

Joan Larkin

My Body

Throat puckered like crepe,
right hand throbbing with arthritis,
right hip permanently higher than left, right leg shorter
 after years of books slung from one shoulder.
One breast smaller, both sagging like Grandma's,
 shriveled around the nipples,
upper arms lumpy, veins in legs varicose,
back freckled from sunburn when I passed out on the beach
 in 1964,
face creasing, still breaking out, hairs bristling from bumps
 I didn't start out with,
nose pitted, burst capillaries on nostrils,
two extra holes pierced in the left ear so I'll never forget
 those months with Sido—thank God I refused the tattoo,
two vaccination scars,
shoulder stiff from fracture in 1986 when I fell on a stone
 floor at Cummington,
skin dotted with—what? moles? age spots? melanoma that
 killed my father?
sagging belly, testament to fear, dieting, birth, abortion,
 miscarriage,
years of fighting booze and overeating still written in my flesh,
small cysts around labia, sparse pubes—not yet like my head
full of gray that first appeared the year I had two jobs and pneumonia.
Eyes needing bifocals now, no good for driving at night,
still blue and intense, tired but my best feature—
or maybe it's my hands, strong, blunt, with prominent veins.
Lungs still wheezing after years of asthma and smoking,
all of me still full of groans, sighs, tears,
still responsive to the slightest touch,
grief and desire still with me
though I hardly ever have reason to close the curtains,
naked fool for passion—
and wonder if I'll live alone the rest of my time in this body,
my old friend now,
healed and healed again,
still walking and breathing,
scars faded as thin silver signatures.

Joan Larkin was active in the gay and women's liberation movements of the '70s and '80s as both a publisher and the editor of ground-breaking anthologies. Her fifth collection of poems, *Blue Hanuman*, was published in 2014.

from *My Body: New & Selected Poems* (Hanging Loose Press, 2007)

Timothy Liu
The Size of It

I knew the length of an average penis
 was five to seven inches, a fact
I learned upstairs in the stacks marked 610
 or HQ, not down in the basement
where I knelt behind a toilet stall, waiting
 for eight-and-a-half inches or more
to fill my mouth with a deeper truth. The heart
 grows smaller, like a cut rose drying
in the sun. Back then I was only fourteen,
 with four-and-three-quarters inches
at full erection. I began equating
 Asian with inadequate, unable
to compete with others in the locker room
 after an icy swim (a shriveled
bud between my fingers as I tried to shake
 some semblance of life back into it).
Three times a day, I jacked off faithfully, yet
 nothing would enlarge my future, not
ads for vacuum pumps, nor ancient herbs. Other
 men had to compensate, one billion
Chinese measured against what? Some said my cock
 had a classical shape, and I longed
for the ruins of Greece. Others took it up
 the ass, reassuring in their way,
yet nothing helped me much on my knees at night
 praying one more inch would make me whole.

The son of Chinese immigrants, **Timothy Liu** is the author of a dozen books of poetry; his first collection was published in 1992, his latest in 2019.

from *Burnt Offerings* (Copper Canyon Press, 1995)

Eric Tran

Portraits of Hand-washing

after Bernard Cooper

I.

Soap the backs of your hands, too. You are a pinwheel of contact points; more than your palms have touched the world today. Flood the fine creases of your wrists, bury the mountains of your knuckles. Each finger is a molting snake, each hand an unbaptized infant. Look: Your forearms end in clouds. The sink is a fresh-made bed, and your hands carry so many weary travelers.

II.

Lasse, my dorm's health educator, taught us to lather for at least two rounds of "Happy Birthday." He had a lingering Swedish accent and unironically loved the Swedish fish gummies I bought him for Christmas. *Happy birthday to you!* he sang. He sang so happily we felt like it was actually all our birthdays; his mimed lathering was our puppet show. When Lasse caressed our fevered foreheads, I imagined him later, at the sink, humming himself bright and clean again.

III.

A nurse visited our class and implored us to be vigilant: *When you enter a patient's room, when you leave.* She wanted to say, *You could save lives,* but she actually said, *You could kill people.* She waved her arms emphatically, flapped like them a bird in distress, or maybe she was just she was air-drying her hands. Maybe she had just washed them. Maybe her hands, which looked thick and strong even from seven rows back, had just held a pink, wailing newborn or palmed a syringe of adrenaline for another patient's stilled heart.

IV.

In New York, I know three bakers who wash their hands, their counters, their instruments before spinning together white sugar flowers. In North Carolina, my neighbor scoops lumps out of a litter box. Elsewhere, after a potter presses out a wide-mouthed bowl, a 5-year-old picks his nose. A butcher, a barehanded fisherman. Somewhere, someone on a great first date uses the bathroom and lingers in the mirror. Mouths again and again, *Oh my god. Oh my god.*

V.

Once, as a kid, I tried to make a kite out of chopsticks and printer paper, but it never caught air. When my dad got home from the mechanic shop, he sighed at my attempt. With a small grout brush, he scrubbed the oil from his hands before building me a new one. Once, he cupped a family of crickets and held them near my ear. Once, he slapped me down to kitchen tile and then

iced my bruise. His kite flew above our apartment rooftop. He wanted me to hold the string, but I refused, afraid it might slip, even from a tightly clenched fist.

Eric Tran is a queer Vietnamese writer and the author of two books and two chapbooks. He is completing a fellowship in addiction psychiatry.

from *Revisions* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2018)

Lesléa Newman

I Feel Good About My Neck

for Nora Ephron, author of the bestseller I Feel Bad About My Neck

I feel good about my neck
that sturdy weathered lamppost
holding up the beacon
of my heavy head
for more than fifty years
and never once complaining

I feel good about my neck
which became a verb
when I became a teen
and wore garlands of amethyst
colored-hickies underneath slippery
silky scarves stolen from my mother

I feel good about my neck
Where else would I hang
the antique gold locket
that belonged to my *bubbe*
and holds an old photo
of my young grandfather
the man I was named for
the man I look like
the man I never met

I feel good about my neck
which harbors my throat
source of all sounds
starting with my first
raspy gasp as I barreled
into the world choking
on the umbilical cord
wrapped around me like a noose
until a doctor cut me loose
and I unleashed a loud indignant cry

I feel good about my neck
no longer swan-like
with its crepe papery

puckering wattle
that begins beneath my flaccid chin
and ends at the hollow
keyhole carved between my collar bones

I feel good about my neck
and let us not forget
the shy cashmere nape
hiding behind a thick
velvet drape of hair that parts
when my beloved seeks a special treat:
the sweet tender meat
of a blushing fuzzy peach

Lesléa Newman is the author of 80+ books for readers of all ages including the landmark anthology *My Lover Is A Woman: Contemporary Lesbian Love Poems* and the children's classic *Heather Has Two Mommies*.

from *Nobody's Mother* (Orchard House Books, 2008)

Kay Ulanday Barrett

On departure & how to say goodbye to your chest

I give my chest a pep talk,
an (un)grateful farewell.

It's not a talking to, just resolution.
It's a basic goodbye.

The kind of honorable glare you
give a worthy opponent, a cordial enemy,

you know they are in the room but you
ignore their good graces, their attempts to
become a part of your life.
They never get you anyway.

At best, they are a family member you
acknowledge between battles

where love
isn't exactly the word
you'd ever use.

Kay Ulanday Barrett is a poet, performer, educator, food writer, cultural strategist, and transgender, gender non-conforming, and disability advocate. They have published two books of poetry.

from *More Than Organs* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2020)

Ellen Bass

Ode to Fat

Tonight, as you undress, I watch your wondrous
flesh that's swelled again, the way a river swells
when the ice relents. Sweet relief
just to regard the sheaves of your hips,
your boundless breasts and marshy belly.
I adore the acreage
of your thighs and praise the promising
planets of your ass.
O, you were lean that terrifying year
you were unraveling, as though you were returning
to the slender scrap of a girl I fell in love with.
But your skin was vacant, a ripped sack,
sugar spilling out and your bones insistent.
O praise the loyalty of the body
that labors to rebuild its palatial realm.
Bless butter. Bless brie.
Sanctify schmaltz. And cream and cashews.
Stoke the furnace
of the stomach and load the vessels. Darling,
drench yourself in opulent oil,
the lamp of your body glowing. May you always
flourish enormous and sumptuous,
be marbled with fat, a great vault that
I can enter, the cathedral where I pray.

Ellen Bass won the 2002 Lambda Literary Award for her poetry collection *Mules of Love*. She co-authored the 1991 child sexual abuse book *The Courage to Heal* and served as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

from *Indigo* (Copper Canyon Press, 2020)

torrin a. greathouse
Sick4Sick

I think my lover's cane is sexy. The way they walk like a rainstorm stumbles slow across the landscape. How, with fingers laced together, our boots & canes click in time—unsteady rhythm of a metronome's limp wrist. All sway & swish, first person I ever saw walk with a lisp. Call this our love language of unspokens: We share so many symptoms, the first time we thought to hyphenate our names was, playfully, to christen ourselves a new disorder. We trade tips on medication, on how to weather what prescriptions make you sick to [maybe] make you well. We make toasts with acetaminophen bought in bulk. Kiss in the airport terminal through surgical masks. Rub the knots from each others' backs. We dangle *FALL RISK* bracelets from our walls & call it decoration. We visit another ER & call it a date. When we are sick, again, for months—with a common illness that will not leave—it is not the doctors who care for us. We make do ourselves. At night, long after the sky has darkened-in—something like a three-day-bruise, littered with satellites I keep mistaking for stars—our bodies are fever-sweat stitched. A chimera. Shadow-puppet of our lust. Bones bowed into a new beast [with two backs, six legs of metal & flesh & carbon fiber]. Beside my love, I find I can't remember any prayers so I whisper the names of our medications like the names of saints. Orange bottles scattered around the mattress like unlit candles in the dark.

torrin a. greathouse describes herself as “a transgender cripple-punk poet and essayist.” Her debut poetry collection, *Wound from the Mouth of a Wound*, was published in 2020.

from *Gulf Coast* journal (republished by The Academy of American Poets)