

Selection from

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***An International Collection of Prose Poetry***  
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**KIM ADDONIZIO**

**Last Gifts**

They were gathered in the room next to the kitchen, where he had his hospital bed cranked up. A writer he had published brought him a long red boa and draped it around his neck; he looked like someone drowning, a small head floating on feathery waves. Someone else brought a pillow stitched with a picture of Elvis, with the words “King of Rock and Roll” across the top. There were red splotches on his arms, and his hand shook slightly when he poured water into the glass on his tray. A poet took a book off the crowded shelves, sat on the edge of the bed and read to him for a while. Someone accidentally stood on the oxygen hose; no one noticed until he began to cough, and there was some consternation, and then relieved laughter and joking. The party grew more animated; people refilled their drinks, and everyone started talking at once. His wife went to the kitchen and brought back a big silver bowl of buttered popcorn and passed it around. For a few moments it seemed as though they had forgotten him. Then someone finished a story, someone else paused to think of the right word, and a silence opened and spread through the brightly lit room. The guests looked at each other; some had tears in their eyes. They turned to the bed, where the sick man sat smiling at them in his red boa, and he knew this was what it would be like when he was gone. And then he was.

—for Al

## AGHA SHAHID ALI

**Dear Shahid,**

I am writing to you from your faroff country. Far even from us who live here. Where you no longer are. Everyone carries his address in his pocket so that at least his body will reach home.

Rumors break on their way to us in the city. But word still reaches us from border towns: Men are forced to stand barefoot in snow waters all night. The women are alone inside. Soldiers smash radios and televisions. With bare hands they tear our houses to pieces.

You must have heard Rizwan was killed. Rizwan: Guardian of the Gates of Paradise. Only eighteen years old. Yesterday at Hideout Cafe (everyone there asks about you), a doctor—who had just that morning treated a 16-year-old boy released from an interrogation center—said: *I want to ask the fortune tellers: Did anything in his line of Fate reveal that the webs of his hands would be cut with a knife?*

This letter, *insh'Allah*, will reach you, for my brother goes south tomorrow where he shall post it. Here one can't even manage postage stamps. Today I went to the post office. Across the river. Bags and bags—hundreds of canvas bags—all of undelivered mail. By chance I looked down and there on the floor I saw this letter addressed to you. So I am enclosing it. I hope it's from someone you are longing for news of.

Things here are as usual, though we always talk about you. Will you come soon? Waiting for you is like waiting for spring. We are waiting for the almond blossoms. And, if God wills, O! those days of peace when we all were in love and the rain was in our hands wherever we met.

## NIN ANDREWS

### The Obsession

Occasionally the sailor suspects a woman swims nude beneath his ship, though when he dives into the water, he sees only white jellyfish opening and closing like umbrellas. He is reminded of the time when he was a boy and imagined ordinary stones were gems, lovely enough to win the heart of the girl next door. But he never reached to pick one up. Instead he decided the girl would never like him. The more he thought about her not liking him, the more he grew to despise her and her adolescent beauty. The more he despised her, the more he wanted to see her, to follow her, to sit just behind her, and never let her out of his sight. That was the beginning of the obsession. Evenings he stayed up late, peeking through his Venetian blinds, hoping to catch a glimpse of her in her pink striped pajamas. Every weeknight she stretched out on the lime green carpet in her living room and did her homework in front of the flickering TV. The boy began to believe that if he did not watch her, she might not do her homework. Then she might do poorly in school and be mocked, and he would have to protect her. What if he didn't know how? Better to be sure she did her work. But the more he stared at her, the more beautiful she became, the more her skin softened, and the silk of her hair awakened him from his dreams. He grew convinced his eyes gave off a kind of glow that polished the girl, like an apple, that she could never have been as lovely if he had not looked at her so intensely. He even thought his staring might have been making her breasts grow, just as the sun's heat caused fruit to ripen. That's when he realized her beauty was a kind of death wish. Like a mirage, he thought. A mirage of an oasis in the Sahara, something that could never satisfy his thirst. No wonder years later he still saw her breasts in the middle of the sea. No wonder he hated her.

## RUSSELL EDSON

### Sleep

There was a man who didn't know how to sleep; nodding off every night into a drab, unprofessional sleep. Sleep that he'd grown so tired of sleeping.

He tried reading *The Manual of Sleep*, but it just put him to sleep. That same old sleep that he had grown so tired of sleeping . . .

He needed a sleeping master, who with a whip and a chair would discipline the night, and make him jump through hoops of gasolined fire. Someone who could make a tiger sit on a tiny pedestal and yawn . . .

## RAY GONAZLEZ

### Busy

I am busy living in the new millennium. It fits well with the depression I left back in the twentieth century. I am happier now because I am older and fewer birds fly after me. If I could grow a beard, I would. If I could take my time in deciding what I think of my country, it would be easier to live here without thinking I have to have an opinion, cast a vote, or drink distilled water. I am not sure where I am going with this, but it is a fine season for confessing how we made it past the zero hour. Even the tiny spider crossing the white rug in the living room is going to make it into the first decade of the new awareness. I don't step on it or call my cat's attention to it. The little spider passes the leg of the sofa and disappears. I read in the newspaper about the 20,000 fish that were found dead in the Guadalupe River near San Antonio. It turns out it was fire ant mating season. After male fire ants mate with the females in midair, they die. When wildlife people cut open the dead fish to see what killed them, they found thousands of fire ants in their bellies. The toxic poison of the male fire ants killed the fish after they gorged on the falling insects. I am busy thinking about this because I used to live in the area and was attacked by fire ants several times. This thought fits with what I was going to say. I have two large windows in my office and a large desk. When I open any book in my office, I always use both hands.

## JIM HARRISON

### Very Small Wars

There's no flash here among the troops. We just want to protect our freedom, well being and safety. It occurred to me that if I were a vehicle I wouldn't be a Maserati but a John Deere or Farmall tractor, nothing that special. Way out here in the country Linda runs a trap line and I patrol daily for rattlers though I can't find the one she saw in the garage behind her gardening tools. She kills a half-dozen mice a day but is now thinking of a device called "Mice Cube" which merely traps them so I could release them on a Republican's lawn when I drive to town for a drink. I'm squeamish about killing mice once having tried to save one with a broken neck in the trap who looked up at me imploringly. I was drunk and actually sobbed, putting the little critter on a cotton bed in a matchbox. In the morning she was gone but was probably eaten by our retarded cat Elie who sits under the bird feeder all day waiting for lunch to fall from the heavens. Also there's a sentimentality about murder as I intend to shoot Hungarian partridge, grouse, woodcock, maybe an antelope for the table this fall. Linda is rather matter-of-fact about killing mice but women are natural hunters. Rattlesnakes aren't innocent. One killed my dog Rose. Our little grandson Silas walks in the flowerbeds which we pre-check for vipers. The mind tires of this war but my peace plan is faulty: let rattlers in the house to kill and eat the mice. The last rattler I shot was within a foot of the front door and struck at our old, deaf cat Warren. I blew the snake's head into oatmeal with my pistola in a surge of anger. I am a man of peace. Send suggestions. It's not known in Washington D.C. but death is death.

**LARRY LEVIS**

**The Leopard's Mouth Is Dry and Cold Inside**

Now I am drying my body, but carefully, as if it doesn't really belong to me, and won't last. And now that I see it, alone like this in the mirror, I think I'm right; it won't last. After all, does a stray dog feel permanent when you touch it? Does something as singular as this ant on my sill? Or if I admit that stray dogs and ants might have a certain anonymous permanence, why doesn't my white, bruised skin? It doesn't look as durable as my wife's reading glasses. It doesn't even look as if it will outlast some clouds I once saw. They were cramped into the sky of a child's painting, and looked as if the child forgot to include them, and then suddenly remembered and put in too many of them, as if to make sure of something.

## NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

### Hammer and Nail

“Would you like to see where our little girl is buried?” my friend asks as we walk between stucco shrines and wreaths of brilliant flowers. Even a plane’s propeller is attached to a pilot’s grave as if the whole thing might spin off into the wind. One man’s relatives built a castle over his remains, with turrets and towers, to match the castle he built for his body in life. If you stand at a certain angle you can see both castles at once, the bigger one he lived in off on the horizon. An archway says in Spanish, “Life is an illusion. Death is the reality. Respect the dead whom you are visiting now.” We hike down the hill toward the acres of “free graves.” Here people can claim any space they want without paying, but also risk having someone buried on top of them. In the fields beyond the cemetery, women walk slowly with buckets slung over their shoulders on poles. Black cows graze on kneehigh grass. The crossbar from the marker to my friend’s child’s grave has come loose and lies off to one side. My friend kneels, pressing the simple blue crossbar back into the upright piece, wishing for a hammer and nail. The cross has delicate scalloped edges and says nothing. No words, no dates. It reminds me of the simplicity of folded hands, though I know there were years of despair. My friend says, “Sometimes I am still very sad. But I no longer ask, ‘What if . . .?’ It was the tiniest casket you ever saw.” On the small plots in either direction, families have stuck tall pine branches into dirt. The needles droop, completely dried by now, but they must have looked lovely as miniature forests for the first few days.