



Clear Mountain Zen Center

Poetry Circle



Autumn 2019

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Fall Song (Mary Oliver)

Another year gone, leaving everywhere
its rich spiced residues: vines, leaves,
the uneaten fruits crumbling damply
in the shadows, unmattering back
from the particular island
of this summer, this NOW, that now is nowhere
except underfoot, moldering
in that black subterranean castle
of unobservable mysteries - roots and sealed seeds
and the wanderings of water. This
I try to remember when time's measure
painfully chafes, for instance when autumn
flares out at the last, boisterous and like us longing
to stay - how everything lives, shifting
from one bright vision to another, forever
in these momentary pastures.

Lost (David Wagoner)

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you.
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.

Ten Years Later (David Whyte)

When the mind is clear
and the surface of the now still,
now swaying water

slaps against
the rolling kayak,

I find myself near darkness,
paddling again to Yellow Island.

Every spring wildflowers
cover the grey rocks.

Every year the sea breeze
ruffles the cold and lovely pearls
hidden in the center of the flowers

as if remembering them
by touch alone.

A calm and lonely, trembling beauty
that frightened me in youth.

Now their loneliness
feels familiar, one small thing
I've learned these years,

how to be alone,
and at the edge of aloneness
how to be found by the world.

Innocence is what we allow
to be gifted back to us
once we've given ourselves away.

There is one world only,
the one to which we gave ourselves
utterly, and to which one day

we are blessed to return.

Harvest Time (Olav H. Hauge; trans. Robert Bly)

The calm days of September with their sun.

It's time to harvest.

There are still clumps

of cranberries in the woods, reddening rosehips

by the stone walls, hazelnuts coming loose,

and clusters of blackberries shine in the bushes;

thrushes look around for the last currents

and wasps fasten on to the sweetening plums.

I set a ladder aside at dusk, and hang

my basket up in the shed. The glaciers

all have a thin sprinkling of new snow. In bed

I hear the brisling fishermen start their motors

and go out. They'll pass the whole night

gliding over the fjord behind their powerful searchlights.

It is that Dream (Olav H. Hauge; trans. Robert Bly)

It's that dream we carry with us

That something wonderful will happen,

That it has to happen,

That time will open,

That the heart will open,

That doors will open,

That the mountains will open,

That wells will leap up,

That the dream will open,

That one morning we'll slip in

To a harbor that we've never known.



I Remember Galileo (Gerald Stern)

I remember Galileo describing the mind
as a piece of paper blown around by the wind,
and I loved the sight of it sticking to a tree,
or jumping into the backseat of a car,
and for years I watched paper leap through my cities;
but yesterday I saw the mind was a squirrel caught crossing
Route 80 between the wheels of a giant truck,
dancing back and forth like a thin leaf,
or a frightened string, for only two seconds living
on the white concrete before he got away,
his life shortened by all that terror, his head
jerking, his yellow teeth ground down to dust.

It was the speed of the squirrel and his lowness to the ground,
his great purpose and the alertness of his dancing,
that showed me the difference between him and paper.
Paper will do in theory, when there is time
to sit back in a metal chair and study shadows;
but for this life I need a squirrel,
his clawed feet spread, his whole soul quivering,
the loud noise shaking him from head to tail.
O philosophical mind, O mind of paper, I need a squirrel
finishing his wild dash across the highway,
rushing up his green ungoverned hillside.

Life While-You-Wait (Wisława Szymborska)

Performance without rehearsal.
Body without alterations.
Head without premeditation.

I know nothing of the role I play.
I only know it's mine. I can't exchange it.

I have to guess on the spot
just what this play's all about.

Ill-prepared for the privilege of living,
I can barely keep up with the pace that the action demands.
I improvise, although I loathe improvisation.
I trip at every step over my own ignorance.
I can't conceal my hayseed manners.
My instincts are for happy histrionics.
Stage fright makes excuses for me, which humiliate me more.
Extenuating circumstances strike me as cruel.

Words and impulses you can't take back,
stars you'll never get counted,
your character like a raincoat you button on the run —
the pitiful results of all this unexpectedness.

If only I could just rehearse one Wednesday in advance,
or repeat a single Thursday that has passed!
But here comes Friday with a script I haven't seen.

Is it fair, I ask
(my voice a little hoarse,
since I couldn't even clear my throat offstage).

You'd be wrong to think that it's just a slapdash quiz
taken in makeshift accommodations. Oh no.
I'm standing on the set and I see how strong it is.
The props are surprisingly precise.
The machine rotating the stage has been around even longer.
The farthest galaxies have been turned on.
Oh no, there's no question, this must be the premiere.
And whatever I do
will become forever what I've done.

Everything Is Waiting For You (David Whyte)

Your great mistake is to act the drama
as if you were alone. As if life
were a progressive and cunning crime
with no witness to the tiny hidden
transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny
the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely,
even you, at times, have felt the grand array;
the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding
out your solo voice. You must note
the way the soap dish enables you,
or the window latch grants you freedom.
Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity.
The stairs are your mentor of things
to come, the doors have always been there
to frighten you and invite you,
and the tiny speaker in the phone
is your dream-ladder to divinity.

The Dream (Olav H. Hauge; trans. Robert Bly)

Let us slip into
Sleep, into
The calm dream,
Just slip in—two bits
Of raw dough in the
Good oven
That we call night,
And so to awake
In the morning as
Two sound
Golden loaves!

The Mill, The Stone and the Water (Rumi; trans. Robert Bly)

All our desire is a grain of wheat.
Our whole personality is the milling-building.
But this mill grinds without knowing about it.

The millstone is your heavy body.
What makes the stone turn is your thought-river.
The stone says: I don't know why we do all this,
but the river has knowledge!

If you ask the river, it says,
I don't know why I flow.
All I know is that a human opened the gate!

And if you ask the person, he says:
All I know, oh gobbler of bread, is that if this stone
stops going around there will be no bread for your bread-soup!

All this grinding goes on, and no one has any knowledge!
So just be quiet, and one day turn
to God and say: "What is this about bread-making?"

Song for the Salmon (David Whyte)

For too many days now I have not written of the sea,
nor the rivers, nor the shifting currents
we find between the islands.

For too many nights now I have not imagined the salmon
threading the dark streams of reflected stars,
nor have I dreamt of his longing
nor the lithe swing of his tail toward dawn.

I have not given myself to the depth to which he goes,
to the cargoes of crystal water, cold with salt,
nor the enormous plains of ocean swaying beneath the moon.

I have not felt the lifted arms of the ocean
opening its white hands on the seashore,
nor the salted wind, whole and healthy
filling the chest with living air.

I have not heard those waves
fallen out of heaven onto earth,
nor the tumult of sound and the satisfaction
of a thousand miles of ocean
giving up its strength on the sand.

But now I have spoken of that great sea,
the ocean of longing shifts through me,
the blessed inner star of navigation
moves in the dark sky above
and I am ready like the young salmon
to leave his river, blessed with hunger
for a great journey on the drawing tide.

King of the River (Stanley Kunitz)

If the water were clear enough,
if the water were still,
but the water is not clear,
the water is not still,
you would see yourself,
slipped out of your skin,
nosing upstream,
slapping, thrashing,
tumbling
over the rocks
till you paint them
with your belly's blood:
Finned Ego,
yard of muscle that coils,
uncoils.

If the knowledge were given you,
but it is not given,
for the membrane is clouded
with self-deceptions
and the iridescent image swims
through a mirror that flows,
you would surprise yourself
in that other flesh
heavy with milt,
bruised, battering toward the dam
that lips the orgiastic pool.

Come. Bathe in these waters.
Increase and die.

If the power were granted you
to break out of your cells,
but the imagination fails
and the doors of the senses close
on the child within,
you would dare to be changed,
as you are changing now,
into the shape you dread
beyond the merely human.
A dry fire eats you.
Fat drips from your bones.
The flutes of your gills discolor.
You have become a ship for parasites.

The great clock of your life
is slowing down,
and the small clocks run wild.
For this you were born.
You have cried to the wind
and heard the wind's reply:
'I did not choose the way,
the way chose me.'
You have tasted the fire on your tongue
till it is swollen black
with a prophetic joy:
'Burn with me!
The only music is time,
the only dance is love.'

If the heart were pure enough,
but it is not pure,
you would admit
that nothing compels you
any more, nothing
at all abides,
but nostalgia and desire,
the two-way ladder
between heaven and hell.
On the threshold
of the last mystery,
at the brute absolute hour,
you have looked into the eyes
of your creature self,
which are glazed with madness,
and you say
he is not broken but endures,
limber and firm
in the state of his shining,
forever inheriting his salt kingdom,
from which he is banished
forever.

He Made Me Learn to Clean the Fish (Susan Abraham)

Something he thought I should know,
that life was not just the thrill of expectation,
holding the bending rod out toward the water
hoping for a tug. That reeling in a prize
and bringing it home to eat could cut
your fingers, and the brutality of what you did,
with matter-of-fact attention to detail, ended lives.
Out on the jetty, above the waves,
he cut off the head while the eyes watched,
blood spurting onto my bathing suit, staining
yellow polka dots, dripping down the navy
rick rack edging to my bare pink stomach.
He insisted I learn how to hold the knife
and rub it against the scales so that they fell away,
slowing the painful details of it, not in a cruel way.
It was like learning to drive for him, or opening
a bank account, a way for him to show me how
to be an adult, that pleasure comes hard and slow.
And that the beautiful things that glinted underwater
could still be beautiful as long as you earned them,
even a small girl in a bathing suit could pick up the knife.

Don't Come to Me with the Entire Truth (Olav M Hauge)

"Don't give me the whole truth,
don't give me the sea for my thirst,
don't give me the sky when I ask for light,
but give me a glint, a dewy wisp, a mote
as the birds bear water-drops from their bathing
and the wind a grain of salt."

My God, It's Full of Stars (Tracy K. Smith)

1.

We like to think of it as parallel to what we know,
Only bigger. One man against the authorities.
Or one man against a city of zombies. One man

Who is not, in fact, a man, sent to understand
The caravan of men now chasing him like red ants
Let loose down the pants of America. Man on the run.

Man with a ship to catch, a payload to drop,
This message going out to all of space. . . . Though
Maybe it's more like life below the sea: silent,

Buoyant, bizarrely benign. Relics
Of an outmoded design. Some like to imagine
A cosmic mother watching through a spray of stars,

Mouthing yes, yes as we toddle toward the light,
Biting her lip if we teeter at some ledge. Longing
To sweep us to her breast, she hopes for the best

While the father storms through adjacent rooms
Ranting with the force of Kingdom Come,
Not caring anymore what might snap us in its jaw.

Sometimes, what I see is a library in a rural community.
All the tall shelves in the big open room. And the pencils
In a cup at Circulation, gnawed on by the entire population.

The books have lived here all along, belonging
For weeks at a time to one or another in the brief sequence
Of family names, speaking (at night mostly) to a face,

A pair of eyes. The most remarkable lies.

2.

Charlton Heston is waiting to be let in. He asked once politely.
A second time with force from the diaphragm. The third time,
He did it like Moses: arms raised high, face an apocryphal white.

Shirt crisp, suit trim, he stoops a little coming in,
Then grows tall. He scans the room. He stands until I gesture,
Then he sits. Birds commence their evening chatter. Someone fires

Charcoals out below. He'll take a whiskey if I have it. Water if I don't.
I ask him to start from the beginning, but he goes only halfway back.
That was the future once, he says. Before the world went upside down.

Hero, survivor, God's right hand man, I know he sees the blank
Surface of the moon where I see a language built from brick and bone.
He sits straight in his seat, takes a long, slow high-thespian breath,

Then lets it go. *For all I know, I was the last true man on this earth.*
And: *May I smoke?* The voices outside soften. Planes jet past heading
off or back. Someone cries that she does not want to go to bed.
Footsteps overhead.

A fountain in the neighbor's yard babbles to itself, and the night air
Lifts the sound indoors. *It was another time, he says, picking up again.*
We were pioneers. Will you fight to stay alive here, riding the earth

Toward God-knows-where? I think of Atlantis buried under ice, gone
One day from sight, the shore from which it rose now glacial and stark.
Our eyes adjust to the dark.

3.

Perhaps the great error is believing we're alone,
That the others have come and gone—a momentary blip—
When all along, space might be choc-full of traffic,
Bursting at the seams with energy we neither feel
Nor see, flush against us, living, dying, deciding,
Setting solid feet down on planets everywhere,
Bowing to the great stars that command, pitching stones
At whatever are their moons. They live wondering
If they are the only ones, knowing only the wish to know,
And the great black distance they—we—flicker in.

Maybe the dead know, their eyes widening at last,
Seeing the high beams of a million galaxies flick on
At twilight. Hearing the engines flare, the horns
Not letting up, the frenzy of being. I want to be
One notch below bedlam, like a radio without a dial.
Wide open, so everything floods in at once.
And sealed tight, so nothing escapes. Not even time,
Which should curl in on itself and loop around like smoke.
So that I might be sitting now beside my father
As he raises a lit match to the bowl of his pipe
For the first time in the winter of 1959.

4.

In those last scenes of Kubrick's 2001
When Dave is whisked into the center of space,
Which unfurls in an aurora of orgasmic light
Before opening wide, like a jungle orchid
For a love-struck bee, then goes liquid,
Paint-in-water, and then gauze wafting out and off,
Before, finally, the night tide, luminescent
And vague, swirls in, and on and on. . . .

In those last scenes, as he floats
Above Jupiter's vast canyons and seas,
Over the lava strewn plains and mountains
Packed in ice, that whole time, he doesn't blink.
In his little ship, blind to what he rides, whisked
Across the wide-screen of unparcelled time,
Who knows what blazes through his mind?
Is it still his life he moves through, or does
That end at the end of what he can name?

On set, it's shot after shot till Kubrick is happy,
Then the costumes go back on their racks
And the great gleaming set goes black..

5.

When my father worked on the Hubble Telescope, he said
They operated like surgeons: scrubbed and sheathed
In papery green, the room a clean cold, a bright white.

He'd read Larry Niven at home, and drink scotch on the rocks,
His eyes exhausted and pink. These were the Reagan years,
When we lived with our finger on The Button and struggled
To view our enemies as children. My father spent whole seasons
Bowing before the oracle-eye, hungry for what it would find.
His face lit-up whenever anyone asked, and his arms would rise

As if he were weightless, perfectly at ease in the never-ending
Night of space. On the ground, we tied postcards to balloons
For peace. Prince Charles married Lady Di. Rock Hudson died.

We learned new words for things. The decade changed.

The first few pictures came back blurred, and I felt ashamed
For all the cheerful engineers, my father and his tribe. The second time,
The optics jibed. We saw to the edge of all there is—

So brutal and alive it seemed to comprehend us back.

No Loser, No Weeper (Maya Angelou)

"I hate to lose something,"
then she bent her head,
"even a dime, I wish I was dead.
I can't explain it. No more to be said.
'Cept I hate to lose something.

"I lost a doll once and cried for a week.
She could open her eyes, and do all but speak.
I believe she was took, by some doll-snatching sneak.
I tell you, I hate to lose something.

"A watch of mine once, got up and walked away.
It had twelve numbers on it and for the time of day.
I'll never forget it and all I can say
is I really hate to lose something.

"Now if I felt that way 'bout a watch and a toy,
what you think I feel 'bout my lover-boy?
I ain't threatening you, madam, but he is my evening's joy.
And I mean I really hate to lose something."

Part of Eve's Discussion (Marie Howe)

It was like the moment when a bird decides not to eat from your hand,
and flies, just before it flies, the moment the rivers seem to still
and stop because a storm is coming, but there is no storm, as when
a hundred starlings lift and bank together before they wheel and drop,
very much like the moment, driving on bad ice, when it occurs to you
your car could spin, just before it slowly begins to spin, like
the moment just before you forgot what it was you were about to say,
it was like that, and after that, it was still like that, only all the time.

The Resident (Michael Hofmann)

We have the White Louse. His name is Donal Dump. He is the Resident, and he heads the Dump maladministration, squillionaires and a sprain-surgeon, a Cabinet of all the talons. They call him a racial spigot. He sees it as he calls it, which makes him spigot. He squitters Twitter on the shitter, and we titter after. He only squeaks for us. He is our mouth-squeeze. He has a background in constriction. Bill the Wall! Bill the Wall! He owes the Dump Hotel, wright here in DeCease. He is a self-dealing man who once in his youth wore out the uniform. Then bone spurts struck, and he invalidated to the venereal front. A ployboy and a much-married man and father to the fair Larissa-without-portfolio who he'd love to give one to. Or even several. A stately plump buck who takes the time to vent before the chopper with his luxury hair and tie blowing bravely in all erections. Fake nudes! Fake nudes! To me he is a crevice to the orifice. The economy is re-relegated like you wouldn't believe. Unvironment too. Offense Dept. going bangbusters. Eye ran. Blat! Mixed Tans. Blat! Gerry mans. Blat! He achoos new tariff-farts every day, whining easy-peasy dread wars, slapping stanchions on Shiner and our other alloys. (All except Rusher, on account of Poo-in.) He is surely flushing in the dawn of a brand-new Yellow Rage. Grate again! Grate again! GAGA! GAGA! We are a Nation of Lawns. (He flogs golf off a tetchy handclap.) We have the suppuration of pars. There is the Supreme Bought, also the Senilate and the House of Unrepresentatives (tho cuntly in Demographic hands). We stand by the corruptibility of our unstitutions, and the wisdom of the Foundering Fathers.

The Twelve Lies (Rumi)

People say, "The one you love is unfaithful."
That's the first lie.

They say, "Your night will never end in dawn."
Did you hear that lie?

They say, "Why give up sleep and die for love? Once in the
grave,
All that is forgotten; it's over."
That's the third lie.

Some thinkers say, "Once you leave our time system,
The spirit stops moving; in fact, it goes backward."
People love to tell lies!

Daydreamers with sluggish eyes say,
"Your poems and your teaching stories are nothing but
daydreams."
I heard that lie.

People running around in the underbrush say,
"There's no path to the mountain and no mountain either."
That's the sixth lie!

They say, "The keeper of secrets never tells
A single secret except to an intermediary."
People love that lie.

They say, "If you're a worker, you'll never receive the key;
The master alone goes to heaven."
That's the eighth lie.

They go on: "If you have too much earth in your chart,
You'll never grasp what angels are."
Another lie!

They like to say, "You'll never get out of this nest
With your stubby night wings; you'll drop like a stone."
Did you hear that lie?

They maintain, "What human beings do is insignificant anyway.
Stones weigh more than our evil. God cares nothing about it."
That's a big lie.

So just keep silent, and if anyone says to you,
"No communion takes place without words," just say to him,
"I heard that lie."

For the Anniversary of My Death (W. S. Merwin)

Every year without knowing it I have passed the day
When the last fires will wave to me
And the silence will set out
Tireless traveler
Like the beam of a lightless star

Then I will no longer
Find myself in life as in a strange garment
Surprised at the earth
And the love of one woman
And the shamelessness of men
As today writing after three days of rain
Hearing the wren sing and the falling cease
And bowing not knowing to what

Love After Love (Derek Walcott)

The time will come
when, with elation
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.