

APRIL GIFTS

2007

Created by: Susan F. Glassmeyer
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Hello All Writers and Readers of Poetry!

Since April is “Poetry Month”, it follows that every day in April is “Poetry Day”. My personal pet project for April is to “love what I love” (paraphrasing poet Frank Bidart) so I am offering (via email) my version of “poem of the day” to inspire, to remind, to nurture, to nudge. I will also include notes about poetry contests and events that have come across my path, bits of interviews with, or commentaries by, poets who may or may not be familiar to you. If you do NOT want to receive one more piece of mail in your inbox, I will be glad to remove your name from this 30-day experiment. Just let me know. Enjoy. Susan

The Race

When I got to the airport I rushed up to the desk,
bought a ticket, ten minutes later
they told me the flight was cancelled, the doctors
had said my father would not live through the night
and the flight was cancelled. A young man
with a dark brown moustache told me
another airline had a nonstop
leaving in seven minutes. See that
elevator over there, well go
down to the first floor, make a right, you'll
see a yellow bus, get off at the
second Pan Am terminal, I
ran, I who have no sense of direction
raced exactly where he'd told me, a fish
slipping upstream deftly against
the flow of the river. I jumped off that bus with those
bags I had thrown everything into
in five minutes, and ran, the bags
wagged me from side to side as if
to prove I was under the claims of the material,
I ran up to a man with a flower on his breast,
I who always go to the end of the line, I said
Help me. He looked at my ticket, he said
Make a left and then a right, go up the moving stairs and then
run. I lumbered up the moving stairs,
at the top I saw the corridor,
and then I took a deep breath, I said
goodbye to my body, goodbye to comfort,
I used my legs and heart as if I would
gladly use them up for this,
to touch him again in this life. I ran, and the
bags banged against me, wheeled and coursed
in skewed orbits, I have seen pictures of
women running, their belongings tied
in scarves grasped in their fists, I blessed my
long legs he gave me, my strong

heart I abandoned to its own purpose,
I ran to Gate 17 and they were
just lifting the thick white
lozenge of the door to fit it into
the socket of the plane. Like the one who is not
too rich, I turned sideways and
slipped through the needle's eye, and then
I walked down the aisle toward my father. The jet
was full, and people's hair was shining, they were
smiling, the interior of the plane was filled with a
mist of gold endorphin light,
I wept as people weep when they enter heaven,
in massive relief. We lifted up
gently from one tip of the continent
and did not stop until we set down lightly on the
other edge, I walked into his room
and watched his chest rise slowly
and sink again, all night
I watched him breathe.

—by *Sharon Olds*



Poetry is the medium of choice for giving our most hidden self a voice—the voice behind the mask that all of us wear. Poetry says, "You are not alone in the world: all your fears, anxieties, hopes, despairs are the common property of the race." In a way, poetry is the most private of all the arts, and yet it is public, too, a form of social bonding. It gains its power from the chaos at its source, the untold secrets of the self. The power is in the mystery of the word.—Stanley Kunitz

The Layers

I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.
When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.
Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!
How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?
In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings my face.
Yet I turn, I turn,
exulting somewhat,
with my will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road
precious to me.
In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:
"Live in the layers,
not on the litter."

Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.
I am not done with my changes.

—by *Stanley Kunitz*



Chances are you may not know there is an annual (currently free) poetry and music festival in Logan, Ohio, every April. This year “The Hocking Hills Festival of Poetry” takes place on April 20 and 21. Find out more at: powerofpoetry.org.

One of this year’s visiting poets will be Laurie Kirkpatrick who has been gathering material for thirty years in the San Francisco Bay area as a clinical psychologist, wife, mother of two daughters, a hiker, a quilter, an aerobics junkie, a piano player, a friend, and a perpetual asker of questions. Her “list poem”.....



Things I Have Made

Two woven baskets,
A tree stripped of its bark with hand tools,
The blue wool skirt which had to be remade by a seamstress
and which I never wore because my mother chose the scratchy fabric,
Intimate conversation with strangers,
Phone calls to influence elections,
A mess of several love relationships,
The permanent knot in my lower left back,
My mother’s eulogy,
Monster plants,
A home,
Disembodied leaps from the high dive,
A chemistry concoction over which I convinced my little sister to stand vigil
lest the house explode,
Superstitious gestures begging god for favors,
Countless walks to the top of the same hill,
Two female infants: a semi-cooperative venture,
Apologies,
A fingerpainting in blood,

Kisses so ardent and tender they constituted a sacrament,
Halloween costumes for Cyndi Lauper and Madonna,
A letter of gratitude to my father,
A hospital for the goldfish,
The magic concordance with the moon and trees in a wooded clearing
which caused a strange cat to jump into my arms,
Poems which stood like thrown pots on their own surprising, little legs,
A fool of myself, throwing the naked party where nobody got naked but me,
A mola for a wedding present, a Chinese coins quilt for a death present,
The circle of safety in which my insomniac husband can sleep,
In proper perspective, very little difference,
But a great cup of coffee,
and Music.

—by *Laurie Kirkpatrick*

Writer **Donald Hall** spends his days writing the way his grandparents and great-grandparents worked the farm in New Hampshire where Hall has resided now for decades. In an interview for *Christian Science Monitor* he explains the comparison: *How many products did they sell? Maple syrup, maple sugar, honey, board timber, cordwood for fires, sometimes hay and corn which they usually kept to feed their horses. There are several ways in which, amusingly and possibly seriously, my work parallels that of my ancestors. One way is that I work on many different things during the course of a day and during the course of a year. I don't have one single product. I write children's books, textbooks, short stories, book reviews, essays and articles. I write everything except novels. I write plays. Of course, poems are the center of things, but I'm talking about the crops that I eat by.*

(Although it's Poetry Month, consider reading Donald Hall's essays in "Here At Eagle Pond" and "String To Short To Be Saved" to get an astounding sense of place— the beloved family farm where Donald Hall still lives, and shared a life there with his dear wife and poet Jane Kenyon, now deceased.)

IN HIS OWN WORDS—Donald Hall

I live by farmer's hours. I get up (early)— this morning it was 4:45. I always begin the day by working on poems. I would very often, say, begin by working on eight or ten poems. And probably the average length of time, from the beginning of the poem to the publication of it, is four or five years. You can imagine that some of my poems, almost all, spend a lot of time stuck away in drawers.

Here is a remarkable and seemingly simple poem undoubtedly written with Jane in mind.



Gold

Pale gold of the walls, gold
of the centers of daisies, yellow roses
pressing from a clear bowl. All day
we lay on the bed, my hand
stroking the deep
gold of your thighs and your back.
We slept and woke
entering the golden room together,
lay down in it breathing
quickly, then
slowly again,
caressing and dozing, your hand sleepily
touching my hair now.

We made in those days
tiny identical rooms inside our bodies
which the men who uncover our graves
will find in a thousand years,
shining and whole.

—by *Donald Hall*

Finding a “no entry fee” poetry contest that offers monetary prizes as well as publication can be a little job in itself. Here are two contests worth taking a look at. THE PORTIA STEELE COMPETITION is available to women poets and prose writers (sorry guys) over the age of 50. Submissions must be postmarked April 15, 2007. You can find more info at: PortiaSteeleAward.org/contest.htm. SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS INTERNATIONAL offers an annual "Presence Poetry Contest" (deadline May 15). Details at www.sdiworld.org/publications/poetry-contest.html.

Today’s poem by **Tryfon Tolides** was the 2004 Foley Poetry Contest winner— a \$1000 prize. The annual FOLEY POETRY AWARD does NOT charge an entry fee to submit to its contest which runs annually from January 1 through March 31 each year. You can Google “Foley Poetry Award” for 2008 guidelines.

The Mouse and the Human

The mouse doesn’t really bother anyone. It doesn’t go around holding up banks or shooting people in the face or locking them up in dank jail cells and sticking electric prods to their genitals. It doesn’t build jet fighters and bomb our cities in the name of peace in the middle of the night while we are sleeping. It doesn’t plant toy mines to blow our children’s arms off. All the mouse wants is to share with us some shelter, food, even the warmth of its nervous body. Yet we plug up the cupboards so it can’t eat, and we chase it around the living room with a broom and remove all the chairs till it has nowhere to hide; then we club it to death as it squeals. Or we set up traps with something it likes to lure it into strangulation and burst its eyes out of its head. And against what? A few light scratchings heard in the ceiling once in a while keeping us company at night? Two or three crumbs of bread taken from the kitchen floor? And after the mouse, there are the ants to be poisoned, the bees to be gassed and burned. Later, the dandelions to be choked by spraying. And after that, after that, there must be something after that.

—by *Tryfon Tolides*

....it is the job of the poet to give pleasure, to amaze and exhort as well as to testify to the real; to demonstrate the capabilities of human genius and joy. Song is heroic. It has its place even at a funeral. How else will we remember that anything is possible. —Tony Hoagland.



Measure Every Grief I Meet

I measure every Grief I meet
With narrow, probing, Eyes –
I wonder if It weighs like Mine –
Or has an Easier size.

I wonder if They bore it long –
Or did it just begin –
I could not tell the Date of Mine –
It feels so old a pain –

I wonder if it hurts to live –
And if They have to try –
And whether – could They choose between –
It would not be – to die –

I note that Some – gone patient long –
At length, renew their smile –
An imitation of a Light
That has so little Oil –

I wonder if when Years have piled -
Some Thousands - on the Harm -
That hurt them early - such a lapse
Could give them any Balm -

Or would they go on aching still
Through Centuries of Nerve -
Enlightened to a larger Pain -
In Contrast with the Love -

The Grieved - are many - I am told -
There is the various Cause -
Death - is but one - and comes but once -
And only nails the eyes -

There's Grief of Want - and grief of Cold -
A sort they call "Despair" -
There's Banishment from native Eyes -
In Sight of Native Air -

And though I may not guess the kind -
Correctly - yet to me
A piercing Comfort it affords
In passing Calvary -

To note the fashions - of the Cross -
And how they're mostly worn -
Still fascinated to presume
That Some - are like My Own -

-by Emily Dickinson

Sam Hamill has taught in prisons for fourteen years, in artist-in-residency programs for twenty years, and has worked extensively with battered woman and children. He is Founding Editor of Copper Canyon Press and was Editor there from 1972 through 2004. In January 2003, he founded Poets Against War, compiling the largest single-theme anthology in history, and editing a best-selling selection, *Poets Against the War* (Nation Books, 2003). His work has been translated into more than a dozen languages. Hamill is the author of fourteen volumes of poetry and three collections of essays.



The Orchid Flower

Just as I wonder
whether it's going to die,
the orchid blossoms

and I can't explain why it
moves my heart, why such pleasure

comes from one small bud
on a long spindly stem, one
blood red gold flower

opening at mid-summer,
tiny, perfect in its hour.

Even to a white-
haired, craggy poet, it's
purely erotic,

pistil and stamen, pollen,
dew of the world, a spoonful

of earth, and water.
Erotic because there's death
at the heart of birth,

drama in those old sunrise
prisms in wet cedar boughs,

deepest mystery
in washing evening dishes
or teasing my wife,

who grows, yes, more beautiful
because one of us will die.

—by *Sam Hamill*

Poet **Stevie Smith** was born Florence Margaret Smith in 1902 in Hull, England. Orphaned by her parents, she and her sister went to live with their spinster aunt, an important figure in her life affectionately known as "The Lion". When she was five years old Stevie developed tuberculosis and was confined to a sanatorium where she battled the disease for many years with extended stays in various hospitals. Later she was to say that her childhood illness triggered a pre-occupation with death that featured in much of her work. After leaving college she got a job as a secretary for the head of a publishing house. The work was undemanding and gave her time to write.

Much of her inspiration came from theology and the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm. Force-fed with what she considered lifeless language in the New English Bible, she often aimed satirical barbs at religion and addressed serious themes in a nursery rhyme structure. She enjoyed reading Tennyson and Browning and read few contemporary poets in an attempt to keep her voice original and pure. Her style is unique in its combination of seemingly prosaic statements, variety of voices, playful meter, and deep sense of irony.



The Airy Christ

Who is this that comes in splendour, coming from the blazing East?
This is he we had not thought of, this is he the airy Christ.

Airy, in an airy manner in an airy parkland walking,
Others take him by the hand, lead him, do the talking.

But the Form, the airy One, frowns an airy frown,
What they say he knows must be, but he looks aloofly down,

Looks aloofly at his feet, looks aloofly at his hands,
Knows they must, as prophets say, nailed be to wooden bands.

As he knows the words he sings, that he sings so happily
Must be changed to working laws, yet sings he ceaselessly.

Those who truly hear the voice, the words, the happy song,
Never shall need working laws to keep from doing wrong.

Deaf men will pretend sometimes they hear the song, the words,
And make excuse to sin extremely; this will be absurd.

Heed it not. Whatever foolish men may do the song is cried
For those who hear, and the sweet singer does not care that he was crucified.

For he does not wish that men should love him more than anything
Because he died; he only wishes they would hear him sing.

—by *Stevie Smith*

Taniguchi Buson (1716 - 1784 / Japan) was a leading poet of the late 18th century and, with Basho and Issa, one of the great names in haiku. Despite his poetic brilliance, Buson (also known as Yosa Buson) was remembered more as a painter until essays by modern Japanese writers revived his reputation. Buson's major contribution to haiku is his complexity and his painter's eye, offering great visual detail in his poetry.

on the one ton temple bell
a moon-moth, folded into sleep,
sits still.

—Taniguchi Buson

In discovering one poem, we usually discover at least one other. And, as one friend inspires another, so one poem can inspire another, and another, and another. Former Poet Laureate, **Billy Collins**, created a poem in response to Buson's haiku. Here it is.



Japan

Today I pass the time reading
a favorite haiku,
saying the few words over and over.

It feels like eating
the same small, perfect grape
again and again.

I walk through the house reciting it
and leave its letters falling
through the air of every room.

I stand by the big silence of the piano and say it.
I say it in front of a painting of the sea.
I tap out its rhythm on an empty shelf.

I listen to myself saying it,
then I say it without listening,
then I hear it without saying it.

And when the dog looks up at me,
I kneel down on the floor
and whisper it into each of his long white ears.

It's the one about the one-ton
temple bell
with the moth sleeping on its surface,

and every time I say it, I feel the excruciating
pressure of the moth
on the surface of the iron bell.
When I say it at the window,
the bell is the world
and I am the moth resting there.

When I say it at the mirror,
I am the heavy bell
and the moth is life with its papery wings.

And later, when I say it to you in the dark,
you are the bell,
and I am the tongue of the bell, ringing you,

and the moth has flown
from its line
and moves like a hinge in the air above our bed.

—by *Billy Collins*

Today's poem titled "Sweet Time" by **Molly Peacock** is preceded by an excerpt from an interview with Ms. Peacock by Laura Leichum, a regular writer for BooksLut.com. [BooksLut](http://BooksLut.com) is a monthly web magazine and daily blog dedicated to those who love to read. One of the writers for BooksLut says "It's occurred to me that after working as a librarian, I have become a bona fide book slut. Gone are the days, when I would monogamously read only one book at a time. Now, I usually read wantonly from a harem of books, flipping a few pages of each one according to my fancy."

LL: You are a formalist, and the other thing I noticed in your books is that you are very fond of the sonnet form. First, I wanted to ask did this form choose you, you know how that happens, when you are working on things and you think, wow this really works for me, or did choose it? And what is your favorite sonnet form and why?

MP: [laughing] *I love sonnets. I loved them since I first discovered them in middle school, maybe. I didn't realize that I loved them because they have a limit. **But when you write a sonnet you discover that having an end in sight forces you into a kind of compression that I love in art.** I also embraced the sonnet because I, in my early life as a writer, was a very poor reviser. Every time I tried to revise something I beat the life out of it. There it was, dead on the page. I began to write sonnets at the same time, I mean seriously write sonnets, when I was working as a seventh grade English teacher. I wrote a poem every Saturday morning and I had to have made certain decisions earlier in the week because I couldn't face a blank page on Saturday morning. I started on Thursday to write the poem in my head. If I knew it was going to be a sonnet, I kind of already knew the guidelines and it was like ice skating in competition, you know you just went out and skated your routine and if you blew it you got low scores that day. So if I blew it I would say well, fine, I'm gonna have 52 of these poems by the end of the year, I could throw out half of them, I could throw out more than half of them and it'll be fine. Because I just couldn't revise, I just could go out and do it, get all the rhymes and the ideas. I would write them completely breathlessly, I mean I was almost spinning free.*

LL: About the private practice of poetry. Is that something that you're regularly involved in and what are some of the pros and cons of working with people one-on-one as opposed to in a workshop or an MFA program?

MP: *For the last fifteen years I have been working one-to-one with private students all over the English-speaking world, usually in the U.S. and Canada, North America, sometimes Central America, occasionally in Europe. And it is a kind of apprenticeship work. I work with some people for a limited period of time. I work with other people over many years and many books. They're long term, intense relationships, they are mentoring relationships, they are coach-like relationships, as well as editing relationships. I think of it using a musical model, where even though there is formal musical training, a musician will study with a maestra or a maestro, it's like that. It's not a substitute for school. I also teach in Spaulding University's (in Louisville Kentucky) low-residency program at school and it's different from what I do privately because the private agenda is simply the student's. And usually the writer is a completely serious writer, often been out there in the world, often already has an MFA. Or they are middle-aged, they've always wanted to write, and something happens in their life*

where they feel this itch and they've got to do it now. Or they're quite young and gifted and in some circumstance where they're not in school or their school isn't working for them in some way or another and we do a little work together and then they go back to school or off to graduate school or something like that. I work with people in extremes, I usually have somebody that I'm working with who's dying, who has to get a book finished.

LL: How is that for you?

MP: The first time it happened I thought I can't stand it, I would talk to this person and I would have to take a nap afterwards. I have done it enough so that I feel that they are teaching me. I am going to know how to go to the next world better because I have worked with some of these quite extraordinary people.



Sweet Time

The largest bud in creation travels
up the swollen stem of the Amaryllis
like a ship in a womb up a river.
When it reaches its height, the bud unravels
so completely slowly that the thrill is
measured, pleasure by pleasure, each shiver
of the petal noted with the naked eye
noting that it is all naked and red
and about to, about to. Something will try
to surface, it is all about surfaces, shed,
discovered, it is all about what wells up
in its own sweet time as dirty and sudden
and unfathomed as an old bad word in the cup
of the lips as a private part sits in a hand, unhidden.
Do you know what sin is? Sin is something

pried out before its time, unresolved unreadiness.
There are things that are properly buried
alive— not bones, not treasure —things living
that will emerge and won't be dug for. The steadiness
of this emergence is strong, lissom, long, and unharried.

—by *Molly Peacock*

Public Service Announcement: Throughout the month of April, local and regional poets will read from their work at the annual Poetry in the Garden series at the Cincinnati Main Library downtown. The readings will take place in the Reading Garden (1st floor, South Building) every Wednesday at 7:00 p.m.

April 11 — David Shumate and Joanie Mackowski.

April 18 — Jillian Weise and Rhonda Pettit (GCWL Member).

April 25 — Lisa Williams and Jamey Dunham.

I discovered today's poem by **Margaret Atwood** (not reminiscent of her other poetry by the way) more than 15 years ago and I never tire of re-visiting it. "Variations on the Word Sleep" always serves to cast a good spell on me, as if through reading it I am entering some arcane alchemical experience. An awakening through the vehicle of "sleep"? That "long stairway", the cave, the body, the boat and the water. Irresistible. And just who is the "I" and the "you" in the poem?

If you are further curious, at least two paintings by visual magician Hans-Werner Sahn echo the word art of Atwood's poem. Consider "Resting Place" (Gallery 1) and "Coming Home" (Gallery 2) at: alchemicalimage.com/HansWernerSahn/index.shtml.



Variations On The Word Sleep

I would like to watch you sleeping,
which may not happen.
I would like to watch you,
sleeping. I would like to sleep
with you, to enter
your sleep as its smooth dark wave
slides over my head
and walk with you through that lucent
wavering forest of bluegreen leaves

with its watery sun & three moons
towards the cave where you must descend,
towards your worst fear
I would like to give you the silver
branch, the small white flower, the one
word that will protect you
from the grief at the center
of your dream, from the grief
at the center. I would like to follow
you up the long stairway
again & become
the boat that would row you back
carefully, a flame
in two cupped hands
to where your body lies
beside me, and you enter
it as easily as breathing in
I would like to be the air
that inhabits you for a moment
only. I would like to be that unnoticed
& that necessary.

—by *Margaret Atwood*

Poet **Karen Braucher's** book of poetry, "Sending Messages Over Inconceivable Distances" is a Finalist for the Oregon Book Award, selected by Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Maxine Kumin. The book is an exploration of her August 1992 journey to Changsha, Hunan Province, People's Republic of China. She went there to adopt a daughter who was then just eight weeks old. Braucher is donating all royalties from this book to the Foundation for Chinese Orphanages, a non-profit organization that sponsors projects in cooperation with the Chinese government to support children still living in Chinese orphanages.

Ms. Braucher operates an independent poetry press, The Portlandia Press, founded in 1999 to encourage the finest emerging poets writing in English by publishing their poetry chapbooks.

A panel of published poets, most with advanced degrees in literature or writing, judges the finalists anonymously to determine the winner. The competition now takes place every other year. The next deadline for submission is March 1, 2008. Contest guidelines will be available in Fall 2007 at www.karenbraucher.com.



A Chinese College Freshman Asks Me The Meaning of Life via Internet, 1997 A.D.

His small concrete apartment is
a two-room box he shares with parents,
not my rambling house with a view.
He shares his computer with twenty others,
while no one else touches mine.
He wrote, "As you know, we are facing
the complex reality now. We are often confuse."
He asks what is the "intention" of living,
whether life is a game. He says he knows
life is not just "to earn more money and

spend it with joyfulness.” On my computer screen
I read, “What is your standpoint of life? For you see,
I want to form my own through consulting others’ advice.”
My standpoint of life. I’m worried he’ll
get in trouble for asking questions.
They could be “counterrevolutionary”
on a bad day. A few years ago the purpose
of life was to serve The Party, to serve Mao.
I’m old enough to be his mother.
Should I tell him to be careful? Does he already
know? Prison such a quick step away.
Or is it more “counterrevolutionary” to
ask me “what is bungee jumping,” as his friend does?
Where does meaning reside? My mother told me
Father had tears in his eyes when he described
a day in court. A lawyer and scholar, he found
our imperfect justice system so beautiful. The accused
is given a fair hearing, at least in theory, and people
are required to listen. This young man is willing
to ask questions and listen across an ocean,
despite the danger. I have my father’s tears now.
I’ll write back that perhaps the answer is
to live by extending ourselves—like he is doing—
hoping crazily to slip through an internet,
beyond communism and capitalism, and connect.

—by *Karen Braucher*

Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction is sponsoring a “free” (no entry fee) poetry contest. The contest offers modest prizes for short poems on a spiritual theme. No simultaneous submissions. Email entries only. Deadline Date: May 15, 2007. Top Award \$100. Three runner-up prizes of \$75 each. The top four selections will be published in the October, December, March, and June issues of Presence, respectively. A number of honorable mentions will also be selected for future publication.

“Presence” is published by Spiritual Directors International, an interfaith organization located in Bellvue, Washington, that offers programs, publications and practices to support spiritual directors and clergy. Further details at:
<http://info.sdiworld.org/archives/2006/12/29/poetry-contest>.

Today's poet, **Vikram Seth** (born in Calcutta, West Bengal, India 1952) always reminds interviewers that he never studied English at university, which he offers as a reason for his “unfashionable” writerly choices: “I was trained as an economist and so I didn't have to go through the rigmarole of English literature, and finding out what was current, what ought to be done, what ought not be done”. While maintaining a strong interest in economics, his passion was literature, and he began writing poetry as an undergraduate. Seth is considered to be a controversial “social poet”.

Poetry is a deep inner calling; it came from liturgy, the psalms, and also the content of religions. In the early ages the poet regarded himself a priest/priestess in order to safeguard his/her vocation. Poet Pablo Neruda says: “Today’s social poet is still a member of the earliest order of priests. In the old days he made his pact with the darkness, and now he must interpret the light.” And so, today, "an interpretation" by Vikram Seth.



A Style of Loving

Light now restricts itself
To the top half of trees;
The angled sun
Slants honey-coloured rays
That lessen to the ground
As we bike through
The corridor of Palm Drive.
We two

Have reached a safety the years
Can claim to have created:
Unconsummated, therefore
Unjaded, unsated.
Picnic, movie, ice-cream;
Talk, to clear my head
Hot buttered rum -- coffee for you;
And so not to bed.

And so we have set the question
Aside, gently.
Were we to become lovers
Where would our best friends be?
You do not wish, nor I
To risk again
This savoured light for noon's
High joy or pain.

—by *Vikram Seth*

During the last week of March a dear client and friend (in her early sixties) spent a sudden, brief and heroic time in hospice. Sitting with her just two days before she died was a privilege that had a profound effect on her family and friends. As her breath rattled out of her body, we considered our own.

In “What The Living Do”, poet **Marie Howe** has reinvented the elegy as a poem for the living, a poem of instruction, how we’re educated by grief. Howe’s beloved brother, dying of Aids, is the subject of her beautiful work. Liz Rosenberg of the Boston Globe says “Howe’s writing is not so much a moan or a shriek as a song. It is genuinely a feminine form...a poetry of intimacy, witness, honesty and relation.” In the chilling twist at the end of “The Last Time”, we recognize that accepting the death of others, even those who we love, is easy compared to accepting that the same fate awaits us.



The Last Time

The last time we had dinner together in a restaurant
with white tablecloths, he leaned forward

and took my two hands in his and said,
I'm going to die soon. I want you to know that.

And I said, I think I do know.
And he said, what surprises me is that you don't.

And I said, I do. And he said, What?
And I said, Know that you're going to die.

And he said, No, I mean know that you are.

—by *Marie Howe*

It's Sunday, and who better to put behind the pulpit than **William Stafford** and "associate pastor", Carl Sandburg. Today's poems, "Ask Me" by Stafford and "Sea Wisdom" by Sandburg offer hauntingly complementary reflections.

William Stafford was mistrustful of poetry that attempted to preach or indoctrinate. As he put it so aptly:...."*poetry is based on something other than just the shoveling in of content: poetry is an experience, a venturing into new encounters, an exercise in thoughts, feelings, dreams, impulses of living human beings.*" He goes on to explain of what true religious experience consists: "*Every religious experience I recall that impressed me greatly has been in the presence of influences that combined several senses—not merely verbal experience in a church. My belief is just something like where north is to a compass: I can sway; I can be confused. But north is still there.*"

And Sandburg? "*I am an idealist. I believe in everything! I am only looking for proofs.*" And, who like Stafford labored in the physical world, Sandburg said: "*I won't take my religion from any man who never works except with his mouth.*"

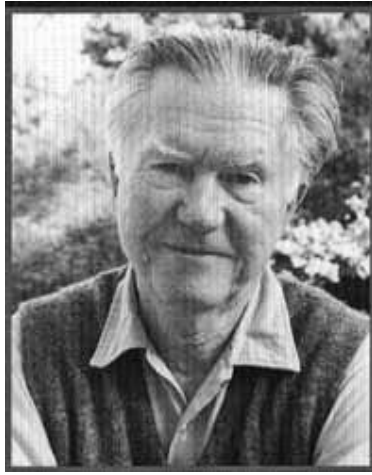
Charles Simic, an admirer of William Stafford, said that at the end of strong poems, we are always alone, their fateful acts and consequences now our own to consider. Maybe the same could be said of a good sermon. Today's "sermon" in two poems

Ask Me

Some time when the river is ice ask me
mistakes I have made. Ask me whether
what I have done is my life. Others
have come in their slow way into
my thought, and some have tried to help
or to hurt: ask me what difference
their strongest love or hate has made.

I will listen to what you say.
You and I can turn and look
at the silent river and wait. We know
the current is there, hidden; and there
are comings and goings from miles away
that hold the stillness exactly before us.
What the river says, that is what I say.

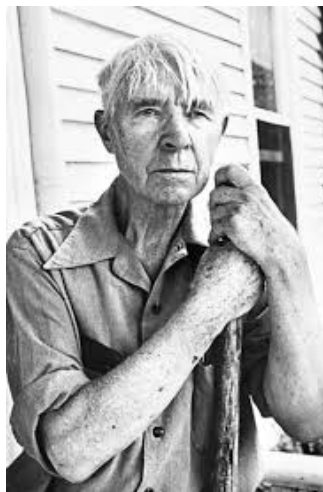
—by *William Stafford*



Sea Wisdom

The sea was always the sea
and a maker was the sea always.
What the sea was making you may know
by asking the sea and getting an answer.
Well the sea knows its own importance.
Well the sea will answer you when it knows
your importance.

—by *Carl Sandburg*



Poetry Festival Announcement:

27th Annual James Wright Poetry Festival April 20 & 21

Featured Poets: Stephen Dobyns & Judith Vollmer

Sponsored by Ohio Arts Council, Eastern Ohio Arts Council, Martins Ferry Public Library, Ohio University. Info: 740-633-0314 / myertsv@oplin.org / <http://mfpl.org>

Michele Wyrebek, author of the book *BE PROPERLY SCARED*, lived an absolutely heroic life, battling recurrent cancers so severe that they cost her a lung and a leg. She died in 2003 at the age of 42. *BE PROPERLY SCARED* takes its title from a tough-minded statement by Flannery O'Connor, with whom Wyrebek felt a great affinity..... "Don't take any romantic attitude.....Be properly scared and go on doing what you have to do."

Wyrebek worked with poet Edward Hirsch at the low-residency M.F.A. program at Warren Wilson College in Asheville, North Carolina. Hirsch tells us: "Night Owl" begins with her (Wyrebek's) driving home from the hospital— it seems as if she was always getting terrible news—and gradually opens out into a great sense of mysterious encounter."



Night Owl

"You are nearing the land that is life.
You will recognize it by its seriousness.

Rilke

Driving my bad news the back way home
I know that I'm in the land that is life
when I reach my favorite stretch of road—fields
flat and wide where corn appears soon after
planting the soil tilled, night-soaked
and crumbled into fists.
Ferguson's barn is somewhere

at the end of this long arm of tar
and as I near it, something grazes the back
passenger-side door, luffs parallel to my car—
a huge owl on headlight spray floating,
holding night over the hood to see
if this moving thing is real, alive,
something to kill—then gliding in
close as if to taste glass.

The road levitates, buffeted on a surf
of light, the fog-eaten farm disappearing
as I ride into starlessness, cells conspiring
so I am bright-flecked and uplifted—is this
what it feels like to be chosen—to be taken
under the wing of something vast
that knows its way blindly?

—by *Michele Wyrebek*

After yesterday's dark news, no poem seemed "good enough" for today's entry. There was even a notion to just run a blank page. Then, I remembered Gregory Orr's work in "Concerning the Book That is the Body of the Beloved" (a book of many short poems, which in their entirety are really one long poem).To feel, to feel, to feel./Failing that, why live /~The feel of not to feel"— /That counts too./Anguish is one clear/Sign we're still here.

When **Gregory Orr** was twelve years old he accidentally shot and killed his younger brother. This was soon followed by his mother's unexpected death, and his father's later addiction to amphetamines. Orr believes in poetry as a way of surviving tragedy. ***"Even the saddest poem I write is proof that I want to survive. And therefore it represents an affirmation of life in all its complexities and contradictions. An additional miracle comes to me as the maker of poems: Because poems can be shared between poet and audience, they also become a further triumph over human isolation."***



Excerpt from: Concerning the Book That is the Body of the Beloved

If deepest grief is hell
When the animal self
Wants to lie down
In the dark and die also ...

If deepest grief is hell,
Then the world returning
(Not soon, not easily)
Must be heaven.

The joke you laughed at
Must be heaven
Or the funny thing
The cat did
At its food dish.

Whatever
Guides you back
To the world.

That dark so deep
The tiniest light
Will do.

—by Gregory Orr

“If death is everywhere we look, at least let's marry it to beauty.”
Poet **Linda Pastan** from her book of poems, “The Last Uncle”.

Near the Sacrificial Site

Pastum, 1997

On an afternoon like this
I want permission to forget
the many varieties of cruelty.
I want the only figures of the past to be
ancestors of these wild
poppies, of this chestnut tree
whose blossoms break through
the hardest wood. I know that cruelty
flourishes just down the road, persistent
as these gnarled roots which overrun
the partly ruined woods.
But on an afternoon like this—
Old Master clouds and waterfalls of light—
I ask for the mercies of amnesia.
I want to open myself to the sun
which I know has killed
with its munificence,
to smell the foxglove
with no thought of the poison
hidden in its leaf.

—by *Linda Pastan*



Two big poetry events happening this weekend:

—Annual Hocking Hill Poetry & Music Festival April 20 & 21. This year's theme: Seeking the Soul of Poetry with poets Laurie Kirkpatrick and Maya & Barry Spector. Check out powerofpoetry.org, site run by Alan Cohen.

—27th Annual James Wright Poetry Festival April 20 & 21 Featured Poets: Stephen Dobyns & Judith Vollmer. Sponsored by Ohio Arts Council, Eastern Ohio Arts Council, Martins Ferry Public Library, Ohio University. Info: 740-633-0314 / myertsyv@oplin.org / <http://mfpl.org>

James Wright, a native of Martins Ferry, Ohio, is widely recognized as one of America's finest 20th century poets. He has left behind a body of work admired by fellow poets as well as critics. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* entry nicely captures his work, saying that he "wrote about sorrow, salvation, and self-revelation." His images arise from the natural and industrial landscape of the Ohio Valley: the football stadium in Martins Ferry, the blast furnaces of Benwood, Wheeling Steel, Hazel Atlas Glass, the suckholes of the Ohio River. His complex outlook was marked by despair and hope; in his dark vision a spirit of affirmation persists. (taken from poets.org).



A Blessing

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies
Darken with kindness.
They have come gladly out of the willows
To welcome my friend and me.
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness
That we have come.

They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.
There is no loneliness like theirs.
At home once more,
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.
Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.

—by *James Wright*

From *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*: There is no writer of comparable influence and achievement in so many areas of the contemporary women's movement as the poet and theorist **Adrienne Rich**. Over the years, hers has become one of the most eloquent, provocative voices on the politics of sexuality, race, language, power, and women's culture. There is scarcely an anthology of feminist writings that does not contain her work or specifically engage her ideas, a women's studies course that does not read her essays, or a poetry collection that does not include her work or that of the next generation of poets steeped in her example. In nineteen volumes of poetry, three collections of essays, the editing of influential lesbian-feminist journals, and a lifetime of activism and visibility, the work of Adrienne Rich has persistently resonated at the heart of contemporary feminism and its resistance to racism, militarism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism.

Today's poem is from Adrienne Rich's book titled: *The School Among The Ruins*, published by WW Norton.



There is no one story and one story only

The engineer's story of hauling coal
to Davenport for the cement factory, sitting on the bluffs
between runs looking for whales, hauling concrete
back to Gilroy, he and his wife renewing vows
in the glass chapel in Arkansas after 25 years
The flight attendant's story murmured
to the flight steward in the dark galley
of her fifth-month loss of nerve
about carrying the baby she'd seen on the screen
The story of the forensic medical team's
small plane landing on an Alaska icefield
of the body in the bag they had to drag

over the ice like the whole life of that body
The story of the man driving
600 miles to be with a friend in another country seeming
easy when leaving but afterward
writing in a letter difficult truths
Of the friend watching him leave remembering
the story of her body
with his once and the stories of their children
made with other people and how his mind went on
pressing hers like a body
There is the story of the mind's
temperature neither cold nor celibate
Ardent The story of
not one thing only.

—by *Adrienne Rich*

Hunt Hawkins is professor and chair of the English Department at University of South Florida in Tampa. He earned a B.A. from Williams College, and M.A. and Ph.D. from Stanford University. His academic specializations are Modern British Literature and poetry writing. He has published two books: *Teaching Approaches to Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"* and *"The Secret Sharer"*, and *"The Domestic Life"* (poems) with the University of Pittsburgh Press.

Today's poem appears in Hawkins's book of poetry, *"The Domestic Life"* which was the 1992 winner of the Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize Competition. Named after the first director of the University of Pittsburgh Press, the prize carries a cash award of \$5,000. You have until April 30 to submit your manuscript for the 2007 prize. Get crackin'! Go to: www.upress.pitt.edu and click on "prizes".

Mourning The Dying American Female Names

In the Altha Diner on the Florida panhandle
a stocky white-haired woman
with a plastic nameplate "Mildred"
gently turns my burger, and I fall into grief.
I remember the long, hot drives to North Carolina
to visit Aunt Alma, who put up quarts of peaches,
and my grandmother Gladys with her pieced quilts.
Many names are almost gone: Gertrude, Myrtle,
Agnes, Bernice, Hortense, Edna, Doris, and Hilda.
They were wide women, cotton-clothed, early rising.
You had to move your mouth to say their names,
and they meant strength, spear, battle, and victory.
When did women stop being Saxons and Goths?
What frog Fate turned them into Alison, Melissa,
Valerie, Natalie, Adrienne, and Lucinda,
diminished them to Wendy, Cindy, Suzy, and Vicky?
I look at these young women
and hope they are headed for the presidency,
but I fear America has other plans in mind,
that they be no longer at war
but subdued instead in amorphous corporate work,
somebody's assistant, something in a bank,
single parent with word processing skills.
They must have been made French
so they could be cheap foreign labor.
Well, all I can say is,
Good luck to you
Kimberly, Darlene, Cheryl, Heather and Amy.
Good luck April, Melanie, Becky and Kelly.
I hope it all goes well for you.
But for a moment let us mourn.
Now is the time to say good-bye

to Florence, Muriel, Ethel and Thelma.
Good-bye Minnie, Ada, Bertha, and Edith.

—by *Hunt Hawkins*

Today, April 22, is the 12th anniversary of poet **Jane Kenyon's** death. Born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1947, Kenyon lived a curious and wrenching life. She was a college student who married her much older professor, poet/author Donald Hall, and retreated from university life with him to Hall's family farmhouse in New Hampshire. Here she rediscovered her faith, wrote daily, and bravely battled chronic depression. Many of her poems address issues of physical and mental illness— none so disclosing of Kenyon's own life as "Having it Out with Melancholy". After successfully nursing her husband through two difficult bouts with cancer, Jane's life was cut short at age 48 when she died after a heroic battle with leukemia. She leaves behind a legacy of unsparing, brave and beautiful poems.

Despite the dark days of her life, and maybe because of them, Jane's resiliency of spirit shines in her poetry about the mundane, the ordinary, as in today's poem, "Happiness".



Happiness

There's just no accounting for happiness,
or the way it turns up like a prodigal
who comes back to the dust at your feet
having squandered a fortune far away.

And how can you not forgive?
You make a feast in honor of what
was lost, and take from its place the finest
garment, which you saved for an occasion
you could not imagine, and you weep night and day
to know that you were not abandoned,
that happiness saved its most extreme form
for you alone.

No, happiness is the uncle you never
knew about, who flies a single-engine plane
onto the grassy landing strip, hitchhikes
into town, and inquires at every door
until he finds you asleep midafternoon
as you so often are during the unmerciful
hours of your despair.

It comes to the monk in his cell.
It comes to the woman sweeping the street
with a birch broom, to the child
whose mother has passed out from drink.
It comes to the lover, to the dog chewing
a sock, to the pusher, to the basketmaker,
and to the clerk stacking cans of carrots
in the night.

It even comes to the boulder
in the perpetual shade of pine barrens,
to rain falling on the open sea,
to the wineglass, weary of holding wine.

—by *Jane Kenyon*

Today's poem is from **Galway Kinnell's** latest book of poetry, "Strong Is Your Hold", published in 2006. Kinnell (now 80 years old and still Irish) conveys an emotional intensity in his work that "compares with the great 20th-century Hispanic poets, such as Pablo Neruda, Gabriel Garcia-Lorca and others". Still vigorous with language, Kinnell continues to produce poems that express deep affection for life. He has a reputation as a very fine reader, enunciating with care in an expressive baritone that literally hums. You can catch his amazing resonance on a CD that accompanies his book – available at the Public Library of Cincinnati – after I return my copy :-).

Coincidence? I found today's poem "How Could You Not" by Galway Kinnell while preparing the page for yesterday's poem, "Happiness", by Jane Kenyon. I thought it was enough of a wonder that I had stumbled upon Kinnell's poem about Jane's death (a poem that includes the presence of her husband Donald Hall). But after re-reading each of their poems, I was amazed to find a lovely unexpected link between them. The clues lie in the 5th line of Jane's poem, and the last line of "How Could You Not".



How Could You Not

– for Jane Kenyon

It is a day after many days of storms.
Having been washed and washed, the air glitters;
small heaped cumuli blow across the sky; a shower
visible against the firs douses the crocuses.
We knew it would happen one day this week.
Now, when I learn you have died, I go
to the open door and look across at New Hampshire
and see that there, too, the sun is bright
and clouds are making their shadowy ways along the horizon;
and I think: How could it not have been today?
In another room, Keri Te Kanawa is singing
the Laudate Dominum of Mozart, very faintly,

as if in the past, to those who once sat
in the steel seat of the old mowing machine,
cheerful descendent of the scythe of the grim reaper,
and drew the cutter bars little
reciprocating triangles through the grass
to make the stalks lie down in sunshine.
Could you have walked in the dark early this morning
and found yourself grown completely tired
of the successes and failures of medicine,
of your year of pain and despair remitted briefly
now and then by hope that had that leaden taste?
Did you glimpse in first light the world as you loved it
and see that, now, it was not wrong to die
and that, on dying, you would leave
your beloved in a day like paradise?
Near sunrise did you loosen your hold a little?
How could you not already have felt blessed for good,
having these last days spoken your whole heart to him,
who spoke his whole heart to you, so that in the silence
he would not feel a single word was missing?
How could you not have slipped into a spell,
in full daylight, as he lay next to you,
with his arms around you, as they have been,
it must have seemed, all your life?
How could your cheek not press a moment to his cheek,
which presses itself to yours from now on?
How could you not rise and go, with all that light
at the window, those arms around you, and the sound,
coming or going, hard to say, of a single-engine
plane in the distance that no one else hears?

—by *Galway Kinnell*

Anna Akhmatova was born Anna Gorenko in Odessa, in the Ukraine, in 1889 (Her father was embarrassed by her poetry and asked that she not use his name, so she chose the name of one of her ancestors). She began writing verse at the age of 11 and at 21 became a member of the Acmeist group of poets. The Acmeists "rejected the esoteric vagueness and affectations of Symbolism and sought to replace them with beautiful clarity, compactness, simplicity, and perfection of form—all qualities in which Akhmatova excelled from the outset".

Persecuted by the Stalinist government, prevented from publishing, and regarded as a dangerous enemy, Akhmatova's life was hard. Her poems were banned from 1925 to 1940 and again after World War II. Her poem, "Requiem," recounts the suffering of the Russian people under Stalinism – specifically, the tribulations of those women with whom Akhmatova stood in line outside the prison walls, women who like her waited patiently, but with a sense of great grief and powerlessness, for the chance to send a loaf of bread or a small message to their husbands, lovers or sons (including Akhmatova's own). Anna Akhmatova died in 1966 in Leningrad. Her work has been translated by several poets.

Today's poem "Lot's Wife" tells us as much about Akhmatova as about the story of Lot's wife. For the curious, I have included two different translations.

Lot's Wife

Translated from Russian by Max Hayward and Stanley Kunitz

"But his wife looked back from behind him,
and she became a pillar of salt." – Genesis 19:26

And the just man trailed God's shining agent,
over a black mountain, in his giant track,
while a restless voice kept harrying his woman:
"It's not too late, you can still look back

at the red towers of your native Sodom,
the square where once you sang, the spinning-shed,
at the empty windows set in the tall house
where sons and daughters blessed your marriage-bed."

A single glance: a sudden dart of pain
stitching her eyes before she made a sound . . .
Her body flaked into transparent salt,
and her swift legs rooted to the ground.

Who will grieve for this woman? Does she not seem
too insignificant for our concern?
Yet in my heart I never will deny her,
who suffered death because she chose to turn.

—by *Anna Akhmatova*



Lot's Wife

Translated from Russian by Tanya Karshedt

"Lot's wife looked back and turned into a pillar of salt." Genesis

Holy Lot was a-going behind God's angel,
He seemed huge and bright on a black hill.
But the heart of his wife whispered stronger and stranger:
"It's not very late, you have time to look back
At these rose turrets of your native Sodom,
The square where you sang, and the yard where you spun,
The windows looking from your cozy home
Where you bore children for your dear man."
She looked -- and her eyes were instantly bound
By pain -- they couldn't see any more at all:
Her fleet feet grew into the stony ground,
Her body turned into a pillar of salt.

Who'll mourn her as one of Lot's family members?
Doesn't she seem the smallest of losses to us?
But deep in my heart I will always remember
One who gave her life up for one single glance.

—by Robert Bly

—Today's Poetry Sunday features Anna Akhmatova, one of the most famous and critically praised Russian poets of the twentieth century. Anna Ahkmatova was born Anna Andreyevna Gorenko in 1889; she started writing early in life, and took the surname of her grandmother after her father forbade her to sully his respectable name by publishing "decadent" poetry under it.

Akhmatova was a prominent poet of the Russian Acmeist movement, which rejected symbolism in favor of clarity and immediate, vivid imagery. Tragically, she had the misfortune to spend much of her life under Stalinism; she was married three times in her life and saw two of her husbands executed by that tyrannical regime for anti-Soviet activities. Akhmatova herself was banned from publication from 1925 to 1940 for suspected subversive imagery in her writing and for her relationships with official enemies of the state. Nevertheless, despite government repression, she remained a much-loved and unofficial symbol of Russian heritage. Her poetry continued to circulate underground, and later in her life she was grudgingly allowed by the Soviet government to resume publishing. However, her gripping and deeply poignant account of Stalinist terror, *Requiem*, was not published in her homeland until 1987, two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

I haven't found much information about her religious affiliation, except for a few references which say she was a member of the Russian Orthodox church. Nevertheless, an unmistakable note of free thought sentiment is evident in today's poem, which retells a famous story of the Old Testament from a viewpoint more sympathetic to the woman - an allegory, perhaps, of Akhmatova's own turbulent life and her suffering in the face of what was taken from her. The translation given is by Richard Wilbur.

A commercial word: The Mid-American Review (MAR) and the Department of English at Bowling Green State University (Ohio) sponsor several excellent writing events throughout the year. The next one is the MAR Summer Writing Workshop June 4-8. The focus is on manuscript polishing, publishing advice and creative prompts. For both poetry and prose writers. More information: www.bgsu.edu/midamericanreview, or call 419-372-2725.

Han Shan (whose name means Cold Cliff or Cold Mountain) was a hermit poet and philosopher of the T'ang Dynasty (618 - 906). Biographers tell us that political intrigue "may have led the handicapped young scholar-bureaucrat to flee the aftermath of the An Lu-shan Rebellion in 760 and retreat to the cold mountains of far eastern China"— for the rest of his life. Han Shan lived alone in caves and primitive shelters in the rugged mountains in an area referred to as the Heavenly Terrace (T'ien T'ai) Mountains. His cave-hut was a long one day's hike to the Kuo-ch'ing monastery where he allegedly went with some regularity to "hang out" until the monks kicked him out.

Han Shan was considered to be an eccentric Taoist, crazy saint, ascetic mystic and sage, the wise fool. He supposedly enjoyed a very long life due in part to "sheer luck, all that fresh air, gruel, pure water, long daily walks, rugged individualism, and all those secret Taoist herbs and unusual exercises".



Today's poem by Han Shan has no title.

Two snow-white butterflies,
one winging up-river, one down
meet directly before me, share
a sudden dance together, then
proceed their separate ways—
Memories with nowhere to land.

What remains,
the open space
left by their parting,
resumes.

As it is
I am.

Mitsuye Yamada is a poet, educator, and founder of Multicultural Women Writers of Orange County. She was born on July 5, 1923 in Fukuoka, Japan and is currently adjunct professor in the Asian American Studies Department at University of California, Irvine.

Mitsuye Yamada spent most of her childhood and youth in Seattle, Washington, until she and her family were incarcerated at a relocation camp in Idaho in 1942— her father was arrested due to potential spying on the U.S. soon after the Pearl Harbor attack. Ms. Yamada was allowed to leave the camp with her brother because they renounced loyalty to the Emperor of Japan. Yamada went to the University of Cincinnati for a brief time in 1944. Cincinnati was her first experience in a “big city” but it is here that she felt the further sting of racism and began to write about it. Yamada's own ordeal during World War II and observations of her mother's way of life bring anti-racist and feminist attitudes to her works. She is the author of “Camp Notes and Other Writings” and “Desert Run: Poems and Stories.”



The Club

He beat me with the hem of a kimono
worn by a Japanese woman
this prized
painted
wooden statue
carved to perfection
in Japan or maybe Hong Kong.

She was usually on display
in our living room atop his bookshelf
among his other overseas treasures
I was never to touch.
She posed there most of the day
her head tilted
her chin resting lightly

on the white pointed fingertips
of her right hand
her black hair
piled high on her head
her long slim neck bared
to her shoulders.

An invisible hand
under the full sleeve
clasped her kimono
close to her body
its hem flared
gracefully around her feet.

That hem
made fluted red marks
on these freckled arms
my shoulders
my back.

That head
inside his fist
made camel
bumps
on his knuckles.

I prayed for her
that her pencil thin neck
would not snap
or his rage would be unendurable.
She held fast for me
didn't even chip or crack.

One day, we were talking
as we often did the morning after.
Well, my sloe-eyed beauty, I said
have you served him enough?
I dared to pick her up with one hand
I held her gently by the flowing robe
around her slender legs.
She felt lighter than I had imagined.
I stroked her cold thighs
with the tips of my fingers
and felt a slight tremor.

I carried her into the kitchen and wrapped her
in two sheets of paper towels
We're leaving
I whispered
you and I
together.

I placed her
between my clothes in my packed suitcase.
That is how we left him
forever.

—by *Mitsuye Yamada*

David Wagoner was born in Massillon, Ohio, in 1926. He has published 17 books of poems, most recently *Good Morning and Good Night* (Univ. of Illinois Press, 2005), and ten novels, one of which, *The Escape Artist*, was made into a movie by Francis Ford Coppola. Wagoner was a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets for 23 years and has won numerous prizes for his work. He has taught at the University of Washington since 1954 and was the editor of *Poetry Northwest* till its end in 2002. His poetry is understated and accessible and often addresses ordinary daily experiences including the beauty found in nature.

His poetry is understated and accessible and often addresses ordinary daily experiences and the beauty of nature. With today's poem, "At The Door", our poet becomes an astute somatic educator, creative as any movement or body-oriented therapist. Through keen observation of ordinary activity, David Wagoner reveals some of the many ways we can "walk through a door", suggesting a question— How many "options" do we have every moment of our life?

At The Door

All actors look for them— the defining moments
 When what a character does is what he is.
 The script may say, He goes to the door
 And exits or She goes out the door stage left.

But you see your fingers touching the doorknob,
 Closing around it, turning it
 As if by themselves. The latch slides
 Out of the strike-plate, the door swings on its hinges,
 And you're about to take that step
 Over the threshold into a different light.

For the audience, you may simply be
 Disappearing from the scene, yet in those few seconds
 You can reach for the knob as the last object on earth
 You wanted to touch. Or you can take it
 Warmly like the hand your father offered
 Once in forgiveness and afterward
 Kept to himself.

Or you can stand there briefly, as bewildered
 As by the door of a walk-in time-lock safe,
 Stand there and stare
 At the whole concept of shutness, like a rat
 Whose maze has been rebuffed overnight,
 Stand still and quiver, unable to turn
 Around or go left or right.

Or you can grasp it with a sly, soundless discretion,
 Open it inch by inch, testing each fraction

Of torque on the spindles, on tiptoe
Slip yourself through the upright slot
And press the lock-stile silently
Back into its frame.

Or you can use your shoulder
Or the hard heel of your shoe
And a leg-thrust to break it open.

Or you can approach the door as if accustomed
To having all barriers open by themselves.
You can wrench aside
This unauthorized interruption of your progress
And then leave it ajar
For others to do with as they may see fit.

Or you can stand at ease
And give the impression you can see through
This door or any door and have no need
To take your physical self to the other side.

Or you can turn the knob as if at last
Nothing could please you more, your body language
Filled with expectations of joy at where you're going,
Holding yourself momentarily in the posture
Of an awestruck pilgrim at the gate—though you know
You'll only be stepping out against the scrim
Or a wobbly flat daubed with a landscape,
A scribble of leaves, a hint of flowers,
The bare suggestion of a garden.

—by *David Wagoner*



ANNOUNCEMENT: Spring Literary Festival/ Ohio University, Athens/ May 9-10-11
Since 1986, The Spring Literary Festival has featured some of the world's finest, most distinguished writers of poetry, fiction and non-fiction. The three-day festival is held in May on the Ohio University campus in Athens, Ohio. It is sponsored by the Program in Creative Writing of the Department of English and is generously funded by the College of Arts and Sciences. All readings and lectures are free and open to the public. The six visiting writers will be present throughout the festival, lecturing and reading from their work. Poets in attendance: Kofi Awoonor, Ron Carlson, Chenjerai Hove, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Charles Simic, Newal El Saadawi. For details go to: www.english.ohiou.edu/litfest/

Grace Butcher was an English professor and cross country running coach at Kent State University for 25 years. She still edits "The Listening Eye", a literary magazine she started on campus in 1970. It is now a national publication.

I discovered "Learning From Trees" by Grace Butcher in the April 1991 issue of POETRY, a slim journal of maybe 25 poems each month. I subscribed to POETRY for most of the years between 1978 through 2002 and each month I underlined in the index those poems that left a strong impression. My unspoken fantasy was that in my old age, if my eyes grew dim, and surely on my death bed, I would have a beloved someone read me those underlined poems, to bring comfort, beauty, intelligence, and perhaps healing. Here is one of those poems that is never far away from my heart.



Learning From Trees

If we could,
like the trees,
practice dying,
do it every year
just as something we do—
like going on vacation
or celebrating birthdays,
it would become
as easy a part of us
as our hair or clothing.

Someone would show us how
to lie down and fade away
as if in deepest meditation,
and we would learn
about the fine dark emptiness,
both knowing it and not knowing it,
and coming back would be irrelevant.

Whatever it is the trees know
when they stand undone,
surprisingly intricate,
we need to know also
so we can allow
that last thing
to happen to us
as if it were only
any ordinary thing,

leaves and lives
falling away,
the spirit, complex,
waiting in the fine darkness
to learn which way
it will go.

—by *Grace Butcher*

WORD FUN: Since 1994 Wordsmith.org has offered a service called “A WORD A DAY”. It’s free! Each week has a theme. This week’s selection are words that contain all 5 vowels— and all five vowels in alphabetical order! So far this week we have: abstemious, caesious, anemious, facetious and annelidous— complete with definition and examples of usage. Wordsmith offers a variety of other word nerd play.....Yes, to the few who have asked, I do have a day job.

Chuang Tzu (369? - 268B.C.) was a leading thinker representing the Taoist view in Chinese thought, using parable, anecdote, allegory and paradox. Central to the Tao (the Way of Nature) is that by dwelling in unity we can achieve true happiness and be truly free, in both life and death. Witty descriptions enriched by imagery, the work of Chuang Tzu's has for centuries been savored by Chinese readers.

When Chuang Tzu was about to die, his disciples signified their wish to give him a grand burial. *“I shall have heaven and earth for my coffin and its shell; the sun and moon for my two round symbols of jade, the stars and constellations for my pearls and jewels; and all things assisting as the mourners. Will not the provisions for my funeral be complete? What could you add to them?”* Today, two short reminders from Chuang Tzu, both translations by Thomas Merton.

The Need To Win

When an archer is shooting for nothing
 He has all his skill.
 If he shoots for a brass buckle
 He is already nervous.
 If he shoots for a prize of gold
 He goes blind
 Or sees two targets—
 He is out of his mind!

His skill has not changed. But the prize
 Divides him. He cares.
 He thinks more of winning
 Than of shooting—
 And the need to win
 Drains him of power.

—by *Chuang Tzu*



Surrendering

If you persist in trying to attain what is never attained (It is Tao's gift),
If you persist in making effort to obtain what effort cannot get,
If you persist in reasoning about what cannot be understood,
You will be destroyed by the very thing you seek.

To know when to stop,
To know when you can get no further by your own action,
This is the right beginning!

—by Chuang Tzu

The end of National Poetry Month has arrived. This April experiment has been a satisfying one and I want to thank you for your feedback, for commenting on which pieces touched you (and sometimes why), and for your encouraging notes of appreciation along the way. Believe me, your responses helped fuel the process, as it took on a life of its own and became my other "work", in the best sense of that word. If you have further feedback, insights, afterthoughts, please send them on.

Throughout the process I learned more than I ever imagined. Deciding which poems to post, and why, is certainly a story in itself. Sometimes the poems chose me; so many of my favorite poets and poems never made it to the page this month. There were also poets and poems unknown to me before this month who knocked on my door and wanted to come in (yet another story). And there were fruits of this month's labor that have resulted in some unexpected (and exciting) related plans. More on that another time.

Now on with the last poem of the month.

Aracelis Girmay is the inheritor of Eritrean, Puerto Rican, and African American traditions. A writer of poetry, essays, and fiction, her poems have appeared in numerous journals and magazines. She currently resides in her native California, where she leads community writing workshops.

Stunning poems that celebrate the richness of her multicultural tradition, Girmay's book "Teeth" explores love, war, wild hope, defiance, and the spirit of creativity "in a daring use of language and syntax". Not afraid to tackle any subject, including rape, genocide, and love, Aracelis Girmay always sustains by an optimistic voice, assuring us that in the end justice will triumph and love will persevere.



Consider the Hands That Write This Letter

Consider the hands
that write this letter.
The left palm pressed flat against the paper,
as it has done before, over my heart,
in peace or reverence
to the sea or some beautiful thing
I saw once, felt once: snow falling
like rice flung from the giants' wedding,
or the strangest birds. And consider, then,
the right hand, and how it is a fist,
within which a sharpened utensil,
similar to the way I've held a spade,
match to the wick, the horse's reins,
loping, the very fists
I've seen from the roads to Limay and Estelí.
For years, I have come to sit this way:
one hand open, one hand closed,
like a farmer who puts down seeds and gathers up
the food that comes from that farming.
Or, yes, it is like the way I've danced
with my left hand opened around a shoulder
and my right hand closed inside
of another hand. And how
I pray, I pray for this
to be my way: sweet
work alluded to in the body's position
to its paper:
left hand, right hand
like an open eye, an eye closed:
one hand flat against the trapdoor,
the other hand knocking, knocking.

—by *Aracelis Girmay*