



“Dragging Virginia Woolf’s Body Out of the Ouse (detail),” *image by Christy Sheffield Sanford*

NOW YOU MUST LOVE THIS TOO

To look life in the face, always, to look life in the face, and to know it for what it is...at last, to love it for what it is, and then, to put it away...

---Virginia Woolf

To come home you must learn echolocation, like a bat. Then you call your ownself out into the dark.

---Ruth Thompson

She's through! She's through! Into the abyss Into bliss a twist at the end of the road a translation dark night become the radiant way.

---George Ella Lyon

Old Woman*By Ruth Rifka*

Old woman,
always you are the image ahead,
woman I'm meant to be.
What shall I know
before I am quietly you,
before I can
finger-press my will,
my breath
my body,
mouthings of word,
burnt offerings of humble deed.

You drive. Urge.
It is late. Late.
I must learn to plant the minutes.
A slow, unwilling pilgrim
I travel to you
who shall greet me
from the last frame
in the Hallway.

Bernard Brings a Drink

By Jill Barth

Bernard holds out his hand to his regular. Old, hatted, nodding Marie takes her seat in the sun. No struggle is mentioned, though he watched her lose balance at least twice on her way to his café.

He reimagines her fall: rumpled skirts and moans of pain. He's seen her fall. Before the wine and after.

At her seat, she moves her feet lightly on the pea gravel and removes one flat black shoe upon which rests her bare foot.

At clustered tables nearby, an assembly of hike-walkers chats in German. They pass their drinks to each other in a tangle of arms and slosh of color. In Burgundy to try new things, they've resolved to say *Yes* to everything that presents itself. Some of the group even swapped wives last night in the beat of saying *Yes, Yes*. Today, the being unsure of who's-who is refreshing.

Later, maybe someone will start an argument and that's as it should be.

But now, even Marie can sense the ticklish energy. She removes the other shoe and places both feet on the sun-heated gravel. It's warm, everything is warm. Bernard brings her drink, a chilled bottle of rosé, one glass. A brown terrier dog says hello by walking past, nothing more, but he came close and that's enough.

Years ago this moment alone would have caused Marie to remember but she's learned something that has precisely nothing to do with memory. She pretends she's never lived a single moment before this *Right Now*. Eighty years of moments are nothing but sunlight, used now by plants as food and by topless ladies on the beach in Cannes...eighty years of memories transformed into verdant leaves and oily suntans.

She now has a pleasurable habit of moment-by-moment touching. A touch is enough, no grasping or clutching, just a sweep of sensing, mental fingers. No leash of marriage, or work, or pain or even her babies (gone to Paris) pull her back into memory.

The babies now call her on a cell phone she knows, easily, how to use. She tells them: *it's buttons, mon cher. And listening. And talking*. Things she mastered when she was a baby herself...but she doesn't insist. She doesn't get on high-power anymore and because of that she's able to taste the wine, not beg it to blend with her blood in mercy and release.

Bernard brings chops of baguette in a basket, cold butter in a rectangle on a small plate. One of the walkers yaks loudly, as if working words over a bad connection but no, she's speaking directly into a man's face. No one wants to be swapped, suddenly, with a long day of walking ahead. Bernard tugs his sweater to cover his belt, first in front and then in back.

Bernard smiles, refills Marie's glass and asks if she needs anything else. She rubs her bare feet in the gravel until she feels the chill of the underneath-dirt.

Woman Waiting*By Antonia Clark*

She ignores clocks and calendars,
lets time slip through her fingers.

One summer, she ran barefoot
all the way to Hartland, a love note

clutched in her fist, her hair like fire
taken by wind, a thin cotton skirt

clinging to her bare legs. So easy,
then, to question perfect strangers

about birth, blood, to keep faith
with her own body's deep secrets.

Now, she smooths a polyester
housedress over her soft belly,

drags a comb through coarse
white hair without needing a mirror.

She holds the future in her mouth,
a pill hidden under her tongue,
and refuses to swallow.

Elegy to a Woman Writer, A Friend

By Barbara Rockman

Walking, I think about luck, death and spring . . .
 Do two black cats crossing in front of a black clad walker cancel bad luck?
 Does the crimson yarrow delete the blue egg's gluey smear?
 Does one daughter's peace shadow or highlight her sister's grief?

My friend died this week. My daughter lost her job.

The pelvis, I'm told, is a bookend to shoulder girdle. Between the two, a ladder that twists a route to the heavens. I ask for metaphor in all things. But my body worker is not grounded in imagination. Though her husband's photos contrast one river through a swell of trees in four seasons. Ice and snow. Blossom and bee hum, white water. Slowed current and winded grasses. Yellow aspens flailing.

She suffered long enough and recognized The End, the way a seasoned author feels in her gut when to lift the hand from the keys. She invited me into her library, offered annotated gifts. Her books sit at the foot of my bed like a quilt.

Yesterday I counted three tanagers. Fire and flare rocketed across my path. Those blood red heads have to be a sign, don't they?

The same way the perfect gray mouse floated in the dog's silver water bowl. Eyes wide, tiny curled paws and the black tail, a rudder of death's dinghy. I scooped that body with a chrome trowel, mumbled a blessing. And buried it.

This morning when the rabbit stared me down, white lips munching a last crust of weed, I thought, we aren't so different, you and I: our hunger, wariness, our agile flanks that surprise us with how far they can cover ground, and how necessary our burrowing. Mine into pillow, quilt, book and pen; yours into dirt and dark. We need a place to come home to, don't we?

When my friend laughed, there was collision of cynic, seer, witch, and mischievous girl, of spirit tender and fierce. All you could do was let her do the talking. *Sisters of the heart*, she said. We knew what happened when one sentence bled into the other's question.

Her dogs have wilted with disbelief. Her daughter inherits her bravery. Her husband rises at midnight, hauls his guitar to the garage, plays alone.

This early sun is knife sharp. I flinch. It isn't just that she isn't in it. It's that this blinding world's unbearable. And yet. And yet, wild yellow roses burst my vision. Overnight, they're everywhere. I think *exuberance*. I think *Dare to be gorgeous*.

And those two dark cats? Maybe an underlining of death's many names, long black dash and in-between, light.

In-between laughter and *See you later*, she stacked her last manuscript, its white pages aligned and ready for the press.

When the Moonlight

By Berwyn Moore

in memory of Ann

Contact inhibition: The cessation of cellular growth and division due to physical contact with other cells.

When the moonlight crept in at odd angles
 and the shadows bristled and sighed

like childhood dragons, dangerous and sly,
 you slew them with a glare and a shrug,

a forbidden word and that hoot (always a giveaway)
 that never, even in your untimely, untidy

last hour, lost its gift for levity. Like that time
 browsing at the book store, unaware

of the panties stuck to the back of your sweater –
 dryer static – until a friend peeled them off

and flung them, the way your laugh ricocheted off
 books and shoppers too embarrassed to look.

Even then the cells were replicating, splitting off.
 As you rocking-stitched quilts for your children,

hammered bed frames, pocketed coquinas at low tide,
 the cells clustered quietly into malignancy.

And in Panama, while bare-breasted Embera women
 painted your skin with black dye and danced

with your husband – your contact inhibition suddenly
 lost in the swell of flute and drum – mutant cells,

resistant to contact inhibition, collected in dark tumors.
 By the time you knew, you had already fisted

the mysteries of light, built towers with the eastern clouds,
 and chased the dragons back into their caves.

And in your last exuberant breath, you knew –
 as touchable as water or bark – that the reasons

for loving far outweigh the reasons for living.

Visit to Sete

By Lynn Tudor Deming

Long drive down the coast to reach
That small cemetery set over the sea
White tombstones tilting their sails
Under the fragrant pines
Immensity of light.

An old man with his cane
Perched alone in the staggering sun
Come to feed the cats
Elegant in a blue turtleneck
Knowing the hunger of the stray.

My father lay once in the nursing home
His cane by the bed
Fully attired for his visitors in slacks, jacket--
A faint aroma of urine--
Elegant still,

And far down the coast
Tilting away
Maybe already perched out
Impeccable
In the shimmering air.

Untitled *jisei* series

By Shirley Plummer

Based on Lewis Turco's *Paradigm*

have morning birds flown?
still earth under empty sky

do you fear the dark
birds of prey swooping 'round me
circling the death that is near

sweet song of blackbird
plucks at the strings of a harp

my heart cries out at
fledgeling's wistful entreaty

owl eyes terrorize
alarmed child bursts into tears

our fears are useless
we are born, we live, we die
seek peace between on the way

night birds sing softly
he was gentle, so quiet
I should have known then
when last I lay with my love
to remember everything

to leave quietly
wear slippers and walk away
alone in the night

In Memory Of*By Peg Duthie*

My aunt hanged herself, but her children
told the press she'd overdosed on pills.
It was in fact pills for the boyfriend of
my then best friend. She had her own pills,
and I never found out if they helped or healed her:
I moved away. She stopped writing back.
I pictured my letters chewed into spitwads.
There were pills, too, for Mr. Popularity—
a prince of my high school back in '85.
They guided his hands to a gun. It fire-carved his name
onto memorial plaques and trophies.
Since then, there have been more pills,
more guns, one river, and obituaries
leaving out more than they share.
I hurl an old yearbook into the dumpster:
four days later, I fish it out
in spite of the stains it acquired.
I salvage a few pages, snipping out squares
and folding them into boats, planes, and swans.
Some nights I dream they're all in Chicago,
lugging NyQuil crates through the dirty snow
or chewing on candy necklaces as they ride
a trolley that endlessly loops a dead Loop.
And still all I ever can do is watch.
Sometimes I field a camera lacking film:
I recite to myself their names, their dates,
and the colors staining their painworn lips,
but everything on my palms melts into the fog.
I gaze and yet forget. I fumble and drop
my leftover aspirin into Lake Michigan
as if it could magick the water, could harness
the light to their shadows, develop their faces
back into nearness, back into touch.

First published in the *Detroit Metro Times*, July 1997

Lady Lazarus*By Jacqueline Doyle*

For Sylvia Plath

That was one pissed-off chick, you know what I'm saying? Sure you do. We've all been there, ready to eat men like air. Whirling in circles, spitting menace, lightning bolts shooting from extended fingertips as we point, "You! Yeah, you!" He's not going to fuck with you no more, they're not going to fuck with you no more. No matter what, nothing, nobody's keeping you down. You're coming back! You're going to stomp that son-of-a-bitch, you're going to haunt his ass. And maybe you put your head in the oven thinking that too. Take that, Herr Enemy. You're the original comeback kid, hell yeah, nine lives and counting, and this time's no different, except this time it's different, and you're not coming back, unless words count, and of course they do. Let me tell you, dying's not an art. It's what you make of it. The words. Each time someone repeats your bad luck charm you're back, the same woman resurrected, red hair swirling and crackling like flames. You turn and burn. Beware, beware. You said it girl, but you didn't listen. 'Cause you were that pissed off.

Cycle for Nembetsu Udori, Festival to Summon Ancestral Spirits
By Judy Schavrien

*Summer in Kyoto,
 Remembering Van Gogh*

Cicada(1) at Dawn

From the full-throated
 throb you alight – sawing
 your single note.

*Noon: Remembering Van Gogh
 on Mt. Heiei*

Noon swelled to bursting.
 In the pine's blue flame – one
 sudden cicada!

Sunset

Cicada, silent
 in a ray of sunset

 you weld to the branch.

Night

Cicada, with all your heart
 you throb the heart of the night –
 Is it home you long for?

And when your brief
 insistence of a life is over
 do you finally find it?

Or does your song just stop
 and the universe go out

Coda

Seven years to arrive

Seven days to live. Cicada,
you sing, you sing!

- (1) *In "cicada," pronounce the first "a" as "ah."*

Singing at the End*By Molly Scott*

How do we know when that is – the end?
so we can put our boots on,
so we can be sure our doors are open
and all the chores are done,
so we can feel the breath, the precious breath
move through the bone house one more time
ribboned with song.

When the sound is right, the singer knows.
It's muscles, really, and intent,
an exercise of tensing this, releasing that,
a gesture – as a dancer arcs her arm across the air
extending energy that cuts the space
to resonance, so calibrated, so precise,
it twists the heart a notch
and we are rearranged forever.

Something explodes in mind when idea
meets itself beyond the bound of reason

There are these intervals that ring like bells
in layers, through the world we know
and ripple into ones we don't,
fluid along a line, as sound strung on the breath,
so serpentine, so muscular, one has to open up
in awe of it and just let go.

So, at the end, is this how it will be?
Self, solid as a flexing flute, filled through a life
with little overtures, chansons,
shattering to shards of colored glass
as layers in the lungs fall open,
the final curtain parts,
and full voiced God
pours through

Plunge

By Margaret Chula

The water felt neither warm nor cold as I sank into the sea
after hitting my forehead against a borrowed surfboard.

The blaze of sunlight on water brought me back
to the surface—pulled out of the rip tide by strangers.

During World War II, it was the job of school girls
from Chiran to take care of *kamikaze* pilots—

washing their laundry, sewing on buttons,
and saying good-bye as the young men

tied on headbands blazoned with the rising sun,
climbed into their small aircrafts, and dipped

the plane's wings three times in farewell. Some gave
the girls their wallets or photographs of their family

before they headed out on their suicide mission: dive
bombing planes, loaded with explosives, into enemy warships.

Only the girls from Chiran knew the “divine wind” pilots
had wept into their pillows.

When I was twenty, I nearly drowned.
I have not told anyone about that bliss.

Responsibility*By Shirley Plummer*

weary

thoughts of the end arise
when
how

if I knew certainly
would I make a pragmatic plan?
or throw up my hands
shout 'live it up, make hay --'
why not?

if there were sun to lie in
I might lie in it
stretch and relax

enjoy for the first time
total freedom

October Ends

By Marsha Howland

For Maureen, 1983-2014

The morning rain has ended;
the afternoon mist has finally
lifted. Late-day sun shines
soft and bronze through
the yellow and orange leaves
at the edge of the woods.
It envelops me, then
passes on through the
French doors, resting on
the wall with the Wyeth
print. It has reached
the end of its journey, this
light that has traveled
a hundred million miles
through space, the woods,
the damp air, the open porch and
elegant doors, content to end
its life on the soft, white
walls of my quiet home.

The gift lies in the
shining.

Why You're Afraid of the Road

By Charlotte Muse

There is room for one car, but what if the wheels
miss and the car hangs over the edge
with two tires spinning? You'd be moving frantically
against the door, hoping to keep the balance
or get out. Never would the yellow dust of the road seem
so desirable; the blue sky so thin and threatening;
and you a turned-over turtle, a blind bird!

Or what if you just drove off the edge
because you were tired of all
curves and wanted to lie on air?

Whether or not spirits come back,
empty and blue and unable to hold anything,
you could say you'd gone into their place
in your body. Of course
you love life--
it holds you as hard as death does.
Everything holds you but the air
and this is why you're afraid of the road.

Beginning the Journey

By Ruth Thompson

Something is ended.

She launches the small paper boat of it out onto the ocean
and turns to the west.

*To wade out through glittering and foam, to lie upon the deep,
to be a membrane between stars and mirrored stars.*

*Then when her throat is full of all the voices she can carry,
to turn and swim for shore.*

To run back, crying messages from inside whale fall.

That is what she is thinking: not about the journey,
but about the coming home.

And if there is no way back?

For now she must empty herself.

Empty her knapsack, put it down. Empty her pockets.
Take off her clothes. Empty her old head.

And if there is nothing left?

All her life she has skirted the edges, backed toward it,
listened secretly from the reeds.

But to go right in, to drown....

*To lie under black water and let what wishes to be spoken
grow upward from her empty throat*

No, no! She is not willing!

Still it presses in, it calls, it wakes her in the night.

Karma

By Felicia Mitchell

Saving the sparrow
whose small self
is wound by wire
may not save the cat
half eaten by coyote.
It may not save even me
from myself, sorrow coiled
around my heart
like a copperhead.
I love my cat.
I love the coyote
that tried to eat the cat.
But I am sad about the cat,
as sad as a woman crying.
I know it is what it is,
this snake that will strike
or not strike,
on any given day,
no matter what I do.
The coyote already came.
The cat may go.
It is what it is, I repeat,
mantra tenacious as mantis,
my breath paired with sorrow
as good as a set of bellows
fanning embers
in a cold hearth.

Credit: Artemis (Virginia), 2015

The Mirror

By Lytton Bell

Look into the mirror and do not flinch
 You can see Death now rubbing her hands together
 spotted, wrinkled, bulging with veins
 engulfing every part of you without judgment

You're a woman with no past
 always threading her needles on the first try
 a flurry of diet pills and designer jeans
 never to be all you might have been

You could be lost and not know it
 a castle with no drawbridge, no welcome
 and nothing rustles when you move
 and the answer never came

You can be Shakespeare for five minutes
 see how the sun rose when you lifted your hand?
 It glows in you no matter where you are
 in the man you love, now quietly removing his pants

his gleaming desire swelling
 seeking to fill and be filled
 You are taller than lightning
 How the world must have glittered beneath you!

A hand twisting the golden knob of a door
 caressing you anonymously
 Now, walk the path with your pulse in your throat
 Listen: this is your prayer

the stoplight eternally stuck on green
 with your name etched right into its crystal skin
 asks you with a voice of peaches and rain
Are you ever jealous of the cool hush of the emerald forest?

Every bird you see is a prayer
 When they see you coming, they hunch like vultures
 swiping a tender wing over a clutch of bright blue eggs
 You were the breeze that wasn't there

I hear you tell your reflection
Flame inside my own soul, I refuse to fear you
 the magic moves when you move

so it never has to feel left behind

Your reflection asks you back:

Did you think of me with your last breath?

And you whisper

Not even you can see me

Promise

By Barbara Sullivan

Age is the great unseen divider of souls—each from the other and from its own former selves—and at the same time, it's the one commonality that can be counted on: we have only to wait a while and we understand everyone.

Time both speeds up and elongates as one ages—maybe relativity is somehow at work—and I feel close to the people I have loved and lost in a new way as I pass through the time of life they inhabited when we were together. I am merely one aging woman among many, one wave that is running out its unique curl, up, up from the sea. For a moment of shining transparency I have filtered the sky through my iridescent lens and then curled in on myself as if to capture it, playing myself out against the sand, casting my foam footprint ashore, perhaps being seen briefly by someone at a window as I am drawn back into the undertow.

Where will I have gone then, I wonder, and how is consolation to find me? I can't quite picture the white-light tunnel with a robed figure like St. Peter or Shirley MacLaine waiting at the end with a beatific smile and cheery news.

I stand in the doorway of a small beach cottage on this grey Easter morning as rain fiercely pocks the roof, and a sharp gust of wind rushes in from the sea, spattering my face. As I breathe deeply, the air's salty sting informs me that even my insides are surfaces on the world, that my whole being is built for interface, and that what I experience as self is mere surface tension. I am stretched taut for the instant of my life between two adjoining realities, a window between the tangible world and impalpable awareness.

When I look back into the cottage, the room takes on an Alice-in-Wonderland aspect, as if the chairs and table, as if the walls themselves are like me—solid, discrete, isolated objects and insubstantial at the same time, as if they might be conspiring illusions. A curious contentment descends as I consider the hovering objects suspended in this looking-glass world; I feel like some mysterious stranger has taken me by the hand and said Look, child!

Instead of pulling me into some well-lit heaven, God turns me around again, peering through me into this darkened world from outside of the time that heals all wounds, yearning through me like a lover inflamed by loneliness and longing, whispering fiercely, like the roar of this stormy surf, how much we matter—reminding me that my calling as a woman is to witness, and as a writer, to testify.

I glance out at the flat expanse of ocean lying like a swath of charcoal above stair-step waves on this greyest of grey days, and unexpectedly the sun slips a brightline spectrum through slate, a brilliant quicksilver signature precisely at the horizon, lying on the water like a promise.

At the Whaling Museum, Point Lobos

By Ruth Thompson

Let us begin here:
outside the one-room whaling museum at Point Lobos,
beneath the dark arms of cypresses.

White bones of whales lie stacked—
chained together so that no one can steal them.

No charnal ground, no messy metamorphoses,
no vultures. Only the antler shapes

of Cypress's transcendence, and these white bones,
past changing. Drybones like stones.
Grieve, Cypress, for the unfallen.

*

Whale fall is out there —
somewhere beyond the harbor, in the abyss.

*Cavern, vast nave, ruined abbey.
Slow downdrift of ancient sunlight.
Voices of liquid angels.*

*

Once she too sang. Once she slapped water, slipped
under her own wake.
When she was sound, she sounded.

Now she is soundless as a worm-hole.
Nor can she be sounded, lying too deep for words.
For had she fallen more shallowly,
she would already be eaten.

*

When you are eaten, that is called a sea change.
All the sweet easy swallowed up.
The fat of the land of me.

Last bone standing
makes the church of whale fall.

To come home, you learn echolocation,
like a bat.
You call your ownself out into the dark.

You ping.

*

In the whale graveyard, chained bones
are set about with try-pots.

A try-pot too contains a terrible sounding –
a sea change –
a fall
from whale to oil.

But the hagfish, the worms and sleeper sharks
are invisible.

Only a flash of blue from the bay
where an otter sleeps, wrapped in kelp.

Only a ruckus of seabirds, mist rising
from the cypresses.

*

If I dived down to whale fall,
a certain poetry would be possible.
That is an extremity
to which I have not gone.

I was taken. I was chained. I was eaten.
But I have not tried myself out.

All these years I have praised the good sun
and the noise of gulls.
I have wrapped myself in kelp
and slept in the current.

Now in the night
three strange angels kick open my door,
unchain my bones—

*Go down, they say. Go down.
Now you must love that too.*

The Vigil

By Dipika Guha

CHARACTERS:

WOMAN: any age, true of spirit and heart, a warrior

AUTHOR's note:

This play was inspired by Maxine Hong Kingston's *A Woman Warrior* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*.

WOMAN

The picture is finished.

The clouds came last.

The sea came first.

The horizon line was soothingly straight; just like the eye likes it.

Then the islands.

A little listless.

Alone.

Present from before they were ever seen.

Or held in vision.

Before they were a resting point for the eye;

A harbor for thoughts and loss.

Before they were placed in the picture.

They were present.

In the sea and water.

In the gleam of a sunset

In storm and drought.

They were the anchor in a story

Made of pebbles and dirt and earth.

Before sight and speech.

Enviably old.

She was a hundred and one when she saw him.

Coming out of the water.

His shirt clinging to his chest

Like Mr Darcy in the BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice*.

She forgot for a moment

Her advanced age.

And supposed wisdom.

As her tongue crept into crevices in her mouth

Where her teeth used to be

She swallowed deeply as he waded towards the shore

His long tousled hair streaked across his shirt

A shipwrecked Mr Darcy

She held him in her sight

Grasping the fleeting moment; him waist high in waves

A soul without a past

Or future
 The moment hung like a christmas ornament
 A bauble round and glistening
 She reached for it

I am, he said, **I am**-
 And she stopped his mouth with her hand.
 We can, she said, talk once you have eaten
 Would you like an apple?
 But his brow furrowed as he kissed her hand
 He was wise enough to recognise a benefactor
 And frightened enough to do as he was asked
 He said nothing
 And the bauble lowered itself
 As the sun lay down and turned itself into the ocean.

I am-he said, clearing his throat-**I am**
 She held her arm up again firmly
 Palm flat in the air
 A universal sign for “hell no”
 Her other arm cradled a blanket
 And a pillow for his head
 Which she threw down and stormed out
 As though she didn't care
 Because vanity is undeterred by age
 And some small part of her
 Had watched television
 And remembered what it was to play hard to get.

And so it began.
 First kiss at sunrise
 His hands strong against her fossil sides.
 Her body uplifted, her clothes undone
 He would pick her up in his arms
 And hold her as though she was an ornament
 A precious thing.
 Removing ‘I’ from his speech he learnt to refer to himself as ‘Himself’
 Excising past and future tense from his speech,
 They lived like this is the tremor of the present

He built things (of course)
 A canoe.
 A small cabin.
 A roof.
 A deck.

It was not that she didn't worry.
 When she bent over the nets to pick up a quivering fish
 She would see her reflection and recoil.
 Time had not stopped!
 It would not stop!
 In moments of grief she would shriek at her reflection
 STOP! JUST STOP! STOP IT!
 Berating endlessness for the fact of its existence.

Why, she thought, does one not become more beautiful with age?
 It was a cruelty that wisdom should be so unattractive
 An evolutionary failure.
 Why, she thought, was all the gain of experience, all wisdom
 Rendered invisible by her white hair and toothlessness.
 But as she saw him casting nets out into the sea
 And felt her own longing.
 She doubted her own wisdom.

Unbeknownst to her,
 He would watch her sleep
 Wipe her mouth
 And the stray tears that crept from her eyes at night
 He would stay vigil over her body
 Honoring it in life like we only ever honor the dead
 He held fast to her.
 Like a rope hauling him to shore.
 He smoothed her hair.
 Tended the night fire.
 Chased away foxes and shadows.
 In the day he would sleep.
 And she wondered if he was sad.
 And worried that it was her company
 That was driving him to lie prostrate on the beach.
 Wrapped in a seaweed blanket?
 Will he remember me, she'd think
 When all of this has been wiped away?
 Will he remember me when I am gone
 And she would weep quietly
 And he would sleep
 And the day would burst into life
 And sink into somnolence
 As though they did not exist.

He had not known a love as great as this.
 It broke his heart
 As it rebuilt it

He held her hand patiently.

He does not say she saved him
 But she knows
 She also knows there is something else
 Which they have not discussed
 The current that brought him there
 Pulling him another way.
 The blue streaking across her heart
 Breaking it and mending it all at once
 Tugs in all directions.
 Its permanence a strange and endless lie.
 What is the matter, she said, summoning cheer.
 Because that is the question that we ask
 When something is both different and sad
 Inside a loved one.
Nothing-he said
Except a kind of electric blue.

So when he walked into her dorm room that day
 First day of college.
 Dragging a duffle bag full of books
 His hair falling over his eyes
 His smile crooked and worn
 And much too old for his twenty one years
 She felt a tug in her gut
 Like a knot was coming undone
 Hi, she said, tucking away a strand of hair
I am-he said-and then he paused correcting himself.
It doesn't matter-
No one calls me by my real name anyway.
You'll soon make one up for me.

And there it was.
 The time.
 The late afternoon.
 Him standing too long at her door.
 The sun streaking the floor
 And the grim plasterboard on the wall
 His cellphone rang
 A christmas tune.
 Even though it was early September
 Its tinny ring brought to mind a shiny bauble
 Hanging on the christmas tree at home
 The only gold shimmer in a sea of red and blue ornaments

I'd like, she said, -
 But he had gone, wandering into the hallway
 That stretched evenly forwards and backwards
 The doorway, a hinge to the past and future.

An email in 2001.
 She opened it without the ceremony or emotion of opening a letter
 Technology, she thought, had rendered letters soulless.
 It was told impersonally in the third person
 By someone hired to tell the story of love.
 They met, it reported cheerfully, when he was doing research.
 And she too, was doing research, and they found one another terribly interesting.

It is finished, she thought and then looked out of the window
 Out into the horizon.
 Where the sea was having a party.
 She was not invited to.
 Holy hell, she thought.
 And then wondered about her choice of words.
 The current had pulled her to a different shore
 Where language was bigger and more important than life.
 She made important decisions about semantics daily.
 As a Professor of Linguistics she specialised in the future tense in Slavic languages
 Her department had made her Chair.
 Right now she was immersed in Hungarian grammar
 Arguing the finer points of the origins of the future
 With her colleagues who all, like her
 Feared losing their jobs in a competitive market place
 You know what the economy is like...

So when he proposed on her forty third birthday.
 A colleague who she had come to know
 At christmas parties over the year.
 She knew it was not love.
 She was much younger than him.
 And did not enjoy Mahler or coffee or crosswords.
 And in her own way considered contemporary culture
 To be inauthentic and dead.
 The classics were much more alive than the present.
 The epic stories, the Mahabharata, the Greeks, Odin
 The others, were much more interesting than her bland friends
 Their dead eyes glazed against the storm of social media
 And their cellphones.
 Terrorized by themselves her colleagues walked the halls zombie like
 Never pausing in any threshold.
 Never halting in between to find themselves.

Classical problems seemed a great deal more urgent
 Than anything anyone living said or did.
 Yes, she said to him, looking at the doorway,
 And the waves receded.
 The horizon sank.
 As though frightened by her.

Love is everything, said someone at lunch.
It is wonderful that you are, at long last embracing it, you know, your life.
It's not too late if you want to have children.
Have you thought about IVF? Or a surrogate? Or adoption?
There are so many children who are orphans.
Who have suffered through no fault of their own
The scourge of war and Aids and human problems.
Why not give one or two a home?

The crossword lay on the table marked up by crosses and hexes.

The future tense, she had said famously, publicly, multiple times
 Was a semantic manufacturing.
 Absent entirely in certain Indo European languages
 It was, she said, pushing her glasses up her nose
 A way to order endlessness.
 A gesture of control.
 She did not add it was therefore a farce
 She did not wish to participate in.
 That would have been too strong, too personal, too unacademic
 It would have painted her a prisoner marking the walls of her cage.
 Crossing the days off with hexes.

Children do not exist, she thought.
 There are only women and the women before them and the moment where they fell in love or
 didn't.
 There was only fate or choice if you had the luxury
 or didn't.

And so when on her sabbatical in Budapest, she felt a kick in her stomach
 She paid no attention at first.
 Because she and her husband had been apart for many months
 Connecting only on Skype on weekends.
 But she felt the kick again and then the doctors hand firm on her belly.
 They told themselves it was the twenty four hour layover they had in Prague.
 When he had given her a gift.
 A box set of Mahler's Symphonies
 To enjoy for many lifetimes.
 And they had chosen prosecco over more expensive champagne

And had fallen asleep, almost certainly, without making love.

So when her waters broke
 It provoked a serious inquiry in her mind
 (One that was to take up many years)
 As to the possibility of intellectual or mental conception
 Rather than a physical one.
 Because there had, you know, been no one else.
 And then he arrived wailing out of the ocean between her legs
 She felt a twinge of familiarity at his cry
 And a tugging in her gut.
 Like a familiar current.

Her husband was overjoyed.
 A son would be easier, he confided.
 Less fraught,
 He thought, looking at his shipwrecked wife,
 Grief will not settle in his bones
 In quite the same way it does with women.

And when her son stood tall over her and held her hand as she picked up her Departmental
 Award (some kind of silver cheese platter) she looked down and saw her reflection in it and was
 disappointed to see strands of white hair escaping from behind her ears.
 But it's shiny, he said. You like shiny things.
 I do, she said, I like shiny things.
 It reminds me of the ocean.
 And your father's ring clinking against his coffee cup.

And her grandson was a runner.
 And her great grandson lay in his cot, cooing at the star shaped mobile
 There was a quiet hush in her soul.
 And in the quiet
 She lay there running her mind over the years,
 The past become a cushion.
 Sensitive to her touch, it yielded beautifully and lay itself bare like an oyster trembling in its
 shell.

I am-she thought-I am
 And he was.
 And it is.
 And they are.
 And the islands lay listless.
 Pebbles in her eyes.
 The earth dark and certain.

I am-he'd tried to say then-

At cross purposes.
Unsure of what to do.
But I am at home with you here
We belong to another time
A time before this one
 Wiping her mouth-
 Holding her body firmly against his
I didn't want to tell you then-he said
About the men I killed.
About the slaughter that happened
Under my watch.
By my hand.
I was wrecked in so many ways.

Her cloudy eyes spoke.

That is our world, you were a participant like we all are

No, I was an instigator!

A bystander

A warlord!

You were unhappy.

I was. I was unhappy.
I walked alone until I met you.

You started throwing rocks into the sea.

I was afraid that you would leave me.

So when you got into the boat
You did it in the afternoon
Unleashed yourself into the ocean
Like a leaf

I expected we would meet again.

And it's easier to leave than be left.

Yes.

But now the future is finished.
The picture's complete.

**And we can begin again.
It's ours to claim.**

*I no longer have my body.
I have read all the stories
The ones from ancient times
I did not want to wait
I did not want to turn into
One of those women
Under the weeping willows*

If you had waited we could have been happy.

The future would not have ended the way it has.

**Life is long.
Endlessness, a fact.**

Someone is here to see you.

Oh, a visitor, that's kind.

The waters edge turns black.
A young man with a tape recorder
Here to ask some questions,
I think, about your life.

Tell him to read my books.
There's nothing to tell
I wrote what I could write
I was primarily concerned with the future tense
And its absence.

But then this young man sat down.
And he took my hand and said
The story is not finished
The waves have taken me out to sea many times,
I thought but didn't say.
And its always thrown me back
A different shape.
I knew better than to swim upstream
Which is what some fish do when they die.

I find this whole conception thing super fascinating
Conceiving in death is uber romantic-said the young man
His eyes shining
That's because, I say to him, you'll never have to carry a child yourself.

For me it wasn't easy.
I am-
 He said.
 And kissed my hand.

Take me back to the islands.
 Where the picture was drawn.
 My feet are like hooves.
 My skin like leather.
 I'm wearing time these days on my feet
 Like women wear shoes.

I didn't get that-he said. Shit. Can we start over?

And it does somehow.
 Time itself rolling around in the ocean
 Like a baby elephant

Can we begin again?

Tell the story, he says.
Tell it like it was never written

It isn't written

I didn't hear that-can we start again?
Why don't you go back and say that again?
I'm recording.
It's not finished
It hasn't begun

Time is fraying at the edges
 Burning grief like sun burns fog

Start over
 And again.
 The end is turning over
 The turn is ending
 And no one to tell you so.
 The current pulls me out
 In his presence
 This young man recording my words.

I think of the horizon and I see you on the threshold
 The picture, I think, is finished.
 The clouds came last.

The sea came first.
The horizon line stretches soothingly.
Then these islands.
A little listless.
Alone.
Present from before they were ever seen.
Or held in vision.
Before they were a resting point for the eye;
A harbor for thoughts and loss.
Before they placed in the picture.
They were present.
In the sea and water.
In the gleam of a sunset
In storm and drought.
They were the anchor in a story
Made of pebbles and dirt and earth.
Before sight and speech.
Enviably old, I begin again
I cross into the current
I walk into the sea.
I am-I say, I am-
Older than this
This story
Myself.
I am-

End of Play

Last Bus

By Lynn Tudor Deming

after Emily Dickinson

He's going to take you now.
He's going to slow down,

And you guess it's the last time
You'll ever have to wait, clutching

Your jacket. Much closer than seemed
Possible--suddenly its dark hulk looms up--

Now it's your bus, like so many you
Fidgeted for in the thickening dusk.

Incantation*By Maureen Cummins*

INANNA. ENHEDUANNA. NISABA, colored as the stars.

KALI, The Ferocious, The Vengeful, goddess of fury.

MEDEA. ELECTRA. LADY MACBETH. IPHIGENIA, murdered by her father.

SAPPHO. MURASAKI. DE PIZAN.

Learn your alphabet. Practice your ABCs: Aphra Ben. Aphra Ben. Aphra Ben.

JOAN OF ARC, bound and burned. HÉLOÏSE, captured and caged. HYPATIA, skin sliced to bone.

All those warrior women: Dressed as soldiers. Fighting in drag.

I don't fear the rebel bullets, I don't fear the cannon.

SARAH GOOD—GOODY GOOD—Executed July 19, 1692.

What creature did you employ? No creature but I am falsely accused.

I am innocent to a witch. And if you take my life, God will give you blood to drink.

HARRIET TUBMAN. SOJOURNER TRUTH. Give me freedom or give me death.

Ain't I a woman? Ain't I a woman? Ain't I a woman?

There is no undoing the damage and there is no turning back.

You become a certain kind of person and that is that.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON, dead, forgotten, resurrected.

AUDREY LORDE. African priestess. Turbaned, dashikied, a warrior poet.

MOTHER JONES, SUSAN B., COUNTESS MARKIEVICZ' advice to women:

Dress suitably in short boots, leave your jewels in the bank, and buy a revolver.

RICH. POWELL. O'BRIEN.

RHYS. DURAS. DICKINSON.

DICKINSON. DICKINSON. DICKINSON.

Hiding within a flower. Handled with a chain.

FISHER. WALKER. CATHER. WELDON. MILLAY.

Fishing. Walking. Cathing. Millaying.

Row Row Row Your Boat. MUNRO. MUNRO. Munroing.

Wide Sargasso Sea. The Waves. Everything Rising, Everything Converging.

Little Birds. The Captain's Deathbed. In the Forest. Night. Down by the River.

Twilight Sleep. My home is Far Away. What is Found There?

A Room of One's Own. A Place to Live. The Final Harvest. An Ample Bed.

SYLVIA. VIRGINIA. DOLORES.

BODKIN. BODKIN. A bare bodkin.

HELL HATH NO FURY. HELL HATH NO FURY. HELL HATH NO FURY!

PLATH. SEXTON. WOOLF.

Wolf den. Wolf pack. Wolf howl.

WOOLF HOWL. WOOLF HOWL. WOOLF HOWL!

Bring Me the God of Mrs. Garcia

By Susan Kelly-DeWitt

The thread was flame-colored, like vermilion flycatchers she once sketched in the countryside near Buenos Aires. Portugal snipped a length and smoothed it with her plump fingers.

The sharp she would use, one of her mother's good golds, weighed less than a hummingbird's feather. She slipped the floss through the needle's eye and thought of the rich man in the parable; she pulled the thread through until it caught at the knot. The thread was too fine and bright for the dull black button Portugal was about to sew onto her brother's old work shirt. She focused hard on the small disc: It was a millstone. Abruptly, she smiled a sly smile.

Ha!

The tiny nubs of thread holding the button to the shabby cloth winked like poppies from their drab center.

She pulled the thread taut and thought of her brother hauling in cod at the dock. She saw him bend and stretch and pull against the slippage in one arduous motion that blended cruel tedium with grace, like the figures she'd seen in a book of paintings by Goya.

Is that how God sees my brother? Portugal wondered. Does He look down from His Throne of Glory upon the hump of my brother's laboring back? *And what if it is true, as Mrs. Garcia insists, that God is a woman?*

Mrs. Garcia was considered a wild one. She looked wild, with a shock of red wire parted at the center for hair, her breasts flying free under her flowered jerseys. She wasn't afraid to walk around with fresh chicken blood on her apron, or to prop her rough hands (with their painted fingernails!) against her wide hips and shout at her husband in front of the other men.

Mrs. Garcia's God would certainly notice her brother's reattached button and the four tight buds of fire-color at its center. Perhaps She would think he was wearing four tiny bouquets—four garnets, four bright chips of carnelian.

And this She-God might even appear to her brother as he slept—glide in through the window, wearing a cape of vermilion feathers. She might pluck one feather and leave it on his pillow for good luck; he would wake the next morning with wonder in his eyes. Portugal would be able to discover that wonder there whenever she wished.

But if God is a man after all...

An old man with a flowing beard, a fake smile and a rod called Judgment. An implacable God who loves the cliff-face, the basalt and granite rocks...

This God would see her brother straining against the haul of the nets; He would notice the tight knots of muscle at his neck, his bone-weary expression; He would smell the stink of dead fish, feel the bite of icy wind on her brother's rough cheeks, and He would approve.

Previously published in *Voices 2022*, Cold River Press

Where God Lives

By Jeanne Bryner

It is hard to believe in God, even now.
 He was always somewhere else. Maybe fishing.
 Sometimes I get mad. Like when my sister was eight
 and I was six. Daddy went drinking, left us
 all alone to tend our baby brothers.
 We were potty-training the chubby one, Ben.

I knelt to pull him off his potty seat
 and his weenie got caught in a crack
 of blue plastic. Blood spurted as if I'd
 chopped a hen's neck. My sister ran.
 All four of us crying now, and me holding
 Ben's poor wiener
 a bloody worm in a washcloth.

I begged God to stop warm ooze soaking
 through to my palm, and held Ben,
 who yelped louder than Sam the day
 we shut his tail in a closet. *I'm sorry,*
please God, help us. I chanted my prayer
 the way you do when you see the train's face
 frothing in the tracks, yellow eyes and teeth
 hissing the dark and your car's stalled
 all the doors locked tight.

Our screen door whined, slammed,
 when my sister brought the women
 in their gingham blouses. They found Vaseline
 in our cupboards, rocked Ben until he slept,
 gave us orange popsicles, threw
 the potty seat in the trash.

It is difficult to believe in God,
 but I want to say that day, when I was six
 and holding what was left of my brother's dick
 in my right hand, God's hair was in pin curls
 under a red bandana. He had two names:
 Elsie and Janet May. He lived on our street:
 the four hundred block in the projects.
 He was home; it was August and too hot for trout.

Dogma

By Cynthia Reeser

Everywhere you look, churches. A proliferation of churches. It's the Bible Belt and to be expected, but this, really. My son counting churches—it's a game, wherever we drive. Churches in the country, churches in the city, churches in the suburbs. Churches across from other churches, dogmatic competition. Every other building a church. A church for every person, one for every other cow. Church in people's garages, out back in their sheds. Law offices and church. Piggly Wiggly and church. A church in the Walmart. Church in the corner mart. Church in the fields. Church in the water. River rafting and church. Fishing and church. Sky-diving and church. Collapsible, disposable, eco-friendly church. Homegrown, organic church. GMO church, church grown from seed money, terminator seed church. Church sprung wild from the fields, feral church, spontaneous generation church. Holy church, profane church, dig-in-the-dirt church. Don't-be-a-jerk church. Glam church, slam church. Fad church, classic church. Fake church, bully church, salt-of-the-earth church. Churches on welfare, churches with steeples. Churches with masters degrees that haven't been able to get a job for seven years, freelance churches, single-mom churches. Old money churches, farmer churches, churches born into the family business.

O but all are equal in the eyes of the Lord, therefore: steeples rise up with the dawn over rolling hills, the glory of morning and singing, the clanging of bells, the country where religion is hawked like 5-cent county fair winnings, common as horseflies, common as fear.

Host

By Roz Spafford

From *The Gospel According to Mary*

Hungry for justice, he
won't eat, not
one grape nor flake
of fish. His flesh
is grass, dry
as a whisper.

His wish:
to divide his body
like those fish.
Gambling on scraps,
returned in baskets,
overflowing.
He would be bread
dry and flat
broken for us.
He would be memory.

Behind him the demons hiss.
Subsistence is what they give us:
our sardines sold for sauce,
our land for taxes.

Heartsick, he would free us
with his shed blood.
As if the broken body
of one more boy
could fix history.

St. Lunatic*By Gayle Bell*

That's what my kids call me
 able to try to fix the whole world
 in a single bleeding heart
 I bare it all baby
 an offered hat, clothes still with good wear
 a burger, coffee, a shoulder, an ear

Ms. June has a smile
 like a brown berry sunshine
 a greeting like a country hug

Mr. Willie can sing spirituals
 that would make a statue get happy
 Alabama tats on a shoulder
A yes mam, Gods Blessings to you
 from a man on crutches

King Jimi holds court with the unseen
 his fiery eyes come from his mountain
Yes, yes I'm ok, thank you for asking
 his courtiers vie for his attention once more

Shadow picks up plastic flowers
 a coveted cigarette butt
 from the Dollar Tree floor
I've been able to stay sane clean sober
making art out of stuff I find
the evidence of things unseen, Ms. Lady
 I slapped my chest 3 times,
 pointed to her and the sky
 that needs no translation

Water Women

By Alla Bozarth

We do not want to rock the boat,
you say, mistaking our new poise
for something safe.

We smile secretly at each other,
sharing the reality that for some time
we have not been in the boat.

We jumped or were pushed
or fell, and some leaped overboard.

Our bodies form a freedom fleet,
our dolphin grace is power.

We learn and teach and as we go
each woman sings~ each woman's hands
are water wings.

Some of us have become
mermaids or Amazon whales
and are swimming for our lives.

Some of us do not know how to swim.
We walk on water.

Womanpriest: A Personal Odyssey, Alla Renée Bozarth, revised edition 1988, distributed by Wisdom House; *Water Women*, Alla Renée Bozarth, audiocassette, Wisdom House 1990; *Accidental Wisdom*, Alla Renée Bozarth, iUniverse 2003 and *This is My Body—Praying for Earth, Prayers from the Heart*, iUniverse 2004. All rights reserved.

Isles of the Wise

By Sharon Suzuki-Martinez

Led by women since time immemorial, the world's last official matriarchal religion survives in the Ryukyu Islands (Okinawa). My mother's parents and all their parents were born on these islands. Mom never wanted to visit, and characteristically, would not explain why. This mystery always drew me to Okinawa. When I finally visited, my husband and I saw *utaki* or sacred groves roped off for the *Kaminchu* or holy women. We stumbled upon one *utaki* in the midst of a modern metropolis. Inches from a playground without graffiti or broken beer bottles. It was a small pristine stand of banyan trees, their aerial roots winding like the veins of a giant. Behind them, a cave as white as papyrus. I had found my doorway to the beginning and the end of all questions.

In Okinawa
Everybody knows
The gods speak only to women.

Village Shakti

By Verena Tay

(for Kamini Ramachandran)

I, woman, dance for me!
My spine snakes into talons,
 your gaze pierced.
My breast-hip curves to heart beats,
 your rhythm smashed.
My feet pound paths fresh,
 your grasp spent.
My smile bites Eve's apple,
 your words lost.
Sita, I am not!

Published: Frederick Cheng, Lim Qing & Ng Kah Gay. (Eds). *Crossing Universes*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2016, p. 31.

Note: This poem was inspired by E Le Guillou (Henry) Emy's hand-coloured painting, *Danseuse de Syngapore* (1820s–1840s), that was exhibited at the National Gallery, Singapore, during 2016.

The Ghigau Women

By Sun Cooper

The Ghigau Women

YŋO, or the Ghigau, was a title bestowed by the Cherokee clans upon extraordinary women who had demonstrated uncommon bravery and benevolence in battle and in community; this title was held for life and literally translates: “beloved war woman.” She was given a ceremonial symbol of her role: a white swan’s wing. Its anatomy is both graceful and powerful enough to break a man’s arm. The Cherokees believed the Creator spoke through this woman endowed with equanimous mercy and ferocity. She headed the Cherokee’s Council of Women and shared a high seat among the Council of Chiefs; a role that flew in the face of her culture – a time when American women were not allowed a vote, and long before. Further, Ghigau held a power even greater than a Chief’s – she alone decided the fates of captives. With a wave of the wing, she proclaimed fatality or freedom. A Seneca myth tells how some Ghigau women tattooed a serpent around their lips, a striking reminder of the life and death in her tongue.

Swan’s Wing

I saw a vision last night. A circle of fire. Smoke curdling past the wattle and daub. A longhouse. Full with council and a half wing of swan.

A half wing of swan in her hands: a mast. Her hands bloodied with births and a battle-axe. She has known mercy. She has known none. She is Ghigau. Beloved War Woman.

Ropes, swollen ankles, eyes white. Captives awaiting their fates. Sooted elbows. Mouths of clay. Teeth knocking. It is not cold; it is sweat.

As she stands, the clan folds to the seam of her rustling. Her brown feet uproot the ground where she walks: Her movements begin inside, then outside, and continue. She lifts the swan’s wing and pauses in deliberation: A drop of mother’s milk; a pale, hard hope like pearl in a blackened oyster. The vibration of swan: Scapulars, humeral, the trailing edge of finality. Around her mouth, a tattooed snake sleeping. It uncoils as her lips open. Her tongue is forward with speech, with death, with life. Swish, swish. You live.

Her movements continue. I unravel the buried seam of her feet, shuffling from uprooted ground; a message from the Ghigau to us:

Be beloved. Be war. Be both.

Uncoil the snake. Unfurl the metaphor. Your hand, a stroke.

Swish, swish. You, live.

White Feather, or Changing the Archetype

My presentation on the Ghigau and the swan’s wing as an individual and collective metaphor of deciding our own narratives was meaningful; but when AROHO women responded by wearing the white feathers on their bodies, tucking them into their journals, and then Maxine Hong Kingston responded to the metaphor in her own *Waves* response, we collectively and powerfully changed the archetype. A white feather no longer symbolizes the cowardice of men but the courage of women.

Currents to change

Waves upon waves

Our stories overlapping
Coward to courage
Woman upon woman
White feathers overlapping
Here –
Into a swan song

Abbey of Our Lady at Gethsemani*By Sherry Chandler*

Bells clang. For matins maybe or lauds.
The Hours of prayer are chimed, the knell
of ordinary hours and quarter hours
resounds across the countryside.
Beyond these walls the earth shudders
with Reaper drones and Hellfire missiles.
Mountaintops are leveled, bedrock
fractured. Border fences rise
and island countries drown. Trappists
singing praise the clock around
may weight the scales toward the good
as much as president or pontiff,
but the calendar I thought to flee
is woven, rough as a jute string,
into the cloistered air by clanking bells.

I give up scattershot sleep, open
my window to the coming dawn.
The moon illuminates the garden,
the stations of the cross, the statue of Mary.
The globe she stands on might be Earth,
the writhing snake at her bare feet,
by the shape of its head, is deadly.
She tramples it with alabaster toes.
I stroke the curves of my cobra earrings,
a small silver joke unnoticed
in this earnest place where, huge
on the horizon, Luna casts shadows.

Questions for the Angel Gabriel II

By Anna Hundert

and another thing:
 are the pink lumps of flesh inside
 me divine, the strange alien bones
 and the red meat of the almost
 living, my legs grow weak from the
 weight and I want to know if I can
 still say no, could I have ever, was it
 ever a question of wanting. my

lover wanted me once, before
 I became an otherworldly womb
 pressing against a fragile pelvis and
 mortal skin. I have begun to bite
 my nails, did you know, the anxiety
 of the eternal Yes, the cruelty of
 the smell of lamb over a fire, it
 never bothered me before. tell me:
 will the purple veins emerging from
 my thighs become purple ribbons
 of royal vestments, can any prayers
 lift my swollen breasts, will I
 thin down enough so that my

lover will be able to lift
 me off of our bed and make love
 to me in the air. legs around his
 waist, arms around his back. he
 stays but he never looks at me that
 way these days. have you ever been
 looked at that way, could you
 ever even guess, ever even
 imagine.

Mother of the Disappeared

By Roz Spafford

From *The Gospel According to Mary*

*Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones
against the stones.*

Psalm 137:9

In the dream it is always the same:
They bring me his body, dressed
in something I have never seen.
The wounds are bruised and red
like eyes. Across my lap,
he is too long and too cold.
I wake to the taste of sour wine.

Who am I to think this cup should pass?
All history is this history:
Of firstborn, children found masked
with damage, martyrs to belief.

Women will stand in the Plaza de Mayo
with pictures of their lost ones,
calling my name,
covering their heads with white scarves,
covering my picture with small red handprints.

Who will be with me, now and at the hour?

A Village of Their Own

By Niloufar Behrooz

There is a small village in Iran called Abyaneh. You might notice this ancient red village on your way to Tehran from Isfahan. Abyaneh is one of the oldest villages in Iran, known to have existed around 2,500 years ago, and it is considered a major tourist attraction for its historical, anthropological and architectural antiquity as well as its rustic atmosphere. The village is almost secluded of residents since the majority of the second generation have migrated to nearby cities over time. The only people who actually do live in the village are the old local men and women who wander around the narrow alleys going about their daily errands hiding their faces from the camera-crazed tourists.

But it isn't the men who are the center of attention in this village. It's the women. The wrinkled tiny little women who sit on their high wooden balconies, wearing their traditional colorful clothes with exquisite flower patterns on them, like decorative dolls sitting on a shop window. Pristine, authentic and aesthetic. They are showcased in their absolute originality and eccentric beauty; only to be looked at, but never to be touched, bought or translated. They are the shining jewels of the village. Some of them are as old as a hundred, and most of them are seen to be living alone. Either single or widowed, these women don't seem to need the helping hand of a man, at least not anymore. Behind their porcelain fragile figures, they have the strength, endurance, and perseverance of an inveterate desert plant. Of course, there are some who lean their chins on their small hands and gaze into the distant setting sun with doleful eyes that glisten with the memories of their progenies, but even those will put a smile on their face when they see a visitor pass by. Sometimes they'll even wave at you. You wave back and then for a moment you feel connected to their noble existence and sublime mystery.

Time has stopped in this village. Almost no signs of highly advanced technologies or vehicles can be seen. Transportation is simple. You walk. You feel the permanence of everything around you. But if you ask the colorfully-clad women in the village they will tell you that they have not stayed here out of weakness or helplessness but out of their own choice and consent. Surely, they could have gone on to live with their children and grandchildren in big cities. But why leave when they have a village of their own?

Safe House

By Jude Rittenhouse

A child: eighteen
months but too old
in the eyes. The joy that makes you reach
toward children
has dissolved. This baby's famished smile
creeps beneath my skin
along with the women's bruises,
missing teeth, broken limbs. Fragments I
will carry with my own when I go home
in one hour. Something no other woman here
can do. Those in this shelter's living room,
crowded with cast-off couches and chairs,
have already left what they needed

to leave behind. For a time. For this hour,
I explain how words have power. Black
eye hidden behind loose hair, a woman whispers:
He found my journals
and laughed, said: Who'd care what you think?
I ask them to write about who they are
and wish to become. The sound
of pens scratching like people buried alive:
trapped in shut-tight coffins.

When I offer a chance to share, two women
have called themselves *fat*
though they are not. The child's mother reads:
I am a good mother, but I could not keep my little
angel safe. I want to pass laws
that protect children. When I say words
can call dreams into being, the final reader thinks
she has done it all wrong. She reads:
I want to be the moon
shining alone, guiding lost souls through night.
She can't yet see
how, already, her light
pierces a deeper darkness.

"Safe House" was first published by Yellow Arrow Journal in their "Kindling" issue on 5/9/23

Poem as a Field of Action

By Berwyn Moore

We seek profusion, the Mass—ill-assorted—breathless—grasping at all kinds of things—as if—like Audubon shooting some little bird, really only to look at it the better.

—William Carlos Williams, “The Poem as a Field of Action”

I had not been thinking of death
 when they stung – three wasps hiding
 in the folds of my shirt, quiet as plaid

until the last button, buttoned. Who’s
 to say this isn’t true? What’s missing
 is the witness, the flash of corroboration,

the fragments of wing and stinger settling
 on the indifferent oak grain. I had been
 thinking of Voltaire, how he fainted

at the first sniff of a rose, of tongue prints,
 how each is unique, yet there I sat, stunned,
 uncertain of anything except twelve

rising welts, twelve – the number of stings
 it took to unbutton one noisy shirt, fling
 it off. And then I thought of Saint Agnes,

muzzled and dragged to the fire at twelve,
 her accusers stymied by the hair growing
 to shroud her nakedness as she gave

her body up, smiling, to her Lord. And who’s
 to say this isn’t true? Here’s where we
 corroborate: we all muddle tales, hobble

rickety bridges of time and space, grasp and tear
 the scrim of doubt. We seek profusion, little birds,
 impertinent facts, safe shirts, hands busy

with clay or bread, and we blunder upon
 miracles of hair and love, honeysuckle,
 a flutter of eyelashes on a wrist—

and we sing—all of us saints—our abundant arms
 reaching toward bodies, surrendered
 and buoyant, bodies rising.

The Arbor of Chance

By Peggy Dobree

Purple hammocks strung at odd intervals across rows of lavender.
 We ate chocolate for breakfast with the first good coffee in days.
 A southern light painted half the oaks in a curt but luminous quiet.
 Fire ants began to dance at our elbows gnats romping at our hairlines.
 All at once some things became as clear as a vault of once hung art,
 as paramount as cadmium, vermillion, black ivory, even zinc.
 I give the sky my mother tears all my lady bits, and two migrant feet.
 The fluids of my birth run into the streams of earth, crimson tributaries.
 Water is power, is moon, is Oshun with her brood, Venus dressed in curls,
 meteor trails waft against the fringe finger the sky as they tickle through
 a copper margin to the night closer than your clan, nearer than your tribe.
 Now the chief calls for your surrender gives you a slave to your longing,
 You are stripped of the deed to your land Mobius rainbows ignite.
 And the planet glows with a tremor you cannot deny.

Summer at Twenty-One

By Eva M. Schlesinger

I loved the air before dusk
Still warm, no longer hot
I lay in the front porch hammock,
the crickets singing with glee
kids playing ball on our dead end Merry Street

I lay watching the sky
change from light blue to stardust to purple
writing in a little notebook
my grandmother gave me
I wrote about the moment I was in
I had sunk my teeth in
like a delicious apple
with juice running down my cheeks

No one bothered me on the porch
They said hi as they passed by or climbed the stairs to go in
Abby, who screamed at her parents
Lizz, in construction, who earned ten dollars an hour
I was in awe of those ten dollars,
but I didn't want to work behind a jackhammer
or wear thick brown pants and work boots on humid days

I didn't think much about the future,
around the corner from me

I felt the braided web of hammock
smelled the air cooled off in the dusk,
heard the crickets singing their chorus over and over
and I was happy to let each moment come to me
the way the stars burst,
sparkling,
one at a time

Next to You, Permanence

By Elizabeth Jacobson

I wrapped the corpse of a juvenile bull snake I found on the road
around a slender branch of a young aspen tree,
coiling it into three even loops. The fluid
from the snake's body collected in its head,
which swelled to many times its normal size.
The next day, flies covered the body so thickly
I could not tell a snake was what they clung to.
On the third day, the snake hung like jerky from its branch,
the coils undone,
the skin split in places where delicate white bones pushed through.
This is what I was hoping for,
skin dropping away without a scent,
a helix of bones to set on my desk,
next to phantasms of you.
On the fourth day, when the snake began to move,
bulges under its desiccated skin rippled
like small hearts toward a new home
and I saw what was dead about the snake
had become the maggots of new life—
that the span from a seed to the echo of what does
not change— is unbearable.

Originally published in *Orion Magazine*

Horseshoe Crab Fandango

By Nancy Krim

Head to tail to back to belly, you begin...
 spin salt sand into shell. No one tells
 you, you just know skin hardens into what protects.
 Remember to lie low beneath the tidal surge,
 keep still, up to your slits in sand.

But always and inside in spite of you and your glossy shell,
 the body grows beyond its own protection.

Moon shifts, bulges on her axis.
 You awaken, short of breath:
 skin's too tight
 The skeleton you wear outside for armor
 binds the heart,
 constricts the lungs cramped stomach cries for air.
 After all that brave and dizzying spinning
 suddenly you cannot breathe to grow.
 How to leave what shields, the spikes that save,
 starting again over and over?

Shrinking is the only way at first:
 inside the softness of your body,
 the part that knows how to, flows, released.
 It's the sliding out that makes you cringe:
 what if the shell doesn't split with the press of your wanting?
 What if you don't know how to lift and bend?
 But it does, you do, you inch out raw,
 shed the whole of that other coating,
 the barnacled and the brittle parts:
 tendons of claws, membrane of ears...

And because you are sea-born sand-shifter,
 daughter of transformations,
 you recommence your wild, spinning fandango:
 hide, harden, sleep, grow, shrink,
 slide out into your most constant self,
 shedding the shell again and again and again.

Stone Love

By Joanna Clapps Herman

I search the river bed
Feeling for stones
Use only my toes

Curl my distal digits around
Pick them up with these unhands
Carry them with me

A punishment
For grief that,
Unworded cannot find tears.

This grief knows nothing
Recognizes nothing
Claims nothing
Is mute

I long for tears, but
I am uncreatured
A dull stone.

Call

By Alla Bozarth

*Inspired by "Mountain Moving Day," 1911,
by the Japanese Feminist Poet, Yosano Akiko.*

There is a new sound
of roaring voices
in the deep
and light-shattered
rushes in the heavens.

The mountains are coming alive,
the fire-kindled mountains,
moving again to reshape the earth.

It is we sleeping women,
waking up in a darkened world,
cutting the chains from off our bodies
with our teeth, stretching our lives
over the slow earth—

Seeing, moving, breathing in
the vigor that commands us
to make all things new.

It has been said that while the women sleep,
the earth shall sleep—
But listen! We are waking up and rising,
and soon our sisters will know their strength.

The earth-moving day is here.
We women wake to move in fire.
The earth shall be remade.

Womanpriest: A Personal Odyssey by Alla Bozarth-Campbell, first edition Paulist Press 1978, New York, New York; revised edition Luramedia 1988, San Diego, California, distributed by bearblessings.com; and *Stars in Your Bones: Emerging Signposts on Our Spiritual Journeys* by Alla Bozarth, Julia Barkley and Terri Hawthorne, North star Press of St. Cloud 1990, St. Cloud, Minnesota; and on the audiocassette, *Water Women*, Wisdom House 1990, Sandy, Oregon. "Call" was put to music by internationally renowned composer, Joan Szymko, and premiered in Fall of 1997, and reprised as the feature piece for the 2015 International Women's Day spring concert, "Dare to Be Powerful," by Aurora Chorus in Portland, Oregon.

Psalm of Fire and Water

By *Cristina Baptista*

“[Christ’s] mother gave birth to him without ever having loved.
She wasn’t a woman: she was a suitcase.”

~Fernando Pessoa (as Alberto Caeiro), *The Keeper of Sheep*~

There’s a martyr in my mind.

She will not rest until the ash is cool, the burning done.
How we fill our hands means everything:

the same fingers that pull triggers pass
through rosary beads. Not every gun uses bullets,
but the target always traces back

to what we were even before language put us there.
The ripeness of things was always my undoing,
a draped coat without putting my arms

through the sleeves. Papa called me reckless:
I was just careful not to be caught
in things unworthy of the time it takes to unravel

and repel. I wanted to be free to touch anything within reach,
with every finger, with arms ready, sleeves rolled.
In Portuguese card games,

Jacks are worth more than Queens—
which tells you everything you need to know
about what we think of our women.

All women carry light as kindling,
all daughters of Lucifer,
if not lucifers themselves—by necessity.

The Portuguese language comes from “Vulgar Latin.”
All I wanted was for my father to say “you’re pretty.”
It made no difference—in his tongue or mine.

The silences are abacus beads, moments tallied
to give shape and texture.
Instead, Papa said, “it’s too bad you look like me.”

I want others to mistake me.
My eyes can be everywhere: I can be Queen of Spades,

another brain where feet remain—a ruse—

and I will not stop my digging.

I want to fill these hands with something.

Do not be mistaken:

even water, and its perpetual beating,

can coax a new color out of rock,

can learn to love this new form, the flame.

Women's Work

By Jude Rittenhouse

I am ironing.
Mother said that, when I was a baby,
I watched her iron. Hour
after hour. In the 1950's, women
pressed dresses, napkins, stacks
of men's white shirts, even sheets. My eyes
followed her hands, back and forth, endlessly
smoothing life's wrinkles and creases.
All of my adult life, I have hated ironing. Now,

I am ironing.
Another woman friend has learned:
cancer. The fifth in a steady stream, as if a dam
above us no longer holds back anything.
As if birthing, washing, stroking, hoping,
smoothing, folding, healing, holding
and unceasing releasing
have worn out something. Have used up
the last of our magic.

I am ironing.
Back and forth with a vengeance. Pushing
down hard. Concentrating beyond damp cotton,
beneath where hands can feel or eyes can see.
Pressing toward what women
have known and done
for centuries of centuries: making
miracles. Smoothing mistakes. Starting
again. Creating.

Doors

By Dawn Banghart

Each morning can start different or like this.
Each morning can be an open door.
Forget the coffee, forget the shower
if you could forget responsibilities right now
where would you go after tugging open the door?
Nothing is needed, not even your shoes
leave them, laces untied, lights off.
Outdoors you will find a predawn sky
a faint brightness in the east
with one airplane coming or going.
Imagine where you want to be right now.
Imagine a doorless place, or a place with doors.
Now imagine walking back through your door
choosing your life.

Patience

By Mary Elise Bailey

from "Songs for Spring"

I curl around the bulb
of a strange blue flower,
its nascent lines, in darker
blues, delphic and hidden,
like a cross between a wish

and a map no one can read.
I wait for the leftover snow
to melt, last year's grass, still
tinted green. I wait for the lines
to reveal their intentions,

to thicken, to ripen,
as the ground slowly unfolds
its inventions: the dark-stricken
things--ugly, persistent--
each one, a question.

I understand uncertainty
better than I used to—
the insides of branches,
of bud and tree bark, of colors —
unwilling to break open.

Mine is a steady and a lower
voice now, a series of notes
answering the pink of the wild
geranium, the frail, furtive edges
of its still-curved leaves.

Sleeping Under Snow

By Susan Austin

The gate is open
so do what you may.
All I ask:
leave what remains wild wild.
Be kind to the thistle.

Of all the lotus flowers raining
upon the Buddha that day,
all the bodhisattvas—
there must have been a weed or two.

I feel 10,000 years old.
I give back all your wars.
As for mine, it was futile
trying to out-swim a tsunami.

Virginia, I put riverstones in my coat pockets.

Given wholly to the freezing river,
my burden sinking, arms wide
as if ecstatic prayer—the coat
slips willingly below the ice.

Dog panting. Crackling cold wind.
All the obvious

then this: the heartbeat
of a sage hen sleeping under snow.

The Last I Saw Mitsou

By Karin Cecile Davidson

The last time I saw Mitsou, she was crying into an embroidered handkerchief that belonged to my mother. Mother believed in things that lasted. Linen, perfume, clothbound books.

Newlyweds, Mitsou and I lived in the fifth-floor walkup. Small rooms with enormous views. Below us, the courtyard, mottled with pale brown stones. Our windows faced the pianist, swaying over his black-and-ivory keys, the small child, her mouth wide for porridge, and the old man, alone except for a stuttering television.

Three months into our marriage, the books appeared in corners of the courtyard. Poetry in flowerpots, nursery rhymes tucked under drainpipes, thin historical volumes near ash cans. Mitsou proposed they had been left for a reason. She turned their pages, sighing, and placed them gently back into their niches and nooks. Wistful, she recalled her father's print shop, the tinny odor of ink, the shudder of the presses. Her childhood was spare, while mine was ample. She had only her father; I had mostly my mother. I wanted to ask about the illustrated cookbooks she'd found after he'd disappeared, but I couldn't find the words.

Soon after, the novels appeared. Malraux, Genet, Zola. Flaubert, Proust, Voltaire. Stacked like bricks in the courtyard entrance, preventing passage so that we had to use the main doors. Coming and going lost meaning, defined now by the dark hallway lined with mailboxes that no longer received letters, only literary reviews.

Mother called. "The wedding, the wedding, the wedding," she shouted. "So glorious, glorious, glorious!"

Mitsou nodded, as I held the receiver away from my ear.

"I'm coming by train, train, train. Thursday next, at seize heures!"

"We'll be there to meet you," I promised.

"*You'll be there*," Mitsou said. "I'll be here, preparing the trout for dinner. Meunière or Amondine?"

Thursday came. Mitsou set down the platter of sautéed trout, golden, scattered with splintered almonds.

"Lovely fish, fish, fish!" my mother said.

"Merci," Mitsou replied.

Mother had brought presents. "Things you might need, need, need." Repoussé butter knives, damask napkins. "You certainly don't need anything to read, read, read." Her voice flew out the open windows.

The courtyard filled with evening sounds. The child, having her bath and singing sweetly. The old man, watching Jean-Paul Belmondo films, a tall bottle of beer beside him. The pianist, leaning over Chopin's Prelude, Opus 28, # 4 in E minor.

Mother and Mitsou stood at the window, whispering of fathers, fish, and faraway things. "So strange, strange, strange," Mother said, pointing to the book-studded doorway.

Early next morning Mother opened a transom in the crowded passageway. She'd extracted *Germinal*, a rough red *Candide*, *Madame Bovary*—moth-eaten, unbound—and a tattered *Time Regained*.

“It’s very sad, sad, sad!” she cried up to our window. “Where, where, where are the cookery books?”

Weeping, Mitsou ran downstairs to Mother, who handed her the kerchief from inside her sleeve. Mother pointed to the gap, narrow and bright, and that was the last I saw my Mitsou, climbing through to the other side.

“The Last I Saw Mitsou” was first published in *Post Road, Guest Folio*, no. 25, 2013.

On the Need to Re-establish Sovereignty Over My Own Heart*By Trina Porte*

because the city machines hum even if they do not sing
because the heart is actually made of muscle
because the silver in my hair will one day be spent
because the sun will rise on the day i am no longer married
 just as it will each day after

Rebuilding the '63 Beetle

By Nancy Krim

The engine needs rebuilding he said
and she said I'll do it.
But what about the camshaft?
She said I can see it slipping there,
sliding against the pulley
I can see where the problem is.
He said *you'll never get it down*
off the blocks to tow it,
you won't know where to order parts,
how to disassemble—
I know all about disassembling, she said.
I've done it all my life.
And what I really know is auto mechanics.
I have my father's hands
and this is a pre-electronic car,
runs on leaded fuel,
heats up on pure exhaust.
I know how to jack it up, ease it down,
pump the tires,
charge the battery,
lubricate the plugs and points.
I know a ratchet from an Allen wrench,
generator from ignition coil.
I don't mind grease under my nails
and I have more time
than you can possibly imagine.
I put the first mile on the odometer without you
and I will be the one at the wheel for the last.
I won't fix it quick and
I won't fix it quiet,
But I will fix it, she said.

There Was a Door

By Leatha Kendrick

There was a door and her hand
 on its lever. In too many clothes –
 her coat's wide cape collar,
 her high button shoes, a bonnet
 heavy and huge whose beruffled
 lining frames a thin face. Enough to smother a watcher.

For more than a century
 she's stood, not going through.
 Was she leaving or coming home?
 Time has carried her cheekbones
 into our Susie. Susie running
 morning and evening,
 as soon as she stood up to walk, she was
 running. I cannot imagine her

stopped so long in a doorway
 in a browned bonnet, feet stilled
 and buttoned, though the lattice
 my grandmother stands at is the same
 lattice on Susie's gate in Virginia.
 Who made this photo? Maybe the door
 isn't a door, though the ground's gritted
 as if she were leaving a garden.

What do I have to say today?
 Only Oh and Oh and Oh
 let me cross my own boundary
 open the door –

or shut it if that's what it takes
 to keep the dark out a while.
 Only a while, long enough

to open light's letter, to read
 the familial hand that is my hand
 open to draw me into the courtyard
 out to the road.

There was a door to the river
 I never lived beside – a door
 on its changing shoreline, its shining.
 My hand on the lever.

Previously published in her 2020 book, *And Luckier*

Selkie

By Sandra Cross

To earn my way to the beach
I have to make it through the back yard
past nodding buds of sour-grass
their white corms underground
waiting to be next spring's weeds.

Past the choking pepper tree
its bark sliced by narrow wire
golden sap marking a slow trail
down its trunk, past the Azalea.
smothered by sweet woodruff.

Past a gopher proof hole waiting
to be dug for the lavender rhododendron
struggling against its black plastic pot. Past
three fallow vegetable bins, past spreading
dandelions, and the ringing bells of wild

onions, past the rain slick pile of rotted weeds
the bin of well wormed kitchen debris, all
waiting for me. Waiting for me, so we can eat
zucchinis tomatoes, artichokes, it all waits
for me to clean and dig and hoe and plant.

Past this busyness, past tasks that
shaped my green life, and cycle still through
my kitchen, through these fingers that grow
old, stiffened by claims of others. My children
grown. Their own on the way. I live now
in my own imagined future.

And finally, the gate, across the road, across
the bridge. The creek running high, pressured
by rain to run to the sea, then between the
dunes - the beach at low tide, the ocean
like a meditation, calling. There is nothing
here I must do. Sandpipers scatter
when I come near
a seal head rises between the waves.

The Potential of Yellow Roses

By Susan J. Erickson

I spent my formative years leading fish to water.
 I heard my mother thinking, *You are not living*
up to your potential. Then I was struck by static electricity
 and took up yoga. The yoga teacher said,
Open toes, open mind. I opened my toes. My horoscope
 this morning announced that in a ten-minute conversation
 between strangers an average of three lies are told.
 If you and I are not strangers, not average,
 what happens? Lie-wise, I mean. Today is the summer solstice.
 Given a trellis, the rose at the front door has hundreds
 of blooms. For years, not recognizing its potential, I treated
 it as a bush, pruning its canes like an ikebana student.
 Less being less, it rarely bloomed. For one yellow rose who expects
 a blue ribbon? I did get one for a crocheted potholder
 at the county fair when I was twelve. Oh, maybe it was red—
 the ribbon I mean, not the rose.
 Tomorrow, like Frida, I'll wear yellow roses in my hair. The thorns
 will comfort, like a friend who does not lie.

Originally published in *Sweet Tree Review*

Adie

By Jay Merrill

I was staring at this peach on the fruit stall but not because I wanted to eat it. Well, maybe I did a little bit but I never had any money on me at the time. I felt in my pockets and as usual, they were empty. You know something, I've never eaten a peach before in my life. How sad is that? Makes me feel like a fool.

But I should be saying who I am. My name's Adie and I live, well let's just say somewhere near the River. I've got a nice little tucked-away spot off the Strand but I'm keeping the whereabouts to myself or I'll soon have unwanted company.

The peachskin looked dry and furry, mauvy-pink on one side and a bit yellowy on the other. Then all at once a shadow fell over the mauve half, and this was because the afternoon was getting on and the shadow was where the awning of the stall came to.

That's just like the world, I thought. Night and day in two different places at the same time. And the shaded part got darker as though it was past midnight on that side, and the other part got more sunny. And then I don't know what came over me. Without even looking to see if anybody was watching I leaned over, grabbed the peach and walked away. Nobody called out so I was lucky. I felt excited about finding out what a peach tasted like at last. Then you know what, I couldn't eat it.

I kept the peach in my pocket. After a few weeks had gone by it got all dry and wrinkled and I thought, this is what happens to a person too when they get old. So I took the peach down to the gardens by the River. It was a warm evening for November and I buried the peach in one of the flowerbeds. And I felt good about that. Like I'd planted something and added to the universe, you know. Maybe a peach-tree would grow and in years to come people would look at it and admire it. But also it seemed like the right thing to do as the peach looked dead now and when people die they get buried, as do animals. So why not a peach I thought. As it had been alive once, just the same.

Didn't say a prayer or anything as I'm not religious really. But, well I did get this funny feeling. As though we on earth were all connected, and like each one of us was part of this vast cosmic spirit or something. I don't know. Strange though, if it wasn't for the peach I'd never have thought of all this. But it was just my mood I guess.

I sat by the earthy patch for some time then set off home, going straight along by the River and turning inwards. Night had come fast. There was a sharp wind blowing.

First published in the Big Issue

Woman of Myriad Seeds

By Margaret Stetler

She has seeds she has given away
that are worth nothing.
She says they are wild and rare.
She has seeds and doesn't know
what flower they came from.
She says they are exotic seeds.
She has seeds she wanted to plant,
but didn't.
She has seeds she planted
that shed their skins
and rotted underground.
She has seeds so tiny, they slip
through her fingers before
she can plant them.
She has seeds so tough,
they can't open out of themselves.
She has white seeds her mother gave her
that are really salt.
Her mother said they would yield
a salve for wounds.
She has black seeds her father gave her
that are hard tacks.
He said it was better to hold a life together
than to grow.
She gave her daughter seeds that split open
and grew in air.
She gave her son seeds he spilled
on the ground.
They grew into two thorn bushes
she could not tend.
She gave her husband seeds that looked
like pearls to pay the rent.
He planted them by the roadside
where they came up weeds.
She gave him the seeds of the weeds
to pay the rent.
She has seeds that are small and round
and shiny, and inside them are more seeds,
and inside them, more seeds.
She has one lopsided seed she has carried
in her apron pocket for forty years.
It is waiting to grow
into her life.

She Let Herself Go

By George Ella Lyon

1.

She let herself go soft fat sexual She let herself go to the library to college to extremes She let herself go wild and gray and all the way She let herself go deep go alone go sane She let herself stay She let herself abide by her own rules She let herself out She let herself in Let herself in for it She put down her mask She held out her arms She let herself go

2.

She let herself go far go ahead go overboard without saying without apology without She undid her bra peeled off her hose let herself breathe She let herself fill up with air no matter who was threatened by the swell of her belly She let herself go around with her own face no foundation concealer minimizer She let herself be She left dishes in the sink dust furring Great Aunt Sudie's breakfront Seeing her neighbors' manicured lawn, she thought Don't they have anything to read?

3.

She let herself have her limits her bad points her life She discovered she was Some Body not just Any Body not an object of fashion fantasy failure But a woman -- not a doll cellophane-worshipped flung to the back of the closet purchased to be perfect forgotten under the bed And she let herself change things besides diapers what's in the refrigerator the state of the floor She changed She made change She thought of herself for a change She let herself flow and there were stains and cramps and shit and shouting in driveways and walking out fear grinding the guts tears tearing down the freeway the free way

4.

Letting herself go and come She came to the end of her rope and hung on though she'd learned to let go till her numb hand sprung and she fell backward turning over and almost inside out landing in the pit of grief the lap of light open mouth wailing open arms welcoming smashed by the rock soothed by the rocking She's through! She's through! Into the abyss Into bliss a twist at the end of the road a translation dark night become the radiant way She let herself go.

How will you begin?*By Barbara Rockman****How will you begin?***

I transport the spider to the night doormat
 Shriveled in white cloth
 a dropped inkblot does not open
 My dog studies the Dipper's spill of tempting morsels
 These will fill the page

And what do you know of dismemberment?

A cobalt cat slouches my path wary this way and that
 This feline fears her prize be snatched
 Between teeth: newborn squirrel hare prairie rat?
 Half a body droops to asphalt Half flails skyward

My birdbath floats entrails feather rib fur
 Meat for one Betrayal for another

I tug the dog from a scatter of rabbit parts spine stripped to casing paws blood-stuck
 to pavement and a frayed skull ball tail like milkweed blown to gutter How I
 want to heft that comfort *Walk on* I say and we obey

By the storefront beside windowed dispensers that require coin for news
 in coo and refuse trash and elm litter: a black bird wing
 ripped and spit back to cement overhung with pigeon shit

Where fled the cripple? where the bloated predator?
 Is one wing sour the other sweet? and why no pastoral resting place?
 The opened door lifts the filthy wing tip sighs shut

Once a one-winged butterfly saved in a glass bowl
 Once both hands worked equally shadow bird on a child's wall

How will you live now?

Seeding grass Splitting open a fresh
 volume of poems Listing what is and is not
 to be eaten spoken of forgiven or believed

Behind a long window sheer drape pulled
 to let what light ekes in avail the face
 Salt wind arms extended

(questions from "The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers," by Bhanu Kapil)

The Beginner

By Janet Fitch

She pulled her chair up to the table and sat. She piled her chips by her elbow. She played Noir. She played Rouge. She put a stack on 9 and lost. The table was hot. The table went cold. She anted. She passed. She called. She held pairs. She lay down with a flourish a grand royal flush. She played games she didn't know the rules for, where things shook and jingled and smacked down hard. Men with snap-fronted shirts coached her. Men in tinted glasses sneered. Fingers moved across the table and took her chips, or brought more. This was what it was to be 23. 24. 25. You pulled up to the table. You didn't know what you were doing, but you began to play. You learned as you lost. You lost, sometimes you won, but there was no saying, really, why, or when.

Some of her friends preferred not to take their places at the table. Too risky they said. They moved back home, where they would stay through their thirties, into their forties. They dated a little but not much. They ate wisely. They went to the movies for the six o'clock show. They had a single glass of wine. Olive oil. Yoga, sunscreen. They felt themselves canny, to have avoided the whole thing.

For her, it wasn't enough. She had to pull up to the table and play. She had to try. She had to fail, fail outright, to know what that felt like, it was important, to taste it, to play the game they were playing, if it was Texas Hold 'Em or Pai Gow or blackjack. It was her time at the table. She pulled up a chair. Her cards set before her. She picked them up, sorted them as best she could, anted up, began.

Writing the Dress

By Barbara Rockman

“I have written up and down my sleeves,” she cried.

“It begins at my wrist, saddens at the elbow, but the upper arm is where rain lifts and,”

she sang out from the far end of the hall,

“At the shoulder, birds flock from the island, the lighthouse lit to make wings whiten and silver. Across the collar, she and the birds and the drove of bleating outrace wolves. But mama,”

she bellowed, “the hero is me.” She braked at the kitchen door.

Her mother, whipping something thick with a wooden spoon, had sifted and cracked when the girl’s voice stopped her spattered arm mid-stroke.

Excitable, she thought, this girl so full of letters, and then sentences, and now a whole story: what the girl had been after, caught at last. On her dress no less.

The girl came to stand beside her.

“The finishing part goes down the other sleeve.”

She had used both hands to write it, wore the frock loosely, could tug either cuff over her hands, both bloodied with ink.

“When the bridge is crossed, the sheep follow her, which is me.”

She shook with excitement.

“My sheep! There’s a steep hill. We must go carefully (oh so!) down a path to the sea.”

It was the sea she wanted, the bodice, shell-flecked and the dirndl and sash smelling of salt and fish.

Down her words clattered and laddered up and over, through sea grass and rickety wood walkways and tide whorls.

“It ends there,” she said, offering her inked wrist.

Her breathless chest, her outstretched story, crashed toward her mother’s spoon.

She licked batter into which the mother had added berries. Rose cheeked, licked, swallowed, and threw her arms out,

twirled round the table so her mother could read her from wrist to elbow, elbow to neck, and down the other side where the story grew sad

and then wasn't. When the sheep stumbled, the story girl sang out comfort

"the rain will wait will wait rain will wait."

When the tip of the sleeve met her wrist, she'd become

flock, drove, trampled fence rail, mud paths sucked down. She was

pounded grass and the wild-eyed animals, hard sand they'd reached, panting.

"The End."

A fine dress, a wide skirted dress, its hem coming unstitched.

"Twirl and tell a tale," the girl sang, "twirl and tell the sheep story."

It had been the mother's summer dress as a girl. She added sleeves so the child in this northern place might be warm. She had not imagined what would come of them.