

POETS WRITING

The Long Devotion

MOTHERHOOD

EDITED BY Emily Perez AND Nancy Reddy

We See *The Lion King* on Broadway,
I Enter the Pride

REMICA BINGHAM-RISHER

Our girl is telling the boys to pose near the theater doors.
We have traveled to the Minskoff in New York

and the children are finally elated.
They have been trying to teach me

their ways—they wrestle and weary one another,
bending and binding love—but I am useless in my tenderness

until this: I have orchestrated the daytrip of dreams.
Herald Square gleams like a lost enchantress.

As we scuttle and preen, she tries pashminas and caps,
designer shades, everything neon at once. When our tickets have been taken

and they step into the circle, for a flash of moment,
she takes the journey in. It is only a measure

before the music starts, while we head to our seats,
she says *This is amazing—*

all you've done to get us here. It must have taken
hours. Years, I think, years, but she is grateful

and I am finally useful. As the curtain goes up,
everything the light touches is ours.



War Stories

PAMELA HART

Stories of war begin midsentence is one way to start. This isn't a story of war. This is the mother on the idea of the son at war. Can he kill is a story. Will the mother blame herself could be another. And how does the mother feel. The mother doesn't like that word. The mother likes the word think. Will ideas versus feelings get in the way. Is this the story of mothers of soldiers. The mothers' lives are windy. The air is elastic. The story is a story on the idea of war and the son who might kill or be killed. She could or could not change this.

from “Whereas”

LAYLI LONG SOLDIER

WHEREAS her birth signaled the responsibility as mother to teach what it is to be Lakota, therein the question: what did I know about being Lakota? Signaled panic, blood rush my embarrassment. What did I know of our language but pieces? Would I teach her to be pieces. Until a friend comforted, *don't worry, you and your daughter will learn together*. Today she stood sunlight on her shoulders lean and straight to share a song in Diné, her father's language. To sing she motions simultaneously with her hands I watch her be in multiple musics. At a ceremony

to honor the Diné Nation's first poet laureate, a speaker explains that each People has been given their own language to reach with. I understand reaching as active, a motion. He offers a prayer and introduction in heritage language. I listen as I reach my eyes into my hands, my hands onto my lap, my lap as the quiet page I hold my daughter in. I rock her back, forward, to the rise of other conversations

about mother tongues versus foster languages, belonging. I connect the dots. I rock in time with references to a philosopher, a master language-thinker who thought of his mother too. Mother-to-child and child-to-mother relationships. But as this philosopher's mother suffered the ill-effects of a stroke he wrote, *I asked her if she was in pain (yes) then where? [. . . she] replies to my question: I have a pain in my mother, as though she were speaking for me, both in my direction and in my place*. His mother, who spoke in his place for his pain and as herself for her own, did this as one-and-the-same. Yet he would propose understanding the word *mother* by what mother is not, the *différance*. Forward, back, I lift my feet

my toes touch ground as I'm reminded of the linguistic impossibility of identity, as if any of us can be identical ever. To whom, to what? Perhaps to Not. I hold my daughter in comfort saying *iyotanchilah michuwintku*. True, I'm never sure how to write our language on the page correctly, the written takes many forms

yet I know she understands through our motion. Rocking, in this country of so many languages where national surveys assert that Native languages

are dying. Child-speakers and elder-teachers dwindle, this is public information. But her father and I don't teach in statistics, in this dying I mean. Whereas speaking, itself, is *defiance*—the closest I can come to *différance*. Whereas I confess

these are numbered hours spent responding to a national apology which concerns us, my family. These hours alone to think, without. My hope: my daughter understands wholeness for what it is, not for what it's not, all of it the pieces;

In Defense of the Empty Chaos Required for Adequate Preparation

ERIKA MEITNER

June 16, 2017

When the (white) man at the pool says
my (black) son reminds him of his youngest and asks
how old is he, eight? I say, *no, four* and I am not
flattered but terrified of the implications because
in study after study the average age overestimation

for black boys exceeded four years, because black boys
are viewed as adults by white undergraduates white
police officers white suburban residents at the age of
ten they lose the protection afforded to them by
assumed childhood innocence ten ten ten my older

(white) son is ten and still struggles to tie his shoes
sometimes curses loves Minecraft and cheese and
catching newts was not sent home from Nature Camp
this week for writing *Snoop Dog* and *Smoke Pot* on
his newspaper craft project but the director spoke

with me at pickup and we laughed and he said *I didn't
do stuff like that until eighth grade* and I was still mortified
that this (white) biologist thought I was maybe a terrible
(white) mother (white) pothead (white) something
so when I call home to see what else we need at Target

I am always calling home from the aisles of [insert
store here there is always something we need] and
Steve says *get extra water guns—they're all broken—
the kids like the ones with pump action best*
and though they have bright orange safety tips

and though they look nothing like actual firearms
with their Nerf logo stamped on the side and their
white and blue and green neon plastic I hesitate



I stand in the aisle staring at the Super Soaker
package with the giant wave and the white boy

on the front aiming his hands his gun straight at me
I stand and stand in the aisle I can't help it
(Microburst2 Blasts up to 33 feet / Also look for
FreezeFire BottleBlitz / Do not aim at eyes or face /
TO AVOID INJURY: Use only clean tap water)

To avoid injury to avoid unconscious dehuman-
ization to make sure you see my son as a person
to make sure you see my son as a child he is four
he is not eight he is four he is big for his age yes
he is not likely to bring violence to your neighborhood

the study describes use of force as takedown or
wrist lock as kicking or punching as striking with
a blunt object as using a police dog or restraints
or hobbling as using tear gas or electric shock
or killing on the radio the cop who shot Philando

Castile is found not guilty his girlfriend's child
who was in the back seat when he was shot
who was four years old then is named Dae'Anna
and you can hear her on the tape after Philando
is shot after her (black) mother is down on her knees

in handcuffs you can hear the (black) child saying
It's ok mommy . . . it's ok, I'm right here with you
she is tender with her mother preternaturally
calm she is four and only dehumanization not
police officers' prejudice against blacks—conscious

or not—was linked to violent encounters with black
children in custody according to the study



10 weeks and intermittent: earning

SARA MUMOLO

The Owh cry—head, hands, feet—a muslin series of folds with living inside. You install the light dimmer, so I can see to feed, fold. You teach me to swaddle before you go back to work at two weeks. You go, and I don't understand until years later. Tuck the corners in tight. I call to get more time off, but I don't get how the benefits work. Neither does the voice asking me to return. At ten weeks go. Not a petal on the black bough. Verbs. I can't yet walk up the hill to our apartment. I go. I fold. My work has benefits. You move furniture from one house to the next, up flights, through the woods, to the beach. You move you move you drive you move you lift. You fall asleep on the train and don't make it home. You save your coworker P's life in back of the work truck in Orinda. Blue face, CPR, ambulance. Not too far away I'm at the work desk. It wasn't oxy; it was fentanyl. You don't make it home. Four years later P goes missing for weeks. You stay up until light learning code on a TV screen. computer hums, revs while M and I sleep. You back the 32-foot truck into a Porsche. You pay the ticket. You dream you kill someone and tell me days later when you finally realize it's not real. Hunger wakes us. I read about the Neh cry on the held screen, a glow by which I see the feed.



I Could Be a Whale Shark

AIMEE NEZHUKUMATATHIL

Bolinao, Philippines

I am worried about tentacles.
How you can still get stung
even if the jelly arm disconnects
from the bell. My husband
swims without me—farther
out to sea than I would like,
buoyed by salt and rind of kelp.
I am worried if I step too far
into the China Sea, my baby
will slow the beautiful kicks
he has just begun since we landed.
The *quickenings*, they call it,
but all I am is slow, a moon jelly
floating like a bag in the sea.
Or a whale shark. Yes—I could be
a whale shark, newly spotted
with moles from the pregnancy—
my wide mouth always open
to eat and eat with a look that says
Surprise! Did I eat that much?
When I sleep, I am a flutefish,
just lying there, swaying back
and forth among the kelpy mess
of sheets. You can see the wet
of my dark eye awake, awake.
My husband is a pale blur
near the horizon, full of adobo
and not waiting thirty minutes
before swimming. He is free
and waves at me as he backstrokes
past. This is how he prepares
for fatherhood. Such tenderness
still lingers in the air: the Roman
poet Virgil gave his pet fly



the most lavish funeral, complete
with meat feast and barrels
of oaky wine. You can never know
where or why you hear
a humming on this soft earth.



Recognition

SASHA WEST

How many storms out of season—a river
rerouted, a current of goods, swelling—but trying
to act normal, all around, people in a kind of

normalcy. Storms made better footage than a slow
starvation. That summer, subway tile everywhere,
and chevrons. Friends dressed well, read well, we

ate farm-to-table meals on one staged set or another—a kind
of illness this swaddled edge of miniature wealth, an illness
not to enjoy this playacting—I kept my mind away

from others the way a sick person doesn't
shake hands, the TV showed us what we couldn't
afford, then stores knocked down workers until

we could, and we had private traumas, deaths
and abuse, assault and grief, enough to keep us
blindered, muddling, in sorrow, enough

not to look too closely—we had two cars, a fridge,
a washing machine, were told we were what the whole
world wanted—have you tried the cold brew coffee?

the activated charcoal cocktail? We had children
who seared joy into us—and toil—and wrote dead
letters to the government, made signs, marched

against the violences we could see—all of it filled
time the way a life does, expanded if we gave it
space, where would those future bodies

go? Where could be quiet enough to imagine
our children's limbs, neighbor's house
in wind we'd never seen? What deserted mall



could be big enough to house the imagined
carcasses of the dying-off animals? Guilt obscures
grief, consolation burns from the inside. I tried to

enlarge my mind the way I'd eaten my pregnant
belly into expansion, swallowing each day more
facts and still I could not contain the entire

ice shelf, the size overwhelmed, the numbers
overwhelmed, at least I could put my body in a storm
to be dwarfed—my heart gulped up the graph lines,

the exponential increase. I put the two boys drowned
in mud inside my daughter's body, then the refugees
in tents, the accumulating genocide, growing speed until

none of them seemed real, until even she disappeared
when I left the room, every time I arrived at the edge
of what the human mind can do, I went back and forth

across the threshold where humans became data, trying
to keep more bodies living in the numbers, but
the disintegration spread, I could feel humans

extending as far back as my imagination could go, but
blurred and flickering forward—and I had made her
to come here and stand in the middle of what

our species had made. Who were the Greek kings
who put their daughters out to be sacrificed? I had
brought her out of my body, had her umbilical

cord cut to bind her to the rock, the mast, the world.

