

Liz Ahl

When She Comes Home From Camp

My lover wears a layer of dirt
more like a second skin than a shirt,
a layer of sweat-sealed grime earned
from chopping wood,
from evicting a mouse-ridden mattress
from a rarely-used cabin
and scrubbing away the aftermath,
from helping to haul and boil water,
from helping to keep the fire alive
beneath the blaring supermoon.

She glows through the dirt because
the weekend of skinny dipping and berry picking,
of sharing dinners cooked by women,
in the earthen oven made by women,
of drinking rum around the fire
fueled by good dry wood
chopped by women, a weekend
of silence at the crest of summer

has not merely painted the body I love
with this layer of soot and earth and dust;
it has also scoured something away,
revealing and polishing a layer beneath,
concealed in the day to day—something
wild and delirious in its happy appetites,
sparkling and strange, a little dangerous—
some name of hers I still don't fully know.

Liz Ahl is the author of two books of poetry and four chapbooks. She teaches writing at Plymouth State University in Plymouth, New Hampshire.

from *Lavender Review: Lesbian Poetry & Art* (June 2018)

Tim Doody

My Fourth Boyfriend

I visit him for the first time since he was taken away. I take an elevator to the eighteenth floor of Bellevue Hospital and check in at a security station where I'm told to keep my laminated pass visible at all times—so the orderlies won't make any mistakes. I walk down the hall unescorted. The metal-meshed windows between the psych ward and the sidewalks of Manhattan seem so thin. In the visiting room, I pace around tables and day-glo chairs. After a couple minutes, he enters with a laugh that says, oh my, what a mess, and even though I've pretty much forgiven him, I still can't ignore what he did.

We first met a month ago, hours after he moved in as my roommate's long-term guest. I hate hellos and good-byes and I didn't want another person in our cramped apartment. So I stayed away until late to avoid that awkward moment when he'd shuffle around the unfamiliar terrain and I'd have to make small talk. When I finally came home, slightly stoned and very aware that this was my first impression (hence the hour and my altered consciousness, two cool points for me), I opened the door and tip-toed in. City lights outlined the frumpy lump beneath a comforter on the daybed. Him. Then I heard the crack in his baritone when he said hey, and as he sat up, the frump slid down to reveal a lanky torso. Oh, sorry, don't mean to disturb you, I said. No no, he said. You're not. He was mid-twenties. My age. I sat down and blew cigarette smoke out the window and we talked about the music he made.

He crosses the visiting room and then we sit down, three feet of plastic table between us. Hey, he says. Hey, I say. I brought you some books. I place a stack on the table. Thanks, he says. They told me I'm getting out in a week, tops. Our eyes connect for two charged seconds. Cool, I say. We drop our gaze toward the topmost book, a graphic novel illustrating Ginsberg's "Howl." My boyfriend's eyes match the sky-blue of his hospital-issued v-neck and pajama pants.

The morning after he moved in, I went out to get coffee while he slept. I returned home and, just before I opened the apartment door, heard his honey voice soar into the mid-range and dance around the acoustic strings he strummed. Two cool points for him. I tip-toed in. Again. I couldn't meet his eyes, not when, in the daylight, I saw that he personified the timbre of his song: dirty-blond Beatles-length hair, pointed cheekbones and those dimples that emerged when he was considering something. And right then, I thought he might've been considering me.

He slumps back in his fluorescent yellow chair, arms folded across his chest. His sock-covered foot finds my calf under the table. I try not to smile. I begin to construct a new version of the future: he stays on the medication that he spent a lifetime trying to avoid, and we live on the disability checks provided to him and his caretaker, who could be me. Those checks would cover most of our expenses if the numbers he had said were right.

A week after we met, he and I slept in the same bed. I can love you like no one has ever done before, he said. We did meals and parties, incessant conversations and four a.m. sex, and I started

thinking about what the future held. For us. But then there was that night when everything changed again: him and a cab driver fighting outside and then me and our trashed apartment and then the cab driver again and the screaming. His flaring dimples no longer seemed like an endearing display of genetics—more like a warning that he couldn't stop. The sirens, the cops, their brandished batons. In the Emergency Room, he sat on the other side of what looked like bulletproof glass. A doctor approached me. Bi-polar disorder, he said. Without medication, it's uncontrollable.

I'm smiling now, can't help it, and we lean forward, elbows on the table, fingers touching, then palms. We hunch together like we're passing secrets. Ripples flow outward in concentric circles where our cheeks brush. When the nurse steps in, our torsos peel back, the heels of our feet flatten against the tile. Like two kids still getting away with something.

Tim Doody is a New York City-based writer and activist. *Nightline* included him in a list of “particularly troublesome, even dangerous, anarchists” in 2004.

from *Brevity* (Issue 21, Summer 2006)

Marilyn Hacker

[Didn't Sappho say her guts clutched up like this?]

Didn't Sappho say her guts clutched up like this?
Before a face suddenly numinous,
her eyes watered, knees melted. Did she lactate
again, milk brought down by a girl's kiss?
It's documented torrents are unloosed
by such events as recently produced
not the wish, but the need, to consume, in us,
one pint of Maalox, one of Kaopectate.
My eyes and groin are permanently swollen,
I'm alternatingly brilliant and witless
—and sleepless: bed is just a swamp to roll in.
Although I'd cream my jeans touching your breast,
sweetheart, it isn't lust; it's all the rest
of what I want with you that scares me shitless.

Marilyn Hacker has published nearly twenty books of original poetry and translations, including the National Book Award winner *Presentation Piece* (1974). She received an Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and has served as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

from *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons* (W. W. Norton and Company, 1986)

Jeffery Conway

Hangover

In a dark bar corner we talk for about an hour.
I drink Budweiser, he's sipping Miller Lites.
He leans over, kisses me – dark eyes, the most
handsome man I've seen – and invites me to his apartment.

In the cab he says my hands are rough, like a laborer's.
I say his are smooth, the hands of a statue.
"That's funny," he says, "I'm a sculptor."

We undress to the B-side of The The's *Mind Bomb*.
I lie nude on top of him in bed. I'm drunk – slobbering as I kiss.
He says he'll get a rubber. I tell him no, I don't fuck.
He says will be really safe. I say no, I don't do that.
His cat jumps onto the bed, purrs. We pet her for awhile
then start to kiss again. We cum at the same time,
he pulls my body next to his without washing off.

At noon, after a few hours sleep, he brings me tea
and oat bran cereal, banana sliced over top.
My head is pounding and I have a dry mouth.
I set the tray on the floor, kiss him again.
We cum a second time. The tea is cold when I reach for it
and the cat has licked the milk from my bowl.
Next to the tray on the floor I see a card
from the Spike, where we met. I turn it over – "Phil"
and a phone number, 201 area code. New Jersey?

At the door, "Thank you for having me over."
He takes an orange from the off-white fruit bowl in the kitchen,
kisses it, puts it to my lips, then slides it into my hand,
telling me to take it for the subway ride.

On the streets, cold air – my eyes water.
The skin on my face is burned, his morning stubble.
I go down into the subway station at Houston and 2nd to wait for the F.
A Puerto Rican boy with dark eyes walks up, says he'll give me
\$20 for the leather jacket I'm wearing. I say I bought it
in Tijuana, that I'm attached to it. He hands me a brown bag.
Inside there's a bottle of medicine for stomachache and nausea.
He asks if I think it'll work, that he feels like barfing.

“It's worth a try," I say. He says he'll buy the orange
off me for a quarter, he's hungry. As the train pulls up
I say, "You can have the orange." I step in and watch him
devour the fruit as the doors close.
The train begins to rumble into a dark tunnel.

Originally from Southern California, **Jeffery Conway** has lived in New York City since 1989. His 2006 collection *The Album That Changed My Life* charted his journey from disaffected suburban Los Angeles teen of the '80s to enlightened poet in New York's East Village of the '90s and was a 2007 Lambda Literary Award Finalist.

from *Blood Poisoning: Poems* (Cold Calm Press, 1995)

Carl Phillips

Domestic

If, when studying road atlases
while taking, as you call it, your
morning dump, you shout down to
me names like Miami City, Franconia,
Cancún, as places for you to take
me to from here, can I help it if

all I can think is things that are
stupid, like he loves me he loves me
not? I don't think so. No more
than, some mornings, waking to your
hands around me, and remembering
these are the fingers, the hands I've

over and over given myself to, I can
stop myself from wondering does that
mean they're the same I'll grow
old with. Yesterday, in the café I
keep meaning to show you, I thought
this is how I'll die maybe, alone,

somewhere too far away from wherever
you are then, my heart racing from
espresso and too many cigarettes,
my head down on the table's cool
marble, and the ceiling fan turning
slowly above me, like fortune, the

part of fortune that's half-wished-
for only—it did not seem the worst
way. I thought this is another of
those things I'm always forgetting
to tell you, or don't choose to
tell you, or I tell you but only

in the same way, each morning, I
keep myself from saying too loud I
love you until the moment you flush
the toilet, then I say it, when the

rumble of water running down through
the house could mean anything: flood,

your feet descending the stairs any
moment; any moment the whole world,
all I want of the world, coming down.

Carl Phillips is a Black gay poet, editor, and translator. His *Then the War: And Selected Poems* (2022) won the Pulitzer Prize in 2023. He's published a dozen books of poetry, received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the Library of Congress, and won awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Academy of American Poets.

from *Cortège* (Graywolf Press, 2002)

Terry Wolverton

Black Slip

She told me she had always fantasized
about a woman in a black slip.
It had to do with Elizabeth Taylor
in *Butterfield 8*.

She came to my house with a huge box
gift-wrapped with gigantic ribbons.
Inside, a black slip.
Slinky, with lace across the bodice.
She told me how she was embarrassed
in the department store,
a woman in men's pants
buying a black slip clearly not intended for herself,
and about the gay man in line behind herself,
sharing the joke.

She asked me to try it on.
I took it into the bathroom, slipped it over my head.
I stared at myself for a long time
before I came out of the bathroom
walked over to her
lying on the bed.

That was the first time. It got easier.
The black slip was joined by a blue slip
then a red one
then a long lavender negligée, the back slit to there.

I wore them to bed.
In the morning she would smile and say
how much she loved waking up next to a woman in a slip.
The black slip remained our favorite.
We always made love when I wore the black slip.

Once I showed up at her door late at night
wearing a long coat
with only the black slip underneath.

One night I cooked dinner at her apartment
wearing nothing but the black slip
and red suede high heels.

It was always the first thing to pack when we went on vacation.

And she used to make me promise
that if we ever broke up
I'd never wear that slip for anyone else.

I don't know where it is now.

Stripped of that private skin
when we broke up
I never went back to claim it.

I think she must have
packed it
given it
thrown it
away.

On bad days I imagine her
sliding it over the head of some new love
whispering about Elizabeth Taylor
and waking up to a woman in a slip.

Or perhaps
it's still there
draped on the back of the door.

A sinuous shadow.

A moan in the dark.

Writer, editor, and activist **Terry Wolverton** was born in Florida, and grew up in Detroit. She has published nearly a dozen books of poetry, fiction, and memoirs, and edited an equal number of anthologies.

from *Black Slip* (Clothespin Fever Press, 1992)

Joseph O. Legaspi

[a subway ride]

His artfully unkempt strawberry blonde head sports outsized headphones. Like a contemporary bust. Behold the innocence of the freckles, ripe pout of cherry lips. As if the mere sight of the world hurts him, he squints greenly and applies saline drops. You dream him crying over you. For the duration of a subway ride you fall blindly in love. Until he exits. Or you exit, returning home to the one you truly love to ravish him.

Joseph Legaspi was born and raised in the Philippines. His collections of poetry include *Threshold* (2017) and *Imago* (2007). With Sarah Gambito, he co-founded Kundiman, a nonprofit organization that promotes and serves Asian American writers and writing.

from *Subways* (Thrush Press, 2013)

Pat Parker

My Lover Is a Woman

I.

my lover is a woman
& when i hold her
feel her warmth
 i feel good
 feel safe
then—i never think of
my family's voices
never hear my sisters say
bulldaggers, queers, funny
 come see us, but don't
 bring your friends
 it's ok with us,
 but don't tell mama
 it'd break her heart
never feel my father
turn in his grave
never hear my mother cry
Lord, what kind of child is this?

II.

my lover's hair is blonde
& when it rubs across my face
it feels soft
 feels like a thousand fingers
 touch my skin & hold me
 and i feel good
then—i never think of the little boy
who spat & called me nigger
never think of the policemen
who kicked my body & said crawl
never think of Black bodies
hanging in trees or filled
with bullet holes
never hear my sisters say
white folks hair stinks
don't trust any of them
never feel my father
turn in his grave
never hear my mother talk

of her backache after scrubbing floors
never hear her cry
Lord, what kind of child is this?

III.

my lover's eyes are blue
& when she looks at me
i float in a warm lake
 feel my muscles go weak with want
 feel good
 feel safe
then—i never think of the blue
eyes that have glared at me
moved three stools away from me
in a bar
never hear my sisters rage
of syphilitic Black men as
guinea pigs
 rage of sterilized children
 watch them just stop in an
 intersection to scare *the old*
 white bitch
never feel my father turn
in his grave
never remember my mother
teaching me the yes sirs & ma'ams
to keep me alive
never hear my mother cry
Lord, what kind of child is this?

IV.

& when we go to a gay bar
& my people shun me because i crossed
the line
& her people look to see what's
wrong with her
 what defect
 drove her to me
& when we walk the streets
of this city
 forget and touch
 or hold hands
 & the people

stare, glare, frown, & taunt
at those queers
i remember
every word taught me
every word said to me
every deed done to me
& then i hate
i look at my lover
& for an instant
doubt
then—i hold her hand tighter
& i can hear my mother cry.
Lord, what kind of child is this?

Pat Parker was a Black lesbian poet and activist who became a pivotal figure in West Coast literary and civil rights movements in the last 1960s and 1970s. The author of five collections of poetry, she also directed the Feminist Women's Health Center in Oakland, CA; founded the Black Women's Revolutionary Council and the Women's Press Collective; and testified before the United Nations on the status of women.

from *Movement in Black* (Diana Press, 1978)