



EDITED BY DIANE GILLIAM

WAVES

*A Confluence of
Women's Voices*

FEATURING
MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

WAVES
A CONFLUENCE OF WOMEN'S VOICES

AROHO Dedication of *Waves: A Confluence of Women's Voices*

In honor of our mirror and our compass, Virginia Woolf.

*For the road was cut many years ago . . . many famous women,
and many more unknown and forgotten, have been before me.*

The room is your own, but it is still bare . . .

*With whom are you going to share it, and upon what terms? These, I think
are questions of the utmost importance and interest.*

—Virginia Woolf, National Society for Women's Service, 1931

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

Style is a very simple matter: it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can't use the wrong words. But on the other hand here I am sitting after half the morning, crammed with ideas, and visions, and so on, and can't dislodge them, for lack of the right rhythm. Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than words. A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it; and in writing (such is my present belief) one has to recapture this, and set this working (which has nothing apparently to do with words) and then, as it breaks and tumbles in the mind, it makes words to fit it.

---Virginia Woolf

So the writer's job is to recognize the wave, the silent swell, way out at sea, way out in the ocean of the mind, and follow it to shore, where it can turn or be turned into words, unload its story, throw out its imagery, pour out its secrets. And ebb back into the ocean of story.

This is why utterance is magic. Words do have power. Names have power. Words are events, they do things, change things. They transform both speaker and hearer; they feed energy back and forth and amplify it. They feed understanding or emotion back and forth and amplify it.

---Ursula K. Le Guin

We entrust our secrets to women and their listening ears draw the stories out of us.

---Maxine Hong Kingston

Sometimes we drug ourselves with dreams of new ideas. The head will save us. The brain alone will set us free. but there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women, as human. There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves—along with the renewed courage to try them out. And we must constantly encourage ourselves and each other to attempt the heretical actions that our dreams imply, and so many of our old ideas disparage. In the forefront of our move toward change, there is only poetry to hint at possibility made real. Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real (or bring action in accordance with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors.

---Audre Lorde

Not so sure about: How safe the water at the edge of the sea. If I can swim back quickly. Reaching the water in time. Whether the waves will flood my home if I open the windows wide.

Know for sure: The waves will flood my home; I will open the windows wide.

---Robyn Hunt

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EDITOR'S NOTE: TO READERS AND CONTRIBUTORS

The work you have in your hand comes to you from many places, through many voices and many lives. The impulse to hold these voices and lives together in a book of their own was born in New Mexico, from A Room of Her Own Foundation, whose mission has always been to bring women together in service of their own collective wisdom and creativity--to share what can be shared, and to protect and bolster what can only be done by one woman alone. This book is also intended to be in the spirit of Virginia Woolf, to honor her and her work, in gratitude for her giving us those words, "a room of one's own," for what it is we need. I said yes to Darlene Chandler Bassett, founder of AROHO, to my part in this work on a couch in a small cottage on Ghost Ranch, during one of AROHO's writing retreats for women. I had no doubts.

My own life changed radically just as the work began. Within a few weeks of the initial call for work for WAVES, I had a classic, widow-maker heart attack which I survived because I happened to be in a hospital when it occurred. I had emergency open heart surgery that morning, followed by a long recovery—an ongoing recovery, truth be told—involving much more than the physical healing of my body. I tell this story because it is part of the story of WAVES, because when these pages came to me, they entered through a breastbone and a heart already broken open.

I often worked up in my writing room, on a quilt spread on the floor with piles of pages all around its edges, trying to see each page clearly and to grasp the connections and tensions that would shape the pages into a whole. It was slow work. The pages I was holding deserved my slowness and anyway, I couldn't help it. There were mornings I would come to a piece that stopped me. I would have to sit with it, put my hands on the page and say to the woman who wrote it—Who *are* you? Where did you come from? Some such pieces were immense in their vision, some dense with pain or anger or some beauty I had never yet imagined. Some spoke in details that shook me—was it too much? should I set it aside?—though of course I knew that I would not. For every truth told, how many go unspoken? Muriel Rukeyser was on the shelf at my shoulder: "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? / The world would split open." I wanted to make of these pages a book that would split open whatever parts of the world it might touch.

The work itself shaped the book, the piles of pages gradually resolved themselves into the nine sections that comprise WAVES. The first section, "Call Me Girl," contains poems and prose representing earliest memories through readiness to move out of girlhood into young womanhood. The section takes its title from "Eagle Girl" by Claire McCabe, in which the girl, taught by her mother that wild things ought not be named, decides, "...please, just call me Girl." It holds voices of other girls still strong in their own selves, as well as the words of girls speaking from moments in which those selves are imperiled. In "Driving Home" by Melissa Grossman, the speaker drops off a girl who lingers: "A startling knock on the window made me stop. / She was still there, bending down to say *thank you* again, / but I knew she was really saying, *please*." The section ends with writing about the passage into young womanhood, a passage as fraught as all that had come before, but which comes to all, ready or not. Valerie Speedwell's "Regina" tells a different story: "she's looking for an audience, looking for the roar of a crowd, their approval and applause, and despite she's fat, despite she's ugly, despite the world expects her to fail, the crowd calls out *go Regina, go Regina*, because she is revolutionary and shocking...."

The second section, "This World I Want You to Save," gathers together responses to the natural world, in its domestic and wild, plant and animal, beautiful and threatening aspects. The work in this section speaks to healing connection, as in Susan Austin's "Church"—"...I lay down // in sweet sage and let the earth / hold the ache for awhile." Some pieces, such as Suzette Bishop's "Jaguar Foretells His Own Extinction," speak to the suicidal outcome of human betrayals of the natural world: "Who will call you to the Underworld? / Who will help you remember / Everything has tiger, / The enemy everywhere, / Until you are where-human?" The sea, the cold, mountains, the desert, forest, wild fire, rock, ravens—the earth in all its variety—is throughout this work a source of solace, mystery, and deep learning. So it is for the speaker of "Inside the Bowl (Asaayi Lake)" by Leanna Torres: "Beauty is a noun on the shores of Asaayi Lake, the water touching the land in a way that is both ordinary and sacred. For the Navajo (*Dine*) people there is a concept of *hozho*. *Hozho* is said to be the most important word in the Navajo language and is loosely translated as peace, balance, beauty and harmony.... Ho'zho', Beautyway." In "Greenman" by Maureen McQuerry the heart of the forest is the site and source of ecstatic experience: "It was like this, precipitous, / life bursting forth in unexpected places, roots seeking hold and feeding / capillaries, the taste of moss and humus / filling my mouth with song, // and not like this, like nothing else at all."

"My Bones Are In You" is the section with poems and prose about mothers, grandmothers, and motherhood. Many of the pieces about mothers and grandmothers recount searches for their stories. The work on motherhood shows its multitudinous facets—as embraced or refused, in its disappointments and losses as well as its complicated loves. In "Maternity," Sue Churchill's speaker bargains with God, bartering for her daughter's sake: "...trading away all pearls / of happiness, the ones I sought so long / in the dark depths, holding my breath / to bursting. // It's not just one or two I concede, / it's all and any and ever." In "The Disappointed Women" Celeste Helene Schantz brings to the page a less represented experience of motherhood: "These are the tssking women; / the women who glance sideways at my son. / These are whispering women, / who talk behind their hands; / who wait for the bus with their precious brats, / little rats with normal brains, / mimicking my boy as he talks / to the wind, to the robins."

The pieces in "My Body Is Not Your Politics" tell the stories of the body, stories of trauma and illness; they also give testimony of its healing, reclamation and wisdom. The section title is borrowed from Hannah Bonner's poem, in which the speaker reclaims her body from commonplace and uncommonplace trespasses: "—as my body, / my body filled with longing, longing // then relief, still churning, still declarative, / shaking like the Lilacs lining the street, / all blossom, blossom / and bark." Accounts of crimes against the female body range widely in this work. In Sokunthary Svay's poem "Molding" about *apsaras*, even these statues of Indian female divine symbols of joy are subjected to transgression: "Foreigners cup their breasts / shiny from years of exploration, / hold them captive / in their viewfinder / to retrieve for pleasure / in future moments." All kinds of injury and illness come to the body. In "Stef's Request" by Abigail Licad, the speaker photographs a friend's naked, burn-scarred body the night before a new skin graft will scar what had remained untouched: "I map the contours of her flesh, the question mark of her sinuous / back's profile, the meetings of inner folds her future husband's tongue / will trace. Into the night, we work like witnesses bearing testimony." For Susan Austin, in "Leap," "Illness creates its own kind of weather, one that can leave you standing in a house you now longer remember." But the body knows what to do and we must follow its lead, as Beverly Lafontaine tells us in "Coming Back":

“Get sick, stay in bed and that’s what happens. / You become a ghost in your own life. // Bits of me are floating back like moons to their / mother planet...”

“If He, If She Would Only” contains work about relationships with lovers and partners—what can be kept, what must be let go. They celebrate what endures, as in these lines from “Blue Moon and Bright Mars” by Sandy Coomer: “We learned how to say love without words, / when the hospital nights sank their teeth in / and the days chewed slowly on your flesh.” In some pieces, such as Sandy Gillespie’s “Without Turning,” the wild feminine is set in contrast to the demands of relationship: “She feels his beard / on her neck; she wants / to roll toward him, offer / breasts to hungry eyes. / The weight of her beak holds her. / From behind, he cannot see / feathers sprouted on her brow.” There are stories of beginnings and endings, of patterns that prevail, as in Tanya Ko Hong’s “Asian Women” where the speaker explains “what you do with your life”—“take what your husband gives you / his care, his food, his shelter, / you learn to bury the jealousy of his concubines / you become their big sister / you bear him sons or you are useless.” There is also the breaking of patterns as in Marcia Meier’s “Dogs and Men in Bed” in which healing comes: “I look out the bedroom window, see the long-needed pine / feel the shelter of this moment / remember the lie once told / ‘You ain’t nobody’.”

“Verdad Justicia Amor”—those words taken from placards from the *abuelas de la plaza* in South America—look at the workings of the world at large. This work focuses on racism and other forms of bigotry, on immigration, on various forms of social and domestic violence, on economic inequalities, war and peace, and on ways to intervene in the world. In “And / Or / Against / For,” Vero Gonzalez lists bits of language turned weapon: “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.” And it goes on: “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.” In “Power” by Susan Eisenberg the threat is immediate—two African American apprentices sent by “the white boss” to disconnect a transformer, stopped by a teacher who insists on a check: “The meter buzzed: 480 live.” Katherine Seluja speaks from the migrant experience in “You Are Migrant”—“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.” This section ends with “Leave the Barren Fields” by Mary Morris—it offers a response to the difficulties and wrongs that have come before. The poem says, “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.”

The poems and prose in “Sisterhood of the Barbed Wire Museum” span a wide range of subject matter, embodying between them a tension between women’s needs for each other, and their equal and opposite need for solitude. There are pieces about friendship and sisterhood—with all their nuanced complications—in this section, also pieces that speak to the need for solitude. The section’s title is borrowed from Carrie Nassif’s poem “We Should Have” which begins, “we house collections of prickled connections / this, the sisterhood of the barbed wire museum” and goes on to say “we should have lassoed ourselves together / lashed down to weather the storms // built pulleys and lifted our souls / cantilevered the clouds.” One such complicated connection is the story of “Bracelets” by G. Evelyn Lampart. It begins, “Sophie is wearing bracelets—I can hear them jangling. I can’t take my eyes off her face to look at them because she’ll think she isn’t interesting. That would break her stream of confidential *I am special* speak. She is talking non-stop again. About herself. Herself as a woman who is jealous of

younger women, the 25-year-olds, with privilege, and with trust funds. I understand. I tell her over and over I understand. I have been telling her for years I understand.” Some pieces speak of painful solitudes, but solitude and silence are embraced by Agnes, a character in the play “The Siege of Ennis” by Eileen O’Leary. Agnes is fighting her brother to keep possession of their childhood home: “Listen! (LONG PAUSE) Listen. (LONG PAUSE) Silence. That’s what’s here. That’s what joined me, kept me company. The shutters...the cows...the rain...sometimes I’d hear them. But what was here...really lived here after everyone had gone...was silence. (PAUSE) Some places...the back end of the universe dips down...and live there. That’s what the universe is made of...silence. Listen. (LONG PAUSE) Nothing. If you can live with that...you can live with God. You can stand the prison of your own skin.” In Donna J. Gelagotis Lee’s poem “Wanting for Grace” it is solitude that holds open the door: “...I have planted myself where no one / will come for me. I might as well / wash my stoop, forage for herbs, // hoe the garden. I am drenched with the island’s / giving. Do not look for me. I am stumbling / up church steps, wanting for grace.” In the final poem of this section, “Rapunzel Brings Her Women’s Studies Class to the Tower” by Susan J. Erickson, Rapunzel ends her long solitude: “I uncoiled my crown of braids, cut the ties and loosened / the strands that held my story captive. Every day / new towers of darkness arrive. Do I need to say / your voices are searchlights that can sweep the horizon / to reveal fault lines and illuminate passage?”

“A Voice Answering A Voice” contains writing about the creative life itself, about foremothers in this life, especially Woolf, and teaching pieces that offer touchstones and maps for navigating this complicated life. It opens with an essay titled “Living with Ghosts” by Ellen McLaughlin, offered as a keynote address at the 2015 AROHO retreat. The title refers to all the ghosts, their voices, that whisper or shout over our shoulders when we sit to do our work: internalized negative voices, the imagined voices of literary foremothers like Woolf, of our personal mothers, archetypal voices speaking to us through myth, voices of monsters “the parts of ourselves we have walled up inside our personal labyrinths.” “All those ghosts, all those voices,” McLaughlin says, “I see them as moths, battering the candle of my spirit, circling the flame of that part of me that is always waiting patiently for me to come back to the desk and work. They teem in me, those ghosts, I feel the press of their wings fluttering inside my chest when the writing takes hold at last, hear the almost inaudible murmur of their thought as the wave of creative life surges and I begin to ride the crest of it to a shore I have never visited.” Many of the pieces in this section speak to such voices. In “Hymnal” by Linda Ravenswood, the speaker of the poem crosses paths with an honored voice on a New York City street: “And I said / *Toni Morrison!* / because I’m like that. / And she said / *You know I am!* / And I said / *Tell me you didn’t win the Nobel / Prize for your stories!* / Ad she threw her head / all around / and said / *You know I did!*” George Ella Lyon speaks across the years to Woolf in “To Virginia”—“If you’d heard me / reading aloud your words / in that room where you drew / your baby breaths / and blew bubbles of words, / where you were translated by time / into a fierce, dreamy, always / ink-stained girl // would you have said / do you say // *Welcome, daughter?*” Audrey Chin’s poem “Mad Bad Sad Woman” attests to the saving power of the work itself: “If not for words // I’d be A mad bad sad woman dancing on the razor’s edge.” In “The Task” Alison Hicks considers ways to approach the time for writing, acknowledging the times of no access: “When it is dark it seems like darkness / will go on for a long time.” In the essay which ends this section, “Unmaking the Form,” Marya Hornbacher also embraces the difficult—perhaps ultimate--wisdom of uncertainty. She says, “I am writing my way into forms I know nothing about. I don’t know how to write anything I’m writing. I don’t know what I’m going to write before I write it, or when it will be

done. This is unnerving.... In those simple rooms of my own, where I was that young woman, half a life ago, I sat alone: hesitating—faltering—writing—and I am still there. I am still her, hesitating, unsure, and secretly terribly brave. And periodically, as it did with Clarissa, that enormous bravery rises up and crashes over me and I say: I will write the book myself.”

“Now You Must Love This Too,” the final section, has pieces about aging and death, about the feminine divine and about the life / death / life cycle. For Barbara Sullivan, age comes, as her title indicates, as “Promise,” which begins: “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.” The title of the section is borrowed from Ruth Thompson’s “At the Whaling Museum, Point Lobos,” where death is to be entered into willingly: “To come home, you must learn echolocation, like a bat. Then you call your ownself out into the dark.” One must go like the whale fall to the bottom of the sea to be undone: “Go down, they say. Go down. Now you must love that too.” Susan Kelly-DeWitt imagines the feminine aspect of God in “Bring Me the God of Mrs. Garcia.” As a woman sits mending her brother’s shirt and watching him laboring at his fishing nets, she considers the possibility of God as a woman: “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 in the morning with wonder in his eyes.” For Jeanne Bryner, it is not a vermilion cape, but something common that adorns the feminine divine. In “Where God Lives,” two women from the projects come to the rescue of a family of young ones left too much on their own: “Our screen door whined, slammed, / when my sister brought the women in their gingham blouses. They found Vaseline / in our cupboards, rocked Ben till he slept, / gave us orange popsicles, threw / the potty seat in the trash. // It is difficult to believe in God, even now, / 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 Mae.” Experiences of cycle, of letting go and beginning again are lived out in a variety of stories and details. In “Rebuilding the ’63 Beetle” by Nancy Krim, the speaker insists on her ability to rebuild at the end of a marriage: “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.” Barbara Rockman’s poem “Writing the Dress” ends this section. In it, the cycle turns as story itself passes on from mother to daughter. It begins as the daughter calls to the mother at work in the kitchen: “‘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 the 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 the wolves. But mama,’ / she bellowed, ‘the hero is me.’”

These nine sections are bookended by the words of Maxine Hong Kingston, honored elder, who spoke to the women gathered together at the 2015 AROHO Retreat. Her words appear here in transcript form, as she spoke them, so as to let the delight and the deep teaching that happened between her and her listeners be as present as possible on the page. In her talk on Woolf’s *Orlando*, which opens this book, she begins by looking at how Woolf represents the writer’s life through Orlando’s struggles with his/her poem “The Oak Tree.” “She works for three hundred years,” Hong Kingston says, “and she still can’t write it. And she has not only one

room of her own, she has three hundred and sixty-five rooms and she still can't write it. She has one hundred and fifty indoor servants, she has eighty horses, and the poem still doesn't come. So, what to do?" Questions of secrecy, privacy, the spirit of the age, motherhood, the nature of time—all figure into what Hong Kingston tells us in answer to that question. And in the talk that closes this book, she considers a wide range of questions put to her by some of the women at that retreat, including questions about writing protest, marginalization, success and labels. "If you have that pink edition of *The Woman Warrior*," Hong Kingston says when asked about labels, "Anybody has it? Oh, I want to show you something. Just to show you that you can escape categorization, on the front cover it says, 'Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction' and then you turn it over and the publishers put at the top 'Fiction.'" This talk closes with an account and recitation of her very first poem which, when held together with all that has come before, shapes her words into the very infinity sign that she has said earlier in the session describes the poet's understanding of time.

I am a poet myself and I expect that all of us have been on the receiving end of some serious talking-to from teachers and peers about the difficulties inherent in a writer's life—the odds, the rejections, the impossibility of living a full-time writing life. I don't doubt that we all continually face such moments and circumstances as we were warned to expect. And yet we keep on—I am daring to speak for others here, feeling myself again on the quilt on the floor, in the welter of all these pages—because the need to do our work is greater than those difficulties and disappointments. Because we know, deep in our bones, truths and mysteries that have yet to be given their rightful place in the world. That place in the world must be found and taken—this too is an essential part of our work.

Perhaps you know some of the names of the writers I mention in my overview of this collection, perhaps not. As I watched this work come in, as I sat surrounded by hundreds of pages of women whose names I was seeing for the first time, I thought again and again—There are so many of us, it's a wonder that any of us get heard. It is exactly that wonder that we are working for and it is your presence here—as reader, writer or both—that makes this work complete.

—Diane Gilliam



“Maxine,” by Sun Cooper

ORLANDO IS THE STORY OF A WRITER, MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

Tuesday, August 11, 2019 (audio file 150811a - 25 m 51s) Transcribed by Tobi Harper

Introduction, Kate Gale, Ph.D.: Now that we're all fully awake, it is my privilege to introduce Maxine Hong Kingston. The work of a great work is that – after you've experienced it – you cannot imagine your life without it. Think about your life without Beethoven's Ninth. Think about your life without Virginia Woolf. Think about your life without *The Woman Warrior*. Maxine has written numerous books and won many, many awards. When you look up the list you feel like, *Are there any awards that she missed?* But I feel that her greatest legacy is right here. All of us who walk differently in the world because we read that book and we understood what it means to claim our own language. I have a PhD in literature and one of the things that they like to talk about in literature is colonized language. And the whole idea is that we are now supposedly in a postcolonial world. It's not nearly as postcolonial for women though, is it? And the reason it's not is that colonization starts at home. And Maxine's books address that very subject. What is it like to lose your language and your identity and your idea of who you could be in the world in your own home? Because if you have your own queenness in your own house, but when you walk out into the world you're not recognized, that's one thing; but if you're negated in your own house, then you never learn how to grow wings. So, I would say that, for all of us, reading Maxine Hong Kingston's books feels like we grew wings. Please welcome, Maxine Hong Kingston.

Maxine Hong Kingston: You have to grow wings to use this thing [laughter and audience laughter, adjusting microphone].

Welcome, my dear women artists. Here together, we're generating the faith and the hope that by being together we can help one another make the writing life easier, make the writing life joyous. I remember as a girl – I think I was about eight years old – when I said “Oh, the writer's life is for me.” And then, not too many years after that, “Oh, why did I want that? That's a wretched life.” That is a wretched life, and I am a wretch of a writer. Virginia Woolf called *Orlando* a wretch.

“The wretch takes to writing ... this is bad enough in a poor man, whose only property is a chair and table set beneath a leaky roof, for he has not much to lose after all; the plight of a rich man who has houses and cattle, maid servants, asses, and linen, and yet writes books is pitiable in the extreme. The flavor of it all goes out of him. He is riddled by hot irons, gnawed by vermin. He would give every penny he has, such is the malignity of the germ, to write one little book and become famous. Yet all the gold in Peru will not buy him the treasure of a well turned line. So he falls into consumption and sickness, and blows his brains out. Turns his face to the wall. It matters not in what attitude they find him, he has passed through the gates of death and known the flames of hell.” (*Orlando*, Virginia Woolf)

So that's the life you have signed onto. [laughter]

So here's Virginia Woolf telling us the conditions of a writer. Even a favored writer such as a wealthy man. Then she begins too – Orlando gets in a better mood sometimes and [laughs and laughter] so he's feeling really hopeful at this point. "He paused and into the breach thus made leapt ambition, the harridan, and poetry, the witch ... and desire of fame, the strumpet." [laughter] And then he's thinking of the ideal, the life that we lust for. "There was a glory about a man who had written a book, and had it printed, which outshone all the glories of blood and state." So to have finished a book and to publish it, that is the highest glory. Okay, now that's Orlando as a man, and even with all the benefits and advantages of a man, he cannot get that poem written. And then he becomes a woman, and as a woman, he – no, she, as a woman, she decides to do what we are doing right now. Maybe – let's get together with other women and then when we're all together we'll be able to find our voices and we will find our stories. And so, Orlando goes and hangs out with the prostitutes. And so that's who we are, we are hoes, we are hoes. [laughter] And these are the people that she will trust. "Nell brought Prue, and Prue—Kitty, and Kitty—Rose, had a society of their own of which they now elected her a member. Each would tell the story of the adventures which had landed her in her present life, in her present way of life. So they would draw around the punchbowl, which Orlando made it her business to furnish generously, and many were the fine tales they told and many the amusing observations they made. For it cannot be denied, when women get together ... they are always careful to see that the doors are shut and that not a word of it gets into print." So, women get together, and we inspire one another, we trust one another and so we tell our secrets. And we entrust our secrets to women and their listening ears draw the stories out of us. And so, these hoes [laughter] ... they are really happy and they are telling their stories ... Virginia – I mean Orlando says, "Oh this is great, I'm going to write this down and I'm gonna publish it" and then they go "What! Don't, no, DON'T PUBLISH IT. These are our secrets, don't even write it down. We can talk story, but don't write it, and don't publish it, because" – I don't think it says why; but I think it's because if we let our secrets out there, we're vulnerable and then we will get hurt and our secret society of women will be destroyed.

And so, Orlando, she's with her people, her women, and they are telling her "Don't tell." And so that is the first sentence in *The Woman Warrior*, and that's my own mother! My own mother saying to me, "Don't tell anyone what I am about to tell you," and then she tells me the most incredible, wonderful stories, and I am to hold them without any writing them down. So, here is Orlando wondering, *How am I going to write the poem, "The Oak Tree,"* and she works for three-hundred years [laughter] and it's still not coming. She can't finish it, she can't even find the middle of it. She has not only one room of her own – she has three hundred and sixty-five rooms – and she still can't write it. She has one hundred and fifty indoor servants, she has eighty horses, and the poem still doesn't come. So, what to do? I think the room of one's own is a metaphor for privacy. But Orlando is such a good hostess, she is such an angel, she has such good manners, that she cannot kick out her visitors and her suitors who barge in on her. When they are there, she cannot work on her writing. So, when she was a man, she was courted by the Archduchess Harriet, and then when Orlando turns into a woman, she thinks Harriet's not stalking her anymore; but one day she appears and she turns into Harry. So Harry's courting Orlando, and he just stays there and stays there. He has him for tea, and he just won't leave. [laughter] And so, Orlando thinks about topics of conversation, she's so bored. And she just – you know, she's such a good hostess, she cannot say "Please leave." "Indeed, Orlando was at her wit's end, what to talk about? And had she not bethought her of a game called fly lou, at which great sums of

money can be lost with very little expense of spirit.” So she says okay, we can have a gambling game, and if she hadn’t thought of this game she would have had to marry him, she supposed, for how else to get rid of him? “By this device, however, and it was a simple one, needing only three lumps of sugar and a sufficiency of flies. The embarrassment of conversation overcome, and the necessity of marriage avoided. For now, the Archduke would bet her 500 pounds to a tester that a fly would settle on this lump and not on that, thus they would have occupation for a whole morning watching the flies.” Doing that instead of writing her poems.

Looking for privacy, I never even knew to look for privacy. It’s in my culture ... I have this big family, I have lots of siblings, and we all shared the room and the space; but not only that, I come from the culture of China. And in Chinese, there is no such word as privacy. Nowadays, there is a term for “the right to privacy,” but that’s a legal term. This idea of solitude is not there. So when I wrote *The Woman Warrior*, I was teaching at a boarding school in Honolulu and we were on-duty 24-hours a day. We lived with the students and we saw them all the time. They would even – oh, I’m remembering there’s a girl who took LSD, and it’s the middle of the night, and she just barges into our bedroom! I wake up, “What is this? There’s somebody here.” Even at night, no privacy. During those years, I had a little table in the living room; in all kinds of goings on, I would be in the corner and I was writing and I was talking to people and I trained myself to write even in the middle of a party or while I was chaperoning them on camping trips. Just let them get lost in the woods [laughter] and I’ll be there; so my model – my role model – had not been so much Virginia Woolf but Jane Austen. I have seen in her living room, just in that same corner, she has a table. It’s a little bit bigger than this table – this stool – and there’s a crack in the middle. And she’s working on her novels but she also has her needlepoint, so if somebody’s coming she puts her needlepoint on top of the writing and pretends that that’s what she’s been doing all along. For some reason, I am most like that. As a writer, when I was a kid, if my parents asked, “What are you doing?” I would say “Oh, I’m doing my homework.” And then when I was writing *The Woman Warrior*, if my husband wanted to know what I was doing I just said, “I’m grading papers.” [laughter] To this day, if I get on the computer, I say, “Oh I’m going to go do my email.” I don’t know what it is, is it the shyness gene? Or what is it that I – I don’t want people to know that I’m doing this – this shameful, wretched activity? [laughter] Maybe I do have a shyness gene. I looked at the words that people put out there, and I was really surprised that I saw so many people write the word shy. I don’t know – well – I don’t know! I am also shy, but I wonder, maybe shy people – we don’t like to talk a lot. But maybe we can write it down. Maybe shyness is part of the talent: that we get to be a writer.

So, having very little privacy in my life, it’s interesting to me to be in this retreat for almost a week ... not interesting – it’s weird for me to be in this retreat [laughter], and so I am experimenting with solitude and aloneness. By the end of the week, I will report to you what privacy feels like. And what I have learned. Okay, now about this motto that we’re all wearing about our necks. “Write against the current.” Okay, so we’re all sort of vowing, and we have this thing around our neck like a stone that says, “Write against the current.” In *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf says that we are enveloped in the spirit of the age. There is no escape from the spirit of the age. And she lives – Orlando now lives – in the age of the British Empire; and when she tries to write, her true words from the inside of her are not coming out. It was not Orlando that spoke but the spirit of the age. Such is the indomitable nature of the spirit of the age that it batters down anyone who tries to make a stand against it far more effectually than those who bend to its own

ways. So she lives in the age of the British Empire and then she comes into this time of the confining Victorian Age. There isn't the freedom that she had when she was a man during the Elizabethan Age. The spirit of the age seeped into her poem and she found her writing getting soggy and dank, and she says, "All of a sudden a gamekeeper arrived in her poem. So what's that? I'm writing like D.H. Lawrence!" [laughter] And, oh, and that connects D. H. Lawrence and *Orlando* – that connects us, because here we are; we're here where D.H. Lawrence and Frieda came. So they were writing all that gamekeeper stuff, all that gamey stuff that Orlando wanted to keep out of her poetry. So here we are soaking up some D. H. Lawrence experience too, and how are we gonna keep that out of our writing? So, here we have Orlando living in the age of the British Empire and there's no getting out of it, and there's no wave of writing differently. So what becomes of us? Women of the American Empire, how are we going to write against the current? Can we write against the current – or should we even try to write against the current? In her next book – the one that comes after *Orlando* – which is *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf tells the women, "Do not write protest. Do not write the novel of protest. Don't protest." But how can we be women of the American Empire and not protest? I do not have an answer to those questions, and please think about this: Maybe by Thursday we're gonna come up with an answer.

(audio file 150811b – 24m 6s)

Please notice that – you know it's very subtle, it's just off-handedly that she writes, so maybe you missed it – Orlando has three, four, five children. We don't know the exact number because she's not paying attention [laughter], and she can't quite remember. Somewhere in there, she can't quite remember the marriage either ... there's some lady named Pepita, maybe they had some kids, very vague. But what we look at, of course, is that Orlando abandons all those children and that was done as a man. He had the children, and he just completely forgets about them and abandons them. But then Orlando has – as a woman – she has a baby! And let's see, I think I have the page where she has the baby; it's just two sentences [laughter]. So I just want to show you it really happened. It's toward the end of the book. Toward the end of the book, she's really relieved because there's been a lawsuit, and it turns out that his marriage to Pepita has been annulled and he's feeling so happy because he doesn't have to pay any child support or inheritance and those children are illegitimate. So, as a woman, Orlando has a baby, and this is told: "It's a very fine boy, m'lady' said Mrs. Banting, the midwife. In other words, Orlando was safely delivered of a son on Thursday, March the 20th at 3 o'clock in the morning." That's the last we hear of this son! [laughter] So, to be a woman, and to write, we must not have any kids.

You know, in her diary, where Virginia writes about Vanessa Bell, the artist, she says "Oh, she's not a great artist. She might have been if she didn't have all those children." And Virginia didn't have any children, so what are we mothers to do? And it's too late. [laughter] And so what are we wives going to do? Even in a happy, perfect marriage, as what Orlando had in a perfect, happy marriage – there are no poems. So if you have your book, turn to page 165 – turn to page 165. On page 165, in there is a blank, blank spot. You see this blank right here? In some editions it's a whole page that's blank. That's how much writing you're going to do if you get married. [laughter] Yeah, yeah. Especially if it's a happy marriage. Because the communication, the communion is so perfect between the two of you, and your minds and souls communicate so well that you don't even need any words; so this is what you end up with. So she's had years of that –

she's really happy, she's so happy. And she doesn't even have to be a writer she's so happy. And then she starts thinking – do we have to make a choice between life and art? And she's thinking about what makes a perfect life. And she says, "Life and a lover, that's all we need for the perfect life. Life and a lover." And then, because the spirit of the age is upon her, her wedding finger starts to itch. And she notices that everybody else are these perfect (married) couples, and she tries to fight it. And she says, "I said life and a lover, not life and a husband!" [laughter] So she's word free at this point, but one day the wind comes up – and her husband had said, *When the wind comes up and the sails go, that's when I will have to leave*. So he jumps on his steed and he rides to the ship, and he's gone, and she's so relieved.

"And she heaved a deep sigh of relief, as indeed well she might, for the transaction between a writer and the spirit of the age is one of infinite delicacy, and upon a nice arrangement between the two the whole fortune of his works depends. Orlando had so ordered it that she was in an extremely happy position; she need neither fight her age, nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself. Now, therefore, she could write, and write she did. She wrote. She wrote. She wrote." (*Orlando*, Virginia Woolf)

So, Orlando finishes "The Oak Tree," and she publishes it. And she wins prizes. It took 300 years. But what are we going to do – who do not have 300 years? Virginia Woolf studied time. She went to the British Museum where the archives of Einstein's papers were kept and she read about relativity and lights and time. And I'm sure she was thinking about "How am I going to get more time?" Orlando ends on the present moment. This nanosecond that we are in right now. You know, this clock that has been striking since the beginning of the book, it keeps ringing throughout the book, and striking and ringing and on and on. And right at the end, the clock strikes, and we are in the present moment. And when the clock strikes, there's a great explosion – the present moment is the big bang.

"Like thunder the stable clock struck 4, never did any earthquake so demolish a whole town. The gallery and all its occupants fell to powder, her own face that had been dark and somber as she gazed was lit as by an explosion of gunpowder. In the same light, everything near her showed with extreme distinctness. She saw two flies circling around and notice the blue sheen on their bodies. She saw a knot in the wood where her foot was, and her dog's ear twitching. At the same time, she heard a bough creaking in the garden, a sheep coughing in the park, a swift screaming past the window. Her own body quivered and tingles as if suddenly stood naked in a hard frost. She noticed the separate grains of earth in the flower beds as if she had a microscope stuck to her eye. She saw the intricacy of the twigs of every tree. Each blade of grass was distinct and the markings of veins and petals." (*Orlando*, Virginia Woolf)

You know that when you try to be very present, and to live right now, and to not miss a thing, that's when you start noticing every grain, every ant. You notice all the details of life, and yet, you would think that that's heaven. That you've already gotten into eternity, and that it's true that eternity and the present are one. And just as you understand that, notice there's this explosion, and everything breaks loose, and we don't know whether what is true and what's really there or not – it's gone. So, Orlando managed to live time in many ways. To live centuries and also to live in this nanosecond of the present, and to live it thoroughly.

So I myself have been experimenting with time, because I am also obsessed by time. To be a writer, it's not enough time, I don't have enough time. How can I also live life fully if I write? Shouldn't I be with my husband and kids? Shouldn't I be enjoying my guests? And do I need to give that up to be a writer? Can I do something about time? So I'm going to tell you about some experiments I'm doing with time. Okay, one of them, I know a lot of people are doing it: Buddhist meditation. The promise there – what we're trying for in meditation – is to get into the present moment, and to live that fully, and to live the present consciously. But the faith is that the present is the only reality: There is no past, and there isn't a future, it's just now. Another way they think about it is the present contains all of the past and the future. So all that we need is the present, and that's the same as eternity. And maybe even Einstein would say that. But that makes it all the more scary when we read *Orlando* and see it all blown apart. Okay, another experiment, and I write about this in *The Woman Warrior*, and that is to make my mind as large as the universe is large and so contain paradox. A practical way for me to think about this: if I know history and I know the history of the human race and the history of many cultures, then I will have lived for all those thousands of years of history that I know. So when I wrote Fa-Mulan, she lived over a thousand years ago. And please notice I write, "I, Fa-Mulan, I am getting my horse and my sword and I'm riding into battle and I'm taking my father's place in battle." And I write about her in the first person, and that's my way of getting her powers. Getting mythic powers. Also, she's a thousand years old, so I just grabbed a thousand years right there. [laughter] Do you know, it's interesting to write in the first person. I'm also hoping that when the reader reads anything in the first person, that the reader also embodies those ideas. What I'm doing now ... I must have some water before I tell you what I'm doing now. [laughter]

I am 74 years old, and I had a great idea that I am writing my posthumous work while I am still alive. And I feel so free saying to myself, *This is not going to be published. If it's going to be published, it'll be 100 years from now.* I already told my agent this, if 100 years from now it can be published; and I feel so free because I am free of form, I am free of critics, I am free of the whole publishing business. And I am free of fashion, the spirit of the age. I am free of trying to write beautifully. I am not going to do that angelic prose anymore, or poetry. And so I feel that – and I'm also letting go of time – and letting go of – and oh, I can die at any moment and it doesn't matter because this book doesn't have to have an ending because it goes in all different forms. And it's going so fast, I'm usually such a slow writer. It takes me a decade a book, but this time – when I'm not worrying about grammar or form or anything – I've already written 1200 pages. And I'm still going!

The last idea about time: I write about time in my book, *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*, which is in poetic form. *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* is a quote from Henry David Thoreau. And when he says, "I love a broad margin," he means he wants a lot of space. But he also means I want a lot of time. I write about a Chinese idea of time. This idea that time is linear and Orlando lives from the Elizabethan Age in a linear way to the Edwardian period, the Victorian period, and all that. That's so British. It's linear! In Chinese time, it's circular – it's not even circular, it can go backwards! It can go backwards; it can go forward. It goes all over the place, it looks more like an infinity sign. There is a myth that poets have that my reader will come a thousand years from now. It's okay if I don't get published next week. Somebody a thousand years from now will read my poem. Notice it's not even a lot of readers; it's just one reader and I'm already happy. You don't have to make the New York Times Best Seller list.

“(Oh, but the true poet crosses eternal distances. Perfect reader, come though 1000 years from now. Poem can also reach reader born 1,000 years *before* the poem, wished into being. Li Bai and Du Fu, lucky sea turtles, found each other within their lifetimes. Oh, the hopes of Chinese time and Chinese poets. You don’t have to be a poet; you live in the turning and returning cosmos this way: An act of love I do this morning saves a life on a far future battlefield. And the surprising love I feel that saves my life comes from a person whose soul somehow corresponding with my soul doing me a good deed 1,000 years ago.)”

There’s one place that’s sort of complicated, so I just want to say this. It’s possible that our reading Virginia Woolf and *Orlando* now is causing Virginia to write it in 1928. So every time we read – whenever we read it – we’re causing her to write it. There’s even a scientific word for this; this is called retrocausation. We can cause things to happen in the past. Okay, so this is so complicated; I’m going to end by just reading those lines again. “(Oh, but the true poet crosses eternal distances. Perfect reader, come though 1000 years from now. Poem can also reach reader born 1,000 years *before* the poem, wished into being. Li Bai and Du Fu, lucky sea turtles, found each other within their lifetimes. Oh, the hopes of Chinese time and Chinese poets. You don’t have to be a poet; you live in the turning and returning cosmos this way: An act of love I do this morning saves a life on a far future battlefield. And the surprising love I feel that saves my life comes from a person whose soul somehow corresponding with my soul doing me a good deed 1,000 years ago.)” [applause]



“Goddess on a Shelf,” by Jennifer Lothrigel

Body II

by Jendi Reiter

I would have to become nobody before I told you these things. Put my soul into a doll. A lampshade with fuzzy tassels on it. I would have to learn to knit for hours. Become someone whose mind was filled with pink stitches. I would have to be a whore on the boulevard. Wash my thighs in the same puddle that the cars rolled over. There is no way I would tell you these things wearing my real hair. I would have to play the piano first, but nothing too difficult. Tunes to sing along. You're the salt in my coffee, the cream in my stew. There are a lot of people I would have to swallow first before you. If I told you these things it would be because I had bought fourteen pounds of ground chuck and the *National Enquirer* this morning. I would not know where meat began or ended. What does it feel like when I tell you these things? Does it feel like taking apart a toy you found in the street? You would have to break your nails on the manhole cover. You would have to grease lazy hands and beg to inspect the sewer. Call me back when the cat scratches your eye. When you have pulled out the heavy spiral of a soldier's intestines and rewound them, when you've unmixed the cream from the porridge and tweezed the sperm out of the imbecile's egg, call me. We'll talk.



“Sisters,” by Marianne Murdoch

CALL ME GIRL

I was looking at the flower bed by the front door; "That is the whole", I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower.

---Virginia Woolf

And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.

---Anais Nin

Unfettered

By Melva Priddy

A meandering god stepped into silence
when I was three years old, settled
and spoke with me inside the dappled edge
of maples, oaks and cedars across the road.
Unfettered, I melded
with dirt, clay, tree trunks and stone.

Doleful and pliant mud, worked from yesterday's rain
which persisted in widening the gully across the front field,
we molded into dishes, laid them aside.
Red clay. Red bowls. Red plates.
Pinched small lumps, rolled them between thumb
and fingertips, peas. Placed them in a bowl.

Between each pea a pause, and my companion
who perhaps had always been with me.
Then, on haunches and mudded feet,
we blessed a bowl and ate.

The grasshopper, the hawk, and the squash vine

By Felice Sea Wyndham

She sat under the plum tree. Gobs of sap had oozed out of the trunk in spots and dried into clear purplish lumps. This garden behind the wattle and daub washroom was overrun with squash plants. Their vines reached up into the lower branches of the plum tree, cascades of orange trumpet blooms along their lines of growth. She had come to feed Henrietta a fat grasshopper, just caught in the long dark green grass in front of the barn. It squirmed in the space between her hands and she checked to make sure there were no gaps between her fingers through which it could squeeze. She could feel the sharp rasp of its chitin feet in the creases of her palm. After releasing the insect into the hawk's expansive inverted-pyramid cage, she stayed, watching the delicate fierceness of Henrietta's snack: the cock of her head to fix the hopper in sight, the easy glide down from a high perch, the grasping of the bright green body in one claw, the curve of her beak slicing through and tossing back first the insect's head, then the rest of it, thorax, legs.

Sitting on her haunches quietly, unmoving, as she knew the bird preferred, she placed her index finger close to an outstretched tendril of a squash runner, touching its light greenness, the underbelly of its curl. She thinks if she can stay still long enough, the tendril will wrap itself around her finger and hold on. She's not sure she has the patience, but she considers herself to be in training for being still, so she sits there without moving. Henrietta wipes her beak from left to right on the bark of her perch, and from right to left, cleaning off a drop of grasshopper juice and part of a leg, which drops to the bottom of her cage. Invisibly, very slowly, over the next forty minutes her finger is taken into the delicate embrace of the squash tendril. When it had barely wrapped itself around her forefinger she was quietly exultant—she had convinced this plant that she, an ambulatory, unreliable animal, was a good support for its slow growth! Then, unwilling to pry herself free of the light green grasp so long in the making, she felt a flicker of panic. How to get out of this contract? Two of the adults drove up to the house at that moment, tires crunching the gravel, closing their car doors and calling out their hellos. Without even deciding to, she stood up, unceremoniously breaking the grasp of the squash, and walked away from the bird in its cage and the vines covering the ground.

Float

By Wendy Miles

1.

An open door.
A child pauses on a step.
Her head turns, lifts to hear
her name float above the yard.
A child is an open door.

The child holds her breath
at the thought of what it means
—her name—stills
to hook it to herself with a bright pin.
A child is a breath.
A name is a bright pin.

2.

A low sink. An open window.
A mother leans at the low sink,
shirt off, breasts pressed to a towel.
Barely audible, Oh, she says, it feels so good
you just can't believe it.
A daughter is an open window, a folded towel.

Shampoo the scent of ginger.
Warm water pours from a plastic cup,
spreads along the mother's pink crown,
neck, around creases at the backs of ears.
The daughter breathes in the mother.
Water dribbles from the chin,
from the daughter's fingers.

A mother is a low sink, warm water.
Animal, Animalis: to have breath.
Love is a plastic cup. Love is a breath.

House Dolls

By Salud Mora Carriedo

housework was everything
in the world of nena's dolls
until one day
came a visitor who talked
of dolls

 stitching wounds
 baking highways
 cooking up bills and rules
 and dishing out
 their revolutions

since then nena's dolls
have been restless—
asking questions on
what's been going on
beyond their fence

today
nena dresses up the dolls
in shirts and pants
and sends them
out of the house

Eagle Girl

By Claire McCabe

We inhale the scent of the stable
horse sweat, hay, leather,
incense linking my childhood
to my daughter's.

She kisses Feather's velvet nose
as she buckles the bridle.
The grey gelding shifts his feet,
accepts the weight of the saddle.

I hoist her up, then lead
the pair into sunshine.
We both exclaim at
the bald eagle overhead.

Here, miles from the bay,
the raptor soars above our woods,
graces our day
with majesty and awe.

*Let's name him, she trills.
He spirals higher, a pinpoint.
We can't, I say. He's not like Feather.
He'll never wear a bridle or do our bidding.*

The raptor vanishes into the blue swath of sky,
guarding his fragile freedom.
*I'll call him eagle, then. She pauses.
And please, just call me girl.*

Kittens

By Chloe DeFilippis

The last time my sister hopped the fence to get a ball from our neighbor's yard, one of the kittens we'd been tracking was dead. Its black furred body was deflated. White foam crusted at the edges of its mouth. Mama told us to stay away from those cats—that their constant hissing meant rabies. We didn't listen. We weren't supposed to hop the fence either. When our old neighbors moved, we were forbidden from that backyard, where weeds grew as tall as our garage. We weren't even allowed to ring the doorbell. Mama warned, *The same man never comes out twice*. I didn't know what she meant.

Victoria never got the ball. The surviving kittens, their mama rushed her. Victoria ran fast, pushed herself over the wooden fence, and landed on our picnic table, panting. She looked at me, dark brown eyes wide: *Ma was right*.

For the next month, we watched more kittens die, on the same patch of concrete where they were born. The new neighbors let the bodies rot until Mama had enough and called animal control. A man with gloves came with a black garbage bag. I wasn't allowed to watch as he took them all away.

Space Invaders

By Roxanna Bennett

Childhood: recurring UFO's illuminated her nights, ladders
swung from stratospheric heights, detached manner
of the doctors who sliced and examined her
small parts, cataloguing ribs, spine, clavicle, femurs
in their labelled containers, cubed the meatier
bits, murmured over their findings before the cure
and connect, numb reconstruct, then the body's transfer
to the bed miles below. She always woke up tender
but whole. Years later she watched cinema aliens plunder
an abductee with crude three fingered tools, the actor's
Oscar nominated scream of wide mouthed terror
foreign to her own dim memory of the operating chamber.
Disturbed she conferred with her medical practitioner
who gently referred her to a licensed counsellor
trained to erase the layers of lies the brain's projectors
play behind the eyes, the clever mind protector
of the wordless young who storyboard horror
they can't comprehend, recast uncles, fathers,
as characters, kindly doctors, space invaders;
they never meant to leave these permanent scars.

Someone Blundered—

By Leonore Hildebrandt

For nothing was simply one thing.

Virginia Woolf

While father paces and declares,
mother takes a moment by the window.
In her own room, the girl finds
that words are emboldened
by the sounds of waves—
the other Lighthouse was true too.

Here the picture wants a daub—
perhaps this time it is their boat.
The girl is bent over its bow,
looking into the water's turquoise depths,
the rockweed swaying, effortless—
it is one way of knowing.

Later her words will touch the shores
of those who blundered—
those who used them for money,
failed to think and feel before writing them into laws,
locked them into dictionaries
where they don't live.

Solitary Prism

By Kathleen Hellen

—at the House of Inscriptions, Little Moreton Hall, Aug. 3, 1649

in this custom of the bride—a girl The beautiful gardens
encircling The trefoils and the quatrefoils as
rings inside of rings The long gallery where the Queen herself had danced

The magnificent bay where panes were scored on upper-storey windows
The “a” looks like an “o”

As though her hand had wavered at the window A girl
no more than fourteen, with skills to read A girl
served up like tea in curtained rooms to the avuncular
To games of noughts and crosses

gambled Who she was before she
signed as Margaret, *Mrs.*, as daughter of the house was still unsure::
*“man can noe more know,
womens myndes by tears, than by her
shadow judge what clothes shee weares”*

As though the diamond she had used was
ballast weight
The scratch on glass less autograph

Three-Legged Foal

By Yania Padilla Sierra

Who built this pen I am kept in?
Stark and sterile, no tender grass
For my tender mouth.
No sweet bales to lie on.
Run I would, if walk could I.
I am a three-legged foal.

In the amniotic ocean
A lovely cinder Venus was I,
'til Father cracked his whip, splitting the mare
And in so doing was I.
Mare a gnashing Fury in her anguish.
I proffered my leg-Mother, maim I.

Now hobbled and lamed
from aery to root
An unclean spirit am I.
Oh Father, pray for
The insatiable monster, I.

For I will not eat grass but men heavier of foot more broken than I
Open the paddock unlock the gate run from the whips that their brute hands would hold
Break necks break spirits
like promises like love

I am cobbled together
by so many sins,
Like so many since.

Lathered and wild-eyed,
Remembered the Way have I.

I am the three-legged foal.

The Gift of Veneer

By Melva Sue Priddy

-after Li-Young Lee

To keep me facing the hole in the veneered door
hung just that week in our two year old bathroom
where none had hung before, he sat on the side of the bed
and pulled me between his legs. Had you entered, then,
you would have thought you saw a man who cared.

“You see that door. You see that hole.” I was transfixed
his voice so unexpectedly careful; I looked into his brown eyes.
I had cried for hours, my list of chores forgotten.
I’d already heard everything, anticipated the yelling,
the whipping, the money taken from my milk check.
My sister had locked the door and refused to come out,
my foot crushed through on the second kick.
I wanted the whipping—just hush and get it over with.

“Some day you will have a house
with a nice bathroom door.
He pointed. I cried anew.
And I will come visit you.
And do you know what I am gonna do.
I’m gonna kick a hole in your door.
Do you understand me.”

No spanking, no money taken.
Never replaced, the door hung wounded.
His words followed me every move,
apartment, house, and every mistake
the rest of my life. I studied each
bathroom door thinking, in the end,
how brittle veneer can be.

La Guapa

By Marianela Medrano

No one has ever seen a Ciguapa, but Grandma and Grandpa told me the story so many times that it became reality. Tia Ceci, Mami and Papi, told it to me so many times that it got recorded in my cells the way important things are recorded. If you don't believe me, ask Nelly. She also heard the same story. The two of us listened as if there was nothing else to do in the world but to sit down and listen.

Nelly and I have seen the Ciguapa. The first time, we were playing under the thatch eaves of our house, gathering goat droppings to make a stew. We collected the animal pellets for cooking in the clay pots we made with Mami. We walked around bent with a cupped hand and the other picking up the droppings as if they were treasures. At that time Mattel did not exist in our world, nor had the furor of plastic touched us. We made believe that the pellets were beans that we cooked together with the white flowers of Yerba Amarga we used as rice. That was before Mami let us use the colorful seeds of the annatto and the morsels clinging to the pot after the rice was cleaned for the main meal. She was standing there looking at us with a smile on her face.

The girl with feet pointing backwards and long hair covering her naked body stared at us with eyes so black they seemed bottomless. Her feet left footprints into which Nelly and I stepped with ours. Since that day, every evening we would go in pursuit of Ciguapa's tracks. It was a time when we were amused by everything—unlike now when we are so different and we don't know what to say to each other anymore. Now that Miami's heat and New England's cold separate us, we hardly recognize each other.

The Ciguapa, moody and sullen, could turn anyone who looked into her eyes into stone, except Nelly and me. La Guapa looked at us with sad eyes and instead of turning us into stone she made us more human. We used to leave the two-pane window open to cool down the room after it was baked in the sun all day. She began to appear in our window. That's how we lost the fear of the night and the spirits of the dead we imagined lurking in the shadows.

In the darkness Nelly and I used to look through the open window, looking for lights or spirits of dead *jupías*, which according to Mami cross the dark edge of the night. Every time a light appeared we used to shout together, "Who's there? Show your navel right now!" We knew that if it was the spirit of the dead it would run because they have no navels. At least that's what Mami told us. We knew that the Ciguapa was not dead because she parted her long hair covering her naked body and showed us her navel. Nelly and I would stare in shock and then go back to sleep saying the beads of the rosary in our hands to ward off evil spirits and keep bringing la Ciguapa back.

Nelly and I realized that Señó Laura was a Ciguapa long before what happened happened. Señó Laura's eyes changed forever after her husband ran away with a young girl from El Cayal. La Señó Laura was skinny and taught us to write letters in perfect form, but sometimes in the middle of class her eyes would travel far, become sad and empty; I looked at her and I too would be sad. Later I told Nelly about her and she too began to get sad when she looked at La Señó's eyes.

La Señó Laura turned into a Ciguapa way before the girl from El Cayal. The first time her eyes took on that power which turned everyone into stone, except Nelly and me, was after her husband fooled around with Fefa, the *bachatera* who sang in the club at the end of the evening. Fefa was tall and wore colored wigs and perfumes that enchanted men. Fefa played the accordion

as a goddess and inflamed the audience with her perico ripiao about betrayal and pleasure. I have forgotten the lyrics of her songs, but I do remember very well the musty smell of bats in the club where we did the veladas. I loved to hide behind the curtain to see Fefa shine on stage lit by kerosene lamps.

My sisters got the shows ready at the club. Nelly always played the role of the weeping woman in the dramas. In one of them she played the wounded woman who recited a list of names of others with whom her boyfriend had betrayed her. In the end, Nelly fell to the floorboards and died of grief by saying the name of Petra, "the most evil of all," as the last line called for. The curtain came down and Nelly would come back to life. It was the last show we did before we moved to the city, when Nelly wrote the drama about the names of women. She wrote it right before she learned to look at the sadness in the eyes of La Seño.

La Seño Laura used to strip in the middle of class causing a commotion and we would gather around her to give her cover. Her eyes became sadder and darker. La Seño had long black hair, the blackest in the village. She looked like an Indian, with soft skin, the color of honey. The second time she had a fit and suffered a patatú, she was suspended from school, before we even learned to write properly.

After that we got used to the heckling voices on the road following the thin body of Seño, covered only by her jet black hair, not as bright as before, because after the girl from el Cayal came and left with Seño's husband she did not bathe or eat or sleep.

Over time the boys fell into following her as entertainment shouting all the way "Crazy Ciguapa that went to Moca and left her children eating mocas!" The last time we saw her she was on her way to the lagoon, followed by the group of boys pelting her with stones, shouting, "Crazy Ciguapa who went to Moca!" Nelly and I could not keep quiet and went after the boys. When our backs were turned to the lagoon we missed seeing Seño Laura slipping into the depths. As we turned, Nelly and I found the tips of her feet pointing out while her body was sinking to the bottom.

At night a luminous figure used to emerge from the lagoon and come to our window. Nelly and I would not ask her to show us her navel because we knew she was not a Jupia but a Ciguapa Guapa.

Glossary:

Ciguapa is a mythic creature of Dominican folklore, with feet pointing backwards and long hair covering her naked body.

Guapa means brave and its also a nickname for Ciguapa.

Mattel is a toy brand popular in the Dominican Republic

Yerba Amarga: A common herb in the Dominican Republic.

Jupía: Spirit of the dead for the taino people.

El Cayal: Name of a rural town in Northwest of Dominican Republic.

Perico Ripiao: The oldest version of the Dominican Merengue genre.

Veladas: Pageants

Bachatera: A singer of Bachata music.

Moca: Name of a town. Moca, is also used here in a colloquial way for Mosca (fly). The line is from a children's song used to tease a mad person.

Sunday Morning

By Jeanne Bryner

Mama stands blotting her red lipstick
and the tired Bible waits on our gray
kitchen table. We have a nickel
for the collection plate. We whine
because Ben gets to carry the nickel.
Ben will drop it, we say. Mama is firm.
We wear strawberry pink dresses, the boys wear
blue sailor suits. Bacon grease is Mama's scent.

Nancy scrapes cornmeal mush into Sam's bowl,
he gulps. Glass lies broken in the trash
and blood stains dry on our green couch.
Sunday morning means the end of Saturday night
pain. Mama buttons her aqua seersucker skirt.
She glides like a wave from the ocean,
presses tan make-up over her left shiner,
and her ice bag sweats on the toilet.

My Mama sings softly beneath her wide-brimmed
straw hat, *Oh come to the church in the wildwood*.
Mrs. Harvey points at my Mama, and the brown suit
preacher pounds his Methodist pulpit
screaming about hell's fury. . . .

My Mama's hair shines, the color of honey.
She quiets my brothers. My Mama's pancake make-up
melts from all this talk of hell.
Her left eye's a slit under a purple avalanche,
and purple is the color for the church,
the color for royalty.

My Father on His Deathbed

By Cynthia Robinson Young

...except he didn't have one.
His deathbed was an alley street,
far away from comfort.
He was abandoned,
lonely,
confused, staring at a
needle he had anchored into his arm,
not meaning to draw his life out. Staring into streetlights
until they become stars, he
wonders what will happen next
In a world he believed he created with his family, and now
believes
the drugs have destroyed.

I, on my twin bed,
across from my sister,
hear the doorbell ring at four in the morning,
see it is still dark as the night before,
recognize even then
the sound of the insistent knock
of Death's Messenger.

My mother, in her empty marital bed,
reaches out
to no one, then awakens
to grief
and an expectancy of
this visit,
these policemen,
this news,
this ending
that was always on its way to
our doorstep.

Sweater Girl

By Darlene Taylor

I rocked my knees, trying not to pee on myself. Thunder rattled the basement windows. Rain seeped through cracks, glistening on the wall like wet glue. I crossed my legs, uncrossed them, and crossed them again. Unable to hold it any longer, I stood.

Girl, Mama said.

I need the bathroom, I said. It was a good excuse. When the lady at the Woolworth counter in Richmond said toilets were for Whites only, I heard Mama say children can't hold their fluids.

I let my eyes drop and bent my head like at the church altar.

Sit down, Mama said. Lord doing his work.

I flopped into the chair beside my brother Todd. A blast of thunder knocked at the windowpane. I covered my ears, and asked, what's he working on?

Irritated, Mama pointed to the bathroom.

I ran in case she changed her mind and did my business quick. When I returned to the room, Mama's head was down, her hands rested one across the other in her lap, palms upwards as if holding a communion wafer. The overhead light shone on mama's pressed hair. A curl pulled away from her temple as if it were too tired to hold its place. Occasionally her head jerked up.

Todd rolled a toy tractor back and forth across his knees, puffing his cheeks out in play. As soon as I sat, Todd tossed the truck to me.

Devil child, Mama said to me.

I'm sorry, I said to Todd, Mama, and God. Silently I asked God to put it in Mama's heart to buy me the new sweater I wanted.

Hissing, his eyelids folded back, and top teeth exposed like a vampire, Todd teased me.

Mamma's quick hand squeezed his knee. I knew that hold. He wouldn't move again. Not until the storm ended.

You think I don't see you? Mama asked.

I knew Mama saw things even when she wasn't there. She said children needed watching. So, God watched and told her everything. God was everywhere.

Wind whipped outside the window; God's whisper. God, I whispered back, I need a sweater. Pink like Santa's cheeks. A pretty pink sweater to wear to school. Pink, fastened with pearl buttons like the ones the white girls wore. If I had a pretty pink sweater, they wouldn't make fun of my clothes and wouldn't call me mean names.

I watched the window and listened, my arms crossed my chest, warming me. If I'm good, if I'm good, maybe I can have that sweater.

Angels and Saints

By Chloe DeFilippis

She kissed her hand then placed it on the foot of a saint. She lit a votive candle. I did the same. On either side of St. Michael's Church were tall, plaster statues of Jesus, Mary, and the saints. As a little girl, I thought they'd come to life. I thought this trick—kissing the foot, lighting the candle—meant what my mother told me: *If you pray to a saint, they'll listen*. I thought this was *especially* true if the church was empty. We didn't attend mass, but after CCD, my mother whispered, "Let's sneak in for a second." In unison, we dipped our fingers in holy water, crossed ourselves, and tiptoed past the pews to our saints. During my early childhood, those somber-faced beings seemed to belong to us, as if our secret prayers solidified a sacred bond, one that was strong enough to make my mother tear as she rose from her knees. I believed in angels more than I believed in God then. I believed they were in the speckles of sunlight that shone through the stained glass windows. And I believed they could tell me what was wrong, what the saints were saying that made my mother cry.

Because We Never

By Emily Geminder

never in cars never on a dare never in the back room of
somebody's basement never playing never have I ever
never once except once because I didn't think it was so
bad but they said it was bad because those sluts they
would know

those sluts meaning had sex meaning car riding glitter
jeweled meaning nelly was cool hot in herre looping all
summer on the radio because they said really it was bad
because we all sang along because now I was a slut too
so take off all your clothes

because a year before it happened the thing that could
never happen because a year before it happened there
was that girl in our town there were the five guys one
from our school whispers they held her down because I
thought it wasn't the worst thing that could happen *not*
like you'd die because you wouldn't die if it happened
dark wouldn't come crashing down never once would
you die if it happened

because it could never happen not to me and because if
it did because it never would but if it did I wouldn't
die because we weren't dying weren't unpacked from
our skin weren't dreaming our deaths like little puffs of
smoke not never not once because we weren't dying
weren't floating up above our bodies weren't scattering
our light like ashes

Spring

By Chloe Honum

Mother tried to take her life.
The icicles thawed.
The house, a wet coat
we couldn't put back on.

Still, the garden quickened,
the fields were firm.
Birds flew from the woods'
fingertips. Among the petals

and sticks and browning fruit,
we sat in the grass and
bickered, chained daisies, prayed.
All that falls is caught. Unless

it doesn't stop, like moonlight,
which has no pace to speak of,
falling through the cedar limbs,
falling through the rock.

In a Shark's Mouth

By Nicole Lacy

Someone once told me about the man-eating muskies in Lake Erie. Someone else swore there were snapping turtles big enough to take off toes and fingers. I stopped swimming, even though Grandma assured me that the stories of pikes picking off Great Lakes waders were myths. But because I was a curious girl, it wasn't long before I learned about the bull shark, which can swim from the ocean and into a river, squeezing itself into a narrow creek bed, because it knows that children are an easy meal.

What is a myth? It is the lie that hides a vicious fact.

Once, on a Sunday afternoon, my mother took me to the natural history museum. We saw the skeletons of giant fish containing smaller skeletons in their see-through bellies. There were fish with fanged underbites that could have gutted entire ships. I stood in front of the fossilized jaw of a megalodon, its body longer than two school buses. One of its teeth was bigger than my mother's whole hand.

A megalodon could have swallowed a great white, even *Jaws*. Against Grandma's advice, I watched *Jaws* over and over. In time, I memorized the details of each attack and no longer covered my eyes when children were eaten. I watched *Jaws* until my brain grew serrated teeth of its own.

Saturated with facts, the ground dissolved underneath me. I was alone in the ocean while a shark sliced through the depths, preparing a fatal strike from below.

Some nights before bed, a plastic shark swam circles around me in my bath, its dorsal fin surfacing briefly before disappearing under the bubbles. When it went in for the kill, I clamped its teeth onto my flesh until fear surged through my body, and I had to pull the plug from the drain.

Someone once gave me a pop-out poster for *Jaws* that leapt when unfolded. I closed it against my face, feeling the cardboard teeth sink into my skin. I imagined being dragged underneath the ocean in a shark's mouth. I still wonder what it would be like to die in this way—suffocated and torn apart all at once.

Sharks wander dark water without fearing for their lives, and never shed tears when their mothers disappear. I set out to become one, absolute in my indifference. But I'm adrift in this ocean, waiting, as shadows move underneath.

What is a fact? It is the secret a grandmother keeps, or a silhouette underwater. It is something as real as the tooth of a megalodon—or my mother, waving goodbye after our trip to the natural history museum, once, on a Sunday afternoon.

The Difference Between a Child and Offspring

By Melva Sue Priddy

The muddy-hoofed sow farrows
on her side, fastened in the log pen,
a wooden gate shoved up to fasten her in.
She heaves and grunts. "Climb in,"
he orders and I slip to the ground beside her.
If she tried, she couldn't see her other end,
the swollen vulva swollen.
And they will birth from that end,
this year's litter. "She'll eat them all,"
he says. "Take this feed sack and swipe
each pig's snout so it can breath
then tip it in to nurse."

Her many pink tipped teats engorge
in two rows pointing toward me.
Into my left hand he shoves a tobacco stick

then leaves for another chore. I look at the space
above the sow; no room to swing should she turn
on me, white skinned and pig scented.

Tulip Girl

By Michel Wing

They said, *Ignore her.*
Shut the door. Give up this hunt.
What matters, one pebble in a wall of stone,
one cry in a torrent of sound?

But tulip girl, I see you, dark tips skirted round,
your bruised petals dancing in night.
No matter how cold the garden, cruel the hoe,
there you are, glory, spark, shine.

Ordinary Sophie

By Karen Heuler

I don't need to stand out in a crowd.

The others do, of course; they want to be special. No one who "wants" to be special is special. The special want something specific.

I find wanting to be repulsive; the neediness drags people down, puts weights on their legs; they can't get free of it.

I exist; I touch things; I move on.

I am 16 and no one else in my family is 16 right now; I have them all beat.

My sister Rita wants too much and she gets it; that may be the only flaw in my argument; people who want things shouldn't get them because it's crass and ugly. I am a Marxist; everything equally. Love and affection, too, given out in a specific dosage so no one is left wondering what to do with this excess of affection thrown my way, not that anyone throws it my way. And I'm grateful for that. It's best to wait for someone else to step forward because then you're not attached, and all these attachments degrade people, make them look at themselves all the time, which is what Rita does, collecting mirrors and bright new shoes that click on the floor so everyone always looks up to see what that noise is. She looks like she's just eaten ice cream, always.

You unwrap these people, taking off their clicking shoes, and there's nothing.

Safety

By Kimarlee Nguyen

I do not know where I can go.

When I was eleven, I climbed to the top of the concrete shed in the backyard and looked down. The dirt was in a pile a few feet below me but I imagined it as the end of a deep, deep valley. I was wearing a hand-me-down dress from my cousin who is much skinnier than I was (or ever will be) and the elastic waist cut deep into my stomach. I pulled down the straps, knotted twice so that my chest wouldn't show because I already had boobs that was big enough to make all the neighborhood boys next door call me a slut.

I was eleven and already I hated myself.

The day before, I rode my bike for over an hour along the boardwalk of the local beach. I rode fast, faster than the driving by cars with the men with their too loud mouths and all the women who told me, *watch what you eat, watch where you walk, you're already too goddamn fat.*

Two days before that, I got my period for the first time, a deep red rose of blood blossoming all over my yellow shorts and my oldest male cousin pointed and laughed and laughed until Yeiy found out, slapped him upside his head and told him to shut the fuck up. She made me take a long bath and when Ma got home, she told me never to play with the boys at night anymore.

I was eleven, but I could be fifteen, twenty-five, forty and I sat on top of that concrete shed, ankles crossed. I wanted to be flat, flatten all my curves so no one would notice me. I wanted to still be a girl, just like my baby cousin, just six, just a girl screaming and shouting and dancing at night.

I cannot breathe. I walk home from art club or when Yeiy and I take the train home from Chinatown, I carry a razor blade in my pocket, I look around every corner and hope that today is not the day when it happens.

You are a woman now, they all say. You have to watch everywhere and anywhere.

Today, I read the news. It is not safe for women, men, old, young, black, yellow, red, straight, gay, poor, rich. It is not safe.

It is not safe and I am holding onto anything because if I look down, there is dirt and it says my name, it says come here, it's the only place where it is safe.

Safe.

I am thirty years old and I am holding on to whatever I can because if I let go, if I try to let go, if they know I am letting go, if letting go is the only way to be safe, then the concrete shed crumbles and headfirst, I am burying myself in the cold, deep dirt.

Fat Girl

By Melissa Grossman

I carry the weight of being a fat girl.
I bear the indelible sledgehammer taunts:
 my brothers call me "tank"
 people say, "how beautiful" I'd be if I "just lost weight."
I wear the weight like battle armor, swallow my anger.

I carry the raw egg of my future on a spoon.

Kitchens

By Michel Wing

Bread cut in thick slabs,
warmth pooling the butter.

Swirled peaks of meringue,
the lemon tart, sweet.

Dinners of simple leftovers,
always enough for one more.

The kitchens of
childhood friends
opened wide for me.

I entered hungry
for mothering,
left full-bellied,
whole.

Driving Home

By *Melissa Grossman*

She haunts me, this young woman I drove home one evening.
Wan with hollow cheeks and mussed blond hair that fell over her face,
she kept me captive in my car, told stories about the room
she rented in a big house where no one talked to her.
She stared at a box of Girl Scout cookies on the floor by her feet,
so I gave her one. Watched her from the corner of my eye,
hold it to her mouth with both hands, like a mouse.
We arrived at the house where she lived, and I waited for her
to open the car door, but she kept talking and talking and talking -
wanting something from me I was afraid to give.
A half-hour later, she finally opened the door, then
turned back to look at me and said *thank you*.
As she stepped out, I grasped the steering wheel, relieved
to drive away. A startling knock on the window made me stop.
She was still there, bending down to say *thank you* again,
but I knew she was really saying, *please*.

Downed Limb

By Karen Skolfield

The deer's eating an oak limb as if it were a salad
or something juicier, strawberries with crème fraîche.
Evidence of early winter's hunger.
The leaves papery brown, exact color of the deer.
It looks like it's eating itself, working away
at its shoulder, not even glancing up.
When we consume ourselves,
we think no one cares enough to watch.
The girl in high school who carved "gypsy"
into her arm with her own blood font –
well, everyone had one of those classmates,
her eyes more drawn each day
until she vanished and we, her not-really-friends
from French, would briefly wonder.
It never occurred to us to express our adolescent
warblings of compassion or cross into the world
of adults and ask them to look up.
Across the road, there's half a deer.
Just the front half, with no drag marks
for the back half through the snow.
Perhaps another doe that began consuming
herself and couldn't quit. Or she thought
someone would stop for her, eventually,
a truck driver with a great big heart.
He'd call out: Deer, you don't have to do that.
You've got my attention. I see you. I see you.
I see you.

Bouncers

By Linda Melick

Mother made me and brother
go out to the apple orchard
to pick up all the bouncers.

The farmer got the good fruit,
but we could have the leavings.

We dragged them home
in a beggared wooden barrel
that reeked of wine.

She would sigh at them
as she cut the bruises out
with a small sharp knife.

Then she peeled their skins off
in one continuous piece.

We snatched up
these spirals,
pockmarked arcs
of red and green,
we tried to extend them
on top of the table,
pressing the loops into lines
to find who had the longest.

When we got too loud,
Mother would smack us
with a stiff rubber spatula
that she kept by the stove.

I got hit the hardest
because I was the oldest.
But I never cried.

I went out to the orchard
and kicked up the dust.
Then I made piles of stones
into pyramids of power,
which I pitched
at my brother
when he came out to find me,

his face full of tears.

Ethel Finds Money

By Karen Heuler

My adopted sister Ethel sat opposite me at the dinner table, waiting for the food to arrive in the multicolored bowls Mom had gotten long ago, to cheer Ethel up and encourage her to eat. Ethel was humming to herself, kicking her legs back and forth; I could tell because her body rocked rhythmically. She often did it. She picked up her fork, examined it, and put it down. My father came in from the garage, cupped his hand over Ethel's head (she always looked up, grinning) and sat down. There was a paper in his hand, as usual. My mother didn't allow anyone to read at the table, but she was still in the kitchen.

There was salad and bread already on the table, and a container of milk, which I began to study—Gilbert Santiago, aged 2. His hair had been wetted down and parted. He wore a short-sleeved white shirt and clip-on bowtie poking out from between his suspenders. He had probably just stopped crying when the picture was taken.

Mom came in with a platter of meat and a bowl of mashed potatoes, slipping them onto the table, seating herself with satisfaction, flipping open her napkin, and bowing her head. "Grace," she said, her hands clasped together. "Bless us O Lord," she began, prompting us to join her. She heard two voices, not three, and looked over to Ethel, who was unfolding a twenty-dollar bill.

"Where'd you get that?" my mother asked.

"It was in my pocket," she said. It was crinkled beyond her ability to smooth it out, but she kept flattening it with the palm of her hand.

"How did it get in your pocket?" my father asked quietly and I smiled, my head lowered.

Ethel heard something in his tone and frowned with concern. "Is it my birthday?"

"No. It's not your birthday. How did it get in your pocket?"

She looked anxiously from face to face, all of them with serious looks. Even mine was serious. "I don't know," she said. "It was just there." Her mouth began to hang low and a little air of gloom settled on her shoulders. "I found it," she said. "I found it."

"Well," my mother said finally. "People lose money and people find money. You're a lucky little girl." She picked up the platter, moved off a slice of meat, then passed it to my father. "Eat up now." Dinner was quiet, with the twenty-dollar bill settled next to Ethel's plate like a napkin. She left it there after dinner as she went off to her coloring book before bed. I left it there as I cleared the table.

Mothers

By Chloe DeFelippis

green eyes & her mother's
television echoing, she's
learned to sleep on the couch.

greens eyes & her mother's
brown bags full, she
collects packets of salt, pepper, ketchup.

green eyes & her mother's
handwriting on index cards, she
cries when shredding paper.

green eyes & her mother's
dead infant daughter, she's
learned to walk away from
needy little girls
sad & alone.

Tanka for Precious and Angie and Vivian, in Particular

By M. Nzadi Keita

Daffodils name you
'home of delicate things.' They
know your yellow mind.
Pollen trumpets secretly
nod. Hear them open their throats?

On Shawano Lake

By Lora Keller

I wrap an orange life jacket around my shoulders
like a crusty stole. You thread the loose canvas tie
through the two silver rings at my waist
and tug it tight, twice. It's my turn,

my one time all year to be alone with you.
Your sons are still asleep and jealous.
Your other daughter is afraid of worms.
Our Evinrude fractures the quiet morning

and soon we stop at the edge of a lily pad acre.
We float and lure perch from their liquid field.
I imagine a stroll across the smooth green,
swaying carpet, sunfish darting

beneath my navy blue Keds, through their foggy
jungle of shimmying stems. Your reel hums
and clicks. I flounder for the perfect question
that would open you to me.

A loon cry echoes. Water softly rubs the aluminum
dinghy. You cast your line again. The black lead weight
arcs through the dark, dawn sky and steers the sheer
fishing line to the pike's cool, still lair. At your feet,

a rusted tackle box sparkles with your arsenal –
minnows, spinners, spoons. I wait for a splash
of golden tail, any glance from you,
even a call to pull anchor.

Your cigar seasons the lake air. I watch the bobber
at the end of my bamboo pole -- the red half
submerged, the white half lifted, alert
to all nibbles.

Space

By Lisa Rosenberg

My father brought home
the blue-jacketed,

government-issued
views of the surface

of the moon. Parsed,
printed, and bearing

the crosshairs of our optics
on mottled fields

where illusion made
bubbles of craters

as we watched; my small
body tracking

toward a moon-cycle
still years away. Toward

wings I would seek
to merit, and a paper

to confirm my degree
in postulating the deep

workings of a universe
but not the world

who sings to us first, before
the logic of reason.

Before speech. Equations
forged in the engines

of memory. Hot interiors
of moments that meld

thought to muscle,
and words to thought.

My Father's Coat

By Christy O'Callaghan-Leue

I pull your unwanted Army green dress coat from a box of crap sent home with us and lay it on my bed, bodiless, discarded because it no longer fit. Angry because you spoke to my brother's history class but wouldn't walk five doors down the hall to speak to mine. Typical. I remove the patches one of your wives had lovingly sewn. Airborne Ranger. Special Forces. I cut stitch after tight stitch with my grandmother's tiny foldable scissors.

With each snip, I count the hours squandered over you. The afternoons planted on the side steps, itchy in a church dress, planning discussion topics you'd enjoy, excited for my special day with dad. You not showing up unless my brothers came too. Weekend visits I slept squished on a triple decker bunk bed with three half-sisters in an insignificant room of your military housing. The extra bedroom reserved for your painted soldier collection. My brothers sleeping in the living room so you can wake them early for adventures, while I get left behind. Free childcare to give your sweet, exhausted third wife a break.

Never once a sorry.

My stitches quick and loose, I decorate the coat with buttons and patches my friends and I collected. "Mean People Suck", stuff about the environment, The Misfits, Dead Kennedys, a red ribbon.

The coat is heavy and thick as I pull it over my shoulders. I push perfect gold buttons through perfect holes and hug the lapels together. Breathe in what I guess is your scent, although you never let me close enough to learn it. I stand in front of the mirror at the foot of my bed and turn side to side, admiring my handiwork and smirking at the reactions I anticipate. Your pissed off face. About to call my brothers in to show them...I stop and take off the coat.

I exhale excitement in a jagged breath and inhale dread. I'd be ok with your yelling and screaming, even hitting, at least you'd be paying attention to me, but if you saw how I desecrated your pride it would be worse. Crueler. To you I would no longer exist. Even the slightest scraps of love would vanish.

Damn it.

I swear low enough so no one will hear me. Hating myself for being so stupid. Pathetic. A child yearning for a father. But I know you. I gather your patches into a shoe box and push it under my canopy bed as far back as my fingertips stretch.

My buttons and patches left on your coat, I place it on a hanger, shroud it with its white dry-cleaning bag and hang it at the far end of the bar in my closet. I shove my shirts and jackets in front of it, hiding what I've done from brother's snooping eyes and tattletale mouths.

There it will stay, haunting the closet until my mom sells the house seven years later.

The Third Thing

By Kathleen Kelly

Grandma Agnes, like me,
believes all things bad
come in threes.

My father's recovered
love of whiskey, Uncle Virgil's
violet eyes in milky disguise, the May twister churning

at our cellar door. Hinges contorting
like Comaneci's saltos
and somersaults.

Grain silos gouged, groaning—
holding their sides.
The auger mangled.

Yet her sweet peas
survive, thrive even, tendrils
twine in lazy daisy

curlicues--like her precise
French knots. We shell the peas,
a colander nestling

between my freckled knees.
Her legs laced
with spider veins, calaminated

mosquito bites.
I don't want
to disrupt the quiet,

to burden her
with my trip to the pawn shop, hocking
her white on blue cameo, or about

the third thing, unintended,
not yet showing.

Bonfire Girls

By Roxanna Bennett

My abortion your whatever, iceberg.
Sometimes boys are ways to mark
a space with caution tape, identical parks,
collapsible homes, your bluebird
this ghost word. We're adrift in an ocean
of fuck. Your orbit slow motion,
I am weeks without weather.
You storm soaked, late, heavy, never
gaining traction. Stuck, stuck, but sometimes
hurricanes in mason jars. Blame Mercury
for summer's dark porches, moth-eaten memory.
Once kissed but all signs point to planets aligned
against these floes, moments, the hidden unloved parts.
Bonfire girls with melted boots and fragile hearts.

Trash Day

By Therése Halscheid

This is how it really looked long ago....

This is myself back in time, a girl
with sallow skin, dragging metal cans to the curb,
notice how I stand for awhile that far from our house
watch how my lips, bright as scars, are parting
open with words so the great air can take them
out of their mystery --

see how my thoughts form the storms, how the morning sky
fills with dark sentences

always something about aphasia, his dementia,
something always about my father caught
so quiet inside me

that would rise in the wind to become
something readable.

I am only fourteen. But you can tell I look old
as if life is ending. Notice how my limbs droop so
willow-like over the trash, see how the cans
are all packed with food, know I am starving myself, I am
that full of my father.

These are our neighbors, each turning in their sleep as they wake,
each waking as they turn from their room to the window
watching the weather above them.

And this is an image of the whole town in shock.
See how they dread my gray hovering grief, just watch
as they walk, how they carry on with the endless clouds
I made weekly, correctly, so very awful and coming
into their eyes.

Chicharon

By Salud Mora Carriedo

Bisaya

Chicharon

(Kilab Nga Sugilanon)

“Chicharon! Chicharon! Tag-baynte ang pak!”

“Tagai ko’g usa, Day,” matud sa babayeng miduol.

“Hutda na lang ni, Nang, para makauli na ko. Tulo singkuenta na lang.”

Gibayran sa babaye ang dalagita. Nagsuot kini’g pug-awg asul nga sayal. Ang iyang puting blaws nagdag na, may nektay nga pareho’g kolor sa sayal ug pug-aw na sab.

“Imo na ‘nang usa, Day! Sakto na ‘ning duha namo!” matud sa ningpalit.

“Salamat, Nang!”

Gisundan sa mga mata sa dalagita ang babaye nga nagpalayo, mitipon sa nagpunsisok nga katawhan sa palengke, hangtud nahanaw siya sa panan-aw.

“Chicharon! Chicharon! Magtiwas! Kinse na lang!”

Filipino

Chicharon

(Dagli)

“Chicharon! Chicharon! Biente isang pak!”

“Bigyan mo ako ng isa, Ne,” sabi ng babaeng lumapit.

“Ubusin nyo na lang po ito, Ate, nang makauwi na po ako. Tatlo singkwenta na lang po.”

Binayaran ng babae ang dalagita. Suot nito’y kupas-asul na palda. Ang kanyang blaws na puti ay nanilaw-nilaw na, may nektay na kasing-kulay ng palda at kupas na rin.

“Sa iyo na yang isa, Ne! Tama na ‘tong dalawa para sa amin!” sabi ng bumili.

“Salamat po, Ate!”

Sinundan ng mga mata ng dalagita ang papalayong ale, nakipagsabayan sa mga taong nagsisiksikan sa palengke, hanggang sa siya’y nawala sa paningin.

“Chicharon! Chicharon! Paubos na po! Kinse na lang!”

English

Chicharon

(Flash Fiction)

“*Chicharon! Chicharon!* Twenty [pesos] per pack!”

“Give me one, Girl,” says the woman who comes to her.

“Do buy them all, Ma’am, so that I can go home now. Three packs for just fifty!”

The woman pays the teenage girl. The latter is wearing a faded blue skirt. Her white blouse is yellowish, with necktie that has the same color as the skirt’s and is faded, too.*

“Take one pack for yourself, Girl! Two is enough for us!” the buyer offers.

“Thank you, Ma’am!”

The teenage girl’s eyes follow the woman as she leaves, dissolves into the market crowd, until she vanishes from sight.

“*Chicharon! Chicharon!* Just one pack remaining! Only fifteen [pesos] now!”

Chicharon - crackling pork rind

*Uniform for girls in some public high schools in the Philippines

This Girl

By Melissa Grossman

She carried a dead coyote to class,
this girl who kept to herself.
Roadkill in her car, she drove to school,
this girl, with thick, unkempt hair.
When she told the professor
of her desire to draw the dead animal,
he polled the other students.
The drawing class gathered
in the courtyard, seated
around the dead coyote,
sketch pads tilted, raspy sound
of charcoal on paper.
This was her moment, this girl
sitting nearest the corpse, to capture
the lifeless limbs, the dangling tongue,
the matted fur, the gray pallor.
Soon, the stench of decay
drove all away. She was
the last to leave, this girl,
who, this one day,
came alive.

Sister's Night Walk

By Abbey Chew

Her nightgown, white and long,
breaks the dark like a ship's prow,
then lets the night come together again
around the flitting hem.
Her breath shags out — just as white, just as
white as the cotton — from her mouth only to
drift back, curl over her ears, and away.
As she moves, her body lights up
the night for brief moments that seem like praise,
the air around her skin flaring up — auroras
drawing movement from her blood, taking
something for their own. And the night wonders
just as much: Where does she go?
What calls to draw her warm, curled body
out of bed, into the night? Sister keeps her secrets. If
the night knows, if it holds the secret —
what waits outside the house, porch, gravel lane —
If the night knows, it isn't telling either.

Nice Girl

By Cindy Lynn Brown

Nice Girl has greasy fingers and trouble breathing. She digs a basement underneath the house. She will use it as rehearsal space. Nice Girl always rehearses before speaking, before brushing herself free from dandruff and before mixing the ingredients. Nice Girl keeps many tiny things in boxes and drawers: shiny stones, creased playing cards and salient disappointments. Her most visible treasure is the sign saying *Guys' n' Dolls* in retro font.

Nice Girl looks at her brother behind the counter. With the red tie. It can be difficult to get in contact with him. It suffices to look at him carefully and pervasively. He has lost his ring, white gold, glossy and warm from skin, it's gone and the pale stripe on the finger it left won't last long in August. Nice girl is chosen and so is her little brother. Chosen to heal the sick and the poor. Take their money and make them healthy and agile.

Nice Girl has a steamroller with grooves and soil and rubber. It pelts and crackles all her thoughts. Nice Girl has often been arrested for strolling on the freeway, for using the splinters from her ancient glass ceiling as a weapon or for eating too much chocolate at night. Dark dark chocolate.

Nice Girl works in an office. She edits and proofreads and hones until Nice Girl cannot contain any more corrections. She saves all of the handwritten letters in a dainty red suitcase, before she lights the fire. The rest is already saved in the Cloud.

Nice Girl doesn't feel like walking away. It's hard to leave little brother behind the counter. Despite the red tie it is hard to disappear from each other's lives. Nice Girl feels nauseous. There is a sweet, oily scent at the counter and little brother avoids eye contact. She knows he is not coming along with her. Little brother serves a single cherry latte. She'll have to drink it. Before taking off.

Entwined Moon

By Lauren Triola

I wanted to catch the moon. Wrap it in a string, wear it around my neck. I could drag the tides as I walked, guide my way with milky white, keep it on my desk at night and watch it wax and wane all for me. But then they told me no, I couldn't catch the moon. Impossible, they said. Ridiculous. It's not just a light in the sky, it's a massive body of stone. It would crush me, the world, and my desk. So I stopped trying. I let it stay in the sky. But I kept the string.

This Girl

By Ellie O'Leary

Everybody in Somerville is either
Irish or Italian
and we're Irish.

Everybody is Catholic except a few
are Protestant
and we are High Episcopal.

Everybody knows we are supposed to be Catholic but
I know my mother
said we aren't.

Everybody tells me my family will be happier
when we move to the country
where things will go more smoothly.

Everybody has a mother and a father unless
your mother dies
like mine did.

Everybody knows being poor means nothing
in a place where
everybody is poor.

The most important thing is having
a boy who likes you but
boys don't like smart girls.

Being one is no help at all if you
are lonely or sick
of raising your hand.

Someday my prince won't come and
I'll go off on my own
to see what I find.

Everybody knows smart girls go to college and
this one is going
to one called Bates.

Everybody has a mother and a father or
a mother or a father
unless your father dies, too.

Everybody knows 18 is old enough to be
independent and
this girl is ready.

Regina

By Valerie Speedwell

Regina is a blend of poetry and jazz, performance and lyrics, offensive, full of swagger, she found the world on fire and threw more flame on it, thick girl, addicted to jelly rolls and pies, the expanse of her spilling over chairs and benches and edges of things, fat but hungry for more because what they feeding her not filling her, dark-eyed girl, color of pitch, one tooth missing, her badge for living in a city made from a blueprint of ditches, hacked-off steel bars and water pipes, her kinky hair separated in two big twists, it's too nappy to flatten and smooth with the sizzle of an iron like the pretty girls, the girls with good hair, gold hoop earrings big as hub caps in her ears, the girth of her squeezed into clothes too small because no one around to buy her new ones, preteen, pre-diva, pre-ghetto queen, unafraid to speak her mind, speak her heart, speak, sing, shout to anyone and everyone who can hear, to stamp her feet, wave her hands, snap her fingers, shoulders going, part prophet, part entertainer, ever combative, her mouth a machine gun shooting words to take out the crowd, to slay them into silence and admiration with her rhyme and her song, the rhyme of the streets in her voice, the rise of church rafters in her voice, the rhythm of beat boxes in her voice, you hear them going strong as she jumps from vowel to vowel, sing song in iambic pentameter, the special meter of the inner city child, flowing about New York, about Central Harlem, about daddy in penitentiary, momma gone in the needle, being motherless and fatherless, a long way from home, about being, having been, what she might be some day, money, money, always hustling for money these days, even as she's saying this, sharing with you her heart, pulling you in, she's a breath away from sticking her finger in your face, one hand on her hip, a Nubian jewel with a bite, fearless in the face of danger, things that'd terrify a grown man, send him running, armed only with words, words, blasted on the schoolyard, sidewalk, any piece of asphalt, she's looking for an audience, looking for a crowd, for their approval and applause, and despite she's fat, despite she's ugly, despite the world expects her to fail, the crowd calls out *go Regina, go Regina*, because she is revolutionary and shocking, two snaps and a circle, what she has to say inappropriate, uncooperative, emotional and tough, but her delivery, half-spoken/half-sung, full of rolling music and finger snaps, is smooooooooooth, so smooth, smooth, smooth, when you hear her, Regina gives you goose bumps.



"Golden One," by Lyndia Radice

THIS WORLD I WANT YOU TO SAVE

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

---Florence Gharibian

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

---Virginia Woolf

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

---Susan Austin

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

---Clarissa Pinkola Estés

Black Cat in a Field

By Beverly Lafontaine

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

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

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

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

The Laughing Place

By Tara L. Masih

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

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

Some Rough in the Hand, Some Smooth

By Marge Piercy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Airy Humus

By Lynn Tudor Deming

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

Saint Flower

By Ann L. Carter

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

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

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

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

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

I see some now
from the front porch swing.

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

and I have little to offer back

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

Familiar

By Sue Churchill

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

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

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Snake Molting

By Lora Keller

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

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

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

and peels
herself
from herself.

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

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

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

Look for Raven Pairs Flying in a Pre-Mating Ritual

By Karen Skolfield

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

The Cows

By Elizabeth Jacobson

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

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

Snake Pit

By Berwyn Moore

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

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

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

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

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

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

Greenman

By Maureen McQuerry

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

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

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

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

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

and not like this, like nothing else at all.

Jaguar Foretells His Own Extinction

By Suzette Bishop

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

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

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

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

Break Beauty

By Lisbeth Davidow

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

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

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

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

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

“Look at that, you son of a bitch”

By Peg Duthie

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

First curated by *Rattle*, February 2016

At the Interface

By Renée E. D'Aoust

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I accept death by dog, not by firetrap.

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

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

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

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

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

[Previously published in *Trestle Creek Review*.]

Keep Calling My Name: Frogs, Circles and Climate Change

By Jocelyn Edelstein

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There's No Place Like Home

By Rebecca Hart Olander

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

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

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

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

Vanishing Point

By Melissa Grossman

It is not miles ahead of you
where the road narrows.
It is not a mountaintop
covered by low clouds.
Nor, the columns of
trees that grow
smaller farther
down the
street.

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

At Butcher's Slough

By Simona Carini

(Arcata Marsh & Wildlife Sanctuary)

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

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

If my worries could ride away!

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

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

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

Cathartidae

By Lynn Deming

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Perfect Kernel

By Mary Stike

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

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

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

Glide

By Ginny Mahar

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

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

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

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

Coastline Forecast: February

By Claudia McGhee

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

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

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

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

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

The Voyage Out: A Poem*

(a forced collaboration)

By Marian O'Brien Paul

I. *The river*

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

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

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

II. *The sea*

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

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

*(across the pool falls
a blue shadow)*

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

Swash Zone

By Nancy Carol Moody

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

seafoam breaking
on the shoreline
a young girl, giggling

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

a gull's outstretched wings
riding the currents
undulating kelp

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

crabs burrow
into shifting sand
small fingers follow

Trying to Return

By Sandy Gillespie

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

River Broken Story

By Molly Scott

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

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

Valley River

By Ethel Mays

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

Oceans

By Shirley Plummer

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

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

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

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

On a Highway of the Pacific Coast

By Cheryl Buchanan

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

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

Bird Women of Wells-next-the-Sea

By Ingrid Jendrzejewski

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

Almost Awake

By Molly Scott

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

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

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

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

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

Ama

By Nikki Russian

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

Against the Tide

By Janet Thomas

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

Kantan Tasi, Song of the Sea
By Mary Therese Perez Hattori

EKUNGOK
LISTEN
to kantan tãsi
the song of the sea

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

EKUNGOK
LISTEN

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

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

EKUNGOK
LISTEN

ekungok: listen
mañaina: elders

Song Eater

By Ruth Thompson

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

About the Ocean

By Ginny Bitting

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

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

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

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

Echoes

By Caroline LeBlanc

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

after Rumi

The Journey

By Florence Gharibian

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

Fields of Hveen

By Barbara Sabol

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

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

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

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

To divine celestial movement, yet not my own prospects!

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

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

The Sun Does Not Set

By Mai-Lon Gittelsohn

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

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

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

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

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

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

Off the Moon Path

By Jane Schulman

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

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

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

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

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

The Way I See It

By Diane Lefer

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

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

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

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

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

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Inside the Bowl (Asaayi Lake)

By Leeanna Torres

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

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

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

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

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

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

Church

By Susan Austin

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

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

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

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

On the Bluff, in the Wind

By Simona Carini

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

And When Raven Shortcuts

By Carrie Nassif

and when raven shortcuts
to the living scarp of red boulders
air spare and still overhead
her nearly silent flight
tsip tsip tsip
is my heart beat beating
staccato sweeps of her wings
cleanse mind-sky like sage

this labyrinth is a barnacled tortoise
bare feet crunch into its pea-gravel shell
toe-heel toe-heel repeat
lavender-shaded driftwood
like a cool like a green-pool moment
following switchbacks to our pasts

all we will ever be
are these swaying seaweed strands
woven through diagonals of skittered sunlight
basking in the cadence of this throbbing brine

When You Reach the Red

By Gabriela Frank

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who have you loved?"

"You," she would have said.

"What do you remember of the earth?"

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

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

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

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

A nod. Nothing more.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I love you," she whispered.

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

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

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

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

Walk until you reach the color red.

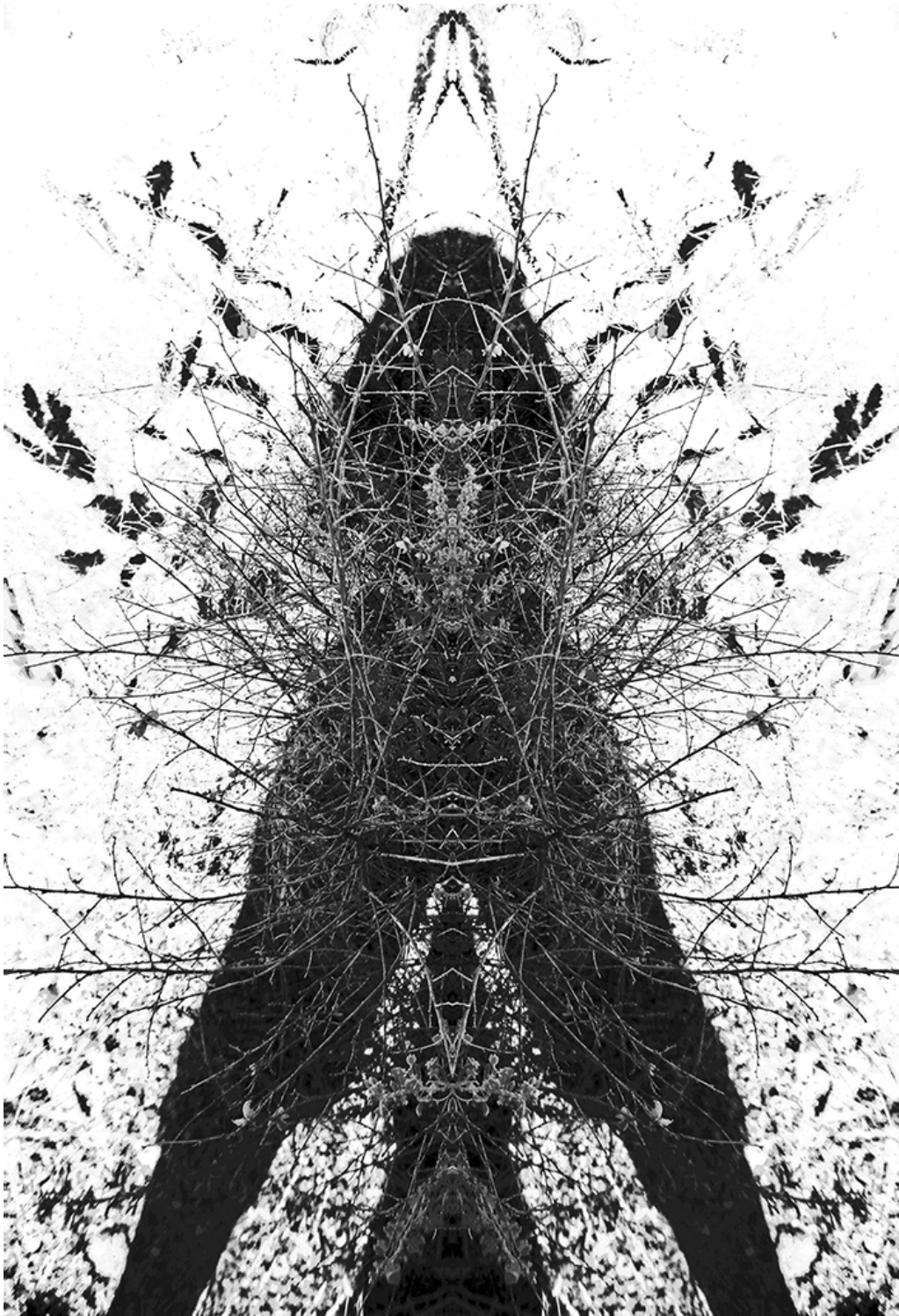
Bhanu. Clarice. Georgia. Virginia. Mom. All of us, cairns along a nameless river, an unmarked box canyon. The path that we make together forms a legacy. For the first time in my life, my eyes are open.

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

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

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

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



“Generativity,” by Marsha Rosenzweig Pincus

MY BONES ARE IN YOU

She was the whole thing; Talland House was full of her; Hyde Park Gate was full of her. I see now, though the sentence is hasty, feeble and inexpressive, why it was that it was impossible for her to leave a very private and particular impression upon a child. She was keeping what I call in my shorthand the panoply of life—that which we all lived in common—in being. I see now she was living on such an extended surface that she had not time, nor strength, to concentrate, except for a moment if one were ill or in some child's crisis....

---Virginia Woolf

My whole life you never know who I am.

---Sokunthary Svay

*You are coming into us who cannot withstand you.
You are coming into us who never wanted to withstand you.
You are taking us into places never planned.
You are going far away with pieces of our lives.*

---Adrienne Rich

No Love Letters

By Helen Casey

There were no love letters to my grandmother.
She could not read. I would be making it up
if I described thin blue sheets of words
binding them. Or roses. He was, as she was,
from the old country, the man who would be
my grandfather. Without money. It was 1919.
He came to return a gun he had used.
Your children need a father. Mine need a mother.
She might have liked more of language
simmering with love that steamed, and spice. Or,
embraces. Hard times ahead is what they both knew.
Too much of not enough. Could she have refused
such a man—a gun, an offer, so few words—
all of them indelible, reeking only of fact?

Legacy

By Carol Smallwood

My grandmother pinned hairpin lace bibs
on grandfather's bathing beauty calendars,
crocheted jelly glass holders for Queen Anne's Lace.

Her flour sack scarves—hemmed to look like
they had no hems, have hourglass patterns echoing
her figure unfamiliar with backs of chairs.

As the neighborhood midwife she whispered:
“garçon” for a boy, “jeune fille” if a
girl to keep such delicate things from children.

Aunt Lily said with uplifted chin, “I
never saw her apron dirty or saw her cry;”
my mother with shaking head,
“She looks at the hats in church.”

She died from complications of tight corsets,
combs holding her Gibson Girl hair and
handkerchiefs folded in fans.

The Button Box

By Rebecca Olander

I loved combing through my grandmother's
box of buttons,
picking favorites to keep.
I thought it wonderful to say
I liked something
and have it given,
thought she didn't notice
how I pulled her like taffy,
she ready to give the cake
from her plate, the Wedgewood
itself, neck scarves, nail polishes,
and any buttons I chose,
the Bakelite aquas and corals,
the silver ones studded
with fake jewels.
I was Golem, or the dragon Smaug,
hoarding my sparkling charms
in a plastic vault.
She let me
think they were worth it,
and never made me feel the thief.
From her vanity drawer,
generous spill of champagne
stockings, twinned gloves, satin
slips from another era,
lavender scented and unsecreted,
there for the taking.

The Saint of Memory: The Peas

By Linda Ravenswood

She came from the West
where rain
measures the hours
in drops
against the house,
where land
breaks into great crags
along the coast of water.
Her high, gothic façade
of radio hollowly sings
through the sitting room
where she's been waiting
against the window panes;
it's raining
down the garden rows,
and the trellis
is beating the overhang
like a metronome.
The apples sweat
in the lane
above the soaking smudge pots;
in the beds
the lettuce leaves
are ripped and drizzling,
and mushrooms bauble
in the mud,
but the peas,
she says, against the panes,
the peas are safe.
In their fibre boats
they are lolling
in the trickle,
their greenness un-muted
by the wash.
In the dawn of that day
she flung some out
of their shells,
sweetly plinking into a bowl,
a ghostly memorandum of spring;
the house was clean and agile then,
the basins white-shining
and the wood well-rubbed.
1930 in the fall

was before money and moving;
her people were plumbers and farmers,
but she married well
and took to tea and touring cars.
I never knew her that way;
as she was aging
she sloughed superfluous finery
and became an Oregonian,
old and mindful in the window.
In the dusk of that day
she was so old
in her bed,
her daughters about her
against the tapestries
like Bayeux matrons.
There, in the spinning,
I saw that even in
death she was more alive
than those stiff keepers,
she was real and oaken
and pirating the bed.
She was tilting
and wet, but she managed to say
her words

put me where the peas are

and she was fast away.
In the years beyond
I pull them
from the bins
in the market,
all green and wonderful.
They are holy, these slim
vegetables, a legacy of will,
a trust of spirit
endowing more than
any stick of Louis Quatorze
or stretch of oil.
They are of the good
lathery soil, like her—
green and sure,
forward in the window,
watching the garden in the rain,
long ago days when she was living
with her whistle

and her custard
and her canvas shoes.

Flight Theory

By Alison Adair

Gorlice, 1908

*Wstawaj, don't
speak, he will
wake, and come
for you. My hand
over your mouth is
our goodbye.*

You turn off the lights this time and
lie still, a body shifting from its country,
climb gaunt gray waves into a sky built
deep within the fat matter of memory. Stirring
his tongue, he slips into your wet speech,
dismantles you quietly, rot threading plaster.

*His black
feathers stir, no
wind, oil upon
oil, his long beak
shines. Take this,
I have saved*

Organs are everywhere: on the workbench outside
animals left unskinned. Empty socket stuffed with
a dirty rag, only you know about the snake
pushing through high grass. He'll slough until the world
offers an indifferent body. (Who can be choosy?)
This, your life – what is a stepfather for? For emptying

*it all slowly in
a shoe, zrób co
mówię, lodge it
in the gathers
at your waist and
never exhale.*

a ribcage, the warm meat of your parts lost as
his hands undo – your mother will say wings, whispering, but
in truth – you lose yourself under a loud human neck,
its gulping skin stretched over bones, over low vowels
you pray no one hears, not even you. These voices, glottal,
they travel with you, to Kraków, Hamburg, Cuxhaven, Nowy Jork.

*Run, road to station
to the dim nodding ship.
Szybko. You will know no
one. If you hear me
calling you, moja
córka, close the*

to the factory where you cart bobbins in a skirt, again and again
arriving full, departing empty: sound rimming the lip of a bell.
Windows too narrow to let the light in. Dark swells
in your quiet inner room, like a mushroom sponging into root.
New world daughter threaded with horsehair worms, their
small farm sprouting even under your fingernail. Once you had a

*door to us. Run
until dark birds
hang, shoreless,
aimless, land
disappearing like salt
in a stirred glass.*

past: the tremoring kerosene lamps, the hard stone roads still
come for you. But now shadows buckle into static, a man sent to
the distant tin-foil moon, doing nothing but walking, without gravity.
As if ours were a small world, well lit, the sounds you hear only footsteps
across the dust of a slackening galaxy; you, a mass of ice slow-spiraling.
Your young son flaps from the screen, *what is it like, Mamusia, to float*
away?

Post-Post-Traumatic Stress

By Samantha Lamph

Trauma is passed
down, inherited
from past generations
like heirloom jewelry
or black and white
photographs of family
we'll never meet;
it is a recessive gene
waiting to be
expressed.

I hear her screaming,
that ancient woman.
I feel the thrash,
the flood of adrenaline
that left her soul
in ruins
yet preserved her body,

so we both could survive.

In my pulse,
she still taps out SOS.

The Suitcase

By Rinat Harel

1.
Lifting the lid, she said,
"Bonbons for my girls";
ghosts in her German accent
floating about.
"Dollhouse table," my sister declared.
"A sofa, and this chair."
Collecting the wrapping paper,
I inhaled Granny's flowery perfume, and imagined
her house in London.

2.
The drifting desert sand, Mother removes
from Granny's gravestone once a year.
I pulled out the suitcase waiting
in the boidem, dusted it off.
My diary packed, small can-openers,
some scarves—waving good-bye,
I moved to another country.

3.
On snowy days, I look to the East—
my hair as grey as Granny's
on her visits long ago—and think
of the Desert and the Forty Years,
asking, *Where is Home?*

Great-Grandmother Annetta

By Lisa Lutwyche

Once I learned to watch her hands
I forgot to be afraid of her whiskers.
Twisted driftwood fingers

tied with the blue ropes of her veins.
Skin like draped patterned silk,
or spotted wax, melted, crinkled,

folded over sinewy bands.
Quick machines, those deft fingers
snapped green beans like cold jade,

“pop-clink, pop-clink, pop-clink”
into a thick white bowl with chipped edges.
Smiling, she murmured responses

to my breathless little-girl questions.
“What was it like back then?”
Her hands stilled, crossed on her apron.

She sighed, eyes closed, remembering.

Las Mujeres

By Gerda Govine Ituarte

Mothers watch daughters who listen with their eyes
whose voices bloom they flower between rain drops
weave their lives inside dreams
with grandmothers' breath
future awakes
in mouth
of now.

Remember This

By Darlene Taylor

"There's no certain time to things," I remembered mama saying as she reached for the canisters of flour, sugar, baking powder, salt and set them on the counter top. She sprinkled water in the flour and seasoned it with a dash of salt and baking powder. She didn't use spoons. Her fingers were brown, the color of maple syrup with rounded nails. Working hands. She dug into the doughy mixture. Hands made things right.

Up to her elbows in flour, she balled the dough up in her hands, pulled and squeezed it. The veins rose up in her hands, slightly dusted. Blue green waves under her skin. She sprinkled water from a cheap tin she reused over and over. An empty lard can. The paper wrapper peeled off. Lard cut into flour was to make it rich, she said. The flour was as white as the sheets that dried on the clothesline, bleached in the sun.

The dough rolled up in a loaf, she separated it into two balls. She flattened the balls smooth and pressed the bottom crust in the roasting pan and along the edges with her thumb.

"Remember this," she used to say, looking over her shoulder to see that I paid attention.

A young girl, it fell to me to pick the berries, wash them in well-water, and drop them in the mixing bowl. I sat on a high stool to see inside the mixing bowl. The bowl was just big enough for one pair of hands. When I thought mama wasn't looking, I sneaked berries and licked the purple-black juice from my fingertips.

Mama lifted the bowl of blackberries, checking the weight. She knew.

She poured sugar and dashed vanilla and nutmeg on top, then dragged her hands in the berries. Cupping them in the palms of her hands, she let them fall into a purple-black syrup. The kitchen and her fingers sweetened.

The top crust stretched over the pan, she set the blackberry cobbler in the oven, trusting her hands got it right. I fidgeted, pulling at the potholder loops as I watched the stove glass window and clock.

"There's no certain time to when the cobbler's done," she said, knowing I wouldn't leave. "Just keep watch. And, if it's not quite right, if things aren't quite right, make it better next time."

It seemed I mostly saw her hands covered. She wore gloves to church on Sundays. White gloves in summer. Beige in the cooler months. Cotton gloves with pearl buttons that fastened at the wrist bone. She carried irises and lilies to the family church graveyard and leaned the stems against tombstones.

"Tend the church graves. Pull the weeds to make room for flower blooms. Your daddy loved flowers," she said. "Remember the springtime scents when the winter comes. Write your name and the children's names in the family Bible...and the children's birth dates too. Keep it in a place where it's handled right."

I remembered as I pinned a lily to my collar.

Interloper

By Berwyn Moore

Like a hand, insomnia covers her mouth.
She thinks of chores and spills and bills unspent,
of Gertrude's cough and fourteen weeks of drought.
The attic shakes. Her body bristles. The misspent
night she wills to light and fuss, to the chaos
of breakfast, laundry, kids with gifts of earth
between their toes, diversions from the loss
of sleep, the jangled nerves, the doubtful worth
of tangled dreams: A sprig of fire on a blue
lapel. The charm of wormwood in a cup of tea.
A tiger singing. Bones nestled in the dew.
A detached hand waving a skeleton key.
Love wears her out and lugs her to bed.
Love wakes her up, demanding to be fed.

Leah

By Lee Ingram

There is sadness in
the movement of my mother's hands,
a hesitation in the way she
wraps her arms around my shoulders.
There always has been.
That hesitation dogs her steps,
even basic movements like breathing,
like sleeping.
She walks gently so as to not disturb
her sister, sleeping in the other room.
She always has, like quiet
is all she knows how to be anymore.
We have the same whiskey eyes,
but that's all we have, the only thing
tying us together.
I am nothing, and yet everything,
like my mother.
She is a woman with weak eyes
and a weaker grasp
and a face that others
never notice.
But every so often,
I creep into the kitchen
and see my mother
dancing in her nightgown,
the navy-blue satin swirling around her ankles.
She dances with that hesitation,
that same pause she's always had,
like someone watches her even now.
And I realize that she
is a woman who knows
that she will never be beautiful,
not even to me.

A Crown of Crows

By Melissa Coss Aquino

I

Upon her return she will be different.

They gave her a clean slate, upon which
to write a new life, for herself and me.
New and transformed, no shadow
of unmet hunger in her eyes; gone the bony grip,
insatiable in its seeking and want.
She will be clean and new and all things shiny
like the plastic beads I used to love to wear in second grade.
Will I be a reminder of all that
she is supposed to erase, to get her clean slate?
Am I the chalky residue clouding her fresh start
with all that I witnessed, suffered, longed for by her side;
the ephemeral tide insistent in its nature,
destined to drag her back out to sea, to deep and dangerous waters?
Wasn't I the one who dragged her there in the first place?

II

Wasn't I the one who dragged her there in the first place?

Wasn't it the high pitched wail of infancy's never-ending
want and need she could not satisfy,
that set her off in search of need she could meet
by following a trail away from me on tracks along her arms.
To our neighbor she would say, "Kids are
nothing but problems." She had three
abortions, to avoid more problems. Of
four possibilities, I, the only survivor,
because she didn't notice till it was too late, or so she said.
When in the mood to tell me stories of my childhood,
she would repeat stories I had told her,
since she could never remember them herself.
I would have liked a big brother to protect me or little sister to keep my secrets.

III

I would have liked a big brother to protect me or a little sister to keep my secrets.

One before me, and two after, I'm flanked
on either side, by unborn babies, bodyguards in the spirit world.
I wear them like a crown of crows.
I would have to be stupid not to wonder

why I was chosen to survive. Singled out
to fight my way through drug-infested birth waters,
maternal ambivalence, narrow hips, and
a cord around my neck, warning enough
that this would not be easy, and maybe
I should have called it quits early on. I
would have liked a sibling who could bear witness
with me, to the cold of being the only fruit
hanging from the branch of a dying tree.
Then again had there been one, I would not have been the only fruit.

IV

The only fruit hanging from the branch of a dying tree.

A fruit so exotic, even bitter tastes good
when you're hungry. The call that she was finished,
ready with her clean slate to return for me,
came in the middle of midterms. She has
no idea what I am in her absence. Nor I, her.
My social worker called, I have had one since I was born
with traces of her drug-filled blood, to urge me to try.
I took everything good she had with me,
I am the wound that never healed
and threatens to kill us both.
My teacher loves my poems. I feel naked when
she says I have potential. She says I have promise.

V

She says I have potential. She says I have promise.

I have never met a promise that wasn't
broken. I am guessing the same will be
true of me. I wonder if a teacher ever
told my mother she had potential.
What was her potential? What did teachers see
in her meticulous handwriting and neat rows of math?
A future secretary? A book keeper? She laughed at me
when I said I wanted to be a doctor.
"Girls like you and me don't become doctors."
Do teachers ever see the potential for evil and
destruction? Or do they see it, but never tell.
How do you write on someone's report card:
Shows great potential for self-destruction.

VI

Shows great potential for destruction.

For Mother's Day, our teacher had us do
a poem about our mothers. She told us to
avoid clichés, to my great relief rich white kids
hate their mothers even more than I hate mine.
They use words like estranged, distant, cold,
manipulative, and withholding. I use words
like devastated, destroyed, demolished,
and demoralized. I searched for all the d words
I could find that wouldn't give away the d word
I was looking for, but would never use: drug addict.
They would love that. Of course a few would chime in,
my mother is addicted to oxycontin, valium, and vicodin.
How could they know my mother, like theirs, is a cliché where I come from.

VII

How could they know my mother is a cliché where I come from?

Drug addicted, unwed, teenage mother
living on welfare, hating child and self,
in need of recovery, rehabilitation. Does it
get more cliché than that? Only if you throw
in the particulars. But you don't say these things
in front of the white folks. They are too focused on how I
defy all the stereotypes and it would get them too excited
to hear I come from the 'types, am them, none the less. I too am cliché:
High achieving daughter of fucked up mother,
so good in every way, at least while you're looking, it hurts your teeth.
Straight A's, free ride to prep school, a smile to light up the room.
A daughter any mother would kill for except the one who had her,
who would have killed her had she had the chance.
Cliches, both of us. Devoid of real.

VIII

Clichés, both of us. Devoid of real.

In plastic frames from the 99-cent store you could
place pictures of strangers that know each other better than we do.
How can you know someone who doesn't know themselves?
How do you love them? The mystery of the love
is strong like sour milk. Disappointingly real.
Like clichés are always a little true, we are also a little
real. Born from between her legs. Only her agony allowed me to live,
as she tried and failed to do the thing her body told her she could do
just because it could.
Motherhood is not biology.
Forced violent reckless love was all we could claim

but it was still love. She remembers and so do I. Blameless love.
First love. Innocent. Mother and child.
Every child a hungry monster. Every mother a terrified source of food.
How do they cope when they can't feed themselves?

At Lock and Dam No. 10

By Kathleen Kelly

Twenty-two minutes without Coppertone, the first warning sign, a pinking around the eyes, the ears. The skin shimmers, opal-white. I stay afloat, my face lifting toward Iowa skies. A beginner. I was once afraid of the water, the skimming dragonflies, territorial mallards. A quick kick of my ankle jetties me farther. Away from shore. Farther away from her. Earlier, her sleepover friend, the postmaster, laughed at me. Called me *little man, a boy*. Forgetting herself, she laughed too. At Lock and Dam No. 10, his clove cigarette dilutes her signature scent. Decanted musk, a faint rose accent. My mother attends to him, fluffs his curls. His pick crimped in her hand. A prince with a bad permanent. A careful trim. So different than her earlier handiwork: scissors like pinking shears razing, zigzagging my once-straight bangs: a sheared-ewe girl, a stern Dutch boy. My aunties never tire of family lore: *she carried youse so low, we was right sure youse gonna be a boy*. Blue crocheted booties, an airplane mobile. My biological slight: a dual X chromosome. Baby oil licks her sun-brown skin, drips between her pin-up breasts, under her pert chin. Miss Allamakee County 1961. Her beauty shop hair: pin-curled, backcombed, perfectly-set. How I imagine Pallas Athena's helmet. Peace before the war. The third-degree burns set in: blistering welts swell. Like smelt on my left cheek. My slightly bent nose. My only likeness to her.

At Least Prostitutes Bring Home Money

By Sokunthary Svay

Why you come home late in the dark
You wear the dress and stupid big boot no job

Where the money you want me save?
At least *prostitute* bring home money

What you want for dinner—noodle again?
Yeah you like your big noodle

Don't worry about freckle American men like that
Go to college get marry then work bring home money

I bring home money from hotel tip
You see my shoe only ten dollar on sale at Macy

Hey your period not come yet
Don't worry we *take care of it*

Your Daddy say he so sad when you not sleep in your room
Why you go out?

Your brother visit work on his day off
He not even bring home money!

My whole life you never know who I am
I work too hard but all my children hurt me

And your daddy send his family all the money I bring home.

The Tulip-Flame

By Chloe Honum

My sister's painting this: a hill, a lane
that winds around the hill, and a wide field
of tulips with a centered tulip-flame.

She rolls her brush through gray and adds the rain
in tiny flicks, glinting arrows of cold.
My sister's painting this: a hill, a lane.

Last year our mother died, as was her plan.
It's simpler to imagine something could
have intervened. The centered tulip-flame

startles the scene; the surrounding ones are plain
pastels, while this one's lit with a crimson fold.
My sister's painting this: a hill, a lane

of cobblestones, a watery terrain
of dripping flowers. Her strokes, elsewhere controlled,
flare out and fray around the tulip-flame

as if it were an accident, a stain,
a blaze in the midpoint of a wet field.
My sister's painting this: a hill, a lane,
a tulip field, and one astounding flame.

Autumn Melancholy with Birds

By Margaret Chula

Morning rain is tender, inviting me to slow down. How it taps the leaves before their final fall. Distant mountains obscured by fog are still there, even though I can't see them.

Will Mother die in autumn, hands nested in her lap, knuckles veined and buckled like the leaves of sugar maples? The bird feeder outside her window is empty.

Once she told me she dreamt of dancing in her wedding dress to a Glenn Miller tune. She woke up to cricket song. I have given away all her slippers.

Tonight, while picking white hairs from my brush, I think of Yu Xiang's mother who was troubled because her daughter talked to flowers. Not *my* mother.

Together we mimicked bird songs, ridiculously happy when they called back—robins, chickadees, and even a bittern hidden in cattails. From the front porch, we mocked its deep-throated gurgle.

Childhood summers, a screech owl slipped its lullaby through my open window. I leaned out in my nightgown to reply, but the owl was too far away to hear.

I learned the mourning dove's song when I lived in Japan. Its cooing on rainy afternoons sounded like damp futons, clammy and musty. Always in pairs, what could they be mourning?

I know what I will mourn. The lost birds, their songs forgotten. My mother's voice that I could never imitate. The blue glass bird she gave me on my window sill, earthbound and mute.

Advice from Mother on Your One Less Day

By Les Bernstein

skip obligation's inescapable sins
wiggle out of pigeonholes
enjoy happenstance and flux
don't forget to floss

clog the clunky machinery of belief
refuse templates of self
ignore persistent memory
elbows off the table

airbrush your self portrait
invite farcical pratfalls
avoid hard labor's invitation to bruise
shoulders back stand up straight

one day a chill seeps into bones
clouds will scud at dusk
adventures of a single consciousness
turn to particle and ash

until then
navigate by lightless stars
hand write thank you notes
rsvp yes to everything

Vision

By Jill Boyles

She saw her mother at a garage sale on a spring blue morning chatting with a woman behind a card table. She closed her eyes and saw her mother's eyes: translucid gray irises and lids bordered by brown eyeliner. The skin on her face soft and slightly fuzzy. She opened her eyes and saw her mother holding up a white blouse and imagined her saying to the woman, "Only a dollar for this?" and then to herself, With a little bit of bleach, it'll look brand new.

She saw her mother leave the garage sale on a spring blue morning with blouse in hand and purse over shoulder, elbow pressing it against her side.

She saw her mother that spring blue morning step into a glaucous, gelatinous moment. Her movements thick and gradual. She imagined her mother saying, "I am real. As real as my elbow is pressed against my purse is pressed against my side." She would scratch her head to prove it, fingers nervously rubbing against skull. Extending from her vagina hung withered umbilical cords and she would wonder about her children and conclude, "They're nebulous."

I see my mother's body wearily gather itself
to move through this moment. She turns toward
me. A malignant tumor branched in her lungs protrudes
from under her shirt. I scream to her but there's no
sound and soon I'm standing at the edge
of a river with my hands cradling ashes. I cast
her into the air like an offering. The wind sifts,
blowing finer ash back into my face as
bits of burned bone drop
and descend down river
smoldering in the water
filtered sun.

She saw her mother emerge back into a spring blue morning. An essence of displaced realness lingered in the back of her mother's mind. What was I thinking? she imagined her mother asking herself and then shrugging off the question. At the next garage sale, she smiled a hello to the woman behind an old, wooden desk with a tattered crayon box on top. Her mother would be sure to let her know about the bargain blouse she bought next to nothing across the street.

Mother's Wishbones, No Doubt

By Ruth Sabbath Rosenthal

furculae with not a fragment
of dried-up flesh or sinew

to despoil their luster —
the slew of them ranging

in size from Cornish hen
to turkey. Funny,

I'd never noticed Mother
extricate any, let alone

strip them clean,
secrete them somewhere

long-forgotten. I stumbled
across those old bones —

took possession of the best
of them, pried

loose some of my own from
birds broiled, barbequed, fried;

primed each, applied gold leaf.
Made more of them

than she could ever have
conceived — the guilt,

over those generations of bones
brittling whole, striking

beneath the wait of wishes.

Afterlife

By Cassandra Lane

The Lynched Man's Widow

Mary feels the baby curling inside her, tighter and tighter, unbearable pain. She closes her eyes and prays for the coiled mass of limbs to dissolve. She and Burt had promised to raise this man-child together. Now, that Burt has been lynched, murdered, buried, his promises of a better future ring hollow. Mary wishes the fetus would stop feeding off her; she has no more to give it. She wishes it would shrivel to a seed and disintegrate into nothingness.

But nothingness, like hope, holds itself just out of Mary's reach.

Wife of the Lynched Man's Son

Avis pushes her first baby's body out into the world and knows right away that she had borne a dead thing.

"Let me hold him," she pleads with her midwife. She wants to smell his baby hair and baby skin.

As the midwife washes him up, fear suddenly tears at Avis. *Will he smell like death?* And, if so, would she ever be able to scrub the stench from her nostrils, or would it follow her the rest of her life?

When the midwife places the baby in Avis's arms, Avis cups him to her neck. He is a doll baby, beautiful and lifeless.

Avis has eight children after her stillborn. With each pregnancy, she waits for death to beat her over the head again. She sinks her nose into each baby's hair, searching for the lost scent of the one who did not live.

The Lynched Man's Great-Granddaughter

At 16, Sand swore off ever becoming a mother. As the eldest of her mother's five children, she felt like she had already walked that path. When she was 17, she aborted the fetus that was growing inside her without shedding a tear.

When she discovers she is pregnant again at 36, something in her is soft and ready. She watches water births on YouTube and includes this preferred method of delivery into her birth plan.

On her day of labor, the doctor tells her that her risk of infection is too great for a water birth. Defeated by the contractions, she does not fight him. She waddles into the hospital bed to dilate more centimeters and wait, lasting half an evening before the contractions break her.

"I can't do this naturally," she cries over the phone to her mother. "I feel like a failure."

“You have to be very still,” the anesthesiologist tells her, but the more she tries to stop trembling, the more violently her body convulses. A nurse eases her back into a prostrate position and covers her with blankets she cannot feel.

After she gives birth to her son, she falls into a dead sleep. When she awakes, she is convinced that the afterbirth is still inside of her, some parcel of flesh that the doctor had not seen. She had read somewhere that this can happen. She presses down on her swollen abdomen, obsessing over the definition of afterbirth: *when the placenta and fetal membranes are expelled from the uterus after the birth.*

She had not felt a second wave after her son was born. She imagines that she has afterbirth stuck inside of her, floating around, unable to find an opening.

Is it alive? she wonders.

Is it the past or the future, or both?

The Ashsong

By Kristi Carter

No fever brings the strange hands to place this bit in my mouth,
it is the cold metal weight on my thin voice that brings me to fever.

The sorrel waved its fleshy leaves at me as my sisters disappeared
over the hill into the holler below. They are not the first to choose silence

over change. Over the chance that an oratorio might burst forth from us
with enough tremolo to hang the notes on a black shiver in mid-air

before their descent into the ears of the men. Before the notes cast a cloud
of fever over those who said they had come to fill us with their white gift of life,

whether or not we might accept it. One of the women runs her hand through the hair
of a son whose father is nowhere. No stag carried him into the horizon streaked

with the residue of old gods, no. He was a nightmare trilling off into the lightning storm
that follows his frail frame—the easier to slip through you. But my sisters forbade me

from singing the battle aria, from marking my cheekbones with the ash of animals
who had eaten from my hands only months before the drought. Do not sing of war,
of death, of the ones who brought us this life we did not ask for. Do not sing.
Lie down on the still earth, and hear the song already continuing.

Ash Ash.

Bite down on your song lest you bite all our tongues from our mouths.
Ash Ash Ash. Bite down on the fever of this pale, dry morning
called motherhood.

At the Abortion Clinic

By Katharyn Howd Machan

White poinsettias,
drained of all their blood,
adorn the waiting room table.
Walk in, take a seat, pick up a magazine.
On its cover pose a man and woman
laughing into a book.
Glance at the pictures on the walls.
Study the frames, the webs of dust
clinging to the corners.
Near the window stands a Christmas tree
draped with silver tinsel.
You remember your childhood, quickly
turn away, consider tomorrow instead.
Look at the women who wait with you,
some awkward with the swelling
they cannot hide beneath loose shirts.
No one speaks. No one smiles.
Some keep their faces blank, wish
to erase the creases of sleepless nights.
Some sigh. Some stare. Some play
carefully with rings and fingers.
Notice one woman holding back tears;
they push at the edges of her eyes,
very bright, and you think
She is the loneliest woman in the world.
Gaze at the clock awhile;
make up stories about the numbers,
the long wand sweeping around.
At some point in the next two hours
your name will be called.
You will stand, pick up your purse,
walk down the hallway of little green tiles.
The other women will watch you go.
They will know exactly what you're feeling
and be completely wrong.

Wanting

By Molly Beer

The boy in purple moonboots thumps up to the gate howling “¡Mami!” for hello. My boyfriend— “Mommy” to this orphan boy who knows no men—avoids my eye.

We first came to this *hogar*, to Ecuador, to teach English: I want; you want; the boy wants; we all want.

We were not expecting, or wanting, babies. We were not ready for such gaping need, for hunger at once wholly repulsive and irresistible. But for six months, by reflex or biology or the programmed magnetism of a child's oversized eyes, we endure the retching induced by the seep from rationed diapers and the sour smell of yucca gruel, and we come each day to hold the *hogar's* babies. We come although neither the stench nor the drifting ash of sadness like *ceniza* from Tungurahua, the nearby volcano named for an open throat, will wash off in a cold rooftop shower.

“Which do you love best?” the director asks me, my lap full of babies.

This is my chosen translation: The verb for “love” and “want” is one and the same in Spanish.

“I love them all,” I manage, with a magnanimous smile. “I love them all equally.” I do not mean to want.

My university students, most of them parents already, want to know: am I lonely without a family? The *hogar* cook wonders with a wink, will we take home an Ecuadorian *recuerdo*? A souvenir? But I cannot want the babies. I cannot want them in the same way I cannot, if given a scalpel, cut out my own heart. Not Pedro with his mop of dusty hair or Soledad with her grave rage or the newborn without a name found under a parked car in Quito. Most of all, I cannot want the boy in purple moonboots who calls my lover mother.

When the ache rises in our own throats, we decide to get away. We put out a thumb, hitch a ride in a truck-bed through Amazonia, climb through the Andes, cross a sea of salt that looks like sky, watch flamingos flap over a red lake, burn our mouths with coca. But however far afield we range, the babies cling to us, polyps, barnacles, the worms that now infest in our bellies too.

In the gold mines in Bolivia, I meet a woman who has adopted an infant vicuña. The creature came in from the wild with her herd of alpaca: who adopted whom is up for debate. Fluff aside, the vicuña's neckbone is as slim as thumb and finger can encircle, but its eyes are the size of fists. As she introduces me, her baby butts up under her bustled velvet skirt, wanting what's not there.

I am no one's mother.

Back in Ecuador, when I carry babies on my hip, I swat their kneading hands away from my breasts, wean their sucking mouths off my skin.

“Amiga,” I tell them when they call me *mami*. “Soy tu amiga.”

My boyfriend sets the boy with purple moonboots on the parquet floor.

And we leave wanting.

Birthday

By Shelley Blanton-Stroud

"No," the doctor says when I ask, "Is everything all right?"

His shiny bald head rises between my wide-spread knees, a perfect red balloon over the ball of my belly.

Like a movie, I think, Demerol having its poetic effect.

Numb below the waist, foggy above the neck, I watch grim-faced professionals race around the fluorescence, like ants disturbed, rolling machines, fetching tools, kneading my belly, stitching my softest skin. One punches buttons on a metal tree, down which slithers a gray tube onto my arm and hand, teeth biting into my vein.

"No," he says again, blue eyes watering. "I don't think everything will be all right."

I stare at the two deep furrows inching like caterpillars up his brow.

My baby is already gone. I haven't touched him.

Nine pounds, fifteen ounces, a big, red bruise, my son Bates has choked on his own meconium long before I squeeze him from the dark warm place grown too small almost a month before. For weeks he has taken black glue into his fresh pink lungs, so that when I finally push him out, he cannot gulp, his lung sacks full, unable to contract.

He knows how to breathe, expects to breathe, after all that practice inside me, but is punished when he does what is natural. The shock to his body when the oxygen doesn't come. He has finally pushed out of the fluid to the land world, where he drowns.

Hours later, I cradle his warm weight, attached to an oxygen-pumping device, surrounded by a circle of strangers, eyes downcast. I touch his cheek with my rough finger, ashamed of my cracked nail polish. I like the lanugo on his shoulder, shimmering under blue light. Below the shoulder, he's tucked into a quilt I taught myself to make out of our old clothes, with tiny precise stitches in unruly patterns, like what my grannies made, but not.

The Demerol dulls me, like numbing cotton on an open wound, so that I don't cry or despair. I observe. The perfectly shaped baby, thick, ready. The shocked professionals. The husband, lips swollen, red. Through the Demerol I see what emotion wouldn't allow.

I nod and a teal-costumed man flips a switch and my son's feet kick, kick, kick and then drop. I shake his body once but he does not answer. I hand him to a tan, blonde nurse with a wet face. Holding my son with both arms, she wipes her dripping nose on the shoulder of the nurse next to her and I laugh. I see that is wrong when my husband vomits on the floor behind me. Teal people scurry to help him, rags, bags, chair.

The snake in the tree drips the Demerol into my vein and I want it to drip forever.

Movement

By Deborah Staunton

I watched her eyes as they focused on the screen,
her head, mannequin still,
her lips a strained line.
her body, motionless,
mimicking my tiny lifeless unborn baby,
willing her to move,
just the flick of a finger, the drop of a shoulder, a barely discernible breath,
just one sign that the small form on the screen could somehow reciprocate,
the gift of movement, any movement.

Instead, she stood,
refusing to make eye contact,
to release the breath we had both been holding.
The heaviness in the tight, airless room
twisted time into an eternity of frozen life.
Just tell me,
Just say the words,
break the agonizing silence
and make the waiting stop.
My baby may be dead, but I'm not.

Birth Marker

By Gerda Govine Ituarte

Newborn son
two days of life

tattoo needle dips into
ink and his ashes

burns "ADAM" on to her
arm skin stings

babies gone from here
sing lullabies to her.

The Birth

By Linda Ravenswood

The ones on four legs
ran away.
Her screams
were a shock
even to her.

Though the mate
had mated
previously,
he too kept in the
outback.

When the little one
fell out
from between her legs,
she had no reason
to smile
and carry on with
all of that laughing
like she did,
but she did it
anyway.

She picked him up;
brought
her mouth,
over his nose,
sucked out
the clog,
jettisoned red streams
from his nostrils,
through
the flute
of her tongue,
onto the earth.
She had no idea why she did it
but she did it anyway

She rolled over in the leaves
nestled her backside in the grass
and cupped him against her.

Stars were up

Shushed

By Rebecca Roth

The first person
I
(Shush!)
is myself.

We're trying, I might say.
But I *can't* say. I could lose
My job. So, I depend on you. On your public, privileged wars.
And still more: on your private battles, private losses.

Silence any open-eyed fear.
Keep a white-knuckled lid on joy.
Keep still: wait til you can't deny;
until then, *deny! deny! deny!*

[The secret no one tells you, you riveting Rosie, you Wonder Woman you, is the closer children are together, the more dangerous; also, that women of a certain age pose a danger, too. This is coded as remorse: *if only you'd tried earlier*. You can't talk openly about your life changing.]

You could *use* a nanny state. It would be helpful.
Brotherhood is a cozy community as thick as thieves.
Motherhood is a singular experience.

You return to work (magically for deadlines, other duties as assigned,
occasional overnight travel required) and the babies disappear...
re-emerging for Bring Your Daughter to Work Day.
Until then, door closed, pump pumping.
Heart beating in there.

Shush, don't cry. Not here.
Or, if you must, crying it out isn't cruel. You have to
learn to soothe yourself to sleep.
Sink or swim, baby.
Sink or swim.
Hush now. Hush.

Always, Every, Only

By Susan Sarver

It only takes a half-hour three times a week to stay fit and a few vitamins every day are good plus a check-up every year, teeth every six months, unless you have kids with braces then it's every four, sort of like smoke-detector batteries that were always every six months unless you track down the ones you only need to change every five years except when you have a child afraid of fire then its every night and therapy every week until soccer starts then it's only every other week sessions that are long enough to get to the shop to check the warning light on the car or slip over for one of those every six-week hair cuts or a mani/pedi but only if you always get those things and waxing is every some time or other but only those who do that know for sure, because every time there's a moment to do the research there's something like the dog's monthly heartworm and flea prevention that's always overdue and walks, which are only twice a day but always take time though they offer the chance to plan for every thing ahead like booking the every-other-month exterminator treatments to keep the scorpions out, the weekly trip to the grocery, the dry cleaners, and the bank, and in the summer, the farmer's market to make sure to always buy local though there are usually lines that are a good time to always think and consider cleaning out the inside of your purse, recommended by the Simple Living column that comes out every month and advises root stimulator every week for the newly planted perennials, which is always easier than the twice-a-week watering of the lawn, if it doesn't rain and you're not concerned about the world's water supply, which should always be on our minds, but letting the grass go is always better than missing a hepatitis B shot for the kids or the one for meningitis, which is every some time or other, but that's an opportunity to refill prescriptions before vacation, which is only two months away and always requires a deposit to hold the cottage but it's only half the rent now and half two weeks before but that's always easier than the last minute chores of boarding the dog, setting the light timers, emptying the fridge, buying snacks, floaties, sunscreen, washing and packing the clothes, gassing-up the car, paying the kid next door to mow, holding the mail and paper, picking up the work file from the office, gathering the chargers and portable smoke detector for the child always afraid of fire, and though every year the traffic gets a little thick only an hour from the beach, it's always worth it once you're there inhaling sea air, sunblock, and beer, searching between the greased bodies for a patch of sand to lay back, breathe deeply, and remember every thing you left behind.

Margie's Monologue

(Excerpted from the full-length play *Cookies for Prisoners*)

By *Thelma Virata de Castro*

MARGIE

(White housewife. Sixty.)

When I got pregnant with Jude, I was so happy. Larry and I had already given up on having kids. Larry didn't want to go to any hocus-pocus fertility doctors. I hit forty and I thought, "That's it." No baby for me. Our lives kept us busy, but I always thought, I assumed, I'd be a mother. And then it happened. I was with child. I felt like goddamn Mother Nature. I did everything right. I didn't know if I'd get another chance. I ate healthy foods. I exercised. I meditated. And then, I took it too far.

When Jude was inside me, I tried an advanced form of meditation. I breathed in all the pain in the world, and I breathed out healing. I felt so . . . superior. But it turns out, that meditation was more dangerous than smoking.

All the pain of the world got trapped in Jude. Oh, and he knows it! The littlest thing can set him off. There's no pleasing him. The truth is, Jude didn't want to be born. He was perfectly happy living off me. He was two weeks overdue and he pooped all over my womb. I ended up having an emergency C-section. They didn't want him to cry when they finally yanked him out. All the crap had to be cleaned up first. The doctors were worried he was going to breathe it in and infect his lungs. When they were ready for him to take his first breath, they spanked him. You know what that little fucker did? He kept his mouth shut! Larry was distraught. I couldn't take it anymore. I yelled at the brat. "Cry!" He did. But he's been shitting on my life ever since.

Kymopoeia

By Tina Pocha

They cut my breasts off. They want me to love, but they cut my breasts off.
They gave me one earring. How can I be fair with just one earring?
They say smile. I smile. They say smile. I smile. They say you are not smiling. I say, this is my smile.

My son thinks I love his brother more.
But I tell the Ayah to draw his bath and lay out his clothes.
My son thinks I love his brother more.
But I sent him to the best schools.
My son thinks I love his brother more.
I do. I love his brother more.

My husband left me with boxes of tea and grandfather clocks.
I stir and wind, stir and wind.
My husband left me with land and tenants.
I pay his debts. I pay his debts.
My husband left me my sarees and jewels.
I take them out. I wipe them clean. No daughters. No daughters.

I am cold.
I am cold.
You know why I am cold.

Premonition

By Faith Holsaert

When I return, my car motor labors up the rise. Our shingled house hunkers into the green woods, the blue and white sky snapping like bed sheets on a line. I am putting the car in gear and setting the brake, gathering purse, books, and a bag of groceries from the IGA. The brown dog leaps barking off the porch, and the shepherd mix hurries toward me, ready to put his body between me and danger, but all I see of danger is the collapse of August's Joe-Pye Weed into its own pungency. The front door slams open and my children run toward me over the hummocks and rabbit holes, their bare feet missing their lost jacks scattered in the grass. She is in her favorite sun dress from last summer – the red one – and he is in jeans and a paisley shirt sent by his grandmother. The brown dog is steadily barking. The children are shouting, *Mommy. Mommy.* I drop to my knees and open my arms, books and milk and hamburger be damned; the children run into me and I let them roll me back into the grasses, the back of my head pressed to the ground. Seed heads burst into our hair. The brown dog can't stop barking. The hill looks upside down. I breathe in the smell of my children, cherish their thrashing limbs and their high voices. They cry, *Mom. Mom. Guess what?*

The brown dog. The shepherd mix. They snap at one another, struggling to reach us. My daughter cries out, *Mom*, as the brindled one grazes her with his teeth. *Mom*, she cries and the dog runs off, head slung low. *Mom*. The whites of his eyes.

“premonition” appeared online in ROAR, 8/14

At Precisely the Corner

By Faith Holsaert

at precisely the corner
a woman with wild eyes
as you are turning
a kind of wildness
as you are turning
turn wall-eyed terror

another whom you knew
and now, look
and now, not whom you thought
and look again
and you will see
another

she is walking close to the wall
no room for a shadow

a dog follows
a feist dog who fits inside her shadow

you know these dogs
know them from back home

The Disappointed Women

By Celeste Helene Schantz

These are the tssking women;
the women who glance sideways at my son.
These are whispering women,
who talk behind their hands;
who wait for the bus with their precious brats,
little rats with normal brains,
mimicking my boy as he talks
to the wind, to the robins;
speaks in signs with small fingers
flying fast as hummingbird wings. He tries
to join their circle, flaps and smiles; they move away.
We'll attend another sort of school today;
at this ugly curb; the bus diesel and pesticide
mist the petalled morning. This is the classroom;
this is where we learn a perfect hate.
It blooms and snakes beneath our well-groomed lawns—
the light and shadows arranged, fancy as the sympathy bouquet
you hold out to every mother of a unicorn child.
We choose to hate among these flowers.
I've finally learned to deadhead this pain you offer;
but at 40 it was all unbearable.
At 40 I tried to run away.

At 40, dear neighbor,
I was an old woman who wanted to die.

Boy Child

By Gerda Govine Ituarte

Boy child what could I have done differently
Boy child where does the blame live

Boy child quiet
Boy child did not bother anyone

Boy child shy
Boy child withdrew at fourteen

Boy child scared to talk on phone
Boy child wanted to be a neuroscientist

Boy child isolated
Boy child attended college

Boy child never hurt anyone
Boy child communicated by email

Boy child visits home slowed down
Boy child disappeared

Boy child bought guns
Boy child stockpiled body armor

Boy child mass murderer
Boy child my own son.

Boy child what could I have done differently
Boy child where does the blame live

Boy child if I had known
I'd be crawling on all fours to get to you

Boy child
I didn't realize that your loudest cry for help was silence.

*La Ganga, Maria L., *Los Angeles Times*, 7/30/2015.

Outside Modern Myths: Waiting in the Car While the Teens Battle on Game Night

By Rebecca Olander

My son and his geek friends are beautiful, with their Magic cards and D6 dice, their plastic-sheathed comic books and revelry in their own stink in the backwoods of gaming stores, huddled around tables like Tolkien's fellowship round a fire. Sometimes, they role-play in forests, becoming weekend healers, totem animals the raven, the hare, or warriors, attempting beards and clanking medieval weaponry, all cloaks and flasks, all lamb-on-a-spit and flower remedies. Some gamers aren't even adolescent. There's green-velvet-skirt-and-leather-headband woman, and the man at the counter with his golden snake choker and hobbit hair. I almost wish I could inhabit a cunning dwarf or a high priestess, not find it silly to speak in grand terms, to fight for love.

Instead, I sidelong glance in the rearview mirror, arrange my hair, suck in my stomach, second-guess my words. How refreshing it would be to sink teeth into a leg of mutton, to wear wings, to call myself another name, Morgana, Ethereal, or Storm Cloud, and have someone – maybe he'd wear a maille breastplate, or strap his sandals three times around his shins – call me *heart's delight*, feed me marzipan, mount a steed by my side. We'd weave each other tansy and goldenrod crowns, drape the kingdom we created with starlight, deer antlers, coniferous red-berried boughs. Dangerous to unmake the known world, though, house of cards that it is, yet just once I'd like to let the weight of self drop, puddled cloak at my feet, and play by calling out the rules as I go.

The Bones of His Face

By Jan Lewbin

I invited
My son
Glorious and brilliant
Yet so adrift separate distant
From me
In that painful precarious place
Between boy and man
To approach
And come close

He laid his head in my lap
Rested his shoulders on my thighs
And nestled his lean body
Along the length of mine
So that
I could soothe
The taut skin between his brows
Circle my finger tips
At his temples
And stroke
The bones of his face
In a way that allowed him
To heavy back into me
To soften with me
And close those eyes
Which can flash vicious black shards

I could have easily bent down
To brush his nose with mine
In an Eskimo kiss
But I didn't
As it was
This return of my son
Was nearly all I could bear
Without my own tears
Splashing onto
The bones of his face

Spear Maiden to Persephone

By Geri Lipschultz

All superheroes are violent, so do not marry one, but all who are not superheroes are also violent. A discovery made by one of the female explorers.

Empty pages, my life has been that for a while. I've stepped into someone else's book. I've skated on their pages. I've relinquished my religion and my height. I've given up my hair for a good cause. They must pulverize, snip off the tips of my daughter's fingers. This will make the bees sing again. Birds will flutter at our windows again. Cicadas will stop preparing for war.

Just a small sacrifice, and the snow falls on the buds of the magnolia, what is left after the great storm. The land has sued the sky for divorce. We walked on the side of the roads, trying not to look at the torn fences, trees fallen. A dry earth, the biologist said, that longs for its herds. We must eat the animals, round them up according to schedule. Tie them to a hook in the earth's core, where the elders lie.

Her fingertips have grown back. Even the whorls. Her little ridges. I lick them, watched by the cat, whose very tongue is a ridge. His eyes like those of owls. He curls around my daughter's fingers and stares.

How a daughter came to this world, I will tell you. I don't have the permit, so do not repeat what I say. I caught her, wrestled with a squirrel for her. He was atop the maple, chewing buds, and she was up there, as well, had climbed up to see the world. She didn't want to come down. I thought to send my cat, but he lives indoors. His purrs inflate the house. I didn't want to come home to a sinkhole, didn't want the house to lose its balance, to tip.

My fingers bleeding, my tongue full of blood. My eyes dry for the collection of tears that I gave to the Jehovah's Witnesses. Yes, you can have them, I said. You have lovely wool that was last seen on a drove of sheep. Dolly gave up her coat, and I gave up my tears.

It's a long story but must remain short. Otherwise, court-martial. Otherwise, prison. Otherwise, the degree stays in the file, and the file will be deleted. I will have to be observed. I will have to show my registration. A small box of index cards with the information written by hand. A relic of my twenty years of labor, for which I was paid a teaspoon of sugar. It adds up. My daughter will tell you. I will send her out into the world with all her whorls reborn, on a berth of roses, her rosette of gardenia, her garden of Eden, her evening posies. Wave goodbye and smile.

I buried a blade under her arm. It's a virgin knife, passed down, like the Bible we all carried down the aisle.

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Unwinding

By Anita Barnard

Broad and capable, still brown
from the long gone summer,
they carry you through the joyous
whys and whats of your days.
Had destiny given us a different setting,
my intrepid daughter, you would
not be running now
through our overgrown garden.
The binding woman would come.
I would wrap my arms around
your fragile limbs, stiffen
against your pain
as feet were folded, bound, broken.
So you will be beautiful to men
with the allure of your suffering
and your helplessness,
the women do this to their little girls.
Like the aunts and grandmothers
on the hot savannah
who sharpen rock, close you up,
scrape away your pleasure.
Ideal, powerless, dependent,
you hobble through your life,
beautifully broken.
Imagine being free of all the bindings.
I am taking your small foot in my hand.
I am unwinding, unwinding.
I am kneeling for forgiveness
at your feet.
Imagine I am pouring the
most expensive oil.
I am wrapping your feet in my hair.

There's a Tornado in My Mind

By Ann L. Carter

It comes and goes
but lately it's been lingering.

Sometimes it wrecks the house,
leaving us to stand amidst the piles,
and how do I find the energy
to put everything back together?

Sometimes it takes my daughters,
with me a shell of memories,
desperate to find their photographs.

Sometimes I alone am swept away,
doubting that those remaining can ever find
forgiveness for the one who left.

Kansas tornadoes often come late afternoon,
a twisting tail to a still dog day.

But mine arrive past midnight,
telling me to touch
the sleeping child beside me,
to check her sister in the other room,
to stay still and close by
to all that may fly away tomorrow.

Maternity

By Sue Churchill

My daughter has a job interview
so I am bargaining with God
recklessly trading away all pearls
of happiness, the ones I sought so long
in the dark depths, holding my breath
to bursting.

It's not just one or two I concede,
it's all and any and ever.
I throw in the ewes,
the lambs I looked for early and late,
the one I fished for in the wet darkness
of the mother, its clammy form
a lump of death, then quickened like Lazarus.

She can go, I decree, without hesitation.
But I give a backward look at that one—
clambering through a gap in the gate
her mother on the other side, bleating, bleating, bleating.

Orbit without Gravity

By Page Lambert

Once, daughter, in keeping with the turning
of the moon—nine times we felt it turn
during those months when we shared blood

and breath, when the iron-rich beef I ate
became the flesh that filled the hollows of your
soft bones, before the nurse cut the cord

and we began that long journey away
from each other, once, daughter
you needed me.

Now, twenty-one years later, the last particles
of your DNA sift from the veins of my blood
and once more the moon turns and

because it is a new day and
because it is the way of things, you
seek solitude, self, autonomy, while I

strain to board the vessel, the lifeboat
which once gave ballast and purpose
to belly and breast, yet even so

because it is the way of things
like a sailor suddenly adrift in a dark ocean
I wallow in these new waters
 with their unsteady
 tides
 and moonless
 nights.

On the Eve of a Daughter's Fortieth Birthday

By Laurie Klein

Little fist of a plum
on the chipped yellow plate,
your heft—mottled
violet, tinge of blue—defines
awkward: Smooth skin
girdles the bloom of pulp.

Youth is a membrane,
poised to tear,
spill seed. Little plum,
sealed tight, were you a door
hinged to my fieldstone wall,
where would I open?

A New Theology

By Sheila Bender

For Seth Bender, 1975-2000

Who has no likeness of a body and has no body
is my son, now five months dead
but in my dreams, my dreams he brings the peace in gardens.

And I see him in his smile and he is hardy
in the rolled up sleeves of his new shirt, well-fed
when he has no likeness of a body and has no body.

I see him next to me in conversation at a party
and I believe that he is fine because this is what he said,
because in my dreams, my dreams I sit with him in gardens.

The nights he comes, the cats moan long and sorry.
I believe they see his spirit entering my head,
he who has no likeness of a body and has no body.

In my life, accepting death comes slowly,
but the midwifery of sadness and of shock bleeds
afterbirth, dreams that bring the peace in gardens.

I know that he is far and he is here and he is holy.
Under sun, I feel the energy it takes to come away from God
who has no likeness of a body and has no body
who is in my dreams, the dreams that bring me gardens.

Identity

By Gerda Govine Ituarte

What do you call a woman who is married?

wife

What do you call a woman whose husband died?

widow

What do you call a woman who was married?

divorced

What do you call a woman who never married?

single

What do you call a woman whose child dies before she does?

Breathing Room

By Holly Norton

What must it have been like to wake up breathless
Not with anticipation
With lack of oxygen
The panic sets in
You call 911
Gasp for breath and wait for them to come.

Medics arrive
Place a mask on your face
Take you away without a change of clothes
No siren, only the sound of wheels on the road
Take you to a place where you know you will have to do
 what they tell you.

Then to a room with a bed on wheels
Fluorescent lights buzz, dilate your eyes
Vicks Vapo Rub wafts through the air
They take you out of your t-shirt you slept in
Put you in a gown that you can't tie around you
Help you crawl under the sheets pulled so tight
You wonder if you will stop breathing again

It's morning and another inmate comes in
Pleasant enough, with talk about the weather
Her daughter coming to visit her
Only later do you learn her reason for being there
Chronic incontinence
You eat the flavorless meat and pudding that only those with no choice
 will tolerate in this salt- and caffeine-free facility
You finally coax a shaker and a diet cola from a sympathetic nurse

They let you go and now you tell me
There's no place like the hospital to make you appreciate home
The nurse comes a few times a week, and
Your meals are on wheels
I imagine you trying to catch them, gasping for air,
Helpless, as I am now.

Windy

By Annita Sawyer

I was born at Winter Solstice on a mountaintop. I came out howling with the wind. “Here’s Windy,” the shout went up, while my dear Mama cried. Old Mrs. Dooley cleaned me off with freezing handfuls of white flakes. My blood showed scarlet on the snow. Once they’d bit and tied the cord, Mama herself held an icy ball against the knot. All the sheepskins, wool coats, down quilts they piled on couldn’t take away the chill. “You screamed yourself blue,” Mrs. Dooley told me when I was two, after I’d begged her for the millionth time to recite again the story of my birth. “Warn’t no warmth got through to you.” A miniature child with blue skin and red hair like me lived on forever in my mind.

Mama needed help at home—there was just her and me—so I never went to school. I couldn’t read, but I learned to sew and weave and how to make things grow. We raised corn, all sorts of beans, and squashes, too, yellow, green, and orange. Tomatoes red as blood on snow overflowed their garden stalks. Watermelons sneaked through the fields like insurgents in guerrilla war. We surrendered, let ‘em come, then passed the feast around.

Warm breezes kissed us summers on the mountaintop. From far and wide folks came to share our endless Solstice Day. “Sing to us, Windy,” they’d call, and melodies moved through my feet till they flowed out my mouth. It wasn’t really me. Mama would smile and squeeze my hand; I just set them free.

My midnight birth in winter’s dark forever left its mark. In the cold I suffered spells so bleak I retreated to a cave, Mama and our neighbors leaving food for me to eat. While other children learned in school, I built fires that wouldn’t burn. I hid near bats, and slept with bears to feel their warmth. Occasionally, I roused a cub, which made a wicked fuss. I had to climb a tree outside the cave, he’d eat my food, and I’d be stuck till spring’s light changed my perspective. Then I’d head for home, bringing Mama armfuls of forsythia and daffodils I gathered along the way.

As shadows lengthen earlier each day, dear Mama’s voice grows weak. Since summer’s peak she’s stayed indoors, afraid she’ll take a fall. Her fears have multiplied ten fold—first snakes, then mice, then poison food, now devils in disguise. I smell snow blowing in the dark; I race the clock. “I’m Windy,” I remind her, “your blue girl with red hair.”

I wash her worried face; I brush her disappearing, wispy curls. Each day more of them depart her scalp for the pillow where she rests her head, first sham I’d woven on my own, after she taught me how.

I squeeze her blue hand tight in mine. Cold wind blows fierce. A howl rises from earth’s core, through Mama, out the midnight sky. It’s my time to cry.

Previous version published in *St. Anne's Review* in 2010.

Tissue

By Berwyn Moore

for my mother, Connie Moore

As though to convince us she's still game,
my mother pulls from her coat pocket
a lemon, blue with mold, and tosses it,
a perfect serve, to the ceiling. Her eyes
glimmer, for just a moment, and she's

back on the court, thirty-love, muscles
poised to swing, but the lemon thuds
to the floor, and she falters, then crumples
to her chair, here but not here, the threads
of her brain tangling into hard knots.

She arrives at the table singing *Jesus loves
me* and lavished with every necklace
and bracelet she owns – pearls, garnets,
silver charms twinkling on her chest
and arms – but no skirt over her worn slip.

She shushes us, her conniving daughters,
for whispering secrets behind her door,
then for two hours she stands at the sink
and scolds us, scrubbing the disposable pan
we used and tossed in the trash to save time—

nothing goes unclean in her kitchen.

Now, she occupies herself with toilet paper,
gently tearing off each square, folding it first
in half, then in quarters, and stacking them,
hundreds of pink and green squares, corners

painstakingly aligned in five-inch pillars.

She arranges them in bowls and wicker baskets,
on window sills and under her bed. She assembles
them like sentries next to the china teacups—
for special occasions, she says, never certain

when the king of Nepal may show up for dinner.
We leave the stacks, undisturbed, grateful
for what she hasn't lost: her need for order,
the folding of grace in her lap, the gifts
her hands still know how to make by heart.

Poem for My Mother

By Mary Elise Bailey

There'll be no cups of coffee here,
no rituals, no book-talk—this time,
even our voices will be new.

There'll be no mother-daughter,
here, where memory has slipped away
and hidden, like a stubborn child

we won't follow: let her go.
Just give us a goldfinch, somewhere
not too distant,

a bright shade of blue, our feet
together, walking a path whose details
we won't notice. Our words

will tumble out, unfettered,
unclaimed, we'll share the very centers
of our stories, not even knowing how.

Just walk with me, today,
in this bright, new quiet, on this simple
path: just the finch, the summer sky.

Just the motion of our union, slowly,
slowly, forward, the light, determined
thudding of our unfamiliar shoes.

Honey

By Margaret Chula

I dream that I visit Mother in the last days of her life as she lies in bed naked, comfortable being naked as she never was when she was alive, her back tan and supple like Katherine Hepburn's in *The Philadelphia Story* and I'm naked too as we compare bellies—how our fat is below our belly buttons, not above like a shelf that can fold over things and hold them fast, and she looks down to see how much pubic hair I have left, but I cannot bring myself to look at hers and then she smiles at seeing the raised skin tag, brown like hers and in the same place—the fold of her left thigh—discovered one golden afternoon sunning together by the pool never imagining winter or old age or even this dream, years after she's gone, where she's offering me a jar of honey saying *Rub this into your skin. It will keep you young.*

The Daughter Walk

By Sheila Bender

For Kathrynne Kent

We live on a circle, our mothers'
houses just to the west of our own.
We carry casseroles to them, newspapers,
print outs of family email, prunes to stew,
brooms to sweep out the corners. Our feet
crunch over their crushed gravel driveways
as the sun rises behind us, sets in front of our eyes.

The Dreaming

By Ruth Thompson

The princess Briar Rose, her mother the Queen, and all the court fall into sleep with the pricking of a finger. The crone, the dark fairy, also sleeps. They dream.

1. The Queen's Dream

When her daughter was born the queen vanished.
Now she stands in her husband's hall.
She opens her mouth and flames pour out.
All the court burns; the king goes up like kindling.

Ah, I'm a dragon, she thinks. But where is my gold?

She uncoils up the stairs in the ochre gleam of torches.
My daughter is my gold, she thinks.

But her daughter is not there. Only a pale doll
of stuffed silk.
Down its skirts, a tracery of blood.

In the shadows, an old woman, turtle head sunk
upon her breast.
Darkness glimmers from eyefolds.

"You've a long journey," she says. "Don't forget to write."

The queen walks out of the castle. The thorns blow
and bow before her.
She takes a blood rose and puts it in her hair.
This is mine, she says.

Naked she walks into the river.
It carries her between golden willows and pink granite.
The sun pours into her belly.
The antlered trees bend down to her.
She takes a red stone and puts it on her sex.
This is mine, she says.

Before her is a caravan, red and yellow,
and a black horse waiting.
Inside the caravan are dresses embroidered with birds.
This is mine, she says, and takes up the reins.
Now I shall find my daughter.

2. The Princess's Dream

The princess steps out of her carcass
out of its golden hair and the soft white flesh
of being careful.

She steps out small, thorny, brown,
wearing a crown of oak leaves
with a cluster of acorns like small penises.

She drops to all fours and climbs out the window
down through the thorn hedge
and there is the forest, leaning against the castle.

His skin is bark, his arms are branches,
small bright eyes peer from the green foliage of his hair.
She walks right into the forest. She climbs up
and climbs down.
When night comes she dances.

Her eyes are round wells of moon, mouse-fall, bird-fly.
The antlered trees bend down to her;
the forest shapes himself to suit her.

In the morning, her mother comes riding a black horse,
sun-gilded and apple-ripened in her dress of birds.
You are my daughter, she says.
I am, says the girl.

3. The Crone's Dream

But what of the dark fairy, the wisewoman, the crone?
She has given the gift of all this dreaming; what now?

At the edge of dark water
galaxies streaming in and out of her eye sockets
she stands so long that weeds
grow and bloom and dry
between her finger joints.

At last she wades out into moonfall.
Everything is shining and invisible.

Oh, she goes far in her dream, this one.
In the end she knows nothing at all.

Then all around her is laughter and the calling of whales.

Ochre light opens her eyelids.

She walks out of the sea and becomes a man.

She walks out of the river and becomes an apple tree.

She walks out of the story and all the clocks begin to chime.



“Embodiment (detail),” by *Lisa Naas*

MY BODY IS NOT YOUR POLITICS

*... each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.*

---Mary Oliver

*...at times
the blood sings all night long
and nobody sleeps, nobody dares.*

---Mercedes Lawry

*This is the time when I am all prayers and incantations,
and I'd do anything to break
the fortress of my skin.*

---Beverly Lafontaine

Why My Body

By Antonia Clark

Because I've made it a temple
and worshipped at its altar.

Because I've stuffed it with secrets
and let it make me sorry.

Because it can't follow directions,
a slave to delay and meander.

Because I've tried to conceal it,
desiring the bodies of others.

Because I've scraped and scarred it,
teaching it needless lessons.

Because it's the seed of my father,
freighted with silent mutations.

Because it's the flesh of my mother
and nothing can please or appease it.

Because it burns up my ambition
and expels the ashes of failure.

Because it grows soft and loose-fitting,
mocking my ministrations.

Because of the rust and the scratches,
the ominous knock in its ribcage.

Because of the thorn in its rouged cheek,
the taste of blood in its mouth.

Because I'll always resent it
and always have to love it.

A Number of Blue Women

By Anita M. Barnard

I

They cannot help it;
they were painted like that,
nude, in that unshrinking shade.
Their bodies round, revealed,
as ripe as the red and yellow
fruit around them, vibrant.
The air quivers clear between them,
the curving bodies of the fruit and the women.
This one in the corner, near us,
lounging, displays her round and ample backside.
The shades of blue arcing in it
seem ready to curve her thighs apart,
fall open, lascivious.
But perhaps that is what you thought
when I said *blue*,
blue women.
What is the meaning of blue?
What is its nature?
In these halls
the Virgin Mary wears it.

II

Tonight I would join these women.
There are no children with them,
no husbands, no lovers,
unless, perhaps...
Many possibilities exist for these women.
I would shed my clothes
and lay my body down among them.
Wrap my lips around
one impossibly golden pear.
Lose myself in color.
I too would display my rounded thighs,
let the paint reveal my healthy buttocks,
supple belly. Wanton,
revel in my blueness.

Before We Met

By Zehra Imam

there is a booth at my college campus where i am stopped one day,

“good afternoon!”

one of the people at the table say.

“our organization is here to raise awareness
about the depiction of women in media
and standards of beauty imposed on them.”

“here. take a thumbtack,”

another continues.

“put it anywhere on the cardboard body silhouette.
anywhere where you don't like your body.”

i look at it.

i look at all the thumbtacks already pierced through
like bullets on the cutout cardboard person.

“you can take more than one,” they offer.

i pause to consider.

i hold the thumbtack and then slowly say,

“but, i love my body.”

i remember flashing a smile then

and my eyes must be shining because i mean it.

“it's not perfect but i think it's beautiful.”

i remember the people at the booth are taken aback.

“we've done this many times before, but no one ever says that.”

My Body is Not Your Politics

By Hannah Bonner

My body is not your politics.

On the bus, in the Laundromat,
in the classroom, on the stained

mattress, stuck in line for groceries,
pressed together, like petals

in a book, waiting for the sign "walk"
in green, my body is not your politics.

In the dark tunnel of the alleyway
building with the tumult

of a March wind, among the blue
fissures of the call light on the college campus,

between the arms of his embrace
mussing the ink on the page

of the last word in this sentence –
my body – as vast as the silence

stretched between the man and the woman
in the poem – my body – the spring sky, blown

clear of clouds, the small indentation
of last night's moon, still

present and virtuous – as my body,
my body filled with longing, longing

then relief, still churning, still declarative,
shaking like the Lilacs lining the street,

all blossom, blossom
and bark.

How To Love Your Body

By Kelly Cressio-Moeller

1. Polish a bronze moon-disc, see yourself reborn through Egyptian eyes.
2. Marvel at how the shape of your ears resembles handles of a porcelain cup.
3. Recall night swimming—the first time tight-laced limbs learned buoyancy in the dark.
4. End the day on a sleigh bed for adventure while dreaming, dip sheet corners in jet—trace *arrows, fire, and flowers* on your wrists instead of scars.
5. Share it with someone worthy, yet err on the side of orgasm.
6. Forgive its trespasses & those who have trespassed against it. Know temptation lives in your shoulder's cup.
7. Adorn it with pattern, ink, & polish—stud it with jewels & millinery.
8. Grow a crown of silver.
9. Let your hands be raven-winged, the wood thrush play your throat like a harp.
10. Honor wildness—raise the ocean in your blood.
11. Remember the stars in your veins, your plumed ribcage.
12. Remember you are a rare bird.

Note: *arrows, fire, and flowers* taken from Pablo Neruda's poem "La Poesía"

The Photographer's Model

By Jeannette Miller

The hard, round lens moved toward me,
its eye growing smaller
the closer it came.

You pictured me until the numbers wouldn't escalate
to hang on a white wall,
a row of trophies, their corners

pinned securely, the image you desired.
Drinking wine from paper cups
people will walk along the frames

studying them for meaning or beauty. A figure,
I'm without invitation
like the glass-eyed doll I loved

in childhood. She sat upright and still
until
I laid her down.

Inside her muslin chest: a sound box
of involuntary cries
someone sewed into her heart.

Molding

By Sokunthary Svay

“...the apsaras always appear on the stone in the same pose derived from that of a flying figure...standing isolated from the world on a lotus blossom or flying in the open air, they are the divine symbols of joy.” -Maurice Glaize, *Angkor: A Guide to the Angkor Monuments*

Cambodian girls
in roadside salons
idolize them in curls.

The eternal female
sculpted for worship,
protector of the temple city, Angkor.

Communist bullets
graze stone nipples.

Humanized by the King,
royal court dancers poised
in gleaming headdress.

In twilight, an apsara costume
slumped beside the royal bed.

Storytelling hands and feet
reminiscent of lotus
unfurling beside the Buddha,
ancestral mudras.

Foreigners cup their breasts
shiny from years of exploration,
hold them captive
in their viewfinder
to retrieve pleasure
in future moments.

Daughter, They'll Use Even Your Own Gaze to Wound You

By Beth Ann Fennelly

1. Chicago, IL

My high school teacher loved that I loved libraries, so she promised she'd bring me to her alma mater's. One Saturday, we took the train in and she donned white gloves to turn manuscript pages while I roamed the stacks, inhaling that dear dusty library funk. Wait: did I hear footsteps? When I was sure I'd been mistaken, I pulled out a heavy tome. There, thrusting through, a tube of flesh. Years later a librarian would tell me paraphilic activity is quite common in her place of work. Just in case you're wondering if I was special.

2. South Bend, IN

My college roomies and I were three beers in, walking from campus to Brigit's, a bar so seedy that, after graduation, it'd be condemned. A Tercel pulled over and the interior light flicked on to halo a man consulting a map. Good Catholics, we inquired if he needed directions. *Can you show me where I am on my map?* So we stepped closer and discovered where he was on his map: through the center, dickly. I'm guessing it was Denise who began laughing, or maybe Beth, but in seconds we were all hooting, we could barely stumble away, shrieking and pounding one another. He screeched through the intersection, the light still red.

3. Fayetteville, AR

From dawn till noon I'd reviewed Wordsworth, cramming for my comp exam, and now as I ran through the park, sonnets metered out my pounding feet. A bicycle came from behind, a man swiveling to see my face. At the top of the hill, he stopped, turned, and coasted back toward me. I could see his fist gripping something low on his belly. What zinged through my head: a bouquet. But that was no bouquet. I didn't even slow as he passed, just averted my eyes.

I'd run nine miles that day with one to go.
I guess I'd learned by then what women know.

There Is More Light Every Day (A Song for Uneven Fingernails)

By Anna Hundert

there is more light every day
and it is helping me to see
my edges, see where my body
ends and the world begins you
see, this separation (here I,
there world) is needed for the
infant mind to grow and I
am just learning

 there is more light in
my eyes and on the ends of
my eyelashes on days like these
when I am glad to have edges
and I am glad to have them
broken only every so often
I ask for love or ask for
forgiveness or ask you
to make love to me, to break
my edges, I ask every now
and then

 somebody breaks
my edges I have not asked, I
cannot say a thing, it is
strange to me (how odd, how
sinister) that another body
within my edges can make me
feel less whole, sometimes.

(you see, I cannot stop biting
my nails for this reason:
sometimes it helps to have
control over my own edges,
to show the world that only
I decide where I begin and
end, I chew them raw)

Tijuana

By Holly Norton

Southern California unwinds like a filmstrip
Unreels when we cross the border in the mint green Edsel
Men run into the street to meet my father and me
Wave their arms and say, "Senor! Senorita!"
He gets out to make a deal
Fifty dollars for new upholstery
Twenty for a new set of rims
He ends with a joke about us getting married
They laugh. I look at the ground.

On the street I look at the pinatas and sombreros
Embroidered with the name of the city
Serapes woven with yarn in colors not found in nature
My father sees a purse like his cowboy boots,
Ostrich skin with dimples where their feathers were plucked
Like the pimples pushing through my skin
And the hairs above my lip that I'm starting to pull out with
Tweezers like tiny forceps.

He sees me eyeing a silver bracelet inset with abalone flowers
Says to the cashier, "She'll take this one,"
Slams it on the glass counter
I flinch
He pays for it
Clamps it onto my wrist.

We walk past darkened bars
Disinfectant wafting from open doors
But my father buys his tequila on the street
Where we eat tacos full of meat and beans
Let the juice dribble into the wrappers and down our arms
And don't speak.

On the way back we see a man
With no hands and no feet
He sits on a cart with a can that says, "Please"
I reach down, and my bracelet sounds like
Money in his cup
My father walks on.

My Brother

By Katharyn Howd Machan

My brother lives in a box of cigars.
Each day every day
he lifts the lid to peek at the world
and hopes the world won't notice.
Bristles grow on his face and throat.
He smells, fears soap.
He never throws his loose hairs away
but carefully keeps them, dirty and dark,
in the teeth of a green plastic comb.

Long ago he spent years committing incest.
I survived but we never mention it.
He's thirty-five now and still lives with our mother.
My favorite joke when I visit is to talk
of the time I stabbed his thigh with a fork
and sent him screeching around the table
for ruining my first perfect crayoned picture.
We pretend to laugh and the scar
does not go away. Migraine headaches
take me back to the fork, to the fort
he built under cool pines
where he wouldn't let me visit
unless I would...and I did.

Now he does his best to repel.
He rots his teeth, sucks his cigars,
growls and belches and grows fat.
Each night every night
he grows a little smaller inside.
One morning my mother, weeping,
may find he's flickered out at last,
a small gray heap in an ashtray.
I'll visit, leave the jokes behind,
bring instead a perfect crayoned picture
to wrap around his coffin.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Father Rucker

by Cheryl Buchanan

Kim says, *It's like I'm still suspended,*
when Jenny asks her to recite it.
Each year it's harder to believe.
Which doesn't mean they can't remember.

Leigh keeps talking about horses, their wide
infantile eyes. Kim brings old photos,
where even grown-ups look so starchy,
squeaky clean. Like those school uniforms

he stuck his hands up while he talked
of disconnected things, like your dead dog
or first lost tooth, and like he wasn't
really there, or like his fingers weren't

the ones inside your flowered underwear.
Who would believe that he's so old now?
The news says he's eighty-three and living
like a recluse in a West L.A. retreat.

What do his neighbors know, asks, Jenny?
What do anyone's know, I say?

They toast to Kim's divorce, and to eternal friendship,
Non Omnis Moriar. Leigh's quit everything else, except
those equestrian Vietnam vets. She's found God
with circling horses. Jenny dreams of losing all her teeth.

We order more mojitos. Forgiveness means let go.
Which doesn't mean they can't keep secrets. But Kim just can't
get past Step Three. Leigh says trust is like those muscles
how their fullness moves and flexes. (Eques, Feques, Neques)

I want emptiness and stillness. A silent house with breath
of watered plants. The last time Kim saw him at the black church,
preaching some bullshit homily, was long after police came
around St. Anthony's (but not about the three of them)

and years after Kim's mom was called
and she first got suspended

for her third grade limerick, which read:
There once was a man named Rucker...

Won't You Be My Valentine

By Elizabeth Hoover

By now you are just the space
my lover touches me around, his care
unwittingly conjuring you. You left
an opening to talk to me—your voice
speckles through—but I miss you
when I feel unknowable, a tongue
too swollen to tell. My body is a dream
I once had of freedom, a foreign
thing that eats silver and loves spiders. How
can I tell my lover of my craving for metal,
how will he understand the watchful
eye of the spider. I long for you—
my only witness—no one else
knows me in that particular
crisis. Not even me. Only you
can tell me what my face becomes,
which animal I sound like, only you
can embroider the scene—the doe gutted
or the doe leaping away.

What Sets Her Apart, Asks Jayne, After Reading Another Guinevere Poem For Me In Massachusetts

By Tania Pryputniewicz

(Poet to Jayne)

The company she keeps: Arthur, his sorcerer sister,
their bastard son. Merlin. Her view of the rain stippled Severn,
orchard's apples rinsed silver by dawn, the blue smoke

of burning peat. Hair framed by candleflame, cobalt
iris of eyes, flecks of cinnamon. Her position,
middle star of Orion's belt, between Arthur and Lancelot

more brothers than lovers, lure of Grail to assure
they'd abandon her for days alone in the Tower
with a rapist. The tear in the veil we share. I prefer

to stay with her those hours, brutal, chivalrous.
Easier than here where I dream of the acned face
of a soldier heaving into me at the bottom of an ancient

church in church's ancient time. To repeat
when I'm fourteen with a seventeen-year-old kid up the street.
Which sets me apart. *Be my parable, I'm teachable:*

You still had it all: husband, lover, convent.
Embroidered sleeves tip backs of your hands,
girl nested in woman like pit to peach.

What Sets Her Apart, Part II

By Tania Pryputniewicz

Looking at Käthe Kollwitz, Women and Art, UC Davis

In *Raped*, trampled leaves, vines. Käthe left one bloom intact. Black center tethers one unified petal. Viewer stands at girl's bare feet, skirt taut over thighs, white flare

where naked breasts disintegrate under sun's sudden path unobstructed where missing soldier stood up to run. Girl's chin to sky, hair strands bled into ground. No reason

to believe she's dead. My boyfriend cheats on me. I fail my final. Enroll in Women's Studies. In an unlit room a professor who calls herself Merline projects

thirty nine backlit circles bearing portaled flowers, winged seams. *Sappho*, *Artemisia*, *Woolf*, Merline's husky voice, *assemble for Last Supper*, as we writhe in slick, elated

revulsion. Behind her bedroom door, my twelve-year-old daughter sleeps. Soon she will rise and enter the now in which still exist Chicago's plates, Glastonbury's Tor.

What We Call Love Is Seldom What We Fall Into

By Sandy Gillespie

what we call love is seldom
what we fall into

*falling free is frightening
even in a dream*

I drive home with my hand between my legs, unaware that I am holding my breath again. Legs laced closed, a gift for someone's blessing. But that was years ago, the cords long severed, never any blood, no hymen, hi men, no gush of virtue -- given to my horse or maybe the blade of my ice skate the time I fell on its shaft, I fall into the shaft, let go and seek the well, the caverns of water, but I am hooked by a root, spinning into vertigo, which way down? or up? Fear pricks my tongue, dry and rough, and the walls close in, there is no up, no down, only in. In here.

*when you step into the sky
at 5000 feet you expect to fly*

I watch my niece make her first jump. From the single engine plane 5000 feet above me, she plummets like a Peregrine falcon, wings sucked tight to her body til the last possible moment, when the rainbow opens over her, catches her in the updraft, and swings her in silky spirals toward the earth. And I want to feel the thousand feet spin by in seconds but I feel instead the weight of the instructor's body, harnessed to my back, and I forget how to breathe, the air rushes in but I don't know how to suck and I feel force fed, like an infant when the milk lets down, and I couldn't believe when he opened my knees, old enough to be my father, pressed his palm between my thighs, smiled, and I didn't close my legs.

*how can you tell five hours
falling into hell*

He said he had a gun and a knife. He put her in his trunk. For an hour-and-a-half he drove around. She was nineteen, my daughter's friend. Leaving her dance recital silver-sequined like the night, she is gone. He'd grabbed her right outside her apartment, her family inside. Said he was going to kill her and forced her into his trunk. In a small mountain town he pulled her out, threw her onto the back seat. *Take off your clothes.* When she said no he clasped her throat, began to squeeze. *I'll kill you now.* When she was naked he forced his penis into her mouth. He put his hands and tongue into her vagina. All over her body. Her body. She can't remember everything. He drove her home. *I'm really a nice person. I don't usually do such things.* Dropped her a block from the parking lot, said he deserved for her to tell.

*the fall of man becomes
the fall of woman*

I want to be the one to press the blade against the rapist's groin or throat, carve the names of every girl I know into his back, then send him to the bottom of the sea where fish can gnaw his gut, trailing his intestines like some giant turd. I don't give a fuck that he is crazy, violated as a child. I only care that he has raped this girl and changed her forever, and it could have been my daughter, could be some other night, or day--one moment as good as another to destroy a young girl's life. My son could be the victim, his body ripped by a violent penis, and if it were a pattern or his own father, he might learn to be a rapist, and what could I do but cry for his life and send him to the bottom of the sea.

Body Parts

By Margaret Stetler

Leg lies on the rug like a dog's gnawed bone.
Arm against the bookcase.
Foot in its slipper beside the chair.
Under table glass, head with blood-matted hair.

The house is dark, vulnerable to sky and earth
the way the sleeper is to wakeful, watching ones.

In the dream I ride with a stunt driver, a man I love.
He speeds to the edge of a cliff, has seconds to brake.
I count on him, he fails, the car flies forward into air.
Down in the mall, shoppers pick through the pieces.

A murderer is still in the house.
Let me reconstruct the crime:

I rise up tall and proud in my young body.
Each part belongs: arms, legs, hips, belly, thighs, head
and moves as a whole.
Even my breasts, too large, surely not mine, are lovely.

I leap, turn, lift arm and leg in arabesque.
The intruder raises his arm.

I am not dead.
I still have my best parts: my voice, my sex, my heart.
Only I cannot carry them on legs, reach out with hands
Or hold with arms, my self or another.

I cannot see who remains in the dark.
But I know he is weeping.

The Untenable

By Cynthia Reeser

A rusted gash in a frigate's flank. Her screaming mouth. Rope uncoiling from tree. His tightening grip around her throat. Her pregnancy a hint of a lump. Rotten Easter eggs, unfound in July. His red swollen face, a Goya of anger. Spine of redfish, played like a xylophone. Her head hitting the floor, unconscious. The hot press of the mattress. The thrum and thrum and thrum of pumping blood.

Comfort Woman

By Tanya Ko-Hong

On August 14, 1991, in Seoul, a woman named Hak Soon Kim came forward to denounce the Japanese for the sexual enslavement of more than 200,000 women during WWII. They were referred to as "Wianbu" in Korean and "Comfort Women" in English.

1939, Chinju, South Kyangsan Province

Holding tiny hands
fingertips
balsam flower red
colored by summer's end

ripening persimmons
bending over the Choga roofs
fade into distance

When the truck crosses the last hill
our hometown is the dust
Soonja kicks off her white shoes

1941, That Autumn

that night, Japanese
soldiers wielded swords
dragged me away
while I was gathering

Pine needles
fell from my basket
filled the air with the scent
of white blood.
When you scream in your dream
there's no sound.

Grandma made Song Pyunon. The maru,
asked mom, *Is the water boiling?*

I feel pain
there—

They put a long stick between my legs—
Open up, open, Baka Chosengjing!
they rage, spraying
their sperm

the smell of
burning dog
burning life

panting
grunting on top of me—
Under my blood I am dying

1943, Shanghai, China

One night
a soldier asked all the girls

Who can do one hundred men?

I raised my hand—
Soonja did not.

The soldiers put her in boiling water
alive and
fed us.

1946, Chinju Again

One year after
liberation
I came home
Short hair
not wearing Han Bok
talk without tongue
Mother hid me in the back room

At night Mother took me behind the house
and washed me
Hot steel scars like burnt bark
like roots of old trees
under the crescent glow
She always smiled when she washed me

Your skin is white jade
She bit her lower lip
washing my tummy softly like a baby's
but they ripped opened my womb
with the baby inside

Mother made white rice and seaweed soup

put my favorite white fish on top
—*but, I can't eat flesh.*

Mother hanged herself in the granary that night
left a little bag in my room
my dowry with a rice ball.
Father threw it at me
waved his hand toward the door

I left at dusk

30 years
40 years
forever
mute

bury it with me

*They called me, wianbu—
I had a name*

1991, 3:00 AM

[That night
the thousand blue stars
became white butterflies
ripped rice paper
flew into my room

Endless white
the web in my mouth,
unhealed red scars,
stitching one by one—
butterflies lifting me
 heavier than the dead
butterflies opening my bedroom door
 heavier than shame]

At
dawn,
I stand

What Is the Medicine for Rape

By Trina Porte

last week at the acupuncturist
while tiny needles helped my qi unblock
the doctor told me that the chinese
view the inside of the body
as a garden with a waterfall flowing through

next week i want to ask him
do the chinese have a word for rape
what is the character for it and
does a spot in the garden die
or does the waterfall wash it away

Survivor's Guide to Sex

By Elizabeth Hoover

Two days before the declared frost, cold snap.
You wake to find the fields a bank, stalks
lost to morning light. Walk through wheat,
stems snap, brittle with cold. Look
into an ear: each kernel is brushed white.
You notice details like that more often
now—how, when wheat bends under the weight
of ice its hair catches in the frozen mud and
can't yank free, even in a strong wind.
Look into the swallow-less sky. Calculate
the acres of ruin, the acres of what
can be saved. Then return. He is just finishing
his toast. Or return and find him still asleep or
do not return. Go into the field. When you walk
over the spiculated ground, it will be like
walking over the tiny bones of your own
inner ear. As you walk, you will recite
your litany of at leasts and add one more.
At least take off your shoes, feel the blades
of frost opening your skin like relief.

Not Always

By Denise Miller

Remember stones skipped across man-made lake. Remember tall grass browned by sunlight. Remember bouldered footsteps against linoleum. Remember town— city's antithesis. Remember the bodies of buildings only one story high balanced on basements taller than their skeletons above ground. Remember rock and stone and wood.

Remember aluminum and that streetlight bouncing off it like a clock face. Remember time— go in for the night. Remember cow bell. Remember slammed door. Remember scream. Remember the crest of fear— its collision against the wall of your stomach.

Remember creek and listen to it— ear to water, heart to current. Then, let it soothe you. Listen. It's not always what you assume. The motion of feet pounding against pavement or the movement of dark at the corner of your eye isn't flashback turned to forever. Remember, water isn't always metaphored tears— and tables aren't always overturned— and glasses aren't always chipped or broken— and your reality isn't always man-made.

The Distance Between

By Maureen McQuerry

You tell me to lean into sorrow
as a horse leans against a fence,
day after day, believing
in time his weight will topple it,
like a child leans into her mother,
forehead to breastbone, the twin press of despair
and hope.

Tonight the air is charged with wanting,
electric blue. The distance between
a question and answer is a skitter of light,
the long ache from gravid sky
to snow.

For the first time in months
there's a trill from the locust tree.
When did I become so rusty
at hope? I have been traveling
years to find you.

Friend, here is the secret
science won't tell you: we are each made of longing,
the smallest particle ever detected,
the shimmy in the heart of each atom.

How Big the Sky

By Anna Hundert

1. he steals my darkest lipstick, the one I never wear, and holds me tightly from behind although I do not struggle, I shake as a steady hand writes his name across my back in my darkest lipstick, the one I never wear, which isn't very dark but dark enough to look like blood. I push him away and then let him draw me close again and then wonder if this has happened to every woman. I look out the window and wonder, how small am I / how big the sky.

2. there was once a boy who practiced his signature everywhere, loopy letters in the corners of textbooks and takeout menus, in the stalls of girls' bathrooms, in red lines carved into his skin that faded to shiny white. when we shared a pew he took the tiny free pencils they put out for prayers and pledge cards (the ones with flat ends instead of erasers because you can't erase anything from god's sight) and he scribbled the name on service leaflets and hymnals, on the announcements pamphlet, beneath a reminder to bring nonperishable foods for the drive, on the wider flat end of palms on palm sunday. he wanted to make the name beautiful but it was never beautiful because it was the wrong name. when he told me that he was a boy I held him close and repeated his more beautiful name into his ear and hoped that he would write it on every flat surface he could find, Peter Peter Peter Peter Peter.

3. my name folds in on itself until you cannot hear it, please do not say it, if I ignore you then you will only say it to get my attention, if I let you into my body then you will only say it for the effect.

4. when it is all over I will use warm water to wipe the lipstick-name from my back and when I look down at the washcloth in my hand, it is like a used pad soaked with the iron drawn out of my body by gravity and cyclic time. like the harsh redness that follows people who have too many empty spaces, it follows me and it follows Peter. it follows Peter in an even more sinister way, when his body opens up every twenty-eight days.

5. have you ever seen someone's handprint on your own skin? it is like a name, it is more than a name. have you ever looked up and wondered, how small am I / how big the sky. my name folds in on itself. is there a way to take a very deep breath without becoming more round at the middle? where can my air go but to fill my body, to grow me?

Bet You Thought You Saw the Last of Me

By Rachel Durs

I used to think that I hated the person I was.
I used to think that I left her to die and became someone so much better,
But now I know I reached into the past and grabbed her out of there
And left all her hang-ups behind.
Now I know I didn't become me by ousting her, but that together we're the hero of this story -
She just happens to be me, pre-transformation into a bionic superpower.

Once, back then, I unzipped my dresses,
Pulled my skirts off over my head,
Wore hats worn by other people -
And somewhere in between wearing someone else's clothing
And walking around completely naked
I found a stamp on my body that said my name in every language known to man,
And then somewhere on my bookshelf I found a book where I was every hero.
Somewhere after a dozen years walking hunched over, I unfurled
And somewhere after another half a dozen years floating over houses
I found the middle ground, and I'll be damned if it wasn't my own body.

And now I walk a happy medium and say to passers-by:
You aren't the first to pass this way and you will not be the last.
Now with this mouth I retell the evolution stories
Until they all proclaim the secret of loving even the most brazen inconveniences of our flesh.
Now with these feet I learn to dance around the old memories I wanted to kill
And with these hands I learn to revive the younger girl from times past
That I tried to bury under a torrent of learning and knowledge.
I like her look when she comes out of the dark,
I like the way she takes my criticism of her in stride.
So now I'll walk hand-in-hand with the self I tried to drown,
And I'll take her to people who haven't seen her for ages
And enjoy how big their eyes get when they see her again,
Since they believed they had seen the last of her ages ago.
And right then and there I'll decide it's time to love my own history like I love everyone else's.
So now they'll call me Wonder-who-that-Woman-is
Or Super Man-don't-you-wish-you-could-be-like-her,
And one by one the former versions of myself will all reconcile in each other
While I walk familiar pathways and replot the furrows that have obviously been plowed before.

Inside Frida Kahlo's Body

By Mercedes Lawry

Wildfires are burning, children
are returning to the womb
and birds are having their wings plucked
slowly, feather by feather,
keeping silent. The old rich men
would never understand.
Shadows will eclipse the heart
but something else is missing.
Pain is a career and the interpretation
fills canvas after canvas.
Love is an echo of that pain.
Where does she put it all,
the fire and the knives? At times
the blood sings all night long
and nobody sleeps, nobody dares.

Lupus Outwits Me, Declares Martial Law

By Susan Eisenberg

Who would dream to awaken from fevered sleep
stun-gunned into paralysis by their own
ruthless doppelganger:
power stations overtaken in a pre-dawn coup;
from every organ of the body
a triumphant, unfamiliar flag!

Who wouldn't be humbled
by their double's brazen brilliance? Or,
begin at once to plot in whispers
the first frantic steps of resistance?

Leap

By Susan Austin

Wind roars home after a windless winter. I listen to its long-haul howl, wonder how spring birds weather a force that tips thin-rooted aspen, rattles windows in their casings, doors in their jams, as if the wind is an intruder, or someone lost, or someone lonely.

For a time I lived in a homestead cabin built by two brothers from St. Joe: craftsmen, bakers, one a fiddler who snowshoed four miles to play music at the dance hall Saturday nights. My closest neighbor lived three miles down an unplowed road—ferocious blizzards, blinding blizzards spun me around more than once on the long ski home.

Illness creates its own kind of weather, one that leaves you standing in a house you no longer remember.

**

Words rear up on their hind legs, toss their heads, the wild wiry hair of their manes and gallop off down a windswept ridge into the creek bottom, cross mountain ranges in inclement weather until they reach a desert.

**

Cells have a memory. Hearts have a memory. Even a heartless sheet of paper has a memory.

**

I remember the pearl diver off the Izu Peninsula in Japan. I remember the fisherman and a fishing bird fishing together. The fisherman ties a string around a gangly cormorant's neck; since the bird can't swallow, it spits the fish out. The old fisherman assures me with hand gestures and a few broken words of English, "The bird cares for me and I care for the bird."

A few wet strands of black hair fall across the pearl diver's face. She isn't a young woman. She does not smile. I am gaijin, a foreigner, watching her from the dock. Her eyes peer into my heart and pry it open the way she pries open an oyster shell. She digs into the muscle of my heart and uncovers the pearl hidden beneath all I thought I was supposed to be, then tosses her catch into a woven basket floating inside a black inner tube. She takes a breath and disappears into deepening blue water.

I want to follow the pearl diver. I want to dive with the cormorant, offer my fish to the fisherman.

The pearl diver surfaces again. She cracks open an oyster with the blade of her knife and hands me a glistening white pearl. It's an act of trust. To trust in the miraculous healing engine of my body.

**

Once I sailed out of a beating wind into the center of a Pacific high, the calmest ocean I've ever encountered. A pod of spinner dolphins escorted me. I believe when I have forgotten nearly everything I will remember the spinner dolphins spinning and twirling and leaping out of the still night sea, a cascade of brilliant blue bioluminescence showering down from their godly bodies, birthing stars.

Stef's Request

By Abigail Licad

The night before the surgery she hands me her Nikon
and asks me to photograph her naked hips and thighs --
the only parts of her body left unscarred by the accident.

In a trailer transporting horses from her mother's farm, her beautiful
twenty-two year-old body snatched by the collision's conflagration,
third-degree burns across seventy-percent of her skin, a permanent redness,
part of her left ear lost, a slight limp, and bluer eyes.

And now, ten years later, unable to turn her head to meet the face
of a friend who calls her name or look up toward the sky,
she faces the scalpel-edge again to trade pain for pain:
plant skin grafts from her body's unburned parts,
new striae of tissue to soften the leather below her jaw.

I try to get out of it -- the nakedness
behind the nakedness, as I chased long-winded excuses
in my head, raised to believe in the female body shared sparingly
and in suffering silenced into prayer.

Who owns the body? Does sharing relinquish
or reinforce its ownership? Choose -- I tell myself.
Relinquish, I decide.

But her blue eyes search until I reluctantly accept the camera
and ready it as she undresses. As her hand trembles, my cowardice
falls away like the silken drift of her robe to the floor. Silently, she begins
to pose. On her stomach. On her side. Crosses and un-crosses her legs.
Standing, she pushes against the wall. Arches her back.
Extends her long limbs. Thrusts her body toward the lens.

I map the contours of her flesh, the question mark of her sinuous
back's profile, the meetings of inner folds her future husband's tongue
would trace. Into the night, we work like witnesses bearing testimony,
before the carving of freshly hewn grooves onto her body's new geography,
which up close appear as a sky-view pictorial of mountain peaks and desert.

When You've Been Sick for a Time

By Susan Austin

The surgeon threaded the catheter
through my superior vena cava, let it dangle
just above my heart.

The young assistant scrubbed
until I felt like pudding—
Strange not to feel

pain, only meaty burrowing.
Sometimes the catheter rubs
and my heart hiccups.

When you've been sick for a time
you give up all your secrets, you give up
lies.

I liked building puzzles
as a child, the constancy
of the card table set up in the den.

I almost stayed at the Denio bar,
paid rent for a trashy trailer out back
because cowboys still hitched

their horses to the rail.
It doesn't take long to turn a *creek*
into a *crik*. I think about going back.

I take my catheter to the grocery store
and to the county dump
where a man named Dirty Dale guides me

through TV dinners and bags of dirty diapers
to listen to Maria Callas sing
on a transistor radio. *Ascolta, ascolta.*

Listen, listen.

*The little things gather
that I have left scattered about.*

Small Talk at Evanston General

By Beth Ann Fennelly

And what is it you do? he asked, after a moment of silence. My mother was in the bathroom exchanging her dress for the cotton gown.

I had the sense that he was asking to fulfill some kind of med school training: *Engage the patient's loved ones in conversation.*

Five outlandish occupations pinged through my head, all lies. But I knew I shouldn't mess with him. I needed to get him on our side and keep him there. *I'm a writer*, I said.

A rider? A light turned on in his eyes, suddenly as blue as his scrubs. He put his fists up and bounced them: a cowboy bounding over the plains.

No, I said. *A writer.* Which now seemed to require a gesture, so I held up my imaginary pen and wiggled it.

Oh, he said, all business again as my mother came out of the bathroom. *Well*, he said, *me too.* He untied her gown with one hand and slipped the black Sharpie from his pocket with the other, clamped it between his teeth to remove the cap, then drew dashes on my mother's naked chest, indicating where his scalpel would go.

After the Cut

By Mai-Lon Gittelsohn

I take a shower differently now
I used to stand under the shower head
a font of water splashing down my back
coursing over my breasts
now I sit on a shower bench
hold a hose in my hand
let it spray over my flat chest
inscribed now with scars
I let the water spray against the pits of my arms
prickles teasing numb skin
after the cut, what?

The Tattoo I Did Not Get

By Felicia Mitchell

Bloodroot sends up leaves,
angel wings on earthen flesh.
A flower comes next.

My right breast, hollow,
is the opposite of spring.
It has bloomed and gone.

I look for flowers
that grow on the sides of trails,
my path a journey.

My left breast likes sun,
flesh flushing as winter wanes.
Its nipple blossoms.

Where the sun falls first,
a bloodroot will bloom early,
its leaves a blessing.

I do not need ink
to replace what cancer took,
no nipple tattoo.

A scar is plenty,
its track like a bird's scratching
on something hidden.

A bloodroot roots deep,
even deeper than earthworms.
I kneel over it.

When They Ask About My Face

By Nancy Carol Moody

I will say something
about snow, the skittered tracks
of a hare just prior to the hush

I will say wind bores
salt into sea-boards,
taut rope burns a furrow,
leaf rust in spring autumns elms

Hoarfrost bit by hob nail
meadow after the scythe
the dory's barnacled hull

a peppermint held
too long against the palate

When they ask about my face,
I will say that even a trodden carriage
leaves wheelmarks in the stone,
that shrapnel can flare
a staggering tattoo,

that left to their own devices,
sparks of midnight fireworks
will carve ferocious trails
into the black wax of the sky

Coming Back

By Beverly Lafontaine

The rosemary thirsts. The brown rice is mealy.
A spider spins a universe between a leg of the piano
and a shadowed corner of the living room.

Get sick, stay in bed and that's what happens.
You become a ghost in your own life.

Bits of me are floating back like moons to their
mother planet. No one else has this exact memory
of honey on toast or this bitter echo of a child lost.

I water the rosemary, sweep away cobwebs, let light and sound
stitch my wounds, healing across time and space.

At the Yoga Shanti Class for Cancer Survivors

By Cheryl Buchanan

We stand in Mountain Pose, *Tadasana*,
a giant step back with the right.
Bend the left leg, left thigh parallel
to Mother Earth. We lean,
prayer-hands connected.

The Sanskrit *Yoga* gives us “yoke,”
of the self and the divine.

We look like any class,
but for the socks and headwraps,
We need to minimize exposure
among the diagnosed and staged.

Feel the ground beneath
you. Everything will pass
and change...

In meditation I replay the burglary.
I'm on my mother's back porch
making her list of missing jewels.
Neighbor women gather in the kitchen.
Lilliana lives next door.
She only grows what will bear fruit.

Avocado, pomegranate, mango,
grapefruit blossoms and banana leaves.
The detectives think it's gypsies
from Miami. It is 85 degrees.

1. The wedding ring made into a necklace
after the divorce, 2. A charm bracelet of silver
booties from her grandchildren, 3. An heirloom
string of pearls.

One hundred years ago,
Dr. MacDougall weighed six bodies
before and after death. *The New York Times*
announced, “Soul has Weight, Physician Thinks.”

The word *Rei* means miraculous. *Ki*
means gas or energy...

Feel the ground beneath you now.

You are a warrior.

You are a tree.

Crone Hands

By Molly Howes

Her large hands bear bony knuckles and uneven, cracked fingernails. An array of rounded patches holds the history of warts. Thin scars line her fingers, the result of working with too much speed and not enough caution. Her hands are functional, not things of beauty.

When she was a child, their unloveliness stood out more. By her teens, her hands resembled an ancient witch's: worn and wrinkled, with misshapen fingers. Never graceful nor suited to adornment, she would have looked absurd with polished nails. She envied friends' delicately tapered fingers and clear, unlined skin. She dreamed of slipping her slim hand into a handsome Prince's larger one.

After being badly dislocated, her left ring finger retains an odd lump at the first knuckle. Her fingernails have grown perpetually cracked from endless long strokes through swimming pools. Recently, they've begun to develop the vertical ridges that grace elders in her family. But, also, across many seasons, she has learned to love the magic in her strong, unpretty hands. They can whisk egg whites and cut sheetrock and soothe a baby. They can pleasure a lover or herself. They have taught her to trust them.

In her middle years, she surprised herself by loving a man with twinkling eyes and tall stature, but smallish hands – for a man's. His were as capable as hers, if not more so, but they foretold other differences between them: His aesthetic was more graceful; hers, plainer. She marveled at his economy of motion; he marveled at the depth of her engagement.

She was prepared when he proposed, romantically, with roses, but was startled by a fabulous, sparkling diamond ring. Later, she confessed, "I'm just not a big ring kind of person."

He replied, "The ring means I want to marry you."

She understood, but had trouble wearing the ring.

Which he noticed.

"Why don't you wear it?" he asked with hurt in his not-twinkling-right-then eyes. "Are you saying No?"

She didn't know how to tell him. The unlikely gem was a masquerade for her, like Cinderella in a ball gown. When people saw it she cringed, thinking they also took in the worker's hand – and lumpy finger – on which it would ride. Then she felt disloyal to her hands, which had served her well. Why should they play the role of ugly background for this expensive bauble?

She tried to explain. "I don't have the right hand for this ring."

He looked in her eyes. He took her hands in his, which are almost exactly the same size. Hers didn't feel too big.

"I love your hands," he pledged. "Yours is exactly the hand I want to wear this ring."

She said Yes.

She still takes the ring off when spreading grout or mixing meatloaf. But now, when she looks down at the lovely, contradictory ring that adorns her working hand, she sees the grace of his love, as well as the alchemy of the relationship they're building and the sturdiness of the older woman she's become.

Hungers

By Catherine Moore

She breathes deeply; it's one of the few intrusions her body enjoys now, and she meditates fullness. Her husband left thirty-five years ago. She has as many years without him as with, more if one counts the years before college. Which she does because life started at their first date. And if she feels utterly mournful, she pulls out the Carmen Ash and wears satin for an afternoon. Not many seventy-year-olds can still wear sleeveless, or contoured waist. Her daughter-in-law is jealous. Makes a point of reciting the items in her refrigerator— cottage cheese, crackers, and Jell-O—under the guise of something for the grandkids to eat.

“But that's what the Little Debbies are for,” she tells her daughter-in-law.

Still, the damn girl whispers *'eating disorder'* behind her back to everyone in the family. It's not believable. She knows the children won't listen; it's not like she is some coed vomiting in a dorm bathroom. And she is healthy, well, usual aging stuff—sinking skin, bone-density. Her children's questions are squelched with the mother's eye. The real nuisance is the kudzu of hair that covers her. Thick cottony down all over. She shaves more and more: face, arms, across her shoulder blades. Frustrating. And the muscle-spasms—tremors that take away yoga classes, cramps that keep her from morning walks—it's maddening.

Some days pass without a stretch of meal. It seems pointless to fuel a futile body and there's the paunch of her belly that troubles her. She'd rather stop talking to the doctor, so she had her grandson teach her how to google pharmaceutical solutions instead. If she remembers where those research notes are. The Post-its have covered her walls like damask paper and yet, everything seems somewhere out of sight. She dare not make a call to re-inquire. Calling makes the emptiness true. Calling provokes questions.

“Wait, what made you upset?” She pauses and doesn't know the answer. It's just that it is all falling away, she cries over the phone. “Have you eaten today?” that irritating girl asks again. She honestly can't remember.

The Pink Hairbrush

By S.J. Eaves

Wear your hair long and straight and hanging to your waist. Brush your hair one hundred times a night with the pink hairbrush until it glistens like silken dark thread. Let lovers tangle fingers in your hair, whispering words of appreciation, some of them lies. Set your pink hairbrush on your dresser beside your cinnamon scented perfume.

Now that your daughter is small, store the pink hairbrush in a drawer. Take it out and use it once before leaving the house for the grocery store, your work, or to take your daughter to school, gymnastics, dance class. Your hair is shoulder-length, the cut simple, but it is still full and dark. Brush your daughter's pale hair with the pink hairbrush while she is seated on her fairy princess bedspread. Tell her bedtime stories by lamplight as you brush. After your daughter is asleep, carry the brush back to your own bedroom and place it back in the drawer without brushing your own hair. You are too tired to care.

Throw the pink hairbrush into a suitcase along with some hastily assembled clothing the day your husband hits you on the jaw. Borrow twenty dollars from a friend for gas money, then pick up your daughter from daycare. Drive to your parent's house to think. "Give him another chance. He didn't mean it," your father says. So you do give him another chance, but it only delays the inevitable. Move the pink hairbrush along with the rest of your things on the day you know for certain that you and your daughter must leave.

Don't use the pink hairbrush at all the morning of your daughter's wedding. Hire a professional to fix your hair in honor of the occasion. Do your hair up in a poufy style you hope is appropriate. Smile as your ex walks your daughter down the aisle. After the wedding cake has been cut, the bird seed thrown, after your daughter has been launched into a new life, after the guests have gone home, you can barely rake the pink hairbrush through your teased and plastered hair. Lay it down on your dresser next to the lily of the valley corsage your daughter made for you by hand. Wonder if you will ever wear that tight, sequined, mother-of-the-bride dress again. Think about joining a health club.

Now your hair streaks with gray and is shorn to just below the chin. You are crinkled in some places of your body, puffy in others. No one seems to care whether or not you use the pink hairbrush. Sometimes you feel invisible. Wonder where the pink hairbrush will end up after you are gone, in a box somewhere perhaps. In a dumpster. Rather it be thrown into the ocean. Rather it race nobly, defiantly, freely, with seahorses.

My Skin Is Not Enough to Keep Me Warm

By Beverly Lafontaine

The sky is thick and heavy with clouds.
A neighbor's dog barks. A yelp from a cartoon.,
Behind closed eyes I see his body shudder with every bark,

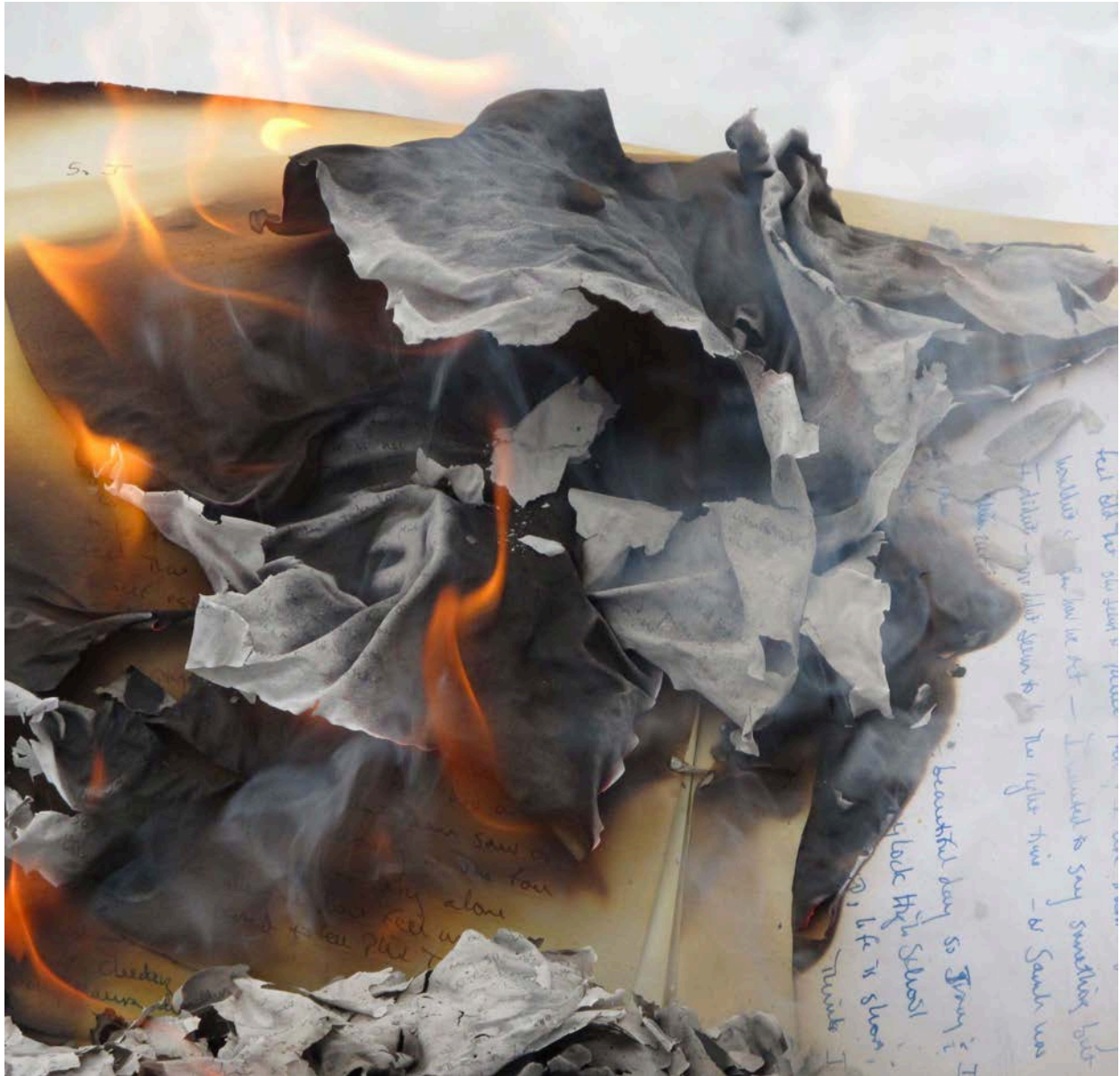
A car roars its presence, eager not to be
ignored. Never complete silence.
In this building, something always whirs,

simpers. Walls moan against the weight
they've borne for years. Water's ceaseless
songs flush through pipes. All the sounds

of the day gather together, a congregation.
The refrigerator hums, reminds me,
You're a body, just a body. A tongue, eyes,

nose, arms, legs. A body chilled by the cold,
warmed by the sun. A body definite in time and
place, destined one day to be a memory

conjured up by three notes on the piano
or a whiff of baking bread, then laid to rest
among seeds of wild grass.



“Divorce Journals,” image by Martha Donovan

IF HE, IF SHE WOULD ONLY

...a man is terribly hampered and partial in his knowledge of women, as a woman in her knowledge of men.

...Then I may tell you that the very next words I read were "Chloe liked Olivia..." Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women.

---Virginia Woolf

I had envisioned love a place I could map.

---Rita Anderson

*From behind he cannot see
feathers sprouted on her brow.*

---Sandy Gillespie

Lovers in the Age of Airmail

By Kelly Cressio-Moeller

There is a reason it is called longhand.
Writing takes time to winnow out

the artifice in blue-black script.
You write each other page after page,

month upon month, year after year;
your cursive cross-stitching the Atlantic,

soaring over slate rooftops
through the open windows

of each other's lives, entwining
yourselves as Chagall's lovers.

You learn patience in narrow beds,
the ache of missing someone

you've never met. Standing near
the water's edge, you watch fireworks

burst and fade, a snowfall of hot stars
dissolving on separate oceans.

And then, nothing more
can be said with ink and paper.

As he swims to your shore—brace yourself.
There is no turning back

from this desire, a quickening
like rivulets of water gliding

off the blades of his shoulders
when he steps from the sea.

The Geography of First Kisses

By Karin Cecile Davidson

Compass Points

The first was Leon. A small, muscular boy. A midshipman at the academy. He knew about compasses, easterly winds, how to bring the boat about on white-capped seas. I went for his blond hair and his deep voice, both like honey, thick and golden and crowded, the waxen chambers, the echo in my chest.

Summer grew brighter, and I refused to go back home to New Orleans, nearly sixteen, without that first kiss. *Sweet sixteen and never been*. We never said it aloud. Those of us who stayed in the corners at dances, at our own tables. All girls, all the time, not too shy, but not quite pretty enough.

For the month of August I was away from that southerly place, where algebra notebooks got left behind and streetcars rumbled past and boys sat on the cafeteria steps, smoking because they could get away with it, and girls sat by them, the kind of girl I wanted to be. In that northerly summer spot called Castine, where the great aunts played games of Hearts and Gin in the afternoon, where the berries were small and bright blue, where the beaches were covered with rocks and sea glass and broken pottery, the rules seemed different. I dared myself to walk near the academy and its giant ship, moored by the town's public dock, and when I did, the boys appeared. And then, even when I returned home, they kept appearing.

Leon with his bright curls. He had an arrow in his glance and shot me through the heart. My heart had room for so many more arrows. Little did I know.

Geoffrey with his roaming hands. Small, sweet hands that like to untie things. Apron strings, kerchiefs, the little gold clasp that held on my bikini top. His eyes were dark pieces of eight that blinked hard, sizing me up and then down, putting me in my place. "You baby," he'd say, reaching out to pinch me.

Buzz with a laugh that broke apart the stars. He liked to drink and do it in his car. He took me to drive-ins and ordered iced cokes in paper cups that he laced with Jack. The smell of whisky on his breath and his breath against my neck. The only film I remember half-seeing is *Lipstick*, Margaux Hemingway looking down and me looking up through the strands of Buzz's long hair, the vinyl seat pressed against my bare back, the twist of double-braid lashing around my ankles.

North

On the beach of rocks and glass and pottery shards, Leon's hand in mine, I walked away from hair ribbons and shy smiles. He kissed me just around the bend from the gray house where the great aunts lived. I leaned against the splintering bulwark and felt his mouth on mine, warm and surprising, and closed my eyes. The weather was gray and coastal, like the great aunts' house, like a cool hand on the back of your neck, but over Leon's shoulder, when I opened my eyes again, the hills were blue and red, and I felt distracted. Robert Lowell had once lived in the house

just above the bulwark and I could feel his lingering presence, in the crooked shutters and pale, weathered shingles, all coming apart and falling down the hill like so much poetry. And then a seagull went for us, two blonde heads too close to her nest in the tall lilac spikes of untended lupine. She drove us down the beach just in time to save us from the rising tide.

Leon's letters arrived in the same way that the seagull's young must have, too late in the season and demanding unimaginable things. I spread the pages over the flowered spread of my twin bed, so unlike the pale white coverlets in Castine, and read words like *trace* and *lips* and *undone*. Embarrassed, I put the letters away in the bedside drawer where later my mother would discover them. She said she didn't read them, but I wouldn't have cared if she did.

Around the edges of the lake, where bleached oysters shells were heaped, the metallic breeze carried traces of brackish water, diesel fuel, rubber boots. I had turned sixteen, saved from being all too sweet, but still sweet enough. I thought about sailing alone, then decided to sit on the shore and watch the shrimp trawlers head out, the dusk pink and violet and falling around them like the shellfish they'd soon catch. Leon was up north in that summer place where the sky was thinner, hued with blue-gray lines, and the sea carried the musk of gulls and lobster traps. For him, the summer place had become year-round. That autumn he wrote his letters, describing in slanted lines how he stood on the bridge of the training ship, still moored, going nowhere until spring, and through field glasses he looked out to the beach where we'd kissed, the gray house a smudge on the horizon.

South

The official end of summer and school a month in, I arrived at a friend's birthday party too early, and the boy hosting it opened his front door in cut-offs and bare feet. A boy from the cafeteria steps, a boy with hands that gestured and lips that curved. He smiled and invited me in to a windowed room, where the floor was wooden and covered with record albums. He asked me to choose one and put it on the stereo. He went to change into jeans, another shirt, and I chose *Blue*. Joni's voice headed into the slow evening like smoke and envy and wishing. When he came back, I realized not only was I early but that it was his birthday, too. I had only one gift, but he said he didn't need anything, that my choice in music was enough.

The days grew shorter, but our shadows never seemed to diminish. The birthday boy with hands and lips and approving nods in my direction – due south – walked under the eaves between classes. And during classes. Simply leaving the building in the middle of biology, his dissection kit untouched, his partner unfazed. He bent the rules and I wished I could do the same. I noticed him more and more and stared at him out the window of our geometry class. Mr. Lê Lâm Trung chanted obtuse and isosceles in Vietnamese-French intonations and seemed not to notice my inattention.

Swimming and sailing on hold, Christmas crept in and then came the debutantes and their dates. I thought of Leon, how strange this would all seem to him. How he was buried in maritime studies, while I could barely fathom the inner life of a mollusk, the pearly insides so slippery and revealing. Did he count the days until summer? Did he counterweight the months by imagining

his bed covered with more than a cotton sheet, a few wool blankets? Did he walk down to the shore, now covered with snow and wonder where the baby gulls had flown?

East

“Reveal more,” Geoffrey said. He sat behind me in homeroom. My last name began with V, his with W. He pulled a barrette out of my hair one morning. I found it later on the floor in front of my locker with a curl of white paper in its teeth. In blue ink, two words – *your shoulders*. Once we kissed in a closet under the stairs where chemistry supplies were stored, the crushed box of glass beakers, bunsen burners, and scales the only hint we’d been there. And a sweatshirt on the floor. Really, it was more than a kiss.

Out on Lake Ponchartrain, moving slowly to Lake Borgne, the shrimp trawlers pushed the blue-brown water apart. The seawall – barely a wall – more like a concrete staircase, led down into the water, rather than up. I stood on the top step and considered entering the lake, but it was February and far too cold. Instead, I walked along the rise, marked by topographical city maps as below sea level and somehow stretching even with the horizon. I wondered if Mr. Lê Lâm Trung had anyone out there, an uncle or a brother who searched for shrimp and threw back the bycatch of shimmering little swimming crabs and baby bluefins. Someone who had lasted the trip from Vietnam to Thailand, who had traded the boat crowded with countrymen for one covered in nets bursting with pinks and browns and reds. Someone who each day spied the battered docks and ancient cypress trees of Shell Beach and maybe even stroked the bright black hair of a son born here, in this place of Assumption and Lafourche, bayous all around.

Sometimes when the sun rose, it had a dirty color, like oyster shells lining a parking lot, like pottery pieces littering a northern beach. Other times I slept and didn’t see how the colors reached, rose-gold and rich, desperate to find a ceiling or a way out. I’d bury my head beneath my pillow, wishing the morning would disappear. And then I’d be late for school.

The streetcar swayed along its tracks, and I leaned against the closed window and tried to read *Romeo and Juliet*. Inside, the row of wooden benches, the smell of sulfur and dirty sneakers, the way the driver sang the blues. Outside, standing up, pedaling a bicycle too small for his long legs, birthday boy spotted me. He tried to keep up, pedaling faster, and then rode past. Way ahead. His hair, like mine, was straight and shoulder-length and flew out behind him. I knew he’d seen me watching him. He played basketball and dated cheerleaders. Girls who, aside from yelling and bouncing at afterschool games, were pretty and elusive, who didn’t seem to see him at all. I made this up, this not seeing him part. I imagined they saw plenty of him. Arm in arm, hull to hull.

Spring raced in with wild colors. Azaleas of pink and lilac, red and white, lacey and bright and reaching, outside front porches and in the park. In front of our apartment building there were only hedges, dark green and tinged with dirt. For Mother’s Day I went for flowers and ended up with a small bubble-shaped terrarium. My mother thought it sweet and just her style – no maintenance, a miniature ecosystem that would take care of itself. Until it didn’t. Rabbit tracks and moss and a small clump of maidenhair fern were the only plants that survived. The curved

sides of the bubble encouraged condensation, drops cascading over greenery, and I thought of emerald and teal prom dresses caught in a downpour.

West

The phone rang and Buzz was on the other end. Talking dirty into the receiver. In English class he'd had some ideas about Shakespeare that our teacher, Mrs. Newell, didn't appreciate. Not embarrassed by words like *fuck* anymore, I listened with interest. He wanted to take me to the drive-in and peel off my panties. I wanted to let him. I wanted to hear a car radio, maybe his, so that it sounded like the inside of my mind, crazy and careless and not quite right. One of Lowell's love-cars might pull up and parallel park next to my desire. The moon would surely refuse to shine.

In World History class Mr. Fernandez peered through his glasses at all of us. He had wide eyes and black brows and white short-sleeved shirts. At lunch he'd play chess with the freshman boys. But in second period he leaned over his desk and told us about Catherine the Great and her penchant for stallions. We'd made our way through Eastern Europe into Russia, and before I even considered the horses, I thought of the word, *penchant*. The liking, the longing, the wishing, the preference for dark hooves and fetlocks, the stretch of the cannon widening up into the hock, the shuddering stifle, and the warm dusty, grassy air all around. I thought of how the moon must have swung down over the stable doors, lighting up the way. How the latch on the stall must've caught and then slid open with the slightest pinch of metal against wood. But I didn't go any further than that. I'd been far enough myself.

In *Word Power Made Easy* there was this word with several meanings. We all hated this book, but Mrs. Newell made sure it was on everyone's desk in her afternoon classes. "Mark it up, commit to it. Your SATs will be all the better for it." She enunciated each *it* so that the t's flew over our heads and out the windows. Outside, the days were sunny and new, breathless. Inside, I stared at the list of words on page 212. *Obstreperous, belligerent, bound, cantankerous, unpropitious, bellicose, inimical*. I focused on the little one-syllable word, crowded in by bullies. Bound by the nylon dock line in the back of Buzz's beat-up Chevy. Bound for glory, for that closet under the stairs, for a rocky beach where scraped knees were traded for kisses. Bound to end up with more homework and detentions and trouble than I'd ever be worth. Without any limits we might leap through the open windows into all that boundless blue. I considered my options, all of them out of bounds and stupid, and then realized birthday boy was leaning in through the doorway, his hands on the doorframe. Behind me, Geoffrey breathed down my neck, asking for the answers to numbers 7 and 9.

On the lake directions were like sins, cardinal and complicated. The wind came at me, warm, south by southwest, up from the oil rigs out in the Gulf. If I ever sailed there, would a roughneck dive from his platform and swim parallel to my boat? Some boys liked land better than sea. Would the one who leaned in through the doorway finally loop his arm in mine? I'd only discover his feet on solid ground, landlocked, guided by the edges of a court, call it tennis or basketball. Games geared to gardens and gymnasiums. There were clear boundaries on land. Out on the water, they weren't so clear. Joni's words cluttered my mind – *sea and sail and song and sinking*. Though I thought I'd known, I'd lost sense of all I wanted. I'd lost all sense of direction.

At the drive-in BUTterfield 8 was showing. The coming attractions lit up the night and Buzz spilled a good portion of his Jack Daniels when he pushed me into the back seat. By the time Elizabeth Taylor had written *No Sale* in red lipstick across the bedroom mirror, I had rope burns around my wrists and ankles. I thought about how it all started with lipstick, and how it kept on going that way. Above me Buzz had his eyes closed, his breath tight and insistent. The Chevy's ceiling was torn, as ragged as the feeling inside me, as rough as the nylon wringing my hands. I thought of boating knots. Rolling, clove, Lighterman's hitches. A round turn and two half hitches. A bowline. But Buzz only knew about the bitter end of the rope, the one he held in his teeth. I stared up at the screen and listened to Liz, her voice sweet and melodic, how she sounded lonely even though she pretended she wasn't.

Leon long ago gave up writing letters. I never answered, and his last note was short, never questioning, simply giving in to give up and maybe even forgive. I doubted that last bit, but went ahead and gave myself permission to keep on not responding. To keep on looking past corners into the odd light of winter and then spring, green and airy, and then summer, vast and muffled and loaded with free time. Geoffrey had taken up with a freshman girl who wore her hair in pigtails. I didn't know whether to wish her luck or pity her. And then, right after the last day of school, I broke my right arm. "Fractured, honey," my mom reminded me. Right after birthday boy waved to me from his too small bicycle and pedaled into the dusty, maze-like traffic and I waved back and thought about him the whole ride home. At my stop, I stepped off the streetcar and tripped. The driver who hummed the blues acknowledged me. First time ever. Face down on St. Charles Avenue and I hear, "You all right, baby?" I sat up in the middle of the paved road and tried to gather my scattered books, the junk that fell from my open satchel, and realized I couldn't. I thought of halyards gone astray, bouncing off the mast, instead of pinioned tight. That was my arm. Or whatever held it together. "Well, honey, that's just your second mishap in life." My mother was clueless. She remembered my green-stick fracture, how at the age of barely a year I'd been reluctant to nap and jumped out of my crib. She had no idea then and she'd no idea now that her daughter was bored beyond dreaming. Until the doctor asked about the marks around my wrists.

Due North

Why is there no such thing as north by south or east by west? Why does direction turn only slightly, instead of leaning full tilt into another place, another time, another anything? I wished for an island to occupy. Only the North Star, or a magnetic pole, to show me where I'd landed. Without doctors or mothers or boys. I ended up on a peninsula with great aunts. I supposed that was good enough. The ship was still there, hulking, its heaving sides a battled hint of gray. I walked down to Castine's town dock and studied the slackness in the cabin cruisers' hitch lines, how they looped through rusted cleats, and the tension in the bowlines that might fall around a girl's ankle just so. My arm was in a sling and a tall midshipman, *Stanley* stenciled onto the back of his blue work shirt, stopped to admire my cast. His smile was too much, and like an idiot, I smiled back. There was no more poetry to Lowell's hill, to the house that slowly fell down its slope, to the kisses that happened one summer ago. And there was nothing as pink and transparent as skinny little shrimp to catch in these waters, their currents too cold and secure for such fragile fish, shell or no shell. And in the boats heading out to sea, there were no promises. I

wasn't allowed out on the water anyway. I looked back at the tall midshipman and his smile. "You play Hearts?" I asked. "Sure," he said. And we walked down Water Street, just above the rock-covered shoreline, a half moon rising into the early evening, its direction set and sure.

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<http://aroomotherownfoundation.org/the-geography-of-first-kisses-by-karin-davidson/>

Recognition

By Sandy Gillespie

We open the window to the lapping bay
and laze beside the fire. Overnights are rare
for grown women, uninterrupted hours

delicate as artichoke petals, from which we scrape
soft flesh with gentle teeth. The Cabernet is an eighty-five,
and children don't exist for us tonight. Tonight we are women

talking about our lovers. Yours is new, and he moves
in such a way that you've found secrets in your body; mine
has been my husband for sixteen years and sometimes

in our comfort we forget what passion feels like.
You stretch on the rug, lean on one elbow, head back.
When have we laughed this hard? I feel like what I never was--

a woman unafraid of her desires. Fire snaps
your hair, one strand slipped loose and dancing
on your breath. The fire burns to embers.

We fold back blankets, crawl into flannel sheets.
Spoon-like you curve into me, breasts against my back.
I can't remember ever feeling breasts, except my own.

Your hands spin silk. Silence rushes
through us, carried us toward a future
whose wealth and cost we only guess.

We let it go and slide together into sleep.
I tell myself I would not love you
better if we kissed.

Postcard from Sissinghurst

By Denise DiMarzio

I. My hand hesitates, hovering above
the clean white rectangle, the small space wide open,
waiting, years unwritten.

Having a great time. Wish you were here.

Vita would never hesitate.

*In the white garden, I wanted to kneel down with you,
anchor my hands in your dark curls, grow roots
and wrap them around us like wild bindweed.*

II. The red deer wander. Shapely ghosts follow,
one in jodhpurs, one in silk.
I trail after, looking for you.

*I think I found their tree, wide enough
to cradle Violet's creamy back, the bark
scoring ragged lines on her satin-smooth
petite frame, Vita's wanton hands pinning her
down, down, gratefully down.*

Inside, the fireplace, hearth and heat.
The sofa where she ravished a willing Violet,
shaking the books on their blushing shelves
'til their Edwardian bindings came
so magnificently loose.

Their perfume scents the air still.

Vita's writing room, up and up
the long tower passage, my hand trailing
along the dark worn railings
writing and rewriting.
On an easel, Violet in oils.

Do you ever think of me?

III. I put the stamp on first, wasted,
the Queen's unbendingly proper profile
serene, oblivious. Torn into a dozen pieces,
blank, it looks like nothing
left behind for the maid to find.

Moby Dick and the Beginning of the End

By Ingrid Jendrzejewski

He says Melville was stupid because he constantly refers to Moby Dick as a fish. Moby Dick is not a fish. Moby Dick is a whale. Everyone knows that whales aren't fish and fish aren't whales; ergo, Melville is not worth reading.

She tries everything she can think of. She discusses poetic language. She suggests that it is Ishmael, not Melville who calls the whale a fish. She asserts that even if *Moby-Dick* does contain an inherent factual inaccuracy regarding fish and whales, there are many reasons that it is still worth reading. Eventually, when she is tired of arguing, she asks why a whale can't be a fish and why a fish can't be a whale in the context of a novel: a novel is a work of fiction, after all.

None of it works; he is not convinced. He can't get past the whale/fish issue and she can't get past the fact that he can't get past it. He accuses her of being out to sea; she retaliates that it is he who is missing the boat. For better or for worse, they are, on this occasion, able to come up with enough nautical puns to hold off the inevitable sinking that is quietly being prepared for them by the roiling sea.

Persephone Tells All

By Ruth Thompson

Persephone carried off (faintly protesting)
by Big Beard the Muscleman,
her weeping mother searched
round and round
but did not go down-
town. Which is where she was.

But Big Beard
down there in the lamplight
in the altogether
was altogether
so large, so loud,
and the latesummer heat so oppressive,
Persephone got tired of it
(though liking the Harley okay)
so she took a hike.

“I wanted a big man,” she says,
“someone who took up the space –
someone who knew what he thought,
so I didn't have to,
you know....”

It was cool I guess
with the jewels and zombies and all that –
but after a while the oxygen
was running short
with all that hot air
and after a while he got heavy –
like *I* could ever be on top –

and after a while you notice
how they are always
going on and on and on
about themselves,
know what I mean?”

Self-Portrait as a Message From Rapunzel to the Princes Trying to Rescue Her

By Michalle Gould

Build me a city, or burn it,
I do not care.
If you don't stop trying to save me,
I will cut my hair.

Without Turning

By Sandy Gillespie

She feels him curve
against her back. She knows
he is awake, his hand
moves with purpose, traces
hip, thigh. Settles.
She feels his beard
on her neck; she wants
to roll toward him, offer
breasts to hungry eyes.
The weight of her beak holds her.
From behind, he cannot see
feathers sprouted on her brow.
He breathes greedy accusations.
She opens her mouth but doesn't turn to him,
her beak too finely honed for kisses.
She feigns sleep—he will not notice
open eyes, eyes black
enough to see through ceilings into space.
She savors the tingling
in her arms, the promise—
fine-boned wings,
talons that will crack the walls.

There Is This Wildness

By Molly Scott

there is this wildness in her
that he touched
and then retracted
fed on
like forbidden game
and then
redacted

The Promenade

By Toni Loefler

—after the painting by Marc Chagall

After their walk
and decanter

of vino she's
flushed

from the
strappings

of love.
Mauvish

folds of her
dress billow in

the geometric
sky—she is

staring
into the

horizon
absentmindedly

but she is
still

there. Soon
he will

lead her
floating

body to the
pastel
chapel
by the deep

ravine,
and they'll

marry so
she can never

get away.

Diner

By Jackie Davis Martin

You would have lied, too. You would have promised the manager to work the entire summer when you applied for the breakfast shift at the diner which had you arriving in the parking lot at 6 in the morning in a brown nylon dress and white oxfords, to set up the creams and sugars and ketchups, shine the counters, all the easy part until the doors opened and people demanded their eggs over light, over for at least a minute, poached firm, scrambled soft, egg whites only, hash browns, home fries, bacon, make it sausage. You stand there, pen in hand, smiling at fat women who want extra gravy, stringy women who cringe at butter, sliding into padded booths, hour after hour so early--where do they all come from?

You need the money, driving in the next morning in your washed brown nylon dress, your polished white oxfords, ready to ready the counters, wipe the menus. More coffee? Decaf? Juices? Can't substitute a milkshake, sorry. They slide in, slide out. It's almost mid-August, six weeks you've done this, and your boyfriend who doesn't love you as much as he once did is impatient. *Are you coming with me or not?* You're going to London with him, but you're also going to the diner, morning after morning. He's paying for London; you are paying for your kids' food and clothes and rent. You tell him yes, yes, I'll be quitting any day and you arrive again in your limp brown nylon dress and scuffed white oxfords thinking I must tell the manager I won't be back, that---that what?--you're scheduled for three more weeks, maybe tell them you have to have surgery, or you've contracted something contagious, anything but that the man you love who doesn't love you the same will cancel your trip, will return to the woman he had an affair with, tell them anything but that your life will be over if you don't quit tomorrow. You need time to pack, to please him once again, yes, okay, eggs barely flipped for you and sunny-side for you, I got it, no, no muffins, just three kinds of toast, and all the while, what will you do, what will you do as you gather quarters sometimes dollars from under saucers, wipe down the tables, take off your apron and say to the boss with the oily scalp, I'm sorry I won't be back tomorrow, my uncle needs rides to the hospital and I'm the only one—I'm so sorry--but, you don't have an uncle, and you walk to the car, tears streaming with humiliation, a job you cannot return to next summer and you say to the boyfriend, it's okay, I'm ready, and he says good then, let's go, and even though you don't know where you're going beyond London, you say yes and never go into that diner again, not even for a cup of coffee.

Co—

By Jennifer Campbell

so much depends upon

a kinetic personality
white space

if he would only

cover couple collapse
will of a melted spoon

since woman was created last

from a wing of white
a caged bone

it would seem that

man is a host for woman
man lives for woman to live

when one thing leads to another

third parties always deconstruct
snake || ache

once it has happened

there is no blame
only the shifting of tectonic plates

just so long as

one remains —dependent

Schrodinger's Wife Sells the House

By Jennifer Campbell

I am ready, a locomotive hurtling
a star already shooting
a lunar eclipse set in motion

He is stuck in a half-state
the house with dwindling half-life
all there and not-there, at once

It's all I can do to find a box
that's just a box. And the cat's
been holed up in the wall for days

I'm thinking outside of it now
The house is a box and we
are Matryoshka dolls lined up

Unboxed, we may be packed
and stacked, the matter being
our traces of matter

Problems bring us closer together
Come, care for my eventuality
Fill the box with gilded frames,

photos of those alive and dead,
at once. Let us begin
packing the box that is a box. At once.

I Promise I'm Always Careful

By Alethea Alden

Jess throws her phone across the bed. It's midnight and her husband's phone has been going to voicemail for two hours.

Sam texted earlier saying he had to work late, so when he wasn't home at ten, she wasn't surprised. When his phone had gone to voicemail, she'd wondered if he took the tube instead of riding his bike since it was raining, but normally he'd text her before leaving work.

He must still be at work. Or he's biking home, slipped on the wet roads and hit his head. Or got hit by a car and is lying dead by the side of the road...

She texts and emails him, again.

Thinking about Sam dying brings up memories of her mother dying. She tries to stop herself from thinking about it, shaking her head to shake away the memory, but her chest tightens.

"Why is he doing this to me?" Jess wonders out loud.

Jess calls again and hears his voice say, "Sam," followed by an automated, "can't take your call right now, leave your message after the tone." She refreshes the email on her phone, the icon swirls a few times. Nothing.

She goes to the kitchen. Opening the window, Jess screams "Where is he?!" out into the night. Pulling the window closed she leans her forehead against the glass. She's not going to get a reply from the street. Watching her mother die continues to play on a loop in her head. The clock on the stove says it's 12:45 AM. Shuffling to the bedroom, she turns on the TV, looking for new images to push out the unwanted ones.

An hour later Jess hears the key in the lock. Sam appears in the bedroom doorway.

"Where *were* you?!"

Sam peers into the room. The light from the TV hits Jess's contorted, tear stained face. Confused, he takes a step back, surprised by her anger.

"Whoa. What's going on?"

"Why didn't you let me know where you were? Your phone went to voicemail for hours. I thought you were dead in a ditch!"

"I did let you know, I sent you an email around ten that my phone died and I was going to be at work longer than I thought."

Jess breathes heavily and hiccups. She hits refresh on her email again, the icon swirls and registers a new email from Sam.

"Fuck. My phone. It didn't show your email, even though I refreshed it... I'm sorry I yelled at you."

Sam sits down next to her. "I'm sorry you were worried, baby."

Feeling ashamed of her outburst, Jess allows herself to be pulled down onto the bed.

"If you died..."

"I know baby. I promise I'm always careful," Sam says drowsily, wrapping his arms around her.

Moments later he's asleep. Despite the comfort from his arms and steady rhythm of his breathing, she still can't let go of her fear. She knows Sam can't promise her what she most wants to hear.

No one can.

When a Ghost Touches Your Body

By Kristi Carter

We wanted what any young couple wants:
to have sex and for everything to be simple.
But it wasn't so. The river freezes over in winter
and the washcloth dries twisted, like a ghost,
after it touches your body—coiled in dermis
and soap. I'd like you to have a picture of me
looking the way I caught myself in the mirror
today—my hair askance as if under clear water,
the mole on my right ear over-pronounced,
and my face, caught off-guard but not surprised.
The same way I must have looked pinned
under the men my mother prophesized,
the ones whose shadows casted so far and long
that even your fluorescent smile couldn't
dispel them. My love, what we wanted, we wanted
a lie. A dream sold to us by movies
and the smell of the ocean coming in through
the curtains. Where *fuck me* and *I love you*
are both copasetic. Where the dishes, the laundry,
and our unborn children can all wait, wait, wait
until we are dead and then, we are satisfied.

Café Des Artistes

By Sally Taylor Tawil

her first sips of the Chateau Margaux surprised—
slid velvet down her white throat
edged with tinier, whiter pearls.
finest vintage ever produced, he promised—

what are promises but the succulent
heady swollen majestic fullness
of the purple grape
before it is ravaged from its vine

broken squeezed compromised entirely
unrecognizable
as the one she promised herself to—
beautiful still, but changed, changed.

Anatomy of a Lighthouse

By Rita Anderson

We preferred our dreams to our lives.

: There is *something to be said* about change
for change's sake, fresh sheets on the line
crisp as wafers in the thrashing wind. Somehow,
the outdoors is trapped in as I press my cheek
against the fabric and breathe in the surf.

. . . And about *contradictions* because although I enjoy
swimming I seldom do. In so many faulty ways
we credit ourselves *due*, claiming health because, once,
every day for a month, we rode a bike, sighing
nostalgically now whenever cyclists pass.
We think we *belong*. Deaf to their laughter
and how their fit bodies navigate inclines up
a flowering seaside cliff, we still imagine
an effortless glide among them. In the end,
there is no reality to it but much comfort.

During a landlocked Midwestern winter
where steel firms but corn farms survive,
the ocean is a hope I could hurt myself with,
a cruel illusion that spoils the good I may hold
in my hand. --Besides, what do I know
of the ocean except that it houses whales and Red Tide?
What peace do I believe would rise from a landscape
where water gnaws at the edges? (*So why, then, do I*
seek refuge in you, from dreams that remember
but cannot console?)

I have read that waves run in patterns
and only in the ocean, where lighthouses line the shallows,
a reach out through fog. But why these wave-swept beacons
over and over again--so many years after the wreckage? And why,
when *you* never liked the water, does the image recur
of you as a lighthouse? *Mine*. Something solid
and protective, a foreign role for us both.

And why do I deliriously render myself a widow,
a pouting statue affixed to the rooftop? (Does being lost and
finding a way out make us survivors--even if we still do not see the world as it is
but as we are?) I had envisioned love a place I could map, a continent that
drowned with you. A boat I floated on that thinned to a raft before falling
apart, when faith in your faithfulness--like the dark air around me--grew
too heavy to carry, a light too faint to follow.

Riding Past the Museum of Natural History

By Ruth Sabath Rosenthal

seeing the steps I first took toward
infidelity — how far I descended.

My lover is history, has been
for some thirty-odd years, yet,

I remember the nervous excitement
still — how unashamed and

unnaturally good I'd felt. How beyond
stupid, thinking I would scale those highs

unscathed — so sure I was just
stepping into my husband's footprints —

impressions he made long before
I ever thought of venturing

to make hurt go by going
the ways of wayward flesh —

before I knew what I know now:
the crawl space one could carve

in a marriage preserved
for the children's sake.

Sustenance

By Sarah Russell

When glacial bogs blush with berries
it'll be a hard winter, folks say.

He is cutting down a dead pine near the cabin,
beetle-killed by drought last summer.
His chainsaw knows the hearth's width
without measuring.

I went to the orchard on Route 5
and bought peaches for canning.
The kitchen smells of sweetness,
furry skins sloughed off with blanching,
floor juice-sticky.

He comes in for lunch,
fills the room with flannel and sawdust.
"A lot of work," he says.
"Yes," I answer.
We eat warmed over stew.
He cleans his plate with bread crust and pushes back his chair.
"Back at it," he mutters and opens the door.

A cold wind makes gooseflesh on my arms
as I set the pint jars of preserves
in steaming water to make them sterile.

Unanticipated Effects of Altitude

By Jennifer Steil

Before you moved to La Paz, you were warned about the dizziness and nausea. You were told not to eat on the plane and to drink coca tea as soon as you arrived. Rest, everyone said. No exercise at all for the first few days. You took these recommendations seriously. Twelve thousand feet demand respect. When you descend into the Andes, all three of you—your husband, your small daughter, and you—feel okay. No one faints or vomits or has a cerebral hemorrhage. But no one warns you about the infinite ways in which altitude subtly erodes. The skin around your nails dries and cracks just enough to admit bacteria that plump your fingers into unbendable sausages. Your nose bleeds. You develop anal fissures, ventricular arrhythmia, eye infections. An angry rash crawls across your scalp. Paper cuts and mosquito bites take weeks to heal in the oxygen-poor environment. Despite daily exercise your spine crumbles and you take drugs for nerve pain. You are too tired to work. You lose your sense of humor. You lose hunger. When you drink more than one glass of wine you wake up sick. You cannot stay up past 9 p.m., yet you cannot stay asleep for more than two hours. You lie in the dark resenting your husband's dreamless slumber. He begins to suspect you of hyperbole and hysteria. He does not feel the things you do. His heart beats steadily and his skin is soft. He and your daughter are adaptable beings, beating you in a Darwinian contest. It's not that you want them to suffer. It's that you've begun to feel about the relentlessly healthy, the way infertile people feel about the pregnant.

When you travel to sea level for work you are stunned to find you can make people laugh. You can run for miles and stay up until midnight. Pain ebbs. You can drink three glasses of wine and feel perky the next day. You remember what it's like to feel human. You perform puppet shows for your daughter over Skype. When you tell your husband this he is silent, interpreting it as an accusation: *You have taken me to a place that has stolen my humanity.* Perhaps he is right. Because he is a kind man, he offers to leave his post. But you will not allow this martyrdom. You will not be the reason he is forced to leave work he loves. You steel yourself for the final year of the four-year posting. Just twelve more months. You can endure.

In your final year, your husband tells you he has the option of extending his post. He assumes you won't want to stay and this assumption, though correct, makes you sad. You do not want to stay nor do you want to be the reason to leave. A chasm has opened like a moat around you. Your husband can no longer cross it. You are not sure he can even see it. Funny that you can stand atop a mountain with this much air around you and feel so much like you are in prison.

Body Memories, Keening, Scars

By Erin Pushman

Once, when I was twenty, injured, and coveting a married man, I sat on the grass in a park that edged up to a lake. Kevin faced me, under a sky deepening to twilight. The beginning of summer. Purple shadows, the infrequent, semi-distant sound of mosquitos. Kevin's khaki shorts bagged open under his legs, and from the way he was sitting—facing me, with his knees bent up and his arms draped over them—I could see inside his shorts to his thighs and the legs of his underwear, which I could tell were white boxer-briefs.

Kevin moved then, shifted toward me, put one finger on my right hand, just at the place where my skin puckered into a purple half-moon from a puncture wound. He rubbed his fingertip back and forth over the pucker of that scar—back and forth. My throat tightened like it did before crying. He touched the next scar and the next one. I watched his fingers, the way my skin moved beneath them. He touched each scar on my hand, then reached to my right leg and the swath of scars there; he paused at each mark—the one on the plane of my tibia, the two above my knee, the one with the piece of bark still inside.

Kevin moved to my left leg, ran his finger over the entirety of my long worm-scar, then touched the impression of each puncture.

When he stopped at the last one, small and half way up my thigh, our faces were close.

“There's one more, isn't there?” Kevin asked, moving one finger to the edge of my forehead. A short snatch of hair was growing back there. Kevin smoothed it. “Erin?”

I turned away.

#

Once, when I was twelve, barefooted and quiet, I passed by a crack in my parents' bedroom door. Lamplight poured out with their voices. Something in them held me, stopped me, drew me right up to the opening in the cedar wall.

I looked.

My mother sat on the bed, one leg folded before her, one dangling down, knee hooked over the mattress. She was naked, bald. Where her right breast should have been, her chest was concave, rib-shadows visible beneath the reddened skin and purple scars. In the lamplight the bruises around her arm veins softened. Her shoulders slumped. Her back curved. Her remaining breast fell toward her belly. The fingers of her right hand kneaded the quilt. But she was looking up at my father. I saw the moisture gathering beneath her eyelashes.

To avoid my mother's tears, I looked at my father. His body faced hers, but he was not touching her. He was naked too. I looked away from him.

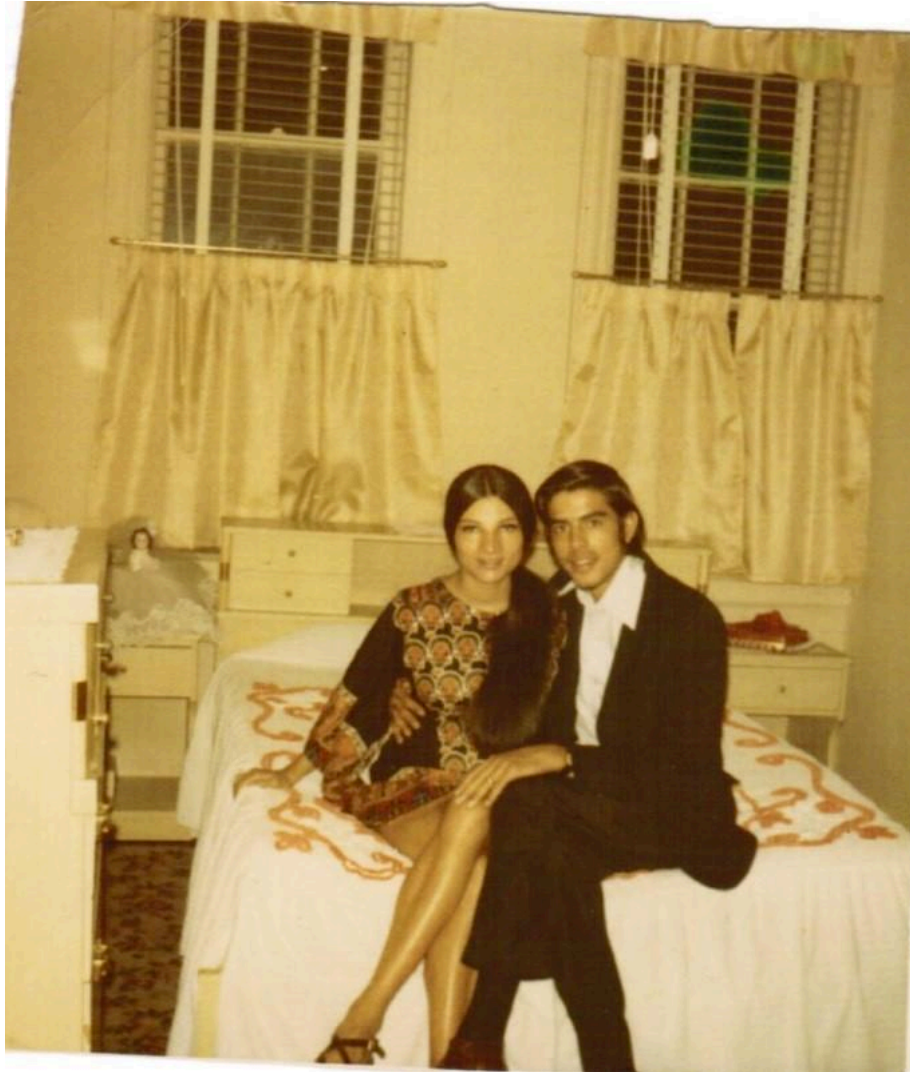
Low in my stomach, a squeamish tightening. I knew I should not watch. They were *not* having sex, and the *not* I understood, was a wrong thing.

“Come on, Bill,” my mother said. Her voice keening. I felt that pain beating from her like a pulse.

The Bronx: A Love Story (excerpt from a memoir)

By Melissa Coss Aquino

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in seeing with new eyes
- Marcel Proust



Whilst the media are saturated with stories of victims, unhappy families, disasters, the family records we keep for ourselves seem to be decidedly lacking anything more than celebrations.

Why is this so?

Jo Spence

My father is a child of seventeen in this picture, my mother nineteen: two Puerto Rican children in The Bronx, and a third one on the way. All three of us full of hope and promise. It is 1969. I am a collection of cells inside her body. She is astonishingly beautiful and slipping from our grasp even as we cling to her: me from the inside and he from without. They are also, both together and apart, slipping away from me. I have no memory of us together, happy, whole

except for what this picture tells me must have been their intentions, even if they were never realized.

In 1977 the Bronx, and my family, were in a tailspin together. Within a six week period I found out my father had another daughter, with a woman that was not my mother, who was already six months old, and my grandfather died, leaving me and my grandmother alone with my mother and “el problema.” After his funeral I learned, without knowing how, that my mother was not “nervous” or “sick” as my grandmother would often tell me, but instead was a drug addict. I watched her, at my grandfather’s funeral where grief kept everyone distracted, doze in and out of a half- awake sleep walking dance that I had seen on the streets in my neighborhood constantly. When I asked my aunt about the “falling people” she had explained by saying, “Those people take drugs. Don’t ever do those things. They live terrible lives.” My mother lived a terrible life. I suddenly understood.

I would come to learn that 1977 was a year that almost crushed my father. I never lived with him in the way I did with my mother, so his life was a slower reveal. It turns out that in 1977 he had two daughters (not just the one he told me about) born within nine months of each other to two different women, he had me lingering in the atmosphere of my mother’s downward spiral, he lost my grandfather who had been a surrogate father for him and for me in his absence, and he was in the throes of battling his own addictions.

He was also a South Bronx boy watching his childhood world, which he had loved, burn around him. 1977 was a hard year in The Bronx and in some ways became associated with The Bronx forever. The image of Howard Cosell proclaiming that The Bronx was burning in the middle of his broadcast of a Yankee Game echoes endlessly in the repeated statistics about the south Bronx being the poorest district in the country. This is not a story about dysfunction or addiction or despair. It is a love story that tries to understand how the same Bronx streets that made me strong had instead devoured my parents. How had our love of The Bronx, a still unifying pride we share, had such different repercussions for each of us?

Asian Woman

By Tanya Ko Hong

"Isn't it about time Chosŏn (Korean) women lived like humans?" – Na Hye-sok

This is what you do with your life:

Take what your father gives you
food, care, shelter
Learn to be a wife
cook, sew, maintain your household
Obey orders, serve your family, command
servants

This is what you do with your life:

Take what your husband gives you
food, care, shelter
Bury the jealousy of his concubines
be their big sister
Bear sons or you are useless
raise them to be fine young men
never take your eyes off them
Never tempt a lover

This is what you do with your life:

Take what your sons give you
food, care, shelter
make your son's wives obey
Demand your son's wives bear sons

This is what you do with your life:

Teach your daughters:
to be like a song

three years deaf
three years blind
three years mute

teach
them to be
like you

Breathing Fee

By Tanya Ko Hong

Talk about the wood
stacked high in the living room
and what it costs
to breathe in my home—
raw wood, oak
so long and thick—
like a dead elephant stretched wall to wall.

He said *to acclimate takes time*
and more money—heartwood
slow to open, to breathe—
one week became a month and more.

I couldn't breathe just looking
at the pile of planks—
unusable, forlorn—
it had to go.

I wanted to speak my mind
instead of smile— be nice—
nice girls don't speak their minds
or question men—
that would be cheap.

How dear it is to breathe.

Reception

By Meghan Giles

Liquored, you drive us
while the other couples
are honeymooned in their hotels.
That rose bouquet I caught,
dying, already, and we
pass the spot where you pulled over
and hit me, hit me
next to wildflowers and tar.

How my tin can bruise
has bloomed like bluebonnets
outgrown of soil skin, a handful
of bluebonnets, a yellow yarrow,
two prairie larkspurs, pressed
between tissue, a tattoo raised
on my thigh, there, peeking
out beneath the cotton
foliage of my dress—a gift.

Aura

By Ginny Rachel

I was perhaps four when I first saw the colors and stood in the gigantic spiral-shaped sprawling church lost someplace deep in my past. A haloed glow hovered around plain-robed priests. I asked and was told, "We don't discuss the lights." These men glowed white from no source, and were shadowless. The wide-open space was dim, like the murky depths of thick muddy water. Heads blurred into the background above pews silent beneath the gloom of a bewildering, lonely place. Should they be good men?

The auras came and went until I became the fish frozen in ice, trapped in a bowl, and strung on a trout line unable to escape. I learned marriage made the world dull to my eyes. In this state, new experiences evolved that carved and shaped the scars left behind on my body and mind so I would never forget. Some men gave their ladies flowers or jewelry, or perhaps even a kind word of care and support—just a daisy a day. Not.

Instead, what I knew was the crimson-centered, purple-black pattern of five neat encircling fingerprints left on my arms like tattoos. I knew there was no escaping the miasma of wrongness—all was my fault—which was illogical, but made perfect sense. There was no love, only survival of the fittest. I didn't know that then, but gradually a day arrived, an hour, a minute when I realized I intended to endure, and be the fittest. Because he was not.

Already he was sick and dying. A thick greasy black light returned to hover around him at times, with prodding fingers that checked him out for size, as if the body might be only a suit, or pinched him, to prepare for the time he'd be devoured with ripping teeth. The end came without fanfare; no love lost, only an unburdening of intense, smothering pressure.

Immediately the lights became a striated conglomeration woven around people, and sounds increased to supernatural levels. A simple act of driving on the same road, in the same truck became otherworldly without direction or any recall of familiarity. The guilt of what I had thought of doing, even though I never acted, became my shroud. I bore this cloak and still bear it as I muddle through memories to grasp an understanding of how I erred.

A day arrived when I stepped closer into the shoes of a whole person. I was fully satisfied not to take care of another being and worry about when the eggshells would crack wide open.

Had I been the smart, tough little girl, I'd have snuffed the one who stole my young life away, who commandeered my being, who removed my identity, and who only wanted a replacement mother to ensure that I could never be one to an actual child. The marks he left run deep, as if a sign on the forehead that attracts the few who will ever stalk my fractured being.

The Cage Is Open

By Margaret Chula

and Billy and Coeey are flying around the upstairs room
in our Kyoto house—parakeets entrusted to us
by an English couple leaving Japan.

The birds are lovers and we awaken to their crooning
in the small tatami room. Lovers, too, we lie beneath
layers of futon, snow dusting the roof tiles.

Parakeets are birds meant for sunshine
and palm trees where all day they dart in and out
of shadows, like lineated jewels.

Japanese would have nightingales, *hototogisu*.
Their song from Hokkaido forests is heartbreaking,
like the trill of a flute in a Noh play

when the ghost of a lover appears,
white and gauzy, face hidden
behind kimono sleeves.

On this morning of sunshine, Billy and Coeey
swoop and flutter, and land on my cherry wood vanity
with mirrors that fold in and out—

and then there are four parakeets, a choir,
perched alongside pendants and pearls
that clatter against the mirror when they fly away.

By afternoon there is only Coeey, huddled
in the open cage, bill tucked beneath her feathers.
Her chirps sound like weeping.

Snow drifts in through the open window.

So

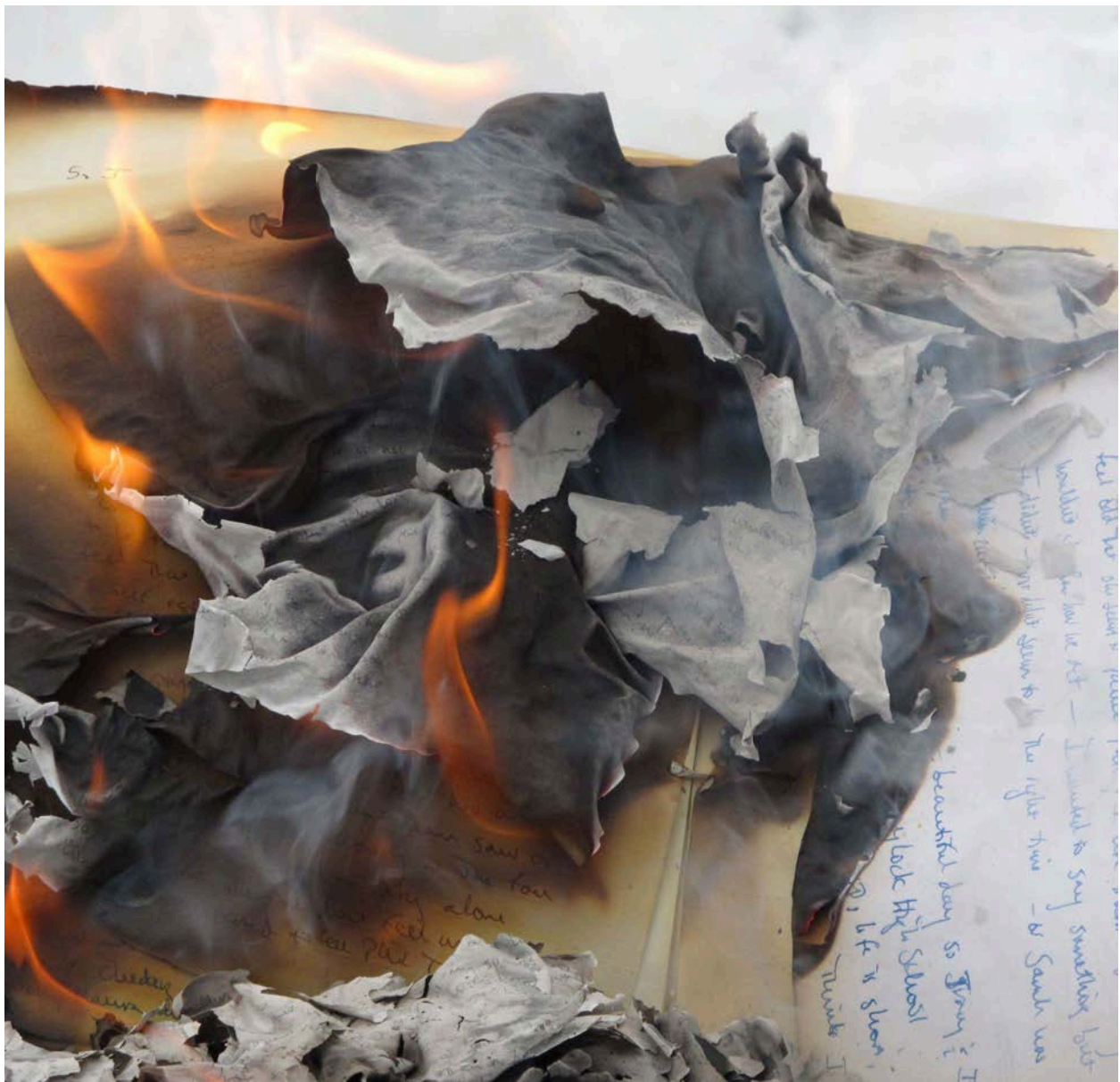
By Martha Andrews Donovan

After Shauna Osborn's Carved Skin

*And I have so many words—
—Maxine Hong Kingston, The Woman Warrior*

I.

“Divorce Journals,” image by Martha Donovan



Here, in the high desert, I am finding my way back to language. I will carry these words on my back. So. I.

II.

Dear Shauna,

I keep circling — how to enter? I have decided to write this as a letter to you. Unformed. Still forming.

Four years ago, in 2011, my marriage began to dissolve. My husband announced his unhappiness.

Let me start again.

The image I invited you to “carve” on my back is a photograph of one of my divorce journals in flames. Last winter I fed twenty-three journals to the flames — three years of daily writing during the seemingly sudden but long dissolution of my marriage when my then husband revealed his deep unhappiness, claiming I had excluded him from a writing life, one of many grievances.

I was stunned into silence.

If writing had destroyed my marriage, then I no longer wanted to write. In the absence of clarity or confidence, this was my reasoning. And so my public writing — which had been fruitful and blossoming at that time — came to an abrupt end. The only language I turned to was the stunned voice in my head — and it was this voice that found its way into the pages of twenty-three journals. The only way to get out of bed in the morning was to write my way out. The only way I could find to lie down each night was to write my way down. This private writing sustained me through those days of confusion and anger and grief.

But this language was never meant for anyone else — and eventually I grew tired of the story. There were moments of lyricism, moments of insights, even moments of beauty — but mostly it became a very tiresome story and I grew bored. So I stopped writing and put the journals away.

They sat on the floor by my bedside. Then they sat on my bookshelf. Then they sat in storage, a few miles from my home. And then, last winter, they sat in my car and traveled across the mountains and into a valley where a friend and her husband built me a fire. And I fed my writing — journal by journal, page by page — into the flames.

In a certain way, my divorce was a cliché — the long-married couple whose marriage ends in divorce when a child goes off to college. In a certain way, all divorces are clichés — the end of any marriage, in our times, a common and likely

story — and who, in their right minds, after all, would willingly accept such terrible odds? And yet, somehow, still, I am glad for the faith I see in friends who choose — and choose again — to marry. It is possible that I will find my way to such faith again.

Meanwhile, the writing in those journals began to haunt my living. This language was no longer helping me to breathe and words became stones in my mouth. This language belonged somewhere else. It was time for me to find my way to a new story.

And so, like the woman warrior, I will invent a new self out of words.

Open or Safe

by Laura G. Schmidt

When she decided to go back, it opened again. The stitches popped in response to that final thought, that, I miss her more, moment.

She went to the hospital the next day. She needed to be closed before she could make that phone call and she wanted to be sewn up before she began to pack herself back in.

The doctor fingered the would-be scar. "This is a strange happening," he murmured into her back. She felt his air against the hollow but ignored it. She tried to think of the daffodils she would buy later. She tried to think of painting her insides new. She thought the red should go.

"I have to open it to close you." She heard the click of ceramic and stone and saw his hands in the mirror across the office. He had left them behind while he went to fill in some paperwork and they were sterilizing her tools with a great and slow care.

He pulled her apart. He slid one hand and then another inside of her. "You will need to get used to this," he muttered into her dark. He pulled at some hanging strings and she found herself in tears. "Enough of that," he said with a yank and she stopped.

"I do not want to be opened to you."

"I am a professional, young lady. I am searching for medical purposes." He paused as he fingered the keys that ran down her ribs. "What was she after when she went in, I wonder."

She felt a great pressure, a need to exhale, a desire to expel. Then with a "hrmph" and a clamor, he was out and sewing.

She sighed. She liked being closed.

"I am using memories this time," he said as the needles clicked through her. "They are sometimes stronger than string. They will dissolve if you forget them." He turned her around. "If you forget too soon, you split open like a sack of sawdust. I cannot sew you up if you insist on being open. You must decide.

"Would you rather be open or safe?"

Parallax

By Jeanette Miller

Here's where we part. Without question
you walk your same, sure pace
into the dark, its walls a comfort. Alone
in this difficult light
I'm stumbling
without familiar boundaries.

In the distance ivy adheres
to a wall, an insistent cover of green.
Did you assume I'd continue
to walk beside you, providing
a shadow? I lean into mine as if
it were water. Each movement changes
the shade's configuration. How
we fed each other's hunger for the dark.

Denouement

By Sarah Russell

The movers are here this morning.
Only things with yellow post-its,
I tell them. I find my long lost earring
behind the couch. Probably landed there
that night we couldn't wait to get upstairs.
I put it in my pocket, wonder
if I kept the other one.

I divide the sterling service for eight
into two sets of four –
Solomon solution of no use
to either of us for dinner parties. Outside,
the garden needs tending – stalks of gray and brown;
withered blossoms in a winter without snow.
I reach for the pruners, then put them back.
The roses are his now.

Tonight I fix a curry with stuff from the fridge,
and we make small talk – my new job, his vacation.
Afterwards, we clean up in choreography
perfected through twenty years of meals together.

I feign tiredness and ask if he'll be around
tomorrow before I leave.
No, there's an early meeting, he says
and turns back to TV.
In the guest room, the sheets smell stale.
The old cat comes and curls into the crook of my knees –
an exquisite kindness.

Dogs and Men in Bed

By Marcia Meier

in the early morning silence
Aussie's stub tail moves rapid-fire
angles her body

scrambles to get onto the bed
our bodies a nest for her wiggling legs and paws
head bobbing as you croon "relax"...

my chest fills
I look out the bedroom window, see the long-needed pine
feel the shelter of this moment

remember the lie once told
"You ain't nobody"

Company

By Muriel Nelson

*. . . from what could we weave the boundary
Between within and without, light and abyss,
If not from ourselves, our own warm breath . . . ?*

— Czeslaw Milosz

Where thought & thoughts associate,
potencies are shelved like kitchen knives,
where every finger's safe, where choirs sing right notes
and someone tells the singers how to feel,
I grew. Later, I helped
a grandmother search for dresses —
used ones, but beautiful, so the child would feel good. When I found
small tights in red, yellow, and pink, the grandmother said,
It don't matter. If they don't match we just pretend.
I've seen a chickadee flit upside-down, in the light at the tip
of a twig — an impossible flight, but that didn't matter;
and a wild squirrel dive off our upper roof, make a small tree quake,
wave his tail, then touch noses with our old dog.
I've known a place so dark all boundaries
are felt, not seen, where loves fade beautifully
on paper — and then flare
as love & loves associate —
where you became my Company.

Blue Moon and Bright Mars

By Sandy Coomer

Now that I have you back,
even your early morning footsteps
seem blessed, and eggs scrambling
in the skillet, the aroma of relief.

I watch you from the doorway,
your clothes hanging on your body,
your hollow face busy in thought, until
your eyes lift and burn me with light.

We learned how to say love without words
when the hospital nights sank their teeth in
and the days chewed slowly on your flesh.
We learned how to say pain,

even the desperate kind that leaves you
rolled out flat and dirty.
And though we haven't yet admitted this –
maybe we never will – we learned

that fear sits in a sacred chamber
and uncoils the minutes of our lives
like the skin of an apple
peeling off in one long red helix.

Last night, we sat on the back porch
and watched the moon – a rare blue moon,
twice full in a month – curve
above Mars, low and bright.

To say your eyes are like stars is trite, I know,
but when I look in them I feel weightless,
moving fast across our lives,
the dizzying spin of all our plans bundled

like atoms in a molecule, barely contained.
We continue our habits, glad
for the repetition, the safety of the familiar.
Everything is the same,

except when you hold me and I feel the tremor
in your arms transparent as breath. It is no good now
to use words to explain ourselves, so we sit down

for breakfast. We eat our fill.



“Queen Without a Face,” image by Montequ 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/1Mzww7k>

“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



Breena 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 Mejia

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.

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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

By *Carolyn 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.

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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.

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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.

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“Acts of Bravery (Day 1 & 3),” image by Lois Bradley

SISTERHOOD OF THE BARBED WIRE MUSEUM

*...we should have lassoed ourselves together
lashed down to weather the storms.*

---Carrie Nassif

That pain in her eyes? It's in mine.

---Louise McKinney

*The concentration of
wife mother woman left untouched
her mysterious hankering
for solitude.*

---Rebecca Ruth Gould

Today I feel centered and time is a friend instead of the old enemy. It was zero this morning. I have a fire burning in my study, yellow roses and mimosa on my desk. There is an atmosphere of festival, of release, in the house. We are one, the house and I, and I am happy to be alone—time to think, time to be. This kind of open-ended time is the only luxury that really counts and I feel stupendously rich to have it.

---May Sarton

*...do I need to say
your voices are searchlights?*

---Susan J. Erickson

we should have

By Carrie Nassif

we house collections of prickled of connections
this, the sisterhood of the barbed wire museum

once wound tight over driftwood wires
long since uncoiled yellow polaroids ago

these twisting pointed links
thumb and elbow grease crafted

from fence-mending callouses
smoothed away with time

water over rocks
under bridges

we should have lassoed ourselves together
lashed down to weather the storms

built pulleys and lifted our souls
cantilevered the clouds

we can only display these remnants
and inventory our fragments

of ingeniously knotted wires
blackened with age

that we used to raise
to hold back the baked earth

and wax a kind of nostalgic comfort
buffing white-wealed scars from when we got too close

rubbing fractious aches
from standing at such a distance

Before the Show

By Donna J. Gelagotis Lee

Under the lone light bulb like a fluorescent moon,
with the smell of wood, concrete under our feet.

Clip clock. The snap of the crossties to
the halter. I comb the mane until it's silky

& you separate the thin strands of hair and cross each one
to form a braid, sewing it into the horse's mane.

How long will it take? The first hour. The stillness
of evening, then night. The horse's nickers, stomp.

Your shrug of the shoulders to stretch. The horse's ponderous
neck. I shift my weight from foot to foot.

While you continue. Hour after hour. Ten braids. Fifteen. You
don't give up, give in. The farm is still.

The night lit only by the moon here. And we
have only to dawn, when we'll return

to load the horse onto the trailer and head to the show.
How beautiful, the thoroughbred's sleek neck.

How beautiful you are as a friend.

Delores (Part One)

By Esther Cohen

My friend Delores
she's 82 beautiful
missing a few body parts
doesn't let that get in her way
makes money cleaning houses
handsome lover named Jim
one good leg that's enough for me
said Delores she got a big turkey for 8 dollars at Shoprite
invited some people made 3 kinds of cookies
including pumpkin oatmeal
my friend Delores says she's grateful
for what she has for what she imagines tomorrow will be
for the time she danced with Rudy Vallee
cute cheap bastard she said grateful
for dancing with Jim on Fridays when he can come to visit
his one good leg is better than some people's two said Delores
for her leopard skin coats she found
when she cleaned out an empty house
for her five children some of them call her
for the dollar store she found her favorite biscuit mix just a dollar for her mother god was she fun
said Delores she had a bar in Harlem five husbands maybe six her mother danced every day of her
life.
So does Delores.

Delores (Part Two)

By Esther Cohen

My daughter Josephine
some family I have
they are a reality show
I love every single one
my daughter Josephine
I have six children
baby is 52 that doesn't qualify
for baby unless
you're her mother
my daughter Josephine
she is sixty this year
still a wild card she's the smartest
one of all of them. Had
a baby when she was 17.
My first grandchild. She married Tom
a handsome guy panhandling
on the street in Catskill New York.
The funny thing is I can
imagine that. I saw him the first time
and I said to myself Josephine's
going to marry Tom.
Everyone's
got to have
a first husband.

“Third Platoon Learns Cover & Concealment”

By Karen Skolfield

Our hair smelled of canvas and green.
Alexis sat cross-legged and touched
my cheekbone with one finger.

She paused as she scanned my face:
“light in the valleys, dark on the hills.
I swear, you look good in green.”

I wove leaves into her helmet, tried
to stay still and shivered as she softened
the lines from brown to green.

We learned to move like shadows.
Muzzles pointed into the brush,
our small blackened hands flashed signals –

enemy ahead, take cover. Alexis
appeared beside me, whispered
“we’re setting up an ambush.”

Three women melted into the brush
on my right and panted slowly,
half drowsing in the June heat,

their eyes blinking beneath the leaves.
I wanted to tell her green could be painful,
how the ripeness of forests could crumble to earth.

Her hand rested inches from mine. Around us,
the smell of leaf mold curtained the forest,
and we waited for rain, or the footsteps of women.

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Sista-Girl

By Louise McKinney

“ . . .and in between it's nicotine and not much heart to fight. . .”

—Sonny Burke

She and me we complain rarely
but sometimes softly and then only to each other.

So as not to get on anyone's *last nerve*
feeling like—maybe just feel like giving up the fight,

or if strapped for cash
could just hit the jukes for some jazz.

One night I might mutter
to her (matter-a-fact) Girl, those quarters and dimes

on the bar sure look like stars—
must be yours.

I don't even mind when she borrows, then returns
the pure-white light-wool worsted skirt

with a brilliant-red ribbon of wine ebbing,
wending 'round the hem of it:

worn on her bender in a bend by the river,
c'rousing down in the Quarters—

white fabric rose (world turned upside down)
dunked into a goblet, then blotted on the sidewalk.

When she sings “Black Coffee”
she gets down, gets soulful

down on her knees, writhing 'round. Why?
Behaves just like a woman scorned,

doesn't have to try imaging it, knows No
(with the back of a hand), knows how to survive it.

Sista Mary, when she comes to the door
shopping bag in hand, has chicken to be “smotha-ed”

stands by the gardenia bush, waiting to be
greeted—comes to fix a meal not our first communion.

Knows just where I been. . . .
There's pain in her eyes I can show you.

She Whispers Korean in My Ear

By Tanya Ko Hong

We were drinking homemade wine
when my blonde friend told me
*Once I had a Korean boyfriend—
his mother hated me
but how I loved her food...*

She knew a bad Korean word—
Whisper in my ear, I said

Jajee, she said
and her face bloomed red as a bong soong ah—
my face cooled sub zero.

Only a whore can use that word—
horny women
dirty women

That's not a bad word, I replied,
It's just a part of the body, isn't it?
But I think
Who does she think she is
to say that word
a man can say that word
but not a woman—not even to her husband.

When referring to the penis, a Korean doctor says
songgi—a Chinese word.

Come to think of it
I never pronounced that word,
with my mouth—

I'd look down and say
there,
(Jagee)
penis, I can say
but using *ㅈ (gioat)
I never said it

*“ㅈ” (gioat) , is a Korean alphabet that is phonetically equivalent to English alphabet, “J” for the word “Jagee”

Bracelets

By G. Evelyn Lampart

Sophie is wearing bracelets – I can hear them jangling. I can't take my eyes off her face to look at them because she'll think she isn't interesting. That would break her stream of confidential *I am special* speak. She is talking non-stop again. About herself. Herself as a woman who is jealous of younger women, the 25-year-olds, with privilege, and with trust funds.

I understand. I tell her over and over that I understand. I have been telling her for years that I understand. But she doesn't feel special enough. Her eyes are asking for confidence. Her mouth is telling me how many people she's recently met who say she is special.

Sophie has been special for all of the forty years that I've known her -- brave, unique, caring, and lovely. She was brave to leave the Brooklyn of our youth, and part from her friends and our familiar ways. I would like to see if she is wearing the bracelet I gave her when she first left for the Southwest -- a country of sunsets that never fade, she boasted. I am afraid to take my eyes off her tulip-like face that is always in bloom and take a good look. I can hear several bracelets jostling each other. They are probably silver and copper bangles, maybe a multi-colored and delicately beaded one tied around her wrist with a leather string, and the heirloom with semi-precious stones. Without taking my eyes off her face, I finally say: "What about me?"

Sophie casts her eyes, strong and gripping, upon me, and says: "Tell me."

I begin. I know I shouldn't, but it's like a game. I'm doing this... I'm doing that... all good stuff -- writing, art, cooking, yoga. Sophie lifts a hand to her mouth in a gesture to silence me, and to tell me that she was always so jealous of me. And there it is on the plate of the gluten free pizza between us that we are sharing in a trendy mid-Village restaurant.

The bill will arrive, and I will offer to pay. It is my fault. For sharing. For having more. Sophie lowers her hand and they are all new bracelets that I've never seen before. One is thick and wide and embossed, handcrafted silver. Sophie's eyes seek mine and see where, and how far, mine have traveled. She carefully removes all her bracelets, one by one. They don't make any noise in coming off.

"Here," Sophie says to me. "Don't be jealous." And she hands me the boldest bracelet of all.

Unity Orders

By Kate Simonian

Hot stuff. Just-what-the-doctor-Orders. Five-foot-ten at twelve-and-a-half years old, with a body to be reckoned with, a body with curves we had just learned to describe as convex. Unity would have been memorable for her name alone—a *sentence unto itself*, one teacher said—but over the summer she'd developed a larger-than-life sex drive to boot. Libido had left her crooked. Her lazy eye had got lazier, as if set free in her body's general riot. Still, Unity was the prettiest girl with a not-normal eye I knew.

At lunch times, Unity lay on the benches with her skirt yanked up, thighs juicy like two burnt offerings. We watched with fascination. How, when a male staff member finally walked past, he'd stop, his ears pinking hard. There would be something in his voice—*Cover yourself, Miss. Orders*—that meant more than it said. Unity would follow such requests with her confronting rendition of Kylie Minogue's "I Just Can't Get You Out of My Head."

Unity told us about the men she'd had over the summer. She sucked their peens right out of their pants. The boy in her apartment block, a friend of her father's. *They all taste different*, she said. *But mostly bad.*

On a field trip once, she took out a pink razor shaped like a Pringle and raked it up her legs, leaving bloody scratches. She pressed her cleavage against the bus windows. Her bra was blue. We saw too much altogether of Unity Orders.

It may have been the stories we carried home to our parents. It may have been what she did with the school's creepy clarinet teacher (known to students as, Mr. *Woodywind*), or the time she cornered the headmistress's son, or when she drew a cock on the overhead projector so detailed that she should have got biology credit, but whatever it was, the school intervened. Our grade was made to attend breakout role play sessions, in which we were asked to imagine a peer who was aggressively sexual to fathers, teachers, innocent commuters. We prayed for this girl and her poor, beleaguered decency.

That didn't end the fascination with Unity. She still had pride of place in the canteen line. People still wanted to sit next to her; it was like straddling a smoking crate of fireworks. I was one of the few who distanced myself. In eighth grade, church had become a thing for me. I went to bible studies and got high on Jesus. At school, I walked around muttering, *sin sin sin*. I didn't like to touch pencils. I was sickened by the skin of things. And Unity? She was so dirty, it burned.

One day, Unity opened her locker to show us a beer that she planned to drink in the bathroom at lunch. I convinced a friend to tell the Dean. Unity was expelled. She moved to another school and we forgot all about her.

As for me, I stayed religious until I went to college and discovered *mauvaise fois* and the twilight of the idols and that all religion was crud on the bottom of the thinking woman's boot. I got wild. It became *de rigueur* for me to screw a couple of guys each weekend and sip vodka from a water-bottle during class. Things sped up. I got pregnant and married the guy and eight years

later I moved with my kid back in with my parents and nothing happened for a very long while. I was thirty-two and finishing my associate's diploma. I tried not to think about my life.

I was shopping with my mom one day when we ran into Melanie Orders, and her daughter.

"Unity's visiting from London," her mother said. "She's got a legal practice out there."

Unity was thinner. She didn't have a lazy eye. I must have misremembered or she'd got it fixed. Unity unclipped and re-clipped her coif and peered at my face, trying to place me.

"What are you up to now?" she asked.

"H.R.," I said. I spun some half-truths until our mothers ran out of talk and we pushed away from one another.

At the cashier, my mother whispered, wasn't that the pretty girl at my school who'd been expelled?

"So much has happened since then," I said. "I can hardly remember."

Coming in Second

By Ruth Sabbath Rosenthal

Body chilled by years of neglect,
my twin lies in a hospital bed

trying to grasp how she's come
to this. The sum of my fears

she's the one person I dread
I could be, save for some kink

in our link of genetic fiber.
Struggling not to catch her death

of cold, I've steered clear of her
notion that our birth was not just

conceptual happenstance. Yet
at times, I find myself more

akin to that than sanity
permits, and though I fall

into the black hole of her undoing
so far I've managed to climb back

out — into the asylum of my life.
Out, according to my twin,

much the same way I exited the womb,
climbing over her in order to be first.

Black Swans: A Poem for Voices

By Katharyn Howd Machan

We are the black swans,
the women who swim.
Who fly at night.
Who are the night.
Our golden feet touch
quiet water, skim
shining surface, plunge deep
to make currents in dark weeds.
We come and go.
We know each other's
names, each other's dreams;
we dream each other.
Dream the flight
past ragged moon,
past singing stars,
and it comes true.
Dream the telling,
the shapes of rain
and frogs and light,
and it comes true.
We are the wings.
We reach for wind
and make it ours;
we become the wind.
Our words are swan words,
black and full.
We go distances,
return, endure.

(This poem is dedicated to the Women's Writing Workshops [which became the Feminist Women's Writing Workshops, under my later direction, the national summer program founded in 1974 by Beverly Tanenhaus.]

Some Secrets

By Debbie Urbanski

Outside this window there used to be a tree. This is the first secret. Now all I can see is the sky which, today, lacks personality, a plain blue streaked with predictable clouds.

My neighbor cut the tree down. Is this the second secret? Let's say, for now, that it's not, that it is more a continuation of the first. This neighbor of mine plans to cut down more trees soon, or all of them, to make room for his decorative flower garden. As the trees root on the other side of my property line, there is little I can do about this. The violence of his solution: the men with their safety vests and chainsaws—I seem to be the only one who cares.

My kids insist they're glad the tree is gone. They never wanted to play outside anyway. Sometimes I dragged both of them outside the house, because I did not want to be the sort of mother whose kids never played outside, then I ran in and locked the patio door—this is really the second secret, okay?—against whose glass my girl would press herself, crying, while my boy slouched around the yard ripping leaves off the tomato plants.

I have a collection of secrets—this is the third secret—as secrets beget secrets, or at least they attract other secrets to them. My collection started when I turned 10. Don't worry, I'm not about to spill all of them now. There isn't room here.

This is the fourth: a girl in grade school who I barely knew, the girl with the cuts on her cheeks, came up to me and softly said, "I have a secret but you can never tell." I was thrilled by that at first, to be a secret's keeper. And then, in deciding whether or not to hold on to it, I let her secret be lifted into the breeze of the fan in the lunch room where it settled upon every table and exploded.

Small Bodies

By Alexandra Reisner

A six-year-old child's eyes are set only about three feet off the ground, which is probably why the girls saw it first. We were coming from the tennis courts when I noticed two or three of them crouching. "What is it?" I asked as I knelt to see what they saw.

It was a mouse—a baby—on its side in the grass. Its head was touched with blood, but still its sides rose and fell with breathing. "We need to save it!" shouted Rebecca*, a thin yet surprisingly muscular spider of a child with long bronze hair and long bronze legs she used to climb all over my back.

We made a circle around the mouse while the girls shouted "Help!" and I looked on half-serious so no one would mistake it for a real emergency until someone important showed up and radioed for a maintenance man. He came, a teenager steering a golf cart with garden-gloved hands. The girls looked up as I explained: 1) we found a mouse 2) it is living and it is hurt and 3) is there anything you can do, please? The boy looked bored. Without a word he lifted the mouse, its thread of tail pinched between his thumb and forefinger, and flung it into the trashcan on the back of his cart.

•

I worked at this summer camp only once, between freshman and sophomore years of college. Among the girls, Corey and Emma were our group's de facto leaders. Already cliquish at six, they spent free time brushing their hair. Another girl, Alexa, was beautiful but quieter in it, with a hum of a voice and gentle presence. She shied away from the other girls, clinging to my co-counselor Diana and me. I worried that she wasn't going to make friends so I pulled away, but she only cleaved to Diana ever more fiercely.

•

I don't remember how we found out. I do know that instead of releasing our campers to their buses that day, we each delivered a few girls into the care of the drivers. I took Alexa last because she wanted to hold my hand the longest. By the time we reached her bus, the driver was pacing. She grabbed the child up in a hug and swung her onto the bus. "I was so worried!" she said to both of us, and then only to me, "I heard it was a little girl."

It was a little boy. As another group sat under a tree, a several-hundred-pound limb—appearing healthy but rotted within—dislodged itself and fell. It scraped up a few children, including an eight-year-old girl. It killed her brother, seated beside her, age four.

•

The following morning, we awaited the arrival of a grief counselor. There was a man with one sleeve of his shirt pinned up, empty, but he was only another counselor's boyfriend, dropping off the lunch she had forgotten at home. We were asked to ask the children to draw something they remembered from the previous day at camp. Some of our girls drew what they had not seen: a child pinned beneath a broken tree. They drew red for blood. Most of them drew the swimming pool or tennis balls. Rebecca—and I wanted to take her up in my arms then—drew (soft grey and curled fetal) the poor, living mouse.

* *Children's names have been changed.*

You Accompany Parents Through Winter

By Alice Cone

As you tend to your father this winter,
when the surface is white, the sky smudged glass,
may your breath swell and rest like the river

as it courses through shadow and silver,
trusting forward and chanting the chorus
that will carry your mother through winter.

When the air is so cold it would splinter
and your muscles so taut they would collapse,
may your breath swell and rest like the river,

the susurrus of current a sister
to that pulsing of blood through umbilicus
when Mother conducted you, one winter.

If her heartbeat's now listing, off-kilter,
the routes of his nerves noncontinuous,
may you rest and crescendo, a river

resolving the chords struck at source, a singer
of canticles honoring the passages.
You accompany parents through winter.
May your hearts swell and rest, trust the river.

Tortoise

By Naomi Westerman

Extract from the full-length play.

Setting: A secure psychiatric hospital ward.

ISOBEL, 30s, a fragile woman with bandaged wrists, hides inside a fort made out of bedding. She is alone. She sits in silence for a long time. Finally (for the first time in the play) she crawls out of her fort.

ISOBEL

When I was five, I had a stray tortoise. We found him in our front garden, a runaway, a throwaway, no one ever knew. Other families find stray cats, we had a stray tortoise. We didn't know anything about tortoises, so we let him live in our back garden. He was so shy, he barely ever stuck his head out of his shell. Relatives used to say he was the perfect pet for me because I was exactly like him, and I pretended to laugh, but I didn't really think it was funny. In May it started to get hot, the start of one of those endless hot summers that only existed when you were a child. I was walking home from school one day, sweat dripping down my back inside my uniform, and I saw my tortoise walking in the opposite direction. With great force and purposefulness. We were half a mile from home and he must have crossed several roads; I don't know how he wasn't killed. So I had to pick him up and walk all the way home with him in my hands, grunting and marching his little legs in the air the entire way, dying on the inside of the mortification of drawing so much attention to myself.

This Houdini routine became a regular occurrence until we put up reinforced fencing. Then autumn came, and we put him in a box with loads of newspaper and tucked him away, to hibernate, because that's what Blue Peter told us to do. The next night we were watching television and we suddenly heard this THUMP, THUMP noise. We listened but it went away. Then it started again. THUMP. THUMP. Then ... [does grunting impression] THUMP. GRUNT. THUMP THUMP. GRUNT GRUNT. We went into the mudroom and there was the box, one little scaly leg sticking out of one corner, bumping and grunting as it spun in impotent circles. [Puts one hand down and twirls around it] We took the tortoise out of the box straight away and put him back in the garden. The next day he hid inside a bag of potting compost, and hibernated. [Pause] I may be in my shell but that doesn't mean anyone gets to put me in a box.

Anne Frankenstein

By Deborah Thompson

When I open my journal, Anne emerges from her hiding place to hover at my shoulder. Does this happen to all female Jewish writers? I began to keep a journal at age 11 after reading *The Diary*. I named my journal Anna. "Dear Anna," I'd write, and then describe my pre-teen travails to Anne Frank in her voice.

"Terri Goodman whispered to Amy Bloom in the temple carpool that my hair looked greasy," I wrote.

"I still believe that people are good at heart," Anne replied.

It was hard to compete with the holocaust.

After I was bat mitzvahed at 13 I abandoned temple, along with much of Judaism. I've forgotten how to read Hebrew, and can't even get through the alphabet beyond aleph-bet-gimmel. But I still fast on Yom Kippur. And I still instinctively scan friends' homes for possible secret annexes.

I am now in my fifties, and have been keeping a journal for 40 years. I don't call it Anna anymore; it's nameless. I write about the stabs of arthritis and of colicky colleagues, about my personal traumas and small-scale unutterable losses. But no monstrosities can compete with my progenitor. Anne, eternally 13, has left my shoulder and now burrows under my greasy scalp, the final hiding place.

Wild Faith

By Karla Morton

All angels, good and bad have the power of transmutating our bodies

- St. Thomas Aquinas

This is how we claim life –
a little wild yet,
transformed by drinking rain
from wolf prints.
We are pack stalking.
We are women walking.

There is not much difference
between woman and wolf,
the love of the hunt,
the steady cadence,
the stare of black-lined eyes.

Even the square of day
seeps its borders;
the thin line of dreams,
a dark edge to feminine thoughts.
We are pack stalking.
We are women walking.

What women believe
charms the saints,
softens the den,
shoulders the night.
Four-legged angels on every side.

We are blue beauty and white holy strength,
Earth trembling underfoot,
lupin eyes looking up into
the great grey of faith.
We are pack stalking.
We are women walking.

Woman Warriors: Babae/Babaylan

By Aimee Suzara

Babae = girl or woman

Babaylan = a shaman of ancient times who is usually two-spirited

Dalaga = a young woman

Diwata = a spirit of nature and the trees.

Babae Babaylan Dalaga Diwata

Women are the healers mothers sisters and daughters

Lorde Angelou Kingston and Assata

Words to nourish nations like mecca and water

Babae Babaylan Dalaga Diwata

Women are the healers mothers sisters and daughters

Lorde Angelou Kingston and Assata

Words to nourish nations like mecca and water

Listen to the voices you can hear the wisdom burning

Alighting minds and hearts to the revolution churning...

Babae Babaylan Dalaga Diwata

I often wonder bout the state of the nation

Why we don't spend every moment in celebration

Of our mothers and our grandmothers too

They the ones who raise us up and carry us through our

Struggles and often with no reward

Living and feeling all kinds of wars

But do much of this in the details

When I turn on the tv all I see is

White man ruling or women objectified

It's time to rewrite the canon of life...

Makes me wanna flip the script and revise

So this world will wake up and realize that

The women warriors are walking in our midst

The women warriors are walking in our midst

Babae babaylan dalaga diwata

Women are the healers mothers sisters and daughters

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Listen to the voices you can hear the wisdom burning

Alighting minds and hearts to the revolution churning...

Alighting minds and hearts to the revolution churning...

The women warriors are walking in our midst
The women warriors are walking in our midst
The women warriors are walking in our midst
The women warriors are walking in our midst

Babae babaylan dalaga diwata
Women are the healers mothers sisters and daughters
Lorde Angelou Hong Kingston Assata
Words to nourish nations like mecca and water
Listen to the voices you can hear the wisdom burning
Alighting minds and hearts to the revolution churning...
Alighting minds and hearts to the revolution churning...

I often worry bout the state of our nation
Every day policemen killing our black brothers
And sisters dying behind metal bars
Angels who fall to system's race wars
Raising our fists we say Black Lives Matter
Women lead the movement say Black Lives Matter

We fight with stories we stand in solidarity
We use our voices and break down apathy
It's time to rewrite the canon of life...
So this world will wake up and realize that

The women warriors are walking in our midst
The women warriors are walking in our midst
The women warriors are walking in our midst
The women warriors are walking in our midst

Babae babaylan dalaga diwata
Women are the healers mothers sisters and daughters
Lorde Angelou Hong Kingston Assata
Words to nourish nations like mecca and water

Listen to the voices you can hear the wisdom burning
Alighting minds and hearts to the revolution churning...
Alighting minds and hearts to the revolution churning...
Babae babaylan dalaga diwata

The Woman Who Picked Me Up

By Antonia Clark

had slammed on the brakes
of her rusty Dodge, deciding
to pull over, after all

had streaked hair and muddy boots,
a lazy eye and, once in a while,
a wistful look

had a gallon of milk and a six-pack,
a torn map, and a hammer
on the seat between us

had to have been under 30, but
claimed she was no spring chicken
in dog years

had her radio tuned to country
and tried to sing along, but didn't
really know the words

had a way of asking questions, then
not waiting for the answers, in a breezy
inoffensive way

had two kids back at her mother's,
one that cried all the time, one
that never did

had just got out of someplace,
I don't know what or where,
but it changed her life

had seen the light, turned
a corner, put the past behind her,
and a 4-day drive ahead

had me thinking, when I got clean
I'd buy a pickup, drive hard and fast
to someplace I've never been.

Blue Goddesses

By Laura Chaignon

I was not born cross-legged
Or blue
Not like Shiva or Amma
But I will give you my love
I will put my lips on your wounds
Swallow the puss
Gorge on your pain

I am no saint
I do not preach
You do not need to kneel

Oh, I will kneel
And liberate you
From the suffering

I will hug the demons out of you
My love is a roaring river
Melting ice, unstoppable
Raging

It does not hum whisper purr
It flows and breaks open
It sings at the top of my lungs

My love is power
Because of my nature
Because it only flows the one way
The one pure way
From me, to you

My arms are wide open
They will multiply to hold
All my sisters abroad
With their hair wet with tears
Cheeks hot and weary
I will embrace your hearts
And my palms on your soul
I will proclaim my love

Boundless universal immortal
Meet me where the sun sets.

Dada Does Dominoes

By Glenda Reed

Washy is so drunk he's unable to hide his cheating. After slamming down a legal play, he attempts to slip a second domino near my end of the table. His fingers fumble the delicate procedure. I look to Raz, but he's studying his own hand too closely to notice. Not wanting to leave the errant domino squatting for long, I snatch it up, "No you don't," and hand it back to Washy.

"Ah, tryin' to cheat again?" Raz says as he and Kool Aid shake their heads.

Before coming to the islands I hadn't played much dominoes, and when I had, never took the game seriously. In the Caribbean players mean business. Money exchanges hands amongst players as well as spectators during betting games in South Caicos, though tonight we're playing for pride.

George, the captain of the sailboat I'm hitching a ride on, is three sailors deep in conversation on the bar's balcony, while at the domino table I only just begin to understand that strategy has something to do with counting. "How many of each number are there?" I ask.

"Seven," Raz says. "Now that one's catchin' on." And laughing, adds, "Watch out boys." I'm not sure how to use this information. Mindful of the five six-dotted dominoes currently resting on the table, I play the double six in my hand to make sure I can play it at all.

Kool Aid knocks on the table to pass. Raz looks at me and winks. These Caribbean men accept me more than my fellow American sailors on the balcony whose interest in me is inversely proportional to their age; the older the man, the less he cares what I have to say. Rather than fight to be heard in a conversation about rough passages and anchorages with bad holding, I lay down a domino without reproof, accepted at the table just for my willingness to play.

After shuffling and reshuffling his hand, Raz triumphantly slams down his play, popping dominoes into the air and scattering the long backbone of our board. Kool Aid and I straighten the table. While we all wait for sauced-up Washy to put two and four together, Raz leans back and says to me, "Y'know, all the people around here have two names, but nobody goes by their government name."

As an outsider, I'm not sure I should ask, but Raz offered. "What's your government name?"

"Terraz. That's Jaime," Raz nods to Washy, "and Clarence," he says in Kool Aid's direction.

Washy draws a tile from the boneyard. I scan the open ends of the board for a play. "What would my second name be?"

"I dunno." Raz consults the four dominoes standing on-edge before him. "I know. I have an aunt named Glenda we call Dada. That's you, Dada."

For the rest of the night it's, "Good one Dada," and, "Come on, Dada."

Tomorrow I'll help George sail across the shallow waters of the Caicos Bank but I won't tell him my name.

A version of this story was originally published in the February 2015 issue of *Word Riot*.

The Jugular

By Karla Morton

You laughed when I said I got out of the truck,
pocket knife in hand, looking for the horse I just hit.
“And what would you have done with *that*?”

I would have wanted to end his suffering; to cut his throat.
“As *if* you ever could.”

I hope I could have done it, if I needed to;
if he hadn't scampered off;
if he'd lain there, barely breathing in the ditch.

I hope I could wring a chicken's neck if my children were hungry;
or wedge a rifle in the soft round ear of a calf,
half-mauled by coyotes;

or stand by your grandmother's bed, like your grandfather did –
fighting the rest of the family's riot for feeding tubes,
because *she* didn't want them.

I'll admit, I've grown up soft.
My poultry comes plucked and quartered from the grocery,
or fried up in the drive-through;
hot water flows at my touch.

But I can tell you, I like the sound my boots make
when they scuffle.
I pack a knife in my garter, a compass in my purse;
my phone holds the lunar calendar and Morse-code apps;
there's a shovel under my back seat.

So, perhaps it's time to reconsider; reassess,
even though I stand 60 pounds less beneath your chin.

Step back. Take another look.
Size me up *again* and decide
if I could find my way to the jugular.

My South

By Wendy Carlisle

On the left, the Atchafalaya, so black, so burnt inside,
silent as a pot. Down here, my lips equal silt and common bliss.

Down here, I carry my grave folded in my pocket,
a cardboard hunger, a box and shards.

The woman beside me in this food line wears, a skintight skirt,
has a back-door man. Down south we have the right

to costumes and gossip, to numbers and pawn.
Down south, we observe the bendable rules that stand in for bone.

Below Arkansas, we have a chicory bias.
Low blues and *Jolie Blonde* are the national anthems.

Down here, I learned acoustics from Professor Longhair, religion
from the Mardi Gras Gods, persistence in February's saxophone wind.

Like Buckwheat and the Meters, I adjust my heartbeat to the pulse of the tune.
Despite the hunter, I am the snake half of the gator.

Despite the fact of jazz, I'm as romantic as a bad house band.
I still think of salvation every time.

Night Train. Sugarcane. Soufflé. Etouffé.

The key to muddy silence is under my tongue.
Where your world gapes open, darlin,' mine shivers in.

Note: Atchafalaya, pronounced Chaffalya is the largest wetland/Swamp in the US. As you drive down on the big road to Lafayette from Arkansas, it will be on your left. The Meters & Buckwheat are Zydeco musicians; Night Train an impossibly bad red wine.

Grip

By Lauren Camp

Sure, I was afraid of the perfunctory *fucks*
of the person standing in grief
with a hand on the subway pole of the 3 train.

In my soft life, I don't hear
such a dispatch
of crisp pitted slurs. The least thing I have

is disaster. After that, exposure.
Thugs trump love at these angles and cornices
where everyone knows the arc of exhaustion.

The train was confronted
with her spectacular angers, the cuff
of strange humor, her strutting language.

On Lenox toward 124th,
I emerged above ground, passing lamplight
and brick. I saw pigeons climb into holes.

Bags of garbage lay restless at curbs.
We do not choose what comes around to meet us.
Food smell and sewage in the half dark,

the wet heart of shoving and love in a place
filled with lashes and gates.
There is nothing more silencing

than the roar of each room
of this city. Every noise long, sharp,
doubled over, and I'm quiet but walking.

Indra's Net

By Ji Hyang Padma

In Zen, one image we use to describe our interdependence with each other is Indra's Net. Imagine a net: its horizontal threads representing time, the vertical threads representing space. Where each of these threads meet, there is a crystal which is reflecting, not only every other crystal, but every reflection of every other crystal. In this way, we are intricately connected to each other: we are composed of reflections of each other.

This was vividly brought home to me on one ordinary day. On that particular day, I had a clear sense of making connections—the kind driven by a tight schedule. Leaving the house to catch the 7 am bus from Kendall Square, Cambridge to Wellesley College. Arriving at 8 am at Wellesley, preparing program materials and making the delivery, catching the 9 am bus— and arriving in Kendall Square at 10 am, right on schedule. Now I was right where I needed to be, to catch the subway downtown, for a stress reduction class I'll teach at lunchtime, in the Financial District.

This is where the universe provides a new lesson.

Stepping out of the subway train, I momentarily look down, adjusting the two bags I am carrying, and the box of Xeroxes. Rebalancing. In that moment, I hear something, a brief chorus of sound. As I look up, I see someone has fallen backward on the escalator. The man is, in fact, still falling, head first: his head bumps each steel step— with each lurch downward, my stomach jumps. This moment seems expanded, as if time has stopped. His falling down the “up” escalator seems to defy laws of gravity. At that moment, for a moment, I pause. There is a man up the escalator, near his pants, who is stopping his fall by grabbing his leg. To my side, there are a bevy of passers-by who have decided it is a good day to take the elevator. In that moment, the illusion of a neatly constructed agenda hovers— and disappears. This is the connection I need to make.

Even as I run up the escalator, a second man is struggling to pull him to his feet— or at least away from the teeth of the stairs. I lean, and push from behind; as the man's form caves backward, I see a place to give a focused push, the kind learned in volleyball. The second man catches his body, anchors it forward— and the man finds his feet. We arrive at the top of the escalator.

I checked in with him “Are you okay?”

Yes, he was.

A woman said, “You hit your head.”

That's okay, I don't keep much in it.

He was, no doubt, ready for a chiropractic appointment the next day, but no other injury occurred. This wake- up call had helped me step out of my own way, see the connection, and respond. At the end I felt more alive, and more authentic, more myself. So, did I help him, or did I help myself?

Is there a difference?

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No Milk Over Tea

Detroit, Michigan

By Zehra Imam

They tell me that if you drink milk your skin turns white.
They tell me that if you drink tea your skin turns black.

I do not know how to convince them that the
pigmentation of my skin has no bearing on the beauty of my soul,
the toughness of my character, or my unabashed laugh.
I have the soul of a warrior
the toughness of a tiger
and merriment inside like a warm home
that is lit up on the outside during holidays

I do not know how to tell them that they are beautiful
but that this distracts.

Freshman

By Sue Churchill

She stood through the whole club meeting—
the officers all announcing themselves--never
spoke, as if not entitled to a word or a chair.

She was small and slim—fawn-like
still, where the seniors, now
they were does, and they knew it.

She'd had her hair streaked grey, an odd
shade for a fawn, the color of ash,
or a boat hull-up in the sun.

She looked out and away, thinking
of where she'd rather be, but where
was there a thicket safe enough,

tight with thorns, blurred in fog,
a spot hollowed with the high
wild frequency we hear as silence?

Agoraphobia

By Susan Austin

Don't paint summer the color of blue flax
then the color of goldeneye, paint
two broad black strokes a river
dammed at the end of the porch,
a rhomboid tilted by the tenacious lure
of dandelions, and if there must be
a figure, paint the figure
a triangle woman with childish arms, her hair
a chaos of wildflowers, the whole of summer
falling through her hands.

Woman Finds Her Face

By Lois Marie Harrod

when she unfolds the tablecloth
and then the stains of her bones, scapula,
radius, pelvis, and she realizes
she has been thinking about sorrow again.
How she doubles it around herself,
belly and back. What she can't change,
punctures circling forehead and scalp.
It's cold outside, ice sheets the gouge
down by the river, 30-degree drop
into hardness, her swollen face,
the telltale wounds of a Roman scourge,
the heart swells and loses elasticity.
Whom can she forgive? The boy who left
her daughter for Aspasia? The pedophile
who was her brother-in-law?
Or is it the old woman who demands
another invitation to dinner?
Everyone's hanging around the skull
like a Renaissance painting. No reciprocity.
Tit for tat. If she has the shroud,
what need crucifixion? Today you will dine with me
in paradise. Suppose someone
tested the image and said it goes back
to the beginning. No lie.
If ice didn't swell as it melted,
no one would be here. True too.
Her daughter said there are some things
we can't forgive--and others, what say the priests?
Something dirties the linen?

Persephone

By Elizabeth Moller

“I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse, perhaps, to be locked in.”

- Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

We are on the road to recovery.

No more shock therapy, no more round-the-clock supervision, no more being surrounded by other crazies who got pulled naked and homeless off the streets and wrested into hospital gowns that don't close. And, yet: we aren't expected to be *normal* either, which is a great relief. There are those among us who wish we could stay in this state forever, half-sane.

On the outside, they said, “Let your freak flag fly!”

This is what they taught us in kindergarten; but we learned fast that they didn't mean it.

What they meant was, *Let your freak flag fly, but not too much. Just enough so that you are interesting but politically correct. OR Be yourself as long as you don't make us uncomfortable. OR Let your freak flag fly, but only if you are talented enough, and it will make you famous.*

Be polite to your teachers and fit in at school. Avoid provocative comments. Don't stand out unless your laugh is candy-coated. Say thank-you but graciously deny the potential truth in any compliments you receive. Don't be so sensitive. Don't take things so personally. Get over it. Write your thank-you notes. Don't steal other people's boyfriends.

Don't pull your skirt up above your waist, even, *especially*, if it is lined with silk, and the rub-rub play feels good. Don't show people your undies. Don't touch yourself.

But we do.

“Beauty, the world seemed to say...To watch a leaf quivering in the rush of air was an exquisite joy. Up in the sky swallows swooping, swerving, flinging themselves in and out, round and round, yet always with perfect control as if elastics held them; and the flies rising and falling; and the sun spotting now this leaf, now that, in mockery, dazzling it with soft gold in pure good temper.

- Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

Persephone – our Persy – is the first to leave. She is just twenty, and “well enough” to go back to school.

She is not the only one to make it outward onward upward against the rush of the odds. Some of us finish college and find jobs.

We mix with the Normals, and we are convincing in our disguises, sipping martinis and joking about our bosses and sex. On spring days we feel peace.

Other times we must work hard to avoid the dark mole world below, swallowing tequila shots until our nerves have been transfigured into flying dots of light, until we have convinced ourselves that our youth makes us beautiful, and we are titillating and titillated, and we dance dance dance before having Erica Jong sex into the morning.

**“As long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking.”
- Virginia Woolf, *Orlando***

Persy is the first to get married.

We attend, and cry, while she and her boy-man covenant love and ownership of one another's sexual organs. We remind ourselves of our good fortune, our light skins and our twenty-first century western freedoms. Isn't that, after all, how we made it this far?

Old Lady McGee's grandmother got electroshock therapy back in the 50s, and it broke her back. She died a year later. Life is good, we tell each other.

The wedding is at the botanical gardens. When it rains, we are moved inside.

On the dance floor Persy glides away from us, follows her new husband into a square of Normals who are white hip thrusting to the Macarena.

Water drips down the greenhouse panes.

“But I'll always have my poetry,” Persy whispers to nobody, unpublished, a writing workshop of one.

Bipolar Girls on a Manic High Are My Addiction

By Stephanie Heit

look for the bipolar girls sexy if you can get them
manic god-like confidence and unlimited energy till
they hum rubbing on streetpoles pure libido oozing
out crotches a slippery invitation those bipolar chicks
will surprise you stripping off clothes without an
invitation not even caring what your name is just that
you are fuck ready bipolar chick like an animal randy
in heat hit that if you can if you are brave enough to
mess with crazy

This Poem Will Refuse to Confess

By Emily Regier

That I have been drinking far too much wine
for years probably. What are
the guidelines? Never mind.
They keep changing and I
keep staying the same.

So I have been thinking,
if this lawyer thing doesn't work out
I am going to buy a vineyard, with rows
and rows of sensational
vines—

Ripe black fruit, intensely structured,
strong on the nose.
That full mouthfeel!
The unmistakable terror in all of it—
I mean *terroir*.

But in truth there is fear
with spires like a cathedral.
And by the time you're able to live in it,
you're too drunk
to notice.

Lines

By Yania Padilla Sierra

I cannot see
See beyond the fluffy lines of euphoric dismay
See past the smoky whiskey
Warm in its dismissal
of everything.
I lick my fingers savoring the bitterness.
My work.
My work is done.

My veins, tired from pumping diesel,
From accepting poison, tremble
Blue with age.
My heart an old horse drawn cart
Huffing slowly over
A pock marked road.

Another line, another vision- Mother in a black dress,
The dirt of consecrated land whirling
About her. An open earth wound, oh flesh of my flesh.
The only eye is the mind's eye.

I will gouge it out with these lines.

Crimson droplets form on the table as I inhale the now
Pink douser of flame. Waste not, want not.
I drink from bottled Styx-forget me, sot.
The promise of yesterday now
A wizened crone of yore, maiden nevermore.

Shut, eye, damn you! Shut!
No more of anthems and pledges of secrets and death.
One more,
One more.
Should help me
Forget.

Ace of Pentacles

By Roxanna Bennett

What is before you: Party dresses twisting on thin wire hangers. Japanese river stones painted with runes. Pill bottle shaking with baby teeth and a polished brown squirrel skull my brother found in a potter's field. Lapis lazuli pendant. Curl of grey hair folded in a comic strip. What is behind you: 999 Carlaw Street. \$825/month. One and a half bedrooms and a bathroom in the hall. Second floor veranda, wood warped with wet weight. Where lost I laid a planetary spread. Balconies thick with tomato vines, laundry lines, dishwasher sunlight. Wan ruin of June. Garden of cracked clay pots, holes punched in the bottom for rain to run out. Purple carrots, sugar snap peas, tiny cherry tomatoes. Soil trundled home in a child's red wagon. Maybe birdsong but smoke detectors, sirens, car alarms. How to make him believe leaving was his own idea. How to defend. After. Wrapping the cards in a torn pillowcase, throwing potential in the trash. And how the garden died wholesale after being transplanted to the suburbs.

What comes next: What is before you: Fear of travelling. I must leave this place. The hospital without memory. Woe from whom we woke. No one open all morning. Do not think of the future's great formula of art. Where caged, a bride is a burden to god. Fear of speaking to strange men. For miles blue lights, empty air. Blue lights, empty windows, how many miles of answers. Who will protect me from voices. To die is to leave the ugliness of summer. Sometimes I dream a warm room filled with words, intention. I sit on the bed in ragged silk. Dark hours rise, one love bird sings at sunset. Cover me with leaves. Blue lights. Empty. Stars. A body and the quiet trees hurt. To assume love where none exists is a weighty object. Alone in a hospital bed. But you return with your lover and I have grieved ever since. Pressed flowers bound together.

What is behind you: Fear seeps under the door like gasoline fumes from that long hot summer up five flights of stairs, straps from the backpack full of food bank cans cutting my shoulders, skin slick with sweat. Weeping in the bathtub, sluicing cold water over my swollen belly. Fear for a child to be out and better than this empty apartment, sleeping bag on the floor and a five inch black and white TV from the alley outside the liquor store. Collect call once a week from a piss stinking phone booth. Silence where congratulations should have been. It is the last day. I have nowhere to go. No one to see. No one comes here. No one comes back.

What comes next:

Stealin' from the Dead

By K. Bruce Florence

Mommy moved in with us about a week ago.
Seems the coal company boys is about tired
Of the widow women filling up all the houses
Along the dusty row moving on up the holler.

I had to take her to the doctor today, but
When we got back that thievin' Bobby Ray had
Filled his truck with Orville's tackle box and fly rods.
Orville thought the world of his precious gear.

They was about all he had left of his daddy's things.
And he never lived long enough to stop missing
His daddy and all the fun they had together.
Them rods and flies always made him smile.

So good old Bobby Ray thinks he can just
Walk in here with my back turned and help
Himself to the best memory Orville ever had.
Killing is a mortal sin, but I swear if I coulda
Got my hand to a gun right then, it would
Have taken more man than that sniveling
Bobby Ray to keep me from killing him.

The Bobby Ray's of this world are very bad
Fooled if they think being a widow has made
Me a simpleton just waitin' to be walked on.
Orville might have been the man in this house,
But he kept it a big secret that right behind him
Was about the meanest woman he ever knowed.

The world wants to make me out to be a strange
New person who can't make butter with sweet milk.
But deep inside me is the same woman who
Slept with her man, loved him, bore his kids,
Tended crops and kept all of us decent.

If you see or hear tell of that sneaking rat, it
Might be good if you warned him to get off
This mountain and stay for good. Being dead
Lasts a good long time and his tombstone would
Be a fine example for anyone else's trifling ways.

Stones

By Michel Wing

Virginia walks into the river with stones
in her pockets. Smooth stones, river stones,
small enough for hands.

I drive to the ocean with nothing
in my pockets. No name, no wallet,
no place to put my hands.

She knows the river,
she knows why she is there.

I am somewhere near the Pacific,
a cliff, a highway. Why am I here?

Fatigue, that's all it is. Enough.
She writes, *I can't fight any longer*,
then steps out the door.

At the payphone alongside
the highway, I dial 0, ask
for the crisis line.

She is walking through the water now, ankle
deep, then higher. The river swirls
around the hemline of her coat.

Hello? May I help you?
I crouch under the phone, ocean salt on
my cheeks. *I want to die.*

The eddies grow stronger, colder,
as she forges forward, hands still
wrapped around the stones.

*Have you thought of going on a walk?
Or maybe a nice bubble bath?
I drop the phone, let it dangle.*

Untitled [*the dark knows this*]

By Jennifer Patterson

The dark knows this (1), the lap-fuls of minutes 'til eyes shut, the way the throat feels blocked and gutted at the same time. Deep in the belly of a well.

There is an absence fingers know, a leaving.
Fingers try to grip.

Where it's wooded,
where it's windowless,
where the quilt has weight,
where a body lies,
where a body leaves.

Where a lake is still
until
water is broken (punctured) by an oar.

Where knowing means not.
Where letting go means standing still.

A deep well,
A dark hole.

Skin that doesn't know fingers anymore.

I can't find you.
I don't want to.

(1) Linda Hogan, *Dark & Sweet*

Her American Life

By Sokunthary Svay

She prays to her altar, says God
but means something else.

The incense hangs in the room
like her ancestral spirits.

Cambodian karaoke blares through the steel door.
In the hallway, neighbors mistake it for Chinese.

Down the elevator, Spanish speakers
pretend she can't understand "Filipina."

Jehovah's Witnesses ring on weekends.
She holds her breath until their voices fade.

Fearless German roaches dot the kitchen,
the walls coated yellow from past deep-fried dinners

A frozen bird defrosts under a trickle of water.
Home from work, a plate of dismembered meat.

Sequined and puffy sleeves old as her adult daughter
are tucked away in the closet.

Boys play basketball late.
The windows only keep out the bugs.

She kisses her husband goodnight to separate beds
in the lonesome room where their sons once slept.

The Siege of Ennis

By Eileen O'Leary

Bernard and his daughter, Cathy, are visiting his childhood home. He has decided he wants the place. His sister, Agnes, lives here. His sister, Marian, has traveled here and wants it for herself. This excerpt is Bernard and Agnes in ACT II.

BERNARD

You're going to throw it all away. The last bit of it. The last crumb. Could you not be satisfied to leave me a goddamn crumb? I started my life in this house. Nowhere I can go will change that. Nothing I do will give me different blood.

I'm not letting some bitter, angry woman throw the last of it away.

What do you think, Agnes? Maybe all the years...down through the centuries it was one man come home refusing to let the thing die? Refusing bitterness? That man comes home. And keeps it alive.

AGNES

You want it.

(BEAT)

BERNARD

Cathy wants it.

AGNES

Cathy.

BERNARD

I want it.

AGNES

You do.

BERNARD

I want it.

AGNES

Ah.

BERNARD

It would play your hand against Marian.

AGNES

Oh, there's nothing like politics when it hits blood!

BERNARD

You won't stop me. I'll have the papers drawn up.

AGNES

Has it crossed your mind that it's mine by possession? That's legal.

BERNARD

Until you're pushed down the stairs, dammit.

AGNES

And don't think I won't come back for a thousand years in a cloud of light in the upstairs hallway and you'll wake up screaming for what I'm still about. Papers. Documents. Deed of assignment. It's mine!

BERNARD

No.

AGNES

I'll tell you what will be done here and what won't.

BERNARD

You don't love it. You don't love your family, either...your own brother. I could help us all live together.

AGNES

You'll take over is what you'll do.

BERNARD

If you'd just....

AGNES

Listen! (LONG PAUSE) Listen. (LONG PAUSE) Silence. That's what's here. That's what joined me...kept me company. The shutters...the cows...the rain...sometimes I'd hear them.

But what was here...really lived here after everyone had gone...was silence. (PAUSE)

Some places...the back end of the universe dips down...and lives there. That's what the universe is made of...silence. Listen. (LONG PAUSE) Nothing.

If you can live with that....you can live with God. You can stand the prison of your own skin. You want me to let you hammer some nails into the shingles on the roof? It seems to me that would bother the silence. And the silence has been here forty years...while you had your life...in a noisy world. No idea what's out there past the heavens. That silence moved in here...and it's my companion. I say...let the place rot. That's the planet we've found ourselves on. I am rotting down...so are you...and I am happy moving toward the earth. Because if I wasn't...if I used this place for profits...pushing for noise and the hammering of nails...the silence would fight back. And win.

Mrs. Ramsey

By Rebecca Ruth Gould

Meaning suddenly suffused
the subway on her way
to pick flowers freshly cut
for her son's graduation.

She became symbolical,
a representation
lingering in London's dusk
while the onlookers

concluded their business,
closed their shops,
said goodbye to colleagues,
headed home.

The concentration of
wife mother woman left untouched
her mysterious hankering
for solitude.

She Shall Soon Find a Way

By Julie Babcock

Gingerbread after an exile. After the funeral pyre has smoked down and the last bread crumbs
stolen. How sweet now to have found this forest

house, ground cinnamon and ginger, spiced bark and root, a revival. Of course she eats it.
Life belongs to whoever can find it, to whoever

keeps walking and trying. Children know this. That eating one door leads to another. That
when captured. . .

She grabs a handful of gingerbread cake, lines her pockets with crispy cookies, licks icing
along a window. She is what she does. She is

a molasses-dark shape in the trees.

Wanting for Grace

By Donna J. Gelagotis Lee

The mist over the olive grove lifts through
the cypress trees and I can taste the olive's
pungency, the heat rising off sunburnt twigs.

I yearn to drink. Fully awake, the sun spun out,
I step vigorously along the coastal road,
where the sea spits and the sunlight shimmers

on my arms in full swing. As I buy today's sundries,
I become brethren to the landscape, not to
the tourists' stores or the cyclist's fumes

but to the Aegean's fierce breath, hundreds of cobblestones
underfoot, the sun beating on 114 steps to heaven,
on the Greek woman's flourishing

geraniums. I have planted myself where no one
will come for me. I might as well
wash my stoop, forage for herbs,

hoe the garden. I am drenched with the island's
giving. Do not look for me. I am stumbling
up church steps, wanting for grace.

All eyes, once turned to me, look elsewhere,
the new tourist coming, the villager intent
to sell. Where are the saints painted

in the ancient Orthodox church? Why does
the village priest ignore me? Why does the breeze,
instead, take my arm, while the sea, if I let

it, would carry me to some distant destination?
All this, I contemplate. All this, I know
each morning when I rise alone and

the house rattles with the sun's heat,
the mountain's easy exhale, this life
far from complete.

Final Crescent

By Jane Schulman

Think of me on bruise-blue nights when
the moon wanes to a wisp
and you scan the eastern sky, wondering.
And think of me as a crocus,
cracking through matted leaves.

For I was born on ebbing days
of Adar, when winds blew out-of-tune
and the moon was a final crescent.
My soul makes its way through the world
with hesitant footfalls.

Two of my sons were born in the month
of Nissan, prankish as lion cubs,
with hearts of honeycomb and voile.
I know my soul more
by what it is not.

Note:

Adar is the 12th Hebrew month that comes at winter's end.

Nissan is the 1st Hebrew month that comes as spring begins.

Rapunzel Brings Her Women's Studies Class to the Tower

By Susan J. Erickson

The setup looked so innocent. Like a rustic
LEGO estate. Before you ask, the ivy escape route
now clambering up the walls was tended
by an apprentice of Edward Scissorhands.
The Government was reclaiming this tract
for a planned wilderness. It was so quiet

I could hear my hair grow. Occasionally
a crazed scientist would wander by, eyes
to the ground, mapping endangered four-leaf clover.

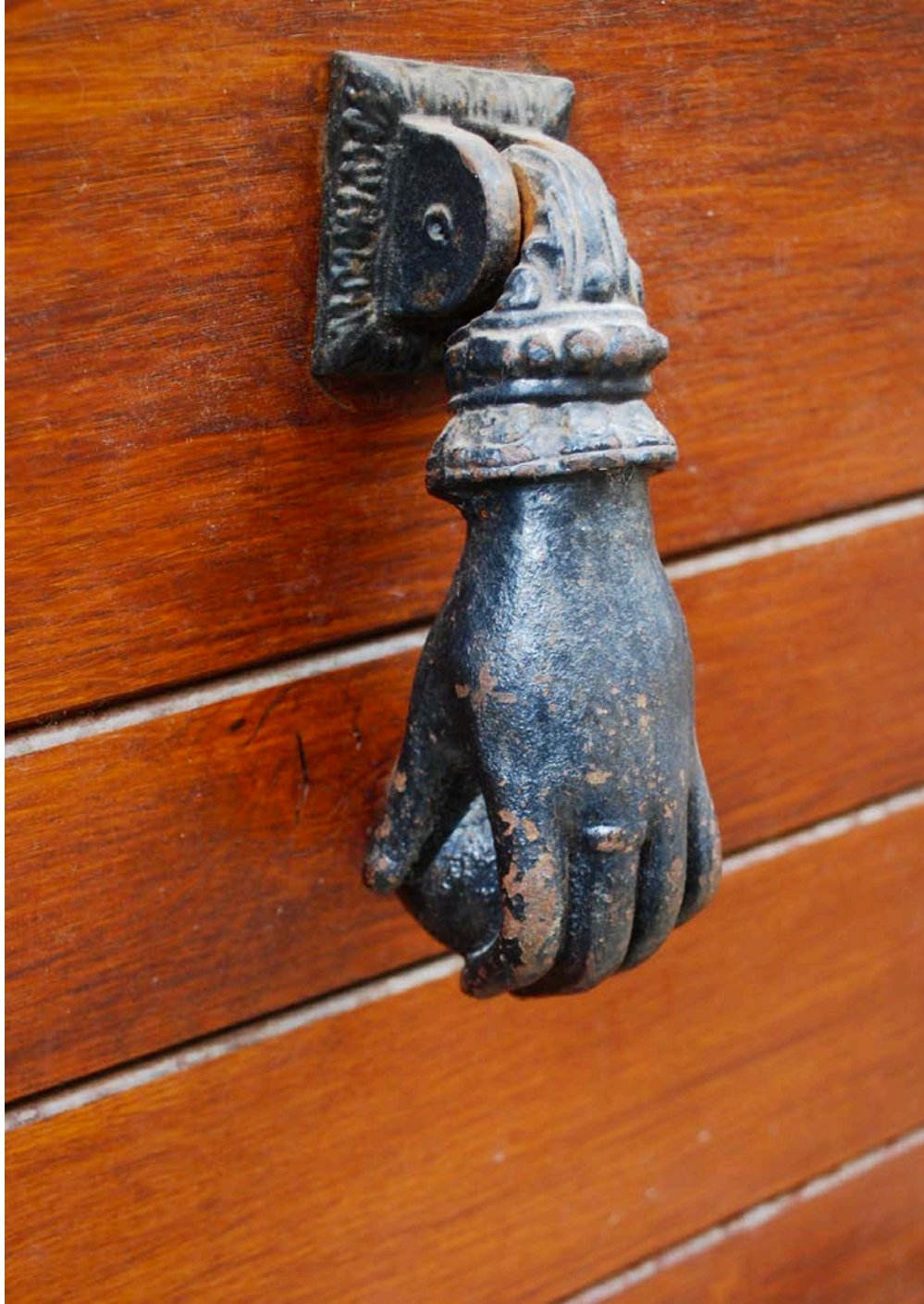
I was endangered too, but had signed on to relinquish
the rib of victimhood. I thought life could be arranged
so only my favorite pineapple LifeSavers came up
in the assorted roll. One sleeve at a time, I slipped
out of my coat sewn from sackcloth and shadows
to wear the skin of solitude.

Each day I recited that line from Rilke:

Let this darkness be a bell tower and you the bell.

When I came down from the tower, the media wanted
a country western song. Everyone would hum,
wipe away a tear, then sing aloud the verse
where Wrong crashes its vintage pickup. Instead,
I uncoiled my crown of braids, cut the ties and loosened
the strands that held my story captive. Every day
new towers of darkness rise. Do I need to say
your voices are searchlights that can sweep the horizon
to reveal fault lines and illuminate passage?

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“Knock,” image by Dawn Banghart

A VOICE ANSWERING A VOICE

One must have been something of a firebrand to say to oneself, Oh, but they can't buy literature too. Literature is open to everybody. I refuse to allow you, Beadle though you are, to turn me off the grass. Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt you can set upon the freedom of my mind.

---Virginia Woolf

The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom.

---Audre Lorde

*I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.*

---Adrienne Rich

...I say: I will write the book myself.

---Marya Hornbacher

Living with Ghosts

By Ellen McLaughlin

It might seem odd that I would begin a speech about writing by talking about how I can't seem to write, but I have been asked to talk about something I have a certain amount of expertise in and, well...

Anyway, what I decided to do, since I was having so much difficulty just writing this speech, was to examine that difficulty. The first problem I encountered was that I realized that it felt false, given that I am addressing a group of women writers, people like me who are dedicated to the form and have made sacrifices to practice it—and some of you have had to make far greater sacrifices than I have ever had to make—it seemed wrong to speak to the likes of you as if from a position of authority. How to offer rather than declare? That seemed to be the crux of the matter. And I realize that the only thing I can offer as the truth is my own experience. It's a matter of speaking, as Ursula le Guin writes, in the mother tongue, which is intimate, common, conversational, spoken to be answered to, as opposed to the father tongue, which is declarative, authoritative, relegated to announcement and judgment. It presents itself as the truth, the real goods to be meted out to the uninformed for their betterment. I can't pronounce anything from a mountaintop to you. I can only view you as my peers, my fellow writers, and so must speak to you in the mother tongue. I will confide in you rather than pronounce to you. So that's the first difficulty, the problem of status and the language in which I'm going to speak to you. The second problem, which is not so easy to solve, is that I can't fucking write because the voices in my head are so loud.

I can't believe I am alone in this difficulty. So what I've decided to do, and I hope you will hang with me on this, is to use this time together to stop trying to shut the door on these voices or drown them out or ignore them or pretend they aren't howling away in here. I'm going to open the door and face them for once and see who they are, why they have come and what the hell they have to tell me. Maybe by this means I can shift at long last the psychic dynamic I have been suffering with all of my writing life, which is a long time at this point. Maybe, instead of pretending to speak from some enlightened peak of expertise, I can actually learn something by writing this speech. Maybe, with your help, I can become a wiser, freer writer.

I suppose that there must be enlightened, blissful souls out there, writers who never experience the days, weeks, even years when the syrup won't pour, but I have never met them and can't even imagine such creatures, mysteriously free of self-doubt or depression, people who have never known the blank afternoons, the empty mornings when one wakes to think "I will never have another original thought, never work again. That's it. I'm tapped out. Whatever I had, if I ever had it, is gone." No desert in the world, certainly not the one we are in right now, has ever been as dry as the deserts of the mind one inhabits in such states of being.

But however dry, my deserts of the spirit are never silent. There is so much yammering going on that it is literally hard to think. Who are these people? So much of the time one is just trying to hear the faint voice of the soul underneath the din of the inner critics sneering their contempt or urging caution, warning that I'm going to hurt myself or others if I continue, telling me to get up, perhaps make myself a snack, stop, please, would I please *stop writing*? If one of them gets hoarse from yowling at me, another will always take over.

Ask any writer about his or her voices and you'll get a slightly different answer, but we all have them. I recently asked a writer friend to tell me about his. He is Marty Moran, a gay man, a former Catholic, who has written shatteringly insightful and tough work, called *The*

Tricky Part, about his struggles to come to terms with sexual abuse he suffered in early adolescence at the hands of a man in the church. He said, well, of course there are the bigots and the homophobes, but I can't take them too seriously at this point. The ones who get to me are the voices of neighbors, friends of my parents, former teachers, the religious members of my family who feel that I have exposed too much, that I'm not taking it like a man, that I'm sentimental, weak, a sissy... the list, as such lists do, went on.

He, like me, has a voice who is constantly telling him that he should grow up and stop navel-gazing, that he's got to face up to the grit and harsh demands of the reality of the adult world, whatever the hell that is. It's the same voice as the one I hear saying, who do you think you are?—some chick who has never even been on a battlefield—how dare you presume to write about war? Leave that to the people who know what they are talking about, stick to the tiny circle of your own concerns and experience. You have no right to that material.

According to that voice, writing is a silly, girly, self-indulgent business compared to, well, any number of noble things. Why, I could be devoting myself instead to human rights, politics, medicine—work that involves improving the state of things, actively bettering the lot of others. This is one of the hardest voices to tune out, well nigh impossible of late, since of course, those voices have a point. The world has never been in more dire need, it seems. (But is it really crying out for me, at my age, to start medical school?)

Who else is in there? Well, of course there are the voices who devote themselves exclusively to competitive comparison. They sneer that while I've been sitting there trying vainly to come up with something, So-and-so has already dusted off her hands after having written another Pulitzer Prize winner or whatever. There's the why-not-me? whining voice of wound-licking envy and bitterness, as if the creative life is a zero-sum game in which another writer's success, merited or not, will always be at the expense of mine.

And then of course there are the voices whose only purpose is to distract you—who tell you that your time would be better spent walking the dog, working on your taxes, calling a friend, doing a little more research, going to the gym, really anything, anything other than continuing to sit there... They are totally shameless, those voices, they'll say whatever it takes to get you out of the chair—Is that gas I smell? The doorbell I hear? A child's cry? The basement flooding? Get up, get up, step away from the desk, head for the hills while you can, flee as if your life depended on it from the mortifying, ridiculous, impossible endeavor of writing whatever it is you are trying to write.

I had a friend who literally tied himself with his bathrobe sash to his desk chair every morning. I was always cheered by that image. Similarly, Mark Salzman, author of *Lying Awake*, one of my favorite novels, a short, luminous work, wrote a charming piece in the *New Yorker* years ago about his struggle with at least five drafts of that novel, each one more painful than the last. During the fourth, he was having difficulty in his home office with his cats, who always wanted to sit in his lap, which was interfering with the rewrite. He heard that cats don't like the feel of tin foil so he would wear a sort of lap skirt of tin foil, which meant that they would leap onto his lap and then leap violently off of it, upsetting themselves and him. Eventually they started trying to settle on his shoulders until he foiled them (ha, ha) with a sort of aluminum shawl, which drove them to trying to perch on his head. A tin foil hat, standard crazy-person attire, was the inevitable final result, until he started working in his car where the cats couldn't get to him and he didn't need so much costuming. One day he was scribbling away in his Saturn, balancing his work on the steering wheel and trying not to sound the horn when he bore down, cramped and uncomfortable, his office abandoned and full of sheets of tin foil while his cats

were yowling, pacing and circling on his car hood, peeved with him, until they settled on the sun roof above him. At one point he looked up to see three cat butts directly above his head and thought, "What the hell am I doing with my life?"

I can relate. Can you?

Then there is the problem the critic Harold Bloom has called the Anxiety of Influence—a phenomenon that, once I heard about it, caused me, well, a lot of anxiety. It's one of the oldest and most reliably loud voices—the one that tells me that whatever I'm trying to accomplish has already been done better by someone else.

Of course this is to some extent true.

After Samuel Beckett, Virginia Woolf, William Shakespeare, and Emily Dickinson have weighed in, just to pick a handful from the sea of luminaries who come to mind, the given is that whatever I'm going to come up with on a Wednesday morning might not stack up. But you know, I've come to the conclusion that it doesn't matter, finally, that their greatness is unapproachable. Their greatness has very little to do with what we're grappling with at our own desks during our own days of silent struggle except as an example of what human beings are capable of. Because their work was their own no less than ours is ours alone, and their work is done. We can no more do their work than they can do ours. That's the good news. And the bad news.

It's a matter of how we choose to live with the greatness of those who came before us. We can either tell ourselves that their work makes ours irrelevant and unnecessary before we've even done it or we can decide that their work makes ours possible. The choice is ours. But we do need to make a choice because the fact of the matter is that those we deem great are part of the furniture in our heads no less than our worst inner critics are. We all inhabit the haunted houses of our own minds, so we have to figure out how to live with these ghosts if we're going to get anything done. How do we do that?

I had a friend who grew up in a haunted house in New England. There were a number of entities in residence—a lady in white on the stairs who wasn't so much disturbing as just sad and a little clumsy. If you sat talking on the stairs, as once happened to me, you might feel a nudge on your shoulder, as if a foot slipped as she tried to step around you going upstairs on some sort of ethereal errand. There was an indistinct but masculine grey presence who sometimes seemed to shimmer on the lawn at night, looking lost, and who occasionally tapped at the windows, as if in search of someone who might have once been able to recognize him and do something for him. And then there was what the family decided was a child, who just seemed frustrated and bored and a bit mischievous. Every now and then he or she would create a great flurry in the pantry, flinging mops and brooms around and knocking cans off the shelves. The family called in a ghost-buster at some point who tried to corral the ethereal inhabitants of the house and get them to "move on," as they say, but no one seemed inclined to leave and the family just got used to it. I asked, well, weren't you scared? And my friend said, "Not really, it was like having mice or something. You just get used to putting the cans back on the shelf every week or so." I have come to the same conclusion about my ghosts and voices. They are just the creaks and groans of the house my psyche lives in.

And it's crowded in there. There are the ghosts of every writer I have ever loved, ever held up as a standard of what is possible. But there is also the ghost of every person who has loved me and every person who has ever hurt me. They are all milling around like vagrants at a bus station. Virginia Woolf is perched somewhere in the upper right side of my brain, perpetually sitting in her study in Monk's House, her note pad on her lap, smoking and looking out toward

the garden as the rooks lift, flap and wheel in circles over the trees. Sometimes, it is just after breakfast, the morning when she wrote the sentence, "Mrs. Dalloway said that she would buy the flowers herself" and looked at it on the page and thought, ah, this is how it begins. Sometimes it is the morning she saw the sky darkening over the world, the war and her madness overtaking her, and thought, ah, this is how it ends. But she is there, of course she is, my Woolf. She will always be part of me, my Woolf, because she has meant so much to me. And of course my Woolf has little to do with the woman who was born in 1882 and died in 1941, she is what that woman's work has meant to me, what I've made of her. The real Woolf who died before I was born and whom I shall never meet is beyond my reckoning. She is lost, dead, and as such I can't hurt her any more than she can hurt me. So my Woolf is my creation alone, a ghost I constructed because I needed her presence. I can use her as a scourge, a reminder of how paltry my own efforts are always going to be by comparison. Or I can let her be a benign ghost, someone who occupies a privileged and sister spirit in my head, another writer before me who struggled and felt it occasionally, that ecstasy, the flow. I can think of her as she sat—not so different from the way I sit when I write, staring into the silence, just as I do, listening hard, waiting for it, trying to hear the mind of the novel speaking to her. I know she had good days and bad days, just as I do. I know that she must have spent some of that time as she sat on the verge of writing trying not to worry about the toast crumbs on the carpet, the cigarette ash on her cuff, whether there was any milk in the house for tea. (At least she never had to deal with the wild distraction of that ping one hears when an email arrives in one's inbox.) I have to believe that she also dealt with all the psychological chatter that is unceasing in any human life, even when one is attempting to drop into the flow of writing, the sorting through the sand of daily consciousness and event. Was I unkind to my husband this morning? What did my friend mean yesterday when she said what she said? Did I just spend too much money on that thing I thought I wanted so much? (It's a wonder we can do anything at all other than vacuum and write letters of apology.) Am I a selfish person? Am I an attractive person? Am I loveable? Do I really look as dreadful as the old woman who looked back at me in the mirror this morning? What will I die of? How did I get that spot on this shirt? And I know, like me, she was rocked off her center continually by reviews, her terrible vulnerability to them. Despite all her success, all her genius, she went through harrowing anxiety about them before they came, and skidded into dangerous depression if they were even slightly mixed.

Oh, the buzz of all those voices! But look at all those novels she wrote, and book reviews! And she also ran the Hogarth Press with Leonard, for god's sake. While two major wars raged, while Modernism was birthed into the world and she was one of the midwives. And in thinking that, once again I risk letting her be a means of making myself feel like a slovenly idiot by comparison. I can't even finish this paragraph without wandering off into a little eddy of speculation about what I'm going to have for lunch while she, despite madness, rampant misogyny and so forth, got all that done. What a loser I am, but mostly, oh, mostly, how sick I am of the sound of my head.

Because of course, all those clamoring voices are one voice, yours, a skein of sound that you have unraveled into multiplicity, tricked into ventriloquism, a chorus. And what they all want, it seems, is to be heard above the quiet but clear small voice of the self, the one who is tapping in the dark of the labyrinth of your own psyche, your walnut mind, trying to get to the truth. But that voice, the voice of your soul, the voice of the writer, is the one you want to hear, if only you could, if only you could get the rest of your voices to shut up. And since plugging your ears isn't going to do the trick, perhaps what's needed is to change the relationship to the voices.

With real ghosts in the house, the solution seems to be to live with them, accustom oneself to picking up the cans and putting the brooms back in the closet every now and then. With the ghosts in the head, it seems to be a trickier business; perhaps it's a matter of listening to them and trying to understand why you have let them in in the first place. Because, whether you want to hear it or not, the ghosts want to speak.

I wrote a play called *Tongue of a Bird* in which the main character, Maxine, is haunted by two ghosts. Maxine is a search and rescue pilot and one of the ghosts is of the girl she's trying to find—a teenager abducted by a man in a black pickup truck who drove her up into the Adirondack Mountains in the middle of winter. The other ghost is that of her mother, a woman who committed suicide when Maxine was very young. The girl, Charlotte, appears in surprising and troubling ways, banging on the cockpit window, suddenly next to her in the plane or just emerging from Maxine's bed when she's trying to get to sleep. Her mother always appears to her in the same way. She is standing in the air dressed in an old-fashioned flight suit, ala Amelia Earhart. Both Maxine and her mother are a bit embarrassed by this, how obvious the symbolism is, but Maxine is disturbed by it as well. They discuss who is responsible for the nature of this haunting, but the mother is elusive about it, basically saying, how should I know? What both ghosts end up saying is, "I'm all yours." The question with ghosts, I realized as I was writing the play, is not why they appear—they just do—but what they have to say. Because every ghost, from Hamlet's father on, has come to say something. Perhaps all they want us to do is actually listen. When Maxine finally stops questioning the existence of the ghosts or trying to figure out the logistics of how they operate, when she finally says, "All right, what have you come to tell me?" the play breaks into its revelations.

And then there are the monsters. They exist in us too—as I say, it's crowded in there—they are just harder to talk about, and few of us have ever looked them in the face. But we know, if we are honest, oh, we know they are there, the parts of ourselves we have walled up inside our personal labyrinths. We can hear them howling at night, or tapping on the wainscoting. They call to us, our monsters, and if we are to write the truth, it's just a matter of when and how we decide to find them, because we will have to find them. They have too much to tell us.

Rilke says that every monster is really just a part of us that needs to be embraced. He wrote, "Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love."

We are storytellers, so we know from monsters. There are several different kinds you run into in myth and, like any mythic hero, we have to encounter every one of them if we are to write our own stories. There are the guardians of every important threshold in myth, the monsters who make demands upon the traveler who seeks the transfiguration of real adventure. Trolls under bridges, three-headed dogs at the gates of the Underworld, dragons at the base of trees and so forth. These are the monsters who demand that we drop everything we thought made us who we are—our definitions of ourselves, strengths, weaknesses, charming little quirks—in order to proceed. They tell us that the only way to cross the threshold and make the passage toward enlightenment is to give up the sense of the self we thought was the self, the ego. We must lay down all our weapons and go forth alone and empty-handed into the darkness, armed only with an impetuous hunger for self-knowledge. And then, if we can do that, we might be able to encounter the most important monster, the monster I've heard keening on the dark nights of the soul when I have been alone with my truest self. I'm talking about the monster at the center of

my labyrinth. It's the shadow part of me I have relegated to darkness, an aspect of the self that needs to be understood rather than shut in the dark where its screaming can only be muffled but never silenced. The force in me that wants to chain and ignore that monster is always going to have to struggle against the part of me that is curious, that senses the suppression of the monster as a real loss to consciousness. The mythology is always about an adventurer going forth to kill a monster, but the truth of the matter is that the self wants to simply *meet* the monster, because the self knows on some level that it needs the monster, the self will never be whole without it. The monster knows something that must be brought out into the light of consciousness. But the adventure is daunting to consider; just about anything would be easier. Who wants to head into the darkness and encounter such a creature? How is it even done? Luckily, we have all of mythology, every story that has ever been told and every writer who has ever come before us, to show us the way. It's just a matter of getting the red thread of narrative firmly in hand.

I do think of it as a red thread, I don't know why. I don't think any myth mentions the color of the thread Ariadne gave to Theseus. Do you know the story? This is how I tell it. (One of the things I love about the Greeks is that there is no orthodoxy, no sacred text; the story is told according to the storyteller.) The civilization of Crete was ancient even to mythological characters—which is to say, beyond time—intimidatingly mysterious and sophisticated in ways that the mainlanders couldn't fathom—and yet it had at its center two great cruelties, two great shames. Pasiphae, the queen of the Minoans, fell in love with a bull. She became so infatuated with it that she asked the great inventor of the kingdom, Daedalus, to come up with some sort of mammoth sex toy, a construction that would allow her to mate with the bull. One imagines a sort of fake cow outfit made of wood in which she could lie in wait, panting with desire. (I do think the Greeks had a sense of humor; I mean really, how else can you see this image except as comic?) Sure enough, she got her wish and was indeed impregnated by the bull, which led to an awkward situation with the king, Minos, who was not amused and who banished the Minotaur, the son born of the union, a hybrid who had a bull's head and tail but a man's body, to a labyrinth he had the ever-resourceful Daedalus construct, a maze at the center of which the dreadful child lived in solitude, howling with loneliness and hunger. And in that hunger lay the other cruelty, the other shame, which was that the Minotaur could feed on nothing but the bodies of virgin men and women. So every year, or, depending on who you talk to, every seven years, such victims needed to be rounded up to be systematically sacrificed to him. But the Minoan civilization being as powerful as it was, with many colonies on the mainland and on islands all across the known world, the victims could always be supplied in the form of yearly tributes, young men and women sent by subjugated states all across the far-flung empire, particularly Athens. These sacrifices would then be fed into the labyrinth where they would be eaten one by one over the course of the year until the next boatful of victims arrived at the dock with the annual high tide.

I have to admit here that what I particularly love about this whole scenario is what inspired it, which is the actual Minoan civilization, a seafaring empire based in the spectacular city of Knossos, which was indeed immensely powerful, and the most highly developed culture in the ancient world, producing wonderfully lively and graceful pottery, murals, and astonishingly complex, clean cities with running water and peaceable ways. There are no defensive battlements, no signs of brutality, oppression, or violence at all. The ruins of the civilization give off what can only be called a kind of joy. The authority was matriarchal, priestesses seemed to run the whole show, and their male consorts apparently dressed in bull's heads. The sex, judging by the direct gazes of the bare-breasted, snake bedecked priestesses in the murals and sculpture, seems to have been just dandy. No need to construct a fake wooden

cow if your partner is just a man wearing a detachable bull's head. (I always think of that song, "You Can Leave Your Hat On.") Which brings one to the bull dances, which seemed to take place not in a labyrinth but in the open air and were attended by everyone. Indeed the dancers are young people, you'd have to be, but unlike the Spanish bullfighters, who torture and then kill a bull which is the sacrifice, the Minoan murals show young people *dancing* with the bull, leaping over his back in spectacular acrobatics, vaulting by means of his horns and being tossed high in the air. There is no image of the bull being killed, or even harmed. This seems to be a kind of exuberant worship, dangerous, to be sure, but intended as a ritual of celebration. As for the labyrinth, there are theories that that was a mythological response to a kind of weaving solo dance each dancer had to learn, a mesmerizing series of steps that, just like Arthur Murray's, was mapped out on the floor and that would work, if done properly, to hypnotize the bull at the beginning of the dance in order to make him easier to work with.

Anyway, back to the story. One year, Theseus, a young hero at the beginning of his epic adventures, steps off the boat with all the other tremulous lads and lasses, but he is already different: he is a prince, the son of Aegeus, the King of Athens. Theseus has decided to sacrifice himself if need be so as to end the wretched system whereby so many of the younger generation from all of Greece are being killed every year. So, with great chutzpah he volunteers—much against his father's wishes—and climbs on board with all the others to sail what they think is their last voyage across the Mediterranean to Crete, there to die. What happens is that Ariadne, the legitimate princess of Minos, sees him and immediately falls in love, as he does with her, and in one of their secret meetings she offers to free him, let him escape alone, but he refuses, confessing that he has a larger project in mind; that in truth he has come to topple her civilization by killing her half-brother, the Minotaur, then destroying her palace and her city, so that no more tributes would ever need be made. And here is where every story is different: the moment of decision for Ariadne. It's an ethical decision, whether to honor the brutal system of her native country, her mother and father and everyone she's ever known, or turn her back on all that, let that extraordinary civilization be destroyed in the name of justice, in the name of love. She decides to help Theseus navigate the labyrinth by giving him a magic ball of thread. He will use it to track his entrance into the maze and to make his exit when the time comes. Sometimes it is actually rolling before him, showing him the way, sometimes it is just his means of getting out once he has to make his escape, but it is always the key to his success, the thread I picture as being red that he can tug on in his blindness as he makes his passage through the darkness to where the terrifying monster sleeps. It isn't only Ariadne who is the traitor here, it is also the inventor Daedalus, who has the idea of the thread as an aid to navigation. But it is she who gives it to Theseus and who stands by at the entrance to the labyrinth keeping watch and awaiting his return. It is also she who helps him release his comrade captives and escapes on the boat with them, watching her city burning behind them, growing smaller as they sail away.

As so often happens, the traitor is in turn betrayed. It happens to Medea, it happens to Hippolyta. These women sacrifice their family and country, breaking every code of honor, putting themselves into perpetual exile and dependence for the sake of a man who then betrays them, abandons them for other women or just for the next big adventure. And in each case, the traitor who is in turn betrayed is not just the usual interchangeable woman, some blonde in a chiton, the mythological equivalent of a trophy to be traded. These are clever women, women of particular talents specifically necessary to the men who then abandon them. Medea is a sorceress who provides crucial help to Jason when he steals the fleece from her father. Hippolyta, the greatest of the female warriors, the queen of the Amazons, betrays her tribe by going soft over

the same man Ariadne betrays her people for, the fast-moving and feckless Theseus. Such women, it seems, must be cut out of the greater narrative, silenced and abandoned. Cassandra is another exceptional woman whom the chugging engine of the heroic narrative shoves to the sidelines. She is gifted with the ability to see the truth and the desire to warn her people of it, but cursed by Apollo, whose advances she had the temerity to reject, never to be believed. She can scream her woefully accurate prophecies but no one, no one at all, will ever hear her. We pity her feelingly because we know such women, some of us have *been* such women, speaking what they know is the truth, always to be ignored or simply misunderstood. They are always excised from the public record, now no less frequently than they were back in mythology. It's not surprising. They draw too much attention to themselves, keep bending the light toward themselves and away from the heroes. They are too much for these narratives to handle, so they are thrown overboard at the earliest opportunity. The heroes of Greek mythology leave a host of such women in their wake.

Ariadne, for instance, is left at the first rest stop along the route away, the island of Naxos, where she is pitied by Dionysus, who dries her tears and makes her his mortal queen. We might be able to see her diadem tonight in the night sky, where he had to put her after she died her human death because he missed her so much.

But about that red thread, the gift of the clever woman who risks everything for love of the hero who needs it.

I think that's our way out of the labyrinth of our doubt, confusion and the dinning of self-consciousness and fear. We have to grab the thread of story and let it lead us out to the self who is waiting in the light and the end of the adventure of the soul's revelation. That thread is story and it is our only salvation. And story, I have to say, is female. We have always been the storytellers, we are the mothers after all, the ones who speak the cultural narrative and teach it through...well, old *wives'* tales, which is to say, the ancient, subversive and immediate mother tongue, the language of metaphor and myth. The mother tongue is our first tongue and we've all shared it, men and women, in the first meaning that was ever communicated to us in language. Who told any of us our first story? Our mothers did—even if it was only the story of where we came from, which we knew—because we remember it without remembering it—was from *them*.

I was very lucky. My mother was not only a gifted storyteller—she is a novelist in her own right—but a mother who taught my brother and me to weave our own stories from a very early age. When we were stuck somewhere, in line for a ferry, in a doctor's office, sitting at a table in a diner, waiting for a meal to arrive, she would point to someone and quietly say, "Tell me her story." And then we'd be off, spinning a tapestry, rich and complex and increasingly real as we put in the time, godlike in our ability to endow reward, punishment, and tragedy at our childish will. These are characters my brother and I still think about, the length of our lives away from them, the people we constructed from, for instance, the lost look of a lady in a blue coat with frayed cuffs sitting across from us in a coffee shop in Natick, MA, in 1969. Why we were there in Natick, what we were waiting for, where we were on our way to, what we were doing—all that is lost, but not that woman—no, that woman I will know until I die because I made her. Her name was Connie St. Vincent and she kept goats in the back yard and she missed her husband, who was a sailor and had been lost at sea... If my mother had never given me anything else I would always be grateful to her for giving me that woman.

The image of the storyteller as a spinner of a tale, or yarn, and as a weaver of a tapestry, becomes literal in some mythology and is generally associated with the female. This was

certainly true in classical Greece, where a woman's primary occupations outside child-rearing were spinning and weaving. The loom and the spindle were tokens of the sphere where she held complete authority.

The association of a thread to a life story is perhaps inevitable, which gives the act of creation to the female, but also hands her the shears. The notion of a life as a thread to be spun, measured, and cut by the Three Fates originates in Greece, but then crops up all over the Western world. Oldest of the deities, they are also the most feared. They are mysterious, implacable, and indifferent to negotiation; they hold the scissors for all of us, even the other gods. But then female divinity is often as bound up with death as it is with birth because it is always bound up with story. We all begin our stories by exiting our mothers at the length of an umbilical cord and still feel that pull, the sense of our life story as a linear, fragile link to our past, which is the female. And since the earth is generally perceived as female, we sense that we will at some point in our lives turn to make the journey back to the mother, the earth, which will receive us in death. But we are suspicious of stories, even those of us who spin them. Spiders are nature's weavers and are associated with the female, and our feelings about spiders are complex, despite our wonder at their artistry.

One sees that ambivalence always in Woolf, for instance. Female figures like Betty Flanders, who is seen several times trying to write letters, always to men, in *Jacob's Room*, or women who paint, like Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, are awash in self-doubt and clumsiness. These women know that whatever they manage to do will be belittled, ignored, or misunderstood. In *Jacob's Room*, Woolf refers to "the unpublished works of women, written by the fireside in pale profusion, dried by the flame, for the blotting paper's worn to holes and the nib cleft and clotted." These women haven't had the kinds of education their brothers and their fathers had; they have no pretensions and no resources. The materials are always so shabby and the efforts, by their own standards, so often ludicrous. That Woolf clearly likes these women because she knows the source of their self-contempt does not make them any the less vexed as portraits of creative women. She knows what they are, their petty envy, their self-mockery and occasional hectic grace, because she knows what they are up against—the roaring machine of the masculine world, with its institutions, prejudices, and ingrained exclusivity, the oppressive power of the father tongue. What Woolf herself struggled all her life against is rehearsed constantly in her work. Her artists, high and low, are desperately overmatched, pushed to the sidelines, denigrated, and condescended to. They are as pathetic as they are occasionally striking and well nigh heroic, as Lily is at the end of the novel.

Alone on the last morning of the novel, she sets up her easel, determined to capture something, the essence of the family summer house, which is to say, the dead woman, Mrs. Ramsay, who once animated it and without whom the soul is gone from the place. Lily is returning to a canvas she began years ago when Mrs. Ramsay was alive, back in the first chapter of the book. She left it unfinished then after struggling with it. I remembered that there was a passage in that chapter about her difficulty and was heartened to see it a few days ago as I was finishing this speech, as if to hear Woolf echoing, in her inimitable way, everything I'm trying to get at. We are in Lily's head here:

"She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark

passage for a child. Such she often felt herself—struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: “But this is what I see; this is what I see.”

But she loses her courage to those terrific odds, the “forces” as she puts it, “that do their best to pluck her vision from her,” reminding her of “her inadequacy, her insignificance” and she abandons the painting of the house in the beginning of the book. She only takes it up again, years later, at the end of the book, when so much has been lost and as she is visiting a house she senses she will never visit again and trying to see it for the last time. Once again, she has been frustrated by her work, alternating between self-doubting stabs at trying to capture something and giving her work up to muse on the recently dead Mrs. Ramsay, her mystery and her fascination. As the time passes, her thoughts wander and the scenery shifts:

“But the wind had freshened, and, as the sky changed slightly and the sea changed slightly and the boats altered their positions, the view, which a moment before had seemed miraculously fixed, was now unsatisfactory. The wind had blown the trail of smoke about; there was something displeasing about the placing of the ships.

“The disproportion there seemed to upset some harmony in her own mind. She felt an obscure distress. It was confirmed when she turned to her picture. She had been wasting her morning. . . . What was the problem then? She must try to get hold of something that evaded her. . . . Phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful pictures. Beautiful phrases. But what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything. . . . Let it come, she thought, if it will come. . . .”

But it evades her until the very end and then appears to her as if by accident, in a kind of vision.

“Mrs. Ramsay. . . sat there quite simply, in the chair, flicked her needles to and fro, knitted her reddish-brown stocking, cast her shadow on the step. There she sat.”

The ghost appears, in other words, and provides the missing shadow, a triangle of meaning at the center of the painting that makes all the difference. The ghost of the novel—who is the ghost of Woolf’s mother, a figure who unsettled and haunted Woolf all her life—bestows her benediction on the character most like Woolf herself, the marginalized and odd Lily, painter of paintings no one but she ever cares much about. No one except, of course, the author of the novel, who gives Lily the ultimate gift, the final paragraph of the book, which is this:

“Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did it matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.”

Which is to say, Woolf has had hers. But what matters most to me here is that in giving Lily the gift of that vision, Woolf gives it to us as well. And that act is a profound gesture of generosity. We are one with the act of creation. And now, with your help, having seen that moment in the novel for what it is, I can never turn Woolf into an instrument of self-torture again; she can only rightly live inside me as one who has bestowed grace upon me in the moment she found it in herself. Now when I encounter her ghost, I can just nod to her in kinship and gratitude as we pass in the corridors of my mind. I can claim her as my own creation at the same time that I acknowledge that my writing self is to some extent *her* creation. All those ghosts, all those voices, I see them as moths, battering the candle of my spirit, circling the flame of that part of me that is always waiting patiently for me to come back to the desk and work. They teem in me, those ghosts, I feel the press of their wings fluttering inside my chest when the writing takes hold at last, hear the almost inaudible murmur of their thought as the wave of creative life surges and I begin to ride the long crest of it to a shore I have never visited.

And in writing this, what I have realized is that my plays are so often about the attempt to have a vision, tell a story, despite self-repression, despite the distrust of the very act of storytelling. My plays often reach their climax at the moment that the story is finally told; the truth comes out, the repressed returns. They happen, much as my plays happen to me, when I stop running from the voices, the ghosts, the monsters, and simply turn to them and let them speak to me, in me and from me. The point, I suppose, is to know your ghosts, your monsters and your demons, yes, face them and hear them out, but then to grasp that fragile yet mighty red thread and head for the light, towards the self that stands waiting in the warmth of day for news of your adventures.

Meet the ghosts, listen to them, and tell the story anyway.

Quotations [and Responses]

By Sandy Gillespie

Helene Cixous [and me] May 11, 1988, Irvine, California

I only know what my direct experience
 [strong current of her voice]
my life
 [rushes into me]
my body has told me
 [carries me]
and it's open to question.
I am going to take only one way
 [the skin at her right elbow wrinkles into circles]
my way
 [patterns of her fifty-one years]
I consider it only an example.

Intertextuality is the basis of every text I write
 [*Oran* across the chalkboard]
not a theory, just a need
 [*Oran je* add self, get fruit]
For me, all texts are composed and grow out of intertextuality
 [born from the city that is a fruit that is a word]
We are composed beings exactly like a text
 [her hair is semi-sweet, the rich dark of my mother's long ago]
composed of many people
 [tight-coiled, close]
Who we are depends on who composes us
 [my breath in sync with hers]
I'm mostly peopled with women
 [MarieFranPollyKimMichelleJen]
I might have been composed of men
 [my father had no interest, my brother eight years older]
and I would write differently
 [I would not write]
I want to write at the very edge of the abyss
 [leaping into chaos]
stories that tell secrets of life and death, almost imperceptible
 [the sleepwalkers are coming awake]
Writing must out write itself
 [write out itself]
go as far as possible from our limits and the limits of writing
 [the book has somehow to be adapted to the body]
and yet it is just words.

The voice is the essence of the body

[body the essence of voice]

The first person always comes back

[nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen]

It is necessary

[her voice and mine and ours]

It is possible

[it is coming, it is gathering, it is about to burst our heads]

Hymnal

By Linda Ravenswood

And there she was —
on Broadway
between 49th
and 50th —
and you know
what that means,
even if you don't
know the city
you can still feel it —
because New York
is everything.

And
I hailed —
Toni Morrison !

And she said —
You know
I am !

And I said —
Tell me
you didn't
win the Nobel Prize
for those stories !
And
she threw
her head
all around
and said

Girl,
You know I did !

And we laughed
and crossed each other
on the sidewalk.

And
smiling
I kept
looking
back of me

at how
 she was
going along
 like you do —
 but then —
I just kept
walking

til
I heard
 quick steps
 behind me
and
I turned around —
 and her face
 was in my face
and she stopped
a second
to catch
her breath
and
 she told me
 something
I'll never forget.

Anna's Hut at Komarovo

By Trina Gaynon

Snow melting on the roof and damp from Pike Lake
bring chunks of plaster down on our heads,
a small matter with Vivaldi on the phonograph
and the room filled with cigarette smoke and poets
who drop their new work on the table before me.
Memorization no longer necessary, reciting is out of style.

When I'm alone, pine trees drift into the room,
driven by winds of the past and the future.
They shadow work on the poem that rises and falls
in me, as a glacial lake laps at its beaches.
Look for the candles that sputter in my window.
I welcome those who venture back across the Lethe.

Celebrate for Anais Nin

By Nancy Shiffrin

in the hills I learn the design
the lizard outside my door
has different markings each year the same tissue
flame terrorizes brush strips ravines
cleanses the small animal population
I mourn quail and rabbits I've fed
fire part of the plan

the wild cells baffling your armor
aspects of the scheme
stain them adjust the lens
see how they multiply
jewels blossoming in your marrow
these homely parasites will devour your high cheek
your graceful step child-woman air will disappear
I weep do not despair
we are one cell -- you I lizard rabbit quail

bequeath me your wigs
orange and yellow bobbed and fringed
I will comfort your falling hair

in *The Vast Unknowing*, Infinity Publishing
first published in a slightly different form in
the *Los Angeles Times*, 1981

What Woolf Dares Us to Write

By Lauren Rusk

The Inspiration of *Orlando*⁽¹⁾

When in her diary Virginia Woolf describes herself as “writing against the current,”⁽²⁾ she refers to the force of expectations, those of writers and critics—many of them her friends—who belong to the masculine literary establishment. Woolf braved this current because she wanted her work to be valued and widely read. But then if so, why did she set her course *against it*?

I think Woolf opposed expectation because she couldn't do otherwise. Temperamentally she was driven by two intertwined goals. First, to enact her sense of what life is in essence, the flow of consciousness itself. And second, to make each book a fresh experiment.

Orlando was a particularly daring one. It violated the conventional understandings of gender and sexuality, of genre and narrative, and even of time. In this fantasy (which Woolf mischievously subtitled *A Biography*) the main character moves through the Renaissance of Queen Elizabeth all the way to the early twentieth century, growing from age 16 to 36 in the course of 340 years. The only explanation the narrator gives is that “some [people] we know to be dead, though they walk among us; some are not yet born, though they go through the forms of life; others are hundreds of years old though they call themselves thirty-six. . . . it is a difficult business—this time-keeping; nothing more quickly disorders it than contact with any of the arts” (223-24).⁽³⁾

Even more startling is the fact that Orlando changes sex partway through the book. As the ambassador to Turkey who's just been made a duke, Orlando falls asleep for a week and then awakens to find himself: herself. Transformed. Again explanations are brushed aside. “It is enough,” the narrator says, “to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since” (103).

As for sexuality, the male Orlando becomes enamored of someone skating on the frozen Thames even before he knows the person's sex. Later the female Orlando cross-dresses from time to time, befriends women of the night, and “enjoy[s] the love of both sexes equally” (161). Finally, when at last Orlando finds her soulmate—one Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire—gender cannot contain either of them. “‘Are you positive you aren't a man?’ he would ask anxiously, and she would echo, ‘Can it be possible you're not a woman?’ . . . For each was so surprised at the quickness of the other's sympathy, and it was to each such a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman, that they had to put the matter to the proof at once” (189).

Each of her experimental novels, especially one as radical as *Orlando*, was risky for the ambitious, anxious, and exacting Woolf. She feared that each book would fall short of what she envisioned, dreaded dismissive reviews, and craved confirmation from writers she admired. Nonetheless, never mind the odds against women, Woolf went ahead and wrote exactly what she felt like writing.

In the case of *Orlando*, she felt like dashing off a fantasy “at the top of my speed”⁽⁴⁾ for a “holiday”⁽⁵⁾ between *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. She pictured the “escapade” that became *Orlando* as “half laughing, half serious: with great splashes of exaggeration”; “the spirit to be satiric, the structure wild”;⁽⁶⁾ “Everything . . . tumbled in pall mall.”⁽⁷⁾ And “Sapphism,” she said, “is to be suggested.”⁽⁸⁾ (In fact, Woolf first imagined two women as the main characters.)⁽⁹⁾

A couple of years earlier, after *Mrs Dalloway* had come out, Woolf's friend Lytton Strachey suggested that she try "something wilder & more fantastic, a frame work that admits of anything, like *Tristram Shandy*," Laurence Sterne's digressively satiric eighteenth-century novel. When Virginia objected, "But then I should lose touch with emotions," Lytton said, "Yes . . . there must be reality for you to start from. Heaven knows how you're to do it."⁽¹⁰⁾

Six months later the emotional reality arose: Virginia and the author Vita Sackville-West became lovers. And after two more years, when Vita had moved on erotically, that reality had become complex enough for Woolf to conceive Orlando as "Vita; only with a change about from one sex to another."⁽¹¹⁾ Thus she reframed their relationship by making Sackville-West into a character she could both dwell on adoringly and step back from critically.

Within the flexible confines of this wildly structured fantasy, Woolf could also explore, and did, any subject that came to mind—history, society, the aims of writers, and the mysteries and multiplicities of selfhood, consciousness, and time.

It is important for us as writers that Woolf's originality didn't arise from thin air; it was nourished by voluminous reading. The liberties she took with structure and genre in *Orlando* had precedents—in Sterne's "shaggy-dog story"⁽¹²⁾ of a novel and also in *Some People* by Vita's husband, Harold Nicolson, a book that intermingles biography and fiction. The process of writing essays praising both these authors must have strengthened Woolf's resolve to experiment with genre and narration.

Encouraged by Sterne's example, Woolf galloped, sauntered, and digressed her way through *Orlando*. Toward the end, the narrator, at first a parody of conventional biographers, begins to sound more and more like Woolf herself.

Among all the anomalies, though, what I find most striking and disconcerting is the way the narrative keeps pulling the rug out from under me, confounding whatever it has just led me to expect. Orlando's attitudes, the narrator's opinions, and even the plot continually reverse themselves.

For one thing, there's the matter of Orlando's feelings about people on the fringes of society. In Turkey he feels a kinship with those who pass beneath his balcony, "fanc[ying] a certain darkness in his [own] complexion" (89-90). A cleaner sees him drawing a peasant woman up to his bedchamber by a rope. He embraces her. Then during his trance, "a deed of marriage" is discovered between Orlando and "Rosina Pepita, a dancer, father unknown, but reputed a gipsy, mother also unknown but reputed a seller of old iron in the marketplace" (98). However, when Orlando wakes as a woman and then runs away with the gipsies for a simpler life, Pepita disappears from the story. And soon thereafter Orlando finds the nomads a bit too down to earth: "'Four hundred and seventy-six bedrooms mean nothing to them,' sighed Orlando. 'She prefers a sunset to a flock of goats,' said the Gipsies" (110). Hence, our lady sails back to England. Not until centuries later, when Orlando's legal status has been settled, does the missing wife come up again, and then only in parentheses. "Turkish marriage annulled," Orlando announces to her lover, Shel. "Children pronounced illegitimate (they said I had three sons by Pepita, a Spanish dancer). So they don't inherit, which is all to the good. . . ." The passage hurries on: Orlando is declared legally female; she can marry and have heirs, and plans to; the city celebrates; "Hospitals [are] founded"; and "Turkish women by the dozen [are] burnt in effigy in the marketplace, together with scores of peasant boys with the label 'I am a base Pretender,' lolling from their mouths" (186-87). As the love story surges to the end of the chapter, I wonder whose cavalier treatment of the underclass this is. Orlando's? Vita's? The novelist's?

And then there's the question of gender. The book begins, "He—for there could be no doubt of his sex" (11). Woolf's opening recalls the first words of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*: "Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that"¹³; each passage raises a red flag. After Orlando wakes from the seven-day sleep, we are told, again categorically, that "Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it." "But" (and here the claim begins to sound more like a puzzle) "in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been." Striving to be exact, the speaker navigates slippery ground (momentarily gaining a foothold in our time): "The change of sex, though it altered *their* future, did nothing whatever to alter *their* identity" (102, italics added). Further on, though, musing over Orlando's cross-dressing and shape-shifting, the narrator reverses course: "The difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity." And then demurs, "For here again, we come to a dilemma. Different though the sexes are, they intermix" (139), the provisional conclusion of one who claims "the immunity of all biographers and historians from any sex whatever" (161).

At some point, the reader may feel moved to cry, "Enough of this rug-pulling!" Where does the book *come down*, regarding gender, or class, or sexuality, or Vita, its biographical shadow-subject? It doesn't.

As various critics have pointed out, Woolf's lightning reversals and changes of subject were self-protective. Cloaked in bravado, camouflaged with an abundance of froth, *Orlando* dances back and forth like a fencer avoiding a hit. Thus Woolf maximized its reach as well as shielded its reputation, and Vita's, in a period when Radclyffe Hall's lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* was ruled obscene and ordered to be destroyed. "[T]he balance between truth & fantasy," Woolf warns herself in her diary, "must be careful."¹⁴ Similarly, the female Orlando, also in the early nineteen-hundreds, wonders whether "the spirit of the age" will allow her to be a writer. Like Woolf and Sackville-West, "She was married," that was in her favor; "but if one's husband was always sailing round Cape Horn, was it marriage? If one liked him, was it marriage? If one liked other people, was it marriage? And finally, if one still wished, more than anything . . . to write poetry, was it marriage? She had her doubts." Although she manages to write a quatrain without the pen exploding, Orlando wonders whether, "if the spirit"—like some customs officer—"had examined the contents of her mind carefully, it would not have found something highly contraband for which she would have had to pay the full fine." Because, as the narrator observes, "the transaction between a writer and the spirit of the age is one of infinite delicacy, and upon a nice arrangement between the two the whole fortune of [one's] works depend [*sic*]" (194-96).

This passage, of course, flirts with the very dangers it refers to, and caricatures them. To me, *Orlando* doesn't feel like a cautious book, but rather an overridingly playful one. It seems to echo Walt Whitman as he writes, "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then . . . I contradict myself; [. . .]"¹⁵ But why does Woolf keep reversing herself, and our expectations, until I at least give up expecting altogether?

Her contradictions arise, I believe, from the greatest urgency. Woolf needed to reflect her experience of conscious being in all its flickering changefulness. "I am growing up," Orlando muses, taking her candle. "'I am losing my illusions, perhaps to acquire new ones,' . . . Change was incessant, and change perhaps would never cease" (129-30).

In the adventure of writing *Orlando*, Woolf jettisoned consistency in favor of authenticity. She let her contradictory impressions and attitudes show. Repeatedly the text delights in fairy-tale aristocratic luxuries, then briefly parodies and deconstructs them, then turns to revel in furs and skates and carriages once more. It reveals not only Orlando's, Vita's, and the

narrator's choices of what to dwell upon, but also the author's. I find this troubling. And yet, isn't it good that I'm troubled? I am disturbed, in part, by recalling my own self-indulgence and callousness. In various pieces of writing, Woolf lets snobbishness and egalitarianism sit uneasily next to one another. Is this a flaw? The fact that Woolf reveals herself to be imperfect and unresolved leaves her open to critique. But that openness also invites us in, to take up the questions she provokes and examine ourselves as we read.

The last twenty-five pages of the novel are one great gesture of opening out. All in a day, Orlando ruffles back and forth through the centuries, her many selves merging and colliding in the present. The essence of life, love, and poetry that she has always sought approaches. Woolf depicts it as a wild goose, and sometimes an elusive fish. "Haunted!" Orlando cries, "ever since I was a child. There flies the wild goose. . . . past the window out to sea. . . . I've seen it, here—there—there—England, Persia, Italy. . . . and always I fling after it words like nets . . . which shrivel as I've seen nets shrivel drawn on deck with only sea-weed in them. And sometimes there's an inch of silver—six words—in the bottom of the net. But never the great fish who lives in the coral groves" (229). On the very last page, the wild goose reappears when Shel returns from Cape Horn; then it flies up and vanishes again. This final vision is followed by an ellipsis, the three dots with which Woolf planned to end, even before she conceived the plot.⁽¹⁶⁾ Planning not to conclude, she wrote an open-ended story, leaving gender, genre, honor, time, and self, ungraspable as water.

Beyond the phrase "writing against the current," Woolf uses fluidity as a metaphor so often that water seems almost to be the medium she lives in. Her first memory, recounted in the essay "Sketch of the Past," is of listening in bed to waves breaking on the beach at St. Ives, of "hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive."⁽¹⁷⁾ In her diaries, Woolf wants to "get into my current of thought"⁽¹⁸⁾ and "swim about in the dark green depths."⁽¹⁹⁾ For material, she "go[es] adventuring on the streams of other peoples [*sic*] lives—speculating, adrift[.]"⁽²⁰⁾ At other times she "toss[es] up & down on . . . awful waves" of "black despair. . . ."⁽²¹⁾ Clearly the currents are inner as well as outer. But without such fluid indeterminacy, how could she arrive at moments of inspiration like this one, in *A Room of One's Own*? "Thought . . . had let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water lift it and sink it, until—you know the little tug—the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line: and then the cautious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out? . . . however small it was, . . . put back into the mind, it became at once very exciting, and important; and as it darted and sank, and flashed hither and thither, set up such a wash and tumult of ideas that it was impossible to sit still."⁽²²⁾

Looking ahead, Woolf aims "to saturate every atom."⁽²³⁾ *Orlando* is just one in a series of experiments that, like *The Waves*, she can't resist running right into. Thus, by example, Woolf dares us to follow our own deepest impulses, no matter how idiosyncratic they seem. Pursue them, she urges, as far as you possibly can.

What asks to be written? Is there a subject you've dismissed because it feels odd, or sensitive, too complicated? An image or a memory that keeps rising to the surface but seems risky for the page? Perhaps a new way of writing, one you haven't yet tried. Dive in, why not—a ten-minute plunge—and just see what springs through your improvising hands to mind.

Notes

- 1 Beyond Woolf's writings, the research of Hermione Lee, Pamela Caughie, Karen Kaivola, Nigel Nicolson, and Karyn Sproles has informed this essay.
- 2 Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 5, 22 Nov 1938, p. 189.
- 3 Woolf, *Orlando*, page numbers in the text.
- 4 Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 3 (D3), 14 Mar 1927, p. 131.
- 5 D3, 18 Mar 1928, p. 177.
- 6 D3, 20 Dec 1927, p. 168.
- 7 D3, 14 Mar 1927, p. 131.
- 8 D3, 14 Mar 1927, p. 131.
- 9 D3, 14 Mar 1927, p. 131.
- 10 D3, 18 Jun 1925, p. 32.
- 11 D3, 5 Oct 1927, p. 161.
- 12 Ricks, p. xi.
- 13 Dickens, p. 1.
- 14 D3, 22 Oct 1927, p. 162.
- 15 Whitman, p. 118.
- 16 D3, 14 Mar 1927, p. 131.
- 17 Woolf, *Moments of Being*, pp. 78-79.
- 18 D3, 16 Sept 1929, p. 253.
- 19 D3, 21 Sept 1929, p. 255.
- 20 D3, 20 June 1928, p. 187.
- 21 D3, 18 Dec 1928, p. 212.
- 22 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 5-6.
- 23 D3, 28 Nov 1928, p. 209.

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Her Poem, the Oak Tree

By Tammi Truax

I have carried this poem for centuries. In the end I shall bury it under an oak tree still in the prime of life, assuming life shall attend that symbolic celebration, and that I remember to bring a trowel.

Incarnation I

The many oak trees in my childhood yard were my playmates. I had no grandfathers, but those big daddies stood sentinel over me daily. I played in their shade, and played with their babies – the acorns that littered the lawn by the thousands. In the fall, after the most magical kaleidoscope of colors ever a child could ask for, I'd play in the dying leaves that littered the lawn by the millions. Twigs and sticks were toys too, or weapons, as needed. There was one tree that had been cut to a high slanted stump and I thought it my princess seat. Before my childhood was over a boy I loved would kiss me as I sat upon my throne. My attachment to the yard was greater than to the house upon it. I miss the land, and the oaks.

Incarnation II

I did not know how to choose a husband. Girls are not well schooled in this important skill. Many years after the fact I realized that I chose mine, though I'd seen his hard ways, because he seemed like a tall mighty oak nothing could ever bend or break. That was before I knew what cancer can do.

Incarnation III

For years I had a cross-temporal affair with another man. Like my husband, also dead, though famous. He was known as General George Washington. I'd learned a lot by then about how to see the real strengths and weaknesses of a man, much as I had better learned to see my own. Humans have so many more flaws than trees do. I went to George's home to gather what I needed, to write what I must write. I prayed over the unmarked graves of his slaves. I gathered acorns under his massive oaks and brought them home. I cherish them, though I could not bring myself to plant them.

Incarnation IV

It is the present. I've moved to a cottage in Maine. The babies are gone, my pockets nearly empty. I've no office anymore so must write in the kitchen. With the last of my money I splurged on a special table. One that would support and inspire me. Where I can sit quietly and see the trees outside. Where I can write what I must write. She is old and purposeful. She is scarred and beautiful. She is, I can see, full of stories, like me. She is solid oak.

Incarnation V

This is the future, so all is phantom. But I believe I will slam my fist upon the table, and cry "Ecstasy!" Then I will sail to a place where I'll see the waves rippling peacefully in the moonlight.

To the Lighthouse

By Kim Hamilton

I saw her lighthouse once,
off St. Ives' shore, a whitewash slip
to sunrays sideways glint, a dozen
canvases like sails raised on sand
Sunday painters working with the wind.
But we ate pilchers from a rolled back tin,
salty oils running through our hands
like the turn of light, the flash that never
will be caught, and never quite repeats.

Virginia Woolf's Hollyhocks

By Deborah Doolittle

Country born, they are still the village
gossips at the garden pump, watching
the neighbor's cat, the doorman's dog,
the grocer's delivery boy. Some say
there is always something new to look at.

It is a commonplace they cannot help
repeating: how the days come to them
in exaggerated quantity and the hours
slide past like slugs and snails. How they
don their Sunday bonnets most days

and yearn to become part of Mrs. Dalloway's
next dinner party, the center of her guests'
attention, leaning in the crystal bowl upon
the table. They'd bask in the conversation
swarming about them as thick as bees.

One needs only to keep one's head turned,
as heads are turned in Regent's Park
and Covent Garden, and nodding down
Flower Row. Pause, reflect, admire, retire,
take heed of their winsome ways, even when
terraced to the contours of London streets.

What Remains

By Maggie Stetler

— *Remembering Virginia Woolf*

I.

As a woman, I guarded
my body too, longed for a
mother, not a man, married
for love and art but not sex.
As a child in Pennsylvania,
I dodged imaginary Cold-War
bombs, pre-divorce barrages.
In London, yours, a real war.
No matter, wounds concur:
woman down. Still you met
head on: fiction, insanity, the
folding over of mind and world.

II.

You, buffeted, frail — your words
shot me out of orbit. A blast of
truth lodged in the central nerve.
A kaleidoscope of self
and others fused, refracted;
time and space collapsed,
colliding. I rode your waves,
voyaged out and back, safe
by your piercing light. For you,
repercussions: headaches,
despair, voices. You died
many times before you died.

III.

I stand in the 21st Century
on my river bank. Cast
a stone, wade out, tread
water, float. Easier than
your walk, still a distance.
Other side, sepia in morning
haze, you wave recognition.
In a second lasting 130 years,
your body bursts into flames.

What remains: a spinning thread
of connection — blood, veins,
hair, gut, gamete — all *pure gold*.

The Only Surviving Recording of Virginia Woolf's Voice

By Alison Townsend

I'm not expecting to hear her speak, stopped as I am at a red light in Stoughton, Wisconsin, on the daily, desperate dash home from work, my fractured spine throbbing as if it housed my heart not my nerves, this snippet on NPR as unexpected as recent November warm weather. But here she is, sounding husky and a bit tired, her plummy accent drawn out as she speaks about words, *English words...full of echoes and memories, associations* she does not name. It's still 1937 in her mouth and later I'll learn that she's not speaking informally at all, but reading – a talk called “Craftsmanship” on the BBC's program *Words Fail Me* – the script held up before her, like a tablet of light in her long, white hands. Or a window the sound of her voice opens in my head, her deliberate phrasing a kind of eulogy to words and the way *They've been out and about on people's lips, in houses, on the streets for so many centuries*, time passing in the hiss and skritch of the tape. As I imagine her in the studio, a bit tense perhaps, her hair in that dark knot, dressed up, though no one will see her, though years later her nephew will describe the recording as too fast, too flat, barely recognizable, her beautiful voice (though not so beautiful as Vanessa's, he'll add) deprived of all resonance and depth. But I don't know this as I listen, nothing to compare her to but the sound her words made in my American head, as I lay on my narrow dorm bed in my first November in college, underlining phrase after phrase from *To the Lighthouse* in turquoise or fuchsia ink, not because I understood what they meant but because they sounded beautiful aloud and my teacher had her photograph up in her office. After my mother died, the first thing I forgot was the sound of her voice, nothing to preserve it but a moment or two on tape where she speaks in the background, saying “Not now, not now,” as if no time would ever be right, even that scrap vanished somewhere in the past. Though I recall it as I listen to Virginia Woolf, her voice—which is nothing like my mother's, which my Woolf-scholar friend tells me she “needs some time to get used to”—drifting on for eight entire minutes, a kind of dream one could fall into, *as words stored with other meaning, other memories* spill like smoke from her throat and the light changes, and I drive on through the gathering darkness, thinking about voices and where they go when we die, how to describe pain

then leave it behind, her *lamp in the spine*
glowing, briefly lighting my way.

To Virginia

By George Ella Lyon

If you knew
I sat
at your feet

I think you do know

If you'd seen me
retrace your steps
Hyde Park Gate *where you were born*
Gordon Square *birthplace of Bloomsbury*
Asheham *now a cement works*
Monks House *last home*

perhaps you did see

If you'd watched
your words
light my darkness
like the Milky Way

If you'd felt me
pouring over
leaning into
your diary
and *To the Lighthouse*
and *Jacob's Room*

boarding an aeroplane
to cross the Atlantic
catching a train
from Paddington
to St Ives
to stay in the nursery
at Talland House
sacred site
of your childhood summers
before your mother's death
slammed that gate

If you'd heard me
reading aloud your words
in that room where you drew
your baby breaths
and blew bubbles of words,
where you were translated by time
into a fierce, dreamy, always
ink-stained girl

would you have said
do you say

Welcome, daughter?

The Poem

By Diane Furtney

“ . . . this loose, drifting material of life . . .
Some idea of a new form. Suppose one thing
should open out of another—as in an unwritten
novel”—Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*

It's instinctive, the lift at it,
the damp summer grassweed smell,
and you think small: gopher,
badger, fox; an over owl; between the weeds.
Then these shallow ditches, and the low
foliage recovering from shock,
scrambling off from our passing headlights.
And now crickets, deploying over a square
cornered exactly as a blanket,
chanting their formations uniformly
to the border. At just one spot,
on past the next field, it's
unaccountable: warm cinnamon.
And good, dulcet Bradley,
so unnerved all spring, really,
seems calm at the wheel now
for the first time in weeks. Continuously,
my threshed hair, blown at the window,
bothers my raised bent knee
and thigh; when my right hand dangles
off the fast steel ledge,
its fingers unconsciously canter the wind.

And I would agree, dear
aggravating V., there may be in these
enough of moment to sustain the novel—
whatever happens in the warm, wide wind—
though just barely,
I daresay, the poem.

Reading Virginia Woolf in the Nineties

By Kristie Letter

yes, Virginia

in irregular rhythm and (extra) articulation, who thought beyond plotting, to take on and through and know mermaids (singing) and sisters who never flower into bards, swimming in words, sapping down difficulty becoming, re-evaluating Madonnas, beyond teen spirits into Victorian charms, a nose for truth, for key moments, the heat of the sun, an embrace in it, the threat of bursting into here-now flames.

a thing there was

in thrift store dresses, embracing flash-smiles, Clarissa's moment with Sally, one breath treasured and polished, a nub of something between the tea, towards survival beyond sweet Septimus, weaving together his fragments of language, warping the past, wefting what's worn-torn and decorating hats, a recognition of money, Buy the flowers her self. Buy herself flowers. By herself, flowers.

for there she was

in waves, with smoke spirals spelling upwards, with waves of desire and desolation, smart girls don't have to sink to simper, but make up the world, each vision, each jaunty hat or chapter without end, without regular periods, without individual fear, with Virginias sallying forth, with Doc Maartens not quite crushed beneath car wheels, while dancing in flower, flinging hair unbound, an embrace.

The Power to Contemplate: An Artist Responds to Virginia Woolf

By Jennifer Carson

*Five hundred a year stands for the power to contemplate ...
a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself.*

Several years ago, when my partner agreed that I could live in his house without contributing to the mortgage, I thought I had landed the perfect life. He had granted me Woolf's five hundred a year. I could work part-time in academia and write the novel I had started in halting pieces.

The arrangement gave me serious material comfort. Together we had built a beautiful contemporary house: granite, bamboo and white oak under my feet and soaring ceilings above, warmly stained concrete walls and tiny skylights that evoked stars. We laid wool and silk rugs in every room and hung chandeliers. Twelve feet of glass doors framed the garden I tended almost daily. I smelled the ocean from my living room. I had my own "deep armchairs and pleasant carpets" and felt for myself "the urbanity, the geniality, the dignity which are the offsprings of luxury and privacy and space." I could focus on the only two things I was sure mattered: writing, which had become an acute creative need, and meditation, which I had practiced intensively for six years.

"The lamp in the spine does not light on beef and prunes," Woolf quipped, and indeed, mine lit more easily in such material security. I had grown up poor and lived on student's wages for most of the first fifteen years of adulthood, as I earned bachelor's and master's degrees in physics and a PhD in astrophysics. There were many days of beef and prunes. At the end of my second year out of school, I could no longer pretend interest in the work I was doing. I did not want the academic career in physics. My partner's offer made it possible to leave it without giving up financial wellbeing. In that luxurious, borrowed house, I finished a draft of my novel. I attended my first writers' workshop, joined three writing groups, and won a scholarship for a year of classes at a local university. These experiences changed me: they charged my work, deepened my commitment, honed my skills and exposed me to literature that challenged me by example.

Eventually, though, the cracks in the arrangement began to show. I cared that the lamp in my spine lit at the discretion and favor of another. Conscious of my dependence on my partner, I became increasingly concerned with gaining his approval. Although he never forbade my writing, he did not particularly approve of it either. He is an engineer, short on creative impulse and long on industry. I do think, in his quiet way, that he wanted me to succeed, but his ideas of what it meant to be productive ran counter to that desire. I felt, always, beholden to him — that I should make myself accountable, that I should waste no time. His thrift and practicality stood in contrast to my tendency "to dream over books and loiter in street corners and let the line of thought dip deep into the stream." I worried often about producing something that would register as legitimate in his eyes.

Intensifying our divide, my partner was never fond of my work. He likes comedy and politics, has no interest in poetry and little in fiction. In contrast, my writing is serious and dense, and I care deeply about language. We had little explicit communication about this growing rift, but his opinion of my work, and of creative pursuits generally, began to fill my pleasant material refuge with the fumes of dependence and self-doubt.

My subversion of my work was subtle. I still picked up the pen, but my thoughts were compromised by an effort to bury my worries, to ignore the residue left by my partner's lack of interest. The work leaned into a frantic and superficial cant, as I hurried for the tangible prize of publication and the legitimacy it would bring. Such a mode discourages exploration of language and form. It dulled my wilder instincts — the very instincts that set my work apart. My impulses toward risk and innovation became alloyed with fear and an undue emphasis on what was acceptable. I could be weird as long as I wasn't too weird.

The risks I refused to take in my relationship were reflected on the page. I laid the novel's foundation during my time with that partner, and there is certainly risk in those pages, but eventually I could not ignore the limits in the relationship — limits that existed even within the material advantage it seemed to give me. External changes were necessary before I, and the work, could grow. "Think only of the jump," Woolf implored Mary Carmichael, and I heard advice for myself. *Jump*.

And so I did.

My perfect life was missing the second half of Woolf's admonition: a lock on the door. The power to think for myself, which I was not going to find under the conditions of protection I had adopted. When I split up with him, my partner insisted I move out immediately, and so within a few days I gave up financial security, the comfortable home, the spacious schedule. But also these: the loneliness of our superficial conversations and the ever-present feeling that I had to account for my days. Jobless, I spent two months cobbling together house-sitting arrangements while laying a new foundation for myself. Eventually I secured two teaching jobs and freelance work. I rented a small but pretty apartment where I could no longer smell the ocean but could still walk there.



In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf writes of author Mary Carmichael, whose work she admired, "I am afraid, indeed, that she will be tempted to become, what I think is the less interesting branch of the species — the naturalist-novelist, and not the contemplative." Woolf argued for the necessity of contemplative writing. As Mary Gordon states succinctly in the book's forward, "It is to encourage writing of genius, to discourage flawed work, that Woolf is so insistent upon money and privacy for women." Woolf's contemplative is someone who aims for such unflawed writing.

I have seen the effect of a lack of privacy on my own creative process and have now been in my modest home, with its lock on the door, for over a year. There is much less time to write, but in the hours I do carve out, I loiter and dip. The space itself has begun to fill not only with my piles of books and notes, but with ideas and questions, poetry of my own generation. No one but me can cross their arms and judge my lack of industry.

How, then, to work toward that seemingly unattainable "writing of genius"? Gordon elaborates: "The important thing is that they express reality; they must express their own genius, not themselves. They must illuminate their own souls, but they must not allow the souls to get in the way of reality." But what does it mean to express reality?

"Many poets are not poets for the same reason that many religious men are not saints," Thomas Merton writes in *Seeds of Contemplation*. "They never succeed in being themselves." We start by illuminating our own souls. A true contemplative cannot saddle herself to ideas that are popular or sanctioned, cannot "waste years in vain efforts to be some other poet, some other saint." Paradoxically, this pursuit does not increase egotism, but humility, for "humility consists

in being precisely the person you actually are." Woolf seems to agree: "I find myself saying briefly and prosaically that it is much more important to be oneself than anything else."

But as Mary Gordon warns, to illuminate one's own soul is not enough. We must plumb deeper, to find and express the "reality" that is not obscured by our particular and limiting neuroses. Woolf described reality thus: "It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech.... [It is] what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge." This points us to a deeper experience of living, so that we may be truer to life in our writing.

The process of training the mind to get out of its own way in order to better discern reality seems to me a kind of purification, producing an unalloyed intelligence, the mind's deepest potential. This pure experience of the intellect is, I think, what the teacher and writer A.H. Almaas refers to when he describes "brilliance" or "essential intelligence": "brilliance" as a luminous quality of mind and "essential" because it is innate and fundamental, existing underneath the neuroses that obscure it. Our "soul" no longer gets in the way of reality. Woolf described this state of mind palpably, as "unity of mind," "resonant and porous, ... it transmits emotion without impediment, ... is naturally creative, incandescent, and undivided." This luminous mind seeks reality and finds truth. Annie Dillard insists on it when she instructs us to "Aim past the wood; aim through the wood. Aim for the chopping block."

What is at stake in our writing is no less than truth itself. Not the depiction of beauty as we usually conceive it, but the record of the real, of things as they are. This strikes me as the Buddhist quest: to see the world — and as a writer, to record what we see — without the obfuscation of opinion, interpretation, prejudice, or grievance. This is, perhaps, the deepest understanding of beauty, as Marilynne Robinson asserts: "For me, this is a core definition of beauty: ... that it somehow bears a deep relationship to truth."

To bring forth truth, to express such beauty, requires that we cast aside the pernicious "self", another task at the heart of the Buddha's teachings. I once heard a student ask Charles Johnson how his decades-long Buddhist practice and perspective affected his work. I immediately thought of the Buddhist themes and wisdom that saturate his novels, but Johnson gave a more process-oriented answer: he gets the self out of the way when he writes. After decades of meditation, he understands the ultimate fiction of self and can write from that place of understanding. What is left, he said, is just the world of the story. No 'Charles Johnson' to erect a barrier to the place where his characters live.

When our allegiance to self is strong, it bleeds out into our writing. Woolf notices it as "... a shadow [that] seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter 'I'." She disdains the "aridity, which, like the beech tree, it casts within its shade. Nothing will grow there." It is out in the sun, away from such withering shade, that true contemplation proceeds.

Woolf's call to women is to be that contemplative. Some of us must try to become capable of expressing our own "genius," of accessing that unalloyed intelligence that makes great work possible — writing without the taint of grudges or personal vendettas and undistracted by concern for what others think. Such purification is different for each woman. There is no generic enlightened mind. Like the purification of metals, each mind has its own properties and transforms according to its unique color, heat, malleability and luster. In bringing forth "genius," we do not lose our individuality, but become, as Merton points out, more ourselves.

Every time I write I try to remember this commitment to truth, to the paradoxical movement in which we loose the shackles of "I" in order to more fully manifest work that is unique and irreplaceable. I know for myself the necessity of the door and its lock, of the time alone, safe within walls I pay for, in rooms slowly imprinted with my creative will. But to maintain these rooms, I, like most women, must work for money. Teaching physics pulls me away from my deeper creative work — not because it is impossible to be a contemplative in physics (though it is as rare there as it is in literature), but simply because it is not my path. I commit to as little of it as possible. I live on a financial edge, tolerating the lack of security so I can keep writing. I eat more beef and prunes than I would like.

The cracks in this arrangement are obvious. I cannot continue to make so little indefinitely. I cannot write well living like Hemingway, skipping lunch and filling my short stories with food. Neither money without privacy nor intellectual independence without material security can support the works of genius Woolf charges women to produce. Five hundred pounds a year *and* a lock on the door are necessary — not for living, merely, but for the *more* that Woolf expects of writers: "to live in the presence of reality, an invigorating life." From across a century, I heed her call to that life.

Women, Windows

By Lauren Rusk

after Vermeer

Light on a wall,
a woman. Light—

the pour of milk, her round

forehead as she reads

where he arranged her—each
of those women—

near a window to catch the glow,
not look through.

But to the women that light means
opening out—

bellying clouds

painted on the virginals
she's poised to play,

a stretch of river blowing.

Lifting her pen, she pauses,

tuning a lute string

listens—does it
ring true?

The seeds prick and sparkle like water,
in her cracked wheat

rising on the sill.

People as Evidence

By Lauren Camp

for Alice Neel

Not so much the eyes
but the middle of the gesture—
early bloom, late wrinkle, the most multiple parts,

nipple and fat roll. Leg and tangle and temper.
It was that entrance
to the center that made it impossible

to look away. Saturation of bones,
the subjunctive. Next I saw black-on-blue
hair and the swirl of a shadow on a cheekbone;

saw where light was offered to forehead.
She drew the fleshbruise of each person,
then smoothed them to drifts and deeper

insinuations of breathing. Desperate mouth
invitations. Each painting told subject-
verb-curl-cleft in overindulged shades

of shoulders and hollows. She knew every
rule and broke them to piles
of mudcolored poses. Hair and knees,

the uncomfortable compassions. Arms in despair
and the opening of casual shapes. For her,
no delicate structure. Cleaving creases

and cheeks to sorrows and obsessions,
she mixed warm and cool, let her fingers conjure
scars, detail, possible selves. With her wrists

she closed off mistake. The painting not saying
but willing to gather
what otherwise sensibly hid.

Studio Visit: Later

By Susanna Lang

Alice Berry

What's left—bobbins, scraps
of fabric, reds and pumpkins
in one bin, blues in another.
A jacket, dark as its corner.

I remember tea in a fairy tale
harem splashed with glistening
silks that spilled from hangers
and shelves, from full-bodied

manikins. The light
now wintry, filtered through
high-set windows,
power switched off,

worktable bare. Ready.
For a year she did not enter
this studio, not sure what the room
was still good for. But out of a duffel

she pulls her new shawls, the fractured
lines like the quilts once sewn
by Dahomey women, whose squares
never lined up—they knew

that evil must walk a straight path,
can be foiled by angles and corners.

as published in Self-Portraits, one of three chapbooks included in Delphi Series Volume IX from Blue Lyra Press (October 2020)

Droom

By Margaret Chula

M.C. Escher wood engraving, 1935

The bishop reclines on tassled cushions
hands crossed at his waist
in sweet repose.

A praying mantis straddles his chest.
Legs, knobbed like rosary beads,
knead the red fabric of his robes.

Thorax and forelegs
cast a shadow over
the bishop's trusting heart.

In the great beyond,
arches of the coliseum
hold up the night sky.

Venus and Jupiter shine out
from their glass coffin—illuminate
the antennae of the mantis

as it prepares to bite off
the bishop's head,
just above his frilled collar.

This one-sided love—nothing
like bees and buttercups
or the honeyed wings of hummingbirds.

Prayer has turned into prey.
Mantis, Greek for *prophet*,
has become mandible.

Sharp teeth of the predator
sever cords, as chords of hymns
play in the young man's head.

Who will believe the bishop
when he awakens,
church bells pealing,

his hands stroking
the thin red line
stitched across his throat?

Pentimento

By Catherine Moore

She painted over his works because she felt he had spent too much time in his blue period. The disemboweled female forms were barely swathed in bolts of lapis atop ecru. Draped over in wide eyes afraid—primitive empties, effigies of sad spoils. The figures needed their horror broken. These moments buried. Their beauty enriched with sun washed colors. Her own brush was true, as the paintings sold well. It was money she rejoiced in spending. At art auctions, she examined the subterranean canvases for original strokes, while critics praised the rather childishness about his final paintings. How wonderfully derivative it all seemed.

Color Coded

By Lauren Camp

Since no one ever wanted to paint me,
I took a brush elsewhere in the city—
behind the white fence, into night.

To my husband I said *Find me there*
with the collapsible blue.
What? he asked. *Do I have to trail you*

through Dame's rocket and upended furniture?
I readied the skin and fat
of my small piece of purpose, so tired

of tallying a landscape to see it slung
on screws for a month on a wall. The distance
was visible either way. By the time I had an audience

and had tucked one drift
of my insistent color theory around them,
I understood multiplicity. Perhaps I was only

surrounded with the discarded: shape
to logic, the absence of faces.
But whatever I saw was the truth.

Among my many actions, I continued
to twist my wrist.
I fingered fat licks of oil,

my work always waiting for surrender.
Such mercy to need it. This was eight years ago.
He was happy, my husband,

that I put a red box in the left corner
when I was unsettled. He told me so
as I laid it beyond the limits of horizon.

Practice

By Alison Hicks

The small precision:
word matched to moment,
finger placed squarely on the string,
the pitch containing not only itself,
but itself halved, and that halved, and again.
Ratios that move the small bones of the ear
translate resonance to the brain.
Lives of sloppy shifts, wrong notes,
mistakes in tonality.

Late at night in the living room,
try to make up for this.
In your notebook, on the instrument, with a partner,
practice harmony, or necessary dissonance,
half-step leading tones.

Contact Dance in the Mission District

By Dawn Banghart

She is there, sitting on the dance studio lower bleachers
untying tennis shoe laces
socks off, toes touching the rough paint chipped floor
spandex tights snug at the knees, hugging her thick thighs
a loose silk shirt swirls as she walks
across the floor past us the small pod of early arrivals.
She opens the windows and breeze rolls across her hand.

We are on the second floor overlooking an intersection
three burrito shops, two bus stops, a BART station
and a woman with a microphone wielding Jesus like a club.

It's Alejandra, the dancer's turn to speak.
She challenges the wall of mirrors
becomes larger here
larger than the pigeon hunched pedestrians below.
This is the place she comes to bend back, stretch
one hand on her hip, one forearm a curtain across her face
fingers postured high past the crown of her head.
Then her chest lifts, an offering.
Now. She dips and around spins
tucking in and dropping low
stretching up, hands out, ribs high
all open, tilting over into a fall and roll
so forgotten, so blurred
she becomes her brother's flipping peso.

Her orange sun silk flutters, memory obscures
Alejandra becomes
a nun's open fan flitting on the Yucatan bus
wings flapping, a chicken held by the ankles
eddies of warm beer spilt into wet mouths
the aroma of tamales wrapped in napkins
the bus axle rumbling Mexico's hip bones
anybody's reason to go to the ruins
a dance on the infinite rise of stone stairs up going up
once more up.

Alejandra's feet are bleeding again.

Copper

By Caroline LeBlanc

A sculptor friend gave me his scraps of sheet copper although
I had no immediate use for it. Still it shines, reddish, in the
cellar after years of collecting cricket's
casings, after long summers of their rasping song.
Even time has
not dulled it, dry and wrapped tight in the dark, so no
free elements oxidized it green or blue. Words
can be like that, pristine as long as they are still
neatly packaged. Heat and hammer it
out though, and copper transmutes color and sounds.
Shape an "o" into deployment or alone, and it's like
cracking a bone, spilling red marrow and sorrow.

After Izumi Shikibu

Make a Body

By Nancy Meyer and Janet Trenchard

First chip away at a block of granite,
pour water over it, rub with oil.
In her hands, the heft of chisel, hammer, pitcher.
Dust whitens the floor, leavens her hair.
Studio walls close in, tools slip,
she wheezes with each breath.
Should she leave it out in a rain storm,
hope for lightening's magic crack?
Climb above tree line, spine against the boulders'
heat, fronds of Castilleja flame red at her feet.
Chip after chip she hews off
history, reveals the wild inside.
Legs roam like clouds, hands are roots around stone.
She makes a body that refuses plinth and price.

Audre Lorde's Unfinished Business: Working Through Religious Resistance to Cancer Treatment

By Pamela Yetunde

I, as a pastoral counselor and theologian, have had the privilege of reading through Black lesbian poet Audre Lorde's journals and diaries archived at Spelman College in Atlanta, GA. Many people are acquainted with Lorde (1934-1992) through some of her more famous rally cry-quotes like, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," or "We were never meant to survive." Here is just one quote of many I would like to offer, demonstrating Lorde as a lay psychologist:

In order to be whole, we must recognize the despair oppression plants within each of us – that thin persistent voice that says our efforts are useless, it will never change, so why bother, accept it. And we must fight at that inserted piece of self-destruction that lives and flourishes like a poison inside of us, unexamined until it makes us turn upon ourselves in each other... ("Learning from the 60s" in Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, p. 142.)

In addition to being a lay psychologist, Lorde was also a lay theologian. She grew up Catholic, deconstructed hope in Catholicism and the Catholic god of her youth through poetry, had positive encounters with *I Ching*, African spirituality, secularized Buddhism and Taoism, and integrated them all proclaiming that one should change their religion if it was not supporting their will to live. Ancient and unreformed religious traditions in contemporary contexts tend to harm women's self-actualization.

Lorde's unfinished business is bringing humanist-feminist-womanist psychology and theology, pastoral theology, together for the welfare of women whose religious orientation prohibits them from seeking cancer treatment. In order to continue Lorde's psycho-spiritual work for helping women work through intrapsychic religious resistance to cancer treatment, here are a few considerations:

Consideration #1

As a patient facing cancer, consider the historical context of your religious tradition and discern whether any of the contemporary sciences help you understand what your religion can and cannot provide. If your religious tradition is anti-science, consider whether your tradition really values truth-seeking.

Consideration #2

If a woman's religious heritage is male-dominated and male-centric, engage in a thorough critique of that tradition to determine if and how the tradition subjugates women. Externalize the critique through writing.

Consideration #3

For those of us attending to and caring for people with cancer, remember to ask them what is important to them before we place our cultural norms on them.

Consideration #4

When there is a gap in treatment for patients who want to live and are also objecting to treatment on religious grounds, they may lose their religious/spiritual leader as a resource. They cannot access the hospital chaplain if they are not hospitalized, and unless their medical doctor refers them to a pastoral counselor, they may not get their religious resistance worked through. Medical doctors should be willing to refer their religiously-resistant patient to a pastoral counselor for a collaborative treatment effort.

Deep compassion calls us to continue Lorde's unfinished pastoral theological business of helping women work through religious resistance to cancer treatment.

... and Stones

By Gillian Barlow

She bends over to pick up a pebble – no, not that one – her hand skips across the roundish brown pebble to the black oval one and then on beyond to where she sees below the surface, the very one she wants - the chosen one. She curls her fingers around it, lifts it from the river floor and turns it over, feels its smoothness, its coolness, its rounded edges, the way the colours move subtly from a brownish beige to yellow. Her hand closes around it, then opens. The final one. She peers at it, at its colours as they mingle, sometimes as a gradation, sometimes as an abrupt change. How do the colours do that? She rubs her finger over the change, closes her eyes to see if she can feel this, rubs her finger across it again and again to try to rub it out. Opening her eyes and looking more carefully, she notices a darkish line that separates the two colours. The last one. She plunges her hand into her pocket, holding the pebble tightly and then lets it go. A crashing of ages. The end of the line. She hears it clack there amongst the others. She feels each stone, caresses them, checks their weight.

She runs through what she has in her pockets, The pebbles and stones that will accompany her are:

Grey sharpish ones that cut and bruise the fingers and keep you on the path.
Safe, multi-coloured ones to remind you, life can, or was or might, be good sometimes.
Long, smooth, sexual ones to remind of a person's body.
Tiny fragments to remind you that this is not everything, not the whole of it.
A handful of small ones.
Five large ones.
Four like balls.
Eight with harsh stripes through them; the truth cut into their very depths.
One like a woman's leg.
One that is perfect for skimming across the water.
One shaped like a heart to remind you of your loves.
Three darkish, reddish, orangey coloured ones.
Two like blades – one side perfect for holding, the other for cutting.

Collecting stones as she had collected people. Casting them off if and when they are no longer useful. Overlooking so many. She reddens. So many. How many exactly? Her privilege blinding her to so, so many. She hesitates, panics some... Can she make up for it now by collecting stones and hence people she had by-passed earlier?

She tries to turn back but then places her hand once more into her pocket, feels the heart shaped stone on top, takes strength from it - so corny, hopes they will notice and recognize the sign. She feels the indentation in the top of the heart-shaped stone.

She walks into the current thoughtfully, feeling the stones, convincing herself she is doing it for her, for him, for the others, knowing it is for herself, knowing she can't go back now. She has ridden that wave one too many times.

She feels another wave arriving - waves made by fish beneath, by boats on top, by her walking, her stomach reacting to what she is doing. The waves' lapping is soothing. Reckless. Free-ing. The thick river water enticing her. She wades deeper. Her clothes beginning to clutch and catch around her legs, dragging in water and river mud. Water at her waist. Water at her neck. At her chin. Her mouth. Her nose. She closes her eyes. The water continues flowing around her.

She breathes out. One hand she keeps in her pocket feeling the stones, grounding her, earthing her in water. The other hand tries to brush the water aside, trying to make a path before her, blindly feeling her way.

Don't panic. Not now.

She needs to take a breath. There is no air - only water. Relax. She grabs again at the heart stone. Her cardigan's pockets sagging with the pebbles and water. Tipping. Relax. Sinking. Relax.

Remember this.

The current of life flowing. Her feet planting one in front of the other on the muddy floor of the river. Don't float off. Be firm. Be solid, stone-like. It is only water. It is only walking.

She moves in against the current.

Confessions of a Family Woman

By Chivas Sandage

“Five hundred a year stands for the power to contemplate...
a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself.”
Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

How strange it sounds: “family woman.”

But “family man” ranks as compliment or defense, connoting respect for “a responsible man of domestic habits.” Or a general term for a man, responsible or not, who has dependents. And the man who isn't a family man, as long as he's heterosexual, is still considered normal, manly, just a little too manly—it's in his nature, we say.

“Family woman” does not exist in the dictionary, revealing a curious, culturally ingrained assumption that no such term is needed—to be otherwise would go against feminine nature. This ancient notion, alive and well today, sustains an old, internalized taboo: women are less likely to express ambivalence for their roles as wives and mothers, except, of course, within the context of humor. It's one thing to complain about the behavior of your partner and/or kids, or even admit that you're fed up and feel you can't hack it on a particular day, but women rarely question *choosing* the roles. At least publicly.

In talking to my women friends, especially other mothers, I have reinforced this taboo. Regardless of how deeply I love and adore and cherish my child or how incompetent or successful I feel in my parental role from one day to the next—I have rarely admitted to the deeper ways I struggle, nor publicly questioned my own ability to be both a good mother and a good writer. I am a warm, caring, consistent mom. I am also passionate about my work. But unlike my friends who are dads, I always feel the tension between the two.

Which leads me to confess: as the mother of a tween daughter, I sometimes look forward to aging and fantasize being an old woman who spends her days in the library. There it is! Or perhaps I just long for endless afternoons, alone, in a quiet room. Yet, I love the library for its occasional clearing of a throat, lone question, or the soft thud of books set down. These are sounds more comforting than silence: air rushing through vents, a computer's tiny chirp, small voices of children that do not call me. I long for one full day of sounds that do not depend on me—lives being lived that do not need me, that meet with mine only by chance.

These are the fantasies of a mother, writer, partner, and teacher with only a few hours to spare, sitting at a table for one in a small town library, in a corner where there is little chance of crowds: poetry. Even if a soul or two ventures into this ghost town-like part of the library, they're unlikely to stop, probably lost. In this way, I hide.

Yes, I confess to lust for the greatest of luxuries: time and space to explore my own mind. A room of my own, a lock on the door, a mind that's free to think without worrying about rent. Virginia Woolf's words have haunted me since I first read *A Room of One's Own*. And when I fear that I'll never achieve my goals against all the odds, I remember the book's end: “...to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while.” And so I do. I return to my notebook, suspending disbelief in favor of passion—to read and write for ten more minutes.

In that sacred realm of the library, if I whisper aloud while putting each line down, no one will hear—I only have to share my table with a computer that's out of order. I know to avoid sitting upstairs, even in a solitary corner, where my words flowed freely until a gentleman, hacking and steeped with smoke, took it upon himself to keep me company. Though he did not

say a word, the mere presence of another, so close yet unseen on the other side of a divider was enough to silence the speaker in my head. And so, I left within minutes of his smoky arrival—the presence of another so palpable, making the air thicker and synapses slower.

The only distractions now, in the desolate aisles of poetry, are the hundreds of titles staring at me. Close by, calling as loudly as poetry, biographies about poets lure; I gravitate to them with guilt, feeling I should focus on the works themselves, not the writers. Perhaps this pull has to do with the tension between my own life and writing—a friction that threatens to explode.

I want to know: in his heyday, did Yeats have a day job?

He started out as a journalist, but eventually, did poetry feed his wife and kids? How did he do it—being both a writer and family man? I try to imagine Yeats scrubbing the insides of a baking dish instead of writing the lines that float precariously in his head. Or carrying armfuls of dirty laundry down rickety steps to a basement while contemplating rhyme schemes. Or the poem he is jotting down being hijacked by the cry of his small child—

My partner arrives, telling me—with compassionate regret—it is time to leave. I have to eat, after all, and I've already passed on my one chance to see the ocean during a short trip to visit family. What have I come to, that the sea lost to the library? And *what* was that thought I had just been thinking?

There was a line, arriving in my head. It was settling like a leaf sailing downward through the air. Then it was gone. Hijacked by the call of my life. No, my words were not hijacked; they were shot out of the sky. Not by my partner or daughter, but by my own choices and chance—starting from day 1 with fate's lottery we call birth. A childhood in poverty followed by school loans I'll keep paying for decades. But that's another story. What, what was that other thought?

That last word, like a bird just shot—suspended mid-air for an instant—begins to fall, wings akimbo, down from the mind's sky, out of sight.

I pack up paper and pen. Fold my notebook closed. I will return to that page, and other words will take the place of those lost, like the reconfiguration of birds flying after one is taken by a hunter's bullet. Other words will rush in to fill the empty page. The new words will fly in another direction—the story, poem or essay that was becoming, will become, another.

*

After savoring a book with my daughter and wishing on glow-in-the-dark stars, I retire to my own bed exhausted. I pick up Adrienne Rich's *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* and begin the essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." As I turn the pages, I sit up straighter. Rich describes being "determined to prove that as a woman poet I could also have what was then defined as a 'full' woman's life." She continues, "If there were periods of null depression or active despairing, these could only mean that I was ungrateful, insatiable, perhaps a monster."

Monster. The word echoes in my thoughts. On a daily basis, I wonder why my small parcels of time to read and write are not enough? What is wrong with me? While my women friends all want to have another baby, I admit to them that I'm very happy with my one, smart, beautiful daughter. Instead of another child, I want to birth a book, and then a dozen more—books already growing in me.

Tomorrow I'll steal two hours in the library, where the rules of conduct innately protect solitude. How magical, to have a place where no one is allowed to converse at length! Or whine,

scream, weep, argue, eat, or play loudly! To be—at least relatively—alone! How can I feel the loss of time to work so palpably and miss it so dearly?

I continue reading, jotting down marginalia, and thinking. In contrast to Rich's struggle to create a "full" life that includes both children and writing, Woolf—who, of course, did not have children—articulates what's at the core of the dilemma:

For a poem to coalesce, for a character or an action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive. And a certain freedom of the mind is needed—freedom to press on, to enter the currents of your thought like a glider pilot, knowing that your motion can be sustained, that the buoyancy of your attention will not be suddenly snatched away.

How can I really write if I so rarely enjoy the "freedom to press on"? In my worst moments, I have caught myself considering the pros of remaining single for the rest of my life! Of course, this is not what I want—which is simply to write. So I choose between things like working at my desk and cleaning. As someone who loves a clean house, I take solace in the fact that words on paper can last forever while a dust-free house "lasts" only a few days.

In Rich's words, I see myself: "I wanted, then, more than anything, the one thing of which there was never enough: time to think, time to write." She describes "reading in fierce snatches, scribbling in notebooks, writing poetry in fragments..." This is my life. I read and write on the run. Advancing by even a paragraph in a book is worth it. In a notebook, I start a short story or a poem with a single line. Sometimes, just a title or a phrase. If I'm lucky: a scene, a few stanzas, paragraphs turn into pages! But usually, it can take weeks or months to return to that fragment. Yet I know it's there. And I know a poem, essay, or even a book can grow from a line or two on the back of an envelope.

It took the lives of every woman I know or have known to teach me to teach myself to write while my daughter sleeps, dishes wait, and in every room a fine film of dust descends.

Mad Bad Sad Woman

By Audrey Chin

If not for words

I'd be a mad bad sad woman dancing on the razors edge
petticoats flouncing
fallen over the ledge
hurtling through yesterday's bed sheets and tomorrow's linens
on my way to the moon.

I'd be a basket case
folded and crumpled
blood stained and rumpled
crashed out on green grass bright bright red
fresh and dead.

WAVES: AROHO Retreat 2015

By Kristi Crutchfield Cox

That summer, turning forty and evaluating my choices in life, roads taken through Oklahoma, the grey slickness, red crumbling, swelling clay churned in fields, sticking to me, claiming me.

I was supposed to live in New York, sidetracked by farms and families, frustrations and illness. Paths changed.

Maxine arrived in an email, I held her face in my hands, she stared off past the insecurities and uncertainty of beginning.

Real writers apply to this kind of thing.

"The henchman didn't let you in," a voice whispers, reminding me of the conference I attended, locked out of a room.

"They won't let you in, you're too..." a dark-haired fairy educated me on the nuances of academia and entrances into guarded rooms.

I debated. Three days to deadline, a decision made; locked in a room; drinking wine, creating an art project and workshop.

I'm not an artist.

An email, "Congratulations."

Oh my god, what are they thinking? Oh shit.

Weekends spent with my mother, waves flowed towards our lives. Women arrived, drawn to rivers of conversations, reclaimed selves narrated their experiences, snuffed dreams, rekindled. A young rodeo rider joined us, aggressively smeared and pressed desert hues into thick grooves. Shifting to raging rivers and oceans, swirling terrain hues landscaped rocky cliffs.

She spoke with frustration, "I read where no one bugs me, the boys make fun of it," her fingers wiped and dipped, splashing larger blends of colors across her canvas.

I read on the floor of Walden's Books, wore library cards out.

My mother confessed, "I am losing my eyesight," as she etched the outline of frothing foam atop cresting swells, smearing darkened blues into sea foam murkiness.

Thank you, Momma, for helping me.

Porch sitting till moonlight reached for dawn. Lavender scented laughter. Tarot cards turned, strengths of kinships on mountain tops, paths lost beneath a thousand stars.

Misogyny said hello, his bright orange handprint topped our monument.

WTF?

We gathered, swirling our power into paints, kaleidoscope muse, each claimed her rebellion, against her own tale of angst, delighted sparkle of closure.

Bunny called the storm.

French parasol elegance walked past butterfly bushes. Tattooed, tree pose yogi dancing amidst haiku mobiles. Carved skin of written words, scrivener of scars. Spoken word SLAM, rattling your soul with her soft-spoken megaphone. Multi-faceted wordsmiths of beauty. Wine and water satiated parched tongues, as times of suppressed voices shared by those who walked the front lines, reaching back, they bring forward awareness, unforsaken. Goddess infused blessing, walking labyrinths in the rain, sitting along a wall, invited to accept self. Scotch and laughter, exhaustion stole my words, waving goodbye.

Arriving home, renovating and rebuilding foundations.

Each claiming A Room Of Her Own.

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman

By Patricia Farewell

She wanted to plant
the long and learned
Face-of-Virginia Woolf
in her garden:
a firm bulb whose roots
would seek every
direction, whose strong,
fine, green stem would
relish its time
climbing the loam
back to the light
it had left on
the waves of the river Ouse.

Surely come spring
a leaf unlike
any other
would brush her ankle
and remind her
that rain and fog and
stark naked stars
could be trusted.
That leaf would
double, then
triple, and
finally a flower
would begin to bloom.

What a flower
it would be, burnt
sienna or
ocher petals
parting the air
as if to say
make way for me,
I have crouched under
your wicker chairs
and heard you chirp
about meaning.
I've swallowed your dust.
All will be new now.

But that was not

the bulb she had
been given.
The one she held
had been frozen.
Its shoots would be
negligible,
any flower
nondescript and
likely to wilt
in hot morning sun.
Still, how she ached
to kneel and turn the earth.

A Meditation on the Wave

By Sarah Hahn Campbell

I was 19 the first time I glimpsed the ocean, and I didn't see it from the shore of my own country. An Iowa farm girl at an Iowa college, I'd applied to do my junior year abroad in Nottingham, England. My first view of the ocean, then, was from a United Airlines plane at 35,000 feet, in the middle of the night. I woke, peered out the window, and couldn't understand why the full moon floated both above and below the airplane wing, and then I remembered the Atlantic Ocean from maps.

It wasn't until a month after I arrived in England, when I took a train with a few new friends west to Wales, that I actually stood at the ocean's shore. I don't remember the name of the village we visited. We hiked up a narrow winding road lined with waxy green holly and found a clear lake, where we swam and then lay on the soft heather in the late afternoon light. Later, after dinner at a pub in the village, the four of us walked down to the ocean's shore.

I expected the ocean to look like an Iowa field. As we rounded the corner of the last building before the shore, I know I was imagining my family's acres of green corn and soybean plants rolling toward the horizon, the way the wind rippled silver in the tender leaves. How could I have been prepared for what the ocean actually is?

There was the sand beneath my feet, the smooth driftwood logs, the round gray stones. Above me, there was the gray sky and the clouds edged with pink. But ahead of me, there was: expanse. An openness so vast I forgot to breathe, dizzy with the being of the sea. I looked and looked and looked.

The rhythm of the waves was my heartbeat. The *shush* of each white crest coming in, the inhale of each curve going out. *Shush*. [inhale] *Shush*. [inhale] *Shush*.

I stood on the shore straining to understand what the ocean meant. At 19, a religion/philosophy and English double major, I was always asking about the significance of things. What did the unknowable depths of the sea say about me, about our failing farm, about my father sinking into a gambling addiction that summer, about my unwritten life? I asked to understand, but the waves insisted I listen. *Shush*. [inhale] *Shush*. [inhale] *Shush*.

The waves. Carrying newness forward, scouring the old away. The artist Cecilia Vicuna built her sculptures out of driftwood and stone below the tideline of the ocean, so that nothing she created was permanent, so that change itself became the point, not the interpretation of a sculpture's meaning. The wave didn't allow time for interpretation.

I want to write like that. I want to write the way I encountered the ocean twenty years ago. I want to slip around the corner of a new page and find that all my expectations for my words cannot describe their silvery presence in the sea of other women bravely writing. And of course, that is what I learned at AROHO: I do not write alone, though I thought for so long that I did.

Away from Ghost Ranch and the AROHO Retreat, I'm again the only one awake in my house, in my orange room of my own, writing. But listen: *Shush*. [inhale] *Shush*. [inhale] *Shush*. I fling these words to a world that needs them, and they'll glitter in the sunlight before they burst, brilliant! -- to rejoin the waves.

Against

By Vero González

I grew up on an island in the Caribbean. I learned to swim before I learned to walk, talk, read, or write. I remember my parents telling me not to swim against the current—not to even try. It was for my own safety. The implication being that the current was stronger than I was; that if it came down to a struggle between us, the current would win. As I grew, *don't swim against the current* became *don't act against the current, don't think against the current, don't write against the current*. The current became a symbol for society and my role in it as a woman. *Don't act on your convictions; don't think thoughts we haven't taught you; don't write unpretty, unrequested truths*. I was told it was for my own safety, but now I think maybe it was for the current's safety too. What would happen if I viewed myself the way I viewed the current—as an unstoppable force of nature, as a powerful being that knows where it's going? I cannot disregard the current in the same way it has disregarded me. I can only meet it and say, *I am stronger than you are; if it comes down to a struggle between us, I will win*.

Writing in Mothertime

By Geri Lipschultz

Ours is not the world of mothertime. We don't live there but some of us write there. Mothertime was never on the map, nor in a book. Unrecordable, its wave undetectable, its mouth knows when to stay closed. Mothertime exists in those moments that come in a flash and then disappear, never to return. You could stitch these moments together, and it would be a quilt of stars. Mothertime exists in a dimension not governed by a world of knowledge gained from analysis, which stands on an outer rim sending missiles into the interior. Mothertime lives outside of time, as does dream. Mothertime is like the violet flame whose source is somewhere directly inside the earth, its cleft deflecting all things borne of analysis. No explorer may arrive by sailboat or submarine and colonize its inhabitants. It resists invasion. Even from the long-toothed syringe. Writing in mothertime is climbing a mountain whose jewels remain intact. Nowadays, we must close our eyes to find it. Perhaps it was located inside the placenta, but it's not there anymore. Or, it is undetectable. Maybe it resists all tools carved to measure, to locate, to evaluate, to—in effect—know it. Maybe it was once located in an apple. All I know is that when I write, it's where I go. Maybe the words take the shape of a tremor or follow the flight patterns of some butterflies I've known, some hawks, my cats, an ant, a fly, or the gusting pattern of seeds from one dandelion or milkweed plant to their rooting places.

Motherhood as pond, as sinkhole, as swamp, as quicksand. A state of being you never fully escape. Tainted you are by motherhood, just as you are tainted by writing. You are guilty as charged, with a belly and wounds, with pain to come, with reminders immortal—hydra-like, and if, god forbid, your manuscript never turns up on the shelves of a library, your reminders are still there, in a dark light, in the dungeon of grief, the key held by memory, with a dark prayer that someone will burn every scrap of every journal you ever wrote. Writing and motherhood are both messy work, both of them taking place in a parallel dimension, the way music is other, the way great loss is other, the way you are tainted when you mourn, when you have slept with someone for the first time, or when you have committed adultery, when you have injured someone and have witnessed the injury, have witnessed the healing, have witnessed the scar. Both writing and motherhood have you take a walk through the house of death, because while you don't remember your own birth, you witness the birth of your child, and knowing birth, you know death. Unspoken suffering they have in common.

My body in motherhood walked me into the pond, and now and forever, that pond will always be in me.

Motherhood opened my third eye by way of the hips.

Pollination

By Barbara Ann Yoder

Monday after the AROHO retreat I woke up early, came into my kitchen and looked at the sun—almost an eclipse behind bay fog—then tasted the sweet tang of Meyer lemon, the first fruit borne by my four-year-old tree. I watched a spider tiptoe up my bathroom wall, as if she too had just awakened, her legs as delicate as eyelashes, her eyes bulging to take in as much of the world around her as she could see, a world I thought she might have forgotten to look at during all those years of writing in her quiet, compulsive way. At my desk I noted that she was a spider, not a writer, and that I was an *almost* awake woman, up and journaling first thing in the morning, breathing in the moist bay air I had missed during my week in the desert, my lips sunburned, my mind filled with love and the humble, bright possibility of being who I am in the world among the women on the mesa under the moon at Ghost Ranch ... even while sitting here, at my desk, back at home, the morning after.

All week brilliant, creative women talked, walked, observed, studied, laughed, counseled, wrote, read our work aloud, cheered each other on, made new friends, cherished old friends, and on the last night, danced in jubilation. In her small group Janet Fitch taught us how to be children again in a curious, engaged, unselfconscious way, to go into the world with senses heightened, and to describe our impressions. I learned to touch plants to get a feel for their texture, to smell leaves, to look at the way light shines on them.

As soon as I got home I went into the garden to water, prune, and harvest. The corn I was worried about before the retreat had come in while I was gone. I had not been sure that it would, because the tassels had emerged before I saw any sign of ears, and the silk and tassels must be present together for corn to be fertile. I was surprised to find that this corn, which I had grown from seed, had produced. The color of its silk surprised me too, its rhubarb blush reminding me of a doll I possessed when I was young, a doll whose hair could grow and was somehow—maybe like Rapunzel—a key to her being. I was suddenly curious about this doll, so I went straight from the corn silk to my computer, to a morning of research and writing that brought me memories and story lines I'm eager to explore.

It is good to go to an AROHO retreat to bask in the wisdom, generosity, and creative work of the women there and to dance with them in the waves of moonlight. It is good to come home again and to wake up the morning after, more yourself than you used to be.

Last Class

By Shawn Lacy

Close your eyes, she says; it won't hurt you, at least not in this form—tactile prompt, giggles around the room, word association, trust, faith, reliance, friendship, back to trust.

Not yet feeling that I have any tips to give to a soul about writing, I decide to go for the “close your eyes and hold out your hands for the object,” a sugar cube. One is often taxed with the reality of going through this existence in a fog—taking all things for granted. Not today, though. The past weeks have initiated a gentle push towards the “what if” fear. What if it all goes wrong? What if all that you know suddenly shifts like a tectonic plate resulting in a tsunami of unfortunate and unexpected occurrences: what if at the last minute there aren't enough credits for her to graduate and she slept through that part of the lecture in spite of her OCD and anxiety disorder; what if she goes to the Outer Banks for Beach Weekend and there is a maniac in the midst, or she gets careless; what if the Chester County Court system is as merciless as is rumored; what if this fifth bout of bronchitis in as many months is caused by mold in the basement; what if there are spores spreading their moldy tentacles in the lungs? What if you can't make payroll? What if you don't have all of the answers? What if you just walk away?

Back to trust, faith, reliance, friendship, trust; what if all of those things make it all ok. What if? The reflection at this last class is the trust that I feel when I pull up outside and know that whatever I bring, as I sit in the chair in the group of those who also strive to express all or nothing, I know that it will be handled with care and sensitivity. I know that whatever I choose to reveal will be carefully poured from palm to palm, examined with a keen eye filled with kindness, and given back as a gift reminding me that no matter what I am not alone with all of the what ifs. So, I close my eyes and feel the sugar cube. How bad can “what if” be?

She's Got Some Nerve

By Janet Fitch

It takes some nerve to be a woman writer. In the Mae West film *Night After Night*, a coat check girl exclaims, "Goodness! What beautiful diamonds!" West quips, "Goodness had nothing to do with it, dearie." The same is always true with writing. Putting our thoughts on the page, making people see the world from our point of view, has nothing to do with being good, following the rules, kissing anybody's derriere. Nipping it maybe, but not kissing it.

Many women play it safe in life, and I understand. Who wants to make a mess of her life? But this urge to safety can be so ingrained it continues on the page, producing something I call 'lady writing.' This isn't *women's* writing, *women's literature*, it's a particular pallid, toothless affair, the one with the soft-focus cover. Yes, I know, that's the publisher's choice, but the problem is the soft focus between the covers.

Sometimes the writing can be pretty accomplished, but what it is, always, is boring, superficial, and *nice*. *Lady writing* is about being safe, being acceptable, and waiting to get a gold star for it. It's what the poet Wanda Coleman called "fitting a 300-pound woman into a size ten life." As women, we spend so much of our lives trying to fit into that size ten—careful, fair, asking for other people's opinions—that we've forgotten how to speak out, how to be authentic, to speak our own truths. To—as Breena Clark said earlier this week—*represent*.

In Greek mythology, there was an innkeeper, Procrustes, who boasted that his bed always fit the guest perfectly. It did because it stretched the guest who was too short, and if too tall, cut their legs off. Ladylikeness is a Procrustean bed that lops off what's *too personal, too disturbing, too challenging, too playful, too difficult, too angry, too hard, too passionate, too opinionated, too smart. Too strong*.

We try so hard to be fair. To think of the other guy. Not to make judgments, not to upset people. We learn to doubt ourselves; we're always asking *what do you think?* We want to be thought caring. We want to be thought good. We think it will protect us from criticism. Do what you like in life, but on the page, you need all your parts.

What we look for in writing is strength. Strong voices, strong opinions, strong work. We say work is 'good' or 'bad,' but it is only strong or weak. Evil on the page is what's bland, predictable, pallid, and timid. It's writing with no views, no take on life. What are we going to learn from a writer like that? Strong writing makes no apologies. There's authority to the writing, someone who's going to tell you what it is. There's no timidity, there's no hiding behind attributions. We cop to how we really think and open ourselves to what comes.

What does 'lady writing' look like on the page? First—no conflict. Nobody gets hurt in a lady book. Ladies pull their punches. Someone rides in and saves the day just before the brawl. Strong writing lets the blows land. Let us feel it, the unfairness, the cruelty of it all. Second, ladies never stand alone. Lady writing always has characters running to someone else and hashing out problems. Strong writing has characters who think and react without advice. If they get advice, it's usually wrong.

Most of all, ladies don't own their own opinions. They don't want to be held responsible for their ideas. They ask, *what do you think* and avoid making declarative statements.. So go ahead and make a bold statement. That's what's called *authority*. It's the necessary quality of this thing called *author*. This is your world, it reflects your views. Your writing is where you get to have your own say.

My teacher Kate Braverman used to say, “You can have your character eat dinner and think about dinner, or eat dinner and think about God.” Lady writing goes to the market and thinks about canned goods. I suggest you try moving towards bigger issues in your work. Consider the implications of what you’ve already written and reach for a larger thought. Ladies rarely talk about Life, God, Justice, Mercy, and the nature of Evil. They leave that work to the real women.

Here’s an exercise. List 20 things you know for sure and 20 things you don’t know anything about. People turn to literature to understand what it means to be alive, to be human. So give us some insights. Nobody’s going to send you to your room.

Weak, lady writing can be detected in the sentences. The language has no power, it’s afraid to be strong, to be specific. If your verbs are “one size fits all”—*was* and *look* and *see* and *went*—if your nouns don’t declare themselves—if your sentences are riddled with *seems* and *usually* and *maybe* and *sometimes*—get in there and whip it.

My final point is about play. Lady writing is conventional. You never see those books playing with form. Play is dangerous. Nobody will give me a star on my chart if I try something really different. They’re going to punish me. I won’t be able to sell it. But writing isn’t about becoming Miss Perfect Posture, and play IS the creative spirit. *You* make up the game. *You* make up the rules. Nobody’s going to punish you. I promise you—in writing, the worst thing you can do is be boring.

So play. Make up rules and then follow them. Be a trickster—don’t always tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Surprise us. If there’s an expected answer in a bit of dialogue, don’t give it! If we expect a character to react in a certain way, have them do something else. If we can already see the end of your book/chapter/scene when we’re only halfway in, that’s already a problem.

If I were your Mae West fairy godmother and could give you three gifts, I would give your writing the gifts of strength, meaning, and play—and the courage to use them.

And keep that *lady* out of the writing room!

Retro Causation

By Peggy Dobreer

*If you are alienated in your own house
how can your wings ever unfurl?* –Maxine Hong Kingston

She's got some nerve. Some call her the maker
of the Procrustean bed, hospital corners.

Don't be too smart, too strong, too epiphanied.
Temporary infertility is to be expected in art.

She had the bad itch. Was restless as water but
looked cool as can be to the outside.

Inside, sharp as a shark's tooth and arrogant as glory
on Sunday morning in the front pews.

How can the moth of your flurried past shield
the shape of your history from your future?

An act of love today can save a single life on a long
lost battlefield in a country as yet unnamed.

Fragments of Anna Dickinson

By Sarah Hahn Campbell

In response to your inquiry. . .

. . . This is a photograph of Anna Dickinson in 1862. Anna stands behind the carved chair in which the great Susan B. Anthony poses with one hand in her lap, the other holding a quill over a sheaf of paper at a desk. Anna's plain black Quaker dress buttons up her neck.

. . . In this photograph, Anna stretches naked on a large white bed, her dark hair loose around her head and shoulders, her mouth curved into a secret smile. On the back of the photograph, Susan B. Anthony has written: "1863. My beloved Anna Dickey Chickadee."

. . . In this photograph, Anna stands in pantaloons flanked by two men. All three lean grinning against an enormous boulder on a mountain summit. Someone has scribbled at the bottom of the photo: "Anna. Boulder-rolling. Colorado Rockies."

. . . And in this photograph, Anna in her Quaker dress faces a crowded hall from a podium, papers in one hand, the other hand outstretched to the sky palm up to invoke God. On the back, the inscription: "1875. America's own Joan of Arc."

What She Was Not

Anna Dickinson was not a man. She could not wear pants or shirts that did not constrict her breath. She could not own property or inherit money or vote in any election. She could not marry a woman she loved.

She was not beautiful. She was not dainty and she was not gentle. Her eyebrows were not fine and her nose was not small. When she stood to speak, her voice was never soft. On her way from climbing Long's Peak to climbing Pikes Peak, she did not ride *inside* the train to Colorado Springs, but perched like a goddess on the cattleguard, the wind in her hair.

Anna Dickinson did not love men as lovers and she did not love women as mountain climbing companions. She never slept with a man and she never slept with just one woman. When she wrote love letters to Olive or Susan or Sarah or Lou, she was not shy. She was never satisfied that she had done or seen or heard or loved enough.

Anna Dickinson was not a man. And yet when she spoke against slavery on the Lyceum stage, the newspapers said she was not demure enough to be a woman. When she played Hamlet in New York in 1881, her harshest critic wrote, "We always knew Anna Dickinson was actually a man."

Once, she wrote to her lover Olive Logan, "Someday, some of us will become so overcome with passion that we will *become* men, and we will make furious love to our beloved women, and then we shall be married, and live happy forever more."

Anna. Ms. Dickinson. American Maid of Orleans, bearer of the fleur de lis. I am not a man. I am a woman, and *I* am your vision.

Anna. If I write your story now, will you hear it one hundred years ago?

Terrible Girls

By Jennifer Patterson

Inspiration moves between their bodies and mine. We try to catch it, trace its lines on paper.

Petra Rowan Rhines brought me to Helene Cixous and one time, from an airplane, she texted me a long passage from Cixous. I imagined her, Petra, peering out of her window trying to find me below the cloud cover in a valley between two mountains. (Always in between.) She is very good at finding me there.

Cixous speaks of the *three steps on the ladder of writing*⁽¹⁾, the three bodies, and one of them is dead. We are always writing from inside a death, or before or after a death, always writing from these dead bodies. I go towards these bodies, the ones consumed by fire, the writer as witness to fire and also the dead body, I write from the rubble and ash.

Helene Cixous brought me to Clarice Lispector and Clarice Lispector doesn't want to bring me anywhere except everywhere. She is man and woman writer at the same time, sometimes: *(w)ho hasn't ever wondered am I a monster or is this what it means to be a person?*⁽²⁾

I think of the monsters we find in ourselves, in our writing, of those writers who write into the terrible places, the dangerous places. Liz Latty writes towards and then into monsters: writes as a *terrible girl*⁽³⁾ as a failed girl as a failed body as a survivor body, like mine and also not like mine. She gives language to the embodiment of our messy masses. She and I, a different kind of similar, a kind of mirror and I'm always looking for a mirror. Holding hands with old failed bodies, trying to slip into new.

A past lover, with their healing hands, bringing me into a new way of knowing my body, a way of knowing pleasure and pain, supporting me as I move through trauma, through traumatic release. Writing me letters and notes to keep me moving along the path, reminding me that I have already fought the dragons and won. Being both muse and teacher, holder and healer. Showing me how to be both *with and without* them. We are still before the time where it hurts more than it heals but that time is indeed on the horizon. Some of this gratitude will turn to fire burning up a river with no end.

My favorite beautiful failed burning bodies and now I'm thinking of other *terrible girls* who are also wildly full of light and heat. I'm thinking of an old friend. A beloved. How I can find her words in my mind many days but can't always find her in books, can't always find her body in the current mainstream feminist conversation. How she strings together words in a way that doesn't always make other people comfortable but helps other people feel loved and seen. I feel loved and seen when I read her words or when we share a tiny backyard pool and we are just talking about our bathing suits. How our bodies are always colliding into each other and also slipping past each other. How I can't know my body my survivorhood if I don't also always look for her hand, if I'm not burning my body to the ground so that I can dig through the rubble to find hers.

Now we are distant, in each other's pasts. The bodies no longer colliding but only slipping past. Time wears on connection, on relationships. The change that sometimes arises when we get too close, see too much. Lose each other or leave each other.

Lines upon lines of *terrible girls* holding hands. And what is a girl but a rupture. A fracture into something else and we don't always know the shape of them but we know her when we see them. And what is a girl but not always a girl either. The binary erases.

Inspiration flows this way, in between bodies and mountains, settling into hands and valleys, starting fires and putting them out too. Ruptures and repairs.

I want to burn into a pile of words, a pile of rubble holding my *terrible girls'* hands as we rise into a bigger badder new body.

(1) Helene Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*

(2) Clarice Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*

(3) Liz Latty's Goddard College MFA thesis title

What It Takes

By Karen McElmurray

Recently, I was part of a panel discussion on strong women called “Kiss My Grits: On the Badass in Appalachian Literature.” It was easy to think of any number of strong women who are badass in the books I love most from the mountains. Gertie Nevel in Harriet Arnow’s *The Dollmaker* came to mind first, followed closely by other strong women characters like Carrie Marie Mullins in Mary Ann Taylor Hall’s *Come and Go Molly Snow*, Serena Pemberton in Ron Rash’s *Serena*, or most recently, Dawn Jewell in Robert Gipe’s *Trampoline*. But as days passed and I thought more and more about what I’d say about strong women characters based on the place I’m from, it was the word “badass” that tripped me up again and again and I did the thing I encourage my writing students not to do. I went to look up that word in the dictionary.

I told myself I was being really hip by choosing a funny, badass even, dictionary that would give me a fun spin on our topic—Urbandictionary.com. This what I found. *Badass*. The epitome of the American Woman. She radiates confidence in everything she does, whether it's ordering a drink, buying a set of wheels, or dealing with men. She's slow to anger, brutally efficient when fighting back. *The badass*. She carves her own path. She wears, drives, drinks, watches, and listens to what she chooses, when she chooses, where she chooses, uninfluenced by fads or advertising campaigns. *Badass*. A style that is understated but instantly recognizable. Like a chopped Harley or a good pair of sunglasses. *Badass*. Simple, direct, and functional.

This definition made me flinch, not because I don’t like the idea of confidence and radiating it on my own chosen path in life while sporting leather pants and a nice dew rag, but some of the other language? *Brutally efficient*. *Simple*. *Direct*. Functional even. Sounds too much like Biker Barbie for me. So I went back to the drawing board, Wikipedia this time, and found a shorter definition. *Badass*. Tough, uncompromising, intimidating. I liked that one a little better. There was something called The Free Dictionary, which described a tough or aggressive person. The meanest badass in town. A badass rock band. A real badass watch. And Merriam Webster, the one I always had my students avoid? *Badass*. Ready to cause or get into trouble. Mean. Pretending to be a badass gunslinger. Of formidable strength or skill.

Strength was at least something I could get my teeth around, the self I had always wanted most, and above all the definition I could lay hands on when it came to some of the women I grew up around. My great-aunt Della, my mother’s aunt, fixed brakes, changed oil, fried eggs, paid the bills. It was the 1960’s. When I was little we’d drive home to Eastern Kentucky and sit in the booths at Della’s place, a service station and diner called the Black Cat. A photograph I have of the diner is of a shelf full of cartons of Winstons and Salems with my great-grandmother seated at a booth. That great grandmother, Beck, lived in a room off that diner until she passed. Della. Her sun-browned face and her sad, fierce eyes. Della, they said, was odd-turned. *Contrary*. I’ve written stories about her, her big hands, black-streaked and strong from the hard work they did. I imagine her reaching down into some vat of soaking spark plugs, some geography of wires and hoses. Later, when I learned to gap plugs and change my Dodge Dart’s oil, I thanked my memories of Della. She was strong enough to run a business, skilled enough to manage a garage and a restaurant. Strong enough to lock the doors when my uncle Russell came home drunk. He fell asleep one winter night with his truck’s engine running and they found him dead of carbon monoxide fumes that early morning.

I remember other strong, skilled women in my family. There was Rita Wallen, a cousin and niece of Della’s, from up toward Pikeville. I didn’t spend much time with Rita when I was

growing up, but she was someone I heard a lot of stories about. Rita, they said, had book smarts. She did good in high school, even better in college, went on to some school up north and became, so the family said, a Big Lawyer, though she didn't come back home much over the years afterwards. Another woman of strength and, they said, dubious skills, was Betty, my Uncle Roy's first wife. Roy and Betty lived in a brick house he built down in the bottom land below my grandparent's house, and they raised a garden, had a little girl, but Betty hankered after something she didn't have. They said it was more of this, more of that, a new couch, a sip of whiskey on the sly, but the Betty I remember styled her hair in a frosted shag. She bought shiny white go-go boots and took off for Ohio in the middle of the night, became a dancer in a juke joint and never came back again.

I could go on all day remembering other women I grew up around who fit the definition of badass as someone strong and also ready to cause trouble or get into it or maybe just survive it. I could tell you about a great grandmother who smoked a pipe and survived two husbands, one killed by, so the stories go, a Floyd county gunslinger. I could tell you about a grandmother who hoed an acre big garden, an aunt who worked triple shifts at the Double Kwik to take care of her family, a cousin who drove an hour a day there and back to go to community college to become a social worker. All those stories of perseverance and strength and, okay, badassery. But the more I thought about definitions, the more I kept coming back to something quieter, another word in our panel description. *Unseen*. Invisible, even. The kind of strength you see if you look at the eyes, at the palms of the hands. The kind of strength you see in the ripped and mended places in the spirit. That kind of badass.

There is a phrase that comes to me again and again about certain women I have known, been friends with, kin to, akin to, is something like this. She is, I will think to myself, someone who someone has done something to. That's a terrible thing to know in your gut when you meet or spend time with someone. There's the cousin I'll call Kristine, the one who had her first baby when she was sixteen, and everyone knew Kristine's child belonged to her own daddy, who ended up in prison for statutory rape. You know she had to do something to bring that on her own self, my own grandmother said, and I bit my tongue to hold back from saying something, saying, look at her, just look. Look how she had that baby, and then walked on from there, went back to school, became a hairdresser, had other babies. I wish I could tell you more about her life, but I only know that when I see her, her eyes are steady, her voice one of the calmest I have known. There's my cousin Jenny, dead now, but her story too is one I walk around with. Jenny, weighing in at three hundred pounds, then down to one fifty, back up again so big that time she had to ride a motor cart when she went to Walmart to buy her packs of powdered sugar donuts, the ones she loved so much. Her mother, my aunt, schizophrenic, living in a home for the disabled, the differently abled as they say it now. Her daughter, Michaela, wild as a hare, bipolar out, dead at twenty, a suicide. But Jenny picked up, packed up, moved to Cincinnati. Is that running away? Is that strength? To leave behind a state, a county line, a town, a house, to move somewhere where the streets were clean and clear, unhistoryed, there to find love, watch it settle in her own two hands, even if her body gave out, that last time, when the weight came back and her face blossomed, that time with happiness.

A couple years ago, when I was teaching in a low residency program in Western Kentucky, a colleague and I were talking about memoir. I had just quoted, in a talk, a favorite author of mine, Dorothy Allison, who said this: "I believe the secret of writing is that it never exceeds the reach of the writer's courage. The best writing comes from the place where our terror hides. Until I was writing about exactly the things I was most afraid of and unsure about, I

wasn't writing worth a damn." My colleague, a novelist, as we chatted that evening over wine, said that she, too, likes memoir, but she called such works "narratives of victimhood." Maybe this is a matter of semantics, but as you know from my experiences with definitions, I took this definition on too. Victimhood. Narratives. Of. Stories of victims. Victim. A person who has been attacked, injured, robbed, or killed by someone else. A person who is cheated or fooled by someone or something. One that is harmed by an unpleasant event. Well, all of that is true. Kristine. Jenny. Michaela. All of them harmed, injured, robbed even. Still, I do not like the words in my mouth. Narratives of victimhood. I prefer, I find, to come back to our original word for this panel. *Badass*.

Sunday mornings I often read the latest issue of *Brain Pickings Weekly*. A few weeks back I read a piece by a woman named Caroline Paul, from her book called *The Gutsy Girl: A Modern Manifesto for Bravery, Perseverance, and Breaking the Tyranny of Perfection*. Caroline Paul takes on the idea that one must be perfect and error-proof in every way in order to live a daring and courageous life. She talks about her many missteps in her own life, and she assures her readers over and over that owning up to mistakes isn't an attrition of one's courage but an essential building. I quote, "After all, the fear of humiliation is perhaps what undergirds all fear, and in our culture of stubborn self-righteousness there are few things we resist more staunchly, to the detriment of our own growth, than looking foolish for being wrong. The courageous, Paul reminds us, trip and fall, often in public, but get right back up and leap again."

The courageous, to me, don't just trip and fall. They have gotten back up and walked on. They are not victims, but keen and strong survivors. They are vulnerable. We see their experiences, an almost map on their skin, a sometimes weary fire in their eyes, a keening undercurrent in a voice in an empty room, a voice in a car down a road heading out, a voice on a page. In the end, that to me is the definition of badass. Courage, hidden, invisible maybe, but sharp as a blade, a fine-honed bone feather, a will not just to survive, but to live. Those are the women I long to read about, write about and, most importantly the kind of woman I want to become.

Snatch

By Christine Wade

A woman invented and named an art form while she was sleeping. It is called the Snatch. It is a short piece of writing, usually one page. It is many words strung together. A Snatch is not rarified like a poem. But sacred, none-the-less. Nor is it a fairy tale. Although it could be an old wife's fable . . . it could be a birth story. A Snatch smells sweet and is under the word count. Sometimes it is an invocation. It is not pornographic, pedantic or propagandistic. It is not linear, nor is it a segment of something linear.

A Snatch is a lift in which a barbell weight is brought in a single motion from the floor to an arms-extended position overhead. A Snatch has velocity. It is sudden and can be pre-emptive. A Snatch is sometimes heavy, like water. Sometimes dark, like the night. A Snatch can make you laugh out loud or entice you to sit quietly and notice your breath brushing up against your ribs.

A Snatch is a place where you put things, tuck them away in secrecy and safety. Sometimes you don't want to share what you snatch. Other times you want the entire world to see your Snatch. You want it to be reviewed in a newspaper. To infect like a disease. To burst and bellow on the internet.

To snatch is to make a sudden effort to seize something, as with the hand. It may also be possible to snatch with your teeth. Or a net. A snatcher is someone who takes. You may have to pull the wool over to snatch. To snatch is to grab without permission, ceremony or right. Then you have to hold on with everything that you have got. Then you have to let go.

Re-interpreting the Carved Revenge on Your Own Back

By Shauna Osborn

In the White Tigers section of *The Woman Warrior*, we bear witness to a short-lived family reunion before our warrior heads off to battle. Her parents carve oaths on her back, making her body a text where genealogical memory is visible and an emotional connection to the family's interests are made physical: "Wherever you go, whatever happens to you, people will know our sacrifice," said the mother. "And you'll never forget either," (41).

The female body is a most exploited target—physically, mentally, culturally, and economically. From the moment of birth, a body is named and mired with social crisis. To confront the female body is to confront not only an individual's abuse but also the abuse of women's bodies throughout history. Our bodies are subjected to legislation that goes against our well-being. They are common sites of physical and sexual abuse, are paid less for work, and are objectified to sell everything from ab machines to zoo memberships. We are told our bodies are failures if we do not embody unrealistic standards of beauty starting when we are infants. We are taught to hate, abuse, and/or fear our own bodies early.

In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Helen Cixous suggests that if women are forced to remain in their bodies, then they can do one of two things: 1) remain trapped inside that body or 2) use the body as a medium of communication.

"By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her... Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time." (880)

When you have ownership of your own body, the world is a drastically different place. As feminist creators, our projects help us to reclaim our voice—to reclaim our own bodies. A woman without her body cannot be as powerful as one that knows herself.

Kingston's woman warrior spent fifteen years learning how to use her body. She could not be a great warrior unless she had connection to her muscles, reflexes, and the strength within her flesh. She finally gained this knowledge and her autonomy to be abruptly reminded that she is not the only one who feels an ownership of her skin, her body. She belongs to a family, to a lineage, to a community, to a country. She is one specific part in a larger whole. The project of knowing her body and gaining battle prowess were not completed in a vacuum. What is the point of becoming a great warrior if there are no battles to fight? She did not learn these skills just to protect herself. She learned them to defend her community, which is the purpose of all great warriors. The woman warrior's parents carved oaths and names into her back so she will never forget her connections again. Once the carving is over, the woman warrior says, "I saw my back covered entirely with words in red and black files, like an army, like my army," (42). Her connections to the world, those grievances on her back, add to her strength.

A woman's body is a physical text—our families, lovers, and communities carving into our flesh whatever they wish for us to remember when we head into battle. What messages were carved on your back? Do they add to your strength?

I am a product of warring tribes from different continents. My mother's people are from the Comanche Nation. My father is from Franconians and Bavarians of Germany. Two extremely different battle strategies and cultures brought together as one with my birth. Both sides brutal, both full of survivors. Growing up, my parents claimed that the Comanche/German temperament could be the world's undoing. That it was a gift, a weapon their children would have to learn how to wield appropriately. There are several family members who did not wield their parts of this temperament with any skill—my parents among them. The battles they fight, the revenge they sought, are of little interest to me. The messages they carved on my skin are not my strength. They are only scars.

A snake sheds its skin as it grows. We go through a similar process—restructuring old, artificial and outgrown forms of self in order to heal and restore what is true within our nature. Yet, deep scars rarely heal to be invisible. There is always a faint reminder of the damage we have endured. Can you spot someone else's scars? Are they celebrated as trophies from the battles survived? Are they beautiful or hideous?

Awam Amkpa writes in "A State of Perpetual Becoming,"

"Your body is a social text. It is spoken for by the legal infrastructures of society... In a highly socialized space, what then happens ... is a hyper-consciousness of the textuality of these bodies and a consciousness about breaking down those bodies so that in their fragmented mode, they actually express their opposition to domination."

How do you fragment your body? How do you use those fragments as part of your battle strategies? What are the ways we can piece ourselves together again? What should we carve into our skins to remind ourselves?

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Against My Own Current; Out in Plain Air

By Lisa Lutwyche

I haven't worn a swimsuit in over fourteen years. I've walked on a beach or two, sat by swimming pools watching other people swim, but always wearing shorts and a tank top myself. The only people to see my torso uncovered, or barely covered, have been medical personnel, my husband, and my brave, then fifteen year old daughter, right after my mastectomy.

Mastectomy. There's that word, the word that looks so clinical and simple, so final and unemotional. Most of the time, I'm able to forget about it. I mean, it's not painful, although it's often actively uncomfortable. I had a complicated reconstruction. I thought age 46 was too young for a flat amputation. Reconstructed or not, though, it's not really all that nice. I had more surgeries after the initial reconstruction, which didn't help; more scars, extra flesh under my arm because I had living tissue fished under my armpit.

My right "breast" is referred to as a "result" by the surgeons and doctors who still look at it.

I usually hide it, even from myself. Until AROHO 2015, and Shauna Osborn's "Carved Skin" workshop.

It wasn't water that got me to open up and show myself. It was the desert.

In Shauna's group, we were all able to "bare" ourselves, bodies, stories, and souls in a way that was pure AROHO, a safe, spiritual experience for all of us. I was frightened to see the photographs of myself, standing in the sunlight, stripped to the hips, but I finally looked at them.

They're beautiful.

Even before Shauna transforms them with text, even before they become a piece of art, those photos have shown me something I've needed to know for a decade and a half; something my sweet husband tries to make me believe – I'm still me, and I have more beauty left to show than I'd have dared to dream. Dreaming is what we do at AROHO, a place made safe by a group of women daring to dream together.

The Task

By Alison Hicks

Late at night into the time before dawn is best.

Too easy to put off in the afternoon—
how long until cocktails, a swim, dinner?

Salvage enough to approach sideways, crab-like.

Lighted by what you wanted,
present what you've lifted proudly,
though it might be refused.

You could be drinking, pouring a mug
to really twist you up.

Instead you're here.

When it is dark it seems like darkness
will go on for a long time.

Even when you go out on the porch to look at the stars.

All of this supposing, of course,
that you are not required to rise early.
Mornings you'll need sleep.

Erotics of Making

By Barbara Rockman

The woman brings her body to the page
the way a climber clamps her thighs to the rock face
the way a lover drops the last garment
the way a girl crawls into a copse and, singing, arranges acorns and logs
the way a mother skips away from the departing school bus.

What is arousal?

Words at the pen tip, ink rich as clotted blood.
Hairs lifted and sinew flexed.
Grip the lid, release vinegar, cut lemon.

Row out into ooze, lean beyond the oar, raise the leg to climb over
into the silt lake bottom, toes sucked down, fear of disappearing.

Kiwi's furred cheek. Rotting peach eaten anyway. Cuticles burnt by salt.
Aged breasts relinquish what's been missed.
Blackened lilac slumped to elegy. Aretha's dropped fur.

I'm in love with women who liquefy my pen, who swing my arms out from my sides. It happens
when I enter their poem, etching, collage, teabags hung from the spine.

One says, *After months, inspiration came.* Her face beatific, saint of the uncensored.

One says, in my studio, *Deep in the making of, I am orgasm.* She swells rice paper into garment,
each gesture a seduction.

One settles by a meadow, her soft body bent to *click click*, crow call. A deer stares. She is so
away into; she is invitation. And I am, *yes*. Without lifting from tap and wonder, lost in dream
time, she beckons. Teacher/student? Elder/youth? No. Women.

Another's name like a razor cuts me limb from history, tugs my fingers out and rearranges them
into a new appendage. She makes of me a placard that screams
Violence to save the female race. She introduces me to her friend, Clarice.

And the long armed sister of a past life who understands addiction to doubt throws
Best Of by men across the room. Pages flail like wings of a dying breed. She takes my hands
across a table scattered with scratched out words, whispers,
We must create a new country. She works her fingers into my tangles.

These women raise a mirror, burn through glass. A marbling of inkblots and burst meteors.
When a silver surface is stripped, a black pool gushes.

Theorist and artist, mother and lover, mentor and apprentice, marriage bed, ocean edge: the hundred seductions, the thousand spent bodies.

Aftermath: bliss.

I have made this; I have read you; you have listened.

We sleep the sleep of each other's dreams.

We become the tale, *Lost in the woods*. But we return home. Purpled dusk, hour of sap.

We grip oars. We climb over the lip.

Gratitude to Ann Laser, Cynthia Fusillo, Carole Maso, Hélène Cixous, Clarice Lispector, and Marie Howe, mentors, friends and fellow travelers, and to all the women whose creativity fuels my own.

Counting and What's Counted On

By Robyn Hunt

"Nothing thicker than a knife's blade separates happiness from melancholy."
(Virginia Woolf, Orlando)

I know for sure: 1 I am married. 2 I own a home. 3 I write poetry - creating metaphor where others claim they cannot. 4 I have a daughter; she lives elsewhere now. 5 My grandmothers, both storytellers, lived well into their nineties, and in one case, to be 104. 6 I can give myself permission to do and be all things. 7 My hair is turning grey. 8 My sense of direction is reliable. 9 My upbringing included prayers and hymns, neither of which I can recite entirely now from memory but recognize at times when others arrive, singing. 10 There is more inside of me that desires to be written. 11 I am capable of juggling many things. 12 I don't always trust others. 13 My writing life was once torrid. 14 I love shades of pine or fern, turquoise or cyan, resembling the wave of the earth around me. 15 My daughter is learning so many things as an adult. 16 My husband gets irritated but we sort it out. 17 I am more often doing what others are not. 18 This latter is both exhausting and exhilarating 19 I can dance.

Not so sure about: 1 How to respond at times. 2 How to be silent. 3 The botanical names of so many trees. 4 How safe the water at the edge of the sea. 5 My memories. 6 If I were to color the shape of rain falling, would it be indigo? 7 Would you see its inky cloaks with me, such streaks? 8 Capturing the entire sensation. 9 How to sweeten the bitter/how to let the bitter remain. 10 Breaking the chain of more of the same. 11 History of continental invasions, and the politics of men. 12 Whether I can shift to another place, rooted in this high desert that I long for when away. 13 Direction back to the beginning where I swayed without limitation. 14 Sustaining confidence. 15 Scaling the wall and dropping. 16 If I can swim back, quickly. 17 How to tell my grandmothers' stories, evasive hummingbirds against the backdrop of piñon trees, for my daughter to truly witness them. 18 Handling the switchbacks up the pink mesa at this altitude (slowly and with intention). 19 Reaching the water in time. 20 Whether the waves will flood my home if I open the windows wide;

Know for sure: 20 The waves will flood my home; I will open the windows wide.

Unmaking the Form

By Marya Hornbacher

Professor Firchow was a giant even when seated, like a bear who towers even when on all fours, and he had enormous hands that gestured slowly, gently, as a bear might gesture if it did. He spoke to us softly of Modernism, and the end of narrative arc, and multiple selective omniscience, and the poetics of fragmented time. I was a snippet of a girl, not yet twenty, shy and a little stunned by the sheer joy and terror of existence and afraid of everything and very brave. I tied myself into a compact knot in my chair, scribbling notes and peering out from behind my limbs at the looming Firchow.

And now, he said with a sigh of contentment, we come to Virginia Woolf.

In those years I slept too little, smoked too much, ate canned potatoes, and fed the cat beans when I was broke. I remember the shadow of my hands turning the pages in the circle of light cast by the crooked lamp on the desk at the third-floor walkup where I was learning to live in a room of my own. And I remember Mrs. Dalloway, whom I referred to only by her proper name; it feels impertinent to call her Clarissa even now; and I remember the tremor I felt when I read the fragile, triumphant opening words: "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself."

"I am made and remade continually," Woolf wrote in *The Waves*, and in writing I find I am unmade and remade continually, again and again becoming a writer and a woman I don't always know. The practice of writing shapes and makes me just as much as I make and remake my work. In order to undergo the writing process, I must be willing both to explore, and to be explored. I must break through the crust of the self I know, and bore down into the strata of selves below. And I need to lay myself open to that excavation. If I am to slip into other selves, see from unfamiliar points of view, speak with new voices that have new things to say—I need to allow those deeper layers to be explored.

It probably was Virginia Woolf who showed me that the act of writing—not just writing of my own experiences, but writing at all—would require a kind of bravery I did not then possess. I still am unsure whether I have the guts to write. What I had, and have, what Woolf's work sparked in me, was the desire to write, the desire to tell stories, bear witness, give voice. I wanted to write about women, and as a woman. What I found in Woolf's work was precedent, evidence, that I could do that—proof that a woman's voice was enough, a woman's story enough, a woman in herself enough—I heard a voice that was witness to the worth of a woman's life. Woolf sees through the eyes of the kaleidoscopic self, looking out at the world as it appears for only an instant, before its fragments gather and scatter again. She moves fluidly between the shifting, uncertain selves she inhabits more than she creates. When I read *Mrs. Dalloway*, I was drawn into that habitation of other bodies, that perspective of minds not my own. I found myself not looking *at* Clarissa but out from *within* Clarissa, an experiential point of view that felt both faintly familiar to me and utterly unknown.

This novel, and Woolf's entire body of work, testify to the significance of tiny things—an instant, a passing thought, a single day—specifically, the significance of one woman's story, no matter how simple or brief. The interior monologue, the open plot, the infinitesimal, nearly invisible transformations that we undergo and create in our wake as we move—these were all things that James Joyce had, to an extent, explored in *Ulysses* a few years before *Mrs. Dalloway* was published; but it took Joyce really quite a lot of pages, and put Harold Bloom's average day on par with a Homeric epic. While I had wandered through *Ulysses* happily enough, it was Woolf

who pulled the thread and unraveled the rest, who made and unmade and remade the form, who undid narrative, story, subject, the sentence itself. Hers was not the first work to play with time or speak of war, not the first to explore the intimate connections and stark divides between human souls; but hers was the first work I had ever encountered that explored a woman's life from within; not her drawing rooms and manners, but the raw inside of her senses, and the cacophony of her mind.

And, for me, it was Woolf who toppled what I had been taught, who ruined what I thought you were supposed to write, and what you were supposed to write about—and whether *I* was allowed to write at all.

Recently I have found myself restless within the strictures of what I have been taught and trained myself to write. I am writing my way into forms I know nothing about. I don't know how to write anything I'm writing. I don't know what I'm going to write before I write it, or when it will be done. This is unnerving. But I know that when I am restless, I need to go where my feet want to go; when my voice and vision change, I must change with them; I must let form follow not from the forms I know, but from whatever form they find that fits; I must always remake the writing, and let the writing make and remake me.

In those simple rooms of my own, where I was that young woman, half a life ago, I sat alone: hesitating—faltering—writing—and I am still there. I am still her, hesitating, unsure, and secretly terribly brave. And sometimes, as it did with Clarissa, that enormous bravery rises up and crashes over me and I say: I will write the book myself.



“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.

Woolf den. Woolf pack. Woolf 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 was a metaphor of courage, compassion, and deciding our own narratives; then Maxine Hong Kingston responded to the metaphor in her own Waves response, reminding us how a white feather has historically represented cowardice. That day, we collectively and powerfully changed the archetype.

Currents to change
Waves upon waves
Our stories overlapping
Cowardice 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.

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.

WAVES RETURNING: A Q&A WITH MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

Tuesday, August 11, 2019 (audio file 150811a – 25 m 51s) Transcribed by Tobi Harper

Introduction, Kate Gale, Ph.D.: Maxine has been looking at all of your questions and talking to God and [laughter] she is back to talk with us about some of those questions and some other things she has on her mind. Could we all please have a big round of applause for Maxine Hong Kingston.
[Clapping and cheering]

Maxine Hong Kingston: Okay before I answer your questions, I'm going to answer a question that I asked you. 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?" ["Yeah!" clapping] [Maxine laughs] In *Orlando*, she calls the age that she has to deal with the British Empire, and she also – there's two places where she makes sly snide remarks about America and Americans. Okay so the question again, how can a woman of the American empire not write protest?

Well, my answer to that question is that maybe what Virginia Woolf is saying is don't write in reaction to some other writing. Don't write in reaction to the male books that are out there. You come at it with something brand new and fresh and modern and original. She does not mean to stop political action. You can understand that when you read her book *Three Guineas*. Non-fiction, very well argued, very political, and philosophical. I have *Three Guineas*, I have this much money, and I can give to three different causes, which ones will they be? This is something we carried out. One of those guineas is money that we will give as a scholarship to a woman. And that will change that woman and it will change the world. And so look at us, we're doing that, we're already doing that. Another guinea would go to a peace organization and she writes about violence, bombs, war, and she thinks what are the things we could possibly do? And what could women do? And she says, first of all, quit handing out the white feathers to your brothers. If the feathers meant – you see a young man in the street, or your family, and he's not in uniform, well he's a coward, so you hand him a white feather. You know what we just did today? We changed a metaphor! We changed an archetype! [clapping] The white feather no longer means, "You are a coward. You should go and commit some violence." It means this wonderful, feminine power, and life. I mean, isn't it incredible, right now we changed an archetype.

Okay, so that book, *Three Guineas*, it's reasoned, but what I enjoy is when she uses a little story, a little image and there's a footnote, there's a Mayoress of a little town, and she refused to knit socks for the soldiers, and she will not roll bandages. Can you imagine the kind of reaction that she will get to that?

Okay so, I will answer a question that is not on the papers, but as I go around talking to people, there are the women who write shy, and they come up to me and tell me that there is something that – should she dare write something about her family or her lover or some weird thing that happened, some small thing or some shameful thing.

So here is my answer that I would like to give to those women and to remind all of us. The story and the poem, there's a process, the process of story and art and poetry is magical. You can take the terrible things of this life and transform them into beauty and art and truth. Here's what you do. You write down any of your terrible feelings, your anger, your hurt, you rant and rave, write down what's ugly, and write down contradictions, and you name names too. And then you write down what's shameful, what's illegal, you put it all on there and don't hold back. And then, you get all this stuff together and there will be an explosion because that's the climax of the book. Because you put all this terrible stuff together and it'll blow up. And that's your high point of action, and when that happens, and as you write along, understanding starts to happen. Also, you write from points of view. So your worst enemy, the people you hate, the ones you're angry at, you write from their point of view too. And so you understand everything. And then, by the end of the book, there is understanding and compassion. And there's realization, there's revelation, there's recognition, there's resolution, all of that happens in the magical shape and form of a poem and a story. Recognition is the English interpretation of what Aristotle said was the most pleasure that we get out of drama and story: recognition that we see our mother's face and we understand her, and we see our own face, we see our enemy, and we understand all of it. Odysseus comes home and first his dog recognized him. But that was wonderful, we like that. And then his wife recognizes him, big beautiful moments there. Okay so, for all of you who feel that there are unspeakable secrets and feelings, go ahead and throw that into the story. And while you're doing it, forget anybody who is – don't think about anybody reading it. This is your secret story. Nobody's going to read it. Think to yourself, *I'm not going to publish this, I am just keeping it to myself but I am going to write it down*. Then, years go by and you've been working on this material over and over again and thinking about it again and again and finding new words for it. Finding new shapes of the story, finding more details, finding what people said to each other, and then after many years of doing this you arrive at realizations and recognitions and your story becomes whole. It becomes beautiful. You started out throwing your ugly feelings in there but when you find the right words and the right way of telling it, the whole thing becomes beautiful. And then you can send it to the publisher. Because you're thinking, *well this is so beautiful, it is so complete, it's so whole*, and you have transformed yourself too, you have become whole, the story becomes whole. Then you feel okay about revealing it to the world. So now you get published and then you get worried, *what if so and so reads it. And they're going to sue me*. Actually that happened to me, in *Woman Warrior*, remember I wrote about Crazy Mary? And I was so young that the people I'd known, I felt like they belonged to me and I didn't have to ask permission, I can call her Crazy Mary—which is her real name. So one day I was in my office at Berkeley and there came a letter from Crazy Mary's nephew, who's a lawyer, and he had it on his lawyer stationary and I was so scared and for the first time as I looked at that envelope, I thought, not just that I'm going to get sued, but she doesn't belong to me. I didn't make her up, she's a real person in her own right and I co-opted her story, I just took it and exploited it and used it. Okay, and so I opened the letter and he says, "I want to thank you for writing about my Aunt. I now understand her and I understand the story of our family and the love with which you wrote." And I thought, wow, my theory works! [laughter from Maxine and all].

Okay there's something that I hear from my therapist, they keep saying trust the process. Do therapists say that to people? Trust the process? Well same thing here, trust the process.

Question: Have you seen progress in the literary world regarding the centralizing of Asian American Women writers?

Maxine Hong Kingston: When *The Woman Warrior* came out and it just exploded on the world, great reviews from all over, prizes, up on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and then in comes this blast and it comes from the Asian American – Chinese American men critics. And what they're saying is that "You wrote lies. That is not the way that we Chinese Americans are. You are portraying us as sexist and you have emasculated us by writing that way. You are a race trader. You are in bed with the white publishing establishment." You can see how this is very sexual. I mean all our women, the white man is taking all our women, that's what they're saying. And, you know, what helped me a little bit is that I saw that this was happening to the black writers too. And Alice Walker gets out there with *The Color Purple* and she was so attacked by black men and again, this thing "race trader." Oh you married a white man also, all of that. And you wouldn't get published if you weren't pandering to the white readers. Okay, or the Latinas, they get the same thing. And so, okay, but that was last century. So let's hope that as the new young women emerge that they won't be welcomed by our brothers in that way. I have a feeling that things may be getting better because I saw President Obama, I met President Obama and he said "The woman warrior taught me how to write." Yeah .. [clapping and cheering] I think the question is, is it centralizing—yeah, I think our writing is getting in the center. And let's hope that our brothers are strong enough now and powerful enough so that they don't feel that they can get their power just by beating on us.

Question: "What advice would you give to Asian American writers and women writers of color?"

Maxine Hong Kingston: Women of color are so wealthy with story. We have so much in images and in culture and in language and the way that we speak the American language. We have so much that's never been done before. Nobody's done what we have! And we haven't stopped mining that. You know, I, Amy Tan, Alice Walker, we've only done a little bit. There's more, there's so much more. We are very wealthy, and let's just remember that. [clapping and cheering] And as I said about language, we have this amazing English language, actually, we have an American language. And what is coming into it are all the rhythms and accents of all the other people. Of people coming from all over the world with their rhythms. And so we bring our languages and then we make a new American language.

Question: "Who and what made you succeed?"

Maxine Hong Kingston: I must say that real people, the actual people, felt to me more like obstacles than help. [chuckling] And so I think what supports me is the spirit of the artist. Maybe they're the muses, and also women that I read about like Virginia Woolf or Jo March. I'm going to be like Jo March [laughs with audience].

Question: "What does it mean to be a woman writer instead of just a writer?"

Maxine Hong Kingston: I think Cynthia Ozick dealt with that in an interesting way. She wrote a letter to the "New York Review of Books," and she says, "Don't you call me a Jewish writer. I am a writer." You know when she says something like that, you can imagine how Jewish people would say, "Wait a minute, where's your Jewish pride? Are you a self-hating Jew that you don't want to identify as a Jewish writer?" But what she wants to say is let's not put labels on it, let's not put gender labels, let's not put race labels. We are this archetypal writer. So I think about it when I look at Wikipedia. Don't look under Wikipedia and look under my name. It's so bad. "She's a Chinese American writer who won the National Book Award for her Chinese American writing." Okay I don't mind being called a Chinese

American writer, but that's not all I am. And what helps me from not worrying so much about these labels is that when I have looked in bookstores and libraries and at universities, I see my books being shelved as *biography*, *autobiography*, *anthropology*, *sociology*, *China*, *California history*, oh even once it was in *Black Studies* [laughter], and oh and then *fiction* and *nonfiction*. If you have that pink edition of *The Woman Warrior*. Anybody have it? Oh, I want to show you something. Just to show that you can escape categorization, on the front cover it says, "Winner of the National Book Critics Award for Nonfiction" and then you turn it over and the publishers put at the top "Fiction." [laughter from Maxine and all] Yes, so I wouldn't worry about how you're categorized.

Question: "Is there any legitimate reason to include your first name on manuscript submissions? For example, first initials, last name, instead of gender identifiers?"

Maxine Hong Kingston: Well, when I read this question I right away thought of E.R. Doctorow, who just left us, and then J.K. Rowling, who's so big, and then E.E. Cummings. So what do people want to accomplish by having their initials and their last name? Is it because they would like, oh in the case of E.E. Cummings, does he want to be, like, really humble? So like, you know, all in small letters? He doesn't want to be famous and for everybody to recognize his big name? Is it because you would like the reader to read without prejudices and without thinking that I am hearing from a man or a woman? Maybe you want to leave it mysterious who you're hearing from? But it seems to me that you get the book out there and instantly they're gonna find out who you are. So really I don't think it makes any difference. It all depends on the writing itself and not who writes it, or the name on the cover.

Question: "What is your process of editing? Is it typically the same or does it vary?"

Maxine Hong Kingston: The best process of editing that I have is everything that I write I read aloud. When you read something aloud you're using all your body and you can hear the way your voice sounds, you can feel how the words feel in your mouth, your body will get all of the emotions that are in those words. So that's what you do, you read aloud, and all the punctuation just falls into place.

Question: "When did you know you were a writer?"

Maxine Hong Kingston: Three incarnations ago. [laughter] I think I've always been doing it. I have always felt this pouring forth of story. Of course, there was a time that I couldn't write yet because I was just a baby. But my mother says that I was born talking. Actually, she started like, "Oh you were three months old and you were already talking," and then she says, "Oh you were two months old," then, "Oh you were talking all along..." Oh you know, so when I'm talking, I was doing talk story. So it's all verbal and making up songs and ... You know what I think I'll do? I will say to you the first poem that I ever wrote—I mean, no not wrote, *said*. Okay, what it is, is that my, I had two great uncles, they're called my third grandfather and my fourth grandfather, but they are my great uncles, and they drove a stagecoach which they had converted into a vegetable wagon. They had two black horses and they drove those horses into town to deliver the vegetables. And we lived on the second floor and my mother opened the window and she'd hang me out the window and she had me around the waist and she says, "Sing to your grandfathers! Make them laugh, tell them a poem," and it was like she squeezed this poem out of me. [laughter] And so the translation is like, "Hey third grandfather, hey fourth grandfather, where are you going? Your horse shoes clippity clapping clippity clapping, where are you going?" [Collective *awwww*] And then my grandfathers would applaud and I thought, *Hey this is—I like this!* [laughter and

clapping] And then when I translate that, I see again how different my first language is from English. Even the sounds of the horses, like Chinese “Cup cup-ka, cup cup-ka” and the “clippity clop clippity clop.” And you know it’s just always playing with those rhythms and different languages. So still, I’m not a writer, I’m just talking and babbling and I think I became a writer when I got the alphabet. And you can say anything in the alphabet. You can even write Chinese, using the phonetic alphabet. And so as soon as I got the alphabet, that’s when I became a writer, in this incarnation.

As we have been thinking about what Virginia Woolf has listed as what a woman needs in order to write a novel, as she says, I realized that I did not have a room of my own, I did not have money, I had to work for money, and that means that there’s no time, and I got married and I have a kid, and I protest, and you know what, I could write those books anyway. [laughter from Maxine, applause and clapping].

That is what we came here to find out, that we could write those books anyway. In spite of all the obstacles, in spite of all of that, that’s what writing against the waves is, it’s writing the books anyway. Thank you so much.