



“Golden One,” image by Lyndia Radice

THIS WORLD I WANT YOU TO SAVE

*Is it the extravagance of reason
that hides the morning sun?*

---Florence Gharibian

*It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams,
flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one;
felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself.*

---Virginia Woolf

*...I lay down
in sweet sage and let the earth
hold the ache for awhile.*

---Susan Austin

*...for there comes over her an urge to wade into the forest as though it is a river and to swim in
the green, to climb to the top of a crag and sit face into the wind. It is a time when an inner clock
strikes an hour that forces a woman to have sudden need of a sky to call her own, a tree to throw
her arms about, a rock to press her cheek against.*

---Clarissa Pinkola Estés

Black Cat in a Field

By Beverly Lafontaine

If you see a black cat in a field,
stop, let the world go by
while you and the black cat
explore the field.

Smell the morning air,
suburb air, full of traces of gasoline,
burned wood, diesel,
dog shit and the raw remnants
of wandering skunk.

Smell it, inhabit it.
Know that you are alive.
Know that you, the cat
and a dozen mice occupy this field,
where the long history of life
on earth is repeating itself.

And when you have made peace
with the untimely death of your sister,
when the bruise that is your heart
regains its poise, bid farewell to the cat,
resume your walk, live your day.

The Laughing Place

By Tara L. Masih

You need a place like this to go to, I tell her, like my sister and I had when we were young. It's called the Laughing Place. You cannot be in that place without laughing. No matter what is going on in your world, in that space, only laughter is allowed. You start in the spring, sowing morning glory seeds in a circle around the sticks you've erected to form a teepee. Part of the beauty is in not knowing what color the flowers will be—blue or pink or white, sometimes all three colors in one mad hybrid. As the shoots begin to grow under your care, you guide the new tendrils—thin, trusting little fingers that gradually curl into a baby's fist around each stake—till the vines climb, hand upon hand, to reach the top. By summer, you have a tent of morning glories. You leave space for a door so you can enter in the morning, when the flowers are open to the sun, and everything that has been dormant in the winter, under your skin, keeping you from eating, making you quake, making your words stab, keeping you from tipping into the next place, has to be laughed away. You laugh your hard life into the blue and pink and white funnels, laugh with the vibrations of bees' wings underscoring your tragic symphony.

"The Laughing Place" originally appeared in *Night Train*, April 2009

Some Rough in the Hand, Some Smooth

By Marge Piercy

On the sill of the window
beside my desk, a row of stones
sits, collected on travels. Like
builders of stone circles – some

grand like Avebury or Stonehenge
most small, just the local rocks
that could be easily moved
into place, but special in their way—

I find some stones liminal, giving
off power like radiation. Some
from famous sites –the Akropolis—
or seldom visited like a temple

only a pile of rubble on a mountain
top in the Peloponnisus where not
even a path led to it. A place
where I was struck as if by a rock

where a tribe was massacred
near Chico. A stone circle
where I dozed and woke to wild
moor ponies staring down at me.

One from an Oregon black beach
that felt holy. One with flecks
of garnet from Newcomb Hollow
nearby. One brought from Israel

and given me. When I feel empty
of poems I fondle them, feel
strength seeping into my palms.
They sing for me and I listen.

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Airy Humus

By Lynn Tudor Deming

So it goes on a good afternoon, screening
this top soil by the drive, jostling it
over the mesh so the clean loam drops
through, sifting out delicate cobwebs of roots,
tendrils of weeds limp in slime, my sweat salting
the collards of this stew until everything unwanted—
little green bowls of splintered pignut, broken
twigs, earth-caked stone, is left behind;
better still to sift the head's glut—
its sticky detritus—reaching at last the airy
humus, so the tune of the wind blows fresh
into the dull mind, its chaff scattering,
the way a breeze moves over marsh grass,
and winnows it, in the haze of far-flung deltas.

Saint Flower

By Ann L. Carter

Zinnias are like some special kind of saint
smiling in the face of my transgressions.

They forgive me when I don't water them
though the Kansas sun beats down like hell.

They accept it when I uproot them
to some godforsaken spot I need to brighten.

They keep face when I cut them down in full bloom
and let them slowly wilt on my sunroom table
while the cat nibbles at them
and the vase water begins to smell.

They even seem to nod their approval
as the compost pile becomes their final resting ground.

I see some now
from the front porch swing.

They are cheering a spot
in a made-over bed,
their yellow, orange and red petals
barely faded
by dust from the road

and I have little to offer back

save the salvation they give me
on this late July afternoon.

Familiar

By Sue Churchill

The stray cat in the loft
owns the barn.
Though the farmers shoo her,
she returns, claiming her place
through her own knowing.
She knows its long blanks of silence.
she knows the fullness of its motion
from swallow to owl to snake to mouse to spider to fly.
She has caught what moves in the soil under the manger.
She knows how to slip behind the barn door
in a pinch. She knows the back ways
from loft to ground and ground to loft--
where the roof leaks, where the wind
pierces, where the night marauders come,
claws sharpened for tearing, tunneling.
She sounds no alarm, but she is first to hear
their visitations, unnoticed by the large and loud.

The cat knows where the slant of sunset
touches the straw in the rick each season.
She knows more than the sheep,
more than the donkey, more
than the rooster or hens. She knows
because she has inhabited the place
fully, stretched herself in each corner,
nosed each crevice
and watched and stayed,
watched and stayed,
till it was home.

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Snake Molting

By Lora Keller

The itch starts at her eyes
and sweeps down the pulsing
muscle of her body.

She swells and shimmies
around fossil-pocked boulders,
silvered driftwood.

When she can't find a bristled
surface, she loops into her own
strained and crusty flesh

and peels
herself
from herself.

She's a single-limbed ballerina
tugging off her tights,
a wrinkled pool

of inside-out skin
coiled beside her,
traces of grass and beetle grub

still etched in its grooves,
her quaking spine sealed
in the gauze of new skin.

Look for Raven Pairs Flying in a Pre-Mating Ritual*By Karen Skolfield*

How they would nest in our bones if they could.
Inhabit a skull, wind-scrubbed, sterile,
line it with the high desert plants, that extra
hour of sunlight, the elevation. Bones bleach
because there's nothing better to do, no books
waiting to be read. Ravens love every little
dead thing, a fur-sack smashed against the road,
a body curled around its own thirst. Strayed hikers,
casualties of friendly fire, someone dying
of a broken heart, it makes no ravenly difference.
Carrion is carrion, you once told me, or maybe
carrion is carillon, the raven voices clanging
like broken bells. There they go, black looped,
long-beaked scribbles, hoping that the world
will end. Tell me they're not the most intelligent
of the birds. The soft parts of us – that's the first
thing we give away.

The Cows

By Elizabeth Jacobson

Now that I have read this story about the cows
I think of them at night when I cannot sleep,
how they are so still in their grassy field,
seemingly suspended like animations of themselves.
Even though there are only 3, I count them over and over,
envision them as if I were floating above their pasture,
observe the different stances they choose:
the 3 of them standing bottom to bottom, or
head to head,
sometimes in a row, one behind the other
sometimes side by side.
They stand where they want and nurse their calves.
They lie down in their field when they feel like it.
If the farmer wants to kill one, and it won't get in the truck
he gives up and lets it live.
If the farmer wants to sell one, and it won't get in the truck
he gives up and lets it stay.
I am glad I read this story by Lydia Davis.
I like to think of how she stood in her window and watched these cows.
I imagine how she may have moved from inside her house to outside her house,
depending on the weather, to stand and watch these cows,
month after month,
and although the details of their days are rather plain
she wrote a very essential story.
Right before I fall asleep I think about how there are no cows where I live
but there are mountains,
and I watch them move in this same way.
They open and close, depending on the weather
and like these 3 cows, these mountains are a few of the things left
that get to live exactly as they must.

NOTE: The Cows references a story by Lydia Davis from her book *can't and won't*.

Snake Pit

By Berwyn Moore

*Tote- 'em-In Zoo
Wilmington, NC*

Camera clenched in hand and pencil wedged
behind my ear, I followed him in – Samson
the Snake Handler wearing enchanted khaki pants
and a safari helmet, and me, daring reporter,

in summer sandals. Not one stirred as we entered,
their stillness tangled in shadow. Heads, tails,
indistinct. Sleepless eyes guarded every corner –
rattlers, copperheads, moccasins, orangebrown

crisscrossing their backs, bodies curled into, over
one another like scraps of flung rope. I focused –
and one by one they awakened, heads charmed
into motion. They slithered to the beams

overhead and burrowed the crumbling floor, dust
rising as skin moved ahead of itself. Streaks
of yellow surfaced the heat, cracked through shadows
as they piled at my feet. I stood dark as timber,

my hands slack, neck tight in a weave of scales
as I shed my skin, left it heaped on the floor.
My flesh singed cold and dry, my tongue
split with the absence of words.

Greenman

By Maureen McQuerry

It was this way, in the heart of the forest:
green sea deep and light,
leaves like rippling water,
a steady heartbeat of silence.

It was this way, a mere tickle
an itching of the scalp and suddenly
every movement becomes a rustle
as tufts of hair unfurl

to leaf, a flourish of jade moustache
sprouting and curling from raw, nude
skin. My legs and fingers swollen wood,
ridged and gray as sycamore bark.

It was like this, a panic of birds
sorting through my hair,
animals seeking shelter in knot holes,
joints sealing and sap running like blood.

It was like this, precipitous,
life bursting forth in unexpected places,
roots seeking hold and feeding
capillaries, the taste of moss and humus
filling my mouth like song,

and not like this, like nothing else at all.

Jaguar Foretells His Own Extinction

By Suzette Bishop

“Our fragile ego drives us to possess the beauty and strength of the jaguar; so we kill it, then hang it on the wall, walk on it on the floor, or wear it like an ancient Maya King . . . the jaguar, despite its strength, is no match for the jungle-eating machinery of man.” Alan Rabinowitz, Jaguar: One Man’s Struggle to Establish the World’s First Jaguar Preserve

It came to me in a hieroglyphic language,
 All of us wearing our radio collars,
 Our death-eye necklaces,
 Forced out by fire
 And shot by arrows,
 A death site.

In procession,
 Our vibrissae tell us when we have reached
 A heavenly village below the sun
 Where we will never feel the waning life
 Of our prey, again,
 Or fronds,
 Where your jaguar callers
 Won’t reach us,
 Drums of calabash,
 One end covered in deer hide,
 Banana skin hardened by beeswax
 Hung inside the gourd
 And rubbed to make our grunting sounds,
 Where-jaguar calls
 We won’t hear and answer.

Who will call you to the Underworld?
 Who will help you remember
 Everything has tiger,
 The enemy everywhere,
 Until you are where-human?

Break Beauty

By Lisbeth Davidow

The lights of lower Manhattan shone in the night sky beyond the bank of large, paned, arched, uncovered windows. In front of the windows, the other eight members of June Finch's dance company stood quietly in the dark. Wearing a pale yellow leotard and matching tights, I danced alone under a spotlight in the center of the broad, sumptuous Merce Cunningham Studio on its smooth, blonde wooden floor.

I arched my back, threw my arms high above my head and turned sharply on one leg, the other reaching behind me in a low arabesque. I had never been less concerned with how high my legs sailed, how fully my feet pointed or how flattering the color of my costume was against my skin. The audience, who sat on risers before me—smart artists, dance critics, fellow dancers, well-wishing family and indifferent strangers—could view me with pleasure or with disdain. It didn't matter. Three Mile Island, a nuclear power plant on the outskirts of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, had just had a core meltdown. Nobody knew how safe we were, what had been changed, or how much would be lost.

When my father died more than a decade ago, I discovered in my shock and grief a similar freedom. Not, at first, the freedom to do as I pleased, despite how fiercely he would have disapproved of my smoking pot, marching against a war, losing my virginity to a poet or becoming a modern dancer. That would come later. The first freedom, which was strangely calming, came from thinking that I had little to lose compared with losing him.

Now, as I rolled soundlessly to the floor, surrendering to gravity like it was a lover, I was not trying to impress or seduce or charm or execute movement cleanly or beautifully or even intelligently. That part of my brain had blown up. Instead, I was trying to say with how I brought my body to lay on my side, how I rested the side of my head on my arm, bent my knees toward my torso and allowed my ribs to rise and fall with each breath, was that all I could do was to be there.

Here we are, I thought. What matters now? What can the critics say now? We are in a dance studio in the West Village. We could be on a farm in West Virginia. How far are any of us from Harrisburg after all? Here I am. Here you are. We share a fate. I can dance my heart out, or I can lie like a hill of sand on this sand colored floor. You can watch me, or you can think about a lost love, or what you would like to eat when this concert is over, or about whatever radiation may be coming our way. If I bring you beauty, take it. It's mine. It's yours. It's ours. Take it. Break beauty with me in this space, in this city, in this moment, under these hot lights.

“Look at that, you son of a bitch”*By Peg Duthie*

In the world I want to believe in, we would greet
hard truths with the gentleness born of water
long gone under the bridge, milk wrung out
of mops whose grey-clean strands
also soaked up the tearfalls slicking
the hay and slopping the mud against
our came-by-their-age-honestly boots. Meanwhile
the moon, which our schoolteachers said
didn't have water, turns out to have plenty,
albeit not yet potable. That won't help the folks in Flint
all but screaming to be heard
so many months about their tainted water. Fire
speaks louder than ice or poison. Fire
beats scissors and paper, but rock-
hard facts will sometimes outlast fire
and the love of lucre feeding it. Mind, science
is not a synonym for truth, but science
will soak the o-rings into icy water
after the shuttle burst into flames.
Will drag the jugs of yellowed water
across the miles and into the halls
of prosecutors and presidents. Will dream
of hopping across the ice-pocked floors
of nearby moons. Of coming back
to tell you just enough to ignite
a fury fit to rinse out stables—just enough
to stagger you with its shiningness,
this world I have seen and want you to save.

At the Interface

By Renée E. D'Aoust

“Catch fire, move on.”
—Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island*

If it all went up in flames, what would I do?

Before her right hand shriveled to a claw, Mom tilled soil around her son's Paradise lily. Once my brother, then a flower. Mom carried on, weeding with her left.

What would I do, if the log cabin burned down?

The oregano patch round the house should be defensible space: firefighters in bloom. I don't clear our oregano patch. I cannot weed whack the forest's fragrant interface,

the line a wolverine expert, with beaver musk and bear scat in a vial, calls “the edge”:
fir, cedar, and pine, quaking aspen, tenacious cottonwood.

Would I lose my mind—to fire at the edge of memory and renewal?

I scrape burnt toast to save the bread underneath. Imagine this fire, jumping treetops, flames a giant pogo stick, my bark flamed free, my uterus gone, my mother gone, my brother gone.

Why would a fire matter now, when that family has flamed out already?

My dachshund wants to hunt the squirrel's latest path to the chicken coop, to kill one more mouse. Her tally rises. A high-pitched bark at the wild edge of cuddle.

I accept death by dog, not by firetrap.

In the space of imaginary fire, lightning refutes sleep. My tube of fur wakes, illuminated by Orion's flashing belt. Mother's Moon Garden becomes her namesake's glow.

I pack a tub of pictures by the door. Wear my gold necklaces, Mother's silver bracelet. Carry my brother's Swiss Army knife in my pocket. Fire plays no favorites.

“As long as we have the dog,” my father and I say, echoing Mom, the loss of her. We follow Hoot Owl regulations, stop running the chainsaw in the afternoons. Stop nattering like squirrels.

We keep keys in the car, hold the dachshund close.

My mother said: “When fire comes, get out sooner than later.”

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Keep Calling My Name: Frogs, Circles and Climate Change

By Jocelyn Edelstein

On a sticky evening in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, I sat behind a tripod, peering at the screen of a small HD camcorder as my friend and his mom let me interview them about life, dance and surviving in Brazil on a very limited income.

My friend, who I'd known since he was a skinny 18-year-old boy wearing oversized newsy caps, had transformed into a muscled 25-year-old-man with short dreads and silver spectacles. He'd always had a way of bridging the space between high concept and simple truth, with a heart-centered perspective. While speaking about the importance of unity, he paused mid-sentence to seek out a more tactile representation for his thoughts. He glanced at his mom and asked her to give him her hand. Lacing his fingers in hers he said, "When a circle is formed it's the symbol of union. This union allows us to circulate energy. This energy is what we call love."

Expanding and shrinking the circle within their interlocked fingers, he demonstrated how to stay linked while responding to movement with pliable ease.

"When there's flexibility in love, there is more power," he smiled.

In essence, the circle has more strength when it can bend and undulate with the velocity of movement or change. This isn't just high concept - this is proven in physics and executed in architecture. It's a truth that scientists use as well as dancers. It's somewhere in our human psyche – the knowledge that the circle has to form and then the circle has to flex.

It's been two years since I was in Brazil and when I'm not a filmmaker in Rio de Janeiro, I'm an elementary school dance teacher in Portland, Oregon. In both of these seemingly discordant worlds, I'm yearning to discover an equally discordant piece of information. I'm yearning to discover what aspects of our humanity we will most need to reconcile a rapidly warming world. I wonder, with shallow breath during sleepless dawns, how we will collectively handle the global climate crisis as it worsens. I wonder, beyond the tangible, necessary, overdue and self-sacrificing measures we must all be willing to take, what deep human well we will draw upon to get us the rest of the way there. How will we stand as a united front, so we can move the planet and ourselves from one side of this crisis to the other?

In the gym, on an unusually sunny January afternoon in Portland, twenty-eight first graders look at me wide eyed as I hold a stuffed frog in my arms. I tell them the story of how this small frog traveled through the Land Of Froo Froo, across the snowy mountains and over the lava bridge, until she reached the castle of a very grumpy king. They lean forward in their cross-legged position and practically tip onto their tummies, as I explain how the frog gathered all of her courage to perform a dance for the king, hoping that in a fit of inspiration, he'd overturn the unjust law that prohibited Froo Froo-ians the right to dance. (If you didn't know this part of make-believe history, there was a terrible decree in 17fluffywiggle20 that no one in the land of Froo Froo could move in any way that resembled dancing and Froo Froo-ians have been living stiffly under the law ever since).

At the school where my part time dance teacher persona operates, children learn about different life guidelines and these guidelines are incorporated, when possible, into daily curriculum. Things like cooperation, resourcefulness, trustworthiness and courage. After my story about the brave little frog and her journey to dance for the king (including her subsequent success overturning the anti-dance law - i.e. Frog V. King) the kids line up against the side wall and prepare to work on their core strength, their spatial acuity and their buoyancy. Or put more

simply, they prepare to jump like small frogs along a green painted line that takes them from one side of the gym to the other.

I instruct them to move one at a time, to keep one frog paw on each side of the line as they jump and to wait on the other side until every frog makes it across.

I know they're excited about jumping, I know they are ready to impersonate the brave little frog from the tale I spun and I know they'll giggle and squeal as they revel in the satisfaction of pushing against gravity. But I don't anticipate what they'll do when they reach the other side. I don't imagine suddenly bearing witness to a profound display of teamwork, as twenty-eight six-year-olds show me the counterpart to courage.

The first child to froggy jump across the green line, (which is clearly imagined to be the treacherous lava bridge our protagonist traveled on her way to see the king), is Jack. When Jack gets to the other side, he immediately begins calling out the name of the next little girl who's waiting to jump.

"Annie!" he cries, "Annie, keep going, I'm here! Annie! You can do it!"

He yells out to her like this, the entire time she jumps the line, until she makes it to the other side. When Annie gets to Jack, she begins screaming the name of their next classmate alongside him, clapping her hands wildly. And so on and so forth - every child that makes it across joins the group and begins to call the next brave jumper to the other side of the gym. The expression on their face as they journey along the line is both courageous and relieved. Relieved to be seen and valued. Relieved by the en-courage-ment of their community. And so the courage builds. The consuming cacophony that accompanies the final member of the class is outright jubilant. It is dramatically heightened because at this point the stakes are clear. NO ONE will be left behind. And finding themselves so close to getting the whole group across the divide, this class of twenty-eight first graders, will not settle for twenty-seven.

I find myself wondering why, as adults, we so often lose our deep inner knowing for how communities function successfully and for what individuals need to not only survive, but to thrive. Why do we lose our basic ability to encourage each other with wild, sincere abandon, in the simplest and greatest of tasks?

These 6-year-olds tapped right into an important universal code. We feel braver when our community bears wide-eyed-witness to our challenges, loving us amidst our fear and our confidence. We feel braver when someone waits on the other side, reminding us over and over, "I'm here!" We feel braver when someone promises to call out our name until we make it all the way across.

As we move forward and the crisis of climate change begins to make a tangible and disturbing impact on the places still largely insulated from its effects, we will need to rapidly join forces and figure out how to save whatever we can or how to survive in the midst of what we cannot save. Blame and villainization will have no place because we will have no time. We will have no time for rigidity. We will need to look for answers everywhere.

We will need to form a circle and figure out where the flex of that circle originates. We will need to bend and undulate with the forces of change without breaking the circle we've formed. We will need to call each other's names over and over and over.

In Brazil, on that night two years ago, my camera battery blinked an alarming five minutes left of charge, but I knew not to rush my friend and his mom. I knew not to break the flow of the interview.

Hands still intertwined, my friend looked at his mother and searched for words to wrap up his metaphor.

“If we leave the circle, if we abandon each other, we...”

She cut in without hesitation, looking directly at my camera and said, “We lose everything.”

There's No Place Like Home

By Rebecca Hart Olander

Finding the screech owl holed up below the canopy
of the spindle tree, auburn feather fist in austere bark,
my father suggests we turn back for binoculars.

I had never seen a daylight owl,
only heard the dusky cries, feeling as mice
must, quivering in a field beneath wing-blotted stars.

Through doubled glass we focus on the russet
bird, casting her as an avian wizard behind the curtain.
But some things can't be known until we know them.

Like what kind of call we will make
as the predator descends, digs in her talons,
and shakes us until we are still.

Vanishing Point

By Melissa Grossman

It is not miles ahead of you
where the road narrows.

It is not a mountaintop
covered by low clouds.

Nor, the columns of
trees that grow
smaller farther
down the
street.

It is
a gam
of whales
swimming
just below the
shimmering surface
of the ocean, and you are whale,
and you are water. It is that cloudless
blue sky when birds disappear into the deep
brightness, and you are bird, and you are light.

At Butcher's Slough

By Simona Carini

(Arcata Marsh & Wildlife Sanctuary)

No ducks ply the slough
No great egrets glide. Wrung out
clouds pattern the marsh
in light ink. Air as crisp as
cave-cooled watermelon.

Silence ambushes me
in this quiet place of
still water, wood pilings—
remains of a mill—
an old railway track.

If my worries could ride away!

My lungs catch a scent
I am an egret sensing
fish just beneath the
surface. I dive. Find
gratitude.

A sheet of paper laid on the marsh
absorbs. A suminagashi print:
Sky marbled with frayed clouds.

I hang the print to dry, leave it
for others. A gift of thanks.

Cathartidae

By Lynn Deming

They were feeding on its torso, a yearling
By the road in its mottled winter coat,

Long hair grizzling the face so its muzzle
Was thickened, more like a dog's--the eyes open.

Drawn from their thermals by the scent of death,
They straddled the ribs with their talons,

White beaks plucking the flesh, a flock
Of silent purifiers with no syrxinx.

When a car passed they rose into the trees,
Huddling in their red hoods.

They left perfect incisions--one each
For gullet, liver, heart--the eyes taken.

The body was barely touched, fur unsullied,
Sky drifting blind in the sockets.

Perfect Kernel*By Mary Stike*

On the house roof,
the mild November wind
blows my hair as fine as spider's breath
across my face
and I find on the rough grey
shingles' surface,
a perfect kernel of bright yellow corn.
I know my spirit sister visits me,
watches me
and leaves her golden gift
of sustenance and care.

Above, a crow,
in ascendance in his own web
that takes in our garden,
scavenged stalks cut down low
to straw-colored mounds,
the small outline of my house from above,
and this ever-changing stretch of our sky.

And me, the girl on the roof,
stringing Christmas lights,
breathing in
my own small piece of it.

Glide

By Ginny Mahar

I walked out the back door of the house, fifteen years old with a pair of white leather ice skates looped over my shoulder. Down the hill and through the valley of the yard, I passed remnants of a snowman in a heap amid a Michigan-winter's worth of snow. Beyond, a wall of long-needled pines opened into a meadow. Long coral ribbons of the day's last light wove through the sky: the kind of melancholy sunset found near the Great Lakes in February, long and low and crisscrossed by birds as they flew to roost for another frozen night.

I reached the pasture and climbed through the fence posts. They creaked with the cold. Before me stood a giant frozen puddle, as big as a basketball court, sparsely wooded with the bare winter skeletons of grey-barked trees. The ice was perfect. Smooth and white. As I stepped onto the crisp edge, water bubbles spread in outward directions, and the sound of plastic crackles vibrated through the soles of my boots. I shuffled out towards the thicker middle and gingerly sat down to tie on the skates.

The horses were feeding far away towards the barn, their musk muting into the smell of the cold. I pushed onto my feet, and the steel blades clicked and slid as I made the first gliding steps. I gathered speed, tracing a great smooth line through the trees, drawing bows around them, and circles, arms outstretched in a winter ballet. I hinged forward in a T-shaped arabesque. I skated grand laps around the perimeter, legs stroking outward. Cold air pinched at my face and neck, nipped at the sliver of skin between mittens and cuffs.

There was only the sound of sharp metal slicing across frozen water, and the glorious sobering cold.

Coastline Forecast: February

By Claudia McGhee

We frozen women hear the dogged beat
of thickened waves through rotten, tunneled snow.
We read on shale the grey veneer of sleet,
in the blackened scrawl of seaweed, we know.

The thickened waves through rotten, tunneled snow
hammer our shores with mandatory pain.
In the blackened scrawl of seaweed, we know
the sharp edge. The slap of thunder and rain

hammer our shores with mandatory pain,
besiege us in sea surge, blind us in hail.
The sharp edge, the slap of thunder and rain
silence only voices, in all else, fail.

Besiege us in sea surge, blind us with hail,
assail us, veil us with curtains of sand,
silence only voices, in all else, fail.
As our hearts breathe salt at our blood's demand,

we warm in the needled beam of longing.
We read on shale the grey veneer of sleet,
remember mud, dreams, and green belonging,
we frozen women hear the dogged beat.

The Voyage Out: A Poem*

(a forced collaboration)

By Marian O'Brien Paul

I. *The river*

Sometimes the river is an opulent purple
or mud-colored or a sparkling blue like the sea
A straw floats past, caught
in an iridescent circle
swims in the well of a tear

Words strike her ear like
the drop of a straw
or a stick stroke
or the impact on river water
of a solitary tear

With eyes as unreflecting as water
she is like her mother
as an image in a pool
fades the face hung above it

II. *The sea*

Looking in the sea she sees
beneath its marred surface
the green grow dimmer, dimmer
melt into sand's pale blur
an empty field bereft
of violet or of hollyhock

Inside at night she shudders
thinking of the sea
outside tossing black
beneath the moon

*(across the pool falls
a blue shadow)*

*Excerpt from "The Voyage Out: A Poem (a forced collaboration)" by Marian O'Brien Paul, *Virginia Woolf and the Arts: Selected Papers from the Sixth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*. Edited by Dianne F. Gillespie and Leslie K. Hankins. New York: Pace University Press, 1997, pp. 237 – 242.

Swash Zone*By Nancy Carol Moody*

Breathing is primary; speech, secondary. Absent breath, speech does not occur. If the woman cannot breathe, she cannot scream.

seafoam breaking
 on the shoreline
 a young girl, giggling

The drowning woman extends her arms outward so that she may push down on the surface of the water, an action which forces her body upward, permitting her to breathe. This movement is not voluntary. It is impossible for her to signal for help.

a gull's outstretched wings
 riding the currents
 undulating kelp

There is no evidence of kicking action, yet the woman remains upright. The mouth sinks and reappears above the water line. There is insufficient time to inhale. 20 to 60 seconds remain.

crabs burrow
 into shifting sand
 small fingers follow

Trying to Return*By Sandy Gillespie*

The ledge is deep enough
to sit on, wide enough
for one. Damp ground,
soft with layered leaves, is chill
beneath me. A wood stove
somewhere near breathes birch
into the midnight sky -- false
sense of warmth. A full moon hangs
cold light from heaven,
a blaze of white to mark
the river's passing. I remember
April's jumbled crush of ice --
the push of water
trying to return to something
greater than itself.
Foxes criss-crossed at will.
I imagine being stranded,
carried into realms past
light, my feet on melting ground.

River Broken Story

By Molly Scott

A river runs between
the ragged edges of my broken story
Its blessing is its silence

But when desire and longing rise up
in me like a high wind keening *never ever*
in my heart, and when
the ghosts of gone loves jangle
in the current like loosened stones,
I run distracted
on both sides of myself,
wild, tearing my hair, believing
everything and nothing, seeing
rift and not the river, until
the moon appears and wraps
its ancient arms around
me and my world
and then I see
and with the river,
sing.

Valley River*By Ethel Mays*

See it running through fields of alfalfa and interloping wild oats,
chasing after the sound of tight gut strummed over exotic woods
crafted by the ones who know the music that must be played
for the heart disappearing into green turning to sun beaten gold,
valley floor the sacred anvil of the hammering sun, birds in flight
with the ghosts of childhood memories: legs browned by summer,
sweet fruit dripping juice licked up by thirsty tongues. Down
among the boulders of the river we found a snake going about the business
of slithering into and out of the edges of the stream. We let it go its way
seeing no need of capture for a classroom of squealing youngsters.
We found the devil's darning needles recounted in bedtime stories
by the grandest people of all – our parents and theirs, dreaming
out loud what they heard by firesides and woodstoves, places
where proper meals were made, sparks flying up from logs
burned to embers, banked against the night fled into by souls
in search of everything lost, found in a single visit to the valley
hidden away amongst the shoulders of hills begging to be climbed;
behind them their cousins, the mountains, blue with rock and ice
and white with snows that nourish all the creeks and streams
that flow to make the one river we all come back to after all,
racing through the valley, searching, finding what was once lost
in the blink of ages.

Oceans

By Shirley Plummer

what is soluble or separable enters the oceans
from a stream that empties into the sea
from a lake, if lacking outlet
 soaking into the earth
 seeping through
 emerging in rivulets
or evaporating into the sky
 falling as rain on water
 falling as rain on land

rainwashed dust and smoke,
 even sand is moved by the sea
and the edge of one sea blends into the next

You, love, may be in the smoke, the mist
 or all the seven seas
I, solidly grounded, weighted in place
 look on the Pacific remembering

We are not so far apart perhaps
as you from this world
or I from where I left you last
 slipping through my fingers
into the small stream near the Atlantic

On a Highway of the Pacific Coast

By Cheryl Buchanan

Each of us arrives
here, naked and blind. Screaming
the very same thing.

Follow the deep breath
of the ocean inside you
in and out again.

Bird Women of Wells-next-the-Sea

By Ingrid Jendrzejewski

They lie in flocks on the beach, tangled amidst the seaweed, their sinewy, sun-stained bodies sprawled amidst sand and terry cloth. They watch the ships with unblinking eyes, nictitating membranes twitching with the breeze that comes in from the sea. Their limbs are wet with oils, and the smells of herring and coconut emanate from their crevices. I walk awkwardly among them, blanched, puffy, foreign. I am from a different clime, a place where the sun is weak and clouds rule supreme, a place where feet are cased in leather and briefcases are wielded as weapons. I am afraid of them, these bird women of sand and salt. When they see me, they point their sharp beaks in my direction and stare with the forward-facing eyes of birds of prey.

Almost Awake

By Molly Scott

After all that
who is this?
Still on my feet after
the woven sea recedes
*whispering how it almost
knocked me down, whispering
how it will be back*

Barefooted at the brink,
Sand moves through my toes
grain by grain
Standing in place I turn to see
what's gone and what is
newly given.

Now that the waves are quiet
I see the sea has pushed
the landscape of my skin
into these valleyed furrows,
rumpled over my bones
like the quilt
of an unquiet
sleeper

But here I am, almost awake!
A great love has washed over me,
over the scars, the salt of my
old sorrows

Light shines on the great land,
Light graces the long rolling water
And I am here
to love this world,
and what it brings
and what it takes away.

Ama

By Nikki Russian

The clear water ripples as the small clan of *Ama* dive with glinting daggers, lungs filled with enough air to reach the deep seabed. The bright sun streams reflections across their strong, naked bodies, darkened from a life under the sea. Scars fleck their skin from sharp fins and coral shards. Under the water, their eyes open in the salt, watching and waiting for their prey. They dart in quick bursts, never floating in one space for too long, their actions quick, precise, a clean kill. The *Ama* rise to the surface for air wearing large smiles, their crooked teeth beaming like pearls they coerce out of large silver shells. They emerge to shore with water soaked skin, carrying woven baskets full of fish and seaweed. They climb atop large rocks; the moat of the sea is their protection. They shuck abalone and tear through raw flesh with practiced teeth. Their hair sets in stiff, salt-encrusted waves. They throw fish bones into the water. Inland women teeter to the shore, lace layers of their dresses ruffling in the water like sea foam. The *Ama* dive to meet them, wearing nothing but the sea.

Against the Tide*By Janet Thomas*

The morning is balmy and still. A woman in a floral bathing cap and thick white bath robe walks towards the sea. Her gait is slow and measured, the walking sticks an extra set of limbs. Fifteen metres from the water's edge she lets the sticks fall and drops the robe from her shoulders. Her limbs are weathered driftwood; the pale green bathing suit clings to her like the too ripe skin of an apple. Her husband, lagging by two paces, steps forward, retrieves her gown and the walking sticks, hands the sticks back to her, watches as she picks a path through the beach detritus. Five paces from the water's edge, using the sticks for support, she lowers herself to the sand. Ignoring joggers and beach walkers, she crawls into the water. Her husband, planted against the rising sun, watches. She leans into the combers, lets them lap her chin and caress her shanks, crawls further into their embrace, lowers her head, spreads her arms, her legs, and rests. Finally, the right then the left arm lifts. Bony elbows flash in the sun, long sure strokes carry her away from pain, until a wringing turn washes her back to shore. She retraces the long crawl across the sand, retrieves her sticks, scales their length and after several studied steps, accepts the proffered robe.

Kantan Tasi, Song of the Sea

By Mary Therese Perez Hattori

EKUNGOK

LISTEN

to kantan tãsi
the song of the sea

mañaina, in sotto voce murmurs
send wisdom in sea foam
power atop waves that embrace the shore
salty sea spray kisses across my face

EKUNGOK

LISTEN

Minetgot, Guinaiya, Lina'la
Strength, Love, Life
Minetgot, Guinaiya, Lina'la
Strength, Love, Life

delivered by ocean currents
umbilical arteries nurturing me
as the Song of the Sea
echoes the sound of my coursing blood

EKUNGOK

LISTEN

ekungok: listen
mañaina: elders

Song Eater

By Ruth Thompson

It's rich here—
flesh, bone,
nice bits falling.

Comes my manta shape—
Song Eater, me—
I swallow what remains to be said.

I heard her letting go.
Then the noise of voracious worms.
But potential music

still clouds around her.
I come to gullet that—
until the sponge of me

is full with it.
Then I swim up,
swollen as a wave—

you can see me out here
if you look—
curved like a hammerhead,

driving at the shore—
that *static* you hear at night?
that's me emptying.

About the Ocean*By Ginny Bitting*

What I want to tell you is
that the ocean is not so scary
once you decide to go to sea.

If you stand on the beach
and only watch the waves crash on the shore
you will want to hide,
but if you gather the courage to leave
solid ground, you can ride them
out over the great chasm where
their violence will subside.

You will float toward a horizon
wide enough to swallow your fear
and bring a whale to your side.
She will roll
and look you in the eye.

Floating in twilight, you will find
the steady lullaby
only waves can provide
and your contented sleep will bring
an upwelling of dreams
and endless time to feast
on their deep truth.

Echoes

By Caroline LeBlanc

On an evening like this
the sun spreads the taste
of pomegranate after its orb is
carved into rough caverns. The
chambers, once opened drip wine
so sweet-bitter we
promise ourselves always, always
to drink the thing its crimson echoes mention.

after Rumi

The Journey

By Florence Gharibian

It started with a broken table,
It started with a missing song,
It started in a midnight's musing,
Thoughts that came before the dawn.
It started with a shattered flower,
resting in the darkened soil.
Petals moving oh so slowly,
vanishing beyond the hill.

Fields of Hveen

By Barbara Sabol

*Denmark should not forget the noble woman
who in spirit more than blood was my sister, Sophia,
that shining star in our Danish sky. — Tycho Brahe*

Now that the long days of summer are spent,
when only Venus and a blush of moon could buff
the abiding brightness, I am, against all protestation,
drawn to Tycho's island to take measure of the heavens.

The sun sets before supper and a dome of darkness
curves above Uraniborg, where we will spend long evenings
in the observatory, plotting the planets' altitude and spin.

I am learning the astrolabe's secrets—
when I position the instrument so, allow
the plumb bead to reveal the arc of Mars, of Saturn,
I enter the whirl and gyre in an astonishment of bodies.

To divine celestial movement, yet not my own prospects!

When the last azimuth is set in ink I walk out
past the flat pasture lands, the wheat fields since reaped
to stubble, to the sandy cliffs of Backafall where starlight
ignites the waves.

I unpin my coif and lean into evening's pitch, clockwork
of stars, the salt spray. Moon, my point of interest;
green glass sea my reference plane; the sky, the sky
my vector in every direction.

The Sun Does Not Set

By Mai-Lon Gittelsohn

My friend says, *The sun does not set!*
You stand on a crust of earth
that revolves away from the sun.

I whimper like a baby afraid that when mama
leaves, she won't come back.
I want to go on watching the sun sink,

a glass of wine in my hand
and you by my side.
I cling to the setting of the sun

with the same passion that makes me believe
my heart will beat tomorrow and tomorrow.
My lungs will fill and empty, fill and empty

with a rhythm I have always taken for granted.
Today I order my new calendar and wonder at my optimism.
Such hope! Should I go on this way planning and planning?

The ancient Danes believed that a horse pulled
the sun across the sky. I see him! His mane flows over
his shoulders—the flaming sun riding in the chariot.

Off the Moon Path

By Jane Schulman

Here's the dress I wore when we met
on the mountain ridge. Light through pine
sparkled gold and scarlet threads.

When I slip this dress over my head,
I am Helios, God of the Sun,
scattering clouds and shadows.

For years I followed the moon path –
like an eland slips behind
a cypress when lions stalk

or a sailor reefs the mainsail
at the captain's bark.
But on Juniper Ridge

my sun-self rose gold,
never to set again.

The Way I See It

By Diane Lefer

When hundreds of small black birds tremble
 the water's skin like vermin
 you know you've got a jaundiced eye.
 Besides which you've got transmission lines
 on rust hills. Dusty tamarisk. The wind. And black,
 barren the mountains. Dwarfed, mere hills
 as though geologic liposuction
 reduced them from the center long ago.

By *you*, of course I mean *me*. And believe me, I try.

But I see no miracle in your (and that's *your*, not *my*) baby.
 How can I be impressed
 with a being that can only grow to be something
 that is very much like you or me?
 Two eyes, a nose. Those little fingers and toes
 that so impress you. I have the same and so do you.

Ah, jaundiced eye! The membrane slides away.
 I see:
 A lizard doing pushups on the rock. So different
 from me it can be no other thing than Life itself.
 Fingers, toes, eyes and mouth. A pulse.
 A miracle.
 Its heart pumping, and mine that had closed down, armored,
 explodes open to beat--beating beating--again.

Lizard, lifted from the rock, throat pulsing.
 Cold-blooded in my hand.
 Fingers cling.

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Inside the Bowl (Asaayi Lake)

By Leeanna Torres

Today I will not be going to Asaayi Lake. Kitcheyan is going to Asaayi Lake, and I am not going with him. I miss seeing the shades of water during different hours of the day, the sun moving in its journey across the sky. I will not be going to Asaayi Lake, but I imagine what it will be like there - soft reds along the bluffs and a light wind.

Asaayi's name comes from a *Diné* (Navajo) word for "inside the bowl".

I will not be going to Asaayi Lake. Kitcheyan is taking someone else to work with him, and it is no longer I that accompanies him on trips to conduct surveys on tribal lakes. I sit for a while in my own discontent, imagining the warblers and bluebirds filling the space between the chaparral brush and piñon-juniper. There are places I want to remember, places I want to return to.

Beauty is a noun on the shores of Asaayi Lake, the water touching the land in a way that is both ordinary and sacred. For the Navajo (*Diné*) people there is a concept of *hózhó*. *Hozho* is said to be the most important word in the Navajo language and is loosely translated as peace, balance, beauty and harmony. I see the word written in red, a beautiful but unwanted graffiti near the tracks between Downtown and Montano Street in Albuquerque. Ho'zho', Beautyway. What is its significance? What does it mean in this moment in time? I see two men driving bulldozers. The afternoon wind is picking up. I am afraid that I will drink again. After the baby is born. I am quiet about this. I am silent.

If I could return to Asaayi Lake, would the beauty there save me, save me from myself? *No*. But I return to this kind of wishful thinking, convincing myself that beauty and or place can save me, will save me. But the truth of myself follows me wherever I go, and it would follow me there to Asaayi Lake, beauty and all. I can find comfort and beauty, but until *hózhó* reaches me at my core, I remain a drifting seeker, always grasping for the next beauty in both ordinary and extraordinary places. These are the places I hide, the open spaces of the west like Asaayi Lake, inviting us to "enjoy", but holding our truths like the wanderers we are. Inside the bowl is where I'd like to hide, safe and silent on the shores of *Asaayi*.

Today I will not be going to Asaayi Lake, and I simmer in the wake of my own discontent. Such an ugly place to be, caught up in a soup of self-pity. So I buy a Snickers bar and think of the color of water instead, sometimes blue, other times clear, but always inviting, always wanting. Beautyway.

Church

By Susan Austin

I leave the mountains to their business
and the weather. Heartache
does not soften me; it makes me

mad for fossiled canyons. I lie down
in sweet sage and let the earth
hold the ache awhile.

Fierce competitor, piety. A map
that loved a mountain.
I tell you—every day,

in every season, wearing every coat
ever owned, giving in to disbelief.
A dry wind blows inside my legs
and heavy heavy the hollowness.

On the Bluff, in the Wind*By Simona Carini*

Summer sky blazes
Pacific pulsates deep blue
On the windblown bluff
Indian paintbrush's flaming
bracts bloom: no better space-time

And When Raven Shortcuts*By Carrie Nassif*

and when raven shortcuts

to the living scarp of red boulders

air spare and still overhead

her nearly silent flight

tsip tsip tsip

is my heart beat beating

staccato sweeps of her wings

cleanse mind-sky like sage

this labyrinth is a barnacled tortoise

bare feet crunch into its pea-gravel shell

toe-heel toe-heel repeat

lavender-shaded driftwood

like a cool like a green-pool moment

following switchbacks to our pasts

all we will ever be

are these swaying seaweed strands

woven through diagonals of skittered sunlight

basking in the cadence of this throbbing brine

When You Reach the Red

By Gabriela Frank

“Sometimes she feels that her body is open to the air. There is nothing that separates her from herself.” —*The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* by Bhanu Kapil

The test of a woman is not in what she will achieve or what she won't. It is not in how far she will travel nor the height of the mountains she'll climb. It isn't in what she will suffer or endure or forgive—not in what she'll overcome or survive. The test of a woman isn't her tenderness, the softer side of the so-called softer sex. No. A woman's mettle resides in the power of her beliefs, namely in herself. This is how I arrived at the entrance of a box canyon trail in the high desert of New Mexico, the red clay dust caking my pilgrim's feet.

Imagine: a boulder, ash gray. Balanced atop that, a large rock, mesa red. Atop that, another, ochre yellow. Another, a sizable stone, flint gray. Atop that, a flat rock, quartz white. A river stone, urchin blue. And, finally, the last, sandstone brown. All told, the trailhead cairn stood five feet; we were nearly eye-to-eye. The path beyond it offered to lead me, though I had no clue as to the destination. The cairn said, I promise; in exchange, I said, I will. The light wind tickled my skin as it transported our vows to the beryl heavens above the box canyon. Only as I passed into the rolling bucklands did it occur to me that, despite these vows, I had embarked on this sweaty pilgrimage alone.

A red-tailed hawk drafted above on the air currents, her wingspan yawning into the boundless blue. I stepped, exuberant yet nervous, past the scanty deciduous trees. My hikes back home were predictable: gravel paths or manicured forest trails, sometimes sidewalks in the city—but not in the desert, not alone.

Walk until you reach the color red, Bhanu had said, our mistress of mystics. In the regal turn of her ruddy British tongue, this petite goddess flung nine women writers into the desert like the limbs of Satī, each in a different direction, charged with discovering whatever it was that only we, ourselves, could know. *Pay attention to the company on your journey*, Bhanu advised. I marked the hawk's shadow drifting back and forth in lazy arcs across my path on earth, which I scanned scrupulously for spiders, scorpions and snakes.

The scrub and trees fell away as the path turned from soft red dust to hard-packed tawny earth, rumbling down from the desert plain into the rocky canyon. The air smelled of sweet ragweed and dirt. I paused at the rock's lip to rest, to drink from my canteen. It was humid and hot. A ring of puffy white clouds began to amass along the western skyline, the start of that afternoon's thunderstorm. Only when I stood still did I perceive the sound and smell of water below. In my amateurish quest to hike the box canyon, I hadn't considered the river that made it.

Zzz-zzz-ree! Tinny insects stung my white, freckled flesh, opening veins into my past, a childhood spent in the unforgiving Sonoran desert, desiccated, thorny and brown—nothing so verdant as thunderstorm-dampened meadows outside Abiquiu. You see, I was born in lakes and forests and marshy Midwest plains, pink and mewling and perfect, if my mother is to be believed—born there, but not of there. My parents moved from Michigan to Arizona when I was six; the desert's vast, blinding soul made me shudder. Something in me knew that I had come home to my real home, and it was not welcoming. Somehow, I knew that I was the desert and the desert was me. This terrified me.

At the trail's input, the river burbled a plumb line into the earth. Its undulating sandstone walls edged the water with striated mesas and tumbling bluffs whose shear, sandy faces only a

deer in flight might attempt. At the canyon's feet, the river rolled cheerfully over the rocks, cool but not cold, from where the undefined trail led. I stumbled reluctantly from the banks into the stream, my feet sinking into the gravelly bottom. The strong current poured against the bare skin of my goose-fleshed ankles. I was not prepared for this. Upon feeling the will of the river against my life, an unstoppable determination the likes of which drove Virginia Woolf down, down into the Ouse, I connected the information they had shared at check-in: a flash flood had ripped through this very canyon only days before, obliterating a ranch building downstream.

When I was six, we crossed over a river into Phoenix—barely a river, an arroyo—a dry, sandy bed with a dirty, wet crack. As we crossed, I whimpered, reaching into the front seat to grasp my mother's arm. An echo of the heart-dread I would one day feel thudded through me, a vision of the future, not that I understood its portent, except that I felt my mother and I would lose each other in the desert. This was an inevitable journey, the result the same no matter the path—she and I always ended up in the desert, caught in the cracked earth. At the time, my mother seemed not to sense this, or else wouldn't she tremble, too? But I knew it as surely as I knew that the desert was a part of me: my soul had returned to the valley of suffering, Valley of the Sun, and it would be my mother's undoing.

Bhanu asked us in class, *Who is responsible for the suffering of your mother?*

The desert, I wrote, shielding my answer with my hand because I am the desert and the desert is me, therefore I am responsible for my mother's suffering and death—which is a crazy thing to think, yet also true. Did she not stay married to my father because of me? Did she not relocate to the desert because of him, because of me? If the answers are yes and yes and yes, then I am responsible for the suffering of my mother. I am the desert and the desert is me. The thought of her death terrifies me.

I hiked on. The box canyon trail was actually a river marked haphazardly with occasional cairns. The way became rockier as I went, the stones giving way to boulders. I had little choice but to follow each marker step by step, maddeningly slow like Virginia wading into the river, pausing at the turns so that I could verify the next cairn ahead. Birdsong partially cheered my task as I ambled beneath the bright sun, losing my footing on the slippery rocks. The water slushed up to my shins in places, the river tumbling down over the red and ochre canyon, a grand hallway whose walls were studded with gnarled trees and thorny bushes whose wind-whipped branches creaked against each other, scraping out a ghostly symphony. If only the trees were bushy enough to block the sun—but no; the ceiling remained painfully blue.

I carried on, slipping and sliding along the water's ragged margin, torquing my ankles, my sandaled feet ungainly against the slimy river rocks. My city-girl body jugged forward and back, a rag doll learning to walk, sinking into unexpected gluts of mud that squished between my toes. This was not a trail. This was ridiculous. Why was I clambering through a rocky canyon alone wearing the wrong shoes with only these cairns to guide me? This was punishment. This was self-penance. (This would make a good story if I could find my way back.) This was me trying to prove something because hiking alone in a box canyon is the last thing I would normally do.

Also: I am a coward. It was impossible to stop the ticker tape running through my mind: What if I get lost? What if I starve to death? What if, by the time the folks at Ghost Ranch realize they're missing a camper, the vultures have already picked my bones clean?

By ten a.m., an hour into my hike, the sun had sharpened the insect chords—*Zzz-zzz-ree!*—into razors. The dismal pests harangued me as I zigzagged from bank to bank in search of the next cairn, sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle, sometimes just four or

five stones standing a foot high. I kept looking over my shoulder, my skin slick with sweat, bug spray and sunscreen, to make sure I could find the way back. Tripping through this so-called trail, I felt like Ariadne without her thread. I was no hiker, no outdoors-woman. I had no compass—not that I knew how to use one. This quest was absurd. I should turn back. The red-tailed hawk screeched overhead in agreement.

This trip to New Mexico did not merely happen. It was part of an unavoidable rhythm to my life. The desert called me home, this time through the voice of Clarice Lispector. In 1973, a year before I was born, she wrote in *Água Viva* that her readers should leave the world of order to embrace “some mad, mad harmony.” Forty-some years later, her words seduced me from the flat, well-kept dirt paths of Ghost Ranch into an unmarked box canyon to find what only I was meant to discover, to learn what only I could know. Bhanu had knocked on the front cover of Lispector’s book, flipped to a page, and read her words as my guidance on this vision quest:

“It’s like moments I had with you, when I would love you, moments I couldn’t go past because I had descended to their depths. It’s a state of touching the surrounding energy and I shudder. Some mad, mad harmony.”

Was that so difficult to believe? That the trail I followed was as much about the past as the present and the future? Was it so unimaginable that Clarice could foresee Bhanu reading her words aloud to me, sending me into the wilderness on a deranged errand that she, herself, had set? If it’s impossible, then why could I imagine myself following her footsteps and one day transcribing my thoughts here in this essay? This is what it means to survive, to re-member, to write, to outlive time, to place thoughts together atop each other like cairns on a trail for readers both present, future and past.

The sky in New Mexico was as blue as the morning we buried my mother in Phoenix when I was sixteen. My tears leaked a trickle on the seething asphalt, a wet crack in the box canyon of my heart. Sonora was our Rubicon, the stream we couldn’t cross intact—that was why I came to this desert, to this canyon, on this trail, in this stream, on this quest to re-member my mother under the watchful eye of a red-tailed hawk.

Beneath the thin shelf of path, the river twisted and turned like a sidewinder. I followed it until I couldn’t see the next cairn and had gone so far I nearly lost the last. How would I find my way back from nothingness? How much nothingness could know until I was truly lost? I considered quitting. Maybe I had already reached the end. Maybe there are no more markers. Maybe it was up to me to make the last link in the chain—or maybe I hadn’t gone far enough. My faith wavered. I spun around in search of a sign, but found no guides. Still, something in me said not to give up yet. What if another cairn waited beyond the arc of the next turn—or above me on the opposite bank?

I reached into the river and drew out a large, smooth brown stone, squishing it into the muddy bank. I squatted to pull up another rock and stacked it on top. Then another, green. Another, blue. Another, russet. One more, gold. There was no one else to make a cairn but me. I turned to look over my shoulder, squinting at the last cairn I had passed, which lay far in the distance. It was taller and better built by my predecessors. My cairn became a new end-point, not only for me, but those who would come after me. We are all pilgrims searching for the path.

Waves from the past spilled into the river, crashing on the beachheads of the future. With good fortune, perhaps I could set enough cairns to make it the whole way there and back, wherever there was.

I looked up into the sun's glare. *How have you betrayed your mother?* asked the voice of Bhanu.

My mother never saw the real me. She never saw that I was the one who led her into ruin across the river and into the desert. She saw only the precious thing she loved above all things, for what mother isn't blind to the shortcomings of her own baby? She stayed in the desert too long. The sandstorms swept away her memory, her birth into this life, the beginning of her end, a stinging cyclone that consumed her every thought. There, in the calm center of its eye, stood a daughter, me, a stack of blood and bones whose betrayal she could not know. I led her astray.

By noon, I began to panic that I would never find my way back. There had been too many twists and turns, too many leaps of faith, too many subtle markers I couldn't remember when I walked up the side of one bank or crossed to the other. But the river still existed, did it not? And wasn't the river the trail? I had to keep moving. I was too scared to stop and see that I was lost.

In one bend, the river exploded from running water into whitecaps breaking over large boulders, the waves splashing and tumbling like unruly toddlers at my feet. How would I surmount this? Then I saw it: just over the top of the boulders, the next cairn in the distance. Someone *had* been there before me. A woman had stood where I stood. She beckoned me from the other side. The cairn was proof that she went on, that I must go on, too. My benefactors waited alongside her: Virginia Woolf, Georgia O'Keeffe, Clarice Lispector, my mother. I placed my trembling hands on the dry spots of the boulder. Was I strong enough to pull myself up the four-foot span to the next level of the river? If so, could I make it back down again?

I pictured my mother, her olive skin turned waxy, her sparse, brown hair, soft as down. The tufts made a rustling noise against the pillow when she turned to look at me from the hospital bed. What did it feel like to walk through a desert of one's own making? Her fevered forehead warmed my cheek when she pulled me into her wasted body, a dark cave in which I once dwelled. There was never a home like the one I knew in her. At birth, I shed her like a second skin and entered the world, pink and mewling and perfect, my conscious reborn clean for a time. Like a wave crashing, I saw myself at six again, the thunderous desert looming, flooding my brain with dread. Ten years later, I would watch my mother's body swept into the chop. She abandoned me on the shores of the desert sands. Or, I abandoned her.

There was nothing I could do to save her. She and I remain in pieces, torn asunder by a storm in the desert. *Pilgrimage is, after all, about dismemberment*, Bhanu had said. *It's about moving from fragments to wholeness, from limbs and heart and head to a composed body.*

Suddenly, I recalled that my own body was not made merely of arms and legs—I had a torso, a chest, a butt. I could sit back on the lowest boulder and use my glutes to pivot and cantilever my legs up and over to the next boulder where I could push myself up and over, rock by rock. It took my entire body to reach the top. At the crest, I stood for a minute, hands on my newly re-remembered hips, to review the river trail I had traversed. The cairn called to me like a siren from the far-off shore. As I passed it, I gave the top stone a gentle high-five.

This trail, this quest—*walk until you reach the color red*—was made of Virginia and Georgia and Claire and Bhanu. Their legacy set me upon a mad, mad journey, but underneath it, I saw my mother in everything—the desert, the canyon, the river—the derangement and order of nature. How beautiful is it to let go of compulsion, to care not of progress or destination, and instead allow the red-tailed hawk's joyful shrieks to settle into my skin? I recognized my mother in places she had never gone, places I must go because she can't. Why were our fates so different? At night I sometimes conjure the memory of holding her, the aroma of milk and spice, my cells and hers. We belong to one body that forever aches to re-member itself.

Deeper and deeper, this unending canyon, these profligate cairns keep leading me nowhere. I make new marks, stacks of rocks drawn from the quarried past, set as my future guardians, leading me into and through and out of time. Was I the one who marked the trail's entrance for myself a hundred years ago? It sounds like nonsense, an unending task, but nothing was for sure anymore. I had gone too far. It was too late, too hot. I was thirsty. The sun shone down, relentless. My mind—I was exhausted.

The daylight seared through my eyelids, so bright I could not shut it away.

I swayed beside my mother's grave until my father shook me by the shoulders. *It's time to go*, he said. *Move*. That is why I hate the blue. The desert sky witnessed my mother's death, and demanded that I see it, too.

This trail... was there ever a path or did I imagine it?

I opened my eyes and turned in a circle. My mother stood on the other side of the river, calling out to me. *Break open your mud-brick heart. Inside you will find me, curled up, asleep.*

I descended into the stream. It rose to my ankles, the rocks in my pockets weighing me down as I stepped, deeper and deeper to the center. The cool water kissed the curls of my iliac crests, the swell of my hips, the cinch of my waist, the white fingertips of my ribs. This life I've lived, obsessed with words and writing, mis-communicating everything. What was it worth? This river, the liminal veil between my mother and me, began to break down. I could see how its membrane separated us.

Fuck it, this distance, this glassy Rubicon between her and me.

I walked forward, deeper and deeper, until the water closed over my head.

"Who are you?" I might have asked my mother, had she lived.

"A traveler," she would have whispered, her eyebrow raised.

"Who have you loved?"

"You," she would have said.

"What do you remember of the earth?"

"The beaches and the worms. The sailors. We followed the impressions of their feet in the sand. Oh, yes, and the spotted lake fish that tickled us when we swam in the weedy fishing holes each summer."

"Those aren't memories of the Earth," I'd scold.

"Ah, but desert has swept everything else away."

"So," I would say, "you do remember."

A nod. Nothing more.

"Who did you betray in life?" I would ask, but she'd only shrug.

"Who was responsible for your suffering?" It was only fair to know.

Here, she would laugh. "My antlers are my own, darling. They grow inward, and my, do their points smart!"

It was hopeless, to have come all this way for nothing. No answers.

Sitting on the sandy beach, I licked the salt off my knees and contemplated the lost trailhead, the canyon, the sky, the black cumulonimbus clouds bulging overhead, burdened with impending rain. I could not fathom how I arrived here, my ankles caked in sucking mud, the bloodthirsty mosquitoes buzzing in my ears, but this was it: the red heart, the plumb line, the trap door leading down into the earth. I could feel its monstrous contractions giving birth to time. An

ancient rage welled within me. I was ready to charge into the underworld, as if my mother was Persephone, and I was Ceres—give her back!

In her hospital room, on her last night on Earth, I lay my hand on my mother's skin, and knew instantly: *This is it.*

"I love you," she whispered.

She hadn't spoken for a week. Out of nowhere came these three words, the last she would utter before the black flies swarmed her brain. Cancer flooded the canyons of her memory with a dark, rotting liquor, devouring her speech and sense and will. Thousands of tiny tumors, inoperable, took everything but love, which inexplicably remained.

When you speak your truth there will be waves in the desert, Bhanu had promised.

All my life I've feared oblivion. I never once considered that oblivion was a lie.

It wasn't my mother who was blind to her fate, but me. I am the desert—yes—but I am the cairns, too; what brought me here does not define me. I came to retrieve the parts of myself that were lost and flung into the river. That's why my mother returned again and again—she kept looking back over her shoulder at me until she knew I could re-member the way on my own.

Walk until you reach the color red.

Bhanu. Clarice. Georgia. Virginia. Mom. All of us, cairns along a nameless river, an unmarked box canyon. The path that we make together forms a legacy. For the first time in my life, my eyes are open.

The red-tailed hawk screeches above, an echo of my own barbaric yawp reverberating against the sandstone canyon walls. I holler, "Pa!!! Pa!!! Pa!!!" like a banshee until my voice falls hoarse into deranged laughter and then silence.

The river, the love, the desert, the cairns—when you reach the red, it envelops you. No. That's not exactly it. When you reach the red, it matters less how or when you've arrived so much as you know you're not alone. Fear is loneliness; it is a lie, fear is an illusion meant to keep us locked in place.

When you reach the red, you glimpse the love that has been curled up inside your mud-brick heart all along, baked shut by the sun. When you reach the red, faith draws a river over it, dissolving the shell of your heart into sediment, returning the goddess to the goddess, your wet heart center cracked open as wide as the sea. You cannot be shown or told or led to the red, only guided. You must find the red yourself, but it is not the end. Red is a test of your faith.

When you do finally reach the red you begin to see that, no matter where you walk, you can always find your way home. You are already home even if you don't know it yet. When you reach the red, you understand that red is love, red is endless, and red is gold—and red is merely the beginning.