John Haile
John.h.haile@gmail.com
978-494-3138

Reading Poetry

Assignment for week 3

On the pages below, you'll find eight poems. Yup, no titles, no authors' names. Some were given to me by members of the class; others I have chosen. All are relatively contemporary. For next Monday, please read these poems and consider the following (and any other things you notice):

- Who are the speakers? The intended audience?
- Where do you see figurative language? How effective is it?
- What interesting word choice do you see?
- What's the relationship between form and meaning?
- What's the tone of each poem? (Try reading them out loud…)

And now the fun part:

- Which do you like best and why?
- Which is the best poem and why?

Please, please resist the temptation to look these poems up. All will be revealed in class.

Poem 1

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster.

Poem 2

I’m too broke to make the work
Or I don’t care enough about the work
To be as broke as I should let myself be
To have the time to make the work
I work too hard to make the work
Or my indolence is too great to take that pleasure
In the work that the work needs
Or once I arrive as a boat from sea
At the limits of my intelligence
I quail and put the work away
I do not push the work or
Push the work too hard
So the work becomes working
A tough dough, not play
That I want to have fun, to see
The delights of the world
With my eyes and drink wine and say
This is the work of the work
Let it relinquish me, tame
Monster, to roam freely among the delights of the world
That yet I travel too lightly, quaffing
The brine of forgetfulness, that I should stay
In some hermitage and let the work of the world
Be, for it circles fine
Without me, that the medium
Of the work is inauthentic and circumscribes
The world of works in false conceit,
Belt that begets its own limitations, that
I speak these words I call my ideas
But lack their commitments
That, gadfly I, delight to say
I am working on
I am working on, and the work
A boat tossed at sea
Never arrives.
No, these are not paradisiacal thoughts.
They do not befit
This situation, which is that of the garnet

In the anguish, the anguish
In the garnet, the cities
In the anguish, in the garnet
All correspondence, all array
And its open, raw, unlikely vitality.

Poem 3

His drinking was different in sunshine,
as if it couldn't be bad. Sudden, manic,
he swung into a laugh, bought me
two ice creams, said *One for each hand*.
Half the hot inning I licked Good Humor
running down wrists. My bird-mother
earlier, packing my pockets with sun block,
had hopped her warning: *Be careful*.

So, pinned between his knees, I held
his Old Style in both hands
while he streaked the sun block on my cheeks
and slurred *My little Indian princess*.
Home run: the hairy necks of the men in front
jumped up, thighs torn from gummy green bleachers
to join the violent scramble. Father
held me close and said *Be careful,*
be careful. But why should I be full of care
with his thick arm circling my shoulders,
with a high smiling sun, like a home run,
in the upper right-hand corner of the sky?

Poem 4

Cheese danish can make you thin,
It's not the ingredients but the thought you're in;
If you think fat, then it's here to stay,
If you think thin it will go away.

Cheese Danish can make you smile,
With a cup of coffee you can walk a mile.
When you get home then you've walked two;
See what cheese danish can do for you!

Cheese danish brings company,
First the food and then the tea,
And when friends have gone, you sweat and clean–
See how cheese danish can keep you lean!

Cheese danish can make your day,
Take a bite and you're carried away,
Take another then you're carried again
To a place where exists neither thick nor thin.

Poem 5

Her closet is plain, doors, a wood rod between two walls,
Holding varied garments aligned in cascading falls.
And the saying that a woman is made by her clothes,
Is a false presumption, as any honest woman knows,
For it's the lady who truly gives life to her vesture,
As each life has its own color, form and texture.

Thus, today I lament that what is here for me to see
Are but tokens from the life of one who used to be,
With each garment having a story to tell,
That their owner for certain would remember well,
And though most might be of the commonest kind,
For others it could be a jewel called to mind,
A precious moment in the lady's long life,
Perhaps one from her roles as mother, worker, or wife.

But just as these clothes tell of days now passed,
As if briefly giving substance to a shadow she cast,
They are like all things made by hard striving men,
And like men themselves, will have their end.
Yet, for now in her closet I can fondly look,
Seeing in each dress a page from her life's book.

Poem 6

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Poem 7

The other day I was ricocheting slowly
off the blue walls of this room,
moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano,
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary
where my eyes fell upon the word lanyard.

No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
could send one into the past more suddenly—
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp
by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid long thin plastic strips
into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.

I had never seen anyone use a lanyard
or wear one, if that's what you did with them,
but that did not keep me from crossing
strand over strand again and again
until I had made a boxy
red and white lanyard for my mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard.
She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
and then led me out into the airy light

and taught me to walk and swim,
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.
Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.
And here is your lanyard, I replied,
which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth,
and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,

and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.
And here, I wish to say to her now,
is a smaller gift—not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took
the two-tone lanyard from my hand,
I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless, worthless thing I wove
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.

Poem 8

How long I've tried to love you, the way
you still blush and gleam like a teenager
in a poodle skirt, unblemished as the day

you were pressed against wire and mortar
in the shower, on the walls, even the floor,
its concrete flecked with pink. The Nolans,

who chose you, are long gone, their daughters
now grandmothers in their own houses,
the blueprints they left behind moldering

in the basement. How can I blame them?
I didn't live through the War, the Boom,
this neighborhood rising up in neat rows

as if each Cape had been pining for sun.
In those years, you were prosperity, pedigree,
First Lady Pink named in honor of Mamie

Eisenhower, her White House bathroom pink
from the walls to the tub to the cotton balls,
so that all over America, millions like me

wake up and stumble into a past that waits
with toothbrush and soap. In you, I saw history
running like a faucet, building to a flood

unless stemmed. But when the contractor
gave me a price, he said you were lead,
and with my daughter . . . it might be better

to let you be. So I'll own your purr and poison,
though I may dream still of reinvention—
blue trim and Harbor Gray—even as I hang

the pink polka dot shower curtain, lay down
that cranberry rug, act as if I chose you,
as if you were everything I ever wanted.