“Yet the biggest problem for voice as a critical term may come from its fans. The term has been used in such a loose and celebratory way as to mean almost anything. It’s become a kind of warm fuzzy word: people say that writing has voice if they like it or think it is good or has some virtue that is hard to pin down.” — Peter Elbow, “What Do We Mean When We Talk about Voice in Texts?”

“Even if we knew the children were all asleep and healthy, the ledgers balanced, the water running clear in the pipes, and all the prisoners free, even if every word we wrote by then were honest, the sheer heft of our living behind it, not these sometimes lax, indolent lines, these litanies, even if we were told not just by friends, that this was honest work…”
— Adrienne Rich, “Poetry III”

1. “City of Boys” by Beth Nugent

— My little sweetheart, she says, bringing her face close enough for me to see the fine net of lines that carves her face into a weathered stone. — You love me, don’t you little sweetheart, little lamb?

Whether or not she listens anymore, I am not sure, but I always answer yes; yes, I always say, yes, I love you. She is my mother, my father, my sister, brother, cousin, lover; she is everything I ever thought any one person needed in the world. She is everything but a boy.

— Boys, she tells me. — Boys will only break you.

I know this. I watch them on the street corners, huddled under their puddles of blue smoke. They are as nervous as insects, always some part of their bodies in useless, agitated motion, a foot tapping, a jaw clenching, a finger drawing circles against a thigh, eyes in restless programmed movement as they watch women pass — they look
from breasts to face to legs to breasts. They are never still and they twitch and jump when I walk by, but still I want them. I want them in the back seats of their cars, I want them under the bridge where the river meets the rocks in a slick slide of stone; I want them in the back rows of theatres and under the bushes and benches in the park.

—Boys, she says. —Don’t even think about boys. Boys would only make you do things you don’t know how to do and things you’d never want to do if you knew what they were. I know, she says, —I know plenty about boys.

2. “My White Planet” by Mark Anthony Jarman

Her enclosed boat a tiny orange orb among monstrous green icebergs, and I dream of her coming to me, waves like giant white gnashing horses, a female coming like a coma, a young woman staring at me from wild water spray, sliding in and out of sight, her little boat a dizzy dome with plastic windows, an orange plastic cask bobbing and rolling at the same time.

3. “We Love You Crispina” by Jenny Zhang

Back when my parents and I lived in Bushwick in a building sandwiched between a drug house and another drug house, the only difference being that the dealers in the one drug house were also the users and so more unpredictable, and in the other the dealers were never the users and so more shrewd—back in those days, we lived in a one-bedroom apartment so subpar that we woke up with flattened cockroaches in our bedsheets, sometimes three or four stuck on our elbows, and once I found fourteen of them pressed to my calves, and there was no beauty in taking them off, though we strove for grace, swinging our arms in the air as if we were ballerinas. Back then, if one of us had to take a big dump, we would try to hold it in and run across the street to the bathroom in the Amoco station, which was often slippery from the neighbourhood hoodlums who used it and sprayed their pee everywhere, and if more than one of us felt the stirrings of a major shit declaring its intention to see the world beyond our buttholes, then we were in trouble because it meant someone had to use our perpetually clogged toilet, which wasn’t capable of handling anything more than mice pellets, and we would have to dip our supply of old toothbrushes and chopsticks to mash our king-sized shits into smaller pieces since we were too poor and too irresponsible back then to afford even a toilet plunger and though my mom and dad had put it on their list of “things we need to buy immediately or else we’ve just lost all human dignity,” somehow at the end of the month we’d be a hundred dollars short and couldn’t pay the gas bill in full, or we’d owe twenty dollars to a friend here and
ten to a friend there and so on, until it all got so messy that I felt there was no way to really account for our woes, though secretly I blamed myself for instigating all our downward spirals…

4. “The Husband Stitch” by Carmen Maria Machado

(If you read this story out loud, please use the following voices:

ME: as a child, high-pitched, forgettable; as a woman, the same.
THE BOY WHO WILL GROW INTO A MAN AND BE MY SPOUSE: robust, with serendipity.
MY FATHER: kind, booming; like your father or the man you wish was your father.
MY SON: as a small child, gentle sounding with the faintest of lisps; as a man like y husband.
ALL OTHER WOMEN: interchangeable with my own.)

In the beginning, I know I want him before he does.


Cut hair. Above me revolving slowly is the tin-bladed fan, turning like a giant knife all day above my head. So you can never relax and stretch up. The cut hair falls to the floor and is swept by this thick almost liquid wind, which tosses it to the outskirts of the room. I blow my nose every hour and get the hair-flecks out of it. I cough them up first thing in the morning. I spit out the black fragments onto the pavement as I walk home with Nora from work…

6. Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston

The people all saw her come because it was sundown. The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment.

Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times. So they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with
relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools of out laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive. Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song.

“What she doin coming back here in dem overhalls? Can’t she find no dress to put on?—Where’s dat blue satin dress she left here in?—Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her?—What dat ole forty year ole ‘oman doin’ wid her hair swingin’ down her back lap some young gal? …”

7. *The Last Samurai* by Helen DeWitt

My name is Ludo. I am 5 years old and 267 days old. It is 99 days to my sixth birthday. Sibylla gave me this book today to write in because she said I should practice writing because my handwriting is atrocious, and they will not let me write on a computer all the time at school. I said I didn’t know what to write and Sibylla said I could write about things I liked so that in later years I would be able to see what I liked as a child. Also I could write about interesting things that happened so that in later years I would be able to remember things that had happened. One thing that I like a lot is polynomials but I do not like the word binomial because it is wrong. I have decided never to use it. I always use the right word for a polynomial whatever anybody else does. My favourite Greek word is γαγγλιον and that is all the things I like today.