

“Do Not Delete!”

**28 Good Poems
by New Formalist Poets**

Selected by Brian Brodeur

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dana Gioia

Majority.....	1
Special Treatments Ward.....	2
Haunted.....	5

Mary Jo Salter

The Reader.....	13
The Age of Reason.....	14
Tromp L'Oeil.....	16

Timothy Steele

In a Eucalyptus Grove.....	18
Toward the Winter Solstice.....	19

Rhina P. Espaillat

Are You Sure You Want to Exist?.....	21
Rosario on Sunday Morning.....	22
Choosing a Seat.....	25

R. S. Gwynn

At the Center.....	27
Body Bags.....	28

Rafael Campo

El Dia de los Muertos.....	30
----------------------------	----

Kim Addonizio

Lucifer at the Starlight.....	32
Therapy.....	33

Andrew Hudgins

Praying Drunk.....	34
--------------------	----

Marilyn Nelson

Balance.....	37
Chopin.....	38
The Ballad of Aunt Geneva.....	39

Jared Carter

After the Rain.....	41
The Shrivng.....	42
Roadside Crosses.....	45

David Mason

The Teller.....	46
-----------------	----

The Collector's Tale 47

Mark Jarman

Someone Is Always Praying 56

Ground Swell 57

After Disappointment 60

DANA
GIOIA

* MAJORITY

Now you'd be three,
I said to myself,
seeing a child born
the same summer as you.

Now you'd be six,
or seven, or ten.
I watched you grow
in foreign bodies.

Leaping into a pool, all laughter,
or frowning over a keyboard,
but mostly just standing,
taller each time.

How splendid your most
mundane action seemed
in these joyful proxies.
I often held back tears.

Now you are twenty-one.
Finally, it makes sense
that you have moved away
into your own afterlife.

1.
~~1.~~

diplomatic bird
my window tree

SPECIAL TREATMENTS WARD

I.

So this is where the children come to die,
hidden on the hospital's highest floor.
They wear their bandages like uniforms
and pull their IV rigs along the hall
with slow and careful steps. Or bald and pale,
they lie in bright pajamas on their beds,
watching another world on a screen.

The mothers spend their nights inside the ward,
sleeping on chairs that fold out into beds,
too small to lie in comfort. Soon they slip
beside their children, as if they might mesh
those small bruised bodies back into their flesh.
Instinctively they feel that love so strong
protects a child. Each morning proves them wrong.

No one chooses to be here. We play the parts
that we are given—horrible as they are.
We try to play them well, whatever that means.
We need to talk, though talking breaks our hearts.
The doctors come and go like oracles,
their manner cool, omniscient, and oblique.
There is a word that no one ever speaks.

2.

II.

I put this poem aside twelve years ago
because I could not bear remembering
the faces it evoked, and every line
seemed—still seems—so inadequate and grim.

What right had I whose son had walked away
to speak for those who died? And I'll admit
I wanted to forget. I'd lost one child
and couldn't bear to watch another die.

Not just the silent boy who shared our room,
but even the bird-thin figures dimly glimpsed
shuffling deliberately, disjointedly
like ancient soldiers after a parade.

Whatever strength the task required I lacked.
No well-stitched words could suture shut these wounds.
And so I stopped . . .
But there are poems we do not choose to write.



my window the
diplomatic bird

III.

The children visit me, not just in dream,
appearing suddenly, silently—
insistent, unprovoked, unwelcome.

They've taken off their milky bandages
to show the raw, red lesions they still bear.
Risen they are healed but not made whole.

A few I recognize, untouched by years.
I cannot name them—their faces pale and gray
like ashes fallen from a distant fire.

What use am I to them, almost a stranger?
I cannot wake them from their satin beds.
Why do they seek me? They never speak.

And vagrant sorrow cannot bless the dead.



Marks the absolute solidity of
the world.



HAUNTED

FRAME

Briefly defining
a characterisation.
Signals the
beginning of
both bodies and
the narrator

"I don't believe in ghosts," he said. "Such nonsense.
But years ago I actually saw one."
He seemed quite serious, and so I asked.

"I think to
write a history
is not
to face a
great
silence."

It happened almost forty years ago.
The world was different then—not just for ghosts—
slower, less frantic. You're too young to know
life without cell phones, laptops, satellite.
You didn't bring the world with you everywhere.
Out in the country, you were quite alone.

I was in love with Mara then, if love
is the right word for that particular
delusion. We were young. We thought we could
create a life made only of peak moments.
We laughed. We drank. We argued and made love.

We begin in
Ancient, heroic
religion, and
end with
Modern
Capitalism

Our battles were Homeric—not Homer's heroes
but his gods, petty, arrogant Olympians
thundering in their egotistic rage.

Backstory

Mara was brilliant, beautiful, refined.
She'd walk into a room dressed for the evening,
and I would lose a breath. She seemed to shine
as movie stars shine, made only of light.
And did I mention she was rich? And cruel?

Do you know what it's like to be in love
with someone bad? Not simply bad for you,
but slightly evil? You have to decide
either to be the victim or accomplice.
I'm not the victim type. That's what she liked.

I envied her sublime self-confidence.
She could freeze someone with a single sentence,
too witty to be rude but deeply wounding,
impossible to deflect or forget.
If I sound slightly bitter, please understand,
it is myself I now despise, not Mara.
She simply recognized what I desired.

Her uncle owned a house up in the Berkshires,
not just a summer house, a country manor,
three stories high with attics, basement, turrets,
surrounded by great lawns and sunken gardens,
hundreds of wooded acres whispering wealth.

We came up for a few days in late autumn,
driving through bare woods under a gray sky,
the landscape still, no birds, barely a breeze,
hushed as the hour after heavy snowfall.

The house had been vacated since September.
I had imagined it as dark and gothic,
cloaked in shadow like something out of Lovecraft,
but the decor was opulently cozy,
a proper refuge for a Robber Baron,
stuffed with *objets* to certify his status,
though slightly shabby from a century's use.

The art was grand, authentic, second rate.
Florentine bronzes, Belgian tapestries,
carved stonework pried from bankrupt Tudor manors,
and landscapes by the minor Barbizons.
Nothing quite fit together. I suspect

Working here
with designs the
Gothic tropes

Setting the scene

The "second-rate"
art and opulent
stuffs in
the Gothic tone of
the Barbizons "country"
manors in late
autumn.

(6.)

sumptuous excess was the desired effect,
a joyful shout to celebrate success—
good taste be damned—let's just indulge ourselves
and revel like a child who greets his playmates
by emptying his toy chest on the floor.
What fun is wealth if no one notices?
Mara seemed to think so. What did I know?
I'd never seen the rich up close before.

// While Mara showered, I explored the cellars,
searching a maze of mildewed storage rooms
until I found a faux medieval door,
flanked by a pair of somber wooden saints.
You should have seen the wine her uncle owned—
six vaulted rooms stocked with the great estates,
bin after bin of legendary names,
Château Margaux, Latour, Lafite-Rothschild,
a prodigal accumulation formed
on such a scale he could have entertained
Napoleon and half his *Grande Armée*.

Dineel /
Building tension

Tension between
America and Europe
under capitalism

I chose two bottles of pre-war Petrus
That probably cost as much as my month's rent.
Clutching their dusty necks, I closed the door,
And told the saints, "I could get used to this."
They didn't condescend to give an answer.

Mara compared
to Diana

That night we drank in the high paneled library,
a great inferno blazing in the fireplace.
Naked Diana stood in tapestry
above us on the wall. Below her, Mara,
stylishly overdressed, refilled our glasses.

Resplendently the room reminded us
that beauty always bears a heavy price.
White tiger skins lay stretched across the floor.
Martyred Sebastian twisted on a pedestal.
Even the dusty books were bound in leather.

Mara loved having me as audience.
She sat there, half illumined by the fire
and half in shadow, spinning out long stories.
They were as fine as anything in books.
No, they were better because they were true.

She was a connoisseur of *Schadenfreude*
and was especially wicked in describing
her former lovers—imitating them,
cataloguing their signature stupidities,
and relishing their subsequent misfortunes.
(I'm surely in her repertory now.)

At first I was embarrassed by her candor.
I felt more like a confidant than lover,
but gradually I understood the motive—
even she needed someone to impress.
Life was a contest. Mara was a champion.
What good was winning if no one noticed?

Of course, that night we drank too much and argued.
She strode off, slamming doors theatrically.
I sat still, slowly finishing my drink,
feigning indifference—just as she would have—
and then went to the other wing to sleep.
Let her find me, I thought. Let her apologize.
She won't like sleeping in this house alone.



The room was cold, and I was too annoyed
to fall asleep. I stretched out on the bed,
still wearing all my clothes, and tried to read.
Believe it or not, the book was Shakespeare's sonnets.
What sweeter text for wounded vanity?

||| *Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing.*

I'd found an old edition in the library,
and from sheer spitefulness I'd stolen it.

That night each poem seemed written just for me.

||| *What is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?*

I hope this explanation makes it clear
I wasn't sleeping when I saw her enter—
Mara, I thought, mad at being ignored,
coming to make a scene. But, no, it was
a handsome woman in her early forties.
I thought she might have been a housekeeper
come in from town to check up on the place,
but why was she so elegantly dressed?

I started to explain why I was there.
She didn't seem to hear and turned away.
Could she be deaf? I didn't want to scare her.
Something was wrong. I couldn't see her clearly.
She seemed at once herself and her own reflection
shimmering on the surface of clear water
where fleeting shadows twisted in the depths.

THE APPARITION, "SHOCK", "REVENANT"

9

I found it hard admitting what I saw.
She seemed to be a ghost, though that sounds crazy.
Oddly, I wasn't scared—just full of wonder,
watching this thing I knew could not exist,
this woman standing by her dressing table,
translucent, insubstantial, but still there,
and utterly oblivious of me.
First to be haunted, then to be ignored! MA

Her back toward me, she started to undress.
Now I was panicked and embarrassed both.
I spoke much louder. She made no response.
Now wearing only a long silk chemise,
she turned toward me, still strangely indistinct,
the fabric undulating, as if alive.
I felt her eyes appraise me, and I sat
half paralyzed as she approached the bed.

Here I was face to face with a dead soul,
some entity regathered from the dust,
returned like Lazarus from the silent tomb,
whose mere existence, right before my eyes,
confounded my belief there could not be
an afterlife. Think what this meeting represented—
a skeptic witnessing the unexplained.

I could have learned the secrets of the dead
if there are any secrets, which I doubt.
So how did I address this revenant,
this traveler from the undiscovered country,
who stared at me with dark, unblinking eyes?
I caught my breath, got on my feet, and said—
nothing at all. The words stuck in my throat.

We stood there face to face, inches apart.
Her pale skin shined like a window catching sunlight,
both bright and clear, but chilling to the touch.
She stared at me with undisguised contempt,
and then she whispered, almost in a hiss,
"You don't belong here. No, you don't belong here."
She slowly reached to touch me, and I ran
leaving behind both Shakespeare and my shoes.

she speaks

climax

Mara was still awake when I arrived.
The lamp was on. The fireplace ablaze.
And she stretched naked under satin sheets.
"So, you've come back?" she yawned with mock ennui,
then added with a smirk, "You weren't gone long."
I didn't say a word of what I'd seen.

We used to sleep in one another's arms,
our two slim bodies interlaced like hands.
That night I held her, feeling our hearts beat—
first hers, then mine—always out of sync,
and in the dark I thought, *I don't belong here*,
I don't belong here. Slipping out of bed,
I quickly dressed, and what I couldn't wear
I left behind—the clothes, the books, the camera,
no longer mine. What a surprise to first feel
the liberations of divestiture.

Falling Action

I moved with such new lightness down the stairs,
watched by mute saints and marble goddesses.
Then out the door. I closed it quietly.
The lock clicked shut. Good-bye to both my ghosts.

I made it to the county road by dawn
and hitched a ride on an old dairy truck.
"What happened to your shoes?" the driver said.
"No, better yet, don't tell me. Just get in."

I climbed in, and one road led to another.
And now I'm in your bar. That's probably not
the story you expected from a monk,
delivering brandy from the monastery.
Not all of us began as altar boys.

I've been there fifteen years. I like the drill—
Poverty, Chastity, and Growing Grapes.
The archbishop calls my port a miracle.
Don't tell His Grace, but I still doubt there is
an afterlife. That's not why I stay there.
This is the life I didn't want to waste.

Jerome +

* THE READER

MARY JO
SALTER

It was the morning after the hundredth birthday
of Geraldine—still quite in her right mind,
a redhead now and (people said) still pretty—
who hadn't wanted a party.

Well, if she'd lost that one, she'd stood her ground
on no singing of Happy Birthday, and no cake;
next year, with any luck, they'd learn their lesson
and not be coming back.

My friend who tells the story (a distant cousin
and a favorite, allowed to spend that night
in the nursery of the Philadelphia mansion
Geraldine was born in),

woke to the wide-eyed faces of porcelain dolls
and descended a polished winding stair that led
like a dream into the sunroom, where Geraldine
sat with the paper and read.

—Or sat with the paper lifted in her hands
like the reins of Lazarus, her long-dead horse
that had jumped a thousand hurdles; shook it once
to iron out the creases;

and kept it elevated, having been
blind for the twenty years white-uniformed,
black-skinned Edwina has been paid to stand
behind her, reading the news aloud.

13

*

THE AGE OF REASON

"When can we have *cake*?" she wants to know.
And patiently we explain: when dinner's finished.
Someone wants seconds; and wouldn't she like to try,
while she's waiting, a healthful lettuce leaf?
The birthday girl can't hide her grief—

worse, everybody laughs. That makes her sink
two rabbit, gapped teeth, acquired this year,
into a quivering lip, which puts an end
to tears but not the tedium she'll take
in life before she's given cake:

"When I turned seven, now," her grandpa says,
"the priest told me I'd reached the age of reason.
That means you're old enough to tell what's right
from wrong. Make decisions on your own."
Her big eyes brighten. "So you mean

I can decide to open presents first?"
Laughter again (she joins it) as the reward
of devil's food is brought in on a tray.
"You know why we were taught that?" asks my father.
"No." I light a candle, then another

in a chain. "—So we wouldn't burn in Hell."
A balloon pops in the other room; distracted,
she innocently misses talk of nuns'
severities I never knew at seven.
By then, we were Unitarian

and marched off weekly, dutifully, to hear
nothing in particular. "Ready!"
I call, and we huddle close to sing
something akin, you'd have to say, to prayer.

Good God, her hair—

one beribboned pigtail has swung low
as she leans to trade the year in for a wish;
before she blows it out, the camera's flash
captures a mother's hand, all hope, no blame,
saving her from the flame.

15

TROMPE L'OEIL[↗]

All over Genoa
you see them: windows with open shutters.
Then the illusion shatters.

But that's not true. You knew
the shutters were merely painted on.
You knew it time and again.

The claim of the painted shutter
that it ever shuts the eye
of the window is an open lie.

You find its shadow-latches strike
the wall at a single angle,
like the stuck hands of a clock.

Who needs to be correct
more often than once a day?
Who needs real shadow more than play?

Inside the house, an endless
supply of clothes to wash.
On an outer wall it's fresh

paint hung out to dry—
shirttails flapping on a frieze
unruffled by any breeze,

like the words pinned to this line.
And the foreign word is a lie:
that second *l* in *l'oeil*

which only looks like an *l*, and is silent.

TIMOTHY
STEELE

In a Eucalyptus Grove

Some small dark thing thrashed in the path;
And I, dumbfounded and afraid,
Recoiling from its agony,
Could not decipher, much less aid,

This lizard—was it?—or young snake.
Yet even as I stood aghast
A long thin leaf spun down upon
And quelled the shadow it had cast.

18

* Toward the Winter Solstice

Although the roof is just a story high,
It dizzies me a little to look down.
I lariat-twirl the cord of Christmas lights
And cast it to the weeping birch's crown;
A dowel into which I've screwed a hook
Enables me to reach, lift, drape, and twine
The cord among the boughs so that the bulbs
Will accent the tree's elegant design.

Friends, passing home from work or shopping, pause
And call up commendations or critiques.
I make adjustments. Though a potpourri
Of Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jews, and Sikhs,
We all are conscious of the time of year;
We all enjoy its colorful displays
And keep some festival that mitigates
The dwindling warmth and compass of the days.

Some say that L.A. doesn't suit the Yule,
But UPS vans now like magi make
Their present-laden rounds, while fallen leaves
Are gaily resurrected in their wake;
The desert lifts a full moon from the east
And issues a dry Santa Ana breeze,
And valets at chic restaurants will soon
Be tending flocks of cars and SUVs.

And as the neighborhoods sink into dusk
The fan palms scattered all across town stand
More calmly prominent, and this place seems
A vast oasis in the Holy Land.
This house might be a caravansary,
The tree a kind of cordial fountainhead
Of welcome, looped and decked with necklaces
And ceintures of green, yellow, blue, and red.

Some wonder if the star of Bethlehem
Occurred when Jupiter and Saturn crossed;
It's comforting to look up from this roof
And feel that, while all changes, nothing's lost,
To recollect that in antiquity
The winter solstice fell in Capricorn
And that, in the Orion Nebula,
From swirling gas, new stars are being born.

20

Are You Sure That You Want to Exist? ✨

This jolt of metaphysics leaps at me
from the computer screen, in anapests
too jaunty for such probing inquiry,
unsettling for the scorn that it suggests,
its hint of threat. An instant's thought, of course,
corrects the reading: "exit," not "exist,"
not an offer to whisk me off by force,
but machine courtesy. Yet they persist,
the questions raised by what I chose to read:
Is anybody sure? Who has a say?
What other options are there, if indeed
I harbor doubts? I sometimes think I may,
but to so plain a query I repeat,
No exit, either! No! Do not delete!

— RHINA P.
ESPAILLAT



Rosario on Sunday Morning

Oh no, not dreaming: clear as I hear you
now on our way to Mass, and the bells tolling,
I heard him calling in the dark last night.
Charo, he called me: I sat up in bed,
the smell of *madreselvas* everywhere,
heavy as the bunches he would bring
when he came courting, all those years ago.

Not dreaming, no: I never dreamed of him—
and seldom thought of him—in all those years
since I sent him away once and for all.
As for my sending him away, I said
all that I had to say then, as you know.
More is nobody's business, though there are
some in this town who may think otherwise.

He, and those honeysuckle bunches damp
from his mother's garden, week on week,
showed up on our front porch, where Mama stayed—
or Sara, or Susana—just to show
that the Alvarado girls, even the ripest,
would not be left alone with any suitor.

You knew my father, how he never said
outright what he could hint at while he chewed
on a cigar. And yet he told me once,
“When there's no bread, cassava's good enough.”

Yes, from the start I knew they hoped I'd take him,
worn down by his scrubbed look. He was polite,
spoke as if he'd been schooled better than most,
but after crops and prices and the weather,
not much was left to say.

And in her way,
his mother courted me with smiles and small talk,
urged me to *recompense a good man's love*:
Amor con amor se paga, people say.
But love you take unwanted is no gift.
And if it were, why would one need to pay?

That's all of it, whatever some may think:
no quarrel, no advances to rebuff,
no secrets to uncover, his or mine.
I simply said, one day, it was no use
his waiting, waiting for what wouldn't fall,
when fresher fruit was out there for the picking,
at harvest dances and even private pews.

Before the rains, he left. And here I stayed—
odd how things happen—married, after all,
reared my two daughters and one bastard son
my late husband brought home, and then another,
taught the town's children over forty years,
with few regrets. Fewer, I'd say, than most,
and with less to do penance for than many
who'll kneel at the rail this morning for the host.

He could have stayed; but no, he was the one
who left—my porch, the town, his mother's house,
the farm, the island, all. If I believed
in country superstitions—but I don't—
I'd say he left the world itself last night.

Why did he come, unhindered by the lock,
in darkness, uninvited, and then call me—
Charo—by the one name nobody calls me?
Why did he say it with a voice that rose
out of a well of sorrow?

And today,
although I've opened every window wide
to daylight breezes from the orange grove,
the honeysuckle smell lies like a pall
over my bed, as if a wall of sorrow
shut out the town and everything that's in it
but bells, as they might sound tolled under water.

* Choosing a Seat

Face backwards and you'll see where you've just been.
Closing like scissor blades, that point pursues
the train until a turn lopsides it in
and out of sight. Curves are the only news.

That would be restful, but for an uneasy
tug on the body, suctioning it out
of the seat's hard security, the queasy
pull of speed in reverse, a kind of doubt.

Grinding into the station settles that,
though, and the backbone hugs its place again.
If you face forward you move sure and flat
past rushing lights, dark columns, working men

strobed by trick vision like prophetic dreams,
hypnotic once they're gone. But as you near
a stop, deceleration pries you, seems
to invite you out, whispers *You're here.*

Sit sideways and you hardly move at all,
intent on neighbors' newspapers, asleep,
or contemplating nothing. You recall
what someone said, wonder if you should keep

25

this or that promise, count letters in some ad.
You rock sideways a little, like a child
on some narcotic shoulder. That's not bad,
if what you like is passing time, beguiled

by trifles, who knows what. In any case,
whatever your choice of posture, chances are
you'll stand, wishing yourself some other place,
and travel just as fast and just as far.

At the Center ^{*}

The pianist is playing Debussy
Beside the lobby cappuccino bar—
Soft smiles and pastels everywhere. You see,
The point's not to remind you where you are
Or *how* you are; the point is not to dwell
On thoughts like these. Look at this normal crowd,
Such as you'd find in any good hotel.
But why does no one say its name out loud?

Later you pass through elevator doors;
Rising to higher levels, you recall
Rumors you've heard of rumors from these floors—
How some guests never leave, how they display
A preference for short hair, or none at all,
How no one asks how long you plan to stay.

— R. S. GWYNN

27



Body Bags

I

Let's hear it for Dwayne Coburn, who was small
And mean without a single saving grace
Except for stealing—home from second base
Or out of teammates' lockers, it was all
The same to Dwayne. The Pep Club candy sale,
However, proved his downfall. He was held
Briefly on various charges, then expelled
And given a choice: enlist or go to jail.

He finished basic and came home from Bragg
For Christmas on his reassignment leave
With one prize in his pack he thought unique,
Which went off prematurely New Year's Eve.
The student body got the folded flag
And flew it in his memory for a week.

II

Good pulling guards were scarce in high-school ball.
The ones who had the weight were usually slow
As lumber trucks. A scaled-down wild man, though,
Like Dennis "Wampus" Peterson, could haul
His ass around right end for me to slip
Behind his blocks. Played college ball a year—
Red-shirted when they yanked his scholarship
Because he majored, so he claimed, in Beer.

I saw him one last time. He'd added weight
Around the neck, used words like "grunt" and "slope,"
And said he'd swap his Harley and his dope
And both balls for a 4-F knee like mine.
This happened in the spring of '68.
He hanged himself in 1969.

EL DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

In Mexico, I met myself one day
Along the side of someone's private road.
I recognized the longing in my face.
I felt the heavy burden of the load
I carried. Mexico, I thought, was strange
And very dry. The private road belonged
To friends more powerful than I, enraged
But noble people who like me sang songs
In honor of the dead. In Mexico,
Tradition is as heavy as the sun.
I stared into my eyes. Some years ago,
I told myself, I met a handsome man
Who thought that I was Mexican. The weight
Of some enormous pain, unspeakable
Yet plain, was in his eyes; his shirt was white,
So white it blinded me. After it all
Became more clear, and we were making love
Beneath the cool sheet of the moon, I knew
We were alive. The tiny stars above
Seemed strange and very far. A dry wind blew.
I gave myself to him, and then I asked
Respectfully if I might touch his face.
I did not want to die. His love unmasked,
I saw that I had slept not with disgrace
But with desire. Along the desert road,
A cactus bloomed. As water filled my eyes,
I sang a song in honor of the dead.
They came for me. My grief was like a vise,
And in my blood I felt the virus teem.
My noble friends abandoned me beside

The road. The sun, awakened from its dream,
Rose suddenly. I watched it as I died,
And felt the heaviness of all its gold.
I listened for the singing in the distance.
A man walked toward me. The story he told
Seemed so familiar, pained, and so insistent,
I wished I would live long enough to hear
Its end. This man was very kind to me.
He kissed me, gave me water, held me near.
In Mexico, they sing so beautifully.

Lucifer at the Starlite

—after George Meredith

Here's my bright idea for life on earth:
better management. The CEO
has lost touch with the details. I'm worth
as much, but I care, I come down here, I show
my face, I'm a real regular. A toast:
To our boys and girls in the war, grinding
through sand, to everybody here, our host
who's mostly mist, like methane rising
from retreating ice shelves. Put me in command.
For every town, we'll have a marching band.
For each thoroughbred, a comfortable stable;
for each worker, a place beneath the table.
For every forward step a stumbling.
A shadow over every starlit thing.

—KIM ADDONIZIO

32

THERAPY

My brother's in the house. I close my door.
He's in the kitchen. Bottles, knives. He breaks the lock,
drags me by one arm across the floor.
A small bird thrums its wings inside the clock;
now it's coming out, it's keeping track
of each indignity: that helpless day,
my father's drinking—Christ, the whole sick
drama of my childhood's on display
like a document in a museum. And you
sit listening, and nodding, like those toys
I've seen, their heads on springs. It's too
ridiculous, this ordering the noise
the past makes into music. What's it for?
Time's up. You're in the house. I'm through the door.

6

— KIM ADDONIZZO

PRAYING DRUNK

Our Father who art in heaven, I am drunk.
Again. Red wine. For which I offer thanks.
I ought to start with praise, but praise
comes hard to me. I stutter. Did I tell you
about the woman whom I taught, in bed,
this prayer? It starts with praise; the simple form
keeps things in order. I hear from her sometimes.
Do you? And after love, when I was hungry,
I said, *Make me something to eat.* She yelled,
Poof! You're a casserole!—and laughed so hard
she fell out of bed. Take care of her.

Next, confession—the dreary part. At night
deer drift from the dark woods and eat my garden.
They're like enormous rats on stilts except,
of course, they're beautiful. But why? What *makes*
them beautiful? I haven't shot one yet.
I might. When I was twelve, I'd ride my bike
out to the dump and shoot the rats. It's hard
to kill your rats, our Father. You have to use
a hollow point and hit them solidly.
A leg is not enough. The rat won't pause.
Yeep! Yeep! it screams, and scrabbles, three-legged, back
into the trash, and I would feel a little bad
to kill something that wants to live
more savagely than I do, even if
it's just a rat. My garden's vanishing.
Perhaps I'll merely plant more beans, though that
might mean more beautiful and hungry deer.
Who knows?

34

I'm sorry for the times I've driven
home past a black, enormous, twilight ridge.
Crested with mist, it looked like a giant wave
about to break and sweep across the valley,
and in my loneliness and fear I've thought,
O let it come and wash the whole world clean.
Forgive me. This is my favorite sin: despair—
whose love I celebrate with wine and prayer.

Our Father, thank you for all the birds and trees,
that nature stuff. I'm grateful for good health,
food, air, some laughs, and all the other things
I'm grateful that I've never had to do
without. I have confused myself. I'm glad
there's not a rattrap large enough for deer.
While at a zoo last week, I sat and wept
when I saw one elephant insert his trunk
into another's ass, pull out a lump,
and whip it back and forth impatiently
to free the goodies hidden in the lump.
I could have let it mean most anything,
but I was stunned again at just how little
we ask for in our lives. *Don't look! Don't look!*
Two young nuns tried to herd their giggling
schoolkids away. *Line up,* they called. *Let's go*
and watch the monkeys in the monkey house.
I laughed, and got a dirty look. Dear Lord,
we lurch from metaphor to metaphor,
which is—let it be so—a form of praying.

I'm usually asleep by now—the time
for supplication. Requests. As if I'd stayed
up late and called the radio and asked
they play a sentimental song. Embarrassed.
I want a lot of money and a woman.
And, also, I want vanishing cream. You know—
a character like Popeye rubs it on

and disappears. Although you see right through him,
he's there. He chuckles, stumbles into things,
and smoke that's clearly visible escapes
from his invisible pipe. It makes me think,
sometimes, of you. What makes me think of me
is the poor jerk who wanders out on air
and then looks down. Below his feet, he sees
eternity, and suddenly his shoes
no longer work on nothingness, and down
he goes. As I fall past, remember me.

36

BALANCE

He watch her like a coonhound watch a tree.
What might explain the metamorphosis
he underwent when she paraded by
with tea-cakes, in her fresh and shabby dress?
(As one would carry water from a well—
straight-backed, high-headed, like a diadem,
with careful grace so that no drop will spill—
she balanced, almost brimming, her one name.)

She think she something, stuck-up island bitch.
Chopping wood, hanging laundry on the line,
and tantalizingly within his reach,
she honed his body's yearning to a keen,
sharp point. And on that point she balanced life.
That hoe Diverne think she Marse Tyler's wife.

37

... CHOPIN

It's Sunday evening. Pomp holds the receipts
of all the colored families on the Hill
in his wide lap, and shows which white store cheats
these patrons, who can't read a weekly bill.
His parlor's full of men holding their hats
and women who admire his girls' good hair.
Pomp warns them not to vote for Democrats,
controlling half of Hickman from his chair.
The varying degrees of cheating seen,
he nods toward the piano. Slender, tall,
a Fisk girl passing-white, almost nineteen,
his Blanche folds the piano's paisley shawl
and plays Chopin. And blessed are the meek
who have to buy in white men's stores next week.

38

Marilyn Nelson

THE BALLAD OF AUNT GENEVA

Geneva was the wild one.
Geneva was a tart.
Geneva met a blue-eyed boy
and gave away her heart.

Geneva ran a roadhouse.
Geneva wasn't sent
to college like the others:
Pomp's pride her punishment.

She cooked out on the river,
watching the shore slide by,
her lips pursed into hardness,
her deep-set brown eyes dry.

They say she killed a woman
over a good black man
by braining the jealous heifer
with an iron frying pan.

They say, when she was eighty,
she got up late at night
and sneaked her old, white lover in
to make love, and to fight.

First, they heard the tell-tale
singing of the springs,
then Geneva's voice rang out:
I need to buy some things,

39

*So next time, bring more money.
And bring more moxie, too.
I ain't got no time to waste
on limp white mens like you.*

*Oh yeah? Well, Mister White Man,
it sure might be stone-white,
but my thing's white as it is.
And you know damn well I'm right.*

*Now listen: take your heart pills
and pay the doctor mind.
If you up and die on me,
I'll whip your white behind.*

They tiptoed through the parlor
on heavy, time-slowed feet.
She watched him, from her front door,
walk down the dawnlit street.

Geneva was the wild one.
Geneva was a tart.
Geneva met a blue-eyed boy
and gave away her heart.

40

- JARED CARTER

After the Rain

After the rain, it's time to walk the field
again, near where the river bends. Each year
I come to look for what this place will yield—
lost things still rising here.

The farmer's plow turns over, without fail,
a crop of arrowheads, but where or why
they fall is hard to say. They seem, like hail,
dropped from an empty sky,

Yet for an hour or two, after the rain
has washed away the dusty afterbirth
of their return, a few will show up plain
on the reopened earth.

Still, even these are hard to see—
at first they look like any other stone.
The trick to finding them is not to be
too sure about what's known;

Conviction's liable to say straight off
this one's a leaf, or that one's merely clay,
and miss the point: after the rain, soft
furrows show one way

Arrowhead
stone!

Across the field, but what is hidden here
requires a different view—the glance of one
not looking straight ahead, who in the clear
light of the morning sun

Simply keeps wandering across the rows,
letting his own perspective change.
After the rain, perhaps, something will show,
glittering and strange.

(41)

Saved from
7 sons

The Shrivng *

And the seventh angel poured out his vial into the air.
Revelation 16:17

He was a druggist. The storefront building had one long room with a pressed-tin ceiling, a line of revolving fans down the middle, and random-oak floors darkened with polishing. The soda-fountain counter was a slab of black glass chipped with tiny moons. There were tables and chairs made of wire where you brought your date after a game: you could look up and see yourself in the mirror. The boys who worked there had imported brooms with handles maybe ten feet long or more; once each week they had to sweep the ceiling. When the brooms wore out, the druggist took them, saved them for a time when he burnt the worms.

Save for the times when he burnt the worms, I never saw him smile. If those who lived there had a name for sacred, they never said it aloud. Once when I was small the aunties took me out to a grove of walnut trees with nothing else around them, no green thing strong enough to rise up from that ground. Some called it poison, others spoke of a strange power in the earth itself, which the tree could summon. My morning there, gathering nuts—black clinkers—stained my fingers for weeks after. And from my first glimpse of that place I knew there are some things not written in books, there are some trees whose names you know on sight.

Got the
writing
Don't do
murder the wife
is it ratharasing?
has she commit
suicide of
drug produced
for the
has been

14

42

These are the names of the trees I came to know:
willow, which is first to turn green in springtime,
poplar, which looks silver when the wind blows,
oak, which is always last to let go of its leaves.
Each time he turned the car into the lane
he praised the walnut trees that stood there:
how they would bring a fortune at the mill,
how their heartwood, sliced thin as paper,
would unfold like ripples in a stream.
But they were his possession now, they came
with the house; he aimed to see they lived out
their span. When the first tent-moths arrived
and spread their stickiness through the trees,
he began to sweat, to cry out in his sleep.

Those who talked in their sleep, who could not rest,
came to the store each day to visit the druggist,
waited in line for a chance to say what was wrong.
Wednesday afternoons he closed, like the bank,
and stayed in the back room, counting the stock.
He knew she would be lounging on the bedclothes,
talking to some drummer who stands by the door,
who wants a cigarette now but lacks the nerve
to light one up. She would tell about her husband,
how he killed moths and butterflies in a jar;
the man would begin pulling on his pants.
The druggist tilts a line of pills into a box,
tells the boys to be sure and sweep the ceiling,
he is going home now, there are chores to do.

Going home after practice, doing the chores—
those things kept me busy. When the war started
the state widened the road to four lanes,
chopped down the trees in front of his house.
But even before that, when he first retired,
and she was long dead, of some illness,
and I, his grand-nephew, was left there

43

on summer mornings, for him to look after—
even then I guessed at what had happened:
when he would gather up the old tools
and get a worn-out broom down from the loft
and go out to burn the caterpillar nests
where they clotted the trees. When I watched him
make harsh changes in the way things were.

Change made him harsh. Things got in the way
of what he saw and heard. It took a long time
for him to tie the rags about the broom,
soak them in fuel oil, then strike a match
and hoist the fuming torch into the air,
touching it here and there among the leaves
where moths were dreaming. I saw them burst
and fall in a bright rain against the grass.
And when the trees were purged, and he stood
with hair and eyebrows full of soot, calling,
pointing toward the branches above, saying how
they were safe now, the fire had healed them,
and when I grew up, I could do it too—
I knew she was not dead, she had run away.

I learned one does not run away from death:
it comes like a harsh glare billowing darkness.
When I went back, after the war, and stopped
at the café next to the bank, no one there
remembered me, though they recalled his name.
“He drove his car onto the tracks one night,”
a farmer said. “Those Nickel Plate tracks
are gone now, all the way to Windfall.
You can hunt rabbit on the old right-of-way
and not worry about some train hitting you.
That whole stretch has come up in wild cherry;
last year the trees were thick with moths.”
“I remember him now,” the feed store man said.
“He was a druggist. Had a storefront building.”

44

— Roadside Crosses

This is a state where nothing marks the spot
officially. They crop up now and then
out on the freeway, or in rustic plots
sometimes, near S-curves in the country, when
the corn's knee-high. A cross, or even two
or three, made out of poles or boards, white-
washed or painted. They seem to have a view
of nothing at all, only the blurred lights
of oncoming cars, and the eighteen-wheelers
roaring by. Memory has a harsh sting—
blown back like the fine grit that settles
while you walk here now, no special healer,
merely a friend or brother, stopped to bring
a can of flowers, to place among the nettles.

45

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Is pro

THE TELLER

He told me, maybe thirty years ago,
he'd met a rawboned Eskimo named Jack
while filming polar bears on an ice floe.
Jack went out fishing in his sealskin kayak
but the current carried him so far off course
that when a Russian freighter rescued him
they signed him as a mate to Singapore.
Five years at sea it took to get back home.

The year an Englishman gave him his name.
The year of hustling on a Bali beach.
The year of opium in Vietnam.
The year he pined for snow. The year he searched
for any vessel that would turn toward Nome.
The man who told me? I tell you, I don't know.

- DAVID MASON

46

THE COLLECTOR'S TALE *

When it was over I sat down last night,
shaken, and quite afraid I'd lost my mind.
The objects I have loved surrounded me
like friends in such composed society
they almost rid the atmosphere of fright.
I collected them, perhaps, as one inclined
to suffer other people stoically.

That's why, when I found Foley at my door—
not my shop, but here at my private home,
the smell of bourbon for his calling card—
I sighed and let him in without a word.
I'd only met the man two months before
and found his taste as tacky as they come,
his Indian ethic perfectly absurd.

The auction house in St. Paul where we met
was full that day of cherry furniture.
I still can't tell you why he'd chosen me
to lecture all about his Cherokee
obsessions, but I listened—that I regret.
My patience with a stranger's geniture
compelled him to describe his family tree.

He told me of his youth in Oklahoma,
his white father who steered clear of the Rez,
a grandma native healer who knew herbs
for every illness. Nothing like the 'burbs,
I guess. He learned to tell a real toma-
hawk from a handsaw, or lift his half-mad gaze
and "entertain" you with some acid barbs.

So he collected Indian artifacts,
the sort that sell for thousands in New York.
Beadwork, war shirts, arrowheads, shards of clay
beloved by dealers down in Santa Fe.
He lived to corner strangers, read them tracts
of his invention on the careful work
he would preserve and pridefully display.

Foley roamed the Great Plains in his van,
his thin hair tied back in a ponytail,
and people learned that he was smart enough
to deal. He made a living off this stuff,
became a more authenticated man.
But when he drank he would begin to rail
against the white world's trivializing fluff.

Last night when he came in, reeking of smoke
and liquor, gesticulating madly
as if we'd both returned from the same bar,
I heard him out a while, the drunken bore,
endured his leaning up against my oak
credenza there, until at last I gladly
offered him a drink and a kitchen chair.

I still see him, round as a medicine ball
with a three-day beard, wearing his ripped jeans
and ratty, unlaced Nikes without socks.
I see him searching through two empty packs
and casting them aside despite my scowl,
opening a third, lighting up—he careens
into my kitchen, leaving boozy tracks.

I offered brandy. He didn't mind the brand
or that I served it in a water glass.
He drank with simple greed, making no show
of thanks, and I could see he wouldn't go.
He told me nothing happened as he planned,
how he left Rasher's tiny shop a mess.
I killed him, Foley said. *You got to know.*



*You know the place. Grand Avenue. The Great
White Way they built over my people's bones
after the western forts made stealing safe.
Safe for that fucking moneyed generation
F. Scott Fitzgerald tried to write about—
and here was Rasher, selling off such crap
no self-respecting dealer'd waste his time.*

*I heard he had good beadwork, Chippewa,
but when I went in all I saw was junk.
I'm thinking, Christ, the neighbors here must love him,
the one dusty-shuttered place on the block
and inside, counters filled with silver plate
so tarnished nobody would touch it, irons
with fraying cords and heaps of magazines.*

*He had the jawbone of a buffalo
from South Dakota, an old Enfield rifle,
a horn chair (or a cut-rate replica),
German Bible, a blue-eyed Jesus framed
in bottle caps—I mean he had everything*

49

*but paint-by-number sunsets, so much junk
I bet he hadn't made a sale in years.*

*You got to know this guy—skinny bald head
and both his hands twisted from arthritis.
I wouldn't give his place a second look
except I heard so much about this beadwork.
He leads me to a case in the back room.
I take a look. The stuff is fucking new,
pure Disneyland, not even off the Rez.*

Foley's glass was empty; I poured him more
to buy time while I thought of some excuse
to get him out of here. If homicide
indeed were his odd tale's conclusion, I'd
rather let him pass out on my floor,
then dash upstairs and telephone the police.
I wouldn't mind if "fucking" Foley fried.

*It's crap, he said. I tell this slimy coot
he doesn't know an Indian from a dog.
I can't believe I drove five hundred miles
to handle sentimental tourist crap.
He rolled himself upright in my kitchen chair
and looked at me with such complete disdain
that I imagined Mr. Rasher's stare.*

I knew the man. We dealers somehow sense
who we trust and who the characters are.
I looked at my inebriated guest
and saw the fool-as-warrior on a quest

50



for the authentic, final recompense
that would rub out, in endless, private war,
all but his own image of the best.

*Pretty quick I see I hurt his feelings,
He gets all proud on me and walks around
pointing at this and that,
a World's Fair pin, a Maris autograph,
and then he takes me to a dark wood cupboard
and spins the combination on the lock
and shows me what's inside. The old man*

*shows me his motherfucking pride and joy.
I look inside his cupboard and it's there
all right—a black man's head with eyes sewn shut—
I mean this fucker's real, all dried and stuffed,
a metal ashtray planted in the skull.
I look and it's like the old man's nodding,
Yeah, yeah, you prick, now tell me this is nothing.*

*He's looking at me looking at this head,
telling me he found it in a house
just up the street. Some dead white guy's estate
here in the liberal north allowed this coot
whatever his twisted little hands could take,
and then he hoards it away for special guests.
I didn't say a thing. I just walked out.*

Now Foley filled his glass, drinking it down.
His irises caught fire as he lit up.
I sat across from him and wiped my palms

51

but inside I was setting off alarms
as if I should alert this sleeping town
that murder lived inside it. I could stop
the story now, I thought, but nothing calms

a killer when he knows he must confess,
and Foley'd chosen me to hear the worst.
Weird, he said, looking straight at me beyond
his burning cigarette. *I got so mad.*
Like all I thought of was a hundred shelves
collecting dust in Rasher's shop, and how
a dead man's head lay at the center of it.

I had to get a drink. Some yuppie bar
that charged a fortune for its cheapest bourbon.
I'm in there while the sun sets on the street
and people drop in after leaving work.
I look at all these happy people there—
laughing, anyway; maybe they aren't happy—
the well-dressed women tossing back their hair,

the men who loosen their designer ties
and sip their single malts—living on bones
of other people, right?
And two blocks down the street, in Rasher's shop,
a head where someone flicked his ashes once,
because of course a darky can't be human,
and someone's family kept that darky's head.

These genteel people with their decent souls
must have been embarrassed finding it,

52

*and Rasher got it for a fucking song
and even he could never sell the thing.
No, he showed it to me just to get me,
just to prove I hadn't seen it all.
Well, he was right, I hadn't seen it all.*

*I didn't know the worst that people do
could be collected like a beaded bag,
bad medicine or good, we keep the stuff
and let it molder in our precious cases.
Some fucker cared just how he dried that head
and stitched the skin and cut the hole in the top—
big medicine for a man who liked cigars.*

*It's just another piece of history,
human, like a slave yoke or a scalping knife,
and maybe I was drunk on yuppie booze,
but I knew some things had to be destroyed.
Hell, I could hardly walk, but I walked back,
knocked on Rasher's door until he opened,
pushed him aside like a bag of raked-up leaves.*

*Maybe I was shouting, I don't know.
I heard him shouting at my back, and then
he came around between me and the case,
a little twisted guy with yellow teeth
telling me he'd call the fucking cops.
I found the jawbone of that buffalo.
I mean I must have picked it up somewhere,*

53

maybe to break the lock, but I swung hard
and hit that old fucker upside the head
and he went down so easy I was shocked.
He lay there moaning in a spreading pool
I stepped around. I broke that old jawbone
prizing the lock, but it snapped free, and I
snatched out the gruesome head.

I got it to my van all right, and then
went back to check on Rasher. He was dead.
For a while I tried to set his shop on fire
to see the heaps of garbage in it burn,
but you'd need gasoline to get it going
and besides, I couldn't burn away the thought
of that weird thing I took from there tonight.

It's out there, Foley said. I'm parked outside
a few blocks down—I couldn't find your house.
I knew you'd listen to me if I came.
I knew you'd never try to turn me in.
You want to see it? No? I didn't either,
and now I'll never lose that goddamned head,
even if I bury it and drive away.



By now the bluster'd left his shrinking frame
and I thought he would vomit in my glass,
but Foley had saved strength enough to stand,
while I let go of everything I'd planned—
the telephone, police, and bitter fame

54

that might wash over my quiet life and pass
away at some inaudible command.

I thought of all the dead things in my shop.
No object I put up was poorly made.
Nothing of mine was inhumane, although
I felt death in a kind of undertow
pulling my life away. *Make it stop,*
I thought, as if poor Foley had betrayed
our best ideals. Of course I let him go.

The truth is, now he's left I feel relieved.
I locked the door behind him, but his smell
has lingered in my hallway all these hours.
I've mopped the floor, washed up, moved pots of flowers
to places that he touched. If I believed,
I would say Foley had emerged from hell.
I ask for help, but the silent house demurs.



Someone Is Always Praying

Someone is always praying as the plane
Breaks up, and smoke and cold and darkness blow
Into the cabin. Praying as it happens,
Praying before it happens that it won't.
Someone was praying that it never happen
Before the first window on Kristallnacht
Broke like a wine glass wrapped in bridal linen.
Before it was imagined, someone was praying
That it be unimaginable. And then,
The bolts blew off and people fell like bombs
Out of their names, out of the living sky.
Surely, someone was praying. And the prayer
Struck the blank face of earth, the ocean's face,
The rockhard, rippled face of facelessness.

— MARK JARMAN

(56)

Ground Swell [★]

Is nothing real but when I was fifteen,
Going on sixteen, like a corny song?
I see myself so clearly then, and painfully—
Knees bleeding through my usher's uniform
Behind the candy counter in the theater
After a morning's surfing; paddling frantically
To top the brisk outsiders coming to wreck me,
Trundle me clumsily along the beach floor's
Gravel and sand; my knees aching with salt.
Is that all that I have to write about?
You write about the life that's vividest.
And if that is your own, that is your subject.
And if the years before and after sixteen
Are colorless as salt and taste like sand—
Return to those remembered chilly mornings,
The light spreading like a great skin on the water,
And the blue water scalloped with wind-ridges,
And—what was it exactly?—that slow waiting
When, to invigorate yourself, you peed
Inside your bathing suit and felt the warmth
Crawl all around your hips and thighs,
And the first set rolled in and the water level

57

Rose in expectancy, and the sun struck
The water surface like a brassy palm,
Flat and gonglike, and the wave face formed.
Yes. But that was a summer so removed
In time, so specially peculiar to my life,
Why would I want to write about it again?
There was a day or two when, paddling out,
An older boy who had just graduated
And grown a great blond moustache, like a walrus,
Skimmed past me like a smooth machine on the water,
And said my name. I was so much younger,
To be identified by one like him—
The easy deference of a kind of god
Who also went to church where I did—made me
Reconsider my worth. I had been noticed.
He soon was a small figure crossing waves,
The shawling crest surrounding him with spray,
Whiter than gull feathers. He had said my name
Without scorn, just with a bit of surprise
To notice me among those trying the big waves
Of the morning break. His name is carved now
On the black wall in Washington, the frozen wave



That griever's cross to find a name or names.
I knew him as I say I knew him, then,
Which wasn't very well. My father preached
His funeral. He came home in a bag
That may have mixed in pieces of his squad.
Yes, I can write about a lot of things
Besides the summer that I turned sixteen.
But that's my ground swell. I must start
Where things began to happen and I knew it.

59

to reach.
lie.

After Disappointment *

To lie in your child's bed when she is gone
Is calming as anything I know. To fall
Asleep, her books arranged above your head,
Is to admit that you have never been
So tired, so enchanted by the spell
Of your grown body. To feel small instead
Of blocking out the light, to feel alone,
Not knowing what you should or shouldn't feel,
Is to find out, no matter what you've said
About the cramped escapes and obstacles
You plan and face and have to call the world,
That there remain these places, occupied
By children, yours if lucky, like the girl
Who finds you here and lies down by your side.

