

POETRY

Her studio, 1890

What's near at hand the leaded glass window,
plain wavery segments unbeveled but
angle-cut at jointure.

Hot lead hardening to
rounds that hold at-times-tilted panes.
Through glass like that you aren't required
to see the world as it really is.

Step into the rooms behind
leaded-glass windows, her artist smock and
smeared colors or dressing-gown loose over
unstayed waist, chamberpot beneath the bed,
if only we could lift off the roof, if only
we could drape trees over
walls, sounds of sparrows and
thrushes, heated brush
of rabbit fur against skin.
I like to think she had it
all in her inner sight as she
gazed at, not through, the texture
of hand-blown leaded glass.

to a painting by
Minerva Chapman (1858-1947)
Still Life: A Shelf in the Studio

Grace Marie Grafton

Emily Dickinson on a Guggenheim

Dearest Lavinia: Venice is unexpected.
All day I walk on water, like Peter.
I step from a boat into a pearl
from which some idle god has carved a church.
He has a string of such beads,
like soap bubbles rising from a dishpan.
You would have cats enough, sister
if you were here! They clutter the doorways
and are over-supplied with kittens.
At night I stand in an archway
and look at St. Mark's – don't think
I sit in a bright-lighted restaurant, pretending
I'm one of the gentry, O no!
I'm a strange wayside gypsy still,
and silent as marble column,
I almost walk invisible.
But as for poems –
I think poems live like pigeons,
thriving on a lean diet. Feed them
too much, and they no longer fly,
just bow and chuckle to each other.
My mind is over-fed here. Adam
and Eve and the 12 Apostles
shine here in white and gold,
and yet I think
I have more to say to a hummingbird,
and more love for the river-pink.

Gail White

Anne Boleyn's Neck

as women were a
dangerous reminder of an

although

and a dismissed mistress is
always last to know that

while the wind whet blades
of grass on stone then

instead two heads bent low

how napes bared through

though conspiring in
pianissimo either

to be beheaded a stutter of

some scofflaw behind
a scaffold with

or hooded not

nor only sanguine in
the bloody sense both

laughed *O, I have but
a little neck so*

for there is not
much to sever with

Jeanette Karhi

Agnes Ayres's Fall *in the silent film, "The Sheik"*

she falls from the horse
down the dune

rolling still

falls down the horse
down dune

still down
sand saddling her back
up the dune

she falls down

still horse still
waiting

its back still
the dune

still she falls
down the saddle
rides the dune down

sanddune falls
down itself

shadow falls under
saddle falls on top

saddled dune
she falls from

down the still saddle

she rolling back up

still mounted
falls from the still
horse on the dune

Jeannette Karhi

Penelope After Troy

Penelope learns to carry groceries
on her own - bags balanced on full hips
rocking. She has sent her maids to flirt
with the men on the doorstep, and now
is taking stock of the house.

At the end of an hour she has gathered a pile
of her husband's things, arranged
them in the middle of the kitchen floor
like firewood - books and records and a ten year
layer of dust.

She will place it all into bags the colour
of tar, drag each behind her to the curb.
This will make her a widow.

At night, when she sings her son
to sleep, she is weaving the song
from her mouth.
The low notes catch like knots
where someone else used to sing,
but she knows not to tug -
Penelope has an awareness of thread.

She raises the pitch, her hand
and cuts the cord deftly.
The sound of severing
like a breath let out.

Aubrey Ryan

Guy on the Left

I.
We were receptionists. Our name
was Michelle. —Hello and thank *you*
for calling. How can I help you?||

Our job: feign interest.
Six women, six rooms.
The sex was secondary.

We had our reasons.
Teresa had two boys
and a husband who loved

to hit her. Samantha had
extraordinary experience. Heidi
kept silent. Kelly wanted

to buy her kids the best
Christmas ever. Athena
owned us. I wanted

money, lots of money,
cash to carry, to never
again think, *Can I afford this?*

I didn't have to. It was easy.
I once bartered \$100 to remove
my blouse. \$150 for a brief

masturbation show. Athena
taught us: *If they want to touch*
you, say you want to show

them how you like it. Pretend
you're in ecstasy, can't stop,
and fake an explosive one.

We sat vigilant in the break room,
sprung at the doorbell's ring—first come,
first serve. The first to rise
opened the door, led him

Poetry

to a room. Came back to say,
Guy on the left or

Guy on the right and we'd march
single file down the hall, open
the door, introduce ourselves,

extend our hands, the art of the deal,
show breast or hip-flesh,
wiggle on the way out.

II.
This is not a poem.
Whores behind doors
are not a poem.

III.
He wanted a blowjob.
She wanted a tip.

He pulled out his cock.
Shocked by how
shriveled and thin it was,

like half a Popsicle stick
or a crooked finger, she
put it in her mouth.

He exploded. She spit
into an empty candle
holder. He gave her

a pile of twenties. She
fingered the edges of the bills,
flicked her tongue against

the pad of her forefinger,
calculated the ratio:
2 minutes times \$80

equals nearly one dollar
per second. Later
that night, at home, she

Poetry

read Nabokov, broke
the spine and fingered
the pages' edges, folded

a triangle to mark her place.
She slid the money
into the book jacket,

slept with visions
of tongues, the urgent taste
of cash on her fingers.

IV.

We dreamt of cocks
and dollars, grimy fingernails
and sweat soaked shirts,

our cunts swelling with bills,
coins pouring from our mouths.
We dreamt of banks, of our bankable

bodies, our breasts spilling over
the water's edge, into
river banks, lakes, oceans thick

with the taste of salt, of rubbing
froth down our bellies, through
the unchecked territory of our thighs.

V.

We know how far to push
the proverbial envelope,
right into your church

collection basket, your
family vacation fund,
your Jackie O. pearls.

VI.

Sometimes, tears come into their eyes
when we touched them. Our fingers
pressing into their shoulders,

Poetry

our nails trailing down their backs.
Sometimes, we knew how desperate
they were for touch. They would ask,

*Is there a release? We would smile
and rest our hands on their hips.
How would you like to take care of that?*

We'd explore their fragile bodies,
gently help them come,
whisper through our finger tips:

*I will take, I will
take you, I will
take care of you.*

VII.
We frighten you
as well we should—

We know how to straddle
your white picket fence.

VIII.
We offered four-hands.
When the new girl, (who got
fired because she undercharged

for blowjobs), didn't know what
that was, Heidi calmly explained:
We both go in, we start

massaging him, she mimicked
the motion in the air. *We barter till
we take every dollar he's got.*

IX.
What is the ratio of the dollar
to self-respect? The going rate
of choice? Does the DOW

drop five points for every
sucked cock? What is the supply

and demand of desire?

X.

Oh baby oh baby oh yes yes yes that's good be a good boy uh-huh
You know what to do, let me have that sweet cum
Don't hold back on me now baby baby darlin'
Sweet thing, let me take care of you

XI.

Spent, tongues grainy with
the remnants of cigarettes,
lipstick peeling from dry lips,

we file into the parking lot:
See you tomorrow;
call if you'll be late...

Hours later, sequestered in our
bathrooms, we stare at our reflections:
we see objects of desire, from cunt

to toe, hip to head, we know
the economy of silence and smiles.

XII.

I refuse

the prim experts with lips pursed
into fine lines, who claim
our choices are warning signs

that we are women *abused*,
women *neglected*,
women *working out our demons*.

We are the clutches of desire.
We are cunning and slick.
We mark our own borders, cry

Land ho! Ho! The uncharted territory
of our bodies defies infiltration,
exploration, the armies

Poetry

of 'sanctified' discovery.
Sailing into our own shores,
we drive in our stakes of claim

and colonize the harsh country
of our bodies' profit.

Sarah E. Azizi

Digesting Dostoevsky

The paperback in front of her has a torn cover,
 bent pages, passages highlighted from past students
who wanted to decipher the words,
 pick out important phrases, figure out
 what the author was really trying to say.

But she feels that she can sum up the work in one sentence:
 he kills a woman & spends 20 chapters
feeling guilty. She runs her fingers
 across the front hem of her jeans, her stomach
 thin & flat, still; she knows a lot about guilt,

having spent most of her sixteen years going to weekly confessions:
 sneaking cookies, fighting with her brother, stealing red lipstick
from the local drugstore, cheating on her math homework
 spending *too much* time with the new boy in her class –
 she hasn't seen a priest in months

and doesn't understand her teacher's admiration
 for a man who could translate guilt only in pages
and not months, words and not actions; *Dostoevsky*, she can barely
 pronounce the name, her tongue slipping
 from the roof of her mouth,

her teeth sinking into her own lips,
 the taste of blood & guilt and *him*
makes her stomach lurch; she should know why
 he was so hard to swallow, after all, he had left
 such a bitter taste in her mouth.

Karen J. Weyant

Secular Jew Visits the Holy Spirit Mission

I arrive at 8:29 for 8:30 mass
to hear Tim sing in the choir,
Gregorian chanting. He said
wear a hat or veil because that's
the custom, but he didn't mention
wear a dress. I'm embarrassed
in my pants suit and my straw
shade hat. I resist the temptation to turn
and ask the man behind me
if my hat's obstructing his view.
It feels wide and silly as a sombrero,
and I'm just sure no one can see around it,
but turns out there's not much to see,
just the priest and the altar boys
ringing bells, swinging brass
containers on chains, draping cloths
over chalices and shoulders.

I don't have a felt hat,
like a few of the women
nor a lace veil, like most
of them. Hadn't even considered my
stocking cap or baseball hat
or ski helmet, until
I noticed a wrinkled lady
with spectacles, up toward the front,
who doesn't stand
when we stand or kneel when
we kneel, which is quite often, thankfully,
because the priest reads
Latin and the choir sings Latin,
and I recognize only *Amen, Hallelujah,*
In Excelsis Deo, words which may or
may not be Latin, so I get bored
despite the lovely chanting.
The older lady up front wears
a bicycle helmet,
my favorite thing about the whole morning
because if helmets are okay,
no one is going to chastise me
about the pants.
And they don't.

Krista Benjamin

someone whose shoes I didn't recognize

Sarah's Inn, a refuge for beaten women,
I discovered when I read a notice
scotch-taped to the mirror in the women's
fourth floor bathroom, at Loyola Lewis Towers,
downtown Chicago across from the Water
Tower, a pink paper, exposing a confessional
subject in this private, almost cloistered space,
that says, —Call us if you or someone you
know is involved in domestic violence, ll
three tear-off tabs already missing. These
speckled marble corridor floors transport people
from all over the world and I've heard that some
Asians are known for their wife-beating even today
and I did hear my student in the stall next to me
once gulping sobs and moaning something over
and over again like a chant in a language I
only just recognized as Korean although I
could tell by her shoes who it was anyway, but
there haven't been many Koreans around so
maybe someone else tore off those little scraps
of paper, someone whose shoes I wouldn't recognize.

Jan Ball

The “Accidental” Woman

They say when a person dies a sudden, brutal death,
the shock can cause a soul to fly
so fast from the body,
the two separate, and the spirit may wander
in a state of confusion long after parts
have been lowered down the earth's dark throat.
Say, a woman is driving with her lover,
so flushed with passion she feels herself immortal—
outside physical laws, the logic of seatbelts—
doesn't see beyond the hard, smooth line
of her lover's beautiful chin,
how the silken wet inside
still glows from their pleasure hours ago.
Doesn't notice the swerve of truck lights
crossing yellow in front of them.
Sees for one futile second her love's horror
before death's two-ton sickle hurls her
to a messy oblivion.
Sometimes I feel like this accidental woman,
haunted by the ghost of old yearnings
that keep coming around, tapping the windows,
blood and muscles that race
at the memory of certain touch—love's wakened flurry,
the frenzy of moths sprung from a long darkness.
And I might float like this for days—
disembodied at the cleaners, the market—drifting
through produce where the soft, orange heads
of cantaloupes have more presence of mind,
until something calls me back:
my daughter's voice snagging reverie's fine sleeve,
my husband's thick, faithful hands,
the way they gather each piece of me
into desire's orbit, his axis of skin—
how we shower the bed
with our thousand points of scattered light.

Michelle Bitting

Barren

I scrape shut, build a wall
of ruin to tumble into.

The sides curve, pink skin
attached to the joints, stuck

out of place.

Nothing uproots from my tangles.
I tap for hollows, wait

for something solid.
Beauty is the grey discharge

of a pearl, the solid refuse of the sea.
This is where love cannot lie—

My shoreline slaps against
the sky, that long black seam.

The stars spin loose, little eggs
fill the deep sockets

of empty space.

I am alone here,
glued to the girders of my bones.

Amanda Auchter

**Pangs
for Mom**

In a room chilled by my mother's nudity,
she sits and sucks in the peaches and seagreens
of a floral wall.

The only sterility is in the white basin sink,
the gleaming silver teeth of tools
which gnaw their way towards my first home.

The doctor is in the hallway
peering over the black ghost of x-ray,
the x'd-out spot of a non-fetus lying tucked
into my mother's body folded like a
baby's fist.

The thin gauze of cloth, this papertowel robe,
covers *less* than my mother's own thick skin.

This angry glowering shadow
that hangs inside my mother
like a lunar cycle without gravity
drenches itself into her body
so much more thinly than my sister or I
before it.

My mother sits on a peach chair in a napkin
eating her own mind about black bruises of the body
which eat the very womanhood out of her.

There are *no* answers—there are *few* hints;
this is not a guessing game we wish to play
while her insides milk poison.

this is *her* waiting;

This is *me* wondering;

This is us as women;

This is women *at risk of being*.

Tina Puckett

Fracture

Because falling from a kitchen
chair Nana fractured
her shoulder, I sleep with one ear
open and all night
intercept her stumbling to the bathroom
Something's wrong I don't know
what: this woman who can't
tell you where her teeth
went but perfectly
locates shame, looking away
each time I pull down
her panties. That chair topples
from her mind, forgotten. Over and over
at the toilet we start
over, I say *kitchen floor*
and *broken shoulder*, try to stop
her mortified grab
at her clothes but I'm too late, look –
she remembers –soundless,
mouth frozen
in a cosmic —Oll of pain.

*

Too beautiful to be shut
up in a box, bright
as water, this sugarbowl
of lead crystal
with its spay of hyacinth leaves
knife-sharp after sixty
years in darkness...a wedding
present. *I'm hot*,
the last thing she said.

Lay it down now, lightly.
Go on. Pack.

Ellen Wehle

Unfastening

—I never had a mother...ll — Emily Dickinson

Hello again, my old boulder, my deep-rooted stump,
my brick wall. Closed, barred, double-secreted.
I never found a good lever or key, and neither
has come to hand just because you've died.
I've hurt us both, tugging at you, chipping away,
eyes abraded with the dust, shoulders creaking
and snapping, in dreams and awake. Dickinson wrote,
—but when she became our child, then the affection came.ll
For decades, I told myself, —Don't count on it.ll
But I did hope, I did. Now you are free, and that hurts, too.

It took my neighbor winter and spring to clear his acre
of the manzanita that loves and abets the summer wildfires.
After the cutting and hauling, the front-end loader came
for a day, and this morning there was nothing but churned red dirt,
a few tracks crossing it. I wanted to walk over it,
and stand for a while in the middle—in all that open air.

Sally Allen McNall

Bali, Off-Season

Ubud. Civilized. All the artisans
along the narrow roads.
Layer of rice fields, tiers of green.
The petals of pink flowers on the doorsill
of our cottage and on our pillows.

A corner room, entered from
a wooden walk crossing water,
tiny lizards on the ceiling,
monkeys on the roof.

At the Café Luna, we eat roasted chicken
and drink the local beer while watching
—A Few Good Men— on a small TV
at the end of a long, wooden table
with tourists who read about these days,
the ten of Galangan. Dead ancestors visit
their families who place flowers on
the thresholds and litter the streets
with them. After the movie,
I ask myself, ask Jane, —Is it possible
a place can be too beautiful?—

A dead dog lies in a gutter,
flies buzzing over its decaying body.
Don't look away
Praise the dead, this completion.

Jeanette Miller

Celeste

Imagine not stopping
camping many miles away
from this carcass which was once a cow
bones and hide
and the puppy sheltering inside
they were like Russian nesting dolls

after hearing the sound
I sit in yellow sand
ants crawling on my legs
sip water so cold it makes my teeth ache
hold milk-soaked bread in my palm

raptors wheel overhead
sing their song of meat and blood
I see her black nose first
black eyes
her white tipped feet

then, she emerges from her larder, her grave
licks the food from my hand
blinks at the brightness
my red car and blue tent
alien against dunes and desert sage

she curls in my lap
chin on my thigh
I rest my hand against
the urgent pulse of her neck
and name this dog I do not want
Celeste

Rafaella Del Bourgo

