

Three Soul-Makers:  
Poems That Bring Us  
Together

by

Mary Kennedy Eastham

Eileen Malone

Kathleen McClung



*The Wapshott Press*

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# Mary Kennedy Eastham

## Summer Afternoon

Lovewrecked by Billy King, There's no other way to begin.  
I say his name even now without thinking  
as if I could step back into our French afternoon  
smell the scent of the roses on the terrace -  
Naked Ladies weren't they called?  
I was his early girl  
the only woman he'd been with  
if you don't count Junie  
a best friend turned awkward lover.  
With Billy I could eat love  
from lips prettier than mine  
and be okay with that.

I called him 'the boy' hoping that would keep  
his innocence, his sweet smile  
from getting to the part of me  
that never wanted  
to give everything away.

I remember the steps in our hotel room leading nowhere  
the Paris subway map in Billy's hand as he slept  
and me sitting on that prayer white footstool  
needing him and wishing I didn't.  
A shutter opened and closed with the wind  
leading a stray cat toward happy ruin on the ledge

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the infinite knot of twisted rawhide Billy made for him  
teasing him toward us, then away, toward us, then away.

Days later when the boy and the cat are gone,  
a pretty maid will appear at my door  
Billy's knit beanie in her hand.  
For you, Mademoiselle, she will say, is this missing?  
I go back to that moment when I was still his early girl.  
What's next for the cat I ask my sleepy boy.  
We'll adopt him, Billy said, pulling me onto the bed  
as flecks of rain began to fall from cracks in the skylight  
wet ornaments of pleasure streaming down on us  
through high glass.

(My friend worked for a time at the Le Meurice Hotel  
in Paris. We slipped a copy of this poem  
printed on beautiful pink hued silk paper underneath  
guest's doors. The next day I did a reading of this poem  
at an afternoon wine tasting Salon. I felt like an  
author princess. The poem was also published in my  
first book *The Shadow of A Dog I Can't Forget*)

## Breaking Them In

He's come back to these hills  
to break in new boots  
at least that's what he says.  
Through prairie winds and days full of hot sun  
he walks, wondering if the trodden weed  
has held it in - all of it - the voices, the faces  
the conversations of his past.  
From the tip of a trembling hill  
the deer appears  
not the one his father made him kill  
this deer has dark eyes that do not turn away.  
He can see it now so clearly  
his mother's hat on the garden swing  
fallen apples on the steps  
the deer unafraid, content to chomp.  
The next day, apples mixed with blood  
below the carcass.  
It happened in the gloaming  
not night, not day, somewhere in between  
when the air feels draped in silk  
tossed across a bead-edged sky.  
Bad things shouldn't happen  
in this time of perfect light.  
He finds himself not going to pieces

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as he thought he would  
boots loosening on his feet.

## Home

You told me to imagine  
the lights were vultures.  
Blink once, you said, and we'll be eaten alive.  
My will is strong.  
I paralyzed the muscles  
around my eyes to stare into faces  
the color  
of sanitized dirt.  
I realized I was living  
a Las Vegas nightmare.

At the hotel  
our pillows  
were hard  
and flat,  
the kind  
that block out dreams.  
You held me  
as we waited  
for the rose glow of dawn  
to return.

Around two a.m.  
or was it three,

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we jumped from the balcony  
of our first floor room  
to follow the sounds  
of night fires in the desert.  
Beware the salamander  
on the rock, I said.  
You wanted  
to touch  
its soft, moist skin.

Walking through purple darkness  
my bare leg  
caught the edge  
of an Indian fig cactus.  
Blood looks different at night, you said  
moving toward me  
like a scientist  
with nothing to fear.  
You stopped the bleeding  
somehow  
as the moon  
shot  
a twister  
of light  
directly in our path  
its sterling silver glow  
surrounding us  
like captured rain.

# Eileen Malone

## From An Unloved Mother

These words about how my son  
stopped being my son  
and made me his enemy  
are too sad; they will cause you  
to shy away, so I will draw you in

view from the wrong end of the telescope  
a skimming bird, swallow of shadow that drops  
feathers on the late day sea beyond this marsh  
where wind laps up all the indigo thistledown  
I'm there, writing

what I say can be found in other letters from  
an unloved mother to a beloved son, usually  
found years later, smoke-moss soft, stashed in  
the backs of drawers, never sent

I had no choice, no matter how you believe  
I sinned, seized or stilted, know that I loved  
you always every minute, I loved you

like the heathery bird who dies for the sake  
of its hatchling, dripping blood from its broken  
beak and crying out

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I write these words on vellum with taloned  
claws with feathered quill, dipped in ink from  
sac of squid, then rip them into bits of wet text  
of pulp, submit as weedy shadows dropped on  
watery marshes to be picked up, salvaged by  
other beaks, other mothers

to hang out to dry in order to use later as lining  
as softening, as warm intuitive comforting  
in other damaged and abandoned nests.

## What They Tell Me

Tranquilize him, chant mental health professionals  
thick with things that are not and do not have names  
whose chain-smoking therapies attempt corporate  
presentations of flip-board explanations as to  
why there is no cure

I try to evoke answers, hunch over the I Ching, tarot  
tea leaves, order fingers about the Ouija board, runes  
consult with television sensitives, spiritual healers  
explain how his brain explodes behind its own thunder  
behind his ears, behind, behind, his entire life has fallen  
behind if in this life the world is to see his light if there  
is to be a light or a this-life, I don't know

what can I do to make him happen, see him in the  
loving space I provided, long ago, when I unfolded  
my girl-child life to bring him in

the old woman in me claws the thunderclouds apart  
prays in attack screeches, won't let them pull together  
like blood-warm sheets of rain on his dim flickerings  
tries, but doesn't really know what to do, doesn't know  
how much longer the final smothering can be held back  
doesn't know

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the young mother sends love, opens to miracles and cures  
accepts reasons, lessons, past life retributions, promises,  
tries, but doesn't really know what to do, doesn't know how  
she gets out of bed some mornings when her ignorance  
grabs her so still, so paralyzed she can actually feel  
the withering of her soul.

## **The Visit Secured**

My key opens your door to greasy sheets beneath  
sealed windows where “Overnight Rates” blinks in  
congealed blood tubes and “Vacancy” takes weak  
turns flashing your attempts to sit up

this week your puffed flesh and increased spasmodic  
twitches give side-effect proof you are taking your meds  
I begin to gag on the effluvial rising through the floor  
of rancid mutton and rotting fish

once I believed my son contained all things, thought he  
would expand, brighten, touch heaven

you remove your earphones, drool, plead a questioning  
smile and your disturbingly beautiful eyes search for  
a promise, another chance, something more of what  
I know not

and I am suddenly filled with you, spilling over with you  
roaring flames of my love for you, pledging to save you  
from drug infested jail corridors of rat droppings, won't  
ever let them lock you away, apologize for my unsure  
methods, will continue in my search for a space  
a sanctuary in which you can incubate your spirit where

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I will stand guard to allow for comfort, I will kill for you  
die for you, not even hell can scrape out this love

spent, I brush my lips to your cheek without touch  
or tears, it's over, the visit secured, I hand you twenty  
dollars for spending on anything,  
anything at all, darling  
whatever you want.

# Kathleen McClung

## Postcard from Hopewell Cemetery

A Michigan woman was sentenced to nine months in jail for attempted larceny. She was arrested after a witness saw a car full of flowers leaving a cemetery.

--*Washington Post*, July 24, 2017

Such lavish praise on nearly every stone.  
Nobody ever cheated here, I guess,  
or bounced a check, defaulted on a loan,  
or lit evictions with a black Zippo. Success  
blooms here in jelly jars of peonies,  
hibiscus, orchids, mums. They go to waste  
each Tuesday though, when short-timers turn keys  
on mowers, ride around, bring home bouquets  
to wives. (My ex did once, ten years ago.  
Then he left town with Viv.) On Monday nights  
I make my rounds at dusk. I drive real slow  
and pay respect, then load the car—blues, whites,  
and fuchsias, sweet ceramic bowls the shape  
of shamrocks, doves. They match my couch, my drapes.

## Glosa from the Edge of Hoarding

“Your job is to stay calm  
Your job is to watch and take notes  
To go on looking  
Your job is to not be turned into stone.”  
--Tony Hoagland, “Gorgon”

Although some people include a *the*,  
you never have. For you it’s just *Goodwill*,  
as in: *I have a bag of shoes*  
*to take to Goodwill.*  
Your job is to stay calm,

clear out those final exams from 2013,  
Clinton-Gore campaign memorabilia,  
your mother’s blouses still hanging  
in your closet since the late 90s.  
Your job is to watch and take notes

but not in spiral bound pads from Walgreens  
that eventually mildew on the floor  
beside the roller blades and Birkenstocks  
you really should deliver to Goodwill.  
To go on looking

Kathleen McClung

for some sort of comfort  
in dusty mounds, in—face it!—stasis,  
does you no discernible good, my dear.  
You must lighten. Recycle that pencil stub.  
Your job is to not be turned into stone.

## **The Nine of Doubt: Cento for Michelle Bitting**

I thread the interior  
slashing my own tires.  
There's never fair warning.  
I set flame to my feet long ago.  
Words like Fleurs Du Mal  
launched from inked lips  
must have been narcotic,  
no more than grains of dust  
bringing traffic to a halt.

I believe in a domination of clouds  
and that coyote crying in the hills,  
masks of mermaid colors.  
I don't know.  
Sometimes you have to wear one  
with your writer's blur and hunch,  
arpeggios, paisley blouse opening,  
the blessing of mud  
between the buttons.

Here's the theatre we sneak into again.  
The ladder down is rickety,  
the night's glass staircase.

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Maybe it's time for a new obsession  
or spinach for dinner. Nothing  
at the brick university to hear,  
we who strut our consonants hard.  
What if reckless backfires? What if  
even the beetles love to be trampled.

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Chiaroscuro, 2002, Red Rock Poetry Winner, The Red Rock Review  
What Marilyn Says About Her Things Being Auctioned, 2006, Marilyn Monroe themed poetry contest, chapbook of winners  
Points of Love, 2007, Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Foundation, 2020 award from Writer's Digest, 2020 Selected for Berkeley, Library's National Poetry Month, Poem in Your Pocket Project, and The San Francisco Dancing Poetry Contest, Tongue - A Magazine of Literary & Visual Arts

### Eileen Malone

From an Unloved Mother, 2004, *North American Review* as Finalist, James Hearst Poetry Prize  
What They Tell Me, 1994, *Journal 500*, University of Arizona  
The Visit Secured, 2004, *The Awakenings Review*  
The Waste, 1994, *Unsoma*  
Mental Health Clinic, 2015, *Amygdala Literary Magazine*  
Locked Ward, Again, 2016, *The Comstock Review* as HM in 30th Anniversary Contest  
Treatment Resistant, 2005, *A Chaos of Angels Anthology*  
Sand Feather, Northwest, 1987, *The Sunday Oregonian Magazine*  
Fractured, 1998, *Billee Murray Denny Poetry Anthology* as Second Prize winner

### Kathleen McClung

Velocity, 2015, *Caesura*  
Instructions for Closing, 2017, *Ice Cream Poems*  
Postcard from Hopewell Cemetery, 2017, *New Verse News*

The Year We Memorize Planets, 2016, *RedRockWriters.org*  
Glosa from the Edge of Hoarding, 2019, *Pudding*  
The Nine of Doubt: Cento for Michelle Bitting, 2019,  
*riverbabble 35*  
My Mother's Cold War, 2017, *Verseweavers*, Second Prize  
winner, Poet's Choice, Oregon Poetry Association Spring  
2017 Contest  
Perfect Game, 2017, *Writing in a Woman's Voice*  
Across and Down, 2016, won the Shirley McClure Poetry  
Prize, Los Gatos-Listowel Writers Festival, 2016  
Alumni, 2013, *Almost the Rowboat*, Finishing Line Press

## Bios

**Mary Kennedy Eastham's** work has been called darkly beautiful, erotic, lyrical and haunting. One reviewer said sitting down with her poems blew his hair back flat, reminding him of when he was in high school, laying in the grass at the end of the runway as the jets took off. In the poem *The Shadow of A Dog I Can't Forget*, a woman, married for only 60 days, deals with feelings of melancholy by inventing a mysterious dog only she can see. Mary Eastham carefully crafts a world of runaways, mystical goddesses, happy strippers, and Marilyn Monroe returned to us to comment on her life being auctioned away. The poet's words nag at us the way only a great seduction can...like liquid pearls falling from the sky above/as soft and easy as a fortune teller's dreams/We are beautiful alone with ourselves/they seem to say/evening snowflakes floating beneath a faint moon/like fingertips about to touch/a new piano/each sound, each song/a miracle.

**Eileen Malone** grew up in England, Ireland and Australia and now lives in the coastal fog at the edge of the San Francisco Bay Area. Her poems and stories have been published in over 500 literary journals and anthologies, a significant amount of which have earned awards, i.e., four Pushcart nominations. She has published four poetry collections and a book on writing groups and taught with the California Poets in the Schools and Community Colleges. [www.eileenmalone.us](http://www.eileenmalone.us) and [www.soulmakingcontest.us](http://www.soulmakingcontest.us)

**Kathleen McClung's** books include *Temporary Kin*, *The Typists Play Monopoly*, *Almost the Rowboat*, and *A Juror Must Fold in on Herself*, winner of the 2020 Rattle Chapbook Prize. Her award-winning poems appear widely in journals and anthologies. McClung teaches at Skyline College where she directed the annual Women on Writing conference for ten years. Assistant director of the Soul-Making Keats literary competition, she was a 2018-19 writer-in-residence at Friends of the San Francisco Public Library. [www.kathleenmcclung.com](http://www.kathleenmcclung.com).

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