



Poetry Writing OLLI at Auburn Fall 2021

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The End of Poetry

Ken Autrey

To scale the cliff of poetry is to scoop out footholds
painstakingly as you go, working with sensitive fingers,
chipped nails, the threat of toppling into the chasm.
The sheer clay wall looms high. You cannot see
the top, but craning around, you see the lit world
open out. Your back is not to the wall
but to the world in its wide charged expanse.

Animals come to the world in faith. The squirrel
skitters between the wheels of a speeding truck,
barely eluding death, then calmly pauses
halfway up the oak to cock its tail and peer around,
oblivious to the cold scrape of mortality.
We, on the other hand, glimpse the truck from afar
and readily imagine its quick ravages.
Our fears are more vivid than our faith,
but that is what makes poetry possible.

The poem denies my right to free speech.
It is an affront to my independence.
The lines of the poem are bars.
My bed is a mere straw mat.
Jail bait, I toss and turn, dreaming
of bread and water. I crack my pencil
on my knee and wait.

The future of poetry rests in the blue wind
trumpeting through the crack in the adobe wall,
throbs in the heartbeat of soldiers, the rattle
of bones, the flutter of pink pantaloons.
Poems grow in the spaces between
the Sphinx's words. When a match flickers out,
what remains is a poem. The audience
is the blind cigarette salesman, the ghost
of Marilyn Monroe, the cave diver.

To write a poem, hold in one hand an object
you've never held before, one that is heavier
than it looks. In the other, hold an object lighter
than it looks. Merge them, and give the bastard
a new name. Balance it on the head of a pen,
and turn your back on it forever.
Walk until you come to your poem.
Greet it with open arms.

Utility

Ken Autrey

A second cup of coffee
prompts me to slip on
work gloves and wander out
to the decrepit utility trailer
that has harbored vines
and rust for twenty years,
one more echo of Dad,
in its day hauling the weighty
matter of his retirement
life: gravel, lumber,
compost, tools, sand.

Something today draws me to it,
something about the kudzu
and English ivy that engulf it.
Soon I'm prying off
the lingering shards
of rotten wood that litter
its flimsy iron frame.
Incredibly, the flat tires
take thirty pounds of air.
Then I roll the skeletal relic
to the road and print a sign
saying "FREE TRAILER"
to passers-by.

I'm drawn to the nearby
rumble of caterpillars and
the growl of a neighbor's
chain saw tearing into oak,
drawn to the pine siskins
massing silently at the feeders,
compelling me to freeze,
spying on the first catbird
of spring, gray but for
black crown and red rump.
He pecks at the suet, then flits
off into the azaleas.

Within the hour, a young man,
maybe a third my age, knocks at the door:
"I'm interested in the trailer."
"It's all yours," I reply. Together
we secure it to his van's burly hitch.
I keep watching and watching,
as another remnant of Dad rolls out of sight.

Haying

William Blake Brown

Under a sky so blue it stops the heart,
and clouds as clean as kids ready for church,
they were haying in the narrow meadow
that stretched along the road that led to town.
In shade beside the road a pickup parked,
and an old man surveyed the scene. Across
the field, a tractor that looked new and large
was pulling a baler that spat out round bales,
wrapped in plastic, impervious to rain. Just one
man could mow, rake and then bale the hay.
In the rearview mirror that is memory
arose another meadow, another summer
An old tractor and an older baling machine
chugged along, dropping the rectangular
bales. Following was another tractor, pulling
a flatbed trailer, and tanned young men hoisted
the bales onto the trailer, stacking them so high
that they teetered visibly when they hit a bump.
At the barn they heaved the hay into the loft
and stacked it all the way to the rafters.
When they finished the last load, they sat
under the pin oak tree, their dusty skin
painted with tracks of sweat, passing around
a gourd to dip into the keg's tepid water,
feeling like they had done something important,
and knowing what it meant to be good tired.
The old man took a last look across the meadow
and pulled onto the blacktop wondering whether
the solitary driver cocooned in the tractor's cab
would ever look back and recall this as a perfect day.

Porch Rocker

William Blake Brown

She sits in her front porch rocker watching
the shadows deepen and the streetlamps
flicker on one by one. It is mid-April,
but the breeze caressing the wind chimes
carries a reminder of March, and she fetches
her worn denim jacket from inside. She drops
a chamomile tea bag into a cup and presses
the lever on the electric kettle. In evening
the porch is a sanctuary where her memories
glow as brightly as the streetlamps.
“We had some good times, didn’t we?” she says
to the empty rocking chair beside her. At last
the darkness is complete, and she goes in
to find that the kettle has snapped off,
and the water in it is cold.

Princeton Junction Station

Cathy Buckhalt

The morning station is abustle.
Final coffee orders,
Juggling messages, notes for today's meetings,
Parking spaces claimed,
Those closest to the station most prized
For return after dark.

Sunset, sunrise, cars still parked carefully,
Locked securely,
Anticipating their owner's arrival.
All night, cars wait,
Trains slow, stop, no owners return.

Days later, cars sit, locked, unclaimed
Collecting Leaves, bird droppings.
Abandoned, not by choice
Dust collects, finishes fade,
Life dulls.
A new reality sets in.
Cars wait to be hauled away
Like dust from lives blown apart.

Godiva Ponders

Wendy Cleveland

Morning sun burns through fog and breeze,
shivers willow leaves in whispered clusters.
Coventry is quiet, its peasants lost in sleep.
They have clapped their shutters tight
and my husband, the Earl, lies abed,
not believing I will ride bare to dare him
to waiver the tolls that burden the poor.
In the stable I saddle my white mare,
lead her to the open paddock where I disrobe,
mount her, and ride naked through the town.
Under the cloak of raven hair breasts sway
with the steady pace of my haughty steed.
Perhaps I am the haughty one,
risking my marriage as if it were some
bargaining chip, my body a holy relic
to barter for the poor who seek lower taxes.
Or, maybe I'm naïve not to think my groom Tom
will find a way to peep through the knothole
gouged wide enough to see the shivering
coin-sized cameo of my body,
an eyeful of lust that quickens his pulse.
I imagine his sigh, heavy with a man's appetite,
and coil my mane tighter, turn the mare about.
Petition rendered, let the sun on louvered shutters
coax them wide open and woo me home to bed.

Still Water

Wendy Cleveland

My father stands in water off the dock,
holds his arms out straight, coaxes
me to jump in, my body an anchor
dropping through dark pockets of cold spring-
fed water, my eyes turned toward the light
looking for sun, his face, his arms.
I touch bottom, push up past muck and rock
until my head breaks the surface, gulping
air and pumping feet I wish were webbed
in water glossy black, shimmering
with damselflies whose diaphanous wings
fold and unfold in silent applause.
Lie on your back he bids, and I float flat
like a board, eyes scanning the bank
and observe for the first time a cluster
of bandit-faced cedar waxwings nestled
in a passel of purple-black elderberries.

A Father's Walk with His Daughter

Margaret Craig-Schmidt

Sunday afternoon was aglow with the warm yellows of Iowa fall.
Sunshine twinkled through the canopy of golden leaves,
Shedding a soft light on a father trekking through the woods
with his five-month-old daughter on his back.
Trees with black trunks lined the gravel path curving
through the glittering magic of the amber forest.
The father/daughter duo walked on ...
not knowing where the path ahead would lead
or what surprises would be around the corner.

The walk in the woods of Iowa was only the beginning
of a journey with the father always walking tenderly
with his daughter through the forest of her life.
She tripped over rocks along the path
and fell into streams she should have seen.
But the father was always there, putting a band-aid on a cut knee
or verbally wiping away tears on a panicked phone call between two exams.
He transferred money when the daughter's bank account got too low,
and arranged for a replacement credit card when hers was stolen.

There were always blue skies peeking through the leaves,
moonlight chasing away the shadows of a dark night,
bridges across the swollen streams,
and hugs to send the daughter on her way again.
There were memorable hikes later on
when the daughter carried the backpack for her father
or listened attentively to stories of his childhood.
The daughter always repaid the borrowed money,
And returned the love with the same tenderness it was given.

Waterfall

Laura Henry

Through steamy forest of multi-greens
punctuated low with tiny splashes of color
they wandered up the lively stream
pausing to ponder each flower, fern, and fungus

Until they encountered a rushing torrent
above them thundering down to splash
white spray on the rocks below
before pooling quiet and icy cold.

Carefully they climbed the mossy wet cliff
to a ledge beside the fall, above the pool,
and laughingly dared one another
to be the first to plunge.

With a toss of her coal-black braids,
she dove salmon-like into the inky deep
disappearing for many heartbeats
before breaking the surface.

A primal scream of shock and delight
pierced the silence, and then his lithe,
sinewy, dark body followed,
swam to meet hers on the shore.

Forgetting time and space
they reveled as one in the touch
and taste and smell and feel of
one another and of
their wild, private world.

Connections

Becca Little

I wake aware I'm already late.
Moving too fast,
I cringe at the crash.

Projectile crystal impales tender flesh
resting in the valley east of Achilles
after our shared trauma.

Weighing my only two choices,
armed with clean towels
I remove the costly dagger.

Slow, steady stream
it's only a vein.
Yet the surge will not stop.

Now the phone is ringing.
Sitting on the cold tile, I let it ring
as I apply pressure to my wound
cleaning up blood and broken crystal.

The machine picks up,
it's my beloved neighbor Betty
imploring me to go outside NOW.

I pick up the receiver, "Why?
I'm sorry, but I'm still in my nightgown.
I'm already late, and I'm bleeding"
but the line is dead.

I trust her.
I wince
in pain and frustration,
but I obey.

Now silent tears
join in the flow.
I stop applying pressure,
unable to walk and do so.

I limp across the living room
wondering if my bloody footprints
will stain the wood,
noting one more thing
to clean up before I can leave.

Stepping outside
I support myself
leaning on the rail,
taking one step at a time.

Gardenia blossoms
make their debut this morning
and overflow the same rail.

I pause and bury my face
in their virgin white petals.
They wipe away the tears
I don't want seen.

But Betty is not here.
Panic in the voices of wildlife
warning each other as they flee
greet me instead.

I limp onto our rural yard
searching for the source
of urgency in Betty's voice.
Discovering the source
of the wildlife terror,
as the source discovers me.

Self-pity subsides
into growing awareness
of the sweet synchronicity
giving purpose to my pain.

Four young Golden eagles
are hunting on our land.
They emerge through the portal
in the canopy of our forest.

How is it they venture so close?
Is it naiveté or curiosity of youth
or has my bloody,
best lingerie enticed them?

Am I a wounded animal
they can overwhelm?
The convocation begins to circle me,
I stretch my arms overhead
and join the ceremony.

Am I reaching in reverence,
fear or is it connection?
Then I understand
my spontaneous reach
is a response to each,
all in one.

Our eyes meet,
and we are connected by our gaze
for a brief sacred moment.
A connection as real as my bare feet
on the cold ground
as I slowly bleed into the earth.

A connection as real
as the atmosphere we share
impales each of us with every inhale,
and we in turn impale it with every breath.

The intimate communion
essential to life.
Still late, I linger.
No longer regretting my fate.

Ars poetica: Th Choppin Blo k

Peter Livant

All poets, but especially the novice poet, should bear in mind the sage advice that it is generally a pretty good idea for a poem to be spare, economical, stingy with words.

It's a good idea for a poem to be spare. Economical. Stingy with words.

It's good for a poem to be as spare as possible.

A good poem is a spare poem.

A good poem is spare.

Good poem: spare.

Spare.

Pare.

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Family Feast

Diane Miller

Even the young ones lounge on the dock
or stretch full-length on the rug in the den,
as the drone of voices fades from sated seniors
and the laughter erupts softer and more seldom.
The table serving the now-spent spread
lingers along the side, reproachful in its disarray, where

gelatinous bits of ham fat cling to Aunt Irma's serving platter
and the forlorn ribs of the turkey carcass stretch raggedly aloft,
crumbled bits of potato chips mingle with yolk from the deviled eggs
and half a piece of chocolate cake sits abandoned by a tea glass.
The banana pudding boasts only remnants of meringue
in a puddle in the bottom, but the raw veggie tray has not much gone.

The last spoonful of potato salad cowers in the corner of the bowl
and the corn pudding has gone on to better things, as overall
the proliferation of spent side dishes recalls Methodists run amok.
An olive crushed underfoot makes a spreading slippery spot,
crumpled napkins and sodden paper plates bulge from a plastic bag,
all mute evidence of the violence that has ensued.

There is no reason that human creatures
could not commune without the comfort of food.
Family ties still bind, friendships yet remain.
But there is something about the melted butter left
in the bottom of a casserole made for gatherings
that heightens the experience, warms the memory.

Rosinante's Lament

Diane Miller

My spavined haunches bear a knight
Like paladin, like Templar,
Except unsung in common sight.
No hero he, no bright star.
O, I would be a Percheron,
A Gringolet for Gawain,
A parfit gentil knight thereon
Veray to bear, a king's son.
But some we are who ever must
A dreamer's burden carry,
Our victories are only dust,
Our catcalls come in flurry.
He who chooses saintly ways
Chooses for us, all our days.

Coming for Thanksgiving

Charlene Redick

So, he is coming for Thanksgiving,
this forty-year-old man
who, as a boy, wanted to know how I cooked salmon croquettes, and to go with me to New York--
anything to avoid school, although he had the memory of an elephant and was a genius at trivia and
sports analysis and could have mastered calculus or the authoring of a thesis paper had he been inclined.

So, will he invite his sisters? I do not want to crowd him, but I am seventy-five. Few holidays left.

I rattle around, a viable 75-year-old, although my knees hurt, and I am unsteady on uneven terrain.
The three daughters and their social anxieties and self-deceptions bring on dread.
So often they are guarded with me but then they break through as they did at the youngest one's destiny
wedding at the beach--one of the most beautiful days of my life -- when the bride gave the older,
sorrowful one the place of honor in the wedding and asked her to read Corinthians on love.

If I speak in the tongues^[a] of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast,^[b] but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Wondering how it might be with them this year if they come, if there will be gains in mercy and compassion, if there will be loving greetings and open hugs, and smiles of gratitude?

Then he, who bounces back like an acrobat from his shortcomings with quirky off-the-chart compliments, turns to me, and delivers once again: *Mom, you expect a lot and are a hard act to follow, so they even the playing field by cruelty and distancing. But the truth is, when we were growing up, you were a force we were in awe of, and you made life worth living.*

I stand amidst the de-hording of the house--the boxes of books, clothes, and worn-out utensils--and wonder if this year we might manage to build each other up instead of our typical cynicism and guardedness that silences the welcome. I am worried that they will need answers when they dig deeper, but I will be gone -- ashes flung on the Gulf of Mexico.

He will make the dressing and I will have the turkey already in the oven,

and as I put together the broccoli salad and the sweet potato casserole, mashed potatoes, and the macaroni and cheese--each child's personal preference carb--I will laugh as he cracks funnies that will lead us to hope on this Thanksgiving Day as they -- adult children no longer in highchairs--acknowledge somehow in true gratitude that they do not know everything and perhaps they ought to give their mother a break, recognizing that while not altogether obvious, glorious things abided in their family or origin: a comedy of errors in the everyday challenges, great stories of victory over adversity, a trove of gorgeous memories of vacations and places we have lived, talent unfolding from each one of us, and the standing evidence that they were truly cherished.

Important things that they can use, keep, and pass down.

Abscission

Crystal H. Rogers

Leaves fall languidly,
slow float to earth, rocking
back and forth, dancing
with the breeze, or alone.

Once abscission starts,
there is no return.
Cells build up, bit by bit,
Wall forms between leaf and stem.

Brown, wrinkled, crunchy underfoot,
Lifetime of labor ended,
Hoping for something
beyond compost.

Oaks with long memories
know hard times are coming,
even as rain sluices down,
filling puddles in the pasture,
even while days are yet
long and humid.

Shells

Crystal H. Rogers

Not pea shells, pecan shells, or shotgun shells,
not shells of cicada, snake sheds,
just the shell of a body after the spirit departed.
Deadly cones, pink tellins, spiny jewel boxes,
delicious scallops, clams, and conchs,
tiny wentel traps, detailed and pristine,
operculum, separated from the house,
useless, a door lying in the sand.
Coinage of the water's edge
buys a memory beyond price.

Backflips

Mary Ann Rygiel

Poets stand on the mound looking at signals
From catchers hiding behind sculpted masks
Studying what will fool the angled batter.
Sliders, curve balls, changeups and more,
Then fastballs clocked at 105 mph
Or was it 98.6? Check the record book.
Strike Three! The batter whiffs before he knows it.
Wants to protest Unfair but doesn't bother,
Knowing it's a setup against him.
The exultant pitcher does a back flip
Meant to show peace with the universe
As he rides a swirling arm of the galaxy,
Hops an Einsteinian elevator
All the way to Andromeda.

Dwelling in the Pure and Infinite

William Squires

(housewife's aria appassionato)

Over the threshold, through the door
Sweep the dirt off the floor.
Kick the dog, swat the cat,
I'll clean and mop this habitat.
If the jerk who trashed my place,
Shows up I will smack his face.
He has no right to mess my house,
I'll squeeze his juice, the dirty lout.
A woman's work is never done
While pigs and men are having fun.
I'll make the bastard do his share,
Or break his face, pull out his hair,
Kick his gonads, smash his brain,
Punch out his eyes, I'll give him pain.
I'll snap his rod and reel one day,
If he won't clean, I'll make him pay.
Give me instead a man who's neat,
Who's spic and span, oh, what a treat,
No muddy boots, but slippers yet,
A light stepping guy with etiquette.
No dog or kids or hunters here,
No tracks of mud, no rugs a smear.
How wonderful it would be
To live this moment of eternity
In one house devoid of filth
And free, free of everyone but me.

Concubine's Letter to Augustine

Bill Wilson

Dear Gus,

Forgive the nickname,
But we did live together for 12 years.
I loved you, bore our child.

You took our son and went off
To join that church of yours.
You left me in Carthage
You abandoned me.
Was I angry? Of course!

Your sanctimonious mother followed you.
She never liked me anyway.
What mother has ever felt
any woman was good enough
For her precious boy?

You hooked up with that Bishop Ambrose,
You called him father.
You acted more like his camp follower
Your brilliant mind catapulted you
to the top of the dogpile.
You won fame, position, and victories
Over those you called heretics.

Gus, I write this from the nunnery
Where you stashed me so you could save
your soul and maybe mine.
Am I grateful? No.
You took my youth, my virginity, and my child.
And left, all for your higher calling.

What you did is the act of a man who wanted
the best of both worlds:
Lechery and carousing as a youth.
A hypocritical sprint for salvation in middle age.

Gus, your Christian God may have
preached forgiveness.
He can have it.
You can have it.
I don't want it
Or you.

Grandma Maud

Bill Wilson

Three grandchildren demand neutrality.
Love all or love none—
no favorites, no rejects, just three—all the same.

But I loved little Bill most—
for being the baby?
for being the only man-child?
for being impish as only boys can be?
I didn't know.

My heart had never opened easily or often.
Life had doled out too much pain, too many disappointments.
But Bill's guileless expectancy cracked the shell of my isolation.
His youth, his wide-eyed naivete drew me in.

That awe at life itself touched me
when not much else did—
offered a rare chance to love, to cherish, to dote,
offered, asking nothing in return
but affection, acceptance.
I embraced that proffered gift,
wishing to dive into
the clear pool of his innocence.