

Jubi Arriola-Headley

Daddy (excerpts)

Fourth of July, 1976

Along this stretch of summer, we ride. Our car, a solid slice of Americana, with its vinyl top & body slathered in that sturdy shade of green reserved for hunters. On the dash, a silver sticker pinpoints time & taste: *Gas, Grass or Ass / Nobody Rides for Free*. The front seat, a single bench: each torque & twist of highway sends me crashing into Daddy, a mimeograph of tenderness. One thousand spans of silence yawn before us, broken only by the screams of passing tires. Suddenly, some sportscar slides in front of us, as if we belonged behind it. In the slivers of seconds between life & impact, Daddy hurls his arm across my chest, pins me to the seat, arm hairs prickling my chin. My savior. An extended blast of profanity, an exaggerated thrust of his middle finger, & the moment, like that sportscar, has passed. Just this quick, I lose my chance to say *I love you too Daddy*.

Labor Day, 1982

Queen Tony's all swish & swagger. He hangs around Daddy's neck like an ornament, at the weekly Saturday domino games, in jeans he must have needed Vaseline to slide on, butt bulging like ripe melons just begging you to bite into them. & always Queen Tony sports an angry-red fishnet top that covers him only in spirit. Queen Tony's nipples fight their way past those slivers—they look like raisins, daring you to flick one into your mouth. Daddy sits Queen Tony on his lap, winks at the guys & says *my good luck charm*. Then Daddy holds the dominoes up to Queen Tony's swelling lips to blow, & Queen Tony always does as he's told. Then Daddy makes some joke about blowjobs & all the men laugh. No matter how much they've tried not to hear it. Daddy's other hand planted firm at the base of Queen Tony's spine. It all feels such a gorgeous blasphemy, such a delicious sin. & oh, how I wish I could be queen, so any man would touch me like that. Even Daddy.

Memorial Day, 1987

Graduation's fast approaching. The slick suit Daddy buys me won't spare him from my silence. I can't get far enough gone. *I got something to tell you*, he says, nursing on a British brand of cigarette, as if he could class up the habit. *I have cancer*. Is it curable, I want to know. *Yeah*, he says, *you know me, I'm a warrior, baby*, & takes another long drag off his undoing. I wonder whether this is irony. & *one more thing before you leave me*, he says. *I love you*. & that's how I know he's dying.

Jubi Arriola-Headley is a Black queer poet, storyteller, and first-generation United Statesian whose second book, *Bound*, will be published by Persea Books in 2024.

from *Original Kink* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2020)

Nickole Brown

For My Grandmother's Perfume, Norell

Because your generation didn't wear perfume
but chose a scent—a signature—every day
you spritzed a powerhouse floral with top
notes of lavender and mandarin, a loud
smell one part Doris Day, that girl-next-door
who used Technicolor to find a way to laugh about
husbands screwing their secretaries over lunch,
the rest all Faye Dunaway, all high drama
extensions of nails and lashes, your hair a
a breezy fall of bangs, a stiletto entrance
that knew to walk sideways, hip first:
now watch a *real* lady descend the stairs.

Launched in 1968, Norell
was the 1950s tingling with the beginning
of Disco; Norell was a housewife tired of gospel,
mopping her house to Stevie Wonder instead.

You wore so much of it, tiny pockets
of your ghost lingered hours after you
were gone, and last month, I stalked
a woman wearing your scent through
the grocery so long I abandoned
my cart and went home. Fanny, tell me:
How can manufactured particles carry you
through the air? I always express what I see,
but it was no photo that
stopped and queased me to my knees.

After all these years, you were an invisible
trace, and in front of a tower of soup cans
I was a simple animal craving the deep memory
worn by a stranger oblivious of me. If I had courage,
the kind of fool I'd like to be,
I would have pressed my face to her small
shoulder, and with the sheer work of
two pink lungs, I would have breathed

enough to
conjure
you back
to me.

Nickole Brown is the author of several books of poetry as well as *Write It! 100 Poetry Prompts to Inspire*, which she co-authored with her wife, Jessica Jacobs. Her second book, a biography-in-poems about her grandmother called *Fanny Says (2015)*, won the Weatherford Award for Appalachian Poetry.

from *Poem-A-Day* (July 2013)

Kevin Bertolero

It's not in what you do, more in what you say

I think of eating soft serve with guiltless boys at the Dairy Queen off Route 11. We consider dissociation, our mothers, the times we were almost hit by cars. My legs unstick from the vinyl booth when we stand to leave, an un-suctioning of thighs. We are sweaty boys with backpacks, with cans of Mucho Mango Arizona warm from the mid-day sun. We ride our fixed-gear bikes to Rushton Falls and look at the limestone steps leading down to the river, the sugar house not far on the other side. I say GOODBYE! To Canton as we pass the sign that wishes us back. We are interested boys with a love for cinema, and in the second-run theater we watch *Purple Noon* (1960). Peter tells us of the heat down in Dallas, his last family vacation, what our bodies would look like in that kind of daylight. *I felt like Alain Delon*, he says. *It was my own Italian summer*. We would have to swim in that dry heat, he explains, in the stylized pools with chlorine perfumed skin. There's nothing quite like it. I think of a time when queer boys our age would listen to Rachmaninoff and stay inside. Today, we sing Mac DeMarco lyrics as we wander through some phantom orchard. A few more months and this field will be alive, then dead again. We kick at the dry soil.

Kevin Bertolero is the founding editor of Ghost City Press and the Associate Director of the Kettle Pond Writers' Conference.

from *Pom Pom: An Online Journal of Poetry & Prose* (August 2019)

Natalie Diaz

No More Cake Here

When my brother died
I worried there wasn't enough time
to deliver the one hundred invitations
I'd scribbled while on the phone with the mortuary:
Because of the short notice no need to RSVP.
Unfortunately the firemen couldn't come.
(I had hoped they'd give free rides on the truck.)
They did agree to drive by the house once
with the lights on— It was a party after all.

I put Mom and Dad in charge of balloons,
let them blow as many years of my brother's name,
jails, twenty-dollar bills, midnight phone calls,
fistfights, and er visits as they could let go of.
The scarlet balloons zigzagged along the ceiling
like they'd been filled with helium. Mom blew up
so many that she fell asleep. She slept for ten years—
she missed the whole party.

My brothers and sisters were giddy, shredding
his stained T-shirts and raggedy pants, throwing them up
into the air like confetti.

When the clowns came in a few balloons slipped out
the front door. They seemed to know where
they were going and shrank to a fistful of red grins
at the end of our cul-de-sac. The clowns played toy bugles
until the air was scented with rotten raspberries.
They pulled scarves from Mom's ear—she slept through it.
I baked my brother's favorite cake (chocolate, white frosting).
When I counted there were ninety-nine of us in the kitchen.
We all stuck our fingers in the mixing bowl.

A few stray dogs came to the window.
I heard their stomachs and mouths growling
over the mariachi band playing in the bathroom.
(There was no room in the hallway because of the magician.)
The mariachis complained about the bathtub acoustics.
I told the dogs, *No more cake here*, and shut the window.

The fire truck came by with the sirens on. The dogs ran away.
I sliced the cake into ninety-nine pieces.

I wrapped all the electronic equipment in the house,
taped pink bows and glittery ribbons to them—
remote controls, the Polaroid, stereo, Shop-Vac,
even the motor to Dad's work truck—everything
my brother had taken apart and put back together
doing his crystal meth tricks—he'd always been
a magician of sorts.

Two mutants came to the door.
One looked almost human. They wanted
to know if my brother had willed them the pots
and pans and spoons stacked in his basement bedroom.
They said they missed my brother's cooking and did we
have any cake. No more cake here, I told them.
Well, what's in the piñata? they asked. I told them
God was and they ran into the desert, barefoot.
I gave Dad his slice and put Mom's in the freezer.
I brought up the pots and pans and spoons
(really, my brother was a horrible cook), banged them
together like a New Year's Day celebration.

My brother finally showed up asking why
he hadn't been invited and who baked the cake.
He told me I shouldn't smile, that this whole party was shit
because I'd imagined it all. The worst part he said was
he was still alive. The worst part he said was
he wasn't even dead. I think he's right, but maybe
the worst part is that I'm still imagining the party, maybe
the worst part is that I can still taste the cake.

Natalie Diaz is an Indigenous lesbian poet whose 2021 book, *Postcolonial Love Poem*, won the 2021 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. "No More Cake Here" won the 2007 Pablo Neruda Prize in Poetry.

from *When My Brother Was an Aztec* (Copper Canyon Press, 2012)

Joseph O. Legaspi

My Mother's Suitors

The moment my mother tells me she'd fallen out of love
with my father, the Santa Ana winds still
for a wingbeat second and the lemon trees
shudder in the backyard, their fruits falling
in a singular hushed thud.

It is a quiet shaking. I sit across
from her at the kitchen table, a man
now, new to shaving. The knowledge
is no revelation to me, not a throbbing secret
made flesh, not a downy egg sac of spiders,
rather, for years, this lovelessness skulks
in our household like mice with bellies full of rice.

How did I earn this disclosure, and why
after a slippery-fingered dinner of sweet pork sausages
and sliced tomatoes swimming in fish sauce?

The Santa Ana resumes its torturous blasting.

My mother then speaks of past suitors:
those who brought her gifts of rose water,
sugar cane, and summer melons; the jetsetters
who promised her the lavish gems of Kona
and Hong Kong; lovers who mastered the rhumba's
oceanic waves, the tempter's hipsway of the tango.

It is astonishing what sustains a person,
what we live on, how my mother has blossomed
with age, as she savors her secret history.
I can't help but envision her by a window,
leaning into the night as her serenading suitors
gather below her, surrounded by *sampaguitas*,
luminous children in moonlight.

Joseph Legaspi is a gay poet born and raised in the Philippines before immigrating to Los Angeles with his family at age twelve. In 2004, he cofounded Kundiman, a national organization that serves writers and readers of Asian American literature.

from *Threshold* (CavanKerry Press, 2017)

Joy Ladin

You Will Never See Me as Your Mother

for my daughter

You help around the house
we've never shared,

sometimes singing, sometimes quiet,
sometimes ablaze with anger.

Apples burn in your orchard, the teapot shrieks
above your ring of fire.

You can't see me, but I'm there.
Love draws me toward you, love

you can't feel
in the midst of the conflagration

that's all that remains
of our life together.

After all these years, I don't know much about you.
What do you want? Who do you love?

What smells remind you of your childhood?
How did you answer the question

on college applications
about hardships you've overcome? Was one

the incendiary umbilical cord
whose burning still ties you

to me, the parent you refuse to see,
in whom you never grew.

Whose love still blossoms
in the midst of the flames. Blazes

like flame among blossoms.

Joy Ladin is a Jewish trans woman poet who has published numerous books of poetry as well as a memoir. In 2007, she became the first openly transgender employee of Yeshiva University, an Orthodox Jewish institution.

from *Lavender Review* (Dec. 2019)

Danez Smith

The 17-Year-Old & the Gay Bar

this gin-heavy heaven, blessed ground to think *gay* & mean *we*.
bless the fake id & the bouncer who knew
this need to be needed, to belong, to know how
a man taste full on vodka & free of sin. i know not which god to pray to.
i look to christ, i look to every mouth on the dance floor, i order
a whiskey coke, name it the blood of my new savior. he is just.
he begs me to dance, to marvel men with the

dash

of hips i brought, he deems my mouth in some stranger's mouth necessary.
bless that man's mouth, the song we sway sloppy to, the beat, the bridge, the length
of his hand on my thigh & back & i know not which country i am of.
i want to live on his tongue, build a home of gospel & gayety
i want to raise a city behind his teeth for all boys of choirs & closets to refuge in.
i want my new god to look at the mecca i built him & call it damn good
or maybe i'm just tipsy & free for the first time, willing to worship anything i can taste.

Danez Smith is a queer Black poet. Their book *Don't Call Us Dead* (Graywolf Press, 2017) was short-listed for the National Book Award.

from *Poetry* (February 2017)