

# **Animal Virtue**

by

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## Acknowledgements

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## Abstract

*Animal Virtue*, a first collection of poetry by Nathanael Tagg, engages with curious as well as quotidian realities—all related to themes of art, place, and intimacy. Aware that humans are animals and that our relationship to nature is the great issue of our time, the book spotlights something like virtue exhibited by, or symbolized by, or learned from animals. Likewise, it exposes behavior that masquerades as virtue. Full of allusions and references, it approaches the Bible as mythic literature evolving independent of dogma, and it helps rejuvenate the tradition of poetry that relates the Bible to contemporary experience.

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St. Francis Day

*Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -  
I keep it, staying at Home -  
—Emily Dickinson*

I feel you, Emily Dickinsons of the world,  
until occupying the cathedral pews  
are shiba inus, American shorthairs,  
and other pets with their people.

Up the aisle, isle of Manhattan,  
a smiley camel leads a motley menagerie.  
On the left, we're the rising Hudson,  
the rising East River on the right.

Hurry, Emilys! Bring your dogs.  
Dickinson's dog Carlo was a Newfoundland.  
Join us on the newfound land of this ritual.  
The organ echoes to the dogs' metronomic barks

in this tragicomic cartoon. Come quickly!  
It's happening. The animators' giant pencils  
have burst through the stained glass.  
They draw moving like broken oars.

And I'm adrift, headed for New York Bay.  
But, in the cathedral garden, clergy bless pets.  
A dog of a friend tugs and tugs while  
I grip my end of the rescue line-like leash.

John(ny Appleseed) 3:16

Scientist, our priest, you so love the world—  
Hummers and All the Way Burgers notwithstanding—  
that you'll activate Johnny, your invention,

your only-begotten son, the legend, our savior.  
The hardest of metal pots on his head,  
your robot nurseryman will plant

stratospheric sunlight-deflecting particles.  
His machine trees will swallow up  
atmospheric carbon dioxide. I believeth in you.

Earth will not perish but have everlasting life.  
But, as Johnny cools our Western Hemisphere,  
will he cream its Eastern counterpart with storms?



## Acetaminophen

Tree snake, you're a headache.  
You climb power lines, cause blackouts,  
devour birds, bite babies. So,  
legless predator, I found your Achilles heel.

We hover over you in this helicopter.  
These scientists took my suggestion,  
lacing dead mice with headache medicine  
(a painkiller to us—to you, a painless killer).

Toxic mice under tiny parachutes will fall,  
will land by you on the tree branches.  
Supper! But, one destroyer to another,  
part of me wants to warn you, at least.

The drop (bombs away) commences in ten,  
nine, eight... My arm extends. A carcass  
thrashes in the downwash. Pinched  
in my thumb and forefinger: a pink tail.

## Thank You

You, the nightmare that woke me: God enlisted Satan to fly over Earth—his wings' bitter wind replacing ice caps and glaciers. You, comic relief: even the Devil's redeemable, given the better use of his body—no longer keeping frozen Cocytus, circle nine of the hell Dante imagined. You, cartoon reverie of leviathan in America: he hits a home run with an ice core baseball bat and later goes all in with his tree trunk slab poker chips. You, sound of applause in cottonwood leaves, of back pats in our footfall. You, nature's one-upmanship that everywhere unveils evidence. You, footlong cylinder of blue whale earwax recording the diminishing quality of air and water. You, science and séance employing that wonky candle, which, as it burns, smells less like a fool's gold color.

## Artist Statement #1

I'd rather not be Nathanael.  
Deaf-blind faith,  
flayed alive, crucified upside down—  
not for me,  
not even metaphorically.

I'd rather not be Nat King Cole  
(born Nathaniel Coles).  
Segregated gigs  
and faithfully unfaithful to women—  
no thank you.

Smooth voice,  
distracting the executioner,  
enthraling like a so-called miracle,  
the Ascension—  
maybe all that'd be nice.

But I'm nominally Nathanael  
or Nate. Call me  
either. I'll just write—  
not wonder if I merit the name  
meaning *given of God*.

## Artist Statement #2

My reality  
grasp? *Shaky*, says the inkblot  
test I take online—

*Firm*, the second time.  
White clover is the popcorn  
a deity spilled,

leaning to her date,  
whispering, *Calm in crisis*,  
*disregard—different*.

Flowers are composed  
by Philip Glass, repeating—  
loved, yes, and despised,

called cosmic secrets  
until dead silent. The smell—  
cuttings—it lingers.

A red flying fox  
bat, I fly low where wings fight  
neither wings nor wind.

Then, stuck on a barbed  
wire fence, like a broken kite,  
I wait and chew on the snags.

Plump with tree flower,  
I dream of others, the roost—  
skeleton of shit.

An anole rams  
his caged reflection (to him,  
another lizard)—

defeated, hobbles  
onto the stick and turns brown,  
dies or realizes,

*It was I—just wild,*  
*able to scuttle from this*  
*cage into cupped hands.*

## Word Painting

*FRAIDSO*, I say, in 3D letters. The artist Wayne White bought a mass-produced painting, I'm afraid, then painted me over its orange maples and trickling brook so that the forest woke up. It's anxious now, I'm afraid, because I appear to be chopped wood. White named me "Fraid So." I ain't some reductive heading that a publisher added to the Bible, nor a mantra to foster Buddhist detachment,

but a funny downer, I'm afraid, to confirm your every concern. My wood reminds you, I'm afraid, that woods are clear-cut to make tchotchkes. It reminds you of your floorboards. Do you see the word *RAID*, spelled in the middle of me? Raid spray, I'm afraid, is too weak to kill your termites. Do you see another word, spelled in me? Yep: *AIDS*. I'm afraid you'll suffer from AIDS or some other illness.

I question not, because it matters not, whether off-color humor

can be high culture. In "Important/Vague," White painted the letters *ue* behind the trees so that the message reads *IMPORTANT/VAG* (pronounced *vaj*, short for *vagina*). At least, I ain't dishonest. In "Honest Artists," White painted the word *Artists* behind an island, rendering the word *Honest* sarcastic, drawing attention to the tiny boats, suggesting that the original painter had something to hide, I'm afraid.

At least, I ain't pretentious neither—well, just as knowingly pretentiously unpretentious and self-deprecating as "I'm With Stupid." White painted some of the letters behind the trees so that the other letters read, *I STUPID*. Whether or not I'm trivial is trivial, because, in my forest and in your world, the sun and the leaves are a-fallin'. The end and the frost are a-comin'—comin'. I'm afraid so.

## A Sentence on Art

These middle schoolers so diligently practice  
writing their signatures, while Mrs. Wiles  
finishes their imaginative paintings of nature

photos, cut from magazine ads, and she paints  
more nature in place of the products  
—for example, more river and mangroves

in place of the *world's greatest fishing boat*  
so that, from bed, parents will marvel  
at their creation's creation hanging on the wall,

will think *this kid of ours could be a real painter,*  
*not a Jackson Pollock, but a regular Bob Ross,*  
but, no, little Tina! student and Attorney at Law,

brandishes an impressive desert scene,  
and approaches Mrs. Wiles on the stand, and says,  
*You painted almost all of this, did you not?*

and the ensuing commotion draws in  
Principal Spiel, who slams down a gavel  
paintbrush and yells the room silent—his big gut

reacting, *Fire Wiles? Cut art from the curriculum?*  
and it's as if even the cut-up magazines  
could be whole again if only a student

would lift up the Impressionistic painting  
that he forgot to sign, that he himself finished  
—he finished himself—and say, *I got into it*

*like Wiles does, and I couldn't stop!* if only  
he would lift up that painting of a cardinal flying  
behind falling snow—beneath skin, blood rushing.

MoMA-goers, 2013

The hands of security block your photo-hungry phones. On two projector screens plays the movie of Minnie the elephant. The artwork is “Play Dead; Real Time” by Douglas Gordon. Nearby is “The Maybe” by Tilda Swinton, the glass box. What’s inside? The real

Tilda Swinton. While Minnie plays dead, Tilda lies exposed, trying or pretending to sleep. Off-screen, calling the shots, are the trainer and the curator. The camera circles Minnie, and you museumgoers orbit Tilda. On the screens are your silhouettes, and,

on the glass, are your reflections: The Goers. *To die*, one of you mumbles, *to sleep*. One of you takes notes: *postmodernism, voyeurism, narcissism, careerism, anthropocentrism. Human not merged with machine will be no celebrity but a circus animal or a museum piece.*

Like a hyena, one of you laughs at the artwork, then at the children who transform into miniature elephants. The little goers use their bodies to make mini Minnies. See how? Take your own nose, and stick it to your own shoulder, and wave your own arm. Voilà: your own trunk.

## Laundry Chute Advertising Itself

Be one with your family  
laundry. Unsupervised child  
in bittersweet solitude,  
hoist your body, climb in me,  
and plummet down the gullet  
of your house. Land in the pile.  
Smell that? It's your parents working  
the assembly line at Electrolux.  
Sprint back upstairs. Repeat. Escape  
through my hidden hatch  
till they're home, till you're home,  
or till you land on the dog  
and she pees the laundry. Alone  
together, ignore whatever hurts.



## Billboard Jesus

I hung on my cross by the highway.  
A boy, you watched from the backseat  
of your crow-blue station wagon.  
Up on my toes, I danced ballet.

I enacted anecdotes, my arms outstretched.  
Never mind the church advertisement.  
I advertised manliness  
(inhabiting the body well

enough there's no crucifixion).  
Your father almost broke  
the silence. *You, son, are a regular artist.*  
*Jesus, what's that you draw so well?*

he could have crowed.  
But your wagon—common, American  
—flew away from the yellowing fields.  
And I felt like a scarecrow.

## Mikey and the Mermaid

*Jackpot!* Mikey yelled, throwing the ball too hard.  
 The boys watched it fly over the high wooden fence.  
 Usually, upon losing a ball this way, they climbed  
 the sycamore tree like Zaccheaus hoping to see Jesus.  
 Whether or not they saw the ball, they did see,

painted near the neighbors' pool, a mermaid  
 not wearing the usual seashell bra. *Fish boobies!*  
 they yelled between laughter. Often, in private,  
 Mikey did what a boy secretly does with himself.  
 Rarely did he imagine touching another person

that way. But that changed. Soon, he was  
 drawing naked girls on Sunday school booklets.  
 Today, enough was enough. They'd have their balls.  
 He climbed up the fence vines, then down  
 the neighbors' tree. Fish boobies was painted over,

gone. A woman dozed on her side like a mermaid—  
 an indigo towel wrapped around her legs,  
 her hair coming off of the rocklike, reclining chair,  
 her nipples gazing right back at Mikey, the balls  
 lying nearby in a pile. Before he could get to them,

she awoke with a yelp. He darted for the tree,  
 watching her over his shoulder. Her towel fell off  
 when she stood up. She turned around and bent over  
 to grab it, unintentionally showing him the rest  
 of her body. When he landed on the other side,

the boys yelled between laughter, *You left our balls  
 with fish boobies!* He shushed them, holding a finger  
 to his lips, walking off. And they followed to ask  
 what or whom he saw over there and whether they  
 ought to climb the sycamore tree and see themselves.

## Crush

A boy, you preferred another altar call  
—Jesus no longer calling softly  
and tenderly, making folks cry  
their way to the altar. The moon out, you  
left the potluck for the dark sanctuary.  
You pressed your ear against  
a cold hymnal—the ground leading to  
a past and future amusement park.  
Your palm brushed violet upholstery—  
fur on the stuffed animal you won  
for a crush. You tongued  
a lipsticked communion glass—her cup.  
You weren't lost. You weren't  
lost, but voices were calling your name.

## A Sermon at Bible Camp

Listen up, campers. Your savior's adolescence should be irrelevant to you, boys and girls. It's undisclosed in the Good Book, lied about in the apocrypha. Keep nailing! Nail your letters to the cross. One says, *Dear Lord, I promise never to have sex.* Wonderful! Be like Him (capital *H*), who was God and man. Not woman, no! Be like the disciples, men who left their women for a man. Don't be like carnal biblical women, like Potipher's wife. Be His member! Member of the Body of Christ. Experience life as mere foreplay before heaven, where you'll be Bride of Christ with a new body for sleeping never with nobody ever. Praise and worship will be your chain, yes! Never-ending chain of soulgasm after soulgasm.

## Missionary

Bible camp didn't prepare the teen couple  
for being in bed together, naked except for  
their WWJD (what would Jesus do?) bracelets.

Finished, they fix the Nativity that fell over—  
virgin Joseph and Virgin Mary and Godchild.  
She leaves the room, walking funny,

and drops hints to her parents, who misinterpret.  
He did it to her, they say: first, she was half-  
awake; then, she was frightened; hence,

she feigned sleep. She doesn't correct them  
and even catches herself believing their story.  
They demand he leave, the liaison end.

Bible camp didn't prepare the teens for feeling  
as if naked and barefoot and treading on  
the shards of the Nativity they made together,

then broke. So rumor mushrooms eternally  
in church. Adults, these two atone by becoming  
covert missionaries. Elders lay hands on them.

A prayer and a hymn and a prayer. Applause—  
as out of the church they go, both walking funny.  
Over the sea, into the dangerous field, they fly.

## Shih Tzu Elegy

With one eye, I stare.  
With the other, I wink.  
I try, anyway.

But you! Dead dog,  
you used to jump,  
bite the toy I held up,

dangle—a caught fish.  
Your eye popped out  
of socket. It seemed to stare,

seemed mad perceptive.  
Nobody could stop you  
from playing rough.

So your eye popped out  
repeatedly until your death  
of a different cause.

Always, you returned  
from the vet, your eye sewn  
shut in a pained wink

so it stayed in socket,  
at least for awhile,  
after the stitches were out.

Dead dog!  
May my memory  
of your life bestow on me

an eye for tragicomedy.  
You got even born-agains  
to say *shit*, shit zoo.

## Hang Time

You can't be like Mike. With an archangel's name,  
Jordan didn't need the nickname Captain Marvel.  
He dunked from the foul line, appearing to float. *Michael*  
no longer meant *Nobody's like God*. It meant *I'm like God*.

Still, I saw you jump the baby grand in your empty school  
auditorium. Its glossy lid was shut, as were, for once,  
the mouths of your inner God and Satan—  
not betting whether your butt would land on the keys,

whether your gifted mitts weren't for fingering chords  
or palming basketballs, whether you'd quit varsity  
like you quit piano lessons years ago, whether you'd prove  
to be once and always devastated by hitting the wrong notes.

### Inclining to Crimson

My pseudonym will be *Teen Vulgaris*,  
 named after my ailment, *acne vulgaris*.  
*Vulgaris* is Latin for *common*,  
 but uncommonly cystic zits cover my face—  
 a toxic, sprouted potato which I rarely see.  
 I'll name it *Mirror Eluder*.

I'm not a burned marine, not his wife  
 (still more self-conscious than he is),  
 not Job (afflicted with boils  
 that hardly outnumber his dead  
 livestock and children), not some poet  
 who compares an ailment to 9/11.

No, I'm Numb the Preterm Buddha.  
 I feel only a bit bad for nearly feeling  
 really bad when my lot's not that bad.  
 Must I talk like Bukowski? *Saw a man  
 with scars on his face that were deeper  
 than mine. Wow! More of a man than I!*

Looking in the mirror, I feel  
 my head and torso are yellow-orange,  
 my limbs blue-black. Pain, won't you be  
 mine? Help make me, say, a namer  
 of future architecture which regenerates  
 and merges with the green terrain.

My body's inclining to crimson.  
 Let me be like the namer who saw that  
 plant with an erect spadix and open spathe  
 and crimson berries (like acne? not really).  
 The namer knew exactly what to call that:  
*lords and ladies* or *jack in the pulpit*.



## Catfish, You're the First of Your Kind

From your mouth hang  
no hooks and broken lines—  
the medals with ribbons,  
the beard of wisdom, on Bishop's fish.  
Perhaps no awards, save survival,  
exist for the risk you take.  
Still, you try  
to be a fish that eats a bird  
in a world where birds eat fish.  
You try to be a fish that becomes a cat  
in a world where cats eat fish.  
You try to be a lion yet not yellow.  
You try, although green, although male,  
to hunt as well as a lioness.  
You try all this,  
and you could fatally beach yourself.  
Toward the pigeon-littered shore, you stalk.  
Your whiskers feel the vibrations, energy  
of any bird that drinks of your River Tarn.  
A bird bows.  
It should be bowing to you,  
because out of the water you explode  
like a revelation,  
like a beast in the Book of Revelation—  
you, Fishcat, the Green Lion.  
For a moment, the splash around your head  
is a mane and a crown.

## No Accident

Yet you crabs, you creatures, spill down the train track  
like bunches of mineral—red, early love-colored,  
red that doesn't mean go but I'm going-colored—  
you creatures, resource that fell off the freight cars,  
then came alive to crab walk off the track, you creatures,

and knock into roadside barriers until you find that  
miraculous overpass, you creatures, and climb  
skyward, you creatures, and cross above whizzing  
vehicles, you creatures, and descend back down  
to the ground, you creatures, who had nowhere to go  
just last week, when a little movement was work,  
you creatures, who now fall in holes at the golf course,

beneath red red flags, you creatures, or dry up and die  
as if to make official your sunburn, you creatures,  
or make it to the shore, you creatures, and just maybe  
complete the ritual, and mate, mate, mate, you creatures,  
the wicks inside your Jack-o'-lantern heads finally lit.

## Concert Bass Drum

She half-straddles it with one  
of her legs, standing on the other one.  
They don't know they're not alone.

Behind them, in the doorway,  
you stand—a clumsy, throbbing thing.  
Oh, could she really be your

old classmate—a sultry professional  
percussionist? They turn red  
in the performance lighting. These

beats have been missing from the din  
of your life. Oh, their half notes,  
quarter, eighth boom and crescendo

as she breathes on his metal that fogs,  
unfogs, as he breathes on her chest.  
Wrapped around it, against it,

her one hand and opposite leg press,  
unpress, to help dictate the intensity.  
She keeps time by bouncing,

flexing her calves and her buttocks  
during three full whole notes.  
Finally, her eyes closed, she allows

a measure of silence. Still in posture  
to play, she opens her eyes, looks over  
her shoulder, and says, *May I help you?*

## Dune Song

Who knew that  
vibrating grains of dune sand  
could sound notes from D to F-sharp,  
that a desert could sing?  
You've seen it on TV. As dunes,  
getting help from the wind,  
reform, droning each variation  
in an erotic death song, let's  
pull ourselves from the quicksand—  
often shallow, usually near water. Let's  
revive and embody expressions:  
*monkeyshines* for mischief,  
*brainstorm* for sudden confusion,  
*about-face* for a big change of mind,  
*long-headed* for wise or foresighted.  
I've read them in a book.  
Let's ride this enormous camel  
of an emotional landscape—  
dunes his humps, the drone the groan  
he makes as we *make it*, execute  
another U-turn.

## Virtuous Dirty Movie

She kneels before him like Mary of Bethany,  
about to anoint Jesus's feet. *Feet* doesn't mean  
*feet*, as it sometimes doesn't in the Old Testament.  
Perhaps the couple's like a pair of apostles.

Anyhow, earlier, he painted a landscape while she  
perused Dickinson poems. Their eyes flirted  
over his wood easel and her book's cleavage.

They stopped to talk work, undressing. Would he,  
a therapist, be effective using a new method?  
Would she, a scientist, bring back the butterflies  
and the bees? Each wore little but an expression

of *Oh, yes—we will indeed*. Anointing his feet,  
she jokes, *I believe in that therapy concept called  
the dodo bird verdict: many methods, one outcome*.

He jokes back, breathing heavily, quoting  
Dickinson: *In the name of the Bee – / And  
of the Butterfly – / And of the Breeze – Amen!*  
She half-jokes back, *Dickinson would cry*

*if she knew we're causing the demise of her trinity*.  
So he kneels to anoint her feet. In reality, this couple  
is a couple. They play themselves in this movie.

Verily, verily, I say unto you: their future holds  
no Judaslike betrayal, no Peterlike denial, no Christ-  
like refusal. Each gladly grants the other's request  
for the full body wash: *Lord, not my feet only*.

### Albino Redwood Speaks

I embody your feeling  
that you're a mutant.  
You lack chlorophyll,  
what makes a plant a plant.  
You're a scraggy nonentity.  
Ascending to the sun,  
others are colossal redwoods  
that defeat lightning and fire.  
Oh, their hard reds,  
their regal crowns.  
You're an ashen parasite  
so umbilically  
rooted to other trees  
that you die if they do.  
You're meant to be a failure  
or a cannibal, then a ghost.

Neremy Neenernen

1

Ever seen stargazer birds? Stargazers are born different. They stare up. Push their heads down. Let go. They pop back up. Haha. Stargazers are dreamers. Want something real bad. Better hurry up and get it. Cuz I got to kill them. Haha. No it's sad. They say Neremy Neenernen. Funny way to say Jeremy Peterson. My name. They say that at the chicken hatchery. Stuff me in a black and blue barrel with bad eggs and dead chicks. Sounds like girls. Haha. No, dead girls is not funny. It's my night shift. I type on boss Kirk's computer. Looks like an egg. What hatches from it? It makes my writing correct. We call boss Kirk egghead. I want a girl bad. To talk to. I can make my profile. Egg computer can find her. Her profile. We sell rare breed chicks.

2

Feather-Footed Bantam Andalusian Frizzle Cochin. Rare means not many. Breed means kind. Chicks can't mean girls. Many girls work here. And they're not kind. One is vegetarian. But puts chicks in a box on a truck to a farm. They call her vegetable. She calls me veggie. Chicks here are red and black and yellow with Afros and Mohawks. Birds ship to farms. Kids to college. Not me. They said keep working here. Once upon a time egghead was little. I thought he stole. Stole my black and blue bike. I pushed him. His nose got hurt. Like chick noses when we press them on hot machines. Egghead said he didn't. I believe him. So I work for him. Push trays of droppings and chick fuzz through a washing machine fast. The room is a loud rainstorm. Hot jungle. I get soggy and dizzy.

3

Then I roll a barrel of extras and stargazers out back. Pour them in bags. Want to let them go in cornfields. But I drop the bags in the dumpster. Drop boxes on top. Push down hard. Remember pushing egghead. I won't talk of what feels bad in my profile. Got to go. I'm back. Walked through dark halls to red lights.

Loaded racks of eggs in incubators. Buff Japanese eggs. Haha. Sexers are from like Japan. Look under lamps. Feel if chicks are boys or girls. Boy chicks. Haha. Extras go to die with stargazers. All of us are birds in boxes. My boxes go no place. That's me on YouTube. Not YouToo. In there. Black and blue barrel. Bad eggs. Dead chicks down my pants. In my mouth. My Hawkeye sweats got ruined. Not HawkGuy. Got to go. I'm back. Loaded more eggs.

4

On metal racks that turn turn turn and look like fair's wheels. Egg computer changes fair's to Ferris. I can reject changes. Right click left click undo autocorrect. There may be different yous and mes. Many worlds. What are you in this world? I'm stargazers. Not bad eggs. Let's ride a fair's wheel at night in red light. We won't fall. Crack. Not grow. Like eggs I drop. Is that better so they never can become stargazers? Egghead's egg computer can hatch. Find you. We can meet. In the egg at first. On the computer. Then in person. The egg is not an egg. We can wait. Not ride a fair's wheel at night in red light right away. Buy new bikes. In red. My first bike since the bike egghead didn't take. I can take a stargazer to my yard. Want to see a grown stargazer? You, me. We're not chickens.



## Biblical Workout

Golden bods chariot across those clouds. That plane pulls its flag, advertising above this beach. The couple wades in these waves. She sees his six-pack abs, and sucks her stomach in, and tries to remember the names of other muscles, while he sees her curves and fears that his bulge appears Lilliputian. Ship motors and sonar,

he recalls, distort the migration and mating songs of whales. Once, she recalls, her family's treadmill decapitated Barbie and depantsed Ken, revealing her airhead and his smooth crotch. At night, still and silent, the couple lies in bed together. Their room drops down an emotional sinkhole until they start

to talk over each other. His voice cracks. She stops. He tells her about the whales that sing on a new frequency to avoid the interference but that never sound like castrati. She tells him of reattaching Barbie's head, pulling Ken's pants up, placing the dolls back on track, on medium speed. Often, she caught them lying

on each other, naked and smiling, on the window sill. That wind rattles those windows like the biblical whirlwind instructing, *Gird up your loins!* Finally, the couple's ready to climb out of this sinkhole. They want a biblical workout, as they used to get together, on separate treadmills or in the same bed, to work it all out—work it.

### In-class Documentary

The orca bites the foot of its trainer and co-performer, and Johnka, one of my students, convulses with laughter. I shoot her one of my favorite looks (happily disgusted), comprised of both a smile and a scrunched forehead.

As if improvising a new, truer performance, the whale drags him way down to the bottom of the deep pool, whips him around and around for well over a minute, yanks him back to the surface, then grabs his other foot.

Down they go again. Johnka laughs again. Her foreign degree is void in America, so she's only a freshman. She emigrated to avoid being yet another Christian murdered by machete. Now, she lives near a crack den

and gang turf. She tends to swallow the C-grade fish I tend to toss. Anyhow, none (especially adjuncts) wish to swim circles, to perform with flopped-over dorsal fins. Forgive my emotional defenses, ludicrous comparisons.

I don't know why Johnka laughs. I can only guess: to her, the new performance appears to be poetic justice. Later, she won't laugh at the ocean orcas—their upright dorsal fins wearing the free glint of water and sunlight.

TBD

Mirror, mirror, you in my mouth, the final  
 dental question was *Do you like your smile?* I  
 wrote, *To be determined* on bluish paper.  
 She is the fairest

dentist, doctoring sexily, bending over.  
 I, reclining—therapy style—can transfer  
 feelings. Gnashing teeth in my hellish sleep has  
 spotted my x-rays:

candidates for cavities, open graves. Oh  
 mere, oh mere, as children may call you, mirror,  
 brittle-handed people, who lug their coffee—  
 handles in clenched teeth—

aren't the only needing assistance. Life with-  
 out enough is never as funny, sexy.  
 Grateful, knowing smiles are the ones I like, oh  
 mere in a muzzle.

Baby Eels, Called Elvers

Oh, the sexy of unsexy. Even Dickinson knew it,  
writing of that snake, the *Shaft* which *likes a Boggy Acre*  
and causes her speaker to experience *a tighter Breathing*.

Now you know it, elver fishing with your partner.  
The creatures spermatozoon upriver to your dip net.  
In the dark, you try slipping a hand down his pants.

*No*, he says (new place, usual response). Maybe *yes*  
will be the usual again if a fishery pays you  
enough of those much-needed, eel-colored dollars.

Meanwhile, each lucky elver gets grown, sprung, wider-  
eyed, a not so *narrow Fellow*. Each willingly makes it  
downriver to the sea again—then mates and disintegrates.

## Silos and Bones

I trespassed this farm silo's ladder  
for a bird's-eye view of each matter,  
including my ambition  
and the usual sexual tension.

Those silo shadows tell the time;  
remind me a bell can ring, toll, chime;  
point to fields—ripe, deserted, fallow—  
to each plot and every kind of silo.

Skirting some village, you, lammergeier,  
hungry bearded vulture,  
from the tallest farm silo's height,  
drop a bone—long, white,

like a silo, packed with food—enough  
or not that much. Tough.  
A sane bird like you lands to swallow  
the pieces, however much marrow.

## Stranger Commuting

Nobody stared at me in the blue  
PATH train to World Trade Center.  
But you do, stranger wearing a red tie.  
So I give you the stink eye. And you go.

Wait, you work on Wall Street?  
How little I know of economics.  
Living back in Iowa, I drove  
past cornfields. A vehicle approached.

So I lifted my forefinger off the wheel.  
I saw red if the driver didn't return  
my wave. The vehicle grumbled past.  
How many drivers were farmers?

How little I knew of agriculture.  
Anyhow, commuting is supposed to be  
gray, not make me feel this way. But  
who are you? What do you do? What's

at stake? After work, the train's orange,  
rumbling, beaming—a brief sparkle  
in the world's unblinking eye, its  
whitish sclera, bluish iris, pupil tunnel.

## Introvert

Cave rocklocked  
for millennia  
housing forgeries  
or originals—  
packs, herds, prides,  
stampedes, all  
painted in shades  
of ocher and black;  
fossilized prints  
of wolf and boy;  
fearful fascination  
with Neanderthals;  
everywhere, cave  
bear scratches—  
inhaling root fumes,  
exhaling glaciers.

## Internal Monologue

Yes, tell me what I am.  
 Personality theory enthusiast,  
 you say I'm the Dreamer,  
 one type of Peacemaker  
 (influenced by the Reformer)

with dominant Self-Preservation—  
 also the Counselor  
 with dominant Introversion,  
 Intuition, Feeling, Judging.  
 So: 9 wing 1, SP, INFJ.

Is that all? Okay, I'm too  
 conflict avoidant, accommodating.  
 Must be why I'm criticizing you  
 in my head, not changing  
 the subject. How 9ish!

You're the rarest,  
 most gifted and tortured type.  
 You don't say? You did say twice.  
 Sounds like your type is best.  
 Sounds like I too would hate

the winning-obsessed 3 wing 4.  
 Maybe my fiancée, whom I love,  
 is a 3 wing 4. Hey, did I say  
 I'm getting married?  
 Yes, that *is* nice.

Fine, back to personality.  
 Okay, I shall never become  
 the Self-Abandoning Ghost  
 with multiple personalities.  
 But I shall be an amalgam of 9s:

Carl Jung, Marge Simpson,  
 Whoopi Goldberg, Jim Henson.  
 Hey, can you believe  
 Hurricane Sandy arrives tonight?  
 Fine, friend, back to personality.



## Disaster Recovery

What he said, coughing,  
leaving her in bed: *I'm sick.*

*Don't want to keep you  
awake.* It was a half-truth.  
He also wanted distance

from their disastrous  
distance. Lying on their couch,  
he counted not sheep  
but each piece of rattling glass  
in their stormy dishwasher.

He up and left—walked  
the hurricane's aftermath.  
Everything seemed clean,  
the storm surge down, homes pumped dry,  
debris removed. He skirted

the mall. On the roof,  
seagulls had held a crisis  
meeting. Powerless  
folks had huddled near outlets—  
just chatting and recharging.

He was cold, hungry,  
tired. Disaster recovery  
is the natural state  
of things. He would just eat, then  
crawl back into bed with her.

## Drinking Can Do Worse

Make a Noah, who'll  
copulate only to multiply,  
sleep through biblical events,  
deal irrational blessings and curses.

Or a bimbo on an island resort,  
some monkey that'll guzzle  
an unattended Mai Tai,  
then bed whomever.

Can catalyze unspeakable ruin.

But, love, I'm sick of us  
becoming toddlers like that  
girl in a stroller. Every adult (we  
too) delighted in her every utterance.

In the liquor store, she drank juice  
and pointed to a row of bottles—  
so-called god-given rainbow.  
*Next, pour me this please!*

All that was no false covenant.

New neighbors pour us hard  
cider, which we don't even like.  
No matter what we utter, they grin  
or laugh. At night, laptops read to us

in our bed, putting us to sleep. Now  
then, have we outgrown intimacy?  
Does close reading that pop-up  
book require too much? No,

remove your glasses and read me.

## Conflict Resolution

Love, you're the bad sort of left-handed.  
You're wrong. It's all your fault.

That's my medieval prejudice. Let it settle  
our lover's row. We're being oh-so-  
sensitive and reasonable. Or prove  
me wrong. Be the good sort of lefty, gifted.

Draw up our peace or enjoyable war.  
Lefty da Vinci had a formula for drawing  
a natural imaginary creature: marry  
the disparate parts of real animals.

A mastiff head, a tortoise neck, cock  
temples, a greyhound nose, porcupine ears,  
lion eyebrows, cat eyes, woman fingers,  
man toes, falcon talons, et cetera. And

voilà: it's a dragon. Jointly, what creature  
will we make? Will it be ambidextrous?

## Driving Love Home

Attracted, we fell in a dopamine swimming hole,  
 then made it under a forest bridge of oxytocin.  
 Dripping wet, we ran the trail with pet endorphins  
 to find ourselves driving love home in the night.

We made it under a forest bridge of oxytocin.  
 Then our child elation dozed off in the back seat  
 as we found ourselves driving love home in the night.  
 Thank you, calm of cruise and power locks.

Our child elation dozed off in the back seat until  
 we bickered him awake and he started crying.  
 Thanks a lot, restiveness of cruise and power locks.  
 Agreeing for a moment, we snapped: *sleep!*

Our bickering kept him waking, crying, dozing.  
*Talk about the movie forever and ever—or else!*  
*Sleep!* we snapped at him, in unison, only once.  
*Always join my coworkers and me for drinks!*

*Talk about the movie forever isn't what I mean, ok?*  
 The tails of our endorphins wagged to the happy side.  
*Ok, always join us for drinks isn't what I mean.*  
 Our child elation woke up—surprised, disoriented.

The tails of our endorphins kept wagging that way.  
*Hey, remember the hole we used to jump in?*  
 Our child elation stayed awake in silent assent.  
*Yes, and the trail we ran. I bet we could find them.*

## Bathsheba

The only reason for her pantlessness is the room's heating up from the oven. Returning from the pantry (what's missing wasn't there), he finds her fair-skinned buttocks exposed as those of Bathsheba in a painting by that name, by Jean-Léon Gérôme. These longtime lovers, newlyweds, make a soporific mix: cheese and potatoes and sour cream. *Please! Thanks!* she said. *Want me to spray the pan?* he had said. She goes off recipe and adds paprika and hot chilies. Pressing against her, he's about to lift her onto the counter to straddle him when, done preheating, the oven beeps. So they load the oven and set the TV tray tables. Later, after he gives a reading of his poetry at the KGB bar, she eyes him from across the room as he mingles and drinks with other writers. To her, he becomes a stranger, attractive and confident as King David—desirous of much, not needy.

Sex was great when they lived in different cities and didn't love each other. He glimpsed her about to bathe and followed. *Sit*, she said, and pushed him down on the closed toilet. *Grab that*, he

said, and put her hands on the towel bar as they reverse cowgirdled. Now, they leave the city for home before midnight. She hands him his dropped gloves. He leads her to an open seat on the PATH train. Later, in bed, they smooch. She gently pinches his shaft and says, in a motherese one level above baby talk, *There you are!* as if it's a good boy who can *do a chore for mommy, okay? Why, thanks!* It won't. So she mounts her laptop on the bed for some late night shopping for a white noise machine, while he listens to the boiler clanking, and wishes their headboard were hitting the wall to match that rhythm, and wonders why, even on their wedding night—before successful consummation—he so kindly unsuited himself, so kindly unlooped her every ring of string, helped her undo all buttons, remove the dress, then the pantyhose, rather than do as he wanted and have her wear, for this, some of the tulle and the sheer.

## Online Jericho

Your laptop practically reads you the Bible. Will you drink what flows online like water from the rock that Moses strikes? Will you participate? You imagine the walls of Jericho cracking, splitting, about to come crumbling down and the invading Israelites shouting at the tops of their lungs.

In the story, none of them desert—  
go quiet, shake their heads, back away.  
Prior to attack, none say, *I'd play no part  
in this even if God did want us to kill them  
and take their gold, considering it holy.*  
Online, you relate to the stone, fashioned  
into tablets in the Ark of the Covenant.

You wouldn't complain if returned  
to unconcerned Mount Sinai. Still, for once,  
your laptop screen is wide enough. It's a hole  
in the walls of Jericho. After a long  
look through, your decision made—Joshua  
can punish you as he pleases—you replace  
the missing brick, closing your computer.

## A Jonah

Was it a fish or whale? A metaphor?  
A Jonah specifies with certitude  
and anger—habits Jonah daily wore.  
*A god should kill* was Jonah's attitude.  
*Better to die than suffer undeserved  
mercy.* For such a sailor, not the cursed,  
the slur *a Jonah* ought to be reserved.  
Why does a Jonah often meet the worst?  
Because he tends to see in black and white.  
Because he claims to be the fish or whale  
that knows the way. His gut is always right.  
To get a darker joke he tends to fail.  
Jonah had led the way to storms that swelled.  
Inside a giant gut, he'd always dwelled.

## A Magdalene

They've speculated Mary was a harlot,  
or second jilted bride of John the Baptist,  
or favorite concubine of Jesus Christ,  
or hairdresser of Magdala, or hermit.  
Absurd! The gibberish of Cousin Itt  
makes better sense, since none are blessed,  
when history's lost, to pass the history test.  
So what of Mary will I not forget?  
A woman then, my story goes, had dared  
become apostle to apostles—culture  
be damned. You can't forget a Magdalene,  
especially if she's hot, not only weird  
(her hair's Ittlike in many a sculpture  
on Google—her figure beneath the sheen).



## Stained Glass Window

What beautifully bridles,  
rather than admits, the light?  
allows you to see  
hardly in or out?  
bears your distorted

reflection? endures most  
weather? survives dark ages?  
lasts and lasts, thanks  
to each unsightly brace  
on the cathedral walls

and ceilings, which cracked  
above terrified congregations?  
what rarely changes much  
but begs to be experienced  
as if you shattered it,

rearranged it, reassembled it?  
what would therefore be  
not only cobalt for  
the people's blues, gold  
for the empire's riches,

vermillion for the blood  
shed in gods' names? what?  
Me. Some window  
I am. Me, or your  
religion, or lack thereof.

## Alternate Daniel 5

At King Belshazzar's party, a bodiless hand,  
 like Thing in *The Addams Family*, appears  
 and dispenses ink from its pointer, writing,  
*Have you ever noticed the name Nebuchadnezzar,*  
*whispered, crackles like flames in a fiery furnace?*

*That king was too thick to interpret*  
*his own dream of a crumbling statue, a stone*  
*monarch with clay feet. Too thick to recall*  
*his one day of attending elementary school,*  
*prior to being home-schooled. Prince Neb nabbed*

*the other kids' clay sculptures—dream homes*  
*and pets—and shaped them into his palace,*  
*then a multicolored ball with which he covered*  
*his feet. And Daniel the Great Dream Reader*  
*was too thick to note the sexual component*

*in Neb's dream of a tree that grew on a bed,*  
*a tree that bore fruit to feed a multitude, a tree*  
*someone felled, a tree that became a crawling man.*  
*Dream readers of the world, stop regurgitating*  
*interpretations. Everybody knows kingdoms fall.*

So the party calls upon the wizened, wiser Daniel.  
 He stands before all, including King Bel,  
 son of Neb, and says, *The self is a cat or an owl,*  
*trapped with the other in the lions' den, praying*  
*for godly lions and cross-species friendship.*

## Collection Time

Grinning, the fallen elderly man lies curbside. A young, glum garbage worker arrives. She hoists him up and hands over his dropped cane. *I knew you'd come. I'm ancient but not dumb.* Arms linked, they inch into his home, where she props him against a wall of family photos. He points to one. *My evangelical son. Fails to convert me. Never forgets to try. But forgot to stop by before work and take out the trash. Had to do it myself.* The truck honks for its missing worker. *Could've run me over. Would've meant no senility, no deathbed conversion, for me.* She goes after his walker in the other room and returns to him lying on the floor with fallen photos. *I'm weak and bald but not some defeated Samson.* Before heading for the door, she hoists him onto his sofa, next to his walker, and cane, and open Bible. He'll use them while his hip injury, which he doesn't mention, continues to heal. *Never mind me or the Philistines Samson murdered. Pity the foxes he tied to firebrands and left to burn or be eaten. Or someone like his wife, who cooperated for family's sake but burned to death along with dad—all according to the divine plan. Good thing we're only human. Not Christlike. Can't jinx an out of season tree for bearing zero figs. Jesus, Jesus. Hey, wait. I recycle, but do you think a guy like me should be recycled?*

## Easter

No doubt, my sister sits in a church pew.  
On her thighs lies a Bible. So I can't  
get her on the phone. Maybe just now  
I rang to recall our differences. I lent

me a wrong excuse for being a stranger:  
talking to her at all would engender  
debate on the question of the divinity  
of Christ...or Sarah Palin's sanity.

We'd exchange insults. But, no, I'll start  
by mentioning the dead bunnies outside  
...or the kids who found a suicide  
at an Easter egg hunt. I'll gradually assert

my resurrected itch to have a heart-to-heart.

## Green Daddy Ring

*You research multitasking. Don't die from multitasking,*  
 her daddy joked in an email with green font,  
 hours after being diagnosed with dementia.  
*Guess my mental fog has nothing to do with marijuana*  
*or multitasking.* He requested that his remains  
 become a diamond ring—green, for only her finger.  
 He noted the Empire State Building was green that night.  
 He pressed send, opened his high office window, jumped.

Tonight, she walks back to the university from the green store,  
 where she acquired the thing, indeed made from his remains.  
 The daddy ring glows green on her finger in the dark city  
 winter light, like his eyes did. Her mind reaches for some  
 numbing info: billions of green dollars are lost to multitasking.  
 IQ drops more from multitasking than it does from  
 smoking green marijuana. But his scarf around her neck  
 has a green odor that calls to mind the first time he struck her.

She was a kid and interrupted him, while he smoked a joint,  
 and listened to the Knicks game, and fiddled with electronics.  
 He invented the anti-multitasking GPS shoulder pads.  
 One pad in her green coat vibrates to say, *Turn*.  
 She doesn't need directions but wears the pads, for they feel  
 like his directive hands. More not-so-numbing info:  
 while multitasking, the body's green, knowing not what to do  
 in what sequence. Her body feels green, as it did recently.

Her son said, *I was born to be violent*, and mimicked her  
 catatonic face, then ran off. All of it's green: the world  
 multitasking, keeping her daddy here and there and not  
 anywhere. The traffic lights turn green, and she flies  
 across the street in a flock of workers, green, invasive birds,  
 conures that chase a hawk lest it hunt them. Taxis honk—  
 almost hit her, the multitasking researcher, daughter, mother,  
 green, who stares as she walks, stares at the green daddy ring.

## Uroboros

1

At the fair, a girl grabs a fetal doll  
and bounces, ignoring the adults  
bickering over abortion. She skips  
toward a bench, where an uninvolved  
man cradles a baby in his arms.  
She sits down on the bench to observe,  
and lifts her doll that fell at his feet,  
and cradles it lovingly in her palms.

2

During church, a boy studies a cartoon  
in the booklet from Sunday school.  
Besides using a donkey's jawbone  
to bludgeon enemies dead, Samson  
holds a sultry Delilah. The story  
and the machismo are lost on the boy  
—but not the hint of a passionate touch  
as opposed to a handshake or a side-hug.

3

Circa 1349, buboes riddle the bodies  
of villagers. The Black Death  
eggs and apples ooze puss and blood.  
First, the villagers parade festive colors,  
and dance in an uroboros, and pray that  
gaiety means immunity, and learn that  
even conjured joy can be potent. Later,  
a surviving builder says, *In a way,*

*we did finish working: it'll make a great  
memorial—our incomplete cathedral.*

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