

CHRISTMAS PUDDING

2006

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Robert Middleton

Christmas Pudding is an anthology devoted essentially to aspects of the use of language, particularly in poetry but also in wit and humour. Poetry is a vehicle for sharing ideas and emotions and, as such, is a mark of our civilisation and collective intelligence: it also promotes an understanding of the nature and importance of language, man's highest natural attribute. I am concerned that few people read poetry today and that the contemporary dominance of the visual media poses a threat to our command (and even understanding) of language and to a decline in writing skills.

I was deeply influenced by the teaching and literary criticism of Yvor Winters at Stanford University in the early 1960s, by his rigorous insistence on the distinction between connotation and denotation in poetry and by his moral crusade against the decline of reason as a precept in art and literature (and life) since the end of the eighteenth century. The accompanying relaxation of content and meaning - and subsequent abandonment of form - that characterises verse for the last two hundred years is, at least in part, responsible for a breakdown in communication between writer and reader: today, 'anything goes' - much verse is obscure and, if it were not divided into lines, would be indistinguishable from prose. I share Winters' view that the late sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century was a golden age for English poetry and that the poets of this age developed a 'timeless' medium for poetic expression characterised by the clear communication of ideas and emotion, using words not only for their sound, rhythm and imagery but also to convey meaning. I recognise, however, that the poetry of this period may not be easily accessible to the general reader as a result of unfamiliar contemporary poetic conventions and shifts in the meaning of words. I also dissent from Winters' rather pessimistic view that not much of comparable quality has been produced since. While drawing on poetry of the 'golden age', *Christmas Pudding* aims to identify those later poems that, in my opinion, meet Winters' strict criteria.

In addition to the desire to entertain and amuse, *Christmas Pudding* has thus a serious intent: I aim to include poems that use language in a rational and comprehensible way, that have a clear meaning with a minimum of decoration and cliché and that express feelings we can share. My choice is intended to show that poetry can be (I would even say, should be) a means of communication between normal rational people.

The inspiration for *Christmas Pudding* is *Christmas Crackers*, an anthology of wisdom, wit and linguistic surprise collected by the distinguished scholar John Julius Norwich. I have tried to emulate his mixture of humour and erudition, although a significant part of my raw material is drawn from the more mundane spheres of e-mail and the Internet. My title seems to me apposite: a Christmas pudding is full of varied, interesting and sometimes surprising ingredients, is well-rounded, requires a considerable amount of stirring in its preparation, is still good a long time after the first serving and is not heavy if enjoyed sparingly. Moreover, a pudding is the least pretentious of dishes, acknowledging Norwich's superior recipe.



Childe Hassam (1859–1935) – ‘The Fourth of July, 1916’

O my America! my new-found-land

John Donne (1572-1631)

In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people,
By the relief office I seen my people;
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking
Is this land made for you and me?
From *This Land is Your Land* by ***Woody Guthrie (1912-1967)***

I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

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CHRISTMAS PUDDING 2006

As you may have guessed from the choice of picture and words on the frontispiece, *Christmas Pudding 2006* is devoted mainly to things American, the first of which, this year, is humour – or, rather, humor.

Art Buchwald, one of the greatest American humorists, began his journalistic career just after World War II in Paris and joined *The New York Herald Tribune* in 1949. One of Buchwald's earliest and now most famous pieces is *Explaining Thanksgiving to the French*, first published in 1953 but repeated almost every year since. In case you haven't seen it yet, here it is (if you have, I am sure you won't mind seeing it again).

'One of our most important holidays is Thanksgiving Day, known in France as *le Jour de Meri Donnant*.

Le Jour de Meri Donnant was first started by a group of pilgrims (*Pèlerins*) who fled from *l'Angleterre* before the McCarran Act to found a colony in the New World (*le Nouveau Monde*), where they could shoot Indians (*les Peaux-Rouges*) and eat turkey (*dinde*) to their hearts' content.

They landed at a place called Plymouth (now a famous *voiture Américaine*) in a wooden sailing ship named the Mayflower, or *Fleur de Mai*, in 1620. But while the *Pèlerins* were killing the *dindes*, the *Peaux-Rouges* were killing the *Pèlerins*, and there were several hard winters ahead for both of them. The only way the *Peaux-Rouges* helped the *Pèlerins* was when they taught them how to grow corn (*maïs*). They did this because they liked corn with their *Pèlerins*.

In 1623, after another harsh year, the *Pèlerins'* crops were so good they decided to have a celebration and give thanks because more *maïs* was raised by the *Pèlerins* than *Pèlerins* were killed by the *Peaux-Rouges*.

Every year on *le Jour de Meri Donnant*, parents tell their children an amusing story about the first celebration. It concerns a brave *capitaine* named Miles Standish (known in France as *Kilomètres Deboutish*) and a shy young lieutenant named Jean Alden. Both of them were in love with a flower of Plymouth called Priscilla Mullens (no translation). The *vieux capitaine* said to the *jeune lieutenant*:

"Go to the damsel Priscilla (*Allez très vite chez Priscilla*), the loveliest maiden of Plymouth (*la plus jolie demoiselle de Plymouth*). Say that a blunt old captain, a man not of words but of action (*un vieux Fanfan la Tulipe*), offers his hand and his heart - the hand and heart of a soldier. Not in these words, you understand, but this, in short, is my meaning.

"I am a maker of war (*Je suis un fabricant de la guerre*) and not a maker of phrases. You, bred as a scholar (*Vous, qui êtes pain comme un étudiant*), can say it in elegant language, such as you read in your books of the pleadings and wooings of lovers, such as you think best suited to win the heart of the maiden."

Although Jean was fit to be tied (*convenable à être emballé*), friendship prevailed over love and he went to his duty. But instead of using elegant language, he blurted out

his mission. Priscilla was muted with amazement and sorrow (*rendue muette par l'étonnement et la tristesse*).

Jean said that *Kilomètres Deboutish* was very busy and didn't have time for such things. He staggered on, telling her what a wonderful husband *Kilomètres* would make. Finally, Priscilla arched her eyebrows and said in a tremulous voice, "Why don't you speak for yourself, Jean?" ("*Chacun a son goût*.")

At length she exclaimed, interrupting the ominous silence: "If the great captain of Plymouth is so very eager to wed me, why does he not come himself and take the trouble to woo me?" (*Où est-il, le vieux Kilomètres? Pourquoi ne vient-il pas auprès de moi pour tenter sa chance?*)

And so, on the fourth Thursday in November, American families sit down at a large table brimming with tasty dishes, and for the only time during the year eat better than the French do. No one can deny that *le Jour de Merci Donnant* is a *grande fête* and no matter how well fed American families are, they never forget to give thanks to *Kilomètres Deboutish*, who made this great day possible.'

T T T T

I remember the Chief of Police in El Paso, Texas, with whom I stayed in 1961, telling me that he would have loved to travel to Europe but that he was afraid he might be depressed by the poverty there. Forty-five years on, misperceptions of 'old Europe' persist.

Misperceptions are, however, frequently reciprocal. I returned from the USA in 1961 with very mixed emotions and would probably then have subscribed to the view that American culture was an oxymoron. The painting by Childe Hassam on the frontispiece, and those by Frederic Remington (1861-1909) included in the text are intended as a reminder to myself that I have since learned better. There are, for example, more than 500 symphony orchestras (not counting youth orchestras) and some 1,500 museums in the USA, several of which I had the opportunity to enjoy this year, in Seattle, Cleveland and Chicago.

Yvor Winters, in his scathing criticism of modern poetic conventions, made some exceptions for a few 20th century American poems. My selection for *Christmas Pudding 2006* aims to demonstrate that some are, indeed, among the best in the English language. Despite the contempt shown by the present US administration for what was hitherto a shared western understanding of human rights and international law, there is – as *The New York Review of Books* used to say in its publicity – another America¹ and the fine poetry included here celebrates an enduring US attachment to Enlightenment values. The results of the mid-term elections last November give some hope of a return to these.

One of the problems in assessing the quality of American poetry is the wide variety in taste of those who compile anthologies. I began - regrettably - with the *Penguin Book of American Verse*. The editor clearly had a preference for abstract, formless and often impenetrable texts (some of them not even meriting the name

¹ The NYRB apparently no longer uses this slogan – could it have fallen victim to political correctness?

of verse, let alone poetry) and I found in it depressingly little that I wanted to include in *Christmas Pudding*. On the other hand, *Fifty Years of American Poetry*, published by Dell in 1984 for the 50th anniversary of the Academy of American Poetry, was better, and so was *The voice that is great within us - American poetry of the twentieth century*, published by Bantam Books in 1970. When I got to the two-volume set of *American Poetry - the Twentieth Century*, published by the Library of America in 2000, I found a treasure on almost every other page, and my problem became how to exercise a choice faced with such an *embarras de richesses*.

Inevitably, therefore, I have had to leave out many superb poems but promise to remedy this in future editions of *Christmas Pudding*. The sub-divisions that follow are somewhat arbitrary, but reflect well, I think, the specific characteristics of the best 20th century American poetry: lucidity about the art of writing poetry and the problems of literary education; mastery of the short poem and (surprisingly, perhaps, in the 20th century) the sonnet; humour and wit; fine description and creation of atmosphere; reflections of the local environment that I have called 'Americana', including some remarkable work by black poets; and finally, a section 'Miscellaneous' that reflects a wistfulness that seems to permeate much of 20th century American poetry, especially poems by women.

T T T T

ARS POETICA

Yvor Winters (1900-1968) - *On Teaching the Young*

The young are quick of speech.
Grown middle-aged, I teach
Corrosion and distrust
Exacting what I must.

A poem is what stands
When imperceptive hands,
Feeling, have gone astray.
It is what one should say.

Few minds will come to this.
The poet's only bliss
Is in cold certitude--
Laurel, archaic, rude.

J.V. Cunningham (1911-1985) - *For My Contemporaries*

How time reverses
The proud in heart!
I now make verses
Who aimed at art.

But I sleep well.
Ambitious boys
Whose big lies swell
With spiritual noise

Despise me not!

And be not queasy
To praise somewhat:
Verse is not easy.

But rage who will.
Time that procured me
Good sense and skill
Of madness cured me.

Marianne Moore (1887-1972), from *Poetry*, 1921

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers that
there is in
it after all, a place for the genuine.

Charles Reznikoff (1894-1976) - *From Early History of a Writer*

I had been bothered by a secret weariness
with meter and regular stanzas
grown a little stale. The smooth lines and rhymes
seemed to me affected, a false stress on words and syllables--
fake flowers
in the streets in which I walked.
And yet I found prose
without the burst of song and sudden dancing--
without the intensity which I wanted.

Free Verse

Not like flowers in the city
In neat rows or in circles
But like dandelions
Scattered on a lawn.

Whether or not poetry requires form is still debated hotly. I like Reznikoff's *apologia* for 'free verse' but my sympathies are more with Robert Frost who, when asked about 'free verse' in an interview with *Newsweek* in 1956, replied famously: "I'd just as soon play tennis with the net down." I have included one of his fine sonnets as an illustration of his mastery of this most difficult of poetic forms. Frost confirmed his view in an epigram (probably the next most difficult form):

Let chaos storm!
Let cloud shapes swarm!
I wait for form.

T T T T

What's in a name?

In March this year, the BBC News website invited readers to submit curious place names. I thought immediately of those I had seen in 1961 on the masthead of a local paper in Northern California, a centre of gold mining more than a century before. Among the towns served by the paper were: You Bet, Yellow Dog, Last Chance, Deadwood, Rough and Ready, French Gulch, Bully Hill, Buzzards Roost,

and Gold Run. Visitors to the BBC site offered the following (mostly in the USA): Crazy Woman Creek, Cowshit Lane, Imalone Road, Zzyzx, Psycho Path, Divorce Court (off Easy Lane) and Farfrompoopen Road - as well as this photo.



T T T T

AMERICANA

Mary Austin (1868-1934) - *The Grass on the Mountain (From the Paiute)*

Oh, long, long

The snow has possessed the mountains.

The deer have come down and the big-horn,

They have followed the Sun to the south

To feed on the mesquite pods and the bunch grass.

Loud are the thunder drums

In the tents of the mountains.

Oh, long, long

Have we eaten chia seeds

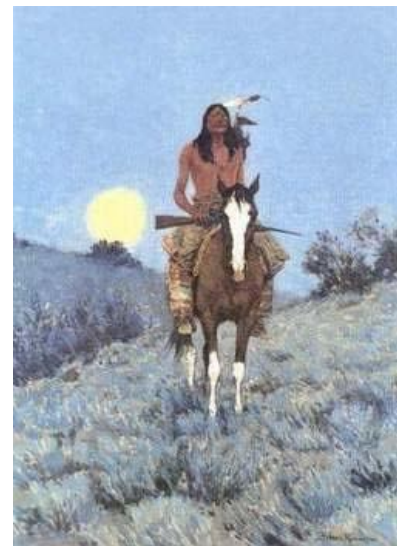
And dried deer's flesh of the summer killing.

We are wearied of our huts

And the smoky smell of our garments.

We are sick with desire of the sun

And the grass on the mountain.



Stephen Vincent Benet (1898-1943) - *American Names*

I have fallen in love with American names,

The sharp names that never get fat,

The snakeskin-titles of mining-claims,

The plumed war-bonnet of Medicine Hat,

Tucson and Deadwood and Lost Mule Flat.

Seine and Piave are silver spoons,

But the spoonbowl-metal is thin and worn,

There are English counties like hunting-tunes

Played on the keys of a postboy's horn,

But I will remember where I was born.

I will remember Carquinez Straits,
Little French Lick and Lundy's Lane,
The Yankee ships and the Yankee dates
And the bullet-towns of Calamity Jane.
I will remember Skunktown Plain.

I will fall in love with a Salem tree
And a rawhide quirt from Santa Cruz,
I will get me a bottle of Boston sea
And a blue-gum nigger to sing me blues.
I am tired of loving a foreign muse.

Rue des Martyrs and Bleeding-Heart-Yard,
Senlis, Pisa, and Blindman's Oast,
It is a magic ghost you guard
But I am sick for a newer ghost,
Harrisburg, Spartanburg, Painted Post.

Henry and John were never so
And Henry and John were always right?
Granted, but when it was time to go
And the tea and the laurels had stood all night,
Did they never watch for Nantucket Light?

I shall not rest quiet in Montparnasse.
I shall not lie easy at Winchelsea.
You may bury my body in Sussex grass,
You may bury my tongue at Champmédy.
I shall not be there. I shall rise and pass.
Bury my heart at Wounded Knee.

Edwin Ford Piper (1871-1939) - *Big Swimming*

Rain on the high prairies,
In dusk of autumnal hills;
Under the creaking saddle
My cheerless pony plods ...

Down where the obscure water
Lapping the lithe willows
Sunders the chilling plain -
Rust-hearted and travel-worn -
We set our bodies
To the November flood.

The farther shore is a cloud
Beyond midnight ...
Big swimming.



H.L. Davis (1894-1960) - *Proud Riders*

We rode hard, and brought the cattle from brushy springs,
From heavy dying thickets, leaves wet as snow;

From high places, white-grassed and dry in the wind;
Draws where the quaken-asps were yellow and white,
And the leaves spun and spun like money spinning.
We poured them on to the trail, and rode for town.

Men in the fields leaned forward in the wind,
Stood in the stubble and watched the cattle passing.
The wind bowed all, the stubble shook like a shirt.
We threw the reins by the yellow and black fields, and rode,
And came, riding together, into the town



Which is by the gray bridge, where the
alders are,
The white-barked alder trees dropping
big leaves
Yellow and black, into the cold black
water.
Children, little cold boys, watched after
us
The freezing wind flapped their clothes
like windmill paddles.
Down the flat frosty road we crowded
the herd:

High stepped the horses for us, proud riders in autumn.

Louise Bogan (1897-1970) - *Last Hill in a Vista*

Come, let us tell the weeds in ditches
How we are poor, who once had riches,
And lie out in the sparse and sodden
Pastures that the cows have trodden,
The while an autumn night seals down
The comforts of the wooden town.

Come, let us counsel some cold stranger
How we sought safety, but loved danger.
So, with stiff walls about us, we
Chose this more fragile boundary:
Hills, where light poplars, the firm oak,
Loosen into a little smoke.

Robert Francis (1901-1987) - *New England Mind*

My mind matches this understated land.
Outdoors the pencilled tree, the wind-carved drift,
Indoors the constant fire, the careful thrift
Are facts that I accept and understand.
I have brought in red berries and green boughs—
Berries of black alder, boughs of pine.
They and the sunlight on them, both are mine.
I need no florist flowers in my house.
Having lived here the years that are my best,

I call it home. I am content to stay.
I have no bird's desire to fly away.
I envy neither north, east, south, nor west.
My outer world and inner make a pair.
But would the two be always of a kind?
Another latitude, another mind?
Or would I be New England anywhere?

Sterling A. Brown (1901-1989) - From *Ma Rainey*

O Ma Rainey,
Sing yo' song;
Now you's back
Whah you belong,
Git way inside us,
Keep us strong. . . .
O Ma Rainey,
Li'l an' low;
Sing us 'bout de hard
luck
Roun' our do';
Sing us 'bout de
lonesome road
We mus' go. . . .



I talked to a fellow, an' the fellow say,
"She jes' catch hold of us, somekindaway.
She sang Backwater Blues one day:

*'It rained fo' days an' de skies was dark as night,
Trouble taken place in de lowlands at night.*

*'Thundered an' lightened an' the storm begin to roll
Thousan's of people ain't got no place to go.*

*'Den I went an' stood upon some high ol' lonesome hill,
An' looked down on the place where I used to live.'*

An' den de folks, dey natchally bowed dey heads an' cried,
Bowed dey heavy heads, shet dey moufs up tight an' cried,
An' Ma lef' de stage, an' followed some de folks outside."

Dere wasn't much more de fellow say:
She jes' gits hold of us dataway.

Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,

And grow strong.
 Tomorrow,
 I'll be at the table
 When company comes.
 Nobody'll dare
 Say to me,
 'Eat in the kitchen,'
 Then.

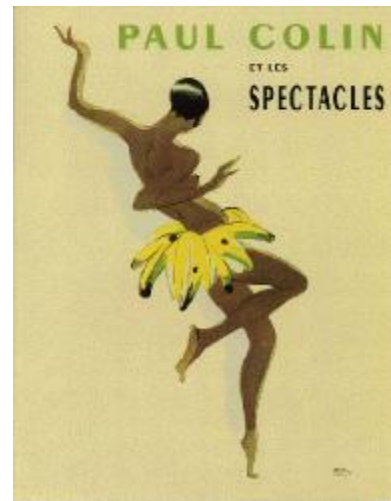
Besides,
 They'll see how beautiful I am
 And be ashamed--

I, too, am America.

Waring Cuney (1906-1976) - *No Images*

She does not know
 Her beauty,
 She thinks her brown skin
 Has no glory.
 If she could dance
 Naked,
 Under palm trees
 And see her image in the river
 She would know.

But there are no palm trees
 On the street,
 And dishwater gives back no images.



Jerome K. Rothenberg (1931-) - *In Beauty May I Walk (From the Navajo)*

In beauty may
 All day long may
 Through the returning seasons may

I walk
 I walk
 I walk
 Beautifully will I possess again
 Beautiful birds
 Beautifully joyful birds
 On the trail marked with pollen may I walk
 With grasshoppers about my feet may I walk
 With beauty before me may I walk
 With beauty behind me may I walk
 With beauty above me may I walk
 With beauty all around me may I walk
 In old age, wandering on a trail of beauty
 Lively, may I walk
 In old age, wandering on a trail of beauty
 Living again, may I walk



It is finished in beauty
 It is finished in beauty

T T T T

John Kenneth Galbraith, one of the most influential economic writers of his generation, died in April this year. He diagnosed the phenomenon of 'private opulence and public squalor' and coined expressions that passed into the language, such as 'conventional wisdom', 'affluent society', and he had a gift for the trenchant and witty phrase such as 'the bland leading the bland' that stuck in the mind. I remember, in particular his cautionary words: "Economic policy involves not a choice between the pleasant and the unpleasant but one between the unpalatable and the disastrous." He not only wrote well but his writings were extraordinarily prescient of the present excesses of neo-conservatism. The following is from his preface to the 1984 reissue of *The Affluent Society*, first published in 1958 – substitute 'Bush' for 'Reagan' and you have a very perceptive critique of contemporary US economic and social policy.

"There are some things that I would change or amend in the chapters on income equality and economic security. I argued there that, with affluence, these are of diminishing political urgency. However, the Reagan administration in the years since 1980 has done more than a little to revive the question of income distribution as a political issue. It has accomplished this by its curtailment of social welfare expenditures as well as its reduction of personal and corporate taxes with major absolute benefit to the very affluent. This was accompanied by the admission of one of its high officials, Mr. David Stockman, that the so-called supply-side economics was really a cover for this intent."

"On few matters over the centuries has the human conscience been more amenable and the human brain more resourceful than in finding reasons why the rich and the fortunate should live in comfortable coexistence with the poor. Those on whom, as it is said, fortune smiles are the natural beneficiaries of their own superior intelligence, diligence, foresight, energy, moral tone or, if even more dubiously, of their better and thus richer ancestors and inherited qualities. The deprived are the natural victims of their own idleness, fecklessness, uncontrolled procreation (the great resort in justification of Ricardo, Malthus and classical economics) or their preference as to mode of life, extending to slumber under bridges or on street grates, as Ronald Reagan has held. Or, for other reasons, they are, in George Bernard Shaw's deathless phrase, the undeserving poor. At the highest level of rationalization, that of Herbert Spencer and his American disciples in the last century, the Social Darwinists, poverty is the socially therapeutic tendency that eliminates the unfit. An instinct for Social Darwinism still lurks in our time, in companionable association with the fundamentalist theology that holds that property is God's natural reward for the worthy. The poor, meanwhile, have the comfort of knowing they are His ultimate preference because He created so many of them and because, unlike the rich, they will pass easily into the next world to enjoy, along with the meek, full compensation for the miseries of this existence. The relevant and supporting texts and sermons are amply available from the religious broadcasters and the Moral Majority.

... [F]rom the compassion and perceptive caution of many of the affluent, came the modern welfare state, with its assurance of a minimum income and essential services

for all and with the accompanying structure of social insurance and social security. This was the political movement associated in the United States with Franklin D. Roosevelt, the New Deal and the liberal Democrats; in Britain with Lloyd George, the Fabians and the Labour Party. In the minds of all concerned or involved this was a permanent revolution; it would, it was assumed, ensure its progenitors power for all time.

In fact, given increasing affluence it was a self-liquidating political movement, as more of those involved, not excluding the author of this book, might have seen. With the spread of well-being, more and more people have a comfortable satisfaction with their own economic position. Once thus blessed, they find, as in all past times, a suitably persuasive reason for separating themselves and their consciences from the still persisting poverty of the now less numerous poor. ...

There are amply varied explanations of the Reagan revolution in the United States, as also of that of Mrs. Margaret Thatcher in Britain and the less clear movements in Germany and elsewhere. Personality is frequently cited, this being the particular predilection of the vulnerable television mind. ... But the deeper and more enduring explanation was that in the modern American economy the securely affluent had become a voting majority, or, more precisely, a majority of those who vote. ...

Coming to office in 1981, President Reagan, as earlier noted, curtailed or cut back on social services with primary impact on the poor. And, as also noted, he reduced personal income and corporation taxes with by far the greatest benefit to the very affluent. The justification, namely that the rich were not working and investing because they had too little money and that the poor were not working because, in the form of government benefits, they had too much, was not intrinsically persuasive. Nor were other justifications, including the argument that benefits to the rich are indirectly the succour of the poor. This, the trickle-down effect -- the horse-and-sparrow metaphor, holding that if the horse is fed enough oats, some will pass through to the road for the sparrow, has always been greeted with mild derision. But, as we have seen, the justification of the affluence of the affluent in face of poverty does not have to be intellectually compelling. It is sufficient that there be no overt admission that one is legislating society for the affluent. It is known that Mr. Reagan came to office with the enthusiastic support of the more comfortable part of the American voting population. It is normal in a democracy to do something for your supporters. Thus it was normal, even predictable, that he would reward those who voted for him and provided generously the considerable money a modern political campaign requires. No reward could be so plausible, so appropriate, so welcome as tax reductions that had their greatest effect in the upper income brackets and a matching economy in outlays for those at the bottom. But decency in the affluent society requires that this not be said. Action on behalf of the rich must, however implausibly, be under suitable camouflage. No one should be fooled. In a generally affluent society we must expect the affluent to reward not poverty but affluence."

"The final pages of this book deal with a question much on my mind twenty-five years ago and increasingly so ever since. That is the commitment of a production-oriented society to the promiscuous and now indiscriminate production of weapons. Nothing that has happened in the last quarter-century has served to reduce that

concern. Were I writing now, I would lay greater stress on the dark shadow that is cast by the military power -- the power that derives from the huge bureaucracy of the Pentagon and the armed services and its great outreach to the weapons firms, to other corporations, to vulnerable politicians and to the voters at large. My concern would embrace the control -- the classification -- of information, the appeal to patriotism, the other social conditioning that aids the military purpose and the huge financial resources by which submission to the military power is won. I would stress the need of the military for a plausible enemy”

T T T T

SHORT POEMS

Lizette Woodworth Reese (1856-1935) - *Wind*

Now has the wind a sound
Made out of rain;
A misty, broken secretness,
That drenches road and pane.
It drips and drips; a hush
Falls on the town;
Like golden clods an old tree shakes
Its apples down.

A Little Song of Life

Glad that I live am I;
That the sky is blue;
Glad for the country lanes,
And the fall of dew.
After the sun the rain;
After the rain the sun;
This is the way of life,
Till the work be done.
All that we need to do,
Be we low or high,
Is to see that we grow
Nearer the sky.

Amy Lowell (1874-1925) - *Vernal Equinox*

The scent of hyacinths, like a pale mist,
lies between me and my book;
And the South Wind, washing through the room,
Makes the candles quiver.
My nerves sting at a spatter of rain on the shutter,
And I am uneasy with the thrusting of green shoots
Outside, in the night.

Why are you not here to overpower me with your tense and urgent love?

Adelaide Crapsey (1878-1914) - *November Night*

Listen . . .
With faint dry sound,
Like steps of passing ghosts,

The leaves, frost-crisp'd, break from the trees
And fall.

Carl Sandburg (1878-1967) - *Fog*

The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches

Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) - *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird (V)*

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

Angelina Weld Grimké (1880-1958) - *Epitaph on a Living Woman*

There were tiny flames in her eyes,
Her mouth was a flame,
And her flesh
Now she is ashes

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) - *The Act*

There were the roses, in the rain.
Don't cut them, I pleaded.
They won't last, she said.
But they're so beautiful
where they are.
Agh, we were all beautiful once, she said,
and cut them and gave them to me
in my hand.

Ezra Pound (1885-1972) - *Liu Ch'e*

The rustling of the silk is discontinued,
Dust drifts over the courtyard,
There is no sound of footfall, and the leaves
Scurry into heaps and lie still,
And she the rejoicer of the heart is beneath them:
A wet leaf that clings to the threshold.

The Bath Tub

As a bathtub lined with white porcelain,
When the hot water gives out or goes tepid,
So is the slow cooling of our chivalrous passion,
O my much praised but-not-altogether-satisfactory lady.

Haniel Long (1888-1956) - *Daphnis and Chloe*

You found it difficult to woo –
So do we who follow you.

Everyone would like to mate;
Everyone has had to wait.

So much beauty, so much burning!
Ages pass as we are learning.

Charles Reznikoff (1894-1976)

These days the papers in the street
leap into the air or burst across the lawns—
not a scrap but has the breath of life:
these in a gust of wind
play about,
those for a moment lie still and sun themselves.

David McCord (1897-1997) - *Waiter*

By and by
God caught his eye.

Robert Francis (1901-1987) - *Museum Vase*

It contains nothing.
We ask it
To contain nothing.

Having transcended use
It is endlessly
Content to be.

Still it broods
On old burdens--
Wheat, oil, wine.

Yvor Winters (1900-1968) - *To My Infant Daughter II*

Alas that I should be
So old, and you so small!
You will think naught of me
When your dire hours befall.

Take few men to your heart!
Unstable, fierce, unkind,
The ways that men impart.
True love is slow to find.

True art is slow to grow.
Like a belated friend,
It comes to let one know
Of what has had an end.

Robert Francis (1901-1987)

By night
After midnight I heard a scream.
I was awake. It was no dream.
But whether it was bird of prey

Or prey of bird I could not say.
I never heard that sound by day.

Lindley Williams Hubbell (1901-1994) - *Sounds*

To me the sound of falling rain
Is very beautiful,
But Japanese prefer the sound of snow
Which I can't hear at all.

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) - *My People*

The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people,

The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people,

Beautiful also is the sun,
Beautiful also are the souls of my people.

Lorine Niedecker (1903-1970) - *Granite Pail 61*

Smile
to see the lake
lay
the still sky

And
out for an easy
make
the dragonfly.

John F. Nims (1913-1999) - *Watching the Planes Come In At La Guardia*

Joan's kiss
-- it pancakes --
a flat smack.
But Jeanne!
The delicate approach, slow tilt and lean.
All hovering danger and delight.
As when
Home, over mountain, sea, and chancy weather,
Plane and its shadow
thrill
and touch together.

Richard Wilbur (1921-) - *Piazza Di Spagna, Early Morning*

I can't forget
How she stood at the top of that long marble stair
Amazed, and then with a sleepy pirouette
Went dancing slowly down to the fountain-quieted square;

Nothing upon her face
But some impersonal loneliness, - not then a girl

But as it were a reverie of the place
A called for falling glide and whirl;
As when a leaf, petal or thin chip
Is drawn to the falls of a pool and, circling a moment above it
Rides over the lip - perfectly beautiful, perfectly ignorant of it.

Marie Ponsot (1922-) - *Multipara: Gravida 5*

Come to term the startled child shocks
Peace upon me; I am great with peace;
Pain teaches primal cause; my bones unlock
To learn my final end. The formal increase
Of passionate patience breaks into a storm of heat
Where calling on you love my heart's hopes rise
With violence to seize as prayer this sweet
Submitting act. I pray. Loud with surprise
Thrown sprung back wide the blithe body lies
Exultant and wise. The born child cries.

Cid Corman (1924-)

Deceased
it comes back
unopened

why open
to see what I said

there was
much to tell you

now there is nothing
to say

Maya Angelou (1928-) - *Passing Time*

Your skin like dawn
Mine like musk

One paints the beginning
of a certain end.

The other, the end of a
sure beginning.

When You Come

When you come to me, unbidden,
Beckoning me
To long-ago rooms,
Where memories lie.

Offering me, as to a child, an attic,
Gatherings of days too few.
Baubles of stolen kisses.
Trinkets of borrowed loves.

Trunks of secret words,
I CRY.

T T T T

Tired of politics? Cynical about politicians? Read the following, first down and then up, line by line. It will confirm your prejudices. (With thanks to Robert Genillard.)

Dans notre parti politique nous accomplissons ce que nous promettons.
Seuls les imbéciles peuvent croire que
nous ne lutterons pas contre la corruption.
Parce que il y a quelque chose de certain pour nous:
L'honnêteté et la transparence sont fondamentales pour atteindre nos idéaux.
Nous démontrons que c'est une grande stupidité de croire que
les mafias continueront à faire partie du gouvernement comme par le passé.
Nous assurons sans l'ombre d'un doute que
la justice sociale sera le but principal de notre mandat.
Malgré cela, il y a encore des gens stupides qui s'imaginent que
l'on puisse continuer à gouverner avec les ruses de la vieille politique.
Quand nous assumerons le pouvoir nous ferons tout pour que
soit mis fin aux situations privilégiées et au trafic d'influences.
Nous ne permettrons d'aucune façon que
nos enfants meurent de faim.
Nous accomplirons nos desseins même si
les réserves économiques se vident complètement.
Nous exercerons le pouvoir jusqu'à ce que
vous aurez compris qu'à partir de maintenant
nous sommes le parti de la 'nouvelle politique'.

T T T T

Testing Texting (From *The Adventure of English*, by Melvyn Bragg)

"The Internet took off in English and although there are now fifteen hundred languages on the Internet, seventy per cent of it is still in English. And a new form of English has just appeared back at base - Text English. This appeared in an issue of the *Guardian* early in 2003, under *English as a Foreign Language*

Dnt u sumX rekn eng lang v lngwindd? 2 mny wds & ltrs? ?nt we b usng lss time & papr? ? we b 4wd tnking + txt? 13 yr grl frim w scot 2ndry schl sd ok. Sh rote GCSE eng as (abt hr smmr hols in NY) in txt spk (NO!) Sh sd sh 4t txt spk was 'easr thn standard eng' Sh 4t hr tcher wd b :) Hr tcher 4t it was nt so gr8! Sh was :(& talkd 2 newspprs (but askd 2 b anon) 'I cdnt bleve wot I was cing! - ! - ! OW2TE. Sh hd NI@A wot grl was on abut. Sh 4t her pupl was ritng in 'hieroglyphics'.

This is yet another English and totally comprehensible to its users who are mostly young and therefore influential on the future of the language."

In another Chapter of *The Adventure of English*, Bragg recalls that in Yorkshire, where he grew up: "The word 'I' would always be pronounced 'Aah'. The definite

article 'the' would often be clipped to 't' – 'the bike' to 't bike', 'the horse' to 't horse'." I too spent my first six years in Yorkshire and remember my astonishment when I learned to read in my first school in the south of England and discovered that 'the' was not spelled 't'.

T T T T

SONNETS

Robert Frost (1874-1963) - *Putting in the Seed*

You come to fetch me from my work to-night
When supper's on the table, and we'll see
If I can leave off burying the white
Soft petals fallen from the apple tree.
(Soft petals, yes, but not so barren quite,
Mingled with these, smooth bean and wrinkled pea;)
And go along with you ere you lose sight
Of what you came for and become like me,
Slave to a springtime passion for the earth.
How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed
On through the watching for that early birth
When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,
The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.

Abbie Huston Evans (1881-1983) - *Under Cover*

Rain with the old sound, with the country sough
From fields and meadows overpast and trees
That strip it into whiplash, I hear now
Beat on this hill and cut about its knees.
Now while the lithe wind turns and springs again
On the spent tree, and rain floods down the glass,
I hear sounds earth knew before we men
Came on, and shall know after we shall pass.
While ancient rumor rising to a shriek
Comes in to tell of matters we forget,
I am one more of the beasts of the field in bleak
Ecstatic cover, huddled from the wet.
So stands the ox, so crouches now the mole,
So sits the dry woodpecker in his hole.

Elinor Wylie (1885-1928) - *Puritan Sonnet*

Down to the Puritan marrow of my bones
There's something in this richness that I hate.
I love the look, austere, immaculate,
Of landscapes drawn in pearly monotones.
There's something in my very blood that owns
Bare hills, cold silver on a sky of slate,
A thread of water, churned to milky spate

Streaming through slanted pastures fenced with stones.
I love those skies, thin blue or snowy gray.
Those fields, sparse planted, rendering meager sheaves;
That spring, briefer than the apple-blossom's breath,
Summer, so much too beautiful to stay,
Swift autumn, like a bonfire of leaves,
And sleepy winter, like the sleep of death.

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950)

I shall forget you presently, my dear,
So make the most of this, your little day,
Your little month, your little half a year,
Ere I forget, or die, or move away,
And we are done forever; by and by
I shall forget you, as I said, but now,
If you entreat me with your loveliest lie
I will protest you with my favorite vow.
I would indeed that love were longer-lived,
And vows were not so brittle as they are,
But so it is, and nature has contrived
To struggle on without a break thus far,
Whether or not we find what we are seeking
Is idle, biologically speaking.

Robert Nathan (1894-1985)

Now blue October, smoky in the sun,
Must end the long, sweet summer of the heart.
The last brief visit of the birds is done;
They sing the autumn songs before they part.
Listen, how lovely -- there's the thrush we heard
When June was small with roses, and the bending
Blossom of branches covered nest and bird,
Singing the summer in, summer unending --
Give me your hand once more before the night;
See how the meadows darken with the frost,
How fades the green that was the summer's light.
Beauty is only altered, never lost,
And love, before the cold November rain,
Will make its summer in the heart again.

Babette Deutsch (1895-1982) - *Black Panther*

This little panther wears a coat of soot,
Well-suited so. Stretched out along his shelf,
Still as one brooding storm, the sultry brute
Looks soft as darkness folded on itself.
His limbs, his tarry torso, are as mat
As night wanting the stars; his resting grace
Lies leashed. Alone his head's erect: pure cat

Stares, alive with danger, in that face.
 From the sharp ears down to the finest hair
 At his tail's tip, he might be carved of coal .
 Child of the shadows, he appears as tame,
 Till, from behind the grate, the gold eyes glare
 With such a light as could consume the whole
 To ashes and a memory of flame.

Babette Deutsch translated poems by Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) and was certainly familiar with *Der Panther - Im Jardin des Plantes, Paris* (1907).

<p>Sein Blick ist vom Vorübergehn der Stäbe so müde geworden, dass er nichts mehr hält. Ihm ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt.</p> <p>Der weiche Gang geschmeidig starker Schritte, der sich im allerkleinsten Kreise dreht, ist wie ein Tanz von Kraft um eine Mitte, in der betäubt ein grosser Wille steht.</p> <p>Nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille sich lautlos auf--. Dann geht ein Bild hinein, geht durch der Glieder angespannte Stille-- und hört im Herzen auf zu sein.</p>	<p>His gaze is now so weary from crossing back and forth along the bars it's vacant now. It seems to him there are a thousand bars and behind these thousand bars - no world at all.</p> <p>His soft gait reveals the suppleness of strength, describing ever-decreasing circles, a dance of power around a central point, that holds, anaesthetised, a powerful will.</p> <p>But, silently, from time to time, the pupil's shutter opens wide - and then an image steals inside, crosses the tense calm of his body and, inside his heart, expires.</p>
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Ogden Nash (1902-1971) may have been familiar with Rilke and Deutsch, but I don't think his poem on the panther was influenced by either of them:

The panther is like a leopard,
 Except it hasn't been peppered.
 Should you behold the panther crouch,
 Prepare to say Ouch.
 Better yet, if called by a panther,
 Don't anther.

Joseph Auslander (1897-1970) - To My Despoiler

Yes, you have taken everything from me:
 Beauty and love and all the measureless
 Impatience of proud April; even our sea
 Shouting under the gulls; all loveliness
 Of form and sound and colour; all that we
 Had touched; the curve of things we used to press
 Glowing against our senses; mystery
 And movement. . . everything taken. . . taken. . . Yes,
 Even the little brave irrelevancies
 Like brooding water, dripping water-cress,
 The cool dark noise of cropping; cruising bees
 On hot gold expeditions--even these
 You took from me--Oh spare me your caress,
 Leave me at least my own stark loneliness!

Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) - *On translating 'Eugen Onegin'*

What is translation? On a platter
A poet's pale and glaring head,
A parrot's screech, a monkey's chatter,
And profanation of the dead.
The parasites you were so hard on
Are pardoned if I have your pardon,
O, Pushkin, for my stratagem:
I travelled down your secret stem,
And reached the root, and fed upon it;
Then, in a language newly learned,
I grew another stalk and turned
Your stanza patterned on a sonnet,
Into my honest roadside prose--
All thorn, but cousin to your rose.

Laura Riding (1901-1991) - *An Ancient Revisits*

They told me, when I lived, because my art
To them seemed wide and spacious as the air,
That time would be pervaded everywhere
With it, until no work would have a part
That had not once awakened in my heart,
That everything would crooked be or fair
As it inherited its proper share
From me and could that share again impart.
But this strange present world is not of me.
If I could find somewhere a secret sign,
That one might say: In this an Ancient sings,
I should acknowledge then my legacy
And love to call this modern fabric mine.
Perhaps, once, in my sleep, I dreamed such things?

Edwin Denby (1903-1983) - *The Subway*

The subway flatters like the dope habit,
For a nickel extending peculiar space:
You dive from the street, holing like a rabbit,
Roar up a sewer with a millionaire's face.
Squatting in the full glare of the locked express
Imprisoned, rocked, like a man by a friend's death,
O how the immense investment soothes distress,
Credit laps you like a huge religious myth.
It's a sound effect. The trouble is seeing
(So anaesthetized) a square of bare throat
or the fold at the crotch of a clothed human being:
you'll want to nuzzle it, crop at it like a goat.
That's not in the buy. The company between stops
Offers you security, and free rides to cops.

Countee Cullen (1903-1946) - *Yet Do I Marvel*

I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind,
And did He stoop to quibble could tell why
The little buried mole continues blind,
Why flesh that mirrors Him must someday die,
Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus
Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare
If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus
To struggle up a never-ending stair.
Inscrutable His ways are, and immune
To catechism by a mind too strewn
With petty cares to slightly understand
What awful brain compels His awful hand.
Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
To make a poet black, and bid him sing!

Phyllis McGinley (1905-1978) - *The 5:32*

She said, If tomorrow my world were torn in two,
Blacked out, dissolved, I think I would remember
(As if transfixed in unsundering amber)
This hour best of all the hours I knew:
When cars came backing into the shabby station,
Children scuffing the seats, and the women driving
With ribbons around their hair, and the trains arriving,
And the men getting off with tired but practiced motion.
Yes, I would remember my life like this, she said:
Autumn, the platform red with Virginia creeper,
And a man coming toward me, smiling, the evening paper
Under his arm, and his hat pushed back on his head;
And wood smoke lying like haze on the quiet town,
And dinner waiting, and the sun not yet gone down.

Helene Johnson (1907-1995)

Remember not the promises we made
In this same garden many moons ago.
You must forget them. I would have it so.
Old vows are like old flowers as they fade
And vaguely vanish in a feeble death.
There is no reason why your hands should clutch
At pretty yesterdays. There is not much
Of beauty in me now. And though my breath
Is quick, my body sentient, my heart
Attuned to romance as before, you must
Not, through mistaken chivalry, pretend
To love me still. There is no mortal art
Can overcome Time's deep, corroding rust.
Let Love's beginning expiate Love's end.

James Agee (1909-1955)

Now stands our love on that still verge of day
Where darkness loiters leaf to leaf releasing
Lone tree to silvering tree: then slopes away
Before the morning's deep-drawn strength increasing
Till the sweet land lies burnished in the dawn:
But sleeping still: nor stirs a thread of grass:
Large on the low hill and the spangled lawn
The pureleaved air dwells passionless as glass:
So stands our love new found and unaroused,
Appareled in all peace and innocence,
In all lost shadows of love past still drowsed
Against foreknowledge of such immanence
As now, with earth outshone and earth's wide air,
Shows each to other as this morning fair.

T T T T

Congratulations to the Travel Office of the French Railways for their 2006 poster campaign, advertising that they don't just sell railway tickets.



T T T T

In 2003 I went to a wonderful exhibition on the sonnet at the New York Public Library, one of the most remarkable of US institutions. The exhibition included a

'skeleton' of a sonnet by Edna St. Vincent Millay, left uncompleted, and invited visitors to try to complete it in her style - have a try:

..... grieve
..... torn
..... shorn
..... bereave
..... morn,
..... here forlorn,
..... Eve.
..... punishment?
..... within
..... went,
..... thin,
..... spent,
..... sin
..... banishment.

It also exhibited the following outline of a rousing patriotic sonnet prepared – with tongue in cheek – by Louis Untermeyer. (From *Heavens*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1922, pp. 116-117. With thanks to Isaac Gewirtz, Curator, Berg Collection, NYPL.)

O thou birth
Great land,
Stern command
Wisdom mirth.
Noble worth,
Future planned,
All men understand
Throughout earth.

Inscrutably designed,
Glorious sea to sea;
Foes blind
Nations free--
Lover mankind,
Thy fame eternity.

T T T T

From *Scientific American* (April 1, 2005)

Okay, We Give Up - We feel so ashamed

There's no easy way to admit this. For years, helpful letter writers told us to stick to science. They pointed out that science and politics don't mix. They said we should be more balanced in our presentation of such issues as creationism, missile defense and global warming. We resisted their advice and pretended not to be stung by the accusations that the magazine should be renamed Unscientific American, or Scientific Unamerican, or even Unscientific Unamerican. But spring is in the air, and

all of nature is turning over a new leaf, so there's no better time to say: you were right, and we were wrong.

In retrospect, this magazine's coverage of so-called evolution has been hideously one-sided. For decades, we published articles in every issue that endorsed the ideas of Charles Darwin and his cronies. True, the theory of common descent through natural selection has been called the unifying concept for all of biology and one of the greatest scientific ideas of all time, but that was no excuse to be fanatics about it.

Where were the answering articles presenting the powerful case for scientific creationism? Why were we so unwilling to suggest that dinosaurs lived 6,000 years ago or that a cataclysmic flood carved the Grand Canyon? Blame the scientists. They dazzled us with their fancy fossils, their radiocarbon dating and their tens of thousands of peer-reviewed journal articles. As editors, we had no business being persuaded by mountains of evidence.

Moreover, we shamefully mistreated the Intelligent Design (ID) theorists by lumping them in with creationists. Creationists believe that God designed all life, and that's a somewhat religious idea. But ID theorists think that at unspecified times some unnamed superpowerful entity designed life, or maybe just some species, or maybe just some of the stuff in cells. That's what makes ID a superior scientific theory: it doesn't get bogged down in details.

Good journalism values balance above all else. We owe it to our readers to present everybody's ideas equally and not to ignore or discredit theories simply because they lack scientifically credible arguments or facts. Nor should we succumb to the easy mistake of thinking that scientists understand their fields better than, say, U.S. senators or best-selling novelists do. Indeed, if politicians or special-interest groups say things that seem untrue or misleading, our duty as journalists is to quote them without comment or contradiction. To do otherwise would be elitist and therefore wrong. In that spirit, we will end the practice of expressing our own views in this space: an editorial page is no place for opinions.

Get ready for a new Scientific American. No more discussions of how science should inform policy. If the government commits blindly to building an anti-ICBM defense system that can't work as promised, that will waste tens of billions of taxpayers' dollars and imperil national security, you won't hear about it from us. If studies suggest that the administration's antipollution measures would actually increase the dangerous particulates that people breathe during the next two decades, that's not our concern. No more discussions of how policies affect science either - so what if the budget for the National Science Foundation is slashed? This magazine will be dedicated purely to science, fair and balanced science, and not just the science that scientists say is science. And it will start on April Fools' Day.

T T T T

HUMOUR AND WIT

Arthur Guiterman (1871-1943) - *On the Vanity of Earthly Greatness*

The tusks which clashed in mighty brawls
Of mastodons, are billiard balls.

The sword of Charlemagne the Just
Is Ferric Oxide, known as rust.

The grizzly bear, whose potent hug,
Was feared by all, is now a rug.

Great Caesar's bust is on the shelf,
And I don't feel so well myself.

Dorothy Parker (1893-1967) - *Résumé*

Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.
Guns aren't lawful;
Nooses give;
Gas smells awful;
You might as well live.

Men

They hail you as their morning star
Because you are the way you are.
If you return the sentiment,
They'll try to make you different;
And once they have you, safe and sound,
They want to change you all around.
Your ways and moods they put a curse on;
They'd make you another person.
They cannot let you go your gait;
They influence and they educate.
They'd alter all that they admired.
They make me sick, they make me tired.

e.e. cummings (1894-1962) - *Poem, Or Beauty Hurts Mr. Vinal*
she being Brand

-new;and you
know consequently a
little stiff i was
careful of her and(having
thoroughly oiled the universal
joint tested my gas felt of
her radiator made sure her springs were O.
K.)i went right to it flooded-the-carburetor cranked her
up,slipped the
clutch(and then somehow got into reverse she
kicked what
the hell)next
minute i was back in neutral tried and

again slo-wly;bare,ly nudg. ing(my
lev-er Right-
oh and her gears being in
A 1 shape passed
from low through
second-in-to-high like
greasedlightning)just as we turned the corner of Divinity
avenue i touched the accelerator and give
her the juice,good

(it

was the first ride and believe i we was
happy to see how nice she acted right up to
the last minute coming back down by the Public
Gardens i slammed on

the
internalexpanding
&
externalcontracting
brakes Bothatonce and
brought allofher tremB
-ling
to a:dead.
stand-
;Still)

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) - *First Fig*(1920)

My candle burns at both ends;

It will not last the night;

But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends--

It gives a lovely light!

***Second Fig*(1920)**

Safe upon the solid rock the ugly houses stand:

Come see my shining palace built upon the sand!

Ogden Nash (1902-1971) - *Reflection on ice-breaking*

Candy

Is dandy

But liquor

Is quicker.

Song of the Open Road

I think that I shall never see

A billboard lovely as a tree.

Indeed, unless the billboards fall

I'll never see a tree at all.

Germ

A mighty creature is the germ,
Though smaller than the pachyderm.
His customary dwelling place
Is deep within the human race.
I cannot help but wonder at
The oddness of his habitat.
His childish pride he often pleases
By giving people strange diseases.
Do you, my poppet, feel infirm?
You probably contain a germ.

Malcolm Cowley (1898-1989) - *Ernest*

Safe is the man with blunderbuss
who stalks the hippopotamus
on Niger's bank, or scours the veldt
to rape the lion of his pelt;

but deep in peril he who sits
at home to rack his lonely wits
and there do battle, grim and blind
against the jackals of the mind.

**Phyllis McGinley (1905-1978) - *Intimations of Mortality*
*on being told by the dentist that this will be over soon***

Indeed, it will soon be over, I shall be done
With the querulous drill, the forceps, the clove-smelling cotton.
I can go forth into fresher air, into sun,
This narrow anguish forgotten.

In twenty minutes or forty or half an hour,
I shall be easy, and proud of my hard-got gold,
But your apple of comfort is eaten by worms, and sour.
Your consolation is cold.

This will not last, and the day will be pleasant after.
I'll dine tonight with a witty and favorite friend.
No doubt tomorrow I shall rinse my mouth with laughter.
And also that will end.

The handful of time that I am charily granted
Will likewise pass, to oblivion duly apprenticed.
Summer will blossom and autumn be faintly enchanted.
Then time for the grave, or the dentist.

Because you are shrewd, my man, and your hand is clever,
You must not believe your words have a charm to spell me.
There was never a half of an hour that lasted forever.
Be quiet. You need not tell me.

Hayden Carruth (1921-) - *Lilac Time*

The winter was fierce, my dear,
Snowy and blowy and cold,
A heart-breaker and record-breaker,
And I am feeble and old.

But now it is lilac time.
Come out in the sweet warm air,
Come and I'll gather flowers
To put in your beautiful hair.

Let's make a bouquet of lilac
For our old bedside table.
Then the fragrance in the night
Will make me form-i-dable.

T T T T

Performance Enhancement

The following were reportedly taken from actual employee performance evaluations in the US government. I am sceptical, but they are quite fun.

Since my last report, this employee has reached rock bottom and has started to dig.
I would not allow this employee to breed.
He sets low personal standards and then consistently fails to achieve them.
This employee is depriving a village somewhere of an idiot.
Got a full 6-pack, but lacks the plastic thing to hold it all together.
I would like to go hunting with him sometime.
He's been working with glue too much.
He has a knack for making strangers immediately.
He brings a lot of joy whenever he leaves the room.
When his IQ reaches 50, he should sell.
A prime candidate for natural deselection.
Gates are down, the lights are flashing, but the train isn't coming.
If he were any more stupid, he'd have to be watered twice a week.
It's hard to believe that he beat 1,000,000 other sperm to the egg.
Some drink from the fountain of knowledge; he only gargled.
The wheel is turning, but the hamster is dead.
This employee is really not so much of a has-been, but more of a definite won't be.
When she opens her mouth, it seems that it is only to change feet.
This young lady has delusions of adequacy.
This employee should go far, and the sooner he starts, the better.
A gross ignoramus - 144 times worse than an ordinary ignoramus.
He would argue with a signpost.
If you see two people talking and one looks bored, he's the other one.
A photographic memory but with the lens cover glued on.
Donated his brain to science before he was done using it.
He's got two brain cells, one is lost and the other is out looking for it.
If you give him a penny for his thoughts, you'd get change.

One neuron short of a synapse.
Takes him 2 hours to watch '60-minutes'.

T T T T

Pass the Port

All his life a senior English barrister had dreamt of playing golf at Sandringham. One day he decided to try, although he knew the club was very exclusive. At the desk, the Club Secretary inquired:

"Member, Sir?"

"No."

"Guest of a member?"

"No."

"Sorry, Sir."

As he turned to leave he caught sight of a familiar face: Lord Wellesby Gresham. He approached, bowed low and said: "I beg your pardon, Your Lordship, my name is Higginbotham of the London law firm of Higginbotham, Willoughby and Barclay: we met briefly at a dinner party a few years ago and I want to ask a great favour – may I play this wonderful course as your guest?"

His Lordship put down his paper, looked Higginbotham up and down and asked: "Church?"

"Episcopalian, Your Lordship – and my late wife Church of England."

"Education?"

"Eton and Oxford – 1st class."

"Athletics?"

"Rugby and cricket for Eton, a spot of tennis for the county and rowed number four oar on the crew that beat Cambridge."

"Military?"

"Coldstream Guards, DSO and MM in Malaya."

"Languages?"

"Fluent French and German and a bit of classical Greek."

His Lordship considered briefly and nodded to the Club Secretary: "Nine holes."

T T T T

FINE DESCRIPTION AND ATMOSPHERE

Witter Bynner (1881-1968) - *The Wave*

You come with the light on your face
Of the turn of a river from trees to the open sun,
You are the wandering spirit of the most beloved place -
And yet you are a joy not there begun
Nor anywhere, but always about to be,
The invisible succeeding crest
That follows from the open sea
And shall be loveliest.

I have no language, hardly any word

To name you with, I have no flight of hands
To swim your surface closer than a bird:
For endless changing countermands
Your face and blinds me blacker than a crest of sun,
O joy not yet begun
But only about to be,
O sweet invisible unceasing wave
Following me, following me
Through the sea-like grave!

Abbie Huston Evans (1881-1983) - *Juniper*

For some twisted reason I
Love what many men pass by, -
Lean-fingered and rock-clinging things,
Bitter-berried, far from springs
Of sweet water, wringing up
Moisture from the rock's own cup,
Or drinking in at every pore
Dew and sea mist, if no more;
All things harsh and slow of root,
Pungent, racy, sparse of fruit,
Heather, gorse, and upland fir,
Lichen, moss, and juniper!

What are two lean years or three,
Bantling of Necessity,
Who on stony-breasted earth
Long since learned to thrive on dearth?
Long as ledges, will endure
Your rock-fed green and roots obscure, -
Ay, will batten on the stone
After man is dust and bone.

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) - *The Lonely Street*

School is over. It is too hot
to walk at ease. At ease
in light frocks they walk the streets
to while the time away.
They have grown tall. They hold
pink flames in their right hands.
In white from head to foot,
with sidelong, idle look--
in yellow, floating stuff,
black sash and stockings--
touching their avid mouths
with pink sugar on a stick--
like a carnation each holds in her hand--
they mount the lonely street.

Wilbert Snow (1884-1977) - From *Advice to a Clam-Digger*

Go when the friendly moon permits the tides
To drop far out at early morn or eve;
When eel-grass lies in windrows on the flats,
And rockweed lays its khaki counterpanes
On barnacles that cling to sunken ledges;
Seek out a place where mud-enameled sand
Looks like a colander whose holes emit
Little salt-water geysers when you step;
Then, facing shoreward, dig till you become
A lame and muddy partner of the cove.

Marvels undreamed of suddenly unfold
The secrets they have kept concealed so long;
The rancid mud-clams whose white shells betray
A worthlessness within, like beggar's gold,
Or empty conkles farther up the beach;
The iridescent clam-worms blue and green
With escalading red and yellow fringes,
Like Chinese dragons whose soft tentacles
Expand, contract, and writhe in oozy slime...
Long-buried whore's eggs; razor-fish with shells
Brown as old ivory and smooth as glass;
Or soggy timbers from a derelict
Who left her oaken bones upon a ledge
In some northeaster forty years ago... ...

John Hall Wheelock (1886-1978) - *Afternoon: Amagansett Beach*

The broad beach,
Sea-wind and the sea's irregular rhythm,
Great dunes with their pale grass, and on the beach
Driftwood, tangle of bones, an occasional shell,
Now coarse, now carven and delicate -- whorls of time
Stranded in space, deaf ears listening
To lost time, old oceanic secrets.
Along the water's edge, in pattern casual
As the pattern of the stars, the pin-point air-holes,
Left by the sand-flea under the receding spume,
Wink and blink out again. A gull drifts over,
Wide wings crucified against the sky --
His shadow travels the shore, upon its margins
You will find his signature: one long line,
Two shorter lines curving out from it, a nearly
Perfect graph of the bird himself in flight.
His footprint is his image fallen from heaven.

Hilda Doolittle (1886-1961) - *Sea Rose*

Rose, harsh rose,
marred and with stint of petals,
meager flower, thin,
sparse of leaf,

more precious
than a wet rose
single on a stem--
you are caught in the drift.

Stunted, with small leaf,
you are flung on the sand,
you are lifted
in the crisp sand
that drives in the wind.

Can the spice-rose
drip such acrid fragrance
hardened in a leaf?

Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962) - *Birds*

The fierce musical cries of a couple of sparrowhawks hunting on the headland,
Hovering and darting, their heads northwestward,
Prick like silver arrows shot through a curtain the noise of the ocean
Trampling its granite; their red backs gleam
Under my window around the stone corners; nothing gracefuller, nothing
Nimbler in the wind. Westward the wave-gleaners,
The old gray sea-going gulls are gathered together, the northwest wind wakening
Their wings to the wild spirals of the wind-dance.
Fresh as the air, salt as the foam, play birds in the bright wind, fly falcons
Forgetting the oak and the pinewood, come gulls
From the Carmel sands and the sands at the river-mouth, from Lobos and out of the
limitless
Power of the mass of the sea, for a poem
Needs multitude, multitudes of thoughts, all fierce, all flesh-eaters, musically clamorous
Bright hawks that hover and dart headlong, and ungainly
Gray hungers fledged with desire of transgression, salt slimed beaks, from the sharp
Rock-shores of the world and the secret waters.

Haniel Long (1888-1956) - *Day and Night*

All the flowers by the lake
are for your shadow:
red hibiscus for your heart,
zuchil with golden centre and ivory petals
for your body
and a flower I do not know
for the thought of you which haunts me.

Under the pepper trees
your shadow waits for me
down on the sand where the waves beat.
There in the black night
I gather a memory in my arms,
murmur a song to nothing.

Mark Van Doren (1894-1972)

This amber sunstream, with an hour to live,
Flows carelessly, and does not save itself;
Nor recognizes any entered room--
This room; nor hears the clock upon a shelf,
Declaring the lone hour; for where it goes
All space in a great silence ever flows.

No living man may know it till this hour,
When the clear sunstream, thickening to amber,
Moves like a sea, and the sunk hulls of houses
Let it come slowly through, as divers clamber,
Feeling for gold. So now into this room
Peer the large eyes, unopen to their doom.

Another hour and nothing will be here.
Even upon themselves the eyes will close.
Nor will this bulk, withdrawing, die outdoors
In night, that from another silence flows.
No living man in any western room
But sits at amber sunset round a tomb.

Léonie Adams (1899-1988) - *The Rounds and Garlands Done*

Now the golden looks are spent
And light no more will brim from the large air,
But green and changeling drips from the little round
Of the close branch;
And the shadow, born of nothing,
Glides over the green ground.
Day that cast the lovely looks is sped;
And from the turf, circled with white dew,
The lovers and the children are gone,
Leaving the wreath, the bouquet fresh, looped up with grasses;
All the golden looks are spent,
And the time of the rounds and garlands done.

High from a drowning heart the waters' cry
Rises subdued to silver and is lost
On the pure bell of silence, and the petal
Whose sweetness drooped the spray,
Drained now of luster, rides
Upon a soundless wind
More light than any ghost.

Robert Francis (1901-1987) - *Onion Fields*

Far inland from the sea the onion fields
Flow as the sea flows level to the sky.
Something blue of the sea is in their green.
Something bright of the sun on little waves
Of water is in the ripple of their leaves.
Stand with me here awhile until the white
Kerchiefs of the women are whitecaps
And the long red barns boats--until there are
Only boats and whitecaps and white clouds
And a blue-green sea off to the blue of the sky.
Wind from the onion fields is welcomer
Than any sweetness. We stand and breathe as we stand
On a shore and breathe the saltness of the sea.

R.P. Blackmur (1904-1965) - *Mirage*

The wind was in another country, and
the day had gathered to its heart of noon
the sum of silence, heat, and stricken time.
Not a ripple spread. The sea mirrored
perfectly all the nothing in the sky.
We had to walk about to keep our eyes
from seeing nothing, and our hearts from stopping
at nothing. Then most suddenly we saw
horizon on horizon lifting up
out of the sea's edge a shining mountain
sun-yellow and sea-green; against it surf
flung spray and spume into the miles of sky.
Somebody said mirage, and it was gone,
but there I have been living ever since.

Stanley Kunitz (1905-2006) - from *The Round*

Light splashed this morning
on the shell-pink anemones
swaying on their tall stems;
down blue-spiked veronica
light flowed in rivulets
over the humps of the honeybees;
this morning I saw light kiss
the silk of the roses
in their second flowering,
my late bloomers
flushed with their brandy.
A curious gladness shook me....
I can scarcely wait till tomorrow
when a new life begins for me,
as it does each day,
as it does each day.

The Devil's Dictionary

In *Christmas Pudding 2003*, I included extracts from the *The Devil's Dictionary* by Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914?), an American journalist and short-story writer. Here are some more.

Academe. An ancient school where morality and philosophy were taught.

Academy. (from academe). A modern school where football is taught.

Acquaintance. A person whom we know well enough to borrow from, but not well enough to lend to. A degree of friendship called slight when its object is poor or obscure, and intimate when he is rich and famous.

Architect. One who drafts a plan of your house and plans a draft of your money.

Cui Bono? (Latin) What good would that do *me*?

Day. A period of 24 hours, mostly misspent. This period is divided into two parts, the day proper and night, or the day improper – the former devoted to sins of business, the latter consecrated to the other sort. These two kinds of activity overlap.

Dejeuner. The breakfast of an American who has been in Paris. Various pronounced.

Habeas Corpus. A writ by which a man may be taken out of jail when confined for the wrong crime.

Harangue. A speech by an opponent, who is known as an harangue-outang.

Impiety. Your irreverence toward my deity.

Infidel. In New York one who does not believe in the Christian religion; in Constantinople, one who does.

Kleptomaniac. A rich thief.

Lecturer. One with his hand in your pocket, his tongue in your ear and his faith in your patience.

Mammon. The god of the world's leading religion. His chief temple is in the holy city of New York.

Mayonnaise. One of the sauces which serve the French in place of a state religion.

Miscreant. A person of the highest degree of unworth. Etymologically, the word means unbeliever, and its present signification may be regarded as theology's noblest contribution to the development of our language.

Oleaginous. Oily, smooth, sleek. Disraeli once described the manner of Bishop Wilberforce as 'unctuous, oleaginous, saponaceous.' And the good prelate was ever afterward known as 'Soapy Sam'. For every man there is something in the vocabulary that would stick to him like a second skin. His enemies have only to find it.

Orthodox. An ox wearing the popular religious yoke.

Pantheism. The doctrine that everything is God, in contradistinction to the doctrine that God is everything.

Patriotism. Combustible rubbish ready to the torch of any one ambitious to illuminate his name. In Dr. Johnson's famous dictionary, patriotism is defined as the last resort of a scoundrel. With all respect to an enlightened but inferior lexicographer I beg to submit that it is the first.

Sabbath. A weekly festival having its origin in the fact that God made the world in six days and was arrested on the seventh.

Teetotaler. One who abstains from strong drink, sometimes totally, sometimes tolerably totally.

Un-American. Wicked, intolerable, heathenish.

T T T T

MORE FINE DESCRIPTION

Constance Carrier (1908-1991) - *Elegy*

Here where the elm trees were
is only empty air.

Where once they stood
how blunt the buildings are!

Where the trees were,
sky itself has fled
far overhead.

We have lost the leafy shield
between us and that space,
that lonely tract, revealed,
that light too straitly shed--

and lost as well the lace,
the filigree, that gave
the works of man a grace
not theirs by right.

The world is smaller and larger
with the tall trees gone.
Through sunlight yellow as pollen
we walk where the elms have fallen.

We walk in too much light.

Winfield Townley Scott (1910-1968) - *Flowering Quince*

If right in front of me,
Slow motion--fast motion really--
The cold branch of the quince
Should all at once
Start with a rash of buds
Then the thin green nudge
The brown back, then the color
Of the waxen flower, the flame,
Open everywhere the same
Golden-centered swirl
Of odor, sweet burning odor--
Performed in one day, one hour
Or even one minute
Which would then hold in it,
For more than sense or praise
Could say, all April's days--

That would set my heart awhirl.
 This stratagem
 Of instant gold from green
 I have never seen
 On tree or branch or stem:
 Never never never--only once;
 Once, and it was a girl.

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-79) - *The Fish*

I caught a tremendous fish
 and held him beside the boat
 half out of water, with my hook
 fast in a corner of his mouth.
 He didn't fight.
 He hadn't fought at all.
 He hung a grunting weight,
 battered and venerable
 and homely. Here and there
 his brown skin hung in strips
 like ancient wallpaper,
 and its pattern of darker brown
 was like wallpaper:
 shapes like full-blown roses
 stained and lost through age.
 He was speckled with barnacles,
 fine rosettes of lime,
 and infested
 with tiny white sea-lice,
 and underneath two or three
 rags of green weed hung down.
 While his gills were breathing in
 the terrible oxygen
 --the frightening gills,
 fresh and crisp with blood,
 that can cut so badly--
 I thought of the coarse white flesh
 packed in like feathers,
 the big bones and the little bones,
 the dramatic reds and blacks
 of his shiny entrails,
 and the pink swim-bladder
 like a big peony.
 I looked into his eyes
 which were far larger than mine
 but shallower, and yellowed,
 the irises backed and packed
 with tarnished tin foil

seen through the lenses
 of old scratched isinglass.
 They shifted a little, but not
 to return my stare.
 --It was more like the tipping
 of an object toward the light.
 I admired his sullen face,
 the mechanism of his jaw,
 and then I saw
 that from his lower lip
 --if you could call it a lip
 grim, wet, and weaponlike,
 hung five old pieces of fish-line,
 or four and a wire leader
 with the swivel still attached,
 with all their five big hooks
 grown firmly in his mouth.
 A green line, frayed at the end
 where he broke it, two heavier lines,
 and a fine black thread
 still crimped from the strain and snap
 when it broke and he got away.
 Like medals with their ribbons
 frayed and wavering,
 a five-haired beard of wisdom
 trailing from his aching jaw.
 I stared and stared
 and victory filled up
 the little rented boat,
 from the pool of bilge
 where oil had spread a rainbow
 around the rusted engine
 to the bailer rusted orange,
 the sun-cracked thwarts,
 the oarlocks on their strings,
 the gunnels--until everything
 was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
 And I let the fish go.

Anne Porter (1911-) - *Consider the Lilies of the Sea*

Their salt wet life erased, eroded, only
The shells of snails lie on the sand,
Their color darkens toward the whorl's conclusion,
The center is nearly black. Even the fragments
Faithfully observe their tribal custom
Of involution; the motionless whirlpool
Is clearly written on the broken shield.

The two joined petals of a small
Tooth-white clamshell stand ajar, and mimic
The opening of wings or of a song-book;
Leaves that a minute and obscure
Death sprung open in a depth of sea;
Held in one's hand, they still present
The light obedient gesture that let go of time.

And close to these frail, scattered, and abandoned
Carvings which were the armor and the art
Of dark blind jellies that the fish have eaten,
The big Atlantic cumulates and pours,
Flashes, is felled, and streaks among the pebbles
With wildfire foam.

Sylvia Plath (1932-63) - *Mushrooms*

Overnight, very Whitely, discreetly, Very quietly Our toes, our noses Take hold on the loam, Acquire the air. Nobody sees us, Stops us, betrays us; The small grains make room. Soft fists insist on Heaving the needles, The leafy bedding, Even the paving. Our hammers, our rams, Earless and eyeless, Perfectly voiceless, Widen the crannies,	Shoulder through holes. We Diet on water, On crumbs of shadow, Bland-mannered, asking Little or nothing. So many of us! So many of us! We are shelves, we are Tables, we are meek, We are edible, Nudgers and shovers In spite of ourselves. Our kind multiplies: We shall by morning Inherit the earth. Our foot's in the door.
--	---

Brad Leithauser (1953-) - *Angel*

There between the riverbank
and half-submerged tree trunk

it's a kind of alleyway
inviting loiterers
in this case, water striders.

Their legs, twice body-length, dent
the surface, but why they don't
sink is a transparent riddle:
the springs of their trampoline
are nowhere to be seen.

Inches and yet far below, thin
as compass needles, almost, min-
nows flicker through the sun's
tattered netting, circling past
each other as if lost.

Enter an angel, in
the form of a dragon-
fly, an apparition whose
coloring, were it not real,
would scarcely be possible:

See him, like a sparkler,
tossing lights upon the water,
surplus greens, reds, milky
blues, and violets blended
with ebony. Suspended
like a conductor's baton,
he hovers, then goes the one
way no minnow points: straight
up, into that vast solution
of which he's a concentrate.

T T T T

William Safire, winner of the 1978 Pulitzer Prize for distinguished commentary, joined *The New York Times* in 1973 as a political columnist. Since 1979, he has written a Sunday column, *On Language*, for *The New York Times Magazine*. He offers the following advice for authors, that he calls 'Never-Say-Neverisms':

1. Avoid run-on sentences they are hard to read.
2. Don't use no double negatives.
3. Use the semicolon properly, always use it where it is appropriate; and never where it isn't.
4. Reserve the apostrophe for its proper use and omit it when its not needed.
5. Do not put statements in the negative form.
6. Verbs has to agree with their subjects.
7. No sentence fragments.
8. Proofread carefully to see if you any words out.
9. If any word is improper at the end of a sentence, a linking verb is.
10. Steer clear of incorrect verb forms that have snuck into the language.

- TTTT

“The attorney general’s comments today should not be interpreted to suggest the existence or nonexistence of a domestic program or whether any such program would be lawful under the existing legal analysis.”

TTTT

What do we praise?--Sunsets, and open fires,
America, and mother love, I guess;

The merry laughter of a little child,
And poems that touch the heart with tenderness.

What do we really praise?--Oh, Life and Time,
(With capitals), books that Fadiman commends,
The chromium bars, the streamlined cars and trains,
The music played for music's newest friends.

What do we praise beyond all this?--High art,
God's majesty and sacraments and grace,
The universal music of the spheres,
The mysteries of interstellar space.

Come down to earth. What is it you and I,
My love, deep in our heart of hearts, adore,
Cherish and tend?--Each other. Not so fast.
Maybe a little, but ourselves much more.

Last question. (On your honor.) What do all
Praise absolutely in this day and age?
Re-read the question; answer thoughtfully;
Write nothing on this portion of the page.

Yvor Winters (1900-1968) - *To a Young Writer* (Achilles Holt: Stanford, 1930)

Here for a few short years
Strengthen affections; meet,
Later, the dull arrears
Of age, and be discreet.

The angry blood burns low.
Some friend of lesser mind
Discerns you not; but so
Your solitude's defined.

Write little; do it well.
Your knowledge will be such,
At last, as to dispel
What moves you overmuch.

John Holmes (1904-1962) - *The Old Professor*

It isn't the young men sprawling in chairs I mind.
(Though when I was a student we sat straight.)
It isn't that I mind the coughing, or cutting
My classes, or ignorant ignorance of the past.
(When I was a student, we said Sir, stood to recite.)
It isn't that I mind ideas. I had some, too,
And was told it wasn't right, and it wouldn't do,
And it couldn't be, and I had them just the same.
It isn't the clothes. It isn't the swing music.
But sometimes I walk the college streets at night,
Hands rammed into topcoat pockets, collar up,

Kicking the leaves before me, cursing the College,
Cursing the dull dear young indifferent damned,
The boys and girls who never wanted to know,
And never will, but can be passed in the course.

J.V. Cunningham (1911-1985) - *Meditation On Statistical Method*

Plato, despair!

We prove by norms
How numbers bear
Empiric forms,

How random wrong
Will average right
If time be long
And error slight,

But in our hearts
Hyperbole
Curves and departs
To infinity.

Error is boundless.
Nor hope nor doubt,
Though both be groundless,
Will average out.

George Starbuck (1931-1996) - *The Spell Against Spelling-*
(a poem to be inscribed in dark places and never to be spoken aloud)

My favorite student lately is the one who wrote about feeling clumsy.
I mean if he wanted to say how it feels to be all thumbs he
Certainly picked the write language to right in in the first place
I mean better to clutter a word up like the old Hearst place
Than to just walk off the job and not give a dam.

Another student gave me a diagragm

'The Diagram of the Plot in Henry the VIIIth.'

Those, though, were instances of the sublime.

The wonder is in the wonders they can come up with every time.

Why do they all say heighth, but never weighth?

If chrystal can look like English to them, how come chryptic can't?

I guess cwm, chthonic, qanat, or quattrocento

Always gets looked up. But never momento

Momento they know. Like wierd. Like differant.

It is a part of their deep deep-structure vocabulary:

Their stone axe, their dark bent-offering to the gods:

Their protoCro-Magnon pre-pre-sapient survival-against-cultural-odds.

You won't get *m*edeputized in some Spelling Constabulary.

I'd sooner abandon the bag-toke-whiff system and go decimal.

I'm on their side. I better be, after my brush with 'infinitesimal.'

There it was, right where I put it, in my brand-new book.
And my friend Peter Davison read it, and he gave me this look,
And he held the look for a little while and said, "George...."

I needed my students at that moment. I, their Scourge.
I needed them. Needed their sympathy. Needed their care.
"Their their," I needed to hear them say, "their their."

You see, there are *Spellers* in this world, I mean mean ones too.
They shadow us around like a posse of Joe Btfsplks.
Waiting for us to sit down at our study-desks and go shrdlu
So they can pop in at the windows saying "tsk tsk."

I know they're there. I know where the beggars are,
With their flash cards looking like prescriptions for the catarrh
And their mnemnmonics, blast 'em. They go too farrh.
I do not stoop to impugn, indict, or condemn;
But I know how to get back at the likes of thegm.

For a long time, I keep mumb.
I let 'em wait, while a preternatural calmn
Rises to me from the depths of my upwardly opened palmb.
Then I raise my eyes like some wizened-and-wisened gnolmbn,
Stranger to scissors, stranger to razor and coslmbn,
And I fix those birds with my gaze till my gaze strikes hoslgmbn,
And I say one word, and the word I say is 'Oslgmbnh.'

"Om?" they enquire. "No, not exactly. *Oslgmbnh*
Watch me carefully while I pronounce it because you've got only two more
guesses
And you only get ten more seconds no nine more seconds no eight
And a right answer doesn't count if it comes in late
And a wrong answer bumps you out of the losers' bracket
And disqualifies you for the National Spellathon Contestant jacket
And that's all the time extension you're going to gebt
So go pick up your consolation prizes from the usherebt
And don't be surprised if it's the bowdlerized regularized paperback
abridgment of Pepys
Because around here, gentlemen, we play for kepys."

Then I drive off in my chauffeured Cadillac Fleetwood Brougham
Like something out of the last days of Fellini's Rougham
And leave them smiting their brows and exclaiming to each other "Ougham!
O-U-G-H-A-M Ougham!" and tearing their hair.

Intricate are the compoundments of despair.

Well, brevity must be the soul of something-or-other.

Not, certainly, of spelling, in the good old mother
Tongue of Shakespeare, Raleigh, Marvell, and Vaughan.
But something. One finds out as one goes aughan.

T T T T

Can you read / Savez-vous lire / Können Sie lesen?

English

Aoccdrnig to a rscheearch at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mtttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoeint tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe.

Français

Sleon une édtue de l'Uvinertisé de Cmabrigde, l'odrrre des ltteers dnas un mto n'a pas d'ipmrotncae, la suele coshe ipmrotnate est que la pmeirère et la drenère soit à la bnnoe pclae. Le rsete peut êrte dnas un dsérorde ttoal et vuos puoevz tujoruos lrie snas porblème. C'est prace que le creaveu hmauin ne lit pas chuaqe ltetre elle-mmêe, mias le mot cmome un tuot.

Deutsch

Die Bcuhtbaenrehenifloge in eneim Wrot ist eagl - Ncah enier nueen Sutide, die uetnr aerdnem von der Cmabirdge Uinertvisy dührruchgeft wrdoen sien slol, ist es eagl, in wlehcer Rehenifloge Bcuhtbaen in eneim Wrot sethen, Huaptschae, der esrte und ltzete Bcuhtbae snid an der rhcitgien Settle. Die rsetclhien Bshcuteban kenönn ttoal druchenianedr sien, und man knan es tortzedm onhe Poreblme lseen, wiel das mneschilhce Gherin nhcit jdeen Bcuhtbaen enizlen leist, snodren das Wrot als gnazes.

If you don't believe it, try it on your children. My eight-year old granddaughter just read the French text back to me without a problem. Sereavl uinertvises are now rereaschnig the pomheennon. It was frist dibescred in 1976 in a dotcoral teshis for the Uinertvisy of Nottingham by Graham Rawlinson etlntied 'The Significance of Letter Position in Word Recognition'. See <http://www.mrc-cbu.cam.ac.uk/~mattd/Cmabrigde/>.

T T T T

More Erotic Poetry

I am grateful to Gordon Read for the following addition to my collection of erotic poetry (see *Christmas Pudding 2003*):

Book Lovers - by Jenny Lewis (*The Guardian*, 9 December 2000)

Let's meet tonight between the covers
to thumb each other's spines
like true book lovers.

Steamy passion or sweet romance,
with titles picked at random,
our mood will depend on chance.

I'll stroke your hard back and thighs,
trail my fingers over your fly-
leaf – admire your point size.

You'll enjoy ogling my index,
fondling my frontispiece, thinking
I'm just the type you like for sex.

I'll let you flip my pages, skim
my contents, skip my appendix
or linger over my fine lines at whim.

And if I get pregnant (which I won't)
let's meet again – in nine months' time.
You choose the font.

T T T T

Pass the Port Again

A blonde wanting to earn extra money decided to do odd jobs for her wealthy neighbours. At the first house, the owner said, "Well, you can paint my porch. How much will you charge?"

"\$50" she replies. The man agrees and gives her the paint and brushes and goes back in the house. The man's wife overheard their conversation and asked him if the blonde had realized that the porch goes all around the house. "She should. She was standing on it."

A short time later the blonde came to the door to collect her money. "You've finished already?" the man asked. "Yeah, and I had paint left over so I gave two coats."

Impressed, the man gives her the money. "And by the way," the blonde added, "it's not a Porch. It a BMW."

T T T T

MISCELLANEOUS

Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) - *Sunday Morning* 2

Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?
Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.
These are the measure destined for her soul.

Adelaide Crapsey (1878-1914) - *The Lonely Death*

In the cold I will rise, I will bathe
In waters of ice; myself
Will shiver, and shrive myself,
Alone in the dawn, and anoint
Forehead and feet and hands;
I will shutter the windows from light,
I will place in their sockets the four
Tall candles and set them aflame
In the grey of the dawn; and myself
Will lay myself straight in my bed,
And draw the sheet under my chin.

Sarah Teasdale (1884-1933) - *The Sanctuary*

If I could keep my innermost Me
Fearless, aloof and free
Of the least breath of love or hate,
And not disconsolate
At the sick load of sorrow laid on men;
If I could keep a sanctuary there
Free even of prayer,
If I could do this, then,
With quiet candor as I grew more wise
I could look even at God with grave forgiving eyes.

Elinor Wylie (1885-1928) - *Parting Gift*

I cannot give you the Metropolitan Tower;
I cannot give you heaven;
Nor the nine Visigoth crowns in the Cluny Museum;
Nor happiness, even.
But I can give you a very small purse
Made out of field-mouse skin,
With a painted picture of the universe
And seven blue tears therein.

I cannot give you the Island of Capri;
I cannot give you beauty;
Nor bake you marvelous crusty cherry pies
With love and duty.
But I can give you a very little locket
Made out of wildcat hide:
Put it in your left-hand pocket
And never look inside.

Hazel Hall (1886-1924) - *Light Sleep*

Women who sing themselves to sleep
Lie with their hands at rest,
Locked over them night-long as though to keep
Music against their breast.

They who have feared the night and lain
Mumbling themselves to peace
Sleep a light sleep lest they forget the strain
That brings them their release.

They dream, who hold beneath the hand
A crumpled shape of song,
Of trembling sound they do not understand,
Yet love the whole night long.

Women who sing themselves to sleep
Must lie in fear till day,
Clasping an amulet of words to keep
The leaning dark away.

Georgia Johnson (1886-1966) - *I Want To Die While You Love Me*

I want to die while you love me,
While yet you hold me fair,
While laughter lies upon my lips
And lights are in my hair.

I want to die while you love me,
And bear to that still bed,
Your kisses turbulent, unspent,
To warm me when I'm dead.

I want to die while you love me,
Oh, who would care to live
Till love has nothing more to ask
And nothing more to give!

I want to die while you love me
And never, never see
The glory of this perfect day
Grow dim or cease to be.

Genevieve Taggard (1894-1948) - *Everyday Alchemy*

Men go to women mutely for their peace;
And they, who lack it most, create it when
They make – because they must, loving their men –
A solace for sad bosom-bended heads. There
Is all the meager peace men get – no otherwhere;
No mountain space, no tree with placid leaves,
Or heavy gloom beneath a young girl's hair,
No sound of valley bell on autumn air,
Or room made home with doves along the eaves,
Ever holds peace like this, poured by poor women
Out of their heart's poverty, for worn men.

Horace Gregory (1898-1982)

Ask no return for love that's given
Embracing mistress, wife or friend
ask no return:
on this deep earth or in pale heaven,
awake and spend
hands, lips and eyes in love,
In darkness burn,
the limbs entwined until the soul ascend.
Ask no return of seasons gone:
the fire of autumn and the first hour of spring,
the short bough blossoming
through city windows when night's done,
when fears adjourn
backward in memory where all loves end
in self again, again the inward tree
growing against the heart
and no heart free.
From love that sleeps behind each eye
in double symmetry
ask no return,
even in enmity, look! I shall take your hand;
nor can our limbs disjoin in separate ways again,
walking, even at night on foreign land
through houses open to the wind, through cold and rain,
walking alive, meet, kiss and understand.

Janet Lewis (1899-1998) - *For the Father of Sandro Gulotta*

When I called the children from play
Where the westering sun
Fell level between the leaves
of olive and bay,
There where the day lilies stand,
I paused
to touch with a curious hand
The single blossom, furled,
That with the morning had opened wide,
The long bud tinged
with gold of an evening sky.

All day, and only one day,
It drank the sunlit air.
In one long day
All that it needed to do in this world
It did, and at evening precisely curled
The tender petals to shield
From wind, from dew,
The pollen-laden heart.

Sweet treasure gathered apart
From our grief, from our longing view,
Who shall say if the day was too brief,
For the flower, if time lacked?
Had it not, like the children, all Time
In their long, immortal day?

Laura Riding (1901-1991) - *In Due Form*

I do not doubt you.
I know you love me.
It is a fact of your indoor face,
A true fancy of your muscularity.
Your step is confident.
Your look is thorough.
Your stay-beside-me is a pillow
To roll over on
And sleep as on my own upon.

But make me a statement
In due form on endless foolscap
Witnessed before a notary
And sent by post, registered,
To be signed for on receipt
And opened under oath to believe;
An antique paper missing from my strong-box,
A bond to clutch when hail tortures the chimney
And lightning circles redder round the city,
And your brisk step and thorough look
Are gallant but uncircumstantial,
And not mentionable in a doom-book.

Lindley Williams Hubbell (1901-1994) - *Ordovician Fossil Algae*

This is the oldest book
That I can read with pleasure.
The Cambrian trilobite
Is an unpleasant sight,
As for pre-Cambrian algae I look and look
And cannot see them, though I'm told they're there.

But these exquisite fern-like forms
Printed upon the rock,
These fragile plants that have survived the storms
Of some odd billion years
Move me almost to tears.

So I come here often
To see these delicate stems
Breathed on the rock like frost crystals on a window,
But permanently, but forever.

This is my favorite book, my favorite picture,
My dependable scripture,
My sense of wholeness, a billion years at my elbow.

T T T T

Yogi Berra

Perhaps surprisingly, one of the persons most-quoted in the USA is the former baseball star Yogi Berra. Despite his claim that "I didn't really say everything I said," the quotations attributed to him are consistently spontaneous and witty, with a touch of the anarchy found in the humour of the Marx brothers.

- § Baseball is 90% mental, the other half is physical.
- § If you can't imitate him, don't copy him.
- § Never answer an anonymous letter
- § I usually take a two hour nap from one to four
- § It's déjà vu all over again
- § When you come to a fork in the road....Take it
- § *When asked what time is was:* You mean now?
- § *On why NY lost the 1960 series to Pittsburgh:* We made too many wrong mistakes
- § You can observe a lot by watching
- § The future ain't what it used to be
- § It gets late early out here.
- § If the people don't want to come out to the ballpark, nobody's going to stop them
- § *When asked what he would do if he found a million dollars:* I'd find the fellow who lost it, and, if he was poor, I'd return it.
- § I knew I was going to take the wrong train, so I left early.
- § *At a dinner in an Italian restaurant, he was asked how many slices should be cut in his pizza, and he replied* "You better make it six, cause I don't think I could eat eight."
- § Nobody goes there anymore; it's too crowded.
- § A nickel isn't worth a dime today.
- § *Upon receiving a check from Jack Buck made out to bearer:* How long have you known me, Jack? And you still don't know how to spell my name.
- § *After being told he looked cool.* Thanks, you don't look so hot yourself.
- § Why buy good luggage? You only use it when you travel.
- § *In reply to Hey Yogi, I think we're lost.* Yeah, but we're making great time!
- § The towels were so thick there I could hardly close my suitcase.
- § You should always go to other people's funerals; otherwise, they won't come to yours.

T T T T

MORE MISCELLANEOUS

J.V. Cunningham (1911-85) - *Choice*
Allegiance is assigned
Forever when the mind
Chooses and stamps the will.
Thus, I must love you still
Through good and ill.

But though we cannot part,
We may retract the heart,
And build such privacies
As self-regard agrees
Conduce to ease.

So manners will repair
The ravage of despair
Which generous love invites,
Rejecting vain delights
For quiet nights.

Josephine Miles (1911-1985) - *Sale*

Went into a shoestore to buy a pair of shoes,
There was a shoe salesman humming the blues
Under his breath; over his breath
Floated a peppermint lifesaver, a little wreath.

I said please I need a triple-A,
And without stopping humming or swallowing his lifesaver away
He gave one glance from toe to toe
And plucked from the mezzanine the very shoe.

Skill of the blessed, that at their command
Blue and breathless comes to hand
To send, from whatever preoccupation, feet
Implacably shod into the perfect street.

William Everson (1912-1994) - *Muscat Pruning*

All these dormant fields are held beneath the fog.
The scraggy vines, the broken weeds, the cold moist ground
Have known it for days.
My fingers are half-numbed around the handles of the shears,
But I have other thoughts.
There is a flicker swooping from the grove on scalloped wings,
His harsh cry widening through the fog.
After his call the silence holds the drip-sound of the trees,
Muffling the hushed beat under the mist.
Over the field the noise of other pruners
Moves me to my work.
I have a hundred vines to cut before the dark.

Jane Cooper (1924-) - *Rent*

If you want my apartment, sleep in it
but let's have a clear understanding:
the books are still free agents.

If the rocking chair's arms surround you
they can also let you go,
they can shape the air like a body.

I don't want your rent, I want
a radiance of attention
like the candle's flame when we eat,

I mean a kind of awe
attending the spaces between us—
Not a roof but a field of stars.

Carolyn Kizer (1925-) - *The Skein*

Moonlight through my gauze curtains
Turns them to nets for snaring wild birds,
Turns them into woven traps, into shrouds.
The old, restless grief keeps me awake.
I wander around, holding a scarf or shawl;
In the muffled moonlight I wander around
Folding it carefully, shaking it out again.
Everyone says my old lover is happy.
I wish they said he was coming back to me.
I hesitate here, my scarf like a skein of yarn
Binding my hand loosely
that would reach for paper and pen.

So I memorize these lines,
Dew on the scarf, dappling my nightdress also.
O love long gone, it is raining in our room!
So I memorize these lines,
without salutation, without close.

John Balaban (1943-) - *The Guard at the Binh Thuy Bridge*

How still he stands as mists begin to move,
as morning, curling, billows creep across
his cooplike, concrete sentry perched mid-bridge
over mid-muddy river.
Stares at bush green banks which bristle rifles, mortars, men -- perhaps.
No convoys shake the timbers. No sound but water slapping boat side,
bank sides, pilings.
He's slung his carbine barrel down to keep the boring dry, and two
banana-clips instead of one are taped to make, now, forty rounds
instead of twenty.
Droplets bead from stock to sight; they bulb, then strike his boot.
He scrapes his heel, and sees no box bombs floating towards his bridge.
Anchored in red morning mist a narrow junk rocks its weight.
A woman kneels on deck staring at lapping water.
Wets her face.
Idly the thick Rach Binh Thuy slides by.
He aims. At her. Then drops his aim. Idly.

T T T T

Odds and ends

Whizz Quiz

1. Which classical composers featured the British national anthem in their music?
2. Imagine you have just arrived in Purgatory. An angel shows you two doors, one of which leads to hell and the other to heaven. The angel points out two guardians, one in front of each door and tells you that one always speaks the truth and the other always lies. You are allowed to ask one of the guardians a single question before choosing a door. What is your question?

United Nations

The name 'United Nations' was suggested to Roosevelt by Churchill who quoted Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* Canto 3, 35 (see *Christmas Pudding 2005*):

... Thou fatal Waterloo
Millions of tongues record thee, and anew
Their children's lips shall echo them, and say -
'Here, where the sword **united nations** drew,
Our countrymen were warring on that day!
And this is much, and all which will not pass away.

A rabbit by any other name

From *The New York Times* of 8.3.06: "... a March 5 editorial on Mayor Michael Bloomberg's plan to manage the city's solid waste, misspelled the name of a City Council member. Her name is Jessica Lappin, not Jessica Lapin."

Coded messages

- In 1843, Sir Charles Napier sent a preliminary despatch to London with the single word 'peccavi' (I have sinned) to announce his conquest of Sindh.
- In June 1908, Lieutenant Arnold Wilson, commander of the Indian cavalry guards at the British oil exploration site at Masjid-i-Suleiman in Persia, sent a message to England announcing that oil had been struck, saying "See Psalm 104, verse 15, third sentence." ('... that he may bring forth out of the earth oil to make a cheerful countenance.')
- After much speculation in the USA intelligence agencies on whether he was still alive, Osama bin Laden sent George W. Bush a letter in his own handwriting to let him know he certainly was. Bush opened the letter and read the following:

VWVSO - '71O SS37 OHOH '37OHSSV 0773H

Bush was baffled, so he e-mailed it to Condi Rice. Condi had no clue either, so she sent it to the FBI. No one could solve it there so it went to the CIA, the NSA, the Pentagon and Homeland Security. None had an answer and the White House finally asked Britain's MI-6. Within a minute MI-6 cabled the White House:

"Tell the President he's holding the message upside down."