

## 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.