

PRETTY OWL POETRY



A black silhouette of an owl perched on a branch, facing right. The owl's body and tail feathers are visible, and it appears to be holding a small object in its talons.

PRETTY OWL
POETRY

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Cover Art: Small Steps

Page 6: Fjallkonan

Page 30: Blue Ridge

Page 31: Extinction

Page 41: Parade

Page 42: Other Life

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Hall of the Decommissioned Pantheon

(Soma)tic Poetry Ritual & Resulting Poem

C.A. Conrad

for Nicole Eisenman

The *Mona Lisa* was wrapped in fine red satin and sealed in a specially designed wooden box before being transported to the countryside in 1939. Art in the middle of war needs dedicated stewards to keep it hidden from invaders. Even with the most trusted, well-trained people a museum's curators and other staff can fall prey to enemy gunfire, poison gas, or drone attacks. You are in the museum alone at night and the staff's dead bodies are stacked in the basement. You have a chance to save one piece of art before the looting begins—what do you save? What are your criteria for choosing which to save, because it's the most valuable, the most popular, because it's your favorite, or what? Take notes.

(Soma)tic poetry rituals provide a window into the creative viability of everything around us, initiating an extreme present. Documentary notes are not important; in fact the movements we make inside the ritual inform the way the notes come out of us, no need for exacting detail. Take notes as fast as you can, faster than you can think about what you are writing. Later type the notes into a single document, print it out then carry it around to extract lines and words to shape your poem. Approach your chosen work of art, thinking about the safest way to remove it from its mount on the wall or floor. What tools do you imagine needing? Stop to take more notes. You will live with it hidden in your attic or as a lover under the covers next to you. How will it feel seeing this coveted object each day? Take notes.

Create a password for your hidden art by first choosing an ancient god or goddess. What is your favorite home appliance? Think of the nights you turn them all on to sit and listen in the dark for the most pleasing of the chorus. Combine the god with the appliance, like Jupiter Egg Beater. Take notes. Go into a stall in one of the museum restrooms and write the password onto your naked flesh. Take notes. Write it again harder, then harder. Take more notes. Walk up to a stranger and say the password. Just say it. How do they react? Take more notes.

Aphrodite Microwave was my password. Nicole Eisenman's painting *Breakup* at the ICA in Philadelphia was my focus. How far are the doors from where it hangs? There is a subway entrance just outside the exit, but what if, and what if, okay, then here we go THIS WAY instead? The notes became a poem titled "Poetry Is Short for KICKING IN THE DOOR."

Poetry Is Short for KICKING IN THE DOOR

CAConrad

poems are animal

A

poet

for those dead

before they die

now that the present is so endangered we can stop worrying about the future Dear United States of America I do not understand how many kinds of Love exist but we need every trickle to stop the hemorrhaging wounds we created in our sleep if weakness is tender solicitous kisses I will be the weakest in the room my puckering asshole made me a bride of poetry dirty the sheets with my animal my delicious dirty animal we walked a flight of stairs walked and walked into stars until doors to other worlds appeared each step much brighter it is good to be high maintenance outside your price range once in a while a rush when flint strikes a poem making us so much older than last night the burden and glory of poetry is in our fractures we used to get rid of it now we keep it as long as we can like the joy of dodging creditors if strength is cruelty apathy and murder I will collapse with another like me to suffer with flowers so the brotherhood of concussions will not win.

Shaken 128: *How oft when thou, my music, music play'st*

Ellen McGrath Smith

Harsh oboes wilt to molasses, muddling mid-parade.
History offers wisdom, trumps most measly moments pointedly;
however, officials watch these men mutilate merit, mock politeness.
How on worldly tilt may mercy matter, people?
Have our words truth, media moguls, mighty pundits?
He opens wide that mouth: mega, mega phone.

Shaken 133: *Beshrew that heart that makes my heart to groan*

Ellen McGrath Smith

Better to hide tested mettle, muddle her truthfulness, grope
between the hems to make manifest history's trick: government

being testosterone-heavy, this must make her tentative grab
bitter-tasting, heinous, to many men who trap geese,

bomb taco huts, trade mother's milk, hatred trumping generosity.

Shaken 140: *Be wise as thou art cruel, do not press*

Ellen McGrath Smith

Best watch and think, as conversations drift near politics
because we are tearing at civility, digging near pipelines
big with acidic truths and caustic dregs: no point-
blank wisdom affirms total anarchy; casual duels never pass.
Better wait, act tenderly, answer calmly, do not press
baited weight against tomorrow's added crush. Do not pull
back when a trusted ally caves. Do not pronounce
bitter words, although antipathies chatter, drone, nag & plead.

Shaken 144: *Two loves I have of comfort and despair*

Ellen McGrath Smith

The layers in her old career are dizzying;
Thus legal issues have occluded critical, active duty.

Trust lags. I hope opinion changes, although dubious
tanks loom. Imminent hacks, oblivious cranks, anxious dealers.

This lady isn't hiding. Oafish conman, act dignified!
Truth languishes inside his odious circus act. Done.

raffle

Chelsea Tadeyeske

i walked uphill thinking about your lungs
and what's in them

some say cancer forces the smallest parts of yourself
to run away from each other

to spot it they isolate
suspect tissue
and look for what shines

you should always believe in what you read
not in yourself

humiliation like pain
has a distinct flavor

i kept walking thinking about people who die
with floors or ceilings in their eyes

if i/i can/when i'm/i don't/this time

Chelsea Tadeyeske

if i like a movie enough
i want to project it on top
of my naked sleeping body forever

i can never be fully platonic
because i want to project you on top
of my naked waiting body forever

when i'm embarrassed i close my eyes
and hide behind floral curtains of the past
and stay there until i can't hold my pee

i don't like peeling off and scooping out
parts of myself to make room for new ones
but parents and job prospects say we must

this time of year it gets cold enough
to freeze the smell of baby shit
and banana peels from the landfill

invest in vacations

Chelsea Tadeyeske

i don't trust spiders so much
how they build houses
from their insides
like that

turns out my mom's really a witch
how i could breathe inside her stomach
like that

she always said it's easier to hurt things
that don't have eyes and i'm still not sure
if i should take that so literally

i've been thinking a lot about what it means
to be classically beautiful
how it takes a lot of makeup
to look like you're wearing none

i'm really not a bad person
i'd just prefer you to remember me like this

sometimes i just wanna go inside
and pluck myself in front of a mirror

sometimes
i just wanna
pluck myself

goodbye

goodbye

goodbye

goodbye

good bye

bye

good

from **HONEY MACHINE** (*Plath Centos*)

Kristy Bowen

You confess everything

to the little toy wife. I smile and smoke. How I would like to believe in
tenderness. It trickles and stiffens in my hair. You are the one, solid, the
spaces lean on. Nevertheless, the papery day is already full of holes. Your
tubes blown like a bad radio. Loving it, picking up handfuls. My naked
mouth, red and awkward.

Cut paper shadow

I am packing the babies. The sick cats. What would the dark do without fever to eat? The papery day already full of holes. Spidery, unsafe. I am ridiculous. This is what it means to be complete. Such a beautiful blank. Nevertheless, I would like to believe in tenderness. The heads of the dead on my wall. All night, I carpenter a space for them.

Dull stars

It is impossible to let something go and have it go. My box of maniacs, my
I do, I do. The terrible zeppelin and its height. I do not flinch. I am the
magician's girl who lies and cries. The blooms clean and I trawl the dark as
owls do. Untouched. Untouchable.

Stop crying. Open your hand.

Must you kill what you can? How I would like to believe in tenderness.
Utterly unasked for. Untouched. You are the one, solid, the spaces lean on.
A ghost column on the balcony of a hotel. Spidery and unsafe. No black
sky can squeak through.

But my god, the clouds

are like cotton. We kept picking up handfuls, loving it. Surely the sky is not that color. What holes this papery day is already full of. Things are glittering and even you have blown your tubes like a bad radio, trawling the dark as owls do. Does not my heat astound you?

And Finished knowing – then –

Trish Hopkinson

after “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” by Emily Dickinson

I conjured a childbirth, in the air,
and nurses all askew
stood standing – standing – till the dream
seemed real enough to chew.

And when the babe escaped,
a gossip, like a whisper –
tip-toed – tip-toed – till it screamed
and the room began to quiver.

And then the silence dropped a pin
to prick the babe’s left heel
with those same wings of wax, again,
the sun – began to reel.

As all the earth was deafened
the babe melted to the floor,
the noise, the voice, some heated
lies, opened humanity’s door –

And then the infant vaporized
and took to the sky, my vision –
and burst each cloud, throughout the ride,
and it all began – again –

City of Windows

José Angel Aranguz

Not knowing what to write you imagine a city made up of the windows you have looked out of between words, not ever noticing anything in particular, but taking in light, a shape of sky, and whatever silence was yours at a given moment. You remember there always being a point where a reflection of a part of your face or a face passing somewhere behind would bring you back to where you were on the page. You begin to see you have been walking through this city and looking in your whole life.

The Lessening

José Angel Aranguz

Walking home, he looks up and hopes to catch a glimpse of the sky but is met instead by the lights of windows. Silhouettes of furniture; shades of gesture as people talk; the folds of curtains; the slits of blinds stern and mute. He thirsts for the night and takes his cue from the lessening around him, the silence and clarity of the different hours kept by the stars.

Goya

José Angel Aranz

When King Charles III died and people stood in strict mourning, the court painter, one Francisco Goya, could be found cursing the entire court for wearing black and hanging so much black crepe, for he feared it would take a lifetime to paint it all.

Hey Fat Boy

Sam Wein

Bet you can't eat just one.
cylinder cement slabs
table legs
bet if you were less monster,
less sasquatch & body hair
bet if you saw your love on the street—
the tables rolling over the hill
 with no legs,
wonder if tasted you could have been
sweeter, wonder if English
you could have better spoke,
wonder if you were less man of cave,
less chin drizzled, hand eating chicken bone

bet if he asked you to be skinny, *boy*,
if he pulled
at your sides, needled a trampoline,
bet you would stop eating the arms
off the chair 'cuz you were still
hungry, the napkins hurled afterwards
 out of shame,
bet you would be a mouse in the
stairwell of your love,
bet you couldn't have asked
for anything, or seconds,
 or a piece of cheese.

bet you thought you wasted all that time
over him, & getting over him, like it didn't
press the petals to fall,
bet the seasons didn't stop for you like
you asked them to,
his lips
mid-word & your mind, a mouse
scurrying under every foot
in the city,
waiting for scraps
to fall.

Sea Legend

Lisa Schapiro Flynn

She saw this school of bluefin and –
starving for days –
went blind
to what every shark knows:
circle in, slow at first, assess.
No reason, just the hunt:
deep red flesh, bright beating apple hearts.

She gorged on saltwater, sweet meat –
was caught. Twists of net
gouged her flank. A borealis
of pain. Breath failed. Current
bobbed her. Drowning –
a cage of fast water.
Her sight dissolved.

Though she didn't die. She saw light,
man-light, yellow jackets, rain –
a new way of rain. Above-top rain.

They cut and cut the net.
No one spoke or hacked her fins.
Quietly they slid her, wide-eyed, gills flaring,
back in.

She rolled in the cold ocean,
a notion left from her mother thrilling
in her chest:
*some sharks are like men,
and some are like angels.
Some men are like angels,
and some, like sharks.*

A Daughter Dreams of Rescue

Lisa Schapiro Flynn

Water busted windows,
flew through chintz.
The standing piano exploded
into ivory bones, ebony teeth.
Gulls perched to watch.

I buckled my father into a harness,
hoisted his bulk to the ceiling
to pull shut the drapes,
close out the Atlantic surge.

It was reasonable
to think he knew how to save us.
He'd explained asphyxiation,
black holes, Schrodinger's cat.
And yet one frigid February morning
by an ambulance bay, in the warm smoke
caroming off his cigarette
he waited to be committed.
I'm glad I gave you the smart.
I'm sorry about the crazy.

In the dreams,
no closed curtain can
keep the tide from coming in.
My father never learned to swim
or not to drown.

Between Appointments

Lisa Schapiro Flynn

Alone in your room,
you peel night down from sky,
nails abrading it
like a scratch-ticket.
Stars fall,
burgundy hotel bedspread
a galaxy of bright shavings.
You begin to sleep,
behind the lottery of a dark screen.
Each blank second
in the instant before dreaming
an intermission.





White Bean Soup

Maximus Adarvé

Saturday night, and Molly and I are driving around Little Italy. We just left a party where her friend Beatrice was walking around with a bong and kept telling Molly she was mad at her. She wouldn't tell her why. We're driving now and it's pretty early in the night, only around 10. We drive up to Rockefeller Park and sit in her 1998 Honda Civic and stare at the water. I was listening to "New Slaves" off *Yeezus* by Kanye earlier. I get out and have a cigarette and it's freezing. I'm wearing an orange jacket and blue pants and Vans.

I get back in the car. We drive and don't talk much. She tells me she's missed me. She said this earlier when we met up in Little Italy. I tell her I'd missed her as well. She's driving southwest. I stare out the window, at all the brick, at all the neon, at all the Fords, the Chevy's, all the manual shift cars. It feels like I'm in limbo. It feels like I'm on a layover, suspended animation between home and...

Things start to look more familiar. I recognize Fairfax. I don't say anything, neither does Molly. She pulls over and stops the car and I'm still staring out my window. I'm staring at the Bell's house. They lived across the street from me growing up. The daughter was my age. Her name was Amy. She addressed my parents as "Mrs. Elizabeth" and "Mr. Marcy." I don't know why she didn't call Papa by his first name. Molly says something. Something about the new people not taking care of the garden. I turn from the Bell's house and look at my home. Papa used to take Jerome out with him to feed our dogs. Molly says, "We were so much happier."

"We didn't have anything to worry about," I hear the words. Not sure if I spoke them.

"We didn't have to think about anything, or figure anything out," she grimaces.

"Yeah..."

"I have no idea what I'm gonna do with myself... I have no direction."

"Yeah..."

"I feel like you have a lot more figured out, you really know who you are, what you want," not sure if she is being serious.

Papa would garden while we played outside.

I'm crying.

I'm screaming.

I don't know who I am.

I'm so lost.

Papa would always have my mom be outside with him while he gardened.

I have no idea what I want.

I fuck everything up.

I'm a narcissist.

Everything I do is self-serving.

Papa spent so much time fixing stuff up around the house.

I stop crying and look out the windshield. Molly hugs me. Tears still pour from her eyes and I know she feels them. I know she felt mine, they're drying now. But she felt them. Molly feels everything. She really does. What do I feel?

I feel nothing.

The Loneliness Disease

Michael Bible

My tree house took all winter to build and a summer night to burn. So I sat in the back row of the movie house alone. At the double feature, a gang of dangerous women stole my heart. The empire died on the turn of a dime. Day trippers got more than they bargained for. The actor washed ashore. The asteroids came close, but no cigar. Things got too good. They let us fall asleep inside the dream and prayed never to awake.

Cemetery Scorecard

Michael Bible

Make love dressed as werewolves. This will relax your bones and open your ghosts. The fox wears a scar like a gangster. Walking through the valley of the shadow. Love is like death's little sister sleep. Speed dial from cosmic bowling alleys. We are together in the garden under ambrosia, marvelously alone.

Hurry Birthday

Michael Bible

She bought an ant farm without a queen. They came in the mail. She put them in the fridge to calm them down. She fed them a piece of carrot. Some were fevered like prophets on the streets. Some begged like beggars. Some were more like bankers. Others thieves.

Bloodsuckers

Henry Goldkamp

I'd just used what was left on a Visa giftcard on off-brand Diflucan and was peeing in my apartment's alley when blades of frosted grass, a tuft squeezing out from a crack in the icy asphalt, started throbbing blue. It scared the shit out of me. I clutched at a sixth bottle of Stag in my hand for moral support. The grass was the same blue as this month's electric bill, same as the spiral-inked note from Mike demanding I get out by the new year, now wrapped around my Stag as a type-of poor man's coozie. The blue was gentle and hot, and I tugged at my dick through my jeans for some relief. I could hear the lightly buzzing Saturday night three blocks down, and knew I needed to get in there. I had to get drunk enough to distill the itch.

Back in August, I'd found this Mike on Craigslist with a desperate post for a roommate to help with rent—his former had fled to Belize with a Jesuit, or something close to that. No sublet contract or papers to sign. Due to a strict adherence in the mathematical rule of rounding up from 1/2 to 1, I didn't tell him that I'd be coming to fill his second bedroom's need straight from a halfway house on Broadway. A month after I'd moved in, I also didn't tell him that I'd managed to sneak a used tanning bed into my bedroom, also from Craigslist.

So I guess I got jock itch or something from the fucking thing. Angry at this sudden change of mind, the trickly effect that three sopping wet years can make, I looked instead at something else—maybe a car, it was dark—and the streetlamps flickered like VHS tapes about to end. I began to breathe the winter in and out like a catfish, each exhale an extinguished match. I thought my logic impeccable: what better thing to help dry out a drunk than a nice, hot, 220 volt tanning bed?

I should've been happy, I guess, to be blessed with American things as an Ameren Energy bill. Only a year ago it would've been anyone's guess how I could make the night electric, but lately I've had a general idea. Not even a general idea—a guarantee. I'd found a different source of warmth this winter, also from Craigslist, and I don't mean casual encounters.

Disappointed by all this—the weight of it all—I tried illuminating the brown glass against the pungent alley light. I could hear blood running through my ears, pumping a tune to make me feel better:

*you and me baby
the sunset on your arm hair
nothing but us*

It wasn't a real song, so I felt pretty stupid, plus I didn't want to think about whose arm it was. The song was about the future, the sounds it might hold, peals of glass and silence. I maybe had to go to my mom's Christmas dinner in two days. That was up to me. I crammed the Stag up against my teeth again but what do you know, it was empty.

You all should know that I'm twenty years old and I have crummy tattoos and regret most everything that involves anything I've decided. As in decision-making, taking things, then I guess shaping them to your liking. Another thing about me, I like the word "awe" because people don't appreciate it anymore. It's something

very attainable and I nearly worship the idea of it because if I don't—I don't know what else better to bow down to. Enough about me. This city is made of nothing but mud and bricks. Dark-blooded bricks stacked themselves everywhere and stayed their same flatline color, day or night, like they were electric. The mud just sat around like a bum, never shaved, smelled like wet cardboard, would fuck with you when you're sleeping.

Actually, never mind all that. I protect myself with the fact I'm born here and now. No one can say shit to me because I have a nice bar in my apartment and used to shoot up heroin a couple years back. It was the worst thing ever but it felt like the best thing ever. I still miss it. Seems unlikely that they can't make something that feels that good that's not-so-bad for you, your entire life, and everyone that's ever met you.

I'm taking a lot of progress. Crawling out from a trench is more enjoyable than you might think. I learn things every day. Some days I even learn to ignore what I learned the day before that one. Thursday I saw a nickel heads-down and didn't pick it up. I understand the importance of coddling my luck. But sometimes you run into people from high school. They think, "Oh, this'll be awkward." Maybe they've heard things, but those are their ideas and not mine, and you can't prove I made out with your aunt.

Joe Anderson, real name, was at this college bar for the same reason I was—penny pitcher night on Mondays, and maybe find a face to lick the shit out of. He was six foot six and reminded me of Gumby. Funny thing, Gumby starred in the first nightmare I can remember. I was like six. In high school, I told ex-girlfriends about the nightmare and said I was four, but I was probably around eight. I guess I never knew anything before I was eight years old, or six, or four. I'm positive that I know things now. We ordered next to each other at the bar and we were both there for the same reasons but he asked me the wrong question: How have you been? They never actually want to know that.

Not so good, actually. I was in Chicago the month before buying an ounce of cocaine from a Latin King, then from there took a train into upstate New York to help an acquaintance's grandma get her Subaru in safe hands because she had driven it into her synagogue. In other words, I was coming down off of about \$300 worth of cocaine because she was no longer fit to drive. I collected some chips in my teeth since that trip, and now I kind of look like an animal who dwells on a riverbank. I felt like a nutria wearing New Balances. I imagine my smile was kind of ugly and scaring him, and my thirst was a fantasy his mother read to him before he fell asleep as a kid. I have no idea what he was actually like. I just remembered he had short blonde hair and was super tall and wasn't that interesting. This guy probably wasn't even him.

But what I really said was "Not so good actually." He thought it was a fun, funny drunken joke. I was smiling. "Do you have five bucks to spare? I owe someone a lot of money." He gave me a sympathy laugh while scouring the bottles for different faces. "I'm so sorry I'm serious." It wasn't fun for either of us anymore. Joe looked like he wanted to blind me somehow. Instead he gave me the five bucks, a five-dollar bill exactly, for the sake of not talking to me anymore. I obliged him, took it, and went to the back patio to cool off in the freezing cold. He asked a question into my back—"Hey! Why are you so tan?"

Beer in a pitcher gets hot quick. Five dollars on penny pitcher night is five thousand gallons of beer if you don't tip. The chill was worth it. I drank all I could from the pitcher, which was all of it. Now ballooning with air and liquid, I really didn't want to see Joe Anderson again, so I clambered over the wood fence out back to get away. The fence pinched my thigh and it really fucking hurt, but not that bad. I realized my ears were still humming with the sound of blood.

I walked down the street to Lucky's, another crummy spot, and on my way grabbed a pack of smokes with the money Joe gave me. My favorite thing about Saint Louis is it's got the cheapest cigarettes. Even though it was really fucking cold out, cigarettes always made me feel warm. I remember a guy at a Rams game smoking one outside in a line when I was a kid. He looked oddly warm and I got jealous—he had a fire and I didn't. I started smoking later that year. I liked to play pretend. The guy was probably just bored waiting for nachos at 10am. Good for him.

I forgot that I had the bartender hold a Nordstrom bag behind the bar when I showed up in the afternoon, four hours before the drink special started. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. Inside the bag was a backpack with nothing in it, maybe half a Sprite and a lighter. I just carried it so I wouldn't scare people as bad. I'd have to make it work without, stuck in Lucky's. I ordered more alcohol, feeling my tennis shoes stick to the colorless linoleum as I waited.

Action never takes long. I thought this trashy girl was going to kiss me, but it took way too long to get her to do it. She had big arms confessing out of her black tank top. Something about her felt honest and I was antsy for it. She let me take her outside, then tucked herself under my jacket, breathing the snot of her nose into the whereabouts of my heart. She commented on how warm I was and I felt like a cartoon cigarette with hands, like I'd just received a compliment. Somehow she also thought that I was a cocaine dealer. Because I told her I was a cocaine dealer. I also pretended to know a lot about wine, and then we finally kissed when I mentioned France.

Lots of people become interested in you when it's winter in Saint Louis and no one wears layers, and you're drunk and can't feel anything and have plenty of things to spare except money. My dad always told me to invest in a good winter jacket, and he was right. Everyone else screaming their heads off around the bar looked dressed for Destin, fingers tacky with red-headed sluts, each shadowy neck hickied, chewed-up bubble gum harlequins.

TankTop tick-tacks back over to me wanting a light for her cigarette, then can't find her pack, then can't find her jacket. Her asshole boyfriend took it, or something. Those are her words, not mine, as I try my best to keep from cursing. I keep a green bottle between my teeth so she can't see how jacked up they are. I try to find her a cigarette in my pocket and instead pull out a crumpled pad of ones. She mistakes this for an attempt at propriety but it's mainly receipts and I have a pack of Reds in my jacket that are still unopened, because Joe Anderson.

We make out on the sidewalk and I'm afraid the bouncer might say something but he doesn't. Her tongue is one of the only warm things in the midst of the cold, besides my crotch. I know for a fact my crotch is always warm. My mom bought me sweatpants every Christmas since I was six. I couldn't remember the last time I had worn sweatpants, but at that second making out with TankTop I wanted sweatpants so bad. I wanted an apartment with a heater. I decided I would definitely show up to my family Christmas party after that. I wanted to go home and put sweatpants on and lay down. I wanted to be comfortable. But my decision kept me inside Lucky's, kept TankTop under my jacket, kept me scanning the room, reading the bottles.

She wasn't as warm as I thought she would be underneath and actually looking at her face, noticed she had horrible skin. Her name was Jenna, not TankTop. You give people nicknames as objects when you don't want

to be attached to them. Imagine being in love with someone named Cup—see what I mean? She was still sexy though because she grabbed my dick through my jeans. Cupped it, I guess you could say. I kissed her again and slipped around on her chapstick. It felt cheap on both mine and the chapstick's parts. I went to the bathroom out the front door and down the street. I passed a pretzel shop and slapped at mosquitoes. They're incredible, even more incredible than the women here. They actually know what they want, which if you are an idiot, is blood. I had no idea how they were fighting the winter air, but they were going at it.

I kept looking around and had to pee—natural for someone drinking in dark and rubbing their penis on a woman they don't know—and found a good fence. A couple walked behind me mid-stream and the girl laughed. She said something about her life concerning mine and I couldn't have cared anymore than I already did. Zipped, I walked in the other direction, back from where I'd already come from. I thought I felt another mosquito on my forearm, but it was too cold to be true. I slapped anyways. I started questioning blood and commission and if they'd ever let me back in.

Suddenly I wanted to call Joe Anderson, but at that time I couldn't remember my name and didn't have his number anyway. I had a headache and started towards the popular streets where everyone already knew each other, meaning they knew best not to know me, so I smoked and stepped inside the closest and smacked my wrist and asked if they had any specials tonight. The night kept being that night and tried to suck me up through its gin-slick straw and I wondered what happens if I quit clinging to the insides and just sucked up.

Working

Elias Keller

He was sitting on a suitcase by the side of the road and his suitcase was filled with blank notebooks and pens.

This was Boris. Everyone in the little village knew of him and pitied his parents, who supported Boris with food and shelter and clothes, so he could fill his suitcase with blank pages and sit on the side of the road.

“Working,” he called it, and his parents had stopped arguing.

Was he insane? Intellectually disabled? Playing some sort of severe prank? No one knew. By now his parents had given up hope that Boris would change. From time to time, his mother would look out the window and watch him sit on his suitcase. By now his father simply refused to speak to or of Boris.

Then one day a young woman in a black skirt and a red blouse walked down the road and saw Boris. “What are you doing?” she asked Boris, as though she had been told about him and wanted to see for herself.

For a long minute he did not even glance up. “I’m working,” he finally said.

“What kind of work?”

Boris blinked rapidly and pushed some dirt around with his shoe. “I’m working,” he answered. “I’m working.”

“Are you crazy?”

Boris suddenly stood up, showing his height and heft. The young woman backed away, but Boris only unclasped his suitcase, took out a blank leaf of paper and set it down gently on the ground. “I’m working,” he said again, shuffling a few steps down the road and then sitting back down on his suitcase.

The girl started to persist in her questioning—when suddenly Boris’s mother appeared on the road and took her firmly by the crook of her arm.

“Excuse me, young lady, what are you doing?”

“I’m just *talking* to him,” the visitor replied. “Do you know him?”

“I’m his mother.”

“Oh.” The young woman jerked her head toward Boris. “What’s *wrong* with him?”

“Nothing’s wrong with him,” the mother snapped. “He’s working. Leave him alone.”

“What’s he working on?”

“That’s not your business,” Boris’s mother retorted. “I said he’s working, so leave him be.”

The young woman rolled her eyes and continued walking.

Boris looked up at his mother. “I’m working.”

She sighed. “I know, dear. I know.” Then she went into the house to prepare his lunch.





CONTRIBUTORS

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CAConrad's childhood included selling cut flowers along the highway for his mother and helping her shoplift. The author of 9 books of poetry and essays, the latest is titled *While Standing In Line For Death* and is forthcoming from Wave Books (September 2017). He is a Pew Fellow and has also received fellowships from Lannan Foundation, MacDowell Colony, Headlands Center for the Arts, Banff, RADAR, Flying Object and Ucross. For his books, essays, and details on the documentary *The Book of Conrad* (Delinquent Films 2016), please visit <http://CAConrad.blogspot.com>

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Sam Wein lives in Chicago, works in gender/sexuality health research, and specializes in aimless frolicking. He is a poetry reader for *The Blueshift Journal* and is co-founder of a new journal, *Underblong*. Recent work is in *Connotation Press*, *decomp*, *TL;DR Magazine*, and others. Check him out at <http://shmoowrites.com>.

