

Poems for Poetry Responses – Third Quarter

Reading Myself

Robert Lowell

[Note: Parnassus is a mountain in Greece and, according to Greek myth, the seat of music and poetry.]

Like thousands, I took pride and more than just,
struck matches that brought my blood to a boil;
I memorized the tricks to set the river on fire—
Somehow never wrote something to go back to.
Can I suppose I am finished with wax flowers
And have earned my grass on the minor slopes of
Parnassus. . .

No honeycomb is built without a bee
adding circle to circle, cell to cell,
the wax and honey of a mausoleum—
this round dome proves its maker is alive;
the corpse of the insect lives embalmed in honey,
prays that its perishable work lives long
enough for the sweet-tooth bear to desecrate—
this open book . . . my coffin.

The Cat

Miroslav Holub

Outside it was night
like a book without letters.
And the eternal dark
dripped to the stars through the sieve of the
city.

I said to her
do not go
you'll only be trapped
and bewitched
and will suffer in vain.

I said to her
do not go
why want
nothing?

But a window was opened
and she went,

a black cat into the black night,
she dissolved,
a black cat in the black night,
she just dissolved
and no one ever saw her again.
Not even she herself.

But you can hear her
sometimes,
when it's quiet
and there's a northerly wind
and you listen intently
to your own self.

The Day Millicent Found the World

William Stafford

Every morning Millicent ventured farther
into the woods. At first she stayed
near light, the edge where bushes grew, where
her way back appeared in glimpses among
dark trunks behind her. Then by farther paths
or openings where giant pines had fallen
she explored ever deeper into
the interior, till one day she stood under a great
dome among columns, the heart of the forest, and knew:
Lost. She had achieved a mysterious world
where any direction would yield only surprise.

And now not only the giant trees were strange
but the ground at her feet had a velvet nearness;
intricate lines on bark wove messages all
around her. Long strokes of golden sunlight
shifted over her feet and hands. She felt
caught up and breathing in a great powerful embrace.
A birdcall wandered forth at leisurely intervals
from an opening on her right: "Come away, Come away."
Never before had she let herself realize
that she was part of the world and that it would follow
Wherever she went. She was part of its breath.

Aunt Dolbee called her back that time, a high
voice tapering faintly among the farthest trees,
Milli-cent! Milli-cent! And that time she returned,
but slowly, her dress fluttering along pressing
back branches, her feet stirring up the dark smell
of moss, and her face floating forward, a stranger's
face now, with a new depth in it, into the light.

Alone

Edgar Allan Poe

From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were—I have not seen
As others saw—I could not bring
My passions from a common spring—
From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow—I could not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone—
And all I lov'd—I loved alone—
Then—in my childhood—in the dawn
Of a most stormy life—was drawn
From ev'ry depth of good and ill
The mystery which binds me still—
From the torrent, or the fountain—
From the red cliff of the mountain—
From the sun that 'round me roll'd
In its autumn tint of gold—
From the lightning in the sky
As it pass'd me flying by—
From the thunder, and the storm—
And the cloud that took the form
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)
Of a demon in my view—

Personal Helicon

Seamus Heaney

As a child, they could not keep me from wells
And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.
I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

One, in a brickyard, with a rotten board top.
I savoured the rich crash when a bucket
Plummeted down at the end of a rope.
So deep you saw no reflection in it.

A shallow one under a dry stone ditch
Fructified like any aquarium.
When you dragged out long roots from the soft mulch
A white face hovered over the bottom.

Others had echoes, gave back your own call
With a clean new music in it. And one
Was scaresome, for there, out of ferns and tall
Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection.

Now to pry into roots, to finger slime,
To star, big-eyed Narcissus, into spring
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

Praise in Summer

Richard Wilbur

Obscurely yet most surely called to praise,
As sometimes summer calls us all, I said
The hills are heavens full of branching ways
Where star-nosed moles fly overhead the dead;
I said the trees are mines in air. I said
See how the sparrow burrows in the sky!
And then I wondered why this mad *instead*
Perverts our praise to uncreation, why
Such savor's in this wrenching things awry.
Does sense so stale that it must needs derange
The world to know it? To a praiseful eye
Should it not be enough of fresh and strange
That trees grow green, and moles can course in clay,
And sparrows sweep the ceiling of our day?

Cottonmouth Country

Louise Glück

Fish bones walked the waves off Hatteras.
And there were other signs
That Death wooed us, by water, wooed us
By land: among the pines
An uncurled cottonmouth that rolled on moss
Reared in the polluted air.
Birth, not death, is the hard loss.
I know. I also left a skin there.

Of Mere Being

Wallace Stevens

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

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 reson
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.

Heritage

James Still

I shall not leave these prisoning hills
Though they topple their barren heads to level earth
And the forests slide uprooted out of the sky.
Though the waters of Troublesome, of Trace Fork,
Of Sand Lick rise in a single body to glean the valleys,
To drown lush pennyroyal, to unravel rail fences;
Though the sun-ball breaks the ridges into dust
And burns its strength into the blistered rock
I cannot leave. I cannot go away.

Being of these hills, being on with the fox
Stealing into the shadows, one with the new-born foal,
The lumbering ox drawing green beech logs to mill,
One with the destined feet of man climbing and descending
And one with death rising to bloom again, I cannot go.
Being of these hills, I cannot pass beyond.

Sort of a Song

William Carlos Williams

Let the snake wait under
his weed
and the writing
be of words, slow and quick, sharp
to strike, quiet to wait
sleepless.

—through metaphor to reconcile
the people and the stones.
Compose. (No ideas
but in things) Invent!
Saxifrage is my flower that splits
the rocks.

Introduction to Poetry

Billy Collins

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

they begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

Untitled

Stephen Crane

In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said: "Is it good, friend?"
"It is bitter—bitter," he answered;
"But I like it
Because it is bitter,
And because it is my heart."

Much madness is divinest sense

Emily Dickinson

Much madness is divinest sense
To a discerning eye,
Much sense, the starkest madness.
'Tis the majority
In this, as all, prevail:
Assent, and you are sane;
Demur, you're straightway dangerous
And handled with a chain.

Song of the Powers

David Mason

Mine, said the stone,
mine is the hour.
I crush the scissors,
such is my power.
stronger than wishes,
my power, alone.

Mine, said the paper,
mine are the words
that smother the stone
with imagined birds,
reams of them, flown
from the mind of the shaper.

Mine, said the scissors,
mine all the knives
gashing through paper's
ethereal lives;
nothing's so proper
as tattering wishes.

As stone crushes scissors,
as paper snuffs stone
and scissors cut paper,
all end alone.
So heap up your paper
and scissors your wishes
and uproot the stone
from the top of the hill.
They all end alone.
As you will, you will.

It was a dream

Lucille Clifton

in which my greater self
rose up before me
accusing me of my life
with her extra finger
whirling in a gyre of rage
at what my days had come to.
what,
i pleaded with her, could i do,
oh what could I have done?
and she twisted her wild hair
and sparked her wild eyes
and screamed as long as
i could hear her
This. This. This.

The Book

Miller Williams

I held it in my hands while he told the story.

He had found it in a fallen bunker,
a book for notes with all the pages blank.
He took it to keep for a sketchbook and diary.

He learned years later, when he showed the book
to an old bookbinder, who paled, and stepped back
a long step and told him what he held,
what he had laid the days of his life in.
It's bound, the binder said, in human skin.

I stood turning it over in my hands,
turning it in my head. Human skin.

What child did this skin fit? What man, what
woman?
Dragged still full of its flesh from what dream?

Who took it off the meat? Some other one
who stayed alive by knowing how to do this?

I stared at the changing book and a horror grew,
I stared and a horror grew, which was, which is,
how beautiful it was until I knew.

Desert Places

Robert Frost

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it—it is theirs.
All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness included me unawares.

And lonely as it is that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less—
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars—on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

The trees in the garden . . .

Stephen Crane

The trees in the garden rained flowers.
Children ran there joyously.
They gathered the flowers
Each to himself.

Now there were some
Who gathered great heaps—
--Having opportunity and skill—
Until, behold, only chance blossoms
Remained for the feeble.
Then a little spindling tutor
Ran importantly to the father, crying:
“Pray, come hither!
See this unjust thing in your garden!”
But when the father had surveyed,
He admonished the tutor:
“Not so, small sage!
This thing is just.
For, look you,
Are not they who possess the flowers
Stronger, bolder, and shrewder
Than they who have none?
Why should the strong—
--the beautiful strong—
Why should they not have the flowers?”

The Hat Lady

Linda Pastan

In a childhood of hats—
my uncles in homburgs and derbies,
Fred Astaire in high black silk,
the yarmulke my grandfather wore
like the palm of a hand
cradling the back of his head—
only my father went hatless,
even in winter.

And in the spring,
when a turban of leaves appeared
on every tree, the Hat Lady came
with a fan of pins in her mouth
and pins in her sleeves,
the Hat Lady came—
that Saint Sebastian of pins,
to measure my mother's head.

I remember a hat of dove-gray felt
that settled like a bird
on the nest of my mother's hair.
I remember a pillbox that tilted
over one eye—pure Myrna Loy,
and a navy straw with cherries caught
at the brim that seemed real enough
for a child to want to pick.

Last year when the chemicals
took my mother's hair, she wrapped
a towel around her head. And the Hat Lady came,
a bracelet of needles on each arm,
and led her to a place
where my father and grandfather waited,
head to bare head, and Death
winked at her and tipped his cap.