

Pretty Owl Poetry

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Established in 2013, Pretty Owl Poetry is a literary shoe string operation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where it sometimes hosts live readings through its Spotlight Series.



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Adulthood

Sara Moore Wagner

The way the ice creaks the morning in,
and it's almost warm enough to go out;
you say, *go and get the baby*,
and we hold her between us, run
our fingers along her gums to stop
the crying. You look so new, too,
like her—downy and feathered, brown
as the sky. I move my hand to your cheek;
it's rough like this first year.

When did we become shadows
under our eyes, this quiet—let's stay
inside until the summer comes out
like new teeth, until we are ready
to be it. Let's play hide and seek
with the light until it fades again
and again, our eyes little crocus buds
blooming, and still bright.

Birthday Trip to White Bird

Debbra Palmer

How we tried to take our minds off the girl—
boiled salted water, cut tomatoes, poured gin.

How we found a radio station,
moved the antennae, liked this song and this song.

How we stared into the canyon, let the news
sink in. How we said we didn't mind
the tangled blinds or animal skins.

How we made ourselves walk to the barn,
gave warning to snakes with a stick,
found a dog's grave in the yard, marked
with a bear's jaw and four stones.

How we didn't say a word about her
until the sky filled up with her
and with every girl and woman like her,
which was also us.

How all night we climbed the walls
and passed each other's grief between us.
How we wanted to leave, but the road down
was dark and steep, rock given way to river.

How we did not sleep, instead, made love
to stay awake. How sorry I was
for bringing you here.

How we went through the rooms, touched
every rock lined up on the sills—
this one is a tooth. This one, an eye.
This one, also an eye.

Late Raking

Ellen Stone

Roar of the neighbor's leaf blower drowning
out the noise of the highway cars blowing.

His floodlight flicked on in the back, so bright
it illuminates the steel fencing, my face,

the wood loosely stacked under an old tarp.
Why do we tip so readily toward despair?

How when night begins to fall, late November
and the leaves not yet raked, debris collects.

Under the deck, squirrel bones, a furred tail,
bricks spilling down like an old creek bed.

In the backyard, snow smatter. Atop the fence,
small ghosts tangled in tendrils of winter clematis.

(As if spring stays with us. As if each pistil
bloomed a girl running through leaves.

Child with rain for hair, new crown of copper
falling, falling – into the pile, worn hammock.)

Brown blooms of the Annabelle hydrangea, slick
imprint of tulip poplar like my father's hands,

fading, through a day's work, worrying
what is yet to do before winter comes.

It used to be, it used to be – the harsh
rasp of each pull. Like a farmer with a scythe

racing the darkness. Off pops the floodlight.
Quiet now, the machine exits the neighbor's yard.

Through a window, the kitchen brightens,
squares hazy-yellow like the glow of the moon.

Yard now full of charcoal. Muted roar of cars.
Almost like a river rushing if I tilt my head enough.

White Lies

Sierra Farrare

1. Age 5 (2001)

Scissors are a happy discovery today. You have learned how to reduce paper, pants, and puppy hair to shreds. You put them all in a shoe box and run through the house with your collection of scraps. You are full of joy.

I stop you, to ask you what is in your box, and you reveal your treasure to me with all the composure of a very innocent adult.

“Did you cut all of these things up?” I ask, knowing my answer already. (I am practicing my motherly guilt.)

And you look at me, directly in the eye. “No, Mommy, I didn’t.”

But you are young and still shiny and oh so new to the world. You have not yet learned malice or cruelty, so I let it slide. After all, it is only one little white lie. You are sparing yourself from punishment. This, I understand, if nothing else. I indulge.

2. Age 9 (2005)

You learn about failure today and, I suspect, you do not know how to cope. Every other child received their report card, except you, apparently.

Over dinner, I do not tell you about the pre-recorded disappointment that awaited me on our answering machine when I came home that evening and sent the babysitter home. I do not tell you that I already know you are in danger of failing the fourth grade.

So, I look at you, as square as I can, and I ask you, again: “Are you sure that you didn’t get your report card? Don’t you think it’s *odd* that your teacher just forgot all about you?”

But you say: “I don’t know, mama.”

I try to convince myself that you would not have lied to me if you did not know how serious this is. (I continue to weep anyway.)

3. Age 13 (2009)

After feeling ill at work, I decide to take the day. (I regret this, even now, even after the ache has had years to settle.) When I arrive home, I discover you and two other kids, smoking cigarettes in the basement. I send your friends on their way, and your eyes hold an emotion that would make the word 'hatred' shudder with grief.

I remind myself that you are young, and that the mistakes of youth always seem so awful. I know this will be one of many, so I must thicken my skin. I ground you and am resolved in doing so; you do not object. Still, my forehead is slick with sweat.

4. Age 15 (2011)

Your father dies. We are divorced and have been since before you were born, so I don't know if I have a right to be upset. (Briefly, I wonder if your father's absence is the reason for your predilection for coldness, and your unwillingness to be on the same page as the truth. I say nothing about it.)

When I tell you that he is no longer living, you make direct eye contact with me and hold it for much longer than is usually expected of someone your age.

"Good riddance."

I shed a tear for you that night before bed and, for the first time in a long time, I pray. I do not know if it is you or me that I am praying for—nor if the distinction matters.

I remind myself just how hard the business of life is when you are 15. I convince myself that you are hurt, and do not mean the petty, cruel, throwaway remark you just made about the man you never met.

And yet, I lie awake until 4:23 AM that night.

5. Age 18 (2014)

You are 18, you tell me, old enough to make your own decisions. (Old enough not to need me, anymore.) So, five months shy of your high school graduation, you tell me that you are dropping out to work full-time and support yourself. You have already signed all the paperwork, and there is nothing I can do about it, you say.

I can hear my own heartbeat. My ears are crowded with a high-pitched hum. I will my fingers to tighten around the phone in my hand. I am at work, and out of both personal and vacation time. I have used it all already, bailing you out of trouble: out of meetings with the principal, out of after school detentions, out of nurse's office after a fight.

"We should talk about this," I say. (I am trying to be an understanding mother, but I sound like an early 20's co-ed being dumped over the phone.)

You say okay, but I know you will not be home when I get there. You are not.

6. Age 19 (2015)

You are caught drunk driving with your girlfriend in her car. I do not know her name. Both of you were wearing seatbelts, but there is only one casualty—and it is not you.

You do not cry—not for yourself, and not for the body someone else's mother will have to identify. So I cry for all of us.

As you are being arrested, you look at me—as square as I looked at you when you were 5 and 9 and 13 and 15 and 18 and every other age in between—and tell me: "You shouldn't have come."

Maybe I should not have, maybe you are right. But I do not speak.

There is no comforting myself tonight, but I do try. You *can* learn from this. I realize I am praying again, pleading that you can in fact learn from this.

I try not to think back to the first lie you told me, but my mind is good at wandering. I try not to believe that I let you become this way, that I let you down, but the white lies we tell ourselves are very convincing.

I am sparing myself from punishment. This, you can understand, if nothing else.

You indulge, and I exhale.



Old Story

Susan Trofimow

Her first time was an error
and an accident of fate—

she stopped her bike
to give an older boy directions.

When I say error,
I mean a 13 year old girl

shouldn't brake at night
for strangers. When I say

fate, I mean what
put him on her street

in a town where not much happens
after dark. She saw her house

a block away, the porch light
shining in the corner,

her father waiting up
till she came home. Too late

she smelled the boy's
drunk breath, felt him

kick the bike from between
her two bare knees, her sock

catching on the chain,
the gears shifting everything

inside her. There was the black
ceiling of the sky, grass

summer thick, a hand
that choked her shout

while the trees stood numb
and quiet. When I say fate,

I mean this story is written back
as far as stone. When I say

error, I mean all this while
the porch light shone.

The World Is a Jaguar with Sharp Teeth Crouched Outside Our Door

Angelique Zobitz

Feed The Revolution but also we taught her
no means no and the power of no and the
difference between nice and kind and why
No is a good word which she has embraced
as in no negotiation no jelly toast, sage
sausage, no to cereal no this or that either
just yesterday she said and I quote didn't I
tell you no don't ask me again end quote &
because yes baby girl and hell yes autonomy
we refuse to risk asking too stridently for
fear she learn coercion because little boys
are taught persistence leading to yes is
correct and o God, we need to sign her up
today for karate repeat anti-coercion routine
again for peeing tooth brushing putting on
her shoes car rides school Where I must
impress on the staff that this Revolution is
our nurtured heart.

chronic lyric xiii

Jill Khoury

o pain:

you want me sucking poppies
on the fainting couch
or soaking in the clawfoot tub
green tea leaves pouched
in my cheeks

my *central hypofunction* grows you
into something glamorous, romp
for the normals, but i'm bored

you watch me stiff-walk
to the sun swathed patio
stick my hand in the hedge
until my fingers return bloody
again and again

who is handler of the helm

does the woman who owns this house
notice your thick laugh
our sudden departure

Depth/Space Perception

Jill Khoury

Loss of memory

before “finding”

lose place easily

i seem to wander

play games

watch

the i missing objects

unusual tilts

r

restricted fields

create

trips

with

and cutting

writing

stimuli

pseudo-

many

details

*Source text for this erasure: Jose, Randall T., Ed. *Understanding Low Vision*. American Foundation for the Blind, 1983, p. 80-1.



Friday Night Hand Grenade

Sierra Farrare

Imagine, if you can, someone tossing a hand grenade into the center of a dinner party. It does not explode, even after its pin is removed.

I have taken to staring at the collection of dinner dishes on the table. None of them match. A casserole pot whose flowers make themselves known as more and more of its macaroni is dished out. A serving plate that looks like it was once a shiny black is now the same dull shade as my favorite sweater, at the back of my closet. I haven't worn it in months, despite winter's early intrusion in November. A clear, plastic serving bowl with a jagged, striped pattern that makes its salad look like a vague collection of the color green. My own plate: red. My neighbor's is blue and white striped. I don't remember her name, maybe it's Aimee.

I can't remember the last thing anyone said.

Chewing noises are the worst thing to hear, I decide. I'm not used to hearing them, and maybe that's because I usually eat alone. Still, I can't say I regret coming out tonight. I want to say that I do, but I don't. I'm an introvert. I have heard it's cliché to still be so, but I haven't changed. I don't anticipate doing so any time soon.

My best friend, Sarah, kind of adopted me. She initiated the friendship and has kept it going, I notice now, almost entirely on her own. She has invited me to every one of her dinner parties, ever since we met in the office three years ago. Our office is small, we write press releases all day, and our job is boring. I can see why she needed a friend. Even now, I see it, in the sad, doe-like look in her eyes. She is avoiding everyone's eyes, except mine. She looks at me—focused, sad, briefly—but it doesn't last. She had needed a friend for some time now, I suspect, long before I appeared, all convenient-like. All I have ever done is show up. But maybe, tonight, that is enough.

Do you remember the hand grenade I asked you to imagine? The one that refuses to explode. I lied. It has exploded, but Sarah jumped on, contained it.

Her husband, Elliot Carver, told us all, seven minutes earlier, that he was having an affair. And now, eight minutes post-hand-grenade, Sarah excuses herself from the table. She goes into the next room, the living room, presumably the living room, anyway. I suddenly can't remember the layout of the home I have been in five times now.

One wall over, Sarah lets out a pillow-muffled scream. My best friend, Sarah, ever-composed, ever-lonely Sarah.

Elliot Carver does not move. His eyes do, instead, to my neighbor. I remember her name now. It's definitely Aimee. He gazes at her for long, so long. So long that I know. I understand.

I understand Sarah's scream, and Elliot's not-silent silence, and Aimee's presence all at once. Wife meet mistress, meet husband.

If you are able, tighten the muscles in your legs to the point of discomfort. Hold the position until you nearly can't stand it. Then release. Repeat.

When I return to work on Monday, after Friday night's dinner party, Sarah is not at her desk. I want to ask Sarah, my adopted best friend, if she's okay, but it feels too heavy to ask via email. So I'll just wait until she shows up. I do a lot of waiting, I think it is something I'm good at. But I think waiting is better than acting in haste — but I don't indulge my impulses. So, really, how would I know?

Lunchtime comes.

Remember earlier when I said I mostly eat alone? I realize now that I actually don't. If you're paying attention, you'll probably have figured out that Sarah has always ensured that this is not the case. So, today, when she is not here, I truly do eat alone.

I can't tell you what she normally talks about when we eat lunch together. I wish I could.

Go into the nearest bathroom—public or private—and stare at your reflection in the mirror until you feel uncomfortable. Keep staring.

You Return

Katherine Fallon

Two are surely better, though I can't tell exactly how. Only the sluing of your hips around my thigh in sleep: the past. Only your reentry, a tint upon the poultry, the pasture, the woods beyond the branch. I am asking myself to be protective. And a voice. Not hollow. Days in, I fold bottle caps fatly, thinking of filled pastries. It is bright here, land set to warbling with heat. I pocket this rock and that acorn, exploded like goldenrod shook loose. Want to take the rabbit's foot, too, severed wetly, redly along no known joint. This land is not mine, but I used its dank and seeping marshland to forget you, didn't I, and so am threatened, too, by tinder fire.

Rasputin

Katherine Fallon

Jewels sewn within a corset's ribbing
deflect bullets aimed
straight to the heart; no stone
is worth its raw potential;

nothing comes without a flippant, crushing

cost: these are among the first lessons taught
me, didactic, by the people who loved,
then left. All were sponges,
rattletrap in water and air. Chandelier-

handsome, ice companion, I'll take you frigid

as a bullet to the breastbone when one day,
you surprise me, surpass me, melt down.
I have lived so long in the years that it took
you to choose, I nearly cut it out altogether.

Crown: In Which I Compare Chance Encounters to Premeditated Murder

Beth Gordon

I'm a mass murderer of spiders
and flies, a purveyor of criminal
psychology, of what would make women
kill, oh these hard villages with water
and balconies, cyanide sidewalks, mud-
splattered party invitations, whisper
like breathing machines into my stone heart,
in Eureka Springs, where my martini
is the subject of debate, and we share
stories of death's rotten breath with a man
who is followed by monarch butterflies
that hover above his head in haloes.

*I've been to St. Louis, I love that town,
my daughter was baptized in your river.*

My granddaughter stolen down the river
Styx, my heart turned to murder, a groaning
scar of lightning, without sparrows or stars,
he tells me that I am mixing it wrong,
let the gold lillet rise to the surface,
his buttermilk mouth the most beautiful
thing in this hard village of Eureka
Springs. My shoes discarded like dragonfly
wings, I count backwards to infinite
while you let go of my hand, whisper
a name, knowing that you will discover
my DNA at the intersection.

Robert Johnson traded sweet salvation
for the music he needed to survive.

I will not survive without the orange
song of her star-shattered voice, arachnid
nightmares destroy golden rice paddies,
each small apocalypse, dark as honey,
where he hunts without guilt, the pre-ordained
deaths written in the book of names, delta
visions rock him to sleep, *I've been to St.*
Louis, my daughter was poisoned and drowned.
I tell you to light a candle, set out sweets,
hand me a shovel to bury my crimes,
bring me my shoes, we still have stairs to climb
in Eureka Springs, the sticky clouds parting.

The sun is hard and refuses to hide
my shameless murder of spiders and flies.

Inventory

Darla Mottram

I love Lana Del Rey unironically. That is not to say without snag—I have worried for the state of my feminism, as if my feminism were a house that needs tending—its dusty corridors, its cobwebs & clutter.

I am suspicious of the tender feelings I once had for people who did not love me in my imperfection—of the way tender feelings reappear less tenderly, barbs working their way heartward.

When I was a child I thought chocolate milk came from black cows & regular milk came from any other kind of cow; for a long time I thought this was cute but now I suspect it was a symptom of racism. Likewise, I thought all dogs were male & all cats female. This perhaps had to do with the way dogs chase cats & the way men bark at women & even more to do with my budding tendency towards categorization, a tendency with which I am in constant conflict, as in deciding whether or not to describe myself as bisexual when what I mean is I am not interested in gender, binaries are boring, I'd much rather tender my identity as slick lips parting on the border between one breath & the next.

Sometimes I see things out of the corner of my eye that aren't quite there; once I was certain I was experiencing myself in a car accident. The person with whom I was in the car couldn't understand the shuddering & the crying & this is partly to do with why I do not drive.

I believe in the law of feeling conservation: feelings cannot be added or taken away but are only able to change shape, still existing in equal measure.

A year & a half ago I unintentionally & casually said something cruel in the presence of a friend (cruel because of what she was going through at the time); though I'm certain she's forgotten the incident I still think about it regularly, this week alone I've thought of it on four separate occasions.

Perhaps I fear a revenant feeling; indeed—I know I fear re-entering doors I'd thought closed behind me.

I am plagued by small-scale health problems I refuse to see a doctor about because I suspect all of them spring from a lifestyle I am not yet ready to grow out of—I am fond of my vices. I am enticed by the way my belly swells in the bathtub, almost as though cradling a baby rather than a second slice of pie.

Lana croons of love & booze. The love is unreturned, the booze top shelf. When her voice gets really low, I feel it in my groin: *God knows I tried, God knows I tried*, she groans in a voice verging on voiceless-ness. Towards the end of the song she takes off, her voice high & airy—*So let there be light, let there be light, light of my life, light of my...* She trails off into pure delight. The feeling rises up through my skin like carbonation.

I try to stop biting. The fingernails grow, milky half-moons. I press my teeth to them, feel along the smooth edge with my tongue. The urge to make rough. Give me something jagged that catches. Keep me not from my own skin.

When I tell someone I do not think it is a good idea for me to drive or I do not think I would make a suitable mother & they respond with platitudes—*practice makes perfect*—my thoughts slide from my incapacities to theirs.

I am both annoyed & comforted by my Myers-Briggs personality type (INFJ—only one percent of the population falls into this category); annoyed because I want to defy categorization, comforted because it affirms my notion of myself as rare & valuable—the need for this kind of categorical affirmation being the most common human attribute I know.

I love animals because they are uncomplicated. I love people because they are complicated.

As I'm writing this piece I feel an echo of a mentor's voice inside of mine & I feel a little like a puppet or a thief.

Writing this, I heard *a puppy or a grief*.

The horoscope app reads “Cap (rising) just wants to be alone in a room with their one thousand books; Libra (moon) just wants to be in a house with their one thousand closest friends; Virgo (sun) just wants everything in its own, separate container.”

The woman is trying to press the buttons on the screen of the credit card machine but her manicured nails get in the way. She tries tapping: pink flamingo beaks against the screen. She tries laying her fingers flat instead. I imagine her laying her fingers across my lips. I imagine biting her nails for her.

The night I left my parents' house, I sat in the passenger seat of my boyfriend's car, vision blurred—I was in such an emotional state that it took me longer than it should have to understand the blurring was caused by tears. We backed over the bump in the driveway & pulled onto the street. I took one good long look, knowing I would not live again under the same roof as my family. The tree my mother had planted to celebrate my adoption (each of us children had a tree devoted to us) waved its wide leaves at me, but it was the weeping birch to which I directed my good-bye. A year or so later, my parents divorced & sold the house. Every now & then I dream my way back there. I stand on the street & weep. All the trees are missing but the birch, whose little green leaves won't stop shaking.

Sometimes I walk great distances for a good many hours only to arrive at myself. This is my Nebraska story, condensed to a sentence. Or: this is the story of anyone.

I have kissed more men than I have women. I have masturbated to more women than I have men. Facts are so fucking useless.

He bit me and it felt like a kiss, Lana sings, & with her voice Jim's hand is soft as silk. *I will do anything for you, babe*. Blessed is this, this union. Jim is the name of her abuser. Coincidentally, the man who molested me as a child was also named Jim.

I have been a cutter in my life. I have taken razor blade to inner thigh, lit match to wrist, I have created rows of blistered little pathways leading nowhere.

I put each thing in its own container so that I can sleep. While sleeping, I dream of ripping open containers, letting loose a river of complicated shit.

I like paradoxes & vortexes & the word *vox* & the phrase in *flux* & Popa's Little Box poems & wild vetch & I could go on forever this way, sounding my way forward, hemlock & fox & apex: you can be delivered like this, an infant screaming bloody & bewildered into the opening of the world—

Pretty Woman (a troublingly romanticized movie from 1990 about a sex worker who falls in love with her trick) has long been a guilty pleasure. My favorite line is delivered by Vivien (played by America's Sweetheart, Julia Roberts), & is a question of ownership. *I decide who, I decide when*, she yells, fists clenched, then repeats, *I decide WHO*.

I feel less guilty when I have sex dreams about Count Vronsky from Joe Wright's adaptation of *Anna Karenina* than I do when my sex dreams involve ex boyfriends. I wish I could eradicate those dreams which is probably why they're still happening.

I should have chosen short stories or novels or screenplays instead of poetry even though I know I would feel the same way no matter what I'd chosen.

I cannot tell by listening whether someone is underlining a sentence or crossing it out. This reminds me of Schrodinger's cat, & a poem I once wrote, & what it feels like when you are first falling in love with someone you know nothing at all about.

The illusion of choice is all any of us want.

In Nebraska, I walked the same trail for two years, or ran it, & at the very end of it I'd stop, sit on the grassy slope overlooking the hospital, & think of calling my ex. I'd hold my phone, dial the number without pressing call, & imagine the things I would say, which is almost the same as saying them. Then I'd close my phone & go home to someone else.

Pretty Woman is the only movie I've seen which depicts the possibility of a sex worker exiting that particular line of work alive, of their own volition, & sane. It's the only movie I've seen where a woman is both a prostitute & indispensable. I'm not blind to the movie's countless clichés, tired binaries, & fucked-up implications. According to a friend who used to be a sex worker, the movie inspired a whole new generation of girls to enter the trade; what wouldn't look glamorous when performed by Julia Roberts? But when Vivien whispers to Edward while they're lying in bed: *It's easier to believe the bad stuff*, I think yes, it absolutely is, & what about the wavering women who saw this movie & thought, *Here's a possibility: I don't have to die alone, raped, dumped in the dirt, a spur in someone else's storyline.*

In my mid-twenties, I cut my hair, dyed it red, then purple, then black, then brown. I got highlights. The highlights made me feel like a different person, so I bought white pants & strappy sandals. In my white pants & strappy sandals, I did things I didn't think I would ever do.

I like listening to actors speak of their craft; I prefer it to listening to writers speak of theirs. Something to do with the overlap & also the distance between modes.

While I was waiting for a bus, a man, drunk at 2:00 in the afternoon on a Tuesday, said, *Men like me go to prison so we can learn how to take care of creatures like you. Delicate creatures. I can protect you*, he said, wafting the scent of whiskey in my face. *Creatures like you need to be protected. Delicate fairy creatures. You're so delicate someone could throw you in a trunk & drive away with you.*

I get a little thrill when I say: *language is useless*. It's a garbage thought, but it makes me feel as though I am inhabiting someone else entirely, Judi Dench acting in a period piece, say, & I deliver the phrase with a haughty defiance, as though deep inside my character knows precisely the power of words & how they may be used—to suppress & to liberate, neither of which I am free enough yet to fully understand.

It's possible this poem (can I call this a poem?) is trying to make up for the lost document. The lost document is a document I kept on my computer in high school. I wrote in it every day, sometimes multiple times a day. It wasn't a diary but an accumulation of thoughts, observations, words I liked, lists upon lists, memories, remembered snippets of language from things I'd read or seen or heard, etc. that piled up with not so much as a paragraph break to indicate the passage of time. As far as anyone would be able to tell I had written the document in one sitting, but actually it happened over a long period of time.

I ask a customer if he'd like to keep or donate his bag credit. He responds by quoting Mao, something about an overabundance of choices being the root of suffering. I feel I have the opposite problem, & in that feeling a seed of resentment sprouts.

I am suspicious of the binaries I create &/or proliferate. Yet I return to them like a guilty lover, not yet ready to shed familiarity for nuance, a mapped world for an unmapped one.

In an interview Lana explains that her inspiration for *Ultraviolence* is the hydrangea—its blues, greens, & violets. I, too, am mesmerized by its hues, & also by how common its flowers. Growing up, our house was filled with them—clipped from the stalk, they'd dry into a muted, mothy brown. Up close, you could see the veins beneath the papery petals.

I think of the lost document sometimes. I poured part of myself into a bowl & the liquid crystallized & then I threw the crystals into a lake & now I can only see them—that part of myself—when I close my eyes.

Caught in a sudden downpour, I stood beneath a bridge, sobbing my longing into the wet night. I remember thinking, *You have to tell the truth when it's raining*. I waited until the rain subsided to go home.

Once I attempted to save a praying mantis from being crushed between a screen door & the doorframe. With the mantis in hand, I stepped out into the afternoon & in my haste to be rid of the clinging, startled creature, I stumbled & fell. As I fell, I kept my arm rigid, my hand open flat, thinking only of not crushing the insect. I remember as I lay there waiting for someone to come help me (my wrist was broken) the mantis exited my palm & turned its head toward me. I will never know how I looked through its colossal, compound eyes or if I even registered as a living thing, if I was monstrous or heroic or simply geography. I felt a blooming shame. I had not fallen from trying to help the mantis; I had fallen from trying to escape the discomfort of its stiff, delicate grasp.

At work customers ask me what kind of poems I write. I am evasive, vague. I exit a poem the way I exit sleep; I know I dreamed, but already the details are shrouded. When I re-read the poem, I might as well be touching an artifact from a lost world. *I write poems about Atlantis*, I say, & it doesn't matter, I'm handing them a receipt, they've already forgotten the question.

I would name my son Forsythia. I would name my daughter Gloam.

I left home in a hurry. Within a week all my belongings had been boxed & relegated to the garage. A teacher took me to get my things. My mother refused to leave her bedroom as my father helped me load the boxes into the car. I don't know for whom in this memory I feel the most tenderness—my mother, angry & grieving the departure of her youngest daughter a week after having a hysterectomy; my father, who carried the weight of my things out to the car without asking for anything in return; my teacher, who would nearly lose her job over this small act of generosity; or that version of myself, who had no idea what she was losing, who she was hurting, or that there was an option to do otherwise.

I know I am a hypocrite for loving Lana Del Rey. I relax into the sound of her voice & my skepticism is subdued by the movement of my hips. I sway & sing along, unsure of who I am, who I might be.

At church while everyone prayed, I stared at the rapt, immobile faces & wondered what streams of gluttony or pain gurgled beneath the smooth surfaces. It took me years to learn that this, too, is a kind of prayer.

What are the edges of the poem? I don't mean this poem so much as poetry. But of course I am interested in the edges of this particular poem, in fact I am enchanted by edges, I like to run my fingers along them & feel that tingling that happens when the edge might be sharp enough to cut.



When you're thirsty:

Calories

½ cup tomato or mixed vegetable juices	25
1 cup bouillon	2
Black coffee or tea	0
No-calorie carbonated beverage	
½ cup apple or grapefruit juice	
½ cup orange or pineapple juice	

The little girl's attempts to gain weight were useless. As she grew older, she could not stand to eat anything.

ST. JOSEPH
ASPIRIN
FOR

ORANGE
FLAVOR

STOMACH TROUBLES

?

Big Mouth Billy Bass

Brett Salisbury

The fish on the wall sings two songs and neither of them takes me to the river.
Grandpa leaves on the motion sensor and we are taken away by the sunrise.

There are fishing tournaments all over the continent. Entering them
and talking to the creatures. Preparing to find the North American version

of Nessie. Land of 10,000 lakes, spillways, dams, muscle, and heft.
We leave the house but Billy the wallfish stays to rest. Billy the wallfish

hasn't changed his tone. Lures at the end of lines. Fish eat as the day begins
and the day ends. Tuttle Creek all full of scum. I am made to feel this way.

I reach my hand into water and expect loveliness. I pull the plug on the lake.
Don't worry—be happy, Billy sings. Fish flop on dry land. What they didn't tell us

about Moses. We try to skip rocks but the lakebed is barren. I've exposed the town
flooded at the dam's conception. Only the world can save us now, so we sing.

Running On About Uncle Leonard

Vivian Lawry

My great-uncle Leonard Butcher, one of eleven children, was eighty-three and closest in age to Granny Parker, so it was only natural that after Granny's funeral everyone went back to the house where he and Aunt Hattie lived to eat and visit and cry a little, and it was all pretty typical, what with friends and family and potluck—though we out-of-staters didn't bring covered dishes, there was enough food for twice as many, because that's the way these things are done—and I saw my first boyfriend from when I was twelve, Larry Turner (who'd been a neighbor of Granny's and who was as handsome as I always thought he would be, back when he called me long-distance on Sundays and sent penciled letters signed "Your lover, Larry") and I met his wife there, and we all talked about our kids and jobs and whatnot till my family went back to our motel to talk some more, and that's when I asked Dad what Uncle Leonard did before he retired—which made Dad snort and say that Uncle Leonard never *retired* because he'd never had a job after he was mustered out of the Army at the end of The Great War, having been gassed in France and come home with ruined lungs that kept him from going down in the mines anymore—the same as had happened to Grandpa Parker, but Grandpa took up hauling coal while Uncle Leonard made his way by dealin' seconds and sweet-talkin' women—at which he must've been pretty good, seeing as how he was never shot for cheating at cards and he married five women we know of, including Aunt Hattie at least twice—though I don't know whether they were actually married at the time of the funeral, in spite of Aunt Hattie wearing a wedding ring, because she always put that ring on when he moved back in—and to my way of thinking, it's a wonder she ever let him darken her door again after they divorced the first time, having come home from work at noon one day to find him in bed with the girl she'd hired to clean the house, which sparked a red rage in Aunt Hattie such that she threw the girl out into the yard, daring her to show her face again, and then she ran Leonard off with his backside full of buckshot, which Dad said she must've been aiming for because if she'd intended to kill him, she would've—except it seemed like nothing could kill Uncle Leonard or he'd've been dead three times over, what with being gassed in the war, and that time he stumbled up the holler in the middle of winter, dead drunk, and passed out with his head in a snowbank and his feet in the creek and then he just lay there till Mabry Willis found him next morning and carried him up to Granny's, where she put him to bed with a hot toddy and a hot water bottle—and he only ever got a snuffle out of that, so was fine as frog hair by the time he went on a bender with Jimmy Mayes and Jim Bit-Nose Ward—six days when they drank moonshine till they ran out of money, then switched to wood alcohol—which everyone knows can kill a body, and it did kill Jimmy Mayes and blinded Bit-Nose, but Uncle Leonard didn't even suffer a hangover—so I guess you could say he led a charmed life, except for the time he spent in the state pen in Frankfort for counterfeiting quarters—which he tried only because he'd been so successful with nickels—but in any event, all that was long in the past by the time of the funeral, and Uncle Leonard was just as I remembered him from my girlhood: soft-spoken, wearing pressed pants and a pastel shirt, hair slicked back and clean-shaven, smelling of Old Spice.

Don Draper Poem

Meghan Tutolo

I don't need to sleep with you
to know you are good. You
are a good boy, Don. I'm sorry
no one has said it before me.

The forecast today called
for rain, but the sun prevailed
likewise, there are so many
things I don't know—

like how does one move
forward completely? How
does one not remain
broken (somehow) forever?

But I wanted to tell you
I wear my loneliness too
like a room with a view
that I've never deserved.

Sometimes I drink coffee
bitter without sugar, let
the shower run too hot
over my freckled skin.

You're so lucky, they say
a cigarette swinging from
their wet lips and it's okay
to say: *You don't get it—*

how it's not just the loss
but it hurts to win most
to work harder to be better
and still not be enough.

Who You Become When You Grow Up Being the Dad Every Time You Play House

Meghan Tutolo

If it were you and I
If it were you and I only
in that plastic playhouse
in my neighbor's backyard
I could say I don't know any better
I could say let's play pretend—*here*
is the kitchen where you
would make dinner and I
would fetch flowers
from Markie's mom's garden
read to you stupid poetry
from the dirt floor.

If it were you and I
I might never get you inside
that plastic playhouse
in my neighbor's backyard
You might say *maybe or*
not today so I'd wait because
that's the shit I do on
two bruised knees folded
under me, my chivalry
tucked in like a tampon
like a code word, like a
t-shirt with a yin-yang
before we even knew
what that meant.

If it were you and I
and this were 20 years ago
I still wouldn't know how
to be a woman, to be
a woman that feels like a boy
to be a boy to a woman like you—
but I would hold open
the red plastic door

each time you'd leave me
carry you safely and all
your broken brown bags
of pretend groceries
hold your hand
hold my breath
until you say when *and even then.*

The Ball

Jack McKenna

You are standing in front of a ball that is lying on the sidewalk. The ball is made of dirt and concrete and glass and shards of plastic debris in blue and green and bits of brown glass and the ball is as big as a basketball. It's growing, somehow as you're staring, it's grown to be the size of your torso. You bend down to get a better look. There are flakes of white, and you lean in close and you can see insects. Pill bugs, you think they're called.

You touch the ball with your fingertips, and pull back as if burned. Nothing happened. You pick it up, and hold it out from you. Underneath the ball there is a small dead bird. The bird looks to be a hatchling, not even feathered. It's unnaturally flat, and you never thought flatness could unnerve you.

You spin the ball in your hands a few times. Smiling an embarrassed grin, even though no one is around to see you, you sit down with the ball. You're crosslegged, like in Kindergarten at story time. You pick up the ball, and place it on your lap.

Then you realize the problem: there is nothing holding the ball together. You spin it around, looking for tarp or rope, or anything. You lift the ball up high and check if anything has fallen off and onto your lap, but nothing. Frustrated, you put the ball down on the sidewalk next to you, roll up your sleeves, the try to pull apart the ball. You cut a finger on some of the glass, but keep going. Maybe, you think to yourself, maybe there's something in the center of the ball, a core, pulling everything in.

You stick your hand into the ball as far as you can, hoping to hit it against this core. You stick your entire arm in, up to your shoulder, but there's still no center. Somehow, your arm doesn't even come out the other side of the ball. You feel the sphere constrict around your arm. It pulls you inside the ball. You let it.

Garbage flows up, over every surface of your body. You feel cuts all where the garbage touches you, ripping your clothes. The garbage envelops you as you stand there, immobile in its grip. You can't breathe. You try to suck whatever air you can in, but all you can feel is the horrid crush as your lungs pull in against nothing. The fragments of ceramic, bits of old paper, pebbles, old beer bottle shards, and dust wrap tighter. They force your eyes open and you can feel the bits of dirt and pebble rub against the surface of your eyes. You can't tell where the garbage ends and you begin. You can feel pebbles inside your legs sink to your feet. A large shard of plastic from an old children's toy lodged in your chest somewhere, creating a blockage and an empty cavity in your chest. You try to breathe in again, and manage a rasping breath. The smell is as strong as a heat. You can feel flat soda and the fluid drippings from rotted vegetables flush through your veins and back out into the garbage again, seamlessly.

But what you don't understand is that I want to dance with you. It won't be sexy, I promise you. But I want to take you by the broken fishing pole and twine bound hands, carefully avoiding touching the raw chicken bits, and dance. It'll be an Allemande. We'll dress up all baroque and take turns leading. Neither of us will like it, but we'll dance around in an awkward circle, and we'll call that circle the core, and then you'll get to say you found the core after all, and you'll be satisfied and leave me and drag all that garbage with you, but I digress. I have no business complaining, I offered the dance in the first place.

Contributors

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