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Beyond Naming

Some mornings walking the ridge
a green hush of hardwood seeps
into my mind like capillaries
feeding skin. It’s a slow, rich
diffusion of something I won’t
name for fear of what naming
it will do. A fox will stand still
until you pass it in the woods,
but sensing its presence, you turn,
and the animal disappears.
Half a dozen golden eye
break the sky’s surface
of a lake, or scores of baby
harbor seals top a giant wave
to greet your boat. It’s being
awakened by a train whistle
in a strange town, your heart
racing in the amnesia
of a dark room. It’s having
a homeless man in Boston
refuse your handout because
you didn’t ask his name.
When I was sixteen, my father’s
ghost stood by my bedroom window
during a storm. Two years after
my mother’s death, I found
a letter to me in her cookbook
beside the eggplant souffle.
Not just a feeling but a blindness,
like the morning I tripped
in tall grass I’d walked for years
to find a grave stone of a child.
I traced its carvings like runes.
This morning I sit on an American
chestnut stump and see a new tree
growing from its stricken roots.
Without naming it, I let my thoughts
steep in hardwood shadows
like tea leaves in a cup of tea.

Laundry

There is no loneliness like laundry
neatly pinned on backyard lines:
underwear, socks and sheets,
pillow cases, blue jeans and shirts.
We dashed through them on Saturdays
waiting for the wind to press a sheet
against our outstretched faces,
making us look like comic masks,
our mouths wide open to cotton,
sucking in the summer air.
We watched mother take clothes down
after lunch, her feet side-stepping
with the basket. We hid behind the sheet
and scared her with our impish grins.
You were my older sister by two years.
I beamed when people asked if we
were twins. A year later when mother
pinned your lace panties and bras
for all the neighborhood to see,
the mask you wore became
a sophisticated stranger to me.
When you got sick, the doctor
called it Asian flu, but after two weeks
of staining sheets, mother couldn’t
bleach your feces from the foul batik.
They hospitalized you, anemic and dehy.
In the 60’s doctors couldn’t name
what ate at you, why every morsel
you swallowed drained from your body
like soup. Before you stopped eating,
Bill Brown

growing from its stricken roots.
Without naming it, I let my thoughts
steep in hardwood shadows
like tea leaves in a cup of tea.

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a sophisticated stranger to me.
When you got sick, the doctor
called it Asian flu, but after two weeks
of staining sheets, mother couldn’t
bleach your feces from the foul batik.
They hospitalized you, anemic and dehydrated.
In the 60's doctors couldn’t name
what ate at you, why every morsel
you swallowed drained from your body
like soup. Before you stopped eating,
you were beautiful in an elfish way.
That night we talked in your bedroom,
you wore a robe and stood in front of the mirror like a luna moth, dried and tattered on the back porch screen.
Alone in my room, I held your picture beside my face to see if we still looked like twins.
After the funeral the sheets got cleaner,
our father worked later, our mother bought a dryer, I learned a heartbreak deeper than anger, and a silence never left our kitchen table.

David Spiering

Smoking Dream

thin filtered kings drip from his lips;
his feels his arms getting close to his shoulders; his heart covers the moon; there’s nothing to stop him from knowing spiritual joy he pines for as he looks up at Orion, wishing he could unchain himself from this lush life where his migratory spirit hides; he wants to go where the sun’s warm in January, he wants to hear how a stream parts itself on a rock; he wants to feel his heart keeping up with the water-slosh of the river.

Stephanie Dickenson

Ditch Lilies

Mother drives toward the ditch where the
The orange trumpets gone, reeking of civ,
Don’t forget, I’m giving my body to the School at the University of Iowa.

The lilies reach like the rabid cat that came
Fur rigid as if frozen into splinters though ninety degrees and ribboned foam held him.
First they will remove my organs. They can
The cat stood burning with thirst where the
I reached out to the eyes scraped open to be
I’ve taken immaculate care of my body.
No one could have preserved herself better

Who will receive my mother’s eighty-six years
She has lived clean, and it will beat like n
What if a drunkard gets it? Or an atheist?
Then my mother--someone’s cadaver.

A med student will joke about having a new
and her name won’t be Florence, her skin
Her aroma, brown sack and celery.
No one will know what her thick fingers did

Carrying corn meal mush, rubbing steel with
They’ll just see old meat. Gone--Florence, who knew the shortcut on Red Ball Road, the milk house and which cans were lightened

Florence, thrown by the black pony, who was
shoot Blackie and cried under the warm kim
Florence will have vanished into the forens
and nauseating song of the mourning dove.
Ditch Lilies

Mother drives toward the ditch where the lilies glut.
The orange trumpets gone, reeking of civet cat.
*Don't forget, I'm giving my body to the School of Anatomy at the University of Iowa.*

The lilies reach like the rabid cat that came at me.
Fur rigid as if frozen into splinters though it was ninety degrees and ribboned foam held his jaw closed.
*First they will remove my organs. They call it harvesting.*

The cat stood burning with thirst where the cattails breathe.
I reached out to the eyes scraped open to bone.
*I've taken immaculate care of my body.*
No one could have preserved herself better.

Who will receive my mother’s eighty-six year-old heart?
She has lived clean, and it will beat like nineteen.
What if a drunkard gets it? Or an atheist?
Then my mother—someone’s cadaver.

A med student will joke about having a new girlfriend,
and her name won’t be Florence, her skin soft as water,
Her aroma, brown sack and celery.
No one will know what her thick fingers did.

Carrying corn meal mush, rubbing steel wool into chair arms.
They’ll just see old meat. Gone—Florence of honey and eggs,
who knew the shortcut on Red Ball Road,
the milk house and which cans were lightest.

Florence, thrown by the black pony, who watched her father shoot Blackie and cried under the warm knife of the sky.
Florence will have vanished into the forenoon and nauseating song of the mourning doves.
Stephanie Dickenson

After they’re done, they cremate what’s left. At their expense. 
No help for the civet cat as he shivered and his legs went out from under him except to become nothing.
What were we looking at? Oh, the ditch lilies. . . .

Kirby Wright

I Have Come

I have come out of a long dark 
Sleep to find I own nothing, am

Nothing. My teeth? Gray pillars
Grinding. In the dream light

Of August, I taste blood
In a lover’s kiss. We have

Bullet dialogue, heartbeats exchanged.
Where will I be buried, ashes

Scattered? The dead know
What I’m saying.

The world is out there making deals
While we continue to sweat

Under the bone-white sky,
I grease her day with attention.

George Young

Remembering Hart Crane

Midnight, off Cuba, standing on the varnish deck planks, flourescent white smiles disappearing off wave tips in the distant blackness, I carefully take off my coat and drape it neatly over the railing; it would be so easy. I feel that pull. My muscles tense as I grip the polished rail.

He was just about here when he did it, on his way back from Mexico in 1932 hangover. It was noon. There must have been huge clouds on like soundless, apocalyptic bombs going and self-loathing rising in his throat like

Suddenly, I try a leap into the air, but over the railing. I land back on the deck. After all, the sea is not so deep and scary. But God, what a way for him to go--the prodigal, like the sun itself falling in the violent water. His final poem.
George Young

Remembering Hart Crane

Midnight, off Cuba, standing on the varnished
deck planks, fluorescent white smiles appearing and
disappearing
off wave tips in the distant blackness,
I carefully take off
my coat and drape it neatly over the rail. Yes--
it would be so easy. I feel that pull.
My muscles tense as I grip the polished wood.

He was just about here when he did it,
on his way back from Mexico in 1932, with an horripilating
hangover. It was noon.
There must have been huge clouds on the horizon
like soundless, apocalyptic bombs going off,
and self-loathing rising in his throat like vomit.

Suddenly, I try a leap into the air, but not
over the railing. I land back
on the deck. After all, the sea is not my mystical metaphor.
It’s deep and scary.
But God, what a way for him
to go--the prodigal, like the sun itself going down, exploding
in the violent water. His final poem.
At last, Sir,
you are standing on the white dot
at the absolute center of the universe, on the marble steps
before the fallen bones
of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi.
Here the oracle once sat on her tripod beside a crack
in the granite rock
and spoke with the voice of God.
But now, no sulfurous fumes rise to intoxicate the oracle.
There is no lyre music,
no singing, just a single bird on top of a fluted
column, screaming a single note, and the wind in the pines.
Yesterday afternoon
you were depressed by Athens, the ferocious traffic,
the polluted air eating the Parthenon, the Agora where
Socrates stalked,
deserted except for cats. So this morning
you drove north to Mount Parnassus. The air is glass.
Two thousand feet below in the distance, the sea glitters.
This is the place where Alexander once came to ask
if he should invade Persia.
He stood right here. But you only come
after years of teaching bored freshmen, to see the place
where a god once talked to men.
Apollo and all the gods
are silent now. The Greek philosophers took care of that.
You wander the empty stadium, the empty theater, circle
the laurel tree and the sacred burnished rock, the omphalos
of the world.
Then you stop, as the god-shaped
hole in the air fills with the liquid light of Delphi.

Small Holes

"U.S. Ponders Small Holes --headline in The New York Times"

U.S. ponders small holes in cheese.
U.S. appoints special commission
to study socioeconomic repercussions
of small holes in cheese.

Commission publishes in-depth report
recommending that the larger small holes
be separated from the surrounding cheese
and combined into one enormous hole
to be used for storing the smaller holes.

The aforementioned proposal
of the Special Commission on Small Holes
is currently awaiting signature on the document
for the Big Cheese.

Broccoli

Branching bravely into
Rococo florets, it
Ogles a buxom
Cauliflower, its second
Cousin once removed, and
Offers it a month of
Lessons in becoming the
Ice-cream flavor of the century.
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Rococo florets, it
Ogles a buxom
Cauliflower, its second
Cousin once removed, and
Offers it a month of
Lessons in becoming the
Ice-cream flavor of the century.
my brain’s still propelled
way out on a limb so that sleep
refuses to call me . . .
even tumblers of spiked cider
are of zero assistance . . . should I
carpet-pace or maybe slip out to ingest
some chill driveway air?
and right now no mental brick burdens
heavy on my mind
so that’s not the culpriting . . .
aha, my walking-upright muse is hinting
that I strongly need a someone
anyone to “talk poetry” with . . .
what about . . . a 900 number
that’s gotta be it!
the universe knows they get paid big
for composing languagey things
most especially oral exposes . . .
But on the other hand
maybe such would only stir
another part of me too wide-awakely

"Do you believe in angels?" he asks
between mouthfuls of risotto, wiping his
scalp a moon ringed by tonsure
as I rise to clear the plates.

When the taxi arrived with the vague man
in pale chinos and a pocket full of found
a Nike bag, my letter in one hand,
the other stuffed with crumpled bills,
I paused to reconsider just
how long it had been since I had made
a really magnificent osso bucco.

"Because, I think they may take the form
of crossing guards. Or, perhaps
the homeless with their strange tongues
the way they’re always looking for some

Now he’s eating a composed salad
with the wrong fork. I stand stirring
the custard, wondering how long
before he knocks over the wine glass.

"Or the Ice Cream Man," he murmurs
as he pushes from the table, revealing
my cat on his lap.

On the way to the bookshelf, he asks me
for a cigarette, and I remind him
that he’s quit. His basset eyes flare
as I show him to his chair upon the ced
and cover him with a quilt.

"Or, perhaps forest rangers."
Billy Comes to Visit

"Do you believe in angels?" he asks between mouthfuls of risotto, wiping his chin slowly, his scalp a moon ringed by tonsure as I rise to clear the plates.

When the taxi arrived with the vague man in pale chinos and a pocket full of fountain pens, a Nike bag, my letter in one hand, the other stuffed with crumpled bills, I paused to reconsider just how long it had been since I had made a really magnificent osso bucco.

"Because, I think they may take the form of crossing guards. Or, perhaps the homeless with their strange tongues, the way they’re always looking for something."

Now he’s eating a composed salad with the wrong fork. I stand stirring the custard, wondering how long before he knocks over the wine glass.

"Or the Ice Cream Man," he murmurs as he pushes from the table, revealing my cat on his lap.

On the way to the bookshelf, he asks me for a cigarette, and I remind him that he’s quit. His basset eyes flare as I show him to his chair upon the cedar deck and cover him with a quilt.

"Or, perhaps forest rangers."
We watch the lights along the fireroad, the last of the sun, the snow on Long’s Peak, wheeling stars.

“Billy, can I ask you something?”

But he’s already asleep, his face a child’s moon.

__Apologia for My Memory__

If I forget your birthday, please don’t jump to steel conclusions. I’ve tried to forget my own since I turned thirty—I guess I love you more.

And think of what I sometimes don’t recall: the time you forgot to fill the gaugeless car with gas and stranded the kids and me four miles from town.

Or the way you cursed me for gambling away the twenties you later found behind your driver’s license. Or each time you drank too much and acted to the fullness of your chemically altered part. How good of a memory do we want? I care as little for bridges and the waters that pass under them as anyone, and as for memory, I save what I have left for the way the stars shone off your hair the first time we decided to be chaste, then forgot.

__Beautiful Ohio__

Ohio is too far west to be eastern, too far east to be midwestern, too far north to be southern, too far south to be northern—no wonder I’m so damned tongue-tied, why any speech I try is not completely true. So I mumble expensively educated syllables with what sounds to not-from-there people like an Appalachian accent, a voice to which Appalachians respond “Shoot fruit, you sure’s hell talk like a Yankee.” Blessed Ohio, a place that barely qualifies as Region, that robs me of the regional arts money which could have been mine to abuse, yet makes me ask for forgiveness for my Appalachian lack of sophistication, my back-eastern rudeness, my taciturn midwestern silence, and, of course, my northern coldness, thus stewing my own true self: an amalgamation of the worst of several regional subcultures.
Ohio is too far west to be eastern,
too far east to be midwestern,
too far north to be southern,
too far south to be northern--
no wonder I’m so damned
tongue-tied, why any speech I try
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my back-eastern rudeness,

my taciturn midwestern silence,
and, of course, my northern coldness,
thus stewing my own true self:
an amalgamation of the worst
of several regional subcultures.
Poem for a November Night

Finally, finally, as I dragged my boots home, scuffed and dumb, I looked to see Orion,

almost new, grinning like a banjo in a toothpaste ad. He even whistled a little, then squinted

and flickered and watched me walk six blocks through the trees, as quiet as the street and sky.

Do you think he may have been out of tune, or trying to recall the first line of a country song,

or the last line of some old vaudeville joke, or might he have just remembered that we would soon

be with you, and silent still, with no song at all?

The Phone Rings

I lift the receiver to my head like a suicide’s pistol: two friends have had a terrible accident. They are bleeding, and my body perspires in response, leaving dark pools on the carpet. There will be no visiting hours. I am to send no flowers. The funeral is somehow over. Now there are only deep scars at the scene of the accident, which I visit sometimes at night to watch the ferns grow back and to feel the soft earth throb.
Stephan Kopel

*leap the gate*

the moon and I
tip-toe your slumber
and I wonder
can you tell me, mother,
tell me if I'm in your satin dream

and, if that is so,
let me grasp your
graceful, calloused hand and, together,
*leap the gate*
that I may gather
all the nodding notes
which nudge high-strung violins
and cautious clarinets to bow and blow

now we may dance
into the quiet street
our mother/son gavotte
smiling at wistful oaks
and sleeping folks
along our cul-de-sac

our laughter rouses dippered stars
which merge into a diamond yoke
pillowing your head on my shoulder,
you whisper,
"I love you" over and over
as I twirl my mother in her barefoot velvet gown

notes dim into the dark, doze
the gate swings open, beckons
and I wonder,
mother, do you hold me in your peaceful sleep
then wink good night to moon
Aquanaut

Cashew toes curled on a precipice, poised, liquid diamonds drip from her ears spattering at her feet in a slowly growing puddle. Her beautiful eyes obscured by glue goggles, she grins a big-toothed loopy grin and launches herself.

B.Z. Niditch

Used Bookstore

There is something to a used bookstore the quiet earthy climate moving shadowy sounds of hands which retrieve a love note in the leaf binding us to someone who notes and writes in certain creative corners those brusque, foaming reviews which stay with you long after volumes return to their rewound leather in our solitary rooms.
David P. Offutt

Aquanaut

Cashew toes
curled on a precipice,
poised, liquid diamonds
drip from her ears
spattering at her feet
in a slowly growing puddle.
Her beautiful eyes
obscured by glue goggles,
she grins a big-toothed
loopy grin and
launches herself.

B.Z. Niditch

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moving shadowy sounds
of hands which retrieve
a love note in the leaf
binding us to someone
who notes and writes
in certain creative corners
those brusque, foaming reviews
which stay with you
long after volumes return
to their rewound leather
in our solitary rooms.
**B.Z. Niditch**

**April Attic**

The moon, like a Japanese fan
stretches its still glance
around an absent-minded night;
we shiver
and almost stop breathing
(no free room in the cold)
and laugh at my worn rose,
wishing for white bread,
wheels of lemon slivers,
and a teaspoon of sugar.

When war and justice
could not be spoken
life became a noose holding us up
with the dead
nailed to grey marble walls
and we fall asleep
among milk bottles,
realizing what we foresaw
in daily unrelenting nightmares
outside public squares,
and here in a deserted street
where only priests and collaborators
sleepwalk to others’ deaths.

It is time to hide
behind chessboard papered windows
in a silence about to signal
that it could happen any time
and be discovered
like bric-a-brac,
we famished prisoners
in nets and mesh of history.

---

**Tiff Holland**

**Press Release**

You are aging into the decaying film star
I always knew you were, caked makeup
and too-blond hair, pink joggers.
You point your cigarette at me with your
as if it were on one of those long-outdate
cigarette holders, Nora Desmond on Sun,
then adjust your cleavage looking
more than a little like Mae West.
We all make our mothers into more than
but you do all the work here.
Theatrical, bigger than life, you started off
so Janet Leigh but become more Marilyn
every day, if Marilyn had lived.

Now you are on suicide watch and medical
tell me you are back to your old self,
not seeing what that means,
trying to black and white the technicolor
I want to say I understand. I want to ask
why you didn’t call. I want to soothe, to
but shocked I just replay the scene
again and again, when I had almost succe
at what you’ve only considered, and you
into my hospital room, stood over me,
the tubes and wires, demanding your
closeup: How could you do this to me?
Press Release

You are aging into the decaying film star
I always knew you were, caked makeup
and too-blond hair, pink joggers.
You point your cigarette at me with your wrist
as if it were on one of those long-outdated
cigarette holders, Nora Desmond on Sunset Strip,
then adjust your cleavage looking
more than a little like Mae West.
We all make our mothers into more than they are,
but you do all the work here.
Theatrical, bigger than life, you started out
so Janet Leigh but become more Marilyn
every day, if Marilyn had lived.

Now you are on suicide watch and medicated,
tell me you are back to your old self,
not seeing what that means,
trying to black and white the technicolor.
I want to say I understand. I want to ask
why you didn’t call. I want to soothe, to mother,
but shocked I just replay the scene
again and again, when I had almost succeeded
at what you’ve only considered, and you strutted
into my hospital room, stood over me,
the tubes and wires, demanding your
closeup: How could you do this to me?
How Things Are

“And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men.” —Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

You tell us pregnancy “objectifies women,” the idea of breast feeding makes you queasy; you’ll adopt or, better yet, convince one of your sisters to realize your child in her womb, whatever it takes to spare you the discomfort, yet still get the end result of desire, a boy or girl, a method to ensure your lives will accrue all benefits, any joy that living allows to husbands and wives. And yet, aren’t there worse things than “showing,” matters more embarrassing than a breast filled with milk—like fear disguised as knowing, or being blind to what mothers know best?
Redwood Burl Table

Wild with roots, a Gorgon head:
my young eyes cogwheeled at
the tangled waist-high mass riverbar trucked
and my squat mallet sent thick flakes like
flack off my checkerboarded chest,
hints of burl beneath the busted rock
stuck in the dirty redwood,
till the giant’s clubbed wart clean of stone
gave a milled slab set rickety
on two paint-thick sawhorses,
wobbling in the pull of the screaming grinder’s
wire bristles spitting back the loose punk wood.
Renegade spiders ran, nooks invaded by the violent metal wand
and brushed sawdust left the surface clear
for belt sanding before subjection to the stages of the orbital.
When the meaty red cross-section doused gleamed
and the scrubbed rings’ fluctuating bands rippled,
torched edges blackened shone silver
where the blue acetylene tip had spread,
and set on the knotted legs of a less charred base
the finished tabletop
took center stage in the showroom
for your more and less impressed tourists,
while in the sideyard my grimed thumb spun a bowl.

The Glory of a Woman’s Head

(for Rose)

As the sun was setting over Kay’s salon
undoing the braids of one long day,
nothing tragic was supposed to happen.
But the laughter grew louder and louder
and the smell of peroxide on latex glove
made me squirm in that black swivel chair.
When I lowered my head into her hands
into a sink where a hose spitting water
teased my scalp like a schoolyard bully,
the part of me that was meant to be charred,
colored and sculpted into shape,
floated away on a toxic tide,
lining the watery tombs of Seattle
with the glory of a woman’s head.
Going there to pay someone I trusted
to make me into more than I was,
to build on the inner foundations of beauty
floor after floor of fabulous light,
I thought people would have to look twice.
But now there is nothing to see.
The horizon of my head is dark, without
The forecast the same for days:
dry, overcast, with highs in the nineties,
and two eyes burning like suns.
The Glory of a Woman's Head

(for Rose)

As the sun was setting over Kay's salon, undoing the braids of one long day, nothing tragic was supposed to happen. But the laughter grew louder and louder, and the smell of peroxide on latex gloves made me squirm in that black swivel chair. When I lowered my head into her hands, into a sink where a hose spitting water teased my scalp like a schoolyard bully, the part of me that was meant to be changed, colored and sculpted into shape, floated away on a toxic tide, lining the watery tombs of Seattle with the glory of a woman's head.

Going there to pay someone I trusted to make me into more than I was, to build on the inner foundations of beauty, floor after floor of fabulous light, I thought people would have to look twice. But now there is nothing to see. The horizon of my head is dark, without clouds. The forecast the same for days: dry, overcast, with highs in the nineties, and two eyes burning like suns.
The Pretender

The man who hides his ring
in the coffin of his pocket
has a different face
every time we meet.

 Fluent in the language
of painless fiction,
I'm shocked when the truth
crumbles from his lips:

The only time she touches me
is when we're having sex.
After she has come,
I vanish in the air.

This is when I ask
if I can rub his back,
if I can stay the night
and memorize his story.

Isn't it bizarre
how I'm telling you
things I could never
tell her.

This is when our bodies
grieve what they've lost,
when the fact that we are strangers
is nothing but a fact.

Contemplating Senescence

Since fascist neurons divide the mind
into immigrants' shacks at the end of our
and memory sleeps in a room by herself
dreaming of a time when electric shock
was the only way to forget, dreaming
of a time when the body could smile,
and the mirror was something a face could
tell it which lip needed more,
maybe we have to think bigger thoughts
beyond the size of our fears, beyond
the realm of eastern religions, or the
dogmas of Vatican Two, where
Buddha's belly could be rubbed raw,
and the golden flakes underneath your mud
would require thorns from Christ's bloom
to remove such divine irritation.

There's too many men in Technicolor
preaching their gospel of terror, saying
Nothing could prepare you
for the afterlife
better than a day with me.
Men who wear corpses around their necks
in the hope of selling redemption,
anything to keep the flesh from feeling
a range of unpleasant extremes,
anything to dull the scissors of death
as they cut through the soul’s thin seam.
In a perfect world, before we died,
we'd at least have time for lunch;
time for the angels to spread their wing
and feed us an apple, quartered and pee
renewing our knowledge of good and evil
and why the garden gate had to rust,
drenched in curious tears.
Contemplating Senescence

Since fascist neurons divide the mind into immigrants’ shacks at the end of our lives, and memory sleeps in a room by herself, dreaming of a time when electric shock was the only way to forget, dreaming of a time when the body could smile, and the mirror was something a face could trust to tell it which lip needed more, maybe we have to think bigger thoughts, beyond the size of our fears, beyond the realm of eastern religions, or the dogmas of Vatican Two, where Buddha’s belly could be rubbed raw, and the golden flakes underneath your nails would require thorns from Christ’s bloody crown to remove such divine irritation.

There’s too many men in Technicolor preaching their gospel of terror, saying *Nothing could prepare you for the afterlife* better than a day with me.

Men who wear corpses around their necks in the hope of selling redemption, anything to keep the flesh from feeling a range of unpleasant extremes, anything to dull the scissors of death as they cut through the soul’s thin seam. In a perfect world, before we died, we’d at least have time for lunch; time for the angels to spread their wings and feed us an apple, quartered and peeled, renewing our knowledge of good and evil and why the garden gate had to rust, drenched in curious tears.
My Sunday School Teacher Knows Too Much

He gets tired of talking Luke.
He bows his head. His face reddens
as he looks up at us third graders
and whispers words from his gut,

“You don’t understand, but... I want death. I wish to die now.
I look forward to my day of death.
Father will greet me. I will smile.

Kids, the glory that is heaven
can never be put into stupid words.
English dies when it speaks of God.
I wish for the perfect time of beyond.”

The elderly man bows his head again,
says something below his breath, and
then looks up beyond the ceiling.
This, the first time I listen to him.

I forget his name, his face,
but not his simple revelation.
His wife sits near him as he stands.
She stares up to him and smiles.

Yet his quiet words mean nothing.
I do not have the synchronism
to understand one who is so deep
he has nothing earthly to gaze at.

I feel shame. I do not learn,
but I do listen from that moment on.
A few weeks later, after I collect
from my teacher a free Bible
for coming ten Sundays in a row,  
he dies. The soft tempest he echoed  
fell to an earth that swallows ideals.  
His whispers dug him a hard grave.

J. Harris

Part-Time Love

Never tell another that you love them,  
They just might expect you to follow through.  
Give over all your claims to part-time love;  
Say what you mean with your deeds or your hands.

Part-time love is rattly hopeless phrasing,  
Just words holding commitment together,  
Heart-crimes, fading flame, attrition, boredom,  
Lust when convenient, between commercials.

Take full-time love if passion’s what you crave:  
No lame vows, for once you meet the plans you  
Put forth, there’s nowhere left to go but down--  
So hear here: Love has a ceiling. Go slow.
3:00 a.m.

The nightstand numbers glow, 3:00 a.m. above her quiet rise and fall, the shoulder’s curve, the shadow of her arm. I press against her in the dark; we blend like pieces of a puzzle worn around the edges now.

She worries that her legs are thick, yet they remain as soft and warm as nights we fetched our boys and girl from their fields in infinity to join us in our daylight.

She worries for the color in her hair, yet it rests as easy on my hand as mist against the house and fills me with the memories of May and the first scent of light in the windows of another morning.

Before There Was a Church
(the corner of granger and)

Before there was a church on the large lot, before they closed it in, gathering the darkness around the April air and fragrances, the high blue walls and drift against the sky to mingle with the plaster and the paint, the fresh sheen of the varnish...

before there was a church, there was the rhythmic back and forth of swinging, clinging to the heavy, shiny rope chains
3:00 a.m.

The nightstand numbers glow,
3:00 a.m. above her quiet rise and fall,
the shoulder’s curve, the shadow of her arm along the sheet.
I press against her in the dark;
we blend like pieces of a puzzle
worn around the edges now.

She worries that her legs are thick,
yet they remain as soft and warm
as nights we fetched our boys and girl
from their fields in infinity
to join us in our daylight.

She worries for the color in her hair,
yet it rests as easy on my hand
as mist against the house
and fills me with the memories of May
and the first scent of light

in the windows of another morning.

Before There Was a Church
(the corner of granger and 104th, 1955)

Before there was a church on the large lot by the rectory,
before they closed it in, gathering the daylight there,
surrounding the April air and fragrances to fill
the high blue walls and drift against the stations of the cross,
to mingle with the plaster and the paint,
the fresh sheen of the varnish . . .

before there was a church, there was
the rhythmic back and forth of swinging,
clinging to the heavy, shiny rope chains,
stretched-out legs and rolled-back heads,
a world gone sweetly upside down
beneath the fresh blue sky with warm chill
rushing past the arms emerged again from winter,
the rust brick school across the road,
old church on the first floor filled
each Sunday with the people from the bungalows
that lined the streets around it like the pews that faced
the brown box of the sacristy;
Fr. Smith’s extended hands, altar boys aligned behind him
answering his Latin with their own,
moving in the slow ballet of liturgy . . .

before there was a church there were
first walks with a sister,
spinning slowly on the playground, watching
red bricks on the corner house warming in the afternoon,
standing like a flower on the stem of Penfield Avenue,
petalled with the straight lines of DeSotos,
the chrome of Buicks gleaming in the sun
and Chevies hinting at the BelAir art to be,
round and flat proportions ready for the fins to point ahead,
to when they’d add to shadows on the asphalt,
to block the sun en route to Parma,

pointing to the new day when the playground would be gone
with the simple breath of spring
that filled our eyes and expectations
in those days in April, once,

before there was a church.
December 18, 1950

I couldn't watch the blizzard from the kitchen like my sisters, knowing snow much better, so I saw it first wrapped up in shiny coat with snaps and scarf and black boots bound by buckles bigger than the fingers in my mittens, two years old, standing in the backyard with the girls, on the path our father shoveled from the billion bits of white built up to walls above my head, a billion bits in that moment of a one-time wind. On the day my wife was born, the Chinese dug their paths inside Korea, and the man next door died at home alone in the dark sea of his cold white bed.

Corey Mesler

An Encounter

I think I saw Walt Whitman leaning against the wall of the Piggly Wiggly, a bottle of cheap hooch stuck into his whiskey maw. A pitiful figure of a man, too many shirts, all begrimed, like his awful sarcastic hide, that no longer resembled human skin, but something other, something artificial. Poor old soak, I thought, after all the years of abuse, the vile, woebegone hammering of America. I took a step or two toward him and he eyed me with understandable suspicion. "Sorry," I said, backing away. "I thought you were someone else." "Okay, sport," he shouted after me. "Publish my name and hang up my picture as that of the tenderest lover."

Corey Mesler

Chloe's Flowering

We are all the children
a brilliantly colored flower.

(from Native American)

My four year-old daughter pulls up our daffodils as fast as they can bloom. You can almost hear Mother Nature breathing heavily trying to keep up with her. Chloe brings them inside, occasionally to her father at his keyboard. I put them here next to Technicians of the Sacred, where they wither and shrivel like a severed pinkie. It is the sacrifice we all make, what we give to the world compared to what we take from it.
Chloe's Flowering

We are all the children of
d a brilliantly colored flower,
d a flaming flower.
(from Native American poem)

My four year-old daughter pulls up our daffodils as fast as they can bloom. You can almost hear Mother Nature breathing heavily trying to keep up with her. Chloe brings them inside, occasionally to her father at his keyboard. I put them here next to Technicians of the Sacred, where they wither and shrivel like a severed pinkie. It is the sacrifice we all make, what we give to the world compared to what we take from it.
continental flight 1485 sends a shadow to earth
en route to hopkins airport.
in lincoln park a saxophone
corral latino breath through its chambers
to sneeze out cuban jazz.
stiltwalkers carry the rhythms
ten feet high.
at edgewater park a hundred kites
butt heads with the wind
a festival of string and silk.
a guitar is cradled by a lone body
on the breakwall nurturing waves
and shells with song.

a man hands me his camera and stands
by a tree just beginning to leach the green
from veined leaves.
without saying, he asks me to capture
one last kernel of warm days to squirrel away
until the last sunday in january, when ice
peppers the ground
waxes the streets
and reroutes airplanes to columbus.
Poem for Gentle Men

Gentlemen of the new particulars
and mundane moments briefed on nowhere
now attitudes, I s idle to your eyes
the hysteria of Christ on the cross,
a complacent Buddha sitting beneath
the fig tree, or white doves imploding from
a focal point of light, beyond which we
may argue the unbridled flame is God’s
eyes. Last night my uncle who is a priest
asked again why I still strayed from the church,
yet continued to keep a crucifix
on the wall above my bed. I told him--
Gentlemen like you taught me to pursue
conviction and theory. The God I know
is greater than any definition
man can give. My icons are pure symbol
of the divine column’s struggle to stand
like centipedes beneath the stampeding
mustang conflicts of third world countries,
or my attempts to understand the midnight
head-first plunge of the suicide stranger
into icy waters. Sometimes I feel
that the answers are left unlocked at night,
and where a new stigmata continues
to bleed, the heroin-eyed heroine
stumbles from her long stage of servitude
shouting Hamlet-like, this play is finished!
Those are a few of the answers I dream
beneath the tired, lolling head of Christ,
or when floating on Buddha’s big, gentle
river of this moment and nothing else,
or upon seeing the greasy homeless
man down on Central Street, who so wild
with life, smiles, shouts from a toothless mouth--
Gentlemen, our heart’s wheel may be broken,
yet sure enough we continue to spin.

Ed Miller

I Know You Need the Money, But

(fragment of a letter to a
requesting forgiveness of

I told you my boyfriend was stalking me,
and had kidnapped me, and tried to kill me.
I had a nervous breakdown.
I lost my home.

And you tell me this isn’t enough reason
to allow me some consideration.

It was months after Raymond died
before I felt safe enough to walk down
the street. Even then there were times
I would see someone that looked like him
and for a moment I would wonder if
he was really dead

or if it were maybe just a hoax. Maybe
he was still out there, somewhere,
waiting, with a knife, to get me.

My life will never be the same.

My memory has problems
due to the trauma I experienced.
I forget things. Like appointments.
Or parts of music, phrasing. It’s scary.
When I try to sing . . . it’s scary.

I am trying very hard to put my life in order
but all the notices and bills
and threats you keep sending just put the fire
right back into me. I can barely pay my rent
and my utilities and buy groceries and so
I Know You Need the Money, But

(fragment of a letter to a credit union requesting forgiveness of penalties, 1993)

I told you my boyfriend was stalking me, and had kidnapped me, and tried to kill me. I had a nervous breakdown. I lost my home.

And you tell me this isn’t enough reason to allow me some consideration.

It was months after Raymond died before I felt safe enough to walk down the street. Even then there were times I would see someone that looked like him and for a moment I would wonder if he were really dead.

or if it were maybe just a hoax. Maybe he was still out there, somewhere, waiting, with a knife, to get me.

My life will never be the same.

My memory has problems due to the trauma I experienced. I forget things. Like appointments. Or parts of music, phrasing. It’s scary. When I try to sing... it’s scary.

I am trying very hard to put my life in order, but all the notices and bills and threats you keep sending just put the fear right back into me. I can barely pay my rent and my utilities and buy groceries and so on.
and now you want more money.
More money. Jesus.

My check went down last month.
What am I supposed to do?

Pretty soon I’ll be right back where I started.

Matt Welter

She has seen a wife slowly bend
to deliberately kiss her husband
and for one split second, make Teddy’s day.

She has agreed with dad and Lincoln,
as that somber look pains everyone’s face
when they realize that it’s time to go.

At twenty-one, barely broken from her past,
she sees them:
she and the night custodian,
their scandalous act
watched with mixed expressions
by four presidents.

David Sapp

Scott

In eighth grade
we shared innocent kisses
with some of the same girls.
Scott played the cornet,
I played the trumpet;
together we marched
up main street on memorial day
and across the field at halftime.

In the early eighties
Scott died of AIDS;
he was among the first victims
of the virus that raced recklessly
along Kinshasa highway,
from the heady crotch
of Africa to every bedroom
and backseat on the planet.
Matt Welter

She has seen a wife slowly bend
to deliberately kiss her husband
and for one split second, make Teddy’s day.

She has agreed with dad and Lincoln,
as that somber look pains everyone’s face
when they realize that it’s time to go.

At twenty-one, barely broken from her parents’ home,
she sees them:
she and the night custodian,
their scandalous act
watched with mixed expressions
by four presidents.

David Sapp

Scott

In eighth grade
we shared innocent kisses
with some of the same girls.
Scott played the cornet,
I played the trumpet;
together we marched
up main street on memorial day
and across the field at halftime.

In the early eighties
Scott died of AIDS;
he was among the first victims
of the virus that raced recklessly
along Kinshasa highway,
from the heady crotch
of Africa to every bedroom
and backseat on the planet.
Scott died when the plague
was the televangelists' hysteria,
a punishment for the sins of gay men,
before Rock Hudson's hollow cheeks
drew a last breath on the TV screen,
before Magic Johnson's big,
toothy smile quit the Lakers,

before condoms were cast
like little multi-colored
life preservers from parade floats,
before the ignorance and inertia
of presidents and bureaucracy,
before the indifference
to the dirty needle,

before AZT and the cocktail
dispensed a few spare years,
before suburban moms
and their children,
pregnant with disease,
allowed the lesions on their fair skin
to be tragic and respectable.

Scott died before
the patchwork of names
filled the Washington mall,
before the quilt could begin
to comfort the nation.

To catch the Long Island
Railroad to Ronkonkoma,
we descend into the hole
called Penn Station,
down the filthy steps
into a dim, medieval crypt
of black grease and peeling paint,
into the unyielding air,
heavy with machines and bodies,
into the cursing, the screaming of trains,
where the stainless steel urinals
look like the minimal art
in the galleries above our heads,
where the numb faces lift
their eyes as if toward heaven,
fixed upon the changing
marquee of track destinations.

A tidy little man,
unremarkable within the waiting herd,
with carefully polished shoes,
precisely combed hair and shirt and trouser
that seem as if laid out
by his mother forty years before,
opens a small cage
and frees a brilliant white
apparition, a cockatoo,
and sits the bird
on a trash container lid;
they share an ice cream
without a word,
without an open hat.
A beautiful woman,
a child, and then a crowd
pauses, gathers and smiles.
The Cockatoo

To catch the Long Island Railroad to Ronkonkoma, we descend into the hole called Penn Station, down the filthy steps into a dim, medieval crypt of black grease and peeling paint, into the unyielding air, heavy with machines and bodies, into the cursing, the screaming of trains, where the stainless steel urinals look like the minimal art in the galleries above our heads, where the numb faces lift their eyes as if toward heaven, fixed upon the changing marquee of track destinations.

A tidy little man, unremarkable within the waiting herd, with carefully polished shoes, precisely combed hair and shirt and trousers that seem as if laid out by his mother forty years before, opens a small cage and frees a brilliant white apparition, a cockatoo, and sits the bird on a trash container lid; they share an ice cream without a word, without an open hat. A beautiful woman, a child, and then a crowd pauses, gathers and smiles.
Winter

From behind the glass
the sun's brilliance deceives;
what should be green and humid,
a tall summer field of timothy,
is frigid ice and the wind
sculpting and burnishing;
and two trees entwined
in delicate silhouettes,
naked limbs prolific
with empty branches throw
shadows, intricate shoots,
across a lush, white surface
in vivid Ultramarine Blue,
a hue from the tube,
brushed upon the canvas
and transformed into traces
of veins meandering
beneath warm, pale skin
or the translucent faults
in the thin marble arms
of a polished Venus and Apollo,
their stone fingers interlaced
as long as the sun's zenith
and winter remain.

The Non-song of Un-love

I have loved you not again
I will love you not at all
I caress your emptiness
With nothing more and nothing less
I had hoped--but that has gone
I once thought--I've no idea
I will live right next to death
With nothing more and nothing less

And So Say All of Us

What is a mood
An attitude
Scooped from the brain
Hollowed from the heart
A faint unholy stain
The alchemist's curious art
Bled the ready pen of my mind
And left me here abandoned
As if the icy fingers of the wind
Spoke by virtue or commandment
I have no mouth to scream, to speak
I curl my body up and count the days
As they telescope together into weeks
I arch my heart to heaven in considered
The Non-song of Un-love

I have loved you not again
I will love you not at all
I caress your emptiness
With nothing more and nothing less

I had hoped--but that has gone
I once thought--I’ve no idea
I will live right next to death
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And So Say All of Us

What is a mood
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A faint unholy stain
The alchemist’s curious art
Bled the ready pen of my mind
And left me here abandoned
As if the icy fingers of the wind
Spoke by virtue or commandment
I have no mouth to scream, to speak
I curl my body up and count the days
As they telescope together into weeks
I arch my heart to heaven in considered ways
A river like so many others
snaking down fields and hills
gurgling out of Canada
rain-fattened pools and streams
washing through hungry brown-black soil
draining into the great belly of rushing water
breathless search for ocean
lumps of red-brick buildings
shivering in ragged edges along the shore
jagged windows hanging by their fingertips
remembering vanished industry’s guttural pounding
the hammering and clanging
spinning out fabric rolls
chemicals flushed in oil-slicked barrels
fitters stitchers welders draymen
scuttling through the eye-opening reds of dawn
scurrying back through shadows of dusk
jaw-jutting house of Civil War myth
commanding the sharp promontory
shouts of barge-masters steamer captains sail- haulers
castles of forgotten merchant princes
tumult of new yacht basins
blinking lights strung along the docks of river restaurants
crowds gathering to cheer the Clearwater tunes
to walk the boardwalk duck channels
waiting for this year’s return of the shad
its succulent smells roasting in the festival field
the river whirls in its basin at the euphoric city
I breathe the wonder of it
bathe ecstatic eyes in it
the river doesn’t belong to me
but it’s mine.

Inside the windows of lonely streets
people laughed and sang
and I hated them for it
their warm living rooms
tree-lined streets whistling up bright mornings
soft afternoons on noiseless pavements
yellow street lights scattering the night
tinderbox streets were living rooms for others never seen by the window people
the Slaughterhouse District
meatpackers cutting wet strips of fat
gripping their steamy paper cups of coffee
ankle-length aprons streaked with bovine
the elderly couple some remember them
if they really were that old
popped out of their cardboard cartons at
the turning up street vaudeville
strolling uptown in their multi-colored
grimy ribbons curled around their legs
remnants fluttering in the breeze
holding hands on their way to the uptown
I never knew where they actually went
their rheumy eyes stared past us into non
blank faces masking their universe of pain
how do they keep their fiercely swollen
they gave us those few moments of relief
we wanted them to go on
smile at them each morning
but one day they were gone
one died we heard
then the other died
drowned in the raging tides of lonely streets
and we lost forever the pain and pleasure
Cardboard Couple

Inside the windows of lonely streets
people laughed and sang
and I hated them for it
their warm living rooms
tree-lined streets whistling up bright mornings
soft afternoons on noiseless pavements
yellow street lights scattering the night shadows
tinderbox streets were living rooms for others
others never seen by the window people
the Slaughterhouse District
meatpackers cutting wet strips of fat
gripping their steamy paper cups of coffee on the curb
ankle-length aprons streaked with bovine blood
the elderly couple some remember them
if they really were that old
popped out of their cardboard cartons at the click of dawn
tuning up street vaudeville
strolling uptown in their multi-colored cast-offs
grimy ribbons curled around their legs
remnants fluttering in the breeze
holding hands on their way to the uptown follies
I never knew where they actually went
their rheumy eyes stared past us into nowhere
blank faces masking their universe of pain
how do they keep their fiercely swollen legs from exploding?
they gave us those few moments of release from guilt
we wanted them to go on
smile at them each morning
but one day they were gone
one died we heard
then the other died
drowned in the raging tides of lonely streets
and we lost forever the pain and pleasure of their company.
Gerald Zipper

Blind Doors

Groping down a blind corridor
sweep of recurring days
thrusts us past the line of sightless doors
swinging open
revealing the lost circus
the tumbling sweating high-flyers
the wailing boy
lions leaping
swords swallowed
where did all those images go?
See the sprawled Medusa
waiting behind the door
her snake lips puckered in a sly smile
eyes flowing memories
beggars sitting in costumes
blinking egg-white eyes
doors flying open
gold coins pouring forth
sounding their painful sweet songs
edging desperately
no turning back
more blind doors wait
stretching endlessly to their implacable end.

Burton R. Hoffman

The Rhythms of Life

Delicate rhythms, waves on the shore,
Shifting the sand,
Lapping, frothing,
Rolling evermore.

Delicate rhythms, city moans,
Automation’s hum
Buzzing, whirring,
On and on it droans.

Delicate rhythms, school’s in session,
Answers flying,
Singing, naming,
Gaming without question.

Delicate rhythms, a gallery walk,
Master upon master,
Stirring deep inside,
Making your feelings talk.

Delicate rhythms, in the wild
Rock-filled trails,
Winding up and down,
Trying to regain
Youth’s long lost child.
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Sancho Panza Was Indulgent

Sancho Panza was indulgent of Quixote, his mad lord. He had never read the lore that so intoxicated. Sancho Panza could afford to be lazy, fond of drink—he had never thought himself more than flabby, crass and dull.

Alas for Don Quixote in his lean body clad in his pasteboard armor, intent upon adventure. Too late had the priest burned his insanity-inducing volumes of chivalry—the twaddle of knight-errantry.

Green Beret at Sixty

So this is what old age feels like for survivors: a very disconcerting bashfulness intrudes. Few would hear anecdotes of sweltering Vietnam—few would remember vividly bad dreams. What can three-score years tell to one-score summers? Plastic flowers never had decent scent, decent death? And the would-be heroes were mistaken for villains? Tragedy within tragedy—catastrophe compounded.
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William Davenhauer

Soundness of Mind

Remove the florid
sixteenth-century
Spanish crucifix
from your mind,
refrain to confound
watered wine with blood,
the cool sap in the hole
with warm milk in breast.

For the health of mind
shed foisted guiltiness
concerning those sins
you did not commit;
saneness presupposes
coherence, sobriety--
discernment of difference
of juice, of wine, of milk.

Ian Haight

Guangzhou

On the sidewalk-bridge
above the heady din of semis
and exhaust,
your virgin-eyes, bright,
the gentle slender of your body's curves--
that pure skin, smooth and new
like your supple, weak-muscled legs,
slight of fat.

On your head, that whiff of hair
looks fresh, still from birth--
your eyes pristine and somehow

Ian Haight

unafraid,
as if this place for you is natural.

Maybe this is somehow better for you,
for who could otherwise imagine this--
you with no clothes to hide that slit
between your legs
(is that the reason you're here?).

Here, alone, naked,
your back's clean skin
touching the asphalt sidewalk's
dirt-fatigue,
an outline of urine
inches from the white chipped cup
as large as your head--

I wonder if all your days are like this--
that cup with coins somehow
worth more than being with the
one who cares for you--

Maybe you need no clothes
in this heat (do I?),
and there is no doubt
that your silk-smooth skin and
one year-old body are beautiful,
and your eyes are clear--aware with
passersby who somehow do not see,
or if they do, what do they think?

Is there no one to call?
Or do they think
the cup suggests you belong there,
as if moving or taking you
would anger someone,
somehow disturb the universe out of
its proportions.
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When I Pick Up Pad and Pen

When I pick up pad and pen
I find I shake the way a wolf shudders river water,
and hissing heads spin like wet lettuce in a sack.

Giants pour from the mountains,
and the horse with the sword that leads them
storms down in a howling tide,
while hornets chop the earth and burst,
and the roars of the great maned beasts
like thunder echo as spear-struck they kick in the dust.

Speedboats break in flames on water,
the scorched and twisting rubble,
and crenelated rock curtains
bridge black chasms
where honeycombs stream.

Groundwater slides down rimstone dam stairpools,
glow worms light the lava tube sky.
Gypsum flowers, witherless stone buds,
burst slow,
stalagmites below wavering recede.
Crab-like creatures crawl on alien debris,
crocodile-fish,
long and white with wide dead doll eyes
slip past obelisks,
while on the banks
maenads and naiads writhe heated behind,
fawn-skinned fan as flame.
And once again I realize,
if you’re not living your own dream
you’re dead in someone else’s.

Snake Bit

Frigid panhandle winter night
the copy editor chose to Alamo
up in the photo morgue fighting off
vipers with delirium tremens
and BillyBob sashayed into the newsroom
just before old friends only
the gods knew how tracked me
that far west walked in
to catch the mewling from the morgue
and BillyBob throwing bearskin coat
open to jars of common hooch
and flasks of prize, downhome corn--
ta-da!--
old friends urging go with them
right then to their California dream,
and, a year or so, did that,
surprised them--ta-da--in a state
of terminal, marital disharmony,
longed right there for a
diamond-pinky-finger-ringed moonshiner
to throw open his shoetop-low
bearskin coat to containers
of Lull Valley waters--Dear lady,
gen’ mun, a cure for every ache.
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ICON

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