

PLEASURES OF POETRY

Join MIT's Literature faculty & friends for readings and discussions of poetry January IAP 2023

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NEW YEAR'S DAY OBSERVED

INSTITUTE HOLIDAY (CLOSED)

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ZACHARY BOS

"After the Rioting and the Burning of the Jaffna Public Library" by Hasanthika Sirisena

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MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DAY

INSTITUTE HOLIDAY (CLOSED)

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STEPHEN TAPSCOTT

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PETER SHOR

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ANNE HUDSON

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ELIZABETH DORAN

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Sessions take place in 14E-304 @ 1:00 PM - 2:00 PM

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Where did the handsome beloved go?

Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi

translated by Brad Gooch and Maryam Mortaz

Where did the handsome beloved go?
I wonder, where did that tall, shapely cypress tree go?

He spread his light among us like a candle.
Where did he go? So strange, where did he go without me?

All day long my heart trembles like a leaf.
All alone at midnight, where did that beloved go?

Go to the road, and ask any passing traveler—
That soul-stirring companion, where did he go?

Go to the garden, and ask the gardener—
That tall, shapely rose stem, where did he go?

Go to the rooftop, and ask the watchman—
That unique sultan, where did he go?

Like a madman, I search in the meadows!
That deer in the meadows, where did he go?

My tearful eyes overflow like a river—
That pearl in the vast sea, where did he go?

All night long, I implore both moon and Venus—
That lovely face, like a moon, where did he go?

If he is mine, why is he with others?
Since he's not here, to what "there" did he go?

If his heart and soul are joined with God,
And he left this realm of earth and water, where did he go?

Tell me clearly, Shams of Tabriz,
Of whom it is said, "The sun never dies"—where did he go?

Tonight

Agha Shahid Ali

Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar

—Laurence Hope

Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight?
Whom else from rapture's road will you expel tonight?

Those "Fabrics of Cashmere—" "to make Me beautiful—" "
"Trinket"—to gem—"Me to adorn—How tell"—tonight?

I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates—
A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight.

God's vintage loneliness has turned to vinegar—
All the archangels—their wings frozen—fell tonight.

Lord, cried out the idols, Don't let us be broken;
Only we can convert the infidel tonight.

Mughal ceilings, let your mirrored convexities
multiply me at once under your spell tonight.

He's freed some fire from ice in pity for Heaven.
He's left open—for God—the doors of Hell tonight.

In the heart's veined temple, all statues have been smashed.
No priest in saffron's left to toll its knell tonight.

God, limit these punishments, there's still Judgment Day—
I'm a mere sinner, I'm no infidel tonight.

Executioners near the woman at the window.
Damn you, Elijah, I'll bless Jezebel tonight.

The hunt is over, and I hear the Call to Prayer
fade into that of the wounded gazelle tonight.

My rivals for your love—you've invited them all?
This is mere insult, this is no farewell tonight.

And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee—
God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight.

《声声慢·寻寻觅觅》李清照

寻寻觅觅，冷冷清清，凄凄惨惨戚戚。乍暖还寒时候，最难将息。三杯两盏淡酒，怎敌他晚来风急！雁过也，正伤心，却是旧时相识。

满地黄花堆积，憔悴损，如今有谁堪摘？守着窗儿，独自怎生得黑！梧桐更兼细雨，到黄昏点点滴滴。这次第，怎一个愁字了得！

Sheng Sheng Man (Note after Note) by Li Qingzhao (1084-1151)

- 1 O search, I search and seek, I seek;
- 2 Yet cold, so cold, alone, all lonely;
- 3 O sad, I'm sad and down, I'm down—O bleak, so bleak!
- 4 At this a time when the clime, oft sudden, from warm turns chilly,
- 5 'Tis hardest to tend to my poor physique.
- 6 How could a three-or-twosome bowls or cups of wine
- 7 Ever withstand the gusty winds that, by evening, upon me wreak?
- 8 Migrating geese fly past,
- 9 Aching, breaking my heart;
- 10 Sweet old friends of mine they were, they now, just squeak.

- 11 On the ground, yellow chrysanthemum petals pile thick,
- 12 All weary, worn and waned;
- 13 By now, O what of flowers are left for me to pick?
- 14 Watching by the window, alone—
- 15 O how I wish the hour of darkness: come soon, come quick!
- 16 The phoenix tree, drenched now in fine mizzling drizzles,
- 17 'Tis evening, in tears, a-dropping: A dot, a dot, and a tick, a tick
- 18 A time, O such as this,
- 19 How shall the one word "sorrow" suffice, to bare a heart so sick?

(Translated by Andrew WF Wong)

To the tune “Note after Note, Long Song”

Searching, hunting, seeking, looking,

so chilly and yet so clear.

distressed, dismal, and forlorn.

4 Warm awhile then cold again, it's that season,

the worst for taking care of yourself.

How can two or three cups of weak wine

hold up against

8 the strength of the evening wind?

The wild geese have flown past,

truly saddening the heart,

what's more, I recognize them from years past.

12 Yellow petals cover the ground, strewn in piles.

I'm so haggard and weakened now,

who bothers to pluck them anymore before they fall?

I sit beside the window, all by myself,

16 how could it have turned so black outside?

Paulownia trees and fine rain,

until dusk has fallen, I listen to

drip after drip, drop after drop.

20 This scene, this feeling—

how could the word “sorrow” ever suffice?

(Translated by Ronald Egan, from *The Works of Li Qingzhao*)

To a Skylark

by Percy Bysshe Shelley

Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!
Bird thou never wert,
That from Heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

Higher still and higher
From the earth thou springest
Like a cloud of fire;
The blue deep thou wingest,
And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.

In the golden lightning
Of the sunken sun,
O'er which clouds are bright'ning,
Thou dost float and run;
Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.

The pale purple even
Melts around thy flight;
Like a star of Heaven,
In the broad day-light
Thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy shrill delight,

Keen as are the arrows
Of that silver sphere,
Whose intense lamp narrows
In the white dawn clear
Until we hardly see, we feel that it is there.

All the earth and air
With thy voice is loud,
As, when night is bare,
From one lonely cloud
The moon rains out her beams, and Heaven is overflow'd.

What thou art we know not;
What is most like thee?
From rainbow clouds there flow not
Drops so bright to see
As from thy presence showers a rain of melody.

Like a Poet hidden
In the light of thought,
Singing hymns unbidden,
Till the world is wrought
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not:

Like a high-born maiden
 In a palace-tower,
 Soothing her love-laden
 Soul in secret hour
 With music sweet as love, which overflows her bower:

Like a glow-worm golden
 In a dell of dew,
 Scattering unbeholden
 Its aëreal hue
 Among the flowers and grass, which screen it from the view:

Like a rose embower'd
 In its own green leaves,
 By warm winds deflower'd,
 Till the scent it gives
 Makes faint with too much sweet those heavy-winged thieves:

Sound of vernal showers
 On the twinkling grass,
 Rain-awaken'd flowers,
 All that ever was
 Joyous, and clear, and fresh, thy music doth surpass.

Teach us, Sprite or Bird,
 What sweet thoughts are thine:
 I have never heard
 Praise of love or wine
 That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine.

Chorus Hymeneal,
 Or triumphal chant,
 Match'd with thine would be all
 But an empty vaunt,
 A thing wherein we feel there is some hidden want.

What objects are the fountains
 Of thy happy strain?
 What fields, or waves, or mountains?
 What shapes of sky or plain?
 What love of thine own kind? what ignorance of pain?

With thy clear keen joyance
 Languor cannot be:
 Shadow of annoyance
 Never came near thee:
 Thou lovest: but ne'er knew love's sad satiety.

Waking or asleep,
Thou of death must deem
Things more true and deep
Than we mortals dream,
Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not:
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

Yet if we could scorn
Hate, and pride, and fear;
If we were things born
Not to shed a tear,
I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.

Better than all measures
Of delightful sound,
Better than all treasures
That in books are found,
Thy skill to poet were, thou scorner of the ground!

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow
The world should listen then, as I am listening now.

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The Caged Skylark

BY GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

As a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage,
 Man's mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house, dwells —
 That bird beyond the remembering his free fells;
This in drudgery, day-labouring-out life's age.
Though aloft on turf or perch or poor low stage
 Both sing sometimes the sweetest, sweetest spells,
 Yet both droop deadly sometimes in their cells
Or wring their barriers in bursts of fear or rage.

Not that the sweet-fowl, song-fowl, needs no rest —
Why, hear him, hear him babble & drop down to his nest,
 But his own nest, wild nest, no prison.

Man's spirit will be flesh-bound, when found at best,
But uncumberèd: meadow-down is not distressed
 For a rainbow footing it nor he for his bones risen.

Source: *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose* (Penguin Classics, 1985)
<<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44391/the-caged-skyllark>>

The Bewlay Brothers (1971)

David Bowie

And so the story goes they wore the clothes,

They said the things to make it seem
improbable.

The whale of a lie like they hope it was

And the Goodmen of Tomorrow

Had their feet in the wallow

And their heads of Brawn were nicer shorn

And how they bought their positions with
saccharin and trust

The world was asleep to our latent fuss

Sighing, the swirl through the streets,

Like the crust of the sun,

The Bewlay Brothers

In our Wings that Bark

Flashing teeth of Brass

Standing Tall in the dark

Oh, We were Gone——

Hanging out with your Dwarf Men

We were so turned on

By your lack of Conclusions

I was Stone and he was Wax

So he could scream and still relax,
unbelievable

And we frightened the small children away

And our talk was old and dust would flow

Thru our veins and Lo ! it was midnight

Back o' the kitchen door

Like the grim face on the Cathedral floor

And the solid book we wrote

Cannot be found today

It was Stalking time for the Moonboys

The Bewlay Brothers

With our backs on the arch

In the Devil-may-be-here

But He can't sing above that

Oh, We were Gone

Real Cool Traders

We were so Turned On

You thought we were Fakers

Now the dress is hung, the ticket pawned

The Factor Max that proved the fact

Is melted down.

And woven on the edging of my pillow

Now my Brother lays upon the Rocks

He could be dead, He could be not,

He could be You

He's Camelian, comedian Corinthian and
Caricature

“Shooting-up Pie-in-the-Sky”

The Bewlay Brothers

In the feeble and the Bad

The Bewlay Brothers

In the Blessed and Cold

In the Crutch-hungry Dark
Was where we flayed our Mark
Oh, We were Gone
Kings of Oblivion
We were so Turned On
In the Mind-Warp Pavilion

Lay me place and bake me Pie
I'm Starving for me Gravy
Leave my shoes, and door unlocked
I might just slip away
Just for the Day, Hey !
Please come Away, Hey !

© *Hunky Dory*, RCA Records.

Vegetable Man (1967)

Syd Barrett

In yellow shoes I get the blues
Though I walk the streets with my plastic
feet
With blue velvet trousers, makes me feel
pink
There's a kind of stink about blue velvet
trousers
In my paisley shirt, I look a jerk
And my turquoise waistcoat is quite out of
sight
But oh, oh, my haircut looks so bad

Vegetable man, where are you?

So I change my gear, and I find my knees
And I cover them up with the latest cut
And my pants and socks all point in a box
It don't take long for my nylon socks
The watch, black watch,
My watch with a black face
Acetate pin, a little hole
And all the lot is what I got
It's what I wear, it's what you see
It must be me, it's what I am

Vegetable man, where are you?

(Ha ha ha, ha ha ha)

(Ha ha ha, ha ha ha)

Oh, I've been looking all over the place for a
place for me
But it ain't anywhere
It just ain't anywhere.

Vegetable man, vegetable man
Vegetable man, vegetable man

He's the kind of fella you just gotta see if
you can

Vegetable man

(Ah, ha ha ha ha)

© *The Early Years 1965–1972*
Cambridge Station
Pink Floyd Records

Hasanthika Sirisena

After the Rioting and the Burning of the Jaffna Public Library

“Immediately afterwards, a journalist found a ‘heartbroken’ local lecturer wandering through rooms... he quoted him as saying, ‘The Sinhalese were jealous of the library.’”

*– Rebecca Knuth, Burning Books and Leveling Libraries:
Extremist Violence and Cultural Destruction*

I trudge through an ash heap, a carcass,
pages pulped, papier-mâché-ed,
clinging like charcoaled flesh,
to shattered chhatris and jagged,
broken pillars.

The remains echo the bird skeleton
I mourned on a beach, a Brahminy kite
torn from its limb by bullets.
Or is it the ammonite, encased
in its vitrine, fossilized body chamber
cross-sectioned, gleaming, eternally
ready to sluice its own extinction?

The air perfumes my skin with loss,
the aroma of burnt sugar and spent
matches. I sang once of our history,
gods scented of honey and butter,
birthed from golden wombs into flame,
gold teeth glinting as they split open
mountains to battle dragons. Now,
for my students, I recite only the future.
Their response, *In a country where
so little belongs to us, they take even more.*

The seed awaits a signal,
karrikin buried in the debris
of charred wood and *ola* leaves.
Soon, it will root, shoot, germinate
the trunk, the limbs, the crown
that will supplant the rubble.

I turn from the fractured pavilion,
its onion dome peeled and leaking sun.

As appeared in the Fall 2015 issue of J Journal: New Writing on Justice. Author information, from that appearance: “Hasanthika Sirisena’s work has appeared in the *American Book Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Narrative*, *Glimmer Train*, *Epoch* and other magazines. She is a recipient of fellowships from the MacDowell Colony and Yaddo and a Rona Jaffe Writers Award. She is currently an associate fiction editor at *West Branch* and teaches creative writing at the City College of New York.” Online on Twitter.com @thinkhasie and at hasanthikasirisena.com.

Le ciel est, par-dessus le toit

Paul Verlaine (1881)

Le ciel est, par-dessus le toit,
Si bleu, si calme !
Un arbre, par-dessus le toit
Berce sa palme.

La cloche dans le ciel qu'on voit
Doucement tinte.
Un oiseau sur l'arbre qu'on voit
Chante sa plainte.

Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, la vie est là,
Simple et tranquille.
Cette paisible rumeur-là
Vient de la ville.

— Qu'as-tu fait, ô toi que voilà
Pleurant sans cesse,
Dis, qu'as-tu fait, toi que voilà,
De ta jeunesse ?

The sky-blue smiles above the roof

Translated by Gertrude Hall (1895)

The sky-blue smiles above the roof
Its tenderest;
A green tree rears above the roof
Its waving crest.

The church-bell in the windless sky
Peaceably rings,
A skylark soaring in the sky
Endlessly sings.

My God, my God, all life is there,
Simple and sweet;
The soothing bee-hive murmur there
Comes from the street!

What have you done, O you that weep
In the glad sun, —
Say, with your youth, you man that weep,
What have you done?

The sky above the roof

Translated by Mabel Dearmer (1916)

The sky above the roof
Is calm and sweet
A tree above the roof
Bends in the heat

A bell from out the blue
Drowsily rings
A bird from out the blue
Plaintively sings

Ah God! A life is here,
Simple and fair
Murmurs of strife are here
Lost in the air

Why dost thou weep O heart
Poured out in tears?
What hast thou done O heart,
With thy spent years?

The sky is just beyond the roof

Translated by Bergen Weeks Applegate (1916)

The sky is just beyond the roof,
So blue, so calm;
A tree-top just beyond the roof
Rocks its slow palm.

The chime in the sky that I see
Distantly rings;
A bird on the tree that I see
Plaintively sings.

My God, my God, but life is there
Tranquil and sweet;
This peaceful murmur that I hear
Comes from the street!

What have you done, you who stand here,
In tears and ruth?
Say, what have you done, you who are here,
With your lost youth?

The sky, above the roof

Translated by C.F. MacIntyre (1948)

The sky, above the roof,
 is so blue and deep!
 A tree, above the roof,
 is rocked to sleep.

The bell in the sky one sees
 softly rings.
 A bird in the tree one sees
 plaintively sings.

Dear God, dear God, life's there,
 tranquil and sweet.
 That peaceful murmur there
 comes from the street.

-What have you done, you there
 who weep always,
 oh, what have you done, you there
 with your young days?

The Sky above the Roof

Translated by Brian Hill (1962)

The sky above the roof —
 How calm and blue!
 A tree above the roof
 Rocks a slow bough.

The sky-hung bell I watch
 Sounds its sweet note;
 The branch-swung bird I watch
 Sings from sad throat.

My God, my God, life's there
 Unvexed, complete;
 That placid murmur there
 Comes from the street.

What have you done, who weep
 Your endless tears?
 What have you done, who weep,
 With youth's lost years?

In Prison

Translated by James Kirkup (2001)

Up above the roof,
 the sky is so blue, so calm!
 Up above the roof
 a tree, rocking its branches.
 – A bell in the sky above

is softly ringing.
 A bird we see in the tree
 in the sky above
 is singing of her sorrow.
 – O God, my God, life

lies out there, simple
 and calm. That peaceful murmur
 comes from the city ...
 What's become of you? You weep!
 O where is the youth now lost?

À Horatio

Paul Verlaine (1884)

Ami, le temps n'est plus des guitares, des plumes,
Des créanciers, des duels hilares à propos
De rien, des cabarets, des pipes aux chapeaux
Et de cette gaîté banale où nous nous plûmes.

Voici venir, ami très tendre, qui t'allumes
Au moindre dé pipé, mon doux briseur de pots,
Horatio, terreur et gloire des tripots,
Cher diseur de jurons à remplir cent volumes,

Voici venir parmi les brumes d'Elseneur
Quelque chose de moins plaisant, sur mon honneur,
Qu'Ophélie, l'enfant aimable qui s'étonne.

C'est le spectre, le spectre impérieux ! Sa main
Montre un but et son oeil éclaire et son pied tonne,
Hélas ! et nul moyen de remettre à demain !

To Horatio

Translated by C. F. MacIntyre (1948)

My friend, it's no time now for plumes, for loud
guitars, for creditors, hilarious brawls
over nothing, taverns, long clay pipes—for all
this vulgar fun for which we were so proud.

Here comes, my dear friend, one you will not gull
at all with loaded dice, my fine pot-breaker,
Horatio, the leaping-house's glory and terror,
with oaths to make a hundred volumefuls.

See there! Strides through the fogs of Elsinore
something far less charming, understand,
than sweet Ophelia, girl with eyes of wonder.

The specter, the implacable! His hand
points *finis*, eyes dart lightning, his feet thunder,
zounds! and he can't be put off any more.

To Horatio

Translated by James Kirkup (2003)

Friend, the times no more
favour guitars and feathers,
broker's men, comic
duels about nothing much,
cabarets, new-fangled pipes

and all that banal
gaiety we once enjoyed.
The time's now coming,
dearest of dear friends, who takes
fire at the first loaded dice,

sweet tavern-basher,
Horatio, scourge, glory
of the lowest dives!
Hundred-volumed oath-raker!
— In the mists of Elsinore

Behold, there comes
something less pleasant, I'll bet,
than Ophelia, gentle
young girl with the startled eyes.
For here comes the spectral form,

Imperious spectre!
His hand points a finger, and
an eyeball flashes!
And his foot thunders! — Alas,
no chance of cancellation!

Snake-Light
Natalie Diaz

I can read a text in anything.

To read a body is to break that body a little.

When my desert reads a life out loud
it takes the body down, back to caliche and clay,
one symbol at a time—

the blue milk of an eye sipped empty,
a wasted tongue rewinding to its vacant throat,
each vertebra unlocked and dragged beneath the sand.

The body after itself, the after-body—

undressed to its banquet,
for yellow jackets and butterflies. Yes, butterflies
nourish on the nectar

and the wrack—ascending, descending,
against the snake's broken body, in adoration.

The devotional fervor-work of revision.

⇒

Let's say it's all text—the animal, the dune,
the wind in the cottonwood, and the body.

Everything *book*: a form bound together.
This is also *book*: the skeleton of a rattlesnake

sheathed tightly in its unopened flesh.
Apex of spine and spur, the wet-black
curves of unlit bone, dark parentheses—letters

flexed across a mica-lit gulley, a line.
What is a page if not a lingering, an opaque
waiting—to be marked, and written?

Even the rattlesnake is legible
through the muscled strike of its body.
A sentence, or a spell, a taut rope of emotion—

serpentine signal against the surface of the eye's
moon-stroked desert floor.

←

In the woods with my love, there was a snakeskin
dangling from the tree bark. Sleeve of gold, honey-
combed, scaled with light.

I touched it softly—the way I touch a line while reading—
trembling with the body of the snake before it left itself,
like leaving one word for the next—becoming, and possible.

I gave the skin to my love and said, *Now I am a story—
like the snake, I am my own future.*

→

Lines are shed like snakeskin—rubbed against
the rough white page, released. Not remembered
or unremembered. The body leaving itself for itself.

Each new line its own body, made possible
by the first body, and here now entering
the rooms of our eye and ear.

The new body is how the rattlesnake knows itself—
not as less body but as whole body.

←

You should never kill a rattlesnake—
a rattlesnake is also human.

→

Americans worship their obsessions in violent ways—
they write them down.

Americans celebrate the rattlesnake in rattlesnake rodeos—
round them up, kill them, sell them. Cash prizes
for the heaviest and longest rattlesnake, more cash
for the most dead rattlesnakes.

Rattlesnakes skinned to their tails, torsos rewritten
as italic slope, meat darkening and arched
among the almost-white prairie grasses—
the rattlesnake read and interpreted, rendered

a classic American character in a classic American font.

←

In my Mojave language, when you desire
the rattlesnake, you call out its first name,

Hikwiir.

You can't know the rattlesnake's power

if you've never felt its first name stretch and strike
in your mouth—like making lightning,

unfolding fangs from the soft palate of your jaw,
delivering all of it to a body you want to pull inside you:

her mouth, her throat, in your mouth and throat,
her shoulders and ribcage—

you would fold her in half if you could—
hips, such a long thigh, thigh, calves, ankles.

And afterward, you are changed,
bewildered, slow.

⇒

In the beginning, the letter N
was the image of a snake.

Phoenician scribes held it in their hands, gave it.
They deepened the body's curve
and chopped off the snake's head,
which didn't change the body's song.

⇐

When I write my name
I hold the cool, scaled body
of the snake. Set it writhing
on the page—*N*, it sings.

Beneath the patterns burnishing
the rattlesnake's back, its pale belly
glows—page, a place of hunger.
Some days the N is silent
without its head. It's the *Hnnnh*
of the scribe's sword I hear
written in my ear.

⇒

I have another name—
I have a rattlesnake name.

I am also *her*.

My Elder says, *You are like that rattlesnake.*
She is quiet, quiet. Then she strikes, and it's too late.

You can rewrite but not unwrite.

←

The rattlesnake. I. Are ampersand.
A coil, almost.

We, ligature.

⇒

When a snake swallows its prey,
a row of inner teeth help walk the jaw
over the prey's body—walking like reading.

Walking over a word with the teeth of our mind.

To write is to be eaten. To read, to be full.

←

The rattlesnake moves like sepia ink.
The white muscle of the page is what makes these dark ribs walk.
The dimmed bone line is still.
Somewhere deep—the rattle of energy, the hibernaculum.

⇒

I watched a rattlesnake swim across the Colorado River,
down near the Devil's Elbow, where the sea monster,
whose name I cannot tell you, turned the mountain to sand—
created a 90-degree bend in the course of the blue-green water.

←

I dream of snakes who want to speak to me.
I cover my ears, I run.

I jumped in the bed of a red pickup truck.
The snake stood up on its tail, human.
It spoke with its black tongue like a flick
of black hair in the wind.

It spoke to me with that tongue,
making all those black knots in the air.

→

The alphabet of my love's hand in the dark,
a gesture I can read. A desire-text.
She enters me—I am her scriptorium.

←

My Tío Facundo was from Zacatecas,
and skinned a rattlesnake in our backyard.
Fried it in el disco. He gave me the rattle
tied on a cord I wore around my neck.
Until my Mojave great grandmother saw it,
said, *Take it off*. I asked, *Why?* She said,
Would you wear my foot around your neck?
I said, *You don't have feet*. She said, *Take it off*.
She said, *We don't eat snakes. They are our sisters*.

She said, *I gave you my name—I called you*.
And I watched her tongue like a whip of ink
write my name in the air.

Postcolonial Love Poem (Graywolf Press, 2020)

O Jeweled Land

Victory!
I registered myself
I adorned myself with a name, on an ID card
my existence distinguished with a number
So hail to #678 issued at Precinct 5, Resident of Tehran!
Now I don't have to worry anymore
The kind bosom of the Motherland
the pacifier of the past full of the glory of history
the lullaby of civilization and culture
the squeaky-toy of the law. . .
Ah,
now I don't have to worry anymore

Overwhelmed with joy
I went to the window and eagerly inhaled
six hundred and seventy-eight times
deep deep into my lungs
air thick with manure and the scent of garbage and piss
and at the bottom of six hundred and seventy-eight invoices
and on the face of six hundred and seventy-eight job application forms
I wrote Forough Farrokhzad

Now that, after years and years, the reality of your existence has been
acknowledged
it's a gift to live
in the land of poetry and the rose and the nightingale
a place where
with my first official look through the curtain, I see six-hundred and seventy-eight poets
impostors, in the guise of strange beggars
searching through garbage for meter and rhyme
a place where six hundred and seventy-eight mysterious nightingales who suddenly, for amusement, have taken the form of six hundred and seventy-eight old black crows
at the sound of my first official step
fly lazily from dark swamps
toward the edge of day
a place where my first official breath is mixed
with the scent of six hundred and seventy-eight roses
fresh from the great PLASCO factory

Yes, it's a gift to live
in the birthplace of Sheikh Abu Clown, the junkie kamancheh-player
and Shiekh "O Love, O Love," a tombak in the tanbur family
to live in the city of fat superstars-legs, hips, boobs on the cover of Art
in the cradle of those who compile the philosophy of "Phooey, who cares?
the cradle of the IQ Olympics-yeah!
a place where, from every regular media outlet, video or audio

comes the blare of the genius of this year's new geniuses
And as for the intelligentsia of the nation
they sit in their adult literacy class
each holding close to his chest six hundred and seventy-eight electric
kabob cookers
and displaying on his wrist six hundred and seventy-
eight Navzer watches and they know
that weakness arises from an empty pocket, not from ignorance

Victory! Yes, Victory!
Now to celebrate this victory
in front of the mirror I proudly light six hundred and seventy-eight
candles bought on credit
and I jump on the window seat in order that I may, with your kind
permission, say a few words
on the subject of the legal advantages of such a life
and so that with a pickaxe I may, to the sound of passionate applause
break ground for the very tall building of my life
with a single blow to the crown of my head
I am alive, yes, as the Zayandeh River was once alive
and from all that is the monopoly of the living I will take my share

Starting tomorrow I will be able to go forth strolling
through city streets brimful of the nation's bounty
among the slender shadows of the telephone poles
and proudly I will write six hundred and seventy-eight times on the
walls of the public bathrooms
I WRITE THIS TO MAKE ASSES LAUGH

Starting till tomorrow like a zealous patriot
I will be able to cherish
in heart and mind
a share in the Grand Ideal Lottery
held every Wednesday afternoon
followed eagerly and anxiously by all
a share of those 1,000- riyal notes that nurture a thousand desires
that can be used for the purchase of refrigerators and furniture and curtains
or exchanged for six hundred and seventy-eight real votes
that can be donated one night to six hundred and seventy-eight
patriotic men

Starting tomorrow
in the back room of Khachik the Arménien's shop
after having a few snorts of first-rate product
and a goblet of doctored Pepsi Cola
and after scattering a few "Ya-Haqq!"s and Ya-Hu!"s and "bow wow!"
and "HooHoo!"s
I will be able to join the gathering of learned thinkers and intellectual
chikenshits

and the followers of the school of thug dancing
and sometime around the 1,678th year of Shams-e Tabrizi
the first draft of my big novel
will be printed by a bankrupt press on both sides of six hundred
and seventy-eight
packets of OSHNU genuine special cigarettes

Starting tomorrow with complete confidence,
I will be able to invite myself to sit in a velvet-covered throne through
six hundred and seventy-eight sessions
of the Majles of the Gathering for Securing the Future
of the Majles of Thanks and Praise
because I have read every issue of Art & Science and Homage & Flattery
and I understand the skill of "Writing Correctly"

I have stepped into the space of existence where the creative masses live
and although no bread can be found there
it offers a field of wide-open vision
it's actual geography defined
to the north by the fresh green of Bullet Square
to the south by Execution Square
and by Artillery Square in the center of town

And from dawn until sunset, in the shelter of a shining and safe sky
six hundred and seventy-eight plastic swans
along with six hundred and seventy-eight angels
-angels made of mixed dirt and mud, by the way-
are busy proceeding with plans for stillness and silence

Victory! Yes, victory!
So hail to #678, issued by Precinct 5, Resident of Tehran
who thanks to perseverance and willpower
has reached such an elevated station that she now stands quietly
in the window frame
six hundred and seventy-eight meters above the ground

and boasts of this:
that she can from this very small opening -not by way of the stairs-
throw herself head-over heels madly into the lap of the kind of
Motherland
and her last will and testament requests
that in exchange for six hundred and seventy-eight coins Master
Teacher Abraham Sabha
write an elegy in some bullshit rhyme praising her life

The Bird was Just a Bird

The bird said: "What a scent, what a sun, ah
spring has come
and I will go search for my mate"

From the balcony's railing the bird
flew, flew away like a message

The bird was small
The bird didn't think
The bird didn't read the newspaper
The bird had no debt
The bird didn't know people

The bird flew on the air
and above the traffic lights
in the heights of unawareness
and experienced madly
the blue moments

The bird, ah, was just a bird

Pair

Evening Comes
and after evening, darkness
and after darkness
eyes
hands
and breaths breaths breaths. . .
and the sound of water
that pours down drip drip drip from the tap

Then two red dots
from two lit cigarettes
the tick-tic of the clock
and two hearts
and two solitudes

Captive

I want you and I know that never
will I hold you as my heart desires
You are that clear bright sky
I am a captive bird in the corner of this cage

From behind the cold dark bars
my longing look is astonished at your face
I think that a hand might appear
and suddenly free me to fly to you

I think that in a moment of carelessness
I might fly from this silent prison
I might laugh in the face of the jailer
I might begin to live again, at your side

I am thinking and I know that never
will I have the resolve to leave this cage
Even if it were the jailers wish
I have no strength left for flight

From beyond the bars each bright morning
a child's gaze smiles in my face
When I begin a joyous song
His lips come to me with a kiss

O sky, if I wish one day
to fly from this silent prison
what will I say to the eyes of the crying child?
Leave me be, I am a captive bird

I am the candle whose burning heart
lights up a ruin
If I choose silence
I will shred a nest
and two solitudes

Death of a Naturalist

Seamus Heaney

All year the flax-dam festered in the heart
Of the townland; green and heavy headed
Flax had rotted there, weighted down by huge sods.
Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun.
Bubbles gargled delicately, bluebottles
Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell.
There were dragonflies, spotted butterflies,
But best of all was the warm thick slobber
Of frogspawn that grew like clotted water
In the shade of the banks. Here, every spring
I would fill jam-potfuls of the jellied
Specks to range on window sills at home,
On shelves at school, and wait and watch until
The fattening dots burst, into nimble
Swimming tadpoles. Miss Walls would tell us how
The daddy frog was called a bullfrog
And how he croaked and how the mammy frog
Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was
Frogspawn. You could tell the weather by frogs too
For they were yellow in the sun and brown
In rain.

Then one hot day when fields were rank
With cowdung in the grass the angry frogs
Invaded the flax-dam; I ducked through hedges
To a coarse croaking that I had not heard
Before. The air was thick with a bass chorus.
Right down the dam gross bellied frogs were cocked
On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some hopped:
The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat
Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.
I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings
Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.

Digging

Seamus Heaney

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

Song

Seamus Heaney

A rowan like a lipsticked girl.
Between the by-road and the main road
Alder trees at a wet and dripping distance
Stand off among the rushes.

There are the mud-flowers of dialect
And the immortelles of perfect pitch
And that moment when the bird sings very close
To the music of what happens.

Myth

Native Guard by Natasha Trethewey

I was asleep while you were dying.
It's as if you slipped through some rift, a hollow
I make between my slumber and my waking,

the Erebus I keep you in, still trying
not to let you go. You'll be dead again tomorrow,
but in dreams you live. So I try taking

you back into morning. Sleep-heavy, turning,
my eyes open, I find you do not follow.
Again and again, this constant forsaking.

*

Again and again, this constant forsaking:
my eyes open, I find you do not follow.
You back into morning, sleep-heavy, turning.

But in dreams you live. So I try taking,
not to let go. You'll be dead again tomorrow.
The Erebus I keep you in—still, trying—

I make between my slumber and my waking.
It's as if you slipped through some rift, a hollow.
I was asleep while you were dying.

Quotidian
Natasha Trethewey

No right is more precious in a free country than that of having a voice in the election of those who make the laws under which, as good citizens, we must live. Other rights, even the most basic, are illusory if the right to vote is undermined.

—Justice Hugo Black, 1964

Sometimes she wrote about the weather—how hot it was, or yet another lightning storm gone as quick as it came. In the catalog of her days: a dress she was sewing, car trouble, pay day, laced with declarations of love to the man who would become my father—her body bright with desire, a threshold I would soon cross into being. Two years before Loving will make their love legal, my mother writes about marrying despite an unjust law; and because it is 1965, Mississippi in turmoil, she writes about a cross burned at the church next door, interracial outings at the beach, and being followed by police—all of it side by side in her letters' tidy script. Reading them, I can't help thinking how ordinary it seems, injustice—mundane as a trip to the store for bread. And I know this is about what has always existed, side by side, in this country. That summer, my grandmother brought *The Movement* home. It tells the story in pictures, and it is beautiful, my mother wrote, adding, I think you know the way I am using the word. On the cover: a black protestor, caught in a cop's chokehold, his mouth open to shout or gasp for air. Inside, pictures I could not bear to look at as a child: a man tied to a scaffold, his body burned blacker, the fire still smoldering beneath him; two boys hanged from a tree above the smiling white faces of the revelers turned back toward the camera: a young couple holding hands, ordinary as any night out on a date. Now I think of my mother, in love and writing love letters, cataloguing her days, those terrible/beautiful pictures on the table next to the crocheted lace doily and crystal bowl my grandmother kept for candy: butterscotch in cellophane wrappers, bright and shiny as gold. It is July 20th 1965, two months before my parents will break the law to be married, and my mother, who's just turned twenty-one, signs off—her rights basic as any other citizen's—Have to run, she wrote; Got to get downtown to register to vote.

Miracle of the Black Leg

Pictorial representations of the physician-saints Cosmas and Damian and the myth of the miracle transplant — black donor, white recipient — date back to the mid-fourteenth century, appearing much later than written versions of the story.

1.

Always, the dark body hewn asunder; always
one man is healed, his sick limb replaced,
placed in the other man's grave: the white leg
buried beside the corpse or attached as if
it were always there. If not for the dark appendage
you might miss the story beneath this story —
what remains each time the myth changes: how,
in one version, the doctors harvest the leg
from a man, four days dead, in his tomb at the church
of a martyr, or — in another — desecrate a body
fresh in the graveyard at Saint Peter in Chains:
there was buried just today an Ethiopian.

Even now, it stays with us: when we mean to uncover
the truth, we dig, say *unearth*.

2.

Emblematic in paint, a signifier of the body's lacuna,
the black leg is at once a grafted narrative,
a redacted line of text, and in this scene a dark stocking
pulled above the knee. Here the patient is sleeping,
his head at rest in his hand. Beatific, he looks as if
he'll wake from a dream. On the floor
beside the bed, a dead *Moor* — hands crossed at the groin,
the swapped limb white and rotting, fused in place.
And in the corner, a question: poised as if to speak
the syntax of sloughing, a snake's curved form.
It emerges from the mouth of a boy like a tongue — slippery
and rooted in the body as knowledge. For centuries
this is how the myth repeats: the miracle — in words
or wood or paint — is a record of thought.

3.

See how the story changes: in one painting
the *Ethiop* is merely a body, featureless in a coffin,
so black he has no face. In another, the patient —
at the top of the frame — seems to writhe in pain,
the black leg grafted to his thigh. Below him
a mirror of suffering: the *blackamoor* —
his body a fragment — arched across the doctor's lap
as if dying from his wound. If not immanence,
the soul's bright anchor — blood passed from one
to the other — what knowledge haunts each body,
what history, what phantom ache? One man always
low, in a grave or on the ground, the other
up high, closer to heaven; one man always diseased,
the other a body in service, plundered.

4.

Both men are alive in Villoldo's carving.

In twinned relief, they hold the same posture,
the same pained face, each man reaching to touch
his left leg. The black man, on the floor,
holds his stump. Above him, the doctor restrains
the patient's arm as if to prevent him touching
the dark amendment of flesh. How not to see it—
the men bound one to the other, symbiotic—
one man rendered expendable, the other worthy
of this sacrifice? In version after version, even
when the *Ethiopian* isn't there, the leg is a stand-in,
a black modifier against the white body,
a piece cut off— as in the origin of the word *comma*:
caesura in a story that's still being written.

Cascadilla Falls

A.R. Ammons

I went down by Cascadilla
Falls this
evening, the
stream below the falls,
and picked up a
handsized stone
kidney shaped, testicular, and

thought all its motions into it,
the 800 mph earth spin,
the 190-million-mile yearly
displacement around the sun,
the overriding
grand
haul

of the galaxy with the 30,000
mph of where
the sun's going:
thought all the interweaving
motions
into myself: dropped

the stone to dead rest:
the stream from other motions
broke
rushing over it:
shelterless,
I turned

to the sky and stood still:
Oh
I do
not know where I am going
that I can live my life
by this single creek.

The Selected Poems,
W.W. Norton, 1975.

Mud

Stephen Tapscott

It is early in the history of the season of humid freshness, herbs, and mud.

I walk across the sod of the meadow, which is after rain a bitter sponge.

I am almost afraid to see how weighty I feel to the earth, which has suffered me
this long time
and still supports, imprinted with corresponding scars.

Many things I have thought and felt I am not proud of and are best not talked
about, disgracing the body:
not even with God, who knows them as acts, having witnessed,

and who does not after all demand to be told them as a condition of forgiveness.
Therefore I print them here, setting my feet carefully where my body touches

the softer body of the meadow – as if to make them more exact,
a condition of the dark receptive soil:

as if prayer were a specific longing, as if the forgiveness I pray toward
would be a specific forgiveness and I will know it when it comes.

From the Book of Changes
(Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2002)

Trash, IV
Joshua Bennett

*Some of these microscopic invertebrates shrug off temperatures
of minus 272 Celsius, one degree warmer than absolute zero.
Other species can endure powerful radiation and the vacuum of space.
In 2007, the European Space Agency sent 3,000 animals
into low Earth orbit, where the tardigrades survived
for 12 days on the outside of the capsule.*

—Washington Post,
“These animals can survive
until the end
of the Earth, astrophysicists
say”

O, littlest unkillable one. Expert death-delayer, master abstractor
of imperceptible flesh. We praise your commitment
to breath. Your well-known penchant for flexing on microbiologists,
confounding those who seek to test your limits using ever more
objectionable methods: ejection into the vacuum of space, casting
your smooth, half-millimeter frame into an active volcano,
desiccation on a Sunday afternoon, when the game is on,
& so many of us are likewise made sluggish in our gait, bound
to the couch by simpler joys. *Slow-stepper*, you were called,
by men who caught first glimpse of your eight paws walking
through baubles of rain. *Water bear*. *Moss piglet*. All more or less
worthy mantles, but I watch you slink through the boundless
clarity of a single droplet & think your mettle ineffable, cannot shake
my admiration for the way you hold fast to that which is so swiftly torn
from all else living, what you abide in order to stay here among the flailing
& misery-stricken, the glimpse you grant into limitless persistence, tenacity
under unthinkable odds, endlessness enfleshed & given indissoluble form.

Endlessness enfleshed in emerald & frost & shades I couldn't
name without further study. All the common weeds are here
& flourishing: bristly oxtongue, barnyard grass, broadleaf
plantain, you know the line from Whitman, about dandelions,
which rise through winter white *as if no artifice of fashion, business,*
politics, had ever been, a reminder to return to the elemental.

I feel that now, standing here, amidst what I later learn
are not filaree or velvetleaf, which I love the look of from
my book of flowers, the sound too, the music of the weeds
is what really gets to me, purslane & lady's thumb, London rocket,
mare's tail, jungle rice, the joy of discovery evident in each honorific,
belying, of course, their social status, or the verb form, which,
like *dust*, destroys the thing it names. And what is it that marks
this distinction exactly, I ask an old friend from my years
uptown, a professional. *Competition*, he says, smiling. *Wildness*.

MODERATORS

Stephen Tapscott is a Professor of Literature at MIT.

Nina (Yihong) Li is a third-year MIT undergraduate majoring in Architecture and Literature. Originally from Qingdao, China, Nina now lives in New Jersey and Massachusetts. She is a painter, an archer, and a frequent bookstore/library visitor no matter where she lives!

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.

Skyler Jones is a senior at MIT double majoring in Literature and Chemistry, graduating at the end of January. She will hopefully be going to grad school for a PhD in English in the fall.

Zachary Bos studied in the MFA program at Boston University. His writing has appeared in *Arts & Letters*, *Iowa Review online*, *The Bosphorus Review of Books*, *Fulcrum*, among other venues. He directs Pen & Anvil Press and owns Bonfire Bookshop. He is presently a finalist for the Hearst Poetry Prize.

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."

Susan Carlisle is a poet who has taught writing at MIT in the Comparative Media Studies/Writing program since 2007.

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.

David Thorburn is the founder of Pleasures of Poetry and has taught Literature at MIT since 1976. His first book of poems, *Knots*, was published in 2020.

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 2000 to 2006 she published the online literary magazine, *Facets*. Currently she works as a freelance editor and is also writing a novel.

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.

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.



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