

## **CHAPTER 8: A ZOMBIE AND APOCALYPSE POETRY COLLECTION**

PREFACE: This short collection of poems explores the zombie epidemic from multiple angles. There are poems which speak directly to the horrors of the zombie apocalypse. There are poems which speak to and echo zombie metaphors - death, war, body, society. And there are poems which attempt to answer or reflect on the question posed by this year's CICC theme: how do we fight back against the zombie menace?

This collection is, of course, incomplete. There are many more zombie poems out there, and poems which will be written and published over the course of this year. There are so many ways to interpret the zombie metaphor through poetry and writing; we certainly haven't touched on all of them here. This short collection is the start. Please help us add to the collection. If you come across a zombie poem you feel belongs in here, please send it along.

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RAE ARMANTROUT

## The New Zombie

1

I stare at a faint  
spinning disc

in the black  
endlessly

ready to pounce.

2

I actually say,

"I'm so sick  
of zombies!"

3

Viral relics  
in the genome?

Genes that switch  
themselves off

and on,

unthinking  
but coordinated?

4

Zombie surfeit

Half-off zombie.

The best zombie  
imitation.

Invisible zombie  
hand

Source: *Itself* (Wesleyan University Press, 2015)

CHEN CHEN

## Eat

Mother, you said, *If I knew you'd turn out this way,  
I wouldn't have bothered to feed you your whole life,  
to feed myself, when I was pregnant with you.*

& I thought, if only I could swallow the fistful of pills  
or swallow nothing — if only I had a will to starve.

But I didn't. I don't.

& I swear, my mother, even if I can never  
speak to you again, say home with you again,  
I will speak to my body: Eat.  
I will speak to your body: Eat.

Listen, this is our home, our great spinning feast —  
the earth.

Source: *When I Grow Up I Want to be a List of Further Possibilities* (BOA Editions, 2018)

ALISON HAWTHORNE DEMING

## Human Habitat

Some did not want to alter the design  
when the failure message  
said massive problem with oxygen.  
Some wanted to live full tilt with risk.

By then we were too weak for daily chores:  
feeding chickens, hoeing yams,  
calibrating pH this and N2 that . . .  
felt like halfway summiting Everest.

We didn't expect the honeybees  
to die. Glass blocked the long-wave  
light that guides them.  
Farm soil too rich in microbes

concrete too fresh ate the oxygen.  
We had pressure problems,  
recalibrating the sniffer. Bone tired  
I reread Aristotle by waning light.

Being is either actual or potential.  
The actual is prior to substance.  
Man prior to boy, human prior to seed,  
Hermes prior to chisel hitting wood.

I leafed through *Turner's England*,  
left the book open at Stonehenge.  
A shepherd struck by lightning lies dead,  
dog howling, several sheep down too.

The painter gave gigantic proportion  
to sulphurous god rimmed clouds  
lightning slashing indigo sky  
while close at hand lie fallen stones

dead religion, pages dusty  
brown leaf shards gathering  
in the gutter yet I cannot turn the page  
wondering what I am and when

in the story of life my life is taking place.  
Now what. No shepherd. No cathedral.  
How is it then that I read love  
in pages that lie open before me?

**Credit:**

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LOUISE GLÜCK

## End of Winter

Over the still world, a bird calls  
waking solitary among black boughs.

You wanted to be born; I let you be born.  
When has my grief ever gotten  
in the way of your pleasure?

Plunging ahead  
into the dark and light at the same time  
eager for sensation

as though you were some new thing, wanting  
to express yourselves

all brilliance, all vivacity

never thinking  
this would cost you anything,  
never imagining the sound of my voice  
as anything but part of you—

you won't hear it in the other world,  
not clearly again,  
not in birdcall or human cry,

not the clear sound, only  
persistent echoing  
in all sound that means good-bye, good-bye—

the one continuous line  
that binds us to each other.

Source: *The Wild Iris* (The Ecco Press, 1992)

MARY KARR

## Disappointments of the Apocalypse

Once warring factions agreed upon the date  
and final form the apocalypse would take,  
and whether dogs and cats and certain trees  
deserved to sail, and if the dead would come or be left  
a forwarding address, then opposing soldiers  
met on ravaged plains to shake hands  
and postulate the exact shade  
of the astral self—some said lavender,  
others gray. And physicists rocketed  
copies of the decree to paradise  
in case God had anything to say,  
the silence that followed being taken  
for consent, and so citizens  
readied for celestial ascent.

Those who hated the idea stayed indoors  
till the appointed day. When the moon  
clicked over the sun like a black lens  
over a white eye, they stepped out  
onto porches and balconies to see  
the human shapes twist and rise  
through violet sky and hear trees uproot  
with a sound like enormous zippers  
unfastening. And when the last grassblades  
filled the air, the lonely vigilants fell  
in empty fields to press their bodies  
hard into dirt, hugging their own outlines.

Then the creator peered down from his perch,  
as the wind of departing souls tore the hair  
of those remaining into wild coronas,  
and he mourned for them as a father  
for defiant children, and he knew that each  
small skull held, if not some vision  
of his garden, then its aroma of basil  
and tangerine washed over by the rotting sea.  
They alone sensed what he'd wanted  
as he first stuck his shovel into clay  
and flung the planets over his shoulder,  
or used his thumbnail to cut smiles and frowns  
on the first blank faces. Even as the saints  
arrived to line before his throne singing  
and a wisteria poked its lank blossoms

through the cloudbank at his feet,  
he trained his gaze on the deflating globe  
where the last spreadeagled Xs clung like insects,  
then vanished in puffs of luminous smoke,

which traveled a long way to sting his nostrils,  
the journey lasting more than ten lifetimes.  
A mauve vine corkscrewed up from the deep  
oblivion, carrying the singed fume  
of things beautiful, noble, and wrong.

Source: *The Devil's Tour* (New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1993)

CATHERINE PIERCE

## How it Ends: Three Cities

### #1: Austin, Texas

This morning we woke to the grackles. Their mouths open, tails oil-black against the blacker pavement. Some had closed their eyes; others had died staring. Cars stopped on Congress and were left, hunched like boulders. The elms, always bright with cries, were still. We didn't call work, just sleepwalked to the Red Pony Lounge and dropped into silence. Now someone puts Sam Cooke on the jukebox, "Cupid," and I think of the girl with the gun. The man across from me reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a bird. Everyone shrieks, draws back, hisses about disease. I touch its small head. Its eyes are closed. I want it to wake up. To see what's left, even if it's only this bar, this green drink rimmed with glowing salt, this long-gone song caught up in smoke like light.

### #2: New York, New York

By lunchtime, the city is swathed in sweetness. A woman says Bit-O-Honey. Her son says roasted almonds. Old men find one another to talk of fifth grade snow days. In Queens, a young man veers from a funeral motorcade in search of lemon meringue. A paralytic woman rises, walks to the freezer, scoops mouthful after mouthful of Rocky Road. In Central Park, a man takes a bottle from his backpack. He builds a perfect snowman and bathes it tenderly in maple syrup. He leans in to kiss it. A feuding couple falls silent in front of a window display of petit fours, chocolate tortes, marzipan apricots. After eating, they brush sugar gently from one another's mouths. A middle school teacher opens the window and students stream from it, called by the air, drifting skyward on the aroma of vanilla extract, as clear and sharp as winter.

### #3: Okemah, Oklahoma

At first the animals don't seem strange. Most twilights the town is full of stray dogs, alley cats. But the hamster? The iguana? Only when she sees the guinea pig emerge from the garden soil, shake itself off, and trundle down the sidewalk, does she begin to understand. Across the way the one-eyed tabby bursts from beneath the oak. Goldfish leap down the street's puddles. Hermit crabs scuttle over lawns, and cockatiels preen dirt from their wings. She hears a sound from the movies, and turns to see Major Luther's old appaloosa gallop down Birch Street. It seems wrong, she thinks, for them to come back only to vanish again. But then Preacher Man, her golden retriever, dives into her lap, and as the stars go black she is laughing.

Catherine Pierce is the author of *Famous Last Words* (Saturnalia, 2008) and a chapbook, *Animals of Habit* (Kent State, 2004).

CAMILLE RANKINE

**Forecast**

I twist myself into a knot  
the day pulls taut.

I am what I am  
told. Good red meat

gone necrotic. A spot of black  
spread out to ruin

a perfect evening. It's the way  
the weather wears me.

A cold, blank day. My blood-  
burned fingers. A white noise

swelling in me. It's nothing  
but night now. That's how

all the days end. An hour  
glistens in its glass case, turns

rancid in my memory.  
Another day, another

dress the day lays out  
before me. I grow older

if I'm lucky.  
And I'm lucky.

My sad heart in its excess.  
Such petty injury. I am worn

against the weather. Limp and prone  
to empty.

What came before this.  
I can't remember.

I dress for all the lives I want  
behind me. I have come here

to make seen the day  
I see. I fall from focus.

The day goes sour. It asks me  
nothing. It asks nothing of me.

**Source:** *Incorrect Merciful Impulses* (Copper Canyon Press, 2015)

CLAUDIA RANKINE

*from Citizen: “Some years there exists a wanting to escape...”*

Some years there exists a wanting to escape—

you, floating above your certain ache—

still the ache coexists.

Call that the immanent you—

You are you even before you

grow into understanding you

are not anyone, worthless,

not worth you.

Even as your own weight insists  
you are here, fighting off  
the weight of nonexistence.

And still this life parts your lids, you see  
you seeing your extending hand

as a falling wave—

/

I they he she we you turn  
only to discover  
the encounter

to be alien to this place.

Wait.

The patience is in the living. Time opens out to you.

The opening, between you and you, occupied,  
zoned for an encounter,

given the histories of you and you—

And always, who is this you?

The start of you, each day,  
a presence already—

Hey you—

/

Slipping down burying the you buried within. You are  
everywhere and you are nowhere in the day.

The outside comes in—

Then you, hey you—

Overheard in the moonlight.

Overcome in the moonlight.

Soon you are sitting around, publicly listening, when you  
hear this—what happens to you doesn't belong to you,  
only half concerns you He is speaking of the legionnaires  
in Claire Denis's film *Beau Travail* and you are pulled back  
into the body of you receiving the nothing gaze—

The world out there insisting on this only half concerns  
you. What happens to you doesn't belong to you, only half  
concerns you. It's not yours. Not yours only.

/

And still a world begins its furious erasure—

Who do you think you are, saying I to me?

You nothing.

You nobody.

You.

A body in the world drowns in it—

Hey you—

All our fevered history won't instill insight,  
won't turn a body conscious,  
won't make that look  
in the eyes say yes, though there is nothing

to solve

even as each moment is an answer.

/

Don't say I if it means so little,  
holds the little forming no one.

You are not sick, you are injured—

you ache for the rest of life.

How to care for the injured body,

the kind of body that can't hold  
the content it is living?

And where is the safest place when that place  
must be someplace other than in the body?

Even now your voice entangles this mouth  
whose words are here as pulse, strumming  
shut out, shut in, shut up—

You cannot say—

A body translates its you—

you there, hey you

/

even as it loses the location of its mouth.

When you lay your body in the body  
entered as if skin and bone were public places,

when you lay your body in the body  
entered as if you're the ground you walk on,

you know no memory should live  
in these memories

becoming the body of you.

You slow all existence down with your call  
detectable only as sky. The night's yawn  
absorbs you as you lie down at the wrong angle

to the sun ready already to let go of your hand.

Wait with me  
though the waiting, wait up,  
might take until nothing whatsoever was done.

/

To be left, not alone, the only wish—

to call you out, to call out you.

Who shouted, you? You  
shouted you, you the murmur in the air, you sometimes  
sounding like you, you sometimes saying you,

go nowhere,

be no one but you first—

Nobody notices, only you've known,

you're not sick, not crazy,  
not angry, not sad—

It's just this, you're injured.

/

Everything shaded everything darkened everything  
shadowed

is the stripped is the struck—

is the trace  
is the aftertaste.

I they he she we you were too concluded yesterday to  
know whatever was done could also be done, was also  
done, was never done—

The worst injury is feeling you don't belong so much

to you—

Source: *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Graywolf Press, 2014)

W.D. SNODGRASS

## “After Experience Taught Me ...”

After experience taught me that all the ordinary  
Surroundings of social life are futile and vain;

I'm going to show you something very  
Ugly: someday, it might save your life.

Seeing that none of the things I feared contain  
In themselves anything either good or bad

What if you get caught without a knife;  
Nothing—even a loop of piano wire;

Excepting only in the effect they had  
Upon my mind, I resolved to inquire

Take the first two fingers of this hand;  
Fork them out—kind of a “V for Victory”—

Whether there might be something whose discovery  
Would grant me supreme, unending happiness.

And jam them into the eyes of your enemy.  
You have to do this hard. Very hard. Then press

No virtue can be thought to have priority  
Over this endeavor to preserve one's being.

Both fingers down around the cheekbone  
And setting your foot high into the chest

No man can desire to act rightly, to be blessed,  
To live rightly, without simultaneously

You must call up every strength you own  
And you can rip off the whole facial mask.

Wishing to be, to act, to live. He must ask  
First, in other words, to actually exist.

And you, whiner, who wastes your time  
Dawdling over the remorseless earth,

What evil, what unspeakable crime  
Have you made your life worth?

Source: *Selected Poems 1957-1987* (New York: Soho Press, 1987)

WISLAWA SZYMBORSKA

## The End and the Beginning

TRANSLATED BY JOANNA TRZECIAK

After every war  
someone has to clean up.  
Things won't  
straighten themselves up, after all.

Someone has to push the rubble  
to the side of the road,  
so the corpse-filled wagons  
can pass.

Someone has to get mired  
in scum and ashes,  
sofa springs,  
splintered glass,  
and bloody rags.

Someone has to drag in a girder  
to prop up a wall.  
Someone has to glaze a window,  
rehang a door.

Photogenic it's not,  
and takes years.  
All the cameras have left  
for another war.

We'll need the bridges back,  
and new railway stations.  
Sleeves will go ragged  
from rolling them up.

Someone, broom in hand,  
still recalls the way it was.  
Someone else listens  
and nods with unsevered head.  
But already there are those nearby  
starting to mill about  
who will find it dull.

From out of the bushes  
sometimes someone still unearths

rusted-out arguments  
and carries them to the garbage pile.

Those who knew  
what was going on here  
must make way for  
those who know little.  
And less than little.  
And finally as little as nothing.

In the grass that has overgrown  
causes and effects,  
someone must be stretched out  
blade of grass in his mouth  
gazing at the clouds.

Source: *Miracle Fair: selected poems of Wisława Szymborska* (W. W. Norton and Company Inc., 2001)

BURLEE VANG

## To Live in the Zombie Apocalypse

The moon will shine for God  
knows how long.  
As if it still matters. As if someone

is trying to recall a dream.  
Believe the brain is a cage of light  
& rage. When it shuts off,

*something else* switches on.  
There's no better reason than now  
to lock the doors, the windows.

Turn off the sprinklers  
& porch light. Save the books  
for fire. In darkness,

we learn to read  
what moves along the horizon,  
across the periphery of a gun scope—

the flicker of shadows,  
the rustling of trash in the body  
of cities long emptied.

Not a soul lives  
in this house &  
this house & this

house. Go on, stiffen  
the heart, quicken  
the blood. To live

in a world of flesh  
& teeth, you must  
learn to kill

what you love,  
& love what can die.

**Credit:** Burlee Vang is the author of *The Dead I Know: Incantation for Rebirth* (Swan Scythe Press, 2010).