

Selected Poems from STRONGER THAN FEAR

Poems by Kim Addonizio, Desiree Alvarez, Toi Derricotte, Ross Gay, Jane Hirshfield, Maria  
Mazziotti Gillan, Jenny Molberg, Mervyn Taylor

KIM ADDONIZIO

**High Desert, New Mexico**

Temple of the rattlesnake's religion.  
Deluge and heat-surge. Crèche of the atom's  
rupture. Night blackens like a violin  
and bright flour falls from the kitchens of heaven.  
This is where the seams begin to loosen,  
where you can walk for miles in any direction—  
rabbit, lizard, raven, insect drone—  
and almost forget the shame of being human.  
Smoke tree. Sage. Not everything is broken.  
Horses appear at this remote cabin  
to stand outside and wait for you to come  
with a single apple. Abandon  
your despair, you who enter here forsaken.  
The wind is saying something. Listen.

DESIRÉE ALVAREZ

## Botanical Drawing of Colonialism

You – poppy, launching ships. You Helen of a bloom.  
What is it to be a flower? *Papaver somniferum*.

Ancient and current fields of war flowers, poppies  
tended and harvested by the poorest. Old

story, centuries of opium wars, kingdoms  
controlling peasants. All the brown hands

stirring vats of sticky sap all day.  
The harvest drugging generations

in the sleep of oblivion. The same flower  
growing in the backyard of my childhood.

Poppy, flower of my mother.  
I remember her in the garden,

tending to their pink crepe ballets.  
But whirling at the center,

black cave of Morpheus  
where she disappeared at the end

in surrender to the witch's field.  
Neolithic opiate flower,

making and re-making yourself over again.  
The best cure for pain.

Bouquet of anemone for my mother,  
a spray of bleeding heart for my mother,

bloodroot sanguinaria that used to grow  
along her path. *Papaveracea*, you are all

descendants of Demeter's flower.  
O tiny purple windflower, withstanding gale,

valiant like my mother who soldiered on as we all do,  
even the plants, until we can no longer.

In the library of the Botanical Garden in Brooklyn  
I learn heroin is named for giving heroes their bravery.

On Veterans Day I plant coral poppies  
thinking not of soldiers or my mother,

but of the teens lost to the spell  
of addiction in the next town over.

I keep planting you to make myself over.  
To begin and end with beauty.

Ancient poppy queen raising her arms to the sky  
blackened with ashes of goddess.

TOI DERRICOTTE

## **Why I don't write about George Floyd**

Because there is too much to say  
Because I have nothing to say  
Because I don't know what to say  
Because everything has been said  
Because it hurts too much to say  
What can I say what can I say  
Something is stuck in my throat  
Something is stuck like an apple  
Something is stuck like a knife  
Something is stuffed like a foot  
Something is stuffed like a body

ROSS GAY

### **A Small Needful Fact**

Is that Eric Garner worked  
for some time for the Parks and Rec.  
Horticultural Department, which means,  
perhaps, that with his very large hands,  
perhaps, in all likelihood,  
he put gently into the earth  
some plants which, most likely,  
some of them, in all likelihood,  
continue to grow, continue  
to do what such plants do, like house  
and feed small and necessary creatures,  
like being pleasant to touch and smell,  
like converting sunlight  
into food, like making it easier  
for us to breathe.

MARIA MAZZIOTTI GILLAN

**Jayden de Leon, Age 7, *The Herald News*, Wednesday, March 2, 2016**

Jayden de Leon, age 7, lived on Rosa Parks Boulevard with his mother and his sisters.

Jayden was shot through a window following a commotion outside his house, a three-story multi-family across the street from a liquor store and a car repair shop.

Everyone in the apartment, Jayden's grandmother and great-grandmother, his sisters, his cousin was hysterical, but Jayden asked for the phone, called 911, said "I've been shot" and gave his address.

The police and ambulance arrived within minutes. Jayden remained calm throughout. His mother said, "I know the streets are dangerous, too many drugs, but I can't afford to move."

For many, the street where Jayden lives offers cheap, stopgap housing.

"It is a place to leave," neighbors said.

Empty lots line both sides of their house. Patches of grass with empty bottles of Remy Martin and Budweiser. Cars rumble by blasting loud music.

Two blocks to the north is School 10. One block north is Church of God of Prophecy. "If you want to live here, you've got to be a survivor," a 15-year-old neighbor, Frederick David said, "it's straight surviving."

JANE HIRSHFIELD

**The Bird Net**

I once decided to pretend to be angry.

Then I was.

As a bird is caught in its birdness before it is caught in the bird net.

The bird might be counted, tagged, released.

The bird might be eaten.

It took hours for the shaking to leave my body.

Body of air, body of branch, what earth's yellows & nectars were made for.

JENNY MOLBERG

## Loving Ophelia Is

loving a ghost and loving a ghost is loving yourself  
and loving yourself is a sudden sorrow  
and a sudden sorrow is the place where the river pools  
and the place where the river pools is not suicide and  
not suicide is confronting the unknown and confronting  
the unknown is the active condition of womanhood  
and the active condition of womanhood is the beauteous nature  
of Denmark and the beauteous nature of Denmark is lovesickness  
and lovesickness is obsession with a version of yourself  
and obsession with a version of yourself is egomania and egomania  
is a room of mirrors and a room of mirrors is love and hate simultaneously  
and love and hate simultaneously is the trick of abuse  
and the trick of abuse is a vexation of the mind and  
a vexation of the mind is the feeble dawn of gaslight and tea  
and the feeble dawn of gaslight and tea is an overbearing husband  
and an overbearing husband is a soliloquy of clichés and a soliloquy  
of clichés is the misery of scholars and the misery of scholars  
is an old friend's skull and an old friend's skull is a sudden sorrow  
and a sudden sorrow is holding one's breath  
and holding one's breath is swimming away and swimming away  
is the other shore on which Ophelia has woken



MERVYN TAYLOR

## **Gum**

In American war movies, chewing gum was a sign of staying calm while bullets whizzed overhead, a symbol of the kindness of GI's, as they passed out sticks of it, to wide-eyed kids.

In Minnesota, while a policeman kneeled on George Floyd's neck, one of the officers kept chewing, as Floyd called to his deceased mother, that he was dying. And recently, a black woman,

just out the shower, stood in her living room shivering, the broken door letting in light, policemen in a ring around her as she screamed, *Wrong house, you got the wrong house!*

And though the sergeant used his jacket to cover her shoulders, she'll never forget their faces, especially the one who never stopped smiling and chewing gum, who never once looked away.



MERVYN TAYLOR

## That One

How they picked one back then  
was by fondling the balls  
the penis the calves by running  
their hands along the flanks  
as you would horses by looking  
into the mouths the other orifices  
pretending it wasn't exciting  
not the thrill of a Saturday  
afternoon not a good break  
from the boring breeze blowing  
through the weeping willows  
not a chance to see in the flesh  
the cargo that came in chains  
from the other side of the world  
passed through a door into hell  
the sea as if in a kettle boiling  
the green land disappearing  
in a gulp gone the last hut like a  
dream upon waking to the touch  
of a strange hand the scent  
of a perfume upon a skin so  
translucent the veins snaking  
in grey rivers through the swamps  
of moss that hung in beards  
off the magnolias as in whispers

the wives advise this one  
this one for the bulbous knots  
on his arms for the pulsing drum  
of the heart visible just beneath  
the sternum for the vacancy  
in the rooms of his eyes as  
they search for the wife the child

not quite seven, for the ridge  
of a spine that will answer the lash  
with its own grimace its own inimitable  
dance in returning to the tree

where its buried navel string  
climbs like a vine you can see now  
if you go there, these many years after.

LAURA TOHE

## Little Sister

—For Frank LaMere

*In 1984 the body of twenty-one year old Michelle LaMere from Winnebago, Nebraska was found in north Omaha where she had been run over by a car.*

I was the youngest of nine children. The morning they found me, the mulberries had already given away their young fruit. And summer was a smooth, slender, dark woman dancing to the center of the drum. My grandfathers' voices still rise above the rolling hills along the Niobrara where my people dance.

But my voice was invisible against the onslaught. Their words lie. They create divisions, arrange my life in numbers, add and subtract me, and put me into neat boxes for storage.

My life unraveled early alone in a large city where I followed shadows and chased the jagged promise of empty bottles. There, I thought I heard my father's voice softly calling "Baby, baby, you're my baby" when my mother first unwrapped me, a newborn present, a young heartbeat to strengthen the drum.

In the blossoming light the earth goes on gathering the dripping fruit of mulberries in her outstretched arms along the Niobrara. In the season of gathering mulberries, I danced the fury of buffalo and dreamed the slender, dark woman, and my brother singing, singing in the voice of praise:

Little sister, little sister,  
tasted her life again  
in the spiraling dance of thunder beings,  
and buffalo  
and was borne away into the  
thunderclouds  
and the rain that  
fell and fell  
afterwards.

