Introduction

Between the Flowers and the Rain, Richard P. Kline

Begin at the Beginnings, Donna Barkman

Becoming of Age, Donna Barkman, Maria Nepomuceno, Redemanga, 2013
Sonny With His Sword, Donna Barkman, Adrián Villa Rojas, The Theater of Disappearance, 2017
Full of Herself, Donna Barkman, Rebecca Warren, Teacher (w), 2003
Adoration, Donna Barkman, Patricia Piccinini, Undivided, 2004
She’s Seen So Much, Donna Barkman, Kiki Smith, Mother, 1991
She Touched Me, Donna Barkman, Keith Edmier, Beverley Edmier, 1967, 1998

Babies & Bruises, Tony Howorth, Figures in an art museum: Keith Edmier, Beverley Edmier, 1967;

STRENGTH & FRAGILITY, Edward D. Currelley, Kiki Smith, Mother, 1991
Mother’s Milk, Colette Kavana, Kiki Smith, Mother, 1991
RESURRECTION, Liz Burk, Berlind de Bruyckere, La Femme sans Tete, 2003
Hope, Excised, Moira Trachtenberg, Berlind de Bruyckere, La Femme sans Tete, 2003
Untitled, Alicia Morgan, Claudette Schreuders, Crying in Public, 2002 Seated,
Wayne L. Miller, Huma Bhabha, The Orientalist, 2011
Witness/Jones, Loretta Oleck, Chris Jones, Futrrapper, 2012
Birth Night, Julie Nord, Patricia Piccinini, Undivided, 2014
In Praise of Monsters, Lorraine Currelley, Patricia Piccinini, Undivided, 2004

I STILL SEE YOU, Merle Molofsky, Evan Penny, Back of Evan (Variation #3), 2006
For Argument’s Sake, Les Von Losberg, Sam Jinks, Standing Pieta, 2014
The Leaving Place, Colette Kavana, Sam Jinks, Standing Pieta, 2014
Death Sigh, Cindy Beer-Fouhy, Pawel Althamer, The Power of Now, 2016
The Alchemy of Hades, Robert Miss, Pawel Althamer, The Power of Now, 2016
There, but for the Grace of God, Go I, Walter Rabetz, Pawel Althamer, The Power of Now, 2016
NOW WHAT HAPPENED, Merle Molofsky, Pawel Althamer, The Power of Now, 2016
I’m Glad to Know Someone Like You, Verity O’Connell, Keith Edmier, Beverley Edmier, 1967, 1998
Kiss this Fish, Moira Trachtenberg, Entang Wiharso, Inheritance, 2014
Family Secrets, Loretta Oleck, Entang Wiharso, Inheritance, 2014

DON’T JUST STAND THERE. PLEASE DO SOMETHING., Gene Tashoff, Mark Manders, Iron Ruler, 2004
Leavening, Judith Heineman, Matt Johnson, Bread Figure Reclining, 2017
I wastoast before I waseven baked, Francesca Ricapito, Matt Johnson, Bread Figure Reclining, 2017
Geiger Man and the Naked Lady, Robert Miss, Damien Hirst, Death Is Irrelevant, 2000
Resurrect, 46Adam, MaryAnn McCarra-Fitzpatrick, Damien Hirst, Death is Irrelevant, 2000
In Memory of My Father in Boca Raton, Bob Zaslow, Damien Hirst, Death is Irrelevant, 2000
Untitled, Ruth D. Handel, Damien Hirst, Death is Irrelevant, 2000
Para Ti, Kahill Koromantee, Maria Nepomuceno, Redemanga, 2013
Oranges, Jo-Ann Brody, Maria Nepomuceno, Redemanga, 2013
Welcome to year 14 of *Writing the Walls*. The 2019 exhibit, *Death is Irrelevant*, was not the easiest to decipher, however, poets are always explorers and they undertook this journey through the figurative sculpture of the Straus Collection with bravery and pens blazing. We thank you all. The historical process of *Writing the Walls* begins with an invited tour with Livia Straus, co-founder of Hudson Valley MOCA. The poets found inspiration in the art works, wrote, and sent us their poems. An anonymous committee of poets and writers read the works and the resultant poems hang next to the art that inspired them.

Over the years, visitors to the museum tell us how much they've enjoyed reading the work. “It gives us a chance to know what others think,” is the most frequent comment. “It encourages me to have my own opinion about the work,” others say. Contemporary art elicits personal reflection. It is the art of our times; the art that records sensory, intellectual, and artistic history gleaned from living in the present. Contemporary art elicits a dialogue and relationship with the viewer. These poems are an expression of that dialogue and our own experiences as we face work that comments on our time and our history.

We thank the many poets who have submitted and been chosen to have their work exhibited and read. And a thanks to MaryAnn McCarra-Fitzpatrick for proofing.

Thank you,
Mara Mills and Jo-Ann Brody
Between the Flowers and the Rain
Richard P. Kline

Death Is Irrelevant

It was 5 thousand years ago
he walked across the village green,
if they called it a village green
way back in those days.
he didn't have pictures of his wife
holding their new born baby child.
so many years till cameras came,
just scratches on the cave walls,
if only they had colored chalk
or anything at all.

Sometimes we fight sometimes we live,
until there's nothing left to give.
resist! swept down a narrow lane,
between the flowers and the rain,
till we circle round the drain,
just circling around the drain.

Fingers from an unclenched fist
gently reached to touch her wrist.
putting down his bloody sword,
looks for love amidst the words,
to find unique within his herd,
big answers still escape him.

Little time to learn of love
he tried as best he can.
explored her vast treasure trove,
symbolic acts join words in poems,
a tapestry still on the loom
amongst the flowers, and perfumes.
he lays his knife beneath her bed,
soothes the impulse in his head
and tries to think of love instead,
his violent self he’ll free it.

A wisdom borne of inspiration,
doing all he can.
she's parries once more his flirtation,
barely shifts her concentration
It’s not what, but when.

This same story for millennia,
he fights to know what love is.
but now amidst the melting ice,
the storms with records broken twice,
while others talk of sea walls
some are trapped in free falls.

It comes again that very year
way too much beyond repair.
no time to finish undone plans,
forget the brotherhood of man,
forget the tired masses yearning
to breathe free.
forget the self centered, narcissistic
yearning to love me.

Amongst the lies this fool trods,
learning to love spent fuel rods,
stopping to charge his ipod,
strutting the stage his life’s fraud.

Between love and war
endlessly drifting
sometimes getting high
on a star filled sky.

Coda:
But what is life what is death,
respite in the other's breath.
from earth to life and back again,
more important than the struggle
enjoyment, memory of the same,
in your mind or that of others,
entwined with love recalls the flame.

Tis better to feel than recall feelings
explore our thoughts In holy rapture
or find a place In deepest mind,
An ember smolders warm like living,
A ripple on the water last ing,
Or a marker made from stones,
Sure not these somber bones.
Begin at the Beginnings
Donna Barkman

Becoming of Age
Maria Nepomuceno, Redemagma, 2013

Pistil  stamen  sprout  stem
leaf  blossom
yield—
orange fruit with pulp  and juice

Fetal flesh  secure
in a hammock
crazy with color
bubbling with beads

Swings into a life more lush than hers

Sonny, With His Sword
Adrián Villa Rojas, The Theater of Disappearance, 2017

He was the sixth of seven
wondering how many more
would come

Like fruit flies
in their kitchen
springing
from a rotten pear

Love bugs Mama called them
clapping and laughing
at their
proliferation

Her babies

Papa wouldn’t hear or touch them
or her
Sonny made sure of that
Full of Herself
Donna Barkman
Rebecca Warren, Teacher (w), 2003

It takes a while
to fill
to bulge
with milk and blood and life
to spill
from nipples
genitals
gut
aroused and ready

I am generous
to a fault
they say
keep some for yourself

But I am yours
breast
belly
bumptious butt
to taste
sate
gorge

Be my guest

Adoration
Patricia Piccinini, Undivided, 2004

Love like this
can’t be contained—
it swells from my embrace
to bloom through open wombs

swollen embryos
bare or hairy
will harbor this child
moored in dulcet dreams
She's Seen So Much
Donna Barkman

Kiki Smith, *Mother*, 1991

The curvature of the earth from a jet
From her kayak
   the simultaneous rising of the moon
and setting of the sun
frangipani and balsam firs
mud huts and igloos

At an age when she could be jaded
wonder at times prevails
surprise at human generosity
and mostly mendacity

She holds her breasts sensuous and
sustaining
Hail falls pinging on the roof and in her
ears
Fog obscures her once-bright vision


She Touched Me
Donna Barkman


I remember her hands as she twisted
the crochet needle to hook the yarn
and pull it through the loop

I remember her knuckly fists as they
kneaded dough, giving it a punch
and a slap before a slide into the oven.

I remember her licking her finger
to catch the edge of a page of a book

I remember her hands rolling
socks into a ball just off the line
and sunny dry

I remember her fingers curling
the end of a thread and pulling
it into a knot before stitching

I remember her hands strong
and persistent as they tugged
my hair into long thick braids

I remember her palms sandpaper
rough as they checked for fever
on my brow

I remember her hands as I look
at my own and wonder what
will be remembered
Babies & Bruises
Tony Howorth

Figures in an art museum: Keith Edmier, Beverly Edmier, 1967; Pawel Althamer, The Power of Now; Olaf Westphalen, Statue, (Laying Down); Kiki Smith, Mother

1. lady dressed in pink surrounded by antiseptic walls feels a kick in her belly lifts her blouse, whispers hello to the child inside

2. battered and hammered from wandering nowhere under skies that only ever pelt him a corner of a park, end of a bench bent into himself, exhausted mutters non-stop who you must no one need go on . . .

3. swat team swarms, handcuffs him stretches him on the sidewalk blue tie flows like blood, cheek flat on the concrete, waiting numb for what happens next

4. Rapunzel lives in a castle her long hair reaches outside to the ground the prince passes by grips it like a rope climbs through her window weeks later she feels her breasts begin to swell
ANTHONY’S IDEAL WOMAN
Liz Burk

Tony Matelli, Ideal Woman, 1998-1999

My ideal woman is deaf, dumb, blind, and owns a liquor store, proclaimed my last patient of the evening, presently wending his well-dressed way through a third divorce.

I struggle to remain inscrutable as I was trained to do, but inwardly I roll my eyes, and manage to hold back a giggle, as I engage in my own sexist musings.

Yup, that’s what most men really want, I think, but most don’t say it aloud. Although these days men claim they want smart, the contest is on when they find a woman who’s smarter.

My patient is trying with his careless quip to amuse me and to distract himself from deep hurt and disillusion—flirting with me, this lanky dapper man, daring me to disagree.

Seriously? I finally ask, as he waits, grinning, for my reply. Nah, he relents, as he reaches over to the table beside him turning around the clock so I can’t see our time is up.
PERFECTION / REFLECTION
Edward D. Currelley

Tony Matelli, Ideal Woman, 1998-1999

Flat head, large ears, toothless, naked and vulnerable
All that you are, is who I am
Your perfection, is my reflection
My taught perception of who you are, should be, have become
A forced identity of selfish convenience
Couch caddy, door mat, punching bag
Pleasure tool who submits to my sexual whims
Comforting when the man within can’t bare the pain or face the reality of weakness
Hating the strength and fortitude of your conviction, allegiance, mere presence
Yet, you remain
Tear filled glassy eyes that penetrate, staring, wondering why with each episode
Evidence of your love or fear, felt deeply from your embrace when comforting
Time after time after time
Always as I crumble on bent knee sobbing, begging for forgiveness
Again and again and again
Time after time after time
Purple bruising on arms, neck and back
Ears that suffer the burden of misguided screams and verbal assault
Yet, you remain
Silently, hiding in the shadow, waiting to comfort, enduring the pain
Time after time after time
Yet, you remain
My courage, my strength, my reflection
STRENGTH & FRAGILITY
Edward D. Currelley

Kiki Smith, *Mother*, 1991

Backed against the wall
Hanging in wait, as mothers do
Nurturing instinct at the ready
A vacant womb still experiencing echoing pains
Calls of concern, non-existent
Calls of urgency, with overwhelming frequency
The fragility of strength always overestimated
Tested time after time after time, always prevailing
Nerve racking, exhausting repetitious anticipation of woe
Bosom coupled in callused yet, gentle hands, bearing offerings again
Breast milk rich in nourishment, like blood in veins, always flowing
Body of paper, strength of steel
Hair like Rapunzel, lowered from tender not yet fully healed scalp
Yet again, assisting in the ascent to sanctuary
Pleading voices of action, echoing in silence, fallen on deaf ears
Reminder that mother’s cup, filled with righteousness is always within reach
Always ready to quench the thirst and feed the soul of her hungry child
Smallest haiku, opens its carcass
Body of calling
Sacrilege of taking
One breast a fig tree
The other a white dove
A feeding of mother's tree
Lost branch from which we grow
Nipples gentle with the stems
Suckling fulfillment, deep of flesh
Endless hollow creeping of night
Yawning cave of a mother's love
Where maternal love is the song of the flower
Suitcase of skin folded around us
Tugging impulse of paper dolls
Full hands holding the softness of brie
Burning spoiled waters, born capable of forgiveness
Nourishing of leaking milk, poured nipples of golden harvest
Where heart lives in the middle of earth and blood of river
Where crest of waves spill milk, from menstrual blood's thick knowledge
Where death and dreams are a strange place
A women utterly silent, in the picked clean of her carcass
Cage she is incorpsed to
Lifetime reservoir
Corridor of blood
Necessity of born flesh
An empty swan of dried river
Flapping her wings against the rain
Indigo of separation
Final moment of relief
Conjoined passage of birth and death

Body to body    Bone to bone
the limber body, smooth flesh
    strong bones, resilient spine, the moxie
and verve of my younger self. The wish
to haul that body from the graveyard
    of buried hope haunts me, stirs images
of endless calisthenics and vitamin brews,
    nutrient-rich tasteless diets, enemas.

My six-year old self lurks inside, erupts in an argument
    with my husband, sulks, slams doors. My 12-year-old
appears at faculty meetings, craves approval, weeps at frowns.
The 40-year-old flirts shamelessly, dances
    past midnight—the Texas Two-Step,
Whisky River Jitterbug, West Coast Lindy—drinks
    bourbon to ease pain.

But they all wake up the next morning
    in the crone’s aging body, with sprained knee,
twisted tendons, bruised hips, rumbling tummy.

A bittersweet caution creeps in—is it wiser
    to relinquish pulse and desire, the longing
for an African safari? A trip to Moscow clashes
    with the wisdom of staying home with a book.

I remind myself from time to time, *I’m old.*
The body is worn, the mind rusty. My Zen
friends ask, *Why isn’t it enough to just be?* And yet

how can I surrender my yen
    to sky dive, play fiddle, write poems,
make love? To walk all available avenues
    before this body folds?
Hope, Excised
Moira Trachtenberg

Berlinde de Bruyckere, La Femme sans Tete, 2003

All haunch and hunch
and cropped
the only apparent effeminate
the waist
pinched and tucked
scrawny feet
(so little to balance on)
without head
without arms
without breasts
so circumcised

Circumscribed
in gray and white
only the faintest blush of pink
labia-less on a rusted
lab table
the empty results of
every medical study
an experiment in absentia
due to the very exclusion
of women—
excision

And yet the soul
hovers its presence
claims its space
in this void
of necessary parts
lay on your hands
soak up the pain
don’t panic—
it may not decimate you

Take on this task
warm her waxen flesh
until pliable
remodel without fear
untwist cold despair
build her up
into a new shape
and name it hope
**Untitled**  
**Alicia Morgan**

Claudette Schreuders, *Crying in Public*, 2002

In her gallery Uptown  
The artist is crying

Sneaking amongst the wreckage  
A cross-cultural pillager

Our lady of various sorrows  
A Madonna on timeshare

Carved from a single piece  
Of Old World stock.

In her studio Downtown  
The artist is transcendent

Our Lady Valarosa  
Fearless and knowing

Rising to the occasion  
With pulse racing

Exultant to the glory  
Of divine love.
Wind sun sandstorms
strip once-painted skin
from this King who rules
abandoned regions
barren and inhospitable,
staring at the wall,
looked upon by you ignorant of his name.

Read the inscription
that omit the victories and accomplishments
he heroically achieved
through wise mind and mighty body.
Witness
Loretta Oleck

Chris Jones, Furtrapper, 2012

Spectator of the dead.
Bystander to tragedy.
Onlooker of trauma.

I’ve been called a gore ghoul,
and although I denounce that label,
on some level, I know it’s true.

I was there, 9/11-
interviewing relatives of the deceased,
photographing devastation,
camera and notebook in hand.

I’ve documented war zones,
pressed lens to my eye, searching
for perfect angles and nuanced light
to better capture the plight of the starving,
and the sites of mass destruction.

All the while, scribbling fragmented
metaphors to later build into articles
and poems.

If it matters. As if it heals.

Shame burns inside as I edit photographs-
a voyeuristic pursuit bordering on addiction.

As if it matters. As if it heals.

What is my responsibility as witness?
To share the story, or to hold it in confidence?
To distract myself from myself?

How often do I awaken from nightmares
and flashbacks to find my heart numb
amid chaos?

Must I become larger than life to be loved by you?
To be loved by anyone?

Might I learn to bear witness to the mundane
without dying?

Is death irrelevant?
Buttoning your soft blue pajamas, little boy,  
you curled up on your ample mattress  
where there was plenty of room for something  
to join you and spoon, nestling  
its naked pudge around your back.  
How sleepy you must have been  
to not notice its arrival—it does not have  
a body type that could maneuver subtly.  
The mattress would have groaned  
at the creature’s weight. And  
the entire bed must have rocked,  
a boat taking on a clumsy  
passenger, and it’s possible  
the armadillo-like plates that run down its spine  clacked and rattled as it drew you  
close to its belly. Yet here you two lie now,  
peaceful, as if you were matching peas in a pod, yet  
to anyone awake and observant you look  
oppositional, unalike in the extreme.  
The smile on your boy lips is baby-blissful as if  
you were back in your mama’s womb, while  
the ugliness cuddling you slumbers  
through the birthing of infant revisions  
of itself—no, not quite of itself . . . No, the litter it’s spawning  
from its back has shed the scales and  
replicates your smile and porcelain skin, while sporting full fur coats,  
and each baby’s little brown claws  
are clenched up in the most human-like, fetal sleep.  
Whatever is emerging during this night,  
sleep well all of you, while you still can.
In Praise of Monsters
Lorraine Currelley

Patricia Piccinini, Undivided, 2004

one night when Jeffrey was a little boy he could not sleep. he heard a sound. looking around his
room he could not tell where the sound was coming from. opening his closet door, there was
only silence. where could the sound be coming from? I know! so, he peeked underneath his bed.
there his eyes met with a curious face like no face he had ever met before. staring back at him.
the face had large eyes and a smile that looked as though it was about to break into laughter.
suddenly as quickly as it had appeared it disappeared. don’t go! don’t go! Jeffrey cried out.
crawling underneath his bed he searched but there was nothing to be found. the following night
when it was time for him to go to bed he pleaded with his parents to come with him, saying he
had something special to show them. go to bed Jeffrey and take Toby bear his parents shouted
from their bedroom. Mommy, Daddy, please come!

there are no monsters living under our beds!
there are no monsters living under our beds!

children do not cry themselves to sleep. nor do toys comfort needing souls no matter how soft
and cuddly. nor provide love’s tender embrace, warmth and soothing words. nor weave magic’s
colors and joy into sweet song. their tears are comforted by those responding to the universal
child’s cry when others fail to listen. children understand, know and speak the language of
love’s true purity and same.

there are no monsters living under our beds!
there are no monsters living under our beds!

when Jeffrey became a parent he cuddled with his children, told them stories and sung until
they had fallen asleep. he spoke of monsters not being unworldly creatures; but us in our most
shameful and evil form, when trying to hurt others in failed attempts to heal the hurting and
ugly spaces in barren hearts and souls.

words like they, we, them, us, other becoming the monsters keeping us from ourselves and each
other. they are different from us. We are different from them, makes the labeled other possible.
the feared, suspected dangerous outsider. the one who does not belong. the one who does not
look like us.

there are no monsters living under our beds!
there are no monsters living under our beds!

there are only the ones we create and place there.
I turned my back away from the absurdity of today’s politics, not America
Ironically, I find myself still facing a wall
The wall, real or not, has already manifested itself through the back channels dark politics
America is larger than an individual, bigger and stronger than any singular political party

My back is turned from politics that resist its founding ideals, closes its doors on the growing inevitability of change, choosing an un-just electoral college over the one person one vote promise.

America is suffering from fear, greed, the perpetuation of hate and the allowed flawed leadership that has closed its eyes on a nation and leaving We the people without guidance or direction.

Our youth, the future of this nation is scrambling, clutching at false hopes and distant promises.

The beauty of America has always been in the belief that all things are possible.
That the dreams and ideals of democracy will lead to prosperity.

We are all dreamers and must not allow dark politics to forget that a blind eye is exactly what it is, and that the road map defining our nation, drawn on parchment, stands on its own, but, only when adhered to.

We are all dreamers.

When we’re allowed to dream, America stands tall, proud, strong and un-matched America is the land of infinite possibilities and opportunity, there is no better nation than a nation that represents every culture and people on the entire planet.

Like me, it’s time for the dark politics of America to turn around.
Don’t turn away,
I’m still here, are you listening?

Time is turning us to stone, or gravel, or silt.
You imagine you are so all alone,
you sit motionless, and travel
into an emptiness you still believe we had built
together.

You think you will live forever,
but I still see you....
Okay, let’s say for argument’s sake
That death is irrelevant. I could
Pontificate upon the meaning
Of irrelevance from epistemological
First principles or from a cosmological
Perspective illuminate the cyclicality
Of matter and energy in time and space;
Or dumb it down and sing the praises
Of the never-ending circle of life
Like some Disney animal cliché.

But I’d rather speak about the dead,
The dead whose sudden departure—
It’s always sudden, that brash
Transition from here to there—alters
The world irreparably: grandparent,
Parent: the ground shifts out
From under our feet; brother,
Sister: the air we breathe rarifies,
Becomes less dense, less sustaining;
A child, a grandchild: the soul
Of the world contracts, grows hard
And brittle, cracks. Even a stranger’s
Death leaves a hairline fracture
In the beautiful world we’ve been
Force-fed in school, by television,
In church and synagogue and mosque
By those who know nothing
About what really happens next.

Whether death is relevant or not
For the dead is, in every relevant way,
Irrelevant, but nothing diminishes death
for the living. Anything to the contrary
is a lie, a hoax, a fairytale, or a miracle:
this is all one can say with certainty,
and all we can say in the moment
is irrelevant as well and of no matter.
It's time to go it's time to go
Someplace full of flat blue sky
Full of sshhuush and quiet
The close of tired eyes
No longer to hear the call of morning
The sensed distance stretching it's defeating
spine between our hearts
The haunting gale of vacancy to fill the
hollows of our eyes
There is no thief to blame because we loved
you
We will send you into the night
Hand you a compass and tell you it will be
alright
Before we lose each other beneath an
endless sky
We will find ourselves again amongst your
shadow
Turn the hours, hold the pages of your
hands
Suckle darkness too heavy to swallow
We will walk backwards into the vexed
destinies of a shared life
The confines of a heart, which is without
confinement, in final pause
Before the threshold of the inexhaustible
silence of lose
How far it feels from the infatuation of
childhood
How thin time seems, how late the
fragrance
Bursting from moments of before
And how your name will throb inside our
minds, and how our hearts dissolve
Into a trembling luminous confusion of
bright anguished tears
Beyond the depth of sight, there is a
kingdom of peace
Vibrating like a cloud of fireflies in warm
summer air
And now that disembodied grief has come
our way
We float in a literary kind of sadness
The suspension of a life and the
remembrance of yours in ours
Where the sky will remain a page of water
Where the life we have longed for finds us
all at the end
The body as a kind of place where the soul
migrates in a spiral of completion
That brings relief and freedom from all
complexity
Escaping one by one into the embers of its
former life
Where the waiting is over the repentance
done, ascending into a final sacrament
of light
We have never really known how intricate a
tone of voice could be
Or how evasive the direct approach to life,
and all of it's conditional endings, could
finally become
A minor shading or a faint intoxication, of a
now memory held in our mind
In pristine of innocence and all insubstantial
floating intellect, we will seek to
understand
The feel of wind which blows the soul about
Where nothing can bring a fragrance back,
or make it breathe again
We will feel the chill of something much too
bold too comprehend
As night folds, we will watch the stars come
out in revelry of fallen silence
Death is still the unimaginable, shadowing
the years
It’s time to go It’s time to go
Death Sigh
Cindy Beer-Fouhy

Sam Jinks, Standing Pieta, 2014

Not nearly ready
To let go,
I lean to hold your
Limp body

As life escapes
Not all at once
But like the breath of long sighs.

Not audible sighs
Of grief or sadness or lost love
But sighs that leave without sound

Like a wave goodbye,
The vapor hand of a
Bottled genie set free.

Perhaps the sigh
Of suffering’s end
I tell myself.

But still not ready
To let go,
I close my eyes,

Tighten my hands
Around your arms
Clenching life,

Unyielding
As a held breath.
We sat on the rim of Hades watching the firemen emerge from the mammoth pit in their dusty shuttle bus. They had labored a twelve-hour shift to clear the debris and find the bones that were not incinerated. When melted computers fuse with flesh an insidious fragrance effuses the air like leftover funeral flowers. Perhaps more like the smell emitted from the furnaces at Auschwitz, or the smoldering Cheyenne tepees left burning by Custer’s cavalry.  

Such was the malingering scent at ground zero of America’s commerce, the towering twins born from the loins of mammon, reduced now to a hole in the ground of twisted metal and sticky-gray ashes. While the other firemen sat, heads down, exhausted, Captain Murphy sat next to us, rogue visitors who somehow slipped past security to vainly see if we could help. He did not question us, but spoke about his family in Queens, and his first responder son who made it out in time. For us to play counselor or consoler, quote the Bible or a spiritual healer would have been a meaningless distraction.

Captain Murphy was pure American steel doing what he was trained to do, and he was doing it well. The survival of his son, his love for family and country was positive enough on this sunny day in September, overlooking Hell.
Trapped inside the minefield of your mind, voices calm and coax, mock and joke, lure you, daily, into the ravenous mouth of a bottomless pit.

You tell me that 4,600 feet underground in the tunnels of a far away gold mine, lives a worm called Mephisto—a devil-worm from hell.

You weep when you tell me that only this blind worm can endure such dark, cramped spaces of the deep.

I say, then, you too must be a worm.

Your headlamp casts light only a few feet in front of you, never bright enough to see anything whole, including me.

I have become a piece-meal messy mosaic, a patchwork of a partner. You know you are still alive on the rare occasion when you catch a glimpse of my thighs tangled in sheets, my lips cracked from the heat. More often, a stray beam from your helmet, like a bullet, pierces my bones, jagged and sharp rocks under flesh.

The voices in your head have become noisy, now.

They speak the language of dead miners, ghosts getting in our way. They are loud enough for me to clearly hear their words, weighing out what is real and what is an illusion—

even in the center of earth, darkness doesn’t exist. The sun never sets. It continually burns. I am a worm. I am rock. I am coal. I am earth. I am sky. I am light. I am you.

I am.

You remind me, the blind, devil-worm will be the last bastion of bloom when this world tumbles into ruins.

I say, you too have thrived inside a barren womb without sunshine, without oxygen. And, you would no longer recognize me if you saw me naked in the light.

You may be a worm but I am a canary.

When you emerge from the shadows of the mine, and the chatter of your mind, don’t bother coming home.

This canary no longer whistles.
There, but for the Grace of God, Go I

Walter Rabetz

Pawel Althamer, The Power of Now, 2016

Each morning on the way to work,
I pass a man sitting in a cardboard box with plastic over it.
Legs sticking out!
Winter -cold.
Shoes - with holes - where scraps of newspaper instead of toes, stick out.
A small can sits in front next to a scribbled cardboard sign.

Thank you -Praise the Lord.

This morning as I am about to pass the man and reach into my pocket for some change, the gentle snow flakes stop and the sky brightens just as I was murmuring to myself, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” I am overwhelmed with the reality of that phrase and its deepest meaning. What if, I, was that man and not vice president of… at that moment …I am compelled to bend down, take off my shoes and exchange them for his, as I do this, I hear a melodic

“There, but for the grace of God, go I “

I realize that I am cold, - very cold, with frozen toes. I look up and I see a man in a warm elegant overcoat bending down and putting several coins in my box.

With frozen lips I say,

“Thank you - Praise the Lord.”
I hear your silent words. witnessing your body bent over as though in prayer. I see the mask that protects and hides your pain. I smile my mouth forming the word hello. you deserve so much more. this is a dance we acknowledge and understand. there will be no perks nor government handouts for our children and families. unlike, fat asses pimping our blood. living high off of our dime. Brother, I got my own story to tell.

seems like my mama was always working to provide for her family. we children witnessing blood, sweat and tears pay for our survival and lives. sun up and sun down is how we learned to tell time. half a day meant 7 to 12. full day meant 7 to 4. overtime, meant mama arriving home by 6 or 7 sometimes, taking a little nap before caring for her own family.

when mama awoke from her nap. We were always eager to hear mama’s stories. bachelors, masters, and doctorates operating elevators, pushing mops, sweeping floors and caring and consoling other people’s children when she had to leave her own. she managed to make hard work sound like adventures.

mama’s telling was always colorful and dramatic. the more we laughed the more dramatic she became. we would plead with her to tell them over and over again. finally after the second or third telling she would say okay that’s enough now, leaving to prepare dinner while we completed our homework. she would tell us from the kitchen what to lay out to wear to school in the morning. we could cook some things. but mama preferred cooking for her family and said she did not want us messing up good food.

mama’s reward was well fed children, content smiles, a roof over our heads, clothing on our backs, compliments on the meals she prepared, laughter and hope. an ever present resiliency birthing generations of Black women and men. standing tall sometimes delayed dreams but never broken spirits. This is what mama’s hands gave the world.
Old Grandmother knows the stories, knows the truth of everything that happened everywhere, to everyone. She wove a magic carpet when she was young, dreaming she could fly, and then she could. Old Grandmother twirls the carpet in the air, and all eyes follow, and obey, and see what she tells us is truly there. In the park, where children play, she cast the carpet on the grass, and there it lay, until she gave it form. Transform! she cried, and carpet danced its way to being bench. Park bench. Whoever finds her way, his way, to sit and ponder what has brought her there, him there, expects to dream a magic carpet dream. Some may. Some won’t. Some find that they are stuck in time, remembering what they should forget. Is rosemary for remembrance? The grass is only grass, but if you ran along the edge and saw the bench your thoughts would turn pensive, and you’d think of pansies, of thyme, of rue. Old Grandmother knew that one day he’d return to her empty of dreams....
Why Does Now Move?
Wayne L. Miller

Pawel Althamer, The Power of Now, 2016

Staring into the floor
hands over his ears
suspended in toxic complicity
with a burden of psychological
time jumping from conditioned patterns
denying any presence running
from the future into an existence
before memory questions
if a milestone is moved ten feet is it
still a milestone or a stepping stone
why is most of life in the present
why does now move one second
per second but I am still here still here
and if I reprogram my curse words
to gosh-darn can I become a griot
and if I tear all the pages
from a book and read them
in order did I just read a book
and today is the last goddamn
goodsweet day of doing nothing
and if I haven’t looked into a mirror
am I still there and I have
no money I’m hungry there’s no
work and what time is it
now and I can’t stay here now
gonna get up to go to the bathroom
at the coffee shop now ask
for a sandwich find a warm subway
grating for tonight and I haven’t got time
and I can’t move now
In the end, flesh rots
Or is turned to ash,
Or is dried out
Like a large piece
Of candied fruit—
But we know this,
At least for the deceased,
Is irrelevant.

What isn’t
And what wasn’t
Even for the dead
Is the first pink blush
Of a young girl’s cheeks,
The crimson flush of her
Burgeoning pubescence,
The delicate scarlet of marriage,
The rouge rush first sex
Washes over her chest and neck,
The delicate pink blossom
Swell of her belly as she waits
To make life, hidden away,
An impending miracle, appear;
To make death—however
Irrelevant in the end—once
Again all that seems to matter.
You have to pay five dollar admissions
Then I’ll lift it up
Then I’ll let you see
The little baby that
Grows inside of me
Pretty cute
Hopefully it won’t turn out
Looking like you
Have the image of an
Angel and the wings of one too
I don’t want you to touch
Stay at a safe distance
All day long I look
Through the plexiglas to see it move
Its eating me
Maybe it likes chocolate too
One day I woke up and it was there
I don’t know what to do with it now
It keeps growing
And I know
That one day it will tear me apart
And scream into the world
And conquer me
And the creatures in the sea
For now I’ll let it be
It’s the closest one can be to another thing
I’m glad I got it
I hope it likes pink
And touching reflections
In dirty pools
On side streets
It is all of the things we never talked about, this fish, all lips and gulp and gape. 
But now, a fish out of water these things we never talked about so obvious glistening here on the table and yet dying because we could never admit any of them were there! that they needed water and not air or air and not water or at least not a wall of fog like the drugs our mother consumed for pain no one called it addiction even when she marked the hours until the next pill right on the bottle like our father, who never helped us with our homework who never talked about his father who jumped off a roof harboring no illusion that he could fly he landed as hard as the fish on this table the evidence is overwhelming that many things in this world exist even though never acknowledged this is your inheritance children to see to confront to resolve for a better future— embrace this fish kiss it on the lips
Family Secrets  
Loretta Oleck  

Wife: Straight spine. Silver dagger in thick hair—it would only take a quick flick of her wrist to send it flying, directly into her husband’s jugular.

Instead, she sits, prim and proper, and says— you have been nothing but a bonefish, feeding in shallow mudflats with the incoming tide. Feeding on lies spit out since the day we married.

What lies? Husband asks.

Lies you slurp and scrape, she says. Fitting falsehoods over fact. Only an expert angler could bait you, turning you belly up to fillet your truth. Spineless man.

Husband: Severed head in hand. Dreams oozing out the neck-dead dreams, dreaded themes, over and again. Will his wife never speak the truth?

Husband says to Wife—you are Narcissus, peering at yourself in the pond where the orange Koi grow so large they no longer resemble fish. You have spent decades in love with your own reflection and its ever-changing complexion. Like the Koi, your pallor looks nothing as it did the day we married.

Wife says, you are a bonefish, not a Koi. You are a skittish, grey ghost retreating into deeper waters when the tide ebbs, hiding from light.  
Son Number One: Butterfly, twitchy hands. Thoughts rumbling. Ruminating. Stop! He wants to shout.  
He wants to gut this fish. He wants to steal the dagger from his mother’s perfect up-do. Stab it into the tail. Draw the blade up towards the head. Split it open. Use his spit to rinse out its insides filled with secrets and lies. But, Son Number One knows he won’t do it.

A family is as unhealthy as its many secrets untold.

Son Number Two: Lives in shadows as a phantom. Tunes out the cacophony of all that is thought but is never spoken. His heart is broken. He goes through the motions of family dinners, all the while, planning his escape. He is a coy and cunning boy. He can morph his face to look like anybody else’s. He can keep secrets so close to his chest they appear to be nothing but his beating heart. He can flee, and his family will never notice he is gone.

Wife: Looks past the lolling fish tongue, resting heavy on her lap, deep inside its gaping mouth. She sees the bones of her future, and has no other choice but to cut out this Koi’s tongue.

Some songs should never be sung.

Husband will throw the severed head aside. Dreams lost in a tide of secrets. He will ride the tongue-less Koi like a wild bronco. Perhaps, then, he will impress his unimpressionable wife.

Son Number One will live a shortened life—a butterfly landing, too soon, on the razor’s edge of mother’s blade.

Son Number Two never existed, but no one ever knew.

A family stew of secrets—neatly plated and served. An unspoken pact pulsing through their veins—the fish who keeps its mouth shut will never get caught.
DON’T JUST STAND THERE. PLEASE DO SOMETHING.
Gene Tashoff

Mark Manders, Iron Ruler, 2004

You can see what my creator has done to me.
Or what he’s not done. Left me naked, entrapped and debauched -
without arms or breasts, seemingly dead, robbing me of the
opportunity to be a fully realized woman.

Why? Perhaps to express his rage at a lover who left him.
Or a mother who could not express love to him. Or a public
that at first didn’t accept him.

But I still have a brain, a fine, pliant one, if I do say so myself.
That is, if I could speak. My artist doesn’t know that.
He would be outraged if he did. And he would neither
understand nor tolerate it.

Despite my limitations, I have hopes, dreams and aspirations.
Starting with a need to join all the other strong-minded young women who are using their
intelligence and ambition to run things.
Look at your recent elections. I’ve heard all about them from
scores of visitors like you.

I know a lot, actually. I know the painter Cy Twombly said, “In art, it’s what you leave out, not
what you put in.” His and my artist’s arrogance could fill all the galleries and museums on the
planet.

This gallery’s owners are fine, knowledgeable people,
fully appreciative of their art. But they are in the thrall of my
artist’s skill and reputation, so they don’t understand my need
to be whole and alive.

I desperately need your help in convincing my creator
to complete me. Though his ego would probably say that I’m complete when he says I am.

I’m aware that this would be hard. But you know what was really hard? Telepathically
convincing one of your male poets to write this page of what I call free-me verse.
Leavening
Judith Heineman

Matt Johnson, Bread Figure Reclining, 2017

Needing dough
Is not enough

Half baked ideas
rise in the recesses
ingredients
ooze, slide, solidify
crusts of memory

stoked meticulously
early morning embers
ignite
woodfired
at the perfect temperature

bemused baguettes
emerge
mere bagatelles
elongated
rounded
pounded
stretched and folded back onto itself

food for thought

Pungent aroma intoxicates
beckoning warmth
security, ritual

Taste buds scream
I was toast before I was even baked
Francesca Ricapito

Matt Johnson, Bread Figure Reclining, 2017

First you pat it
Then you roll it
Then you mark it with an XX

Poor sad-sack baker’s man
called knuckles probing my flesh.
Pushing me into shapes that fit your hand,
stretching me wide,
flipping me over,
and doing it again.
I see your mouth watering.
You want to feel me?
Want to crush my crust and cut me open?
Stick your face up close and smell me?
Are you going to taste me?
Butter me up and eat my soft insides?
Feel the heat: I’m rising. I’m hot and fresh.
And you can chew on that.
This is the night of the snow moon.
It rises above the curved rim of the sea,
sending a spume of waves
rushing like tossed silver to the very shore.
But the black swan of night swoops down
to turn dark the sweeping strand.
A solitary figure follows the
scratchy clicks of his Geiger counter,
probing the beach inch-by-inch
for sandy treasure,
a bobbing flashlight in his hand.
At the beach motel, a whirr of alabaster legs
sweeps across the shadowed rooftop.
Lounging guards protecting their rebel commander,
see the naked lady as a moving target,
but too late as she swings through an open window,
probably into the arms of her lover, they surmise.
A tossed grenade pre-empts the imagined tryst.
Two lovers dying in each other’s arms.
Geiger man’s headphones cancel out
the explosive mayhem. He does not pause.
The guards are unsure of detection.
They run toward the surf, snatch the Geiger counter,
make the man kneel in the sand,
shoot him in the back of the head.
Only empty coke cans are uncovered
as they play with the Geiger counter
then abandon it.
It’s daybreak. Some people are now walking their dogs
up and down the beach.
They are afraid to go near or even look at the body.
But in the morning glare, the tattoo of a naked woman
across Geiger man’s back cannot go unnoticed.
He had it made to please his wild and beautiful wife.
MaryAnn McCarra-Fitzpatrick

Resurrect, 46 Adam

Damien Hirst, Death is Irrelevant, 2000

a heart, first, from a cooperative doctor
to place behind those ivory bars—
more pleasing eyes—those will come later

she winds the sinews through her hands,
applying them there, and there, and there,
again counting the joints of his bones,
telling those beads,
hardness between her thumb and index finger,
then places the lacy tributaries of veins,
scarlet,
plushly branched lungs, to bring him life

46 Adam—do you hear me?
46 Adam—what’s your status?
46 Adam—check and advise.

for a scrap, embracing vitriol as their oxygen.

the tension must be just right
to make him smile again, the eyes to see, azure as the painted sky breaking above her head,
the flesh laid skillfully onto the boneframe, ivory, freckled, supple as that of a newborn child, drawn up
over the skull before she bends and breathes life into him, for “death shall have no dominion” this day, the brainpan, heavily grey, tightly knotted, placed just so

And shall we dance again?

from the apse she hears—them—in
the transept, gorging on carrion corpses,
dead horseflesh, dead dogs, these pulsing with
glistering maggots, each a throbbing jewel,
fit victuals for those who twist scripture
to their own ends—mewling, shrieking,
nursing their air of perpetual grievance, aching to be offended, spoiling

Resurrect, 46 Adam, and shake
your black locks,
freed, finally, from these splayed strictures, that most unnatural stance, check and advise and
dance all your days, reborn,
rebounding, resounding, answering the call to live,
speaking truth to the faces of liars.
Memory of My Father in Boca Raton  
Bob Zaslow

Damien Hirst, Death is Irrelevant, 2000

Listened to his breaths.  
They were more forced.  
Lifted my eyes from the paper.  
Hospice bed covers barely moved.  
Eyes closed, lips closed, ears open?  
Nurse must have folded his glasses into their plastic case.  
The one that always closed with a CLACK!  
Which forty years ago told me Daddy was done reading for the night.  
I could hear that sound through my sister’s bedroom to mine.  
I liked hearing the CLACK! before I fell asleep.  
An exclamation point on the day.  
Wondered if I’d ever hear it again.  
That’s a lie. I knew.  
Stopped reading, and, moving close to his ear, told him what a great job he’d done.  
Kissed his forehead, and said, “I love you. I’ll be right back.”  
Two minutes later, Nurse touched my shoulder.  
“He’s passed,” she said. No words came.  
“I’ve seen it before. Some people wait until their loved ones have left the room to take their last breath.”  
I don’t know how long I stood by his bed, but before I left I tucked the glasses case into my pocket.
**Untitled**

**Ruth D. Handel**

Damien Hirst, *Death is Irrelevant*, 2000

eyes spin but the skeleton’s pinioned
encased in a plexiglass boat,
honey and money remaindered and stripped,
at sea without landfall or moat

arrested mid-air for years and a day
bones attesting to human life claim,
compressed within boundary above and below
no landing for whatever remains

palms cupping upward, arms stretching out,
reminding of crucifixion,
a torso of bone without fracture or strain
ribs bulging with skeletal conviction

steady in place the bones of the feet,
one curving over the other,
left foot is raised, sole deeply etched,
two almost identical lovers.

the ping pong eyes of this skeletal face
with insouciant irrelevance spin,
disdaining aluminum, steel, rubber tubing
and hint at a spirit within

bulbs revolve above the cadaver’s calmed bones,
disclaiming all shock or surprise,
no outsider vision can mock them
or quiet their trickster eyes.

Moving they stake claim as the prime remains,
though contours of bone appear;
eyes dance in an aura of blinking light,
humorous movement, outcome unclear.
On the other hand,
There’s you
And your tendency
To position yourself
According to which side
The coconut falls
And yet I fought for you
Let your babies
Suck at my offended nipples
I fed you my music
To help shape
Your identity of convenience
Where you honor my ancestry
But laugh at my skin color

And I still fight for you
Cut down sugar canes for you
When the one who stole your nose
Builds walls to keep you
From crossing over
To the heavenly place
Where you learn to deny me
Of even a respectful glance

It’s that same tendency
To pick at my treasures
But marry the one
Who throws you crumbs
That you answer to
So devotedly
Or risk being seen with me

There’s a reason why congas
Came from the Congo
Why you need me
Only when a baby’s on the way
Why you need me
Only when I bring you healing
It’s that tendency
Of selective memory
When I remember everything.
Eve ate an apple
not an orange.
It fell from the tree
In the garden of Eden.

But this is the tropics
orange tree, bright, lush colors
A hammock filled with me
Me filled with tree

The scent of orange blossoms from my youth
It’s a good place to live if you are an orange, she said
But she wanted city life, culture, urbanity not an
Orange tree all prickly
Not unlike a rose bush
In the desert miles from nowhere.

Hammock all
rose colored, reds, oranges, and burgundy.

Woman as vessel, holder of the future
A clay woman holding life, nourishment, promise
And a tree
fertility figure
Venus figure
Me