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Literary Category: POETRY

*Work Titles:*

Emerging, Art of	2017
The Woman in the Ring	2016
I Consider Forty	2017
The Gestures of Trees	2017
Five Years Alive	2013
Decade	2015
My Son's Gay Twin (or: Possibility)	2016
Au Pair	2016
An Unusual Collection	2016
Grandmommy	2016
Girl's Song	2015
Brandenburg Gate	2016
After Auschwitz	2015
Spectrum: November 8, 2016	2016
The Big Top Comes Down	2017
you the shining thing	2017
Psalm for a Son's Burial	2017

## *Emerging, Art of*

Check the box that best describes  
your career thus far, the form says, or how you see  
yourself as a writer.

It seems I've been emerging  
for a number of years now. But how do I see  
myself - tunneling down the dark fleshy corridor  
of my mother's cervix covered in ick, my slippery  
soft skull bones mashed, intent on the drowning  
sounds and the wreath of light ahead, finally emerging  
to my first strident yawp?  
And from that moment hence the steady  
march of metamorphosis,  
of emerging and becoming.

What must the torpid caterpillar do to emerge  
from its glistening chrysalis a laurel-crowned monarch?  
The worm digests itself. The lowly pupa  
writes itself off in hopes of emerging  
a butterfly laureate.  
Self-immolation, it seems, is a requirement  
for emerging.

So when you knock at the majestic doors, be prepared  
for bleeding knuckles and a tamped  
down spirit, be prepared to extinguish  
yourself in a phoenix fire before you can emerge.  
Established.

***The Woman in the  
Ring***

was clearly celebrating  
something.

Life. Or the abdication of  
care.

To my eight year old  
eyes

she was glorious, a  
rainbow

swathed in chieftain  
feathers,

a glistening Santa Fe  
turquoise

nestled in the silver  
filigree

of her throat's dusky  
hollow.

When she laughed her bright teeth  
moonbeamed from her brown mouth but  
my mama said I must be dreaming.

When she swirled her frayed skirts  
frolicked with her shining calves but  
my mama said it was time to grow up.

When she beckoned with a crooked finger  
cracked long ago by the rage of a large man  
my mama said *stop yo' nonsense now*

I was in thrall to the  
cottony dread-

locks snaking down her bony back  
wrapped in a gleaming

band of sun-  
shine, to the glint of gold

peeping between  
her tinsel toe-

nails, and I never noticed  
the blackened fissures

of her cracked heel, or her  
scabby pale palm,

or our matching meta-  
skin.

### *I Consider Forty*

I consider forty. Invisible.

I reconsider forty, in light of forty-five.

I remember thirty, vaguely.

I forget eleven, probably for good reason.

I consider aging something to be done well.

I reconsider, endlessly, the art of being female.

I remember the girlish charm of my childhood.

I forgive my mother for trying to frown it out of me.

I reconsider my sister's attitude, the altitude of her moral perch.

I forget those hours we played together as equals.

I consider my daughters, their fleeting girlhoods.

I reconsider my preference for raising sons.

I want to forget my panic at discovering a penis on the ultrasound.

I remember wishing it would magically melt away.

I remember my last was the hardest pregnancy of all.

I forget the miserable infancy of my first born.

I reconsider motherhood, a quarter century after my start.

I forgive my husband his wooing me for just one more.

I consider family, and my own place in the orbit.

I reconsider forty: birth as proof

that I exist.

### *The Gestures of Trees*

I imagine it must be Godlike to create  
something from nothing. Sound  
from silence.

The stealthy escape of light

from the tight black hole of space.

The close wrapped buds on the magnolia tree  
outside my newborn daughter's window wave  
and beckon shyly,  
resurrected from their snow-

shrouds, the frozen decay that birthed them.

*Come out to play, little girl.*

*Like you, we were only a figment last season.*

*And now we live.*

*Five Years Alive*

Sufi whirlwind dervish of my life, spinning spinning fever giddy, energy embodied - body in motion, moving the very breath of being, consuming the very chaos, overtaking the very air. HE IS VERY.

Spirited superlative, nothing by halves, buoyant remarkable alive, playful puppy inside of a boy bounding scampering nose-nose kissing, compelling. crossing my lines, perseverating. pushing my boundaries, punishing rousing yet still my very own lovable Looney Tunes Tazmanian devil, fiery haloed blue-eyed - angel actually, enchanting smile melting a golden pathway through anger and annoyance, exciting-exasperating-extraordinary exultant Tom Sawyer, chieftain of mischief, charming disarming testing chancing dancing to his private drumbeat, delicious adorable teachers' darling loving laughing heartfelt boy hurtling through swinging doors singing...in out out in out out out...this is how we define magnificent boyhood - a miracle, a marvel, a maelstrom. infuriating invincible frenetic kinetic thrilling and thrilled sometimes vexing, always vital always vibrant always always

*The Incredible Dash!*

racing speeding  
bolting flying  
why walk  
when you  
can run  
like  
him



*My Son's Gay Twin (or: Possibility)*

I met today my son's gay twin, a man  
whom I never pushed screaming from my body.  
An idea - until that moment I stepped

into the shop on Main selling lush dreams and lavender  
scented air, when he grinned and called me "sweetie."  
Bizarre, that. Alternate universe stuff,

to see on his face my own face. And how  
is it possible for anyone to be so goddamned  
impossibly happy. And gay. Some of my best friends

are gay. *Yes, but if he was your own?* The great  
unanswerable question - until that moment I stepped  
into the shop on Main selling fragrant promises

to dial back time. "My name's Charlie." Charming  
young man. I wish I had a son like him. Oh wait,  
but in fact I do. On one face, horn rims hint

at bookishness. On the spitting image, green eyes blaze  
ambition. On one millennial head, locks close  
cropped as befits a man who chases his name

with a degree. And here, a glossy thatch of springtime bends  
over a hunk of homemade seaweed soap, wrapping and taping  
a smile to be born in this bubble in time.

*Au Pair*

I.

A cape starling or amethyst, some little bird –  
Afrikaans  
warbler, shows up in the greening spring, miniature

flicker-beat fluffing her breast, and gingerly finds  
her perch among  
our young. From somewhere within the murmuration

she exhales, violet-backed, wearing her mantle  
like a boy.  
Pied starling, fledging along with our own nestlings,

content to hover, and admire the view. Long-tailed  
glossy starling,  
her plumage lambent and glowing. *Lamprotornis* -

how fitting. A Tiffany work of art. Shimmer  
up to us,  
little bird. Gently she lights upon our New York

nest, but every so often I sense the sudden  
run, the nimble  
lift-off and vanishing flight of this lovely bird

back to Port Elizabeth, to the African  
nesting ground,  
the vivid southern tropics that'd spawned this chick.

II.

No address in the U.S. is proof  
of residency except for your pulsing  
heart emoji, fitted into a cage  
of ribs built of pipe cleaners and hair

elastics, a rainbow of chortles,  
and a compass pointing straight ahead

and a little to the left. *Ons is werklik geseënd.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We are truly blessed. (Afrikaans)

*An Unusual Collection*

*An unusual collection* the visitors murmur with  
a puzzled crease, *but what exactly are we looking at?*

Bits of string, buttons, green pennies and the occasional  
stray Israeli shekel, ribbons festooned with  
dried frosting, some giggles. The perfect ponytail.  
A someday boy who'd bestow mystery kisses.  
And don't forget the playing cards –  
a Queen of Hearts, a Queen of Diamonds,  
a future flecked with shards of relationships,  
all taken from Bubby's little drawer near the stove  
in secret, for keeps.

An unusual collection.  
Bubby's bits of string became my baubles. I took  
for keeps the forgotten things, the things  
no one else wanted.  
Bits of string, buttons, a drifter niece,  
a handful of husbands. Apartments so bare  
almost anyone could perish in them.

What you take for keeps no one expects you  
to give away. Four husbands  
equals three *gets*<sup>2</sup> plus one *ketubah*.<sup>3</sup>  
An unusual equation.  
And don't forget the kids –  
how do they all add up? A couple  
of sons from this one and that,  
plus the two daughters and don't forget  
the stepchild whose emerald eyes  
belong in another's face.  
An unusual arrangement.

Bits of string, buttons, an old glove,  
a new husband. I took for keeps  
the forgotten things, the things  
no one else cared for. A lost nephew,  
the lone beta fish that refused to die. Fridges full  
of nothing and neighbors who knew  
when to leave well enough alone.

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<sup>2</sup> *get*: document of divorce (Hebrew)

<sup>3</sup> *ketubah*: marriage contract (Hebrew)

*An unusual collection the visitors muse  
amazed, but how on earth  
did she have the nerve  
to marry then leave then marry again?*

The museum of husbands hosts  
an unusual exhibit, where here one may view  
pronouncements stamped and sealed  
by rabbis and esquires -  
twelve lines long - signed here - and there -  
*we now proclaim this erstwhile wife free*  
to curate an unusual collection,  
teeming with tales and bits  
of biography, the patina of the passed  
and the music of memory.

*Grandmommy*

Because you stayed silent you took  
 the newborn child downy and slick,  
 soaked with her mother's rage,  
 howling with your daughter's grief,  
 you took her as yours and imagined  
 that you bore down, veins engorged purple,  
 scarlet carnations blossoming from your  
 capillaries and sweat-pools streaming  
 from your taut temples and you  
 believed that you bore her yourself,  
 birthed your own granddaughter,  
 how does that even make sense, but  
 you made sense of it rather than bear  
 the terrible knowing of your silence  
 while he sinned her dreams away,  
 not even a sin you can name but  
 the unthinkable *allowing* of things  
 to unfold, and your teenage daughter  
 barely able to bear the nine months  
 of swelling silence, of a scarlet  
 secret hiding in the hush that  
 begins and ends with a bloody gush,  
 growing even as her belly grew  
 a life she felt was a death and  
 you were impotent with silence,  
 feeble in the face of this history-  
 a baby having a baby having  
 a baby having a baby and so  
 the burden of birth is passed  
 from grandmother to mother to  
 daughter to grandmother and so  
 because you stayed silent  
 she called you Grandmommy,  
 a one-person-all-mixed-up.

*Girl's Song* (for FM, in memoriam)

*"Hashem is here, Hashem is there..."*

My childhood voice sparkles with song  
floating just out of earshot, just this side of consciousness,  
pregnant with promise, confident of jump ropes and joy,  
brunette braids bouncing against my narrow sweated back,  
skipping in clumsy penny loafers and a long navy skirt that  
obscures the human girl underneath.

*"...Hashem is truly everywhere..."*

Bedtime stories and children's tales,  
stories of great sages, tales from the Talmud.  
So it was. So it shall be.  
A 17th century rabbi relates the prophecy of a mother  
forced to scald her daughter's bare skin into eternity.  
The women bear the burden.  
So it was. So it shall be.

*"...up up down down..."*

Up above Hashem<sup>4</sup> spills angry ink onto Rorschach clouds and His  
elbows erase spots leaving sparkling starlight  
winking at me, promising...  
Down below the cityscape unfolds  
twenty stories down, twinkling bridge towers blip,  
office towers alit, the mighty Hudson slips beneath the GWB.

*"...right left and all around..."*

All around me they are drinking and laughing, all  
elbows and knees, shocking how much bare skin shows  
in the dim glow of nightlife, afterlife of daytime.  
To my right a half-dressed ginger waif leans heavily  
bored and sleepy on the last sober man left up here.  
I am the odd one. I am out.

*"...here there and everywhere..."*

Here is my chance.  
Behind me, a cold husband waits for me to dip  
and cleanse my impurities in the *mikvah*<sup>5</sup>  
before he is permitted make more babies for Hashem.  
Before me, a cold gleaming city, lights and glittering lights,  
jewelry box for a Jewish bride.

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<sup>4</sup> *Hashem*: God (Hebrew) *lit.* The Name

<sup>5</sup> *mikvah*: ritual bath

*"...that's where He can be found..."*

In yeshiva the boys chant "Bless You, O Lord,  
for not creating us women."

In yeshiva the girls murmur "Bless You, O Lord,  
for creating us according to Your will."

In yeshiva the girls are reminded that Hashem can be found  
in the crook of our elbows and the turn of our ankles.

When I fall no one will notice my scandalous ankles  
when my long navy skirt flips up around my waist  
as I drop twenty stories down to  
where Hashem will surely meet me.

## *Brandenburg Gate*

Is it fixed now –  
 now that a flag of light, of blue and of white,  
 wraps itself around the Brandenburg Gate

because four Jewish soldiers on a Jerusalem corner were crushed  
 into the world to come by a truck blind with hate?

In 1939 crimson flags billow and bleed  
 beneath the columns of the Brandenburg Gate,  
 adorned with marching black swastikas, like twisted tarantulas  
 who exterminate their living prey.

*Unter den Linden* is now a street, was once a song  
 my Bubbe hummed  
 to her long ago babies in a dying tongue,  
 her Yiddish not so very unlike the German they spit  
 to the goosestep and drum  
 behind bolted synagogue doors just as they lit

up the pyres of Jews; and the SS helmets then darkened  
 her doorstep and made a memory of her four Jewish births.

In 2017 the Brandenburg Gate is lit up in brilliant  
 blue and white with a six-pointed star - not yellow  
 this time, not howling Jude, but still announcing to the world  
 the slaughter of Jews.

*After Auschwitz*

I am vague I am hazy I am indistinct

I am bodiless-  
 but my black Romani blood river runs  
 boils and bubbles and  
 pushes up Piotr's daisies  
 I am faceless-  
 but my non-Aryan features glow searing hot  
 my crippled mouth and communist eyes  
 coal to cinder  
 fuel to Himmler's furnaces  
 the fog of my Jewish bones  
 blurs Wladyslaw's farmhouse  
 my homosexual tongue a licking lapping flame  
 a hideous gape, a burning yawning mask  
 my embers smolder in the wake of the Zyklon B  
 that fumigated my lungs  
 and left me breathless, voiceless, mute.  
 Silent.

...so I am nameless...

I am vague I am hazy I am indistinct

Write me, Paul Celan  
     -your neighbor from Czernowitz  
 Write me, Nelly Sachs  
     -your neighbor from Berlin  
 Write me, Miklós Radnóti  
     -your neighbor from Budapest

Give me a body and fill me in and grant me life.  
 Birth me-  
 for oblivion awaits  
 Birth me-  
 lest I disappear  
 from the awareness of humanity  
 into the amnesia of history  
 ...vapor and ash...

Adorno was wrong - there must be poetry.  
 Write me.

*Spectrum: November 8, 2016*

The day the red-ones drew the curtains and chose the orange-one  
to mind the white oval that had embraced the black-one  
nearly three thousand days --- that day

was the day the blue-ones formed  
a veined parenthesis to contain the pulsing mass  
of the red-ones, spilling sideways,

was the day the red-ones and the blue-ones  
never turned to purple and the green-ones  
stayed scattered, shoots pushing up to be counted,

was the day the brown-ones huddled and burst, and  
waited for the white-ones, the eye-holed pointed ones,  
to bear a burning broken cross, its twisted arms akimbo,

was the day the pink-ones, like the blue-one who  
missed her grip at the finish, snatched steel from  
between their legs and bound themselves each to each,

was the day the tan-ones veiled themselves  
into invisibility,

was the day the yellow-ones shifted, and strove  
for the exits,

was the day the beige-ones bent double, and breathed  
*dios mio*,

was the day the rainbows clung together, their colors melted  
and shriven,

was the day a keening *Hallelujah* rose up from the teeming streets  
and evanesced into the violet sky,

was the day I waited for the raging ones to bring a yellow star  
for me.

*The Big Top Comes Down: A Consciousness Poem*

once the elephants left the crowds stopped coming to the circus but look do my eyes deceive me the elephants are back they are blustering along on Capitol Hill with old white-man creases leathering their skin leaving yuge piles of shit in their wake for the humane rights activists to shovel and yes the crowds are back to see the gilded circus with their very own eyes especially the trumpeting elephants imported from Russia but the parks department submits based on alternative facts that it's not truly a crowd it's really fake news it's a scattered gathering of empty bleachers lining the parade mall of the grand old circus the greatest show on earth headlined by the triumphant return of the elephants their legendary memories faulty somehow remember last year how they snorted and swore and yet oh my god here's the winning new ringleader just promoted and he's tripping over the ludicrous length of his tie he used to be an ordinary clown y'know all he did was comb-over the orange wig and shift his makeup from white to perma-tan but some clowns are scary and this one likes water for his next trick he wants to pour gallons of it down Ahmed's gagging gullet oh yes he's a self-styled high inquisitor turned into a meme this big league circus ringleader oh look there he's cracking his golden pen now to tame the donkeys braying out of control in an obstinate corner of the congressional ring ladies and gentlemen hell is empty and all the losers are here the circus is not shuttered it's terrific it's tremendous just look at those asses their portfolios prancing ringing round the oval kicking up their heels amidst piles of rubles they imagine they're stallions able to vault a fantastic wall and see up there the amazing gymnastics of the aerialist acrobats wow they can twist themselves into anything huh the people on the pavement ooh and aah and scratch their heads as they witness hope and change swing upside down from filmy vows of lightweight silk and in the center of the platform can you see the monkeys tilting at that crumbling Mexican windmill or maybe it's Syrian who really knows and guess what my friend the great cats are back the pink pussyhats no more jumping through hoops or performance on demand hear those fierce felines roar they're swarming the parade route and chasing this circus act right out of town watch the ringleader ex-clown snatch a bellicose bow amid the hue and cry believe it or not a Ripley themed spectacle is playing itself out on the splendid stage of our nation's capital

*you the shining thing*

Meet me in the daffodils, that velvet field of sunlight.  
 Wear your braided necklace of hope and hazy dread.  
 Take this pipe and smoke a screen to shield us from their  
 prying.

We could be Victory winged, all marble veined and dead,  
 our gone heads with plaited locks  
 lazy maimed and  
 dying.

Dying  
 could mean freedom.

You could be a bell – you the shining thing.  
 And I the weather wounding you, whispering and flying.  
 I storm you sometimes. And I blow you sometimes and I sing.  
 And I wring you restless ‘til the breath of you is borne, rendered airy  
 as a mockie’s wing, secretive and torn. Even so I love your swells, your shoulder  
 dips, *ma belle*. Your hollow waist, your flaring mouth, your beaded lip that’s  
 lying.

Lying  
 could mean liberty.

I could be the bell, and you the gnomy hunchback  
 bending low into my tarnished coat, sucking dry my brassy womb  
 on cresting notes of sighing, rending me with loveliness, shy and slow as  
 lightning. My blood washed skirts, they float atop this bounded life I know. I call  
 you and I bawl until the clamor of me cracks and writes a history of  
 crying.

Meet me where the golden vista meets our bellies, swollen.  
 Bind your wrists. Bind our breasts.  
 Grab your hair and shear it.  
 Bells we are, these shining things, divinely tuned, a-pealing.  
 Victory, her head forgone above the prow is kneeling.  
 She’s woke. Unblessed.

Our time is chiming.  
 Go ungently.

And know that you can bear it.

*This love song is inspired by women who love women, women whose freedom is born of lies, women who must sometimes bury their former selves in order to live an authentic life. To these women I offer wedding bells of a different sort.*

*Psalm for a Son's Burial*

Hush now, it must be written somewhere  
that death is the domain of men.

The father, spent, eulogizes the son –  
or the brother, the husband – and he knows his time

for sleep is done. They grab the shovels  
and empty the last of the balm of hurt minds

into the void, then they cover your heartbeat  
in a silence broken by a rustle and chuff,  
the men.

And somewhere, too, it must be written  
that birth is the domain of women.

The mother who conceived and carried  
and birthed you in blood shakes - the vessel

whose cracks have yawned into fissures  
splits wide open, her center cannot hold,

her head shakes no and again no no  
again, and the women, they crush in closer,

to enfold the mother who lost you last night,  
to press her brittleness back,  
the women.

Hush now, but you were supposed to stay alive.  
Your mother's loved *Kaddish*<sup>6</sup>, you were meant

to be the one to stand in the pelting rain  
skirring across the graveyard's sheeted ice,

and recite the way it should always have been:  
when the mother goes, the son stands and recites.

Hush now, your mother hides a husk for a heart  
and a stone sits deep where her soul once pulsed.

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<sup>6</sup> *Kaddish*'l: endearing term for a son who will recite the prayer for the dead (mourner's *Kaddish*) upon his parent's death (Hebrew/Yiddish)

Listen now the silence, so loud and hard -  
no echo struggles up through the snowy loam

that blankets your body so finally. No harm  
any longer, finally. No harm no breath no laugh

no life. What version of sanity brings you so soon  
to this quell of quiet, to this farewell place,

to the end of the world on a stillborn afternoon  
in a whiteout blizzard as white as the shroud,

as numbing and raw as the spotless *tallit*<sup>7</sup>  
embracing now your earthly remains?

Today they put you in the frozen ground,  
a frigid trifecta for the meteorologists.

Snow. Sleet. Hail the almighty  
storming spirit. We can hear heaven

*pinging pinging* ice pellets of shock  
onto the wooden board that separates

your earthly remains, so recently quick,  
from us who remain, stunned, on the earth.

We the women who remain on the earth  
remain standing, shuttered and stooped

around your huddled mother, double-bent,  
fending off the great wingèd capes

of the vulture umbrellas clustered like shadow  
angels of death gently nudging our shoulders,

reminder of how feeble is the attempt  
to hope and hide and shelter in place.

A mother of five is always counting heads.  
Leaving your grave, counting heads. One

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<sup>7</sup> *tallit*: ritual prayer shawl

gone missing. She worries you'll be cold,  
you're way too skinny, she never liked the sound

of that cough and you, you refused to eat  
the healthy stuff. So hush now, hush.

Your mother will survive you, bleeding inside,  
by counting heads. Four remain.