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“The Thief of Permission” first appeared in American Poetry Review.
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“An Angel of the War Years” and “The Grackles” first appeared in Painted Bride Quarterly.

Michele Wolf’s “Astigmatism” first appeared in Southern Poetry Review.

Errata

Four stanzas were accidentally omitted from the midsection of Katrina Roberts’ poem “The Ruffled Edge” in PBQ 55/56. We offer our sincere apologies and are happy to reprint the restored poem in this issue.
The Ruffled Edge

Smoked salmon leather, this thong of a man, who ambles by water in a
directed south saunter over gravelly
sand—now wet purple where it rims the sea. He carries an oblong sack
his own skin’s color. His plastic
shoes, clear with numerous holes (sloosh in sloosh out) make a
squelching sound. She lifts her head, ball-
bearing pivot, to widen her peripheral range; he knows she’s there and
he figures she sees him; cap bobbing
blue like dark water. She lies beneath dunes amidst shells—curled in
glass eye colors. Sand rises in wind,
creamy and sorrel. Ka-plunge plunge—dog feet in shallows sends a
crawl up the salt-pulled skin on her spine.

Sun prisms hot shards, and black dots squabble, moaning and mewing
in thin air. She follows him, eyes tracing his
lines—the path of his all-one-color skin, as he wanders. Wound tight
rubber-bands and a rounded nub hangs in front,
while his legs just continue. Up in back too, merely darker. Ribs she
can see and his bones through his skin, weathered
parchment, shell of a valuable book, striated pink marble like smoked
rump of a pig been skinned. How common this
hairlessness, she thinks, thinking: how I should write that here, held in
a purple cup, headside toward bluffs,
feet pointing down across the Atlantic toward America?—(she
stretches her body in length toward some green
grey seaport on the eastern coast, maybe Boston, maybe even the
wharf with that big hotel. She spent the night
with a man buying drinks with so many pieces of money it began way
past dark, to resemble useless,
dirty handled roughage of paper, lettuce promises which wilted, as the
evening wore on, while he
all the time, heated up; his coins clacked angrily like bits of glinty
glass in the sea of melted ice and foam
at the bar, chips worn deceptively smooth from his shifty use, but oh-
so-dangerously brittle, algid, sharply insincere and...
that: It's good. Something at least. Small rise of sand, size of one hand, by her navel. And lower.

She watches him pass, tipping the frame of her ribcage forward, and he, still passing below her, halts; they're somehow together. What would the others say if they came down to the beach where she rocks—her excitement too much to contain—and she could feel herself swell, like the dark blue water, swell in their sight, save for the bloodblack interior, the elastic smooth eel-kush-hibiscus bruising interior of her favorite flower—which is always in bloom, or can be on command, and is, therefore, often the favorite. And then she lies back hearing the bubbled muskiness of the sea; sun climbs high over whispering grass, reeds, vetch and thistle, spikegrass and wheat. Kasherrr kashush—the plashings of low surf tide into reefs lull her, a gentle breakage. Thinking:
dizzy gazing down waterway algae green like frog green soup swamp stubble growth of reef bone clean sticks of carnage.
Heat soaks through. On her skin she feels a double-tone horn somewhere, a single noise. And far off a rumble purr.
The bubbling motor of an aeroplane, redwhite toy pulled bobbingly across the enamel blue, clay-baked cloudless sky. Sea a bit darker rising in caps, catches her eye, just before closing. She imagines walking over the dunecliff edge toward: the harbor, stands selling rounds of ice cream in bright colors, seafoam green shutters, high blue trees and blue pink shadows, toward glinting stucco, brilliant orange pink red green purple black fishing boats, dunepink buildings—their green and white awnings striped over tables with tiny wire chairs set in rings, over grasses, cobbles, near benches, tar and creosote in her nose, warm black on her feet and bonfire air, good sharp salt air, toward the red light on the point, vinegar light in the house saying—watch out here, past boats docked for lunch of fish and baguettes, yellow suited men in their curls and caps with tins, clinking bottles, melting colors
in the water, toward cafés under awnings, bowtied, boxcoated waiters, yawning in the sun on the terrace, suit jackets double breasted grey with four buttons done up, down by the hips, spitpolished men asking—what would she like. What would she like? What she would like is... and she opens her eyes. He is merely a shape, arms-legs-bag dangling down darkening in the center, hollowing in the rear, smooth contoured like clay, whelk of a shell, conch of a cake of a lifetime. He stops slowly, stands, toes in the water’s frill, pivots 360 degrees, from his kidney bean sack he extracts a small stripe of turquoise cloth, two boys wail by in bright short pants. How far is it to some (unknown) destination? Two more voices and a third approach—and he once nude now steadies himself, lifts first his right then left leg through spaces meant for legs, and all most gingerly completed, he moves off, shifting from pale stone to stone, his spine growing more distant but concurrently seeming sharper on the horizon, a mahogany nick, a nut or vessel, easing away, his blue stripe blue no more but seeping to be his color, hangs low on his hips, torso long letting his suit slip to reveal the top of dividing buttocks, dark space peeping above color, more pleasing... She lets go. It feels good, this, that particles spin and she brushes the skin on her arms as though to rub it away and suddenly she decides to tear up the card she had written before, stuck in her hook to mail on the way, addressed in green ink to some other who mattered, who is, as it happens, covered with a forest mat of dark hair, curled like fur of the dog in the surf, some man in a city where pressed shirts are required, where sand is a tiring nuisance, and dunes can’t possibly hide what goes on, and furthermore, stretching to stand she unfolds toward the clear flat open expanse of sky, walks gingerly also, yet with confidence toward the incoming onrushing waves. It seems to take her forever, she thinks. How long have I been walking directly toward this—
impossible distance. Just when she has decided to stop, ah, she's arrived at the ruffled edge. She tears the card with its glossy view and its spindly message into tiny triangular pieces and Whoosh, she lets go. They scatter... wafting away, small sails capping the waves, some ripple over the horizon where America probably still hunkers, some drift up toward Concarneau and Penzance, then on to St. Georges Channel and Newcastle, then even past Ireland all together, and the Hebrides and off toward Iceland and maybe even further past that... and there are others which swirl down toward San Sebastian, riding the currents which stir the Bay of Biscay, making their way out and around Spain's shoulder, buoyed off toward Portugal, Tangier, into the Mediterranean Sea toward Italy, then Cyprus, following currents through the Dardanelles, past Istanbul, eddying into the Black Sea, and then....
Battery

if my skin was so encased
smooth, electric
you could not find my buried prong
if my father held himself that way
contained, metallic
till his charge burst
releasing dank gin swills
and i clicked with camera his purplish decay
which marked my first real moment of growth

if you slipped me in your pocket
and held me close
my radium, my quick-twisted crown
i would know something
so subterranean
it could make me sing

oh, run your tongue
upon the withered zinc
the dampness will help the connection
i will arc across streetlights and saliva
the dashboards will glow
blue with drowning, or submission
the song will come in slow
broken pauses
the dance will ache
like a palm on the hip
of some distant cousin

don’t slap me
i’m not through yet

i think we stand
by the sulfurous glow
of the local town dump
our headlights will bleach the dark
dry tree bones
till our batteries run low
we'll whisper the names
already asked toward forgiveness
my third-grade teacher
my hypodermic nurse
oh, slit the skin open
my dark-haired insect
let the charge run home
Denim

yes, the AM radio reached us, by the chain link fence and the bright spreading grass of the school yard. it only made it worse, those rhinestone-studded choruses singing about “Afternoon Delight” while our fingers knotted the wired twine of the fence, and lawn mowers hummed in the distance, pollen exploded from dandelion spores and the sharp blue intake of cigarette smoke burned our throats, took us as close as we could get to escape; better than sex, spilt jism, denims unzipping with a sound like steady thunder in the locker room. oh, the incense i smelled in that private, nervous sweat, like the catholic school education i never received, heavy, stolid, stone-grey saints frozen in poses of rapture denied me, the fumes that rose from the thick, tree-branching corridors to the unknown which was my two legs running across the school yard, over hurdles and scattered gravel, making the ground unfold, my breath, my heartbeat, the soil damp and rich after a rain, the sky ripped open with a color i can’t remember. no, christ, you wouldn’t know about that, the only colors you knew were lamb-skin pink and the blue of robins' eggs, which came pure and rare as the smooth blue drift glass washed up on the beach, in broken medicine jars, ointments and old pains, oh no, you wouldn’t know about that, not the dampness of two legs twined beneath denim, the smell i keep dreaming about, like steam in the parking lot after a rain, station wagons all equipped with child safety seats and huddled, desperate patience, but where did they come from, lord, the buckles, the latches, the lashed, blue vinyl grip, i think you know what i mean, there was a child who was howling, who was kept in his place in the seat, and where did he come from but that dark pounding, the wretched spilling words can’t erase, even my english teacher couldn’t hide his hard-on when Susan P. got up to explain MacBeth, she was the first to grow breasts, and oh, her blond arm hairs arched in a dog fur salute, in the back lot during science experiments, as we watched the baking soda rocket feebly wobble up to grip the sun, oh, her body’s changing beneath funnelled denim, there are things twisting in her i want to find, lord, to hide this smell her shirt might be silk, oh, i am a dog, i
am a dog, i am a dog, christ, you can't keep me nailed to the spot, my blood not sacred, it scabs, i am running, away from that spot on her arm where the sun gleams and everything turns to crystals and equations and i want to seize it, smell the blonde continent beneath her denim, i am counting, lord, as i grow down, the jaw of the zipper fly hangs open, each tooth a striptease as i pee in the urinal by myself, i am counting, lord, i am counting.....
A Note on the Poetry of Henry Braun

Though I never studied with Henry Braun, himself a lifelong teacher of literature and creative writing, he has in a way been a teacher to me since I first heard him read his work at Chestnut Hill College, nearly three decades ago. He read then from The Virgil Woods, his first book, and I was taken by the delicate intelligence of his work. His poetry has always had a way of claiming things that are nearly ceremonial, each object or allusion entering welcomed like a visitor into his text. All of his poems communicate a sense of the migratory character of poetic writing in a century that has denied poets the consolations of believing that the mind is its own place:

My father was “over there,”
a doughboy with ceremonial puttees
that scared the hair forever from his shins.
In her cloche, a felt shell, my mother
moved chin-up through the Twenties.
They met, containing me,
et quorum pars parva fui.

It’s hard not to praise the technical subtlety revealed in these lines mid-way from “At a Pier of the Ben Franklin Bridge”—the self-possessed rhythms, the graceful allusions to an old patriotic song, the appearance of puttee and cloche (a kind of hat) in what is essentially an elegy, and the comfortable entrance and comical slant-rhymed closure on the backhanded Virgilian tag (Aeneid, II:6, where the original reads “et quorum pars magna fui”). And Braun manages his erudition with such delicacy it is easy to forget that what he writes is very clearly and unfashionably a learned poetry that seeks to possess without consuming, and to own without excluding the gaze of others. At the same time the learning is presented without contempt for the fools who might be reading it. “I know,” he says in “Description of a Solstice,” “what was all/is now some,” and with the assured compassion of a born teacher notes the passing of ritual and how, in modern art, “it’s OK to approach the king.”

There are times when Braun’s historical consciousness puts him in a dangerous place, as in “Morning in America”:
High up, in sudden gusts, kites
comma. Hawks and doves imprint
the Federal Triangle upside down
upon their retinas.
The old Smithsonian holds its own
among the white facades.

If some of the emblematic political references have yet to achieve
the status of political symbols (and may never, given the cultural drift
into historical oblivion and consequent extinction of written record),
the hawk's and the dove's shared inverted view of Reagan's inaugural
shindig may appear decorative. It, of course, is not; nothing in Braun's
verse is. The sense of slight strain one often feels is that of a mind
pulling against a cultural tide and attempting to elegize an entire history
of political thought that the Eighties set out to obliterate. During "those
famous days for the spirit," as he calls the era of political protest in
another elegy, "An Angel of the War Years," the human imagination
fed itself and others on ideas

depth within the intelligence of our houses
where bookcases tower in the night
seen from outside dark by lamplight.

His cadence remembers "the dark fields of the republic rolling on into
the night," Fitzgerald's tropings of the death of American visionary
idealism, and one wonders who, if anyone anywhere, is equipped to
assess the fullness of the historical tragedy that culminated in and
with Viet Nam. How much can the poet drag into the light of verse?

Braun's poetry, as a staging area for dramas of political recognition,
at least attempts an answer. His instinctive gesture is toward enactment
of an idea in the simplest, often anecdotal terms. You see it in ambitious
poems like "In Memory of Benjamin E. Linder," where Linder's name
is recollected along with those of Schwerner and Goodman (Freedom
Riders) and Steve Biko, and in relative sprints like "The Gettysburg
Epiphany, Even." Such poems register occasions obliquely, like cameras
trained in one direction and trip-wired; this poetry in the service
of a larger purpose, is, that is to say, instrumental, the outcome of a
faintly Shelleyan vision of experience as mediated by or registered
in poetry, though never entirely fixed in it. Hence the tone, whether
gently skeptical or openly ironic, is always taking its direction from
Braun's vision of the art as principally commemorative.

Perhaps this is why his imagination seems to take its most enabling
impressions not of all things but of certain things, those whose impor-
tance is unclear until the poem touches them:

I remember Aprils when they came to build
nests in the landscape, grackle by grackle
in oak and elm as perfectly as crystal
laying its points.

They are more human now,
unbridled in their conclave on the lawn
where they sit swaying in the honey of fever.

("The Grackles")

That he cannot resist the political analog is the outcome of the intensity
of convictions not purely or merely political but essentially philosophical,
and if you resist such speculation you will not look up the references
and may dismiss the poetry. Yet the feeling is as genuine as the design
is subtle. At stake is the human "presence" in his poems and the way
we take the measure of them is by way of metaphors and names, both
and yet no one appears worried that the decay reflects a slow process
of recollective disintegration: we are the names we confer.

Who we are is blurred.
Only our presence is certain
over the ground and water we keep
naming.

Unless it is informed by some sense of human responsiveness to what
went on before us, history is the random doodling of desire all over
objects—is, that is to say, what deconstructive theory understands
it to be and what Braun seemingly refuses to countenance. Whatever
goes on, to this most essentialist of poetic intelligences, must be under-
stood to be and celebrated as hopelessly human.

Hence, and not at all incidentally, the poems that appear to harbor
"ecological" concerns are, in their way, uncannily unconcerned about
the natural environment, and remind one of Simon Schama's instructive remark that "landscape is the work of the mind." Comically identifying himself with pre-Socratic science in "Why I Am Not a Scientist," denying that the elements are other than "earth, air, fire, and water,/the old contenders for/ our naked eyes," Braun sounds Blakean:

As for this killing field
and resurrection ground
of the minute
minute particular, the act just so,
just and so, endlessly reenacted—
I am allowed to come
and watch
her desire to share
burn condescension to a fine ash.

If science reenacts the things it purports to describe, then what, exactly, does it describe? Viewing an experimental lab as a "killing field" is what gives the poem not depth so much as its depth perception. (Blake: "Locke says we learn everything we know. But Man is born a Garden ready and planted. This world is too poor to produce one seed.") It is characteristic of his work that Braun is not out to get scientists or science, merely to reinstall in our understanding the realization that nothing goes on without, or outside, of human imagination, which plays with everything because it must. The poem ends in a memory of Braun at the age of twelve gazing into the "triptych" of his chemistry set.

Braun's manner of claiming (without laying waste) a moment's perception leaves, whatever one thinks of his politics, a good deal left for the rest of us. One will not find in his poetry evidence of an imagination on a shopping spree for democratic subjects (which it then manhandles as objects); his respect for elemental creative energies explains, to those of us who have learned from his work, why so little of it is available in an age where every new anthology is another mass grave of minor talents. Braun himself, I am sure, would be among the first to separate himself from such sentiments: they smack of a meannesspiritedness that he and his work will have none of. His words say it better:
I work at my fit each morning
this comfort from the age's terror,
I am a child of God.
Serious secular
waiting equals prayer,
and is my work.

Lavorare est orare, Braun implies, making the creative space one needs
in an age of evangelical consumerism whose motto is tacire consentire.
This is how all of Braun's poems have always spoken and what one
learns from reading them. Enough of the object is left unchanged
that it is impossible that we not respond the next time the
object—grackle, train station, or place name—comes before us, and
in the gentle and purposive manner the poems themselves teach
us.
Initiation Into Chaos
for Mandelbrot and Mandelstam

My first pronunciation of "chaos"
created laughter.
    I was twelve
and doing Genesis in Hebrew school.
"Kows?" "Kaa-ohs?" How could I know?
How *could* I know?
And trilobite with the reversed $l_b$,
Plato with a flat $a$, Aristotle accented
on the second syllable—
trilobite, Plato, Aristotle....
A quiet boy, I read before I said.

Gradually it all came out kosher,
as it were, "tripply on the tongue."
I emigrated from my social class,
 another raznochinites
whose true country is a bookcase.

Now,
    ah now,
I live in faith with "the meaning
bearing Nature of system violations,"
the strange attractors of my only life.
At a Pier of the Ben Franklin Bridge

Iron was thicker
and woolen suits were fatter
in the American dream time
that around us, beneath us
set
the infrastructure.
In milky barrels the pickles swam.

Decoration on the firehouses!
Solid Shivaic quenchers on each block!
Heavy lapels on famous writers!
Greatcoats!
Silver buttons on the generals!
The Brauns have seen it all,
long gown to miniskirt and back
across the Muybridge of fashion.

My father was "over there,"
a doughboy with ceremental puttees
that scared the hair forever from his shins.
In her cloche, a felt shell, my mother
moved chin-up through the Twenties.
They met, containing me,
et quorum pars parva fui.

Here today, I'm more
the bar at the middle of the seesaw.
In milky barrels pickles swim again.
Morning In America
(early 1980s)

To the marble seat of government we come
from the folding chairs of our meetings
and walk the Mall’s long slice toward Lincoln.
The sky is blue with after-rain perfection.
High up, in sudden gusts, kites
comma. Hawks and doves imprint
the Federal Triangle upside down
upon their retinas.
The old red Smithsonian holds its own
among the white facades.
Around the Monument,
the Father of Our Country’s stele,
a pubis of flags, Flaghenge,
curls and whips against the blue.

“WE’RE NUMBER 1!”

Broken? Unbroken?
The voice in which my country’s
triumph is spoken.
The Gettysburg Epiphany, Like
(the President discovered in the blowup
of an old photograph)

A life so lived the thoughts like humpback whales
are here suddenly from under.

Close looking

reveals. Like Lincoln, though tophatted,
hidden until now.
So conceived and so dedicated
like
the time starlight spends in travel,
hecatombs of years,
though now

seen in the open,
the bare, the capped, mostly tophatted
sea.
An Angel of the War Years
(early 1970s. For Father Dan)

New angels were infolded among us
to share our daily bread and circus
and drink from our running cup.
Coming foreseen, one stood worn like a menhir,
grass pate flattened by the rain,
in a neighborhood two generations old.
Small children at the heart of meaning,
with dew still heavy on our customs,
we were not ready for an angel,
but we took him in. And none of us asked for wings
or the tilt of flesh that breaks
common sunlight into halos.
His gestures were familiar: tired shepherd
after the parables begin straying
back towards the herd of what goes on.
With the quality of concern
one brings to a physician, we fed him
bread he praised and held in both his hands,
those famous days for the spirit,
deep within the intelligence of our houses
where bookcases tower in the night,
seen from the outside dark by lamplight.

We have an affection for our tiredness,
now he is gone in the small German car,
for our peculiar brand of sadness.
The Grackles

More savage birds flock the lawn each April, some with spears in their beaks and all with beaks. I remember Aprils when they came to build nests in the landscape, grackle by grackle in oak and elm as perfectly as crystal laying its points.

They are more human now, unbridled in their conclave on the lawn where they sit swaying in the honey of fever.

I cannot tell from here which is the master bird, and a closer look might fasten them on me, and soon that bird will start up anyway from off-center or the far edge and wing round to an oak, the others in its wake, to resume the broken conclave vertically.

Where are the songs of spring? I think of birds fattening in its warmth, climbing, threading along the invariable vineyard of its praise outside windows. Where is the spring of song in which these sad migrations have no part, their birds so hard?

Summer last year was calm. Against what season do these grackles arm?
Lament for the Metaphors

Down by the old broad stream
of discourse I sit lamenting
all the camels’ backs broken by straws,
the grass-choked, alder-filled roads not taken.
I lament each unsalvageable stitch
in time, the old woman who
lived without childcare in a shoe.
The two birds killed by one
continually hurled stone
receive in this elegy their due
again. Lenin and Mao and all
the people who lie dead in glass houses
and shouldn’t throw bones
of doctrine at “the people” anymore,
I mourn. Since it’s important, I cry twice
“Goodbye! Goodbye!” and then,
for months at a time, refrain.

Carl Rakosi In Orono
“the eyes in particular
unaccountably attendant”

Where he comes from is exactly far
and near together,
a stop and a go together,
very like the life
we accumulate in tears
in the heartpool, in
nods of understanding, the Salvador
Rosa landscape of the lungs
in fear, yes, and hope
through which the language sings.
A Fulbright Scholar Remembers His France
1955

i
Hugest salle, boiling with students,
workers, ageing intellectuals,
calluses on their cerebra
from day by day analysis of the news,
O reasoning heart
of angry Paris,
I once heard your voice,
I felt the ambience of your words

before I returned to Lyon
and my landlady Grataloup's
"sales Algériens"
milling about below her windows
to play
"mon pauvre Henri"
with naked foot stalking in my chambre,
despising her proferred rank
pantoufles.

ii
November 2
If I stand very still
I can watch all souls
continuing to move in their houses
and out along the Boulevard des Brotteaux
and up the hill to Fourvière.
And if I even
stroll through the arch of the archaic
carefully enough, I'll join
and move myself among them.

Back then, somehow, has changed and stayed.
The needlepoint showers of yore
pass through ghosts like masses of neutrinos.
The pantoufles? Worn about the same,
though odorless now. Waiting in a V.
My old concierge in Lyon,
her face of glass ground to a perfect smile,
welcomes her American.
Why I Am Not a Scientist

Sunday in the quiet Science Building.
My hotelier
of the elemental,
my friend in white,
lays the table before me
so, the 100-proof
proof: the ball on its inclin-
ing plane, the water spark-
broken into gasses.
She demonstrates the world that is
and is not mine,
for whom the elements
are not, as by latest count, 106,
but earth, air, fire, and water,
the old contenders for
our naked eyes.

If, like an Ionian, I had to
pick one, one Thing everything is made from,
I'd be dumb. Earth?
Air? Fire? Water?
Some of each, thank you, is what I'm after,
have been all my years. At 60
it's far too late
to nominate
a substrate.
Chaos more or less benignly reigns
for me and mine,
chaos and old day.

As for this killing field
and resurrection ground
of the minute
minute particular, the act just so,
just and so,
endlessly reenacted—
I am allowed to come
and watch
her desire to share
burn condescension to a fine ash.

For I too was born in Scientia
and naturally desire to know
this way as well.
On Christmas day when I was 12,
near midnight, I aligned the labels
of tiny wooden barrels of sulfur,
calcium carbonate, and charcoal,
and sat in quiet, proud attention,
a novice in prayer
before the triptych of my Gilbert
#10 Chemistry Set.
My father slept. The Bunsen burner was awake.
It felt like Sunday
in a quiet Science Building.
The Professor

I study the beam from the lighthouse
that plays its witness over
the in between and the peripheral.
Day by day I live its many lives;
by night, even when the sun shines, my own
over the same sea, close to the breathing,
my body more vulnerable than light.

Creative Writing Class

There's no end
to the great creative innocence
that keeps sending, sending
the dear next ones
so openly among us.

For whole moments I find the years
useful.
Nothing comes to mind, nothing to tip
of tongue, not one stout Cortez of a word
to insert its human sound in the silence.

For whole moments, only
to be mortal and have successors
canted around this table like an edge,
each one toward his darkness, her sunlight.
And....
In the Chemistry Lecture Hall at Temple

The formulas appear, conserving themselves
back and forth over an equals sign,
any blackboard the address of heaven.
We call them down to earth,
hand them the apples of example,
our miles, our years.

Yet back and forth,
gracefully like Gaston and Alphonse
sowing themselves before the doors of life,
they stay—
God is one but in hiding.
All men are mortal but it feels unique.
Late Mail in Mt. Airy

Cars peel off from the Schuylkill,
How small the seamless triumph of peeling
off at 55 while talking quietly!
Yet for another day we all feel it.

Somewhere else
the mongoose and the cobra
hold each other's full attention.
It's time to stop paying ours
and come at last to down at the far end
of Wellesley Road.

Our little street
is getting on in years,
it's oaks old enough now
to raise sidewalks on their own.
It's always a car coming
slowly through children
this way on summer afternoons.

The mailman's dog-awful hump of leather
lightens from door to door,
rousing once a day even the recluse
out of the deepest chair
through the lick of cobwebs.
And my letters glow,
an irregular pool in the sun
that still angles down from the mailslot.
The trafficperson's
red radish of a helicopter
thucks lazily above Mt. Airy.
The Thief of Permission

A thief lives on the side where my eyes were.
I glance back and forth
with my day vision and my night vision. And eat carrots.
But he gets around me.

Were my head all eye, a ball that tells all
the present to itself—then,
ah then I would find this thief,
deny him what he takes,
my sense of permission to live freely
and make freely.

But my eyes are
slow slits that close half the time
to rest their blindness for the other half.

Sometimes though, all a-prong I act
as if the thief permitted,
going very far out, laughing, giddy, serious,
until the permit's stealthily withdrawn.
Description of a Solstice
for my grandson, Natsuo

i

Through quiet midnight
the past dovetails with the future
and we have a city
in full day.

And still
in Philadelphia
the heaven of the blueprint governs
the mortar’s slap,
the lodgment of the brick,
mute arcs swinging from a crane.

We come as family
in twos and threes, molecules of love.

We rise up
in the old neighborhoods
where giving in a sandgrain at a time
equally governs.

Our hills shoulder more than Atlas.

In libraries, college sheds,
the gables of la bohème,
the unmoored
accumulate like clouds, big lost cerebra.
The mulling over from odd angles
begins.

Or sunbathing
with closed eyes down a silver funnel.

In the Northern Liberties
the church with a gold dome welcomes sunlight.

At 30th Street
under the high clerestory of the station
people like to stand
and see others with gold flecks around them.

Veni creator spiritus!
Whatever happened
to laying on of hands
and the gift of tongues,
the world folded in the altarpiece?

I know,
what was all
is now some
and lives in a museum
supplemented by a café-bookstore.
In art
it's OK to approach the king.

I work at my fit each morning,
this comfort from the age's terror,
I am a child of God.
Serious secular
waiting equals prayer,
and is my work.

I know,
hearing the bird call,
I'll see the bird too
if I wait right,
if I wait.

It is so quiet I hear
the silk dress of my own breathing,
and I desire myself
as I am best, a leaner forward
with widened eyes, a listener.

Though I arrest myself
years later
for having left the scene
of opportunity,
I know the scene is always me
in a little plenum of a world.
Often I find when looking back
the count is higher than I thought.
So subtractable 1930!
I was complete in July, a 9 lb. Vishnu
floating inside a young Irishwoman.
My new name waited on her lips.
By and large, I was born

and am reborn
in complementary rings
around some hidden core

which probes all levels like a solstice:
a lint-fringed paramecium
flirting with him and her
self sub oculo,
filings huddling in magnetic fields.

Adam and Eve, the forkèd pair,
ignite my memory like flints:
an’ sh’ wore a nekkid dre-ess
for slow kissing’s fishnibbles,

the laying on of hands, the gift of tongues.

iv

Soft familiar summer shoe,
your laces leap
through the bent justice of the eyeholes,
tick and tick and tick.
The motions of swimming
disenhibernate.
I’ll walk upon the beach, if not
with a young man’s pharaonic stride,
at least with even shoulders and clear eyes.
In the peaceable republic
of early morning
when the cat lies down with the mouse
and the water
opens its first eyes over the burner,
the matin
of poor kettle-one-note
opens both of mine.

I stretch ten ways in five directions
at the high loft window
and watch for THE WORD to appear
on its curl of ribbon above the city.
As if our whole age were on parchment
decorated here and there by lightning,
yet more immune to lightning than we are!

Afterward, it’s time—
the juice and milk on the table getting warmer—
to call Everyman by his first name.

July 3, 1988
Stalking My Calling

Some students demand to be let in to the inner sanctum, which is to say, our own psyches. They feign independence and maturity, give us that “we’ve lived through it all” look, then ask about our marriage. Depending on my mood, I provoke them with a look that says “you don’t know shit”, or give them the finger. Sometimes they really do know, something, and I try to offer them something else. I point at their hearts, tell them to do some hard thinking, and in the end maybe they’ll come up with some answers.

Here’s the latest story, tell me if I’m wrong. We write dialogues together, which end up being a story of their lives—past, present, and good, strong inklings of the future. She writes something, I write something. She writes Greece sucks, I write, What about America? She writes, I have nothing to say this week, I write, Look around you and take word pictures. She writes, I’ve never been able to experience anything without being distracted by thoughts. I write, Try it this once. She walks into a convent of Greek Orthodox nuns and admits that she’s on the verge of falling in love. I write, let yourself fall.

So the world that opens up to her is so foreign she can only fall in love with it. She can’t bridge that gap between who she is, smart, rich girl from California, and what they are, virgins whose every action is a dedication to God. She can’t live her way, questioning their existence, because the fact of their existence is stronger than her ability to question. And for once she lets herself be stunned by the fact of an existence other than her own.

Our three-month long dialogue has been spiced with quotes from Annie Dillard’s “Living Like Weasels.” First I started putting them in, then she started quoting them back at me. Dillard says: “I would like to learn, or remember, how to live.” And later on: “The thing is to stalk your calling in a certain skilled and supple way, to locate the most tender and live spot and plug into that pulse. This is yielding, not fighting. A weasel doesn’t ‘attack’ anything; a weasel lives as he’s meant to, yielding at every moment to the perfect freedom of single necessity.” I kept telling her to “stalk her
calling” just when she’d get greedy and want all the answers. Then, she was really there, flying, leaving the house early in the morning, before anyone else was up, and coming back late. She was learning to paint icons, and the nuns were teaching her the lives of the saints she was painting. She ate with them (while the Bible was recited in order to distract from the pleasure of eating), slept there one night. Once these young women understood that they were the “calling” she was stalking, they stalked her right back. They took her for walks in the garden, offered her gifts of food, and the most precious: they gave her little bits and pieces of their lives before entering the convent. They spoke of siblings and parents who were aghast at the young woman’s decision to leave home for a nunnery.

And all the while, I told her: write it down and we’ll see what comes of it. At many points she was lost in the narrative. There were weeks when she, herself, was simply not there anymore. Or at least she had become a different version of herself, conscious only of the smiles that were exchanged with the nuns. I said Yes, your heart is there. I congratulated her. She had made it, let them into her heart, made a place for herself in theirs. Then I had to change direction, quickly, because we only had another month. I said: But you said you’ve always had trouble stopping the questions. Where are you now? Where have the questions gone? Now that you’ve been to the heart, bring your mind to bear on it. What is this faith about? How are you going to live your life?

She pulled very stiffly away from the source of her inspiration, as if she was being punished, and put near thoughts down on paper. She became analytical, her inspiration crushed. I said gently, urging, then more desperately: Bring it all together. Put spirit down on paper. Who are you and what is your world now that you’ve loved a different life? But she couldn’t pull back without crushing what she loved, without keeping it so deep inside herself that none of us could sense its presence.

I feel like the psychiatrist who has lost her patient to madness, whose patient has fallen in love with her own mad mind and has no desire or method to desert it. The point of the experiment was growth, an ability to be heart and mind, spirit and body all at once. And I tried to offer a method. Have I betrayed her? She’s shunned me now, has closed her mouth, shut her pen away.
The only hope is that she'll remember Annie Dillard, who was desperate to live like a weasel. She writes: "I could very calmly go wild. I could live two days in the den, curled, leaning on mouse fur, sniffing bird bones, blinking, licking, breathing musk, my hair tangled in the roots of grasses." Dillard knows she's not animal the way a weasel is. She offers a solution for the human being whose nostalgia for the animal life is compelling, furious: "I think it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go, to dangle from it limp wherever it takes you. Then even death, where you're going no matter how you live, cannot you part."

The point is, Dillard writes for us, not for the weasel.
Easter Sunday

Families are resurrected
in sunlight. Another family man, drunk,
sleeps in the grass
on his side. I believe in something

now and then, feel a larger body,
older, walk through
a secret door in me. I read

your letter, see in my hands
the island you live on. I open the door,

walk through, knowing I am in love with this distance
that makes us look harder for the body,
the tangible light of skin.
Container

Since it harbors them all, from folded hands
to vagrant ships, you don't need to utter the word.
Refer only to "not-poem" when necessary,
as in the case of the remarkable absence:
water evaporates, reeftybottom's scraped
and the sailor hears an echo of bells
that ring him to the vast, swaying table.
Or lift up the curtain of air, to hear
a dial tone throbbing the lonely misconnection
which has grown louder while you wept and aged.
Under the great dome, holy, gray-bearded
firework purveyors scurry through the lie
of night that cannot be large enough
for the glory they'd promised.
A Country Romance

Coming over the hill, his ploughed field
smoking in the headlamps of the truck.
A dog’s hoarse bark
jumps between house and shed.

Standing on the wooden porch, fog clinging to my face,
I realize if my neighbor’s still here he wouldn’t answer.
Last time he was suddenly at the edge of the orchard
then gone back into the shape a tree’s shadow makes.

The yard is lost to memory, the roses, renegade
and overgrown, a sagging fence.
In the brittle cold, stars
hold their breath, a tiny wind rattling
the necklace of dead lightbulbs

strung above the back door.
Near an iron barrel of rain, rusting
against the stoop
some wild thing has lingered.
Commuting

Something's happened up ahead, maybe a trucker's jack-knifed and spilled his semi's load
of oranges across four lanes in what looks like an insane game
of Bocce ball,
or maybe a housewife on her way to her first job interview in eighteen years
rolled her wagon and is at the shoulder staring at a bottle
of Perrier that miraculously, unbelievably,
fell through her window and is now in the travel lane, upright,
unbroken, the early sun
caught in its green throat. I can't tell. I'm stuck about a mile back, there's not much I can do,
tune the radio to the traffic band, fidget, then in my rear-view
I see the driver purse his lips
and blow a kiss into his rear-view and for a second it's kisses down the line for at least three exits.
Witnesses

Cold. Ice sheaths the root wads jutting from the bank where they dip in the dark current. Dangling limbs shudder with the river, a faint crackling. So cold. Even the feeble wind of the boat inching upstream burns exposed skin. Damp breath freezes, milky in the thin air. Late. Even the owls are silent. Night is pierced only by the steady whine of the battered Evinrude edging the johnboat upstream, the quiet hiss of the twin gas laterns dangling off the bow, and the distant snap of shoreline skimming ice. So late only the shred of a new moon speaks in the dark, a dim glow.

“Now, Mr. Seaforth...Bill...we’ve got no reason to be all formal here today. I want you to relax. We can all relax, I think, get this over with, and be out of here by suppertime. I need to start out by asking if you’re feeling poorly or such today, if you’re taking any medications, anything that might keep you from understanding me, if you have any kind of ear problem that might interfere with your hearing me?

O.K., Bill, now you’re gonna have to verbalize, to speak your answers, O.K.? If Linda just takes down a nod of your head, it’s gonna be real hard for us to figure out later on, O.K.?”

“Yes.”

Cold and late. Cold enough to freeze all but the simplest connections. Eyes tear, fight to hold focus on the bottom, rippling images, bright beneath the laterns’ glare, the sand, the mud, the rounded stones set ablaze in the light. Hands, gloved, numb, awkward, still manage a tight grip on the shaft, waiting for the eyes to see...there.

“O.K., Bill, now we all know how cold it gets this time of year, colder at night, of course, and on the river, well, I suspect it’s just as cold as can be. A night like that, I imagine most everybody takes along a little something to keep warm, a little something to stave off the chill. Nothing wrong with that. Nothing at all. Just the same, it’s important that we know. Were you drinking? Had you had anything, anything at all to drink?”

“Coffee. “

There. Motionless against the current, brown, like the rounded rocks, dark, mudlike, but shape gives it away, wider at the head. There, hovering
close to the gravel.

"Slow now." A whisper echoes from the mute blackness, vague, as indistinct as the dull clumsiness that possesses the hands. "Easy... easy," hissed with soft urgency. The body leans forward, bends over the johnboat's bow. Hands inch the shaft deeper into the clear water, a cautious descent toward the unmoving shape. "Hold it," stretching out the two words, as the hands reverse, inch backwards up the long shaft. Further, until they are held high, stretched skyward over the head, the dim shadow of the erect pose outlined through the water, etched in black on the sandy gravel below.

"And you were in the front of the boat? Is that right, Bill? O.K., remember now, we need you to talk, not just nod your head."

"Yes."

"So someone else was in the boat with you?"

"Eddie... Edward Woods. He was tending the motor."

"And how long had you and Mister... you and Eddie been on the river?"

"A couple hours, I guess, a couple, two hours. You see, we got there late, so we'd only been out for a couple hours."

"I see. You got there late. Were there others, then? Others who got there earlier? Others with you?"

"No. Well, not with us in the boat."

"But that night, were there others nearby, on the river?"

"Well, yes, a whole bunch. We had four or five johnboats and there was two or three out in each of them and then a bunch more was setting on a gravel bar with a fire going. They'd gotten there before us."

"But it was you who first saw it, is that correct? Remember, I need you to talk."

"Yes."

The hands plunge downward. The shaft gurgles, shooting into deep water, hangs up with a momentary jerk as it makes contact, then slides the last few inches. And the dark shape comes to life, swift violent twitching, arching its body side to side struggling to free itself from what it cannot see, the three barbed tips of the gig piercing deep into its back. The shaft pitches wildly in a furious dance. Quickly now, the hands stretch, one over the other, fighting to pull it up. Aroused, arms struggle to balance the sudden, awkward load as it breaks the surface, heavy, still jerking frantically. The huge brown shape, quivering, flops savagely, banging its tail
in fierce thumps against the bottom of the boat.

"Damn, Billie. That's the biggest red drum I've ever seen. Wait'll the boys get a load of that sucker."

Convulsions still shudder through the big fish, echoing against the aluminum hull. A throaty crackle seeps from its mouth, less a drumming than a croaking, frog-like. With the Evinrude's steering handle between his legs, Eddie stands. Balancing with care, he hoists a baseball bat, brings it down hard and swift on the drum's head, once, twice, then a third massive blow just to be sure. "Damn, Billie."

The hands, cold, stiff, tremble now, the arms ache with fatigue. And the voice again falls weak, distant. "What's that?"

"And what did you do after you saw?"
"I didn't know what it was at first. I told Eddie, Mr. Woods, to motor on over, to see. I wasn't sure."
"Well, what did you think it was?"
"I don't know. It was dark. I couldn't see much at first."
"Well, what did you do? When Mr. Woods motored over to it, then what did you do?"

"It was, uh, the current was strong. We couldn't, Eddie couldn't keep the boat still. We just about capsized trying to get close."
"Well, when you did get over, then what? Did you touch it? Remember, Bill, I need you to verbalize your answers."
"No."
"You didn't touch it?"
"No sir."

The hands shake hard now. The quiver of adrenaline tightens the chest, sickens the stomach. "Oh Jesus... Eddie, get us on over there." This distant voice is closer now.

The Evinrude whines louder, fighting as the boat turns sideways in the current. Small waves slap into its sides. Soft croaks still roll from deep within the dying drum.

"Can you see anything?" Eddie's voice filters up from the back of the boat.

The eyes do see, but the mind will not accept. "Hand me the spotlight." The voice grows distinct, familiar. No light is needed. I know what lies before us in the tangled branches along the shoreline. "It's a boy," I tell
Eddie.

“So you never touched the body?”
“No.”
“Well, Bill, if you never touched it, how did you get the body to shore? That’s all right. Take your time.”
“I looped a, you know, a slip knot over his ankle, where his foot was sticking out of the brush. I looped it around his ankle and we pulled him up alongside the boat. We pulled him up, towed him, towed him back.”
“Towed him back? You say you towed him back. And where exactly did you tow him back to?”
“Towed him. We towed him to the gravel bar where the other boys were.”
“So you you towed him back to where the others were. And you never touched him...”

“Oh, Lord,” I hear Eddie’s voice from the back of the boat.
“Come on. Get us over there.” I hear my own voice grow stronger.
“Hurry up, damnit. Come on.”
I feel the current catch the boat, sweeping us sideways. I feel the boat fight back as Eddie guns it. The Evinrude’s sound grows throaty. Too much. We jam into the branches. Ice-covered, they crackle and break, shattered pieces plopping off into the water and clattering as they skitter about the boat.
“Current’s sweeping us off,” Eddie shouts over the sound of the motor.
“You gotta grab him. Grab him now.”

“Jesus, Billie, Eddie, what the hell you boys got there?” Ruby Taylor was the first to join them when they beached the johnboat. Eddie shone a light, running it down the length of the body, stopping at the face, the skin that chalky white, the eyes shut. “Son of a bitch,” Ruby said in a low voice. “Hey. Wade, Gary, Jeff, get on over here,” he bellowed.

Three of them stumbled across the gravel noisily, lurching, laughing at their own clumsy walks. One paused to urinate against a fallen tree, the others hooting as they waited, all with the tumult of men who have had too much to drink, all falling silent when they saw the lifeless form dragged up on the beach.
“O.K., Bill. Now, did you notice what he was wearing? That’s all right. Take your time. See if you can remember.”

“Jeans, I guess. A jacket. I don’t know. Shoes.”

“I see. And maybe you thought there might be a breath of life in him? Maybe you opened up his jacket or his shirt to listen for a heartbeat? Did you do anything like that? Check to see if he was alive? Now, don’t forget to verbalize your answers...”

“No. I never touched him.”

“Damn,” Wade said, looking over the body.

“Somebody better go out after some law,” Eddie Woods said as he struggled to tilt up the Evinrude on the back of the johnboat.

“Anybody recognize him?” Bill Seaforth asked, shining a spotlight down on the boy’s face.

“Nah,” Ruby answered quickly. “Ain’t nobody we know. Lookit that face, them eyes, that nose. He ain’t from around here.”

“Who do you suppose he is?” Bill asked, shuffling his feet noisily in the gravel.


“Somebody better go call the sheriff,” Eddie said, climbing out of the beached johnboat and walking up onto the gravel bar.

“There’s no big hurry, I guess,” Ruby said. “He ain’t going nowhere.”

“How do you suppose he drowned?” Wade asked, his voice quiet, sober now.

“Doesn’t look like he’s been dead long,” Bill said, holding the light on the face, then sweeping it down to the arms raised up around the chest, fists clenched, almost a boxer’s pose.

“Probably tried to swim across the river,” Wade said, answering his own question.

“Who’d be swimming in Green River in the middle of January?” Bill asked. “That’s crazy. It’s freezing out here.”

The boat rocks wildly in the buffetting current. Water splashes up over the gunnels. The Evinrude runs high, screaming. The icy air acrid with the sting of oil and gas burns in my nostrils. We plunge sideways into the fallen trees as Eddie loses control and I crash again into the hard, cold branches.

“Grab him,” Eddie shouts again. “You’re gonna have to grab him.”
“I can’t. Move in closer.” We pitch to one side, snagged on a downed limb. “Jesus,” I cry. “Watch it. Watch it.”

“Get him any way you can,” Eddie bellows. “Gig him, for God’s sake. Gig him.”
I wrap my hands around the shaft...

“O.K., Bill, now you’ve told us you looped a line around his foot. Is that correct? Don’t forget about that verbalizing...”

“Yes.”

“Now as you did that, or while you were towing him, I believe towing him back was the way you put it. As you were towing him back, did the line come off or anything like that?”

“No.”

“Did the line, it was a slip knot, you said, did the slip knot do anything like pull off his shoe, his sock, any article of clothing?”

“Damn,” Wade said again. “He shouldn’t’ve tried to swim the river.”

“Hell, Wade,” Ruby snapped. “We don’t know who he is. We don’t know if he tried to swim the river. We don’t know nothing about this boy, nothing.”

“Look at the way his hands are.” Bill pointed the spotlight at his chest. “All drawn up like that, like he was fighting, like a boxer or something.”

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “Or praying.”

“Don’t mean nothing,” Ruby said. “A boy drowns, his arms are likely to go any which way.”

“I dunno,” Jeff said, rocking back and forth slightly in the bright gaslight. “Way he’s got his hands up there ‘round his mouth looks like he might’a been tryin’ to eat somethin’.”

Gary hooted once but fell silent as the piercing beam of Ruby’s flashlight shot into his eyes.

“Somebody oughtta go for some law,” Eddie said again.

“Damn, but it’s cold,” Wade said.

The boat rides rough with the boy’s body tied alongside, bouncing, shuddering as it passes over even the smallest rapids. Eddie, silent, scans with his light to find landmarks and make our way back. I keep looking at the face, blurred as the clear water rushes over it. It shows no pain, no sign of fear. It is completely blank.

In the bottom of the boat, the drum has finally stopped moving. Its blood coats the floor, smears the sides where it has thrashed its last. Blood.
More than I expected. It is a big fish. And yet there had been none, not even the faintest cloud of pink in the water, when I plunged the gig into the boy’s leg.

“Now Bill, once you got the body up on shore, did you stay with it?”
“For a while. I stayed for a while.”
“And then what?”
“Cold. I was cold. I went over to the fire to warm up.”
“And you left the body lying there on the gravel bar?”
“Yes.”
“And was there anyone there with it? That’s O.K., Bill. Take your time.”
“I don’t recall exactly. I mean, I think probably some of the boys stayed there with it and some probably walked back over to it while we waited for the sheriff. I don’t know. I was over by the fire trying to get warm. You see it was cold that night, really cold.”
“Of course, Bill. I understand.”

“There,” Wade said. “What’s that?” He shone his light at the seat of the boy’s pants. “Looks like his jeans is all tore up there, see?”
“I don’t see anything,” Bill replied softly.
“Sure,” Wade said, certainty growing in his voice. “Look at that. Right there.” The small rips in the denim were unmistakable.
“We couldn’t get him outta the brush,” Eddie broke in. “We kept getting caught crossways in the current. I damn near lost the boat, getting slammed into those rootwads and tangles. He was down a real swift chute. Only way we could get him out was for Billie to gig him.”
“No shit?” Gary was on one knee looking at the torn pants. “You gigged him? Hell, Billie, I guess you’ll be takin’ home the prize for giggin’ the biggest fish tonight.”
Jeff still wobbled back and forth. “Damn right. I’d say this boy got himself thoroughly poked.”
Gary laughed, an unnatural laugh, too loud, painfully loud. “Some fish, Billie.”
“Shut up you two,” Ruby said. “Billie, Eddie. You boys must be near freezin’. Whyn’t you come on back to the fire and get warm. We got a bottle…”

Eventually, we all drifted back to the fire, away from the boy.
Beside a Stone Lantern:
Notes in a Japanese Journal

Slice of green tea apple wedge of silk
Sun-fluttered gingko gilt upon a fan
Flocked tea leaves birds inked to scroll
Wood walked bare toes raked through sand

I stand in a weep of petals paler
than my skin rice wine
warm between my breasts carp
coined in golden scales quick
as giggles at my feet in a
trespassed night I call to the
snoring frogs awaken the rice
Painted Bride Quarterly is pleased to feature the following two poems by Michele Wolf, winner of our Second Annual Chapbook Contest.
Astigmatism

When I held smooth the satin to zip
Up your wedding dress, frosted with flounces
And pearl-beaded filigree, a rococo
Confection more sugary than the cake,
And watched as you swiveled slowly to face
Me—all floaty notes, pure flute—so still
As I situated the baby’s breath and the veil,
How could I have told you, knowing
You’d learn it soon enough, my perfect doll,
How fuzzy the world is, how the clearest
Picture, frill-tipped gladioli in primary
Colors, can dissolve into darkness, how
The eye can fool you, presenting a straight
Or diagonal path when the earth is curved.

“It can be corrected,” I tell you, a half-truth,
When you call me to say you can no longer
Focus, nothing is sharp. And I can hear
How the light is bent in your voice, the shadows
Behind what you say, while in my mind’s
Eye you stare at me blinking, a week old,
The day you were placed in my arms,
Able to distinguish little but two black
Moons, my eyes dancing in the fog.
That this was the most exquisite
Instance of my childhood never changes.
Nor does the decade between us
Or the way you looked up at my face
After racing out the front door
To greet me eight years later, almost
Toppling me over, ringing my waist.
Two sisters, so nearsighted
That upon my return to you, before
I resumed my groping tromp
Through the world, you held me like a reference
Point, a place you will always find,
The sheen of your eyes announcing
My bearings as much as your clear
Shout of my name, as your words: “You’re here.”
Levitation

My mother’s eyes, pooling over, lingered
Upon mine, shining my tiny
Face, floating in place, on their
Surfaces, fighting to lift me above
The dark weight within.
The mirrors were blindfolded,
Hung with a draping of white sheets,
As if eyes could deny their
Awareness of solids, of mists,
The invisible paint box of dreams.
I stared at my mother with the grayness
Of a dense-packed cloud, choking, ready
To drown. “Daddy has died,” she finally
Said. “Do you know what that means?”

My chin reached the windowsill. I fixed
On the sky, on a white place beyond the sky.
The ceiling, a far lid pitched by the winds,
Shifted. The front yard remained laced
With snow, the tree empty of leaves, but
My feet lost the floor and I drifted
Like dust to a place too minute
To be seen. It was then I came to know
The meaning of gravity. I plunged
Myself down. There they waited
At attention in the closet, racks of them,
Polished to a sheen. Knotted in the blackest
And bulkiest oxfords, I scuffled
From room to room. I would need
My father’s shoes for the rest of my life.

Starting at the curtained bureau by the window,
I stripped all the mirrors. I knew
What I’d see. It’s what
I see now when I stand barefoot, floating,
By the steamy glass of the medicine
Cabinet, holding the porcelain
Mooring of the sink, holding on. I see
His eyes, including the wandering one,
The eye I work so hard to compensate for,
The estate that skews all physical
Boundaries so I can never gauge
Exactly where I am. I trip. I get hit.
It is an eye with a will of its own, an eye
That drifts.
Living This Life

"And every grass that plays outside
Is sorry, sure, for me."

*Emily Dickinson*

Blues, blues,
these dinner bells,
o my handsome soul lost
among the bloodhounds of early fall.

The Seventh Day in Louisiana,
in Georgia, too, what really matters?
I woke up this morning in a good mood.
Blonde stars slithered across my ceiling.
The milkman smiled in the predawn
dark, and I didn’t mind
the slow coffee.

But another evil strain
of Something is festering in my bloodstream.
There are too many wrinkles in my mattress.
Finally, I admitted, I put them there,
wrestling with Satan and the sharks
that ate the Fifties and the Sixties.
O Lord of the Long Nap,
I have come and gone
on credit...

Beneath the music
of a far-out velvet room, I wait,
frozen into surreal place like a woodlot varmint
transfixed in smoky lantern-light, no time
for revision, of course, or tedious
tasks like dusting.

There is no South of Here
to migrate to, and it’s September
and neighbors are packing their trunks, starting
their cars, riding Eastward for a day of work.
I watched them from my ragged window.
Human waves, blown back into
dilapidated mobile-homes
at 5 p.m.

Or is it beauty I am missing,
all thumbs in a gazebo of desperation.
Pity the man that does not understand the bark
of a Doomsday dog, the wail of a lonesome freight.
They just pull me apart, these sounds,
shrill schoolyard voices practicing
their known songs, thronged
around the snack bar.

Long-gone Daddy, help him
on a bus, there's no forgetting these arcades.
Give me more buns of steel, a case of beer,
words to go, the absurdity of Judgement.
I am learning from experience
the graveyard shift.

I am walking
in the shadow of my father,
in the imperial glow of suppertime
silhouetted on the dusty table
called tomorrow.
Road

I slept for over ten hours and drove some more. Montana was still icy even though April was almost gone and come nightfall I reached a small town, population in the low thousands. Outside a laundromat I watched a small lady dry her clothes. Two kids with mud stains on their cheeks crawled at her feet and ate orange cheese slices off the tile floor. A red sweatshirt spun and spun in her load, surrounded by whites, and I stood at the window until my stomach growled and the lady smiled at me through brown teeth. In the only tavern I could find, a barman with a red beard and a black head of hair gave me two scotch n’ sodas on the house, and I asked no questions. I told him I was hard on my luck, which was true. I told him I was thirty, which was also true. But when I took his hands and thanked him for the drinks and the bowls of chili he placed before me, telling him I would remember his kindness always, I straight-faced lied.

Days later I picked up a whore named Ready del Santo. She was the whitest woman I’d ever seen, with glassy white hair, and skin the shade of flour. She wore light colored clothes too. She said she was running from the law, that she had a purse-full of diamonds to hock, and that when those ran out, she had herself. She bought me five meals a day for a while and when we got a couple states away, we started staying in motels. Ready was beautiful but not in the normal way. She had this big red spot on the side of her nose that looked like catsup and didn’t seem to go away. But after a while I got to like it, the way it got smaller when she laughed. She was like a bad song that grows on you after you hear it a few times. Either you like it cause you know it, or it was good all along. I couldn’t get used to calling her Ready, so I called her R. In bed she slept with her head next to my crotch, her toes in small clenched balls at my neck.

After we’d been traveling together R ran out of birth control pills and that was fine with me. Some stretches she’d sit on my lap and steer while I’d nod off, lift up her shirt and dip my nose into her bony back. She always smelled of caramel whether she had washed or not. One afternoon it was raining hard and R was sitting beside me, one arm behind my head, telling me that she was almost sure there was something growing inside of her and that she hadn’t bled in more than a while. I watched the wipers get drunk with rain, and I wondered about the invisible liquid and wet skin, if it would be white chocolate like R or deep brown and dirty like me. R said she wanted
to drive and she scooted on top of my lap. But the thing is, she didn’t really want to drive. She rubbed her bottom back and forth against me, and instead of drifting off to sleep, I unzipped my jeans and let it out. Steam started rising from everywhere, fogging up the windows. Pull over sugar, I said, pull over. I grabbed one tit in each hand and pinched them between my fingers like clay. Pull over sugar, I whispered, pull over. Huge blankets of rain were coming down from the sky and I couldn’t keep my eyes open any longer. R just wiggled and rubbed, small giggles every once in a while. I meant to let up on the gas, but R put her foot on top of mine and together we were flooring it, the old Ford gliding along. All of the sudden R screamed, flew off to the other side of the seat. Seemed like the car spun twenty times, although when we got out R said it was only two. The rain was coming down thick like milk and so we couldn’t see much of the car but what we saw looked fine. R grabbed my hand and pulled me after her. There was a lot of brush and bushes and trees, and everywhere we stepped was muddy. My pants were back on, but as we ran, R kept stopping and unzipping me, sticking her hand inside. Finally we got to this flat area which didn’t seem to have many rocks. R straddled me and I closed my eyes and opened my mouth to her kisses and the rain.

The drops were as loud as helicopters and I didn’t even hear myself. R, too, was just a blur, and even when I opened my eyes she was more of a feeling than a sight. Then out of nowhere, I heard louder noises, noises closer than the rain even. I couldn’t see the dogs, but I could hear their growls, sharp knives hacking through the air. R was buck naked and she jumped off me and just started darting around and screaming. I buttoned my pants and tried to grab hold of her, but she just spun like a top as the dogs came at us, barking growling. The dogs started biting our heels and I had my arms around R, but then I didn’t. She broke free and just started running, she was screaming “car, car.” The rain started letting up a bit and I could see her skinny white legs, splashing up mud like white string cheese dipped in chocolate, and I went after her and the dogs went after her. One of them got a big chunk of her ass and she just kept running with one hand on it to stop the blood but then another dog got her leg and then she just toppled over like a ship and I was yelling and screaming words and I heard my own sounds but I could not understand. R was flailing and as I got closer she stopped moving so much and I saw one dog take a big bite of her neck and I was gone.

I waited in the car until the rain stopped. Two dogs were outside my door and I saw R’s blood around their mouths like red punch around some dumb kid’s lips. For a while I thought about the gun, but the shells were in the
trunk, so I stopped thinking about it. I dug around on the floor and found two hairy Oreo's that R had dropped. I ate them and then I tried to sleep. Trouble was my eyes wouldn't close. I kept thinking about wild packs of dogs and the way they roam around and just take whatever they see. And I kept picturing the place I'd run from. Overdue rent, my job at the burger joint shut down by the health authorities, my apartment on the top floor with the squirrel shadows I never saw but only heard. How the day I left I loaded my gun and let out ten shots, making a figure eight in the ceiling above my naked mattress. My landlord's face was big as a grocery sack with blue eyes sharp as the dogs', and his belly stuck out before him in soft rolls. Through the whining and the paws scratching long strands of paint off the car, I saw him standing there, in the doorway of my bedroom, watching the shadows of dead squirrels through the ceiling, their blood red and black, dripping slow as the sky, coloring the yellow carpet with their death song. When the squirrel blood faded and the landlord faded, I watched a few cars pass and the skies opened up their grey nightshades, letting out the baby blue. I watched the dogs' steel eyes and they watched mine. At that time all three of us wanting something we couldn't have.

I stayed on the road for months. Sold most of R's diamonds to keep me going. I went up and down the countryside, stopping only for gas, food, and an occasional shower and sleep at a roadside motel. I figure R would've wanted it that way and somewhere outside of Omaha I hocked the last diamond and decided to splurge. I let this old guy in a tight black suit with one of those army-type caps park the car, and I spent nearly one hundred bucks on this room with cable and a jacuzzi. As soon as I got upstairs I turned on the t.v. full blast and I ordered dinner for two, chicken and steak. In the jacuzzi, body lost beneath the vibrating suds, I looked out into my bedroom and saw the t.v.'s flashing reflected against the mirror behind my bed. It was some Western with a lot of Southern accents and I wished so hard that the volume was off. I began to think about R and how much she would've liked being hot and clean and inside of all that water. I figured that the buzzards had already gotten to her by now and I pictured the white of her skeleton shining under the evening moon. But more than R I began to think about the baby, the flesh of it growing within her stomach. I wondered if it tasted any different to the dogs. If by chance, someone had witnessed the attack, there would have been a difference in the dogs as they ate it. As if the new life hidden beneath the old might've tasted bitter, sour, or like a seldom eaten delicacy. I let my head float below the surface over and over again. The vibrating water tossing me around and around.
Untitled

Days it lords above me like a coin, a scission from what passes from real, blotting out our tall trees, your flowers that unrile by their gorgeousness: just this flow & ebb of nature threatens: Here are the finishings, never mind if they stand for some beginning—I want the perpetual candle in the window, beef on Sundays, us as spoons in the bed, the grace of never being one, to have it go on: a thousand Easters, converging & rising
Jung's Animal Alphabet

Although she did have a lion in a pen in the backyard some of the while she lived in Bountiful, Zinia swears now, six years after and her knees knots under white sheets, Zinia swears still that pet lion was not what made life what life is. By high school, Zinia points out, her arms crossing her chest in an "X" so her hands can hold her own shoulder sockets, her family had moved; left the orchards dripping everything that wasn’t canned, sweet peaches splitting, things someone should eat left to spill themselves out to small winged zinging insects. "Call it what you please," Zinia starts, stops, sterilizing each word; it did not have that much to do with the lion.

"Dogs, it was maybe the dogs," Zinia dry-lipped, licks, swallows. "Eating is what those dogs did," Zinia tries to explain, searching for how to say how it was; her mother’s steamed kitchen the only place dogs would not be, Zinia dipping sanitized mason jars under echoes of choke chains jingling on thick necks, dogs panting, salivating, Queen growling out the slick sides of her mouth at the others, them lapping out of big pans with their ladle tongues, eating all they could hold. For every word that is moving out of Zinia, there are many more tied up back in her throat.

"Great Danes," she finally says, and she sighs, placing her hands in a cup over the small bone bump where her legs meet in her lap.

Hardly a one of those people peeling at Zinia to get her to speak her piece knows how the lion came to her home: Zinia’s brother, older, much older than she, had a pet shop, “The Wild Side,” and he could obtain all sorts of exotics—this back before endangered animals, or rather before one had to move on what danger there was—her brother had made dreams come true for more people than Zinia knew, shipping in snakes and apes, birds who could only eat tropical fruits which had to be shipped to Bountiful, too; he’d imported a cheetah once Zinia remembers, and the lion was ordered and paid for in full by a small woman who then never showed to pick up her goods, not with Zinia’s brother nervous, checking and calling, the notices coming back in the mail marked “moved address unknown,” the phone not in service—and so, since the cage was too small and Zinia’s brother was starting to wake up in the night with a stomach ache, thinking about it all, the fine lines of the law—and seeing how the lion already had been paid for, in full, Zinia’s father, who did keep Great Danes, said he’d be happy to have a lion and would give it a good home, quiet, with every advantage.
“In you go,” Zinia’s father had said, lifting the door of the cage with a stick, letting the lion out in the dog pen. Juice from ripe fruit was stinging the air with a smell so red that always after Zinia did say she could not bite into a plum without knowing again the way the lion had shriveled against the cage while her father poked with an old pruned off branch to force it free in the pen; the smell of apricots, and the other fruits too, forever for Zinia mixed with the death smell that came out from the lion’s mouth when it roared.

King, King II, and Queen had never before bothered about the dog run. Living, Zinia says as she gathers the lines of her legs inside the sheets into a narrowness under her chin, “living is what the dogs did inside the house,” eating, drinking dog water from metal pans or from whatever toilet was open, leaving stools large as swarming things in a cow field which Zinia’s father cleaned up and expected her to, exempting only her mother, a clatter in the kitchen, preserving. “Mulch,” her father would say, lifting a newspaper drooped in the middle under the weight of the dog pie, him carrying it carefully to where one of the new trees met the ground and dumping it onto the young growing roots. Now though, the dogs, most especially Queen, wanted to be nowhere else except in the backyard outside of the pen, barking their hearts out over what lived there: a lion.

“Over and over,” Zinia says, her eyes planted down, her head low, her shoulders laddering onto the bones of her back, “the dogs would stand at that fence,” Zinia says sorting steamed words through her tongue, “barking like they would burst over nobody seeming to know what it was they were saying.”

“Perhaps it all would be how it is without any lion at all,” Zinia declares into her own crotch in the bend of the sterile hospital bed. Queen might still have been ill, the dog’s thrashing spasms so painful for Zinia’s father to see that he would drop his own body on top of the dog’s, pin Queen to the earth until she’d be still; he’d call “The Wild Side” and beg Zinia’s brother for pills, proteins, collars that somehow would hold dogs together—him hanging up mad every time. Really, Queen would have died lion or no, and Zinia’s father would have held her, mourning her unlikely harvest until she was stiff, her slippery pink mouth yellowed and dry, her long legs so set that he would have to build the casket in a sideways U-shape to accommodate.

Some weeks before Zinia’s few junior high friends had both been forbidden to come near her house—the big dogs, the roaring, the smells—so there was no one but Zinia herself, and maybe her mother, to watch while
her father dug through the orchard, wanting, he'd told her, the appropriate place to place Queen's remains: a spot with a view of the sky and some grass, the sort of soft place where flitting bugs and sweet blossoms would thrive. The problem seemed to be too many roots, everywhere, enmeshed wooden chains; her father would chop at them with his shovel, enraged, move on, hack open another hole, until he was to the dwarf cherries beyond the rope corner, next to the lion's dog pen. Usually King and King II would have been in place barking there, with Queen barking too, except, of course, Queen was dead and Zinia's father had shut up the other dogs inside the house for respect.

"Very likely," Zinia says lifting her head like a heavy thing on an insect antennae, "whether the lion had been there or not," mashing its patchy backside against the cage metal, growling into full roars the way it did do as Zinia's father bored into the dirt, "life would live out the way it did," does every day.

"What happened that day," Zinia will begin and her white fungied tongue will come to the front of the hole of her mouth, "was that," the place where her father dug while she watched was where Zinia had watched many times her mother go to; Zinia had seen her mother carry month after month's worth of jars to that place—bottles of jellies, pickles, embalmed swollen fruits—and Zinia had seen her mother dish the load of the watered food into the lap of the ground, had stood still as her mother turned earth to hide the broken bottles and spoils of labor. "X" is the shape her mother's arms formed over her womb as she stood, muttering, sealed to the dirt she had fed.

"Yes," Zinia says carefully, measuring the move of the slits of her lips, her father did find what her mother had hidden; "yes," he did go fetch the Great Danes—but what it was they did then: the lion, the dogs, her father, her mother maybe, who on earth knows—for she will not spill any more. Zinia shakes the weight of her head at whatever is offered, leaving dishfuls of food to decay, panting out droplets of sucrose these people splice into her; Zinia boned as an anthropod, her sounds penned in her own exoskeleton as she explains, "I cannot."
Magenta

Watching a breeze whisk dried leaves
across the road, near where her brother, Tom,
fell on a rock there and cried, she walks
like a London dame—imaginary umbrella held
high warding off no rain. The sun
has burned straight seven weeks with no
end in sight. That’s what her father said
in his dry Iowan voice: And how Tom is off
to the Bad City (Cedar Rapids). Just now she
sees the old wagon creak down the ruts
raising dust to her eyes, and the
driver halts his team. She likes the painted one
painted pony soft nose breathing, and then
as a strong hand comes down in the
corner of her eye she breaks off the
fantasy there. That hand pointing to
her is too fantastic—she breathes in a sharp
pang of death smell. Maybe just something in
the dry corn, but the wagon puffs away
showing familiar road and fading the angry
hand offering to pull her back into
that space of nothing.

Flatrock in the hump
of the road becomes a springboard to thought.
She ponders better on hard surfaces and
thinking there she pictures Tom crashing
over the sharp rock it is back there
under racing blue clouds what did he say to her?
There was blood on his hands. She offered
a corner of her birthday-yellow sweater to
wipe it clean. No he told her sharply.
She turns away to face the nodding
sumac, then freshly green now dark
magenta as she watches it nodding
to herself. Tom is in the bad city,
according to her father, though “bad”
is not the word he used. That word is
meaningless out here
on the road
out of the house’s view.
Commuters

We have mountains
and ice gray breakfast
windows and sheep breath
mornings by the
train station
where the workers stand
reading and reading.

One might look up and
squint across the tracks
and there I am in a shiver
of waiting as the train
nudges into view
between the distant
snow tunnels.
But, I try to look
low (below the roof lines only)—
the mountains impose
too many expectations.

Snow keeps lifting us
closer and the air is too
translucent, too liquid
to avoid the distance
completely. The train
enters to snuff out the
line of readers; it imposes
its green shape too closely
to be seen clearly just a soft
whir and it is pulled
away on wires.

The sheep pull on frozen grass
in the snow next to the
dripping station, and the
train glides away becoming
sheep-sized. Keep your eyes
down on the lines near the
ground. Uneven snow clumps,
shining rails, sheep shadows
all crowd out the feel of
breakfast. Sit back on the
bench and savor the memory
of the loss of grayness on
the sun ground.
In Lieu of a Long Dark

You say Yes to every crevice with a vacancy sign,
Exchanging your eye teeth for a set of keys,

And each time you enter one of the linoleum rooms,
You say These are the wings I imagine. But the legacy
Of the small space remains, and no window relinquishes
The same light twice, and worse, there’s always a ceiling

With a single hair-line crack. No matter how you hang
The alabaster door, the hinges turn to glass.
You honor the walls with a handful of wax,
And as you enter your life, the radiant dial fails.

That’s what hurts most. Still you hold the dark
At bay by tethering strings of thistle and wool
To the widest arc of your room, and in your hour
Of greed for what good avails, you tag your ache

With a word, as the engines cease or at least diminish,
And you find yourself waking to a white like noise.
Convergence

We wanted our world to come together
in some neat way, just a tidy thought
that removed theory and simplified

gEOGRAPHy in a way that allowed us to think
Calcutta and Chicago might enjoy
a form of proximity.

It makes courtship seem unnecessary—
that the separate must eventually merge,
that what we think most peculiar

is inexorably tied to more than antithesis.
What brings us together predates
the quantum notion that all

parallel lines are not, but it improves
upon the possibilities of cubism:
we can enjoy a single vantage

of all things from all angles.
Contributors’ Notes

J. T. Barbarese is the author of two books, Under the Blue Moon ('85) and New Science ('89), both from the University of Georgia Press. He contributed essays on Hart Crane and Ezra Pound to the Columbia History of American Poetry. His work has recently appeared in Southern Review, The Atlantic, and Painted Bride Quarterly. He has twice been awarded grants from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. He is a guest lecturer at Rutgers University, and a regular contributor to Sewanee Review.

Since completing an MFA in poetry at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Patrick Brady’s work has appeared in The Black Buzzard Review. Work is forthcoming in Big Easy Press’ anthology on infidelity.

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Susanne Kort’s poems have been published in puerto del sol, Maryland Poetry Review, Antigonsih Review, Sonora Review, Spoon River Poetry Review, the Graham House Review, Northwest Review, and others. She currently resides in Venezuela.

Roger Lopata writes and teaches in upstate New York. His work recently appeared in Other Voices, Sou’Wester, and The Worcester Review. He also builds wooden boats.

Kevin Loreaux is a Philadelphia photographer and furniture designer, and a graduate of the University of the Arts. His most recent exhibition was in Duffy’s department store.

Errol Miller’s poetry has most recently been published in Midwest Quarterly, puerto del sol, Hiram Poetry Review, Centennial Review, Cibuan, Cimarron Review and many other journals. Poetry is forthcoming in American Poetry Review, Hampden-Sydney Review, West Branch, and several other journals.
Rose Ann Miller was born in South Texas and is currently living in Boston. She is a recent graduate of Hollin's Masters Program in Creative Writing and is currently working toward her M.F.A. in fiction at Warren Wilson College.

"Container" is from Robin Amelia Morris's unpublished collection, *The Fragility of the Enterprise*. Other poems have appeared in Bakunin, Eclectic Literary Forum, and Plastic Tower, as well as forthcoming issues of Pen & Ink and Lilith. She is currently pursuing a doctoral degree at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Amy Randolph received her M.F.A. in Creative Writing at Southwest Texas State University. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. at SUNY-Binghamton.

Katrina Roberts lives and teaches in Cambridge, MA. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in a number of journals, including: The Antioch Review, Negative Capability, North Atlantic Review, and The Southern Poetry Review, and in the anthologies: *Life on the Line* and *The Best American Poetry 1995*.


Dede Wilson's poetry has been published or is forthcoming in Southern Poetry Review, Cream City Review, Light Quarterly, Negative Capability, Sun Dog: The Southeast Review, Wellspring and many other journals. Her short fiction has appeared in Negative Capability and the Nightshade Short Story Reader. Work is forthcoming in Potato Eyes, Pembroke Magazine, Sow's Ear, and other journals.

Michele Wolf's collection *The Keeper of Light* is the 1995 winner of Painted Bride Quarterly's Poetry Chapbook Series. Her work has recently appeared in Poetry, The Hudson Review, Boulevard, The Antioch Review, and many other literary journals and anthologies including the award-winning *When I Am an Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple and I am Becoming the Woman I've Wanted*, both from Papier-Mâché.

Ashton Scott Worthington was born and raised in Baltimore, MD. He graduated from the University of Delaware and is now establishing his career in New York City.

James Wyshynski is a former editor of the Black Warrior Review. His work in progress is entitled Stakes, Rippers, Harmonies.
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CAUCUS OF LITERARY ARTS (COLA), A NATIONAL ACTION COMMITTEE

The Pittsburgh Statement; Drafted at the Associated Writing Programs Annual Meeting, March, 1995

STATEMENT-IN-PROGRESS:

"LITERATURE: WORDS WORK"

Literature, to write and to read, is an essential part of our American heritage of free expression; it honors our diversity and celebrates the universals of human experience through language. Literature enables us to understand what it means to be alive in a particular time and place, sustaining the significance of an individual life in an increasingly impersonal culture. Literature weaves the story of individuals, families, communities and cultures, and makes of these stories and memories one nation.

Literature, then, is vital to our democracy because it is the most democratic of the arts. It must be available in its many forms as a means of preserving and presenting our national fabric. For the individual and society literature encourages participation, opening the door to thoughtful change.

Not for profit literary institutions in America make the visions of our writers accessible to millions through education, publishing, public programs, libraries, and evolving communication technologies. In a democracy, literature has always played a public role, and the public in turn must play its role.

Nurturing literature and its institutions helps America understand the present and imagine the future. The well-being of future generations of Americans is dependent upon the opportunity to participate in the programs that are created and maintained by such institutions.