

SIX POEMS FROM FIVE POETS

FLOWERS, DOGGIES, THE MOON

Lisa Gluskin Stonestreet

It's only beginning to recede, that time, that milk-
dream

of a year

the long hours in the rocker, the occasional calculating, to assuage my restlessness,
its portion: that is, the first of his/the last

of my thirties: one year. One percent, two? Worth so much
more, I think (once more)

and so once more keep

rocking, switch sides, watch

the last streetcars lumbering home through the half-open blinds, switch sides, brief flicker
at the corner of his mouth, a sigh, rocking...

(and where else would I rather be?)

That's not to call up the rhetoric of choice, privilege, the drill
of tussling generations (*what we fought for / what we take for granted*)

and embrace): it's just
so difficult to step (back) into that sea, soft swirl without counting—

only to rise, days later,

in a different spot on the waves.

...

What did you do today?

Check the mommy-memoirs: nurse, bathe, dress, change, sleep, fail to sleep; feel about it

all the ways one is supposed, or not supposed, to feel—

in the beginning, though, we were

free even of the balm of naming:

flowers, doggies, the moon

Lisa Gluskin
Stonestreet

on its pages or in the sky. Only circles within circles, and *doing*, or even *feeling*, so much
 beside the point: the warm thrum of the tide.

...

Once I tried sitting—this, when my life was one quietly perfectible room, discipline,
 books and tea, a long view of hills and the signal tower—driving to the zendo in morning
 frost and folding my legs on a square white mat.

How impossible it was, first sending each thought out on its little line

(boat / boat / boat)

then the fidgeting, the sarcasm, sudden aches; then finally reduced to counting back from
 a hundred, and still the harbor with its jostling and its tethers—

38, 38, 38—

37—

...

Isn't this one idea of heaven? beyond
 giving, or change, or love and down

into this deep bright sphere of what-is, tomorrow
 and yesterday lost in eddy of *here*—

the only count the heartbeat rhythm of his mouth
 (small round callus on the upper lip) and us together back and forth in the chair—

...

How can you have memory without language? my friend asks, one of those
 many slow mornings, and even then the thought flows back into the sea, a place
 sans both ten o'clock and tomorrow: present, present, present...

our two boys nursing, again, sometime mid-afternoon and the sea laps at the rug, each of us
 bobbing cross-legged and curled over,

bowless hulls for our swaddled sons.

...

Is this why we remember nothing of the time? Its only position *before*.

Memory without language. Memory of face, smell. The bath, the big dog, the tree.
 But mostly of this:

no name, no category. Milk.

Lisa Gluskin
Stonestreet

The present nudging at the shore.

...

He is asleep and I'm awake.

My husband and I joke: what's a good dream for a baby?

The breast.

Bad dream?

No breast.

But seriously, folks: An eternity of no breast. (Shivers, nervous giggles. Drum roll.)

...

38, 38, 38, 37—

and sometimes it is all I can do. Calling up the masks of patience, again.

...

(nurse, bathe, dress, change, sleep, fail to sleep; feel about it)

Yes, I do in fact, on some days, want a medal.

...

Walking, rocking. Singing one song when all the rest have fled from memory:

oatmeal, oatmeal, it's a meal made of oats. Oatmeal, oatmeal—

[Repeat until the space between the blinds goes violet, white.]

...

Even out there, the lines get tangled. Especially out there. Each small hull
throwing out a line to the next, a web, a path back to not-

here, not-now, back on the shore

of the phone call, the gas bill, the poem and how it should end, the need

to show up tethered to the tug on the other end: and it's so easy to see myself hopping from
one to the next, to link them like metaphor until all the clocks line up on either side and the
kitchen and the desk are sparkling empty, arrayed

(not now / not now / not now)

—scows pulling out, laden—

**Lisa Gluskin
Stonestreet**

. . .

—rock, switch sides, watch

for the slow dip of eyelid, the open hand. He's beginning
to fight it, swimming up for one more round

(*Eye. Eyebrow. Nose. Mouth! Teeth, teeth—*)

of saying, and the moon on the waves is a moon in the book, the book

we read yesterday, in the big chair at the window, and the eye under its brow

is round like the moon; the lines multiply, shimmer
in the light of the day, of *this morning* and *what we're doing tomorrow* and

now we're again down in it: his eye a crescent slipping into line

and on the horizon the dozen tiny hulls receding, receding, going to silhouette
as we're pulled together

back into the mute night sea—

Lisa Gluskin Stonestreet's *Tulips, Water, Ash* was selected for the Morse Poetry Prize and published by University Press of New England in 2009. After working as a technical editor, arts magazine publisher, gift wrapper, film studio gofer, English instructor, and cocktail waitress, Lisa now makes her living as a freelance editor. Her poems have been awarded a Javits fellowship and a Phelan Award, and have appeared in journals such as *Quarterly West*, *Blackbird*, *The Iowa Review*, *32 Poems*, and *Third Coast*. She lives in San Francisco with her husband and son.

**Jimmy Santiago
Baca**

from BREAKING BREAD WITH THE DARKNESS: BOOK 1, THE ESAI POEMS

Jimmy Santiago Baca

12-28-03

My gift to the world
is Esai, his hands
in the semi-dark move into their own
interpretations of life, love, compassion,
fingers wiggle like worms in garden soil,
 performing magic,
 a sorcerer with wand
 making an ordinary dawn
 special;
he intently focuses on his fingers' movements
one finger up and down, then all five spread, then his whole hand
arched down in swan neck fashion,
his left hand joins his right in this dance
honoring the dawn,
dark silhouettes contrast against the window
where the day with its trees, mountains, and housetops
 slowly become visible
 with more light to view them with,
 as the dark angel in his altar
 dances its coming, its life force,
beckoning it to come and scatter its seed-sparks,
its cold, chilled sparkles of light
brimming the old dented pails my heart is
with love

3-14-04

I wonder as I watch my son walk
across the kitchen, pulling cupboard handles,
unsteadily wobbling into the sunroom,
why, if there is so much joy in watching
a child develop into a person with love and compassion,
seeing him mimic my gestures with my hands,
when I cough he coughs, I brush my teeth and he
does the same except he has no teeth,
when I see my child and know there is love there,
there is curiosity about the world,
there is intimacy, how he loves to grab and hug,
smile, laugh, go out as we did the other day
for a long walk along the river banks,
 why, with all this evidence of our nature,
do my brothers and sister still churn out
robots, small kids intent only making money,

**Jimmy Santiago
Baca**

why do Latino parents strive so hard
to make their children lawyers, bankers, engineers—Why?!!
—occupations that destroy life,
more and more take from life and turn it
into a casino,
millions of Latino children pushed and urged and forced
to become mainstream consumers,
what a terrible waste of life.

I will teach him to draw his dreams out
like a small sparrow, picking up each twig and grass blade
to make his nest where he can rest safely in the branches
of his favorite tree—

I want my son
to treat each day like a twig or grass blade
place his dream in a nest of them, to incubate
and allow his heart to break from the shell
on its own time,
wings spread, the unending skies
his boundaries.

Jimmy Santiago Baca's many honors include the American Book Award, a Pushcart Prize, an International Hispanic Heritage Award, and an International Award. He is the founder of Cedar Tree Inc., a nonprofit foundation that works to give people of all walks of life the opportunity to become educated and improve their lives, and his most recent books include *Selected Poems/Poemas Selectos* and *Stories from the Edge*. The poems here are taken from *Breaking Bread with the Darkness: Book 1, The Esai Poems*, which is due out this month from Sherman Asher Publishing.

Erica Dawson

DRUGFACE

Erica Dawson

I. TAKE WITH FOOD

I was born, Mom says, big-eyed
 And starved, ready to vindicate
 My appetite and baby weight
 As a Big Girl, bona fide,

Bona pétite. My lips
 Were made for sucking bones, my tongue
 For fingertips, and when the slung-
 Low pants hung off my hips

(Or meat, Mom says) I worked
 A real sashay. An edentate,
 I licked the areola's plate
 And bit Mom's nipple, smirked

Until she fed me more.
 I ate the apple core and broke
 A tooth. The days when she would yoke
 My hair in plaits, I wore

A do-rag fit enough
 For Aunt Jemima, Aunt Bob said,
 "Now's who's your mammy, Shortening Bread?"
 Dear reader, yeah, I'd stuff

Myself. I'm told that food
 Is anything metabolized.
 I watched, and it materialized
 In delicacies.

They stewed,

Crickets and beetle wing
 Aflutter. I brake, and they fly tonight
 In the high beams and twin headlight
 Refractions. The entrée sings

The dinner buzz, creates
 A dizzy air of vertigos.
 Big WONDERBREAD looms tall and blows
 A fuse. The sign deflates

To WNDERBREAD—the O,
 In hemoglobin red, dying
 To dark, but not before flying
 In sparks with the high-heat glow

Erica Dawson

Of a stove's eye. Although
I've closed my windows, I can smell,
In synaesthesia, the shell
Of a light bulb burning slow.

I smell like cocoa butter,
Dior, and zinfandel (white) seeping
From me as if it's in there steeping,
Making its squatter Sutter

Home at home in my wasting
Wrists, Mom says. The ironic twist?
I've grown to an apologist
With cotton mouth a-tasting

Like shit. My appetite's
Been gone. But "the shell of a man," alive
Or dead, is always true. We thrive
In bone the parasites

And rot can't take. Against
The grain, score me on the cold steel slab
Like brisket. Drain me. Pray I'll gab
With the deceased and fenced-

In in pearled gates. "Melville,
Ice down Dom Perignon and I
May take a sip. But when I spy
Brillat-Savarin I'll spill

The beans and tell him I
Am nothing." When I eat again,
I'll skip the lady's madeleine
And start with foods with my

Own body parts inside,
The kidney bean, palm heart, the sweet
Meats a la carte. With Aquavit,
I'll wash it down, mouth wide

With bitter spit and pills
Like an ad reading, *Got Suicide?*
Xanax rattles in the bag beside
Me and I aim for kills,

Road kill with bloody hide,
Bowels worming like a gastrotrich.
Let's pay attention. Fuck the sick.
Driving, I'm satisfied.

I carry a heavy load.

Erica Dawson

("Look, Ma, no—" ("Watch it, man!")) DrugFace is
 A song of homeo(oh)stasis
 And I'm back on the road.

II. DO NOT DRIVE A CAR OR OPERATE HEAVY MACHINERY UNTIL
 YOU KNOW HOW YOU WILL REACT TO THIS DRUG

Who knew quick-fired road-
 Runners are kin to cuckoos, rain
 In single-file can hydroplane,
 Geese stand up pigeon-toed?

And, damn, my heart's too loud.
 I was born, Mom says, to draw a crowd,
 A Wonder-kin. So if I bowed,
 Cocksure and high-cock-browed,

Would someone clap and pass
 With a *Semper Fi* or *Brake For Squirrels*?
 Who knew rain fell in funneled whirled,
 Pavement's like polished glass,

White Castle's blue? Big byte-
 Sized road signs spell in tiny dash-
 Like marks. They flit. They fib. They flash
 WRONG WAY. And here tonight,

Though grandiose, they're not
 A dream. Still big-eyed, wide awake,
 (Look, Ma) my body starts to shake.
 I watch my polka dot

Moles in a pell-mell dance,
 My fingers gripping ten and two,
 Prehensily. Mom says *virtu*,
 Says Lovely, Elegance,

Says, *Girl, you're in tall cotton*
Now. DrugFace gets her Miss Daisy on.
 I ride the High Street autobahn
 Like I have flat forgotten

To steer. I close my eyes
 And hear Mom say a prayer, *Dear Lord*,
Watch over her. Hell, Ouija board
 Won't help me now. Surprise—

Who knew I'd doubly expose
 With open eyes? The signal's green's
 Gone red. And zoom. A trip? Bad genes?

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Who writes the end? Who knows
 My heart *is* loud with bass
 And rain *does* fall like rewind tears
 Crying up the windshield. When the gears
 Hum low, I'm keeping pace

With the car ahead. No doubt
 Tonight, as Housman said, to the road
 All runners come. But this episode
 Is mine: a whirlabout

Inside the yellow lines,
 Horns trumpeting, so loud, like it's
 Elysium till it remits
 To fog, tears, rain..., your standard signs.

III. DO NOT DRINK ALCOHOL WHILE TAKING THIS MEDICATION

Hey baby what's my sign?
 OPEN's in mercury, Labatt
 Blue-blooded as aristocrat
 Budweiser crowns. Red wine

Is Yellowtail. The thin
 Stirrers go round and multiply.
 I was born, I've said before, to die
 With (gasp) a familial sin,

Die Grandpa's suicide:
 One shot, a bullet behind a rush
 Of Johnnie Walk—. *Sweet honey, hush,*
Respect the Certified,

Mom says, the *Crazy*. Jack
 And Coke? Jim Beam and Branch? Why, yes.
 The corner TV lights fluoresce
 A dim lit strobe. Darts whack

At cork and a man plays pin-
 Ball like he's fucking the sloped machine.
 Fuck yeah, I'd be the Dancing Queen,
 The Girl, the Mandolin,

Maudlin and moved as I sweep
 Across the peanut floor and sing
 Falsetto with a flickering
 Bright jukebox frame. I keep

Drawing a blank so dark
 My rods must readjust to focus

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On this kingdom come in *taverne locus*,
And cynosural spark

Of cigarettes. St. James
Protects our patronage—"The Great"
Or "Lesser," I don't know. I sate
Myself with gin, and names

Mean nothing. Call me still
Heredity's Sad Heroine
With the boozier gene, encephalin
Sans dopamine—a Pill

(For those less technical)
With side effects intensified.
Fuck sober. Fuck me open wide.
I'll suck the bottle, lull

Myself to sleep and wake,
Later, as an amnesiac.
That Mendel guy's a garden quack.
I toast him though, and take

Another sip for old
Acquaintance I'll forget, one for
The therapist, and three or four
For earworms in Mom's bold

Big blissful voice, the bough
Always broken. Sweet lullabies
Swear falls and don't apologize.
So, Sweet Boy, kiss me now.

IV. MAY CAUSE DROWSINESS

And down comes Baby, now,
Though the cow has yet to jump the moon
And I rock, fast, without the tune
Of "Rockabye." Allow

Me this: no sleep, but a slump,
No haze but the blurry fix of my
Depression. Like a damselfly
At rest, I'll fold as (thump

Thump thump) my heart retards.
My head goes numb until I think
Nothing (no food or ride, no drink)
But picture birthday cards—

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Big clown, bright carousel—
Signed *Mom*, by Dad, when Mom was sick
As me. There's *Love* and *Rica-Tic*.
I was born, Mom says, to tell

Tall tales, born storied song
And dance who fancies make-believe,
Scheherazade, recitative;
Says, You *remember wrong*;

Says, *Fine*. I say Daughter
Knows monkeyshine. The a.m. train
Accompanies my verse and rain
With a whistle in the water,

Far off and lonely, subdued
As a dampered note, and yet (Ta-dum!)
Like the evening's perfect requiem.
Mom, hear my gratitude.

She tells me I exude
Great Soul, and I want no reprieve,
As Shakespeare warned us sleep would thief
Us of the magnitude

Of our own company.
This company loves misery.
And that's beatitude. That's chi,
DrugFace synecdoche;

It's equilibrium
And a little death, like apnea,
A breathless beat inside the *joie*
De vivre, or dreams in dumb

Slumber. I'll doze drug free
So I can know it all: loose joints,
My sweat-wet thighs, stiff hair in points,
And Mom in mourning. I'll be

Big-Eyed Afraid, then tasting
My tongue and teeth as my throat expands
In a squeaky gulp that never lands.
Whose breath is it I'm wasting?

I pull the covers up,
Blink fast until the night-light dances
In afterglows and second chances
And reflects inside my cup

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Of water still, untouched,
And sweating in a single drop.
I pick it up like it's a prop,
A moment's weeping clutched

With a fingertip and placed
Against my eye. When the tear won't fall,
I choke and cough and start to bawl.
And if a breath erased

It all, inhaled the tears
And pushed my concave belly out,
(Look Me!) I'd lose the will to shout
And hold it in. So here's

Drugface. My makeup smears
In two black streaks across my spit-
And salt-wet cheeks. And this is it.
I was born big-voiced, with ears

Made for my lonely din
Of Daughter's Daughter, Flesh and Bone,
And the only name I've always known.
The world's outside. I'm in.

This poem is reprinted here with the generous permission of the author and Waywiser Press. It originally appeared in Erica Dawson's first collection, *Big-Eyed Afraid*, which won the 2006 Anthony Hecht Poetry Prize and was named Best Debut of 2007 by *Contemporary Poetry Review*. Her poems have appeared in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Best American Poetry 2008*, the 7th edition of *Poetry: A Pocket Anthology*, and other journals and anthologies. She is an Assistant Professor of English and Writing at University of Tampa and Poetry Editor of the *Tampa Review*.

**Patrick
Donnelly**

NOCTURNES OF THE BROTHEL OF RUIN

Patrick Donnelly

First Lesson: Aleph

Never Christmas there. Never Thanksgiving:
always the same day and no day,
the same twilight, the same pounding
from overhead, and no one had a name.
If you asked a man for a name, he'd pause
and whatever name he said
would not be his real name, the number
he gave not his real number. If later
you called, a phone would ring and ring
somewhere in the wrong dark.

Second Lesson: Beth

*. . . he needed ten minutes
with my cock, a gift I'd given him
a dozen times for free. And I needed
money, so that one time I required it.
The exchange seemed fair, at first.
But the way he threw the money
on the narrow bed, saying "for you, anytime,"
the way my love which began as religion
ended as commerce . . .*

Third Lesson: Ghimel

His heart
gabbled endearments,
secret even from himself:
"Come," it cried,
"desperado, camerado, my mikado,
O root, O key, O king," etc., eventually referencing
all the lovely antiphons of advent.

Fourth Lesson: Daleth

Handsome lean surfer dude
played with my ass:
*"We're not going far that way.
There's a brick wall, so to speak."*
Wiped my shit on my thigh.

Fifth Lesson: He

John, you said your name was,
and offered your hand to be shook,
which was absurd, there.
It was like kissing a little deer

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Donnelly**

to stroke the fine hair
at the back of your neck, to run
my hand over your belly
which was both soft and hard.
I moved carefully to cup your ear
in my mouth and breathe,
hoping you might let me pretend
we were in love. But after a moment
you said, "Let's take a break,"
which, in the language of that place
meant: *I'm through,*
there are others . . .

Sixth Lesson: Vav

Ten cops sprinted up the stairs
through the line of waiting men: a call
to save a customer who wouldn't wake up,
who never woke up again.

Seventh and Last Lesson: Zain

The Prophet Jesus, peace be upon him,
rapped gently at the door of the cubicle.

"Are you about ready to go?" he asked.

"I'm not sure . . ."

The man pulled a towel
over himself as the Prophet sat and lit
a cigarette, Turkish, with a little sugar
at the tip, the burning nub the brightest thing
in the room as it passed between them.
The Prophet smoked with obvious enjoyment,
and when he exhaled over the man,
he renovated him
from the head down
on seven interior levels.

"I was looking for you everywhere,"
the man said, "I gave up."

"I know," the Prophet answered,
"would you like to get some breakfast?"

(Or maybe what he said was, "break your fast.")

Outside, as always, a row of ten yellow taxis
waited, drivers ready to ferry anyone
who wanted to go to the black cube
at the center of the universe.
In the cab the man made a pillow
of the Prophet's thigh, and lost
what tears he had been holding.

**Patrick
Donnelly**

Patrick Donnelly is the author of *The Charge* (Ausable Press, 2003, since 2009 part of Copper Canyon Press) and *Nocturnes of the Brothel of Ruin*, forthcoming from Four Way Books. His poems have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Slate*, *Ploughshares*, *The Yale Review*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, and many other journals. He is Director of the Advanced Seminar at The Frost Place, an Associate Editor of *Poetry International*, and a member of the Massachusetts Poetry Outreach Project Advisory Board. With Stephen D. Miller, he translates classical Japanese poetry and drama; their translations have appeared in many journals, including *Bateau Circumference*, *thedrunkenboat.com*, *eXchanges*, *Kyoto Journal*, *Metamorphoses*, *New Plains Review*, and *Noon: The Journal of the Short Poem*. Donnelly is a 2008 recipient of an Artist Fellowship from the Massachusetts Cultural Council. His website: <http://web.me.com/patricksdonnelly/site/>

Thom Satterlee

CHARACTER STUDIES: *LES MISERABLES*

Thom Satterlee

1. MONSEIGNEUR BIENVENU

Let us ask, "Who is Monseigneur Bienvenu?"

It does not suffice to say he is a character
created in the mind of a French novelist
and translated into our mother tongue with,
we must admit, an uncomfortable high style
impossible to read without a fake accent
placing, as it were, a beret upon each word.
No. That will not do. We must not make light
of such a serious book and such a serious man
as Monseigneur Bienvenu. Shall we say he was good?

We shall. For no smaller personage than Napoleon
called him so and appointed him Bishop of D-----.

Once installed, Monseigneur the Bishop
turned his mansion into a hospital;
his wealth he gave to the poor, not withholding
his most prized possessions, two silver candlesticks,
which he gave to the poorest soul, one Jean Valjean,
to light that man's way to sainthood. The good bishop,
we must permit, lived for others and not for himself.
He seems to have taken the Gospel at its word
and become both friend and benefactor to the poor.

In him, in short, we find the book's true theme:
that we must view the world with sympathy; we must read it
as "a permanent subject of sadness seeking to be consoled."

2. JEAN VALJEAN

Whom, we ask, of the many characters
presented to us in this astounding work
of some twelve hundred and twenty pages
(and not especially large print either)
whom might we call the Christ figure?

My reader, look no further: it is Jean Valjean.

Why, you say, he is the obvious choice.

Good then, we agree. But let us not be content.

Let us not, like two book ends holding up
the same books, assume we hold all alike.

Our hearts beat differently on every page.

By necessity we must explain ourselves
and interpret our interpretations.

Let us begin. Let us admit some doubt
is cast upon our choice when we review
the early years of this man Jean Valjean,
whom we purport to be a parallel, a literary Christ.
For when in any of the Gospel narratives

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does the One from Galilee steal bread,
 as Jean Valjean most certainly does, or go to prison
 only to escape and be recaptured?
 Christ is called the bread of life.
 He preaches but once in the prisons of hell.
 How can these two, then, be compared?
 How indeed? We shall endeavor to show.
 My reader, I offer you this, a miracle
 that brings back to life not only Lazarus,
 not just Jairus' daughter, but a whole town of them—
 I speak of M—sur—M— and of its mayor,
 Monsieur Madelaine, the miracle mayor, the mysterious one
 who revives the manufacture of jet black
 and restores the town to prosperity. Who is this Madelaine?
 My reader has already guessed, whether he has read the book
 or seen the play—it is Jean Valjean. This man
 helps all, loves all, even his enemy, Javert,
 even the lowest of “sinners,” the book's true Magdalene,
 none other than Fantine (of which more later).
 Like Christ he gives to those in need,
 and like Christ, too, he suffers his Gethsemane—
 I mean the night when he decides on sacrifice.
 And for whom does this Christ-like one “die”?
 For a man, who like Adam, stole a branch of apples,
 and this Adam-stand-in stands for us all.
 True, we must not presume to read the author's mind,
 but how could the writer of that book be plainer
 about the symbolic identity of his protagonist
 than when he has Jean Valjean buried
 only to resurrect, mistaken at first as the gardener?
 Ah, my reader, perhaps we have always agreed
 on these points—but what pleasure to review them.
 We hold open the book. We read it together.
 In our minds, the words turn into flesh;
 Jean Valjean becomes for us the Christ.

3. FANTINE

She is young, innocent. She picnics with friends
 on the outskirts of Paris. All joy is hers that summer day,
 the weather perfect for tragedy. For the story at this point
 needed to be cruel in order to be true. Fantine is fooled
 and left with child from a man who does not care,
 who disappears from the pages and goes off to relax
 the rest of his days in a bourgeois easy chair.
 Poor Fantine. But poorer still Cosette, the daughter
 of literature's most misdirected mother.
 How does she not hear us when we shout,
 “Do not give Cosette to the Thénardiens!”
 The wife is an ogress. The husband is the product
 of a card shark coupling with an out-of-work actress.

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Don't do it, Fantine. Don't. Don't." She does not listen.
 How then can we sympathize with her
 when she moves, alone, to M—sur—M—
 and becomes the only one not to win
 at the easy game in town, the generous jet black trade?
 The author tries to make us care. He has her
 cut off her beautiful hair to pay for clothes
 that end up not on Cosette's back but on those brats
 of the Thénardiens. Oh, the misguided goodness
 of this maternal moron—it has only begun.
 Next she sells her teeth. Then her body.
 Meanwhile the daughter she adores from a distance
 huddles under a table in the Thénardiens' tavern,
 stitching socks not intended for her own bare feet.
 Everything this mother imagines about her child
 is wrong. Fantine dies believing Cosette a little lady
 warmed in furs bought by the money she sent.
 It is, we must admit, a complicated melodrama,
 but still a melodrama. A century after the story was written
 our hearts are too hard for you, Fantine. We forget
 that you were fooled, and think of you alone: a fool.

4. MARIUS

Let us repeat ourselves a little.
 This story, whether it shows the life
 of a bishop, a convict, or a prostitute
 has always the same subject: caring.
 Each turns from his or her own needs
 to tend to another, successfully or no.
 Intention perhaps is paramount, our words
 about Fantine no doubt too harsh. Who knows
 whether she did not, with the perfect sight of a mother,
 see past the Thénardiens and spot Marius?
 This young man may be in fact
 the realization of her own idealized love.
 She believed she had found for herself a Marius;
 she was spurned, but her belief built
 limb by limb a Marius for her daughter.
 Fanciful, perhaps, and not essential to the story.
 So let us return to the matter at hand: caring.
 For Marius has it hard. Marius must choose
 not between himself and another, but between
 two others: the one who (he believes) saved his father
 and the other who (he believes) is the father
 of the one he loves. Ah, Marius, what will you do?
 We watch you climb your bureau and peer through the chink.
 The ambushade has begun. A steel pick glows
 in the fireplace, chains and ropes are piled
 in a dark corner. Men in masks prepare

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to lunge, not seeing the young man hidden
 behind the wall, pistol cocked, a trigger-pull away
 from sounding the alarm that would save one man,
 condemn the other. But Marius wants to aid them both.
 He cannot. The story has come to this complication,
 has had to, to show the complexity of caring.
 Only when his situation proves perfectly impossible
 does the real hero arrive: the author,
 who has cared more for the characters than they themselves,
 lets drop the words Marius could not conceive,
 and preserves the possibility, many pages hence, that Marius,
 he Marius, might yet do service to two men
 as contradictory as Thénardier and Jean Valjean.

5. GAVROCHE

*“Listen to me,” continued Gavroche, “you must never whine any
 more for anything. I will take care of you.”*

Absurd, is it not? That the destitute, the homeless
 should take care of anyone, and Gavroche is
 merely a child, a street kid, a *gamin*.
 He comes, no less, from bad stock: the Thénardiers.
 As a baby, when he cried, no one held him;
 now, but a boy, he proposes an embrace
 of gigantic proportions. What does the author see
 in this rascal’s breast? Roughened shells
 when opened reveal the purest pearl—
 inside Gavroche we find the heart of Paris.
 Will a shopkeeper forget to pity? A shadow
 of goodness spreads at his door: it is Gavroche
 willing to give away his larger piece of bread,
 to share accommodations in his elephantine apartment.
 He will bring even his ingrate father a rope of rescue.
 And when his city is torn by war, he provides
 free entertainment, dancing in no-man’s-land, singing
 in response to bullets. And when they finally bring him down,
 his fall is like a bow, his last line spoken silently
 and true: *Messieurs, to care you must have spirit*

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