

Dearest Creature

Amy Gerstler

Penguin Poets

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Primitive Man

Past Lives (with Alexis Smith)

Bitter Angel

Nerve Storm

Crown of Weeds

Medicine

Ghost Girl

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I.

Refugee



For My Niece Sidney, Age Six

Did you know that boiling to death was once a common punishment in England and parts of Europe? It's true. In 1542 Margaret Davy, a servant, was boiled for poisoning her employer. So says the encyclopedia. That's the way I like to start my day: drinking hot black coffee and reading the 1910 *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Its pages are tissue thin and the covers rub off on your hands in dirt-colored crumbs (the kind a rubber eraser makes), but the prose voice is all knowing and incurably sure of itself. My 1956 *World Book* runs to 18 volumes and has red pebbly covers. It begins at "aardvark" and ends with "zygote." I used to believe you could learn everything you'd ever need by reading encyclopedias. Who was E. B. Browning? How many Buddhists in Burma? What is Byzantine art? Where do bluebells grow? These days, I own five sets of encyclopedias from various

eras. None of them ever breathed
a word about the fact that this humming,
aromatic, acid-flashback, pungent, tingly
fingered world is acted out differently
for each one of us by the puppet theater
of our senses. Some of us grow up doing
credible impressions of model citizens
(though sooner or later hairline
cracks appear in our façades). The rest
get dubbed eccentrics, unnerved and undone
by other people's company, for which we
nevertheless pine. Curses, outbursts,
and distracting chants simmer all day
long in the Crock-Pots of our heads.
Encyclopedias contain no helpful entries
on conducting life's business while the ruckus
in your skull keeps competing for your
attention; or on the tyranny of the word
"normal"—its merciless sway over those
of us bedeviled and obsessed,
hopeless at school dances, repelled by
mothers' suffocating hugs, yet entranced
by foul-smelling chemistry experiments,
or eager to pass sleepless nights seeking
rhymes for "misspent" and "grimace."
Dear girl, your jolly blond one-year-old
brother, who adults adore, fits into
the happy category of souls mostly at home
in the world. He tosses a fully clothed doll
into the inflatable wading pool in your
backyard (*splash!*) and laughs maniacally
at his own comic genius. You sit alone,
twenty feet from everyone else, on a stone
bench under a commodious oak, reading aloud,
gripping your book like the steering wheel
of a race car you're learning to drive.
Complaints about you are already filtering
in. You're not big on eye contact or smiling.
You prefer to play by yourself. You pitch fits.
Last week you refused to cut out and paste
paper shapes with the rest of the kids.
You told the kindergarten teacher you were
going to howl like a wolf instead, which you did
till they hauled you off to the principal's
office. Ah, the undomesticated smell

of open rebellion! Your troublesome legacy, and maybe part of your charm, is to shine too hotly and brightly at times, to be lost in a maze of sensations, to have trouble switching gears, to be socially clueless, to love books as living things, and therefore to be much alone. If you like, when I die, I'll leave you my encyclopedias. They're wonderful company. Watching you read aloud in your father's garden, as if declaiming a sermon for hedges, I recall reading about Martin Luther this morning. A religious reformer born in 1483, he nailed his grievances, all 95 of them, to a German church door. Fiery, impossible, untamable girl, I bet you too will post your grievances in a prominent place someday. Anyway, back to boiling. The encyclopedia says the worst offenders were "boiled without benefit of clergy," which I guess means they were denied the right to speak to a priest before being lowered into scalding water and cooked like beets. Martin Luther believed we human beings contain the "inpoured grace of God," as though grace were lemonade, and we are tumblers brimful of it. Is grace what we hold in without spilling a drop, or is it an outflooding, a gush of messy, befuddling loves? The encyclopedia never explains *why* Margaret Davy poisoned her employer, what harm he might have done her or whether she dripped the fatal liquid on his pudding or sloshed it into his sherry. Grievances and disagreements: can they lead the way to grace? If our thoughts and feelings were soup or stew, would they taste of bile when we're defeated and be flavored faintly with grace on better days? I await the time and place when you can tell me, little butter pear, screeching monkey mind, wolf cub, curious furrowbrowed mammal, what you think of all this. Till then, your bookish old aunt sends you this missive, a fumbling word of encouragement, a cockeyed letter of welcome to the hallowed ranks of the nerds, nailed up nowhere, and never sent, this written *kiss*.

Dearest Creature,

If I end up an arid isle of desirelessness, it will be 1,000% your fault. Why don't you write? Why make me beg? Are you even reading these letters? Weren't we happy, each in our own peculiar way, traversing that rumpiled no-man's-land, the Gobi desert of our bed? Night of Too Many Body Fluids, can we laugh about that now? And that tussle in the motel tub when I accidentally knocked you unconscious? A minor concussion. Surely you've forgiven me. It's been several decades. I was loving you so much this morning, while brushing my teeth and doing my hair. Remember that abandoned car we found while hiking in the middle of nowhere, tufts of grass sprouting from the radio, gymnastic acts we performed in its rusted-out chassis? I'm just trying to depress you. (*Hah!*) How am I doing? If you don't send me a letter soon, I'll have to resort to forgery. Your white violets have prospered and spread. Do you mind if I go on a while longer? I have so many thoughts zipping around my head and I'm trying to fit them all into words that will win you back and that's why my handwriting rushes and floods, which is also true of my speech, chatter that's been known to reach unintelligible and perhaps irritating-to-most-people speeds, though I always secretly believed what I said and meant completely, sweetly intelligible to you, even when the idea-content was, well, a bit melted, or had been run through, as you liked to quip, one of my several mental blenders. Remember when you said, after we'd camped near Crater Lake for a week, that I looked like the sort of tree one sees in a dream? I made fun of you all day. Called you loony. But now, with your tangerine tree, the one you planted and fed fireplace ash all its first winter, covered with hummingbirds,

I know exactly what you were trying
to say that precious day. Dearheart: a single
word would be enough to summon me. All else
burns off like fog. I lie *vividly* awake. Waiting.

Sonnet

The small stone towers pictured on the other side of this postcard
are called Lanterns of the Dead. Lights are displayed at night in
those tiny
portholelike openings at the top, to indicate the location of cemeteries
so penitents hiking through graveyards by torchlight (a popular
activity here, the allure of which is a complete mystery to me)
can find their way. The lace pillow slips in this hotel look as if
they're crocheted from loops of white icing. This creates the sensation
that one is sleeping with one's head on a large rectangular pastry.
The hotel manager, a man with a drooping mustache, greets his
squirmy young dog each morning, cooing, "Hello, Mr. Wiggling
Gentleman."
Of course this sounds ever so much better in French. That's all for
now, dear.
Kiss the baby for me. I trust his custardy little mind remains sweetly
unencumbered by thought. Determined as I am to return from this
mission
in one piece, I see now why your daily prayers are soooo important.

Luncheon with the Etruscans

As reedbirds with mustard were served,
the youngest Etruscan proposed a toast.
"You who drink wine by the bowlful,"
he began, "you who loll and sprawl
on soft couches: even *your* minds
are not beyond decipherment." We
all raised our glasses and laughed.
Turns out citizens in this florid but
short-lived civilization believed all is
sacred, sentient, trembling all over,
just like us. Next course: broiled
plover on toast. Talk drifted

to the archaeological record,
“beyond this world” contexts, and how
many words our languages had for being
drunk. We exchanged gifts and bribes.
Breast of partridge larded and fried
came next. One of the loveliest gifts
we received was an ornate fired-clay
drinking vessel. The figures on it seem
to be dancing, though they might be
peering into a cauldron of fresh entrails,
trying to divine the future, or making
primitive pie filling. Etruscan cemeteries
were larger and more elaborate than
their villages for the living. That
shocked some members of our party
a bit. “But our sphinxes had wings,”
the Etruscan host bragged, as his
countrymen looked away. “Same for
our horses. Our satyrs had long dirty
fingernails, out to here,” and he
measured one hand a good ten inches
in front of the other. Just then the room
went pungent with wild oregano and fennel.
“The smell of our backyards,” one said,
and the youngest wept. When the cover
was raised from its dish, we gave their
braised quail with bacon a standing ovation.

Letter from the Middle Ages

The barbarians are colorful and inventive
and we envy the heck out of them. Six lashes
for monks who sing out of tune. Altar boys

get slapped for stuttering or coughing. My
youngest daughter, kidnapped after morning
Mass, energetically fended off every rescuer.

However unworthy or out of date, I send you

the peppercorn of my affections, the pinkening
pomegranate of my regard, praying hard

for these greetings to embrace you across the named
ages that divide us (though we're mindful that
history never falls into such simplistic divisions).

Not a hopeful century I'm stuck in, full
of haggard cooks, ragged armies, and few
laws, scribbled by tallow candles' grimy light.

Unicorns sightings provide faint consolation.
Attempts to enforce celibacy in the priesthood
continue to fail. (More about that later . . .)

Future-dwelling pen pal: my own era repels me,
whereas other places, times, and climes beckon.
Is there not some way we can, by Christ's grace,

trade places? Even if only for a day? I have
striven to locate myself in spirit in other ages,
alas, to no avail. Only your letters and the love

of my dear (if runty) ones sustain me. How I long
to yank open a "fridge" and stare in, zip a zipper,
channel surf, sample antibiotics and a hundred

other coming attractions your missives describe.
Except for this pesky death stuff, we're all fine here,
coming to tardy consciousness of our wickedness

every day, seizing the property of our weaker
neighbors, watching peasants get arrested,
valuing the sweet and savory equally in our cuisine,
and even while pawning hymnals to get money for drink,
putting all confidence in God. Boldly we ride into war,
Bible quotations emblazoned on our helmets. The barbarians,

who get to wear all the eye makeup they like,
find us comic. A handsome lot, not one among them
is odious, vulgar, or sluttish. Their eyes shine

with sweet wonder. Their breath smells of cloves.
Like shy virgins they clap their hands over their mouths
when they laugh, hiding perfect teeth made of stained glass.

A Million Happy Endings

You see, casseroles can shout too. Everything can.

—Pablo Picasso

Seeking relief from the tidelike pull of dark thoughts, I took some household objects into my confidence. “O useful friends,” I began. “What am I to do? Marooned and wounded, I’m in the middle of an extended stretch of celibacy. Each time the last man I dated and I got to the brink of sex, he’d go pale and whisper, ‘Let’s just cuddle.’ My boss takes great delight in making me cry. The troop of toothless parolees next door opened a car repair shop in their driveway. It’s busy from midnight to five in the morning, with jobs that require chain saws and rivet guns. Police helicopters swoop back and forth over my block all night, shining searchlights into bedroom windows. My brain is a smoldering train wreck, full of sinister information and . . .” The waffle iron yawned greasily. “It’s your own damn fault. Why didn’t you move to a better neighborhood when you could afford it? Or for Christ’s sake don’t cry. I was only joking.” The faded tablecloth looked ashamed. Its fringes continued to fray. “Quit whining,” rasped the cracked glass pitcher. She was feeling a bit choked, so I’d cut a bunch of begonias and jammed their stems into her open throat. I poured myself some club soda to settle my stomach. “Water’s for sissies,” the tumbler mumbled. “After all you’ve been through, what you need is vodka, pronto.” The light of day mocked me. “A couple of slaps in the face and a few fresh setbacks, and suddenly you’re numbering yourself among the slain? Give me a break.” During a lull in the conversation, a hand-painted china plate explained, “You suffer the trials and transformations of middle age. Yes, there are annoyances and betrayals. Yes, loves fall away. That doesn’t mean you give in.” For several minutes an atmosphere of gravity and forgiveness seemed to prevail in the kitchen. Pink and black peppercorns nattered happily in their grinder. “We who are

about to be pulverized salute you!” Down the long hall, the bed was remarkably welcoming. “Come me,” it whispered. “Climb aboard and drift for a spell. We’ll find some windswept piney islands, and you can go ashore and colonize them if you like.” I thought about the soul’s wilderness, still unexplored at this late date. So began an unmapped and provisionless voyage. I threw my clothes overboard and watched them sink. Immediately I felt lighter, like a woman whose health has been recently restored. Peering over the edge of my barge, I could see a beautifully appointed ballroom at the bottom of the deep water, complete with coat-check rooms, mirrored walls, and lounges carpeted in a bold pattern of red and yellow quarter moons. There were rows of round tables, with candles aglow on each, and beyond that an oblong mahogany dance floor. People were dancing the Lindy, the shimmy, and the mambo. The bandstand was lit with colored spotlights as though a show was about to begin. Can you fathom the serene feeling it gives to float over a drowned ballroom? And now everything slows way down. We must wait patiently to see who steps out onstage to entertain us, to warble and croon, struggling to attain his or her perfect form, clad perhaps in dark green sharkskin or a silvery gown encrusted with pearls.

Moon Salutation

Even as I sleep in a ravine
on a mattress of dead grass,

bright jawbreaker,
I do salute you.

Don’t look askance as my
stomach rumbles, ravishing

omelet, buttermilk layer
cake, bubbling four-cheese

pizza. O washed-out mandala,
radiant, featureless, cratered

face afloat in a bowl
of 4,000-year-old noodles:

don’t let me be dimmed
by injury. Drape me in your

knowing corona. Let me sip
the skeleton tea you're steeping.

Keep our intimate religion top secret.
Even if it's only reflected light,

let me shine a while longer.



II.

Creaturely

Advice from a Caterpillar

Chew your way into a new world.
Munch leaves. Molt. Rest. Molt
again. Self-reinvention is *everything*.
Spin many nests. Cultivate stinging
bristles. Don't get sentimental
about your discarded skins. Grow
quickly. Develop a yen for nettles.
Alternate crumpling and climbing. Rely
on your antennae. Sequester poisons
in your body for use at a later date.
When threatened, emit foul odors
in self-defense. Behave cryptically
to confuse predators: change colors, spit,
or feign death. If all else fails, taste terrible.

Moths

lapel pins
for widow
or widower

eyes like
tiny burn
holes

hair ornaments
for ailing maidens

the house is full of them
between seasons:
brown scraps
of singed tissue
on which cryptic laws
are written

they fly awkwardly
as if nursing
old injuries
or rising
from bonfires
many lack mouths
of those who *can* eat
some feed on wool
feathers, fur, hair
leather, dust, tidbits
of linen: a vacuum
cleaner's diet
what kind of appetite
do they bring to pink
sweaters?

one drops
into your lap,
tiny dry dirt-colored leaf
whirring,
or it lights on your
sleeve
and you gasp

is it bad luck
when they land on you
these grubby
bits of missives
from limbo?
lint from God's pockets?
God's tapped off
cigarette ash?
dead they are majestic
toasted flowers,
nature's punctuation

just like us,
orchards spring
from their corpses

He

He wonders why there are no tigers in the Bible.
He thinks someone should consider putting them in.
He can be the very soul of elation. Yet some days
he's too sad to even button his coat. An impetuous man,
not entirely bound by natural laws, he never gets enough
kissing or figures out what kind of animal he is.
An impoverished doctor or handsome drifter,
when he sees a woman carrying a sick child wrapped
in an old plaid coat into the emergency room
he rushes over to help her. No coward soul is his,
though he is given to copious groaning. He once
wrote a play called *Eight People Who Are Really
Tired*. The audience loved it. When he and his brother
were thirteen and fourteen, respectively, they took LSD
in a tree house their father had built. For seven hours
he watched his cells vibrate wildly in time with cells
in the tree's trunk and leaves. Now, thirty years later,
he's never entirely forgotten that feeling.
It's been raining for days. He seems content
to stand on the covered front porch, under the dripping

eaves, smoking and petting his adoring sheepdog.

Whenever it rains like this, he remembers the one offense

his dad spanked him for when he was a kid.

He knows he deserved it. He sits down on the welcome

mat, taps off his ash, and kisses the dog's furry head.

She wiggles her hindquarters and licks the knee of his jeans.

In gleaming moments like these, forming and falling

like raindrops, I'd give anything to be one of them,

either that man or his dog. Instead, not knowing

which end is up, or what saints to pray to,

I find myself hopelessly in love with them both.

Chanson

Seriously undermedicated, I waltz

downstairs into the soaked street

during a short storm. No one but

the new dog home to advise against

it, and he decides to come along.

Rain pelts us like pills spilling from

the pharmacist's pockets as she does

a quick headstand to clear her mind

before another trying lunch with her

mother. The wet dog shakes himself

hard, license tags jingling like dimes

in a jar—a sound halfway between

maracas and breaking glass. I must

waltz carefully across sidewalks alive

with promenading snails, defenseless

and jellyish. Their motto: the wetter

the better. The dog licks a snail once,

unpersuaded by its flavor. I'm ruining

my boiled-wool bedroom slippers

in multiple puddles. You loved puddles

and tide pools, dear friend. Now

you are dead and I'm left not high

enough and not dry, wavering

in the rain, only snails and a spotted

dog urinating on geraniums for company.

I'd better not wander far in this drugged

weather, with the primitive cinema

in my head showing old cartoons

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