

Introduction

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Men don't like poetry—often with good reason. A lot of poetry is lame, dealing with fuzzy emotional stuff in syrupy fashion. It's enough to give a guy the willies. Other poetry deals with issues that, though certainly a part of life, we'd frankly rather not face—at least until they're inescapable. Either way, we're likely to pass on poetry. Look the other way. Dismiss it outright. Dash for the nearest exit. Even bolt for the country.

A suspicion of poetry is a good thing. Life's too short for fuzz and syrup. The combination's repugnant. But some poems speak to what life's about, what's going on here, what we're all doing. And a few poems do so with stunning clarity. They wap you across the side of the head. Or, cut to the bone, far into the marrow.

I read thousands of poems over the past two years. I talked with people, asking which poems, if any, they liked. I sifted and sorted. Though I didn't have hard and fast rules, I gradually developed guidelines:

- No poems with obscure references, especially to English history
- No poems about poetry
- No clubby poems written for other poets
- No thines and thou arts or other painfully outdated phrases
- No pomposity or gobbledegook
- No translations
- No self-consciously cute forms
- No avant-garde nonsense
- No epigrams, especially in the original Greek or Latin
- No esoteric poems that can't possibly be understood by anyone

And, of course, I ignored each of these guidelines (except the last) at some point when considering particular poems.

I eventually came up with a list of a couple hundred players, poems that might make it into the book. Then I reread and read some more, finally selecting the all-stars—the fifty-two poems that I believed would speak most clearly to you. If any of them snatch your breath, that's the idea. If any shake you awake, that's good. If any cut deep, so much the better.

The themes in these poems aren't new—birth and death, parents and children, growing up, love, loss, war, beauty... all the usual suspects. I did, though, look especially for poems that captured moments, provided glimpses of life, and suggested small insights.

The dimwitted omissions in this book are mine, as are the wrong-headed inclusions. But that's exactly the point. Take from this group whatever grabs you. Reread and reject others. Decide what to hold fast and what to discard. Tear out any poems that offend. Rip them right out of the book. Add your own. But, whatever you do, keep listening to the voices.

Here are fifty-two poems for men. You won't like all of them, but some will speak to you. A few, deeply.

Those Winter Sundays

ROBERT HAYDEN

11

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Eleven

ARCHIBALD MACLIESH

13

And summer mornings the mute child, rebellious,
Stupid, hating the words, the meanings, hating
The Think now, Think, the Oh but Think! would leave
On tiptoe the three chairs on the verandah
And crossing tree by tree the empty lawn
Push back the shed door and upon the sill
Stand pressing out the sunlight from his eyes
And enter and with outstretched fingers feel
The grindstone and behind it the bare wall
And turn and in the corner on the cool
Hard earth sit listening. And one by one,
Out of the dazzled shadow in the room,
The shapes would gather, the brown plowshare, spades,
Mattocks, the polished helves of picks, a scythe
Hung from the rafters, shovels, slender tines
Glinting across the curve of sickles—shapes
Older than men were, the wise tools, the iron
Friendly with earth. And sit there quiet, breathing
The harsh dry smell of withered bulbs, the faint
Odor of dung, the silence. And outside
Beyond the half-shut door the blind leaves
And the corn moving. And at noon would come,
Up from the garden, his hard crooked hands
Gentle with earth, his knees still earth-stained, smelling
Of sun, of summer, the old gardener, like
A priest, like an interpreter, and bend
Over his baskets.

And they would not speak:
They would say nothing. And the child would sit there
Happy as though he had no name, as though
He had been no one: like a leaf, a stem,
Like a root growing—

Mother to Son

LANGSTON HUGHES

15

Well, son, I'll tell you:

Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

It's had tacks in it,

And splinters,

And boards torn up,

And places with no carpet on the floor—

Bare.

But all the time

I've been a-climbin' on,

And reachin' landin's,

And turnin' corners,

And sometimes goin' in the dark

Where there ain't been no light.

So boy, don't you turn back.

Don't you set down on the steps

'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.

Don't you fall now—

For I've still goin', honey,

I've still climbin',

And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

From the Childhood of Jesus

ROBERT PINSKY

17

One Saturday morning he went to the river to play.
He modeled twelve sparrows out of the river clay

And scooped a clear pond, with a dam of twigs and mud.
Around the pond he set the birds he had made,

Evenly as the hours. Jesus was five. He smiled,
As a child would who had made a little world

Of clear still water and clay beside a river.
But a certain Jew came by, a friend of his father,

And he scolded the child and ran at once to Joseph,
Saying, "Come see how your child has profaned the Sabbath,

Making images at the river on the Day of Rest."
So Joseph came to the place and took his wrist

And told him, "Child, you have offended the Word."
Then Jesus freed the hand that Joseph held

And clapped his hands and shouted to the birds
To go away. They raised their beaks at his words

And breathed and stirred their feathers and flew away.
The people were frightened. Meanwhile, another boy,

The son of Annas the scribe, had idly taken
A branch of driftwood and leaning against it had broken

The dam and muddied the little pond and scattered
The twigs and stones. Then Jesus was angry and shouted,

"Unrighteous, impious, ignorant, what did the water
Do to harm you? Now you are going to wither

The way a tree does, you shall bear no fruit
And no leaves, you shall wither down to the root."

At once, the boy was all withered. His parents moaned,
The Jews gasped, Jesus began to leave, then turned

And prophesied, his child's face wet with tears:
"Twelve times twelve times twelve thousands of years
Before these heavens and this earth were made,
The Creator set a jewel in the throne of God
With Hell on the left and Heaven to the right,
The Sanctuary in front, and behind, an endless night
Endlessly fleeing a Torah written in flame.
And on that jewel in the throne, God wrote my name."
Then Jesus left and went into Joseph's house.
The family of the withered one also left the place,
Carrying him home. The Sabbath was nearly over.
By dusk, the Jews were all gone from the river.
Small creatures came from the undergrowth to drink
And foraged in the shadows along the bank.
Alone in his cot in Joseph's house, the Son
Of Man was crying himself to sleep. The moon
Rose higher, the Jews put out their lights and slept,
And all was calm and as it had been, except
In the agitated household of the scribe Annas,
And high in the dark, where unknown even to Jesus
The twelve new sparrows flew aimlessly through the night,
Not blinking or resting, as if never to alight.

My Papa's Waltz

THEODORE ROETHKE

19

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.
We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.
The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.
You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.