

Poetry South

2023





Poetry South

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 The W logo consists of a large, stylized letter 'W' with a small 'The' above it and a small 'TM' at the bottom right of the 'W'.

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Poetry South

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Denton Loving

BLUEBIRD DREAMS OF RED FOX

And then as the eastern sky colors
like the skin of an over-ripened peach,
you appear—as if I conjured you—
pirouetting under my hemlock perch
with your death-kiss-is-beautiful kind
of allure—gangly, untamable, too proud—
and then you belly-creep home. I know
about your fatal fox magic, how you
open doors to new worlds, how you lure
hunters to fall in love with you. Could you
confound a bluebird, too, charming me
with your dance, pretending you can't
hear me when I'm singing your name?

BLUEBIRD DREAMS RED FOX HAS WINGS

I followed your tracks and flew back
in time to the mountain where
the Maker mined red clay to shape you.
I watched him kiss life into your lips,
and I prayed to be refashioned
like you with legs that glide like fire.
When the Maker refused my plea,
I begged instead to release the blood-
red cardinal that beats inside your chest—
your fur burned into feathers—
so instead of always running ahead,
you could wing alongside me.

Kaecey McCormick

MORNING FOG RISING

This morning I rose still asleep
and drifted into the hills where the fog,
thick and ghostly, towered above
the mountains and valley
keeping silent watch.

It smothered my footfalls
the way a mute alters a horn—
covered the mountains, an indigo
and gray blanket blanching the light.

It held the earth's exhales close,
warming the air like a moist breath
and when I opened my mouth, the taste
of dirt and worms and rotting logs rushed in,
irresistible and divine.

I lay down on the dead leaves gathered
in the windy spot and dreamed myself
awake until the fog parted and the morning sky,
smudged in its pinks and blues and oranges and greens,
danced with birds greeting the sun once again.

I watched the day move closer to its end
and when the curtain fell and the only light
shone through pinholes torn in the fabric of night
by suns expiring eons before my first breath,
I rose again and washed my face in the cold
creek and dried my skin with the mountain air
and thought of you.

As the fog rolled in to cover me again,
I contemplated staying on the leafy counterpane,
to let my body root and flower,
to give myself back to the earth,
to become something more by becoming
something less.

Instead, I gathered the moss around me
like a cloak and planted poppies in my brain
and let the creek run through my veins
and carry me home.

Tohm Bakelas

CASUAL WITNESS

picture this: it is early morning,
south of somewhere familiar,
south of somewhere
you call home

there are power lines
running down dirt roads
where the dust seems to
never settle until it rains

there are grey birds
flying skyward
towards destinations
you will never reach

and you are there,
driving alone in a car,
a casual witness to this
which you'll never
understand...

but you are not there.
you are here with me,
with these words on
this page and we have
only each other and
the oncoming autumn

Michael Romary

DAWN

The stars have gone. Those I saw last
will come back again, and at some time, I

Will see new ones now being born that will
show themselves, to the I I am not, eons

From now, though not the I I am now.
For even now, Orion's shoulder,

Star Betelgeuse, once was recorded
yellow, shining, now is shining as red.

Thousands of years from now it will become
a supernova, black hole or a neutron

Star. Then something else. All perishes.
Something will return. Not to worry in now.

Jianqing Zheng

MINDFUL LIFE

for Theodore Haddin in celebration of his 90th birthday

It sings like a robin
welcoming spring,

sounds like a finger snap
after composing a poem,

delights like a violin
playing Brahms,

rises like a pink moon
shining budding trees,

leaps like a dolphin
enjoying the sea,

sits like a thinker
on the essence

of existence that
mind is no mind,

name is no name,
star is no star, and

space is no space
but Way reaching far.

THE WORK SONG

After Eudora Welty's Chopping in the Field

Chop sunrise
into sharecroppers'
loud yawn

chop sweat
into cotton seeds
to grow hope

chop days
into vast fields
row after row

chop pains
into downpours
to saturate the dry land

chop sunset
into cow dung
to fertilize hardships

chop dream
into stars
to twinkle in the night sky

chop sunup
chop sundown
chop chop chop chop

Rob Vance

SPECTATORS ON A COUNTRY ROAD

In those hours owls cease talking, a rusting hinge
of crickets calls to me. No streetlamps or porch lights
line this rural path. Under the glow of a small headlamp,
I run. In a country of darkness, I follow a small circle
flickering like firelight on the ground. No choice offered—
the path WELL traveled requires stronger knees
than my own. Slopes are steeper in the city and maybe
the sky is raised higher to accommodate those crowds
of climbers. Not for me. I wind through fallow fields,
grain stalks parting. Each morning, my audience gathers,
round glimmers of light floating just above tall grass.
As I draw near, pairs will turn, stamping or snorting, revealing
comet-white tails raised. My faint lamp reflects
in doe eyes, like autumn starlight
illuminating the world with what is already gone.

Marcus Whalbring

WHERE BIRDS COME FROM

There's a door in the forest floor that opens every thirty-seven hours. No one knows who turns the knob. But when it opens, they come burning out, literally burning, you can smell the smoke from miles away. You didn't know a sky is happening underground, that birds began as stars in it. Each one you see still feels the pull of all the planets that once turned within its reach before it started burning out. Then it came falling through like the others, shaking flames out of its feathers as it landed in the nearest empty branch. Think about it, have you ever seen a star at rest? No, it's always open like an eye sitting in its nest of void, waiting for the moment it can start to fade and float through and taste the dew from blossoms for the first time, lay its planet-shaped offspring in a bed of grasses in spring, look up to see what clouds look like from below, and to learn the flag-like choreography that lets it call the air its vacation home as it sings a star-sized song through its keyhole of a mouth.

Josh Nicolaisen

ODE TO TREES MAKING ME HUNGRY FOR LIVING

once I sniffed rich compost birthing
lushness in someone else's garden
and I gagged on the desire
to grow something for myself

I squeeze dreams my children
and me link our arms around a trunk
we could never hug alone

there are words that fill me
with so much of something
they command all
of my hairs to stand staccato

water transforming
into ice, that stiffening
sprung from a lover's touch

ice melting again in spring, listening
to a cute dog barking at a
scurrying chipmunk in the park
a plant titillated into perk

by the first drops in oh so many days
or the heavy knock on the roof
on a day I want nothing

to do, a snowy path carved in the forest
after waking to a chorus of pine
siskins singing a powdery song
I longed to join

the hot boiling of sap
the sweet amber juice it produces
a warm waffle soaked in maple syrup

a quick whiff of that green flower
burning, a j being shared high
on a chair or beneath
the subway somewhere I'm low

I saw a savant speak and my stomach wept
like ladies mantle, yellow and pouring out
like smoke

I watched it waft out an open window
saw dogwoods adorned in orgasm-
ic faces as big as dinner plates, lips open
a low moan intoned from stretching bark.

Annalise Mabe

FIELD NOTES FROM THE BOTTOM OF A LAKE

I was a girl—
 which meant I was for the taking,

one for the books,
 hooks wormed in my heart peat moss daughter of drudgery,

lifted up from beneath
 lake water tannins and the decay of dried leaves

falling, always

to that bottom where alligator eyes, afraid watch for little feet
 where they are more scared

of me, summer hymn sing
 me down to that bottom

of sunken flowers, of floating skulls of pine rot and two-toned bass
 last me a little longer let me stretch

a girlhood where I might even forget
 I was a girl

Patricia L. Hamilton

EVE, AWAKENED

After Marc Chagall's "Paradise I (Tree of Knowledge)"

In dreams I know many things

I open my eyes

The moon shimmers

Ripening persimmons dangle

I hear the slightest ruffling

I cannot explain how

your night-silvered skin is my skin

sheltered by leafy boughs

above your soft, steady breaths

as if of angels' wings

Rosa Castellano

A GIRL THE COLOR OF A HAYFIELD STRADDLES
THE FENCE BETWEEN TWO YARDS

Just out of reach of the loose dog
trotting through the back yard,

with a chicken—neck broke
and dangling from his mouth.

I grasp the chain-link fence
with both hands, the scab

on my knee broke open, weeping
red as the dog lays the bird

at my feet. This dog who
every time I step outside—

barks, jumps, strains violently
against the rope, as though

all he wants in the world
is to bite.

On the ground the bird's mouth
is open, her feathers' pulse

with his panting, till he inclines
his head toward me, as though,

all this time, he's only been
trying to say, hello.

Mark Smith-Soto

NOTHING ELSE

I scramble out of bed: what was that sound?
A burglar prying open the back door,
or out in the garden making the rounds
of the house in a chill dark softening for

spring? I peek outside. The almost pink
garage glows like a ship in mist. Tall tulips
stand guard along the drive. No one. Nothing
disrespects the midnight emptiness. I pull

up the blinds, stand in the kitchen—deeply
awake. Poetry doesn't have a prayer if not
this moment when my lover lies safe asleep
and silence is the moonlight's only thought.

I grab a pen, a pad, sit to write these words.
Nothing else happening except the universe.

Mark Smith-Soto

ANNIVERSARY

I hardly gave a thought to what they meant:
Barbed wire, you said once, with a grin
that broke across your face like an accident
as you pulled down your sleeves on a forbidden
theme. Which was okay with me. I was bent
on brighter things, could barely fit in my skin
for wanting it pressed against another body.
Not that you were just any body, not anybody

would do— I wasn't that blind even then.
I found you charming, smart, that kind of thing,
and it was clear that when it came to men,
you knew better than most what you were doing.
Still, of us, maybe you were the innocent,
I the merely virginal, in want of a fling.
How you have grown, with each distancing year,
into a presence intricately near.

Which makes regret look foolish, moot.
Wrong-headed, if it meant wishing away
the sophomoric impulse and pursuit
that led me to throw myself in your way.
Knowing you was something totally good,
for me, at least. For you I cannot say.
Did you count on my not taking to heart
the pain that must have been there from the start?

You called yourself madcap, a drama queen.
Disarming, to hear the echo of my thought,
which let me ignore without feeling mean
the wounded soul in the body I sought.
One thing does hurt, to think you might have been
looking for more from me. How I hope not,
hope you saw me as I was and liked me so,
and weren't very sad to see me go.

Not long after, thirty years now to the day,
you'd had enough of yourself. The young man
on the phone, half-choking on what he had to say,
thought I'd want to know. And I felt newly alone
hearing your name again in that new way.
The scars came back to me then, how they shone
pale on the pallor of your skin, and to my sight,
all but invisible in the morning light.

Whitney Koo

OPHELIA IN THE SWANNING

Say she stepped out of life one leg at a time. Say she crashed the handset down after a series of inquiries the caller had no right to. Say what you want, I had a friend in Colorado who set off one morning on a hike to mark the start of starting over—missed a step and died. He wasn't even trying. And she the same, could only commit to starting. And what's commitment but an attempt to expand time; a finger gently tapping around the edges of your lipstick to soften your mouth. As if it were the point of a lesson in an art class on figure drawing in which the professor has something to note here on curvature but pauses too long at the miracle.

Brian Jacobs

RAINBOW ASSASSINS

I never wanted a home nor a Lotus Sutra

I am not a lotus eater
I'm a rapture of rainbow assassins

the loss of formalism
I am a complex ask of fantast's accretion

floating
in language soundfacts

Kate Polak

WEEDS

Life loves a weed, or
 maybe, weeds love life
more than most of us
 are used to. To cling to this
with no softness:
 thistles, brambles, things
that stick and hurt—things
 that stay painful in the skin
but live. The blue ball
 of the thistle is the best
I can hope of what love
 really is: it hurts
if you touch it wrong.
 It's what we are: gorgeous,
but hard to hold. It lives,
 in spite of no water in the jar
I carelessly set on the counter
 a week ago.
It will hurt you, yes, but
 will you look at it?
The absolute astonishment
 of possible pains?
The strange spike of longing
 against whatever's plain?

Court Ludwick

HOW TO SURVIVE A COLLAPSING

Keep the ___ outside of your body.
(do not open your mouth when they say *calm down*)

Be sure to preserve your ___
—fill the dark pockets of yourself with light.

And close your ___
because they say so, because

they say a six-year-old was swallowed here
and there are certain things people shouldn't see.

Do not ___
what's unstable. (~~do not~~ remember you are too)

Let people know ___ you are.
You are no sandfish—you do not possess

the ability to retract yourself
when ___ creeps in, easy as anything.

Debra Kaufman

AFTER CENTURIES OF GRIEF, THE WOMEN IN BLACK

still bring cakes and casseroles to your home,
help arrange the ceremonial flowers,
hold the hands of the grieving in their own.

Because they are ancient and have borne
many deaths, they themselves are beyond
wails and tears, beyond tearing

their garments, bathing their heads with dust,
beyond having to tell children terrible stories

of wolves at the door and blood-stained floors,
where to find the nearest cupboard to hide in,

they are beyond their own bodies, they are
crows mobbing any intruder, crones
with mysterious spells, harpies crouching

on the lawns of those who refuse to see
how mourners must endure.

Behold their fierce claws and haggard faces.
See them spread wide their tattered wings
wild in the wind that made us.

Kathryn Thurber-Smith

IF I COULD

after Susan Rich

if I could, i would bring back your goldenrod
cardigan with pockets of agates and cigarettes

dance with you at st columba's church
on industrial tile and dust

if I could, I would add forgotten flour to your brownies
break up egg yolks with a wooden spoon

remind you to turn off the oven
after rosemary and potatoes are roasted

if I could, i wouldn't pinch you in the arm
leave an imprint of my thumb

run from you barefooted
through broken glass and spilt trash

if I could, I would watch you thread your needle
sew a straight seam sow a row of peas

if I could, I would hold your elbow on beach stairs
Not just because you might lose your balance

if I could, I wouldn't wait for faltering footholds
or missteps in a recipe to befuddle you

if I could, I would plant snapdragons and hope
and moon-sparkled zephyrs would blow you back to me

Paula Reed Nancarrow

THE WOMAN WHO HAD NO SHADOW

Aarne-Thompson-Uther type 755, Redemption and Forgiveness.

Why must the correct
answer always be
Be it done to me
according to Thy will?

In the folk tale
a pastor's wife
seeks remedies
from a witch in the woods
& is given them.

Stones tossed
into a well.
Her shadow
following after.

Thereafter
no shadow.
No children.

*

In the folk tale
it takes death
and a miracle

for the pastor
to forgive his wife —
to conceive at least
of a God who might.

On the slate roof
of the parsonage
wildflowers are blooming.

At the bottom of a well
the shadows
of dead women
nurse stones.

Mariah M. Friend

FALTA

Me haces falta
You are missing
from me

You were
never good
with accents—
couldn't pronounce
the word baño
to save
your life

But when I
flew to France
for the holidays
to visit my then-boyfriend,
you wrote
an entire
Christmas card
in French, painstakingly
translating your love
in ALL CAPS

sent it in a sealed
envelope and said—
“Daughter, here
are some wool socks
to keep you warm.

“It's cold near
the North Pole
and I know
you are looking
for the light.”

Liam Strong

AFTER-PARTY AT SPIDER LAKE & THE LAST
STAY FAST HOMETOWN SHOW

the rocks punch my shins before water
considered my face. jumping in i want

a familiar sense of being held. maybe to break
surface tension down, comprehend its many

facilities & corners. my arms are empty allen
wrenches scratching at footholds. it's easier

for me wanting to become the goth girl
who lingers on the dock, easier to hate

myself like some punk-ballad cliché. there's no effort
in singing that to myself. fill a lake with trash cans, you

get a metropolis of turnbuckles. but where to place
myself among things cast away? i've got three budweiser

tall bois in me & no name behind the ass
of my trunks. i could be my stillborn sister,

tits legible through sodden Silverstein
shirt. the water never warms until

August, & school's back in. i'd walk
through, sopping with regret, lighter

than air, queerer than ramshorn snails. my lungs
don't know what they'll hear

when they reach up for release
or reincarnation. a person will never love

the first dive back
no matter how little we shiver.

RC deWinter

NATURALIZING

when i begin to feel like a tourist in my own life
i turn to changing yet unchanging nature

the delight of the summer sun marching proudly across the sky
until the bittersweet hour when it melts into the arms of twilight

that gentle executioner painting the sky
in the gaudiness of daylight's death

the winter mornings i taste the first snow in steelgray clouds
although it hasn't yet started falling to bury us in its shroud

knowing the coming labor of clearing it does nothing to diminish
the anticipation of its beauty sparkling in the kiss of the next sun

and between these hot and cold extremes
the changeable delights of spring and fall

winds warm and cool
the births and deaths of green growing things

the arrival and departure of birds
that wake us and sing us to sleep

along with armies of buzzing humming croaking
creatures filling evenings with atonal hymns

the embrace of nature resurrects the will
to participate in the carnival of life
that like a kaleidoscope

delivers fresh beauty with each turn of the wheel

Theresa Monteiro

KYPHOSIS

This spring rain bounces off cars
and basketballs left in the driveway
of some vinyl-sided house on a street
with no sidewalks named for the breed
of a faithfully domestic dog.

By an east-facing window, a crop of
magnificent herbs turns anemic—
dead basil's not a judgement, but it's
not good for pesto, either. No one is
charmed by false humility, no one is

worried about the curving of my spine,
the hunched back I'll make without
striving. Nobody cares for poems about
flowers by women who buy them and
let them die. I should be seen, should suffer

immortality—preserved for scrutiny
in digital photos where I look exactly
as I look, crooked. It is always the shape,
not the size, that's the obstacle, always
turning in the mirror to turn away. Hard

truth is the great deterrent. That sound
of my own voice, heard on VHS tapes, has me
hungry for distraction. Stooped and staring
into the shadows of the fridge drawers to find old kale,
softened and black, or anything rotten I can throw away.

Meredith Macleod Davidson

BESOTTED

The glitch aesthetics are at it again

~I guess

four times revising the day's data mine

~refresh, refresh, refresh, re-

harvest drawn from beneath the chin, man's thumb

~keep it light, now

guiding a gaze disdained. The images

~it is important to be seen performing the rites

degenerating with every tap

~even if it is bad, just be seen

from home inward. The timer loosens sand

~in a way, metaphysical

with a threat: miss your moment and you only

~your moment, like you own it

have the one; with a reward: be present

~I do have an issue with intrinsic motivation

again, again. There is a principle

~not to mention obsession

to applications, an imperative

~think business

to encourage our continued visits.

~"the feminine urge to disappear"

If I am always replicated there,

~that's me rent-free in your mind right now

how can I ever truly be here, when

~in the darkness I cannot look myself in the mirror

intimacy is a closeness you feel.

Jeff Hardin

A POEM IS A WAY OF PRACTICING A SERMON

Forsaken in the world, shuttled from home
to home, I broke open smooth rocks to find
a sky inside. Now I do the same with words.

Across from a pasture of cows, a white church
left its door unlocked through the week. A boy
could practice a sermon spoken only to God.

Can anyone say with certainty that the rapture
hasn't already happened? Even so, someone
still has to gather in rows of okra and squash.

Some poets spend their lives speaking of beauty,
truth, or blessing. Meanwhile, another boat of
migrants capsized overnight. Not all find rescue.

Sometimes I sat in one pew, then another, then
stood, kneeled, bowed my head, lifted my arms,
trying out every self to find the one redeemed.

Hallie Fogarty

CATECHISM

after Donika Kelly's "Commandments"

Abstain from touch,
from widening within spaces.
Grow accustomed to being larger
than the space you're allowed.

Abstention means disowning.
Means dissolve.

Dissolving means the taking apart
of your body, stitches ripped out.

Dismembering is a pastime.
Dismembering is an affirmation.
Touch the body to itself.

And so, where once a body,
now the imprint of a body.
Where once an imprint,
now an idea.

Dissection means all the knives
are sharp. Recollection means
all the rooms are empty.

Empty means you have disintegrated,
means someone can take your place.
Your place, implying a mark was made.

Ace Boggess

LIFE INDOORS

Mouse in the closet, bird in the garage.
There is no folklore here but winter,

urgency to escape, seek shelter,
a roof between safety & snow,

carpet with crumbs like a lush meadow
in spring. The Bicknell's thrush,

speckle-necked & plump,
can't find its way through an opening,

trying to breach the invisible barricade
of windows along the far wall.

Like wiper blades, its wings rise
then slide back down the glass.

When the thrush relents, rests,
I collect it in gloved hands,

walk it out, release it like a dove.
I wish I could say things

will end as well for the mouse.
Today, I close the door, leave it alone.

Tomorrow or someday soon,
I'll no longer be a gentle man.

Barbara Westwood Diehl

HOLDING MY PHONE ABOVE MY HEAD
AND RECORDING WITH THE BIRD ID APP

I search. If there is a god, the god knows this.
I think, there must be a god with hands
that can wipe eagles and hawks right off the sky
like the guy at the diner
who clears the pie plates and coffee cups,
shoulders hunched.

For now, the world hides its bright feathers
in a fist behind its back. Finches clenched
like new nickels. I search
the roof ridges and power lines, the places
I've been told to search. The poplar
is choked with leaves. Only leaves.
The Open sign of the world is turned
to Closed.

Dust reshuffles itself. A papery air of farmers almanacs,
remedies and moons. Forecasts.
Crows in pairs, fine weather.
Seagulls flying inland, here comes rain.
I think I believed in gods and almanacs
once. I am told a Carolina Wren
is singing. I am told an American Robin is singing.
I am told to go slow, to sift through sound, to study shape,
but my hands want to grasp music by its feathered throat.

Why should I believe what I am told. I can't even imagine
what I hear singing.

John A. Nieves

POSTBANG

The closet is dead, okay? Its back was blown
out and the darkness it held like a warm
sweater had unfurled into hideous light—
a beige that stole the green off the grass.
The explosion took so little, really, but what
it took, it took completely. Like quiet, which became

a nursery rhyme, something you made up to
keep the little ones happy. Like the calendar
that hung on the closet door, now only the savage
curls of too big eyelashes on the wrecked
pine floor. But the door itself survived.

Recontextualized, it rested flat on the queen bed,
hinges all a-twist. And intimacy. Once something
inside has become outside, it never really gets to be
inside again. A room that once felt far from the weeds
feels them now like a starchy tag on a new shirt,
an irritant we all pretend to ignore while it rubs raw.

Jeff William Acosta

2022, BAGUIO CITY

Baguio's too cold
tonight my love
throw me inside
your body like an
undone bullet I wish
it would kill me
this time make
the bed a mess of
our fears midnight
took my last breath
before I was 18
I carry voices of
ghosts that lived
in my childhood
at Trancoville St
a woman was found
silenced with a tape
her mouth can't
swallow and I heard it
echo outside our
window I don't want you
to know that I crave
to live and make a god
out of you Lovie
don't laugh look how
happy we are Lord—
forgive us to be
no one is enough
to erase ourselves—
drown to the sound
of innocence I fear
 the softness—
you gentle
enough angel-
teeth soft animal
my body hungers

Jeff William Acosta

DEAR WEEJU

1

Let me begin again / with love / like awakened & deathless / like how we used mahal as a type of fuel / to start every sentence. Tell me / how our tongues carry / the weight of infinite stinging /sub-atomic particles of a dying star. /Call it lost wishes. Call it a memory / when my lips still hold your name. / Here is what I know: my mouthful /of hope / my shedding skins / sleeveless. I am my own nocturne. / I unwrapped a piece of my bones / only to learn my body's constellations / are still unholy. I promised myself not / to look upwards / so I can survive a canon / flash of your snow skin.

2

Unbearable / your thighs— / a guillotine of wants. My god / was drowning. / I am trying to stay / clean—sink my head only to put it /up like it's the last day /of my penance. It's been a long time / since I had weight. I had substance.

3

How the pavements echo / a name / a voice I mistook / for grace. I sentenced myself / to everlasting / night ritual. If I stayed on my knees / I'd reach for your lips. / Again / to your songs. / It doesn't make sense Lovie / that love is a wound. And ours / a slaughterhouse. You / a flick of a knife. / Because I'd keep coming / back to our psalm-less tongues— / how we learnt to recognize / touch: the open passage of one mouth / into the other. Watch the spring tide / lick around our bodies. / Two sinners tied / to a prayer.

4

Today / A Tuesday I started running / though I kept stopping to touch / again my body just to be safe / just in case I forget. / I understand now / even when surrounded by ghosts / how to celebrate my bruises / how to worship / like everyone else—I confessed / to the Lord / I want a storm I can dance in. / To the moon to be brighter / than any moon. / Am I greedy / if I ask for comfort? / for your forgiveness? / The answer is always an echo. / Topsy turvy. / Aimless against my throat—your hands / if not god's / I'd ask to tighten your fingers / around my neck / like a noose—like a fist / not enough to ruin me / but just so it wakes you / terrified at night / & restless without end / bear my slow hollowing—the sound / of pleasure you cannot will / as an arousal. / Because I had to assure myself / until my name / my body / starve you empty.

5

I kept running closer / not where I grieved my deaths / but the distance /
between our sins / and daylight. That I can / name a new name for mahal
/ this myth /question our tongues. Lovie / I messed up. I admit the wars /
never ends in my head. / Because my demons still haunt me / in my sleep
& I am killing them / in silence. Because I am out of breath / & I call
myself holy anyway. / I want to be left in solitude / when the night sky
breaks / its wounds / turns lifeless like falling stars / bursting into red / &
I disappear completely.

Holly Cian

A DAY AT THE MUSEUM

We walked along a public greenway in crisp weather,
late fall, surrounded by the color of sunlight

in the trees. We ate in a small cafe
tucked in the corner of North Market;

I picked out plump vegetables for yogurt;
later, we browsed a collection of art at the city

museum; I brushed your arm, and you smiled,
and as the hours of the day wound down

like the wheels of a train as it nears the place
where it is headed, we said less and less,

and in the morning, we said it had been
a wonderful day. I don't know how to not

end up here. To not put my shoes
in this hallway. I wonder how I would

have been changed. The moon, the clouds;
anything can cover the stars.

YOUR CELLAR

I say too much at dinner because I am nervous.
My pages are softening
and you have things to show me.
It is four. I lift myself to be a part of you.
The fat dripping sun is high in the sky.
Everything now preaches back at what happened before,
all the little visions. Shoes are tied. I'm round
as a peach. I filter a wooden comb through my hair.
I once attended a training where our darkness
was referred to as the cellar and
you live in your cellar;
I'm a part of your tall yard
reaching to the lid of your entrance.
How can I slide into my own mind?
Everything about the cellar and the yard
and being braised in the sun:
if you can float you float,
if you could eat you would eat,
and if you could die you would die,
and I would sleep in your hands. I'm skeptical of anything
to do with a pear and when you hold your hands
out to me in that shape, it looks like you are
dying, all at once you are becoming a closed eye.
I am afraid of you always: that is love. In the past I inhaled smoke
from the fire. I laundered clean sheets. I struck the sky that was so black
in the night. That is also love. Your grind. The round world,
round as a rock or a reverse in direction. It is night again.
It rains again. I cup my hands out for it as though for your face.
I'm going again. And you, sweet as a strawberry,
in the things we did I never forgot how cold
we could be together.

Jon Parrish Peede

METAFICTION AT SARDIS LAKE, MISSISSIPPI

Sardis Lake, dry as a whistle,
 is waiting for the spring rain to return.
The two of us, beers in hand, await too.

This certain Thursday we have not written
 for a long time, and it is grinding against us
like a big gear upon a smaller one.

We don't know anymore what we want
 from the page, or what the page wants from us.
So we come here, to the water, or at least its shadow.

From the boat landing at Hurricane,
 we watch the sun drop behind the cypress,
burning time with our Zippos.

A cold wind sweeps the lakebed from the north,
 kicking up candy wrappers, wrecked bobbers, swirls of dirt.
It promises a dry season.

We no longer speak here.
 We don't have the words for it.
In a world full of fish, we've run out of bait.

A HOUSE REPAIRED

The plumbers finally moved along
two weeks before, maybe three.

Then you noticed something wrong
and turned the jewelry box toward me.

The emerald bracelet was gone,
engraved at Christmas: SKP.

A first-born's heirloom never shared—
the price of a house repaired.

Jason Gordy Walker

GREETING CHARLES HENRI FORD AT ROSE HILL CEMETERY

Brookhaven, Mississippi

Circling the graveyard behind the public school
my father attended years ago, observing tombstones
chiseled with the names of my long dead cousins,
I rubbed my sunburned scalp, puzzled not to find

your resting place. I pictured it adorned with a tulip,
petals luminescing among the weeds beside a chipped
picket fence, like in my dreams of Hazlehurst.
Throat-tightened, worried I might not find you,

I thought of flowers cooing, pixelated in my mind's eye.
My aching chest relieved. I breathed. Sunlight caressed
a modest plot of grass: Your father, his wife. Your sister,
Ruth Ford: ACTRESS—MUSE. No tulips in sight.

I gasped when I saw you, a stone:
SLEEPING THROUGH HIS REWARD.
I had waited so long to tell you how much I loved
“A Curse for the War Machine,” but here you were asleep . . .

No blossoms for you. I touched the ground. Not above
your bone. Nor above your handsome skull. Above your ash.
I wanted to learn how to cure myself of word-shitting.
But why did I ask you, my country's first Surrealist poet?

Fasasi Abdulrosheed Oladipupo

AFTER THE CHAOS

The mayor would add more badges, accolades, nations.....
Would marry silence, corporals and sergeants would be forced into
Psychosis of the veteran-hood, memories will come after them, voices of
Children whose bodies were turned rags, cries of their mothers'

Packing the gifts of war, after the chaos mothers will sing
Their children through the dusk, into the dawn, empty streets will
Echo the music of bombs, more memos, vacancies at prosthetic
Industries, as more fingers would be needed for soldiers

Who dashed theirs to chaos, more legs for patriots bitten
By explosives, "*dedi bodi go full ground, dem say*
Hefty men are needed to dig the ground and till the soil
For the dictators to eat." After the chaos schools would be opened

For the students of history to learn more, more theories and hypotheses
For all, more cartoons in the dailies, more grief for the poets who
survived the doom

More memories that would last the world for another two decades,
More women carrying the ashes of their dead family at our borders,

More news that suffices us like rain after a long drought.

Natan Last

SLIGHT OF HAND

*By dint of wanting to elicit the marvelous at every turn,
the magician becomes a bureaucrat.*

— Alejo Carpentier

When Vanya the Dog perished from being pet, the magician
yanked endless rainbow hanky from my sleeves,

& I'd dab my eyes with the reds.

We sit shiva in the living room! The magician throws cards
he won't pick up.

The magician sees a woman in half
& everyone applauds — white gloves on,

the magician's smooth
palms are like paper en route to origami.

Long ago he [the /

magician] yanked
my boyish hand as I dashed into crosswalks — I saw

cars without hands pushing plastic necks.
When I was a boy a magician

matched his palms to mine,

& seeing the smallness of me,
my inaptitude for sleight,

he linked our fingers like wreckage,

each thumb a monster truck,
the secrets huddled under ratchet strap

& each trick's instruction

a white dove
awaiting [in the wings / in a trunk] a cue.

He stumbled his way to my ear, I felt
the electric graze of his finger, nearly —

I don't think he touched me, but I know
I sniffed money's metal, invisible under gloves.

When I was a boy I was the sort of boy
you'd expect, bearing gifts of fists that unclenched,

revealing [at last / at least] a butterfly

making tarmac of this palm,
used cocoon, it says here, of my fingers.

Matthew Merson

SHE LIKE A FISH

she was swinging on a grapevine
across the creek that smells like crawfish

innocent as a dragonfly
I hated her when I saw her

how could I ever say that
out of all the others I loved her

we were only kids and
it was the summer

kudzu vines and humidity
hypnotized me with

a spell of a snakecharmer she
held lightning bugs on her tongue with

the most elusive fish in the creek I
desperately wanting to land

fly rod moving with the rhythm of a pendulum

fly rod moving with the rhythm of a pendulum

desperately wanting to land
the most elusive fish in the creek I

held lightning bugs on her tongue with
a spell of a snakecharmer she

hypnotized me with
kudzu vines and humidity

it was the summer
we were only kids and

out of all the others I loved her
how could I ever say that

I hated her when I saw her
innocent as a dragonfly

across the creek that smells like crawfish
she was swinging on a grapevine

Sabrina Ito

MARRIAGE CONTRACT

Husband, your job will be to keep the wolf at the door.

Never let me spy its jaw line completely -

mask its eyes, black its teeth, cut off its claw-crusted

feet, so that you can dangle them from a key

chain that you'll make for me, for my birthday.

Though, I know that at times this will be too much

to ask - like, on dark winter evenings

when you are tired, and I am crying,

or claiming some strange form of insomnia.

It is then that you must keep the door ajar,

and tempt the wolf closer with fresh meat -

so that I might sleep through the nightmares

that will invite all the snowdrifts in,

to collect in the hallway, lock me in.

Wren Donovan

NEXT TRACK: LOVE IN VAIN

There's always a train, he used to say.
Always a train, a whistle in darkness, reminder of distances
we'll never know. Reminder of there not here, you not me
and curved strung-out wires in between.
Reminder of infrastructure, metal and bones
that suddenly give up their marrow. Reminder of Christmas
wide-eyed vulnerability, shiny wrappers
that can't keep their promises.
Each steampunk locomotive a vector for transgression
dispossession marched out across maps.
Iron and deadwood and black-hammered spikes,
screech of smoke on non-helical rails.
Bright pennies sacrificed on the backyard tracks,
small copper faces distorted. Memory of
a perfect day, when shadows shook the armor
from my shoulders. Cradle rocking. Or
insistent forward, like the Folsom Prison Blues.
Lions and peacocks roared through mimosas
that tossed feathered forms on our moldy white walls.
Memory of a mattress
then solidity of my square heel
on a platform under rustle of silk skirts.
Parallel scars travel dark rooms
punctuated
by stations and steam under streetlights.

Tammy Greenwood

ASSEMBLAGE

*As.sem.blage | art that is made by assembling disparate elements—
often everyday objects—scavenged by the artist*

She was made from the mud of the Gulf,
a sculpture of found objects sediments of stardust
assembled over decades of wanderings
digging through layers of shale
for the place that had never been wounded.

Collaged with sheddings of others
—snake skin, cicada shells and antlers
arms draped in rosary beads and malas singing to all the gods
while mantled in manzanita.

Each cell of her honeycombed hair
filled with relics envied by the bowerbird
feeding her unblemished heart wrapped in words words unfolding
into welcomed wings carried on breaths
among milkweed and dandelion seeds.

ALWAYS PERFECTLY NICE

she wakens and reaches for the smile
kept safely in the box by the bedside

pulling at each corner after brushing
her teeth as a conductor straightens

his bowtie before his performance
screaming pillow kept safely

buckled on the passenger seat
silently wearing her strands of sorrows

neatly knotted like the good set of pearls

escaping the preserving jar with too few
holes pierced in the lid to breathe

the word nice becoming nothing
more than semantic satiation

nice, nice, nice... knife, slice, cries, demise, dies

she lets the crowd pass
steps aside for the masses

searching through faces of strangers
with their perfect smiles

connected like a row of paper dolls
joined by one seamless cut

Vaughn Hayes

20TH CENTURY NUDITY

People at the edge of town
 slung together and slid
out of their soft clothes,
 into someone's back pocket.

It was a terrible age:
 Black for Jim's skinning Crows,
Jew for hatred's searing shower; all
 buried under some eternal curfew.

It was nothing like Modigliani,
 not a celebration of our shapes
nor of the strength in a *déshabillé*.
 Instead, an abacus of flesh.

"Art?!" Cry out. "You think *art*
 can save us from this?"
Maybe...we will find...muscle,
 supple and gentle, a stripe

above gravity, a shouldering out
 of the soil, a rosy wing!
But the manic empires couldn't see
 any beauty beyond purpose.

And here we are now, and here
 it is happening again—
our napes buttoned, our breasts
 shut. Useful, but not for us.

luna rey hall

MEGAFUNA

we introduce fire in the morning;
boreal cindering,

soot the bark, soot the sky,
soot the teeth and bones.

we dice the vegetation, arid diet,
delicacy, fowl eggs

crack-stone, gum trees, fertile
plains. we claim the soil.

thumb the earth. we take stick
to skin, arrowhead

meet muscle, trap palms, we
see other, we big scared,

we overkill. we folklore, we dream.
by night, we eat the future.

Jane Rosenberg LaForge

FIREPROOFING

In grade school fire was
a triangle. Oxygen, of course,
was everywhere, so we had
to watch for other inspirations.
We lived on a ledge, less involved
than most homes when it came
to accelerants, though within
the pine and conifers that were
said to be materiel. Notify a grown-up
if you see smoke but not always
your parents, as they are prone
to see faces in the blaze as it
reaches upward, mouths wrenched
open to give their final speeches.
After school, my friends and I peeled
the bark of eucalyptus, as if it was
our sunburned skin; or tin foil to be
sundered from wax paper, the wrapping
of our confections. We separated vinyl
and plastic with our fingernails from
the covers of our textbooks because
we were looking for the god in things,
what kindles decisions in men, heroics
in boys, the palm, sage, and greasewood
bushes in our neighborhoods: native
and perilous, yet necessary in the season
where only roots in the soil resisted
the force of gravity. We ran from
flowers because they attracted bees,
just as we ran to escape the words
and warnings of our mothers, their
presence like embers with that power
to resurrect the geometries.

Amanda Roth

HOW TO COOK A WOLF

I recognize the wolf by the way he jingles his keys
while he walks, circles the houses of every woman
and child, calls them each beautiful.

I say woman and child, but we both know the younger
the better — red cape closing ‘round
faces round with baby fat, all the better

for his eyes and lips and teeth. The thing about this
wolf is how he plays every part:
narrator, prince, huntsman, father, fairest

of them all. Note the shape-
shifting, how he hides his eyes, double
checks for a tail. This is how you recognize

a wolf: by the way he is anything
but a wolf, by the way he figure-eights
through forest traps, how he mouths

the words *let me come in* while eyeing the slopes
of your roof. My daughters, the world is full
of wolves. He is only one.

Now, let me show you how to keep your
chimney open and the fires hot.
How to be ready when a wolf

slips.

Arianna Moulton

WHEN I WAS FOUR

I used to ask if the dad would be home
when my mom took me to a friend's house.

I didn't want to see his scratchy face,
hear that louder voice.

But thirty years of forgetting
has made waves out of my body,

an ocean of thoughts spill
like milk, a cheerio mess.

I pay money to sift through
the emotional silt,

shaking around for a hint of gold,
invaluable stress.

Because remembering never seemed
so important, so urgent.

If it wasn't for the tides reminding me
that change bends with the earth,

I would put down that mirror,
breathe into myself,
release all questions,
the non-memory of him.

Marisa P. Clark

THE THERAPIST ASKS WHY I'M READING A BIOGRAPHY OF
SYLVIA PLATH

I suppose when most of what is known
of a person is her madness and suicide—
and the holidays encroach, daylight
shrinks, dark and cold close in,
and loneliness arrives, unwelcome guest—

it's fitting that my therapist should inquire.
The book is good, that's all. It came
recommended by a friend, and I've long
admired the poet's work. Every word
has me in suspense; I hold

my breath, complicit, witness
to her unraveling life. Relentless,
the London winter, the wet,
the snow, the cold; the husband
a louse. The children stay ill. The pills

don't help. On the desk, a black binder
of typed pages, all there is of order:
Ariel. I near the end I know
is coming. I fear she won't
make it out alive.

Lyndsey Kelly Weiner

MY SON TURNS 10

a black & blond fisher cat dashes across our dirt road
a sideways parenthesis gliding into the pond

tulip shoots grow 3 inches under a foot of spring snow
when it melts they stand like smug red penises

spring peepers cling to the screen door
the window hums with their din while my son's in the bath

I hand him my deodorant stick from the drawer
so he can begin erasing parts of himself

the rooster climbs on the black hen for the 5th time
his mouth full of her fine neck feathers

on my son's 9th birthday his father handed him 5 crisp twenties
we haven't seen him since

the crescent moon skims the top of the tamarack trees
lighting their young green needles before slipping away

THE MAN WHO BUILT MY HOUSE

parked his red snowmobile next to one of my tumble-down sheds
I don't know when but it has all metal parts
did he know it was the last time

he built my house when he was 20 and we bought it when he was 60
he had prostate cancer and 2 little dogs named Katie and Molly
I and my husband had our son in my belly

the man who built my house moved to Arizona to live with his favorite
cousin
his son had died in a foreign war and his wife left
he sold his 0-turn mower

I can only see the snowmobile in spring when it's not covered with vines
or drifts
I don't know where the man who built my house stays but I hear he's back
I don't know where my husband stays

last week I saw the man who built my house come down our dirt road
in his conversion van with his 2 dogs on his lap
small dogs live a long time

Claire Scott

SCHEHERAZADE AT THE DOCTOR'S

The doctor opens her laptop and frowns
I tell her about my six year old son
who sneaks Double Stuffed Oreos at night
leaving crumbs all over his bed
he can't figure out how I know
she returns to her screen
I am so very sorry she says, looking down
I regale her with stories of my mother
throwing noodles against
the walls to see if they are done
hiding scotch in shampoo bottles
stumbling down to dinner

She leans over to show me the MRI
I tell her the story of when my daughter
was in first grade and went to school
wearing layers of my make up
along with a pair of high-heeled shoes
the teacher made me come get her
didn't think it was at all funny
the doctor smiles a wide lipstick smile
smooths her hair and closes her laptop
I ask her to join me for lunch
where I will tell even more stories

Jessica Conley

THE AMNIOCENTESIS

At the vineyard the winemaker shows us
the barrel thief, a glass tube,

a way of drawing out wine

to test its readiness,

and now I'm back

in my mother's womb, reaching for the needle's silver,
my first wound

still red years later

like sliced fruit I hold out

on my palm. For my mother,

a way to be sure—collecting the warm
water, my silent house—that I would

stand at the doorway

when she called my name.

And, when the need to be near

filled her throat, she knew I would reach
for what was close.

Emily Adams-Aucoin

CROSS SECTION

like all daughters, I witnessed my mother's pain
& how she cradled it. I mirrored the motions,

spoke to her pain politely, smiled with my teeth.
I took some of it with me when I left.

o

a memory of myself: another hazy September;
a short skirt, my empty hands

at the bar or alone in my violet room, drumming the beat
of my loneliness on my bare thigh. I spilled

my drink. I spilled myself across a stranger's
living room because I wanted to light some small

thing inside of me.

o

I wrote a poem
about my longing— it is still ongoing, it contains

everything. I tried to leave the center of myself;
I crossed one ocean & swallowed another.

I belonged sometimes. mostly to the darkness,
which I called my life.

o

the trees in the backyard spelled out fear
with their bare branches,

but no one else saw it. we'd planted them
as delicately as we could; our hands had trembled

with tenderness.

we covered them up like children for the freeze.
then, we watched the leaves shrivel & fall one by

one, in protest to the cold or the
covering, or both.

o

I had a daughter who was born already full of light,
& I kept the darkness from her carefully,

like something sharp or on fire. it wasn't easy.

it wasn't easy,
but I don't think she'll take it with her when she leaves.

Linda Hughes

THOSE STARS ON YOUR NIGHTGOWN

*Those stars on your nightgown remind me
of the jukebox in that diner
where we used to hang out.*

I take her hand and we start a slow dance.
No music but the rain outside.

My mouth close to her ear,
*I want to do for you what the rain does
for the leaves.*

Mm-hmm.

I touch the soft shine of her collarbone
trace there with my fingers.

*What a sunrise does to clouds.
I want to open you like a poem
devour each perfect word.*

Ah, you've been reading Neruda again.

I dip her low. Her long hair sweeps the floor.
Maybe Neruda has been reading me.

I don't want to be pushed down
by the weight of love.

*Love has no weight.
It won't constrain
even as briefly as the nightingale's wing
brushing by the morning lark.*

I twirl her. Invisible ribbons
wrap around, pull us closer.

I often feel I don't know you.
It seems we have just met
that we are unacquainted..

*I will let you ride on the threads of my memories
to know me more deeply.*

Perhaps we could exchange finger prints.
Better than a tattoo. Those fade.

Rain waltzes around the window pane,
catching candle light.

I touch her fingers to my lips.

She presses her palm
against my cheek.

Her fingers move along the curves
of my face, knowing me.

Her kiss is like a rose opening layers
into her sacred self.
The pull of desire finds us there
moves the dance to our bed.

At morning I wake seeing we are clothed
only in sunlight.

She lies away from me
at the far edge.
Sweet as a ripe pear in her nakedness.

Breathing out strands of silk
to wrap herself, in solitude.

Linda Hughes

WE STOP BY THE LAKE WHERE YOU PROPOSED

The lake is low,
It ebbs and flows with the rain
and the water let in.
Today it shows stones
we stepped on years ago.

Under those trees
the grass covered floor
where we lay.
Do we wish we had chosen different ways?

You don't recall
you picked flowers for me
on the hill,
placed them one by one in my hair.

I remember the car wouldn't start
when we left the radio on
while dancing barefoot in the grass.
You say that was a different time.

Memory tells lies,
images detach, mingle.
The future we have
reveals itself second by second
like that sliver of moon lifting
above the cloud.

What will we remember of this day:
that last bright leaf hanging tight on the tree?
How you took my hand and we danced in silence
in the shimmering light at the edge of the Earth?

John Moessner

DEATH IS NEVER FAR

*...a victim
of the part that loved,
the part that was mortal.*

Louise Glück

Driving at night, I enjoy the silence and the stars,
the steadiness of a dark world, the stark outlines
of nocturnal animals against a bright moon.
You never find a meteor by looking. You need
to pour the whole sky through the sieve

of your peripheral. Our bodies have adjusted for this,
our rods better in low light, possessed of patience,
a finger on a radio dial rolling through bands of static,
searching for a break in the fuzzy pattern. On the edge
of my radio's reach, the opening notes of Mahler's Fifth

trumpet into the pool of night that buoys me, a clearing
so crystalline the silence between notes hums in tune.
Our souls have not adjusted to this dark indifference,
a black top hat we pull gods from, ascribing significance
to any streaking spark. The termination of the Moon

behind Earth shadow, a lover's body beneath sheets:
their stunning disregard leaves me wanting. Once,
I was told God loved me so much he braided each
of Saturn's rings. But in photographs, it's not the broad
disks of stardust, or the millions of miles, or the singular

probe sending back its particles of light that grab me,
but the inky space, a void so finite it looks fake, cutting
the striations of atmosphere, its numerous moons.
What waits beyond that velvet veil? Is it the same
silent animal breathing beyond my headlights?

Jennifer Raha Newhouse

HEREAFTER

I ignore the crumbs, sip coffee
in stillness & imagine
the ghost of this house
is watching. My grandmother
has been visiting me, prodding
me into a more appropriate
motherhood, where we
are happiest—one with
gravy and durable, pretty things.
You can see it in my new desire
for solid wood furniture, a flower garden.
How long does it take to miss the dead?
She has just gone next door.
Often, I pass her in the produce aisle
quietly assessing the fruit.
You'll say her absence has slipped
into eternal song—the cardinal
by the window reminding
cheer-cheer-cheer. Surely, that's her
now, finally, opening the squealing back door
of my mother's house, relieved to find me,
having been gone so long: *oh hi, Jenny—*

Esther Sadoff

I DON'T KNOW IN WHAT KEY MY MOTHER HUNGERS

I know she planned to leave a thousand times,
waiting for a prince charming down the line,
not that she actually needed to leave or truly wanted to
but things can always look up. After all, no man is perfect.
So when I too make escape plan after escape plan,
it's not because I need to but because I believe in choices.
On the crowded subway, my mother's eyes watch the exit.
She looks for signs, a need for a swift getaway and so do I.
My mother is always dreaming of what's next.
At the piano lesson, she is brutally honest.
She slaps her knees, sighs, and waves her hands as if to say
What did you expect? My mother knows there's
always someone working harder. Like my grandmother
always said *There are other fish in the sea* though I took
this to mean a million fins flitting, tails swishing.
Always someone hungrier. Someone who wants it more.

Natalie Pelino

RECITATION

Even now your absence does not offend
in the wholeness of winter when wind circles grey
upon barren trees. I cannot trust loose words
professed from cold lips when every palm turns to touch
and all eyes lift away from sorrow. I count the leaves
collecting in high piles, dying outside wooden doors, and step
with soft steps past the iron gate into a garden, onto hard ground
of sticks and stones and forgotten things. Here, not a single crocus
blooms, only the mockingbird under a juniper, cracking twigs
like oyster shells. Now, I want to taste the brine so not to forget
the sea's relentless tide, a churn that does not open the shell
but asks the moon to slit the mollusk in due time. I beg you, wind:
minister to this flesh. Let the waning moon draw high tide
higher, let go what is low. I know everything I have ever written
has been told to me and this season will find its end.
Peace, the peace you give. I savor the body present.
Even now, in this absence, almost emptied of the light.

THIS TIME

Let us touch the fruit. Eat through its tender layers of skin
and wait in the shade of knowing.

Under a crystal canopy sky at the mouth of an immovable river—
our skin, this stone burns to sapphire, violet, and tangerine.

Some daughters still in their original positions: knees drawn in,
covered with moss, flesh still fresh with musk and myrrh.

The caladrius arrives to comfort us, to turn life-lines
and love-lines in a position to receive, to teach: healed is to heal.

Something somewhere is casting us free. I say to daughters
with skin not yet leathered by the sun's ceaseless beating:

your hands will touch my shadow but turn your gaze on the day
when without shame we will skin everything forbidden.

Andrea Menendez

THE INHERITANCE

The burlap sacks sat
neatly forgotten by the back door
while the white velvet
of the early April
frost
burned the budding leaves
of the fig tree

rescued from my
mother's
mother's
cuttings

The extension office said it'd be fine
and I believed them
and cried
as I pruned the shriveled branches
down to the quick

Do you remember
the final summer
after the
funeral
plucking too ripe fruit
from the parent tree
cradling the bursting purple flesh
in the Cool Whip container from the kitchen
and presenting the best one
to you from my sticky palm
as you said

I've never had a fig

So I promised their sweetness and pleaded

Let's grow these for ourselves.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR A FUNERAL

We like to see the body one last time
illuminated by the fluorescent flicker
of Visitation Parlor No. 2.

We need to stare hard at the folds
of slack skin.
Follow the familiar rivulets and valleys
now eroded by gravity
and the embalmer's heavy hand.

It looks nothing like him.

We smile, relieved,
like recognizing an actor in a haunted house.

We poke our finger
at the starched cloud lining the wooden box
and hear a plastic crinkle like opening a library book.

“What'd they stuff this with? Easter grass?”

And now Mom's tears are choked
out with a laugh that cuts
through the haze
of lilies and roses,
her lilting breath rattling
the styrofoam hearts perched
on flimsy wire tripods.

We join in this obscene display,
holding our sides
now silently wheezing until
the visitors grow tired of waiting
and the dead walls crumble around us.

Jim Tilley

CHANNELING PLATO

It's been nearly eight years since I last wrote to you, father, yet here I sit at the antique walnut desk with letter paper set out on the inlaid leather top. I remember drawing points and lines, making planar graphs to disprove your latest conjecture about how to demonstrate elegantly the truth of the famous coloring theorem.

I pick up the brass icosahedral paperweight and turn it in my hand, the key, I have hypothesized, to the theorem—it never failed a test I subjected it to, but in the end, fell short of a watertight proof. How strange the Greeks with their four elements and five regular polyhedra. How ironic that Plato chose to assign the icosahedron to water.

But now, as I write, I imagine the shape of fire instead, the flame you kindled in my brain by way of math conundrums you posed on our walks. Plato again, the tetrahedron, its four apexes like licking flames, fire struck into being by matchsticks, six assembled into four triangular faces, the very first puzzle you gave me to solve.

I can't recall anything based on the earthly cube or airy octahedron. Dodecahedron—the fifth Platonic solid—is not an element at all. To you, it stood for something like the quintessence of thought. As I placed your ashes into the ground, I found it hard to breathe, not inspiring air in that moment, but thinking of the love for math you handed down.

AND STILL THE EARTH IS SHAKING

*—arrange the numbers 1 to 4, each occurring twice,
so that between the appearances of the number n,
there are n numbers.*

Took longer than it should have, but I figured it out, the correct string of numbers, not a combination to a lock I had forgotten, nor a key to understanding the incomprehensible, but the solution to a puzzle my mind had been turning over since the latest horrific news for the planet, the death of more than 50,000 this time. Reminds me of when Richter 7.8 struck China and buried 900 schoolchildren. Now, the same for these new victims and their survivors, who'll try to carry on in the world when they'll only want to be anywhere else, so long as it's with their lost ones, even in an alternate universe where the unthinkable didn't take place because fault lines don't exist there and slippage can't occur, a place assembled according to a different set of rules, a kinder geology, yet where beauty can still be found. So, yes, I have solved that number puzzle, but can't fathom these too-large numbers, can't imagine a man holding the hand of his deceased 15-year-old daughter still pinned under the rubble of their home, or two breathless brothers locked in a final embrace. Instead, once again, I must distance myself from a tragedy. Play some music, read a book, go for a walk, forever unable to figure out why any god would let this happen.

Ellen June Wright

OF ORDINARY MEN AND MINISTERS

I never learned to love the gun—
the heft of it,
the ice of gunmetal steel,

the power of my index finger
squeezing the trigger.
I never learned to prepare

for the recoil's punch
or the blast's fire-cracker pop.
I've only ever seen what a gun can do.

On the news,
I've witnessed the assassination
of ordinary men and foreign ministers.

I've seen the shock of a bullet to the back
of the skull for resisting arrest;
60 bullets in the back for fleeing unarmed.

I've witnessed a gun mistaken for a taser.
I've witnessed the wrecked, blurred bodies
of grandparents after the parade.

Cecilia Savala

BE GOOD

The opposite, shame.

As in: there is only one legitimate reason
to spend time on your knees.

As in: your teeth should scrape the skin of plums,
not your knuckles.

Your throat—a one way cavern, a body of water
in which to sanitize your hang ups.

Your throat should experience each food only once.
Swallow and be done with—for good.

Be good. Don a dress that fits well,
falls below your knees, doesn't drag the floor.

Size matters. As in: a size too big
to protect your body from unworthiness.

As in: dress for the job you deserve,
not the one you want.

Want. The opposite, to taste the fruit
whose juice is your ruin.

Too much juice takes you places.

As in: do you come here often?

As in: to be the first to know.

Too much is worse than not enough.

Know your place—standing in for your mother,
your name interchangeable with her job,
it's your father's fault.

Measure in silk, in bowls and jars, in brevity.

As in: good enough. As in: skin and bones.

As in: it's all relative. Keep your clothes on.

Bless us oh lord, for these thy gifts.

As in: white fish, no bread.

As in: take only what you need.

Be good. As in: be small. Be quiet. Be less.

Angelica Whitehorne

AN EIGHT-YEAR-OLD BOY DIES CROSSING THE RIO
GRANDE RIVER AS TED CRUZ'S DAUGHTERS FLY TO
CANCUN TO ESCAPE THE TEXAS STORM

The girls take their seats. Neck pillows, wool socks,
last year's movies playing on flat screens:
a coming of age film, a thriller, a love story.
But they chose to sleep, silk masks
blocking the light from their eyes.

The boy holds onto the side of his mother's sweater,
which is too light for the desert night as they trudge
from one wrecked country to the next—

another voyage paid for by a parent's devotion.
Her turned out body, not so different from Ted's Amex,
(both pushing and sliding through the storm).

How all of us, and I mean *all* of us, will send
our children the distance for safety.

The boy chooses to watch the flat horizon, a love
story, a hope in the fantasy production of our country,
he does not rest, his body is his only vessel—

and is this the lesson, we get the escape we pay for?

In the second hour, one daughter reclines her chair back,
the other shakes out a cramp from the flat of her foot,
complains about the space the plane can afford her.

On the second day, the boy's blisters pop and bleed, but he keeps
walking toward the river with his family, the land sprawling
and hungry, the snow dusting the bones of other failed journeys.

30,000 feet up into the sky and the girls' ears pop and crackle,
they force air through their noses, a woman in heels strolls a
cart down the aisle and hands them mini water bottles,
packets of peanuts.

300 miles in and the boy is wishing for water, until they
hit the river bank. With no wings, the only way over is through.
Then the boy wishes the water away, but only the current moves.

And how he could have been drowning
just as the girls were flying over, one's head resting on her
sister's shoulder, Spotify on full blast, a current, a plunging rhythm, .

and what song did the boy hear as he was going under?
The chatter of an American bird? The frantic song of
his mother's prayers? Or only the rushing of water?

The girls disembark. Their baggage is rolled around and left at their feet.
The boy's body is dragged from the river. He will be one less thing
his mother carries home, after they send her back at the border.

It's true that money offsets the violence our bodies face. In water,
in a world where two girls dip their painted toes into a foreign
beach scape, and a boy in the other direction is left to swallow
the ripples from our lines until silence.

Mads Gordon

GUILTY PLEASURE

Neighbor boy spit in my eye last
June. Where the old lady grows
calla lilies in white domes for Easter

and funerals. We live here. Nicest
trailer, double wide. Back porch
deck swing for July nights. Glass

diamond window on the front door.
Nextdoor, it's cinder blocks. No
trailer to unhitch or to hitch. On

my favorite day I stand sweat cold,
cutting across dew crusted grass
barefoot, see the smoke pillars, feel

heat on my freckled cheeks. Watch
the only house on Ellen Street burn.
I am not afraid. Men cutting circles

in the roof. At my feet, neighbor boy
is weeping, I love him so. In the tall grass
he needs me. I am just a child. My god

is chaos. I try to imagine how clean
it must feel. To be nothing at all.

I SPENT SIXTEEN SOUL WINNING IN JUNEAU

At Government Hill the sky stayed light until
the day was new. Just once, he held me still
against his chest as sleep, a fleeting thing, left
my eyes a red and static haze. 1 a.m.—Denali

nosing through the fog. I felt my own for the first
time. In the absent rise and fall of day, the constant
sun made hollow time we slipped into like glacial
flows beneath thin ice. I was nothing more than

my mother's only girl back then, on a mission
to spread the Good Lord's gospel. He became my
first chance to choose for myself. I'm thinking
of him now, in a city where I broke my own belief.

Brandon, with his air-force dreams and his bad eyes,
called me just before the plane took off at the end
of June. His crying seeped out of my phone low and
broken from my window seat view of Alyeska fading.

I did not want to be loved by him, but wanting love still,
I listened. There was no haloed glow to it, my first soul
saved. Just the cries of a grown man, a hissing sound
cigarettes make when snuffed out into pale-grey snow.

Paula M. Rodriguez

LUVIAN

I see many
different colors
in the rain.

There is the fine rain
of spring mornings,
rays of sun escaping
wandering clouds
that lighten up the streets
as if paved in gold.

There is the winter rain,
colorless mud
that merges
sunset and dawn,
confusing the senses
in its litany of gray.

That is the rain
that transports me
to the past lives
nearly gone.

The same rain
that weighted down
the wool
of my schoolgirl skirt,
and damped
unending hours
among yellowed
school corridors.
The rain that soaked
the land of my ancestors
fading in the late
evening fire
while, outside,
the storm
was still raging.

That is the lightning rain
that whispers
like an old song
and brings a promise
of eternity,
for it will always be there,
this rain
that soaked my soul
before I was born,
after I am gone.

Paula M. Rodriguez

GIRA, MONDO, GIRA!

Carnival is the time
of burned chocolate,
spells,
and masked Harlequin
roaming the crossroads

in his happy gait
of red and gold,
sometimes skipping
and turning,
sometimes sleek
as a cat.

He, who holds
the seven keys
of destiny
is the luck
of the gambler
down
on his last cent.

He is the rose
in the smile
of the child
selling his wares
in the street market.

He is the carriage
of the old man
in his last journey
to meet his loved ones.

And so does the world
continue to spin
over lanes and streets,
roads and alleys.

Allen Kenneth Schaidle

POUR MILK OVER MY BODY

two white doves over Ida County
South Dakotan winds a dustin
rocking me to sleep,
like a boat in the Brooklyn navy yard

more affordable than therapy
and more meaningful than local lore

lightning strikes
making me unclean

if I catch fire
pour milk over my body

you might hear me yell with thunder,
but only if your window is open
or there's loose casing around the porch door

I'm the prairie lightning
passing through your house
exploding your windows
blowing the door off the hinges
leaving you naked

Nancy R. Yang

ROAD TRIP HOME

One night in Georgia I watched
the stars pass above the pines
as my dad drove us home from Athens
and a visit with Aunt Stelle—
her hugs and cornbread, chocolate pudding
in her white kitchen, its wide window—
the sun on the checkered floors—
so much green around the modest house—
the tire swing calling, where I sang
out loud and heard the birds join in

and wondered
if I'd be happier in the country
like this, where it's slow—where it's simple—
but this mind was with me then
with its yearnings
for bustling city streets—full
of boutiques and coffee houses
theaters and museums, eclectic
tastes and innovation—

And so tonight I watch
the faint night sky above the street lights
along the sides of Highway 101—tail lights
reddening with caution—
signaling uncertainty
and whether or not the driver
has chosen the right lane to get home.

Ceci Webb

LINES WRITTEN IN EARLY SPRING (VAR.)

Supine and sleep-
tossed, I watch the trees
tremble as the wind's
warmth-parched song
joins my aching thoughts
as they arc through this
fluttering bounty. Something
in me reaches

out, scratching
toward the living
branches bowing
down to meet me—but that
has been lost to us.
We did it to ourselves.
Hundreds of years
and hundreds of self-inflicted
walls later, to reconcile

is impossible. To simply exist
is out of the question.
I can imagine the hushed
redbuds, their simple pleasure
in spring emerging—I can
guess the ineffable
musings of bird-play
in the leaf-strewn sky.

We did it to ourselves.
Somewhere, along
our bloodied way, our power-
flushed fingers gouged
out that last shrapnel thrumming
with nature's ill-laid
devotion, condemning
man to sovereignty.

Lauren Peat

CROSSING NEW MEXICO AS HECATE

I become suspicious
of my attachments.

Friends turn thirty and clip into vows
tighter than a seatbelt's tongue—

I saw it coming.
I willed something different.

But there are evenings like these
when I too forget

to protect the future, wide and brittle
as a windshield,

having suddenly pledged
every part of my life

to one cliff face, pink with sun,
gas station nestled

in its neck, a dim bulb fizzing on.
Then I remember.

Then I leave each behind
along the highway's blue ribbon.

For to see the road signs grow larger.
For to disobey them.

*In Greek mythology, Hecate (heh-kuh-tee) is the goddess
of magic, crossroads, entranceways, and moonlight*

FREIGHT TRAIN

The 1:52 train sustains a C major chord.
The blinds resolve the streetlight into a rhombus
on the wall. I stumble to the piano to affirm the train's cry
and find that mine has too much purpose in it.

We press our mouths up against the world
like this, patterning accident, odd scraps of silk—
the piano's pedal is cold. I rehearse
having no purpose inside night's cargo of shadow.

Mitzi Dorton

COOKING CHERRIES

Cook me some cherries,
You say in a wavery voice,
Your favorite
I remember when I was four
And befriended the old couple next door
Every cookie baked and offered to me,
I had to run home to share with you.
Here we are at the end, Mama,
Me stirring cherries
Like the ones that used to go in the
Lattice pies you made for me
pies your mother made for you,
pack mule peddler delivered filling
I know your stories

How did we come to be
This aged pair
You nearing one hundred
And me,
Remembering the thick of love
That I didn't know I was in

Don't go, don't go

Marianne Kunkel

ODE TO FOOD STORAGE

In our laundry room are jars and jars
of canned apricots, peaches, bing cherries.
My mother has cooked them to pale mush,
placed them on shelves,
and now we wait for the world to end.

One day, our best friends will starve
as my parents, sister and I crouch around
a candle, scooping the swollen fruit
into our mouths, gulping lukewarm juice
and pulpy threads that broke loose over the years.

The wheat my mother ground into beige powder
we'll eat like sugar, licking our fingers to dip
and coat them with wheat sawdust. Our backs to
the old washer and dryer,
we'll reminisce of times we predicted this day:

when a hurricane barreled through. When my school
eliminated morning prayer. When our town
began selling beer on Sundays. We'll consider
our neighbors may be in flames—until my father
hums *How Great Thou Art* then we'll sing and feel better.

I haven't mentioned the tap water
in large soda bottles lining the low shelves.
It's for someday washing our juice-sticky hands,
brushing our teeth. Stored so long
in green plastic, it will taste like rubber erasers.

I like to kneel and stare into the rows
of water. My palm looks bigger the more
bottle layers I peer at it through.
Looming hand, looming catastrophe,
tears; my mother puts a lid on it all.

Christopher Ankney

INTERSTITIAL SPACES

Your body like a granite countertop
wiped clean, its smoothness belies
durability, its coolness shocks

the fingers' paddings. I am washing
peppers and counting garlic
cloves when you say you miss the smell

of things, even the urinated back streets
of Chicago, the dumpsters dank heat
from leftover dough and sauce.

We've learned new words for damage
and faint hope: anosmia, stellate gang-
lion block. I tell you about an article

on smell therapy, careful to preface the author
concludes nothing, instead of confessing,
I was thinking of the moment I knew

I first loved you: you crossed the finish line,
your body reeking of ammonia and silt,
the clay our bodies were shaped

from. From. To. A simple word choice
determines the memory's presence.
Your team held each other's shoulders,

conference champions. The sweat, rank,
body after body pushing out
what wasn't wanted from the space

between your own cells. Later, I get home
from a shakeout four-miler, drenched
by humidity and sun, pull off my tank,

crumple it up like a towel as an offering
to you, a plea—*Recall this*—you try
with a tense grin to bring it all back

through the memories we attach to things.

Aaron Caycedo-Kimura

IN THE WAKE

After three months in my childhood room, separate twin beds,
Luisa and I move into my parents' room. Into their bed.

The one Mom died in last week. The one they slept in
forty-seven years—content, angry, sometimes indifferent.

Four years ago I took it apart, made way for the hospital bed
I ordered for Dad. I should've let him die in his own.

Luisa and I stare at the ceiling. Around us, their mahogany dressers,
Singer sewing machine, baby picture of Mari above the TV.

Just as my parents must have done countless times, we wonder
about our next steps: stay in their house, make it our home

or move back to Connecticut, find our own way. I feel the fullness
of the room with lights out. Window slid open, faint summer breeze,

Seth Thomas clock with hands that glow mint green in the dark.
They left their bodies right where ours fill the space.

Ellery Beck

PLACES I'M SEARCHING FOR

my body. The collection of bugs, built
up over the last months, resting
unpinned. In my partner as they tell me

hushed I'm *still the same*
person. In the skin wrapped around
me, saran-stuck, unable to shed off

fast enough. The clementine, dismantled
in the shrubs, rind spread throughout
the yard. In my scalp, the first time

seeing sun, how quickly the roots
try to take my body back, to grow.
That same body, for anything left to forage.

Bruce Robinson

LUNAR

Yet the moon, the way it seems
to chase us, mirage that never makes it
or a song, it's on the radio
miles of quiet country

soft phrases foundered, have my word. Tonight
rising over the risen moon and by its light
my grandmother swearing herself to sleep
I think the moon nothing but a flare

that has lonely startled us; dreams only
go so far - so fur, so feather,
her flesh her kin
scent cooler weather.

Anthony DiMatteo

LATE PASSAGE

We were in a strange country.
We searched our new rooms
for a view and found the source
of the silence: down the block
seas of purple wreckage. It was
that time late in the afternoon.

We were in a place we'd never heard of.
As we made the rooftop again,
crowds of angry young men
dressed in the same clothes came
towards us like a wave of muddy river
drowning and fracturing everything.

We went in search of guns hidden
beneath the boards. That is when
my dead father advised we should
flee in a car, the 1950's Oldsmobile
parked outside with enormous fins
yellowed from the photo he was in.

It was that time late in the same night
after we had fled away deeper
into this nation with no name.
I asked my father hanging on for life
inside my dreams if he had ever
heard of such a silence. He had.

Hari Parisi

IN SIGHT OF THE PACIFIC

Walking the curved path, a pair of small does, a two-point
buck with amber antlers, look up from nibbling seed laid out
by a neighbor. Gray shingled houses with gray roofs, white trim,

rust slurred stains. Red doors, blue doors, turquoise and purple.
Shore pines huddle together, finger-long cones tucked in spiny
branches. The waft of fish, of all things fishy, salty, swept from

the sea. We walk as if we are going nowhere, talk about nothing
much, would prefer, I think, to keep going until we must sit
from the ache in our feet pushing through sand, eyes strained

from the glint on the waves. Breakfast is waiting. The others
are waiting. Activities laid out for the day. In the distance,
a child screeches in delight. An orange kite swirls in the wind.

Jessa Queyrouze

BUCK MOON

You dream about pulling a startled man
from a quiet room, and wake to thunder, the stuttered
light of a summer storm. Buck moon, July.

The things we throw off in the wake of turning—
the churning water, the head toss, the startled horse.
Mid-stream and clinging to its shaking, muddy flanks.
What thanks? To see it through. What fellow traveler?
It's too late to save your father. How does the strap
feel, under your hand? Reined in, or loosed?

It's time to go now. The storm is swinging
in from off the coast. In this moonlit room, the gentle ghost
of your mother's long-lost pony whickers. Appaloosa,
speckled as the moon's bright hide. You can
decide what happens now. You can unclench
your jaw, that tired bit. Unhitch your tethered story.

Her hair, you could have cut it. Again, the lightning
flickers. The sluice of rain. The dream will be there in the morning,
waiting. Shake it off again.

Jeff Schiff

THEY RELUCTANT WARDS OF OSHA

harvest sandstone
veined with feldspar
coax dolomite schist agate

chert and granite
exhale on the backside
of choreographed ammonium nitrate

and diesel fuel blasts
manage diamond saws and block tilters
the region barrow-pitted

honeycombed with excavation lakes
such exquisite utility
in what remains

a thousand thousand years
after the fact
cooled magma compacted sediment

derelict quarries where local teens
can perfect dawdle and shirk
bellyflop into the narrow wake of copperbelly

and yellow-striped northern ribbon snakes
or footdangle
from any pit's iffy edge

CONTRIBUTORS NOTES

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Poetry South is published annually by the low-residency MFA program in creative writing at Mississippi University for Women, offering online workshops in poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, drama, translation, and new media, along with literature, forms, and professional classes and two types of residencies.

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