

This Is Just To Say

by William Carlos Williams

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

What it Look Like

by Terrance Hayes

Dear Ol' Dirty Bastard: I too like it raw,
I don't especially care for Duke Ellington
at a birthday party. I care less and less
about the shapes of shapes because forms
change and nothing is more durable than feeling.
My uncle used the money I gave him
to buy a few vials of what looked like candy
after the party where my grandma sang
in an outfit that was obviously made
for a West African king. **My motto is
Never mistake what it is for what it looks like.**
My generosity, for example, is mostly a form
of vanity. A bandanna is a useful handkerchief,
but a handkerchief is a useless-ass bandanna.
This only looks like a footnote in my report
concerning the party. *Trill* stands for what is
truly real though it may be hidden by the houses
just over the hills between us, by the hands
on the bars between us. That picture
of my grandmother with my uncle
when he was a baby is not trill. What it is
is the feeling felt seeing garbagemen drift
along the predawn avenues, a sloppy slow rain
taking its time to the coast. Milquetoast
is not trill, nor is bouillabaisse. *Bakku-shan*
is Japanese for a woman who is beautiful
only when viewed from behind. Like I was saying,
my motto is Never mistake what it looks like
for what it is else you end up like that Negro
Othello. (Was Othello a Negro?) **Don't you lie
about who you are sometimes and then realize
the lie is true? You are blind to your power, Brother
Bastard, like the king who wanders his kingdom
searching for the king. And that's okay.
No one will tell you you are the king.
No one really wants a king anyway.**

The Blue Terrance

by Terrance Hayes

[excerpt]

**Suppose you had to wipe
sweat from the brow of a righteous woman,
but all you owned was a dirty rag? That's why**

**the blues will never go out of fashion:
their half rotten aroma, their bloodshot octaves of
consequence; that's why when they call, Boy, you're in
trouble.**

The Blue Etheridge

by Terrance Hayes

Dear Parole Board of the Perennial Now,
let me begin by saying it's very likely
none of my ex-wives will vouch for me.
Let's just say the parable
of the Negro who uses his dick for a cane
and the parable of the Negro who uses his cane
for a dick convey the same message to me.
I'm sorry. You mean before that?
Well, it's as if some ghost the height
of my granddaddy was lighting a cigarette
the wrong way to symbolize my muddy path
through life. You ever seen the Mississippi?
You'll learn all you need to know
if you look at the wall of my kinfolk's pictures.
Belzora Knight Taylor. BuShie.
Janice. Eunice. Clyneese. Me
and my brothers fishing in high waters.
Whenever I see brown hills and red gullies,
I remember what the world was like
before I twisted spoons over flames.
I pissed from a bridge the day I left.
Yes Sir, I've changed, I've changed.
But I won't be telling you the story
of the forlorn Negro or the Negro cutthroat
or the Negro Hero or the Negro Tom.
I won't be telling you the story of the night
I died. I believe everything comes back
to music or money. Belly Song.
Song of the twelve fingered fix.
Song of The Gemini Women. I know I'm cursed.
I sang out to the Baptists I saw gathered
on the riverbank the day I left. I sang out
to the reeds straight as tongues and the salmon
in the waters of my people, and beyond that
to my barrel-backed shadow damming the stream.

My Father's Love Letters

by Yusef Komunyakaa

On Fridays he'd open a can of Jax
After coming home from the mill,
& ask me to write a letter to my mother
Who sent postcards of desert flowers
Taller than men. He would beg,
Promising to never beat her
Again. Somehow I was happy
She had gone, & sometimes wanted
To slip in a reminder, how Mary Lou
Williams' "Polka Dots & Moonbeams"
Never made the swelling go down.
His carpenter's apron always bulged
With old nails, a claw hammer
Looped at his side & extension cords
Coiled around his feet.
Words rolled from under the pressure
Of my ballpoint: Love,
Baby, Honey, Please.
We sat in the quiet brutality
Of voltage meters & pipe threaders,
Lost between sentences . . .
The gleam of a five-pound wedge
On the concrete floor
Pulled a sunset
Through the doorway of his toolshed.
I wondered if she laughed
& held them over a gas burner.
My father could only sign
His name, but he'd look at blueprints
& say how many bricks
Formed each wall. This man,
Who stole roses & hyacinth
For his yard, would stand there
With eyes closed & fists balled,
Laboring over a simple word, almost
Redeemed by what he tried to say.

My Papa's Waltz

by Theodore Roethke

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

Where Will Love Go?

by Sharon Olds

Where will love go? When my father
died, and my love could no longer shine
on the oily, drink-darkened slopes of his skin,
then my love for him lived inside me,
and lived wherever the fog they made of him
coiled like a spirit. And when I die
my love for him will live in my vapor
and live in my children, some of it
still rubbed into the grain of the desk my father left me
and the dark-red pores of the leather chair which he
sat in, in a stupor, when I was a child, and then
gave me passionately after his death-our
souls seem locked in it, together,
two alloys in a metal, and we're there
in the black and silver workings of his 40-pound
1932 Underwood,
the trapezes stilled inside it on the desk
in front of the chair. Even when the children
have died, our love will live in their children
and still be here in the arm of the chair,
locked in it, like the secret structure of matter,
but what if we ruin everything,
the earth burning like a human body,
storms of soot wreathing it
in permanent winter? Where will love go?
Will the smoke be made of animal love,
will the clouds of roasted ice, circling
the globe, be all that is left of love,
will the sphere of cold, turning ash,
seen by no one, heard by no one,
hold all
our love? Then love
is powerless, and means nothing.

Track 5: Summertime

by Jericho Brown

as performed by Janis Joplin

God's got his eye on me, but I ain't a sparrow.
I'm more like a lawn mower . . .no, a chainsaw,
Anything that might mangle each manicured lawn
In Port Arthur, a place I wouldn't return to
If the mayor offered me every ounce of oil
My daddy cans at the refinery. My voice, I mean,
Ain't sweet. Nothing nice about it. It won't fly
Even with Jesus watching. I don't believe in Jesus.
The Baxter boys climbed a tree just to throw
Persimmons at me. The good and perfect gifts
From above hit like lightning, leave bruises.
So I lied—I believe, but I don't think God
Likes me. The girls in the locker room slapped
Dirty pads across my face. They called me
Bitch, but I never bit back. I ain't a dog.
Chainsaw, I say. My voice hacks at you. I bet
I tear my throat. I try so hard to sound jagged.
I get high and say one thing so many times
Like Willie Baker who worked across the street—
I saw some kids whip him with a belt while he
Repeated, Please. School out, summertime
And the living lashed, Mama said I should be
Thankful, that the town's worse to coloreds
Than they are to me, that I'd grow out of my acne.
God must love Willie Baker—all that leather and still
A please that sounds like music. See.
I wouldn't know a sparrow from a mockingbird.
The band plays. I just belt out, Please. This tune
Ain't half the blues. I should be thankful.
I get high and moan like a lawn mower
So nobody notices I'm such an ugly girl.
I'm such an ugly girl. I try to sing like a man
Boys call, boy. I turn my face to God. I pray. I wish
I could pour oil on everything green in Port Arthur.