



The Reader

Fall 2023

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# *Poems*

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## THE MORNING THE ORCHID DECIDED TO BE A BUTTERFLY

*Man can make a decision in an instant. The thought of  
a plant might take 100 years.*

ALFREDO BLAUMANN

What was the starweed pondering  
the morning the orchid decided  
to be a butterfly  
as homo habilis lifted his flint  
and struck at the underbrush?

what was the yarrow dreaming  
the day grandfather Cain began  
weeding his garden  
what was the redwood about to say  
when the chain-saw struck?

when the sunflower stammers into song  
only the wheat will lend an ear  
when the nettle frames a paean to the sun  
only the queen-anne's-lace will smile

in the steamy green  
the orchid lifts  
its brittle wings  
in hope of a breeze

*"The Morning the Orchid..." Donald Finkel, from What Manner of Beast (Atheneum, 1981)*

## Place

On the last day of the world  
I would want to plant a tree

what for  
not for the fruit

the tree that bears the fruit  
is not the one that was planted

I want the tree that stands  
in the earth for the first time

with the sun already  
going down

and the water  
touching its roots

in the earth full of the dead  
and the clouds passing

one by one  
over its leaves

—W. S. Merwin

*"Place," W.S. Merwin, from The Rain in the Trees (Knopf, 1988)*

## CRUSHED BIRDS

---

So many crushed birds in the street.  
I don't know why it rains so  
taking the small bodies  
down to their bones, just a few  
but they are silver.

Day by day, more fall—  
a sparrow, a young cardinal  
not yet  
his true color. Sometimes the head  
is perfect, the eye  
glossy, no failure in its depths.  
It's the wings  
that are shattered, as if  
in flight, gravity gave way, the sky itself  
throwing down this thing  
passing through it.

There was one I couldn't  
recognize: bits of muscle  
tied to bone, a few  
feathers awry. Even a cat  
would complain. In rain, it looked  
washed by every human sadness,  
not a heart or a thought, more  
what aches and aches—those times  
I stood there  
and could not speak, didn't say....

*"Crushed Birds," Marianne Boruch, from A Stick that Breaks and Breaks (Oberlin, 1997)*

## Obsession

Wilderness, you scare me like cathedrals,  
You howl and rattle like organs.  
My dark heart answers  
*... one season, the season of sorrow ...*

Ocean, I loathe your bounding and tumult.  
That's already in my beat brain.  
Bitter hilarity, weeps and insults:  
All I hear in the sniggering sea.

Night! Take down your stars.  
I already know their language of light,  
Want only black blankness.

But shadows themselves are sketchpads  
Where live, by thousands, as under my eyelids,  
Flickers and flashes of the dead.

*"Obsession," Daisy Fried, from The Year the City Emptied (Flood Editions, 2022)*



## Glass Jaw Sonnet

Glass jaw, chicken neck, bag of bones, heart sick.  
Knuckle head, bug eyes, lily-livered chump.  
Sweet feet. Heavy handed, gutless, headstrong,  
Weak-kneed, barrel-chested, hairless, loose-lipped,  
Lion hearted redneck. Hair of the dog.  
Brainiac, bow-legged, slack-jawed punk. Head  
Strong. Sweet spot. Gut Shot. Back away. Meat hooks.  
Lazy eye, on the chin, stink eye, reed thin.  
Face only a mother could love. Back down.  
Nerves of steel, limp wrist, square jaw. Thin skinned, Soft-  
Skull, small of the back, heart strings, limp wrist, green  
Eyed monster, cauliflower ear. Knock-kneed,  
Slim waisted, eye of the tiger. In God's  
Arms. Thick neck. Ass backward. Harden my heart.

*"Glass Jaw Sonnet," Gabrielle Calvocoressi, from Apocalyptic Swing Poems (Persea Books, 2009)*

## Meditation at Lagunitas

All the new thinking is about loss.  
In this it resembles all the old thinking.  
The idea, for example, that each particular erases  
the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-  
faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk  
of that black birch is, by his presence,  
some tragic falling off from a first world  
of undivided light. Or the other notion that,  
because there is in this world no one thing  
to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds,  
a word is elegy to what it signifies.  
We talked about it late last night and in the voice  
of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone  
almost querulous. After a while I understood that,  
talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice*,  
*pine, hair, woman, you* and *I*. There was a woman  
I made love to and I remembered how, holding  
her small shoulders in my hands sometimes,  
I felt a violent wonder at her presence  
like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river  
with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat,  
muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish  
called *pumpkinseed*. It hardly had to do with her.  
Longing, we say, because desire is full  
of endless distances. I must have been the same to her.  
But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread,  
the thing her father said that hurt her, what  
she dreamed. There are moments when the body is as numinous  
as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.  
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,  
saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry*.

*"Meditation at Lagunitas," Robert Hass, from Praise (Ecco, 1974)*

## WOLF SONG

At the party they're all wearing swan suits.  
The fur on your back thickens. You're slicked  
against the wall of the flow-through kitchen  
between your ex and his girlfriend.  
You'd still like to devour him as you once did,  
but you are trying to become human.  
Though also you are starving,  
sick of scavenging nuts and berries,  
gnawing the occasional biscuit.  
You want to take down a caribou!  
You want to tackle a moose and rip open  
the flap of skin swaying beneath its throat  
and share it with the next wolf  
to trot by. But here there are no wolves.  
Through the kitchen window fangs the moon  
to fuck you up even more, to send you slathering  
away, past the condo community,  
past the lit houses, into the deep woods;  
where there's a moon,  
there's always a deep woods.

*"Wolf Song," Kim Addonizio, from Now We're Getting Somewhere (W.W. Norton, 2021)*

## HIGH DESERT, NEW MEXICO

Temple of the rattlesnake's religion.  
Deluge and heat-surge. Crèche of the atom's  
rupture. Night blackens like a violin  
and bright flour falls from the kitchens of heaven.  
This is where the seams begin to loosen,  
where you can walk for miles in any direction—  
rabbit, lizard, raven, insect drone—  
and almost forget the shame of being human.  
Smoke tree. Sage. Not everything is broken.  
Horses appear at this remote cabin  
to stand outside and wait for you to come  
with a single apple. Abandon  
your despair, you who enter here forsaken.  
The wind is saying something. Listen.

*"High Desert, New Mexico," Kim Addonizio, from Now We're Getting Somewhere (W.W. Norton, 2021)*

## The Trees

In my front yard live three crape myrtles, *crying trees*  
We once called them, not the shadiest but soothing  
During a break from work in the heat, their cool sweat

Falling into us. I don't want to make more of it.  
I'd like to let these spindly things be  
Since my gift for transformation here proves

Useless now that I know everyone moves the same  
Whether moving in tears or moving  
To punch my face. A crape myrtle is

A crape myrtle. Three is a family. It is winter. They are bare.  
It's not that I love them  
Every day. It's that I love them anyway.

*"The Trees," Jericho Brown, from The Tradition (Copper Canyon Press, 2019)*

## UNUSUAL SUMMER WEATHER

This overstated thunderstorm is a fancy blue hat  
upon the very brink of which Zeus is perched and crooning,  
poking out his godly pinkie while sipping good Zinfandel

and catapulting seedless grapes down into the Nile  
or into the hot and steamy redwood tubs on the weather-  
proofed decks  
of the women of the DC start-ups. That is,

he's crashing roller coasters and hitting small children  
upon their anemic heads and pulling out his loincloth pennies,  
licking them for luck. He listens all day

for the plunk and holler of the children on their slides  
and chain-link swings and plastic motorbikes.  
That's when the Moms come running with their bras half-  
snapped

and their panties askance. Whereupon Zeus rubs his belly  
with olive oil and powder puffs his golden hair  
and bids the Orchestra pluck *Sweet Home Alabama*

and knots tiny rose blooms into the straps of his sandals  
and giggles over at Venus lying on a towel  
under a colossal brass lamp, sunning her glossy skin  
like a lizard on a rock  
while down below we bitch and moan and whine and weep  
like demons, like puppies, like newborns in our beds.

*"Unusual Summer Weather," Adrian Blevins, from Brass Girl Brouhaha (Ausable, 2003)*

## *Starting Back*

We were set once. When it rained, each man  
got uniformly wet and our curses  
rolled uniform over the plains.  
Scarcely room for deviation or hope.  
Each thing had one name. We aged unnoticed  
by the day, exchanging only slightly  
differing versions of our common fantasy.  
Then, the mutant horses, sudden anger  
of cow and glass, three-legged robins.  
From that time on we put up houses.

That was (still is) when we started dying.  
Windows got bigger. We made bigger curtains.  
We stopped begging, took odd jobs  
that paid well in vegetables and flesh.  
One of us, whoever, invented the stove.  
Another, love. Then our gradual discovery  
of seasons, four names accounting  
for the way trees looked, the relative warmth  
of the wind. Copper in time. Tin. Gold.  
After that, only some of us seemed right.

On beaches now we wonder what to do  
about the vanishing dogfish. In hallways  
we have learned to say hello, wear clothes  
others approve of or cloth to irritate.  
Some of us are starting back, tearing down  
the factories, designing on purpose  
flimsy tents. It will take long. Dragons  
in the hills and sensual cousins wait  
at the end. Someday, we will know for sure  
we are alone. The world is flat  
and the urge in the groin comes at 4 P.M.  
Shoes are the last thing we will abandon.

*"Starting Back," Richard Hugo, from What Thou Lovest Well, Remains American (Norton, 1975)*

# A Fish to Feed All Hunger

On the porch like night peelings,  
bags of red hackles.  
The fisherman is dressing,  
capas of moose mane around him.  
In his vise, he wraps the waist  
of a minnow with chenille.

We wade downstream. I am barefoot.  
The fisherman stands, thigh deep,  
seining insects. Perhaps today  
in this blizzard of cottonwood  
it is the caddis that rises,  
after a year in mud, from larva  
to phoenix in four seconds.

The fisherman ties an imitator  
of hare's mask and mallard breast.  
He washes his hands in anisette,  
then casts back, a false cast,  
watching the insect's legs  
break the water.

I line the creel with hay and mint  
and lay in six pale trout. There is a pink  
line that runs the length of a rainbow's  
belly more delicate than an inner ear.  
It makes the whole basket quiver.

The fisherman does not ask why I come.  
I have neither rod nor permit.  
But I see him watch me afternoons as I bend  
to brush down my rooster-colored hair.  
He understands a fish to feed all hunger.  
And the lure is the same.

*"A Fish to Feed All Hunger," Sandra Alcosser, from A Fish to Feed All Hunger (U Press Virginia, 1986)*



## Ice Fishing

From open water at the lake's  
unfrozen outlet, steam rises, a scrim  
dim enough to turn the sun as round as a dime,

though it's still so bright across snow,  
so low in the sky it rings  
with a ball-peen clang behind his eyes,

each time he looks up  
from his augered hole in the ice.  
Wind spins a spider-silk filament

of frost from the dorsal fin of a quick frozen  
blueback, and blood spots  
the snow around the hole.

From the darkening woods  
two coyotes pipe and prate, the late  
mouse they toss aloft in play, the same

they'll squabble over soon. And soon  
the sun will sink an edge in the ridge,  
and the wind will chase its tail

behind the trees. Then the man will stand  
and take his stool and the tool  
for the ice and the tool

for the fish and the fish and leave.  
Only the low, late coals of his fire left behind,  
pinkening down toward pure black ash,

the hole scabbing over already with ice,  
where the dark below blows a kiss to night,  
by the blood-freckled cheek of the evening snow.

*"Ice Fishing," Robert Wrigley, from Reign of Snakes (Penguin, 1999)*

## The Crows Start Demanding Royalties

Of all the birds, they are the ones  
who mind their being armless most:  
witness how, when they walk, their heads jerk  
back and forth like rifle bolts.  
How they heave their shoulders into each stride  
as if they hope that by some chance  
new bones there would come popping out  
with a boxing glove on the end of each.

Little Elvises, the hairdo slicked  
with too much grease, they convene on my lawn  
to strategize for their class-action suit.  
Flight they would trade in a New York minute  
for a black muscle-car and a fist on the shift  
at any stale green light. But here in my yard  
by the Jack in the Box dumpster  
they can only fossick in the grass for remnants

of the world's stale buns. And this  
despite all the crow poems that have been written  
because men like to see themselves as crows  
(the head-jerk performed in the rearview mirror,  
the dark brow commanding the rainy weather).  
So I think I know how they must feel:  
ripped off, shook-down, taken to the cleaners.  
What they'd like to do now is smash a phone against a wall.  
But they can't, so each one flies to a bare branch and screams.

*"The Crows Start Demanding Royalties" Lucia Perillo, from Time Will Clean the Carcass Bones (Copper Canyon, 2016)*

## Famous

The river is famous to the fish.

The loud voice is famous to silence,  
which knew it would inherit the earth  
before anybody said so.

The cat sleeping on the fence is famous to the birds  
watching him from the birdhouse.

The tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek.

The idea you carry close to your bosom  
is famous to your bosom.

The boot is famous to the earth,  
more famous than the dress shoe,  
which is famous only to floors.

The bent photograph is famous to the one who carries it  
and not at all famous to the one who is pictured.

I want to be famous to shuffling men  
who smile while crossing streets,  
sticky children in grocery lines,  
famous as the one who smiled back.

I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,  
or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,  
but because it never forgot what it could do.

*"Famous," Naomi Shihab Nye, from Words Under the Words (Far Corner Books, 1980)*

## New Model Honeybee

There's nothing you can do to stop it. A wind moves  
over your ear, muffling  
the music you thought you could hear from a car  
parked outside, invisible, behind the next house. Microchip stocks

have risen dramatically in the past few weeks. Honey  
is down. Honey is always down. The best men  
are working on a solution. You can't  
do anything except watch  
the TV special on the dogface boy.  
The historical dogface boy. See how they all said  
he was really a genius under  
all that fur? I mean, I don't want

to tell you what to do. But your worry is beginning  
to seep. It's flooding the local streets. The interstates  
are down to one lane. It's not  
just your worry. It's becoming a pandemic. New laws

have dimmed home light bulbs. New laws forbid  
the sale of baklava under all  
but the most dire circumstances. New laws require the donation  
of Saran Wrap to local scientific research stations.

When are you going to move closer on the couch? We don't  
have all night. You told me to wash  
my bedclothes and I did. You told me

is this humming that washes my head like a wave?  
O Europe! O ton of honey! A wind

moves through your emptied ribs. The ship's fire  
is put out by the water rushing into the hold.

*"New Model Honeybee," Glenn Shaheen, from Predatory (Pitt Press, 2011)*

## WITCHGRASS

Something  
comes into the world unwelcome  
calling disorder, disorder—

If you hate me so much  
don't bother to give me  
a name: do you need  
one more slur  
in your language, another  
way to blame  
one tribe for everything—

as we both know,  
if you worship  
one god, you only need  
one enemy—

I'm not the enemy.  
Only a ruse to ignore  
what you see happening  
right here in this bed,  
a little paradigm  
of failure. One of your precious flowers  
dies here almost every day  
and you can't rest until  
you attack the cause, meaning

whatever is left, whatever  
happens to be sturdier  
than your personal passion—

It was not meant  
to last forever in the real world.  
But why admit that, when you can go on  
doing what you always do,  
mourning and laying blame,  
always the two together.

I don't need your praise  
to survive. I was here first,  
before you were here, before  
you ever planted a garden.  
And I'll be here when only the sun and moon  
are left, and the sea, and the wide field.

I will constitute the field.

*"Witchgrass," Louise Glück, from The Wild Iris (Ecco, 1992)*

*West*

An apocalyptic crack spreads like thunder  
over sintered gorges and alkali flats.  
The junco is knocked sideways then drops  
as if shot onto a granite bed, turning  
slowly mahogany there—wild peony.  
Somewhere in the bleached sky and cirrus a Phantom  
is at play, singeing cattle, lifting shingles  
off farmhouse roofs. An enormous ball  
of phosphorus bounds across the Carson Sink.

—*Christ, it was hot out there on Jackass Flats  
after that big wave of wire, sagebrush  
and rattlesnakes broke over us.*

The Paiute flint auger fairly hummed  
with chromium when they pulled it out of Stillwater  
Marsh.  
You could listen to it like a conch shell,  
an impossibly busy, serial music  
that compounds and accelerates, on and on.

*"West," August Kleinzahler, from Green Sees Things in Waves (FSG, 1998)*

## Yoko

All today I lie in the bottom of the wardrobe  
feeling low but sometimes getting up  
to moodily lumber across rooms  
and lap from the toilet bowl, it is so sultry  
and then I hear the noise of firecrackers again  
all New York is jaggedy with firecrackers today  
and I go back to the wardrobe gloomy  
trying to void my mind of them.  
I am confused, I feel loose and unfitted.

At last deep in the stairwell I hear a tread,  
it is him, my leader, my love.  
I run to the door and listen to his approach.  
Now I can smell him, what a good man he is,  
I love it when he has the sweat of work on him,  
as he enters I yodel with happiness,  
I throw my body up against his, I try to lick his lips,  
I care about him more than anything.

After we eat we go for a walk to the piers.  
I leap into the standing warmth, I plunge into  
the combination of old and new smells.  
Here on a garbage can at the bottom, so interesting,  
what sister or brother I wonder left this message I sniff.  
I too piss there, and go on.  
Here a hydrant there a pole  
here's a smell I left yesterday, well that's disappointing  
but I piss there anyway, and go on.

*"Yoko," Thom Gunn, from Collected Poems (FSG, 1995)*

I investigate so much that in the end  
it is for form's sake only, only a drop comes out.

I investigate tar and rotten sandwiches, everything, and go on.

And here a dried old turd, so interesting  
so old, so dry, yet so subtle and mellow.  
I can place it finely, I really appreciate it,  
a gold distant smell like packed autumn leaves in winter  
reminding me how what is rich and fierce when excreted  
becomes weathered and mild  
but always interesting  
and reminding me of what I have to do.

My leader looks on and expresses his approval.

I sniff it well and later I sniff the air well  
a wind is meeting us after the close July day  
rain is getting near too but first the wind.

Joy, joy,  
being outside with you, active, investigating it all,  
with bowels emptied, feeling your approval  
and then running on, the big fleet Yoko,  
my body in its excellent black coat never lets me down,  
returning to you (as I always will, you know that)  
and now  
filling myself out with myself, no longer confused,  
my panting pushing apart my black lips, but unmoving,  
I stand with you braced against the wind.

*"Yoko," Thom Gunn, from Collected Poems (FSG, 1995)*



## POEM

Form is the woods: the beast,  
a bobcat padding through red sumac,  
the pheasant in brake or goldenrod  
that he stalks—both rise to the flush,  
the brief low flutter and catch in air;  
and trees, rich green, the moving of boughs  
and the separate leaf, yield  
to conclusions they do not care about  
or watch—the dead, frayed bird,  
the beautiful plumage,  
the spoor of feathers  
and slight, pink bones.

*“Poem,” Jim Harrison, from The Complete Poems (Copper Canyon, 2022)*

## Hail Mary

SNJ

1)

There is blue in the world; for instance, this scarf  
from a stall near Rialto.

In Venice I never worried

because everyone thought I was Italian. But I walked  
with one hand on my bag.

2)

At our parallel, in December, light  
dims. To blue. Our star is moving

on the other side. I believe  
there is a woman holding the world

like a little girl holds an egg  
she finds in the grass in springtime:

blowing warm breath on it.  
You can know good will rise

from things, even if you don't live to see.

*"Hail Mary," Éireann Lorsung, from music for landing planes by (Milkweed, 2007)*

3)

My sister looks out the window. She will have a baby  
when the first flowers are done blooming.

Peonies. She thinks it will be a girl, born (I know it) between dark  
and day and blue with air & effort. Girl of the future,

I'm sending you a crown airmail, made of bluebells, hydrangeas,  
hyacinths.

4)

Could you touch the stranger?  
Next to you on the bus. Line at the bank.  
Don't imagine oceans there, but currents  
like electricity.

We stretch out of ourselves  
without permission. The body  
receives annunciations anytime,  
unawares. It is magic,  
I can say this, it is not  
to be possessed, not willing to be tamed.

*"Hail Mary," Éireann Lorsung, from music for landing planes by (Milkweed, 2007)*

5)  
If somewhere someone is dying in pain, forgive me.  
The world, the ocean, and the sky adore you. Infinite.

You notice everything and you  
are reason. The stars go out and we  
break each other open. What is it

to be so large you can love us when we are so awful?  
Stealing good out of the body's broken pocket.

6)  
The pledge is, love everything here. For a little while,  
which is all.

Once, there was no place for me. So I lived where I could.  
I held on to words, my body,  
the lily that was my husband.

Sisters, in this cold world, give out the heat you carry.  
Say yes, as long as you can.

*"Hail Mary," Éireann Lorsung, from music for landing planes by (Milkweed, 2007)*

## I WORRIED

I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers  
flow in the right direction, will the earth turn  
as it was taught, and if not, how shall  
I correct it?

Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven,  
can I do better?

Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows  
can do it and I am, well,  
hopeless.

Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it,  
am I going to get rheumatism,  
lockjaw, dementia?

Finally I saw that worrying had come to nothing.  
And gave it up. And took my old body  
and went out into the morning,  
and sang.

*"I Worried," Mary Oliver, from Swan (Beacon Press, 2012)*

## May

What lay on the road was no mere handful of snake. It was the copperhead at last, golden under the street lamp. I hope to see everything in this world before I die. I knelt on the road and stared. Its head was wedge-shaped and fell back to the unexpected slimness of a neck. The body itself was thick, tense, electric. Clearly this wasn't black snake looking down from the limbs of a tree, or green snake, or the garter, whiz-zing over the rocks. Where these had, oh, such shyness, this one had none. When I moved a little, it turned and clamped its eyes on mine; then it jerked toward me. I jumped back and watched as it flowed on across the road and down into the dark. My heart was pounding. I stood a while, listening to the small sounds of the woods and looking at the stars. After excitement we are so restful. When the thumb of fear lifts, we are so alive.

— Mary Oliver

*"May," Mary Oliver, from American Primitive (Back Bay Books, 1983)*

The stars are dying

like always, and far away, like what you see looking up is a death knell  
from light, right? Light

years. But also close, like the sea stars on the Pacific coast. Their little  
arms lesion and knot and pull away

the insides spill into the ocean. Massive deaths. When I try to sleep I  
think about orange cliffs, bare of orange stars. Knotted, glut. Waves are  
clear. Anemones n shit. Sand crabs n shit. Fleas. There are seagulls  
overhead. Ugh I swore to myself I would never write a nature poem.

The sand is fine. They say it's not Fukushima. I feel fine, in the sense  
that I feel very thin—I been doin Tracy Anderson DVD workouts on  
YouTube, keeping my arms fit and strong. She says *reach, like you are  
being pulled apart*

I can't not spill. Sometimes it, sometimes . . . what you see is what you  
glut. There are sometimes insides.

*"The stars are dying..." Tommy Pico, from Nature Poem (Tin House, 2017)*

I  ANIMAL GRAVES

The mower flipped it belly up,  
a baby garter less than a foot long,  
dull green with a single sharp

stripe of pale manila down its back,  
same color as the underside  
which was cut in two places,

a loop of intestine poking out.

It wouldn't live,  
so I ran the blades over it again,

and cut it again but didn't kill it,

and again and then again,  
a cloud of two-cycle fuel smoke  
on me like a swarm of bees.

It took so long  
my mind had time to spiral  
back to the graveyard

I tended as a child  
for the dead ones, wild and tame:  
fish from the bubbling green aquarium,

squirrels from the road,  
the bluejay stalked to a raucous death  
by Cicero the patient, the tireless hunter,

*"Animal Graves," Chase Twichell, from Ghosts of Eden (Ontario Review Press Princeton, 1995)*



who himself was laid to rest  
one August afternoon  
under a rock painted gray, his color,

with a white splash for his white splash.

Once in the woods I found the skeleton  
of a deer laid out like a diagram,

long spine curved  
like a necklace of crude, ochre spools  
with the string rotted away,

and the dull metal shaft of the arrow  
lying where it must have pierced

not the heart, not the head,  
but the underbelly, the soft part  
where the sex once was.

I carried home the skull  
with its nubs of not-yet-horns  
which the mice had overlooked,

and set it on a rock  
in my kingdom of the dead.

Before I chopped the little snake  
to bits of raw mosaic,

it drew itself  
into an upward-straining coil,  
head weaving, mouth open.

*"Animal Graves," Chase Twichell, from Ghosts of Eden (Ontario Review Press Princeton, 1995)*

hissing at the noise that hurt it.

The stripe was made  
of tiny paper diamonds,  
sharp-edged but insubstantial,

like an x-ray of the spine  
or the ghost beginning to pull away.

What taught the snake to make itself  
seem bigger than it was,  
to spend those last few seconds

dancing in the roar  
and shadow of its death?

Now I see, though none exists,  
its grave:

harebells withered in a jar,  
a yellow spiral  
painted on a green-black stone,

a ring of upright pine cones for a fence.  
That's how the deer skull lay in state

until one of the neighborhood dogs  
came to claim it,

and carried it off to bury  
in the larger graveyard of the world.

*"Animal Graves," Chase Twichell, from Ghosts of Eden (Ontario Review Press Princeton, 1995)*

## Identities

If a life could own another life—  
a wolf a deer, a fish a bird,  
a man a tree—who would  
exchange a life with me?

Dark in the forest a path  
goes down; soft as moss  
a voice comes on: my hand  
on bark, my stilled face alone—

Then water, then gravel, then stone.

## At the Un-National Monument along the Canadian Border

This is the field where the battle did not happen,  
where the unknown soldier did not die.  
This is the field where grass joined hands,  
where no monument stands,  
and the only heroic thing is the sky.

Birds fly here without any sound,  
unfolding their wings across the open.  
No people killed—or were killed—on this ground  
hallowed by neglect and an air so tame  
that people celebrate it by forgetting its name.

## Ask Me

Some time when the river is ice ask me  
mistakes I have made. Ask me whether  
what I have done is my life. Others  
have come in their slow way into  
my thought, and some have tried to help  
or to hurt: ask me what difference  
their strongest love or hate has made.

I will listen to what you say.  
You and I can turn and look  
at the silent river and wait. We know  
the current is there, hidden; and there  
are comings and goings from miles away  
that hold the stillness exactly before us.  
What the river says, that is what I say.

*Three Poems, William Stafford, from The Way It Is (Graywolf Press, 1999)*

## At the Bomb Testing Site

At noon in the desert a panting lizard  
waited for history, its elbows tense,  
watching the curve of a particular road  
as if something might happen.

It was looking at something farther off  
than people could see, an important scene  
acted in stone for little selves  
at the flute end of consequences.

There was just a continent without much on it  
under a sky that never cared less.  
Ready for a change, the elbows waited.  
The hands gripped hard on the desert.

*"At the Bomb Testing Site," William Stafford, from The Way It Is (Graywolf Press, 1999)*

## Hearing the Song

My father said, "Listen," and that subtle song  
"Coyote" came to us: we heard it together.  
The river slid by, its weight  
moving like oil. "It comes at night,"  
he said; "Some people don't like it." "It sounds  
dark," I said, "like midnight, a cold . . ."  
He pressed his hand to my shoulder.  
"Just listen." That's how I first learned the song.

*"Hearing the Song," William Stafford, from An Oregon Message (Harper Row, 1987)*

# Trying to Talk with a Man

Out in this desert we are testing bombs,  
that's why we came here.

Sometimes I feel an underground river  
forcing its way between deformed cliffs  
an acute angle of understanding  
moving itself like a locus of the sun  
into this condemned scenery.

What we've had to give up to get here—  
whole LP collections, films we starred in  
playing in the neighborhoods, bakery windows  
full of dry, chocolate-filled Jewish cookies,  
the language of love-letters, of suicide notes,  
afternoons on the riverbank  
pretending to be children

Coming out to this desert  
we meant to change the face of  
driving among dull green succulents  
walking at noon in the ghost town  
surrounded by a silence

that sounds like the silence of the place  
except that it came with us  
and is familiar  
and everything we were saying until now  
was an effort to blot it out—  
Coming out here we are up against it

Out here I feel more helpless  
with you than without you  
You mention the danger

*"Trying to Talk with a Man," Adrienne Rich, from Diving into the Wreck (Norton, 1973)*

and list the equipment  
we talk of people caring for each other  
in emergencies—laceration, thirst—  
but you look at me like an emergency

Your dry heat feels like power  
your eyes are stars of a different magnitude  
they reflect lights that spell out: EXIT  
when you get up and pace the floor

talking of the danger  
as if it were not ourselves  
as if we were testing anything else.

*"Trying to Talk with a Man," Adrienne Rich, from Diving into the Wreck (Norton, 1973)*

**Because my grief was a tree**

It forgave the dog that pissed on it  
It moderated quarrels between the stones  
It had a few knots that looked like a weeping face  
It had a few knots that looked like a laughing face  
It never stopped grasping the earth  
It was badly tuned by the wind  
It grew inedible fruit  
It grew fruit that fed the worms magnificently  
It held a yellow newspaper on its head for seven months  
It felt the rumba in a squirrel's chest pressing against it  
It wore a gash from when my friend was drunk and stupid  
It looked up at the geese in their lofty arrows  
It looked up at the geese in their trombone-heavy operettas  
It looked up at the geese and wished them all good shoes  
It stretched its arms wider every year  
It waved its dozens of dark hats over the grass

*"Because my grief was a tree," Nicky Beer, from Real Phonies and Genuine Fakes (Milkweed, 2022)*

## LEARNING TO READ

I left my book out on the field in the rain  
but back in the dark to look for it  
could not remember which patch of vetch,  
which blades of grass. I ran my fingers over  
a zucchini, wet eggplants,  
the black currants.

In the distance a light in the barn still on—  
my father in there, my father  
who'd once spelled the word *goat* for me on the dirt  
using goat shit  
so I would never forget. My father,  
who had wanted to write an opera,

rocking in the barn,  
reads poems to the team  
so they will learn the smallest left and right of his voice.  
I still have not found my book  
but I can smell those horses through the dark:  
I could put them into my mouth and say them.

*"Learning to Read," Molly Bashaw, from The Whole Field Still Moving Inside It (Word Works, 2014)*



LARGE BOUQUET OF SUMMER FLOWERS,  
OR ALLEGORY OF THE IMAGINATION

*For Chen Li*

You can walk only a finite number of dogs  
On a given morning. Say, twelve. Six leashes  
In each hand. Or six in one hand, five in the other,  
If one of the leashes is that bifurcated kind  
For the twin bulldogs. I don't know if it's odd  
In Mandarin or Slovakian to call dogs twins.  
It's because humans usually give birth  
To one of their kind at a time that a pair  
Is slightly unusual and the word "twin" in English  
Has an odd radiance and, though it can be subtle,  
These human pairs walk through the world  
As if they are the beneficiaries and victims  
Of a luminous mirroring. And since dogs  
Can have numerous offspring—we say "litter"  
In English, there must be a Russian word  
And it must also extend across the mammal species—  
A litter of pigs, of cats—applying the faintly spooky  
Aura of twinning to dogs doesn't seem quite right  
(Though a French psychiatrist has applied it  
To consciousness, arguing that we are haunted  
Or even constituted by the teasing awareness  
Of the presence in ourselves of an unreachable  
And twinned other which creates the small shock  
We feel when we sense the dissimilarity in metaphors  
And in the way that a translation doesn't feel like a twin.)  
Imagine you were walking down a lane

*"Large Bouquet...," Robert Hass, from Summer Snow (Ecco, 2020)*

In an English village full of half timber houses  
With thatch roofs and a rectory by the churchyard  
With dormer windows and a melancholy yew.  
Just beyond it, in the most nondescript part  
Of the walk is an old wooden door, much worn  
But newly painted, that leads to a secret garden.  
If you imagined the door is blue, you will marry twice.  
I'm so sorry for the way your first marriage went.  
If you'd had some idea of who you were,  
You might at least have made a better job of it.  
But remember also the waking early with him or her  
Beside you in those first mornings in summer?  
If you imagined the door was orange, your daughter  
Will marry a fishmonger. Hard, I know, to imagine  
That those small deft hands that you loved so much  
As they busied themselves with paper snowflakes  
Are red and raw from years of being plunged in ice,  
But she has grown used to the startled eyes  
Of dead sturgeon. Her husband is Italian, something  
Of a hothead, but basically a good guy, and  
They make a nice living, can afford lessons  
For the kids, travel. In fact, at this moment they are sitting  
At a white table in a café on a hilltop in Umbria,  
Drinking a small cup of strong coffee, looking  
Out over olive groves, and feeling, each of them,  
Though they may not say it in so many words,  
That they are having their lives. It might be  
A little hard to explain the expression "in so many words"  
In any number of languages, so it may be best  
To skip over it, though I am sure there is an equivalent.  
If you imagine the door is red, your oldest son's daughter  
Will become the mayor of a quaint fishing village  
On Puget Sound. She got the likeability gene  
That eluded your son. She has three children,

*"Large Bouquet...," Robert Hass, from Summer Snow (Ecco, 2020)*

Has mastered the vocabularies of field hockey  
And soccer, is widely respected in town and great at budgets.  
That's her in the raincoat walking on the old fishdocks  
By the harbor mouth. She's too busy and, in truth,  
Too unreflective for psychotherapy, but it's where she goes  
Sometimes to think about her father whom she loved very much  
Despite whatever you may have heard on that score.  
There's a watercolor gold on the river's face. Can you say  
In Spanish that a river has a face? Hers is a piercing sorrow  
She shakes off with a little half-conscious shudder  
And a shrug of her shoulders. Walking back to the office,  
She passes that woman who walks dogs. Faintly ludicrous.  
She's got two black Labs on one fist, a golden retriever,  
A wiry little terrier that seems to think it's immense,  
And on the other a Dalmatian, a pug-faced Pomeranian,  
And a pair of milk-white bulldogs. Many wagging tails,  
Much excitement, much voluptuous sniffing of assholes.  
Your granddaughter is smiling to herself at how much  
This other woman looks like her, is almost identical to her.  
It's begun to drizzle so she turns her collar up. She's noticed  
That the dog walker is pregnant and smiles thinking  
Everyone has to find a way to a living. She isn't thinking,  
Of course, that the dog walker is an egregious liar.  
She wouldn't. She tends not to see the world that way.

*"Large Bouquet...," Robert Hass, from Summer Snow (Ecco, 2020)*

## **Elegy for the Kudzu Vine**

It's time somebody did it right, unwound you from your immortal trees,  
from crucifix-style power lines  
and pulled you from the roots, doused you  
in diesel fuel and burned you in the ditch where you rest.

Effigy of myself. Effigy of anything but Alabama  
and Alabama all the same, boiled peanuts  
rotting green on a gas station counter  
outside Montgomery, reminding me of you, and how you cling

to life: one tendril coiling a pair of posthole diggers.  
Maybe I should take the vine  
that you are and wrap you around my hand.  
Call it bareback brass knuckles on a Saturday night,

talking to a man who goes by King Snake, another Catfish,  
in a bar where they name me Cotton,  
my skin shining through a pitcher of Miller Lite.  
We talk pussy. We talk railroading.

We talk about a giant chicken formed by the welding of mufflers.  
We talk about how a milk pail from 1942  
rusts behind the smoker.  
Hog jaw. Rib cage. Pork butt pulled slowly with a fork.

But never do we talk about the vine that grew between our toes  
in the churches where we were baptized,  
those county roads the graveyards of our childhoods.  
We throw darts. We drink cheap beer from small glasses,

stumbling over the line. We hold God in one hand and swear with the other.  
We'd give anything to forget  
about the one-stoplight towns, Piggly Wiggly's, the BP station  
where we bought Mountain Dews after football practice

and a Snickers for the road. We'd give anything to understand  
what you have done for our lives, how you hold dead trees  
from falling after an ice storm,  
how you keep red clay from washing into our veins—

*"Elegy for the Kudzu Vine," Kerry James Evans, from Bangalore (Copper Canyon, 2013)*

all that iron and blood. There is no forgetting when raised the grandchild  
of the Ku Klux Klan. And you, old vine,  
tied like a noose as a reminder, blooming your purple flower  
so that every hanged soul might find a voice.

But even we know the power of tithes, King Snake  
pulling a five-dollar bill from his bifold wallet  
and making change, lining stacked quarters  
on the pool table like deacons ready to receive an offering.

With a bent cue, he shoots, recalling, with each ball he sinks,  
a dead man's grin, each ball the color of a sin.

I ask Catfish to take over. It is here,  
I learn the speech of men. The speechless guilt of every swig.

I've never shot pool worth a shit, but I know the crack  
of a pool stick when snapped.

I know a splinter in the throat. I know blood  
tastes better when it's dried to a busted lip and why Moses

parted the Red Sea, that the Old Testament is better than the New,  
because it is filled with the blood of men

and the wrath of God, that a vine is not the truth,  
but a placeholder for a history not worthy of remembrance.

*"Elegy for the Kudzu Vine," Kerry James Evans, from Bangalore (Copper Canyon, 2013)*

## GIVING UP WRITING

Let's face it, you don't have it anymore, and maybe, you never did. There's always someone smarter than you, with better connections, a cooler author's photo. There's always someone strutting about like a porn star, jazzed about their latest—it's the best they've ever written, and it came so easily, dictation sanctioned by God. There's always someone unwrapping the first shiny copy of a brand new book, their name in big letters on the spine, front cover, all sorts of embarrassing praise on the back. Let's face it, you've got a few scribbled notes, a few undisciplined lines, and achy knees from kneeling too much, praying the Lord or any acceptable substitute will make of you an instrument. Maybe you're not fit for music, you're thinking, with your busted gut strings, disheveled hair. Maybe silence is all you can handle among the glossy and well-groomed. Think of all the failures before you, how they refused to let critics shut

*"Giving Up on Writing," Allison Joseph, from Lexicon (Red Hen Press, 2021)*

them down. Or up. Think, and  
pause before you write again,  
knowing what you have to say  
has nothing to do with anyone  
but you. Give up writing for them,  
the naysayers and doomspreaders,  
and say what you need to for me,  
one solitary woman waiting states  
or decades or continents away,  
listening for the thrum of your life.

*"Giving Up on Writing," Allison Joseph, from Lexicon (Red Hen Press, 2021)*

## Song

Listen: there was a goat's head hanging by ropes in a tree.  
All night it hung there and sang. And those who heard it  
Felt a hurt in their hearts and thought they were hearing  
The song of a night bird. They sat up in their beds, and then  
They lay back down again. In the night wind, the goat's head  
Swayed back and forth, and from far off it shone faintly  
The way the moonlight shone on the train track miles away  
Beside which the goat's headless body lay. Some boys  
Had hacked its head off. It was harder work than they had imagined.  
The goat cried like a man and struggled hard. But they  
Finished the job. They hung the bleeding head by the school  
And then ran off into the darkness that seems to hide everything.  
The head hung in the tree. The body lay by the tracks.  
The head called to the body. The body to the head.  
They missed each other. The missing grew large between them,  
Until it pulled the heart right out of the body, until  
The drawn heart flew toward the head, flew as a bird flies  
Back to its cage and the familiar perch from which it trills.  
Then the heart sang in the head, softly at first and then louder,  
Sang long and low until the morning light came up over  
The school and over the tree, and then the singing stopped....  
The goat had belonged to a small girl. She named  
The goat Broken Thorn Sweet Blackberry, named it after  
The night's bush of stars, because the goat's silky hair  
Was dark as well water, because it had eyes like wild fruit.  
The girl lived near a high railroad track. At night  
She heard the trains passing, the sweet sound of the train's horn  
Pouring softly over her bed, and each morning she woke  
To give the bleating goat his pail of warm milk. She sang  
Him songs about girls with ropes and cooks in boats.  
She brushed him with a stiff brush. She dreamed daily  
That he grew bigger, and he did. She thought her dreaming  
Made it so. But one night the girl didn't hear the train's horn,  
And the next morning she woke to an empty yard. The goat  
Was gone. Everything looked strange. It was as if a storm  
Had passed through while she slept, wind and stones, rain  
Stripping the branches of fruit. She knew that someone  
Had stolen the goat and that he had come to harm. She called  
To him. All morning and into the afternoon, she called  
And called. She walked and walked. In her chest a bad feeling  
Like the feeling of the stones gouging the soft undersides  
Of her bare feet. Then somebody found the goat's body

*"Song," Brigit Pegeen Kelly, from Song (BOA Editions, 1995)*



By the high tracks, the flies already filling their soft bottles  
At the goat's torn neck. Then somebody found the head  
Hanging in a tree by the school. They hurried to take  
These things away so that the girl would not see them.  
They hurried to raise money to buy the girl another goat.  
They hurried to find the boys who had done this, to hear  
Them say it was a joke, a joke, it was nothing but a joke....  
But listen: here is the point. The boys thought to have  
Their fun and be done with it. It was harder work than they  
Had imagined, this silly sacrifice, but they finished the job,  
Whistling as they washed their large hands in the dark.  
What they didn't know was that the goat's head was already  
Singing behind them in the tree. What they didn't know  
Was that the goat's head would go on singing, just for them,  
Long after the ropes were down, and that they would learn to listen,  
Pail after pail, stroke after patient stroke. They would  
Wake in the night thinking they heard the wind in the trees  
Or a night bird, but their hearts beating harder. There  
Would be a whistle, a hum, a high murmur, and, at last, a song,  
The low song a lost boy sings remembering his mother's call.  
Not a cruel song, no, no, not cruel at all. This song  
Is sweet. It is sweet. The heart dies of this sweetness.

*"Song," Brigit Pegeen Kelly, from Song (BOA Editions, 1995)*

# *Essays*

*A dunghill at a distance sometimes smells  
like musk, and a dead dog like elder-flowers.*

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, *Notebooks*

**I**t's a bright morning in early May. I leash Chester, our border collie, and head south on Louisiana Avenue, the street empty of other pedestrians. We take a desultory pace, like an old couple out for a stroll. Leash looped around my forearm, I look up, watching for birds, while Chester sticks to the lawn strip with his head down, occasionally stopping to cock his leg. His eyes are focused on the grass a few feet ahead, but absently; all attention is clearly concentrated in his nasal cavity. A thick stand of clover, the lower branches of a holly tree, and a wax-paper sandwich wrapper offer absorbing subjects for inspection.

Not everything draws his nose. After last night's rain,

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*"Creaturely," Devin Johnston, from Creaturely and Other Essays (Turtle Point Press, 2009)*

the white azalea bush is heavy as cake frosting, its perfume thick. But it does not pertain to him. Likewise, the sweet smell of hops from the Budweiser Brewery, a lawn mower's clippings, and gasoline sloshed on the curb are olfactory background to be filtered out. He sifts the world for relevant signs.

Predictably, traces of urine and old turds are Chester's expertise: he examines each stain as if under a glass slide. Although I may catch a whiff of ammonia and lilac in cat piss, or yeast and jasmine in dog feces, expressive variety is lost on me. But a dog's nasal membranes, the size of a handkerchief unfurled, allow for subtle gradations and recognitions of what has passed.

It's a quiet, local gossip. Surely this trace was left by Poncho, Mr. Hubbard's dog, got loose again and ambling up and down the block, in a quandary as to how to spend his freedom. Beyond where and when, the trace may carry somatic information of infection, unhappiness, or a full belly. Insides are out, nothing is private. When Chester inhales, or touches his tongue to a dried droplet on a violet leaf, the outside is in again.

Smell and taste differ radically from vision and hearing in conveyance. Whereas the latter are stimulated by

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*"Creaturely," Devin Johnston, from Creaturely and Other Essays (Turtle Point Press, 2009)*

energetic phenomena, smells are carried by plumes of particulate matter on air currents, dispersing as the air stirs. As matter blown apart, smells invade our sensorium and adhere. Apart from our shame or revulsion, smell is in this respect more intimate than sight or hearing, closer to touch. It stirs wants and fears beneath what the eye can see or intellect discern.

“Is it even possible to think of somebody in the past?” the writer Aidan Higgins asks. The source may be long gone; the dog that ambled by at noon sleeps on a chair. Yet its smell remains a palpable presence. We are so accustomed to the certainties of sight that olfaction baffles time. It ripples through the world like books or dreams.

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From an open window, the smell of pine cleanser rides a wave of cooler air onto the sidewalk. Following an etymological trail, I find that the word *smell* relates to the Slavic *smola*, which means “resin” or “pitch.” Pine has long been a demonifuge, driving away evil spirits with purifying smoke. Household cleaning products, household gods.

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*“Creaturely,” Devin Johnston, from Creaturely and Other Essays (Turtle Point Press, 2009)*

If sight is evidential (I saw it with my own eyes), smell moves us closer to essences. I have known some people who exude the scent of chlorine or vanilla with sweat, a faint but indelible association. In Greek thought, an inner fire distills essences from the more volatile portion of a being. As Herakleitos writes, “The stuff of the psyche is a smoke-like substance of finest particles that gives rise to all other things; its particles are of less mass than any other substance and it is constantly in motion.” Somewhat more mysteriously, he adds, “In Hades psyches perceive each other by smell alone.” For the Greeks, bodily odors and breath carry the effluvia of essence, undiminished while the organism lives, the sole continuity of the psyche when it dies. They burnt offerings, making taste and smell primary to their experience of divinity. Such was the case with most of the ancient world, from Han to Heliopolis. In Exodus, the Lord goes so far as to give Moses a detailed recipe for incense, promising to meet him in the smoke.

Perfume emerged as a variation on incense, *per fume* meaning “by smoke.” Yet applied to the body, it assumed increasingly erotic associations. A rose, eros. “A bundle of myrrh is my beloved to me,” the poet writes

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“*Creaturely*,” Devin Johnston, from *Creaturely and Other Essays* (Turtle Point Press, 2009)

in the Song of Solomon; “Whenas the meanest part of her, / Smells like the maiden-Pomander,” Robert Herrick claims of Lady Abdy. Perfumes both mask and amplify the pheromones, carrying hints of something vaguely urinous. The bass notes of many perfumes have drawn from the bowels of sperm whales and civets or the glands of Himalayan musk deer. Walking into any steak house, one could detect the steroidal odors of exotic creatures on both men and women; only the human is forbidden. Beneath the light and quick scent of hyacinth, sage, cinnamon, or sandalwood, a warm animal smell lingers.

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Human olfaction is full of such preoccupations, deflections, and echoes. We have little language proper to smell, only makeshift analogies that take on currency through volatility. On my daily walks, pipe tobacco from a screened porch recalls pot roast, and I find that nitrogen is a prominent element in each. As I pass The Blackthorn, its beery floor brings to mind cheddar cheese, and diacetyl may be the shared compound. But such links hardly amount to a system of classification or

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*“Creaturely,” Devin Johnston, from Creaturely and Other Essays (Turtle Point Press, 2009)*

taxonomy. Confronted by airplane glue I might say “unguent” or, synesthetically, “aluminum”; whether these are circumstantial or chemical associations I cannot say.

In the vast dark of olfaction, only cooking, wine, and perfume are illuminated by science as well as intuition. Yet even in these fields, characterizations remain empirical and exploratory. The scientist Luca Turin has described one perfume as “brilliant, at once edible (chocolate) and refreshingly toxic (caspirene, coumarin).” Perfumery is replete with such oxymorons intended to project social desire, a devil for every angel. For wines, most descriptors are suffixed nouns: buttery, grassy, oaky, earthy. Like the painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo, the wine connoisseur fabricates composite portraits from flowers, fruits, and vegetables. We do not find ourselves in an order of things but rather in a constellation of metaphors.

Each person accretes a private concordance of olfactory associations over the course of a lifetime. The resemblances are unstable, often sparked by emotional resonance and secondary associations. In this respect, smell is tightly woven into the fabric of consciousness.

— CREATURELY \ 8 —

*“Creaturely,” Devin Johnston, from Creaturely and Other Essays (Turtle Point Press, 2009)*



At some depth, our notions of the world must be founded on odors—a familiar world of milk, sweat, skin, and detergents—from before the eyes could focus.

The poet Robert Duncan writes of butterflies “in warm currents of news floating, /flitting into areas of aroma, /tracing out of air unseen roots and branches of sense / I share in thought.” Aromas have their own argot, a chemical code that triggers unconscious impulses in the nervous system. I get the news with each inhalation but have few words for it. We know more than we know but have no means to measure the extent of our participation in the world.

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In literature, smell and taste often stand in for the mute fact of lived experience. Though I cannot verify the claim, I suspect that the chemical senses can be found most often in works of autobiography or memoir. Marcel Proust, after all, wrote thousands of pages on the flavor of a *petit madeleine* soaking in tea and what memories it evokes. The taste and its associations are inextricable yet ultimately incommunicable. As Proust writes, “The past is hidden somewhere outside the

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“*Creaturely*,” Devin Johnston, from *Creaturely and Other Essays* (Turtle Point Press, 2009)

realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling.” In *A Remembrance of Things Past*, as in a great many books, odors come to us from a lost world with sad voluptuousness. Each taste or smell bears no substitute, enters no general currency, but longs for a more perfect articulation. In melancholic reverie, we want no approximations of what we love.

I am reminded of a passage in Basil Bunting’s poem “Briggflatts,” subtitled “an autobiography,” in which he enumerates the pleasures of the senses. Taste comes first in the list, followed by sound and touch:

It tastes good, garlic and salt in it,  
with the half-sweet white wine of Orvieto  
on scanty grass under great trees  
where the ramparts cuddle Lucca.

The intimacy of taste sympathetically encourages an intimacy in the language, resulting in the apt but unexpected word “cuddle” applied to city fortifications. Yet at the end of this list, sight introduces a gap of self-consciousness that can never be mended:

— CREATURELY \ 10 —

*“Creaturely,” Devin Johnston, from Creaturely and Other Essays (Turtle Point Press, 2009)*

It looks well on the page, but never  
well enough. Something is lost  
when wind, sun, sea upbraid  
justly an unconvinced deserter.

Looking and writing are sure but distancing, Bunting suggests. We abandon full participation in sensual experience for its representation. According to the poem, “something” lost may be the smell of burning applewood or the twitter of a lark; meanwhile, the mason’s chisel “spells a name / naming none, / a man abolished.”

“Briggflatts” records a counterpoint or argument between the senses, each of which accords differently with time. Doubtless we carry time with us, each cell a tiny clock. Yet the experience of it comes to us in plumes, waves, particles, and through impulses of the nervous system. A bull chases hurdling shadows (sight), knots of applewood smolder all day (smell), pulse determines pace (touch), and a wagon rattles in polyrhythm:

harness mutter to shaft,  
felloe to axle squeak,  
rut thud the rim,  
crushed grit.

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*“Creaturely,” Devin Johnston, from Creaturely and Other Essays (Turtle Point Press, 2009)*

In these various senses of duration, animals figure prominently, a bestiary of bull, lark, vulture, cormorant, slow-worm, tortoise, starfish, hermit crab, salmon, bass, rat, bear, and border collie. To test the amplitude of time beyond human scale, creatures are enlisted as emissaries of the senses. At high altitude, ocean depths, or close to the earth, they enact modes of attention. If anthropomorphism interprets the world in human terms, we can with patience arrive at its inversion: not humanizing but creaturely.

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It's a warm evening in early June. As we walk south on Louisiana Avenue, Chester catches the scent of something—who knows what—upwind: his nose tilts into the air, nostrils flaring, accurate lips slightly parted. Meanwhile, I watch the sky for birds. Above Roosevelt High, a pair of red-tailed hawks spiral on updrafts into the clouds. A starling trails behind them, hectoring the male with jabs at its slick fan of tail feathers. But having made its point, or simply half-hearted, the starling soon descends. As the world pours away, the hawks enter silence and damp air. Loose and indifferent, their wheel-

— CREATURELY \ 12 —

*“Creaturely,” Devin Johnston, from Creaturely and Other Essays (Turtle Point Press, 2009)*

ing dilates with ascent; aloof and aloft, they are all eyes. The sun's lost to me behind roofs of houses, the whole street filled with shadow. But a thousand feet up, the sun must ride the tree line of Tower Grove Park, daylight for a quarter-hour more. Though witness to each other, our days are not the same.

*"Creaturely," Devin Johnston, from Creaturely and Other Essays (Turtle Point Press, 2009)*

### Thinking Like a Mountain

A deep chesty bawl echoes from rimrock to rimrock, rolls down the mountain, and fades into the far blackness of the night. It is an outburst of wild defiant sorrow, and of contempt for all the adversities of the world.

Every living thing (and perhaps many a dead one as well) pays heed to that call. To the deer it is a reminder of the way of all flesh, to the pine a forecast of midnight scuffles and of blood upon the snow, to the coyote a promise of gleanings to come, to the cowman a threat of red ink at the bank, to the hunter a challenge of fang against bullet. Yet behind these obvious and immediate hopes and fears there lies a deeper meaning, known only to the mountain itself. Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf.

Those unable to decipher the hidden meaning know nevertheless that it is there, for it is felt in all wolf country, and distinguishes that country from all other land. It tingles in the spine of all who hear wolves by night, or who scan their tracks by day. Even without sight or sound of wolf, it is implicit in a hundred small events: the midnight whinny of a pack horse, the rattle of rolling rocks, the bound of a fleeing deer, the way shadows lie under the spruces. Only the ineducable tyro can fail to sense the presence or absence of wolves, or the fact that mountains have a secret opinion about them.

My own conviction on this score dates from the day I saw a wolf die. We were eating lunch on a high rimrock, at the foot of which a turbulent river elbowed its way. We saw what we thought was a doe fording the torrent, her

*"Thinking Like a Mountain," Aldo Leopold, from A Sand County Almanac (Oxford, 1949)*

breast awash in white water. When she climbed the bank toward us and shook out her tail, we realized our error: it was a wolf. A half-dozen others, evidently grown pups, sprang from the willows and all joined in a welcoming mêlée of wagging tails and playful maulings. What was literally a pile of wolves writhed and tumbled in the center of an open flat at the foot of our rimrock.

In those days we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf. In a second we were pumping lead into the pack, but with more excitement than accuracy: how to aim a steep downhill shot is always confusing. When our rifles were empty, the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impassable slide-rocks.

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.

\*                     \*                     \*

Since then I have lived to see state after state extirpate its wolves. I have watched the face of many a newly wolfless mountain, and seen the south-facing slopes wrinkle with a maze of new deer trails. I have seen every edible bush and seedling browsed, first to anaemic desuetude, and then to death. I have seen every edible tree defoliated to the height of a saddlehorn. Such a mountain looks as if someone had given God a new pruning shears, and forbidden Him all

*"Thinking Like a Mountain," Aldo Leopold, from A Sand County Almanac (Oxford, 1949)*

other exercise. In the end the starved bones of the hoped-for deer herd, dead of its own too-much, bleach with the bones of the dead sage, or molder under the high-lined junipers.



I now suspect that just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer. And perhaps with better cause, for while a buck pulled down by wolves can be replaced in two or three years, a range pulled down by too many deer may fail of replacement in as many decades.

So also with cows. The cowman who cleans his range of wolves does not realize that he is taking over the wolf's job of trimming the herd to fit the range. He has not learned to think like a mountain. Hence we have dustbowls, and rivers washing the future into the sea.

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*"Thinking Like a Mountain," Aldo Leopold, from A Sand County Almanac (Oxford, 1949)*



We all strive for safety, prosperity, comfort, long life, and dullness. The deer strives with his supple legs, the cowman with trap and poison, the statesman with pen, the most of us with machines, votes, and dollars, but it all comes to the same thing: peace in our time. A measure of success in this is all well enough, and perhaps is a requisite to objective thinking, but too much safety seems to yield only danger in the long run. Perhaps this is behind Thoreau's dictum: In wildness is the salvation of the world. Perhaps this is the hidden meaning in the howl of the wolf, long known among mountains, but seldom perceived among men.

*"Thinking Like a Mountain," Aldo Leopold, from A Sand County Almanac (Oxford, 1949)*

# *New to 2023*

## Wild Thought: Some Notes on Poetry

DEVIN JOHNSTON

I am up early, sitting on the couch with a mug of coffee, reading Claude Lévi-Strauss for the first time in twenty-odd years. I have long known *La Pensée sauvage* as *The Savage Mind*, the title of the book's first appearance in English, in 1966. But a new translation by Jeffrey Mehlman and John Leavitt renders it *Wild Thought*, a title more suited to such a vertiginous, *sui generis* work. The translators note in their introduction that the French word *pensée* refers not only to thought but to the *Viola tricolor* or pansy. In the language of flowers, a pansy means *I am thinking of you*, doubling the title's emphasis on thinking, but with that thinking directed by feeling towards another. As an epigraph to the book has it, in a quote from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, 'and there is pansies, that's for thoughts'. The thought itself is undomesticated, uncultivated, perhaps involuntary. *You've been on my mind*, the old songs tell us, on my mind in a sustained or recurrent way. Flower on flower, thought on thought, our preoccupations and desires elaborate the architectures of the world.

It is a bright spring morning after a night of rain: I set aside Lévi-Strauss and leash Edie for a walk down Virginia Avenue. On the corner of Sidney, I pass a priest in black and white sneakers talking on his cell phone. Otherwise, beyond the buzz of a few distant power tools and the chitter of chimney swifts, the street is quiet. The brick fronts of turn-of-the-century homes offer no signs of life. An azalea shrub has erupted in deep-red ruffles, unmodified by green, and all yellows refer to forsythia this morning. In the community orchard, pansies are blooming beside primroses. This is the pink evening primrose, a native that opens in daylight; it grows wild in empty lots and open fields, its rhizomes adapted for prairie soil, trailing through tall grasses and over limestone. The four petals are a pale Victorian pink, an oiled satin surface with delicate crimped veins, the stamens yellow and white, the stalk slender and furred. As I rub a petal between finger and thumb, my fingertip's haptic sense faintly registers the veins. Bending over, I detect mild vanilla and Earl Grey tea, the flower's scent almost over-

*Devin Johnston, Wild Thought: Some Notes on Poetry (PNR)*

whelmed by that of nearby honeysuckle. The feeling-tone of the flower: at once stimulating and mollifying, a loose sensuality and touch of wistfulness, a ragtime lilt, a sunlit fluttering quality that allows for lingering attention without flitting away too quickly. Such is the primrose.

Set aside philosophical questions of idealism and realism, questions of the flower's reality and where it lies. How does the brain bind a conceptual whole from these qualia, these modalities of perception? From pale pink in the wave band of electromagnetic radiation, from petals on receptors in fingertips, from chemical energies of smell stirred in the air? In the world summoned through electrochemical signals, the flower's features mingle. Though nature recognizes no distinction among thing, action and attribute, qualia tend to be adjectival: *mild, mellow, creamy, sweet, white, satin, pink, oily, furry* emerge from the flux to define the flower.

In early infancy, we begin to draw associations between such signals, weaving sensory strands into the fabric of consciousness. Neurologists have speculated that all infants are synesthetic but gradually lose the trait, with only rare individuals remaining synesthetic into adulthood. Surely this early synesthesia forms the experiential basis of metaphor, in the sour salty taste of a bright yellow wooden block, in the hiss of a fingertip against a silk pillowcase, in the cool sensation of skin in deep shade. Distinct qualia find equivalence in an implied object of perception. Of course, we remain synesthetic between taste and smell, with every sip and spoonful. More generally, the sensory modalities become intertwined, with bindings and associations among them.

I suspect that all the arts, at their greatest power and intensity, are fundamentally synesthetic. The painter 'sees by touches', with discombobulations between sight and surface texture across humming surfaces of paint. A colour chord on the piano may bloom a particular colour in the mind, with sound and colour mingling as a matter of feeling. For the true synesthete, the bindings between modalities prove fixed and insistent. But for all of us, an intensity of aesthetic response stirs up something appetitive or libidinal, a desire to consume and be consumed. It creates a dynamic reciprocity between inside and out. In poetry, signifiers made of sound invoke the other senses through sympathetic textures. Dante characterized words as smooth or shaggy. Even such obscure words as *nesh, cinerulent, shirred* and *slobbery* communicate varieties of softness through their very sounds. The pleasures of a poem can be at once aural and oral, heard and sounded, matters of the ear and mouth. It is through such synesthetic interplay of the senses that we inhabit a phenomenal world. Through the implication of such a world, we enter states of thought and feeling.

We enter such states, but how, exactly? The true test of a poem is not the thought or feeling it expresses, but that which it elicits. As Valéry has it, the poet's function is to induce 'the poetic state in others'. A deeply moving poem might make no reference to emotion, while drawing it from us. (Conversely, a poem that expresses emotion often evacuates it. Nothing comes through, or when it

does, we are purged of passions. The poem then functions as a performance – on the other side of the glass, so to speak – and apart from the reader or listener. The feeling isn't ours, but that of someone else, probably the poet.) Feeling is the poem's shadow, just as the experience of a tree, as we stand beneath it, is that of shade. Feeling is largely inarticulate, its profusions hidden. So often, the very terms withheld are the ones that matter. Perhaps they are not so much withheld as experienced through sympathetic resonance. Those musically minded might think of Olivier Messiaen's use of natural resonance in his harmonies, or LaMonte Young's use to overtones and undertones in his scales and tunings. Or the dreams and drones of the Velvet Underground. We hear a note that has not been played. In music, these resonances can be explained in terms of physics, in arrangements that are mathematical. But how does the transference happen in poetry?

If a poem is an experience, along the lines I am suggesting, it isn't simply constituted by words on a page, or even those words aloud. It includes words that are absent, and sensations that are nonverbal (or preverbal). We compose not just phrases and lines but sensations. We anticipate effects. Among other things, the poem offers a sensorium, on loan, to the reader. It does not insist on the individuality of the poet's apprehensions; rather, it transfers them to the reader or listener. Beyond a loan, the poem might be a deed of transfer.

Casting about, this morning, I pick up an old issue of the *London Review of Books* and read an essay by T.J. Clark on Pissarro and Cezanne. In one passage, Clark gives voice to the attitudes of both artists towards individualism in painting:

Yes, it was 'mine'; but as I made the actual marks that *were* my seeing ('Je vois, par taches'), I came to understand that in some sense it did not belong to me at all – or at least to the 'me' of the mind, of subjectivity. It, the 'sensation', was the contact – the deep structure of the contact – between sensorium and surrounding. Unique to each individual, doubtless, but full of a materiality, an exposure to the exterior, that put individuality at risk.

Likewise, the lyric poem 'does not belong to me at all': it does not enter the story of my life, as a reader or a writer. It momentarily displaces the story that I am telling and retelling myself. Each day, through the day, we tell the story again, in even the faintest whispers of consciousness, with slight variations to accommodate changes in our lives; each night, we unravel the story in dreams. Yet the poem, even freshly composed, carries the feeling that it precedes such narratives, or stands apart from them. However much the poem may be mine, it 'puts individuality at risk'. The trail that I have been following through a wood opens into a field and disperses in the grass. In this sort of place, we are likely to find pink evening primroses – that's for thought, that's for feeling.

*Sunday Morning*

How oddly content, these dogs of the homeless,  
asleep at their feet in doorways, under benches,  
good, healthy coats, breathing easily

Sunday morning in the fog downtown, in the quiet  
as the hotels and neighborhoods awaken  
to clouds of eggs and excrement, the chatter

on color TVs, spectacular reds and greens.  
The ragged sleepers tremble under blankets  
of newsprint, cough, turn over, curl as far

into themselves as they can, careening through  
the switchbacks of dreams, fighting the wheel  
as they barrel downhill, working that clutch

till the brakes go . . . *Oh*, with a muffled cry,  
suddenly in the world like newborn babes,  
except on Market, filthy and cold.

The dog opens one eye, no trouble, old routine.  
Sighs and dozes off again, snoring  
a thin wheezing snore, muzzle to sidewalk.

He is a well-looked-after animal,  
fed as best as one can, touched, held.  
The man tickles behind his dog's ear.

*August Kleinzahler, from Green Sees Things in Waves (FSG, 1999)*

Fella's ear twitches. He calls him *Fella*.  
That's what the guy he got him off called him.  
Good, brown, short-haired mutt,

not too dumb and doesn't make a big fuss.  
All of his pleasure, all that's left of love—  
ridiculous, tragic: 45 lbs. of snoring dog.

But it's mutual, you see, and genuine.  
Real as warm food in an empty belly.  
And, in fact, that's just what is for them both:

Fella's dog smell, the heat that raises it,  
and that sour, musty smell the man has,  
they all have, the stairwells and walls have

wherever they congregate. But Fella's friend  
has his very own, very delicious smell,  
a bit like old bones, urine, soup.

*August Kleinzahler, from Green Sees Things in Waves (FSG, 1999)*

*Diablo: A Recipe*

*(For H. S. Di Piero)*

Caro mio, the hot must dwell among the dark  
the orange habanero

burning like a candle in a terra-cotta jar  
and the onion tuned, just so

that when the mud commences to bubble, to streak  
and to spit, a barely audible sweetness

is there too; but still, still  
that torrid little fist commands

the temperate hand, the wooden spoon, the meats  
nothing will avail

but patience, as in many things  
in love, say, or with a poem

but in this the most of all  
for as the first of afternoon's late shadows falls

and as I-95's muffled rumbling  
ebbs and flows in the distance, crossing the river

beyond the big beech tree, its leaves flaring gold  
only now, after how many hours

*August Kleinzahler, from Green Sees Things in Waves (FSG, 1999)*

the meat and marrow slip from the bone  
the dark pasilla and chorizo show

as currents in a muddy river show  
only a shade or two off

but careful not to turn the lights on  
or all of it is lost

for the broth and the room are now as one  
one fabric of shadow

broken only by the blue flame of the burner  
turned very low

and so, the moment has come  
for the first, the most important glass of wine

a big red, why not a Merlot  
because only now, alone in this room

dark and quiet as a chapel  
the garlic has slowly begun to bloom

and the wine in the back of your throat  
will be made sonorous by it

then it is time, after much stirring  
and some contemplation

to find the appropriate tune  
perhaps one of Schubert's final sonatas

and take up your spoon once more  
and for the first time taste

how the ferocious one, the brute  
because of the lily has been seduced

and burns still, indelibly  
but like the small blue flame in the darkened room

*August Kleinzahler, from Green Sees Things in Waves (FSG, 1999)*



## FOURTEEN

By fourteen, the heart turns strange, mercurial in mood:  
the flash of silver dulls to lead, now indolent, now rude.

You who sought me out for help now shut the bedroom door,  
a voluntary quarantine from all that you abhor.

You shut the blinds against the sun, against the trees in bloom,  
and test a gift you gave yourself, a bottle of perfume.

Indole, a fragrant molecule in flowers and in feces,  
attracts the curiosity of pollinating bees:

it smells of jasmine on the vine, or jasmine's counterfeit  
dispersed in the evening air, and yet, it smells of shit in shit.

What would it smell like by itself? Like ink from iron gall,  
a cake of Chinese indigo, or some damp animal.

*A pungent odor, dark yet brisk.* Sequestered in your room,  
you text or scribble furtively to concentrate the gloom.

*Devin Johnston, from Dragons (FSG, 2023)*

## THE LEASH

Bone idle, I gnaw the doorstep while I wait  
for you to stir at last from sleeping late,  
then with a clatter, boil a kettle, steep your tea,  
and fog the kitchen window with humidity.  
I tap the tiles and whine, *What of the day?*  
You clear the cups and bowls, no more delay,  
and from your enigmatic stream of talk,  
my ear discerns the long-awaited *walk*.  
You lock the door, and we resume the flow  
of walking, going where we often go:  
a left on Sidney Street, down Arkansas,  
a few blocks to the park, and on through Shaw.  
Though free, we take our customary route,  
no end in mind except to walk about,  
to sniff the wind, to see what we shall see;  
a mobile state of mild expectancy.  
Here we find a cage of seed and suet  
suspended from a branch, and here a bluet  
in bloom beside a pale blue plaster Mary.  
*I'm on the road, I got no time to tarry.*

*Devin Johnston, from Dragons (FSG, 2023)*

When firecracker dogs explode behind a fence  
and chafe at each anomaly that gives offense,  
my breath begins to rasp and hackles rise;  
I strain against the leash and roll my eyes.  
But even as I growl and grow more wild,  
at every lunge I hear you calling, *Child!*  
*Edie, watch me!* Then softer, *Don't be rude!*  
My frenzy fades, my temperament subdued.  
Shorn for spring, I'm hailed as muttonhead,  
alpaca, goat, or any quadruped  
that's raised for wool. *Who made thee, Little Lamb?*  
I'm named for everything but what I am.  
This morning, all things bark—pneumatic brakes, a sneeze—  
no sentiments unsung in Tang anthologies.  
A white-throated sparrow draws out its sour whistle,  
as if to answer, *Here!* before the day's dismissal,  
the unrecorded present, a flicker at the edge  
of consciousness, above the privet hedge.  
But humans live in absence, their thought and speech  
adapted to abstractions out of reach.  
In hats and coats, they paraphrase themselves  
and hide in quotes of fruit and flower smells.  
Trotting in a neighbor's wake, I sniff the sea,  
a blend of oakmoss, ambergris, and celery,  
and then a final breath of salt, tobacco, hay,

*Devin Johnston, from Dragons (FSG, 2023)*

and something animal, before it fades away.  
In masquerade—a dab of Shalimar—  
they smell of anything but what they are.  
Beside the school, I chase a rubber Kong,  
a fetch of forty yards I run headlong,  
rehearsing freedom with each outward bound  
and deference each time I turn around  
to custom, habit, power—constancies  
of my regard for you, and yours for me.  
Each liberty entails a bond of tenderness,  
each sweet endearment comes with leash and harness:  
*obey*, from *obaudire*, to hear and understand,  
submitting to a click or syllable’s command.  
With thoughts of lunch, with thoughts of rich repast,  
we swing through Compton Heights and saunter past  
a block of cats, a colony of strays;  
they flick their tails and I avert my gaze.  
One sits atop a brick retaining wall  
and with vast self-regard he surveys all  
that passes by, but will not condescend  
to rub against the fingers you extend.  
Beside the curb, I root through trash and find  
a spicy broth of smells to feed the mind.  
*Leave it, stubborn mule!* I plant my feet  
and hesitate, but soon admit defeat.

*Devin Johnston, from Dragons (FSG, 2023)*

*Good Eatie, Miss MacGreedy. Good E.T.!*  
What shall I do with this absurdity?  
My fringe and ears recall a legal wig  
that rides atop a spinning whirligig,  
a brain that circles round and round the same  
two syllables that form my human name.  
When we have closed our circuit, home once more,  
we climb the stairs, and you unlock the door,  
admitting light to pierce the mellow gloom.  
The smell of frying onions fills the room  
from some ad hoc ragout or casserole,  
while I make do with kibble in my bowl.  
By afternoon, we go our separate ways.  
You sit at desk and fret a battered phrase  
or nose through dictionaries, on the scent  
of obsolescent words and what they've meant.  
Stock-still, you stare until the symbols signify,  
as when a border collie gives her flock the eye,  
while I curl on the couch, my breathing slow,  
my thoughts unleashed to go where they will go.  
Through inner dark, anonymous and free,  
I dream that I am you, and you are me.

*Devin Johnston, from Dragons (FSG, 2023)*

## The World Calls to Us

by James Crews

Driving on the state highway, on our way to coffee, I thought the thing I spotted in the maple must be a burl, one of those huge knots in the trunk of a tree, or maybe a bundle of leaves that served as the nest of a squirrel. “What was *that*?” I called out, now sure I’d seen something special. And because my husband Brad is an avid birder, his binoculars always nearby, he turned around and pulled off onto the shoulder. It took only a moment before we both saw it—a juvenile bald eagle perched on a branch, waiting for his chance to swoop down and feed on some roadkill. He did not yet have the distinguishable white head we’re used to seeing, but he was the largest bird I have ever encountered up close. I could hardly believe my eyes.

Brad had already grabbed his binoculars and was peering across the highway at him. Even with my naked eyes, I could see what I couldn’t help but think of as his *face*, his sharp eyes and curved beak, and his large yellow talons gripping the branch on which he rested for now. *Wow*, I kept saying over and over, more than a little pleased that I was the first one to notice this creature with his dark, ruffled feathers. Brad almost always sees the birds before I do, and can name them right away.

The eagle seemed to grow uneasy and restless the longer we sat there staring at him, and so—not wanting to disturb his meal anymore—we turned around again, this time pulling up right next to the tree where he perched, taking one last, long look at the massive bird, then continuing on our way to the café. But I felt changed after that sudden encounter for several days after, amazed at the way nature can still draw me out of whatever distracted state my mind happens to be in, bringing me back to the moment at hand, the world we actually live in.

When I first moved to rural Vermont to be with Brad, I thought I was a nature lover, deeply connected to the environment, but I realized I still had so much to learn, from the names of wildflowers that shiver up through leaf litter each spring, to the names of trees and birds, and the habits of the owls and coyotes that surround our house. I find myself looking out of windows more than I ever have, hoping to catch a flock of wild turkeys taking a dust-bath on the hillside, or a red-tailed hawk hunkered high in a tree, hunting at the periphery of the yard. No matter where we are, whether in the woods or in the middle of a bustling city, the world is always calling to us, and all we have to do to accept the gift is stay open to what we see.

*James Crews, from Kindness Will Save the World: Stories of Compassion & Connection (Insight Editions/Simon & Schuster, 2023)*

## From an Amtrak Along the Hudson

I saw a bald eagle perched on a log,  
the beacon of his white head alerting me  
to his presence in the estuary  
where he stood with the writhing  
silver body of a fish gripped tight  
in talons that would not release  
until his catch had exhausted itself.  
He watched from a distance, undisturbed  
as a much larger silver body slid by  
on the tracks, and he seemed  
to meet my gaze for an instant –  
both of us hunting in our own ways  
for something bright to bring home.

*James Crews, from Every Waking Moment (Lynx House Press, 2020)*

## Winter Morning

When I can no longer say thank you  
for this new day and the waking into it,  
for the cold scrape of the kitchen chair  
and the ticking of the space heater turning  
orange as it warms the floor near my feet,  
I know it is because I've been fooled again  
by the selfish, unruly man who lives in me  
and believes he deserves only safety  
and comfort. But if I pause as I do now,  
and watch the streetlights outside winking  
off one by one like old men closing their  
cloudy eyes, if I listen to my tired neighbors  
slamming car doors hard against the morning  
and see the steaming coffee in their mugs  
kissing their chapped lips as they sip and  
exhale each of their worries white into  
the icy air around their faces – then I can  
remember this one life is a gift each of us  
was handed and told to open: Untie the bow  
and tear off the paper, look inside  
and be grateful for whatever you find  
even if it is only the scent of a tangerine  
that lingers on the fingers long after  
you've finished eating it.

*James Crews, from How to Love the World: Poems of Gratitude & Hope (Storey Publishing/Hachette, 2021)*



## Planting Trees

Dad taught us that paper  
comes from trees and the word for book

comes from beech. He showed us  
the olive-grey bark, smooth as river rocks,

how to tell the light hues of young wood  
from the gloom of the old

and how to count the rings—starting  
at the centre, working out towards the edge.

He's unable to move from his bed,  
but when we ask about the row of beech

beside the bridge, he's clear as a bell,  
*my father's father's father planted them,*

*a shelter-belt for a nursery, when the British  
were giving grants for planting trees.*

*Tomorrow, I'll get dressed,  
we'll go down to see them again.*

*Jane Clarke, from When the Tree Falls (Bloodaxe, 2019)*

## THE COWS

If it weren't for the cows  
—the black and white Holsteins, the red Holsteins  
and the small plain Jerseys —  
if it weren't for the cows,  
we would not have  
a green Denmark.  
We would have grain, of course,  
it's true color is gold,  
and grain is something second-rate,  
that is only eaten  
by pigs and humans, no  
if it weren't for the cows,  
if these mounds of meat  
did not wade around in grass to their knees  
always grouped tightly together, always  
— almost —  
in step, if it weren't for the cows  
we would not have Denmark  
like a green dream about eternity.

But the dream  
is in constant danger:  
There is always one cow  
that is different, one cow  
that keeps from the flock, one cow  
that turns its head the other way, one cow  
that eats, while the others are chewing their cud, one cow  
who nears the visitor  
with its tongue out, prepared  
to show a coarse approachability and seeking  
beyond itself, there is always one cow  
standing licking and sniffing  
and looking far off past the fence  
and wishing

*Knud Sørensen, from Farming Dreams Tr. from Danish by Michael Goldman (Duyvil Press 2016)*

for a life as a not-cow, maybe  
as a hen in a cage  
or a pig on the third floor  
or a human on the fourteenth, there it stands  
uneasy, unsure, unaware  
of its own heaviness, there it stands  
holding one end of a lengthy  
wistful moo,  
when the stranger leaves.

The real cows  
lie in the grass.  
They chew their cud  
as cows always  
have chewed their cud.  
They only look within,  
and they are green all the way to their souls.  
The real cows  
are reincarnated farmers —  
it is for them  
that the grass grows,  
the sun shines  
and the rain falls.  
It is for them that the seasons change,  
so the world is always  
invariably new —  
it is for the real cows  
who are reincarnated farmers  
— and for the real farmers  
who are reincarnated cows.

*Knud Sørensen, from Farming Dreams Tr. from Danish by Michael Goldman (Duyvil Press 2016)*

# Stone Work

*for Margaret Hassan*

Here is the split, dark crop  
in the stone's heart. I say,

as I hold in my hand, *stone*,  
as in *skipping*, as in *refuse*

*to answer*. Today on the news,  
another beheading, a woman

this time. As in *leave no*  
*unturned*, black hole of a mouth,

of a plum, of an eye. I know you  
have stones there, *hail*, *paving*,

*ware*. Find one. Hold it, As in  
*cast the first*. As in *to death*.

*Andrea Scarpino, from Once Then (Red Hen Press, 2014)*

## 300 Goats

In icy fields.

Is water flowing in the tank?

Will they huddle together, warm bodies pressing?

(Is it the year of the goat or the sheep?

Scholars debating Chinese zodiac,

follower or leader.)

O lead them to a warm corner,

little ones toward bulkier bodies.

Lead them to the brush, which cuts the icy wind.

Another frigid night swooping down —

Aren't you worried about them? I ask my friend,

who lives by herself on the ranch of goats,

far from here near the town of Ozona.

She shrugs, "Not really,

they know what to do. They're *goats*."

*Naomi Shihab Nye, Poetry Magazine (January 2016)*

# Alive

Dear Abby, said someone from Oregon,  
I am having trouble with my boyfriend's attachment  
to an ancient gallon of milk still full  
in his refrigerator. I told him it's me or the milk,  
is this unreasonable? Dear Carolyn,  
my brother won't speak to me  
because fifty years ago I whispered  
a monkey would kidnap him in the night  
to take him back to his true family  
but he should have known it was a joke  
when it didn't happen, don't you think?  
Dear Board of Education, no one will ever  
remember a test. Repeat. Stories,  
poems, projects, experiments,  
mischief, yes, but never a test.  
Dear Dog Behind the Fence, you really need  
to calm down now. You have been barking every time  
I walk to the compost for two years  
and I have not robbed your house. Relax.  
When I asked the man on the other side  
if you bother him too, he smiled and said no,  
he makes me feel less alone. Should I be more  
worried about the dog or the man?

*Naomi Shihab Nye, from Transfer (BOA Editions, 2011)*

## Bees Were Better

In college, people were always breaking up.  
We broke up in parking lots,  
beside fountains.  
Two people broke up  
across a table from me  
at the library.  
I could not sit at that table again  
though I did not know them.  
I studied bees, who were able  
to convey messages through dancing  
and could find their ways  
home to their hives  
even if someone put up a blockade of sheets  
and boards and wire.  
Bees had radar in their wings and brains  
that humans could barely understand.  
I wrote a paper proclaiming  
their brilliance and superiority  
and revised it at a small café  
featuring wooden hive-shaped honey-dippers  
in silver honeypots  
at every table.

*Naomi Shihab Nye, from If Bees Are Few: A Hive of Bee Poems, Ed., James P. Lenfestey,  
(University of Minnesota Press, 2016)*

## APOCRYPHAL GENESIS

The banal loomed large. Windows fogged up  
and emojis were fingered upon the glass panes.  
Out of the wider bends of Mississippi river mud  
crept the creepers that creepeth, while flames licked  
clay to fashion bricks for the first Savings and Loan.  
Orchid labella unfurled—someone leaned in and said,  
*my, my, my*, while God kept laying two-dollar pony bets  
and losing his shirt and wrinkling down the foreskin  
of a paper sack and tilting his bottle filled with god  
knows what. The sky not yet entirely aflame. Face  
of the waters of corporate fountains still profitable,  
and on the sixth day, a ragtag group of engineers  
slipped on the condoms of creation and flagged  
the first outpost on Mars as you overslept (king-sized)  
and missed your own coronation. Waters did rise  
and rise and the polar caps were like, *Whatever*,  
which was the typical response from their generation.  
*Whatever*, said the mountains laid plane, and,  
*Whatever*, said the reefs melting like candle wax.  
*Whatever*, said the carboniferous bones sludging  
the tarpit remains where once proud jungles stood  
and brought forth friendlier cyclones. Raindrops  
tapped against the stream of consciousness like a junkie  
looking for his one good vein, waiting for the last  
wild thing in Heaven to become undeniably reasonable.

Travis Mossotti, from *Apocryphal Genesis* (Saturnalia Books, 2024)



## CONTEMPLATION OF A LIVE OAK IN SAN ANTONIO

—for Naomi Shihab Nye

If I contemplate this tree the wrong way,  
I might conclude it's not a tree at all, which  
may indicate that all beauty has evaporated  
at last from the world leaving only what  
shocks us awake at night, and what good  
would that do anyone? No, I conclude this  
crooked finger reaching from the earth  
is, in fact, a tree—not a symbol or sign  
of the density of solid matter. Not a theory  
bending towards uniformity or grace under  
the pressure of indifferent weather. Not  
a new breed of cancer or the pummeling  
of hammer on rock. Not bread or discourse  
or atmospheric anomaly. I admire how  
the skin of the tree stiffens to bark, gray  
as a man's beard in the autumn of his life,  
and its leaves rest still upon the still air.  
One could paint this tree for hours on end  
and the only noticeable change would be  
angled light, hues, shadow filling the bark's  
crevasses, darkness spilling over into deeper  
shades of black and then the moon grinding  
its teeth while dreams begin convalescing:  
anger and faith and mild forms of retribution,  
telescopes scraping deeper into the womb  
of the universe in the way we've all become  
accustomed to. By nature, I'm not an alarmist,  
but I believe this single tree is a problem  
we've yet to solve and it's so obviously here,  
just an arm's length away, jutting up from soil  
and compacted rock and breathing, yes  
breathing, and speaking the language of time  
so we might venture to touch it and feel  
for once some peace we've forgotten  
or given up on entirely. There it is though,  
in the space between the whirl of electrons.

Travis Mossotti, from *Apocryphal Genesis* (Saturnalia Books, 2024)

## MISSING THE FARM

Here's the orchard someone else will tend to.  
And the crawl space beneath the porch  
of the house where someone else's barn cat  
will slumber through the summer nights  
dreaming of long-tailed mice in the high grass.  
Over that field, the light dips and refracts  
through the broken glass of the muck pond  
where a catfish will take someone else's bait  
and hook—that it might meet the refined  
heat of a skillet. The ghosts of a thousand  
head of cattle walk through the woods at night  
in someone else's dream while the windows,  
cracked slightly, let a mild breeze pass  
through the empty rooms like an appraiser.  
There is no death that cannot be undone  
by simply turning the compost with a pitchfork  
or by scattering scratch in the dirt for chickens  
who sing each time they lay, but every repair  
is only a gesture against the torment of slow  
winds and steady rain and heavy sun. It will be  
someone else who grows too old to climb  
the ladder into the barn's cool loft or the flight  
of stairs that lead to and from their own bed.  
It will be their hand weighing the mortgage.  
It will be their face forgetting its smile. Listen,  
if the well pump kicks to life at dawn, it will be  
someone else drawing a bath for the last time—  
joints relaxing as their form submerges, body  
recovering and failing in the same held breath.

Travis Mossotti, from *Apocryphal Genesis* (Saturnalia Books, 2024)

## EVIDENCE

Fungus rehearses  
its communion underground  
as night rain coldly taps

a wooden cane, and the old  
hound asleep by the door  
twitches, dreaming the long

chase has ended with escape.  
A peppering of lightning  
followed by the arrival

of thunder. Neither stay.  
Everything ephemeral  
recedes back into waiting

while the sun raps  
its mallets against the timpani  
of horizon and fog

drags its bow evenly across  
the rosin. Each woolen  
sock slides over a heel.

The kettle clears  
its throat. You take a long  
knife across a lemon

as the kitchen window lets in  
dawn. You stand there  
quietly sipping, looking out.

Travis Mossotti, from *Apocryphal Genesis* (Saturnalia Books, 2024)

## THOREAU AT THE TRAILHEAD

I'm apex, bitches. I kick open  
the door to my feral country  
disparaged by snow  
and burn the moon's long tongue  
down switchbacks gorged  
and strafed by bootcrush  
to the river I canoe open  
like a knifing of willow flesh.  
I fashion a sway bridge  
from bear sinew and heart strings  
and cross wherever I please.  
I cast a glisten and a bramble  
and a canopy of coyotes  
riffing a full-throated note  
deep into the milky Milky Way.  
To survive is mean, and I mean  
to survive—if need be for weeks  
on the fat of others and loose  
berries and tubers I dig up  
using my teeth like a shovel.  
I make myself scarce and lonely.  
I lilt like murdered sunlight.  
I cache myself under a mountain  
for when wild goes out of style.

Travis Mossotti, from *Apocryphal Genesis* (Saturnalia Books, 2024)

## BLACKBERRY WINTER

The birdbath water that cupped  
the moon had bloomed to slush, acacia  
and ivy bejeweled with ice, spring gone maniacally  
astray when we stepped out, unbedded, in love  
and in May, or at least in May, which seemed  
enough, or had that day on the rural routes  
where we wound up, windows

down, drinking hot beer  
with descending cheers— *To the both of you!*  
*To you! To us!* Even after we'd stopped, picked  
berries in ditches, then pee'd, then drove  
away, we both knew what we were up to  
with my date set, and you, uh, *practically*  
engaged. And yet, with what

ease, what facility  
did we slip into that body of facts  
with two backs, a corpus ruminatum that we  
perused separately the next thawed afternoon,  
too flustered to phone, too embarrassed  
to speak if we happened to see one  
another paired with our

respective others across  
the haze of some bar or cafe on an otherwise  
unremarkable day. Nothing, so far, has frozen  
this May. No love bewildered, none betrayed.  
As for the trees—green notes of the air—  
they hover with the moon in a skillet of water  
past three a.m. when I

walk out to call the dog in.  
What breeze there is does not sway  
the branches, nor does time's wand wave or blend  
any past lapse of common sense into  
a clarified present tense: the clouds  
push along at a summer's pace, the wisteria  
is sprouting, climbing the fences,

the whole world smells  
like fresh-cut grass. And there it is, faith-  
ful as ever, frozen in place: the memory  
not of our ascending from a drunken rush,  
an error of flesh out of season and bounds,  
but nature's joke, Jack's revenge—fog  
rising from our wordless mouths.

*James Kimbrell, from Gatehouse Heaven (Sarabande Books, 1998)*

## Highway 45 Truck Stop

—Hamilton, Mississippi

It's simple. You scoop ice  
into a bag. After you pack it tight,  
you spin the bag at the neck,  
then clamp the tie. You  
carry each bag to the freezer  
in front of the store. The monotony  
keeps your body moving  
in the early morning  
before the farmers  
sit in the window booths,  
hawked over cups of coffee. They  
speak loud enough  
for you to catch phrases:  
*The cows are running free,*  
or, *She can't get pregnant,*  
but there is no context, except  
for the nickels  
tolling in your ears,  
and for each bag of ice,  
one falls into your pocket,  
which is already filled with  
so many nickels  
you don't know where  
you'll put them. Maybe you'll buy  
some music  
or shoes. You won't.  
You never do.  
The shoes you are wearing  
are good enough for  
the job, and later, there is  
college, you hope, but  
aren't sure, so you take the scoop  
in your hand and thrust it  
into ice. You spin the bag.  
You clamp the tie.  
There are many like you, but  
you are still young,  
and you tell yourself,  
*I won't get stuck.* You  
say it every day, until it happens.

*Kerry James Evans, from Kenyon Review Online (Spring 2015)*

## The Woods Lament For Me

—For William Loren Katz, who wrote *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage*, and in it he wrote: “But beyond the pain were armed Black Indian communities named ‘Hide Me’ and ‘The Woods Lament For Me.’ They were home for some of our earliest explorers and pioneers.”

Beyond folktales are awe-inspiring stories  
that stretch far into the woodlands  
of San Miguel de Gualdape  
in what became these United—  
bowls from bark

simmering spices cupped from terra cotta pots  
ancient as Indigenous and Bantu lessons  
on the Pee Dee River. Yams made perfect  
with sweet potatoes—  
and home had become wherever the sun  
and all its warmth shined on a Black face  
ascended free from worry.

Secrets among the leaves  
leaves full of history—  
as told by the Seminole who  
raised maize to make a way  
for the strangers who frequently  
found themselves hungry  
on their way to freedom,

refuge in the swamps or deep in the forest  
is where earthenware bubbled with recipes shared  
like heirlooms:

a gifted arrowhead or handmade drum  
deer antler atlatl or mahogany mask cast in  
wood from a tree that never knew  
strange fruit.

*Jason Vasser-Elong, from Sapiens (Feb 2023)*

Secrets among the leaves  
leaves full of history—  
as told by an Ibo who  
after bondage in this foreign land  
fled to a community in the woods  
    free from Dogma,  
    where Animists believed  
    in the sacredness of animals  
    and streams that did not take but gave  
    freely like friendship, was sacred like

life lived by those who  
braved the winters  
in deer skins and cow hide  
who knew the seasons came and went  
on a passing wind, deep in the  
South Carolina forests you'll find remnants  
older than Jamestown in the east—

where the land holds space for those  
    who bonded over the common enemy  
    familial

and generations hence  
there are stories of blended lineages  
    an inheritance of resilience  
    that is ours to keep,  
    something that can never,  
    never be taken away.

*Jason Vasser-Elong, from Sapiens (Feb 2023)*



# Lunar Eclipse

Though I marked my calendar, I'll forget to watch  
earth paint the moon gray, then black, then white again.

White as toothache, dry elbow skin, a crown of bones,  
as, I imagine, a narwhal's tusk, though I've never seen one.

Tonight I'd dip that tusk in my wine glass  
to prevent all future hangovers, all future gloomy

moods where I pretend I'll look up the etymology  
of melancholia, but don't. Where I pretend I need

a spouse to soothe me—but I don't. Like—I won't say  
earth or moon—but like a shovel, I'm purposeful

but often idle. Collecting cobwebs is a passing,  
though fulfilling hobby. Someday I hope to be less

shovel, more soil. Prepped for roots, for thriving—  
Love, I want to say (to whom, I'm not sure),

I've come to a different power tonight.  
This is the self stripped of alimonies, stripped of pearls.

Unforgiveable, unrelenting, cherished by no one—  
not you, wife, nor you, husband. Not even you

dear moon, whom I want to see cloaked  
but won't. Clouds tonight. Bats beading them.

At least, I think so. Maybe smaller darkneses  
are just that—smaller, and thus, personable.

*Amie Whitemore, from Academy of American Poets Poem-a-Day (2016)*

# Trophic Cascade

After the reintroduction of gray wolves to Yellowstone and, as anticipated, their culling of deer, trees grew beyond the deer stunt of the mid century. In their up reach songbirds nested, who scattered seed for underbrush, and in that cover warrened snowshoe hare. Weasel and water shrew returned, also vole, and came soon hawk and falcon, bald eagle, kestrel, and with them hawk shadow, falcon shadow. Eagle shade and kestrel shade haunted newly-berried runnels where deer no longer rummaged, cautious as they were, now, of being surprised by wolves. Berries brought bear, while undergrowth and willows, growing now right down to the river, brought beavers, who dam. Muskrats came to the dams, and tadpoles. Came, too, the night song of the fathers of tadpoles. With water striders, the dark gray American dipper bobbed in fresh pools of the river, and fish stayed, and the bear, who fished, also culled deer fawns and to their kill scraps came vulture and coyote, long gone in the region until now, and their scat scattered seed, and more trees, brush, and berries grew up along the river that had run straight and so flooded but thus dammed, compelled to meander, is less prone to overrun. Don't you tell me this is not the same as my story. All this life born from one hungry animal, this whole, new landscape, the course of the river changed, I know this. I reintroduced myself to myself, this time a mother. After which, nothing was ever the same.

*Camille T. Dungy, from Trophic Cascade (Wesleyan University Press, 2017)*

# October Sonnet

—after Ted Berrigan

Even on the 13th floor of a high building, Chicago's  
wind winds its slick way through any unsecured  
window on its singsong to the lake. It's fine-tuned,

perfectly pitched in this sinister season  
of cackling jack-o'-lanterns & candy corns  
nobody eats unless they're the last sweets left.

Bags of fun nonsense for all the little ninjas  
& ghosts. It's true, I weep too much when  
the seasons partition: snack-sized tears dropping onto

tear-sized leaves swirling in the autumn  
of my reproduction. Occasional receipts & parking  
tickets, too, yellowed during their own windy migrations.

Like the rest of us gusty apparitions, every  
untethered thing ends up at the lake shore seasonally.

*Adrian Matejka, from Academy of American Poets Poem-a-Day (2023)*