

# Disambiguation



Jen Jabaily-Blackburn

2024 Louisa Solano Memorial Emerging Poet Award

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poems by Jen Jabaily-Blackburn

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**Salamander/Suffolk University English Department/  
73 Tremont Street/Boston, MA 02108**

*SALAMANDER'S ANNUAL LOUISA SOLANO MEMORIAL  
EMERGING POET AWARD*

Generously funded by Suffolk University's Ellen LaForge Memorial Poetry Fund, this award is given retroactively to a poet who has not published more than one full-length poetry collection at the time of their publication in *Salamander*. This award is named in honor of Louisa Solano, former owner of Cambridge's Grolier Poetry Bookshop and a champion of poets and literary magazines.

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*for my parents*





# Callisto

## *disambiguation*

Callisto may refer to a dead moon or a girl in a bear suit. Girl in a bear suit may refer to itself & its reverse, a recursion of bears & girls trading wardrobes. *Or* is itself a dead moon. Dead moon may refer to goth makeup that never suited but wore anyway to show I meant business. I did not mean business but loved to stress my most terrible features: eyes & lips sharp as snakes. Apparently a cruise is the least stressful form of vacation if the sample is restricted to those likely to go on cruises. If there is water on Callisto & she is not actually dead, there is no possibility of a cruise; the water, if present may, in fact, be a nest.

# Callisto

*applied classics*

I woke up brilliant in a forest chock full of new intelligences  
the woven nets of scent dragged me miles from myself

Dizzying in the same way that trying to grasp  
the horizon makes a person feel sick & giddy

Suddenly the thought *I have a bank account* lands  
like a lash of vinegar on bicarb the fizzy giggles oh my god

What would they do with  
this

Living back there was to act pressed between glass slides  
to be cross-sectioned & mounted

& then I woke up brilliant *i.e.* the moon  
fell through the firs like Mylar ribbon over my eyes & I thought

does the moon on waking first thing  
lift her shirt to inspect her stomach

to see how it fails to pass muster today  
ha does she the fuck

*This is a peaceful village* the neighbors back there  
loved to telegraph *This is a peaceful village* please

read that with a scrunched low voice & a jolly hoedown waggle  
of the arms like you know how a civic Rumpelstiltskin would say

The old tea shop's floor-to-ceiling drawers always looked poised  
to speak a gallery of silent faces never successfully saying *ooo*

This pleased the neighbors as if they could shut up a room  
by just stepping over a threshold

Either they will not know me or they will know me immediately  
these changes to me feel cosmetic a logical if impractical extension

The collective noun for knives in a block is a slumber  
that one's never catching on with the neighbors

The kids are mirroring me taping butter knives  
to their fingers it's hilarious

The neighborly thing for me per them  
would be to just wait out there bewildered

black hole spawning  
bang in the middle of Park Street

Just sit tight brace myself  
for their spring

## Callisto

*& the mad honey*

Last night I dreamt I went to Dairy Queen again  
I went to the grocery store  
& stress-ate fistfuls of cavolo nero & no one  
so much as looked at me I melted  
in a bath of sheer proximity felt the warmth of a crowd  
like dough coming together  
the glutinous matrix of a world in making I felt entirely  
osmosed & molecular Last night I dreamt  
I held a dear friend in a steam bath he would  
hate this but just like an Italian painting of Jesus  
everything felt gilt & serious  
a Giotto with lines of red spider silk  
renovating a holy man's heart except just between us  
I was embarrassed by the intimacy but my lips direct to god  
last night I dreamt a man in a broad-brimmed hat  
hemmed me into his chest then settled my body  
alone into a sun-warmed bed of a pickup truck  
where lazy clouds disassembled overhead & reformed  
into a Georgian rivièrè of citrines & gold  
what can I say except everybody's living  
in a material lair & last night I swear  
I dreamt I was only a girl again who went  
*type type type* about her moods in the cold  
high garret of her skull just one small endless coal  
& a mouse in a teapot for company irregular  
as ever a wave in confused sea  
ending in a gentle icy curl

## Callisto

*tantrums*

Sometimes I forget we're the both of us now & wonder  
What's her today like? What's the agenda?

A stiff wool skirt I bet teething on her waist & her going *I can eat soup  
all winter & black coffee the winter of soup & black coffee*

(Now she's going *no I wouldn't say that* yelling from the basement  
knocking to the roof of me

She would have said that  
& knows it) But probably nothing special

just the usual home away & home again brass globes tumbling after each  
other on a glass-domed clock

(Almost by reflex she saw one of these clocks on hearing or reading  
"the music of the spheres"

like divinity made visible & compact like a cosmic reliquary  
so orderly so almost affordable)

Oh can you imagine the both of us back there  
it'd be a circus act just to run errands

imagine us reassembling a pyramid of plums  
thumping cantaloupes

(*What*  
she's saying *who misses errands*)

Imagine her trying to make us wait  
under the fluorescents because it's what you do

She remembers the impatience always fizzing off of her like a bottle  
wrenched open

The act of waiting in retrospect is hilarious  
The herky-jerky procedure *you go no you go no you*

sometimes misfiring crashing together like cymbals  
then peeling back in the noise

Always allowing other passengers to disembark  
before embarking

(The bad felt like little lords the good rewarded with a half-hour of elbows  
in the belly in the breast)

It's not easy trying to get her to throw off all her good  
but we'd get a wide berth now I bet

a private city inside the city We could crack the windows on the jewelers'  
building do the bewilderment thing

& exit swimming in emeralds A brass clock wait  
a gold clock

tucked in the fold under every arm  
one in the mouth why not

She's kicking me now like  
*No we do not do that* Her tantrums are so light & adorable

so manageable when you know where  
they'll poke up their heads

Like if you know Wednesday morning  
she'll bang on the piano Tuesday cut the strings

# Callisto

*survival*

In a panic the girl remembers something called bear-trap  
actually called bear-trap

It takes all I have not to yell at her  
but she should have been paying better attention

because I don't know what it looks like & now she can't  
remember

& I'm not saying  
*you have to be shitting me*

& she feels me not saying it

We have very different ideas about survival  
I wasn't safe living so close to the humans & she insists

on preserving everything for an artifact at the smallest  
burning  
trace of human she goes running up like

*people people people people*

*like a dog*    I tell her  
*like a dog*

//



The girl is making less & less sense

*have you ever been to the movies she said*

*do you know what movies are*

I said *come on dummy*

*of course I've been*

*& fine I don't really remember*

Her favorite movie she called it educational was about two humans

a man & a woman

living inside a white-haired (but not old) man

there was a magic man with a broken bowl who could separate them

She threw her voice into focus & said

*feezhbowl* (then waited for me to reply)

*feezhbowl* (& waited again)

leaving the blanks for me to fill in

*(fix the bowl she said quietly*

*it's fix the bowl but I didn't know)*

//

For us no bowl to fix She thinks every person is a magic man  
coming to pull us apart

I know it

//

Suddenly the girl remembers

*right right right*

she says the relief swelling our chest  
pitching our shoulders back

*right it's a set of eager teeth  
these stainless eager teeth*

so that's that

//

The citizens have agreed forest is vital to the landscape  
high level predators are welcome to rejoin it

conditionally

but what out here is not a trap

they hang little bundles of seed & fat just  
high enough for us to reach  
the measurement one inexperienced bear high

Or oh god that deer in the woods that stung  
when we tried to touch it & she gasped at the wires  
stuck into it coming from the little humming box

Now we're getting to the point  
where we can no longer claim inexperience



## Self-Portrait as Rembrandt's *Storm on the Sea of Galilee*

Whether or not I actually exist  
is surprisingly fit for debate.

That 21st-century people know me at all  
supports a simulation theory.

It's possible that I am  
currently a pile of ashes.

I have never been to Miami,  
probably.

If I stop to think how tightly  
I might now be wound,

all the cracks become  
nearly audible. There we go—

how I've missed your sharp  
bewildered gasps.

It's possible I was once a single  
ash-pile, now scattered.

I have no idea  
how blue I am in real life.

I am deeply afraid  
of not having whereabouts.

I tried my hand at infiltrating dreams,  
hovering greenly in tangled scrub.

Unmade things in general  
unsettle me, their insides—no,

let's paw that thought away  
like a brine from an eye.

You'd think I'd know if I was buried,  
but that's not my call.

How strange it'd be to re-join the party  
dressed in an excavator's jaw.

I wonder sometimes  
if a truffle pig might be useful?

It pains me to acknowledge  
I had a pretty good life

in my fancy & dull before.  
Sure, people would heckle, like

“what's that one got over  
a Papa Gino's mural—”

I don't know, sir; fewer  
whole & visible grapes?

Or I'd feel weirder if people touched  
themselves while thinking of me?

I never could have been  
anything except what I was.

I heard that  
when you looked at me, like

*really* looked at me, you felt  
the full force & drama of the open sea.

## Braintree

All of this was farmland once. When they came to build the incinerator, my father dressed like a masked outlaw. His friends carried six-foot pencils. My sister & I carried Mike Dukakis in a tank. Our mother carried us children home, & the adults had sandwiches in jail. All of this is true. Jellyfish found belly-up in the salt marsh. So small as to look harmless. When possible, our passions are graspable. Mandatory karaoke Fridays, Jade or Golden Bowl. Always a choice. One church or the other. All of this was farmland once. Where we are dancing was once a horse. Helen, late of the old country, please choose: dogged fire or glowing grate. Machined lace for every maple table. Beloved cypress paneling new owners haul out. Rhotic lack the shibboleth. All of us are from here, but some are more from here than others. On the classroom wall, the lonely Yeats watching over brass-chained glasses down his nose. I propose we build in Watson Park a shrine to last working payphones. Stars deceptively near & yet so small as to look harmless. St. Brigid's friable cross above the door. Cigarette fires rip the cattails in the marsh. Glass shards in the parking lot a wrecked diadem. No country for old Helens. Blond Mr. Phys-Ed oils his feet in the center of the library. Unforgivable. Doughy feet gleaming like combative seals under the fluorescents. His younger self locked in the mural in the foyer. The mascot, a bodiless feathered chief, cast as his fawning moon. The building's architecture is considered to be Brutalist. Naphthal smell on the tracks off Pond. The last actual nuns wandering the drugstore. The replica Umbrian church, terracotta in snow. St. Francis's living epaulets. Francis, patron saint of animals, though always

the same: small passerines, rabbits, deer. You never see St. Francis attended by porcupines. You never see him cradling a jellyfish, its gas flame cool in his palm. Fore River & ever & ever. Bonus moon bobbing on the surface, belly-up. Our excuse for the sea, so small as to look harmless.



## Nantasket Half-Elegy (I)

One of the last holdouts, the Fascination parlor, once a palace of warm blinking lights & menthol smoke, is only half-awake, any nightly turn of its key perhaps the last. Playland Arcade was gone too soon; its sister, the Dream Machine, still lives. Kooky Kastle, Bermuda Triangle, Tunnel of Love; all gone, gone, gone. Kohr Bros. pulled its last custard a decade ago, the decadent wrought-iron swirls enrobed in cherry & chocolate. Is there a plainer word for *promenade*? For the surface custards split on under ongoing fugues of jut-lipped tears? The bathhouse's repolished glass bricks fling caustics. Someone's been refreshing the stucco ornaments; as long as there's a sea, there's salt that needs to be rinsed clean. The Giant Coaster, twice burned, twice reborn, was dismantled & packed to a Six Flags far too far from the shore; a hideous condominium has phoenixed up in its place. Paragon Carousel's delicate Wurlitzer trembles through Mister Sandman, & may it never—I mean let me live long. As long as there's a sea. & let it outlive me.

## Mommy Hotel

Mommy Hotel is a hotel, not a motel but it may look like one. It is right next to the sea. It is not an *Express*. It is not a *by Marriott*. There are no beeping breakfast machines in the lobby. There is no lobby. Mommies do not have to pay for Mommy Hotel; it is paid in full by a Cool Aunt Energy foundation. No one needs to apply. It's basically a MacArthur for mommies where someone puts your name in, then one day in the future you get a call saying "Hey girl, it's Mommy Hotel! Welcome!" The selection process is opaque but the one thing you know is you do not have to be good. It says as much right on your mug. Once a day your loved ones drive by in red parade cars, waving. They never say "miss you;" no, it's always a sunny "See you soon!" The staff is so well paid by Big Cool Aunt. The mommies all say thank you for everything, every time, but neatly in a way that considers the recipient's feelings. There's an office with everything you need. Your projects can go in a cupboard by the door. Someone will launder your "also no" tote bag. Go ahead, sneeze; you can pee on anything. You can ask for a shiny puce loaner liver at the desk like you might a toothbrush. There's the sea right there, but no pressure. If you want to just watch it to an erratic party of windchimes, ok. You can go in if you want, but do whatever.

## Nantasket Half-Elegy (II)

A new stall's about to start selling six-dollar elote like we're a *place*. There's an imprint of thirstiest aunts where The Red Parrot isn't anymore. How bad it can stand to get, they knew. Gentle neighborhood witches with greigey crepe décolletage & gold heart chains for crying on. *I don't know you* comes out as *don't I know you*. How old was I when I first began decoding obituaries? Long illness vs. short illness; long illness vs. "long illness;" Many rhymes for heart-death, cancers, overdose. As a region, we're particularly skilled at dying suddenly from "long illness." Long oxy. Long heroin. Long Old Crow. My minor crush from down the hill who played the bass like a dream. His sadgirl eyes like mine. Most often, though, our cells just won't shut up & gradually estrange from us. I can't make us be from somewhere better or worse. We are inlet people. Harbor people. The water here only nods to a greater wild. The heart wants, & what a dumb muscle. If nothing else, the carousel horses still pulse out of habit. It's possible to waste a whole ride watching the cranks judder in the rafters, blue grease like holy bright bodies. *Don't go*, they say. *Don't go. Don't go.*

## *The Preparation of the Dead Girl or The Preparation of the Bride*

For a person who doesn't believe in ghosts, I sure have a lot of thoughts on their possible mechanics. Example: if I move houses after a loved one has died, will they know where to find me, or does their presence assume a locality (see: the Romans' *lares*)? Will they recognize a child they'd never met, or instead assume that I am attended by a growing rift in time? That I talk to this rift, saying *no mouth*, saying *goodnight*, *do you have enough light*? That I tell the rift *I love you* & bend to kiss its bright unstable head? When I was a child, my town fought an incinerator. We held homemade signs saying "Kiss My Ashes." An older girl, Karen Boyle, built a tiny Braintree overlaid with concentric bands of color to mark how sick our townspeople might get. I think she won a medal. We moved house from orange to yellow. The smell I associate most with this time is smoke from the meeting room where they fought for clean air carried home in the cables of a sweater. We held hands across the Fore River Bridge. We kept fighting, & won.

Does that sound like an ending? Now a new company is talking about building a plant on Fore River. A compressor station for gas, different, but not. There have been disasters on the estuary before & since. Oil & metals. Some children who swam there have organs fraying in their chests. A barge— run by, shit you not, Lafarge— spilled the liquid insides of a number of cows so huge my brain just cannot. Tallow spills may be cleaned mechanically or by hand, which I imagine requires ropes, nets, & many, many hands. Not, as I wish, a massive

spoon-ex-machina skimmed across the estuary's cooled soup. That the company tasked with cleaning Lafarge's mess was Clean Harbors, the same one whose incinerator we blocked, at least satisfies my taste for irony. If you can't be soothed, you can always be petty.

*The Preparation of the Dead Girl* or *The Preparation of the Bride*, indulgent as an album's split track. Courbet, its painter, left the world as we all do, all his work left to its care. As far as Courbet's knowing could carry him, the girl was dead. She was dead & then made marriageable, badly resurrected by an agent, white dress layered over her naked body. If all you ask is the money, good art is sold art. *Good art is not huge & unsalable*, it says. *Good art relinquishes its space in the showroom*, it says. The girl's attendants aren't so much mourning as doing or not doing. Resting, washing, folding. Some girls worry with their hands. Every dorm has a girl who untangles necklace chains for the whole floor. It is not patience or goodness but stubborn drive in need of a channel. The girl's neck was still so obviously limp & wrong. No dress hides that. It is obvious, right? She looks like a wrung-out goose hoisted up for the yard to see. I see the occasional gull out where I live now, under a small mountain 90 miles west. Nothing here smells of salt. Our fish ride in vans out the Pike every day. January, estuary, march. What's an ending? Anything might be undone.

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*The Common* “Braintree”

*Couplet Poetry* “Callisto *applied classics*”

*Indiana Review* “Callisto *tantrums*”

*On the Seawall* “*The Preparation of the Dead Girl* or *The Preparation of the Bride*”

*Salamander* “Callisto *disambiguation*” & “Callisto *& the mad honey*”

The following poems were also included in *Girl in a Bear Suit* (Elixir Press, 2024): “Callisto *disambiguation*” “Callisto *applied classics*” “Callisto *& the mad honey*” “Callisto *tantrums*” “Callisto *survival*” “Braintree”

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**Jen Jabaily-Blackburn**'s first book of poems, *Girl in a Bear Suit*, was selected by Christopher Citro as winner of the 2023 Elixir Press Annual Poetry Prize. Her recent work has appeared in or is coming soon from *SIR*, *Arkansas International*, *Palette Poetry*, *Salamander*, *Fugue*, *Banshee*, *On the Seawall*, and *Couplet Poetry*, and her poems have twice been selected for *Best New Poets*. She is at work on a series of mixed-media blackout poems, *hem*, drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Originally from the Boston area, she now lives in Western Massachusetts with her family. In 2024, she joined the advisory board of Perugia Press, and she is an associate editor of Nine Syllables Press, housed at Smith College, where she is the Program & Outreach coordinator for the Boutelle-Day Poetry Center.

