

94 Short Poems

Western Wind

Western wind, when will thou blow
The small rain down can rain?
Christ, if my love were in my arms
And I in my bed again!

—Anonymous

This Room

The room I entered was a dream of this room.
Surely all those feet on the sofa were mine.
The oval portrait
of a dog was me at an early age.
Something shimmers, something is hushed up.

We had macaroni for lunch every day
except Sunday, when a small quail was induced
to be served to us. Why do I tell you these things?
You are not even here.

—John Ashberry

Rain

With thick strokes of ink the sky fills with rain.
Pretending to run for cover but secretly praying for more rain.

Over the echo of the water, I hear a voice saying my name.
No one in the city moves under the quick sightless rain.

The pages of my notebook soak, then curl. I've written:
"Yogis opened their mouths for hours to drink the rain."

The sky is a bowl of dark water, rinsing your face.
The window trembles; liquid glass could shatter into rain.

I am a dark bowl, waiting to be filled.
If I open my mouth now, I could drown in the rain.

I hurry home as though someone is there waiting for me.

The night collapses into your skin. I am the rain.

—Kazim Ali

you fit into me

you fit into me
like a hook into an eye

a fish hook
an open eye

—Margaret Atwood

[The old pond]

The old pond;
A frog jumps in —
The sound of the water.

—Matsuo Bashō (Translated by R. H. Blyth)

Letter to Jerusalem

To hold the bird and not to crush her, that is the secret. Sand turned too quickly to cement and who cares if the builders lose their arms? The musk of smoldered rats on sticks that trailed their tails through tunnels underground. Trickster of light, I walk your cobbled alleys all night long and drink your salt. City of bones, I return to you with dust on my tongue. Return to your ruined temple, your spirit of revolt. Return to you, the ache at the center of the world.

—Elana Bell

Prayer at 3 a.m.

I washed your father's pants in the kitchen sink.
That should have been enough to tell you.
I am still convinced there is no difference
between kneeling and falling if you don't get up.

The head goes down in defeat, but lower in prayer,
and your sister tells me each visit that she has learned
a new use for her hands.

I've seen this from you both: cartwheels through the field

at dawn, toes popping over the corn stalks like fleas
over the heads of lepers. Your scarecrow reminds me

of Jesus, his guilt confused for fear.
The sun doesn't know; the fog lifts
everything in praise.

—Dexter L. Booth

We Real Cool

THE POOL PLAYERS.
SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

—Gwendolyn Brooks

[Before the white chrysanthemum]

Before the white chrysanthemum
the scissors hesitate
a moment.

—Yosa Buson (Translated by Robert Hass)

Careful, I Just Won a Prize at the Fair

Don't remind me
how insufficient
love is. You

threw quarters
into a bowl. We are bones

and need, all hair

and want: this fish won't swim
in a plastic bag
forever. My makeshift

gown is a candle, my breasts
full of milk for our young—
whose flames

are these anyway?

—Susanna Childress

Bowl

Give me a bowl, wide
and shallow. Patient
to light as a landscape open
to the whole weight
of a deepening sky.

Give me a bowl which turns
for ever on a curve
so gentle a child
could bear it and beasts
lap fearless at its low rim.

—Elizabeth Cook

Helena, Montana

If you lie back on the rocks just right, you can see bones in the
stars.

But if you stare too long, the moon becomes an enormous bone
and the truck you drove becomes bone and your skin becomes
bone and then your bones become bone.

Once everything in the world is bone, there won't be a need for
conversations or love or money or friends. All we need to do, then,
is observe our new journey of becoming dust.

When we are dust and mixing with one another, we will only have
the brittle memory of what it was like to be bone.

—Adam Crittenden

On the Day That He Goes, I Will

think of you first.	& then I will think of you again:
Your belongings—	Stripey, a whoopee cushion—my heart,
stowed in secret— will lurch	pitching, heaving, tumbling,
behind my breastbone,	will stagger toward an image seared into
my chest	the shape of my own grandfather standing near
a bingo hopper	the mailbox, draft card in hand—
& the stunned aftermath	the effect numbers have in our lives:
of a roiling 6.9 tremor	of age five, of age eighteen years old &
all at once	already gone.

—Meg Day

A Collector

The things I found
But they'll scatter them again
to the four winds
as soon as I am dead

Old gadgets
fossilised plants and shells
books broken dolls
coloured postcards

And all the words
I have found
my incomplete
my unsatisfied words

—Erich Fried (Translated by Stuart Hood)

Nothing Gold Can Stay

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,

So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

—Robert Frost

Concerto for Double Bass

He is a drunk leaning companionably
Around a lamp post or doing up
With intermittent concentration
Another drunk's coat.

He is a polite but devoted Valentino,
Cheek to cheek, forgetting the next step.
He is the feeling the pulse of the fat lady
Or cutting her in half.

But close your eyes and it is sunset
At the edge of the world. It is the language
Of dolphins, the growth of tree-roots,
The heart-beat slowing down.

—John Fuller

The Guest Speaker

I have to keep myself awake
While the guest speaker speaks.
For his and his procedure's sake
I have to keep myself awake.
However long his talk might take
(And, Christ, it feels like weeks)
I have to keep myself awake
While the guest speaker speaks.

—Sophie Hannah

Invisible Fish

Invisible fish swim this ghost ocean now described by waves of sand, by water-worn rock. Soon the fish will learn to walk. Then humans will come ashore and paint dreams on the dying stone. Then later, much later, the ocean floor will be punctuated by Chevy trucks, carrying the dreamers' descendants, who are going to the store.

—Joy Harjo

Child Fear

Sour milk. Rotten eggs. Bumblebees.
Giant women. Falling through the privy hole.
Snapping turtles. Electric fences. Howling bears.
The neighbor's big dog that tore apart
the black lamb. Oil wells. Train wheels.
Dentists and doctors. Hitler and Tōjō. Eye pain.
School superintendent with three gold teeth.
Cow's infected udder, angry draft horse.
School fire. Snake under hay bale. Life's end.

That your dead dogs won't meet you in heaven.

—Jim Harrison

Scaffolding

Masons, when they start upon a building,
Are careful to test out the scaffolding;

Make sure that planks won't slip at busy points,
Secure all ladders, tighten bolted joints.

And yet all this comes down when the job's done
Showing off walls of sure and solid stone.

So if, my dear, there sometimes seem to be
Old bridges breaking between you and me

Never fear. We may let the scaffolds fall
Confident that we have built our wall.

—Seamus Heaney

The Rescue

In drifts of sleep I came upon you
Buried to your waist in snow.
You reached your arms out: I came to
Like water in a dream of thaw.

—Seamus Heaney

Sonoma Fire

Large moon the deep orange of embers.
Also the scent.
The griefs of others—beautiful, at a distance.

—Jane Hirschfield

Beauty Is a Real Thing, I've Seen It

If only those parakeets would settle
A little nearer to where I'm sitting, instead of at the tops of far-off trees, this morning
Would be so much more remarkable.
One could watch the blackbirds, I suppose, peck their ways like Oxford dons across
The flagstone paths and lawns, or the swallows, or the sparrow,
Or the crows. But those birds are so plain—, so...painfully available.
No, only those parakeets will do and they will not do
What I want them to. In this, they are like everything else in the world.
Every beautiful thing.

—Jay Hopler

Wet Evening in April

The birds sang in the wet trees
And as I listened to them it was a hundred years from now
And I was dead and someone else was listening to them.
But I was glad I had recorded for him
 The melancholy.

—Patrick Kavanagh

Trees

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;

A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

A tree that may in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;

Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

—Joyce Kilmer

Stars and Planets

Trees are cages for them: water holds its breath
To Balance them without smudging on its delicate meniscus.
Children watch them playing in their heavenly playground;
Men use them to lug ships across oceans, through firths.

They seem so twinkle-still, but they never cease
Inventing new spaces and huge explosions
And migrating in mathematical tribes over
The steppes of space at their outrageous ease.

It's hard to think that the earth is one—
This poor sad bearer of wars and disasters
Rolls-Roycing round the sun with its load of gangsters,
Attended only by the loveless moon.

—Norman MacCaig

After the Alphabets

I am trying to decipher the language of insects
they are the tongues of the future
their vocabularies describe buildings as food
they can depict dark water and the veins of trees
they can convey what they do not know
and what is known at a distance
and what nobody knows
they have terms for making music with the legs
they can recount changing in a sleep like death
they can sing with wings

the speakers are their own meaning in a grammar without horizons
they are wholly articulate
they are never important they are everything

—W.S. Merwin

High Fronds

After sundown the crowns
of the tallest palms
stand out against
the clear glass of the eastern sky
they have no shadows
and no memory
the wind has gone its own way
nothing is missing

—W.S. Merwin

Looking up in the Garden

These trees have no names
whatever we call them

where will the meanings be
when the words are forgotten

will I see again
where you are

will you be sitting
in Fran's living room

will the dream come back
will I know where I am

will there be birds

—W.S. Merwin

The Cow

The cow is of the bovine ilk;
One end is moo, the other, milk

—Ogden Nash

Epitaph

Of the Great World he knew not much,
But his Muse let little in language escape her.
Friends sigh and say of him, poor wretch,
He was a good writer, on paper.

—Howard Nemerov

Prometheus at Radio City

Because he has forsook his nasty vulture
To be an emblem of electriculture,
He swims the air above our skating rink
In a golden inner tube, a marble sink.

And if he still objects to Zeus's reign,
Or shows a symptom of the ancient pain,
The band will loudly play 'The Skaters' Waltz,
While waiters run to him with liver salts.

—Howard Nemerov

The Golf Links

The golf links lie so near the mill
That almost every day
The laboring children can look out
And see the men at play.

—Sarah Norcliffe

Praying

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try

to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak

—Mary Oliver

Swimming, One Day in August

It is time now, I said,
for the deepening and quieting of the spirit
among the flux of happenings.

Something had pestered me so much
I thought my heart would break.
I mean, the mechanical part.

I went down in the afternoon
to the sea
which held me, until I grew easy.

About tomorrow, who knows anything.
Except that it will be time, again,
for the deepening and quieting of the spirit.

—Mary Oliver

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

—Ezra Pound

New Gravity

Treading through the half-light of ivy
and headstone, I see you in the distance
as I'm telling our daughter
about this place, this whole business:
a sister about to be born,
how a life's new gravity suspends in water.
Under the oak, the fallen leaves

are pieces of the tree's jigsaw;
by your father's grave you are pressing acorns
into the shadows to seed.

—Robin Robertson

Snow

Snow is what it does.
It falls and it stays and it goes.
It melts and it is here somewhere.
We all will get there.

—Frederick Seidel

The Universe: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack

The first track still almost swings. High hat and snare, even
A few bars of sax the stratosphere will singe-out soon enough.

Synthesized strings. Then something like cellophane
Breaking in as if snagged to a shoe. Crinkle and drag. White noise,

Black noise. What must be voices bob up, then drop, like metal shavings
In molasses. So much for us. So much for the flags we bored

Into planets dry as chalk, for the tin cans we filled with fire
And rode like cowboys into all we tried to tame. Listen:

The dark we've only ever imagined now audible, thrumming,
Marbled with static like gristly meat. A chorus of engines churns.

Silence taunts: a dare. Everything that disappears
Disappears as if returning somewhere.

—Tracy K. Smith

The Weather in Space

Is God being or pure force? The wind
Or what commands it? When our lives slow
And we can hold all that we love, it sprawls
In our laps like a gangly doll. When the storm
Kicks up and nothing is ours, we go chasing

After all we're certain to lose, so alive—
Faces radiant with panic.

—Tracy K. Smith

To my Daughter

Bright clasp of her whole hand around my finger
My daughter, as we walk together now.
All my life I'll feel a ring invisibly
Circle this bone with shining: when she is grown
Far from today as here eyes are far already.

—Stephen Spender

The Falling Star

I saw a star slide down the sky,
Blinding the north as it went by,
Too burning and too quick to hold,
Too lovely to be bought or sold,
Good only to make wishes on
And then forever to be gone.

—Sara Teasdale

The Way We Go

the way we go about our lives
trying out each empty room
like houses we might own
eavesdropping for clues in corridors until

standing at a gate or attic window
seeing beauty in a flag of sky
we're gone, leaving the doors open
all the lights burning

—Katharine Towers

A Noiseless Patient Spider

A noiseless patient spider,

I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

—Walt Whitman

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

—William Carlos Williams

Letter to Arafat

In the rebuilt café where the bride exploded with the
glass, we order cappuccino to sip with our cigarettes.
Across the invisible line, only Arabic coffee. In Gaza
they make rockets from lead pipe and nails. We say
animals. Is a body worth a body? What if it has wept
in the rain? Whispered the ninety-nine names of God
and claimed one for itself. In the first light. Before
morning.

—Elana Bell

Self-Portrait in the Bathroom Mirror

Some days, everything is a machine, by which I mean
remove any outer covering and you will most likely

find component parts: cogs and wheels that whir just like an artificial heart, a girl in a red cap redacting the sky, fish that look like blimps and fishlike blimps, an indifferent lighthouse that sweeps the horizon. I wasn't a child for long, and after I wasn't, I was something else. I was this. And that. A blast furnace, a steel maze inside, the low-level engine room of an ocean liner. My eye repeats horizontally what I by this time already know: there is no turning back to be someone I might have been. Now there will only ever be multiples of me.

—Mary Jo Bang

I Was Icarus

It must have been a hot summer back then, when I could fly.
I was maybe seventeen.
My room was on the ground floor, facing the back.
Night after night I lay on the bed and imagined myself flying.
That was a strain, I tell you.
Usually I'd lie perfectly still for an hour before my body rose from the bed.
Very slowly I rose, until I hovered a meter or so off the floor.
Then with swimming strokes I propelled myself through the open window.
Outside I flew higher and higher, over the garden fence, over the clothes-lines, over the roof tops and the apple-trees on the outskirts of town.
The entire flight I felt the wind's touch on my skin,
and sometimes I heard voices, calling.

—Ulrich Berkes

The Kiss

For Laue-Anne

That kiss I failed to give you.
How can you forgive me?
The kiss I would have spent on you is still
there, within me. It will probably die there.
But it will be the last of me to die.

—Kurt Brown

Lantau

While sitting prostrate before the ivory feet of the great Buddha, I spilled almost an entire can of Diet Coke on the floor. I quickly tried to mop up the mess with my long hair. I peeked over my left shoulder: the short nun said nothing and averted her eyes; to my right the skinny old monk was consumed by a frightful irritation of his own. He was at once swatting and dodging two bombarding hornets that were fascinated by his newly shaved head. "I hope he's not allergic." I chuckled softly. And beyond us was the motherless Asian sea, glittering with the promise of eternity.

—Marilyn Chin

Driving at Night

I think it's quails lining the road but it's fallen Birchwood.
What look like white clouds in a grassy basin, sprinklers.
I mistake the woman walking her retriever as a pair of fawns.
Could-be animals. Unexplained weather. Maybe they see us
that way. Knowing better, the closer they get. Not quite ready to let it go.

—Rio Cortez

I Know a Man

As I sd to my
friend, because I am
always talking,—John, I

sd, which was not his
name, the darkness sur-
rounds us, what

can we do against
it, or else, shall we &
why not, buy a goddamn big car,

drive, he sd, for
christ's sake, look
out where yr going.

—Robert Creeley

Current

The third rail
and the electric chair

are charged with the current
that glows tonight

in the bedside lamp

illuminating your body

—Stuart Dybek

The Southern Hemisphere

They are out there somewhere,
the lovers at summer camp.
It's February here. That means
they must be on the other side of the equator.
Soon their counselors will arrive
in golf carts, shining flashlights
to herd them back to their bunks.
Therefore they take this time
to whisper nothings to each other.
Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing,
nothing, they whisper
in Australian accents. *All of this*
will be nothing. A journal entry
re: the scent of grass in the dark.

—Jacob Eigen

Examples of the Interrogative in Jane's Kitchen

Is the fifth sense talking?
How do you do a capital G?
I have to, don't I?
Do you want to be just like me?
Why did you put on makeup to go to the grocery store?
Why don't you wear your boots?
Is this really better than taking the pills?
Can we just start with what we have?

—Jennifer Habel

I'm Going to Start Living Like a Mystic

Today I am pulling on a green wool sweater
and walking across the park in a dusky snowfall.

The trees stand like twenty-seven prophets in a field,
each a station in a pilgrimage—silent, pondering.

Blue flakes of light falling across their bodies
are the ciphers of a secret, an occultation.

I will examine their leaves as pages in a text
and consider the bookish pigeons, students of winter.

I will kneel on the track of a vanquished squirrel
and stare into a blank pond for the figure of Sophia.

I shall begin scouring the sky for signs
as if my whole future were constellated upon it.

I will walk home alone with the deep alone,
a disciple of shadows, in praise of the mysteries.

—Edward Hirsch

In California

I must have been about six.
We had just arrived from Canada.
Every day I missed Paulette
And Larry the frog.
I wanted my ant farm back.
All I had was the blue elephant and a few marbles.
On the other side of the hill
Near our house. I knew
I would find Prince Edward Island again.
It was getting cold.
I had a cap gun and a doughnut with me.

—Margaret Levine

Okay, Ophelia

We've heard you were a victim.
Stop crouching in shadows, chewing your hair.

You can be graceful, not like a ballerina,
like a hedge of coral,

Built up and eaten and worn down
yet alive, carving the rhythms of the seas.

You can be a threshing sledge,
new and sharp with many teeth.

—Jeannine Hall Gailey

Alone

I never thought Michiko would come back
after she died. But if she did, I knew
it would be as a lady in a long white dress.
It is strange that she has returned
as somebody's dalmatian. I meet
the man walking her on a leash
almost every week. He says good morning
and I stoop down to calm her. He said
once that she was never like that with
other people. Sometimes she is tethered
on their lawn when I go by. If nobody
is around, I sit on the grass. When she
finally quiets, she puts her head in my lap
and we watch each other's eyes as I whisper
in her soft ears. She cares nothing about
the mystery. She likes it best when
I touch her head and tell her small
things about my days and our friends.
That makes her happy the way it always did.

—Jack Gilbert

Michiko Dead

He manages like somebody carrying a box
that is too heavy, first with his arms
underneath. When their strength gives out,
he moves the hands forward, hooking them
on the corners, pulling the weight against
his chest. He moves his thumbs slightly
when the fingers begin to tire, and it makes
different muscles take over. Afterward,
he carries it on his shoulder, until the blood
drains out of the arm that is stretched up
to steady the box and the arm goes numb. But now
the man can hold underneath again, so that
he can go on without ever putting the box down.

—Jack Gilbert

Lies and Longing

Half the women are asleep on the floor
on pieces of cardboard.

One is face down under a blanket
with her feet and ankle bracelet showing.
Her spear leans against the wall by her head
where she can reach it.
The woman who sits on a chair won't speak
because this is not her dress.
An old woman sings an Italian song in English
and says she wants her name in lights:
Faye Runaway. Tells about her grown children.
One asks for any kind of medicine.
One says she has a rock that means honor
and a piece of fur.
One woman's feet are wrapped in rags.
One keeps talking about how fat she is
so nobody will know she's pregnant.
They lie about getting letters.
One lies about a beautiful dead man.
One lies about Denver. Outside
it's Thirtieth Street and hot and no sun.

—Linda Gregg

Summer in a Small Town

When the men leave me,
they leave me in a beautiful place.
It is always late summer.
When I think of them now,
I think of the place.
And being happy alone afterwards.
This time it's Clinton, New York.
I swim in the public pool
at six when the other people
have gone home.
The sky is grey, the air hot.
I walk back across the mown lawn
loving the smell and the houses
so completely it leaves my heart empty.

—Linda Gregg

A Story About the Body

The young composer, working that summer at an artist's colony, had watched her for a week. She was Japanese, a painter, almost sixty, and he thought he was in love with her. He loved her work, and her work was like the way she moved her body, used her hands, looked at him directly when she made amused and considered answers to his questions. One night, walking back from a concert,

they came to her door and she turned to him and said, "I think you would like to have me. I would like that too, but I must tell you that I have had a double mastectomy," and when he didn't understand, "I've lost both my breasts." The radiance that he had carried around in his belly and chest cavity -- like music -- withered very quickly, and he made himself look at her when he said, "I'm sorry. I don't think I could." He walked back to his own cabin through the pines, and in the morning he found a small blue bowl on the porch outside his door. It looked to be full of rose petals, but he found when he picked it up that the rose petals were on top; the rest of the bowl -- she must have swept them from the corners of her studio -- was full of dead bees.

—Robert Hass

Unflushed Urinals (lines written in the Omaha bus station)

Seeing them, I recognize the contempt
Some men have for themselves

This man, for instance, zipping quickly up, head turned
Like a bystander innocent of his own piss

And here comes one to repair himself at the mirror
Patting down damp, sparse hairs, suspiciously still black
Poor bantam cock of a man, jaunty at one a.m., perfumed, undiscourageable...

O the saintly forbearance of these mirrors!
The acceptingness of the washbowls, in which we absolve ourselves!

—Donald Justice

This living hand, now warm and capable

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm'd—see here it is—
I hold it towards you.

—John Keats

Goodbye

If you are still alive when you read this,
close your eyes. I am
under their lids, growing black.

—Bill Knott

Maybe (to H)

a stopsign stranded
in a sea of cacti
won't grow needles
maybe but then

even I take on some
characteristics
of human when
I'm with you

—Bill Knott

Poem to Poetry

Poetry, you are an electric,
a magic, field—like
the space between
a sleepwalker's outheld arms!

—Bill Knott

The Ache of Marriage

The ache of marriage:

thigh and tongue, beloved,
are heavy with it,
it throbs in the teeth

We look for communion
and are turned away, beloved,
each and each

It is leviathan and we
in its belly
looking for joy, some joy
not to be known outside it

two by two in the ark of

the ache of it.

—Denise Levertov

Witness

I want to tell what the forests
were like

I will have to speak
in a forgotten language

—W.S. Merwin

Carillon

Phones were ringing

in the pockets of the living
and the dead

the living stepped carefully among.
the whole still room

was lit with sound—like a switchboard—
and those who could answer

said hello. Then
it was just the dead, the living

trapped inside their bloody clothes
ringing and ringing them—

and this was
the best image we had

of what made us a nation.

—Wayne Miller

Gift

A day so happy.
Fog lifted early, I worked in the garden.
Hummingbirds were stopping over honeysuckle flowers.
There was no thing on earth I wanted to possess.
I knew no one worth my envying him.
Whatever evil I had suffered, I forgot.
To think that once I was the same man did not embarrass me.
In my body I felt no pain.
When straightening up, I saw the blue sea and sails.

—Czeslaw Milosz

Sleeping in the Forest

I thought the earth remembered me,
she took me back so tenderly,
arranging her dark skirts, her pockets
full of lichens and seeds.
I slept as never before, a stone on the river bed,
nothing between me and the white fire of the stars
but my thoughts, and they floated light as moths
among the branches of the perfect trees.
All night I heard the small kingdoms
breathing around me, the insects,
and the birds who do their work in the darkness.
All night I rose and fell, as if in water,
grappling with a luminous doom. By morning
I had vanished at least a dozen times
into something better.

—Mary Oliver

Reading the Obituary Page

In starched dresses
with ribbons
in miniature jackets
and tiny ties
we would circle
the chairs
at birthday parties and

when the music
stopped, lunge
to be seated. One
by one we were welcomed
To hard ground
and empty air.

—Linda Pastan

Why Are Your Poems so Dark?

Isn't the moon dark too,
most of the time?

And doesn't the white page
seem unfinished

without the dark stain
of alphabets?

When God demanded light,
he didn't banish darkness.

Instead he invented
ebony and crows

and that small mole
on your left cheekbone.

Or did you mean to ask
"Why are you sad so often?"

Ask the moon.
Ask what it has witnessed.

—Linda Pastan

June

The June bug
on the screen door
whirs like a small,
ugly machine,

and a chorus of frogs
and crickets drones like Musak

at all the windows.
What we don't quite see

comforts us.
Blink of lightning, grumble
of thunder—just the heat
clearing its throat.

—Linda Pastan

July

Tonight the fireflies
light their brief
candles
in all the trees

of summer—
color of moonflakes,
color of fluorescent
lace

where the ocean drags
its torn hem
over the dark
sand.

—Linda Pastan

September

Their summer romance
over, the lovers
still cling
to each other

the way the green
leaves cling
to their trees
in the strange heat

of September, as if
this time
there will be
no autumn.

—Linda Pastan

Salutation

O generation of the thoroughly smug
and thoroughly uncomfortable,
I have seen fishermen picnicking in the sun,
I have seen them with untidy families,
I have seen their smiles full of teeth
and heard ungainly laughter.
And I am happier than you are,
And they were happier than I am;
And the fish swim in the lake
and do not even own clothing.

—Ezra Pound

Root Cellar

Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch,
Bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark,
Shoots dangled and drooped,
Lolling obscenely from mildewed crates,
Hung down long yellow evil necks, like tropical snakes.
And what a congress of stinks!
Roots ripe as old bait,
Pulpy stems, rank, silo-rich,
Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against slippery planks.
Nothing would give up life:
Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath.

—Theodore Roethke

Cuttings

Sticks-in-a-drowse droop over sugary loam,
Their intricate stem-fur dries;
But still the delicate slips keep coaxing up water;
The small cells bulge;

One nub of growth
Nudges a sand-crumble loose,
Pokes through a musty sheath
Its pale tendrulous horn.

—Theodore Roethke

Cuttings (Later)

This urge, wrestle, resurrection of dry sticks,
Cut stems struggling to put down feet,
What saint strained so much,
Rose on such lopped limbs to a new life?
I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,
In my veins, in my bones I feel it,—
The small waters seeping upward,
The tight grains parting at last.
When sprouts break out,
Slippery as fish,
I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet.

—Theodore Roethke

Lament of the Conductor

All the pretty things you do
the way you lean outward
against the window of the train everyday
none of it is mine
(Only the train is mine)

—Molly Russakoff

Blandeur

If it please God,
let less happen.
Even out Earth's
rondure, flatten
Eiger, blanden
the Grand Canyon.
Make valleys
slightly higher,
widen fissures
to arable land,
remand your
terrible glaciers
and silence
their calving,
halving or doubling
all geographical features
toward the mean.
Unlean against our hearts.

Withdraw your grandeur
from these parts.

—Kay Ryan

A Poet's Poem

If it takes me all day,
I will get the word *freshened* out of this poem.

I put it in the first line, then moved it to the second,
and now it won't come out.

It's stuck. I'm so frustrated,
so I went out to my little porch all covered in snow

and watched the icicles drip, as I smoked
a cigarette.

Finally I reached up and broke a big, clear spike
off the roof with my bare hand.

And used it to write a word in the snow.
I wrote the word *snow*.

I can't stand myself.

—Brenda Shaughnessy

Lives of the Poets

Dickinson had a cockatoo
she called Semiramis
and loved dearly.

Whitman was a trencherman,
his favorite dish
a mulligan stew.

Frost went for long walks,
Eliot played croquet,
Pound took fencing lessons.

There is a snapshot of Yeats
in a garden with a woman
naked to the waist and smiling.

Auden when he was old
counted the sheets of toilet paper
that a visitor used.

—Louis Simpson

American Poetry

Whatever it is, it must have
A stomach that can digest
Rubber, coal, uranium, moons, poems.

Like the shark, it contains a shoe.
It must swim from miles through the desert
Uttering cries that almost human.

—Louis Simpson

And I Raised My Hand in Return

Every morning for two weeks on my walk into the village
I would see the young goat on the grassy slope above the stream.
It belonged to the Gypsies who lived in the plaza below the castle.
One day on my walk back to the mill house I saw the little goat
hanging from a tree by its hind legs, and a Gypsy was pulling
the skin off with a pair of pliers which he waved to me in greeting

—Joseph Stroud

Nativity

I am the one
who took the photo,

the one
who on a frigid moonless night
was summoned, instructed
to rise from a warm bed,

to arrange the baffled animals,
to adjust, over and over,
for light.

—Mike White

Wind

Not a remarkable wind.
So when the bistro's patio umbrella
blew suddenly free and pitched
into the middle of the road,
it put a stop to the afternoon.

Something white and amazing
was blocking the way.

A waiter in a clean apron
appeared, not quite
certain, shielding his eyes, wary
of our rumbling engines.

He knelt in the hot road,
making two figures in white, one
leaning over the sprawled,
broken shape of the other,
creaturely, great-winged,
and now so carefully gathered in.

—Mike White

Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,
Asleep on the black trunk,
Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.
Down the ravine behind the empty house,
The cowbells follow one another
Into the distances of the afternoon.
To my right,
In a field of sunlight between two pines,
The droppings of last year's horses
Blaze up into golden stones.
I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.
A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.
I have wasted my life.

—James Wright

Ping Pong Ball

Is the size of a heartbeat felt in the wrist,
Is the weight of an egg, emptied with a pin,
Is alive as a rabbit inflated with breath,

Is doomed baby rabbit in a yard with a cat.

Is served on a table set for two with a net,
Chirps like a bird or a tongue on a palate,
Spins all directions like an uninhabitable planet,
Is all the joy in a Midwestern basement.

Is all by itself, is the last one left,
Goes back and forth like a child till it can't,
Is pinned to the table like a guilty defendant,
Is coaxed until it confesses its crack.

—Matthew Yeager

Gulls

Eternity doesn't travel,
eternity waits.
In a fishing port
only the gulls are chatty.

—Adam Zagajewski

A Black Cat

A black cat comes out to greet us
as if to say, look at me
and not some old Romanesque church.
I'm alive.

—Adam Zagajewski

At Dawn

The world's materiality at dawn—
and the soul's frailty.

—Adam Zagajewski