

Poetry South

2017



Poetry South

Issue 9 2017

The **W** Mississippi University
for Women
FOUNDED 1884 COEDUCATIONAL SINCE 1982

Poetry South

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Poetry South is a national journal of poetry published annually by Mississippi University for Women (formerly published by Yazoo River Press). The views expressed herein, except for editorials, are those of the writers, not the editors or Mississippi University for Women. Poetry South considers submissions year round. Submissions received after the deadline of July 15 will be considered for the following year. No previously published material will be accepted. Poetry South is not responsible for unsolicited submissions and their loss. Submissions are accepted through Green Submissions. <https://greensubmissions.com/815/poetry-south/index.php>

Subscription rates are \$10 for one year, \$18 for two years; the foreign rate is \$15 for one year, \$30 for two years. All rights revert to the authors after publication. We request Poetry South be credited with initial publication. Queries or other correspondence may be emailed to: poetrysouth01@gmail.com. Queries and subscriptions sent by mail should be addressed to: The Editor, Poetry South, MFA Creative Writing, 1100 College St., W-1634, Columbus MS 39701.

ISSN 1947-4075 (Print)
ISSN 2476-0749 (Online)

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Indexed by EBSCOHost/Literary Reference Center

CONTENTS

Rachel Hoge	5	A Hymn for Bluegrass Pkwy
Sandra Kohler	8	Hunger
	9	Remember
Randolph Thomas	10	Insomnia Study
	11	Flood of Autumn
Katherine Indermaur	12	Looking East at Shiprock
Christie Collins	13	Pantoum
	14	Christina's World
	14	Honeybees
	15	Fetus-in-Fetu
Celisa Steele	16	Last-Day-of-the-Year, Pre-Dawn Blues
	17	Why to Forget
David Colodney	18	Condensation
Mary-Sherman Willis	19	Sea Anemone
Simon Perchik	20	[You fold your arms...]
	21	[You drink from this hole]
Kari Gunter-Seymour	22	Because the Need to See Your Daughter Overcame All Sense of Reason
John Sibley Williams	23	Supernova
	24	Honest Attempt
	25	The Strangers
Ted Haddin	26	Near Centreville, Alabama
	27	Coming Back
	28	Guest
	28	Postcard to Randy Blythe
Carolina Morales	29	Blabbermouth Night at "The Place" with Jack Spicer
Katherine Gekker	30	Language Consumes Fire
	31	The World Trembles, The World Masquerades
Carol Sanders	32	Bending for Limbo
Janice Whittington	33	Birding
Jennifer Highland	34	Landscape with Burning Bush
Barbara Lawhorn	36	Even Words Fail to Protect You
Kali Lightfoot	38	Cousin Margaret's Friend, 1955
C. W. Emerson	40	Easter Portrait, 1964 (Father to Son)
	41	Last Request
Heather Steadham	42	At Liberty
	43	Nos for the Proper Modern Southern Girl

Jenna Bazzell	44	Ghazal: The night undresses and...
	45	Crayons
	46	Strawberrying
John C. Mannone	47	Breakfast at Midnight
Ed Hack	48	More
	49	Early Morning, South Florida
Richard Perkins	50	Flare
	51	Nimbus of Night
Leah Browning	52	Vancouver-Beijing
Holly Welker	54	Happy Birthday
	56	Vagabond
K. B. Ballentine	58	The Burning of Flipper Bend
	59	Forgetfulness of Rain
Grant Clauser	60	The Tattooist's Lament
	61	Blue Willow
David Armand	62	Debt
Dixon Hearne	63	Blood Roots
Matthew W. Schmeer	63	Dear Carol:
Jeff Griffin	64	Sparkle, Stutter, Leave
Lisa Marie Brodsky	65	The Spy
Janet Cannon	66	flawed algorithm
	67	letting go
Sarah Dickenson Snyder	68	After the War
Joanna White	70	Sestina for My Grandmother
Jocelyn Heath	72	Epithalamion
Mercedes Lawry	74	In Hiding
	75	Solitude In Many Guises
Claire Scott	76	Gretel & Hansel
	78	How Did We
Melissa Esposito	79	Clean
Dianne Silvestri	80	Grandma
	81	Singing
Charissa Menefee	82	Light and Easy
Jennifer Conlon	83	In the Wild
J. C. Reilly	84	Wind Through Corn
Sharon Scholl	85	This Would be the Place to Press
Patricia Hamilton	86	Jumping Lessons
Matthew Schmidt	87	Dusk for the Open Mouth
Corey Ginsberg	87	The Day the Horses Escaped from the Merry-Go-Round
	88	Contributors

Rachel Hoge

A HYMN FOR BLUEGRASS PKWY

I. *Codetta* — London, Kentucky

We sang on Thanksgiving that Tom
Petty song though words are gone
wood I remember mahogany maybe ash
dancing floors dancing ghosts
woodchips littered flower beds.

I forgot to ask do our bones
vibrate like cello strings?
Can measures hold our song?
Your mom took our photo
by fireplace smell of roasted
coffee Lucy's paws against the floor
and later your sweater my sweater
cotton held cotton slipped
while your family grocery shopped.

Next morning there's warm
fleece warm eggs
Rosecomb Cornish Naked Necks
colored wisps of feather. Home
is you holding
hens Rhode Island Reds
curled talons bugs and soil
the only things they keep.

II. *Sonata* — Scottish Highlands

Inverness in Gaelic
mouth of the River Ness
in American
so green not money green
land green earth tasting tired
air like cotton like socks worn
with boots in rain.
If you and I are puddles
everyone else is the sun.

In my last letter I forgot to ask
do castles belong in pages?
do stones survive the sea?
I sent your parents Cornish blue
preserved in wax
shaped like a heart and shipped
to Kentucky.

Do birds breathe over water?
Do we hum like engines in a train?

Sometimes folding laundry I fantasize
him me high heat high tumble
but you are waiting for my phone call.

If you are ground coffee then I am loose
leaves.

Once in a hostel I sang
Home that Edward Sharpe song
on acoustic. The guitarist cried
but I never knew why.

Like many other things I've never thought to ask.

III. *Solo* — Lexington, Kentucky

Find Blue Grass Parkway
eat basket of fish
when call comes through
ignore ~pack sundress amber ale
books read while abroad.

Home is patchouli
flower stems mint juleps oiled
wrists and bones. Answer: yes
birds drop
wings break measures cannot
keep us.

Inside pretend sleep pretend ash
newspaper fire
outside orange
inside red everything charcoal.
Boys are scared
of hands and mothers. Girls are scared
of me: spiteful rain humble thunder
storm of woman touching ground.

IV. *Coda* — San Francisco, California

On a boat near Alcatraz the island spoke
in rain. Lighthouse stone stone ground
steps sheets of powdered rock. I never
asked but can I know do hands
hold down the dawn?

On Baker Beach her feet
were sloped gown in sunrise glow.
I remember flowers tied to string
spinning feet spinning silk
camera flash hands on neck
girl in air singing
dancing ghosts.

I'm there in fall in summer
your bike your breath staccato
C your bedsheet cotton falsetto
ring.

Refrain of sweet Kentucky

Sandra Kohler

HUNGER

Hungry this morning, something insistent in my hunger.
What's in the larder?—cauliflower, chard, choices. What
shall I make for dinner tonight, tomorrow? I work at a

task I put aside yesterday, do little. I touch this, that
and the other. My family's the other. I'm tight, tensed.
Where is ease, release? In the heart with its pumped up

desires, inchoate, ceaseless? To say I love my granddaughter
more than I've loved anyone else would be to confess my
failure to love. I don't. Doting on her, still how precious

my son is to me, what pleasure his existence gives me.
But when I walk into their house it's my granddaughter
who gets my attention, not him. Because it's so much

simpler, so much less intricate? Like her ritual of clearing
off our coffee table, putting away everything that she's
forbidden to play with when she comes into our living

room, her pleasure in doing that. Love lasts and does not:
The story that I love you, it has no end. My brother
sang that to me when I was my granddaughter's age.

That story ended. Or did it continue when I sang it to
my son, granddaughter? What moves us, matters, comes
from an underground spring hidden in childhood's

harsh landscape, its barren scarp, scoured plains. We
remember nothing of that source but our satisfied hunger.

REMEMBER

Winter arrives today, heralded by yesterday's snow. What's fallen is a dusting, gossamer, weightless. At this point, a pretty snow. Is its beauty treacherous? Is its treachery the hard ground, iron, beneath it, or the slick softness of the snow itself? Which is truth, which danger, deception? Is my happiness this morning snow or iron? Is my fear the coating or the ground?

I dream I'm walking through a huge building, theatre-like, with one glass wall a waterfall runs down. I'm with younger versions of my son, husband. We come upon the waterfall from an angle which makes it impossible to see that it is water flowing down a wall of glass, but suddenly it coheres: illusion, *trompe l'oeil* that reveals a facade that tricks us, like the snow.

I have been trying to understand a facade slippery and volatile as this waterfall: a past with its vanished selves, vanished others. To remember is to recreate, but I can't see how these images coalesce, can't see what ground, iron, lies beneath surfaces deceptive as snow. Nights I write letters to those dead, asking what might have been otherwise in the scenes I revisit if I'd been other than the self I was.

Randolph Thomas

INSOMNIA STUDY

Each afternoon we took apart
the stacks of cots at the back of the room.
The teacher and her aides

handed out pillows and quilts, and we
lay on the cots for forty-five minutes
in silence

in the dark.
I lay awake while all the others slept
like I lie awake sometimes now

wondering what made me uneasy
even then, the voices
of the elders

whispery and muted
nursing their secrets
and the other children around me

content, trusting
in their sound napping
until the lights clicked back on,

until they rose, yawning,
as the cots and pillows
were gathered and put away.

FLOOD OF AUTUMN

When the flood comes, everything we own drowns.
All the pets drown, and we drown.
The chime on the back gate
is washed away. The copper wire
that lets water into the ice maker
breaks. Lights flicker. Clocks fall off night tables
into rushing brown and black water.
Even months later, in our rental, I wake
in the night, my stomach roiling
and rolling with the shifting floors,
with the animals' whimpering.
You doze while I lie awake, or I doze
while you mind the roar of finances, the swirl
of house plans, of calculations and debt.
Morning comes, black and still. I rise, I call
the pets, I make coffee, I sit
in front of the computer, dim light
on my face. These rented rooms
come into focus from dreams of childhood
houses, from books with warped pictures.
Barefoot, I stumble through them; outside
I learn the overgrown garden in the pre-dawn
dark, I nail chicken wire over gaps in the
fence, make the new yard safe for the pets.
I wait for you. My fear that you will not rise
from whatever figures you lie under,
that your escape was part of the dream,
recedes only when you join me to drink
our morning coffee and work our puzzles
in the yard, in the plastic garden chairs,
as the dog I carried, squirming, to the boat
lies at our feet, watching us.

Katherine Indermaur

LOOKING EAST AT SHIPROCK

From the furthest foothills
a great glittering city laid out
before us like the promise
of decades of unfallen future
still held up sparkling
whatever it is that heat
does to light over distance
I want to touch
feel my fingers flicker
under yours for years for
ever yet everything swells
out toward an existence
I've already forgotten
what I know is
what starlight doesn't
do to my skin
when I close my eyes
what mountains I see
which is to say
almost electricity

Christie Collins

PANTOUM

I am a fable, dawning.
I know this because I sing
the morning song of my myth:
I've been beast, child, woman.

I know this because my myth
spreads wild like forest moss.
I've been beast, child, woman,
a howl in the throat of the holler.

Wild like forest moss, I spread into
branches of metaphor, memory.
My throat unwrites my holler.
The earth ends & my body begins.

Branches of metaphor, memory,
my legend roars with the rising sun.
The earth begins & my body ends.
I am wilderness & song—

Sun rising, roaring into blossom,
a voice awakens from budding skin
in a forest of civilization & song—
I verge on—my tale on my tongue.

My voice awakens from budding skin:
I'm earth's flesh, vessel of babel & clay.
I verge on— my legend on my tongue.
I fable into the forest, into the dawn.

Christie Collins

CHRISTINA'S WORLD

After the painting by Andrew Wyeth

Soft, loose-fitted pink. Wayward
browns & yellows of the field.
Pigment of pinned hair, windblown.
Color of bare arm, bone thin.
White-washed sliver of sky. Distant
home hums & drums of whispers.
A black belt around a barren hip.
The sinister color of a doorway ajar.
The dark angle of the path
a body cuts through tall grass.
The dark angle of what could be
a crow stuck mid-flight.

HONEYBEES

How could I not have grieved?

When their bodies, poisoned into a deep
& enduring sleep, drifted like dusty snowflakes
from the attic above—down, down
onto the ruddy linoleum floor
in the restroom of my therapist's office.

When the capsules of their still bodies
were stepped on, crunched,
swept up, disposed of—

When it took a maintenance crew
hours to undo their nests,
the impressive sheets of comb
that had been so carefully composed
from earth, paper, bits of human trash,
a home forged of communal tenacity, instinct.

When the wealth of their honey,
that golden sea of their life's work,
was drained from the combs, willy-nilly,
into several black trash bags —

When such a bustling city as it must
have been fell & fell silent.

I expected nothing of the afternoon,
no poem to unfold, no narrative to break
from my back like inkblotted wings.
But after seeing the last of their hive
swept up into a rusted dust pan,
I felt the truth of their absence.
I felt the early blistering of an ache & an elegy.

As the afternoon backbends into night,
I hear the memory of the honeybees buzzing,
rebuilding outside my window.
But, it can't be. It can't be. Their catacomb,
unyielding, Their bodies, only traceable
as tiny, magnanimous words.

FETUS-IN-FETU

I wasn't born an *only child*
I was born a single parent
already a mother
to a boy and a girl, who asked
me to call them *momma & daddy*.

Celisa Steele

LAST-DAY-OF-THE-YEAR, PRE-DAWN BLUES

Or call it Lamentation for That Which I Did Not
Accomplish This Year: miles unrun,
kindnesses that remained pure
conjecture, the Italian book on its quiet shelf,
spine perfect. The kids dream in their beds. Clutching
one scruffy stuffed animal apiece:
The Lovely Ignorance of Youth.
I'll turn something ending with a zero
this year that starts tomorrow
as will my father, who shuffles more than steps now.
Let's call it Dread of the Inexorable Advancement
of the Future. Or What We All Know
of the Ills of Time. Or Forty Is Not the New Thirty.
Today and tomorrow are holidays,
then back to work, a story known as
The Meaninglessness of Modern Labor.
The work we do at desks or on phones
so far removed from finding food, shelter, clothes,
and so overwhelming, we could call this
The Lie of Progress. Soon others will wake,
and every action will carry the mock-weight
of being the last of the year: last shower, last
flossing, last kiss. Though it's just legerdemain
of the calendar. We can count a year from any moment.

Soon the song of the interior day
will take shape—scrape of dishes,
heavy feet on bare floors—and blend
with dogs barking at their backyards
and the grumble of cars carrying those who have to
to work today. Until we might call this Orchestra
of Loss. And All Its Many Blessings.

WHY TO FORGET

To sleep, you have to forget,
each night letting go
the grapes, the milk, the gin,
mouthwash and bread until the whole
grocery list unstitches. Then the news of wars
and the color of your hair, your daughter's
age and red rain boots. Metronome,
mendicant, cruet, then every word
you've known. Even your name.

Everything you forget
lines the path to sleep—
breadcrumbs of unknowing
marking nameless streets.

As you wake,
retrace your steps,
relearn any fact
or wish you find
left untouched
by night's ravenous birds.

David Colodney

CONDENSATION

Raindrops splatter on downtown towers' roofs,
forging spider-spoke alliances atop Miami.
You and I tiptoe the edges, breathing Biscayne Bay
clear down to Brickell. We're stormier than daily rains
bathing summer afternoons, chillier than scowling winds
before high tide. Lie down close to me, love. I'll shroud you
in a blanket and we'll pretend we have different names,
stories separate from the ones we lug like weights
drawn from mirages, answering questions
about where we've been, who we've seen.

Car horns blow in the street, our words echo under thunder,
windshield-wiper prayers baptizing us clean,
lie down close to me, love, I'll shroud you, lie.

Mary-Sherman Willis

SEA ANEMONE

A tentacled animal-flower blooms in ocean shallows.
Nestled with damselfish, they sea-sway

commensally, host and symbiont. Each wants
something from the other.

He's rooted to a rock by a sticky foot, all arms
and oral (a mouth at heart),

and toxic. Except to the damselfish who knows
not to nibble. That's the charm.

She's housed safe from harm in his current-
combing stingers, and keeps it clean.

So nourisher is nourished, clinger clung-to, ducking
zingers. Cross-currents work

them over. They're feeling clever; the tears shed,
the goring, not boring, ever.

Simon Perchik

*

You fold your arms the way this pasture
gnaws on the wooden fence
left standing in water—make a raft

though it's these rotting staves
side by side that set the Earth on fire
with smoke rising from the ponds

as emptiness and ice—you dead
are winter now, need more wood
to breathe and from a single finger

point, warmed with ashes and lips
no longer brittle—under you
a gate is opened for the cold

and though there's no sea you drink
from your hands where all tears blacken
—you can see yourself in the flames.

*

You drink from this hole
as if it once was water
became a sky then wider

—without a scratch make room
for driftwood breaking loose
from an old love song in ashes

carried everywhere on foot
as that ocean in your chest
overflowing close to the mouth

that's tired from saying goodbye
—you dig the way the Earth
is lifted for hillsides and lips

grasping at the heart buried here
still flickering in throats and beacons
that no longer recede— from so far

every word you say owes something
to a song that has nothing left, drips
from your mouth as salt and more salt.

Kari Gunter-Seymour

BECAUSE THE NEED TO SEE YOUR DAUGHTER
OVERCAME ALL SENSE OF REASON

we made it there and back in a flurry
of flap and catch. You fresh out of the VA
hospital, your story untold so long it re-booted
old terrors—brittle photos of mortar fire
and keening mothers. Me the tightrope girl
who rides her unicycle along the edges
of our sunny avenue, parade waving to the crowds,
trying to blink the red out of swollen eyes,
the overbite of my jaw scraping my lower lip.

Twenty-five hundred miles, empty
Pringles cans, beef jerky wrappers,
four-lane to two. Kansas rawboned
and weedy in the rearview worth
a whoop and high five.

Now homebound, the tip of my finger
traces a single drop of water as it travels
the length of the car window's glass.
The sky's faded edges fill with the glow
that comes after rain. I know soon
the dark above the clouds will do everything
it can to turn us. But for now there is this—
a star-carted sky, a trickle of grace,
our uneasy peace unwilling to unknot.

John Sibley Williams

SUPERNOVA

If the lights strung from the sky are far-off collapses, nearing, I can live with that. & if the names we give to the world don't break its surface. If I say *love* but mean something else entirely, you reply in kind, & so on. Though it gets harder to distinguish embellishment from memory, I am pretty sure as a father I'm meant to be more than this. I imagine, maybe remember, a horizon as urgent, gold as our expectations of it, & systems of stars named for fiercer animals than the ones I point out to my son. It hurts when I laugh at the wisdom, or lesson or lie or whatever you call the preserved parts of conversations thawed out for handing down, & I'd like to say I don't believe a word. In & over & through our view of each other, a spattering of bird shadow. Some newfound restlessness that's always been there. A new world on its way to wintering. & I say I can live with that. & I live with it. & it hurts so much less than forgetting.

John Sibley Williams

HONEST ATTEMPT

Even letting go of the dying will not illuminate the recesses light avoids. Tangling up toward sky, these vines are only climbable to a certain point & after that everything is fall. I'd be lying to say my town is made up of grass clippings and fences alone, or that seeds don't hold, if not tree, its possibility, or that I'm even trying, really, to get things right. I am trying to get it right this time, to be a different kind of animal. My son's hands manage my face into a smile, which has looked so long like a cut. But even knowing all mountains eventually flatline to prairie doesn't calm the birds in my trees. Each day more are heading south, though it is far from winter. I am trying, son, to see through to the other side of day, though I know it is not yet night.

THE STRANGERS

In the tented fields south of town,
soldiers or holy men or carnival folk
drive stakes through unspooled rope
& do their best to raise the dead. I
don't know how to interpret all this
canvas ascension. Dust kicks up in a
fury of construction. Our borders re-
draw. Evening quickens to bonfire
& star. But whatever distracts from
night, we go to it. Gunshot or over-
zealous prayer. Promises of earthly
beasts, or heavenly. Maybe the only
true thing is this autumn chill unzip-
ping our spines. & all these brilliant,
brash, desperate lights. & the dark
we sow around them.

Ted Haddin

NEAR CENTREVILLE, ALABAMA

It was the night Sam Bush, playing his fiddle for long hours, made the people get up and dance as if they'd never put foot to earth and felt their madness in firelight powers. It was an original performance you'd never hear again, arpeggios in the bluegrass, frenetic folksong pizzicatti, something in the center, like Old Joe Clark but not, then at the edge mixing St. Anne's Reel and Red-Haired Boy, resonating through trees to wild calling and thunderous stomping. What else could a fiddle play? Even if stars came down? Every move was made of something else. Nothing the same. It went into the night and after.

But there was another performance later, I hadn't counted on. Weary of dancing, I wandered along a path beside a small stream, not knowing which way to go. The path lay only one way home. Then I heard it. While I stood still, a slight wind came as of voices moaning and singing over the stream. They were moving, but stopped, as if to give me time to take them in, then started again. It was a mixed sound of mixed voices, none singing the same. They twisted like a flame in my ear. Was such singing out of the woods, where I was, did angels sing like this, the lost chords of an old testament? No echoes of Sam Bush's fiddle here. These, too, were sounds I'd never heard before. What were they saying to me they couldn't say to anyone else? If Heaven and Earth could speak together, this is what I heard. Then I knew which way I was going.

COMING BACK

Where I made my turn that day
it was long rows of bare trees
in an old pecan orchard and a rail
fence. As I drove, the fox appeared
beside the road. His sudden leaping
made me slow to a speed we could go.
His magnificent tail flowed through
openings in the rails. I steered eerily
as tiny black feet and tail effortlessly
floated along. I know I saw *him*, but
what did he see in the side of my car
as far as he could see? Or was he like
a dog, running to bark at my wheel.
Fox and man are nothing new. The
game was on—seen in this race they
could make a pair and maybe place.
In trying me, he increased the pace.
Whenever I got close, the car might
take a blow from the fence. Whether
he enjoyed this I'll never know. At
times I was loping with the fox in the
slow-motion flow of bodies, as they go.
He seemed to have no sense of ego or
pride in showing off. We kept this
flittering up for about a mile, till I,
turning left, thought I saw him smile
as he calmly veered right, and his tail
went out of sight. He left me in a cold
sweat. This was no question of who was
fooling who, or how he went, or how
my eye was bent to see him to the end.
We know who won. It was black, red-
brown and white all the way. Today what
fox might feel was all his own and far off;
for me the wonder of being this close to
a moving fox was in keeping to the wheel.
Could I have done this without a car? I
don't know how to run. I remember him
like a dream. From where he came, I was
certain he spoke for something I'd forgotten.

Ted Haddin

GUEST

I am walking through my house.
The guest has brought me
to my seneses.
Piles of papers have disappeared,
books back in their places;
manuscripts ready to be written,
aisles again become empty spaces.
I am free to be here.
Something has opened up
six years of accumulated dust
and academic debris.
I remember the guest
who played his violin
and hurried to his next event.
Then spoke the night and,
amid our conversations,
returned my self to me.

POSTCARD TO RANDY BLYTHE

Dear Randy, I know you are writing
a super-high kind of poetry, a gut-and-
head remembrancer with splendor
nobody else can sing or utter. Don't
be lost on anything you don't want
to remember, but spring the word-
spreader's latest news of you. I've
waited on silence I feel in the air
and by your doorway where sun
still shines and rain sometimes comes.
Of course, your place isn't any different
from mine, where weeds appear for
grass, and words recede in time.

Carolina Morales

BLABBERMOUTH NIGHT AT “THE PLACE”

WITH JACK SPICER

the poet who said he received poesy from
the dead—read their signals—followed
orders from beyond—took dictation from

satellite stations—transcribed outer realms—
who encouraged others to bleep noises—
broadcast disembodied voices—babble—

beam in “Martian” waves—push language
like furniture between material and invisible
worlds; this man gravitated with sorrows

and complications—later quarantined into
desolation—dismembered from his Berkeley
companions—self-exiled from his origins,

personal history, record of birth, as if born
through dislocation into a galaxy far from earth.

Katherine Gekker

LANGUAGE CONSUMES FIRE
– STOCKHOLM 1955

Mordbrand the crowd whispers, *mordbrand*, arson –
an arsonist is torching Stockholm's buildings.
Winter solstice bonfires – heat singes eyebrows, eyeballs feel liquid,
our backs turn to ice – we cast long shadows on blue snow.
Arson is a new word, burned into the brain –

Struwwelpeter's Pauline plays with matches, flames leap.
She dances, her dress is made of fire. Someone kneels
in buildings' shadows, lights kerosene-soaked rags. Fire
licks at children's dreams, children scream, no words for their
nightmares. Even a mound of ashes needs language to exist –

In the dark morning, Sankta Lucia's crown of candles blazes,
her body the miracle flames cannot touch. We spoon lingonberry
jam onto Sankta Lucia's sweet rolls, *lussekatter*. We sing her
Swedish song to an Italian melody, we speak English in school,
at home we speak many languages. It depends on what is being said.

Once you have language, how can you extinguish it?
Language: arsonist, arson; *mordbrännare*, *mordbrand*;
building, no building. Fire's order: spark, catch, blaze, destroy.
Fire extinguishes, even itself – it cannot distinguish.

THE WORLD TREMBLES, THE WORLD MASQUERADES

May, acid green like a new
snake, past scorched August
into September bursting orange,
I played around, strayed from you, beloved.
A new love put a spell on me, promised
—oh, the promises— if only I would
leave you behind—

would you even know or care?

Then October's early morning light
slanted, frost gleamed on crisped
grass. Fog smoked, dallied over a pond,
dread winter hovered. I shivered, a hand
lingered on my shoulder, a touch so light
it didn't warm me.

Something—an airborne
jellyfish? transparent skate?—shimmered,
skimmed invisible waves, flew at me, I
couldn't take my eyes off it—it
dazzled, glittered, I stepped aside to avoid –
a spider's web—filaments glinting,
gliding from its anchor into this web

of the wind's choosing. I turned, watched
the web float by, disappear. No one else
noticed anything—I wondered why—

Then I remembered who I am and
then I remembered who
can I tell this to but you?

Carol Sanders

BENDING FOR LIMBO

Another perfect day in Buffalo
sky blue as the Virgin's cape, dollops
of alabaster clouds, fervent,

a shimmering white tent disappears
the lawn at the old folks home, crowded
today with family and friends.

The steel drum trio charms the crowd with "Down
by the seashore, Mary Ann." Bamboo sticks mark time
but only the singer dances.

A pretty young woman, Chanel sunglasses
on her head, bounces a baby on her knee,
ignores the old lady beside her like a teenage boy

disregards the road sign, "Curve ahead."
Blood red geraniums, orange day lilies,
nurses flit, hold an elbow here, pat

a shoulder, lean in to catch a soft request
linger to talk with a lone gentlemen,
comfort a sobbing woman.

Blindfolded Shamika, Queen of the Limbo,
in her red Spandex leotard, sparkling trim,
palms two trays of teacups, bends

and squirms, bends and squirms under the pole
balanced between two beer bottles only
18 inches above the ground, suspended in time.

The bandleader closes with "Daylight come
and me want to go home." We drift inside
for supper and evening meds.

In the hall, a stooped black-haired crone licks
a chocolate ice cream cone and warns,
"watch yourself, there are stairs to heaven in here."

Janice Whittington

BIRDING

An immature Cooper's hawk on the telephone pole
scans sparse winter grass below.
Eyes and legs yellow, speckled bib fluffed,
he owns his range, or is learning to.

Nearby, in the bare red oak,
a cardinal sings on this February morning,
his feathers naming the tree, his song calling
to someone, someone.

At the pond, a green heron
stands in slim silhouette,
neck hunched into shoulders,
eye peering, beak ready.

Audubon shot and pinned birds
to a board, posing them, inking
their likenesses on handmade paper,
color bleeding inside the lines.

Am I stealing these feathers
for my own, my camera lens the bullet
that enters their breasts, my film the taxidermy
fluid to stiffen them?

Let me go bare naked birding, only my eyes
capturing the black mask of cedar waxwing,
the blushing chest of house finch,
a cormorant low in the water and serene.

Jennifer Highland

LANDSCAPE WITH BURNING BUSH

1. This is how it begins:

the struck match hurled
again and again
until instead of faltering mid-air
or dying into the ground
the spark catches hold
claws over drought-parched wood
and suddenly roars forth tangerine tongues
so that the two barehanded boys
open-mouthed, freckled with ash
matchbook dropped at their feet
riveted by what they've made
abruptly unfreeze
turn and sprint
as a spreading circle of hectic grass
screams at their heels

2. And this is how it begins:

the rain-cloaked sky split by a roar
that breaks the darkness in two
and through that crack
a light almost too bright to bear
screams into the ordinary world
—and even as the sky slams shut behind it
the light seeds itself in a fury
of flaming leaves
smoke spreading like prophecy

3. And this is how it begins:

metallic rain hurled from the sky
ignites as it slams against
parched ground
goat grass and branching olive
while high above
the roar of a motor
where two boys look down
at two boys looking up
through smoke

4. And this is how it ends:

scarlet twigs claw the darkness
dismembered embers
scatter like seed, bright legions in the grass
that will rise up at daybreak
a purifying heat
that soars, spreads

5. This is how it ends:

two heads bowed before a
blaze of branches
speaking in tongues
scorched
scarlet
prophecy roaring in their ears
eyes, seared naked of lashes
open wide to the furious light

Barbara Lawhorn

EVEN WORDS FAIL TO PROTECT YOU

The moments of greatest
tenderness, you don't share

with anyone. Your newly come
daughter, in the moments after

your husband abandons you both
for the *Survivor* season finale.

Breathing the world for only hours,
at your milk-stone breast, wordless hunger

and need unmet, unable to nurse. A howl
in you both, still there as she thresholds

to teenager. Umbilical cord. You scissor it,
again and again. Your favorite professor,

passenger side of the minivan you swore
you'd never own. Wise and sorrowful.

It's not about you, he said, not unkindly, meaning
it all. All of it. He read aloud to another version

of you. Saved you from social work. Gently
questioned the idea of your marriage, so young

and twenty years later, as divorce unspools,
he seems an oracle. His words a mantra.

Under your son's coiled rage, his heart
is a honeycomb. He has to fight you before

you can pour him into your lap. Before his love
is something he can't contain. He is a jelly jar, shattered.

You can't hold his immense sweetness.
Mama, he croons, half-song-half-sob.

The first man you invite into your bed—into your
body—into your brain, you love profoundly, expansively

and without question. Maybe you shouldn't. You have been walking
without skin. Even words fail to protect you or articulate

what is between you—Steinbeck's folded map, creased with use,
such letters written, thousands of miles and three months

traversed. You whisper he does not have to be
so gentle. *Yes. Yes, I do.* His stillness shakes you.

You press your ear to skin, listen
to the cadence of his heart, steady—

tires rotating on road as you slip
into sleep, child in the back seat.

Good-bye. Good-bye. Good-bye.

Kali Lightfoot

COUSIN MARGARET'S FRIEND, 1955

Cousin Margaret opened her door, smiling.
A sweater wrapped tight around her,
she spoke of the chill in Miami that day.
Pale, fey woman, shy with us—
her cousins from the North—an exotic bird
who might at any moment disappear.

Margaret's friend lightly touched her
shoulder, then filled the space
beside her, smiled, and shook
my father's hand. They led us to the parlor
for coffee and pie. We balanced china
plates and cups, the adults "catching up."
The friend promised to take me
to her pet store, making her my hero,
I, the kid who "rescued" sick birds
from our yard back home.

Later my dad and the friend went out back,
laughing together, ripping the husks
from coconuts on a sharpened metal stake,
tall and lethal. Next morning after breakfast
a young man knocked, whisked into the parlor
by Margaret's friend, murmuring head to head,
poring over charts. "Her bookie," my mom
whispered. "She's betting on the horses!"
We all went to Hialeah Race Track that afternoon.

This was years before Cousin Margaret died,
"A bum ticker," my dad said.
Margaret's friend sat in her car outside
her pet store with an old rag stuffed
in the exhaust pipe. Mom and Dad
just clucked their tongues and exchanged a glance.

Half my life went by before I understood.
Now I too have loved a woman and lost
her to death. But not to silence—

I wish I could sit in the parlor
with Margaret's friend, ask how they met,
ask about their life together; push aside
the china cups and take her hand.
I wish I knew her name.

C. W. Emerson

EASTER PORTRAIT, 1964 (FATHER TO SON)

I hold the snapshot
close to the lamp.

The print is faded, sepia-toned;
only hints of color remain.

You were three years old,
and dressed for Easter—

shorts and knee socks,
sport coat, cap.

You are handing me a crocus.
I bend to receive it.

I am your father, twenty-five,
and you, my eldest son.

Your grandmother's garden
is glazed with light.

I look up
from my hospital bed,

hoping for a glimpse
of Carolina moon.

My night-sky rider,
sweet bantling boy:

how far have you come
for this vigil—

and what have I done
to deserve you so
near?

LAST REQUEST

for my father

You call out to us from the edge
of a field we sense but cannot see.

If you could, you'd get into a car,
set the gear, disappear into the night.

No one would question your leaving.
Your children are middle-aged now.

Here the pollen falls like dust
from the pines and great oaks.

It coats and shadows the glass
of the hospital windows.

Here, the southern Bradford Pear
hurls its blossoms into the world,

and the dogwood's thin branches
bear the weight of their own flowers.

You've made your life amid these woods.
Your children have settled elsewhere.

I come because you ask me to, bringing
your daughter, my sister, to see you.

You haven't seen her in years.
You speak to her in whispers.

She writes the names of the dead
on the back of old Kodak prints.

I watch as the two of you work,
your hands making bridges

of spark and light and remembrance.

Heather Steadham

AT LIBERTY

C-section skin
hangs heavy.

Crow-crinkled eyes,
knees like elephants,
heels scaly
as a centuries-old tortoise.

No longer even human.

I'd like to get an oyster knife.
Pierce that scar & shuck my hide—
save my skeleton
from its surfeit sheath.

But how difficult would it be
to free my fingers,
that've tickled the feet
of my children?

My ears, that revel in thunder
before tornado?

My tongue, that aches to taste
a sfogliatella
one more time
before my bones tread free?

NOS FOR THE PROPER MODERN SOUTHERN GIRL

donuts

Dr. Pepper

ice cream

bread

if it tastes good, spit it out,

my grandma said

miniskirts

eyeliner

Spandex

flats

you can't catch a decent man

looking like that

glasses

bare face

naked nails

frowns

or do you want the boys to think

you'll always turn them down?

tattoos

piercings

hair of pink

or blue

if God had meant for those to happen

he'd've made them born on you

skipping Sundays

names in vain

rock & roll

& drinking wine

a Christian girl just trusts the Book

and not her fallen, wicked mind

smiling in public

speaking to strangers

laughing out loud

(just what kind of message are you trying to send, anyway?)

Jenna Bazzell

GHAZAL: THE NIGHT UNDRASSES AND

the moon lacquers the cloud shelf, the blooming weight
of crape myrtles. Fog pools. The telephone cables wait
for hawks to perch, to resemble what has passed: lonely
like the dead in the earth, like roots of saw grass waiting
for something else. Until then, I'll remember I belong
to a family where loss looms inside grief with the weight
of utter ruin, of hail-battered foxglove collapsing. I pray
to what I am not: a cloud of gnats, a womb. My body waits,
wants to slip between mistakes. The hours filled with plumes
of smoke, the volume of fingernails. The unremarkable weight
of a glass door sliding shut. A mouth opening. For the room
to cave in, to stop raining. For tonight's tight ball of red weight
to burrow inside me. Let it consume me. Let it smell
like burning plastic fumes. Tell me: What am I waiting
for here I haven't for before? To resume tilling up old
stones, training legume runners. How long must I wait
to be forgiven? Instead, another gloomy day, another
broken broom handle, an empty jar to be weighted
against the dark. Your mouth is not a dead moon. A fawn
attempts to stand assuming it is able to hold up its own weight.

CRAYONS

The first time I was six.
The box of crayons my mother

insisted *are to stay*
on the bookshelf. I couldn't wait.

The color names of robin's eggs,
outer space, inchworm, and apricot

lured me. I wanted them all.

I took them to school.

I drew a cornflower, a plate

of macaroni & cheese, bicycle wheels,
a field of shamrocks, a lump of coal —

lightning, the inside of a well.

Mint green tiles and peeling wallpaper, a plastic fern
hanging over the rock vanity and wall-length mirror

where in reflection my grandmother saw the bruises
scattering my back like rain clouds, but didn't ask

what happened or *who did it* but instead ignored them,
rubbed my head with the towel, asked about
long division, my annoyance with remainders.

While it happened, my mother's breath
curved over my back like a hook smelling
like mold and I imagined what mango tango
would taste like. I could hear the cry of a timber
wolf, a hiss of enfolding wings, and held the bloom
of thistle between my fingertips, but the feeling of raw
umber buried itself in my belly —

I could have stayed.

John C. Mannone

BREAKFAST AT MIDNIGHT

We are hungry after we kissed
all night in our driveway, and later
at an IHOP, the host splits our order
—two large pancakes & eggs—
places them in black styrofoam boxes.

We eat our midnight snack in the car
still running because we had to jump
the battery; it completely discharged
because we left the tailgate open
to let the cool honeysuckle breeze in
and hear the swish of pines where
spring's first fireflies flashed together
with the cool gauzy light of stars—
green scintillations sparking the haze
of a hot mayapple moon.

I lean across the console, whisper
something holy, then caress her
face. We kiss. That salt-sweet savor
—bacon & maple syrugging our lips—
lingers
 even after fifty years.

Ed Hack

MORE

What more than light that seems a song of ease,
a breeze that plays inside the trees like kids
who laugh themselves to sleep? There are the seas,
remote and difficult, whose winds forbid
the hope embedded in the DNA
of dreams, that redefine what balance means.
And there are evenings perfect as a day
that dawns in blood and fire and seems a dream
of how the furnace of creation glows.
Each dying autumn day, the wind-whipped ice
December flays, the spring's hot perfumed rose,
and summer's last-forever paradise.
Each time is more, and with each more there's less.
And then? About that we can only guess.

EARLY MORNING, SOUTH FLORIDA

I know that orange fire in the east,
that dying into blue. I've come back to
this dawn down south where fire is unleashed
that cools to blue and charcoal gray, the new
day being born. And then it's blue and white
that's towering, and all there is is sky,
a pouring clarity that's chiseled bright
from silvered sun, a white that clarifies,
astringent as the truth. Below, among
the trees, soft gold, a burnished glow, ignites
the leaves to kindling. Who says the dumb
don't speak? They've never seen the morning light,
the candles of the dawn vermeer the trees,
so silence is a language now set free.

Richard Perkins

FLARE

You unknotted the sun a lesser vastness
solar magma which becomes the
reflection on your teeth you released
your wild shadows to the reclusive frontier
where we had once lain unknown to
anyone hidden at high noon you
pantomimed aviantradewinds
plummeting through humidhandholds
day barely black you hummed in grayest gloom

You gave
away an ounce of restraint
the scent of asphalt driveways
you sloughed
off a thin spindly glint
burrowing into a condensation of failure
and drew back your lips killing the angels
of your lesser self sweating contempt
and little yellow flowers
sun bleach will someday cleanse all—
you descend into optics smiling.

NIMBUS OF NIGHT

Lost outlines —

a wall
taken by darkness

heaviest ether
descends

upon beech tree
crickets

flailed
by cold
lake breeze

nimbus of night
purchased

with the dying
soft coin

of moon.

Leah Browning

VANCOUVER-BEIJING

The day you left, you sent me a message,
a single line on your way to what I used to think
was the other side of the world:

About to board, Vancouver-Beijing.

I don't remember whether I answered.
For days, you kept up a chatty correspondence:
You got a traditional massage,
you reluctantly tried a bite of roasted durian.

It was near midnight there when you called
and told you me that you'd visited Tiananmen
Square. It was fifteen hours earlier
in California, the morning of the same day.

We hung up and you went to sleep.
It was already the next day in Beijing
when I saw the BBC News report
about the attack in Tiananmen Square.

After you left the site, a vehicle drove into
a crowd of tourists, then caught fire. Five people
had been killed, almost forty injured. Black smoke
flowed up from the burning wreckage.

The following June, eight people were sentenced
for their roles in planning the attack. Five received
prison sentences: five to twenty years, and for one, life.
The other three were sentenced to death.

Xinhua News Agency reported that they
had traveled to Beijing earlier that October
to deliver money to buy what was needed.
A jeep, for example. Gasoline, knives.

At some point, they must have gone
to sleep, tired after a long day's work.
It was fifteen hours earlier, then,
here in California. I was pouring milk

into a glass, scrambling eggs. The cat
rested his head for a moment against my leg.
You were climbing the ladder into the attic,
whistling, pulling down your suitcase.

Holly Welker

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

An arid December morning, the sun
heaving itself listlessly through a sky
dull with particulate and refinery smoke.
It's my birthday, the second since my mom
died. How did it take so long to feel,
somewhere near my sternum, that I'm
celebrating the day I outgrew her,
and that she probably found it no picnic?

Two birthdays ago, the last she was alive,
she didn't call. I called her but she couldn't
talk, too weak from age and disease and
their treatments. She spent my birthday praying
to die, till she realized it would ruin
Christmas. She prayed for the pain to go away
till it didn't, and then she prayed to endure it.

She endured it. We endured her death late
in March, her funeral on Good Friday.
"This'll ruin Easter," my religious family
complained. A godless heathen, I pointed out
that being buried on Good Friday worked
OK for Jesus. We endured a Christmas without
her, and the first anniversary of her gruesome
death, till it felt a little less like endurance.

No reason now to pretend I don't like
friends and presents just because Mom's gone.
My sister calls, full of good wishes. I'm telling
her about the party I have planned when
a great horned owl glides on enormous wings to
land in the ponderosa pine outside my fifth-floor apartment.

"Holy shit! You should see this big huge owl
in my tree," I say. Still on the phone, I grab
my camera, open the window. The owl looks
directly at me for three or four pictures, then,
bored, swivels its head on its freaky rotating
neck and surveys the ground. I keep snapping
till it decides I'm annoying and flaps away.

The owl's a sign. It has to be: messenger of wisdom
and truth, conveying invitations to study magic
and sometimes messages from the dead.
A good sign generally, a better sign when one
shows up on a birthday in daylight downtown.

Or it's a sign that this one hasn't found a mate,
wants to expand its territory, wants to eat
the frenetic squirrel living in that tree.
Whatever. It's a sign. It's a big package of wild
outside my urban home. It's a gorgeous aloof predator
fierce enough to scare away a full flock of pigeons.
It's alarming yellow eyes that peer fearlessly
into mine and a neck that does things mine can't.
It's a brief, startling, uncanny greeting from
the world on the day I decided many years ago
to check the world out, and it's one more thing I'll love
and remember and miss in this world so full of lack.

Holly Welker

VAGABOND

The four corners of
the globe were nailed down
with thumb tacks. I pried
them up and folded the world
into a tidy parcel of colored shapes
that fit in my back pocket.

I had strong ankles
and shoes I didn't mind
wearing out. I had a watch
I never checked and a clear
understanding that the sun
set in the west.
Even when I was lost
I was never lost.
I was seeking a fastness of
my own soul to escape to,
a remote and secret place
tucked obscurely in some
vast and howling wilderness
on the desolate backside of a
mountain peak everyone else
liked looking at from the
tranquility of the valley floor.

Even when I was homesick
I was never homesick.
The countryside frothed with
bad coffee and dirty weather,
held few theaters and not
a single gallery, which meant
it was just like home.

I skulked along a winding border
I could've crossed with a nimble leap,
wanting to keep my options open.
I skirted the question
of itinerary as early cartographers
skirted the question of inland detail.

I kept to my dogged miserly path,
brooding on solitude
and heading in the direction
a stiff, rusty weathervane
indicated would lead to wide, high
mesas and a few spectacular views.

There I was, climbing a mountain
littered with rocks and
the homes of very rich people.
No one wanted me there
and autumn rains came early.
When rain turned to snow, I hit
another wanton wanderer up
for a bottle, then passed out,
drunk on borrowed radiance
under a prodigal moon. Frantic
shadow formed a gown of mist
trailing her slender curved body,
while stars glinted behind her
like so many silver pins in
a clingy black dress.
On the ground, drifts of snow
lay like sheets discarded
in the night, waiting to be
picked up and wound
around a torso still glowing
with a patina of exertion and desire.

Abruptly I came to, knowing
suddenly where I belonged:
not in the country
I was in or even the one
across the border, but the one
beyond that, the one requiring
a passport I'd have to steal and
counterfeit, the one I'd never be
a citizen of, but still
the only country where
I'd ever feel at home.

K. B. Ballentine

THE BURNING OF FLIPPER BEND

Smoke smothers the ridge,
chokes the gorge—97 days since rain
washed the creek beds, dusty tracks riddled
where clay shrinks and cracks.

Soddy Lake anchored in puddles,
banks scabbed, crusted with soot.
Blue herons, green light on the dock
blurred, no current to beat against—

Sky the hazy yellow of an air raid.
Houses and cars caked with pollen
from burning pine and thistle,
all that moves or stays masked—
ash of bird bone, a fox pup,
teeth still steaming from the heat.

Butterflies vanished—caterpillar sacs
morphed into blazing stars. Night sparks
with wings that will never fly.
Seeds dried and split, clouds secret,
somewhere far away, folding over a gray horizon
while we wait here, tongues parched, growing mute.

FORGETFULNESS OF RAIN

Rain echoes in my dreams—
drizzling hush that shifts
into syncopated downpour.

I wake to sunsplit clouds,
leaves that crackle and whirl
into faerie winds and frisk
down the road, quelled
only by the dying breeze,
the rising heat this November.

Thunder grumbles
then withers into distance
and patterns each day until we weary
of ourselves, our thoughts
shriveling like the azaleas,
the hostas not bothering to bloom.
Even the raspberries yield only thorns.

Squirrels nudge acorn husks,
consider the leftover birdseed.
Ravens shadow the back deck,
and the nuthatch spirals down
the bark of the blackgum until I'm dizzy
with longing, my hands empty.

My heart waits the promise of rain...
of faeries... of sustenance—anything
but this bleak winter desert.

Grant Clauser

THE TATTOOIST'S LAMENT

It will be an eagle in flight
or a heart, or another damn
panther clawing its way up
an arm that's never been in a fight,
but we'll both have to live
with this—the drawn out quiet
in a church just before the minister
speaks, when the needle
first breaks skin, then finally
an ink line begins, then blood
and we both know there's no
going back. She'll go home,
watch blood turn to scab
and I'll scrawl the next tramp stamp
below an elastic waistline,
watch another emblem of mine
walk out the door and around
the world, stretching, aging,
part of late night explanations
maybe someone's great regret.
I've marked enough bare skin
to shame a hundred congregations,
to sew a leather jacket for god
with hieroglyphs to read its history.
Some days I pack up my ink vials,
peel off rubber gloves like a snake
shedding its skin and wonder where
this walking gallery is now,
some burning up on beach sand,
some hidden from parents,
others reaching past rolled-up sleeves.
Our work has the only canvas
that remembers the day before
it lived, a life unmarked, and then
the life beyond. But how many
remember my name, the hand
that carved Together Forever
when someone thought forever
was something they couldn't change.

BLUE WILLOW

Every week my grandmother brought home another
Blue Willow dish from the Catasauqua A & P.
Some weeks a cup and saucer, some weeks
two pie plates or gravy boat, whatever
her change purse could spare until
a year of night shifts at the iron works went by
and she could sit the family down at Christmas,
beam over the the English-made china
on her walnut table, blue pagoda,
fisherman poling a junk past the small bridge,
a pair of swallows swooping above willows,
while cousins passed potatoes, scooped spoons
of Cope's corn onto the scene of lovers
escaping a tyrant father, then fold
her depression apron over the chair,
hoping that checks from the factory
would keep coming while neighbors packed
their cars, moved to the city
to look for work at the telephone company,
maybe a job as a brewery worker
or something else that lasts.

David Armand

DEBT

A knock on the front door as you play in the den
with your brother and your older sister.
Your mom gets up from the sofa to answer it.
Then you hear her screaming as a man pushes
his way into the house, a gun pointing
at her face. She tells you and your siblings
to run, hide under the bed. You can't remember
anything else from that morning except for this:
the man asking where your father is, saying
he's here to collect his money, a payment
on a shady loan. But your father's at work
and probably wouldn't pay him anyway,
even if he was here and could see his kids
hiding in a quivering row underneath their bed
like the three little pigs in that story your mom reads,
the one about the big bad wolf who blows down
all their poorly-made houses—all except for one.

Dixon Hearne

BLOOD ROOTS

He left on a Saturday bound for nowhere—
leaving debts and bruises in his wake.
Thirteen years, enough to train a young boy's mind
on flash and flimflam. Buck authority! Beat the system!
Sadness runs the family roots—
sins of the father, retribution
infecting every branch
with fruit of broken spirits, broken lives.

Matthew W. Schmeer

DEAR CAROL:

When we move across the days like this, with no place to go, nothing between us but the night, the movement of one thing to the next, the love of the place where we sleep, the grooves we've worn into the cushions, the chairs, the bed, and although we try to grasp what it is that keeps us here, circling the emptiness that has engulfed us, there is no way to know what it is that we want, what we truly look for in the silence of the room when the other goes to sleep, the rest that comes too easily from the lunge toward selfishness that keeps us tied to the moor of sleep.

Jeff Griffin

SPARKLE, STUTTER, LEAVE

Plexiglas flowers
dissolve in the tongue.

Silken contamination,
dress sounds—cut smoke and jewelry

pieces, a curly feather,
a lung smell, westbound

eyes, deep asphalt.

His teeth on her long arm,
memories that sound different...

ear against the wall
listening to coordinates.

It's almost time for soft leather,
warm dreams, perfume,

an overflowed whisper,
knives and soft pollen.

Lisa Marie Brodsky

THE SPY

The dim light bulbs on the houseboat
flicker “shh...shh...”

I gasp the icy air, taste the dead lake fish
spring from my tongue.

My ear an open palm, my eyes an open clam.
Three men crowd around a splintered table

and point to maps, flick around
hundred dollar bills.

I’m at the window, ducking as
each head bobs by.

Littered with ash and grounds,
their discarded coffee plots revenge.

Fists pound the table and when
they file out the door

like rogue schoolboys
sneaking out of a smoke-filled latrine

I take a deep breath and dive back under,
slippery fins grazing my face.

Every new secret a bubble
I exhale out my nose.

Janet Cannon

FLAWED ALGORITHM

just so you know
seventy-eight cents
is not equal to one

work place same job
dollar plus we are
not here for corporal

pleasure or disdain
we protest and
suggest you go back

to the element of
the dis functioning
calculator and redo

the equation so that
 x equals x and y equals
 y are absolute like

a woman is a woman
equals a man is a man
any questions?

LETTING GO

trying to let go we hold
on to letting go too tightly
like living with a mythical
mind brace like limping
down the street with
gum on the soles of
summer sandals sticky
steps slow everything
holding on exposes
hesitation for the future
of desires and dismissals
acquitting years of why
and why not of loving
magic and dancing
like wild horses holding
onto the wind in an open
field alone without bridled
expectations we have
tried letting go of holding
onto us it has been years
since we were we and
spoke out loud about us
years since warm air kept
us cozy years since
you left our harmony
without closing the door

Sarah Dickenson Snyder

AFTER THE WAR

My grandmother drove across the country
with three children, one old enough
to drop off at the Taylors' sugarcane farm, friends

from another time. The long drive
way was miles from the nearest town.
The land looked barren, save the waves

of stalks that my dad would have to slay.
He told us about those weeks. The loneliness.
The meager food on chipped plates. The evenings

endless, quiet, wind-filled. But mostly
about the rattlesnakes he knew were there
in the thatch of stalks while he hacked.

How wind rattled everything.
How he devised the lie that would pull
him off the farm, land him on an ice truck,

his tee-shirt wet with sweat and melted
blocks of ice. One night when all three
were in the room—my father, the farmer,

and his wife, the phone rang—my grandmother,
her only summer call. When she hung up,
he stayed on, faked a conversation for the farmer

and his wife—*Oh no! Uncle David died?! Yes...
I'll head back by train tomorrow.*
He packed his bag that night

and at the station the next morning,
waved goodbye to a man and woman
he would never see again, along with their machete,

the rattlesnakes, drudgery, and fear.
We loved that lie and the boy who hauled
blocks of ice for weeks until he had enough

money for a train ticket, the boy who found
a room at the Y. We loved his cowboy spirit,
his finding a way home on his own.

Joanna White

SESTINA FOR MY GRANDMOTHER

My summer grandmother,
water-coloring in her garden—artist
scanning with eyes of hazel blue,
hair wisped in a bun, bone white—
dashing at the shrieking of the kettle,
pausing in the door frame to laugh

Her sparkled laugh,
her harsh tongue. My grandmother,
noisy when she clanged the kettle
but first and foremost an artist
with a canvas of foam white,
and crystal eyes of blue.

Sketching in winter, she blew
on her hands; not often did she laugh.
Her pearls glimmered white,
elegant. Grandmother
with paints, a true artist.
In her yellow kitchen, a kettle

sang, a blasting, cacophonous kettle.
She served me butter tarts on plates of blue,
banging cabinet doors, that headstrong artist,
in a kitchen flecked with laughs.
Small child with her grandmother
flipping Scrabble tiles, antique white.

Into flower-sprigged china, eggshell white
she hissed tea from the kettle,
looking at me—my grandmother
with bore-through-you irises of blue.
Admiring my crayon drawings, we'd laugh
and she'd say I was an artist.

We went to class (she was a student artist)
saw a model with skin of seashell white
posing naked for the class without a laugh.
Tea from the kitchenette kettle
warmed students brushing oils of blue,
while I waited by the window for my grandmother.

At her final show as an artist, we drank black tea from a kettle.
With puffy face, ghostly white in a dress of peacock blue,
she could only weakly laugh, but she was still my grandmother.

Jocelyn Heath

EPITHALAMION

*Now lay those sorrowfull complaints aside,
And having all your heads with girland crown'd,
Helpe me mine owne loves prayes to resound,
Ne let the same of any be envied...*

—Edmund Spenser

This morning, the leaves were Army gold
as fall first crossed into Atlanta.
At the pavilion in the park, I picked up
a few that'd fallen on the grass,
laid them back on the railing and thought
of an arbor in this same early stillness,
its wood cool and dappled with shadow,
awaiting a procession. You,
behind the silver satins and deep red silks,
light of the gowns glancing off live oaks
that edge a green lawn. Men draped
with earth shades follow behind
the niece all in pink. Your hand
on your father's elbow. You see him, waiting,
but in your eye,
the arbor
meets a second sky where a summer arch
twirled with fairy lights casts disco shades
across the white of her gown, and yours
when you reach her. Her fingers in the morning,
in every morning together: warmed by a teacup
or you. She slips you a daisy and disappears
behind an eyelid. Step forward:
his haystack hair and tux, this one you've chosen.

You were one of us. I watched you chase
rebounds, hit layups, kiss your girl quick before
sprinting to half court. We danced the sticky floor
at Coconuts with drag kings whose beards
sagged in the heat. After my split, after I left
the fold, I quilted your memories in t-shirt squares
backed in Army gold. We haven't talked
since I left it with you, but I see your photos:
him, and him, and both of you an iceberg

Mercedes Lawry

IN HIDING

In the hollow
of the half-dark
swallow of moon

with the stink
of leaf mold,
glisten of snail.

Crouched
like a spent iris
between weeping trees,

I look out
on wild filigree,
listening for

sounds beyond
river-rush
and nighthawks,

risking small breaths
a moth wing
from silence.

SOLITUDE IN MANY GUISES

Damp earth surrounds a small heart
of slight, irregular beats,
where each pause is a reminder
of swollen rivers loud with rain,
subsiding, by slow degrees, to the empty.

A night daunted by sleeplessness,
where a vestigial moon interrupts stars
bruised without echo. Caught in a room
clotted with ruined hours and no exit.

Desolate bones rise up from the blue ice
like forget-me-nots, petals so perfect,
suggestive of a life understood as symmetry,
the lyric intact.

This solitude is mine and devoid of music,
a tightrope walker with no audience,
the only gasps, her own, when a sly wind
leaks in to wobble the wire and the temptation
to fall is like a summons from a field of new clover,
its sweet, soft green.

Claire Scott

GRETEL & HANSEL

Dear Reader,

I need to clarify the record
the woods we wandered
were not at all lovely
but definitely dark & deep
no sunlight rimpled
through wide branches
breadcrumbs gone by noon
Hansel sniveling, lagging behind,
grousing how hungry he is
& suddenly there it is
the iconic gingerbread house
covered with gum drops & lifesavers
ginger snaps & spun sugar
I tell Hansel to steer clear
we all know this story
but the stupid boy snatches
a candy cane & of course
the witch grabs him with her bony fingers
& bottomless cackle
stuffs him into the cage (again)
what is a sister to do
poor Hansel can only handle so much
abandonment before psychosis sets in
the dumb witch keeps forgetting that
she shouldn't crawl into the oven
to show me how
some sort of repetition compulsion
so it was pretty easy to do her in (again)
snag the jewels (again)
but let me interrupt myself here, dear reader,
I have to tell you I am sick of this fairytale
Hansel always gets top billing
the story always listed under "H"
but I was the one who schlepped water,
baked bread, scrubbed the house with Q-tips,
ate crab shells for supper
while he got roast chicken & French fries

I am the one who stuffed the witch in the oven
suffering second degree burns
I am the one stuck with PTSD
nightmares stealing my sleep
not Hansel who has completely
forgotten/repressed the story &
sleeps like the log he is.

& now, dear reader, please excuse us
I need to drag Hansel home (again)
we have miles to go before we sleep.

Yours truly,
Gretel

Claire Scott

HOW DID WE

how did we survive
you and I

a mother chasing us with knives
a father pretending not to know
how did we survive
driving eighty miles an hour
through a tollbooth
her shrieks of delight

how did we survive
mayonnaise sandwiches
in our greasy lunch bags
Chef Boyardee suppers
the taste of burnt mixed
with cigarette ash

how did we survive
her locked bathroom door
I will swallow every pill
the creak of the medicine cabinet
our father in his wingback chair
reading the Evening Bulletin

you who left
weighing less than a sparrow
checking the scale each morning
seeing a therapist five times a week
for twenty years

I who stayed
sipping wine at three pm
wandering the halls at night
seeing four different doctors for
prescriptions of Percoset

how did we ever survive

Melissa Esposito

CLEAN

Science says our skin cells shed.
We decompose and regrow.
I stand in the shower and scrub until my skin turns pink.
Until I'm raw.
I want thighs you've never touched,
I want a body you've never kissed.

The ghost of your fingerprints won't go away.
I can feel the light touch of them on my knee while your mom was
speaking.
I can feel them running across my back as you confessed you loved me
in the dark.
I don't want to be haunted anymore.

I use loofahs, exfoliants, scalding hot water, but nothing works.
Your lips still trail down my neck, my collarbone.
My hands still crave your fingers laced in mine, like muscle memory.
Your breath shivers against my ear, an unsettled spirit that won't leave.

I scratch at my skin until red tracks mark it, bright in the steam.
I keep waiting for an exorcism that won't come.
I don't want to remember you.

I just want to be
Clean.

Dianne Silvestri

GRANDMA

Too small to know the address
of the house with the rockered porch—
Grandma's rich palace—
but I know how she filled my doll bottle
with milk so I could help
the naked baby bunny
I found under her hedge

how she held my hand on the walk
to the dark outdoor toilet
and waited for me to finish

how she stood me up on a chair
on the kitchen's yellow linoleum
and let me pump the handle
to make the water gush
into the basin that was her sink

how she never went into her bedroom
so I didn't either but through
the doorway from the sitting room
I could see her neat white quilt

how she invited me up onto
my favorite apron-covered cushion
with pillowed bosom and asked
what I liked to do

how one afternoon she let me
watch her pull bobby pins out
of the flat nest on her crown
unspooling the long silver ribbon
of twisted hair till it flowed
over her shoulders like a girl.

It never occurred to me
she loved anyone else.

SINGING

In Grandmother's closed back room
with the ponderous sleigh bed
and comforter with mothball breath,
a pot-bellied mahogany Victrola
balanced its colossal brass
glowing morning glory—
magical machine! One time

I begged, she dried her hands
and came from the kitchen to crank
the handle to spin the plate.
When she guided the paw to the disc,
music warbled through static,
*O Lord, my God, when I
in awesome wonder consider...*

“Who is that?” I interrupted.
She stared at me, “You don't know?
It's me and your grandpa, when we
were young.” ...Grandpa, the farmer,
gone for years, singing
a hymn with the farmer's wife,
stiff housedress, now become real.

Charissa Menefee

LIGHT AND EASY

The little old grandma in the kitchen
nixes what's written on the order:
It's no good like that,
it'll be too dry,
tasteless, flavorless,
she doesn't know what she's doing.
Don't make it the way she wants it—
make it the way I tell you—
she'll see,
she'll see that it's better this way.

I prefer to imagine this assured
scene, when the server once again
brings my sandwich out, slathered
in mayonnaise, white globs oozing
out the sides and congealing in the
leafy ruffles of lettuce, despite
my request for light or easy does it,
rather than what I know to be true:

that gangly teenager, in need of a
haircut, wishing he was in need of
a shave, cramming his paycheck in
his back pocket as he shoulders his
way out the back door,
is my chef.

Jennifer Conlon

IN THE WILD

I am disappointed when we only catch catfish, all whiskers no scales.
But when the bass or carp come, men send scalers across their sides.

I catch the shining flakes on newspaper under the gutting table.
When I have enough, I hide in the shop bathroom, press their sequins

to my body, practice kissing in the mirror. Scales at my elbow form a fin.
A gill to cover my neck. Mucus sticks the fish parts to my body.

I open and close my mouth, protrude my lips. What does a fish do with its
tongue? Some fish have teeth on their tongue. Some fish have girl parasites

that eat the tongue and take its place. Her eyes will shrink, her legs stretch
out,
and she anchors herself in the mouth. The fish is minimally damaged.

But when the fish does die, the girl parasite leaves the mouth,
clings to the head or body. No one knows

what happens next.

J. C. Reilly

WIND THROUGH CORN

Sure that they have trudged
this track twice already, she veers
left at a break in the rows
while her siblings keep straight.
Their low voices carry a bit on the wind,
“you’ll be sorrys” clutching
at her the way a stalk suddenly seems
to snap at her hair or snag her overalls.

Rustling flags of Gold Queen
leaves soon sweep husky chatter
deep into the maze, and for all the ears
around her, she can’t hear them now.
Younger, she might have panicked
at the dead ends, the impulsive corner
turns, the back-tracking sameness
of paths that promise escape but lure her
down corridors of glume-laden
tassels waving on endless stalks.

But now, as she comes to a clearing,
and stares overhead at horse white clouds
galloping across a too-blue-for-October sky,
the wind shaking the leaves
like a thousand rattlers blows a kernel
of truth her way: that she can’t be lost,
not she who draws earth energy
through her feet to her heart to her lungs,
and releases it back to creation
with breath and thanks
as every Sibley woman before her has done.

She breaks off a cob, peels away the floss,
and tosses it free. It glints like a flame,
like a faerie on a fresh burst of wind—
flying eastward, towards exit, towards home.

Sharon Scholl

THIS WOULD BE THE PLACE TO PRESS

the button that stops time, then turn
the knob backwards so we meet again,
fall in love, hunt for housing. Here climbing

sandy shale among great
rust-colored boulders, or here cooling
our tired feet in a Colorado

mountain stream. We could
hold onto a cloudy
bonnet of sky that encircles this

angled precipice, keep forever gnarled
mouths of cedars sucking at dry earth, a falcon's
gyre etching space. There must not be

tomorrow when you'll feel the first
sweats and fevers. You lie
down, believing it

will pass. It does. Until the next day
and day after. Then we're home searching
for a doctor who will see you. Frantic

and researching likely diseases, then
too late to press the button.

Patricia L. Hamilton

JUMPING LESSONS

If only he'd taken the long view,
started you on hay bales
stacked two high, or three,

something springy like grass
to land on. Promoted you
to the tailgate of a pickup truck

parked on asphalt so your knees
learned to flex on hard surfaces.
A policy of gradualism—

split-rail fences, low boughs—
might eventually have led you
to the roofs of barns, wingless.

If only, when he led you
unsuspecting
to a retaining wall

twice your height
under pretense
of helping you face fear,

you'd thought of Satan
beckoning Jesus
to the temple's pinnacle.

If only you'd jumped
to the proper conclusion,
freeing yourself of paralysis

from imagining your contorted
body, and told him
to take a flying leap.

Matthew Schmidt

DUSK FOR THE OPEN MOUTH

Cows at the trough, long
tongues licking salt blocks,
tail-slaps warding off flies.
Each cow has their place.
And they are named. We milk
by hand, talk to them about the school
day ahead. One room, open enough
to seat the wide, rough hands
of farm. Not one of us plays
hooky; no reason to acquire
more tasks, to ask if we can
head into town for a treat.
The answer is in the rigid
nipple spitting full the pail.
This close calm loam.
This balm in our hands.

Corey Ginsberg

THE DAY THE HORSES ESCAPED FROM
THE MERRY-GO-ROUND

It was inevitable, their wanting to go beyond
circular waltz and pre-charted pole dance.
Children screamed as the hollow stampede unhinged
into a collective metal shriek. The horses never looked back
as they tore away from their eternal hell of asses and sticky hands.
They galloped onward, reigns dangling, whipping them
lovingly toward freedom. Or at least across the park
to the Ferris Wheel, where they reconvened
and decided to stomach a forty-minute wait
to experience a different kind of circle.

CONTRIBUTORS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Poetry South is produced by the low-residency MFA program in creative writing at Mississippi University for Women. Cover photograph: “Egrets at Noxubee Wildlife Refuge.” We wish to thank the College of Arts and Sciences and the Department of Languages, Literature, and Philosophy of Mississippi University for Women, as well as Theodore Haddin, Bill Spencer, and Carolyn Elkins for their generous support. We also thank Jianqing Zheng for his help and advice and for founding the magazine and creating our first seven excellent issues. We strive to continue the legacy.

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