

Selection from

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Founded in 1996 by Robert Alexander, the Marie Alexander Poetry Series is dedicated to promoting the appreciation, enjoyment, and understanding of American prose poetry. An imprint of White Pine Press since 2001, the Series publishes one to two books annually. It is our mission to publish the very best contemporary prose poetry and to carry the rich tradition of this hybrid form on into the 21st century.

THE RELEASE OF HOSTAGES, by Holly Beye (1922-2011)

My grandfather, wearing patent-leather shoes with pointed toes and leaning heavily on his ebony cane, stood in the doorway.

“Put the light on!” said his harsh shadow of a voice, filling the hallway with an oppressive musty odor. “It’s dark for an old man here!”

It was July.

Outside, in the humid twilight, birds retuning to their nests twittered in busy conversation like Chinese women leaving some dingy factory together. A pink peony blossom, snatched from a neighbor’s bush, lay across the doorstep, its crushed petals sending into the house an intoxication fragrance.

“Put the lights on, somebody. . . !” he kept calling, knocking his cane sharply against the iron doorstep.

Even when I shut my eyes and try very hard, I can’t remember that man now. For the life of me, I couldn’t tell you whether or not his eyes were blue, if his skin tended to the ruddy, if he carried a gold pocket watch and chain, nor even if there were three black whiskers on his ears, which may have been large and nearly perpendicular to his head.

But so it may have been. For just now when a red truck rattled past the house, loaded to the top and dangling from either sides a load of chimney brooms, the morning air was suddenly full of the sound of nesting birds, and for one long, exquisite moment, the smell of peonies against a darkened doorstep. . .

JANUARY 1, U.S.A., by Kay Boyle (1902-1992)

Annie-Lou, the prettiest girl in Seattle, was unable to speak intelligently on many subjects. "We're really awfully lucky to be alive now," she said. "It's such a wonderful time. It's so recently that they've made eye-black that doesn't run and kiss-proof lipstick and permanent waves." In the night club the ballet was stepping wild "La Nuit de Légalité," the violins lisping, the basses snoring the name of the man who sprang from the winds in full flight. He was not Nijinsky, being of Seattle, of no old splendor. He was the picture of a rainbow in spite of his jowls and the gold crowns on his teeth. After him came a group of male dancers with violets for modesty, pansies for thoughts, daisies for simplicity on their brows. Even their neat, grey moustaches and their bald heads did not mar the perfection of the whole. They tossed gilt-edged cards in a shower over the tables. This, the wild extravaganza comparable to "Une Nuit de Cléopâtre" but modernly unlike it, inspired by the words "New Deal," and bringing the businessman into play. One small viola, almost a violin, dressed in a Schiaparelli oil-cloth frock and under the influence of legal liquor, climbed on a table and wailed: "He asked me to marry him, not to marry him, but to marry him, if you know what I mean." Legally, legally, legally, sobbed the cellos, and the dancers, sobbing, took the measure. But it was no more than a catch in the throat, having been composed not for poverty but for prosperity, words by Beatrice Fairfax, clothes by Mrs. Fellowes, mental appeal by George M. Cohan. "It's a New Deal, you mustn't squeal, you'll get a meal," tinkled the triangles. Annie-Lou lifted her perfect features from the table where they had fallen and gulped: "Tomorrow I can look Daddy in the eye and say sure, I was drunk again last night, but it was legal, sweetheart."

BARN-YARDING, by Harriet Dean (1892-1964)

I cannot joyously write little things. Perhaps that is why I write none at all. The little people about me fill me with disgust. They are cocksure bantam hens, loose and fertile, laying egg-thoughts carelessly. The crack of shells is loud, but tiny wet chicks roll out, smaller than the rest. God forbid that I am of the same breed! If I must linger in the barn-yard for a few days, studying the swagger of these hens and silently measuring my own, may I in the end fly away to my mountain-top—alone in the night. Strut, if I must, but quite alone.

Their voices are splinters of sound which prick my desolation to shreds. My one great fear is that clumsily they may stumble against my loneliness. What matter if the tongue be unknown to me! These tone arrows beat at my door like undesired rain; they hurl themselves against my tissue walls until I shall go mad with their urgency.

The only true friendliness near me is the blank brick wall of the house next door. I wrap myself in its unresponsiveness and stop up my ears with its cold silence that I may have courage to go on with my work.

Flame curtains flap in my grate and send grey indistinctness shivering and stumbling over my walls.

A dusty mirror in a lonely house waits. . . .

HYSTERIA, by T. S. Eliot (1888-1965)

As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it, until her teeth were only accidental stars with a talent for squad-drill. I was drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary recovery, lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat, bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles. An elderly waiter with trembling hands was hurriedly spreading a pink and white checked cloth over the rusty green table, saying: "If the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden, if the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden . . ." I decided that if the shaking of her breasts could be stopped, some of the fragments of the afternoon might be collected, and I concentrated my attention with careful subtlety to this end.

THE DEATH OF ENGLAND, by John Gould Fletcher (1886-1950)

Slowly, athwart the terrible fierce sunlight that marks a blasted summer, the body of England, rigid and stiffened in death, is borne to its last long rest.

Horse-chestnuts lift ten thousand waxen candles before it; thrushes intone their office in plaintive cadences; the faint grey-purple incense of lilac is wafted into the air; bees cease their murmurings; and the swallow, the blithe crossbearer of the sky, is silent.

From a million starving faces, pale and stunned with excess of suffering, a lonely silent plaint of irremediable misery climbs softly, like the great wailing notes of an endless De Profundis, into the ashen-blue vault of the sky.

Slowly athwart the terrible days that crawl forward to where the sun is offered up on the altar of midsummer, the body of England, broken with weariness, is borne to the slow wailings of the chant which the winds weave about it, and the dropping of wax-white petals from innumerable hawthorn trees.

Eternal rest grant her, O Lord, and the peace of the night that passes all understanding.

TIRED, by Fenton Johnson (1888-1958)

I am tired of work; I am tired of building up somebody else's civilization.

Let us take a rest, M'Lissy Jane.

I will go down to the Last Chance Saloon, drink a gallon or two of gin, shoot a game or two of dice and sleep the rest of the night on one of Mike's barrels.

You will let the old shanty go to rot, the white people's clothes turn to dust, and the Calvary Baptist Church sink to the bottomless pit.

You will spend your days forgetting you married me and your nights hunting the warm gin Mike serves the ladies in the rear of the Last Chance Saloon.

Throw the children into the river; civilization has given us too many. It is better to die than it is to grow up and find out that you are colored.

Pluck the stars out of the heavens. The stars mark our destiny. The stars marked my destiny.

I am tired of civilization.

BREAKFAST TABLE, by Amy Lowell (1874-1925)

In the fresh-washed sunlight, the breakfast table is decked and white. It offers itself in flat surrender, tendering tastes, and smells, and colors, and metals, and grains, and the white cloth falls over its side, draped and wide. Wheels of white glitter in the silver coffee-pot, hot and spinning like catherine-wheels, they whirl, and twirl—and my eyes begin to smart, the little white, dazzling wheels prick them like darts. Placid and peaceful, the rolls of bread spread themselves in the sun to bask. A stack of butter-pats, pyramidal, shout orange through the white, scream, flutter, call: “Yellow! Yellow! Yellow!” Coffee steam rises in a stream, clouds the silver tea-service with mist, and twists up into the sunlight, revolved, involuted, suspiring higher and higher, fluting in a thin spiral up the high blue sky. A crow flies by and croaks at the coffee steam. The day is new and fair with good smells in the air.

HISTORY PROFESSOR, by Robert McAlmon (1896-1956)

“Now in the interests of scholarships—uh huh—yes—in the interests of scholarship” he’d lecture, asking for bibliography, collateral reading, and annotations, which requests never interfered with students’ thoughts on Saturday night dances, or Monday night drunk-ons.

It’s a shame, kiddo, I’ll tell you it’s a shame that jazzy people like Alexander, Cleopatra, Hannibal, and Henry the Eighth should be annotated thus by a male pedagogue who wears his winter underwear through June, and uses a Pinkham pill for a laxative twice a week to keep his system in order.

FAMILY PORTRAIT, by Kenneth Patchen (1911-1972)

Great tarry wings splatter grayly up out of the blinding glare of the open-hearth furnaces. In the millyard the statue of some old bastard with a craggy grin is turning shit—colored above the bowed heads of the night shift that comes crunching in between the piles of slag. That's my father washing at the kitchen sink. The grimy water runs into the matted hair of his belly. The smell of scorched cloth and sweat adds its seasoning to the ham and cabbage. The muscles of his back ripple like great ropes of greased steel. Awesome thing to see! Yet he never raised his hand in anger against any man—which was a very lucky thing. A soapy snort escapes him with the sound of a thunderclap, and my kid sister vigorously rattles the lid of a pot. In the parlor my grandfather lies, two days dead. “Aye, and the only statue for him's a spade in 'is stumpy teeth now.”—“A lapful of withered nuts to make the muckin' grasses grow . . .”—“Hush you are, for here be the priest with his collar so tidy and lady-clean.”—Liked his bit of drink, Hughey did, God take the long thirst out of his soul and all.”

I myself remember once after a brush with Mrs. Hannan, who happened to be passing hard under his window one morning, he told me, “Ah, there's only one thing worse than the rich, my lad . . . and that's the poor, and that's the ruckin', lyin', unmannerin', snivelin' poor, my lad!” and a great whip of tobacco juice lashed out onto the tar-topped road.

On, on into the small hours went the singing and the laughing and the gay, wonderful storytelling . . . and all the while the candle wax dripped slowly down on my grandfather's shiny black Sunday suit.

HUNGRY TO HEAR, by Laura Riding (1901-1991)

Hungry to hear (like Jew-faces, kind but anticipating pain) they sit, their ears raw. The conversation remains genteel, of motor cars: her brother bought a car, he was having a six months' vacation from an Indian post, he should have known better than to buy an American car, the value depreciates so, and *she* (his sister) should not have lent it to *her* (her friend) even though it wasn't her fault that the car only did fifteen miles to the gallon after she returned it. A clear situation like this, in which life is easy to understand, is cruel to them. It leaves no scratches in the mind around which opinions, sympathies, silly repetitions can fester and breed dreams and other remote infections—too remote always to give serious pain. They long to be fumbled, to have confusion and uncertainty make a confused and uncertain end of them. There they sit, make a confused and uncertain end of them. There they sit, having pins-and-needles of obscurity which they mistake for sensation. They open their newspapers: "I suppose it is foolish to spend all this time reading newspapers? They are lying and dishonest and devoted to keeping a certain portion of the population in ignorance and intellectual slavery? Or is it foolish to take it so seriously? I shall go on reading them out of sophistication? . . ." Oh, go to hell.

AT THE ELITE, by Robert Alden Sanborn (1877-1962)

The raspberry cream melts in my mouth, dragging down to the roots of my tongue the savor of false violets.

In my left hand I hold a copy of the Review, high over the mound of pink lather in the silver cup. My falling eyes graze the print, and the savor of Wyndham Lewis melts down to the roots of my brain.

(As I read there is a slight arresting contraction of the nerves under the stomach, caused by the fear that the cashier is watching lest I dart out the door without paying.)

There is a hush over the room, the hush of many frosted cakes waiting for appetites. Most people are at home. This is not home. It is more peaceful.

There is also the hush of your absent presence, the fluent curves of your tenderness, which the air, this chair, and I, remember.