

The Habit

February 2020 Webinar:
Writing Better Love Letters

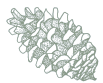
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Plucking the Rushes

Anonymous, 4th-Century China

[A BOY AND GIRL ARE SENT TO GATHER RUSHES FOR
THATCHING]

Green rushes with red shoots,
Long leaves bending to the wind —
You and I in the same boat
Plucking rushes at the Five Lakes.
We started at dawn from the orchid-island:
We rested under the elms till noon.
You and I plucking rushes
Had not plucked a handful when night came!



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Bird Understander

by Craig Arnold

Of many reasons I love you here is one

the way you write me from the gate at the airport
so I can tell you everything will be alright

so you can tell me there is a bird
trapped in the terminal all the people
ignoring it because they do not know
what to do with it except to leave it alone
until it scares itself to death

it makes you terribly terribly sad

You wish you could take the bird outside
and set it free or (failing that)
call a bird-understander
to come help the bird

All you can do is notice the bird
and feel for the bird and write
to tell me how language feels

impossibly useless
but you are wrong

You are a bird-understander
better than I could ever be
who make so many noises
and call them song

These are your own words
your way of noticing
and saying plainly
of not turning away
from hurt

you have offered them
to me I am only
giving them back

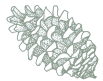
if only I could show you
how very useless
they are not

Coming Home at Twilight in Late Summer

by Jane Kenyon

We turned into the drive,
and gravel flew up from the tires
like sparks from a fire. So much
to be done—the unpacking, the mail
and papers ... the grass needed mowing
We climbed stiffly out of the car.
The shut-off engine ticked as it cooled.

And then we noticed the pear tree,
the limbs so heavy with fruit
they nearly touched the ground.
We went out to the meadow; our steps
made black holes in the grass;
and we each took a pear,
and ate, and were grateful.



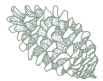
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Recitative by A.E. Stallings

Every night, we couldn't sleep.
Our upstairs neighbors had to keep
Dropping something down the hall—
A barbell or a bowling ball,

And from the window by the bed,
Echoing inside my head,
Alley cats expended breath
In arias of love and death.

Dawn again, across the street,
Jackhammers began to beat
Like hangovers, and you would frown—
That well-built house, why tear it down?



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Noon, the radiator grill
Groaned, gave off a lesser chill
So that we could take off our coats.
The pipes coughed to clear their throats.

Our nerves were frayed like ravelled sleeves,
We cherished each our minor griefs
To keep them warm until the night,
When it was time again to fight;

But we were young, did not need much
To make us laugh instead, and touch,
And could not hear ourselves above
The arias of death and love.

(the) present

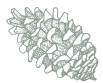
by Amelia Freidline

be here now — with you
driving down snow-covered streets,
evening armchair talks

be here now — with you
pea shoots, tomato fragrance
worm ends in rich soil

be here now — with you
laughing together, today,
with crinkle-eyed smiles

be here now — with you
this moment, this moment, this,
enjoying the gift

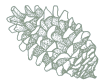


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Lines Depicting Simple Happiness

by Peter Gizzi

The shine on her buckle took precedence in sun
Her shine, I should say, could take me anywhere
It feels right to be up this close in tight wind
It feels right to notice all the shiny things about you
About you there is nothing I wouldn't want to know
With you nothing is simple yet nothing is simpler
About you many good things come into relation
I think of proofs and grammar, vowel sounds, like
A is for knee socks, E for panties
I is for buttondown, O the blouse you wear
U is for hair clip, and Y your tight skirt
The music picks up again, I am the man I hope to be
The bright air hangs freely near your newly cut hair
It is so easy now to see gravity at work in your face
Easy to understand time, that dark process
To accept it as a beautiful process, your face



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from “That Walk Away As One: A Marriage Brood”

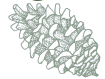
by Rachel Hadas

This afternoon I came up the stairs from the
subway
at the southwest corner of Broadway and 96th
Street

at the exact same moment you were striding
north on that corner. Tall; dark overcoat—
it’s false to put together
recalled details, as if I’d seen a stranger.
How then to remember and separate what I
saw?

It was you. Pure pleasure in recognition
doesn’t say it either. There you were
so simply before my eyes and walking fast
and a split second later you saw me too.

A gift, a gift! Did we kiss? I took your arm,



we hardly missed a beat, we crossed the street
and did our errands—wine, squid, number one
pencils, grapefruit—went home; went on living

This walking arm in arm in harmony
having come from separate directions—
this is a marriage too. It looks so easy
and is perhaps so easy and is not.
It always is a gift.

It gives a form to life
perhaps invisibly. I don’t look married.

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The Clearing

by Jane Kenyon

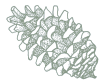
The dog and I push through the ring
of dripping junipers
to enter the open space high on the hill
where I let him off the leash.

He vaults, snuffling, between tufts of moss;
twigs snap beneath his weight; he rolls
and rubs his jowls on the aromatic earth;
his pink tongue lolls.

I look for sticks of proper heft
to throw for him, while he sits, prim
and earnest in his love, if it is love.

All night a soaking rain, and now the hill
exhales relief, and the fragrance
of warm earth. . . . The sedges
have grown an inch since yesterday,
and ferns unfurled, and even if they try
the lilacs by the barn can't
keep from opening today.

I longed for spring's thousand tender greens,
and the white-throated sparrow's call
that borders on rudeness. Do you know—
since you went away
all I can do
is wait for you to come back to me.



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After the Argument

by Stephen Dunn

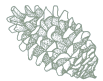
Whoever spoke first would lose something,
that was the stupid unspoken rule.

The stillness would be a clamor, a capo
on a nerve. He'd stare out the window,

she'd put away dishes, anything
for some noise. They'd sleep
in different rooms.

The trick was to speak as if you hadn't
spoken, a comment so incidental

it wouldn't be counted as speech.
Or to touch while passing, an accident



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of clothing, billowy sleeve against
rolled-up cuff. They couldn't stand hating

each other for more than one day.
Each knew this, each knew the other's body

would begin to lean, the voice yearn
for the familiar confluence of breath and syllable.

When? Who first? ...

This time
there was a cardinal on the bird feeder;
one of them was shameless enough
to say so, the other pleased to agree...

If We Were Vampires

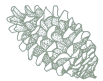
by Jason Isbell

It's not the long, flowing dress that you're in
Or the light coming off of your skin
The fragile heart you protected for so long
Or the mercy in your sense of right and wrong
It's not your hands searching slow in the dark
Or your nails leaving love's watermark
It's not the way you talk me off the roof
Your questions like directions to the truth

It's knowing that this can't go on forever
Likely one of us will have to spend some days alone
Maybe we'll get forty years together
But one day I'll be gone
Or one day you'll be gone

If we were vampires and death was a joke
We'd go out on the sidewalk and smoke
And laugh at all the lovers and their plans
I wouldn't feel the need to hold your hand
Maybe time running out is a gift
I'll work hard 'til the end of my shift
And give you every second I can find
And hope it isn't me who's left behind

It's knowing that this can't go on forever
Likely one of us will have to spend some days alone
Maybe we'll get forty years together
But one day I'll be gone
Or one day you'll be gone



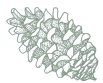
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Windchime

by Tony Hoagland

She goes out to hang the windchime
in her nightie and her work boots.
It's six-thirty in the morning
and she's standing on the plastic ice chest
tiptoe to reach the crossbeam of the porch,

windchime in her left hand,
hammer in her right, the nail
gripped tight between her teeth
but nothing happens next because
she's trying to figure out
how to switch #1 with #3.



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She must have been standing in the kitchen,
coffee in her hand, asleep,
when she heard it—the wind blowing
through the sound the windchime
wasn't making
because it wasn't there.

No one, including me, especially anymore
believes
till death do us part,
but I can see what I would miss in leaving—
the way her ankles go into the work boots
as she stands upon the ice chest;
the problem scrunched into her forehead;
the little kissable mouth
with the nail in it.