there  
with my face buried to the tears  
in your familiar must. The long,  
long night we will sleeplessly entrust  
the darkness with our pain  
and wait to see: does the wrong  
depart with the sunrise,  
or cruelly taunt us  
from the limit of your run?  
But, O my heart, I promise:  
I will not desert you.  
I will not leave you all alone.



# Wordsmouth Harbor Founder

I rage into the phone.  
Heedless? No. I feel  
the windlash crack the lines,  
I bid the waves crash me 'gainst the pier.  
The wordstorm pounds with sounds  
my lips curl to form, I exult  
as I hurl the handset down  
into the consequences,  
at last past any caring  
that the relationship is sheering  
its moorings and plunging  
into forsaken haven danger.  
(Ill the fell tongue tastes after anger  
jettisons the heaviest cargo,  
while the unlashd chests careen  
across the lightless decks below.)  
As I turn from the phone stand,  
the ghost-ship heels toward the maelstrom,  
rudderless, sails shredded by the gale.  
As I walk down the hall, the empty hull  
tips over the grimace lips and shudders  
as it surrenders to the swirl.  
Wracked and groaning,  
cracked open past mending,  
way past hailing any rescue,  
I sink. I drink past drowning  
the deep oblivion overhead.  
I slowly settle on the bed.  
I listen in the darkness to the echo  
of all the reckless things I've said.

# Heather ‘Byrd’ Roberts

## Undoing

*To burn it like cedar  
I request another dream  
I need a forest fire  
—James Blake*

in the forge, i see mama pulling bada out of the flames. smoke folding into itself. bada’s irises now an extinguishable forest, noncombustible. tears evaporate from my curling lips, head unrests from mama’s chest. my body, once rubble, does not collapse. the limo driver masters rolling in reverse back to the only two-lotted gingerbread house in chatham. the sun sets in the east. it is not mourning. eyes remain shut. dwelling in the undecided but my bones know.

that poem should’ve started with us walking backwards into a funeral home, west on sixty-seventh. the waiting area on the left, the main office—right. our mouths unauthorizing this contract, suppressing all calls for second opinions, renegeing the invitation to this internment, or service, or whatever the fuck we were being offered. we insist on another option to say goodbye where my twenty-two-year-old self does not witness bada’s body burning in chamber. never inhaling death at two thousand degrees fahrenheit.

in this poem, i settle for the bits that got pummeled into dust. a phoenix existing inside blue blown glass around my neck. an eighty-seven-year-old ribbon, grounded, i never saw incinerated. this would be the only memory i’d wear.

## Paralyzed

When walking, we needed three things: the silver walker, the worn black wheelchair, and the will to be mobile. Only eight or nine but I was willing to catch her if she fell. I was strong enough to walk behind as she glided her weighted left leg across the mustard yellow floor. Her muscles wouldn't cooperate the way she wanted them to. Told the doctors to go to hell.

She lifted her left foot off the floor and slowly traveled down her Hyde Park condo hallway. It sounds like an easy task but the stroke took this privilege. Left her droopy and immobile and reverted to infant. Seventy-three years old, learning how to walk again.

They say doctors make the worst patients. We should add nurses to that list too.

# Keloid

I got my ears pierced  
for the first time at eighteen. Sat in a chair  
and allowed this stranger to bore holes in me,  
willingly. Replaced the gaps with diamonds.  
I was handed instructions for cleaning:  
take a cotton swab twice a day, dip it in alcohol,  
swirl it around the site. Twist often.

Terrified of Bada's warnings,  
I cleaned it. Made sure the skin  
around the stud didn't hold it hostage.  
Form a forgotten memory. Become infected.  
Hold an extra boulder where beauty  
used to be. Our secrets, mostly keloids,  
are from her. I dodged the majority of the knives  
that carved my legs. Caught all of the words.

I tell myself she didn't mean it.  
I still bled. I healed. Still left a narrative behind.

## Elegy for Breath

The only time a party erupted in my house  
a balloon was born.

Bada's voice crackled. Her smile,  
slightly slanted to the left, teeth coated in  
Marlboro and Folgers. Her breath mostly ether.  
The clots stole the parts of her voice  
that reminded us of Walgreen after bath splash.

But this day, a kaleidoscope of balloons  
were blown. Tied with fingers not quite  
old enough to stay up past ten. The colors  
glided across the room cloaking  
the brawl the walls carried.

She swat at the balloons with her right hand,  
just like she did us after the stroke.  
She rumbled from laughter.  
This day, the roof of her mouth swallowed  
every *fuck you* from the ceiling. Her breath  
anesthetic.

We giggled away gravity.

# How I Named Her

I have known  
babies' tongues  
to swallow English  
and giggle.  
The sounds  
adults' mouths  
have forgotten  
were prescribed.

My teeth,  
barely breaking  
through gums  
dusted in formula,  
swung past options  
to baptize her.

At two,  
my mouth  
too infant,  
crusted in apple sauce  
pressed its lips  
into drums.  
I was too rebel  
to carve *Grandma*  
into the roof with tongue.

My native dialect,  
coated in plantains,  
exchanged Bibi for Bada.  
Kiswahili for a new code.

# Greenheart

i can see you even when you are hiding  
even when your bulky sweater covers your ribs  
and your leggings cover the fine sleek scabs  
on your thighs  
and your sunglasses shield the broken vessels of blood  
that pool around your eyes  
holding a memorial for your heart  
like old friends gathered in a graveyard  
talk to me  
open your mouth like a chimney flue  
and let the smoke roll out  
i will not move my body away from your side  
until the raging fire turns to ash  
and when it does  
i will collect the ash on my fingers  
and put on you a new mark  
and whisper in your ear all the ways in which  
you are rising up  
until i see your soul is peeking out  
of your body  
like sunlight  
through the opening  
of springs gray clouds

when i die  
and no one  
looks at you  
the way i did  
and no one sits  
in the darkness  
and listens  
to your stories anymore  
and you lay still  
and feel  
and wonder  
who will mirror  
my existence  
who will remind  
me i am still alive  
who will beam love  
upon me as i sleep  
who will take  
my hand when  
the shadows melt  
one into another  
and all becomes  
black and fear  
when i die  
and you miss me  
and the candle dancing  
on the nightstand  
melts your emotions down  
to waxy tears  
and all you want  
to do is hear  
my voice  
whisper to you  
like sips of hot soup  
restoring you once again  
to health  
when i am gone  
and these hands  
that have held you well  
are scattered upon



wave and field  
and no longer are fused  
into five magic wands  
casting spells of comfort  
upon all you aching parts  
and you are sick  
with grief  
and pain finds a way  
into every nerve and pore  
and no drink can comfort the separation  
it is here you will  
find me  
for it is here  
in the sorrow  
i will wait

*left to live on earth without you*

close the door behind you  
keep the robbers away  
the ones who steal my confidence  
and the ones who steal your attention  
lights off nothing on  
only our energy in this dark space  
all colors gone  
illusions melted down  
harsh lines blended together  
like you and me  
full moon and cloudless sky  
someone wants to be noticed it seems  
the crack in our curtains creates a beam of light  
softly falling across our body  
a silver band that molds around every curve  
keeping promises  
staying true

*june full moon*

maple is wearing her red satin nighty  
in broad daylight again  
swaying her shoulders and hips  
enjoying being enjoyed  
wind came and swept her up in just the right spot  
she giggled  
hiding nothing  
it seems she has forgotten her sprouting phase  
and her brittle exposure in winter  
i wonder if she even remembers herself  
before her red satin nighty  
captured craved attention

*false confidence*

like the shy stars  
i too  
come out slowly  
waiting for stillness  
and silence  
waiting for intimacy  
and wonder  
i am not interested  
in a love that  
drowns me out anymore  
i am tired of  
disappearing in all  
their glory  
i want a love  
that draws me out  
and bears witness  
to my subtle existence  
connecting my dots  
and celebrating  
the beautiful constellation  
that symbolizes  
all i am  
and  
all i am yet to be

*sunny ex*

# Ashton Vaughn

## Blackbird Looming

Who turns the hands of the clock,  
fastidious and careful, over  
and over again and again?  
Who animates the chipmunk  
that gently lifts himself out of the earth,  
and once, twice, snaps his head to the sky  
to peer at the sun he has forgotten?  
What is it that moves in the wren  
to urge her to sing—  
what is it that calls forth the blackbirds,  
year after year,  
to flood the skies in raven waves  
and leave the muddled face of Death  
burnished like a sigil in our thought?

I know not why when the music begins  
my feet turn to dancing and my voice to song,  
but I do know there is something  
lively and wild and wonderful  
coursing through each life, each body,  
and that every time I give myself over to it  
I can once again feel the sun shining upon my face.

When the raven waves arrive,  
and the song of the wren is diminished,  
I think I shall be waiting,  
not sitting—but dancing and singing,  
ready to greet them with whatever song the Earth may have of me.

# Through the Valley of Mount Chimaera

If the silence breaks,  
I hope your gold crumbles upon me like dust;

Caught between the cusp,  
we tasted a brevity, not short and sweet,  
but as consuming as the flame which burns  
on testamentated trust.

And as I glimmer, a newfound thing,  
a burning blaze of aurum,  
enshrouded in a majesty  
like the decadence of boredom,

I twist against the agony  
that looms like Hades' quarry;  
a flame to raze a man's fell hope,  
a prince's claim to whoredom.

Toll the bells,  
Death's keeling knell  
shall palpitate the earth.  
March in robes of sanguine red  
through obsidian gates of Hell.

# Halcyon

Snakes slithering in the undergrowth,  
gloomy murk and despair  
and leaves blackened by rot;

Weeds reaching clumsily through the turned earth  
—earthworms, those little tendrils of life,  
spindling along like fibers of the mortal system;

Orchestral buzz of flies,  
stagnant water and algal bloom  
(which tells of death and life,  
death and life;)

Upon the earth, like gravedirt turned,  
onerous ants trail back and forth—  
a machine stronger than any of man's;

And among the swamp a heron stands,  
tall as a tower, and just as mighty,  
his cloudy down as soft and blue as wisdom:

This is another way of life.

Halcyon is a place in one's mind;  
here, the birds fly from the earth,  
and back to the earth they must go.  
here, the weeds die, and come back,  
and die and die again.

They're coming back as strong and as lovely as ever.

## ***Hallelujah, Hallelujah,*** **as God Looked Away**

Washed up from the bay:  
I am driftwood.  
I am bound and I am impermanent,  
I am beautiful and I am careless.

Salty water seeps from my head into the earth  
as I lie in the grass on the shore by the bay,  
as I lie in the fields that are faded.

My hair is woven into the ground—  
I am the roots!  
and my fingertips are stems,  
sprouting and growing  
and searching for sunlight  
in this faded field  
on the shore by the bay,

Where I believe I am surrounded  
by the company of friends  
until I notice  
that the skies are empty and the birds are quiet  
and I lean to my side  
to whisper to the resting wolf  
that “the world has gone silent”  
but the wolf has gone silent also  
and beside him are the birds  
who are absent from the sky  
and their throats don’t hum  
and their wings don’t flutter  
but their feathers still hold  
the luster of an old life’s glory,

and so I sit beside them  
and I sing the songs that they can no longer sing for me.

*Hallelujah.*



# Song of Solomon

I. Names inscribed on trees,  
scratched along fences and bridges—  
    *but we carved our names into the sky,*  
cut out the stars and kept them like secrets in our pockets.

II. The night I shed my clothes  
you watched me.  
You wouldn't even show your face,  
and later told me to get some sleep;  
pixels glared back at an empty stare.  
    *You couldn't show your face, so you watched instead.*

III. The way the earth livens before the rain.  
Melodies hummed softly, held between the lips.  
    Lavender.  
    Bumblebee.  
    Salt of the ocean.  
Wildflowers, freshly cut and pressed.

IV. shatter,shatter, shatter, shatter, shatter, shatter,  
shatter, shatter, ,shatter, shatter .

V. ***I love my body but only in the dark.***

VI. Did I ever carry you?  
Slung over my shoulder, the wind in our hair,  
running just for the hell of it?  
Did I ever carry you?

VII. You see, love,  
we were never creatures of permanence.  
We douse our skin in ephemeral perfume,  
laced with rose or violet  
or whatever else was once new and beautiful,  
and we make short love,  
and then we wash ourselves of all of it  
and begin again.

VIII. But I still hold on.

There is no desperate hope.

There is no foolish naivete.

There is only truth:

that when my lungs collapsed

and you were suffocating

I pulled you out

and I carefully pressed each of your blooms

inside the walls of my notebook

and now each pressed flower

I wear like a seal upon my arm and my heart,

stronger than death, the grave,

it's jealousy diminishing the very flames of Hades.

*IX. I loved my body, but only in the dark.*

*X. I left your body alone in my dark.*

# Linda Speckhals

## Death Wears a Speedo

His bones chatter when his body trembles a laugh  
you're too bony for a red speedo  
she said as if  
he hadn't heard that one before

Sometimes, he tells her,  
But sometimes even this  
Speedo can't protect me  
And he clutches his scythe because  
even though he's shed his black robe, he may  
still have a job to do, even on the beach on  
a hot summer day

especially on the beach on a hot summer day

Sometimes, he says,  
I just want to feel the sun  
warming my bones

Are you the type,  
he asks,  
who never imagines  
what it would be like  
if you weren't scissored into shape  
by those who look up  
and assume the perfect sky  
has no clouds

The type  
who never dreams of glitter wings and  
floating like a flower  
on the spring breeze  
afraid of being more bird than human

though your blood would still vibrate in music and you  
would still love the sounds of thinking and the feeling of  
skin on skin

To be so much more, like Death in a speedo, lying on the  
beach, unafraid of the stares, soaking in the sun  
and listening to the  
beat  
beat  
beat  
of the ocean  
as it pulses through the veins of the world

# Borderlands

She traced a line in the summer sand,  
Asked a stranger to dare her  
To step over  
As if that would disappear it.  
His feet followed his gaze away and  
Silent across the sand  
Leaving her to watch the tide  
smooth the sand and remind her again and again and again  
That sometimes wishes don't materialize  
And sometimes the string of someone else's balloon binds  
Her wrists together  
And sometimes she knows that the only thing she can do  
Is to hide the ocean in her memory  
And return to the road.

She drove towards home  
But when the exit came  
She went straight  
Past the sign that said  
Welcome to Pennsylvania

And the words "if not now,  
When?"  
Echoed in the empty car.  
She accelerated  
And imagined the rush of gas was like the rush of her own blood or  
the rush of mere expectation that crossing this border  
would be crossing to a new life

She closed her eyes  
Felt the rush of disappointment  
Just like when she kissed her best friend,  
Felt his scruff exfoliate her chin.  
Crossing that border too  
Left her disappointed  
Like a blue balloon  
Caught  
In the branches  
Of an old pine tree

## Blue like the sky: A Pantoum

Blue like the sky  
As I feel the caress of clouds  
I long to swim in the air  
And feel the sun on my face

As I feel the caress of clouds  
Until the rainstorm passes  
And I feel the sun on my face  
From your gentle smile

Until the rainstorm passes  
And the curtain clouds part  
From your gentle smile  
And the sky shifts to night

The curtain clouds part  
While I sleep under the stars  
And the sky shifts to night  
I let the waves wash over me

While I sleep under the stars  
Blanketed by your warmth  
The waves wash over me  
I long to swim in the air

Blanketed by your warmth  
The waves wash over me  
I long to swim in the air  
Blue like the sky

## Around 3

He deserts his children each day around 3  
Leaving them in midswing on the tire  
That hangs from the ancient tree in the backyard  
Or while they sip tea with pinkies extended  
Like the adults they want to be  
Or while they play tug of war with the crayons  
They need to create their art  
Or while they are giggling or imagining or telling stories.

He is a gliding centipede,  
Passing over the toys and debris of family life

He drifts out of time  
And away from now  
And into that 3 o'clock moment.

One day, maybe  
His children will look into his eyes  
As the hand of the clock ticks into its place,  
Hugging the 3  
They will see that he's not there.

# Lucy Griffith

## Breathing Room

*Holiday Inn, Corpus Christi*

One of those Spring Breaks  
too chilly for the ocean,  
I meet her in the hot tub,  
her swimsuit ruffled in blue-gray.  
*I'm Sophie!*  
*I'm five!*

Her babysitter—doing her nails nearby.  
We play with bubbles in the water,  
I learn more about Mommy's boyfriend  
than I ought to know,  
retire to my deck chair  
with Conroy's *Prince of Tides*.

"Somebody, HELP!"  
Babysitter shrieks, stricken,  
dangles Sophie by one foot,  
blue as her suit, limp as a bag of laundry.  
Red letters neon my mind.  
\*CALL FOR HELP\*  
I yell "*Call 911*" slide in to her side.

\*POSITION\*  
"*Lay her down, I've got her*"

\*CHECK FOR PULSE\*  
No need to check,  
her heart thunders under my hand.

I tilt her head  
\*AIRWAY\*  
pinch her nose. Cover and  
blow—nothing.



Her jaw is clenched,  
I try the jaw-thrust,  
still clamped.  
I wedge my knuckle  
behind her teeth,  
twist, her mouth pops open.

\*BREATHING\*  
Pinch, cover, blow.  
Two rescue breaths—  
cough, splutter, the welcome spill of  
warm water.  
Her eyes fluttering, glorious,  
before a mighty wail.

Her mom appears beside me, reaching—  
I unfold Sophie into guilty arms.  
Wander, back to my book,  
craving a bourbon and branch.  
Later, the first responder  
chides “*You could have lost a finger doing that!*”

I don’t care.  
I put the sun back in Sophie’s sky.

# The Art of Goodbyes

*Life, after all, does not take death for an answer.*  
—Donald Culross Peattie

Plenty of practice—this art of goodbyes.  
Two babies, two breasts,  
a starter marriage to a wounded boy.  
Both parents, all the aunts and uncles,  
a sister so close.

I know to sit behind the baby at the service.  
Babies are circles.  
And the officiant, I know the exact tone of voice  
when eulogy turns to commercial.  
I know to cry as much as I must.

Afterwards, I know to look for the hawk  
circling the cowboy's grave, the hummer  
at my shoulder, and later—shooting stars.  
I know how much chardonnay to have on hand,  
how many candles to light, to put the Bach on long and slow.

I know how to write build sing and story my way through,  
how to fasten my despair to the earth.  
I hold that grief is another way of loving.  
I know to follow those spiral steps,  
that heartache is a hologram.

That the second year  
can bring you to your knees, and  
decades later ambush with a sneak attack—  
the heart has a long attention span.  
The great gears spin on.

# Even though

*for my daughter*

my ashes are spread  
on the cliff by Sister's bench,

mingling with her, and  
your childhood pup,  
perhaps a few choice bits of me  
hauled off by harvester ants,  
down their grassy highway,  
secured in a pebble cave.

Even though  
I am gone,  
you will know me near—  
when a wren lands on your knee.  
When you start waking early  
to watch the world make a morning.  
When the asparagus

thrust their tender heads  
into April's warmth.

Even though  
I am not here,  
to hold you,  
to brush your hair,  
give it a trim,  
auburn curls on the front steps,

I am murmuring—  
get your whole story out.  
Don't let anyone shush you.  
I am reminding,  
perfection is overrated,  
a nap is a balm.

Hear my voice.  
Take a walk.  
Put flowers in a jar.  
Sit in the river,  
let it run through you.

Eat cookies, watch the moon rise.

# Visitation

My belly boiling with blood,  
I lie in the ER.  
A nurse with *Maria* sewn in blue script  
on her white coat,  
takes one look at me—drops her charts.

She thinks my tears are fear—  
the long shine of needle  
in the doctor's hand.  
She doesn't know what I know,  
I will never have a child.

She twines her arm in mine  
leaning close to hide  
the man in the baby-blue hat  
between my knees  
with his sword.

Eyes of caramel never leave mine:  
*I'm taking you on a picnic.*  
Like a song, she narrates a  
trip to the beach, the feel of the sand,  
lap of the waves,  
sandwiches of ham and cheese.

My ears fill with tears.  
I don't remember the feel of the needle,  
I remember the taste of ham and cheese.

# Steven Valentine

## Written

Your Father has already  
written your story.  
Even the poet's.

The difference remains  
that we continue to write it  
into existence.

# **My Father Built These Things by Hand, I Say**

it was a green house, a house we knew  
was green, not the hue or the paint  
of the panel, or the President heads floating  
into it, no, no, this was a green house, a green  
house so vile and toxic, it breathed a musty  
camouflage, a darkness that sat atop the stoop my  
father built, a stoop my father cemented like  
the times, like the time he gave me condoms before  
prom, like the time we discussed my girlfriend and how  
both she and his insomnia were make-believe but  
both a pretty butterfly in the green grass, both miracles on  
a sunny Sunday on a stormy stoop, my father built that  
stoop and his depression held the jackhammer, keeps  
buzzing to the melody of the stream line, the green  
on the glossy coated memory affixed to the sealant, bastardly  
it was, a house, a house that didn't feel like home.

## Metal and Magic

As a boy my father always brought me to the car wash.  
There was something about metal and magic and the idea  
that something could reappear polished;  
It was like a dream.  
It was a father and son moment when our slates were clean  
and we were happy.

As I got older we stopped going to the car wash.  
My father didn't seem like he wanted to go anymore;  
His sadness overshadowed him like a blackened smoke.  
By now, I knew he wanted to but physically couldn't get up  
to go.  
Depression, festered its way into his torso;  
His polish would never reappear the same;  
He was a vase with a hairline mosaic.

That day I learned that sadness muddles bodies into an  
unsettling being.  
That day I learned the gritty of a man's tongue when anxiety  
got the best of his throat  
And that day, I learned even family can serpent-tongue their  
opinion into a father's suicide note.

You see they thought my father fit  
for electric shock treatment, thought him fit  
to lightning bolt his conscious  
to live under the hellfire

They would tell him to get over it;  
To stop overreacting;  
Ask him why he can't just be happy again

As if happiness wasn't a roadblock right in front of another  
roadblock  
Depression, doesn't come in seasons, but when it comes, it is  
always a Fall-out  
Depression, is the nosy neighbor, who forgot they could, just  
be a neighbor



They always feel the need to ring the bell

But my father—My father  
is not a one-way ticket to a hospital-wing;  
He is not admission to your nearest explosion

He is not a warning label;  
He is just the vessel that God used to test the boundaries  
And he's had to live behind them—always

Walking the tightrope above the lion's den and sometimes  
falling into it  
Shouldn't you--Be the one to feel shock after seeing a  
melancholy man so unscathed,  
But one who survived the pain?

Isn't it ok for him to feel pain here?  
Isn't it ok for him to feel here?

Now I've tried  
I've tried to make him happy  
Tried—to bring him to a car wash--maybe he'd reappear  
clean and polished  
And I've tried and tried and failed  
time and time again  
and despite it all he keeps living.

He keeps moving forward--Here  
is a man who thinks he lives in a world that doesn't love him  
back--  
He's wrong and each time he keeps living  
He reminds me he is the bravest man I've ever met.

A comic-book dream, nature-loving Demi-God,  
Each day I drive past a car wash I cling to his voice.  
I say—That waterfall of a man has always been polished.  
And he shines like it too.

## A Son's Trust

My father told me  
He warned me

He said:

*Remember who you are.*

Only for it to take four years of college and  
twice as many girls to totally forget  
the places I find sanctuary in

He told me:

*Reach for the moon. Reach for the stars.*

But I find myself searching for pussy and power  
in these bars--these poems are my walls  
incased in brimstone they seldom fall:

*I don't trust things too often.*

But as for my father,  
I trust him.  
I trust him often.

# When Tomorrow Comes

and the followers roam,  
they'll ask of our existence.

Tell them we were born into a bottle of warmth  
and found out how cold-hearted this cruel world could be.

Tell them  
we faced darkness at the split of a cliff  
but saw sun before dawn at the edge of a mountain peak.

They'll ask of our existence.

Tell them we've built the back of our homes  
with our spine to the sky and power in our palms.

Tell them  
we lived in a city that collapsed in the sea  
and we mustered the strength to form the monuments we lead.

They'll ask of our existence.

Tell them we lived.  
Tell them we lived in a house  
that didn't always feel like home.

# Emily Varvel

## **B is for Boy and G is for Guy (1945)**

The girl grips the grill,  
Of her Grandpa's busted truck,  
Still tasting the grape juice,  
Along her burbling tongue.  
Granted, Grandpa's truck is larger than her.  
"Goodness, gracious," any bystander would gander,  
That truck could grab her and break 'er in half.  
But she's a natural, balanced there  
In her brand-new, baby-white boots,  
As if God himself had planted her little feet down,  
On that graveled ground,  
At Grandpa's.

Little girl,  
Gorgeous girl,  
You don't get it yet.  
But you will in good time.  
That place you're in is not granted to you.  
Grandpa's truck is for the guys in town.  
Right now, it is only for make believe.

You see, God didn't see fit to gift you that advantage.

So, bathe in the greatness now,  
Of guiding that automobile,  
Of governing where it goes,  
Because in the war of guys and dolls,  
It'll be awhile before the guns are finally on your side—

Once and for all.

# An Analysis in Assonance

She suffers in suffixes,  
Communicates in commas,  
Periodically exists,  
As a series of punctuations,  
And periods.

Her euphoria rests  
in anaphora  
in parallelism  
in  
enjambment

Poetry flows in her veins—  
Ink as thick as blood  
Her eyes act as a pen  
Shooting pins

Her punches are puns  
Laced in the fine vintage  
Of Shakespeare and Frost  
Of Dickinson and Poe

Allusions made all too clear  
In the illusion she presents to the world

She prefers  
to perform  
through prefixes  
She gets as excited for an ellipse  
As the world for an eclipse . . .

# Vase

You knocked my flower vase off the counter.  
Now I have to wrap my shirt,  
Tightly around my skin,  
And pick up the splatter.

But the glass still slips through,  
Scarring my bone-tired hands.  
The mirror image now  
Encasing my heart in glue.

So, I pick up the glass,  
While you sit on your ass.

But I know that's not fair,  
To make that assumption.  
Because I know a little secret,  
About how your flower vase functions.

An invisible string,  
Like two cans between neighbors,  
Tied our vases together,  
'Til you cut with your razors.

So, your flowers fell forward,  
Crashing to the floor.  
But the furniture is too high,  
For me to see you anymore.

But you cut and you clawed,  
Not me and my issues.  
We weren't responsible for your pause,  
For my abuse of these tissues.

I patch my vase back together,  
To display my pretty flowers.

# Obstruction

*“The anxiety, worry, or physical symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.”—DSM-5*

The heaving,  
Scratching,  
Vomiting—

The distress,  
Impairment,  
Obstruction—  
    And yet,

What about the seemingly insignificant things?

“Did she just give me a funny look?”  
“I hope I locked my car door so no one breaks in . . . ”  
“Does this dress make me look fat?”  
“They’re staring at you.”  
“Look, you made him leave.”  
“You didn’t get everything done? Typical.”  
“How will I pay my bills if my car breaks down?”  
“You are a disappointment.”

The incessant inner-monologue of anxiety cuts deepest.

Thoughts churn from head,  
To stomach,  
To mouth.  
Unloading your  
Breakfast and insecurities  
Into the toilet.

Stomach and brain briefly empty.

But a person must continue to eat.  
A brain must continue to think.  
Cyclical.

Anxiety is walking on eggshells,  
Begging yourself not to step on a crack,  
Firmly believing there's a connection between your mistakes,  
And your mother's broken back.

Anxiety is replaying scenarios in your mind,  
Over and over.

Each run through a dissent  
    Into a different  
        Circle  
                of Hell

Anxiety is running a marathon without moving an inch.

Sleep for a year?  
Still tired.  
Can't fall asleep?  
Still wired.

Anxiety blinds you to accomplishments,  
Binds you to its establishments.  
Distress,  
Impairment,  
Obstruction—  
Yes.  
But truly,  
Anxiety majors in its minors.

*“By the pricking of my thumbs,  
something wicked this way comes.”—Shakespeare, Macbeth*



# Juxtaposition

There are 3 cement rectangles  
Completely solid  
3 feet thick

They connect to form an open square  
The 4th wall  
Bars  
Smooth and silver  
3 inches thick  
Across these 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 vertical bars  
Rests a horizontal latch  
3 inches thick

You are sitting in a cage  
You know  
You know life outside the cage  
It's liquid freedom and joy  
A concoction mixed with happiness

But also unknown  
Potentially dangerous  
And yet you are locked in this cage  
Aren't you?

The lock is inward-facing  
The world can't get you out  
It's an inside job  
And you are the only one with a key  
A gift  
Should you choose to use it

You are comfortable in your cage  
More five-star than cell block

But there is something sour  
Like the faintest of rotten scents in the finest perfumes  
That permeates these walls

The base is still there  
But you wait  
And wait  
2 sides of yourself conflicting  
Juxtaposing each other

You take 1 2 3 steps forward  
Pick up the key  
Jagged breath—one more step  
Shove the key in the lock

Back away  
Look at the venomous luxury  
1 2 3 steps back

Returning to life in the cage  
Immersing yourself in the comfortable filth  
With the flicker of freedom fluttering  
In the back of your mind

You look up  
See the bars  
Beyond—  
Freedom  
Joy  
Happiness  
1 2 3 4  
Turn the key

Step back  
You hang a curtain across your bars  
Your 4th wall  
But you can hear it  
The joy, happiness, freedom

1 2 3  
Rip the curtain back  
Drink in the sight  
Satiating your need

You nail 3-inch-thick wood to your bars  
Blocking out the sights and sounds  
Returning like a pig to its slop

But again and again you return to that wall  
Long for it

1  
Freedom  
2  
Joy  
3  
Happiness

Carnivorous as wolf  
You shred the wood

Quick as a fox  
You push the door

You look back  
Because you are a juxtaposition  
You don't want to be a juxtaposition

1 2 3  
Steps *forward*

You live this uncomfortable life  
Filled with uncertainty and pain and strife  
But  
Filled with freedom and joy and happiness  
No rottenness to tinge the sweet

You belong to the outside  
Always will

And yet  
1 2 3  
Steps back  
Door closed  
Lock latched  
Lose sight

Beginning again

And again  
And again

Because you are a Juxtaposition

# Jhazalyn Prince

## What the Body Wants and Does Not Want

I. Parted lips at wide doorways  
parched and empty intimacies  
mounds of poppy and lilac leaves  
Black hands ; pale at palm and itching  
touch me at the tip        please  
swallow my breath  
don't spit me  
out  
cacoons landing  
what are woman body parts  
disassemble  
eyes rolled in filth  
brown eyes ; sodden  
Big belly        empty womb  
Priceless body

II. her body unfolded  
tendons tight  
but spilling outward  
like a knotted shoelace  
dug into with the inner side of  
your strongest nail  
inside there was a battle  
but her body lay still

Silent  
not singing  
like when held  
by dance and melody  
not vibrating  
like when limbs spread out  
as the first of morning sunlight leaks through the blinds

His body curled into her  
filled her with sound  
that had no rhythm

the cucaw of a wide-winged  
sharp-beaked eagle  
searching for a quick snack  
nothing that would make Him fatigued  
the deep whistled cry  
of a siren  
rushing to beat death  
those sounds were not meant to live in her  
make her glow red from the inside

how would the world believe a quiet body filled with foreign sound?

III. I don't sleep the same  
once your scent has lifted from my sheets  
and I can no longer breathe you in  
Being touched scares me at first  
The muscles in my back flex and my butt clenches  
Then I come undone  
like a song so well sung  
the room vibrates afterwards  
Run your fingertips in the warm  
crease behind my knee  
damp with sweat like your brow  
when you burrow your face  
into the crook of my neck  
Show me other ways that I can bend  
touch me and don't touch me  
and bring your lips so close  
that when you whisper  
your breath raises the hairs on my skin  
forget that we exist except to exist in this moment  
So taboo, just with you, won't you . . . come through.

How does it feel to live  
inside of me  
a house that has been empty for years  
How will you decorate my wombs  
crash your angled hips into what is plush  
into what is warm and dewy  
and leave behind your sweet and fading smell  
maybe if I hadn't pressed my face into my pillow  
and hungrily inhaled the memory of you  
it could have lasted longer  
but instead your face is fleeting  
Sweet as it is

#### IV. Barren

belly bloated with air

Here is the mother of your land

Slain on it

skin melted into her soil and tears seeped into her veins

your eyes disdainful

for the love she once had for the earth

the songs she wept into her bosom

the dancing feet she padded into her ground

are now swept away and over and consuming her

you took the child away screaming and

Stripped the tenderness from her eyes

the virtue from her thighs

until she was child no more

but beaten but bruised but bullied and subdued

the dirt will not spring rose petals because it is saturated with blood

too heavy with melancholy to pretend

you were not the one who caused her ruin

you with greedy hands and disdainful eyes

God forbid you give back

even a crumb of what you've wrought from the womb of this earth

scatter like tumble weed in a desert

as she be deserted and lonely

and know not what company be like when it just stand there

cause it always be picking and nipping and grabbing at her fruitfulness

Oh she.

is bound to grow tired of you and roll you off her striped back

Patch up her wounds

Take her chosen few

The ones you watched suffer

with those eyes that suddenly turned blind

The ones humbled through suffering and blunt trauma

The ones you dared not help less you be less comfortable with yourself

Don't you feel less comfortable with yourself?



# Marte Stuart

## Watercolour

Reclined at home,  
bathed in water,  
you must have watched  
mesmerized, as your blood  
let out in ribboned rivulets,  
warm tendrils of you swirling  
until the dissolved dizziness  
was mixed monochrome  
and you were dead.

Only last week you lay languid  
too, this time on your belly  
with sheet-entangled feet,  
staring into a morning coffee,  
oblivious to my slick salty trace  
mucking your thigh.  
You twirled a spoon  
in lazy dips, hypnotized  
by the surrender of cream  
to black, while a cigarette thread  
roiled and collapsed in the air  
behind your head.

Wet on wet, with painter's ease,  
I captured you then—  
my brush, a tongue, traced  
the crushing line of your hip.  
Watery hues brimmed  
at the curved edge  
of a sketched boundary,  
until a crimson pool burst  
your delicate pecan form,  
as though your bleeding-out  
were inevitable.

# Generation Snowflake

Each sculpture manifest  
by a wavering thermal flux,  
presumption at the crux,  
entitled and crystalline,  
crafted by a million  
well-meant imperfections.

Take no offence,  
precious little snowflake,  
fragile beauty  
tumbling cherished  
from the sky,  
you are no match  
for this wet street.

# Lost

Just behind the house,  
close to home,  
is the forest where we got lost,  
certain our snowy prints  
would bring us back.  
The regular rise and fall  
of undulating land,  
this tree stand, another,  
different only for failed light.

Before the rocky outcrop,  
we veered sharply left.  
I think that's where we went off.  
Minds disoriented  
by the pull-push  
of what I said, you said,  
the return ground shifted,  
you arguing,  
the sun's low angle,  
my boots dug-in,  
our familiar turn, missed.

# awaiting the biopsy

each moment  
the river drifts

no part twice  
the same

now  
and now again

*now*

what comes  
passes

dragon boats  
blocked ducts  
stuck dams  
lumps

water  
under a bridge  
runs elusive

*this*

not captured  
as it is

*as it is*  
*as it is*

**S. J. Enloe**

**Surgeon General's Warning**

Commercials corrupting  
kiddies, cancelling  
kinder-care. Cancer,  
killing. Cultivate caution.  
Carcinogen candy  
cremates conscious corpses.

## ***Sopas de Caldinho (Kale Soup)***

The only way I can make kale soup is with words,  
toss letters in a pot with some meat and stir,  
hoping something decent comes out. I try  
to remember the recipe, the words, but sometimes I lose them.

I remember *Vovó* tossing live crabs in the boil.  
Into the pot they'd go, mixed together in a stew of lost days.  
After scattering and writhing, like memories trying to remember,  
we'd break their legs to toast another moment soon to be a  
forgotten thought.

*Vovó* wasn't like the other *Avós*—her Portuguese was on the plate,  
in her offering a *bolacha* when I was fresh and a *bolacha* when I  
was good.

It was in her dark hair and tan skin, inherited from Azorean  
ancestors,  
tending to island farms, gathering cabbage and onions, butchering  
the pigs for *chouriço*,

mixing them into kale soup—a recipe made from memories,  
never written down, just told like old stories,  
their travels overseen by half shell Marys,  
carried here by planes and boats, shipping

family and feasts, religion and tradition, memories  
fresh and forgotten. I cannot remember  
sometimes, so I keep stirring the soup,  
mixing words—hoping something decent comes out.

# The Resilience of Earthworms

The dog never liked earthworms.  
He wasn't a vicious dog.  
He never bit, barked too loud,  
or ran out of sight.  
But in the spring,  
after the rain had pushed  
the worms through the dirt, he'd pull  
them up, bearing his teeth and whip  
them against the concrete  
wall that surrounded the yard.  
After the violent *thwack*, the worm  
would delicately, silently break  
in two. I'd watch as the two halves  
lay still, then—come alive. They writhed  
and wriggled away and back into the ground  
and the dog  
would lift his leg to the wall.

## Displays of Nature II

We sit on the handmade wooden playset.  
I don't remember why we chose that place.

The nameless woman reads us a story  
about water bugs and dragonflies.

*What do you think the story is about?*  
Julia can't form full sentences yet. I answer,

*Water bugs turning into dragonflies?*  
A dragonfly flutters by our heads.

*Yes, but what do they represent?*  
I shrug. *Death*, the woman says,

as if I should know this. She explains  
the allegory of the story, but

I block her out, like everything else  
and warm myself in the noonday sun.



# Canaries in the Basement

Sometimes I'd sneak  
downstairs and peer  
through the crack  
of the closet  
to watch the birds  
try to fly. To hear  
them sing. My sister  
got one for her  
birthday. And another.

I never did.

# Meghan Dunsmuir

## Where Do I Begin

tell me  
where do i begin  
was that normal? was  
that the right way to grow  
up into the spaces before i even  
knew what shapes would be emerging?  
you supported me with an infrastructure we  
called love but you would still encourage  
me to smile sorries every time i cried  
because really everything was fine  
because belly worms are really  
stagnant butterflies hiding  
within the spiralling  
infinite expanse  
of my mind  
glowing

# Ancestor

when i was born  
the pathway  
lined the sky with light  
splitting once again

soon the centre  
of my circle shifted  
and the faces beyond my mirror  
were hauntingly familiar

perhaps i am the ghost  
of your ancient home  
decade after decade  
not the other way around

a cobweb history  
unborn and reborn anew  
expands in form  
into the sphere

so much bigger  
than us

# Dreamtime

last night i went to bed  
praying i would wake up  
somewhere deeper  
than today

i closed my eyes  
and i saw roots soggy  
with millennia of ancestral currents  
still the same level of damp

the rainforest greeted me  
from my cotton coated vessel  
my head touching ground  
holy, undiscovered

the creatures gathered 'round me  
and i asked, politely  
how the time is treating them  
in infinity

they said  
the midnights are darker than oblivion  
and the summers brighter than newborn eyes  
but i mustn't stay too long

so  
despite the hypnotic  
coloured mist  
beckoning

i woke up  
in morning  
to start another  
present day

# Our Path

we've been walking  
down this path a lot these days

mostly because we have realized  
it's the only place left to go

i spent the majority of last night yelling  
about something

someone did  
(very far away)

to someone i do not know  
(will never know)

you simply stared  
back down the now-empty path

thinking about the last fir tree  
cut down a while ago

since then we've just been walking  
and finding peace when i'm not yelling

at all those stubborn ghosts  
here and nowhere

## 17 Years

i lived within  
a tiny pale pink universe  
where I have cut my hair to fly  
beyond the walls that kept me near  
this everything space, this nothing space,  
a curvature of plaster swirling the same air  
over and over, my own foggy reflection  
was slowly appearing; cracks revealed  
we've been floating side by side  
together we would learn,  
hope, grieve til

the circle breaks

# Contributor Notes

**Laura Apol**'s poetry appears in numerous anthologies and literary journals, and she is recognized through a number of poetry prizes. She is the author of four full-length collections, most recently, *Nothing but the Blood* (Michigan State University Press, 2018; winner of the Oklahoma Book Award for poetry). She is currently completing a manuscript, *Lullaby*, about her daughter, Hanna, who was lost to suicide in 2017.



**Nathaniel Cairney** lives with his family in Belgium, where he writes, travels, cooks, does dishes, and marvels at the ease with which moles explode holes in the rich soil. Originally from the U.S. Midwest, his poems have been published in *California Quarterly*, *Illya's Honey*, and others. He holds an M.A. in English Literature from Kansas State University and is a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators.



**Steven Dale Davison** has published poems in a number of journals. He has written plays in both verse and prose, some of which have been produced. He has written both short and long fiction and has published a number of nonfiction essays and book chapters. Mr. Davison worked for twenty years as a journalist and professional writer in the private sector and was awarded a writing scholarship by Earlham School of Religion in Richmond, Indiana.



**Taylor Dibble** is currently a junior at Central Michigan University studying Psychology and Sociology. After her Undergrad she plans to move west and continue her education, while advocating and fighting for youth in the criminal justice system. Her work has been published in *My Body, My Words*, *The Central Review* and now here, in *Sixfold*. When she's not writing, you can find Taylor dancing around music festivals with her friends, from which she draws inspiration.



**Meghan Dunsmuir** is a white, queer identified woman of settler descent currently writing from her current location of Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq people, known today as Halifax, Canada. Born in Tkaronto (Toronto), she crossed the country to attend the NSCAD University, where she is in her final year of study. Her interdisciplinary degree has had a focus on textiles, specifically weaving on the loom. Through both art and writing, Meghan aims to return herself and others to the creative spirit within us all, traversing otherwise divisive and limiting borders.



**S.J. Enloe** is a New England-based writer who received her B.A. in English from Westfield State University in 2016. She enjoys nature and the outdoors, hiking whenever weather and time permit, but is equally content with watching it through a window while daydreaming and conjuring up new writing ideas. When not enjoying nature, she can be found spending time with loved ones or cuddled up on the couch with her dogs.



**Taylor Gardner**, nineteen, is an amateur writer who enjoys tiptoeing, and sometimes outright annihilating, the line between poetry and prose. She endeavors at this from her small dorm room at SUNY Oneonta, located in Upstate New York, where she studies English and Creative Writing.



The poet **Greenheart** is known for her emotional work of stringing together words and feelings for the world to enjoy. She lives in MN and has learned to use the seasons there as springboards for inspiration. Her IG handle is greenheart\_\_\_\_\_.



**Lucy Griffith** is happiest on a tractor named Mabel (a muse of 55 horsepower) and lives on a ranch beside the Guadalupe River near Comfort, Texas. Her first collection, *We Make a Tiny Herd*, was published by Main Street Rag as a finalist in their poetry book contest. She co-edited *Echoes of the Cordillera: Attitudes and Latitudes Along the Great Divide*. She won the Returning Contributor Award in Poetry for the 2019 Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.



**George Longenecker** lives on the edge of the woods in Middlesex, Vermont. His poems have been published in *Bryant Literary Review*, *Evening Street Review*, *America*, *The Main Street Rag*, and *The Mountain Troubadour*. His book *Star Route* was published last year. Since 2018 he's been president of The Poetry Society of Vermont. He and looks for poems in nature and in the paradoxical ways humans interact with the environment and reflect nature in their art.



**Joanne Monte** is a poet and novelist. Many of her poems have appeared in highly acclaimed literary journals such as *Poet Lore*, *The Raintown Review*, *The White Pelican Review* and *Bayou*. She is also the recipient of numerous awards, most notably the Bordighera Poetry Book Award for her collection of poems, *The Blue Light of Dawn*. Her novel, *The Day to Eternity* has been described as a gripping narrative set during the Korean War and has been included in Reader's Favorites. Much of her writing encompasses social, cultural and human rights issues. In 2005, the American





Biographical Institute selected her as one of five hundred notable American women for her literary and humanitarian contributions.

**Jhazalyn Prince** was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY where she earned her high school diploma at Academy for Young Writers before moving on to Amherst, MA, to earn her Bachelor's degree at Hampshire College. There she studied Creative Writing as a source of healing for marginalized communities. She is a poet with special interest in interdisciplinary writing and exploring themes of maternal relationships, body image, race and inter-generational trauma to name a few.



**Heather 'Byrd' Roberts** is a Chicago-based poet, performer, teaching artist, and author of "Mahogany: A Love Letter To Black." Her work focuses on the intersectionality between form and freedom. She uses her experiences to shed light on issues of privilege, love, and familial relationships as she unlocks the opportunity for invisible voices to be heard. Byrd will appear in CAGIBI's journal in July. Her favorite words are balloon and bubble.



**Jamie Ross** writes, paints, hauls water and repairs his Toyota pickup on a mesa near Taos, NM. He also lives in Mexico. His work has appeared in numerous journals, including *Sixfold*, *Nimrod*, the *Northwest*, *Texas* and *Paris Reviews*, also in *Best New Poets 2007*. His 2010 collection, *Vinland*, received the Intro Poetry Prize from Four Way Books.



**Julia Roth** was raised in suburban Massachusetts, attended college at the University of Central Florida, and continued her zig-zag across the United States when she began the MFA program at Western Michigan University. Her most recent accomplishment is learning to ride a bicycle. She currently resides in Kalamazoo, Michigan, which truly exists.



For **Linda Speckhals**, poetry is truly an act of rebellion. When she was young, her father told her she could be anything she wanted to be. Except a poet. She recently released a poetry collection, *Pas de Deux*, a collection of poems that tell a story of love and loss. It is available on Amazon.



**Marte Stuart** gravitates toward poems with scientific and/or theological underbellies. Her current fav is *A Backwards Journey* by P. K. Page. Often lost, she believes "being led backwards through the eye of the mind" to be a helpful space-time practice, or observing a river. Her best life work has been devoted to two perfect snowflakes, yet in free-fall.



**Greg Tuleja** was born in New Jersey and received degrees in biology and music from Rutgers University. He has worked as a professional musician, piano technician, and flute teacher. Greg lives in Southampton, Massachusetts with his wife, Frances, and is currently the Academic Dean at the Williston Northampton School in Easthampton, where he has taught English and music, and for 35 years coached the girls' cross country team. His poems and short stories have appeared in various literary journals and magazines, including the *Maryland Review*, *Lonely Planet Press*, *Romantics Quarterly*, *Thema*, and *The Society of Classical Poets*.



**Steven Valentine** is a spoken word poet hailing from New York City and recipient of the Lena Horne Performing Arts Award from the UAlbany's NAACP in 2013. He was later crowned the "Nitty Gritty" Slam Champion at Albany's Music Hall, placed fifth in Jazz in the Gardens' National Poetry Slam, and placed third at the Nuyorican Poet's Café in 2018. Steven then competed in the Individual World Poetry Slam and Rustbelt Poetry Festival later that year.



**Emily Varvel** is an 8th grade English Language Arts teacher in Katy, Texas. As a recent graduate from the University of Texas, her degree in English introduced her to a wide variety of poets and styles of poetry. This inspired her to start experimenting with poetry of her own. She enjoys providing ghostwriting and ghost editing services. You can either find her reading, writing, watching anything superhero-related, or playing with her little bean of a dog Buffy.



**Ashton Vaughn** is an upcoming freshman at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, OR, studying environmental studies and international affairs. When he's not writing music or poetry, he's often meandering through nature. Despite soon moving to Portland, Vaughn spent his entire childhood in Birmingham, AL. Much of his poetry was influenced by his experience growing up as an LGBT youth in the heavily religious, conservative South.



**Nicole Yackley** is a poet and artist from GA. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Belletrist Magazine*, *Sunset Liminal Magazine*, *Z Poetry*, *Phoenix Literary Magazine*, and performed as part of a chamber piece at the 2019 Nief-Norf Festival, among others. She has a BA in English from UGA and an MFA from UTK. More of her poetry can be found at [whirlsofwords.tumblr.com](http://whirlsofwords.tumblr.com).



