



*Bruise &  
Go Pale*

2004 Poetry  
LeeAnn Heringer

# *Bruise & Go Pale*

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## *prayers of a traffic light*

please stop.

please go.

please let it rain.

I'm dusty and the spiders  
are beginning to itch.

I don't mind a couple birds,  
but when there's twenty  
or thirty, the entire arm  
begins to sway.  
please make them go away.

thank you for the spring  
where the petals dropped  
from flowering trees  
bounce along the asphalt  
in the wake of cars.

thank you for letting me  
face south-west  
so I see every sunset.

thank you for each day  
and its cellphones  
and its boom-boom boxes  
and the paint jobs with flames.  
thank you for everyone  
who looks up and sees me.

## *if you find her, just send her home*

my muse is out driving tonight  
using my heart as a purse  
stuffed with cigarettes,  
a flask of tequila,  
& an empty martini glass  
just in case.  
she's ignoring traffic lights.  
she's looking for that quality of light  
as if the whole country was an empty motel bed,  
anything but undiscovered.  
she's looking for a bar full of men  
who aren't wearing their one true lost love  
as a purple smudge around their mouths  
like a grape juice stain.  
men who are more careful with love  
than they are with their food.  
a place she doesn't have to get blurry  
to forget.  
she promised me  
when she left  
this time she'd find  
the great unwashed novel  
hiding in the hollow leg of a church pew  
next to the secret of who killed Kennedy.  
but I'm not sure either of us  
has the strength left  
to write it.

## *12 steps down. 12 steps up.*

amen  
my brother  
amen

sit down. stand up.

2 choruses of laying your burdens  
on Jesus' breast.  
stand up. sit down.  
shuffle out into the dark.

try not to imagine  
your life  
a string of christmas lights,  
the white puddles  
separated by a string  
of night.  
the too bright light  
of train stations  
and bus stops  
and church basements  
which remind you vaguely  
of Rusty, the preacher's son,  
taking down his pants,  
a 100 years ago.

you can almost see the beginning  
but you cannot see the end.

amen  
my brother  
amen.

## *I met a man in Time Square*

a black preacher who spent  
his days in Time Square, Manhattan,  
witnessing  
with hope God  
would bring lost sheep  
and what I noticed most  
were his hands,  
long and thin between the joints.  
as if he'd spent his whole life  
willing his body toward something  
just out of reach.  
his fingers gentle  
as he turned the onion skin  
pages of his Book.

he asked me if I knew  
the last words of Christ.  
and I said I wasn't a girl  
who'd know this sort of thing.  
but I could help him find it  
on the Internet  
which was not God,  
but the comfort of knowing  
all things are known.  
we are never truly lost  
if Google can find us.

he told me,  
*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*  
he kissed me on the cheek  
and said, sister, some things  
you just have to know.

## *my house has 29 walls, not counting second cousins*

this wall blocks the view of the garden.  
this wall holds back the rain.  
this wall catches the afternoon heat.

this wall is a stand-in & once we get the lighting just right,  
we'll go out to the trailer & get the celebrity wall for its closeup.

this wall watches too much tv.  
this wall listens to the baseball games on the radio.  
this wall spends too much in the refrigerator  
& has gone fat.

this wall is made of glass bricks & is  
a little sensitive about its transparency.  
try not to stare.

this wall still has a bruise from the last party.  
this wall is writing a tell-all-book or maybe a novel.  
it depends on how many cups of coffee it's had.

this wall is in training for the Ironman & keeps telling us  
pork rinds are power food.

each wall's built upon the others.  
each wall leans on all the rest.  
none of these walls are going anywhere.  
take it or leave it.

## *shunga (spring pictures)*

San Francisco is a border town,  
an edge city,  
a crumbling 100 year old concrete sea wall  
a former bath house  
where we all taunt each other  
to take one more step  
out from center.

and the sea below is not empty.

it's full of environmentalists with bombs  
and animal liberators  
and Buddhist nuns who've slept  
standing in a special box for 30 years  
and otherwise sane people  
who carry paint in their purses  
just in case they meet someone  
wearing fur.  
we pride ourselves on our protests.  
it's a growth industry,  
the new tourism.

we've given up discussing politics,  
in preference to coffee house one-upmanship.  
we want to be more artistic,  
more radical than our neighbors.  
we seek the minority of one  
where no one shares our opinion  
so we're finally special,  
even if we had to lie  
about being an American Indian  
to the census worker.

San Francisco thinks it's the groin  
of the first world,  
the geological erection  
of the last major continent  
before the international dateline  
makes today into tomorrow.  
we're the last ones to think about tomorrow.  
and if it's not true,  
well, it feels true.  
San Francisco believe it's invented  
the eroticism of shock.

don't bother telling us  
if we're wrong.  
it would break our hearts.

## *I'd rather dance than talk*

when I close my eyes  
I know you've wandered off to sea  
in a trawler hinted with rust  
assigned to dredge ocean bottoms  
for creatures unknown to science,  
a cataloging of odd colors  
& appendages  
dying to be seen.

surf bubbles &  
water puckering at the net,  
& the things I say follow in your wake  
like a crowd of jellyfish  
feeding on your cast off fish  
until you notice them  
& scoop them up  
all out of order.  
"the Iraqi soccer team  
is doing quite well  
at the Athens Olympics"  
arrives before  
"you forgot your anchor,  
left it buried in my soft mud."

you have become quietly feral.  
your only companion  
a lap-dog-sized crescent wrench  
you wave as a metallic tentacle.  
your ship apparently in need  
of constant tightening.

but who can tell us  
this isn't love.

## *the snake charmer's wife*

the cage of the wicker basket  
like an unmade bed.  
the hollow skin  
in her own scraped off shape  
the woman keep confronting.  
they say the cobra is deaf.  
they say she's been milked in secret.  
there's got to be a trick  
to this marriage thing,  
a reason he hasn't been poisoned yet,  
but the man's not talking.

# *postcard from San Francisco*

dearest,

now & then  
even San Francisco  
gets the kind of day  
they use in postcards.  
where if I'm not careful  
I'll burn my pearly  
foggy skin.  
& down I went  
to Baker Beach,  
to the north end  
where you see the orange towers  
of the Golden Gate  
& hear container ships  
coming in from Asia  
blowing their deep, loud horns.  
water so cold  
it comes straight down  
from Alaska still dreaming  
of narwhals & walruses.

to the north end of Baker Beach  
where it's clothing optional.  
gay guys sitting on bare sand  
graceless as walruses,  
none of their smiles for me.  
two topless women hugging in the surf.  
their nipples hard  
as the hammers on pistols  
in the hands of private detectives  
chasing each other over the serpentbacked

curves of the seven western hills  
in a thousand San Francisco novels.

a naked couple sat on a blanket,  
her hair, blonde & tangled,  
his hair not.  
the woman with her cheek  
against his back,  
against his neck  
while he played a battered guitar  
& sang in her ear.  
& it didn't matter the sea air  
had stretched the strings off-tune.  
I envied her.  
when you're not here,  
I envy the woman  
I am with you.

San Francisco was warm &  
brightly lit today.  
I wished you here.

love, LeeAnn

## *a hand on love*

I argued yesterday with someone  
over whether love had weight or gravity.  
whether we're flattened or crushed by it.

gravity strong enough to notice  
comes from planets & moons,  
from stars,  
from interstellar objects.  
we don't walk around on planet love.  
there's not enough of it to be found.

the Mary Poppins lunch box,  
painted pale blue against white,  
has no strong gravitational effect  
with the table.  
it's more interesting  
what's going on at the bottom of the pail  
where the tin molecules are not mixing  
with the wood. even our atoms,  
the atoms of our possessions,  
have a sense of self &  
know where they belong.

this was the lunch box  
I carried for 3 years in grammar school  
until my brother threw it out the bus window  
one afternoon while headed home.  
my mother took me back  
because lunch boxes cost money  
& I waded down into the ditch  
to find my box corroded red & rough,  
filled with bugs.

10 years old. I found out  
you can hold something in your arms  
& it could still be gone.

I thought of you  
while I argued gravity vs. weight.  
I thought of you  
backing out of my life,  
getting smaller & smaller.  
you had scolded me once  
because I treated love like it was temporary,  
as if you'd go away.  
you said you'd always love me.

we carry love in our hands, in our arms,  
on our backs. we drag it behind us,  
leaned forward & sweating  
against its weight. it sits on our chest  
at night & takes our breath away.  
& even if we never let go,  
it still goes.

## *short stories about faith*

this is the story of faith.  
faith like light,  
neither particle or wave.  
faith as a blue-light mustard-gas  
special at the top of the menu  
because the cook bought too much of it on sale.  
faith like a bottom-less 5 cent  
cup of coffee after the bars close.

this is a story of America  
where the Bible is never out of reach.  
it's lurking in the ratty top desk drawer  
of the motel we wake up in.  
the words on the page  
so crisp  
people lose themselves  
& yet it promises to remember  
when everyone else has forgotten us  
& we're too dead  
to hear someone singing in the night.  
God will come back for us, it says,  
& I am suspicious of any God  
who comes looking for  
me.

## *up too early after being up too late*

the house is a glass box  
of white wood  
& with morning, it fills up,  
a swimming pool of light,  
of watery reflection.  
a drinking glass  
of sausage & eggs.  
fresh ground coffee.  
the kitchen table,  
an island in the white tile sea,  
& we, its shipwrecked crew.

## *egg-eyed prophets*

when you've been too long  
at the computer. when  
it is 3am & you're like a dog  
gnawing a bone behind the wall  
of your skin & have forgotten  
how to speak,  
when you're least prepared,  
you'll find yourself  
in line at the all night grocery,  
staring at the tabloids  
while you wait.  
& the girl in front of you  
will turn & point to them & say,  
good & evil  
clearly marked  
as the difference  
between fire & wind.

& you remember the last time you stood  
leaning on a fist-wide stick  
next to the fire  
with embers swarming in your hair,  
the wind blowing through the fire.  
the wind & the fire lying down  
on the surface of the lake  
& even the stars were jealous  
because it was love  
where two people hold each other,  
one crying &  
one singing.  
love.  
& if this is a sign  
of the end of everything,  
bring it on.

## *she's never stopped explaining her one bad thing*

she likes to tell stories about the riots  
about what she saw  
and how things got broken,  
the sequence stuff was stolen in, this before that,  
the order in which people laid down and died.

with all the retelling,  
she never gets it quite right,

never really explains  
what it feels like to stand  
so deep in anger  
you think you'll drown  
and yet be calm  
because for the first time,  
it's not inside of you.  
it's out there where you can push it around.

desire that can't figure out  
it's own phone number,  
want that can't talk to itself  
without everyone at the bus stop  
thinking it's crazy.  
that's her story. the one  
about how people give up and get mad.  
hell, even the sky rains fire sometimes.

## *what the lawn furniture watches all day*

there's a trick water has  
of moving in a swimming pool  
different from the lake.  
a way of throwing sky  
& the wind at you.  
white face,  
blue shadow,  
the bottom color  
if it's not too deep.  
water pacing back & forth,  
restless as prisoners  
in a small yard.  
one wave bragging  
about being an iceberg  
years ago.

## *6 o'clock shadow*

the walkway from the building  
to the parking lot  
is lined with ornamental plums.  
February's pale pink  
against reddish bark.  
the night smells of flowers.  
smells of rain.  
the sunset on the horizon  
swirls, as if strawberry milk  
has been dropped  
into cold gray river water.  
night is sunset's shadow.  
the thing attached to its feet.  
I stand at the spot  
where sunset makes  
dog shadows with its hands  
across the face of the earth.  
and I am too small to see.

## *mechanical american*

my machines used to speak to me  
in the voice of Christopher Walken,  
unpredictable as a bad wheel  
on a shopping cart.

a long 4th of July weekend &  
we've had days of fireworks.  
muffled explosions  
as I work at the computer  
I imagine war with half an ear  
& in that broken breath  
Christopher Walken voice,  
I sing "America the Beautiful"  
because my computer can't.  
impatient with the singer  
deliberately dragging out the phrases  
as if holding your breath  
was a sign of patriotism.

## *hippie-hair & a backpack*

I am reading a travel book  
dangerously  
because the description  
of a rainstorm in the sub-sahara,  
a solitary camp next to ruins  
carved with pregnant hippo gods,  
the fire reflected white against sand  
answered only in the crumbs of stars,  
can affect me for days.  
ah, such a desert,  
where the earth has given up her growth  
her green, her easy life,  
melting into sweat & dust & the razor  
whispers to cut my hair.  
because I'm not a woman of veils,  
of hennas. I'm white bone.  
unwatered wood. chalk dust.  
the sight of a red backpack  
in the corner of a cafe  
makes my hair speak to itself.  
I am so easily seduced  
into longings  
for uncomfortable journeys.  
ah, to be the happy captain  
of a drunken boat.

## *my God*

my God has 6 billion hands  
& we are his sock puppets.  
I won't tell you where he sticks his hand  
but it's all good & he moves me  
while he moves you  
& when we get naked & move  
it's God rubbing his hands together.  
the God-hand in me  
recognizing the God-hand in you  
with a lot of heavy breathing  
& static electricity.

He has created me in his woolen image,  
with respect to the cotton & silk sects  
because God moves in them too.

I've lost people I loved.  
they've gone into the dryer  
& never returned.  
sometimes it feels that God  
has removed his fingers  
& left me empty.  
but he is right here.  
he'll never stopped wiggling the one  
out of 6 billion hands that is mine  
until he is done with me.

## *we are all one thing*

pale as winter flesh,  
the orange blossoms open to the sunlight.  
the tree opens to the halo of yellow bees.  
the doors of the house open to the garden,  
to the sticky smell,  
to the bruised petals  
fallen across the patio concrete.  
I open the window  
drawn to the overstuffed green chair  
in a puddle of white.  
my husband kisses my smile  
open mouthed.  
I hear him humming in the kitchen  
as he cuts the berries for breakfast.  
we are all one thing  
tied around the middle  
by a cord of sunlight.

## *wooden rain*

yesterday the woods  
were filled with a tapping sound  
like hollow stick on hollow stick  
by a crowd of drummers  
not paying attention to each other.  
like wooden rain.  
too many to be birds.  
and I could hear the slow flap of a raven.  
eerie  
like a wind coming for you.  
maybe it was insects.  
but I could hear the bees  
like melody. like the rise and fall of flutes.  
like a hum of boys  
flaunting their stingers.  
maybe it was the trees  
expanding in the morning sun.  
maybe it was ground warming up.  
maybe it was my bones  
happily singing  
it's spring. it's spring.

## *night driving*

a little white line

a little white line  
another white line

a concrete median with trees  
an acre wide empty intersection

a little white line  
a conga line of bott dots  
the solid line before a hill  
street lights let down their golden hair

the wakeup ridges before the ditch

a little white line

clouds of white moths  
the wet body of a dragonfly  
caught in the grill

everyone eventually sleeps  
no matter how our bodies fight it  
and nobody sees the end of the road  
with eyes open

## *old / girl*

out there  
the moon  
a white on white pot  
frozen mid-boil  
in a lavender sea,  
the color of rosebuds  
& bridesmaids dresses.  
not the fluorescent light  
of oldness. of complaint.  
& this is what it means  
to be old,  
to be one breath in,  
one breath out,  
a soft murmur of what if,  
what if I was young.  
& each moment  
I get to decide this question.  
I get to fall forward,  
the bride  
or the bride's mother.  
you made me laugh today,  
so I'll keep you.

## *the slanted wooden roof beneath my ribs*

if I was transparent,  
you wouldn't see  
a lung, a spleen. you'd see  
a broken backed barn  
in waist high grass  
rain soaked green.  
the oak trees,  
like teenaged boys who  
stand as if touching  
would kill them,  
scraggy  
with long delicate twigs.

you never know  
what will pass through you  
just another car blurring away  
as it passes on the highway,  
another reflection  
in the side of a milk tanker,  
& what will stick.  
the small cutout,  
the bright shadow  
suspended in the soul.

## *the man who tried to pick me up in Vegas*

I'm glad there's a place like Vegas,  
an official burial ground  
of anything-can-happen  
when the light is too bright.  
broken  
and blinking.  
where the tables sing  
and growl with luck  
and all the great treasures of the age  
are imitated in stucco and sequins.

midnight  
and I'd been drinking  
and he'd been drinking  
and we met somewhere in the middle  
on a ramp going into-out of a casino.  
laughing because we'd almost  
collided, almost kissed.  
now my husband won't stop talking  
about this man  
he claims  
tried to pick me up in Vegas.

I'm as loyal as dice, baby,  
just as long as I'm rolling.

## *we talk sometimes*

we talk sometimes  
about your wife coming & going.  
how she can never make up her mind  
whether she's sleeping with you  
or her mother.  
when she's gone, you want her to stay.  
when she's home, you want her gone.  
not that you've said anything.  
the two of you only communicate now  
through the shadows  
your hands make on the wall  
when the lamps are turned on in the evening.

you told me  
the sky is such a flat blue  
when you can't the future clearly.  
you spent 3 weeks watching it  
while you fixed the roof on the barn,  
hoping it would change,  
that you would get your infinity back.  
& how you lie in bed  
on hot nights & try  
to figure out where  
the universe goes when its ends,  
listening to her snore.

## *when everything is mine*

we mingle his and hers,  
mix our whites, ball together our jeans,  
take our dry cleaning  
out for rides in the car.  
our papers have lain together  
in a drawer's marriage bed,  
shuffling the great deck of our things.  
never looking forward  
to the winter where  
only one of us remains.  
what to do with the left over love  
drifting into mounds, pushed into berms,  
cutting off the unused corners  
in the house. and the words  
spoken before realizing  
no one's there. the secrets  
like earthworms after rain.

## *love letter, written in thread count*

I go on about the bed.  
about the white sheet  
journal of our days  
we have worn into creases  
wide enough to lie down in.  
the great ocean  
of sleep. of sickness.  
of insomnia.  
restless with tides and currents.  
Hamlet was read here.

I am tired of talking  
about the bed.  
the bed becoming  
our Mt. Everest.  
expeditions are planned  
with provisions for ice  
bad weather  
and altitude.  
sometimes we pack a lunch.  
the bed becoming  
our mid-Atlantic spread, the place  
where continents drift  
and new land is created.

you are always there.  
you are never there.  
you have left me there  
and returned.  
when I close my eyes  
I imagine  
we meet in the middle.  
I can't stop talking  
about the bed.

## *winter wind*

the hollow men,  
the man shaped snow,  
the angels in the melt holes  
at the base of pines.  
the four limbed black cracked ice  
so beautiful against the blue,  
so beautiful against the water  
in waiting. I hear the wind.  
I hear the frozen leaves knocking  
against each other.  
the icicles chiming dull.  
the wind rattles.  
it throws sideways the salt,  
the ice. scours with it.  
as if winter was an old woman  
scrubbing her kitchen floor  
with sand.  
we are bundled  
in wool and plastic  
like cavemen carrying fire.  
pretending we are cold and cruel.  
pretending we are winter.  
we are the pure silver mirror  
fragile as mercury  
threatening to break  
into a thousand daggers.  
only our warm foggy breath  
gives us away.  
betrays our hearts  
on this cold, cold day.

## *at dusk we can see the day stretched backward behind us*

what if we've gotten it all wrong,  
what if we're really attached loosely  
to the planet by our feet.  
and the rest of us  
stretches up from our shoes,  
loose and twisted as a flag.  
what if the bones  
are our imagination.  
what if our shadows cling to us,  
hang on our knees,  
like small nervous dogs  
afraid of the light.

*love is as unobtrusive as plaid  
knickers on a windy day*

let me tell you. I know love.  
I'm the proud owner of love  
and know it to be  
a mixed breed bulldog  
spotted and pale  
with a muscular jaw  
to lock on and cling,  
a bad back to complain about it.  
and narrow Japanese-girl hips  
so that when it stands next to me  
I'm forced to ask,  
does this make my butt look big?  
it constantly needs to be petted  
and when you're gone,  
it howls at night.  
it can never be happy  
unless it's sprawled across the bed  
pushing both of us off on the floor.  
even when the gate gets left open  
and it gone  
and I've posted signs  
on every pole between here  
and the fire station,  
I can never make it  
so love wasn't here.

*I dream you backward,  
starting with goodbye*

I was leaving you  
before we met,  
the air between us  
has always been full  
with the clap of wings  
and no birds. like applause  
for our happiness.  
there's a empty chair  
left out in the rain under the trees  
the tourists keep photographing  
where we never sat,  
where we never held hands  
and spoke of love.  
and yet it's ours  
for as long as we want.  
the bed still holds our shape  
embracing.  
love is slippery  
better to have a backup plan,  
better to become the salt of a kiss  
gone.

*if you're dreaming,  
are you dreaming of me?*

it's the places we walk through  
half awake, wearing  
neutral pasturized milk smirks  
to render us invisible.  
the airports  
& train stations, the lines  
for the tickets agents,  
the empty roads  
out of focus from carelessness  
because we're never coming back.  
the places we don't love  
where we dream our lives  
in black elastic  
we stretch & stretch  
and call it asphalt.  
call it the highway out of here.

*a good liar is never alone*

I've never heard you sing.  
I've never complained  
about the weight of your head  
on my shoulder.  
I've never held your hand  
while you slept  
& noticed the curve  
between your last rib & your hips  
where the kisses from all the women  
who've held you  
have rolled down & collected.  
I've never seen someone  
in the market & thought for a moment  
it was you. I've never held my breath.  
I've never dreamed  
you were where you're not.  
I've never kissed the window pane  
thinking of you, the palm  
of my hand flat,  
leaning with my whole body  
in the most likely direction toward you.  
I've never craved the cigarettes  
shared after sex.  
I've never been separated from you.

## *lies are like moonlight*

I've put ribbons  
in the braids of my forked limbs.  
I've gotten clever about  
how I tell the truth  
at the end of the day  
when I put my hands on you,  
a light touch on your rough stubble,  
another day bristling from your skin,  
& I tell you  
I'm as constant as the moon.  
meaning when I go away,  
I've always come back.  
dwindle down, new moon, new love.  
but I've always come back to you  
& your inward eye. I've always given you  
a constant cycle of full moons.  
& you think,  
she love me, she loves me.  
she holds her face  
always turned in my direction.  
one of us is right. one of us  
thinks he knows the moon.

