

## Poems for Poetry Responses – Second Quarter

### *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 sleep-  
walkers 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.

### *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.

### *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.

## *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

of dark water, a prayer.  
And I recall his hands  
two measures of tenderness  
he laid against my face,  
the flames of discipline  
he raised above my head.

Had you entered that afternoon  
you would have thought you saw a man  
planting something in a boy's palm,  
a silver tear, a tiny flame.  
Had you followed that boy  
you would have arrived here,  
where I bend over my wife's right hand.

Look how I shave her thumbnail down  
so carefully she feels no pain.  
Watch as I lift the splinter out.  
I was seven when my father  
took my hand like this,  
and I did not hold that shard  
between my fingers and think,  
*Metal that will bury me,*  
christen it Little Assassin,  
Ore Going Deep for My Heart.  
And I did not lift up my wound and cry,  
*Death visited here!*  
I did what a child does  
when he's given something to keep.  
I kissed my father.

## *Disillusionment at Ten O'Clock*

Wallace Stevens  
(1879 – 1955)

The houses are haunted  
By white night-gowns.  
None are green.  
Or purple with green rings,  
Or green with yellow rings,  
Or yellow with blue rings,  
None of them are strange  
With socks of lace  
And beaded ceintures.  
People are not going  
To dream of baboons and periwinkles.  
Only, here and there, an old sailor,  
Drunk and asleep in his boots,  
Catches tigers  
In red weather.

## *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 girlhood 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.  
It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,  
Have always known, know that we can't escape,  
Yet can't accept. One side will have to go.  
Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring  
In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring  
Intricate rented world begins to rouse.  
The sky is white as clay, with no sun.  
Work has to be done.  
Postmen like doctors go from house to house.

## *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,  
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  
Wincing 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.