

How to Stay Curious

Poems by Rebecca Macijeski for Critical Mass 13, June-August 2026

This text is intended for viewing by visitors to the Critical Mass Exhibition at Artspace in Shreveport only and does not constitute publication. Do not share, copy, or redistribute this text. Any inquiries about the poems may be directed to howtostaycurious@gmail.com. Thank you.

How to Keep a Secret to Yourself

You start looking in the library for labyrinths, mazes, vortices. Instead of practicing hitting each other between the sandbox and the swing set with the other recess kids, you pace the rows and rows of books deeper and further away. You sit, piling yourself gently on the old carpet, glad the other third graders sound distant outside and indistinct—like traffic, a dull hum. You're grateful they can't reach you. Grateful no one can reach you. At arm's length are hundreds of worlds, lined up, tidy and catalogued for you. Things make sense here. Drawing your fingers along smooth spines. Grabbing a handful at a time. Looking for a new story, a new town, a new name, a new map to read. It feels good. When you're learning about islands with blue dolphins, girl spies, hitch hiking the universe, chocolate factories, the old west, you think less and less about the frontier you leave behind. You start wondering what another girl in another world in another library might do if one day she opens the third book from the left and finds you there, saved through time, like one of Emily Dickinson's crickets or a pressed pansy so fuchsia and fresh no one remembers it's dead.

How to Write Your Name

Rebecca is a collection of sounds that point at me, my ears trained to them like inevitable dogs.

Rebecca makes the same shape on all of my credit cards shingled together in my wallet until they expire, until I expire.

Rebecca was the first word I learned to crayola onto a plain white field. She fledged slowly. She could have been a mountain, or a rhino. A many-legged thing trying not to wobble in the loose grass.

Rebecca, the more I say it or hear it, becomes another label I can't shake. People think if they know it they know me. An unwanted chorus pulling me again and again. I am no one's magic word.

Rebecca is more than a shorthand for the energy that follows me. It's a motif. It signals I'm still part of the world. *Rebecca*, in other peoples' minds, puts me in Bibles or Hitchcock movies or Sunnybrook Farm. I become a reference, someone else's character, an allusion to stories I don't live in. A warp in the melody.

Wikipedia gives 56 variants of *Rebecca*. An archive of butterflies pinned to the screen. A swarm. When I scan each spelling, I'm not sure which one is me. Each scroll, each click, each flutter brings me further away from my name. I'm haunting my home from the outside. I'm looking for a light on in the window.

How to Revive Ophelia

You must remember a girl is a wild animal. She begins as an idea in the wilderness of her mother. Dark solitude, clinging warm, arriving into a future she must learn new every time. It's a story of distance, of severing—first from the land that made her, then over and over again from the freedom she makes in herself before the tides shift, before you see a territory to claim instead of a flame to keep, lumber to harvest instead of wind to witness shimmering the trees. You must remember. We mean the way moonlight means, in the old festivals, in the impossible green after days of rain. Don't give us flowers. Don't tell us we're beautiful. Fear us. Divorce us from the means of production. We aren't here to make you. We're here to make ourselves. To glow. To hold our own lanterns. To know ourselves as sisters in returning, sisters in wilderness.

How to Learn What the World Knows About You

Open the chat window. Type. Ask what you want to know. Let the AI sing back, spewing facts like a kid who can't shut up about dinosaurs. A kid can't regulate the bigness in her body, the bigness of that dream—lizards bigger than busses were just out there eating trees before a space rock killed the world. When she tells you what excitement feels like she gets as big as she possibly can. The AI doesn't have scraped knees. It gives you statistics about the likelihood of blood-borne infection based on how much time the skin stretched over the patella stays in contact with the playground pavement. Variables include mud, the presence (or not) of hopscotch chalk, air temperature, humidity, and whether or not one of the Dilena boys is catching snakes nearby. But we're distracted now. Tangents are a sure way to prove we're still human. The stories data tell aren't the full meals you crave—they're an assemblage of facts like a deconstructed salad. I ask the chat window to tell me about where I was born, to build a history out of what little I know to tell it. Manhattan. 1984. The same hospital where AIDS patients and 9/11 victims came to die before it was torn down for luxury condos. My mother, full with my future, rode the subway there. I picture her scared on the train, worrying between universes like Nadia in an episode of Russian Doll. That's what I've got. Then questions come next. Was my father with her? Was she alone? Did someone give up a seat for her, or was she stuck standing, holding on, bracing for impact? The AI can't tell me. Like me, it can imagine a scene of grit, smokers, screeching metal, inaudible radio, then a young me at the end of the tunnel. It can't tell me something my mother never told me. Here the project fails. If a secret hasn't been whispered into a journal, an ear, an internet browser, a subway train, a playground, it's lost to time. I don't get to know it, either.

How to Transform

I'm a basketball. I'm a pinwheel. I'm underwater. I'm growing. I'm inside the moon. I believe in whatever you don't believe in. All my plants call me mother while I water them and watch the Rohrschachs of their leaves bloom. I sleep the same way a mountain cleaves to the land it drifts from. I began long before I was born. When I taught in Japan I was a sci fi hero; my depression lived in the future and catalogued its own storms. I drew face after face, measuring my life in pencil shavings—a hamster dressing her cage. Like anyone, I live too long in the test scenarios of memory. There's a thin line between remembering and imagining. It's easy to track the wrong path through the wrong grid when all you really want is a map back to the moment you're living in, a loosening, another new chance to understand. I'm a low radio hum. I'm a fortress. I believe that someday I will make sense in a way that makes sense. For now—and now is all we ever have—I'm right here. Holding on before I change again.

How to Believe

No. No thought experiments.

No one can tell you how.

Kill the albatross. Eat for days.

How to Track Joy

Though she lives in plain sight in a variety of environments, she's difficult to locate. Some days she prefers forests. Other days it's jeans pockets, or a grocery shelf shadow where she's hiding with the last sleeve of cookies. Some say she's another cryptid, like the mothman; if you declare your belief in her, then your family will renounce their belief in you. There are no definite tools to aid in the search. Your local hunting supply shop has duck calls and camouflage, but disguises won't help you. She can't be fooled. She can't see you unless you see yourself. She's tricky that way. Something about quantum entanglement. You forget where you are. The time math gets wonky. You live in moments now, each one a river stone. Your life the river. Feel it cool on your toes. The quiet you live inside makes room for the wind in your hair, for bird song. This isn't decoration; it's the sound of the world knowing itself, the sound of the world knowing you. Stop trying to figure it out. Soon the quiet outside is the same as the quiet inside. When it happens, it feels simple. Like all you had to do was listen, rediscover the trust in yourself you stopped tending. For once, become a garden instead of a to-do list, instead of a bomb, instead of the catalog of wounds you hope no one sees. Turn the soil over. The shoots are waiting. Green is good. But it's been a lifetime. Ease is the least easy feeling there is. Don't worry. She's got you. She knows the way. She's here. Take a walk in the woods. If there are no woods, make some. If there are no words, make some. Smile. See what happens. Breathe. See where she finds you next.

How to Live Inside a Folk Tale

Spend years in caves. Trust nothing
you haven't read written in moss,
or calves' blood, by candlelight,
escaping. Others fear the forest.
Good. Leave the plowed fields.

Learn instead to believe the trees.

To be like the old growth. To speak
in seasons. Let others think
you are lost. Good.

You'll find yourself. You'll find
your own way.

You'll know the plants and animals
by their wild names, not
by human myths. Latin or Greek? No.

The syntax of
deer and wolves
splitting themselves
into generations.

How to Make Dinner

The house needs to be quiet for days. No one has called you on the phone. No visitors, no e-mails, no bills, no anxious trips to the mailbox. If you're lucky, the sky is busy building a storm so not even sunshine can bother you out of your solitude. There's just enough light on in the kitchen to not trip over yourself while you search the freezer for time travelers. You slide the toggle on one of the little plastic envelopes and welcome the nervous food home. To the future. The potatoes need a while to acclimate, to catch their breath. They're in a different world now. They're from before Thanksgiving, from before your love cracked his head on the floor in this same kitchen and spent a week in the hospital. Barely made it out for his birthday. But he's home now. Okay now. It's springtime. The trees are blossoming. They're showing you what they've been working hard on all winter. Like kids about to cannonball into a pool, they do their darndest to get you to look. Why else would they smell like you've never really been alive before right now? And the stove burns its little fire for you. And the rain begins. And the potatoes are warm in their final journey to your mouth. And later you'll kiss your love with that same mouth. And the house will know just how to hold the world.

How to Cast Extras for the Film Adaptation of Your Brain

Audition all the banshees. The wailiest ones. They're hovering in clusters like ghoulish kites. They turn your mind into a verified haunted house. There are storms. There are bats and creaky floorboards. There are creatures who won't show themselves, a few who can't stop showing themselves. No telling why. There are hundreds of wick flames swimming in waxy pools. Despite all their coursework in physics and lore, banshees make poor improvisors. Their chaos is too predictable. They're always wailing. Only ever wailing. I've tried convincing them into other verbs but that gets tricky. Late one night, on a dare, I managed to coax a small one into hooting. She stopped bobbing up and down—just for a moment, but I saw. She became a row boat on a still ocean. The space where I guessed a mouth might be narrowed, curled. What happened next was stunning. I prepared to hear something like a circus ride, a radio sing along, or a meadowlark. What came instead was more like a rape whistle, a police siren, a single falcon piercing a windstorm.

How to Stay Curious

A trillion questions flow through us every day. Blood. Digestion. Electricity cruising the neighborhoods in our brains. We know every mailbox. Every sidewalk weed. When I try to tell you what's in my mind, I know it would come out better as a hug or a succulent or a pot roast. Twinkle lights. A single perfect cupcake. At least the icing. As kids, we'd collect things. Back yards. Bruises. Seconds between lightning strikes. Names of dinosaurs. Days after this pain and before the next full moon. Plastic trays with clusters of river rocks, puffy stickers, vitamins, coins from other countries. And now? We keep getting ready. The millennium was supposed to be ours. We waited for all those 9s to flip, odometers spinning the world. But here we are. Here we always are. Let's be kids again watching fireflies over and over. Or Helen Keller learning to shout WATER with our hands. Or we could move to the moon. We'd weigh less there, and there's no homeowner's association to regulate our tulips. Not even any tulips. But we can make new ones. We can bring the seeds. My pockets are full. What about you? We could stay up night gardening on the moon. It's always night on the moon. It's like living inside a wish. We'd stay up until the all-night diner flips back to breakfast. I could tell you all about the pancakes, the shit coffee, the space truckers lingering over their sausage biscuits. But don't you want your own plate and mug? You can have the hash any way you like. We can share some chocolate pie maybe while the longhaulers gather their hats and coats to head out for Mars. Here. I'll help you. Squint a little and we'll get there. All maple and chrome, old china, engines, distant galaxies shimmering.

How to Invent Someone

His name was Gus. He lived in a cave hidden on the edge of town. It was small, but it was his. When the neighbor kids would walk past in the afternoons after school carrying knapsacks full of algebra and popsicle goo and zoo permission slips, he'd watch them from a little opening between sticks and other forest litter he fashioned together as a kind of lookout. This way he could enjoy the colorful kids laughing, poking at each other, or splashing their little boots in puddles on their way to their separate houses. This wasn't creepy. This wasn't that kind of watching. Gus wasn't a person. Or, he wasn't not a person—not exactly. He wasn't human is what I was saying. He wasn't like us in that way, but he was like us in other ways. He had long bits of himself situated generally at the front with opening and closing grabby bits at the ends of those bits. He used them to scoop up flowers at night to fill his cave. It was easier for him to sleep on a soft bed of stolen irises and daffodils than it was to close his eyes and hope for dreams in a cave without flowers, which would essentially just be a piece of empty night that the ground held onto. Gus had been here a few weeks or so. He was a steadiness the town didn't know it had, a kind of fulcrum between human knowing and wild knowing. Again, this wasn't creepy. I feel like I have to remind you of that. It was just Gus's way. He was trying to maintain his steadiness. He didn't need to hunt or eat. What else was there to do? His favorite days were the rainy ones—the ones when the sky wasn't so bright—when he wouldn't have to squint all his eyelids to keep from developing migraines. The clouds made the relative dark outside his cave the same as the relative dark inside his cave. And there was great comfort in that. The world seemed to know him better in the rain, like it understood the shapes he made when he was happy, the shapes he hoped—if anyone saw them—looked like smiles.

How to Have Depression

Again. Wake up. Again. Breathe with intention, to fill the pink balloons of your lungs. Maybe this time you'll fly. Again. Convince yourself this day will be okay. Turn the idea over and over. Watch it shine. It's a beautiful lie. Again. Remember your brother. Beat yourself up for not remembering what day he died. So many years ago. Was it June or July? Again. Drink enough water. Get enough exercise. Not too much sugar. Enough fat. But only the right kind. Keep track, but don't obsess. Try not to get overwhelmed. How are you doing? Again. Days blur, losing their crispness. Each one another piece of the same inarticulate metaphor. Again. I thought I solved it yesterday. Again. Protect yourself. Guard against all invaders. E-mails, bills, rooms to clean, happiness, people who love you. Everything a stimulus, everything a threat. Again. Don't check your phone. Let's try something new today. Meditate for twenty minutes before anything else, before breakfast even. Don't forget. Forgetting means you're weak, you have no discipline, you don't love yourself, you'll break at the slightest tremor, people around you will worry you're dying of sadness. You'll think about all the beautiful people who've died of sadness. You'll wonder what it sounded like inside them. If it sounds like this. Again. Hydration becomes an issue after a while. You'll need the right kind of eye drops, the good kind, not the ones that dilate your blood vessels. If you cry while lying on your back trying to sleep, the little tears will flow like runoff down the sides of your face. You will imagine you are a mountain. There's strength in mountains. Again. Certain times of year make it worse. Winter after the holidays, but also during the holidays, also summer, also springtime, also anniversaries, also evenings. You might try to keep data to help yourself know ahead of time. You might try. You might close the loop. Your phone can remember what you can't, can remind you what to feel, when to feel, that other people probably don't need reminding. They just breathe. They just feel. Or you might sit with it a while. It might become dark or cold. It might rain the way a sky is clear one minute and biblical the next. Again. And you're humming now. The same way the thunderstorm hums out, long reaching, becomes distance. This feels familiar now, terrible now, like home. Quiet. Again. At least it's yours. At least you're here. Minding the weather. Cloud by cloud. Each one. Again.

How to Grow Tulips

It's simple. Think of it this way.
It's the earth's birthday and your backyard
is the cake. If you cut it open,
you'd see all the time there—rocks, soccer balls,
the beloved dog, and the wisp of Kentucky blue on top.
The bulbs are ready to party.
They're waiting—all quiet
in the dark of the ground—to shout
SURPRISE into the sunshine. They can't help themselves.
They wait just as long as they can,
but we all know flowers are shit at secrets.
So here they come all of a sudden, lit up and colordrunk,
mouths hanging open. On a Tuesday!
Who needs candles? Who needs a wish?

How to Learn Your Place

No one kisses in this house. Not on the tv. Not in pictures. Not in a marriage. Birthdays mean extra morning prayers. Bringing the groceries in means pulling down the little blue and white china box with the holy salt from the high shelf and blessing every plastic bag so the devil can't get us through the store brand corn flakes. You're part of a story you didn't write. Aren't you lucky. Now you can save your thinking for algebra and violin lessons and waiting for someone to decide you're a wife. Your body is just a rent control apartment where your soul lives. Everywhere you go is a dangerous neighborhood with no protection and you're never sure what exactly to be afraid of. So, to be safe, you'll be afraid of everything. Decisions, fitted clothes, anyone not from this house, yourself. It's easier that way. You were told you were born special. Not like the others. Your parents gave up their lives to make you. You're the reward for that sacrifice. Aren't you lucky. You get to be everybody's promise but your own.

How to Say No

I need to make sense of things, so I decide each thought in my head is a polished skull. Toucans and crocodiles and elk, all manner of wild. They're all jumbly in there, a muffled clanking. What matters most in this mess are the negative spaces, the shapes between hollowed-out heads, the eyeholes, the potential behind teeth, crevices in smooth bone. Each one its own room. I'm not anyone's specimen. You can't collect me. I'll join the bone tower first. I'll be another grizzly smile. But there's another way to say no. Did you know that your imagination could open up its very own mouth and say *Fuck That*? Just out into the air. Same as a bird chirping. It could whisper *Fuck That* as an old woman on a stoop in Brooklyn who has earned the right to spurn a world that spurned her. Or, it could gurgle *Fuck That* as a hippo just under the surface of a river never once photographed by National Geographic. Maybe there aren't words. Maybe the *Fuck That* comes as the squinty side eye from your own orange house cat licking what's left after the neutering. As many things as you can think, that's how many options there are. I bet you have your own list. I bet it's a good one, too. I bet it might have a snow globe, a brick thrown at Elon Musk's neck, the memory that never happened of your mother telling you cleanly and gently from the hidden symphony of her real self that she loves you, she's proud of all you're becoming. You have so many good time bombs right there. Your imagination is valiantly holding them all under her arm even as they try to escape their way up to you or sneak snacks from your kitchen like a little army of raccoons. The *Fuck That* could be one of the raccoons. Maybe you're named Rebecca like me, or Rebecca like the raccoon who lived in the White House with Grace and Calvin Coolidge. I like to think she had some fancy hats, and that she almost never ate any of them. They're tidy now in some closet no tourists get to see. We—my imagination and I—like to think Rebecca (the racoon one, not me) looked particularly good in a pillbox hat, that she could have made a marvelous taxidermy Jackie O. You could do this, too, you know. You, too, could say good morning and instead of following acceptable guidelines for thought and object permanence to stay the you other people see, you could become whatever your imagination can make. Your *Fuck That* could be the solution to your own pain, a beautiful salmon dinner, the way it feels when the person who loves you best walks into a room to see you and smiles so you smile back and you know even with the backdrop of everything at least this bit is good. At least this bit. At least bit—this right now—is enough.

How to Learn

Green. A soft mist. Coming into view.
A dusty road. Convergence. Leaves: debris.

Data again. Fragments join, knowing.
Each. Molecule. Somehow. More.

How can I possibly show you? This holding
is where I live. Forest? Brain?

It's all just branching. Just connection.

One wrong lightning and I've never been here.

One good flash and I'll live forever.
One slice, one scope at a time.

Watch me split thinner and thinner.
Page after page after day after day.

Do you see? Or are you lost again in the woods,
scrambling for something to read?

How to Befriend Your Sleep Paralysis Demons

They're not like us. But it's okay. They practice shapes because they can't make us breakfast or tell us about their vacations. How would you feel if we could only see you out of the corners of our eyes in mid-terror when all you wanted was a hug, maybe a nice story? They have no reflections. They have no shadows. There's never enough light to see if they have eyes or faces even. They didn't ask to be tall or lurking. We didn't ask to need a third of our lives in transitional consciousness, either, waiting for the morning to rob us of our dignity. The whole thing's weird. We know it is. We just don't say it. What if we're the creepy ones who can't be avoided—lying down each night and covering ourselves with old quilts to close our eyes for the long journey of our dreaming? Meanwhile they're waiting at the edge of things so as not to disturb—thoughtful—and we only see them when we're already ready to shout at what isn't there. That doesn't seem fair. I have a friend who left seeds at the edge of the woods for weeks to trade with crows. She'd bring snacks and the crows would bring her back trinkets—dimes, thimbles, brass buttons, little army men, earrings, bullet casings, one time what looked like a finger bone. Maybe that's our way forward. At the edge of our beds we'll leave sweet cakes and candy, maybe some pretzels, and when we see what hovers opposite us when our minds are prone, resetting, we'll see them more like ourselves. Liminal and lucky, waiting for a prize.

How to Die

We gather. We watch the monitors in orbit.
This cathedral of digital flickering.
The faces, our faces—solemn moths
at the spoiling flame.

We know there will be embers soon.
There will be the final bird song of the heart,
a terminal flutter, frail muscle softening to sleep.

But we are a circle now.

We hold the departing
the same way hollowed earth and dry wood
form a kind of holding for the burning

that must spend itself.
This is how matter works.
This is how we matter.
We witness the living leave
and know that we will follow.
We know the burning will stop.
We know we will stop.

I know I will stop.

Why else am I looking so hard for what glows?

How to Befriend the Moon

I wish we wore the same size. Then we could share cardigans, traveling pants, craters, maybe gravity. I wouldn't let anyone plant any more flags on her face. She wouldn't let anyone call me moody. It's true we both have dark sides. What satellite doesn't? Some of us orbit planets. Others orbit existential questions. There's not much difference functionally—maybe just in how we'd write the equation, how we'd name the variables. She could help me see time differently. Breakfast isn't a new shore. It's a return. A study in phases. My yogurt waxing and waning in the sky of its little bowl. And I've got things to offer, too. I can get real close and tell her what she's too far away to see even squinting. Sure she takes a look around on her elliptical, but it's hard to make out kangaroos or ice cream when you're going 2,000 miles an hour. She never shows a sweat, but I know she's running. She's like all of us that way—one of the girls. The world only ever sees one side. Never the rest of it. Just light and dark blinking into millennia.

How to Get Drunk on Robert Frost's Porch

We waited. It's June. Bugs are buzzing now. The dense New Hampshire dirt road forests are filling with fireflies and bears. We wait for dusk, for the colors on the mountain ridge to sigh to sleep like kids whose fathers will carry them to bed. You and the half dozen or so others on the porch with us aren't quite pilgrims—Bob isn't worth all that—but something did bring us here. Something compelled us to gather. These woods are lovely, dark and deep, and we have promises to keep. So we pour them slowly, passing mason jars and plastic cups. The best storms and the best stories wait for nightfall. We know this now. We're held in the upturned palm of this moment as thunder bellows its blessings in the impossible dark. If a bear were to shamble up the stony road toward us and look through the beaded curtain of rain shimmering from the eaves of the old house, we'd be like a cave painting, each one of us spotlighted by moonshine.

How to Be Gentle

Write your name. It's a blessing now.
 The pen in your hand is a bird's foot
 scratching for worms. Light a candle. Become
 the candle. Become your hands in the matchbox,
 the strike, the resolute flame. Get lost
 in the flicker, the clinging wick, the memory
 of other fires. You've done this before.

Show up. Sometimes an explosion, sometimes
 a hesitation. Maybe a coffee or a relapse
 or another book about how to make decisions.
 The first footprint in snow. A throat clearing.
 A glance. Stay here. A red bird lands
 at your window. Just for a second. Just like
 a promise, before flaming back into the sky.

It's not a test. No litmus paper.
 No voting booths, blue books, glossaries,
 flow charts. Our bodies are borders as fictional
 as what separates Spain from France,
 living from dead. The molecules that make us
 are smarter than all that. They know pain is pain
 whether it's yours or mine, ours or theirs.

You don't have to believe. You don't have to
 anything. This place, this backyard, is beyond
 what you imagine the old storytelling days brought
 with silks and tents and trade winds blowing in.
Welcome, the grass says. *Welcome*, the trees say.
Welcome, the mind says, as it unfetters itself
 from clumsy promises. *Drink*, we hear ourselves say,
 the same way an ocean drinks a river.

What are any of us really
 other than a mouth or an open well,
 the wishing or the wish.