

LOOKING FOR WORK

I have always wanted brook trout
for breakfast.

Suddenly, I find a new path
to the waterfall.

I begin to hurry.
Wake up,

my wife says,
you're dreaming.

But when I try to rise,
the house tilts.

Who's dreaming?
It's noon, she says.

My new shoes wait by the door,
gleaming.

RAYMOND CARVER

In winter
all the singing is in
the tops of the trees
where the wind-bird

with its white eyes
shoves and pushes
among the branches.
Like any of us

he wants to go to sleep,
but he's restless—
he has an idea,
and slowly it unfolds

from under his beating wings
as long as he stays awake.
But his big, round music, after all,
is too breathy to last.

So, it's over.

In the pine-crown
he makes his nest,
he's done all he can.

I don't know the name of this bird,
I only imagine his glittering beak
tucked in a white wing
while the clouds—

which he has summoned
from the north—
which he has taught
to be mild, and silent—

thicken, and begin to fall
into the world below
like stars, or the feathers
of some unimaginable bird

that loves us,
that is asleep now, and silent—
that has turned itself
into snow.

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COMPLETE DESTRUCTION

It was an icy day.
We buried the cat,
then took her box
and set fire to it
in the back yard.
Those fleas that escaped
earth and fire
died by the cold.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

CUTTING GREENS

curling them around
i hold their bodies in obscene embrace
thinking of everything but kinship.
collards and kale
strain against each strange other
away from my kissmaking hand and
the iron bedpot.
the pot is black,
the cutting board is black,
my hand,
and just for a minute
the greens roll black under the knife,
and the kitchen twists dark on its spine
and I taste in my natural appetite
the bond of live things everywhere.

LUCILLE CLIFTON

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WON'T YOU CELEBRATE WITH ME

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

LUCILLE CLIFTON

WINTER LOVE

I would like to decorate this silence,
but my house grows only cleaner
and more plain. The glass chimes I hung
over the register ring a little
when the heat goes on.
I waited too long to drink my tea.
It was not hot. It was only warm.

LINDA GREGG

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is what my sons call the flowers—
purple, white, electric blue—
pom-pomming bushes all along
the beach town streets.

I can't correct them into
hydrangeas, or I won't.

Bees ricochet in and out
of the clustered petals,

and my sons panic and dash
and I tell them about good

insects, pollination, but the truth is
I want their fear-box full of bees.

This morning the radio
said *tender age shelters*.

This morning the glaciers
are retreating. How long now

until the space-print backpack
becomes district-policy clear?

We're almost to the beach,
and *High dangerous!* my sons

yell again, their joy in having
spotted something beautiful,
and called it what it is.

I'm in the house.
It's nice out: warm
sun on cold snow.
First day of spring
or last of winter.
My legs run down
the stairs and out
the door, my top
half here typing

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THIS IS JUST TO SAY

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

WILL IT GET US THROUGH THE WINTER

Will it get us through the winter, this new
smaller love? Compact, slim. You can fold it,
store it easily, though it slips through cracks,
asserts itself when needed, then steps back,

arranging its limbs. Now less bulky, this
unassuming love curls into corners, waiting
quietly. No demands, no promises,
no expectations either: it lies still,

poised in crisp papery newness, well-bound, a
document quickly signed and never read,
not really. Eyes passed over it, pen flashed,
and there it was, a cut-rate love, a new

agreement I do not recall signing,
but must have. For here it is, beside me.
The other fades, recedes. Or that's the hope.
A thought of it brings joy, so it must die.

SUE SORENSEN

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LIFTED

Well, I guess no one can have everything.
I must learn to celebrate when I fail.
Inner growth and fortitude follow the sting,
right? Won't I rise with holy wind in my sails?
Yet *they* always seem to get what *I* want,
door after door flung open. Why are
the keepers of doors, who haunt
the hopeful halls of fate and desire
so partial to them, but not to me?
Yes, I *do* feel sorry for myself—don't, brother,
pretend the bitter blanket of self-pity,
hasn't warmed your bones. It's not lovers
or fame I crave, nor even happiness, particularly.
Only to be lifted, just once, above all others.

CRAIG MORGAN TEICHER

THOSE WINTER SUNDAYS

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

ROBERT HAYDEN

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RED WITH A TOUCH OF SULFUR

Isn't it funny
when suddenly after all these decades
you notice a new part of your body.

Maybe the hamstrings—
entirely unused when lifting weights,
back used instead
which then pains for years.

Maybe the slight shoulder raise
that tightens those muscles
maybe for good.

I notice my body
slide through time.
It is odd and peculiar,
genius of no one,
a perfect clock
making clocks
look simple.

Newness comes naturally.
Resisting it causes the past
to present memories on yellow
platters.

My age is a number.
Bones getting ready to play poker.
I will remain a small book
hidden away deep
in the library.

I love my body and this world!
Such a declaration
five years ago
would've driven me insane.

But now an appreciation arrives
with a fine taste of sulfur
and anywhere I look is born
a rose.

DANSE RUSSE

If I when my wife is sleeping
and the baby and Kathleen
are sleeping
and the sun is a flame-white disc
in silken mists
above shining trees,—
if I in my north room
dance naked, grotesquely
before my mirror
waving my shirt round my head
and singing softly to myself:
“I am lonely, lonely.
I was born to be lonely,
I am best so!”
If I admire my arms, my face,
my shoulders, flanks, buttocks
against the yellow drawn shades,—

Who shall say I am not
the happy genius of my household?

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My neighbor to the left had a stroke a couple years ago. It didn't look like he was going to make it, and then he made it. I'm watching him now from my window as he makes his slow way across his yard with some tree branches that fell in last night's storm. Three steps. Wait. Three steps. It's a hard slog. Watching, I want to pitch in. And we do, at such times, wanting to help. But on the other hand, it's good to be as physical as possible in recovery. Maybe this is part of his rehab. Maybe this is doctor's orders: DO YARDWORK.

And here comes his wife across the yard anyway, to give a hand with a large branch. She's able to quickly overtake him, and she folds into the process smoothly, no words between them that I can make out. It's another part of what makes us human, weighing the theory of mind, watching each other struggle or perform, anticipating each other's thoughts, as the abject hovers uncannily in the background, threatening to break through the fragile borders of the self. "What's it like to be a bat?" we ask. The bats don't respond. How usually, our lives unfold at the periphery of catastrophes happening to others. I'm reading, while my neighbor struggles, that the squirrel population in New England is in the midst of an unprecedented boom. A recent abundance of acorns is the reason for this surge in squirrel populations, most particularly in New Hampshire. They're everywhere, being squirrely, squirreling acorns away. We call it "Squirrelnado" because it's all around us, circling, and dangerous, and kind of funny. Language springs from the land, and through our imagination we become human. They're back in the house now. We name the things we see, or they name themselves into our experience, whichever, and then we use those names for things we don't understand, what we can't express. Wind becomes spirit becomes ghost. Mountain becomes god. The land springs up before us. It shakes us and pushes us over.

THE LINE

There's an old song
my grandfather used to sing
that has the question,
"Or would you rather be a fish?"
In the same song
is the same question
but with a mule and a pig,
but the one I hear sometimes
in my head is the fish one.
Just that one line.
Would you rather be a fish?
As if the rest of the song
didn't have to be there.

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The river is high. I'd love to smoke pot
with the river. I'd love it if rain
sat at my table and told me what it's like
to lick Edith Piaf's grave. I go along thinking
I'm separate from trash day
and the weird hairdo my cat wakes up with
but I am of the avalanche
as much as I am its tambourine.

The river is crashing against my sleep
like it took applause apart and put it back together
as a riot of wet mouths

adoring my ears, is over my head
when it explains string theory
and affection to me,

when it tells me to be the code breaker,
not the code. What does that mean?
Why does lyric poetry exist?

When will water open its mouth
and tell us how to be clouds, how to rise
and morph and die and flourish and be reborn
all at the same time, all without caring
if we have food in our teeth or teeth in our eyes
or hair in our soup or a piano in our pockets,
just play the damned tune. The river is bipolar
but has flushed its meds, I'm dead
but someone has to finish all the cheese
in the fridge, we're a failed species
if suction cups are important, if intelligence
isn't graded on a curve,

but if desperation counts, if thunderstorms
are the noise in our heads given a hall pass
and rivers swell because orchestras
aren't always there when we need them, well then,
I still don't know a thing.

PEACHES

A mouthful of language to swallow:
stretches of beach, sweet clinches,
breaches in walls, pleached branches;
britches hauled over haunches;
bunched leeches, wrenched teachers.
What English can do: ransack
the warmth that chuckles beneath
fuzzed surfaces, smooth velvet
richness, splashy juices.
I beseech you, peach,
clench me into the sweetness
of your reaches.

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THE CREATIVE DRIVE

A recent study found that poems increased the sale price of a home by close to \$9,000. The years, however, have not been kind to poems.

The Northeast has lost millions of poems, reducing the canopy. Just a few days ago, high winds knocked a poem onto a power line

a few blocks from my house.
I had not expected to lose so many at once.
“We've created a system that is not healthy

for poems,” said someone. Over the next thirty years, there won't be any poems where there are overhead wires. Some poems may stay as a nuisance,

as a gorgeous marker of time.

CATHERINE BARNETT

HOW TO STAY ALIVE

For myself
and perhaps
for some others
it is all about
watching, no, admiring
the crystalline examples
of intelligence found
at times in the shade
on a far-too-hot afternoon,
those winged ones I share
this staying-alive thing with
flutter about
seeking the perfect branch,
no, stone, or blade of grass,
to land on, knowing then
one spot, no, choice,
is to be the coolest.

CHAD NORMAN

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A COWBOY OVERFLOW OF THE HEART

We inaugurate the evening
Just drumming up a little weirdness
It gets late so early now
The waves come in mountain phases
Linked impossibilities
Branching possibilities
I'd see fire where it's not supposed to be

In the empty library at suppertime
By the respirating basement door
The dog eats out of an old tambourine on the floor
I've been told you can live a long, long time on the love of a dog
And that things get bitter and bad
When the people are wrong
And sleep can be had for the price of a song
Late in the day
When the options are gone
When the seatbelt's the only hug you've felt in weeks
When wrong numbers are the totality of your social life
The obscure strategies of wildlife
Only flummox the hell out of you, kid

I first saw her in a megastore
A day-glo raven
Born into a free fall
Like plastic easter basket grass
Falling from an overpass
The fulfillment of a tenth grade prophecy
A motel masterpiece
Blind to the branching possibilities
Blind to linked impossibilities
Teardrops were standing in my eyes
Like deer before they bolt

It was like I was stretching my arm through the cat door to heaven
I was thinking I could lick the frosting off these summer days
if nights were half as sweet
Me like a banged up dog walking half sideways
I adored the way she modified my mornings
When I'd wake up in the calm shoals of her bed
Somersaults of smoke in a universe asleep
Before she slipped back into her heritage
And disappeared

Now every second thought is out of control
I guess in a way I long to be rad
When I was with her it felt wrong to be sad
Did I tell you an angel finally came and shut my mouth?
There was a smile and a tear in her voice too
And she taught me
To relight, relight,
and relight again

They tell me you can live a long, long time on the love of a dog
Things get bitter and bad
And sleep can be had
Late in the day when the options seem gone
Please let your eyes be a friend to me again
It's just malfunctioning teardrops
A cowboy overflow of the heart

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Winter. Time to eat fat
and watch hockey. In the pewter mornings, the cat,
a black fur sausage with yellow
Houdini eyes, jumps up on the bed and tries
to get onto my head. It's his
way of telling whether or not I'm dead.
If I'm not, he wants to be scratched; if I am
He'll think of something. He settles
on my chest, breathing his breath
of burped-up meat and musty sofas,
purring like a washboard. Some other tomcat,
not yet a capon, has been spraying our front door,
declaring war. It's all about sex and territory,
which are what will finish us off

in the long run. Some cat owners around here
say the cat, although I am more equal than you.
Can you leap twenty times the height of your body?
Can you run up and down trees? Jump between roofs?

Let us rub our bodies together and talk of touch.
My emotions are pure as salt crystals and as hard.
My lusts glow like my eyes. I sing to you in the mornings
walking round and round your bed and into your face.

Come I will teach you to dance as naturally
as falling asleep and waking and stretching long, long.
I speak greed with my paws and fear with my whiskers.
Envy lashes my tail. Love speaks me entire, a word

of fur. I will teach you to be still as an egg
and to slip like the ghost of wind through the grass.

Mine, says the cat, putting out his paw of darkness.
My lover, my friend, my slave, my toy, says
the cat making on your chest his gesture of drawing
milk from his mother's forgotten breasts.

Let us walk in the woods, says the cat.
I'll teach you to read the tabloid of scents,
to fade into shadow, wait like a trap, to hunt.
Now I lay this plump warm mouse on your mat.

You feed me, I try to feed you, we are friends,
says the cat, although I am more equal than you.
Can you leap twenty times the height of your body?
Can you run up and down trees? Jump between roofs?

Let us rub our bodies together and talk of touch.
My emotions are pure as salt crystals and as hard.
My lusts glow like my eyes. I sing to you in the mornings
walking round and round your bed and into your face.

Cat, enough of your greedy whining
and your small pink bumhole.
Off my face! You're the life principle,
more or less, so get going
on a little optimism around here.
Get rid of death. Celebrate increase. Make it be spring.

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PIGS CAN SEE THE WIND

Down by the barn
the pigs are restless;
toss their heads,
behave like horses.
Skid through the mud and straw
on wild hooves,
snout-jousting.

At the fence,
nose pushed between
the wooden rails,
is the sentinel pig,
the serious pig.
Waiting for the first twitch
of distant grass,
the long, slow tumble
of wind across the field.

And when it comes,
when that first cool slap
hits their skins
the whole pen
of grunting, sliding pigs
stills.

They stand aquiver on
stumpy legs, nostrils
wide, snuffle the new air.
As if the wind is a gift.
As if it is all
they've ever wanted.

SO MUCH REMAINS INVISIBLE

A dog with nose to
the ground reads the
scent, the many different
story lines all
at once: the dog
highways. At 4:00 am

the dogs speak
to each other. With
nine languages in
the house, the musicians
are still not multilingual
enough. One large black
dog panting, runs past
the lower rooms or

so the cellist says. She hears
chewing under the palm tree.

The percussionist rises
to check for human
intruders. Only the
pianist, whom dogs

usually attack, sleeps through
the night. As though the dogs

were the first to know,
the rain begins

to fall in the desert
briefly.

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VI. WISDOM: THE VOICE OF GOD

Ninety percent of what's wrong with you

could be cured with a hot bath,

says God through the manhole covers.

but you want magic, to win

the lottery you never bought a ticket for.

(*Tenderly*, the monks chant,

embrace the suffering.) The voice never

panders, offers no five year plan,

no long-term solution, no edicts from a cloudy

white beard hooked over ears.

It is small and fond and local. Don't look for

your initials in the geese honking

overhead or to see through the glass even

darkly. It says the most obvious shit,

i.e. Put down that gun, you need a sandwich.

MARY KARR

It's so quiet now the children have decided to stop being born. We raise our cups in an empty room. In this light, the curtains are transparent as gauze. Through the open window we hear nothing—no airplane, lawn mower, no siren speeding its white pain through the city's traffic. There is no traffic. What remains is all that remains.

The brick school at the five points crosswalk is drenched in morning glory. Its white flowers are trumpets festooning this coastal town. Will the eventual forest rise up and remember our footsteps? Already seedlings erupt through cement, crabgrass heaves through cracked marble, already wolves come down from the hills to forage among us. We are like them now, just another species looking to the stars and howling extinction.

They say the body accepts any kind of sorrow, that our ancestors lay down on their stomachs in school hallways, as children they lay down like matches waiting for a nuclear fire.

It wasn't supposed to end like this: all ruin and beauty, vines waterfalling down a century's architecture; it wasn't supposed to end so quietly, without fanfare or fuss,

a man and woman collecting rain in old coffee tins. Darling, the wars have been forgotten. These days our quarrels are only with ourselves. Tonight you sit on the edge of the bed loosening your shoes. The act is soundless, without future weight. Should we name this failure? Should we wake to the regret at the end of time doing what people have always done and say it was not enough?

THE HEROIC AGE

the day after you left was like
curly haired boys shouting from the back of a pickup truck,
souvlaki smouldering and hissing at the waterfront,
waves exposing their white flesh, moments before striking concrete.

like a girl's hesitation before she boards the rickety bus to Athens,
like vagrant dogs sniffing at fresh graffiti each morning,
gold-rimmed glasses of ouzo slid carelessly over a wooden counter,
ripples of bouzouki music seeping into humid air.

like trading your last drachmas for olives under an amber sun
the scent of freshly-ground oregano woven between curls of cigarette smoke,
like pairs of bronze feet dangling from the edge of the sea wall,
milky sailboats balancing on wine-dark waves.

like visitors stepping onto quivering docks,
bewildered, failing to remember Greek phrases they believed they knew.

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Wash the earth,
let it run rust
with ink, then clear.

Palpate for pebbles
embedded, remove
with tweezers.

Bandage slowly, align
the edges evenly,
press gently.

Make it invisible,
ignore the itch
to probe further.

Keep it cool and dry:
forget, then
let it breathe.

Soon, you are remade:
one line
across your skin.

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.

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