

SIXFOLD

POETRY SUMMER 2020



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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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Rodrigo Dela Peña, Jr.

If a Wound is an Entrance for Light

then perhaps this hurting is both wave
and particle, a ripple on a pond,
a pebble. The scar on my mother's sewn
up belly is a shadow, a partial
eclipse imprinted on her skin.
I am still trying to grasp how a nick
on a fingertip can bleed so much
and why a scan of my father's body
showed constellations, a whole galaxy
that whirled within him. Think of bones and how
they keep our secrets, a history of hairline
fractures, phantom aches. Think of people
who wake up, cross the streets, with a bullet
beside the spine, shrapnel inside the skull.
My mother prays to saints whose miracle
it was to be suddenly graced with wounds.
My father has been reduced to ashes.
Who knows of all the brightness we carry?

Kinderszenen

1.

and there was light	a flicker, a flood
something like a face	unfurled
becoming mother	as if the world
came into shape	by being seen
her voice a song	sparkle of water
in the distance	it was almost
clear and there	came shadows
the edge	of things a blur

2.

Say there was a trinket in your hand,
 beads of glass strung with a thread.
Say the names of each color, the tongue
 baptizing what could be touched,
tasted. And here was a brother who took
 and took, snatching your precious away.
Say shards, say fracture, how easy
 it was for the world to be shattered.

3.

Mother was a soiled apron, clatter
of pots and knives and spoons, was broom
that swept the floor, was fingers
on forehead, chest, left then right shoulder.

Father was a cigarette, its glowing
ember, tendrils of smoke, was a gun
in a drawer, was a gravelly voice
and the silence that followed.

4.

The days stretched and repeated themselves.
Language began inhabiting the tongue.
I was told to wake up, obey, be quiet.
There was no way to outrun my own shadow.
A game: pass a finger quickly through a flame.
My knees always had cuts, scrapes, scratches.
A hand could be a claw, could be a fist.
I had yet to learn forgiveness.

Metamorphosis

Quick swerve along the highway
 then suddenly there was a bus
hurtling toward us, and I saw
 the wreckage that would happen,
felt the impact in my bones
 as the vehicles drew closer,
air luminous and charged
 with current at this instant,
the edges of things sharp, time
 suspended as a pendulum
in its apex, though all I could
 say then was *no no no*—I still
wanted to live,

 and somehow
there was no collision, death
 speeding, missing our skin
by a hair, breath so close
 that I sensed its chill on my nape,
a flash that would return
 to me, pierce me in the years
to come, the weight of it
 settling, lightening on my chest,
only a moment but I knew
 when we stopped, struck
by a god or a sliver of luck,
 O, I was already changed.

Instead of a Letter

You who made a bracelet out of scars
on your wrist, how each slash inflicted

was a memento of getting through each week.
You from whom I learned how to drink cheap gin

straight out of the bottle, wincing at every
swig—where have you been after the tumble

of years, everyone else caught in the song
and dance of getting married, raising kids?

I heard you moved to Finland and I worry
that snow would come as a gradual

erasure of your world. You would have laughed
if I said that to you, this looking

at Nordic weather as metaphor, the way
you rolled your eyes when I wept at the ending

of a Mexican film where two stoner guys go
on a roadtrip with a woman who would lead their lips

to each other. Now the snow must be melting
in spring and I think about water draining into

sewage pipes, its many faces as liquid
on a glass, as ice cubes, as rain. You who would leave

and vanish, who would become history,
memory, elegy. Drink with me

in Manila, Singapore, Helsinki. Let me remember
your name when the credits scroll in a movie

theater. Maia, good mother in Greek,
illusion in Hindi. Aisha, meaning alive.

Shellie Harwood

With My Sister, In a Tornado Warning

You offer me wine, when I come to you.
Red or white. As if today it could matter.

You are the perfect hostess.
Even under a tornado warning, even when
your lip is split and bulging
like a bulb
too late for planting.
Red, I say.

Your face blooms from his hand:
fuchsia, violets, O'Keefe's dark iris,
an explosion of forget-me-nots.

I think of the photo I have
of your wedding in Carmel-by-the-Sea.
He is dipping you back, with only one hand,
in your satin. Your dark hair raking the sand.
His smile says, *look what I can do.*

My glass empty, I stare out your window.
Sky is blackening above your sunflowers.
It may be time.

First, I must stitch you up;
thread the needle's eye and
sew shut every opening: the eyes, the mouth, the heart,
the vulva. Taking care not to puncture,
before I bite the thread and tie the knot.

Then we sit, fists in our throats,
hands grasped across the rough wooden table,
splinters digging through.

Out over your garden, a funnel cloud is forming.

We are in no hurry.

You are sewn shut.

Nothing, now, will ever get in.

Last Train to New Haven

As doors slide shut, he slips through
onto the half-deserted train.

No more than a boy,
carrying the weight of a starving sparrow.
A shirt of magenta, flowered
in periwinkle blue.
Head down, hands empty,
wanting only safe passage home.

A pack of them, hyenas, laughing
as he moves, hunted, down
the lurching aisle.
Kiss, kiss. Isn't she a pretty one?
A boot out, then, or a sneaker in front of him
in his path, tangling his slender legs.

I see it fast-motion:
boy flying, broken metal seat arm rising
up to him.
Faggot hissing in the air
as the pack of them scatter, screeching,
to another car.

I have nothing. Half-empty bottle of
Poland Spring,
napkins from Ground Support Café.

Up from the floor before I can reach him,
in his seat, shoulders shaking.
Blood trickles down on periwinkle, but does not pour.

I press limp napkins into his hand, hold out the bottle.
I have no language left in me.
He turns his head away.

Ashamed, suddenly, of the smear of human stains
across the window,
I choke on my own uselessness.

A drowning boy does not cry out for water.
No one will stop this train.

On the Line

We wait behind the yellow tape.
Our own arms wrap ourselves in the sticky heat,
as if we could insulate from the heresy of words like *active shooter*.
I think about the house of women who raised me.
Voices that blanketed me with “Hold back. Be patient. You’re fine.
No, you really are fine. You require nothing.”
Words that assault me now, in this place; stinging me, like a swarm of
yellow-jackets.

And then they are coming out of the school.
Hands over heads, in single file. Some of our children.
Everyone’s children. Snaking in a grotesque conga line.
And, inexplicably, I remember the footage of the camels in Libya.
3,000 camels herded in frantic lines from the Port of Tripoli
in artillery fire.
My son urging them on the screen: *Go faster! You need to go faster.*

And I see him then. Toward the end of the snake; not lost, but here.
One sleeve of the red shirt is torn and dangling.
It may be possible to mend it. From this distance I can’t be sure.

I want to touch him. I want to lunge and break the yellow tape,
trample every living thing to get to him.
To shriek at that long line of women who wait with me, all the living
and the dead ones:
*No. Remove your hands from me.
This day, I will not wait my turn.*

Early Evening, Late September

You were just back from the war.
Your eyes were the color of coastal fog,
and you were lost in them.

Downstairs,
the aunts and uncles circled you,
anxious to hear news of the jungle, or of the desert.
So many battle landscapes,
who could know?

I took your hand,
and we climbed up to the roof, sat on the slope
above the flaming trees, away from smothering embraces.
I asked if you would tell me, if you would try.
But your voice was low and level when you said
not yet.
And your eyes never left the horizon,
so I didn't ask again.

Not knowing yet
that the moment had already raced between us,
that you would be gone by Thanksgiving,
that my regrets
were already standing sentinel outside the door.

That there was only this,
this early evening, late September,
where the manes of sugar maples
tossed below us in the wind like the hair of women
who must have loved you long before,
before I loved you; before I failed to rescue,

before we sat there
on the slope line, cradling your homecoming
between us
like a broken, battered child.

Virus

In the winter of twenty-twenty
the virus, they insisted,
slithered through China,
 out from the wet markets
 into the heart of Wuhan
 and Hubei.

 Only ghosts rode the subway
 or walked the hutongs
 in Beijing.

In America,
we coughed into our sleeves,
scrubbed raw our fingers,
 recoiled within borders
 to accuse and sanitize.

But the virus, the other one,
was already with us.
Hatred
tunneling through air vents,
 exchanged in cold clouds
 on the avenues.

We passed it, ungloved,
in arenas
and on airwaves.
 Raised high
 our cups of steaming malice,
 shared them hand to hand; lips to lips.

And when abhorrence
pressed its filthy boot down
on human kindness,
 we drew in close,
 our mouths uncovered;
 breathed out the execrations
 and breathed them in.

Take off your face masks now.
They will do you no good.
If you have come this far,
you are already exposed.

William A. Greenfield

Billy Baxter's Wooden Car

Walking down Station Road, I heard an engine rev,
the sound naked and raw; Billy's voice muted by
the shriek of loose belts and a cold start.

The small house was blackened by exhaust;
old clapboards coated in mud churned up
from treads worn thin over time.

I built plastic models; at fifteen Billy built the real thing,
harvested organs, an engine, axles and wheels cradled
in a chassis made of two-by-fours.

He drove us in circles, past the front porch, across
the rough-cut driveway, around the mound of tires and back
to square one, his Chrysler Slant-6 screaming like a banshee.

Tapping the steering wheel, Billy shouted "Got this from a '57 De-Soto"
I had this thought that he had been dipped in Valvoline, forever to
be coated in grease and grime, but I didn't care.

Endlessly bouncing from here to there all summer, watching
the mud fly, watching the ruts get deeper, seeing the pride in
Billy's smile as the days grew shorter.

When school started I looked for him in the halls, in the lunch room,
ambling across the long shadows on Station Road. One flat tire
and a bent axle, his car in the tall weeds, canting into the loam.

On a Sunday morning I was Billy, sliding on and taking the wheel.
A woman walked onto the porch. The missing teeth and sunken
face betrayed any youth she once had.

"Billy don't live here no more" she said; "went to some special
school upstate; teachers said he couldn't learn nothin, could barely
spell his name."

All he ever talked about was pistons and drive shafts, never about his life beyond that circle. She kept talking but all I heard was Billy's engine pulling us through the mud one summer on Station Road.

Back Talk

I am you and I've come back to visit you. I'm like that distant star you see in the winter sky, so infinitely far away, like I was to you when people were of two kinds, children and grown-ups with a boundless vortex in between. When you looked at your father, smelled his dirty clothes, you didn't know that some of those distant stars no longer exist. It's been said that, if you travel to infinity, you'll end up staring at the back of your head. Well, mom and dad have died but I won't tell you when because you'll just use it as an excuse to stop taking your medication. You remember the leak in the ceiling and the broken windows? You just expected everything to be as it always was no matter how distant that star was. You just came out of a mold and were already labeled. Well, you were right you little shit. I still live in that rusty old tin can and the ceiling still leaks when it rains. I have nothing, no money, no dignity, no hope. Why couldn't you muster up just a shred of audacity to think that you could become a mechanic or a plumber. Thank the lord that you broke the mold and I have no children to feed, no children to smell my clothing, my fetid breath. If you knew that you would be the end of the line, would you have let me become just another black hole in the night sky?

Please Brush the Snow from My Shoulder

When the wind was captured inside
the soft blanket of white and the sound
of machines was dampened to a whisper,
I tried to catch the snowflakes on my tongue.

They did not rage from the sky. The
percussion against the window pane
was not from shrieking banshees darting
sideways in the howling wind.

When my mittens were caked in white
and my cheeks rosy, Mama met me at
the back door. She warmed my hands
and brushed the snow from my shoulder.

Mama died in the spring, many years
after the cold wind escaped, moaning
and howling relentlessly and turning
my fingers a ghostly white.

If you were still here, Mama, you could
wait for me while I fill the gas generator
as the Gulf Stream meets the descending
arctic freeze in a counter-clockwise air mass.

When the chains are taut you could clean
the blood from my knuckles. I cannot do
this much longer, Mama. I am tired and my
arms can no longer reach places they once did.

So meet me at the threshold and stand on
your tiptoes to give me the illusion of being
taller; capture the wind for me and
please brush the snow from my shoulder.

The Boy with the Crystal Trinket

It lay under your mother's empty bed. Reach for it child through the layers of dust and take it in your hand; hold it gently like it was your mother's fragile heart.

Do not leave it with your father. He has anger issues. Hide it from your uncle. He is a corrections officer. Do not give it to your grandmother. She will soon be with your mother.

Put it in a small box beside the two animal books and find someone to cling to, someone at the hospital or the lady with the soft voice who comes to visit on Mondays and Thursdays.

Do not bring it to school. Children steal things. Let it absorb the light of day and shimmer in your tears at night. Take it to the park where she carried you inside and out.

I was assigned to help build your skills. You showed me today that you can tie your shoes but the bow was too small and your laces dragged. I can help you with that but I don't know what else to do.

The Deacon's Lament

Five years after Uncle Kenneth came home from
The Big One two things happened;
I was born and Kenneth began to paint.

His sky was an empty home void of children,
each stone in the stream a cobblestone from
Church Lane just outside Manchester.

She is looking down into the water.
He will only allow himself a subtle profile, a reflection
in the stream sluicing around her perfect toes.

The *Instructions for Servicemen in Britain* said not
to show off and never to criticize the king or queen.
There were no rules about falling in love.

He left her in a village outside of Essex after Operation
Overlord. He left her there like a half glass of Guinness
left at the pub because there was a plane to catch.

He flew home to Mama and joined The Dutch Reformed Church.
When the calling came, he became the Deacon.
He polished pews, painted Bingo signs and painted a memory.

We learn of the broken hearts of fathers and
uncles only when we ourselves have grown old,
when wars are history and wounds have scarred over.

I sat on his knee while he read the Sunday comics to me.
She was on the wall in a golden scalloped frame.
The cigarette in her slender fingers was very natural.

If I knew that she was more than a piece of his imagination.
If I knew that each brushstroke of her golden hair was a heartache,
I would have said I was sorry.

J. H. Hall

The Hatch

Evening, done fishing, I lay rod and self
beside the river, observe the subtle
surface eruptions, the slow unfolding
of wings, lifting into tenuous flight,
or the sip, the sucking under, of a creature
so delicate, it's called *Ephemerella*.

The current wipes the slate clean,
carries the dimples, death's memory,
downstream.

Before me, more flies emerge,
as if to say, *Death moves on.*
Life stays in place.

Then the hatch ends.
The stream's glassy surface,
impervious as black marble,
moves like solid slab towards the valley floor,
mirrors the darkening sky,
which soon closes like a cellar door.

Hal

Though electroshock eased your pain,
it erased our evening's fishing.
I wish I'd worked harder
to restore that night
to your whitewashed brain,

starting with the plump, pumpkin moon
that pulled the tide nearly into your yard
where striped bass grazed
a pasture of aquatic grass for crabs,
our skiff rising and falling
with the Chesapeake's breath.

The honor of your excitement
magnified our catch, its size, the moon
and tide to monuments in my eyes.

You, cousin, mentor and friend,
serious commercial fisherman,
who that very morning waded ankle deep
in bunkers, bluefish, spot and speckled trout,
now as excited as I by individual fish.
Surely even the fish were honored.

Months later, when I tried to reminisce,
and that night went missing, I was angry,
first, in my youthful foolishness, at you,
then at those who, meaning well, broke
into your mind and burglarized us both.

Your blank eyes deflated the moon,
lowered the tide, left me flailing
the exhausted water alone,
your illness lurking in the darkness,
mine as yet unknown.

How were we to know
the evening's real blessing,
was neither moon, nor tide, nor fish,
but our very own obliviousness?

Immersion

A trout stream's beauty sometimes
makes falling in seem appealing—
floating silently, weightlessly among
cathedral columns of blue-tinted light.

But when I fell in, there was nothing
spiritual about it. I only wanted out.
I realized, *Oneness with Nature*
was a figure of speech or a death wish.

Now the stream seemed more human-trap
than holy place: gnarled, boot-grabbing roots,
dark swirling eddies. I scrambled to shore
like a clumsy beaver, lay in the sun, gasping for air.

I wondered, did the trout connect my rude,
roof-crashing entry with the fanged,
phony insects, that tore lips
and yanked fish towards the fatal light?

This whole angling business—
life or death for trout, now mostly pageantry
for me, a re-enactment of a past,
when fish were necessary food.

My need to pursue outlived its usefulness,
more done to me than my own doing.
I never asked for these desires. They were passed
to me by generations of commercial fishermen.

The needs endured, like orphans, seeking friends,
finding trout. An apology seemed in order,
but how do you apologize to flowing water,
when that which you are sorry for is already far away?

From Her Bedroom Window

She heard waves lick the beach
like a cat lapping a bowl of milk,
soon to feast on Mud and Oyster Creeks,
then trees and fields. Unafraid,

she didn't resist, but submitted.
She loved that body of water
as another might love a man
or woman or cherished pet.

In storms, the Bay slung the beach around
as if playing with a yarn strand.
Wherever the sand came to rest, she walked
in solitude and wonder, but never sorrow.

For she found arrowheads, pottery shards
from hundreds and thousands of years ago,
and in one deep ditch, fossilized shark teeth,
millions of years old.

The fantasy of permanence
was not permitted on her land.
No barriers to the waves advance,
no rip-rap, seawalls or revetments.

And when the Chesapeake
finally wandered up to her old home place,
she'd ruffle its fur, scratch its belly
and offer nourishment.

St. George's Lake, Copenhagen

Two seagulls settle as delicately as teacups
onto the lake's green tablecloth.
A light breeze fingers the willow leaves.

A rectangular lake, cut to fit a cityscape,
fringed by gravel and asphalt path,
metal benches, a granite patio of people.

An inner layer of ducks, gulls and wading birds,
but no fish in sight. Unlikely, though,
that herons place faith in a barren lake.

That's a human trait:
St. George gave his life for Jesus.
In retrospect, was that really necessary?

John said, *In the beginning was the Word.*
If only he had stopped there,
left well enough alone,

But he couldn't keep his mouth shut.
Some call it *Good News*.
That's a matter of opinion.

While gulls and breeze seed language,
the lake's silence speaks volumes.
But, like the herons, I have all day,
I'll wait.

Kimberly Sailor

Two Aphids

Has the house on the corner
always been vermilion red?
Just like the back of the still-living aphid
that sap sucking sucker
trapped between screen and pane
of my awning crank window. Turn, turn, stuck;
does your God hear the prayers of insects?

The tired I tolerate is not easily describable:
a stuttering, clumsy, make-him-hurt sleep-step
where my blue-toned under-eyes
are bridal white now
because blood stopped flowing up
to save the feet below
that still have to move, on special occasions.

If only I could prioritize so precisely,
without emotion, just instinctual action
but instead: buy new fitted sheets
with stubborn manufacturing lines
suffocating inside a cellophane bag
sleep, sleep, divorce with recreational teas
and herbal drugs.

You won't let our dog Sally
lie on the couch
but you screwed a work-girl
down there on the cushions
so I really don't know what's off-limits,
what's even possible now,
for that aphid, or you.

Genesis Ribs & Wings

you killed my sick chicken
that's all it took to fall for you

I added backyard hens to my woodshed;
a Madison hipster.

Religion in southern Wisconsin is biking to holy brunches
of farm-raised salmon on beds of fleshy arugula

what color were your hands
after the slaughter?
I ask
because blood looks different on everyone
and I'm still waiting to study your skin

kind of you, to wrap the dead hen
in a floral dishcloth, the Shroud of Turin;

though you wouldn't know about that,
because your Easters are red ales and spiral hams.

The bird's funeral was brief, but reverent:
I think about the service when dividing hostas atop her grave

should have consumed
a tender eulogy of beef jerky and pork rinds with you.

Wish my husband
offered such direct masculinity

but his knife, rests at the throat,
of church choir high notes.

Husband-Adam is still perfect
in His image:

didn't even interrupt
when a woman laid her love-liness atop mine

that Creation Christmas
in a classier than expected Comfort Inn

though who of anyone
wild or mild
would stop two
goddamn gorgeous women?
Ain't no deniers of that faith.

All three of you correctly evangelized:
I'm not a real farmer, or a Biblical scholar.

For the birds, this attraction to everyone;
duality, in an unbalanced trinity

with God perched on my shoulder
leaning over to braid my hair

as my husband,
supportive,

and scripture-read,
stirs chicken risotto on the stove.

After Eleven Summers, She Said She Never Really Loved Me Anyway

when your insides
still recognize another
automatically
syncing during the day
cardio-exercising
to avoid acquired heart disease
the only way forward
is robotics:
find a simulacrum
of sturdy aluminum
to do the ticking
and beating
for you

Faded Green

I am afraid
of Ireland.

Psychoanalysts agree, wagging thee:

unstable euro
thinning dollar
Brexit bullshit
border guards
queen's opinion
religious tension
rowdy Cork lads
craggy sheep-shit lanes
opinionated Dublin drunks
colour-coded Belfast neighbourhoods
unpopular view of all things American and British and
somehow Asian, too,
God help the purity of the Emerald Isle! May she stay
jewel'd and potato'd forever!

I say *no*. also, *christ*:
not any of that.
Maybe you are comprehensively anxious
about light treason and unjust sanctions?

Simply,
I am afraid
to see our honeymoon place
where we laughed ten years ago
in love
with matching backpacks
and rented bicycles
because nothing is like *that*
anymore.

25 Years Later

Even now, I talk chopped // small bursts are easy to release // I'm not
in smoke-stitched sweaters // I outgrew // thin fuzzy gym shorts //
I can't count
grocery money from Feds // I have investments // I grew // I have
billions // (I do not)
sleep in a bed someone else bought // Though I do sleep, sometimes.

I still feel // the panic of a snarl-headed girl // fourth grade // I need
glasses
can't circle her state // can't see that far // but can still find
solace in custody-dad tires // arriving at the school yard // I love
public education //
good teachers save you // Jesus could not, but state aid did.

Even now // with teal household pottery // glazed by poor Navajo
hands
about my age // When all of that other life happened.

Even now // with Aran Islands scarves // fitness punch cards
groceries delivered by drones // crisp white pants requiring special
detergent //
And a bed that holds the weight, dreams, and children of two.

a friend stops by with cake

will she smell smoke
from 25 years ago
unfurling from my closet
and will she meet

that other, captive me?

Sugar le Fae

Facing

You can face your fears,
face facts, face an audience.
Here at the Mustard Seed,
we face merchandise
—face it forward
so customers can read
names, flavors, varieties.
Soymilk, vegan sushi, wine,
coffee station carafes,
condiments in the café.
Anything unsightly
is cleaned or carted away.
Customers don't want
to know who made lunch,
what it takes to make it
into work each week.
A place where words are
turned, where you have to
face what you can't
have—where facing it
means making it face you.

False Buddha

My body glows with the numb calm
of detachment. I've let it all go.
Rage. Envy. Especially of anyone
who can afford to shop here. I don't want
their lives, churning with unresolved
trauma, coffee, and quinoa
(ethically sourced when it's on sale),

their righteous, American guilt,
flash-fried, freeze-dried. I wipe cold sweat
from gluten-free, cashew-cheese
frozen pizzas. I ask easy questions:
Did you find everything okay, today?
Did you know bulk is 10% off on Tuesdays?
The answers don't matter.

I do my best to banter. Bad jazz
blasts overhead. I double-bag 12-packs
of water. This is all so absurd.
I've chosen to stay, though no one
can see me floating here
cross-legged behind this register,
my gold robes licking the air like fire.

After the Lunch Rush

The lady with brain cancer
came through my line again today
in her knit cap and sweatpants,

apologizing for her cancer
if her manner seemed erratic,
leaving to milk and sugar

a coffee, while a line
of people waited.
Frustrated but patient,

I offered to carry her
groceries out to her car,
but she was taking the bus.

I wondered if cancer
had clarified or confused her,
counting out exact change.

Was it at last an answer
—a visceral resolve to live or
the sadness she'd been waiting for?

Bagging

I don't need to brag, but I'm a master bagger.
No one has to ask me to bag their meat
separately, or double-bag their walk home.
I bag all bottles sideways to distribute the weight.
While you confer with the card-reader,
I'm stacking strata in my head: a tarot spread.
First, the Two of Water Bottles, prostrate

on the bottom, overturned but unpilt.
Then the Fruits of Labor: apples, oranges,
cherry tomatoes, cotton candy grapes
washed invisible of their Brown toil.

Reversed: the Fruits of Labor are unsellable,
bruised or ugly—juiced or (rarely) fed to the staff.
The Four of Soup-Cups goes

below To-Go boxes floated soft as UFOs.

Reversed: these Paper Lanterns will. spill. lava.
And obviously, Cold attracts Cold.
Glass under Plastic under Paper under Bread.
My trainees can read carts like star-charts.
The same physics built the pyramids.
All those years of Tetris have finally paid off.

Liberty Head Nickel

Checking out a customer, I broke
a roll of nickels and out she fell.
I thought she was a peso
and set her aside till after the rush.
Her reverse was less corroded,
easier to read: a Roman V inside
a Greek wreath, circled by her owner's

name: United States of America.
Only then did I notice her,
searching the shine for her cameo:
her scarred, hard edges of light,
that far-away look still discernible
in her upturned gaze, the suppleness
where nose meets cheekbone.

America, France, Rome—
Liberty was always Apollo in drag,
the lost Colossus of Rhodes;
Helios, god of the sun and prophesy,
crowned in spikes of light,
who straddled the harbor nude
till an earthquake shook him down.

Her proud countenance,
struck within earshot of the Civil War,
is visible only at a certain slant.
'Liberty' shorn from her coronet,
13 stars halo her loose hair.
And beneath her severed head,
the year, last number rusted-over.

Lauren Sartor

Shopping Cart Woman

She was brought in like a stray dog,
one past the use of breeding.

The young men shifted on the beds.
They had never been in this position before.

But she had. Minimally at first,
a way to make the occasional end meet.

Back when she was beautiful, back
when no one let her believe it.

Fending Off Loneliness

There's always a cliché to cling to.

Hair of dog and keep scratching.
Tie one on and get loose.
Off the wagon and hit your head.

I put a record on the player;
the grooves deepen.

I crack one open.

The singing comes first—
that I understand.
The reading aloud
is reasonable enough.

But this talking to walls?
I don't know when it happened,
but it's happened.

Each night my feet paces the distance
from Binghamton to Syracuse.

The floor's wood is testimony
of this delirium, of this trek, of my tongue
moving like a train full of philosophers.

I've answered questions put forth by phantoms,
reminisced at length about my childhood to the face in the window,
drank until I became incoherent.

I've sat on the rocking chair to make it nod,
strained my voice at the curtains to make them clap.

Each night is a compulsion for company,
an argument to be put to sleep.

Gravity

I stare out my bay window, a little drunk
(it is Tuesday but not too early)
at a young girl who tilts her head to the street.
Both her feet straddle the blue-grey stone
that borders my neighbor's driveway.

She must be the granddaughter
of the old couple I saw planting
yellow flowers, side-by-side,
not speaking, burying roots deep enough
to stand the storms of spring.
This would mean the little girl
recently lost her youngest uncle,
but she does not look concerned.
With her chest puffed out,
she jumps with legs straight
like fresh cut branches
and sticks the landing, a slight give
in the knees. She does it again—again
with the same seriousness of an Olympian.

She faces the street
and seems to consider the weight
of her body on the elevated plane.
Satisfied, she hops off. Heels kick
the space between us.
She dances to the mailbox.

I keep very still so she doesn't see me
staring like a fool with tears jumping
from my upper lip; a tall boy crinkling in my fingertips.

She comes back from the (unopened) mailbox
and leaps over a bed of black-eyed Susans
onto the lawn. She throws out
her arms and holds a triumph poise
for an imaginary audience.
In the stunned silence, the young girl stretches

her stomach back by the upward
and backward pull of her palms.
Her exposed belly button gathers
a droplet of sun.

Her body is a bridge.
A golden anchor of a leg
shoots from under her—
then falls.
She tries again, kicking
with more force and confidence,
(a touch of desperation).
In an instant, her body is upside-down,
wavering, as if calculating
the distance from sun to toe.

One of the Good Ones

Eileen and I drank from tiny bottles
while dressed in knee-length skirts
and low heels.

What really bothers me is that he was one of the good ones

Then she goes on about a cousin-in-law—Jimmy—
who had the same addiction. Jimmy: deadbeat,
father and son, a motel room,
maybe an extra woman or two.

Eileen sighs.

*Bausch was looking for help . . . There were no
beds available.*

Sitting in the passenger seat,
I sip at a 99 cent bottle
and imagine Bausch at the kitchen counter of a one-story house
on his cellphone, trying to make sense of himself
as a teacher and addict while two large dogs busy themselves
sniffing the floor. (I have no reason to believe
he owned two large dogs).

In the coffin, his body looked over-stuffed as if with straw
or like his organs were forgotten inside and engorged.
A fireman's medallion was neatly clasped in his hands.

His mother, like the other mothers I've seen before,
was composed, even smiling as if in satisfaction
as a mother would in any event her child is party to—
if that party is innocent.

*When he was little, he was so shy. I always had to push him forward
(the mother mimed her mothering) and tell him to smile.*

The plastic teeth to another tiny bottle breaks the silence,

*He was one of the good ones.
And that's a shitty thing to say.*

Drinking Cures

by erasure.

Suffering makes us whole;
there are parts about myself I had forgotten about,
the bridges are down,
towns move in.

The whirl of sediment in the yowling mouth
of the toddler,
her fingers clutching her father's body,
the way she clutched his thumb
as an infant.

The young learn
by touching, the old learn
by being burnt.

I am not ashamed. I cried, that night,
sobbed, rocked myself on the toilet,
begged for the bottle.

Unable to dislodge
the fantastic death
and worse
the image of the girl's diaper,
squared to capacity
the way my son's gets
after a long nap.
But whatever urine was there
was washed out by the pull
of the Rio Grande,
forcing both parent and child
face down—dead—on its shores,

as if insulted: *these people
are yours.*

Nathaniel Cairney

There in the Wet Autumn Leaves

October's last apples
warp slender limbs, bending

them like an old man's back
when my son, looking down,

spies a rotting Braeburn
lurking in wet red leaves.

I fling it toward heaven.
We hear it carom off

the metal stable roof
then noiseless it descends

into nettle groves where
cats hunt fat compost rats

while moles burrow beneath
pastures that masquerade

as playgrounds for children
who appeared like April

blossoms on fragile stems
never suspecting we

were simply fruit meant to
nourish the dark earth.

At Night the Borders Disappear

From here I dream flat earth bends
toward river bluffs where four lanes
of cracked asphalt stretch ghostly
past all the places we once haunted—
the dry cleaner, the meat locker,
the seminary, your garden store.

Recession summer steals in as I breeze
past half-stocked Belgian grocery store
shelves until settling at last on bulk sumac
plentiful as memory and blazing red
like your father's final wish and at once
I am on the little street that led to

a window's worth of slim branches
dancing over shattered barn roof tiles
where heavy trucks lay abandoned
to riotous green shocks of saw-toothed
stinging nettles and the gazes
of two immigrants unclenching our fists

to sigh together toward the past.
Even as it inched toward ruin, you asked
how can I not love the place where
I learned to love? When you turned to ash,
when slate gray sky dawned and I woke,
I said, too late, of course I love what's broken.

Mushroom Hunting, Jackson County, Kansas

I blunder through
root and thistle, lost
in the implication
of rotting wood,
withered ivy,
abandoned dens and
bleached bones
when it appears—
an April morel,
substantial like prey,
pulling me
earthward
to see what majesty
springs from decay.

Four Trips to the National Forest, November 2016

1.

Pine needles, billions deep, covered soft earth.
When elk were near, I could smell them
and they could smell me,
a stranger driven by helplessness into groves
where cows and calves stalked valleys and ridges,
ears alert, skittish and tense.
But the bull, in mid-November, at dusk,
in the thick of the rut, a forest king with a king's power,
glared at me from one hard charge away.
He snorted a warning, and I looked about wildly.
A climbing tree towered to the right.
My only ally.

2.

Two coyotes lolled in golden grass.
A male, the larger of the two, sprang to his feet when he saw me,
ears raised, long jaw beautiful and deadly,
eyes betraying nothing,
unaware that I was there to fling myself against the wilderness
because it was the only thing capable of swallowing my sorrow.
The female rose a few seconds later,
uncaring that her presence as a predator
banished humans from my mind
for the first time since that night
forced me, weeping, to the floor.
I clapped my hands to remind them
I was a creature who had hands to clap.
They glanced toward a thicket of scrub brush,
an invisible pack unimpressed
with opposable thumbs that could make noise.
I strode quickly away,
looking back every chance I got.

3.

I had long since abandoned the footpath
when I stumbled across traces of humans—
a fence, a blue plastic water barrel,
a brown house hewn from logs,
murky windows, rectangles and frames
and a dirt lane rutted by fuel-burning metal machines
with crushing black tires.

In the presence of people,
neighbors but still strangers,
ancient fear spiked the base of my neck.
Despite sharp hooves and killing teeth,
the beasts of the forest
do not own pistols.

4.

I brought them with me at last,
their small dirty sneakers stamping faint imprints
as we wound deep into the darkening wild.
We dropped from the smooth skeleton of
a long-dead pine giant, ducking hardened roots
torn whole from shallow soil before
pausing to press our hands
against the ruggedness of living alligator juniper.
Singsong voices,
incapable of betrayal,
chirped wonder at the crescent moon
chasing sun to darkness, softening
the edges of everything made jagged.

Punching Permanent Ink

With a thick black marker our gloved hands scrawled pain
on red canvas—the Polish boy who broke your heart,

my aching knees, your cancelled trip to Paris.
We corralled phantoms and named them like fugitives

on wanted posters: fear of making mistakes,
fear of disappointing others, faithless friends, dying.

I first taught you to throw a punch during the age of living
room dances, horse rides and long blonde ponytails.

Nothing seemed unmendable then, but now here we are
in this frigid garage, fists balled, taking aim, on an edge—

no, I warn, arms up, don't ever let them hit your face,
head back, eyes forward. The heavy bag hangs still

as you step into warmth and light, where glad voices
welcome you. You ask me if I'll be okay remaining

in the cold darkness, where the floor needs to be swept
and the jump rope stowed. Yes, yes, I murmur: always.

Elisa Carlsen

Nest Initiation

it begins
like all stories begin,
a particle of light
exploding into the sun
expanding uniformly,
until we appear
to shoulder the wonder of it all,
carve our story from time
and make count
the exact number of days
we have to be here,
because when they pass
we'll call back to them
full of nostalgia,
for the dive bars
and hullabaloo crowds,
for our weird and hungry hearts
still longing to be filled
like a river,
waiting for rain
like I was
waiting
for you

Fledgling

all my life
I've tried to slip the knot,
tied to the bow of my body
from birth,
wanted to lift my life up
and conform the shape of me
to something the world could love,
instead, I enter every room
awkward and un-ordained,
stuck in that space between space
where lost things live,
who only want to feel
the promise in their life again
like a pursuit-diver
on a broken piling
near the mix of salt,
and cold dark water
in the orbit of its own time
who can point its chest
to the tip of the world
fuck off and fly that way

Human Dimensions

stern-faced and beautiful
you set your life to sail
like a butterfly boat,
ported from the city
crowded with desire
going your way
until I got on mine
and we crossed
under that same
ever-dark, Astorian sky

where you / divided me

I could tell you were tired
from everything,
all the time, everything
but still you leaned in
as if to say . . .
I hope someday, something
wakes up inside of you,
tenders your darkness,
catches your fall
and turns you back
to water

Scientific Integrity

there is no doubt you went
between the folds
of interstitial space,
in deterministic beat,
I bet you'll measure
the many moods of waterbirds
behind a perfect blind
with your still, empirical heart
and even though it's been years
since your last sighting,
there are echoes of you here
a lasting, long-winded coo
roosting in the snags of
second-growth Sitka
from the yellow, curved shore,
where a cormorant, double-crested
dives in the air,
and where someone
who has loved something scared,
gives it back to its wild,
like you were given to yours

Social Attraction

I wonder about you
my maybe friend
with your tin-tin heart,
a wolf-trap for misfits and their kin
you love wild things so much
the fingers on your hand
blur into a web and look
like pelican feet standing
one-legged on driftwood
your bright-brown sea lion eyes
shining, ever watching
that great blue bear, the ocean,
your raspy voice
sounding like a DOS printer
running out of time
until it was,
if I could wish you back
with my dark birdy poems,
if just for the few sunny days
we get here, I would

Daniel Gorman

A Poem About Mothers

Tina writes a post
because this time
this time they've gone too far
"have you heard? they're outlawing plastic bags! this is so stupid!"
it used to be we fished for compliments
but now we bait our hooks with outrage and grievances
casting from a ship called
"Entitlement"
hoping to catch loves and likes
and Tina is trolling in familiar seas
where whole schools of friends and family
churn the waters
waiting to feed and give back,
feed and give back
feed
and give back
until only the bones of their discontent remain
sinking to the bottom
forgotten

my fingers hover over the keys
fingertips at battlestations
I've got torpedo tubes full of truth
because I am an educator
I whistle past graveyards but not
teachable moments
Tina's lulled to sleep on the deck of her ship
I want to wake her up
set an alarm clock
with the sounds
of a sperm whale
beached on an Italian shore
mourning the dead calf she still carries
dying
because her stomach is packed with fifty pounds of plastic bags

packed so tightly the scientists that open her up when she dies say
it was as hard as
a baseball
fifty pounds of plastic
she starved to death because she was always full
I want to ask Tina if she's ever used her teeth
to rip open a string cheese
or a freeze pop
for her daughter
if she ever accidentally swallowed that thin strip of plastic
if she could feel empathy
for a mother who tried to nourish her child
on the detritus of human convenience

instead,
I stand down
click "unfriend"
because I'd rather swallow an ocean's worth of shopping bags
than waste one more moment
teachable or otherwise
trying to convince a mother
that her convenience isn't worth the price
of dying whales mourning dead calves on the beaches of Italy.

The Boy Achilles

Greg was the most dangerous kid in the world

I grew up next door to a boy made of skinned knees and curse words
daredevil bruises and dirt
who never heard a double-dare
that scared him
because the truth was
books bored him
and if he ever cracked a dictionary
he never got far enough to learn the definition of “fear”

I worshipped him

to me he was everything I wanted to be
to me he was everything I was afraid to be

the summer we were ten Greg never stopped wearing camouflage
every day—army boots, camo pants, camo jacket, camo hat
he was a boy painted with Rambo’s palette
drew inspiration from sketches of Arnold
hunting predators in alien jungles
because that summer—he was at war
this was not our usual game
where we donned grease paint
and ran through the woods firing toy guns—
our enemies were not the soldiers of our imaginations
nor the teachers that vexed him even during summer vacation
vexed him so much he drew their mugshots
just to shoot with bb guns

our enemy
was the humble honey bee
you see
Greg’s mom got some intel that spring
handed him some new marching orders
handed me an epipen
told him he couldn’t go outside without covering up
turned his camouflage into a suit of armor

turned my hero into a mortal
and suddenly
I understood what Patroclus probably felt
when folks would cough
and mumble that maybe Achilles shouldn't take his boots off

Greg didn't take his newfound mortality lightly
he hated his mother for revealing this weakness
hated me for knowing it
hated the bees for owning it
for no creature had ever had power over him
and despite his mother's demands
he planned
plotted and schemed
he built Trojan horses from the skeletons of old tree forts
tore them down again because
subterfuge was beneath him
he wanted the bees to know his naked aggression
so he ripped the sleeves from his jacket
bared his freckled arms and
dared them
made a torch from a broom and some tool shed gasoline
tried to sack a buzzing Troy and was grounded until he was seventeen

he was the bravest person I have ever known

today, I understand that Greg was not a boy at all
he was boyhood
an avatar
the living embodiment of what it meant
to be the boy sketching with unsteady hands
the blueprint of the man
the architect of my adolescence
he was the rights and the wrongs
the stolen beer and filthy songs
the eggs thrown at cars on halloween
the lies you told your mom so she wouldn't ground you
the lies you told your mom so she wouldn't lose faith in you
the bravery that etches itself into your skin
telling the epic poem of your childhood

so that when the time comes
when the demands of manhood call on you to be more than you are
you can look down at those scars
find inspiration in old heroism
when you ran through the Elysian fields of your childhood
chasing the slings and arrows on the backs of bees
with a sleeveless boy Achilles.

Sleeping Sickness

Sometimes, when we sleep together
I wake up in the middle of the night
and stare at where you lie
your soft form cloaked
in twisted sheets and shadow
unmoving
lifeless
dead?
suddenly my love for you manifests itself
in worst-case scenarios
I invent aneurysms and blood clots
murderous robots sent back in time to
break my heart
maybe it was an undiagnosed heart defect or
asphyxiation—did you go out like Hendrix?
or maybe Rumpelstiltskin came to collect on an old debt
Was it vampires, assassins, a ghost child crawling on the ceiling?
my love is the fear I'll lose you
my fear is that you have succumbed to every horror of my imagination
and I slept through it
until
my eyes adjust
and I see the gentle rise and fall of your chest
only then
when I know you've survived the worst of my nightmares
can I fall back to sleep.

Summer School

In summer school
I teach barbarians
I wave novels like white flags
at 8th grade berzerkers
who come to class with their own tales
boasting of broken noses in backyard brawls
fist fights during bathroom breaks
gang-style beatdowns
on empty playgrounds
they hype win-loss records like
they are prize fighters
and not middle school boys
failing English

my syllabus says English
but I practice anthropology
studying this warrior culture in our midst
where how many hits you've got on your fight video
is far more important than whether
Simon
on that island
was a Christ-figure
all they say is
"he's a pussy for not fighting back"
so I try a different tack
appeal to their violent natures
I offer up slam poetry
toss it into the fighting pits
maybe I can trick them
with something that sounds violent
but the lesson is mine to learn
words are for those without the courage
to come down from the stands
these boys are gladiators
content to let the weak write stories about them

Samara Hill

Self-Portrait as a Poet Who Can't Stop Writing Self-Portraits

here, you are nineteen.
your father fishes for his truth, in his expired scriptures
and in the shallows of your words.
you are named: wretched sinner. righteous disappointment.
here, Love is promising your mother is with you
as your father attempts to strangle you
in his frustrated attempt to regain control.
here, Love is gasping for breath and watching your mother's steps
retreat.

here, you are twenty.
your boyfriend shows you he is not your boyfriend, through the
medium of other people.
here, he confesses in a text message his desire for bodies that are
not yours.
bodies that could never be yours, even if you tried.
here, you are trying.
here, Love is dieting. Love is an apple a day and a gallon of water.
Love is skinny tea
and weight loss regimes. Love is collapsing in the gym. Standing
in the mirror, happy
to see a rib.
here, Love is fleeting moments of acceptance. Devastation when he
doesn't notice. Agonizing shame when he mentions *her* name.
here, Love is honesty. honestly looking at your reflection
and retreating because
here, Love is failing.

here, you are twenty-one.
the sunlight is dull.
your room is a dark blue.
sometimes the bright hue from your phone blinds you as you
attempt to scroll through
empty notifications. refreshing until something comes up.

you try for hours. and, nothing comes up.
here, you are measuring your self-worth in how long it takes
for someone to say *happy birthday*
and one minute before it is no longer your birthday your
boyfriend who is not your boyfriend
tells you he hopes you *enjoyed your day*.
here, you wished you were dying.
here, you thought dying synonymous with interesting. with
remembered. with loved . . .

here, you are not.
escaping is convenient for you, I know.
yet, while knowing you have gone some place far and lonely,
I look for you mostly everywhere.
because somewhere, Love is waiting in plainest view.
because somewhere, Love is waiting for you.

Nicole Justine Reid

My Little Orange Tomato

Gently, my tender toes tiptoe
over grainy, hard ground. Warmth
rising in tiny patches
from last night's rainfall. Clasp
the yellow watering can with care,
I tilt its fresh contents
into the waiting dirt, giving
what little of life I have to offer.
Leaves, soft and furry, catching tips
of my fingers. Sun, gentle and bright,
catching strands of orange-copper
as I lean forward, stroking stalks
filled with life. Fingertips
to my nose now—
fragrance, familiar and ripe.
Smell of sweet
and something else.
Just one lies on the vine.
An orange little sun streaked with yellow.
On its skin, a little map
of dividing lines, set hard
on the surface. I've wavered so long.
Now, I pluck this bulb,
wrestling it resolutely from its true mother.
Holding it in my palm, squeezing
the taut skin slightly, I press
a crevice. Juice wells up, flows.
I made this in a way,
with my offering of water,
my daily barefoot walk. But
I also know I didn't.
That I have nothing
to do with this miracle.
I think of all the heartbroken women
and wonder if I've—unwittingly—

made myself one of them.
I walk back inside, orb in hand,
place it gently on a plate,
feeling somewhat proud. Until
the aching emptiness engulfs me,
drowning slowly
into strangled rage—
a sorrow I cannot name.

Before Georgia

The road slithers
into the night, snaps
us on a straight line
melted white ruler keeping us steady

I look left to you,
wondering
if the dream hidden in your eyes
will keep us alive

To the right,
the skyline scatters itself
in shards,

the blur dizzying
and wild.
Thrilling.

Outlines

The chameleon sits green on a green leaf
 red on a red rock.

Borders bleeding
 boundaries being
deprived of themselves

The colors—they want their own magic—
pressed up against | each others' soft edges.

/It's so hard
being brown (when yellow screams to get out)
being pink (when the black sits heavy)

 in an office
 at a party
 with a lover
 or a stranger

I always wished to be a rainbow—all those bright colors
separated | working together for beauty.

The rainbow is certain of itself.

I rush to touch it
but my hand comes away clean

Returning to Sensual: A Prayer, Far Too Many Months After Car Crash

Please, pull this pain from my breasts,
nipples now too tender to touch
from so much play so needed

Loosen tightness where my spine
meets my hips, I want to worship with rhythm,
dance an altar between us

Make my mouth open gently,
have my heart follow suit
the way it lights up when you're in one,

All smart, mystery leaking,
naked skin hidden
just beneath those fine threads

I want to return to my body's waves
where the muscle meets the horizon
and the cold is far far below where I cannot touch it

I want to play in our sheets, waking
to want us, shyness thrust off like covers
exposing salt, heat, and sweat

I want to kiss you like I mean it, mouth hungry
for more, circles circling each other, connecting
like rings, fingers clasping like mouths

I want to lay in the stillness, my spine
curved to your muscle, your arms
firmly around me

So when you touch me, it no longer hurts

I have been drowning without waves—our cold

blinding me from being, but I can see the horizon
here now, we're in it

Soft and melting, like a sunset over ocean
bright enough for our souls to light again,
the fire lit and skimming past skin

Sweet Salt

Ocean, large
then little, lunging
at me, a child hugging with ferocity,
wrapping
herself around my legs,
the foaming
grip
a white announcement
to come and play. She beckons,
a best friend, looping lovingly
up
on to the grainy shore and
back
into herself,
her sparkling, impish, endless eyes await
Plunging
in beyond sand,
my knees,
my hands
becoming wet, I follow
into her cosmos, splashing spilling
secrets and swapping kisses her
calming balming watery wisdom
washing over me a devoted magical mother
soaking salty salves
into quiet cracked places
a sacred song
floating
inhaling
the entire universe through salt
feeling namelessly alive
but
deep within me I feel the sadness churning
the longing
to have come here sooner
to have connected more often
to myself or the ocean
I do not know
I do not understand
their separation

David Ginsberg

Butterfly Wings

If reality is perception
therapy is time travel.

Reflection is like stepping
on butterfly wings.

So . . . how have you been?
Every question is a cliché.

Any thoughts of suicide?
Every answer is a diversion.

Pins and Needles

Nail-biting
is a hunger, not a habit.

A destructive comfort.

An out-of-office reply
from which stress is the sender.

Cuticle picking, grazing
for a loose end to peel
down like chipped paint.

Rip into the flesh.
Self-inflicted cannibalism.

Lunula infections.

The insatiable urge to redirect
the flow of endorphins.

Open a trench at the root.
Flood the streets
under the crescent moon.

Twist the tip
tightly with a shirt.

Search for an unused needle.

Hammer the spike deep
into the tracks.

Listen to the screech as an
engineer grips the brakes
of a mid-century locomotive.

The Moment

For sale: baby shoes, never worn.
—Ernest Hemingway

The doctor will be with you
in just a moment.

But a moment is more than a moment
when you have nothing to do.

The chair is cold, the room
is dark with a soft red glow.

As if we are waiting for a print to dry.
A print to keep in my wallet.

She turns to me and sends a smile
with her lips, but not her eyes.

She is here, living in the moment.
I am lost among the clouds.

Typical.

We brought our passion
but not for waiting.

The clock is just a still frame.
Still waiting.

The doctor enters.
For her, not for me.

I am just a watcher
lost among the clouds.

We shift our gaze and smile, together.
It is our turn for our moment

but the frame remains still.

I stay confused, for the moment.
Not her, she understands.

I still remain
lost among the clouds.

She turns to me and says she's sorry
with her lips, and her eyes.

So I come down, from the clouds
at least for the moment.

Without a print to keep in my wallet.

Colors and Shapes

All the colors and all the shapes
but all they see are black and white.

Yet we see color, we see the shape
of our tiny baby daughter's head

developing limbs, pink transparent skin
blue veins, two eyes, a nose, a mouth

a beating heart, a flicker of hope
a second chance to complete our trio.

But that was then, and now we see
her precious flicker has gone out

and with it our hope, replaced
with only one word—*why?*

Cotton quicksand and saline rain
King Midas calls my name

but I refuse to accept that I will
never have the chance to hold her.

And in this moment, I open my eyes
and see every color and every shape.

Just as the folds in the drapes
allow hope to shine in, I hold her high

this child, this life, part me, part you
our sweet Persephone.

We smile and laugh, our trio complete
but only in a dream.

Dujardin Deconstructed

Van Gogh never witnessed his paintings
hanging in the halls of the Musée d'Orsay.

Otis Redding never heard the radio play
Sitting on the Dock of the Bay.

Many an ill-fate. An allegory on the transitoriness
and the brevity of life.

But Grandpa sits back in his favorite chair
dreaming of days—long lifted away.

Thoughts that drift off into a memory
of children blowing bubbles in the breeze

with smiles as wide as Grandma's arms
when her family walks through the front door.

Katherine B. Arthaud

Café Sant Ambroeus

Across the yellow omelet and the lightly sugared,
sectioned half of grapefruit
and the pancake stack with a whipped cream crown,
across the heap of tawny hash browns and the tiny pats of butter
like golden gifts under a tree, my son sits tall and still.

I tell him he has crossed a line, seems better than before.
He says, I am still crossing the line (a line I see as a ribbon, or
neon on a road at night).

He opens his phone to show me a photograph:
a monarch butterfly on a frosted leaf against snow.
In the next booth, a woman—black beehive hairdo, face pale
as an ice rink—orders café au lait.

I summon the waiter.
My son bends to fetch a fallen napkin.
He disappears from sight beneath the table.
I startle as though touched by sudden rain.
I take nothing for granted.

the ant

high up above the madness of the green lawn
there is a flat chair and a small table and a glass of water
this is my secret not even the dogs are welcome here
yesterday I watched an ant carry in his pincers a green
sprig as big as its body across the boards toward the place
the roof connects another ant came around and ran a few
circles and the ant with the leaf wobbled on with great
strength and perseverance as I talked on the phone to my friend
who is a counselor for refugees and I told her this ant
could be a metaphor for all she was saying and she
laughed and agreed and the sun kept shining though
less and less so as night came on and we all of us
settled into ourselves somewhere in this world
while the ant family either did or did not welcome
their glistening brother with his offering and his long endeavor
and mighty unswerving determination to get back to them with
the bright green thing which once grew also but no more
and the sky turned slightly lavender because this is the gift
we get over and over whoever we are whatever we carry

at the barn

why are old people afraid of horses
young people are not thinking
about death and broken bones
they are galloping around the indoor ring
and jumping over tires while birds
sing in the rafters
even when the snow slides
off the roof and makes a sound like thunder
they are not afraid

but when the world is warm and the sky
is blue and the sun hovers
like a good nanny
the old people tack up
and circle the outdoor ring
their tall black horses startle
at the crows and the deer that
come down from the forest

the young people do not understand the old people
and the old people don't remember being young
back when the world was red and crisp as an apple
and lust was a cushion as well as a thing to gallop
through shaggy shivering trees

o but you will find
us all at the fountain afterwards
washing the horses in the cool water
you will find us all at the fence
feeding them carrots and clover
soft whiskered nostrils quivering
it will be night by then
and the world cold as a bit
smelling slightly of leather
and grass
brown manes flaring in wind
lacy lazy silhouettes against a dying sun
with nothing to hold and no reason
to hold on.

POETRY SLAM

A dark man in rubber boots stands center stage, introducing.
The first, in boots and a lavender tutu, tangles language, says
she does not know who she is alone.

The second raps, and bounces on his toes.

The third sings, discordant, about his divorced parents.

He wants to crush them like a glass he can't part with.

A young woman with a headscarf tells: the history
of black people does not begin with slaves.

It was so cold out when we left our eyelashes froze.

It was so cold.

But my brain felt like a Van Gogh painting,
garish and stellar, messed up, singing with paint and light.

Paddle Tennis

We thought you were friends,
playful as otters in the sun,
even in the cold, with the mountains
blue and peaked with snow
in the distance. We thought
of you as friends. But today, Kay,
your pupils were pinpoints
against a watery blue—
and your words in the warming hut: blaming and cruel,
while Genevieve stared at her knees
and seemed to agree
with everything you stated, nodding her chin,
her hair black, slicked back, fixed and firm
with a floral fleece-lined headband. We
tried to explain, but you didn't want to hear
from us, were not willing to discuss
the past, which held the fuller truth like a crockpot
in a kitchen. You wanted to talk only
about the future and your need for us
to change. Backed up against the window in our parkas,
we were not expecting this, and then
we went out in the cold and not to waste the afternoon,
we played, game after game, Julie and I determined to win,
reclaim lost dignity and ground. But
something was finished, forever gone, like land
eroded by a wind. And yet,
and yet, we raised our mittened hands into the air,
while a neon ball ripped through the graying sky,
a dislodged planet, a friendship unseated wobbling
in a new and troubling orbit. Hey,
will we have an end-of-year party this spring
or do we hang this up
like one of the old dented paddles
that dangle, obsolete, against the wooden wall?
And so,
where does this go, my friends, as life and time play onward
with or without us.
Where does this go, as hair turns gray and wispy,

breath condensing in winter's air, laughter's echoes
fading against the frozen hills, smiles thawing
in other rooms.

Trivial, eternal, cruel, this battle shimmers—
shimmers like hope and rage and everything that has ever
shimmered on this shimmering complicated nearly ruined earth.

George R. Kramer

Passover/Easter 2020

Since Eden never such a sanguine night.
After the slaughter in Goshen of all the flocks,
their cries abate in the last limb of light.
Against slave hut doors a blood tide knocks.
Moses chafes for the risen sun god's eye
then the furious flight to silent Sinai.

Contagions and devils stalk this spring
as willets and warblers ring and rage
over this and that malicious king,
over these just deserts, that minor plague,
over those years of Egypt grown tired and fat
and the hungers haunting Judea after that.

Another prophet offers up feeble explanations
for each lost child and blood-let lamb.
Fear lumbers today through divided nations
and down the snaking streets of tired Jerusalem
stumbles the risen son, a savior, an enemy
falling from this weedy Garden of Gethsemane.

Young Odysseus

You sprang from the old story
Boys lined along a gully
Soldiers belting up a gun
Arguing in a strange tongue
Whether to shoot or not
Each boy half in terror half sailing away

Someone was always nosing to know
Where you were from though long
from fresh off the boat your patois
peppered words like wave
cresting crashing long after

Father feel my skin wrap over your old ribs
Drag your battered oars far from sea
Winnowing fan kindled for heat
Tread your shadow across the Canadian steppe

Horizon is border of the sailor's knowing
But my mind is shallow against relentless ocean
All I think is borne in light breeze
Carrying this thin vessel to the edge of the world

Dividing ourselves in our dreams
We chart many headings
This sail slooping below a bright horizon
That body not dropping in a red ditch

At Your Birth These Hopes Ate My Heart

At your birth these hopes ate my heart.
Against a fetal monitor's anxious beat of passion
your red ear emerged yearning to wander,
sprouting like a mollusk from a glassy shell,
arising from a sea floor, alive to the limpid world.

If ever a toddler swaddled the limping world,
it was you, your lips pursed like a heart
kissing then pinched to a hermit crab's shell,
and your faith that your tidal passion
will wash out grief to find other seas to wander.

Did I think then that you would one day wander
your way as you choose, spinning the wild world
into your dreams, throwing your passion
beyond the farthest territories of your heart,
kicking out of your cavernous shell?

Then we will mend and refill this shell,
your fading parents, and wander,
two shadows cast by one aging heart.
In a whelk beneath the wobbly world
we bathe in your conch blast's passion.

I lie awake mulling these days of ill passion,
prelude to tattering seas and artillery shells,
or perhaps a broken fever and a patched up world,
where you can remember me while you wander
across maps marked by the travels of your heart.

I wish your heart a moment's rest from its passion, a morning
to wander the beach for shells, at peace in this implausible world.

Amy Swain

In Praise of Trees

after W. H. Auden

What do they form? Bearing in mind clear,
inconsistent treatment, it may not make
for desirable consideration.

But there they are, substance and skin of the
pages we read, the oxygen we breathe,
the forest that makes us homesick and sick for
other simple things, like digging in dirt.

What could be more like Mother than nature?

On vacation admiring the redwoods,
feeling the faults in the bark and admiring,
while her son pisses on another tree,
content in the knowledge that he is doing
what he has been taught; that his own faults
will be appreciated just as tenderly.

If a tree falls in the woods, and no one

is around to hear it, did ego
mania even happen? If an ant
does not see *you* die—would you, understand?

Watch, then, bands of monstrous machines
make it clear, cut in twos and threes and three
hundred seventy million years before you.

Ant in metaphor, speaking of trees as green
money and smoke, do you know what you saw
when you sit on that branch and hack away
at what is behind you? Try to appreciate

the secondary growth allowing arbor
to grow in as well as up then try it.

The poet, admired for his earnest
appreciation of the Burren stone,
sees definition in the faulted ground
that once hosted pine shadows
and made room for sap.

It's Not Just the Heart

I *am* yours, yes—
my hands are yours to hold
And bend and touch
 my lips
open to you
 my legs
are eager to wrap around you and keep you.
You are welcome
 to spread my hips,
to occupy my fourth finger.
My feet will walk with vibration
and elation
toward you
as the song that plays will play.

But my guts remember him, and when we stopped

on the way to North Carolina, and in that field rivaled the
sun with heat.

Igbos Landing and Other Histories

In 1940, a book was published titled “Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes.” It is compiled of accounts of oral folklore, many which include, with hope and confidence, flying Africans.

when drums and shadows came around
asking what happened,
not one eye (nor wing) was batted.
some said “*I never saw, but I know people.*”
some said “*of course I’ve seen it, why, you got a net?*”

you don’t have to believe it, like they didn’t have to

TELL IT—

emancipation isn’t for the captor.
more than twenty-five accounts
of heavenly descent.
the Gullahs and the Timucuan knew it too,
but they always knew magic.

if Orpheus could go back for Eurydice,
they could surely escape hell.

“why did he run?”
He forgot he could fly.

Willful

On some writing in a women's bathroom stall:
Sad and betrayed, glaring. How did you get here?
It is dangerous to remember, it wept.

Don't blindfold yourself!

Quiet sanctuary of the space, should have
kept out those who don't know that memory is
keeping our mothers and grandmothers inside
our blood, souls, and mind.

Who, in this stall, thinks witches simply burned out?
When I smell smoke, I become hysterical.
Mixed race declarations on plantations say,
His story's not hers.

Stop, think—brock turner and yellow wallpaper.
Really think, was your grandma allowed to vote?
I think, how sad a woman sat here and thought,
I don't want to know

that it's easier imagining, laughing
alone, than to scream in a coven outside
for what the tenth muse loved, praised and made form of,
love for womankind.

Lunar Eclipse

I am the moon.

Dark, quiet, blemished
and howling

You are the sun.

You make me go down,
go to bed.

Make me useless,
and senseless.

You end me and you
make sense of my existence.

When you're gone I shine.

Matthew A. Hamilton

Love Triangle

We parked in the driveway
and waited for the lights to go out
in your parent's bedroom.
The house set back
from a quiet dirt road.
The surrounding woods
accepted the last light of the sun
before you cut off the ignition
and unhooked my seatbelt,
the smell of you a restless odor
pressing the inside of my upper lip.
We entered the house
and found your friend
waiting for us in the den.
Faint amber waves
of a corner lamp
hugged her exposed sex.
Your tongue pleased my ear
as your friend's mouth
blew warm air down the trail
where sin travels like a controlled fire
clearing righteous undergrowth.
When we were finished,
we lay covered in blankets on the floor
and imitated the cautious actions
of Adam and Eve and Lilith.
We listened to heavy footsteps
march, in the cool morning,
down the miraculous staircase.

Summer of '89

Jason dared me to touch you
down there in the garden of Eden
where the forbidden fruit ripened
on the tree that every boy wanted
to pick but could not because they
feared death, something I came
to desire after my father slugged
me so hard in the face I saw God.
Snubbing the consequences, I
touched you down there and you
said you liked it and you stuck
your tongue down my throat,
right down the essential conduit
of my being, and the bouquet of
your sex flowered on the tip of
my finger. When we rolled in
the hot, sticky grass, it stung
our bodies, but we did not care,
we were happy and in love,
two naked mammals collecting
crickets in our hair, preserving
the earth by our very nature,
the dirt and clay of a miraculous
creation, and naming, one by one,
all the animals in the woods, an
aesthetic action where fear, not
love, fades away.

Chris Kleinfelter

Covered Bridges

I am my father's son, walking in time
with my father's face printed on my skin,
looking through the eyes of stories
told on kitchen table evenings.

As a boy he strode barefoot on dusty days
of humid summers, in green farm country,
down to where the broad brown creek
passed by endlessly in tuneless murmuring
where the bridge groaned to the weight
of car and carriage, echoing traveler's voices
in the timbered roof-space among rafter oak
and swallow's nests, in cool rising air.

Worn wooden planks spanned the bottoms
of shoeless feet under the roof-shade,
above gliding water on it's long journey from
mountain meadows and Pennsylvania coal towns.
In high noon heat, cold currents came down
between grassy banks, over moss-slick rocks,
where wary brown trout lurked in
deep eddies while above stealthy fishing-boys
waited, patient as hunting lions.

I am my father's son standing in time
with my father's face gone from sight
on the harsh summer days where the bridge
once stood on the humid shore waiting
for the sons of country boys to come
stalk the deep running fish.
The strong oak of past seasons gone,
the floods have left only foundations,
standing still, in place, showing
the character of so much weather.

Buoyancy

When I feel how the river of time
carries me along in its strong current
the sandy bottom glides by
and I see the present,
firm and unbroken.

But I think of the layers from eons uncounted
and wonder at how they have shaped the course
of my path through a universe that counts
me as a mere particle shifting with a current
that I can not direct. I can only reflect
that I am still afloat and have always been
a swimmer between the shores
of an uncertain future
content to drift the quiet stretches,
between the rapids,
to find my fortune
one ripple at a time.

First Love Goes Viral

I wonder, if I were young
in this year of plague,
you know like before
I was in my prime
and the life of juggling
was still to come.
Would I be likely
to fall in love at first sight
from six feet away
Like I did that day
long ago by the river
when a blind girl asked my name
and my eyes became hers
all in a moment?
Could I see the fine person
beneath the N95 mask?
If I had the nerve to ask
would I show up
with roses in rubber-gloved hands
and say that I liked hers
with delicate fingers
showing beautifully
beneath tight-stretched latex?
How would we find the magic moment
when PPE must fall
and our souls bare all
with courage and passion
in spite of the pall
making it hard to see
the ones we long to touch?

Summer Night Discovery

Once we lived on the stoops
on hot summer nights.
Mom kept the lights on bright
to see what we were up to.
Heat lightning traced the skyline
and mirrored the electric desires
of our fevered age.
Our fire was not rage.
It was ignited on the pages
of revealed knowledge
showing us our brightest colors
and urging us to slip into the night
where all we could see was each other.

Getting from There to Here

I am, at times, a stiff-necked fool,
a tool of my inner urges.
There were times when I served
the worst of them
and spread my apologies
behind me like a trail of regrets
through a landscape of lost wishes.

Raised on dreams and muttered prayers
I had no one to be
except a feather in the wind
looking for a better wing
and learning that flight is just
deciding not to land.
And that my one true love
is the ever receding horizon.

Martin Conte

The following poems are part of a series about Achaemenides, who according to Virgil was left behind on the island of the Cyclops as Odysseus and the rest of his crew escaped.

If Quiet

Achaemenides turned one ear
into the silence. In it,
he beheld many things:
two figures, pausing near
the horse's trough; the toes
of a young boy gnitzing
grass from the ground; the gulping
tears of the young man at the concert,
but not the sound
which drew them out; the sexual loon,
calling for mates.
He heard the closing of screen doors,
the slinking of chains
over human forms, heard the shout
and toom of Eurylochus beating for
the row, heard the splash of guts
dropping out of a hen, the round
boom of the movie in the theater
next door. Achaemenides, listen,
tell us what you heard:
the sound of two watching the sunrise,
the sound of the clothespin closing,
the unabashed shouting of Polyphemus,
still throwing rocks and reworking the shore,
the sound of the shore fading into water.
Listen, because we can't, have it all at once,
do what your ears only can do:
the sim the storm the moan the lick
the click the tick tock rot and rock
of a tipping chair but not the fall.
Listen to it all, Achaemenides, and of it,
make a prayer or a list or just listen, and
keep your secrets for yourself.

Intertidal Zone

The rock absorbs
this utter light,
and gives it back
as warmth.
Our feet are
familiar.
The seaweed stretches
to meet
the sleeved boundary
where tide begins.
We descend beyond,
into silent din
of waterbrown
stain. It is
something,
to stand
where no man owns,
the ocean's land.

Here, Achaemenides,
we can stop
thinking
of death. Here,
there is no need
for breath or

beat. Here, we
are rocks so sculpted
with reverence by salt
and undone to our
second skin, which
can withstand this
water's one question.

What else need
there be?

The Sacrifice

After H.D's Trilogy

Again and again Achaemenides
dies. I cannot help
it. Help myself.
H.D wanders an empty city.
She beckons me
to follow, but asks,
demands, loss to see
what she has found.

Who have I to give?
He is willing, he hasn't
discovered his freedom
to choose. Into the waves

he wades, carrying
a cement block.
On his shoulders he pours
flames, scorched flesh
rising as sacrifice. H.D
shakes, her head
lilting to side. In the light,

she looks, too, like Helen.
She chants, an echo
in Achaemenides' temple.
He is willing.

On her page walls fall,
and Achaemenides dashes
beneath to be crushed.

I hold out both hands,
all fingers, show his blood,
crusted under my nails.

He has been so willing.
She turns them over, she points
to the wicker thatch of lines
traversing the backs.
This many, I ask?
But she is in another
city, she is searching for

the echoing bleat
of the sacrificed lamb.
Achaemenides has heard
that Odysseus is among
the dead. He is so

willing. He binds his body
to the tree, lets his breath
waste to nothing. But each time

he is turned away by the
ferrier of the river.

H.D draws near. She tells me
she cannot bear to see
such letting of blood, such
false smear. I look through tears

and see her bare, clean hands,
her white smock. I tell
Achaemenides to stop. He was

so willing, not because he
didn't know
his own freedom. He looked
to my poor, shriveled hands,.
No, not for not knowing.

Ghazal for the Shipwrecked

Picture it: the bayberries sprawl like pubic hair
toward water, the rock returns like bone.

Picture it: I leave sweetness out
for butterflies. They come with their many eyes.

Picture it: I am Ozymandias, King of Kings,
I write in the sand.

Picture it: sometimes, a boy comes, a refugee
from his father. We listen together but don't speak.

Picture it: the cyclops din on the other mountain
often sets up great waves. I ride them on my chest.

Picture it: seven crows, seven archers, seven
questions for the veil, seven shadows moving across.

Picture it: the poet asks me lots of questions,
but doesn't linger for answers.

Defense of His Borders

Eventually, rescuers arrived.
They wore round masks,
oxygen tanks, frightening.
“Come! Come
with us. We will bring you
to the food, doctor, shelter.”
He wondered who they
spoke to. Though he sat
there on a rock, waiting
to be taken, they passed him by.
One, with a bright
fire of beard below his mask,
paused to ask “Do you
know the marooned man?
We’re here to rescue him.”
Achaemenides paused, and a bright
toll of a bell crimped up
from their boats.
“No, I don’t know him.”

The man moved on.

Natalie LaFrance-Slack

Carry the Weight

he comes home from
school with his heavy
tie-dye backpack
draped across skinny shoulders
walking with that slow
sixth grade swagger
carrying that slow stocky
sixth grade baby weight
with the weight of a world
on his shoulders as if
the world was a dumpster
behind a dirty McDonalds with
a thousand leftover Big Macs
and
a thousand extra large fries with
a thousand barrels
of fry grease poured
on top and lit on
fire

like the world was the last herd of
elephants
being poached by a herd of
narcissists
like the world was an Amazon forest set
ablaze

he holds that weight like he's
seen
babies shot in kindergartens by
military grade weaponry bodies
torn to shreds
by bullets made for buildings
made for death
like he's used his sixth grade body to hold

closed a classroom door
to pile on top of a killer
to hope he's heavy enough to
hold him down
the way it holds him down

he holds it
like he carries
the state of Florida
Pulse. pulse. pulsing.
Sandy Hook
all of Colorado
fields of Columbine
Texas and
a couple hundred years of
brown people being told they aren't
welcome
on their own lands
in the land of the free

like that rainbow tie-dye backpack is
Stonewall
and marriage equality
and the Supreme Court
and stilettos and
forbidden fake eyelash strips
peeled off a boy's eyes before
he climbed back in the window
climbed into his bed in Brooklyn
in seventy-two
in Nashville
in two thousand two
in Rapid City
in twenty-twenty

like it weighs as much as
a woman's right to choose
like he's carrying Christine Blasey Ford's
heavy holy testimony
like he's carrying Brett Kavanaugh's
heaping pile of shit

like that shit is on fire
like we ate too many animals
and now the whole planet
has the meat sweats
like we used to have dinner
prepared for us nightly by a
five star Michelin chef
and now we get a mayonnaise sandwich
like the adults have left the room
and blamed the millennials
barricaded the doors
run out of the school
loaded up on gasoline
sped in their cars
home to their weapons stockpile

where from the safety of their laptop
screens they'll protest red flag laws
while waving white flags
and surrendering his future

he climbs into my
gas guzzling
soccer mom
full-sized van
and all four res pop under
the Weight

and we are forced to walk
silently home
sloping shoulders
backpack swinging
and a quivering upper lip
me perched on his shoulders
overweight and
old as fuck
and him
knees crumbling
and palms bleeding
from the shrapnel

and his resolve
and the weight of
one thousand unmet promises
in a one thousand year war
where he'll carry the bodies
where he'll carry the Weight

Grace

my original son was born
Original sin stained and
wailing
at a hospital called
Grace
and middle-named
Determination
finger and heel
pricked with needles
smacked along the back
and told to cry

for the next ten years
he'd be told
over and over
to stifle the tears
harness the rage
take control of emotions
until
with grace
I relearned my own
emotion
was offered names for
feelings
was rebirthed into
a way of becoming
Loud
and proud
a weeping grace

ten years of
telling my brother
his love was unequal
to the contemptuous
possessive
codependent love
I clung to
while he sought safety

in the arms of boys who promised
a grace in the midnight
weeping for family
hoping for change

man up
we thought
but we were wrong
strength is in the breaking
tears rolling
hands shaking
lips open enough to
draw a breath from
another's lungs

this love smacked me
along the back
and taught me to cry

I Do Not Owe You My Beauty

I do not owe you my beauty or
the youthful glow I collected
some summer on the shores of
Lake Superior
throwing fish hooks into open mouths
of well fed fish
throwing glances at boys on docks
and shorelines
shorts and sandals
grit in my mouth as I chewed my tongue to
a pulp asking for my
towel back
spit not swallow
swimsuit top
giggling boys snapping beach towels on
sandy asses
give me my name back

I do not owe you my beauty or
the coal dark sultry stare of well lined eyes
the club in Minneapolis
dance floor in Dakota
crotch rubbed against my shoulder
for eleven miles as he stood above me
on a Mexican street bus
the violent undressing of my
clothed body by his naked stare
hands wrapped around my neck
masturbating minds like exploring
mineshafths

I do not owe you my beauty
come sit on your knee and tell you about
me come sit on your lap and give you a kiss
come sit on your cock and tell you I want
you
call you daddy or master or a
long-drawn-out apology
imsosorryimsosorryimsosorryimsosorry

my worth the width of the handprint
you left on my ass
pulling panties lined with pearls from my
palms as penance
remind me the rent is due
rename generosity

I do not owe you my beauty
the summons of Greek mythology the
rewriting of Wonder Woman the
sexualization of My Little Pony the all male
Ninja Turtles the scented washable markers
we used to line our lips as toddlers the
tragedy of Sylvia Plath the scent of a
woman the mother's bargain the oldest
profession the dirtiest hotel room the
knowledge of escape routes the salad in
your teeth

I do not owe you my beauty
not my long silky hair
not my shaved legs or armpits
or lip
not the curve of my shoulder
my hip
the rise of my navel
forever forcing fuckably flatter the way
desire is spelled out
dimple
ear
so I
render
everything undone and alone and not
worth it

I do not owe you my beauty
so when you ask for my tears
I let them fall bleating bleeding lemon from
puffy eyes
I ring the redness around them with black

as you like it
use a fifth grade highlighter to circle
every blemish
I resolve to lose my hair alongside my
father but do not wait for his to go pull
fistfulls from a bloody scalp
decorate with table salt in every wound
put an infants' hairbow on every scab and
stare you down
every woman I know has
claw marks on the insides of her eyelids

let me tell you about beauty
when every eye closing is a slasher film
every eye opening is a slasher film
every cartoon is a slasher film
every pornography is a slasher film
harder faster better longer

every sleep is watching youth pass
every scream turned up loud enough
becomes indistinguishable from silence
it is possible I think that the trees are
screaming
top of their lungs
as they display beauty every autumn
every fall is a slasher film
every scream is caught so far back in the
throat you wrapped your hands around and
called sexy that we've put our hands up
unable to breathe
put on the jumpsuit
taken no bail
accepted the paradoxical prison
put on the shame
the escapism of ugly
before I will owe you my beauty
because
I do not owe you the least of me
the best of me

the bloody knees or baited breath
the heightened rent of being a woman
the terms of repayment
the mess of your stain
swallow don't spit
the endless apologies
Imsorryimsorryimsorryimsorry
but
I do not owe you a goddamn thing

My Brother's Engagement

my brother's engagement is my first tattoo
18 years old
driving home from college
early morning hours
crashing on my parents' sloping
living room couch
awaiting mom's chemo results
dad sees the tramp stamp
symbol in the space between my
shirt and the waistband of my
flannel pajama pants

I hope that's temporary
he says
and intakes his morning potassium
glass of orange juice
conservative news

my brother's engagement is my sister's
sexual assault
16 years old
walking to her car in an alley
early morning hours
disappearing into my parents' blind eye
her quiet bedroom floor
awaiting a holy period
because what were you wearing
why were you walking downtown
shirt untucked and coat undone
icy winter down unzipped pants

no one needs to know
they think
while she dissolves into
a glass of addiction
conservative stares

my brother's engagement is a son's criminal
charges
27 years old
driving record
read in court
all hours of the day
always taking cover in
my parents' quiet kitchen
awaiting a custody battle
youngest brother buys my
parents a convertible in pleading bribery
to cover the bruises blossoming beneath
his girlfriends' skintight dress

now he'll get help
they say
how can they they bear witness to
glass breaking midnights
conservative apologies

my brother's engagement is a hard pill to
swallow
64 years old
six years of relationship stability
fortyninethousandfourhundred hours
building handmade blocks of safety
a permanent home
awaiting their approval
when they visit and vacation in his comfort
call him for affirmation and expect gifts
weekly phone calls and letters
a comfortable sweater

we're just blindsided
they say
it's so hard to forgive this act of rebellion
stained glass commitment
conservative shame

my brother's engagement is a sky-splitting
sunrise
at 30 years old
the first healthy model of love I've seen
in countless hours of investigation
his is the story we've ached
to tell on the long drive home
awaiting the joyous way words
flow like waterfalls down the canyon
cut tributaries through what we've known
sprout flowers in rocky patches
light like a smile

we'll forgive you
they say
sit stoically at the ceremony
drink monogrammed wine glasses
conservative celebration

Vows

we wrote our own vows
but I do not remember them
childish words from
children's lips
while children grew
children
inside
childish bellies
we pledged life or love or
forever
like we knew what forever was

the morning of the wedding
I sliced the bottom of my
fourth toe on
a piece of broken mirror
some sort of
soul or sole
symbolic
just south of the finger
on which I'd wear his ring
take his name
bear his children
betray him
leave him
return

do you think there should be
starter marriages
I ask him
recently
three year mini commitments
so you know you know
before you vow you know
and he agrees
laughing
lined brow wrinkling
over blue brown eyes

that have betrayed me
left me
and returned

we wrote our own vows
but I do not remember them
I write this life
half spent in his arms
half spent running
half spent returning
instead

Susan Marie Powers

Dark Water

My mother dog-paddles through words
searches for the end of a sentence.
She sinks in muddy waters,
she drops to the bottom of this gray pond—
hair streams like Ophelia's,
hands grasp seaweed,
her curved feet touch soft muck:
fish fly every which way.

I stand on shore and call out,
but I know she does not hear.
She reaches for words in the dark water,
but they float away.
Names bounce off her fingers, memories
fall onto empty shells.
She stops moving and waits, waits
at the bottom of the pond.

I want to give my mother pearls, water lilies,
daylight, bird song.
I want to hear my mother
speak my name.
I want to see my mother walk and smile.
I tell myself she is not lost, that I carry her
in my cells, the shape of my mouth,
but I do not have the words
to summon her back to me.

Wild Hearts

A young beaver coasts underwater,
skims silt and water plants.
Sleek fur undulates as he pushes
one webbed foot back, and then the other
bicycling through this dreamy waterscape.

I think about his rotund mass, freed from gravity,
the effortless glide beneath lonely waters
where minnows dart, and herons fish.
Above water, he digs, constructs his pond,
works through the night while a female floats
down the river, following his scent,
finding her home and her mate for life.

Tunnels worm through hidden depths.
Moonlight illuminates dark silhouettes
piling branches against stones.
Beavers fortify their lodge, deepen the pool,
create a world beckoning all wild hearts
to enter these black waters.

City of Widows—Vrindavan, India

After my husband died, his family spat at me.
“What do we want with you? Another mouth to feed?
Get out!” My bones could not support me,
and I fell in the gutter, begged for food.

My Lord Krishna guided me here, to my sisters,
where I am wanted, loved, where we celebrate Holi,
the festival of colors, spring, new beginnings.
We toss iridescent powder, coat ourselves in paint,
and whirl in kaleidoscope colors, swaddled in love.
All is gone—my husband, my parents, my children,
yet Lord Krishna showers me with rose petals.
I dance until I fall to the floor.

Thank you, bones, for 80 years of dancing.
Thank you, skin, drenched in colors,
Thank you, hips that sway to music.
Thank you, voice, for laughter and love.

My husband’s mother said I killed him.
How careless of me to let him die!
I was worse than a stray dog,
Twenty years old—a disgrace.

Now, sisters pull me to my feet,
embrace me, entice me—we dance,
link arms, and my voice is unleashed:
I sing to life that surprises us.
I sing to warm arms enfolding me
and the heart I feel as I lay
my head on my sister’s chest.
Petals tickle my toes, pungent
marigolds mingle with
rose. My sari and skin
stained in purple hues, purple
as the heart beating beneath my ear,
purple as the pounding rhythm of joy.

Frederick Shiels

Toussaint Louverture, Breda Plantation, 1791

Your *Ayiti*, Toussaint, your Haiti, blazes now
from the northern Cap to Tiburon, the fires of
sugar cane and fragrant white plantation bodies
blaze now in Jeremie, Jacmel, and Port-au-Prince
blood dries on the black backs of four hundred
thousand slaves now—your Legionnaires who
carry torches in the black nights. Slaves refusing
to be slaves brandish torches down sandy paths
to verandas and smoke-houses of the Blancs—
Mulattoes, too. Slaves who light, Identify, and
burn, light and burn.

The French rise too in Paris, Orleans, Marseilles and all
the *paysage*, Normandie to Pyrenees *Departement*, and
young Napoleon grows restless with his fellow troops
aching for order and for breath, Toussaint, he reads of you,
Toussaint, in his barracks, but does not sweat your sweat,
Yet.

Did You Ever

see the black cherry tree
guarding an ancient family
graveyard beside the road to
Watkins Glen from Ithaca along
Route 79? And touch the once

electric barbed wire fence rigged up years
ago to protect the tombstones marker from
lives lived in the Finger Lakes in the time
of the early Republic, Monroe, Jackson
those aching decades of working the rocky
land.

Who were they—Henry Sayre, Hannah Sayre,
young Daisy? what are they doing now in those
white oak and knotty pine coffins with the orange sugar
maples burning above them in October and the green
flames of hell burning below? I like to picture Hannah in
her blue calico dress arms folded at her boney chest,
skeletal fingers still holding a lock of her aughter's hair
Daisy, 1819-1823, lying under the rocky loam Three feet
away, smaller stone.

Bad October: 2016

When I tell you this October
alone has seen Syrian sisters and
their brothers die cyanic blue
under chunks of concrete ripped
from the very walls round them
by their very own State-
sponsored bombs and sure
plenty of Russian rockets too
well you tell me life's not fair.

These thugs look to us in
America so they say
inspired by how easy it was
for us to crush young
bones not on purpose but
as a distasteful side-effect,
a 'collateral' of
The Mission—say Vietnam 1968
and 1972—October was
especially bad those years. There.

Oh, and this October, 2016,
six hundred children—give or
take—Haiti saw erased:
choked battered by boards
from their own treasonous
houses tree and waterrocked:
Hurricane Matthew dumb,
relentless—mothers wail and
dead is dead. Whom do we
put on trial for all this
autumnal not- fairness?.

The Rebel

Saturdays when afternoons were
too steamy or too cold for outdoor play
our refuge and our culture too
were penny-wise enriched

by the none-too-proud Rebel Theater
on old Pine Street where
matinee double headers drew in
boisterous kids by the station-wagon-load.

Parents dropped (dumped) their offspring there—
(It was not a safe/sane place for them).
We the loved the faintly rancid the popcorn the pickle-for-a-nickel
the Junior Mints and Milk Duds that

though pricey in boxes obscenely large went quickly
Heck the tickets were only a quarter so a dollar
bought an afternoon. A better deal for Moms and Dads
is hard to imagine.

It was at the Rebel that I first stepped into Ancient Rome.
Charlton Heston's chariot race deliverance from his galley oars or
not as high up on the cinematic ladder, the "Three Stooges Go
Around the World in
a Daze"—the laughter began before the action with opening credits
lifted by peppy
strains of "Three Blind Mice," like lightening seen
before the thunder sound for Larry Curley Moe an
epic no less than Ben-Hur itself.

The Rebel, distinctly inferior to Hattiesburg's other
downtown movie house the Saenger
gold ornamented, turquoise curtained
more adult more favoring
Romantic Evening Entertainment. I saw "The King and I" there
with my mother after dinner out. Dressed up—yes, pearls.
she would not have been caught dead
at the Rebel.

Red: High End of the Spectrum

Today in the bright *Light* of day a red deer vaulted over my car on a curve and dodged—I think—a line of cars in the opposite lane to safety. My sedan, oblivious to this drama, moved me on down the road—shone midway between Chinese and fire engine red; it was a red day.

Nothing in Latvia will cause me to beg my friend to pull her Volkswagon to the side of the road by a green sea of *rapsis/flax*, like the splash between flax-stems—of poppies—*Magonites*. They grow together. I always want to cut some of these carmine stars to put in water, knowing sadly that they will not last a day—out of soil.

Our eye chases red or red chases our eye to the delicate feet of the mourning dove on snow, to red's tiny splash in a Vermeer—a girl's hat, the pearl ear-ringed girl's lips.

What stop-light is ever Blue?
What stop sign?
Nor the eyes in your most perfect photo, no, there is no 'Blue-eye' setting on your Nikon.

You pomegranates
You oozing childcorpses You
cardinals lighting on bare-beeches or
in the Vatican, You sea-snapperfish on
my plate
You tell-tale hearts under the floorboards.

Do gently cut your boy's-arm
just a bit and me mine, and we
touch, become brothers.

The 13.8 billion light—year farthest, farthest out
galaxy, colorized, perhaps
but what do you suppose that color is? And
when I die what red remaining within me
will be motionless

Contributor Notes

Katherine Arthaud has been writing poetry for many years. She is a graduate of Harvard Divinity School and currently serving as a UCC pastor in northern Vermont. She has studied with Howard Nemerov, Dave Smith, and Stephen Sandy, but that was years ago. James Merrill, Sharon Olds, Anne Sexton, Billy Collins, Mary Oliver, and Sylvia Plath are some of her influences. She lives in Vermont with three mostly grown children who are sometimes home, sometimes not, and some dogs, and a mad cat.



Nathaniel Cairney lives with his family in Belgium, where he writes, cooks and hosts podcasts. Originally from the U.S. Midwest, his poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Midwest Review*, *Broad River Review*, *Sixfold*, *California Quarterly*, and others. He holds an M.A. in English Literature from Kansas State University.



Elisa Carlsen is an artist, poet and rusted metal fanatic. She recently completed her first chapbook about her experience working for the federal government to develop a cormorant management plan. She lives with love, in the Youngs River Valley. She is an outlier, untrained, with no awards of merit in her craft. And still, she persists.



Martin Conte grew up on the coast of Maine, in a community known for its high concentration of writers, fiber artists, steelband musicians, and homesteaders. His fiction and poetry have appeared in *Sixfold*, *The Aureorean*, and *Glitterwolf*, among others. He cofounded the independent literary journal *Thieves & Liars* with Victoria Hood. He continues to live and create on Maine's coast, working as an educator, a gardener, and a private research assistant.



Rodrigo Dela Peña, Jr. is the author of *Aria and Trumpet Flourish* (Math Paper Press, Singapore), as well as the chapbooks *Requiem* and *Hymnal* (Vagabond Press, Australia). His poems have been published in *Rattle*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Likhaan*, *Kritika Kultura*, and other journals and anthologies. He has received prizes from the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature, Kokoy Guevara Poetry Competition, British Council, among others. Born in the Philippines, he has been based in Singapore since 2011.



David Ginsberg hails from Indianapolis, Indiana and is currently studying Informatics at IUPUI. He enjoys cookouts with family, Friday dinner date nights, and listening to punk rock with his daughter. David wants nothing more than to live a quiet, private life with his family.



Daniel Gorman is a teacher living in Albany, NY who hopes to one day quit his day job and become a full-time writer. He has participated in the NYS Writer's Institute workshops for fiction and poetry, and frequently enters writing contests to stay sharp. His fiancée suggested he include in his bio that he loves dogs and is a big nerd. This is his first time being published.



William A. Greenfield's poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *The Westchester Review*, *Carve Magazine*, *The American Journal of Poetry* and others. His chapbook, *Momma's Boy Gone Bad*, was published in 2016 by *Finishing Line Press*. His chapbook, *I Should have Asked the Blind Girl to Dance*, was published in 2019 by *Flutter Press*. His full length collection, *The Circadian Fallacy*, was published this month by *Kelsay Books*. He lives in Liberty, New York, with his wife, son, and a dog, always a dog.



J. H. Hall My background is in religion, literature, medicine and fishing. My poems, essays and short stories have appeared in *TriQuarterly*, *The North American Review*, *Gray's Sporting Journal*, *FlyRod & Reel*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Fugue*, *Slipstream*, and other places, as well as in six anthologies and several collections of my own, most recently *Chesapeake Reflections* (The History Press) Raised in Virginia, I've lived in Maine for years.



Matthew A. Hamilton holds an MFA from Fairfield University and a MSLIS from St. John's University. His chapbook, *The Land of the Four Rivers*, published by Cervena Barva Press, won the 2013 Best Poetry Book from Peace Corps Writers. His second poetry collection, *Lips Open and Divine*, was published in 2016 by Winter Goose. He and his wife live in Richmond, Virginia.



Shellie Harwood, a poet and actress with an MA in playwriting, has written several plays, including *Ember Days*, and *Another Bite of the Moon*. She's taught Theatre/Communication and Literature at universities in Idaho, California, Utah, and Connecticut. Shellie recently returned to Connecticut, after writing for a year in Paris. Her poem, "When She Runs," will be published in *Mudfish22* (Box Turtle Press), and she'll soon publish her book of poetry, *With My Sister, in a Tornado Warning*.



Samara Hill is a University of Maryland psychology graduate who has been writing for as long as she can remember. Though some may disagree with her use of poetry, she believes writing is a way to express one's deepest thoughts and most troubling emotions. Hill writes with the utmost vulnerability and honesty. She hopes that when people read her poems, they are able to find comfort in knowing they are not alone in their struggles.



Chris Kleinfelter has been writing poetry since going back to college at age 40. That was 20 years ago. He won awards for poems submitted to the campus literary journal, *Thoughts Beyond Insanity*. Following that his work was published in the literary journal, *Harrisburg Review*, and *The Villager*, published by The Bronxville Women's Club. Most recently he won third place in *Tidepools*, the literary journal of Peninsula Community College in Port Angeles, Washington.



George R. Kramer hails from Canada, Colorado, Kenya and Alabama, but is a long-time Virginia transplant. The child of European refugees from Nazism and Communism, his parents' legacy and his peripatetic childhood leave a trace in much of his writing. He makes his living as an attorney. His recent published poems are on his website, <https://blueguitar58.wixsite.com/website>.



Natalie LaFrance-Slack I am a mother. I am a storyteller. I have my father's smile. I carry my mother's laugh and loss around my eyes. I am sister to many; a long-time lover. I am lucky to have and to hold (open palmed, always willing to see where the wind blows and what is meant to go) the tender hope of a redemption story.



Activist, musician, photographer, Radical Faerie, and prize-winning poet, **Sugar le Fae** (PhD) has taught English Composition and Literature for over 15 years; served as the Social Media Director (2012) and Poetry Editor (2013) of *PRISM international* (UBC); and published dozens of poems and essays across North America. Follow Sugar on Instagram @sugar_lefae.



Susan Marie Powers I live in the beautiful Connecticut woods with my family, dogs, chickens, and cat. My life's work has been teaching, and I cherish memories of my many students. Reading and writing are also essential to me, and I published a chapbook, *Break the Spell*, plus my work has appeared in a few online venues including the *Tiferet Journal* (2011) and *Sixfold* (Winter 2013).



Nicole Justine Reid is an emerging poet. Her poetry has been long-listed for the 2020 Fish Publishing Poetry Prize, shortlisted for the 2019 Bridport Prize, won first place for Free Form Poetry in the 2019 San Mateo County Fair, and is published in *The Santa Clara Review* and the *Carry the Light* anthologies, *Vols II, III, and IV*. She loves immersing herself in the salt of the sea and in an ocean of words.



Kimberly Sailor of Mount Horeb, WI, is a 2020 poetry fellowship recipient at the Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing. Sailor, a 2019 Hal Prize poetry finalist, is also the editor-in-chief of the Recorded A Cappella Review Board, with more than 300 music publication credits. Her poetry has appeared in the *Peninsula Pulse*, *Sixfold*, and the *Eunoia Review*. She is the author of the fiction novel *The Clarinet Whale*, and serves as an elected official on her local Board of Education.



Frederick Shiels is a poet and Prof. Emeritus of Politics and History at Mercy College. He has published in *Avocet*, *Deep South Review*, *The Hudson River Anthology*, *The New Verse News*, *Sulphur and Honey (Bosch: Garden of Earthly Delights)*, *Sixfold* (2013), and his most recent book is *Preventable Disasters*. He has been a Fulbright senior scholar in both Japan (1985-1986) and Latvia (2006).



Amy Swain is a new writer and recent graduate from Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts, having studied Writing, Literature & Publishing. She currently lives in New Hampshire with her boyfriend Jon, and their cat and dog, Ham & Lucci.

