

**The following poems are best read out loud!**

## Venus of Willendorf

I first met her in Art Appreciation. Art one-oh-one,  
where the professor was young and fresh and  
he'd only been teaching for two years so  
he was still excited  
about things.

I first met her there at  
community college improving my GPA so  
I could get into real school. It was nine years after  
I'd run out of money and stamina  
the first go-round. Since then,  
I had gotten really good at pretending at  
grown-up things.

The art class was because I needed  
something easy. I also took Intro to Humanities and  
World Regional Geography, and  
I liked that I obviously knew more than  
those teenage kids who hadn't been anywhere or  
done anything yet.

But Art one-oh-one made me feel I could be  
an artist, even me,  
who was always so good at telling stories, but who  
couldn't draw or paint or even mold play dough. And if,  
because of this class, I could  
do art, I could  
do anything.

This bright-eyed professor, who seemed  
too young to be called that, was really  
an artist, but art didn't pay the bills, and  
if he had to have a day job, teaching  
about art was maybe  
the next best thing. I'm not sure if  
I appreciated art more after the class  
than before, but I never forgot that  
tiny, bulbous, carved figurine.

I first met her early in the semester because  
the professor taught art chronologically, and  
she was practically the first art  
ever made. Probably there were dozens  
of photos in the slide show that day of  
the cave paintings and stone carvings and  
engraved bones of the Upper Paleolithic, but  
I don't remember  
any of those.

The picture on the screen at the front of the classroom made her look enormous, but she is actually only eleven centimeters tall where she sits in a museum in Vienna. You can buy actual-size replicas in the gift shop made out of soap or even chocolate. People all over the world display the soap in their guest bathrooms because it sparks conversations about their recent European vacations. Someone might be eating her delicious chocolate bosoms right now.

From the moment I first saw her round, fertile belly and disproportionately large breasts and prominent lower lips I knew she was something special. I wanted her tattooed on my arm or maybe my own supple breast. An actual-size replica, of course, the chubby little goddess, she would wobble and bounce with my every step as if on a miniature trampoline, a naked symbol for sisterhood and solidarity and vaginal pride.

I wondered about the artist. Did she consider herself an artist? Was Stone Carving one-oh-one supposed to be her easy class? Was she surprised when it inspired her to do more with her life than hunt and/or gather? Did she shame her family by making art instead of making babies? Was she proud of her curly-haired goddess with the teeny-weeny arms? Did she teach the cave children to paint the walls and sculpt with clay and carve their own tributes to the gods because she needed a day job to pay the bills? Did she make other things? Did she sell jewelry and trinkets at the prehistoric farmer's markets? Was she voluptuous like her limestone doll? Did someone love her?

Once upon a time, someone took a rock and, with something hard and sharp, probably a bone, shaped the rock into a fat little lady, and now, thousands and thousands of years later, people see the lady, the Venus, in a museum or in pictures on the internet and wonder about how hard life must have been for skinny girls back then.

## **The House We Build**

Let's build a house of Legos

Not those off-brand bricks that don't quite snap together  
let's be rich enough to afford the real ones special-  
ordered in all the sizes even the big ones made for the  
toddlers so they don't choke and all the colors even the  
glittery ones and every shape even the weird ones so we  
can make a garden

The Plastic Garden of Misfit Lego Parts

Let's build a house of mazes

There'll be surprises at every turn and the tunnels will  
stretch for miles and the children will go missing for  
weeks happily lost on underground expeditions and only  
you and I will know the way to our room the one in the  
high tower with a ceiling open to the stars and a proper  
view of the ocean

It doesn't matter which one

Let's build a house of books

With stairs made of science fiction and walls made of  
bedtime stories and the kitchen table will be one giant  
atlas so we can plan our vacations during dinner and  
some rooms will be just for reading adventures with  
wardrobes to Narnia and Neverland and Oz and  
Hogwarts and we'll keep all the Sherlock Holmes in the  
Escape Room and there'll be a stage for performing  
Shakespeare and Tennessee Williams

Meet me in the Poetry Room in the mornings

Let's build a house of music

With literally every instrument ever made even like sitars  
and stylophones and pan flutes and bagpipes and we'll  
have a live-in musician to teach us how to play them all  
and the pipe organ will take up the entire second floor  
and the massive jukebox will hold every song ever  
written and we'll start a rock band in the garage

The dance parties will go on for days

Let's build a house of cities

We can photograph the different architecture in our pajamas and we'll have pizza in the Rome Room and sushi in Tokyo and there'll be rooms for lost cities like Atlantis and Pompeii and Machu Picchu and there'll be a New York Room and a London Room and a Paris Room which we'll have all to ourselves to explore

There won't be any tourists

Let's build a house of dreams

There'll be a room for dreams of outer space and one where we can feast all day and never get fat and a room for serendipitous encounters with celebrities and one for dreams that are scary but in a good way and the attic will hold the flying dreams but we'll lock the bad ones away in the basement

We'll send the therapist there to evaluate them

The house we build

Will have rooms with only soft things for arguments and rooms full of costumes for make-believe and rooms for practicing languages and jiu-jitsu and rooms for baking cookies and making art and forest rooms where the birds and squirrels will live and rooms under the water for the manatees and dark rooms where the ghosts will live and rooms full of closets for the monsters

And everyone will have a room to keep their snacks in

And everyone will have a room to keep their secrets in

And the rest of the world won't matter there

In the house of Legos and books

The musical house of mazes and cities

The house by the ocean that stores all the dreams

Where we'll make love under the stars

And breakfast with the poets in the mornings

## **“Dyke”**

### **(or “What I’d like to have said to that Woman who called me a Dyke at the Grocery Store”)**

If by *dyke*  
you mean  
a low wall meant  
to guard against the floodwaters  
of the sea or  
those tricky memories that  
surface at the worst times, then  
you’re not wrong.

If by *dyke*  
you mean  
sandbags stacked high enough  
to keep the rivers from  
drowning the village or  
the swells from  
smudging my mascara, then  
I would agree with you.

If by *dyke*  
you mean  
I can take a pounding  
whether by hurricane winds or  
patriarchy or  
Mondays or  
enthusiastic lovers, then,  
well,  
you nailed it.

If by *dyke*  
you mean that  
even as I break  
and crumble or  
as I am swept away  
by the waves, that  
I can always be rebuilt  
stronger, better next time, then  
I thank you for  
the compliment.

However,  
if by *dyke*  
you mean  
a causeway like  
a raised path over  
a marsh or a bog, then  
it’s not so true because  
I often forget to  
take the high road,  
you cunt.

## The World Breaks Everyone But You're Never Gonna Keep Me Down

I once heard that Hemingway said *we're all broken, that's how the light gets in*, which is lovely, but Hemingway never said it. What

Hemingway said was *the world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places*, which is also quite

inspirational except Hemingway went on to say, rather darkly, *those that will not break, it kills* and, I'm paraphrasing now, *the world*

*kills everyone impartially no matter how good or gentle or brave*. Later, it was another great poet, Leonard Cohen, who said *there is a*

*crack, a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in*. Twenty years after that, some lady merged the quotes together in a tweet. But this

absurd game of telephone actually started eight hundred years ago with the Sufi mystic Rumi who wrote something beautiful about a wound, and

that was, *Don't turn your head. Keep looking at the bandaged place. That's where the light enters you*. And it should be noted that Emerson

first said the thing about a crack in an essay in 1841. He wrote *there is a crack in every thing God has made*, but he left it at that without any

hope of light getting in there. But, after all of that, it was Chumbawumba who made the best point because it doesn't matter so much about cracks

or light as long as, after you get knocked down, broken or not, you get up again.

## Elephant Ears

incredible plants, Technicolor,  
Emerald City green, impossible leaves,  
Jurassic, from before everything got so  
much smaller, shelter for ground mammals  
and garden gnomes and fairies, I watch  
through trickles on window panes, a mouse  
darts out from under, braving the drizzle, which  
to her must be torrents, for the half-drowned  
worm in search of higher ground, then,  
with her wriggling meal, she returns,  
the canopy creates a dry space, a secret  
place for feasting, the rain tap tap taps  
a lullaby, this day is meant for reading  
and eating something warm and sweet

deep-fried cinnamon smells  
cinnamon thoughts, the first yeasty bite,  
dopamine explosion, endorphins compete  
with sugar for space in the bloodstream,  
eyes roll backward, lids fall just  
almost closed, a shudder, a  
not totally unsexual sound,  
cinnamon lips after and, oh  
I can see the carnival games, feel  
the thick summer air, hear  
the bluegrass band play in the square  
at the state fair, and I remember  
school trips to the zoo where they served  
the confections in the African village because  
it makes the most sense to eat them  
in view of their namesakes

the gray giants, their own ears like sails,  
like wings, for flying across golden oceans,  
and it seems they are probably soft  
like suede, like velvet and, oh  
to walk beside them in the wild, the lords  
of the savannah, to watch the children  
chase the birds, to laugh at the noses they  
haven't quite gotten used to yet, the  
floppy ears, twice the width of their round bodies,  
a calf trips and takes a tumble, but mother is only  
steps away, she coos and soothes, she  
kisses boo-boos as the little prince steps  
on an ear and falls again, baby mine,  
don't you cry, baby mine, you'll grow into them



and he might, but she won't see, the queen,  
the matriarch, who has lived long enough  
to birth five others, she has lived  
long enough to grow enviable incisors,  
titanic tusks, the pride of the herd, they  
match her roar in strength, in might,  
in venerable royalty, she earned that  
crack in the left one like she earned those  
scars on her shoulder, like she earned  
the bullet encased in her ample rump  
the last time they came, but she was  
younger then, and guns are bigger now,  
and desperation breeds savagery

two sisters are down before they know  
what's happening, and the babies are screaming,  
the air smells of blood and panic, and she tries,  
this queen mother, to gather the young ones  
behind her, to face her foes, to charge them  
like before, but she doesn't see them, they  
are too far, the cowards, hiding behind rocks,  
so she trumpets retreat, and her family scatters,  
the other mothers and the aunts herding the calves  
before them, but she stays, her majesty,  
roaring her anger, stomping her loathing  
into the dirt until she feels something

brush against a leg, her youngest child too scared  
to leave her side, he cries and she reaches down  
instinctively to comfort him, she turns to shield  
him, she takes fire, twice in her side, so he is safe,  
a third bullet hits a kneecap and she falls,  
the baby screams as the ground shakes, a final  
shot passes through an ear, finds her neck,  
the calf runs circles around her until she  
calls him close, the familiar rumble draws him in,  
she raises her trunk, lifts a bloody ear as the  
African wind carries her final heartbeats  
to her ancestors, and the little prince nuzzles  
underneath, his own ears flat against his  
shoulders, he cries, but mother is there,  
baby mine, dry your eyes, baby mine,  
you'll be just fine, except she can't know

if that's true, and so I  
cry too, fat  
elephant tears, lament

the broken kindred, mourn  
the great loss the world  
has suffered because  
I do know

that somewhere it has happened,  
is happening,  
will continue to happen,

and I used to wonder why I am so  
affected, why I feel  
everything

around me for thousands of miles, why  
I can't just write about plants  
or pastries without drawing  
tragic parallels, why

my own ears throb with the sounds  
of their cries, why  
their pain becomes my pain and  
why

it stirs within me such  
passion, such  
outrage, such  
revulsion

for humankind, but now I wonder why  
there are so few of us  
who use our ears  
for listening