

APRIL GIFTS

2008

Created by: Susan F. Glassmeyer
Cincinnati, Ohio, 2008

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On the first day of April, I send you a villanelle (defined below) by poet, essayist and musician **Robyn Sarah** who was born in New York City in 1949 to Canadian parents, and has lived for most of her life in Montreal. She is known for her interest in form and experiment in poetry and her work has appeared in many journals on both sides of the border.



In an interview through Literary Magazine Review, **Robyn Sarah** says—

For me, inspiration takes two possible forms. Sometimes words come into my head— fragmentary phrases that I like the sound of— I call them “tinder words” because they're like fire-starters for poems. Or sometimes it's a sudden feeling I get, that the thing I'm looking at is infused with mysterious significance— that it is both itself and more than itself. It's like the world jumps into a different kind of focus. I can't make it happen, I don't have control over it, but I try to arrange my life to keep myself open to it.

What is a Villanelle? A villanelle is a poem consisting typically of five tercets (3 lines) and a quatrain (4 lines) in which the first and third lines of the opening tercet recur alternately at the end of the other tercets and together as the last two lines of the quatrain. The villanelle uses only two rhymes throughout the whole form.

Villanelle for a Cool April

I like a leafing-out by increments,
--not bolting bloom, in sudden heat begun.
Life's sweetest savoured in the present tense.

I like to watch the shadows pack their tents
before the creep of the advancing sun.
I like a leafing-out by increments:

to watch the tendrils inch along the fence,
to take my pleasures slow and one by one.

Life's sweetest savoured in the present tense.

Oh, leave tomorrow's fruit to providence
and dote upon the bud--from which is spun
a leafing-out to love in increments,

a greening in the cool of swooning sense,
a feathered touch, a button just undone.
Life's sweetest savoured in the present tense,

as love when it withholds and then relents,
as a cool April lets each moment stun.
I like a leafing-out by increments;
life's sweetest savoured in the present tense.

—by *Robyn Sarah*

Alden Nowlan (1933-1983) was born (Windsor, Nova Scotia) in poverty to a 15 year-old mother and an alcoholic father. Nowlan left school in grade 5 and during his adolescent years worked at a variety of jobs, all of them menial, manual, or both. He was a pulp cutter, a farmhand, a sawmill worker, a night watchman, a ditch digger and a logger. Primarily self-educated, he later went on to work as a newspaperman, and published poetry, plays, short stories, and novels.

Out of a childhood of anguished loneliness he says: *I had three choices: madness, death or verse . . . It's hellish what the sicknesses of our culture have done to us all. So that love sometimes becomes simply protection against loneliness when it should be an exchange of gifts.*

Diagnosed at the age of 33 with thyroid cancer, Nolan's illness marked a major turning point in his maturity as a poet. From one of his letters during the early years of his illness: *Ever since I got sick I've become less and less hypocritical and more and more honest. Since we're all of us going to be out of the world so soon it seems silly not to tell one another what we really think and feel.*



He Attempts to Love His Neighbours

My neighbours do not wish to be loved.
They have made it clear that they prefer to go peacefully
about their business and want me to do the same.
This ought not to surprise me as it does;
I ought to know by now that most people have a hundred things
they would rather do than have me love them.

There is television, for instance; the truth is that almost everybody,
given the choice between being loved and watching TV,
would choose the latter. Love interrupts dinner,
interferes with mowing the lawn, washing the car,
or walking the dog. Love is a telephone ringing or a doorbell
waking you moments after you've finally succeeded in getting to sleep.

So we must be careful, those of us who were born with
the wrong number of fingers or the gift
of loving; we must do our best to behave
like normal members of society and not make nuisances
of ourselves; otherwise it could go hard with us.
It is better to bite back your tears, swallow your laughter,
and learn to fake the mildly self-deprecating titter
favored by the bourgeoisie
than to be left entirely alone, as you will be,
if your disconformity embarrasses
your neighbours; I wish I didn't keep forgetting that.

—by *Alden Nowlan*

The tensions and conflicts from living in New York after a Mennonite childhood in rural Pennsylvania are the focus of **Julia Spicher Kasdorf's** poetry. A student of poet Sharon Olds, her collection of poems in the book "Sleeping Preacher", won the Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize. An excerpt from the poem "Mennonites" explains her culture in her own words: *"We keep our quilts in closets and do not dance. /We hoe thistles along fence rows for fear/we may not be perfect as our Heavenly Father. /We clean up his disasters. No one has to call;/we just show up in the wake of tornadoes/with hammers, after floods with buckets."*

Kasdorf's poetry brings a voice to a faith and culture historically silent in America. Her work has been published in the New Yorker, the Paris Review, and Poetry. Currently, she teaches at the Pennsylvania State University where she is an associate professor of English and director of the Master of Fine Arts Program.

What I Learned From My Mother

I learned from my mother how to love
the living, to have plenty of vases on hand
in case you have to rush to the hospital
with peonies cut from the lawn, black ants
still stuck to the buds. I learned to save jars
large enough to hold fruit salad for a whole
grieving household, to cube home-canned pears
and peaches, to slice through maroon grape skins
and flick out the sexual seeds with a knife point.
I learned to attend viewing even if I didn't know
the deceased, to press the moist hands
of the living, to look in their eyes and offer
sympathy, as though I understood loss even then.
I learned that whatever we say means nothing,
what anyone will remember is that we came.
I learned to believe I had the power to ease
awful pains materially like an angel.
Like a doctor, I learned to create
from another's suffering my own usefulness, and once
you know how to do this, you can never refuse.
To every house you enter, you must offer
healing: a chocolate cake you baked yourself.

—by *Julia Spicher Kasdorf*



"I read poetry aloud and I read my own aloud when I'm working on it. It's important to me what it sounds like on the tongue." Born in the foothills of the Virginia Blue Ridge in a small town named Rocky Mount, poet **Michael Chitwood**, grew up there, attending the county's only high school. He worked as a science writer at the University of Virginia Medical Center and became a student in the MFA program while there, receiving his degree in 1980. He is now a freelance writer living in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and is a regular commentator for the local affiliate of National Public Radio.



Ties

Uncles worked pocket knives
to rake the grease of work
from beneath their nails,
but yours, in the Sunday mirror
and quick at my throat,
were always clean.
Over, under, down through.
"The print or stripe should match the blue."
Sundays only
Granddad wore one.
Saturdays only
you did not.
Over, under, down through.
"You can judge a man by the shine on his shoes."
Granddad's hung
on the back of the bedroom door,
knotted all week.
Before services,
he'd cinch it and grin,
proud his boy felt this pinch
every working day.
My back against your chest,
you talked me into the knot,
over, under, down through.
Then you'd snug it
just short of choking
and call me "Mr. Chitwood,"
the name you dressed in
every morning to leave the house.

—by Michael Chitwood (from *The Weave Room*)

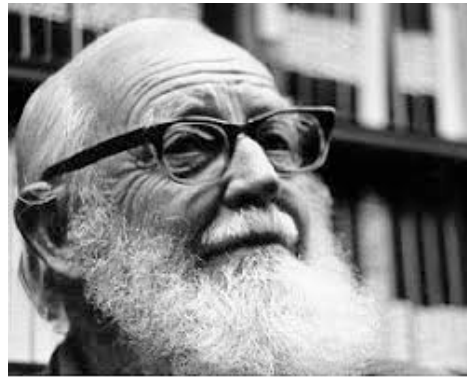
Michael Chitwood has been called an Appalachian poet who has been influenced by the work of Charles Wright and Seamus Heaney. Chitwood hopes his poetry is recognizable by its “music”—a music, he says that you hear in everyday language— *Where I grew up, which was rural, people, it seemed to me, were more connected to the landscape, the natural world, that even in their regular conversation, they were more metaphorical, more attuned to images. They were more attentive to what something looked like, what it smelled like. To me that is poetic language.*

There Are Delicacies

there are delicacies in you
like the hearts of watches
there are wheels that turn
on the tips of rubies
& tiny intricate locks

i need your help
to contrive keys
there is so little time
even for the finest
of watches

—by *Earle Birney*



Earle Birney (1904-1995) was born in a log cabin on the banks of the Bow River in Calgary, Canada where he lived a rural isolated (only-child) childhood. His parents gave up their hard-scrabble farm life and moved to help Earle get proper schooling. Enrolled at the University of British Columbia, Birney set out to become a chemical engineer but graduated from the English program instead.

Earle Birney was not your average scholarly bookworm, and often caused controversy wherever he went. He was removed from his position as editor-in chief at UBC by the university administration for not compromising his views. Rather than simply reading and theorizing about the world, he took a very active stance, a stance which is reflected in much of his writing. In the early 1930s, he was in England working as a Trotskyite. Later, while in Germany, he was arrested for not saluting a Nazi parade. Many of his longer works call for change on both national and international levels.

Today's little poem seems incongruent with the above history, which is one reason, among others, why I like it so much.

This Morning

The barn bears the weight
of the first heavy snow
without complaint.

White breath of cows
rises in the tie-up, a man
wearing a frayed winter jacket
reaches for his milking stool
in the dark.

The cows have gone into the ground,
and the man,
his wife beside him now.

A nuthatch drops
to the ground, feeding
on sunflower seed and bits of bread
I scattered on the snow.

The cats doze near the stove.
They lift their heads
as the plow goes down the road,
making the house
tremble as it passes.

—by *Jane Kenyon*
(from her first book, *From Room To Room*, published in 1978)

Well, I sat here for a long while not knowing where to begin when it comes to saying something about the poetry of **Jane Kenyon**. Her poems have a way of stopping me in my tracks, interrupting the yakety-yak mind, grounding me. So I began by responding this way:

Her poems bear a weight
without complaining.
Her poems breathe a little light
into the darkness.
Animals and people have their jobs to do.
Small flourishes occur.
Words slow down,
they too drop to the ground.
What is it that trembles
whenever I read them?



Jane Kenyon was a good-hearted, smart woman from Michigan who wrote simple words that carry a significant, even mystical, weight. She married a famous writer (Donald Hall) and they lived together on his ancestral farm in New Hampshire where Jane seemed at home; not what you would call “happy”, but content, and sufferingly shy. Plagued by terrible bouts of depression, Jane wrote every day along with her husband, and spent time in her beloved farmhouse gardens, was a member of the village church, tended to her cats and walked the hills with her dog.

She thought her husband would be the first to die, aging and living with cancer as he was, but the weight came down first on Jane and she died of leukemia in 1995 at the young age of 48.

Yusef Komunyakaa's poetry is noted for its short lines, its simple vernacular, its jazzy feel, and its rootedness in the poet's experience as a black of the American South, and as a decorated veteran of the Vietnam War. Born in 1947 and raised in Bogalusa, Louisiana, Komunyakaa graduated from the University of Colorado, and also received master's degrees from the University of California, Irvine, and Colorado State University. Komunyakaa was a professor at Indiana University for over ten years, and in 1997 began teaching at Princeton University.

Yusef Komunyakaa's poems have been described as *"razor-sharp pieces that tell us more about our culture than any news broadcast."* Consider reading *Dien Cai Dau*, his stunning poetry grappling with the Vietnam War. Author of eleven poetry volumes, Komunyakaa claims that *"language is what can liberate or imprison the human psyche"* and that *"we are responsible for our lives and the words we use"*.



Read this poem out loud. You can almost hear the pounding of feet on the court!



Slam, Dunk, & Hook

Fast breaks. Lay ups. With Mercury's
Insignia on our sneakers,
We outmaneuvered to footwork
Of bad angels. Nothing but a hot
Swish of strings like silk
Ten feet out. In the roundhouse
Labyrinth our bodies
Created, we could almost
Last forever, poised in midair
Like storybook sea monsters.
A high note hung there
A long second. Off
The rim. We'd corkscrew
Up & dunk balls that exploded
The skullcap of hope & good
Intention. Lanky, all hands
& feet...sprung rhythm.
We were metaphysical when girls
Cheered on the sidelines.
Tangled up in a falling,
Muscles were a bright motor
Double-flashing to the metal hoop
Nailed to our oak.
When Sonny Boy's mama died
He played nonstop all day, so hard
Our backboard splintered.
Glistening with sweat,
We rolled the ball off
Our fingertips. Trouble
Was there slapping a blackjack
Against an open palm.
Dribble, drive to the inside,
& glide like a sparrow hawk.
Lay ups. Fast breaks.
we had moves we didn't know
We had. Our bodies spun
On swivels of bone & faith,
Through a lyric slipknot
Of joy, & we knew we were
Beautiful & dangerous.

—by *Yusef Komunyakaa*

Today's featured poet is **Susanna Childress** who is a Ph.D. student in English at Florida State University.

In 2007, former U.S. poet laureate Billy Collins selected Susanna Childress' manuscript *Jagged With Love* from among 930 others as the winner of the Brittingham Prize in Poetry, an annual award given by the University of Wisconsin Press which offers a monetary award and publication of the winning manuscript. He commented that Childress writes "*at the cutting edge of the long tradition of love poetry....she unfailingly delivers rhythmic and linguistic pleasures to her lucky readers as they follow the course of these inquisitive, unpredictable poems.*"

Childress' poetry addresses difficult subject matter with care, inviting the reader to consider complex aspects of human love: how selfishness, fear, lust and even brutality might coincide with tenderness and loyalty.

I discovered today's poem, *To Things Cursory*, accidentally couple of years ago during a Google search for something else. This particular poem won the annual Foley Poetry Award sponsored by America/The National Catholic Weekly (a Jesuit publication) in 2003. This poem is not included in Childress' new book, *Jagged With Love*.

To Things Cursory

Maybe it was the scraping and flung petals, the orange
degrees of your voice, saying, *Yes*, saying, *Okay*, saying, *I did*.

Too many things happen quickly. Like the bullet
shot into a mattress. Like this morning when I wrote

in my journal, a careful, silly decision: I paid attention to the loops
of handwriting, the diligent rhythm of the porch swing,

a finch with her breakfast among the mulch and roots.
And I didn't think the *Thud* I heard was a car crash

because even the word *Thud* was too slow. If it happened at all,
it happened *Dihh*. Then a man and a woman stood on the street,

peering at footprint-sized dents and a little steam. There wasn't even
the *Reee* you hear in movies before a crash. There wasn't any such time.

The man and woman squinted, exchanged cards as you would
cheap gifts, embarrassed and slippery. So little time was wasted

even the sunshine was not inconvenienced. Watching, I felt a defeat:
I thought things would slow. I thought time would thicken into some

painful pudding around the bodies, reducing the speed of eyelashes, glances,
gesticulation. Instead, it was: *I slept with her*. As quick as the final

stage of birth, the way the pushing and moans slicken
into an immediate red life. Your words bulked enough to allow

that weightlessness of confession, but your tongue lay, far more inert
than a tongue should be in such moments, for if anything dispenses time

shouldn't it be the tongue, the twisting wet muscle that will form words
days and weeks later, words to take the sting out, like *bamboozle*.

A wonderful deceleration for the mouth, that word: our fingers
meshed in the carpet, our faces down, speaking into air that snaps

and syrups, speaking, and each syllable falling
like the placenta, like thirty shekels into your hands.

—by *Susanna Childress*



Twisting Vines

My mother bought a dress once and my dad
said it looked like curtains. Nothing if not honest,
nothing much but me to his name, doing his best
about the trike and baby pool, new triple-speed
living-room fan, her just-landed job as a typist
while her mother baby-sat. There must
have been some wedding, or National Guard
occasion--James-Dean handsome he was,
even in eagle-crest hat, glare-polished shoes--
but the dress went right back in its creased
paper bag, unused. She had modeled it for me first
though, gazing over each shoulder to the longest
mirror before he got home, smeared and hot
from painting houses. How does it look, hon?--
that dress I remember more than any other,
off a rack at London's, our two-block downtown's
only clothes store. Scoop-necked, she called it,
for summer. Cap-sleeved. White, with a pattern of
little twisting green vines. I touched the satin piping
that showed off her collarbone, tiny waistline.
Made her look like a full grown fairy out of my book.
Those days she still sang when she sifted flour, folded
laundry plucked off the line by the morning
glories and tulips--"Tammy's in Love," "Blue Moon,"
"My Buddy." Never again got herself
what she wished for, if she knew.

—by *Debra Nystrom* (from *Torn Sky*)



The landscape of *Torn Sky* is South Dakota, a place of extremes, where parched land meets frigid air and exiled Native Americans still struggle to live in peace alongside ranchers.

In an interview poet **Debra Nostrom** says: *I grew up in South Dakota, among reserved farming and ranching people. The sense of the unspoken was always palpable there, amid the homesteaders' descendants, the native Lakota, and in the landscape itself. I think that my curiosity about what language can do comes from a wish to grasp— through patternings of sound, rhythm, syntax and image— the kind of meaning that is experienced physically: that can't be easily paraphrased, but attests to the inner self which hasn't many opportunities for expression in our culture. Yeats said that "we believe in those thoughts which have been conceived not in the brain but in the whole body." When a poem communicates to us in that way, it's possible to feel for a moment less essentially alone.*

Born in Pierre, South Dakota, Debra Nostrom now lives in Charlottesville, Virginia, and teaches creative writing at the University of Virginia along with Gregory Orr, Charles Wright and Rita Dove.

How to See Deer

Forget roadside crossings.
Go nowhere with guns.
Go elsewhere your own way,

lonely and wanting. Or
stay and be early:
next to deep woods

inhabit old orchards.
All clearings promise.
Sunrise is good,

and fog before sun.
Expect nothing always;
find your luck slowly.

Wait out the windfall.
Take your good time
to learn to read ferns;

make like a turtle:
downhill toward slow water.
Instructed by heron,

drink the pure silence.
Be compassed by wind.
If you quiver like aspen

trust your quick nature:
let your ear teach you
which way to listen.

You've come to assume
protective color; now
colors reform to

new shapes in your eye.
You've learned by now
to wait without waiting;

as if it were dusk
look into light falling;
in deep relief

things even out. Be
careless of nothing. See
what you see.

—by *Philip Booth* (from *Lifelines*)



*Being a poet is not a career, it's a life.
Writing poems is a lifetime of looking into, and listening to, how words see.*
Philip Booth.

After returning from Air Force service in World War II, poet **Philip Booth** studied with Robert Frost as a freshman at Dartmouth College. Reading Frost's poem "After Apple-Picking" during a week spent harvesting in an orchard, Mr. Booth had an epiphany when his eyes chanced upon a line with the image of instep arches aching from perching on ladder rungs. *"And it suddenly occurred to me that poets could tell the truth! I was hooked on that realization."*

Booth taught at Dartmouth and Wellesley College and, eventually, left New England for Syracuse University, where he was one of the founders of the graduate program in creative writing and taught for more than two decades. Mr. Booth inspired generations of writing students and pursued a poetic ambition that cut a singular path. He was apparently indifferent to the pecking order in poetry. A former student of Booth's at Syracuse University, Stephen Dunn has said, *"While other poets of his generation have been struggling not to duplicate themselves, Philip Booth has managed to extend and deepen the subject matter that always compelled him: ... even when his subject seemed to be the dailiness of Castine or the vagaries of sailing."*

Philip Booth (1925-2007) spent much of his childhood in Castine, Maine, in a house that had been in his mother's family since 1797, and lived year-round there following his retirement in 1980. At his funeral his daughter said, *"He had a restraint born of his intensity and passion for living. I really don't know many people who lived the way he lived. Behind my Dad's decorum and formality, there was always a feeling, to me, that he was about to burst at the seams. There was just an intensity to the way he felt things."*

Yesterday's poem- *How To See Deer* by Philip Booth brings me to today's poem(s). Deer are intriguing, especially when they appear like apparitions, shadowy figures in the forest at dawn, black silhouettes among night's trees inside a city park, a sudden unexpected grazer in the far backyard. I started collecting poems about deer when I was introduced many years ago to William Stafford's now famous poem, *Traveling Through The Dark*.

Ten years later I discovered today's poem, *Pikuni Free School* by Art Homer, in the April 1999 issue of POETRY. Art Homer was born in the Missouri Ozarks in 1951. He spent his childhood there and in the Pacific Northwest of California and Oregon. He worked on forest trail crews, as an animal caretaker, and as a journeyman ironworker before finishing his education at Portland State University and the University of Montana Graduate Program in Creative Writing where he studied with Richard Hugo, Madeline DeFrees, and Tess Gallagher. His poems and essays have appeared in numerous journals and he received a 1995 Pushcart Prize. *An abiding love for land, a love of strong, utilitarian beauty in horses, people, and books are the staff of life for Homer*—Publishers Weekly. Homer's most recent of four poetry collections is *Sight Is No Carpenter* (WordTech Communications, 2005).

Read Stafford's excellent poem *Traveling Through The Dark* and then read *Pikuni Free School*, which alludes to Stafford's poem.

Traveling through the Dark

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.

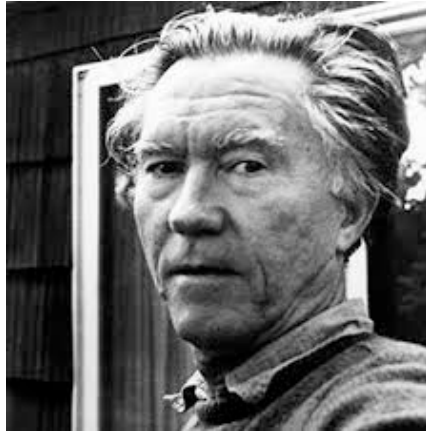
By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason--
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,
alive, still, never to be born.
Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

I thought hard for us all--my only swerving--,
then pushed her over the edge into the river.

—by William Stafford



Pikuni Free School

Browning, Montana

It's the land, what is there to say? I already
wrote about the buffalo, how
they're gone and how it used to be.
I got an A. I seen two or three
at the county fair—from Arlee, some
cousin's ranch for rodeo stock.

Some guy from Missoula come up here.
Read us a poem about somebody finds
a roadkill deer. He's worried it's pregnant
so he rolls it off the side. I said why don't
he dress it out if it's that fresh.

Then that poetry
guy says you don't understand and gives us
paper, says write about the land. It's full
of graves I say and he says write that down.

—by *Art Homer*

My favorite **Sharon Olds'** book is *The Gold Cell* which includes today's poem, *Looking At Them Asleep*. Although her work generally moves toward love and reconciliation, Olds is regarded as controversial, described as self-indulgent and over-dramatic, with a predilection for shocking subject matter. Born in San Francisco, California, in 1942, Olds was raised as a "hellfire Calvinist" which might explain a few things. Conditioned to be seen and not heard during my growing-up years, I personally cheer Sharon Olds on. You could think of her intensely personal voice as the poetic equivalent of the aggressive musicianship of Metallica. Nothing wrong with that in my book. In the words of poet Michael Ondaatje, Sharon Olds' poems are "*pure fire in the hands*." Her poetry has been translated into seven languages for international publications. She was the New York State Poet Laureate for 1998-2000. Her fiercely tender poems about her son and daughter are an exception to her harsher themes, and never fail to touch my heart. I dedicate today's poem to my little sister who is celebrating her April 12th birthday. Happy Birthday, Sis!



Looking At Them Asleep

When I come home late at night and go in to kiss the children,
I see my girl with her arm curled around her head,
her face deep in unconsciousness -- so
deeply centered she is in her dark self,
her mouth slightly puffed like one sated but
slightly pouted like one who hasn't had enough,
her eyes so closed you would think they have rolled the
iris around to face the back of her head,
the eyeball marble-naked under that
thick satisfied desiring lid,
she lies on her back in abandon and sealed completion,
and the son is in his room, oh the son he is sideways in his bed,
one knee up into the night,
and under his thin quivering eyelids you
know his eyes are wide open and
staring and glazed, the blue in them so
anxious and crystally in all this darkness, and his
mouth is open, he is breathing hard from the climb

and panting a bit, his brow is crumpled
and pale, his long fingers curved,
his hand open, and in the center of each hand
the dry dirty boyish palm
resting like a cookie. I look at him in his
quest, the thin muscles of his arms
passionate and tense, I look at her with her
face like the face of a snake who has swallowed a deer,
content, content -- and I know if I wake her she'll
smile and turn her face toward me though
half asleep and open her eyes and I
know if I wake him he'll jerk and say Don't and sit
up and stare about him in blue
unrecognition, oh my Lord how I
know these two. When love comes to me and says
What do you know, I say This girl, this boy.

—by *Sharon Olds*

Cathleen Sweeping

The wind blows, and with a little broom
She sweeps against the cold clumsy sky.
She's three years old. What an enormous room
The world is that she sweeps, making fly
A little busy dust! And here am I
Watching her through the window in the gloom
Of this disconsolate spring morning, my
Thoughts as small and busy as her broom.

Do I believe in her? I cannot quite.
Beauty is more than my belief will bear.
I've had to borrow what I think is true:
Nothing stays put until I think it through.
Yet, watching her with her broom in the dark air
I give it up. Why should I doubt delight?

—by George Johnston (from *Endeared by Dark: The Collected Poems*)



Crossing the northern border and heading for Canada again today. Part of the fun of exploring poetry is discovering and meeting new people-- though they might be dead ;-). Poet George Johnston died just a few years ago at age 90 after a long and distinguished career as a charismatic and much-loved professor of Old English and Old Norse at Ottawa's Carleton University. Johnston's early verse, in *The Cruising Auk* (1959) and *Home Free* (1966), was formal and traditional, using stanza, meter and rhyme with great skill, at a moment when free verse had become “fashionable”. He was dismissed by the reputation-makers of the day as old-fashioned.

Our April 1st poet, Robyn Sarah (Villanelle for a Cool April) says of George Johnston: Johnston wrote on everyday subjects, in language carefully modulated to avoid ostentation, and he masked his formal virtuosity with a conversational casualness. The rhymes are still there, but hidden: half-rhymes, internal rhymes, vowel and consonant echoes. Regularity of metre has given way to accentual rhythm and syllable count. Effects are subliminal, easily missed in a cursory reading. You could mistake this for free verse, and many probably did. But it came at a time when Canadian readers, grown accustomed to prosy-colloquial free verse, expected some novelty of content, shock effect, biting cleverness, or gut-wrenching anecdote to make it 'poetry'. Lost on such readers was the prodigious artistry at work here, the nuanced ear, the refinements of diction that infuse these quiet poems with uncanny staying power.

George Johnston has been described as a kind of urban Viking, with longish white hair and beard and a strand of gold wire spiraling through one earlobe, long before men wore earrings. He had three daughters and three sons. A man whose diverse interests included calligraphy, bell-ringing, wine-making and beekeeping, Johnston kept up a wide correspondence and enjoyed reading the classics aloud with his wife.

If you missed the fact that today's poem is a sonnet (not you, Jean ;-)) , it's probably because it is so well written. When certain poets make impeccable technique look easy it seems we want to read them again and again.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is perhaps one of the best known and most prolific of Canadian writers. Born in Ottawa in 1939, Atwood has published so many books of fiction, poetry, short stories, literary criticism, social history and children's books, that if she stood her 5'2" self atop a stack of them, she would literally be a giantess in the literary world -- somewhere around 7' tall.

The poems from Margaret Atwood's latest collection, *The Door*, are at times quite personal in their telling of such every day tragedies as the death of her dear cat, or the difficult onset of her mother's senility. The overall tone of these poems seems a bit grim— one poem compares all poets everywhere to violinists on the Titanic— but I like that Ms. Atwood is not afraid to look at pain and unfairness. Her poems remind us that although suffering can sometimes cause us to be selfish and small, they also teach a certain kind of tenderness that might not at first be recognizable in ourselves.

Atwood says she will no longer write “blurbs” for other writer's manuscripts, but someone wrote a nice one for her latest collection of poetry, *The Door*— *These fifty lucid yet urgent poems range in tone from lyric to ironic to meditative to prophetic, and in subject from the personal to the political viewed in its broadest sense. They investigate the mysterious writing of poetry itself, as well as the passage of time and our shared sense of mortality. The collection begins with poems that consider the past and ends with harbingers of things to come.*



You heard the man you love

You heard the man you love
talking to himself in the next room.
He didn't know you were listening.
You put your ear against the wall
but you couldn't catch the words,
only a kind of rumbling.
Was he angry? Was he swearing?
Or was it some kind of commentary
like a long obscure footnote on a page of poetry?
Or was he trying to find something he'd lost,
such as the car keys?
Then suddenly he began to sing.
You were startled
because this was a new thing,
but you didn't open the door, you didn't go in,
and he kept on singing, in his deep voice, off-key,
a purple-green monotone, dense and heathery.
He wasn't singing for you, or about you.
He had some other source of joy,
nothing to do with you at all—
he was an unknown man, singing in his own room, alone.
Why did you feel so hurt then, and so curious,
and also happy,
and also set free?

—by Margaret Atwood (from *The Door*)

—*If you make any money, the government shoves you in the creek once a year with it in your pockets, and all that don't get wet you can keep.* —Will Rogers commenting on April 15th.

At the Un-National Monument Along the Canadian Border

This is the field where the battle did not happen,
where the unknown soldier did not die.
This is the field where grass joined hands,
where no monument stands,
and the only heroic thing is the sky.

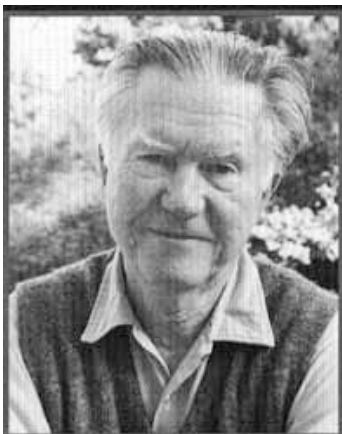
Birds fly here without any sound,
unfolding their wings across the open.
No people killed— or were killed —on this ground
hallowed by neglect and an air so tame
that people celebrate it by forgetting its name.

—by *William Stafford* (from *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems*)

Born and raised in Kansas, later a conscientious objector during World War II, **William Stafford** settled in Oregon in the late 1940's and never left. For this reason, he has a special place in the curriculum of many grade schools, high schools, and colleges throughout the state of Oregon. He died in 1993.

It could be said that the one grand theme of Stafford's poetry is how to live in the world, how to be a survivor, but there isn't much practical advice in his poems. What we learn, instead, is how to listen to the signals that people and nature are constantly offering us. William Stafford's poems invite us to think about how we are taking care of our inner life as well as our relationships with family, friends, and the earth. And we are asked to consider what we think about the social and political issues of our times.

Stafford's habit was to rise in the early morning dark, make himself coffee, recline on the living room couch and write while the light came back to the world. He wrote a poem every day of his adult life, never judging it by anyone's standards but his own.



The Problem Was

The problem was a different sense of form.
He was all couplets, heroic and closed;
I always wanted to carry on, one line
into the next, never reaching an end,
or, if I did, imagining it might be
the possible beginning to a different train
of thought, which might lead to the exact
opposite of what I was saying now.

The problem was we rhymed in various ways:
he liked perfection; I preferred the wise
conjunction of nearly alike, almost
a match made in heaven, both of us most
certain we knew where to take the next line.
He loved his words the best, and I loved mine.

—by Joyce Sutphen (from *Naming The Stars: Poems*)



Joyce Sutphen (1949) has been called a modern metaphysical poet. Her poems are attentive, consoling, enlightening, elegant and witty. She lives in Chaska, Minnesota and teaches at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota. She is the author of *Naming the Stars* (2003), *Straight Out of View* (Beacon Press, 1995), winner of the 1994 Barnard New Women Poets Prize, and *Coming Back to the Body* (Holy Cow! Press, 2000). Her poems have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Poetry*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Water~Stone*, *Hayden's Ferry*, *Shenandoah*, *Luna*, and others.

I appreciate when poets share the nature of their writing process. Joyce Sutphen talks a bit about this in an interview with *Contemporary Authors*:

Here's what happens when I sit down to write a poem. I think that I will say something about this, but I end up writing about that. I don't always come away with a poem. Sometimes all I have is a notebook filled with starts, a few lines here, lots of crossed out lines there, a space and another couple of lines.

In the last year or so my pages are filled with the funny marks I use to keep track of the poem's meter. Sometimes-but only rarely-there are columns of rhyming or slant rhyming words down the side of a page. Other times there are phone numbers, names of songs I heard on the radio, directions to a party in double-lined boxes. 'This is not a poem!' the boxes say, 'this is a reminder,' but sometimes when I go back to read them, they have become more like poems.

Two reasons keep me coming to the empty page: the desire to make a place for the glinting shard, the divine detail, and the hope that this caressing, this pressing against the visible will reveal the invisible. In the end, it isn't hard: when I sit down to write a poem, one thing just leads to another.

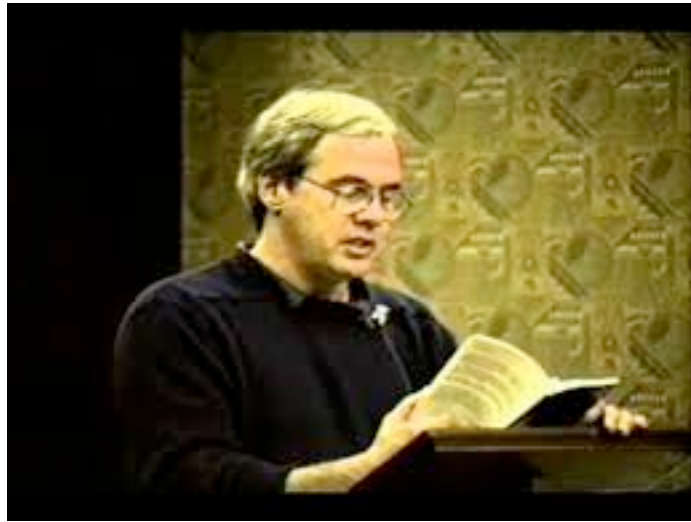
When I read Len Roberts I feel my heart being broken and put back together again.

—Hayden Carruth

Learning Our Place in the Hierarchy of Angels

Jon Dumas wanted to be a Throne,
 a fiery wheel
sent by God to bring justice to
 us all,
which meant beating up Dougie
 Freeman, the class bully,
and no more spelling bees or
 math,
while Gabriella Wells politely
asked if she could be a Virtue
and work miracles on the earth,
help Jimmy Lagust take his braces
 off,
give Dorothy Blake a new stomach
so she could stop throwing up
 into the black bucket
 filled with sawdust,
and I wildly waved my hands
 to be a Power,
stopping the demons from overthrowing
 the world,
my father on his last drunk,
my mother kicked out of Boney's Bar
 where she pressed herself
 into the dark,
thunder in my left fist,
lightning in my right
as I rose from that third-grade seat
 to assume my place
with the other eight who were holding
 orbs or swords
some singing *Holy, Holy, Holy*
while others kept the stars fixed
 and bright,
all nine of us flapping our wings
 hard
in a circle around the emptiness
Sister Ann kept pointing to, insisting
 That, That was God.

—by *Len Roberts*



When I went to post today's poem by **Len Roberts**, I was surprised and saddened to learn that he had passed away in May of 2007 in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, having taught English at Northampton Community College for more than 30 years.

Len Roberts was the son of Raymond Roberts, a bread deliverer, and Margery Roberts, a textile worker, in Cohoes, New York. He wrote about the painful difficulties of his family life with a gentle sensibility, and sharp curiosity. His work recalls a line for me from a Sharon Olds's poem, in which she addresses her parents: *Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it*. Poet Stephen Berg showed an appreciation for Robert's work by describing his poems as "*the rebirth out of the rubble of the past into a redemptive vision of being alive now*".

The poetic career of Len Roberts was sparked by the death of his father when Roberts was 28 years old. Writing poetry became his method of coping with troubling memories of the man that spent most of Roberts' youth under the influence of alcohol. After just a year of writing, Roberts presented some of his work at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, where the late poet Allen Ginsberg happened to be listening and liked what he heard. Ginsberg sent Roberts' manuscript to a publisher he knew, and soon afterward, *Cohoes Theater*, Roberts' first collection of poetry, hit bookshelves.

Len Roberts is the author of many books of poetry, including *Counting the Black Angels*, *The Trouble- Making Finch*, *Black Wings*, *Sweet Ones*, and just last year, *The Disappearing Trick* (Illinois Poetry Series).

New Poems from the Third Coast: Contemporary Michigan Poetry (Wayne State University Press, 2000) is proof that Michigan is the home to some of the best poets in the country. My home away from home is northern Michigan, and every year when I return to Leelanau County (way up in the little pinkie) one of my favorite rituals is attending the “Beach Bards” (an old tradition begun by local poets) who gather under the stars on Friday nights during the summer. Known and unknown poets come to recite by heart (no cheat sheets allowed) favorite poems around a bonfire on Lake Michigan's Sleeping Bear Dune Shoreline. Families with children, nomadic retirees, carpenters and fishermen, professors and students, cherry pickers, jewelry makers and accidental tourists, all gather to listen, and sometimes take the earthy stage themselves to join this oral tradition.

Today's poet, **Susan Blackwell Ramsey**, was born in Detroit in 1950. She earned a degree from Kalamazoo College and liked the town well enough to stay there and raise a family. Her poems have appeared in the Atlanta Review, Poetry Northwest, and several anthologies. You have likely never heard of Susan Blackwell Ramsey before today, but her poem may help you to remember her. Its clarity of diction is reason alone to appreciate it. I especially like how the second stanza is one long flowing sentence through eight lines. Then a stop. Then, two final lines that are haunting.



Aftereffects of Bell's Palsy

Having a good and bad ear comes in handy.
My bad ear, victim of a surgeon's saw
screaming through bone to free a facial nerve,
has lost the very highest range of sounds-
bats, telephones, or sirens at a distance,
mosquitoes if they're male, small children whining,
regret, ambition's wheedlings, most tactful hints.
Banshees can keen on my ridgepole all night long,
and, exhausted, watch me leave for work,
brisk and refreshed from sleeping good ear down.

My undiminished left ear can perceive
the beginnings of nightmare in a sleeping child
two rooms away behind a closed door, hear
the click of covert glances at a party,
the first drop on the roof of the first rain
of April, surmise the maiden name and color
of the eyes of the grandmother of the boy
my daughter sits thinking of, based on her breathing.
It can hear loneliness seven lamp posts down
the street, slamming like a screen door in the wind.

—by *Susan Blackwell Ramsey*

I write for other people with the hope that I can help them to see the wonderful things within their everyday experiences. In short, I want to show people how interesting the ordinary world can be if you pay attention.... Poetry's purpose is to reach other people and to touch their hearts. If a poem doesn't make sense to anybody but its author, nobody but its author will care a whit about it. —Ted Kooser

It looks like I'll be eating a potluck lunch in Logan, Ohio today with former U.S. Poet Laureate (2004-2006) **Ted Kooser**. Happily, I'm not making this up. Earlier in the day Mr. Kooser will lead us in a writing workshop organized by Sir Alan Cohen, poetry maven of Hocking Hills and founder of the annual Hocking Hills Festival of Poetry (<http://powerofpoetry.org>). Tonight, after a musical performance in the cozy Logan Hocking County Library on Main Street, Mr. Kooser will be reading poems to us as the sky softens to darkness and the spring peepers begin to sing.

Theodore Kooser (1939 -) wrote poetry from the time he was quite young and got serious about it as a teenager. *"The first poets I read have remained strong influences: Edward Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, May Swenson, John Crowe Robinson, and others."* He took a position teaching high school after graduating from Iowa State University in 1962. Realizing that he had to make a living, Kooser took an entry-level job with an insurance company in Nebraska. Throughout his insurance career, Kooser kept on writing, usually from about five-thirty to seven o'clock each morning before he went to the office.

He says: *"I never saw myself as an insurance executive, but rather as a writer in need of a paying job."* He would remain in the industry until 1999, retiring (as a vice-president) due to a serious encounter with cancer. I chose today's poem, *A Blind Woman*, from one of Ted Kooser's many books, *Weather Central*. It reminds me of the blind man I often saw who regularly walked the downtown streets of Cincinnati where I worked (the city, not the streets (-:)) in the late 60's, early 70's. Tapping his white cane with confidence, he moved like a breeze through the crowded sidewalks, looking more astonishingly happy than most of us who had eyes to see with.



A Blind Woman

She had turned her face up into
a rain of light, and came on smiling.

The light trickled down her forehead
and into her eyes. It ran down

into the neck of her sweatshirt
and wet the white tops of her breasts.

Her brown shoes splashed on
into the light. The moment was like

a circus wagon rolling before her
through puddles of light, a cage on wheels,

and she walked fast behind it,
exuberant, curious, pushing her cane

through the bars, poking and prodding,
while the world cowered back in a corner.

—by *Ted Kooser* (from *Weather Central*)

Today's poet, **Sharon Bryan**, is a native of Utah and resident of the state of Washington. A restless soul, she describes herself as a "professional nomadic poet", having been a visiting poet/teacher at universities around the country including Dartmouth College, San Diego State University, Pacific University, and California State University, Fresno.

Her love for anthropology and a keen desire to name and understand our role in the bigger picture, the planet, space, etc is always evident in her work. Her poems are equal parts science and spirituality, both philosophical and playful. Research for Sharon Bryan consists of getting in a prop plane and touring the geologic magic of an area she is interested in.

She says: *Life and poetry are completely interwoven for me here, not separate strands. Robert Frost has a line in "Two Tramps in Mudtime" about merging his vocation and his avocation "until the two make one in sight," and that's the vision (of more than one kind) that always shimmers on the horizon for me.*

Sharon Bryan has published three collections of poetry: Salt Air (1983), Objects of Affection (1987), and my personal favorite, Flying Blind (1996). She also co-edited two collections of essays, Where We Stand: Women Poets on Literary Tradition (1993) and Planet on the Table: Poets on the Reading Life (2003)

Try reading today's long skinny poem out loud. It's fun and challenging.



Bass Bass

Stringed fish thub
thub thubbing its way

downstream or wave-
grained instrument—

the words make a little
sizzle in my brain,

which twin is it, does it
rhyme with ace or ass,

my tongue trips over
itself when I come to

either one, am I at
the opera, jazz club,

bait shop, is something
keeping time or sifting it

through gills—you've
got the picture, here's

the quiz: striped bass,
stringed bass, sea bass

double bass, basswood—
what a difference a vowel

makes, this is the danger
you face, telling the story

of your life, if you fail
to enunciate perfectly

you could have yourself
all wrong, Bayzil not Basil,

married to Lisa not Liza,
writing for Poultry magazine—

how many close calls our
lives are made of, did

the palm reader say
You will have a long life

or the wrong wife, suppose
god has bad handwriting

or a lisp, and we've mis-
understood the messages:

In the begonia was the worm...
we mistook gardening advice

for the story of our lives—
god made lime, and separated

the lime from the bark, planted
seeds, they were fruitful and

vegetable, he looked at what he had
made and saw that it was food,

he was pleased, this was just
his first try, blessed were the leeks,

unheard of on earth until he
grew them, and the peas also,

he tasted them and found
that they were good, a god

could spend his life like that,
puttering in the garden, not

a care in the world beyond
watering his plants, growing

the only sweet fat tomatoes
in the universe—if only

he hadn't wanted to take a day
off to go fishing, so he created

fish and fishing line, and got
to looking at the line, thinking

what else it might be good for,
suppose he plucked it just like

that, and that, it sounded pretty
good, but by then he was tired,

he used almost the same names
for the stringed thing and the fish

that jerked his line just then,
he got himself all tangled up

in words, until he didn't know
his bass from his treble,

he was in trouble, he saw
he needed help, so he invented

Mingus and other people
to show him which way was up.

—by Sharon Bryan

A few of this month's poets have risen, remarkably, out of near impossible circumstances—poverty and isolation, as well as mental and physical illness, to become renowned poets. That would also surely include today's poet, **James Wright** of Martins Ferry, Ohio (1927-1980). Numerous accounts of his personal and writing life are available online.

As a result of a meaningful conversation I had with a poet friend less than 24 hours ago, I began reading more by and about James Wright. In doing so, I stumbled upon today's poem which I had not previously known and decided to let it bump the poem that was previously planned for this 21st spot. My friend explained that James Wright's earlier poems embraced traditional systems of meter, while his later works were shaped by more modern thought and expression, resulting in what could be considered a poet's identity crisis.

If anyone knows when this fine little piece was written, please let me know. Considering the conversation with my friend, I am wondering: Why an unused pasture? Just who are these single-file ants, the tired grasshoppers, and the one dark cricket?

Depressed by a Book of Bad Poetry, I Walk Toward an Unused Pasture and Invite the Insects to Join Me

Relieved, I let the book fall behind a stone.
I climb a slight rise of grass.
I do not want to disturb the ants
Who are walking single file up the fence post,
Carrying small white petals,
Casting shadows so frail that I can see through them.
I close my eyes for a moment and listen.
The old grasshoppers
Are tired, they leap heavily now,
Their thighs are burdened.
I want to hear them, they have clear sounds to make.
Then lovely, far off, a dark cricket begins
In the maple trees.

—by *James Wright*



Looking Back in My Eighty-First Year

*How did we get to be old ladies-
my grandmother's job-when we
were the long-leggèd girls?*

—Hilma Wolitzer

Instead of marrying the day after graduation,
in spite of freezing on my father's arm as
here comes the bride struck up,
saying, I'm not sure I want to do this,

I should have taken that fellowship
to the University of Grenoble to examine
the original manuscript
of Stendhal's unfinished Lucien Leuwen,

I, who had never been west of the Mississippi,
should have crossed the ocean
in third class on the Cunard White Star,
the war just over, the Second World War

when Kilroy was here, that innocent graffito,
two eyes and a nose draped over
a fence line. How could I go?
Passion had locked us together.

Sixty years my lover,
he says he would have waited.
He says he would have sat
where the steamship docked

till the last of the pursers
decamped, and I rushed back
littering the runway with carbon paper . . .
Why didn't I go? It was fated.

Marriage dizzied us. Hand over hand,
flesh against flesh for the final haul,
we tugged our lifeline thru limestone and sand,
lover and long-leggèd girl.

—by Maxine Kumin (from *Still To Mow*, 2008)



In her sixteenth collection of poetry, *Still To Mow*, poet **Maxine Kumin** addresses the realities of aging and dying in the section titled “Looking Back”. It is from that section of the book that today's beautiful love poem is found. Married sixty years to the same man she met in college, Kumin moved from suburban Boston to a 200 acre farm in New Hampshire where she has spent most of her life, working with horses, gardening and writing poetry. When asked if her work would be different if she had remained a suburbanite, Maxine said: *I think it would be worlds different. The countryside and the farm itself are so important to me; I can't even visualize being a poet without living here.*

At the age of seventy-four, Kumin was nearly killed in a horse-driving accident. During months of rigorous and painful therapy she wrote about the ordeal in a compelling memoir, *Inside the Halo and Beyond: The Anatomy of a Recovery* (2000). Although she has nerve damage and “hurts all the time”, Kumin does not let it keep her down. Her latest book of poetry, *Still To Mow*, is a testament to that purposeful will.

Linda Nemec Foster began the MFA program at Goddard College in Vermont (the program subsequently moved to Warren Wilson College in North Carolina). Foster studied there under the guidance of Lisel Mueller, Heather McHugh, Donald Hall, Raymond Carver, Louise Gluck, and Robert Hass. She graduated in 1979 with her MFA in creative writing. She has received numerous awards and her poems have appeared in more than 250 journals. Foster currently conducts writing workshops for the Michigan Council for the Arts and Cultural Affairs in Grand Rapids.

All four of Linda Nemec Foster's grandparents were immigrants from southern Poland--a fact which has played an important role in her book of poetry by the same title as today's poem, *Amber Necklace from Gdansk*.

As I was studying today's poem, I came across this quote from Homer's *Odyssey*- "*A man came to our house with a golden necklace intertwined with amber. All the girls and respectable mother held it, touched it unable to take their eyes off it, and tried to bargain for a good price.*"

Amber Necklace from Gdansk

for Lisel Mueller

I don't want the luxury of diamond, luster
of pearl, nor the predictable news of my birth-
stone: emerald, green symbol of love
and success. No sapphires either -- no matter
what the ancient Persians said about the blue gem
being responsible for the sky and the ocean.
No jade stone of heaven or picture jasper cave.
I don't want gold or silver, marcasite's northern France.

Give me the prehistoric past that washed ashore
after a storm on the Baltic coast. Fossilized
pine resin that's trapped ancient air. Tears
of the sun that smell like honey, three
strands of the past braided around my neck.
White amber of memory, gold amber of song, dark amber of regret.

—by *Linda Nemec Foster*



*Always fall in with what you're asked to accept. Take what is given, and make it over your way.
My aim in life has always been to hold my own with whatever's going. Not against: with.*

—Robert Frost

I Could Give All to Time

To Time it never seems that he is brave
To set himself against the peaks of snow
To lay them level with the running wave,
Nor is he overjoyed when they lie low,
But only grave, contemplative and grave.

What now is inland shall be ocean isle,
Then eddies playing round a sunken reef
Like the curl at the corner of a smile;
And I could share Time's lack of joy or grief
At such a planetary change of style.

I could give all to Time except - except
What I myself have held. But why declare
The things forbidden that while the Customs slept
I have crossed to Safety with? For I am There,
And what I would not part with I have kept.

—Robert Frost (1874-1963)



He has been described as a loner who enjoyed company; a rebel who longed to fit in; a poet of isolation who sought a mass audience, even though he remained terrified of public speaking to the end. All that is a sweet irony considering the fact that there are now nearly two and a half million references to **Robert Frost** on the Internet.

Asked his opinion of free verse, he said: *"I would as soon play tennis without a net."* Writing as he did in form was not as simple as it seemed but a labored shorthand that contained universalities if only a curious reader would take the time.

Today's poem by **Arlene Weiner** caught my attention because it's a black and white snapshot of a former time and it's sassy staccato cadence is reminiscent of something familiar to my past -- the rhythmic pounding sound of workhorse typewriters hard at work. You can practically hear the steno pool beating out its collective "song". And although she's not mentioned, you might be able to picture the PBX operator (ours was named "Lydia") working the octopus arms of the switchboard at the entrance of the room's huge open interior.

In 1967 my first job out of high school was entry level clerk in the Accounts Payable Department of a men's clothing manufacturing company on the east edge of downtown Cincinnati. I made \$1.64 an hour and take home pay for a 40 hour work week was around \$65.00— *before* taxes. After a year on the job, I was asked to train the newly hired accounting assistant, a pleasant enough white guy, a recent college grad just a few years older than me. Curiously, he did not have to "clock in" as did all the female employees (and a few men who did menial labor). Our new guy took long lunches, had someone get his coffee, and brought home a paycheck twice as big as most of the women who had worked there for years. I know, because I helped with the weekly payroll.

This poem is dedicated to all my old girlfriends at the Palm Beach Company, and to "the colored man", our elevator operator, who was also "on the clock".



1959

Is it hot enough for you?
 the neighbor said on the stairs
 to the girl in gloves. *Hot enough*
for you? said the subway conductor,
 closing the doors. *Hot*
enough? the elevator man
 to the girl in a shirtwaist dress,
 one of many white girls,
 in summer gloves, hair damp
 on her neck, on her way
 to the typing pool. She laughed
 for the colored man moving
 the brass control through its arc.

In the big room where the men
yelled into phones at debtors
fans turned. Ribbons fluttered
on the round cages to indicate breezes.
In the center of the room
an iron mesh, floor to ceiling,
surrounded the typists. Little jackets
hung on the backs of their chairs.

After work, elevator, subway,
stairs, supper. Maybe a movie,
Twenty degrees cooler inside.
Maybe an Esther Williams.

They never said, *Fast enough*
for you? Deep enough? High enough?
They never said then, *Far enough?*
Far enough for any of us?

—by *Arlene Weiner* (from *Escape Velocity*, Ragged Sky Press)

Arlene Weiner has worked as college instructor, cardiology technician, research associate in educational software, and editor. She grew up in Inwood, near Manhattan's northern tip. If you know more about her, please send the info my way.

Sleep is comfortable, but awakening is interesting.
—Hazrat Inayat Khan

With Valerie Chronis Bickett's approval, today's poem is dedicated in memory of her dear mother, Ann —Athanasia Bouloukos Chronis who, after lingering with ill health, died on Tuesday of this week in the midst of a mercifully swift medical emergency. The beautiful poem is written by **Miriam Pederson** of Grand Rapids.



What Is Our Deepest Desire?

To be held this way in our mother's arms,
to be nestled deep in the warmth
of her body, her gaze,
to be adored, to overwhelm her
with our sweetness.
This is what we seek in chocolate,
in the food and drink and drugs
that stun the senses, that fill the veins
with the rich cream of well being.
What we take for lust—can it be, perhaps,
a heavy pang of longing to be swaddled,
close, close to the heartbeat of our mother?
No bucket seats, Jacuzzi, or even a lover's embrace
can duplicate this luxuriance,
this centered place on the roiling planet.

When the old woman, small and light,
can be carried in the arms of her son,
he, at first, holds her tentatively,
a foreign doll,
but gradually, as the pool loses its ripples,
he sees his face in hers
and draws her to him,
rocking to the rhythm of her breathing.
This is the way to enter and leave the world.

—by Miriam Pederson

Poet **Miriam Pederson** has been a professor of English and Creative Writing at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for more than 20 years. Her poetry has been published in many journals and anthologies. In collaboration with her husband, a sculptor, Ms. Pederson regularly exhibits her poetry in area and regional galleries. She also offers writing workshops to elementary schools in Grand Rapids. Her chapbook of poems, *This Brief Life*, was published in 2003

Alchemy is the art of far and near, and I think poetry is alchemy in that way. It's delightful to distort size, to see something that's tiny as though it were vast. —Robert Morgan

For most of us, the word "alchemy" conjures up the picture of a medieval laboratory in which an old magician labors to discover the formula for the elixir of life and the transmutation of metals. But if you do even a cursory study of this ancient scientific art, you will find something far more than the foolish infatuations of the old and the eccentric. My paternal German ancestors were glass makers ("the Glasmachers"), so finding this particular poem about "glass" stirs in me considerations of the spiritual rather than just things temporal.

Today's poet, **Jared Carter**, is a contemporary American poet born in 1939 in Elwood, Indiana. He studied for a while at Yale and Goddard College, dropped out of school twice, served in the Army's Signal Corp and lived in France in the early sixties where he began an interest in the legends and lore surrounding Gurdjieff. Carter traded in his classic Olympia manual typewriter in 1983 for a \$1,500 portable computer that was "just slightly smaller and lighter than a bank safe." He now lives in Indianapolis and does all of his alchemic writing on a state-of-the-art PC.

Cutting Glass

It takes a long, smooth stroke practiced carefully
over many years and made with one steady motion.

You do not really cut glass, you score its length
with a sharp, revolving wheel at the end of a tool

not much bigger than a pen-knife. Glass is liquid,
sleeping. The line you make goes through the sheet

like a wave through water, or a voice calling in a dream,
but calling only once. If the glazier knows how to work

without hesitation, glass begins to remember. Watch now
how he draws the line and taps the edge: the pieces

break apart like a book opened to a favorite passage.
Each time, what he finds is something already there.

In its waking state glass was fire once, and brightness;
all that becomes clear when you hold up the new pane.

—by Jared Carter



Historical footnote: According to the ancient-Roman historian Pliny (AD 23-79), Phoenician merchants transporting stone actually discovered glass in the region of Syria around 5000 BC. Pliny tells how the merchants, after landing, rested cooking pots on blocks of nitrate placed by their fire. With the intense heat of the fire, the blocks eventually melted and mixed with the sand of the beach to form an opaque liquid.

Apples

Rain hazes a street cart's green umbrella
but not its apples, heaped in paper cartons,
dry under cling film. The apple man,

who shirrs his mouth as though eating tart fruit,
exhibits four like racehorses at auction:
Blacktwig, Holland, Crimson King, Salome.

I tried one and its cold grain jolted memory:
a hill where meager apples fell so bruised
that locals wondered why we scooped them up,

my friend and I, in matching navy blazers.
One bite and I heard her laughter toll,
free as school's out, her face flushed in late sun.

I asked the apple merchant for another,
jaunty as Cezanne's still-life reds and yellows,
having more life than stillness, telling us,

uncut, unpeeled, they are not for the feast
but for themselves, and building strength to fly
at any moment, leap from a skewed bowl,

whirl in the air, and roll off a tilted table.
Fruit-stand vendor, master of Northern Spies,
let a loose apple teach me how to spin

at random, burn in light and rave in shadows.
Bring me a Winesap like the one Eve tasted,
savored and shared, and asked for more.

No fool, she knew that beauty strikes just once,
hard, never in comfort. For that bitter fruit,
tasting of earth and song, I'd risk exile.

The air is bland here. I would forfeit mist
for hail, put on a robe of dandelions,
and run out, broken, to weep and curse — for joy.

—by *Grace Schulman*



In her newest collection of poetry, *The Broken String* (2007), **Grace Schulman** creates sacred order (as usual), this time with vivid descriptions of life from works of art, in music (classical and jazz) or on canvas, and always with attention to the details. The title of this new collection refers to Itzhak Perlman's will to play a violin concerto despite a missing string— "*make music with all you have, and find/ a newer music with what you have left.*"

Today's poem "**Apples**" is from this newest collection, a book of poems filled with meter, rhythm and meaning, which celebrates the fullness of life including its limitations. Every word of every poem, and every poem in the series, seems to be chosen like pieces of a purposeful mosaic forming a cohesive whole.

Born in 1935, poet **Grace Schulman** is Distinguished Professor of English, Baruch College, C.U.N.Y. She has served as director of the Poetry Center, 92nd Street Y (1974-84), and poetry editor of the Nation (1971-2006). She lives in New York City.

Gregory Orr is the author of nine books of poetry, four collections of criticism, and a memoir (*Concerning the Book That is the Body of the Beloved*, 2008) that was selected by Publishers Weekly as a "Best Book of the Year." The former poetry editor for the Virginia Quarterly Review, Orr teaches at the University of Virginia and lives in Charlottesville.

I often return to the poetry of Gregory Orr because of his conviction from experience that not only in poetry, but in life itself, trauma can be transformed into art. Winding down the month, I find I can't leave it without offering something exquisite from Gregory Orr. His gift for imagery and sound, along with his concision of words, make for stunning poetry.

Heart

Its hinges rustless,
restless; opening
and shutting on trust.

We guard it;
it guides us.
Gods lack it.
Vacant their gaze.

Doctors listen
to its cryptic
lisp.
 From *sacred*
to *scared*— a few
beats skipped,
a letter slipped.

Cavity and spasm;
a spark can start
it; parting stop it.

Such a radiant husk
to hive our dust!

—by Gregory Orr



Stanley Kunitz was a generous soul whose passions were words and flowers. He died in 2006 at the age of almost 101, leaving behind a long trail of books, poems, impressive gardens and devoted friends. There are harsh and tragic aspects of his life, to be sure, but Kunitz triumphed, and suggests that we can too. Believing that “community” was critical to the health of poetry and poets, Kunitz helped establish the Fine Arts Work Center, in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and founded Poet’s House in New York — a 45,000 volume poetry library and meeting place that brings poets and the public together.

The poetry of **Stanley Kunitz**, with its recurring myths, themes and symbols, was influenced, in part, by the thinking of Carl Jung. *My conviction is that each poet has a set of key images that are the clue to one’s deepest identity. And the key images never change. So, in a way, all the poems dissolve into one poem, the poem you spend your life writing.* In another interview, Kunitz says: *You cannot separate the word from the maker of the word. That’s why I have insisted in my teaching that the first crucial act of the imagination is to create the person who will write the poems.* I think today’s poem is a perfect place to “land” this April Gifts poetry project.



The Round

Light splashed this morning
 on the shell-pink anemones
 swaying on their tall stems;
 down blue-spiked veronica
 light flowed in rivulets
 over the humps of the honeybees;
 this morning I saw light kiss
 the silk of the roses
 in their second flowering,
 my late bloomers
 flushed with their brandy.
 A curious gladness shook me.
 So I have shut the doors of my house,
 so I have trudged downstairs to my cell,

so I am sitting in semi-dark
hunched over my desk
with nothing for a view
to tempt me
but a bloated compost heap,
steamy old stinkpile,
under my window;
and I pick my notebook up
and I start to read aloud
the still-wet words I scribbled
on the blotted page:
"Light splashed . . ."

I can scarcely wait till tomorrow
when a new life begins for me,
as it does each day,
as it does each day.

—*by Stanley Kunitz*