

# Dearest Creature

Amy Gerstler

Penguin Poets



# Dearest Creature

Amy Gerstler

Penguin Poets



---

# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[I. - Refugee](#)

[II. - Creaturely](#)

[III. - Maidenly](#)

[IV. - Elegy](#)

[About the Author](#)

[PENGUIN POETS](#)

---

## ALSO BY MY GERSTLER

*The True Bride*

*Primitive Man*

*Past Lives (with Alexis Smith)*

*Bitter Angel*

*Nerve Storm*

*Crown of Weeds*

*Medicine*

*Ghost Girl*

---

# Dearest Creature

Amy Gerstler

Penguin Poets





---

## Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges prior publication of some of the poems in this book in the following: *American Poetry Review*, *The Best American Poetry* blog (<http://thebestamericanpoetry.typepad.com/>), *Brooklyn Review*, *Burnside Review*, *CAB/NET*, *Coconut*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *DMQ Review*, *Flight*, *Jacket*, *MiPOesias*, *No Tell Motel*, *Ocho*, and *TriQuarterly*.

Special thanks to:

Brighde Mullins, Brian Tucker, Paul Slovak, Marnie Weber, Mimi Gerstler, Dinah Lenney, Tom Clark, Bernard Cooper, and David Lehman.

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A. • Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England • Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd) • Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd) • Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110 017, India • Penguin Group (NZ), 6 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd) • Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:  
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published in Penguin Books 2009

Copyright © Amy Gerstler, 2009

All rights reserved

Page ix constitutes an extension of this copyright page.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Gerstler, Amy.

Dearest creature / Amy Gerstler. p. cm.—(Penguin poets)

eISBN : 978-1-101-14498-5

I. Title.

PS3557.E735D'.54—dc22 2009019882

Set in Waldbaum MT

<http://us.penguin.com>

---

# 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  
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? Oh  
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, and  
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



---

sample content of Dearest Creature

- [\*The Gates \(Samuel Johnson, Book 1\) book\*](#)
- [download The Spellcoats \(Dalemark Quartet, Book 3\)](#)
- [\*Ruhlman's How to Roast here\*](#)
- [download True Blend pdf, azw \(kindle\)](#)
- [Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars \(African Issues\) for free](#)
- [Theory of Mind: How Children Understand Others' Thoughts and Feelings pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub](#)
  
- <http://xn--d1aboelcb1f.xn--p1ai/lib/The-Gates--Samuel-Johnson--Book-1-.pdf>
- <http://bestarthritiscare.com/library/The-Spellcoats--Dalemark-Quartet--Book-3-.pdf>
- <http://www.celebritychat.in/?ebooks/Towards-the-Definition-of-Philosophy--Athlone-Contemporary-European-Thinkers-.pdf>
- <http://econtact.webschaefer.com/?books/Mary-Barton.pdf>
- <http://aseasonedman.com/ebooks/Dom-s-Guide-To-Submissive-Training--Volume-1.pdf>
- <http://www.1973vision.com/?library/Ten-Poems-to-Set-You-Free.pdf>