

1. At the Galleria Shopping Mall

by TONY HOAGLAND

Just past the bin of pastel baby socks and underwear,
there are some 49-dollar Chinese-made TVs;

one of them singing news about a far-off war,
one comparing the breast size of an actress from Hollywood

to the breast size of an actress from Bollywood.
And here is my niece Lucinda,

who is nine and a true daughter of Texas,
who has developed the flounce of a pedigreed blonde

and declares that her favorite sport is shopping.
Today is the day she embarks upon her journey,

swinging a credit card like a scythe
through the meadows of golden merchandise.

Today is the day she stops looking at faces,
and starts assessing the labels of purses;

So let it begin. Let her be dipped in the dazzling bounty
and raised and wrung out again and again.

And let us watch.

As the gods in olden stories

turned mortals into laurel trees and crows
to teach them some kind of lesson,

so we were turned into Americans
to learn something about loneliness.

(2009)

2. A Ball Is for Throwing

by ADRIENNE RICH

See it, the beautiful ball
Poised in the toyshop window,
Rounder than sun or moon.
Is it red? is it blue? is it violet?
It is everything we desire,
And it does not exist at all.

Non-existent and beautiful? Quite.
In the rounding leap of our hands,
In the longing hush of air,
We know what that ball could be,
How its blues and reds could spin
To a headier violet.

Beautiful in the mind,
Like a word we are waiting to hear,
That ball is construed, but lives
Only in flash of flight,
From the instant of release
To the catch in another's hand.

And the toy withheld is a token
Of all who refrain from play—
The shopkeepers, the collectors
Like Queen Victoria,
In whose adorable doll's house
Nothing was ever broken.

(1957)

3. Le sporting-club de Monte Carlo (for Lena Horne)

by JAMES BALDWIN

The lady is a tramp
a camp
a lamp

The lady is a sight
a might
a light
the lady devastated
an alley or two
reverberated through the valley
which leads to me, and you

the lady is the apple
of God's eye:
He's cool enough about it
but He tends to strut a little
when she passes by

the lady is a wonder
daughter of the thunder
smashing cages
legislating rages
with the voice of ages
singing us through.

(1983?)

4. Bullet Points

by JERICHO BROWN

I will not shoot myself
In the head, and I will not shoot myself
In the back, and I will not hang myself
With a trashbag, and if I do,
I promise you, I will not do it
In a police car while handcuffed
Or in the jail cell of a town
I only know the name of
Because I have to drive through it
To get home. Yes, I may be at risk,
But I promise you, I trust the maggots
Who live beneath the floorboards
Of my house to do what they must
To any carcass more than I trust
An officer of the law of the land
To shut my eyes like a man
Of God might, or to cover me with a sheet
So clean my mother could have used it
To tuck me in. When I kill me, I will
Do it the same way most Americans do,
I promise you: cigarette smoke
Or a piece of meat on which I choke
Or so broke I freeze
In one of these winters we keep
Calling worst. I promise if you hear
Of me dead anywhere near
A cop, then that cop killed me. He took
Me from us and left my body, which is,
No matter what we've been taught,
Greater than the settlement
A city can pay a mother to stop crying,
And more beautiful than the new bullet
Fished from the folds of my brain.

(2019)

5. Caged Bird

by MAYA ANGELOU

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill

of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

(1983)

6. Blackberry-Picking

by SEAMUS HEANEY

for Philip Hobsbaum

Late August, given heavy rain and sun
For a full week, the blackberries would ripen.
At first, just one, a glossy purple clot
Among others, red, green, hard as a knot.
You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet
Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it
Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for
Picking. Then red ones inked up and that hunger
Sent us out with milk cans, pea tins, jam-pots
Where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots.
Round hayfields, cornfields and potato-drills
We trekked and picked until the cans were full,
Until the tinkling bottom had been covered
With green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned
Like a plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered
With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's.

We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre.
But when the bath was filled we found a fur,
A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.
The juice was stinking too. Once off the bush
The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour.
I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair
That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.
Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not.

(1966)

7. Dream Song 14

by JOHN BERRYMAN

Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
we ourselves flash and yearn,
and moreover my mother told me as a boy
(repeatingly) 'Ever to confess you're bored
means you have no

Inner Resources.' I conclude now I have no
inner resources, because I am heavy bored.
Peoples bore me,
literature bores me, especially great literature,
Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes
as bad as achilles,

who loves people and valiant art, which bores me.
And the tranquil hills, & gin, look like a drag
and somehow a dog
has taken itself & its tail considerably away
into mountains or sea or sky, leaving
behind: me, wag.

(1969)

8. If—

by RUDYARD KIPLING

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

(1910)

9. The Nuns Assist at Childbirth

by BARBARA HOWES

Robed in dungeon black, in mourning
For themselves they pass, repace
The dark linoleum corridors
Of humid wards, sure in the grace

Of self-denial. Blown by duty,
Jet sails borne by a high wind,
Only the face and hands creep through
The shapeless clothing, to remind

One that a woman lives within
The wrappings of this strange cocoon.
Her hands reach from these veils of death
To harvest a child from the raw womb.

The metal scales of paradox
Tip here then there. What can the nun
Think of the butchery of birth,
Mastery of the flesh, this one

Vigorous mystery? Rude life
From the volcano rolls and pours,
Tragic, regenerate, wild. Sad,
The unborn wait behind closed doors.

(1954)

10. A Nocturnal Reverie

by COUNTESS OF WINCHILSEA ANNE FINCH

In such a night, when every louder wind
Is to its distant cavern safe confined;
And only gentle Zephyr fans his wings,
And lonely Philomel, still waking, sings;
Or from some tree, famed for the owl's delight,
She, hollowing clear, directs the wand'rer right:
In such a night, when passing clouds give place,
Or thinly veil the heav'ns' mysterious face;
When in some river, overhung with green,
The waving moon and the trembling leaves are seen;
When freshened grass now bears itself upright,
And makes cool banks to pleasing rest invite,
Whence springs the woodbind, and the bramble-rose,
And where the sleepy cowslip sheltered grows;
Whilst now a paler hue the foxglove takes,
Yet checkers still with red the dusky brakes
When scatter'd glow-worms, but in twilight fine,
Shew trivial beauties, watch their hour to shine;
Whilst Salisb'ry stands the test of every light,
In perfect charms, and perfect virtue bright:
When odors, which declined repelling day,
Through temp'rate air uninterrupted stray;
When darkened groves their softest shadows wear,
And falling waters we distinctly hear;
When through the gloom more venerable shows
Some ancient fabric, awful in repose,
While sunburnt hills their swarthy looks conceal,
And swelling haycocks thicken up the vale:
When the loosed horse now, as his pasture leads,
Comes slowly grazing through th' adjoining meads,
Whose stealing pace, and lengthened shade we fear,
Till torn-up forage in his teeth we hear:
When nibbling sheep at large pursue their food,
And unmolested kine rechew the cud;
When curlews cry beneath the village walls,
And to her straggling brood the partridge calls;
Their shortlived jubilee the creatures keep,

Which but endures, whilst tyrant man does sleep;
When a sedate content the spirit feels,
And no fierce light disturbs, whilst it reveals;
But silent musings urge the mind to seek
Something, too high for syllables to speak;
Till the free soul to a composedness charmed,
Finding the elements of rage disarmed,
O'er all below a solemn quiet grown,
Joys in th' inferior world, and thinks it like her own:
In such a night let me abroad remain,
Till morning breaks, and all's confused again;
Our cares, our toils, our clamors are renewed,
Or pleasures, seldom reached, again pursued.

(1713)