

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Annie Dillard Reader

The Living

The Writing Life

An American Childhood

Encounters with Chinese Writers

Teaching a Stone to Talk

Living by Fiction

Holy the Firm

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

Tickets for a Prayer Wheel

MORNINGS LIKE THIS

FOUND
POEMS

ANNIE
DILLARD



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Author's Note

Poetry books seldom require explanation, but this one does. Excepting only some titles and subtitles, I did not write a word of it. Other hands composed the poems' lines—the poems' sentences. These are found poems. They differ substantially, however, from what we usually think of as found poems.

Usually those happy poets (including me) who write found poetry go pawing through popular culture like sculptors on trash heaps. They hold and wave aloft usable artifacts and fragments: jingles and ad copy, menus and broadcasts—all objets trouvés, the literary equivalents of Warhol's Campbell's soup cans and Duchamp's bicycle. By entering a found text as a poem, the poet doubles its context. The original meaning remains intact, but now it swings between two poles. The poet adds, or at any rate increases, the element of delight. This is an urban, youthful, ironic, cruising kind of poetry. It serves up whole texts, or interrupted fragments of texts.

This volume, instead of presenting whole texts as "found," offers poems built from bits of broken text. The poems are original as poems; their themes and their orderings are invented. Their sentences are not. Their sentences come from the books named. I lifted them. Sometimes I dropped extra words; I never added a word.

Some of the section headings are my own ("A Comical Question for Boys"). Most come from the books themselves, even the wondrous heading from *Junior High School English*, "Studying and Making Little Poems Packed with Meaning."

In the course of composing such found poems, the original authors' intentions were usually first to go. A nineteenth-century Russian memoir of hunting and natural history yields a poem about love and death. A book of nineteenth-century oceanographic data yields a poem about seeing. A nineteenth-century

manual of boys' projects yields a poem about growing old—and so forth. Others, of course, pin down less readily.

Two of these poems raise other points.

The New Testament Apocrypha is a loose collection of written legends and, chiefly, torn and damaged fragments. Scholars editors print such texts carefully to show—using ellipses and question marks—where fragments break off and which translations are guesses. An edition of the New Testament Apocrypha yields a poem about the baffling quality of Christ's utterances and the absurdly fragmentary nature of spiritual knowledge. Like many of these poems, it looks surprisingly sober on the page.

It certainly does not do to rob a brilliant literary stylist of sentences, rearrange them as poetry, and fob off the work as one's own. Consequently the poem "Mayakovsky in New York" requires explanation, for Mayakovsky was a poet quite before I took wild liberties. He wrote his own poems about United States cities (ably edited by Patricia Blake in *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*). The prose text I mined here, however, is a hastily written piece of travel journalism of some sixty-one pages. Its subject meets only glancingly the poem's subject.

This is editing at its extreme: writing without composing. Half the poems seek to serve poetry's oldest and most sincere aims with one of its newest and most ironic methods, to dig deep with a shallow tool. The other half are just jokes.

We are not interested in tree limbs
Weighted with Spanish moss.
What we want to know is
Why arms go limp.

Is it the pain of blocking
Too many hooks? Is it the aching
That comes from throwing
Too many punches too soon?

We want facts, not French phrases.

—A letter to *Sports Illustrated*
by James P. Lewandowski, Toledo, Ohio. February 18, 1974

I want to use the world rather than my own invention.

—Ellsworth Kelly, *The Painter's Eye*

Stars

—Martha Evans Martin, *The Friendly Stars*, 1907.
revised by Donald Howard Menzel, 1964

To enjoy the constellations one must
Be satisfied not to expect too much of them.

Take them as we do our human friends:
Dragons fixed on the walls of the sky.

They hang during black nights under the dome.
Castor and Pollux: Two lusty-looking

Youths stand with their heads consolidated
Each wearing a star in his eye.

Cepheus: He stands with one foot on Polaris
And his head reaching to Andromeda. This comes

About because of confused mythology.
It has been discovered that Capella is not alone:

Another of nature's secret doors burst open
By pressure of zealous, untiring workers.

Occasionally one of the fainter stars
Calls for particular attention, as in the case

Of Mira, the Wonderful, in the Whale.
Pegasus: Ever on his back, he goes pawing

Across the heavens and down. The brevity of life,
However, does not stay the inquiring mind.

s in this
s have been muddy
s hasten.
id my brudder,
id de little
en I was young.
to try
few words
e you have felt.

Signals at Sea

—Charles H. Cugle, *Cugle's Practical Navigation*,
1936

(If the flags in A's hoist cannot be made out, B keeps her
answering pennant at the "Dip" and hoists the signal "OWL"
or "WCX".)

CXL

A

D

F

G

P

U

X

K

L

R

Do not abandon me.

I am undergoing a speed trial.

Keep clear of me—I am maneuvering with difficulty.

I am disabled. Communicate with me.

I require a pilot.

Your lights are out, or burning badly.

You are standing into danger.

Stop carrying out your intentions.

You should stop your vessel instantly.

You should stop. I have something important to com-

municate.

You may feel your way past me.

I Am Trying to Get at Something Utterly Heartbroken

—V. van Gogh, letters, 1873–1890, edited by
I. Stone, translated by Johanna van Gogh

I

At the end of the road is a small cottage,
And over it all the blue sky.
I am trying to get at something utterly heartbroken.

The flying birds, the smoking chimneys,
And that figure loitering below in the yard—
If we do not learn from this, then from what shall we learn?

The miners go home in the white snow at twilight.
These people are quite black. Their houses are small.
The time for making dark studies is short.

A patch of brown heath through which a white
Path leads, and sky just delicately tinged,
Yet somewhat passionately brushed.
We who try our best to live, why do we not live more?

II

The branches of poplars and willows rigid like wire.
It may be true that there is no God here,
But there must be one not far off.

A studio with a cradle, a baby's high chair.
Those colors which have no name
Are the real foundation of everything.

What I want is more beautiful huts far away on the heath.
If we are tired, isn't it then because
We have already walked a long way?

The cart with the white horse brings
A wounded man home from the mines.
Bistre and bitumen, well applied,
Make the colouring ripe and mellow and generous.

III

A ploughed field with clods of violet earth;
Over all a yellow sky with a yellow sun.
So there is every moment something that moves one intensely.

A bluish-grey line of trees with a few roofs.
I simply could not restrain myself or keep
My hands off it or allow myself to rest.

A mother with her child, in the shadow
Of a large tree against the dune.
To say how many green-greys there are is impossible.

I love so much, so very much, the effect
Of yellow leaves against green trunks.
This is not a thing that I have sought,
But it has come across my path and I have seized it.