

# Poetry Responses

Often students cringe when they learn that a key focus of this course is poetry. As little kids, most of us loved poetry, reciting nursery rhymes and chanting goofy limericks. What happened? I don't have the answer, but one of my goals this year will be to rekindle your enthusiasm for and appreciation of poetry. Poetry is neither some arcane secret-society technical practice, nor is it a silly wad of marshmallow-fluff emotions. It's an expression of something uniquely ... human.

Laurence Perrine suggests, "People have read poetry or listened to it or recited it because they liked it, because it gave them enjoyment. But this is not the whole answer. Poetry in all ages has been regarded as important, not simply as one of several alternative forms of amusement, as one person might choose bowling, another chess, and another poetry. Rather, it has been regarded as something central to existence, something having unique value to the fully realized life, something that we are better off for having and without which we are spiritually impoverished."

John Ciardi writes, "Everyone who has an emotion and a language knows something about poetry. What he knows may not be much on an absolute scale, and it may not be organized within him in a useful way, but once he discovers the pleasure of poetry, he is likely to be surprised to discover how much he always knew without knowing he knew it. He may discover, somewhat as the character in the French play discovered to his amazement that he had been talking prose all his life, that he had been living poetry. Poetry, after all, is about life. Anyone who is alive and conscious must have some information about it."

This year we will approach poetry two ways. Obviously, we will study poetry in class, learning about the tools and devices that poets use in their craft, talking about what a poem means or how it can affect a reader, or seeking answers to questions we raised while reading or studying. We might call this our structured or formal study of poetry. But we will also study poetry informally through occasional poetry responses.

When asked to write a poetry response, you should choose one poem from the packet of poems I've given you for the grading period and write a response to that single poem. Most of these responses should be completed in a composition book although I may occasionally ask you to type one up in MLA format.

What should you write in a poetry response? You may approach this assignment several ways. Sometimes students might write a very formal, stuffy analysis of the poem. They explain what is going on in the poem and relate what they think the big idea is. Other students begin with a theme and elaborate on that, while some apply the poem to themselves by relating a personal experience. Occasionally a student might just write a response on just one line from the poem. What you do with the response is up to you — as long as you say something and say it in first person. You've been banned from writing in first person for long enough; you've earned it back. Use it well. Do not spend time explaining how you could not understand the poem no matter how hard you tried. Naturally, I do not expect you to like all the poems, but if you dislike a poem because of its content or style, then support that with specifics.

Please acquaint yourself with several of the poems in the packet. Read a few every week; read them at different times, in different places, and in different moods. You might notice how a poem will reveal itself to you over time.

## Poems for Poetry Responses – First Quarter

### Blackberries for Amelia

Fringing the woods, the stone walls, and the lanes,  
Old thickets everywhere have come alive,  
Their new leaves reaching out in fans of five  
From tangles overarched by this year's canes.

They have their flowers, too, it being June,  
And here or there in brambled dark-and-light  
Are small, five-petalled blooms of chalky white,  
As random-clustered and as loosely strewn

As the far stars, of which we now are told  
That ever faster do they bolt away,  
And that a night may come in which, some say,  
We shall have only blackness to behold.

I have no time for any change so great,  
But I shall see the August weather spur  
Berries to ripen where the flowers were—  
Dark berries, savage-sweet and worth the wait—

And there will come the moment to be quick  
And save some from the birds, and I shall need  
Two pails, old clothes in which to stain and bleed,  
And a grandchild to talk with while we pick.

—Richard Wilbur

### To Myself

Even when I forget you  
I go on looking for you  
I believe I would know you  
I keep remembering you  
sometimes long ago but then  
other times I am sure you  
were here a moment before  
and the air is still alive  
around where you were and I  
think then I can recognize  
you who are always the same  
who pretend to be time but  
you are not time and who speak  
in the words but you are not  
what they say you who are not  
lost when I do not find you

—W.S. Merwin

### Evening Concert, Saint-Chapelle

The celebrated windows flamed with light  
directly pouring north across the Seine;  
we rustled into place. Then violins  
vaunting Vivaldi's strident strength, then Brahms,  
seemed to suck with their passionate sweetness,  
bit by bit, the vigor from the red,  
the blazing blue, so that the listening eye  
saw suddenly the thick black lines, in shapes  
of shield and cross and strut and brace, that held  
the holy glowing fantasy together.  
The music surged; the glow became a milk,  
a whisper to the eye, a glimmer ebbed  
until our beating hearts, our violins  
were cased in thin but solid sheets of lead.

—John Updike

### Lost Brother

I knew that tree was my lost brother  
when I heard he was cut down  
at four thousand eight hundred sixty-two years;  
I know we had the same mother.  
His death pained me. I made up a story.  
I realized, when I saw his photograph,  
he was an evergreen, a bristlecone like me,  
who had lived from an early age  
with a certain amount of dieback,  
at impossible locations, at elevations  
over ten thousand feet in extreme weather.  
His company: other conifers,  
the rosy finch, the rock wren, the raven and clouds,  
blue and silver insects that fed mostly off each other.  
Some years bighorn sheep visited in summer—  
he was entertained by red bats, black-tailed jackrabbits,  
horned lizards, the creatures old and young he sheltered.  
Beside him in the shade, pink mountain pennyroyal—  
to his south, white angelica.  
I am prepared to live as long as he did  
(it would please our mother),  
live with clouds and those I love  
suffering with God.  
Sooner or later, some bag of wind will cut me down.

—Stanley Moss

## A Gray Haze Over The Rice Fields

A gray haze over the rice fields.  
The black cow grazing with her newborn calf—  
long-legged, unsteady—  
or trucks going past the high road:  
such things only claim  
that I am looking out in search of memory,  
not death. Those little kisses on my cheeks  
my long-dead grandmother gave me, or  
the soft dampness of my tears when  
my mother didn't notice me  
from beyond the closed door of her youth.

Today the dangling thread stops halfway down,  
where my hands cannot touch it.  
It's not that I wait for judgment.  
But at times I see a shadow  
move slowly over these, a shadow freed  
from the past and from the future,  
that contains the footsteps of that childhood  
so light I can only think of squirrels  
slipping in and out of the mango trees.

—Jayanta Mahapatra

## For A Duro

*Christmas Eve, 1965*

For a *duro* you got a night out of the wind.  
(A *duro* was a five-peseta coin bearing  
Franco's profile, the hooked nose tipped  
upward as though he alone received  
the breath of God. Back in '65  
only he did receive the breath of God.)  
For a *duro* you could lie down in the hallway  
of the Hotel Splendide in your Sunday suit,  
sleep under the lights, and rise in time  
to bless the Son's first coming. For a *duro*  
you could have a coffee and a plain roll  
that would shatter like glass. For a *duro*  
you could have it all, the cars, the women,  
the seven-course meal and a sea view,  
with the waitress bending to your cheek  
to ask reverently, "More butter?" For a *duro*  
I bought a pack of Antillanas and gave one  
to the only traveller in the deserted terminal,  
a soldier in uniform. When he bowed  
to receive a light I saw the milky nape,  
unlined. He must still be there, waiting.  
The hotel is gone, the building remains,  
a pet hospital and animal refectory  
overseen by Senor Esteban Ganz arrayed

for work this morning in white coat,  
dark tie, and soiled sneakers. Modestly  
he shows me three lobo pups, pintos,  
saved from slaughter, the striped feral cats  
pacing the big cage like tigers, the toucan  
levelled by an unknown virus but now  
alert and preening. Riotous colors:  
reds, greens, and illuminated golds  
suitable for banners proclaiming inter-  
galactic peace the moment it arrives.

—Philip Levine

## Still Memory

The dream was so deep  
the bed came unroped from its moorings,  
drifted upstream till it found my old notch

in the house I grew up in,  
then it locked in place.  
A light in the hall—

my father in the doorway, not dead,  
just home from the graveyard shift  
smelling of crude oil and solvent.

In the kitchen, Mother rummages through silver  
while the boiled water poured  
in the battered old drip pot

unleashes coffee's smoky odor.  
Outside, the mimosa fronds, closed all night,  
open their narrow valleys for dew.

Around us, the town is just growing animate,  
its pulleys and levers set in motion.  
My house starts to throb in its old socket.

My twelve-year-old sister steps fast  
because the bathroom tiles  
are cold and we have no heat other

than what our bodies can carry.  
My parents are not yet born each  
into a small urn of ash.

My ten-year-old hand reaches  
for a pen to record it all  
as would become long habit.

—Mary Karr

### The Halo That Would Not Light

When, after many years, the raptor beak  
Let loose of you,

He dropped your tiny body  
In the scarab-colored hollow

Of a carriage, left you like a finch  
Wrapped in its nest of linens wound

With linden leaves in a child's cardboard box.

Tonight the wind is hover-

Hunting as the leather seats of swings go back  
And forth with no one in them

As certain and invisible as  
Red scarves silking endlessly

From a magician's hollow hat  
And the spectacular catastrophe

Of your endless childhood  
Is done.

—Lucie Brock-Broido

### Berry Bush

The winter they abandoned Long Point Village—  
A dozen two-room houses of pine frames clad  
With cedar faded to silver and, not much whiter  
Or larger, the one-room church—they hauled it all  
Down to the docks on sledges, and at high tide  
Boats towed the houses as hulks across the harbor  
And set them on the streets of Provincetown.  
Today they're identified by blue tile plaques.  
Forgotten the fruitless village, in broken wholes  
Transported by a mad Yankee frugality  
Sweating resolve that pickled the sea-black timbers.

The loathsome part of American Zen for me  
Is in the Parable of the Raft: a traveller  
Hacks it from driftwood tugged from the very current  
That wedged it into the mud, and lashes it  
With bitter roots he strips between his teeth.  
And after the raft has carried him across  
The torrent in his path, the teacher says,  
The traveller doesn't lift the raft on his back  
And lug it with him on his journey: oh no,  
He leaves it there behind him, doesn't he?  
There must be something spoiled in the translation,

Surely those old original warriors  
And ruling-class officials and Shinto saints  
Knew a forgetting heavier than that:  
The timbers plunged in oblivion, hardened by salt;  
Black, obdurate throne-shaped clump of ancient cane-spikes  
At the raspberry thicket's heart; the immigrant  
Vow not to carry humiliations of the old  
Country to the new, still infusing the segmented  
Sweet berry, illegible ingested seed, scribble  
Of red allegiances raked along your wrist;  
Under all, the dead thorns sharper than the green.

—Robert Pinsky

### 1943

They toughened us for war. In the high-school auditorium  
Ed Monahan knocked out Dominick Esposito in the first round

of the heavyweight finals, and ten months later Dom died  
in the third wave at Tarawa. Every morning of the war

our Brock-Hall Dairy delivered milk from horse-drawn wagons  
to wooden back porches in southern Connecticut. In winter,

frozen cream lifted the cardboard lids of glass bottles,  
Grade A or Grade B, while marines bled to death in the surf,

or the right engine faltered into Channel silt, or troops marched  
—what could we do?—with frostbitten feet as white as milk.

—Donald Hall

## Inoculation

Cotton Mather studied small pox for a while,  
instead of sin. Boston was rife with it.  
Not being ill himself, thank Providence,  
but one day asking his slave, Onesimus,  
if he'd ever had the pox. To which Onesimus replied,  
"Yes and No." Not insubordinate  
or anything of the kind, but playful, or perhaps  
musing, as one saying to another:

"Consider how a man  
can take inside all manner of disease  
and still survive."

Then, graciously, when Mather asked again:

*My mother bore me in the southern wild.  
She scratched my skin and I got sick, but lived  
to come here, free of smallpox, as your slave.*

—Susan Donnelly

## The Pigeons And The Girls

Quite early in the day I saw them,  
Side by side; perched on a twig  
Above the traffic, those two pigeons,  
They raised with a single motion  
Their heads toward the light.

I must have raised mine also  
To have so rapidly glimpsed  
The beaks they lifted, in unison,  
Up to the light that made such gleams  
Glide across the troubled cars.

Two girls came to the vacant pool,  
Stepping tentatively down the stair,  
And one dipped a foot into the water;  
Still she held the other by the hand,  
For the other was thin, she limped,

A thigh or hip bone was not working right.  
The girl who led this other one along—  
A perfect saint, at such a distance:  
Firm breasts, the fair hair swept up,  
A white towel knotted round her waist.

Quite ordinary motions, daily gestures,  
Apparently disturb the sheet of time.  
Becoming very ancient, birds and people  
Fold back the sheet; locked in traffic,  
Or waterborne, you hardly notice.

But watch too long, prone among junipers,  
The formal cloud, while dragonflies  
Briskly penetrate, to no purpose, air—  
Girl and pigeon, stripping the sheet off,  
Wake up to immortality's aroma.

Then hear Spirit settle in its woodland.  
In its throat a growl, a heavy breathing;  
See sprayed from great eager eyes the sparkle,  
Bushes whisked apart. That was Dios  
Vanished into the open, with a spurting wand.

—Christopher Middleton

## Beginning Again

"If I could stop talking, completely  
cease talking for a year, I might begin  
to get well," he muttered.

Off alone again performing  
brain surgery on himself  
in a small badly lit  
room with no mirror. A room  
whose floor ceiling and walls  
are all mirrors, what a mess  
oh my God—

And still  
it stands,  
the question  
not how begin  
again, but rather

Why?

So we sit there  
together  
the mountain  
and me, Li Po  
said, until only the mountain  
remains.

—Franz Wright

## A Chinese Bowl

Plucked from a junk shop  
chipped celadon  
shadow of a swallow's wing  
or cast by venetian blinds

on tinted legal pads  
one summer Saturday  
in 1957.  
Absorbed at his big desk

my father works on briefs.  
The little Royal makes  
its satisfying *clocks*  
stamping an inky nimbus

around each thick black letter  
with cutout moons for "O"s.  
Curled up on the floor,  
I'm writing, too: "Bean Soup

and Rice," a play about  
a poor girl in Kyoto  
and the treasure-finding rabbit  
who saves her home. Fluorescent

light spills cleanly down  
on the Danish-modern couch  
and metal cabinet  
which hides no folder labelled

"blacklist" or "Party business"  
or "drink" or "mother's death."  
I think, This is happiness,  
right here, right now, these

walls striped green and gray,  
shadow and sun, dust motes  
stirring the still air,  
and a feeling gathers, heavy

as rain about to fall,  
part love, part concentration,  
part inner solitude.  
where is that room, those gray-

green thin-lined  
scribbled papers  
littering the floor?  
How did

I move so far away,  
just living day by day,  
that now all rooms seem strange,

the years all error?  
Bowl,

what could  
I drink from you,  
clear green tea  
or iron-bitter water

that would renew  
my fallen life?

—Katha Pollitt

## My Fear

He follows us, he keeps track.  
Each day his lists are longer.  
Here, death, and here,  
something like it.

Mr. Fear, we say in our dreams,  
what do you have for me tonight?  
And he looks through his sack,  
his black sack of troubles.

Maybe he smiles when he finds  
the right one. Maybe he's sorry.  
Tell me, Mr. Fear,  
what must I carry

away from your dream.  
Make it small, please.  
Let it fit in my pocket,  
let it fall through

the hole in my pocket.  
Fear, let me have  
a small brown bat  
and a purse of crickets

like the ones I heard  
singing last night  
out there in the stubbly field  
before I slept, and met you.

—Lawrence Raab

