

TELEPHONE PROJECT 2

these toys [
after and with Sappho

*The hope gets hold of me that I won't share
anything that the blessed gods [themselves desire—*

no lending those toys that smell of clay or graphite
however much apportioning was thrust

into tissue, gray or pink. I'm sick
of placating them with string or wax—

after all I have to work.

I look toward the beekeeper keeping bees at home
that she knows damn well will sting and swarm.

—KIMIKO HAHN

elegy for the beekeeper

How dazed the body after stinging, how drunk
with death & venom. We wear our good shoes

to the funeral. & our black eyes, fat
with hallucination, hold the image of the swarm

& take it everywhere: the streetlight, to church, the coffin.
Even now, the air is wild with the fever-pitch of wings.

Our girl, small graveyard of marks & stings—
so fast.

We leave her to sleep outside like a cat.
We climb into our houses & our beds, & we miss her.

For years, we dream our deaths little
as the bee's.

—ARACELIS GIRMAY

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BEE AT THE BEEKEEPER'S FUNERAL

When they say "swarm"
What they mean is us.
What they mean is black
Mass of wings, a thousand
Thousand chanters. Unison.
What they mean is body.
What they miss is brain
Born of lifetimes, mind
Made of centuries. Sacked
Catacombs and tenements
And what is most sweet
Is what they both breed
And box us for. Swarm,
What they call swarm,
Is the imperceptible
Rumble in the gut,
Years inside of other
Years, the stinger's ache
To break free the abdomen.
What born warriors know
As Noble Death. And there
Is me, the dreamer drawn
By a laughing daffodil
Away from the others,
Brothers and cousins,
That massacre afternoon,
Away from glory, now
With only this to do:
To witness, to tell again
What the eulogizer said,
The beekeeper dead,
And of these wreaths,
Their raucous stink
And hues. I'll tell how
I put my face deep in the bell
Of each and every blossom
And breathe deep. Oh, child,
I breathe so deep.

—JOHN MURILLO

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TRANSLATOR'S BLOCK

The poet translated the poem with fear and trembling,
as if somehow unworthy of the source text.

His writer friends thought his suffering ridiculous,
and perhaps they had a point.

Hardly difficult, this poem. A simple narrative
in modern Persian. For setting, the clichéd garden.

Basically, as two lovers kiss on a bench
a bee stings the man on his thigh.

He's allergic, so the ambulance arrives.
The woman can't find the key. (Fearing exposure

they had previously locked the gate). One paramedic
hoists the other over the wall.

On the verge of anaphylactic shock,
the semi-conscious Romeo gets injected

in the same spot of the sting. He survives.
Afterward, the key's found in his pant's pocket.

"Perhaps," says the poet's shrink, "it's too accessible;
It opens your heart to love, which means danger."

As she's talking, the poet unconsciously clicks and unclicks
a ballpoint pen into his thigh.

"You have a point," says the poet,
"but I can't see how the lines could hurt me."

—ROGER SEDARAT

BALL POINT PEN

I had never meant to take the ball point pen apart
and yet the spring leapt away, the coiled metal
leaping into the lap of the football player next to me

in Algebra II, the class I walked to the High School
for, where I was widely considered a math prodigy
despite merely being a year ahead. He could have

destroyed me. I had done something terrible. Allowed
myself to explode into his lap. Allowed the pen
to dissolve into its component parts, each a platonic

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ideal. The ink pure inkiness. The spring pure springy-
ness. I wish there were more here. A story about
how he turned to me and fell in love. A story about

how later on he kicked my ass. But this is the end.
He put the spring back on my desk and returned
to his own, hunched in his letter jacket until the bell.

—JASON SCHNEIDERMAN

MOTHEROTHER

Inside me: don't think
this. If inside is a place
then I am thinking in the suburbs
in the mud/grass
but I hate driving and pizza.

I'd consider *mine:*
"the boy is mine!" Or, "before,
mine was mine." (This is
my head. Where is your head?)
Before...I can't remember.

Before one tree was touched
before another and this
was a lovely diagram
for putting together
a plan for making it a-ok.

If I allow myself an inside,
I find component parts (coiled
metal, archaic weaponry,
plumb line). Some are
for me and some for him.

How generous! But no:
inevitable metal. Shoot
into water the find a lost
bridge. Or there might be
someone. Instead: we walk.

—JENNIFER KRONOVET

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THE MOTHER

No one saw her but me
As she stumbled through the living room
Whispering to herself in tongues
I'd not heard
Before, limned, here,
by the streetlamp's spare
light, her hushed words
now become a song
I think she was giving to the moon:
Why, why me?

—ROSS GAY

INSTRUCTIONS

Why not you?
He will think he has given you the moon.
He will think you owe him a song
with words like hushed lights,
light from a streetlamp muted
by mist and limbs and sheer curtains.
Look here.
Anything he ever says he will say only to himself
if the first time he stumbles through the living room
your only word to him is *no*.

—H.L. HIX

ANYTHING HE EVER SAYS HE WILL SAY ONLY TO HIMSELF

As if talking could cure a slammed door,
you follow, walking through like an apparition
from an old relationship. And what else does
an apology hold other than the mist of mistakes
from the past, rearing their past addictions?

But you follow not with your feet
but with your words, writing
a letter from this downtown café.
In the background, a voice
talks over your written words
with a mouth like a sunflower
breaking from the concrete,
but you keep writing to him,
in the spirit of this voice.

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Look, you say, people are living
all around me and I want in on it;
children are walking like families
of ducks led by their teachers;
couples have a hand in each other's back
pocket; a woman is carrying her laundry
in her arms. I'm sure any one of them
would say they want more: The children
don't want to trail behind a teacher;
the couple wants more than passion;
the woman wants the comforts
inside her home. But I'd take it
all. Sometimes, I just want to step
off the curb of the past onto whatever will stay
beneath me. But, over time, I wonder
if asking for nothing, when all is said
and regretted, too much to ask for?

—A. VAN JORDAN

APPARITION FROM AN OLD RELATIONSHIP

What dark/men you aroused in your young man's veins.
—from "The Third Duino Elegy"
Rainer Maria Rilke

Ancestors gathered to the pulse of hate
generations past still drum in their heirs' veins.
Those who had guns and gold, those who had naught,
those who were pushed aside, those who wore chains:
their histories continue to divide
neighbor from neighbor, like the ghosts of love
turned cruel. How long memories take to fade.
And those we can't forget, we must forgive.

—MARILYN NELSON

(UNBUTTONING HER SHIRT...)

Unbuttoning her shirt in the second dream, she pointed to the hole in the
center of her chest, mouthed *Look*.

I am not any closer to saying what I mean.

Kneeling, with my hands on her hips, I closed one eye and peered into her
chest, which was filled with water.

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Love has made itself so quiet, a few red fish moving in slow circles.

I want to say like blood.

I want to say like forgiveness, this obedience, looking inside her on my knees.

I mean to cease to feel, to cancel, to give up all claim to—

At some point, she rested her hands on my shoulders and I thought this is my face housed underwater.

This is a death letter.

Every word but *mouthed* erased.

—ALLISON BENIS WHITE

LOOK

If I had unbuttoned your blouse
as you lay in your coffin, I could have seen
how the tumor that killed you had grown
overnight into merely benign.

I marveled instead at your lips,
the red kept within proper borders.
(The first time in how many years?)
Unlike you, whoever applied it
acknowledged the edges
that blur in a woman your age.

The edge between living and dying
began to blur weeks before you wandered
over the finish line. No celebration
except for that party-girl red
on your lips, no doubt chosen
to match the coy flowers
that bloomed on your silk blouse.

Now I want to name it a shade
that says more than mere red,
which end-rhymes too quickly with dead,
the *quick* of which I'm still a part
and you *dead*, which I cannot escape.

Better dead than red,

I grew up hearing patriots bluster,
but came to prefer *Better red*

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*than dead. Give me better
than red, give me Raising Hell Red.*

Better yet, *Everlastingly Red*
till the last trumpet blares
and you wake up,
your lips mouthing,
“How do I look?
Do I need rouge?
More lipstick?”
(So long in the grave,
the voice shrivels to wind
down a drainpipe.)

I open my poem-sack,
and lift out the golden tube
wherein a scarlet nib waits
to inscribe on your lips
a shade conjured from *sheer*
disbelief and *indelible* dread,
and infused with no more
than the *balm* of a name.
Neither Hope.
Nor Hereafter
but this gleam
of *Wide Awake Red*.

--KATHRYN STRIPLING BYER

CALCIUM'S SLENDER EMBRACE

Now I see that red means nothing
in this winter landscape
with flurries of snow
across the unfenced graveyard.

Don't stare into my ruby lips,
My Love; color is wasted on the dead—
a mockery, a hush, a denial
of what the body has become.
I have no use for a dress
drenched in prised memory.

Say “here lies” if you must.
Wish for one last impossible word
to sum a lifetime. Pretend you knew
me — I was always a field of wild flowers,
more than this patterned dress could ever say.
I was the roots and insects and the dew,
the wind shaken stalks, the bones.

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Now I have a new name for shadowed snow
that is more than the crunch and crackle,
a metered response for the end of life.
The slow grinding down, erosion, entropy,
I know as *bone and ash scattered on frost*,

Or *calcium's slender embrace*.
No fanfare for me. I am given to the whisper
wind and then back to the field
like seed. My voice
is the rasp of flake and dust,
the low thrum
of repeated soft impact,
so long in the field
it condenses to shell
the frozen ground.

This body no longer holds
my voice. I can never be written
or captured again. The words fall
and skitter like shrouds and veils
across the sparkled ice.
My name is no longer
my name.
I am calm.
I am moving
toward the promise
of Spring.

--J.P. DANCING BEAR

SUNG (LACKING WORDS)

I stood where a street ravel dirt
Where green leaves clamor

When somehow in spring
My love came stumbling from a broken house:

Someone with hand flourishes and yelling
Shoved him onto a stretcher.

Ruin of handkerchief his head was bound in,
Blue shirt stained.

I raced to his side, but a child clad in blue—
Why so much of that color?—

Shaved head in a bonnet, dress flowing at her ankles,
Clutched at my thigh

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Crying to be taken home.
Nothing I could spell or summon up

For language is always a something else,
A furrow beyond, a yard elsewhere

A fracture in the sensed,
Sempiternal falling.

No snapline here, nor portamento of touch.
Hands grasp at dew

Which is what my flesh turned to
When a child held me in dream's clear light

As somehow in spring
My love came stumbling from a ruined house.

--MEENA ALEXANDER

A BIRD IN HAND

Unclasped, will soar
eventually. Kept, would have soured
surely, on the flesh-clothed
bones a hand is. Spoiled as raspberries do when we
un-tend them, leave too many
for the birds,

birds as hand-
sized fires, extinguished
season to season.

A reasonable sentence.
But the Lord spoke
through a burning bush once and gave
miracles.

Proof that fire has a mouth
and a will? With birds our angels on earth.
To say, *I spent most of the day in bed*
sleeping is difficult.

Love-making would have made
a less ashen replacement.

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Un-held, in dreams, birds fleck and swoon—
silvery, coppery, gold. In harrowing
diving flocks. Like sparks.

--PAULA BOHINCE

BORROWED BREATH

The sky, an invisible cage that fetters
air with toxic bars bent from acronyms,
opens and pulls back its lone lip
while blackbirds assume a mining canary's fate.

Fumes creep into lungs small as walnuts,
nip the alveoli, roll the eyes into
final descent—a chorus tumbling on land,
not just a clutch of folded feathers,
but diving flocks, like sparks.

There is no bullet fragment to extract
from flesh, just unseen parts per million,
a kind of counting most don't fathom
unless playing the lottery, don't they know
this is another ticket, a borrowed breath?

--TARA BETTS

AND SHARPLY

Ours to make: sparks; edges; a device
for cutting pictures out of light. We filled
tin trays with water in the backyard
and slowly dipped the paper in. Having
is accomplished not so much by attention,
but by habit. Still, we made lists: cedar,
smoke, the rabbits racing fast across
the grass. Also, the fence to slice the light
into white scissors while we pushed
the paper flat for trimming beneath the water.

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She spoke through the window to say
 she had planted them herself—still
 we forced our way under the branches to wait
 while the sun did what breathing does, but loudly.
 And always shadows anyway: the junipers bent
 to blue beneath our fingers cut, too, lengthwise
 where the pictures made sharp frames
 of our hands for holding them. We knew wood grows
 like trees do, so we watched the tables
 all afternoon to see our pictures lifted nearer
 to that sun like a hole in the sky, burning.

--KRISTINA JIPSON

INTERNET K-HOLE

“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.” - L. P. Hartley

Like prehistoric petroglyphs they astonish us,
 So many photos, from Aquarius
 To New Wave to Grunge,
 All those million gold cubes:
 Sierras of snaps! Saharas of forced smiles!
 Proud mullets, handlebar mustaches, muscle shirts, miles of cleavage and biceps!
 Gleaming ice cream cones! Look at them.
 Kodachromes and Polaroids, curled at edges,
 As ancient, suddenly, as vellum, stylus, and parchment.
 What fate befell those strange tribes?

A billion harvested emulsions, mulled by time,
 Pent for decades in musty drawers
 Until Google's
 Voracious magnet pulled them
 Like iron filings—

Spent fashions sprint away and speed back again—
 Hairstyles three times new and pants gone ironic

Return refreshed to chilly malls
And teeming high school halls.

Whole solar systems of style squandered on unsuspecting kids!
Why is everyone so happy? How could they be?
Or is that unbridled glee merely a try at posterity,
An aching “say cheese” rictus aimed at eternity?

Each gangly pose hints at some mystery, some dream, some clue just out of frame
That will glue the scene together somehow, show us more.
There is always so much more.

Everyone pretending to be sexy
In murky dad-fashioned dens or hot silver of mountain sunlight.
They pose and pose, tongues out, eyes crossed, head-banging to riffs unheard,
Doubled at jokes forgotten,

All the hairspray in the world holding it together,
Parting bangs like waves of the Red Sea!
Observe Venus perched in her pearl-white Pontiac scallop!

And the sweaters! Like farm belts seen from the sky,
Jagged patches of cork and olive.
It all seems so sad, so graceless, so heartbreaking, the triumph of naïveté.

And that milk-wet flash, constantly caught in car windows and eyeglasses,
A quasar, an exploding star, bleaching half the scene.
It detonates in the mirror behind the prom couple in powder blue,
And they squint, impatient to be released burning into their summer evening.

It keeps going! We are powerless before it.
Those downy orange kittens died long ago,
Mischievous mutts gone under grassy yards,
Scarf-tailed goldfish gulped by porcelain—
Forest-green shag rugs ripped up and rolled away,
Squat walnut televisions, big as tombs, hauled off!

Bermuda shorts like kaleidoscopes and toucan Hawaiian shirts! Velcro!
Zebra tights, tabby purses, Star Wars pajamas, and pillbox hats!
Water skis wielded like broad swords!
Nightmare Halloween Gorillas and, O, frowning holidays with the folks!
Such animation! Cartwheels suspended for all time, mascara'd winks,
Rabbit ears rising from perms,
Ditzy headstands, sudden kisses, icy beer-chugs,
So much to forget.

Phalanxes of sophomores, acres of acne, greasy floss of waist-length hair,
Sweat-licked volleyball stars, dirt-bikers muddy as barbarians,
Silver radios the size of suitcases, weighted with depth-charges of D batteries!
Pastel sprays of bridesmaids, arrays of such uncanny silk confections!
Cloudy pyramids of wedding cake, Crayola-hot cummerbunds—

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Velvet flares of bellbottoms, misty sheen of Christmas lights,
 And all that wood paneling: In rec rooms,
 On the flanks of barge-wide station wagons.
 So auburn, so golden, so gone and lonely those years!
 Up the BB-pocked water tower, into the murky lake,
 Down to the foggy shore at dawn, away, away, away!

Those moments seem so happy, but possibly, on reflection,
 After all this time, were no *more* than more wasted time,
 Hours blissfully wasted on waves of blue smoke and sunsets,
 Or else mere remnants, meaning nothing, flash cubes discarded,
 Depleted ammunition, all wasted, all trash. . . .

And yet here, after all this time, forever floating
 In his one small happy moment,
 Everyone's fat friend, you knew him too,
 The one who made everyone laugh until ribs were raw,
 There he is above the mouthwash-blue
 Spangle of warm swimming pool,
 Like a boulder hurled by a blinded Cyclops,

Yes, he's still there, cannon-balling
 For all time in that affectionate air,
 All for us, eyes clamped shut,
 Clapsed in fetal position as everyone flinches,
 Waiting for the splash.

--ERNEST HILBERT

THE CATCHES

I have a home I don't like to go home to.
 Stupid people have placed a ban on stupid.

They've all slowed down to savor what they missed.
 What you wished for is pretty much what happened.

She has amassed important memories.
 He fought so long he lost the sense of fighting.

What revelations have come have come too soon.
 Despite large changes nothing much has happened.

I have no memory of that conversation.
 Inside the seed the full-grown flower is wilting.

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Finally we can see over the falls.
My opposite is not your opposite.

Of the five women each one had her reasons.
The mathematician disproved his own proof.

I love the stars but can't name hardly any.
Let's say for instance this is what we said.

--DAVID YEZZI