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Solemnity

upon observing

on the death of bubba the mouse

summertime

promenade on the beach

backstage

before i left

treadmill city

stoic

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new mexico

omani girl

never

half-moon

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antiques

veiled

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lake shore

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tim richards

laura perlberger

justin dainer-best

lisa summergrad

carly yasinski

emily kline

peter barish

jill foley

claire pringle

jill foley

lisa summergrad

justin dainer-best

ben field

hilary leichter

emily kline

elizabeth gruenstein

brian hemmat

katie baratz
Bittersweet

Anne hired me and so I scooped ice cream that summer
Anne & Steve's Creamery
where Anne invented cinnamon sundaes
while Steve did impressions of
Christopher Walken
Sometimes when they were scooping vanilla
Steve's hand would brush against
Anne's waist
and her fat happy cheeks would go red
this was because they were always in love and never lovers

The woman who lived upstairs sang along with old Ella Fitzgerald albums
every day at three.
Her husband bought the albums twenty years before he forgot them behind the bureau
and left for Wyoming.
I would sneak into the walk in freezer and listen to her swing a few tunes
And each chord smelled like sugar

Even now
When I lick a scoop of strawberry I taste Basin Street Blues

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Memory

I have heard that goldfish
Have no memory.
I contemplate this thought
Lying on my side, watching the smaller one
Moving gracefully
Through still water.

Here, a simple soul,
Discovering forever foreign worlds
With wonder
And wet eyes.

What is it like,
living unaware
Of past torments,
Never reliving
Past hurts?

The larger one, the gold one,
Has found the castle,
I suppose,
For his first time.
I am glad he does not know
To expect more.
Word Prayer

In lotus-position,
a statue among tiny, rug-fiber followers,
I write August,
smooth and thick, Egyptian and silken, curried and deep

With each continuing word—
    My ribcage blooms outward,
crimson petals
pulsing, pumping.

Cicadas use their large, glossy wings
to pray for me.

I crave my ending,
plump and ripe—
I pluck it from the tree.
Background story: This random list of words came to me as part of an unsolicited email about “male enhancement.” I was so taken with the way the words fit together that I arranged them into this poem by breaking the string of words up into lines.

quadrature ac simpleton: a spam poem

antedate cheryl congressman
somehow reverie
cancerous visa
regina drosophila
carthen bambi gerbil
eminent noun
lumberman
avuncular budd
aching splayed mystique
retrospect drill
learn faint elmira construct
summer jennings
disembowel macaque
dusseldorf
revoke escape aflame
annals anaglyph cottage fulfill
songful prodigious trickery
planetarium
asymptotic weapon
pittsfield klein
abstain
rhesus cradle
birdbath convect
quadrature ac simpleton

<Dirging the Crash>

Eleven days worth of Piano Man Billy
back-to-back with Bennie and his Jets
Blind Stevie and Georgia Ray bobbing heads behind sunglasses
until someone called curfew on the gig
and the stage lights went dimmer than dim

Five hundred some odd point-n-click poses
corrupted
like Montmartre’s Sacred Heart by soot
and dusty Costa Rican back roads
not meant for rental cars

Twenty-six mile journey of the blinking bar
words tied end-to-end through interpreted Aristotle and his mentor
stretching like the sojourn of Marathon
before his message was delivered

Three by two inches of metal plastic green circuitry
wired and unwired like a sugar high sugar low
spinning like a gyroscope-child before collapsing to the ground
out of breath
Waking

Hit the alarm
he drops 40 mg of awake
into my palm,
sealed with a kiss
and bottled water.
Hit the alarm
in drowsy daylight I trace
hair off of his forehead;
a closed-eye smile lulls me
back to eiderdown sleep.
Hit the alarm
stubble brushes against my shoulder,
settles down into the edge of my pillow
as he wraps us back up
in tangled vanilla linen.
Hit the alarm
half-awake, we count down minutes left
of hiding from day already rushing by;
know reality is waiting
outside our bedroom door.
Hit the alarm.

Heal

After the Indian summer
Elizabeth continues to wear tank tops, gym shorts
folds of elastic and cotton hugging
the girth of her hips and bottom.
My meds make me sweat, she snaps
lifting tired arms to reveal half-moons
wanning or waxing, we cannot know; only that
she prefers a quiet perspiration
to the din that used to bellow between her ears
a marching band in a dark tunnel.
I sweat too, mumbles Tulli, whose voice
has the sweetness of a damp summer evening
but whose eyes
are always
elsewhere.
I shake, she says, she shakes
fingers like a back-alley surgeon
wrists like a sorry believer
jaw, like a frightened child and
thighs. Thighs. Her own weight
has become too much.
She is exorcising her demons
with pills, through chattering teeth.
Her voice is so sweet--
she is getting better.
These women are not beautiful. They are lumpy, they have frizzy hair, cloudy eyes and stray locks growing above their lips. The drugs have side effects they do not discuss such as the feeling of great love slipping from their embrace, until they are hugging only themselves and the world is a cold white room. Elizabeth asks if I am one of them. I touch my lip and wonder if I too, am getting better.

When I Am Old

The poem says “When I am old, I shall wear purple and wear a red hat.” It says nothing about showing pictures of women all red-hatted and smiles and identifying each one by illness. “Carol Colon-Cancer” and “Ann Diabetes” are wonderful people, I am sure and some part of me looks forward to days spent watching discounted movies and sitting on the front porch and knowing all the people in town by name.

But then there is this other part, the part that runs screaming, immediately jogs up stairs and lifts heavy things, turning impossible knobs—because I still can.

And no part of me wants to be in a commercial praising any arthritis medicine, no matter how many doctors approve, no part of me wants to even bring up any concern to any doctor.

Before dinner, my grandmother takes her arthritis pills. I have to sit on my hands to keep from cracking my knuckles at the table and even though the conversation turns to a relative’s recent heart attack, I pour on more gravy.

After all, I am young and it is only when I am old that I shall wear purple.
I am wind worn stone,
rain polished rock with aching fingers
recalling elaborate country roads,
crowded arteries pumping along
under the faded halogen suns of
subway lines, love lines, life lines,
a figure mappled in their chaos,
an eye, a strand of hair
refracted and refigured
in a pointillist dream,
falling drops of moisture
wiped away by her hand,
sending shivering cracks across the face,
along the jaw and down the neck,
a shattering mannequin
with steam rising cautiously through
the map of crevices
sketched across her skin,
an ancient tome taped together from
a million jagged pieces,
falling gently one by one,
blown away like leaves in an autumn wind,
a trace of color, of ink traced in the air,
a crumbling parchment with the history of life
scumbled across the skin,
and seven years bad luck reflected in the pieces of my profile
as I put back together the broken mirror
spread across the tiled floor.
Listening

My third time in the mountains, I couldn’t stop writing. I had words on my lips, my arms, my shoulders. Each time the pack jolted onto the other hip, a word slipped between my eyes. I was a writer, that day, as I climbed past storm avalanches and broken white birches, between water-spotted cliffs and sandy lakes. My feet pounded my thoughts into the slovenly mud, slipped my name into the pores of rock.

My father talked the entire way, his hair a slash of an eagle, gray above green eyes. He couldn’t stop smiling. He told me the stories that make him himself; he told me his dreams and adventures. He shared with me his past; I shared with him my present. Our stories filled the crackling leaves with consequence; the rushing water was the more beautiful.

We took pictures of the world as we saw it, and the world slipped its fingers into my camera and described itself perfectly. We captured it in boxes, and it sat still and waited. We gave it a beginning and an ending, and it fit itself into them before transcending.

When we set up camp, orange and red glaring into the green of wilderness, our legs tired in the falling sun, I whispered our stories to paper, feeling them caressed by the leather hands of my journal. I released my secrets into hands soft as charcoal, crinkling with the precision of language. As the sky heralded the dawn of darkness, I cupped my journal in my hands and breathed into it.

The sheer joy of mountains pressed into me; the clear thoughts of open spaces, and winds that bite through eyelids. You can’t close your eyes on a peak: there’s nothing but sky and expanse below. You feel like if you only spread your arms, you would be picked up by Wind and soar. Each rock has significance; each shrub struggles to live. And I welcomed these bald peaks, embraced them, and wrote them into my un and consciousness.

When my father and I talked in these mountains, exchanged stories, it was communion. When I listened to the sky, it spoke poetry.

Coming From Your House

I saw the most amazing thing—
gold and Egyptian-blue clouds,
each the other’s lining,
creating ancient movement;
time and light interchangeable.

Oh! To turn off the lights and coast—
Head turned aside and straight up,
Everything quiet—
Silence passing and continuing;
The glass of my lake at midnight,

I want to be not saved by nighttime
You have already not saved me—
This is what it felt like.
Autumn

It is the seer and withered leaf mulched into spring
that brings the buds. I craved the woods
and so I strode,
stumbling over leaf mold, to the river and the sunshine
and the tang of rot, like roasted onions,
that ghosts around my hair.
I wonder what bones are buried here. I slid
down swollen banks, and death
sighed deeply in the trees
and the skeletons of leaves, and my hands held up to sunshine
glow deep with red disease.

I slowed my breath and held it, and tried to be a stone
or an effigy, or to crystallize my longing on the surface of the pond.
Shall I emerge some aching green thing
ravished and gasping into spring?

All the desire of the buried seed sits shapeless in my brow.
Tonight the geese fly south.
Tenth grade I was a perfect tester, straight-A laced, a potential judge doctor president, except at the ‘women in science’ seminar where everything was cell-heavy forehead furrows, where poetic Joan told the microphone, the crowded room she hadn’t learned anything except that she wasn’t supposed to be a scientist (everyone laughed)

we built fake heart machines like my grandma’s.

we had to grab this stick—this heart-measuring stick—nervously, I suppressed my breath, and quelled my insides—my pulse was still too high. a mystery peak on the ‘women in science’ perfect pulse sheet.

Should-be-scientist girls stared at me like Uranium

---

Scrapbook

The girls dart like butterflies across the yard, fragile-legged in heels and gossamer skirts aglow in evening sunlight, the flair of tulle and silken sheen of youth while parents hover like doing paparazzi. An older sibling, I am relegated to the edges of relevance with only a camera lens to watch these shadows of my past, memories layered in high-contrast holograms. Contrary to theory this moment does not fade, the colors don’t wash away but instead expand, grow vivid and immortal in my mind: humid green suburban gardens, the soft rustle of jewel-tone skirts and matching boutonnieres in gold-drenched June twilight. Watching, I ache for my sister, for her face a mirror of my past her present nervous smile and bad posture because I know in retrospect what it is being single in these photographs.

I’d like to think that this isn’t bitterness lodged just above my sternum, that I’m not jealous of some younger girl only green-eyed on my sister’s behalf, but even after the limousine has left I can’t escape that lingering secret inadequacy, lasting longer than my corsage, pressed between the pages of my past.

Lisa summergrad
Use Only a Pea-Sized Amount (To Avoid Swallowing)

I know you’re not supposed to swallow toothpaste and really awful things will happen to you if you do. But I just did. I can feel it sliding down my minty fresh esophagus and the air I exhale tingles. I have no idea what it will do once it hits my stomach. Hydrochloric acid fights wars with toothpaste so I’ve heard and maybe the clean taste can’t be digested like gum, it’ll stay intact forever. Or maybe it’s OK this one time, but thirty years from now if I get distracted and do it again my stomach lining will disintegrate and chunks of my dinner will float through my body and my anthropomorphized internal organs will slap their foreheads and say “Not again! Doesn’t she know? You’re not supposed to swallow toothpaste!”

judging my too-fast-too-nervous absurd heart- wondering if it, and I, would simply implode over the lab floor, to rest next to pig liver juices from last week’s dissection.

angie mccole
Metamorphosis

Sing as you leave, please.
Allow that nightingale voice to fly back to me,
left standing in the doorway, stupefied.

When did you become a vulture?
My cage is still littered with hummingbird feathers.
Children Playing Hide and Seek

Leaves scattered on still-green grass
  dry cases curled like the bodies
of moths found tangled in the dust
in hollow corners of wood-planked cabin where we waited
hidden from kid called “it” and the end of the game.

Bird crumpled body feathered
eyes blue slitted
chain of dry dust membrane.

I said let’s carry it home
  warm in nest of tissue paper you said
Don’t touch it
It’s dead.

That means you are under the ground
  the dirt gets in your eyes
  if they forget to close them for you
at the funeral, you know
  what I mean you can’t do anything
you told me but couldn’t tell this:
why we were hiding and from what.

The game over, the others
and kid called “it” had all gone home
hungry to chunks of beef
  steaming stew, hot dripping potatoes

As we walked crunching over leaves
  faces in the uncut grass.
Yesteryear

Do you remember falling asleep
feeling warm watching Nick-At-Night
in a fortress made of pillows and sheets?

What about the underwear square dance
after you finally assembled
the stereo?

How I cried
when E.T. went home
and the Giving Tree became a stump?

Do you recall who was cowboy
and who Indian
during the ambush of Stone Mountain?

That I wouldn’t go to the moon
if not with you?

When did we decide to bat left
throw right
and how were you on time to every single game?

Wasn’t Frank-n-stein Halloween
—hot dogs stuffed into your beer mug—
the year after human toilet was such a hit?

How did we drive so smoothly
you on the clutch
me on stick from the passenger seat?

Why did I stay at the dinner table
captivated by every rendition
of every story?

I wanted you to know
that I peeked at donkey
before pinning his tail

and when Poppy was going
you did right to let him go.
By the age of twenty, all the Zamenhof children were either poets or dead. Some were only poets as a manner of speaking. Gideon was, in fact, a corporate lawyer. But sometimes he wrote free verse in the margins of his yellow legal pads, filling the neatly regimented spaces in his neatly regimented life with all the words he wasn't allowed to use in court. Words like eiderdown. And chamomile. Fern was the real poet of the family, the one who smoked cigarettes in coffee houses and used snippets of French in conversation and went through, as she called them, “phases.” During her dark phase, she had smashed every mirror in her tiny apartment and rearranged the pieces in jagged clusters throughout the main room. With these reflective mosaics it was impossible to ever see oneself entirely, only scattered fragments of the whole. Fern liked it that way. She wanted to be thought mysterious and felt it helped to wear scarves in her hair. The problem was, she was usually so busy being poetic that she forget to actually ever write anything. Elsie liked classics like Emily Dickinson, because as a teenager she had admired her restrained Victorian angst and now, as a mother of two, envied her solitude. Amidst the heap of plastic toys, diapers, and baby food that made up her life, Elsie composed poems about all the little joys of life: June twilights and the first fire of autumn and lying in bed on Christmas morning. These simple poems kept her sane and she remembered them just long enough to forget each night during the dreamless sleep of mother-martyrdom. And Zed, little Zed, last letter of the alphabet and first in the hearts of every girl on his floor at college. Oh, how big the disappointment would have been had they realized that every genderless love poem he submitted to the campus literary magazine was, in fact, composed in honor of his roommate Andrew. All one-hundred and forty-four of them in iambic pentameter, a perfect dozen squared. Molly’s grave was verse free, saying nothing more than Molly Pollyanna Zamenhof: you left us all too soon. The grave stayed empty that way for three years, save for the day each year when the four remaining Zamenhofs dutifully brought flowers, retiring afterward to one of their homes for a tense dinner. The third year it was Fern’s turn. Wearing a gauzy black head scarf that brought the word “diaphanous” to Gideon’s mind, Fern led the way to Molly’s grave. Her bouquet was...
a ragged bunch of flowers she’d picked herself then forgotten to put in water for twenty-four hours, so they were now dry as well as disorderly. Two years ago, Elsie had brought a beautiful flower display she’d made herself after taking one of those weeknight classes at her local community center, painstakingly trimming the blossoms just the way she’d been taught. And, despite his tight schedule and tighter purse, Gideon had managed to spring for a dozen ivory roses last year. Beaded earrings clattering as she bent to place the flowers before the headstone, Fern ignored the look of mild distaste that Elsie was sharing with Gideon.

No one said anything, but not because there was nothing to say.

Back at her apartment, Fern served tea and stale crackers, wishing she’d thought to go to the market down the street that morning. She had nothing for dinner, unless they were willing to nibble on pieces of the wilting potted herb garden she kept on the counter in the kitchen.

“I can’t see myself in this,” Elsie complained to the room, trying to examine her neatly-coiffed hair. “Don’t you have any normal mirrors?”

“Or chairs, for that matter?” Gideon was perched uncomfortably on a low stool, his legs at awkward stork angles with too much of his socks showing.

“That’s a Tibetan meditation stool,” Fern said, clearing Zed’s tea before he’d finished it and whisking it behind the stained floral sheet that separated the kitchen from the living room.

“That doesn’t mean it’s comfortable,” Gideon replied. He was ill at ease in this cluttered, musty smelling little loft with its disjointed reflections that had a way of startling him. He didn’t like being startled. He needed a distraction. “Where’s the television?”

Fern didn’t dignify such a question with a response.

Zed got up to investigate the books by Fern’s bed, stacked in such artfully random piles that he might have thought it done on purpose. Camu’s The Stranger, in both French and English. Meta-morphosis. Collections of poetry by Allen Ginsberg and his comrades. All purchased from local used bookstores and sales at the public library, with pencil markings and coffee stains that were not Fern’s.

A tiny cluster of mirror bits at the foot of the bed caught Zed’s eye as he crouched by the books and he stared at the visible fragments of himself: his overgrown hair, nervous narrow hands curled inside his shirtsleeves, the charcoal sweater Andrew had said looked good on him.

Taking a seat on the bed, Zed was able to see Fern while she was still in her curtained-off kitchen. She was no longer washing dishes and clattering plates, pretending she had food to serve, but instead standing with one hand pressed lightly to her mouth, staring at a dying plant on the counter. She was hiding from them.

“…cooked it all myself, even the cake was homemade!” Elsie was saying in a low voice to Gideon, who was nodding but not really listening. Zed remembered Elsie’s cooking: everything looked straight out of a home and garden magazine, but the flavor was lacking.

Fern strode back into the room carrying a few worn take-out menus, her voice forcefully crisp.

“I didn’t have time to cook. Who wants take-out? There’s a tres splendide Indian place—”

“Ever since the kids I can’t have Indian,” Elsie announced. “It upsets my stomach.” Fern’s look suggested that she was not inclined to care. “What about that sweet little restaurant a block from here?” Elsie reached for her purse. “The one with the blue tablecloths?”

“Too expensive,” Gideon objected, at the same time as Fern muttered, “I thought we were staying here.”

“Gideon, you make more money than the rest of us combined,” Elsie protested. Fern took the take-out menus and stalked back into the kitchen.

“I’m not really hungry,” Zed said, but nobody listened.

After a few more minutes of silence, during which time they might have heard a clock ticking had Fern owned a clock, Gideon announced that he was supposed to be meeting a client for a nightcap at a bar uptown, and if they weren’t going to be eating dinner then he hoped they’d excuse him.

“If I make it home before eight, I won’t have to pay the babysitter for an extra hour.” Elsie went to the edge of the flowered curtain and addressed Fern’s back. “You should call us more often.”

After Elsie had gone Fern told Zed and the sink, “I don’t usually pay the phone bill.”

And so Zed used the pay phone on the corner to call Andrew and ask him to meet at the diner across the square, using the excuse that he was both hungry and in need of a friend right then. While he waited, hands in his pockets and hoping he wouldn’t get propositioned by the short-skirted girls lurking on the corner, Zed resigned himself to the reality he and his siblings had been refusing to acknowledge. He knew that he wouldn’t be hosting a similar gathering in his dorm room next year; he’d always known that. The first year they’d all made an effort, taking out
Upon Observing a Drunk Man Who Thinks He Sees God

He has ceased to talk and is stumbling in would-be circles, now only pattern-less misplacements, tangled footfalls.
With arms spread open, head lifted, tilted backward
He is reaching toward the ceiling calling
Toward a presence visible only to him,
“God, God, I have found you.”
In the murky basement darkness his eyes are closed
His movements frenzied
His spinning a blur.

My own tired eyes cannot focus.
I look at his shadow, an illusion
Projected onto a darkened wall
Twirling among posters of paintings, Renoirs and Van Goghs.
In this instant, he has become art
A portrait decorated with
Darkened stars, smelling like croissants
And the earliest spring blossoms.

From my concealed corner
I am watching as the figure
Finds company alongside the Seine,
Plucks sunflowers in Versailles
Dances in places I have only barely imagined.
Amid indifferent observers, strewn bottles, empty cans,
He thinks that
He has found redemption.

lisa
— summergrad

claire
— pringle
On the Death of Bubba the Mouse

I, with lament and remorse irreconcilable, proffer the following for our fated friend, him being a wayward tenant in my abode just last night:

O, he who so innocently roamed, such as were the ways of his kind, who oft, albeit obliviously, explored the esoteric parts of that Gummere which we call home.

We were “grossed out” by his presence, ignorant of his innocence, all the while bereaving thus for want of normalcy. Why can we not live free, apart from non-human infringement?

Here now we are bereft; devoid of our curious creature, Bubba, who merely wanted to find a meal. He, stripped of his mortal coil, by an indiscriminate metal mechanism, which cleft his corporeal self in twain: Though not his spirit, nor memory.

For if our grief is comparable to the machine which so grievously and unjustly brought him death set forth the analogy as such: he, the glorious cheese for which we subconsciously pined, yet consciously shunned; by disallowing his presence to come into fruition, we fell into the trap of neglect, we

did not extend the auspices of our humanity to include his companionship, nor did we establish our halecon commune in concert with man and mini-beast alike. Resultant: our hearts ensnared, lie prostrate, deserted, sullen; still beating, though pinned flat and constrained thus by the trappings of our grief.

May him, who, deceased, with the nomenclature “Bubba” eternally lie in the glory of God and in the mercy of humanity. For he who died on the cross for our sins did not preclude the egregious error which was our ensnaring of the amicable rodent. For now we are not sickened by the prospect of his absence. To us, no longer Bubba bilious; but, rather: Bubba beauteous.

Would that the crimes of these heartless Homo sapiens be purged... And the providence of humanity reconciled.
Promenade on the Beach

Her dress orange:
squeezed oranges like the way her tongue
flickers over their beaded skin,
rough and wet and eternal --
flowing over her curves, a sunset of fabric.
She flows, too -- luxurious undulations to the drumming of waves
Her feet are engulfed by spraying sand,
and loose wisps of sea foam,
her shoes lost to the night's dark hands.
The moon beams down,
milky on her dark skin;
a bowl of milk for her long tongue to lap, acerbic but sweet.
An orange rolls in the sand, then:
a tinkle of chimes.
She moans,
and her arms wave in the breeze like palm fronds.

Me in a penguin-suit, pants abandoned,
trailing coat-tails in the sand,
balanced atop a precarious sand-mount --
apt to fall into the damp sand at her feet with exhaustion.
My mind's a paltry thing,

Summertime

we are level with the skyline
on a barefoot Saturday.
I pink lemonade lacquer my toes
and talk about Gershwin—the only
English my mother would sing me
to faux de do. I cannot sing like her
or Ella Fitzgerald, but it is
enough to make your eyes smile, forget the stress
And the living
breathing city that stirs beneath us—
it is ours because we can remake it and
I can tiptoe dance on top of it
to my own music, because you will join me
and love a song you do not know if it is
precious to me, because custom-made
glamour when love rebuilds you
Is easy.

Summertime

lauraperlberger
beaten by the immensity of evening into a trembling remembrance.
An orange rolls past my comatose toes,
below her smooth soles,
plowing into the sand smooth and plush.
I howl at the moon, and the tide turns,
and the sun rises, golden orange like her dress.
I talk to the air as it glows like the sky --
it talks back in our tongue.
Treadmill City

City of straight lines & planning
for me you seemed a wise decision.
A right place & time.
Nevermind that I had just left another
hastily covered fresh sutures with contrived tissue
wore long sleeves to hide lingering doubts because,
you seemed to make sense.

Grid City, Old City
City of cool brother’s love,
I could never get lost in you.
Your streets too straight & well-traveled
Never threw my hands up
in the helplessness of being bound to you,
in you.

For years I have diligently placed
one foot in front of the other
so focused on the plodding pavement
walking a taught rope of
Broad sidewalks & Common Sense -
always watching my feet, lest they veer
in the natural curve of their motion -
Until one day,
having memorized the shape of my toes,
I lifted my gaze in the direction of my destination
only to find I had forgotten what it looked like,
couldn’t recognize it in the crowd.

Before I Left

this town raised me well
above factory buildings
that sit like sad old women
their eyes dusty and their clothes covered in

must I always remember
the Ticonic Street family and their kids evicted
from cracked-paint houses
electricity-worn and physically torn

away I sat warm and safe
in the Waterville public library with one turret like a hat

burning with book-air
deep in decaying apples
I kept cover
reading stories of winter

snow reaching white and gray windows
wearing away color and noise until
we all whispered in one Maine shade

carly
— yasinski
Cool city, big city,
A city proud of its history,
Where are your secrets?
Have you no mysteries?
Did they sprawl to the suburbs,
catch the Patco to Jersey, seeking privacy
& a tax cut?
Or did you never trust me enough
to even hint at their existence...

Young city, hip city,
City where I can never find my keys,
Center City - Old City - Northeast, West & South City,
I am leaving you.
You may not miss me,
and I may not look strong.
But I have stamina
to walk west over the Schuykill at sunset -
past the train station, law firms & universities
past the ghettos that fringe outward
the liquor stores and abandoned parks
the City Line, so aptly named -
I don't mind moving west at sunset
to hold out for a greater love.

Emily Kline

Stoic

Peter Barish
New Mexico

She is selling jewelry since, after all, it is her job.
She earns her living by attracting tourists like myself
With silver and turquoise and beads that are green,
Beads that make me wonder where they came from when
In this world of browns and dark reds and grays
I don’t often think of colors, much less green.

Tourists are supposed to feel connected with her ancestors
When they try on her necklaces or earrings or pins,
They’re supposed to think that when they buy her jewelry
They are supporting our nation’s past,
Declaring themselves defenders of our earliest heritage,
The wilderness, the adventures, the tales that go back and back,
All of this is theirs with their purchase.

When people told me of New Mexico they talked of endlessness.
It’s true that the roads stretch into eternity
And the mountains look like poppy seeds muffins
With black rocks and dusty slopes and after awhile
They all become the same, rising again and again
One after the other, all the same.
No one ever mentioned the loneliness.
And of course no one mentioned her, not specifically. Maybe they displayed a bracelet of intricate silver weaving. And I never wondered where it came from. Until I saw her on the side of the road, just her and her table. And what most failed to recognize as her life. I didn’t buy anything and I felt guilty but not until I looked in the rearview mirror and saw nothing. Only the cloudy sky and red earth, stretching and stretching.
When Wendy shed her London limits and stepped barefoot onto land that never was she did so carefully, toes first to test grass pearled with dew, then ball of the foot with damp imprint in dirt and finally the heel, stabilizing, planting her there in steamy wilderness a lone nightdressed figure.

Those bare-chested feather-crested youth offered more than scope for girlhood domesticity, for clean fingernails and nursery tales. Among them stood the challenge of keeping her head high at shoulder-height, long curls a vine-twined hindrance now, racing to keep pace with longer legs and strides.

Barefoot, earth-stained, free of finery she lost words first — the eloquence of lavender, eiderdown, and chamomile gone, replaced with only lush green moss, hushing footfalls, waterfalls for washing also for swimming slipping into the elegant deep. They swam there evenings, her and her boys treading water draped above with necklaces of fireflies, a glowing chandelier of drifting light.

And when they dunked her underwater she chose not to scream, instead used sharp elbows to fight them back, to push to leap over to splash to dunk, inscribing each in concentric ripples layered cross water like scattered rings, and the laughter echoed louder than the fauna and higher than the moon.

But Wendy did not stay for the glitter of adventure but for that puckish Pan with his little-boy grin soft eyes, sitting side-silhouetted near her come the dawn. With him feet unplanted, solid ground fell away and reality dwindled below and so she forgot she could not stay forever.
The Other City

This is the place in between
where you were
and where you were going.

You passed it when your head was buried in the stereo.
You missed it between traffic lights and your cell phone.

It is where paper bags and crushed glass
look at home
adorning
the alleyway.

Concrete stoops are verandas.
Iron-laced windows
picket fences
of sorts
and churches welcome
Sunday best
through barb-wire courtyards.

The neighbors ignore side and cross walks
walking the street itself
invincible to vehicles
like they own this place
like you and I could never.

The playground has players
playing late under park lights.

Get your checks cashed
or your ring pawned.

Mr. C’s Love Lounge
is open through the night.

The neon lights promise
this place won’t disappear
when you arrive
where you were going.
Antiques

The store was wet-wood brown while
he was gray
old man fingers dancing through a box of lockets

Look at the pretty lockets he whispered and his voice
was a record-scratch
Why don’t you wear a pretty locket, pretty girl
this one was my sister’s
this one was my wife’s
they had lockets, not you?

I have no secrets so I have no lockets, I lied.

When my wife died
I did not cry he said
but now you want her locket and I am sad to see it go.

I do not want her locket.
You will buy it now? No.
It is very old, you would like it?
No.
I am very old, you would like it? No.

I was never married, he said.
I know, I said –
the locket was my mother’s.

Veiled

I: 1989
At Kol Nidre, where we break
our vows, renewing duty, I sat
at my father’s left in the solemn sancturary.
His tzi-tzit splayed over the arm rest that separated
my cushioned seat from his, and I
combed the long silk strands with tiny fingers,
braiding and winding in soft palms,
pretending his prayer shawl was my favorite doll
which my mother had forbidden me
to cradle in temple.

II: Prayer
V’natnu al tzitzit *
We brush our fingers or the air
with pursed lips, punctuating
a familiar language
we cannot understand.

III: Desire
For each grandson,
my father’s mother needlepointed
a tallis bag.
For Benjamin, the majestic Jerusalem
skyline in turquoise and gold;
for Samuel, a Steelers diamond.
Ashamed to admit her want,
my sister sewed herself a crooked bag
from cotton scraps and a mislaid zipper.
My grandmother died
thinking her needlepoints complete,
and Kate still carries her prayer shawl through cold
weather in its fraying vessel.

IV: Trinity

Holy, Holy, Holy
is the Lord of Hosts.
The Rabbis argued till sunrise,
unable to settle their dispute over the age of the language
and the veil.
"The Holy One, blessed be He, created the world
with a murmur, for as the Good Book says,
‘Let there be light,’” argued Rav Ben Eliezer.
To which Rav Yehoshua replied, “Ah -
but His was a mystical tongue
imperfectly transcribed.
Old as Adam’s exile,
the shawl came first
for as the Good Book says,
‘They were ashamed of their nakedness.’”
Entering the conversation late
and in silence, I note
that both the prayer and the veil
ancient and irretrievable as Eden’s dust
are lifeless
until a man resurrects them from a temple cupboard

breathing life into linen words
with his ritual, or faith.

V: Portnoy’s Redemption
The tallis makes a fairy tale prince
of every Jew, a lovely limp white rag
reanimated by a kiss
to the nape of her neck,
a blessing.

VI: The Shawl Renders Unrecognizable
Jacob lifted Rachel’s veil,
searching beneath for something familiar, a body
he’d once loved.
Once I lost my father beneath a prayer shawl.
Hip high, I wandered like Ruth
through strange fields of gray woolen pant legs
at Kiddush, the white fringes of tzitzis
tangling with my pigtails,
horrified at these cruel strange men
impersonating my father.

VII: Holy Ghosts on Yom Kippur
Like trick-or-treaters perched beneath wide white sheets
they beat their chests and wail for absolution,
trailing chants as they bow and trip through graceful sanctuaries,
while I, hidden like Vashti behind a red curtain,
choke gross confessions in the only language I know.
VIII: Nakedness

At sixteen, I wore my favorite blue t-shirt to the wrong Saturday service. Not liking the look of my plump young arms, goosepimpled flesh, the usher handed me a prayer shawl to cover the exposed parts. I fingered the embroidered inscription, mouthed an awkward blessing, and spread the shawl tight around the frame of my shoulders, chest, and ribs, clutching it close between my breasts, those warm new animals breathing quietly, anxiously, above my belly. Then, I understood the sad, fraudulent shame of the transvestite: unable to remove these wrong clothes because they conceal this wrong body that hides beneath.

Exodus

It is impractical to walk in the desert with no shoes and so I did, and left skin behind, shedding off. Naked bloody footprints snaked away from the bus stop, stumbling and gone towards the sun-raptured rocks.

It was deep in that heart that I came upon the knot of hummingbirds feeding on the wretched bones of morning, three thousand jeweled feathers and one toad, who took residence in the quicksand hole from which the sun rose.
the cannon and the ones firing the cannon
they stand on a hill on a hill
listening to the tin and trill
they stand on a hill of green-dyed grasses because they must

on the hills green with hills
they stand buttoned down in gold in gold in pretty mold
flapping against the breaths of men
and they plot with secret knowledge
and stored up truths and point the cannon and wait
till some next soldier climbs up the hill and dons that gay apparel and opens his eyes with knowledge and shuts
them again with the blast