

A4307: Poetry and Storytelling

Reading List

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Optional Readings

We likely will not have time to discuss these poems, but I included them as additional/optional readings that hit on some of the things we will be discussing.

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The Rider

by Naomi Shihab Nye

A boy told me
if he roller-skated fast enough
his loneliness couldn't catch up to him,

the best reason I ever heard
for trying to be a champion.

What I wonder tonight
pedaling hard down King William Street
is if it translates to bicycles.

A victory! To leave your loneliness
panting behind you on some street corner
while you float free into a cloud of sudden azaleas,
pink petals that have never felt loneliness,
no matter how slowly they fell.

<https://www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/poet-laureate/poet-laureate-projects/poetry-180/all-poems/item/poetry-180-165/the-rider/>

French Novel

by Richie Hofmann

You were my second lover.

You had dark eyes and hair,
like a painting of a man.

We lay on our stomachs reading books in your bed.

I e-mailed my professor. I will be absent
from French Novel due to sickness. You put on
some piano music. Even though

it was winter, we had to keep
the window open day and night, the room was so hot, the air so dry
it made our noses bleed.

With boots we trekked through slush for a bottle of red wine
we weren't allowed to buy, our shirts unbuttoned
under our winter coats.

The French language distinguishes
between the second
of two and the second
of many. Of course
we'd have other lovers. Snow fell in our hair.

You were my second lover.

Another way of saying this:

you were the other,
not another.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/04/08/french-novel>

Those Winter Sundays

by Robert Hayden

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

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

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

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46461/those-winter-sundays>

Writing Poems on Zoom with my Grandchildren
by Wendy Mnookin

Lucy prefers cardboard
and crayons, scissors and glue—
she loves decorating a Poetry Box—
but she's not so crazy
about writing. She makes faces
at the screen, adds emojis,
while I explain an ode is a poem
of praise. Pablo Neruda
wrote an ode to tomatoes!
He wrote an ode to bicycles!
OK, OK, she says,
pasting a smile on the screen.
She'll write about Crossing Night—

At Crossing Night

*we stopped cars
so salamanders
could cross the road.*

She taps her pencil.

It was raining.

She taps her pencil.

Now can I draw a picture?

Max yawns into the screen,
insists he's not tired.

Bored, maybe.

Something you love, I say.

Baseball? Minecraft? Star Wars?

He gives a sigh.

*Blue, he says. The old dog
who's going blind and deaf.*

*Sometimes when I lie down
next to her to scratch her ears
she doesn't know it's me.*

Max looks into the corner of the screen
as if the next words might appear there.

Sometimes she growls.

He rocks a little in his chair.

I have to learn to be careful.

Eliza starts in so quickly

I wonder if she's heard me.

You're writing an ode? I say.

She nods. *What are you praising?*

She holds the poem out to me.

Antibodies.

<https://www.rattle.com/writing-poems-on-zoom-with-my-grandchildren-by-wendy-mnookin/>

Rootless

by Jenny Xie

Between Hanoi and Sapa there are clean slabs of rice fields
and no two brick houses in a row.

I mean, no three—

See, counting's hard in half-sleep, and the rain pulls a sheet

over the sugar palms and their untroubled leaves.

Hours ago, I crossed a motorbike with a hog strapped to its seat,

the size of a date pit from a distance.

Can this solitude be rootless, unhooked from the ground?

No matter. The mind resides both inside and out.

It can think itself and think itself into existence.

I sponge off the eyes, no worse for wear.

My frugal mouth spends the only foreign words it owns.

At present, on this sleeper train, there's nowhere to arrive.

Me? I'm just here in my traveler's clothes, trying on each passing town for size.

<https://poets.org/poem/rootless>

Mother of All Balms

by Aria Aber

Morning she comes, mother of all balms.

Only the news reporter says it wrong:
but aren't you strung: little ping

and doesn't memory embalm
your most-hurt city:

those yellow creeks of your rickety holm
where your mater: your salve:

left all her selves behind
so she could surrender to a lifetime

of Septembering: what she members most:

yellow grapes and celeries
and visiting her father's glove

a balm, to be by absence so enclaved:

your mender
a follower, devoted

to what she cannot see. O air miles,
how can it be real?

How uncertain you should
be if it existed, if there are no photos left

of her playing
on her childhood lawn—

burned are all the documents, or eaten—

this ink,
like memory,
an ancient unguent,

enshrining what cannot be held
of what went missing—the dog, her hat of hay,

one brother. She was in prism,

your mother says—and that's how you will write her,

atoning her, just in fluorite a figurine caught

to fracture her stolen years,
 her brother,

all her once-upon-a-chimes.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/150750/mother-of-all-balsams>

Good Bones

by Maggie Smith

Life is short, though I keep this from my children.
Life is short, and I've shortened mine
in a thousand delicious, ill-advised ways,
a thousand deliciously ill-advised ways
I'll keep from my children. The world is at least
fifty percent terrible, and that's a conservative
estimate, though I keep this from my children.
For every bird there is a stone thrown at a bird.
For every loved child, a child broken, bagged,
sunk in a lake. Life is short and the world
is at least half terrible, and for every kind
stranger, there is one who would break you,
though I keep this from my children. I am trying
to sell them the world. Any decent realtor,
walking you through a real shithole, chirps on
about good bones: This place could be beautiful,
right? You could make this place beautiful.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/89897/good-bones>

The Visitant

by Marietta McGregor

We never found out where she came from, our hen. One morning she was just there, in the back yard. That was one of the times when only two of us, Mum and I, lived in that house. One of the times when Dad had gone off, we didn't know where, driven by demons we couldn't imagine. It happened at unpredictable moments. Something would set him off, he'd start drinking, and he'd disappear. We had the house to ourselves. Life settled down a bit. I'd go off to my Seventh Day Adventist Primary school each day and hurry home, glad to have Mum to myself.

And then someone else came to live with us, this plump, glossy Black Orpington, gentle and sweet-natured. She loved a cuddle, and would sit on my knee, crooning soft warm chicken songs for hours while I stroked and settled her feathers and babied her as my special doll. She had a whole repertoire of contented burbles and trills. Sitting with her warm bulk on my knee I felt happy, protected. I wondered who she was, really.

I found out much later that chickens make about 30 different sounds. We'd do well to learn their language. I tried murmuring her talk back to her, which she seemed to like, arching her neck under my hand, fluffing and resettling herself. I don't remember how long she stayed with us, I only remember the pleasure of having her there. One day she wasn't. There were no signs of pain or mayhem—no foxes in Tasmania in those days. We thought she must have moved on to warble to another family.

My father came home later that year. He'd been in a War Repatriation Hospital for some time, and looked ill and tired, the emphysema beginning to cave in his chest. We never saw the chicken again.

a handful of mash
that ache for something
different

<https://www.rattle.com/the-visitant-by-marietta-mcgregor/>

A Story About the Body

by Robert Hass

The young composer, working that summer at an artist's colony, had watched her for a week. She was Japanese, a painter, almost sixty, and he thought he was in love with her. He loved her work, and her work was like the way she moved her body, used her hands, looked at him directly when she mused and considered answers to his questions. One night, walking back from a concert, they came to her door and she turned to him and said, "I think you would like to have me. I would like that too, but I must tell you that I have had a double mastectomy," and when he didn't understand, "I've lost both my breasts." The radiance that he had carried around in his belly and chest cavity-like music-withered quickly, and he made himself look at her when he said, "I'm sorry I don't think I could." He walked back to his own cabin through the pines, and in the morning he found a small blue bowl on the porch outside his door. It looked to be full of rose petals, but he found when he picked it up that the rose petals were on top; the rest of the bowl--she must have swept the corners of her studio--was full of dead bees.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/04/28/AR2005042801331.html>

Traveling Through the Dark

by William Stafford

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.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42775/traveling-through-the-dark>