The Rest Is Memory

an anthology of poems

June 2022

"Sometimes in thought the mind hears them.

And with their sound for a moment return
other sounds from the first poetry of our life—"

-Constantine Cavafy, "Voices"

"Which perhaps was the reward of having cared for people; they came back in the middle of St. James's Park on a fine morning."

-Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

"That a poem could do that to the poet—that it could rescue one from wasting one's life—that its very nature forced one to undergo that very core of experience something in all of us will do anything to avoid—well, it made me a poet. Or at least someone who wanted to try to write poems."

-Jorie Graham, presently

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Preface

The Greek poet Constantine Cavafy, a modern writer whose sensibility made him an intimate of the ancients, harked back in his poem "Voices" to "the first poetry of our life—." Cavafy's sense of "poetry" is at once poignant and expansive. He means to evoke not the voices of the literary dead but the voices of those closest to us. Or rather, his poem sees these two very different kinds of voices as working upon us in the same ways. Here is his poem in full:

> Ideal and beloved voices
> of those who are dead, or of those
> who are lost to us like the dead.
>
> Sometimes they speak to us in our dreams;
> sometimes in thought the mind hears them.
>
> And with their sound for a moment return
> other sounds from the first poetry of our life —
> like distant music that dies off in the night.

This is an anthology of poems that—for singular and perhaps unforeseeable reasons—have stayed with readers who first encountered them in their own high school days (in a few cases, a little earlier or later). For at least one reader, that is to say, each of these poems has made the unlikely leap from a literary artifact dutifully studied to a voice known and remembered and returned to, sometimes over a distance of many years. Probably the poem that has had the longest life in the mind of one our contributors is one he first learned around 1949 and has been turning over since. (You do the math.)

Some contributors are writers, editors, or teachers of one or another kind. One is a lawyer. Each has been kind enough to write a line or two, or more, about why the poem they've chosen has stayed with them all this time.

I'm grateful to Leon Steinmetz for allowing his art to grace this anthology twice. The artist records that among his own best-remembered poems would be John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in particular its last stanza:

> O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
> Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
> With forest branches and the trodden weed;

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

I hope you find something here you're struck by, whether when you first read it or—even better—when it comes back to you, in however fragmentary a form, sometime in the future.

-TU

I've always loved Louise [Glück]'s poem "Nostos"—especially the last lines "We look at the world once, in childhood. / The rest is memory." When I was younger, the last lines seemed like an unshakable truth, but now they feel like a warning to keep digging through the surface of the world so that the way I observe doesn't become static.

And I wish I had discovered Marwa Helal's "Poem to Be Read from Right to Left"—so much power in her formal gesture! She really captures what it's like to live in multiple languages.

Laura Marris

Nostos
Louise Glück (1943—)

There was an apple tree in the yard—
this would have been
forty years ago—behind,
only meadows. Drifts
of crocus in the damp grass.
I stood at that window:
late April. Spring
flowers in the neighbor's yard.
How many times, really, did the tree
flower on my birthday,
the exact day, not
before, not after? Substitution
of the immutable
for the shifting, the evolving.
Substitution of the image
for relentless earth. What
do I know of this place,
the role of the tree for decades
taken by a bonsai, voices
rising from the tennis courts—
Fields. Smell of the tall grass, new cut.
As one expects of a lyric poet.

We look at the world once, in childhood.
The rest is memory.

Poem to Be Read From Right to Left
Marwa Helal

language first my learned i
second
see see
for mistaken am i native
go i everywhere
*moon and sun to
ل letter the like
lamb like sound
fox like think but

recurring this of me reminds
chased being dream
circle a in
duck duck like
goose
no were there but
children other
of tired got i
number the counting
words english of
to takes it
in 1 capture
another

//

*شمسية و قمرية

The poem that blew me away in high school was Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." I loved the way he wasn't searching for sentiments that would fit into a poem--instead, he seemed to believe that a poem could take any shape in order to encompass everything: every subject, every feeling.

For a particular example, I loved that he would write "he and she," when every other 19th century writer would have just written "he":

"Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?
I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it."

It was like he was 150 years ahead of his time.

Brian Morton

From "Song of Myself"
Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

6.

A child said What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say Whose?

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out of their mothers' laps,
And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

7.

Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?
I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it.

I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd babe, and am not contain'd between my hat and boots,
And peruse manifold objects, no two alike and every one good,
The earth good and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good.

I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth,
I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself,
(They do not know how immortal, but I know.)

Every kind for itself and its own, for me mine male and female,
For me those that have been boys and that love women,
For me the man that is proud and feels how it stings to be slighted,
For me the sweet-heart and the old maid, for me mothers and the mothers of mothers,
For me lips that have smiled, eyes that have shed tears,
For me children and the begetters of children.

Undrape! you are not guilty to me, nor stale nor discarded,
I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether or no,
And am around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless, and cannot be shaken away.

In Robert Brown's AP English, 1988, Rice Memorial High School, South Burlington, Vermont:

"A Note on Moonlight" by Wallace Stevens. It taught me how to see by moonlight, what to look for, how to use my imagination to complete what the eye takes in.

I think much of what people call "loneliness" could be reclaimed as a positive experience, if only we knew what to do with our minds. Stevens's poem is a series of thrilling mental events, adventures: the "change of color in the plain poet's mind." We're all "plain poets"—Stevens reminds us that we can "disturb night and silence" not with speech or song, but even with "an interior sound."

When I first read it, I realized all the time I had already logged inside my mind—and how much more time I would be spending there. The poem teaches us how to keep ourselves company.

Dan Chiasson

A Note on Moonlight
Wallace Stevens (1879-1955)

The one moonlight, in the simple-colored night,
Like a plain poet revolving in his mind
The sameness of his various universe,
Shines on the mere objectiveness of things.

It is as if being was to be observed,
As if, among the possible purposes
Of what one sees, the purpose that comes first,
The surface, is the purpose to be seen,

The property of the moon, what it evokes.
It is to disclose the essential presence, say,
Of a mountain, expanded and elevated almost
Into a sense, an object the less; or else

To disclose in the figure waiting on the road

An object the more, and undetermined form
Between the slouchings of a gunman and a lover,
A gesture in the dark, a fear one feels

In the great vistas of night air, that takes this form,
In the arbors that are as if of Saturn-star.
So, then, this warm, wide, weatherless quietude
Is active with a power, an inherent life,

In spite of the mere objectiveness of things,
Like a cloud-cap in the corner of a looking-glass,
A change of color in the plain poet's mind,
Night and silence disturbed by an interior sound,

The one moonlight, the various universe, intended
So much just to be seen—a purpose, empty
Perhaps, absurd perhaps, but at least a purpose,
Certain and ever more fresh. Ah! Certain, for sure…

Heather McHugh's "What Poems Are For":

I don't remember any poetry from high school; my "ah-ha" moments in literature all came in college, not before.

Instead of a high school memory, I'll offer this, much later one:

I was preparing to interview at another school a number of years ago, and I was supposed to teach "a poem" to an honors class. I could choose the poem. I asked a colleague, himself a poet, for suggestions and he recommended Heather McHugh's *Hinge & Sign*. I've bought at least three copies of that collection in the past decade and given each one away (unintentionally—the "borrowers" simply refused to return the texts!). I'm about to order another.

The poem I find myself coming back to is "What Poems Are For." I have an attraction to poems that examine their craft; I look for answers to why I'm so drawn to poetry, and I hope to find those answers in these poems. McHugh's poem begins so frustratingly oblique: "They aren't for everything." Like a Billy Collins annotator, I find myself disagreeing, asking, "LIKE WHAT?" But by the third line I don't care because I'm in the beat of the language and sound—"wind up shut up by openness so utter"—the stutter step of the mutes and repetition. The second stanza opens up to the most wonderful topic in all literature, love (I am also always looking for love poetry) and in "the heart may bloom, the sex may roar," I hear Galway Kinnell's "After Making Love We Hear Footsteps," until McHugh draws me back to the counterpart of love, the horror of "the well the child // fell in forever—yes." And just like that I am Mrs. Ramsay with meat to "lace" and pinafores to check and stones to putty and flowers to pinch back, the details that make up a life.

So I find this poem is a brilliant tapestry of memory of other literary voices I love until the first three quatrains end and McHugh switches to tercets and the tone shifts with the monosyllabic language of what the poet cannot do, cannot give—"a word to hold the dead… A name / to hold a god," all addressed to the reader with the arrival of the second person and the admonition "find yourself / a church instead."

McHugh's poem ends with giving, what is hers to give, what is not, what the poet can do and cannot, or will not. And it ends so sparsely, the lines shortening, the

world (of poetry) indeed, "small." She'll give us that. And I'll keep coming back to it, to take whatever she will give.

Eve Goldenberg

What Poems Are For
Heather McHugh (1948—)

They aren't for everything.
I better swallow this, or else
wind up shut up by openness so utter.
Nip and tuck, poems are for

a bit, a patch, a mended
hem, carnation's cage—and then
the heart may bloom, the sex may roar, the moment
widen to be the well the child

fell in forever—yes—but not until
I've checked the pinafore
and laced the meat,
puttied the stones, and pinched

the flowers back. I can't give you
a word to hold the dead. I can't give you a name
to hold a god, a big enough denomination. Find yourself

a church instead, where roofs are all allusions
to the sky, and words are all
incorrigible. Timelessness, and time,

they are not mine to give. I have
a spoon, a bed,
a pen, a hat.
The poem
is for something,
and the world is small.

I'll give you that.

"Duende" by Tracy K. Smith stunned me with its dense interiors and imagistic freight. It heightened for me the ways that poetry can approach the unsayable, and how it can bring us up against larger questions and aches we fall silent before.

Jenny Xie

Duende
Tracy K. Smith (1972—)

1.

The earth is dry and they live wanting.
Each with a small reservoir
Of furious music heavy in the throat.
They drag it out and with nails in their feet
Coax the night into being. Brief believing.
A skirt shimmering with sequins and lies.
And in this night that is not night,
Each word is a wish, each phrase
A shape their bodies ache to fill—

I'm going to braid my hair
Braid many colors into my hair
I'll put a long braid in my hair
And write your name there

They defy gravity to feel tugged back.
The clatter, the mad slap of landing.

2.

And not just them. Not just
The ramshackle family, the tíos,
Primitos, not just the bailaor
Whose heels have notched
And hammered time

So the hours flow in place
Like a tin river, marking
Only what once was.
Not just the voices of scraping
Against the river, nor the hands
Nudging them farther, fingers
Like blind birds, palms empty,
Echoing. Not just the women
With sober faces and flowers
In their hair, the ones who dance
As though they're burying
Memory—one last time—
Beneath them.
And I hate to do it here.
To set myself heavily beside them.
Not now that they've proven
The body a myth, a parable
For what not even language
Moves quickly enough to name.
If I call it pain, and try to touch it
With my hands, my own life,
It lies still and the music thins,
A pulse felt for through garments.
If I lean into the desire it starts from—
If I lean unbuttoned into the blow
Of loss after loss, love tossed
Into the ecstatic void—
It carries me with it farther,
To chords that stretch and bend
Like light through colored glass.
But it races on, toward shadows
Where the world I know
And the world I fear
Threaten to meet.

3.

There is always a road,
The sea, dark hair, dolor.

Always a question
Bigger than itself—

They say you're leaving Monday Why can't you leave on Tuesday?

Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays":

I was floored by the work this poem does of revisiting the past—a time in the past (here in childhood) during which one perhaps missed the truth of things, a time when one had judged a loved one harshly and wrongly, a time when one had been, yes, innocent, but with a blind, simple, reactive, shallow innocence—a blunt instrument—willfully overlooking what was before one, animated by a great desire to survive by judging. I was amazed by how the poet used the poem to go back to that instant when

> "I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
> When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
> and slowly I would rise and dress,
> fearing the chronic angers of that house,
>
> Speaking indifferently to him,
> who had driven out the cold
> and polished my good shoes as well"

and how, in the act of writing that memory, of resurrecting that instant via the power of imagery and poetic form, the poet handles his autobiographical materials in such a way as to suddenly be taken by surprise: his encounter with his past via the poem makes his heart swerve, awaken, and, as if with a spiritual jolt, force him to see, for the first time (not "as if" for the first time), right there on the page before him, almost burning him, almost burning us, the horror of not having loved, not having thanked, not having recognized love when it came for him. The horror of not having done so in time. That it is too late now. That there is no way to undo that error. Except via the poem. It's a very religious experience. The poem becomes a mystery and a sacrament. Can one change the past? Can one undo what one did or neglected to do?

One can feel him cry out in astonished shame:

> "What did I know, what did I know
> of love's austere and lonely offices?"

This takes him so much by surprise he is forced to repeat it as, like an electric current, it courses through him, finally awakening compassion and love in him. Cracking him open into the understanding of what this beloved "other", this

intimate stranger (our parents are most strange to us, almost more than anyone), is, does, has been through, what he has done to survive, and how much love he has given in spite of his own pain (cracked hands that ached are just the outer tip of the father's pain).

He finally understands the implication, the emotion, of what he had only recounted in stanza one—which is discursive and expositional in tone even if it speaks of ache, and labor, and going unthanked:

> "Sundays too my father got up early
> and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
> then with cracked hands that ached
> from labor in the weekday weather made
> banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him."

The first time through those are anecdotal facts. It takes poetry's means—it takes writing the poem—(a "broken" sonnet, which is a whole other matter which I'm sure you can unpack!)—for him to grasp and be forever changed and awakened, and I would say "saved"—by hearing into what it is his imagination has summoned. By the end he is speaking not "of" that father's pain, but "from" it.

I understood then that writing poetry is a way of undergoing the world. One can make the mistake of bypassing life, rather than undergoing it. One can do so and never know. Poetry, when undertaken with this kind of honesty, compels one to go " through" existence rather than "around" it. The casual way of saying this is "life is what happens while you're making plans".

That a poem could do that to the poet—that it could rescue one from wasting one's life—that its very nature forced one to undergo that very core of experience something in all of us will do anything to avoid—well, it made me a poet. Or at least someone who wanted to try to write poems.

We say a great many things to others and to ourselves. But only under pressure do we hear what we say, do we hear what we think. And only under even greater pressure (and poetic imagination, and poetic form are such pressures) do we listen enough to be changed.

Jorie Graham

Those Winter Sundays
Robert Hayden (1913-1980)

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

"How We Heard the Name": I loved the way it seems casual "that is the thing/ about the river" and at the same time had such focus, and the contrast between, on one side, "Granicus" and "Lacedemonians" and on the other "ba-bas."

"The Land of Counterpane": The body as a terrain, populated, entered my imagination forever when I was ten or eleven years old.

Robert Pinsky

How We Heard the Name
Alan Dugan (1923-2003)

The river brought down
dead horses, dead men
and military debris,
indicative of war
or official acts upstream,
but it went by, it all
goes by, that is the thing
about the river. Then
a soldier on a log
went by. He seemed drunk
and we asked him Why
had he and this junk
come down to us so
from the past upstream.
"Friends," he said, "the great
Battle of Granicus
has just been won
by all the Greeks except
the Lacedaemonians and
myself; this is a joke
between me and a man
named Alexander, whom
all of you ba-bas
will hear of as a god."

The Land of Counterpane
Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)

When I was sick and lay a-bed
I had two pillows at my head,
And all my toys beside me lay
To keep me happy all the day.

And sometimes for an hour or so
I watched my leaden soldiers go,
With different uniforms and drills,
Among the bed-clothes, through the hills;

And sometimes sent my ships in fleets
All up and down among the sheets;
Or brought my trees and houses out,
And planted cities all about.

I was the giant great and still
That sits upon the pillow-hill,
And sees before him, dale and plain,
The pleasant land of counterpane.

The poem I remember best from my high school years is Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Spring and Fall"—the one that starts "Margaret, are you grieving / Over Goldengrove unleaving…". I love it still, because of the feeling it conveys, and because the verse, with its seemingly necessary rhyme scheme, is so memorable.

Wendy Lesser

Spring and Fall
Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)

to a young child

Márgarét, áre you gríeving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leáves like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Ah! ás the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you wíll weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sórrow's spríngs áre the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It ís the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

Two poems by Millay:

I was a high school sophomore when I learned about Edna St. Vincent Millay. My favorite English teacher, Mr. Scott, gently scolded a classmate who was falling asleep in his class, with "Does your 'candle burn at both ends'?"" He asked whether we knew who wrote "First Fig"—we didn't—and he said, in his famously patrician tone, "My, my, my. That Edna St. Vincent Millay is someone you ought to know." The first poem of hers I read was in an AP Language practice exam: "See where Capella with her golden kids," it begins. Cool, clever, and pretty, I thought of the language, but the poem itself felt thematically distant from me. (Still—it meant enough to me that I cut it out and taped it to a page in my diary that has Mapplethorpe's calla lilies on the cover.)

Maybe a year after that, when I was crushing and then falling in mad love with a senior who was kind and used semicolons correctly, what I was looking for was a poem that described my teenage yearnings. I was/am a romantic, who was looking for the most precise language to describe what I was feeling for the first time. In my diary entries, I wrote often of how disappointing not having the right words was: After all, my heart wasn't "broken." I wasn't "staining my pillow with my tears." I did not feel as if I were, as kd lang sang, "constant[ly] craving." So… what was it? What was keeping me up at night, listening to melancholy mixes on my Walkman?

Then, I stumbled upon these two poems in an ESVM collection. The imagery of the field-mice at the bulbs, the sound of the word "gnawing," the delicateness of the hyacinth…. Even at 43, I can access exactly what I was experiencing, that ache of loving a friend whom I wasn't sure felt the same, and that strange delight in feeling as if my life had been nudged open a little bit by this love. The second poem "The Philosopher's" cadence and syntax reflect the facade we all put up when we're trying to mask our desire or hide our vulnerability: we rhyme, acting as if we make sense, pretending we can somehow control the rhythm of our feelings with "philosopher's questions." That the poem begins with the word "And" makes me giggle: the conjunction makes it sound as if we intruded on a soliloquy. It's not a particularly profound poem, but I think that the poem's familiarity makes it funny and comforting. We're not alone in our silliness, awkwardness.

Kristine Palmero

Hyacinths
Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950)

I am in love with him to whom a hyacinth is dearer
Than I shall ever be dear.
On nights when the field-mice are abroad he cannot sleep:
He hears their narrow teeth at the bulbs of his hyacinths.
But the gnawing at my heart he does not hear.

The Philosopher
Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950)

And what are you that, wanting you,
I should be kept awake
As many nights as there are days
With weeping for your sake?

And what are you that, missing you,
As many days as crawl
I should be listening to the wind
And looking at the wall?

I know a man that's a braver man
And twenty men as kind,
And what are you, that you should be
The one man on my mind?

Yet women's ways are witless ways,
As any sage will tell, -
And what am I, that I should love
So wisely and so well?

I heard this recited in a TV documentary, when I was 14 or so, looked it up and read it and still liked it a lot - for the sound of the words and the rhythm but also the consistent emotion, the exhilaration.

David Bromwich

Poem in October
Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)

It was my thirtieth year to heaven
Woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbour wood
  And the mussel pooled and the heron
      Priested shore
    The morning beckon
With water praying and call of seagull and rook
And the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall
    Myself to set foot
      That second
In the still sleeping town and set forth.

  My birthday began with the water-
Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name
  Above the farms and the white horses
      And I rose
    In rainy autumn
And walked abroad in a shower of all my days.
High tide and the heron dived when I took the road
    Over the border
      And the gates
Of the town closed as the town awoke.

  A springful of larks in a rolling
Cloud and the roadside bushes brimming with whistling
  Blackbirds and the sun of October
      Summery
    On the hill's shoulder,
Here were fond climates and sweet singers suddenly
Come in the morning where I wandered and listened

To the rain wringing
Wind blow cold
In the wood faraway under me.

Pale rain over the dwindling harbour
And over the sea wet church the size of a snail
With its horns through mist and the castle
Brown as owls
But all the gardens
Of spring and summer were blooming in the tall tales
Beyond the border and under the lark full cloud.
There could I marvel
My birthday
Away but the weather turned around.

It turned away from the blithe country
And down the other air and the blue altered sky
Streamed again a wonder of summer
With apples
Pears and red currants
And I saw in the turning so clearly a child's
Forgotten mornings when he walked with his mother
Through the parables
Of sun light
And the legends of the green chapels

And the twice told fields of infancy
That his tears burned my cheeks and his heart moved in mine.
These were the woods the river and sea
Where a boy
In the listening
Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy
To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide.
And the mystery
Sang alive
Still in the water and singingbirds.

And there could I marvel my birthday
Away but the weather turned around. And the true

Joy of the long dead child sang burning
In the sun.
It was my thirtieth
Year to heaven stood there then in the summer noon
Though the town below lay leaved with October blood.
O may my heart's truth
Still be sung
On this high hill in a year's turning.

S.T. Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"
W.B. Yeats, "The Ballad of Father Gilligan"
P.B. Shelley, "Ode to the West Wind"
Alfred Noyes, "The Highwayman"

Maybe these came earlier than the end of high school; I can no longer recall. All are dramatic and narrative and somehow stuck in the memory. My mother recited the Yeats and Shelley poems so; she remembered very clearly a lot of long poems that she had had to learn by rote in schooldays. My rather erratic English teacher loved 'The Highwayman' for some reason I cannot now remember, maybe to teach us how to scan. I must have had a taste for the lurid!

Joe Cleary

Ode to the West Wind
Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

I

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odours plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh hear!

II

Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky's commotion,
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,

Angels of rain and lightning: there are spread
On the blue surface of thine aëry surge,
Like the bright hair uplifted from the head

Of some fierce Maenad, even from the dim verge
Of the horizon to the zenith's height,
The locks of the approaching storm. Thou dirge

Of the dying year, to which this closing night
Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre,
Vaulted with all thy congregated might

Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere
Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst: oh hear!

III

Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
Lull'd by the coil of his crystalline streams,

Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay,
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,

All overgrown with azure moss and flowers
So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou
For whose path the Atlantic's level powers

Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below
The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know

Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,
And tremble and despoil themselves: oh hear!

IV

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share

The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, O uncontrollable! If even
I were as in my boyhood, and could be

The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed
Scarce seem'd a vision; I would ne'er have striven

As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.
Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

A heavy weight of hours has chain'd and bow'd
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

V

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth

Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

The Ballad of Father Gilligan
W.B. Yeats (1865-1939)

The old priest Peter Gilligan
Was weary night and day;
For half his flock were in their beds,
Or under green sods lay.

Once, while he nodded on a chair,
At the moth-hour of eve,
Another poor man sent for him,
And he began to grieve.

'I have no rest, nor joy, nor peace,
For people die and die';
And after cried he, 'God forgive!
My body spake, not I!'

He knelt, and leaning on the chair
He prayed and fell asleep;
And the moth-hour went from the fields,
And stars began to peep.

They slowly into millions grew,
And leaves shook in the wind;
And God covered the world with shade,
And whispered to mankind.

Upon the time of sparrow-chirp
When the moths came once more.
The old priest Peter Gilligan
Stood upright on the floor.

'Mavrone, mavrone! the man has died
While I slept on the chair';
He roused his horse out of its sleep,
And rode with little care.

He rode now as he never rode,

By rocky lane and fen;
The sick man's wife opened the door:
'Father! you come again!'

'And is the poor man dead?' he cried.
'He died an hour ago.'
The old priest Peter Gilligan
In grief swayed to and fro.

'When you were gone, he turned and died
As merry as a bird.'
The old priest Peter Gilligan
He knelt him at that word.

'He Who hath made the night of stars
For souls who tire and bleed,
Sent one of His great angels down
To help me in my need.

'He Who is wrapped in purple robes,
With planets in His care,
Had pity on the least of things
Asleep upon a chair.'

I thought about time differently after reading this.

While the opening metaphor describes history as a cycle repeated over and over, the decidedly unchristian Second Coming Yeats imagines and the final question he poses remind us that once matter loses shape it will never return to quite what it was.

Sam Panarese

The Second Coming
W.B. Yeats (1865-1939)

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

The greatest lyrical poem in 19th century Europe of how solidarity holds back deep despair!

Cornel West

Wild Broom
Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837), translated from the Italian by A.S. Kline

'And men loved darkness rather than the light'
John, III:19

Fragrant broom,
content with deserts:
here on the arid slope of Vesuvius,
that formidable mountain, the destroyer,
that no other tree or flower adorns,
you scatter your lonely
bushes all around. I've seen before
how you beautify empty places
with your stems, circling the City
once the mistress of the world,
and it seems that with their grave,
silent, aspect they bear witness,
reminding the passer-by
of that lost empire.
Now I see you again on this soil,
a lover of sad places abandoned by the world,
a faithful friend of hostile fortune.
These fields scattered
with barren ash, covered
with solid lava,
that resounds under the traveller's feet:
where snakes twist, and couple
in the sun, and the rabbits return
to their familiar cavernous burrows:
were once happy, prosperous farms.
They were golden with corn, echoed
to lowing cattle:

there were gardens and palaces,
the welcome leisure retreats
for powerful, famous cities,
which the proud mountain crushed
with all their people, beneath the torrents
from its fiery mouth. Now all around
is one ruin,
where you root, gentle flower, and as though
commiserating with others' loss, send
a perfume of sweetest fragrance to heaven,
that consoles the desert. Let those
who praise our existence visit
these slopes, to see how carefully
our race is nurtured
by loving Nature. And here
they can justly estimate
and measure the power of humankind,
that the harsh nurse, can with a slight movement,
obliterate one part of, in a moment, when we
least fear it, and with a little less gentle
a motion, suddenly,
annihilate altogether.
The 'magnificent and progressive fate'
of the human race
is depicted in this place.
Proud, foolish century, look,
and see yourself reflected,
you who've abandoned
the path, marked by advancing thought
till now, and reversed your steps,
boasting of this regression
you call progress.
All the intellectuals, whose evil fate
gave them you for a father,
praise your babbling, though
they often make a mockery
of you, among themselves. But I'll
not vanish into the grave in shame:
As far as I can, I'll demonstrate,

the scorn for you, openly,
that's in my heart,
though I know oblivion crushes
those hated by their own time.
I've already mocked enough
at that fate I'll share with you.
You pursue Freedom, yet want thought
to be slave of a single age again:
by thought we've risen a little higher
than barbarism, by thought alone civilisation
grows, only thought guides public affairs
towards the good.
The truth of your harsh fate
and the lowly place Nature gave you
displease you so. Because of it
you turn your backs on the light
that illuminated you: and in flight,
you call him who pursues it vile,
and only him great of heart
who foolishly or cunningly mocks himself
or others, praising our human state above the stars.
A man generous and noble of soul,
of meagre powers and weak limbs,
doesn't boast and call himself
strong and rich in possessions,
doesn't make a foolish pretence
of splendid living or cutting a fine
figure among the crowd:
but allows himself to appear
as lacking wealth and power,
and says so, openly, and gives
a true value to his worth.
I don't consider a man
a great-hearted creature, but stupid,
who, born to die, nurtured in pain,
says he is made for joy,
and fills pages with the stench
of pride, promising
an exalted destiny on earth,

and a new happiness, unknown to heaven
much less this world, to people
whom a surging wave, a breath
of malignant air, a subterranean tremor,
destroys so utterly that they
scarcely leave a memory behind.
He has a noble nature
who dares to raise his voice
against our common fate,
and with an honest tongue,
not compromising truth,
admits the evil fate allotted us,
our low and feeble state:
a nature that shows itself
strong and great in suffering,
that does not add to its miseries with fraternal
hatred and anger, things worse
than other evils, blaming mankind
for its sorrows, but places blame
on Her who is truly guilty, who is the mother
of men in bearing them, their stepmother in malice.
They call her enemy:
and consider
the human race
to be united, and ranked against her,
from of old, as is true,
judge all men allies, embrace
all with true love, offering sincere
prompt support, and expecting it
in the various dangers and anguish
of the mutual war on her. And think
it as foolish to take up arms against men
and set up nets and obstacles
against their neighbours as it would be in war,
surrounded by the opposing army, in the most
intense heat of battle,
to start fierce struggles with friends,
forgetting the enemy,
to incite desertion, and wave their swords

among their own forces.
If such thoughts were revealed
to the crowd, as they used to be,
along with the horror that first
brought men together in social contract
against impious Nature,
then by true wisdom
the honest, lawful intercourse
of citizens would be partly renewed,
and justice and piety, would own
to another root than foolish pride,
on which the morals of the crowd
are as well founded
as anything else that's based on error.
Often I sit here, at night,
on these desolate slopes,
that a hardened lava-flow has clothed
with brown, and which seem to undulate still,
and over the gloomy waste,
I see the stars flame, high
in the purest blue,
mirrored far off by the sea:
the universe glittering with sparks
that wheel through the tranquil void.
And then I fix my eyes on those lights
that seem pin-pricks,
yet are so vast in form
that earth and sea are really a pin-prick
to them: to whom man,
and this globe where man is nothing,
are completely unknown: and gazing
at those still more infinitely remote,
knots, almost, of stars,
that seem like mist to us, to which
not only man and earth but all
our stars, infinite in number and mass,
with the golden sun,
are unknown, or seem like points
of misted light, as they appear

from earth: what do you seem like,
then, in my thoughts, O children
of mankind? And mindful of
your state here below, of which
the ground I stand on bears witness,
and that, on the other hand, you believe
that you've been appointed the master
and end of all things: and how often
you like to talk about the creators
of all things universal, who descended
to this obscure grain of sand called earth,
for you, and happily spoke to you, often:
and that, renewing these ridiculous dreams,
you still insult the wise, in an age
that appears to surpass the rest
in knowledge and social customs: what feeling is it,
then, wretched human race, what thought
of you finally pierces my heart?
I don't know if laughter or pity prevails.
As a little apple that falls from a tree:
late autumn ripeness,
and nothing else, bringing it to earth:
crushes, wastes, and covers
in a moment, the sweet nests
of a tribe of ants, carved out
of soft soil, with vast labour,
and the works, the wealth,
that industrious race had vied
to achieve, with such effort,
and created in the summer: so the cities
of the farthest shores
that the sea bathed,
were shattered, confounded, covered
in a few moments, by a night of ruin,
by ashes, lava and stones,
hurled to the heights of heaven
from the womb of thunder,
falling again from above,
mingled in molten streams,

or by the vast overflow
of liquefied masses,
metals and burning sand,
descending the mountainside
racing over the grass: so that now
the goats graze above them,
and new cities rise beside them, whose base
is their buried, demolished walls
that the cruel mountain seems to crush underfoot.
Nature has no more love or care
for the seed of man
than for the ants: and if the destruction
of one is rarer than that of the other,
it's for no other reason
than that mankind is less rich in offspring.
Fully eighteen hundred years
have passed, since those once-populated cities
vanished, crushed by fiery force,
yet the farmer intent
on his vines, this dead
and ashen soil barely nourishes,
still lifts his gaze
with suspicion,
to the fatal peak
that sits there brooding,
no gentler than ever, still threatening
to destroy him, his children, and his
meagre possessions. And often
the wretch, lying awake
on the roof of his house, where
the wandering breezes blow at night,
jumps up now and again, and checks
the course of the dreadful boiling,
that pours from that inexhaustible lap
onto its sandy slopes, and illuminates
the bay of Capri, the ports
of Naples and Mergellina.
And if he sees it nearing, or hears
the water bubbling, feverishly, deep

in the well, he wakes his children, quickly
wakes his wife, and fleeing, with whatever
of their possessions they can grasp,
watches from the distance, as his familiar
home, and the little field
his only defence against hunger,
fall prey to the burning tide,
crackling as it arrives, inexorably
spreading over all this, and hardening.
Lifeless Pompeii returns to the light of heaven
after ancient oblivion, like a buried
skeleton, that piety or the greed
for land gives back to the open air:
and, from its empty forum,
through the ranks of broken
columns, the traveller contemplates
the forked peak and the smoking summit,
that still threatens the scattered ruins.
And, like night's secret horror,
through the empty theatres,
the twisted temples, the shattered
houses, where the bat hides its brood,
like a sinister brand
that circles darkly through silent palaces,
the glow of the deathly lava runs,
reddening the shadows
from far away, staining the region round.
So, indifferent to man, and the ages
he calls ancient, and the way descendants
follow on from their ancestors,
Nature, always green, proceeds instead
by so long a route
she seems to remain at rest. Meanwhile empires fall,
peoples and tongues pass: She does not see:
and man lays claim to eternity's merit.
And you, slow-growing broom,
who adorn this bare landscape
with fragrant thickets,
you too will soon succumb

to the cruel power of subterranean fire,
that, revisiting places
it knows, will stretch its greedy margin
over your soft forest. And you'll bend
your innocent head, without a struggle,
beneath that mortal burden:
yet a head that's not been bent in vain
in cowardly supplication
before a future oppressor: nor lifted
in insane pride towards the stars,
or beyond the desert, where
your were born and lived,
not through intent, but chance:
and you'll have been so much wiser
so much less unsound than man, since you
have never believed your frail species,
can be made immortal by yourself, or fate.

I've never forgotten "Black milk of dawn" [an alternate translation from the below] and hearing it in the original German read by Celan was extraordinary, you didn't need to speak the language to feel the rhythm and depth.

Louis O'Neill

Death Fugue
Paul Celan (1920-1970), translated from the German by Michael Hamburger

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night
we drink it and drink it
we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete
he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are flashing he whistles his pack out
he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave
he commands us strike up for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you in the morning at noon we drink you at sundown
we drink and we drink you
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined

He calls out jab deeper into the earth you lot you others sing now and play
he grabs at the iron in his belt he waves it his eyes are blue
jab deeper you lot with your spades you others play on for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon in the morning we drink you at sundown
we drink and we drink you
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith he plays with the serpents

He calls out more sweetly play death death is a master from Germany
he calls out more darkly now stroke your strings then as smoke you will rise into air
then a grave you will have in the clouds there one lies unconfined

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon death is a master from Germany
we drink you at sundown and in the morning we drink and we drink you
death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue
he strikes you with leaden bullets his aim is true
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
he sets his pack on to us he grants us a grave in the air
He plays with the serpents and daydreams death is a master from Germany

your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith

I love the way Herbert tells his own "improbable tale" with that last metaphor: the rain, his brother. His poem is tragic-eyed enough to treat the thought with some irony—and searching enough, compassionate enough, to give it truth.

Tomas Unger

The Rain
Zbigniew Herbert (1924-1998), translated from the Polish
by John and Bogdana Carpenter

When my older brother
came back from war
he had on his forehead a little silver star
and under the star
an abyss

a splinter of shrapnel
hit him at Verdun
or perhaps at Grünwald
(he'd forgotten the details)

he used to talk much
in many languages
but he liked most of all
the language of history

until losing breath
he commanded his dead pals to run
Roland Kowalski Hannibal

he shouted
that this was the last crusade
that Carthage soon would fall
and then sobbing confessed
that Napoleon did not like him

we looked at him
getting paler and paler

abandoned by his senses
he turned slowly into a monument

into musical shells of ears
entered a stone forest
and the skin of his face
was secured
with the blind dry
buttons of eyes

nothing was left him
but touch

what stories
he told with his hands
in the right he had romances
in the left soldiers memories

they took my brother
and carried him out of town
he returns every fall
slim and very quiet
he does not want to come in
he knocks at the window for me

we walk together in the streets
and he recites to me
improbable tales
touching my face
with blind fingers of rain

In college I loved Roethke's "The Lost Son," in particular the greenhouse poems.

Henri Cole

The Lost Son
Theodore Roethke (1908-1963)

1. The Flight

At Woodlawn I Heard the dead cry:
I was lulled by the slamming of iron,
A slow drip over stones,
Toads brooding wells.
All the leaves stuck out their tongues;
I shook the softening chalk of my bones,
Saying,
Snail, snail, glister me forward,
Bird, soft-sigh me home,
Worm, be with me.
This is my hard time.

Fished in an old wound,
The soft pond of repose;
Nothing nibbled my line,
Not even the minnows came.

Sat in an empty house
Watching shadows crawl,
Scratching.
There was one fly.

Voice, come out of the silence.
Say something.
Appear in the form of a spider
Or a moth beating the curtain.

Tell me:
Which is the way I take;

Out of what door do I go,
Where and to whom?

Dark hollows said, lee to the wind,
The moon said, back of an eel,
The salt said, look by the sea,
Your tears are not enough praise,
You will find no comfort here,
In the kingdom of bang and blab.

Running lightly over spongy ground,
Past the pasture of flat stones,
The three elms,
The sheep strewn on a field,
Over a rickety bridge
Toward the quick-water, wrinkling and rippling.

Hunting along the river,
Down among the rubbish, the bug-riddled foliage,
By the muddy pond-edge, by the bog-holes,
By the shrunken lake, hunting, in the heat of summer.

The shape of a rat?
It's bigger than that.
It's less than a leg
And more than a nose,
Just under the water
It usually goes.

Is it soft like a mouse?
Can it wrinkle his nose?
Could it come in the house
On the tips of its toes?

Take the skin of a cat
And the back of an eel,
Then roll them in grease,-
That's the way it would feel.

It's sleek as an otter
With wide webby toes
Just under the water
It usually goes.

2. The Pit

Where do the roots go?
Look down under the leaves.
Who put the moss there?
These stones have been here too long.
Who stunned the dirt into noise?
Ask the mole, he knows.
I feel the slime of a wet nest.
Beware Mother Mildew.
Nibble again, fish nerves.

3. The Gibber

At the wood's mouth,
By the cave's door,
I listened to something
I had heard before.

Dogs of the groin
Barked and howled,
The sun was against me,
The moon would not have me.

The weeds whined,
The snakes cried
The cows and briars
Said to me: Die.

What a small song. What slow clouds. What dark water.
Hath the rain a father? All the caves are ice. Only the snow's here.
I'm cold. I'm cold all over. Rub me in father and mother.
Fear was my father, Father Fear.
His look drained the stones.

What gliding shape
Beckoning through halls,
Stood poised on the stair,
Fell dreamily down?

From the mouths of jugs
Perched on many shelves,
I saw substance flowing
That cold morning.

Like a slither of eels
That watery cheek
As my own tongue kissed
My lips awake.

Is that the storm's heart? The ground is unstilling itself.
My veins are running nowhere. Do the bones cast out their fire?
Is the seed leaving the old bed? These buds are live as birds.
Where, where are the tears of the world?
Let the kisses resound, flat like a butcher's palm;
Let the gestures freeze; our doom is already decided.
All the windows are burning! What's left of my life?
I want the old rage, the lash of primordial milk!
Goodbye, goodbye, old stones, the time-order is going,
I have married my hands to perpetual agitation,
I run, I run to the whistle of money.

Money money money
Water water water

How cool the grass is.
Has the bird left?
The stalk still sways.
Has the worm a shadow?
What do the clouds say?

These sweeps of light undo me.
Look, look, the ditch is running white!

I've more veins than a tree!
Kiss me, ashes, I'm falling through a dark swirl.

4. The Return

The way to the boiler was dark,
Dark all the way,
Over slippery cinders
Through the long greenhouse.

The roses kept breathing in the dark.
They had many mouths to breathe with.
My knees made little winds underneath
Where the weeds slept.

There was always a single light
Swinging by the fire-pit,
Where the fireman pulled out roses,
Those big roses, the big bloody clinkers.

Once I stayed all night.
The light in the morning came slowly over the white
snow.
There were many kinds of cool
Air.
Then came the steam.

Pipe-knock.

Scurry of warm over small plants.
Ordnung! ordnung!
Papa is coming!

A fine haze moved off the leaves;
Frost melted on far panes;
The rose, the chrysanthemum turned toward the light.
Even the hushed forms, the bent yellowy weeds
Moved in a slow up-sway.

5. "It was beginning winter"

It was beginning winter,
An in-between time,
The landscape still partly brown:
The bones of weeds kept swinging in the wind,
Above the blue snow.

It was beginning winter,
The light moved slowly over the frozen field,
Over the dry seed-crowns,
The beautiful surviving bones
Swinging in the wind.

Light traveled over the wide field;
Stayed.
The weeds stopped swinging.
The mind moved, not alone,
Through the clear air, in the silence.

Was it light?
Was it light within?
Was it light within light?
Stillness becoming alive,
Yet still?

A lively understandable spirit
Once entertained you.
It will come again.
Be still.
Wait.

Child on Top of a Greenhouse
Theodore Roethke

The wind billowing out the seat of my britches,
My feet crackling splinters of glass and dried putty,
The half-grown chrysanthemums staring up like accusers,
Up through the streaked glass, flashing with sunlight,
A few white clouds all rushing eastward,
A line of elms plunging and tossing like horses,
And everyone, everyone pointing up and shouting!

I was in eighth grade when I first read this poem and now I remember wondering about and being secretly tickled by the strangeness of the poem -- the line "I used to – when a Boy" written by a woman poet and, especially, the cavalier tone when referring to the neighbor who died, possibly on a mattress someone flings out: "They wonder if it died – on that –."

Duy Doan

There's been a Death, in the Opposite House
Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

There's been a Death, in the Opposite House,
As lately as Today —
I know it, by the numb look
Such Houses have — alway —

The Neighbors rustle in and out —
The Doctor — drives away —
A Window opens like a Pod —
Abrupt — mechanically —

Somebody flings a Mattress out —
The Children hurry by —
They wonder if it died — on that —
I used to — when a Boy —

The Minister — goes stiffly in —
As if the House were His —
And He owned all the Mourners — now —
And little Boys — besides —

And then the Milliner — and the Man
Of the Appalling Trade —
To take the measure of the House —
There'll be that Dark Parade —

Of Tassels — and of Coaches — soon —
It's easy as a Sign —

The Intuition of the News —
In just a Country Town —

Grateful to my English teacher in about 1949, Mr Swan, for Louis MacNeice, "Bagpipe Music." Serious fun and games, so light on its feet (good joke in it about feet), the rhyme on baby teaching me how to pronounce Ceilidh, and (words that I didn't know then) the pleasures of the risqué ("a bit of skirt in a taxi"!) and of élan.

Christopher Ricks

Bagpipe Music
Louise MacNeice (1907-1963)

It's no go the merrygoround, it's no go the rickshaw,
All we want is a limousine and a ticket for the peepshow.
Their knickers are made of crêpe-de-chine, their shoes are made of python,
Their halls are lined with tiger rugs and their walls with heads of bison.

John MacDonald found a corpse, put it under the sofa,
Waited till it came to life and hit it with a poker,
Sold its eyes for souvenirs, sold its blood for whisky,
Kept its bones for dumb-bells to use when he was fifty.

It's no go the Yogi-Man, it's no go Blavatsky,
All we want is a bank balance and a bit of skirt in a taxi.

Annie MacDougall went to milk, caught her foot in the heather,
Woke to hear a dance record playing of Old Vienna.
It's no go your maidenheads, it's no go your culture,
All we want is a Dunlop tyre and the devil mend the puncture.

The Laird o'Phelps spent Hogmanay declaring he was sober,
Counted his feet to prove the fact and found he had one foot over.
Mrs Carmichael had her fifth, looked at the job with repulsion,
Said to the midwife 'Take it away; I'm through with over-production'.

It's no go the gossip column, it's no go the Ceilidh,
All we want is a mother's help and a sugar-stick for the baby.

Willie Murray cut his thumb, couldn't count the damage,

Took the hide of an Ayrshire cow and used it for a bandage.
His brother caught three hundred cran when the seas were lavish,
Threw the bleeders back in the sea and went upon the parish.

It's no go the Herring Board, it's no go the Bible,
All we want is a packet of fags when our hands are idle.

It's no go the picture palace, it's no go the stadium,
It's no go the country cot with a pot of pink geraniums,
It's no go the Government grants, it's no go the elections,
Sit on your arse for fifty years and hang your hat on a pension.

It's no go my honey love, it's no go my poppet;
Work your hands from day to day, the winds will blow the profit.
The glass is falling hour by hour, the glass will fall forever,
But if you break the bloody glass you won't hold up the weather.

When I was a teenager, Donne's poetry mesmerized me (still does). "The Sun Rising" thrilled me with its violent shifts of scale--from the cosmic and planetary to the space of the lovers' bedroom: "In that the world's contracted thus...". The intricate stanzas did the "contracting." The wit, the elaborate tongue-in-cheek argumentation, the impertinence, are all seductive and are meant to be.

Rosanna Warren

The Sun Rising
John Donne (1572-1631)

Busy old fool, unruly sun,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtains call on us?
Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run?
Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide
Late school boys and sour prentices,
Go tell court huntsmen that the king will ride,
Call country ants to harvest offices,
Love, all alike, no season knows nor clime,
Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.

Thy beams, so reverend and strong
Why shouldst thou think?
I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink,
But that I would not lose her sight so long;
If her eyes have not blinded thine,
Look, and tomorrow late, tell me,
Whether both th' Indias of spice and mine
Be where thou leftst them, or lie here with me.
Ask for those kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,
And thou shalt hear, All here in one bed lay.

She's all states, and all princes, I,
Nothing else is.
Princes do but play us; compared to this,
All honor's mimic, all wealth alchemy.
Thou, sun, art half as happy as we,

In that the world's contracted thus.
Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be
To warm the world, that's done in warming us.
Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;
This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere.

A poem I return to again and again is Gwendolyn Brooks' "when you have forgotten Sunday." It is a simple poem describing a rather minimalist life (small room, plain and predictable meal) but furnished with a rather rich emotional tapestry. There is, somewhere online, a recording of me reading the poem and commenting on it, along with another favorite of mine by Rupert Brooke (Brooks and Brooke) called "Jealousy." These two poems I discovered early on in my reading life and I continued and continue still to love them.

D.A. Powell

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when you have forgotten Sunday: the love story
Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)

—And when you have forgotten the bright bedclothes on a Wednesday and a Saturday,
And most especially when you have forgotten Sunday—
When you have forgotten Sunday halves in bed,
Or me sitting on the front-room radiator in the limping afternoon
Looking off down the long street
To nowhere,
Hugged by my plain old wrapper of no-expectation
And nothing-I-have-to-do and I'm-happy-why?
And if-Monday-never-had-to-come—
When you have forgotten that, I say,
And how you swore, if somebody beeped the bell,
And how my heart played hopscotch if the telephone rang;
And how we finally went in to Sunday dinner,
That is to say, went across the front room floor to the ink-spotted table in the southwest corner
To Sunday dinner, which was always chicken and noodles
Or chicken and rice
And salad and rye bread and tea
And chocolate chip cookies—
I say, when you have forgotten that,
When you have forgotten my little presentiment
That the war would be over before they got to you;
And how we finally undressed and whipped out the light and flowed into bed,
And lay loose-limbed for a moment in the week-end

Bright bedclothes,
Then gently folded into each other—
When you have, I say, forgotten all that,
Then you may tell,
Then I may believe
You have forgotten me well.

Jealousy
Rupert Brooke (1887-1915)

When I see you, who were so wise and cool,
Gazing with silly sickness on that fool
You've given your love to, your adoring hands
Touch his so intimately that each understands,
I know, most hidden things; and when I know
Your holiest dreams yield to the stupid bow
Of his red lips, and that the empty grace
Of those strong legs and arms, that rosy face,
Has beaten your heart to such a flame of love,
That you have given him every touch and move,
Wrinkle and secret of you, all your life,
—Oh! then I know I'm waiting, lover-wife,
For the great time when love is at a close,
And all its fruit's to watch the thickening nose
And sweaty neck and dulling face and eye,
That are yours, and you, most surely, till you die!
Day after day you'll sit with him and note
The greasier tie, the dingy wrinkling coat;
As prettiness turns to pomp, and strength to fat,
And love, love, love to habit!

And after that,
When all that's fine in man is at an end,
And you, that loved young life and clean, must tend
A foul sick fumbling dribbling body and old,
When his rare lips hang flabby and can't hold
Slobber, and you're enduring that worst thing,
Senility's queasy furtive love-making,
And searching those dear eyes for human meaning,
Propping the bald and helpless head, and cleaning
A scrap that life's flung by, and love's forgotten,—
Then you'll be tired; and passion dead and rotten;
And he'll be dirty, dirty!

O lithe and free
And lightfoot, that the poor heart cries to see,

That's how I'll see your man and you!—

But you
—Oh, when that time comes, you'll be dirty too!

I was getting over the heartbreak of getting over first love, and grappling with guilt and anxiety about growing up and leaving friends, hometown, and my old self behind. "Ah, when to the heart of man / Was it ever less than a treason / To go with the drift of things" struck right to the heart of my ambivalence, as did "The heart is still aching to seek, / But the feet question 'Whither?'"

Daphne Bissette

Reluctance
Robert Frost (1874-1963)

Out through the fields and the woods
  And over the walls I have wended;
I have climbed the hills of view
  And looked at the world, and descended;
I have come by the highway home,
  And lo, it is ended.

The leaves are all dead on the ground,
  Save those that the oak is keeping
To ravel them one by one
  And let them go scraping and creeping
Out over the crusted snow,
  When others are sleeping.

And the dead leaves lie huddled and still,
  No longer blown hither and thither;
The last lone aster is gone;
  The flowers of the witch hazel wither;
The heart is still aching to seek,
  But the feet question 'Whither?'

Ah, when to the heart of man
  Was it ever less than a treason
To go with the drift of things,
  To yield with a grace to reason,
And bow and accept the end
  Of a love or a season?

The poem that sticks in my head is Kipling's "If—." I first read it in high school, and the lines that stick with me to this day, and of which I often think in an aspirational way, are "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs" (it's a partial line, but it's not the blame part that interests me) and "If you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two impostors just the same"—but as I reread the poem, I realize that there are so many couplets that speak to me of what and who I wish I could be every day and in every interaction.

Kate Hamblet

If—
Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

If you can keep your head when all about you
  Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
  But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
  Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
  And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
  If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
  And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
  Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
  And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
  And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
  And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
  To serve your turn long after they are gone,

And so hold on when there is nothing in you
    Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
    Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
    If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
    With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
    And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

I bought W.S. Merwin's book Present Company the month I graduated from high school and have ever since associated this little poem with the time around graduation, where things are growing and changing as well as ending.

(I guess this outs me as a teenager who identified with the words of really old people...)

Kate Lund

To This May
W.S. Merwin (1927-2019)

They know so much more now about
the heart we are told but the world
still seems to come one at a time
one day one year one season and here
it is spring once more with its birds
nesting in the holes in the walls
its morning finding the first time
its light pretending not to move
always beginning as it goes

The poem I encountered as a child is/was "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" by William Wordsworth.

There was nothing unusual or special about this encounter; almost all children growing up in the British Empire and who went to school would have collided with it and been forced to memorize an ode to a flower they most likely would never see. Of course for Wordsworth, the point wasn't the flower, the point was the feelings he had about himself, the wonder and beauty of his Being, his smallness existing in an unfathomable world, "for oft when on a couch I lie, in vacant or in pensive mood." What was a couch? As a child, had I ever seen one? As for moods: Vacant? Pensive? I had no idea that they varied. I am almost 73 years of age now and have gone through many moods with this poem. I have ended up planting twenty thousand (so far, for I am sure more will come) of them on a lawn that lay before my house. When they are in bloom, I recite the poem and drink a glass of wine or something like that and say, "To Wordsworth!".

There! You asked for a line or two but I am not capable of a line or two.

Jamaica Kincaid

I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

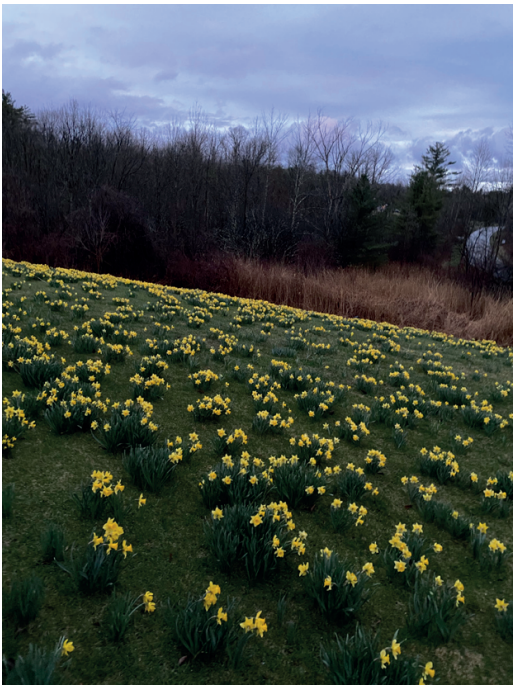
I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Postscript



This is a small view of what the lawn looks like when they start to bloom. It lasts for about four weeks and then I have to wait 6 weeks to mow the lawn. – Kincaid

A note on the art

This anthology includes, with generous permission, images of two artworks by Leon Steinmetz:

-Cover: " 'I Can Do It' — 'All Right, Be My Guest!'" from Ladies and the Devil series. Copyright © 2004 Leon Steinmetz.

-Table of Contents: selection from The Spell of Antiquity series. Copyright © 2010-2014 Leon Steinmetz.

About the latter museum exhibit, Steinmetz has written: "For me, antiquity is a live, unbroken wire extending across the millennia and carrying a charge of such profound spiritual power that artists from every age and place—Dante and Cervantes, Rembrandt and Lorrain, Handel, Gluck, Picasso, and countless others—have drawn energy from it. Or, in other words, were thirsty for the antiquity's 'water of life.'"