Elegy

I know but will not tell
you, Aunt Irene, why there
are soapsuds in the whiskey:
Uncle Robert had to have
a drink while shaving. May
there be no bloodshed in your house
this morning of my father’s death
and no unkept appearance
in the living, since he has
to wear the rouge and lipstick
of your ceremony, mother,
for the first and last time:
father, hello and goodbye.

Alan Dugan
Poems 7

Love Song: I and Thou

By Alan Dugan

Nothing is plumb, level or square:
the studs are bowed, the joists
are shaky by nature, no piece fits
any other piece without a gap
or pinch, and bent nails
dance all over the surfacing
like maggots. By Christ
I am no carpenter. I built
the roof for myself, the walls
for myself, the floors
for myself, and got
hung up in it myself. I
danced with a purple thumb
at this house-warming, drunk
with my prime whiskey: rage.
Oh I spat rage’s nails
into the frame-up of my work:
It held. It settled plumb.
level, solid, square and true
for that one great moment. Then
it screamed and went on through,
skewing as wrong the other way.
God damned it. This is hell,
but I planned it, I sawed it,
I nailed it and I
will live in it until it kills me.
I can nail my left palm
to the left-hand cross-piece but
I can’t do everything myself.
I need a hand to nail the right,
a help, a love, a you, a wife.
At the Cabin

We ripple aspen the way we move out
in the morning meadow wind. Stay close
through the buffalo willow’s manic perfume
across the field of lupin where the fresh track
of a cougar gives us the direction not to go.
We climb high lichen and below us
farther than our first dream of the void
the north fork of the Teton cannot move.
We are frozen deep in hunger.
If we tumble coupled down the rock side
bouncing from the last edge out in sky
in final isolation like the eagle, like the bones
of Crees, we’ll shatter on the valley floor
separate as stars. Love’s the best way
to feel safe. Love on moss. Love on springy bed
of juniper. And there must be definite ways
of telling how the mate remaining, widower Mallard
or warrior Cree who killed his wife by mistake
doubles his grief every storm.

Pale letter from home: “We hope you return
someday. We love you still.” The pages
ride thermals like white spastic birds
across the canyon to Uninhabited Mountain.
More than letter disappears. More than past.
The red hawk stumbles, catches himself and climbs.
The cougar, spurred by rumor of a spacious cave,
turns south to Ear Mountain and a hoped for role:
I am good enough to own a home.

We come back tired. Ways of hating the past
sour inside of us. We bore ourselves remembering
children in ruin, too many tears at the pass.
If the Teton falters, move the rocks.
No matter how water jitters, water
has no nerves. Rivers flow because the first law
of all land is slant. The second, desire to ride.
We ripple aspen the way we move back
to the cabin baking in motionless noon.
And the aspens ring. The river loosens at its pools
and takes off shooting wildly at the sky
like some drunk cowboy, his first night back in town
after centuries of good work done.

--Richard Hugo

Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg

You might come here Sunday on a whim.
Say your life broke down. The last good kiss
you had was years ago. You walk these streets
laid out by the insane, past hotels
that didn’t last, bars that did, the tortured try
of local drivers to accelerate their lives.
Only churches are kept up. The jail
turned 70 this year. The only prisoner
is always in, not knowing what he’s done.
The principal supporting business now
is rage. Hatred of the various grays
the mountain sends, hatred of the mill,
The Silver Bill repeal, the best liked girls
who leave each year for Butte. One good
restaurant and bars can't wipe the boredom out.
The 1907 boom, eight going silver mines,
a dance floor built on springs--
all memory resolves itself in gaze,
in panoramic green you know the cattle eat
or two stacks high above the town,
two dead kilns, the huge mill in collapse
for fifty years that won't fall finally down.
Isn't this your life? That ancient kiss
still burning out your eyes? Isn't this defeat
so accurate, the church bell simply seems
a pure announcement: ring and no one comes?
Don't empty houses ring?
Are magnesium
and scorn sufficient to support a town,
not just Philipsburg, but towns
of towering blondes, good jazz and booze
the world will never let you have
until the town you came from dies inside?
Say no to yourself. The old man, twenty
when the jail was built, still laughs
although his lips collapse. Someday soon,
he says, I'll go to sleep and not wake up.
You tell him no. You're talking to yourself.
The car that brought you here still runs.
The money you buy lunch with,
no matter where it's mined, is silver
and the girl who serves your food
is slender and her red hair lights the wall.
Driving Montana

The day is a woman who loves you. Open. Deer drink close to the road and magpies spray from your car. Miles from any town your radio comes in strong, unlikely Mozart from Belgrade rock and roll from Butte. Whatever the next number you want to hear it. Never has your Buick found this forward a gear. Even the tuna salad in Reedpoint is good.

Towns arrive ahead of imagined schedule Absorakee at one. Or arrive so late-
Silesia at nine - you recreate the day. Where did you stop along the road and have fun? Was there a runaway horse? Did you park at that house, the one alone in a void of grain, white with green trim and red fence, where you know you lived once? You remembered the ringing creek, the soft brown forms of far off bison. You must have stayed hours, then drove on. In the motel you know you’d never seen it before.

Tomorrow will open again, the sky wide as the mouth of a wild girl, friable clouds you lose yourself to. You are lost in miles of land without people, without one fear of being found, in the dash of rabbits, soar of antelope, swirl merge and clatter of streams.

--Richard Hugo
Duwamish

Midwestern in the heat, this river's curves are slow and sick. Water knocks at mills and concrete plants, and crud compounds the gray. On the out-tide, water, half salt water from the sea, rambles by a barrel of molded nails, gray lumber piles, moss on ovens in the brickyard no one owns.

Boys are snapping tom cod spines and jeering at the Greek who bribes the river with his sailing coins.

Because the name is Indian, Indians ignore the river as it cruises past the tavern. Gulls are diving crazy where boys nail porgies to the pile. No Indian would interrupt his beer to tell the story of the snipe who dove to steal the nailed girl late one autumn, with the final salmon in.

This river colors day. On bright days here, the sun is always setting or obscured by one cloud. Or the shade extended to the far bank just before you came. And what should flare, the Chinese red of a searun's-fin, the futile roses, unkept cherry trees in spring, is muted. For the river, there is late November only, and the color of a slow winter.

On the short days, looking for a word, knowing the smoke from the small homes turns me colder than wind from the cold river, knowing this poverty is not a lack of money but of friends, I come here to be cold. Not silver cold like ice, for ice has glitter. Gray cold like the river. Cold like 4 PM on Sunday. Cold like a decaying porgy.

But cold is a word. There is no word along this river I can understand or say. Not Greek threats to a fishless moon nor Slavic chants. All words are Indian. Love is Indian for water, and madness means, to Redmen, I am going home.

--Richard Hugo
The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir

Not my hands but green across you now.
Green tons hold you down, and ten bass curve
teasing in your hair. Summer slime
will pile deep on your breast. Four months of ice
will keep you firm. I hope each spring
to find you tangled in those pads
pulled not quite loose by the spillway pour,
stars in dead reflection off your teeth.

Lie there lily still. The spillway’s closed.
Two feet down most lakes are common gray.
This lake is dark from the black blue Mission range
climbing sky like music dying Indians once wailed.
On ocean beaches, mystery fish
are offered to the moon. Your jaws go blue.
Your hands start waving every wind.
Wave to the ocean where we crushed a mile of foam.

We still love there in thundering foam
and love. Whales fall in love with gulls
and tide reclaims the Dolly skeletons
gone with a blast of aching horns to China.
Landlocked in Montana here
the end is limited by light, the final note
will trail off at the farthest point we see,
already faded, lover, where you bloat.

All girls should be nicer. Arrows rain
above us in the Indian wind. My future
should be full of windy gems, my past
will stop this roaring in my dreams.
Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. But the arrows sing:
no way to float her up. The dead sink
from dead weight. The Mission range
turns this water black late afternoons.

One boy slapped the other. Hard.
The slapped boy talked until his dignity
dissolved, screamed a single ‘stop’
and went down sobbing in the company pond.
I swam for him all night. My only suit
got wet and factory hands went home.
No one cared the coward disappeared.
Morning then: cold music I had never heard.

Loners like work best on second shift.
No one liked our product and the factory closed.
Off south, the bison multiply so fast
a slaughter’s mandatory every spring
and every spring the creeks get fat
and Kicking Horse fills up. My hope is vague.
The far blur of your bones in May
may be nourished by the snow.

The spillway’s open and you spill out
into weather, lover down the bright canal
and mother, irrigating crops
dead Indians forgot to plant.
I’m sailing west with arrows to dissolving foam
where waves strand naked Dollys.
Their eyes are white as oriental mountains
and their tongues are teasing oil from whales.

--Richard Hugo
The Milltown Union Bar

_for Harold Herndon_

_(Laundromat & Cafe)_

You could love here, not the lovely goat in plexiglass nor the goat shot in the middle of a joke, but honest drunks, crossed swords above the bar, three men hung in the bad painting, others riding off on the phony green horizon. The owner, fresh from orphan wars, loves too but bad as you. He keeps improving things but can’t cut the bodies down.

You need never leave. Money or a story brings you booze. The elk is grinning and the goat says go so tenderly you hear him through the glass. If you weep deer heads weep. Sing and the orphanage announces plans for your release. A train goes by and ditches jump. You were nothing going in and now you kiss your hand.

When mills shut down. When the worst drunk says finally I’m stone, three men still hang painted badly from a leafless tree, you one of them, brains tied behind your back, swinging for your sin. Or you swing With goats and elk. Doors of orphanages finally swing out and here you open in.

--Richard Hugo
Still, Citizen Sparrow

Still, Citizen Sparrow, this vulture which you call
Unnatural, let him but lumber again to air
Over the rotten office, let him bear
The carrion ballast up, and at the tall

Tip of the sky lie cruising. Then you'll see
That no more beautiful bird is in heaven's height,
No wider more placid wings, no watchfuller flight;
He shoulder nature there, the frightfully free,

The naked-headed one. Pardon him, you
Who dart in orchard aisles, for it is he
Devours death, mocks mutability,
Has heart to make an end, keeps nature new.

Thinking of Noah, childheart, try to forget
How for so many bedlam hours his saw
Soured the song of birds with its wheezy gnaw,
And the slam of his hammer all the day beset

The people's ears. Forget that he could bear
To see the towns like coral under his keel,
And the fields so dismal deep. Try rather to feel
How high and weary it was, on the waters where

He rocked his only world, and everyone's.
Forgive the hero, you who would have died
Gladly with all you knew; he rode that tide
To Ararat; all men are Noah's sons.

--Richard Wilbur
1950
Constantly risking absurdity

Constantly risking absurdity and death
whenever he performs above the heads of his audience
the poet like an acrobat
climbs on a rime
to a high wire of his own making
and balancing on eyebeams above a sea of faces
paces his way to the other side of day
performing entrechats and sleight of foot tricks
and other high theatrics and all without mistaking
any thing for what it may not be
For he’s the super-realist who must perforce perceive
taut truth before the taking of each stance or step
in his supposed advance toward that still higher perch
where Beauty stand and waits with gravity
to start her death-defying leap

And he
a little charleychaplin man who may or may not catch
her fair eternal form spreadeagled in the empty air
of existence
IN A DARK TIME

In a dark time, the eye begins to see,
I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;
I hear my echo in the echoing wood--
A lord of nature weeping to a tree.
I live between the heron and the wren,
Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den.

What’s madness but nobility of soul
At odds with circumstance? The day’s on fire!
I know the purity of pure despair,
My shadow pinned against a sweating wall.
That place among the rocks--is it a cave,
Or winding path? The edge is what I have.

A steady stream of correspondences!
A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,
And in broad day the midnight come again!
A man goes far to find out what he is--
Death of the self in a long, tearless night,
All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.

Dark, dark my soul, and darker my desire.
My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,
Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?
A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.
The Writer
By Richard Wilbur

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.
Traveling through the Dark
By William E. Stafford

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason—
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,
alive, still, never to be born.
Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—,
then pushed her over the edge into the river.
The Mill
BY EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

The miller's wife had waited long,
The tea was cold, the fire was dead;
And there might yet be nothing wrong
In how he went and what he said:
"There are no millers any more,"
Was all that she had heard him say;
And he had lingered at the door
So long that it seemed yesterday.

Sick with a fear that had no form
She knew that she was there at last;
And in the mill there was a warm
And mealy fragrance of the past.
What else there was would only seem
To say again what he had meant;
And what was hanging from a beam
Would not have heeded where she went.

And if she thought it followed her,
She may have reasoned in the dark
That one way of the few there were
Would hide her and would leave no mark:
Black water, smooth above the weir
Like starry velvet in the night,
Though ruffled once, would soon appear
The same as ever to the sight.
September Midnight

by Sara Teasdale

Lyric night of the lingering Indian Summer,
Shadowy fields that are scentless but full of singing,
Never a bird, but the passionless chant of insects,
    Ceaseless, insistent.

The grasshopper’s horn, and far-off, high in the maples,
The wheel of a locust leisurely grinding the silence
Under a moon waning and worn, broken,
    Tired with summer.

Let me remember you, voices of little insects,
Weeds in the moonlight, fields that are tangled with asters,
Let me remember, soon will the winter be on us,
    Snow-hushed and heavy.

Over my soul murmur your mute benediction,
While I gaze, O fields that rest after harvest,
As those who part look long in the eyes they lean to,
    Lest they forget them.

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What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why (Sonnet XLIII)
by Edna St. Vincent Millay

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
Under my head till morning; but the rain
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh
Upon the glass and listen for reply,
And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain
For unremembered lads that not again
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.
Thus in winter stands the lonely tree,
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before:
I cannot say what loves have come and gone,
I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more.

1956
With My Crowbar Key

I do tricks in order to know:
careless I dance,
then turn to see
the mark to turn God left for me.

Making my home in vertigo
I pray with my screams
and think with my hair
prehensile in the dark with fear.

When I hear the well bucket strike something soft
far down at noon,
then there’s no place
far enough away to hide my face.

When I see my town over sights of a rifle,
and carved by light
from the lowering sun,
then my old friends darken one by one.

By step and step like a cat toward God
I dedicated walk,
but under the house
I realize the kitten’s crouch.

And by night like this I turn and come
to this possible house
which I open, and see
myself at work with this crowbar key.

--William Stafford
Song of the Rabbits Outside the Tavern

We who play under the pines,
We who dance in the snow
That shines blue in the light of the moon
Sometimes halt as we go,
Stand with our ears erect,
Our noses testing the air,
To gaze at the golden world
Behind the windows there.

Suns they have in a cave
And stars each on a tall white stem,
And the thought of fox or night owl
Seems never to trouble them.
They laugh and eat and are warm,
Their food seems ready at hand,
While hungry out in the cold
We little rabbits stand.

But they never dance as we dance,
They have not the speed nor the grace.
We scorn both the cat and the dog
Who lie by their fireplace.
We scorn them licking their paws,
Their eyes on an upraised spoon,
We who dance hungry and wild
Under a winter’s moon.

--Elizabeth Coatsworth (1893-1963)
AN IRISH AIRMAN FORESEES HIS DEATH

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

THE CAT AND THE MOON

The cat went here and there
And the moon spun round like a top,
And the nearest kin of the moon,
The creeping cat, looked up.
Black Minnaloushe stared at the moon,
For wander and wail as he would,
The pure cold light in the sky
Troubled his animal blood.
Minnaloushe runs in the grass
Lifting his delicate feet.
Do you dance, Minnaloushe, do you dance?
When two close kindred meet,
What better than call a dance?
Maybe the moon may learn,
Tired of that courtly fashion,
A new dance turn.
Minnaloushe creeps through the grass
From moonlit place to place,
The sacred moon overhead
Has taken a new phase.
Does Minnaloushe know that his pupils
Will pass from change to change,
And that from round to crescent,
From crescent to round they range?
Minnaloushe creeps through the grass
Alone, important, and wise,
And lifts to the changing moon
His changing eyes.
The Fisherman

Although I can see him still,  
The freckled man who goes  
to a grey place on a hill  
In grey Connemara clothes  
At dawn to cast his flies,  
It's long since I began  
To call up to the eyes  
This wise and simple man.  
All day I'd looked in the face  
What I had hoped 'twould be  
To write for my own race  
And the reality;  
The living men that I hate,  
The dead men that I loved,  
The craven man in his seat,  
The insolent unreproved,  
And no knave brought to book  
Who has won a drunken cheer,  
The witty man and his joke  
Aimed at the commonest ear,  
The clever man who cries  
The catch cries of the clown,  
The beating down of the wise  
And great Art beaten down.

Maybe a twelvemonth since  
Suddenly I began,  
In scorn of this audience,  
Imagining a man,  
And his sun-freckled face,  
And grey Connemara cloth,  
Climbing up to a place  
Where stone is dark under froth,  
And the down-turn of his wrist  
When the flies drop in the stream;  
A man who does not exist,  
A man who is but a dream;  
And cried, "Before I am old  
I shall have written him one  
Poem maybe as cold  
And passionate as the dawn."

1916
My Grandmother’s Ghost

She skimmed the yellow water like a moth,
Trailing her feet across the shallow stream;
She saw the berries, paused and sampled them
Where a slight spider cleaned his narrow tooth.
Light in the air, she fluttered up the path,
So delicate to shun the leaves and damp,
Like some young wife holding a slender lamp
To find her stray child, or the moon, or both.

Even before she reached the empty house,
She beat her wings ever so slightly, rose,
Followed a bee where apples blew like snow;
And then, forgetting what she wanted there,
Too full of blossom and green light to care,
She hurried to the ground, and slipped below.

Saint Judas

When I went out to kill myself, I caught
A pack of hoodlums beating up a man.
Running to spare his suffering, I forgot
My name, my number, how my day began,
How soldiers milled around the garden stone
And sang amusing songs; how all that day
The javelins measured crowds; how I alone
Bargained the proper coins, and slipped away.

Banished from heaven, I found this victim beaten,
Stripped, kneed, and left to cry. Dropping my rope
Aside, I ran, ignored the uniforms:
Then I remembered bread my flesh had eaten,
The kiss that ate my flesh. Flayed without hope,
I held the man for nothing in my arms.

James Wright
from Saint Judas
1. POEMS TO A BROWN CRICKET--JAMES WRIGHT

I woke,
Just about daybreak, and fell back
In a drowse.

A clean leaf from one of the new cedars
Has blown in through the open window.

How long ago a huge shadow of wings pondering and hovering leaned down
To comfort my face.

I don’t care who loved me.

Somebody did, so I let myself alone.

I will stand watch for you, now.

I lay here awake for a long time before I looked up
And found you sunning yourself asleep
In the Secret Life of Jacob Boehme
Left open on the desk.

2. Our friends gave us their love
And this room to sleep in.

Outside now, not a sound.

Instead of rousing us out for breakfast,
Our friends love us and grant us our loneliness.

We shall awaken again
When the courteous face of the old horse David
Appears at our window,

To snuffle and cough gently.

He, too, believes we may long for
One more dream of slow canters across the prairie
Before we come home to our strange bodies
And rise from the dead.

3. As for me, I have been listening
For an hour or so, now, to the scampering ghosts
Of Sioux ponies, down the long road
Toward South Dakota.

They just brought me home, leaning forward, by both hands clinging
To the joists of the magnificent dappled feathers
Under their wings.

4. As for you, I won’t press you to tell me
Where you have gone.

I know. I know how you love to edge down
The long trails of canyons.

At the bottom, along willow shores, you stand, waiting for twilight,
In the silence of deep grass.

You are safe there, guarded, for you know how the dark faces
Of the cliffs forbid easy plundering
Of their beautiful pueblos:

White cities concealed delicately in their chasms
As the new eggs of the mourning dove

In her ground nest,
That only the spirit hunters of the snow can find.

5. Brown cricket, you are my friend’s name.

I will send back my shadow for your sake, to stand guard
On the solitude of the mourning dove’s young.

Here, I will stand by you, shadowless.

At the small golden door of your body till you wake
In a book that is shining.
To the Muse

It is all right. All they do
Is go in by dividing
One rib from another. I wouldn’t
Lie to you. It hurts
Like nothing I know. All they do
Is burn their way in with a wire.
It forks in and out a little like the tongue
Of that frightened garter snake we caught
At Cloverfield, you and me, Jenny
So long ago.

I would lie to you
If I could.
But the only way I can get you to come up
Out of the suckhole, the south face
Of the Powhatan pit, is to tell you
What you know:

You come up after dark, you poise alone
With me on the shore.
I lead you back to this world.

The lady doctors in Wheeling open
Their offices at night.
I don’t have to call them, they are always there.
But they only have to put the knife once
Under your breast.

Then they hang their contraption.
And you bear it.

It’s awkward awhile. Still, it lets you
Walk about on tiptoe if you don’t
Jiggle the needle.
It might stab your heart, you see.
The blade hangs in your lung and the tube
Keeps it draining.
That way they only have to stab you
Once. Oh Jenny,
I wish to God I had made this world, this scurvy
And disastrous place. I
didn’t, I can’t bear it
Either, I don’t blame you, sleeping down there
Face down in the unbelievable silk of spring.
Muse of black sand,
Alone.

I don’t blame you, I know
The place where you lie.
I admit everything. But look at me.
How can I live without you?
Come up to me, love,
Out of the river, or I will
Come down to you.

--James Wright
from Shall We Gather At the River
James Wright  (1927-1980)

A BLESSING  1961

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies
Darken with kindness.
They have come gladly out of the willows
To welcome my friend and me.
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness
That we have come.
They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.
There is no loneliness like theirs.
At home once more,
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl’s wrist.
Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.
Two Hangovers—James Wright

NUMBER ONE
I slouch in bed.
Beyond the streaked trees of my window,
All groves are bare.
Locusts and poplars change to unmarried women
Sorting slate from anthracite
Between railroad ties:
The yellow-bearded winter of the depression
Is still alive somewhere, an old man
Counting his collection of bottle caps
In a tarpaper shack under the cold trees
Of my grave.

I still feel half drunk,
And all those old women beyond my window
Are hunching toward the graveyard.

NUMBER TWO: I TRY TO WAKE AND GREET
THE WORLD ONCE AGAIN

In a pine tree,
A few yards away from my window sill,
A brilliant blue jay is springing up and down,
On a branch.
I laugh, as I see him abandon himself
To entire delight, for he knows as well as I do
That the branch will not break.

Drunk, mumbling Hungarian,
The sun staggers in,
And his big stupid face plods into the stove.

For two hours I have been dreaming
Of green butterflies searching for diamonds
In coal seams;
And children chasing each other
Through the hills of fresh graves
But the sun has come home drunk
And a sparrow outside
Sings of the Hanna Coal
The filaments of cold light
In music like delicate birds
Ah, turn it off.

--from The Branch Will Not Break
Figurative Language
or
Tropes Are Our Friends

**Purpose:** We use figures of speech in fiction and poetry because we can say what we want more vividly and forcefully than we can by saying it directly. Figurative language adds extra dimensions to what we write.

**Effect:** Tropes are effective in fiction and poetry because they:

a) Afford imaginative pleasure--helps the mind to leap.

b) Bring additional imagery to fiction and poetry, makes the abstract more concrete and sensuous. Figures multiply the sense appeal.

c) Tropes add emotional intensity. Owen's comparison of a man caught in a gas attack to a man drowning in the sea conveys despair and suffocation as well as visual image.

d) Tropes add concentration and compression--a way of saying much. "Out, out brief candle" (Macbeth) says much about life.

**Definition:** Broadly speaking, a figure of speech is any way of saying something other than the ordinary way. More specifically, it's a way of saying one thing and meaning another.

**Metaphor and Simile:** Writers use these as a way of comparing things that are essentially unlike. A simile is a comparison between unlike objects or ideas expressed with *like, as, than, similar,* etc. A metaphor is implied--the figurative term is substituted for or identified with the literal term.

*Simile:* Freddy is like a rabid dog when he's angry.

*Not a simile:* I like pizza more than liver.

*Metaphor:* Freddy's a mad dog when he's angry.

*Metaphor:* Freddy was so angry he foamed at the mouth.

*Metaphor:* Mad Dog Freddy snarled at the timid students.
Four Forms of Metaphor:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literal</th>
<th>Figurative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Named Life</td>
<td>Named the hound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Named Leaves</td>
<td>Implied got up in a coil and hissed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implied It</td>
<td>Named powders all the wood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implied It</td>
<td>Implied sifts from leaded sieves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Personification:** Attributes human life to an animal, object, or concept. Leaves whispered in the wind. The engine coughed twice, then died.

**Apostrophe:** Addressing someone absent or dead or something non human as if that person or thing were present and alive and could reply. Keat's "Ode to a Grecian Urn" would be an example.

**Synecdoche:** The use of the part for the whole. Eliot's Prufrock whines, "I should have been a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across the floors of silent seas."

**Metonymy:** The use of something closely related for the thing actually meant: "Flowers paint the meadow with delight." Delight replaces bright color—which produces delight.

**Hyperbole:** Overstatement--a lie in the service of truth. If I say that my one-pound trout is one pound and two ounces, I’m deceiving you. But if I say I caught a trout the size of a Shetland pony, then I’m communicating that I’m happy with the size of the fish.

**Understatement:** When the great white shark attacked me, he had my full attention.

**Cliché:** Dead metaphor. Overused figure of speech. Pre-fabricated phrase. Avoid clichés. Busy as a bee. When all is said and done. Right there and then. Like a bolt from the blue. Like a hot knife through butter. Blushing bride. Basket case. Bite the dust. Do not write clichés unless your characters speak in clichés for character development.
**Symbol**: A symbol is itself and something more. In poetry and fiction writers do not accidentally toss around storms, caves, winter, the sea, rivers, night, paths, graves, snakes, sleep, etc., etc., etc. Some symbols are universal—they have the same meaning for all members of a culture or all people on the planet. Other symbols are specific to a certain work, as Moby Dick becomes a symbol in Melville's work. Symbols often indicate theme. Warning: it's easy to see symbols everywhere. 'Tis better to under-interpret than over-interpret symbols. The symbol is the richest and at the same time the most difficult of the poetical figures. This richness and difficulty result from the imprecision, but the symbol is therefore able to suggest a great variety of meanings.

**Distinctions**: Image, metaphor and symbol shade into each other and are sometimes difficult to distinguish. To help with the distinction remember:

a) An image means only what it is,
b) the figurative term of a metaphor means something other than what it is,
c) and a symbol means what it is, and something more too.
Musical Devices

Music  The poet, unlike the writer who writes only to convey information, chooses words for sound as well as meaning.

In Bad Poetry  The music, the sound, is held in importance above all else.

In Good Poetry  The music plays an equal role with meaning, image, symbol, meter and other devices to create an organic whole.

Repetition  Essential in all music, and so is variation.

All things we enjoy greatly and lastingly have these elements.

The sea--with its waves--always the same, yet always different.

We enjoy baseball because it contains the same complex combination of pattern and variation.

We like the familiar, we like variety, but we like them combined.

If we get too much sameness the result is monotony and tedium: doggerel.

If we get too much variety, the result is bewilderment and confusion.

Alliteration  The repetition of initial consonant sounds: safe and sound, fish or fowl, rhyme or reason.

Assonance  The repetition of vowel sounds: mad as a hatter, time out of mind, free and easy.

Consonance  The repetition of final consonant sounds: first and last, stroke of luck.

In Combination  "Malt does more than Milton can..."
Alliteration and consonance and assonance in combination create interlocking connection among and between lines and stanzas.
Rhyme  
The repetition of accented vowel sounds and all succeeding sounds.

**Masculine**  
Rhyme sounds involve only one syllable:  
*support* and *retort*.

**Feminine**  
Rhyme sounds involve two or more syllables:  
*mellow* and *yellow; fertile* and *turtle*.

**Internal**  
When one or more of the words rhyming are within the line.

**End**  
When the rhyming words are at the ends of lines.  
Because it comes at the end of the line, it receives emphasis as a musical effect. Also, end rhyming words are often the most important.

**Approximate**  
Also called "slant." Words with any kind of similarity. Especially noticeable in modern verse.

**Enjambment**  
When one line of verse runs into the next line of verse without punctuation at the end of the line.

**End-Stop**  
Punctuation at the end of a line of verse

**Caesura**  
Punctuation within a line of verse.
The Sonnet

From the Italian for "little song."

Perhaps the most important formal, closed form in our language, the sonnet attains power through the compression necessary to convey emotion and imagery in such a confined space and within the strict format. Almost every great poet has achieved greatness in this form.

Typically sonnets contain liberal amounts of enjambment and caesura. The traditional sonnet is in iambic pentameter (u / u / u / u / u / ), but accomplished poets employ liberal metrical substitution to achieve rhetorical/poetic effects.

Poets continue to write sonnets today. In modern poetry, any poem of fourteen lines evokes the sonnet with all of the power and significance in the tradition of that form.

Two main types of sonnets:

Petrarchan/Italian

Fourteen lines
Organized in an octave and a sestet
First stanza (octave) introduces the subject and problem metaphorically.
Second stanza (sestet) comments upon the problem.
The break between the octave and sestet is the turn signaling the shift in tone and stance
The typical rhyme scheme is ababcd cdefge. This pattern varies between poets.

English/Shakespearean/Elizabethan

Fourteen lines
Organized in three quatrains and a concluding couplet
Each quatrain expresses the subject or problem with a different metaphor.
The turn occurs between the third quatrain and the concluding couplet. Thus the poet must rely upon wit, irony, paradox, and symbol for his commentary and closing effect.
The typical rhyme scheme is abab cdcd efef gg.

The Petrarchan and English sonnets are not alone in the world of sonnets—other forms exist, but these two forms are the most important, and other types of sonnets generally derive from one of those forms. Many great poets have developed their own formats for sonnets.
Poetry Concepts and Terms

Quotation: Using “/” to indicate line breaks
Speaker (Persona)
Dramatic Situation
Auditor, Apostrophe
Caesura, Enjambment, End-stop

Denotation & Connotation

Stanza Structure/Form
- Couplet
- Tercet-Triplet
- Quatrain
- Quintain
- Sestet
- Septet
- Octave

Shape
- Haiku
- Sestina
- Epigram
- Villanelle
- Sonnet
  - Italian/Petrarchan
  - English/Elizabethan/
    Shakespearean

Musical Devices
- Alliteration
- Consonance
- Assonance
- Rhyme
  - Internal Rhyme
  - End Rhyme
  - Masculine Rhyme
  - Feminine Rhyme
  - Slant/Near/Approximate

Tropes
- Simile
- Metaphor
- Hyperbole
- Synecdoche
- Personification
- Litotes
- Kenning
- Metonymy
- Onomatopoeia

Paradox-Oxymoron

Ironic
- Verbal
- Dramatic
- Situational

Meter & Rhythm

Scansion
Feet
- Iambic foot
- Trochaic foot
- Anapestic foot
- Dactylic foot
- Rising, Falling
- Double, Triple

Line Length
- Trimeter line
- Tetrameter line
- Pentameter line

Imagery
- Gustatory
- Tactile
- Olfactory
- Visual

Symbolism
Theme
- Occasions
- Carpe Diem
- Aubade
- Elegy
- Epigram
- Epithalamion
- Rant
- Ubi Sunt