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Seth Pennington, design

Peter Ralston, "Passage," photograph made in Maine, 1994
(courtesy of the artist and Ralston Gallery, Rockport ME)

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→

An arrow at the bottom of a page indicates the stanza does not break.

**In memory of Lee Sharkey
(1945-2020)**

The Book Eaters

Our envy of the insects took us by surprise.

Whether they spotted “a spike of wheat”
or “the barren soil” in a field of words,
there was no difference:

The letter became a crumb.
The sentence became a loaf.
Blank margins metamorphosed into a soil
ever fecund, ever teeming with crops

as larval bodies translated
pages into food and themselves
into their winged stage.

We waited to harvest from ideas
our sustenance.

We waited for our new selves to come.

HOPE JORDAN

Once

There were boys who didn't want
my desire it never occurred to me that could
happen I was a girl
I was the one in danger except not always
for some of them I was too much too
smart too hungry too well read
in my father's erotica collection and some of them said
(in so many words) no and not
that and not yet and looking back over
all the versions of myself both wronged and merciless
I want to believe I heard them I want to remember
I stopped

HEIDI SEABORN

from **Divine Marilyn**

[1929—Norma Jeane, age 3, with her mother]

Momma came & made promises
but stuffed me in a closet.

“Don’t make so much noise, Norma”
I was a brown quiet mouse.

Momma fell down the stairs.
Her head broke open.

[1932—Norma Jeane at age 6]

It was Los Angeles
& our street was a bag
of saltwater taffy bought
on the boardwalk for a nickel.
I didn't have a nickel

but I lived in a mint green
farmhouse across the street
from the pink bubble gum house
that belonged to my grandma.

She & Momma went crazy & left me
with the goats, chickens & a herd
of foster kids. We sold brown eggs,
apples, plums, lemons & watermelon
from our stand.

I climbed the big fig tree,
watched for Momma's return.

[1935—Los Angeles Orphans' Home Society]

The sun cut sharp
angles down that scratch
of dirt road, stopped
short of the stone building.
Someone had painted the inside
walls sidewalk grey,
ordered metal tables,
chairs, beds, toilets. Sheets—
once white now laundered winter grey.
Every day I'd run
outside into the lit sky.
Lie on a patch of green
weeds before walking
to the cinderblock school.
Its walls were covered with maps—
countries the color of saltwater
taffy like my first
remembered home.

[Undated—photo of Charles Stanley Gifford, Sr.]

I will haunt this man, my father.
Be his last dream as night unspools
into day. I will be the white shadow
on his gleaming forehead, slick in his hair,
shaving nick on his throat.

I want to hollow his chin with my knuckle,
slice his mouth like an apple—
the mouth grinning
as it breaches the picture frame.

But he's already gone—leaving nothing
but a trail of scat for me to follow.

[June 19, 1942—Portrait of Norma Jeane on her Wedding Day to Jim Dougherty]

Instructions from my Aunt Grace
at the end of my high school sophomore year:

“Marriage or the orphanage, your choice
Norma Jeane.”

If I say yes, the dress is iced in lace
& I am a ribbon-tied gift—a statue

in honor of {him}. In my brand-new
shoes, I am a hand-me-down. Pass

the green beans & I will mind
my peas & queue up for groceries.

I will whip up a wife for breakfast
& bake rockets & bathe

in his glory. & when night growls,
I will dutifully give him my promise.

[1944—Yank Magazine Pin-Up of Norma Jeane by David Conover]

There are so many men
& I find myself wanting

to shed even this flimsy skin
like a snake, reveal what lies beneath—

Instead, I trade
a shimmer of my skin for their letters—

the envelopes emptying as I swallow
each word from *dear* to *love*. Does the flash

tattoo my flesh with diamonds? Will I dazzle
& distract? Does the camera see *me*? See

the blueprint of my bones?
If I thrust out my hip,

will it save a life? & if I tilt my chin,
bite my lips? What then?

Note: this poem is from a larger work inspired by photographs in the exposition *Divine Marilyn* (2019) Galerie Joseph, Paris.

K. HENDERSON

The Host

The brochure tries to brag, “Best service in the state,
best cocktails on the block.” In the hotel restaurant
sleek pencil dresses hover just above their guests, bend
over the waste, clear it away. Further above, rooms nest
men and women sheathed by wealth, siphoned excess,
and enough time to regret their purchase in my life.
Each night I smile, demurely lead my guests
the way they like, pour the drinks they pay me to
forget. We are set pieces in a script that won’t unwrite
itself. Without me, who would play this permeable role,
but anyone? I serve to live. Behind my every line, a toll.

K. HENDERSON

A Mixed Girl's Virginia

was the mother remarried, a new house in the country. Was the home sown by Quakers, picked by stone, one by the other to fallow the field. Was it there I learned *foyer*, a new word to welcome the sting of a place, summon the soon-to-be echo of my twice-turned cheek. Was my nose first opened in the dusted wall. Was my nostrils wadded with snuffed news, strangled plastics, what was mice. Was their husks an antique proof of being had. Was it night that found her tangled in the bath, was it the last girl's hair snaked up from the drain. Was a tug on the leash to a southern muck, knee-deep in the yard before the veranda. Was unearthed a focus for digging by hand, a salt shaker the shape of a blue-black woman, cap cracked in half, half-filled with clay. Was it the day she seeded bones for me to pluck as warning. Was the wedding flowers picked on the grounds of a plantation. Was I spared their spoiling. Was inherited. Was which came first, the color sulfur or canary.

Farewell Face & One of Picasso's

... it is rather the form of the impossibility of fleeing.

—Catherine Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*

You like to drink

water from the neighbor's army-green hose

because it still smells like summer hitting the hot ground. Here,

you are whipped wind, a statistic, always one age: long before you

can be at all a woman. Before dusk's late curfew

sleepover or simply because Mom was pill-happy home with

Dad, you boot-break her oval makeup mirror without anger, scatter its new

scant face shapes into the far yard earth between a petting zoo of plants that

needed to see sky's fresh violence...dirt-colored hair stuck to your cheek.

From the *d'Avignon* room

of one spectator, Mom tried, for her sake, not yours, to stop your bad

side that seemed unstoppable, an inebriated sea breaking itself apart, the form

of you, unrecognizable & disappearing over & over into summer's darkening

olivine body of sand...Mother was always staring at her beautiful face

in mirrors as if it might change.

Her rear-view one, half-cocked

back at her while driving, terrified me. Faces slowed or sped by us: back

of a redhead, an apple's half facing forward, floating baby nose, eyes

aligned with ears, or only sunglasses like twin poker cards, turned.

Picasso knew so well what he had in front of him: women neither

affirmed nor denied belonging. That's why his painting could destroy them.

I really didn't know which Mother face was reflected in the windshield

ahead, which bottle-blue eye was open on the moving road.

CALEB NOLEN

John's parents

were dropping him off. Don't blame them
for saying hello but not stopping me
as I walked to the woods behind
the school. It was snowing. I remember
thin ridges forming along all the tree branches,
caves underneath. I remember the shirt I wore,
the song I played on my Walkman radio.
I remember the color of the rope. My mom said
You didn't actually tie it, did you? and I didn't tell her
the truth. What makes you think I'd tell you now?
Things didn't go how I planned. I got cold,
the snow fell all over, then I walked back.

CALEB NOLEN

First Gun

A pistol, wrapped in an old shirt, hidden behind a panel
in his parents' basement. When he brought it out to show us,
he held it carefully in both hands.

I know what you're thinking, if you've seen the pictures
left on his MySpace, but he didn't point it at anything.
Not this one. He never even loaded the magazine.
He was afraid of getting caught and decided to get rid of it

after a few weeks. I tried to buy it off him. I pretended
I was having problems with a kid at my new school.
He wouldn't hear me out.

Mike was there—wasn't he always?—and he said
they weren't going to help me kill my dad. I didn't know
what to say. It was dark except for our cigarettes'
glow. Darker when we finished and flicked them away.

WILLIAM FARGASON

When My Friend Tells Me My Father Doesn't Seem That Bad

at lunch before my wedding I agree because of course
my father can be a tree full of leaves in the summer

my friend stood off near the corner of my wedding reception
beer in hand my father's smiling face atop his stiff body

I love my friend who travelled three states to be there
that day when my father would travel I would be

so excited he was leaving still too young to know
why I felt safe and I love my friend but I can't

give him the memory of my father in the fire of an afternoon full
of broken glass from the picture frame hit against his desk

to make a point my constant dread of when he came home
later and later my friend is somewhat joking I know

but like a joke followed with *no offense* there is a layer
of seriousness my father has mellowed in his age

a dormant volcano still smelling of sulfur I am walking
the smooth black lava it has cooled

to a sheen in the afternoon light it is almost as beautiful
as a smile but it covers what it has burned

AMY BAGWELL

fourteen

kid you walk so hard
in your moon boot feet
all the lightbulbs are loose
& they flicker sometimes
like there's air in the lines
or a ghost in the den but
the lights they fight back
like little Captain Americas
I think as you stomp down
the stairs pause & jump
the last four & lope for
the door past a floor lamp
of mine that stammers
in time with your steps
& I'm struck by how much
room in this world you
take up with no sense of
your own power no desire
to dominate & I love you
so much I say nothing

AMY BAGWELL

epitaph for uneasy inheritance

*He was sent to Vietnam to do a job, and on March 16, 1968,
he thought he was doing his job.*

—John Philp, WSB-TV News, Atlanta, March 20, 1971

the only soldier convicted of murder for the My Lai Massacre
returned from Vietnam to my hometown where he was never
despised the only soldier sentenced for the My Lai Massacre
served ninety minutes for each of his twenty-two confirmed dead
victims the only soldier imprisoned for the My Lai Massacre
thanks to Nixon left life and hard labor for three years' house
arrest the last soldier to *apologize* for the My Lai Massacre
became a strip mall jeweler and when my mom stopped

biting her nails bloody sold my dad a diamond and sapphire ring
for her prize (her only such item) and none of this they explained
but who could blame them *Rusty* isn't a killer *Rusty* is your buddy
with a past you want to help him outlive because it's your past
too and looking back means we either look at or look through
at least five hundred ghosts, one-third of them children

Prayer

Always with this smashing, muddy river. And my child vexed. The white sky her screams crested. The white coats rounding the kid wing. Where histories were charted, looks gauged. Under my touch. Scrolled symptoms and elevators. Chimes. A drip was hung. A bed opened, a gown. In a room with a magic mural. One wand sent forth waves of sound her tissues made bounce. Unheard echoes went. In or out of view. Bats in the mural.

Bedrails. Yet her roiling. Not to be contained. We were spoken with. I wanted any edge to punch: through. There was none. No night, no shrinking, no edifice, none. Doorframe. I went wooden too. All call buttons called. Wood still feels. Cut so. I forgot our stories.

Not I. Sang the moon in the mural. Sang the witch. Sang the fish. Until rivers rose. And a piece of water turned back into a girl chin to chest curled into herself.

Listen. The girl sings exultant songs from our house by the river that spills over walls into dreams.

CAROLYN HEMBREE

La Dictée

My mother calls to say she isn't dead
but choked on a cheap kebab. *You say you're
a writer. What's so tough it won't go down?*

What can I do? Voices from a blotted-out
planet tell her I'm not her daughter.
My mother calls to say she isn't dead

but OD'd on the shitter. I stomp, I beat,
I chew the bites I feed my daughter.
What's so tough it won't go down? She read

me French who now reads phantom doodles
on her flesh, those padded walls my author.
They call me Mother, the loving dead,

mes étoiles. I sell science my parts. *Adieu.*
I save love for poems. I get wet, I sing.
Écrivez-moi vite qu'elle est revenue.

Students dissect the pearly tissue
that held these bones. My cadaver rings.
My mother calls to say she isn't dead
and *Gristle!* I'm her writer. I get it down.

Note: *Écrivez-moi vite qu'elle est revenue.* ("Write to me quickly that she has come back.") From *Le Petit Prince*, by Antoine de Saint Exupéry, with the masculine pronoun replaced by the feminine.

O-JEREMIAH AGBAAKIN

the passage: i, morpheus. amorphous.

i make my wraith-home in a dream: i, morpheus. amorphous
where the moon sends confetti of fireflies even as it wanes

to a sickle. sanguine as the ebb revealing cowrie shells
& fossil footprints, as it draws back across the sandbank.

the sea has stopped howling. a kite flies into my dream
with its tail missing. & that's no omen. in the mirror,

my image takes after me. we stand on both portals,
two generations separated by flimsy glass. the glow

worms die in the night. & that's no omen, but the sun
creaking through darkness. the glass & i take our life

even from this same old sand. & for all our puffing,
gravity is God's gambit. i inflate my air bladder long

enough to sigh a blessing. i find my rooting on the cold
tiles & stained glass. i surrender, an earthenware kilned

in the shape of the potter's mind & the crater of hunger,
between the firewood burning under & a rapturous broth

frothing towards heaven. bubbles ballooning, clanging
the pot cover on the rim like a steam-powered cymbal

& it goes: ìkòkò tí'ò j'ata. . *fire destroys all hunger.* . .
if i sleep long enough, i might wake to the next life.

God, kiln me into a flower vase. an oil lamp with its
tongue, one with a flame slurring from its spout—

never settling into the tyranny of an eye. it takes its
life from palm oil & a teasing wind. the oil is ordinary

until the groom arrives. my time will come & i'll be
formless. amorphous. i, morpheus. like a primordial god

eeled in & out of water, a voice sparking the first light
...ìdì rẹ á kókó gbóná: ... *fire precedes a platter of gold.*

JIM WHITESIDE

Last Month

I've lived long enough, the father says, taking his name off the transplant list, *give the healthy organs to someone young*.

The mother grows thinner and thinner, while the father's sickness causes his body to swell. He keeps drinking

like it's his last joy. He needs help standing.
Compression socks bind his calves, preventing blood clots.

The father has dreams where they're all back at the beach—the father, the mother, and the son, on vacation.

They stand together, the tide gradually drawing their feet deeper into the sand. Up the coast, turtles emerge

to lay their eggs. Each egg sits in the warm sand, a cluster of cells dividing and multiplying to make flippers and eyes,

the carapace, the egg tooth that breaks open the shell and, soon after hatching, disappears.

TIM SEIBLES

Amusement Park

Shuffling along, shouldering softly through the crowd,
you don't remember the admission or planning

to come. The rides look new, but it's mostly
the paint. Every day the sun disappears

and reappears as if unsure of the situation.
Your parents used to talk about being

"young once." Now, you wonder what they
really wanted to say. Shadows

scratch the sidewalk. Popcorn, hotdogs,
pizza: aromas stoke the breeze.

Of course, fear takes the air too—
like the kind of perfume you only notice

when it's gone. You told your friends
"I'm sick of this shit," but somehow,

here you are back in line,
itching for the Wicked Flea, a ride

famous for jumping the tracks, but
the whole park is like that. Even

the cross-eyed calico creeps
low to the ground, as if ready

for some bad surprise. Worrying
this way, the cat is a lot like

the people who come here
to undo their daily lives:

built on hard work
and scary news—and bigotry

which usually moves around disguised
as someone else. Wherever you turn,

women, men: almost every hue, some skin
so dark it holds a hint of stars, other faces

white as paper, cinnamon-gold, cocoa
with a kiss of brass. Of course the fear

is shared unevenly—with all these colors
and the history they recall—but the people

remain lovely, enticing, a smorgasbord ready
to be consumed and, though strangers

exchange harmless glances, each
suspects the rest of playing a part

in a story that seems impossible
to explain—like the park itself:

both natural and not, both
deadly and full of fun.

The Crazy Crook is the scariest: *guaranteed*
to remix your mind the neon winks. Some get on

with glee, some with stolid faith, but you go
half-doubting, half-hoping it'll be alright

like your parents said though lately, you haven't
seen them on any rides. Its height is legendary,

the loop-de-loops, ridiculous: that long first climb,
the haphazard twists and dives, the whoops,

the shrieks and every time somebody yelling,
"Look, ma, no hands!" Maybe

the loudmouth is a superhero
ready to pretend the courage

that might make Death and his shiny badge
back off or maybe he's just another

dumb chump begging to be noticed
in a world that repaints and forgets,

refuels and drives on.
"Sit your simple ass down!" you snap,

while the Crazy Crook rolls over those bone-
bending swerves that snatch the riders

back to their bizzy, befuddled, stampeded lives:
out of hand and harder, faster—

as if some cranked up kidnapper has everyone
locked in his trunk and won't stop

stomping the gas: the days blur, each month
honks by like a V of Canada geese—you

spin around: your friends keep testing their
new knees. How did you get used

to this? When did you forget
how to sleep? What

made your parents
play certain words over

and over—*job, success,*
love, responsibility—and where,

exactly where did they go?

TIM SEIBLES

It Had Been a Long Time

since the poem had seen a sunset: trees, tall buildings

black against the burnt-orange sky. The breeze soft
like a sigh for a friend long dead.

Nothing to do now but try to stay clean.
And think. The poem never

tells anyone it had been “incarcerated”
which sounds like a way to cook meat.

Afraid, always kind of. Impossible not to remember
certain faces—the hard quiet of men.

Even out here
this light:

the feeling of being trapped—
as if a country could itself be a cage.

Something invisible: an idea, a germ, something
had worked on everybody.

Night now. The poem
looks back at the city

sees the moon not up, two headlights
shivving the dark.

It does not matter

It does not matter my friend can throw a punch or that her superman kick can put a 6-foot man on the ground. I am always waiting for this call. I'm always thinking about alleys, guns, boys we call our best friends until. There is no perfect day in green grass, dragonflies, jumping rope in Astoria Park. A girl grins at me across the track while I shadowbox. She's 7 or 8. She wants to know how to throw a jab, a hook, an uppercut. I'll show her though I want to make her promise a list of things she won't do, but I don't. I don't want her to be careful. I want her to flick her fists into the sun like she's strong enough to dent it. I want her to make the sun a donut and look through it into another a world where my friend has never called me today, weeping, where I have not had to wonder what it is I must say. I watch this girl's fists, the first of autumn caught in her hair. "Thumbs down," I say, "like this like this like this."

RAISA TOLCHINSKY

Interview, Coach X.

the taste
of blood
& grief
that lingers
spins the
perimeter
of my body
already busted
open by
shampoo bottles
coffee cups
a china patterned
plate
a foot a head
a fist a fist
which is why
when i was eight
i promised myself
i'd grow up
to be the kind
of superhero
who lived wide
& filled with
woman
like wolverine
who when
the police said
put your weapons
down said *i can't*
& held up
his hands as if
they weren't
long blades
covered in skin
& god bless him,
his weapons
were indistinguishable
from song
god bless his fists
for a moment
unbloomed roses

CHISOM OKAFOR

in telephone conversation with my father where he enquires about my marriage plans

a dagger navigating through a gulf of wire curls
meets the centre point of my forehead
just after he spells out the words

lost between the frontiers of things
i desire and what i must be
i want to tell him about the ringing cold

or the house sparrow who homeless
after her tree was felled had made
her nest just at the edge of my windowsill

instead i say baba i don't think the telephone
line is clear enough for this
conversation.

JEN STEWART FUESTON

Bury me with piñon

I tell you, I am already
burning. Our old god promises that flesh
will not be quenched so I'm sewing
fragrance in my pockets that our hell will reek
of lavender and sage. Already I'm burning
to the marrow at the places your hands lit me,
crinkle of tongue on clavicle like pink flame,
your mouth at my throat a soft knife
cleaving salt off my skin. What do saints
bodies smell of when they burn? Legends
say they're sweet in their decay, a bloom.
—I smell your drip on my thighs, rub them
together like flint, strike your length
like kindling, like the match we are.

Self-Portrait in the Beyond

Smoothly side-stepping the skunk—critical
underscore of the road—my body runs
past, emphatic, not turning
a nose. No sweat. Knowing
press is a thing I am good—& not good—at.
Press on, *press* toward, take it to—
but fatherless is not news. Another grief
in a surfeit of losses, yet
I flatten faster than tanoak leaves
skeleton to lace. Bunny loop
my bows together, berate how I trip, break-
down. Am, for the count: 3, 2, 1
as the walking man flashes to red
handing me not much
left. I am not the anchor my mother needs—
not the leg securing gold, now—unmoored
from all clocks. Watch how she wants
infinite magic hours for me
to keep dashing off lines, marathoning
across the span, to bridge
generations gone. Ahead, all fog but
in its wake: a road marked
black & white, stench & jasmine—plain
at least: what to rush, where to
avoid. A void. Every place I turn—: curb cuts
smooth the awful way. Spray
in your hollow of a throat—how it
perfumes the live-long days

DEBORAH ALLBRITAIN

Prospects

Radishes in the garden, Swiss chard, the tart-hot
crunch, all that green sustaining you.

Mornings, the roll of kettle, coffee alone, lunch
alone, the seams of the greyhound's ears calling you to reason.

Even tonight, poached salmon in the fridge, the cucumber-dill
more than you'd hoped for.

If food becomes sublime, let it boil each frostbite
of memory. Sell his engagement ring, the Movado
that can't keep time.

Wear only knee socks as you sleep alone
planted in a purple prairie of sheets.

If you try to figure this out there's the chance of retrograde.

Outside your bedroom window, a tortilla moon, somewhere
one lush island of possibility.

DEBORAH ALLBRITAIN

Sad Fish

For once life may be on your side, the objects
in the house beginning to breathe, the heart, a slice

of rosemary toast, content to sit in the doorway,
dip into the long smell of evening coffee, distant

traffic heading north, and you have nothing
to think about except what to cook for your dinner,

when to set the clocks back before bed.
In the life you thought
you wanted, some *us*

has vaulted off the balcony, no longer the
loggerhead snoring beside you.

And you enter this sentence knowing you can't go
back to those days of petty grievances, sad fish,

happy badger, slouched at each end of the sofa,
the marriage of hunched failure, which when said aloud,

failure, sounds French, a beautiful word for something
so lousy, falling on the stone floor,
its life spent in the dark.

POLCHATE (JAM) KRAPRAYOON

Selipar

First came the herald and the omen it held.
The fishermen caught the swollen thing
in the brown, hungry water of the Mekong.
They nearly lost their footing
as the boat rocked about, the great fish thrashing
its whiskered snout, its thick head
hammering the cast net.
It fought for hours until they hove onto the deck
that giant—bear-big, gills crisp with blood,
breathing a terrible, alien air.
Took three men to butcher it:
two to hold, the other to pith,
his hands shaking as he pushed
the knife's point into its brain.
The fishermen scanned the catfish,
now limp, its grim lip hung open,
its slug-skin the color of pig iron.
They cut a slit along the belly, from tail to jawbone
and opened it up. Inside was gill, gut,
liver, heart, and—
a lone plastic flip-flop
stowed away in its stomach.

After the herald, came the flood:
a towering wall of flip-flops,
iridescent like soap or an oil slick,
swelling as it approached the coast.
I huddled by the radio
to hear the clacketing of shoes
battering the beaches in Phang Nga,
Manila, Hong Kong, Mombasa, so on.
Their straps caught on branches of mangrove and palm,
on telephone poles and wires.
People, birds, dogs drowned,
their bodies packed with a plastic
that will survive us.
The news had said there'd be more flip-flops
than fish in the oceans,
more flip-flops than stars in the Milky Way.

We hadn't understood then
that rivers and oceans would not
forget the debris we chucked,
that what we'd thought was sunk
would surface.

Daphne

1

Translucence of backlit maple leaf, dappled radiance of half-shaded maple leaf, cool heaviness of clustered and all-shadowed maple leaf. O infinite, O alphabet of sun-in-leaves. Numberless run of the singular. Numberless run of the multiple multiplied. O flashing current all through.

Let us consider her: a girl become, by the force of her own prayer, hard and silent and arboreal.

Among other things, the Daphne/Apollo myth is an etiology: the story of how Apollo became linked to the laurel tree. In some versions, it is also the story of how Apollo became a poet: like Orpheus' song, Apollo's art is given in consolation for the loss that initiates it.

The story goes like this: a girl/woman is chased after and lost. She becomes a lost thing. The man becomes a poet. In my early readings of the various iterations of this story, I imagined myself a chaser.

On a morning in late May I find myself sitting in a small, six-sided room in a museum in front of a painting by Agnes Martin, thinking about the meanings of capture and escape, and whether one can capture or escape those meanings, or what beauty might be if it were not experienced inside a story of capture and escape.

A critic: It is dramatically satisfying that rape and violence should occur at the ultimate place of refuge: in the dark recesses of the woods, where the heat of the sun is excluded, in a virginal setting, in those very woods where Diana herself maintains her realm as the defender of virginity.

How may these threads be separated? The god, the girl fleeing, the prayer, the tree, the crown, the critic's dramatic satisfactions.

Her language sounds, perhaps, the way Martin's *Night Sea* would sound if a painting could sound. A small electric thing repeated, each time the same, each time minutely different, the hand becoming evident when you come close, a breathing irregularity held inside the grid of the regular, a fluttering, a pulse coming through it. When you stand close to the painting you can see how this electricity is created, is ongoingly created, by the small movements of a human hand, by overlapping and minutely different shades of blue paint, by quivering lines which are in fact tiny gaps between the blue rectangles.

When I first made a grid I happened to be thinking of the innocence of trees and then this grid came into my mind and I thought it represented innocence, and I still do.

In Ovid, the lost virgin girls Daphne, Syrinx, and Arethusa mean: the space between what is wanted and what may be had.

The stories are told in different voices but contain many of the same elements: the girl is a servant to Diana, goddess of the hunt. She scorns marriage, is careless of her hair, desires to remain a virgin. Hunted by a god, she prays for deliverance. At the moment of her capture she becomes: a laurel tree, a stream, a weeping cloud, a spring.

A critic: *The end of the hunt regularly is an actual or ritual death.*

In the instant before transformation, both Daphne and Arethusa feel their pursuer's breath on their hair. This detail is picked up in Pope's version of the Syrinx story in *Windsor-Forest*.

*And now his shorter breath, with sultry air,
Pants on her neck, and fans her parting hair.*

In American Sign Language the sign for “applause” is shaking two hands in the air. The sign for “hearing applause,” according to the online ASL guide I consulted, is to *mimic clapping*.

Movement of little waves on the water, movement of leaves. Shudder of bright, shudder of leaf light. Weightless, without a body, it comes to you through the shifting body of leaves.

Little leaf, little light. A movement you would not call *pleasure*.

I am thinking of the difference between clapping and mimicking clapping, the space occupied by that difference.

Imagine the sudden unfolding of leaves. A living rustle of light on water.

Is Daphne a suicide? It seems a poverty to think so.

In her film *Bright Star*, Jane Campion invents for Fanny Brawne a poesy of clothes, the intricate folds of a ruffled collar flashing like leaves around her throat.

Two possibilities:

1. We could imagine Daphne's tree-life as a sort of freedom. For this version, the only part of the story we change is her silence. In its place: a shivering and light-saturated language, silent only to the inattentive, and a resistance so entire that it grows past what it resists and becomes something wholly beyond the grammar of capture.

Or,

2. we could imagine the scene without the hunt. What if the laurel crown were not a consolation? What if the runners ran together toward some beckoning ecstasy? What if Apollo felt not grief but joy at Daphne's strange and sudden flourishing?

The second version is harder to believe.

6

When I was [] a man twice [] known [] child. He []
 [] and expertly [] []
 couldn't move until [] weeping cloud. [] (the
 lifting? unbutton-[] I cannot [] []
 [] then frozen and insens[] ongoing and []
 [] movement of [] *happeningness* of []
]. I recall a *no* [] did not speak itself in the absence of any question, []
 [] lifted and handled [].

But there was a question.

It was: "fast or slow?" These being the options I said, "fast."

This presence of this element of choice made this occasion into a kind of flickering short circuit at the far end of my memory: I could speak, I could not speak. Consenting subject, inert object.

I am interested in the relation between my becoming frozen and insensible and Daphne's becoming arboreal, the way both occur at the moment of being caught. The trauma literature calls this response "tonic immobility"—*an evolutionary adaptive defense to an attack by a predator when other forms of defense are not possible*. The trauma literature also says this response may exacerbate psychic harm in the aftermath of the event: feelings of shame and worthlessness, etc.

Tonic immobility is sometimes called *thanatosis* or "apparent death." Though the trauma literature suggests that this state is detrimental to assault victims, preventing them from effectively resisting, I am compelled by the implications of the word "tonic," which as an adjective can mean both restoring or preserving of health and relating to the home key in tonal music. I want to imagine that the immobilized body holds some evolutionary secret, that a body subject to tonic immobility might break or be broken into a new kind of singing.

An actual or a ritual death.

Sometimes a kind of blankness settles in and it is difficult to locate the substrate of ordinary beauty and pleasure that pull one toward, say, a better sentence. I am trying to reconceive of this blankness as a kind of quiet music. A tone. I am trying to imagine it as *tonic*.

A grid. A drowsy numbness.

The laurel is known for its uses in cooking (the aromatic bay leaf comes from the laurel tree) and its medicinal properties, especially its use as a *salve for open wounds*.

One of my questions is about how much we have to give up. In "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the poem that for me most perfectly communicates the infinite as a lived idea, Keats describes the urn as a *still unravish'd bride*. The verb *to ravish* may mean: 1. To seize and carry off, 2. To rape, 3. To fill with intense delight.

What am I to do with this language?

For a long time I have been asking, is our delight recoverable?

As a result of one of these stories or all of them I think often about the space between desire and love, and whether there is a space, and whether love is a laurel crown or a transformation past all capture or joy at another's strange and sudden flourishing, and whether desire is compatible with love or love's destroying machine.

I am always looking for proof that what looks like love is only the machinery of a desire which would kill its object and I am always finding it.

In the moment love is consumed by its machinery, personhood slips out and seals itself in wood.

One of my questions is about how much I have to give up.

A weeping cloud distributes itself. A weeping cloud is a disbursal of small blue currents of equal size in all directions. A weeping cloud sheds so much feeling feeling ceases to feel anything beyond the labor of release and the labor of reception. Weeping, like shaking, is the body gone into ungatherable being.

Or now the shaking of this willow in the slight and continuous breeze within what might be collected as the porousness of a shared silence, or non-silence—the wind making little waves of light and sound through the languorous branches. This cicada.

9

This morning there is rain in the trees, layers of rainsound on layers of leaf, a surround of it.

In the surround of rainsound, each nameless, shudder of wishing.

I am thinking of Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* and of the hermit thrush and of the sign for hearing applause.

What I am trying to describe is a world without any words on it.

The song of hermit thrush seems to come from many directions at once. It throws itself beyond itself.

When the singular is merged into an uncountable multitude of minute differences another kind of being is suggested. Suggests itself. I want to suggest.

A laurel tree, a spring, a weeping cloud, a stream.

What tone, what tonic, what wordless repair?

Notes:

Sections 2 and 3: Parry, Hugh. "Ovid's Metamorphoses: Violence in the Pastoral Landscape." *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, vol. 95, 1964, pp. 268-282.

Section 3: Campbell, Suzan. "Interview with Agnes Martin." *Archive of American Art*, 15 May 1989, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC., pp. 10-11.

Section 6: Russo, Francine. "Sexual Assault May Trigger Involuntary Paralysis." *Scientific American*, 4 Aug. 2017, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/sexual-assault-may-trigger-involuntary-paralysis/>.

ERIC TRAN

Clonidine

Did tremble at the lip
of the bottle. Tumbled

through a mouth's wide
and broken door. Flattened

myself, flattered myself
as false as any god

wet with prayer.
Drunk with need. Fecund

yet flaccid. Fantastic.
Mastered that first

sloppy wobble towards
you dry. Alive

at least for now. And what
nowness, what practice,

what capsule of ease.
Did breathe then, didn't we?

ERIC TRAN

Baclofen

shiver a body's verb
your body's curse
words in my mouth
want down right

to my marrow
oh mercy me
o mercury spiked
from base to bulb

like seed blown
into my hand
on yours on a knob
cranked again and again

hurry holy how
the body can't wait

BRADLEY R. STRAHAN

In Passing

It's all too much:
the scarred wood of this desk,
darkness creeping in
through the half-open window,
walls and walls of maps
and memorabilia,
distant sound of traffic passing
 like the days do,
 like this day did.

DEREK OTSUJI

Preserves

What she remembers still is the sweet smell
Of summer guavas boiling on the stove,
Plumes rising with aromas of a grove
Where the fruit's lemon yellow was a bell
Of ripeness rung. To hear my mother tell
The story again—how they'd sack the trove
From trees growing wild by the road they drove
To school and church and back, a ritual
That was her frugal mother's and imposed
On her and the twins, when she was scarcely tall
Enough to reach the low hung fruit at all—
Is to preserve more than I had supposed.
In extract tart and red and gold and clear—
The sweet yield of memory, the simmered year.



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EDITORS' NOTE

Lee Sharkey—Editor, Poet, Mentor, Friend

Lee Sharkey, who died in October 2020, created and sustained a home in poetry for the makers of the *Beloit Poetry Journal*—generations of poets, editors, and staff. For decades she nurtured and helped lead the *BPJ*, and it is nearly impossible to describe what her generosity, precision, steadfast empathy, and crackling wit have meant to the history of this magazine. Her strength of purpose and faith in poetry—and especially in poets themselves—are lodestones for all of us who remain to do this work.

Leonore Hildebrandt, one of the journal's longest serving editors reflected, "Lee seemed indefatigable, even in hard times. Her commitment to a diligent and hands-on process for choosing poems fostered our best work. She was not afraid to tackle a 'difficult' poem, one that I might have been tempted to dismiss as impenetrable. She motivated me to stay with the poem—repeatedly reading it aloud, listening to its music, parsing its syntax, trying to connect the pieces into an artistic whole."

The way Lee listened—to the poem and to the poet—left a lasting impression not only on all of us at the journal but on hundreds of writers like Janice Harrington and Jacques Rancourt, whose tributes to Lee follow. Her approach was both sharply discerning and deeply generous. It helped define a journal that reflects diverse and lively editorial tastes and that values conversations between editor and poet, encouraging every poem toward the full realization of its power. This listening continues to be at the heart of the *BPJ*'s editorial practice.

In her own work, Lee was brave, clear-eyed, and generous. Her lines are spare, luminous, and wise. They reach for connection, even in grief, as revealed in the small collection of poems we include in this issue from Lee's posthumously published book *I Will Not Name It Except to Say* (Tupelo Press, 2021):

I was becoming sculpture. I had no will but to go further into the dark I was, that
held me, to weep in my mother's skirts

It breathed me

Before I was, was onyx gliding through onyx. Every night I sought it out to surrender

Every morning I woke in my mother's arms

Now I was whole and mortal. Grief-seasoned. Mitral fingers shivered and almost
touched

—"The Walking Rooms"

EDITORS' NOTE

Perhaps the very best tribute to Lee that we can offer is this volume you hold in your hands—the latest issue of a journal that has published without interruption since 1950 and which Lee shaped for so many years. It contains poems that vary widely in tone, style, perspective, and subject matter, but that share, as Lee would say, “one criteria: excellence.” We’re sure that Lee would have delighted in the sizzle of Jen Stewart Fueston’s “Bury me with piñon,” the innovation of K. Henderson’s “A Mixed Girl’s Virginia,” and the insight of Polchate (Jam) Kraprayoon’s “Selipar,” along with the varied texture, flavor, and representation of the entire issue.

Lee Sharkey’s devotion to, and insistence upon, the core values of the *BPJ* live on in all we continue to do: establishing long, deep relationships with poets, showcasing under-represented voices and perspectives, championing social justice through art, and nurturing a vibrant editorial family and process. Lee left the *BPJ* a rich tradition as well as the resilience and spirit to move confidently into the future. We are grateful to and inspired by her, always.

JANICE HARRINGTON

Lavishness

Lavishness, magnanimity, bounteousness, munificence, liberality . . . even using a thesaurus, I cannot find a word grand enough to describe Lee's unfailing generosity to the many artists she published in the pages of the *Beloit Poetry Journal*. I first published poems in the *BPJ* in Spring 2004. I still remember my thrill and sense of accomplishment, but even more, in the years afterward, I recall feeling the absolute support of Lee Sharkey. She actually knew my work, read my books, and encouraged more poems. Lee inspired. She conveyed with unassuming ease that—*yes, you are a poet, write more*. Thanks to Lee, I took aesthetic risks and knew that when I sent a poem to her keen editorial eye, it was in safe hands. A new form? A quirky poetic sequence about doilies, where else to send it but to the editor whose aesthetic had open boundaries rather than poetic walls and narrow prescriptions?

Several years ago, at an AWP Conference, I did something out of character. I drew up the nerve to approach an editor that I admired and invite her to lunch. Lee's acceptance left me amazed, but it shouldn't have. The poet interested Lee as much as the poetry. People always mattered to Lee, from her work with the Women in Black, a movement that advocates nonviolent resolution of political conflict, to her advocacy for women and social justice, to the small kindnesses that she performed for the *BPJ*'s continually growing community of artists. She gave me ways to find and meet new readers, celebrated my successes with me, and challenged me always (even now) to do my best work.

Readers, critics, scholars, and poets will long admire Lee's legacy as an editor, but I also love her poetry.

Reticence the shell, joy the nutmeat
The skin reluctance, joy the open mouth
 "Its roundness curving to a cleft" *Calendars of Fire*
 (Tupelo Press, 2013)

Her poems are elegant. Their lines float, each image flensed and tautly drawn on a bow of breath. Released from that bow, her words strike their target, which is always the readers' imagination and empathy. She wanted us to see and even more to feel. Although her poems can turn toward difficult subjects, she never abandoned a hopefulness: "joy the nutmeat" and "joy the open mouth."

I feel lucky to have heard Lee's stories and her laugh. Lee liked to laugh. She told me a story a year or so before her death, recalling a favorite teacher who taught her to look for the "heat" in a poem. Where's the heat? A question that works for poems must surely work for poets as well. Lee's heat as an editor, a poet, and a friend centered in

her generous heart, in a mind that refused to despair, in a life that refused to ignore injustice. But the light-dazzled, combustive, star-producing heat that shone throughout Lee's poetry and life continues to warm and illuminate the accomplishments of the poets she championed, the lives of her students, and the heart of this poet. She encouraged us all to believe: "Yes, you can write. Write more."

The thesaurus proved useless. I will never find words to describe her tireless generosity, empathy, or kindness—which only proves what we know, that for those who have meant the most to us—words sometimes fail. I fall back on simple ones, "Thank you, Lee."

JACQUES J. RANCOURT

A Tribute to Lee Sharkey

I spoke with Lee for the first time during my interview for an internship at the *Beloit Poetry Journal*. She was a familiar and central figure in the small, single-intersection town of Farmington, Maine, where I attended college. With an orb of silver hair, all-black clothes, a blurry band of flowers tattooed around her left wrist, she could easily be spotted. Before I knew her well, I recognized her as one of the demonstrators standing each Friday at noon in front of the post office with the Women in Black, a silent vigil protesting the US invasion of Iraq. Her reputation as a writer and activist, as the founder of the Women and Gender Studies program at the university, preceded her.

During the interview, we sat beside each other on a couch in her co-editor John Rosenwald's living room, which served as the headquarters for the *BPJ*. I don't recall what we spoke about that day or any of the questions she asked me. I do recall, however, *how* she spoke—slowly, carefully, sage-like, with prolonged pauses. She waited patiently for the right word to find her, sometimes using her hands to extract it, to pull its thread out of the ether between her thumb and forefinger.

*

Each day of the internship began in ritual: Lee picked up the day's submissions from the PO box downtown, cut through each envelope with a letter opener, paperclipped a quarter-sheet paper to each submission, and stacked them in front of me and Matthew Luzitano, the other intern, to read. And for the next several hours, always with the help of clementine oranges and shortbread, we passed submissions back and forth, read poems, and wrote our reactions on the quarter sheets. At the end of each day's work, we would gather together on that couch to discuss what we had discovered. These conversations—about what role politics should play in poems, the muscularity of language, the authenticity of narrative, the moral obligations of a writer, how sounds contribute to meaning—were my education as a poet.

There was a purity about Lee. She tossed out cover letters and biographical statements unread. I watched her place the same level of attention into considering a handwritten submission from an inmate as she did with one from a prize-winning poet, always searching for, what she once described to me in a letter, that "great thumping visionary heart heat" of poetry. I remember watching her read submissions in the corner of the living room, holding out a poem in one hand, and with her free hand, conducting its particular music to herself.

Over the twelve years since that internship, Lee and I maintained our friendship over my visits home to Maine or at the annual AWP Conference, and through letters. "Where are you," she'd write to me, "on and off the page?"

As a poet, Lee was fearless. Her poems, often presented without punctuation, are taut with the tension between reckless abandon and a surgical exactness. They are authentic yet lyrical, visceral yet visionary, both written in a vernacular yet oracular mode; they are alive and shimmering with that precision, that perfect word-searching I had witnessed her perform so often, that percussion that I had watched her conduct in the corner of the *BPJ* office those autumn afternoons. The poems Lee was most interested in—both in her own work and in the poems she accepted for the journal—engaged with the ethics of human dignity. She saw poetry as an extension of her activism, and her activism an extension of her poetry. Despite directing so much of her energy into others—into editing, demonstrations, her students—Lee’s work in its own right is a major force in contemporary poetry.

This idea struck me again, a couple of years ago during one of my annual visits to Maine, when I heard Lee read a few of her new poems at a house party celebrating the *BPJ*. I remember watching her hands move through the cadences and rhythms of her poems, swooping slowly and deliberately. I made a mental note to remember this, as the thought had occurred to me then that this might be the last time I would see Lee. Later, as I prepared to leave, pulling on my boots in the mudroom before driving back through the mid-March slush to my parents’ home, Lee came over to give me a farewell hug. She held my shoulders afterwards with both of her hands for a long time before kissing me goodbye. It was evident that this thought had crossed her mind, too.

*

It is difficult for me to describe Lee and her contribution to American letters, the warmth she nurtured her students with, her dedication to peace both globally and in her communities, without speaking in grandiose terms. She bent one of the nation’s leading poetry journals towards social justice, championed the unpublished, and launched the early careers of so many poets. In her life and in her practice, Lee paid close attention to etymology and the history lurking in our speech. She knew that language, like any other natural force, can be warped towards cruelty and violence just as easily as towards transformation and peace. Words held power. Lee devoted her life to this conviction, and she plucked them out of the air.



LEE SHARKEY

Clarity and Compassion

Let the cat be the cat, sprawled on her back, her belly stretched out in the sun.

Let the man be the man, asleep in his chamber, legs tucked, soundless, so I wonder

is he breathing, and will this never end. Let me forgive myself

for thoughts that come and go and come and go again

for pyramids of bone climbing into the azure.

Let the dead stay dead.

Let us escape to the forest, where we survive on berries and seeds.

Equal and opposite pressures keep me upright.

My mother, a painter of icons, had teeth flecked with lapis from licking her tiny brush.

My other mother worked in a factory painting radium numbers on watch faces.

She waited in the cold for her bus until the buses stopped running.

I loved her more than gold but coveted her small gold earrings.

LEE SHARKEY

Cloth

A figure bends over a table spreading out a cloth
The cloth floats for a moment before it settles
A practiced tug to straighten it. Palms run over it
It doesn't matter who the woman was
You could take her form, as others have done before
I could spend my childhood watching her
planting a harvest of women, all of us watching
the cloth float down to the table
the sheet float down to the bed
the wings spread before landing
the wings spread before landing
I remember watching you

LEE SHARKEY

Self-Portrait

—Käthe Kollwitz (1923)

I secretly expected God would provide a ram for the sacrifice,
that *willingness* to sacrifice would be enough.

The bone truth: I am the woman who sent her son to war.

I kneel. His blood drains through me. “Mother” spills to the ground.
It is so. I am none.

What’s needed: sure mind in a sure body, that I may go on working
as a cow grazes, the barn a dim idea in the distance,

the life light the one light burning—go on with the work to its end.

I bend to the head I chisel in wood, a woman watching,
unmoving, no secret in her, just lines to rend, render me,

mouth shut, everything wholly felt, determined
to bend the sacrifice to my will.

LEE SHARKEY

Broken Sky

If they appear at the threshold

If they take the form of man, woman, and infant

The sky carries the weight of mountains

Children are straggling behind

How shall I welcome the stranger

If they stand at the threshold

If they arrive through dream, lore, or prognostication

If they don't know if they are coming or going

I see they carry the stone of sorrow

The Red Sea has parted but not for them

I set a table before them

I light two candles. The flames leap to reveal blasted mountains

Moses has thrown down the stone tablets

Aaron has confiscated the gold from the women's ears and fashioned a hollow calf

If they appear, stripped of possessions

The children are coughing

The infant is subdued to silence

If I could pray

I would pray for the sons the blood of the lamb has not protected

I would pray for the tribe abandoned by Moses-up-the-mountain communing with
Yahweh

They appear, mute, insistent

They ignore my offer of bread

One of the flames is consuming the house and the other, casting shadows on stones

If what they want of me is my attention

LEE SHARKEY

The Walking Rooms

It slid into me. I waited for my name to fall on me. It named me, *I am a child, without compassion*

Even as it slid into owls and fireflies, sheathed field grasses and was stirred by them

Someone was with me. She touched her finger to my lips and asked, *Whose mouth is this?*

I was becoming sculpture. I had no will but to go further into the dark I was, that held me, to weep in my mother's skirts

It breathed me

Before I was, was onyx gliding through onyx. Every night I sought it out to surrender

Every morning I woke in my mother's arms

Now I was whole and mortal. Grief-seasoned. Mitral fingers shivered and almost touched