For the Sleepwalkers
Edward Hirsch  
(b. 1950)

Tonight I want to say something wonderful for the sleepwalkers who have so much faith in their legs, so much faith in the invisible arrow carved into the carpet, the worn path that leads to the stairs instead of the window, the gaping doorway instead of the seamless mirror.

I love the way that sleepwalkers are willing to step out of their bodies into the night, to raise their arms and welcome the darkness, palming the blank spaces, touching everything. Always they return home safely, like blind men who know it is morning by feeling shadows.

And always they wake up as themselves again. That’s why I want to say something astonishing like: Our hearts are leaving our bodies.

Our hearts are thirsty black handkerchiefs flying through the trees at night, soaking up the darkest beams of moonlight, the music of owls, the motion of wind-torn branches. And now our hearts are thick black fists flying back to the glove of our chests.

We have to learn to trust our hearts like that. We have to learn the desperate faith of sleepwalkers who rise out of their calm beds and walk through the skin of another life. We have to drink the stupefying cup of darkness and wake up to ourselves, nourished and surprised.

A Work of Artifice
Marge Piercy  
(b. 1936)

The bonsai tree in the attractive pot could have grown eighty feet tall on the side of a mountain till split by lightning. But a gardener carefully pruned it. It is nine inches high. Every day as he whittles back the branches the gardener croons, It is your nature to be small and cozy, domestic and weak; how lucky, little tree, to have a pot to grow in. With living creatures one must begin very early to dwarf their growth: the bound feet, the crippled brain, the hair in curlers the hands you love to touch.

The Possibility
James Fenton  
(b. 1949)

The lizard on the wall, engrossed, The sudden silence from the wood Are telling me that I have lost The possibility of good.

I know this flower is beautiful And yesterday it seemed to be. It opened like a crimson hand. It was not beautiful to me.

I know that work is beautiful. It is a boon. It is a good. Unless my working were a way Of squandering my solitude.

And solitude was beautiful When I was sure that I was strong. I thought it was a medium In which to grow, but I was wrong.

The jays are swearing in the wood. The lizard moves with ugly speed. The flower closes like a fist. The possibility recedes.

The Coming of Wisdom with Time
William Butler Yeats  
(1865 – 1939)

though leaves are many, the root is one; Through all the lying days of my youth I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun; Now I may wither into the truth.


**Unveiling**

Linda Pastan
(b. 1932)

In the cemetery
a mile away
from where we used to live
my aunts and mother,
my father and uncles lie
in two long rows almost the way
they used to sit around
the long planked table
at family dinners.
And walking beside
the graves today, down
one straight path
and up the next,
I don’t feel sad
for them, just left out a bit
as if they kept
from me the kind
of grown-up secret
they used to share
back then, something
I’m not quite ready yet
to learn.

**Even If You Weren’t My Father**

Camillo Sbarbaro
(1888-1967)

Father, even if you weren’t my father,
were you an utter stranger,
for your own self I’d love you.
Remembering how you saw, one winter morning,
the first violet on the wall across the way,
and with what joy you shared the revelation;
then, hoisting the ladder to your shoulder,
out you went and propped it to the wall.
We, your children, stood watching at the window.

And I remember how, another time,
you chased my little sister through the house
(pigheadedly, she’d done I know not what).
But when she, run to earth, shrieked out in fear,
your heart misgave you,
for you saw yourself hunt down your helpless child.
Relenting then, you took her in your arms
in all her terror: caressing her, enclosed in your
embrace as in some shelter from the brute
who’d been, one moment since, yourself.

Father, even were you not my father,
were you some utter stranger,
for your innocence, your artless tender heart,
I would love above all other men
so love you.

**Toads**

Philip Larkin
(1922-1985)

Why should I let the toad work
Squat on my life?
Can’t I use my wit as a pitchfork
And drive the brute off?

Six days of the week it soils
With its sickening poison—
Just for paying a few bills!
That’s out of proportion.

Lots of folk live on their wits:
Lecturers, lispers,
Losels, loblolly-men, louts—
They don’t end as paupers;
Lots of folk live up lanes
With fires in a bucket,
Eat windfalls and thinned sardines—
Them seem to like it.

Their nippers have got bare feet,
Their unspeakable wives
Are skinny as whippets — and yet
No one actually starves.

Ah, were I courageous enough
To shout Stuff your pension!
But I know, all too well, that’s the stuff
That dreams are made on:

For something sufficiently toad-like
Squats in me, too;
Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,
And cold as snow,

And will never allow me to blarney
My way to getting
The fame and the girl and the money
All at one sitting.

I don’t say, one bodies the other,
One’s spiritual truth;
But I do say it’s hard to lose either,
When you have both.
The Writer

Richard Wilbur
(b. 1921)

In her room at the prow of the house
Where light breaks, and the windows are tossed with linden
My daughter is writing a story.

I pause in the stairwell, hearing
From her shut door a commotion of typewriter-keys
Like a chain hauled over a gunwale.

Young as she is, the stuff
Of her life is a great cargo, and some of it heavy:
I wish her a lucky passage.

But now it is she who pauses,
As if to reject my thought and its easy figure.
A stillness greatens, in which
The whole house seems to be thinking
And then she is at it again with a bunched clamor
Of strokes, and again is silent.

I remember the dazed starling
Which was trapped in that very room, two years ago
How we stole in, lifted a sash
And retreated, not to affright it;
And how for a helpless hour, through the crack of the door,
We watched the sleek, wild, dark
And iridescent creature
Batter against the brilliance, drop like a glove
To the hard floor, or the desk-top,

And wait then, humped and bloody,
For the wits to try it again; and how our spirits
Rose when, suddenly sure,

It lifted off from a chair-back,
Beating a smooth course for the right window
And clearing the sill of the world.

It is always a matter, my darling,
Of life or death, as I had forgotten. I wish
What I wished you before, but harder.

The Gift

Li-Young Lee
(b. 1957)

To pull the metal splinter from my palm
my father recited a story in a low voice.
I watched his lovely face and not the blade.
Before the story ended he removed
the iron sliver I thought I’d die from.

I can’t remember the tale
but hear his voice still, a well
Acquainted with the Night
Robert Frost
(1874-1963)

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain – and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-by;
And further still at an unearthly height
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

Defining the Grateful Gesture
Yvonne Sapia
(b. 1946)

According to our mother,
when she was a child
what was placed before her
for dinner was not a feast,
but she would eat it
to gain back the strength
taken from her by long hot days
of working in her mother’s house
and helping her father make
candy in the family kitchen.
No idle passenger
traveling through life was she.

And that’s why she resolved
to tell stories about
the appreciation for satisfied hunger.
When we would sit down
for our evening meal
of arroz con pollo
or frijoles negros con platanos
she would expect us
to be reverent to the sources
of our undeserved nourishment,
and to strike a thankful pose
before each lift of the fork
or swirl of the spoon.

For the dishes she prepared we were ungrateful,
she would say, and repeat
her archetypal tale about the Perez
brothers from her childhood town of Ponce,
who looked like ripe mangoes,
their cheeks rosed despite poverty.

My mother would then tell us about the day
she saw Mrs. Perez searching
the neighborhood garbage,
picking out with a missionary’s care
the edible potato peels, the plantain skins
the shafts of old celery to take
home to her muchachos
who required more food
than she could afford.

Although my brothers and I never
quite mastered the ritual
of obedience our mother craved,
and as supplicants failed
to feed her with our worthiness,
we’d sit like solemn loaves of bread,
sighing over the white plates
with a sense of realization, or relief,
guilty about possessing appetite.

Human Condition
Thom Gunn (b. 1929)

Now it is fog. I walk
Contained within my coat;
No castle more cut off
By reason of its moat:
Only the sentry’s cough,
The mercenaries’ talk.

The street lamps, visible,
Drop no light on the ground,
But press beams painfully
In a yard of fog around.
I am condemned to be
An individual.

In the established border
There balances a mere
Pinpoint of consciousness.
I stay, or start from, here:
No fog makes more or less
The neighbouring disorder.

Particular, I must
Find out the limitation
Of mind and universe,
To pick thought and sensation
And turn to my own use
Disordered hate or lust.

I seek, to break, my span.
I am my one touchstone.
This is a test more hard
Than any ever known.
And thus I keep my guard
On that which makes me man.

Much is unknowable.
No problem shall be faced
Until the problem is;
I, born to fog, to waste,
Walk through hypothesis,
An individual.
On Reading Poems to a Senior Class
At South High
D. C. Berry
(b. 1942)

Before
I opened my mouth
I noticed them sitting there
as orderly as frozen fish
in a package.

Slowly water began to fill the room
though I did not notice it
till it reached
my ears

and then I heard the sounds
of fish in an aquarium
and I knew that though I had
tried to drown them
with my words
that they had only opened up
like gills for them
and let me in.

Together we swam around the room
like thirty tails whacking words
till the bell rang
puncturing
a hole in the door

where we all leaked out

They went to another class
I suppose and I home

where Queen Elizabeth
my cat met me
and licked my fins
till they were hands again.

The Snow Man
Wallace Stevens
(1879 – 1955)

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold along time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Aubade
Philip Larkin
(1922 – 1985)

I work all day, and get half drunk at night.
Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
Till then I see what’s really always there:
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
Making all thought impossible but how
And where and when I shall myself die.
Arid interrogation: yet the dread
Of dying, and being dead,
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse
--The good not done, the love not given, time
Torn off unused -- nor wretchedly because
An only life can take so long to climb
clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;
But at the total emptiness for ever,
the sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon: nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

This is a special way of being afraid
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,
The vast moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die,
And specious stuff that says No rational being
Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing
That this is what we fear – no sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anesthetic from which none come round

And so it stays just on the edge of vision,
A small unfocused blur, a sanding chill
That slows each impulse down to indecision.
Most things may never happen: this one will,
And realization of it rages out
In furnace-fear when we are caught without
People or drink. Courage is no good:
It means not scaring others. Being brave
Lets no one off the grave.
Death is no different whined at than withstood.

Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.
For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.
Ethics

Linda Pastan
(b. 1932)

In ethics class so many years ago our teacher asked this question every fall: if there were a fire in a museum which would you save, a Rembrandt painting or an old woman who hadn’t many years left anyhow? Restless on hard chairs caring little for pictures or old age we’d opt one year for life, the next for art and always half-heartedly. Sometimes the woman borrowed my grandmother’s face leaving her usual kitchen to wander some drafty, half-imagined museum. One year, feeling clever, I replied why not let the woman decide herself? Linda, the teacher would report, eschews the burden of responsibility. This fall in a real museum I stand before a real Rembrandt, old woman, or nearly so, myself. The colors within this frame are darker than autumn darker even than winter – the browns of earth, though earth’s most radiant elements burn through the canvas. I know now that woman and painting and season are almost one and all beyond saving by children.

Curiosity

Alastair Reid

may have killed the cat; more likely the cat was just unlucky, or else curious to see what death was like, having no cause to go on licking paws, or fathering litter on litter of kittens, predictably.

Nevertheless, to be curious is dangerous enough. To distrust what is always said, what seems, to ask odd questions, interfere in dreams, leave home, smell rats, have hunches do not endear cats to those doggy circles where well-smelt baskets, suitable wives, good lunches are the order of things, and where prevails much wagging of incurious heads and tails.

Face it. Curiosity will not cause us to die—only lack of it will. Never to want to see the other side of the hill or that improbable country where living is an idyll (although a probable hell) would kill us all. Only the curious have, if they live, a tale worth telling at all.

Dogs say cats love too much, are irresponsible, are changeable, marry too many wives, desert their children, chill all dinner tables with tales of their nine lives. Well, they are lucky. Let them be nine-lived and contradictory, curious enough to change, prepared to pay the cat price, which is to die and die again and again, each time with no less pain. A cat minority of one is all that can be counted on to tell the truth. And what cats have to tell on each return from hell is this: that dying is what the living do, that dying is what the loving do, and that dead dogs are those who do not know that dying is what, to live, each has to do.

Vergissmeinnicht

Keith Douglas
(1920-1944)

Three weeks gone and the combatants gone, returning over the nightmare ground we found the place again, and found the soldier sprawling in the sun.

The frowning barrel of his gun overshadowing. As we came on that day, he hit my tank with one like the entry of a demon.

Look. Here in the gunpit spoil the dishonored picture of his girl who has put: Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht in a copybook gothic script.

We see him almost with content abased, and seeming to have paid and mocked at by his own equipment that’s hard and good when he’s decayed.

But she would weep to see to-day how on his skin the swart flies move; the dust upon the paper eye and the burst stomach like a cave.

For here the lover and killer are mingled who had one body and one heart. And death who had the soldier singled has done the lover mortal hurt.
A Study of Reading Habits
Philip Larkin
(1919-1985)

When getting my nose in a book
Cured most things short of school,
It was worth ruining my eyes
To know I could still keep cool,
And deal out the old right hook
To dirty dogs twice my size.

Later, with inch-thick specs,
Evil was just my lark:
Me and my cloak and fangs
Had ripping times in the dark
The women I clubbed with sex!
I broke them up like meringues.

Don’t read much now: the dude
Who lets the girl down before
The hero arrives, the chap
Who’s yellow and keeps the store,
Seem far too familiar. Get stewed:
Books are a load of crap.

A Noiseless Patient Spider
Walt Whitman
(1819-1892)

A noiseless patient spider,
I marked where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Marked how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launched forth filament, filament, filament, filament,
out of itself
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the
spheres to connect to
Till the bridge you will need be formed, till the ductile
anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O
my soul.

Those winter Sundays
Robert Hayden
(1913 – 1980)

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 coal 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?

I thank you god
e e cummings
(1894-1962)

i thank YOU God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun’s birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)
The Secret

Denise Levertov  
(b. 1923)

Two girls discover  
the secret of life  
in a sudden line of  
poetry.

I who don’t know the  
secret wrote  
the line. They  
told me

(through a third person)  
they had found it  
but not what it was,  
not even

what line it was. No doubt  
by now, more than a week  
later, they have forgotten  
the secret,

the line, the name of  
the poem. I love them  
for finding what  
I can’t find,

and for loving me  
for the line I wrote,  
and for forgetting it  
so that

a thousand times, till death  
finds them, they may  
discover it again, in other  
lines,

in other  
happenings. And for  
wanting to know it,  
for

assuming there is  
such a secret, yes,  
for that  
most of all.

Bedtime Story

George MacBeth  
(b. 1932)

Long long ago when the world was a wild place  
Planted with bushes and peopled by ages, our  
Mission Brigade was at work in the jungle.  
Hard by the Congo

Once, when a foraging detail was active  
Scouting for green-fly, it came on a grey man, the  
Last living man, in the branch of a baobab  
Stalking a monkey.

Earlier men had disposed of, for pleasure,  
Creatures whose names we scarcely remember—  
Zebra, rhinoceros, elephants, wart-hog,  
Lion, rats, deer, But

After the wars had extinguished the cities  
Only the wild ones were left, half-naked  
Near the equator: and here was the last one,  
Starved for a monkey.

By then the Mission Brigade had encountered  
Hundreds of such men: and their procedure,  
History tells us, was only to feed them:  
Find them and feed them;

Those were the orders. And this was the last one.  
Nobody knew that he was, but he was. Mud  
Caked on his flat grey flanks. He was crouched, half-  
Armed with a shaved spear

Glinting beneath broad leaves. When their jaws cut  
Swathes through the bark and he saw fine teeth shine,  
Round eyes roll round and forked arms waver  
Huge as the rough trunks

Over his head, he was frightened. Our workers  
Marched through the Congo before he was born, but  
This was the first time perhaps that he’d see one.  
Staring in hot still

Silence, he crouched there: then jumped. With a long swing  
Down from his branch, he had angled his spear too  
Quickly, before they could hold him, and hurled it  
Hard at the soldier

Leading the detail. How could he know Queen’s  
Orders were only to help him? The soldier  
Winced when the tipped spear pricked him. Unsheathing his  
Sting was reflex.

Later the Queen was informed. There were no more  
Men. An impetuous soldier had killed off,  
Purely by chance, the penultimate primate.  
When she was certain,

Squadrons of workers were fanned through the Congo  
Detailed to bring back the man’s picked bones to be  
Sealed in the archives in amber. I’m quite sure  
Nobody found them

After the most industrious search, though.  
Where had the bones gone? Over the earth, dear,  
Ground by the teeth of the termites, blown by the  
Wind, like the dodo’s.