

# Our One-Way Street

Poems by

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## How to Classify a Reptile

At the reptile show, I am reminded of him,  
the first guy who made me orgasm.  
As the presenter drapes a yellow Burmese Python  
around his shoulders, I think about how my ex showed up  
at my doorstep unannounced over a decade after he said  
that I was like his Volvo, comfortable and dependable,  
but not worth going back to once he'd driven a sports car.  
Yes, he really said that and I said nothing, nothing at all.  
Instead, I cried every time I saw his new girlfriend,  
his beautiful blonde Ferrari, everywhere I went around campus:  
in the food court, at the library, throwing bread to the fish  
that swam in the gunky water, playing the bongos outside the art studios,  
and smoking clove cigarettes outside the Humanities Building.

While the presenter flips the python over so we can see  
the snake's claws, proof of evolutionary progress,  
I think about how I let my ex in, how he sat at my kitchen table  
while I peeled and sliced an apple for his daughter  
and gave her a glass of milk with a red and white striped straw.  
I listened as he told me his sob story about his custody battle,  
about not having a job, living in his mother's cramped apartment  
that didn't even have a bathtub. He even had to wear his bathing suit  
to take showers with his daughter. Then he asked me if I had a tub.  
I listened and poured him coffee. I made peanut butter and jelly  
sandwiches for them while balancing my own infant daughter on my hip.  
I did not offer up news about myself; I did not offer up our tub.

I listen as the presenter introduces Ally, a seven-month-old alligator  
that the police took away from some guy who was keeping it  
as a pet in his bathtub. This happens too much, the presenter says,  
then goes on to say that a male can end up weighing up to  
eight hundred pounds. He walks around the room to give the kids  
a closer look. He explains how, like a submarine,  
even when submerged under water, the alligator's periscope-like eyes  
allow them to hunt for prey and I look away as Ally blinks at me  
and think about how before leaving that day, my ex asked me for  
gas money, and without hesitation, I reached into my pocketbook  
and gave him all that I had: a ten, a five and three ones.

## Our One-Way Street

We let our children ride their bikes on our one-way street at dusk while we sit on dilapidated porches, discussing how our houses are worth half of what we paid for them and make bets on whose roof will go first. We all planned to fix them up, but found out money is the only thing that leaves this neighborhood fast.

*Out of the road!* we yell when we see headlights.

I run into the street each time to make sure drivers slow down. My neighbor to the right, Terry, tells me for the twentieth time how, while on a bike, he was hit by a car when he was my kid's age, rolled right over the hood, got back up and rode home.

*Look*, he says, holding up his hand, wiggling four fingers, *I'm fine*.

Patti, from across the street, donning a raggedy pink bathrobe, asks, *Did you really go to graduate school?* with the same tone you'd ask a coworker if they're banging the boss. Shying away from a response, I go inside to get a box of ice pops. Wine and beer in big, red, plastic cups appear in our hands. Someone brings out yesterday's newspaper to show us an article about another neighbor, busted for growing pot plants in his backyard.

It is too dark for the kids to see the chalk borders I drew on asphalt earlier and we are buzzed, so the kids take advantage, moving further and further away from us. Their expanding ellipses make me feel guilty about accepting another cup of beer.

Crazy Kay, the old lady who lives closest to the dead end sign, strolls by with two of her stinky, old dogs, stops in the street, screeches, *Who started the party without me?*

As our kids circle around her, she complains about parking tickets and the growing number of sinkholes in this city, *If I didn't know better, I would say that this city is trying to swallow us whole.*

## How to Avoid a War

Our daughter pedals then brakes,  
asks you to push her again, pedals  
then breaks. She is learning how  
to trust a world that moves rapidly  
below her rotating feet. You

worry about elbow and knee pads,  
all the safety measures we fail  
to provide. I am preoccupied with  
politics, run ahead to point out  
pending ruts. A boy, riding a bicycle

in the opposite direction, darts toward  
us; his mother trails behind screaming,  
*Slow down.* As she passes she covers  
her eyes and says she's not cut out for  
this job. I yell, *this is exactly how the*

*presidential candidates see the looming  
war in Iran,* and you give me that look  
and shake your head. You don't want me  
to explain this abstract metaphor, but know  
I will try. It is like how we each negotiate

with fate, as if we are more worried about  
how we will be perceived if we are wrong,  
rather than doing what is right. If there is a  
right. You say that I don't make sense.  
Our daughter stops short, jumps off her bicycle,

grabs the bag of stale rolls from her basket.  
She is ready to feed the ducks in the river,  
that is beside the path. The bicycle pedals  
are still in motion; so is your head that  
sways back and forth like a bone-white flag.

## A Lobster's Home

On Thanksgiving, everyone brings.  
My uncle boils the lobsters  
we will eat in lieu of turkey,  
claws instead of wings.  
The women put out  
crackers and picks,  
troughs of melted butter  
and empty bowls for shells.  
Even though most of us moved  
off the Island, everything and every-  
one we love comes from water.  
My brother worked on a lobster boat  
with other men in our family  
when he was still in high school.  
Now he is losing his house,  
deciding whether to  
make the bank take it from him  
or simply give it back.  
I pick every last crevice,  
even suck the meat from the  
antennas and eat the red eggs  
hiding at the end of my  
husband's tail as he and my  
daughter look on in disgust.  
*It's alright, really,* I try to  
convince them in the same tone  
my brother used when he told me  
he stopped paying his mortgage.

## How to Work on Cars

They both hope it's not the carburetor,  
the device that blends air and fuel.  
My husband and his brother try to  
squeeze under the hood at the same time  
looking for answers. If you did not know  
them, you would never guess they  
grew inside the same womb, these two  
men standing side by side in the driveway  
on Christmas Eve. The horror of having to  
take everything out of its chest  
weighs heavy on their expressions:  
neither of them have bought a single  
gift yet, and the sun is already setting.