

2017-2018



**CLASSIC SLAM
ANTHOLOGY**

GO IN, POET!

GETLIT.ORG

TABLE OF CONTENTS

“Portrait of the Alcoholic Three Weeks Sober,” Kaveh Akbar	6
“Memorial,” Francisco Alarcon	7
“Eulogy,” Sherman Alexie	8
Excerpts from “Half-Hanged Mary,” Margaret Atwood	11
“Funeral Blues”, W.H. Auden	13
“One Art,” Elizabeth Bishop	14
“The Forging,” Jose Luis Borges	15
“Epithalamium NYC,” Anne Carson	16
“When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities,” Chen Chen	17
“Choi Jeong Min,” Franny Choi	18
“Good Hotdogs,” Sandra Cisneros	20
“A Blue Note for Father’s Day,” Tiana Clark	21
“Grave,” Billy Collins	22
“The Lanyard,” Billy Collins	23
“The Opposites Game,” Brendan Constantine	24
“In Colorado My Father Scoured and Stacked Dishes,” Eduardo C. Corral	26
“Somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond,” E.E. Cummings	28
“I Remember Watts,” Richard Dedeaux, Father Amde Hamilton, and Otis O’Solomon (aka Watts Prophets)	29
“Nobody,” Marsha De La O	32
“Holy Sonnets: Death, be not Proud,” John Donne	33
“The Owner of the Night,” Mark Doty	34
“Odysseus’s Secret,” Stephen Dunn	36
“The Neighborhood Dog,” Russell Edson	37
“self-portrait with no flag,” Safia Elhillo	38
“The Boatman,” Carolyn Forshay	39
“First Kiss,” Denice Frohman	40
“Most People Would Rather Not,” Hannah Gamble	41
“A Brief for the Defense,” Jack Gilbert	42
“Nikki-Rosa,” Nikki Giovanni	43
“You Were Brave in That Holy War,” Hafiz	44
“The Blue Terrance,” Terrance Hayes	45

“Half-Mexican,” Juan Felipe Herrera.....	47
“Beauty,” Tony Hoagland.....	48
“Personal,” Tony Hoagland.....	50
“2pac couplets,” Chinaka Hodge.....	52
“Crossing Jordan,” Langston Hughes.....	53
“Mercy,” Tyehimba Jess.....	54
“Author’s Prayer,” Ilya Kaminsky.....	55
“You and I are Disappearing,” Yusef Komunyakaa.....	56
“Gust,” Peter LaBerge.....	57
from “Feel,” Kendrick Lamar.....	58
“Losing Track,” Denise Levertov.....	59
“What Work Is,” Philip Levine.....	60
“There are Birds Here,” Jamaal May.....	61
“Down South,” MarShawn McCarrel.....	62
“The Church of Michael Jordan,” Jeffery McDaniel.....	63
“Native Trees,” W.S. Merwin.....	64
“When I am Asked,” Lisa Mueller.....	65
“Just Keep Quiet and Nobody Will Notice,” by Ogden Nash.....	66
“Sonnet LXV,” Pablo Neruda.....	67
“Cockfight,” Hieu Minh Nguyen.....	68
“Kindness,” Naomi Shihab Nye.....	69
“Wild Geese,” Mary Oliver.....	70
“Love Song,” Dorothy Parker.....	71
“Mad Girl’s Love Song,” Sylvia Plath.....	72
“Lady Lazarus,” Sylvia Plath.....	73
“Race’ Politics,” Luis J. Rodriguez.....	76
“Worry,” Sam Sax.....	78
“The Surface of Water,” Jason Schneiderman.....	80
“Screens and Storms,” Natalie Shapero.....	81
“Ugly,” Warsan Shire.....	82
“Their Savior Was Me,” Patricia Smith.....	83
“Sci Fi,” Tracy K. Smith.....	84
“Eating Poetry,” Mark Strand.....	85

“Happy Idea,” Mary Szybist	86
“Advertisement,” Wislawa Szymborska	87
“The Memories of Fish,” James Tate	88
“Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night,” Dylan Thomas	89
“Bear,” Ellen Bryant Voigt	90
“Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong,” Ocean Vuong	91
“Did I Miss Anything?,” Tom Wayman	92
“Song of Myself, section 52,” Walt Whitman	93
“A Blessing,” James Wright	94
“Belief in Magic,” Dean Young	95
“I am Trying to Break Your Heart,” Kevin Young	96
“After Anna Akhmatova,” Cynthia Zarin	98
SHORTIES	99
“Decisions,” M.K. Asante	100
“The More Loving One,” W.H. Auden	101
from “Ten,” Jimmy Santiago Baca	102
“The Power Lines Are Down,” Laurel Ann Bogen	103
“We Real Cool,” Gwendolyn Brooks	104
“Scientific Method,” Adam Clay	105
“blessing the boats,” Lucille Clifton	106
“i am running into a new year,” Lucille Clifton	107
“I Like my Body when it is with Your Body,” E.E. Cummings	108
“Surgeons must be very careful,” Emily Dickinson	109
“I’m Nobody! Who are you?,” Emily Dickinson	110
“Leadbelly,” Cornelius Eady	111
“Poetry as Insurgent Art [I am signaling you through the flames],” Lawrence Ferlinghetti	112
“On Hatred,” Rudy Francisco	113
“Everything Must Go,” Matthea Harvey	114
“Invictus,” William Ernest Henley	115
“Amor Fati,” Jane Hirshfield	116
“Birthday,” Richie Hoffman	117
from “Theme for English B,” Langston Hughes	118
“Blues on a Box,” Langston Hughes	119

“To Helen About Her Hair,” Robinson Jeffers	120
“Genesis,” Etheridge Knight,.....	121
“Common Form,” Rudyard Kipling	122
“Screech Owl,” Ted Kooser	123
“Self Pity,” D.H. Lawrence	124
“Summer,” Robin Coste Lewis.....	125
“If We Must Die,” Claude McKay	126
“I Know My Soul,” Claude McKay	127
“Sorrow,” Edna St. Vincent Millay	128
“When I Consider How My Light Is Spent,” John Milton	129
“August,” Mary Oliver	130
“Resumé,” Dorothy Parker	131
“Zazen on Ching-t’ing Mountain,” Li-PO	132
“My Papa’s Waltz,” Theodore Roethke	133
“Untitled,” Rumi	134
“Violence, I know You,” Khadijah Queen	135
“In the Depths of Solitude,” Tupac Shakur.....	136
“Starry Night,” Tupac Shakur	137
“what they did yesterday afternoon,” Warsan Shire.....	138
“Not Waving but Drowning,” Stevie Smith	139
“Keeping Things Whole,” Mark Strand.....	140
“Vietnam,” Wislawa Szymborska	141
“Toy Boast,” Ocean Vuong	142
“Lost,” David Wagoner	143
from “Song of Myself (number 2),” Walt Whitman	144
“If You Should Tire of Loving Me,” Margaret Widdemer	145
“this is a material world,” by Saul Williams	146
“Danse Russe,” William Carlos Williams	147
“Never Give All the Heart,” William Butler Yeats	148

“Portrait of the Alcoholic Three Weeks Sober,” Kaveh Akbar

The first thing I ever saw die—a lamb that took fifteen long minutes. Instead of rolling into the grass, her blood pooled on the porch. My uncle stepped away from the puddle, called it a *good omen for the tomatoes* then lit a tiny black cigar. Years later I am still picking romas

out of my salads. The barbarism of eating anything seems almost unbearable. With drinking however I’ve always been prodigious. A garden bucket filled with cream would disappear, and seconds later I’d emerge patting my belly. I swear, I could conjure rainclouds

from piles of ash, guzzle down whole human bodies, the faces like goblets I’d drain then put back in the cupboard. So trust me now: when I say *thirst*, I mean defeated, abandoned-in-faith, lonely-as-the-slow-charge-into-a-bayonet *thirst*. Imagine being the sand forced to watch silt dance

in the Nile. Imagine being the oil boiling away an entire person. Today, I’m finding problems in areas where I didn’t have areas before. I’m grateful to be trusted with any of it: the bluebrown ocean undrinkable as a glass of scorpions, the omnipresent fragrant honey and the bees that guard it. It just seems such a severe sort of

miraculousness. Even the terminal dryness of bone hides inside our skin plainly, like dust on a mirror. This can guide us forward or not guide us at all. Maybe it’s that *forward* seems too chronological, the way the future-perfect always sounds so cavalier when someone tells me *some day this will all have been worth it*.

“Memorial,” Francisco Alarcon

The Pacific Garden Mall as we know it,
ceased to exist at 5:04 today. – Mardi Wormhoudt,
Mayor of Santa Cruz, October 17, 1989

do towns
suffer
like people
heart attacks

do buildings
get scared
too and try
to run

do steel
frames
get twisted
out of pain

do windows
break
because
they can't cry

do walls let
themselves go
just
like that

and lie on
sidewalks
waiting
to be revived

is this how
old places
give birth
to new places?

“Eulogy,” Sherman Alexie

My mother was a dictionary.

She was one of the last fluent speakers of our tribal language.

She knew dozens of words that nobody else knew.

When she died, we buried all of those words with her.

My mother was a dictionary.

She knew words that had been spoken for thousands of years.

She knew words that will never be spoken again.

She knew songs that will never be sung again.

She knew stories that will never be told again.

My mother was a dictionary.

My mother was a thesaurus,

My mother was an encyclopedia.

My mother never taught her children the tribal language.

Oh, she taught us how to count to ten.

Oh, she taught us how to say “I love you.”

Oh, she taught us how to say “Listen to me.”

And, of course, she taught us how to curse.

My mother was a dictionary.

She was one of the last four speakers of the tribal language.

In a few years, the last surviving speakers, all elderly, will also be gone.

There are younger Indians who speak a new version of the tribal
language.

But the last old-time speakers will be gone.

My mother was a dictionary.

But she never taught me the tribal language.
And I never demanded to learn.
My mother always said to me, "English will be your best weapon."
She was right, she was right, she was right.
My mother was a dictionary.
When she died, her children mourned her in English.
My mother knew words that had been spoken for thousands of years.
Sometimes, late at night, she would sing one of the old songs.
She would lullaby us with ancient songs.
We were lullabied by our ancestors.
My mother was a dictionary.
I own a cassette tape, recorded in 1974.
On that cassette, my mother speaks the tribal language.
She's speaking the tribal language with her mother, Big Mom.
And then they sing an ancient song.
I haven't listened to that cassette tape in two decades.
I don't want to risk snapping the tape in some old cassette player.
And I don't want to risk letting anybody else transfer that tape to
digital.
My mother and grandmother's conversation doesn't belong in the
cloud.
That old song is too sacred for the Internet.
So, as that cassette tape deteriorates, I know that it will soon be dead.
Maybe I will bury it near my mother's grave.

Maybe I will bury it at the base of the tombstone she shares with my
father.

Of course, I'm lying.

I would never bury it where somebody might find it.

Stay away, archaeologists! Begone, begone!

My mother was a dictionary.

She knew words that have been spoken for thousands of years.

She knew words that will never be spoken again.

I wish I could build tombstones for each of those words.

Maybe this poem is a tombstone.

My mother was a dictionary.

She spoke the old language.

But she never taught me how to say those ancient words.

She always said to me, "English will be your best weapon."

She was right, she was right, she was right.

Excerpts from “Half-Hanged Mary,” Margaret Atwood

7 p.m.

Rumor was loose in the air
hunting for some neck to land on.
I was milking the cow,
the barn door open to the sunset.

I didn't feel the aimed word hit
and go in like a soft bullet.
I didn't feel the smashed flesh
closing over it like water
over a thrown stone.

I was hanged for living alone
for having blue eyes and a sunburned skin,
tattered skirts, few buttons,
a weedy farm in my own name,
and a surefire cure for warts;

Oh yes, and breasts,
and a sweet pear hidden in my body.
Whenever there's talk of demons
these come in handy.

...

8 a.m.

When they came to harvest my corpse
(open your mouth, close your eyes)
cut my body from the rope,
surprise, surprise,
I was still alive.

Tough luck, folks,
I know the law:
you can't execute me twice
for the same thing. How nice.

Before, I was not a witch.
But now I am one.

Later

My body of skin waxes and wanes
around my true body,
a tender nimbus.

I skitter over the paths and fields,
mumbling to myself like crazy,
mouth full of juicy adjectives
and purple berries.
The townsfolk dive headfirst into the bushes
to get out of my way.

My first death orbits my head,
an ambiguous nimbus,
medallion of my ordeal.
No one crosses that circle.

Having been hanged for something
I never said,
I can now say anything I can say.

Holiness gleams on my dirty fingers,
I eat flowers and dung,,
two forms of the same thing, I eat mice
and give thanks, blasphemies
gleam and burst in my wake
like lovely bubbles.
I speak in tongues,
my audience is owls.

My audience is God
because who the hell else could understand me?

The words boil out of me,
coil after coil of sinuous possibility.
the cosmos unravels from my mouth,
all fullness, all vacancy.

“Funeral Blues”, W.H. Auden

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone.
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling in the sky the message ‘He is Dead,’
Put crepe bows around the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song.
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can come to any good.

“One Art,” Elizabeth Bishop

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

“The Forging,” Jose Luis Borges

Like the blind man whose hands are precursors
that push aside walls and glimpse heavens
slowly, flustered, I feel
in the crack of night
the verses that are to come.
I must burn the abominable darkness
in their limpid bonfire:
the purple words
on the flagellated shoulder of time.
I must enclose the tears of evening
in the hard diamond of the poem.
No matter if the soul
walks naked and lonely as the wind
if the universe of a glorious kiss
still embraces my life.
The night is good fertile ground
for the sower of verses.

“Epithalamium NYC,” Anne Carson

I washed my hair the morning I got married put
on
red boots found license woke C. set off for City
Hall
had ceremony drove to Fairway got cups of tea
sat
at bench on boardwalk watched man & Woman
at
next bench come almost to blows over her having
put
ketchup on his egg sandwich too bad they couldn't
just
trade hers had the sausage Don't ever put ketchup
on
my egg sandwich he clenched You handed it to me
she
cawed meanwhile their aged father paying no heed
was
pulling out bits of paper one after the other That's not
it
he'd say That's one from four years ago beautifully
mild
he searched on his wife I bet kept track of the list
when
she was alive bluish mist lifted sank on the water a
statue
(Liberty) slid us a wave from way across the bay

“When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities,” Chen Chen

To be a good
ex/current friend for R. To be one last

inspired way to get back at R. To be relationship
advice for L. To be advice

for my mother. To be a more comfortable
hospital bed for my mother. To be

no more hospital beds. To be, in my spare time,
America for my uncle, who wants to be China

for me. To be a country of trafficless roads
& a sports car for my aunt, who likes to go

fast. To be a cyclone
of laughter when my parents say

their new coworker is like that, they can tell
because he wears pink socks, see, you don't, so you can't,

can't be one of them. To be the one
my parents raised me to be—

a season from the planet
of planet-sized storms.

To be a backpack of PB&J & every
thing I know, for my brothers, who are becoming

their own storms. To be, for me, nobody,
homebody, body in bed watching TV. To go 2D

& be a painting, an amateur's hilltop & stars,
simple decoration for the new apartment

with you. To be close, J.,
to everything that is close to you—

blue blanket, red cup, green shoes
with pink laces.

To be the blue & the red.
The green, the hot pink.

“Choi Jeong Min,” Franny Choi

for my parents, Choi Inyeong & Nam Songeun

in the first grade i asked my mother permission
to go by frances at school. at seven years old,

i already knew the exhaustion of hearing my name
butchered by hammerhead tongues. already knew

to let my salty gook name drag behind me
in the sand, safely out of sight. in fourth grade

i wanted to be a writer & worried
about how to escape my surname – choi

is nothing if not Korean, if not garlic breath,
if not seaweed & sesame & food stamps

during the lean years – could i go by f.j.c? could i be
paper thin & raceless? dust jacket & coffee stain,

boneless rumor smoldering behind the curtain
& speaking through an ink-stained puppet?

my father ran through all his possible rechristenings –
ian, isaac, ivan – & we laughed at each one,

knowing his accent would always give him away.
you can hear the pride in my mother’s voice

when she answers the phone this is grace. & it is
some kind of strange grace she’s spun herself,

some lightning made of chainmail. grace is not
her pseudonym, though everyone in my family is a poet.

these are the shields for the names we speak in the dark
to remember our darkness. savage death rites

we still practice in the new world. myths we whisper
to each other to keep warm. my Korean name

is the star my mother cooks into the jjigae
to follow home when i am lost, which is always

in this gray country, this violent foster home
whose streets are paved with shame, this factory yard

riddled with bullies ready to steal your skin
& sell it back to your mother for profit,

land where they stuff our throats with soil
& accuse us of gluttony when we learn to swallow it.

i confess. i am greedy. i think i deserve to be seen
for what i am: a boundless, burning wick.

a minor chord. i confess: if someone has looked
at my crooked spine and called it elmwood,

i've accepted. If someone has loved me more
for my gook name, for my saint name,

for my good vocabulary & bad joints,
i've welcomed them into this house.

i've cooked them each a meal with a star singing
at the bottom of the bowl, a secret ingredient

to follow home when we are lost:
sunflower oil, blood sausage, a name

given by a dead grandfather who eventually
forgot everything he'd touched. i promise:

i'll never stop stealing back what's mine.
i promise: i won't forget again.

“Good Hotdogs,” Sandra Cisneros

Fifty cents apiece
To eat our lunch
We'd run
Straight from school
Instead of home
Two blocks
Then the store
That smelled like steam
You ordered
Because you had the money
Two hotdogs and two pops for here
Everything on the hotdogs
Except pickle lily
Dash those hotdogs
Into buns and splash on
All that good stuff
Yellow mustard and onions
And french fries piled on top all
Rolled up in a piece of wax
Paper for us to hold hot
In our hands
Quarters on the counter
Sit down
Good hotdogs
We'd eat
Fast till there was nothing left
But salt and poppy seeds even
The little burnt tips
Of french fries
We'd eat
you humming
And me swinging my legs

“A Blue Note for Father’s Day,” Tiana Clark

Because I don’t know where you are—
I send you a letter of tree leaves

I heard this morning harmonizing
like emerald waves above a pond.

I send you John Coltrane,
who locked himself in a room of amethyst

for days with no food or mercy to write
A Love Supreme

We destroy ourselves for splendor—
emerging from the buried deep

like cicada song to mate & disappear again.
Today, I will not be bitter

about this holiday or the Facebook posts.
No, today I send you a roofless church,

a grotto with fuzzy moss & trickling water
that sounds like wet piano keys.

Please know—I’ve made good with my life.
With or without you, I know how to kneel

before imperfect men. I know this pond can carry
cold morning skin like blue blue notes

pressed from warm saxophone buttons for:
Acknowledgment, Resolutions, Pursuance, & Psalm.

Dear father, I hope you know that I can love
the absence of a thing even more than

the thing itself. That I can have one day a year
that doesn’t beat like the rest.

& friends, don’t ever wish to be me.
You don’t want this sunless song.

There is no number in my phone to call
There is no home with his face I remember,

just a place called Nowhere & this is where
I find & lose him like a savior.

“Grave,” Billy Collins

What do you think of my new glasses
I asked as I stood under a shade tree
before the joined grave of my parents,

and what followed was a long silence
that descended on the rows of the dead
and on the fields and the woods beyond,

one of the one hundred kinds of silence
according to the Chinese belief,
each one distinct from the others,

but the differences being so faint
that only a few special monks
were able to tell them all apart.

They make you look very scholarly,
I heard my mother say
once I lay down on the ground

and pressed an ear into the soft grass.
Then I rolled over and pressed
my other ear to the ground,

the ear my father likes to speak into,
but he would say nothing,
and I could not find a silence

among the one hundred Chinese silences
that would fit the one that he created
even though I was the one

who had just made up the business
of the 100 Chinese silences -
the Silence of the Night Boat

and the Silence of the Lotus,
cousin to the Silence of the Temple Bell
only deeper and softer, like petals, at its farthest edges.

“The Lanyard,” Billy Collins

The other day as I was ricocheting slowly
off the blue walls of this room
bouncing from typewriter to piano
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
I found myself in the 'L' section of the dictionary
where my eyes fell upon the word, Lanyard.
No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
could send one more suddenly into the past.
A past where I sat at a workbench
at a camp by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid thin plastic strips into a lanyard.
A gift for my mother.
I had never seen anyone use a lanyard.
Or wear one, if that's what you did with them.
But that did not keep me from crossing strand over strand
again and again until I had made a boxy, red and white lanyard for my mother.
She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard
She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted teaspoons of medicine to my lips,
set cold facecloths on my forehead
then led me out into the airy light
and taught me to walk and swim and I in turn presented her with a lanyard.
'Here are thousands of meals' she said,
'and here is clothing and a good education.'
'And here is your lanyard,' I replied,
'which I made with a little help from a counselor.'
'Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth and two clear eyes to read the world.' she whispered.
'And here,' I said, 'is the lanyard I made at camp.'
'And here,' I wish to say to her now,
'is a smaller gift. Not the archaic truth,
that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took the two-toned lanyard from my hands,
I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless worthless thing I wove out of boredom
would be enough to make us even.'

“The Opposites Game,” Brendan Constantine

This day my students and I play the Opposites Game with a line from Emily Dickinson. My life had stood a loaded gun, it goes and I write it on the board, pausing so they can call out the antonyms –

My	Your
Life	Death
Had stood ?	Will sit
A	Many
Loaded	Empty
Gun ?	

Gun.

For a moment, very much like the one between lightning and it's sound, the children just stare at me, and then it comes, a flurry, a hail storm of answers –

Flower, says one. No, Book, says another. That's stupid, cries a third, the opposite of a gun is a pillow. Or maybe a hug, but not a book, no way is it a book. With this, the others gather their thoughts

and suddenly it's a shouting match. No one can agree, for every student there's a final answer. It's a song, a prayer, I mean a promise, like a wedding ring, and later a baby. Or what's that person who delivers babies?

A midwife? Yes, a midwife. No, that's wrong. You're so wrong you'll never be right again. It's a whisper, a star, it's saying I love you into your hand and then touching someone's ear. Are you crazy? Are you the president

of Stupid-land? You should be, When's the election? It's a teddy bear, a sword, a perfect, perfect peach. Go back to the first one, it's a flower, a white rose. When the bell rings, I reach for an eraser but a girl

snatches it from my hand. Nothing's decided, she says, We're not done here. I leave all the answers on the board. The next day some of them have stopped talking to each other, they've taken sides.

There's a Flower club. And a Kitten club. And two boys calling themselves The Snowballs. The rest have stuck with the original game, which was to try to write something like poetry.

It's a diamond, it's a dance,
the opposite of a gun is a museum in France.
It's the moon, it's a mirror,
it's the sound of a bell and the hearer.

The arguing starts again, more shouting, and finally
a new club. For the first time I dare to push them.
Maybe all of you are right, I say.

Well, maybe. Maybe it's everything we said. Maybe it's
everything we didn't say. It's words and the spaces for words.
They're looking at each other now. It's everything in this room
and outside this room and down the street and in the sky.

It's everyone on campus and at the mall, and all the people
waiting at the hospital. And at the post office. And, yeah,
it's a flower, too. All the flowers. The whole garden.
The opposite of a gun is wherever you point it.

Don't write that on the board, they say. Just say poem.
Your death will sit through many empty poems.

“In Colorado My Father Scoured and Stacked Dishes,” Eduardo C. Corral

in a Tex-Mex restaurant. His co-workers,
unable to utter his name, renamed him Jalapeño.

If I ask for a goldfish, he spits a glob of phlegm
into a jar of water. The silver letters

on his black belt spell Sangrón. Once, borracho,
at dinner, he said: Jesus wasn't a snowman.

Arriba Durango. Arriba Orizaba. Packed
into a car trunk, he was smuggled into the States.

Frijolero. Greaser. In Tucson he branded
cattle. He slept in a stable. The horse blankets

oddly fragrant: wood smoke, lilac. He's an illegal.
I'm an Illegal-American. Once, in a grove

of saguaro, at dusk, I slept next to him. I woke
with his thumb in my mouth. ¿No qué no

tronabas, pistolita? He learned English
by listening to the radio. The first four words

he memorized: In God We Trust. The fifth:
Percolate. Again and again I borrow his clothes.

He calls me Scarecrow. In Oregon he picked apples.
Braeburn. Jonagold. Cameo. Nightly,

to entertain his cuates, around a campfire,
he strummed a guitarra, sang corridos. Arriba

Durango. Arriba Orizaba. Packed into
a car trunk, he was smuggled into the States.

Greaser. Beaner. Once, borracho, at breakfast,
he said: The heart can only be broken

once, like a window. ¡No mames! His favorite
belt buckle: an águila perched on a nopal.

If he laughs out loud, his hands tremble.
Bugs Bunny wants to deport him. César Chávez

wants to deport him. When I walk through
the desert, I wear his shirt. The gaze of the moon

stitches the buttons of his shirt to my skin.
The snake hisses. The snake is torn.

“Somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond,” E.E. Cummings

somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond
any experience, your eyes have their silence:
in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,
or which i cannot touch because they are too near

your slightest look easily will uncloset me
though i have closed myself as fingers,
you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens
(touching skilfully, mysteriously)her first rose

or if your wish be to close me, i and
my life will shut very beautifully, suddenly,
as when the heart of this flower imagines
the snow carefully everywhere descending;

nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals
the power of your intense fragility:whose texture
compels me with the colour of its countries,
rendering death and forever with each breathing

(i do not know what it is about you that closes
and opens; only something in me understands
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)
nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands

“I Remember Watts,” Richard Dedeaux, Father Amde Hamilton, and Otis O’Solomon (aka Watts Prophets)

To light up New Orleans,
Atlanta,
Chicago,
Philadelphia,
Detroit,
New York,
and most major cities of the world,
it takes trillions
and billions
and millions and millions of Watts

To light up Los Angeles
it only took one

I remember Watts
with her eyes saddened with hunger
and her empty pots
a place where winos and have-nots took their treasured possessions to pawn shops
on 103rd and other spots

And I can remember her old man
sittin’ around on boxes
in front of pool halls and in alleys and vacant lots
drinkin’ wine, playin’ checkers and telling each other how this young generation
was going to pot
crack and stuff like that
yeah, I remember Watts

and I can remember her icy lips kissing cold Winter nights as our ghetto come to life
with all its strife
in gambling houses and night spots
with strong arm robberies and uzi fights
all a part of ghetto life

and I can remember warm days of running around with no shoes or socks
and lots and lots of cops
stopping us on our way to and from school
searching our little baby sisters, breaking all of morality’s rules
or maybe just slamming young brothers against the wall,
across police cars
cracking our heads open whenever they choose
treating us like we were fools
that’s what lit Watts’ fuse

I remember Watts
and I can remember her huge black body quaking from the shocks

of a slow rumbling freight, snatching me from my dreams
this blood curdling scream
rattling windows,
waking babies,
driving the sick into shock
block
after
block
after
block
after block

yeah, I remember Watts

and I can remember how plain
and unmade she looked in spots
with her chuckholes in the streets and broken sidewalks
and high tension lines and railroad tracks and all us blacks
living in Jordan Downs,
Nickerson Gardens,
The A.G.'s,
Imperial Courts,
Grape Street
and all those old raggedy shacks
yeah, I remember Watts

and I can remember when she would just turn away,
pretending not to see
all that senseless, senseless violence

and I remember how glad I was when I moved away
but you know what?
I came back
because I found out
that it really doesn't matter where you go—
New Orleans,
Chicago,
as long as you po'
it's still the ghetto

you could be poor and white
it's still the ghetto
you could be poor and brown
it's still the barrio
you could be poor and black
it's still the ghetto

Detroit,
Dallas,

Soweto,
Rio de Janeiro,
Mexico City,
Cleveland,
Toronto,
New York

they all the same
they all the same
they all the same

the only difference
is in
the name

“Nobody,” Marsha De La O

We had to imagine you even then, Ramon, your star lost,
a glimpse to die for,
all the kids galloping to Westside Park
where your gang was supposed to meet in open warfare
those bitter skinny boys from Toonerville,
well-armed, Lupe said.
And when we got there, nothing, no armies, no chucos
with long tails and zip guns, just the grass
with its stunned look, as though it never really wanted all that light.
City grass doesn't want much of anything,
it's not out there trembling with desire,
minds its own business, leeching slowly upward from busted pipe.
And now nobody knows what you really wanted, Ramon,
when the needle spun true north,
or why that final rush of light, flat stare of lawn
as you staggered by, seared your own throat shut.
Tonight, I'm getting to the smallest place I know,
dusk coming on slow,
the moon half full of shade,
so still it almost doesn't want to move,
whispers a phrase to particles of blue.
Same moon you knew with its white mind watching,
same moon you walked beneath and were gone.

“Holy Sonnets: Death, be not Proud,” John Donne

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

“The Owner of the Night,” Mark Doty

interrogates whoever walks
this shadow-lane, this hour
not reserved for you: who

are you to enter it?
Orion’s head over heels
above the road, jewel-belt

flinting starlight
to fuel two eyes looking
down from the air:

beacons in reverse,
since light pours in
toward her appetite

until she wings her noiseless outline
between our rooftop and the stars,
over this door and all the doors

hidden in the grass:
dreaming voles,

firefly province,

wasps in the palace
they’ve hollowed under the hill.

Mole resting his face against his splayed hands.

Perch, blink. Pose
the evening’s question
to the sleepless

while the moon if there is one
scatters islands
on a field of ink. Who

maps this? The owner
of the night looks down
to mirror and admit the hours

before the upper vaults
begin to lighten and recede.
Did you hear what I said,

a face looks down from the night?

Did who hear me? Who
reads this page, who writes it?

“Odysseus’s Secret,” Stephen Dunn

At first he thought only of home, and Penelope.
But after a few years, like anyone on his own,
he couldn't separate what he'd chosen
from what had chosen him. Calypso,
the Lotus-eaters, Circe;
a man could forget where he lived.
He had a gift for getting in and out of trouble,
a prodigious, human gift. To survive Cyclops
and withstand the Sirens' song—
just those words survive, withstand,
in his mind became a music
he moved to and lived by.
How could govern, even love, compete?
They belonged to a different part of a man,
the untested part, which never has transcended dread,
or the liar part, which always spoke like a citizen.
The larger the man, though,
the more he needed to be reminded
he was a man. Lightning, high winds;
for every excess a punishment.
Penelope was dear to him,
full of character and fine in bed.
But by the middle years this other life
had become his life. That was Odysseus's secret,
kept even from himself. When he talked about return
he thought he meant what he said.
Twenty years to get home?
A man finds his shipwrecks,
tells himself the necessary stories.
Whatever gods are—our own fearful voices
or intimations from the unseen order
of things, the gods finally released him,
cleared the way.
Odysseus boarded that Phaeacian ship, suddenly tired
of the road's dangerous enchantments,
and sailed through storm and wild sea
as if his beloved were all that ever mattered.

“The Neighborhood Dog,” Russell Edson

A neighborhood dog is climbing up the side of a house.

I don't like to see that, I don't like to see a dog like that, says someone passing in the neighborhood.

The dog seems to be making for that 2nd story window. Maybe he wants to get his paws on the sill; he may want to hang there and rest; his tongue throbbing from his open mouth.

Yet, in the room attached to that window (the one just mentioned) a woman is looking at a cedar box; this is of course where she keeps her hatchet; in that same box, the one in this room, the one she is looking at.

That person passing in the neighborhood says, that dog is making for that 2nd story window...This is a nice neighborhood, that dog is wrong...

If the dog gets his paws on the sill of the window, which is attached to the same room where the woman is opening her hatchet box, she may chop at his paws with that same hatchet. She might want to chop at something; it is, after all, getting close to chopping time...

Something is dreadful, I feel a sense of dread, says that same person passing in the neighborhood, it's that dog that's not right, not that way...

In the room attached to the window that the dog has been making for, the woman is beginning to see two white paws on the sill of that same window, which looks out over the neighborhood.

She says, it's wrong...something...the windowsill...something...the windowsill...

She wants her hatchet. She thinks she's going to need it now.

The person passing in the neighborhood says, something may happen...that dog...I feel a sense of dread...

The woman goes to her hatchet in its box, she wants it. But it's gone bad; it's soft and nasty. It smells like something that's lost its ghost. She wants to get it out of its box (that same cedar box where she keeps it), but it bends and runs through her fingers...

Now the dog is coming down, crouched low to the wall, backwards; leaving a wet streak with its tongue down the side of the house.

And that same person passing in the neighborhood says, that dog is wrong...I don't like to see a dog get like that...It's not over yet...

“self-portrait with no flag,” Safia Elhillo

i pledge allegiance to my
Homies to my mother’s
small & cool palms to
the gap between my brother’s
two front teeth & to
my grandmother’s good brown
hands good strong brown
hands gathering my bare feet
in her lap

i pledge allegiance to the
group text i pledge allegiance
to laughter & to all the boys
i have a crush on i pledge
allegiance to my spearmint plant
to my split ends to my grandfather’s
brain & gray left eye

i come from two failed countries
& i give them back i pledge
allegiance to no land no border
cut by force to draw blood i pledge
allegiance to no government no
collection of white men carving up
the map with their pens

i choose the table at the waffle house
with all my loved ones crowded
into the booth i choose the shining
dark of our faces through a thin sheet
of smoke glowing dark of our faces
slick under layers of sweat i choose
the world we make with our living
refusing to be unmade by what surrounds
us i choose us gathered at the lakeside
the light glinting off the water & our
laughing teeth & along the living
dark of our hair & this is my only country

“The Boatman,” Carolyn Forshay

We were thirty-one souls all, he said, on the gray-sick of sea
in a cold rubber boat, rising and falling in our filth.
By morning this didn't matter, no land was in sight,
all were soaked to the bone, living and dead.
We could still float, we said, from war to war.
What lay behind us but ruins of stone piled on ruins of stone?
City called “mother of the poor” surrounded by fields
of cotton and millet, city of jewelers and cloak-makers,
with the oldest church in Christendom and the Sword of Allah.
If anyone remains there now, he assures, they would be utterly alone.
There is a hotel named for it in Rome two hundred meters
from the Piazza di Spagna, where you can have breakfast under
the portraits of film stars. There the staff cannot do enough for you.
But I am talking nonsense again, as I have since that night
we fetched a child, not ours, from the sea, drifting face-
down in a life vest, its eyes taken by fish or the birds above us.
After that, Aleppo went up in smoke, and Raqqa came under a rain
of leaflets warning everyone to go. Leave, yes, but go where?
We lived through the Americans and Russians, through Americans
again, many nights of death from the clouds, mornings surprised
to be waking from the sleep of death, still unburied and alive
but with no safe place. Leave, yes, we obey the leaflets, but go where?
To the sea to be eaten, to the shores of Europe to be caged?
To camp misery and camp remain here. I ask you then, where?
You tell me you are a poet. If so, our destination is the same.
I find myself now the boatman, driving a taxi at the end of the world.
I will see that you arrive safely, my friend, I will get you there.

“First Kiss,” Denice Frohman

October 13th

His lips must've been born in winter but I did it anyway and I'm proud of that. The
boy
had pot-holed dimples a collection of white teeth so perfect you could tell God
got to him first.

In a dark room, I assembled myself the way I imagined any girl should: arms up
in position and pregnant with waiting. He kissed me and I waited for the flood. I waited
for God to gift me my own desire for the angsty snow to melt between us for the
muscles in my neck to howl in an octave I've never known for the next chapter of my
womanhood to appear and none of that happened.

When you get stood up by your own first kiss you feel like nothing belongs to you—
not even the promise of magic. Love is a rumor like Santa Clause. It lives in a pretty
house that nobody has access to.

I must have had a bad past life I must have practiced on my hand too much. My mouth
is a terrible orchestra the music it makes is foreign and uneven I am a thrift store of
broken piano keys a visitor looking at myself from some window far, far away. I can't turn
17 and have nothing to say when someone asks if I know the choreography of heat.

October 28th

Laura's lips looked like two oceans put together on purpose like something you're supposed to
get lost in and not know the beginning of and there's a whole world in writing that out
loud for the first time. (I hope nobody reads this, it was her idea)

I sat down on her couch looking like a good example of desperation. I wanted to know if
my body was capable of speaking to another body in a language we already knew. I
wanted to know if I could inherit my magic. If this doom was a prank caller or if it meant I was
gonna be alone for the rest of my life.

My mouth was mine and I know because I gave it to her. We kissed and my blood
became
a congregation of songs. I wrote myself on the inside of a girl's mouth and I didn't even
care. Every nerve in my body sprouted legs, my spine founded a country of fireworks—this
is the only thing better than the Thriller album. Ever.

Every fizzle of me that was, now has a name. My heart isn't some Hail Mary of a prayer or
the secret apology I keep. One day I'll write poems about the woman who loved me so deep I
grew color in my bones. I know when they ask me about my first kiss, I'm gonna say I leaned
in with all of my skin and only got half of it back I'm gonna say I work real good I'm
gonna say that some things are only felt the second time around.

“Most People Would Rather Not,” Hannah Gamble

Most people would rather not,
but I indulge, every few weeks,
the thought of it. Sometimes

the oily smell of an evening flower appears
and hangs in the air, a slightly browner spot.

I think most people had it wrong when they said
forget about it and find a fresh patch
of grass to lie down in.

There are prayers, though,
about that kind of peace.

I have to admit, sometimes
I want nothing more than to be lying on the bottom
of an unimpressive river.

I can watch all the leaves and sticks skim over my head,
and no one will bother me
because they're swimming
in the more impressive rivers.

The water's not too cold. It doesn't feel
like being dead.

It also doesn't feel like being old
or fetal.

I came to the humble water to lie down.
I did what I set out to do.
Now I don't have to tell you
anything more about it.

“A Brief for the Defense,” Jack Gilbert

Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies are not starving someplace, they are starving somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils. But we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants. Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not be fashioned so miraculously well. The poor women at the fountain are laughing together between the suffering they have known and the awfulness in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody in the village is very sick. There is laughter every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta, and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay. If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction, we lessen the importance of their deprivation. We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure, but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil. If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down, we should give thanks that the end had magnitude. We must admit there will be music despite everything. We stand at the prow again of a small ship anchored late at night in the tiny port looking over to the sleeping island: the waterfront is three shuttered cafés and one naked light burning. To hear the faint sound of oars in the silence as a rowboat comes slowly out and then goes back is truly worth all the years of sorrow that are to come.

“Nikki-Rosa,” Nikki Giovanni

childhood remembrances are always a drag
if you're Black
you always remember things like living in Woodlawn
with no inside toilet
and if you become famous or something
they never talk about how happy you were to have
your mother
all to yourself and
how good the water felt when you got your bath
from one of those
big tubs that folk in Chicago barbecue in
and somehow when you talk about home
it never gets across how much you
understood their feelings
as the whole family attended meetings about Hollydale
and even though you remember
your biographers never understand
your father's pain as he sells his stock
and another dream goes
And though you're poor it isn't poverty that
concerns you
and though they fought a lot
it isn't your father's drinking that makes any difference
but only that everybody is together and you
and your sister have happy birthdays and very good
Christmases
and I really hope no white person ever has cause
to write about me
because they never understand
Black love is Black wealth and they'll
probably talk about my hard childhood
and never understand that
all the while I was quite happy

“You Were Brave in That Holy War,” Hafiz

You have done well
In the contest of madness.

You were brave in that holy war.

You have all the honorable wounds
Of one who has tried to find love
Where the Beautiful Bird
Does not drink.

May I speak to you
Like we are close
And locked away together?
Once I found a stray kitten
And I used to soak my fingers
In warm milk;

It came to think I was five mothers
On one hand.

Wayfarer,
Why not rest your tired body?
Lean back and close your eyes.

Come morning
I will kneel by your side and feed you.
I will so gently
Spread open your mouth
And let you taste something of my
Sacred mind and life.

Surely
There is something wrong
With your ideas of
God.

O, surely there is something wrong
With your ideas of
God

If you think
Our Beloved would not be so
Tender.

“The Blue Terrance,” Terrance Hayes

If you subtract the minor losses,
you can return to your childhood too:
the blackboard chalked with crosses,

the math teacher's toe ring. You
can be the black boy not even the buck-
toothed girls took a liking to:

the match box, these bones in their funk
machine, this thumb worn smooth
as the belly of a shovel. Thump. Thump.

Thump. Everything I hold takes root.
I remember what the world was like before
I heard the tide humping the shore smooth,

and the lyrics asking: How long has your door
been closed? I remember a garter belt wrung
like a snake around a thigh in the shadows

of a wedding gown before it was flung
out into the bluest part of the night.
Suppose you were nothing but a song

in a busted speaker? Suppose you had to wipe
sweat from the brow of a righteous woman,
but all you owned was a dirty rag? That's why

the blues will never go out of fashion:
their half rotten aroma, their bloodshot octaves of
consequence; that's why when they call, Boy, you're in

trouble. Especially if you love as I love
falling to the earth. Especially if you're a little bit
high strung and a little bit gutted balloon. I love

watching the sky regret nothing but its
self, though only my lover knows it to be so,
and only after watching me sit

and stare off past Heaven. I love the word No
for its prudence, but I love the romantic
who submits finally to sex in a burning row-

house more. That's why nothing's more romantic
than working your teeth through
the muscle. Nothing's more romantic

than the way good love can take leave of you.
That's why I'm so doggone lonesome, Baby,
yes, I'm lonesome and I'm blue.

“Half-Mexican,” Juan Felipe Herrera

Odd to be a half-Mexican, let me put it this way
I am Mexican + Mexican, then there's the question of the half
To say Mexican without the half, well it means another thing
One could say only Mexican
Then think of pyramids - obsidian flaw, flame etchings, goddesses with
Flayed visages claw feet & skulls as belts - these are not Mexican
They are existences, that is to say
Slavery, sinew, hearts shredded with sacrifices for the continuum
Quarks & galaxies, the cosmic milk that flows into trees
Then darkness

What is the other - yes

It is Mexican too, yet it is formless, it is speckled with particles
European pieces? To say colony or power is incorrect
Better to think of Kant in his tiny room
Shuffling in his black socks seeking out the notion of time
Or Einstein re-working the erroneous equation
Concerning the way light bends - all this has to do with
The half, the half-thing when you are a half-being

Time

Light

How they stalk you & how you beseech them
All this becomes your life-long project, that is
You are Mexican. One half Mexican the other half
Mexican, then the half against itself.

“Beauty,” Tony Hoagland

When the medication she was taking
caused tiny vessels in her face to break,
leaving faint but permanent blue stitches in her cheeks,
my sister said she knew she would
never be beautiful again.

After all those years
of watching her reflection in the mirror,
sucking in her stomach and standing straight,
she said it was a relief,
being done with beauty,

but I could see her pause inside that moment
as the knowledge spread across her face
with a fine distress, sucking
the peach out of her lips,
making her cute nose seem, for the first time,
a little knobby.

I’m probably the only one in the whole world
who actually remembers the year in high school
she perfected the art
of being a dumb blond,

spending recess on the breezeway by the physics lab,
tossing her hair and laughing that canary trill
which was her specialty,

while some football player named Johnny
with a pained expression in his eyes
wrapped his thick finger over and over again
in the bedspring of one of those pale curls.

Or how she spent the next decade of her life
auditioning a series of tall men,
looking for just one with the kind
of attention span she could count on.

Then one day her time of prettiness
was over, done, finito,
and all those other beautiful women
in the magazines and on the streets
just kept on being beautiful
everywhere you looked,

walking in that kind of elegant, disinterested trance
in which you sense they always seem to have one hand

touching the secret place
that keeps their beauty safe,
inhaling and exhaling the perfume of it—

It was spring. Season when the young
buttercups and daisies climb up on the
mulched bodies of their forebears
to wave their flags in the parade.

My sister just stood still for thirty seconds,
amazed by what was happening,
then shrugged and tossed her shaggy head
as if she was throwing something out,

something she had carried a long ways,
but had no use for anymore,
now that it had no use for her.
That, too, was beautiful.

“Personal,” Tony Hoagland

Don't take it personal, they said;
but I did, I took it all quite personal—

the breeze and the river and the color of the fields;
the price of grapefruit and stamps,

the wet hair of women in the rain—
And I cursed what hurt me

and I praised what gave me joy,
the most simple-minded of possible responses.

The government reminded me of my father,
with its deafness and its laws,

and the weather reminded me of my mom,
with her tropical squalls.

Enjoy it while you can, they said of Happiness
Think first, they said of Talk

Get over it, they said
at the School of Broken Hearts

but I couldn't and I didn't and I don't
believe in the clean break;

I believe in the compound fracture
served with a sauce of dirty regret,

I believe in saying it all
and taking it all back

and saying it again for good measure
while the air fills up with I'm-Sorries

like wheeling birds
and the trees look seasick in the wind.

Oh life! Can you blame me
for making a scene?

You were that yellow caboose, the moon
disappearing over a ridge of cloud.

I was the dog, chained in some fool's backyard;
barking and barking:

trying to convince everything else
to take it personal too.

“2pac couplets,” Chinaka Hodge

one line for each year he lived

ninety six minutes after tyson wins and you're gone
las vegas quickly strips you of your last song

every black man in nevada pilgrims to trudge you
walk last rites, as only god can judge you

nomad, you baltimore, you new york, you l.a.
captured only by wind, a consummate stray

west coast makes you ours. Claims you loudest
you gave game for free, we recoup it proudest

don't want no producers dancing in our videos
named our first borns after brenda's embryo

your dear mama, eschews her crackfiend fame
afeni becomes household, recognized name

the people used to clown when you came around
with the underground mimic and savior your sound

mark your ink, the lives of thugs on their stomachs
their bottoms, their rolling twenties, their hunned

your words so sacrament so memorized so litmus
test and testament so wretched so generous

never knew malcolm as machiavellian text, hence
you vexed and cursing: our black and shining prince

our sweetest thing, our prism and its light
lynched by bullet, won't survive the knight

now your blood spills and the people crowd around
just one question:

r u
still
down?

“Crossing Jordan,” Langston Hughes

It was that lonely day, folks,
When I walked all by myself.
My friends was all around me
But it was just as if they'd left.

I went up on a mountain
In a high cold wind
And the coat that I was wearing
Was mosquito-netting thin.

Then I went down in the valley
And I crossed an icy stream
And the water I was crossing
Was no water in a dream
And the shoes that I was wearing
No protection for that stream.

Then I stood out on a prairie
And as far as I could see
Wasn't nobody on that prairie
That looked like me—

Cause it was that lonely day, folks,
When I walked all by myself
And my friends was right there with me
But was just as if they'd left.
Crossing Jordan! Crossing Jordan!
Alone and by myself.

“Mercy,” Tyehimba Jess

the war speaks at night
with its lips of shredded children,
with its brow of plastique
and its fighter jet breath,
and then it speaks at daybreak
with the soft slur of money
unfolding leaf upon leaf.
it speaks between the news
programs in the music
of commercials, then sings
in the voices of a national anthem.
it has a dirty coin jingle in its step,
it has a hand of many lost hands,
a palm of missing fingers,
the stump of an arm that it lost
reaching up to heaven, a foot
that digs a trench for its dead.
the war staggers forward,
compelled, inexorable, ticking.
it looks to me
with its one eye of napalm
and one eye of ice,
with its hair of fire
and its nuclear heart,
and yes, it is so human
and so pitiful as it stands there,
waiting for my hand.
it wants to know my answer.
it wants to know how i intend
to show it out of its misery,
and i only want it
to teach me how to kill.

“Author’s Prayer,” Ilya Kaminsky

If I speak for the dead, I must leave
this animal of my body,

I must write the same poem over and over,
for an empty page is the white flag of their surrender.

If I speak for them, I must walk on the edge
of myself, I must live as a blind man

who runs through rooms without
touching the furniture.

Yes, I live. I can cross the streets asking “What year is it?”
I can dance in my sleep and laugh

in front of the mirror.
Even sleep is a prayer, Lord,

I will praise your madness, and
in a language not mine, speak

of music that wakes us, music
in which we move. For whatever I say

is a kind of petition, and the darkest
days must I praise.

“You and I are Disappearing,” Yusef Komunyakaa

The cry I bring down from the hills
belongs to a girl still burning inside my head. At daybreak
she burns like a piece of paper.
She burns like foxfire in a thigh-shaped valley.
A skirt of flames dances around her

at dusk.

We stand with our hands
hanging at our sides,
while she burns
like a sack of dry ice.
She burns like oil on water.
She burns like a cattail torch
dipped in gasoline.
She glows like the fat tip
of a banker's cigar,
silent as quicksilver.

A tiger under a rainbow
at nightfall.

She burns like a shot glass of vodka.
She burns like a field of poppies
at the edge of a rain forest.
She rises like dragonsmoke
to my nostrils.
She burns like a burning bush
driven by a godawful wind.

“Gust,” Peter LaBerge

It begins with a question, and ends / with a plea. It begins with *yes, I want / this world inside of me*, and ends with *prayers / in the attic*. It begins with twelve forests and twelve / apostles to ravage them, and doesn't end until the bodies are forever / sealed shut. It begins with thousands / of curious boys, and ends with snow / the color of a fingertip. It begins and ends / with a body out of walking distance, with no one / to let the hunger out. It begins like this, *I was / born quiet and slow*. It begins, and the question / is just as empty as a new mother's deflated / belly. It begins with a young boy collecting / boughs, and ends with *please, it is not winter / in my body*. It begins and won't end until someone has mercy / on the woodpile. It begins with winter and cannot end / as winter. It begins a game and ends / a pistol in the ground. It begins / with metaphor, and ends with a boy running naked / and bloody through the forest / of his own skin. It begins and ends / in the length a bullet can travel. / It begins with *hello*, and ends / with the receiver nearly touching / the floor.

from "Feel," Kendrick Lamar

Feel like I'ma learn you a lesson
Feel like only me and the music, though
I feel like your feelin' ain't mutual
I feel like the enemy you should know
Feel like the feelin' of no hope
The feelin' of bad dope
A quarter ounce manipulated from soap
The feelin', the feelin' of false freedom
I'll force-feed 'em the poison that fill 'em up in the prison
I feel like it's just me
Look, I feel like I can't breathe
Look, I feel like I can't sleep
Look, I feel heartless, often off this
Feelin' of fallin', of fallin' apart with
Darkest hours, lost it
Fillin' the void of bein' employed with ballin'
Streets is talkin', fill in the blanks with coffins
Fill up the banks with dollars
Fill up the graves with fathers
Fill up the babies with bullshit
Internet blogs and pulpit, fill 'em with gossip
I feel like this gotta be the feelin' what 'Pac was
The feelin' of an apocalypse happenin'
But nothin' is awkward, the feelin' won't prosper
The feelin' is toxic, I feel like I'm boxin' demons
Monsters, false prophets schemin'
Sponsors, industry promises

...

I can feel it, the phoenix sure to watch us
I can feel it, the dream is more than process
I can put a regime that forms a Loch Ness
I can feel it, the scream that haunts our logic
I feel like say somethin', I feel like take somethin'
I feel like skatin' off, I feel like waitin' for 'em
Maybe it's too late for 'em
I feel like the whole world want me to pray for 'em

“Losing Track,” Denise Levertov

Long after you have swung back
away from me
I think you are still with me:

you come in close to the shore
on the tide
and nudge me awake the way

a boat adrift nudges the pier:
am I a pier
half-in half-out of the water?

and in the pleasure of that communion
I lose track,
the moon I watch goes down, the

tide swings you away before
I know I'm
alone again long since,

mud sucking at gray and black
timbers of me,
a light growth of green dreams drying.

“What Work Is,” Philip Levine

We stand in the rain in a long line
waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work.
You know what work is—if you’re
old enough to read this you know what
work is, although you may not do it.
Forget you. This is about waiting,
shifting from one foot to another.
Feeling the light rain falling like mist
into your hair, blurring your vision
until you think you see your own brother
ahead of you, maybe ten places.
You rub your glasses with your fingers,
and of course it’s someone else’s brother,
narrower across the shoulders than
yours but with the same sad slouch, the grin
that does not hide the stubbornness,
the sad refusal to give in to
rain, to the hours of wasted waiting,
to the knowledge that somewhere ahead
a man is waiting who will say, “No,
we’re not hiring today,” for any
reason he wants. You love your brother,
now suddenly you can hardly stand
the love flooding you for your brother,
who’s not beside you or behind or
ahead because he’s home trying to
sleep off a miserable night shift
at Cadillac so he can get up
before noon to study his German.
Works eight hours a night so he can sing
Wagner, the opera you hate most,
the worst music ever invented.
How long has it been since you told him
you loved him, held his wide shoulders,
opened your eyes wide and said those words,
and maybe kissed his cheek? You’ve never
done something so simple, so obvious,
not because you’re too young or too dumb,
not because you’re jealous or even mean
or incapable of crying in
the presence of another man, no,
just because you don’t know what work is.

“There are Birds Here,” Jamaal May

For Detroit

There are birds here,
so many birds here
is what I was trying to say
when they said those birds were metaphors
for what is trapped
between buildings
and buildings. No.
The birds are here
to root around for bread
the girl's hands tear
and toss like confetti. No,
I don't mean the bread is torn like cotton,
I said confetti, and no
not the confetti
a tank can make of a building.
I mean the confetti
a boy can't stop smiling about
and no his smile isn't much
like a skeleton at all. And no
his neighborhood is not like a war zone.
I am trying to say
his neighborhood
is as tattered and feathered
as anything else,
as shadow pierced by sun
and light parted
by shadow-dance as anything else,
but they won't stop saying
how lovely the ruins,
how ruined the lovely
children must be in that birdless city.

“Down South,” MarShawn McCarrel

My Grandmother lives down south.
Where the trees still have night terrors of bodies tugging rope
like childish games.
Have you ever heard the forest scream?
It sounds like city school systems where children engage in the
same games of tug-o-war where they only pull the books away.
My grandmother lives down south,
Where “Nigga” is the lightest word your tongue will ever lift.
Her mouth an underground railroad,
Her children northern stars, bright enough to light every sky
they were never given, in a town 76% intoxicated on cotton gin
with a history of hangover.
Where they celebrate Easter seven times a year.
One time in church,
Six times on fire.
In Jesus name she prays poverty cease to squeeze like black
fingers of inner-city youth who live like poets where murder
taste like metaphors
Obituaries are chapbooks of the dead down south,
You would think R.I.P. was our favorite team.
That our primary language was drunken eulogy on musty
carpets where we speak of heaven as if we’ve been there.
As if heaven was a mile away,
As if every morning grandma doesn’t wake up dilated,
On a tree.

“The Church of Michael Jordan,” Jeffery McDaniel

The hoop is not metal, but a pair of outstretched arms,
God’s arms, joined at the fingers. And God is saying

throw it to me. It’s not a ball anymore. It’s an orange prayer
I’m offering with all four chambers. And the other players—

the Pollack of limbs, flashing hands and teeth—
are just temptations, obstacles between me and the Lord’s light.

Once during an interview I slipped, I didn’t pray well tonight,
and the reporter looked at me, the same one who’d called me

a baller of destiny, and said you mean play, right? Of course,
I nodded. Don’t misunderstand—I’m no reverend

of the flesh. Priests embarrass me. A real priest
wouldn’t put on that robe, wouldn’t need the public

affirmation. A real priest works in disguise, leads
by example, preaches with his feet. Yes, Jesus walked on water,

but how about a staircase of air? And when the clock
is down to its final ticks, I rise up and over the palms

of a nonbeliever—the whole world watching, thinking
it can’t be done—I let the faith roll off my fingertips, the ball

drunk with backspin, a whole stadium of people holding
the same breath simultaneously, the net flying up like a curtain,

the lord’s truth visible for an instant, converting nonbelievers
by the bushel, who will swear for years they’ve witnessed a miracle.

“Native Trees,” W.S. Merwin

Neither my father nor my mother knew
the names of the trees
where I was born
what is that
I asked and my
father and mother did not
hear they did not look where I pointed
surfaces of furniture held
the attention of their fingers
and across the room they could watch
walls they had forgotten
where there were no questions
no voices and no shade

Were there trees
where they were children
where I had not been
I asked
were there trees in those places
where my father and my mother were born
and in that time did
my father and my mother see them
and when they said yes it meant
they did not remember
What were they I asked what were they
but both my father and my mother
said they never knew

“When I am Asked,” Lisa Mueller

When I am asked
how I began writing poems,
I talk about the indifference of nature.

It was soon after my mother died,
a brilliant June day,
everything blooming.

I sat on a gray stone bench
in a lovingly planted garden,
but the day lilies were as deaf
as the ears of drunken sleepers
and the roses curved inward.
Nothing was black or broken
and not a leaf fell
and the sun blared endless commercials
for summer holidays.

I sat on a gray stone bench
ringed with the ingenu faces
of pink and white impatiens
and placed my grief
in the mouth of language,
the only thing that would grieve with me.

“Just Keep Quiet and Nobody Will Notice,” by Ogden Nash

There is one thing that ought to be taught in all the colleges,
Which is that people ought to be taught not to go around always making apologies.
I don't mean the kind of apologies people make when they run over you or borrow five dollars or
step on your feet,
Because I think that is sort of sweet;
No, I object to one kind of apology alone,
Which is when people spend their time and yours apologizing for everything they own.
You go to their house for a meal,
And they apologize because the anchovies aren't caviar or the partridge is veal;
They apologize privately for the crudeness of the other guests,
And they apologize publicly for their wife's housekeeping or their husband's jests;
If they give you a book by Dickens they apologize because it isn't by Scott,
And if they take you to the theater, they apologize for the acting and the dialogue and the plot;
They contain more milk of human kindness than the most capacious diary can,
But if you are from out of town they apologize for everything local and if you are a foreigner
they apologize for everything American.
I dread these apologizers even as I am depicting them,
I shudder as I think of the hours that must be spend in contradicting them,
Because you are very rude if you let them emerge from an argument victorious,
And when they say something of theirs is awful, it is your duty to convince them politely that it is
magnificent and glorious,
And what particularly bores me with them,
Is that half the time you have to politely contradict them when you rudely agree with them,
So I think there is one rule every host and hostess ought to keep with the comb and nail file and
bicarbonate and aromatic spirits on a handy shelf,
Which is don't spoil the denouement by telling the guests everything is terrible, but let them have
the thrill of finding it out for themselves.

“Sonnet LXV,” Pablo Neruda

Matilde, where are you? Down here I noticed,
under my necktie and just above my heart,
a certain pang of grief between the ribs,
you were gone that quickly.

I needed the light of your energy,
I looked around, devouring hope.
I watched the void without you that is like a house,
nothing left but tragic windows.

Out of sheer taciturnity the ceiling listens
to the fall of the ancient leafless rain,
to feathers, to whatever the night imprisoned;
so I wait for you like a lonely house
till you will see me again and live in me.
Till then my windows ache.

“Cockfight,” Hieu Minh Nguyen

I met my brother once
in a small village in Vietnam
who, upon meeting me
grabbed my small arm
& dragged me into the woods
behind his house
where a group of men
all wearing our father's face
stood in a circle, cheering
while the two roosters
whose beaks had barbed hooks
taped to them, pecked
& clawed each other open
until the mess of bloodied feathers
were replaced by two clean birds
one, my brother's, the other
a man's, who I am told is deaf
but vicious. He told me
our father calls him long distance
from America, every week.
I can't help but wonder how
they tell the roosters apart
since the blood has turned their feathers
the same shade of burgundy.
I told him how our father, who lives
only three mile away from me
avoids making eye-contact at supermarkets.
I can tell this made him happy.
Though, he didn't cheer
when the crowd cheered, when one rooster
fell to the dirt with a gash in its neck.
I knew he was the winner
when he lowered his head to hide
his smile, how he looked at me
then snatched his earnings
from the vicious man's hands.
I learned what it was like to be a brother
by watching the roosters
& how, at first, the air was calm
until they were introduced
& then they knew:
there could only be one.

“Kindness,” Naomi Shihab Nye

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and
purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
in is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

“Wild Geese,” Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

“Love Song,” Dorothy Parker

My own dear love, he is strong and bold
And he cares not what comes after.
His words ring sweet as a chime of gold,
And his eyes are lit with laughter.
He is jubilant as a flag unfurled—
Oh, a girl, she'd not forget him.
My own dear love, he is all my world,—
And I wish I'd never met him.

My love, he's mad, and my love, he's fleet,
And a wild young wood-thing bore him!
The ways are fair to his roaming feet,
And the skies are sunlit for him.
As sharply sweet to my heart he seems
As the fragrance of acacia.
My own dear love, he is all my dreams,—
And I wish he were in Asia.

My love runs by like a day in June,
And he makes no friends of sorrows.
He'll tread his galloping rigadoon
In the pathway of the morrows.
He'll live his days where the sunbeams start,
Nor could storm or wind uproot him.
My own dear love, he is all my heart,—
And I wish somebody'd shoot him.

“Mad Girl’s Love Song,” Sylvia Plath

"I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;
I lift my lids and all is born again.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

The stars go waltzing out in blue and red,
And arbitrary blackness gallops in:
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed
And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade:
Exit seraphim and Satan's men:
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I fancied you'd return the way you said,
But I grow old and I forget your name.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

I should have loved a thunderbird instead;
At least when spring comes they roar back again.
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)"

“Lady Lazarus,” Sylvia Plath

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it——

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?——

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot——
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.

The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

'A miracle!'
That knocks me out.
There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart——
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash—
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there——

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

“Race’ Politics,” Luis J. Rodriguez

My brother and I
—shopping for la jefita—
decided to get the "good food"
over on the other side
of the tracks.

We dared each other.
Laughed a little.
Thought about it.
Said, what's the big deal.
Thought about that.
Decided we were men,
not boys.
Decided we should go wherever
we damn wanted to.

Oh, my brother—now he was bad.
Tough dude. Afraid of nothing.
I was afraid of him.

So there we go, climbing over
the iron and wood ties,
over discarded sofas
and bent-up market carts,
over a weed-and-dirt road,
into a place called South Gate
—all white. All American.

We entered the forbidden
narrow line of hate,
imposed,
transposed,
supposed,
a line of power/powerlessness
full of meaning,
meaning nothing--
those lines that crisscross
the abdomen of this land,
that strangle you
in your days,
in your nights.
When you dream.

There we were, two Mexicans,
six and nine-from—Watts no less.
Oh, this was plenty reason
to hate us.

Plenty reason to run up behind us.
Five teenagers on bikes.
Plenty reason to knock
the groceries out from our arms—
a splattering heap of soup
cans, bread and candy.

Plenty reason to hold me down
on the hot asphalt; melted gum,
and chips of broken
beer bottle on my lips
and cheek.

Plenty reason to get my brother
by the throat, taking turns
punching him in the face,
cutting his lower lip,
punching, him vomiting.
Punching until swollen and dark blue
he slid from their grasp
like a rotten banana from its peeling.

When they had enough, they threw us back,
dirty and lacerated;
back to Watts, its towers shiny
across the orange-red sky.

My brother then forced me
to promise not to tell anybody
how he cried.
He forced me to swear to God,
to Jesus Christ, to our long-dead
Indian Grandmother—
keepers of our meddling souls.

“Worry,” Sam Sax

is a woman
burying bread

beneath her lawn.
praying for summer

to make whole loaves
break in their plastic

shells through dirt
like so many hands.

worry is how i thumb
a groove in the stolen

jewel case in my back
pocket at tower

records, the man
puts his hands

on me & i'm cooked,
i'm crooked, red

handed, red thumbed.
had enough money

in my pocket
for music

& who really needs
that bad? all my father's

overtime stocked
in our pantry.

all my mother's
edges worried

smooth below
the river of her

boss's hands.
who am i

who steals music
who sells drugs

because i love
how it sounds.

who sold my own
good mouth

for gold. a man
puts his hands

on me &
i'm his & i'm paid.

in the old country
women buried

what little we had
in the dirt & hoped

it would make more
better on earth.

in this country
all food is unzipped

from its plastic
& passes clean through us.

my grandmother's
panic is a relic, is bread

unearthed from
some forgotten dust

bowl still dark
& moldy & whole.

why not eat the hand
that feeds you, i think,

why not eat the arm,
the elbow,

the shoulder? why
not eat the whole

damned body alive

“The Surface of Water,” Jason Schneiderman

has properties, tension, behaves differently
from the rest of the water. If you fell

onto it from a height, you would bounce.
The surface would reject you, say

I’m a solid too — we can’t both be here,
but then the rest of the water would accept you,

take you into itself, pull you down
away from the surface, saying I’m sorry,

I want you, come in.

“Screens and Storms,” Natalie Shapero

Our garden grew enormous not from care,
but from neglect. I slept there, covered in bells
so I would wake if anything tried to harm me.
Of the two types of windows known, he threw
himself from neither, over and over. A bird
clock, he extended his body past the sill
but never dislodged from the structure, chiming on
about how he couldn't
die if he tried.

Who left this lab to me? Viewing a cabbage
by microscope, I proceed with only reverence,
while for my own body, I feel nothing but pity.
It's so blind. It follows me here and there
like a lovesick person, fetching my essentials,
shoeless on the slate floor in the cold or cramped
in a truck for a thousand miles, and yet I don't
even like it. I wouldn't
cry if it died.

“Ugly,” Warsan Shire

Your daughter is ugly.
She knows loss intimately,
carries whole cities in her belly.

As a child, relatives wouldn't hold her.
She was splintered wood and sea water.
They said she reminded them of the war.

On her fifteenth birthday you taught her
how to tie her hair like rope
and smoke it over burning frankincense.

You made her gargle rosewater
and while she coughed, said
macaanto girls like you shouldn't smell
of lonely or empty.

You are her mother.
Why did you not warn her,
hold her like a rotting boat
and tell her that men will not love her
if she is covered in continents,
if her teeth are small colonies,
if her stomach is an island
if her thighs are borders?

What man wants to lay down
and watch the world burn
in his bedroom?

Your daughter's face is a small riot,
her hands are a civil war,
a refugee camp behind each ear,
a body littered with ugly things

but God,
doesn't she wear
the world well.

“Their Savior Was Me,” Patricia Smith

Now, everything that breathes
knows my given name, the full of it,
The scars it leaves on the skyline.
They know my moments of mercy,
And yes, how calmly I can kill.
The bastard child of a bluesman and an ocean,
I won't die until music does. But I

have never heard a prayer
that began with my name,
gave me pause,
forced me to rearrange my wind
instead, I listened, bemused, to thirty-four
snotty pleas addressed to the idea of Him,
the ghost in the air, my rumored father.

I was all the seconds they had left.
They should have smothered me with kneeling.
Instead, in their old scratched voices,
They begged the wet air for salvation. They called
Lord, Lord, Lord,
until I was forced to show them my face.

“Sci Fi,” Tracy K. Smith

There will be no edges, but curves.
Clean lines pointing only forward.

History, with its hard spine & dog-eared
Corners, will be replaced with nuance,

Just like the dinosaurs gave way
To mounds and mounds of ice.

Women will still be women, but
The distinction will be empty. Sex,

Having outlived every threat, will gratify
Only the mind, which is where it will exist.

For kicks, we'll dance for ourselves
Before mirrors studded with golden bulbs.

The oldest among us will recognize that glow—
But the word sun will have been re-assigned

To the Standard Uranium-Neutralizing device
Found in households and nursing homes.

And yes, we'll live to be much older, thanks
To popular consensus. Weightless, unhinged,

Eons from even our own moon, we'll drift
In the haze of space, which will be, once

And for all, scrutable and safe.

“Eating Poetry,” Mark Strand

Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.
There is no happiness like mine.
I have been eating poetry.

The librarian does not believe what she sees.
Her eyes are sad
and she walks with her hands in her dress.

The poems are gone.
The light is dim.
The dogs are on the basement stairs and coming up.

Their eyeballs roll,
their blond legs burn like brush.
The poor librarian begins to stamp her feet and weep.

She does not understand.
When I get on my knees and lick her hand,
she screams.

I am a new man.
I snarl at her and bark.
I romp with joy in the bookish dark.

“Happy Idea,” Mary Szybist

*I had the happy idea to fasten a bicycle wheel
to a kitchen stool and watch it turn.*
—duchamp

I had the happy idea to suspend some blue globes in the air
and watch them pop.

I had the happy idea to put my little copper horse on the shelf so we could stare at each
other
all evening.

I had the happy idea to create a void in myself.

Then to call it natural.

Then to call it supernatural.

I had the happy idea to wrap a blue scarf around my head and spin.

I had the happy idea that somewhere a child was being born who was nothing like Helen
or
Jesus except in the sense of changing everything.

I had the happy idea that someday I would find both pleasure and punishment, that I
would
know them and feel them,

and that, until I did, it would be almost as good to pretend.

I had the happy idea to call myself happy.

I had the happy idea that the dog digging a hole in the yard in the twilight had his nose
deep in
mold-life.

I had the happy idea that what I do not understand is more real than what I do,

and then the happier idea to buckle myself

into two blue velvet shoes.

I had the happy idea to polish the reflecting glass and say

hello to my own blue soul. Hello, blue soul. Hello.

It was my happiest idea.

“Advertisement,” Wislawa Szymborska

I’m a tranquilizer.
I’m effective at home.
I work in the office.
I can take exams
on the witness stand.
I mend broken cups with care.
All you have to do is take me,
let me melt beneath your tongue,
just gulp me
with a glass of water.

I know how to handle misfortune,
how to take bad news.
I can minimize injustice,
lighten up God’s absence,
or pick the widow’s veil that suits your face.
What are you waiting for—
have faith in my chemical compassion.

You’re still a young man/woman.
It’s not too late to learn how to unwind.
Who said
you have to take it on the chin?

Let me have your abyss.
I’ll cushion it with sleep.
You’ll thank me for giving you
four paws to fall on.

Sell me your soul.
There are no other takers.

There is no other devil anymore.

“The Memories of Fish,” James Tate

Stanley took a day off from the office and spent the whole day talking to fish in his aquarium. To the little catfish scuttling along the bottom he said, “Vacuum that scum, boy. Suck it up. That’s your job.” The skinny pencil fish swam by and he said, “Scribble, scribble, scribble. Write me a novel, needle-nose.” The angel executed a particularly masterful left turn and Stanley said, “You’re no angel, but you sure can drive.” Then he broke for lunch and made himself a tuna fish sandwich, the irony of which did not escape him. Oh no, he wallowed in it, savoring every bite. Then he returned to his chair in front of the aquarium. A swarm of tiny neons amused him. What do you think this is, Times Square!” he shouted. And so it went long into the night. The next morning Stanley was horribly embarrassed by his behavior and he apologized to the fish several times, but they never really forgave him. He had mocked their very fishiness, and for this there can be no forgiveness.

“Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night,” Dylan Thomas

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on that sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

“Bear,” Ellen Bryant Voigt

pressed full-length against the screen unzipping it
for a better grip to help him help himself to the seed and the suet
slung high under the eave by the man
who has charged down from the bedroom onto the porch
in his white loincloth like David against Goliath
but only one good lung shouting swearing
and behind him the woman caught
at the lip of the lit kitchen

where was my sister
with her gun or would she be praying since she prays routinely
for a parking spot and there it is or would she be speechless for once
that this man so moderate so genial so unlike me
had put himself one body-length away from a full-grown bear
or would she be saying you my dear are the person who married him
which of course I did I did and I stood behind him
as he stood his ground on the ground that is our porch

you can see

the marks gouged by the famous claws on the wall inside new screen
now laced by a wire trellis on which nothing climbs
a vertical electric fence one of us thinks
the bear can hear it hum from the edge of the woods
watching us like a child sent to his room as we grill the salmon
we spiked with juniper berries the other one thinks
the plural pronoun is a dangerous fiction the source
of so much unexpected loneliness

“Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong,” Ocean Vuong

Ocean, don’t be afraid.
The end of the road is so far ahead
it is already behind us.
Don’t worry. Your father is only your father
until one of you forgets. Like how the spine
won’t remember its wings
no matter how many times our knees
kiss the pavement. Ocean,
are you listening? The most beautiful part
of your body is wherever
your mother’s shadow falls.
Here’s the house with childhood
whittled down to a single red tripwire.
Don’t worry. Just call it horizon
& you’ll never reach it.
Here’s today. Jump. I promise it’s not
a lifeboat. Here’s the man
whose arms are wide enough to gather
your leaving. & here the moment,
just after the lights go out, when you can still see
the faint torch between his legs.
How you use it again & again
to find your own hands.
You asked for a second chance
& are given a mouth to empty into.
Don’t be afraid, the gunfire
is only the sound of people
trying to live a little longer. Ocean. Ocean,
get up. The most beautiful part of your body
is where it’s headed. & remember,
loneliness is still time spent
with the world. Here’s
the room with everyone in it.
Your dead friends passing
through you like wind
through a wind chime. Here’s a desk
with the gimp leg & a brick
to make it last. Yes, here’s a room
so warm & blood-close,
I swear, you will wake—
& mistake these walls
for skin.

“Did I Miss Anything?,” Tom Wayman

Nothing. When we realized you weren't here
we sat with our hands folded on our desks
in silence, for the full two hours

Everything. I gave an exam worth
40 percent of the grade for this term
and assigned some reading due today
on which I'm about to hand out a quiz
worth 50 percent

Nothing. None of the content of this course
has value or meaning
Take as many days off as you like:
any activities we undertake as a class
I assure you will not matter either to you or me
and are without purpose

Everything. A few minutes after we began last time
a shaft of light suddenly descended and an angel
or other heavenly being appeared
and revealed to us what each woman or man must do
to attain divine wisdom in this life and
the hereafter
This is the last time the class will meet
before we disperse to bring the good news to all people
on earth.

Nothing. When you are not present
how could something significant occur?

Everything. Contained in this classroom
is a microcosm of human experience
assembled for you to query and examine and ponder
This is not the only place such an opportunity has been
gathered

but it was one place

And you weren't here

“Song of Myself, section 52,” Walt Whitman

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

The last scud of day holds back for me,
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow'd wilds,
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

“A Blessing,” James Wright

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies
Darken with kindness.
They have come gladly out of the willows
To welcome my friend and me.
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness
That we have come.
They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.
There is no loneliness like theirs.
At home once more,
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.
Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.

“Belief in Magic,” Dean Young

How could I not?
Have seen a man walk up to a piano
and both survive.
Have turned the exterminator away.
Seen lipstick on a wine glass not shatter the wine.
Seen rainbows in puddles.
Been recognized by stray dogs.
I believe reality is approximately 65% if.
All rivers are full of sky.
Waterfalls are in the mind.
We all come from slime.
Even alpacas.
I believe we're surrounded by crystals.
Not just Alexander Vvedensky.
Maybe dysentery, maybe a guard's bullet did him in.
Nonetheless.
Nevertheless
I believe there are many kingdoms left.
The Declaration of Independence was written with a feather.
A single gem has throbbed in my chest my whole life
even though
even though this is my second heart.
Because the first failed,
such was its opportunity.
Was cut out in pieces and incinerated.
I asked.
And so was denied the chance to regard my own heart
in a jar.
Strange tangled imp.
Wee sleekit in red brambles.
You know what it feels like to hold
a burning piece of paper, maybe even
trying to read it as the flames get close
to your fingers until all you're holding
is a curl of ash by its white ear tip
yet the words still hover in the air?
That's how I feel now.

“I am Trying to Break Your Heart,” Kevin Young

I am hoping
to hang your head

on my wall
in shame—

the slightest taxidermy
thrills me. Fish

forever leaping
on the living-room wall—

paperweights made
from skulls

of small animals.
I want to wear

your smile on my sleeve
& break

your heart like a horse
or its leg. Weeks of being

bucked off, then
all at once, you're mine—

Put me down.

I want to call you thine

to tattoo mercy
along my knuckles. I assassin

down the avenue
I hope

to have you forgotten
by noon. To know you

by your knees
palsied by prayer.

Loneliness is a science—

consider the taxidermist's
tender hands

trying to keep from losing
skin, the bobcat grin

of the living.

“After Anna Akhmatova,” Cynthia Zarin

“As the future ripens in the past...
a terrible festival of dead leaves”

—Anna Akhmatova

The trees talk quietly among themselves
the thrush sings its brown song brushed with blue
the roses from the bodega open in the vase

and under the streetlight the long shadows
tarnishing the day as we know it—if
I ask for a stone you give me a stone,

if I ask for water I do not get water,
everything I love weighted and found
wanting, as if the world knew how to give

answers to questions. In the long generous
shadow of history, I wake and wonder
how long it can go on, my lips touching

your ear, asking, what are you thinking—
while in the capital the lion stalks his cage
and on the veld the scorched banyans bend

under their fruit, the camps charred, no one
to pick it. A long time ago, after months
when death came so quickly to us it was

as if we had written an invitation, crows
settled in the ghost trees. There is my
mother, you said, and my father. It goes on.

SHORTIES

“Decisions,” M.K. Asante

decisions lead to options
options to choices
choices to freedom

we all design our own reality
write our own script
build our own house
or prison
or coffin

“The More Loving One,” W.H. Auden

Looking up at the stars, I know quite well
That, for all they care, I can go to hell,
But on earth indifference is the least
We have to dread from man or beast.

How should we like it were stars to burn
With a passion for us we could not return?
If equal affection cannot be,
Let the more loving one be me.

Admirer as I think I am
Of stars that do not give a damn,
I cannot, now I see them, say
I missed one terribly all day.

Were all stars to disappear or die,
I should learn to look at an empty sky
And feel its total dark sublime,
Though this might take me a little time.

from "Ten," Jimmy Santiago Baca

If it does not feed the fire
of your creativity, then leave it.
If people and things do not
inspire your heart to dream,
then leave them.
If you are not crazily in love
and making a stupid fool of yourself,
then stop closer to the edge
of your heart and climb
where you've been forbidden to go.
Debts, accusations, assaults by enemies
mean nothing,
go where the fire feeds you.

“The Power Lines Are Down,” Laurel Ann Bogen

Current spilling into current
I am cross-wired
aborted energy
mad with voltage
I flash neon signals

Love me
you

Fool
I spill all crazy
the fusion
of teashops and suicides
coming and going
without shieldings

Meltdown
meltdown
whalebone and garter
I will not be confined
by steel casings
or wedding rings
my name is preceded
by a warning --
the power lines are down
love me

“We Real Cool,” Gwendolyn Brooks

THE POOL PLAYERS.
SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

“Scientific Method,” Adam Clay

Twenty-three percent when placed under
intense pressure did in fact kick
the door in. Soldiers creep on the other side
of the turn. Every little thing
is destined for ease. Music, be still.
Keep the mannequin secrets
to yourself. Remember a ladder
can take you both up and down.
The weather grows less stable
than us. This line here is where
the season starts. Spring seems
fluorescently golden. Too much
milk in the fridge. When left alone
long enough, the prisoners
began to interrogate themselves.

“blessing the boats,” Lucille Clifton

(at St. Mary's)

may the tide
that is entering even now
the lip of our understanding
carry you out
beyond the face of fear
may you kiss
the wind then turn from it
certain that it will
love your back may you
open your eyes to water
water waving forever
and may you in your innocence
sail through this to that

“i am running into a new year,” Lucille Clifton

i am running into a new year
and the old years blow back
like a wind
that i catch in my hair
like strong fingers like
all my old promises and
it will be hard to let go
of what i said to myself
about myself
when i was sixteen and
twenty-six and thirty-six
even forty-six but
i am running into a new year
and i beg what i love and
i leave to forgive me

“I Like my Body when it is with Your Body,” E.E. Cummings

i like my body when it is with your
body. It is so quite new a thing.
Muscles better and nerves more.
i like your body. i like what it does,
i like its hows. i like to feel the spine
of your body and its bones, and the trembling
-firm-smooth ness and which i will
again and again and again
kiss, i like kissing this and that of you,
i like, slowly stroking the, shocking fuzz
of your electric fur, and what-is-it comes
over parting flesh....And eyes big love-crumbs,

and possibly i like the thrill

of under me you so quite new

“Surgeons must be very careful,” Emily Dickinson

Surgeons must be very careful
When they take the knife!
Underneath their fine incisions
Stirs the Culprit - Life!

“I’m Nobody! Who are you?,” Emily Dickinson

I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there’s a pair of us!
Don’t tell! they’d advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –
To tell one’s name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!

“Leadbelly,” Cornelius Eady

You can actually hear it in his voice:
Sometimes the only way to discuss it
Is to grip a guitar as if it were
Somebody’s throat
And pluck. If there were

A ship off of this planet,
An ark where the blues could show
Its other face,

A street where you could walk,
Just walk without dogged air at
Your heels, at your back, don’t
You think he’d choose it?
Meanwhile, here’s the tune:
Bad luck, empty pockets,
Trouble walking your way
With his tin ear.

“Poetry as Insurgent Art [I am signaling you through the flames],” Lawrence Ferlinghetti

I am signaling you through the flames.

The North Pole is not where it used to be.

Manifest Destiny is no longer manifest.

Civilization self-destructs.

Nemesis is knocking at the door.

What are poets for, in such an age?

What is the use of poetry?

The state of the world calls out for poetry to save it.

If you would be a poet, create works capable of answering the challenge of apocalyptic times, even if this meaning sounds apocalyptic.

You are Whitman, you are Poe, you are Mark Twain, you are Emily Dickinson and Edna St. Vincent Millay, you are Neruda and Mayakovsky and Pasolini, you are an American or a non-American, you can conquer the conquerors with words....

“On Hatred,” Rudy Francisco

how beautiful would it be
if we lived in a place

where everyone called hatred
by its full name,

tapped it on the shoulder,
looked into its eyes
without shaking
and said

“you cannot live here
anymore.”

“Everything Must Go,” Matthea Harvey

Today’s class 3-Deifying:
Godgrass, godtrees, godroad.

A sheet of geese bisects the rainstorm.
The water tower is ten storms full.

We practice drawing cubes—
That’s the house squared away

& the incubator with Baby.
The dead are in their grid.

○ the sleeping bag contains
the body but not the dreaming head.

“Invictus,” William Ernest Henley

Out of the night that covers me,
 Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
 For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
 I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
 My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
 Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
 Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
 How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
 I am the captain of my soul.

“Amor Fati,” Jane Hirshfield

Little soul,
you have wandered
lost a long time.

The woods all dark now,
birded and eyed.

Then a light, a cabin, a fire, a door standing open.

The fairy tales warn you:
Do not go in,
you who would eat will be eaten.

You go in. You quicken.

You want to have feet.
You want to have eyes.
You want to have fears.

“Birthday,” Richie Hoffman

I look for words in the dark,
silently describing to myself
the particular conditions of the weather
on the morning I saw you most recently—
the wind, its patterned disarray—
my mind elsewhere, distracted, lyrical
while the pianist plays an encore.
Mozart was born on this day
257 years ago. All day
I have been ungenerous, resentful,
Impatient. In between
movements, no applause
but the old ladies cough loudly, violently.
We cannot last forever.
I loved music before I loved books.
I loved Mozart before I loved you.

from “Theme for English B,” Langston Hughes

Go home and write
A page tonight
And let the page come out of you—
Then it will be true.

“Blues on a Box,” Langston Hughes

Play your guitar, boy,
Till yesterday's
Black cat
Runs out tomorrow's
Back door
And evil old
Hard luck
Ain't no more!

“To Helen About Her Hair,” Robinson Jeffers

Your hair is long and wonderful;
It is dark, with golden
Lights in the length of it.

Long, lovely, liquid, glorious
Is your hair, and lustrous,
Scented with summertime.

Beware when you are combing it,
In the nights and mornings,
Shaking its splendor out.

I bid you comb it carefully,
For my soul is caught there,
Wound in the web of it.

“Genesis,” Etheridge Knight,

the skin
of my poems
may be green. yes,
and sometimes
wrinkled
or worn

the snake shape
of my song
may cause
the heel
of Adam & Eve
to bleed. . . .

split my skin
with the rock
of love old
as the rock
of Moses
my poems
love you

“Common Form,” Rudyard Kipling

If any questions
why we died,
Tell them,
because our fathers lied.

“Screech Owl,” Ted Kooser

All night each reedy whinny
from a bird no bigger than a heart
flies out of a tall black pine
and, in a breath, is taken away
by the stars. Yet, with small hope
from the center of darkness
it calls out again and again.

“Self Pity,” D.H. Lawrence

I never saw a wild thing
sorry for itself.

A small bird will drop frozen dead from a bough
without ever having felt sorry for itself.

“Summer,” Robin Coste Lewis

Last summer, two discrete young snakes left their skin
on my small porch, two mornings in a row. Being

postmodern now, I pretended as if I did not see
them, nor understand what I knew to be circling

inside me. Instead, every hour I told my son
to stop with his incessant back-chat. I peeled

a banana. And cursed God—His arrogance,
His gall—to still expect our devotion

after creating love. And mosquitoes. I showed
my son the papery dead skins so he could

know, too, what it feels like when something shows up
at your door—twice—telling you what you already know.

“If We Must Die,” Claude McKay

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die—oh, let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

“I Know My Soul,” Claude McKay

I plucked my soul out of its secret place,
And held it to the mirror of my eye,
To see it like a star against the sky,
A twitching body quivering in pace,
A spark of passion shining on my face.
And I explored it to determine why
This awful key to my infinity
Conspires to rob me of sweet joy and grace.
And if the sign may not be fully read,
If I can comprehend but not control,
I need not gloom my days with futile dread,
Because I see a part and not the whole.
Contemplating the strange, I'm comforted
By this narcotic thought: I know my soul.

“Sorrow,” Edna St. Vincent Millay

Sorrow like a ceaseless rain
Beats upon my heart.
People twist and scream in pain, —
Dawn will find them still again;
This has neither wax nor wane,
Neither stop nor start.

People dress and go to town;
I sit in my chair.
All my thoughts are slow and brown:
Standing up or sitting down
Little matters, or what gown
Or what shoes I wear.

“When I Consider How My Light Is Spent,” John Milton

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest He returning chide;
“Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?”
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, “God doth not need
Either man’s work or His own gifts. Who best
Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best. His state
Is kingly: thousands at His bidding speed,
And post o’er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait.”

“August,” Mary Oliver

When the blackberries hang
swollen in the woods, in the brambles
nobody owns, I spend

all day among the high
branches, reaching
my ripped arms, thinking

of nothing, cramming
the black honey of summer
into my mouth; all day my body

accepts what it is. In the dark
creeks that run by there is
this thick paw of my life darting among

the black bells, the leaves; there is
this happy tongue.

“Resumé,” Dorothy Parker

Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.
Guns aren't lawful;
Nooses give;
Gas smells awful;
You might as well live.

“Zazen on Ching-t’ing Mountain,” Li-PO

The birds have vanished down the sky.
Now the last cloud drains away.

We sit together, the mountain and me,
until only the mountain remains.

“My Papa’s Waltz,” Theodore Roethke

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother’s countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

“Untitled,” Rumi

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase "each other" doesn't make any sense.

“Violence, I know You,” Khadijah Queen

so well it's like you're my real
lover, the reason I can't stay
attached to anyone, making a heaven
out of beginning again & you
knock at my voice
as if I could speak you back in
as mine & I had time enough to learn
the secret of cruelty
as if that made it lose
its power over me, its antics
failing notice,

but it lives in us all like a question
we can't answer but keep trying
because it feels good to & the secret
is it can't last,
& that is when it hurts—
we
who can't bear to lose &
stitch to any nothing
that acts like a landing place but turns
out to be a fissure, we pretend
voices tell us it's music
& familiar or alien
we listen, it's only a dance

“In the Depths of Solitude,” Tupac Shakur

I exist in the depths of solitude
pondering my true goal
Trying 2 find peace of mind
and still preserve my soul
Constantly yearning 2 be accepted
and from all receive respect
Never compromising but sometimes risky
and that is my only regret

A young heart with an old soul
how can there be peace
How can i be in the depths of solitude
when there R 2 inside of me
This duo within me causes
the perfect opportunity
2 learn and live twice as fast
as those who accept simplicity

“Starry Night,” Tupac Shakur

A creative heart, obsessed with satisfying
this dormant and uncaring society
you have given them the stars at night
and u have given them
Bountiful Bouquets of Sunflowers
but 4 u there is only contempt
and though u pour yourself into that fame
and present it so proudly this world
could not accept your masterpieces
from the heart.
So on that starry night u gave 2 us
and u took away from us
the one thing we never acknowledged
your life.

“what they did yesterday afternoon,” Warsan Shire

they set my aunts house on fire
i cried the way women on tv do
folding at the middle
like a five pound note.
i called the boy who used to love me
tried to ‘okay’ my voice
i said hello
he said warsan, what’s wrong, what’s happened?

i’ve been praying,
and these are what my prayers look like;
dear god
i come from two countries
one is thirsty
the other is on fire
both need water.

later that night
i held an atlas in my lap
ran my fingers across the whole world
and whispered
where does it hurt?

it answered
everywhere
everywhere
everywhere.

“Not Waving but Drowning,” Stevie Smith

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he’s dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
They said

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning
“Fairy-Tale Logic,” A.E. Stallings

Fairy tales are full of impossible tasks:
Gather the chin hairs of a man-eating goat,
Or cross a sulphuric lake in a leaky boat,
Select the prince from a row of identical masks,
Tiptoe up to a dragon where it basks
And snatch its bone; count dust specks, mote by mote,
Or learn the phone directory by rote.
Always it’s impossible what someone asks—

You have to fight magic with magic. You have to believe
That you have something impossible up your sleeve,
The language of snakes, perhaps, an invisible cloak,
An army of ants at your beck, or a lethal joke,
The will to do whatever must be done:
Marry a monster. Hand over your firstborn son.

“Keeping Things Whole,” Mark Strand

In a field
I am the absence
of field.
This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.

When I walk
I part the air
and always
the air moves in
to fill the spaces
where my body’s been.

We all have reasons
for moving.
I move
to keep things whole.

“Vietnam,” Wislawa Szymborska

"Woman, what's your name?" "I don't know."
"How old are you? Where are you from?" "I don't know."
"Why did you dig that burrow?" "I don't know."
"How long have you been hiding?" "I don't know."
"Why did you bite my finger?" "I don't know."
"Don't you know that we won't hurt you?" "I don't know."
"Whose side are you on?" "I don't know."
"This is war, you've got to choose." "I don't know."
"Does your village still exist?" "I don't know."
"Are those your children?" "Yes."

“Toy Boast,” Ocean Vuong

For Tamir Rice

yellow plastic
black sea

eye-shaped shard
on a darkened map

no shores now
to arrive — or
depart
no wind but
this waiting which
moves you

as if the seconds
could be entered
& never left

toy boat — oarless
each wave
a green lamp
outlasted

toy boat
toy leaf dropped
from a toy tree
waiting

waiting
as if the sp-
arrows
thinning above you
are not
already pierced
by their own names

“Lost,” David Wagoner

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you.
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.

from "Song of Myself (number 2)," Walt Whitman

Do I contradict myself?
Very well, then I contradict myself,
I am large,
I contain multitudes.

“If You Should Tire of Loving Me,” Margaret Widdemer

If you should tire of loving me
Some one of our far days,
Oh, never start to hide your heart
Or cover thought with praise.

For every word you would not say
Be sure my heart has heard,
So go from me all silently
Without a kiss or word;

For God must give you happiness...
And oh, it may befall
In listening long to Heaven-song
I may not care at all!

“this is a material world,” by Saul Williams

your priests and presidents
no longer matter
only you and i, my love,

in order to commune
we must dismiss the false gods
we have granted domain
over our will and testament

this earth is our sanctuary
nothing more need be built

our mother
has erected
mountains of quartz
we need only climb
to synchronize our hearts
with hers

the truth
erupt from her core

“Danse Russe,” William Carlos Williams

If I when my wife is sleeping
and the baby and Kathleen
are sleeping
and the sun is a flame-white disc
in silken mists
above shining trees,—
if I in my north room
dance naked, grotesquely
before my mirror
waving my shirt round my head
and singing softly to myself:
“I am lonely, lonely.
I was born to be lonely,
I am best so!”
If I admire my arms, my face,
my shoulders, flanks, buttocks
against the yellow drawn shades,—

Who shall say I am not
the happy genius of my household?

“Never Give All the Heart,” William Butler Yeats

Never give all the heart, for love
Will hardly seem worth thinking of
To passionate women if it seem
Certain, and they never dream
That it fades out from kiss to kiss;
For everything that's lovely is
But a brief, dreamy, kind delight.
O never give the heart outright,
For they, for all smooth lips can say,
Have given their hearts up to the play.
And who could play it well enough
If deaf and dumb and blind with love?
He that made this knows all the cost,
For he gave all his heart and lost.