



*Chanel Brenner*

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## A POEM FOR WOMEN WHO DON'T WANT CHILDREN

I won't preach about the rewards of motherhood.  
I won't say it's the best thing that ever happened to me.  
I won't say it's the best job I've ever had.  
I won't say you'll regret not having a child.  
I won't say you'll forget what life was like before.  
I won't say it makes life worth living.  
What I will say  
is my son died.  
What I will say  
is I would still do it again.





*Rebecca Gayle Howell*

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MY MOTHER TOLD US NOT TO HAVE CHILDREN

She'd say, *Never have a child you don't want.*  
Then she'd say, *Of course, I wanted you*

*once you were here.* She's not cruel. Just practical.  
Like a kitchen knife. Still, the blade. And care.

When she washed my hair, it hurt; her nails  
rooting my thick curls, the water rushing hard.

It felt like drowning, her tenderness.  
As a girl, she'd been the last

of ten to take a bath, which meant she sat  
in dirty water alone; her mother in the yard

bloodletting a chicken; her brothers and sisters  
crickets eating the back forty, gone.

Is gentleness a resource of the privileged?

In this respect, my people were poor.  
We fought to eat and fought each other because

we were tired from fighting. We had no time  
to share. Instead our estate was honesty,

which is not tenderness. In that it is  
a kind of drowning. But also a kind of air.



Courtney Kampa

BABY LOVE

Gregory had a mole below his left eye  
and sometimes kids in our 5<sup>th</sup> grade class  
would tease him, saying he had chocolate  
on his face. I was the girl who knew it  
was his left eye and not his right. Who listened  
in secret to Oldies 100—music like *Baby Love* by the Supremes  
and knew every Patsy Cline song by heart. Gregory  
didn't backpack pocket blades to school like Richard  
or look up girls' skirts beneath the monkey bars  
the way Kenny did, whose mom let him watch  
all the Late Night TV he wanted. He was nothing  
like Vinny who'd steal the grape juice box  
off your desk when you weren't looking.  
And he didn't mock William, whose dad worked hard  
for a gasoline company—gasoline has the word *gas*  
in it, which all the cool kids thought  
was *pretty funny; really classic*. Gregory had immaculate  
Ticonderoga erasers and he made my knee-socks droop  
and he made my weak bony ankles  
weaker. At recess before summer a soft piece of sidewalk  
tar was thrown at my feet and I looked up  
and he there he was, skipping backwards, a rocket wanting  
me to chase him. Mrs. Rivers led him off to suggest  
alternative ways of procuring  
female attention and in those awful green uniform pants  
he looked back at me and winked—which is not  
something the average 5<sup>th</sup> grader does  
to another 5<sup>th</sup> grader. Three weeks later his winking face was fed  
into the teeth of a triple car wreck. Eleven years  
and I'm still mouthing the triple syllables  
of his name. Not because he needs me to  
but because I have no alternative way of procuring  
his attention. At school I quit talking, Colin inches  
from my face taunting *SAY-SOME-THING*  
but I didn't, so now I *will* say something, I will say  
that I cried at our class talent show, watching Gregory's mom  
out in the audience, shirt mis-buttoned, camera readied,  
looking for him, and seeing him

[...]

nowhere. I will say that with Gregory gone there was no one  
to stop the boys from snapping  
Stephen's stutter like a twig across their knees. I'll say ours  
was a misfit purity. That after art he gave me  
his scissors and I swapped  
him mine, both blades aimed forward, looking at each other  
like we'd just done something  
dangerous. Handles inked with initials  
in handwriting not his, marked the way mothers mark us carefully  
when we walk into the world. I'll say that I still  
have them. Gregory, ask me to name a thing  
as indestructibly beautiful as you, and I cannot. Time disfigures  
those who breathe and those who no longer can  
but none of that has touched you. Not the cruelty  
of children. Not the gravel and glass  
that pushed their way into your green  
restless legs. Not the ugliness of an ambulance  
come too late. Not the small grass square  
that mothers and quilts you. Not even the skid marks  
below your brother's eyes, tire treads  
red across his chest. Love is nothing  
if not what takes its time. It takes sweet  
time and it took tar but was taken  
by tar and it's taken eleven years of not trusting  
the pitch of my voice or the shamed  
insufficiency of what I have  
to say—that at your service I got no further  
than taking a holy card from the altar boy; picture  
of an angel as dark-haired as you: an angel I'd soon shred  
to ribbons, my hands around those handles for the first  
and only time. Gregory, think of me  
in St. Joe's parking lot in July in a sweaty cotton skirt.  
Think of my confession to that angel, in his headband  
of light, how much I liked  
you too. Hoping you had stopped a moment  
in the beatific beating of your wings; in the now-familiar strumming  
of that strange, beseeching harp.



*Stephen Kampa*

## WHAT HE MUST HAVE SEEN

He's so old that a man has to stand on either side of him  
to prop him up, but he gangles there on his own legs, climbing  
the stairs slowly to the baptistery where the pastor waits,

youthful and brimming with a swift, practiced benevolence now  
that the old codger has finally made up his mind for Christ,  
and the man totters on the concrete edge of the pool before

he tremor-steps sideways down yet more stairs into the water,  
where the standard words are spoken, and he goes under but can't  
come up by himself, so the two attendant men are rushing

over to help the pastor haul him to the surface, the prayer  
gets said, a little orotund still despite the breathlessness  
tugging at the pastor's voice, then we watch the slow ascension

out of the water, and here the sopping man can't hold himself  
upright anymore, he has to put his hands down on the stairs  
to steady himself, the other men surrounding him, their hands

at his scabbed, purplish elbows or against the small of his back  
while we the congregation hold our one long bored breath, praying  
that he won't slip and fall, crack open his spotty pate and bleed

into the baptistery, and I think he must have seen this  
the moment he decided to be baptized, he must have known  
that he would have to clutch arms and rails and even the black edge

of the piano to help himself be hoisted out, and all  
in front of this smarts-riddled crowd come of age in the age of  
the body, the youthful body, the digital blink, the why

is he taking so long to get out, knew he would have to put  
one knee on a step, a hand, another knee, another hand,  
up and up, over and over, and he chose it, chose this path

we raced past, our pose his posture, our figures of speech his facts  
as he crawls, in front of God and everybody, as he crawls  
on his hands and knees into a new life, short but eternal.



*Bea Opengart*

MAN ON MAD ANTHONY

Yelling "Miss, oh Miss" from three houses up  
 as if it was my name and who on this street has such  
 fancy manners? I hadn't seen him before, not him or his black  
 t-shirt or black jeans turned up halfway to his knees.  
 And he carried a tall black plastic cup in one hand, surely not  
 from the UDF but maybe the ball park? "A neat little guy but who  
 is he and what's he doing here?" I wondered because  
 things are a little iffy on this side of the avenue. I had just  
 gotten home from someplace. The day was not too hot  
 for me to feel pleased with my trim self and the front yard  
 in its late June blooming and even the vacant house  
 next door appeared for once well tended because I had mowed  
 and edged that lawn a day or two before, annoyed how  
 fast it turned into another mess in the neighborhood.  
 "Hi!" I called back to him as I climbed the front steps,  
 seeing no need for rudeness. "Miss, that's a nice dress  
 you have on!" He was still far enough away to raise his voice.  
 But not by much. "It looks good on you." I smiled  
 thanked him and kept climbing and then he was right there  
 at the bottom of the steps. Standing there. Even close up, he looked tidy.  
 Short hair that stood up and missing a tooth or two, as I remember.  
 As natural as you can imagine, he said "I bet that dress  
 would look good on me, too." I remember pausing but not  
 thinking. Feeling, more like. That it was okay to talk with this guy  
 but to say what? "I'm not sure you'd want it to look good on you"  
 was the best I could do at the moment. As if he didn't know  
 what he meant. "Oh yes I would! It would make me  
 feel sexy." Him smiling without a bit of embarrassment and me  
 thinking I don't remember what. Just amazement, if you can  
 think that. Also like I was playing a game I didn't know  
 rules for except to act regular, I guess because  
 he seemed to be acting what was regular for himself.  
 Which I can see now isn't the best reason for passing time  
 with what some people might call a weirdo and maybe  
 I should've gone inside right then. For a man to come out and  
 say such a thing! At that point he climbed a step toward me  
 and hesitating just a little, he cut into my thoughts. "If I ask you  
 something will you get mad? Lots of women get mad when I ask."  
 "Depends on the question," I said, thinking "Uh-oh."

“Do you have any old panties you could let me have?” Considering he admired the dress for himself, it didn’t seem like he’d want panties to smell or whatever else. Still, things were getting pretty strange. I told him the truth, that I’d just driven a load of stuff to St. Vincent and had nothing to give him. He turned persistent. “Could you look?” Pressing it. I said I would but I didn’t think ... “And slips and nighties too,” he added, talking faster now. “You could put it all in a paper bag and leave it right there, around the side of the house.” He was pointing, his arm stretched all the way out in case I didn’t know where the side of my house was. “I’ll come by once in a while to see if anything’s there.” I pictured my old torn panties and stretched-out bras carried off down the street in a rolled-up Kroger bag and him decking himself out and admiring himself in front of a mirror, maybe the long tilting kind that has its own stand. Or worse, sitting around handling my things in some ugly way. To be honest, half of me wished I had something to give him because, well, how could what I didn’t actually know about hurt me? Maybe he really did want to feel sexy and this was his only way. Doesn’t everyone want to feel sexy? I even thought about buying him some stuff at Family Dollar and leaving it in the spot he’d be watching. But would he come back later for more? Want dresses, stockings? Did I want to get into buying him a whole wardrobe and maybe replacing items as they wore out? It was a crazy idea. Even I could see that. He asked me to think about his plan. I lied that I would. Then “Shoo! Shoo!” I thought as hard as I could. And was relieved to see him finally give up and walk down the steps carrying his black plastic cup and I haven’t seen him since. Later I wanted to tell people about him the way you tell people about strange things that happen to get rid of them, as if picking bugs off yourself and dropping them to the ground. If Dad was still alive, I’ve thought, he would’ve laughed like hell. But that was the problem. I didn’t want to make this guy into something to laugh at. Why didn’t he buy his own things at Family Dollar? Couldn’t he pretend to be buying them for someone else? And what did he really do with women’s old underwear, if he ever managed to lay hands on any? I imagine him walking around with whatever secret

[...]



and not-so-secret wants and I feel bad for him, the way I feel  
for a skinny cat that won't get fat no matter how much it finds to eat.  
Know what I mean? You're the first person I've told.





*Michelle Ornat*

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## LAUNDRY LIST

I'm terrible at running errands, going to the post office,  
picking up my dry cleaning. Once I lived in Virginia  
for four years before I went to the DMV to get a license.  
I didn't want to give up on California, all its sex and sea  
and taco trucks and redwoods and freeways.  
But, Virginia, you can have sex in Virginia too.  
My morning walk is on my laundry list of things to do for the day.  
I love to walk, but I tend to sit around in my nightgown  
and drink coffee until eleven o'clock when it just might start raining.  
I'll pay the bills then. But not before I take an online poll  
casting my vote for who wore Ralph Lauren best.  
I wonder what it is like to have sex with a man who is so tan.  
Skin that tan and old must feel like a disappointment.  
I need to wash my hair. I'd like to have sex  
in a shower or in a salt water pool or in a clear bottomed bay,  
maybe in a dream, because I look dreadful wet. I water the plants,  
run out to buy three or four flats of sexless pink petunias.  
I buy some Drano and pick up paint samples:  
bali kiss, coconut grove, tidewater rise.  
I love putting a stir stick in paint for the first time.  
I haven't had a first time in a long time.  
I prop myself up on a washing machine  
during the spin cycle, wondering if I'll feel aroused.  
Nothing much happens. I probably need an older, less efficient model.  
I strip the bed linens, chase after the dog, sew a button onto a cuff.  
I clean the kitchen window so I can see crystal clear the petunias.  
I could have sex in the yard, the wind on my face,  
on my naked back, against blades of grass or sky.  
I'd like to have sex with men I don't know and men I used to know.  
I think of all the sex I could be having when I'm writing  
a grocery list, shopping for shallots and radicchio at Whole Foods,  
choosing a pork shoulder. The produce manager and I can make a bed  
of steel cut oats and flax seeds and paper towels in aisle 8.  
Nothing like that ever happens. I think about sex each time I peel  
a clove of garlic and heat olive oil in a heavy bottomed pan.  
At the first inhale I'm high and it smells like sex.  
I slice an onion along its God given lines to come down. I'd like  
some unnamed man to stand behind me and wash my hands in the sink.

*Jack Powers*

MAN ON THE FLOOR

I remember my thirteen-year-old self walking through my sister's freshman dorm as the girls yelled, "Man on the floor! Man on the floor!" and I, not yet a man but hoping, looked for any excuse to fetch forgotten items from the car or just stand in that hallway soaking in that mix of fear, annoyance and flirtation. My idea of a man then was probably my father's

paycheck-earning, pipe-smoking, golf-ball-whacking, bourbon-swilling silence or James Bond's unstirred cool. No, it was probably just playing football, basketball—and baseball until someone learned to throw a curve. And girls—Courtney Carron, in particular that fall, and dreams of getting a hand under her tight shirt. Even over the bra would have had me standing taller for a week. Once my dad,

after a hot afternoon of golf and a cart of cold beers, broke a rib mowing the lawn when the mower overheated and kicked back into his chest. I'd been hearing the mower roar and stop, roar and stop, watching my father search through the grass before screwing something back in and restarting, but I didn't know until afterwards that the mower was out of oil.

So when my father tiptoed around the house, saying, "I'm fine," through gritted teeth, I wanted to shout, "Just say it hurts" and "Just say you're an idiot." Of all the things I'd sworn I'd do differently than him, my ability to admit my idiocy has never developed. I've learned to apologize, but—there's always a "but" as I need to explain why every stupid thing I've ever done

seemed like a good idea at the time and I wonder if the girls were really yelling, "Idiot on the floor! Idiot on the floor!" The first year I taught, I wore sneakers to school because I didn't have any adult shoes. My boss suggested I take charge of the class more: use a point system, assign seats and buy some shoes. But I didn't want to make the class any more oppressive than it already was

so I threw her a bone and bought semi-comfortable shoes that weren't too dorky. The shoes seemed like one more part of the disguise I was sure they'd all figure out someday. They say everyone feels powerless; the last to know they have power



are those who have it. Is that true for the clueless as well? What clues have I missed? I think of Edie years ago

calling me an asshole. I had to agree. “But,” I wanted to explain, “I’d spent years dreaming of that night—when we climbed into your parents’ car in that dark garage and laid the seats flat, when I was finally inside you—I wasn’t thinking about Kerry arriving from LA in a week—” but Edie didn’t want to hear it. And I didn’t try to explain. How could I?

The day before he died, my father awoke in his hospital bed and said, “Everything in Springfield is just like it was—Dreisen’s Fountain, McDougal’s Grocery. The whole street is the same.” “Did you see anyone there?” I asked, not sure if it was dream or dementia. But my father’s eyes had turned to the wall. Sensing the end—hoping really,

because the next stop was a nursing home he’d made clear he never wanted to see—I went to get my family from the lounge. All I could hear was the squeak of my semi-adult shoes on linoleum in that hospital hall. Stroke and dementia had softened my father, made him kinder. He seemed to appreciate us all more. “You’re a better father than I was,”

he said one night after he’d watched me coach Will in some peewee basketball game and if he wasn’t my father I would have hugged him, but I needed a stroke myself to break the habits of our long history. “Thanks” is all I could sputter, not “The rules have changed. You did your best.” In class, a student said, “You forget 90% of your dreams

in the first ten minutes you’re awake.” What percent of my dreams did I forget by age twenty? The list of failings my thirteen-year-old self nurtures increases by one. Some Septembers the freshmen boys’ attempts to saunter down the halls are so uncertain, it’s as if the ground is shifting. I want to shout, “Man on the floor!” to embolden their strides

if only for a moment. I think of having yelled at my own son, now probably back from school and rooted

[...]





to the couch and his computer, and I cringe at how much I sounded like my own father: sarcastic, impatient, wanting the problem solved now. When I open the door he's already glued to his laptop eating Chex Mix. "Sorry," I say.

"What?" he says, trying to keep one eye on me and one on the screen. "I'm an idiot," I say. And he flips it shut and says, "What?" Before I can say, "But ..." the dog starts barking and barking. I don't know what he's trying to say. I kneel on the floor to calm him, but his barking grows more frenzied, his furious tail sweeps magazines off the tables.

The dog picks up a toy and begins a high-pitched whine that sounds like singing. My son is asking, "What are you doing?" I shake my head. It doesn't matter what I say, just what I do. The dog keeps singing. My son's brow furrows in confusion and concern. But I can only lay back on the floor, close my eyes and slow my breath as if I could fall asleep and wake up and start all over again.



*Danez Smith*

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## BASIC STANDARDS TEST

*Section I: Comprehension w/ answer key.*

1. Where does the black boy go when he die?

-to thug mansion  
*they been at capacity since '97.*

-to heaven  
*they got no capacity at all.*

**-to the gates of heaven**  
*but they won't let him in until he changes  
his pants, puts on proper shoes.*

2. Why the black boy die so quick?

-cause the world ain't love him  
*but what bout his mama & kin. What bout his play cousins & the  
lord?*

-cause the world cold  
*then why they pass so fast in July?*

**-cause**  
*yeah, you got that right.*

3. A black boy is born ...

*Based on the context clues, complete the story.*

a. & his name becomes synonymous with *shame, ain't it or keep him in your prayers*. His mama worry about how comfy he is in shadows. The bedrock's eager tongue beckons him to bend, he presses his ear to the ground seeking a song & never comes up again.

b. & marries a woman with 100 watt flesh, hair like the wood of a match. He gets a good job, goes to a non-denominational church every other Sunday. He

[...]



has no kids & 2 briefcases, enough golf balls to break all the windows in his mama's house.

c. & he lives for a little bit & then he dies. Assume teeth, assume arched back, assume refusal of prayer, assume pot roast, assume heartbreak & whisky, assume bus stop head, assume clouds & fist, assume called a nigger in Nebraska, assume blunt (at least once), assume the need to collapse into an orchard of arms, all this happens while his heart beat no matter how brief or unhistoric.

d. to no avail.

*Section II: Essay Question: Explain what you've learned thus far.*

believe you-me, I know this world  
ain't the first & ain't the last. I know  
a blink of an eye & we go from learning  
to walk to learning to become memory.

Our whole lifetime only as long  
as it takes the father to spell his name.  
What are we but a forgettable moment?  
A piece of lint in chaos' swirling eye?

I know tomorrow doesn't care  
how much I hurt today, but I hurt today.  
The roots holds too many boys who look like me  
their names packed around stems & on sneakers.



Patricia Smith

## WHO BREATHED IN BINDERS

*I went to a number of women's groups and said, 'Can you help us find folks?' and they brought us whole binders full of women.*  
—Mitt Romney

Strange we should forget. Once between the covers of a worn leather binder a black girl languished, her limbs linked by iron, her feet and breasts and muscle measured, written. Back then, white men underlined her name, then dared her price. They bellowed their gold, tried to combine her

with cattle or grain or another child to make her worth their while. Behind her, a hundred hard eyes teared at the mere sweet of her bound landscape. The maybe buyers stretched open her mouth, peered in, calmly assigned her a number. For hours, in the hissing Carolina sun, they confined her

to the block, demanded she succumb, pirouette on cue. They fought to mine her for treasure, computed the width of her bare hips with their chapped hands, predicted her belly tight with child and child and child and child, declined her a cure for thirst. Out loud, their spittle a wall in her face, they redesigned her,

scribbled her arithmetic on crammed pages, tried hard not to mind her father, a foot away, grimacing as his penis was handled, as he was pronounced too old for anything and led away. There was absolutely no need to remind her to swallow that scream. *This is merely business*, they said. *We are not unkind*. Her

father, after all, was mercifully allowed a backward glance. Resigned, her future now screeched in numbers, she scanned the men's faces, the unbridled pink of foreign skin. One locked a wet gaze, saw their bodies already intertwined. Her purchase slipped the heat from her shoulders. He grinned, wrote her new name, and closed his binder.



*Wendy Videlock*

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OF YOU

You've been the wolf, you've been the bear,  
you were the grass when I was air,  
the hush of the lake, eyes and lips,  
a shyness at my fingertips,

a motion that knew when to slow,  
the forest where I always go;

and now you are the windowsill  
I rest my elbows on until  
the night grows dark and I can't see  
these silhouettes of you and me.

