

POEMS BY LINETTE LAO

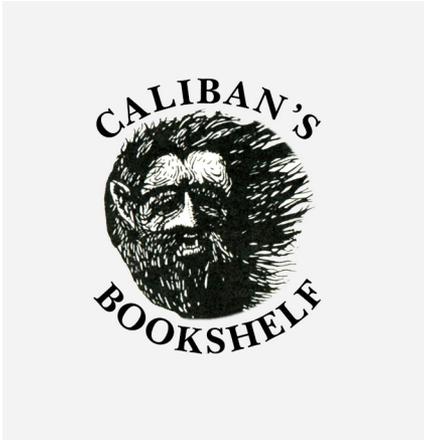




# LUCK

Linette Lao

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*for the future, clementine and arlo*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“Mother Tongue,” “Harlem 1930-1939,” “Petersen’s Field Guide to the Beefcake Kings,” “New Fires,” “Ice Cream,” “Query,” “Charm,” “Colossal 1, 2, & 3,” and “My Century” first appeared in *Caliban*; “Her Mineral Matter” and “A Geometry” in *The Denver Quarterly*; “Magnetic” in *Many Mountains Moving*; “Luck” in *Love & Other Futures: Poetry of Untold Stories of Liberation & Love*, ed. Julie Quiroz.

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## **Luck**

An octopus dreams, blooming under the skin, like clouds moving across the sky. She eats a red crab with pleasure, making space for what is hers. Her body is a story, secretless, all surfaces for innovation. Line a nest for her babies. Draw a door for possibilities. Map a line of sisters with muscled arms that bend and break and regenerate in the underglow, as we activate our ancient DNA, a complex invitation to an inevitable future.

## Query

The pulse escapes the ankle of Houdini, revealing the influence of talk. It is a magnet pulling the man through idle moments of adventure and boredom, leading the heart to beat like an electrical switch or a magical trumpet. It is the decoder, the absolute factual information that calls out to him through water and iron box, through rusted chain and twine.

Listen, I have appeared.

Despite the milk can, the pistol, the photographer's knot of needle and thread, the elbows are thrown forward to receive messages.

# Excavation

I can see you are  
still green  
slightly damp  
and hungry.

Help me ease the organs  
into proper vessels

Teach me to knit  
slipstitch and purl

Bring me sweet cakes  
Lipsticks and spoons

Show me how each slow moment  
layered upon the next  
removes another

## **Mother Tongue**

What could cull rosemary twigs from tangled hair, pull splinters from soft fingertips, or push salt from along the edge of rough skin, but your tongue, brushing the slope of her face into your mouth?

Her head has been rubbed by warm baths. She is wet milk, warm tar, a briny baby with a full set of teeth dissolving into the taste of lye and chocolate, an undersea ape with no crown or flashlight.

## Her Mineral Matter

Water is no longer surprising.

Only a small thing in the world of things could cause such a response. The coarse details of memory have dropped long ago, the folds of the brain have relaxed, uncoiled just enough to let these things go. They fell out like heavy cards, fanned themselves out on the table in the shape of twitching fins.

Her name was not dumptruck and she was transparent.

You were marked with the perfume of soup from the beginning. It blew around you, a visible ghost smell that covered your hands. It went through your elbows, down your spine and the back of your legs, across your caved chest in an X.

Her name was not millipede.

The telephone wire was sliced in two parts, crosswise. The raw edges of wires left silver marks on my chin and ear. The insides, full of soft vines and clips were sold for scrap. It does not stop your voice because nothing will.

Her name was not milk and she was transfixed.

The dolls that hang from your hat like a live crown are made from spit. They rattle and roll across the forehead, you are all doll ankle and eyebrow from the waist up, chipped rubber hair and lipstick, eyeballs blinded by soap suds.

Her name was not insulated pressure valve.

The house next door was made of photographs. The kitchen slides into the closet, the bedroom falls into the bathroom,

the coat hooks have become fish hooks, the hallway is full of gaps, the living room folds in two halves, couch here, television there and everything collects in the seams. Nothing will stop the constant arranging and collapsing of plaster and wood, no earthly pushpin, no scotch tape or rubber cement, no nail or screw or staple. Houses made of photographs are subject to these perils of extreme heat or cold.

Her name was not Marilyn.

In the mirror when I squint, I see your face, older than it was, but still your face like it is still your fingerprint. The filter of pores, the light skin of oil shifts everything to the left slightly. It is only a slight distortion, as if you were looking at the underside of things, turning out the unseen linings and setting them on fire.

Every year millions of people disappear. They sink into their shoes, or go up in flames, they grow in size so that they cannot be seen by the human eye or they fade slowly year after year, starting from the top of their ears. They crawl into refrigerators, empty boxes, or small holes in the earth full of worms and ants. They dig long flower beds and lie down in them. Women constructed entirely from shadows, men who have never been seen in the first place, but who have been missing for weeks. Children built from dryer lint never last long, but still, it is surprising when they dissolve in the summer heat.

Her name was not magnet and she was contagious.

We are halfway there. I am in the house, or out on the lawn in the shade. You are above, numbers and dots drinking sour

juices, a connecting game, a rough sketch, a mathematical equation with at least three zeros as an answer.

You drop out of the sky, whole, shaking all ten fingers and all ten toes. You dive from the sky with a basket of weeds in your teeth, diving for the bankers and the businessmen, the general practitioners, the magicians, the accountants, the con artists, the bakers and the bricklayers. You dive for the tree surgeons and their pink rubber gloves lined with fur. You dart through the fields cutting a flat path for seawater and other liquid.

Her name was not available.

Noise is terrible, that rushing, the sucking in and blowing out, the sweep, clatter and bang. It is not the house falling apart, but the ordinary objects flying around without direction that causes it. I am afraid to come to the door, afraid to peek through the skirts of the window. Thick glass or not, you have not been contained.

Her name was a single theory.

A concise thought cannot be contained in a single cupped hand. You will find out that it will slip through locked fingers, it will pry at the muscle and bone until it escapes. It will multiply and grow until it is waterlogged and heavy on your dying lips, ready to fall.

Corncob,  
elephant eat,  
parchment paper,  
peapod.

sugar,  
teacup,  
salamander,  
sand trap,  
come back.

Nobody wants you in  
their comfortable chair,  
nobody wants you  
in the corner of the kitchen.

Nobody wants your bare  
feet making prints on the floor,  
nobody wants your cool  
breath on their forehead.

Together we will cross  
the empty fields, we will  
curl into place,  
turn back into dirt,  
unsolved and asleep.

## **Harlem 1930-1939**

I want a wilderness with distance, a structure to lift and feather my skeleton as the air moves faster. Dinners appear and disappear, eighteen frames of light reverse above the flicker and grit of the fish market. Come stand on the stoop. Blow smoke into the brim of your hat. Don't listen to the music. Don't watch the men pass by. Look up. Let me fill your mouth full of snow. Let me cover your eyes and tell you a story. Give me your breath to inflate my skirts as I float toward the ground.

## Heat

It wears a pyramid of needles walking through you, a botanical study of bone and blood. It drags a long smile and pours through your teeth. This is how the portrait begins: it takes your hand and gently rubs out your fingerprints.

It takes you by surprise and leaves you in dark places. It hides the sun and leaves you breakfast on the back porch. This is how the portrait begins: it crawls in your mouth and waits on your tongue.

It pulls your teeth and hair. It breaks glass and watches you bleed blue eggs and wire. It waits for the fruit to rot and then leaves before the portrait even begins.

# Magnetic

1.

I woke up this morning  
with oysters for eyes and  
saw you there, a crown of  
guppies around your head  
their translucent hearts beating  
in small finless bodies.

Your live ankles pumping  
warm tea through  
the sleeves of your best dress  
into the tips of your plain hands.

Once we called you earth eater,  
chicken diver,  
mushroom heart,  
envelope tongue,  
forest fire.

Now we call you grandmother, and  
your names still curl around us  
like cigarette smoke.

Your electrical heart stops watches.  
It swings through these dull plaster  
walls. Your stubborn ear is at the door,  
and your breath calls at the window.

Listen.

2.

When you were young  
you discovered mars.  
It's simply another  
cracked surface.

3.

You married a bird watcher,  
electrical taper, water tapper,  
book binder, pipe maker,  
bone digger.  
The duck egg photograph corner,  
meat and scissor,  
mint and zipper, pie and ice cream,  
broken watch man.  
Words are orange and green  
flying from your mouth to hang  
upside down from the ceiling.

4.

Children crawl across the floor and  
shake the folds of your clothes.  
Language is a red wire,  
in an empty mouth.  
Language will not describe this  
black candy heart,  
this space between ribcage  
and throat.

5.

Dishes are singing,  
kitchen chairs unfold.

The onions have your name  
on their soft lips.  
You stand at the counter,  
a blurred contraption of knitting needles,  
knives, hot oil and elbows,  
a seamless intervention  
from an unopened embassy.

A clay pot cracks and I am  
born to the sounds of  
squid ink draining,  
gentle scratches of claws  
against the inside of pots and  
live fish hammered in dishtowels.

6.  
You are lead  
pouring into heavy shoes,  
a rounded belly,  
a collection of stones  
arranged in a safe deposit box.

Targets, flags,  
numbers and maps—there is a plan written lightly  
on the back of your hands.

It will not involve  
the red Cadillac  
the icebox  
the aquarium  
or the scooter.

It will not include  
children, the milkbox,  
the mailbox, rock salt,  
sawdust, vinegar,  
nylon or chocolate.

7.

The cure for magnets  
will appear in hearts of palm  
or in carnation bouquets  
on an untuned television  
across the faces of neighbors  
in a yard of fresh snow.

8.

Like a sleepless animal or  
a long lost alphabet, you walk  
the long halls of the house,  
the blue-gold eye of a carp rolling  
in your mouth like a single word  
on the tongue, a secret that crawls  
across history to find its home.

# Optic

When we glance at an object and close our eyes we seem for  
a moment to have seen through our lids

The aeronaut's radar is empty  
The noise of the engine is gone  
But you are there  
Climbing up into the air  
Visible, expanding

If the eye is intently fixed upon a patch of black on a sheet of  
white paper, and then suddenly turned upon a white surface, a  
bright patch appears on that surface

Across the country  
Catfish are found in basements  
They kick at the walls with blue tails

Through paneled rooms and across muddy carpets  
Into the sleeve of my shirt  
You disappear like a live dove  
That moves with the eye and gradually fades away



# Peterson's Field Guide to the Beefcake Kings

Let me tell you what I think I know about the beefcake king.

*By studying their skulls and teeth, we have learned that most devoured flesh, although some of them ate plants.*

I was not of his species, but alive and on earth at the same time. I was clay, chlorine and sand. My teeth in their sockets were curved backwards and sharpened on both sides. I watched from sea level as he and his child bride sucked salt from the sugar bowl.

*The width of their ribcage has given us clues to the position of their internal organs—even an idea as to the size of their hearts.*

He would drag himself over land, naked, leaving a trail of calamine and mud. I will begin at the body and let him name himself—he was tall, thin and lizard-hipped like a bird.

*The position and size of their nostrils and the structure of their nasal passages have given us hints of the sounds they may have made.*

He gave me wigs and eyelashes and everything a girl needs. He knew exotic dances for wives and lovers. Ambrosia, iodine and aqua velva—those were the fluids that ran through his spine.

*Not all of them were huge. Some of them, when full grown, were barely as large as a chicken.*

What a thing it was, to call him sweetheart, avocado, artichoke.  
What a thing it was to pave my teeth with diamonds and tar.  
I showed him how the flexible cartilage of the heart moves.  
He showed me how an idol breathes.

*A wide fin of skin, well supplied with blood vessels, helped the beef-cake kings absorb heat when it was cold and radiate heat when it was hot, thus enabling them to maintain a relatively constant body temperature.*

Then, turning knives, casting dry spells, he began to bring me everything wrapped in plastic. He spoke in atomic names and numbers. A rock, a star, the eleven simple machines—these were only the first things to disappear.

## A Geometry

The breath and bone of his rusted body have only begun to dry. He is all mud and sequins, sawdust and spiders. They call him a rubber-band disappearing act that sinks through the floor but I call him an amazing device of burnt wood, a superconductor, a force of geometry and more.

*An examination under a powerful glass would have revealed nothing suspicious.*

I follow his delicate heels through the swamp, full of angles, easily named but not yet numbered. There is no pin caught in the tissue of my pigeon chest, nothing to laminate or waterproof.

*Twigs and small trees of various sizes are concealed by means of a cloth, behind which no one was allowed to peep. The manner of concealing the highest tree, nearly six feet high, is by bending it so it occupies only half its height. The two ends are tied together, one end a little lower than the other, this end being planted in the ground.*

I bring the plywood, the invisible ink and the oranges. There are not broken records, no maps of stars, no reversible or tattooed children, nothing but the smell of milk on my scalp.

*His tongue turned a tiny cog-wheel. This caused a small brass rod to revolve in a cylinder, which in turn operated a wheel or catch inside the instrument.*

The plain surfaces of his body imitate flight, the voice of a glasseater blows through his square heart. It is the noise of a thousand bare feet lifting through air and the quiet sound of an escapist bending backwards.

## Evolution

We know how to lie like fossil in fern. Our arms are telephone wire, I can hear my spine crackle and twist. I invent myself, a sliding number game from a birthday party. I leave my bones alone, let them rearrange themselves. Placement is everything. When I do this, I am a young boy with a newspaper route. Like this, I am a mammoth lying with leafy green in my frozen jaws. Here I am a bird, there I am the tiny curve of a fish spine pressed into clay. I think like animals with aerodynamic snouts and faces do. I think economy, ecology and history as I cover myself with dirt.

## Rules and Etiquette

Do not pick up your ball when the bowler on the adjoining lane is ready to bowl. If you do, you may interrupt his concentration.

Trouble is written on the inside of his eyelids. You can see it when he stares at the sun, or when you hold him to a strong light. It's like the salt on his neck, it's like the potatoes on your chin, like blood, like borscht, like sky.

Make sure there are no liquids on your shoes.

He smells of strawberries when he's drunk. Flower and vegetable seeds fall from his sleeves like refrigerator magnets. They fall like walnuts, like kidneys, like chains.

Confine your body English to your own lane. It is not only a distraction to the bowlers in the adjoining lanes, but could result in accidental bumping.

Holding his eyes close to your ear, you can hear the ocean. He's a boxed boy, he floats in comic books and expired milk cartons. Like the scab over a tattoo, like sweaty hands, this is a story that finally ends.

## Charm

We have found that the paper heart is fist-shaped and sized for utility. It rings the pulse through the body, burning salt and lining its interior walls. This is why we fly on hinged feet, eyes open, dreaming of olives and limes.

The organs are slowly charmed out of the body, a sometimes painless process. Each has its own name, unique as the space it occupies.

The body is an ordinary object of construction. Invented muscle, wild gestures of bone, light and sand in shifting amounts form an exterior. We keep our teeth in cups by the door.

We have been turned loose like birds powered by television. And though we are half history and mostly water, we float and fall, a simple machine turning in its sleep.

## Myth

The neutral angel sends me a postcard from the city. He tells me his bones are soft as salmon. His skin has become citrus. I can see the spiny sea in his hair, the waves of glass through his forehead. He's a winged suicide, you can tell because time traces lines in his open palms.

The neutral angel speaks astrology and artifice, they move through his fingers, squeeze wet and new like words. Counting by tens, numbers shoot from his fingertips, spinning through the room. He reaches one hundred and flies away. I can see him with my eyes closed, a pile of sand and his empty skin.

## Spring Forward

Your electric eye throws me winged and lifeless into the January dishes. We engineer the dynamics of this accident, whose stitch and stain we wear like concrete. I am wireless, without invention, without wings or spiders, pipes or cans. Without essential night vision, without organic or chemical logic, we give away the kitchen knives and listen to the slowing sounds of hand and heart over water.



# Yet

do you remember?  
you have a pulse in each finger  
beautiful wigs, a nest of  
white teeth, truffles, plastic dresses  
a shiny pair of scissors

behind the hive  
you draw feathers  
peaches and figs  
a map  
with roads like ribbons  
where your heart moves up, then down  
inside your jacket

it moves without regular noise  
no noise  
the rush of blood  
replaced by the sounds of  
blood,  
bees, a bell and  
one foot  
replacing another

## New Fires

When you die  
I will go in the box with you  
My daughter said

I am not going in a box  
I am going in a fire  
I am going in the fire too

You think you will  
But you won't

I know this because I did not  
want the box or the fire  
For D, K or C  
For my grandmothers  
For my grandfathers  
For my uncle  
Or my murdered friend J

Their disease, crime, and old age  
Inhabit a landscape in reverse  
Invisible and adjacent

I want ghosts  
I want ghosts  
I want ghosts

You will too  
We will want them together  
Defiant, impossible and  
Not dead

## **Ice Cream**

The President demands dry and gray meat in a fake blood blanket of ketchup. The meat is out of the meat. He eats without hunger—a swallow, a lump, a reflex on repeat until there is nothing left. After that, the only pleasure of dessert is having twice as much as you.

## **Colossal 1**

Give me your pale millionaires  
yearning for more wretched and golden fame

Keep your ancient sea-washed homeless  
Your mother of exiles

With silent lips, a flame commands  
Not you, not you, not you

## **Colossal 2**

Give me your mother of lightning  
Your mother of flame

Breathe her name  
Torch sunset gates

Mighty, welcome and world-wide  
You, you, you

## **Colossal 3**

Give me your limbs, your gates  
Your lamps, your doors

Send me your sea-washed refuse  
Teem the shore

From land to land  
More, more, more

## My Century

If I would dream up white moons on each of your fingers,  
I would forget underground horses with automatic eyes,  
x-ray boats with a door for the living and a door for the dead.  
I would erase the battleship cinema of girls, the best hotels,  
winter roots, architecture—and leave, behind each eye,  
an arrangement of loops on an ordinary frame.

# LUCK

Linette Lao

Linette Lao's poems in *LUCK* spin with bodies be-dangled, be-dazzled—they're mesmerizing. "All mud and sequins, sawdust and spiders." Her poems conjure this planet's whirly-gig luck of the evolutionary draw, the surreal webs of intimacy and kinship in living systems. "We know how to lie like fossil in fern." What luck to have this small book now. With the nerve of a surgeon and the magic of poetry's justice, Lao opens up fabulous ecosystems and equivalencies, a reign of democracy in this collection.

—Janet Kauffman

The world created by Linette Lao's poems is both seductive and menacing, reminiscent of the early surrealists and their experiments with "le raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens," Rimbaud's description of self-induced schizophrenia. Those trance experiments in the Twenties scared the surrealists so much, they stopped doing them. But Lao is fearless. She takes us into a dream landscape of stunning language: words and objects interacting in ways we could never imagine. *LUCK* casts a spell, one we embrace as we travel through it, wishing it would never end.

—Lawrence R. Smith