



“Queen Without a Face,” *image by Montequi Pope-Le Beau*

VERDAD JUSTICIA AMOR

Before I answer your questions, I'm going to ask you to answer a question . . . And that was the question that came out of my reading of A Room of One's Own in which Virginia Woolf says, "Don't write protest." The woman writer should not write protest. Okay, so what does she mean? And the question I asked was "How can a woman of the American Empire not write protest?"

---Maxine Hong Kingston

*On every given morning
Women's prayers dam the waters of history.*

---Sarah Black

*All the wombs claimed for war's offspring.
All the mothers left enraged, bereft.*

---Leatha Kendrick

*What do you mean you're queer? You're dating a man!
What do you mean you're Puerto Rican? You're so polite.
What do you mean you're a woman? I can't seem to keep you down.*

---Vero Gonzalez

Abnegation

By Cynthia Reeser

That it should not be mine, or yours, or yours. Denial becomes a habit. Some get used to hearing *no*, expect nothing more.

It says: you can't have it, you can't do it, it's not good enough, you can do better, or wait, no you can't. It says: you have to be chosen. It says: (regardless of merit).

Aunt Jemima, Eleanor Bumpers, and Sandra Bland

By Breena Clarke

“Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show” by Breena Clarke and Glenda Dickerson[1]

Frankly, I never thought I’d be updating “Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show” or even seriously reconsidering it. I had not read it in at least ten years if not longer. Written more than twenty-five years ago, the play contains topical references that I thought might seem stale to me. In pondering what to explore at the AROHO (A Room Of Her Own) Retreat 2015 for the WAVES discussions, this work just popped into my head. “Writing Against The Current”, our discussion theme, seemed to fit. I’d always felt that Glenda Dickerson and I had, in writing “Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show,” sort of flung ourselves at notions of racial propriety. We had not wanted to write a domestic drama full of polite insistence that black people are worthy of Western civilization. We had wanted to confront the popular culture of negative images of Black Women in messy confrontational language.

My sister and fellow workshop leader, Cheryl Clarke, agreed. “Time to look at that play again,” she said.

“Only the black woman can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.’” - Anna Julia Cooper [2]



Anna Julia Cooper

When Anna Julia Cooper spoke those inflammatory though seemingly mild words in 1886 in one of her best known speeches she was just two years out of Oberlin College and not yet thirty years old. The exclusively male, black clergy of the Protestant Episcopal Church she spoke before must have nearly fallen out at her audacity, as well as, been persuaded by her ladylike demeanor. The fin de siècle organizations that came to be called The Black Women’s Club movement had guiding principles which held that if the Black Woman could uphold dictates of proper behavior, maintain her domestic sphere and educate her children, she would be the best instrument to deliver her people into mainstream American life, i.e. freedom and full access.

But it was exactly Cooper’s narrowly defined concept of female propriety that *Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show* was meant to take on.

Menstrual/True Woman 1: Ladies, shall we step next door and sample Aunt Jemima’s temptalatin’ comestibles

Menstrual/Ann Julia: Compositively-trary not! I would rather leave public life.

Menstrual/True Woman 2: When Aunt Jemima laid eyes on the speechifyer seemed like to her it was the little girl who risked all to earn to read.

Aunt Jemima: Anna, Anna child, is that you?

Menstrual/Anna Julia: Oh, Mammy, all through the darkest period of the colored woman's oppression in this country, a period full of heroic struggle, a struggle against fearful and overwhelming odds that often ended in a horrible death, I have prayed to once again see your greasy face.

Menstrual: And so Aunt Jemima is reunited with her daughter, Anna Julia, who was a founding member of the National Association of Colored Women and a proponent of the tenets of the cult of true womanhood.

The reality was that the opportunity for the Black/Colored woman to care for herself, her household, to raise and educate her children was, despite her determination and fortitude, a nearly unattainable goal in the post-Civil War/Early 20th century era. State sanctioned obstacles to full access and opportunity were and still are designed to thwart her efforts.

I wrote *Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show* with the late Glenda Dickerson (1945 – 2012) in the very early 1990's. Glenda Dickerson and I seized on the iconography of Aunt Jemima, the oldest and most well-known advertising symbol in American material culture because she embodied all of the elements that we'd been taught to despise. We decided also to use a disreputable form of popular entertainment – the Minstrel Show, an enduring theatrical invention of Northern imitators of Southern plantation performers – as our theatrical stylistic framework. Minstrelsy, developed in the 19th century and organized as a three-part variety show, was a style based solely on exploiting gross racial stereotypes for laughs. We chose this convention as the basis for our look at Aunt Jemima. For a fuller discussion of the Minstrel Show, see *African American Theater: A Cultural Companion* by Glenda Dickerson.
<http://bit.ly/1Mzwk7k>

“In the US, the minstrel shows began with working-class white men dressing up as plantation slaves. White performers blackened their faces with burnt cork or greasepaint and performed songs and skits that mocked enslaved Africans.” [3]

This quote is from our playwright's notes that accompanied *Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show*, as published in “Colored Contradictions,”[4] edited by Elam and Alexander:

Contemporary Black women are all but invisible in a popular culture and society which fears and loathes us unless we can be fitted comfortably into a recognizable stereotype: the Mammy, the Sapphire, the Jezebel, the Tragic Mulatta. The playwrights chose to use the minstrel format and its most potent device – innovative word play such as malapropisms, puns, conundrums, and double entendre - in an attempt to write Black female identity into existence on the world stage. Thus, this postmodern Menstrual Show is created to provide a “place” or context for the latter-day African-American woman performer.

One of the chief intentions in writing the play was also to create a critical number of challenging character roles for African American women performers. Eleanor Bumpurs, a Black woman murdered by the police in 1984 became, in our play, Aunt Jemima's doppelganger. Tawanna Brawley, Anita Hill, Anna Julia Cooper and others became her daughters.



Eleanor Bumpurs

Aunt Jemima, advertising icon

The climax of *Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show* is the death of Aunt Jemima in her Eleanor Bumpurs persona at the hands of a policeman. Eleanor Bumpurs, a mentally ill, arthritic and elderly African American woman was shot and killed on October 29, 1984 by New York City policeman, Stephen Sullivan. The police were present that day to enforce a city ordered eviction of Bumpurs from her apartment in the Bronx for failure to pay four months past due on her monthly rent of \$98.65. Housing authority workers told police that Bumpurs was emotionally disturbed, had threatened to throw boiling lye and was using a knife to resist eviction. When Bumpurs refused to open the door, police broke in. In the struggle to subdue her, one officer shot Bumpurs twice with a 12-gauge shotgun.

Glenda Dickerson and I started writing *Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show* by beginning to ponder the imagistic details of the Bumpurs case. Why hadn't this Sullivan guy - the cop who shot her - seen her as we saw her, as her family saw her and as the man across the hall who said he was looking out his peephole and saw her naked body in the hallway for a long time saw her? No respect — no respect for the big, black body naked and dead and on display. Hours later they covered her with a sheet before taking her away to the morgue, but left part of her blasted finger on the floor for her daughter to find.

Menstrual: After her long faithful years of service, the food inspectors came to evict Aunt Jemima from the pancake box.

Menstrual: She was sixty-six years old and weighed three hundred pounds. She had arthritis, high blood pressure and diabetes.

Menstrual: The cops said she shouted that she would kill anybody who tried to evict her.

Aunt Jemima (singing)

IT'S GODDAMN SHAME

WHAT THEY DO TO ME

WHAT WILL IT TAKE

TO SET ME FREE?

GODDAMN, GODDAMN!

IT'S A GODDAMN SHAME

WHAT THEY DO TO ME

WHAT WILL IT TAKE

TO SET ME FREE

Aunt Jemima: Ah'm a free Black woman. Here is my free papers dat ah carries in my shoe.

Menstrual: They said she charged at them with a ten-inch knife. Her right hand was blown away by the first shot. She looked surprised.

Menstrual: The second shot blew a hole in her chest. She fell back into the kitchen and bled profusely.

These lines became the nucleus of the play. These were the facts of the case as reported in the papers:

The cops said she shouted

She would kill anybody who tried to evict her.

They said she charged at them with a ten-inch knife.

Her right hand was blown away

That was by the first shot.

She looked surprised.

The second shot blew a hole

in her chest.

She fell back into the kitchen

She bled profusely.

I continue to be affected by the facts of this killing. Glenda Dickerson and I vowed to always remember this woman and her death. Why? Part of it was a vow to myself never to be the kind of daughter who let her mother fall into the slurry Eleanor Bumpurs was mired in. Partly because I know, as surely as I know my own name, that racism killed her. Seeing the experiences of Black women through this lens meant looking at complex issues of color, self-esteem, sexual violence and parental abuse. In mounting *Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show* Glenda and I asked questions about the notion of propriety. What should and shouldn't be said on a stage? Certainly talking about menstruation was, and still, is a no-no. Talking about Aunt Jemima,

nappy hair and miscegenation? We seemed to be spoiling for a fight. And talking about women's anger and frustration is never welcomed.

Tiny Desiree: At least I ain't like Sapphire. I can't stand that evil, treacherous, bitchy, stubborn thing. I ain't nothin' like Sapphire. I is the Anita-thisis of Sapphire

Sapphire: I ain't none of those things folks call me. I just ain't afraid to express my bitterness, anger, and rage about my lot.

Sandra Bland, the young African American woman who recently was arrested by police in Texas and later found dead in a jail cell, clearly is a daughter of Aunt Jemima, too. I understand her to have been oppressed by a twenty-first century version of The Sapphire/Angry Black Woman stereotype. She was not polite enough or careful enough to put out her cigarette and act deferential to the State Trooper who profiled her and pulled her over. He needed Aunt Jemima's smiling face and Sandra Bland wasn't giving it. A new, revised and updated *Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show* must speak to roadside jeopardy at the hands of the police and should include the many disappeared Native American women traveling and being lost along the highways in Canada and the mind-boggling tortures of Dalit women that I've only, in recent years, become aware of. Aunt Jemima's endangered daughters are everywhere around the globe.

It's Aunt Jemima's damnable grin. We're not supposed to ever show anger and dismay. Don't you dare say about Sandra Bland that, "She shouldn't have been so sassy – so angry." Sandra Bland had an ordinary brown-skinned face like my sisters and me. I'm nervous for my sisters. Will they scowl at some cop and raise his ire?



Sandra Bland



Breana Clarke

Notion confirmed: They don't see you as you see yourself, as you feel yourself to be. If the other tells you your face is angrily fixed, then it will not matter how you feel inside. We've worn masks for so long and they've been trained to not look. I'm beginning to think our actual faces are unrecognizable to the mainstream lookers. They know us by some disreputable ideas of animal/wildness/non-humanity - like the scowl of some fierce beast. It is the photo they will always choose to illustrate you – your face caught in a fierce, unattractive grimace, an expression that is emblematic of what they imagine is your justifiably deep rage. Or by that damnable pancake grin of Aunt Jemima's.

"Pancakes from the good, ole days!"

And Aunt Jemima with her permanently fixed, broad, ingratiating grin is still a most comforting and enduring image of Black women for many whites. In *Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show*, Glenda and I endeavored to actually disassemble the iconic image and restore her in a more complex collage of ideas/attributes.

WE ARE HERE TO PERFORM AN ACT OF MAGIC.
WE ARE HERE TO PERFORM AN ACT OF MAGIC.
WE'RE GOING TO WEAR THE MASK OF THE JOLLY MAMMY
PITCH OURSELVES OFF THE PANCAKE BOX
WERE GOING TO FIND OURSELVES,
LOVE OURSELVES
IN THE BIG, FAT MAMMY OF LIES.
OH, MAMMY, DON'T YOU KNOW
WE'LL RESCUE YOU WITH MAGIC
DON'T YOU KNOW WE'LL SALVAGE YOUR BAD NAME?
WHO DO WE HATE?
LET'S PULL OURSELVES TOGETHER
WHY DO WE HATE?
LET'S GIVE IT ONE MORE TRY
WE'RE GOING TO PULL OURSELVES TOGETHER
AND NOT HATE OURSELVES
PULL OURSELVES TOGETHER
SO WE'LL FEEL ALRIGHT
WE ARE HERE TO PERFORM AN ACT OF MAGIC
AN ACT OF MAGIC TO PERFORM

What makes the Aunt Jemima stereotype so hateful? That is one of the central questions we posed with our play. We decided that the bravest thing to do would be to take on the stereotype, tear it apart, examine it and put her back together as the archetype she originally was. In doing so, we proposed to rescue our foremothers from the stereotyping that makes us face our mirrors with fear. In celebrating the character and person of Aunt Jemima we did not condone the stereotype as she had been used to oppress African-American women; rather we acknowledged the shame we felt at the sight of her, at the sound of her name. We acknowledged her as the symbol and the repository of the shame, disease and self-hatred from which we wished to free ourselves.

Production history: *Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show* was first performed as a work-in-progress in January, 1992 at the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre in San Francisco, California. It has been performed as a staged reading at Newark Symphony Hall, Moe's Restaurant/Cabaret, and the National Black Arts Festival. It premiered at the National Black Arts Festival/Spelman College in Atlanta on 3–6 August 1994. Directed by Glenda Dickerson, the cast included Sandra Bowie, Stephanie Berry, Gwendolyn Nelson-Fleming and Gwendolyn Roberts-Frost. An excerpted version was published in *Women and Performance* Vol. 6, No. 1, 1993. (2005-06-28). *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color: An Anthology* (p. 50). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show is included in the anthology, “Contemporary Play By Women of Color: An Anthology, edited by Kathy Perkins and Roberta Uno, 1993 and “Colored Contradictions: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Plays,” edited by Harry J. Elam and Robert Alexander, 1996

[1] *Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show* is included in the anthology, “Contemporary Play By Women of Color: An Anthology, edited by Kathy Perkins and Roberta Uno, 1993 and “Colored Contradictions: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Plays,” edited by Harry J. Elam and Robert Alexander, 1996

[2] "Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race," later published as the first chapter of *Cooper's Voice from the South*

[3] *African American Theater: A Cultural Companion* by Glenda Dickerson, 2008

[4] *Colored Contradictions: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Plays*, edited by Harry J. Elam Jr. and Robert Alexander, 1996.

Power

By Susan Eisenberg

While her classmates cut in panels, bent pipe,
worked from blueprints, the black girl
ran for coffee, rustled stock, drilled
ceiling anchors by the mile, and swept
the shanty out; often worked alone. So,

when she was paired with a crackerjack
mechanic, a brother, and the foreman asked
how they'd like to disconnect
a transformer, high voltage, placing the cutters
in her palms, she leapt
like a racehorse out the starting gate.

The white boss walked them over to where the end
of cable lay in flaccid loop. Lifted it to show
the circle of fresh-cut copper, round
and wide-eyed as a shiny dollar coin: proof
power was dead. She was fired up.

But Omar, bless that man, had to teach.
They walked the length of the site
and back, retrieved his meter, as he explained
good practice: test equipment, take no one's word.

The meter buzzed: 480 live.

The two looked down; saw wet mud
beneath their boots. Looked up:
white faces — like in a postcard
from a lynching — gathered
on the ledge above
to watch.

The Summer Lolly

By Breena Clarke

Cleary took rooms in a cottage at the seaside. I was sick in the worst way since I heard what happened to the preacher woman. I cried, and he threatened me. He said he would leave me and, at first, I wished he would. But I beg him not to leave me off nowhere. He says, "Be a good, quiet, brave girl. I'ma take you for a turn by the sea."

Cleary ain't no weak man. He can walk in anywhere and tell 'em what he wants, and they better hurry to give it to him. They may look at him sideways when they see me, but they don't say a thing.

He bought me two new dresses after he shot that runaway and splattered the buckra's innards all over me. They's both nice, pretty-plain, gray-colored dresses. He bought me a white shift, too. He say to put it on when I undress and then come to him in bed so he can take it off. He like to command.

At the beach, in our rooms, in our lolly, I put that shift on and took it off four or five times a day. I went out to fetch crabs and oysters for our meals. I never eat so much or laugh so hard. I drink a lot. Cleary make me drink whiskey. I steal away and bathe in waves without my shift and the sea fingers me lovely, tiny grits of sand stick all over me.

I know right away I got a baby. We was three weeks down on the shore. My blood doesn't come, and I am swole. What he goin' to do when he find out? He told me don't make no babies. "I'll dump you," he say. It all up to Cleary anyway. He got the right to take me back to Woolfolk or even to kill me. I never seen him kill a woman. He only shot that bukra because he was going to throttle me.

If I run off from Cleary to save myself, it will be two of us to starve. I could do washing, but where I'ma lay myself down when my child wants to come? Where we going if Cleary don't keep us? When he mad, he say he send me back to Woolfolk. I look up under my lashes with my head down and he lif' my chin and brush his hand on my breasts, and he remember why he don't want to take me back. What happen when the Granny-woman say don't let him in that door? How I'm going to keep him from selling me and John to South? I'm calling him John. I don't care what Cleary call him! I'm calling him John.

Is my John going be like his Papa, like Cleary? Is his Papa going to make him free?

Stirring

By M. Nzadi Keita

“Being herself one of the first agents of the Underground Railroad,
[mother] was an untiring worker...”
Rosetta Douglass Sprague

By now their breath has thawed; they're drunk on sleep.
A trouser-wearing woman with one hand
just sits. Her mouth stays fixed on calling “Cille“--
her daughter's dead name rubbed to burlap strands.
A boy whose rough low singing charms the room
stands up but loses words to bless the food.
Some stare. Some cradle every taste. Some lean
too near the fire as I stir. One eats the steam.
This choir of beef and beans could harmonize
and banish what they thought would never die.
A bit of food and music is no cure
in truth, but what I cook into this stew
does make these shadows talk. They'll feel their new
selves catch and light; now, watch what black hands do.

Quiet 1 With Eyes

By M. Nzadi Keita

1. with eyes

My husband oversees the world up front
where all the parlor-talk
is Congress and North Star and Harper's

and what they Know is only what
they Read. When I pass, The Readers
squint into my mouth.
 with eyes
that you could use to sharpen something.

I watch him worry. watch
him when I raise my brow
watch his eyes burn off
my work scarf watch him whittle me
with the corner of his mouth
and blush as I go

up front
I am a curiosity. smoke.
hail, squawking. a twisted
sound out of place. like a goat
in the library. like a hammer
in a keyhole. like a riverbank
giving birth to a woman.

come where it is quiet come
through my house, to the back
where no one is afraid
of what I say.

out back in the garden
what I am teaching myself –
(the wild letters
I mark down with a stick)

don't concern the Parlor.
I stand at the door, black
flesh of little use to them.

Nothing here to buy. to Know. Nothing
here for barter. for bluster. Debate. They

have what they need. they have eaten.

Imagine: A Love Song

By Denise Miller

-for and "from" Sandra Bland

Imagine I am not fingernail
scrapings— imagine I

am not neck,
or vagina or legs—
Imagine I, am
not a knot.

Imagine you are not a toe
tag. Not rubber band that
encircles the right wrist.
Not a black hooded, zip—
up sweatshirt (cut) black—
Not black with white
lettering, blue jeans,
black— boxers (cut), two
black— shoes and two
black— socks.

Imagine you
are not tags

attached to both great
toes— ankles tied
together— a boy altered
by surgical
intervention— Imagine
you are not

a recovered bullet, metal jacketed
moderately deformed,
mushrooming

at the nose— Now "TR"

inscribed on its base

Imagine? Instead?—

We—

are not
kidney, or head, or hands.
Imagine we— are not
unremarkable, not— skin as
thin or disposable or
ordinary as a plastic garbage bag.

Imagine us not on display not
pathology
or pathologized

Imagine We—
backs, still
vertical— still alive.
Not

twisted until made lethal.

Making Waves in 1798

By Tammi Truax

“I can tell when Gaja smell water. Can read it in the way she move. This is way a’fore any water’s in sight. She get excited. It’s the only time that she take to walking at a fast clip. Mister like her to go fast.”

Solomon whispered as if Mister Owen was within earshot. “He think we travel too slow. Makes more money if we git places faster. But we like the slow walk.” He chuckled, then leaned back against a barn beam.

“Then we come to water. She’ll tear off the road to get to it. Makes master fume. Most the time no one see us, but sometimes a landowner makes a fuss that Mister has to settle up. I git yelled at from one or all of ‘em, but it does my heart good to see Gaja take her bath. It do.”

“First she look, sniffin’ it out, for anything in the water that might bother her. She take a sniff, then a taste. I think she know if it poison. Then, very slowly, she wades in, jus like the song. Dip her toes in. Then she gets in there and just goes to town. She snorts up water and sprays herself all over, getting good and clean in all her places. Makes all sorts of noises. Then she play, frolicking like a little lamb in spring. Swims a bit, seems like she know how.”

“I sing her the song. You know the one.”

Wade in the water

Wade in the water, children

Wade in the water

God’s gonna trouble the water

Gaja opened her eyes while Solomon sang to the stranger.

“Today’s real warm. I’s as dirty as her. Didn’t see any white folks round, so, know what I done? Took my clothes off and waded in the water too! Never seen Gaja so happy. Like near to drown me she was, and I’s worried what a farmer, or his wife, would feel need to do if they see’s nekkid negro bathing in they pond with an elephant. That was a good time, yes t’was.”

“When we’s done we’s minding the muck at the edge, I saw Mister standing up on a ridge watching us. When I couldn’t stop Gaja from flinging dirt all upon herself he git mad again. He know she like a pig that way. Some animals just need to cover theyselves with dirt after a bath. He know it, and know I can’t stop her none. He jus makes a big noise sometimes. That’s the way of it.”

“Well, this day Gaja lay in the dirt and roll herself ‘round. While she down there she thought to have a little nap. Ain’t no way to get her up once she down. Nothing I could do but lay down and have a little nap myself. Jus a’fore I closed my eyes I seen the master tear his hat off his head and throw it down in the dirt. Oh Lord, this a good day.”

102.

By M. Nzadi Keita

My mother washed your weekly pile of panties while pee tested her own body's drawstring with a faint touch, then a nudge. She wanted to get done, to skip the field. She wanted to play. After she hung your drawers up by the scant silk rim, made to catch your sweat, she dropped her head into a quiet she could own. This girl. Whom you called "Your Girl" or "Your Day Girl" depending on the company--when of course, she never was. Simply My Mother, before Marriage-and -Children Camp. You having a fancy moment, her having a nickel. Nobody looking with a tilted, preordained lens at a ten-year-old female, Negro, counting a times table. Wrapping a wish like a grace note, like a string around her thumb, a wish for wings. My mother squatted on the way home after her portion of 'yes, ma'am.' Before having to make rules and beds and trace the lines. She yanked her own grayish cotton drawers aside to water a slope of pine needles, far from your gaze. Far from the shade of your house.

Bulletin¹*By Cheryl Clarke*

Disguising her vigilance with passive stance, she read the bulletin stealthily, with some difficulty and great understanding.

The General will esteem it as a singular favor if you can apprehend a mulatto girl, servant and slave of Mrs. Washington, who eloped from this place yesterday. She may intend to the enemy. Her name is Charlotte but in all probability will change it. She is light-complected, about thirteen years of age, pert, and dressed in brown cloth westcoat and petticoat. Your falling upon some method of recovering her will accommodate Mrs. Washington and lay her under great obligation to you. A gentle reward will be given to any soldier or other who shall take her up.²

A spray of brown fluid splashed upon the publishing. She tore it down from its post and ground it into the dirt.

‘I bootblacked my face and hands
and any other parts that shows.
Ain’t answering to Charlotte, nigger,
nor no other name they give me.
I’m wearing a westcoat and pants,
left the petticoat in a cornfield.
I’m sixteen. Thirteen was a lie the owner
told the auctioneer.
I’m evil, mean, and will use my knife.
I dips snuff, chews tobacco, smokes a pipe.
Ain’t no son of Satan gon fall on me lessn
he want his tail curled.
Won’t be intendin tward no white folk
—all of ems enemies.
I’m headed West.
I’ll swim any river—maybe the Ohio—
follow any star.

¹ From Clarke, C. *The Days of Good Looks: Prose and Poetry, 1980-2005*, 289.

² Stockton, F. “Slaves of New Jersey,” in *Stories of New Jersey*. 1896. And whoever try to take me up may be ketchin his guts as he run.’

Terrible Fortune Inside My Head, Grenadine

By Lynne Thompson

inspired by Alison Saar's sculpture "Foundered"

...and my head lies, eternally, on its side, its
one unbound ear cocked to the wind (always
howling, racing away, exposed, expectant)

...and though my head is made of glass, nothing
could be less clear, caked with the dark world's
detritus: bone, tissue, links of chain, centuries

...and if my head is made of glass, it could not
be more clear-cut if only you would look closely:
above my throat, behind both occluded eyes

...if you look, you'll see the ship—its masts time-
worn, ragged—routes unremembered—(could it
be the unnamed slaver that ran aground at Spring?)

...and though my ancestors cannot tell me if its
provenance—its terrible fortune—is false or true,
the ship moans, unmoored, for all that's been lost

...my head sideways to history, my free ear tintin-
abulating old miseries of a terror that scored walls
in Elmina Castle & all the tortured shrieking inside...

And / Or / Against / For

By Vero Gonzalez

AND

1. Allows for contradictions: weak (emotional) and strong (in control of emotions), victim (defined by experiences) and survivor (defines own experiences), here (United States) and gone (Puerto Rico). Good Latina (quiet, submissive) and fierce feminist (vocal, empowered).
2. Encourages synthesis: *This plus this plus this*--no part of us excluded. Spanish (colonial heartsong) and English (colonial carnivore) and woman (colonized, so heartsick and hungry). Duck and duck and goose.
3. Codes language: It wasn't your fault *and* here's what you could have done to prevent it. *So it was my fault?* Of course not. It's just that you could have prevented it.

/OR

1. Binary thinking, the kind your therapist says you often show.
2. Either it was your fault or it was my fault.
3. *Por mi culpa, por mi culpa, por mi gran culpa.* [Beating your chest as you chant this in church, a new heartbeat: myFAULT, myFAULT, myFAULT.]
4. Implies choice, but also, that one must choose. Limited choices, limited by choices. [You can have a career or a family. You can have opinions or a man.]
5. What do you mean you're queer? You're dating a man!
What do you mean you're Puerto Rican? You're so polite.
What do you mean you're a woman? I can't seem to keep you down.

/AGAINST

1. You need to stop acting like the world is against you. Just because it's true doesn't mean you have to act like it's true.
2. Hold up a mirror as proof. After all, I'm still here.
3. Current: Stop fighting me. Stop struggling. Just let go. I know you want this. Me: *Just keep swimming, just keep swimming.* [Sing-song, like in the cartoon.] Don't let the current see you sweat.
4. Against my better judgement.
Against all judgement.
Against the odds.
Against the current.

/FOR

1. For the sake of thriving, not just surviving.
2. For the sake of living, not just breathing.
3. For the sake of all women--past, present, and future--even myself.
4. Maybe, especially, for myself.

The Weight of White*By Lorraine Meja*

He brought her to his orchard home
of white snow, holding her out
with pride so his family could see
her beauty. They only saw her accent,
saw through the bleached hair.
Woman with Aztec blood! Father
tried desperately to make them see.
In the farmhouse attic bedroom,
the grandfather clock
that used to rock him to sleep
now watched as she silently cried,
reapplied makeup so they wouldn't
know. Outside, snow softly fell,
covering their newlywed car
with the heavy weight of white.

The, a lyrical soliloquy

By Chiori Miyagawa

How can anyone read my chart
with either thirteen or fourteen-hour
differences, depending on when the
candies go on sale for Halloween?
Maybe fate just means chronology.
Or it's an April first joke or the second.
A man's name is a man's name,
it takes three generations to undo it.
I have a girl, she has a girl, and
fingers crossed, like that.
At some dinner, I overheard a
very smart librarian say *Asians seem
not to be able to use "the"
correctly. Must be cultural.* "I hate
the. I'll stop using it entirely,"
I said loudly. Biologist who sat between
us inspected his plate of tikka masala.
Recently, my Icelandic doctor looked at
me thoughtfully and said, "As we get
older, it gets more difficult for us, not
being from here." I was surprised by
his use of word *us*.

Diaspora

By Faith Holsaert

Our inheritance in the Diaspora is to live in this inexplicable space—Dionne Brand

if there was a curtain we didn't notice
 if there was something other than raspberries
 among dusty leaves we didn't see

we saw how the path wound up from the creek
 we knew we had to carry
 we knew the old man in the next town
 we knew our coats smelled of pear
 and our cat, we knew our cat

Maybe the portal was there all along
 when we ate ramen and watched TV
 not talking spent
 after we had danced

we are past the curtained gateway
 have passed through the membrane
 this end has lost the other end

we live where our memories can not
 except as clearwings in their brief season
 this is an inexplicable place

we had to leave our bundled words behind

the new discount words
 do not fit like our own
 can someone teach us to live here

an exile is not a guided tour
 the others we think are tourists

we grew on a soil
 that fed the eyes of potatoes
 that received our offered berries

Do not say we are
 this place where we have fallen

[diaspora, accepted by *potomac review* (spring 2017)]

You Are Migrant

By Katherine DiBella Seluja

which is to say

you are standing in a line
a very long line
you are grasping the fist of a child you do not know
you will not lose this child
you don't know where this line will lead you
but you know well what it took you from
you are from Syria, Tunisia, Mexico, Ukraine
a sack holds your belongings in other words
please God, praise Allah enough to barter for your passage
in other words you'll barter the child if it comes to that
a woman with hair as golden as the sky
above your grandmother's house
offers you water, rice
you do not understand the loud marketplace
of her language but you do recognize the sound
so like your grandmother's voice
the last time you saw her
which is to say your clothes were torn
to say you are not synthetic
nor bullet proof
not digitally secure
you are dehumanized say
you are transitory
on the way to some other
border country jail cell
you are migrant
not refugee
is to say

Raqqa, Syria to Crete

By Susan Shaw Sailer

Doah's 19, Syrian, working in Egypt *all human beings are born free*
her own town bombed out *and equal in dignity and rights*

Egypt doesn't want her *they are endowed* tries to kidnap
and send her back *with reason and conscience*

Decides to go to Europe *and should act toward one another* pays \$2000 for a spot on a fishing
boat meant for 50 max, 1 of 500 *in a spirit of brotherhood*

4th day at sea: her boat sinks *everyone has the right to life* She can't swim.
A man hands her a life ring, she floats, corpses bobbing around her *liberty and*

security of person. A man swims to her, hands her his 9-month baby, asks her to save it. He
sinks. A woman swims to her, hands her an 18-month baby, asks her to

save it. She sinks. *No one shall be subjected to torture* No food or water for 8 days *or to cruel,*
inhuman or degrading Corpses black in the sea. Babies listless.

She sees a plane, waves frantically. 9th day: a ship comes, takes her and the babies to Crete, to
hospitals *treatment or punishment* The younger baby dies,

the older lives, weeks later is adopted *born free* Doah survives *equal in dignity and rights*
wants to get to Sweden, go to college *should act toward one another*

bring her family to safety *in a spirit of brotherhood.*

Note: Italicized words come from the UN General Assembly's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Articles 1, 3, and 5. The Syrian woman's story was told by Melissa Fleming in a TED talk (TEDxThessaloniki.19:15. Filmed May 2015).

The Refugee

By Julie Christine Johnson

1 used lifejacket
 1 passport
 1 sunhat
 Toothbrush
 Comb
 Seasickness tablets
 200 Euros
 200 Turkish liras
 Three multi-packets of cigarettes

With this, and the clothing he wears, he leaves a broken city whose name meant *copper* in a language time has long since melted down and reshaped. The man's name, the one thing he carries that no one can steal, is Radwan.

~

1 eiderdown duvet
 1 set of bath towels
 1 down-filled anorak, worn only once

A man in a town with a name that means Driftwood Bay prepares for the arrival of the refugee. His own name, Árni, has been handed down from grandfather to father to son to a grandson who lives not far from Keflavík. Close enough that Árni visits every Sunday for supper. He will invite the refugee to his grandson's home. Everyone is waiting.

~

For years, they had been telling Radwan to leave Aleppo. The young linguistics professor should take his family and flee to Turkey, they said. Follow the footsteps of his colleagues to London, Hamburg, New Jersey.

Yet he stayed. He learned a new language, the language of war: barrel bombs, improvised mortars, RPGs. He queued for hours to buy cooking fuel and watched, helplessly, as one of his colleagues had a heart attack and died, on the sidewalk, in the heat.

Not until rebel groups and ISIS began fighting each other for control of his disintegrating city did Radwan admit he must go. One group or another, so many factions that no one knew who opposed whom, would raid his home at midnight and force a father of four to become a soldier.

~

Árni hangs the anorak in the spare room closet and folds wool sweaters in the bureau drawers. The sweaters are woven in somber blues and grays, the color of his peninsula wrapped

in winter. Does the man have a family? Has he made his journey alone? The Red Cross tells Árni nothing of the man's story, for the refugee has not yet arrived.

~

For weeks Radwan travels, from Syria through Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary. Stories reach him: dozens suffocated in an abandoned lorry in Austria. The newspaper left on a park bench shows a tiny boy in a red shirt, the same age as his Sami, washed up on a shore in Turkey.

It is September and he intends to reach Germany, where he will find a way to bring his family out of Aleppo. Then he hears one word repeated on parched lips: Iceland.

~

In Keflavík, a larder is stocked with rice and potatoes, onions and garlic. Árni has washed a rainbow of fruits and vegetables. He thinks perhaps this eggplant, these tomatoes, this melon might have been grown in places that touched the refugee's own homeland. Still life, ignorant of war.

~

It is December, and snowing, when the men meet. Over a meal, in a warm home, a story quietly unfolds.

Blackbirds

By Karen Heuler

When my grandparents immigrated, they were very poor and lived for a time near a park with some of their children (it would be years before the whole family could be together).

My grandfather went to the park at evening to catch blackbirds for dinner. I guess they ate blackbirds where he came from and it was a familiar thing to do. The blackbirds in this country were very agitated, however; they were New World birds and not used to being eaten. They would dive at my grandfather whenever they saw him, sometimes a dozen birds all together. They would wait in the trees for him; sometimes they'd wait over his doorway. I don't know how the birds communicated my grandfather's sins to each other, but occasionally a bird would swoop on him when he was blocks away.

Because of the attacks, my grandfather was forced to buy hats, which the birds ripped to shreds. He couldn't afford to keep buying hats, so he stopped snaring the birds.

Years, years later, his grandchildren became vegetarians and put out bird feeders and bird baths. By then grandfather had gotten smaller and smaller and his bones had gotten as thin as a bird's and with the black cap that he perpetually wore, and the way he sometimes stole bright things, we called him Magpie.

Manifest Destiny

By Kirin McCrory

It is Man's natural state to expand his boundaries past the land that has been granted him by the immediate moment. Give a man an acre and he will fill it, and want two. Give him two and he will break those, and need three. It is the nature of Man to bound and be boundless, and the West seemed boundless to him until it fell at his feet like it was, indeed, destined, manifest between the two of them like a brokered deal. Give him the West and he will reach it, and what then? He rejected his coast and set out for another, stretching across the continent for a horizon, a dream of one day sliding fingers through silt at the bottom of a pan. The West seemed a thing worth taking, worth owning, a badge one might show to others: *this is the West, and it is mine. I belong here.*

In the Great West, men and women were Men, were Mankind, were Pioneers; there were only wagons and Walkaloosas, and there was no glass in which to fix your hair. Sure, there were skirts and trousers and children were conceived on the long journey to a new beginning, but in the East we knew where to sit and cross our legs, and on the Westward bound we all had to pull our own weight, at least. Lesser women, greater men, our differences merged into an axle, something round and spinning, all of us moving too fast to see our spokes, whirring our lines into nothing. We might've been dragged along or whisked off, but even we got to begin again. We ended up in the West one way or another, and no one could say we sat around and looked pretty. We never looked pretty. We only looked forward.

Zeus didn't split my country, not in two, or even three, but he didn't make it boundless. There are borders to this continent that seem unbreachable, and yet we found ourselves at the broken end, a bluff that dipped into waters we'd never seen, and how terrifyingly indivisible the ocean was. In a single person, there are many Wests, and many Easts, and no oceans to let us know we've reached them. The land is dividable. A broken wagon wheel has parts that we can see. Like a sorb-apple which is halved for pickling, or as you might divide an egg with a hair, so then are there two pieces, and one whole. But how many parts did the Pioneers lay in? When they packed their apples and eggs and pushed off for California, they had visions of the day they'd part their lips and whisper, "It is mine. I belong here."

I don't think I've ever said that in my life.

This Land

By Chloe DeFilippis

On a farm in Lakewood, New Jersey, my father, a little boy, visits his paternal grandparents. They are immigrants, speaking broken English to the family and yelling Italian commands at the dogs. Their land is filled with food: watermelons, peaches, raspberries, blackberries, grapes, peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, herbs, chickens, rabbits, and a goat or two. My father runs throughout this land picking what he can. Blackberries and grapes for his grandfather's wine. Tomatoes and peaches for his grandmother's sauces and preserves. He sits on the porch spitting seeds out of fat watermelon slices. He sleeps in the attic under peppers that hang from the ceiling, slowly drying. On this land, my father forgets that at home in Bayonne he is losing to poverty, to his parents' failing marriage, to his mother's catatonic state after months of electric shock therapy. On this land, my father no longer lives in observance of all that is rotting, decaying, dying. On this land, his grandparents' farm, my father becomes of grass and sun, of all that is ripe and alive.

Women's Voices

By Diana Woodcock

Sometimes I listen to
Turkish music, *Bahar*,

Kordes Turkuler, even though
the tempo's too fast, too

brash, because I need to feel
at last a little unsettled,

a bit rattled by discordance—
the voices of women from

Turkish, Armenian,
Kurdish borders calling

out to me. Language
mysterious, but no

mistaking their message.
Same in every language:

absence of love and respect
the ultimate atrocity.

Mothers Who Carry Their Own Water

By Gerda Govine Ituarte

When there is no well land is parched
mouth dusty skin cracked
bloody fingers plant roses

Mothers who carry their own water
are viewed with discomfort
curtains of words fall

I don't know what to say time heals all
whispers trail behind like tails
a reminder of what could happen to them

Mothers who carry their own water
live through in under around
the death of their children how

They never ask why
lean on winds of change
find warmth in cold places

Push through survival to thrive
learn to move beyond black and white
traverse shades of gray

refuse to stay stuck in grave
dig deep for well
inside.

Spoil of War

By Leatha Kendrick

--for the Chibok schoolgirls,
and all the girls and women taken

Every womb ransacked, every womb wound round
with shame's body, once a studious curious being
now bounty of a holy war. Every sacred
shift of childhood ripped away leaving ravaged
skin, unhinged senses, echoed calls to prayer
beat in their ears, the constant wound remade
more than daily. All the wombs claimed
for war's children. All the mothers left
enraged, bereft. Every prayer
a call for them for us for some
god to hear and lift these torn
changed children never to be girls again
always to be our gone daughters.

Telling Stories at Tea Time

By Zehra Imam

Karachi, Pakistan

When women hold tea cups their stories pour out. In Pakistan, when the tea arrived, it was a magical and sacred time. Samosas namkparay were decent additions but it was really the tea that gleamed gold in the evening sun, the real star of the show. The children didn't always drink it, we would run around it, ask for sips. We would ask to dunk our biscuits in it. But we didn't swallow it whole, just with timid sips for fear of its hot sweet sass. It was tea and what came up as a result of the women drinking it that educated us. Political parties, corruption, the jahanum we lived in. Sometimes a neighbor or two would stop by in the evening and everyone would gather and exchange stories sipping tea and eating biscuits from the bakery or hot fried meat and vegetable samosas from the samosa stand. Stories such as how, just a few years earlier, M sahib's son had disappeared. Everyone knew he was involved with such and such political party and that it was like a black hole you could never leave. M sahib's son was returned to him in a bori, a sack, full of cut up pieces of flesh. "We've plucked his eyes from their sockets," the young delivery boys shouted and snickered, zooming off on their gleaming-like-tea-in-sunlight motorcycles as everyone present watched with hushed fear. On the sack in slanted jagged Urdu it read: *the consequence of revealing secret information*. The neighbors whispered that M sahib never was quite sane after that incident; everyday, he stared off into space from his wooden chair by the window pane as if fighting with memories to separate them from the memory of that day.

Silence on a June Morning, 1944

By Tracy Davidson

Soldiers lined up in perfect formation
beside the egg, its skull cracked,
peeled back bit by bit,
white matter exposed and discarded.

The soldiers move in, drowning
themselves in gold treasure.
The metal tool enters the fray,
scraping up every last vestige of life.

Ejected shell casings lie scattered about
amid crumbs of debris
and puddles of dripped butter.

I sip my tea and pretend
the telegram on the corner
of the table never came.

The Last Diary Entries of Septimus Warren Smith

By Katherine Orr

Like an attic full of books.
 Like a gymnasium. Like sorrow.
 Everything is always so big.
 But I'm not afraid of the silence
 that follows what I came to say.
 So instead of talking, I watch
 my wife work on her bonnets –
 feathers and flowers, violets,
 vegetables, birds. All the ladies
 come to her, now that it's Spring.

*

Explosion in the park again
 this morning, bits of bodies
 close to her buttoned boots,
 a terrible, synaptic white
 against the lawns, the intricate
 lattices and canals of our ears –
 We dissolved, deaf, into
 park benches and boxwood,
 at least I did, and tonight I see
 the worry in her face as she
 braids last autumn's bittersweet
 into a pearl-edged veil.
 She's not known what to do,
 who to turn to and, as I once did,
 has trusted those they told her
 to trust, she's emptied her purse
 and signed her name and
 spelled out mine –
 she's told them where we live –
 What else could she do?

*

Last night, she showed me –
 she'd gathered all my little poems
 and pictures, placed them in a
 swatch of satin and tied them
 in a packet with a long silk ribbon
 which I untied and together we
 looked at them one by one.

And then we sat there
without saying anything.

*

I swore to protect her
and I am an honorable man
but the doctor is on the stairs –
Once I'm gone, she will – what?
Stand here, slight, among the
tea cups and colors? Three ripe
peaches in the cut-glass bowl,
lace curtains, barely moving.

The Late Afternoon Crashed All Around

By Karin Cecile Davidson

Excerpt from “The Late Afternoon Light Crashed All Around” – first published in *Iron Horse Literary Review, Father’s Day Issue, June 2011*

My daddy, Charles Royal Blackwood, III, was ranked a Sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps, his uniform sleeve decorated with three chevrons and a pair of crossed rifles. Mama had long since dubbed him Royal Three, which then became R3, nicknames that my stepbrother Saul and I agreed were not only dumb but embarrassing, especially when she’d call out to him at the lake, at church, even at the bowling alley. “R3, come on out of that water and sit by me,” she’d call from her lawn chair. “I’m missing you.” And settling into the fifth pew on the right, “Royal Three, honey, hold my gloves just a sec.” And then, squinting through her cigarette smoke, “R3, pick out a ball for me. One that’s gonna get me some strikes.”

Saul knew him as more of a father than his own, a handsome, hot-tempered Marine by the name of Isaac Finch Edwards, our mama’s first husband who she’d divorced long before he met his demise on a beach in Qui Nhon. I was sure he’d been dead to Saul long before he was killed in action. Until he left for Vietnam, my daddy had always been there, for Saul as much as for Mama and me. And as if to prove that point, Mama called her oldest, “Saul B,” reworking family history and family names so that it suited her. She did like to keep things simple.

By the time 1969 ended and the new decade began, Mama said she’d never heard of a tour of duty that lasted so long. “That man is just fooling with us,” she said, pretending to cry. “Probably lying, taking his stateside leave over in Asia, shirking his family responsibilities.” But I didn’t worry about that so much as I did about the promise he’d made.

That October morning in 1967 when my daddy left for Vietnam came flying back to me. I was nine years old and still pretty small, more like a six-year-old really. Daddy swung me up in his arms and hugged me hard, kissed me even, but kind of distractedly, then landed me lightly on the ground. His black hair was shaved so closely I could see his tanned scalp.

“You try to mind your mama,” he said. “Don’t sass her. When you feel a sass coming on, recite to yourself: romeo, sierra, tango. Then you’ll be good to go.” His eyes were my eyes almost, dark brown with gold flecks. Sad, unsure eyes. He held my chin for a long second, and I swear he said he’d be right back.

And then practically three years went by, so I gave up on his coming right back. But that promise kept pushing in on me, making me mean. No military alphabet could save me.

L'Orange

By Page Lambert

I'm having a pedicure at Ivy's Nails and Spa. The shop owner is Vietnamese. Her seven sisters and one brother work here too. The shop is immaculate. Ivy and I talk about her homeland while she files my toenails. When her father, a prosperous businessman, lost everything, he was given \$200 to start a new life with his wife and their nine children. He paid Ivy's passage on an illegal smuggling boat first because she was the oldest. She lived on one orange a day, for thirteen days. One by one, her siblings and their mother joined her in America.

"My father—he died," she tells me, a nail file suspended in her hand. Her eyes mist over. "His heart was broken. He lost his country. Then his pride left. Then his soul."

"My own father lost everything, too," I tell her, "when a flood took our home. I was with him when he died. My eyes mist over. "His heart broke too." She reaches one hand up and touches my knee. I think of the war demonstrations in Boulder when I was in college, and of a novel about a Vietnam vet whose soul split in two.

As Ivy massages my feet, our conversation turns to the Iraq war. She knows more about America's foreign policy than I do. She speaks in rapid-firing syllables. "War is horrible," she says. "It is never good. In my old country, the land has died." She puts down the fingernail file and looks at me. "But not here," she says, smiling. "Here, everything is possible. Land of opportunity. We work hard, but life is good."

As a senior in high school, I watched classmates go off to war in Vietnam. Many suffered the shame of the My Lai Massacre. Those who stayed home suffered the shame of "not being patriotic." Robert Kennedy was assassinated, Richard Nixon was elected, America seemed hopeless. The boys in my graduating class compared draft numbers like today's graduates might compare SAT scores. Too low, and you wouldn't make it into college. Too low, and you'd find yourself in the jungle killing gorilla soldiers younger than your own brothers. Nowhere, including Kent State, seemed safe, or sane.

My boyfriend drew #68. By the time he took his physical the army had already drafted his best friend, who had drawn #69. A few months later, his friend came home in a body bag, the number of troops was cut to 70,000, the draft ended, and anti-war demonstrations faded away.

"Did you pick your color?" Ivy asks.

I hand her the sunset-colored bottle of L'Oréal I've been holding and glance at the label. L'Orange. I think of Ivy as the oldest daughter, still just a girl, eating one orange a day, for thirteen days. I think of Agent Orange. I hesitate. Ivy takes the bottle from me, shakes it, twists the lid off, draws out the tiny brush, and bends over my toes.

"Good choice," she says. "Here, there are many choices."

No Radio

By Sokunthary Svay

i.

Sinn Sisamouth, Khmer poster boy
resonating tenor of every residence
off rooftops on radios
a voice that chilled and warmed

Beloved, iconic face
decapitated pasted over bodies in posters

ii.

My father is lost at Gun Hill Road in the Bronx.
A voice interrupts my daze
sprays 60's surf rock from the dashboard,
a Cambodian riding the radio waves.

Honey, this was the most famous singer in Cambodia.

iii.

Post-exodus Cambodia, 1975
two soldiers looked over the singer,
his palms pressed together in greeting.

He is asked to sing something
but muzzled by rattling AK-47s
echoing across hills. Children are playing soldier.
Fetuses ripped from wombs dangle
in nearby trees.

Yet he opened his mouth
and a flood of love melodies poured out.

iv.

An online friend revived
Bopha Reach Sroh over a hip-hop instrumental.

*No one knows what happened to him.
It's said that the Khmer Rouge made him sing
before they shot him.*

v.
The stench of the unburied
transmit across towers of bones.

Nocturne

By Charlotte Muse

Into the always mysterious air,
place of breath and wings,
the moon is rising

It reveals by its milky light
a dull gleam of wakeful eyes

The teeth of marauders

Outlines of mountains and trees--
enough to reassure

A path to itself, straight across the water
and then up

Where the owl's nest is,
and its comings and goings
How the owl is its own shadow
and its shadow's shadow

An expanse of field, whitened as if by tepid snow

The general in the square on his bronze horse
medaled with pigeon droppings

The beauty of a fish, if it lights on a fish

One bare arm of a soldier, dead on the field

His black blood
The cave of his open mouth
The sheen on a gun

The whitest statue in the churchyard

Moonlight in its mildness
like glib speech in what it leaves out

Like peace, which must overlook
so much

Backblast Area Clear

By Karen Skolfield

“I shot one of those,” I say to Dennis, pointing at the screen. It’s a light anti-tank weapon, a LAW, long fiberglass tube, next to weightless. I was 17 when I picked it up, drill sergeant beside me on the firing line, an instructor guiding this gigantic straw onto my shoulder. Even the small-size uniform looked ridiculous on me. So I have the LAW on my shoulder and it feels good. Not like the M-60, which was like dancing with a barrel of oil. The LAW was nice. A little plastic scope pops up, with red lines and a circle. Downrange, there’s a huge hunk of metal that looks like a tank. I take off the front cover, a black plastic cap. Take off the back cover, another plastic cap. Both swing free. This thing is like a Pixie Stick it’s so light. If I’m ever in a war, I am definitely carrying one of these, I think. It’s pale green, somewhere between moss and sand. The instructor loads the thing and now, it’s a loaded LAW, still not heavy, but lethal. “Pretend it’s someone you hate,” drill sergeant says. I’m 17. Firing line clear. Backblast area clear. Cheek, chin, against the tube. Line up the scopes. The trigger is under a squishy rubber cap, not a rifle trigger at all. There’s no one in the tank. Though I’m sure there was noise, I don’t remember it. Just the joy of being on target, some metal crumbling downrange. Then it was another girl’s turn. “Did you hit any helicopters?” Dennis asks. “Don’t be silly,” I say. “They don’t let you shoot helicopters.” But of course, they do.

Reprinted from [*Frost in the Low Areas*](#) by Karen Skolfield. Copyright © 2013 by Karen Skolfield. With the permission of the publisher, Zone 3 Press.

How to Get Inside of a Ship That Won't Let You In

By Debbie Urbanski

Everyone had assumed the blues came here for some pressing reason. That's why the scientists wasted days with them in those tiny rooms. "Where. Is. Home. You? You? Home?" the scientists repeated into their microphones, their smart faces peering out from the helmets of their hazmat suits. When a blue finally pointed to a map pinned to the wall, a blank spot in some other galaxy, the scientists tittered excitedly, we all did. Communication! Understanding! "Here? Right here? This is your home? Your home? Home?" Only the blues then touched another spot on the map, then they touched a different map, you see, it was all just a game to them. There were cameras in the rooms, the footage streamed live to our screens. They blinked only once every three minutes, like they were animals watching other animals, and when they did talk, they kept asking the scientists bizarre questions. *Where were the thousand lakes? And the sweet water? And the enormous trees? And the animals who lived in the woods who helped the lost children? And the giants? And the people who talked to the animals and the trees? And the people who sounded like music when they talked? And the women with powerful wings?* Their questions made us think that they were in the wrong place.

The scientists kept the ship at first where it landed, beside the woods in Indiana, though they brought in barbed wire, flood lights, armed guards, and dobermans. For days, they tried to get inside but they couldn't find a door of any kind or a hatch, and the blues had no idea either. "Before the ship was open," a blue male explained, the white mist oozing off him, it made the scientists cough. "We came onto the ship, it flew us away. Now the ship is not open." So the scientists cut into the hull of the ship using their wet saws. There was something sad about watching this, like we were conquering some golden giant. But it was also exciting. We never before had wrecked such a thing.

Blood Moon

By Elizabeth Jacobson

echoes of a hate crime

People are made of paper, love affairs,
anything that tears easily.

A pregnant woman stands under the lunar eclipse,
carves a swirl into a tree,
her baby is born with this same mark on his thigh.

It's just like the earth to come between the sun and the moon
and cause this kind of mystery.

Point at a rainbow, and it will plummet and slice your finger off.

Use your lips instead, to show others what you are looking at.

Don't stand on high rocks or they will push you into the sky,
and you will be pressed like a flower in a book.

People are made from rain showers, hatred, smears of spit,
anything that might evaporate instantly.

That night, the moon was a true blood red,
not the pale rust of this moon, this morning.

An entire human body coated red with blood,

except where a path of tears washed through.

Don't stare at the moon

or it will follow you persistently like a stray cat you have fed.

Don't hold out your hands when the sun is shining,

or you will burn continually with possibility.

People are made of buckets of sand, sequins of clay, desire,
anything that washes away easily.

Don't inhale too deeply, the scent of fallen leaves
pasted to the forest floor after a fresh rain,
or you will be repeatedly stepped on.

Don't count the seeds in a mound of bear scat
or just as many clouds will split open above your head.

Note: Blood Moon remembers Matthew Shepard, December 1, 1976 – October 12, 1998

Ghazal for Emilie Parker

ByCarolyn Wright

(Newtown, Connecticut: December 14, 2012)

He had been teaching her to speak Portuguese
So their last words together were in Portuguese.

Such simple words that morning: *Thank you. Please.*
I love you, Daddy. All in Portuguese.

Then he rode off to work, past winter trees
And she to school, smiling to herself in Portuguese.

She fell with her classmates, the other girls and boys,
Folding into herself like snow. No tongue, no Portuguese,

No hearts that walk outside their lives in fields
That winter can't amend. No Portuguese

Can call them back, unspeak their parents' grief
In English, Spanish, Chinese, Hebrew, Portuguese—

Oh Charlotte. Daniel. Olivia. Josephine. Ana.
Dylan. Madeleine. Catherine. Chase.

Jesse. James. Emilie. Jack. Noah. Caroline.
Jessica. Benjamin. Avielle. Alison. Grace.

First published in *North American Review*, Vol. 299, No. 2, Spring 2014.
James Hearst Poetry Prize (Third Place).

Reprinted in *This Dream the World: New & Selected Poems* (Lost Horse Press, 2017).
© 2017 by Carolyn Wright.

Sexy Barbie Rapunzel*By Deb Jannerson*

you yell
blissfully unbound from the
what-do-they-think of
female education.

your dime-dozen hoots
poke me into the ground like
a nail with
phantom pounds from conviction of the
skeleton key in your pants.

another tiny weight between my shoulder
blades, a further contortion in
my wavy spine
a brother scar of night terrors and
feeble days without sun.

you cast me as plaster
casted as plastic
blank word-bubble princess for
your pleasure, your status
your story.

defenders will point to an
ignorant innocence
the luck of the gender
a sickness of social grace
a mistake.

yet here we are
explaining with a million lips
bleeding rage
exhaling truth
and you have no excuse.

First published in RABBIT RABBIT (Finishing Line Press, 2016)

The Frame of a Couch Is Not a Couch

By Karen Skolfield

The bricked-up fireplace doesn't even pretend. We could start a fire on the hearth, but then what? In front of the Hotel Lewis and Clark, the Walk sign's stopped working. For ten years I haven't seen my father. Every public building has an exit plan. He forwards emails: "The Grandmother of All Blond Jokes." Heidegger said we must abandon logic to understand the nature of Nothing. The Blond: always a woman. The therapist I dumped said an abusive parent is still a parent. The fear of Nothing is angst, while the fear of Something is smarts. The heat in the hotel's so high that the windows tremble with it. In coaches' training, a video on power and predation in sports. We learn: predators spend months preparing a child and, more importantly, the child's parents. Grooming: sitting in front of a mirror with a favorite brush, and also. There's a little crack of blue in the sky, clouds without the protection of mountains. Another email from my father: "How To Stop Domestic Abuse," a joke that includes beer and Southern sweet tea. At 10 degrees the snowflakes form stars; at zero, hexagons. The wife tells the doctor her husband has been clobbering her. The doctor tells the wife to swish with sweet tea the moment her husband comes home. At minus 10 degrees, triangles within triangles, the world's smallest yield signs. At minus 20, snow columns shaped into billy clubs or baseball bats. "It worked! she tells the doctor. "I swished and swished the sweet tea, and he didn't hit me." The doctor says, "See what happens when you keep your mouth shut?" At minus 30, miniature pyramids of ice which even the mummies have abandoned. A friend said that calling an abusive parent "monster" does a disservice to real monsters. At minus 40, the threshold of no precipitation, no matter how heavy-bellied the clouds. Truth, Heidegger believed, is always both concealing and revealing. One to two feet of snow expected between here and Tennessee: the whole of the eastern seaboard, covering up.

Good Stories

By Esther Cohen

What is the same
 what is different?
 When I was a child
 I had a big bear
 funny bear
 a girl bear
 not a doll
 with yellow hair
 I talked to Miss Bear
 all day long
 told her
 stories long
 long stories.
 I didn't know
 much
 about bears.
 I knew she
 was smiling at me.

Many of us listen for what we know, familiar sounds. Maybe this starts with lullabies, with words we hear every night, when we are young.

Not me. I wanted my mother to change up the song. I wanted my family to move around, not to sit in the mama bear papa bear seats every night, facing in the absolutely same direction, looking right at the light green wall, or outside the window next to the table, or watching the clock move around during dinner. I wanted to hear voices I didn't know, from people who looked nothing like me.

What's interesting is how we understand our tribes: who we want to be in the worlds we inhabit, how our circles form. The ghettos we make.

My parents were both children of Eastern European immigrants with difficult histories, living in countries where people were killed for being different, for not having the same religions. They were Jews who lived through World War II, who lost relatives.

This history, what they knew could happen in the world, this first hand knowledge of evil, and it was evil, made them wary, in different ways.

My father was more worried than wary. A considered considerate man, he only wore white shirts and he spoke in a gentle voice. A cautious voice. My mother, although she lived the traditional sixties life, she volunteered, she played cards, still my mother, a good dancer, a woman with

orange capris and large earrings in a small town where people liked circle pins, small circle pins even, my mother, had she been alive today, would have been entirely different.

All these years later, I wonder where I came from. How I began.

My parents invited people over who looked and spoke the way they did: Jews who went to college, who worked hard, who talked sometimes about a good life. Kind people, often funny.

I would ask our neighbors to visit. People from Poland, from Ireland. I would ask Mr. Gittings the crazy old man down the street who was sometimes incoherent and sometimes amazing to come and see me on our porch.

I wanted my tribe to be a Big One, to have everyone who wanted to be there just to come over.

And in a way, that's been my work, my life's work. Bringing people over to my apartment and hearing their stories, and telling a few of my own.

In the eighties, I heard a story, one of those stories that stays inside you forever. I was in my twenties, working for a book publishing company. The story, told to me by a union leader named Moe Foner, was about women and children in Lawrence, Massachusetts, immigrant women working in a textile mill. The year was 1912. They wanted a better life, a life where work was not all they did. Their slogan, We Want Bread and Roses too stayed with me. Who knows why some words become lodged inside us all. Moe ran a cultural program for working people, a program designed to provide roses, alongside bread. Inspired by the women in Lawrence who went on strike, and won.

Hearing this particular story changed my own trajectory. Just the way good stories can. The way good stories often do. And even though I told Moe the day we met because he was a man who worked every single day of the year who did not stop for anything that I would never work for him, never never never, I found myself in the office next door to his, not only because he was persuasive, insistent, relentless, but because his cause, his mission to make life even a little better for working people, seemed better than anything I could do on my own. So I joined him, listening many times to his explanation of roses, what they were and what they could be and what we could provide if we were resourceful, if we too were persuasive and insistent and relentless, if we understood, the way he did, that no almost never mattered.

I didn't believe him, not really, when he told me that the work on the walls of big institutions like the Metropolitan Museum had little to do with the lives of low wage workers, especially the women in the union Moe helped build, a union of women of color, African American and Latina, who came from different cultural worlds, worlds Moe wanted to honor and celebrate, worlds he wanted everyone to know and honor.

He, and the work we did for many years changed what I thought about work, and about jobs, and about the stories I knew and wanted to hear. I started teaching writing workshops, called Workers Write, with homecare workers, all in the beginning of life. Women who work hard, are

never paid enough, and who are not afraid of life's beginnings, of the endings either, or of all that happens in between.

He and the work we did changed the stories I was lucky enough to hear, and the stories I tell.

Like a Maelstrom with a Notch

By Lois Marie Harrod

Emily Dickinson

And when the clothing factory collapsed
in Dhaka, Bangladesh, one young seamstress
was trapped in the Muslim prayer room
which also stored boxes of skirts and shawls,
shirts, sheers, socks and sequins,
and for those in need, a few prayer cloths
thrown over pipes and stretching to a strut or two.

And when that nineteen-year-old was rescued,
it was a miracle because we wanted to believe
that we too can survive, ignorant and inventive,
disregarding the adjacent, the close-by distant
dead, sucking air through shaky pipes, licking
the leaking rain, yes, washing our faces, knowing
whatever those gods of mercy had done to others
they had not yet done it to us. That miracle.

And of course, to keep sane, she did find things to do,
packed and unpacked the boxes of saris in her little room,
maybe the first she had ever had to herself,
changed her clothes repeatedly as teenagers do,
why not, hadn't she always wanted to try them on?—
so that after seventeen days when someone at last
heard her cry, she was wearing a radiant red scarf
around her neck, as if she had just tripped off a runway—
a scarf any one of us might buy for almost nothing.

published Naugatuck River Review

Smash Shop

By Elizabeth Jacobson

From the bench above the pond
 I watch two ducks make dark channels
 in the water as they feed,
 pathways through a mosaic of cracked green ice.
 Behind me the rocks, strata of red igneous beneath ochre sandstone,
 are an unconformity— a geologic span—
 characterized by an immense amount of nothing
 between two calculable intervals of time.
 Nothing not meaning that something wasn't there,
 but that no thing remains
 from the something that was.
 I make lists of things here:
 A female body is more regulated than weaponry;
 white tigers swim like sharks onto flooded coastal streets;
 this world might not be a mess
 if individuals weren't imagining God.
 My friend wants to create a Smash Shop—
 a space where people can break as much as they want,
 for as long as they like.
 She envisions a warehouse full of junked cars
 and thrift shop pottery,
 long lines to get in,
 because one of the things people do best
 is destroy things.
 The geologist Clarence Dutton coined the term
Great Unconformity, a concept indicating an absent interval
 of geologic time.
 In 1882 he couldn't date the rocks the way we can today,
 still Dutton saw something was missing;
 he just didn't know how vast it was.
 My friend's idea is to have people pay by the hour,
 but who will ever be able to stop?
 The simple beauty of common things
 makes us rage enough
 to want to demolish everything in sight.

Untitled [When have you ever heard a silent crowd?]

By Monika Cooper

When have you ever heard a silent crowd?
Without a word, they watched their schoolhouse burn
But one man must have turned his wide-brimmed hat
Over and over slowly in his hands.
They go home silent. I remember when
I wanted to be Amish, like in books,
Or Mennonite, like one I saw, my age,
Pushing a stroller, in a pioneer dress.
The future drove a car I didn't trust.
I knew instinctively that it meant harm.

It meant me harm. With all the force of fear,
I fought to make time stop. But since I've learned
I can't do that, I modify my prayer.

Time, not too fast. The pace of horse
And buggy was just right, the pace of feet.
When needed, flames, deliberate, complete.

Where I Am Standing

By Marsha Pincus

I am standing at the gates of Auschwitz
 peering up at the iron words *Arbecht Mach Frei*.
 I take my place among the school children and
 families of Europe in the ticket line.
 “Exhibits on your right, showers on your left,”
 the Polish tour guide says without a trace of irony.

On the other side of the gate I am standing
 on a murderous Main Street in a genocidal Disneyland.
 The guard towers rise to attention flanked by obedient barracks.
 Carved wooden Jew figurines are sold
 at souvenir stands in the railway station.
 I stop and buy postcards from the end of the line.

I am standing at Majdanek on the concrete floor
 of the concrete gas chamber with the concrete walls with
 the golden cans of Zyklon B whose skull and crossbones
 smirk and wink their warning at me.
 Scratch marks, the only epigraph inscribed in the walls
 by the living at the moment of death.

I am standing among the trees of Treblinka
 in the landscape of childhood nightmares
 in the heart of darkness of every fairy tale.
 There is a stone for each city, town, and village destroyed
 A cemetery for a civilization,
 a rubble of remembrance.

I am standing, calling for the spirits of the children.
Lazar! Chaim! Moishe! Duddy! Tatele! Boyele!

I am standing as one million flies buzz in endless testimony
 to the bodies buried here their ashes constituting
 this ungodly soil which can grow nothing but stones.

Razel! Rachel! Rivkah! Shayndele! Feigle! Memele!

But their spirits are long gone
 having fled with the smoke of their skin rising
 through the crematoria's chimneys.

Like birds with no songs
 they flew away in silence.

I am standing.

Mooring the Boat to the Dock

By Sarah Black

Anna Larina was the only audience to the final testament
of her husband Nikolai Bukharin.

Each morning after his death—

Stalin let her live for the national asset of her beauty—
she rose to recite her husband's testimony.

Through one decade in the Gulag and one in exile,

through the birth of another man's children,

she held Nikolai's heart in her mouth,

incantation against the inevitable.

I thought of Anna when I read of the women who assembled
in Manhattan September 2001 to sit shiva in shifts

among trailers of refrigerated remains,

seven months of unbroken vigil.

Sitting so the dead would not be alone,

singing so the living would not be silent.

On any given morning

women's prayers briefly dam the waters of history.

Tongues in their hands, we promise the dead

we are still here, we are still here.

Sculpture Under A Bridge

By Debbie Hall

*Buenos Aires, at a memorial for the “disappeared”
during the military dictatorship, 1976-1983*

Each figure climbs atop the other
up from the dust and dark.

They reach through cracks in the road
to pull travelers out of their cars.

Here a muscled figure pulls a ghost
from an earthen grave.

Wooden boards form the outline
of a reclining human, five meters long.

No weeds grow in this small plot.
The soil sprouts small signs:

Eva Esther Nunez, someone’s daughter.

Luis Angel Veron, someone’s son.

Rosa Dalia Herrera, someone’s mother.

The travelers stand still, feeling
the voices of the *Abuelas* resound.

The signs shudder in a sudden breeze.

Home

By Kristen Ringman

I don't feel home anywhere
after losing it, after the shipwreck. We move
from place to place. It feels better to move. It reminds me of the sea.

I wake each day with disappointment I pretend
can be cured with coffee or friends, with your small lips
nursing my breasts, the way you ask for
"yogurt and granola" every morning, without fail.

Every day, by mid-day,
I fail myself—I give in to
the anxiety of loss—
But I don't want to fail you, my
son, I don't want to fail our family,
I don't want to fail me.

So I left. I flew to the desert—to the red
rocks that have never touched the sea
like we have touched the sea—

I retreated to the dry hills of the mesas. I prayed to Virginia Woolf,
Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keefe. I prayed to the lovers I've had, the lovers
I've lost. I prayed to the teachers chasing rainbows, leaning their heads back
because they could hear the thunder from above echoing the thunder from within.

And I've decided, everywhere
is home—even the red rocks, the knowing
in a fellow woman's eye, your hands trying to spell words and
only making funny shapes. I am moving my hands.
I am spelling out my dreams, spelling the word
"home", again and again—

Telling myself I am there already.
Like the women carrying thunder,
I carry the sea.

Leave the Barren Fields

by Mary Morris

Enter water, swimmer.
Touch the muddy floor.

Reappear dripping
to be born for this.

Cover the body with honey
on the night of a new moon.

Gather and eat soft eggs of a raven,
drink milk from a goat by noon.

Awaken at midnight feedings.
Draw the ovaries.

Paint in panthers,
ruby-lit flowers.

Gather your voice at the river.
Sing with the loon.

Read Grimm's fairy tales
to children in the next village.

Adopt a field or a horse.
Take on a juvenile

stealing your money for her addiction
or a boy herding his bony cow

across Darfur.
Be sworn in.

First published in *Prairie Schooner*