

How Old Are You?

Some Mondays I unstack old bills, look for signs.
I don't care what sports team wins. Since I started
playing Scrabble, words make less sense. Which makes
me wish for the old days, even if that means
I'm old. If this were the '80s, I'd be stamping letters
or kissing in ways I've forgotten. I'm still impossibly
romantic. I watch young women's asses roam their ways
to parked cars as they look at tiny screens. Buildings
may explode. I still make goofy faces at cameras, though
I know how to make my face look thin: Chin out, head down.

Which reminds me:

The same greenhouse gas that destroys the ozone
helps produce erections. Is this why I keep forgetting
my reusable grocery bags? In the past decade, I've learned
to comb my mother's hair, cut her fingernails. She says, *Ow!*
Ow. If I could give her my brain. If I could get my own daughter
to say what she thinks. Long ago, my grandmother crossed
the ocean with a stranger's baby. As the ship was leaving,
a woman said, *Can you hold him for a second, please?*
Then walked away. Sometimes what happens in outer space
is less puzzling than what happened yesterday.

Holy

How many days can a woman's body
go uncleaned? On the seventh,
I cheated her to the bathroom—
no—me bargaining one Catholic mass
for one shower. It's hard to say
what frightened me
more: taking off her clothes
in the room I'd warmed—*Who are you?*
Where are my pants?—water slapping
the tub, or the sight of her hands
hiding withered breasts.
You can't go to church if you're not clean
I told the mother who'd bullied me
into a VW on hungover Sundays
demanding a church bulletin
to prove I'd gone.
I'd spend the sermon
furrowed in a pew, counting holes
in the priest's words, mocking
his pulsing tone, planning a killer
debate. *Please let me go.*
We'd been a family of never think
before you speak, of feel and yell.
I won't tell how loud her voice got—
let me go!—rasp of a scared assailant.
When I was young, I wanted to be touched
into believing, feel the cool hand
of a spirit, maybe God himself
on my cheek. A jeweled window
sending a blue beam could be it.
Witnessing a votive flickering out
could be it. Consecration
seemed possible. I felt an opening
in my heart, and wasn't that where God
was supposed to live? I wanted

also, to feel sorry for my sins.
The empty shower ran its water cold.
All those Sundays, holding a hymnal,
my mother sang in a voice that switched keys
and now, naked, she wailed
long-breathed sobs worse than an infant's
because she knew too much—
the awful inside her head, the sacred
she sought. I moved to cradle
the coiled shoulders of the woman
I could almost forget I'd come from,
who, in her pain, I could love
in a blessed and wordless way.
She leaned into my waiting arms
then pummeled me with skilled fists.
She knew how to hit. I leaned
on her fury, which felt fair and holy.

Weed Whacker

Weed whackers do solve a problem, just like smacking
a two-year-old's face makes him startle quiet for a second.
Smacking is a good thing to hate, but if you're honest,
you understand the desire—then remember *right is right*.
On the bus, I watched a young mother playing Give Me Five
with her little boy, a smacking game. Later, he wanted something
he couldn't have and smacked his mom's breast. What happened
next. A weed's roots weave close to the surface,
so when you pull them up, it's like roads lifting off a map
and suddenly we go back centuries to when this country was new.
People tramped prairie grass and navigated with the sun.
And the roots of weeds can dig down deep, so deep
you spend hours on the ground, arm in the earth,
loosening and pulling. This small, deep killing feels good,
it feels right. I read about a six-year-old wandering the highway
while her mom was at work. She wanted Twinkies,
Twinkies from the store. There wasn't a store for miles,
and there's so much shit in them they're barely food.
But she wanted spongy sweetness, wanted a glass of milk,
wanted a mom who has a way not to leave her at home alone
while she works. Whack rhymes with smack, and in some ways,
right rhymes with wrong. *Forgive us*, we say to our hands.

The Woman in the Corner

I cut a leaf from my mother's blooming violet,
long alive past her death, to start a plant

for my daughter who I never knew as a baby—
born to a different woman—

but for whom I explained birth
control, blood, how to relax, push in a tampon,

what my mother never touched, her body
a child-making mystery that pushed me

into mystery. What is a woman
who doesn't long for kids?

The leaf I choose, long-stemmed, healthy.
I taught my daughter how to skip.

We were on a bridge. She wasn't my daughter
then. For months after, she reached for my hand,

Let's do it again, never wanted to walk.
I dip the clean cut in *TakeRoot*—

what I wanted for us.
Indole-3 butyric acid. If spilled on skin,

rinse for 20 minutes. If inhaled, call 911.
I place the broken solitude in dirt.

Chemicals cut my daughter's birth mother's blood—
legal drugs, illegal, hormones, history, a diagnosis:

Bipolar. A woman who nods off as she drives
a side-swiped Honda to NA meetings,

stands slack-faced and smoking outside.
Whose bad-credit phone calls flood my house.

In the corner of my dining room, on the corner
of a shelf, a leaf waits in the come and go of light

pokes up like a paddle piercing
a drowning lake. I am trying to save it.

The violet's dirt can't be drenched,
so each morning I spritz. Enough? Too much?

My mother taught me to parcel out love.
Something about giving

meant taking away,
as if tenderness was an apple

and love a mouse's sharp teeth. It was hard
touching my daughter's toothbrush bristles

to check if she'd brushed, counting dirty underwear
in the week's laundry to see if she'd changed.

The smell of dried kid shit, bad breath
were mothering failures

I could fix while I battled the failures
of a thrifty, handed-down heart.

At 16, my daughter brushes eyeshadow
bruises to her neck, her wrists,

pretends she's been beaten.
Threatens suicide, believes woman-

as-victim is a path to love.
Runs into my bedroom at 3 a.m.

I didn't mean it I didn't mean it
as cops pound the door. It was hard,

reading about fetal alcohol syndrome,
studying the shape of her young girl ears.

Reading signs of bipolar disorder in kids,
tracking her hours of sleep.

Picking her up early from a monthly visit
with her mom, ambulance in front of the house

shining red and white silence
on my daughter's hollowed face.

Years later, hugs, wails, the knowing her mother
would never change. My daughter

leaves for college. I am the mother
of caution. *Don't. Watch. Think. Don't.*

Ask. Plan. Don't. Remember. My failure:
I know she'll fuck up, dark guesses of how.

Alone in her dorm room,
we're never alone in a room,

our woman-pasts stuck to our skin.
Greasy lotion. Blood itch.

A month of spraying. The leaf begins
to die, which could mean roots,

could mean rot. My daughter and I talk
on the phone, her voice the voice

she uses with friends—part Doc Marten boots,
part breezy new perfume. *I've gotta go,*

I've gotta go. She forgets I, too, live
a life, have things to do.

Stare down her empty bed.
Touch a picture she'd left behind,

my gift meant to remind her of home—
us high above a river, hair swimming to the sky.