

## **Pamela Spiro Wagner**

### *How to Read a Poem: Beginner's Manual \**

First, forget everything you have learned,  
that poetry is difficult,  
that it cannot be appreciated by the likes of you,  
with your high school equivalency diploma,  
your steel-tipped boots,  
or your white-collar misunderstandings.

Do not assume meanings hidden from you:  
the best poems mean what they say and say it.

To read poetry requires only courage  
enough to leap from the edge  
and trust.

Treat a poem like dirt,  
humus rich and heavy from the garden.  
Later it will become the fat tomatoes  
and golden squash piled high upon your kitchen table.

Poetry demands surrender,  
language saying what is true,  
doing holy things to the ordinary.

Read just one poem a day.  
Someday a book of poems may open in your hands  
like a daffodil offering its cup  
to the sun.

When you can name five poets  
without including Bob Dylan,  
when you exceed your quota  
and don't even notice,  
close this manual.

Congratulations.  
You can now read poetry.

*\* How to Read a Poem: Beginner's Manual, is scheduled for publication in Pamela's new book, We Mad Climb Shaky Ladders (CavanKerry Press, 2009).*

## **Pamela Spiro Wagner**

### *The prayers of the mathematician...*

rise without sound,  
primes uttered like a rosary's  
beaded polynomials of devotion,  
climbing the sky towards a god  
unknowable as the dark infinity  
between rational and irrational  
numbers. His hair in a wild corona  
framing eyes so deep-set  
they seem to drown what's caught there,  
knowing the hardest questions  
may sometimes answer,  
he wanders the halls  
pale and abstracted as pi,  
trailing numbers in chalkdust,  
like the spectral footprints of a ghost  
no one remembers passing there,  
these incandescents of his faith  
illuminating all the unsayables  
as only equations can,  
in brief yellow chalk on a green board:  
that life yearns towards binariness,  
that our ending is in our beginning,  
that if we name as nouns  
the verbs he numbers in strictest silence,  
our dualism's just as binary:  
good or evil, pure or profane,  
we only constrain what he sets free  
with his meticulous 1's,  
his careful and perfect 0's.

*The mathematician referenced here is the troubled Nobel Prize-winner John Nash before A Beautiful Mind won him popular acclaim. This poem won first place in the 2001-02 international poetry contest sponsored by the BBC World Service and is scheduled for publication in Pamela's new book, We Mad Climb Shaky Ladders (CavanKerry Press, 2009).*

## **Eleanor St. James**

### *Half Flight*

Underneath your skin  
you are a swallowtail butterfly

regal, feebly fluttering  
with one magnificent, fragile wing.  
How I long for you to sip sweet nectar,  
to lose yourself in the heady fragrance  
of wild hyssop blooms.  
I will spare part of life looking for wings.  
I will look in gutters before rain comes.  
I will hunt dark, neglected corners where  
things like discarded wings mound up.  
And when I find your wing,  
my golden swallowtail,  
I will gently cup you  
in my hands,  
stroke your downy hair  
in one direction,  
and lift  
your missing wing  
into place,  
saddened  
by the years  
it will take you  
to learn  
how  
to fly.

## **Katherine Case**

### *Life of the Giant Squid*

She propels herself through infinite space using a long  
series of sighs, muscled arms pumping tandem ballet

in the half light. She may never see another of her kind,  
may never be a mother, might not be glimpsed

by a passing ship or deep-roving submarine as she swims  
at unknown speeds through water spotted with phytoplankton,

oil-thick and cloudy, while the massive, slanted remnants of daylight  
fade down into darkness. *What else to do.* She speeds up,

bits of plant life streak by like comets or stars, and she opens  
her beak, relaxes her belly and feels for a moment

the life of the ocean coursing through. At rest, constellations of algae  
sway slowly in near space, oppressive in their benign totality

like that great bowl of humid air resting over the plains of Illinois  
on a cloudy day—a world belted by the horizon.

She keeps moving, and again the day ends. Light removes itself  
from water, and speed and direction are chosen now not by vision

or distance but by the bleak geometry of curved bottom, invisible horizon,  
the eventual return of color, until which she is a planet hurtling

through uncharted space, her huge eyes mirror back the black  
of water as it passes, her almost-companion in the quiet dark.

### *Doppelganger*

We rearranged the furniture, cleaned the fish tank  
and moved it to the hall table near the bathroom, where now

of our three old goldfish—tennis-ball sized ancients whose cheek sacs  
sag around their raggedy fins—one has taken to watching me

as I get ready in the morning or at night, walking past in slippers  
and an old t-shirt, so that when the tank is the only light

and train noises come soft through the open window  
I think of his lidless dog-eyes or catch myself looking again

toward the hallway out the open bedroom door. What is this  
I cannot admit? If I am nothing more

than a huge, ill-defined shadow not of his fear,  
but of all the things he could not possibly know,

passing with a coffee cup most mornings just when the sun  
almost reaches the far corner of his green haze, then how is it

for the mundane clockwork of this life to be his liminal world,  
a parallel universe in which nothing happens, in which I leave the apartment

every morning, stand on the stairs in the sunshine, look up  
and still don't notice the darkness beyond my own blue sky.

## **Karla K. Morton**

### *Dilation*

Driving back from the eye doctor,  
dusk turned to dark,  
and as I pulled in to park, I became feline.

I slinked out of the truck to sit on the stoop,  
looking up through two pupils  
huge and dark with dilation;

understanding my cat's  
wild fascination with the night;  
how every pinpoint of light became starred and feathered;

not knowing whether Moon was orb or Goddess  
in her silver broad headdress of halo—  
her undeniable undertow of magic.

How tragic that humans don't know this world,  
where the beasties and flowers are glistened and pearled,  
and all is lost to the night... Ah, but one time, I knew...

and now my cat looks back as she passes out the door,  
to the dark once more... with eyes, wild and wide—  
the Goddess, calling, calling, calling her outside.

## **Angela Masterson Jones**

### *First Taste of War*

*for Randy Masterson*

You sprang from your nap on the floor

when I kissed you, in your thin ribbed  
undershirt with armholes bigger than my head.  
*Supper*, Mom had said.  
*Go wake your dad.*

I didn't know I'd find you  
on hills of high grass,  
rifle slung over khaki shoulder,  
swinging to the beat of dry-socked,  
booted feet, following a cadence  
called by countrymen  
in a foreign land.

Korea was not a place I'd met,  
at seven, because I hadn't yet seen  
how it made you lunge,  
alarm camouflaged in sleep  
by twitching eyelids, ticking cheeks.

I got my first taste of war in that kiss,  
my baby tooth's loose root  
knocked free by the strong  
bone of your chin  
that quivered at supper when I couldn't eat  
because of all our blood  
on my lips.

## **Wayne Lee**

### *My Father's War*

*For Henry David Esau, 1913-1997*

Life is perfect.  
My father is five years old,  
youngest son of a Mennonite pastor  
in this quiet Ukrainian village.

This is before the Revolution.  
Before the wounded soldiers appear at the door.  
Before the children start finding bodies in the field.  
Before the family is reduced to eating garbage.

Before the Bolsheviks march their horses  
like shining toys across the Steppes.

Before the family flees by train to Estonia,  
by boat to England, by ship to Canada.  
Before they become outsiders in a Protestant land.  
Long before World War II, when my father joins  
the RCAF, trains airmen to take off and never return,  
gets reassigned to a German POW camp in Alberta,  
exchanges drawings, jokes and smokes with prisoners  
just as lost as he.

This is before I am born.

It is a perfect day,  
a cloudless, windless, summer day.  
Everyone at work in the fields, the kitchens, the barns.  
Amid the gentle sounds of their labors,  
a distant buzz like a mosquito in the next room.  
Then a biplane, weaving its way erratically  
above the squares of rye and wheat,  
banking over the schoolhouse and church,  
circling the cows grazing in the paddock,  
casting a shadow like a giant hawk.

Now they see the pilot, flying low, flying crazy,  
goggles askew, scaring the chickens and ducks,  
setting the dogs barking, stopping the workers in mid-task,  
steering with one gloved hand, reaching inside the cockpit  
with the other, pulling something up, holding something out,  
dropping something down, watching something fall toward the herd,  
explode like thunder at their feet, send smoke and sod and pieces of cow  
like fireworks spiraling through the morning air, the biplane arcing,  
jerking, diving like a rabid bird of prey, the pilot reaching again  
inside his cockpit, holding out again that instrument of death,  
dropping again that terrible bomb, reaching, holding, dropping, watching  
again and again and again until the detonations stop, the air stills,  
the mouths close, the tears spill, till every single cow lies shattered  
as the morning calm.

Some say they heard the pilot laugh as he banked and sputtered away  
like a hacking drunk back from where he came.

Life is perfect.  
My father is dead,  
years after quitting booze, leaving wives

and children, abandoning art and giving up on life.  
It simply made no sense to him, the death, the insanity,  
the slaughter of innocents on the golden fields of his youth.

He never forgot the cows, couldn't shake the specter  
of that drunken bomber, couldn't abide that shell-shocked exit  
from childhood. For my father stood among the herd that day,  
did not survive beyond the perfect age of five.

## **Amy Wright**

### *The Part of the Universe That Looks at Itself*

***'Sometimes a single phrase is like a lion  
crouching on the ground.'* —Yuan-Wu**

through isinglass of air  
a small motion slows  
inside the bellows  
of the body, an aperture  
in the evergreens "for love  
I am contingent"  
on the Gelvie looking back  
eyes black as drains. The clear  
open space between two things  
*The calf is being pulled out  
by a man* through the pupil  
toward the question  
of boundary. I end  
where you begin  
only sometimes  
in the snap of hair, the tips  
glisten in all directions  
& there is no place  
we can remain  
separate selves

## **Diane Gilliam** (for Daddy)

### *Your pencil breaks...*

... as you try to write the poem you are meaning  
to write. One more reason to give up, go  
downstairs and start a pot of coffee. But you like

the electric sharpener, so you heft  
yourself up out of the couch and head across  
the room for the desk. You remember the metal  
sharpener bolted to the back wall in Room 5  
and how you had to raise your hand for permission.  
Broken lead's grist for that noisy mill, the half-wood,  
half-metal smell of it. How the broken black bone  
of the pencil came out sanded and smooth,  
ready to yield its point to whatever  
you wanted to write. You remember  
homework and the round kitchen table and only  
one pencil in the house. Your father's hands—  
his fingers trembling from overwork—dangle  
over the trashcan, broken pencil  
in his left hand, kitchen knife in his right,  
its blade flat against the pad of his thumb,  
whittling at the point. How the shavings  
fell unshaped and thick, the lead not long  
and cylindrical now, but nub-shaped  
like something out of his toolbox. Even the tip  
slightly squared off so that the up-and-down lines  
of your letters come out too thick, the sideways curves  
way too thin—the odd, homely calligraphy  
of his rough edges shaping all your words.

*\* Your Pencil Breaks first appeared in Appalachian Heritage.*

**Gayle Elen Harvey**  
*Among All Instruments*

In some other life, perhaps, you were an oboe,  
cor anglaise, transposing instrument, and I, Sumerian lyre, plucked  
bare-fingered, just as now, tonight,  
clasped taut against your belly, your hands are transposing me,  
my breasts, my guarded thighs strummed *lentamente*, to arpeggios  
of wanting. *Dolce*—  
*Dolcemente*, you bring both of us to perfect pitch.

Among all instruments, you were, perhaps, a contra bass,  
flesh polished rosewood in this votive light,  
your potent, thrumming curves a skyline, harbor like Marseilles  
or Istanbul at nightfall, mosqued and sonorous  
with its muezzin.

Within this life, I've come to you, impaired, debauched with  
sorrow, but you keep time, play rubato, lingering,  
tenendo, giving, taking until I become wind instrument, recorder,  
swart interior receiving you,  
your carillon of grace notes filling me until, felice, svgliando,  
I can't make a sound.

## **Patrick Carrington**

### *A Heraldry of Hands*

I've always been taken by women's hands,  
each with their own way of being  
in history. But I'm untouched  
by the ones satiny with birthrights  
and a pinky raised for tea. I'm  
never sure what to make of hands  
like those, the purchased purity  
as spotless as new linens,  
lifelines like the seam  
of untroubled glass. They are

so unlike hands of earned identity  
that are more soul than skin,  
that bear damage,  
the blemishes and bends that say  
earth is not a place of justice,  
that wear a simple ring so well  
union really does seem sacred. As a boy

I was fascinated by my grandmother's,  
how her hands were a human story  
written at Hardscrabble Creek  
in knobs and nicks, in slants  
that spoke celery snaps of bones,  
cottonfields and crazy days. I listened,

and they told me hands were made  
before spades, and I could hear  
the wail of slaves  
as they dug with crooked fingers,  
the sobs of mourners  
muffled in palms as dirt was turned.

And too, I heard better times. Crackles  
of ice they held in enough highballs  
for her to miss a few trains and steps,  
the secrets in the silky rub  
of rented rooms. They said years

are pushed down hard by rain,  
and in the mud I could tell  
without looking at her face  
how beautiful she must have been  
in a storm. Her hands were clean

because she had wept on them so often,  
and marked fields and flesh  
with their chaste blood. I stared  
until I wanted to grow up clutching  
such beauty and scars to me,  
closer than any love or tattoo.

*\* A Heraldry of Hands first appeared in The Evansville Review.*

## **Mil Norman-Risch**

### *Song*

whether a dog sleeps too much  
or whether he just sleeps

(like saying “this pot boils too much”  
or “this hand holds too much”  
or “this heart feels too much”)

the dog just sleeps

the hand holds

the pot boils

why ask

whether there is too much suffering

four gray birds on a limb  
sing and sing and sing and sing

and somewhere the blinds are closed  
and somewhere the sidewalk is in the shadow of an elm  
and somewhere long rafters in a barn are hung with ropes

empty  
but not too empty.

## **Vicki Goodfellow Duke**

### *Garment*

*'Suppose time is a circle, bending back on itself.'*

—Alan Lightman

The gown  
is fairy-pleated  
in damask silk,  
bodice formed  
to the waist's curve,  
firm in the long groove  
of your back.  
See how chiffon falls  
over the contour of hips,  
fluted sleeves  
grazing the wrist.  
Note the well-placed pearl,  
each hand-culled bead.

Turn once, and look  
through this gossamer veil  
back to the bend  
in the circle.  
See the circumference  
of your life,

the way the hours curl  
in a ring from then to now  
and begin over,  
each wound as hook and eye,  
binding the fabric of days.  
How in going round  
you would not alter  
one scar, embroidered  
seamless,  
the glossed brilliance  
of completion.

### *Falling Dark*

The flower seller in a fringed wool shawl,  
a scarcity of berries and summer squash. The little things  
you hardly notice. Cathedral doors locked after Matins,  
the scent of musk, over lavender and pear.  
And one day you look  
and your father is old, the streets bare,  
dark turned in, and you know the permissions  
you give yourself, in a city settling  
with snow, you can't remember falling.

## **Ruth Daigon**

### *The Drowning*

1.

We keep pulling him up  
from the bottom of the Red River  
in stop-action or slow-motion  
and replay the splash  
Blooming around his hips.

We correct his dive  
restore the promise  
of his form each movement clear  
in the instant of falling.

The moment reversed  
we reel him up  
to where he's still  
sitting on the bank.

Mother covers  
her bare scalp with hair  
torn by its roots

Scream sucked back  
become soft  
syllables again.

Her shredded clothes  
re-woven. The table set  
for his return.

2.

Again he's swimming  
and the Red River  
takes him in.

Mother's rooted to the bank  
her voice floating over water.  
*We're waiting supper for you.*

Bread and milk lie  
heavy on the table where sisters  
stand strange to one another

They turn their backs  
and climb the stairs  
to narrow rooms.

It's that time of year  
nudging memories of  
his face streaked with summer

murmurs at evening meals  
walks along the river  
with its glowing spine.

In this house where  
no one survives love  
darkness opens like a white door.

3.

Summer nights we'd sit on the back veranda  
planing down the hours with small talk.  
Stories flowed in a spill of old pleasures,

sweet and tart and light on the tongue.  
The air was fresh, the weather excellent.  
The room radiant with the dead.

## **Laura Hilton**

### *Drowning*

as the car wills itself  
into summer dark  
and a waiting midnight river  
she remembers  
this crazed flight—  
the sinking of metal  
the weight of water

and so she is prepared  
she knows what to do  
which is to release the harness  
it is so easy  
this first part  
and she is confident

but she hasn't dreamt the black of it  
how could she?  
at the end  
which is now  
there are no colors  
no lines  
and she acknowledges  
even accepts  
that she has forgotten the next step

## **Yvonne Postelle**

### *Journey*

*'When I talk of a trip I mean forever,' —Adrienne Rich*

To float day after day  
on a broad river  
into whatever comes after—  
as the early Americans  
are said to have done—  
seems not the worst way;

to follow the river's bend,  
slowly separating  
from the known  
letting the carved canoe,  
with its scant provision  
of dried maize, wend  
toward a greater water  
where no one  
has seen the end;

to give oneself  
to the journey  
the way the arctic tern must  
when it begins its long flight  
to a dimly remembered spot,  
sensing the direction  
one wing beat at a time;

to travel night  
after star-lit night  
until you get there,  
until you're gone.

## **Merle Feld**

### *Aunt Julie In Our Doorway*

Making fun of Aunt Julie was a family sport,  
her wide open face beckoning like a target,  
the large twin circles of her spectacles  
forming a double bullseye, offering no protection

to the pale watery eyes behind them, eyes  
that seemed perpetually surprised by the casual cruelties  
of her siblings and their spouses, perpetually  
surprised that even their well-brought up children  
finally couldn't bring themselves to laugh  
along with her as she laughed and laughed.

Hers was a distinctive laugh, like a small summer  
waterfall, little peals and gales, falling and falling  
and then starting at the top all over again.  
A gay laugh, a child's laugh, a laugh from high  
in the throat, she laughed as if she had no  
alternative, as if laughter and confusion were all  
that God had given her to choose from.

And then at the end of every visit, Aunt Julie  
in our doorway. It's common to describe someone  
as "lingering in the doorway," but that's not it at all—  
Aunt Julie took up residence in the doorway,  
planted herself there and effectively resisted  
any effort to uproot her. This too, of course,  
became a set piece when riffing on the peculiarities  
of Aunt Julie—Aunt Julie and her long goodbyes.

How far a journey was it after all—  
three city blocks to her own small apartment,  
back to the coarse widower who had taken her  
for wife, taken her to wash his underwear, mind  
his daughter, scrub the linoleum, have supper  
on the table. Fifty years later I wake up remembering  
and finally understand: *There's something  
I came for and didn't get, something I need.*  
So hard to leave without it.

## **Jeanne Wagner**

### *Photo of You Taken by the 'Other Woman'*

***Brighton Beach, 2006***

I like the way the scene seems to smear,  
as if shot through the rainy windscreen of a car,  
and the way you're caught  
turning away from the bleary distance,  
indifferent as a child  
taking a back-seat to everything outside,

while inside  
he listens to the wipers' metronomic rhythm,  
the warm exhalations of a heater kicking in,  
making him playful in a callous way,  
as you are now,  
standing under a red umbrella.

Now that I think of it, you seem dressed  
a bit too formally,  
considering what sort of day it is,  
those natty black slacks  
not even covered by an anorak,  
and the slight back-heel tilt of your body,  
the way it's casually swaying  
to a music I can't hear,  
as if you're singing,  
just singing in the rain.

And of course the pier  
functions mostly as a prop,  
symbol of how heartlessly things burn  
when untended:  
the old pavilion melting like a movie vampire  
when the light of dawn overtakes his face,  
though yours will remain  
hidden behind that red umbrella,  
which is complicit here,  
flaring like a struck match, so tense  
I can almost hear it hiss and arch its back  
against the rain.

## **Pat Landreth Keller**

### *Draglines\**

twins the ones she told us were murdered  
floated through the telling so many times

she believed she saw them dragged to the river's flat surface  
that calm spring day barbed wire for collars

twelve she said pretty little girls  
tossing slippers and stockings up the sandy bank

tucking hems into their bloomers wading the shallows  
at the cowpath's end water lapping the willows

barehanded man whipping wire into lassoes  
spinning those girls like sugar tied back to back

2.

shuffling old man thick-tongued sad  
coins sticky in his open hand  
Her seeing wanting

she said he tried to kiss her she said  
she tried not to think of twins two weeks in the water  
strung together like beads

silver spilling from his fingers  
he said *closer*  
hand under her dress she said like water rising

she felt his tongue each time  
she slipped a hidden nickel from under the shaving soap  
her papa left behind she said if she dropped the nickel

the old man's words rolled under the door  
*gotta little honey by the stockyard comes to my room*  
*likes my hand on her sweet little leg*

she said she'd kept the taste of metal on her tongue  
fingerprints on her thigh old as she was  
said the twins never would quit turning in her mind

washing into the river out of the river  
hair tangled in the willows  
just like wanting she said just like words

*\* A slightly different version of Draglines appeared in GSU Review and is the title poem in a forthcoming chapbook from Toadlily Press.*

### *Independence Day*

I have wanted it forever—  
now it is mine,  
your fur from the war years:  
ripped lining, frazzled seams,  
hem snagged in a car door's sudden slam  
behind a beer joint on the river road;

rubbed hairless around a collar  
turned up high for careening, breakneck rides  
over rutted ice to rough backwater camps;  
split up the sleeve  
you raised, your loose and happy arm  
saluting the moon;

matted,  
a smell like last year's rum-soaked cake;  
pockets bulged outward from long-gone bottles of gin;  
cuffs tattooed by drifting cigarettes;  
frayed belt, lost buttons,  
lipstick stains.

It is all the style you had.  
It is all your sons remember from those nights  
huddled in the backseat as you leaned  
on whatever man was driving you home at closing:  
they felt it gather and climb your moonlit thighs  
as his slow hand moved.

Now it is mine:  
Mine the barrel, the kindling, the gasoline,  
the flame:  
ashes for my brothers, who learned to weep  
at the sound of hinges, who wept each time  
you tossed it back over the seat to comfort them.

## **Laura Spagnoli**

### *Nest*

First what would save me: red kettle,  
wooden crate, the spoon, knife and fork  
in a drawer.

There's enough light to read by the window  
eye-level with what moves away:  
pigeons, chimney smoke,  
other eyes looking out  
for other things.

The message I write says *I'm fine*. Still warm  
in the gray coat a man gave me. Still young  
enough. Still pretty. I push my way in  
to subway cars crammed with shopping bags and hands.  
I slip into galleries, restaurants, apartments  
like the mice I will have to kill  
in this new kitchen  
when they come in.

What cracks we find in hard things—

fissured concrete and brickwork, a nickel-size breach  
where the tiles meet the stairs.  
Pink nose sniffs the hole by a heating pipe.  
Now another gets in, you see?

Hungry still, they make doors  
beside doors that are shut. In the dark,  
on all fours—what they must, what I must—  
that one so low she fits, lucky thing.

Lucky me on the floor I call my own floor,  
safe enough to tell lies—I am nothing  
like them—even down on my knees by this trap  
that's caught another one,  
scratching slow, half alive.

The one that has me playing which-way-is-worse,  
putting one hand over my eyes.  
The head I smash in *to be kind*  
with my other hand  
in a shoe.

## **Charles Sharpe**

### *The good old boys in my closet...*

play mumbledy-peg  
and rock paper scissors  
with their long bony fingers  
and they bicker in the dark.

Their names are Mr. Jim,  
Crackers, Hum Bow, Karma,  
Slick and Uncle Shiva  
and they sit on milk crates  
clicking and clacking their teeth

drinking beer with saltines  
and pickled herring,  
banging and thumping around  
when they get bored.

They scrape and wheeze,  
singing sea chanteys

when Crackers plays his concertina  
and they turn the vacuum on and off  
and put on my hats and shoes  
just to laugh at themselves.

But when I can't hear them,  
I become nervous  
and wonder what they're up to.

They wait quietly for me  
so I'll forget they're there  
and open the door—  
they stand and drool  
and leer at my friends while Mr. Jim  
makes rhymes about my past.

When I've been away,  
they wait anxiously,  
pressing their ears to the door  
hoping I'll feel sorry for them  
and let them out  
to clatter about opening  
cupboards and drawers  
as if they were memories.

If I'm not minding them  
they shamble into the street  
led by Uncle Shiva,  
playing their snare drum  
and turning over garbage cans,  
singing folk songs  
late into the night.

Hum Bow and Slick break  
into neighbor's garages  
to steal paint so they can write  
things about me in large letters  
on the street,  
resisting like drunk uncles  
my furtive attempts  
to round them up  
and get them back  
into the closet—  
where they belong.

## **Dianalee Velie**

### *Love All*

Poets have to love a game beginning  
Love/All, Forty/Love, so close to winning,

the lack of a point signified by Love  
under unconditional skies above.

Admiring your backhand return, I  
stare at the ballistic ball transfixed by

its perfect placement in the left corner,  
bouncing hard and out of my reach, cleaner

than a slice of life. Such perfection in  
motion, I do not run or try to win

this point. It is enough to watch the ball,  
like a plunging sun, radiant downfall

of perfection and glory. Awaiting  
another return, I bend low, fearing

I have misplaced my competitive edge  
with an artist's eye and a poet's pledge

to love all beauty with intensity,  
and honor ideal synchronicity,

to honor in verse, with this clear blue sky,  
that holy shot, so it will never die.

## **Rebekah McCarroll**

### *Wonder*

Where were you my loving friend  
Ever so long ago?  
Were we both in the same universe?

Did we have nowhere to go?  
Did Venus cradle you to sleep?  
Did Mars greet me "hello"?  
Where were you my dear friend  
So many years ago?

Were your eyes as blue as a hemisphere  
Not even yet created?  
Was your hair as black as the coal  
Wherein diamonds for me awaited?  
Were your lips as soft as buttered moon rays  
Was your being close to mine?  
Where were you my treasured friend  
In that long forgotten time?

Did you dance a circle game with me  
Around on Jupiter's rings?  
Did you play marbles with the stars  
Did you hear an angel sing?  
Did you know that I was there  
Did you ever see my shadow?  
Or were our worlds too far apart  
That to you it did not matter?

Where were you my beloved friend  
Oh so long ago?  
Were we ever even up there?  
Will we ever really know?  
Did black holes of future sin  
Ever enter our pure souls?  
Were we ever ever up there  
So many years ago?

*\* Wonder first appeared in Eva magazine.*

## **Emily Tallman**

### *I Ask My Father About Vietnam*

He tells me about the boy  
he passed on the dirt road of some nameless village,  
on his way to a military hospital.  
The boy was alone, walking in an unblinking daze.  
His stomach had been blown open.

Someone must have helped him pull the hanging flap of skin,  
stretching impossibly from his belly up  
between his teeth so he could bite it,  
and hold his intestines in.  
He was alone and my father  
rode past him in the back of a dusty truck,  
toward the hospital that would repair his own burns  
and send him home.

He stares straight ahead,  
sitting at his potter's wheel  
and to avoid seeing him cry I stare at his hands,  
fingers cracked from the clay  
which draws all moisture out as he shapes it.  
Sometimes his hands get worn down  
where they rub the turning shape until they bleed,  
and he keeps working,  
blood mixing with the clay.  
He leans over the wheel  
studying the shape only he can see,  
pressing the edges, carefully lifting up,  
and I wonder what he is thinking  
as he pushes the wetness into a form—  
does he see in this spinning  
a dirt road? A village?  
A boy  
with a halo of singed hair  
who stumbles, alone,  
arms held out from his burned sides  
as he bites his own skin,  
trying to keep himself from falling out  
trying to keep himself *in*.

*\* I Ask My Father About Vietnam first appeared online in Blood Orange Review, Volume 2.2 April 2007.*

## **Amy Nawrocki**

### *How to Visit Your Alma Mater*

It should be quiet when you visit:  
choose study days or weekends when students  
filter out of dormitory shells in soundless trickles,

ensuring an eerie solitude you'll recognize  
as the lonely thump of acorns outside  
the dorm room when your parents drove away.

It must be autumn: pine needles crinkle  
under feet walking from the parking lot  
to campus as the movie of your life  
flashes back, each image framed  
in an old October light. Red-haired  
girls saunter down the same sidewalks  
where new buildings startle you.  
Think of them as the growth and maturation  
you were promised during those first days,  
when another autumn felt crisp  
as the unbroken binding of a textbook.

Take the boyfriend you dreamed of and show him  
the nooks you crannied into: your first classroom  
where the discovery of Sappho and Rilke  
saved your life not once, but again  
and again each time winter clouds  
recycled their white pages into spring rain  
and you scurried under words for shelter.

When the man you plan to marry  
enters you in a library study room,  
the nuances and doom of pixie girlhood  
disappear as new myths are created,  
ones where dreaming no longer aches,  
but permeates like red maple sunshine  
on your wise and blissful face.

## **Kurt Steinwand**

### *Tintype*

*From a photo of my grandparents in a  
New 1928 Whippet Roadster, Toledo, OH.*

The hired hands were alcoholics,  
and beer runners into Ontario—  
among them my grandfather  
who swerved his Whippet into a pond.

I pull him out  
of the picture, the water, the unlit past.

He was a happy drunk until  
at Buster's speakeasy (*pull him out, at last*)  
on a payday afternoon  
he drank himself into a bad dream

about anything and nothing (*dreams  
come and go*), too drunk to know or care  
about a mad octopus swinging crowbars,  
then the bars became scolding crows.

He was only dreaming,  
stoned at the edge of a pond of vomit,  
awakened to the wounded cursing  
of what he thought was an angel . . .  
her name was Violet (*my great aunt*).

His chrome-bright smile,  
his brushed-tweed hair...  
the tintype doesn't do him justice,  
doesn't show the airbrushed layers  
of cool Northwest Ohio evenings  
in the Whippet driving him onward.

Violet turtled into the rumble seat.  
They took off down Statesville Road  
to Buster's (*pull them out, and fast*),

with grins like gleaming radiator grills.  
They split the wheat on either side,  
feeling their oats and gulping the grain.

After crashing (*and stashing the hootch*),  
he flagged a mule team, hauled the car out,  
beat the front of the fender smooth  
the best he could by Sunday morning  
where he spilled the offertory wine sloppily  
in front of the priest at St. Joe's church.

The Whippet sat in rutted mud  
with the black Tin Lizzies of the working men  
(*Amen, brethren*) as he knelt in the family pew  
tinted green from withdrawals and stained glass

...praying for Violet (*which means faithfulness*)  
who'd taken a turn for the worse—pneumonia,  
puss in the lungs from riding in the rumble seat

and standing garters-deep in cold water,  
slapping him awake with her screams  
as he smiled and dreamed of the octopus.

They called the Lucas County doctor . . .  
eased her onto the kitchen table,  
slipped her head onto a pillow of cock feathers.  
Three days out she turned the color of her name  
and died at the fragile age of seventeen.

It was early spring, the year of The Crash,  
and they were to marry in the summer,  
but dreams crashed like a hidden hemorrhage,  
like the spring beneath its cloth of green  
(*you'd never know there were ruts in the mud*).

So Belle, the eldest (*my grandmother*)  
left the wake early, boastful, confident,  
claiming to know how to care for a man  
with a daredevil smile and a car like that.  
She was the second-choice, second-best sister  
who vowed to fix his damaged love.

*Cl-ap!* goes the tintype at Spielbusch Market,  
goes the youth of my grandfather  
shirtless behind the wheel, a roll-your-own  
centered in a smile big as Al Jolson's,  
my grandmother's young and bonneted face  
peering out from the rumble seat.

She was thrilled to ride to the picture show  
at the Paramount downtown (*talkies were a gas!*)  
across from LaSalle's Department Store,  
was thrilled as the wind unraveled her ribbons  
in the Whippet driving them onward.

\* *Tintype previously appeared online in Riverbabble.*

## **Nell Stanton**

### *The Cherry Pie*

Out by your pool I pit for hours, lamely  
hunched over twin buckets. My hands rusty,

bare legs daubed, at six I slope up to the house.  
You point to lemon to take out the stain.  
We collaborate nicely on the crust.  
Then off to the cold beach, quarrelling, to joust  
in black sand under bright firework fields.  
Back home, hungry for truce, we turn the key.  
The timer chimes, the stainless oven yields  
our basted berries, now beached garnet peas.  
A wisp of smoke eddies, we flush pink,  
stare at our mitts, then a bitterness  
like ash or accusation moves between  
us, sour bleeding through its latticework screen.

### **Barbara de la Cuesta**

*'The Liberation of the Peon'—Diego Rivera*

They form a circle round him and  
round are the guerilla's faces  
and the sombreros, round...  
Circlets of bullets crisscross their chests  
and pistols ride on hefty buttocks  
Round and wild are the horses' eyes  
and a lasso holds them  
earthbound

They cover the clay colored  
body on the ground  
with a ruddy blanket  
No *Acensión del Señor de Alba* here,  
but only a return to earth  
under the red  
petal of a blanket

### **Suzanne Owens**

*Being Watched Outside The Winter Palace*  
(from the larger work, *Ten Days In Russia: 1992*)

*for my son Cullen Owens*

Sitting cross-legged on the ground by the bus,  
I decide I may as well  
barter too.

For a few packs of cigarettes, for a few  
American dollars, everywhere we go: in the field  
by our hotel, by the back canals,

when we stop in small towns, I witness  
young Russian men trading  
black market army watches: as cheap

as the candles we lit for the dead  
or the few coins we parted with  
for penance.

A young vendor pulls up his sleeve, extends  
his arm down to me where the watches coil  
like a cobra tamed.

Does that one run, does this one  
need a battery? He pulls a watch off his arm.  
The watch goes from his hand

into mine. Our fingers touch. In a moment  
I see the watch in my hand, look up, there  
in that space between

the vendor and the clock tower  
beyond, the approach  
of two gray uniforms...

As they haul him a few yards away,  
the other vendors scatter into  
the crowds of Leningrad Square.

The billy club snaps  
down and down  
and down on the young man's skull...

The noise ricochets like shots  
off the portals of cathedrals; half conscious,  
he keeps on fighting while my own body

seems to be flying away from me; I think  
that boy will never  
fall, and I want him

to fall, to fall  
quickly; through an eternity he falls  
he falls the way a leaf does; finally

his body touches the pavement, as softly  
as a kiss touches  
the closed mouth of an indifferent lover.

His arms and legs flung out, scrawl an X  
on the stones;  
stomach up he is all exposed

to the sky,  
the passersby  
and the young policeman who

nods, half smiles over at us,  
over a silence into which any  
thick-toothed boot might stomp.

**Gindy Elizabeth Houston**  
*Postpain*

*for Cecilia Woloch*

This poem bled an awful  
red—revision's cuts  
tore what I'd knit past limits  
of the alphabet.  
Seeping like another lovelorn  
kitchen tap, it wept in shapeless vowels.  
Weeping too, I let  
my hand speak in my voice's stead:

*Dear poem, it said, this pain you weather  
is not yours, but mine.*

Now this poem rests. Mends.  
A new wound opens,  
my own door to anchored ends—  
wound of loss and closure, thief of  
my found rapture—



This is not a night on the calendar.  
It's a night beyond the mosaic of imagination,  
a night that dissolves through the edge of time  
and cascades into an ocean of picturings and pulses.

The turning of the stars,  
the breathing galaxies,  
the lift and the falling away,  
draws me near to the moon.

When I feel this way,  
thoughts  
even I  
don't make sense.

## **Mary Cole** *What It Was*

What a big thing,  
to sit with secrets,  
to have a life beneath your life  
that runs with an engine of its own,  
fueled by passions unspoken  
but leaked out,  
like light behind closed doors  
flooding through the cracks  
and little spaces  
where the wood is warped—  
so seductive—  
gold spilling around the edges  
of conversations,  
creeping silently

into our curious lives.  
As children, we used to think  
the trees kept secrets every spring  
because we watched so  
carefully, to catch them popping into leaf.  
But every year the trees fooled us,  
dazzling us with displays of green, exactly

when our backs were turned.  
We missed the whole scene!  
We weren't fast enough,  
or maybe  
we just weren't paying attention.  
My mother had a secret

that she took to her grave.  
This secret was a different kind of engine  
rumbling underneath our lives,  
one that sucked up the light  
and created darkness  
where the light might have been.  
But we never got it.  
We believed  
with all our thumping little hearts  
that something was terrible and important  
and probably our job to fix  
if we could just figure out  
what in the big wide world  
it was.

*Three by...*

**Susan Berlin**

*Mistress*

He uses her sparingly  
between his divorces, as  
Europeans use sorbet,  
to cleanse the palate  
between courses.

*Hippocrates Redux*

Doctors always  
wear soft-soled shoes,  
cushioning the messenger,  
if not the news.

## *Qualifier*

It's *February*, sir,  
that's the cruelest month,  
once your days  
are numbered.

## **Pamela Ethington**

### *Suburban Life*

I would write a poem about my childhood  
but if you're going to write poetry  
you need to use words like “bitter” or “soul dead” or  
something that expresses some sort of  
angst

and all I can think of is my mother's tuna casserole  
with the peas and Campbell's cream of mushroom soup and those  
chow mein noodles that were so popular in the 50s  
the kind we would eat as a snack right out of the can  
if we could get them before she turned them into that  
tuna casserole

and about the most dangerous thing in our lives was just  
when she would pull out the pack of  
True cigarettes she kept in the freezer  
light one up and cry and sometimes  
drive off in the car after finishing it

I got scared when I smelled those cigarettes

I was never really sure if it was us or the casseroles  
or the ranch house we lived in or just what  
bitter soul-dead thing had come to roost in her  
spreading its shadow  
over all of us

## **Bobbi Dykema Katsanis**

### *Incarnation*

It is not just an exquisite fruitful longing  
nor only a body, framed in a crimson mandorla  
capitulating toward heaven.  
Many a diurnal beast's  
gone slouching toward a place configured holy,  
face smeared with starlight.  
It is not even the agony of the wicked;  
but the place where the little chickens  
gather meal from among the gritty dust.  
We are. It is an off-tempo mood,  
toes tapping irritably at the overextended wait.  
A hill crowned with a childlike carpentry;  
the idleness of hours; a pair of glassy, flyblown eyes.  
Hope springing from the blackly bubbling swamp  
in the shape of a new-hatched tadpole.  
The sun feathering its wings,  
o Icarus, amazing to see such heights,  
so labyrinthine are the leagues of man.  
The lightness in the step of the young woman  
who goes out to her chores singing,  
and the individual held note  
in every choir, of the deepest basso profundo.  
The resonance of oaken-timbered stalls  
in shadowed, magisterial cathedrals.  
It is the sunset overlooked with a lover  
too intent on kissing,  
the embrace of the patient ancestor at fireside,  
a close-clipped camel's champing at the meager grass,  
turning solidly down the road toward home.

*\* Incarnation first appeared in Ginosko #4, [www.ginoskoliteraryjournal.com](http://www.ginoskoliteraryjournal.com).*

### *New Husband, Home for Christmas*

On television, a cheetah takes down a gazelle,  
komodo dragons greedily demolish goats,  
Technicolor fish dart through otherworldly reefs.

But here,  
driving north on gravel in South Dakota,  
frost shimmers thickly on bare trees.  
Not twenty yards from the road,  
six deer scamper through the frozen scrub,  
coats tawny, winter plush,  
breath alive and white;

twenty more stand restless in a draw.

My husband, city-bred,  
is as enchanted as a child,  
with nothing to compare it to  
but television.

But I grew up among coyote,  
white-tails, mule deer, ground squirrels,  
meadowlarks, golden hawk, and badger.

I envy him this newness.  
He envies my familiarity—  
the magi bring their gifts.

**Doris Ivie**

*Three Haiku*

***Mending Rifts***

Mending rifts takes time  
Even lacewings can rebuild  
Given thread and light

***Crossing Sixty***

Flow into this age  
all rocky, ragged and raw  
on hawk wings, ready

***Ever Present Ants***

Ever present ants  
scuttling dead leaves with heart  
no need for shovels

**Alinda Wasner**

*Heaven, she supposes...*

is that place where the cops

do not leave the ladder  
leaning against the house  
for three days, the alarm  
blaring so the whole damn world  
knows you've been gone  
for at least a week—  
where they at least scoop up the dead rat  
outside McDonald's  
or the tennis shoes  
from of the middle of Jefferson Avenue  
where the child got hit  
instead of leaving them  
there like some sort of admonition;

heaven, she supposes  
is where the thief  
who gets in at night even if you are home  
does it discreetly,  
almost Biblically,  
stealing only the important things  
in such a way  
that you think  
you've merely misplaced them—  
the earrings in a pocket maybe  
or the wedding ring  
on the back of the sink  
instead of tearing the place apart  
ransacking even the children's room  
as if they own stock in Fisher-Price  
and hide it in the Play Family Village;

heaven, she supposes  
might even have been that place  
on Lenox Street  
where the curtains were yellow  
and the cutlery matched  
if only her Mama'd taken her  
in her arms  
and said, O Baby  
why didn't you tell me?  
instead of smacking her  
until her eyes swelled shut  
as if not being able to see the man  
she made her call Daddy  
sneak into her room  
at night

would mean it didn't happen.

O God, she thinks,  
somewhere in the desert  
there must be a cold stream  
where you can lie down  
and let the water turn the blood  
to ice in your veins—  
let you be sucked under  
just long enough  
so that when you come up  
(if you come up—if you have to)  
it is someplace downstream  
where, even if it is the Detroit River  
at least you'll be numb enough  
so that when  
you catch your reflection  
you won't be totally mystified  
if it shifts  
and everything seems  
entirely different.

*\*Heaven She Supposes first appeared in Comstock Review 2008.*

*And so you...*

put on the red mini dress  
and you tell the sitter  
that you'll be back  
before ten  
because you're still breast feeding  
and even though it's the Winans  
and the tickets were pricey  
and you should stay the whole time  
you won't even though you'll be tempted  
because at some point during *Celebrate New Life*  
there is this feeling of dread  
that even if you come home earlier  
than you said  
she'll be asleep on the sofa  
and the baby will have  
cried so long  
that the three-year old  
will try to feed him  
and there will be

a busted jar of Gerber's  
on the floor by the fireplace  
there will be glass in their hands  
and in the baby's diaper  
and blood  
will be everywhere  
and your fingers will be  
shaking so bad  
you can't dial the doctor  
all you'll be able to do  
is scream at her lazy ass  
threaten to slit her throat  
except that  
the children are waiting  
for you to  
catch them up  
bury your face  
in their shirts,  
breathe the life  
their very souls  
back into them.

### **Ellen LaFlèche**

*Gulsum, a 16-year-old Afghani Girl, Sets Herself  
On Fire After Being Beaten by Her Husband*

Gulsum pours lamp oil over her head,  
lets the warm liquid rain-soak into her roots.

She strokes the match. Flames  
finger-crawl up Gulsum's arm.  
Her hair flares. Black curls  
burn to crackle and smoke.

Her husband turns.

A neighbor woman beats the blaze  
with her veil. It is her best veil—  
white silk, red-embroidered with roses.  
The veil vaporizes.

The scent of scorched rose petals  
lingers in the ambulance.

Only later  
in the sterile burn unit  
does Gulsum smell the burned half of her face,  
the soot like vacuum dust in her lungs.

The nurse dribbles apricot juice  
on Gulsum's tongue. Her lips sip the nectar.  
The sweetness lingers kiss-sticky in her mouth.

When the doctor unwinds—slow as love—  
the white shroud from her head  
Gulsum watches in the hand mirror.  
The unveiling reveals the tired,  
half-turned face of an old midwife.

Gulsum looks at her good right eye:  
black-lashed, it is pretty enough  
for flirting with the doctor. Its iris  
blooms big with morphine.

The midwife's eye cries.  
The teenager's eye dreams the future.

*The Parish Housekeeper Cleans the Church  
After the Funeral of a Young Soldier Killed in Iraq*

Bertha smells the post-dirge darkness,  
the sad candles swaying in tiered  
rows like a chorus of mourners.

In the front pew she finds a tranquilizer.  
It is white as a de-nucleated eye.  
Bertha stares into its blankness  
then swallows it down.

On her knees she sweeps up grief's debris:  
crumpled prayer cards, balled-up kleenex.  
Dead carnation heads roll into her dustpan.

When Bertha plunges her mop into the wash bucket  
its dreadlocks drip water like a baptized skull.

There are scuff marks to clean:  
the soldier's widow drilled her black  
high heels into the floor's pine planks.

Bertha still has the black dress,  
the black purse from when her son  
came home from Nam in a zippered bag.  
She bought him a mahogany coffin



Crickets' cadenced dirges, whirring  
downward of maple seeds to their own  
burial, death rattles in the narrow throat  
of the desiccated gourd: herein  
lay a hundred million secrets,  
but only one revelation, one  
certainty—no matter what  
might have been, what was.

Remember the trap you set as a child  
just to see what could be caught—  
crushed wing and broken leg  
of the sparrow there, pale flesh  
around the surprised round eyes—  
how the sun shone down on you  
both and on the winter lawn.

*\* Never Tell first appeared in What We Burned for Warmth, Finishing Line Press (2006).*

## **Bernard Mann**

### *Sunsets*

Moored, unhappily, on the east-facing slope,  
he grumbled endlessly over sunset deprivation,  
how the house afforded no vista of the clashing clouds,  
the titanic spills of mauve and gold,  
that others see.

Now and then he'd remember  
to run errands around the time of day  
when the sun went down,  
nudging and tweaking the hour spent  
to get him to the spicewood road  
that ambled steeply down  
the long west face of the hill that led  
to the main road back,  
and took his time, at that, raising tempers  
in the cars behind him so that he would  
descend the ridge to the beat  
of the sun's own departing song.

He missed the Merrimack, where his home  
had perched on the river's edge,  
and bends on east and west caught the sun's

chromatic crescendos at first as it rose  
and then as it set.

And glorious displays on Cape Cod's souging shore,  
and other lands' ends.

But now he grew older with every night's hello,  
longing for the celestial furnace  
that once kept him younger with every day's goodbye

## **Alice Owens Johnson** *Writing Under the Gun*

Summer brings rain and revolution.

Heat ripples down the cobbled streets  
of Oaxaca, Oaxaca, the sing-song city  
of heavy *cantera* stone. Quiet settles  
during siesta, but at night the air clangs  
with bells and the piercing *frisson* of bullets, sirens.

Echoing pings from the tortilla man's high-pitched  
metal triangle says *safety in the street*, at least for the  
moment. Indoors, my computer's cursor blinks at me  
like the Cheshire cat. My mind is a split screen; one side  
back flips with the image of a machete-wielding rebel, on the other  
side my novel curls in sunlight, languorous as a napping kitten.

Each day I greet my novel,  
I pray for a visitation. My Muse is Mexican;  
she doesn't show up on time, sometimes not at all.  
I want my characters to save me; pull me into the story so deeply  
I can ignore the chaos and shattering light.  
I sluice myself with Pound's raspy advice: "Make it new, make it new."

In the *Jacaranda* tree, boughs sag with bright green birds. They caw  
*Make it weird, make it strange. Just make it.*  
I bargain, burn *copal* all summer. I beg for a cloak  
of words to muffle the exploding story outside my window.

At last she comes. In the middle of that quiet moment  
soft as rustling corn sheaves, I know the story  
in the character, the character in the story. I enter Camille's

mind and body. My sweet, lost child reveals  
herself. I know why her heart churns and spits.  
I finally know her secret. I pick up my pen and write.

## **Cynthia West**

### *Where We Did Not Love*

In the evening quiet  
    the Moonlight Sonata sounds, my mother  
    playing her aloneness on notes  
    of gathering dark. Her inability to teach  
    me how to touch  
    rings in every fading chord,  
    defining the separate grief of night.  
The heavy-shadowed house refuses to leave  
    my dusty mind. No amount of washing  
    dissolves this photo printed with lonely ink.

My bedroom is here, where we did not love.  
The swing-set rusts by the garden shed.  
If I could repair it, could I bring you,  
    my own children, from the distant cities  
    where I taught you to live? Could I find you  
    where you hide in law-suits, addiction, debt?  
Could I dare to break the old pattern  
    that I passed along?

Let me kneel down before you, touch you  
    with all the bluebells we never had the time  
    to notice. Let us finally inhabit the rooms  
    that have waited empty  
    for our tears. When we open the windows  
    the sad music will bloom.

## **Ronda Broatch**

## *Two Loaves*

Our rooms are infused with the scent  
of bread—two loaves,  
one plain,

one dotted with millet, quinoa, wheat  
germ—a reflection of my need  
to complicate the simple.

My daughter kneads  
just so long, palm to sticky  
dough to which she adds

a hint of flour. My own  
clay beats the walls of the mixing bowl,  
a testament to tired hands,

less time. Our mounds rise  
and we push them down with the heels  
of our hands, fold them

into fat origami flowers, cup them  
taut as a ball,  
firm belly dough.

I watch her turn  
her round on the counter,  
some magic maneuver she learned

from another. Our loaves  
ascend again in clay pans  
and what I've let go these past years

returns, if briefly. In the oven our breads  
expand over steaming water,  
crusts form hard and dark,

hers smooth, mine scarred on top  
and spreading open. Our two loaves  
cool on racks, *still baking inside*

she tells me, before the knife  
releases heat and the scent of  
what is possible in time.

*He calls to her and she ascends...*

step by wooden step  
to the bedroom where he lies  
on a horse hair mattress deepened  
with forty years.  
She straightens his tangled sheets,

listens as he tries again to rouse  
the sleeping soldier on the bus.  
It is 1941; he knows they are nearly home.  
It is the year after coming to America,  
after the camps, a book mostly written.  
Sometimes

he still reaches trembling fingers  
to conceal the window shrapnel sliced  
into a brother's skull.  
Germany, front line, 1915.  
She catches his hand, gives him  
water and something for sleep.  
Sometimes  
he doesn't  
know her.  
She looks beyond the curtain

to the tree he grafted,  
tiny limb wrapped firmly until it held.  
She knows its broad sweep, apples,  
seedless, green.  
She'll stoop to collect them in a paper sack,  
later when they fall.

## **Michael Sweeney**

### *Holy Icons of Mother Russia*

*for Patricia Elizabeth Sweeney*

Christ himself allowed Saint Luke to paint his sacred portrait  
so there's no idolatry, just honest craftsmanship, icons on wood  
a thousand years old hacked from deserving trees, wood that  
serfs might've gladly burned mounted for public display, hung  
for agnostics & worse, every heart-shaped countenance utterly  
disengaged. You can stand with them like Pasternak & not be  
the wiser man, not till you face your shame, flog an already

broken horse or beg for your worthless life but witness that dread ascent, however you kneel or crawl. How can they float above altar & cross on solar vermilion rays? How can that primitive blood-orange light seep from their flaking pores? How can they breathe those turquoise hues without getting vertigo? They're not human, those martyrs & saints, those translucent Roswell eyes, they see Chernobyl & Babi Yar, the gulags you resurrect no matter your tongue or creed. An innocent system & a guilty defendant, that's what John Ashcroft said, you can believe Raskolnikov opened his wretched heart. You can look through them like cold stained glass warmed by the Arctic sun, where suffering's sacrosanct. You can appreciate anything executed so well

## **David Witherspoon**

### *Silly Geese*

What the field guide calls “rich, musical honking” makes me look up from my yard work for the V-shaped flock winging north, but only four appear, the wild pibroch resounding in their litany of desire that awakes space rendering sky a cupola. The mind forsakes its small talk, the cove is a temple. Like some ad hoc steering committee they argue all morning, as if in shock at losing the way, up and down the river in a file that takes them nowhere. He who ardently honks with every wing beat wants to head straight for Baffin Island, but the leader says we are nearing the mountains of Carolina, where streams flow sweet and air is cool enough without flying thousands of miles just to be like every other goose. Or maybe they simply discuss where to eat next. I myself will stay here, birds and seasons flowing through me.

## **Laura Still**

### *Forgotten Language*

*Once I spoke the language of flowers—*

*How did it go?*

*How did it go? —Shel Silverstein*

Soft summer grass murmuring tenderness against my cheek,  
sweet smack of buttercup kisses  
grasshoppers prattling in buzzy whirs and clicks,  
lazy dandelion hours watching shade stretch over ground,  
gone  
silent as light leaves treetops, sudden as a last kiss.

When did I stop attending  
the blossom of morning glories under my window,  
their drowsy buttoning up at twilight?  
Did the wild violets grow mute, lilies cease their fanfare?  
I need to soak my skin in moonlight, stare a few hours  
at stars, leave myself out in the rain, lay my ear  
against hollow earth, sing till music echoes back,  
dance till my feet stop hurting—blunder, laugh,  
bruise my way through—  
till I fall into the river of words forgotten  
and it drowns me with remembering.

## **Anthony Hughes**

### *Bliss*

On the bank under the green spring willow,  
he loves a woman with his eyes.

She gathers up her dress, just above the knee,  
and steps into the incandescent stream.

The white water curtsies round her ankles.  
Tonight, the moon will set in the small of her back.

## **Nellie Hill**

### *City Slickers*

How mean it was of him to bring the deer to the house  
when he knew it was for her but pretended  
to be giving it to both of them;  
and like a buddy showed the husband  
how to carve the fur and skin from the fat  
and the fat from the meat and how to separate  
the muscles and tendons and how to go around  
the genitals and the anus and how to pull the guts out  
and the liver and the heart and how to do the job.

He enjoyed telling the husband what to do  
as if he were telling him how to make love to her,  
but the husband thought it was about the deer  
and the knife and the body and their meal.

And she saw this and thought it funny  
because the lovemaking she had with the hunter  
was simple, like something alive,  
an engine with its own heart that might,  
at any moment, run away.

### *The Word*

Make it my name you say and mine you hear  
in your sleep my ears near your mouth my arms  
in your arms and your hands wrapped in mine  
for this one late moment before we turn aside  
as earth opens up and swallows us  
our complaints and yearnings our harsh syllables  
our mouths empty of names and no skull  
to fill the hollows of our hands or shore to follow  
barefoot behind the summer flies. Take this image  
into the center of your hand and fold it  
into mine as if into a canvas the landscape of  
thought desire winter summer all extremes until  
we've swallowed the word and the world  
of words the world the last

### *After Camus' Story, 'The Adulterous Wife'*

She went into the hall  
down the stairs, left him  
in their bed breathing the heaving  
rhythms of sleep. He turned  
and groaned

as she walked though the rooms to the stairs,  
and the front door and walked out  
into the coolness, the garlands of stars  
and the dark sky beyond.  
She walked along wet grass into the forested  
hillside, overlooking the neighbors  
with their midnight lights and dogs;  
and she watched the shadows carefully  
and heard the whispers of men from ways  
still foreign to her as she moved  
through the tall grasses, thinking of love,

gliding to the calls of foxes, and the sounds  
of deer tumbling into the orchard.

### ***NMW First Verse***

**Donna Naney**

#### *Nature's Children*

Mountain lions lurked in those hills,  
rattlesnakes plentiful  
in the playland of my childhood.

With loud determined innocence,  
we stomped our territory,  
marked our terrain.  
What predator would dare cross the line?

Flying down the dry yellow grass of summer  
on flattened cardboard—  
magic carpets carried us  
invincible  
over irresistible hills.

Our joyful play so profound  
I dream about it to this day.  
We owned those hills  
in the hot dry summers  
of our intrepid souls