

# The Art of the Swerve

## Materials

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# Float

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A collection of twenty-two chapbooks whose order is unfixed and whose topics are various.

Reading can be freefall.

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Case design by Cassandra J. Pappas



Jonathan Cape London

## Maintenance

1. Water the earth
2. Polish the steel circles and squares
3. Tighten the threads
4. Replace the lightbulbs we have hundreds better still turn lights off
5. Do not touch the plywood
6. Do not touch copper atop the felt you can touch the felt
7. Replace the actual oilcan with a plastic one from hardware store paint it to look old, German
8. Remove pennies inserted in the felt and toy magnets stuck on the arc
9. Do not dust the glass dust is part of it how you break the glass is your own problem
10. Draw the lines according to the diagram
11. Do not take rust off the arcs let them go purple let it *wuther*
12. Do not let UV rays hit the boxes move tatty-looking boxes to the inside
13. Hang the portraits only on the special \$1000 wallpaper then destroy also destroy any scraps
14. Take up the floor and lay strips of charcoal made from charred oaks in Japan under floorboards
15. Repaint over fingerprints
16. Smooth out footprints
17. Close gate (deadly holes)
18. Do crumpled cars gradually uncrumple is that a worry
19. Do threads slacken

20. Is order an issue of maintenance as in in what order as in the order given in the diagram the order they came out of the box etc.
21. Who does all this thinking are there rules for it ~~this boundary~~ between the work and its maintenance who draws it
22. Don't like boundary
23. How about "the honourable the producible case" Henry James
24. Reverse maintenance (ghost of a clean gallery problem) right under the strings are spaces where no one walks they lack wear and tear stand out from the rest of the floor can you dirty them up
25. Call room service at midnight ask for cornbread what do they suggest instead
26. People hate the art hate the building hate the wealth hate the specialness why not keep the art in *say a baseball park* some guy said to me at the reception

## Thunderstorm Stack

Who cares about thunder?  
Problem of making a sound.  
To make a sound while we live.  
Emily Brontë's surname was an  
invention you can tell by the fake  
umlaut.

Bolt.

Crack.

Wrong accent.

Who cares?

If I don't make a sound.

If you don't hear my sound.

Her father invented it.

BRONTE being the ancient Greek word *thunder* the other

Emily listened.

"What an afternoon for heaven when Brontë entered in!" (she wrote).

Heaven

is not an example of a "last in first out" construction or LIFO.

## During the Impossible Age of Everyone

by Ada Limón

1.

There are so many people who've come before us,  
arrows and wagon wheels, obsidian tools, buffalo.  
Look out at the meadow, you can almost see them,  
generations dissolved in the bluegrass and hay.  
I want to try and be terrific. Even for an hour.

2.

If you walk long enough, your crowded head clears,  
like how all the cattle run off loudly as you approach.  
This fence is a good fence, but I doubt my own haywire  
will hold up to all this blank sky, so open and explicit.  
I'm like a fence, or a cow, or that word, *yonder*.

3.

There is a slow tractor traffic hollering outside,  
and I'd like not to be traffic, but the window shaking.  
Your shoes are piled up with mine, and the heat  
comes on, makes a simple noise, a dog-yawn.  
People have done this before, but not us.

## Swerve

by BRENDA MILLER

*Brevity journal of flash non-fiction*

I'm sorry about that time I ran over a piece of wood in the road. A pound of marijuana in the trunk and a faulty brake light—any minute the cops might have pulled us over, so you were edgy already, and then I ran over that piece of stray lumber without even slowing down. *Thunk, thunk*, and then the wood spun behind us on the road. Your dark face dimmed even darker, and you didn't yell at first, only turned to look out the window, and I made the second mistake: *What's wrong?* That's when you exploded. *You're so careless, you don't even think, what if there had been a nail in that damn thing*, you yelled, your face so twisted now, and ugly. *And I'm always the one that has to fix it whenever something breaks.*

*I'm sorry*, I said, and I said it again, and we continued on our way through the desert, in the dark of night, with the contraband you had put in our trunk, with the brake light you hadn't fixed blinking on and off, me driving because you were too drunk, or too tired, or too depressed, and we traveled for miles into our future, where eventually I would apologize for the eggs being overcooked, and for the price of light bulbs, and for the way the sun blared through our trailer windows and made everything too bright, and I would apologize when I had the music on and when I had it off, I'd say sorry for being in the bathroom, and sorry for crying, and sorry for laughing, I would apologize, finally, for simply being alive, and even now I'm sorry I didn't swerve, I didn't get out of the way.

## Good For Her

*D. Brody Lipton, winner, Reflex Flash Fiction Competition, Winter 2020*

Dad tells Mom to feed the damn cat. She obeys but appears hollow. She pads to the garage, gets in the car, and drives away.

Postcards arrive addressed only to me. Dad never reads them, complaining instead to his buddies that he wishes she'd made dinner before going. On a map at school, I trace her movements.

In Ludlow, she works at a Coke bottling plant, stationed beside a broad-faced woman from Ecuador who hasn't seen her daughter in twelve years. "The *drogas*."

Mom ices cakes at a Pittsfield bakery until the owner burns it down. She sells the car.

There's a mad painter she lives with in Albany, cleaning his house while he pores over canvases in his barn. He licks his paintbrushes instead of washing them.

Years pass. Dad speaks of Mom like he's spitting on the floor. When I look for my hate, I can't find it.

In a Schenectady hotel, Mom befriends a woman in the room next door. That woman is killed by her boyfriend. Mom stays in town to answer the cops' questions.

She waits tables in a Manchester diner. A grown man orders apple pie "all aboard".

When postcards stop coming, Dad says she's probably dead. I imagine Mom camped in the woods north of Burlington, studying with clear eyes the Canadian border, her hair a crown of greying braids.

I'm eating cereal when Mom comes home.

"Where's the cat?" she asks.

I say she ran away.

Mom says, "Good for her."



## Insufficient Funds, But Plenty of Tooth and Feather

Kate Barss (*Catapult*)

That winter, I went to the ATM to withdraw everything. My plan was to leave all the money in a trust for my cat. Later, I would drown myself in the ice-crusting lake.

But, when the gears of the machine whirred, it didn't spit out money. Instead, through the slot, the machine produced a long blue feather, perhaps that of a heron, or a tall blue jay.

The gears whirred a second time, and out appeared a tiny tooth with sharp angles, like that of a marten or a weasel. Once again, I heard the gears, and this time, in the machine's mouth emerged a piece of bark, brown and mossy and wormy.

I went into the bank to ask the teller what the hell was wrong with their machine. I showed her the feather, bark, and tooth in my hand.

*Haven't you seen money before?* she replied.

*This isn't money,* I said, waving the bark in her face, small wooden shards falling to the pristine white of the countertop. *This isn't money,* I repeated.

I remember how she reached across the counter, took the feather from my hand and said, *It's so soft, sometimes money is so soft.* She lifted it to her face, and rested her cheek against it like a pillow.

## SEVEN STARTS TO THE WOMAN WHO WENT OVER THE FALLS IN A BARREL

Annie Edson Taylor, 1901

by Frankie McMillan (Clever magazine)

1

Picture the cold dark inside of the barrel. Annie feeling her way over the padded mattress to a harness hanging from the side. The barrel sways in the water. Picture her fastening herself upright into the harness, pulling the leather strap tight across her chest. Picture Annie flailing about, she can't find her lucky heart-shaped pillow. Now picture the barrel picking up speed, with the current, heading straight towards the falls.

2

It's not as if falling was something new. Early on, I fell from my crib, I fell through haystacks, I fell from grace, I fell behind the church to kiss the bridesmaids, I fell between heaven and hell then into marriage and when my good husband was taken off to war I fell into despair. When cholera came and took the baby I fell so low I did not know I'd fallen. I fell short of loving men. I fell into debt. I fell about the house; birds beat against the windows, mold grew upon the cheese. Yet in the dark I dreamed that fame could come with falling.

3

Us boatmen watch the wind fall. Then we anchor by Goat Island so we can get Mrs. Taylor and the barrel ready without too much sway. When she begins undressing, we turn our backs. Let the oars rest in the locks, listen to the falls. We'd done talking. We'd told her *no one* has ever survived going over in a barrel, it was madness it was. She was killing herself and on her *birthday*.

We turn around. She stands there, a man's coat flung over her shoulders. A big flowery hat on her head. Can't help but stare. The long barrel begins bobbing alongside the boat. Later it'll have white letters painted on it. *Heroine of Niagara Falls*. But we don't know that now.

We spit on our thumbs, hold them up to see which way the wind's coming.

4

*If I hide my grey hair under a hat, if I lie about my age, I have my good reasons.*

5

My poor head is full of measurements. The length of the barrel staves, the circumference of the iron hoops, the position of the bung-hole, the exact weight of the anvil at the bottom so the barrel floats upright during the ride. I look the barrel maker in the eye. I tell him I have every expectation of surviving.

Night comes. I talk to my lucky heart-shaped pillow, I talk about the barrel maker, the boatmen, the beef-faced newspaper men, I talk about their buffoonery, their banter, and blather, I talk about the Buffalo Exposition, the crowds that await me, how lucky the timing was for my stunt, and I go on talking while candlelight gives such a ruby glow to the pillow I

push my cheek into the plump mounds of silk and *Maude, Maude, Maude* I breathe though I don't know any Maude, not even a bridesmaid Maude and later, to knock some sense into my God-fearing self, I draw my knees up to my chin, listen to the noise of the falls and *brace, brace, brace*, I cry.

6

A huge crowd had gathered on the Goat Island bank. Some had been there the previous day when the wind got too fierce to get the barrel out. Over the noise of the falls, we hear snatches of a voice shouting from the wharf. *Mrs. Taylor, refined teacher of New York ...What are the bets ...Will she take the plunge...* We head around the inlet into view. The crowd erupts in cheers. Horns blast the air. We pause a bit as Mrs. Taylor stands in the boat, big hat on her head, her arms held out to the falls.

7

The noise from the falls grows louder. You are in a barrel heading for the plunge. You are still upright in the harness, arms crossed over your chest. Your lucky heart-shaped pillow, wedged under your chin. The barrel begins to spin. You are prepared, you tell yourself. You have planned for this. Below the boatmen are waiting. Below is your new life, fame and fortune. The noise is deafening. Happy birthday, you breathe into the red silk pillow. Happy birthday, you.

## All My Mad Mothers

Jacqui Saphra

My mother gathered every yellow object she could find:  
daffodils and gorgeous shawls, little pots of bile  
and piles of lemons. Once we caught her with a pair  
of fishnet stockings on a stick, trying to catch the sun.

My mother never travelled anywhere without her flippers,  
goggles and a snorkel. She'd strip at any opportunity:  
The Thames, The Serpentine, the shallows of a garden pond,  
a puddle in the park. She was no judge of depth.

My mother was a dipterologist, sucking fruit flies through a straw.  
Our house was filled with jars of corpses on display.  
Sometimes she'd turn them out, too dead to flee, their wings  
still glinting, make them into chokers for our party bags.

My mother barely spoke between her bruises:  
her low cut gown was tea-stained silk. From behind  
her Guccis or Versaces, she would serve us salty dinners,  
stroke a passing cheek, or lay her head on any waiting shoulder.

My mother was an arsonist. She kept a box of matches  
in her bra, lined up ranks of candles, ran her pretty fingers  
through the flames. At full moon, she would drag  
our beds into the garden, set them alight and howl.

My mother was a fine confectioner. We'd come upon her sponges,  
softly decomposing under sweaters in a drawer, or oozing  
sideways in a filing cabinet. Once, between her pearls and  
emerald rings, we found a maggot gateau, iced with mould.

My mother was so hard to grasp: once we found her  
in a bath of extra-virgin olive oil, her skin well slicked.  
She'd stocked the fridge with lard and suet, butter: salted  
and unsalted, to ease her way into this world. Or out of it.

## Egg

by [Nora Nadjarian](#) (*Staccato Fiction*)

We soft boiled the free range egg, cracked it, and were surprised to find nothing in it. My mother sighed, as if the meaning of life had been snatched away before it was born. I cried because I wanted to own a chick and keep it in my hat. My brother said he wanted to add the shells to his breakfast cereal, just to make it crunchier. My father rushed to get the glue out of the drawer where he keeps all his headless statuettes.

**Right and Wrong**  
**Lydia Davis**

She knows she is right, but to say she is right is wrong, in this case. To be correct and say so is wrong, in certain cases.

She may be correct, and she may say so, in certain cases. But if she insists too much, she becomes wrong, so wrong that even her correctness becomes wrong, by association.

It is right to believe in what she thinks is right, but to say what she thinks is right is wrong, in certain cases.

She is right to act on her beliefs, in her life. But she is wrong to report her right actions, in most cases. Then even her right actions become wrong, by association.

If she praises herself, she may be correct in what she says, but her saying it is wrong, in most cases, and thus cancels it, or reverses it, so that although she was for a particular act deserving of praise, she is no longer in general deserving of praise.