

Self-Portrait as a Clogged Toilet

For once, a disaster you can control. Wild, wet rat-girl,
Hunkered at the bottom of your self-made
Sewer. Now, the tide flows over your great white

Goblet. You should clink it with another giant
Glass. Here's to normal people problems you've bent
Your head in prayer for before at that same pale

Bowl after drinking too much Yellow Tail because
Whatever half-mad man you loved sank deeper
Into his own drink, went fishing with a younger girl,

Or stained your door with his manic shadow.
Some days, you have to praise the simple outpour
Of your own shit. Here's to skid-marked years you soiled

Your reputation. A tired angel held back your hair,
Patient as a reflection, only for you to cough and plunge
Into another older man's arms. Whatever weary force

Turned back clean blood tests, whatever unnamable
Thing expelled bad choices from your body, must be knelt
Before like a porcelain altar. Now, you watch the bowl

Erupt what you thought was contained, onto the white-
Tiled floor. Maybe this is God's giant phone. Those years
You called and just heard the ringing of your hung-over,

Off-the-hook head, perhaps there was always the answer.
Maybe not the one you wanted, but maybe the one
You needed, telling you, don't cry over spilled

Crap. Telling you, rise and scrub your human mess. Now,
Sewage floods your floor. Still, you wade out into the dirty,
Blessed waters of what you swore you left for good.

Sestina for the Ex Who Stalked Me for a Year Until, After Filing Multiple Restraining Orders, I Moved to a Different City

The flies would circle the kitchen.
 The Angel from Montgomery boiled
 On the stove. The man played
 Off-key guitar. Like a fiddlehead fern,
 His shadow would grow a long dark form
 Stretched over my sleeping shape, long

Before I learned who not to trust. Longer
 Until I'd learn, again. He stuck like a tiny fly
 Sticks to traps. A poem in tight form
 Thrashes and snaps against restraints, boiled
 Bunnies on my stove? No. But a fern
 Of darkness rose. This was no longer play—

He left sex toys at my door, playing
 With himself. My photos: a sex-doll. His long
 Shadow trailed mine. Oaks shrunk into ferns
 Where I could see his shape—butterflies
 Became skittering insects in my boiled,
 Simmering stomach. Soon, my door lost form.

There were no walls. Just his human form
 That came to call as his shadow played
 In my home. There was no boiler room
 For me to escape to. No dark long alley
 For me to be blamed for. Time flies
 When you're followed, his body a fern

That shadowed me at summer's peak, a fern
 Of flame burned my brain. Love. In the form
 Of a broken man who hovers, starved fly,
 On my sill. Following me home was play;
 As every day grew hotter, long, and longer,
 I prayed for him, on a hot day, to boil

In a place hotter than hell, a burst boil
 Of an ex that kept swelling: an acid fern
 Springing up every year. One long
 Mindfuck of time, I uttered formalities.
 Tried to go about my day and play
 It off as if my heart wasn't flying

Up from leaves. Long form. Short stack.
 Little hands. Sick man, boiler of ferns. Bell-ringer.
 Play alone, you moth-man. You hunter of butterflies.

Instructing Students on Poetry as a Career

Listen, I know you think a poem is special:
 A crystal-stemmed Chianti, a page-long revolution.
 But no: it's a Brooklyn watering-hole where you go to drown,
 but can no longer afford because hipsters priced you out.

A poem begins, a page-long revolution.
 You're off to a good start in poems and in this life
 you can't afford because hipsters priced you out.
 That's when you dig in your heels. I won't go—

You start off right in poems. Then, in life,
 you'll likely fail spectacularly as me.
 Still, in this poem, dig in my heels. I won't go.
 When I tell you what I know, it's to buy cheap Merlot.

If you're lucky, you'll fail, spectacularly, like me:
 Not just ruining poems, but every job I've loved.
 I'll tell you what I know, it's two-dollar Merlot,
 waiting tables, spilling Cointreau on a bride's pearled bodice.

Like me, ruin poems and every job you love—
 Shoulders slumped, retreat to the kitchen,
 then splatter Bloody Marys on a woman's cashmere cardigan,
 cringing while the wine-soaked patron screamed.

With shoulders slumped, retreat to the kitchen.
 Botched lines, spilled wine, no blood, so you keep going.
 Back to the dining room, the wine-soaked, screaming patron,
 to sop up messes from poems and pissed-off women.

Botched lines, spilled wine, no bloodshed. Keep going.
 If this is what you want, then you'll have to butch it up.
 Try again. It's just a fucking poem, a pissed-off patron.
 Blot the stain, say sorry, back to work, calm her down.

Maybe this isn't the life for you. But if it is, butch it up.
 Listen, I know you think your poems are special.
 Say sorry; get back to work and calm down.
 Poems: an Omaha watering-hole where you go to drown.

Happy Hour

A woman in her seventies with a feathered haircut droops like a lily over the bar. She's lost

her credit card, again, goddammit, she says, dumping out her wallet. And her kids, her fucking kids,

they say she ruined their life. What do they know about life, she says. What do they know about ruining.

After her sixth shot of Jameson, she keeps examining the wallet's contents on the bar. She touches each card

as if reading tea leaves before almost pitching off the stool. They don't bring you anything

but heartache, she says to no one. The slender bartender gently tells her she's cut off. A man no more than thirty,

in a flannel and baseball hat who was just informed the same, slides beside her and takes her hand. We watch

from the end of the bar as he ushers her onto the empty dance floor. They begin to spin like two tangled marionettes.

He holds her as if grasping a sinking ship's splintered mast. He's the captain. Or maybe they're both survivors,

having stayed upright this long. She rests her cropped head on his shoulder. It's too early to dance.

Too late to find love. But he buries his face in her hair. Then, the bartender takes my hand and lifts me from my stool.

And a townie follows as if by pushed by an invisible breeze. Over their shoulders, as we move arm-in-arm

to the music, I hear the woman tell her new companion that she doesn't drive, too many OWIs, but lives across the street.

Holding hands, they stumble out of the swinging double doors. Light floods in. Still, we dance, dumbstruck

and sun-stunned. Brushed by the tip of an angel's broken wing: only to see it belongs to the person swaying beside us.

The Statute of Limitations Speaks

Poor police, take rioters and pin them down, poor
 Penguin, poor piggy, rooting in a stiff, white-starched
 Collar. Poor stores: windows bashed to glass, the end
 Of ATMs, jewelry pinched. I back the badge, my glittering
 North Star, it shines high above the gray Great Plains.
 Make America great. Make it ripe with god, good lord,

Here's the thing, my soul doesn't need saving. Still, I lord
 Over you, my savior: you wear blue, the world's good, poor
 Until proven innocent. Do you hear me? The Great Plains,
 Nebraska, we're waiting with open arms in starched
 Schoolgirl uniforms. I polish my eyes until they glitter
 Like pennies, a boat on fire: hello, hi, this is the end.

The world's flat when we reach the end; a high end
 Note as we float on calm waters. The world is flat, the Lord
 Is waiting for us to sail off the side, holding his glittering
 Chandelier. Look, his earlobes glitter with the poor's
 Snatched hard-won gems. This is a place of starches
 Among vegetables. Grow roots so deep in the Great Plains,

They're thick as chains. Don't you dare call me Plain Jane.
 Pierce my nipple, rub glitter on my boobs like it's the end
 Of the '90s. Still, I rise early, iron your shirts, stiff with starch,
 Steamed in hot holy water. I pray to my blue-eyed lord.
 Call me black-and-white, my olive ass. I'm a whippoorwill's
 Shrill crescendo. A magpie, hoarding your knock-off glittering

Gold. We're stained in Black folks' blood. Corn-fed, corn-starch
 Can clean up our mess. Your aviators block out the glittering
 Souls in your rearview. And I wait. Oh lord, do I wait, lord,
 For mine to shine. Why did you put me here? The Great Plains
 Are so kind, so blind to their hate. They live on the high end
 Of a flat world. The heartland sheets tugged tight, pour

Me a drink, Officer. Rise, lie beneath the weight of a starched
 Blue sky, potato, *potabto*, root through dirt, a glittering
 Truffle waiting to be unearthed. You're my keeper, the lord
 Of misfit toys. The Devil wears blue jeans, has blue eyes, I'm plain
 Plumb tuckered out; I've walked a straight line, but reached the end
 Of my tiny tightrope. I've tried and tried, to pinch my poor

Nose. But I smell bacon. You, your fellow warlords: starch
 And pork. Your heart's poor, hungry. You bargain for a glittering
 Toy badge, so plain, so free. It won't outshine me: I am your end.

Cheating Poem

Open the door to a hotel room that smells of unwashed
adults. Tell that woman what she knows: this is the story
of the body which begs for forgiveness. The song for anyone
who's desired someone else while loving another. Her man

back home notices nights are long, that her eyes flash
like blunted knives. He's tired of being ridden like a rocking horse
with wheels, sick of her shrinking like a lily
from his touch. Their laughter's

a song he can barely hum. Now, she's in a bed with another man. They lie
beside each another, but do not touch. This poem is the grown-up
lie we tell: that broken things will work. If you don't believe that,
say what she refuses: that her other love will softly shut
like a book. In this room, you may remember how your own body
once betrayed you. How you stayed

to make a mess of flesh and sheets. If you're still watching them
touch themselves, side-by side under covers, don't feel ashamed;
you've done nothing wrong. Or maybe you have, and now
this poem is the poem that reminds you. Whatever you do,
please don't leave: this poem

is the poem that cheats, that uses this woman, this man, and you
to distract. I want to cheat, I am that woman who's been unhappy
for so long that I couldn't see my way out. This is the poem about hiding
beneath sadness, outstaying your welcome,
loving someone who you can't

stand to look at. Peel back my covers. Ask what I'm thinking. Tell me
to stop, go, touch the man beside me. Just please, say what I know:
It doesn't matter, it's already done. Whatever you do, for the love
of a fallen star, tell me to come out, come out, where ever I am—
there's no hiding. This is the story, this is the hungry, lonely poem that's mine,
and mine, alone, to finish.

Love is a Light Bulb

that a man you barely know, picking you up for your second date,
hands you for a bathroom fixture

that you hadn't known was out. Love is when the lights are out.
When your sweaty body sags

and sighs against the weight of your equal. Love is an equals sign:
the answer to when you want to gently

stick his head between the banister rails. It's that same symbol
that stops him from doing that to you.

Love is cat vomit encrusted on the rug. It's the ninety-ninth time
you told him you don't need to use a public computer

to book plane tickets. That a Chrome Incognito window works fine.
And still, he doesn't believe you.

Love is a plane ticket out of Eden and without a destination.
Love is a Ferrari without a steering wheel:

a woman who, in a fit of rage, grabbed the steering wheel out
of your hands while you were driving on the highway.

It's the person who holds back your sick world's hair while it pukes
comets. Love is looking at someone

in hunger and not eating them. Love is those times we trail a lengthy
shadow. Love is the window

that stands between us. Love is standing at the window at dawn,
wrapped in a blanket.

Love is when you hand someone a loaded gun and say, "Don't
shoot." It's when you put your hands up.

Step out of the vehicle. Slowly stoop to wave a dirty napkin soaked
in a puddle of surrender. It's when you keep waving

that tiny white flag: always and forever. Even in the middle
of the darkest, longest night.

Love as Arson

You know it must be love—
not you—that starts a tiny, accidental fire
on your forgotten kitchen stove.
In fact, you know it must be love:
He puts out your flames, unclothed,
and dripping from the shower.
So, you both *know* it must be love,
not you, that starts an accidental, tiny fire.

Anniversary

And again, we sit down to another year,
and join hands, clumsily accepting the fact
we only have each other to love, ourselves to fear,
yet it's love that keeps us coming back.

Let's hold hands. Clumsily accept these facts:
that we're fevered, sober, in love, and in trouble.
Still, it's love that keeps us coming back,
so, for a long, sweet second, we ignore the rubble—

Sometimes fevered, sober, in love and troubled.
Still, we show up to this table and try again.
For this long, sweet second, look past this rubble
and watch our walls fall to let each other in.

Show up to the table, we stumble, try, try again.
As long as we're alive, being human is the problem.
So, let's watch our cupboards fall; let each other in:
look beyond our crumbling faces, a sweet slow ruin.

So long as we're alive, humans are a problem:
Our house, empty, clean with many rooms.
Look at my crumbling face, its sweet, slow ruin
Call it an altar, an offering, a tomb—

Like this house, another worn but intact room:
This place of collapse, a sweet religion.
Call it an altar, an offering, or a tomb.
Forgiveness is the beauty of being human.

This home whose walls are sweet, a religion:
Let's plaster over promises and old pinholes.
Forgiveness, the beauty of beaten-down humans,
in a home whose walls still slowly erode.

Still, we've plastered over old punch-holes.
And sit down, again, to yet another year,
in a world whose walls slowly erode:
With only each other to love, ourselves to fear.

Broken Sestina for Another COVID-Related High School Lover's Death

In the end, there were no glittering needles
to do you in. Still, the story of your sickness
spins. *At least not drugs*, can be worn all day,
pretty as a scarf, without choking its speaker; but alone
you went, without a shot in the arm. No hospitals,
just on your floor. You used to call me, bound in white

straitjackets, plagued by skinless people. White knuckling
the phone, I'd tell you to let the nurse's needle
stop your thrashing. God, grant me a hospital
not gill-packed with burning cheeks, sick
boys I love are dying, unvaccinated, and alone,
afraid of their shadows. Tomorrow is another day—

Let's go back to standing three feet apart, dazed
by the clash of bodies. Still, you voted for a white
man whose bloated tan eclipsed you. Left you alone,
for dead. Stuck without the right fucking needle.
Can I love you and call you dumbfuck, sick
under thick bricks of lies? You needed a hospital.

A syringe of antibodies. No more hospitality
for dead lovers. I wish I could take a holiday
from one man's pain. If we could dry-hump sickness
away...let's rewind and pretend. Wear white
to funerals. Plant roses in rocks. Stick needles
in haystacks burning in brains aflame; you left alone,

born-again and finally sober. Still. You aren't alone—
you and so many others, forever pacing hospital
halls in my head. Keys sparkling your necks, needle
me this; when you went, cigarette unlit between lips, days

before they found you, did God peel back his white
face, eyes burning blue with fever of the unborn sick?