

The Literature faculty and its friends present

Pleasures of Poetry

Reading and discussion of memorable poems

IAP JANUARY 2025

1-2 pm 14E-304

Monday

6

Peter Perdue

Tao Qian: "After Drinking Wine: I, IV, V" & "In Praise of Ching K'o the Assassin" & Olaf H. Hauge: "Everyday", "Tao Qian", "Qu Yuan's dialogue with a Daoist fisherman", & "The Tale of Qu Yuan"

Tuesday

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Mark Hessler

Louise Glück: "Grace," "Parable" & "Quince Tree"

Wednesday

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Bronwen Heuer

Take a Walk with Me
Mark Strand: "Keeping Things Whole," Robert Duncan: "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow" & Theodore Roethke "The Waking"

Thursday

9

Noel Jackson

William Blake: "Proverbs of Hell"

Friday

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Arthur Bahr

Emily Dickinson: "I dwell in Possibility"

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Peter Shor

Dana Gioia: "Psalm and Lament for Los Angeles," "Words, Words, Words," & "At the Crossroads"

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Mary Fuller

Dante Alighieri: "Canto I"

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Caitlyn Doyle

Lee Maracle: "War" & "Everything begins with song"

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Ben Mangrum

Anne Sexton: "The Abortion" & "With Mercy for the Greedy"

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Elizabeth Doran

Louise Bogan: "Song for a Lyre," "Come Sleep..." & "Evening in the Sanitarium"

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Martin Luther King Jr. Day

Institute Holiday (Closed)

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Anne Hudson

Natasha Trethewey: "Again, the Fields" & "South"

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Sandy Alexandre

Mahmoud Darwish "The Cypress Broke" (translated by Fady Joudah)

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Avery Nguyen

Arthur Rimbaud: "Ville" (translated by John Ashbery, Paul Schmidt, and Louise Varese)

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David Thorburn

John Crowe Ransome: "Captain Carpenter"

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MIT Pleasures of Poetry 2025

Peter C. Perdue

Tao Qian (365 - 427)

After Drinking Wine : I

衰榮無定在 Decline and growth have no fixed time,
彼此更共之 Everyone gets his share of both:
邵生瓜田中 Master Shao of the melon patch
寧似東陵時 Used to be Lord of Tungling,
寒暑有代謝 Cold weather alternates with hot
人道每如茲 And so it is with human lives –
達人解其會 Intelligent men understand
逝將不復疑 And are beset no more with doubts.
忽與一觴酒. When chance brings them a jug of wine
日夕歡相持 They take it gladly as night comes on.

IV

栖栖失群鳥 Anxious, seeking, the bird lost from the flock –
日暮猶獨飛 The sun declines, and still he flies alone
悲回無定止 Back and forth without a place to rest;
夜夜聲轉悲. From night to night, his cry becomes more sad,
厲響思清遠 A piercing sound of yearning for the dawn,
去來何依依 So far from home, with nothing for support.
恩值孤生松 Until at last he finds the lonely pine
斂翮遙來歸 And folds his wings at this his journey's end.
勁風無榮木 In that harsh wind no tree can keep its leaves
此蔭獨不衰 This is the only shade that will not fail.
託身已得所 The bird has refuge here and resting place,
千載不相違 And in a thousand years will never leave.

V

結廬在人境 I built my hut beside a traveled road
而無車馬喧 Yet hear no noise of passing carts and horses.
問君何能爾 You would like to know how it is done?
心遠地自偏 With the mind detached, one's place becomes remote.
採菊東籬下 Picking chrysanthemums by the eastern hedge
悠然見南山 I catch sight of the distant southern hills:
山氣日夕佳 The mountain air is lovely as the sun sets
飛鳥相與還 And flocks of flying birds return together
此中有真意 In these things is a fundamental truth
欲辯已忘言 I would like to tell, but lack the words.

In Praise of Ching K'o the Assassin

Prince Tan of Yen knew how to treat a man—
His aim was vengeance on mighty Ying.
He long had looked for the man worth a hundred
And then as the years ran out he got Ching K'o.
“A gentleman will die for one who knows his worth;
With sword in hand I will leave Yen's capital,
My pallid charger whinnying through the streets
As they escort me, filled with high resolve.”

The hero's hair thrusts through his high hat,
His valor saturates the long capstring.

...

He mounted his carriage and never once looked back.
Canopy flying, he headed for the court of Ch'in.
Straight for his goal he dashed, ten thousand miles
Around and through a thousand towns he drove.
When the chart unrolled, the thing was there –
Even the intrepid ruler drew back in fear.
Alas, that his swordsmanship was faulty
And left the unimaginable deed undone!
Although the man is long since dead and gone,
After a thousand years he inspires us still.

Olaf H. Hauge (1908 -1994)
(translation from Nynorsk by Helen Huiwen Zhang)

Everyday (1966) (Translated from Hauge's 1966 collection *Drops in the East Wind*)

The tempests—
you have set behind you.
Then you asked not
what you were for,
where you came from, or where you were going;
in the tempest you were,
in the fire you were.
But it is fine to live
in the everyday too,
the grey still day,
plant potatoes, rake leaves
and carry twigs;
there is so much to ponder in this world,
one man's life suffices not.
After the toil you can fry bacon
and read Chinese verses.
Old Laertes cut briars
and dug round the fig trees,
letting the heroes fight at Troy.

Tao Qian (1971)

Were Tao Qian
to come visit one day, I would
show him my own cherry trees and apples,
I hope he comes in spring
with the trees in bloom. Then we sit in the shade
over a glass of cider, perhaps I can show him
a poem—if I find one he likes.
The dragons that shoot through the sky trailing venom and smoke
glid quieter in his day when more birds were chirping.
Not one thing here would he not understand.
More than ever he yearns to retreat
into such a garden nook.
But I know not if he does so with good conscience.

Qu Yuan's dialogue with a Daoist fisherman (Sima Qian, Shiji)

“Are you not the king's advisor? What has brought you here?”
“All the world is muddy; I alone am clean. All men are drunk; I alone am sober. Thus my exile.”
“The wise man is not bound by things, but can flow with the world. All men are muddy, why not stir up their mud?
All men are drunk, why not swill their dregs? Why think deep and aspire high, only to get yourself exiled?”
“I have heard: The freshly washed man should tap his hat; the freshly bathed man should shake the dust off his robe.
How can I expose my purity to the filth of things?
I would rather cast myself into the Xiang River and rest in the bowels of fish. How can I expose my gleam to the
gloom of the world?”
The fisherman, with a faint smile, dipped his paddle in the water and made off, singing:

“When the waters are clean,
I wash my tassels.
When the waters are muddy,
I wash my toes.”

The Tale of Qu Yuan (translated from Hauge's 1972 revision)

This is the tale of Qu Yuan. The king's advisor.
Rice fields and mandarins bowed to him.
Until he was ousted and became a dreamer.

Where was his realm now? On stars and fabled isles,
far from here, in the quest of her he saw in a dream.
But he favored the other world. And as advisor
he set crosses and signs for strange paths and drew
on the silk cairns and omens for those who come after

But Qu Yuan lamented. He could not forget
his land and the people he served; nowhere
did the orange tree blossom as by the wells there.

I know not why he lamented. But I know
that reality is a rocky shore for a driftwood dreamer.
And dew makes water widest.
Did he yearn for the bridge winding in the wind e'er higher?

What was he thinking, as he hugged a stone and leapt into the Miluo River?

The river running, gave no answer,
the stone's eye staring sank into brooding.

GRACE

by Louise Glück

We were taught, in those years,
never to speak of good fortune.
To not speak, to not feel—
it was the smallest step for a child
of any imagination.

And yet an exception was made
for the language of faith;
we were trained in the rudiments of this language
as a precaution.

Not to speak swaggeringly in the world
but to speak in homage, abjectly, privately—

And if one lacked faith?
If one believed, even in childhood, only in chance—

such powerful words they used, our teachers!
Disgrace, punishment: many of us
preferred to remain mute, even in the presence of the divine.

Ours were the voices raised in lament
against the cruel vicissitudes.
Ours were the dark libraries, the treatises
on affliction. In the dark, we recognized one another;
we saw, each in the other's gaze,
experience never manifested in speech.

The miraculous, the sublime, the undeserved;
the relief merely of waking once more in the morning—
only now, with old age nearly beginning,
do we dare to speak of such things, or confess, with gusto,
even to the smallest joys. Their disappearance
approaches, in any case: ours are the lives
this knowledge enters as a gift.

PARABLE

by Louise Glück

First divesting ourselves of worldly goods, as St. Francis teaches,
in order that our souls not be distracted
by gain and loss, and in order also
that our bodies be free to move
easily at the mountain passes, we had then to discuss
whither or where we might travel, with the second question being
should we have a purpose, against which
many of us argued fiercely that such purpose
corresponded to worldly goods, meaning a limitation or constriction,
whereas others said it was by this word we were consecrated
pilgrims rather than wanderers: in our minds, the word translated as
a dream, a something-sought, so that by concentrating we might see it
glimmering among the stones, and not
pass blindly by; each
further issue we debated equally fully, the arguments going back and forth,
so that we grew, some said, less flexible and more resigned,
like soldiers in a useless war. And snow fell upon us, and wind blew,
which in time abated—where the snow had been, many flowers appeared,
and where the stars had shone, the sun rose over the tree line
so that we had shadows again; many times this happened.
Also rain, also flooding sometimes, also avalanches, in which
some of us were lost, and periodically we would seem
to have achieved an agreement, our canteens
hoisted upon our shoulders; but always that moment passed, so
(after many years) we were still at that first stage, still
preparing to begin a journey, but we were changed nevertheless;
we could see this in one another; we had changed although
we never moved, and one said, ah, behold how we have aged, traveling
from day to night only, neither forward nor sideward, and this seemed
in a strange way miraculous. And those who believed we should have a
purpose
believed this was the purpose, and those who felt we must remain free
in order to encounter truth felt it had been revealed.

QUINCE TREE

by Louise Glück

We had, in the end, only the weather for a subject.
Lucky, we lived in a world with seasons—
we felt, still, access to variety:
darkness, euphoria, various kinds of waiting.

I suppose, in the true sense, our exchanges
couldn't be called conversation, being
dominated by accord, by repetition.

And yet it would be wrong to imagine
we had neither sense of one another nor
deep response to the world, as it would be wrong to believe
our lives were narrow, or empty.

We had great wealth.
We had, in fact, everything we could see
and while it is true we could see
neither great distance nor fine detail,
what we were able to discern we grasped
with a hunger the young can barely conceive,
as though all experience had been channeled into
these few perceptions.

Channeled without memory.
Because the past was lost to us as referent,
lost as image, as narrative. What had it contained?
Was there love? Had there been, once,
sustained labor? Or fame, had there ever been
something like that?

In the end, we didn't need to ask. Because
we felt the past; it was, somehow,
in these things, the front lawn and back lawn,
suffusing them, giving the little quince tree
a weight and meaning almost beyond enduring.

Utterly lost and yet strangely alive, the whole of our human existence—
it would be wrong to think
because we never left the yard
that what we felt there was somehow shrunken or partial.
In its grandeur and splendor, the world
was finally present.

And it was always this we discussed or alluded to
when we were moved to speak.
The weather. The quince tree.
You, in your innocence, what do you know of this world?

Take a walk with me

Three poems

Bronwen Heuer

Keeping Things Whole

by Mark Strand

(1935 - 2014)

In a field
I am the absence
of field.
This is always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.

When I walk
I part the air
and always
the air moves in
to fill the spaces
where my body's been.

We all have reasons
for moving.
I move
to keep things whole.

Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow

by Robert Duncan (1919 - 1988)

as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,
that is not mine, but is a made place,

that is mine, it is so near to the heart,
an eternal pasture folded in all thought
so that there is a hall therein

that is a made place, created by light
wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall.

Wherefrom fall all architectures I am
I say are likenesses of the First Beloved
whose flowers are flames lit to the Lady.

She it is Queen Under the Hill
whose hosts are a disturbance of words within words
that is a field folded.

It is only a dream of the grass blowing
east against the source of the sun
in an hour before the sun's going down

whose secret we see in a children's game
of ring a round of roses told.

Often I am permitted to return to a meadow
as if it were a given property of the mind
that certain bounds hold against chaos,

that is a place of first permission,
everlasting omen of what is.

The Waking

by Theodore Roethke (1908 - 1963)

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me; so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady, I should know,
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.

William Blake

As I was walking among the fires of Hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius, which to Angels look like torment and insanity, I collected some of their proverbs, thinking that as the sayings used in a nation mark its character, so the proverbs of Hell show the nature of infernal wisdom better than any description of buildings or garments...

PROVERBS OF HELL (selected)

In seed-time learn, in harvest teach, in winter enjoy.

Drive your cart and your plough over the bones of the dead.

The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.

Prudence is a rich ugly old maid courted by Incapacity.

He who desires, but acts not, breeds pestilence.

The cut worm forgives the plough.

Dip him in the river who loves water.

A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees.

He whose face gives no light shall never become a star.

Eternity is in love with the productions of time.

The busy bee has no time for sorrow.

The hours of folly are measured by the clock, but of wisdom no clock can measure.

All wholesome food is caught without a net or a trap.

Bring out number, weight, and measure in a year of dearth.

No bird soars too high if he soars with his own wings.

A dead body revenges not injuries.

The most sublime act is to set another before you.

If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.

Prisons are built with stones of law, brothels with bricks of religion.

Excess of sorrow laughs, excess of joy weeps.

The fox condemns the trap, not himself.

Joys impregnate, sorrows bring forth.

What is now proved was once only imagined.

The rat, the mouse, the fox, the rabbit watch the roots; the lion, the tiger, the horse, the elephant watch the fruits.

The cistern contains, the fountain overflows.

One thought fills immensity.

Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth.

The eagle never lost so much time as when he submitted to learn of the crow.

The fox provides for himself, but God provides for the lion.

Think in the morning, act in the noon, eat in the evening, sleep in the night.

He who has suffered you to impose on him knows you.

As the plough follows words, so God rewards prayers.

The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction.

You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.

The weak in courage is strong in cunning.

The apple tree never asks the beech how he shall grow, nor the lion the horse how he shall take his prey.

If others had not been foolish we should have been so.

The soul of sweet delight can never be defiled.

When thou seest an eagle, thou seest a portion of Genius. Lift up thy head!

To create a little flower is the labour of ages.

Prayers plough not; praises reap not; joys laugh not; sorrows weep not.

The head Sublime, the heart Pathos, the genitals Beauty, the hands and feet Proportion.

As the air to a bird, or the sea to a fish, so is contempt to the contemptible.

Exuberance is Beauty.

Improvement makes straight roads, but the crooked roads without Improvement are roads of Genius.

Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires.

Enough! or Too much.

I dwell in Possibility – (466)

BY EMILY DICKINSON

I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars –
Impregnable of eye –
And for an everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky –

Of Visitors – the fairest –
For Occupation – This –
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise –

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Source: The Poems of Emily Dickinson Edited by R. W. Franklin (Harvard University Press, 1999)

Three poems by Dana Gioia

PSALM AND LAMENT FOR LOS ANGELES

I.

On the streets of Hawthorne I sat down and wept.
Yes, wept as I remembered it.

I came to the asphalt country of my childhood,
To revisit the precincts of memory.

I walked the old boulevard, where the shops
Had been condemned and demolished.

I passed the bankrupt mall, defaced and boarded.
And all was vacancy and squalor.

Where was the drugstore where my parents met?
And the neighborhood park with its Indian palms?

Where was the Plaza Theater with its neon beacon
Taller than a church spire?

I wandered the silent ruins of my city.
What was there to sing in a strange and empty land?

II.

If I forget you, Los Angeles, let my eyes burn
In the smoggy crimson of your sunsets.

If I prefer not the Queen of the Angels to other cities,
Then close my ears to the beat of your tides.

Let me stand on the piers of Malibu, blind
To the dances of the surfers and the dolphins.

But, O Los Angeles, you dash your children against the stones.
You devour your natives and your immigrants.

You destroy your father's house. You sell your daughters to strangers.
You sprawl in the carnage and count the spoils.

You stretch naked in the sunlight, beautiful and obscene—
So enormous, hungry, and impossible to pardon.

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

It isn't just the words, though we have made
a science of them. Eloquence excels
in polishing the sentiments we need
no longer say.
Words are the cards, not why the game is played.

It isn't just the rhyme, though we surmise
the accidental insights of conjunction—
the superstitious chanting we despise
but can't forget,
shamed by our childish pleasure in surprise.

It isn't just the pain we hope to end.
Old wounds still seep their blood between the lines.
The truest words subvert what we intend.
They bring no ease.
The cost is always more than we can spend.

It is the luck to fail at what we started,
of letting language use us as a vessel
swept on a course we never could have charted—
to hope that once
the angel came, possessed us, and departed.

AT THE CROSSROADS

Here are the crossroads where old women come
Under the quarter moon to cast their spells,
And where young lovers meet to argue out
The secret terms of their surrender.

It is a place that each sees differently—
The salesman scouting, soldiers tramping home,
The scholar napping by the riverbank
While someone else's fortune drifts downstream.

But if you stand at crossroads long enough,
Most of the eager world comes strutting by—
Businessmen, preachers, cats—all going somewhere,
Even the Devil striking up a deal.

I used to wonder if they ever got there.
Be careful here in choosing where to turn.
You learn a lot by staying in one place
But never how the story truly ends.

Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, canto 1, tr. Michael Palma (Norton, 2002).

CANTO I

Midway through the journey of our life, I found
myself in a dark wood, for I had strayed
from the straight pathway to this tangled ground. 3
How hard it is to tell of, overlaid
with harsh and savage growth, so wild and raw
the thought of it still makes me feel afraid. 6
Death scarce could be more bitter. But to draw
the lessons of the good that came my way,
I will describe the other things I saw. 9
Just how I entered there I cannot say,
so full of sleep when I began to veer
that I did not see that I had gone astray 12
from the one true path. But once I had drawn near
the bottom of a hill at the far remove
of the valley that had pierced my heart with fear, 15
I saw its shoulders mantled from above
by the warm rays of the planet that gives light
to guide our steps, wherever we may rove. 18
At last I felt some calming of the fright
that had allowed the lake of my heart no rest
while I endured the long and piteous night. 21
And as a drowning man with heaving chest
escapes the current and, once safe on shore,
turns back to see the dangers he has passed, 24
so too my mind, still lost in flight, once more
turned back to see the passage that had never
let anyone escape alive before. 27
3

I paused to let my weary limbs recover,
and then began to climb the lone hillside,
my fixed foot always lower than the other. 30
But I had hardly started when I spied
a leopard in my pathway, lithe and fleet,
all covered with a sleek and spotted hide. 33
And as I faced it, it would not retreat,
but paced before me and so blocked my way
that more than once I had to turn my feet 36
to retrace my steps. It was the break of day,
the sun was mounting in the morning sky
with the same stars as when that whole array 39
of lovely things was first given movement by
divine love. The sweet season of the year
and the hour made me think that I might try 42
to evade that bright-skinned beast as it came near,
but then I felt my good hopes quickly fade
and in an instant I was numbed with fear 45
to see a lion in my path that made
straight for me, head held high and ravenous,
and seemed to make the very air afraid. 48
And a she-wolf too, that in its leanness was
laden with every craving. Those who seek
fulfillment there find only wretchedness. 51
The sight of this one made me feel so weak,
so overcome with dread, that instantly
I lost all hope of climbing to the peak. 54
As a man is eager in prosperity
but when time brings him losses can be found
giving way to weeping and to misery. 57
so did I feel as the she-wolf pressed me round
so relentlessly that bit by bit I stepped
back where the sun is mute on the low ground. 60

And as I drove myself into the depth,
a shape was offered to my vision, wan
as if from a long silence it had kept. 64
Seeing him in that great desert, I began
to call out. "*Miserere*—on me," I cried,
"whatever you are, a shade or a solid man!" 66
"Not man, although I was a man," he replied.
"My parents were both Mantuans. I descend
from those of Lombardy on either side. 69
I was born *sub Julio*, at the latter end. [In the reign of Julius \(Caesar\)](#)
Under the good Augustus I lived in Rome
in the days when false and lying gods still reigned. 72
I was a poet, and I sang of him, [Aeneas](#)
Anchises' righteous son, who sailed from Troy
after the burning of proud Ilium. 75
But why do you turn back toward trouble? Why
do you not ascend the delectable mount instead,
the origin and cause of every joy?" 78
"Are you that Virgil then, that fountainhead
that spills such a mighty stream of eloquence?"
I said this with a shame-filled brow, and said: 81
"Light and glory of all poets, may my intense
love and long study of your poetry
avail me now for my deliverance. 84
You are my master, my authority,
for it is from you alone that I learned to write
in the noble style that has so honored me. 87
You see why I have turned back from the height.
Illustrious sage, please help me to confound
this beast that makes my pulses shake with fright." 90
"It were best to go another way around,"
he answered, seeing tears start from my eyes,
"if your hope is to escape this savage ground, 93

because this creature that provokes your cries
allows no man to get the best of her,
but blocks each one, attacking till he dies. 96

(Faint, illegible text) 99

(Faint, illegible text) 102

*(Omitted text details an opaque prophecy about the
destruction of the shewolf).* 105

(Faint, illegible text) 108

(Faint, illegible text) 111

Therefore I think it would be best for you
to follow me. I will be your guide, and I
will lead you out of here and take you through 114

an eternal place where you will be greeted by
the shriekings of despair and you will see
ancient tormented spirits as they cry 117

aloud at the second death. Then you will be
with those who are content within the fire,
for they hope to join the blest eventually. 120

You will see those blest, if that is your desire,
with a worthier soul than I. Into her hands
I will entrust you when I can go no higher. 123

That emperor who presides above commands,
since I did not heed his law, that none may gain
entrance through me to where his city stands. 126

His rule is everywhere. There is his reign,
his city, and his throne! Happy are they
whom he chooses to inhabit that domain!" 129
"Poet," I said to him, "so that I may
escape this harm and worse that may await,
in the name of that God you never knew, I pray 132
you lead me out to see Saint Peter's gate
and all those souls that you have told me of,
who must endure their miserable state." 135
I followed him as he began to move.

Notes

- line 1* The poem is set in 1300, when Dante was thirty-five, halfway through his biblically allotted threescore years and ten.
- line 17* The planet is the sun, which in Ptolemaic, pre-Copernican cosmology was believed to revolve around the earth, the fixed center of the universe.

War

by Lee Maracle

In my body flows the blood of Gallic
Bastille stormers and the soft, gentle
ways of Salish/Cree womanhood.

Deep throated base tones dissipate,
swallowed by the earth; uproarious
laughter sears, mutilates my voice.

Child of the earth-tear of west
coast rain; dew drop sparkling in
the crisp, clear sun of my home.

Warm woman of the Mediterranean sunscape,
bleaching rough cotton-sweatshop
anniversary.

Thunderous, rude earthquakes that
split my spirit within. Tiny grapes
of wine console me.

Can I deny a heritage blackened by
the toil of billions, conceived in
rape, plunder and butchery?

In the veins, that fight to root themselves
in the wondrous breadth of my
homeland, races the blood of base
humanity.

European thief; liar, bloodsucker.
I deny you not. I fear you not. Your
reality and mine no longer rankles me.

I am moved by my love for human life;
by the firm conviction that all the world
must stop the butchery, stop the slaughter.

I am moved by my scars, by my own filth
to re-write history with my body
to shed the blood of those who betray themselves

To life, world humanity I ascribe
To my people... my history... I address
my vision.

Everything begins with song

by Lee Maracle

The sweet mountain breath of wind whispering through cedar—earth’s symphony.

Wind taps out tunes to the valley floors, even the howling storm winds sing agonizingly beautiful songs, arias of painful transformation we come to love.

Songs hooked to the language of wind lessens this burden of being,

couples itself to the promise of language;

voice elevates being, renders life manageable;

There is power in the breath we pass over vibrating vocal chords.

The words carry a charge.

The spark invites response.

The hum of song points receivers in the direction of the good life.

The breath of others takes their own journey through the body,

passes breath through some imagined future.

From *Selected Poems of Anne Sexton*, ed. Diane Wood Middlebrook and Diana Hume George (Houghton Mifflin, 1988).

The Abortion

*Somebody who should have been born
is gone.*

Just as the earth puckered its mouth,
each bud puffing out from its knot,
I changed my shoes, and then drove south.

Up past the Blue Mountains, where
Pennsylvania humps on endlessly,
wearing, like a crayoned cat, its green hair,

its roads sunken in like a gray washboard;
where, in truth, the ground cracks evilly,
a dark socket from which the coal has poured,

*Somebody who should have been born
is gone.*

the grass as bristly and stout as chives,
and me wondering when the ground would break,
and me wondering how anything fragile survives;

up in Pennsylvania, I met a little man,
not Rumpelstiltskin, at all, at all . . .
he took the fullness that love began.
Returning north, even the sky grew thin
like a high window looking nowhere.
The road was as flat as a sheet of tin.

*Somebody who should have been born
is gone.*

Yes, woman, such logic will lead
to loss without death. Or say what you meant,
you coward . . . this baby that I bleed.

With Mercy for the Greedy

For my friend, Ruth, who urges me to make an
appointment for the Sacrament of Confession

Concerning your letter in which you ask
me to call a priest and in which you ask
me to wear The Cross that you enclose;
your own cross,
your dog-bitten cross,
no larger than a thumb,
small and wooden, no thorns, this rose —

I pray to its shadow,
that gray place
where it lies on your letter . . . deep, deep.
I detest my sins and I try to believe
in The Cross. I touch its tender hips, its dark jawed face,
its solid neck, its brown sleep.

True. There is
A beautiful Jesus.
He is frozen to his bones like a chunk of beef.
How desperately he wanted to pull his arms in!
How desperately I touch his vertical and horizontal axes!
But I can't. Need is not quite belief.

All morning long
I have worn
your cross, hung with package string around my throat.
It tapped me lightly as a child's heart might,
tapping secondhand, softly waiting to be born.
Ruth, I cherish the letter you wrote.

SONG FOR A LYRE
by Louise Bogan

The landscape where I lie
Again from boughs sets free
Summer; all night must fly
In wind's obscurity
The thick, green leaves that made
Heavy the August shade.

Soon, in the pictured night,
Returns—as in a dream
Left after sleep's delight—
The shallow autumn stream:
Softly awake, its sound
Poured on the chilly ground.

Soon fly the leaves in throngs;
O love, though once I lay
Far from its sound, to weep,
When night divides my sleep,
When stars, the autumn stream,
Stillness, divide my dream,
Night to your voice belongs.

“COME, SLEEP . . .”

by Louise Bogan

The bee's fixed hexagon;
The ant's downward tower;
The whale's effortless eating;
The palm's love; the flower

Burnished like brass, clean like wax
Under the pollen;
The rough grass-blade upright;
The smooth swathe fallen:

Do the shadows of these forms and appetites
Repeat, when these lives give over,
In sleep, the rôle of the selfish devourer,
The selfless lover?

Surely, whispers in the glassy corridor
Never trouble their dream.
Never, for them, the dark turreted house reflects itself
In the depthless stream.

EVENING IN THE SANITARIUM*

by Louise Bogan

The free evening fades, outside the windows fastened with decorative
iron grilles.

The lamps are lighted; the shades drawn; the nurses are watching a
little.

It is the hour of the complicated knitting on the safe bone needles; of
the games of anagrams and bridge;

The deadly game of chess; the book held up like a mask.

The period of the wildest weeping, the fiercest delusion, is over.

The women rest their tired half-healed hearts; they are almost well.

Some of them will stay almost well always: the blunt-faced woman
whose thinking dissolved

Under academic discipline; the manic-depressive girl

Now leveling off; one paranoiac afflicted with jealousy.

Another with persecution. Some alleviation has been possible.

O fortunate bride, who never again will become elated after childbirth!

O lucky older wife, who has been cured of feeling unwanted!

To the suburban railway station you will return, return,

To meet forever Jim home on the 5:35.

You will be again as normal and selfish and heartless as anybody else.

There is life left: the piano says it with its octave smile.

The soft carpets pad the thump and splinter of the suicide to be.

Everything will be splendid: the grandmother will not drink habitually.

The fruit salad will bloom on the plate like a bouquet

And the garden produce the blue-ribbon aquilegia.

The cats will be glad; the fathers feel justified; the mothers relieved.

The sons and husbands will no longer need to pay the bills.

Childhoods will be put away, the obscene nightmare abated.

At the ends of the corridors the baths are running.

Mrs. C. again feels the shadow of the obsessive idea.

Miss R. looks at the mantel-piece, which must mean something.

*This poem was originally published with the subtitle "Imitated from Auden."

Two Poems by Natasha Trethewey (1966-)
Presentation by Anne Hudson
Pleasures of Poetry, January 21, 2025

From *Native Guard: Poems* (Mariner Press, 2006) by Natasha Trethewey

Again, the Fields

AFTER WINSLOW HOMER

*the dead they lay long the lines like sheaves of Wheat I could have walked on the bodes
all most from one end too the other*

No more muskets, the bone-drag
weariness of marching, the trampled
grass, soaked earth red as the wine

of sacrament. Now, the veteran
turns toward a new field, bright
as domes of the republic. Here,

he has shrugged off the past—his jacket
and canteen flung down in the corner.
At the center of the painting, he anchors

the trinity, joining earth and sky.
The wheat falls beneath his scythe—
a language of bounty—the swaths

like scripture on the field's open page.
Boundless, the wheat stretches beyond
The frame, as if towards a distant field—

the white canvas where sky and cotton
meet, where another veteran toils,
his hands the color of dark soil.

South

*Homo sapiens is the only species
to suffer psychological exile.*

--E. O. WILSON

I returned to a stand of pines,
bone-thin phalanx
flanking the roadside, tangle
of understory—a dialectic of dark
and light—and magnolias blossoming
like afterthought: each flower
a surrender, white flags draped
among the branches. I returned
to land's end, the swath of coast
clear cut and buried in sand:
mangrove, live oak, gulfweed
razed and replaced by thin palms—
palmettos—symbols of victory
or defiance, over and over
marking this vanquished land. I returned
to a field of cotton, hallowed ground—
as slave legend goes—each boll
holding the ghosts of generations:
those who measured their days
by the heft of sacks and lengths
of rows, whose sweat flecked the cotton plants
still sewn into our clothes.
I returned to a country of battlefield
where colored troops fought and died—
Port Hudson where their bodies swelled
and blackened beneath the sun—unburied

until earth's green sheet pulled over them,
unmarked by any headstones.

Where the roads, buildings, and monuments
are named to honor the Confederacy,

where that old flag still hangs, I return
to Mississippi, state that made a crime

of me—mulatto, half-breed—native
in my native land, this place they'll bury me.

The Cypress Broke

BY MAHMOUD DARWISH

TRANSLATED BY FADY JOUDAH

*The cypress is the tree's grief and not
the tree, and it has no shadow because it is
the tree's shadow*

—Bassam Hajjar

The cypress broke like a minaret, and slept on
the road upon its chapped shadow, dark, green,
as it has always been. No one got hurt. The vehicles
sped over its branches. The dust blew
into the windshields ... / The cypress broke, but
the pigeon in a neighboring house didn't change
its public nest. And two migrant birds hovered above
the hem of the place, and exchanged some symbols.
And a woman said to her neighbor: Say, did you see a storm?
She said: No, and no bulldozer either ... / And the cypress
broke. And those passing by the wreckage said:
Maybe it got bored with being neglected, or it grew old
with the days, it is long like a giraffe, and little
in meaning like a dust broom, and couldn't shade two lovers.
And a boy said: I used to draw it perfectly,
its figure was easy to draw. And a girl said: The sky today
is incomplete because the cypress broke.
And a young man said: But the sky today is complete
because the cypress broke. And I said
to myself: Neither mystery nor clarity,
the cypress broke, and that is all
there is to it: the cypress broke!

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ILLUMINATIONS

1

Ville. by Arthur Rimbaud

*Je suis un éphémère et point trop mécontent citoyen
d'une métropole crue moderne parce que tout goût
connu a été éludé dans les ameublements et l'extérieur
des maisons aussi bien que dans le plan de la ville.
Ici vous ne signaleriez les traces d'aucun monument de
superstition. La morale et la langue sont réduites à
leur plus simple expression, enfin! Ces millions de
gens qui n'ont pas besoin de se connaître amènent si
pareillement l'éducation, le métier et la vieillesse,
que ce cours de vie doit être plusieurs fois moins long
que ce qu'une statistique folle trouve pour les peuples
du continent. Aussi comme, de ma fenêtre, je vois
des spectres nouveaux roulant à travers l'épaisse
et éternelle fumée de charbon, — notre ombre des bois,
notre nuit d'été! — des Erinnyes nouvelles, devant
mon cottage qui est ma patrie et tout mon cœur puisque
tout ici ressemble à ceci, — la Mort sans pleurs, notre
active fille et servante, et un Amour désespéré,
et un joli Crime piaulant dans la boue de la rue.*

Manuscrit de la Bibliothèque Nationale, N. a. fr. 14123, feuillet 14 (entre la
fin de *Les Ponts et Ornières*).
13 *continent*: le troisième *n* surcharge un *t*, venu un peu trop tôt — 16
Erynnies — 18 *Mort*: le *M* surcharge un *m* — 19 le *et* qui suit la virgule est
biffé d'un trait au crayon.
Commentaire, p. 177-180.

CITY

(translated by John Ashbury)

I am an ephemeral and not at all dissatisfied citizen of a metropolis thought to be modern because every known taste has been avoided in the furnishings and exteriors of its houses as well as in the plan of the city. Here you would never point to the traces of any monument to superstition. Morality and language are reduced to their most basic expression, indeed! These millions of people who feel no need to know one another experience such similar kinds of education, occupation and old age, that their life-spans must be several times shorter than those which a mad statistic determines for the peoples of the continent. Just as, from my window, I see new specters rolling through the thick and eternal fumes of coal fires,—our shadow of the woods, our summer's night!—modern-day Furies, in front of my cottage which is my country and all my heart since everything here resembles this,—Death without tears, our active daughter and servant, and a despairing Love, and a pretty Crime whimpering in the mud of the street.

CITY

(translated by Paul Schmidt)

I am a temporary and not at all discontented citizen
Of a metropolis considered modern because all known taste has been
eluded
In the furnishings and the outsides of the house,
As well as in the plan of the city.
Here you will find no trace of a single monument to superstition.
Morals and language have been reduced
To their simplest expression, that is all!
Thees millions of people with no need to know each other
Lay down so equally the path of education, of trade and old age,
That the course of life is probably several times shorter
Than anything a crazy statistic sets up for people on the continent
And from my window, what original specters roll
Through this thick eternal smoke—
Our Crowded Shade, our Midsummer Night!
Latter-day Erin's fly before this cottage
Which is my country and the depth of my heart,
Because everything here looks like this:
Dry-eyed Death, our diligent daughter and servant,
A hopeless Love and a pretty Crime wailing in the mud of the road.

VILLE

Je suis un éphémère et point trop mécontent citoyen d'une métropole crue moderne, parce que tout goût connu a été éludé dans les ameublements et l'extérieur des maisons aussi bien que dans le plan de la ville. Ici vous ne signaleriez les traces d'aucun monument de superstition. La morale et la langue sont réduites à leur plus simple expression, enfin! Ces millions de gens qui n'ont pas besoin de se connaître amènent si pareillement l'éducation, le métier et la vieillesse, que ce cours de vie doit être plusieurs fois moins long que ce qu'une statistique folle trouve pour les peuples du Continent. Aussi comme, de ma fenêtre, je vois des spectres nouveaux roulant à travers l'épaisse et éternelle fumée de charbon—notre ombre des bois, notre nuit d'été!—des Érinyes nouvelles, devant mon cottage qui est ma patrie et tout mon cœur puisque tout ici ressemble à ceci,—la Mort sans pleurs, notre active fille et servante, un Amour désespéré et un joli Crime piaulant dans la boue de la rue.

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CITY

(translated by Louise Varese)

I am an ephemeral and a not too discontented citizen of a metropolis considered modern because all known taste has been evaded in the furnishings and the exterior of the houses as well as in the layout of the city. Here you would fail to detect the least trace of any monument of superstition. Morals and language are reduced to their simplest expression, at last! The way these millions of people, who do not even need to know each other, manage their education, business, and old age is so identical that the course of their lives must be several times less long than that which a mad statistics calculates for the people of the continent. And from my window I see new specters rolling through the thick eternal smoke—our woodland shade, our summer night!—new Eumenides in front of my cottage which is my country and all my heart since everything here resembles it,—Death without tears, our diligent daughter and servant, a desperate Love, and a pretty Crime howling in the mud of the street.

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CAPTAIN CARPENTER
by John Crowe Ransome.

Captain Carpenter rose up in his prime
Put on his pistols and went riding out
But had got wellnigh nowhere at that time
Till he fell in with ladies in a rout.

It was a pretty lady and all her train
That played with him so sweetly but before
An hour she'd taken a sword with all her main
And twined him of his nose for evermore.

Captain Carpenter mounted up one day
And rode straightway into a stranger rogue
That looked unchristian but be that as may
The Captain did not wait upon prologue.

But drew upon him out of his great heart
The other swung against him with a club
And cracked his two legs at the shinny part
And let him roll and stick like any tub.

Captain Carpenter rode many a time
From male and female took he sundry harms
He met the wife of Satan crying "I'm
The she-wolf bids you shall bear no more arms.

Their strokes and counters whistled in the wind
I wish he had delivered half his blows
But where she should have made off like a hind
The bitch bit off his arms at the elbows.

And Captain Carpenter parted with his ears
To a black devil that used him in this wise
O Jesus ere his threescore and ten years
Another had plucked out his sweet blue eyes.

Captain Carpenter got up on his roan
And sallied from the gate in hell's despite
I heard him asking in the grimmest tone
If any enemy yet there was to fight?

"To any adversary it is fame
If he risk to be wounded by my tongue
Or burnt in two beneath my red heart's flame
Such are the perils he is cast among.

"But if he can he has a pretty choice
From an anatomy with little to lose
Whether he cut my tongue and take my voice
Or whether it be my round red heart he choose. "

It was the neatest knave that ever was seen
Stepping in perfume from his lady's bower
Who at this word put in his merry mien
And fell on Captain Carpenter like a tower.

I would not knock old fellows in the dust
But there lay Captain Carpenter on his back
His weapons were the old heart in his bust
And a blade shook between rotten teeth alack.

The rogue in scarlet and grey soon knew his mind.
He wished to get his trophy and depart
With gentle apology and touch refined
He pierced him and produced the Captain's heart.

God's mercy rest on Captain Carpenter now
I thought him Sirs an honest gentleman
Citizen husband soldier and scholar enow
Let jangling kites eat of him if they can.

But God's deep curses follow after those
That shore him of his goodly nose and ears
His legs and strong arms at the two elbows
And eyes that had not watered seventy years.

The curse of hell upon the sleek upstart
That got the Captain finally on his back
And took the red red vitals of his heart
And made the kites to whet their beaks clack clack.

(1924)

MODERATORS

Peter C. Perdue has taught Chinese history, among other subjects, at MIT and Yale University.

Noel Jackson teaches literature at MIT and has been an organizer of Pleasures of Poetry.

Mark Hessler is a local alum with a 21S degree in literature and physics. He has worked in the US and overseas as a high school teacher, actor, and programmer, and has attended PoP for many years.

Bronwen Heuer a retiree of 20+ years at MIT as a member of the IS&T staff. She is an open-water swimmer and a student of the Japanese resist dyeing technique known as Shibori. In her Stony Brook University days, she wrote her dissertation on the Spanish poet Francisco de Quevedo.

Arthur Bahr the author of *Chasing the Pearl-Manuscript: Speculation, Shapes, Delight* (Chicago, 2024) and *Fragments and Assemblages: Forming Compilations of Medieval London* (Chicago, 2013). He is excited to combine his interest in manuscripts with his training as a figure skater and National Singles and Pairs judge in his next project, *Sheets of Parchment, Sheets of Ice*, which will explore those surfaces as sites of performance, inscription, and erasure.

Peter Shor is a professor in the Math Department at MIT. He likes to read and occasionally to write poetry and has had one poem about a mathematician published in the magazine "The Mathematical Intelligencer," and some translations of poems by Paul Verlaine published in "The High Window."

Mary Fuller joined the Literature Faculty at MIT in 1989. She teaches introductory and advanced subjects in poetry as a break from her research, which focuses on the records of maritime and colonial history 1450-1650.

Caitlyn Doyle teaches literature at MIT.

Ben Mangrum is an Assistant Professor in the Literature section at MIT. He teaches twentieth-century literature in English, with special interests in the environmental humanities and digital studies.

Elizabeth Doran is a poet and painter. She resides in Boston's Back Bay. Her poems have been published in: *Ibbetson Street*, *Poiesis*, and *Spirited Magazine*. Two of her paintings were chosen by the Mass Poetry Festival for their Poetry on the T series. Her painting was featured on the cover of *Salamander* in 2016. She is the former manager of the historic Grolier Poetry Book Shop.

Anne Hudson worked at MIT from 1985 to 2016 and has participated in Pleasures of Poetry since 2002. Her own poetry has appeared in print and online, including in the *MIT Faculty Newsletter*. From 2001 to 2007 she published the online literary magazine, *Facets*. Currently she works as a freelance editor and is also writing a novel.

Sandy Alexandre is an Associate Professor whose job and joy it is to read and also to think, talk and write about the things she reads. She strives to make literary interpretations alluring.

Avery Nguyen is an MIT'22 alum who double majored in Chemical Engineering and Literature.

David Thorburn taught literature and media at MIT for 47 years, retiring in 2023. He is the founder of Pleasures of Poetry.



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