

Coming this Spring, the poetry of

IRAQ

ATLANTA



**ATLANTA
REVIEW**

REVIEW

POETRY 2006

International Poetry Competition

M. B. Powell

Grand Prize Winner

Coming this Spring

Poetry of IRAQ

Fall / Winter 2006

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**ATLANTA
REVIEW**

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ATLANTA REVIEW

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Welcome

The first two poems of this issue take us from the wettest place on earth to the driest, preparing us for an issue that provides ample proof of poetry's ability to embrace the extremes of human experience. Joy and agony, laughter and grief all take their turns. "Ayodya" explores the abyss of misunderstanding that leads to a religious massacre, while the story of "Hermit Moon" turns on an act of spiritual generosity so unexpected it is shocking. Our *Poetry 2006* winner epitomizes this marriage of extremes, alternating lines of the driest platitude with an oceanic baptism of passion.

I'd like to announce another sudden and dramatic turn here. Next spring, *Atlanta Review* will be going to the one place in the world you never expected a poetry journal to go—*Iraq*.

The editors of *Gilgamesh*, Baghdad's own literary journal, and Haider Al-Kabi, an *Atlanta Review* poet from Iraq, will bring you the poetry issue you never expected to see. This astounding collection will give you the human side of the world tragedy taking place in Iraq, in a way that the news media can never hope to approach.

I first saw this manuscript just two weeks ago, and, as a result, decided to pre-empt our normal publication schedule to bring you one of the great poetry events of our time.

Dan Veach
Editor & Publisher

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What Breathing Means

San Ignacio Lagoon, Baja California Sur, Mexico

On a midnight so dark it made light seem
a fantasy, I stood, blind, in the anchored boat's
bow, and listened. Coyotes hunting far off
sang like a gospel choir; one animal led,
others answered, call and response crisscrossed
the desert. Nearby, a gray whale surfaced
and blew. Its exhalation exploded
like a thousand overheated stallions snorting
as one, then the whale sucked new air
down, drew in the windy drone
of all those horse hundreds filling hot lungs.
Another whale blew and breathed,
and another, yet another and one more,
the breathbeat of a dark herd aroused,
immense and wild. Out-and-in went
on and on, coyotes sopranoed above,
while I melted into breath, into song.

Robert Aquinas McNally

In the Sahara

Then, after years of dry imagining,
arrived, soul-parched, at the great Sahara—
sea of glistening sand and smogless air,
sun-filled afflatus for languid spirits.

I have always loved the Sahara
and its insidious equality.
There where bare sun smashes the eyes and cooks
the brain, there is never dispensation,
no haven safe from day's intensity.
Visions of eternity are common
as mirages, small objects loom larger
than they are, what looks touching-near is far,
and bright colors shimmer and magnify
in psychedelic hues like rainbows
in an endless summer. There the Prophet
takes many forms, makes frequent visitations,
and dry death rumbles in the empty stomach
of a beast that has never seen the sea.

Time is the sun's position in the sky.

At the gloaming the white fires of the stars
ignite and night rims the round horizon
circling the sands like a wide-winged bird,
black as a nun's habit; the thinning strands
of day vanish behind waves of windblown
mounds as the breath of the faithful ascends;
and the fading sun quickly drops and leaves
beneath a legacy of prickly warmth,
relief for everything that lies beneath,
and shifting dunes for nomads in their graves.

Night is the black hole of infinity.

Phillip Corwin

The Highest Branch

I cling to the day by its hair. Yours flies with the waves.
My clothes are wet. An autumn beach. I remember
that I have no other place. The consistency of the sand
on my feet and the birds that settle on the highest
branch for the highest flight. What other place?
Perhaps the desert, a palm tree in the south.
Dates rain down. To let the pit roll around in one's mouth
From wave to wave. Who receives my voice?
I undress as if you're waiting for me to tell you all.
Silence works within my flesh. The city at night
seen from the other side. We walk along in each other's
breath. We know nothing. Ignorance
like a flower in the desert. Do you know that you've arrived?
Don't leave your mouth at the door, your smile.
Help me to become your thirst.

Rosa Alice Branco
translated by Alexis Levitin

Giving Light

I cup my hands around this swollen pocket,
its button pronounced from each trimester's
added carat. This globe that stretches beneath
my fingertips was once the size of my thumbnail,

pale and lunar. Who knew that it would become a garden,
a drowsy damp bloom where his ears began to curve
and his wrist angle, where the muddy color of his iris
hides behind a tender eyelid that flutters above the spooned

valley of his collarbone. The daylight shocks my eyes
but all I can think of is dusk, how soil-dark
it must be in this bud, yet how his birthday will come

as a starburst baptism. A Spanish phrase tickles
the roof of my mouth: *Doy a luz*.
I'm giving light, from one realm to another.

Doy a luz.
These three words fall like tiger lilies from my lips,
leaving spicy orange freckles on my tongue.

Christy Patchin

Object Lesson with Apples

She'd been a pre-school teacher once and learned the secret of apples.

Picking up a knife
and reaching for the fruit bowl in her kitchen,
she offered me an exhibition:
there is a star if you slice it sideways.

The number of seeds isn't random:
there are always five,
radiating from the apple's heart,
a little star, an asterisk to mark
what's been missing all the other times

my lips have been drawn to the glistening red, how many
I've held without knowing
what really lies at the core.
It was the hour of whispers. Would she show me more,
something else I've never known before?

Al Hudgins

Listening to My Husband Describe an *X-Files* Plot While Driving Past Spring's First Poppies

It is all a conspiracy.

See how their heads bend
at the same angle, picking up my thoughts
as they escape this metal cage into the wind.

What you mistake for stamens are antennas
tuned to frequencies beyond our understanding. Why
do they sprinkle the tender earth
like droplets of blood?
And where do they come from?
Underground.

They plotted the past year in cells
no light could penetrate, and now
they've arrived, spreading over our land

with a shocking beauty that will seduce,
then hypnotize. They got Dorothy from Kansas—
I read the file. The story we know
was a sham; that sweet kid was haunted
for life. They'll get us, too,
following orders from the mole who sent them—
the hunched one in the overcoat, smoking,
without a face.

Maria Terrone

Apostrophe

Oh, apostrophe,
prince of possession,
little claw that clutches
what is ours
to our breast:
the eagle's prey,
the collector's find,
the child's toy,
the body's last breath.

Oh, apostrophe,
princess of seduction,
the curled finger
that beckons
"Come closer."
The vowel drops
like lingerie,
intimate contract
that makes two into one.
Won't you slip
into something
more comfortable?
You're ready
for possession,
having sacrificed
the heart.

Michele Ruby

Understanding History

Throughout the exam,
my student called her
Clytemenstra.

As if that explained her mood,
not the sacrificed daughter,
not the power-hungry lover,
not the straying husband,
not the seer sex toy he brought back
from his business trip.

Female troubles.

We are all Trojan horses,
carrying within us the seeds
of our own destruction:
the offspring who unfurl
the flags of their own kingdoms,
and exile us; the hormones that desert us,
rats fleeing the shipwreck
of our aging bodies.

We will be abandoned.

Later, my student remarked
that time heals all wombs.

Michele Ruby

Orpheus and the Ex-Mrs. Lot: A Second Marriage

It's been a hell of a time,
too much alike in too many ways,
me still writing poems to dead parents
and old wives, and you back down
south with your fundamentalist father
who claims to be dying again, weeping
so hard on the phone every night
I'm afraid that bulge of blood
in your brain might finally burst,
or that your tears will turn you
to salt, and nothing I sing
or say can help—he won't read
or even hear how much
I need you up here. His head
is cocked on the pillow, listening
to his boombox hymns
and making you listen, too.

Let the dead bury the dead,
come home again,
and let's start over,
rewrite the myths to get us
beyond all this,
so when you see me
up the long hallway
from the gate
and my face appears
to be turned away
toward the terminal,
don't doubt this time,
just follow.
I won't look back
if you won't.

William Greenway

That Famous Look

No snake in the toaster at dawn,
no spiders with rucksacks marching
across the kitchen table, no mice
line-dancing while an orchestra
of cockroaches and crickets plays.
The morning weighs less than I do,
its skirts ragged at the hems,
its jewelry clanking like scrap.
It gives me that famous look,
and I realize it's you.

Last night the great storyteller
descended from the Horsehead
Nebula in Orion to recount
the tale of the rabbi who lost
his faith in the name but not
the word of God. He convinced me
I believe in neither name nor word
but expect the cosmos to express
itself in snakes, roaches, spiders,
crickets, jewelry, skirts, and mice.

Now in ragged hem and rattle
of sterling bracelets you descend
from your office amid the aloof
and touch my shoulder and rout
my reverie by reminding me
that if I want a snake to coil
in the toaster I have to bait it
with the proper bread,
and if I expect a spider army
I have to breed many flies,

and if I demand an orchestra
I have to write music in major
and minor keys. And finally,
if I want you in your tattered hems
to sit on my lap and shed light
I have to worship sun and moon
equally, and admit that the clack
and clatter of your metal trim
generates sounds as powerful
as the names I'm afraid to speak.

William Doreski

Safety Is My Goal

slogan with missing "o" painted on the back of an 18-wheel truck

I-75

Atlanta

Well before Safety there was Abandon.
Reckless, she was a hellbender.
Reclining in the cab,
sunlight on her bourboned cheek.
Tripping on ludes or ketamine,
she tapped out the mile markers
on her beaded sleeve.
Sometimes she'd put her mouth
to my ear. It was hard to hear
her honeyed whisper over the rig's roar,
above the road's mantric hum.
Sometimes she slid her tongue
down my neck. I'd almost cross
that yellow line or drive into the grassy median.
God almighty! Abandon—
 my little fire in the wire,
 my reason to drive on.
 Nodamene?

Before Safety there was also Error
and her twin sister Regret—
a wasp-waisted double-decker.
We traveled as a threesome,
ménage a trois-ing our way
from L.A. to Phoenix,
from Tuscon to Abilene.
At a Texas rest stop we might
go flatline for a while, then later

stop for food and 40-weight
or to check the truck's skins.
Regret was always saying sorry,
Error was always busy
trying new things, inventing
 bigger and better sins.
 Mercy!

Nodamene?

Cheryl Stiles

Nodamene CB radio lingo for "know what I mean?"

Bimbo Limbo

My wife says my exes are all there: Linda, Leslie, Toni, Anne, Debbi, Dawn, Kathy, Natalie drifting beyond the Kuiper Belt in the very-dark-and-cold, or very-bright-and-hot while catching, on the far horizon, just the faintest glow from heaven's golden streets, the barest hum from choirs of angels, and the shouts of those who made it, joyful as the day the Red Sox snapped Bambino's Curse.

But wait—the lovers who pumped up my life's balloon when it threatened to drop me into jungles of ebola, seas of krakens, fast-lanes full of roaring 18-wheelers with lung-shriveling breath—they can't be dead! Oh, maybe one or two—breast cancer, car wreck, some disease I've never heard of, nor had she when Doc mumbled, "I have bad news." The others are (I pray) like me,

still keeping heads out of the river, enjoying the swim and view, though the current's picking up, the roar ahead as undeniable now as mist-clouds rising from the shark-toothed rocks on which the water, after a mile's lacy collapse, explodes. Yet there's good company in limbo—not just babies who died sinless, and are available for cuddling. Plato is there—and Aristotle, Socrates,

Pythagoras, Euripides... think of the brainy conversations! And don't think my former flames couldn't join in. Didn't they have the great good sense to fall for me? I'm only kidding. No I'm not. I don't believe in limbo anyway—or purgatory, or heaven, or hell, though watching Britney with her low jeans and heavenly thighs, and Pamela before the apotheosis of her chest,

and Jessica, who can sing some, and didn't really say "The capital of Hawaii is H," and, let's face it, looks fantastic as Daisy Duke in cut-off jeans... watching that trio do the Bimbo Limbo—*How low can you go?*—doesn't sound bad. A place where that happens can't be too far from God, especially not if my old girlfriends are there, God being Beauty, after all, God being Love.

Charles Harper Webb

In order to write the earth's poem,

you must absorb the life of its streets
and walk them in silence and alone,
study faces and buildings, chairs
and the curve of backs, heads held high
or dropped down, eyes innocent or knowing.
What adornments do the women wear?
What proud ties and vests the men?
When dark falls, do footsteps slacken
on sultry Summer evenings? Do families
stroll, children dressed in their best?

What is this sweetness that comes over me
in side streets and alleys where children play,
men smoke and women gossip?
Delicious cooking odors rise to bright
colors hung from balconies,
saffron reds and oranges, where plants
climb buildings, seeking sun.

Then the city bares its poor
in so many ways—knees protruding
from pants, toes from shoes,
scavenger skills sharpened for survival,
the knowledge of dry ledges and overhangs
to sleep under with one eye open.
It is the quiet cry of despair I register,
unexpected soft dark eyes,
among the poorest poor, sometimes
quiet strength, and voices soft and shy.

Roger Weaver

On Poverty

O Mother of Disease and Ignorance
and a thousand other brats, who loves you now?
You loot the public treasury and lance
our swollen self-esteem, that fatted cow.
I've seen you sitting on a stoop surrounded
by your brood, their sleepy hooded eyes
that track each well-fed passer-by in his car
and heard your baby's hungry cries
as it lay in bed and one more day rounded
into darkness, one more wound into scar.

Once you were a nun, by all respected,
at home among the ill, the lame, the blind,
and though you cared for all, went uninfected
by abstract vigors of the mind.
I've seen you kneel in some grave sanctuary
fat beeswax flames enlightening the gloom
head bent, hands folded, swallowed by quiet
as you pondered mankind's doom
and held an easy, heart-felt colloquy
with God, your refuge from earthly riot.

But though I've seen you haggard and serene,
I've always known your beauty, O bright star,
and loved you, my ever difficult queen,
intimately, from afar.
Each taste of cool water tastes of you.
You are the clarity of a wind-bright day,
you the sweetness of berries plumped in mud.
How could I doubt your love for me,
stronger than my fear, who does not cease to woo,
your voice, the ancient murmur of the blood?

Lee Rossi

The Night Man

His Old Spice floats like a skiff
on the sickly sweet of spilt beer.
From 4 until after midnight,
the fat-bellied decanters wear him like a smear
as he dispenses drinks, patrols the duckboards,
nails groaning like prisoners in stockade,
wipes up spills and the tiny reflecting pools
left by bottle and glass. A dandy
in his fresh white shirt and sharply creased slacks,
he serves a brotherhood of bachelors:
the tax guy whose pale plush hands cost him
all his girlfriends, the building inspector
whose neck swells like an inflatable hemorrhoid cushion.
For one, dinner is a jar of fluorescent cherries,
for another, it's olives with their gallstones removed.

Pundit of the potable, savant of the sipped,
he knows all the recipes for disaster.
With gin and soda, lemon juice and sugar,
he'll tell the tale of Tom,
miscreant and heir to the Collins fortune,
who in one night visited all the pubs in London,
only to greet the new day surrounded by
the graves of his forebears. Kahlua,
vodka and cream will set you on a wild charge
through forests of naked aspen
into the waiting guns of the Red Army.

From time to time he taps the metal plate above his right eye—
sound but no feeling—as if to remind himself of something.
You can take the whisky and vermouth tour
of the Big Apple or lose your head to the Virgin
Queen's older sister. Or with vodka and orange juice
open the lid of your father's coffin.
He listens to all the stories like someone in a wheelchair
watching swimmers being swept out to sea by an undertow.

So don't ask him to join you while he's on duty.
He's a pro. With a bat underneath the bar
for rummies who want a fight. A gun for stickup men.
And back in his room, a bottle of 90-proof.
Never mix, never worry, the one incorruptible truth.
His own executioner, one shot at a time.

Lee Rossi

Job

1933. Prohibition out, Depression in,
the breweries back in business. His first job
out of college: *Climb down this ladder, kid,*
—the foreman pointing to a hatch
in a fermenting vat, a leviathan,
copper-lined, steel-sheathed tank—
and take this pneumatic drill with you,
and grind down all that corrosion
till the metal shines. Sweating, breathing
copper dust, near deaf with the metal echo,
he lasted three days. No matter;
you do what you can. You work
for a living. He sold sheetrock
to lumberyards; he moved: Chicago,
Green Bay, Johnstown, Reading, Baltimore,
New York, with each move more mouths,
more diapers. Retired, he resurrected
his hobby: sawdust on his gold watch,
he crafted shelves and cabinets, odd jobs
to help pay bills; his Social Security sucked
into college tuition—mine.

One day,
lying in death-bed delirium, sheathed
in his beating, failing body, he rises
to a moment of focus, and demands:
Release me from this work.
He's asking me—the son who managed not
to work full-time till I was thirty-five.
My first thought—how did I become
his boss? When did I apply for this job?
His youngest son, I do what I can:
I shift, I shoulder him closer,
stroke his hand, stroke the forehead,
colder now, the wild hairs on his brow.
I tell him what I think a man like him

is waiting to hear. —The job
is finished, father; there's no more work
today. It's time to go home,
home to mother, who's already there.
I don't tell him where home is. I tell him
the kids will take care of themselves,
that we'll take care of everything.
I tell him it's our shift now.

William Wenthe

Migrant off the Stream

Shoulders down, caps furled tight above the ears,
swarming at the approach:

landscapers,
 mowers,
 floormen,
 roofers,
 painters,
luggers,
 haulers,
 pushers,
 pullers,
 grunters and heavers.

They come from Aguascalientes, San Luis Potosi,
Oaxaca, Chiapas,
Quintana Roo, Tamaulipas,
Tlaxcala, Nuevo Leon.

Working for the family, grown daughters,
 young wives,

la otra vieja,
 papis uncounted,
 abuelos infirm,

cost of school, truck repairs. And new house,
shoes on the feet,
spoon to the mouth,
a breeze without debt,
the looks of neighbors, and pay off the *cantinero*.

Build a chapel, fix a bridge,
be a fancy *futbol* fan,
speak the Inglich,
wassa matta ju.
Latuya carajo, fix your house in the rain,

look for the money after the job,
wrack my brains with questions,
sic the law on me,
tempt me with the greener grass.

Give me the toil, give me the work,
stuff needs to be done, a little effort,
load up on the truck, get on the ladder,
work on your knees, don't smell the glop,
wash all the dishes, spray on the paint,
pick up the branches, lay on the brick,
smooth the cement, pick all the fruit,
mind all the babies, empty the waste,
what are they saying, what are they doing,
standing at the corner, shoulders down,
looking for work, meester, looking for work.

Rene F. Cardenas

The Same Dirt Is On Our Hands

The man
on the machine behind me is Mexican
half my age
from a neighborhood where no white men walk
the back of his neck
is covered with tattoos
and maybe
his father did nothing but beat him
and disappear
or a gang bullet just missed his head
but we are from different worlds
and we
pick up our crescent
and monkey wrenches
look
out a window where a floating cloud is our only taste
of freedom
step
back for each other to pass as we do a dance lifting
and carrying and clamping chucks and vises
onto our machine tables
long
with all our hearts for the next 10 minute break and the lips
of our women
look
with the same helplessness toward the company owner's far office
as we
barely get by on the money he gives us
pull
the same slivers of steel out of our skin and wash
off the same blood

rub
our sore hands with the same soft green shop rags
dream
of horses or k.o. punches
or poems
and know
that after 10 hours on this hard concrete floor we might as well
be brothers.

Fred Voss

Soliloquy

The cat under my desk is dead,
buried in the back yard, but her
presence still lingers at my feet
or under the rocker, or on the top
stair step when I awaken, drugged
with sleep, go to the kitchen,
turn on the coffee. I've hurdled,
fell down steps and tripped
at my desk until she trained me
in one of life's lessons—
watch where you're going.
Once while my wife and I
made love, the cat climbed
on my back for a ride... hard
to stay in the mood, pet clinging
to my shoulders, wife laughing
in my face.

A person can get arrested
or beat up in Tennessee
for naming a cat Soliloquy,
but that was her name, always
walking around the yard making
speeches to whatever listened.
And when she made a kill—shrew,
titmouse, vole, chipmunk, rat—
she whispered the sweetest song
to each before eating them, starting
with the head, careful to extract
the spleen and gallbladder
on the welcome mat by the door.
Late one night we sat up, startled

from a dead sleep, to hear her
little song coming from the quilt
at our feet. She had brought a lizard,
the perfect bed toy, before losing
it beneath our sheets. June bugs,
luna moths, Japanese beetles,
the world was her culinary delight.

When she stopped eating, we knew.
The vet gave us heart meds to rub
in her ears but she hid to keep us at bay.
All hail to the cat who sang like Joni Mitchell,
quoted Lorca and Shakespeare, and was
six pounds of hell on dogs. The softest
foot warmer in catdom... let death
have her now, her old acquaintance.

Bill Brown

For a Dog

It seemed the line between thought and thing
was blurry in your mind, the essence
of meat being more than the morsel itself,
which vaporized under a consuming desire—

Surely such a will
continues to pull in the dark earth,
wild with the ecstasy of your own smell,
drawing dirt and decay to it like a magnet,

the seething microscopic filings
gnawing and honing and polishing your long bones.
Now what you most longed for you have become:
the marrow, the blood, the gut.

Skin, fur, and feathers—oh, all that
beauty you would gladly investigate.
You had an engineer's instinct to expose
the inner workings, as now

you have been exposed, your black pelt
laid to one side, a sensuous shining.
One night, a small black bear padded
into my dream, restless for the door,

and I took its collar off and opened up—
And so I watched you go, released
from your body and chain. You knew
what you needed, as the bear knew,

asking to be let out into the night,
no more collar and leash,
a dark force in a dark world,
running headlong with the wind wherever it might.

Janet MacFadyen

The Sorrow of Dogs

Lonely and afraid, they howl long, plaintive cries,
as if someone had recently died.
It's their own slow dying they feel, so they bark in the yard,
the family just inside watching TV, or gone all day at work
and other unknown places families go for hours on end.
"I'm here! I'm here!" they bark repeatedly,
seeking comfort in their own sound,
until you'd think they'd go hoarse.
Frightened all day by un-dog-like noises:
motorcycles, basketballs hitting the driveway next door,
the buzz of the weed-eater, the mower's roar,
their cries rise from behind the fence,
out into the fields, over the long expanses of the earth,
to make contact, to be reassured
by the familiar sound of other dogs
who share their plight. And their sadness at night
is almost unbearable, when in the dark distance,
they hear coyotes howling at the moon,
a howl different from their own,
unfenced, unchained, filled with animal joy.

Michael P. Aleman

For Kaspar Hauser

They say wild and flying birds landed on your shoulders,
as if you were branch or steeple. Birds always know, Kaspar,
not to approach the busy human. But you were an animal without words.
You stood without blinking at the open face.
This is life, Kaspar, everything that falls between disaster and miracle.
You saw ripples in water as miracles then touched an open flame,
you did not know fire, then your tears—this was disaster.
I trust the heart of a man who spends his early years chained in a cellar.
Why do I want you like birds want the peaceful, the quiet, the solid
and the wordless?
Imagine, sometimes I want the cellar with only one ray of light,
and myself chained and unbothered by people. And you dear,
so alive when you came out,
wanting to know everything. Kaspar Hauser I want to be your wife.
I would have loved most of all your filthiness. Your lack of depth perception.
Your rough hands holding the tiny bird.
I would ask you to show me the world on a plate of still water
but you are already gone. This is the shame of living—
so many of our lovers born and dead before we ourselves are babies—
Kaspar, when I die it will be a beast that dies. This is all of me.

Anna Baker

For Just a Garden

For just a garden, a small garden amongst fragrant fields,
She fills her waking dreams with its sleeping flowers
And yearns for the simple magic that it yields.
She thinks only of its long restful peace,
The place in her heart that it shields.

For but a garden, a bit of bright earth for her present pains,
She longs for those budding petals blooming
Beneath a drizzle of soft and gentle rains,
And can already see their blossoms
Amidst the lavender lanes.

For just a garden, a little garden under warm Midi skies,
She holds the hope of a single shady tree
Cooling the afternoon fire in her eyes.
She would sit beneath that willow
And watch sunflowers rise.

Patrick Kielty

Dinner Before In-gathering

From the window, my wife watches the green
gray slowly, and ash leaves release. Summer's done

the unconscionable and left us early, orphaned
to our storm-stunned bodies and the worst hurricane

weather in a century—furious rains, the whine
of chainsaws, whiplash of power lines,

limb-scored lawns. Fall's a pseudonym for Even-
Steven, Zero-Sum: though the azalea's thrown

one last crimson blossom, the yellowjackets own
the sugar feeder, slumming till sundown

chills them. Still our female hummingbird's stayed on
longer than last year, which is why we stand

here, scanning the garden for the slightest sign
of levitation. Then, suddenly!—and we bend

forward, as Blake over his breath-forsaken
brother's body waited for the doors of heaven

to spring open, follow as the unseen
wings hover her up, for a split-second

suspend her, then instantly render her windborn,
invisible. Not at all like seeing the human

soul rise, clapping rapturous over Albion,
but enough to make us turn to the kitchen

grateful—for these olives, this purple wine,
the brown-grain bread that leavens in the oven.

Steve Myers



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I love the way you sleep,

dark hair floating across the pillow,
seaweed on the waters of your dreams.
You are loose and damp in your sleep,
hands curled like a baby's, alone and
safe in the depths of your world.

A thief, I inhale, your kelpy
forest filling the night, thick
and humid with possibility.
In these few moments I know
your dreams paint my days.

I hesitate to wake you each morning,
but then slowly I reel, so carefully
I pull your tender body, scales
and lovely flesh through
seas thick as pudding.

I want you to have time
in the stretch of your waking
to gather the sparkling treasures
from your fathomless world
that may keep you well when
you come back to mine.

Elizabeth Pessl-Rossi

The Awakening

I live inside of words. Viola B. Sirolis,
Children's librarian, is my friend.
She has signed all my Summer
Reading Club certificates for five
Years. I have surpassed all
My peers. I've moved out
Of Children's tentatively,
Gingerly, into Adults. The room
Is vast with vaulted ceilings. Old
Wood. Stained glass. I cruise
The stacks. Poetry.
I suspect there's more here
Than I've yet found. One name
Looks familiar: I open the book
And words fly up, spill out, swarm about—it is
Dylan Thomas in his piled up vowel and Welsh consonant
Frenzy of melodic fume. He reeks at me and I embrace
These words I do not even know but hear
The ringing, chiming music there. *The night*
a dingle starry and the crash of waves on shingle.
I see the little cottage rutted roads
His leaving, his longing, his surge
Of *force that through the green fuse drove the flower.*
I look up, the book in my lap, stunned. I still
Remember some lines. I still remember
When I signed on.

Mary Fitzpatrick

Rough Draft

This is the box where they live.
Scraps of poems on bar napkins,
back from when I still went to bars.
A check deposit slip with a promising
title penciled in the margin.

On the back of a failed sonnet,
I find the account of a dream
I had in 1989, and read the scrawling
tale of a giant's severed head
that rolled like a bowling ball

on my bedroom floor, sniffing
at puddled underclothes and leering
up with horrible eyes.
And I want to gather the girl
who would dream this into my arms,

touch her thin shoulders and long hair
across the impossible distance.
I want to tell her how well
I sleep now, how happy I am,
but I know that whatever words I choose

she will never believe me.

Jennifer Finstrom

Borderline

It's crazy down there, nobody works but everyone prospers.
They plot revolutions in the cells of the asylums,
do cha-chas down the maze of hallways.
Hallucinations are free in the cantinas; you can dream there
till closing, till you've finished the song
you've been writing in crayon.

I've peeked past the border, seen flowers grow faces, heard
castanets speak in tongues. I saw my muse swirl by
in a florid flamenco skirt.
Don't go there, son, the crossing's too risky, the desert littered
with promises. Barbed wire will shred your illusions
and worse, you'll be caught.

Your ashen complexion will give you away, or your mangled
language. A guard will spot your artful rags
and uncertain stance.
He'll note how your head tilts as you listen to far-off music.
He'll arrest you for closing your eyes
as you try to disappear.

Stay with me, son. I've come back from the border and seen
that the aridness here has its own beauty,
this poverty its own richness.
I'll cook us a humble dinner; we'll strum guitars by the fire
and watch the flames dance like Gypsies
before they die out.

Sherman Pearl

Marilyn's Unmentionable

Marilyn's wiggle was not God-given: she designed it herself, practicing in private, one foot bare and flat to the floor, one tortured into a stiletto heel.

Alone at home, she rehearsed her rolling gait until the slow rotation of the hips, the seamless operation of her gears, became a trademark she held the patent on for years. Even fully clothed, her essence was revealed: her nipples protruded through the thickest knitted sweater, the smoothest velvet dress. Dysrhythmia (pandemic)—distressed pubescent males of all ages. From women, empathy rather than envy for the poor soul:

She can't help it. She must be cold.

Marbles! It was her idea. She selected the size of the globes, gave them to her seamstress to sew into the cups of her most delicate French bras. It suggested a subtle vulnerability, a constant state of arousal for every fan to fantasize about. And who would suspect: after the nose job, the chin bob, the marriages and miscarriages, after the pills and invisible scars, after enduring all manner and shape of personal pain to attain sainthood (however planned and unordained), it wasn't her body that stood her apart: it was her brain.

Susan Berlin

The Elastic's Gone Out of the Rubber Band

Spent the morning crouched on the basement's cold floor, disinterring thirty years or more, stuffed into cartons and cookie tins. Here's a stack of letters my husband must have saved, written by my hand, held together by residue from a slack elastic band.

Under this mumbling fluorescent light, I'm flustered by the evidence: the unrestrained gush spread thick across each onion-skinned page, emotions so lush and eager to be spent they flood the banks, spilling into the margins with frivolous garlands and curlicues. How green and abundant, the trust I invested. I'm stunned,

so far from that state of praise for him have I come. I'm thinking now of Galileo, at the end, under house arrest on orders from the Pope. Left without resources or friends to occupy his mind, he unearthed his early plans, only to find objects of his own invention he could no longer understand.

Susan Berlin

Eunuchs on Their Lunch Hour

Office workers file back into their cubicle tombs
Holding their take-out lunches before them like
Eunuchs carrying lacquered boxes of
Testicles—to be buried with, always that dream to be
Whole one day.

All summer, I feel emasculated without my boots.
I want a life of jumpin' punkins! I want to lie
Incandescent by your side, naked in wedding rings
Sacred, warm & spermy.

I whisper to you: I feel infused at the shoots, all good green growing your way.
On the street below, a little girl hops off the bus toting an impossibly large leaf.
But I've forgotten how you rest, your head jammed closed with ear plugs.
Again, this longing in fullness—snipped at the sack.

Autumn sighs and turns on its side, still
You won't admit you love me.
On three separate occasions my neighbor
Gifts me garden hearty tomatoes—round-ripe, red-willing.
Over the weeks I watch them split and sputter, untouched.
Your reticence is catching.

My effusiveness blubbed numb & now even down
At the gym, someone has taken it upon themselves to scrawl
Equipment Repair List:
The physioballs are under-inflated
Especially the blue one.

Jeannette Allée

For the Sensualist

I met a man who made me think of cloves
And pepper on the eastern coastal air
And windy wheat that, cut, became the loaves,
And ginger in the wind that blew his hair.
Another made me think of bolts of silk;
Another of the oranges of Spain,
The shimmer of a stream of Jersey milk
And mushrooms that would mingle with the rain.
I never thought of socks or moldy bread,
Of sandwiches that lie around neglected,
That jobless wonder loafing in your bed
Who leaves you feeling cheap and disrespected.
So think about the world of useless oaves
And tell me if you smell the scent of cloves.

Alexandra Oliver

Unwritten Letters

From Josefa Carson to Kit

I

I step into the laundered air of morning,
into my courtyard of sky. The pigeons
have multiplied overnight. Their voices
resemble sweet oranges. I glance
toward sunrise, pink melting into fierce
blue and remember the way corn crisps
above flame. My willow fills with sparrows.

I think of only one thing, the dust
raised by hooves on the mesa. I place
corn over red coals, learn to read fire,
turn its yellow pages, interpret the arch
of slender flame. A child's laughter
flutters through birdsong.

I lift the lid on a clay pot, sprinkle
marjoram into broth. *Mis bolsas* line
the shelf with scent—cinnamon, cilantro,
pepper corn, mint. My son brings me
an armload of split cedar. A caterpillar
spins its cocoon in willow bark, and dusk

takes on the ochre of desire. I am waiting
for you, dear husband, to return
with your company of Ute, your tobacco
pouch sweetened with candy, your pockets
teeming with buffalo nickels, to return
with your feet blistered, your hair sullen,
your skin tinged to *rosa* like sunrise over sage.

II

Think of my fingers when you ride into that ocean,
your horse's nostrils flaring at the sound of gulls,
when the wind burns your neck and the ponies
turn restless. Think of my fingers when you watch
buffalo graze on a satin prairie, when sunset
streaks the Sangres with violet-orange tapers,
when you reach for the tobacco pouch, lift
the scope to catch the doe fleeing. Think of my fingers
when you pour coffee into a tin cup, and the warm
liquid passes over your tongue, travels close
to the heart, when you loosen the saddle girth and slip
the bit from the mare's mouth. Think of my fingers
when the mule nuzzles oats from your palm,
when cedar logs catch flame and you roast trout
over coals, when you hang your shirt
in the willow, lay your head on the saddle,
and sleep is a welcome ride through snowdrifts.
Think of my fingers when darkness leavens the sky
and the smell of juniper fills your empty boots.

III

I'll give you a horizon filled with stampede,
a wicker basket of seashells.

I'll give you bare feet and bundled hair
coming undone.

I'll give you the long avalanche of my skirt
caught in wind.

I'll give you the other arm, the other lip,
the other breast.

I'll give you children with names like wheatgrass,
faces like restless clouds. Their feet will know
the sound of gravel beneath boots.

IV

I remember your fingers when I hang sheets in wind, watch their white skirts lift until dusk, when I release them into a willow basket and bring them to the bed. I remember your fingers when I stroke Josefita's hair and tie the laces of Carlito's boots, when the scissors release his neck curls to the floor, and I rub lanolin into their cheeks, when we sing *Dulce Naranja, Lemón Picada*, in a room with double doors, a skeleton key. I remember your fingers when I trace the lines you mapped above our bed, long strokes of charcoal for rivers, when I press onion bulbs into dark soil and lift cedar logs onto flame, when I husk corn and stitch cotton, when I unlace my boots and slip my ankles into heated water. I remember your fingers when I lift the cloth and let the trickle cool my neck, course between my breasts, and flow into the pool at my feet. I remember your fingers like the trails you have etched over half a continent.

V

I step into the cracking of piñons,
step lightly on your memory.

The smell of corn roasting,
scorched husk, awakens the children.

The sound of ravens litters sky.

My window lattice frames a piece
of blue, sky's peripheral voice.

Sun enters the alley,
a perfect slant falls across my cheek.

I glance toward the gorge,
recognize the dust cloud of arrival.

Katie Kingston

The Topography of Motion

Wind chimes in the distance
set brightly falling through my mind:
a memory, or a coin shimmying
to the bottom of a fountain
beneath the weight of my wish

to linger here—before the first
thought of autumn sails down
from the sycamore tree.
Motion always has a story,
and memory is a landscape

that is constantly changing.
In that air between branch
and dust, a leaf can be transformed
into a burning light;
the weathered hand of my mother

waving good-bye;
a map of a thousand meandering
trails, of white churned
rivers that flow from stem to tips.
And this moment is a bird

already flying beyond reach.
Autumn is the season that tears up its past.
Pieces flutter down for weeks,
like wishes, or memories, or the notes
of a chime blowing away.

Margaret J. Hoehn

Watching Them Sleep

First I listen outside the door,
my mother makes a tea kettle sound
since surgery, my father is silent,
the legendary snores mysteriously gone.
Then I crack the door, peer into the dark,
watch the breath lift and lower their bodies,
see my father's good leg twitch under the covers.
I am forty-five next week.
The chance for children as good as over.
One percent the gynecologist said.
The instinct that was supposed to make
me want to change my life, do anything
for a baby, briefly flared and died.
I only wanted something small
to hold, something powdery and soft.
But for the work of care taking,
I have this, bending to tie my father's shoes,
helping him up when he falls.
I'm not carrying anyone into the world
but out of it. Watching my parents sleep
before returning to my own room
in my in-laws' house in the mountains
where we have gathered for Thanksgiving,
I say into the dark, let this last.
Let night pass through our hands
like a silk cord. In the morning,
let us open our umbrellas, walk carefully
in the rain that higher up the mountain turns to snow.
Let us eat and let us complain
about being too full to ever eat again.
Let us walk it off.
Let us praise November's beauty
which is lovelier than June's

for being mixed with sadness.
Let us love the short days
given over to long nights.
Let us love what is frayed,
what will not be fixed,
because life, towards the end,
begins to fold itself away.
My parents don't have grandchildren
to extend beyond them.
Let our span that has no purpose
but to be lived be praised.

J. Berger

What the Women Get

My friend's cat just died, an old tom named Fergus.
And this is after a long year of loss:
a husband gone to divorce, a father
to cancer, a son fled to some college
four days' drive east. Men disappearing
over the horizon's unfathomable
edge. Now out my kitchen window dusk starts
its settling on our small western
city. Cottages puff smoke from their brick
chimneys, blink porch lights on in the indigo
of early evening. It must have looked
the same in 1944 when half
this town—husbands 'come soldiers 'come strangers—
shipped off for war and left a churning froth
of women in their wake, pale palms rising
like bubbles to burst over their heads
in signs of farewell. And the only men
left behind were old, crippled, sick, insane.
Or simply boys, Sunday morning church ties
flapping over their shoulders as they ran,
little hangmen for the noose. Perhaps at first
it was strange, calling the grocer Mary
rather than Steve, who was then at the front,
or lining up for gas at a station
where women worked the pumps, some sort of bizarre
reverse evacuation. And then it
became life again—a new form, but life
nonetheless, complete with all its surfeit
of obligations and recompense—
women in the factories, on baseball
diamonds, behind the desk, beside the lathe.
Rosie drove her rivets and, what's more, learned

to see absence as opportunity.

Which is what each woman realizes
at some point in her life. Just like those wives
or mothers who hadn't yet heard the word
Hiroshima, didn't know what it would
come to mean. But had they known, they might have
used it to name their hunger in the shadow
of what they'd lost, to identify
the peace they somehow found in the rubble
of what their men left behind. They go from us
and we remain: in our houses with their
chimneys, porch lights and victory gardens.
What's left doesn't become ours until we
claim it. Which is what I tell my friend, who
now begins to see it all around her.

Keetje Kuipers

My youngest son goes to war

I stand apart from him as if I were watching
a play sideways.

He has walked into the center of a drama,
and my only part is just catching
the lines of script
as they fall from the writer's pen.
Even camouflage and helmets seem more
like props than reality.

I breathe over him as if he were a newborn
receiving life from me once more.

In the beginning I hovered over his skin
with a potter's anxiety
noticing every variation and blemish.
Now, that outer layer has grown tough
apart from me.

The only breath I have left to give him
is a single word of hope
that he might
fold under his rib in a sacred place
and take it with him.

For the first Spartan time,
I stand beside centuries of mothers
forced to the table of war.
With eyes of steel we watch greedy battles
devour our sons
leaving only bare bones on white platters.
It is the ultimate devastation,
and we are called to witness.

My son's face is calm.

It has been forged from iron plates
and bullet-proof shields and raw commands.
He will wear it with honor like a Greek mask
in this drama.

And I will hold fast to all that is deep within him,
all that is human and valuable.

Catherine Moran

why talk

why talk of beauty what could be more beautiful than these heroic happy dead... they did not stop to think they died instead
—e e cummings: "next to of course god america i"

once upon a park we prammed our babies
in ruffled pinafores embroidered shirts
to feed ducks pigeons white reflected swans
why talk of beauty what could be more beautiful

than these our infants (so they seem
though bearded busty more than six feet tall)
who kill now or must be killed themselves
in afghanistan iraq for love of

i pledge allegiance to... etcetera
cheer them a hundred thousand women men
my only son deployed to battle hate
so strong it soothes itself to sleep with bombs

i watched his childmind measure mud into
a blue tin pail how he learned rocks tumble
flight of milkweed seed bathed a skittering
mongrel that ate t-shirts and polished shoes

your children mine across these a handsome
these our heroic happy young who do
not stop to think but die instead for this
america next to of course god

Suellen Wedmore

Ghost Story

By the time said country gets the bomb
my infant son will read the news.
For now I merely crackle each page
of the paper before him, if only
to shake myself from reality.
How often this boy (descendent of said country)
saves me from terrifying thoughts of the future.
Just yesterday while washing a month's worth of laundry
I became a magician, pulling sheets upon sheets
from a single container, as if to trick him
into believing that things are eternal.
Then when I laid his two-foot tall body
upon a sea of freshly dried clothes,
he showed me how little we matter,
enshrining himself in a white cotton sheet
for his mock-Muslim burial.
I remembered the morning's story
and he began shaking himself free.
Tiny ghost of the symbolic, insistent snicker doodle
intent on making life meaningful,
go forth in the world with your blankness,
cover that which becomes too scary to see,
take back your first word as soon as it's spoken,
and so haunt the world as a prophet of innocence.

Roger Sedarat

Greek Courtyards

I read how Kazantzakis traces water and salt—
his urges to gather any spilled grains,
to shut off the tap
before water needlessly spills,
how he names this his father's
desert father—the Bedouin—
embedded still in his blood,
and I wonder at the way
I cannot bear any walls,
how I rush outdoors
at the first warm breath of day,
as in the open courtyards

where lives were daily made
among scent of acacia, oleander;
my grandmother's mother
rinsing linens in wide tubs,
drawing cool water from the well,
laying down the grapes to dry;
with my grandmother, small Aristeia, beside her,
Aegean breeze ruffling her skirts,
her kerchiefed hair,
as she embroiders a trail of roses
and birds on sun-dried cloth.

Andrea Potos

Hakeem's Farm

Two hours' drive from Doha,
heading cross-desert northwest,
his family farm sprawls hidden
behind brick walls—waterfalls
music to the ears after the silent
shifting of sand. In this desert land,
I often dream of rain, but when I awaken
it's always to the same blue sky, relentless
sun. On his farm, three camels come
to nuzzle me. There are peacocks and
ostriches, Arabian horses, ducks and reems,
deer from Australia, cattle, goats, sheep.
No pigs, of course.

*My father started with nothing, Hakeem
proudly beams. Now he owns six
businesses in town. We sit down to a feast—
fresh fish from the Arabian Gulf, vegetables
and lamb from the farm. I could understand
if they'd known we were coming, but here we
sit unexpectedly. I hear the ducks squabbling
on the pond, feel the nuzzling of the camels
lingering on. Always a strange sensation:
awareness of the making of a memory.*

Just a few friendly words exchanged
at the Al-Koot Fort. *Come see my farm—
you are welcome*, he had smiled, this young
man who had studied five years in Tucson,
then returned to his Bedouin roots. Such
hospitality in the desert: strangers welcomed
as if we were emissaries of God—a gift that in
the West has all but died. Money can't buy
happiness—how many have tried? But at least
in the middle of a desert a farm that thrives
and a feast fit for Allah.

Diana Woodcock

My Father as a Schoolboy

Lions at the nearby Zoo roar me to sleep.
They echo the roars we once heard at Tsavo,
where at dusk elephants came to lick salt
from the pools by our cabin, and dung beetles
crushed wetly under my feet like cobblestones.

In my dream, I am climbing Table Mountain.
Under blinding sun, I reach the plateau.
Far below, a schoolboy on a class outing,
you carve your name in rock and dream
of diving into the cool bay. Tonight

you will copy your oldest brother's essay
in Afrikaans: *My Day on The Mountain*.
You will be the fifth brother to hand it in.
It will not be your children's language.
You are the last brother on the mountain.

I want to call down to you, restless boy
who will seek your fortune in a rainy land,
tell you to seize the Cape of Good Hope,
an ocean glimpsed through a cloth of cloud
that spills into air like a breaking wave.

Andrew Sofer

The Kiss

Early Monday morning the night train from Hamburg pulls into the Gare du Nord & I step down from the train & make my way through the crowded bustling station & emerge through the front doors & am confronted with the spectacle of intense rush hour traffic now almost at a standstill making the Place de Roubaix seem like a giant sea of sheet metal or a vast cubist-futurist collage accompanied by honking horns & idling motors & clouds of exhaust & the staccato rattle of jackhammers & the piercing blasts of the traffic policemen's whistles as they struggle to maintain a semblance of movement through the obstacle course of metal barricades set up by the street department who have torn up huge sections of the street for some expansive construction project while people are loading & unloading luggage from cars & taxis & pedestrians are streaming in & out of the station working their way through the maze-like ever-shifting gridlock & delivery drivers & motorcycle couriers are vainly struggling to inch ahead as the collective tension increases exponentially becoming a palpable pulsing presence & suddenly I catch sight of a young couple standing beacon-like in the middle of the stagnating chaotic scenario locked in an embrace apparently totally oblivious to their surroundings deeply immersed as they are in the obvious sensual pleasures of a prolonged & passionate kiss putting a particularly Parisian-romantic spin on the otherwise harrowing reality of another Monday morning in the grinding-to-a-halt City of Light.

Mark Terrill

Ayodhya

*After the Babri Masjid Massacre
December 1992*

Knowing you so well, Husham,
you must have been sitting at an old wooden desk,
hiding behind a wall of books, contemplating
the unifying potential of Rumi's poems
when the rioting suddenly broke, when the mobs flooded
the streets, heading straight towards the Babri—
that cursed house of God long evacuated
and left to crumble under the weight of the centuries.
That afternoon, children exiled into the bowels
of misunderstood history, suffering
from the inheritance of their parents' grievances,
hypnotized by stories that spoke of imaginary pasts,
of holy birthplaces and forgotten birthrights,
ripped through Ayodhya, roaring like a stampede
of elephants, thirsty for the taste of a brother's blood.
Convinced only a divine decree could inspire
so many to suddenly become so god-conscious,
even the most simple-minded onlookers
must have felt compelled to join in, to help dismantle
one version of history, brick by brick, limb by limb.
When darkness finally fell on our city, falling like a black veil,
as if trying to keep the stars from bearing witness
to this unholy event, from this suicidal December day,
the demolished edifice was mere backdrop.
The 3,000 corpses were what reminded us
that Ayodhya would belong to no one anymore.

Yet this city was still ours—
we grew up here, misfits who spent our days in the streets,
our nights sneaking off to the movie houses
to see our boy-dreams projected onto movie screens
as wide as the night. This is our Ayodhya.
Here we attended the same school our fathers did,

the one behind the dilapidated church, peopled by the poor
Hindu converts who were fooled into believing
that Jesus was born blue—that the name
Krishna was rooted in the words *Christ* and *Christian*.
That was our Ayodhya. Do you remember
how we longed for school to end each afternoon,
suffering through the schoolmasters' thrashes,
generously intended to subdue our perpetual impatience?
We couldn't wait to go hide behind Black Joseph's
sweetmeat stand, positioned perfectly to steal quick glances
at the girls blossoming in our neighborhood.
Remember how boyishly we battled over Nargis,
the girl we renamed after the film goddess?
She taught us the meaning of lust
by occasionally winking at us with her dark eyes,
making us hard between the legs, an obvious embarrassment.
Do you remember how Black Joseph,
whenever he saw us eyeing Nargis, our crotches
pressed up against his stand, would sing songs stolen
from films—songs our fathers sang to us long
before we understood the meaning of heartache and loss
and memory? And how, lost in musical reveries,
Black Joseph, hands on hips, would whirl
like a drunk dervish, mocking us with his fluttering eyelashes?
How whenever he laughed he would be overcome
by a bout of coughing so violent he had to hold onto his
sarong-like dhoti to keep it from falling to his feet?

Husham, do you remember the sweet scent
of the mango trees on my uncle's farm in Amritsar,
their thick leaves dangling elegantly like earrings
from the ears of Queen Noor Jahan? Do you know
why we never went back there? Outside,
under their generous shade—in a darkness so viscous
it held us like a black net—we remained unaware
of the turbulence raging in my uncle's kitchen.
We never heard him cursing wildly, throwing guilt and history
in my father's face, who, I learned many years later,
had dared to bring a Muslim into a Brahmin home,

who threatened our family name with an unwashable stain.
My father—who always called your father *Bhaiya*
and taught me to call you by the same brotherly name—
never spoke back, allowed his brother-in-law
to beg Lord Krishna's blue face to curse my family
with sickness and a shameful legacy of barren daughters-in-law.
Protected from the sweltering summer sky
by the mango trees, we enjoyed our youthful ignorance,
counted the ants crawling up our legs,
and eventually admitted drowsiness, the heat heavy
on our eyelids, pushing them down, slowly until shut.
I leaned back in my charpoy, rested my head in my hands.
Between the dull thudding of ripe red mangoes
falling to the ground, I enjoyed the calming silence
of your sleep, and dreamed away the restlessness
I sometimes saw dancing in my mother's eyes.

My friend, it is a shame our mothers didn't talk more.
They both suffered from the same epidemic of silence,
a clinging to a nameless injury, one no words would heal,
one no amount of forgetting could ever undo.
I remember one Friday afternoon, when you disappeared
with your father into a masjid near the vacant Babri,
my mother asked that I come home to help her
chop greens for dinner. We were expecting company,
old family friends, people too important to disappoint,
and I was expected to be godlike, to sit silently in the corner
of the room, watchful, smiling, dead to the living.
After a morning of street cricket and wrestling
in the dusty school gardens, my face was dark with dirt,
and mud stained my clothes—I looked like a beggar,
absolutely shameful. My mother joked that I was too filthy
to be her son. As she washed my face, her hands
kneading at my skin, she let a long, deep sigh betray her smile.
When I asked her why her eyes looked so
all-of-a-sudden dim, her face became the sun,
no longer sad. She said she just preferred that I spend
more time indoors, out of reach of the sun's summer fury,
which—if I wasn't careful—would make me
dark-skinned forever, like an untouchable.

When your wife Jamila begged you to forget
Ayodhya, to find a teaching post in Lahore,
where Urdu's best writers spent their evenings
at the Pak Tea House—at least for your unborn children
if not for her—you pressed your body hard against hers
to still the violence of her breathing. You knew she had never felt
at home in India, had begged you since your wedding night
to do as her parents had done and migrate away
to Pakistan. But you refused to flee. You would not
tolerate her mistrust of Hindus, would not fall victim to a history
flooded with misinterpretations. In your eyes,
the mistake of Partition had disfigured the Subcontinent,
had left this land wounded, aching, fractured, forever searching
for wholeness. Now she curses your relentless optimism
and wishes to forget your ghost, which she sees forever
in your son's eyes. Bilal must be in school now, a small prince
of a boy who will soon inherit the poison of a mother's suffering.

Husham, when you were killed outside the Babri,
in the aftermath of the storm that bathed our city with blood,
each drop in the name of one god or another,
I fell against the wall, torn apart, mumbles of some broken language
spilling from my fumbling lips. With an aggression
that gave me nightmares for weeks, I seized the statues
my parents had given me, so placid and silent
on bookshelves and tabletops, no longer worthy
of my trust, and flung them to the floor.
Decapitated heads, amputated arms, severed legs flew
in all directions, in splashes of marble, stone, and porcelain.
My body quivered with the disease, I considered
prying out my eyes from my skull with my fingers,
but only pushed hard enough to see explosive red flares colliding
against the backs of my eyelids. Then I disappeared
to find you—but *all I saw were faces, glowing, alive with fury.*
Faces broken and blinking, without sequence, like film clips
sewn together haphazardly—faces lost in time, in slow-motion, overlapping,
becoming the same face. Faces white with fear, flowering
with a flourish of curses, some lips spewing spit, mixed with blood, dust.
Others stitched shut, with voices clogged in windpipes, the muffled sounds

of gagging and suffocation reverberating through the alleys. I saw faces with eyes gouged out, limp optic nerves hanging flaccidly from empty eye sockets. Faces singed, seared onto corpses, strewn through the streets, left for the dogs to manage. Faces full of tears, shame, happiness, disbelief. For a moment I saw your face, one of the many—a transient flame, flickering, fading fast, engulfed by even larger flames, consumed by chaos, disappearing completely, drowned in a sea of other faces—forever lost, forever lost.

My dead brother, Ayodhya suffers without you, continues to battle its own wounds, and I no longer know what to believe in. The difficulty of Ghalib's poems brought us together at school, while Amitabh Bhachan united us in the evenings, in film. He was the hero of our lives, defying the test of time with movie after movie, handsome as ever, the only true actor-singer Bollywood has ever known. His *Namak Halal* was our favorite, with the crazy action sequences in which he would defeat the weakling villains, each with a single punch. We wanted to be him—or just like him since we preferred to kiss the heroine at the end. But such were the storyline formulas of Indian cinema—nothing could ever be changed, and we knew to let our dreams fill in the rest, to complete the vacancies that perforated our lives. We were just two boys too close to notice the differences that would fall between us like worlds, two friends growing up, learning to absorb the tremors of inheritance, the rhythmic pounding of clashing histories, remaining unshaken, never questioning the motherly silences that congealed in our memories, that became stones and sank into the sands of our forgetting. Perhaps nothing has brought us so much misery through the centuries as these religions, these solemn ways of life and death and indifference. And our abbreviated brotherhood was blessed to have such perceptive fathers who shielded us from the foolishness that accompanied blind faith, who taught us that new partitions would not help us unravel our convoluted pasts.

Yes, Bhaiya, every year as a stranger I come to Ayodhya under quiet circumstances—just the wind and me—to keep myself from forgetting you. Yet I pray for forgetfulness here, for some way to erase the events of that bloody December, which replay themselves in my nightmares, frame by frame. I have learned from the violence that still stains our soil, that no one ever forgets the things that must be forgotten. Forgetting, a kind of forgiveness, eludes our people, keeps them helplessly bound to pain, so easily ignited into bursts of hateful action.

Visiting you helps purge my despair, instills in me a new kind of hope, one that propels me back into my incomplete life in a faraway city. I have left Ayodhya many times, and in leaving I continue to live. This is a city still devoid of faith, a city wounded and bleeding, a city once ours to trust, once ours to pass on. I press my ears against your tombstone, flat on the ground, closer to you. I feel its cold hardness and listen for our fathers' songs to rise like phantoms from the earth. From this fallen position I remember your voice, remember how you impersonated Mohammad Rafi with effortless precision, while I stretched to be Lata, as we sang together the old songs. On the train home, whenever my body begins convulsing in tremors of sadness, these songs console my lostfulness and save me from weeping loudly in the company of strangers.

Faisal Mohyuddin

For Sothy, Angkor Guide:
Siem Reap, Cambodia

September 2005

For your dark eyes
in which I did not read "tourist."

For your villagers, bones and skulls
found in killing fields
displayed in a roadside stupa.

For the babies tossed in air
to land on a carpet of nails.
Rouge means red, you said.

For Pancourt, your grandmother,
burned alive naked,
buried in a common grave.

For your mother, who found
your grandmother's red shirt.

For you, a child of eight,
tied to a tamarind tree, then
covered with red ants.

For your mother who told you
your body turned red with welts,
your head swelled.

For Vishnu, the protective god
you invoked to inspire me.

For your photo, given to me
as we parted. Your last words:
How good to be alive, yes?

Wanda S. Praisner

Tin Cup

From the gray, crusted
cup with handle like a single
listening ear,
we drink deep water.

We taste metal
and moss, lichens
on stones, granite,
sifted sand, water
filtered through
plates of slate, brewed
under sodden leaves.

We drink our body,
from the body of earth,
of water found by the dowser
who cut a willow wand
and walked it through
woods until it bent
and twitched his hands.
Here, he said.

It was only taking faith,
we had found water. High
on a hill, we drilled for water
days, a week, then two
until from clay shot a gusher,
clean and bright as all we
ever hoped. We put in a pump
whose iron handle, heavy
as an arm, we lifted
and lowered to fill
fill and overflow
the tin cup.

Ruth Moose

Whirling Dervishes

Counterclockwise
right to left, left
toward one's own heart,
their arms extend
left palm to earth,
right to heaven.

Sufi mystics
stir the senses
arouse the air
sweating garlic,
olive oil,
sweet sage and thyme
to punctuate
the night, the place,
the very air.

Black cloaks swirl fast
and faster still,
full skirts skimming,
cone hats tilting
and still they whirl
tilt this way, that,
in ecstasy.
Such devotion
deliberate
as the clapping
north south east west
"Welcome, spirits
good and evil."

Tossing back capes
they stomp as one
then still themselves
while earth spins on
despite the dance
despite the night
the earth spins on
like dervishes:
live to suffer
whirl, whirl to heal.

Amy Dengler

Listening to the Wind Among the Pines

You stand in the pines
and a sifting sweeps through them
softly or heavily bending
with vagaries of wind,

and the sifting sweeps
through your mind like a broom
cleaning out the years'
accumulations down to your name,

your surety of self. You
become an empty vessel again.
The sound of the pines
is what you are

and you stand and raise your arms
like an ancient sage, though
nothing is blowing
through your brains but the wind.

You are an idiot savant
of the wood; bird calls interrupt
the flow like thoughts,
strange as the sounds

of dead languages, lovely
as Greek, concise like
Japanese, but you do not
know their meaning.

You are an idiot in the warp
of the world, a child
on the first day of school:
everything is yet to be known.

Ron De Maris

Love Song for the Geminid Meteors

The night of the meteor shower
I went outside and looked up
at the only patch of sky the moon
had not blanked out
with all her proud light.

Soon I saw one,
a quick flaw in the celluloid,
a scratch of fire that smoked.

I waited for a sizzle or a boom
but the only sound
was the faraway mutter of traffic.

I went inside, understanding
that the one I saw was mine
somehow, enough for me,
and that's the secret
I didn't know ten years ago
when I was afraid to piss
because I might miss something,
when I didn't know how to love one
instead of letting hundreds
fall away.

Christopher Buehlman

Miles in the Sky

*The authentic account of the under-reported
resurrection of Miles Dewey Davis
in the evening Mojave desert sky
September 28, 1991
the day he died*

Mojave sky already orange
erupts deep into red
as the sun falls
downbeat
out of sight.

The only electric power pole
within one light year
of Jackass Rock
stands forty nine feet west.
Crazy, like you and me.

Lean here against Jackass Rock, and watch
the damn universe pivot....

Molten Mojave sky pours out
a twenty-four carat gold ingot, the size of a man.
Man floats down, out of the sunset
in one stride—
right alongside the utility pole.
Man carves himself a pure black silhouette
from the orange sunset he poured himself out of.
Wears a big black silhouette Stetson hat
and carries an instrument case.
He leans against the pole, natural
like he planted it from seed.

Miles opens the instrument case, spins out a huge gold nugget.
It floats in the love of his hand. He kisses it—
draws his hand away like lightning!—
spinning the nugget into a b-flat trumpet
with *Miles* scribed across the bell.

Miles Davis blows
one
long
bending
sensuous note....

Its golden bloom transcends every nuance of orange
in the dark fiery September sky
he has given his life
to be.

His lips open the note
into three universes of Zen,
harpoon it suddenly into the deep merlots of red
and explode it all the way back into yellow
like a canary becoming the sky.

Miles is the sky
the whole sky

all hues
all blues... and

yellow

like the canary

Raymond Greeott

Ballet Teacher's Brief Bio

I teach flying
 have 2500 children
find eternity's height and breadth
 in small space
see my way by Northern Lights
 often arrive home
with foreign dust on my shoes
 thrive on leaves and seeds
am a bulldozer made of velvet
 listen for cello and church bells
meadowlark and mourning dove
 carry odd credentials
enter through the escape hatch
 define cobalt
by evergreen shadows cast on snow
 understand the mockingbird
declare the Russian Impressionists
 my godparents
and those with paw or wing, fur or fin
 my siblings
I find much peace with tulips
 and Archangels

Joan Kunsch

Spanish Dancer

The way a white match in the hand will flare
Before it comes in flame, its hot tongues lashing
And flickering their fire everywhere,
Her dance, inside the crowd that rings her there,
Ignites. Bright, hot, and quick, it flickers, flashing.

So at a stroke, pure fire fills the air.

With just a glance, she touches off her hair.
And all at once, with daring art, she turns
Her dress entirely to fire. It burns,
And from it comes—each one a writhing snake—
Two naked, stretching arms, clapping awake.

And then, as though the fire could burn no more,
She takes it up to fling it to the floor—
A gesture masterful, imperious—
And looks down: there it smolders, furious;
Still flaring up; unwilling to give in.
But sure of victory, she smiles a sweet
Smile, looks up with a victor's welcome grin,
And stamps it out with powerful small feet.

Rainer Maria Rilke
translated by Len Krisak