

BROOKLYN
ANTEDILUVIAN

SAMPLE POEMS FROM BROOKLYN ANTEDILUVIAN

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BROKEHEART: JUST LIKE THAT

When the bass drops on Bill Withers'
Better Off Dead, it's like 7 a.m.
and I confess I'm looking
over my shoulder once or twice
just to make sure no one in Brooklyn
is peeking into my third-floor window
to see me in pajamas I haven't washed
for three weeks before I slide
from sink to stove in one long groove
left foot first then back to the window side
with my chin up and both fists clenched
like two small sacks of stolen nickels
and I can almost hear the silver
hit the floor by the dozens
when I let loose and sway a little back
and just like that I'm a lizard grown
two new good legs on a breeze
-bent limb. I'm a grown-ass man
with a three-day wish and two days to live.
And just like that everyone knows
my heart's broke and no one is home.
Just like that, I'm water.
Just like that, I'm the boat.
Just like that, I'm both things in the whole world
rocking. Sometimes sadness is just
what comes between the dancing. And bam!,
my mother's dead and, bam!, my brother's
children are laughing . Just like—I can't
pop up from my knees so quick these days
and no one ever said I could sing but
tell me my body ain't good enough
for this. I'll count the aches right now,
one in each ankle, the sharp spike in my back,
this mud-muscle throbbing in my going bones.
I'm missing the six biggest screws
to hold this blessed mess together. I'm wind-
rattled. The wood's splitting. The hinges are
falling off. When the first bridge ends,
just like that, I'm a flung open door.

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**CHILDREN WALK ON CHAIRS TO CROSS A FLOODED
SCHOOLYARD — TAYTAY, RIZAL PROVINCE, PHILIPPINES**

(based on the photo by Noel Celis)

Hardly anything holds the children up, each poised
mid-air, barely the ball of one small foot
kissing the chair's wood, so
they don't just step across, but pause
above the water. I look at that cotton mangle
of a sky, post-typhoon, and presume
it's holding something back. In this country,
it's the season of greedy gods
and the several hundred cathedrals
worth of water they spill onto little tropic villages
like this one, where a girl is likely to know
the name of the man who built
every chair in her school by hand,
six of which are now arranged
into a makeshift bridge so that she and her mates
can cross their flooded schoolyard.
Boys in royal blue shorts and red rain boots,
the girls brown and bare-toed
in starch white shirts and pleated skirts.
They hover like bells that can choose
to withhold their one clear, true
bronze note, until all this nonsense
of wind and drizzle dies down.
One boy even reaches forward
into the dark sudden pool below
toward someone we can't see, and
at the same time, without looking, seems
to offer the tips of his fingers back to the smaller girl
behind him. I want the children
ferried quickly across so they can get back
to slapping one another on the neck
and cheating each other at checkers.
I've said time and time again I don't believe
in mystery, and then I'm reminded what it's like
to be in America, to kneel beside
a six-year-old, to slide my left hand
beneath his back and my right under his knees,

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and then carry him up a long flight of stairs
to his bed. I can feel the fine bones,
the little ridges of the spine
with my palm, the tiny smooth stone
of the elbow. I remember I've lifted
a sleeping body so slight I thought
the whole catastrophic world could fall away.
I forget how disaster works, how it can turn
a child back into glistening butterfish
or finches. And then they'll just do
what they do, which is teach the rest of us
how to move with such natural gravity.
Look at these two girls, center frame,
who hold out their arms
as if they're finally remembering
they were made for other altitudes.
I love them for the peculiar joy
of returning to earth. Not an ounce
of impatience. This simple thrill
of touching ground.

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FROM THE TITLE POEM “BROOKLYN ANTEDILUVIAN”

...I want this. I want to say
the names we've been given aloud. The ones

they took away. I want to shout out the names
of those who named us. I want to go back

far enough that all of memory gets cloudy
and we have to—as our grandfathers

and grandmothers have done for more
than four hundred years—make it up...

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