

Join MIT's Literature faculty & friends for reading and discussion of poetry this January IAP 2021

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI
4	5	6	7	8
Noel Jackson "A Partial History" Ariana Reines	Stephen Tapscott "Ulysses" Alfred, Lord Tennyson " <i>Inferno</i> , Canto 26" Dante; & "The Sail of Ulysses" Wallace Stevens	Mary Fuller "Genesis" Mary Ruefle & "Aubade with Burning City" Ocean Vuong	Elizabeth Doran Selections from "Across the Vapor Gulf" Will Alexander	Diana Henderson "A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day" John Donne & "On my First Son" Ben Jonson
11	12	13	14	15
Marah Gubar & Kieran Setiya "Sci-Fi" Tracy K. Smith	A.J. Odasso "Exeter Book [Anglo Saxon] Riddle 29" Anonymous & "The Same Old Riddle" Katharine Coles	James Buzard "Tithonus" Alfred, Lord Tennyson	Zachary Bos "A Few Lines for Jordin Tootoo" Joan Naviyuk Kane	Sandy Alexandre "landless acknowledgment" Nate Marshall
18	19	20	21	22
<i>MLK Holiday</i>	Anne Hudson "Sad Utensils" & "Dearly" Margaret Atwood	Arthur Bahr "The way Hope builds his House" Emily Dickinson	Peter Shor "Moon Sonnet" & "Unexpected Ferry Ride to Spain" Jacqueline Osherow	David Thorburn "Sleet" & "Zoom" Alan Shapiro

Sessions take place on zoom @ 1:00 PM - 2:00 PM

pleasures of poetry
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A Partial History
by Ariana Reines

Long after I stopped participating
Those images pursued me
I found myself turning from them
Even in the small light before dawn
To meet the face of my own body
Still taut and strong, almost too
Strong a house for so much shame
Not mine alone but also yours
And my brother's, lots of people's,
I know it was irrational, for whom I saw
Myself responsible and to whom
I wished to remain hospitable.
We had all been pursuing our own
Disintegration for so long by then
That by the time the other side
Began to raise a more coherent
Complaint against us we devolved
With such ease and swiftness it seemed
To alarm even our enemies. By then
Many of us had succumbed to quivering
Idiocy while others drew vitality from new
Careers as public scolds. Behind these
Middle-management professors were at pains
To display their faultless views lest they too
Find censure, infamy, unemployment and death
At the hands of an enraged public
Individuals in such pain and torment
And such confusion hardly anyone dared
Ask more of them than that they not shoot
And in fact many of us willed them to shoot
And some of us were the shooters
And shoot we did, and got us square
In the heart and in the face, which anyway
We had been preparing these long years
For bullets and explosions and whatever
Else. A vast unpaid army
Of self-destructors, false comrades, impotent
Brainiacs who wished to appear to be kind
Everything we did for our government
And the corporations that served it we did for free
In exchange for the privilege of watching one
Another break down. Sometimes we were the ones
Doing the breaking. We would comfort one another
Afterward, congratulating each other on the fortitude
It took to display such vulnerability. The demonstration
Of an infirmity followed by a self-justificatory recuperation
Of our own means and our own ends, in short, of ourselves
And our respect for ourselves—this amounted to the dominant
Rhetoric of the age, which some called sharing, which partook

Of modes of oratory and of polemic, of intimate
Journals and of statements from on high issued by public
Figures, whom at one time or another we all mistook ourselves for.
Anyway it wasn't working. None of it was working.
Not our ostentation and not the uses we put our suffering
To, the guilt- and schadenfreude-based attention
We extracted from our *friends* and *followers*, and even the passing
Sensation of true sincerity, of actual truth, quickly emulsified
Into the great and the terrible metastasizing whole.
To the point it began to seem wisest to publish only
Within the confines of our own flesh, but our interiors
Had their biometrics too, and were functions not only
Of stardust, *the universe* as we now were prone to addressing
The godhead, but also of every mean and median of the selfsame
Vicious culture that drove us to retreat into the jail of our own bones
And the cramped confines of our swollen veins and ducts in the first place
Our skin was the same wall they talked about on the news
And our hearts were the bombs whose threat never withdrew
Images could drop from above like the pendulum in "The Pit
And the Pendulum" or killer drones to shatter the face of our lover
Into contemporaneous pasts, futures, celebrities, and other
Lovers all of whom our attention paid equally in confusion
And longing, and a fleeting sense like passing ghosts
Of a barely-remarked-upon catastrophe that was over
Both before and after it was too late. We were ancient
Creatures, built for love and war. Everything said so
And we could not face how abstract it was all becoming
Because it was also all the opposite of abstract, it was
Our flesh, our mother's bloodied forehead
On the floor of Penn Station, and wherever we hid
Our face, *amid a crowd of stars* for example as Yeats
Once put it, and for stars insert celebrities
Or astrology here, your choice, and even when
We closed our eyes, all this was all we looked at
Every day all day. It was all we could see.
We were lost in a language of images.
It was growing difficult to speak. Yet talk
Was everywhere. Some of us still sought
To dominate one another intellectually
Others physically; still others psychically or some
Of all of the above, everything seeming to congeal
Into bad versions of sports by other means
And sports by that time was the only metaphor
Left that could acceptably be applied to anything.
The images gave us no rest yet failed over
And over despite the immensity
Of their realism to describe the world as we really
Knew it, and worse, as it knew us

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/149725/a-partial-history>

Ulysses

by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: All times I have enjoy'd
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone, on shore, and when
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades
For ever and forever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!
As tho' to breathe were life! Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains: but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

 This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle,—
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:
There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'T is not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Henry F Cary's translation of Dante's *Inferno*, *Canto 26* [1812]

Of the old flame forthwith the greater horn
Began to roll, murmuring, as a fire
That labours with the wind, then to and fro
Wagging the top, as a tongue uttering sounds,
Threw out its voice, and spake: "When I escap'd
From Circe, who beyond a circling year
Had held me near Caieta, by her charms,
Ere thus Aeneas yet had nam'd the shore,
Nor fondness for my son, nor reverence
Of my old father, nor return of love,
That should have crown'd Penelope with joy,
Could overcome in me the zeal I had
T' explore the world, and search the ways of life,
Man's evil and his virtue. Forth I sail'd
Into the deep illimitable main,

With but one bark, and the small faithful band
That yet cleav'd to me. As Iberia far,
Far as Morocco either shore I saw,
And the Sardinian and each isle beside
Which round that ocean bathes. Tardy with age
Were I and my companions, when we came
To the strait pass, where Hercules ordain'd
The bound'ries not to be o'erstepp'd by man.
The walls of Seville to my right I left,
On the' other hand already Ceuta past.
"O brothers!" I began, "who to the west
Through perils without number now have reach'd,
To this the short remaining watch, that yet
Our senses have to wake, refuse not proof
Of the unpeopled world, following the track
Of Phoebus. Call to mind from whence we sprang:
Ye were not form'd to live the life of brutes
But virtue to pursue and knowledge high.
With these few words I sharpen'd for the voyage
The mind of my associates, that I then
Could scarcely have withheld them. To the dawn
Our poop we turn'd, and for the witless flight
Made our oars wings, still gaining on the left.
Each star of the' other pole night now beheld,
And ours so low, that from the ocean-floor
It rose not. Five times re-illum'd, as oft
Vanish'd the light from underneath the moon
Since the deep way we enter'd, when from far
Appear'd a mountain dim, loftiest methought
Of all I e'er beheld. Joy seiz'd us straight,
But soon to mourning changed. From the new land
A whirlwind sprung, and at her foremost side
Did strike the vessel. Thrice it whirl'd her round
With all the waves, the fourth time lifted up
The poop, and sank the prow: so fate decreed:
And over us the booming billow clos'd."

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's translation of Dante's *Inferno*, *Canto 26* [1867]

I am more sure; but I surmised already
It might be so, and already wished to ask thee
Who is within that fire, which comes so cleft
At top, it seems uprising from the pyre
Where was Eteocles with his brother placed."

50

He answered me: "Within there are tormented 55
Ulysses and Diomed, and thus together
They unto vengeance run as unto wrath.
And there within their flame do they lament
The ambush of the horse, which made the door
Whence issued forth the Romans' gentle seed; 60
Therein is wept the craft, for which being dead
Deidamia still deplores Achilles,
And pain for the Palladium there is borne."
"If they within those sparks possess the power
To speak," I said, "thee, Master, much I pray, 65
And re-pray, that the prayer be worth a thousand,
That thou make no denial of awaiting
Until the hornéd flame shall hither come;
Thou seest that with desire I lean towards it."
And he to me: "Worthy is thy entreaty 70
Of much applause, and therefore I accept it;
But take heed that thy tongue restrain itself.
Leave me to speak, because I have conceived
That which thou wishest; for they might disdain
Perchance, since they were Greeks, discourse of thine."
When now the flame had come unto that point, 76
Where to my Leader it seemed time and place,
After this fashion did I hear him speak:
"O ye, who are twofold within one fire,
If I deserved of you, while I was living, 80
If I deserved of you or much or little
When in the world I wrote the lofty verses,
Do not move on, but one of you declare
Whither, being lost, he went away to die."
Then of the antique flame the greater horn, 85
Murmuring, began to wave itself about
Even as a flame doth which the wind fatigues.
Thereafterward, the summit to and fro
Moving as if it were the tongue that spake,
It uttered forth a voice, and said: "When I 90
From Circe had departed, who concealed me
More than a year there near unto Gaëta,
Or ever yet Æneas named it so,
Nor fondness for my son, nor reverence
For my old father, nor the due affection 95
Which joyous should have made Penelope,
Could overcome within me the desire
I had to be experienced of the world,
And of the vice and virtue of mankind;
But I put forth on the high open sea 100

With one sole ship, and that small company
By which I never had deserted been.
Both of the shores I saw as far as Spain,
Far as Morocco, and the isle of Sardes,
And the others which that sea bathes round about. 105
I and my company were old and slow
When at that narrow passage we arrived
Where Hercules his landmarks set as signals,
That man no farther onward should adventure.
On the right hand behind me left I Seville, 110
And on the other already had left Ceuta.
'O brothers, who amid a hundred thousand
Perils,' I said, 'have come unto the West,
To this so inconsiderable vigil
Which is remaining of your senses still, 115
Be ye unwilling to deny the knowledge,
Following the sun, of the unpeopled world.
Consider ye the seed from which ye sprang;
Ye were not made to live like unto brutes,
But for pursuit of virtue and of knowledge.' 120
So eager did I render my companions,
With this brief exhortation, for the voyage,
That then I hardly could have held them back.
And having turned our stern unto the morning,
We of the oars made wings for our mad flight, 125
Evermore gaining on the larboard side.
Already all the stars of the other pole
The night beheld, and ours so very low
It did not rise above the ocean floor.
Five times rekindled and as many quenched 130
Had been the splendor underneath the moon,
Since we had entered into the deep pass,
When there appeared to us a mountain, dim
From distance, and it seemed to me so high
As I had never any one beheld. 135
Joyful were we, and soon it turned to weeping;
For out of the new land a whirlwind rose,
And smote upon the fore part of the ship.
Three times it made it whirl with all the waters,
At the fourth time it made the stern uplift, 140
And the prow downward go, as pleased Another,
Until the sea above us closed again.

The Sail of Ulysses [1954]

Wallace Stevens

Under the shape of his sail, Ulysses,
Symbol of the seeker, crossing by night
The giant sea, read his own mind.
He said, "As I know, I am and have
The right to be." He guided his boat
Beneath the middle stars and said:

.
"Here I feel the human loneliness
And that, in space and solitude,
Which knowledge is: the world and fate,
The right within me and about me,
Joined in a triumphant vigor,
Like a direction on which I depend . . .

.
A longer, deeper breath sustains
This eloquence of right, since knowing
And being are one - the right to know
Is equal to the right to be.
The great Omnium descends on me,
Like an absolute out of this eloquence."

.
The sharp sail of Ulysses seemed,
In the breathings of that soliloquy,
Alive with an enigma's fluttering,
And bodying, and being there,
As he moved, straightly, on and on
Through clumped stars dangling all the way

Of Mere Being [1954]

Wallace Stevens

The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze decor,

A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

You know then that it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy.
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57671/of-mere-being>

Wallace Stevens, "Of Mere Being" from *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*. Copyright © 1967, 1969, 1971 by Holly Stevens. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Random House LLC. All rights reserved. Source: *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play* by Wallace Stevens (Alfred A. Knopf, 1971)

Genesis

By Mary Ruefle

Oh, I said, this is going to be.
And it was.
Oh, I said, this will never happen.
But it did.
And a purple fog descended upon the land.
The roots of trees curled up.
The world was divided into two countries.
Every photograph taken in the first was of people.
Every photograph taken in the second showed
none.
All of the girl children were named And.
All of the boy children named Then.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/91686/genesis-5848812fb9385>

Source: Poetry (January 2017)

Aubade with Burning City

By Ocean Vuong

South Vietnam, April 29, 1975: Armed Forces Radio played Irving Berlin's "White Christmas" as a code to begin Operation Frequent Wind, the ultimate evacuation of American civilians and Vietnamese refugees by helicopter during the fall of Saigon.

Milkflower petals on the street
like pieces of a girl's dress.

May your days be merry and bright...

He fills a teacup with champagne, brings it to her lips.

Open, he says.

She opens.

Outside, a soldier spits out

his cigarette as footsteps

fill the square like stones fallen from the sky. *May all*

your Christmases be white as the traffic guard

unstraps his holster.

His hand running the hem

of her white dress.

His black eyes.

Her black hair.

A single candle.

Their shadows: two wicks.

A military truck speeds through the intersection, the sound of children

shrieking inside. A bicycle hurled

through a store window. When the dust rises, a black dog

lies in the road, panting. Its hind legs

crushed into the shine

of a white Christmas.

On the nightstand, a sprig of magnolia expands like a secret heard

for the first time.

The treetops glisten and children listen, the chief of police

facedown in a pool of Coca-Cola.

A palm-sized photo of his father soaking

beside his left ear.

Selections from *Across the Vapor Gulf* by Will Alexander

A Note on the Text

When I first laid eyes on the writings of Cioran, I was smitten by the form. The aphorism seemed cleansed of detritus. Unlike the sequential novel (so appropriately condemned by Breton) the aphorism in Cioran's hands seemed to spontaneously ignite. Poetry, history, philosophy, the essay, medicinally combined appearing on the other side of itself as insight. Reading Cioran opened an unexpected neutral pathway, opening the way for the composition of the compilation at hand. Each entry was instantaneous. The aphorisms welled up and appeared with such astonishing alacrity, that they seemed to compose themselves practically fully formed.

Many of the entries from this writing have remained in suspended animation for the greater part of thirty years. Bringing this work out of my personal archive has been fraught with a kind of painstaking archaeology.

Some of these entries have appeared electronically and in print over time but for the most part have remained occulted. As I went over the whole text again — one of the few times doing so since its initial composition — I discovered some of the entries were attributed to a subsequent book *General Scatterings and Comment*, and contributed to my collaboration with visual artist Byron Baker in our book *The Codex Mirror*. My intent here is to restore all entries to their original grouping so that my initial foray into the form can be properly evinced as a living ensemble.

—Will Alexander

To understand the vertical, the perpendicular, one must have sufficient thrusting of the psyche into the margins of existence. As if whole walls of sound were thrown up into a flaming spider's heavens and dissolved into the essence of light itself. This level of which I speak insists on the non-corporeal, opposed to dates and names, to the anecdotal bondage of rudimentary confessional neurosis.

*

Having passed through various iodine levels of social constriction, I feel philosophically privy as witness to the frozen condition of pain eating away at faces militantly centered around false constrictions, and this false constriction negatively combines via pure statistics and pure corporality. This compound constriction acts as conscious scaffolding constantly invoking the psychic gravity of collection consensus.

*

How does one deal with absolute freedom when constantly shouldered by a society corroded by psychic statistical mercury? It seems one's survival depends on practical numerical superiority. But when one lives in a state of constant high samadhi, how does one cope with opaqueness condoned in the mind of sluggards? Psychic removal, conjuration of hieratic lavender stars rising in radiant cinnamon evenings?

For now, one must maintain a dynamically charged neutrality that allows the deeper ores to transmute, to fully mature, as though one were preparing for a more optimum rhythmic of a coming transmundane interior era.

*

Look into the wall of emptiness and you will see fire, see its origination in nothingness, absolved of dialectical metrics, simultaneous with what I'll call the unmeasured summa of eternity. It symbolizes the body via transmutation across vacuums of consciousness where the transmundane flares up as curious igneous light transmuting the phenomenology of the visage. Appellation is altered, context spontaneously transmutes. Thus one becomes charged with the power of origins, then the fact of miracles, of the elliptical appearance and disappearance of the body, is understood at most to be a secondary power, because one will have merged with the susurrant presence of deathlessness, thereby merging with light flowing from the mirror of the sun door.

*

*

Having reached this plane of the susurrant, does the body, seismic beyond its perceptual immobility, take on the totality of higher light or does it opt for mental thanatopsis, sulking, algebraic, depressed? As for intervallic transition, does the body continue to flow as Grossseteste suggests, naturally, geometrically, with the rays of the Sun darting through one's blood?

Given the fact of creation as it continues to flow through us, the latter condition would seem to be the prevalent one in spite of visible evidence of seemingly invincible entropy; there exists a level of unbridled astral plasticity, alive at the core of the body and the heavens.

*

Walking around an orchard of riddles, a milky dynasty of ants erupts, and the idea coalesces in my mind mixtures of color that emanate from the spectral beyond the constraint of consensus optical limit. I find in such spectral emanation the pictorial principle of the artist Ljuba. Waves of color emanating from the "supra terrestrial mirror of light." Concerned with the palpable reality of "Eternity" the painter himself pronounces "...I want my paintings to be a source of disturbance and irritation for both the eyes and the mind, something that might foster second thoughts about our relationship to the world." But how transmit such thoughts to the consuming tastes of the upwardly mobile, to young academic personalities, to opportunistic bursts of progressive entrepreneurs? Confronting the latter one gets the true experience of the gulf, the organic rupture between planes of existence.

*

A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day

By John Donne

'Tis the year's midnight, and it is the day's,
Lucy's, who scarce seven hours herself unmask;
 The sun is spent, and now his flasks
 Send forth light squibs, no constant rays;
 The world's whole sap is sunk;
The general balm th' hydroptic earth hath drunk,
Whither, as to the bed's feet, life is shrunk,
Dead and interr'd; yet all these seem to laugh,
Compar'd with me, who am their epitaph.

Study me then, you who shall lovers be
At the next world, that is, at the next spring;
 For I am every dead thing,
 In whom Love wrought new alchemy.
 For his art did express
A quintessence even from nothingness,
From dull privations, and lean emptiness;
He ruin'd me, and I am re-begot
Of absence, darkness, death: things which are not.

All others, from all things, draw all that's good,
Life, soul, form, spirit, whence they being have;
 I, by Love's limbec, am the grave
 Of all that's nothing. Oft a flood
 Have we two wept, and so
Drown'd the whole world, us two; oft did we grow
To be two chaoses, when we did show
Care to aught else; and often absences
Withdrew our souls, and made us carcasses.

But I am by her death (which word wrongs her)
Of the first nothing the elixir grown;
 Were I a man, that I were one
 I needs must know; I should prefer,
 If I were any beast,
Some ends, some means; yea plants, yea
stones detest,
And love; all, all some properties invest;
If I an ordinary nothing were,
As shadow, a light and body must be here.

But I am none; nor will my sun renew.
You lovers, for whose sake the lesser sun
 At this time to the Goat is run
 To fetch new lust, and give it you,
 Enjoy your summer all;
Since she enjoys her long night's festival,
Let me prepare towards her, and let me call
This hour her vigil, and her eve, since this
Both the year's, and the day's deep midnight is.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44122/a-nocturnal-upon-st-lucys-day>

On my First Son

By Ben Jonson

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
My sin was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy.
Seven years tho' wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.
O, could I lose all father now! For why
Will man lament the state he should envy?
To have so soon 'scap'd world's and flesh's rage,
And if no other misery, yet age?
Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say, "Here doth lie
Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry."
For whose sake henceforth all his vows be such,
As what he loves may never like too much.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44455/on-my-first-son>

Sci-Fi

By Tracy K. Smith

There will be no edges, but curves.
Clean lines pointing only forward.

History, with its hard spine & dog-eared
Corners, will be replaced with nuance,

Just like the dinosaurs gave way
To mounds and mounds of ice.

Women will still be women, but
The distinction will be empty. Sex,

Having outlived every threat, will gratify
Only the mind, which is where it will exist.

For kicks, we'll dance for ourselves
Before mirrors studded with golden bulbs.

The oldest among us will recognize that glow—
But the word sun will have been re-assigned

To the Standard Uranium-Neutralizing device
Found in households and nursing homes.

And yes, we'll live to be much older, thanks
To popular consensus. Weightless, unhinged,

Eons from even our own moon, we'll drift
In the haze of space, which will be, once

And for all, scrutable and safe.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/55516/sci-fi>

Tracy K. Smith, "Sci-Fi" from *Life on Mars*. Copyright © 2011 by Tracy K. Smith. Reprinted by permission of Graywolf Press. www.graywolfpress.org
Source: *Life on Mars* (Graywolf Press, 2011)

Exeter Book [Anglo-Saxon] Riddle 29

Anonymous, 10th Century

I espied a wondrous creature,
sporting his spoils between two horns,
illuminated cup of air, cleverly readied,
plunder to his home from that war-march—
He wished to build a structure in that city,
setting it skillfully, if he could do so.
Then came another amazing thing over the roofing cliffs,
she is well-known by all earth-dwellers—
then she recovered all that booty,
and hurried him homewards,
the wretch against his will, departing from there into the west
the unfolding of their feuds, driven forwards.
Dust scattered to heaven. Dew fell upon the earth.
Night passed on its way home. No man afterwards
knew the course-way of those creatures.

The Same Old Riddle

Katharine Coles, 2014

We keep trying to kill it, split it, hack
It to itsy bits. We suspend it
On the wall where we can see it
Passing. We hang it around our necks
Or wrists, laying pulse next to
Pulse as if each might like
Company. Ba-bump, etc. Rising
And setting has everything to do
With it. In the afternoon we feel so
Lazy we try not to close our eyes
And jerk awake, wondering what has
Passed, and where did we go
For that suspended hour,
And could anything keep us here.

Tithonus

By Alfred, Lord Tennyson

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.
Me only cruel immortality
Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms,
Here at the quiet limit of the world,
A white-hair'd shadow roaming like a dream
The ever-silent spaces of the East,
Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn.

Alas! for this gray shadow, once a man—
So glorious in his beauty and thy choice,
Who madest him thy chosen, that he seem'd
To his great heart none other than a God!
I ask'd thee, 'Give me immortality.'
Then didst thou grant mine asking with a smile,
Like wealthy men, who care not how they give.
But thy strong Hours indignant work'd their wills,
And beat me down and marr'd and wasted me,
And tho' they could not end me, left me maim'd
To dwell in presence of immortal youth,
Immortal age beside immortal youth,
And all I was, in ashes. Can thy love,
Thy beauty, make amends, tho' even now,
Close over us, the silver star, thy guide,
Shines in those tremulous eyes that fill with tears
To hear me? Let me go: take back thy gift:
Why should a man desire in any way
To vary from the kindly race of men
Or pass beyond the goal of ordinance
Where all should pause, as is most meet for all?

A soft air fans the cloud apart; there comes
A glimpse of that dark world where I was born.
Once more the old mysterious glimmer steals
From thy pure brows, and from thy shoulders pure,
And bosom beating with a heart renew'd.
Thy cheek begins to redden thro' the gloom,
Thy sweet eyes brighten slowly close to mine,
Ere yet they blind the stars, and the wild team
Which love thee, yearning for thy yoke, arise,
And shake the darkness from their loosen'd manes,
And beat the twilight into flakes of fire.

Lo! ever thus thou growest beautiful
In silence, then before thine answer given
Departest, and thy tears are on my cheek.

Why wilt thou ever scare me with thy tears,
And make me tremble lest a saying learnt,
In days far-off, on that dark earth, be true?
'The Gods themselves cannot recall their gifts.'

Ay me! ay me! with what another heart
In days far-off, and with what other eyes
I used to watch—if I be he that watch'd—
The lucid outline forming round thee; saw
The dim curls kindle into sunny rings;
Changed with thy mystic change, and felt my blood
Glow with the glow that slowly crimson'd all
Thy presence and thy portals, while I lay,
Mouth, forehead, eyelids, growing dewy-warm
With kisses balmier than half-opening buds
Of April, and could hear the lips that kiss'd
Whispering I knew not what of wild and sweet,
Like that strange song I heard Apollo sing,
While Ilion like a mist rose into towers.

Yet hold me not for ever in thine East:
How can my nature longer mix with thine?
Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, cold
Are all thy lights, and cold my wrinkled feet
Upon thy glimmering thresholds, when the steam
Floats up from those dim fields about the homes
Of happy men that have the power to die,
And grassy barrows of the happier dead.
Release me, and restore me to the ground;
Thou seest all things, thou wilt see my grave:
Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn;
I earth in earth forget these empty courts,
And thee returning on thy silver wheels.

[https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45389/
tithonus](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45389/tithonus)

A Few Lines for Jordin Tootoo

Joan Naviyuk Kane

“When I was drinking, I was selfish because of my addiction to popularity and being out in the public eye. I used that as a mechanism to create commotion with everyone. And if I got into trouble away from the rink, I made it up on the ice.” —Jordin Tootoo

What do you see out there on the ice?
Perhaps something dark, far off,
louder than the bellowing headlines
in the otherwise technical silence.

In a lecture hall, once, in Barrow,
I listened while the ice of the Beaufort Sea
split into blue leads three months early.
What I heard was: if only we learned

the old ways, we'd learn where we fit
in life, how critical we are to each other.
That a hunt done right results in little
suffering or loss. That the migrations

of fowl, fish and mammals will continue.
What I wanted to hear was a reassurance.
Some kind of premonition or promise:
when words come back, so do the other things

*or words come back when you have a chance
to learn them.* Instead, what I hold within
is the felt absence of place. A land of great
failure, abundance: it goes on without us.

Another time up north, maybe by mistake,
I was invited to watch the men butchering
but I didn't want to see where it was
they found the heart, if they ever did.

Like you, in front of me is all I have.
In the distance, mostly, another world.

From *Milk Black Carbon, 2017*

Nate Marshall, *Finna* (2020)

landless acknowledgment

before we get started we would like to acknowledge that we live on some unceded bones. sometimes me & mine imagine ancestral homes. all i got so far is Montgomery, Alabama. maybe a boat. maybe a plot of land somewhere so far from the south sides i've claimed that i would get lost on the way. i admit sometimes my homies talk about their families immigrating & i get jealous. we lost the land we were custodians over before i was a twinkle in the eye of a twinkle in the eye of a twinkle in the eye. closest i got to a homeland is my mama's caucasian pitch on the phone calling the police. closest i got to a homeland is not never calling the police. closest i got to a homeland is my daddy's laugh in a spades game. closest i got to a homeland is my lover's tongue talking or otherwise. closest i got to a homeland is the funk under a DJ's needle & my hand full of a dance partner. not to be dark but i am. not to be dark but the planet is on fire. not to be dark but they moving capitals because the water is coming up. not to be dark but our bones are in that water too. maybe that's my capital? once the polar capitals melt & there's a whole lot less land for folks to buy & sell & steal maybe everybody will feel a little more dark. will feel a little more homelandless like we do. why you think i call my compatriots homies? maybe ain't no home except for how your beloveds cuss or pray or pronounce.

From Dearly by Margaret Atwood (2020)

SAD UTENSILS

The pen reft of the hand,
the knife ditto.
The cello reft of the bow.
The word reft of the speaker
and vice versa.

The word *reft*:
who says that any more?
Yet it was honed, like all words,
in the mouths of hundreds, of thousands,
rolled like a soundstone over and over,
sharpened by the now dead
until it reached this form:

reft

reft

a cloth ripped asunder.

Asunder—minor sunset,
peach clouds faded to slate:
another loss.

And what to do with these binoculars,
sixty years old or more,
reft of their war?

DEARLY

It's an old word, fading now.
Dearly did I wish.
Dearly did I long for.
I loved him dearly.

I make my way along the sidewalk
mindfully, because of my wrecked knees
about which I give less of a shit
than you may imagine
since there are other things, more important—
wait for it, you'll see—

bearing half a coffee
in a paper cup with—
dearly do I regret it—
a plastic lid—
trying to remember what words once meant.

Dearly.
How was it used?
Dearly beloved.
Dearly beloved, we are gathered.
Dearly beloved, we are gathered here
in this forgotten photo album
I came across recently.

Fading now,
the sepias, the black and whites, the colour prints,
everyone so much younger.
The Polaroids.

What is a Polaroid? asks the newborn.
Newborn a decade ago.

How to explain?
You took the picture and then it came out the top.
The top of what?
It's that baffled look I see a lot.
So hard to describe
the smallest details of how—
all these dearly gathered together—
of how we used to live.
We wrapped up garbage
in newspaper tied with string.
What is newspaper?
You see what I mean.

String though, we still have string.
It links things together.
A string of pearls.
That's what they would say.
How to keep track of the days?
Each one shining, each one alone,
each one then gone.
I've kept some of them in a drawer on paper,
those days, fading now.
Beads can be used for counting.
As in rosaries.
But I don't like stones around my neck.

Along this street there are many flowers,
fading now because it is August
and dusty, and heading into fall.
Soon the chrysanthemums will bloom,

flowers of the dead, in France.
Don't think this is morbid.
It's just reality.

So hard to describe the smallest details of flower
This is a stamen, nothing to do with men.
This is a pistil, nothing to do with guns.
It's the smallest details that foil translators
and myself too, trying to describe.
See what I mean.
You can wander away. You can get lost.
Words can do that.

Dearly beloved, gathered here together
in this closed drawer,
fading now, I miss you.
I miss the missing, those who left earlier.
I miss even those who are still here.
I miss you all dearly.
Dearly do I sorrow for you.

Sorrow: that's another word
you don't hear much any more.
I sorrow dearly.

The way Hope builds his House
By Emily Dickinson

The way Hope builds his House
It is not with a sill –
Nor Rafter – has that Edifice
But only Pinnacle –

Abode in as supreme
This superficialities
As if it were of Ledges smit
Or mortised with the Laws –

450
the way
Hope builds his
House
It is not with a sill -
nor Rafter - has that
Edificer mans. knows
But only Pinnacle -
Abode in as supreme
this superficial
As if it were of
Ledges smit with the
Or morticed with the
And
Laws -

The way Hope builds his House

Poem, ca. 1879

Amherst College Archives & Special Collections

<https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/emily-dickinson/15>

Moon Sonnet

by Elizabeth Osherow

Hey Moon. Remember me? It's been a while
since I last came around for conversation.
My stoop an improvised confessional,
I'd talk and talk and talk and you would listen.
It was thrilling while it lasted. I was young.
Now I've come looking for some help.
The truth is, Moon, a lot's gone wrong;
I was hoping our paths could overlap,
that you might tell me where you find the patience
to get yourself from empty back to full.
(I've watched you, fingernail by fingernail;
eventually you always hit your stride.)
Do you think, if I made a vow of silence,
you'd let me come along once for the ride?

Unexpected Ferry Ride to Spain

by Jacqueline Osherow

Iceland's Volcano Disrupts Air Travel

—headline, *New York Times*, April 16, 2010

Volcanic Ash Will Cause Spectacular Sunsets in Britain

—headline, *Daily Mail*, April 16, 2010

The moon's
a pale sickle
blade atop
a single star
balanced
on a stack
of colored
rectangles
(purple over
orange over
crimson over
gold) as if
God were
a child piling
building blocks

on the narrow
strip of water
that keeps
Portsmouth
from the Isle
of Wight,
His tottery
construction
for all His
storied will
any second now
about to topple

and I only see
this because
the Earth's in
flux, spewing
its freshest
bits of rock
and glass
from a newly
temperamental
aperture,

wreaking
havoc with
our slim
pretense
of mastery,
our nonsense
about having
tamed the sky

when all along
we've been at
its mercy, as
I—for these
two nights
on the ferry
to Spain—am
at the mercy
of this fickle sea.

I'll awaken
on the Bay
of Biscay
to scour
the miserly
horizon
for whales and

dolphins who
will not show
themselves

as if to remind
me yet again
that above all
else the Earth
is mystery,
that our
movement
through it
must be slow—

a pilgrimage,
however
unconscious,
toward a
rumored
unremitting
majesty that
might at any
time reveal
its face:

a spout, a fluke,
a leap midair, a
moon over a star
over the show
of color put
on by the un-
seen overflow
of Earth's refusal
to contain itself,
that skyward
yearning we
call volcano.

What was it like before the doctor got there?

Till then, we were in the back seat of the warm dark bubble of the old Buick. We were where we'd never not been, no matter where we were.

And when the doctor got there?

Everything outside was in a rage of wind and sleet, we were children, brothers, safe in the back seat, for once not fighting, just listening, watching the storm.

Weren't you afraid that something bad might happen?

Our father held the wheel with just two fingers even though the car skidded and fishtailed and the chains clanged raggedly over ice and asphalt.

Weren't you afraid at all?

Dad sang for someone to fly him to the moon, to let him play among the stars, while Mom held up the lighter to another Marlboro.

But when the doctor started speaking. . .

The tip of the Marlboro was a bright red star. Her lips pursed and she released a ring of Saturn, which dissolved as we caught at it, as my dad sang Mars.

When you realized what the doctor was saying. . .

They were closer to the storm in the front seat. The high beams, weak as steam against the walled swirling, only illuminated what we couldn't see.

When he described it, the tumor in the brain and what it meant. . .

See, we were children. Then we weren't. Or my brother wasn't. He was driving now, he gripped the steering wheel with both hands and stared hard at the panicked wipers.

What did you feel?

Just sleet, the slick road, the car going way too fast, no brother beside me in the back seat, no singing father, no mother, no ring of Saturn to catch at as it floats.

ZOOM

Alan Shapiro

In the hospice where you died, a lot of money
was spent to make the place conform to someone's
algorithm of home – shag carpeted lobby,
wood paneled elevator, particle board furniture
with shrink-wrap thin mahogany veneer, faux marble
linoleum tiles. There were paintings of chickens
in a barnyard on the walls of every room.
The homier they tried to make it, the more clinical it felt.
You of course were out of it by then, the ersatz homeyness
was for the living, not the almost dead.
And in the rare occasions when you woke
and tried to talk, I could only hear enough
of what you murmured to know how far away
you were from anything I knew, alone
in a remoteness that today seems almost
familiar, though no less remote, like hospice

you might say, by another name: my face
isolated, in a square stacked with the squares
of friends and family inside the screen sized square
our separate boxes make together, boxes
talking box to box as in a bar, or restaurant
face to face, as in a pre-posthumous world
of host and gameshow faces mummified
to paste, to pasty smiles of dead celebrities
still quipping, "How many balls on a pool table?"
"Depends on how many men are playing pool!"
I think I hear you in our edgy laughter,
as if we'd won a one-day ticket to
a last resort, a Club Meds of an island
rendezvous, a hidden, herded hoard
of "I" germs doing anything to keep
alive and still be seen and heard. Funny
how signing off, no matter who I wave to,
it's you I always see wave back at me,
the two of us together once again
in a lost dimension, as if we're both on ship
and shore, stranded departing, waving till
the square goes mute and blackens and the room
with just myself inside it feels so unreal
I'm virtually nowhere, where you are.

From *The Threepenny Review* (Winter 2021) p. 31.

MODERATORS

Noel Jackson teaches literature at MIT and is the current organizer of Pleasures of Poetry.

Stephen Tapscott is a Professor of Literature at MIT.

Mary Fuller came to MIT in 1989. She studies the history of exploration, and teaches introductory and seminar classes in poetry.

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 currently the book buyer and events Coordinator at the historic Grolier Poetry Book Shop.

Diana Henderson is a Professor of Literature who primarily works with Shakespeare across media and as a dramaturg, but loves poems, novels and plays from a wide array of times and places.

Marah Gubar & Kieran Setiya are MIT Faculty members, Marah in the Literature Section and Kieran in the Department of Linguistics & Philosophy.

A.J. Odasso has been widely published in fandom and non-fandom contexts since 2005. Their debut poetry collection, *Lost Books*, was a finalist for the 2010/2011 People's Book Prize. Their second collection, *The Dishonesty of Dreams*, followed in 2014. Their third collection, *The Sting of It*, was shortlisted for the 2017 Sexton Prize and was published in 2019 by Tolsun Books—and won Best LGBT Book at the 2019 New Mexico/Arizona Book Awards. They serve as Senior Poetry Editor at *Strange Horizons*.

James Buzard is Professor of Literature at MIT. He works mainly in the Victorian and Modernist periods.

Zachary Bos directs the publishing projects of *Pen & Anvil Press*, and is an alumnus of the poetry workshops of the graduate programs creative writing at Boston University. He plans to open the doors of Bonfire Bookshop in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, in the first half of 2021.

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

Anne Hudson has participated in Pleasures of Poetry since 2002, when she attended a session in the wake of 9/11 on WH Auden's "September 1, 1939." 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*.

Arthur Bahr teaches medieval literature at MIT's Literature Section and is interested in the materiality of poetry.

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."

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

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