Sympathy

Eileen Myles

She's rubbing his shoulder

and he's reading about

Western birds. There's a scoop

of light just above my knee

it resembles the world, the one I know

a layer of smoke spread thin, a shelf

my mind returns again &

again to the picture

you gave me. In pain.

I'm holding the receiver

in Denver some woman making

human eyes at me from her

blue seat, but I later

conclude she's crazy

I'm helpless, rushing back to fix the

"h," how can I help you

I think we tried this long enough

our cure

we would save us from everybody

else, we "got" it,

us

and now we're another falling down car

complaining animal

empty house

you bleeding & expanding

until

the red night itself

is your endless disappointment

in me

who promised so much

on that hill

O Glory to everybody & everything

that we will fish again & again

& get lucky

The Average Child

Mike Buscemi

I don’t cause teachers trouble;

My grades have been okay.

I listen in my classes.

I’m in school every day.

My teachers think I’m average;

My parents think so too.

I wish I didn’t know that, though;

There’s lots I’d like to do.

I’d like to build a rocket;

I read a book on how.

Or start a stamp collection…

But no use trying now.

’Cause, since I found I’m average,

I’m smart enough you see

To know there’s nothing special

I should expect of me.

I’m part of that majority,

That hump part of the bell,

Who spends his life unnoticed

In an average kind of hell.

Rotting Symbols

Eileen Myles

Soon I shall take more

I will get more light

and I'll know what I think

about that.

Driving down Second Ave. in a car

the frieze of my hand

like a grandmother

captured in an institution

I know I'll never live here again etc.

many many long years ago

Millions of peeps in the scrawl

the regular trees

the regular dog snort &

dig. In the West Village

you could put on a hat

a silly hat & it's clear

whereas over here

20 years passed

that rotting hat

it's loyalty to someone or something

that's really so gone

the moment clenched

like religion or government.

Wait a minute. I prefer

umm a beatle's cap

when it's really really old

neighborhood devoted to that.

Poetry is a sentimental act

everything spring she said

being surrounded by so much rot.

Pages & pages

mounds of them that I'm in

not some library but in your

little home, like you.

Every season I know I'm leaving

I'm as loyal as the cross

to this smeltering eccentricity

down by the river with Daddio

toss your ball in the river

in the future over bridges

they say you have to imagine

the 20th century.

All these buildings were colored

a blasted interior

scarlet curtains rattling day

cobwebs on inexplicable machinery

a theater once dwelled here

all I see is rotting ideas

the epics I imagined

the unified cast of everyone

eating turkey together

on a stage

my idea

like water towers popping up

feeling mellow

not exactly nothing all this time

but the buildings that are absolute

gone that I never

described. You can't kill

a poet. We just get erased &

written on. It aches in

my brain, my back

this beauty I'm eating my toast

everyone I knew you would

be dead tomorrow

& you were. The composing camera

infatuated with the shovel

on the lid & the pile

of rocks. He is not aging

same Alexandrian

blond in Bini-bons

the sirens are gods

when I lifted my head

from my swarming difficulty

You were so marvelous

bringing those toys to my feet

in between the invisibility of

the constant production & consumption

the network of that

& apart from the mold.

You survived.

Sticks

Thomas Sayers Ellis

My father was an enormous man

Who believed kindness and lack of size

Were nothing more than sissified

Signs of weakness. Narrow-minded,

His eyes were the worst kind

Of jury—deliberate, distant, hard.

No one could outshout him

Or make bigger fists. The few

Who tried got taken for bad,

Beat down, their bodies slammed.

I wanted to be just like him:

Big man, man of the house, king.

A plagiarist, hitting the things he hit,

I learned to use my hands watching him

Use his, pretending to slap mother

When he slapped mother.

He was sick. A diabetic slept

Like a silent vowel inside his well-built,

Muscular, dark body. Hard as all that

With similar weaknesses

—I discovered writing,

How words are parts of speech

With beats and breaths of their own.

Interjections like flams. Wham! Bam!

An heir to the rhythm

And tension beneath the beatings,

My first attempts were filled with noise,

Wild solos, violent uncontrollable blows.

The page tightened like a drum

Resisting the clockwise twisting

Of a handheld chrome key,

The noisy banging and tuning of growth.

The Hazards in Child-Naming

Brian Spears

My daughter’s name is Brittany Spears,

a choice for which—one day I hope—

she will forgive me. How’s one to know

what names will ring in peoples’ ears

in future years? No prophet, I.

I asked for it, I guess—James Bond

lived in my hometown, grumpy as

you might expect, from questions on

martini choice and British cars.

So did Fred Sanford, who sold Olds-

mobiles and Chevrolets. Had cards

made up—"No junk on this lot!"

Barbara Eden was divorced,

worked at Delchamps grocery,

had a son my sister’s age

who hated all the genie jokes.

Brittany goes to college soon.

I wonder if she’ll claim her name

her own, or if she’ll take the chance

to make a break from stardom not

her own, claim life undefined by

the tabloids’ curiosity.

Or maybe she’ll just hope the star

will fade, and leave her name, weathered

and worn, ready for another.

Ars Poetica

Dorothea Lasky

I wanted to tell the veterinary assistant about the cat video Jason sent me

But I resisted for fear she'd think it strange

I am very lonely

Yesterday my boyfriend called me, drunk again

And interspersed between ringing tears and clinginess

He screamed at me with a kind of bitterness

No other human had before to my ears

And told me that I was no good

Well maybe he didn't mean that

But that is what I heard

When he told me my life was not worthwhile

And my life's work the work of the elite.

I say I want to save the world but really

I want to write poems all day

I want to rise, write poems, go to sleep,

Write poems in my sleep

Make my dreams poems

Make my body a poem with beautiful clothes

I want my face to be a poem

I have just learned how to apply

Eyeliner to the corners of my eyes to make them appear wide

There is a romantic abandon in me always

I want to feel the dread for others

I can feel it through song

Only through song am I able to sum up so many words into a few

Like when he said I am no good

I am no good

Goodness is not the point anymore

Holding on to things

Now that's the point

"June 14, 1848"

Leigh Stein

Weather: hot. Health: fair.

Dear Diary, had to leave the baby

behind because she wouldn’t eat.

Sent Jon out to shoot a buffalo,

but he said they all looked so peaceful

he couldn’t bring himself to do it.

Figures. We’ll all be dead soon

enough. Waiting for the Indian

to get here so we can cross

the river. June 15, 1848

Weather: still hot. Health: same.

Dear Diary, Chastity’s doll

drowned. She wanted to dive

in after it, but I reminded her

that she doesn’t know how to swim.

Dove in anyway. Another one lost.

Jon says he’ll skin us a buffalo

so we have something to eat, but

only if the buffalo has recently

died of natural causes. Get

a grip, Jon, I told him.

June 16: wagon broke.

Eating wild blackberries while

we wait for another wagon

party to come by and help.

Jon has gone off on his own

to meditate and ask forgiveness

of the earth. Prudence might

have dysentery. Figures.

June 17: Some days

I feel like I’m just a character

in a game played by a sick,

sick person, who has sent me

on this journey only to kill all

my loved ones along the way.

June 18: help came, but

in the night they stole our oxen.

Guess we’ll just have to walk

to Oregon now. Are you there,

God? It’s me, Mary Jane.

Send me some oxen and

a son who likes to shoot things.

June 19: Lost Prudence

to dysentery. Should we

eat her? Tough question.

June 20: another river!

You have got to be kidding!

June 21: Managed to swim

across with diary on top

of my head so it wouldn’t

get wet. Jon and I have found

a tribe of Indians who will let us

stay with them. At least,

we think that’s what they said.

We don’t speak their language.

They seem to have indicated that

tonight we must follow them,

blindfolded, into a grove of trees,

and in the addled darkness our

dead will return and speak to us.

Zelda

Leigh Stein

I want Rattawut Lapcharoensap to write my biography.

I want him to come to my apartment when my boyfriend’s

not home. I want to make him coffee. I know that he

will want to tape record all of our sessions, and

after I die I want these tapes catalogued and archived

in the temperature controlled basement of an ivy league

university library. Additionally, I would like

my biography to have a neon purple dust jacket and

I would like Nancy Milford to grant us permission

to call the book Zelda even though there is already

a book called Zelda because it is about the life of Zelda

Fitzgerald. Maybe because it is just one word and

that word is a name we won’t need permission; I’m

not a lawyer. Also: I would like Martin Scorsese to direct

the movie based on the book based on my real life.

I don’t know if any of you have seen The Departed yet, but

I just saw it last night and my life is almost exactly like that

except instead of Boston I grew up in Chicago, and instead

of going to police academy I toured with Cirque du Soleil.

If Rattawut could just get a hold of a copy of the screenplay

and make Matt Damon a female trapeze artist

who was born to Prussian immigrant parents in 1984,

I’m sure he’d have a good three, four chapters right there, easy.

Have any of you ever tried to think of all the different ways

you could disappoint your parents and then done them?

I chose the calliope over the violin; I ran with gypsies;

I dated a boy three years younger than me just because

he had an apartment and I didn’t want to live

with my parents anymore. I want Rattawut to tell me

he likes my blue sweater. Maybe I’ll sit next to him

while I show him old photographs and wait to see

if he puts his hand on my leg. I don’t know what will happen

to me after I turn 23, but when my biography comes out

I will have to avoid the reviews and the interviews

and any website that gives away the ending.

I will probably have to spend a few weeks in a cabin

in Minnesota. By then, I will have broken up

with my boyfriend in order to marry Rattawut

beneath a chuppah in the western suburbs of Chicago

because even though I’m not technically Jewish,

my father is, and any tradition is better than none.

When Rattawut gives me my autographed copy,

I’ll stay inside my childhood, making daisy chains,

enrolled in summer programs for the gifted and talented.

I’ll concentrate on the photos of myself holding prize ribbons,

playing leapfrog, dressed up like Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

I won’t read the chapters about my future addiction

to pain medication, my lepidopterophobia,

my failed marriages, my miscarriages, the fire

that will destroy all my manuscripts, my fall

down the stairs. I won’t ever read the last chapter,

the one that describes in vivid detail the flames

that will erupt from my fatal motorcycle accident

somewhere in the Badlands, how it will take weeks

for them to discover my body. I am only 22 years old.

I want to fake my death on Facebook. I want a pony.

The Savage Banquet Of Machines (*For M.E*.)

Leah Umansky

When the machines all got together they shed their coats and met in the bare in the round. Cross legged, they crossed wires. They fused parts and aligned keys. It didn’t matter who was cuter than whom or QWERTY-er than whom. They dined on prosecco and bruschetta. Like ordinary people, they told vulgar jokes, and mocked the machines who were not present. They played charades, and hangman, and then one machine brought out a gold bag. It dazzled in the half-light. The machines got close-like – coming in towards each other like one would for a secret, but this was only a half-secret; a particle, really. In the golden bag, was a little knickknack M1 found behind his desk. It had marks on it, like small groves. M2 grabbed his case and turned his right arm until music started playing. He made M4 touch his middle, and then, they realized, he too was a grooved thing: a music box. M3 moved closer to the Golden One with the golden bag and felt the small groves that rested before him. No one could figure out what it was. M6 felt the soft side at the end and smelled it, pressed it, bounced it against the floor. She couldn’t quite place where she had seen this thing, but had a faint moment of déjà-vu. M8 pushed through the crowd and noticed the spike its end. He was about to jam it into his side, when the Golden One stopped him, “We can use this for our own good; Let me show you the way.” They all stepped back as the Golden One took a mustard sheet out of the bag, and placed it at the center of the floor. It seemed to be glowing in the light. M9 drew her little m’s close as they rolled their way to the front to get a good view. The Golden One pulled his levers and took the thing in its claw. He pressed the spike to the sheet and then there was a “gasp.” It was a miracle. The Golden One made lines on the mustard sheet and the machines knew this was a wild time. They were re-creating the past. They were opening doorways into rooms left cold. “Pencil,” said The Golden One. “Eraser,” said M10 as he flicked through his database with one hand. “Yes,” said the Golden One, “we are now participating.” Then came a loud belch, that came from afar, and the machines turned their faces across the room, towards the prosecco which was all over M9’s little m’s and already starting to rust their parts. They burped up bubbles and clanked their motors. The Machines laughed, and the light dimmed with their heightened electronic awareness.

Locks

Neil Gaiman

We owe it to each other to tell stories,

as people simply, not as father and daughter.

I tell it to you for the hundredth time:

"There was a little girl, called Goldilocks,

for her hair was long and golden,

and she was walking in the Wood and she saw — "

"— cows." You say it with certainty,

remembering the strayed heifers we saw in the woods

behind the house, last month.

"Well, yes, perhaps she saw cows,

but also she saw a house."

"— a great big house," you tell me.

"No, a little house, all painted, neat and tidy."

"A great big house."

You have the conviction of all two-year-olds.

I wish I had such certitude.

"Ah. Yes. A great big house.

And she went in . . ."

I remember, as I tell it, that the locks

Of Southey's heroine had silvered with age.

The Old Woman and the Three Bears . . .

Perhaps they had been golden once, when she was a child.

And now, we are already up to the porridge,

"And it was too— "

"— hot!"

"And it was too— "

— cold!"

And then it was, we chorus, "just right."

The porridge is eaten, the baby's chair is shattered,

Goldilocks goes upstairs, examines beds, and sleeps,

unwisely.

But then the bears return.

Remembering Southey still, I do the voices:

Father Bear's gruff boom scares you, and you delight in it.

When I was a small child and heard the tale,

if I was anyone I was Baby Bear,

my porridge eaten, and my chair destroyed,

my bed inhabited by some strange girl.

You giggle when I do the baby's wail,

"Someone's been eating my porridge, and they've eaten it —"

"All up," you say. A response it is,

Or an amen.

The bears go upstairs hesitantly,

their house now feels desecrated. They realize

what locks are for. They reach the bedroom.

"Someone's been sleeping in my bed."

And here I hesitate, echoes of old jokes,

soft-core cartoons, crude headlines, in my head.

One day your mouth will curl at that line.

A loss of interest, later, innocence.

Innocence; as if it were a commodity.

"And if I could," my father wrote to me,

huge as a bear himself, when I was younger,

"I would dower you with experience, without experience."

and I, in my turn, would pass that on to you.

But we make our own mistakes. We sleep

unwisely.

It is our right. It is our madness and our glory.

The repetition echoes down the years.

When your children grow; when your dark locks begin to silver,

when you are an old woman, alone with your three bears,

what will you see? What stories will you tell?

"And then Goldilocks jumped out of the window and she ran —

Together, now: "All the way home."

And then you say, "Again. Again. Again."

We owe it to each other to tell stories.

These days my sympathy's with Father Bear.

Before I leave my house I lock the door,

and check each bed and chair on my return.

Again.

Again.

Again..

The Wound

Ruth Stone

The shock comes slowly

as an afterthought.

First you hear the words

and they are like all other words,

ordinary, breathing out of lips,

moving toward you in a straight line.

Later they shatter

and rearrange themselves. They spell

something else hidden in the muscles

of the face, something the throat wanted to say.

Decoded, the message etches itself in acid

so every syllable becomes a sore.

The shock blooms into a carbuncle.

The body bends to accommodate it.

A special scarf has to be worn to conceal it.

It is now the size of a head.

The next time you look,

it has grown two eyes and a mouth.

It is difficult to know which to use.

Now you are seeing everything twice.

After a while it becomes an old friend.

It reminds you every day of how it came to be. Cat in an Empty Apartment

Wisława Szymborska, translated from the Polish by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

Die—you can’t do that to a cat.

Since what can a cat do

in an empty apartment?

Climb the walls?

Rub up against the furniture?

Nothing seems different here

but nothing is the same.

Nothing’s been moved

but there’s more space.

And at nighttime no lamps are lit.

Footsteps on the staircase,

but they’re new ones.

The hand that puts fish on the saucer

has changed, too.

Something doesn’t start

at its usual time.

Something doesn’t happen

as it should.

Someone was always, always here,

then suddenly disappeared

and stubbornly stays disappeared.

Every closet’s been examined.

Every shelf has been explored.

Excavations under the carpet turned up nothing.

A commandment was even broken:

papers scattered everywhere.

What remains to be done.

Just sleep and wait.

Just wait till he turns up,

just let him show his face.

Will he ever get a lesson

on what not to do to a cat.

Sidle toward him

as if unwilling

and ever so slow

on visibly offended paws,

and no leaps or squeals at least to start.

Five Ways to Kill a Man

Edwin Brock

There are many cumbersome ways to kill a man.

You can make him carry a plank of wood

to the top of a hill and nail him to it.

To do this properly you require a crowd of people

wearing sandals, a cock that crows, a cloak

to dissect, a sponge, some vinegar and one

man to hammer the nails home.

Or you can take a length of steel,

shaped and chased in a traditional way,

and attempt to pierce the metal cage he wears.

But for this you need white horses,

English trees, men with bows and arrows,

at least two flags, a prince, and a

castle to hold your banquet in.

Dispensing with nobility, you may, if the wind

allows, blow gas at him. But then you need

a mile of mud sliced through with ditches,

not to mention black boots, bomb craters,

more mud, a plague of rats, a dozen songs

and some round hats made of steel.

In an age of aeroplanes, you may fly

miles above your victim and dispose of him by

pressing one small switch. All you then

require is an ocean to separate you, two

systems of government, a nation's scientists,

several factories, a psychopath and

land that no-one needs for several years.

These are, as I began, cumbersome ways to kill a man.

Simpler, direct, and much more neat is to see

that he is living somewhere in the middle

of the twentieth century, and leave him there.

A Story That Could Be True

William Stafford

If you were exchanged in the cradle and

your real mother died

without ever telling the story

then no one knows your name,

and somewhere in the world

your father is lost and needs you

but you are far away.

He can never find

how true you are, how ready.

When the great wind comes

and the robberies of the rain

you stand on the corner shivering.

The people who go by–

you wonder at their calm.

They miss the whisper that runs

any day in your mind,

“Who are you really, wanderer?”–

and the answer you have to give

no matter how dark and cold

the world around you is:

“Maybe I’m a king.”

Autobiography In Five Chapters

Portia Nelson

1) I walk down the street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I fall in.

I am lost... I am hopeless.

It isn't my fault.

It takes forever to find a way out.

2) I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I pretend I don't see it.

I fall in again.

I can't believe I'm in the same place.

But it isn't my fault.

It still takes a long time to get out.

3) I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I see it is there.

I still fall in... it's a habit.

My eyes are open.

I know where I am.

It is my fault.

I get out immediately.

4) I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I walk around it.

5) I walk down another street.

A Lesson In Drawing

Nizar Qabbani

My son places his paint box in front of me

and asks me to draw a bird for him.

Into the color gray I dip the brush

and draw a square with locks and bars.

Astonishment fills his eyes:

"... But this is a prision, Father,

Don't you know, how to draw a bird?"

And I tell him: "Son, forgive me.

I've forgotten the shapes of birds."

My son puts the drawing book in front of me

and asks me to draw a wheatstalk.

I hold the pen

and draw a gun.

My son mocks my ignorance,

demanding,

"Don't you know, Father, the difference between a

wheatstalk and a gun?"

I tell him, "Son,

once I used to know the shapes of wheatstalks

the shape of the loaf

the shape of the rose

But in this hardened time

the trees of the forest have joined

the militia men

and the rose wears dull fatigues

In this time of armed wheatstalks

armed birds

armed culture

and armed religion

you can't buy a loaf

without finding a gun inside

you can't pluck a rose in the field

without its raising its thorns in your face

you can't buy a book

that doesn't explode between your fingers."

My son sits at the edge of my bed

and asks me to recite a poem,

A tear falls from my eyes onto the pillow.

My son licks it up, astonished, saying:

"But this is a tear, father, not a poem!"

And I tell him:

"When you grow up, my son,

and read the diwan of Arabic poetry

you'll discover that the word and the tear are twins

and the Arabic poem

is no more than a tear wept by writing fingers."

My son lays down his pens, his crayon box in

front of me

and asks me to draw a homeland for him.

The brush trembles in my hands

and I sink, weeping.

Pablo Neruda

Veinte poemas de amor y una

canción desesperada

XX

Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche.

Escribir, por ejemplo: "La noche está estrellada,

y tiritan, azules, los astros, a lo lejos".

El viento de la noche gira en el cielo y canta.

Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche.

Yo la quise, y a veces ella también me quiso.

En las noches como ésta la tuve entre mis brazos.

La besé tantas veces bajo el cielo infinito.

Ella me quiso, a veces yo también la quería.

Cómo no haber amado sus grandes ojos fijos.

Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche.

Pensar que no la tengo. Sentir que la he perdido.

Oir la noche inmensa, más inmensa sin ella.

Y el verso cae al alma como al pasto el rocío.

Qué importa que mi amor no pudiera guardarla.

La noche está estrellada y ella no está conmigo.

Eso es todo. A lo lejos alguien canta. A lo lejos.

Mi alma no se contenta con haberla perdido.

Como para acercarla mi mirada la busca.

Mi corazón la busca, y ella no está conmigo.

La misma noche que hace blanquear los mismos árboles.

Nosotros, los de entonces, ya no somos los mismos.

Ya no la quiero, es cierto, pero cuánto la quise.

Mi voz buscaba el viento para tocar su oído.

De otro. Será de otro. Como antes de mis besos.

Su voz, su cuerpo claro. Sus ojos infinitos.

Ya no la quiero, es cierto, pero tal vez la quiero.

Es tan corto el amor, y es tan largo el olvido.

Porque en noches como ésta la tuve entre mis brazos,

mi alma no se contenta con haberla perdido.

Aunque éste sea el último dolor que ella me causa,

y éstos sean los últimos versos que yo le escribo.

Twenty Love Poems and a

Song of Despair

XX

Tonight I can write the saddest lines.

Write for example, 'The night is shattered

and the blue stars shiver in the distance.'

The night wind revolves in the sky and sings.

Tonight I can write the saddest lines.

I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too.

Through nights like this one I held her in my arms.

I kissed her again and again under the endless sky.

She loved me, sometimes I loved her too.

How could one not have loved her great still eyes.

Tonight I can write the saddest lines.

To think that I do not have her. To feel that I have lost her.

To hear immense night, still more immense without her.

And the verse falls to the soul like dew to a pasture.

What does it matter that my love could not keep her.

The night is shattered and she is not with me.

This is all. In the distance someone is singing. In the distance.

My soul is not satisfied that it has lost her.

My sight searches for her as though to go to her.

My heart looks for her, and she is not with me.

The same night whitening the same trees.

We, of that time, are no longer the same.

I no longer love her, that's certain, but how I loved her.

My voice tried to find the wind to touch her hearing.

Another's. She will be another's. Like my kisses before.

Her voice. Her bright body. Her infinite eyes.

I no longer love her, that's certain, but maybe I love her.

Love is short, forgetting is so long.

Because through nights like this one I held her in my arms

my soul is not satisfied that it has lost her.

Though this be the last pain that she makes me suffer

and these the last verses that I write for her.

A Love To Die For

Gabriel Gadfly

Darling,

in the event of a zombie apocalypse,

I’m gonna marry you.

I know, that romantic testimonial

isn’t quite the matrimonial proposition

you were expecting,

but I’m projecting a lovely future for us!

You see, when the dead break free,

I’ll come save you.

I’ll be your knight in shining Kevlar,

your cranium-crushing crusader,

and safe in our barricaded bungalow,

we’ll match moans for groans

with the shambling horde outside.

We’ll make love ’til death do we part,

or at least til we start

to run out of supplies,

and if we get in a pinch,

I’ve got a surprise:

see, I’ll paralyze them with poetry,

’cause if there’s anything

a zombie understands, it’s desire.

Meanwhile,

you lay down suppressive fire

and we’ll take out as many as we can.

If in the end we are overrun,

I’ll let them take me

so you can get away.

They can have my brain–

it’s my heart that beats for you.

Some People

Charles Bukowski

some people never go crazy.

me, sometimes I'll lie down behind the couch

for 3 or 4 days.

they'll find me there.

it's Cherub, they'll say, and

they pour wine down my throat

rub my chest

sprinkle me with oils.

then, I'll rise with a roar,

rant, rage -

curse them and the universe

as I send them scattering over the

lawn.

I'll feel much better,

sit down to toast and eggs,

hum a little tune,

suddenly become as lovable as a

pink

overfed whale.

some people never go crazy.

what truly horrible lives

they must lead.

How To Watch Your Brother Die

Michael Lassell

When the call comes, be calm.

Say to your wife, "My brother is dying. I have to fly

to California."

try not to be shocked that he already looks like

a cadaver.

Say to the young man sitting by your brother's side,

"I'm his brother."

Try not to be shocked when the young man says,

"I'm his lover. Thanks for coming."

Listen to the doctor with a steel face on.

Sign the necessary forms.

Tell the doctor you will take care of everything.

Wonder why doctors are so remote.

Watch the lover's eyes as they stare into

your brother's eyes as they stare into

space.

Wonder what they see there.

Remember the time he was jealous and

opened your eyebrow with a sharp stick.

Forgive him out loud

even if he can't

understand you.

Realize the scar will be

all that's left of him.

Over coffee in the hospital cafeteria

say to the lover, "You're an extremely good-looking

young man."

Hear him say,

"I never thought I was good enough looking to

deserve your brother."

Watch the tears well up in his eyes. Say,

"I'm sorry. I don't know what it means to be

the lover of another man."

Hear him say,

"Its just like a wife, only the commitment is

deeper because the odds against you are so much

greater."

Say nothing, but

take his hand like a brother's.

Drive to Mexico for unproven drugs that might

help him live longer.

Explain what they are to the border guard.

Fill with rage when he informs you,

"You can't bring those across."

Begin to grow loud.

Feel the lover's hand on your arm

restraining you. See in the guard's eye

how much a man can hate another man.

Say to the lover, "How can you stand it?"

Hear him say, "You get used to it."

Think of one of your children getting used to

another man's hatred.

Call your wife on the telephone. Tell her,

"He hasn't much time.

I'll be home soon." Before you hang up say,

"How could anyone's commitment be deeper than

a husband and a wife?" Hear her say,

"Please. I don't want to know all the details."

When he slips into an irrevocable coma,

hold his lover in your arms while he sobs,

no longer strong. Wonder how much longer

you will be able to be strong.

Feel how it feels to hold a man in your arms

whose arms are used to holding men.

Offer God anything to bring your brother back.

Know you have nothing God could possible want.

Curse God, but do not

abandon Him.

Stare at the face of the funeral director

when he tells you he will not

embalm the body for fear of

contamination. Let him see in your eyes

how much a man can hate another man.

Stand beside a casket covered in flowers,

white flowers. Say,

"thank you for coming," to each of seven hundred men

who file past in tears, some of them

holding hands. Know that your brother's life

was not what you imagined. Overhear two

mourners say, "I wonder who'll be next?" and

"I don't care anymore,

as long as it isn't you."

Arrange to take an early flight home.

His lover will drive you to the airport.

When your flight is announced say,

awkwardly, "If I can do anything, please

let me know." Do not flinch when he says,

"Forgive yourself for not wanting to know him

after he told you. He did."

Stop and let it soak in. Say,

"He forgave me, or he knew himself?"

"Both," the lover will say, not knowing what else

to do. Hold him like a brother while he

kisses you on the cheek. Think that

you haven't been kissed by a man since

your father died. Think,

"This is no moment to be strong."

Fly first class and drink Scotch. Stroke

your split eyebrow with a finger and

think of your brother alive. Smile

at the memory and think

how your children will feel in your arms

warm and friendly and without challenge.

hell is a lonely place

Charles Bukowski

he was 65, his wife was 66, had

Alzheimer's disease.

he had cancer of the

mouth.

there were

operations, radiation

treatments

which decayed the bones in his

jaw

which then had to be

wired.

daily he put his wife in

rubber diapers

like a

baby.

unable to drive in his

condition

he had to take a taxi to

the medical

center,

had difficulty speaking,

had to

write the directions

down.

on his last visit

they informed him

there would be another

operation: a bit more

left

cheek and a bit more

tounge.

when he returned

he changed his wife's

diapers

put on the tv

dinners, watched the

evening news

then went to the bedroom, got the

gun, put it to her

temple, fired.

she fell to the

left, he sat upon the

couch

put the gun into his

mouth, pulled the

trigger.

the shots didn't arouse

the neighbors.

later

the burning tv dinners

did.

somebody arrived, pushed

the door open, saw

it.

soon

the police arrived and

went through their

routine, found

some items:

a closed savings

account and

a checkbook with a

balance of

$1.14

suicide, they

deduced.

in three weeks

there were two

new tenants:

a computer engineer

named

Ross

and his wife

Anatana

who studied

ballet.

they looked like another

upwardly mobile

pair.

Roll the Dice

Charles Bukowski

if you’re going to try, go all the

way.

otherwise, don’t even start.

if you’re going to try, go all the

way.

this could mean losing girlfriends,

wives, relatives, jobs and

maybe your mind.

go all the way.

it could mean not eating for 3 or 4 days.

it could mean freezing on a

park bench.

it could mean jail,

it could mean derision,

mockery,

isolation.

isolation is the gift,

all the others are a test of your

endurance, of

how much you really want to

do it.

and you’ll do it

despite rejection and the worst odds

and it will be better than

anything else

you can imagine.

if you’re going to try,

go all the way.

there is no other feeling like

that.

you will be alone with the gods

and the nights will flame with

fire.

do it, do it, do it.

do it.

all the way

all the way.

you will ride life straight to

perfect laughter, its

the only good fight

there is.

Butter

Elizabeth Alexander

My mother loves butter more than I do,

more than anyone. She pulls chunks off

the stick and eats it plain, explaining

cream spun around into butter! Growing up

we ate turkey cutlets sauteed in lemon

and butter, butter and cheese on green noodles,

butter melting in small pools in the hearts

of Yorkshire puddings, butter better

than gravy staining white rice yellow,

butter glazing corn in slipping squares,

butter the lava in white volcanoes

of hominy grits, butter softening

in a white bowl to be creamed with white

sugar, butter disappearing into

whipped sweet potatoes, with pineapple,

butter melted and curdy to pour

over pancakes, butter licked off the plate

with warm Alaga syrup. When I picture

the good old days I am grinning greasy

with my brother, having watched the tiger

chase his tail and turn to butter. We are

Mumbo and Jumbo’s children despite

historical revision, despite

our parent’s efforts, glowing from the inside

out, one hundred megawatts of butter.

Elegy for the Forgotten Oldsmobile  
[Adrian C. Louis](http://wwww.adrian-c-louis.com/)

July 4th and all is Hell.  
Outside my shuttered breath the streets bubble  
with flame-loined kids in designer jeans  
looking for people to rape or razor.  
A madman covered with running sores  
is on the street corner singing:  
O beautiful for spacious skies…  
This landscape is far too convenient  
to be either real or metaphor.  
In an alley behind a 7-11  
a Black pimp dressed in Harris tweed  
preaches fidelity to two pimply whores  
whose skin is white though they aren’t quite.  
And crosstown in the sane precincts  
of Brown University where I added rage  
to Cliff Notes and got two degrees  
bearded scientists are stringing words  
outside the language inside the guts of atoms  
and I don’t know why I’ve come back to visit.

O Uncle Adrian! I’m in the reservation of my mind.  
Chicken bones in a cardboard casket  
meditate upon the linoleum floor.  
Outside my flophouse door stewed  
and sinister winos snore in a tragic chorus.

The snowstorm t.v. in the lobby’s their mother.  
Outside my window on the jumper’s ledge  
ice wraiths shiver and coat my last cans of Bud  
though this is summer I don’t know why or where  
the souls of Indian sinners fly.  
Uncle Adrian, you died last week—cirrhosis.  
I still have the photo of you in your Lovelock  
letterman’s jacket—two white girls on your arms—  
first team All-State halfback in ’45, ’46.

But nothing is static. I am in the reservation of  
my mind. Embarrassed moths unravel my shorts  
thread by thread asserting insectival lust.  
I’m a naked locoweed in a city scene.  
What are my options? Why am I back in this city?  
When I sing of the American night my lungs billow  
Camels astride hacking appeals for cessation.  
My mother’s zippo inscribed: “Stewart Indian School—1941”  
explodes in my hand in elegy to Dresden Antietam  
and Wounded Knee and finally I have come to see  
this mad fag nation is dying.  
Our ancestors’ murderer is finally dying and I guess  
I should be happy and dance with the spirit or project  
my regret to my long-lost high school honey  
but history has carried me to a place  
where she has a daughter older than we were  
when we first shared flesh.

She is the one who could not marry me  
because of the dark-skin ways in my blood.  
Love like that needs no elegy but because  
of the baked-prick possibility of the flame lakes of Hell  
I will give one last supper and sacrament  
to the dying beast of need disguised as love  
on deathrow inside my ribcage.  
I have not forgotten the years of midnight hunger  
when I could see how the past had guided me  
and I cried and held the pillow, muddled  
in the melodrama of the quite immature  
but anyway, Uncle Adrian…  
Here I am in the reservation of my mind  
and silence settles forever  
the vacancy of this cheap city room.  
In the wine darkness my cigarette coal  
tints my face with Geronimo’s rage  
and I’m in the dry hills with a Winchester  
waiting to shoot the lean, learned fools  
who taught me to live-think in English.

Uncle Adrian…  
to make a long night story short,  
you promised to give me your Oldsmobile in 1962.  
How come you didn’t?  
I could have had some really good times in high school.

Missed Connections

Sherman Alexie

Descending, in our forty-seat airplane,

I saw an older man had parked his car

At the edge of the runway. He waved

At us, so I waved, but we were too far

Apart to see each other, and he was not

Welcoming me anyway. Near the back

Of the plane, a woman, hair in a knot,

Clutching a tattered Vintage paperback,

Waved and smiled and hugged her seatmate.

“That’s my husband,” she said. “I haven’t seen

Him in ten years. It’s so great, it’s so great.”

She shook and wept; it was quite a scene—

A mystery—and I was hungry to know

Why a wife and husband had lived apart

For a decade. I wanted to ask, but no,

I decided to imagine the parts

They’d been playing: She was the Red Cross

Nurse who’d been kidnapped by militant

Rebels, then blindfolded and marched across

The border, but he’d remained diligent

For ten epic years, pressuring despots

And presidents, until the March dawn

When Australian tourists spotted

Her staggering across a Thai hotel lawn.

Starved and weak, she fell into their arms.

“I’ve been released,” she said. “I’ve been released.”

Traded for ammunition and small arms,

And treated for malnutrition and disease,

She was only now, six weeks after rescue,

Reuniting with her husband. She was first

Off the airplane—we all gave her the room—

And she, aching with a different thirst,

Burst through the security gates

And rushed into her husband’s embrace.

Later, after they had gone, as I waited

For my bags, I saw a friendly face—

A young woman who’d just witnessed

What I’d witnessed. I wiped away tears.

“Ten years,” I said. “I’d die from the stress.”

“Oh, no,” she said. “It wasn’t ten years.

It was ten days.” Jesus, I had misheard

The old woman and created glory

Out of the ordinary. Just one word,

Misplaced, turned a true and brief story

Into a myth. And, yes, it was lovely

To see how the long-in-love can stay

In love. But who truly gets that lonely

After only ten days away?

I thought I had witnessed an epic—

A Santa Barbara elderly Odyssey—

But it was something more simplistic.

It was a love story, small and silly,

And this is cruel, but here’s my confession:

Depending on the weather or my mood,

I’ll repeat the myth because it’s more impressive

Than something as tender as the truth.The Facebook Sonnet

Sherman Alexie

Welcome to the endless high-school

Reunion. Welcome to past friends

And lovers, however kind or cruel.

Let’s undervalue and unmend

The present. Why can’t we pretend

Every stage of life is the same?

Let’s exhume, resume, and extend

Childhood. Let’s all play the games

That occupy the young. Let fame

And shame intertwine. Let one’s search

For God become public domain.

Let church.com become our church.

Let’s sign up, sign in, and confess

Here at the altar of loneliness.

Knowledge

Philip Memmer

My philosopher friend is explaining again  
that the bottle of well-chilled beer in my hand

might not be a bottle of beer,  
that the trickle of bottle-sweat cooling in my palm

might not be wet, might not be cool,  
that in fact it's impossible ever to know

if I'm holding a bottle at all.  
I try to follow his logic, flipping the steaks

that are almost certainly hissing  
over the bed of coals - coals I'd swear

were black at first, then gray, then red -   
coals we could spread out and walk on

and why not, I ask, since we'll never be sure  
if our feet burn, if our soles

blister and peel, if our faithlessness  
is any better or worse a tool

than the firewalker's can-do extreme.  
Exactly, he smiles. Behind the fence

the moon rises, or seems to.  
Have another. Whatever else is true,

the coals feel hotter than ever  
as the darkness begins to do

what darkness does. Another what? I ask.

Bey the Light

Words by Beyoncé

Remixed by Forrest Gander

It’s my daughter, she’s my biggest muse.

There’s someone, we all find out soon,

more important than ourselves to lose.

I feel a deep bond with young children –

all those photos in my dressing room –

especially those who’ve been stricken,

Children I’ve met across the years –

they uplift me like pieces of moon,

and guide me, whispering in my ear

I’m turned to spirits, the emotions of others.

And I feel her presence all the time

though I never met my grandmother.

I learned at a very young age,

when I need to tap some extra strength,

to put my persona, Sasha, on stage.

Though we’re different as blue and red,

I’m not afraid to draw from her

in performance, rifts, even in bed.

I saw a TV preacher when I was scared,

at four or five, about bad dreams,

who promised he’d say a prayer

If I put my hand to the TV.

That’s the first time I remember prayer,

an electric current humming through me.

You call me a singer, but I’m called to transform,

to suck up the grief, anxiety, and loss

of those who hear me into my song’s form.

I’m a vessel for all that isn’t right,

for break-ups and lies and double-cross.

I sing into that vessel a healing light.

To let go of pain that people can’t bear.

I don’t do that myself, I call in the light.

I summon God to take me there.

Utopias, they don’t much interest me.

I always mess things up a bit.

It’s chaos, in part, that helps us see.

But for my daughter I dream a day

when no one roots for others to fail,

when we all mean what we say.

The Flowers Alone

William Carlos Williams

I should have to be

Chaucer to describe

them—

Loss keeps

me from such a

catalogue—

But!

—low, the

violet, scentless as

it is here! higher

the peartree in full

bloom through which

a light falls as

rain—

And that is gone—

Only, there remains—

Now!

the cherry trees

white in all black

yards—

And bare as

they are the coral

peach trees melting

the harsh air—

excellence

priceless beyond

all later

fruit!

And now, driven, I

go, forced to

another day—

Whose yellow quilt

flapping in the

stupendous light—

Forsythia, quince

blossoms—

and all

the living hybrids

The Centenarian

William Carlos Williams

I don’t think we shall

any of us live as long as

has she, we haven’t the

steady mind and strong heart—

*Wush a deen a daddy o*

*There’s whisky in the jar!*

I wish you could have seen

her yesterday

with her red cheeks and

snow-white hair

so cheerful and contented—

she was a picture—

We sang hymns for her.

She couldn’t join us but

when we had done she raised

her hands and clapped them

softly together

Then when I brought her

her whisky and water I said

to her as we always do—

*Wush a deem a daddy o*

*There’s whisky in the jar!*

She couldn’t say the first

part but she managed to

repeat at the end—

*There’s whisky in the jar!*

3 Stances

William Carlos Williams

1

ELAINE

poised for the leap she

is not yet ready for

—save in her eyes

her bare toes

starting over the clipt

lawn where she may

not go emphasize summer

and the curl

of her blond hair

2

ERICA

the melody line is

everything

in this composition

when I first witnessed

your head

and held it

admiringly between

my fingers

I bowed

in approval

at the Scandinavian

name they’d

given you Erica after

your father’s

forebears

the rest remains a

mystery

your snub nose spinning

3

EMILY

your long legs

built

to carry high

the small head

your

grandfather

knows

if he knows

anything

gives

the dance as

your genius

the cleft in

your

chin’s curl

permitting

may it

carry you far

The Boss Tell Me: A New Poem

Victoria Chang

The boss tells me of the billionaire who likes me   
            who likes my work again this year   
      this year I am safe for another year I can stand by   
                  for another year I can align   
  
myself with the bystanders who have different   
            standards for another year I can mortgage my heart   
      in monthly installments for another year I can fill  
                  my garage with scooters and things  
  
with motors like Mona at the end of the hall with   
            her loan and home and college bills who never   
      sees anything in the office never seems to hear   
                  anything in the office but her own  
  
heartbeat her own term sheet for another year   
            when asked about Mary or Tom or Larry I too   
      can say I never saw anything never saw the boss  
                  wind them up and point them towards the  
  
edge of the roof before Mary went over the   
            edge I threw down a pillow in the shape of a  
      pet and hoped it landed under her I didn’t stay long   
                  enough to see what happened

I once was a child am a child am someone’s child

Victoria Chang

I once was a child am a child am someone’s child  
       not my mother’s not my father’s the boss  
   gave us special treatment treatment for something  
          special a lollipop or a sticker glitter from the

toy box the better we did the better the plastic prize made  
       in China one year everyone got a spinning top  
   one year everyone got a tap on their shoulders  
          one year everyone was fired everyone

fired but me one year we all lost our words one year  
       my father lost his words to a stroke  
   a stroke of bad luck stuck his words  
          used to be so worldly his words fired

him let him go without notice can they do that  
       can she do that yes she can in this land she can  
   once we sang songs around a piano this land is your land  
          this land is my land in this land someone always

owns the land in this land someone who owns  
       the land owns the buildings on the land owns the  
   people in the buildings unless an earthquake  
          sucks the land in like a long noodle

He Would Never Use One Word Where None Would Do

Philip Levine

If you said “Nice day,” he would look up  
at the three clouds riding overhead,  
nod at each, and go back to doing what-  
ever he was doing or not doing.  
If you asked for a smoke or a light,  
he’d hand you whatever he found  
in his pockets: a jackknife, a hankie –  
usually unsoiled — a dollar bill,  
a subway token. Once he gave me  
half the sandwich he was eating  
at the little outdoor restaurant  
on La Guardia Place. I remember  
a single sparrow was perched on the back  
of his chair, and when he held out  
a piece of bread on his open palm,  
the bird snatched it up and went back to  
its place without even a thank you,  
one hard eye staring at my bad eye  
as though I were next. That was in May  
of ’97, spring had come late,  
but the sun warmed both of us for hours  
while silence prevailed, if you can call  
the blaring of taxi horns and the trucks  
fighting for parking and the kids on skates  
streaming past silence. My friend Frankie  
was such a comfort to me that year,  
the year of the crisis. He would turn  
up his great dark head just going gray  
until his eyes met mine, and that was all  
I needed to go on talking nonsense  
as he sat patiently waiting me out,  
the bird staring over his shoulder.  
“Silence is silver,” my Zaydee had said,  
getting it wrong and right, just as he said  
“Water is thicker than blood,” thinking  
this made him a real American.  
Frankie was already American,  
being half German, half Indian.  
Fact is, silence is the perfect water:  
unlike rain it falls from no clouds  
to wash our minds, to ease our tired eyes,  
to give heart to the thin blades of grass  
fighting through the concrete for even air  
dirtied by our endless stream of words.

On 52nd Street

Philip Levine

Down sat Bud, raised his hands,

the Deuces silenced, the lights

lowered, and breath gathered

for the coming storm. Then nothing,

not a single note. Outside starlight

from heaven fell unseen, a quarter-

moon, promised, was no show,

ditto the rain. Late August of '50,

NYC, the long summer of abundance

and our new war. In the mirror behind

the bar, the spirits—imitating you—

stared at themselves. At the bar

the tenor player up from Philly, shut

his eyes and whispered to no one,

"Same thing last night." Everyone

been coming all week long

to hear *this*. The big brown bass

sighed and slumped against

the piano, the cymbals held

their dry cheeks and stopped

chicking and chucking. You went

back to drinking and ignored

the unignorable. When the door

swung open it was Pettiford

in work clothes, midnight suit,

starched shirt, narrow black tie,

spit shined shoes, as ready

as he'd ever be. Eyebrows

raised, the Irish bartender

shook his head, so Pettiford eased

himself down at an empty table,

closed up his *Herald Tribune*,

and shook his head. Did the TV

come on, did the jukebox bring us

Dinah Washington, did the stars

keep their appointments, did the moon

show, quartered or full, sprinkling

its soft light down? The night's

still there, just where it was, just

where it'll always be without

its music. You're still there too

holding your breath. Bud walked out.

A Story

Philip Levine

Everyone loves a story. Let's begin with a house.

We can fill it with careful rooms and fill the rooms

with things—tables, chairs, cupboards, drawers

closed to hide tiny beds where children once slept

or big drawers that yawn open to reveal

precisely folded garments washed half to death,

unsoiled, stale, and waiting to be worn out.

There must be a kitchen, and the kitchen

must have a stove, perhaps a big iron one

with a fat black pipe that vanishes into the ceiling

to reach the sky and exhale its smells and collusions.

This was the center of whatever family life

was here, this and the sink gone yellow

around the drain where the water, dirty or pure,

ran off with no explanation, somehow like the point

of this, the story we promised and may yet deliver.

Make no mistake, a family was here. You see

the path worn into the linoleum where the wood,

gray and certainly pine, shows through.

Father stood there in the middle of his life

to call to the heavens he imagined above the roof

must surely be listening. When no one answered

you can see where his heel came down again

and again, even though he'd been taught

never to demand. Not that life was especially cruel;

they had well water they pumped at first,

a stove that gave heat, a mother who stood

at the sink at all hours and gazed longingly

to where the woods once held the voices

of small bears—themselves a family—and the songs

of birds long fled once the deep woods surrendered

one tree at a time after the workmen arrived

with jugs of hot coffee. The worn spot on the sill

is where Mother rested her head when no one saw,

those two stained ridges were handholds

she relied on; they never let her down.

Where is she now? You think you have a right

to know everything? The children tiny enough

to inhabit cupboards, large enough to have rooms

of their own and to abandon them, the father

with his right hand raised against the sky?

If those questions are too personal, then tell us,

where are the woods? They had to have been

because the continent was clothed in trees.

We all read that in school and knew it to be true.

Yet all we see are houses, rows and rows

of houses as far as sight, and where sight vanishes

into nothing, into the new world no one has seen,

there has to be more than dust, wind-borne particles

of burning earth, the earth we lost, and nothing else.

Mother Night

James Weldon Johnson

Eternities before the first-born day,

Or ere the first sun fledged his wings of flame,

Calm Night, the everlasting and the same,

A brooding mother over chaos lay.

And whirling suns shall blaze and then decay,

Shall run their fiery courses and then claim

The haven of the darkness whence they came;

Back to Nirvanic peace shall grope their way.

So when my feeble sun of life burns out,

And sounded is the hour for my long sleep,

I shall, full weary of the feverish light,

Welcome the darkness without fear or doubt,

And heavy-lidded, I shall softly creep

Into the quiet bosom of the Night.

I Eat Cannibals  
Gina Abelkop

You’re my proudest     dish soaking  
up sun in the graveyard  
Anna     roasting in the stink  
of all our town’s dead children  
Anna     Still you are so sweet  
  
to me         Still I remain  
cannibal        sappy murderousy  
for you Anna     What’s this  
edible love Anna     if not good     our  
kind of good        Anna and Dora and     good     good     good

# FARM 2

# Paul Legault

The contract began somewhat sporadically  
Involving the land animals' removal of their others  
While keeping a few agents at hand  
To bridge one thing from another.  
Our status felt unnatural.  
We drew a force from the property  
Of course, but that didn't mean anything  
When it came to be about an emotional attachment  
To the physical partition that exists  
Uninjured by sight and our sudden escape plans.

So we left the city for once  
In a steadfast manner with the new girl  
Who established that white fences exist   
And that the comings and goings could  
Do just that. Poppies and irises  
Negate them. The purple of the ages  
Calls for you, wretchedly. Few enough  
Get by, but this was their season  
With you amongst them. There was one   
Who hadn't been excused to be there.

The White Witch

James Weldon Johnson

O brothers mine, take care! Take care!

The great white witch rides out to-night.

Trust not your prowess nor your strength,

Your only safety lies in flight;

For in her glance there is a snare,

And in her smile there is a blight.

The great white witch you have not seen?

Then, younger brothers mine, forsooth,

Like nursery children you have looked

For ancient hag and snaggle-tooth;

But no, not so; the witch appears

In all the glowing charms of youth.

Her lips are like carnations, red,

Her face like new-born lilies, fair,

Her eyes like ocean waters, blue,

She moves with subtle grace and air,

And all about her head there floats

The golden glory of her hair.

But though she always thus appears

In form of youth and mood of mirth,

Unnumbered centuries are hers,

The infant planets saw her birth;

The child of throbbing Life is she,

Twin sister to the greedy earth.

And back behind those smiling lips,

And down within those laughing eyes,

And underneath the soft caress

Of hand and voice and purring sighs,

The shadow of the panther lurks,

The spirit of the vampire lies.

For I have seen the great white witch,

And she has led me to her lair,

And I have kissed her red, red lips

And cruel face so white and fair;

Around me she has twined her arms,

And bound me with her yellow hair.

I felt those red lips burn and sear

My body like a living coal;

Obeyed the power of those eyes

As the needle trembles to the pole;

And did not care although I felt

The strength go ebbing from my soul.

Oh! she has seen your strong young limbs,

And heard your laughter loud and gay,

And in your voices she has caught

The echo of a far-off day,

When man was closer to the earth;

And she has marked you for her prey.

She feels the old Antaean strength

In you, the great dynamic beat

Of primal passions, and she sees

In you the last besieged retreat

Of love relentless, lusty, fierce,

Love pain-ecstatic, cruel-sweet.

O, brothers mine, take care! Take care!

The great white witch rides out to-night.

O, younger brothers mine, beware!

Look not upon her beauty bright;

For in her glance there is a snare,

And in her smile there is a blight.

The Creation

James Weldon Johnson

And God stepped out on space,  
And He looked around and said,  
*"I'm lonely --  
I'll make me a world."*

And far as the eye of God could see  
Darkness covered everything,  
Blacker than a hundred midnights  
Down in a cypress swamp.

Then God smiled,  
And the light broke,  
And the darkness rolled up on one side,  
And the light stood shining on the other,  
And God said, *"That's good!"*

Then God reached out and took the light in His hands,  
And God rolled the light around in His hands  
Until He made the sun;  
And He set that sun a-blazing in the heavens.  
And the light that was left from making the sun  
God gathered it up in a shining ball  
And flung it against the darkness,  
Spangling the night with the moon and stars.  
Then down between  
The darkness and the light  
He hurled the world;  
And God said, *"That's good!"*

Then God himself stepped down --  
And the sun was on His right hand,  
And the moon was on His left;  
The stars were clustered about His head,  
And the earth was under His feet.  
And God walked, and where He trod  
His footsteps hollowed the valleys out  
And bulged the mountains up.

Then He stopped and looked and saw  
That the earth was hot and barren.  
So God stepped over to the edge of the world  
And He spat out the seven seas;  
He batted His eyes, and the lightnings flashed;  
He clapped His hands, and the thunders rolled;  
And the waters above the earth came down,  
The cooling waters came down.

Then the green grass sprouted,  
And the little red flowers blossomed,  
The pine tree pointed his finger to the sky,  
And the oak spread out his arms,  
The lakes cuddled down in the hollows of the ground,  
And the rivers ran down to the sea;  
And God smiled again,  
And the rainbow appeared,  
And curled itself around His shoulder.

Then God raised His arm and He waved His hand  
Over the sea and over the land,  
And He said, *"Bring forth! Bring forth!"*  
And quicker than God could drop His hand.  
Fishes and fowls  
And beasts and birds  
Swam the rivers and the seas,  
Roamed the forests and the woods,  
And split the air with their wings.  
And God said, *"That's good!"*

Then God walked around,  
And God looked around  
On all that He had made.  
He looked at His sun,  
And He looked at His moon,  
And He looked at His little stars;  
He looked on His world  
With all its living things,  
And God said, *"I'm lonely still."*

Then God sat down  
On the side of a hill where He could think;  
By a deep, wide river He sat down;  
With His head in His hands,  
God thought and thought,  
Till He thought, *"I'll make me a man!"*

Up from the bed of the river  
God scooped the clay;  
And by the bank of the river  
He kneeled Him down;  
And there the great God Almighty  
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,  
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,  
Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand;  
This Great God,  
Like a mammy bending over her baby,  
Kneeled down in the dust  
Toiling over a lump of clay  
Till He shaped it in His own image;

Then into it He blew the breath of life,  
And man became a living soul.  
Amen. Amen.

Metropolitan Nightmare

Stephen Vincent Benét

It rained a lot that spring. You woke in the morning

And saw the sky still clouded, the streets still wet,

But nobody noticed so much, except the taxis

And the people who parade. You don't, in a city.

The parks got very green. All the trees were green

Far into July and August, heavy with leaf,

Heavy with leaf and the long roots boring and spreading,

But nobody noticed that but the city gardeners

And they don't talk.

Oh, on Sundays, perhaps you'd notice:

Walking through certain blocks, by the shut, proud houses

With the windows boarded, the people gone away,

You'd suddenly see the queerest small shoots of green

Poking through cracks and crevices in the stone

And a bird-sown flower, red on a balcony,

But then you made jokes about grass growing in the streets

And gags and a musical show called "Hot and Wet."

It made a good box for the papers. When the flamingo

Flew into a meeting of the Board of Estimate,

The new mayor acted at once and called the photographers.

When the first green creeper crawled upon Brooklyn Bridge,

They thought it was ornamental. They let it stay.

That was the year the termites came to New York

And they don't do well in cold climates—but listen, Joe,

They're only ants, and ants are nothing but insects.

It was funny and yet rather wistful, in a way

(As Heywood Broun pointed out in the *World-Telegram*)

To think of them looking for wood in a steel city.

It made you feel about life. It was too divine.

There were funny pictures by all the smart, funny artists

And Macy's ran a terribly clever ad:

"The Widow's Termite" or something.

There was no

Disturbance. Even the Communists didn't protest

And say they were Morgan hirelings. It was too hot,

Too hot to protest, too hot to get excited,

An even African heat, lush, fertile and steamy,

That soaked into bone and mind and never once broke.

The warm rain fell in fierce showers and ceased and fell.

Pretty soon you got used to its always being that way.

You got used to the changed rhythm, the altered beat,

To people walking slower, to the whole bright

Fierce pulse of the city slowing, to men in shorts,

To the new sun-helmets from Best's and the cop's white uniforms,

And the long noon-rest in the offices, everywhere.

It wasn't a plan or anything. It just happened.

The fingers tapped slower, the office-boys

Dozed on their benches, the bookkeeper yawned at his desk.

The A. T. & T. was the first to change the shifts

And establish an official siesta-room;

But they were always efficient. Mostly it just

Happened like sleep itself, like a tropic sleep,

Till even the Thirties were deserted at noon

Except for a few tourists and one damp cop.

They ran boats to see the big lilies on the North River

But it was only the tourists who really noticed

The flocks of rose-and-green parrots and parakeets

Nesting in the stone crannies of the Cathedral.

The rest of us had forgotten when they first came.

There wasn't any real change, it was just a heat spell,

A rain spell, a funny summer, a weather-man's joke,

In spite of the geraniums three feet high

In the tin-can gardens of Hester and Desbrosses.

New York was New York. It couldn't turn inside out.

When they got the news from Woods Hole about the Gulf Stream,

The Times ran a adequate story.

But nobody reads those stories but science-cranks.

Until, one day, a somnolent city-editor

Gave a new cub the termite yarn to break his teeth on.

The cub was just down from Vermont, so he took his time.

He was serious about it. He went around.

He read all about termites in the Public Library

And it made him sore when they fired him.

So, one evening,

Talking with an old watchman, beside the first

Raw girders of the new Planetopolis Building

(Ten thousand brine-cooled offices, each with shower)

He saw a dark line creeping across the rubble

And turned a flashlight on it.

"Say, buddy," he said,

"You'd better look out for those ants. They eat wood, you know,

They'll have your shack down in no time."

The watchman spat.

"Oh, they've quit eating wood," he said, in a casual voice,

"I thought everybody knew that."

—and, reaching down,

He pried from the insect jaws the bright crumb of steel.

Chicken Little In Love

Eliza Griswold

I’m through! I’m through!

she says and resays.

The years pass.

Her feathers gray.

Her eggs

lay themselves

less frequently.

The sky falls.

Today’s Special

Michael Lista

Well I guess that’s all locked up tight

Says Sam who guards the mall at night.

Sam’s a puppet! He can’t use his eyes.

His body is an excellent disguise.

I’m Muffy the Mouse! I’m condemned to rhyme

Until the Christmas special end of time.

That’s Jodi, my human friend.

The world goes on and on and will not end

Hiya there Jodi. Oh hi Sam.

Jodi straightens Jeffrey’s magic tam.

Everything’s safe here let’s go upstairs

Sam says through a moustache Props repairs.

Jodi is so pretty. I hate her.

She carries Jeffrey up the escalator

To the kid’s department every night

Where he turns into space and starlight

When I say the magic rhyme. Jeff’s a mannequin

Until the mall goes dark. Then he’s a man again.

Our Duties Are in Relation to One Another

Sharon Dolin

Feel unique in roiling solitude? Oh, you are not alone  
though you may feel fallen, snow up your nose. Join  
            with others in your dank reclusion.

How do you find something worth saying?  
How do you find desire to find desire  
            to find something worth saying?

And yes. That is where you might be: twice —  
or is it thrice — removed in a receding  
            mirror of acedia. Finding a way to

find a way to want to find a way back in  
to conversation. This is what negative numbers  
            (a negative soul) feel like: You want to want to want ...

If you go back far enough — lateral excavation —  
will you hit bone? So many converging lines yakking  
            to themselves over a haywire switchboard

you used to find out who you were through  
cookie crumbs tossed down your own path.  
            Now that you have no crumbs, don’t

even have pockets to turn out—only the memory  
of such acts, such things. How weary, stale, and  
            profligate it seems to be to plasticize these

lines. You’re in a hamless state of mind.  
Now get out and talk to anyone your age: Like you  
            they’ve all got Death studded on the tongue, which

livelies up the talk they walk.

Temple On My Knees

Mary Karr

When this day returns to me

I will value your heart,

long hurt in long division,

over mine. Mouth above mine too—

*say you love me*, truth never more

meant, *say you are angry*.

Words, words we net with our mouths.

Soul is an old thirst but not as first

as the body’s perhaps,

though on bad nights its melancholy

eats us out, to a person.

True, time is undigressing.

Yet true is all we can be:

Rhyming you, rhyming me.

Among Women

Marie Ponsot

What women wander?

Not many. All. A few.

Most would, now & then,

& no wonder.

Some, and I’m one,

Wander sitting still.

My small grandmother

Bought from every peddler

Less for the ribbons and lace

Than for their scent

Of sleep where you will,

Walk out when you want, choose

Your bread and your company.

She warned me, “Have nothing to lose.”

She looked fragile but had

High blood, runner’s ankles,

Could endure, endure.

She loved her rooted garden, her

Grand children, her once

Wild once young man.

Women wander

As best they can.

Proverbial

Wendy Videlock

It’s always darkest before the leopard’s kiss.

Where there’s smoke there is emphasis.

A bird in the hand is bound for the stove.

The pen is no mightier than the soul.

Never underestimate the nib of corruption.

Better late than suffer the long introduction.

All work and no play is the way of  the sloth.

If  you can dream it bring the child the moth.

He is not wise that parrots the wise.

All that glitters has been revised.

An idle mind is a sign of  the time.

The less things change the more we doubt design.

The Fury That Breaks

By Michelle Boisseau

*After César Vallejo*

The fury that breaks a grown-up into kids,

a kid into scattered birds

and a bird into limp eggs,

the fury of the poor

takes one part oil to two parts vinegar.

The fury that breaks a tree into leaves,

a leaf into deranged flowers

and a flower into wilting telescopes,

the fury of the poor

gushes two rivers against a hundred seas.

The fury that breaks the true into doubts,

doubt into three matching arches

and the arch into instant tombs,

the fury of the poor

draws a sharpening stone against two knives.

The fury that breaks the soul into bodies,

the body into warped organs,

and the organ into eight doctrines,

the fury of the poor

burns with one fire in two thousand craters.

Song of the Shattering Vessels

Peter Cole

Either the world is coming together,

or else the world is falling apart —

here — now — along these letters,

against the walls of every heart.

Today, tomorrow, within its weather,

the end or beginning’s about to start —

the world impossibly coming together

or very possibly falling apart.

Now the lovers’ mouths are open —

maybe the miracle’s about to start:

the world within us coming together,

because all around us it’s falling apart.

Even as they speak, he wonders,

even as the fear departs:

Is that the world coming together?

Can they keep it from falling apart?

The image, gradually, is growing sharper;

now the sound is like a dart:

It seemed their world was coming together,

but in fact it was falling apart.

That’s the nightmare, that’s the terror,

that’s the Isaac of this art —

which sees that the world might come together

if only we’re willing to take it apart.

The dream, the lure, is the prayer’s answer,

which can’t be plotted on any chart —

as we know the world that’s coming together

without our knowing is falling apart.

Beaded Baby Moccasins

Joanne Dominique Dwyer

If   love is like a doll’s shoe —

the color of nascent snow

that laces over the ankle

or the polychromatic beaded baby moccasins

we saw lying in the museum drawer

that belonged to an infant from a sea tribe of seal hunters.

Or the rutilant pink blossoms

of the locust tree that bloomed in the dark

while I slept dreaming of my arrival

on a red-eye wearing a long to the floor skirt —

not of a postulant, but of a flower vendor

or a woman covering disfigurement.

Freud believed that religious faith

is a wish-fulfilling illusion.

I can’t locate faith in a carved or uncarved pew.

I’m more focused on the altar boy’s shoes.

Under his white robe he’s wearing a man’s black loafers

vastly oversized for his small feet with

sufficient spare space for a coyote den in each toe.

I want to buy him a kite.

If   love is a mezzanine floor we will not fall from,

a hand holding back my hair from my face

as I’m sick on the side of the bus.

The mouth so at home in the vicinity of pavement.

Pew also means to enclose, as in men who were

*as willingly pewed in the parish church*

*as their sheep were in night folds.*

Freud also believed civilized life imposes suffering,

yet he always wore a dinner jacket.

We delaminate layers of old paint

bleach sheets in the shade.

I take out the oily ham from the beans,

the unflattering photos from the folio,

the quotes about repressed homosexuality

being the reason Sigmund’s patient Little Hans

is afraid of   horses.

Old Mama Saturday

Marie Ponsot

*“Saturday’s child must work for a living.”*

“I’m moving from Grief  Street.

Taxes are high here

though the mortgage’s cheap.

The house is well built.

With stuff to protect, that

mattered to me,

the security.

These things that I mind,

you know, aren’t mine.

I mind minding them.

They weigh on my mind.

I don’t mind them well.

I haven’t got the knack

of  kindly minding.

I say Take them back

but you never do.

When I throw them out

it may frighten you

and maybe me too.

Maybe

it will empty me

too emptily

and keep me here

asleep, at sea

under the guilt quilt,

under the you tree.”

Girl-Watching

Dan Brown

In the years I’ve been at this

(Lots, not to be precise)

You’d think that once or twice

At least I would have seen

Some anomalies. I mean

Some major ones. As in

Not feet but little wheels,

Or crests like cockatiels’.

Where are they keeping the girls

With a chrome exterior,

Or an extra derriere?

Apparently nowhere.

Assuming my sample’s valid,

The pool is limited

To the standard types I’ve tallied;

Such variance as there is

In the usual congeries

Of   physiognomies —

And yet enough of   it

To be worth the looking at.

The walking by, for that,

Of   the same girl over and over

Would be no cross to bear

If   it were that one there.

Aria

David Barber

What if   it were possible to vanquish

All this shame with a wash of   varnish

Instead of wishing the stain would vanish?

What if   you gave it a glossy finish?

What if   there were a way to burnish

All this foolishness, all the anguish?

What if   you gave yourself   leave to ravish

All these ravages with famished relish?

What if   this were your way to flourish?

What if   the self   you love to punish —

Knavish, peevish, wolfish, sheepish —

Were all slicked up in something lavish?

Why so squeamish? Why make a fetish

Out of everything you must relinquish?

Why not embellish what you can’t abolish?

What would be left if   you couldn’t brandish

All the slavishness you’ve failed to banish?

What would you be without this gibberish?

What if   the true worth of the varnish

Were to replenish your resolve to vanquish

Every vain wish before you vanish?

Pandemania

Daniel Halpern

There are fewer introductions

In plague years,

Hands held back, jocularity

No longer bellicose,

Even among men.

Breathing’s generally wary,

Labored, as they say, when

The end is at hand.

But this is the everyday intake

Of   the imperceptible life force,

Willed now, slow —

Well, just cautious

In inhabited air.

As for ongoing dialogue,

No longer an exuberant plosive

To make a point,

But a new squirreling of air space,

A new sense of   boundary.

Genghis Khan said the hand

Is the first thing one man gives

To another. Not in this war.

A gesture of   limited distance

Now suffices, a nod,

A minor smile or a hand

Slightly raised,

Not in search of   its counterpart,

Just a warning within

The acknowledgment to stand back.

Each beautiful stranger a barbarian

Breathing on the other side of the gate.

Judo

Dan Brown

I.e., the kind of   verse

That doesn’t try to force

People to their knees

(Seeing as it sees

To people’s being thrown

By forces of   their own).

Countermeasures

Sara Miller

I wish I could keep my thoughts in order

and my ducks in a row.

I wish I could keep my ducks in a thought

or my thoughts in a duck.

My point is that we all exist, wetly, in the hunt.

The ducks are aware of this

in their own way, which is floating.

The way of the mind is brevity.

There may be other thoughts on other days

in the minds of other and better men

and their constant companions, the women,

but these same tidy capsules — never.

This is just one of the things

I noticed about my thoughts

as they passed easefully by.

Not for You, Not for the World

Barbara Perez

Because a little reprieve, a little hope (even for those whom I love)

would exculpate the world of  its actions, I hold to logic steadfast.

Belief, without knowledge, dislodges perception of all the empirical world

— (even for you, mom and dad). Know that if, for you, on some filthy lie

I could wish for the mind’s persistence after death, I would say no.

Will

Rae Armantrout

In English

we place a noun

meaning fixed purpose

before our verbs

to create the future

tense.

Here, in the private life

my team invents,

I’m in a floodlit kitchen

like the set

of an old-time ad

for Tide

and I am chopping

something.

Isn’t this the past

perfect?

Should I feel nostalgic?

This corn is highly

leveraged

and I’m wearing

a pink slip.

Ovid on Climate Change

Eliza Griswold

Bastard, the other boys teased him,

till Phaethon unleashed the steeds

of Armageddon. He couldn’t hold

their reins. Driving the sun too close

to earth, the boy withered rivers,

torched Eucalyptus groves, until the hills

burst into flame, and the people’s blood

boiled through the skin. Ethiopia,

land of   burnt faces. In a boy’s rage

for a name, the myth of race begins.

Hesperus

Shann Ray

My four-year-old daughter handed me a card.

To Daddy written on the front

and inside a rough field

of  five-pointed lights, and the words

*You’re my favorite Daddy in the stars.*

In this western night we all light the sky

like Vega, Deneb, Altair, Albireo,

the Summer Triangle,

Cygnus the Swan, our hair

tangled with wood and gravel,

our eyes like vacant docks

that beckon every boat.

Tell me about the word

stars, I said.

Oh, she said. Sorry.

I didn’t know

how to spell world.

Monstrance Man

Ricardo Pau-Llosa

As a boy he had trouble speaking,

past three before a real word preened

from his lips. And for the longest time,

malaprops haunted him. His older sister

did what she could to train the bitten seal

of   his brain to twirl the red ball

on the nose of eloquence, and his grandmother

tired of   insisting he utter the names

of   toys or foods — for every desire

was coded — and gave him whatever

he grunted and pointed to.

O, the man then a boy

thought, when I tower among them

I should invent my own speech

and leave others empty and afraid

that they did not know it, could not ask

or plead their case in the one tongue

that mattered. I shall have them

look upon the simplest things,

the man then a boy thought,

and fill up with stolen awe,

and point with their faces,

their pupils wide as blackened coins,

and hope with all the revenue

shattered heart-glass can muster

that someone had grasped

their need as need and not

as the monstrous coupling

of   sounds in a trance of whims.

Then, the grind of   his teeth

vowed, then the plazas of my city

will fill with my name,

and their blood will matter

as little to them as to me.

Nose Job

Dan Brown

An unexpected consequence

Of mine (and one that shows how well

It really went, in a scary sense)

Is at its most perceptible

When I happen to observe a nose

With the hump of  which my nose is rid

(Though not my psyche, you’d suppose)

And feel the sighting visited

By what a lord might call a kind

Of  pity: distant, tinged with scorn...

A thing you’d more expect to find

In someone to his beauty born.

Pluralisms

Anna Maria Hong

to challenge sleep to go against

the one-eyed god

of  victimhood:

Polyphemus by way of  Redon

rising, open eye ripe

with stupid gazing.

How dare you look at me?

plural tense: now and then, to bed and back again and

one more war.

The oral rinse of moral sense can lift the fence

of expectation, expand the dome

of  tolerance. I, too, arose from

the unthinkable, used to Nobody

responding loud as circumstance.

Strange Little Prophets

Barbara Perez

When is the smell of a blackberry tree

a harbinger of  violent movement

rather than simply the recollection of

a childhood Sunday dress hem-dipped

in mud, handprinted with juice and seeds?

Hard to say. A mind, when playing tricks

is at its most sincere — at home raking

through the body’s history, repeating

the strange and nostalgic. The taste of

dirty copper, the imagined cockroach

in the corner, the sluggish slow of  the clock

 — doctors call these strange little prophets

warning signs of a seizure, synaptic misfires

looming like a song discordant, until the body

 — an unplucked string — is finally strummed.

Nothing

Randall Mann

My mother is scared of the world.

She left my father after forty years.

She was like, Happy anniversary, goodbye;

I respect that.

The moon tonight is dazzling, is full

of   itself  but not quite full.

A man should not love the moon, said Milosz.

Not exactly. He translated himself

into saying it. A man should not love translation;

there’s so much I can’t know. An hour ago,

marking time with someone I would like to like,

we passed some trees and there were crickets

(crickets!) chirping right off  Divisadero.

I touched his hand, and for a cold moment

I was like a child again,

nothing more, nothing less.

For Jane

Stephen Stepanchev

I know that rarity precedes extinction,

Like that of the purple orchid in my garden,

Whose sudden disappearance rattled me.

Jane, in her way, is also beautiful.

And therefore near extinction, I suppose.

She is certainly rare and fragile of  bone.

She insists she is dying, day by dubious day,

And spends her evenings looking at photographs

Of  her mother, who never believed in love.

Rare Jane, I worship you. But I can’t deny

You access to the endless

With its river of cold stars.

Proprietary

Randall Mann

In a precisely lighted room, the CFO speaks

of  start-to-start dependencies.

Says let me loop back with you.

Says please cascade as appropriate.

It’s that time of morning, so we all can smell

the doughnut factory. If scent were white

noise, doughnuts would be that scent.

The factory won’t sell at any price.

The building next to it burns the animals

we experiment on. I have worked

on a few preclinical reports in my time.

The rhesus monkeys become

so desperate that they attempt suicide,

over and over again. I am legally obligated

to spare you the particulars.

How could things be any different?

Here many choice molecules have been born.

Here. This pill will dissolve like sugar.

Your last five months will be good ones.

Loony Bin Basketball

Mary Karr

*For Phil Jackson*

The gym opened out

before us like a vast arena, the bleached floorboards

yawned toward a vanishing point, staggered seats high

as the Mayan temple I once saw devoured by vines.

Each of us was eaten up inside — all citizens of   lost

and unmapped cities.

Frank hugged the pimply ball

over his belly like an unborn child. Claire

dressed for daycare in daffodil yellow and jelly shoes.

David’s gaze was an emperor’s surveying a desiccated

battlefield. Since he viewed everything that way, we all

saw him the same.

The psych techs in Cloroxed white

were giant angels who set us running drills, at which

we sucked. The zones we set out to defend were watery

at every edge. We missed close chest passes, easy combos.

Our metronomes run different tempos,

John proclaimed.

Then Claire started seeing

dashes stutter through the air behind the ball.

Then speed lines on our backs, and then her own head

went wobbly as a spinning egg. She’d once tracked

planetary orbits for NASA and now sat sidelined

by her eyes’ projections.

Only Bill had game.

Catatonic Bill whose normal talent was to schlub

days in a tub chair — his pudding face scarred

with chicken pox — using his hand for an ashtray,

belly for an armrest. Now all that peeled away, and he

emerged, clean as an egg.

He was a lithe

and licorice boy, eeling past all comers, each shot

sheer net. He faked both ways, went left. Beneath the orange

rim his midair pirouettes defied the gravity that I

could barely sludge through. He scored beyond what even

Claire could count,

then he bent panting,

hands on knees as the orderlies held out water cups,

and the rest of us reached to pat his back or slap

his sweaty hand, no one minding about the stench or his

breath like old pennies. Then as quick as that

he went.

Inside his head

some inner winch did reel him back from the front

of   his face bones where he’d been ablaze. He went back and

back into that shadowed stare. Lucky we were to breathe

his air. Breath is God’s intent to keep us living. He was

the self   I’d come in

wanting to kill, and I left him there.

The Weavers

Linda Gregerson

As sometimes, in the gentler months, the sun

will return

before the rain has altogether

stopped and through

this lightest of curtains the curve of it shines

with a thousand

inclinations and so close

is the one to the

one adjacent that you cannot tell where magenta

for instance begins

and where the all-but-magenta

has ended and yet

you’d never mistake the blues for red, so these two,

the girl and the

goddess, with their earth-bred, grass-

fed, kettle-dyed

wools, devised on their looms

transitions so subtle no

hand could trace nor eye discern

their increments,

yet the stories they told were perfectly clear.

The gods in their heaven,

the one proposed. The gods in

heat, said the other.

And ludicrous too, with their pinions and swansdown,

fins and hooves,

their shepherds’ crooks and pizzles.

Till mingling

with their darlings-for-a-day they made

a progeny so motley it

defied all sorting-out.

It wasn’t the boasting

brought Arachne all her sorrow

nor even

the knowing her craft so well.

Once true

and twice attested.

It was simply the logic she’d already

taught us how

to read.

A Perfect Mess

Mary Karr

*For David Freedman*

I read somewhere

that if   pedestrians didn’t break traffic laws to cross

Times Square whenever and by whatever means possible,

 the whole city

would stop, it would stop.

Cars would back up to Rhode Island,

an epic gridlock not even a cat

could thread through. It’s not law but the sprawl

of our separate wills that keeps us all flowing. Today I loved

the unprecedented gall

of the piano movers, shoving a roped-up baby grand

up Ninth Avenue before a thunderstorm.

They were a grim and hefty pair, cynical

as any day laborers. They knew what was coming,

the instrument white lacquered, the sky bulging black

as a bad water balloon and in one pinprick instant

it burst. A downpour like a fire hose.

For a few heartbeats, the whole city stalled,

paused, a heart thump, then it all went staccato.

And it was my pleasure to witness a not

insignificant miracle: in one instant every black

umbrella in Hell’s Kitchen opened on cue, everyone

still moving. It was a scene from an unwritten opera,

the sails of some vast armada.

And four old ladies interrupted their own slow progress

to accompany the piano movers.

each holding what might have once been

lace parasols over the grunting men. I passed next

the crowd of pastel ballerinas huddled

under the corner awning,

in line for an open call — stork-limbed, ankles

zigzagged with ribbon, a few passing a lit cigarette

around. The city feeds on beauty, starves

for it, breeds it. Coming home after midnight,

to my deserted block with its famously high

subway-rat count, I heard a tenor exhale pure

longing down the brick canyons, the steaming moon

opened its mouth to drink from on high ...

Sestina: Like

A. E. Stallings

*With a nod to Jonah Winter*

Now we’re all “friends,” there is no love but Like,

A semi-demi goddess, something like

A reality-TV star look-alike,

Named Simile or Me Two. So we like

In order to be liked. It isn’t like

There’s Love or Hate now. Even plain “dislike”

Is frowned on: there’s no button for it. Like

Is something you can quantify: each “like”

You gather’s almost something money-like,

Token of virtual support. “Please like

This page to stamp out hunger.” And you’d *like*

To end hunger and climate change alike,

But it’s unlikely Like does diddly. Like

Just twiddles its unopposing thumbs-ups, like-

Wise props up scarecrow silences. “I’m *like,*

*So OVER him,*” I overhear. “But, like,

He doesn’t get it. Like, you know? He’s like

It’s all OK. Like I don’t even LIKE

Him anymore. Whatever. I’m all like ... ”

Take “like” out of our chat, we’d all alike

Flounder, agape, gesticulating like

A foreign film sans subtitles, fall like

Dumb phones to mooted desuetude. Unlike

With other crutches, um, when we use “like,”

We’re not just buying time on credit: Like

Displaces other words; crowds, cuckoo-like,

Endangered hatchlings from the nest. (Click “like”

If you’re against extinction!) Like is like

Invasive zebra mussels, or it’s like

Those nutria-things, or kudzu, or belike

Redundant fast food franchises, each like

(More like) the next. Those poets who dislike

Inversions, archaisms, who just like

Plain English as she’s spoke — why isn’t “like”

Their (literally) every other word? I’d like

Us just to admit that’s what real speech is like.

But as you like, my friend. Yes, we’re alike,

How we pronounce, say, lichen, and dislike

Cancer and war. So like this page. Click *Like.*

I Eat Cannibals

Gina Abelkop

You’re my proudest dish soaking

up sun in the graveyard

Anna roasting in the sink

of all our town’s dead children

Anna Still you are so sweet

to me Still I remain

cannibal sappy murderousy

for you Anna What’s this

edible love Anna if not good our

kind of good Anna and Dora

and good good good

Ovid in Tears

Jack Gilbert

Love is like a garden in the heart, he said.

They asked him what he meant by garden.

He explained about gardens. “In the cities,”

he said, “there are places walled off where color

and decorum are magnified into a civilization.

Like a beautiful woman,” he said. How like

a woman, they asked. He remembered their wives

and said garden was just a figure of speech,

then called for drinks all around. Two rounds

later he was crying. Talking about how Charlemagne

couldn’t read but still made a world. About Hagia

Sophia and putting a round dome on a square

base after nine hundred years of failure.

The hand holding him slipped and he fell.

“White stone in the white sunlight,” he said

as they picked him up. “Not the great fires

built on the edge of the world.” His voice grew

fainter as they carried him away. “Both the melody

and the symphony. The imperfect dancing

in the beautiful dance. The dance most of all.”

Not Easily

Jack Gilbert

When we get beyond beauty and pleasure,

to the other side of the heart (but short

of the spirit), we are confused about what

to do next. It is too easy to say arriving

is enough. To pretend the music

of the mountain needs only to be heard.

That the dance is known by the dancing,

and the lasagne is realized by eating it.

Not in this place on the other side

of desire. We can swim in the Aegean,

but we can’t take it home. A man finds

a melon by the road and continues up

the hill thinking it is the warm melon

that will remain after he has forgotten

the ruins and sea of the summer. He tells

himself this even as the idea of the taste

is replacing what the melon tasted like.

Failing and Flying

Jack Gilbert

Everyone forgets that Icarus also flew.

It's the same when love comes to an end,

or the marriage fails and people say

they knew it was a mistake, that everybody

said it would never work. That she was

old enough to know better. But anything

worth doing is worth doing badly.

Like being there by that summer ocean

on the other side of the island while

love was fading out of her, the stars

burning so extravagantly those nights that

anyone could tell you they would never last.

Every morning she was asleep in my bed

like a visitation, the gentleness in her

like antelope standing in the dawn mist.

Each afternoon I watched her coming back

through the hot stony field after swimming,

the sea light behind her and the huge sky

on the other side of that. Listened to her

while we ate lunch. How can they say

the marriage failed? Like the people who

came back from Provence (when it was Provence)

and said it was pretty but the food was greasy.

I believe Icarus was not failing as he fell,

but just coming to the end of his triumph.