How are you going to trap reality?
How are you going to trap appearance
without making an illustration of it?

—Francis Bacon
I Gave Birth

Woke to the “mean error” of birds squawking inside the scorched-gray-black polyphony of what happens when we lose the terminology to determine how bad things really are. Was there no way to puncture the agonizing film keeping us all corralled here? I looked through the window—bewildering axiom, condition, assumption—I looked at the dwarf orange tree, fruiting sour fruit incessantly.

In Another

Suppose it is possible to be in three states of error at once and in each place to think three things and in each thing to feel a different version of the salted wind as you are walking along the high sea cliff.

Take, for example, apricots that have been genetically bred to amplify the length of time their fragrance stays in the crisp air of the cadaverous supermarket, just long enough to place them in your cart and think to yourself, the world is good.

You may be very lonely at this point. The grocery clerk scans the apricots and asks you a few questions to which the answers are always “no.”

Era

“When will it all be over?” asks the griever, who’s a very small child in the room we have painted Amalfi blue but have not yet filled with sea-themed decor. How much of a garden’s design is made more pleasing through negative space? Across from the entry for “grief” is “grenade,” which derives from the Old French word for pomegranate.

Why do I write poetry? Because I don’t know what it means to live anymore—other than the shapes left behind.

Why do I write poetry? Because I want to drown.
Bildungsroman

Grabbed a hole.
Grabbed Mother.
Was abandoned.
Saw green light.
Was grief.
Was stellar in algebra.
Studied.
Learned collapse.
Practiced collapse.
Memorized collapse.
Saw red light.
Got awarded for collapse.
Was lonely.
Learned fields.
Practiced fields.
Memorized fields.
Smoked in fields,
emaciated.
Stole stickers.
Stole pencils.
Saw aqua light.
Stole eyeliner
Stole eyeshadow.
Left everything.

Ran away.
Came back.
Absconded.
Flirted. Skinned
my knees.
Was brutal.
Was beyond.
Was lured.
Was yelled at.
Took flights across
continents alone.
Memorized books.
Became a highly
skilled reader.
Earned awards.
Went back to the dry
fields and smoked.
Zoned out plenty.
Gravitated
toward criminals.
Saw orange light.
Criminals turned my
body into a crime scene.
Saw white light.
Committed more.
Grabbed another hole.
That wasn’t it.
Remembered what?
What was possible.
That wasn’t it.
Became sick again.
That wasn’t it.
Left one bad state
for another.

Practiced libraries.
Memorized libraries.
Mastered libraries.
Grabbed at a mother.
Grabbed at nothing.
Grabbed a black hole.
Gave birth.
Held on.
Breast-fed.
Committed.
Traveled widely
with libraries memorized.
Amassed nothing.
An infant tugged at my
nipple.
Became sick.
Made smoothies.
Created dioramas.
Bought a house.
Was choked.
Gave birth again.
Almost bled to death.
Stayed in the hospital.
Recovered.
Took pharmaceuticals.
Went back to work.
Made more dioramas.
Saw purple light.
Went back to bed.
Made mac and cheese.
Committed. Amassed
nothing. Became sick
again. Took more
pharmaceuticals.
Bought tent.
Bought sleeping bag.
Went camping.
Looked at the stars.
Made love.
Grabbed another hole.
That wasn’t it.
Remembered what?
What was possible.
That wasn’t it.
Reading The Bell Jar

When Esther Greenwood is almost raped, why can’t she connect what happened to her downward spiral: from throwing designer clothes off the hotel balcony to her unwashed hair, electro-shock therapy and worse? “Slut,” the guy kept saying. “Slut slut slut, where’s my diamond, Slut?”

*  

In 6th grade science class there was a boy who lit the hair of girls on fire. The science teacher laughed ha ha ha (she didn’t believe us when we told her) ha ha ha until the smell of Heidi’s burned braid mixed with the chalk: powder that fell off the enormous grave-green board.

In Everglades

It rained all day. Then, I read your poetry. I lied twice. First, when I told you I wasn’t afraid of rain and then when I put it in this poem. So, I unfolded the piece of paper where the poem was and wrote a true story: eight or ten vultures on top of a Corolla pecking at a black tarp the national park provides their visitors.

I texted Alex, vultures are the bird form of roaches. Then, one of them looked at me. “There were vultures everywhere, in the swimming pool vomiting, shitting, blood blood blood. It was gross,” said Mrs. Delamo who bought a $700K vacation home in West Palm where the birds invaded. It wouldn’t stop looking. All the other birds were pecking away at the tarp to get to the windshield wipers, which, apparently, give off the scent of a carcass when the plastic melts in the sun. “Save me save me save me,” I said to the vulture, but it wouldn’t look away.

National Park

My name is Esther Greenwood. Sometimes, I get a bad idea and follow through on it. That’s the difference between me and other people. Other people get distracted by roasting a chicken or watching TV, but I am carnal.

I know the difference between killing yourself and stepping down the spiral staircase into the cellar of the self, that really meaty, stringy place wrapped in shadows, booming with an arterial pulse so that if you were to kill it, it would mean something.

Now, look at me. Look at the mirror I’m holding up. You can smash it. There’s another face behind it, and another one behind that. Just like stars, they are endless and stretch obliviously in their cold calculations.

It is Christmas Eve, so go ahead, smash it. I’m sure someone out there is in love with me.
The man from Paros who lives beyond the temple of Artemis takes a high fever. When they inject me with a cerulean anesthetic, I become the mint I planted between the jasmine and swimming pool. On the sixth day, the man from Paros is delirious. When I wake, the nurse gives me a painkiller. Winter was like spring and spring like winter. On the eighth day, the man from Paros dreams in turquoise, of the nodes on the body where sea and sky entwine, dreams of his mother who bakes octopus. I stand up. I faint. On the tenth day, the man from Paros believes he will die and is now very angry at himself for keeping secret his love for a man in the next village, but the man from Paros cannot move and must send a messenger. I get up, ask my husband for the mascara in my purse. On the sixteenth day, the man from Paros receives no word from his

“I cry,” Jane Eyre says, “because I am miserable,” but what could she know of town hall meetings on climate crisis, workflow, the technological sophistication of our new lingo—content strategists, reaching out (did Ms. Eyre reach out to Rochester or to her little friend who died of consumption? Jane held the girl all night and in the morning she was dead)—calls to action, optimizing, becoming “impactful”? Jane’s world revolved around so little and yet, it was a life. Newest version of the world: hurricanes that obliterate; investors who come in, buy the islands cheap. I Dub Thee la ti Landlord of the Underworld and you can pick up your laurels at the Teller of Bones. Baudelaire’s family was so annoyed he was a poet they sent him on a long sea voyage from Calais to Calcutta. He hated everyone on the boat except Jane Eyre. He liked her because she was ugly and read books. “A poem,” he said to her as they crossed the Horn

We often say the sun is over there; he walked over the hill with a handful of figs. To wander helplessly into the artist’s fist. No wonder he couldn’t find the king in this painting of the former world. You will feel the ecclesiastical floodplain, clay, heartbreak. Some people with a psychological disorder eat soil. And some, in grief, pull hair from their head and eat it. In another life, I pulled hair from my head. Grief begins so full of water and ends saying farewell to the sour, wild pears of another island, forsaken, the core shaken. Don’t forget rivulets of fluid down your leg after sex, the sensuous smell of musical geraniums after a long rain, two owls crisscrossing the green-gray sky. He roamed and roamed. What is growing from my little palm tree? Long, outrageous fronds! Get back where you belong! Now his back is to the artist, his long scarlet cloak mocking the attenuation. The man
Sandra Simonds is a poet and critic. She is the author of seven books of poetry: Atopia, Orlando, Further Problems with Pleasure, Steal It Back, The Sonnets, Mother Was a Tragic Girl, and Warsaw Bikini. She lives in Tallahassee, Florida, and is an associate professor of English at Thomas University in Thomasville, Georgia.