

Poetry South

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Poetry South

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Poetry South

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Grayson Jones

SIGNS

Thunderstorms of the past few days
have left the mornings with heavy mists
that roll over the mountains
and linger in the valleys and coves.

As the sun rises this morning,
skies clear, the mist dissipates
leaving wisps of white. The air
is clean, and for the season, cool.

A great quivering of wings is all about
as young wrens and bluebirds
still beg to be fed though nearly as big
as the parents that feed them.

Thin white fingers, upturned at the ends
like a new bride showing off her rings,
mark the sourwood in bloom.
The bees are at their work.

The flute of the wood thrush echoes nearby;
the joe-pye weed, grown tall, is blushing in buds.
In the trees, cicadas start a sporadic rasping.
It will be a summer day after all.

Sean Tierney

SANDSTORM

an overcast of wading
birds' yellow legs striking
sand / soft bolts / counting
the seconds between a landing
and the thunderous little
chirps that follow

SAUCEBOX

a cardinal, now, where
the rabbit was just moments
ago, where the tall grass meets
the property line, a dragonfly
perched in Paleozoic daydream

but life, I keep telling myself, is
not supposed to be this
easy

Claude Wilkinson

FOUR-LEAF CLOVERS IN BIBLES

As with teacakes and cloudlike meringues,
in this too, my mother was expert.
Under a net of evening shade
from our two huge walnut trees,
she would sit on her old wrought-iron chair
in the hush just after supper swatting sweat bees
and pointing me in the right direction.

Among scents of wild allium
and waves of green deception,
I groped from cold to closer
to there at my sweeping palm
where were clustered three or more
of the magic charms she had seen
at least six feet away.

A whole minute might go by
as she twirled them between
her index finger and thumb
as if checking genuineness
before sending me for her Bible
with the white leather cover
and luminous Sacré-Coeur
stung with a ring of thorns
above its table of contents.

Somewhere after the Fall
but before the Resurrection, her favor
ripened from emerald to golden
in columns like verses themselves
amid Job's patience or Solomon's wisdom.

The first leaf, they say, bears hope;
the second, ironically, faith;
the third leaf is for love,
and a fourth holds the luck.
When there's a fifth, even a sixth,
they are paths to money and fame.
And if ever a seventh, the finder
can count on a long life as well.

Though our chances at nature's lottery
are figured to be only one
in ten thousand, or half those odds,
if you believe the optimists.

Still, they were hunted then harbored
in Bibles of other women
in the community too, as they had been
by their mothers and so on,
perhaps for happier marriages,
a bountiful garden, or better children.

On occasion, when I spot their fortunes now
while spraying anthills or weeding the lawn,
I sometimes imagine an endless line
of all the saintly others, like my mother,
halt from worn-out knees,
taken in their dances with cancer,
going one by one through Heaven's
narrow gate, their winning bets below
perfectly hedged and pressed.

Claude Wilkinson

REVELATION

What is it you've looked at
that quickened your next breaths,

left you beholden, stunned
with its essence in the earth:

perhaps an ungainly buzzard,
of all things, unafraid and staying

high on the wing while buffeted
about like a plume of soot

against rolling storm clouds;
that glittering carp swum

from its cover of amber water,
flashing now and then

along the clear shallow,
so at home even without our air;

symbiosis made flesh
as morning's white herons

shop a low river
and fringes of swamp pink;

or, just making their flight into open field
beneath November's yellow canopy,

the suite of honey-colored, tined,
rut-ready bucks

glimpsed through the lens
of such golden noon light?

Thomas Cook

EARLY DARK

There is perfection in the early dark,
the smell of moist figs rolled in raked
courtyard dirt, planes gaining
distance from takeoff, birdsong in warm
January morning. I stand, barefoot,
like my dog, and I don't disturb this
dark. I couldn't. It is larger than I am
by leagues.

My place is to begin small,
to scratch versions of my name
into notebooks until dawn.
I hear less myself less in the light.
Light disturbs the surface,
forces a new sense into apprehension.
But I don't want sense.

I want life as it is, in shadow,
forms that bump and blend
in their shapeless sound. I want a world
that refuses to be singular or distinct,
that frightens me from myself.

John Saad

BEFORE I TEACH YOU THE SUNFLOWER RIVER BLUES

in open C tuning

Come, boy, sit—and know
first that while our home rivers
 have no blues that does not mean
 they have no song.

Your task is to find it. It is there
somewhere beyond your fretboard's frontier
 in the Tombigbee, the Black Warrior,
 the Tensaw. The names

will guide you like a rosewood
semi-tone. But for all our sake, boy,
 sidestep the red dirt roads—
 unless you are fleeing

a colonel's dogtrot birthplace
you set a match to. So eat a carp-eye
 like a plum (the rest
 of the world does),

and love what frustrates noble men.
As for the blue lines the pine barons
 paint on the edges
 of their woods,

coyote their claim by spraying more lines
so that a thousand blue trills
 fill the woods all the way
 to the riverbluff. Look

out at the towboat's Gulf-ward march
and remember that *Tombigbee* is
 still Choctaw for *coffin-maker*.
 Tune down. Start here.

Monique Zamir

VISITING AN ABANDONED HOUSE
IN THE OKLAHOMA PANHANDLE

You could never see the little breath
left among the shards of cloth. The wristband
weathered in the dirt. A whirl
of needles spindles into the blanching
sun the way a thread once wove

through young fingers. This air was once
heavy with the backbeat of bare feet on ground.
In the wind, a scrap of batiste. The absence of a dress.

The scorched and arid clouds visit the day with you.
This fringe of twine and cracked earth receives
no one. The cloth is forever twisting above and your
breath already sodden with the revelatory dust.

The hawk watches you:

the heavy dirt,
the relentless wind,
your fumbled nerves.

You, breaching the air as you leave.

Michelle Brooks

THE NIGHT MARKET OF GHOSTS

The ground moves with snakes,
and the sky bleeds red streaks,
as if the night couldn't leave
without a fight, and all your dreams
are tragedies where no one dies,
but everyone suffers. In your past
life when you woke up hungover, you'd
think, *Anything is better than this.*

You were a confection, a little
dead around the eyes, the kind
of woman people describe as
pretty in a hard way. And you
refuse to go gently into that good
night. And let's face it. Not all
of them were good ones. You don't
care. There is nothing you can do
about it now. Gather the pieces
as best you can even if they cut you.

John Sibley Williams

OASIS

A sudden lushness

sprung from a single desert rain
already swimming in locusts.

Naked, in the briefly raging
river, absent its skin, a pulled-apart

body, thousands of bodies preparing
to take its place.

A blanket for its dying. A corset. Flame.

That we are here watching the all-or-nothing
of that flame, hungry as ever, terrified;

a blessing

light as gunpowder, sparking,
as light itself before the heat takes hold.

Angela Ball

GREAT MOLASSES FLOOD

It was a strange day when Great-Aunt Patricia
and Great-Uncle Phillip died in a flood
of steaming molasses. Just discovering
married life, they may have felt
a long rumble as from an elevated train;
heard a machine-gun sound as rivets shot
from the fifty-foot-tall tank. Fermenting ethanol
may have contributed to the disaster. Funeral homes
smelled like pancake houses. Even closed,
caskets were thronged by unseasonable
bees. Warmish after frigid weather,
January 15th had seemed mildly optimistic,
unfit for the unusual. A judge
passed sentence; a pie made from cellared apples
steamed on a windowsill. A man said to a friend
about to share unsavory news, "A gossip's mouth
is the Devil's postbag." Dark syrup joined toast
in a white-washed café. Most people think
they can outrun molasses. It flows at thirty-five miles
per hour and is forty percent
denser than water. To this day, affected families
avoid the stuff, light or dark,
unsulphured or sulphured.
Somewhere in the afterlife, Patricia's last thought
repeats, "Like flies in amber."

AM I

lost without you?
I know in which direction
flies the beltway
with ditches and irises
as sidekicks, how it
fraternizes
with swamps,
climbs to resume
probity. How one-ways,
diversions, and cul-de-sacs
extend and preempt. Anyone
with a live
cell can be located
in space. If anyone's lost
it's me
in you.

You Li

PICKING UP IN MONTGOMERY IN MAY

Nevertheless she would have ducked
into my cab. We would have started
driving before she knew where. *Drive*,
she would have said. Shrinking behind, he
would have been looking, face all vertical lines,
or thumbs jamming into his phone. I
would have offered for her to sit up front.
She would have crawled, smoothing
her skirt down the backs of her legs
modestly as her phone dinged like
a stuck Roomba, then silent. Alive
silent. We would be driving as if sledding.
I would be too respectful to steal glances,
but I would come to realize that she was
a cloud of glitter, mostly indigo with specks
of every color. I would see her cloud
body reflected in the window, and, excited,
I would click off the air so the windows
would unfog. She would be the grains
of the music and the road's spitting gravel.
That night with moon after moon like fat
lollipops lining the highway, I would be
a cloud of glitter too. At our edges her
specks would be interspersed with mine
like cymbal crashes. Gaseous we would
expand and leak out of the car, our
sparkles outlining the doors. Spacious we
would watch the car slide over the bridge.

Scot Langland

DIRT ROAD FUGUE

—*after* Grave with Egg Carton Cross, Hale County, Alabama
by William Christenberry

On Decoration Day,
 we stipple the Alabama clay

with azalea pedals.
 Taking turns, we tamp the grave,
 lingering untethered, burying

what we see as if it's us.

 We should take

a chance to turn the soil,

 to incarnadine our gloves.

 With tulip buds we pink
 the carton-cross,

wired in place,
 pinned up like

an arm held up in defiance,
 coat hangers supporting the hollow weight.

We still ourselves
 in melancholy,
 practiced, worn,

 as if we had some draw to red mud,
to the fresh packing
 of loss.

Scot Langland

RURALITY

What is the smell
of a bog to me,
what is the thickness
of breath at night,
what is in the queer
Alabama summer to me?

Driving south
from urban
Carolina
through
the plurality
of ponds, lakes,
and unlit roads,
I am never alone
with my thoughts
of silent kin
belonging
to more
than me.
I snake circles
around
my mind.
I slip
past the fields,
the rough-human borders
lining grazing lawns
brimming with disquiet,
cicadas calling
out for a fuck --
their mockery
a faceless homily.

I wish I never chose to grow up removed

from familiarity
of type,
from friends
of the same ilk
as me,

from the myriad of names given to types like us: the queer,
the happy sodomite, the naked
Satan, the fag,
the bachelor
confirmed,
the unhappy man without a place to be.

AT THOMAS HOSPITAL

He whispers *us* with pillowed air;
his breaths envelope me
as if we're paired.
He whispers *us* with pillowed air
as if he's spared
from monitors and weight.
He cleaves us in the pillowed air;
his breaths envelope me.

Lauren Davis

IF I DRINK IT

am I flood?
Almighty swallowing the village
eating the ground.

I have a sound.
I build history. One hundred thousand fingers that find.

Call me Floyd. I am here to purify.

FIVE HUNDRED EIGHTY MILES HE STRETCHES HIS ARMS

*The Flood of the Century, the 500-Year Flood, Hurricane Floyd. It
remains the single greatest disaster in North Carolina's history.
— S. Daniel Siepert*

Some do not know until he creeps
into their homes. He cracks the dark.

He splits each sleeper's dream.
No boat. No ark. No bridge to yesterday.

Across townships, cement fields,
subdivisions he stitches his name. Hurls

children into drainage pipes.
Submerges bodies in cars. All our lands

glutted. Mother, father, have you
ever seen so much water?

EMZARA SAYS

Look how lonely the world after rain.
I lie outside the lions' cage, wander
through halls of sparrows—their hymns
cluttered with each dog's whimper.

Noah, days are long without land.
I talk to the elephant. I tell her
this marriage was a mistake.
Maybe I'm not meant to survive.

My womb is no redeemer.
This is not a lack of love. I respect
endings. If you must keep me, keep me
from the ark's lip. Fish sing my name.

MY GOOD CHRIST

| | |
|---------------|----------------|
| what did I do | to bring water |
| was it my | birth |

crime

| | |
|-----------------|---------------|
| You consume all | Your children |
| for a sin | unnamed |

Angie Macri

COMPLETE COMBUSTION

When the sirens moved downtown,
the men thought of the ocean,
that turquoise from under mountains
same as the eyes of women
who sang lovely as flames.
A skyscraper burning, a museum.
An open-air market with a man firing
indiscriminately. I had no idea
what I was doing, he told investigators
later, just that I was angry.
As if anger was identity. As if man
meant life slipping away
and him chasing, the gun in his hand
a new bone grown and ready.
The sirens sang clear as cathedrals
where bells had marked hours and weddings
until they were melted into cannons
and replaced with recordings.

M. Drew Williams

A FIELD

If you could fathom it.
A line of browning pines
on its westernmost side,

and to the east, a road
leading nowhere except
to another shallow pond,

another rural town where
you can't talk without
sounding like an outsider.

There's the thick ryegrass
after a light rain, a cloud
and its dissolving shadow.

To think of wind as the
worst kind of addendum,
you'd be mostly correct.

A bird chitters somewhere
behind you. You're ready
to laugh at anything.

Romana Iorga

BIRTH

For my grandmother

She walked to the door: small, viscous steps.
The apron tightened over her swollen
belly. She called the virgin's tender name
and it came out as a howl. Her husband
was milking the cow in the barn. He cursed
the cow for kicking the pail, cursed
the pail and his wife for scaring the beast.
The shriek pierced the darkness under the eaves
where a meager bulb dangled from a wire.
He ran to the house to find her fallen
across the threshold, a black pool spreading
around her skirts, catching the white
of his eyes, the white of his clenched teeth.

Morning came unannounced. A dead sun
hung limp in the sky. She climbed back
into bed, pulled the blankets under her chin.
The bed lurched like a wagon clattering down
a rutted road. Ashes kept falling from the ceiling.
She clenched her shaking hands, watched
the shadows of skeleton branches on the wall.
Her husband's shoulders filled the window.
He stood there for a moment, looking in, spat
on the ground, went back to his business.
He knew they had been boys, he had asked.

They could have grown up to beat
their wives, wage wars against neighbors.
They could have hated her weakness, her tears.
They could have followed their father
into the fields, baling the hay, leading the cows
to pasture. Ignorant cows. So much time
spent with those cows, so little with her.
Tired, hungry, at odds with themselves
and their parents, her boys could have come
home at night and let her clean, warm hands
rest for a moment on their wide shoulders.

SHARP DAWN

All night long, black moths
shattered my bed with their bodies.
I see your shape in the hallway
growing from my gnawed
fingernails, bowing toward the earth.

Who am I to honor you, Mother?
Bring in your dog, sit by the fire.
I have wine cooling in the bucket,
bread and cheese on the table.

Your scythe drags its shadow
over the threshold
like an unwanted child.

The slippery blade curves
under the burden. I recognize my fear
in the throaty croak of a rooster.

Erin Carlyle

GIRL, DIRT, AND WALL

For Francesca Woodman

Your body is a scratched photograph,
and I want to live like you do

in front of a ruined wall, buttons on my skirt
begging to be opened. You hold a jewel

behind your back, palmed in your hand,
and there are so many white ash

trees behind you. I want to be in your photo.
I want to put a mirror under my naked

body, and a finger in my mouth.
I see myself like you on the floor

—stretch-marked. My dirty feet over
yours. The tiles under your body are old—

you are not. You are only nineteen living
in Italy. When I was nineteen, I lived with a man,

did his dishes, and I have never been
to Italy. You sit with your hands over your mouth—

back straight, head down. The floor under you
is celled—a honeycomb, and I would do your dishes.

Francesca, now your head is on the floor,
your feet are shelved inside a cabinet,

and there is no room for your arms.
If you were married, this is where you

would put your china, says the stuffed raccoon
at your ear, and I hear you whisper

to the cabinet: *a curio is only for body*
curiosities. You cannot close the cabinet,

and there isn't room for me inside.
Look, three women who are also you hide

behind mirrors—their own reflection.
Am I also there in the blur of those bodies,

or am I in the mold on the walls?
What it comes down to is your dull stare

and your birth certificate. Am I there
in your gaze. I hover over the little fish

in your bathtub, and there is the light coming
in the windows. In all that sparkling doom

and your back to the camera, did you expect me
to pick up your book? I try to figure the blurs

of your long exposure and your suicide,
and how I came after you, still a woman,

and in your shadow, I try to master my body.

Erin Carlyle

THE IN-BETWEEN

Here is a story: My mother
saves me from the electric

pull of the kitchen. She travels
to the otherside to find me

in pink, asleep, and followed
by the dead. She carries me

home, teaches me
how to dial a psychic phone.

I call my grandmother,
god. Her voice is muffled

by mud and I tracked it into her
house. I'm sorry, I stamped it under

my shoes. I walk down the road,
to her house where rain

has made a pool in her backyard.
The neighbors meet in that hole

in the ground, make O's
with their mouths at an ancient

tree. I think: how do I get my grandmother
out, but the tree swallows me

down its trunk stomach. I hear
a man sing *God is in his holy temple*

as I fall through a static-somewhere.

Carl Boon

THE MEN IN GİRESUN

The men in Giresun are good
at watching the stars because
their fathers watched the hazelnuts
sometimes never ripen
season after season and
never much complained. The noise
from the sea somehow
made them less concerned
if their lungs ached, if their hands
traced figure 8s on the tablecloths
while their wives were away
shearing lambs or close by
peppering the soup. The men
in Giresun are good and do not
have to feign laughter anymore—
and perhaps the stars watch them,
looking down at strange men
striding past the mosque
straight home. And of course
the sea waits, it being the sea
with nothing much to do but be
the sea at Giresun where once a year
the bluefish glide south
to warmer water as the hazelnuts
ripen or not, September, and
the schoolchildren hoist books,
wishing they were older.
I was there—one week—
among them, and all was still
except the men in Giresun,
their voices recalling wider sunsets
and girls in purple skirts.
And every one of them was good.

Rachel Morgan

IF GIFT

It would be wrapped in the wings
of baby birds, not the colorful kind
on get-well cards, but the wild-brown,
nest-worn kind. Rare as the shiny
green-blue beetle pinned in an exhibit hall.
Unimaginable and behemoth like obsidian
bones of extinct mammals, jagged antlers
and bowl-small skulls. When you open it,
you ask, *what is it?* But *what is it*, you demand.
Listen to its odd sounds, like songs broadcast
through outer space—an ocean yawn of whales.
When was the last time you stood by the sea,
or in any remote place, hair blowing like wild
beach grasses whose names are like the names
of my imagined children. Already my body
has made two bodies. Your body has made
you sick, for which I blame my body, so
I've gathered the shoals and open waters,
myth-making, and unscientific faith,
the autobiographical dream where birds
turn into rain or rain into birds. This if gift
would be everything I could not give you
and everything I already have, ten times tenfold.

- for my son

Michael Pittard

I SWEAR I HEARD THE TREES

sliding their roots over each
other, pushing through dirt
& mulch & rot. When the trees
touch roots they discuss
how best to dispose of me,
ask which limbs to save
for the willow, the mulberry,
the crabapple to munch
during a golden summer day,
explain how my skin will cover
next year's pecans, peaches, &
persimmons. They debate if
my fingernails are capable of
hardening the dogwood's soft
bark or if they should go instead
to the beech. If only I could
know the hidden names the trees
have for each other, how secrets
remain between friends, why
desire must be whispered
into the dark brown earth.

Tim Gavin

LOVE POEM XLIV: BLAZE

Give me this mountain because I have walked up and
Down it my entire life and still lose my way. Give me
The snow moon of February and maybe I won't lose it
In the gray clouds. Give me an organ recital with all the
Stops open and maybe I will escape in some wild
Dance where I am flashing my knives and tossing my
Hair and lifting my thighs and breathing through my
Nose and dreaming of a banquet where my true
Neighbors will rise incorruptible not from the darkness
Of the deep or tombs but from the ashes that still hold
an ember and could ignite a full blaze.

LOVE POEM LVII: FUCHSIA

when the cherry blossom tree cascades fuchsia
into the stream and the robin once again builds her nest
straw by straw in the box hedge creating room
for those turquoise eggs that rock from side to side
with expectation I am once again resigned
to shake my gloom and walk toward the longest
day falling in love with the reflection
in the stream

LOVE POEM LXIII: GARTER SNAKE

At first it startled me until I realized all the life
Had withdrawn the oxygen from its muscles.
I saw it laid straight out across the footpath –
Single track dirt path – where many walkers and
Runners come to stay young. As I noticed
The fear and sadness lined in its face, I felt
Sorrow for him as he lay there and I imagined
That if he had legs he could have lifted one
Ugly leg and alternated the other to move
From point A to point B in a straight line
Without much negotiating of his surroundings
Instead of curving and coiling and uncoiling
His muscles and vertebrae to move through
His own no-man's land where he had to dodge
The thread of hiking boots and thud of walking sticks.
I saw his head twisted awkward and his one eye
Missing and he called out to me with his
Forked tongue and his ancient language
To unmask himself to the full length
Of his vulnerability and forgive
Him even symbolically of all
The curses he caused when he coiled around
The branch of the forbidden tree.

Rebecca Ruth Gould

SPYING ON A PEACOCK AT THE SUBWAY STATION

Like a pool of glass
on the ocean's edge,
you perch on the subway platform.

Observe, supreme miracle
of iridescent falconry, royal bird,
trespasser of this expanse:

Four hundred condors once sailed
over the Brooklyn Bridge
before dipping their wings in the Atlantic.

I used to sail with them
when the night was young
when my pillow—

next in line to dance with me—
clung to my hair, and together
we breathed the long hours ahead.

Dear bird, if you snag me a meal tonight
I might make room for you on my pillow
before the ocean of sleep sets in.

Daniel Edward Moore

SOMETIMES SURRENDER

Noble are the reasons to quit.
Teasing the tourniquet's
squeeze & release. Bluffing
the batter to bang one home
through Heaven's museum
of shattered veins. You, my
docent of fictitious frames,
my finger of the voice pointing
back to wrong. Back to the
dust on security lights training
my ears with silence. Giving
out comes long before giving up.
Poverty loves hosting dinners
for zero. Zero time left to reflect
on how long the lines outside
will stand in the cold to watch you
sign papers naked & shameless.
Crowd control was the mirror's job
until something in you
stopped looking.

Robert Beveridge

LOBSTER THERMIDOR

*January 16, 2019
100 years ago today*

Gavel smashes a thousand
thousand vertebrae, fountain
pen lodged in the esophagus.
What can you do? Why, reach
for a chilled glass, of course,
distress a shaker full of rocks,
of honey, of nectar, until it,
too, is that perfect temperature
just a few degrees above solid.
Before us stretches what looks
like a drought that will never
be broken by a single drop
of rain; it only makes sense
to hydrate, hydrate, hydrate
this night, and every
night we can, until the clouds
roll in, the light dims forever.

FLOOD OF RUBBERS

along the delta
women cook gumbo
and smile, always smile
out the window
at the flatboats
and their strong
shirtless men
who pole the soft silt
to get along

the gumbo has a velvety texture
of methane, sulfur, magnesium.

Conor Scruton

ON THE LONG WAY WALKING

On the long way walking home after buying food
I saw a couple two-point bucks steal
even-backed past the corner of the cemetery —
becoming the wooded clearing
by the far edge.

So often they move like that,
another and another, a sleek brown shadow
now brothers' imprints on wet leaves,
a motherless wish.

Each vision carries
something we've yet to see in its breast —
the people paying for their meals nearby,
the cars that pass the river bridge
all full of families.

Far from here men gather in towers
and watch, as I have watched.
Their promises like bullets, their soft targets
lost blended between the trees.

STORM SEASON, TENNESSEE

They always said to stand away
from windows, their visions
of a thrown branch, a young brain
full of breaking glass.

Yet from there they look
like maybe lovers, enticing, the anvils
and low lightning's whispers,
indecipherable.

Then, a wet cold
the next morning,
spent to fix the slim wood fence
that keeps the animals in,
from where they shouldn't go.

A mile off, a chainsaw
wails high through its fangs
at the shivering trees.
Again, a cow across the field calls
for her weaned calf
for days,
unable to tell how long
it has been, or will be.

John A. Nieves

CONSUMPTION AS STARVATION DIET

I ordered a disaster because the news
had been giving them out for free and I wanted

to pay for one. Sometimes it means so much
to spend your hard-earned capital on spilled

seven-layer dip or unremarkable falls down
unremarkable stairs. I thought, this morning,

I saw the Attorney General of the United States
eat raw his own fist and a sizzling side

of self-respect. Another free disaster. The habit
of leaving your blood on the floor beside

you is a bad habit. The habit of misleading
like a nursery rhyme set to death metal

is a bad habit. I hope I can buy the kind
of disaster people get nostalgic over—like walking

through a screen door holding a slushy or helping
the thing you love the most build so much

distance you forget how to eat.

TO FIND THE *SEA BIRD*

You called on an old night
 when fog and history licked the panes
 and the tiny candle fires seemed
 to fight both cold and darkness. When we met
on the beach, the sand froze
 our feet. You kept talking of a ghost
 ship gliding in on the tide. You
 kept saying *almost there* like there
were some agreed upon spot it had promised
 to meet you. A cop on horseback
slipped past us and never even looked
 down. An osprey watched from a crumbling
pier post. I could hear something under
 your breath. You were counting. I was
 counting your counting. We were both
 watching your feet. If the ghosts had been
 good to their word, we would not have
noticed. Then some rock and mud on the cliff
 above wanted a closer look, came to greet
us. The slide stopped a few feet from the waterline.
 We were on a thread of sand with the icy ocean
pressing our left and on our right, the shivering
 land. I saw no ship. There was never any ship. Still
 you slid an *I told you* through the breakers.

Devon Balwit

NOT HERO MATERIAL

I have no sigil, of no house but mongrel,
though I have been a standard bearer for many
an abandoned cause, stitch-work fallen
when I took to the hills, fleeing the unfunny
stench of threat. I've watched from shore as broad-
sides foundered ships-of-the-line, yawing masts,
men leaping overboard, flawed
plans hauled up like the aftermath
of a brawl, dumbwaiter creaking until
a jumble of blood-red cup-rims,
fat-scraps and stained napkins spill
into my hands. The industrial sink brims
suds. No glory for me, friend—
just staying alive until the end.

Meg Freer

THE TAUTOLOGY OF WHEELS

An ant can't escape
if you draw a circle
around it with a pen,

its efforts hopeless
as my attempt to align
dominoes at world's edge,

where the slant of everything
elicits defiance. Lions keep watch
in my dreams, judge which of us

they will eat. Whitecaps gleam
in the harbour at dawn, seagulls
tread air as they scan for lunch,

the in-between time thick
with the noonday devil's temptation
to let my weary mind run in circles.

I know so much about your days,
but today I know nothing
except you drove and you arrived.

Anna Sandy-Elrod

UPON A MARRIAGE

In Norse mythology, Fria is the goddess of, among other things, marriage and wisdom. She is said to have the gift of foresight but never shares what she knows.

I wrap the sky around my body
for a cape, weave clouds from my lap.
Another lilt of wedding vows lifts
into my ears like music from the earth.
I watch the couple make their promise,
and I know if they will break
it. I know, already, all that is to come
for them. I breathe into my clouds,
let snow fall around the couple,
heady on their reckless belief
that they are something that will last.
If they will, I won't tell them.
I'll let the husband go on picking
oyster shells from their Georgia backyard,
let the wife paint the walls of their home
first pink then blue then green then.
What is wise if not to allow
two people to love each other
against all odds. I wear the stars
on my shoulders and constellations
spill out to tell their stories.

THE PRIMEVAL ATOM

Call me what you will: if you
went backwards in time

to the moment before a man spoke
the words *hot*, *big bang* and then

even farther to the first words
ever spoken, you'd hear nothing

at all. All the universe exited quietly
from the point of one mouth,

expanding forever outward
until it knocked up against dirt,

formed you and me and kept on,
paying no attention to our loud demands,

only silently tumbling into galaxies
that care nothing for us and what we know,

or for the names we insist on giving.
Whatever you call me will only turn

back into silence, inhaled someday
into the mouth again and swallowed.

Janice Whittington

AND IT CAME TO PASS

For seven years,
Leah watched him—
the sinews of his arms
wet with sweat in the summer—
breathed the scent of sheep
heavy as he passed her,
and saw him gaze
only at her sister,
the red of Rachel's lips, her
dark eyes like the glint
of obsidian.

Obeying a father's deceit,
veiled, escorted in the night
to the marriage bed,
Leah slipped under fleece
and felt Jacob's body on hers.
Morning brought his anger
but she bore sons,
grasping the moments
when he was tired or
dreaming of Rachel
to draw him to her.

Leah, called weak-eyed,
the plain daughter,
the faithful,
accepting the scraps
of Jacob's passion,
held her sons
close in her arms,
feeling only love,
unaware
of the holy lineage
she bore.

PENELOPE AT THE LOOM

Holding frayed ends
of that first thread, I try to remember
what color was his hair? Is this wool
the rough red of his mouth?
Should I crush more berries into the yarn
for his eyes? I know the color of the sea.
I've memorized that blue
wandering through my weaving,
twenty years surging into my blood.
Rags of warp threads
catching in the ridges of my fingertips,
the fibers staining
like memories.

Once my hair grew wheat-yellow
like floss in the tapestry, but now I see
milk-white, the color
of strange pale swine
that crowd my dreams, their hooves
clicking shuttles.

My fingers ache. I search
for a sun-burned brown the shade
of his touch, or do I forget? Reweaving,
ripping out,
each day I watch the sea.

I am the cloth,
a net the seas rush through
in my dreams, hungry fingers
reaching for ships
far from my whispers
in the night, my songs
falling on ears
distant
and wax-filled.

Cheryl Nance

A YEAR AFTER THE END OF US

It was always dusk when I arrived from Florida. Wild dogwoods bloomed bright white against slate mountain walls, the sky covered in purple pockets of approaching night. I sat in my car; the innocence of the dirt road lost as weeds wallowed in shadows. A rabbit burrowed out from a den, unbothered. I took it as a sign. When I finally found your new apartment, I scooped up Cat and the three of us piled in your truck, beachbound. I was almost asleep, lulled by the road and the purring kitten against my chest, when you swerved with intention. You hit your target, the run-down rabbit not even a bump under the oversized tire. I forgave you, not understanding why. I was never good with directions.

June Sylvester Saraceno

VOICE LESSONS

The perfect correspondence between light and water—
bright ripples over the sea surface that still show
the bronze ribs of sand underneath.

I want to speak in natural elements just this way—
sounds combined by breath, like breaking
through the water's surface—that first gasp of air.

How were we before outcast, before other,
pulled so by the poor milked moon—so touchstone,
so lorn, full and crescent and gone.

Tyler Friend

THIS

after H.D.'s "Thetis"

- I On the pavement, you
 all amber & onyx, flecked
- with violet & white. We
 mingle in the light, slowly becoming
- seaglass & gay, crimson lilies.
- II We pass
 on this island
- (we myrtle wood
 & silt cave, we
- slow stretch of beach
 & chicory chisel moon)
- when the sun slips through us
 we sing like amber.

R Brown

IN MY TOWN THEY ARE CLOSING DOWN FOUR MILES
OF ROAD,

letting the trees grow up again my aunt
moves back to our town where she was born and feels very uncomfortable
my girl says, *i planted this garden and now someone else will eat my fruit*
and i am not sorry i drive 1,600 miles to sit next to her and i would do
it again and again and again and

the neighbor says the fence is broken down the street, that we should
go and take the fruit that is growing there my aunt says it belongs to
someone, someone planted it, the fruit rotting on the ground is theirs to
keep

how long will it take for the concrete to crumble? how long will we wait?

VOCABULARY

After she says *lesbian*
at a coffee shop in Jackson,
Ten years the words festered,
mouth to mouth until
her chest. The word cuts
the barista five feet away
When she spoke the new words
she stole the word
he'd almost stolen it once,
and the woman who heard
was calloused, buzz-cut,
When she walked out
the father whispered, *Shame*
What do you mean?—
but stopped short,
I can tolerate it, but
well, I'd beat her up.
his daughter's body.
couldn't know then

without anyone saying it for her
she knows she can say anything.
a virus in the streets passed
erupting out the hot cage of
Bible study women gasping,
glancing from the cash register.
she sputtered first but
before her father:
she was sixteen at the ER,
her heartbeat
a weathered sidewalk voice.
keys jingling from her waist
she's that kind of woman—
You know the kind—
breath failed.
if she looked at you wrong,
Fever flamed
Father, eyes on her eyes,
what he hated.

Amy Roa

TWO DREAMS

My dog had just been executed for witchcraft in front of our house,
then I wandered inside an opium den nestled somewhere in the Arctic.

Other living things around me
flayed their arms about,
claimed they were trapped inside a salmon.

A salmon that had been brought up and raised by two giraffes
who were never happy at the same time
and who often stepped out
into afternoons blinded with light.

That was the first of two dreams.

In the other, we're at the wedding of the eight-legged girl our brother had
fallen in love with.

We called one of the extra legs Alice, after the black and white dog of ours
that had run away into a snowstorm and hadn't been seen since.

Mostly, the bride looked bored and offered us plates of orange food.

A fruit fly buzzed in my ear and whispered that he was a long-lost ancestor.
"Everyone loves me," he said. "I've only been in one fight."

Jill M. Talbot

RACCOONS DON'T APOLOGIZE

I'm sorry you wore a dark blue suit and a maroon tie
I'm sorry I used to like maroon
I'm sorry it looked like moon and raccoon
I'm sorry I watched Jerry Springer Uncensored
I'm sorry out of peer pressure
I'm sorry I was eleven
I'm sorry everybody on the internet's sorry
I'm sorry your victim had to listen to you cry
I'm sorry apologizing is so manipulative
I'm sorry I wouldn't be sorry if they stabbed you in prison
I'm sorry when raccoons fight people
I'm sorry I usually side with them
I'm sorry when raccoons go through people's trash
I'm sorry I root for them
I'm sorry I watch Dr Phil
I'm sorry to feel like nothing's real
I'm sorry you've ruined the moon
I'm sorry death is slow in the suburbs
I'm sorry I met a predator who knew my writing
I'm sorry he didn't know he was a predator
I'm sorry he should've known better
I'm sorry I wrote about trauma
I'm sorry I was fifteen
I'm sorry I got a Facebook account
I'm sorry I can't unfriend myself
I'm sorry my Twitter followers feel like stalkers
I'm sorry I had a real stalker
I'm sorry he was so sad
I'm sorry he didn't make a good enemy
I'm sorry I know you are but
I'm sorry what am I?
I'm sorry I watch Law and Order: SVU
I'm sorry being a Special Victim only makes it worse
I'm sorry I was twelve
I'm sorry I was special
I'm sorry the twelve steps make you apologize
I'm sorry for everything you've ever done
I'm sorry it sounds like that's your program
I'm sorry I'm tempted to Google if there's a twelve-step program

I'm sorry for what you are
I'm sorry I think I already know there is
I'm sorry I've given you more than twelve
I'm sorry you didn't even need to be special
I'm sorry you just needed to forget
I'm sorry it isn't yours
I'm sorry you don't see the same moon I do
I'm sorry writing is just make-up
I'm sorry for not getting good therapy
I'm sorry I'm too anti-social now to be pressured—
I'm sorry that was a lie
I'm sorry big bad wolf
I'm sorry I lied again
I'm sorry you wore maroon
I'm sorry so am I.

Tina Barr

CRIME

My husband went to peep shows.
I splashed his cheek with a paintbrush stroke.
Joan lived across the road,

moored off the rocks, her husband's boat.
A girl in a booth pulled open a curtain; I broke
knowing Logan went to peep shows.

I stood on the ladder when my husband shoved.
The doctor in Blue Hill drew closed
the curtain, asked me, and I said "No."

A blue stain on my thigh, big as a hand, showed.
All the tools from the garage, Logan sold.
We rented the house; he rented time in peep shows.

Joan and I read, on her deck, *National Geographic*,
how circumcision was common among Mandingo,
who sold slaves and gold. Joan clerked in the Post

Office. Down the road, neighbors shot coyote.
Joan's husband brought a lobster home.
Ten pounds, should have thrown
it back, shell shellacked lavender, lilac, indigo.

Erin Aube

PINCH

I upset the important books in your library,
folding down pages
—the librarian's enemy number one—
dozens of tiny dogs' ears
you will never be able to uncrease.
Novels with pages suddenly top-heavy,
now needing too much space
on the shelf that was once a just-right fit.

Marking pages
but never passages,
I once believed you would read the same
and find my line.
But if that were true,
then the library would still be ours.

Erin Aube

WHERE WE SLEEP

I need a king-sized bed.
Or at least two twin beds pushed together,
with some sort of something covering the split between,
holding it together.
Because that split between could become a real problem.
Narrow at first.
Fine at first.
Perfect.
At first.
And then 120 miles in width
like the Amazon in the wet season.
No bridges,
and always flowing against its original self.

I hate a king-sized bed.
You migrate west,
like a harpy eagle overtaking the five foot nest of his once mate,
making his own bed in which to lie,
all the while preening his crown,
and searching for the next innocent sloth on which to prey.
I migrate east,
a poison dart frog
with a laser pointed focus on where I am headed
and the tree on which I will rest.
Mismatched outfit,
and, according to research,
“shorter than a teaspoon,”
“heavier than a U.S. penny,”
highly toxic,
and cocky as hell.

I want a king size bed.
But it would ruin us.
We are fragile. So fragile.
A spider’s web trying to survive the mist of the fastest moving river,
which isn’t mist at all,
but a monsoon.
Especially to a spider,
even a Brazilian Wandering spider,

who could bite a person
and watch,
through multiple eyes,
that same person die
twenty-five minutes later
and then turn her many eyes to her home and her many babies
and watch it and them blow away
in the mist
twenty-five seconds later.

Instead, let's get one twin bed.
So tiny that we could not possibly get away from each other.
Like macaws,
with wings longer than their bodies by one-quarter
to wrap each other up for their sixty years together.
Let's be macaws.
Hating avocados, together.
Hating cherries, together.
Wrapped in each other's abnormally long wings,
for sixty years in our twin sized bed,
with sheets the color of a river at its widest point,
and blankets the color of sunsets in Peru,
and even more blankets the color of sunrises in Brazil.

Ellen Malphrus

OTHER CHANCES

Hérons pattern the shore
in hieroglyphics
then settle into
steely dusk—
ready for
the night hunt.

Silver fish that rise
to the light
are impaled
by the unforeseen flash
of sudden consequence.

But those who get away
carry the message of moonlight
to where you lie
in salt crisped sheets
and watch
through a curtainless window—

pretending
 there is
 no design
 for escape.

RELATIVITY

Turns out
that unsettled old slat house
on the road to nowhere
is right outside of town
if you're coming from
the other way.

Makes for a different story—
but the latch is still busted
on the barn swallow porch
and the chimney refuses the wall.

It's hard to know which is the sadder version
but never mind what emptiness tells you—
sunflowers can always

jump the ditch.

John Belk

BEGINNING

*And God said, "Let the waters bring forth
swarms of living creatures—"*

The bayou pirouettes across the mud-
drenched beds where I grew up. Overly
concerned with how it looks, it sweeps the silt
away in barridas. But I still travel
tousled waters, treacherous and wild.
I hear that this is part of larger plans—
fate and pre-determined reasons I
can't understand. They tell me God created
algae—God created mud. It's God
who made the pennywort and God who caused
the flood. And this has got me thinking that
this God must be a fish that glides behind
a mudbank, darts into the marshweed, or
just fades into the bayou when glimpsed.

CLEANING

My father showed me how to clean a fish.
He showed me how to slice behind the gills
and kill it quick. He showed me how to get
fillets off bone and how to soak the meat
in milk so that it doesn't taste as strong.
I watched him as he held the tail in case
it flopped and sent a knife's edge slicing into
flesh. He has the scars to show me how
it hurts. He taught me how to feed the guts
and bones to Uncle's dogs—the mangy strays
that ramble to the porch when it gets cold.
He showed me how to freeze what I don't eat,
to make it keep—to leave some back for when
you can't imagine ever needing it.

James Wyshynski

TILLING, VALDOSTA, GEORGIA

I'm here at this narrow plot tucked
against the house, kids off, wife napping,
my hands caked with Georgia clay.

All that's brought me here – every broken
word, twisted turn, reckless promise
sweats in the noonday heat.

I stop to take a deep drink from the dented
spout of a galvanized watering can and I find
absolution is cold and laced with iron.

Joanne Nelson

PREPARATION

In the basement my mother folds
towels, snaps into the air,
smooths each against her body
before she adds to the pile
on the dryer humming
with another load.

She gives me hankies
for practice. My hands too full
of the season, I drop more
than I fold before adding
to my own crooked pile.

“Don’t get too excited,” my mother warns,
“you’ll only be disappointed.”
I am left with the enormity
of this thing called *too*.

What is *too excited* and how do I get there?
The drone of the dryer sways
the pile ever so slightly. Christmas paper
and tinsel scent the air.

She straightens the folded towels,
corrects my ragged edges before
the hankies fall. I decide
too disappointed is a risk
I’m willing to take.

Eric Roy

A ROOM OVER THE GARAGE

I had just watched my first adult movie on his family's new VCR and, while watching, tried not to look as he masturbated. After cleaning himself up with some tissues, he told me to follow him and I did. I followed him over white shag carpet, up white stairs to the bedroom on the second floor.

The room was immense, cavernous, but due to everything painted or clothed in white the room had, not heavenly but an afterlife feeling to it: hazy, holy, safe. Past the king-sized bed, a sliding door opened onto a porch where at one end was a walkway like a bridge, and following him I realized I was on top of the covered walkway that led from the garage to the entrance of the house below. Up here it led to a door to a room over the garage. Before opening the door, he looked back at me then disappeared inside.

Stepping through the doorway I was unprepared for what I saw: a dark mountain lifted all the way to the ceiling from a waist-high platform nearly filling the entirety of the room. Taking a step closer I could see wild animals in a forest, and a lake on which ducks alighted, people rowing canoes or drinking in boats. A whistle blew, a steam whistle, a sound I had never heard before and my eyes grew as lights began to blink on like eyes of alerted predators all across the face of the mountain. Cars began moving over mountain roads, and a train came out of a tunnel gradually picking up speed, as if making up for time. The tracks I could see now wrapped around, up and down the mountain through trees and tunnels and a well-lit depot where families stood waiting, one family with a dog. When he appeared from behind the mountain I knew I wasn't going to tell anyone about what I'd seen and that knowledge, that I could keep a secret, that, good or bad, I could do whatever I chose filled me like an urn.

Molly Mattingly

THE NIGHT YOU TOLD ME I WAS SPECIAL

I barely fell asleep
next to someone who liked
the way my pale soft skin looked
in his unlit, empty
gray bedroom.

It was the furthest I'd ever been
from you, and he was
the furthest thing I'd ever had
from you.

And each time

I sighed,

I could hear you say,

"You are special,

special,

special."

When he was finished,

I lay awake against

the wall, and

he slept against me.

So I left before he could

wake up or wrap

his arm around my waist

or tell me to stay any longer.

And as I closed his door,

I could see

the sky was already a gradient

of his orange t-shirt

and my cheeks blushing pink

and the same hue of blue

that fell over your mind

the next time

I told you

I wasn't anything special.

Beth Suter

MOTHER TONGUE

I try to translate
this wordless language
of regretted regret

I speak around it
to confirm its existence

to draw the shape
of its brimming white space

its contradictions

rooted both deeply and up
we weathered each other

my will-o'-the-wisp boy
a gift of light to get lost by

both of us leaving
and left behind

THE DIAGNOSIS

and yet tonight
a river of crows flying
above their reflections

back-lit by the oldest moon
thin as a feather, its light
clouds the surface of their wings

and a group of strangers
stopping along the river road—
destination forgotten—

a village of us
getting out of our cars
looking down at the sky

too startled into this moment
to take a picture—
and yet these words

Angela Narciso Torres

AUGUST

Something in this garden
is dying. Last week's
poppies have gone to seed

and today the honeysuckle dries
on the branch. Every day one
day closer—maybe somebody

else, maybe you or me. Another
ash tree taken down.
This is nothing

new. My father's
cancer has spread—
tiny maps colonizing

his spine. How or where
to keep this
slow-growing grief?

All these small
departures—
and large, islands

on the horizon,
green dark mysteries
I cannot know.

Annabel Lang

APPLE BUTTER

After she hears of the miscarriage,
she writes my mother a letter

about ordinary things: buntings
at her feeder, cows that got out,

bedclothes left on the line
overnight in a rainstorm—

they had be taken in again,
then washed twice.

She writes nothing like god
has plans, now you know

you can, sorry. In the middle,
she switches pens.

Maybe the first runs dry
or she has a thought, pauses,

resumes in a different room,
safe from interruption.

*All weekend, I made jam.
We canned everything left
in the orchard, the garden.
I think it is enough to last,
but if not, fine. We can go
to the store. We can eat
something else.*

Jianqing Zheng

KEEPSAKE

after Eudora Welty's One Writer's Beginnings

My mom kept in her bottom bureau drawer
boxes of treasures and gave me
permission to play with one of them—

a switch of her chestnut-colored hair
in a heavy bright braid that coiled
like a snake inside a cardboard box.

I liked to hang it from the doorknob
and unplait it, letting it fall
in ripples so I could comb it out.

One day I noticed in the drawer
a small white cardboard box
tightly closed. I opened it—

two polished buffalo nickels
embedded in white cotton. I rushed
with the box to mom and asked if

I could run out to spend the nickels.
“No!” she exclaimed, telling me
that a little brother had come but died

as a baby before I was born.
The two nickels were his, once laid
on his eyelids, for an untold purpose.

BIRD-WATCHING

twittering cardinals
spring daybreak
slowly reddens

...

Welcome Center:
a mockingbird
loud for a look

...

boat song
a coot, startled, skims
across the lake

...

autumn dawn
the bright song of a wren
on a bare tree

...

squawking crows
shades of nightfall
disperse west

...

sudden wind
blackbirds' hubbub
drifts away

...

after rain
the mourning dove
resumes cooing

Bob Hoeppepner

FAWN

We burned the blanket
under which the fawn had died.
We told it not to.

We burned the fawn, too.
The smoke was like the steaming
from its dry nostrils.

It is many years
since I saw that steam and smoke.
Breathing is old now.

About to forget
I look up and see the clouds.
Sky is full of fawn.

Megan Eldredge

WHITE INK

I kept a meticulous record of all of the
Things that I saw and touched and heard and
Learned from, a history of all the things that
Shaped me and sustained me and created me,
Only to find that, when I tried to reinvent
The very fibers of my being, yet stopped seeing
The beauty of being Me,
I had written my lifetime of reminders
In nothing but white ink.

Rosemary Royston

EZRA'S HOUSE

The hardwoods were paint splattered,
Pollock-like. The former owner, Ezra,
had left his mark in this 40s bungalow
off a dirt road that overlooked a pasture
lined with Queen Anne's lace.

The first year asparagus grew on its own.
Snapdragons and marigolds filled sagging
window boxes, and we left the windows open
until first frost.

Inside, I painted the brown panel white,
the trim mint green and ignored
the orange shag. I turned the avocado fridge
glossy white with appliance paint
while my husband patched a hole in the bedroom.

We never forgot that first weekend,
a baptism of sorts,
as we unloaded box after box,
the radio up loud--
how the DJ announced *Better Than Ezra*
was up next, but instead of a song, we heard
a buzz, then silence. The power flickering off
after Ezra's name hit the air.

Elizabeth Rees

ELEGY FOR US

The Dakota rested stones for their dead
firmly, permanently
in fields of tall grass
protected by spruce.

You and I were not so devout. Restless,
finished, we cracked from doubt
alone in the cold. We did not
mark the spot with a stone.

Grasses have grown over
our last traces, a kind
of devotion to keeping
this grave warm.

Andrew Lafleche

AT LAST

she stands
in the upstairs window
framed in stone
choker chain around her neck

stares across the water
over the rolling knoll
through the forest skyline

and steps with the setting sun

to become a shadow
in the disappearing past

MacGregor Frank

MAKING

I dumped the spent
poinsettias
and that broken-necked
bird that hit the window
and died.

No need to go outside
what I now know:
The poem will evolve
from present circumstance.

But one structure always
suggests another and
the other invites me
to divagate. I'll stay.
I regret to abandon
the plantlife in the trashcan
and my heart speaks
for the bereaved
broken bird's mate.
Life goes on. The poem
spins out.

Ruth Holzer

LIQUIDATION

The sandwich-board man stands
hatless in the hammering sun,
takes a few steps forward,
a few steps back, waves
vaguely at the passing traffic.
He's doing a job
a machine would scorn.
A pole could hold up
his sign that says,
Everything Must Go!
Even a spike in a stump
could perform as well.
Even a nail in the stake
that will take his place
tomorrow at the junction
of the Flood Memorial Highway
and Dranesville Road.

Nancy Anne Miller

HALTER

I remove the oxygen tank
nose piece from your head,
hold a lasso of clear plastic
circles in my hand, remove

it like a halter off your head.
You sit on your bed, pieces
of paper around as you write
as Matisse cut shapes in his

lasts days, piles all about him,
buried in work. The commode
with its pelican beak made us
laugh, ready to swallow any

debris, on its home environment
of a beach. Today in America
people watch an eclipse and
shout for joy when seen. Yours

I watch daily slivering you
thin, like the moon shadows
a sun. I adjust your fan, turn it
up, down, tuning a fine violin,

music only you hear. Whispery
sounds, the flapping of angel
wings, from a sole one,
to a band of them coming.

Claire Scott

PREPARING AN APPEAL

—capital cases dog-eared & highlighted
determined to appeal the sentence

issued today by Dr. J. C. Newhouse,
eminent oncologist

handing down his diagnosis like a sentence:
six months to live

an appeal takes years
I don't have

no time for state and federal
courts to pour over ponderous details:

occluded valve, clogged arteries
four divorces, a slight embezzlement

handfuls of statins & beta blockers
a hit & run & run when I was twenty-two

I have sent a writ of habeas corpus
asking the judge to overturn the conviction

based on information not addressed in my trial:

I have yet to see the Northern Lights
or the face of my soon-to-be grandson

I swear to be kinder to my cat
take vitamins, visit my mother

even though she spits & swears &
confuses me with the sister she despises

I will send my case straight
to the Most Supreme Court

may God have mercy
on my malignant soul—

Jen Karetnick

WAYS TO DISCOUNT A WOMAN

1. Fill your mouth with words that taste like war. Chef's kiss them down her throat until they become her daily charge.
2. If her face is worth a twenty-dollar imprint, force her to settle for a two-dollar bill. Make her a stamp. A coupon. A BOGO bargain.
3. Scissor the canvas of her. She is an expert at holding in her guts with arms of invisible tape.
4. Conserve your eyesight. Emotional vandals, hunger is only a secret if you're not looking.
5. Don't look.

John Davis Jr.

BEFORE WE MOVED

You took down
our beige curtains of words,
said you wanted them to hang
in the new place
same as before
but shading different rooms
from unfamiliar views
and light that fell
in directions
we had never faced.
What did they say
again? Names of teas
and coffees in foreign tongues,
I think,
though I never cared
enough to notice
until you stripped them,
bundled them
over your arms
like you needed their warmth.
Our undraped windows
spilled overcast day
through salted white panes,
across marble sills.
You sighed, tore tape,
and guessed they wanted
some better farewell
than a hard undressing
before you sealed that last
box marked *linens*.

DUST WORKERS

My sister and I built ruins
the April our father left. His bricks
became a game governed by her rules:
We have to crush them and collect the dust.
The boss says he'll be back to inspect.
With a rusty claw hammer,
we crumbled bricks into chunks,
chunks into sediment that gathered
under our fingernails and among
the backyard sycamore's roots.
Rusty haze rose into our nostrils,
infected our throats and laughter.
We heard its grit between our teeth at night.
Our knuckles swelled, and our sweat ran
lightning-jagged, fell into starbursts.
The boss never returned to check
our work, to watch us spit and decide
whose was redder. He'd never know
the creak of our toy truck loaded with powder
we dumped by the empty garage.

David Swerdlow

THREATS OF ACCUMULATION

I'm raking the universe
across the patio, dead leaves
hurrying with me and the wind

behind them, our rattling tines,
our brown and gray field
of pushed-over thistle,

as we're not brought to panic
over a little absence,
but to listen
to ourselves

rumbling through untended trees,
around the house, into the future.

We're not made
for anything but this
resistance, knowing God's

disregard is a field
bereft of devotion
and purpose.

*

Forget God,
possible snow,
and what grief demands
from this side of December.
Forget dread.

If you hear yourself
dripping through dusk's
filter, forget yourself.

These were my directives,
easy enough
for a man coupled to his future
like freight. All afternoon,

threats of accumulation crippled
the will, so I sat alone amidst
backyard trees, ornamental pear
and weeping hemlock, probabilities

floating through attention, gold
leaves falling, alighting on
the brick patio, mind's bottom
collaged with woe, what I will rake
tomorrow and lift
into the wheelbarrow until I see

God watching
from the corner of my lot, hands
pocketed, brow wrinkled, making
his periodic assault on mindlessness,
what will weigh upon

the world he has wanted
to abandon, so I am gathering
my life, closing
down the future, leaving God

with the trees I know
he cannot demolish.

*

I'm staring out the sliding glass door at the night snow, shallow bowl
of oatmeal in one hand, spoon in the other, and I'm admiring a perfect layer
of glistening accumulation on the patio. I'm thinking *this is something*
as I carve out another stiff spoonful of steaming oats as if they too

were snow, and I were the night plowman, with my silver blade moving
decisively across the landscape in my bowl, my white bowl with its blue
snowflakes and its blue rim, and I'm listening to the furnace work, its barrel
chest in the basement, its burner and blower, its clear desire to make us

warm. I'm as close to happiness in my rose kitchen with its white
trim as I'll ever be. I'm looking at the snow-laden rake and shovel I left
leaning against the stone wall. I'm looking out into the night where I know
the hemlocks line up against the wind from the west and keep me

from further harm. O God of oatmeal and snow and the small
pleasures I have tonight, I know you are in the dark trees too.

Taylor N. Schaefer

HICKISMS AND HICKIES

You know how you do— when you lie
on my bedroom floor? Your hair sunbursts

round your head— like afternoon
through winter branches. Jiggle your good foot, count

the stars popcorned onto the ceiling. Always
gotta stretch your arm up, follow your pointer like it'll guide you

to an answer. Do the same in the bed
of the Chevy I *borrowed* from my brother, freezin'
fluorescents cupped in the hollow of your throat. Almost like a prayer

'cept I never had the urge to kiss one a those before, never
pinched vessels between lips desperate
not to taste salted buckshot. I didn't know

mud could bloom that way, lip-gloss
blended on the edges.

C. Pope

PRAYER FOR THE WOMAN AT THE FAIR WHO CAN
CRY ON COMMAND

Who cares? I'll tell you: I met a boy once who could whistle with his ass.

We gathered in the den after school
and he told us to shut the curtains, to close our eyes tight.
We held our breaths. Another time, a giant lumbered toward me

through a crowded hall like a phone pole over a hilltop. I recognized him;
they paid him three million dollars to play with a ball.
"Hello, giant," I almost said, my memory redacted by vast spectacle
so whatever name his parents gave him

vanished beneath shadow. This is what reality makes of us: an old man
at the fair, asking someone to cry for his brother's passing.
"My heart just—*shoof*—left out of me," he explained. "Didn't cry a drop."
Somehow, he'd tugged open the vault door protecting him

from his worst fears, only to discover it empty. Fifty cents,
it cost. Then—you could see it—the Weeping Woman
transfigured herself, her everliving spirit, into a hissing wad
in preparation to ascend from the mouth of whatever cannon

rolled its truck-wheels around her shifting fronts and shorelines.
Let her fight such interior wars. Not to find whom
might sob for *her*—who cares—but to unearth the primacy of one tear
filled with self-knowledge against the rest, the distinction

between the compass wobbling in the direction of home and the one
spinning haywire at an equator. She cast her face down at the eroded
midway grass as though mourning what our feet destroy in their hunt
for spectral joy. What would it be like to contain the immortal?

The taste of cotton candy, butter, and appalled lights sheering away
one sense and another, like stars from a nova. Then the tents,
their thin, billowy walls, and trying hard to distinguish the wanderers
from the travelers, the buzz of flies from snoring in the night.

CONTRIBUTORS

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TAYLOR N. SCHAEFER is a student at Salisbury University. She is a lover of poetry, and tries to make work that either pulls and pulls at something deep inside or hands out black eyes like candy. Her previous works have also appeared in *Scarab Literary Magazine* and *Polaris Literary Magazine*.

CLAIRE SCOTT is an award-winning poet who has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her work has been accepted by the *Atlanta Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Enizagam*, and *Healing Muse*, among others. Claire is the author of *Waiting to be Called* and *Until I Couldn't*. She is the co-author of *Unfolding in Light: A Sisters' Journey in Photography and Poetry*.

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BETH SUTER studied Environmental Science at U.C. Davis and has worked as a naturalist and teacher. She is also a Pushcart Prize nominee, with recent or forthcoming poems in *Barrow Street*, *Colorado Review*, *Natural Bridge*, and *CALYX*, among others. She lives in Davis, California with her husband and son.

DAVID SWERDLOW's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The American Poetry Review*, *Poetry*, *Poetry Northwest*, *American Literary Review*, and elsewhere. He has published two books of poetry with WordTech Editions: *Bodies on Earth* in 2010, and *Small Holes in the Universe* in 2003. His novel, *Television Man*, is forthcoming from RBY/Czykmate Productions.

JUNE SYLVESTER SARACENO is the author of *Feral, North Carolina, 1965*, her debut novel. *The Girl From Yesterday*, a poetry collection, is forthcoming in January 2020. She has two previous books of poetry in print, of *Dirt and Tar*, and *Altars of Ordinary Light*. She serves as English department chair at Sierra Nevada College, Lake Tahoe, where she teaches in the undergraduate and MFA programs in creative writing. She is the director of the literary speaker series Writers in the Woods, and founding editor of the *Sierra Nevada Review*.

JILL M. TALBOT's writing has appeared in *Geist*, *Rattle*, *subTerrain*, *PRISM*, *The Stinging Fly*, and others. Jill won the PRISM Grouse Grind Lit Prize. She was shortlisted for the Matrix Lit POP Award and the Malahat Far Horizons Award. Jill lives in Vancouver, BC.

SEAN TIERNEY's first collection of poetry, titled "My Ill-Read Ophelia Poem", was published in 2010 by Ra Press of Vermont. Ra Press has since released seven of Tierney's books, an experimental mix of poetry and short stories, the most recent of which is 2017's "Inhibition at 20,000 Feet". His poems have been featured in various publications, such as *The Curlew* and *Right Hand Pointing*. He currently resides in South Florida.

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JANICE WHITTINGTON has published the chapbook *Does My Father Dream of Sons?* from the University of West Florida and the full-length *Into a Thousand Mouths*, a Walt McDonald Series Winner from Texas Tech University Press. Other poems have appeared in journals such as *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Touchstone*, *Mississippi Valley Review*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Writer's Forum*, and *Southern Poetry Review*. She lives with her husband in Lubbock, Texas.

CLAUDE WILKINSON is a critic, essayist, painter, and poet. His poetry collections include *Reading the Earth*, winner of the Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award, and *Joy in the Morning*, which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. His most recent collection is titled *Marvelous Light*, published by Stephen F. Austin State University Press.

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS is the author of *As One Fire Consumes Another* (Orison Poetry Prize, 2019), *Skin Memory* (Backwaters Prize, University of Nebraska Press, 2019), *Disinheritance*, and *Controlled Hallucinations*. He serves as editor of *The Inflectionist Review* and works as a literary agent. Previous publishing credits include: *The Yale Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Southern Review*, *Sycamore Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Saranac Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Third Coast*, and various anthologies. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

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