

Picaroan Poetry



Issue #15

Picaron Poetry

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Rosie Garland

Auto-da-fé

Comets are not victims of their orbits.
The star round which they swing
not rescuer, persecutor. Their ring-a-rosie
is no procession of flagellants
lurching on bloodied knees towards the pyre.

I lay down the cat o' nine tails. Unlock
the scold's bridle, the girdle of barbed wire,
life as a succession of Ash Wednesdays.
Raise my forehead from dirt, learn fire
that is not immolation. Stand up. Dance.

David Wyman

Muzzle Flashes In The Dark

Hours before the ice age is scheduled to begin,
the evening percolates with wistful faces.

The masks are fixed, images representing
things we don't want but they stick

even when being two separate persons
can keep you from losing a sense of self.

And the streets act like we don't belong.
A sign advertising *Psychic Readings* alludes

to our higher aspirations but
with so many discredited terms—

none of this ever gets us anywhere.
As always we look forward, parts of an idea

affecting the unlettered future. Better
to move away then, not be stuck to a place,

keep it in the camouflage of dreams
that wake you up in the night, as I have

no feel for where I stand right now, the answer
deferring to a brighter probability of days.

Isaac Stovell

Herenow

presented with personal pasts
present self to face futures
& preponderously practicing –
paraphrasing paradoxical paragraphs
purposes punctured purple –

& to be you

a verbal state
of adjectiving
pronounly

The Pain Machine

I have built a machine
that feels other people's pain.
Simply enter the details of the person
whose pain you wish to understand,
to receive a printout detailing
every pinch, twinge, and shame.

Once you have your printout
and think you grasp what their pain is,
you can cross reference their coordinates
with your own.
Feed those into the machine
and hook yourself up to one of the hair-thin wires
that come in the pack (non-refundable).
Wrap it around your forefinger and wait.
Within five minutes, you will feel their pain;
every unsated desire, every slipped disc,
every pointed look from a friend,
every squeeze of the uterine wall,
and every hatred.

The machine is available in a range of colours,
but I do not offer any guarantee of results,
or that what you experience will really be
the pain of the other person, or your own.
Please enjoy the pain of others responsibly.

The needle buzzes to the radio.
The woman winces, but the pain has dulled
A while ago.
Something hypnotic in it now.
She hums along, and marvels how
Each crimson petal of the rose
Underneath the needle grows.

A gang once found her vulnerable,
Drugged her, exploited her and stamped their mark
(Another needle stabbing in the dark)
On her left breast, a crude tattoo
To say, our tools are rape, starvation,
Addiction and manipulation,
And what a piece of art we've made of you!

The needle buzzes to the radio.
These things did happen, yet they happened
Long ago.
Free, independent, at her ease,
She hums and winces, smiles and sees
Her mark of shame, their brand of power
Transformed into a spreading flower
Inwoven with her daughter's name.

Emily Strauss

How to Tell a Mother her Child is Dead

a found poem from NY Times, 9/3/16

First get your coat, the white doctor one
and go into the bathroom, stare in the mirror

practice your line, use the child's name, use
the mother's name, say it until it's clear

and loud, loud enough. Don't make her
wait, the mother, and never stand.

Now you explode the world, you have to.
Then you wait. You will not stand up.

Perhaps the other son breaks a chair. It's ok.
There is money for new chairs. Never say

'*the body*'. It's her son. If she has no questions
now, you don't give her any answers. Go home.

Don't yell at your husband. If he left his socks
on the floor again today, it's ok too.

Night Thoughts

A

The past holds our priorities ransom despite
only speculation how we'd turn out
—still | we keep on spooling falsehoods into our future.

Putting another man's hat on mistakenly
may not reveal his inner most thought
nor how he polishes his precious trophy of testosterone.

Wearing another's shoes we do not tread their step.
Your prescription only blurs my vision
: I see only the absence of spectacles.

B

Blocking the gasps windows | never
turning | silhouette-shape

: "behind you | look |
behind...make note of us!"

I snooze in this puddle of objects
that speak & feel— off-cut tendrils of matter

with DIY ideology | hunger & concern
—is this animism |

reification of matter?

C

Still | at times that dream returns | where
I'm driven down a dark road
(dark you can rub) & the driver commands: "GET OUT!"

The dark disorients | I cannot know that N E S & W

equal an indiscriminate emptiness.
I wake where I sleep but it takes 5 minutes

pawing the dark room in terror | until I realize I'm not asleep.
The first time this happened | in late May 2009 |
I was in Oftersheim | 24 years wet behind the ears.

D

I step outside | the round night after rain
& the wet perfume of grass & soil
makes me want to sleep.

I sense the feminine
in the closure of the night's rain.
I'll remember that when I was 32

we often cried.

Pam Thompson

The Screening

When we entered we couldn't see
anything then heads, the gleam of an eye—
your animal cry, someone touched me,

fingers, cold through my clothes, why
did I always follow? What were they doing in there?
A girl, *Michael, Michael!* Seats. A row of seats.

I banged my knee, grabbed at ... nothing. I swear
to God the place was shut down last year.
It was the end of us. I shut down too. *Where*

are you? I catch people looking. Is it fear
or boredom in their faces. The nights gape
and sag. Sometimes owls scream too near

my window and instead of sleeping I escape
into my mind where bright objects
settle like planets above an indifferent landscape.

Mark J. Mitchell

A Sin of Fiction

She heard the story call her secret name.
It cooed, soft as a half-remembered kiss.
She left, propping her door open. She came
awake in new air—bright. She almost missed
the stranger who must hold some kind of claim
on her misplaced soul. She stopped him to kiss
his white forehead and to take his lost name
for a stroll. Hand in hand, she let mist
own them. But that door, propped open, let dreams
escape—real dreams—where enchanted white queens
became poisonous and lost cats returned
disguised as her sister. Blue skies go green.
Because they've left, she can't wake up. She screams
But he holds her. Tense. So cold. Cruel. Firm.

Betsy Housten

The Other Town

after Cheryl Strayed & Joseph Fink

I dream I'm a small-town bartender, slinging drinks
along a splintered veneer, mopping sloshed rum

and the neon glut of maraschino cherries, overboard.
The lives I haven't led are not grand. I miss them.

On deck the phantom ship, I do not wave back
at the hologram of me saluting from shore, because

I have not yet learned about the casualties of choice,
the coax of gold that might be pyrite. I fall for it

every time; I'm even doing it now. If I were a man
I'd buy a Corvette, high-five friends over fingers

of watery scotch at a dive in the middle of nowhere.
If I were afraid of death I'd call someone to help

deal with this mouse, flattened against the wall
behind my bookshelf, stinking up my room all day.

But I'm not. I scrape its corpse off the molding
with the side of a box, gently at first, harder when

it will not come unstuck. Paint chips onto its scarlet
abdomen: impossibly bright, flayed open by my

insistent hand. Below the stain its life left, there is
a small hole, rodent tunnel reeking of purpose.

Poor bastard couldn't have anticipated a housecat.
I should patch it up. I should do a lot of things.

Courtenay S Gray

//The Killing Of Winter//

The dark coveted my safety like as Winter berry desecrated with pine needles.
Each needle pricking my cheek like a forbidden kiss.
It's a sham to claim that the snow can protect you from the patched up bear who recovers in the wood.
The moonlit horizon twinkles and sparkles.
Each star is a place in my heart reserved for the downtrodden and the lonely.
A doe of Hollywood starlet quality.
Tinsel town smoothed over like a well oiled machine.
Our hands gingerly reach for the others neck.
We are tempted to squeeze but instead we trace an X across the jugular.

Divine Trickery

My bedroom, a room of death—
Sexual fury on the walls,
Painted with Michael Angelo's three
Fingers. A lizard floating in the
Bathroom mess, lighting herself
With bare wires—O Liz, what did
I do to deserve such atonement?

No word of God spoken here, no sir,
No eulogies for his sons either. This
Room is a room of irreligiosity, ma'am,
A breeding ground for worm eggs and
And snails which crackle their shells.
Pity the mercilessness of their Lord!

I reside in this Parisian gutter and
Wonder where religion and faith,
A sense of belonging, meaninglessness,
Will take the rest. Perhaps a Heaven?
Perhaps ninety angelic women?
Perhaps a grave with no exit signs,
Red, a lack of stairs, and only some
Curses blown out of proportion:

"Goddamn, I could have been an atheist instead!"

Matt Gilbert

The POV

“Your point of view is ready now,”
they announce from behind the counter,
I check the ticket, the numbers match

Must be time to collect what’s mine,
Though I’m feeling a little bit uncertain,
surely someone has a greater need,

For batteries or a clothes-horse,
curtain rail or forks, or something
else not so protean, so tricky

But my number 843 flashes urgent,
And the woman behind is coughing,
Impatient for this ditherer to get on

With it, she’s no time for tentative,
or vague - neither do the others
in the line, coughing tutting faces

Push me to be delivered of an opinion,
packaged awkwardly in black and white,
with a warranty for just a little extra

“You hold it like this” they say,
tilting its single facing plane up
toward me, before I drop and run

“You’ve still to pay” barks abruptly through
the swinging door, words snagging, in the
thick atmosphere of the street outside

James Croal Jackson

After-Work Binary

I know we need to decompress because
there's a multitude of zeroes airplaning
from our mouths while a jet drones above
and my heart is 01001010010 you tell me
your dad had a heart attack at 30 I hear
murmuring between my valves throat
clenched I want to kiss you but the
world is on fire and I want to turn
you off and on and off and on again

The golden cage

I spend my days at an office where
I file things alphabetically
and print things surreptitiously.

Our garden is a wilderness where
I dig, overturning strange grubs,
and bury my hands in knobbly roots.

I go to writing workshops where
I peel off pieces of myself for others to judge.
I never go for drinks after.

My favourite place to write is perched on a stone slab where
Romans once bathed. Steam curls from green water.
Sometimes tourists sneak a photo.

Walking home, I pause where
Georgian crescents shine with outstretched arms.
The smell of weed lingers in invisible pockets.

“Don’t stay here too long,”
my boss advises. “It’s where
ambition comes to die.”

Louisa Campbell

Application form

If I write that I deserve this
– that I'm worthwhile, good,
accomplished –
then my mother will be wrong

and I want her to be right;
I want to be *problematic*
with my *skewed view*,
my *vivid imagination*.

I want to sob, *Mum*,
you were right all along,
let her fold me in, her soft cardigan
buttoned behind my back.

The cardigan is sunshine yellow,
the buttons white plastic daisies.

Or was that *my* cardigan,
my daisy buttons?

Still, I must complete this form,
snivel-smudge the ink.
Pissing gravel would be easier.
It'll have to do.

A declaration

I am a Pictish child
who starved to death
after our crops were burned
by some well-fed warlord
to intimidate another
in whose praise the bards
first elevated speech to poetry,
in the Age of Arthur, long ago.
They never sang a song for me.

I am a child of Dalriada
who perished in the pestilence
which the saints told us God sent
to punish us for the sins
described in their Vulgate
and by their desert fathers,
sins which explained our misery.
But I was happy until they came.

I am the infant daughter of MacWilliam,
brains bashed out against the mercat cross
one dreich day in Forfar:
a lineage extinguished, a dynasty defunct,
to throttle the bifurcations of history
as had been publicly proclaimed in advance.
But what do I know of ambition?

I am the nameless child
ripped from its mother's womb
in the streets of Berwick
after the three days of its siege and sack
before the flower of our chivalry were captured
at Dunbar, and the country fell,
and the chronicler recorded how the manner of my death
seemed to exceed even the most medieval of excesses,
and prompted churchmen to ask a king
to call a halt to the atrocities.

I and my twin brother were miscarried

before we could be baptised,
dying along with our mother
in the smoke and straw and turmoil
as the blazing thatch collapsed
when they burned us out
to clear the land for sheep.

I took my last breath
before I could speak my first word
when I succumbed to tuberculosis
in the slums of the Calton.

And since you exported these extravagant atrocities
that you had practised on each other
in the narrow corridor of our Scottish centuries
to fulfil some broader civilising duty you say God ordained,
I am the American child skewered by a sabre
as I fled the cavalry, running between our lodges
while my people's land was seized to satisfy your cupidity,
- or rescued from our savagery, as you would have it -
to submit to the grim teleology of commerce,
the plough, and the long-horned herds of alien ungulates
that replaced the buffalo you machine-gunned to extinction
from the trains you dispatched across the metal web
you spun across our prairies,

that grim teleology that dictates
the dark declining climate of our fates:
that everything is just a means to an end,
in which the end of everything awaits.

I am a child taken from its mother's arms by the sea
and drowned as we seek these less hostile shores as refugees,

and the very language in which my mother named me,
whose lilt and grace animated my now forgotten name
has itself been forgotten.

I am silence.

I am that mute substratum of your loud history
that has no voice. I am that bloody backdrop

to your every great exploit. I am the sawdust
swept from the stage before the curtain is raised
and you step forth to perform your epic and inspiring tale.
I am every untold story lingering in the interstices of your syllables.
I am the ghost that convects and coils through the shafts of light
that project your favourite blockbuster onto the silver screen.
I am every blank page, every pause, every unseen presence
loitering at the back of the darkened auditorium.

But I will be heard now, and it is not for honour
- for what honour is there in being a victim of history,
in being the silt and ashes which settle in unseen anoxic depths,
to form the compacted layers upon which the future struts -

nor for glory - for what glory is there
in being disposed of and stamped down and ignored,
suffocating under wasted generations in the landfill of history -

nor for riches - for there no recompense for annihilation,
no coin that compensates for my enforced absence -

that I speak up, but for freedom
- freedom to be born, freedom to grow,
freedom to learn and love and know
the rain and sun and wind and snow,
the seasons turn and years unfold -

for freedom, yes, and that alone,
which no good man gives up but with his life.
The same freedom which I never gave up,
but which was taken from me, with my life,
when I became a victim of your history,

and I call on you now for restitution,
for resurrection, for restoration, of my dignity
in the dignity you seek to establish for yourselves.
Give your riches to the beggar. Place that coin
in the hand held out where mine has been held back,
and find your glory in the insignificance you embrace,
your honour in the ego you erase. This is my declaration:

make this Scotland, and the world it is in,
a monument to the dignity of all
in commemoration of those who were granted none.
Make this Scotland, and the world it is in,
memorable for the best of reasons,
in memory of those forgotten for the worst.
Cultivate the anonymous ashes of the past
to bring forth a blossom so fragrant with freedom
that its celebration effaces my anonymity,

and let there be no more victims of history
in the future you begin to write today
on the first page of this,
my declaration.

Salome

I thought I was condemned to wander
Forever, but then I saw the black rose.
It took mud for my footprints
To interpret my heart's weight.

The one-eyed vulture sings its elegy
Circling the gray sky like a dervish.
Thousands of the impaled have turned
Skeletal, the moon casting crooked

Shadows on the parched field.
They say the maiden men of the invading
Army raped is the priestess I'm looking
For - the gatherer of lanceolate leaves

For the god's cauldron. Wolves return for
Bones of her enchantments. The King yearns
For her words, and when the black rose blooms
Her eyes turn white, the sky vermillion.

Matt Duggan

The Hunger

All that's left are the berry pickers
the foxes have gone – magpies have flown far from the storm;
We watched children throwing stones at drones
that hovered above council estates,

Waiting for that interlude – the lightness –
a symphony we can't hear. Stomach is brimming
tight muscles can't clench wilderness not reached –

We draw this hunger in pencil across a sky in dark velvet;
walk among dunes of concrete where fumes fill a green arena;

Our sanity disturbs this restless hunger as we devour colours and textures
seeking images that tempt our throats; waiting for that interlude – the lightness – the break.

Rupert Locke

I just don't get modern art

In the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, at the Bottle Top Brasserie
There's a lounge bar styled from a boxer's mouthpiece
Where barnacles sup on 'Mermaid's Tears' -
Some fancy new cocktail shipped in from the mainland

A crab kayaks his way past the unhappy drinkers
In a margarine tub with a cotton bud oar
He pulls up at an atoll to look at the artwork
Of whales made of binbags and fishing twine

He gets the regurgitating gulls feeding their chicks
On splayed toothbrushes and broken lighters
But the triggerfish, using a bucket as a gastric band
Is just too much for him. *This filth isn't art* he grumbles

Appetition

Through which loupe do I see lineup
of oddments, seriocomic at one level,
unbelievable at another? In laundered
streets of the sky there is no shortcut.
There are no needs. Essentialities stir
the urge. Paphian calls alter the fret-
work. There is no greater ego-buster
or booster. The latter post *ne plus ultra*.

The Misery Index

We must be lost. As someone who grew up here, I should really know where we are. We walk around to get a sense of place and pass payday loan shops, the bloated carcass of a dog, streets with holes. A teenage girl writhes on the sidewalk, her right leg splayed at a gruesome angle, her face contorted with pain. Huddled over her are a couple of friends whose idea of help is to just yell, "C'mon! Stand up!" At this point I can't even tell anymore what's real and what isn't. "If you see me," the mass shooter says in the latest tweet, "weep."

&

This part of the river is popular for suicide attempts. But if you go early, it's not very busy. Just up the street, I encounter a wild-eyed woman, debt-ridden, detested, abandoned by everyone, walking in circles. "Please help, please help, please help," she keeps saying. The air around us swarms with particles of ash and smoke, as if bodies are regularly being fed into industrial ovens. And, in fact, modern homes burn 8x faster. There are so many fires you can't even see the sky.

&

Today I went looking for flowers for the funeral, but the shelves held only bottles, broken auto parts, a basket with plastic eggs. On the way home, I saw a young mom submerge her baby for a suspiciously long time in a galvanized tub set up beneath a cat's cradle of clotheslines. Birds were darting here and there, making a noise like "Ha-ha-ha!" as if something in the situation was screamingly funny. I just kept walking. When I got to the corner, I happened to look back. It was like watching TV with the sound off, but you didn't need sound to know what was happening to my country.

Spangle McQueen

Kelly G

(Douglas Gissendaner's killer will be eligible for parole in 2022)

Someone idly wondered if she'd swallowed
all her final meal - fajita nachos
smothered with a cheesy dip and swilled down
with diet lemonade -
while still clinging to a
slim hope for clemency.

But even papal intervention could not save
a woman
who had orchestrated
murder.

She sang Amazing Grace
from the gurney
until the lethal
injection
silenced
her
faithful
voice.

Ron Riecki

The Skeleton Speaks Up

and tells me that one day
he will own everything,
that the porch of my face
is nothing, that it will
melt in days once death
comes kicking the lake
to the side. My heart,
even with all of its
hurting for sex will only
pay homage to rot.
And the lungs. And
the eyes. And the
sad shithole of my feet.
Only the skeleton, it says,
will dance in the womb
of forever. The pancreas
yells, *Shut the fuck up!*

Frederick Pollack

Nor Gloom of Night

When the Postal Service is abolished,
they empty all the files and drawers
and the Dead Letter Office.
Thousands of letters descend.
Torn, gummy, brittle ...
some date from Father's time.
Some of them *are* from Father.
(Everything Mother had to say she said.)

Nothing's forgiven. Some things are.
Ending with her sardonic proto-
smiley-face, G
says she'd like to hear from me.
K still regards himself as a friend.
T needs money.
B recognizes my genius
in 1993.

In the future, catalogues and pizza
flyers (for a fee)
will arrive with the speed
one expects from a corporation,

but private missives, only
entering one's head
through chips one installs there,
won't be sent by the dead.

Rus Khomutoff

Popularity killed the night

Ravelin beginning
titania of vertical life
the day we began a
divergence from the course
quiver the clog
bottomless helix blitz
the distance of golden exalt
from shadows to spotlight
conditioned zero

Leather Red Riding Boots

Once upon a time

Life was pure and chaste

She was as unblemished as white lace.

Immaculate. That innocent, fragile girl was
milk and sugar.

She stayed on that fragrant, rose-laden path
untouched, unbroken.

With her silver laugh and liquid blonde curls
she carried

a light wicker basket

filled to the brim with

sweet cakes and ruby red wine.

She tasted temptation;

She never looked back.

Sweetness married sour

Adulthood tainted purity.

She began to dress in red and black.

Curiosity seethed inside

the dark depths of her soul.

The young woman indulged in the carnal

a resurfaced beauty.

Her days were spent in glistening sheets

women and men

could not resist

her signature amber locks

and her tantalizing, honeyed offerings.

Dominant and unrelenting

Lovers kneeled at her feet.

Leather Red Riding Boots

gains pleasure from pain.

No longer dainty and soft for

all little girls must grow up.

With lurid lacquer lips, she conducts

the intricate teasing and taunting of

eager men.

Cruelly encapsulated in bonds of black rope
for nothing

but deep, dark pleasure.

At the end of a slick whip

to obey the vermillion Mistress.

Young women

can be wolves too.

Ikat dress

you flow out from my breasts to swirl
space around my belly
over my hips nestled in milky fat
low cut arm holes air
pheromone-rich sweat as my waist
remains coy its outline lost
cloth ink-blue and soft across bare thighs
and cream lights thread stars
through night skies I stroke your warp and weft
eager to feel you and your weaver's fingers
digits that wove and swept you
on the loom birth-bed of my second skin
my lovely lilting Ikat dress

Andie Berryman

When true instinct takes over

She snarls at me
She gets in my face,
Her face of her aunt,
Her blue eyes blazing
Just like mine.
I don't threaten,
Like my mother
I don't second guess,
Like I've learned.
I send her to her room,
She stomps off.
At last,
True instinct takes over.

Group therapy

“Doesn’t it blow your mind?” she asks
the entire room, and gives us a minute
to process the information.

It does blow my mind,
but I can’t openly agree with her
for fear of judgement, for fear

of encouraging bad thinking,
for fear that other people’s minds
are in tact and this realisation

is not actually as big as I think,
as she thinks, it is. But seconds pass,
and the “Yes” moves in a wave

around our safe circle. Even the leader –
our long-suffering deity – admits it blows
her mind too, that there are people out there

who can eat anything they want without worrying about it.

Lisa Stice

Observance

The Lenten roses are in bloom again
(as they always are this time of year)
night coaster, royal heritage, pink
frost, dashing groomsmen, romantic
getaway, honeymoon French kiss.

And we have given you up again
(as we always do this time of year)
finning, self-contained breathing,
parachutes, mock cities, survive,
evade, resist, escape, night maneuvers.

Remembering Dad

My dad always said scythe
as sigh. Such a lovely name
for a lethal, curved blade – sigh...
as if it were a girl inhaling
on the backswing
to exhale soft kiss through
the neck's flesh.

Not that my dad used it
for anything other than beheading
grass in our hillside garden,
preferred it to the mower,
someone taught him the technique
one dry-grass summer of the sort
hip-high growth happens overnight.

I would watch him always
safe from accidents at my window,
him careful in his secret skill
doing what must be done well
– like the barber will not cut the throat,
like the fencer dances with the sword,
like death comes to take the old,
leaving space for the young.

Clutter

My mother is going on a trip.
She doesn't need much sleep,
will be met, looked after and return.

My father won't starve or freeze,
but what thoughts might rise
with no one to distract him?

When you're old you shouldn't be
alone, except that's not how
it's been arranged.

She keeps each cracked cup.
He'd throw everything out,
even though being on your own

in an empty room
is no preparation
for what's to come.

He stirs a pan of food,
carries it to the TV,
then sleeps, which is not like death,

and is waiting at the door
when she comes home,
busy, questioning,

turning on the lights,
with a bag of presents
he does not want.

Amy Soricelli

God, Full of Mercy

I promised you when I learned about death,
to treat it like expensive silver.
To understand it only sometimes; to not stare too hard
into its distorted reflection.
I look now at the faces of the grieving; their shadowy eyes
and somber, grasping, fingers.
We all watch them, I see separately that we do,
we sit in judgement safe from their grief.
We search their faces for some change that crept over them in their sleep.
That maybe things have become different for them,
changing the way their eyes see the shapes of everything.
They fill the front pews; a strong army; raised fists
and prayers from the book of Psalms.

You wore the same suit all the time as you left me
at the kitchen table to join a minyan.
I sat with the cinnamon toast just born;
steamy almost, with sugar breath against
my cold glass of milk.
You carried your prayer book and tallit
promising me all sorts of things when you returned.
I would ask grandma where you were going
and she told me about uncles from old countries
and I pictured long beards in brown clothes, fists of dirt,
and plates of nut filled cookies, hard, misshapen.

Sometimes you would take me down the street
to someone's dark apartment, mirrors covered,
crying women sitting on boxes.
You would ask me to bend down and say I was sorry;
to offer a few kind words; to show them my young spirit
in a room of best dresses,
and small black memorial ribbons.

Sky Burial

The Rogyapa breaks the spine,
folds the body, drags the corpse
up the mountain. He places her
face down on the stones.
Separates the hair
from the scalp.
Flays the flesh. Chops the limbs.
Removes the muscles.
Creates heavenly scraps
for the birds.

He checks his watch.
Wonders what his wife
is preparing for dinner
tonight. Hopes to make it
home to put
his daughter to bed—
gingerly tucking
the sheets under her chin.

It would be so much faster
to burn this carcass.
He laughs now and
notices the sky
as he waits
for the wake of vultures
that will gorge
on his handiwork.

How long will it take
before nothing is left—
He is tempted to leave this mess
that even the scavengers
have lost interest in—

but dutifully replaces
knife with hammer
and prepares to pulverize
what remains—
Pounds the bones
down to powder
for the crows.

John Leo

The Night Before I Leave

we collect
behind the back window

to watch wolves
bloom like nightlilies

they arrive to feed on our chickens
a hen screams like a mule

there has never been a moon
only the light by which we fail

tonight my teeth glow
I capture will-o-the-wisp behind blue teeth

the wolves mutter between chickenribs
one howl shrugged into meat

another comes as close as the porch
stares through the screen door

as if asking "do you think we're safe here?"
"do you believe home is where the heart is?"

do you think we can carry so much within us
or do we have to have a place, a cave or hollow

where we store our favorite skulls and apologies?
is that why you're like this, poet?

Do you write
so you don't have to leave?"

he circles our favorite tree
bottlebrush tail on bark

he does not look back
the pack vanishes

into a stand of cedar
I emerge like a pup

with dustpan and Hefty bags
I scoop the lattice of bone

they clack and rattle like a dead man's
wastebinned razors

moonblood glows
in the grass we planted

I bury the bones
I am trying to be merciful

my love
the wolves are calling

dull my fangs
trim my tail

I am trying to learn to stay look
how my pen catches the light

Thank you for reading!

