

SIXFOLD

POETRY SUMMER 2023



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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.

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Kristina Cecka

Rabble

In the middle of Lake Superior, a ghost
mountain stands impediment to
kaleidoscopes of monarch butterflies
rushing south for the year.

The mountain is gone. Only the butterflies remember;
parting, river-like, around the emptiness
where it once stood, just one more step on the long
journey their ancestors carved over ten thousand years.

Do they know they won't see it again?

The dark, wild forests and the deep canyons,
the frothy rush of the great rivers?
The trip is only one way.
There is no looking back.

They land in Mexico only days
before Día de Muertos.

The Aztecs looked at the black, open
eyes in monarch wings and named
them spirits of the dead. Tiny ghosts,

they rest in the arms of the fir trees,
huddling together, wings beating in unison,
until they can lay their precious, starry eggs
on the tips of the dusky milkweed leaves.
When death takes them on their last long journey,

their children will crawl into the world,
encoded with escapism, restlessness built in their
twitching antennae and tiny, sticky feet.

They will carry all their ghosts with them;
generations of the monarch rabbles
who made those endless, cyclical paths whispering
as they take to the sky in one huge leap,
bound for home.

Look: one perches on a skull's empty eye
socket. Veined, velvet wings beat once, twice:
a slow blink of tiger's eye and amber.

Six fiber-straw legs bend at the ready,
grasping cool, solid bone. Eyes
always open—faceted, fractured,
watching the world with the hunted's attention.

Tiny Thing

The crushed bird on the sidewalk, smaller than my palm,
has its beak open to the sky. Tiny thing. Gray now after three days
crushed into bone pulp and sinew, but its feather might have been blue, once.
The hopping brown pigeons down the street don't recognize it.
I barely do, only stepping around it at the last second. I hate to see
dead birds. I always look away, like they need privacy.
It's not just the meat-and-gristle grisliness of an unclean death—
it's the pitifulness. Aloneness. Left to die-ness.
In the space between recognition and avoidance, my soft
heart aches for a little bird who can't sing or hop or fly. Dying on the sidewalk,
left to rot—not even in a green place, where rot might become life again,
but on cold concrete, where nothing grows and corpses are left behind
for the sun to pick clean. For more people to step on instead of around.
Tiny thing, once-upon-a-time blue bird: you deserved better than that.

The Dentist

My dentist appointment is in an hour and
I have to go—my teeth ache. I made it
four months ago, two months before you died
and your empty shell descended into
inky earth.

I can't call. The phone and I are enemies these days.
It rings to remind me of the world and I, wise to
the perils of befriending the enemy, ignore it.

Besides, what would I say?

I pantomime the conversation to myself:
Hello, good morning, I can't make my appointment;
I lost my heart.
I'm sorry, but even my teeth
miss her and I can't stand to expose them to harsh light.
No human eyes should witness them.
I'm sorry, but my home is now in the warm,
soft quilts of my bed where I lay
entombed as in the womb.

(I dream of existing before infancy,
when heartbreak, tears, and grief
were not yet born.)

I can't say it in reality. I know I can't pick up the phone and
tell the sweet-faced secretary the fog has
subsumed me, and when I will emerge, cleansed, is
anyone's guess. I can't rage against her for reminding me
that even as your body cools and decays, there are still doctor
appointments and electric bills and dentist visits.

I can't say it. So I put on my jeans. My unwashed sweater.
I go to the dentist.

to the boy who reached for me with both hands

You reach, feather-fingered,
to cradle my heart in your
unblemished palms, but

I am not a person. I am a
war zone, walking.

Bones dense with land mines;
tears, more gas than water.
Those breasts? Ticking grenades.
I have an atom bomb

heart—one wrong touch and
we both go up.
I believe in taking my enemies with me.

I warned the ones who came before.
They thought that if they rained down fire
I would be baptized: instead,

I burned.
They left me spiderwebbed,

stuttershook.

I'll give you what you need, not
what you want: the truth of me.
I am lacuna, that avaricious maw
yawning,

hungry.
So reach, if you want.

Your touch may bloom
galaxies or birth stars but
you won't make a garden out of me.

Notes on Building Human Beings

Teeth first. Blunted, not sharp.
Killing is too easy for them anyway.
Bones should follow: femur, scapula,
zygomatic, wishbone tibia-fibula;
all the knotted, tender vertebrae.

Detail work next. Caged ribs,
delicate hinged phalanges, metacarpals,
the all-important interphalangeal joints.
Fill them with marrow.
Thicken for seven days and seven nights.
Humans need to be sturdy.

Braid together muscle, sinew, nerves.
Drop in organs: the odd pear spleen;
wing spread lungs; coiled snake gut: gray, pulsing.
Pack tightly. They need them all—except the appendix.
Add it for fun, and to teach:
even useless things can be dangerous.

Brain, tongue, heart—no human is complete
without them. Set aside.

Skin, blooming and luscious. Smooth it carefully
over the messy organs, the sturdy bones. Bind your
love to their downy hair, feathery eyebrows.
They'll remember. Not in the mind, but deeper—
blood and bone do not forget so easily.

Knit in the tongue, bless it with speech.
Settle the heart in the ribcage, cloistered
as a monk. Massage until it thumps.
Finally, the brain—hinge back the frontal bone.
Lower it into the deep bowl of the skull.
Gently. Gently.

(If you pray, pray.
Your thing of darkness has come alive,
and may need the guidance.)

Gillian Freebody

Capture Myopathy

Marked morbidity and mortality in wild animals that arises from human-inflicted stress from intense pursuit, capture, or restraint.

the tawny stag limps immense
before my idling car
slowly
we watch

its breath
cloud its mouth
and disappear

movement three-legged delicate
muscled shoulders yoked
with massive weight
spine stone—
straight noble blade
unlike mine bent, shattered
into so many stippled shards

its quiet acceptance
stoically splits the street
across arterial by-ways
back left leg unusable stripped to
flaking peels of bone

mine pooled in the ciliatic delta
sharp as jagged teeth sawed
off the trunk
then tweezered out
before butchering the cord

*You can't touch it, you know
my daughter sighs
It'll die*

as it hauls its heavy-antlered head
around from the dry bank

for now

in its ink-black eyes
my face flashes frantic
forced into trauma's wake
its waves bashing the battered
borders

of humanity and its spill into all
the wrong places
as I wonder
who has touched me
since the fall

eager hands moist, willing
sparking flame from where
I slapped them away

Roy's Roadside Diner at Sherman's Bog (an abecedarian poem)

*Ain't no man pining for an old
bitch like me, I*

chortle as Roy's grill singes my arm hair with grease.

Darlene, the world sure done got its fists into you good, girl as jukebox
Elvis croons a lonely blues, blue as the blood beneath my paper thin
frame while I hum and slop runny sunny-sides with hash in front of a
phone-addicted trucker,

giving Roy a wink as my crow's feet pucker in the
heat and the weight of so many long shifts smacks me broadside with its
isolation afterwards: tiny, immaculate apartment, silence crawling the
walls

just past Main where the unfolding of no one just about
kills me. *Can't*

love no man when my heart be

maimed and twisted as hoary knotted pine

nine miles deep in Sherman's bog I sigh to the stone of quiet.

On certain days, I tell Roy: *a*

*piece a' me already out there, Roy, it ain't coming back—
quiet, cracked to hell as it is and calling* and

Roy says, *Hush now. You just tired* and wonders if he
should say something to someone but knows

talk is poisoned rough and I'm a'right—probably—

until I run myself empty as a sucked out tidal pool making

very sure everybody's needs is met, not knowing mine or if I even have
'em anymore:

waitress, widow, wreck of a woman,

expatriate from herself

yapping to Roy 'bout nothing and more nothing in a roadside dive

zipped neat and far back from the road, bog behind the screen door

beckoning me like a lover.

Ode to My Body in Middle-Age

I want to let a man love my body.
I want to forgive it its genetic miscues,

its deformities,
 its pear-shaped absurdity.

I want a man to know where it's been—
the night the porch swing broke free from its moorings,
the fragile silver necklace of support meant for a
delicate throat, not a plaster ceiling that would betray,
heave me off the porch, crash into my folded body
like a ship against a fogged-in jetty,

tumbling of vertebral fists
exploding inward in the inky interior until
L1 shattered entirely, lit up the spinal canal with bone
fragments, a dusty calisthenics of acrobats
not meant for exposure,
 excision,
 re-construction from the ground up.

I want the scar(s) deep in my gut to ignite Times Square.

Twice, the same cut—
first girl head-up, stubborn even then,
stuck enough for the doctor to put his foot on the table,
yank her from me so the 9.9 apgar came as no shock,
my body seizing on the table—

seven years before the second, a boy, torn from me the same way
while the surgeons discussed baseball and politics and my sister
covered my ears except when they were silent—

so much blood—

I shook in recovery like steel tracks before the train barrels down.

An absent man for the first.
No man for the second.

And this body, a map of what it's seen.
Trauma, the scolding nurse said in the ER last week
as I watched the red line of blood pressure
spike on the screen, a second stroke: the elephant pacing the floor.

And you, a ghost at my wedding to a man I didn't love.
I want you
to see me—

the roads I have walked beaten back,
grass dusted, blown flat,

but still, even now,
budding with the most intricate, nubile shoots.

The Uncivil War of Love

I

Loving you is a spool unspun:

my life-long fight in the world's ring must be forfeited,
a letting go like air from a pierced balloon,
latex body emptied and thrown in a wild release

possibly recovered as mere flash of color on a curve of pavement
or not—instead swirled down a sewer drain when torrential rains
rush for the nearest decline.

I mean, how can a scarecrow strapped to a spike,
lips painted blood red with straw pushing up from the neck,
escape its straight-jacket for warmer October sun
and a view over its left shoulder?

I mean, you must gut yourself for love—
not fuel the battlefield tank each day.

No, all that scarring must be scrubbed away, so I can
at least stay clean enough
for your voice to blow through.

II

Let's say your mother stands in your driveway one morning
with a laundry list of your wrongs
as a single parent—

each one a whip-strike to the soul so when you walk away slump-
shouldered,

she cries, *Do you want to hear the last one?*

Let's say your *NO!* hangs in the air like throat-choke smoke
and you wonder when conditions became claws
and the vacant lot she abandons rots and refuses
to be filled

even at rush hour, even with men, even with you.

We still divide ourselves as soldier or supplicant—

I mean how to make myself vulnerable after
a catalog of imperfections is waved in my face
like a flag pinned but pulling
in each furious gust of wind?

III

The cavern of self dies alone,
a whisper to some perhaps,

but not for long as way paves to way,
and the same slant of sun spills over the floorboards each day—

I mean this uncivil war of love amounts to nothing—
not attachments that strangle or save,
not unmet needs in an unwinnable tug of war.

It is the trunk and roots of you *as you really are*
that must satisfy so when what has lashed you to the ground weakens
and threatens to pull free, the hole that remains will not gape
or cave at the sides but instead turn itself
over for fresh growth, plow the earth new

and start again.

What We Learn From Birds

When a goose gets sick, wounded, or shot down, two geese drop out of formation and follow it down to help protect it. They stay with it until it dies or is able to fly again.

Slipped from formation, the drag is immediate—
feathers forged in the wake of absent bird:
an envelope of sky: open and willowing.

The warm goose body plummets to earth: an anvil
of dead weight, a force of gravity that becomes its last weapon,
its power in death.

Two healthy birds follow, a dive synced to the sick
and inevitable.

By the time the body cracks against my neighbor's fence,
the inky muscular neck is bent into itself
like a tributary dammed and forgotten

but for the two who tuck their gristled feet
beneath their wings, hunker down, wait for the body to grow
cold.

There's one on each side, my neighbor texts, sending a picture—
the vigil: a pixilation of autumnal sunset familiar
in its crimson filigree,
belts of black, and total
lack of sound. Three motionless
bodies huddled like boulders, one
without
breath.

By morning, the survivors are gone.
Whatever plagued the body has flown
and the shell of flight rests unencumbered,
feathers resolutely still, no whispery response
to the wind.

*Will you help me bag it? she texts.
I don't think I can do it alone.*

of a glacier. The rest
submerged lucent blues

miners in the cave
forging, foraging along the vein.

Caverna Sagrada

Everything she knows tells her
she has to let it go, the hollow place
where the baby lived, where the
maturing boy struggles, miles away
with words like *liar* and other thorns.
This boy made out of light

how did it happen?
who chose to stay with the dark raveling
of his father's pain—father
who recognized in him the gold
thread in a nightmare. While she
had been an unbearable glare
that showed too clearly the whole loom
Looming. Life looms
like a wave in slow motion
getting bigger and bigger and you know
what it is going to do to you
without love.

So the boy
knew himself to be the flecks of sun
that rode that wall of water, the only light
his father could see. How could she turn
her back on that?

In the cave of sorrows she sits
with the emptiness, rocking it
like a cradle. Rocking the poem
trying to get her back adjusted
in the lap of the arm chair. Looking
at a photograph: the baby
glistening in his bath. She had framed it
with a special mat that hid his father
who held him in the tub: Even
in the rage of divorce, she would not
cut them apart.

Now, she goes to bed curled with an ache
lacuna in the midst
of a blessed life. Lets herself sag
into it like limp cloth. When she wakes
the thread is taut. She can stitch the poem
over the absence. She thinks of women

in the old world whose sons went to war
at twelve, daughters married into another
province, disappeared
in a wilderness of that takes by force
one way or another. Spinning
in the wee hours, there is never enough thread
to tell these stories, no satisfying way to end
such a poem. You can drown
forever. That poem just stops.

But there is a boy
made out of passion and June sun, given
the gift of choice, not required to make
any trades.

An excellent swimmer, his features
a perfect blend of both parents
he is not afraid of the dark.

Green Damselfly

Breaking loose from her mating flight
She settled to the naked log in the fugue
of Rocky Run, where I lay crucifixed
hands and feet in the eddies.

She faced me, perfectly still
but for the occasional curtsy of wings.
I moved slowly with my camera.
Sun played on the log bright as a dance floor.
It is I who should bow, I told her. She ducked,
clasped harder as the breeze shook her. Yes
it's just like that for me too, I said. Long
moments

then

she fluttered, settled
nearer, walked
toward me

black eyes distinct
in her emerald head, all of her body, even
the edges of the black velvet wings a radiant

emerald: *You cannot
die, no matter what
pierces you.*

Soon,
she let the air lift her. I don't know how long
there were two
in their lilting turns
then the sound-filled absence.

Oak Chair

The birds this morning, as if they could sing
about anything. So we unloaded
your mom's oak china cabinet, carried
from three states away, as she is

finished with it. It was heavy, and I was heavy
but I wiped it perfectly clean, anointed it
with orange oil and bees' wax. And the wood sang.
This I thought *is eternal life*. It made me turn

to her older sister's single dining chair
I had asked for, orphan long dispersed
from its fellows. Thin and tall, flowing
like a dancer, its shapely contoured seat made

of a burl—that knot where the wood
has had to struggle, grain all spun
like a storm, fans of blonde curled
among black strands. When I finished

it simply shone. *This* it said
is what you are trying to do.
And yes, it is worth it.

Skunks at Twilight

One night when you were a baby,
the four-room house on the sheep farm

a whole family of skunks
crossed at the bottom of the yard.
I watched from up on the porch
white stripes undulating a soundless tide,
mother and five half-grown kits
flowing through the early dark.

I called to your father, you were asleep.
This was thirty years ago, we didn't know
it wouldn't last. Everything
stark with suffering, you a tiny geyser
our bolt of enlightenment. And this
exotic little family stealing along
like the sweetest secret.

I still can't read the sign.
*Kundalini, strong attraction
and repulsion, self-respect*
says the medicine book. I can say this:

They knew where they were going.
Their flawless rhythm rolls in my mind. It's out there
even when we don't see it, moving like a wave,
arriving. We are born
to this bold errand, sorting out the darkness
weaving in the light while others sleep
amid the breathless watchers

Alyssa Sego

This Isn't Poetry

There is nothing poetic about rising from the ashes,
nothing lovely about the way we survived.
We did not emerge like a miracle, wet and crying
and new. No one marveled at our lives.
Survival was like the quietness after a storm; it was ominous
and not to be trusted. I would not say that we rejoiced.
I would say we looked at each other with the shock
of being alive, with suspicion, our bodies unsure
of what to do with the “gift.”
This second life wandered toward us tentatively
like a stray dog orphaned by the disaster.
To this day, he keeps watch by the window.

Migraine

Someone walks under the archway in the yard across the street, carrying a hedge trimmer. I swear, when he starts it, I take it personally. I peer out from the window and watch as the foliage collapses. I consider his labor representative of me; I am shedding with the hours. My body, over time, has been carved into shapes I don't recognize. They say it's the years that change you, but I find the hours to be worse. An hour swings like an ax. An hour can sever something vital.

I Could Tell You about the Illness

but I don't want to write about that.

I want to tell you about a dream I had:

Something was stuck in my leg, it was squirming its way into my skin.

I remembered how to dislodge a tick and went about it the same way,
counterclockwise,

twisting till I pulled it out. Its head was stuck—

which I knew, even in my dream, was bad—

so I dug and dug, and retrieved the head of a snake.

I crushed it and threw it in the dirt

and for the first time in months I woke up thinking:

Maybe I have the power to kill the things that want me dead

I'm Too Young to Die

and this is my only consolation. There is an unwritten rule that should prevent death from overplaying its hand. I am summoning things that should not be awakened; I am raising the dead every time I get out of bed. Every morning the universe gawks at my appearance—every morning it gasps *she's alive*.

Passage

When I'm gone, use my
Bones as oars, hulls, or other
Means to cross water

Anne Marie Wells

Who knows why
some oak leaves remain

latched to the branches
that sprouted them, enduring the lion

gales of January, the grizzly hale

of March, while others float
effortlessly to the ground,

never meant to hold on.

Miscarriage I

The fox lay mangled

on the side of the highway, dead, of course, in a pool of ended potential. The days she once knew—free but bound to her role in predator and prey, shackled to the means by which she survived—were over, and her shredded pelt could not, at this point, even find use in a furrier’s workshop had she surrendered her dignity in exchange for a vain existence traveling on the hood of a coat in the upper echelons of the city, feeling the arias of sopranos resonate in the tips of her fur from a Kennedy Center box seat or the September whir of the turnpike whooshing through her cayenne and ginger tones from the passenger side of a top-down Aston Martin.

The beast would never know what tragedies would have hit her if the tires had not, and yet, she still had work to do in this world. She was no longer just a fox, but had she ever really been? If she lived on now within the veins of vultures and crows, raccoons and coyotes, within the grass peeking out from the gravel, hadn’t she, too, always lived as a composite of the past? An amalgam of all the realities that were once possible—the ones that still are and the ones that are no longer. One life had come and gone, sure. But what is it to release one unrealized dream when standing at the threshold of

infinite what ifs?

Salt

As a child, I ate crumbs,
salvaged the near-empty bags of
pretzels, chips, crackers from
the trash, poured the salty
remnants into a bowl and dipped
my tongue before racing to the
mirror to admire the crystals as
if I had a mouthful of diamonds
to devour. I'd stand staring at
my reflection, watching the
minerals disappear in my spit.
When I swallowed the leftovers,
I held on still to see how long I
could wait before taking a drink,
letting the thirst linger for hours, just to see
 how long I could hold onto the craving
 without giving in. I wonder
now, if this practice
 misinformed my inchoate
 heart, if this is not the reason I find
strength and satisfaction
 from holding out;
 find failure and surrender
 from letting
 in.

Forest of One

The clouds paint the sky in watercolors
as I commit my feet to the Earth blessing

the worms and voles blessing the needle
-laden soil weaving between my toes as I sink

beneath the surface Thrushes play their tinny flutes
and I laugh at the quilt of doubt I patched

from years of revolving doors
and fire escapes Why has it felt so hard to find freedom

in stillness? The way trees have done for ages?
Instead of asking if I will endure the months

heavy with bitter snow falls with the trust
needed to swear nothing will change or asking if

I will tire of this view after I let my skin harden
let my hair fill with the smell of dust can I

intertwine my branches and vow to bloom
a ring for each year I've forgiven myself?

Can I keep pushing toward a new unknown?
Can I let myself settle into an evergreen existence?

Allowing everything else to whorl around me?

Miscarriage II

my eyes are not eyes lights illumine when
the cranks jig the curtains up my hands
are not hands mechanics clutch
the controls operate an illusion on a rotary of
cogs my skin is not skin
 only a sheath acting as scaffolding
 acting as a barrier in motion linked to gears
and fine fibers to sense cold and moments of
awe my bones are not bones rods
and piping bolts and brackets
 wrought and hammered mounted
to swivels and pulley systems my lungs
are not lungs just steam engine bellows
programmed to expand and contract no
questions just algorithms and mathematics
 but my heart is still
a heart a muscle a glitch
tugging to the left as if in protest to the metal
and rust still feeling
the disappointments of the past
despite the grease no pillows or blankets
 no art on the walls no candles
or novelty towels steel and wire
a reminder i once wanted to be more
than machinery the passerines sing their
arias in the neighbor's yard but their songs
don't linger in the corners of these halls
the breeze of their wings does not sweep
eddies of wayward petals from the neighbor's
marigolds over the threshold i don't
leave seeds in the feeder for them to fly off with
they stopped visiting stopped looking
for reasons to visit long ago

Brent Foster

Golden Silk Orb Weaver

*What was building a web
but a gustatory expression of hope?
—Adrian Tchaikovsky*

The bridge is heavy
with fog's dim gray,
so dark I almost miss
the blink of a spider splayed
like many fingers—
as if thrumming those strands
dripping with morning is enough
to call the world home.

The space between words

lingers on your tongue
till it rubs your teeth and you know

what you want to say

but it *burns*
like cinnamon up your nose.
Or maybe it

hums like prayer,

the difference
between drowning and songs
shimmering through time,

casting
long
shadows.

If only
I could find the voice of honeybees—
silent, yet in their dance

I sometimes think

I glimpse the after-blink
of understanding, the quiet
between ideas a bond strong as

thought

when the stuff of a moment

stretches
wide
as
eternity.

Ode to Darwin

Don't you see, Darwin—
 there's no going back.
Not once you sketch your beaks
 in your books and write
how each wing branches
 from the tree of life. Your words
stick, a web that ties me
 to a fruit fly.
But do you feel it, Charles?
 The yearning still to be
more than genus and species
 anatomized in a laboratory?
We see the world through smoke,
 where brains decompose, where
death breeds life, where hearts tick
 and wet lungs fill as if by chance.
But surely you see that breathing
 is more subtle than living.
The truths you speak hide
 like moths against black bark,
their edges blurred by our squinting eyes.
 Through a glass, we see veins
of earth, ourselves, everything—
 we look to the stars
and wonder where our thoughts fit
 in this story you tell.
Tell me honestly—do you feel
 a kinship with those distant lights, too?
Because we both know, unreachable
 as they are, we are made
of those same atoms our ancestors
 called the gods.

Grandma's Dementia

You don't remember
how we'd play

Scrabble on the floor—
you'd help me

find sense between words
and silence.

We'd laugh at silly nouns
like *twaddle*,

at ticklings on our tongues
and new things

shaped inside our throats.
The world was

a garden of word play
and stones flipped

belly up, but now words are lost
behind your eyes,

gummed in your nerves.
Your brain is

a lit universe
growing dark

gaping large in this zenith
of a life.

Here I am lost in what
I know, what

I think I know, trained
to understand

the suicide of your mind
as it drowns.

Your voice is empty of verbs
and your nouns—

mostly your lips remind me
of a fish,

the way they open,
the way they

close, soundless as
memory.

Do you remember when you
locked the door

and left without a word to walk
past headstones,

the way unfamiliar, lined with tulips
and cut grass?

I searched for you then—
I search now,

invoke your name to remember
that symbol

of character worn out
after all

the years. This is a genesis
of thought, time—

a wandering for meaning. Here,
denouement

is defined by its absence
and longing—

I only learn what
waning is

when memories break like
fraying strings.

Genesis

An ocean stretches, pulsing in the breeze
as sweeping fog throws shadows from the sea.
We wander the gray of beach; your fingers

squeeze my fingers, our edges cold and sharp
and melting, fluid as that place where sand
meets surf, the ebb and flow of tides

a whisper drifting on our skin. Brine dusts
our lips—a savor of our genesis
who thought the earth held promises beyond

the membrane of sea. While seagulls gawk
from cliffs, we walk the curve of wrack line,
toeing streams together with our pants rolled

mid-calf and crouching to touch a crab or rub
the polish of driftwood and imagine
the tumble and abrasion of salt

that smooth jagged edges with the patience
of chitons, their radulae scraping rocks
and tending gardens one diatom at a time.

Water licks our feet, brings the slime
of palm kelp and their bulbs that fit
in a slit of sand and stiff enough to stand

as if a tree, stranded on an island
where we might learn the shape and art
of building worlds with arthritic fingers.

Jack Giaour

cab

the humble ghost slides my usual cabernet across the bar
delicate fingered dark browed beak nosed
/why are you always here alone/ he doesn't ask and i don't tell him
in the last century the devils were all from eastern europe the ghost says instead
he is from romania /just like dracula/ he laughs
the ghost is a chatterbox he used to be a cab driver he says
shy grin /sorry for my english/
drove all over new york for twenty years and talked to everyone in the city
and learned american words from the radio always on
the ghost won't tell me why he stopped driving taxis or how he ended up in boston or how he
started working here
in the last century all the gays were devils he says instead
/the police thought we were dangerous that we would corrupt people/
shrugs /but it's ok i've met a lot of nice boys here/
voice-spoiled grin there's a story there that the ghost won't tell me
because i'm too shy to ask we slip back into the old movements i drink from my cab
he throws himself back into his careful tending of the bar
flitting from stool to stool sipping at conversations like a slow-starved summer bee
and all of us flowers nod haughtily back at his presence over our glasses
all rotting very sweetly together

license

as i take his words into my mouth i am glad for their taste
glad they have been released and given to me

in the interval in the seconds between his texts
i have time to think of a fruit in a dream garden

the serpent no longer has license to strike
the tree sheds its leaves with almost joy makes a carpet over the parking lot

he says that i am desirable
that i am handsome in the office light

i want to make a fruit from the pulp of a nail
the last leaf shivers and falls

it is frightening to offer myself to the tree to the fruit
it is frightening to swing the burning sword he says

and though his body is full of seeds and mine is full of shells and discarded skins
we are compatible

i taste of the fruit but i don't know if i like it
or if it reminds me of the bones he crunches on sometimes when we're watching netflix

i don't mind the bones but i like much more the residues
the warm inner marrow

he wants to make a coin from the juice of the fruit
it's commerce he says that is the only infinite

they were right about the wind
it's sharp and seems to carry something that it shouldn't

the snow is worse than the sun
the trees seem almost gold in the early morning light

the snow is worse than the sun but somehow i'm drawn to it
drawn to the glint of black ice by the roadside

i dream for this
a natural enclosure a world inside a word

has our knowledge made us free /?/
and when they finally call my number do i bring water or

a portrait or a curtain or a bridge
or a conclusion /?/

to hang up our lights is always a project
there's just no place to plug them in

i am always thinking of light and time and the flashing of the messages on my screen
you cannot accuse me of inattention

i no longer have license to drive and the decision to forego renewal for so long
has consequences

clusters of possibilities whiz through our heads he says
electric charges clogged with coffee grounds and brain bits

the fruit is so easy to bring to the mouth
to seize with eager lips

he says we go to the tree with equal needs
which honestly is bullshit

we are in the habit of him on top of me of tasting and teasing
at the residual flesh

impersonal
only an animal could be so

the holy angel dashes the snake against a wall
quietly tastes of the fruit we have rejected

these are old photos he says because there's nothing else to say
it's so hard to think of her as me

a new license means a new picture a chance to more officially be the he that is really me
and so i do my best to be myself as it were and questions are easy to answer

but mistakes are hard to right

trans man is feeling blue

i am man

a man with a black beard and
a peeling bluish skin

once
my throat was

unlocked

by a broken statue of krishna

but now
i feel ticklike and mucal

jingling
with word-lice and crooked teeth

once
i was raptured into silk ropes

tight around my winged past
and hairy thighs

but lately
my thought-veins have been leaking

sievelike and pipish

i too have been broken lately

chipped and dust-fed

i too have been god lately

bruise-flowered and desperate-seeded

a broken god in the bluish body
of a man

wet dream with lord byron

i answer you and it rends me like old silk
you take me through each room

your tears red then turning slowly the color of silk
do you know why you dream of marrow ?

that's what you asked me in the long dark after sex
i survived birth

but i failed in my need
my hunger for stamens licked clean

when the long dark came you worked me
so roughly between your grey fingers

you asked how else can you beg under the red
silk buckle and heave of my need ?

rockport sunrise

nothing for us in the morning but the smear of fog bank
against the pure sky-shift of sunrise

i heard the sunlight grating against the rooftops
one morning this sound won't bother me

but this morning it did and you were there
clutching at the roots of the ocean

when i read to you last night i was listening for the
rustlings of your blood in the ugly pinking veins of your eyes

i shouldn't have spoken to you
you didn't know how drunk i was you didn't know

but you got into my bed anyway we read to each
other anyway and believed this is what delight is

like what the morning is just before sunrise
sky and sea are pinking but they're never quite the same color

as the fog

Alan Gann

Why Apples Fall

I *The Blue Jay Told Me*

The Blue Jay told me it is true
I too was once nothing
more than a tiny bud that bloomed
and visited by bees
many times before petals shed
But all I recall are endless days
sun or rain
feeling crisp and juicy
never noticing increments of girth

At night we whispered
speculating what might be in store
Some claimed it was all about letting go
first unfettered moment
while others worshiped the rush
topsy-turvy feeling in your pit
But I always craved impact
umph and ecstasy
of accomplishment of knowing the light
is neither beginning nor end

II *Newton's Song*

My mother says
most behaviors are learned
by imitation so the apple falls tomorrow
because it watched
all the apples falling today
who fall because of what they saw
who fall because of what they saw
who fall all the way back
to our first fall and back again
to the first angel falling away

But my father believes falling
is the inevitable result of rising
striving to achieve escape velocity
ad astra and beyond
thermodynamics of capitalism

My sister the gardener lives in a world
filled with green songs
suggests apples fall
because dewy grass
sings as a siren
come come whomever you are

All Newton could calculate was force
of an apple's attraction to the earth
how fast and hard
shallow understanding
but I grok seeds need dirt
and when they finally learn to take root
in the empty air of existence
apples will fly
 one day apples will fly

III *Fumbling into the Future*

Because everyone craves
a kiss that addles
and the radio is filled with static

Because we are trapped
between curiosity
the reaper and beauty
is a blue dancer cast in bronze

Because momentum is a dragon
and the carriage pointed
toward eternity

Because we are condemned
to fall into the future
fumbling among the aliens

Because we are blessed
to fall into the future
thinking thoughts never think

Because we'll never know
who wound the clock
if they are spying or not
and somehow planets keep on spinning

Because spokes roll with the wheel
and every unfurling sprout
challenges entropy's dominion

Because Granny Smith cooks
while Pink Ladies flirt
and a crisp clean bite
leaves both of us weak in the knees

Because a double-helixed chain
crawled from the ooze
and it is an astonishing thing to be alive

sixtieth birthday poem

for Indigo

twenty-one thousand nine hundred fifteen chances to be
a buoyant plum
purple orb against a field of waterlilies
blooming under a cloudless
somebody-take-a-photograph sky
kissed by perfect twin
floating beneath the surface

and she said
do not be a buddhist
be the center of stillness
do not dance for the goddess
but be her forests, oceans, skies
and all the wild things
do not be a Christian
be the loaves that feed the masses

then she asked what if
the plum is too sweet?
nearly twenty-two thousand chances
to explode brighter than superest nova
fill the air with a song
that makes all the other songs
jealous and squandered

how many?
watching reruns
aunt bea and gilligan
clicking widgets
as if the world needed faster
shinier more expensive
ways to kill itself
how many frittered away
worrying
which squirrel will win the race

and the bending
of palms in a hurricane

she said do not be
an artist be the fire
do not be a dancer
but the space between leap
and falling star
do not be a writer be the phrase
that turns laughter to wine
then bleeds

never regret
infatuations
polkas twists and cha-chas
the unexpected hallelujah
search for mythical cities
bushwhack through jungles
golden spires a machete slash from reality
and remember to converse with quarks
to shudder as needed
with grief

still she said do not invest too much
in even my most tender trace
ecstatic twining of our bodies
remember the star exploding
vanishing of nanoseconds and millimeters?
because even deepest namaste
is a cluttered desk
punctured radial
out-of-tune piano
twenty-two thousand galaxies away
from the astonishing plum

how strange

for Carol Coffee Reposa

how strange
that I am forever
wandering the halls as if life
were an art museum
and my job
to bestow meaning
upon color and form
how strange
that I am forever
listening in as Cezanne's apples
whisper to the blue dancer
relax
there is nothing beyond us
worth reaching for
how strange
not that you should die
but the shapeless gray of your absence
my inability to cadge meaning
from a swollen tumor
how strange
but perhaps less strange
than Werner Heisenberg
teaching that we cannot know
a bullet's speed or heart
without changing its impact
that certainty
is either velocity or acceleration
never both
and even though the cat is both
dead and alive
winter still gives way
and bees still choose flowers
so one ripe June morning I will
think of you before biting into
the sweetest sweetest strawberry
how strange

I am not an avocado

no oily pulp
beneath leathery green skin
nothing to spread
on morning toast
only disappointment
when mixed with onions
diced tomatoes
lime cilantro
and cayenne
nor am I the squawking
parrots flying free
carrying soft grass
across the river
as if there is no border

I could possibly be
steam rising
from a hot pool
opaque
a fog beautiful
for what remains
unseen or a dream
of snow—shroud for
forgotten graves
or regrets
of an old man
after toasting
a change of calendars
checking email
to find a note
from the girl unknissed
so many
champagne corks ago

Richard Baldo

New Patient Appointment

Minutes into the session,
holding myself frozen at my desk,
my spine shivers in its confinement,
unable to bolt for the door behind me,
only three feet, too far for safety.

I discard the impulse to run
and attend his fist, pounding
on my gray Steelcase desk.

My heart answers with blood pulse
pounding in my ears.
The man's senseless shouting
continues to shake my office.

Breathe
—wait,

master the bullied boy inside me.

The shouting continues,
now ready to kill.

He shouts he will:
 He will.
 He will kill.

His face red,
 his voice hard,
 too real,

scenes of blood on the walls,
 bodies in the sagebrush
 pass through me.

Who has he killed already?

Killed???

My young therapist heart calms,
wait,
wait . . .

Hold firm with steady eye contact,
just let the threat pass.

He gradually tires of his own helpless rage.
I watch as the angry shield gives way.

My therapist self acknowledges
how much misery and helplessness
feeds that scary outer rage.

As the conversation continues,
he agrees to sit down.

He starts his real story.

I suggest,
Just raise the recliner footrest.

At the end of the hour with parting words
he turns to leave the office.

I see the wooden grip of the revolver
sticking out of his back pocket.

How afraid must he have been
to need that.

The Privilege

How does one decide to call a dying patient? But
a family member called to cancel her appointment.

Thinking of her lying unconscious in a distant city, dying;
Her urgent need helped overcome my shock and helplessness.

We had worked so hard to heal such near-deadly wounds
that bound her at the stakes of childhood brutality.
There must be something I could do to overcome
the indignity of life's new assault against her.

Could she not have a moment of comfort, to be at ease?

The ICU doctor answered and said there was nothing else
he could do,

her husband and children on a plane,
expecting to be too late.

There was only enough O² getting through
to keep her brain alive for a short time.

“Doctor,
 You may think this weird,
 but would you put the phone?
 to her ear?”

He replied,
 “*At this point, I'll try anything.*”

and ran a line to her pillow.

The one-sided conversation reached into her life,
asking her to choose it with all its pain,
with her children, the hard struggle to heal,
anchoring memories lived in our shared years,
desperate reaching for moments of innocent light.

Perhaps I was there,
somewhere among the pulsing screens,
beeping machines, I.V. poles
and tubes of precious air,
There, in that white automated room
two thousand miles away.

Twenty minutes later,
someone picked up the phone.
Something had changed.

The pulse of *life* was quickening,
oxygen piercing inflammation,
being metabolized.

In the chart, a change of heart was noted.
They put the phone back to her ear,
an hour longer and she breathed stronger.

I put down the phone,
shaking.

The Prowling Man

Contact is the trigger for the man
and the young boy who knows

his home is not safe.
He runs.

The man chases.
For this primordial reptile response,

there is no cause.
There is only the immediate:

Two hundred pounds of man charge.
Fifty pounds of boy cower.

Both would say,
“I don’t know why.”

Just the meaningless replication
of generations,

the nuclear disaster
of so many nuclear families.

Psychologist Returns to Therapy

Leaving my office to sit in the other chair
in her office to ask another human
to hold up the mirror for me, despite the fear
that a bright shield might make me stone.

Here, sitting in my limitations to try to answer
the question of the Sphinx on the road to freedom.
Can I crawl to contentment through necessary pain
to rise from four and stand on two legs?

Will she see a case of Orpheus without his harp?
Is there a new rock to push up the hill—again?

Stuck within life's latest labyrinth,
a part of me knows the way out of any maze.
Just to put a hand on the wall
and not take it off until I am through.

I ask her to be my steady wall,
to keep this shaky hand,
and look into her mirror.

But, Oh,
the persistent problem
of that Minotaur.

Drama in the Office

There are exhilarating sessions
for a therapist.

The patient furiously storms in,
sweeping all the books
from my table,
crashing across the floor.

Perhaps once every five years,
Ordinary People bring
that explosive moment
of their lives into my office
igniting a mechanism into metamorphosis.

For these few, their denouement
makes me the blood-spattered audience.
The therapist can only be awed by the power
of cathartic leaps my patients make.

The method of these actors
demands they speak
their scalded soul truth
of anguished guilt,
secret betrayal,
of righteous anger for freedom.

At every moment, my job
as therapist is to contain the space,
safe from judgment and interruption.

Emotions of emblazoned lightning
sears nervous systems—endured together.
We may be shocked,
but never broken by the power
that overwhelmed their defenses,

until now.

The room moves in storms,
with waves of light and shadow.

As they see their therapist standing safely
in the nightmare brought alive here,

they can survive it.

I stand witness to any chaos
of catharsis freed.
We feel each wound together,
healing whatever bleeds.

In the quiet after the storm,
we are exhausted and cleansed.

We part in calm with much
to talk about in our next meeting.

When alone again,
I pay the smaller price,
stooping to pick up the books
as if replacing the props
for the next scene.

Michael Fleming

*I could build a house
with nothing level, plumb, square—
but not to live in.*

In

It's like a club, and maybe you were hired
or maybe you were tapped, it's all the same,
you're in, that's the thing, you're in on the game—
but first: the trial, the hard ordeal of fire
and ice, the hazing, initiation. Admit
it, you wanted this, you wanted in, you
wanted a chance. Fine—you're in. And the blue
vestments suit you, the rooms are underlit
and filled with whispering—it's what you said
you wanted, it's what everybody wants,
that special smell, those slots where special coins
can be the only tender, and you're fed
the special food, you dance the special dance,
forget to wonder why you even joined.

A Gentle Nudge

It happens sometimes—an unforeseen moment
unburdened by yesterday or tired
rehearsals for tomorrow—the world slowed

down like an opening rose with its scent
and its color, a tacit hint of knowing
without thinking of knowing, a gentle

nudge, no drama, no heavenly choirs
or talking bushes, just the truth you're meant
to stare into—life's steady quiet fire.

Pulse

A cloud of starlings undulating, rising
in the failing light, boiling with urgent,
unknowable purposes—the sky
is breathing starlings.

Tonight it's fireworks
and the fierce tang of gunpowder—the flash
and the bang, the sudden blossom of light,
the crackling drizzle of sparks.

This old-fashioned
universe—same old wrongs, same old rites,
always the one story forever telling
itself: the point, the sphere, the eversion
of the sphere, the ringing of the bells
theorem and all things involute.

We're nursed
on nothing, shot into the cloud of unknowing,
spooked by murmurs of *Go, baby, go.*

Holly York

As it turned out, there was no bomb on board

Pacific-bound passengers, enshrouded by night
and vibration sleep right through
the turn. *Can't tell them,*
the captain said. *One*
may be the bomber.

review my life
raft assignment my life
jacket instructions
forgetting my life
that may not be
which door do I open
for launch hoping
not to mess up
all still alive
thinking fast
from blink
to blink
will this one
be the last
will all
become
nothing

Through the darkness, sudden light. The runway!
Our final departure, after all, won't be tonight.
I grab the mic, half sigh, half cry, "Fasten
your seat belts" for landing (back where we began),
and gasp it out again in three more tongues,
to rouse them from hours of dozing unknowing.

They only thunder their dismay that they're HERE
and not THERE, where they'd planned to be today.

The Other Shoe

*On Pan Am, you'll have a stewardess who knows her way around
the world the way most girls know their way around the block.
—From a TV commercial*

Gardenia-scented breezes breathed me past
tiptoeing waves that ruffled satin black
volcanic sand. There was a single shoe,
a few steps later, reading glasses, bent
and lightless. Inbound I'd served the skipper's
coffee one and one, had cooked Tom's steak not
rare but medium. On that very beach
I'd slapped away Tom's wandering hands and growled
adieu.

The guys headed for Samoa, where
their 806 went down, all passengers
and crew. Tom's landing, the black box said,
the Tom I'd told to go to hell the night before.

Through warming seas and over land
time's flotsam and jetsam wash up
on memory's shrinking shore.
As I walked the dog this morning I saw
just down the block a single shoe.

Fight or Flight Night

—*It's your lucky night*—he said and I knew
then he was no knight in shining armor,
as they say. Things went downhill from there
He detailed each carrier landing,
each different lay on each layover. Thus
the night had not gone well. We finished
dinner, strolled too long on the moon-starved beach.
—*Too early to call it a night*—he shoved

past me through my front door demanding
that I offer him—what else? a night cap.
Also a goodnight kiss. You can guess
the rest. We wrestled. He twisted my arm
and I snatched my keys from the nightstand—small
defense. Threats and bruises. He seemed to doze
so I grabbed the phone. He cursed and called me
a tease. Accusations, more threats, wrestling.

When the night was finally over, relief
that whoever he was would never
come back. Wherever he is after
so many years, he probably doesn't
remember that night
or me—

Flight 815

Hurting west toward Pacific morning
imprisoned in a metal tube. Sleeping
passengers. Overheads packed, and packed
underneath. Crew sleeping shifts in aisle seats.
Air of stale food, toilets and failing
deodorant. Dim light endless night
Why on earth had she bid this flight?

Destination far as the sextant's star.
Tiare flowered hais and seashell leis
flying fish and joyous swish of dolphins
nearing shore thatched huts' glass floor
for prying eyes to see sea creatures' lives
slack strings strum, steel drums thrum hips gyrate,
grass skirts vibrate: tamouré!

dim light endless night why this flight

Hurting west over Pacific black velvet—
longing for shore. At the jump seat in back she
touches the door, whose red arrow beckons
with a sign: to OPEN.

Jettison unneeded words

*I write a line
about orange. Pretty soon it is a
whole page of words.
—Frank Ohara*

The earth, our big blue marble, is “as blue as an orange,” says Eluard. Orange, the new black, is as orange as a black box filled with words of flyers fallen silent. Reentry capsule is jettisoned to splash down offshore. No reentry without hand stamp, says the sign at the sock hop door. Without a word, he takes my hand. A man of few words. Strong silent type. Say it with flowers, not words. Actions speak louder. “Leave some white space talking through” says Mrs. Thornton in watercolor class. White space talks like white noise. Then Mama said *Don’t talk with your mouth full*. Now I say *Don’t talk with your mouth too full of words*. Enough is enough, by definition. Why do they call it a black box if it’s orange?

Celeste Briefs

Ars Primavera

The sky belched out a wet snow today,
heavy
white flakes,
not enough to disguise early spring
as old winter.
Enough to know
that it's spring in Colorado.

Thousands, millions of snowflakes
will spit-shine the pavement
before I leave
the house.
I'd like to dream the future
under all this
soft drizzle,

dazzle the trees with the gift of
their children
before a distant car horn
calls me back up
to remember departure, remember
restlessness,
impermanence.

I didn't expect to dress my hard skin
in golden compost, but
I suppose if I am becoming
the cultivated earth
then I had better look
the part.
I haven't smelled like myself since

the tilling.
What comes of grieving former youth
instead of growing into new—

what comes of carpet bags filled with brass
knobs and cold, dim rooms
where people used to dance:
forgetting to bleed like autumn and cauterize like summer.

People have been throwing pennies down my throat
for as long as I can remember, saying
*cut down the stem of the brain and build a raft,
drag its pitiful roots right out of the spine.
Put your lips together and blow a song
through the empty reeds,
sing something that can rebuild a house,*

*wield brick and mortar.
Forget
about the snow
and
the trees
and their new
children.*

But I cannot sing another's song,
tap roots that aren't mine, or
build something out of what I do not have.
I like when it stays cold enough to
snow in spring,
so that is the wish I will grant,
the raft I will sail.

I'll put
my hand to
the back
of my neck
and know
when it is
warm again.

Dyke

I was sixteen the first time
someone called me a dyke
& I liked the way it felt,
sharp & curved
like a hammer's claw
a scythe reaping dead things from under
my skin, tearing
them out by their bony
roots,
detoxifying soil
that had yet to be
plowed.

It snapped against my tongue like sour
candy, ringing against my
teeth, razing the pink
puckered flesh until the air tasted
like fire. I was sixteen & I knew
an unwhet bowie knife had sheathed
itself between my breasts.

The blood-chested bullfinch
perched on a rib
calling out with its one-noted voice
for something that might answer
in a familiar tongue.

I was sixteen & it cut
like a blue bite to the neck, sucked dry
of all my innocence in that moment,
unable to mimic the alien syllable. So
I sing it out into the world
with smoke in my throat,
blood welling up like groundwater
where the blade has culled
its fill,
& hope
that somewhere an echo
will return to fill my aching troughs.

medusa with the head of perseus

I see a girl-beast staring out at me through
stone eyes that look on the verge of tears,

rain-slicked serpent tendrils dangling down
her left shoulder,

fluted ribs arched gothic towards cascading
river canyon sternum.

I see a woman standing still, hips
canting to one side, her curves carved raw

from the heft of her grief. Hips
cradling something too black to be seen by the

naked eye. Pallas Athena knew what she was doing
when she granted her the gift of breathless beauty.

A stoned woman whose flesh is unmarked,
whose flesh is not choked with demons but who is

the demon. From the Greek *daimōn*, meaning deity,
guardian, genius. Unexorcisable.

Her abdomen is an urn full of ashes,
telling a story of how she was cursed and hunted

down like an animal, like an abomination.
She could never have unwritten those scars without

something alive and pure as fire inside. I see
her wrath, a clean blade cutting through silence.

To feel conquered by her, I walk around
until I am standing directly behind her.

It's worth it to see her back muscles straining
from the weight of scimitar and severed head.

a retelling of the Genesis story (not in a garden but a house, and at the end of the world, not the beginning)

a boy without wings / a girl without wings
a house that hasn't felt a sigh
since—

arms bruised apple-brown, noon-shade—
fallen from black branches painted into the sky-white ceiling
long ago, faded
sour breasts / flaccid penis
all else forgotten

postlude / tarnished metals
naked legs, tight skin smeared over ankle bones
that whisper to broken heels (dipped almost all the way into the river
but not quite enough to forget pain, to
know memory)
mythless—

the silver cup is cloudy, overflowing with rust—
the bed sags under their bodies, making no sound, breathlessly cold
too small
warm thighs / hot hands
all else forgotten

a girl with trauma / a boy with hope
a house that hasn't felt the loving trace of fingers
along its inner walls
since—
 their hands meet in the middle
 at a smiling portrait of a widow and her child—
snow flickers down through the roof's splintered ribs, showing how long it takes
 for something to
 really pass
 thin walls / hard chest
 sometimes it's hard to feel translatable

a retelling / unstoried
lonely as sin
I used to be a garden, cradling bones and ineffable soils
candied with sweet fruits and flowers that opened up wet and lusting for air
before they ripped them all out and built
in their place
this house of—
 bruises gone, no wicked brand of abandonment—
at the end of it all, when the sky clears and the pallid city stops bleeding
 hope always remains at
 the bottom of the jar

the girl feels / his hand at her back
 a flutter there

Late Poppies

for Sylvia Plath

Your daddy points out the car window. You don't
Have to look, you smell them blooming
Bright red and early, or late, depending on how you view time.

You've been here before. This place needs
No open-eyed gaze from you
To be real. It sits between sunrise and sunset, wavering

Like a mirage, or a metronome. A memory
Burning like the sweet blood of blackberries on your
Tongue.

There's a hole in your head. Steam shrills out of it like a
Boiling kettle, singing
Louder than an ocean, louder than your memories.

You think to stick a needle in your daddy's eye
To see if it would burst open the way his heart used to do.
But the poppies have made your hands heavy. They sink into
your chest

As you sink into the passenger seat. You never used to believe
in heaven;
You've confessed this many times, in as many ways as it's
Passed you by. This might be it: your daddy says, so it must
be true.

The car has stopped, pulled up to the edge
Of the orange-faced cliffs. The ineffable smiths haven't
Broken for sleep; their hammering wakes you.

Too early; the morning hasn't yet seized
The earth with its molten fist. Breaking dawn scrambles
To catch its own falling pieces.

The sun spreads over glowing green fields
Like a lion's mane, yellow and
insane. Sylvia.

You've made your body an immortal work of art,
Captive in stone, sung down like a legend,
Upended and stolen by a silent angel whose face is

The rounded smoothness of an egg. When they try
To pry your fingers apart,
You can be certain that they will break.

We shall never get you put back together entirely,
Pieces shuffled, recombined, shattered again into atoms.
Girl that was the shape of a blue, unbroken egg,

Girl that could not be told
When to stay and when to go
And when to leave out food and milk for her babies

For when they wake to find mommy
Has gone on a long, strange trip with her daddy.
Sylvia.

Sylvia.
Don't you know it's not a dream
This time?

Kayla E.L. Ybarra

Packing And Unpacking Forever

Uprooted frequently, familiar was
the smell of cardboard and defrost,
cigarette ash in strewn-about coke cans,
papers, stapled wings, on the doors.

The hall slowly piles up and empties,
ferns wilting by the window of my college
apartment, a museum of my small life
stuffed into banker boxes again.

Move to the gated community of dreams,
a tiny quad of tiny people in tiny
homes nestled between crawl space and
yearning to make room for more.

Goose Song

*“What punishments of God are not gifts?”
—Stephen Colbert*

The copper wire stripped
in the dingy garage,

The geese that took shelter
behind the tall grass,

The candy rain pneumonia
we ingested as children,

sing of plaster, bruises, and glass.

The cicada shells scattered
at the roots of the willow,

The crochet baby blanket
brought places you’ve slept,

The things we lamented
but learned how to love,

cry for meaning, home, and regret.

Lavender

I went to gather flowers
between the veil of this world
and the next, when God peers
down from the heavens and
is so close to us.

I sat on the swinging bench,
freckled in the moonlight,
and thought of Qamarun
who illuminated my path
on the cold walk back home.

Only The All Knowing could hear
the crying in my throat.
I didn't find sleep, kept up
by the chorus of rain that tried
to fill your absence.

Snapped 5 stems until quiet.
Their sweet scent carried me
while angels wept, busied with
their pens, watching me pull
stolen gifts up my sleeves.

I tried to retrace my steps
but they wouldn't bring back
your sweet laughter on the phone.
I miss you so much though
the lavender hasn't dried.

Pear Tree

The heavy fruit that fell
from the pear tree at Cherokee
Path was grainy and sweet
like my clock radio's whispers
from the yellowed window
and reminded me of grandma's
laughter in old photo albums.

I was always told I resembled
my grandmother. Marla,
the pearl hunter, the stern
traveler who never settled.
Catching her fruit where God willed.

I hid my pile of pears in
a bush fort and snuck away
to rifle through the dumpsters
and play in the street.
Marla and her mother lived
in Las Vegas where she would
flip back and forth between
Jeopardy and the Gospels
until they would both die.

Moe's Garden

The best tomato I ever ate was from a garden I built with my grandpa, Bobber.

He lived next door to Moe's Tavern, a bar where local fishermen would thaw after long days of sitting on the ice.

One morning I was caught whittling in the garden by a bar patron and was told to go down to grandpa's shop instead.

The Big Mouth Billy Bass collected dust there in the basement. Tackle-box memories collected there like night-crawlers.

Bobber grew too old to keep hopping on the riding lawn mower with me on his lap for rounds of weeding.

We didn't grow flowers but you can't bring tomatoes to a funeral. I read a verse about Zechariah who told us God remembers.

The garden of what used to be so many vines and fruits growing from the ground where we'd unearth bait.

Now the garden is paved over with tar for a local bank. They don't know that a child used to run there barefoot in the rows.

S.E. Ingraham

I Get Ready To Sell the Family Home

I find barnacles on the bottom of our old sailboat
upturned tortoise-style in the backyard.
They are brittle as a gang of great-grandmothers,
and scrape off with my bare hands.

I fire them like I used to throw snowballs over the peak
of our bungalow roof, now burnished copper,
drenched by sunlight soon departing the day.
The yard becomes a blur once the sun deserts the sky.

Until my eyes adjust to dusk's bathing every blessed thing,
I see my mother crumpled beneath the old elm, her skin
the ashen color it had become when they cut her down.
Even blinking rapidly will not dispel that flinty image.

And tears long thought dried sit bitter on my tongue.
It's hard not to visualize the men swaddling her
like a mummy. No, no—more like something
cocooned—before finally taking her away.

your leaving scars me still

(after rob mcLennan's the girl from abbotsford)

two years one month four days
i waken, my hand on your pillow
still lonely for your warmth.

your cat curls at my feet
but is still not my cat does not
purr—ever—awaits your return.

i continue to lose weight.
food does not interest me
nothing does really—

i am holding your taste
like a verb on my tongue
afraid to swallow your tense.

i wonder how long it takes
for wounds to fully heal
and if scars ever fade.

perhaps they are all
that keep me here, remind
me of you, that i was loved.

These Are Your Hands

Here, where the babe lay, stillness
now. These are your hands holding
my hands, both so empty even as
we try to catch at life,
our lives, whatever we imagine is left.

There on the steps is our dog, uneasy
in his stance as if suspecting the sea
change in us. He sleeps with one ear cocked,
one eye slitted open to our strained
tension-filled space.

Our television, like some artifact, remains
silent. Closed off, as are we, gathering
dust in a living room that mocks us
almost as much as the nursery and the
family room are wont to do.

The names of objects have never meant
much until now when cruel irony seems
to rebuke at every turn. You are careful
not to cradle my womb, as am I, that
empty vessel where Ely last lay.

Lay in a perfect breathless slumber
that will remain forever flawless,
however tragic. Determined, we strive
to be stoic. Don't you think our Calvinist
parents will be so proud?

On the Cusp of Recall

“The half-life of love is forever.”

—Junot Diaz, This Is How You Lose Her

The night you put me on notice was a hot August one, the day before your eldest son’s 5th birthday—do you remember this as clearly, as do I?

Whenever August nights are hot and sticky as scones with butter and jam, and the skies grow so black they have glimmers of seaweed—green running through them—the colour that threatens storms that can portend tornadoes—I remember that night and can hear you screaming. Odd that, as all your threats and final words were in writing—you never spoke, never shouted, nor screamed—all of that is me imagining your voice from other times, times I had forgotten entirely until now.

It wasn’t as if your sister, you, and I didn’t have some crazy fights—especially when you two were growing up—and they got wicked loud—But we always made up and came together—especially you and your sister, and you and your Dad. It was you who couldn’t stand for anyone to be mad. And you, who would be the first to apologize and make up. That’s why this prolonged silence, especially without any explanation, and no hope of reconciliation (your words) is so bewildering and hurtful.

Another Christmas looms, and of course, I find myself thinking of you, my love, and your boys—our grandsons. I can’t help wondering, as I often do, what you told them about our abrupt absence from their lives? We, who love them fiercely and saw them often were suddenly just not there—heartbreaking for us, confusing for them.

I was stopped at a green light the other day, waiting
for a funeral procession to pass
And found myself thinking that I was glad we still observe
this courtesy.

The police tasked with blocking the intersections so
the cortege could stay together, stood outside their cars,
and removed their hats in a sign of respect.

It occurred to me that perhaps you've told your boys
we're dead, so that's why they don't see us anymore.

Or maybe they were content with hearing we've moved away?
We haven't, but it would likely do as an excuse.

I thought after enough time passed, I might not still feel a
physical pain when I think about this estrangement.

I was wrong.

When you first kicked us out of your lives—I remember
it felt like half my family was ripped away as surely as if
they'd been in a car accident.

I didn't ever express this feeling because it seemed outrageous.

—I knew you and your kids (and your husband, who I've grown to
distrust, as I believe he's a large part of this) still breathed.

Treating my loss as if you were dead seemed over the top.

As time wears on and nothing changes—in fact, any
overtures I make to try and reach you are so firmly rebutted,
(including legally, as it turns out), I begin to feel ill—both
physically and emotionally—my mental health starts to
deteriorate also, as my anger grows.

You know, one of the things that triggers my depressions
is a fear of abandonment (long stories, but you *do* know them)

I wonder if whatever it is you think we have done warrants our
being cut out of your life forever.

Does it ever occur to you that excising us from your lives
might also send me spiralling into a deep depression?

It's not like you weren't aware of this possibility—it happened
more than once when you were growing up.

Five years on, and still no word from you. Half a decade.

It hits me, if we bump into the boys somewhere,
we won't know them nor they us.

I worry all the time about how they are, how you are.
Should I send the police to do a wellness check on you?
Or am I just fooling myself? Trying to believe that you must be ill
or surely you would have been in touch by now—
your father and I are getting old. Do you realize that?
We'll be dead, and there will be no resolving this.
Is that going to be okay with you? I don't believe it. I don't.

The wind has picked up, and there's a blizzard
blowing outside the window.
Visibility is nil which suits me as I write
about our situation—as always,
I can't see clearly about any of it—
still, I wish only the best for you. Truly.

Leaving to Arrive

She gasses the old mauve Buick at the last self-serve on the way out of town, smacks at droning but harmless bugs landing on the stalk of her smooth white neck and keeps shifting; stands with one dirty barefoot covering the other, then switches.

She watches the numbers flip over on the gas pump, notes the ping announcing every gallon added, and jerks the nozzle out before it's finished. A faint dribble of fuel scents the air as the excess runs down the side of the car.

Bill paid, she sashays back to the car, refreshes, *Sweetheart Pink* lips in her rearview, puts it in first and peels into the night, the dust chasing her out to the two-lane the only evidence she was ever there.

Rachel Robb

A Luna Moth Is Not a Swallowtail

That night I saw a luna moth
as big as your open hand,

sunning herself in the
back porch light. A

woman's wide-set eyes
in a green winged face stared

back—brimming with new
dark & roiling ideas. They

say your saint chooses
you, not the other way

around. I sketched her on
napkins & in hymn books.

Declared my love
over coffee with fair

weather friends. My
far-seeing Rorschach

flown right out of the
canopy to anoint

only me, not you.

I marvelled.

& at night dreamt of
striding around town like

some vainglorious queen
in a dress of her wings

sewed together.
Then it was my birthday

& a party that required
much planning and the

laundry piled up in
little knolls,

and the car needed
new tires and the baby

split the night wide open
with his cries, clutching

his sore, shell-like ear
in the dark.

& how quickly
I forgot about the promise

of those green wings!

Red Dahlia

I.

Darkly involute florets. Deep red
of a young person's
blood.

Faultless head.

II.

I could grab rough
hold of its pom-
pom blossom.

Stand between it and the sun it seeks. Crush it in my hand,
when I'm sure no passersby are behind me
with their shopping bags
& her tender
gardener is asleep
in the house, unaware.

A pulling down

What has been built,

Grown. A destroyer of

Worlds on a Tuesday

morning.

(The first frost will
win anyway, so perhaps
it barely matters.)

III.

I am stronger than it,
this flower. Red Dahlia

Beauty.

And this poem is a decree,
a flag planted in the
dirt:

The choice to walk away
must count for something.

Molting Scarlet Tanager

Blood spattered
Yellow bird
On my October
Maple. Avian

Lieutenant
Come from
The Crusades—
Tail feathers
Open like a hand.

Everything is
Contrast
I'm learning:
Beauty is

Contrast. Red
Against
Yellow breast—

Bird King of
Hearts. Bursting
With old love.

I see we are all of
Us moving
Through the
World like this.
Some more
Cloaked,
Disavowing,
Than others—

Bruce Marsland

Sauna by a Finnish lake at Midsummer

In the heart of the forest, we cut young birch twigs
to bundle into switches for our sauna.

You called them *vihta*, the plosive bouncing
off your tongue like a pebble skimming water

as we undressed for the heat. Enveloped
by silence and steam off wetted hot stones,

which you said was *löyly*, the frontal vowels
coiling your lips into a pouting tantalus,

we swatted our skin, tentatively at first,
then more bravely in redolent leafy swirls,

until we paused to let the sweat drip
off our backs and off our noses

before giving our bodies to the outdoor air,
scampering to the water's edge, to dip and emerge

and wonder at the strangeness of clothes
and towels, and gaze at each other lingering

au naturel, reluctant to peel on
the layers and trappings of social fabric.

How do you measure joy
or contentedness or peace?

What is the scale for beauty
or attraction or satiety?

None of that matters.

In the morning, we swept the birch leaves
from the sauna bench, filled our bucket from the lake,

and gathered firewood and twigs to burn
for a luxuriously melancholy second sitting.

Bivalent dreamscape

Stumbling on Caribbean cobblestones
after tourist piña coladas,
dreaming of escape to here,
I lock glances with a local,
mirroring my opposite,
dreaming of escape from here.

Momentum shoves me downhill,
but in that split-second, our eyes ask,

was a day enough to watch big blue sky
turn grey and weep hibiscus
over eroding columns by the waves;

was a year enough to snag carnival bouquets
before youth departed,
evicted by biology, responsibility, and law.

In that split-second, our eyes dream,

bomba 'til sunrise,
a lioness of steel
twirling in pink rose-petal shoes;

feast on periwinkles,
a salt-sweet buffet
laid and beloved by mermaids;

raise butterflies
and train them
so they susurrate our names.

I re-join the crowds,
but above the souvenir-stall hustle,
two hummingbirds are whispering
escape! escape!

Not saving the world at the last minuet

Gravel and dust flew in the air
as I steered my bicycle off the road
to claim a sightseeing spot.

The pedals, chain, and stand clanked briefly
before my sea legs stumbled forward
and I leaned too heavily on the wooden fence.

Breathing for a moment, like me,
the conifers turned away
and gazed into the sky.

Clouds nestled over mountain tops.

“That one looks like an airplane,” I said.
That’s the wardrobe door to Narnia, said she,
imploping me to be original.

I stared and tried a little longer,
until the sun had nearly finished its descent.

Tree needles rippled in a breeze,
and I noticed that just for a moment
no vehicles were passing,
no swoosh of rubber on tarmacadam.

Tree branches started rising.
Dancing, waving, undulating.
Cloud faces appeared and shifted,
dissipating like tropospheric aerosol,

pirouetting, minueting, do-si-do-ing
so much, so close, so hard,
I could smell the clouds perspire.

“What in heaven is that?” I asked.

Woodland nymphs, said she.

Then a teardrop brushed my ear
and she was gone,
just as a truck stormed past in its stench
of diesel, leaving the trees shaking.

Some difficulty with ants

The executioner leaves
soon-to-be victims
scurrying unaware,
sniffing at bait
behind a light-switch.

Ants, dear ants,
what have I done?

Like troops in mustard gas,
small corpses stagger,
piling up by skirting boards,
brothers, uncles, second cousins
now removed,

until one final dizzy worker,
blindly following his own trail
in ever slowing circles,
collapses
two toaster lengths
from home.

Obeying orders,
pest control,
ruthless,
has performed my genocide.

But now,
as tiny bodies multiply,
I doubt my solution,

wondering why
I have entrenched myself
as the Pol Pot
or Radovan Karadžić

of shattered
ant
folklore.

My forearms itch
as I put out the trash.

Remembering a reading at the literature club

I lean against the blackboard
with a love poem in my mouth.

Murmurs asphyxiate my words

as a swat dispatches a daddy longlegs
against the wall at the back of class,

where girls with sensible names,

Sarah with an haitch
and Sally with a why,

gossip, chew gum,
and aspirate at their boy crush.

But the teacher assigned me love
and gave the boy crush football.

So fouled desire
staggers goalless from my lips,

mugged by adolescents

who adamantly choose studs over hearts
and grass stains over eternity.

Ellen Romano

Seven Sisters

Linda sings in her kitchen
about the murdered and missing,
songs written for her indigenous mother
and those who have disappeared.
I warm my hands over the flame of a candle,
listen to the song of a woman who looks out
a window and sees an image
of her murdered sister in her own reflection.

In the winter sky the seven Pleiades
are pursued by a hunter and flee
across the night sky, a story
so ancient and widespread
it could have first been told in Africa
when we huddled around the same fires
before dispersing among the continents.

I walk home under a crescent moon,
to the rhythm of a mournful song,
too far from the light of a friend's kitchen,
thinking of sisters and loss,
of the ways families fall apart and never
regain their old configurations.

Pictures of Mary, 1983

Gina had a crush on Agnetha from ABBA,
took pictures of her on the television
while her friend stood next to it, posing.

What, Mom? I just want some pictures of Mary.
Her mother didn't know she liked girls.

When the pictures came back nothing
could be seen on the TV screen.
Gina's mother yelled at the waste of film,

ten pictures of the same thing,
Mary next to the television
gazing into the camera.

The Rocking Chair

My husband bought a rocking chair
before he died, *Grandpa's chair*
he called it, long before
any sign of a grandchild. Now
I take a picture of my son rocking
the child his grandfather never met.

One generation brightens
as another fades, the gift
of continuity, the reason to be human
is to suffer, though a handful of days
are nothing but joy.

If the world survives, one day a child
will see this picture and say,
there is my grandfather rocking my father,
others will see great-grandfathers,
and second great-grandfathers, on and on,
down the long chain of grateful, suffering humans.

My son gazes at his child, his feet move
up and down, working the chair,
the pivot connecting all that has passed
with everything still to come.

Mocking

He returned in the spring,
his song a car alarm. Eight years
was his expected life span.
My husband did the research
and wished it shorter,
then the mockingbird outlived him.

His was the loss I was not prepared for.
I feel like I'm going to die.
On purpose? asked my sons,
whose love anchored me to the world.

Only a mockingbird desperate
for a mate sings through the night.
Alone in my bedroom
I was conscious of the bird's effort,
the convulsions of the diaphragm
and breast muscles as he sang
his discordant notes hour after hour,
seeking a mate with a warning of danger.

Greg Hart

Leo of St. David

Tonight at dinner in a little Greek restaurant, my wife Vicki said, “Have you seen my husband lately?”

“Yes, I have. I am your husband.”

And she laughed a little, and said “I must be losing my mind.” And, of course, she is. Even though she can’t always put our relationship in context, she still speaks to me as her most trusted friend, and that is maybe the most important thing right now.

At dinner tonight she tried so hard with so much courage and humor to contextualize her life, our life together, with our sons. “Where do they live,” she asked? “Do they come to see us?” Are they married? I know I have known them a long time and I did my best, and did a lot of things with them. I was with them. I know I love them.”

“You were a wonderful mother, they were everything to you, you gave them everything and they are happy and good men because of you.”

“I am happy I can talk to you this way. It is important for me.”

“Me, too.”

Please help me,” she said, “if I do anything stupid.”

“Like what?”

“If I hurt them in any way.”

“I will.”

Last weekend we went to see the sandhill cranes at Whitewater Draw in southeastern Arizona with our friends Jerome and Sue. They have been at our side, unfaltering in the face of this change and the loss and the harbinger of more loss it represents. The Sandhill Crane migration is one of a dwindling number of mass animal migrations, and watching it is as awe inspiring as it is a sad reminder of what we have lost and are losing. We went last year, too. I wrote a poem about it with the refrain “We are here . . .” which I think sounds like the cry of the cranes as they come down to land on the water. Here it is.

The Coming and Going of Cranes

Sandhill cranes, elegant
as the concubine’s kimono,
forming at first like barely visible
wisps of smoke undulating
over the mountains
in the eastern
desert haze of mid morning
and then and coming and coming
in wave after
wave, hour after hour
to this desert wetland,
fed by water
flowed down
from the mountains
that had been
still, at rest in the
aquifer for 4,000,000 years,
cranes coming and coming
with their jubilant, insistent
cries, we are here, we are here,
we are here, in the world
come to this resting and feeding place,
just like the 10,000 generations
before came, and came.
and came.
We are here. We are here.

We have been married for fifty years.
Not so long. It does not seem at all long.
There are moments now when she does not
remember the names of our sons.
We are sitting side by side
on the edge of the wetland
looking up into the gyre of 1,000 sandhill cranes
descending in striations from
above, some moving clockwise, others
counterclockwise, we are here,
gliding down, their gilded underwings
sliding through the cloudless blue,
so elegant, so much more here that is true
in this golden, trilling whirlwind
than can be described and codified
by deadenders, poets,
philosophers, priests and gurus.

We don't know where we've been,
why we are or where we are going.
The cranes see us better than
we see them, know what we've done,
what we can do.

It is all so ancient,
so maddeningly real,
this jubilant swirl,
so familiar, but
so very brief.
Yet, we are here.
We are here.

On the way back this year from the cranes, we stopped at
a little roadside stand in St. David, Arizona, which was
founded in the 1870s by Mormon settlers, or Latter Day
Saints as they now prefer to be called. It is just a little
bit down the road from the much better known town of
Tombstone. There are now about 1,600 people living there.
It sits near the banks of the San Pedro River, one of the last
living, perennial rivers in Arizona. But it is only a river by

desert standards, which means it has water in it, albeit just enough at times to get your feet wet.

The largest building in St. David is the Stake House of the Latter Day Saints just off Highway 80. Just down highway 80 a bit on the other side of the road is the Catholic Holy Trinity Monastery.

We pulled up to the roadside stand beneath the winter-bare cottonwoods. The sun was getting lower, and it was soft on the pond behind the stand and we had the barest of breezes. The stand had one pound bags of seasoned pistachios for sale, salted, unsalted, garlic, peppered, chipotle, and more with free samples so that you could make an informed choice. Leo was the proprietor, a diffident but approachable man in a beaten up straw hat and a hard used T-shirt and a pair suspenders holding up his jeans. He would lift his hand a little as the cars passed, a little gesture, but I suspect an effective one.

Leo had some pecans, too, and a sign advertised honey for sale, but I didn't see any honey on the table. "Do you have honey?" I asked him.

"I do. Can't sell it on Sunday." I didn't think I heard him correctly.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Can't sell it on Sunday. Can't have it on the table."

"Why?"

"Man who produces the honey's wife died, and he married a younger woman, 15 years younger, and she says we can't sell it on Sundays. We used to, but then the first wife died and he does what the new wife wants. There's no law in the Bible that says you can't sell honey on Sunday."

"Oh," I said, "well do you have any around?"

“Yeah, over in the trailer.”

And then we walked over to the trailer and Leo reached in took out a bottle of honey for me. I asked him if he would mind if we had a little picnic behind his stand, and he said go right ahead. Help yourself. Later when we were having our picnic on the soft tree duff and in the dappled shade and I could see Leo lifting his arm in a little diffident wave at the passing cars, I put some of the Sunday honey on a slice of apple, and I had the thought that this was the best honey I’ve ever tasted.

I went back over to the stand to get a bag of pistachios, and Leo and I talked a little. He didn’t eat the pistachios, he said. “Don’t have any teeth,” and then I noticed that was a fact. He didn’t smile at all. “My dad had the same problem,” he said, “lost his teeth early. But he ate pistachios anyway.

“How’d he do that?” I asked.

“He gummed ‘em to death, I guess,” he said, and Leo almost smiled.

He was from Boston, had been in St. David for 37 years. Would have never known that by looking at him, but what do we ever really know by looking at someone? He didn’t make or grow the pistachios, got them from the monastery. He said he had had a rough year.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Well, my wife died, then my son died two weeks later, found him frozen behind the courthouse in Boston, and then my dog died, all within three weeks.”

“That is hard. “I said. “Very, very hard. Terrible. I am so sorry.”

“Yes,” he said. “Thank you. Life goes so fast,” he said, looking at me directly, “in a nano second.”

“Yes, I know.”

And we did know that between us there.

“Take care of yourself, Leo.” We shook hands.

“You, too.”

“Take it easy, Leo,” I called back as I walked to the car. And he lifted his hand a bit in recognition and turned back to waving at the cars going down the road in the settling light of the afternoon beneath the winter-bare cottonwoods.

False Coordinates

I love you all,
want you desperately,
but you cannot be
my coordinates.
I can't set my
way by you,
by what you say,
by your attention,
your tribute,
your disdain,
your adulation
or your pain.

If I am in a dream,
in the womb of a sycamore
above the water
of a sacred river
on the edge
of a pristine frozen plain,
that's my business,
mine alone.

I can't have
you doing the calculations
for a way through
that you can't see
and that only
I can follow, can I?

(When I say "I,"
think "you.")

If you don't like
the color of my shirt,
or the part in my hair,

should I pretend
I'm not alone and
brush it over

the other way
so that you'll

be happy
and someday
I'll be sad?

No, the truth
is, everyone
is already in
the rearview mirror
and I am going
directly to
the place that
only
I can know.

You, too.

At the Altar of Being

The Sphinx moths are large,
the size of a delicate hand, say,
my wife's hand,
the wings black and white
in fractal repetitions,
their eyes aglow in the dark
when struck by light, like a deer,
a dozen of them in amongst
the midnight Cirrus blooms
glowing white, there is nothing whiter
than the desert night flowers
which spend just one night
under the moonlight
in the moist, cinnamon scented air,
the sound of Sphinx moths
slowly undulating wings
the only sound there is,
then the graceful dropping descent
between the velvet, long-expectant petals,
through the powdery mist
of the anther's saffron pollen
as the long tongue unfolds
and slips between the labia
of the stigma and the stamens
and laps at the sweet nectary.

I think I should pray here,
that if I am to be left behind,
it would be good to pray,
to get down on a knee,
but one knee is not enough,
to get down on both knees
in the gravel and the dirt
here amongst the Sphinx moths
and the Cirrus blooms in
the perfumed moonlit air
is to relinquish any claim
other than to being,

to be suspended between
ineffable grief and
ineffable gratitude, to be
both those in the instant,

to let the heart grow larger
than can be imagined
at the altar of these beings,
of this being.

This is all there ever really was,
all that there really is,
all we ever need or needed.

I read of the last man
of an uncontacted tribe
deep in the Amazon, alone
and hidden for thirty years
from those who destroyed
all that he loved and knew
and understood,
from those who wanted
more than there is.
They found him dead
in his hammock
outside of his hut,
adorned in a rainbow
of macaw feathers,
ready at last
for the moment
when he could
fly to his people.
I understand him
here, with the flowers,
the moths, the moon,
the sound of the
undulating fractal wings.
with this gift of air,
he is my brother,
he is our brother,
and I, too,

and we, too,
when left behind,
adorned in feathers,
will fly
to our people.

Not the Longing

It's just part of the deal.

Who doesn't want
a dog that will never die?
A home that will never fall?
A voice that will never crack?

Longing is the heart
of the long dream.
For a lost child,
a kinder mother.
A faithful brother.
A heart that
never skips a beat.
To be taller.
For unclenched teeth.
For health, enough to eat,
a final explanation.
You name it.

For the innocence.
the green fields,
the black earth,
where I lie,
a child humming with
the bees, hidden
in the fields of mustard,
in the life of the grasses,
in the life of the planet,
chewing the milky bases
of the blades
the sunny sweetness
running down my throat
that's become suddenly
a light sparked brook,
I become the sun,
the black earth, the grasses
and all of the around.

No discrimination, no separation.
I long
the lost nation.

For the high flying
circus life, bumbling,
clowning round the ring,
chasing my hat,
laughing, home with my kind,
my funny, flying friends?
for something upon which
nothing depends,
that will never unwind,
something that always stays.
Laughter is the finest satisfaction.

For a perfect lover
right from the dream,
right out of the sacred fire,
to fill the original
borderless space.
To whisper into
my perfect ear
with her perfect
electric mouth,
you are complete,
you are safe,
in this forever place,
you make me entire.
The ghost consummation.

What is it?
What is it
In this long dream?
Always alone,
finding a way
everywhere, everyway,
in the water,
across the cliff,
through the uncertain crowds,

there, in the dream,
to find a way,
to the culmination.
To be the life,
not the longing.

To be the life.

Greg Tuleja

Two Geese

On the drive home, just a brief glimpse
off to my left at the side of the road,
the one, standing erect and alert, firmly balanced
on webbed feet, the other, sprawled carelessly against
the curb, one wing fanned, the bill half open,
both of them motionless.

I had read somewhere that geese mate for life,
like wolves and swans and otters, so it's likely
that these two were paired, before some predatory
or mechanical piece of violence had occurred,
the only sign now a roundish mound of feathers,
and a particular, perfect stillness.

It was just a goose, one among millions,
lacking our treasured human sensibilities,
a brutish creature without emotion,
in its abundant, anonymous wildness,
and surely, I thought, they do not feel hope,
or love or loss. Still, I felt like crying.

Kudzu

In the deep South, it's now almost a joke,
the massive, relentless ubiquity,
monstrous green curtains that suffocate oak
and dogwood, smothered blossoms of cherry
and rose, growing fiercely, one foot per day,
overachieving, unwilling to spare
a house or barn that might be in the way,
a dogged instinct to spread, everywhere.
I'm on the lookout, as it crawls and creeps,
an irresistible march to the North
where helpless, I wait, unable to sleep,
a nightmare that it will soon reach New York.
Central Park, the High Line, Fifth Avenue,
the Brooklyn Bridge. All covered in kudzu.

In County Wicklow

We were married in Glendalough,
under a wide blue sky, on a clean mountain breeze
that I imagined might lift away suspicion
and soothe our stubborn family controversies,
but it only ruffled the lavender blossoms
in Aislinn's hair, as red as the deepest, fiery sunset.

We named the baby Claire after my mother.
She came too early, weak and yellow,
and though we admired her proud resolve to survive,
she lasted just six weeks. We buried her in the far hill,
and marked the spot with a granite cross
that we hauled down from Dublin in the hay wagon.

For a time, we contemplated the mysteries
of human misfortune, placing ourselves,
in thought and memory, against our more profitable neighbors,
whose good luck or superior character, allowed them
to gather and assemble their daily contentments,
and to avoid calamity.

This was in 1918, when the influenza had spread
to Ireland, creeping north from Spain, some said.
Aislinn's skin turned suddenly gray, and she was besieged,
spectacularly, by fever and nosebleeds and monumental fatigue.
One October afternoon, she climbed the heavy stairs,
and for the first time in full daylight, lay down in bed.

A more adventurous spirit would have looked ahead,
in spite of these dreary setbacks, to rediscover hope
and confidence, but I have found the strength only to remember,
one starry midnight when I carried our tiny daughter
through a field of primrose, and a cool autumn morning
when Aislinn turned to me and whispered that she loved me.

Shanksville

With broken hearts we stared, our mouths agape,
as three planes crashed, a horror on TV.
The never-ending replay traced the shape
of grief and fear, a grotesque tragedy.
The news would come that there were four not three,
another plane in Pennsylvania down,
and witnesses would swear that they had seen
it was inverted, when it hit the ground.
And now a vast memorial marks the site,
where mysteries are known and stories told,
the forty screens of marble, gleaming white,
and forty names in letters scratched in gold.
We sense an invitation here, for prayer,
a kind of peace, and infinite despair.

Two Boxes of Sheet Music

From deep in a dark, dusty corner of the attic
I carried them down, down to the light and air
of the present day, and cautiously reached inside
toward a strangeness long passed, to touch
once familiar pages, the austere mythologies of my youth.

Andersen etudes, Bach sonatas,
Quantz, Rameau, Danzi, Hindemith,
Mozart concertos, Kuhlau duets, and layered
appropriately at the bottom of a pile, mercifully hidden,
the much dreaded Prokofiev and Chaminade.

Elaborately cascading displays of ink, a vast profusion
of notes, and my own markings in pencil,
indications of tempo, dynamics, articulation,
and for wind players the most profound
and impossible of challenges, where to breathe.

Once so much a part of me, or who I thought
I might be, an ecstatic urgency
to know music, to understand it, to master an instrument,
with yes, some measure of ability and interest, but alas,
as I had always suspected, an undeniable absence of real talent.

Slowly I sifted through the pages, with sharp waves
of nostalgia, and true astonishment that I used to be
able to play these pieces, with what I presume
was an elevated refinement of mind and personality,
an immersion in the beauty and elegance of bygone centuries.

I can still recall the joy of being a musician, the wonder of it,
the long, long hours of lonely practice, occasional pride
and constant doubt, and the miraculous thrill of a high G,
lifted tremulously above a final shudder of strings,
a proper moment of silence, then the rush of applause from strangers.

Corinne Walsh

Don't Forget the Night

Just before dawn
when darkness is still lingering
above the treeline,
a lonely ravener
rides the morning air
on the wings of a single hawk.
Empty handed he slows and settles
on a high branch,
his presence like the whispered utterance
of one simple sentiment:

 Not "Good-Morning,"
too soon.

 Not "Farewell,"
too final.

More like, "Don't forget the night,"
echoed from its hidden perch.
Then like a conjured magic trick,
fledgling sunrays unfold,
blasting light through the treeline
demanding a blessing from the sky.
Exposed in the morning radiance,
the hawk squawks
his disappointed dissent.
But, it's not enough. The new day starts
without contrition.

Southern Charm

(for Lu)

Turns out, southern charm is my greatest weakness.
The accent, the gentle politeness that drapes
its friendly arm over your shoulder, and makes you
feel like you're the only one. For every girl like me,
a southern belle is the most magnificent dream.
I followed the pine trees to her neck of the woods.
She lives on the edge of a golf course where the sun rises,
as it always has, and she walks in beauty
but lives squarely in the past. Her craving for adventure
quelled by familiar smiles, welcome obligations, and abiding
outstretched arms. Accepting the embrace of memories,
#30 All-American, living the life of past praise and present grace.
No surprises. Fewer risks, and none taken.
Her gentle kindness held me like a home.
Shyly avoiding each other's eyes, we laughed until we cried,
under a canopy of stars in her backyard. Her hospitality unsurpassed,
while my desire stayed fully masked.
Nobody before or since has ever taken better care. She cooked for me:
sausage and eggs with a teaspoon of grape jelly on top.
All the while her soft voice revealing the history of her sacrifices
with the poise and gratitude of a poem. Labels of friendship,
and roommate hiding any "unnatural passions."
All those southern secrets, and stories of what might have been
poured out with morning coffee, followed by a pathless walk
beneath the daylight moon, where a snow-white egret
watched me swoon and a great blue heron spread the news.
No remedy. No regrets, and no cure for our connection.
The slope of her shoulders remained level with the fact
that what people already knew about her was enough.
She's the one who gets down on the ground, and wiggles
through the dirt under the porch to capture the abandoned,
imperiled kittens before they succumb in the August heat.
Southern charm has love enough for everything and everyone,
but her own heart lives in a cage, and I cared for her more than
she could claim. So now we live our lives in separate places.
Good ole Southern charm is nothing without patience.

If (K)not for Love

If not for love,
we wouldn't make mistakes,
take no wrong turns,
commit no crimes of omission.
We would all sing
in perfect harmony and pitch.
If not for love,
we could see clearly always
and follow any path.
Justice would prevail.
But love ties us up in knots,
and breaks us down in the dark.
Dreaming about love, we can't help
being tempted by its promise.
Greedy we swing and miss.
We leap and fall,
and when we lose
"mistake" we call.
Failure stops us not.
We crawl, and brawl
and want it all at any price.
If not for love,
loneliness would have no name,
and a broken heart would have no pain.
Flowers would grow but never bloom,
and I would not have met you,
if not for love.

Pardon

You are a poem
to me
not a person
who will let me down
as you change
with the seasons
dropping your leaves
like a tree
and then becoming
a bird in that very same tree
making a beautiful
nest with your lost leaves
until you fly free
and I watch you float
and soar
(until you have flown away).
No rejection do I feel
because you are a poem
not the woman
I loved
and lost.

Contributor Notes

Richard Baldo is a recently retired clinical psychologist. That experience informs much of his poetry. He has been writing poetry off and on since college beginning serious study a few years ago. He won the UNR English Department's Award for Best Poem in Spring 2020 and has poems published in *The Meadow* 2021, 2022, and *Sixfold Poetry* 2022, 2023. He is currently a second-year MFA student at the University of Nevada, Reno.



Celeste Briefs is a Colorado native and emerging poet whose work has been previously published by *Applause Journal*. Much of her work revolves around nature and the imagination, grounded by her experiences as a member of the LGBTQIA+/neurodivergent community and her passion for the timeless magic of the mundane. She graduated from Arapahoe Community College in 2020 and received her B.A. in English, Creative Writing and Literature from the University of Colorado, Denver.



Kristina Cecka received her B.A. in English and Creative Writing from the University of Iowa. After several years living overseas and traveling, she returned to her hometown in Minneapolis, MN, where she lives with her two cats and a ridiculous amount of books. She has been published in *Sixfold* and *Crosswinds Poetry*.



Michael Fleming was born in San Francisco, raised in Wyoming, and has lived and learned and worked all around the world, from Thailand, England, and Swaziland to Berkeley, New York City, and now Brattleboro, Vermont. He's been a teacher, a grad student, a carpenter, and always a writer; for the past two decades he has edited books of every description. His first collection of poems, *Bags and Tools*, was published by Green Writers Press in 2022.



Brent Foster earned his BS in neuroscience, with minors in linguistics and creative writing from Brigham Young University. He is a laboratory technician at the University of Florida and a science writer. You can read more of his work at his website clippings.me/fosterwriting. Brent lives in Palm Coast, Florida with his wife, Alicia.



Gillian Freebody, a veteran writing teacher of 25 years, finds her lifeblood in poetry. Always teetering on the tightrope of chaos, Gillian only settles on her permanent precipice when formulating thoughts and emotions into poems. She lives with her two children and two cats in suburban New Jersey where a constant state of frenetic energy is the norm. She is indebted to her family and friends who tether her to the ground, so she can mother, teach and write poems.



Alan Gann, a teaching artist-poet, tutors and facilitates writing workshops for at-risk youth. His newest collection of poems, *Better Ways to See* from Assure Press, features nature and ekphrastic poems celebrating the wonder-filled attitude his parents instilled in him and his sister. Other publications include 2 volumes of poetry: *That's Entertainment* (Lamar University Press), and *Adventures of the Clumsy Juggler* (Inkbrush Press), plus *DaVerse Works*, Big Thought's performance poetry curriculum.



Jack Giaour's (he/him/his) poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Sonora Review*, *Albatross Magazine*, and *Poetry South*, among other journals. He holds an MFA from Chapman University, was a writer-in-residence at the Belgrade Art Studio in Belgrade, Serbia, and has volunteered with both Mass Poetry and the Salem Arts Festival. He sunlights as software manager for a steel fabricator just north of Boston.



Greg Hart I was born in 1950 in South Bend, Indiana and lived there on York Road. When I was four, I headed to California in my father's Oldsmobile. We lived there in Green Valley in a house on Rockville Rd that had been built over the remains of a Miwok village at the edge of what was once the world's largest cherry orchard. It became a golf course. Now I live on Mitchell St, in Tucson.



S.E. Ingraham lives in Edmonton, Alberta, where she writes and reads in equal measure. She has been published with *Poets for Change*, *Sixfold*, *ARTA*, *Shot Glass*, *Red Fez*, *winningwriters*, and *Freefall*, among others. One of her greatest joys is volunteering as a CTA for *ModPo*, a MOOC at the University of Pennsylvania, each September, where she learns as much or more than she gives back.



LuAnn Keener-Mikenas has two collections of poems. *Homeland* won the 2013 Library of Virginia Award; *Color Documentary* (Calyx Books 1994) won a 1990 Virginia Prize. Poems have been anthologized in *A Fierce Brightness: Twenty-five Years of Women's Poetry and Worlds in Our Words: Contemporary American Women Writers*, among others. She has been a fellow at MacDowell and Virginia Center for Creative Arts. A therapist in private practice, she lives with her husband in Virginia. www.luannkeener-mikenas.org



Bruce Marsland was born and raised in the United Kingdom and has also worked in Finland and Bulgaria. He currently lives in San Diego, California, doing business as an editor and writer. He has been a winner of the Sentinel Literary Quarterly poetry competition, a runner-up in the Prole Laureate poetry competition, and shortlisted for the Hammond House international literary prize. He has self-published four poetry chapbooks. See more at <http://www.brucemarsland.com>



Rachel Robb is an English teacher living in Toronto. She placed 1st in Hamilton's 2014 gritLit festival for a short portfolio of poems entitled, *Notes from the First Year* and 3rd in the 2016 Bridport Prize for flash fiction. In 2018, she graduated from the Humber School for Writers under the mentorship of Cherie Dimaline with a Letter of Distinction. Most recently, she placed 2nd in the Alice Munro Festival of the Short Story (2022).



Ellen Romano, an educator, mother, grandmother and widow, lives in Hayward, California with her cat, Billy. Her themes are memory, family and grief. Some of the publications where her work has appeared are *December Magazine*, *Lascaux Review*, and *Crosswinds Poetry Journal*.



Alyssa Sego is a poet and writer living in Louisville, KY with her husband and two dogs. She enjoys traveling, baking, and discovering new coffee shops for her writing time.



Greg Tuleja was born in New Jersey and received degrees in biology and music from Rutgers University. Greg lives in Massachusetts and has recently retired, after working for 39 years at the Williston Northampton School, where he taught English, music, and for many years served as the Academic Dean. His poems and short stories have appeared in the *Maryland Review*, *Lonely Planet Press*, *Romantics Quarterly*, *Thema*, and in two previous *Sixfold* publications.



Corinne Walsh has lived on both sides of the Atlantic, and she likes to compare poetry to the ocean tides as constant and inevitable. Her poems explore the layers of emotional perspective concerning love and loss, and what happens in between. Her first chapbook *The Book of Lu* (2022) was a self published collaboration with the photographer, LuAnne Underhill. She is currently working on a book length collection of poetry. <https://youtube.com/@CorinneWalsh-Poet> or follow on Twitter @Corinne80382848



Anne Marie Wells is the author of *Survived By* (Curious Corvid Publishing, 2023), the inaugural winner of the Wanderlust Travel Book Award for her memoir, *Happy Iceland*, through Wild Dog Press, and the 2023 winner of the Cinnamon Press Chapbook Contest for her collection, *Mother, (v)*. She is the lead faculty for the DC Chapter of the Community Literature Initiative poetry publishing program and strategic partnership fellow for The Poetry Lab.



Kayla E.L. Ybarra is a humble poet who delicately weaves stories of loss, offering moments of introspective grief for readers to ponder upon. Kayla recently graduated from the University of California, Santa Cruz with a Bachelors in Feminist Studies. With a passion to contribute positively to human life, Kayla aspires to uplift others through her poetry and future endeavors. Through her words, she hopes to ignite empathy, fostering moments of reflection and meaningful connections.



Holly York is Senior Lecturer Emerita of French at Emory University. In addition to *Sixfold*, where she was runner-up in Summer 2022, her poems appear in *Crosswinds*, *Oberon*, and in online journals in the U.S. and U.K. Her chapbooks are: “Backwards Through the Rekroy Wen,” “Picture This” and “Postcard Poems.” A blackbelt in karate and grandmother of five, she lives in Atlanta with her two Dobermans.

